

Coming to Terms with a Child

Henry Beissel
BLACK MOSS PRESS 2011
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Reviewed by James Bacque

Henry Beissel as a boy lived through terror bombings, attempted genocide against his people, a lost war, mass starvation and the accusation by the victor that he and his fellow Germans bore all the guilt for WWI and WWII. Surviving by his wits in ruined Germany as a translator for the American and the British conquerors, he acquired skills in the language that he deploys here in this amazing book, *Coming to Terms with a Child* (Black Moss, \$10).

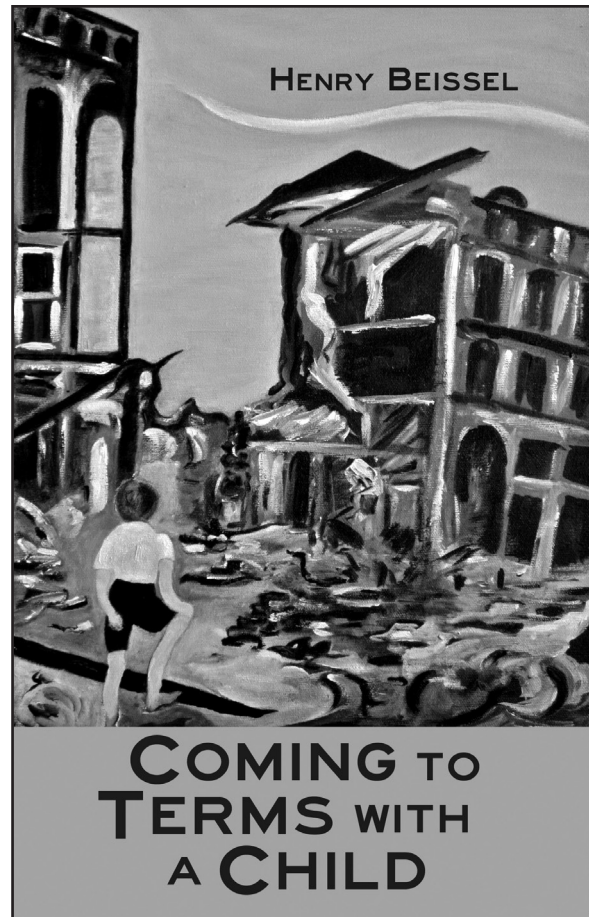
It is about

the ancient games of greed
and power the few have always played with
the many, staking nations on a dare, banking
on turning strangers into scapegoats, whipping
generations into orgies of hatred and violence
till the whole continent caught fire and twice
in a single century the honourable succumbed
to the poison of patriotism.

The history of the west through four or five generations has had a constant theme, fear and hatred of Germany. This finally gave way to hatred and fear of communism and Germany, and it is now fear and hatred of Islam and Germany. Beissel faces this and faces it down with his elegiac epic which is nowhere rancorous, never calls for vengeance but always reminds us of the truth of what happened to men, women and children in the cities where once a great civilization lived.

The horrors of today from Bosnia through Gaza evoke for him

the surreal scenes I witnessed in those years of terror

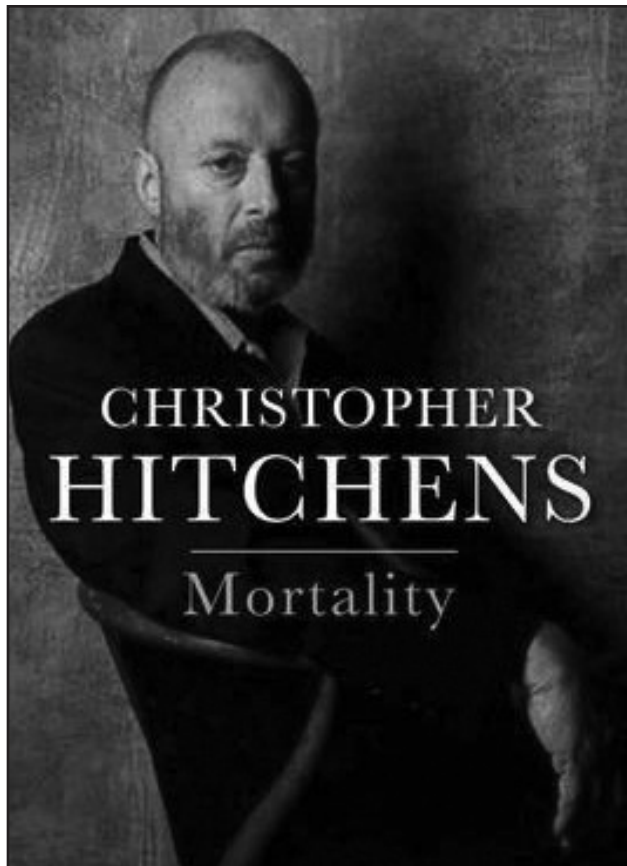


and tyranny so bone-chillingly beyond belief and
bearance I can no longer be sure
what fevered fear projects
on the walls of memory and what I experienced,
what panic stampedes into images and what I saw
turn ten thousand childhoods into one long nightmare.

Germany today is a nation of wounded souls and Beissel's is one of them. That is why this epic astonishes us – he has managed an amazing feat: driven from a land he was taught to hate, he has remained stable, sane and kind. Exiled in Canada, he has become a poet for the world, as well as teacher, editor and writer of uncommon achievement. He concludes,

As the red river of the heart carried me
from the Rhine to the Ottawa, I learnt
that rivers speak the same language
always and everywhere: they link the clouds
to the roots of all life on their way to the sea.

James Bacque is a world-renowned historian, novelist, and playwright who lives in Ontario, Canada, with his wife Elisabeth.



Mortality

Christopher Hitchens

SIGNAL , 2012

128 pp

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Reviewed by Geoffery Dow

It seems somehow churlish – or maybe *uncouth* – to take the last words of a dying man and pronounce them lacking.

But here we are. Christopher Hitchens is dead and I have at hand an elegantly-designed but very thin hardcover book, with small pages set in large type, that contains the writer’s last words – at least, the last words he wrote for *Vanity Fair* magazine.

Hitchens, whose passing was as unexpected as the death of a man being treated for advanced oesophageal cancer could possibly be, was as much a showman as a writer. He was as comfortable on stage and at parties as he was behind a keyboard and over the years counted not just other writers but also many among the economic and political elites of the United States (and elsewhere) among his friends and drinking buddies.

A public intellectual to his admirers, his detractors saw him more as mere showman, glib and facile, a clever polemicist, but by no means

a serious thinker. Though never a close student of his work, prior to 9/11 I leaned towards the former position; after he allowed his personal fears to trump principle, I swung hard into the latter camp. It was hard to say which was the more disappointing: the credulity that saw him buy (and try to sell) the transparent lies on which the invasion of Iraq were based, or the moral idiocy which saw him support torture, simply because it was “us” doing the torturing.

But however wrong he was on matters of state, he was and remained a strong proponent of freedom of speech and – a rarity in his adopted country, the United States of America – he was an unabashed atheist. It was his 2007 addition to the small blizzard of pro-atheist books (along with his decision to have himself water-boarded, and his subsequent admission that the “procedure” was torture after all) that convinced me to take another look at his work.

Having already read Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*, I could not help but compare it

to Hitchens' *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.

Hitchens' book turned out to be inferior to Dawkins' in just about every way. Ironically, the professional writer didn't write as well as the professional scientist, and he certainly didn't *argue* as well.

Where Dawkins was trenchantly analytical, Hitchens was glibly prejudiced; an undertone of contemptuous rage ruined any chance the book might achieve Hitchens' professed end, to convince at least some Believers of the error of their ways.

Those qualities that made Hitchens an entertaining polemicist at short lengths – his cruel wit, clever turns of phrase and over-the-top passion among them – proved disadvantages at longer lengths. His arguments were glib, but shallow; his anger heartfelt, but indiscriminate; his research and dialectics sophomoric at best.

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Hitchens fell ill with what would prove to be advanced oesophageal cancer while promoting his memoir, *Hitch-22* in June of 2010. *Mortality's* eight brief chapters are dispatches to those in "the country of the well" by a *reporter* on permanent assignment to "the land of malady," written over the next 18 months and published in the magazine *Vanity Fair*.

Determined to carry on as usual and determinedly contrarian, Hitchens' first essay takes issue with the familiar Kubler-Ross "theory" of progression – "denial to rage through bargaining to depression and the eventual bliss of 'acceptance'".

Admitting that he has "been taunting the Reaper into taking a free scythe," he finds that

he has "succumbed to something so predictable and banal that it bores even me. Rage would be beside the point for the same reason. Instead, I am badly oppressed by the gnawing sense of waste."

[...] he finds that he has "succumbed to something so predictable and banal that it bores even me. [...] Instead, I am badly oppressed by the gnawing sense of waste."

Hitchens similarly rejects the metaphor of struggle or battle when it comes to his disease as well as the urge to anthropomorphize it.

When I described the tumour in my oesophagus as a 'blind, emotionless alien,' I suppose that even I couldn't help awarding it some of the qualities of a living thing. This at least I know to be a mistake: an instance of the pathetic fallacy (angry cloud, proud mountain, presumptuous little Beaujolais) by which we ascribe animate qualities to inanimate

phenomena. [Page 11.]

In Hitchens' view there is no enemy and no war. He has a disease and he – the patient – is reduced to a kind of passive stoicism at best, enduring pain and fear and the indignities of loss: of hair and appetite; of weight and libido; while his doctors *work* to stop, or even to reverse, the progression of the disease.

If he can be said to fight at all, it is through his decision to document his illness and to use the experience as a novel weapon against often-familiar enemies.

So in Chapter II, he re-engages with religion, putting the lie to the so-called powers of "intercessory prayer", reporting with cynical amusement on those determined to pray for his recovery (or at least, for his salvation) and on others who (really!) prayed for his death and eternal suffering from "HELLFIRE" (caps in the original).

He writes with a melancholic irony about the advances in medical science that have kept

him alive – and about those to come, which he has little chance of living long enough to take advantage of.

Chapter IV is a terse and very funny meditation on the etiquette of illness – of cancer in particular – for both patients and their friends and loved ones, who so often say the wrong thing.

Chapter VI is a forceful demonstration of the adolescent bullshit behind the Nietzschean maxim, “whatever doesn’t kill me makes me stronger.”

That it took the prospect of immanent death for Hitchens to realize the vacuity of the statement reflects poorly on him as an intellectual. He says that he “now sometimes wonder[s] why I ever thought it profound.” As well he might.

That said, Chapter VI could serve as a useful tonic for someone still stuck in the delusion. And further, it is a moving personal statement on the nature of pain.

It’s probably a merciful thing that pain is impossible to describe from memory. It’s also impossible to warn against. If my [radiation] doctors had tried to tell me up front, they might perhaps have spoken of “grave discomfort” or perhaps of a burning sensation. I only know that nothing at all could have readied or steadied me for this thing that seemed to scorn painkillers and to attack me in my core. I now seem to have run out of radiation options in those spots (thirty-five straight days being considered as much as anyone can take), and while this isn’t in any way good news, it spares me from having to wonder if I could willingly endure the same course of treatment again.

But mercifully, too, I now can’t summon the memory of how I felt during those lacerating days and nights . . .

“I only know that nothing at all could have readied or steadied me for this thing that seemed to scorn painkillers and to attack me in my core.”

–*Christopher Hitchens*

This is strong medicine, insightful writing that unfortunately makes only fleeting appearances in *Mortality*. Too often what little there is here are the facile musings of a columnist practising his craft on autopilot. A very good columnist, but nevertheless one churning out disposal words meant to fill the space between adds in a slick magazine

and, as likely as not, seeing print without benefit of a second, let alone of a third, pass of his word-processor.

Hitchens himself thought there would be a good many more columns than there were. It wasn’t the cancer that ended his life, but an opportunistic infection: plain, old-fashioned pneumonia. It is certainly not his fault his personal plague diary was cut short, nor that the eighth and final chapter comprises only notes for a column that never got written.

Death alone, though, doesn’t justify a book’s existence. My copy came to me for free, but bears a cover-price of \$22.95. Including the aforementioned introduction by Graydon Carter and an afterword by Hitchens’ wife, the writer Carol Blue, the elegantly designed and well-made little hardcover only just breaks 100 pages of pretty large type. By word-count alone, *Mortality* is no bargain.

Mortality is not a bad book, but neither is it a very good one. Amusing, even moving in places, in the end there is not any great wisdom contained within the covers of this book.

If you’re curious, look for it in a library, or find the original columns on the web. In the end, it’s tempting to wonder if Hitchens himself might not have decided his last words would have been better left to the impermanent pages of back issues of *Vanity Fair*.

Geoffrey Dow is a writer, editor, and consultant. For more see www.ed-rex.com