The Case That Will Not Die

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This is a book for which I feel some measure of responsibility. In an introduction I wrote for two editions of Chambers' classic autobiography Witness, I said: "Tomorrow someone may go further and bring back into life and print whatever of Whittaker Chambers now lies buried in the archives of periodicals to which he contributed some of his finest essays. As his appreciation of Franz Kafka's story 'The Hunter Gracchus' in Cold Friday indicated, Whittaker Chambers was not only an excellent writer himself but a devoted lover of excellence in other writers, and his opinions of things literary and cultural as well as things political and religious should long remain of interest to readers."

Now the publisher of those editions of 1985 and 1987 has brought out a good book such as I envisaged. For those old enough to have followed the drama of the Hiss trials and to have read Witness when it was a bestseller and thus have some notion of the journalism of Chambers, the massive display of it in this book, which covers Chambers' work from the days when he wrote for The New Masses, through his editorship of Time and his contributions to Life and American Mercury, all the way to his final, post-Witness contributions to National Review, is bound to come not only as a confirmation of an earlier opinion but as something of a revelation. One who was in least need of all this, William Buckley, who has published a collection of Chambers' letters to him under the title Odyssey of a Friend, is hardly exaggerating when he describes Ghosts on the Roof as "an important contribution to history and to literature." The title piece was written in 1945, at the time of the Yalta conference, another euphoric time, when optimism was running about as high as it does now, in the wake of the destruction of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe. In early 1945, the Second World War was drawing to a victorious close for the opponents of the Axis; the atomic bomb had not yet been exploded; hopes for cooperation between the ruler of Russia, Stalin, and his allies in a post-war settlement guaranteeing a stable period of peace, were seemingly well-based. It makes for good reading now as a cautionaryparable in the days of perestroika, glasnost, the rising of subject nationalities against Moscow's imperial control, and the self-assertion of the Russian democracy within the Soviet Union for the first time since the constituent assembly was dispersed by Lenin with bayonets in 1918. Chambers, in 1945, strove to make us aware of some ghosts at the celebratory feast of Yalta, the ghosts of murdered Romanovs, ironically congratulatory...
upon the imminent triumph of eternal Imperial Russia in the guise of internationalist Communism and humanitarianism. Chambers might have used as his epigraph a passage from T. S. Eliot's *Gerontion*:

> History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
> And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
> Guides us by vanities. Think now
> She gives when our attention is distracted
> And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions
> That the giving famishes the craving. Gives too late
> What's not believed in, or if still believed,
> In memory only, reconsidered passion.
> Gives too soon
> Into weak hands, what's thought can be dispensed with
> Till the refusal propagates a fear.

Chambers brings on stage Clio, the Muse of History, in a fable against mindless optimism when things, finally, seem to be going our way. That he did so in the pages of America's most popular weekly, *Time*, where the euphoria of the perennial American dream was almost compulsively de rigueur, fills us with astonishment. Of course, an editorial footnote attempted, as we would expect, to disinfect his apocalyptic Dostoevskian gloom. Nevertheless, they published it, and there it is, standing up under our most critical scrutiny nearly half a century later.

As one might expect in a collection of journalism, much of it is necessarily topical, but it is rarely only topical. Chambers brings to bear upon matters of the moment, his deeper knowledge of historical contexts. And even in a review of the motion picture *Grapes of Wrath* he brings to bear an exceptional fineness of critical discrimination and an ability to bestow just and measured praise and blame upon popular aesthetic artifacts deserving of both:

People who go to pictures for the sake of seeing pictures will see a great one. For *The Grapes of Wrath* is possibly the best picture ever made from a so-so book... Censorship excised John Steinbeck's well-meant excesses. Camera-craft purges the picture of the editorial rash that blotched the Steinbeck book. Cleared of excrescences, the residue is the great human story which made thousands of people, who damned the novel's phony conclusions, read it. It is the saga of an authentic U. S. farming family who lose their land. They wander, they suffer, but they endure. They are never quite defeated, and their survival is itself a triumph.

Readers of *Witness* may be reminded of how much of Chambers' feeling about the land and those who cultivate it has gone into the writing of this review. It was that feeling which inspired Rebecca West to write in her review of *Witness*: "He believes that nature is an aspect of God, and that to grow crops and tend herds is a means of establishing communication with God. He believes that he communicates with God and that God communicates with him." Chambers' feeling for the land and its people comes through directly and forcefully in a letter he wrote for *The National Review* at the end of May 1958, less than three years before his death, in which he contrasts the country and its government:

After winter's long, cold enemy occupation, spring is back, no longer halting and promissory, but true, irreversible spring... And as throughout nature in the spring voice answers voice... voices are answered by other voices. There are the voices of the Agriculture Department's employees, and other official and semi-official farmers' helpmeets. There are enough of these turtles in the land so that, if there were time at this season to count noses, I suspect that the bureaucratic nose count in almost any county would fill you with wonder at how they manage without colliding. In part they manage by a divi-
sion of labor. While some (bringing, often, a good deal of expert knowledge and patient solicitude to jobs, in general poorly paid) are helping you multiply yields—others (the land bankers and that ilk) are exhorting you to decrease yields. They will pay you for it too; and so painlessly that some scarcely notice that the hand which reaches for the payment is thereafter meshed in the controls. Since few seem to mind this, or to notice the gaping paradox—the coos of increase cancelling the coos of decrease—perhaps it hardly matters. Yet history, glancing back, may be struck by another paradox and wonder if, in America, it was not in the countryside that socialism first took root and stooled.

The last word, illustrative of Chambers’ command of the full resources of language, as the lexicon informs us, is an intransitive verb meaning to throw out shoots. This letter from Westminster, Maryland, one of the finest inclusions in this new selection, strikes us as something of a great prose poem; to grasp its power and beauty its half dozen pages would have to be reprinted in their entirety.

By an odd coincidence, the most recent book by Alger Hiss, Recollections of Life (1988), reveals that his first job for the New Deal in Washington in the 1930s was to serve as counsel for the Agricultural Adjustment Administration which had the bureaucratic task of cutting back farm production in order to raise depressed prices—in other words he was concerned with the same problem that Chambers saw as a farmer. But he saw it from the angle of the government bureaucrat, while Chambers grasped it as a producing farmer who resented the straitjacket of controls imposed by an intrusive government. In a chapter recounting an unfortunate encounter between some young New Dealers in the early thirties and one of their chief idols, the Fabian H. G. Wells, Hiss is somewhat abashed and ironic as he recalls in embarrassment “our missionary zeal in recounting the glorious accomplishments of the New Deal.”

The word missionary in this context may be more significant than the writer realized. For insofar as he was conscious of his own motivations for doing the Lord’s work, as he saw it, these were evidently the condescension of a privileged member of society towards the “lower orders.” This is suggested by an unexpected passage detailing some of his earliest influential intellectual experiences: “Of my reading while in college, I was most moved and influenced by Somerset Maugham’s Of Human Bondage (1915). His protagonist’s self-imposed mission of helping a young woman who had none of his advantages made him a role model for me.” Many young men, including the present writer, must have read Maugham’s book at the same impressionable age, but it boggles the mind to think of any one of them interpreting Philip’s amatory enslavement to Mildred as an instance of missionary zeal to redeem the socially underprivileged. He must never have become aware that the title of the novel is shared with the Fifth Book of Spinoza’s Ethics, which deals with the bondage of man to his emotions. He is obviously fixated on the meaning of the word “bondage” as referring to a social condition rather than a human one. This is the accidental meaning of the word for Maugham rather than the essential one, which he shares with Spinoza. In other words, Maugham’s novel has much in common thematically with one by Marcel Proust which was published a couple of years before, Swann’s Way. Has it ever occurred to anyone that Charles Swann’s motivation for his involvement with Odette was to “uplift” her to his own superior social status? Only one unacquainted with the compulsive emotional potential created by an instinctual drive might do so. He would not really recognize, then, the nature of the plight so masterfully portrayed by both Maugham and Proust. He
would be like a tone-deaf person listening to music.

Hiss’s misreading of Maugham seems to me to tell us something significant about himself. It is little wonder that a man who reads so poorly and with such little objectivity should write a book so inferior in persuasive power to Chambers’ Witness. Thirty years earlier, when he emerged from the penitentiary (“impenitent,” as he tells us now), he had made a first try to win belief “in the court of public opinion” (as he entitled his book) that he had failed to win in the courtroom before two juries of his peers. In the Court of Public Opinion (1957) succeeded only in moving an audience prepared to be moved by a clever lawyer’s consummate technique. It carried little weight with that larger audience that had greeted Witness with exclamations of astonishment: “What a man! What a writer!” Rebecca West spoke for this larger audience when she wrote that...

...perhaps the greatest of all surprises disclosed by the Hiss Case is that Whittaker Chambers should be capable of writing an autobiography so just and so massive in its resuscitation of the past that it often recalls the name of the master of all autobiographers, Aksakov. The value of this book does not depend simply on its painfully exceptional material, nor on the sincerity of the author. Whittaker Chambers writes as writers by vocation try to write and he makes the further discoveries about reality, pushing another half inch below the surface, which writers hope to make when they write.

Some superficial readers at the time, who were possessed solely with the political meaning of the case and believed Chambers in his confrontation with Hiss, still found fault with Witness for what they regarded as the needless exposure of his own family’s soiled linen, which they rightly surmised must have caused the writer almost unutterable anguish. From the vantage point of posterity, it is easy to see they were mistaken, for it is precisely the 200 or so pages dealing with the very American tragedy of his family that give to Witness its surest stamp of authenticity. Robert Frost had once asked mischievously: “How can we write the Russian novel in America so long as life goes on so unterribly?” One possible answer to this rhetorical question is given in Witness! Others may be found, of course, in Melville’s Bartleby and in some of Theodore Dreiser.

What readers must be brought to realize, however, is that a masterpiece like Witness is not likely to have been an isolated fluke in its writer’s oeuvre. Like the critic in the nineteenth century who discovered Vermeer’s View of Delft in the Mauritshuis in The Hague on a journey through Holland and was convinced that the artist who painted it must have done many other pictures hardly less remarkable and went in search of them and proved his hypothesis, a sympathetic reader is likely to search out what else Chambers has written. That is precisely what Teachout has done, and he merits praise for it.

If I have any reservations about the new book, it relates not to the writings he has managed to exhume from obscurity but to certain remarks of his in the introduction, and the quite dreadful, furtive-looking snapshot of Chambers which appears on the dust-jacket. Teachout seems to me altogether too deferential to the caviling criticisms of Chambers as a writer by his friend Lionel Trilling. Trilling was a classmate of Chambers at Columbia and wrote a novel, The Middle of the Journey (1947), in which the principal character is modeled on Chambers. Trilling was prepared to vouch for the honorable character of Chambers and had admired his literary work up to a point but had lost touch with him spiritually after that and was inclined to place the blame upon Chambers. The truth seems to be that Trilling was always a liberal of a

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natively mild temperament, as well as a cultivated one, and Chambers was never one. Chambers’ temperament inclined him to extremes as much as Dostoevsky’s did, and it is certainly no accident that Dostoevsky was perhaps his greatest admiration as a writer. But whether one likes it or not, that is a source of Chambers’ strength, not weakness, and in any case he was a more considerable writer than Trilling, and it is not illuminating to bring to bear Trilling’s opinion about him. Given the difference between the two as men and as writers, it is just about what we would expect it to be.

I have another objection to Teachout’s introduction. While accepting Allen Weinstein’s scholarly judgement on the “truthfulness” of Hiss in his book Perjury (1978) and having examined Weinstein’s massive documentation on which his judgment was based, he can still say that “in the absence of a full-scale biography, Chambers must inevitably remain in large part an enigmatic figure.” He expresses the hope that this new book will contribute to removing some of the darkness and mystery that he still sees surrounding Chambers’ character and motivations, and there is no doubt in my mind that it will.

But what may be troubling Teachout, as it may have troubled other readers of Weinstein’s confirmation of the Hiss verdict, is the revelation of an unsigned statement by Chambers to the F. B. I. concerning his homosexual experiences before his first marriage. Though Weinstein only alludes to this document and does not reprint it, I am sure that Teachout was given access to it in the files which Weinstein opened to him. Chambers apparently produced this unpublished account in anticipation of a possible homophobic attack upon his character by the Hiss defense team. Since this never materialized in the courtroom, though it was the subject of considerable gossip at the time and since then by psychoanalytic partisans of Hiss, Chambers neither signed his statement nor alluded to its subject matter in Witness. It may be compared to the suppressed chapter of Dostoevsky’s The Possessed, a suppression consented to if not originated by Dostoevsky himself. And like that famous chapter, it is probably destined eventually to be printed either separately or as part of Witness itself. When it does appear, it is likely to support the judgment of Weinstein that, whatever light it sheds upon the private life of Chambers, it is irrelevant to determining the question of perjury with regard to Hiss. And it would add little to the persuasive validity of Witness, the intensity and anguished truthfulness of which are their own credentials.

With regard to all autobiographical writing, it is important to keep in mind what Rudyard Kipling reports of his interview with Mark Twain:

Speaking of truth and the like in literature, he said that an autobiography was the one work in which a man, against his will and in spite of his utmost striving to the contrary, revealed himself in his true light to the world. . . . In genuine autobiography, I believe it is not given to human nature to write the truth about itself. None the less, the reader gets a general impression from an autobiography whether the man is a fraud or a good man. . . . And the impression the reader gets is a correct one.

As usual, putting aside the humorous exaggeration, Mark Twain is upon sound ground. No autobiography can be quite complete; and no autobiography can altogether avoid the accusation of being self-serving. All autobiography consists only of chapters of autobiography, but this does not mean that they are all of equal merit. We judge them not only by what they leave out (even if this is vaguely sensed by the reader) but also by what they choose to include. The objection to Hiss’s Recollections of a Life is not that it is skimpy and sporadic and desultory as compared to Witness, but that it is nig-
gardly with regard to details in those passages of his life which Hiss must know (if he is not autistic) that those who followed his trials attentively or read Chambers fully would want covered. Lacking this chapter and still concealing his humanity behind a professional and bureaucratic mask, he is likely to seem to the reader an Iago saying:

*Demand me nothing. What you know, you know; From this time forth I never will speak word.*

And yet Mark Twain is also right in noting that, contrary to the intentions of the writer, some valid impression does transpire through the pages of autobiography. The character involuntarily revealed to me by the hop-skip-and-jumping chapters of his *Recollections* is that of a courtier, a snob, a worshipper of power of every kind. His tone in speaking of his teacher at Harvard, Felix Frankfurter, of his “boss,” Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and of his associate at the United Nations, Eleanor Roosevelt, approaches that of a gushing schoolgirl or “groupie” of a rock star. His egalitarian snobbery even extends to the mobster Frank Costello, with whom he served time in federal prison and from whom he learned that the public personality he admired most was Mrs. Roosevelt. He seems surprised that Mrs. Roosevelt was hardly thrilled to hear this.

Chambers must have intuitively grasped this about Hiss when he said to himself about Hiss’s appearance before the Un-American Activities Committee, in response to the accusation against him: “Why do we wrap the gentleman in our more rawer breath?” The “gentleman” referred to in this quotation from *Hamlet* is the courtier Osric, and it is typical of Chambers that he should be reminded by living reality of something in literature which throws light upon it. He was certainly closer to the mark here than when he described his own early impressions of the glossy smoothness which Hiss presented not only to the world but also to his friends: “Hiss is a man of great simplicity and great gentleness and sweetness of character.” His later assessment of the character of his lethal adversary, who was beguilingly simple and stubborn in his continuing attempt to depict his accuser as a bald-faced liar and informer actuated only by motiveless malignity to destroy his career, was entirely different.

Faced with the prospect of the destruction of his own character, Chambers came to see his former friend as an agent of evil. Not that he ever says this in so many words, but his imagery in *Witness* speaks for him. He began to see Hiss’s evasiveness before the committee as a “legal sinuousness” and Hiss at his best (to use a figure in his review of Rebecca West’s *The Meaning of Treason* (1947), as a man seduced by “that serpentine whisper heard in the dawn of Creation.” The predicament of the Congressional Investigating Committee itself, bent upon exposure of the penetration of the American government by the Communist conspiracy but fearful of the penalties politically levied by liberal public opinion, is described by Chambers in classical allusions. The Committee had set out on the heroic mission of lopping off “the Gorgon head of the Communist conspiracy” but trembled when now, “almost casually, the snaky mass had been set down on the congressmen’s collective desk. It was terrifying. It petrified most of them.” It would be surprising if the very name Hiss did not acquire a sinister significance in the literary mind of Chambers such as is suggested by that scene in *Paradise Lost* in which the fallen angels, wishing to signify their approval of Satan’s speech, can express themselves with no other sound than hissing, since they have all been turned into serpents!
Not that Chambers himself would ever consciously assert this. In *Ghosts on the Roof*, one of his most devastating critical reviews is reserved for Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), and one of his main objections to her ideological fiction is that "the author deals wholly in the blackest blacks and the whitest whites." On the other hand, his praise is reserved for Rebecca West because

in a world racked by partisan passion, which more and more insists upon viewing man in black and white, caricatures of good or evil, she finds them blends of both. Her view asserts the faith that what distinguishes men, not so much from the brutes as from their more habitual selves, is the fact that however tirelessly they pursue evil, their inveterate aspiration, invariable even in depravity, is never for anything else than the good. ... Thus, in a prosy age, her style strives continually toward a condition of poetry, and comes to rest in a rhetoric that, at its best, is one of the most personal and eloquent idioms of our time.

This appreciation applies so well to Chambers himself that it goes far to explain the mutual shock of recognition experienced by the writers reading each other's work. This double enthusiasm somehow seems noble and not to be confused with the log-rolling and back-scratching, which are such commonplace characteristics of a corrupt literary marketplace.

Though Chambers is no snob, high fashion in literature does not frighten him any more than popular culture scares him off. In each he searches out the common denominator of humanity, which gives them their interest for him. Thus, his report for *Time*, May 8, 1939, on the newly published *Finnegans Wake* is a model of intelligent discernment and tolerance ("Night Thoughts" in *Ghosts on the Roof*), and his report of the death of Joyce in 1941 ("Silence, Exile, and Death") is still moving after half a century.

Writing a series of articles on "The History of Western Culture" for Henry Luce's mass-circulation magazines, Chambers is necessarily a popularizer, but this does not mean that he debases his material or condescends to his audience or regales it simplistically. He is unfailingly serious and grave in his manner. Even his puns have a certain weight unfortunately, as in the sentence which he tells us got him his job as a book reviewer for *Time*: "One bomby Sunday afternoon, Mona Gardner sat in a Shanghai park talking Chinese poetry during a Japanese air raid." More felicitously, his prose is characterized by a rhetoric which teeters on the edge of poetry, as in his description of a Gothic Cathedral as "a prayerful uprush of stone," followed by his telling us that Thomas Aquinas' *Summa* is like a Gothic Cathedral. And in a popular magazine he does not shrink from discussing seriously the meaning of Thomas Mann's characterization of Kafka as "a religious humorist." In following the trajectory which brought him from Communism to conservatism, one sees Chambers' journalistic career as a prolonged effort at self-examination, self-education, and self-improvement. What remains constant throughout is the writer's integrity, the sense that he is sharing himself, his own feelings and ideas sincerely with his readers and is not simply trying to manipulate them propagandistically into following a line which he is selling at the moment. He was always, in other words, that rarest of all things in the social mix, *his own man*. If he failed at any point as a result of his human limitations, it was never in honesty of purpose. That is the basic reason why he ultimately succeeded in eliciting from the world, if not wholehearted sympathy, perhaps the more important feeling of trust.

That may also be why he has been reaping some of his laurels posthumously (I am thinking of the Medal of Freedom...
bestowed on him by an American President in 1984 but also of a slowly growing number of American readers who are discovering his remarkable *Witness* with a fresh sense of wonder), while Hiss, who has survived him by thirty years, still seeks to retain credibility and vindication with an ever-dwindling group by vain literary emulation. Intentionally or not, his *Recollections* do throw some light on the role he played. I am thinking here of Hiss's account of the schooling in silence and denial he was given as a child by his family's attitude toward what was regarded as the shameful suicide of his father. The words accidentally overheard—"Those are the Suicide's children!" (about him and his brother by a neighbor)—were the first he ever heard of the matter, and though they were spoken when he was ten years old, they are still ringing in his ears. Then there is what Hiss calls his "lifelong love of the theater." And perhaps not unconnected with this is his observation that his great teacher, Felix Frankfurter, seemed to be enjoying his own notoriety in Boston during the period of the Sacco-Vanzetti Case (May-July, 1921). He may share the feeling expressed somewhat ironically by Emerson in his verses *Brahma* that, under the aspect of eternity, there is little difference between shame and fame! It seems to me as if, at the age of eighty-five and with failing sight, Hiss has reconciled himself to leaving the fame to Whittaker Chambers. He now looks to history for his vindication, and there are some who, though hardly among his admirers, have suggested that he may be posthumously pardoned.

Before that can happen, however, he must face another posthumous judgment made upon him by the greatest of American historians of Bolshevism, Bertram D. Wolfe, the author of *Three Who Made a Revolution* (1948). In his own autobiography, *A Life in Two Centuries* (which was published in 1981, four years after its writer's death, as so many great autobiographies, starting with Rousseau's, have been), Wolfe addressed a couple of very interesting pages to Chambers and Hiss, which are worth quoting extensively, for they are as nearly definitive as our own generation and possibly future ones are likely to see.

Wolfe's name had appeared in passing in the pages of *Witness*. On the strength of that, William F. Buckley, Jr., in 1957, when Hiss's post-prison *In the Court of Public Opinion* made its appearance, was inspired to ask Wolfe, among other public figures, to express his opinion of the case, which he did in a brief statement printed in *National Review*. Wolfe mentions this and notes that, in addition to the mention of him in *Witness*, he is also mentioned in Buckley's collection of Whittaker Chambers' letters, *Odyssey of a Friend* (1970). Wolfe continues: "Concerning my review of *Witness*, [Chambers] writes: 'Bert made the prime point—the lengths I went to to save Alger [Hiss]; for that is the heart of *Witness*. Then he clinched the public points, clearly, briefly.' This statement was followed by a personal letter, the only communication I ever remember having received from him. In this letter he writes:

Dear Bert,

... I want to thank you ... not only because it made the necessary points so tidily. What moved me was that you noted my efforts to spare Alger. I do not remember anybody else having noticed this. Yet this lies at the heart of the meaning of the whole business. The west that I meant to stand for was one of humanity that, above all, understands, forgives, spares, and whose reality lives precisely in proportion to the courage that is required for the effort. In the contrast of that spirit with a Communism that hates, reviles, kills, in the name of an implacable Zweckmassigkeit, lies the crux. Thus the night in which I tried to kill myself so that, having disclosed the conspiracy for all our sakes, I
might spare the conspirators by eliminating myself as a witness against them was the high point of the case. . . . If these things are worth remembering at all, I think that, one day, when grosser aspects of this affair have sunk from sight, some few may grasp this central meaning. You have understood it in advance, and I am deeply grateful to you. . . .

That letter goes to the heart of the feelings of Whittaker Chambers toward his once intimate friend, Hiss, and the Chambers-Hiss case. If Alger Hiss should ever come to that understanding of the duty of men to their fellow humans, he would drop his attempt to impugn our court and jury system, to lower men's opinion of what he has called on occasion "the best system in the world" (in a lecture calculated to undermine our democracy), and would cease the extravagant effort to get typewriter experts to manufacture a Woodstock of 1928 that can write letters with typeprints, letter for letter, exactly like the dispatches on microfilm that Whittaker Chambers hid in the pumpkin on his farm so that the Cheka, searching his mattress, walls and floors, would not steal them before the libel suit that he had brought against him could be tried; typeprints, too, exactly like the letters that Priscilla Hiss sent to her friends and which were introduced as evidence in the libel trial and the Hiss perjury trial. A true espionage trial, of course, could not take place, because according to the American system of justice the lapse of time had outlawed the charge to be tried. Only the perjury fell within the legal time limit, but if the perjury was true, then the espionage—outlawed or not—was true also.

The papers turned in as evidence against Hiss at his trial were partly in his own handwriting and partly typed on a 1928 Woodstock typewriter that Priscilla's father gave him and on which Priscilla Hiss also wrote letters to friends and to women's groups. Some 200 pages of typescript were offered in evidence, all typed on the old Woodstock. Hiss's first answer in court concerning his machine was: "I am amazed, and until the day I die, I shall wonder how Whittaker Chambers has got into my house to use my typewriter." It is this same typewriter that Alger Hiss has since claimed was perfectly imitated, word for word, letter for letter, by one specially manufactured for that purpose by the F.B.I. An attempt was made by him to get typewriter experts to duplicate that feat, but it failed. Professional experts whose lives are devoted to identifying the typewriter on which challenged documents were typed have declared that no two typewriters are exactly the same and that no other Woodstock made in that year would produce identical letters, just as no two fingerprints are identical. Moreover, by concentrating on the typewriter, Hiss has obscured the fact that a number of the documents introduced were in what he acknowledged in his perjury trial as his own handwriting.

Those of us who have lived through and watched this drama cannot be fooled. However, not one, but two whole generations have grown up, in whom an attitude can perhaps be instilled by Hiss without the slightest knowledge on their part of the facts, nor where to look for them, in what books, or in what court records, nor do they even feel the suspicion that something is being put over on them. What emerged from Hiss's addresses to college audiences in the seventies is not that he is innocent, but that our courts, our jury system, our security system are corrupt and our country unjust and rotten to the core. This makes all the more shocking the decision of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court in August of 1975 ordering the Massachusetts Bar Association to re-admit Alger Hiss to the Bar although it had never attempted before to tell the Bar Association what the qualifications of a member of the Bar should be, nor ever attempted to reverse a disbarment. The court found that Hiss was "presently of good moral character," a verdict which The New York Times endorsed editorially by saying, "After so many years of decent behavior, Mr. Hiss should be permitted to practice his profession." Moreover, the court examined the testimony at the trial which made it clear that the perjury involved the handing to Chambers of espion-
nage documents, a betrayal of trust in connection with Hiss’s high office, which evidence was no longer subject to indictment only because of the Statute of Limitations. Hence, the “decent behavior” consisted in his spending much of the last quarter century in continuing to assert his innocence of the perjury charge.

Although more than thirteen years have now elapsed since the death of the man who wrote these words, their judgment is not likely to be reversed any more than is that of the court which convicted Hiss. In fact, Wolfe’s verdict was considerably buttressed in scholarly fashion a year after his death by the publication of the findings by Allen Weinstein in *Perjury*. Yet more than a decade after that, Hiss has continued the “comedy” in his *Recollections*, though the press, including *The New York Times*, has not to my knowledge given its existence any sign of recognition. Which is not surprising, since the “media” are as easily bored as the public they serve, and therefore both are satisfied to let issues drop completely if they are not resolved quickly enough. But I have met too many people, liberals or not, who are content with their own verdict: “A plague on both their houses!” Chambers was too off-beat to command their confidence; some, who should know better, simply write him off as “crazy”; and they are too shrewd and realistic to couple this with a defense of Hiss. But the problem refuses to go away so easily. Either Chambers was lying or Hiss is a traitor. *Tertium non datur*, as a medieval logician would say. We cannot have it both ways, and we cannot reject both hypotheses either. And whichever hypothesis is adopted, it cannot be permitted, as Oswald Spengler once said of Marxism, “to die not of refutation but of boredom.”

Though *Ghosts on the Roof* has been published for some time now, there has been no rush to review it, and my local bookseller, who does not carry it in stock, assured me (after he consulted *Books in Print*) that he could obtain it for me from his wholesaler, but it would take time. Apparently the book is being silently consigned by editors and booksellers to the same category as Hiss’s “memoirs.” But it is not in the same class at all. It awaits discovery by the same readers who have been rediscovering the claims of *Witness* to inclusion in the permanent library of America. In 1961, after the death of Chambers, Arthur Koestler remarked that “the witness is dead; his testimony stands!” Quite independently of the sensational trial which occasioned the initial discovery of Chambers’ claims as a writer, it would be well for Americans to learn something more of the literary development of the man capable of giving that unshakeable testimony.

I miss my guess if that testimony does not have special meaning just now for readers in eastern Europe and even in Russia, who are still rousing themselves with the realization that they are awakening from the long nightmare of Communist dictatorship. It is their struggle (far from over apparently) that was reproduced for Chambers in the experience of one man as he describes it.

Hiss tells us that he looks to a future he does not expect to see for his vindication. He could be right, but only if historical revisionism restores the reputation of Stalin first. One of the most vivid and unforgettable vignettes in *Witness* is that of Chambers, already planning his break with Communism and sounding out his friend Hiss, albeit by cautious indirectness, on the subject of the Russian purges and particularly of the character of Stalin: “For the first time, I saw Alger Hiss glance at me out of the side of his eye, ‘yes, Stalin plays for keeps doesn’t he?’ he said. I had not heard the expression used before except in marbles. I thought that it was a neat summing up. I also thought that I had gone too far, and stopped.”

Yes, Hiss retains his old self-confi-
idence, because he has working against
him only such epiphanies in the words of
the dead and the muteness of inanimate
objects like documents and typewriters.
This is precisely the combination that
has proved potent enough to topple hid-
eous idols of Stalin and Lenin in various
capitals across Europe, and they should
be powerful enough to carry conviction
in the still, small voice of truth to future
generations, however distant and how-
ever "revisionist" in temper.

Eliot Agonistes

T. S. Eliot and Prejudice, by Christopher
Ricks, Berkeley and Los Angeles:
vii+290 pp. $25.00

In a letter to the Listener on April 29, 1971,
George Steiner brought out into the open
a charge—construed as a puzzle—that
has plagued T. S. Eliot criticism for many
years. Taking as a given "Eliot's anti-
Semitism," Steiner remarked:

The obstinate puzzle is that Eliot's uglier
touches tend to occur at the heart of very
good poetry (which is not the case of
Pound). One thinks of the notorious "the
Jew squats on the window-sill...Spawned
in some estaminet of Antwerp" in
"Gerontion"; of

The rats are underneath the piles.
The Jew is underneath the lot.

in "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein
with a Cigar"; of

Rachel née Rabinovitch
Tears at the grapes with murderous paws

in "Sweeney among the Nightingales."

Can poetry of a high order express senti-
ments that are felt to be illiberal or preju-
diced on the ground of race or religion?

Are, in fact, these lines evidence of anti-
Semitism?

More recently a flap developed in Lon-
don amongst philanthropic Jews as to
whether a library with which Eliot had
once been associated, in his lifetime,
should now be financially supported. And
in the November 20, 1989, issue of The
New Yorker, Cynthia Ozick, writing as "A
Critic at Large," dismissed Eliot as now
defunct, no longer a presence (much less
a force) in modern poetry. The essay,
one of the nastiest hatchet-jobs ever to
appear—at any time and in relation to
any dead poet or other writer—is full of
bizarre misconceptions of the man and
ugly innuendoes. Eliot's personality, his
family relations, his literary theories, his
religious thought, his status as exemplar
of high culture, his influence on others—
all of these are savaged under a peculiar
pretext: Ozick represents herself as hav-
ing once been awed by Eliot's magisterial
authority, but now she perceived that he
had feet of clay and wasn't worth her
admiration.

Given her overall objective of destroy-
ing every aspect of his reputation, it will
come as no surprise that she denigrates
Eliot on the ground of religious preju-
dice. A sampling of her opinions will
have to suffice. Eliot's religious thought
and feeling she dismisses as "local and
exclusionary," a worship based on "the
forms of the Church of England—itself an
island church, after all, though he did his
best to link it with what he termed 'the
Universal Church in the World.'" This
religion, she remarks, embittered him:
"he allowed himself to become estranged
from humanity." Certainly, she writes,
"he had contempt for Jews as marginal, if
not inimical, to his concept of Christian
community."

The gravity of high art led Eliot to envision
a controlling and exclusionary society that
could, presumably, supply the conditions
to produce such art. These doctrinal ten-
dencies, expressed in 1939 in a little book