

In memoriam Keith Hitchins
**LONGING FOR HOME - KEITH HITCHINS TRAVELING
THROUGH EUROPE (1960-1962)**

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Abstract

The text recalls Keith Hitchins' travels through Europe. It stresses that travel for Keith Hitchins was not a matter of joyful explorations or inspirational journeys. He sought to understand a place through prose, through research, and through the books he found and purchased in bookstores.

Keywords: *travels; Europe; books; Keith Hitchins; Romania*

As a graduate student going to Europe for research, Keith Hitchins looked to societies, landscapes, and events through the eyes of his American identity. His stay in Romania was mainly spent in libraries in Bucharest and Cluj; he travelled to Hungary to find materials in the archives. France was a frequent stop on his itinerary with stops in Paris to visit bookstores. He got a taste for the German technical advances and culture when he visited Germany to find books to mail home: Frankfurt with its unique zoo, Stuttgart's newly built super-highways, which were just like the American ones, with gasoline stations and small restaurants along the way, Nürnberg's intact thirteenth-century medieval character, and Vienna with its underground passageways full of shops and bookstores. Yet, everywhere his interests led him, his American taste and background, as well as thoughts of his father and home at Rotterdam Junction, NY, followed him relentlessly.

There is no knowing Keith Hitchins. This year, on November 1, we commemorate a year from his passing at 89. In life, he was discreet and extremely private, yet his fame has known no bounds, and his reputation no rest. Like Shakespeare or J.D Salinger, Hitchins did not want his private life to be known, letting only his books and articles, most of them scattered in unknown journals, speak for himself. Searching for Hitchins means searching through the letters he sent to his friends (if preserved), letters that remained formal and revealing too much about his work and too little about the man and his private

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thoughts. In his later years, he began writing short autobiographical pieces and invited me to write about him as professor and friend (to this end, I have collected materials and taken extensive notes in classroom and during our daily conversations). But his autobiographical attempts were nothing else than a generous intention to leave a record of his training in French and Romanian universities. He hoped that his learning trajectory be considered by a few of his former students and colleagues who teach in the American academia. In life, he shied from administrators, lawyers, and intrusive, nosey acquaintances, making sure that, until the end of his life, he remained independently minded, self-reliant, and free to do the things he enjoyed the most. Only his articles and books remained freakishly autobiographical, even pondering his legacy. He liked to select as his object of research intellectuals who shared his own vision of life, particularly those who embraced the conservatism of American small towns prevailing at the time of his coming of age. He used scholarship and travel for research purposes as tools for crafting a world of his own, which he closely imagined and closely inhabited. His world was dense, morally Christian, and scrupulous in vocation and destiny. He showed an instinctive understanding of himself and thus he could tap the interior richness of the intellectuals with whom he found a kinship of the mind and spirit.

Travel for Keith Hitchens was not a matter of joyful explorations or inspirational journeys. He sought to understand a place through prose, through research, and through the books, he found and purchased in bookstores. He did not seek the sensations of life on the road but cherished the people and their activities for what they could possibly reveal in terms of similarities to his own country. He linked the emotions and stress of a journey solely to his physical safety and that of others. "When the land was sighted, joy brightened the faces of us all," he told me once when describing his trip to Europe by boat. Like always, his comments were pleasantly literary, eliciting instant amusement. He was also careful about the safety of his friends, fearing that they might get arrested for talking to or visiting an American "imperialist."

As soon as he settled in Bucharest in 1960, he was seeking the opportunity to visit some English language classes. He found that English was very popular in Romania and there was great curiosity about 'our way of life and history,' an expression that calls Hitchens to mind so closely, for it served as a core tenet of his scholarship. Whenever he thought of travel, he thought of home. In discovering the culture of the Romanian homeland, Hitchens was fascinated whether a country could be like the United States and should disrupt its ancient mode of life by accepting trade and outside influences.

In Cluj, he brought with him American magazines like “House Beautiful”, which, he recollected, were quickly snapped up by the Romanian students and professors. He noticed that the textbooks in English being used at the University of Cluj came exclusively from the Soviet Union. The reason for that, he pondered, was to ensure that the books will contain nothing contrary to the official line. He also reasoned that, in this way, the regime could conserve the small supply of dollars available to the regime.

In 1962, he has taken a room at the Saint-Roch Hotel in Paris and spent his days writing his thesis and going to movies. One evening, he decided to go watch an old American movie “You can’t take it with you!” with James Stewart, Jean Arthur, and Lionel Barrymore. Back in Bucharest, he could not miss the premiere for “The Old Man and the Sea” to be held in June for it was a great occasion for Hitchins to reflect on the movie’s philosophizing character. He was curious about the impact such a movie had on the Romanian audience and discovered that it was little understood. He thought that the movie had too little action and was too difficult for the foreign, non-English speaking audience. At the event, he expected a little hoopla since one or more American movie stars were invited to attend the premiere and agreed to participate in the follow-up events. To his utmost surprise, the American actors were able to relate to the Romanian public in very warm terms. He noted that due to their immense popularity, the actors ended up traveling to four more cities - Constanța, Iași, Cluj, and Timișoara – in the course of a single week. At the premiere, he spotted in the audience two Hollywood stars, Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine. Although they did not play in “The Old Man and the Sea,” (it was Spencer Tracy who played as the lead actor) they stayed a few more weeks, well past their own movie’s premiere, and came to severely strain their voices from talking incessantly to Romanian guests. Their movie “The Apartment” was a tremendous success for several weeks, leading to numerous social doings in Bucharest. Given all the American events going on, the spring of 1962 could well be labelled as the American season of the year. In interviews, the American actors openly declared that they totally embraced the very warm reception they received from the Romanian public and the communist authorities. Hitchins was able to talk to them for a few moments when he was invited to attend the reception given in their honour at the US Minister’s private residence. He thought of Lemmon and MacLaine as very fine people, as they mixed easily with all the guests and made time to talk to each of them effortlessly, without pretentiousness or putting on airs. That quickly won Hitchins over as he felt proud of his co-nationals. Ever since, he became their very loyal fan. Yet, only Gretchen Buehler, another

Fulbright American student who was studying in Romania at the time, jostled to take their autograph.

Going to movies was a fascinating experience for Hitchins, as he tried to observe the Romanians' reactions to language. He noticed that movies were closed captioned with subtitles in Romanian, a practice common in most European cities. When he watched a puppet show, "The Hand with Five Fingers," he looked again at how Romanians would relate to it. The show was a satire on American and British detective movies, and Hitchins found it clever in many ways, concluding that Americans would appreciate it better than the Romanians mainly because the latter watched few, if any, American detective films. Besides movies, other cultural events attracted Hitchins and quickly reminded him of American life and culture. When watching ballet shows, like the performance of the Russian troupe of the Bolshoi Theatre of Moscow, Hitchins could not help but mention that the female lead appeared in New York the year before.

One of his goals when travelling to Eastern Europe was to learn Hungarian. When he was invited to have coffee by the Hungarian staff at the Library of the Romanian Academy in Cluj, he was intent on practicing his Hungarian. One evening in Cluj, he bought tickets to "Faust" the leading role being sung by a Hungarian opera star. He was hoping to get used to understanding Hungarian words in a musical deliverance. Reading novels and watching movies drawn from famous works of literature held a particular attraction to him. When reading Franny Molnar's novel in Hungarian *A Pál Útcai Fiák (The Paul Street Boys)*, Hitchins was trying to learn Hungarian and quickly discovered that it related the adventures of a group of schoolboys in Budapest, in a close resemblance to Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*. This made the novel pretty fun to read, he told me, and did not seem like work.

He often used amusement for research purposes, but other times he just relaxed and set time aside to take in a football game. Getting the baseball standings was a constant request of his from friends and family back home. Watching American football and baseball games were his favourite pastime. The warming of the weather meant, in Hitchins's mind, that the baseball season would be starting soon. He was thinking of America time and again. Televised bowling shows also drew Hitchins in as did the golf matches, which he followed in St. Cloud in Paris, and the race tracks nearby, which he visited several times since 1958.

Everything American, from events like the exhibition of plastic inventions to the newest US minister appointed to serve in Bucharest, has been of intense focus for Hitchins. He traced his fellow Americans as news about them were published in newspapers. While in Bucharest in 1962, he was invited to a cocktail party to celebrate July Fourth at the US Minister's residence. By a strange coincidence and

to his great joy, he ran into a man from Schenectady, who lived on the Saratoga Road, and was employed at General Electric. Along with three other colleagues from General Electric, he has been attending a two-week electronics conference in Bucharest.

Besides sports and cultural and technical events, Hitchins paid attention to architecture and landscaping, finding similarities between the newly built dining hall of the University of Cluj and the dining hall at Harvard only that the former was built “without the frills.” Whenever he embarked on a trip to various Romanian destinations, it was always spurred by the initiative of others, and by invitation. His Romanian colleagues and friends competed for his attention and, as a result, he went on many trips across the country. During a visit to the Bran Castle, he marvelled at the small town of Bran itself, which reminded him of a New England village. The village was green in the centre with well-kept houses all around. As a Reformed believer himself, he paid close attention to Reformed Churches in Transylvania. The most attractive building in Cluj was the Reformed Church built in the fifteenth century. It was Gothic in style and in an excellent state of preservation, just like the medieval town surrounding it. He even attended the church ceremony and found it beautiful. But watching the parishioners placing flowers and lighting candles on the graves in the Cluj cemetery had an even stronger impression on him. Being situated on a steep hill, the cemetery was all aglow with candlelight.

Weather is a constant observation for Hitchins, comparing the intensity of storms in the countries he visited the geography and climate of the Atlantic Coast. But weather comments were always followed by other mundane inquiries about his hometown while traveling through Europe. He would check with people not only about the baseball standings, but also how the elections in his hometown came out. Comparisons with America were constant.

In Cluj, he told me, Christmas toys were available in stores in abundance, and the prices, by American standards, were quite low. Yet, only New Year’s Eve cards were available for purchase. Christmas cards were nowhere to be seen, so, he purchased cards and conformed with the regime rules to wish his cards recipients only “La Mulți Ani!

While abroad, travellers are tempted to set out full of expectations, or take an unsparing look at their host society as well as their own. Yet, we can turn to Hitchins for an impartial picture of both Romania and the United States as he refrained from condemning or disparaging the vastly opposed political regimes. His successful research trips seemed to build his reputation in Romania without affecting or delaying his recognition in the United States or even further. With Hitchins, more he got to know Eastern Europe, fonder

he became of his home. Being elected to serve as a representative, Hitchins turned out to be an extraordinary ambassador of his own country, the United States, and in every move and step he took, he thought of his home, his country, and his fellow Americans.