# On Isaiah Berlin

Lecturing at the time of the Franco-Prussian war, Jacob Burckhardt told his history students that the revolutionary age from 1789 onwards had been lehrreich: rich in teaching. The greatest spirits of a hundred years before were now looking short of knowledge, but only because of what had happened since. Modern students should not attribute virtue to themselves just because they could see so much that their mental superiors had not foretold. It is worth remembering Burckhardt's principle when we come to deal with another great lecturer, Isaiah Berlin. He was once famous for understanding everything about the age he lived in. There is still reason to believe he understood a lot. But if today he is starting to look a bit less penetrating about it all, it could be because things have moved on.

Though Berlin wrote comparatively little about the twentieth century's worst horrors, there wasn't much he didn't know about them. The question is how much he usefully wrote about them: a question worth trying to answer, because on the answer will eventually depend how much we can usefully write about him. On the level of personal publicity, his renown as an amiable sage goes on increasing after death. Mainly due to the beavering diligence of his editor Henry Hardy, compilations of Berlin's essays have continued to appear, making him seem more productive than when he was alive. Michael Ignatieff's finely proportioned biography, a model of the genre, summarises and clarifies Berlin 's themes with a terseness that might lead its readers to skip through the subject's own compositions when it is found that they are seldom as tightly written. But The Proper Study of Mankind, a concentration of the compilations, provides sufficient evidence that Berlin's best prose was something more weighty than the distilled monologues of a fascinating talker: as a set book it is likely to go on being a touchstone of liberal thought for many years to come. Thus attended by curators and commentators, Berlin continues to enjoy a bustling second life, like the city of the same name. Yet somehow it has become necessary to assert, instead of just accept, that he had deep feelings about what was going on in modern history, because all too often his written response sounded shallow.

As the bright young son of a bourgeois family that sensibly fled Riga to escape the Bolshevik revolution, he took with him, as part of his baggage, memories of Cheka arrogance that made him suspicious for life about any concept of freedom that presumed to impose itself through political coercion. But even on the subject of the Soviet Union, he would later write much more about the repression of individual artists than the mass obliteration of ordinary people — which, as Michael Burleigh has tried to remind us, is the thing to concentrate on, not gloss over. And the depredations of Nazi Germany scarcely figure in Berlin 's writings at all, even though he played an honourable part in fighting Hitler. He spent much of the war in Washington only because he had been sent there on a diplomatic posting, not because he was playing for safety. If he had been caught in Britain , he would undoubtedly have shared the fate of millions of other Jews had the battle been lost. Silence about Mao's China might be understandable — the full story emerged late in his life — but how was it that the global aggregate of totalitarian mania failed to take a central place in his treatment of recent history? Does his eloquent advocacy of liberalism take the full measure of the forces ranged against it? We are not necessarily in contravention of Burckhardt's principle if we say that the twentieth century's seismic outbursts of irrationality were its defining events. There were plenty of thinkers who thought so at the time. But if Berlin thought so, he was reluctant to say so; and if he starts looking weak there, then doubts are bound to creep in about the strength of his contribution to his main field, the history of ideas in the Enlightenment and the nineteenth Century. If he could say so much about the preparation for the main event, but so little about the main event, how good was he on the preparation? Perhaps the first defence against so subversive an enquiry would be to say that a later superficiality doesn't necessarily erode an initial seriousness. If it did, Bertrand Russell's recommendations for unilateral nuclear disarmament would have made nonsense of Principia Mathematica. But a better defence would be to show that Berlin 's superficiality was only superficial.

This would be easier to show if this whopping first volume of his collected letters had not been published. Wilfully complete — it was Berlin himself, and not, for once, his editor, who wanted everything included — the book begs for belittlement, which it has duly received from some reviewers, especially if they placed a high value on his more formal work. With a lot more to come, the letters cover his active life from the late 1920s, in which the young refugee from revolutionary Russia became almost immediately assimilated into the English beau monde, through to 1946, by which time he was established as the most dazzling Jewish social asset since Disraeli, and without being baptised. The contemplative life, however, is largely absent, which is probably the reason why some of the reviewers reacted as if to the diaries of Chips Channon, or of Harold Nicolson at best. Certainly there is an awful lot about grand houses, dinner parties whether in London or in Washington, and — this above all — academic politics in all their bitchy intricacy, as if recorded by a less ponderous and more cultivated version of C.P. Snow.

But “cultivated” is the operative word. Although the letters might give the impression that Berlin was always at least as interested in the power struggles going on within Balliol and All Souls as those going on within the Foreign Office, the U.S. State Department, the Wilhelmstrasse or the Kremlin, the knowing gossip is enriched by the intensity of his enthusiasm for the arts and for civilized institutions. Indeed he treats British institutions as works of art in themselves, as if endorsing Chesterton's idea that democracy was another name for the sum total of humane traditions. In that crucial regard, this book of letters — and further volumes are bound to confirm the impression — is a sumptuous demonstration of one of his key principles, and ought to be valued as such. The principle is no less valuable because Burke thought of it first: a tolerable polity is an inheritance, and too multifariously determined by the past to be altered comprehensively in the present without the risk of its lethal disintegration. Later on, Karl Popper, in exile in New Zealand, would do the theoretical work establishing the imperative that any imposed social change should be aimed only at the correction of a specific abuse: the theoretical work that decisively identified revolution as the enemy of an open society. Berlin might have elaborated the same theory earlier, if he had had the time. But he was too busy embodying its truth. Sixty years later, nearing death after a happily fulfilled life, he was right to demand that none of his early letters should be left out, because they registered all the different ways he could function, as a free and thoughtful human being, in the full and complicated texture of an historically continuous society, an order which he thought needed no fundamental reordering. If he failed to notice some of its failings, it was only because he was enjoying so many of its virtues. The Jew out of nowhere was in demand everywhere, and he can be excused for loving every minute of it. To call him profoundly conservative hardly meets the case. He thought even the frivolity was part of the bedrock. The ideal guest, a fountain of scintillating chatter to match the fountain in the courtyard, he would gladly have revisited Brideshead every weekend.

Sexually inoperative but incorrigibly flirtatious, he loved the high-born ladies, who loved him right back, although his paucity of physical response — a desert under the ocean of talk — led several of them to despair, and one of them to the mad-house. On this evidence, his appeal was no mystery. Clever young beauties with hyphenated surnames found themselves being adored for their cleverness as much as their beauty. A single letter to Cressida Bonham-Carter is peppered with references to Beethoven, Tolstoy, Kafka, Racine, Henry James, Debussy, Proust, Bartok, Berg and St John of the Cross. It probably went down a storm. Certainly she didn't ask him to lay off the erudition, because his next letter to her mentions Diderot, Balzac, Maupassant and Turgenev, while commending her for agreeing with him about the attractions of his admired Herzen, whom Berlin himself had discovered only recently, while researching his monograph on Karl Marx. Herzen's magnanimity — in such sharp contrast to Marx's vengeful rancour — had bowled him over. (“There is no writer, & indeed no man I shd like to be like, & to write like, more.”) These letters to Cressida were written in 1938, by which time it must have been obvious to him that the old world he had already seen coming apart was showing few signs of putting itself back together. Clearly he thought, as Herzen did, that it could be put back together spiritually, in a convivio of civilized minds favoured by the seemingly unshakeable social cohesion of Britain , his land of exile.

It hardly needs saying that there were plenty of intelligent native-born people at the time who thought that the social cohesion was bound for well-deserved ruin. But he noticed that they were almost all well connected. To join the Communist party, he observed, was mainly a way for guilty liberals to feel serious. A more serious liberal than that, he firmly recommended, not least by his behaviour, the inherited political stability that enabled subversive opinion to be expressed safely in the first place. If his success as an adornment of grand dinner tables looks a bit cosy in retrospect, we should not forget that he had small reason to question the impenetrable exclusiveness of a social structure's upper works if they were penetrable and inclusive enough to allow his own ascent to favour. He was the living proof of what he proposed as a necessary condition for liberalism: hang on to what works, pas de zèle, no root-and-branch solutions for the problems of a civil order that was something far more complicated than a tree. Left-leaning intellectuals who thought that society was on the point of ceasing to work altogether had good reason for despising his attitude as a voluble incitement to do nothing. So it was, but it arose from an acute apprehension of what might happen if the wrong things were done.

From this distance, the apprehension looks like a perception. There were many intellectuals of comparable status who could not accept until many years later that the society they already lived in was the only reliable source of any alterations that might improve it. Berlin took that for granted: so much so that he didn't write much on the subject. Professionally, he didn't yet feel obliged to. His little book on Marx was a one-off, although its attendant prodigies of research would serve him well in his post-war future. Throughout the thirties — and indeed right up until the famous war-time Atlantic crossing when he had his change of heart in the unpressurised belly of a bomber — he was nominally a philosopher, not an historian of ideas; and the philosophers of the day were already well set on the hermetic course that would separate their metiere from any obligations to interdisciplinary wisdom. But significantly, he didn't write much on the subject in his letters either. Not only was society unquestioned: so were its questioners. Stalin gets only a few lines of the index, and Hitler fewer still. There is a whole column for Maurice Bowra. (“on Forster as bore, 104;” “hates Connolly, 142;” etc. and ad inf.)

Apart from Berlin's sharply expressed objection to his aristocratic friend Adam von Trott's apologetics for the Nazi legal system — a system that would later reward von Trott by hanging him from a hook — the paucity, in the letters, of Berlin's written reaction to the global disaster that emanated from Hitler's Germany would be continued after the war, when, no longer a formal philosopher, he began producing the long string of lectures, broadcasts and essays that gave him his enduring lustre as an intellectual. Hardly any of his public writings impinged directly on that subject; an omission we can safely postpone examining until after taking account of the considerable amount he wrote about the Soviet Union, because there would also be an omission in that, and one that might provide a generally applicable clue. Some of the later letters in the book evoke his celebrated meeting with Anna Akhmatova in Leningrad in 1945. It was one of the key episodes in his life, and, indeed, in Akhmatova's. (Understandably self-obsessed after years of mental torture, she thought that her meeting with Berlin — “the guest from the future” — was the cause of the Cold War.) His correspondence on the topic presaged the post-war wealth of his writings about Russia in general (to be found in the 1978 collection Russian Thinkers) and the Soviet Union in particular. To a certain extent they had been presaged by his book on Marx, but by now he knew that Stalin was the man to contend with.

In The Soviet Mind , the latest posthumous collection of Berlin 's dispersed papers, it's Stalin who gets the whole column in the index. Maurice Bowra gets a single mention, and there is nothing frivolous even about that. Bowra, an early translator of some of Akhmatova's poems, had spoken of her as someone not heard of since World War I. When Berlin found her still alive at the end of World War II, he made a lot of it. Her beleaguered career under the Soviet Union is at the heart of the book. There is reason to believe that her survival led Berlin to a false conclusion, but there are plenty of true conclusions to consider first. In 1957 he wrote that Stalin's repression of “ideas as such” had had a destructive effect even on the sciences, whether pure or applied. He could have taken this line further, and certainly much further back: Solzhenitsyn took it as a far back as the fate of the engineers when Stalin first came to power. But at least the point takes care of what happened to Russian genetics under Stalin's pet crackpot Lysenko, a triumph for charlatanry which ensured that anything left of Soviet agricultural expertise after the ravages of collectivisation was reduced to a terminal impotence. Berlin was capable of assessing the effects of Stalin's dead hand in fields other than the arts, so when it comes to the arts it is no surprise to find him being acutely sensitive to the desperate position that the serious Russian writers were in, at a time when prominent Western writers still felt no shame about accepting invitations to Moscow so that they could spend the blocked roubles of their royalties. Akhmatova and Boris Pasternak emerge from these pages as giants harried by swarming pygmies. It turns out, from Berlin 's text and the editor's notes to it, that when Zhdanov, in 1946, infamously characterised Akhmatova as “half whore, half nun”, he was lifting a tag that had already appeared in the Soviet Literary Encyclopedia in 1930, and was not new even then. The party apparatchiks had always had boundless powers to suffocate the creativity of their intellectual betters. The ability to pick which head merited the application of a pillow was a kind of intellectual qualification in itself. (Solzhenitsyn said it was called “the Moscow talent”: the talent to frustrate talent in others.) There was never any danger that Berlin would regard such persecution as a mere cultural quirk. He clearly loathed it. But what he says about the Mandelstams makes you wonder if he really took in all the implications.

In her two great books Hope Against Hope and Hope Abandoned, Nadezhda Mandelstam was talking about a lot more than personal losses among the intelligentsia. She was talking about an impersonal bloodbath: in that regard, her writings rank her with Evgenia Ginzburg and Shalamov, and join her with Solzhenitsyn and Robert Conquest in tracing the whole catastrophe all the way back to Lenin. For her, the death of her husband was at the centre of a far bigger story. Berlin, too, was appalled by Osip Mandelstam's fate. But one of the points Berlin made about him in the 1965 essay “A Great Russian Writer” is oddly conciliatory towards the regime that murdered him. “No socialist society has (or at any rate, should have) anything to fear from unfettered powers of creation... Perhaps like other maitres caches he too will be allowed to emerge into the light of day.” It could have been that Berlin , with Stalin safely out of the picture, was tempering his opinions in the hope of the essay being read in the Soviet Union and having a helpful effect. It even might have done so. Mandelstam's poetry, like Akhmatova's, was indeed officially republished while the regime was still running. But again like hers, it was in a censored edition. Pretty in its blue binding but devoid of an historical context, the Mandelstam volume was a Potemkin Village in printed form, with no hint in its supposedly scholarly introduction that the poet had fallen victim to much more than an unfortunate accident. Compared with the three-volume collected works that had already been published in the West, it was an insult added to an injury. Certainly it did nothing to contest Josef Brodsky's resonant opinion that true lyricism, which embodies the ethics of a language, is always intolerable to a tyranny. Strangely enough, Berlin elsewhere seemed to be of the same mind: he traced Stalin's repression of the independent intellect back to Napoleon's belief that all critics, of anything, should be silenced, lest they start criticising him. But Osip Mandelstam wasn't just silenced: he was murdered. Berlin talked about him as if he had lived on in spirit — which was true — but made much less out of the recalcitrant fact that he was dead. And in general Berlin preferred to talk about the Russian writers who had stayed alive, almost as if they had done so by will power. Nowhere in this book can he be heard going quite go so far as the opinion attributed to him by Ignatieff, who says that Berlin learned from Akhmatova that “history could be made to bow before the sheer stubbornness of human conscience.” (According to Ignatieff's footnote, Berlin said something like this in a letter to his friend Jean Floud, which we will probably be getting in the next volume.) But he did seem to believe, or want to believe, that the hounded artists could somehow choose to resist. The facts, however, say that the only choosing was done by Stalin, who chose whether they would live or die.

As Berlin learned later to his horror, his meeting with Akhmatova put her in danger. Her few remaining privileges were revoked and she even ended up losing her union card, which meant that she was no longer, from the official viewpoint, a writer at all. But there had been scores of moments since the Revolution when she might have lost her life, like her husband, or been locked away, like her son. She stayed alive because of Stalin's arbitrary decision, which could just as easily have gone the other way. Among the artists, it had gone the other way many times. Frantic to get her son out of the Gulag, Akhmatova eventually wrote poems in praise of the regime. Her subservience was obtained in the same way that Bukharin's confession had been obtained in 1938. (They didn't have to torture him. All they had to do was threaten his children.) And there had never been any time when, if her existence had been thought useless, it would not have been ended. After the regime fell, Isaac Babel's confession was found in a filing cabinet in the Lubyanka. There was dried blood on it. That was the extent to which history bowed before his stubborn conscience: no extent. Babel 's fate gets precisely one mention in this book. Meyerhold's gets two. But even had Berlin talked at length about them and about many other artists and intellectuals equally unfortunate, he would still have been a prisoner of his illusion that the regime's powers of repression were actuated by some variety of rational logic, however ruthless. Yet there was plenty of evidence that the whole thing had been irrational from the beginning. The evidence had been pouring out of the Soviet Union since before Stalin even came to power. After he did, his arbitrary decision went the other way millions of times. Berlin should have seen the sufferings of his living artists in the context of a multitude of less important people — more than all the people alive in Australia when I was a boy — who were dead for no good reason, or even for a bad one. Some of his living artists tried hard enough to tell him, but somehow he didn't get it. It's the somehow that should concern us.

The anomaly may well have arisen from Berlin 's fondness for seeing history always in the context of ideas. For him, political propensities, up to and including the propensity for mass murder, arose out of the ideas leading up to them. He rarely considered that the ideas might have been preserved, and given lip service, only to serve the propensity. In “Soviet Russian Culture” (1957) he correctly noted that under the Soviet Union the Russian intelligentsia had been reduced to “silence and total submission”, but he added a revealing sentence. “Mere intimidation, torture and murder should not have proved sufficient in a country which, we are always told, was not unused to just such methods and had nevertheless preserved a revolutionary underground alive for the better part of a century.” Even at the time, when Khrushchev himself, who had been an energetic participant in the slaughter, has just finished pointing out that there had been nothing “mere” about it, Berlin's proposed continuity between the relatively selective barbarities of Tsarist absolutism and the Soviet Union's unrestricted warfare against its own population should have struck him as a touch glib. There was, however, an even more revealing sentence to follow. “It is here that one must acknowledge that Stalin achieved this by his own original contributions to the art of government.”

Alas, Berlin was being only half ironic. One of the original contributions he specified was the Artificial Dialectic, a term he attributed to O. Utis. For security reasons, Berlin was as yet unable to reveal that “O. Utis” had been a code-name for himself, when he was sending reports back from Moscow to London at about the same time that George Kennan, code-named “X”, was telling Washington why Containment was the only feasible policy. The notion of Containment had many fathers: nobody who had witnessed the Soviet Union's homicidal activities in Poland could doubt its necessity. The notion of the Artificial Dialectic was all Berlin 's, and in retrospect it looks too sophisticated to be true. According to Berlin , Stalin's rhythm of purge and relaxation had always been precisely calculated to maintain the system. One's first objection would have to be that Stalin's purge of Red Army officers on the very eve of Operation Barbarossa might have been calculated to bring the system to an end. But there is a wider objection: the theory makes Stalin a Soviet Mind, a thinker — and therefore a student of history, like Isaiah Berlin.

It seems doubtful. The mark of intellectuals is, or should be, their ability to reach conclusions that don't suit their prejudices. However much Stalin read, he took nothing in that didn't suit his disposition. Dossiers were brought in bundles to his desk that proved Hitler was about to invade him. Those who brought them ran the risk of getting shot. His mind was made up that there would be no invasion. When it happened, he collapsed into bed, giving his colleagues a chance to bump him off that they unforgivably let slip. His debacle convinced even him that he would have to listen to other voices if he wanted to win the war. Listening only to his own, as he usually preferred to do, he would have lost it in the first six months. In the use of his unlimited powers, Stalin was too irrational even to defend the most pressing interests of the regime he ruled. Just as Hitler, with Nazi Germany fighting for its life late in the war, went on diverting manpower and precious rolling stock into the self-imposed task of wiping out Jews, gypsies and homosexuals, so did Stalin, earlier in the war, when the Soviet Union was fighting for its life, go on diverting manpower and precious Studebaker trucks — sent to him by the Americans on convoys which he mentioned only when they were late — into the self-imposed task of resettling his own populations, with all the usual obscenities attendant on that pointless activity. The Soviet Union was an asylum with the most violent patient in charge. Berlin advised London that it was best dealt with by making no threats, and that it would probably last for as long as it liked. Kennan was closer to the mark when he advised Washington that its belligerence could be contained only with armed strength, but that its irrationality would set a term to its life. The terminus proved to be another 45 years in coming, but it came. Berlin was not the only student who thought that the vast mechanism might go on maintaining itself indefinitely. I.F. Stone, with the credentials of an ex-Communist, argued persuasively that the security services were geared to keep their omnipotence in perpetuity. With even better credentials, the expelled sociologist Alexander Zinoviev wrote a series of closely reasoned essays — much more impressive, in retrospect, than his gigantic satirical novels — showing how the control mechanisms worked, and how the upsurge of dissident literature might even be one of them. Not just on the bien pensant Left, a considerable intellectual investment went into crediting the Soviet Union with unearthly powers of reasoning.

To do him credit, Berlin rejoiced when the expectation finally proved false. His essay “The Survival of the Russian Intelligentsia”, written in 1990, is practically a chorus from Fidelio: the prisoners emerge blinking from their cells into the light of day. But here again, there is a false note. “My impression was that what remained of the true intelligentsia was dying. In the course of the last two years I have discovered, to my great surprise and delight, that I was mistaken.” Mistaken, he might have said, mainly in neglecting to note that what did not remain of the true intelligentsia was already dead ten times over. Going on to celebrate the vindication of his friend Andrei Sakharov, he sings this kaddish above his grave: “Nor was he alone. The survival of the entire culture to which he belonged, underneath the ashes and rubble of dreadful historical experience, appears to me a miraculous fact.” More than miraculous, one would have thought: illusory. The entire culture survived? Tell it to Babel.

But impatience is out of place. Berlin was right enough about the Soviet Union to help ensure that, in Britain at any rate, those who were entirely wrong could not have it all their own way. It could have been, however, that Britain was simply better prepared to take a realistic view than, say, France . It was Berlin 's French equivalent, Raymond Aron, who published, in 1955, the single most penetrating analysis of Communist ideology, The Opium of the Intellectuals. But Aron's message was lost on the gauchiste intelligentsia, which continues to this day to behave as if all the atrocities added up to something respectable. Le Livre noir du communisme, a new Book of the Dead which counts the innocent victims in their many millions, was reviewed in France as if it had been written by the Plans division at Langley , Virginia . Another philosopher who, like Berlin, graduated to political history, Jean-Francois Revel, in his L'Obsession anti-américaine, has done a convincing job of tracing fashionable anti-Americanism to this long-lingering reluctance to accept the facts about the new world order that was supposed to replace the depredations of capitalism with something beneficial. (The more chic Bernard-Henri Lévy, recently in the news for taking the same line on this point, is really piggybacking on an effort that Revel has been putting in for decades.) But is it really a reluctance? Following the rule that we should put the best possible construction on the motives of our opponents, perhaps we should consider the possibility that the facts have been accepted, but can't be fully faced, because the cost of reconstructing a world view would be too painful. Berlin's own — much lesser, but still striking — shyness on the matter suggests this might be so. His view of history depended on the assumption that large-scale events, however terrible, came about as a result of minds deliberating. He would have had to rethink his position altogether if he were to admit the possibility that there could be large-scale events into which minds didn't enter. So there might have been inertia to go with the revulsion. But there can be no doubt about the revulsion. Berlin was a man of feeling. Those giant totals of dead on the page — lines of zeroes like strings of bubbles — might look meaningless to the insensitive. But to the sensitive they can be devastating. They mean too much.

Which brings us to the European empire of Nazi Germany , where so many of the bubbles represented Berlin's fellow Jews. There could have been several reasons why Berlin said so little. He called it “the most fearful genocide in history”, but beyond that he offered no illumination, as if the subject were too dark to admit light. The first reason might have been that he didn't know what to say. Thomas Mann — not a Jew but married to a half-Jew, and prominent on Heydrich's personal list of illustrious absentees with Jewish sympathies who should be dealt with promptly if they ever returned to Germany — started broadcasting from America as early as 1942 about what he knew the Nazis were up to in the East. (He didn't need access to the Ultra decrypts to get the facts: they were in the Swiss newspapers.) But after the war, when the full statistics of the Holocaust came out, his reaction was to work on The Confessions of Felix Krull . Berlin, too, probably knew all about it from an early date, but perhaps he found himself equally short of adequate things to say when the full magnitude of the horror was revealed. One of the revelations was that both of his grandfathers had been murdered immediately when the Nazis occupied Riga in 1941. He barely mentioned it, and the best explanation is that he was traumatised, and that the trauma was intensified to a paralysis by the realisation — imagination overload — that the extinguished multitudes were his grandfathers multiplied by millions.

Another reason could have been that other people did the job, notably Raul Hilberger and Martin Gilbert, and that anything he had to add would have been rhetoric. (He said this to Ignatieff, who might have been slower to report that Berlin “actively despised the Holocaust industry”. The Holocaust industry has never produced as much toxic waste as the Holocaust Denial industry, and if there are too many books, too few of them have reached even Vienna, let alone Cairo and Riadh.) Yet another reason might have been guilt for one of the two roles he had played in war-time Washington with relation to Zionism. A Zionist himself, he was a personal friend of Weizmann. Berlin used his connections to smooth Weizmann's path to Roosevelt and a possible endorsement for the Zionist cause. But as an emissary of Britain 's Ministry of Information, Berlin was also obliged — unless he resigned— to promote his government's official line on Palestine , based on the infamous White Paper that denied refugee Jews entry to what was, for many of them, the only possible sanctuary from Hitler. It couldn't have been long before Berlin realised that this made him party to a crime. Ever the diplomat, Berlin sided with Weizmann in the conviction that a Jewish entity of some kind would eventually emerge after the British had been talked into modifying their mandate — sided, that is, against David Ben Gurion, who thought that the Jewish state would have to be established unilaterally, if necessary with resort to force. Berlin always thought that reason might prevail in the matter. (In a letter written home in 1943, we find him opining that the cause would be best promoted “by means of private conversations on the part of sensible persons.”) Ben Gurion knew better: or, if you like, worse.

Born to a concerted Arab attack, the state of Israel grew up in the middle of a war, which has not yet ended. For the rest of his life, Berlin remained committed to Israel, although he was always careful not to offer advice from outside, in case it was thought patronising. Ignatieff records that Berlin felt guilty about not having said anything publicly in favour of Peace Now. It was a pity he didn't, because the emphasis that Peace Now places on giving up the Occupied Territories is a potent argument for the only possible means by which Israel can preserve itself as a democracy. Berlin's agreement would have been useful to the young soldiers: long on bravery, they were short of clout. But generally, throughout Israel's short and threatened history, Berlin seems to have had the right opinions, even when he didn't voice them in public, and the Israelis valued him as a star of the diaspora, the Jewish equivalent of a Righteous Gentile. In 1979 he was awarded the Jerusalem Prize as a mark of respect. To actually live in Jerusalem , however, was never part of his plans. At one time or another Ben Gurion, Abba Eban and Teddy Kolleck all asked him to move there. He preferred Oxford . He already had his sanctuary. But of course he had always had his sanctuary. He was a Jew who had never needed to make it to the new home. His guilt must have been tremendous for the many who had needed to, and didn't. To where they went, there was no boat: only a train.

The train takes us to the best reason. Apart from his epic visions of domination and destruction, Hitler had few ideas on his mind. As a consequence, Nazi Germany gave the historian of ideas little to talk about. In The Proper Study of Mankind , the two essays grouped under the heading “Romanticism and Nationalism in the Modern Age” stop well short of Hitler's rise to power, as well they might, because Hitler was truly interested only in the power. The German right-wing intellectuals had already discovered this to their embarrassment while he was still a long way from the Reichstag. In 1922 a bunch of them called the June Club invited him to address one of their meetings. Their idea was that they would treat him to their combined scholarly wisdom before he spoke. He made it clear that he wasn't interested in what they had to say, and used the time gained to speak longer, boring some of them into the floor but convincing others that they had been wasting their lives: brutality, that was the thing. (He had the same effect on Goebbels, a proud bookworm before he met his action hero.) Even the anti-Semites found him incurious about the subtleties of their philosophy, as indeed he was, because for him anti-Semitism was a passion, not an argument. Though various ideological dingbats were allowed to pursue their researches on the government payroll, the Nazi regime reflected Hitler's hatred of ideas in all of its departments. Hitler admired Mussolini personally and copied his methods along with Stalin's. But Hitler and most of the other top Nazis thought that Fascism as a philosophy was a waste of time: too many intellectuals.

Hitler rigorously divided action from thought. Thought had to be under the control of action, not vice versa. The action came from his propensities, which were psychotic from the start. Almost all of his early successes depended on initiatives so bizarre that nobody sane could anticipate them. After the Battle of Britain had been lost, his second big failure, in Russia , came about mainly because he preferred to maltreat people who had suffered under Stalin rather than enlist their aid. Making territory he had already conquered ungovernable was no sane way to conquer more of it. Even Himmler could work that out, but Hitler didn't listen. He couldn't, because it involved conciliation, which was a true idea, as opposed to mass murder, which was an expression of emotion. Though it is tempting to believe that Hitler, after absorbing a few nutty anti-Semitic pamphlets in Vienna, read nothing except Karl May's western sagas about Old Shatterhand, the truth is somewhat different. He fancied himself as a philosopher and could drop the names that backed up the claim. In that unintentionally comic masterpiece Monologe in Führerhauptquartier 1941-1944, we can find him, on May 19th 1944, telling his nodding audience that throughout the Great War he had carried the full five volumes of Schopenhauer everywhere he went. Since he got the Iron Cross as a runner in the trenches, he must have been running with a handicap. But there is no reason to doubt he carried them, or even that he read them. Nor, however, is there any reason to believe that he critically weighed a single word. Like Stalin, he sought in texts nothing but pretexts for his actions. To bring ideas under scrutiny was not his purpose.

Since it was Berlin 's, we have a right to ask how well he did it. The first answer has to be that he did it very well. Though a worthy assemblage of his more heavyweight efforts, The Proper Study of Mankind is a bit misleading about how delightful he could be; and as so often happens with writers on serious topics, it is when he is at his most entertaining that he is most informative. He didn't really write all that brilliantly. Most of his prose pieces were transcripts of his talk boiled down from draft to draft, which is not the same process as the ab initio concentration necessary to yield a cogently nuanced text that reads like speech. He himself called his talk “an avalanche”, and he seems to have had little gift for the aphorism. That might have been one of the secrets for his continuing success at glamorous dinner tables. With his salon-wise wife Aline to manage his diary, he went on dining out until he had to be carried. Dr Johnson, in his own old age, told Boswell that he wasn't much invited anymore, because his unanswerable sallies silenced the table. Berlin was careful not to make the company feel stupid. On the night I saw him in action, he engaged in a tremendous competition with the political journalist Frank Johnson to name and evoke, with sound effects, every second-rate opera in the world. They were at each other like Joe Louis and Jersey Joe Walcott, to hilarious effect: titled ladies were spitting pheasant. At his best, he could get the same sparkling treasure into his writings. To take just one compilation, Against the Current: there is wealth of incidental truth in it. “Benjamin Disraeli, Karl Marx and the Search for Identity” is the ideal introduction to both men and makes you wonder how they would have got on. (Not very well, probably: we learn that Marx called Lassalle “the Jewish nigger”.) “The 'Naïveté' of Verdi” is a classic restatement of Schiller's principle of the difference between the naïve and the sentimental: saturated with Berlin 's infectious love of music, it should be on the first-year course of every student in the country. Best of all, there is the essay about Montesquieu, which comes in handy when we try to give the second answer.

The second answer had to be that he missed a lot out, and some of it has proved to be of lasting importance. Here we should remember Burckhardt's principle. Berlin was already getting old before it started to emerge that totalitarianism had been so poisonous that the collapse or reform of the governments that imposed it would be no guarantee of its disappearance. If the first thing we now see about Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, Maoist China and the other totalitarian states is their irrationality, it could be because of the growing evidence that totalitarianism can live without a state, and even without having a new state in mind. In that respect, even Saddam Hussein was obsolete, because he was a student of Stalin. Osama Bin Laden doesn't need to be as student of anybody except Andreas Baader, Ulrike Meinhof, the Brigati Rossi, Carlos, and whichever Japanese terrorists attacked the El Al desk at foreign airports because they had no Jews of their own. Irrationality, we can now see, is a force in itself, and scarcely in need of a brain. Already there is not just an equivalence, but a blend, between the Islamism that condemns the Western liberal democracies and the international pseudo-left intelligentsia that condemns them as well. The anti-Semitic arguments of those Muslim groups — whether terrorist organizations or, less openly, states — who think Israel can be made to disappear are only just crazier than the pseudo-left arguments proclaiming America's responsibility for every injustice in the world. In fact the Arab arguments might even be more sane: the Palestinians can scarcely have a parallel state while suicide attacks against Israel continue, but sacrificing the Palestinians has always suited the Arab nations, and meanwhile Israel, under that degree of pressure, can be relied upon to go on gravitating towards an extremism of its own; although what the Arabs expect the Israelis to do with their atomic bombs should the point arrive when Israel caves in is difficult to judge.

We can be certain, however, that the performance of the Western intelligentsia has never been worse. Before the collapse of the Warsaw Pact regimes, the intelligentsia was merely deluded. After the collapse of the World Trade Centre, it has gone haywire. Essentially a branch of the home entertainment industry, the left intelligentsia circulates, almost entirely for its own consumption, opinions even more contemptuous of ordinary people than used to prevail on the right. At least Kissinger, when he gave the green light for the murder of Allende and the hideous events that predictably followed, could be reasonably sure that Chile 's standard of living would go up. When fashionable intellectuals pour scorn on Iraq 's provisional government as American stooges, they effectively ally themselves with the fanatics who would like to kill its every minister, with special treatment for the women. As Abba Eban once suggested, a consensus is an opinion shared by people who wouldn't dare to hold it individually. Loathe their own societies as they might — and there is plenty to loathe, even for those of us who realise that a free nation is bound to be full of things we don't like — even the most uninformed Western intellectuals are smart enough to see individually that President Bush didn't order the attack on the Twin Towers: if he had, the Golden Gate bridge would have fallen down instead. But collectively they are ready to agree that it doesn't matter what lies are told as long as a greater political truth is being served. They are unfazed when it is pointed out that the same assumption was a point of agreement between Hitler and Stalin. The totalitarian attitude to the truth, with history being rewritten not just retroactively but as it happens, has become standard. This could be an instance of decay through inheritance. Studying the institutionalised opportunism of states ruled by unalleviated mendacity, a previous generation of students caught the bug. In their separate death throes — spasmodically sudden in the case of the Third Reich, gruesomely prolonged in the case of the USSR — the totalitarian powers were dying patients who infected the doctors: a clear case of the original virus being sucked up into the syringe. The antibiotics have become toxic, like Harry Lime's penicillin. Measuring their virulence, we get a good idea of how lethal the disease was that they were originally employed to cure.

But we can't ask philosophers to predict events. What we can ask of them is that they should illuminate realities. The big reality that Berlin did not illuminate was the force of evil. His original background among the analytical philosophers, none of whom liked abstractions, may have stuck to him even after he broke away. Wittgenstein, by whose linguistic scrupulosity Berlin was buffaloed, said nothing about the Nazi assault on the Jews until it was all over. He had to see the photographs of the liberated death camps before he finally realised that the Nazis had meant what they said: a late and hard way to find out that death really is an event in life. For most of the philosophers, evil was a word: too large a one, and thus lacking in specificity. But evil is a reality, as Berlin 's fellow philosopher Stuart Hampshire discovered. Hampshire didn't reason his way to that conclusion. He arrived at it emotionally, when he interrogated Kaltenbrunner at Nuremberg. Wedded to ideas, Berlin missed the opportunity to develop his political theories from his feelings. His love of music might have given him the hint. Quality is art's equivalent for the truth: Aron said that. Berlin, didn't, but he felt it. When it came to great music, Berlin was alive to the composer's all-comprehending tragic sense that made it great.

When it came to history, he had the tragic sense, but somehow he never got it into his writings. It went the way of his grandfathers, into a mental realm where threatening facts are received but not attended to, like brown envelopes from the Council piling up on the hall table. There are prose writers, stretching from Thucydides and Tacitus onward, whose plain language gives us the thrill of poetry because they can face the full rage of chaos and still use its power to reinforce their sense of order. The passage in Tacitus about Sejanus's daughter is an uncanny forecast of the girl who gave her age to the German sergeant of engineers at Babi Yar. What Tacitus says would drive us to despair of it had not driven him to a perfect sentence. There is a gravitas beyond eloquence. Montaigne is often like that. From more modern times, Burckhardt is invariably like that, even when going wild about the arts. As Berlin did, he loved Verdi — after the premiere of Aida he had to calm himself down with beer — but he could give you the same lift when he talked about Torquemada. From Berlin's own time, we can read Golo Mann's essays and the section of his Deutsche Geschichte dealing with the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich; we can read it in the book reviews Lewis Namier wrote after the war, when the German generals were cranking out the autobiographies that proved they had known Hitler was a madman even though they had known nothing about what he did; we can read the paragraphs that sympathetically but decisively discredit Georg Lukacs in the third volume of Leszek Kolakowski's Main Currents of Marxism; we can read the chapter of Benedetto Croce's Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono that devastatingly analysed the Soviet Union as early as 1931; we can read Abba Eban's Personal Witness, a diplomatic memoir that leaves Metternich's sounding simple-minded; we can read a lot of prose like that and get the same thrill. Not always sprightly but always dense with implication, it is the unmistakeable and addictive music made by those who have felt on their own skins, even if only as a flash of heat from the far horizon, the full destructive power of human history and are still wedded to making sense of it. Berlin could hear it in his beloved Herzen. He could not, however, quite produce it himself, and it might well be because he couldn't let thought give way to feeling. But feeling is thought's wellspring. The clue was staring him in the face, in his essay about Montesquieu.

What the great humanists have, and learn to overcome, is an apprehension that humanity might be worthless. Berlin lacked that apprehension, and it would be quixotic to regret it. It might have eroded his gusto, which is one of his most lavish gifts to us. Nobody who ever heard his booming burble in the lecture hall as he delivered an unbroken hour-long extravaganza from notes written on a tram-ticket will ever forget his incarnation of benevolent mental energy. An invention from the ground up, like the Wolfson college he created in his later years, he was part of the landscape. But he paid the sure penalty for being in the swim. As a theoretician, his chief concerns were not the threats to democracy from without, but the conflicts within. Most of what he said about those was bound to become unremarkable. His celebrated distinction between positive and negative liberty is now the common debating point between and within all the main political parties. Every parent knows that you restrict liberty if you ban smacking. Every child knows that you increase it. There is nothing thought provoking about the dichotomy because there is nothing except the dichotomy. The same applies to his celebrated pluralism. In a free society, what else is there? Dangerously, he left in the air the question of whether good ends could be reconciled. The missing answer left the way open for the suggestion, recently popularised by Donald Rumsfeld, that some ends might have to be pursued by bad means: a tempting idea that Berlin got from Machiavelli.

But it is only an idea. Its refutation was formulated by Montesquieu. Berlin's essay on Montesquieu is a good candidate for the most resonant piece he ever wrote about anything, but even then he stopped short conceptually of the conclusions he was on the point of reaching by instinct. He gives a detailed account of how Montesquieu's pluralism valued all cultures; and then a further account of how Montesquieu, seeing the danger, wanted to leave room for some cultures being more valuable than others; but he made comparatively little of the device by which Montesquieu furthered the concept of an absolute morality that would apply even in the world of relative values that he had done so much to celebrate. Yet the device was right there in Montesquieu's prose, and Berlin actually quoted it. “Justice is eternal, and doesn't depend at all on human conventions.” Berlin thought Montesquieu had merely deepened his problem by saying that there could be universal laws in a relative world. But Montesquieu wasn't saying that there were universal laws instinctive to all men. He was saying that there were eternal laws instinctive to some of them. Montesquieu argued that it didn't matter who says torture might be necessary: our better nature, if we have one, tells us it is wrong. He was, in other words, a good man by instinct. The implication is that there were good men among the first men, and bad men too. If Berlin had faced the likelihood that his own goodness, like the evil of Stalin and Hitler, stemmed from a time when there was no idea in mankind's head except where the next meal was coming from and how to kill it, he might have been better equipped to deal with modern malevolence in its full horrific force. There was an Isaiah Berlin in the cave. He just had less to talk about at dinner, and the food was terrible.

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