

Berlin My Hero



By **Justin Cartwright**

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I can sum it up simply by calling myself a wannabe Jew. From my earliest days I have had the sense that Jews embody the distillation of what it is to be human. As if being Jewish were somehow a more extreme version of being human. Perhaps this sense I have is heightened by Jewish history with its unmatched defiance of the dual imperatives of time and place. For me, being Jewish embodies the triumph of ideas over events and the persistence of hope against overwhelming odds. As a student in South Africa I came across *Two Concepts of Liberty* by Isaiah Berlin. When I saw and heard him in Oxford later, I believed, and I still believe, that he was the greatest exponent of a broadly liberal, pluralist politics there has ever been. What he saw, and I think this must be inseparable from his Jewishness, is that fixed credos and closed systems of belief invariably lead to disaster. No one is the sole proprietor of knowledge. In his words 'there is no incorrigible proposition.' He understood that freedom is not an absolute: it cannot be guaranteed by subscribing to one political system. To my immense relief he confirmed that there are essentially only two freedoms; the first he called 'freedom from' which is the freedom to be left alone as far as possible to do what your inclinations tell you — essentially liberalism — and the other, very dangerous kind of freedom, is 'freedom to' which means that you achieve freedom only by total surrender to a state or closed system of belief. In South Africa

we who were opposed to the apartheid state were supposed to want the alternative of Marxism, the path chosen by the ANC. It seemed madness to reject apartheid in favour of another absurd belief system, which had all the characteristics of a secular religion. Berlin's simple distinction of freedoms shone a cool light of hope and truth upon the dark chaos of apartheid.

Berlin was fond of Kant's saying 'out of the timber so crooked as that from which man is made nothing entirely straight can be carved'.

Perhaps romantically, but understandably, he attributed many of his values to England. He understood that respect for others and tolerating dissent is better than pride and a sense of national mission; that liberty may be incompatible with, and better than, too much efficiency: that pluralism and untidiness are, to those who value freedom, better than the rigorous imposition of all-embracing systems, no matter how rational and disinterested, better than the rule of majorities against which there is no appeal.

When in his last years a Polish academic asked Berlin about the meaning of life he replied, 'All I can say is that anyone who thinks there is a script or a libretto for life is seriously deluded. Life has no meaning...' What he meant was that life entailed making the most of the here and now, rather than delaying gratification for an afterlife, or a communist utopia, or a fascist heaven. One of his favourite sayings was from Alexander Herzen: Where is the song before it is sung? 'Nowhere, is the answer,' said Berlin. 'One creates the song by singing it, by composing it. So, too, life is created by those who live it step by step.' I took this as the title of my novel, because it seemed to encapsulate exactly the differences between Berlin and his Oxford friend, Adam von Trott, which forms the basis of my story.

Berlin's personal history — born in German-speaking Riga, emigration to Britain with his parents, a swift rise through British academia to become the first ever Jewish fellow of All Souls College — all this gave him a perhaps exaggerated respect for the liberal aspects of British life, while his close understanding of Germany and Russia, informed by wide reading in both languages, made him aware of the extreme danger facing the world. The leader, in the German version of romanticism, is the demiurge; this god-like creature is exclusively a product of the Germanic race, so creating two classes of humanity — men proper, who have access to these higher worlds, and inferior people with inferior cultures. Berlin saw that this was something wholly new in history. Von Trott, on the other hand, was raised with the concept of a national destiny and the German romanticism which turned so vicious. Berlin's distrust of his friend arose not from the thought Trott was a closet Nazi, but because he saw that Trott had ideas about Geist and the inevitable destination of history, both of which were anathema to him; from an early age he understood where they could lead, and he recognised that they were present in both Communism and Fascism. I think this is what Berlin had in mind when he said that Von Trott was not really 'one of us or on our side', that Von Trott was primarily a German nationalist and that it was possible to be against Hitler for the wrong reasons. Von Trott's friend, Col Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg, rightly considered a hero, had some very anti-democratic plans for Germany had the Bomb Plot succeeded. With his two brothers he was a devotee of the sinister cultist poet, Stefan George, whose poetry was the apotheosis of extreme German romanticism. George was courted by the Nazis when they came to power and after

his death in 1934 his devotees tended his grave and held candle-lit poetry readings. Incidentally, Von Trott's family have been adamantly opposed to my novel, as if my task as a novelist should have been to applaud everything Von Trott did, rather than explore the moral issues that divided two friends.

Later I was to discover that there were other aspects of Berlin's personality and belief that were supremely charming. Since my book appeared many of his friends have discussed him with me, so much so that I feel as if I, too, knew him. I wish, as we wannabe Jews say. Berlin's friends speak of his excitable conversation, and the swooping nature of his vowels. He loved gossip and music, and understood that we cannot live in an entirely rational world. Love, music, poetry, friendship are none of them susceptible to logic. When he was listening to music, his head would be bowed and his concentration absolute. When he was gossiping, he was a bubbling fountain.

But behind his inexhaustibly charming self, lay a steely mind. I don't wish to over-dramatise my own philosophical torments as a young man, but from the moment I read Berlin for the first time I felt liberated. Above all, this was because he loathed abstractions about people and society. In his famous lecture *Fathers and Sons*, he spoke of Turgenev, but in fact he could have been writing about himself:

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He shared their hatred of every form of enslavement, injustice and brutality, but unlike some among them he could not rest comfortably in any doctrine or ideological system. All that was general, abstract, absolute, repelled him: his visions remained delicate, sharp, concrete, and incurably realistic. Hegelianism, right-wing and left-wing, which he had imbibed as a student in Berlin; materialism, Socialism, positivism, about which his friends ceaselessly argued, populism, collectivism, the Russian village commune idealized by those Russian socialists whom the ignominious collapse of the left in Europe in 1848 had bitterly disappointed and disillusioned – these came to seem mere abstractions to him, substitutes for reality, in which many believed and few ever tried to live, doctrines which life with its uneven surface and irregular shapes of real human character and activity, would surely resist and shatter if ever a serious effort were made to translate them into practice.

So as a human being and a political philosopher, as a student of life and history and of ideas, but most particularly as a human being, Berlin is my greatest hero.

Justin Cartwright's *The Song Before It Is Sung* won the London Jewish Cultural Centre's 2008 Award for literature.