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*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

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Essay by Joseph Epstein

## A THINKER, I SUPPOSE



*What are you? You call yourself a thinker, I suppose.*  
—R.H.S. Crossman to Isaiah Berlin

**P**ROLIXITY, THY NAME IS ISAIAH, LAST name Berlin. So one feels on coming to the last letter in the four-volume collection of the letters of Isaiah Berlin, edited with sedulousness and unstinting devotion by Henry Hardy. A former editor at Oxford University Press, Hardy, not long after meeting Berlin in 1972, took it upon himself to gather together Berlin's various writings, which today, nearly two decades after his death, fill up no fewer than 17 books, including 10 reissues of his older books. He has now come to the end of editing these letters. No writer or scholar has ever been better served by an editor than Isaiah Berlin by Henry Hardy.

I write "writer or scholar," but it is less than clear whether Berlin was one or the other, or for that matter if he were either. Berlin began his university life as a philosopher, in the age of British analytic philosophy, which, though he recognized its usefulness, he found too arid for his tastes, altogether too dead-ended. He gradually came to the conclusion that he want-

ed a subject "in which one could hope to know more at the end of one's life than when one had begun." He turned to traditional political philosophy, which led him to his ultimate general subject, his passion: the history of ideas.

### No Hedgehogery

**A**S FOR HIS OWN CONTRIBUTION TO this history, Berlin is credited with formulating the useful distinction between negative and positive liberty. Negative liberty covers that part of life—private life, chiefly—not covered by coercion or interference by the state, allowing freedom to act upon one's desires so long as they don't encroach upon the freedom of others. Positive liberty is that entailed in choosing one's government, which in turn determines in what parts of life interference and coercion ought to be applied to the lives of citizens in pursuit of what is deemed the common good. Much has been written about this distinction by contemporary philosophers, not a little of it disputatious.

The other idea associated with Berlin's political thought is pluralism, sometimes de-

noted "value pluralism," holding that useful values can be, and often are, in conflict. Berlin was opposed to the notion that the central questions of human life can have one answer. Wallace Stevens's "lunatic of one idea" was not for him. In a talk called "Message to the Twenty-First Century," read on his behalf at the University of Toronto in 1994, three years before his death, Berlin wrote:

if these ultimate human values by which we live are to be pursued, then compromises, trade-offs, arrangements have to be made if the worst is not to happen.... My point is that some values clash: the ends pursued by human beings are all generated by our common nature, but their pursuit has to be to some degree controlled—liberty and the pursuit of happiness...may not be fully compatible with each other, nor are liberty, equality, and fraternity.

"The Hedgehog and the Fox" is Berlin's most famous essay, taking off from an epigraph supplied by the 7th-century B.C. Greek

poet Archilochus: “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” The essay is on the intellectual travail of Leo Tolstoy—a natural fox in Berlin’s reading, who, in his search for the unifying principle controlling the multiplicity of human actions, longed to be a hedgehog. The temptation of hedgehogery was never one to which Berlin himself succumbed.

### Intellectual Celebrity

**F**RUCTIFYING AS THESE IDEAS HAVE been, it is not as a political philosopher that Berlin is chiefly of interest. He was instead that less easily defined phenomenon, a *flâneur* of the mind, an intellectual celebrity in three different nations, England, America, and Israel, a personage, no less—yet perhaps not all that much more. As for his reputation in England, the 27-year-old Berlin, anticipating his own career, recounts telling Maurice Bowra “that in Oxford & Cambridge only personalities counted, & not posts, & that striking and original figures always overshadowed dim professors etc.” He was himself nothing if not striking; it is only his originality that is in question.

In many ways Berlin, as he would have been the first to say, led a charmed life. Born in 1909 in Riga, Latvia, the only surviving child of a successful Jewish lumber merchant, he and his family, after a brief stay in the Soviet Union, departed in 1921 for England. A tubby boy, with a lame arm caused at birth by an obstetrician’s ineptitude, a foreigner in a land not without its strong strain of xenophobia and anti-Semitism, the young Isaiah Berlin carefully negotiated his way up the slippery slope to eminence. He gained entrance to St. Paul’s School in London, thence to Corpus Christi, Oxford, and thence to an early fellowship at All Souls, the first Jewish fellow in the history of that college. He waited until his mid-forties to marry Aline Halban, *née* Gunzbourg, a woman whose substantial wealth allowed him to live out his days in great comfort, amidst costly paintings and servants, and putting him permanently out of the financial wars.

Gregarious and charming, Berlin met everyone: Sigmund Freud, Chaim Weizmann, Winston Churchill, David Ben-Gurion, Felix Frankfurter, Igor Stravinsky, Jacqueline Kennedy, Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak...the list goes on. Less a Casanova than a Mercurio, he found his way into the select circles of such women as Marietta Tree, Sibyl Colefax, and Emerald Cunard. Before long Berlin himself became a name others wished to add to their own lists of social and intellectual collectibles.

Awards and honors rained down upon him: the presidency of the British Academy, honorary degrees, festschrifts, doctoral dissertations written about his works, an Order of Merit, international prizes, headship of Wolfson (a new Oxford college), all this and more—and yet none of it was sufficient to convince Berlin that he was a figure of the first quality. Self-deprecation is a *leitmotif* that plays throughout his letters over nearly 70 years. “I am quite clear that such career as I have had was securely founded on being overestimated,” he wrote toward the end of his life to the archeologist John Hilton.

rior intellectual penetration, and character analysis.

### On and On

**A**LTHOUGH THE FOUR VOLUMES OF Berlin’s letters run to more than 2,000 pages, these published letters, Mr. Hardy informs us, are a selection merely and scarcely all of his letters. These letters give us insight into Berlin’s character that Michael Ignatieff’s biography, *Isaiah Berlin* (1998)—researched while its subject was alive and published at his request posthumously—fails to give. The letters emphasize Berlin’s doubts and failings and are far removed from Ignatieff’s hero worship.

The letters make plain why Berlin never wrote the great book every serious intellectual with scholarly pretensions hopes to write. “I really must try and achieve one solid work—say a study of [Vissarion] Belinsky [the 19th-century literary critic]—and not scatter myself in all these directions all over the place,” he wrote. In 1981 to Joseph Alsop he confesses: “Occasionally I wonder how many years I have left,” and “will I be able to write a big book in the years left to me, and does it matter whether I can or not?” He never did.

Other impressive intellectual figures in Berlin’s generation failed to write the masterwork everyone thought was in them, Hugh Trevor-Roper, Maurice Bowra, Arnaldo Momigliano, and Edward Shils among them. Why these extraordinary men failed to do so remains a mystery, but in Berlin’s case it is clear that he talked and dawdled and scribbled it away in correspondence. Even his prodigious letter writing, he claimed, was a form of stalling. “Answering letters, in fact, is a kind of drug,” he wrote to one of his stepsons, “great relief from real work.”

The letters themselves tend to be vast rambles. To a lifelong correspondent named Rowland Burdon-Muller, Berlin writes: “Forgive me if I do not write you a long letter,” and then proceeds to write him a long letter. To Margaret Paul, an economics tutor at St. Hilda’s College, he writes: “By nature I like to say too much, to exaggerate, embellish, inflate.” In this same letter he goes on to do just that. To the novelist Elizabeth Bowen he writes: “Please forgive me. I write on & on as I talk, & how tiresome that must often be.... I really must not go on and on.” To Felix Frankfurter: “God knows why I go on—maundering like this.”

Everyone who ever met Isaiah Berlin remarked on his rapid-fire, glittering, torrential talk. Edmund Wilson, in his journal, writes that Berlin showed up at his, Wilson’s, London hotel and talked uninterruptedly for nearly two hours. “He won’t, where the com-

#### Books discussed in this essay:

*Isaiah Berlin: Letters 1928–1946*, edited by Henry Hardy. Cambridge University Press, 752 pages, \$105

*Enlightening: Letters 1946–1960*, edited by Henry Hardy and Jennifer Holmes. Random House, 900 pages, \$50 (cloth), \$29.95 (paper)

*Building: Letters 1960–1975*, edited by Henry Hardy and Mark Pottle. Random House, 864 pages, \$59.95 (cloth)

*Affirming: Letters 1975–1997*, edited by Henry Hardy. Random House, 704 pages, \$75

*Personal Impressions*, by Isaiah Berlin. Princeton University Press, 528 pages, \$29.95

*Isaiah Berlin: A Life*, by Michael Ignatieff. Vintage UK, 356 pages, \$16.50

One might suspect this to be false humility on Berlin’s part. From the evidence abundantly supplied by his letters, however, he genuinely felt himself, as a thinker, a scholar, a writer, and a Jew in England, a nowhere man. Berlin kept no diary; he wrote neither autobiography nor memoirs, though he produced a book, *Personal Impressions* (1980), of portraits of friends and famous men he had known. His letters are the closest thing of his we shall have in the line of introspection. They are a gallimaufry, a jumble, an extraordinary mixture of attack, sycophancy, resentment, confessions of weakness, gossip, exaggeration, generosity, kindness, supe-



petition is easily overpowered and he can get the bit between his teeth, allow anyone else to talk; you have to cut down through his continuous flow determinedly, loudly and emphatically, and he will soon snatch the ball away from you by not waiting for you to finish but seizing on some new association of ideas to go off on some new line of thought." Later in his journal Wilson added: "His desire to know about everybody and everything seems to become more and more compulsive." Coming from Edmund Wilson, himself a famous monologist, this is strong criticism.

Berlin's loquacity was transformed into verbosity in his writing. Had the government ever declared a tax on adjectives, he would have had to declare bankruptcy. Triplets in adjectives, nouns, clauses was his speciality. Here is a sample sentence from "The Hedgehog and the Fox," a splendid essay that would nonetheless gain from being cut by at least a third: "With it [Tolstoy's attitude toward history] went an incurable love of the concrete, the empirical, the verifiable, and an instinctive distrust of the abstract, the impalpable, the supernatural—in short an early tendency to a scientific and positivist approach, unfriendly to romanticism, abstract formulations, metaphysics." Berlin was a man to whom it was not unnatural to append a postscript three times the length of the letter itself. From Harvard he writes to his wife about his being asked at a dinner party to say "a few words" about the current political situation, to which he responded: "No, no, I cannot make a short statement. Are you asking me to say a few words?" Everyone laughed, I hope happily."

### Indiscretions

**T**S. ELIOT SOMEWHERE NOTES THAT every good letter should contain an indiscretion. Berlin's letters score high on this criterion. "Plauderei [chatty gossip] is my natural medium," Berlin writes in one of them. A sideline interest in these letters is Berlin's take-downs of people to whom he writes with great intimacy in other letters. Of the aforementioned Rowland Burdon-Muller, a wealthy homosexual with radical political views, he writes to Alice James, daughter-in-law of William James, that he "gets me down no less than you," and that he is, though "genuinely civilised, not a little snobbish and talks too much." To this same Burdon-Muller, he writes of the philosopher Stuart Hampshire, whom he genuinely liked, that he is about to deliver a lecture "suitably enough on 'Emotion and Expression,' or something of the kind, which sounds more like his own personality than like philosophy." Of Noel Annan, one of his intimates, he writes to Marion Frankfurter, "I am glad you like An-

nan—who hasn't much substance but a certain amount of sensibility & is the Bloomsbury (official) dauphin &, they hope, commentator." Of the Schlesingers, Arthur and his first wife, Marian, he writes: "She is much more intelligent & a better man in all ways."

Several of the figures in *Personal Impressions* whom he elevates in his high panegyric style are taken down in his letters. Aldous Huxley, for example, is "enormously unsympathetic,

I think." The saintly Albert Einstein of *Personal Impressions* is in the letters "a genius but surely a foolish one with the inhumanity of a child." Maurice Bowra, whom he elsewhere lauds for his nonconformist spirit and role as "a tremendous liberator in our youth," is in the letters this "pathetic, oppressive, demanding, guilt inducing, conversation killing, embarrassing, gross, maddening, at once touching and violently repellent, paranoiac, deaf, blind,

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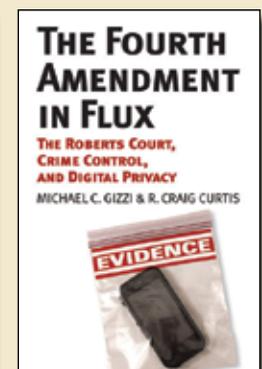
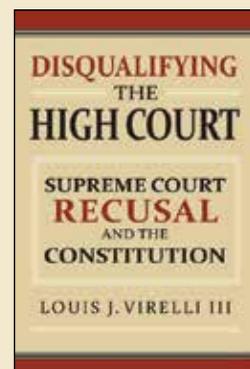
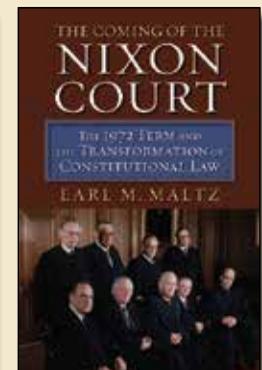
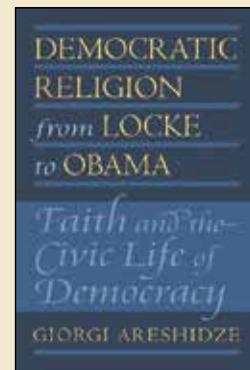
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thick skinned, easily offended presence.” He thanks Felix Frankfurter for sending him a copy of his memoirs, and tells him how much he looks forward to reading it—then writes to Rowland Burdon-Muller that “the vulgarity of the whole thing is exceedingly depressing... the book has given me nothing but acute embarrassment.” F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote that it was the sign of high intelligence to be able to keep two contradictory ideas in one’s mind at the same time; but to keep two contradictory ideas of the same person is, one should think, rather a different order of business.

Henry Hardy, perpetual counsel for Isaiah Berlin’s defense, contradicts the notion that Berlin was a logorrheic, social climbing time-waster, reminding readers of his letters that he published some hundred and fifty essays and gave a great many lectures. But, as Berlin himself acknowledges, he was able to produce written work chiefly under deadline pressure; he likened himself to a taxi, “useless until summoned I stay still.” Lecturing was torture for him, only relieved when he lost the use of a vocal chord and had a proper excuse for turning down invitations to give further lectures.

### Holding Grudges

**B**ERLIN WAS ONE OF NATURE’S TRUE extroverts, who flourished on commitments, in common rooms, at dinner parties. “I am utterly miserable if alone,” he wrote to Stuart Hampshire, “and avoid it now by every possible means.” As for his need to please, he allowed toward the end of his life that its source was to be found in his efforts to adapt to a new environment when, as a 10-year-old boy, he emigrated with his family from Riga. Might it also have sprung from his precarious position as a Jew in English intellectual life? In his letters, Berlin is always on the *qui vive* for anti-Semitism, which in England could be found in the highest places. “The upper classes of England, and indeed, in all countries,” he wrote to Alistair Cooke, “have a large dose of anti-Semitism circulating in their veins.” In England he felt it was to be found in Bloomsbury, in the form of a “club anti-Semitism,” not least in Bertrand Russell, E. M. Forster, and Maynard Keynes in whom “it was at once genuine and superficial.” (One recalls here Virginia Woolf, in her diary, writing about first meeting Berlin, noting, “a Portuguese Jew, by the look of him.”) In government, Ernest Bevin, the trade unionist who became Secretary of State in the Labour government, was no friend of the Jews. Even Winston Churchill was not without his touches of anti-Semitism: “And Winston, too,” Berlin writes, again to Alistair Cooke, “who was a stout Zionist,

did not particularly like Jews. He may have liked Baruch...but...quite definitely thought of them as foreigners of some kind, *metiques*, resident aliens, some of them perfectly nice, but still not Englishmen, not Scotsmen, not Welshmen, not Irishmen—Jews.”

Berlin never expressed shame at his Jewishness, nor attempted to hide it in the manner of Proust’s character Bloch, who removed all evidence in himself of the “sweet vale of Hebron” and broke the “chains of Israel,” and in later life sported a monocle. Berlin was not synagogue-going, except on high holy days; he wanted to but finally could not believe in an afterlife, though to comfort his aged father he claimed that he did. “As for my Jewish roots,” he wrote, “they are so deep, so native to me, that it is idle of me to try to identify them.” Another time he claimed that Jewishness “was not a burden I ever carried, and not an attribute I ever felt made a difference to my philosophical opinions, to my friendships, to any form of life that I lived.”

His letters are a jumble  
of attack, sycophancy,  
resentment, confessions of  
weakness, gossip, exaggeration,  
generosity, superior  
intellectual penetration,  
and character analysis.

One wonders if being Jewish didn’t confer a permanent insecurity on Berlin. Touchier than a fresh burn, he seems never to have forgotten a bad review of any of his books. He held on to grudges more firmly than an Irishman (in Irish Alzheimer’s, the joke goes, one forgets everything but one’s grudges). He threatened to sue Robert Craft unless he removed a paragraph on Berlin’s loquacity from one of his Stravinsky books, *Dialogues and a Diary* (1963). He sometimes found insult where it is unclear any was intended. When Michael Oakeshott introduced him before a lecture at the London School of Economics by saying, “Listening to him you may be tempted to think you are in the presence of one of the great intellectual *virtuosos* of our time, a Paganini of ideas,” Berlin found this to be “ironic disparagement.”

Oakeshott remained on Berlin’s permanent enemies list. The pro-Soviet historian E.H. Carr was on it; so, too, were Harold Laski, Lillian Hellman, A.L. Rowse, C.P. Snow, and George Steiner, whom he regarded as “having

too professional an interest in the Holocaust, and [to] glory in being obsessed by it.” He disliked above all Hannah Arendt. “I see nothing in her writings of the slightest interest, and never have.” To Derwent May he writes that “she had become conceited, fanatical, and talked terrible nonsense both about Jews and about history in general; and what a strange thing it was that all those intellectuals in New York should be taken in by all this cultural rhetoric.” Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) he thought both “heartless and wrong.”

### Evasive Action

**B**ERLIN’S JEWISHNESS MAY ALSO HAVE had to do with his never finding it easy to take strong positions, at least public ones, especially if it might make him enemies. “For reasons that must have been deep in his personality,” writes David Pryce-Jones in his memoir *Fault Lines* (2015), “he wanted influence without the attendant publicity. In the absence of civil courage, that necessary virtue, he preferred a strategy of backing into the limelight.” In his letters he called the student rebels of the 1960s “barbarians” of little intellectual quality, stirred into action by ennui. He felt much the same about the university campaign for egalitarianism, which in intellectual matters he knew could be fatal. But he wrote or publicly said nothing about this outside his letters. “I am temperamentally liable to compromises,” he writes, when what he really means is that he wavers.

Where possible, he did his best to lend respectability to his tergiversations on subjects upon which some might think it impossible to remain neutral. To Morton White, who taught philosophy at Harvard, he writes in 1966: “You and I and Arthur [Schlesinger]—I feel we are all there, stuck together in some curious middle-of-the-road patch of territory—no clear answers about Vietnam, about Berkeley U., about any of the questions upon which it is so easy and delightful to have clear black or white positions, doomed to be condemned by both sides, accused of vices which we half acknowledge because of general scepticism and doubt about our position, or positions in general, and not because we think them just or fair.” In his eighties, he writes to Henry Hardy that his propensity to please “probably does spring from unconscious efforts to fit myself into a totally new environment in 1919. As it is successful, the need for it evaporates, I suppose, but its traces cannot but remain in all kinds of subconscious, unexpected and perhaps rather central ways.” Elsewhere he writes: “I *wish* I had not inherited my father’s timorous, rabby nature! I *can* be

brave, but oh after what appalling superhuman struggles with cowardice!" The question is whether Berlin's floundering on most of the key issues of the day was the result of genuine perplexities or of fear of displeasing.

In one of his letters, Berlin allows that in writing about other people he was often guilty of writing about himself. Nowhere does this come through more strongly than in his Romanes Lectures on Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev. Berlin suffered from what I think of as Turgenev Syndrome. Or perhaps Turgenev suffered, *avant la lettre*, from an Isaiah Berlin Syndrome. Each man found himself locked in the middle between radicals and rebels, bureaucrats and tsars (crowned and uncrowned). Both were chary of offending the young. Writing of Turgenev, Berlin might be writing about himself: "audacity was not among his attributes"; he was "by nature cautious, judicious, frightened of all extremes, liable at critical moments to take evasive action"; and "all that was general, abstract, absolute repelled him."

At the center of Berlin's lecture on Turgenev is the reaction aroused against the novelist by the publication of *Fathers and Sons* in 1862, and especially by his portrait of the character Bazarov, the new man of 19th-century Russia, the nihilist, who in his ruthless scientism some claimed to be the first Bolshevik. Those on the right thought Turgenev was glorifying Bazarov; those on the left, that he was ridiculing him. Berlin, in what might again be autobiography, writes: "It was his irony, his tolerant scepticism, his lack of passion, his 'velvet touch,' above all his determination to avoid too definite a social or political commitment that, in the end, alienated both sides.... But, in the end, he could not bring himself to accept their [the radicals'] brutal contempt for art, civilized behavior, for everything that he held dear in European culture."

Berlin closes his Romanes lecture by defending those, like Turgenev and like himself, who are caught in the middle, arguing that wishing "to speak to both sides is often interpreted as softness, trimming, opportunism, cowardice." He enlists in defense of Turgenev admirable middle-of-the-roaders of whom this accusation was untrue: it "was not true of Erasmus; it was not true of Montaigne; it was not true of Spinoza...; it was not true of the best representatives of the Gironde." He neglects only to say that it is also not true of himself.

### Communism and Zionism

**I**N HIS ANTI-COMMUNISM, BERLIN WAS stalwart. The Communist question was never troubling, for as a young boy he had experienced the levelling brutality of Rus-

sian Communism at firsthand. Explaining his anti-Communism to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., he writes: "No doubt inoculation by the 1917 Revolution was in my case a dominant fact." He considered Stalin's murderousness not a departure but a natural continuation of the policies of Lenin. He considered Stalin even more monstrous than Hitler. To his friend Shirley Anglesey he wrote that the fall of the Soviet Union "is much the best thing that has happened in our lifetime."

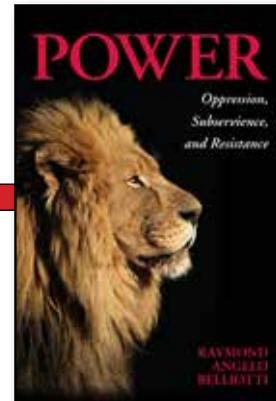
About Zionism Berlin had few doubts, and in one of his letters to Marion Frankfurter he writes about Chaim Wieszmann wanting him to join the Israeli government "and abandon all the ludicrous efforts to teach little English boys unnecessary subjects." He was never seriously tempted, and late in life wrote to the Polish historian of ideas Andrzej Walicki that "I know it was no good my going there, that I would sooner or later, and probably sooner, be torn to pieces by contending parties and would be completely frustrated and made totally impotent."

In defense of Israel, he wrote to Karl Miller, then editor of the *London Review of Books*, calling him out for the strong anti-Zionist pieces he was publishing (and which the journal, under its new editor, continues to publish). He gave advice to Teddy Kollek, then mayor of Jerusalem, on how best to handle visiting American and English intellectual eminences, Robert Lowell among them, showing them the best of Israel in the hope of turning them into Israel's defenders.

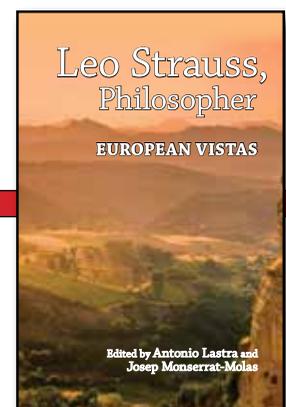
Berlin wrote strong letters to Noam Chomsky and I.F. Stone arguing with their views on Israel published in the *New York Review of Books*. As he wrote to Mark Bonham Carter about Chomsky, "hatred of all American establishments governs him, I think, much more than thoughts about Israel as such, or fear of a world war triggered off by Israel." Then he adds: "Besides, despite his often shocking actions, I wish to preserve my remote friendship with him." Why?, one wonders.

I used to think that Berlin's relationship with Robert Silvers, the editor of the *New York Review of Books*, resembled that of a cardinal now lost to history who was asked how he could serve under so miserable a figure as Pope Pius XII, and who answered, "You don't know what I have prevented." In 1970, as Berlin wrote to Arnaldo Momigliano, he conducted Silvers on a carefully planned tour of Israel, including a lengthy meeting with Golda Meir. As with Lowell, it didn't take, and did nothing to alter the anti-Israel line of the *New York Review of Books*, which remains firmly in place in our day. Toward the end of his life, Berlin seemed wobbly even on Israel,

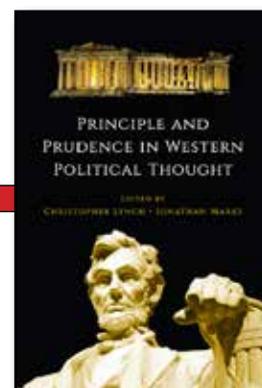
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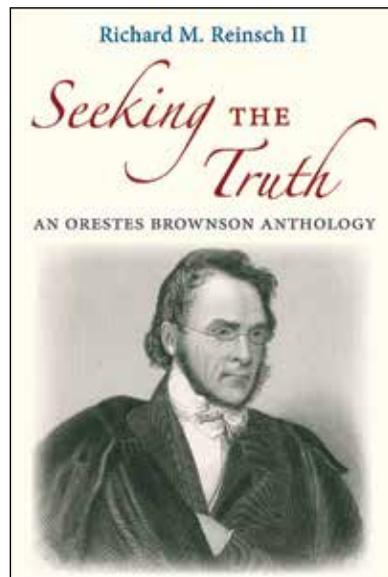


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for he loathed the conservative Likud government of Menachem Begin and contemned the occupation of the West Bank. “Now of course,” he wrote to Kyril Fitzlyon, the British diplomat, “[Israel] has an appalling government of religious bigots and nationalist fanatics, and God knows what will happen.” The old Jewish leftist in Berlin, even in regard to Israel, never quite died.

#### Harmless

**T**O JUDGE BERLIN SOLELY, OR EVEN chiefly, by his opinions would be reductive. His letters reveal him to be a deeply cultivated man. Music meant a great deal to him, and his knowledge of it was considerable. Like most serious historians and social scientists of any quality, he was steeped in literature, and sophisticated and subtle in his judgment of it. At another time he might have been a first-rate literary critic. He preferred Tolstoy over Dostoyevsky, remarking, “Tolstoy is always sunlight even in his most severe and tragic passages—Dostoyevsky is always night.... It is with relief that I stop reading him, and return to ordinary life.” He notes the want of poetry in Balzac. He prefers Proust over James, adding that the former is braver, “and indeed one has to be in French which does not allow emotional timorousness to be translated into such indeterminate vagueness as English.” To his friend Jean Floud he writes: “I cannot take more of the Bellow-Kazin-Malamud-Roth regional culture; it is too claustrophobic, sticky, hideously self-indulgent.”

The four volumes of letters are also filled with lovely tidbits. Berlin reports Patrick Shaw-Stewart saying of Lady Diana Cooper that “she has no heart but her head was in the right place.” About A.L. Rowse, he writes: “The thing about Rowse which is not so often noticed is that underneath the nonsense, the vanity, the ludicrous and dotty and boring egotistical layers, he is quite a nasty man—very cruel to those who do not recognize his genius if they are weak and defenceless, and filled with hatred if they are in any degree formidable: a man who, I think, has some of the temperament of genius without a spark of genius, which is quite difficult to live with.” In a brilliant *aperçu*, he sets out the sonata form that after-dinner speeches take: “First light matter, allegro; then grave things which you really wish to impart, if any; then, allegro again, jokes, light matter, desire to please the audience; and in some awful cases a rondo, i.e. you go back to the beginning and start again.” In a letter to Arthur Schlesinger, he offers the best short definition of democracy I know:

“the government, or those in power, have systematically to curry favor with the citizens for fear of being thrown out.”

It is difficult to determine how, precisely, Isaiah Berlin judged his own life. He did not have a high opinion of his writing. In a letter to Noel Annan, he remarks that after his retirement from the presidency of Wolfson College “I shall spend some time on some very obscure topics in the field of history of ideas—at once obscure and difficult without scholarly training, pedantic without being precise, general without being of interest to anyone outside a very narrow circle.” Elsewhere he notes that what he has written will be little more than the stuff of other people’s footnotes.

The fate of England saddened him. In one of his letters he likens the Englishmen visiting America to Greeks visiting Rome. “Empires are curious places in which to live,” he writes to Shirley Anglesey, “or indeed flourish.” In his sixties he complained he had no one to look up to; in his early eighties he asks, “Why must the end of my life be covered in this growing darkness?” His was a remarkable generation of writers and scholars, included among them Hugh Trevor-Roper, A.J. Ayer, Evelyn Waugh, A.J.P. Taylor, Stuart Hampshire, Lewis Namier, and Elizabeth Bowen—the last gasp, really, of an English aristocratic intellectual tradition that would be replaced, dismally, by Margaret Drabble and Christopher Hitchens, A.S. Byatt and Terry Eagleton. He wrote to Stalin’s daughter that “the *vieille Angleterre*, the civilised aristocrats, the marvellous novelists and poets, the urbane, cultivated statemen—that England, believe me, is no more.” Berlin was lucky not to have lived on to our day, when England appears to have become the country of Sir Elton John and Sir Mick Jagger.

To the end of his life Berlin received honorary degrees—evidence, he felt, “that I am harmless.” Not yet 87, he wrote to Ruth Chang, a young American philosophy professor, that he could not care less how he is remembered: “I do not mind in the least if I am completely forgotten—I really mean that.” Poor Isaiah Berlin, all his life he played it safe, gave pleasure to his friends, took care to make no enemies in important quarters, and would seem to have won all the world’s rewards, except the feeling of self-satisfaction that comes with accomplishment and courageous action.

*Joseph Epstein is an essayist, short story writer, and a contributing editor for the Weekly Standard. His most recent books are Frozen in Time: Twenty Stories (Taylor Trade Publishing) and Wind Sprints: Shorter Essays (Axios Press).*

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