

Dignity is Everything:
Isaiah Berlin and His Jewish Identity.¹

James Chappel
Haverford College
Senior Thesis
Adviser: Linda Gerstein
April 25, 2005

¹“Dignity is Everything” is a quotation from Berlin’s mother’s diary. Marie Berlin, *Diary*, 23 January 1940, transcribed by Henry Hardy, located in Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

*What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish?*

T.S. Eliot²

*I am not disembodied Reason.
Nor am I Robinson Crusoe,
alone upon his island.*

Isaiah Berlin³

² T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*, London: Faber and Faber, 1963, 51-76, page 53, lines 18-19.

³ Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, 191-242, page 201.

Table of Contents

<i>Preface</i>	4
<i>Introduction</i>	5
<i>Chapter 1: From Riga to London</i>	8
<i>Chapter 2: A Spectator in God’s Theater</i>	33
<i>Chapter 3: The Postwar Confrontation with Religion</i>	67
<i>Chapter 4: Problematizing Liberalism</i>	95
<i>Conclusion</i>	114
<i>Bibliography</i>	121

Preface

This essay represents my attempt to grapple with the meaning of Isaiah Berlin's life and work. It is not a dispassionate consideration of his thought; those seeking that are directed to George Crowder's excellent *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism*. Nor is it a biography, as Michael Ignatieff has already written a very fine one. It is rather my attempt to answer the following personal question: why is it that Berlin is such a wildly attractive figure to me? I had dabbled in philosophy and intellectual history before encountering Berlin. But when I read him for the first time, I felt like the Piltdown Man stumbling upon New York City. Ideas came to life, and the history of thought became exciting and important.

But the army that sprang from the dragon's teeth was not staid and dull. Berlin delights in ideas that flash instead of plod, coming from thinkers more like the warriors of the Old Testament than the benevolent preachers of the New. And when I began to read Berlin's purely philosophical works, it struck me that these terrifying but fascinating ideas were not absent from his own thought: modified, surely, but not entirely ignored as they were by other liberals, then and now. This essay is my attempt to ascertain how and why Berlin's ideas "flash" like those of de Maistre, instead of seeming limp and dull like those of John Dewey and Karl Popper, two of the most estimable liberals of the 20th century. Berlin's wit, which has ever remained his most attractive feature to me, is much closer to the aristocratic *hauteur* of the conservative Waugh than the bitter acerbity of Bertrand Russell. As the Queen Mother once reputedly said of Isaiah Berlin: he is "such fun!"⁴

⁴ Peter Hennessey, Interview with Tony Wright, 11 March 2004, accessed 21 April 2005 at <<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmselect/cmpubadm/212/4031101.htm>>

Introduction

Now that the 20th century has at last lurched to its ignoble end, it is possible to cast the cold eye of hindsight on the century that J.G. Ballard called “the marriage of reason and nightmare.” The 20th century was about very many things, but it might be said that the primary issue around which history clustered was *identity*. How is a human being defined? Is it true that, as John Donne said, “no man is an island, entire of itself”? Or is each human being an individual with no important ties to any of his fellows? Supposing Donne is correct: with whom do I have my “true meaning”? With my family, my church, my nation, my race? Or with the course of History itself? Or with God? The 20th century had no dearth of brilliant minds, and they stepped up in support of each of the solutions that I have just outlined, in addition to innumerable others.

The Jew is, in many ways, the symbol of the century. James Joyce certainly thought so. When he attempted to portray the consciousness of modern man in *Ulysses*, he chose a Jew, Leopold Bloom, as his subject. Yuri Slezkine agrees, and goes so far as to propose that “the modern age is the Jewish Age.”⁵ Joyce and Slezkine choose the Jew as emblematic because the Jewish people had been dealing with the complexities of identity ever since the formation of the Diaspora. It is only in the 20th century, when national borders were changing by the year and populations were being shuttled about like so many chess pieces, that the rest of the world “caught up” with the Jews and became immediately concerned with these issues. Time and again throughout history, the Jews had been forced to confront the most basic of questions: what does it mean to be a Jew? This inevitably lead to the larger question: what does it mean to be a human being? It was no accident that Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx, the two modern thinkers who have done most to revolutionize our notions of identity, were each Jewish.

⁵ Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004, page 1.

I begin, then, with the controversial and perhaps audacious claim that Isaiah Berlin is one of the central figures of the century. He was not a politically powerful man, of course; armies did not heed his command. He was not even especially famous in his lifetime, as the Berlin “cult” dates back only a decade or so. He did not attach himself to high-profile public movements, nor was he the chief ideologue of a powerful political party. These sorts of positions were open to Berlin, but he rejected them. He would have agreed with Pushkin: “My greatest wish, a quiet life/And a big bowl of cabbage soup.” Berlin did not want power or fame; he wanted to live his life as he chose, boisterously and spontaneously and among close friends. Berlin is not unique in this: there are very many non-powerful people, myself included, who are not, in fact, the central figure of their century. Where, then, does Berlin’s centrality lie?

Berlin dealt with the question of national identity more openly and directly, and with more subtlety, than most anyone else. His life and work can be seen as an attempt to answer the question asked by Misha Gordon in *Doctor Zhivago*: “What does it mean to be a Jew?”⁶ Perhaps Berlin’s unsuitability for public life stemmed from the terrific complexity of his *private* life. Isaiah Berlin was not solely, or even primarily, a Jew. He had to balance this facet of his identity with equally powerful Russian and English ones. Those are more obviously evident in Berlin’s life and work, and Berlin effortlessly locates their respective influence in “The Three Strands in My Life,” an autobiographical essay penned in 1979. As Berlin himself readily admitted, the influence of his Jewish inheritance is not nearly so easy to codify; although he occasionally wrote about Jewish topics, he wrote no Jewish volume to complement *Russian Thinkers* (1978). And while he was acquainted with the elite of Israel, he never moved there and never assumed a powerful position in its government or even its cultural institutions.

⁶ Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, trans. Max Hayward and Manya Harari, New York: Ballantine, 1957, 13.

It is significant, though, that Berlin ends his autobiographical essay with the Jewish “strand” of his identity. The reader does not suppose that it is unimportant, or an afterthought; rather, Berlin states that his Jewish roots are too deep-rooted for him to even consider. “As for my Jewish roots, they are so deep, so native to me, that it is idle for me to try to identify them, let alone analyze them.”⁷ I do not think that this is an “idle” task; it is, in fact, the one that I have chosen for myself. I will begin, in the first two chapters, by following Berlin’s life from his birth to middle age, focusing on his relationship with his Jewish identity. The final two chapters will consider the impact of this engagement on his mature thought.

Berlin always valued his Jewish heritage and the traditions that went along with it. But he valued his English and Russian identities as well, and he reserved the right to navigate these national commitments, as well as his political ones, as he saw fit. This simple assertion of human dignity, however, placed Berlin in opposition to both the left-wing and right-wing thinkers of his immediate context. Berlin emphasized the sanctity of the individual, and thus always remained a liberal; however, his belief in the sacred right of the individual to *choose*, as he was forced to do all his life, necessitated a radical reformulation of the liberal tradition. It is this synthesis, unstable as it might be, that makes Berlin a titanic figure of the century.

⁷ Isaiah Berlin, “The Three Strands in My Life,” in *Personal Impressions*, ed. Henry Hardy, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998, 255-259, page 258.

Chapter 1

From Riga to London

- **Overture: Riga and Andreapol**

Our story begins in Riga, Livonia (now Latvia), where Isaiah Berlin was born in 1909. Riga was then still part of the Russian empire, and would remain so until 1918. He remained here until June 1915, and established a pattern that would follow him for many years, all around the globe. Berlin and the Berlin family never constructed a simple relationship with their Jewish identity; they were always cautiously threading their way between their Jewish identity and their Russian (and later English) one, unwilling to give up either.

Riga at the turn of the century was a relatively comfortable location for an enterprising Jewish family. It was located outside the Pale of Settlement; Mendel was, therefore, saved from submitting to the potentially crippling restrictions placed on the Jews in that region.⁸ The Jews, in fact, controlled much of Riga's substantial export business.⁹ Their behavior during the First World War is indicative of their status. The Russian Grand Duke Nicolai Nicolaevitch ordered all of the Jews living near the battlefields to relocate to the interior. He was following the advice of Januschewich, his Chief of Staff, whom Mendel, Isaiah's father, referred to as a "rabid anti-Semite."¹⁰ The Jews of Riga were spared by creating a special committee charged with bribing the Governor-General of Riga, General Kuzlov.¹¹ These wealthy and powerful Jews were not helpless captives of a hostile city.

⁸ Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life*, Metropolitan: New York, 1998, page 16.

⁹ Modris Eksteins, *Walking Since Daybreak*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000, 144.

¹⁰ Mendel Berlin, *Autobiographical Notes*, transcribed by Henry Hardy, located in Bodleian Library, Oxford University, page 43. Page numbers for this text refer to the manuscript and not to the typescript.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 43. This account differs with that of Šteimanis. According to him, the council of Jews negotiated with the Russian military authorities, who agreed to let them stay in Riga providing they turn over a number of prominent Jews as hostages, who would be killed if there was any hint of espionage. The Jews agreed. Josifs Šteimanis, *History*

Their wealth was dependent upon their relatively great economic freedom, which allowed Mendel's timber industry, inherited from his great-uncle, to flourish. Mendel was a prominent member of the Riga community; he was, for example, a Merchant of the First Guild. This hereditary honorific, bestowed upon a small class of the wealthiest Jews, granted him immunity from restrictions on the Jews that were still in force throughout the Empire.¹² Riga did have a Jewish ghetto, but Isaiah never lived there. He lived on the fashionable Albertstraße in central Riga, far from the Jewish suburbs where most of Riga's 33,000 Jews lived.¹³ Mendel's firm employed droves of these ghetto workers, but the Berlins were a family set apart.

The Berlins' assimilation, which was fabulously successful, was coupled with continued attachment to their Jewish identity and the Jewish faith. The best evidence for this can be found in Mendel's unpublished autobiographical memoir, written in 1946 and prompted by the end of the Second World War. He described the piece as a sort of last ditch attempt to protect "the living link between the past and the future."¹⁴ As such, its short text is predominantly concerned with the Jewish family history. Berlin's later judgment that it represented "pure sentimental return to roots" is probably unfair.¹⁵ This remark is itself telling; it sheds more light on Isaiah's own feelings of guilt than it does on the memoir itself, which, even if somewhat romanticized, seems a fair-minded text.

In it, Mendel recounts the tragic and colorful history of the Berlin family, beginning with the eighteenth-century imprisonment of some of their number on account of their alleged

of Latvian Jews, trans. Helena Belova, ed. Edward Anders, East European Monographs: Boulder, 2002, 41. Both accounts, however, demonstrate the power of the Jewish community; the Russians negotiated with them and did not simply dictate commands.

¹² Ignatieff 14.

¹³ Šteimanis, 32, 34. In 1913 there were 33,615 Jews in Riga, comprising 6.5% of the population.

¹⁴ Mendel Berlin 17.

¹⁵ Ignatieff 13.

involvement in a blood libel.¹⁶ He devotes an inordinate amount of space to his grandfather, R. Schneur Salmon Fradkin, who was a renowned Talmudic scholar (Mendel devotes a comparatively small amount of space to his father, a businessman who spent most of his time in Petrograd on business).¹⁷ Mendel grew up in Vitebsk, a Polish city within the Pale. His childhood, which he recalls with a touchingly nostalgic glow, was devoutly Jewish: “on the way to Podvinnie – the street we lived – was a church and I was taught to make a wide semicircle to avoid touching the church’s parapet, as an unholy place.”¹⁸

Once Mendel was grown and employed with his uncle’s timber company, he became estranged from these traditional and external forms of devotion; this is accurately presented in the memoir, if never explicitly stated. However, Mendel’s Jewishness was always central to his experience, and later to that of his family. One anecdote in particular is striking. Mendel, a polyglot, was hired to accompany his Uncle Shaya on a grand tour of Europe as a translator. Mendel describes one of their trips on a night train: “I remember how early at dawn I was awakened by my uncle saying ‘Hurry, everybody else is asleep in our compartment we can put on Tallis and Tephillin and pray’, and so we did.”¹⁹ This is a perfect example of the Mendel’s, and later Isaiah’s, ambiguous relationship to his Jewish identity. Mendel wanted to pray, but he wanted to do so when others could not see. In this way, one might maintain both a Jewish and a

¹⁶ Mendel Berlin 19. Charges like these, which accused Jews of desecrating the Host or abducting and slaughtering Christian children, plagued European Jews for centuries. Cf. Max I. Dimont, *Jews, God and History*, 2nd ed., New York: Signet, 2004, pages 240-241.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 36a. A Tallis is a prayer shawl. Tephillin, also known as phylacteries, are small leather boxes containing Scripture. They are traditionally strapped to on the forehead and left arm during prayer.

non-Jewish identity. His religiosity stayed with him as he started his own family; Isaiah could not have failed to notice Mendel's yearly trip to Lubavich to be blessed by a rabbi.²⁰

Marie Berlin was also a staunch supporter of Jewish tradition. This can be seen in her own incomplete memoir, written in 1971. Her childhood was difficult, as she did not enjoy the wealth and concomitant privilege of her future husband or son. Perhaps as a result of this class distinction, Marie experienced a relatively large amount of explicit anti-Semitism. She worked as a maid in a German household: "the anti-Jewish atmosphere of the Germans whose house was near to ours was something which has given pain [...] Of course I was used to anti-Semitism because Riga's Christians were all Germans."²¹ However, like Mendel, she did not give in to the pressure to assimilate. She retained a sort of stiff-necked and defiant Judaism that she would communicate to her son. In 1956, she wrote in her diary that she was "a Jewish woman with all [her] soul, as well as a *Russian Jew*."²²

Berlin always remained close to his parents, despite some occasional and inevitable tension, and maintained a voluminous correspondence with them. Isaiah's letters following Mendel's death in 1953 make for heartbreaking reading. One quotation might suffice to demonstrate the closeness of their relationship: "Indeed, my father meant an enormous amount to me and things will now never be the same again."²³ Isaiah also recognized the importance that his parents had in forming his own personality. As he told Michael Ignatieff: "I have been [a

²⁰ Ignatieff 14. Lubavich was a small town in Eastern Poland, and it served as the headquarters of an important sect of Hasidic Jews (the Lubavicher). Berlin is actually related to its founder, Rabbi Schneur Zalman Schneerson. Ignatieff 15.

²¹ Marie Berlin, *Memoir*, transcribed by Henry Hardy, located in Bodleian Library, Oxford University, pages 15, 17.

²² Marie Berlin, *Diary*, 18 November 1956.

²³ Isaiah Berlin to Max Ascoli, 13 January 1954, Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

Jew] one hundred per cent from the very beginning as indeed any child of my parents couldn't help not be.”²⁴

As Marie Berlin's experience shows, Riga was not free of anti-Semitism. Bernhard Press, who was born in Riga in 1917, recalls playing a game with a Latvian boy, in which the players lock fingers with each other and try to force the opponent onto his knees (inexplicably, this game remains popular): “My opponent, a Latvian boy, would not, despite the pain I was obviously causing him, go down on his knees. When I insisted that he surrender, he gritted his teeth: ‘I will not kneel before a Jew.’”²⁵ The Berlins' abrupt departure from Riga shows that all of the Berlins' considerable distinction failed to protect them from prejudice. This is the first time in Berlin's life that he saw firsthand the impossibility of total assimilation; fashionable houses and modern clothing do not a Gentile make. The immediate cause of the relocation was a legal dispute with a Baltic German businessman. The details are unimportant, but it should be noted that Michael Ignatieff thinks that the proceedings were “tinged with anti-Semitism” and Mendel's memoir is in agreement (Marie assumed as a matter of course that all Baltic Germans were anti-Semites).²⁶ Mendel sent Isaiah and Marie to Andreapol, a small Russian town where Mendel had a summer home, in the summer of 1915.

Here, in this small rural village, Berlin came face to face, perhaps for the only time, with unfiltered and traditional Jewish *shtetl* culture. He was 6 years old when he arrived, so it seems likely that Berlin's first coherent memories of his childhood would be of Andreapol. Even though Berlin was only there for 14 months, the experience was life changing. Ignatieff reports

²⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *Tape MI 17*, monologue delivered into a tape recorder, for the benefit of Michael Ignatieff, on 10 January 1997, transcribed November 2002 by Esther Johnson, located in the Berlin Archives, Wolfson College, Oxford University.

²⁵ Quoted in Eksteins 145.

²⁶ Ignatieff 21 and Mendel Berlin 42.

that the memories of this short interlude were emotional, even 7 decades later.²⁷ Berlin attended Hebrew school with the village children, and learned the Hebrew alphabet from an elderly rabbi who told them this: “Dear children, when you get older, you will realize how in every one of these letters there is Jewish blood and Jewish tears.”²⁸

Many years later, Berlin would write:

“They [Western Jews] have throughout carried within them the uneasy feeling that their stoical ancestors, locked nightly into their narrow and hideous ghettos, were not merely more dignified, but more contented, than they; prouder, better, more hated, perhaps, but less despised by the outer world. And this uneasiness, which rational argument failed to dispel, has troubled the Jews and troubled their friends, and has infected all discussion of the subject, as if something lay concealed which could not be mentioned in the course of it and yet was the center of the entire problem.”²⁹

Is it not likely that Berlin had, at the back of his mind, the stately old rabbi of Andreapol? Indeed, this image of the stately, dignified and patriarchal Jew was never far from his mind, despite his own attempts, seconded by those of his biographer and commentators, to secularize himself. This is, in a nutshell, the special genius of Berlin: he recognized the importance of dignity and of holding one’s head high. As simple as this might seem, this humanism of Berlin’s was rare among 20th century thinkers.

- **St. Petersburg and emigration**

In 1916, Mendel relocated his family to Petrograd, where they joined an already-established clan of Berlins. Here they remained until 1920. Isaiah did not attend any sort of organized school in Russia; nevertheless, he passionately threw himself into Russian culture. In “Jewish Slavery and Emancipation” (1951), quoted above, Berlin discusses the Jew’s fate as a

²⁷ Ignatieff 21.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁹ Isaiah Berlin, “Jewish Slavery and Emancipation,” in *The Power of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy, London: Pimlico, 162-185, page 164.

stranger in a strange land. Jews, who lack any sort of organic connection with their adopted culture, are forced to become scrupulous students of national life. The slightest gesture or vocal inflection, which comes quite naturally to the natives, must be studied and perfected by the Jew.³⁰ While Berlin is not explicitly speaking about himself, it is clear that he is speaking from experience. By the time he left Petrograd, he had forged a Russian identity that would last him a lifetime. Berlin's love affair with the opera began at the age of 8, when his parents took him to see *Boris Godunov*; his lifelong love affair with Russian literature, which was to yield such fruitful scholarship, also began during these years as the precocious 10-year old child slogged through *War and Peace* in his parents' library.³¹ This Russian period formed the second pillar of his tripartite identity, described by Berlin in the aforementioned autobiographical essay, "The Three Strands of My Life."

Isaiah was in Petrograd during the fateful year 1917. Between 1916 and October 1917, they maintained the luxurious lifestyle to which they were accustomed. While the family was spared excessive hardship after the Revolution, they had to undergo a substantial change in lifestyle. Throughout 1918 and 1919, they were forced to live in two small rooms in order to conserve heat.³² Their lives during these years were tense, although Isaiah was, by all accounts, personally aloof from his circumstances.³³ Of course, this likely had more to do with his age than with any exceptional fortitude.

Regardless, these were horrifying times and Berlin's psyche did not emerge entirely unscathed. Bertrand Russell, who happened to be in Petrograd in May 1920 (the Berlins did not

³⁰ Isaiah Berlin, "Jewish Slavery and Emancipation," 166-169.

³¹ Ignatieff 22-23.

³² *Ibid.*, 28. Also, cf. Isaiah Berlin and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991, page 5.

³³ Ignatieff 28. Also, cf. Isaiah Berlin and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* 4 and Mendel Berlin 50.

leave until October), recorded his impressions this way: “The time I spent in Russia was one of continually increasing nightmare [...] Cruelty, poverty, suspicion, persecution, formed the very air we breathed. [...] In the middle of the night one would hear shots, and know that idealists were being killed in prison.”³⁴ Many years later, in 1988, Berlin described one especially poignant memory that confirms Russell’s account: “I remember seeing a policeman being dragged off, pale and struggling, by a mob, obviously to his death – that was a terrible sight that I have never forgotten.”³⁵ In the same interview, he made this especially telling statement, describing a 1972 trip to Iran: “The processions round the Imam’s tomb by men who seemed to me to wear fanatical expressions on their faces terrified me. I had never seen anything so frightening since the Revolution.”³⁶ Berlin’s hatred of all sorts of fanaticism is a characteristic of his later work; however accurately the 71-year old memory was reported, it demonstrates that Berlin located the germ of this passion here, in Petrograd.

It became obvious that the Berlin family should leave if possible; in 1920, they decided to return to Riga. Berlin’s account of this trip conflicts with that of his father. Isaiah stated that the family had no problems on the trip from Petrograd to Riga: “we were never touched: neither my father nor any immediate member of my family were arrested or in any way molested.”³⁷ Mendel Berlin, in his memoir, tells a very different story. I will follow Michael Ignatieff in giving credence Mendel’s version of the story (Ignatieff does not mention the discrepancy). Mendel was a frightened father at the time, and was writing his reminiscences a comparatively short 26 years later; Isaiah was a bright-eyed child and uncomprehending child, speaking more than a half-century after the events. On the train from Petrograd to newly-independent Latvia, Mendel

³⁴ Bertrand Russell, *Autobiography*, one-volume edition, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2000, 333. For the date of his trip, see 336.

³⁵ Isaiah Berlin and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

reports that Latvians “were permitted to proceed to Riga, while Jews had to disembark at Reshitza.”³⁸ They were told that they would have to wait for a week or more before being allowed passage. Mendel refers to this as “a new anti-Semitism, as even pre-1914 Russia did not practice it.”³⁹ He paid a hefty bribe to hasten matters, but this was not the end of their troubles. On the train to Riga, some of the Latvians on the train made anti-Semitic remarks to Marie. She was, then as always, a fiery personality; during the course of her reply she stated that she preferred Russia to Latvia. Unsurprisingly, they were escorted directly to the police station upon arrival in Riga; this necessitated another substantial bribe. After these misadventures, Mendel decided that he should take his young family to England, where he was heavily invested in plywood. Mendel sums up their situation in 1920 this way: “This was our greeting to free and democratic Latvia. This bribe and the one in Reshitza left me with scarcely any money.”⁴⁰ And so it was that, in early 1921, the Berlin family arrived in London.

Isaiah’s first known work, written in faltering English, is a short story written in 1922. It is untitled, but Henry Hardy (his editor of many years) has grafted on the suitable title of “The Purpose Justifies the Ways.” This is the motto of the story’s villain, Uritsky; the imperfect translation of “The Ends Justify the Means” conjures up a charming image of the 12-year old Isaiah Berlin copying directly from a Russian-English dictionary. The piece is interesting on a biographical level, as the impact of the harrowing Russian experience is laid bare. Significantly, the ideas that would obsess the elder Isaiah are here in embryonic form. It is difficult to believe Berlin’s later assertions that he was oblivious to the terror around him when we find sentences like these, written very shortly after leaving Soviet Russia: “The people in Russia, and its capital

³⁸ Mendel Berlin 51a.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 51a.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 52a.

Petrograd especially, were very depressed by the Bolsheviks, who terrorized the people to the utmost.”⁴¹

Berlin emphasizes the personal nature of the narrative by including autobiographical details. For example, Soviet soldiers ransack the house of the fictional Ivanovs, searching for “precious stones.”⁴² The same thing happened to the Berlins in Petrograd; Mendel unsuccessfully attempted to hide diamonds in a flowerpot.⁴³ It seems that Isaiah had been understandably worried about the fate of his father. Peter Ivanov commits the same crime as Mendel (hiding jewelry), is sentenced to be taken away by the secret police, and is eventually killed by the wicked Uritsky.⁴⁴

Uritsky, named after a Bolshevik leader who had been assassinated in 1918, is by far the most arresting figure of the story. “In this deep armchair sat a man about forty years old with long flowing hair which showed a big white forehead [...] a sharp nose, a carnivorous mouth and a sharp chin covered with a little French beard. This was the famous Uritsky.”⁴⁵ While Uritsky never reappears by name in Berlin’s work, the young Berlin’s hatred of Uritsky is linked with the elder Berlin’s hatred of Stalin. Uritsky was the enemy with whom the later Berlin would expend all of his considerable intellectual activities in combat: the scrupulous planner treating human beings as chess pieces, the “engineer of human souls,” to use Stalin’s famous phrase.⁴⁶ “Uritsky, the man of action [...] divided manhood in two classes: first class, people that stood in his way;

⁴¹ Isaiah Berlin, “The Purpose Justifies the Ways,” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy, New York: OUP, 2002, 331-335. Page 331.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 131.

⁴³ Mendel Berlin 50. He reports that they eventually recovered the diamond, with the help of a neighbor. Ignatieff, for whatever reason, writes that the jewelry was successfully hidden and never impounded by the Cheka. Ignatieff 28.

⁴⁴ Isaiah Berlin, “The Purpose Justifies the Ways” 131.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁴⁶ Berlin cited this remark of Stalin’s many times. For example: Isaiah Berlin, “Political Ideas in the 20th Century,” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy, New York: OUP, 2002, 55-93, page 82.

second, the people who obeyed him. The former, according to Uritsky's understanding, did not deserve to live at all."⁴⁷ He is a fanatic and the perfect representation of Berlin's greatest fears.

Berlin, all his life, despised those with the audacity to tell people others how to lead their lives. This passion, I propose, sprang from his relationship with his Jewish identity. Michael Ignatieff finds the roots of Berlin's value pluralism in this relationship: there are many ways to be a Jew, and no one has the right to force the glorious variety of human beings onto a Procrustean bed of dogma. The mature Berlin was convinced that the individual was capable of navigating his identity without following the dictates of a despot, however benevolent. Stuart Hampshire wrote that "in all Berlin's thinking and writing one is aware of the ample, generous, humorous and seductive figure of David Hume smiling in the background."⁴⁸ Hampshire was wrong. We are not aware of smiling lips, but a "carnivorous mouth." We are not aware of the benevolent Hume. We are aware of Uritsky.

- **London, 1921-1928**

Michael Ignatieff reports that, the day after Isaiah's arrival in London, he played a one-fingered version of "God Save the King" on the piano.⁴⁹ This anecdote is a suitable metaphor for Isaiah's experience in England, where he was to reside (with frequent interruptions) for the rest of his life. He later stated that Mendel "was a fanatical Anglophile – and I grew up in the belief that the English could do no wrong."⁵⁰ In 1921, Berlin began to immerse himself in an alien culture, just as in Russia, but on a much grander scale. In the allegorical terms of "Jewish

⁴⁷ Isaiah Berlin, "The Purpose Justifies the Ways" 134.

⁴⁸ Quoted in John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996, page 81.

⁴⁹ Ignatieff 32.

⁵⁰ Isaiah Berlin and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* 6.

Slavery and Its Emancipation,” Isaiah (and, indeed, his entire family) is one of the strangers exhibiting an “excessive interest in the tribe [in this case, England] and its fortunes.”⁵¹

His first foray into academia, a world in which he would soon flourish, was a failure. Mendel gained Isaiah entry into Westminster, an elite private school. However, after a school visit, during which he saw the boys worshipping in Westminster Abbey and received suggestions from his tutor that he change his unfortunate name to “Jim”, Isaiah decided that he was not interested in attending.⁵² Mendel later wrote that “for a foreigner and a Jew Westminster might be, for the first year or two anyhow, not a very comfortable place.”⁵³ So he enrolled Isaiah in St. Paul’s junior school which, despite its inferior social status, seems to have been more accepting of foreigners.⁵⁴ Isaiah was a success there. He made quick friends, as he always would; his English friends once pummeled a boy with the nerve to refer to Isaiah as a “dirty German” (in 1921, this was the worst of insults).⁵⁵

Berlin’s experience at St. Paul’s also introduced him to Anglicanism. He was present for chapel and prayers, and saw Cardinal Manning’s portrait staring down at him in St. Paul’s examination room.⁵⁶ He did not participate, of course; however, there are no signs that the experience made him particularly uncomfortable. It seems that his classmates were not especially religious, anyway. Arthur Calder-Marshall, a classmate of Berlin’s, remembers a man coming to school and telling the students that “Christ might have rowed for the Varsity if there’d been any

⁵¹ Isaiah Berlin, “Jewish Slavery and Emancipation” 167.

⁵² Ignatieff 40.

⁵³ Mendel Berlin 54-54a. Mendel also claims that he made the decision *for* Isaiah.

⁵⁴ Arthur Calder-Marshall, who attended St. Paul’s with Berlin, recount this story that took place in New York City. “*My brother*: ‘What school did you go to?’ *Obvious Englishman*: ‘Westminster,’ *My brother*: ‘I went to St. Paul’s.’ *Englishman*: ‘To tell the truth, so did I.’” Arthur Calder-Marshall, “More Frank than Buchman: St. Paul’s,” in *The Old School: Essays by Divers Hands*, ed. Graham Greene, London: Jonathan Cape, 1934, 61-72, page 61.

⁵⁵ Ignatieff 34. Ignatieff reports that Berlin misspoke at first, recalling that the boy had called him a “dirty Jew.”

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 41. Manning was a leader of the Oxford Movement, for which see page 73.

Varsity to row for.”⁵⁷ This is far removed from orthodox Christianity. Berlin alluded to this in a later essay: “The simplified form of Marxism held by most ordinary people in the USSR is extraordinarily like public school religion, actively believed in by a small minority, passively held by the rest.”⁵⁸

There seems to have been little to no explicit anti-Semitism at St. Paul’s, but this was tempered, as it always would be, by a subtle sense of separateness. G.K. Chesterton, one of the school’s most famous alumni, paints a portrait of the institution in his *Autobiography*. It should be kept in mind that he attended three decades before Berlin (Chesterton left in 1897); however, it is notable that he recalls befriending Jewish children at the school. In his view, the school was free from anti-Semitism but the Jewish children were still the objects of much curiosity. He remembers one child “being lightly tossed from one boy to another amid wild stares of wide-eyed scientific curiosity and questions like, ‘What is it?’ and ‘Is it alive?’”⁵⁹ Calder-Marshall’s reminiscences show that this sense of separateness was still manifested in Berlin’s day. When discussing his lack of interest in the disciplinary responsibilities given to him as an upper-classman, he writes that he didn’t do much “except give a Jew half an hour’s detention.”⁶⁰

Perhaps in a valiant effort to overcome his foreignness, Isaiah demonstrated a surprising amount of “school spirit.” He was a founding member of a new publication entitled *The Radiator*. In that capacity, he wrote a letter to Chesterton on March 31, 1928, hoping that the distinguished alum would write an article for the debut issue (this is, in fact, his earliest extant letter). After criticizing the existing school publications for failing to showcase the school’s

⁵⁷ Calder-Marshall 64.

⁵⁸ Isaiah Berlin, “Soviet Self-Insulation,” in *The Soviet Mind*, ed. Henry Hardy, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004, 90-97, page 93. This is not to say that St. Paul’s was free of religiosity, Arthur Calder-Marshall was an active Christian there and recalls many others of the same persuasion.

⁵⁹ G.K. Chesterton, *The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton*, New York: Sheed & Ward, 1936, page 70.

⁶⁰ Calder-Marshall 70.

excellence, Berlin writes that “there is no doubt that the School is as full of original talent as ever.”⁶¹

Berlin’s sense of well-being during his public school years was atypical; the majority of the English inter-war intellectual elite had been miserable in the notoriously harsh institutions. This antipathy is evident in much of the period’s fiction; Evelyn Waugh, for example, provides a hilarious caricature of a typical public school in *Decline and Fall* (1928). In 1934, Graham Greene edited a collection of essays entitled *The Old School Tie*, in which a number of prominent intellectuals located the roots of their radicalism in childhood rebellion at public school. That same year, John Strachey pinned his own Communism on his exclusion from the Eton cricket squad.⁶² Much of this was, of course, tongue in cheek; whatever else it might have been, Berlin’s generation was a remarkably comical group. However, it remains true that Berlin never felt excluded from society and, therefore, never felt the need to rebel from it. During the 1930s, the intellectuals were racing towards opposite corners of the political spectrum. Miranda Carter writes that the generation was inspired by “an almost tangible Oedipal fury in the air.”⁶³ Berlin, however, remained relatively aloof; he was never inflamed by the passions for revolution. This is the beginning of Berlin’s love affair with the British Establishment, which would culminate in his knighthood and presidency of the British Academy.

However popular and successful he became in English society, he never abandoned his Jewish roots. Mendel writes of Isaiah during these years (his memoir is addressed to his son): “Your Jewish studies also proceeded apace and you have acquired a very tolerable and useful knowledge of Hebrew and the Bible. [...] You have read the modern Hebrew poets, such as

⁶¹ Isaiah Berlin to G.K. Chesterton, 31 March 1928. In Isaiah Berlin, *Flourishing: Letters, 1928-1946*, ed. Henry Hardy, London: Chatto & Windus, 2003, 6.

⁶² Miranda Carter, *Anthony Blunt: His Lives*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003, page 53.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 92.

Biolik, and I think this as well as some of your friendships gave you a sympathy for Zionism, which shaped to some extent your ‘*Weltanschauung*’.”⁶⁴ Although he never learned to speak Hebrew fluently, he learned enough, between his London tutors and those in Andreapol and Petrograd, to correspond in Hebrew with his Israeli friends decades later.⁶⁵ He ventured, with his friend Leonard Schapiro, into the Hassidic synagogues of London’s poor Jewish neighborhoods.⁶⁶ He had probably made similar ventures into the *Vorstadt* of Riga: the devout Jews from these London neighborhoods, like those of Andreapol and of the Berlin family history remained respectable curiosities.

His correspondence during these London years demonstrates his continued attachment to Jewish life and vocabulary. In a 1928 letter to his parents, for example, he uses the Yiddish word “Schlemil.” However common this word might be, it is probably *not* common among those who are trying to hide their Jewishness. This letter also contains an account of his recent correspondence which is indicative of his and his family’s involvement in London Jewish society. “To day for instance I sent off 7 letters to Mr. I. Goldston informing him that though father would simply leap for joy if he could contribute some £1000 to the N[ew] West End Synagogue, yet, because he is away, the joy is still to come; to Women Zionists I write [...] To Councillor Arthur Howitt I write of my sympathy in that he is going to be deprived of both your companies when he opens a Talmud Torah [a religious secondary school].”⁶⁷ To Ida Samunov, his aunt, he writes of a forthcoming marriage between two Jewish relatives: “There is something to be said for the Jewish method of marriage after all. In every sense a Mazal Tov.”⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Mendel Berlin 54a. “Biolik” refers to Haim Nahman Bialik (this is the standard transliteration).

⁶⁵ For example, cf. Leo Cohn to Isaiah Berlin, October 1953, Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

⁶⁶ Ignatieff 41.

⁶⁷ Isaiah Berlin to Marie and Mendel Berlin, 3 June 1928, *Flourishing* 8-9.

⁶⁸ Isaiah Berlin to Ida Samunov, undated (June 1928?), *Flourishing* 11.

One reason for this continued engagement with Judaism was Berlin's relationship with the idiosyncratic Schmucl Rachmilievich. Rachmilievich was a Riga Jew with a colorful past: he had been educated at German universities, spent years preaching social democracy to Riga timber workers, and escaped to England after the revolution.⁶⁹ He met with no sympathy in English academia and was forced into an unhappy life as a legal adviser. Berlin later said that Rachmilievich "was the first person who gave me a taste for ideas in general."⁷⁰ Their friendship lasted many years; for example, he is thanked in Berlin's preface to *Karl Marx* (1939).⁷¹ This influence extended well into Berlin's adult life; in 1950, Rachmilievich wrote him a letter with advice about a forthcoming book on the Russian intelligentsia.⁷² Rachmilievich is significant in that he ensured that Berlin's introduction to ideas was Russian and Jewish, rather than English and Christian.

- **Isaiah Berlin and 1920's English Culture**

As in Russia, Berlin quickly immersed himself in the culture of his adopted home. He later described the character of post-WWI culture in a 1950 article for the *Encyclopedia Britannica Book of the Year*. "Arrayed against [the defenders of liberalism] were those skeptical and destructive persons who out of amusement and indignation exposed what they regarded as the shams, the muddles and the absurdities of their immediate predecessors [...] They proudly flaunted their disbelief in, and indeed contempt for, tradition [...] it was a period exceptionally rich in works both good and bad and artistically and intellectually most exhilarating."⁷³ This

⁶⁹ Ignatieff 42.

⁷⁰ Quoted on *Flourishing* 141n. From Ignatieff Tape 6.

⁷¹ Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*, 3rd ed., London: Oxford UP, 1963. The acknowledgment comes in the "Author's Note to First Edition." No page number.

⁷² Rachmilievich to Isaiah Berlin, 26 May 1950, Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

⁷³ Isaiah Berlin, "The Trends of Culture," contribution to "The Year 1949 in Historical Perspective," in *1950 Britannica Book of the Year*, Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1950, xxii–xxxi, page xxii.

quotation accurately presents Isaiah's attitude towards inter-war English culture: respectful and interested, but always skeptical.

There is one especially interesting document that has escaped the attention of Berlin's commentators, as it was only discovered in 2002. This is Berlin's only extant poem, entitled "M. Henri Heine," which he wrote for a journal called *transition*. Berlin never published it. When he rediscovered it in 1951, he added this inscription: "Written in 1928 by the author aged 19. Intended for *transition*, to see if they were as bogus as they seemed to be."⁷⁴ Interwar Paris is famous for its expatriate culture, and the so-called "little magazines" in which Hemingway, Stein and Joyce could publish their work.⁷⁵ *transition*, one of these, was billed as "an international quarterly for creative experiment." The February and March 1928 issues, for example, contained pieces from James Joyce's "Work in Progress" (which would eventually become *Finnegan's Wake*).⁷⁶

"M. Henri Heine" is doubtless a parody of those modernist poems that he would later diagnose as "experiments intended not to produce objects of lasting value, but to innovate and to shock."⁷⁷ Berlin displays here a great degree of familiarity with modernist culture, as well as a bemused skepticism which was probably common among 19-year old boys in 1928.⁷⁸ Calder-Marshall remembers, during his St. Paul's years, he used to meet a local pub with a group of his

⁷⁴ Henry Hardy, preface to "M. Henri Heine," <<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/nachlass/mhenriheine.pdf>> in Henry Hardy (ed.), *The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*, accessed 3 December 2004. Heine was, like Marx and Berlin, a Jew troubled by his own Jewishness.

⁷⁵ The expatriate culture was winding to a close; *transition* was one of their last remaining journals. Humphrey Carpenter, *Geniuses Together: American Writers in Paris in the 1920s*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988, page 213.

⁷⁶ Richard Ellman, *James Joyce*, revised edition, New York: Oxford UP, 1982. Page 596.

⁷⁷ Isaiah Berlin, "The Trends of Culture" xxii.

⁷⁸ Humphrey Carpenter, *The Brideshead Generation: Evelyn Waugh & his Friends*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1990, pages 72-73. Carpenter cites a highly amusing parody of modern music presented by John Betjeman, among others. It apparently consisted of "a concerto for megaphone and orchestra."

friends, including “Shaya Berlin,” and “talk of Eliot and Ezra [Pound], bitter and Burton, Cocteau and Cambridge; of Picasso’s blue period” and so forth.⁷⁹

The poem’s title itself is curious: Henri Heine was a German Jewish poet, often mentioned by Berlin in his later work. Berlin, however, refers to him as *Monsieur* instead of the more appropriate *Herr*. The poem is written in English and its ostensible subject is a German poet with a French title. Berlin is likely poking fun at the cosmopolitanism of modernist culture (Eliot and Pound were both Americans living in England, for example, and *transition* was aimed at American expatriates in France). This marks the beginning of Berlin’s obsession with the meaning and malleability of national origins. The idea that national identity could be transcended, that a German Jew might turn himself into a Frenchman, was, for the Berlin of 1928 no less than the Berlin of 1978, worthy of mockery.

The poem begins with a striking bit of prose: “When the enemy wynds and the big lewis guns will have blasted the last snigger off the face of the last spengling, declining, tarred mannikin.” The first phrase is doubtless a reference to Wyndham Lewis, one of the less endearing characters of interwar English culture. “Tarred” refers to *Tarr* (1918), one of his novels. “Spengling, declining” is a reference to Oswald Spengler’s 1918 work, *The Decline of the West* (Berlin would later refer to Spengler as a “fanatical schematiser.”⁸⁰) Berlin continues with an imagery of death and decay that is probably designed to parody *The Waste Land*, T.S. Eliot’s seminal 1922 poem. “The prickly pear hangs dead [...] agony pillars are deepstruck desertislanded.”⁸¹ Compare this with Eliot: “After the agony in stony places [...] Dead mountain

⁷⁹ Calder-Marshall 71.

⁸⁰ Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, ed. Henry Hardy, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000, 163. Hereafter *TCE*.

⁸¹ Isaiah Berlin, “M. Henri Heine,” <<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/nachlass/mhenriheine.pdf>> in Henry Hardy (ed.), *The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*, accessed 3 December 2004.

mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit.”⁸² He also, less explicitly, evinces familiarity with Joyce and Bergson.⁸³ All in all, this demonstrates an impressive degree of culture assimilation for a youth of 19. What, then, was the nature of this culture in which Berlin was steeped?

English culture was consistently plagued by a sort of implicit anti-Semitism, which could not have been lost on the young Berlin. During the 1920s, for example, Berlin read Dickens and T.S. Eliot.⁸⁴ If that is so, he would have noticed Fagin, the stereotypical Jew in *Oliver Twist*, or lines such as these from Eliot’s “Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar”: “The rats are underneath the piles. The Jew is underneath the lot.” The same poem includes these lines referring to the Jewish Bleistein: “A lusterless, protrusive eye/Stares from the protozoic slime/At a perspective of Canaletto.”⁸⁵ Ezra Pound’s notorious anti-Semitism had not yet reached its fanatical heights; however, he published in 1914 a poem including these lines: “Let us be done with Jews and Jobbery,/Let us SPIT upon those who fawn on the JEWS for their money.”⁸⁶

Berlin never overtly criticized English culture for this anti-Semitism; this is the beginning of a lifelong attempt to assimilate and avoid “making waves” in the English intellectual community. He had great respect for Eliot as a poet, and pays tribute to Ezra Pound’s revolutionary techniques in his 1965 essay on Mandel’shtam.⁸⁷ In “The Year 1950 in Historical

⁸² T.S. Eliot, “The Waste Land,” l. 324 and 339, page 66.

⁸³ The two references to “Flux” are, I think, Bergsonian. It should be noted that Wyndham Lewis had published a long discussion of Bergson’s philosophy the year before, in 1927. It was entitled “The Revolutionary Simpleton” and appeared in *The Enemy: A review of Art and Literature*. Paul O’Keefe, *Some Sort of Genius: A Life of Wyndham Lewis*, London: Pimlico, 2001, page 268. The Joyce references are even more implicit; however, it seems to me that such words as “deepstruck” and “desertislanded” are parodies of Joyce’s work, which, as I noted earlier, was appearing in *transition*.

⁸⁴ Ignatieff 42.

⁸⁵ T.S. Eliot, “Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar,” in *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*, London: Faber and Faber, 1963, 32-33, l. 17 and 23. Originally published in *Poems* (1920).

⁸⁶ Quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, *A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound*, New York: Delta, 1988, page 250. This appeared in Wyndham Lewis’s infamous and short-lived *BLAST*.

⁸⁷ For Eliot, see Isaiah Berlin and Ramin Jahagbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* 197. For Pound: Isaiah Berlin, “A Great Russian Writer,” in *The Soviet Mind*, ed. Henry Hardy, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004, 41-52, page 44.

Perspective,” he praises the collected edition of Ezra Pound’s letters, failing to mention the outrageous anti-Semitism contained in that notorious collection. For example, Pound asserts that “all the Jew part of the Bible is black evil.”⁸⁸ Berlin’s relationship with Eliot is particularly interesting. Later in life he would justly accuse Eliot of anti-Semitism only to back down immediately (see Chapter 3 for a full discussion of this key episode).

Berlin also read the essays of G.K. Chesterton. Chesterton, whom Berlin interviewed, was a Christian figure much admired by Eliot. In “Jewish Slavery and Emancipation,” Berlin mocks “the neo-medieval day-dreams of such eccentrics as Belloc and Chesterton.”⁸⁹ The coincidence of names is not random; Hilaire Belloc and Chesterton were close friends with similar ideas (George Bernard Shaw memorably referred to them as the “Chesterbelloc.”⁹⁰) Belloc was a French and Catholic anti-Dreyfusard. He was ferociously anti-Semitic; for example, he thought of the Russian Revolution as a Jewish conspiracy on account of Marx and Trotsky’s heritage (in fact, he initially refused to meet Chesterton after being told that his handwriting seemed “Jewish”⁹¹). In *The Jews*, written in 1922, he advocates the reintroduction of the ghetto as the only way to solve the Jewish problem.⁹² And, while Chesterton was not personally anti-Semitic and was one of the first to condemn Hitler, he largely agreed with his friend.⁹³ In Chesterton’s view, Jews are devoted first and foremost to their fellow Jews and to their religion; this necessarily keeps them from feeling any sort of attachment to their home countries. In *The New Jerusalem*, published in 1920, this is transformed into an argument for Zionism. While

⁸⁸ Ezra Pound to Henry Swabey, 9 May 1940. In Ezra Pound, *The Letters of Ezra Pound: 1907-1941*, ed. D.D. Paige, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1950, page 345. This was the same edition that Berlin reviewed.

⁸⁹ Isaiah Berlin, “Jewish Slavery and Emancipation,” 180.

⁹⁰ Chesterton 115.

⁹¹ Bryan Cheyette, *Constructions of ‘The Jew’ in English Literature and Society: Racial Representation, 1875-1945*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 154.

⁹² Christopher Hollis, *The Mind of Chesterton*, Toronto: Hollis & Carter, 1970, page 134.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 133. For Chesterton’s condemnation of Hitler, see Hollis 140.

Chesterton had great personal respect for Jewish culture, he believed that the Jews belong in Israel, just as Englishmen belong in England.⁹⁴ This is an argument that would plague Berlin throughout his life, and to which he strongly objected.

Berlin did eventually criticize Chesterton for these beliefs, but in his youth he remained outwardly devoted to him. In an article in *The Radiator*, a publication at St. Paul's at which Berlin was joint editor, he writes of Chesterton in glowing terms. He had been granted an interview, apparently with his fellow editors, and he ended his account this way: "We felt that we had been in the presence of the great, and the great had not disappointed us."⁹⁵ I am not, by any means, attempting to criticize Berlin for this. He was still very young and likely excited at the chance to edit a newspaper; it is unfair to expect Berlin to take a stand. Berlin was, later in life, often accused of cowardice. This is not a fair example, but the germ of his alleged cowardice can be found in the 1920s. Here, as later, it might be read as his unwillingness to over-privilege one aspect of his multi-faceted identity; Berlin was Jewish, but he was English as well, and to stake a claim against Chesterton would mark him as an over-sensitive Jew. Berlin always reserved the right to maneuver his own identity as he saw fit, and this sometimes meant that he had to be avoid making committing himself. In other words, Berlin wished to remain free of all tyrannies, be they of governments, ideas or identities. In 1928, at the age of 18, Berlin made his first philosophical statement of this idea.

- **“Freedom”**

Every year, St. Paul's awarded the Truro Prize to the best essay on an assigned topic. In 1928, the winning essay was entitled "Freedom," and its author was Isaiah Berlin. The essay, in addition to demonstrating Isaiah's considerable precocity, contains within it the germ of much of

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 139. For more on Chesterton and Zionism, see page 72.

⁹⁵ Isaiah Berlin, "Our Interview with GKC," pub. 5 June 1928 in *Radiator*, reprinted on *Flourishing* 7-8.

his later thought. The major tenets of Berlin's later philosophy, which Noel Annan called "the truest and the most moving of all interpretations of life that my own generation made," can be traced back to his childhood and adolescent experience.⁹⁶ "Freedom" is the beginning of Berlin's lifelong attempt to describe a possible means of navigating his various identities. By 1928, he had experienced a staggering variety of cultures: he had journeyed from cultured but anti-Semitic Riga, to the *shtetl* life of Andreapol, to revolutionary Petrograd, and finally to London where he experienced life at fancy hotels and at poor synagogues. This massively varied childhood experience is at the root of much of Berlin's thought. Perhaps he had himself in mind when he made this proclamation in a 1968 letter: "All central beliefs on human matters spring from a personal predicament."⁹⁷

I do not mean to imply that Berlin had fully developed his philosophy by his eighteenth year. "Freedom" is full of ideas at which the mature Berlin would certainly scoff. For example, he discusses the "diseased state" and "degeneration" of modern culture.⁹⁸ This kind of absurd generalization, so typical of the time, would have been anathema to the later Berlin. This is an example of the influence of the modernists on the young Berlin's thought; the "disease" of culture is a trope of modernist texts, most obviously *The Waste Land* and Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (although it can be seen as early as the 1890s). Berlin also includes a paean to the great man, who can rise above this diseased culture.⁹⁹ This might well be the influence of Carlyle, whom Berlin had studied; regardless, this is surely uncharacteristic of the later Berlin.¹⁰⁰

"Freedom" does, however, prefigure Berlin's later thought with remarkable prescience. Berlin introduces the notion of incommensurable values, which would loom so large in his later

⁹⁶ Quoted on Gray 4.

⁹⁷ Isaiah Berlin to Jean Floud, 5 July 1968, Berlin Archives, Wolfson College, Oxford.

⁹⁸ Isaiah Berlin, "Freedom, in *Flourishing*, 631-637, page 634.

⁹⁹ Isaiah Berlin, "Freedom" 635.

¹⁰⁰ Isaiah Berlin to Ida Samunov, Undated, [June 1928?], *Flourishing* 11. "My prize is for Shakespeare & Carlyle."

thought. He writes that it is impossible to directly compare modern and medieval life: “It is obvious that any attempt to weigh one against the other must, in this case, be futile and yield false results, because the feudal system and the factory system cannot be compared in any true and fruitful manner.”¹⁰¹ This idea, expanded later in life, would become one of Berlin’s most important philosophical contributions. In “The Pursuit of the Ideal” (1989), Berlin’s most concise summary of his thought, he writes that “if [...] we are to understand Scandinavian sagas or the poetry of the Bible, we must not apply to them the aesthetic criteria of the critics of eighteenth-century Paris.”¹⁰²

It might seem that this would easily collapse into relativism, the idea that values are only meaningful within a specific historic context. This idea always horrified Berlin, and he refused to be associated with it. Berlin was able to assimilate and make himself understood in Andreapol, Petrograd and London; he knew that *something* unified G.K. Chesterton and Rachmilievich. This is the root of Berlin’s unshakable belief in universal values, which he was later to call variously a “central core” or “common horizon.” In “Freedom,” he admirably foreshadows his later thought: “no revolution has taken place in ethics which has affected the bulk of mankind as the Industrial Revolution has affected it: Truth and Goodness and Justice and Courage are essentially the same concepts to Professor Santayana to-day as they were to Shakespeare and Socrates.”¹⁰³ Compare this to Berlin’s Introduction to *Five Essays on Liberty*, first published in 1969: “acceptance of

¹⁰¹ Isaiah Berlin, “Freedom” 632.

¹⁰² Isaiah Berlin, “Pursuit of the Ideal,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer, London: Pimlico, 1998, 1-16. Page 23.

¹⁰³ Isaiah Berlin, “Freedom” 632.

common values (at any rate some irreducible minimum of them) enters our conception of a normal human being.”¹⁰⁴

Berlin would later devote most of his intellectual energies towards combating materialism, in both its positivist and Marxist guises. This is also presaged in “Freedom,” in which Berlin ruthlessly criticizes determinist materialism: “the materialistic philosopher of our days delights in expelling every vestige of purposive, free co-ordination from the world [...] the psychologists [Freud and Bergson] intensify this confession of bondage [...] The slave is bound with yet another chain.”¹⁰⁵ He goes on: “The view of the mechanical universe is the boldest and the most merciless self-depreciation which man ever enunciated. It is not surprising, therefore, if few are found to pursue its premises relentlessly to their rational conclusion.” This last idea prefigures the motivating idea behind “Historical Inevitability” (1954), Berlin’s most extended critique of determinism. In 1954, Berlin writes that the determinist hypothesis is “not, of course, actually accepted by any working historian, or any human being in his non-theoretical moments.”¹⁰⁶

This anti-materialism might also be linked to his Judaism. Berlin was raised as a Jew and always retained a great respect for religious feeling, even though he did not necessarily experience it himself. Berlin later said that he was “religiously tone-deaf,” meaning that he personally did not experience the divine, or even understand what is meant by the very word “God.” This is tempered, however, by a great respect for religious tradition: in the same interview, he stated “I go to synagogue from time to time because I wish to identify myself with

¹⁰⁴ Isaiah Berlin, “Introduction” to *Five Essays on Liberty*, in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy, New York: OUP, 2002, 3-54, page 24. *Five Essays on Liberty* is comprised of the famous *Four Essays on Liberty*, with the addition of “From Hope and Fear Set Free.”

¹⁰⁵ Isaiah Berlin, “Freedom,” 635.

¹⁰⁶ Isaiah Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy, New York: OUP, 2002, 94-165, page 120.

the traditions of my ancestors.”¹⁰⁷ Berlin felt this in 1928 just as strongly as he did in 1989, when he wrote of his “great sympathy for religious ceremonies and works and poetry.”¹⁰⁸ For the determinists of Berlin’s day, both Marxist and positivist, religion was nothing more than lamentable irrationality that was bound to succumb to the onslaught of science. Berlin later said that “dry atheists seem to me blind and deaf to some forms of profound human experience.”¹⁰⁹ He had known since childhood that there was something admirable about the Andreapol rabbi and that cold reason could not explain it.

“Freedom” also shows us Berlin’s attempt to justify his assimilation, as if he were slightly guilty about it: “it hurts no man to conform if he knows that conformity is only a kind of manners, a sort of universal etiquette.”¹¹⁰ Berlin argues that, even if we are entirely conventional on the outside, we can maintain a perfectly free spiritual or mental existence. Berlin would later recant this over-simplistic position. He later referred to this doctrine, that one could maintain inner freedom while surrendering to outward slavery, as “a sublime but, it seems to me, unmistakable, form of the doctrine of sour grapes.”¹¹¹ Regardless, this demonstrates that Berlin was already, in his teenage years, concerned with the significance and meaning of identity as related to assimilation. This concern would only increase in magnitude as Berlin left the friendly confines of his home in order to attend Oxford, where he would spend the vast majority of his life.

¹⁰⁷ Isaiah Berlin, interview with Fred Worms, 10 July 1991, quoted in Isaiah Berlin and Fred Worms, “From Abraham to Washington: Extracts from an unpublished correspondence,” *Jewish Quarterly*, Winter 1998/99, 32-36, page 33.

¹⁰⁸ Isaiah Berlin to Edward Lowbury, 4 December 1989, quoted on Ignatieff 41.

¹⁰⁹ Isaiah Berlin and Ramin Jahagbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, 110.

¹¹⁰ Isaiah Berlin, “Freedom” 634.

¹¹¹ Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 211.

Chapter 2

A Spectator in God's Theater

- **Berlin at Oxford**

In the autumn of 1928, Berlin entered Corpus Christi College at Oxford University. There were a fair number of Jews at Oxford, as there had been at St. Paul's. Berlin was not forced to be a minority of one until his election to All Souls in 1932. However, it is notable that Berlin chose Gentiles for friends (with some relatively insignificant exceptions: Victor Rothschild, for example, or Herbert Hart). Further from his doting parents, his Oxford years were marked by a continued ambivalent and ambiguous relationship with his Jewish identity.

While Isaiah was certainly not a hermit at St. Paul's, it is at Oxford that he assumed his role as socialite *par excellence*. He would maintain this position for the rest of his life: it is often thought that Harold Macmillan recommended Berlin's knighthood on account of his services to the fine art of "talking."¹¹² Berlin was quick to scale Oxford's social heights: his friend Stephen Spender recalls that his rooms were a "place of resort," where Oxford's intellectual elite would come to eat, drink, be merry and discuss poetry.¹¹³

He assumed the editorship of the *Oxford Outlook* in 1930, thereby ensuring that he would continue the engagement with English culture manifested in "M. Henri Heine." A representative issue contained poetry by John Hilton, essays by Louis Macniece and A.L. Rowse, and a letter from William Empson. All of these were already, or would soon be, prominent cultural

¹¹² Marilyn Berger, "Isaiah Berlin, 88, Philosopher and Historian of Ideas" [obituary], *New York Times*, 10 November 1997.

¹¹³ Ignatieff 48.

celebrities.¹¹⁴ Other issues contained work by John Middleton Murry, another central figure in English culture at this time.¹¹⁵

As at St. Paul's, Berlin was not confronted with explicit discrimination. Oxford was still, at this point, an explicitly Christian institution. Mornings at Corpus Christi began with prayers in chapel; these were optional, but it no doubt contributed to a sense of separateness, however subtle.¹¹⁶ He was known to everyone as "Shaya", his Jewish family nickname, as he had been at St. Paul's. People knew he was a Jew, but they did not seem to take much note of it. As he later told Ignatieff, "I presumed that everyone knew I was a Jew."¹¹⁷ His tutors took him seriously as a student and a scholar. Most spectacularly, he was elected in 1932 to a fellowship at All Souls College. The prestige of this appointment cannot be underestimated: All Souls, a research institution with no undergraduate members, is the pinnacle of the Oxford establishment. Berlin was the first Jew ever elected to a fellowship in the nearly 500 years of its existence, a fact that was cheerfully reported by *The Jewish Chronicle*. Michael Ignatieff reports that "the whole Jewish community" knew of Berlin's success, and rightly so.¹¹⁸

But that is not the whole story and Berlin's relationship with his Jewish identity remained complex. In other times and places, it might have been possible to float through life while maintaining a sort of ironic distance from a Jewish background; Disraeli, for example, acted this way and went so far as to convert to Christianity. Marx, the son of a convert, ignored his heritage

¹¹⁴ *Oxford Outlook*, Vol. XI, No. 54, March 1931. These figures would each become monumental in their field: A.L. Rowse as a historian, Louis Macneice as a poet and William Empson as a literary critic.

¹¹⁵ J. Middleton Murry, "Communism and the Universities," *Oxford Outlook*, ed. Isaiah Berlin and Richard Crossman, Vol. XII, No. 58, May 1932, 79-88. His eminence can be ascertained through the eminence of his many adversaries. Stephen Spender writes: "The 1920s seem to have been declared by Eliot, [D.H.] Lawrence, and various other writers as an open season for hunting Murry. You were allowed to do anything but shoot him." Stephen Spender, *T.S. Eliot*, New York: Penguin, 1976, 80.

¹¹⁶ Ignatieff 47.

¹¹⁷ Isaiah Berlin, *Tape MI 17*.

¹¹⁸ Ignatieff 61.

altogether. But in the 1930s this was an impossibility. A sensitive mind could not ignore the German menace or Oswald Mosley's anti-Semitic outbursts. Anti-Semitism was an important, although not *all*-important, feature of the British far Right.¹¹⁹ In 1940, for example, a group of Conservative MPs wrote that the naturalization of refugees would "result in a permanent increase of our already over-large Jewish population [...] a most unhealthy symptom in the body politic."¹²⁰

Even if the radical groups are not taken into account, the attitude towards the Jews in 1930s England remained substantially negative. Anti-Semitism was still widespread, even though it mostly took the form of what Berlin was later to call "gentle old fashioned anti-Semitism."¹²¹ Berlin later learned, for example, that the Bishop of Gloucester (another fellow of All Souls) had been opposed to his candidacy on account of his Jewishness. Jews were widely regarded as a separate nation living in the midst of jolly old England, and this often led to a more than "gentle" anti-Semitism. H.S. Ashton, an English author, wrote in 1933 that "the average person [...] is filled with a tolerant disgust at many Jewish habits." He particularly objected to "the unpleasing Jews of Eastern Europe."¹²² While Ashton is exceptional, it remains true that the population at large saw the Jews as a nation apart: one typical respondent to a 1943 survey described the situation this way: "[The Jews] haven't got steadiness like we have [...] The Jews are different, they're like foreigners; in fact, you might say they are foreigners."¹²³

Even the assimilated families were affected by the increase in anti-Semitism during the inter-war years. There were a handful of upper-class Jewish families that had, over the years,

¹¹⁹ G.C. Webber, *The Ideology of the British Right 1918-1939*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986, 21, 73.

¹²⁰ Tony Kushner, "British Anti-semitism, 1918-1945," in *The Making of Modern Anglo-Jewry*, ed. David Cesarani, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1990, 191-208, page 198..

¹²¹ Isaiah Berlin to Felix Frankfurter, 23 August 1937, *Flourishing* 247.

¹²² From *The Jew at Bay*, quoted in Anthony Julius, *T.S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form*, rev. ed., New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003, 12.

¹²³ Kushner 198.

been fully integrated into English Society' the Montefiores and the Rothschilds are the most obvious examples. Victor Rothschild, for example, was an accepted member of the interwar Cambridge intelligentsia and great friends with Anthony Blunt, who was later to be employed by the King himself as curator to the Royal art collection.¹²⁴ Even these families were affected by the increasing anti-Semitism of the 1930s, as they lost their traditional Conservative seats in Parliament (in 1945, no Conservative Jews were elected).¹²⁵

- **Conflict with Adam von Trott**

This unseemly atmosphere might explain Berlin's unwillingness to draw too much attention to his Jewishness. We can see a rare manifestation of it, however, in his conflict with Adam von Trott. Berlin later wrote that von Trott was "a German Rhodes scholar who took part in the 1944 plot [to assassinate Hitler] and was brutally killed by Hitler. We became friends in his Oxford years, and I liked and admired him greatly."¹²⁶ After graduating from Oxford in the fateful year 1933, von Trott returned to Germany where he worked in a prosecutor's office. In 1934 *The Manchester Guardian* ran an article decrying the anti-Semitism of the German judicial system (by that time, it was widely known that the Nazis were persecuting Jews in Germany). Von Trott, in a published rejoinder, wrote that "in court there was most emphatically no distinction against Jews. I have been present at a great many cases which were brought up by or against Jews, and I can therefore assert this fact from personal observation. Attempts to influence the court by suggestions that the claimant was a Jew were checked with unhesitating firmness."¹²⁷ Berlin was outraged. Whether or not this was actually von Trott's experience, it was, in Berlin's eyes, outrageous to defend the Nazis against the charge of anti-Semitism, as

¹²⁴ Carter 74.

¹²⁵ Kushner 201.

¹²⁶ *Flourishing* 39. Quoting a contribution to 'Books of the Year: A Personal Choice,' *Observer*, 22 December 1968, 17.

¹²⁷ Quoted in Christopher Sykes, *Troubled Loyalty*, London: Collins, 1968, page 106.

their true nature was obvious by 1934. Berlin was unafraid to express this to his Oxford friends, most of whom remained loyal to von Trott.¹²⁸

Berlin wrote about this in a remarkable letter to his friend Shiela Grant-Duff, herself a close friend and defender of von Trott, in March 1934. The document illuminates his complex relationship with his Jewishness. He explains to her that he cannot possibly approach the issue as a rational outsider: “I am hopelessly *a parti pris* [biased] in the question of Nazis & Jews: & this probably colours everything I think about Nazis in general [...] I cannot be expected to be reasonable on this matter.”¹²⁹ Berlin’s tone is conciliatory: “I daresay his [von Trott’s] limitations in this matter are wider than mine, which are really rather narrow.” Berlin does not seek to hide his heritage, nor does he seem ashamed of it. He does, however, recognize it and even comes close to apologizing for it.

The letter is especially interesting when compared to another that Berlin wrote to von Trott a few months later, in July 1934.¹³⁰ Again, he seeks to downplay the entire incident: “I never intended to raise an issue between you and me.” He explains his discontent this way: “I, who felt that for once I was arguing with an almost disinterested passion, and had got away from personalities, felt irritation that all my arguments were taken as evidence of personal treachery and not estimated *an sich* [on their own terms].” This is, of course, the exact opposite of what he told Duff.

These responses, so different in content, are identical in aim: in each case, Berlin seeks no more than to end the conflict, without paying particular attention to the exact truth of the dispute or his own position (the same would be true of his later quarrel with T.S. Eliot). In each letter, it

¹²⁸ *Flourishing* 83.

¹²⁹ Isaiah Berlin to Shiela Grant Duff, March 1934 [exact date uncertain], *Flourishing* 84-85. For Duff’s allegiance to von Trott, see Shiela Grant Duff and Adam von Trott zu Solz, *A noble combat: the letters of Shiela Grant Duff and Adam von Trott zu Solz, 1932-1939*, ed. Klemens von Klemperer, New York: Oxford UP, 1988.

¹³⁰ Isaiah Berlin to Adam von Trott, late July 1934 [exact date uncertain], *Flourishing* 89-91.

seems that he is attempting to make up for earlier and harsher judgments (in the letter to von Trott, Berlin apologizes for a “very small explosion” – Ignatieff comments that it was “not in fact ‘very small’”¹³¹). He even goes on to praise von Trott: “the thought of seeing you would excite me for some time to come.” Berlin was not willing to compromise his friendship for the sake of a political disagreement. The same unwillingness to take a political stand can be seen in a speech he gave in November 1935 to a Jewish undergraduate society. He wrote to his mother: “I think I pleased quite well: except for one remark of mine about the dirty condition of the streets of Tel-Aviv & its chaotic buildings, which gave offence to somebody, so I withdrew about half of it.”¹³² This was to become a keystone of Berlin’s personality: he always valued personal relationships more than political solidarity. Berlin felt that, in the 20th century, ideas were reigning supreme over men. His opposition to this tyranny is one of the defining features of his thought, and its roots can be found in his personal life.

- **Palestine**

Berlin, however, did not wish to fully emancipate himself from his Jewishness. In fact, he was more than willing to leave himself open to another label: Zionist. While Berlin was consistently critical of Israel and its policies (particularly terrorism), his support for the ideal of Zionism was unwavering. He presents this as an inevitable fact about his outlook; to deny his Zionism would be akin to denying that he had two eyes. He has been described as a “cradle Zionist.”¹³³ He may have literally imbibed Zionism in the cradle, as his mother was an active Zionist, and had been since her childhood. In her memoir, she wrote that, during her childhood in Riga, “I used to lie at night and think how that hatred can be cured – At that time many decades

¹³¹ Ignatieff 74.

¹³² Isaiah Berlin to Marie Berlin, November 1935. *Flourishing* 142.

¹³³ Henry Hardy, “A Deep Understanding,” in *Jewish Chronicle*, 26 March 2004, 35-36, page 35.

ago I became devoted to Zionism [...] In my heart I was sure that I may have some compensation for the sufferings of my childhood.”¹³⁴ Berlin said in 1972 that “when I read in the memoirs of my intimate friend and Oxford colleague Maurice Bowra that my pro-Zionist views seemed to him, in the years before the war, the most prominent and characteristic of all my political convictions, this came as no surprise to me.”¹³⁵

A few months after the von Trott affair, Berlin traveled to Palestine with his friend, John Foster. It is significant, of course, that Berlin had a desire to go to Palestine. Had he been attempting to suppress his Jewishness, he never would have made the long and arduous journey. Berlin was far from anxious to hide his heritage (this remained true throughout his life; his schedule was always full of speeches at Jewish societies, and his bibliography is full of publications in *The Jewish Chronicle*). The trip marked his reentry into a Jewish culture that he had, effectively, left behind for nearly 15 years.

Berlin was, in Palestine as everywhere else, a tireless socialite. His weeks in Palestine were a blur of new faces. One representative letter, written on 10 September 1934 to his parents, includes an enormous list of the people he’s met, most of whom were English officials or Jewish intellectuals. Then: “I had lunch with a Syrian anti-Semite called Antonius, a charming, polished, highly educated[,] clever, unscrupulous man. Very formidable enemy. I want to see everyone. If I could lunch with the Mufti I would.”¹³⁶ This episode is characteristic; Berlin was very willing to lunch with Antonius, and even seems to have enjoyed his company. He refused to let his

¹³⁴ Marie Berlin, *Memoir*, 15-16.

¹³⁵ Isaiah Berlin, “Zionist Politics in Wartime Washington,” *Flourishing* 663-693, page 667. Interestingly enough, Bowra does not say exactly this in his memoir, although he does mention Berlin’s Zionism. C.M. Bowra, *Memories: 1898-1939*, Harvard: Cambridge UP, 1967, page 184.

¹³⁶ Isaiah Berlin to Marie and Mendel Berlin, 10 September 1934. *Flourishing* 96-98. A Mufti is an Islamic religious figure.

Jewishness get in the way of his love of conversation and friendship. However, there is no doubt in his mind that Antonius is the enemy.

His opinions on the Jewish inhabitants of Palestine are various and interesting:

“Everyone is charming, the Jewish officials are the rudest people on earth.”¹³⁷

“Tel Aviv is dreadful – like the Klondyke – imagine a whole lot of Jewish gold-diggers suddenly swooping on to the place [...] Jews have no taste [...] And yet the atmosphere, though hectic is beautiful: Jews.”¹³⁸

“The problem is the Jewish House [IB is comparing Palestine to an English public school]: abler & richer than the other boys, allowed too much pocket money by their parents, rude, conceited, ugly, ostentatious [and so forth].”¹³⁹

“As for the Jews they are most odd & fascinating, & I felt equally uneasy with them & away from them, like relations one hasn’t seen for 30 years or something, to whom one knows one is, even feels, related, but whom one doesn’t really know.”¹⁴⁰

Berlin is full of criticism for the Jews, but it is never mean-spirited. His opinions on English Jews was much the same; the following year he wrote to a friend upon the death of her grandfather: “I much respected the general type represented by your grandfather – a tiny class with hardly any members – one of the *very* few English Jews of any station by whom one was in no way embarrassed.”¹⁴¹ He writes like one who is slightly embarrassed by his family, his affection for which is never really questioned. This is unsurprising; many Jews feel that anti-Semitism is acceptable only within the Jewish community. All of the letters quoted were written to other Jews. He would never betray the Jews to the *goyim*. Berlin’s ambivalent attitude towards his Jewishness can be seen in his choice of pronoun: the Jews are not “we,” but “they.”

This is the same attitude he demonstrated six years after the trip to Palestine, when Berlin was in New York City working for the British Information Service. On 14 February 1942, he

¹³⁷ Isaiah Berlin to Marie and Mendel Berlin, 6 September 1934, *Flourishing* 95.

¹³⁸ Isaiah Berlin to Marie and Mendel Berlin, 24 September 1934, *Flourishing* 101.

¹³⁹ Isaiah Berlin to Marion and Felix Frankfurter, 7 December 1934, *Flourishing* 106.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁴¹ Isaiah Berlin to Diana Hubback, February 1936, *Flourishing* 149.

reports to his parents that he had recently gone to a Jewish court, where religious authorities would convene to hear religious arguments.¹⁴² A parallel can be drawn to the 1934 visit to Palestine: it is significant that he went to the Jewish court in the first place. The Jewish Court was not the gathering-place for the elite of New York City (or even the Jewish elite), among which Berlin loved to move. He describes two absurd cases: the most amusing, for Berlin, is one in which a one-legged man was worried that he would be deprived of his leg for all eternity. The court decided that if a small part of his body, “a hair, or a nail”, were buried “with appropriate rites, it being solemnly announced that this should function as a substitute for the leg, then the Almighty, who has done queerer things before, would, in all probability, recognize the just claim supported by the New York Court, and produce a leg at the required moment.” This letter, aside from documenting Berlin’s consistently keen sense of humor and love of the absurd, demonstrates again his somewhat ambiguous and distant relationship with the Jewish people.

Berlin was always keen to the failings of the Jews, but he very seldom discusses them maliciously. Rather, he has the tone of a parent discovering the child’s messy room: a curious mixture of amusement and exasperation. There is no doubt that Berlin also exhibited the love of a parent; however unseemly the Jews might sometimes have seemed to him, it remains true that he *wept* when he saw the first Jewish ticket-collector walking down the aisle of his train.¹⁴³ This is the same man who seemed so aloof from the passions that moved people’s lives, who would not have a serious relationship until he was well into his 40s, and of whom Stephen Spender was to write that “he had an interest in other people’s lives which was strengthened by the conviction that he himself was detached from the passions which moved them.”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Isaiah Berlin to Marie and Mendel Berlin, 14 February 1942, *Flourishing* 392-396.

¹⁴³ Henry Hardy, “A Deep Understanding” 35.

¹⁴⁴ Stephen Spender, *World within World*, London: Readers Union, Ltd., 1953, 60-61.

But Berlin is the sort of parent that every untidy child would love to have, because he staunchly defended the Jews' right to act as they pleased. In "Jewish Slavery and Emancipation," Berlin's key text on the Jewish problem, he lists the failings of the Jews: "to be over-sceptical or over-critical or over-sensitive; to lack dignity, or practice vulgar ostentation; to be obsequious or morally aggressive [...] is doubtless unattractive and thoroughly regrettable." This is not novel or unique; most of Berlin's fellow Englishmen would have agreed with these negative assessments. But Berlin continues and asserts that this behavior, as irritating as it might be, "is not a crime [...] They are human beings, and have the right to misbehavior."¹⁴⁵

- ***Karl Marx***

Karl Marx: His Life and Environment, the only book-length monograph Berlin ever wrote, was described as the work of a "youthful prodigy" and has, deservedly, remained widely-read.¹⁴⁶ Although Berlin had written a number of purely philosophical essays during these years (aimed at fighting the specter of logical positivism¹⁴⁷), *Karl Marx* is Berlin's most important work of the 1930's. The book is a milestone in his life, and was largely responsible for leading him towards the concerns that would dominate his remaining half-century.¹⁴⁸

Karl Marx should, like all of Berlin's work, be read with Berlin's Jewishness in mind. *Karl Marx* is not a meditation on the Jews in disguise; it would not have gone through 5 editions were it not a wonderful piece of scholarship. Regardless, it does provide insight into the mind of the young Jewish Berlin. Marx, who denied his Jewish background entirely, was the type of Jew that Berlin could never be and, what is more, did not want to be. Marx wrote that the "Israelite

¹⁴⁵ Isaiah Berlin, "Jewish Slavery and Emancipation," 184.

¹⁴⁶ Norman P. Ross *et al.*, "Editor's Preface," in Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*, 3rd ed., London: Oxford UP, 1963, ix–xii. Page xii.

¹⁴⁷ These essays on logical positivism have been collected in: Isaiah Berlin, *Concepts and Categories*, ed. Henry Hardy, New York: Penguin, 1979.

¹⁴⁸ Crowder, George, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism*, Polity: Cambridge, 2004, pages 21-27.

faith” was “repugnant” to him.¹⁴⁹ He was very careful about suppressing this side of himself; scholars have only identified one instance in which he explicitly mentions his Jewishness.¹⁵⁰ The Marx family, like the Berlin family, was very Jewish, as their Jewish roots extended into the 15th century and Karl’s grandfather was a rabbi.¹⁵¹

Marx’s upbringing was, however, radically different from Berlin’s. These different backgrounds might explain Marx and Berlin’s disparate relationships with their Jewish identity. Marx’s father, Herschel Levi, had been infected by the *Aufklärung*, the German equivalent of the French Enlightenment. He took advantage of the tragically short period of Jewish emancipation under Napoleon to become a respectable lawyer. When the false hopes of the Napoleonic era were extinguished in 1816 and the anti-Jewish laws put back into place, Herschel marched to a Lutheran church and was baptized. The next year, Karl was born. He was baptized as well and was never introduced to Jewish ritual. There is nothing in his childhood experience comparable to Berlin’s Jewish education in Andreapol. He attended High School with his Lutheran neighbors, and received his effective education from his Gentile neighbor, Freiherr Ludwig von Westphalen.¹⁵² Marx and Westphalen remained close, and Marx married his daughter (an interesting parallel might be drawn between Westphalen and Rachmilievich; they played similar roles in the lives of their students, but were diametrically opposed).

Berlin was in the 1930s, and remained throughout his life, an implacable enemy of Marxism. However, in *Karl Marx* he was able to, as Robert Heilbroner put it, “criticize without

¹⁴⁹ Karl Marx to Arnold Ruge, 13 March 1843. Quoted on Isaiah Berlin, “Benjamin Disraeli, Karl Marx and the Search for Identity,” in *Against the Current*, ed. Henry Hardy, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001, 252-286, page 276. The essay was originally published in *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* (this, by itself, is sufficient to prove that Berlin’s relationship with his heritage is worlds apart from that of Marx).

¹⁵⁰ In a letter to Lion Philips, he refers to Disraeli as coming “from our common stock.” Quoted on Isaiah Berlin, “Benjamin Disraeli, Karl Marx and the Search for Identity” 276.

¹⁵¹ David McLellan, *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought*, New York: Harper & Row, 1973, page 3.

¹⁵² Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*, 3rd ed., London: Oxford UP, 1963, page 26.

demeaning. Marxism emerges in his hands as a tremendous intellectual achievement, nonetheless remarkable because it is imperfect and even, in crucial areas, downright wrong.”¹⁵³ As is evident in Berlin’s relations with Adam von Trott or Antonius (the Syrian anti-Semite), Berlin found much to praise in anyone. His hostility to Marxism cannot be underestimated: while he saw much in it of value, he held it responsible for much of the carnage of the 20th century. However, a few representative quotations will show the truth of Heilbroner’s judgment: “[Marxism] as it finally emerged was a massive structure, heavily fortified against attack at every strategic point, incapable of being taken by direct assault.”¹⁵⁴ Marx’s “pamphlets, articles and letters [...] are sharp, lucid, mordant, realistic, astonishingly modern in tone,”¹⁵⁵ while *Das Kapital* “constitutes the most formidable, sustained and elaborate indictment ever delivered against an entire social order.”¹⁵⁶

Berlin was, however, unable to find kind words with which to describe Marx’s thoughts on the Jewish problem. He calls Marx’s one essay on the subject a “dull and shallow composition.” Marx had “decided to kill the Jewish problem once and for all so far as he was concerned, declaring it to be an unreal subject, invented as a screen for other more pressing questions.”¹⁵⁷ The essay was written in response to a claim by Bruno Bauer that the Jews were a historical anachronism, and should simply be baptized (this claim, was soon to be espoused by T.S. Eliot). Marx countered that the Jews were not a racial or religious entity at all, but only an economic one; therefore, baptism *en masse* would be a waste of time. For Marx, the whole

¹⁵³ Robert Heilbroner, “Introduction” to Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*, 3rd ed., New York: OUP, 1963, xv – xix, page xvii.

¹⁵⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx*, 14.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

problem was ephemeral, and the liberation of the Jews would not come until society as a whole was liberated from its capitalist chains.

Karl Marx does not include much discussion of Marx's Jewishness. This is unsurprising; it would, indeed, have been out of place as it played such a small role in Marx's life. However, it is an omnipresent undercurrent. Berlin theorizes, for example, that Marx's character was affected by "his latent dislike of the fact that he was born a Jew."¹⁵⁸ During the book's lengthy process of composition, Berlin wrote to his mother: "Marx is a *very* Jewish character. His bad early poems, his satire of society, his sentimental snobbery & learning."¹⁵⁹ Berlin also explores possible instances of anti-Semitism in Marx's career.¹⁶⁰

However hard Marx tried to suppress his Jewishness, Berlin shows us that Marx's life and thought are nonetheless inextricably related to it. Perhaps Berlin had seen the April 1935 edition of *Criterion*, the well-respected journal edited by the anti-Semitic T.S. Eliot (for more on Eliot, see page 81). In it, Eliot describes Marx as a "Jewish economist." The year after the publication of *Karl Marx*, Ezra Pound wrote that "Marx was a Jew [...] he invented very little."¹⁶¹ As we will see, this sense of the *impossibility* of total assimilation would become a key feature of Berlin's thought about the Jews. In his researches for *Karl Marx* he saw a figure who could never entirely escape his identity; in the twelve years before he wrote "Jewish Slavery and Emancipation," Berlin was to find the same thing out for himself.

- **Berlin in the United States**

In 1940, Berlin assumed his wartime position at British Information Services in New York City. This was preceded by an absurd, complex and irrelevant set of events, in which he

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵⁹ Letter to Marie Berlin, uncertain date. July 1935? *Flourishing* 129.

¹⁶⁰ Cf., for example, Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx* 192: "Bakunin's attacks on Marx and Lassalle could not pass unnoticed, the more so because they were tinged by anti-Semitism."

¹⁶¹ Quoted on Julius 144.

was duped by Guy Burgess (an explosive Cambridge graduate and Soviet spy).¹⁶² His job was to work with various minority groups as part of a larger effort to convince Americans to take part in the Second World War. He was understandably apprehensive, but succeeded brilliantly.

Throughout his brief career as a public official, Berlin was torn between his affinity for Zionism and his duty to the Foreign Office (in a larger sense, this might be seen as a conflict between his Jewish and English identities). The United States during the war was a hotbed of Zionist activity, and Berlin was at the center of it all. For example, he acted as something of a buffer between Chaim Weizmann and Felix Frankfurter, both key Zionist figures (Weizmann and Berlin had been friends since 1939; for more on their relationship, see page 50).¹⁶³ In 1930, Harold Nicolson confided to his diary that he was concerned about hiring Jews to work in the Foreign Office: “Jews are far more interested in international life than are Englishmen, and if we opened the service it might be flooded by clever Jews.”¹⁶⁴ Berlin proved him right.

The possibility of conflict existed because the State Department and Foreign Office were, at this time, rabidly pro-Arab and anti-Zionist (late in life, Berlin attributed this policy partially to anti-Semitism on the part of British officials).¹⁶⁵ Berlin publicly maintained, however, that there was no conflict of loyalties between his Zionism and his official duties.¹⁶⁶ Noel Annan agrees. In his introduction to the first edition of Berlin’s *Personal Impressions* (1980), he writes of Berlin’s time in Washington that “dual allegiance can create tensions and strain loyalty; it is untrue to deny that the problem exists. But it did not exist for Berlin.”¹⁶⁷ With all due respect to

¹⁶² Ignatieff 96-98.

¹⁶³ Ignatieff 106.

¹⁶⁴ Quoted on Julius 160.

¹⁶⁵ Isaiah Berlin to Fred Worms, 10 January 1995, quoted in Isaiah Berlin and Fred Worms, “From Abraham to Washington: Extracts from an unpublished correspondence,” 36.

¹⁶⁶ Isaiah Berlin, “Zionist Politics in Wartime Washington,” *Flourishing* 663-693, page 683.

¹⁶⁷ Noel Annan, “Introduction,” in *Personal Impressions*, ed. Henry Hardy, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998, xv-xxxii, page xxvii. Later in the introduction, Annan correctly observes that “as a pluralist [Berlin] sees no contradiction in

these two brilliant men, it turns out that Annan was wrong and Berlin was lying. Berlin approaches the truth in a 1944 letter to his parents: “The Jewish issue is certainly about to boil up seriously here, and I try as much as possible to have nothing to do with it, without success, as everything ultimately comes to rest on my desk and I have to perform miracles of diplomatic contortion.”¹⁶⁸

In 1941, for example, Berlin let down his guard. One of the major wartime Zionist issues was the possibility of creating a Jewish army. The Foreign Office concocted a variety of reasons to explain the plan’s impossibility, but it was obvious that, in reality, they feared upsetting the Arabs. Berlin neglected the party line referenced this rationale in a private letter in 1941; the censors lit upon it and wrote in a confidential minute directed to Berlin’s superiors that “it looks as if his co-religionists have got him in a corner.”¹⁶⁹

This prefigured a more serious affair two years later. The reality of this situation was kept secret by Berlin until the very end of his life, when he revealed it to Michael Ignatieff. In May 1943, Anthony Eden wrote a memo describing his fear that the Arab countries might not support the Allied war effort, if they felt that an Allied victory would result in the creation of a Jewish state. The next month, the American ambassador to the U.K. voiced similar concerns and proposed that Churchill and Roosevelt issue a joint statement condemning Zionist agitation and defer the whole issue until the end of the war. This would have crippled the Zionist movement, especially since Churchill was one of its most unwavering champions.¹⁷⁰

observing quadruple or quintuple loyalties.” [page xxviii] For whatever reason, he’s decided that Berlin only observed one of these manifold loyalties while he was in Washington.

¹⁶⁸ Isaiah Berlin to Marie and Mendel Berlin, 31 January 1944, *Flourishing* 474. Berlin consistently lied to his parents about his own health and well-being; these charming deceptions do not, however, color his letters about political topics.

¹⁶⁹ Ignatieff 107.

¹⁷⁰ Churchill “was the most powerful and faithful friend of Zionism to be found anywhere.” Isaiah Berlin, “Zionist Politics in Wartime Washington,” 686.

Berlin heard about the proposed statement from one of Weizmann's staff at the World Jewish Congress's offices in Washington. Berlin's Jewish and English commitments came into open conflict and, this time at least, his Jewish side carried the day. This led to his only known breach of his duties as an employee of the Foreign Office. Berlin leaked the rumor to George Backer, a newspaper publisher and influential member of the Zionist community. Backer in turn informed Henry Morgenthau, the Secretary of the Treasury, who immediately demanded that Roosevelt rescind his support of the declaration.¹⁷¹ Berlin then informed Lord Halifax, the British ambassador, that news of the declaration had somehow been leaked. He neglected, of course, to mention his own role in the matter.

On 9 August Berlin sent a letter to Angus Malcolm, one of his superiors at the Foreign Office, purporting to explain the failure of the joint declaration. In it, Berlin presents a wild, convoluted and entirely false narrative; this is obviously not the work of a seasoned double agent. "You and, perhaps, the Eastern Department may wish to know something of the background of the (apparently) final abandonment of the Joint Anglo-American Declaration on Palestine, Zionist agitation, etc. Naturally I do not know anything like all the facts [...] I tell the story at some length because it is an absolutely clinical case of how things are done in Washington [...] Dr. N. Goldmann of the Jewish Agency came to see me early in July and said that he had vaguely heard that something 'disagreeable' (he did not know what) was being planned in London [in fact, Goldmann told IB all about the proposed declaration] [...] After this nothing happened for a bit, virtually until the fate for the Joint statement had been fixed. About three days, at the most, before that, there was another leak, equally vague [this is the one for which IB was personally responsible]. This time so far as I could gather it was probably the

¹⁷¹ Ignatieff 117-118.

Current Affairs Division of the State Department.”¹⁷² Berlin here goes so far as to blame someone else for his own leak.

Ignatieff reports that Berlin was so agitated by his duplicity that he could not sleep at night.¹⁷³ This was likely exacerbated by another, nearly simultaneous, inquiry into his Zionism (it is unclear whether or not they are related). Sometime in the summer of 1943, Paul Alling, then the Head of the Near Eastern Department of the State Department, became suspicious of Berlin on account of his well-known Zionist sympathies. He aired these doubts to William Hayter, who vehemently defended Berlin. Berlin was, nonetheless, upset by the incident and suspected Angus Malcolm at the Foreign Office of alerting Alling. So, on 2 August 1943, he sent a vehement letter to Malcolm disavowing any commitment to Zionism. “No Zionist could possibly acknowledge me as a member of the faithful [...] Picture my indignation at being charged with the appalling crime of Zionism.”¹⁷⁴

Berlin’s association with Chaim Weizmann, the Anglophile Jewish Zionist who was to become the first President of Israel, admirably encapsulates his brief career as a public official. Berlin had met him in 1939 at a meeting of the Friends of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in London, and the two became fast friends. Throughout their relationship, however, Berlin kept his distance. His correspondence throughout the war years and beyond represents a string of missed appointments and excuses for not coming to Israel (it must be said that Berlin was far from reliable, but his continual neglect of so important a personage is remarkable).¹⁷⁵ Weizmann was willing to bend over backwards for Berlin, whose friendship he seems to have greatly valued. He wrote to him in 1948: “I am afraid it is no use repeating my invitation to you to come over even

¹⁷² Isaiah Berlin to Angus Malcolm, 9 August 1943, *Flourishing* 443.

¹⁷³ Ignatieff 118.

¹⁷⁴ Isaiah Berlin to Angus Malcolm, 2 August 1943, *Flourishing* 439-440.

¹⁷⁵ Cf., for example, Chaim Weizmann to Isaiah Berlin, 24 January 1947, Vera Weizmann to Isaiah Berlin, 6 March 1947, Vera Weizmann to Isaiah Berlin, 19 June 1951. All located in Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

for a short time [...] if you say the word I could arrange for our own plane to pick you up in Paris and bring you here.”¹⁷⁶ Weizmann exhorted Berlin to take a position on his staff, but Berlin refused. His wife, Vera, also tried to prod Berlin into emigration: “Who, my dear friend, gave you the right to stand aside and take refuge [in Oxford]?”¹⁷⁷ After Weizmann’s death, she begged Berlin on at least two occasions to write her husband’s biography.¹⁷⁸ She, too, was disappointed. Boris Guriel tried to enlist Berlin to write the introduction to Weizmann’s collected letters; this also came to nothing.¹⁷⁹ The Weizmanns were not the only ones clamoring for Berlin’s emigration to Israel: Ben Gurion, among others, also desired it and was also disappointed.¹⁸⁰ To emigrate to Jerusalem, or to write a book about Weizmann, would link Isaiah irrevocably with Zionism, just as taking a stand against Chesterton would link Isaiah irrevocably with his Judaism. These were commitments that he was unprepared to make.

- **The Retreat from Politics**

In August 1955, Victor Gollancz, founder of the Left Book Club, wrote to Berlin in the hopes that he would sign a petition against the death penalty. Berlin replied this way: “I wish I knew my mind about capital punishment. I am more against it than for it, and if it were abolished I should, I think, feel relief. Although, at the same time, I do not feel strongly enough to identify myself with a movement of the completely converted.”¹⁸¹ This detachment from the world of politics was typical; once the war was over, Berlin excused himself from public life. He rejected three prestigious powerful and public positions: Chief of Staff for Chaim Weizmann, writer for

¹⁷⁶ Chaim Weizmann to Isaiah Berlin, 10 November 1948, Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

¹⁷⁷ Vera Weizmann to Isaiah Berlin, 19 June 1951. Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

¹⁷⁸ Vera Weizmann to Isaiah Berlin, 1 March 1955 and 21 May 1955, Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

¹⁷⁹ Boris Guriel to Isaiah Berlin, 23 April 1962, Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

¹⁸⁰ Ignatieff 181.

¹⁸¹ Isaiah Berlin to Victor Gollancz, 20 August 1955, Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

Lord Beaverbrook's papers,¹⁸² and member of the Foreign Office's Research Department under Arnold Toynbee.¹⁸³ This was, for him, a relief. He had tired of "diplomatic contortions" and wrote to Angus Malcolm about the allure of Oxford: "no Congress, no Zionists, no files, and no appalling discretion about practically everything."¹⁸⁴ For Berlin, public involvement meant that he could not navigate his manifold loyalties on his own terms. Public figures are forced to take unequivocal stances on issues, and are not granted the intellectual and political freedom that Berlin valued more than power or fame.

This retreat from politics had been an exceptional characteristic of Berlin's ever since his entry into Oxford. The culture of depression-era England was extremely political, especially in the universities (one English official comically referred to Communism as "undergraduate measles"¹⁸⁵). In 1936, Berlin wrote to Stephen Spender, himself an important manifestation of the turn towards politics, that "the barometers of culture in England [are] in Oxford & Cambridge & not in London."¹⁸⁶ This shift in Oxbridge culture, therefore, found its way into English culture as a whole. Berlin, characteristically enough, encapsulates his own somewhat tenuous position in a later essay on Turgenev, who could not bear the "fanatical rejection of all that he held dear – liberal culture, art, civilized human relationships."¹⁸⁷ This retreat is reflected in Berlin's activities throughout the 1930s: he remained aloof from the political chaos that surrounded him, focusing on art, *academic* politics, and his own personal relationships.

¹⁸² Noel Annan, "Introduction" to *Personal Impressions*, xxviii. Lord Beaverbrook at this time controlled such prominent newspapers as *Daily Express* and the *Evening Standard*. In 1938, he wrote that "unconsciously [the Jews] are drawing us into war. Their political influence is moving us in that direction." I offer this as another piece of evidence that Berlin's England was marked by pervasive but subtle anti-Semitism. Kushner 194.

¹⁸³ Isaiah Berlin to Arnold Toynbee, 1 January 1945, *Flourishing* 516.

¹⁸⁴ Isaiah Berlin to Angus Malcolm, 26 February 1946, *Flourishing* 627.

¹⁸⁵ Carter 258.

¹⁸⁶ Isaiah Berlin to Stephen Spender, 3 June 1936, *Flourishing* 171.

¹⁸⁷ Isaiah Berlin, "Fathers and Children," 275.

When he does mention politics, it is often to discuss his ignorance or repulsion from the subject. For example, he writes to Shiela Grant Duff in 1933: “I have begun to think about politics. It is very disagreeable: I do not understand anything.”¹⁸⁸ Later in life, he claimed that 1930s Oxford was not especially political, aside from the fact that most students opposed Mussolini and were “liberal-minded.”¹⁸⁹ This contradicts most other accounts of the time; in addition, Berlin had himself published, in *The Oxford Outlook*, an essay by John Middleton Murry entitled “Communism in the Universities.”¹⁹⁰ The extent of Berlin’s distance from 1930s politics is so striking that, following the publication of the first volume of his letters, the British humor magazine *Private Eye* published a parody. In it, Berlin goes on for paragraphs about academic politics and his personal affairs, while dispensing with the Spanish Civil War this way: “There is a civil war in Spain. This is really very serious.”¹⁹¹

Berlin’s attachment sometimes seems excessive, leaving him susceptible to later charges of elitism. Duff writes in her autobiography, *The Parting of Ways*: “I was deeply moved by the sight of the Hunger Marchers, England’s unemployed, as they tramped through Oxford. Isaiah reproached me for my ‘Tolstoyan sentimentalism.’”¹⁹² She refers to the Hunger March of February 1934, in which workers from across England marched to London to protest against the government’s indifference to their plight.¹⁹³ The sight must have been heartbreaking. Isaiah, however, seems to have been relatively unconcerned. At this period in his life, at least, the

¹⁸⁸ Isaiah Berlin to Shiela Grant Duff, April[?] 1933, *Flourishing* 48.

¹⁸⁹ Isaiah Berlin and Ramin Jahagbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, 7.

¹⁹⁰ See, for example: Stephen Spender, *World within World*; Peter Stansky and William Abrams, *Journey to the Frontier*; Miranda Carter, *Anthony Blunt: His Lives*.

¹⁹¹ Unattributed, “What You Didn’t Miss, Pt. 94,” in *Private Eye*, 2–15 April 2004, 24.

¹⁹² Shiela Grant Duff, *The Parting of Ways: A Personal Account of the Thirties*, Boston: Peter Owen, 1982, page 55.

¹⁹³ Peter Stansky and William Abrahams, *Journey to the Frontier: Two Roads to the Spanish Civil War*, Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1966, 214. Following the complex crisis of 1931, a National Government was formed under Ramsay MacDonald. The Labour Party saw this as a betrayal (going so far as to expel MacDonald from the party). David Thomson, *England in the Twentieth Century*, London: Penguin, 1965, 135-137.

frequently leveled accusation that Berlin was an ivory-tower elitist seems accurate. Consider this letter to Elizabeth Bowen, the Irish novelist, written two days before the Munich Pact: “I escaped from the horrors of my half evacuated room to the town hall [...] I more than ever believe in the necessity of preserving standards of civilized life against the frightful warmth & intimacy of wartime cosiness [sic] which here at any rate has begun to develop already.”¹⁹⁴ While Berlin was bemoaning the frightful intimacy of Oxford, Europe was on the brink of war. The French had recently mobilized 600,000 reservists, and the British Navy had been mobilized as well.¹⁹⁵

While Berlin’s detachment from politics sometimes appears elitist, it can also be heroic. In 1949, Berlin wrote a laudatory essay entitled “Winston Churchill in 1940.” In it, he concludes that Churchill was “the savior of his country, a mythical hero who belongs to legend as much as to reality, the largest human being of our time.”¹⁹⁶ This is most interesting in that Churchill’s views, as expounded by Berlin, are entirely antithetical to Berlin’s own. For example, Berlin reports that Churchill “has always looked on the Russians as a formless, quasi-Asiatic mass beyond the walls of European civilization.”¹⁹⁷ This viewpoint is anathema to Berlin and is, in fact, one of the fallacies that his extensive work in Russian intellectual history aims to combat.¹⁹⁸ However, there is no hint of Berlin’s objection in the article. Berlin dispassionately writes that Churchill sees the world in terms of absolutes. In his world there are “no half-tones, nothing intangible.”¹⁹⁹ Berlin praises Churchill for always knowing his position, and for never altering it.

¹⁹⁴ Isaiah Berlin to Elizabeth Bowen, 27 September 1938, *Flourishing* 286. Cf. also this roughly contemporaneous letter, also written to Bowen: “The Proustian malice we use vis a vis each other at least serves to remind me of the necessity of keeping up standards against the ocean of mediocrity and amiable crassness in which I now move so self-consciously.” Isaiah Berlin to Elizabeth Bowen, October 1938, *Flourishing* 288.

¹⁹⁵ Thomson 175.

¹⁹⁶ Isaiah Berlin, “Winston Churchill in 1940,” *Proper Study of Mankind*, 605-627, page 627.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 612.

¹⁹⁸ Cf. especially his work on Herzen and Turgenev. To Berlin, the 19th century Russians are serious thinkers, worthy of consideration alongside their more famous Western contemporaries.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 612.

This sort of certainty was normally reviled by Berlin, but his only criticism of Churchill is that he is “sometimes over-simple.”²⁰⁰

It is a fascinating document and throws a good deal of light on Berlin’s character. A quick review of the historical context is in order: Churchill had been voted out of office in 1945, and Berlin’s article appeared shortly prior to the 1949 election, in which Churchill was back on the ticket as a Conservative. The appearance of the panegyric was, then, a shock to Berlin’s liberal friends. Harold Laski, a prominent Labor intellectual, wrote two irate letters. Rachmilievich, of all people, also criticized Berlin for the article: “It is not the business of a member of the Labour party to write an ‘objective’ account about the role of Churchill, it is after all not an obituary, it is a heroisation of the still alive and acting Churchill, appearing 2 months before the election.”²⁰¹ The incident is even more curious given that Berlin did not even support Churchill in the election (he voted for the Liberal Party).²⁰² The whole affair displays Berlin at his most typical and most noble; like Orwell, he categorically refused to engage in any sort of partisan hackery, or to let his perception of the truth be colored by political considerations. Even though Churchill’s ideas were not Berlin’s own, he recognized that Churchill saved England from the Nazis. This was the reality of the situation and it would be false and blind to tell the story in any other way.

This drive to detachment was sometimes unheroic, as well. In 1952, Christopher Sykes published a biography of Adam von Trott in which the conflict with Berlin is mentioned. As Berlin had helped him with the book, Berlin was, naturally, thanked in the acknowledgments. As Sykes, von Trott and the book itself might reasonably have been construed as anti-Semitic,

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 609.

²⁰¹ Quoted on Ignatieff 196.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 197.

Berlin balked. However, his reasoning, at least as he expressed it to Sykes, has nothing to do with his disapproval of Sykes's project. On the contrary, Berlin merely sought to avoid controversy:

*“I have a feeling that if you so sweetly include me in your list of acknowledgements I shall, sooner or later, have to begin ‘explaining myself’ to Israel; ex-hosts & present friends & acquaintances: how I partially share & partially do not share your views of them & their state: to what degree I sympathize & to what degree not with your somewhat (and very intelligibly so) ambivalent attitude to the Jews etc. etc. – & will be dragged into dreary arguments about anti-semitism v. anti-Zionism etc. all of which I should like to be allowed to avoid, if possible.”*²⁰³

This is Berlin at his most unattractive. He does challenge Sykes's “ambivalent” views towards Jews and Zionism. He simply seeks to avoid the whole mess altogether. A few weeks later, Berlin thought better of this and wrote a telegram expressing his change of heart. On the telegram, Sykes has written the following: “When the book came out he got cold feet, not so cold however that he could not run, and he ran faster than any Jew has ever run away from anything. I was rather disappointed.”²⁰⁴ Berlin was right about Sykes: he *is* anti-Semitic, and this note chronicles Berlin's inability to escape being labeled as a Jew.

This refusal to blindly commit led to Berlin's perpetual status as a skeptical outsider, carefully skirting his way between the forces of the left and right. He refused to commit himself to any party or ideology, just as he refused to commit absolutely to any of his competing identities. This self-image is surely the root cause of his lifelong love for the 19th century Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev. While not Jewish, Turgenev's temperament was very much like Berlin's; Berlin did not think that this “outsider” status was exclusively Jewish. Turgenev's period was, like Berlin's, one of great upheaval and polarization. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky

²⁰³ Isaiah Berlin to Christopher Sykes, 1 September 1952, Berlin Archives, Wolfson College, Oxford University.

²⁰⁴ Christopher Sykes, *Note appended on 11 September 1952 telegram from Berlin to Sykes*, Berlin archives, Wolfson College, Oxford University.

screamed their sermons in 19th century Russia, while Laski and T.S. Eliot preached their own in 20th century England. In 1932, around the time that Oxbridge was becoming heavily politicized,²⁰⁵ Berlin took refuge in Turgenev's beautiful and apolitical world. He wrote to Spender: "I have suddenly begun to read Turgenev in Russian and am now reading him wildly in a sort of intoxication."²⁰⁶

Late in his life, Berlin was to write that "Turgenev was by nature cautious, judicious, frightened of all extremes, liable at critical moments to take evasive action; his friend [...] described him to a reactionary minister as being 'kind and soft as wax.'"²⁰⁷ Leonard Schapiro, a recent biographer, has agreed with Berlin's assessment: "what makes [Turgenev] remarkable and exceptional in the Russian scene is that he cannot be readily labeled – unless love of liberty, decency and humanity can be called a label."²⁰⁸ This judgment might, just as easily, be applied to Berlin himself. Consider the already-quoted judgment of Stephen Spender that Berlin "had an interest in other people's lives which was strengthened by the conviction that he himself was detached from the passions which moved them."²⁰⁹ Ambrose Usher is a character based on Berlin, who appears in a series of novels by Chaim Raphael. In *A Killing in Hats* (1965), the detective strictures Usher: "You're not really very helpful. You seem to *like* everybody too much. Isn't there just a little too much milk of human kindness in you for this sort of game?"²¹⁰

²⁰⁵ This is chronicled in Stansky and Abrahams. Cf. page 105: "In the late 1920s, when Julian [Bell, the son of Vanessa Bell and nephew of Virginia Woolf] had been an undergraduate, 'no one' at the Universities [that is, Oxford and Cambridge] had seemed to care very much about politics; then, as it were overnight, with the coming of the new decade, the situation was reversed and 'everyone' was political, arranged on a spectrum from Left of Centre to furthest left."

²⁰⁶ Isaiah Berlin to Stephen Spender, 5 December 1932, *Flourishing* 42.

²⁰⁷ Isaiah Berlin, "Fathers and Children," in *Russian Thinkers*, ed. Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly, New York: Penguin, 1978, 261-303, page 267.

²⁰⁸ Leonard Schapiro, *Turgenev: His Life and Times*, New York: Random House, 1978, xii.

²⁰⁹ Stephen Spender, *World within World* 60-61.

²¹⁰ Quoted in: Henry Hardy, "Writings about Isaiah Berlin,"

<<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/onib/onib.htm>> in Henry Hardy (ed.), *The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*, accessed 7 February 2005.

Albert Einstein wrote to Felix Frankfurter in December 1952 that Berlin seemed to him a “spectator in God’s big but mostly not very attractive theater.”²¹¹

- **Assimilation and Its Discontents**

This retreat from politics is symptomatic of a larger character trait, one that has been a recurrent thread throughout the narrative thus far: assimilation. One of the most remarkable facts about this remarkable man was his ability to quickly earn the favor and friendship of most anyone; he did not let ideological considerations interfere with his social life or, as is evident in the Churchill article, his Party identification interfere with his historical judgments (Turgenev was the same way; his friendship with Herzen, for example, transcended political differences²¹²). At St. Paul’s School he became friends with his Anglican schoolmates and warmly interviewed G.K. Chesterton. At Oxford, he enjoyed intimate friendships with both Communists and Nazi sympathizers. In Palestine, as we have seen, he enjoyed the company of Zionists, anti-Zionists, Jews and anti-Semites alike. In the United States, he quickly ascended the highest ranks of Jewish society. Shortly before his death, after a lifetime of such successful social climbing, culminating in familiar relations with the House of Windsor, Berlin delivered a monologue into a tape recorder for the benefit of his biographer: “the thing about me, the thought of which occasionally embarrasses me, is that I adjust myself too rapidly and easily to almost any group of persons I am thrown together with.”²¹³

This indiscriminating sociability sometimes led to conflict, as it did with Donald MacLean. MacLean was, like Burgess, a member of the famed Cambridge spy ring (Berlin was,

²¹¹ Albert Einstein to Felix Frankfurter, 3 December 1952, quoted on Ignatieff 194.

²¹² Schapiro 201.

²¹³ Isaiah Berlin, *Tape MI 17*.

like most everyone, oblivious to this).²¹⁴ Maclean was stationed in Washington, D.C. during the war when Berlin appeared at a dinner party at which he was present. In the course of the alcohol-fueled discussion, Berlin mentioned his friendship with Alice Roosevelt Longworth, a cousin of Franklin D. Roosevelt, then President of the United States. Her personal views were antithetical to the President's (and to Berlin's): she was a vigorous reactionary who made no secret of her anti-New Deal opinions. Berlin later wrote of her that she "disliked democracy and general American ideals" and had a "not undeserved" reputation as an "acute reactionary."²¹⁵ This gathering was heavily weighted towards the left, and the partygoers, with MacLean at the helm, hounded Berlin for his duplicity. In their view, life was a battle and one should stick to one's team. This view was, of course, not Berlin's own. Why on earth should political ideals determine with whom one can or can not spend one's time? The question is related to an earlier one, pondered by Berlin during the Churchill affair: why should political ideals determine what can or can not be said about history? The gathering dispersed gloomily, with hurt feelings all around.²¹⁶

Berlin wrote about the incident to Cressida Ridley, in a telling letter dated 14 February 1945. "Donald McLean [sic] is very very nice. I've had a row with him, funnily enough, & then we made it up – I was the aggrieved party as always alas, & although I cannot really forgive him I like him v. much."²¹⁷ Although this incident is not comparable in scale to the von Trott affair, a parallel can be drawn. In each case, Berlin retired with somewhat hurt feelings, all the while exclaiming his loyalty and affection for his opponent. These are the sorts of incidents that led to the charges of cowardice that plagued Berlin in his later years; the best example of this concerns

²¹⁴ Maclean was certainly spying at this time, as he was recruited by Kim Philby in the autumn of 1934. Carter 160. The Cambridge spy ring was made up of Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, Kim Philby, Anthony Blunt and possibly one more member. They were recruited as spies by the U.S.S.R. during the 1930s.

²¹⁵ Isaiah Berlin to Carol Felsenthal, 16 September 1985, quoted on *Flourishing* 484.

²¹⁶ Ignatieff 128-129.

²¹⁷ Isaiah Berlin to Cressida Ridley, 14 February 1945, *Flourishing* 532.

T.S. Eliot (see Chapter 3). This is for Berlin's alleged embarrassment at his overwhelming capacity for assimilation: it came at the price of a sort of willingness-to-please, a lack of backbone born of a desire to fit in with the crowd.

However, he always resisted the temptation to assimilate completely. He had the opportunity to do so in July 1945, when Patricia de Bendor proposed marriage. She was a very English figure, as her father was the 11th Marquess of Queensberry. Berlin had been in love with her for years, but he turned her down.²¹⁸ While the reasons for this must have been numerous, it is remarkable that Berlin had the opportunity to assimilate completely into the English community and he refused. Five years later, he married Aline Halban, an assimilated Parisian Jew. She had Russian blood, as well: as her grandfather had been a wealthy banker in pre-revolutionary Petrograd. The marriage was successful. As Berlin neared death, in his last interview with Ignatieff, he stressed that his love for her was the most important thing in his life.²¹⁹ He did not marry her solely because she was a Jew, but it must have played a role. They had at least one thing in common: her life had also shown her the impossibility of assimilation. Even though her elite family had completely assimilated into French society, she had been forced to flee in 1940 after France fell to the Germans.²²⁰

After the war, Berlin was faced with another reminder of his *own* failure. In 1950, he was faced with the only instance, in all his time in England, of overt and explicit anti-Semitism. Berlin was friends with Oliver Lyttleton, a Conservative politician (this is another example of his refusal to let politics dictate his personal life). Lyttleton nominated Berlin for membership at the prestigious St. James's Club in London. The application was rejected because several members

²¹⁸ Ignatieff 112.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 299.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

resolutely refused to allow entrance to a Jew.²²¹ Berlin knew this, and it must have been crushing. After relating this story, Ignatieff presents Berlin's admittance into the even more exclusive Brooks's Club as a slap in the face of the anti-Semitic establishment; Ignatieff fails to mention that Berlin's entry to *that* club, as Berlin was well aware, was nearly turned down for the same reason.²²²

The Holocaust caused these ideas about the impossibility of assimilation to crystallize. It is remarkable that Berlin never wrote much about the catastrophe; as Ignatieff observes, "it was Stalin's crimes, not Hitler's, that roused his most intense imaginative response."²²³ This is not to say that it did not affect him. It surely did, as it must have every sensitive Jew (especially those who, like Berlin, lost relatives to the Nazis²²⁴), and it haunts much of his later work. The Holocaust heightened his already-existing sense that total assimilation was impossible. As he said in 1989, it "proved [...] the hopelessness of assimilation. Nobody was more deeply assimilated than the German Jews."²²⁵ He explores this further in "Jewish Slavery and Emancipation." The German Jews had, for centuries, been violently suppressing their Jewishness in order to be accepted by the Germans; he points out that Heine and Mendelssohn were both more German than the Germans.²²⁶ Aline Halban was more French than the French, and yet was forced to flee her country. Berlin was more English than the English, and yet was denied access to St. James's and seen by the Bishop of Gloucester, Christopher Sykes, and the officials at the Foreign Office as a Jew. Late in life, Berlin claimed that "in Israel I don't particularly feel a Jew,

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 176.

²²² Letter from [illegible; IB's nominator at Brooks's] to Isaiah Berlin, 4 July 1950.

²²³ Ignatieff 123.

²²⁴ Berlin lost both of his grandfathers, who were still living in Riga. *Ibid.*, 123.

²²⁵ Isaiah Berlin and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, 21.

²²⁶ Isaiah Berlin, "Jewish Slavery and Emancipation," 170.

but in England I do.”²²⁷ His own history, combined with that of his friends and of his generation as a whole, taught him that Jews will *always* be Jews, however comforting it might be to think otherwise. Berlin does not discuss whether this is a private or public affair; that is, whether the failure to assimilate is founded on the inability of the Jew to transcend his own Jewish consciousness or the inability of the non-Jewish society to fully incorporate the foreign, Jewish element. He would have seen this as a false dichotomy (in this, he was following Herder; see page 100).

- **Boris Pasternak and the Reality of Tragedy**

Shortly afterwards, Isaiah embarked on what was to be his last major public duty: he was sent to Moscow in order to draft a report on the status of post-war relations between the U.K., the U.S.A., and the U.S.S.R. The trip is significant in that it marked his re-immersion into the culture of his youth, and may well have sparked the intense interest in all things Russian that was to bear such scholarly fruit a few years later. Mendel wrote of the visit in his memoir: “You had an opportunity of meeting my brothers and sister and their families, all very novel and out of the ordinary. Your knowledge of Russian affairs, their literary and cultural activities [were] much clarified.”²²⁸

Berlin was reintegrated with his Jewish roots in a concrete sense as he visited his relatives. This was not an easy task: Berlin was closely watched by the NKVD (the Soviet secret police, soon to be re-christened the KGB), who were wary of allowing foreigners to fraternize with Soviet citizens.²²⁹ The most interesting escapade concerned Berlin’s attempts to visit Leo Berlin, Mendel’s brother. Berlin had the address on a sheet of paper, which was surreptitiously

²²⁷ Isaiah Berlin and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, 87.

²²⁸ Mendel Berlin 59a. Berlin seconded this appraisal: he wrote that “I had plenty of spare time on my hands. I used it to visit museums, historic places and buildings, theatres, book-shops, to walk idly about the streets, and so on.” Isaiah Berlin, “Meetings with Russian Writers in 1945 and 1956,” in *Personal Impressions*, 198-252, page 199.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 205, 210.

confiscated by the NKVD.²³⁰ He somehow recovered the address, and wrote to his parents: “I do not lose hope of calling on Leo. I think I know how.”²³¹ Berlin did not reveal his precise plan to them, probably out of a quite justified fear they would worry: he evaded the NKVD by slipping out of a ballet performance during the intermission.²³² The picture is a poetic one: a middle-aged, physically timid and rather rotund Jewish Oxford don scurrying down the streets of nighttime Moscow, evading Stalin’s secret police in an attempt to visit his long-estranged uncle. For Berlin, this is what it means to be a Jew: a dangerous act of evasion in a hostile world.

When in Russia, Berlin was not interested only in reestablishing family ties. He longed to meet the poet Boris Pasternak, an assimilated Jew who lived in Peredelkino, a writers’ colony outside Moscow (this was made possible by Pasternak’s sisters, who lived in Oxford). In Berlin’s account of the event, written 34 years later, Pasternak opened the conversation by launching into a tale about his speech to the Anti-Fascist Congress in Paris, during which he had said: “I understand that this is a meeting of writers to organize resistance to Fascism. I have only one thing to say to you about that. Do not organize. Organization is the death of art.”²³³ Whether or not Pasternak began this way (as seems unlikely), it indicates the role that Pasternak was to play for Berlin. He had found a new Turgenev, living and breathing the spirit of artistic and intellectual freedom in the midst of intense political and partisan pressure.²³⁴

Berlin became a lifelong devotee. Shortly after his return to Oxford in April 1946, for example, he began to drum up support for his proposal that Pasternak be granted an honorary degree from Oxford. He worked with the bureaucracies of both Moscow and Oxford to this end.

²³⁰ *Flourishing* 590.

²³¹ Isaiah Berlin to Marie and Mendel Berlin, 19 September 1945, *Flourishing* 591.

²³² Ignatieff 139. He used this trick twice.

²³³ Isaiah Berlin, “Meetings with Russian Writers in 1945 and 1956,” 214.

²³⁴ He was later to find more of the same in his famed meeting with Anna Akhmatova; while this was a key moment in Berlin’s life, Pasternak’s Jewish identity renders him more useful for the purposes of this essay. Pasternak was, in fact, positively fearful of being seen as a politically orthodox writer. *Ibid.*, 226.

He was, however, disappointed. The response from the vice-Chancellor of Corpus Christi must have especially angered Berlin, given his sympathies with Pasternak's refusal to be a political tool: "I do not much like the use of Honorary Degrees for political purposes (though obviously Pasternak has other claims), nor do I feel that this is the moment for a 'gesture' to Russia."²³⁵ There were political obstacles in Moscow as well. Brenda Tripp, a British diplomat in Moscow, wrote to him: "I can't imagine what's gone wrong with the Honorary Degree Proposal. Perhaps everything with Russia is damned to disappointment."²³⁶ This was the sort of affair that angered Berlin to the utmost. Boris Pasternak, a literary genius, could not be honored as such because of partisan considerations.

Berlin also sympathized with Pasternak's tortured relationship with his Jewish identity. In Berlin's own words, Pasternak's "passionate, almost obsessive, desire to be thought a Russian writer with roots deep in Russian soil was particularly evident in his negative feelings towards his Jewish origins [...] he wished the Jews to assimilate, to disappear as a people."²³⁷ Pasternak's father, Leonid, was not afraid of his Jewishness. His household had a "Judaic element," and he categorically refused to convert to the Russian Orthodox Church, even as it jeopardized his career. His son did not have these qualms, and became an enthusiastic convert to Christianity.²³⁸

Pasternak's last word on the Jewish question can be found in *Doctor Zhivago*, on which Pasternak had recently begun working when Berlin visited him. Misha Gordon, the novel's primary Jewish character, bemoans the irrationality of the Jewish people, who should have, according to him, converted to Christianity when they had the chance. "And they actually saw and heard [Christianity] and let it go!" He then counsels his people to completely assimilate:

²³⁵ R. Livingstone to Isaiah Berlin, 1 June 1946. Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

²³⁶ Brenda Tripp to Isaiah Berlin, 26 May 1946. Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

²³⁷ Isaiah Berlin, "Meetings with Russian Writers in 1945 and 1956," 222.

²³⁸ Efraim Sicher, *Jews in Russian Literature after the October Revolution: Writers between Hope and Apostasy*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 152, 154.

“Don’t stick together, disperse. Be with all the rest. You are the first and best Christians in the world.”²³⁹ The spiritual center of the novel is Yuri Zhivago’s lover, Lara (based on Pasternak’s wife). Not a Jew herself, she echoes Misha and counsels total assimilation: “It’s so strange that these people who once liberated mankind from the yoke of idolatry [...] should be incapable of liberating themselves from their loyalty to an obsolete, antediluvian identity that has lost all meaning, that they should not rise above themselves and dissolve among all the rest.”²⁴⁰

But the novel’s relation to the Jewish question is more profound than that. *Doctor Zhivago* would not be the great novel that it is if it provided pat and simplistic answers to complex questions of identity. Misha is not a success after suppressing his Jewish identity. He does not appear for much of the novel and when he appears at the end, he has become a ridiculous quasi-intellectual. The narrator comments on his “intellectual poverty” and “average tastes.”²⁴¹ His Jewishness is not mentioned; he has succeeded in letting go of that nuisance but has failed to assume a more worthwhile identity. Were Pasternak certain about the possibilities of total assimilation, Misha might have become more of a successful character.

The ambiguity surrounding the Jewish question in the novel stems from Pasternak’s appreciation for history. The primary message of the novel is the importance of continuity, tradition and society. This is most clearly represented by the status of families in the novel; traditional family life has absolutely fallen apart in Soviet Russia. The novel begins, for example, with Yuri’s mother’s funeral, which is closely followed by his father’s suicide. The rest of the novel is an exhaustive catalog of broken families, where parents are separated from their children by death, estrangement or imprisonment (significantly, Misha, who has a healthy relationship

²³⁹ Pasternak 122.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 301.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 483.

with his father, is one of very few exceptions to this pattern).²⁴² In other cases, the relationship between generations is one of outright hostility; the partisan army, for example, is composed of “sons of kulaks in arms against their fathers.”²⁴³ At the conclusion of the novel, when Yuri and Lara’s child is introduced, it is named “Bezotchcheia,” which means “Fatherless.”²⁴⁴

The novel preaches the folly of ignoring or abandoning history and tradition, yet counsels the very same to the Jewish people. Pasternak was not the only writer making these claims; England was bursting with them. But Pasternak was *Jewish*, by heritage if not by religion. He was, for Berlin, another example of the anguish felt by the modern Jew. Pasternak had done everything possible to disavow his Jewishness, just as Aline and Marx had, but he failed. The problem of the modern Jew did not end after the Holocaust, nor was it confined to Germany. Berlin obviously did not think that all Jews should convert, as he never considered it for himself. However, he did not chastise Pasternak for doing so. In fact, he thought Pasternak a genius. What, then, is the modern Jew to do? The problem is insoluble: there are a variety of solutions, none of them perfect. The reality of tragic moral dilemmas became a touchstone of Berlin’s thought.

Berlin might have sympathized with Pasternak’s attempt at conversion, but he strongly disapproved of Pasternak’s desire to remove the possibilities of choice from the Jewish people. If the Jewish faith ceased to exist, as Pasternak wished, the decision will have been made for all Jews. Berlin’s life had shown him, first, that total assimilation was impossible and that Pasternak was deceiving himself. Second, Berlin valued the ability to make *choices*; to choose between values and ends. If Berlin in the United States had unquestioningly adopted the official stance on

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 18, 21, 29, 38, 126, 174, 262, 372, 471.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 262,

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 512.

every issue, in what sense would he have been a free individual? Isaiah Berlin is Isaiah Berlin, just as Boris Pasternak is Boris Pasternak and George Bush is George Bush, because of his capacity to choose between values, and it is positively inhuman to remove these possibilities.²⁴⁵ Pasternak's desire to subvert the value of individual choice was alive in England as well. This took two forms: some thought that individual choice should be sacrificed to the demands of history, whereas others thought that reason could save us from the burden of individual responsibility (for the latter group, see Chapter 4). The former group of thinkers was in the ascendant when Berlin returned to Oxford.

²⁴⁵ Isaiah Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," 10, 11.

Chapter 3

The Postwar Confrontation with Religion

Berlin, always an acute observer of society, was commissioned by *Encyclopedia Britannica* to write a piece summarizing the cultural scene in 1951. In it, he wrote that “one of the most notable characteristics of the literary and artistic scene during the year 1951, not merely in western Europe but beyond its confines, was the revival of religion, in the widest as well as the narrowest sense of the word, as a central issue of discussion.” He saw this, more generally, as a “continuing process of slow pulverization of all intermediate positions – of all the older forms of liberalism, secularism and tolerant humanism.”²⁴⁶ These latter positions are, of course, those of Turgenev and Berlin himself.

Berlin pointed to the works of Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene and T.S. Eliot as proof of this shift towards religion. Each of these figures had been reviving cultural Catholicism since the 1930’s; to an outside observer, at least, it does not appear that culture in 1951 was any more religious than it had been in 1950. 1951, however, does represent the year in which Berlin himself butted his head against the religious tradition. He actually wrote the *Britannica* piece in January 1952.²⁴⁷ At that time, “Jewish Slavery and Its Emancipation” had been printed and Berlin had just received his letter from T.S. Eliot, which was to force him into a bitter and religiously-tinged dispute.²⁴⁸ While Berlin was not dishonest or overly personal in his account of 1951 culture, it is possible that the sudden emphasis on religion was a result of this confrontation

²⁴⁶ Isaiah Berlin, “Nineteen Fifty-One: A Survey of Cultural Trends of the Year,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica Book of the Year 1952*, Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952, xxii-xxxi, pages xxii and xxxiv.

²⁴⁷ Isaiah Berlin to David Cecil, 3 January 1952, Wolfson College Archives, Oxford.

²⁴⁸ Per the letter to Cecil, Berlin began the Britannica essay in early January. Eliot’s letter is dated 28 November 1951, but Berlin claims, in his response, not to have gotten it until the 16th or 17th of January. This is certainly a ruse to explain his belated reply, as he wrote to his father about the letter from Eliot on 4 January. Isaiah Berlin to Mendel Berlin, 4 January 1952, Berlin Archives, Wolfson College, Oxford.

with Eliot. Eliot forced him to take the intellectual right-wing, which had been growing in prominence and legitimacy since the 1930's, into consideration.

The cultural right-wing was a product of the modernist movement of the 1910's and 1920's. This generation of artists was concerned with the construction of new and timeless values in a chaotic world (hence their unpopularity with the post-modernist critics). In the 1920s these values were found in the eternal world of art; Wyndham Lewis, Pound and Eliot were not, during these years, especially concerned with politics. During the 1930s, however, detachment from the world of politics became impossible. The shift was readily apparent in Oxford itself: after the economic crash, the aesthetes of 1920s Oxford were replaced by the radical political activists of the 1930s.

This new search for value expressed itself in two different ways. In each case, there was the sense that art must be related to value and belief, a position hateful to Turgenev and Berlin. This quest invariably led to dissatisfaction with parliamentary democracy and "all the older forms of liberalism, secularism and tolerant humanism" (to be fair, democracy was not functioning terribly well in the 1930s). First, there was the move towards a socialist art; this was the position famously taken by Spender, Auden and MacNiece.²⁴⁹ John Cornford, who was to die in the Spanish Civil War, was one of the most radical of these poets. In an acerbic poem entitled "Keep Culture Out of Cambridge," he laments the influence of "Webster's skull and Eliot's pen," when all that is necessary is "our [Communist] party cards."²⁵⁰ Berlin's opinion on these issues, and his engagement with far-left in general, is well known.

²⁴⁹ Auden later converted to Christianity and was considered by Berlin to be a religious writer. This sprang from his disillusionment with the social activism of the 1930s, which he called a "low dishonest decade" in his poem "September 1, 1939."

²⁵⁰ Quoted on Stansky and Abrahams 218.

Less has been said about Berlin's relationship with the other manifestation of this search for value: the far right. This was the solution towards which the quintessential modernists tended. Around 1930, Wyndham Lewis penned a controversial book extolling the virtues of Hitler and Ezra Pound became an enthusiastic supporter of Mussolini. Yeats had already begun flirting with Irish fascism in the 1920s. His political speeches are indicative of the sense that art must be related to a system of value, be it religious or political. In a 1924 article addressed to "All Artists and Writers," he writes: "We condemn the art and literature of modern Europe. No man can create, as did Shakespeare, Homer, Sophocles, who does not believe, with all his blood and nerve, that man's soul is immortal."²⁵¹

Berlin very plausibly sees a connection between the far-right and far-left positions. In this he agrees with, of all people, the Duke of Northumberland, a radical conservative, who wrote that Bolshevism represented "the exaltation of pure materialism into a religion."²⁵² While this is implied in his *Britannica* essay, he was more forthright with the connection, and his judgment of it, in a contemporaneous letter to David Astor. "[The religious] mood is wh[at] is fashionable, & it has made a literarified religion the latest means of presenting unpleasant facts - which used to be the monopoly of Marxists & psycho-analysts."²⁵³ In his mind, the religious outlook keeps us from maintaining the sober sense of reality that he prized. He wrote to Astor that unpleasant facts were viewed by the religious in one of two ways: "(a) the hideous things are hideous because we do not understand God [...] (b) the hideous, chaotic, tragic is *true*: & religion is the mode of apprehending it [...] the uglier and bleaker and less intelligible the more necessary." Each of these are, obviously, alien to Berlin's own project and that of meliorist liberals in general. When

²⁵¹ Quoted in: Richard Ellman, *Yeats: The Man and The Masks*, New York: Penguin, 1979, 251.

²⁵² Quoted on Webber 63.

²⁵³ Isaiah Berlin to David Cecil, 3 December 1952, Berlin Archive, Wolfson College, Oxford University.

Auden converted from socialism to Christianity after the war, the step was not a terribly large one. The Christian vocabulary may have provided the only alternative to the godless Marxist one after the failure of liberalism, which seemed so evident during the desperate 1930s. T.S. Eliot himself, an arch-conservative, criticized the labor exploitation, environmental destruction and gender inequality that were produced by the capitalist system. In Berlin's eyes, however, both the Marxist and the religious positions were forms of blindness to the facts.

They widely diverged, however, in their treatment of history. The liberals did not believe in the value or importance of history; they sided with Stephen Dedalus (from *Ulysses*), who famously described history as "a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." The logical corollary, with which postwar liberals also agreed, is that questions of nation and group identity, as historical constructions, are comparatively unimportant. Berlin disagreed with this atomic view of the individual; he had lived enough and seen enough to know that these theories ignored the forces that move men. This is first seen in "Jewish Slavery and Emancipation," in which Berlin argues that the Jews need a state of their own so that they can truly have their own culture, thus ending their perpetually confused and *sui generis* status. The liberals would argue that everyone should become stateless Jews. Berlin argues the exact opposite: the Jews must have a state in order to become like everyone else. Berlin was, in this sense at least, in discord with his liberal context. This will be considered in more detail in Chapter 4.

Berlin's ideas are surprisingly sympathetic to those of contemporary far-right thinkers. The conservatives in 20th century England, as always, lionized history and convention. For them, the importance of the individual pales in comparison with that of the social whole, which must grow organically over the course of centuries. Consider this quotation: "My friends and I had in some general sense a policy in the matter; and it was in substance the desire to give Jews the

dignity and status of a separate nation. We desired that in some fashion, and so far as possible, Jews should be represented by Jews, should live in a society of Jews, should be judged by Jews and ruled by Jews.” And this: “Zionism would bring to the Jew territorial patriotism, which he now lacks. It would assuredly allow him to develop his own culture in arts, in literature, in science.”²⁵⁴ These judgments might well have come from the pen of Isaiah Berlin, as they are very close to Berlin’s own justification for Zionism. But they are the work of G.K. Chesterton, the anti-Dreyfusard and arch-reactionary.

But Berlin obviously did not agree entirely with Chesterton, who did not think that Jews should or could live in England. In fact, the entire project of Zionism is at least somewhat alien to the conservative spirit, as Zionists hope to build a state, from scratch, where one did not exist before. Berlin is usually and sensibly categorized as a liberal. His liberalism is, however, problematic. He trod a lonely path between the left and right, learning from each one. Just as he was unwilling to choose absolutely between his Jewish, English and Russian identities, he was unwilling to choose between right and left. Although it has been often overlooked, Berlin’s sympathies with right-wing thinkers are important and necessary for a nuanced understanding of his thought.

- ***Brideshead Revisited* and the Character of the British Right**

When Berlin wrote that early 1950s culture was tending towards a religious tone, he had in mind a whole bevy of cultural icons, among which were John Betjeman, T.S. Eliot, Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh (who once referred to Berlin as “diffuse and voluble”²⁵⁵). Instead of attempting to create my own grand interpretation of English culture, I will choose these figures

²⁵⁴ The first quotation comes from G.K. Chesterton, *The Jews* (1920). Quoted on Cheyette 150. The second is from a 1911 interview with *Jewish Chronicle*. Quoted on *Ibid.*, 184.

²⁵⁵ Selina Hastings, *Evelyn Waugh*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994, 593.

as representative of the entire tradition (Eliot will be specifically dealt with later; as Berlin himself once said about him, “Eliot is a great poet but that is a very different story”²⁵⁶). These are all Christian figures, and they also represent the cultural manifestation of the interwar British right-wing. Although there were certainly exceptions, this equation of Christianity and the far-right is grounded in historical fact. Even Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists explicitly dedicated itself to upholding Christian values.²⁵⁷ The career of Eliot, Waugh and the rest demonstrate that the religious tone of 1951 culture was not as much of a revolution as Berlin implied. Each of them were titanic cultural figures from the 1930s through the 1950s and beyond. The Catholics and Anglo-Catholics were not a radical fringe movement (Betjeman became the poet laureate of the United Kingdom in 1972).

I should mention here that much of the Catholic revival took a specifically Anglo-Catholic form.²⁵⁸ Anglo-Catholicism, which sprang from the 19th century Oxford Movement, sought to reorient the Anglican Church towards Roman Catholicism. This led to a rejection of individualist Protestantism (linked, of course, with political liberalism). Their work was more theological than social; Newman, the leader of the Oxford Movement, supported the epistemology of faith as opposed to the bloodless and secular scientific method. It was up to their followers to transform Newman’s attack on liberal theology into an attack on liberalism in general. Keble and Newman, like their 20th century successors, were not lonely radicals on the fringes of society. In fact, Berlin could have stepped out of his All Souls lodgings, turned right onto Park Street, and arrived at Keble College within minutes.

²⁵⁶ Isaiah Berlin and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* 197.

²⁵⁷ Webber 63.

²⁵⁸ There are deep-rooted historical reasons for the English distaste for Roman Catholicism, including the inevitable link with Irish Republicanism.

Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, his most famous novel, is in many ways a typical document of the Catholic Revival. Humphrey Carpenter wrote a group biography of Waugh and his friends entitled *The Brideshead Generation*; in his view, the book is the most emblematic production of an entire generation of religious and conservative aesthetes.²⁵⁹ In the novel, Waugh demonstrates his disgust with contemporary England. Hooper, the symbol of "young England," mucks about in the "general, enveloping fog from which he observes the universe."²⁶⁰ Hooper represents the hopelessly bourgeois businessman, detested by Waugh and inevitably linked with the reign of liberalism. Waugh bemoans the fact that the natural aristocracy of England must perish "to make a world for Hooper [...] the traveling salesman, with his polygonal pince-nez, his fat wet hand-shake, his grinning dentures."²⁶¹ This vicious elitism, manifested in a hatred for the uncultured masses and the popular press, was a characteristic of British conservatives more generally during these years.²⁶²

The problem with the modern man, according to these conservatives, is that he is *fragmented*. Rex, Waugh's characteristically comic and unflattering portrait of the modern politician, is "something absolutely modern and up-to-date that only this ghastly age could produce. A tiny bit of a man pretending he was the whole."²⁶³ The early poetry of both Eliot and Pound, before they arrived at their respective far-right positions, was obsessed with this fragmentation. Eliot famously wrote in *The Waste Land*: "I shore these fragments against my

²⁵⁹ Humphrey Carpenter, *The Brideshead Generation: Evelyn Waugh & his Friends*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1990.

²⁶⁰ Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1945, 9.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

²⁶² Webber 65-66, among others. John Carey, in his *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, describes the surprising prevalence of these ideas among British intellectuals as early as 1890. John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, London: Faber and Faber, 1992.

²⁶³ Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited* 200.

ruin.”²⁶⁴ Pound, for his part, saw the modern man as “a bundle of broken mirrors” and actually created a photography machine that used mirrors to create shattered portraits.²⁶⁵ Their work also chronicled the search for unity (for Eliot, Part V of *The Waste Land*; for Pound, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly*). This sense of fragmentation, linked with liberalism, and the concomitant desire for a return to wholeness, of both the individual and the society, is another defining characteristic of the inter-war Right.

Once Eliot and Pound devoted themselves to social theorizing, it was left to Graham Greene to explore the consciousness of the fragmented modern man. Greene was a perpetual doubter and, even after his conversion, remained skeptical about the possibilities of Catholicism. His novels diagnose instead of preach. *The End of the Affair*, set in wartime London and published in 1951, concerns the spiritual consequences of the extramarital affair between its two protagonists, Maurice Bendrix and Sarah Miles. Maurice is thrown into spiritual crisis after the death of the saintly Sarah. The novel is, however, not a morality tale; Bendrix is not presented as a saved man. Maurice’s fate at the novel’s end is ambiguous. He finds religion, but there is no indication that this will ease his suffering. In fact, he hates God.²⁶⁶ The same ambiguity can be found in *The Heart of the Matter*. Again, we see a man (Scobie) caught between reality and God. Near the end of the novel, he exclaims: “It’s an *impasse*, God, an *impasse*.”²⁶⁷ The *impasse* is not resolved. Scobie is driven by his basic goodness to commit suicide: “the worst crime a Catholic could commit.”²⁶⁸ In Greene’s world, there is something wrong, but neither he nor his characters knows what it is.

²⁶⁴ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, line 430.

²⁶⁵ Ezra Pound, “Near Périgord,” line 25. For the photography machine, called a “Vortoscope” (developed during the short-lived Vorticist movement), see: Humphrey Carpenter, *Ezra Pound: A Serious Character*, 281-282.

²⁶⁶ Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair*, New York: Penguin, 1975, 191.

²⁶⁷ Graham Greene, *The Heart of the Matter*, New York: Viking Press, 1948, 259.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

Greene's ambivalence and perpetual doubt was anomalous during the polarized 1930s; many of his contemporaries thought that they *had* found a solution. They linked the fragmentation of the modern consciousness, so vividly evoked by Greene, with a fragmentation of society at large; like Plato, they assumed that a whole and perfect individual could only exist in a whole and perfect society. The social order, they thought, had been torn apart by the insidious doctrines of liberalism. The individual was being championed at the expense of the social whole, which was more important than any individual could possibly be; both the Catholic and Marxist critics, exemplified by Georg Lukács, despised modern literature for its over-emphasis on the subjective and the individual. Waugh, for example, discussed "the failure of modern novelists since and including James Joyce." His own task, as he saw it, was "to represent man more fully, which, to me, means only one thing, man in his relation to God."²⁶⁹

The conservatives yearned for the strictly defined social order of the past. This is the root of their identification with the Tories of the 18th and 19th century.²⁷⁰ This sense had been with the Anglo-Catholics since the beginning: Geoffrey Rowell writes that John Keble, one of the founders of the movement, had a "Tory reverence for the order and hierarchy of established institutions in society."²⁷¹ *Brideshead Revisited*, in which the Marchmain family is unable to find a niche in modern society, might be read as a eulogy to the aristocracy. Sebastian, a member of the family and a magnetic figure at Oxford, spends much of the book in an alcohol-induced stupor. In doing so, he is following the example of his father. Lady Marchmain concludes that Sebastian and his father are "too pitiful. The men I grew up with [...] were not like that."²⁷² The whole novel, in fact, seems like an English version of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, in which

²⁶⁹ From a 1946 article in *Life*. Quoted on Hastings 504.

²⁷⁰ Webber 7.

²⁷¹ Geoffrey Rowell, *The Vision Glorious: Themes and Personalities of the Catholic Revival in Anglicanism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983, 8.

²⁷² Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, 137.

Chekhov describes the decay of the Russian aristocracy; Waugh hints at his own purposes when Julia says that Brideshead is “like a character in Chekhov.”²⁷³ Brideshead, Sebastian’s brother and the head of the family, is completely unable to fit himself into modern society; he occupies himself solely with his matchbook collection.²⁷⁴

This identification with the old English aristocracy was often manifested in affection for the architecture of the English manor house. Charles Ryder, the protagonist of *Brideshead*, makes a living by painting portraits of them: “I became an architectural painter. [...] I regarded men as something much less than the buildings they made and inhabited.”²⁷⁵ Waugh intends the architecture to represent the traditional social order, which is worth more than any individual (hence the distaste for liberalism). This is made clear in another remark of Ryder’s: “I loved buildings that grew silently with the centuries, catching and keeping the best of each generation.”²⁷⁶

Waugh exhibits a similar concern in *Decline and Fall*, an early and pre-conversion novel. The Gibbon-inspired title clearly expresses Waugh’s feelings about English culture (another of his early novels was entitled *A Handful of Dust*, a quotation from *The Waste Land*). The title refers specifically to King’s Thursday, a Tudor country house that is not spared from the ravages of the modern age. Mrs. Beste-Chestwynde, the owner of the house, hires a Bauhaus-trained architect to redesign it. Professor Silenus, an architect whose sole experience consists of designing an unbuilt Hungarian chewing-gum factory, turns the beautiful house into a silver and glass monstrosity. Significantly, Silenus comes from Hamburg and his style is distinctly un-

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 258.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 280.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 226.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 226.

English.²⁷⁷ The implication is obvious: Waugh is blaming foreign influence, at least partially, for destroying English culture.

John Betjeman was the most outspoken architecture connoisseur of the inter-war religious thinkers. An Anglo-Catholic himself, he agreed with his friend Waugh about the decline of culture and its embodiment in the decline of architecture. In a 1970 introduction to his 1933 treatise on architecture, *Ghastly Good Taste*, Betjeman wrote of his inner conflicts at the time of its composition: “wanting to be up to date but really preferring all centuries to my own.”²⁷⁸ The book begins with “an apostrophe to the landed gentry,” in which Betjeman directly addresses his intended audience: a member of the English aristocracy, living in constant fear of the “democrats and the freethinkers” who “are coming up the drive in their motor cars.”²⁷⁹ The entire book is a polemic against the so-called “average man,” the product of all of this democracy and free-thinking (Waugh called him “Hooper” and Eliot called him “Sweeney”). Betjeman’s solution was that of many, most notably Eliot: “the only hope that I can put forward is that England will emerge from its present state of intense individualism and become another Christendom. Not until it is united in belief will its architecture regain coherence.”²⁸⁰

For Betjeman, Waugh and Eliot, art was linked explicitly and irrevocably with religion; religion was, then, linked with rigid social order as it was for Keble. Waugh makes this point in *Brideshead*; the manor house is permeated by art in ways that the city is not. Ryder, in fact, can only create good art in the presence of these houses: at Brideshead, “the brush seemed somehow to do what was wanted of it.”²⁸¹ The house, in turn, is linked with religion; history, culture and

²⁷⁷ Evelyn Waugh, *Decline and Fall*, Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1928, 328, 329.

²⁷⁸ John Betjeman, *Ghastly Good Taste, or a Depressing Story of the Rise and Fall of English Architecture*, Chatham: W.J. Mackay & Co., 1970., xxvii

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁸¹ Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, 82.

religion are intertwined, as they were for Burke. “Religion predominated in the house [Brideshead]; not only in its practices – the daily mass and rosary, morning and evening in the chapel – but in all its intercourse.”²⁸² Eliot famously makes the same point in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*: “no culture has appeared or developed except together with a religion.”²⁸³

Betjeman explicitly links social regeneration with the rebirth of European Christendom. These conservatives were not fanatical nationalists or fascists; Catholicism is, like Marxism, an explicitly international, or even extra-national, doctrine. We will see in the next chapter how many Communist fellow travelers were attracted by the internationalist language of Marxism; they thought that questions of nationality were superficial and only served to draw attention away from the real economic issues. This distaste for nationalism was sensible enough during the 1930s, during which nation after nation in Europe was falling to fascist or ultra-nationalist dictatorships (the failure of liberalism was perceived as a world-wide, and not merely English, phenomenon). Eliot sought after “an international fraternity of men of letters, within Europe.”²⁸⁴ In 1929, he described Dante, his literary hero, in similar terms: “Dante, none the less an Italian and a patriot, is first a European.”²⁸⁵ The Duke of Northumberland, a prominent interwar conservative, glorified medieval Christendom in the same way.²⁸⁶ It can be seen earlier, as well; Chesterton and Belloc, for example, were each nostalgic for a unified European Christendom.²⁸⁷

The internationalism of the British Right, with all of its emphasis on a renewal of Christendom, was often linked with its apparent opposite: pastoralism.²⁸⁸ This respect for the soil

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁸³ T.S. Eliot, “Notes towards the Definition of Culture,” in *Christianity and Culture*, New York: Harcourt, 1967, 79-202, page 87.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 195.

²⁸⁵ T.S. Eliot, “Dante,” in *T.S. Eliot: Selected Essays*, 237-280, page 239.

²⁸⁶ Webber 63.

²⁸⁷ Cheyette 150.

²⁸⁸ Webber 59.

and its workers was the conservative equivalent of the Communist idolatry of the industrial proletariat. This was a necessary shift, as the conservatives regretted the consequences of industrialization. *Brideshead Revisited* is full of this sort of nostalgia. For example, Book I is entitled “Et in Arcadia Ego,” a reference to classical Arcadia, linked by Virgil and others to pastoral simplicity. Sebastian, the symbol for the crumbling but valiant upper classes, is consistently linked with nature, whereas Hooper is linked with the suburbs and the *destruction* of nature.²⁸⁹ Ryder expresses sadness at the loss of the Oxford of the 1920s, where “men walked and spoke as they had in Newman’s day [...] Open country was easily reached in those days.”²⁹⁰ At the end of *Brideshead Revisited*, Charles Ryder converts to Catholicism. This might be seen as the defining moment of this entire generation: Ryder is led, through his association with the aristocracy, art and nature, to convert to Roman Catholicism, the most international of religions. Whereas Maurice Bendrix’s conversion is ambiguous, Charles Ryder’s is not.

This pastoralism can be seen time and again in Catholic art. As noted by Stephen Spender, this admiration for the rural peasantry can be seen in Eliot’s work as well.²⁹¹ *Ghastly Good Taste*, Betjeman’s work on architecture, is also full of hatred for suburbanization, traffic and anything that might intrude on the aristocratic way of life. Even Maurice Bendrix, Greene’s world-weary novelist, flirts with this ruralism: “If I examine myself I find only admiration and trust for the conventional, like the villages one sees from the high road where the cars pass, looking so peaceful in their thatch and stone.”²⁹²

Waugh ends his novel, which so perfectly sums up the concerns of his generation, with these words: “CHAGFORD, *February – June, 1944.*” Chagford, where Waugh loved to work, is

²⁸⁹ Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, 24, 28, 34, 54.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21, 23.

²⁹¹ Spender, *T.S. Eliot*, 203.

²⁹² Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair* 19.

a small and ancient little town in Devon.²⁹³ It seems to have been something of a pastoral paradise; Waugh lived and worked in a converted farmhouse that featured a lovely walled garden.²⁹⁴ This ending is radically, and perhaps self-consciously, different from that of the emblematic novel of the modernist generation that preceded Waugh's: James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Joyce was interested in the rootlessness of modern man. Joyce saw that the problem of modernity is most perfectly represented by the Jewish problem; Leopold Bloom, his protagonist, is a Jew in search of a homeland. It might appear that the last words of his novel are "yes I will yes." This is untrue. Joyce ends his novel this way: "Trieste-Zurich-Paris: 1914-1921." *Ulysses* springs from an international and cosmopolitan culture, as he makes clear. Waugh, who once referred to Joyce as "dotty,"²⁹⁵ emphasizes his, and his generation's, dissatisfaction with this rootlessness. Waugh's capitalization of CHAGFORD is almost defiant. His art springs from a particular time and place, and is rooted in the soil of Devonshire instead of the grimy streets of Europe's capitals.

- **T.S. Eliot**

The central figure of this tradition is T.S. Eliot. It is impossible to overestimate his cultural importance. He was no fringe religious fanatic, but rather a Nobel Prize-winning poet and the supreme cultural arbiter of Berlin's generation. In 1951, Berlin published his seminal essay, "Jewish Slavery and Its Emancipation." In it, he writes that "fearful thinkers, with minds seeking salvation in religious or political dogma, souls filled with terror, like T.S. Eliot and Arthur Koestler, may wish to eliminate [the Jewish minority] in favor of a more clear-cut

²⁹³ Humphrey Carpenter, *The Brideshead Generation*, 353.

²⁹⁴ Hastings 248.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 316

structure” (for Koestler, see page 85).²⁹⁶ Eliot read the article and was outraged at the insult. This sparked a fascinating exchange of letters that demonstrate the extent to which Berlin’s mature thought was formed by his relationship with his Jewish identity.

Originally from St. Louis, Eliot had emigrated to London and eventually rose to a position of unrivalled preeminence in England’s literary circles. While Berlin did not know him well, they were acquainted and met several times. Stephen Spender, who did know Eliot well, writes that his work is consistent in that he always sought to escape the subjective self in order to apprehend objective values.²⁹⁷ This desire manifested itself in two distinct ways; in this, Eliot was typical of his generation. He began with a belief in the primacy of art, which had value apart from the political or social world. This found its most famous expression in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), in which he argued that the personal beliefs of the artist should not enter into the artist’s work whatsoever: “the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.”²⁹⁸ While this position has similarities with that of Turgenev and Berlin, it is different in that it does not leave room for individual genius. The early Eliot conceived the artist as a mere receptacle of sensory impression and artistic tradition, the conflation of which will, through some quasi-scientific process, manifest itself in art.

Eliot was dissatisfied with the non-aesthetic world of experience. While he disagreed with John Cornford, an Oxford Communist, in particulars, he agreed with him that the age of gradualism and secular liberalism was over. Eliot would have agreed with Cornford’s poetic assessment of the world’s wretched state as the 1930s loomed: “The clink of empty glasses in dim bars,/Hoot of the foghorn bawling out to sea,/The klaxoning of twenty million cars,/Is this

²⁹⁶ Isaiah Berlin, “Jewish Slavery and Its Emancipation,” 181.

²⁹⁷ Stephen Spender, *T.S. Eliot* 6.

²⁹⁸ T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *T.S. Eliot: Selected Essays*, London: Faber and Faber, 1976, 13-22, page 17.

thy chosen music, liberty?”²⁹⁹ He was dissatisfied with the contemporary world, and one of the goals of his poetry is to catalog the deadening impact of modernity. In “A Cooking Egg,” published in 1920, he wrote: “Where are the eagles and the trumpets?/Buried beneath some snow-deep Alps./Over buttered scones and crumpets/Weeping, weeping multitudes/Droop in a hundred A.B.C.’s.”³⁰⁰ A.B.C.’s are tea shops, linked in Eliot’s mind with the multitudes and the middle class. His task, as he saw, was to exhume the eagles and the trumpets. This might necessitate the burial of the multitudes.

In 1927, Eliot converted to Anglo-Catholicism; two years later, he famously described his general outlook this way: “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion.”³⁰¹ This is quite an illiberal trio of commitments. It is unsurprising, then, that Eliot was a radically conservative thinker (he had been for some time, but it is only after his conversion that he merges his political and aesthetic theories). He began a slow march towards his eventual position that art and belief are inextricably intertwined, a position Yeats had reached years earlier. He wrote in 1935 that “literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint”; this is, of course, the polar opposite of his earlier opinion.³⁰²

Eliot presents his utopian vision in a set of essays, delivered in 1939 and later published as a book entitled *The Idea of the Christian Society*. It is unnecessary to revive the catalog of horrors that make up Eliot’s social theorizing; much of it is reactionary elitism that quite obviously did not concern Berlin. Eliot’s project as a whole, however, is respectable, if only because its major suppositions have a long and distinguished pedigree. The title itself has Platonic or Hegelian resonance, and its contents do not disappoint. Eliot presents his idealistic

²⁹⁹ Quoted on Stansky and Abrahams 166.

³⁰⁰ T.S. Eliot, “A Cooking Egg,” in *T.S. Eliot: Collected Poems: 1909-1962*, lines 29-35.

³⁰¹ T.S. Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1929, xii.

³⁰² T.S. Eliot, “Religion and Literature,” in *T.S. Eliot: Selected Essays*, 388-401, page 388.

and non-empirical “idea” of society, and is convinced that it could only be brought about by a total revolution. Whereas Berlin, Popper and the other liberals counseled small steps, Eliot believes that society must not be simply changed in particulars, but rather “fundamentally altered.”³⁰³ It is a tract in favor of “positive liberty,” as Berlin was later to call it. Eliot, like Plato before him, thinks that people are too stupid to guide their own lives: “what is often assumed, and it is a principle that I wish to oppose, is the principle of live and let live.”³⁰⁴

The book contains Eliot’s portrait of social bliss. He envisions a society in which an elite “Community of Christians” will rule a rural and uneducated mass with an iron fist.³⁰⁵ This elite will “form the conscious mind and the conscience of the nation,” thereby saving the masses from the onerous burden of independent thought.³⁰⁶ They would not require much ruling however; as in Plato’s *Republic*, mass education is carefully designed. This “Christian education” would ensure that the masses are never exposed to “a way of life in which there is too sharp and frequent a conflict between what is easy for them or what their circumstances dictate and what is Christian.”³⁰⁷

He adds to these ideas in “Notes Towards the Definition of Culture,” a set of essays that appeared in the *New English Weekly* in 1943.³⁰⁸ This text is less utopian and more concerned with modifying the existing social system. Here, he explicitly recommends “the persistence of social classes.”³⁰⁹ He also exhibits his pastoralism: culture “will have to grow again from the soil

³⁰³ T.S. Eliot, “The Idea of a Christian Society,” in *Christianity and Culture*, New York: Harcourt, 1967, 1-78, page 7.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 22, 24.

³⁰⁸ Peter Ackroyd, *T.S. Eliot*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984, 266.

³⁰⁹ T.S. Eliot, “Notes Towards the Definition of Culture,” 88.

[...] it would appear to be for the best that the great majority of human beings should go on living in the place in which they were born.”³¹⁰

These social theories necessitate a good deal of social homogeneity; this is the root of Eliot’s anti-Semitism. Anthony Julius, in his *T.S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form*, has recently exhumed this accusation. As Julius points out, there is undoubtedly evidence of anti-Semitism in Eliot’s work. The most obvious example (Julius has many), endlessly quoted by Eliot’s enemies and quoted by Berlin himself in a letter to Eliot, appears in *After Strange Gods*, a notorious and rather terrifying set of lectures given in 1934: “what is still more important is unity of religious background; and reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable.”³¹¹ Eliot wants a rural and organic society, ruled by a Christian elite. There is no room in this utopia for anyone “free-thinking,” let alone members of a people with the audacity to lack a state of its own.

- **“Jewish Slavery and Emancipation”**

This was the sort of argument that had confronted Berlin throughout his life. Eliot, Bruno Bauer, Marx, Chesterton, Belloc and Pasternak were, despite their enormous differences, united in that they saw the Jewish Question as one that was eminently and easily solvable, and in that their respective solutions involved the abrogation of individual choice. Arthur Koestler felt the same way; in a 1950 interview with *Jewish Chronicle*, he argued that Jews have only two solutions: conversion or emigration to Israel. This was, for Berlin, a travesty: a living, respected and anti-Communist Jew had bought into the xenophobia of the anti-Semites. His response was “Jewish Slavery and Its Emancipation,” which William Shawn at *The New Yorker* called

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 91. Eliot, of course, did not follow his own advice.

³¹¹ Quoted on Asher 67.

“without doubt the finest piece of writing on the subject of the Jews that I have ever encountered.”³¹²

This essay, published in *Jewish Chronicle*, represents Berlin’s first formulation of some of the themes that would appear time and again in his later work. Up to this point, Berlin had not written much of substance aside from *Karl Marx*. He had written a handful of philosophical essays, mostly concerned with refuting logical positivism; they do not have, and were not meant to have, wide appeal. He had written a good number of minor reviews, and a few substantial ones. The only truly important essay he had written by 1951 was “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century” (1950). This essay, rich as it is, is largely topical; it is an attack on Stalinism and is not overly concerned with speaking to the ages. “Jewish Slavery and Emancipation,” even though ostensibly about a topical issue, is the first time we see the Berlin that would become famous: that is, the Berlin that was concerned with fundamental human issues. In “Jewish Slavery,” Berlin broaches the topic of group identity, so important to his later thought. The article has been described as the “canonical statement” of Berlin’s Zionism.³¹³ Nowhere else in his massive body of work does he lay out the philosophical underpinnings of this sympathy.

One main purpose of the essay is to disprove the notion that total assimilation is possible. We have seen that Berlin was unable to emancipate himself from his Jewish identity. This is evident in many places: the correspondence surrounding the von Trott incident, for example, or his conflicts of loyalty in Washington, D.C., or his inability to gain entrance to St. James’ Club, or the stories he heard from Aline about fleeing France. He also had in mind the tragedy of German Jewry; he notes that German Jews were more German than the Germans, and still failed

³¹² William Shawn to Isaiah Berlin, 16 November 1951, Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

³¹³ Henry Hardy, “Editor’s Preface,” in *The Power of Ideas*, ix-xv, page xi.

to assimilate.³¹⁴ Even were total assimilation possible, Berlin does not find it *desirable*. This can be seen in his life, as well as in the essay. A Jew who was trying his hardest to assimilate would not associate with Chaim Weizmann and write articles about Zionism for *Jewish Chronicle*.

Berlin does not scoff at the bearded Hasid; for him, these irrational “residues” are not simply lamentable and stupid aspects of human nature, as they were for Bertrand Russell. Instead, they are precisely what makes us human; he celebrates them. This notion of celebration is central to Berlin’s work and character; one of several *Festschriften* devoted to him is, in fact, called *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration* (a book entitled *T.S. Eliot: A Celebration* is unthinkable; perhaps *T.S. Eliot: A Somber Gathering* would be more fitting). This appreciation of the irrational is linked, logically enough, with a distrust of reason. I will quote again this important passage: modern Jews “have throughout carried within them the uneasy feeling that their stoical ancestors, locked nightly into their narrow and hideous ghettos, were not merely more dignified, but more contented, than they [...] And this uneasiness, which rational argument failed to dispel, has troubled the Jews and troubled their friends.”³¹⁵ Berlin’s point is that, when it comes to issues of dignity and national identity, rational arguments (whether they come from Karl Marx or Karl Popper) do not have the power to magically evaporate these feelings.

This distrust of reason, so characteristic of Berlin’s work as a whole, is more often linked with the right than the left. Liberalism and rationalism are historically intertwined, as described by Frederick Beiser.³¹⁶ As we will see in Chapter 4, post-war liberals were convinced of reason’s limitless powers. Berlin, unlike Popper, would agree with Cardinal John Newman, founding member of the Oxford Movement, that “man is *not* a reasoning animal; he is a seeing, feeling,

³¹⁴ Isaiah Berlin, “Jewish Slavery and Emancipation,” 169-171.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 163.

³¹⁶ Frederick Beiser, “Berlin and the German Counter-Enlightenment,” in *Isaiah Berlin’s Counter-Enlightenment*, ed. Joseph Mali and Robert Wokler, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, Volume 93, Part 5, Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2003, 105-116, pages 105-6.

contemplating, acting animal.”³¹⁷ While Berlin had hinted at the limits of reason in “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century,” the idea can, I propose, be traced directly to his relations with his own Jewish identity. There was no rational reason for Berlin to weep at the sight of a Jewish ticket-collector, but weep he did.

Berlin’s distrust of reason is linked to his separation of the arts and sciences, a doctrine that was to loom so large in his later work and which is expressed here for the first time. The reason that Jews have excelled at science, and not at art, is that the symbols of science are “divorced from national cultures and times and places.” The symbols of art, on the other hand, “are the fruit of unconscious growth of traditions.”³¹⁸ Modern Jews are, Berlin proposes, under-represented in the fields of imaginative literature and art precisely because of the absence of tradition. According to Berlin, this is the root of the modern Jew’s irrational nostalgia for the ghetto or the *shtetl*. Those Jews, despite the obvious drawbacks of their position, were at least heirs to a coherent tradition.

Instead, Berlin notes that Jews have tended to excel at interpretation (even natural science, at which Jews have excelled, might be seen as an interpretation of the world of nature). He explains this through a curious and elaborate allegory, in which the Jew is represented as a wanderer finding himself among an unfamiliar tribe. The stranger’s life depends on fitting in to his *milieu*, so he fanatically studies the customs and habits of his host tribe. Despite the strangers’ best efforts, however, they are always viewed precisely as “strangers – persons the very quality of whose excellence goes with their being in some sense different from, and outside, the tribal structure.”³¹⁹ They never assimilate entirely, and their life “depends upon the

³¹⁷ Quoted on Rowell 13.

³¹⁸ Isaiah Berlin, “Jewish Slavery and Emancipation,” 173.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 166.

assumption that they can by conscious effort [...] [mimic] those activities which the natives perform by nature and spontaneously.”³²⁰ Berlin had done this himself, moreso than the average Jew: we can picture him giving himself a crash course in Russian culture in Petrograd, or at St. Paul’s school, where he quickly began pronouncing “say” as “sigh” to match the other boys.³²¹

This allegory implies the existence of substantially more discomfort with his own identity than Berlin was willing to admit. For example, he told Michael Ignatieff that, while at Oxford, he “felt totally at ease, completely natural.”³²² This seems unlikely, given his characterization of the Jew as a perpetual stranger. There is one more extended metaphor in the article that demonstrates Berlin’s discomfort. In an uncharacteristic and surprising passage, he equates Jewishness with physical deformity. Jews in a non-Jewish society “acted like a species of deformed human beings, let us say hunchbacks, and could be distinguished into three types according to the attitudes they adopted towards their humps.”³²³ A Jew who is entirely comfortable with his identity would never characterize himself as a humpback. He goes on to distinguish three different methods of dealing with the hump: pretend the hump does not exist, embrace the hump as “a privilege and an honor”, or simply ignore it “and move among the straight-backed.” While he certainly knew that the means of dealing with Judaism were more complex than this, he would have lumped himself in with the last group, who “tended to wear voluminous cloaks which concealed their precise contours.”³²⁴

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 168.

³²¹ Ignatieff 34.

³²² Isaiah Berlin, *Tape MI 17*.

³²³ Isaiah Berlin, “Jewish Slavery and Emancipation,” 174.

³²⁴ It is tempting, if a bit far-fetched, to find biographical confirmation for his own identification with these cloak-wearers. In this passage from a 1937 letter, Berlin discusses a comically hideous article of clothing that he wore on vacation: “There is an entity, best called a cloak, owned by me now for 5 years [...] an ugly, dark blue, shapeless sheet.” Isaiah Berlin to Ben Nicolson, late September 1937, *Flourishing* 254-260, page 256.

This metaphor, distasteful as it might be, ties in nicely with Berlin's Zionism. In his view, there is a possible fourth way to deal with the hump: surgically remove it. This is accomplished by the creation of the state of Israel. If the Jews have a homeland, they are no longer *sui generis*. Berlin recognizes that "the operation was certainly both costly and dangerous," but it was worth it.³²⁵ Jews all across the world can hold their head high. In Berlin's view, the Jews in Israel *are* "straight-backed."

Yuri Slezkine argues that in the 20th century, everyone has become Jewish: national ties are abandoned in favor of cosmopolitan identities.³²⁶ In his view, Joyce's "Trieste-Zurich-Paris" is representative of the 20th century, whereas "CHAGFORD, England" is a relic of the past. Berlin was, however, a Zionist; he obviously thought that homeland and nationality were not antiquated concepts. We will see in Chapter 4 how the other postwar liberals agreed with Slezkine: the age of racial and national ties is over and the reign of the free and rational economic actor is at hand, just as it was to the *philosophes*. This Berlin rejects out of hand. In Slezkine's terms, Berlin does not, like Slezkine, rejoice that the world is becoming Mercurian; instead, he wants the Jews to become Apollonian. He desires nothing more for the Jews than normality.³²⁷

While Berlin mentions this in "Jewish Slavery," he expanded on this two years later in "The Origins of Israel," a brief historical essay published in *Jewish Frontier*. Here, he chronicles the advent of a new and Apollonian Jewry. This essay contains, to my mind, the most moving passages that Berlin ever wrote. He discusses the gloriously prosaic existence of the Jews in Israel: "What you find are natives of a country, not unlike the natives of some other

³²⁵ Isaiah Berlin, "Jewish Slavery and Emancipation," 176.

³²⁶ Slezkine 1.

³²⁷ Isaiah Berlin, "Jewish Slavery and Emancipation," 164.

Mediterranean State [...] [The modern Israelite] may produce no very sophisticated art, may produce nothing culturally startling or arresting, but he and his fellows will exist, and be happy, and be a people, and that is surely sufficient.”³²⁸ Berlin describes the disappointment of the Western tourist, expecting to find a land full of despondent intellectuals, drowning their sorrows in chess and metaphysics. Instead, they find a straight-backed people, farming and conducting everyday business in Hebrew. Berlin is not disappointed.

Berlin, of course, did not move to Jerusalem and pick up a shovel. Koestler had advised all Jews to do just this, or give up their ties with Judaism. Berlin was perfectly happy in Oxford and, it must be remembered, he had turned down prestigious posts in Israel. As explained in “Jewish Slavery,” Berlin values Israel because it gives every Jew a *choice*, whether or not they choose to take it. “Before the present situation the tragedy of the Jews was that no real choice was open to them.”³²⁹ In his famous letter to George Kennan, written in the same year, Berlin writes: “It is the denial to human beings of the possibility of choice [...] That is what cannot be borne at all.” The state of Israel gives Jews this choice, and they are rendered more free whether or not they choose to take it. “In this sense the creation of the State of Israel has liberated all Jews, whatever their relation to it.”³³⁰

Berlin’s thought, diverse as it is, is all of a piece; he does not, like George Sorel, delight in his own inconsistencies. We can see in “Jewish Slavery” the germ of Berlin’s later notion of negative liberty (“Two Concepts of Liberty”). Negative liberty refers to the absence of obstacles; we are free in a negative sense if we have many options open to us, whether we take them up or not. In 1969, he explained it this way: “if, although I enjoy the right to walk through open doors,

³²⁸ Isaiah Berlin, “The Origins of Israel,” in *The Power of Ideas*, 143-161, pages 156, 158.

³²⁹ Isaiah Berlin, “Jewish Slavery and Emancipation,” 179.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 184.

I prefer not to do so, but to sit still and vegetate, I am not thereby rendered less free.” “Jewish Slavery and Emancipation” marks Berlin’s adoption of this, his most famous theory; even if Jews do not migrate to Israel, the fact that they have more choices increases their freedom.

- **The Eliot-Berlin Correspondence**

Eliot, of course, was appalled at the essay’s accusations and wrote to Berlin, expressing his disagreement with the charges. This correspondence sheds a good deal of light on Berlin’s relationship with his Jewish identity and his cultural context. The most important aspect of the correspondence is Berlin’s deference to Eliot, whom he had obviously thought something of a monster during the composition of “Jewish Slavery.” He begins by attempting to distance himself from his essay: “they were extracted from me under some pressure – and I sent them to nobody [...] I vaguely hoped that the pieces would pass unnoticed.”³³¹ There is no evidence that the essays were “extracted” from Berlin; he turned down countless requests for articles during these years, and it is obvious that he had poured his heart into this particular one. It must be said that Berlin was always self-deprecating about his own work, but in this case he was exceptionally so. As to the specific accusations, Berlin comforts Eliot with the fact that they were “very unwarranted & arrogant.”

As we have seen, they were entirely warranted. Berlin himself must have known this, as he immediately launches into a justification. He first gives the infamous quotation from *After Strange Gods*, discussed above. Interestingly enough, however, it seems that Berlin was unaware of this statement when he wrote the original essay. Two weeks before the letter to Eliot, he wrote to his father: “I have now discovered a very aggressive passage on this subject [certainly the *After Strange Gods* passage, the only truly aggressive one about the Jews Eliot ever wrote] in his

³³¹ Isaiah Berlin to T.S. Eliot, 30 January 1952, Berlin Archives, Wolfson College, Oxford University. He refers to “pieces” because the article was originally serialized in four parts.

own writings and shall write him a very polite letter forgiving him for all this.”³³² His language in this letter, written in a spirit of candor entirely absent from the Eliot correspondence, makes it obvious that he considers himself in the right and considers his apology an act of magnanimity. Berlin’s inclusion of Eliot in “Jewish Slavery” was not a knee-jerk reaction to one particular passage. Instead, Berlin was reacting to the general tone of Eliot’s social criticism which, as we have seen, merely rendered explicit the assumptions underlying the art of the 1930s Catholic Revival. Their work tended to ignore the Jewish problem; in fact, neither “The Idea of a Christian Society” nor “Notes Towards the Definition of Culture” so much as mentions it (Anthony Julius claims otherwise, but his examples are far-fetched³³³).

For Eliot, as he explains in his letter to Berlin, the problem of the Jews is solely a religious problem, and not one of race. While this differs in emphasis from some of the other framings of the question that we have seen, it is at one with them in that Eliot’s formulation logically leads to an absolutist solution. He writes that “whether the Jews are a race is disputable [...] From a Christian point of view, the Jewish Faith is finished, because it finds its continuation in the Catholic Faith. Theoretically, the only proper consummation is that all Jews should have become Catholic Christians.”³³⁴ This is obviously alien to Berlin’s ideas of freedom, human nature, and the impossibility of total assimilation; this is also Eliot’s authoritarianism at its most violent (this is Pasternak’s idea as well, presented without any of Pasternak’s ambiguities). In the midst of this misguided attempt to clear his name, Eliot even asserts that there are several “inferior races,” such as the “black-fellows.” After this, the correspondence basically ended. There was no meeting of the minds, and Berlin did not seriously challenge Eliot to explain

³³² Isaiah Berlin to Mendel Berlin, 15 January 1952, Berlin Archives, Wolfson College, Oxford University.

³³³ Julius 150. Julius here equates the desire for social homogeneity with anti-Semitism. They are undoubtedly linked but are not the same.

³³⁴ T.S. Eliot to Isaiah Berlin, 9 February 1952, Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

himself. But, as Berlin must have hoped, the conflict did not reach the pages of the *Jewish Chronicle* and they each maintained a healthy respect for the other. In a later set of correspondence, the two are almost ridiculous in their attempts to shower the other with praise.³³⁵

Although Berlin, rightly, did not agree with Eliot's defenses, he excised the sentence about Eliot when the article was republished in *Hebrew University Garland* in 1952. We have seen how anxious Berlin was to avoid treading on toes. Berlin noticed this himself; Ignatieff writes that "the charge of cowardice bothered him all his life." Ignatieff, for his part, thinks that this accusation is misguided; he supposes that in the major conflicts of his life, among which Ignatieff explicitly names this one with Eliot, "Berlin gave no ground at all."³³⁶ I think that the charges of cowardice are overblown; the Churchill essay, for example, seems to me an example of laudable courage. However, in this case, there is no avoiding the fact that Berlin backed down without qualification, even though he thought that his original claim was justified. He did not want this to escalate into a public feud; T.S. Eliot was an enormous force in English society, much moreso than Berlin, and Berlin quite reasonably did not want to make any waves within the English establishment. Recent events have indicated the wisdom of Berlin's position: Anthony Julius, a Jew and the author of a recent book accusing Eliot of anti-Semitism, is very open and public about his position. However, Eliot's respectability, even after he has been dead for decades and his corpse has been pummeled by a generation of postmodernist critics, is still such that there has been an enormous uproar over the book. At least one reviewer, Gabriel Josipovici, thought that Julius was "oversensitive" on account of his own Judaism: "I would urge [Julius] and other Jews obsessed with unearthing anti-Semitism to turn the spotlight on

³³⁵ Isaiah Berlin to T.S. Eliot, 9 August 1955, Berlin Archives, Wolfson College, Oxford University. "I feel quite sure that, for all your disclaimers, your erudition, as well as your wisdom are far profounder than mine will ever be." T.S. Eliot to Isaiah Berlin, 7 September 1955. Bodleian Library, Oxford University. "I was already convinced that you are my superior in learning, profundity and eloquence."

³³⁶ Ignatieff 257.

themselves occasionally and ask themselves whether their activities are motivated solely by the impeccable scientific desire to bring out the truth.”³³⁷

Berlin was unwillingness to have the essay republished during his lifetime. This is in keeping with one detail that he gives to Eliot: he did not send copies to anyone. As was common practice at the time, Berlin often sent complimentary copies of his work to friends. It seems to me that Berlin found something to be embarrassed about in this article. He changed it as Eliot desired, allowed it to be reprinted one time, and then sought to wash his hands of the whole thing. He relegated the essay to obscurity, repeatedly denying Henry Hardy’s requests to have it reprinted. He never wrote explicitly about his own Zionism again. Instead, he generalized his ideas so that they could apply to humanity *writ large*. This was done, mostly, by exhuming the ideas of the counter-Enlightenment and taking seriously their critiques of Enlightenment-style liberalism. From here on, Berlin is not writing about the Jews. He is writing about humanity.

³³⁷ From a 6 October 1995 review in *Jewish Chronicle*, quoted on Julius 329.

CHAPTER 4

PROBLEMATIZING LIBERALISM

“Liberal” is a problematic term. It carries connotations today, as it did in Berlin’s time, that I do not mean to imply. I am referring to “liberal” in the philosophical sense; that is, I refer to John Stuart Mill and not to John Kerry. Liberalism in this sense has, historically, been linked with free-thinking rational individualists, taking up arms against old-fashioned and reactionary rulers or clergymen. Liberal thinkers tend to disparage religious, tribal and national ties as irrational and old-fashioned. John Gray, in defining liberalism, stresses its universalism: liberals affirm “the moral unity of the human species and accord a secondary importance to specific historic associations and cultural forms.”³³⁸ France’s tumultuous history provides a good example. The battle cry of the liberals of 1789 was “liberty, equality and fraternity”; there is no hint of national or religious ties here. General Pétain, in his capacity as ruler of the collaborationist Vichy regime during World War II, consciously replaced the battle cry of 1789 with a new and conservative one: “Work, family, homeland.”³³⁹ In this perennial struggle, Berlin remained squarely opposed to Pétain and the like: he wrote that Voltaire, the quintessential anti-religious freethinker, “probably did more for the triumph of civilized values than any writer who ever lived.”³⁴⁰ However, his experiences demonstrated to him that national identities were decidedly not “of secondary importance.” Berlin sought, therefore, to enrich and expand the Enlightenment tradition by making room for the insights of its opponents.

³³⁸ John Gray, *Liberalism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, x.

³³⁹ Kenneth Asher, *T.S. Eliot and Ideology*, New York: Cambridge UP, 1995, 8.

³⁴⁰ Isaiah Berlin, “The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, 326-358.

- **Isaiah Berlin and the Counter-Enlightenment**

When the American Philosophical Society devoted an issue of its journal to Isaiah Berlin, they called it “Isaiah Berlin’s Counter-Enlightenment.” “Counter-Enlightenment” was a term used by Berlin to describe all of those thinkers who, despite their sometimes massive differences, were united in opposition to the chilly rationalism of the French *philosophes*. This tradition was not entirely unsympathetic to Berlin. He is normally and correctly viewed as a liberal; however, his liberalism is a bit problematic. This is why Sir John Gray, one of his most distinguished commentators, writes that “his thought remains haunted by an uncertainty.”³⁴¹ Regardless, it is this attempt that makes him so fascinating; his points of tangency with these illiberal thinkers are the source of Berlin’s distinctive genius.

Berlin’s major task, as I see it, was to reintroduce these forgotten critiques of the Enlightenment. He did this in two ways. First, he incorporated their ideas in his works of political philosophy, sometimes without disclosing their provenance. Second, he wrote an enormous amount about them and was always careful to shower them with praise. His favored thinkers, more often than not, tended to be discarded by scholars as knee-jerk reactionaries and, as such, their insights were lost to the liberal tradition. Concerning Joseph de Maistre, for example, Berlin writes that “few men have had comments so inept made about them by their commentators.”³⁴² He writes similarly about Herder, Vico and Hamann, his other favored counter-Enlightenment figures. Their reputation sorely needed a few glowing epithets from a distinguished scholar, and these Berlin was willing and able to give.

³⁴¹ John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 156.

³⁴² Isaiah Berlin, “Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism,” in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, ed. Henry Hardy, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990, 91-174, pages 168 and 155. The other, according to Berlin, was de Tocqueville.

Eliot's conservatism was, as he openly acknowledged, descended from the counter-Enlightenment and, more specifically, the radical French right. This is explored at length in Kenneth Asher's study, *T.S. Eliot and Ideology*.³⁴³ Berlin himself wrote two lengthy essays on right-wing French thinkers: Joseph de Maistre and George Sorel.³⁴⁴ He concentrated on French, German and Italian thinkers, and nowhere in his work does he give more than passing references to Edmund Burke, surely one of the most important opponents of the French Revolution. The reason, I propose, is that Berlin was interested in the topicality of the French Right, whose ideas were alive and well in the world. Burke's ideas, close as they might have been to Berlin's own, were not actively influencing a new generation of conservatives the way Maurras and Sorel, themselves influenced by de Maistre, were.³⁴⁵

Berlin's essay on de Maistre is, in my view, one of his finest pieces of scholarship. De Maistre was a reactionary and ultramontane Catholic writing in post-revolutionary France. He championed authority and tradition, while ruthlessly criticizing the power of human reason to remold society. He was the originator of the "great" French tradition that culminated in Maurras (whom Eliot adored).³⁴⁶ Berlin's decision to call the French right-wing tradition, anti-Semitic and reactionary as it was, a "great" one is part of his effort to rehabilitate these thinkers and rescue them from the dustbin of intellectual history (the modern French right-wing, by which Eliot was most directly influenced, was more explicitly anti-Semitic than de Maistre; this is a

³⁴³ Asher 8.

³⁴⁴ The inclusion of Sorel as a conservative is controversial. This enigmatic thinker is difficult to pigeon-hole; monuments to him were planned in both Fascist Italy and Soviet Russia. This difficulty springs from his support of an integrating myth, which might be either the Marxist myth of the general strike or the myth of Catholic Christianity (he respected each of these options much more than he did secular and individualist liberalism). So, whether or not he was conservative, he was certainly counter-Enlightenment. H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reconstruction of European Social Thought 1890-1930*, Vintage Books: New York, 1961, 161.

³⁴⁵ Kenneth Asher cites de Maistre specifically as an influence on Eliot. Asher 12-13. Hilaire Belloc, who had grown up in France, was widely influenced by these ideas, as well; he had been an anti-Dreyfusard and, like Eliot, sung the praises of Maurras and *Action française*. Cheyette 150.

³⁴⁶ Isaiah Berlin, "Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism," 170.

result of its formation in the turmoil surrounding the Dreyfus case, which was itself the unfortunate ending to a century's worth of assimilation by the Jews of France³⁴⁷). Berlin writes that de Maistre "held very penetrating and remarkably modern views" on many subjects and was one of the two most "sharp realistic observer[s] of his own times."³⁴⁸ Berlin's work on de Maistre is full of such praise, as noted by the incredulous Graeme Garrard.³⁴⁹ The reason is that de Maistre, like Berlin and unlike Condorcet, recognized the importance of history and national identity.

- **Berlin and the post-war liberal intelligentsia**

It is well-known that Berlin was an opponent of the far left. These were, of course, the thinkers most resolutely and outspokenly hostile to group identities. As Marx himself famously advised: "Workers of the world, unite!" Marx was opposed to any national groupings and saw all national questions as illusory. This internationalist component remained a feature of Communist thought, at least in the West (by this time, "socialism in one country" had been adopted in the Soviet Union, although this did not imply full abandonment of the Comintern). Louis Fischer, one of many who briefly flirted with Communism during the 1930s, recalled that his "strongest bond with the Soviet system had been its internationalism."³⁵⁰

Much of Berlin's work was devoted to dismantling the intellectual systems supporting Stalinism and Communism, and his most high-profile disputes were with Communists, most obviously E.H. Carr and Isaac Deutscher (biographer of Stalin and Trotsky). E.H. Carr, with whom Berlin was already displeased on account of his pro-Soviet history of the U.S.S.R., spends

³⁴⁷ Eugen Weber, *Action Française: Royalism and Reaction in Twentieth Century France*, Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1962, 5

³⁴⁸ Isaiah Berlin, "Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism," 131,155.

³⁴⁹ Graeme Garrard, "Isaiah Berlin's Joseph de Maistre," in *Isaiah Berlin's Counter-Enlightenment*, 117- 131, page 118.

³⁵⁰ Richard Crossman, ed., *The God that Failed*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949, 214.

pages attacking Berlin in *What is History?*, while Berlin responded with a lengthy refutation in his introduction to *Five Essays on Liberty*. Deutscher plagued Berlin with hostile left-wing criticisms of his work, and was one of few people capable of penetrating Berlin's armor of affability. As he wrote to David Astor, "The [Deutscher] review duly appeared and I must confess was nastier than I had conceived possible. I must own to you at once that I have the greatest contempt for Deutscher. [...] [The review] ascribed to me views which I certainly do not hold and which, so far as I know, no human being holds."³⁵¹

Less attention, however, has been paid to his position within the more moderate liberal tradition. Berlin himself did not discuss it much, as he was understandably more concerned with the ideas that ruthlessly governed his beloved Russia than the relatively benign ones circulating through Oxford's common rooms. Regardless, he can not be seen as working in tandem with the other great postwar liberal thinkers in England: Friedrich von Hayek, Karl Popper and Bertrand Russell (only one of these three was English, of course; however, they all lived in England and had great influence there).

- **Herder and the critique of internationalism**

Bertrand Russell, 73 years old at the end of World War II, was the patriarch of 20th century English liberalism. After a long and controversial career, Russell was still active in these postwar years; in fact, he was an outspoken opponent of the Vietnam War decades later. It might seem controversial to call him a liberal, as such a label obviously does injustice to such a complex character. The label does fit, though, if only in immediately postwar England. He prefaced his collection of essays written during these years (1937-1950) this way: "Most of the following essays [...] are concerned to combat, in one way or another, the growth of dogmatism

³⁵¹ Isaiah Berlin to David Astor, 27 January 1955. The review in question criticized "Historical Inevitability," a lecture given in 1953 and published in 1954.

whether of the Right or Left.”³⁵² He had been a vocal opponent of the Soviet experiment for decades, and wrote with great eloquence and passion in favor of individual liberty. This sense of moderation, combined with boundless respect for the individual, was sympathetic to Berlin.

The differences between their thought are, however, more illuminating than the similarities. One of the largest concerns their distinct opinions regarding the value of national identity. Russell thought it categorically absurd. He had no sympathy for nationalism, and considered any manifestation of it to be hopelessly foolish and irrational. He was, like Marx, an internationalist and a vocal proponent of world government (Berlin saw this as a necessary corollary of the Enlightenment spirit, and one of those with which he disagreed³⁵³). Russell wrote in 1950 that “there are now only two fully independent states, America and Russia. The next step in this long historical process should reduce the two to one, and thus put an end to the period of organized wars, which began in Egypt some 6,000 years ago.” He thought that only this international government, with a monopoly of armed force, could save civilization from certain destruction.³⁵⁴ He welcomes this process, and cannot conceive any rational objections to it. The same outlook can be seen in his treatment of the crisis in Israel, one especially dear to Berlin. He can not conceive why the Jews and Arabs do not simply “see how to get the greatest amount of good for both together, without inquiring too closely how it is distributed.”³⁵⁵ This naïvely Utilitarian solution indicates a blindness to the importance of group identity.

Karl Popper, another prominent postwar liberal (arguably more important than Russell, at least during this postwar period), thought much the same. He lived in New Zealand during the Second World War, where he wrote the enormously influential *The Open Society and Its*

³⁵² Bertrand Russell, *Unpopular Essays*, New York: Routledge, 2005, preface.

³⁵³ Isaiah Berlin, “Nationalism: Past Neglect and Present Power,” in *Against the Current*, 333-355, page 353.

³⁵⁴ Bertrand Russell, *Unpopular Essays*, 45, 54. From “The Future of Mankind” (1950).

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 43. From “Philosophy for Laymen” (1950).

Enemies. It was published in 1946, the year that Popper arrived in England, to widespread acclaim (Bertrand Russell himself called it a “brilliant” book).³⁵⁶ It is a lengthy demolition of totalitarian thought, the roots of which Popper finds in Plato and Hegel.³⁵⁷ This should have been a book very close to Berlin’s heart and, to a large extent, it was: he called it “the most scrupulous and formidable criticism of the philosophical and historical doctrines of Marxism by any living writer.”³⁵⁸ Popper’s ideas were close enough to Berlin’s that E.H. Carr, in *What is History?*, treats Berlin and Popper (“two distinguished gentlemen”) as if they were making exactly the same argument.³⁵⁹

Popper, like Russell, was unwilling to grant any validity to claims of race, nationality, religion or community. These irrational residues (to use Pareto’s term) belonged to the vocabulary of the sinister conservatives. This was a trope of English liberalism, and the corollary is that Jews could be accepted by society if they simply gave up their extra-national ties (Bill Williams has provocatively called this the “anti-Semitism of tolerance”³⁶⁰) Popper, like Russell, supported an international government, which could rule the whole world rationally.³⁶¹

One of the most pejorative terms in Popper’s lexicon is, therefore, “tribalism.” He links the irrational tribal urge with Plato, Hegel, and, all of the horrors of the twentieth century. He defines tribalism this way: “the emphasis on the supreme importance of the tribe without which

³⁵⁶ Edmonds and Edinow 214. Bertrand Russell, *Unpopular Essays*, 16. The essay was originally written in 1947.

³⁵⁷ Oswald Mosley, the British fascist, wrote that Popper “virtually denounced every thinker from Plato to Hegel as a fascist.” He was pleasantly surprised to find himself among such distinguished company. Oswald Mosley, *My Life*, Camden, NJ: Thomas Newlson and Sons, 1968, 318.

³⁵⁸ Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx* 239. This comes from the third edition, which was published in 1963.

³⁵⁹ Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History?*, New York: Random House, 1961, 137. Minor differences between them, such as Berlin’s failure to implicate Plato as the founder of totalitarianism, are snidely brushed aside by Carr, who suggests that Berlin harbored a “lingering respect for this ancient pillar of the Oxford Establishment.” This might be read as a swipe at Berlin’s reluctance to take controversial intellectual stands. Carr 120.

³⁶⁰ Kushner 202.

³⁶¹ Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. I, 288.

the individual is nothing at all.”³⁶² This is all well and good; Berlin the liberal individualist is more than willing to criticize this brand of tribalism.³⁶³ However, Popper’s rejection of tribalism is, unlike Berlin’s, resolutely unqualified. For Popper, as for Russell, tribalism was no more than irrational obedience to blind authority; he implies that all forms of religious injunction are mere “taboos.”³⁶⁴ Popper implies that all traditions are mere holdovers from the age of the “magical” and closed society, going so far as to state that the need to live “in the haven of a tribe” is a sort of pathological disorder, “especially for young people who [...] seem to have to pass through a tribal or ‘American-Indian’ stage.”³⁶⁵ Again: “The principle of the national state is not only inapplicable but it has never been clearly conceived. It is a myth. It is an irrational, a romantic and Utopian dream, a dream of naturalism and of tribal collectivism.”³⁶⁶

This distrust of “tribalism” might, like Marx’s, be linked to Popper’s discomfort with his own Jewish background. In 1902, Popper was born into an assimilated Jewish family in Vienna. *Fin de siècle* Vienna, home of Karl Lueger (Vienna’s notoriously anti-Semitic mayor) and the young Adolf Hitler, was very much different from the Riga of 1909. The Viennese Jewish community was the epitome of liberal assimilation; Vienna had, in fact, the highest Jewish conversion rate in Europe.³⁶⁷ Like Marx, Popper came from a recently-converted family (his parents were Protestant). He writes in his autobiography that his father felt an “obligation” to assimilate and convert; this was not, of course, the position of Berlin’s father, or Berlin himself. The early sections of Popper’s autobiography, entitled “Childhood Memories” and “Early

³⁶² Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 5th ed., vols. 1 and 2, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1966, vol. I, 9. All citations are to Volume I unless otherwise specified.

³⁶³ Cf. Isaiah Berlin, “Nationalism: Past Neglect and Present Power,” 341, in which nationalism, defined here almost exactly the same way in which Popper defines tribalism, is described as “dangerous.”

³⁶⁴ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 172.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁶⁶ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. II, 51.

³⁶⁷ Edmonds and Edinow 94.

Influences,” do not even mention his Jewish background.³⁶⁸ Also like Marx, Popper was violently hostile to his Jewish origins: he once said that “I do not believe in race [...] I do not consider myself a Jew.” Near the end of his life, he responded to Israel’s policy towards the Arabs by asserting that “it makes me ashamed of my origin.”³⁶⁹

Popper’s absolute opposition to history and national identity might also be explained by his purpose: he told Berlin that *The Open Society* was a “fighting book” and elsewhere described it as his “war effort.”³⁷⁰ The book was Popper’s contribution to the cause of freedom and was not meant to be an objective piece of scholarship. It is significant that George Soros named his philanthropic society, initially designed to aid the onset of democracy in Eastern Europe, “The Open Society Institute” (is it conceivable that he might have named it “The Two Concepts of Liberty Institute”?). Voluminous criticism has been heaped upon Popper’s terrifically one-sided treatment of his subjects, particularly Hegel.³⁷¹ Even to readers who are not expert Plato or Hegel scholars, it is obvious that Popper uses unfairly loaded and anachronistic terms in describing their thought. For example, Popper twice refers to Plato’s support of a “master race” and once to his belief in the “superman.”³⁷² Popper was willing to take sides and to pull no punches; he would doubtless have sided with MacLean at the aforementioned and ill-fated dinner party.

Berlin, however, was not willing to be seen as a Cold Warrior. For example, he was outraged when Irving Kristol sub-titled one of his essays “Herzen and the Grand Inquisitors”

³⁶⁸ Karl Popper, *Unended Quest*, New York: Routledge, 2002, 3-9, 119.

³⁶⁹ Both quoted on Edmonds and Edinow 108.

³⁷⁰ Edmonds and Edinow 92, Popper, *Unended Quest* 131.

³⁷¹ Walter Kaufmann offers a particularly lengthy and devastating critique of Popper’s treatment of Hegel, and essentially accuses him of outright intellectual charlatanism and dishonesty. Walter Kaufmann, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, New York: Anchor Books, 1959, 67-128.

³⁷² Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 82, 119, 149.

without his permission, as this implied that the essay was a piece of “Cold War propaganda.”³⁷³

Berlin was, then, willing to grant the value of national identity, even though it had been violently exaggerated by the fascists. Berlin drew from his belief in the reality and importance of national ties (a belief that sprang from his Jewish identity) the logical corollary that national self-government is a valid and worthwhile goal. This is the thesis of “Jewish Slavery and Its Emancipation,” and it appears in a more generalized form in “Two Concepts of Liberty,” written 7 years later. In the latter essay, Berlin writes that the desire for recognition, as manifested in self-government, is “profoundly needed and passionately fought for by human beings.”³⁷⁴

Berlin rehabilitated the Counter-Enlightenment thought of Johann Gottfried Herder in order to combat this liberal prejudice against national identity. Herder was, for Berlin, “the profoundest critic of the Enlightenment, as formidable as Burke, or Maistre, but free from their reactionary prejudices and hatred of equality and fraternity.”³⁷⁵ He is widely viewed as the father of nationalism and, therefore, the cause of much evil. Berlin attempts to rescue him from this fate, reminding us again and again that “Herder’s nationalism was never political.”³⁷⁶ In “Jewish Slavery and Its Emancipation,” Berlin writes that the importance of national origins “has been too violently exaggerated by nationalists and other extremists in recent years to be as obvious as it should be.”³⁷⁷ Berlin sought to find a middle ground between Bertrand Russell and T.S. Eliot, and he thought that he had found it in Herder.

³⁷³ Irving Kristol to Isaiah Berlin, 9 May 1956, Bodleian Library, Oxford University. The “Grand Inquisitor” is a character from Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamozov*. 7 years earlier, Berlin had explicitly linked the Grand Inquisitor, who “stood for the dogmatic organization of the life of the spirit,” with modern totalitarian government. Isaiah Berlin, “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century,” 86.

³⁷⁴ Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty” 229.

³⁷⁵ Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, 188.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 200.

³⁷⁷ Isaiah Berlin, “Jewish Slavery and Emancipation,” 172.

Much of Herder's thought was attractive to Berlin, and his evocations of it are among the most moving in all of his work. Herder thought that men are only comprehensible within a social context, which includes all of the different manifestations of a culture: dancing, pottery, legislation and the rest. Humans are like plants in that they cannot be happily transplanted; Canadians belong in Canada and can only thrive there, just as cacti belong in the desert.³⁷⁸ Berlin's life, of course, does not demonstrate the truth of this precept, as he was a happy transplant himself. But this does not mean that he ignored the importance of these national ties. Throughout his life, he clung to his Jewish identity, as well as to his Russian and English ones.

Berlin's attitude to the Jewish people, as expounded in "Jewish Slavery and Its Emancipation," is quite Herderian: "the language, or the musical forms, or the colors and shapes in terms of which [man] expresses himself are the product not merely of his own individuality, but of a wider social tradition, of which he himself is largely unconscious."³⁷⁹ In fact, Berlin's entire argument for Zionism is based on the precepts of Herder; the very idea that self-rule and nationhood are necessary and important values comes from him. In an interview, Berlin laments that Zionism has fallen away from these humane ideas: "Today Zionism has unfortunately developed a nationalist phase. The origins of Zionism were very civilized and Herderian. The Jews wanted simply a way of life which was Jewish."³⁸⁰

It goes without saying that, in Berlin's context, this idea is associated with the right-wing thought discussed earlier. Waugh and Betjeman are Herderian in their appreciation of architecture that grows with the centuries and is linked to an organic society; Eliot echoes Herder when he writes that "culture," which he defends, includes all the "characteristic activities and

³⁷⁸ This botanical explanation is based on Berlin's own. Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, 201.

³⁷⁹ Isaiah Berlin and Ramin Jahagbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, 103.

³⁸⁰ Isaiah Berlin, "Jewish Slavery and Emancipation," 172-173.

interests of a people: Derby Day, Henley Regatta [...] the dog races, the pin table, the dartboard [and so on].”³⁸¹ Bertrand Russell and Karl Popper, for all their merits, were wholly uninterested in the irrational and cultural value of dog races.

- **Vico and the critique of methodological absolutism**

Popper and Russell were each, in their own way, absolutist thinkers. By this I mean that they, at root, accept only one idea and accept it fanatically. It might seem controversial to view canonical liberal thinkers in this way; this is because we normally reserve such terms as “absolutist” or “fanatical” to describe thinkers and ideas that we find sinister. I do not use the terms in this way; I recognize that they each wrote lucid and occasionally brilliant defenses of liberty and the sanctity of the individual. But they were each fanatical in their desire to apply reason and the scientific method to all problems. As Berlin shows us, they are not alone; the belief that “the method which leads to correct solutions to all genuine problems is rational in character; and is, in essence, if not in detailed application, identical in all fields” has been central to the Western philosophical tradition since Plato.³⁸²

Russell was originally a philosopher of mathematics and Popper a philosopher of science. This found its way into their political works, which were written years later. They were each unqualified supporters of the scientific and rational method and felt that it could be applied to the social realm just as easily as the political. In *The Open Society*, Popper writes that “the methods of the social sciences are, to a very considerable extent, the same as those of the natural sciences.”³⁸³ In fact, one of Berlin’s few published references to Popper takes him to task for this conflation: Berlin writes that, in *The Open Society*, Popper seems “somewhat to underestimate

³⁸¹ T.S. Eliot, “Notes towards the Definition of Culture,” 104.

³⁸² Isaiah Berlin, “The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities,” 327.

³⁸³ Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 286n. This note was appended to one of the later editions (Popper does not specify which).

the differences between the methods of natural science and those of history or common sense.”³⁸⁴ *The Open Society* implies in several places that large-scale social engineering, based on scientific precepts, is acceptable in theory; Popper only regrets that we do not yet have enough scientific data to engineer society effectively.³⁸⁵ This is why Berlin once said of Popper that “He believes in theory that Marxism is wrong but something like it could be true.”³⁸⁶ Russell, for his part writes that “the scientific outlook [...] is the intellectual counterpart of what is, in the practical sphere, the outlook of Liberalism.”³⁸⁷ For him, the scientific way of looking at the world is the only justifiable way; everything else is the rankest folly, worthy of nothing except mockery (of which Russell was a master).

Berlin disagreed, and formulated this disagreement using the thought and vocabulary of Giambattista Vico, a Neapolitan philosopher of the 17th and 18th centuries and a precursor of the Counter-Enlightenment (in a book entitled *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, Herder and Vico are two of the three). He was, in Berlin’s mind, the progenitor of what he approvingly called “The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities” in an essay of the same name. This phrase refers to a distinction between the creations of God, the study of which is called “science,” and the creations of man, the study of which is called “humanities.”³⁸⁸ Russell and Popper, of course, denied that this cleavage exists; Berlin accuses many liberal thinkers of this same error.

³⁸⁴ Isaiah Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 126n. John Gray also notes the gulf between Popper and Berlin in this regard: There is in Berlin a deep difference from Popper, and from positivists of every variety, in that he rejects any form of methodological monism.” John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, 12.

³⁸⁵ Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 162, 167.

³⁸⁶ Isaiah Berlin, Interview with Beata Polanowska-Syngulska, 6 May 1988, Wolfson College, Berlin Archives (publication pending).

³⁸⁷ Bertrand Russell, *Unpopular Essays*, 26. From “Philosophy and Politics,” pub. 1947. In context, it is obvious that Russell is not simply making an accurate historical judgment, but using this equation to praise liberalism.

³⁸⁸ Isaiah Berlin, “The Divorce between the Sciences and the Humanities,” 342.

The humanities differ from the sciences in that they are conditioned by history. While Vico, like Berlin, recognized the static aspects of human nature (Berlin had believed this at least since “Freedom” (1928)), he also, like Herder, pointed out that the outward manifestations of human nature are *not* static, despite all of the philosophical appeals to an abstraction called “human nature.” On the contrary, human nature and its offspring (laws, art, music, religion, and the rest) are indissolubly connected to a specific culture or society. That is, it is impossible to create an aesthetic theory, legal code or religion that will be true in all times and places; to do so is to ignore the importance of history. This is not true for the world created by God: the truths of science, for both Berlin and Vico, *are* universal. However, this cleavage contradicts Russell and Popper’s claims for the universality of reason; their support of a world government implies that one set of laws and institutions is suitable to every nation.

Many would quarrel with Carr’s opinion that Berlin did not make a “serious contribution” to the philosophy of history, about which Berlin wrote reams.³⁸⁹ Much of Berlin’s work in this field is obviously and strongly influenced by Vico, although he is not always named. In “The Concept of Scientific History” (1960), Berlin asserts that historiography is not a science, as it requires the flair of an artist to reconstruct the past on paper. He argues that there is no way to prove, using the scientific method, that *Hamlet* was not written in Outer Mongolia. Berlin borrows Vico’s epistemology to explain how we attain this knowledge: through a process that Vico called *fantasia*, we can imaginatively enter the court of Genghis Khan and imagine its values as our own. While humanity differs greatly according to time and place, the basically human element is present enough in all civilizations that, even if we do not condone their values,

³⁸⁹ Carr 23. In context, Carr is saying that Collingwood, the Oxford don who had introduced Vico to Berlin, had made the “only serious contribution” to the study of history. However, given the rest of Carr’s book, this is obviously a swipe at Berlin.

we can comprehend them. Using this knowledge, we can determine that *Hamlet* expresses values alien to those of Mongolia and sympathetic to those of Elizabethan England. Interestingly, Berlin uses the same Shakespearian example both in “The Concept of Scientific History,” where the idea is presented as his own, as well as in an essay on Vico, in which it is presented as an illustration of Vico’s own theories.³⁹⁰

Again, this belief in the limited power of reason is more often associated with the right-wing than the left. Left-wing thinkers, whether they be moderate (Popper) or radical (Lenin), tend to believe in the limitless possibilities of pure reason to transform society. Graham Greene, for example, severely criticizes the positivist approach in *The End of the Affair* through the vile character of Richard Smythe. Smythe is a positivist (although Greene does not use the word); he seeks to “explain away love” with omnipotent reason, claiming that “under it all [is] the biological motive.”³⁹¹ At the end of the novel, however, he prays and possibly even converts to Catholicism.³⁹² It was de Maistre, and not Voltaire, who wrote about “the inevitable drawbacks of science” and “the ineptitude shown by scientists when it comes to dealing with people or understanding them.”³⁹³ These sorts of statements are inconceivable from Popper or Russell, but might well have been written by Berlin.

- **Pluralism**

The germ of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* was a lecture entitled “The Poverty of Historicism” (1935), given by Popper at a seminar led by another Viennese immigrant: Friedrich

³⁹⁰ Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment* 53 and Isaiah Berlin, “The Concept of Scientific History,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, 17-58, page 23.

³⁹¹ Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair*, 107.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 144.

³⁹³ Quoted in Isaiah Berlin, “Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism,” 120.

von Hayek.³⁹⁴ Hayek, according to Sir John Gray, is “more than any single figure [...] responsible for the revival of classical liberalism in the postwar period.”³⁹⁵ His most influential work was an attack on economic planning published in 1944: *The Road to Serfdom*. As with *The Open Society*, there is much in *The Road to Serfdom* that was sympathetic to Berlin. Most obviously, Berlin and Hayek had the same enemies: the far Left, both in the U.S.S.R. and the U.K. Hayek addressed his book “to the socialists of all parties.” He later wrote that the book was a “warning to the socialist intelligentsia of England,” which he worried would adopt policies similar to those of Russia.³⁹⁶ Berlin was also worried about the threat to civil liberties inherent in socialist planning (hence his distaste for the “miserable grey on grey” of the Attlee government³⁹⁷). He expressed this concern over the socialist-tinged legislation of the Labour government most clearly in “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century,” published five years after *The Road to Serfdom*.³⁹⁸

It might seem surprising, then, that Berlin despised the book as much as he did. There is a scathing indictment of it in one of Berlin’s weekly political reports from the Foreign Office during the war (this fact is indicative of the widespread influence of *The Road to Serfdom*; it is not often that reports from the British Embassy would dwell on the work of Austrian economists). In the report, Hayek is portrayed as a stooge of the conservative economic isolationists: “Professor Hayek should not be surprised if he is invited to address the Daughters of the American Revolution to provide them with the latest weapons against such sinister social

³⁹⁴ Popper, *Unended Quest*, 123, 130. In fact, Hayek helped Popper find a publisher for the book. The two became life-long friends and each dedicated a book to the other in the 1960s. Alan Ebenstein, *Friedrich Hayek: A Biography*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, 156-157.

³⁹⁵ John Gray, *Liberalism*, 39.

³⁹⁶ F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976, page iii. This is from a foreword written in 1976.

³⁹⁷ Isaiah Berlin to Vera Weizmann, December 30 1949, quoted on Ignatieff 197.

³⁹⁸ Isaiah Berlin, “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century,” 83.

incendiaries as Lord Keynes and the British Treasury.”³⁹⁹ The opinion was personal, as well as professional. In 1945, he wrote to Elisabeth Morrow: “I am still reading the awful Dr. Hayek.” He goes on to describe Ludwig von Mises, Hayek’s teacher in Vienna, as “just as much of a dodo, if not more so [than Hayek].”⁴⁰⁰ It is possible that Berlin simply saw Hayek as a lackey of the Conservative Party; despite his misgivings, Berlin always remained a card-carrying Liberal at heart. But there is another and more interesting explanation for this distaste, one which exposes the root cause of the cleavage between Berlin and these thinkers.

Noel Annan hints at this deeper rationale in his foreword to one of Berlin’s essay collections: “No one can doubt Berlin’s belief in the importance of liberty. But he does not beat a drum-roll for Hayek. Liberty is only one of the good things in life for which he cares. For him equality is also a sacred value.”⁴⁰¹ It is necessary to delve a little further into Hayek’s argument to understand this statement. Hayek criticized centralized planning for two reasons. The first is moral; Hayek was a passionate defender of individual liberty. He argues that “individuals should be allowed, within defined limits, to follow their own values and preferences rather than somebody else’s.”⁴⁰² Hayek’s second reason is technical and scientific; he uses neoclassical economic theory to argue that personal liberty necessarily maximizes economic efficiency. In other words, Hayek argues that an increase in personal liberty is the panacea to all social ills; in his thought, liberty represents the happy confluence of moral virtue and economic rationality.⁴⁰³

³⁹⁹ Isaiah Berlin, “31 March 1945” in *Washington Despatches 1941-1945: Weekly Political Reports from the British Embassy*, ed. H.G. Nicholas, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, 531-535, page 535. This is also a good example of Berlin’s wit, for which his reports were widely known.

⁴⁰⁰ Isaiah Berlin to Elisabeth Morrow, 4 April 1945, *Flourishing* 540-541.

⁴⁰¹ Noel Annan, “Foreword,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer, London: Pimlico, 1998, ix-xv, page xii.

⁴⁰² Hayek 59.

⁴⁰³ He recognizes, of course, that the rule of law is a necessary precondition for a free society; his biographer, Alan Ebenstein, sees this as “Hayek’s major positive contribution during the last fifty years of his life.” However, laws are only designed to safeguard freedom and not to promote any other competing value. Ebenstein 159.

He approvingly quotes Élie Halévy, who disparages the socialists for holding contradictory values: “The socialists believe in two things which are absolutely different and perhaps even contradictory: freedom and organization.”⁴⁰⁴

Hayek’s unspoken assumption is that all good things necessarily entail another. This notion has been linked with liberalism at least since Benjamin Franklin: “They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety.”⁴⁰⁵ Berlin rejects this claim. For all that Berlin cared about liberty, he was quick to point out that it often came hopelessly into conflict with other values, including safety. In “Two Concepts of Liberty,” he wrote that “to avoid glaring inequality or widespread misery I am ready to sacrifice some, or all, of my freedom.”⁴⁰⁶ For Hayek and Franklin, this is an absurd statement, since freedom is an unqualified good. For Berlin, there is no such thing: every choice is tragic. Liberty, democracy and safety are all very good things, but they are also *different* things, and do not necessarily entail one another. In fact, they often conflict. Despite Berlin’s Zionism, he was always clear that self-government is one of those values that might tragically conflict with liberty or economic efficiency or any of the other values pursued by men. He argues that there are those who, faced with this conflict between liberalism and self-rule, might choose to be ruled by the most autocratic government of their peers than the most liberal of imperialisms.

This introduction of the inevitability of tragedy was the largest reform Berlin hoped to make to liberal philosophy. As he wrote in “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” the 1988 essay in which Berlin sums up his thought: “We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss.” What is more, this act of choosing is integral to the human project: “without

⁴⁰⁴ Hayek 80.

⁴⁰⁵ From *An Historical Review of the Constitution and Government of Pennsylvania* (1759), quoted in Francis Biddle, *The Fear of Freedom*, New York: Doubleday, 1951, 1. Berlin accuses John Stuart Mill, a sort of liberal deity, of the same flaw. Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 200.

⁴⁰⁶ Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 197.

some modicum of [liberty] there is no choice and therefore no possibility of remaining human as we understand the word.”⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰⁷ Isaiah Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” 10, 11.

Conclusion

The place of religion within Berlin's thought is highly ambiguous. Berlin refuses, as we have seen, to make any absolute commitments. This is, however, the very nature of religion, as Berlin recognized. In a 1992 letter to his friend, Fred Worms, he wrote: "I remember Herbert Samuel [the first British High Commissioner for Palestine] once wrote that the Jewish religion did not oblige one to believe anything which reason was against. That is absurd. Faith, blind faith, is what is enjoined upon us; and that is true of every truly religious religion."⁴⁰⁸ Berlin recognized and respected the value and beauty of religious tradition but he was, however, unwilling to place "blind faith" in *anything*. This is the root of the tension, which just might be irresolvable. In another letter to Worms, he described his position this way: "I am religiously tone-deaf. What I mean to say is that a deaf person cannot appreciate music. That is my position vis-à-vis God. I go to synagogue from time to time because I wish to identify myself with the traditions of my ancestors which I would like to see continued."⁴⁰⁹ Berlin seems to admit the impossibility of his situation when he writes that it will only prove satisfactory for "a small minority."⁴¹⁰ It is unsurprising, then, that religion is scarcely mentioned within Berlin's published work. It is a lamentable hole in his thought, though, and I will here attempt to construct a tentative resolution. Following Berlin's example, this might best be done by considering Berlin in relation to other thinkers.

- **Religion in the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment traditions**

⁴⁰⁸ Isaiah Berlin to Fred Worms, 3 December 1992, quoted in Isaiah Berlin and Fred Worms, "From Abraham to Washington: Extracts from an unpublished correspondence," 34.

⁴⁰⁹ Isaiah Berlin, interview with Fred Worms, 10 July 1991, quoted in Isaiah Berlin and Fred Worms, "From Abraham to Washington: Extracts from an unpublished correspondence," 32.

⁴¹⁰ Isaiah Berlin to Fred Worms, 18 July 1991, quoted in Isaiah Berlin and Fred Worms, "From Abraham to Washington: Extracts from an unpublished correspondence," 32.

Liberal thinkers have generally been opposed to religion and the clergy ever since Voltaire, and they join him in decrying *l'infame*. Bertrand Russell is the epitome of the secular rationalist; his attitude to religion is, unsurprisingly, unsympathetic to Berlin's own. Russell was an atheist, and does not seem to grant the religious impulse any sort of value. He wrote to Goldie Lowes Dickinson (then in China) in February 1913: "Are you finding the Great Secret in the East? I doubt it. There is none- there is not even an enigma. There is science and sober daylight and the business of the day – the rest is mere phantoms of the dusk."⁴¹¹ This is a particularly pithy formulation of a conviction that would only grow in strength as his long life wore on. "An Outline of Intellectual Rubbish," a choleric 1950 essay, makes the same point in many more pages. In it, he chronicles his horror at the fact that so many of his contemporaries lead their lives according to the dictates "of very ancient and very ignorant pastoral or agricultural tribes."⁴¹²

This is, obviously enough, counter to Berlin's own convictions; he thought that atheists were "deaf to some profound human experience."⁴¹³ In one letter, he explicitly criticizes "one of [Russell's] typically rationalist essays in which he attempted to dismantle religion. That is not the way to treat what religious beliefs mean to those who hold them."⁴¹⁴ Religious beliefs are, for Berlin, not founded on reason and should not be expected to follow reason's mandates.

Popper, despite his own claims to the contrary, was an anti-religious thinker as well. He lamely attempts to reconcile his thought with Christianity, to which he provides a surprising amount of lip service in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. The entire enterprise seems

⁴¹¹ Bertrand Russell to Goldie Lowes Dickinson, 13 February 1913, quoted in: Russell, *Autobiography*, 231-232, page 232.

⁴¹² Russell, *Unpopular Essays*, 91. From "An Outline of Intellectual Rubbish" (1950).

⁴¹³ Isaiah Berlin and Ramin Jahagbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, 110.

⁴¹⁴ Isaiah Berlin to Fred Worms, 3 December 1992, quoted in Isaiah Berlin and Fred Worms, "From Abraham to Washington: Extracts from an unpublished correspondence," 33.

disingenuous; Popper is just as unsympathetic to religion as Russell, his idol.⁴¹⁵ Popper's ostensible defense of religion is tempered by the fact that he is only interested in supporting a sort of ultra-liberal Christianity, far removed from that believed by most Christians. He argues that all norms and moral axioms are manmade and, therefore, susceptible to guidance by science. Popper is shocked to find that some consider the notion that morals are entirely man-made to be anti-religious: "the view that norms are man-made is also, strangely enough, contested by some who see in this attitude an attack on religion." He continues with a, to my mind, utterly contradictory statement: "I would not admit that to think of ethical laws as being man-made in this sense is incompatible with the religious view that they are given to us by God."⁴¹⁶ If values were given to us by God, the implication is that they were God-made; therefore, Popper asks us to believe that "man-made" and "God-made" are synonymous. Nothing seems further from the Christian enterprise. Popper lays bare his unwillingness to defend any sort of serious Christianity when he says that "whether Christianity is other-worldly, I do not know."⁴¹⁷

Berlin thought that this attempt to reconcile religion with reason was hopeless, as it stunk of methodological absolutism. For Berlin, reason is not the sole arbiter of human existence. As Berlin wrote to Worms, "the imitation religions, liberal church Reform synagogues, diluted Buddhism and the like are not the genuine article, and Kierkegaard is right – only total

⁴¹⁵ For Popper's worship of Russell, see: Edmonds and Edinow, 55. He thought that Russell was the only great philosopher of the 20th century, and one of the greatest since Aristotle. Curiously, Popper does not defend religion as such, but only Christianity. He was no Christian himself, although he never tires of reminding his reader that his teachings are, in fact, representative of "the true teaching of Christianity." (*The Open Society, Vol. II, 274*) There is no logical reason for Popper to embroil himself in theology; it is irrelevant to the rest of his argument, much of which is brilliant, and only serves to make him look ridiculous. It might be, I propose, Popper's unspoken desire to assimilate that was the motive force behind these digressions. Russell, the grandson of a prime minister, could do as he pleased without fear of compromising his acceptance as an Englishman; he was properly known as Lord Russell and described himself as "passionately English." (Russell, *Autobiography*, 516) Popper, on the other hand, with his alien appearance and accent, had a much more tenuous hold on his acceptability to the English.

⁴¹⁶ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 65.

⁴¹⁷ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies: Vol. II, 274*.

commitment and no questions asked, is the truly religious attitude, the rest is a modification.”⁴¹⁸

He used to joke that the Orthodox synagogue was the one that he was not attending.⁴¹⁹

Essentially, the attempt to reconcile reason and religion is the same as the attempt to have all good things at once; the belief that they are one and the same is utopian.

- **Religion and the Counter-Enlightenment**

Berlin, then, is more sympathetic with the religious enterprise than Russell or Popper. However, he is much less so than his Counter-Enlightenment heroes. Here, as elsewhere, Berlin is forced to thread his way between these apparently disparate positions. Each of the Counter-Enlightenment thinkers to which Berlin devoted considerable attention (Vico, Herder, and de Maistre⁴²⁰) couched their thought in explicitly religious terms. Vico and de Maistre were devout Catholics, and Herder a Lutheran pastor. In their own minds, their thought was inseparable from their religion.

Berlin seeks to rectify this in his own work. He always delighted in pointing out that apparently fanatical monists did not, in fact, *truly* believe as they professed (he had been doing this as early as 1928; see page 31). His favorite example comes from his friend, J.L. Austin, who turned to him during the positivist onslaught of the 1930s and said: “They all *talk* about determinism and *say* they believe in it. I’ve never met a determinist in my life, I mean a man who really did believe in it.”⁴²¹ Berlin makes the same point in “Historical Inevitability,” where

⁴¹⁸ Isaiah Berlin to Fred Worms, 3 December 1992, quoted in Isaiah Berlin and Fred Worms, “From Abraham to Washington: Extracts from an unpublished correspondence,” 33-34.

⁴¹⁹ Ignatieff **294**.

⁴²⁰ I am, for simplicity’s sake, ignoring Hamann, in whom Berlin was also passionately interested. The same analysis applies.

⁴²¹ Isaiah Berlin, “J.L. Austin and the Early Beginnings of Oxford Philosophy,” *Personal Impressions*, 130-145, page 143.

he argues that determinism “does not in fact color the ordinary thoughts of the majority of human beings, including historians, nor even those of natural scientists outside the laboratory.”⁴²²

Likewise, he argues that Vico and Herder were not *really* devout Christians, whatever they might have thought. He writes that “[Vico] does, at times, remind himself that Christian values are timeless and absolute; but for the most part he forgets this.”⁴²³ Again: “the *New Science* [Vico’s major work] in effect rejects the notion of absolute, timeless values, and its historicism is as fatal to the Christian as to any other doctrine of natural law.”⁴²⁴ Berlin also thinks that Herder’s Christianity is superfluous, and even inimical, to his thought. For example, Herder usually argued that language developed organically out of a society, just like pottery or dancing. However, “at other times, recalled, perhaps by Hamann [his teacher], to his beliefs as a Lutheran clergyman [...] Herder recanted and conceded that language was indeed implanted in, or taught to, man by God.”⁴²⁵ Berlin also sees a “tension between Herder’s naturalism and his teleology, his Christianity and his enthusiastic acceptance of the findings of the natural sciences.”⁴²⁶

In his essay on Vico, however, Berlin hints at a way out of this impasse: “religion is not for [Vico], as for Comte or even Saint-Simon, simply a social cement whose value lies in its utility: it is what makes men men; its loss degrades and dehumanizes.”⁴²⁷ The choice of language is telling, as it is reminiscent to the phrases he uses when describing his own thought. There are many examples; this attempt to define the human enterprise is one of the most moving aspects of Berlin’s work. In “Two Concepts of Liberty,” for example, he writes that social engineering is a

⁴²² Isaiah Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” 145.

⁴²³ Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, 62.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

“denial of that in men which makes them men.”⁴²⁸ Berlin would not flatly reject Christianity, or any religion. A lifetime of the most varied experiences had shown him that, in order to hold their heads high, men must be allowed to believe and live and speak and think as they please without interference from well-meaning but profoundly misguided philosophers. T.S. Eliot may have been wrong about the nature of the universe. The same is true of Berlin’s father praying on the train, Berlin’s Hassidic teacher in Andreapol, and the unfortunate man in the New York Jewish court.

- **Self-creation**

However, to say that these people are “wrong” and to wash our hands of them is to destroy that which makes life worthwhile. People are blessed with the ability to choose and to live as they please, and the command that these choices be rationally defensible, or that all of an individual’s choices cohere with each other, is tyranny. Berlin chose to adhere to some aspects of Jewish ritual because it behooved him to tap into the tradition of his ancestors. He refused, however, to grant any validity to the metaphysical assumptions of Jewish doctrine. Who are we to demand that Berlin’s attitude towards religion be coherent? For Berlin, life is made up of much more than the disinterested pursuit of truth; as he describes in “From Hope and Fear Set Free” (1963), knowledge is a value that can conflict with others.⁴²⁹ Had the man in the Jewish court been aware that God was, in all likelihood, not concerned with the court’s ruling, the world would have been deprived of a bit of its glorious variety. This is why Berlin’s discussion of this man is bemused but never mocking; he positively *delights* in images like these, and does not mercilessly mock the religious like Russell.

⁴²⁸ Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 209.

⁴²⁹ Isaiah Berlin, “From Hope and Fear Set Free,” in *Liberty*, 252-286.

The human experience, for Berlin, is linked with choice and self-creation, and if we submit to the dictates of a rationally conceived and coherent set of abstract ideas, we are blinding ourselves to the possibilities and meaning of human existence. Isaiah Berlin loved to quote Joseph Butler, who said that “Things and actions are what they are and the consequences of them will be what they will be.” He might well have applied it to himself. Isaiah Berlin was not a liberal, or a conservative, or an Englishman, or a Russian, or a Jew, or an atheist, or an agnostic. He was all of these things and none of them. Isaiah Berlin was Isaiah Berlin, and that is surely enough.

Bibliography⁴³⁰

Works by Isaiah Berlin

1. "31 March 1945." In *Washington Despatches 1941-1945: Weekly Political Reports from the British Embassy*. Ed. H.G. Nicholas. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981. 531-535.
2. "Benjamin Disraeli, Karl Marx and the Search for Identity." In *Against the Current*, ed. Henry Hardy. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001. 252-286.
3. "The Birth of Greek Individualism." In *Liberty*. Ed. Henry Hardy. New York: Oxford UP, 2002. 286-321.
4. "The Concept of Scientific History." In *The Proper Study of Mankind*. Ed. Henry Hardy. London: Pimlico, 1998. 17-58.
5. "The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities." In *The Proper Study of Mankind*. Ed. Henry Hardy. London: Pimlico, 1998. 326-358.
6. "Fathers and Children." In *Russian Thinkers*. Ed. Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly. New York: Penguin, 1978. 261-303.
7. "From Hope and Fear Set Free," In *Liberty*. Ed. Henry Hardy. New York: Oxford UP, 2002. 252-286.
8. *Flourishing: Letters, 1928-1946*. Ed. Henry Hardy. London: Chatto & Windus, 2003.
9. "Freedom." In *Flourishing: Letters, 1928-1946*. Ed. Henry Hardy. London: Chatto & Windus, 2003. 631-637.
10. "J.L. Austin and the Early Beginnings of Oxford Philosophy." In *Personal Impressions*. Ed. Henry Hardy. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998. 130-145.
11. "A Great Russian Writer." In *The Soviet Mind*. Ed. Henry Hardy. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004. 41-52.
12. Letter to George Kennan, 13 February 1951. In *Liberty*. Ed. Henry Hardy. New York: OUP, 2002. Pages 336-344.
13. "Historical Inevitability." In *Liberty*. Ed. Henry Hardy. New York: OUP, 2002. 94-165.

⁴³⁰ I have divided the references up into sections for simplicity's sake. I recognize, as Isaiah Berlin is living testament, that this dichotomy is somewhat artificial; however, I use it as it follows the organization of the paper itself.

14. Interview with Beata Polanowska-Sygulska. 6 May 1988. Wolfson College, Berlin Archives. Publication Pending.
15. "Introduction" to *Five Essays on Liberty*. In *Liberty*. Ed. Henry Hardy. New York: OUP, 2002. 3-54.
16. "Jewish Slavery and Emancipation." In *The Power of Ideas*. Ed. Henry Hardy. London: Pimlico, 2001. 162-185.
17. "Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism." In *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*. Ed. Henry Hardy. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990. 91-174.
18. *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*. 3rd ed. London: Oxford UP, 1963.
19. "M. Henri Heine." <<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/nachlass/mhenriheine.pdf>> in Henry Hardy (ed.), *The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*, accessed 3 December 2004.
20. "Meetings with Russian Writers in 1945 and 1956." In *Personal Impressions*. Ed. Henry Hardy. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998. 198-252.
21. "Nationalism: Past Neglect and Present Power." In *Against the Current*, ed. Henry Hardy. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001. 333-355.
22. "Nineteen Fifty-One: A Survey of Cultural Trends of the Year." In *Encyclopedia Britannica Book of the Year 1952*. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952. xxii-xxxii.
23. "The Origins of Israel." In *The Power of Ideas*. Ed. Henry Hardy. London: Pimlico, 2001. 143-161.
24. "Our Interview with GKC." In *Flourishing: Letters, 1928-1946*. Ed. Henry Hardy. London: Chatto & Windus, 2003. Pages 7-8.
25. "Political Ideas in the 20th Century." In *Liberty*. Ed. Henry Hardy. New York: OUP, 2002. 55-93.
26. "The Purpose Justifies the Ways." In *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy. New York: OUP, 2002. 331-335.
27. "Pursuit of the Ideal." In *The Proper Study of Mankind*. Ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer. London: Pimlico, 1998. 1-16.
28. "Soviet Self-Insulation." In *The Soviet Mind*. Ed. Henry Hardy. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004. 90-97.

29. *Tape MI 17*. Monologue delivered into a tape recorder, for the benefit of Michael Ignatieff. 10 January 1997. Trans. November 2002 by Esther Johnson. Berlin Archives, Wolfson College, Oxford University.
30. "The Three Strands in My Life." In *Personal Impressions*. Ed. Henry Hardy. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998. 255-259.
31. "The Trends of Culture," contribution to "The Year 1949 in Historical Perspective", in *1950 Britannica Book of the Year*. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1950. xxii–xxxii.
32. *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*. Ed. Henry Hardy. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000.
33. "Two Concepts of Liberty." In *The Proper Study of Mankind*. Ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer. London: Pimlico, 1998. Pages 191-242.
34. Various correspondence located with the Isaiah Berlin Papers, Bodleian Library.
35. "Winston Churchill in 1940." In *The Proper Study of Mankind*. Ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer. London: Pimlico, 1998. Pages 605-627.
36. "Zionist Politics in Wartime Washington." In *Flourishing: Letters, 1928-1946*. Ed. Henry Hardy. London: Chatto & Windus, 2003. 663-693.
37. Berlin, Isaiah and Fred Worms. "From Abraham to Washington: Extracts from an unpublished correspondence." *Jewish Quarterly*. Winter 1998/99. 32-36.
38. Berlin, Isaiah and Ramin Jahanbegloo. *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991.

Berlin's Right-wing Context

39. Asher, Kenneth. *T.S. Eliot and Ideology*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1995.
40. Betjeman, John. *Ghastly Good Taste, or a Depressing Story of the Rise and Fall of English Architecture*. Chatham: W.J. Mackay & Co., 1933.
41. Carpenter, Humphrey. *The Brideshead Generation: Evelyn Waugh & his Friends*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1990.
42. Carpenter, Humphrey. *A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound*. New York: Delta, 1988.

43. Chesterton, G.K. *The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton*. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1936.
44. Eliot, T.S. "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar." In *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*. London: Faber and Faber, 1963. 32-33.
45. Eliot, T.S. "Dante." In *T.S. Eliot: Selected Essays*. London: Faber and Faber, 1976. 237-280.
46. Eliot, T.S. "The Idea of a Christian Society." In *Christianity and Culture*. New York: Harcourt, 1967. Pages 1-78.
47. Eliot, T.S. *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1929.
48. Eliot, T.S. "Notes towards the Definition of Culture." In *Christianity and Culture*. New York: Harcourt, 1967. Pages 79-202.
49. Eliot, T.S. "Religion and Literature." In *T.S. Eliot: Selected Essays*. London: Faber and Faber, 1976. 388-401.
50. Eliot, T.S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In *T.S. Eliot: Selected Essays*. London: Faber and Faber, 1976. 13-22.
51. Eliot, T.S. "The Waste Land." In *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*. London: Faber and Faber, 1963. 51-76.
52. Greene, Graham. *The End of the Affair*, New York: Penguin, 1975.
53. Greene, Graham. *The Heart of the Matter*. New York: Viking Press, 1948.
54. Hastings, Selina. *Evelyn Waugh*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994.
55. Hollis, Christopher. *The Mind of Chesterton*. Toronto: Hollis & Carter, 1970.
56. Julius, Anthony. *T.S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form*. Rev. ed. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003.
57. Mosley, Oswald. *My Life*. Camden, NJ: Thomas Newlson and Sons, 1968.
58. O'Keefe, Paul. *Some Sort of Genius: A Life of Wyndham Lewis*. London: Pimlico, 2001.
59. Pound, Ezra. *The Letters of Ezra Pound: 1907-1941*. Ed. D.D. Paige. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1950.
60. Rowell, Geoffrey. *The Vision Glorious: Themes and Personalities of the Catholic Revival in Anglicanism*. New York: OUP, 1983.

61. Spender, Stephen. *T.S. Eliot*. New York: Penguin, 1976.
62. Waugh, Evelyn. *Brideshead Revisited*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1945.
63. Waugh, Evelyn. *Decline and Fall*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1928.
64. Webber, G.C. *The Ideology of the British Right: 1918-1939*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986.
65. Weber, Eugen. *Action Française: Royalism and Reaction in Twentieth Century France*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1962.

Berlin's Left-wing Context

66. Carr, Edward Hallett. *What is History?* New York: Random House, 1961.
67. Carter, Miranda. *Anthony Blunt: His Lives*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.
68. Crossman, Richard, ed. *The God that Failed*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949.
69. Ebenstein, Alan. *Friedrich Hayek: A Biography*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.
70. Hayek, F. A. *The Road to Serfdom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.
71. Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 5th ed. Vols. 1 and 2. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1966.
72. Popper, Karl. *Unended Quest*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
73. Spender, Stephen. *World within World*. London: Readers Union, Ltd., 1953.
74. Stansky, Peter and William Abrahams. *Journey to the Frontier: Two Roads to the Spanish Civil War*. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1966.

General Reference

75. Annan, Noel. "Foreword." In *The Proper Study of Mankind*. Ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer. London: Pimlico, 1998. ix-xv.
76. Annan, Noel. "Introduction." In *Personal Impressions*. Ed. Henry Hardy, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998. xv-xxxii.
77. Beiser, Frederick. "Berlin and the German Counter-Enlightenment." In *Isaiah Berlin's Counter-Enlightenment*. Ed. Joseph Mali and Robert Wokler. Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, Volume 93, Part 5. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2003. 105-116.

78. Berger, Marilyn. "Isaiah Berlin, 88, Philosopher and Historian of Ideas." Obituary. *New York Times*. 10 November 1997.
79. Berlin, Marie. *Autobiographical Notes*. Transcribed by Henry Hardy. Located in Bodleian Library, Oxford University.
80. Berlin, Marie. *Diary*. Transcribed by Henry Hardy. Located in Bodleian Library, Oxford University.
81. Berlin, Mendel. *Autobiographical Notes*. Transcribed by Henry Hardy. Located in Bodleian Library, Oxford University.
82. Biddle, Francis. *The Fear of Freedom*. New York: Doubleday, 1951.
83. Bowra, C.M. *Memories: 1898-1939*. Harvard: Cambridge UP, 1967.
84. Calder-Marshall, Arthur, "More Frank than Buchman: St. Paul's." In *The Old School: Essays by Divers Hands*. Ed. Graham Greene. London: Jonathan Cape, 1934. 61-72.
85. Carey, John. *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1918-1939*. London: Faber and Faber, 1992.
86. Carpenter, Humphrey. *Geniuses Together: American Writers in Paris in the 1920s*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988.
87. Cheyette, Bryan. *Constructions of 'The Jew' in English Literature and Society: Racial Representation, 1875-1945*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
88. Crowder, George. *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty and Pluralism*. Polity: Cambridge, 2004.
89. Dimont, Max I. *Jews, God and History*. 2nd ed. New York: Signet, 2004.
90. Duff, Shiela Grant. *The Parting of Ways: A Personal Account of the Thirties*. Boston: Peter Owen, 1982.
91. Duff, Shiela Grant and Adam von Trott zu Solz. *A noble combat: the letters of Shiela Grant Duff and Adam von Trott zu Solz, 1932-1939*. Ed. Klemens von Klemperer. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.
92. Eksteins, Modris. *Walking Since Daybreak*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
93. Ellman, Richard. *James Joyce*. Revised edition. New York: Oxford UP, 1982.
94. Ellman, Richard. *Yeats: The Man and The Masks*. New York: Penguin, 1979.
95. Garrard, Graeme. "Isaiah Berlin's Joseph de Maistre." In *Isaiah Berlin's Counter-Enlightenment*. Ed. Joseph Mali and Robert Wokler. Transactions of the American

- Philosophical Society, Volume 93, Part 5. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2003. 117-131.
96. Gray, John. *Isaiah Berlin*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996.
 97. Gray, John. *Liberalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
 98. Hardy, Henry. "A Deep Understanding." In *Jewish Chronicle*, 26 March 2004. Pages 35-36.
 99. Hardy, Henry. "The Editor's Tale." In *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy. New York: OUP, 2002. ix-xxxiii.
 100. Hardy, Henry. "Editor's Preface." In *The Power of Ideas*. Ed. Henry Hardy. London: Pimlico, 2001. ix-xv.
 101. Hardy, Henry. Preface to "M. Henri Heine."
<<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/nachlass/mhenriheine.pdf>> in Henry Hardy (ed.), *The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*, accessed 3 December 2004.
 102. Hardy, Henry. "Writings about Isaiah Berlin."
<<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/onib/onib.htm>> in Henry Hardy (ed.), *The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*, accessed 7 February 2005.
 103. Heilbroner, Robert. "Introduction." In Isaiah Berlin. *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*. 3rd ed. New York: OUP, 1963. Pages xv – xix.
 104. Hennessey, Peter. Interview with Tony Wright. 11 March 2004. 21 April 2005
<<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmselect/cmpubadm/212/4031101.htm>>
 105. Hughes, H. Stuart. *Consciousness and Society: The Reconstruction of European Social Thought 1890-1930*. Vintage Books: New York, 1961.
 106. Ignatieff, Michael. *Isaiah Berlin: A Life*. Metropolitan: New York, 1998.
 107. Kaufmann, Walter. *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*. New York: Anchor Books, 1959.
 108. Kushner, Tony. "British Anti-semitism, 1918-1945." In *The Making of Modern Anglo-Jewry*. Ed. David Cesarani. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1990. 191-208.
 109. McLellan, David. *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.
 110. Margalit, Avashai. "Discussion: Nationalism and Israel." In *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*. Ed. Mark Lilla *et al.* New York: New York Review of Books, 2001. 177-198.

111. Pasternak, Boris. *Doctor Zhivago*. Trans. Max Hayward and Manya Harari. New York: Ballantine, 1957.
112. Ross, Norman P. *et al.* "Editor's Preface." In Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*. 3rd ed. London: Oxford UP, 1963. ix –xii.
113. Schapiro, Leonard. *Turgenev: His Life and Times*. New York: Random House, 1978.
114. Sicher, Efraim. *Jews in Russian Literature after the October Revolution: Writers between Hope and Apostasy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
115. Slezkine, Yuri. *The Jewish Century*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004.
116. Šteimanis, Josifs. *History of Latvian Jews*. Trans. Helena Belova. Ed. Edward Anders. East European Monographs: Boulder, 2002.
117. Sykes, Christopher. *Troubled Loyalty*. London: Collins, 1968.
118. Thomson, David. *England in the Twentieth Century*. London: Penguin, 1965.
119. Unattributed. "What You Didn't Miss, Pt. 94." In *Private Eye*, 2–15 April 2004. Page 24.