



More Affirming

Supplementary Letters 1975–1997

This PDF is one of a series designed to assist scholars in their research on Isaiah Berlin, and the subjects in which he was interested.

The series will make digitally available both selected published items and edited transcripts of unpublished material.

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More Affirming

Supplementary Letters 1975–1997

Most of these letters do not appear in *Affirming: Letters 1975–1997* (A), being later discoveries. More annotation may be provided later, but for now the texts are made available here for the convenience of readers. Abbreviations and other editorial apparatus mostly follow the conventions adopted in the published volume, or those listed [here](#).

Three (asterisked) letters from the published volume are also included: one because only a carbon copy was originally available to the editors (since then a top copy has come to light, and manuscript additions made by Berlin are shown here [in this red](#)); one because the question arose on social media of what had been cut from it; one because of the later posting of articles about IB by Japanese scholars. In all three cases the passages omitted from *Affirming* have been added [in this blue](#).

See also the further online supplement, '[More Explaining: Isaiah Berlin on His Own Ideas](#)'.

The four published volumes include for the most part only letters written by Berlin, but where we have the other side of the correspondence, and have been able to secure the necessary copyright permission, the online supplements will also include a selection of letters written *to* Berlin, chosen for their interest and the light they throw on the context of the exchanges. See for example the letters from George Kennan, David Pryce-Jones and Judith Shklar in this supplement. We thank those who own the copyright in these letters for permission to include them here.

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In 1968 the British Academy awarded the historian Robert Skidelsky¹ a research fellowship to undertake a study of British Fascism in the 1930s, centred on the character and leadership of Oswald Mosley.² The award was controversial because the fellowship was endowed by the Thank-Offering to Britain Fund, set up by Jewish emigrés who had left Germany and Austria after Kristallnacht in 1938 (B 228/2, 354/3). IB had been instrumental in negotiating the creation of the fellowship, but supported the award to Skidelsky only reluctantly, a decision he went to considerable lengths to justify to his friend Jean Floud, who was adamantly against it. Because of her friendship with Skidelsky she did not make her opposition, or the strength of her views, publicly known. When in 1975 Skidelsky published not a study of British Fascism, but a full-scale biography of Mosley, the controversy reignited, both because the book was felt to be sympathetic towards the Fascist leader, and because it seemed to betray the spirit of the original grant. There was an obvious irony in refugees from German Fascism funding a flattering biography of the leader of British Fascism, and had they known that this would happen it is likely that many would not have wished to donate in the first place. After reading extracts from the biography, Floud was ‘scandalised’,³ and objected to a draft communiqué prepared by Herbert Hart for the Academy that was intended to address the matter, feeling that it dodged the central issue. On 24 March 1975 she wrote to IB to ask that the selection committee responsible for Skidelsky’s award should own up to an error – not of academic judgement, but of moral insensitivity – however difficult this might be. IB was prepared to admit to a moral error on his own part, but not on behalf of his colleagues, who he believed had acted in good faith, albeit ill-advisedly. He replied to her on 27 March.

¹ Robert Jacob Alexander Skidelsky (b. 1939), later (1991) life peer; historian; Research Fellow, Nuffield, 1965–8, British Academy 1968–70; associate professor of history, Johns Hopkins, 1970–6.

² Oswald Ernald Mosley (1896–1980), sixth baronet; Fascist politician; founder of the anti-Semitic British Union of Fascists 1932; interned during the Second World War as a security risk.

³ Letter to IB of 24 March 1975.

TO JEAN FLOUD

27 March 1975

Headington House

Dear Jean,

Thank you for your stern letter.⁴ Oddly enough, I was not scandalised by the extracts. I have not, as you know, met Skidelsky more than two or three times at the most; everyone who ever mentioned him to me seemed to praise him, whether as a person or as a historian – Larry, Vernon Bogdanor, Jenifer etc.; but I scarcely knew him. I was not scandalised because, after the decision by the Academy Committee, when I was charged with the odd duty of impressing on him that there was something paradoxical in a grant from that particular source for that particular purpose, and that it was hoped that he would seek to be severely objective, he took this so badly and seemed so furious – not because of any suspicion that he might be biased, but at the thought that his intentions had any relevance to the character of the fund – that I then realised that things might not turn out well, that I was certainly the worst person to talk to him about anything. I never saw him or communicated with him thereafter, and conceived a distinct prejudice against him, which I retain but do not, except to you and Vernon, articulate.

I do not agree with you about the disingenuousness of Herbert's draft. It seems to me certainly to reflect what he thought at the time of the award – namely, that Skidelsky was a gifted historian, that the topic fell within the scope of the fund's purposes (a chapter of British political history), that there was no reason for thinking that it would not be treated with appropriate detachment – of which, indeed, John Plamenatz in particular assured us in his testimonial. This is what Herbert thought, and he convinced most of the rest of us. I think we were wrong at the time not to give in

⁴ 24 March 1975, enclosing a series of documents including extracts from Skidelsky's book and the proposed reply to objectors.

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to the qualms which I think were felt by everybody in varying degrees – but only on the grounds, I suspect, that when instinct says one thing and reason another, instinct is usually right (so Burke tells us).

You did indeed condemn us at the time, and I remember being much affected by this and thinking that you were probably quite right: but whether I should feel this now as strongly as I do if Skidelsky had turned out to be an objective writer, and written not necessarily a pathology of the movement (though of course, even more so if he had), but a calm and dispassionate account, which would surely have been even more morally effective than explicit criticism or condemnation – I am not at all sure. I think that I should then have regarded it as a respectable contribution to historical knowledge, perhaps too Butterfieldish in its anxiety to suppress all personal feeling – all boo and hurrah words – but admirable all the same. This was the view which emerged from the testimonials and, in the minds of those who liked him, from the interview. I was not present personally at a later interview by the Committee (it was clear that I brought out the worst in Skidelsky, as John Pl[amenatz] probably brought out the best (but my God he *was* mistaken!)). I have no idea what was discussed then: it was spilt milk so far as I personally was concerned – I thought no good could come of it by then, but I saw no way of preventing it, and successfully forgot about the whole thing. This was cowardly only if one thinks that one should continue to be worried by something which one cannot prevent: perhaps one *should* worry continuously – for one's own sake? This seems a priggish sentiment, but it does not follow (I suppose?) that the proposition is false.

For this reason I do not think that Herbert's draft is disingenuous – I think it truly reflects what the majority of the committee believed, or were persuaded to believe. Why, then, should one not say so to those who complain? The only reason for collective breast-beating (or beating of my individual breast on

behalf of the collective one) would be Rose's point⁵ – could *any* Jew have wished to give money for *any* life of Mosley? To assume that they could not, or should not, and that the committee should have been guided by this line, seems to me not, as it did to Herbert, simply wrong, but debatable. I think that in fact you were and are right, but I don't think that it is a clear case, and therefore the Committee has the right to claim the benefit of the doubt. I feel sure that if we were to ask the members of that committee – e.g. Wheare, Robbins, Sayers, Roy Allen, Mortimer Wheeler, and perhaps the two representatives of the donors, Messrs Behr and Ross – whether they feel themselves guilty of a moral error (that is the only alternative to an academic error, surely?), which you want the committee to acknowledge, the majority – all but two – would probably quite sincerely say that they do not. I must admit that I do not feel like trying to persuade Wheare, who presided over us on that occasion, to try to persuade the others of our collective moral error, even though I personally felt quite uncomfortable enough at the time to convict myself of having gone further in a liberal direction than I should have. But that is a purely personal statement, and if I speak, I must do so on behalf of the committee.

But I am glad to think that you will speak severely to Herbert about this in Cornwall – I do not see why I alone, and not my leader (capital L?) on that occasion, should go through these agonies.

Yours, with much love

Isaiah

⁵ Kenneth Rose, 'Albany at Large', *Sunday Telegraph*, 16 March 1975, in which he writes: 'How many Jewish refugees would have contributed to the British Academy fellowship had they known it would be used to endow *any* work about Sir Oswald Mosley?'

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TO JEAN HALPÉRIN

29 April 1975

Headington House

Cher Cousin,

It is indeed an honour to be asked to contribute to M. Picard's second album – I only hope it will 'go' as well as Album I. I do not regard myself as highly suitable for this purpose – I have no standing in the world of the arts. I doubt if anyone has heard of me beside the British intellectual establishment – if they have, this must be pure chance and more than my due. But if you would like something from me for these good causes, can I say something like this:

Art is the only human activity that is purely creative, not, like virtually everything else that men do, an effort to remedy some imperfection in human nature. If we had been born omniscient, we should not have to pursue knowledge. If we were immortal, or omnipotent – if we were not (that is) in need of food, shelter, health, security, love, happiness, justice – we should not need to secure food or clothing or buildings and their contents, or the many other things provided by industry or trade, or medical attention, or soldiers or policemen, or courts of justice or the family, or all the other institutions that mark the transition from barbarism to civilisation. If we did not have the sense of something greater than ourselves we should not feel the desire to worship. The only activity that rises not from man's imperfections, but from a sheer wish and need to express and to create, is art. That is why every vision of paradise, in which men are finally liberated from all their earthly needs, contains some kind of artistic activity. The angels are represented as playing musical instruments. In the Indian world of the blessed gods there is dancing; there are, I am told, among them divine beings who paint and sculpt. Art, which springs from the individual vision of the world, is thus the only activity that is not, in Plato's words, a *plerosis* – the filling of some void. It is the only activity that can fitly be called divine – the nearest that mortals can attain to pure creation.

Isaiah Berlin, President of the British Academy, 1975

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

Will this do? I hope so. If not, just throw it in the waste-paper basket.

Yours ever,
Isaiah

TO DERRICK PUFFETT

9 May 1975

Headington House

Dear Puffett,

When I last talked to Isaac Stern he was quite clear that it is the Sheldonian he would like to play in – for Wolfson, or for the University, or for some other charity – or whatever (he kindly suggested) I advised. But he did seem set on the Sheldonian. I see that the Curators have behaved badly for the second time (they could easily shift one of the less important concerts to the Town Hall, as you know). I cannot bring myself to press Stern to play in Wolfson in 1975/6 – he plainly does not want to do this, and I don't want to drive him to the point of having to accept reluctantly or flatly refusing. Surely it would be better if he played for Wolfson in 1976/7, if you could get the Sheldonian for him then. But he has no idea of his dates, so it will take some working out.

In the meanwhile, I fear you will have to tell the Music Committee that Isaac Stern in Wolfson in 1975/6 is, very regrettably, not on. The Curators could alter this if they wished – Dr Rosenthal has similar trouble with them about Christoff, who wished to do the same. They really are a terrible lot of people, and their servant Mr Brown, at the Registry, is worse.

Yours,
Isaiah Berlin

Arabs and Jerusalem

From the Jordanian Ambassador
Sir, Mr David Jacobs in his letter on Jerusalem (July 8) seems to have distorted history to an extent that calls for correction.

In 1948 the Jordanian Armed Forces entered Jerusalem to defend the Palestinian Arab majority of the inhabitants of the city within the municipal boundaries as fixed under the British Mandate, who were fighting desperately against continued attacks by Zionist aggression, which forced tens of thousands of Christians and Muslim Arabs out of their homes and into the defended sector of the city.

The truce of 1948, divided the city into two and the vast majority of Jerusalem Arabs lost their homes and property when they were expelled by force. It is the *Arabs* of Jerusalem and not the Jews who were expelled and forced out. The Jewish inhabitants of the Jewish quarter in the old city were evacuated on the request of the Zionist Jewish Agency as part of the surrender terms.

If "Jerusalem was never an Arab capital", it has never been a Jewish capital either, due to the fact that there never was "a recognized national Jewish state" before the creation of "Israel" in Palestine in 1948. "As for it being the first holy city of Judaism, but only the third holy city of Islam", it seems futile to base an argument on the legitimacy of claim of sovereignty on the degree of holiness, this city depicts for a certain religion rather than another.

Jerusalem is holy to all the religions and will remain the spiritual

capital of all Christians and Moslems as well, and not exclusively to the Jews. It is this exclusiveness which the Arabs are fighting against in order to avoid making Herzl's promise to Zionism and threat to the world come true, when he said at the first Zionist conference in 1897:

"If we should one day acquire Jerusalem and I am still alive, I shall remove from the city everything that is not holy to the Jews and I shall destroy the relics that have been there for centuries."

Yours sincerely,

MA'AN ABU NOWAR,

Ambassador,

Embassy of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan,

6 Upper Phillimore Gardens, W8.

July 8.

*The letter of 8 July 1975 to The Times that stimulated
IB's closing remarks in his letter of 11 July below*

Arabs and Jerusalem

From Dr S. Levenberg

Sir, I agree with Mr Ma'an Abu Nowar (July 13), the Ambassador of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, that distortion of historical facts calls for correction. I am therefore, surprised that he used a quotation from Dr Theodor Herzl's speeches which is a product of his own imagination.

Herzl didn't mention Jerusalem in his address at the First Zionist Congress (1897). But he did make the following reference to the Holy City in his private diary on October 31st, 1898—written during his visit to Palestine:

"... If Jerusalem is ever ours, and if I were still able to do anything about it, I would begin by cleaning it up.

"I would clear out everything that is not sacred, set up workers' houses beyond the city, empty and tear down the filthy rat-holes, burn all the non-sacred ruins, and put the bazaars elsewhere. Then, retaining as much of the old architectural style as possible, I would build an airy, comfortable, properly sewered, brand new city around the Holy Places." . . .
("The Diaries of Theodor Herzl", Victor Gollancz, London 1958, p 284).

At the turn of the century when these words were written Jews were the large majority of Jerusalem (28,200 from the total of 45,000; the rest were 8,760 Christians and 8,600 Moslems).

The distortion of Herzl's views is deplorable because he was a man who had great respect for the Holy Places of all religions and firmly believed in close cooperation between Jews and Arabs as indicated in his famous novel *Alt-Neu Land* (1902).

Yours, etc,
S. LEVENBERG,
4 Regent Street, SW1.

A reply to the letter on the previous page

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TO GEORGE WEIDENFELD

11 July 1975 [*signed 12 July*]

Headington House

Dear George,

I apologise for returning to the eternal subject of *From the Other Shore*, by A. Herzen.⁶

Since Blackwells, from whom I have kept ordering copies during the last two years without success, have now had a formal statement from your firm that the book is out of print (and has been, so far as I can tell, for a number of years, according to all the booksellers I have approached – half-a-dozen or so), I wonder if you could ask one of your staff to let my agent, Mr Andrew Best of Messrs Curtis Brown, have a copy of the original contract (if there was one), since one day I hope to get the book republished, here or in America. Apart from the memoirs, very little of Herzen has appeared in English, and it might be combined with some other translations and make a respectable academic volume – I should seek advice on this from Curtis Brown.

Arafat⁷ lost no time in capitalising on the celebration of Moyne's⁸ assassins. I do not envy poor Gideon [Rafael], between the 'Jewish Archdukes' here, as the revisionists used to call them, and his Government at home. <What a monstrous letter by the

⁶ See letter of 18 February 1975 in B+.

⁷ Mohammed Abdel-Raouf Arafat As Qudwa al-Hussaeini (1929–2004), known as Yasser Arafat, Palestinian leader; co-founder, Fatah (a political and military party comprising the largest faction of the PLO) 1958, leader 1958–2004; chair, PLO executive committee, 1969–2004.

⁸ Walter Edward Guinness (1880–1944), DSO 1917 and bar 1918, 1st Baron Moyne 1932, Conservative and Unionist politician; secretary of state for the Colonies 1941–2; leader, Lords, 1941–2; deputy minister of state, Cairo, 1942–4, resident minister 1944; assassinated by members of the Stern Gang 6 November 1944.

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Jordanian Ambassador⁹ to-day – the quotation from Herzl is typical of the wild & inflammatory rubbish Arabs produce in public. Will it be refuted in *proper* style?

Yours ever,
Isaiah

TO GEORGE WEIDENFELD

19 August 1975 [*manuscript*]

Paraggi

Dear George,

[...] I received a message from Yigal A[llon] and J. Talmon re activating people to write articles against the ‘expel Israel’ campaign¹⁰ which will reach a climax in Lima at the end of this month. Talmon suggests a) T[revor]-Roper b) Norman Cohn c) Alan Taylor. N. Cohn is *I* think, useless: *who* has heard of him? not the non-aligned nations to whom these pleas are directed. T-Roper: I’ll suggest it, but have small hopes. Alan may shout in any direction & is too whimsical. But I wondered if a piece by C. P. Snow (*not* a “contact” of mine) in, say, the Economist or Financial Times; by some decent Left Wing sympathizer – say [Eric?] Heffer in the Guardian or N. Statesman; by Paul Johnson; by some other Labour Friend of Israel in some periodical likely to be clipped by Non-aligned Embassies, might just possibly sway a vote or two of some not hopelessly committed “non-aligned” nation. Arnold [Goodman] & you could surely stimulate some demand for this? I’ll write to Dollie & ask her to stimulate Mr [Terence] Prittie. I just feel bitterly frustrated about the cards so horribly stacked against Israel: doubtless U.S. & U.K. will veto the proposals in the Council:

⁹ Ma’an Abu Nowar (1928–2016), Jordanian Ambassador in London 1973–6. His letter was published in *The Times*, 12 July 1975, 13e–f. A reply by S[chneir] Levenberg appeared on 23 July.

¹⁰ On 16 July thirty-nine Islamic countries and the PLO had called for the expulsion of Israel from the United Nations and all other international bodies.

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but harm *will* have been done. If you *cd* have a word with Arnold and Mrs K. ... I am helpless on this hill top –

yrs ever
Isaiah.

TO ROBERT SILVERS

15 October 1975

Australian National University, Canberra

Dear Bob,

You are marvellous; nobody in England was able to be of the slightest help, including the Vico expert, Dr Pompa. [...] I feel sure that the English translation is not *my* translation of Michelet or anybody else, but must come from a free rendering of Michelet's own free rendering of Vico's words, and so is doubly garbled. I shall therefore not use it in my book – there is no time for clearing the whole thing before it goes to print – I cannot, alas, hold the printer up while I conduct elaborate researches, as I long to do. For my own satisfaction I will do it as soon as I arrive in Oxford. If there is ever a second edition of my book which seems more than doubtful, I shall concoct a learned footnote, which at least Momigliano may appreciate. In the meanwhile, I am relieved to know that I did not invent the quotation, though it is inexcusable of me – and shows that I have not the beginnings of scholarly habits – that I should have copied this out without the faintest memory of where it came from. But your achievement is truly wonderful, and I am most grateful to you and Mr Mooney and Tagliacozzo for this splendid piece of investigation. If Graham-Harrison can do something with Mooney's elucidation and put something in, I shall not resist. It shows me that my text is probably full of inaccuracies and I shall probably be torn to pieces, justifiably, by Kristeller and his disciples and colleagues and opponents, and have to eat humble pie. I never did think well of my qualities as a scholar, and this confirms my worst suspicions about myself.

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How awful about Kay and her tribulations. Do give her my love and sympathy. I am delighted that Stuart should be having this lovely break with Joe – he thoroughly deserves it. When in Australia he apparently complained about the ‘absence of manners’ here – I do not find this so. We are happy here, and I shall insist on describing to you the levels of Australian society; the vitality, the warmth, the excitement of politics, the currents of feeling, academic, personal and political, all seem fascinating to me. You might have thought that Aline might not have enjoyed all this; but she does. If we don’t meet before I shall tell you in late January, when I appear in Tagliacozzo’s new Vico variety show – that is what it looks like. Tomorrow to New Zealand, and perhaps, who knows, the outback. <Australia is full of seekers & of what they call “stirrers” here: the malaise of England is terribly present by contrast: it *is* a new world, & not a provincial survival.>

Yours ever,
Isaiah

TO JOHN SPARROW

9 January 1976

Headington House

My dear old friend,

I did not mean Simmonds to lift the matter to such a high level – it was only in answer to his enquiry as to whether I was a something *atque verus socius* in the query about the Codrington key & I responded in kind. In fact, *no* minutes of the meeting I inevitably missed arrived, either at All Souls (where there was very little post waiting for me), so the infallible Mrs Utechin assures me, who checks every item most scrupulously. If I could have another set I should be grateful: my only reason for wanting it is to discover Michael’s new voting system, which I have not seen – otherwise, I should of course not have bothered so much as to mention the matter. But since this is evidently to be discussed next Saturday, I did not think it inappropriate to ask Simmonds where I might

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obtain this information: but of course I did not (I am delighted to go back to the style of correspondence of more than ten years ago) intend to make a formal demarche upon the subject. I should not dream of occupying your time, etc., etc.

I am beset by telephone calls from many quarters about the Chichele Chair of Social and Political Theory: I stonewall them all – *suave mari magno* ...¹¹

Yours ever,

I.B

TO ROBERT SILVERS

3 March 1976

Headington House

Dear Bob,

When next we meet I must tell you about my meeting with Solzhenitsyn – the *Sunday Times* implies that I was the host, but I was not: it was a super-secret meeting at Christ Church, presided over by Obolensky. He is, of course, exceedingly impressive – I see that his magnificent performance on television, which I did not see, has finally driven Lord George Brown out of the Labour Party. Stuart and my secretary, Pat Utechin, thought it was a stupendous sermon, of nineteenth-century intensity and splendour. He is entirely intent upon his mission and wants to talk only to people whom he thinks can help him with it, and whom he regards as complete sympathisers, e.g. Max Hayward, Leonard Schapiro, George Katkov etc. He wishes to spend his earnings on a series of publications on Russian history, to divide it sharply from Soviet accounts of anything – there is an almost Freudian (or Vichian?) note in his view that men are transformed by coming to consciousness of their own past experience, and cannot act

¹¹ 'Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis, / e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem' ('It is sweet, when the winds are buffeting the waves on the great ocean, to watch from land the massive struggle of someone else'). Lucretius, *De reum natura* 2. 1–2.

properly while this is suppressed and they live in delusive illusions. He was very civil to me, but only wanted to know about my meetings with Akhmatova, who is a tremendous heroine of people like himself and his wife. His wife is charming and sensitive and interesting to talk to about the personal relations of Madame Mandelstam, Pasternak etc. I had an exceedingly interesting and profitable conversation with her. All this for when we meet. They all agree that Brodsky is the best living Russian poet, though perhaps hardly a poet of genius.

You will soon be seeing Stephen, who had a dream in which Solzhenitsyn told him that his association with the Congress for Cultural Freedom, Lasky etc. was his finest hour. The question is – suppose this tremendous figure orders Stephen to go back to it, what does he do? Stephen is wonderfully funny on such occasions. Flanked by Leonard Schapiro on one side and Bernard Levin on the other, Solzhenitsyn can hardly give way to what I feel must be a certain lack of sympathy for the Jews of the modern world, in his heart of hearts. [...]

The reviews of my book so far have been perfectly civil – Alasdair MacIntyre was very funny indeed, and enjoyable to read. Tony Quinton also funny, but makes me wince, as always: like all entertainers, he is liable to black depressions, and embarrassing personalities – most kindly meant – about his friends. If you read the *Observer* you will see what I mean. Hideously squalid correspondence between Alastair Forbes and Auberon Waugh, about Connolly, in the *TLS*. I do not regard either Peter Conrad or Ali (whom I do not at all dislike) as *trouvailles* in the way of reviewers.

Love to Grace. We would love to see you both here, at once.

Isaiah

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TO ISAAC STERN

23 May 1976 [*carbon sent as top copy*]

[Headington House]

Dearest Isaac,

These speak for themselves. Puffett is a very nice spastic musicologist, who drives himself fairly skilfully in an invalid chair, and deserves *rachmanut* (or do you still say *rachmonus?*). As you can see, the bureaucracy of the Sheldonian is ghastly, and it would be a kindness if you could send Puffett a swift, preferably telegraphic, message if you can. If you really cannot, at all, then a swift message to put people at Wolfson out of their misery would be a kindness.

I am sure the Rothschild Festival will have gone off triumphantly – I was genuinely concerned about Mrs R's health – she looked somewhat exhausted before she left: this is obviously, in her own mind, her last farewell visit to Israel. I do hope she has not been overdoing it (as if one could avoid that in Jerusalem) – and that you have not either. Some people are much more valuable than others: some kinds of egalitarianism are and always will be totally ridiculous.

Meanwhile we have a ludicrous scandal about peerages, which you may have followed – Bernard Levin's observations in *The Times* of 25 May about Lord Weidenfeld's work among the deprived children of Calcutta, and the performance of the Double Violin Concerto by Lords Grade and Delfont, was vicious but very funny. I cannot bring myself to enclose the clipping – there is a limit to all malice. Besides, I could be accused of anti-Semitism.

Fondest love; I do wish I were there; I am sure this light in the midst of darkness is very welcome in Jerusalem,

yrs ever

Isaiah

§ TO ROBERT SILVERS

2 June 1976

Headington House

Dear Bob,

I have read and re-read your letter about Solzhenitsyn, and of course all you say is perfectly true: he is completely obsessed by a single idea, as the Dissenters of the seventeenth century were – for them, Peter's new state was Anti-Christ, inspired by the devil, to be resisted by every possible means: all suicide was preferable to surrender, so they burnt themselves if need be. Solzhenitsyn is not in the least interested in the West, does not seek to understand, looks on it simply in terms of what it can do or fails to do in resisting the dreadful contagion of Soviet power: he will make alliance with anybody prepared to resist the forces of darkness – fascists, liberals, rich man, poor man, Reagan, thief, since all differences pale into insignificance in comparison with the destruction of the human spirit by these wicked men. In a way I think he does identify himself with Lenin – the other way about. The thing to remember about him is that he is completely a Soviet man: the values are inverted but the black and white outlook, the simplification, the totalitarian conception of the true spiritual life seems to me very similar. In this respect he really is totally different from Sakharov, who is, to me, a wholly sympathetic figure. Nevertheless, Savonarola did precede the Reformation, and in that sense Solzhenitsyn is perhaps a precursor of something which we may not welcome – a wave of nationalism, religion, a great wave of anti-rationalism which seems to me to be springing up not only in the bosom of the Soviet Union but certainly in the Middle East, where there is a huge wave of Islam, of an anti-Western sort, gradually growing against Marxism, modernism, industrialism etc.¹² Islam is certainly stronger in Egypt and in Syria and Jordan than it

¹² Girolamo Savonarola (1452–98), preacher active in Renaissance Florence who denounced secular art and culture, clerical corruption, despotic rule and the exploitation of the poor.

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was – what used to be regarded as purely Saudi-Arabian fanatical Moslem attitudes are spreading fairly rapidly in the rest of the Islamic East. The anti-Christian drive in Lebanon is in this sense symptomatic; just like the awful Gush Emunim in Israel, so the corresponding nationalist-religious groups among the Arabs in Libya, and I daresay soon in Algiers and Tunis too.¹³

I am very depressed about Israel, of course, as I am sure you are: I feel that the kind of concessions that two years ago might have made a difference will now not have much effect. The PLO are far bolder and more demanding than they were, and nothing less than the abolition of Israel would really satisfy them, even the so-called ‘moderate’ among them. In that sense, I think they are like the Italian Communists – it is an illusion to suppose that they really will settle for half a loaf, although they may be forced to do so, of course, in both cases. But the forcing can scarcely be done by Israel alone. What line will Carter take?¹⁴ I am sure he is not interested in that part of the world; I am sure he intends to be ‘tough’, whatever that may mean; and I feel equally sure that American Jews, however involved they may remain with Israel – and I believe that in the last instance they always will (as will Jews everywhere), will resist direction from the Israel Embassy of an old-fashioned kind, and will display aggressive American autonomy. Quite a good thing intrinsically, no doubt, but in the short run God knows what will emerge from it all. I wish I could believe that war with somebody is not imminent: not Egypt, perhaps, but then Syria. And supposing there is such a war, whoever starts it, will that mean that Russia will try to extinguish it at once, and that the United States will wait to see what happens? Or will they step in too, and will there be joint pressure, and the cutting up of the Middle East into spheres of interest, like Persia in the old days, between Russia and England – this time America

¹³ Gush Emunim, Orthodox, right-wing Israeli movement committed to establishing Jewish settlements in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights.

¹⁴ Jimmy Carter (b. 1924), US president 1977–81.

over Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Russia over Iraq and Syria? With Gaddafi neutralised by Morocco and Boumédiène by Egypt and Tunis?¹⁵ All this, I suppose, is pure Kissinger spillikins, an out-of-date mosaic; and what will happen will be far more radical and untidy and frightening.

Now about dear Vico: there is a funny letter from Tagliacozzo, which you had better not receive, in which the poor man protests about the forthcoming review by Momigliano.¹⁶ I told him, I think, that Momigliano was writing it, and said quite truthfully that I wondered what he would say. Obviously Tagliacozzo thinks of Momigliano as a ferocious enemy of Vico and historicism – which has some truth in it, but only some. I cannot possibly reply to him and say that in view of the fact that Momigliano does not think of my work as wholly contemptible he is likely to be neutral in tone about my approach (which he cannot really think well of), and will confine himself to writing about Vico in general terms, about historicism, language, relativism, European historiography, etc., etc. – which from the point of view of the readers of the journal is just what he ought to be doing. But I am entertained by the thought of this most dedicated Cartesian of our time being permitted to butcher the inspired prophet of humanism, to whom I am alleged to have given a tiny extra lease of life.

I am off to celebrate Syme's OM, to which Momigliano has not been invited.¹⁷

¹⁵ Mu'ammer Gaddafi (c.1942–2011) governed Libya 1969–2011. Houari Boumédiène (1932–78), chairman of the Revolutionary Council of Algeria 1965–76, president of Algeria 1976–78.

¹⁶ Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), Neapolitan jurist, philosopher and historian. An essay on him by IB, 'A Note on Vico's Concept of Knowledge', was published in the NYRB 4 April 1969, 23–6. Giorgio Tagliacozzo (1909–96), Italian academic and editor. Arnaldo Momigliano (1908–87), refugee Italian ancient historian, taught at University College London 1951–75; regular contributor to the NYRB.

¹⁷ Sir Ronald Syme (1903–89), OM 1976, an ancient historian at Oxford.

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When do we meet? Where – here, in Italy? You will be glad to hear that we are to elect to the British Academy Empson, Hobsbawm and Scholem – Noel is quite pleased with me.¹⁸

Yours ever,
Isaiah

TO ROBERT SILVERS

12 July 1976

Headington House

Dear Bob,

[...] I heard Lord Home deliver a speech in which for once he was quite amusing: he said he could put up with his deafness, his dentures, the thick lenses of his spectacles; what he missed was his mind. I feel exactly this – I have not suffered a real *coup de vieux*, as I think John Sparrow has (but do not breathe to anyone that I said so): still, it is true that I do not feel too youthful.

By all means come and see us in Italy in early August – when you come here we shall already be gone, as you know, but you will find not only Stuart and Renée, but also the Nabokovs in our house. Do call on them; they will be overjoyed, and it will help them to bear what they, indeed, look forward to, but what I suspect may prove in some ways to be a somewhat lonely sojourn.

Meanwhile All Souls has elected as Warden one Patrick Neill, a perfectly amiable, decent, sweet, honourable barrister, and rejected Bernard Williams. The entire jeunesse voted for Bernard, and so indeed, of course, did I; whether the fact that all the philosophers were in his favour antagonised the others, whether his supporters over-canvassed and so created a backlash, what exactly happened I really do not know and do not wish to know. I suspect that what

¹⁸ Sir William Empson (1906–84), an English literary critic and poet. Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012), a Marxist British and European historian. Noel Annan (1916–2000), Baron Annan 1965, was Provost of King's College, Cambridge, 1956–66 and Provost of University College London 1966–78. He was a friend of I.B. and a regular contributor to the NYRB.

happened was that the ‘outside’ Fellows felt that Bernard might start on some awful reformist path and try and re-insert All Souls into the Oxford framework – not so much build bridges with the outside world (which is the cliché), but bridges with Oxford, which it badly needs. Anyway, it is a disappointment, and as Noel Annan put it in his usual direct fashion to me on the day of the election, ‘a major defeat’. Bernard is, I think, somewhat upset. I turn out to be the only person who supposed that the outcome might be what it was – Stuart and John Sparrow (who longed for Neill) supposed that Bernard was invincible. Now, I suppose, he will have to become Provost of King’s, which, since he doesn’t want to be head of an undergraduate college, is, from his point of view, a second best. It is rather awful, really. New College, All Souls, Worcester (Asa Briggs), University (Lord Goodman) have all elected to choose non-academics or dim academics, managerial types. I feel sure that Tony Quinton feels a little better about his own defeat now that he is in the company of Bernard Williams – but that’s no great comfort to anyone. Corpus Christi is the only College which has behaved honourably by electing the best Greek scholar in the country, one Dover. I feel uncomfortable in All Souls again, as I did after they rejected Kreisel. Perhaps this will wear off. I ought to be too old to mind, but I suppose it is a sign of life that I do. I think fundamentally the ‘outside’ Fellows thought that they might be displaced in some way, their Fellowships in the end declared void – it was simply a move of self-protection. Stuart says that one cannot blame anyone for voting out of self-interest: perhaps so.

You are quite right about Lebanon: the idea of either Israel or America intervening is obvious lunacy; even Moscow saw that in its own terms. Still, you do in the *New York Times* have letters from people who say ‘Why should the Israelis be congratulated when, if it had been the French hostages of the Gestapo, we should not have congratulated the Nazis for so bold a coup?’ Or people who say ‘Supposing it had been Heathrow or Gatwick?’ No doubt all these letters are planted; nevertheless I feel irritated that the *Times* should choose to print them rather than obviously more intelligent comments, which they must have received, since there has been a

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huge influx of letters, according to someone on the staff, of which they printed no more than two or three a day.

I wonder what they have done with poor Mrs Bloch: do you think Amin or the PLO have murdered her? Will all this immediately be forgotten? Imagine what would have happened if it had been the other way about – some ancient Arab lady swept into their net by Israeli commandos in Syria or Lebanon. But I must not go on so: I wonder if this really will give poor Rabin some freedom of manoeuvre, as you and I hope, or, on the contrary, will merely help the hawks, as all daring military exploits probably do.

Cal and Caroline called on us after some meeting on Ulster organised in Oxford by Lord Longford – another pointless assembly, which Conor Cruise O'Brien rightly failed to attend.

Back to Hume and Hamann – that's the only comfort, dreary as it is. A painful spectacle in the Middle East. I do not dramatise myself, as the late George Lichtheim did, as a lofty observer above the battle of all those human frailties – still, even tedious work helps – as I am sure you daily find.

Yours ever,
Isaiah

TO ROBERT SILVERS

27 September 1976

Headington House

Dear Bob,

Your visit really was the peak of the entire summer. Glowing reviews of the Montepulciano Festival were provided by the British critics – Shaw Taylor a little tepid, and I gather Andrew Porter.

We are about to go to the last two 'Days' of the London Ring – well received by the critics, a paean of praise by Bernard Levin, and a violent, really malignant attack by Peter Conrad in the *New Statesman* – he is, you remember, John Bayley's Tasmanian protégé who now writes in the *TLS* and *New Statesman* – he teaches English at Christ Church and is obviously determined to make a name for

himself by dramatic vituperation. The amusing thing about John Bayley is how hard, arbitrary and unyielding he is. He makes up his mind, says what he wishes, and is totally unconcerned about correctness, facts, other people – except that he does not want to fall out with too many too much at once. Sometimes it is interesting, sometimes perverse, or half-baked, or just clever. Too un-Rahv-like and un-Russian for my taste, but I can see that it is a sort of fun, except that I do not think criticism ought to be – I feel solemn about that.

Evelyn Waugh's diaries appear to me to be 1 per cent funny – very funny – and 99 per cent embarrassing and tedious and pathetic.

In theory I have nothing to do – in practice, two enormous theses to read, each of about a thousand pages, plus two reviews, one of Walicki on Russian populism for the English *Slavonic Review*, the other the last Vico volume for some similar professional periodical: I propose to go through the last bit essay by essay and to give marks, defying the editor, who wants a general piece, which I cannot do again. Arnaldo came to tea with Stuart and the Williamses in Paraggi – I had him to lunch by myself – not a word about the review: we both behaved with appalling dignity. Stuart and Bernard were much amused by his disparagement of a review of his book in the *TLS* as 'very silly, totally irrelevant, ridiculous, did not understand anything'. This was by young Hornblower of All Souls, a protégé of Finley, whom Arnaldo described as 'basically a bloody man'. He talked very well about the prospects of Italian socialism and Communism, and was partly pleased and partly annoyed [when] he asked me what I could tell him about Professor Kryukov – who I think wrote something on Roman law or Roman history. I turned out to know that he was a professor of philosophy in Moscow in the 1840s–50s, and this impressed Arnaldo and also slightly annoyed him – but Kryukov was in the same circle as Belinsky, Herzen etc., so I could scarcely not have heard of him; nevertheless, in the game of one-upmanship I got about two stars.

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Now I am engaged in a long and courteous correspondence with Miss Kathleen Coburn, the authority on Coleridge, about when exactly and what exactly Coleridge read by Vico. The tone is exquisite in mutual politeness and anxiety to afford illumination. I am sure she is a very nice and good woman. John Sparrow is looking for £5,000 to enable him to get his Anglo-Italian collaborators' collection of Italian Renaissance verse published in England, and proposes to sell his own books to finance it. Heroic, but wrong – there must be some old American millionaire with special tastes who would be ready to finance this enterprise, though Sparrow would never dream of looking for such.

A tremendous campaign has been mounted by the upper class Mafia in England, led by the Duchess of Devonshire, to suppress Pryce-Jones's¹⁹ book on Unity Mitford, or at any rate reviews of it. Mosley is trying to extract affidavits from people who have been interviewed by David saying that they never said anything of that kind: Lord Lambton, the Dukes, Anne Fleming etc. etc. are telephoning, writing, threatening, cajoling, to find out who is going to review it when, etc., and in the meantime saying that it is fortunately a very, very bad book. Poor David Pryce-Jones is not very good at keeping a cool head in a storm, and a storm against him is undoubtedly blowing. The story of the embattled British aristocracy intent on punishing someone who has 'betrayed our world' is a better story – though trivial enough, and perhaps not very interesting – than, I suspect, the issue itself. 'Everyone' is talking about it. This would have got into the pages of some New York magazine before now – but in England at the moment not even *Private Eye* seems to have got hold of it – if only out of a general distaste for virtue and a certain degree of anti-Semitism, by which they do seem to be briefly infected.

¹⁹ David Eugene Henry Pryce-Jones (b. 1936), author and literary editor; his mother, Thérèse ('Poppy') (1908–53) née Fould-Springer, was a close friend of Aline Berlin, whose family he knew from childhood; special correspondent, *Daily Telegraph*, 1966–82; from 1999 senior editor, *National Review*.

Now back to Coburn and Vico and Coleridge. I love these kinds of correspondences.

Thank you very much for all those books which your secretary has very kindly supplied. I am sending separately a clipping which Nicolas rather typically has sent me.

Yours ever,
Isaiah

TO BRYAN MAGEE²⁰

13 January 1977 [*card*]

Headington House

I listened with fascination to your ‘Man of Action’. Alfred Einstein once said to me ‘The four greatest English composers are Elgar, Delius, Tchaikovsky and Sibelius’ – you cannot disagree! The chasm between our musical tastes seems to me as wide as that on Zionism – but never mind, Mahler, Mozart, Beethoven, even Wagner–Schopenhauer,* we could agree upon: but Elgar, Tommy Dorsey, Gershwin, Strauss! Tchaikovsky I adore, but not the symphonies. I loved the programme, if only for wondering how the chasm would widen. Happy New Year!

Isaiah

²⁰ Bryan Edgar Magee (1930–2019), writer, philosopher and broadcaster; Labour MP 1974–82 (later SDP MP 1982–3); a familiar figure on British television and radio (sometimes fronting his own series), he had published widely, including works on politics and homosexuality. He had interviewed IB and Stuart Hampshire in 1972 on ‘**The Problem of Nationalism**’ for the ITV series ‘Something to Say’, and IB was his first guest on BBC2’s *Men of Ideas* series (the episode, ‘An Introduction to Philosophy’, was recorded 23 May 1976, and first aired 19 January 1978). IB maintained a very amicable friendship with BM, but had his reservations about him, writing to Bernard Williams on 24 February 1975: ‘It is not his lack of philosophical talent, or coarseness of fibre, or prying habits, or journalistic vulgarity, that gets on my nerves: but something does – would you tell me what it is?’

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* of course, if you *began* with Parsifal, only a stiff course of Kunst der Fuge & Musikalischer Opfer cd help. Too late!

In the second half of the 1970s the Holocaust survivor José Moskovits (1926–2004), Argentinian reparation lawyer and president of the Jewish Association of the Survivors of Nazi Persecution, conducted a worldwide survey on anti-Semitism and attitudes toward Jews and Israel. These were his questions:

1. Do you think that Jew-hating (anti-Semitism) is a rational attitude, or is it pathologic?
2. In your opinion, has anti-Semitism objective causes? If so, are they of a theological, racial, economic, social, psychological or any other nature?
3. Do you believe that an honest interreligious dialogue is feasible and that it could be useful for a better living together?
4. Do you agree that the Jews, because of their weakness, have often been chosen as a scapegoat by governments and political bodies in order to divert the attention of the masses from other, more pressing problems? In other words, that anti-Semitism, practiced in any of its forms, has been used as an unholy political weapon?
5. Do you feel that the malicious and consistent association of abhorrent concepts like ‘apartheid’ or ‘racism’ with Zionism constitutes an anti-Semitic aggression and that we are now witnessing an offensive on a global scale against anything Jewish?
6. Could and should something be done in view of this?
7. Do you believe that anti-Jewish propaganda should be made a criminal offense of instigation to discrimination?

TO JOSÉ MOSKOVITS

13 January 1977

Headington House

Dear Mr Moskovits,

In answer to your questions:

I think that all racial hatred has some pathological root, and anti-Semitism is no exception.

I wish I could answer your second question – I do not know what the causes of anti-Semitism are. I think such enquiries are extremely difficult to make, for neither psychology nor sociology nor anthropology have become precise enough instruments to be able to answer such questions with any degree of certainty. But, speaking purely subjectively, I should say that it certainly has a theological root, even though anti-Semitism precedes Christianity: the image of the Jews in the New Testament is such that even those who had never met them conceived of them as a somewhat sinister group, and then, with certain economic and social factors, xenophobia in general is apt to flare up owing to a degree of economic pressure or social resentment – and they are a ‘natural’ object of this feeling. I suspect that these other conditions are only those which fan the embers into a flame, but that the embers themselves are deeper than bad education and that degree of antipathy to strangers which probably all human groups to some extent experience, though not necessarily in an acute or dangerous form, which I think answers your question 4. Certainly anti-Semitism has been used as a wicked political weapon, both in Russia and in Germany in our day, and in many other countries as well.

As for 5, I think that it is possible to be anti-Zionist without being anti-Jewish: I have met persons genuinely opposed to Zionism, for political or ideological reasons, who are certainly not anti-Jewish. Nevertheless, the line is apt to be somewhat thin: acute anti-Zionism often spills over into Judaeophobia. And the very unjust attacks on Zionism as racism certainly fan such latent anti-Semitism as may lurk in various men’s breasts, and sometimes become identified with it, so that there is a perpetual possibility of anti-Zionism either springing from or being allied to or turning into [ir]rational anti-Semitism.

As for your last question, I am sure that any form of instigation which leads to violence or near-violence should be made illegal; but I do not believe that criticism of the Jews – difficult sometimes to distinguish from what you call ‘anti-Jewish propaganda’ – should be made a criminal offence. Any form of limitation of

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freedom of speech or publication is, I think, regrettable, but in cases where there is a great deal of tension and where such expression of prejudice leads [to] actual discrimination, measures may have to be taken; but it is very difficult to determine where the line should be drawn between a political or social polemic, however irrational, which democracies should not be eager to extinguish, and instigation to hatred and violence. The tolerant, the enlightened and the liberal should not lean over backwards to permit a situation to arise in which the freedom of society is undermined, but neither should they encourage the restriction of free speech, however repellent the things said may be to them – this is the beginning of the general abrogation of the minimum of political liberty on which democracies rest. Where the line should be drawn must be left to the judgement of the decent and the wise by whom one hopes to be governed.

Yours sincerely,
Isaiah Berlin

TO NOBUTOSHI HAGIHARA²¹

20 January 1977

Headington House

Dear Mr. Hagihara,

Thank you very much for your letter of 2 January – I should, in my turn, like to apologise for my late reply, due in large measure to absences in London during this month. From this you will have gathered that I have recovered from the operation about which you have so kindly enquired, about which our friend Professor Joll wrote to you – indeed, I saw him in London only the other day,

²¹ Nobutoshi Hagihara (1926–2001), Japanese historian, disciple of Masao Maruyama, graduated from the law department of the University of Tokyo, then studied abroad, first at Pennsylvania, then at Oxford, where he got to know IB. He was one of the first Japanese scholars to introduce IB's work to Japanese readers, and it was he who, on behalf of the Japan Foundation, invited him to visit the country.

told him that I would be writing to you, and he wished me to send you his warm regards, which I am happy to do. As for the hectic life of which you speak, that is my condition too: these things, I fear, are a matter of individual temperament more than of objective circumstances – I fear that as long as our health lasts, you and I are probably doomed to bouts of feverish activity from time to time: to learn to live at peace with one's own temperament is a form of wisdom which I am sure you possess and I hope to attain.

And now, about the points that you make in your very courteous and helpful and lucid letter, which I shall take in the order in which you make them.

The booklets have indeed reached me and look extremely useful – I shall not read them until a little nearer April, since my memory is not what it used to be and I shall forget everything if I read them now. Thank you very much for sending them.

We are indeed looking forward to coming to Japan in April, as was originally proposed. Thank you very much for organising the reception committee – I do hope that this will not be too much trouble for anyone, but I am afraid that we shall have to rely a great deal on your help and that of other kind friends, since we have never, as you know, visited Japan before and know neither the language nor the ways of life – we shall probably need all the help that we can get. Still, you must not assume too heavy a burden – it would be unjust to you and embarrass us both greatly. I am grateful to Professors Maruyama (whom I know) and Kyogoku²² for 'taking us on'.

About the lectures: I shall do as you suggest. The rise and decline of utopianism in Western Europe is a subject I shall be ready to speak about (I shall forget about the Russian subject); I shall prepare another lecture as well, namely, the rise of Romanticism in the West, especially its intellectual origins. If I am to have a seminar or class as well, I could continue with either of these two subjects – I shall not be able to say too much in, say,

²² Junichi Kyogoku (1924–2016), political theorist, University of Tokyo.

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forty-five minutes, and shall not try to pack it too full, so as to make it reasonably intelligible; and I might perhaps add to that something on the odd career of nationalism in Europe in the last two centuries, which I shall be talking about at a seminar in New York just before I come to Tokyo.

I shall do my best to produce a written version of at least one of these lectures. I do not normally read from a written script – I find that difficult, become confused, talk too rapidly – it is rather as if I were reading the minutes of a society written by some other secretary, I am not sure where the punctuation marks come in, and tend to read at a rapid and monotonous pace. I usually come armed with fairly copious notes, at which I tend not to look, but which give me some sense of security, in case I am struck by sudden loss of memory, in which case I can collect myself by looking at the notes. However, I think you must be right: if there is to be a translation, that would take perhaps as long as the lecture itself, and one-and-a-half hours is as much as any human audience can be expected to tolerate. So I shall try to produce a typescript which could be given to the translator, and try to post it to you before I actually arrive.

I shall ask my secretary to remind me of this from time to time, as otherwise I shall forget to do it: I am apt to leave things to the last moment and then do them in excessive haste and regret the result. My secretary, who is typing this letter, will, I am sure, get me to keep this promise to you. So all should be well.

About the actual stay in Japan. You very kindly ask me where I want to go and whom I should like to meet and what I should like to refrain from. I wish I could answer. I have never been in Japan, and should, of course, like to see what is of interest during my three weeks. I ought to begin by explaining that my wife, who will, I expect, be happy to accompany me for most of the time, will not want to do so *all* the time; I should be grateful if arrangements could be made whereby she is shown places, particularly scenes of natural beauty, which I may be too busy to visit; I expect, too, that she will want to do a little shopping, and perhaps go to museums and galleries for which I may not have time. We are no longer

young, although I am six years older than my wife, and are fairly easily exhausted; nevertheless, she would like to have the opportunity of some independent sightseeing if that can be easily arranged. But on no account must you put yourself out for either of us. I should like to emphasise this very strongly: if I noticed that we were impinging too much on your normal lives, this would cause us genuine embarrassment. I mean this very seriously.

Naturally, we would want to see places, buildings and institutions that are most characteristic of the life of Japan. We have spoken to friends here who have been to Japan, and they recommend not only Kyoto and Nara, but also Osaka (in particular, Bunraku), Nikko, Hakone, and of course the shrines and gardens (particularly the women's garden, Rjnku²³ – I hope I have spelt this correctly – near Kyoto).



The gardens at Katsura Rikyū

²³ Probably Katsura Rikyū, the Katsura Imperial Villa and gardens in Kyoto: not a women's garden.

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With regard to food and the like, we would, I think, like to be initiated into the Japanese cuisine most of all – I am not very good with chopsticks, nor is my wife, but apart from that I should myself be inclined towards a Japanese diet rather than a Western one, so long as we are in Japan – you must certainly not assume that we wish to eat the selfsame food as we should in this country or America. I ought to add that I am practically a teetotaller – not on any principle, but because alcohol disagrees with me. My wife has perfectly normal tastes in wines and the like, but is reasonably abstemious.

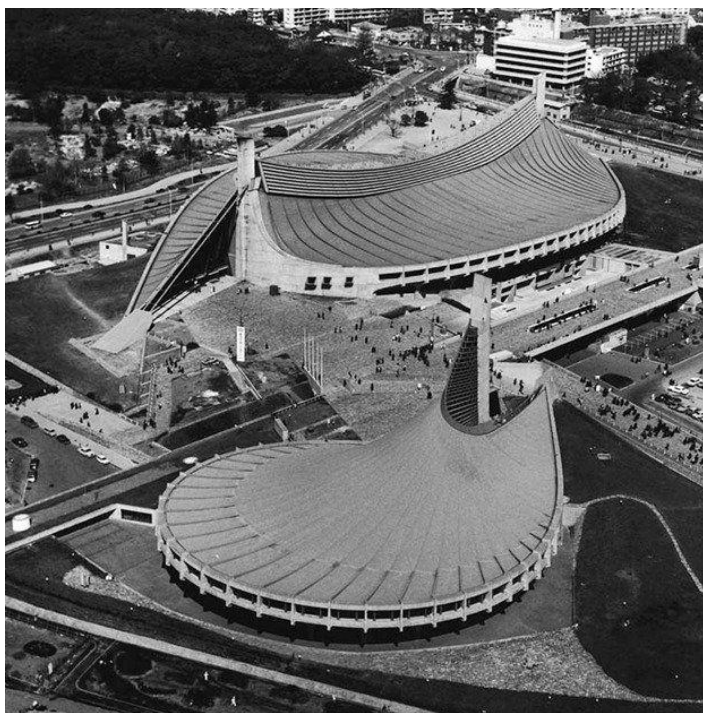
As for people to meet, since I scarcely know anyone in Japan I should be delighted to place myself in your hands for this purpose. Broadly speaking, the people who would interest me most are those who are interested in the history of ideas, Japanese, Buddhist or other ideas of Asia as well as Western ones. Political science interests me rather less, though political theory is, of course, a subject in which I should be delighted to meet specialists of whatever period or type. I expect that, because I am President of the British Academy, I ought to pay at least a courtesy visit to the corresponding Japanese institution – I think my colleagues would expect me to do that, and indeed, I should like to do so myself. Naturally we should like to fall in with any arrangement that you suggest. A week in Tokyo, then a week for visiting other places, then a return to Tokyo for the last few days, seems very acceptable to me.

As to staying in Tokyo, my wife and I would both be grateful if we could stay in a hotel straight away, on arrival. Professor Gottmann,²⁴ the Professor of Geography here, who is, I believe, very well known in Japan (a friend of Professor Tange and a world authority on the civilisation of cities and their designs, originally from Paris and Princeton), warmly praises the Palace Hotel, since he thinks it is more characteristic of Japanese life than the Okura;

²⁴ (Ivan) Jean Gutmann (1915–94), Professor of Geography, Oxford, 1968–83.

but if you think the Okura more suitable, we should be happy to stay there.

If the Japan Foundation finds, as it well may, that two weeks at one of these luxury hotels is more than they are accustomed to spe I have no particular intention of inflicting myself on the British Embassy, but again I may have to do that as a matter of etiquette – if you could send word to the British Ambassador (it sounds dreadfully pompous, but I owe this to my colleagues, some of whom may feel that it is required by my formal position) that the Japan Foundation has been kind enough to invite Sir Isaiah Berlin OM, and Lady Berlin, for three weeks, I should be obliged to you. (If nothing results from this, I shall be only too relieved.) Could this be done as inconspicuously as possible?



*Kenzo Tange's Olympic Stadium and swimming pool,
built for the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games*

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There is one eminent person whom I should love to see, and that is the architect Kenzo Tange, whom I had the pleasure of meeting in New York ten years ago, and whom I regard as the greatest architectural genius of our time. If he is in Tokyo, and not too busy, I should love to see him again: we would have invited him to build Wolfson College if we had had enough funds to put up the kind of building which would have given sufficient scope and expression to his unique gifts. The modern buildings I should most like to see in Japan are those which he has designed – e.g. the Olympic Stadium and swimming pool, the Roman Catholic cathedral and the like – I cannot exaggerate the strength of my admiration for his work. Naturally I have never been able to say this to his face – I expect it is a feeling which is shared by many people; I wish Europe had someone comparable to him. But it has not. Also, of course, I should like to see Mr Kawai, whom I met when he was at All Souls and I he and his charming wife came to see us – we enjoyed the occasion greatly.



St Mary's Cathedral, Tokyo, by Kenzō Tange, 1964

Naturally we should like to fall in with any arrangement that you suggest. A week in Tokyo, then a week for visiting other places, then a return to Tokyo for the last few days, seems very acceptable to me.

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If the Japan Foundation finds, as it well may, that two weeks at one of these luxury hotels is more than they are accustomed to spend on their visitors, we should be perfectly ready to contribute to the cost ourselves. Please do not take this as any reflection on the generosity of the Foundation, of which I have no doubt; it is only a means of suggesting that we should not like it if more was spent on us than on the other guests of the Foundation. If the arrangement I suggest suits the Foundation better, please have no hesitation in acting upon it – we should be happy to contribute to our expenses. [...]

This is all. I think, that I have to tell you at the moment. If other thoughts or problems come up, I shall interpret the kind suggestion you make in your ninth point quite literally, and write to you as soon as ideas burgeon in my mind. I do not suppose they will. But one never knows. If it is any trouble, please ignore my suggestion about communicating with the British Embassy – it is not of the slightest importance.

²⁵ (Ivan) Jean Gutmann (1915–94), Professor of Geography, Oxford, 1968–83.

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May I say again how grateful I am to you and Mr Komatsu²⁶ and the Japan Foundation and everyone else concerned for making this visit possible. We both look forward to it most eagerly, particularly seeing you and talking with you again on a wide variety of matters, in the most uninhibited manner.

Yours sincerely,
Isaiah Berlin

TO THE COUNTESS OF DUDLEY AND ROBERT SILVERS

21 April 1977 [*manuscript postcard of Zen garden: 'The snowy scene of rock garden'*]

Miyako Hotel, Kyoto

Tokyo is not as horrible as described: but Japanese culture *is* mysterious: beneath the huge carapace of Western technology etc. there is an unbroken continuity with a formal, very unebullient, stiff, genuinely exotic, non Weidenfeldable culture. Most odd and rather marvellous: much much stranger than Japanese experts led one to imagine. We are off to *Nara* which our intellectual guides describe as "horrible, vulgar baroque". Anything less American than my dinner with Japanese scholars is not imaginable: grave, formal, serious, the sentences formed by a sort of inner calligraphy: beautiful & somewhat stifling.

Isaiah

[PS by Aline] Les manières super. Renée, le traitement super VIP, les jardins, l'hôtel Japanese-style, nous enchantent + salvés par l'All Bran! A.

²⁶ Jun'etsu Komatsu, director of the London office of the Japan Foundation from 1975.

TO NOBUTOSHI HAGIHARA

23 May 1977

Headington House

Dear Mr Hagihara,

I know that you were the primary agent of getting the Japan foundation to invite us, and no one has ever done a greater favour to my wife and myself in the course of our long lives. It was a most marvellous experience at every moment – we trod on air – no one who lives in a country, especially one like Japan, which has its own coherent inner pattern and internalised discipline, in which so much that the West probably does not begin to understand is taken for granted, can ever tell what a marvellous and transforming experience it is for foreigners to be allowed to contemplate it – to enter it is a very different matter, and I wonder whether anyone from the West has really succeeded in doing so at any depth. But that is another subject.

What can I say but that my wife and I are infinitely grateful to you for everything – for suggesting our names to the Foundation, for getting them to invite us, for the style in which we were received and accompanied and entertained, with infinite courtesy and tact at all stages, for meeting us in Nikko, for greeting us on our arrival and accompanying us on our departure, for being so patient and understanding, for explaining everything, and for spending so much time (which I realise only too well, who am exposed to this kind of hasty work against the clock myself) in looking after us, tearing yourself away from your biographical chapters. I, too, am quite incapable of preparing anything in good time – only under hideous pressure, urgently – and therefore everything I have ever written is incomplete, insufficiently thought out, inexact, unscholarly, with all the marks of a messenger waiting at the door to take it to the printer: but these things are matters of temperament and probably cannot be avoided. You and I, Shakespeare and Dickens, Dostoevsky and Balzac, write like this: Dante, Tolstoy, Goethe, Joyce, Proust, and, I am sure, most

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Japanese writers, worked differently – polished, thought-out perfection: perhaps that is why I am temperamentally opposed to utopias, and prefer untidy, improvised, impermanent human compromises.

But this letter is really intended to offer you our deepest gratitude for your initiative and your help and your company and all that you have done for us. I shall never think about the world in the same way now that I have visited Japan – it has transformed my conception of human possibilities, and for the richer and the better.

I do hope we may meet again soon. When are you coming to the West? I am prepared to go a very long way to meet you again.

Yours sincerely,

Isaiah Berlin

[...]

TO MASAO MARUYAMA²⁷

23 May 1977

Headington House

Dear Professor Maruyama,

I felt, and so did my wife, throughout our three weeks in Japan, that we were moving in a noble and coherent dream of great beauty and some strangeness. It was a transcending experience, in some ways the strongest cultural impact I have ever suffered in my life; but (and perhaps this is an indication of a certain shallowness of nature on my part), however disturbing, it was always enjoyable. It was sometimes tantalising – not exactly inscrutable, but composed of an infinity of perspectives, so that each door opens into a prospect that leads one to the next, to an apparently infinite *enfilade*,²⁸ each of which is completely satisfying in itself and yet

²⁷ Masao Maruyama (1914–96), Japanese political theorist; prof. of the history of East Asian (especially Japanese) political thought, dept of law, Tokyo, 1950–71.

²⁸ In this sense, a suite of rooms with doorways in line with each other, creating a vista of repeated elements when the doors are open.

creates a yearning for that which lies behind it. I am not expressing myself very clearly, and all this romantic patter is merely an attempt to convey how strange and marvellous I found it all. You never warned me, during our meetings in Oxford, how firmly, despite all the modernisation and Westernisation of the Japanese cities and economic life, the independent Japanese culture had in fact been preserved. Beside it, England, and particularly America, must surely seem crude, chaotic, shoddy, horribly uncontrolled. All this on the basis of three weeks in Japan! What right have I to generalise, or say anything at all about a life and a civilisation of which I have only seen the tip of the topmost part of the surface? Is there anyone in the West who truly understands it? I doubt this. I remember my conversations with Sansom, a learned, careful, sympathetic, modest and deeply scholarly man, as you know, but I do not think that he conveyed the essence: certainly Lafcadio Hearn didn't. People tell me that Dore, my colleague at the British Academy, knows all about it. I have yet to meet him – I wonder how deeply he penetrated.

I suspect that even China is more intelligible to Westerners than Japan, if only because the contact of the Chinese with foreigners is longer, more continuous, and so the adaptation is greater. But I think this insulation a marvellous thing – the desire to knock down walls and cause familiarity between everyone and everyone can go too far. A fastidious withdrawal is a precondition of certain forms of artistic creation and spiritual self-protection, without which all values tend to assimilation, identity – that is, evaporate altogether. But again, I am beginning to indulge in fine writing.

What I really wish to say is that I know well that it is Mr Hagihara, Mr Kawai and yourself who are responsible for getting us invited: and since Mr Hagihara and Mr Kawai are your disciples, it is really to you that we owe it all. For fear of further fine writing, let me say that it has been the most marvellous visit of our life; and that nothing, even a second visit to Japan, could ever equal it; and that for this I shall always remain profoundly grateful to you. I am not really used to VIP treatment, but even that was done with such exquisite tact and courtesy that it was never oppressive, never

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excessive. I must not go on. You will, I am sure, know that I cannot put into words my real feeling; but I wish you to know that it is unique and delightful, and that you are its primary begetter.

Let me ask you only one question. If I were to propose you for a Visiting Fellowship to All Souls in 1979/80, would that be about right in the way of dates? I have no idea what the College will or will not do, but pressure upon the gates is very strong; I am determined to try, but I should like to know whether this would be convenient for you, and whether you would wish to come for a year, or two terms only, and if so, which. There is, of course, no need to answer immediately, but if you were to let me know sometime, I should be grateful.

In the meanwhile, we both send blessings upon your head.

Yours sincerely,
Isaiah Berlin

TO ROBERT SILVERS

3 June 1977

Headington House

Dear Bob,

[...] When are you coming? Shall we see you in Italy? (Yes of course: Aline *has* the dates) It is sad about Salzburg – I hope all is not lost. I wish you had been here to come to the party to celebrate the publication of Stuart's book – he is most anxious not to have the book reviewed and extracted a promise from John Gross not to do so – he goes even further than I do in this respect – very un-American conduct. The party would have amused you, because the mixture of Stuart's literary friends and members of the British Academy presented a motley aspect, which delighted me more, perhaps, than it should have done. The two groups held off from each other somewhat – Stuart moved awkwardly from one to the other, I crossed the line with less embarrassment. Two lives, two moralities.

Yours ever,
Isaiah

TO ROBERT SILVERS

18 July 1977 [*dictated but not read by IB*]²⁹

Headington House

Dear Bob,

I have just had a letter from Nicolas Nabokov telling me that at the obsequies for his cousin Vladimir, the organist played ‘Thy Tiny Hand is Frozen’ from *Bobème*, and Véra N., looking like a cross between the wicked fairy Carabosse and Indira Gandhi, said to him that you and I were ‘pink’ and unreliable, that the only decent organisation to be defended by all good men was the CIA, that she is a passionate supporter of Likud and likes Begin very much save for his teeth. What will happen? I feel as worried as you. For once Izzy and I are in the same camp – I saw him here with pleasure, and the thought of him and his wife joining the eight hundred or so guests at the entomological congress held by Miriam Rothschild gave me acute pleasure. She wrote to me that they were indeed there but that she only obtained a fleeting glimpse of them, as she was mainly engaged on the papers on fleas, and seeing that the polo players were adequately serviced. It all does seem like the end of an *ancien régime*.

Aline left yesterday morning and I go to Paraggi tomorrow. When are you coming? Perhaps Aline knows precisely, but I do not. Anyway, perhaps you will telephone Paraggi – Santa Margherita Ligure 88441 in case you have lost it – as soon as you feel inclined, and set at rest my doubt.

Take no notice of poor old Noam: to say that protest about repression in Vietnam and Cambodia must not be made because it helps ‘them’ will not do. I have similar uneasiness about torture in Israel. Ever since David Caute, who is not at all pro-Israel, came back and said that he thought that many of the stories about the treatment of Arabs were true, but that the stories about torture were not, I have felt relief, as he is – on this sort of thing – a

²⁹ Last page typed on pre-signed sheet.

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reasonably impartial witness. And David Pryce-Jones wrote to the same effect, as you know, and he certainly believes that what he says is true – though what exactly the evidence is, I do not know. I wish the Israelis did not behave like every other sovereign state, or looked on suggestions that they might be investigated by some impartial agency, say, the International Jurists, as a slight to them – not the way any other sovereign state would be treated – and would allow a reasonably impartial investigation. Those *Sunday Times* articles were, I thought, pretty monstrous: the ‘Insight’ team are not reputable persons – they change, of course, from occasion to occasion, but certainly the people who came to see me some years ago about Burgess and Maclean did not impress me with their seriousness or scruple. I suspect that there must be actual cases of something pretty near to torture in the case of some of the terrorists they catch – the temptation to discover what else has been planned must, after all, be pretty irresistible, and Arabs are not the most stoical of prisoners. I believe this without evidence, but I cannot believe there is no fire at all behind the smoke. On the other hand, the horror stories of the *Sunday Times* are founded on information from Arabs who are living peacefully in Israel still, plus Miss Langer and her friends, and the lunatic Professor of Chemistry, whose name I cannot remember, who seemed unbalanced to Stuart, whom he saw in Oxford – that, with the repetition of the same old stories during the last seven or eight years, cannot be regarded as dependable evidence. My view is that Israel has nothing to lose if they publish the truth – even if parts of it are disagreeable – any more than the English had when they confessed to torture in Northern Ireland and promised to stop it. But I daresay it is impossible to expect this anywhere in the Middle East – or, indeed, anywhere except in a very few Western countries at present. Someone ought to write about when torture began again in the Western world – it has never ceased in China, I suppose, or in Persia, or Turkey. But I have a feeling that the last real torture – as opposed to being knocked about by the police – in Europe ceased in the early nineteenth century, in Russia under Alexander I, in Spain and Portugal and Italy at about this time too, just after

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Tosca, so to speak. I don't think King Bomba actually tortured anyone, though his gaols were not much better. Assuming that the Pope ceased torturing in about 1810, and that the Iberians did so too, the re-introduction of systematic torture by professionals with special techniques, as it were, must have begun in Russia in the 1920s, with the Cheka. Suppose someone said that, would Chomsky and his choir be aflame with indignation? The whole thing is a most horrible subject, but probably should not be burked.

I shall read Avishai in Italy, or will that be too late? Will you have published it by then? Anyway, do ring me up.

yrs,

Isaiah

TO BRYAN MAGEE

16 November 1977

Headington House

Dear Bryan,

The walk was *most* enjoyable. Popper's essay is definitely not here – I do not think he did send it to me: if you could tell me how to get it through ordinary commercial channels, I shall endeavour to do so – I shall say this to you in the interval of *Lobengrin* if I see you. As for body/mind dualism, I do not really know what the true issues involved are: and Popper's views on the external world are to me less interesting than his views on method, and on human freedom.

Yours,

Isaiah

[...]

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TO BRYAN MAGEE

24 March 1978

Headington House

Dear Bryan,

Do not worry! It shall be as if nothing had been said by anyone to anyone. Anyway, I have now heard it from the horse's mouth, with a similar invocation to secrecy. If anything does leak, it will not be through me – I have observed the most sacred silence on the subject, and indeed simulate total ignorance, even to persons well known to us both, who have come near the truth, owing to a near-leakage from certain quarters in London: but I retained, so far as I am capable of this, a poker face and merely nodded absently from time to time. I am sure this is morally and politically right, and will lead to the greater happiness of quite a large number.

Now I have a request to make, which you will instinctively tend to turn down, but do not do so. I want to introduce a footnote – no more – to my piece: a footnote of about twenty or thirty words, to account for an apparent discrepancy between two positions which I adopt: (*a*) the business of moral philosophers is not to tell people what to do but to elucidate the assumptions of their moral or political beliefs and contrast them with the fundamental assumptions of alternative moral doctrines, i.e. second-order propositions (that sort of thing being the general task of philosophy), and (*b*) the fact that the vast majority of moral philosophers have in fact uttered first-order propositions, telling people what to do, or what is good, or what is worthy or right – which is as it should be, since it is the job of philosophy to look after all assertions that are neither empirical nor formal – baskets etc. This may look inconsistent, but is not, and there is no reason why philosophers should not do both these things. I can say all this in a condensed manner, but say it I must, else this will be the first point to be attacked in every serious review which takes any notice of my piece. I do beg you to allow me to do this – I cannot believe that a late insertion of this kind is physically or technologically

uninsertable. So *do* be nice, and let me do it, and tell me how many words I can have, and I shall condense my none too simple footnote to that. I do not think I possess the corrected text of my talk – if I could have at least the photostated page of where the relevant passage comes, I should be grateful. Do be kind and forgive me for this last-minute intrusion. (I lie awake for thinking of it: it worries me.)

Yours,
Isaiah

I enjoyed lunch v. much as usual. I cannot exaggerate Sir Karl's toughness in negotiation – terrible!

TO GRACE DUDLEY

25 August 1978 [*manuscript*]

Paraggi

Dear Grace

We enjoyed your visit vastly, as always: you have been watching the Pope's funeral Mass: we propose, to-day, to get to a colour TV – will Pirelli have it? – to see the procession of Cardinals filing into the Conclave: I see that Chairman Hua has taken no chances: a Chinese Pope would have been a marvellous move (do you think I could send the Contessa Archinto, who is distinctly highbrow, Ronald Firbank's *Cardinal Pirelli*? Would this, somehow, destroy our peaceful relations? I think it might: I am terribly tempted)

Thank you for the postcard from Venice – it took exactly 23 days to arrive (it came yesterday) & for Mongiardino: he was charming, but sunk in a gentle melancholy, distressed by the failure of the film [on] Nietzsche,³⁰ and sighing after something to follow

³⁰ *Beyond Good and Evil* (Liliana Cavani, 1978), for which Renzo Mongiardino (1916–98) was the production designer.

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his décor of Thyssen's house near Oxford:³¹ I had no idea he was so near: this should excite the Trevor Ropers. And thank you for the invaluable programmes: *most* useful: I'll get credit for this which belongs to you: I shall be relieved when Karajan stops conducting, and the entire world of opera will feel a great clearing of the air, and everyone will start circulating more freely and the Salzburg prices will slowly drop when ten or twenty Japanese conductors, singers, players will take the whole thing over and perform *everything*. I shd like to live to 2000: (I shall be seriously annoyed if I die before 1990 – my Lebensplan is founded on that). Aline sends her fondest love

yrs

Isaiah

TO PATRICK NEILL

3 April 1978

Headington House

Dear Patrick,

Enryanthe, Coliseum, 22 May. I have secured four tickets for this performance – could you both come with Aline and me? It would be exceedingly nice if you would.

I hope the American tour was profitable.

The more I think of it, the more desirable it seems to me that the Research Committee should be charged with thinking about academic policy – the fears of members of the GPC about impingement on their powers seem to me groundless. I doubt, to take an analogous case, if the Council of the British Academy would ever stir from its dogmatic slumber if it were not prodded by what is in effect the Research Committee, which spends something approaching £300,000 a year in grants etc. As it is, exciting and useful reforms in that field have in fact taken place. It

³¹ Hans Henrik Ágost Gábor, Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza de Kászon et Impérfalva (1921–2002) bought Daylesford, Gloucestershire, in 1978 and had the interiors redesigned by Mongiardino.

may be that the Research Committee would in that case have to be slightly afforded. It obviously should do more than merely examine the progress and claims to promotion of existing Fellows (or am I being unfair to it? that is all I did in the days when I sat on it – it was somewhat stodgy and immobile in those days). I do not plead for unbridled dynamism, but it plainly could do much more than it does at present.

Which reminds me: Momigliano – I do not know what exactly his status is – expires this summer, and surely ought to be renewed for, say, another three years. He is a man of world prestige and genuine ornament to us, even if he is a little too touchy about the mild criticisms which our fearless Quondams, Fergus Millar and Hornblower, allowed themselves to publish in the *TLS*. I have reminded Peter Fraser (M's college sponsor) and Michael Wallace-Hadrill, who may mention it to you. It would be wrong to let him lapse by default and be absorbed totally by the University of Chicago – so far as I know, we pay him nothing.

Yours,

Isaiah

TO PATRICK NEILL

5 May 1978

Headington House

Dear Patrick,

I enclose two tickets in case it is best to meet at the Coliseum. I had no idea that Byron wrote verse tragedies – I cannot believe that I shall be able to read it before the performance. It would be best if we met in the Coliseum just before – or, if either of us is late, we can go straight to our seats and meet in the interval. I have thought of a rather good new restaurant for supper afterwards.

Yours ever,

Isaiah

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PS Don't forget Momigliano! He is in Chicago, enjoying the limelight there with John Sparrow, at the moment: they are both Alexander White Visiting Professors, and presumably alternate – or perhaps it is a double turn.

TO BRYAN MAGEE

19 May 1978

Headington House

Dear Bryan,

I had no idea that my letter went off with a 7p stamp; it was done in All Souls lodge – until now, I did not realise that they presumably do this automatically unless one marks the envelope differently. Did you know this? I suspect you know more about All Souls than I do, so the question is not at all absurd.

I knew that the Powells wanted to talk about Elizabeth Bowen and did not know how interested you might be in this – although I was bound to her by ties of warm friendship, I could not read her later, and probably best, novels – and this she knew, and to some degree it inevitably came between us. I simply assumed that unless one took an especial interest in her novels, and in particular in *The Death of the Heart*, one might not be gripped by the circumstances which obviously had something to do with the position of that novel. I am glad that I was wrong, and that you enjoyed it all.

I have just read the draft of a piece on myself in *Isis*, which the author kindly let me read – there is no malice in it, only goodwill, but the result seems to me appalling: inaccurate, confused, composed solely of non sequiturs. After it, I have sunk to about 43 per cent.

Yours,

Isaiah

PS A BBC photographer³² suddenly appeared in London and took shots of me walking into Burlington House en route to the British Academy – this for the benefit of ‘our’ forthcoming volume. Can I be allowed to choose what seems to me the least repellent? I expect they all will be, but some may be a little less horrible than others. I hate being photographed or having my hair cut – I hesitate to ask Anthony Storr about this, but shall do so one day – or you might find out for me. Don't tell me the answer if it is too terrible.

TO GRACE DUDLEY

25 August 1978 [*manuscript*]

Paraggi

Dear Grace

We enjoyed your visit vastly, as always: you have been watching the Pope's funeral Mass: we propose, to-day, to get to a colour TV – will Pirelli have it? – to see the procession of Cardinals filing into the Conclave: I see that Chairman Hua has taken no chances: a Chinese Pope would have been a marvellous move (do you think I could send the Contessa Archinto, who is distinctly highbrow, Ronald Firbank's *Cardinal Pirelli*? Would this, somehow, destroy our peaceful relations? I think it might: I am terribly tempted)

Thank you for the postcard from Venice – it took exactly 23 days to arrive (it came yesterday) & for Mongiardino: he was charming, but sunk in a gentle melancholy, distressed by the failure of the film [on] Nietzsche,³³ and sighing after something to follow his décor of Thyssen's house near Oxford:³⁴ I had no idea he was so near: this should excite the Trevor Ropers. And thank you for

³² Geoff A. Howard.

³³ *Beyond Good and Evil* (Liliana Cavani, 1978), for which Renzo Mongiardino (1916–98) was the production designer.

³⁴ Hans Henrik Ágost Gábor, Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza de Káson et Impérfalva (1921–2002) bought Daylesford, Gloucestershire, in 1978 and had the interiors redesigned by Mongiardino.

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the invaluable programmes: *most* useful: I'll get credit for this which belongs to you: I shall be relieved when Karajan stops conducting, and the entire world of opera will feel a great clearing of the air, and everyone will start circulating more freely and the Salzburg prices will slowly drop when ten or twenty Japanese conductors, singers, players will take the whole thing over and perform *everything*. I shd like to live to 2000: (I shall be seriously annoyed if I die before 1990 – my Lebensplan is founded on that). Aline sends her fondest love

yrs

Isaiah

TO WILLIAM STEWART³⁵

21 September 1978

Headington House

Dear Stewart,

Thank you for your letter of 26 July, which I have only seen now, on return from abroad. I read your 'Alcaics' with the greatest pleasure – if only I could be as optimistic as you about the activities of Basques, Bretons, Flemings, Catalans, Corsicans – and the far larger beasts in the ever more dangerous jungle. You may be right: at any rate, we shall not know how far the prophecies are fulfilled.

The Forster experts have now discovered that my attribution of 'Everything is like something, what is this like?' is correct – it is contained in one of the essays in *Abinger Harvest*.³⁶ Why they denied it originally, I cannot think. I do not think Forster deserves the minute examination to which Dante or Shakespeare have been

³⁵ William McCausland Stewart (1900–89), formerly (1945–68) Professor of French, Bristol; poet and translator.

³⁶ Not quite accurate. Forster wrote, 'Everything must be like something, so what is this like?' 'Our Diversions', 3, 'The Doll Souse' (1924): *Abinger Harvest* (London, 1936: cf. F 161/1), 49 ('This' is Queen Mary's dolls' house). Cf. F 212/1.

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subjected – but still, those who do set up as authorities on his entire *oeuvre* should not, perhaps, be too quick to assert the existence or non-existence of a particular passage – it may be misdirected scholarship, but if it claims to be scholarship at all ... but I will not go on.

Thank you ever so much for your charming letter.

Yours ever,

Isaiah Berlin

TO PATRICK NEILL

6 October 1978

Headington House

Dear Patrick,

Thank you very much for asking us to *Don Carlos* – we shall be delighted to come. If they start at 6.30, I feel they are morally obliged to do the ballet as well (which is not likely) – do you know it? It is very rarely performed, but it exists – there is a tremendous description of it by Andrew Porter: it has the same name, which I have now forgotten, as a famous jewel with which it is in some way connected, bought by Richard Burton for Miss Taylor.

Yours,

Isaiah

TO PATRICK NEILL

27 October 1978 [*manuscript*]

All Souls

Dear Patrick,

'*Three things:*' as my late friend, Sir M. Bowra used to say when opening a conversation: in order of importance

1) Would you both come to *L'Africaine* at Cov. Garden on Nov. 25 (Saturday though it is) to the R. Box with us? Where else will you have heard Meyerbeer opulently produced, and not in some

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lecture hall in London University? *Do* come if you can. As for Don Carlos, I can endure almost anything: Aline possibly not.

2) I wish Kerrigan wrote in a less exalté manner. Is it mere old age that makes me long for a less decorated style? I see no muscle or mental power – am I mistaken?

3) I cannot alas come to the Campbell–Hailsham celebration. I have to dine with a body of scientists who were helpful to Wolfson Coll. during its difficult birth. I do apologise.

Yours,

Isaiah

TO BRYAN MAGEE

5 December 1978

Headington House

Dear Bryan,

Alas, on 11 December Aline and I have promised to lunch with Lord and Lady Redcliffe-Maud in their house in North Oxford – this is an engagement made God knows how many weeks ago. If you would like to come and have a drink before lunch, in Headington or All Souls – I should be delighted: if in All Souls, come in time to let me walk from All Souls to somewhere in the Woodstock Road – what with one-way streets etc. I don't want to make Aline or anyone else have to pick me up in a car, and I should quite enjoy walking – unless there is very heavy rain. I am glad to know that Schopenhauer will be achieved. How many MPs engage in any intellectual pursuits? I can think only of Michael Foot, Quintin Hogg – and I am not a fan of their works: there is no need to mention Ian Gilmour either. Since Crosland and Crossman (Douglas Jay is in the remote past), is there anyone at all? Apart from yourself? If not, why not? Is the Labour Party entirely given over to Philistines? Have the old LSE ideologues, in some of their writings certainly, no successors at all?

Yours,

Isaiah

TO ROBERT SILVERS

13 December 1978

Headington House

Dear Bob,

Your scribbled messages always send my spirits upwards – do not stint them. [...]

In the meanwhile, poor Stephen has had terribly nasty things said about him – first by the horrible Conrad in the *New Statesman*, then, I am told, by A. Forbes in the *Spectator* – I have not read that but am told it is so dreadful that even Mrs Fleming was moved to moral indignation – I dare not mention it to Stephen. I wonder why he attracts such bitter hostility – he is obviously felt to have got away with it somehow, by the envious and the defeated – even Dr Leavis did not go to such lengths of purely personal denigration. Used to it as he must by now be, nevertheless it hurts him deeply. I do hate the public outpouring of innocent blood – any blood, really, but particularly that of someone so curiously unprotected as Stephen is – nobody ever attacked Tolstoy or Dostoevsky like that, or Graham Greene or Evelyn Waugh, because they were thought too formidable – whereas Turgenev and Stephen are exposed to this kind of thing, and evoke a patronising tone even from their most admiring commentators.

I must stop, and go to an All Souls College meeting which promises to be stormy. I am grateful to the College for giving me a Fellowship in what is called the evening of my life. My life would have been much duller without it.

As I always say at the end of my letters to you, when are you coming?

Yours,

Isaiah

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TO ISAAC STERN

14 December 1978

Headington House

Dear Isaac,

It is terrible not to have spoken to you: you are quite right. It all began with my telephoning your (perfectly authentic) number, and being told by the New York operator that no such number existed: I did this three or four times from my hotel room, with the same result. After this monstrous and inexplicable sabotage, I did telephone a message to the America–Israel Foundation – I did not know what else to do – and duly received a message from, I expect, Vera, giving me the original number. On return I rang it, and received no answer whatever. On the next day there was a voice, which informed me that you were both away and that you would be away for some days – until two or three days, in fact, after we were due to depart. So there it was, and is. But it does not make it less unthinkable. Obviously I ought to have cabled you beforehand, and for failing to do this I do blame myself.

Now, let us turn away from the past and gaze confidently into the future. We shall be there on Sunday 4 February – tickets have been ordered (at least, I hope they have). On the 2nd, we hear an opera called *Evgeny Onegin* at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in what used to be called the Royal Box. If you are in London, and free that evening, come for the whole or part of it as you please – you can be fed during the intervals – so can Vera if she is with you (but you must let me know about this a few days before). March on: on Saturday 3rd I am, alas, blocked by a College meeting which is likely to be stormy and long, but would be free in Oxford in the afternoon, say, after 3 p.m. – so, although I shall not be able to come to London that day, you could perhaps come here? Or could I come to London sometime before your concert on Sunday and have a talk to you? On Friday the 9th we go to Budapest, don't ask why; on Monday we return, and unless totally broken (which in my present condition may in fact happen) we

shall, if invited, go to the Rothschild festival (of which not a word has been breathed by the honorands to us so far). On Tuesday 13 February I am due to go to the Oxford Opera Club's performance of *Fidelio*, for attending which there is no possible musical motive; on the 14th we have to [go to] a Covent Garden dinner somewhat connected with a financial appeal – it is plain to me that I cannot do all these things without dramatically shortening my own life, and Aline at a certain point will intervene; so will the doctor. This is just a general impression of what life is like for us at the beginning of February: however, it is plainly necessary, come what may, and I literally mean that, to carve out some time for conversation – I have placed the facts before you, the rest is all yours. Happy New Year.

Yours ever,
Isaiah

TO PATRICK NEILL

5 January 1979

Headington House

Dear Patrick,

Thank you ever so much for your letter of 19 December. I shall, undeniably, be 70 on June 6 next: Judge Learned Hand correctly observed – ‘One begins by forgetting names, then nouns, then everything’ – I am approaching the last stage at a gallop.

It is very sweet of you to suggest a small gathering on the relevant Wednesday – I do not propose to celebrate it in any way myself – my parents did not believe in birthdays, I was never given any presents on that day, and it is a wonder I did not grow up a grim, alienated misanthrope, a man of few words, and those better unspoken on the one hand, or, on the other, a heartless Don Juan as, according to modern psychology, I should have. So if you would like me to dine on 6 June, I should be happy to do so – if you would rather it was 2 June, I should be equally happy about that. Aline thinks there may be some difficulty about the 9th.

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And of course we should be delighted to dine with you on 8 June.

For all these things, I offer you my warmest thanks. I hope we shall meet before that, and if not sooner then at least on the fateful 3 February, with the eyes of the whole world, allegedly, gazing upon us.

Yours,

Isaiah

One more thing: will anything of great moment come up at the *stated* College Meeting in *March* (as opposed to Feb.)? I am committed to a ridiculous Eighteenth century gathering about then with various Royal Society profs – and I make superhuman efforts to get back on the 17th & I have to go to Princeton *and* Jerusalem but may get out of Princeton: in Jerusalem, alas, I have to start proceedings off in place of Bullock (!) resigned.

I.B.

TO JACOB TALMON

29 January 1979

Headington House

Dear Yaacov,

I was delighted to receive your letter and to learn from it, both from your explicit testimony and from the general tone of the letter, that you are in order: that you have been working peacefully, that your heart has not given you trouble, that you like the Center and North Carolina (where I, too, was once quite happy for about a week at Duke), that Charles Frankel conducts it all decently, and so on. I am glad, above all, that you have finished your last volume – it must be an enormous relief – I do not suppose that you feel quite like Gibbon; nevertheless, you must have a sense of parting with an old friend, and a sense of liberty too, as if a kingdom of necessity were over and a kingdom of freedom had begun. I feel that simply because of retirement: still hacking away at this and

that, but the compulsion has diminished. Physical health is everything: we both have something to complain of – you, perhaps, more than I; but I, too, during my brief visit to America in November (Yale, Washington etc.), was once more subjected to my irregular pulse and extreme discomfort. No sooner did I come back to England than on the whole it abated: it is a pure result of tension and in America I never feel relaxed. Even dinner parties induce it. At any rate, I came back to England a patient, swallowed some sort of new pills given me by a clever Jewish doctor (what an anti-Semitic phrase!), which seem to have done me good.

So now I gird my loins to go to the deeply troubled land of Israel. It all began with an invitation from the Princeton Institute to deliver a lecture on Einstein's impact on general thought as part of the centenary celebrations which they are holding there. I replied as politely as I could to Dr Woolf, of the Institute, that, while his impact on the conception of the physical universe was obviously transforming, and his impact on the philosophy of science, according to some, significant (it was genuine, but smaller than people suppose), his impact on the world of general thought was, to say the least, problematic. There is no doubt about Newton's impact on the entire Enlightenment, or Darwin's, in ways which I am sure you discuss in your last volume (if you call him a scientist), or Freud's on our world – but Einstein's? I should say virtually none. Of course relativity was interpreted as relativism – everything is relative, etc. – but he happened to believe the precise opposite, that there was an objective material world, independent of human thought, and that although our concepts were not, as he had once believed, themselves derived from experience (which Mach had taught), but were arbitrary creations of the ever-creative human imagination and intellect, nevertheless the many possible ways of describing this world were only valid if they corresponded to some kind of external reality, of which men were a part but which, *pace* Marx, they did not – so far as natural science was concerned – affect in any way.

I did not say all this to Dr Woolf, but I did say that I did not think that the subject he proposed for me existed. He wrote back

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very politely and said that what he had meant was the world in which Einstein had lived; I replied once again that the German world was known to others better than to myself, the Princeton world also, and that I was totally unqualified to deal with this topic. I then received a similar invitation from Washington, which I declined in similar terms. I then received one from Jerusalem: Aline said that I could not refuse everything and that whatever my pulse and its rhythms, I must do something. So I agreed to say a few words by way of introduction to Isaac Stern and his orchestra – and this I have composed and wonder whether it begins to be adequate. I suffer from despising everything I write: what others write is objective, valid, important, true, original, at least sometimes; what I write is invented by me, so what value can it possibly have? Money is genuine only if made by an external, authorised agency; money one makes oneself is a forgery. I feel this about everything I write. It is a form of self-persecution which will end only with the grave. Modesty can go with a just valuation of oneself; self-depreciation carried to the degree which I carry it induces only despair. In my most optimistic moods, I think that I am perhaps not quite as useless as I cannot help believing about any of my activities taken one by one. But enough about myself.

I only wish to report that I have to go in March to Israel to attend some meetings of the Music Centre, interview Rothschild scholarship candidates and talk about Einstein; and again in April in connection with the Book Fair, which I promised to do. You, I suppose, will be in America during the whole of this time? I naturally regret this, for I do not know when I shall be coming to Israel after that, or you to England. Your letters to me are the only totally convincing account of Israeli politics that I receive: I occasionally go to meetings of a little group in London which is addressed by the Israel Ambassador (who has just been sacked unceremoniously and gratuitously by Dayan, simply because he did not like him – he is a perfectly good Ambassador, dignified, socially highly acceptable, and intelligent – there was no real reason for dismissing him with the kind of brutal suddenness which shocked and distressed everyone who liked him here. He was not

marvellous, but he was much more than adequate; this seems to me fairly symptomatic of the way in which Israeli policy is conducted now, with total disregard for other lands and reactions in the most influential circles, both in great matters and in minute ones like this).

To return – the Israel Ambassador occasionally tells us about what is going on, so does Lord Weidenfeld. The latter takes a straight pro-Begin line – it took him about six hours to switch from Labour to Likud and it will take less than that to switch back if it is necessary. What he says is always ingenious, interesting, imaginative, amusing and outwardly convincing: made up, ‘contrived’ (Tolstoy’s most pejorative description). He is good company and I enjoy listening to him almost always, but it lacks moral and even intellectual weight, rather like Nahum Goldmann. It is bright, and on the subject of individuals and their attitudes, amusing and instructive; but the trouble, in a sense, is not dissimilar to that with Harold Laski: no genuine moral substance – ambition, amiability, brilliance, vanity, charm, a certain innocence (true of Laski, not of George or Nahum), but a total lack of anything resembling integrity or moral steadfastness or Machiavelli’s *virtù*, which so forgotten a figure as, let us say, the late Reverend J. K. Goldbloom, whose name you will remember from your days here during the last war, represented so incomparably more, in my eyes, than these iridescent, lightweight figures.

In the meanwhile, all that you say about the policies of the Israel Government is painfully true: when I was in Washington in mid November the mood was sharply anti-Israel, on the part of friend and foe alike (this is true of official circles in England too – but it was always truer of establishment opinion in England so far as officials were concerned than even in America – with the sole exception of the State Department and the Foreign Office, which were always at one on this issue). Nor is the idea of sending Harold Wilson to the United States to collect money for the Technion a very marvellous one, it seems to me – although rich American Jews are as naive as rich British Jews, and the savour of even an ex-Prime Minister with Wilson’s particular characteristics may give

them naive pleasure and a false sense of important allies in important places.

To go back to Washington, when I was there Henry Kissinger said more or less what you said to me: that partition was the only sensible and practicable solution. He maintained that by talking about home rule on the West Bank the Begin Government had given away all its cards, that home rule was clearly unrealisable – and must lead to war or to an Arab state; that the frontiers of such a state are pre-selected by offering the entire West Bank for home rule, and that this leaves Israel with no diplomatic or military cards to play – which seemed to him unaccountably stupid: ‘unaccountably’ is the only inappropriate word, it seems to me, but he is surely right – large concessions but not complete cession of territory on the West Bank seems the only feasible alternative. And I have a terrible feeling that Israel is behaving rather as the European powers did vis-à-vis German claims in the early 1930s – what was not given to the Democrats was given to Brüning; what was not given to Brüning was offered to Schleicher or Groener; what was not offered to them was offered to Papen, and so to Hitler. In other words, a somewhat precarious but not hopeless peace could have been purchased years ago by concessions far smaller than those which now seem, even to the allies of Israel, ridiculously small; there was a moment when enough Arabs would have accepted them and it would have been difficult for the others to fight a war to reject them. Still, all this is speculative, and would-have-been history which E. H. Carr and other realists reject as unworthy of serious men. How wrong, how deeply wrong, such people are: nothing in history can be understood save in terms of possible alternatives – it is only disbelief in the existence of alternatives, i.e. of [sc. in] a rigid determinism (I am back on my hobby-horse) that makes history so dreadfully boring. Carr’s history of the Soviet Union, although very full of material, carefully and excellently written, is one of the most tedious and dreary books in existence: if ever the archives, or even a part of them, are opened, it will have to be rewritten very radically.

Morton White, of the Princeton Institute, keeps tempting me with offers to collaborate with him in writing a piece on historical method, philosophically considered, and perhaps I shall do it. History is certainly much too important to be left to historians – with certain exceptions: let me urge you to write a modern history of the Jews. I need not tell you that there is nothing remotely first-rate on that subject – not Mahler, not all those Russian historians of the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century led by Dubnov, not all those popular American books, can satisfy the taste of a genuinely critical reader or professional historian wishing to acquaint himself with the Jews in the modern world. There are monographs, I suppose, about Jews in Russia, Germany, America – the English Jews are the dullest of all topics, a happy community if Hegel is right – and some quite good pieces about the French Jews before, during and after Dreyfus. But apart [from] Namier and yourself, and let us say Zhitlowsky's essays, what is there? So if you are in good enough health, and take a proper rest – ('shoot a Turk and take a rest') – do do it: North Carolina is as good a place as any for the recharging of the batteries. Let me urge you to this sacred task. Vital's first volume on the history of Zionism seems to me the only good book on that topic – far better than the dead researches of Kolatt & Co.: his point of view may not be ours, but there is life and learning and a sense of purpose and unity of style – a very useful contribution to anyone who seeks to write a general history of modern Jewish society. Of course there is Salo Baron but – though I may be unfair – it has to me the smell of the candle about it, which is not to be deplored in the case of learned monographs, but does not make for historical masterpieces – and not only of the candle but of the tin. Still, I think this is too unfair – I withdraw half of it. All this is meant to spur you into a sense of your public responsibility, which you have never evaded before and must not evade now. Unless, of course, you have retired and want to take a genuine rest, which is surely not only your right but your direct duty.

There now, I must cease and return his manuscript to Bernard Wasserstein, who has written an exceedingly gloomy but excellent-

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ly researched, accurate and coolly written history of the attitude to Jewish immigration in England in the immediate pre-war and war years. *Encounter*, I see, has employed Beeley as the reviewer of Middle Eastern books, particularly by Jewish authors: I know exactly what he will say about this one – in spite of every effort to write in a dispassionate manner, his violent feelings, profound resentment, boil underneath the thin, smooth, bureaucratic surface. This not a topic on which anyone, evidently, can be impartial. So you have a job to do.

With much love,
Yours ever,
Isaiah

<PS A man called Leo Motzkin (grandson) ex Haifa; came to see me, with terrific testimonials from both Flusser & Pines – he is a U.S. citizen and with degrees from Chicago & Pennsylvania, & it seems a dedicated scholar with extensive knowledge of classical & medieval philosophy, Arabic thought, Maimonides, Spinoza etc: a kind of junior H. Wolfson. Wd there be a job ~~temporary or otherwise for him in your establishment?~~ Hampshire thought there ~~must be, in Vlastos's [?]~~ whether temporary or otherwise in the N. Carolina Center? I know that when it was being founded the Princeton philosopher Gregory Vlastos certainly went about promising that scholars in the humanities – e.g. classical learning, medieval Platonism & the rest wd find a home there. But I have no idea what in the end was decided. I do not know Motzkin – but his testimonials particularly from Pines who is very chary of praise – & ferociously critical as you know – impress me: he may well be an interesting & distinguished scholar in his early or mid-forties. Why he wants to leave Haifa I do not know, save that his wife is a {n} Filipina converted to Judaism & very pious; he taught in Brandeis once – I expect you know him, & have an opinion of your own; – it is clear that he is in obvious financial need & so remarkably recommended that I think something shd be done to help him. And there is his admirable grandfather – ‘*Zechut Avot*’ [‘ancestral merit’]

IB>

TO ROBERT SILVERS

1 February 1979

Headington House

Dear Bob,

[...] I had no idea that the excellent Hardy had sent you the introduction to *From the Other Shore*. He rightly wondered whether I would be furious – I am slightly put out, since this is an ancient piece, and what reason is there for publishing it now in the *NYRB*? I feel distinctly embarrassed, but of course Hardy acts as an editor should, with my putative interests at heart. But I find this much easier to bear than the introduction to my vol. 4, from Noel, which is going to embarrass me for the rest of my life, even though it is now much modified as a result of my painful and hideously embarrassed representations. I honestly do not think I am hyper-sensitive (all hyper-sensitive people say that), but my extreme dislike of personal publicity is surely not a pathological trait – better men than I have felt this – I think you do yourself.

Izzy's pieces from the Greek are very sweet. They are pretty familiar, but his translations into plain prose, however poetically printed, are touching. It is all, whether he realises it or not, something out of an American Jewish novel.

I am groaning about having to address learned men on Einstein in Jerusalem – at least I shall not be doing so at Princeton or Washington – and then in Israel again, making an 'acceptance' speech for a prize, in April. It is all, I suppose, as Weizmann once described one of his secretaries, 'a harmless nightmare'.

When are you coming here?

Yours ever,

Isaiah

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TO PATRICK NEILL

1 March 1979

Headington House

Dear Patrick,

I see that the timetable you proposed to me is in some jeopardy owing to Hockney's wayward wanderings: never mind. Now, now another date has become perilous – that is, 8 June, when you kindly asked us to dinner. May I beg you for an earlier or a later date for this? The reason, involving a visit across the ocean, is supposed to be shrouded in the darkest secrecy, but you can fairly easily guess the kind of thing it is: it is connected with an academic institution which has done much for me in the past and which demands my presence on 7 June, increasing the obligation that I already feel to it. Consequently, I cannot bring myself to decline on the grounds of a previous engagement, sacred as it is. Will you forgive me? We shall be back a few days later, I with all the weight of my seventy years upon me. I shall tell you what this secret engagement is the very next time we meet: it is only that, given the request for secrecy, I do not feel like putting it down on paper.

I shall be sorry not to be present at the March SGM – the opening of the issue about fifty pounders I regard as very bold: I will not, I promise, write you a letter about that, but if bachelors are not to be automatically re-elected, the notional resistance to women is liable to melt away more rapidly than might have been anticipated.

Yours ever,
Isaiah

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

TO ROBERT SILVERS

11 April 1979 [*manuscript card*]

Headington House

Dear Bob,

Here is my Zionist tract – not for publication I need hardly say – even by the devoted Hardy, although of course he is proposing various unwelcome uses for it.³⁷ I am very very sorry about your mother: I know what it is to be in this condition – it was so when my father was ill with leukaemia – my mother died peacefully – simply of age (94). But you must be in continuous & irremediable (there is nothing one can do except act with love & emotion) misery.

yrs

Isaiah.

FROM JUDITH SHKLAR

11 July 1979

Harvard

Dear Isaiah,

I was delighted to hear from you after such a long time. In fact, I had been thinking about you and wishing we might meet and talk again. It is of course a common experience, but also a curious one, to be quite close to someone in space and time as I was at the top of the Widener stairs watching you receive your degree, and yet to be quite unable to reach them. Obviously, human circumstance does its frustrating work. In any event it came to me how very much I did want to see you again and your letter was more than welcome.

I shall simply show up in Princeton sometime in the last two weeks of January. I am supposed to be there sometime next fall in

³⁷ 'Einstein and Israel', nevertheless included in PI2.

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any case and I shall tell them to wait till then. That will be much more relaxing than New York.

I have not heard from your young friend. He should phone me at home in the evening or write me a note when he gets here. Once I find out *exactly* what he wants to do I'll look around for him. I expect that between us, Adam Ularn and I should be able to help him find a suitable niche. It is not, however, a good idea to start off in a department with a view to transferring to another. It is discouraged on the reasonable grounds that no one wants to inherit a malcontent. The main thing is for him to talk to people directly.

As for my coming to England, there is nothing I would like better and I was more than flattered by your invitation. I think, however, that a fellowship at All Souls would commit me to a longer stay than I should really like and I do not think you should put yourself to that much trouble – some easier way for me to visit must be possible. I have never been to Oxford or Cambridge and in fact have never taught anywhere except Harvard and I now would like to see what life there is like. I suspect that between having a family and not having to think about money, mine has been a somewhat odd academic career. Could we perhaps think up something that would be useful, agreeable to all, and impose on no one, when I see you in Princeton? I know, also, nothing about schedules, terms, teaching, or anything else in England and I think the best way to start is for you to tell me about things.

Sincerely,

Dita

TO ROBERT SILVERS

19 September 1979

Headington House

Dear Bob,

I think that the unsettled state, to call it by no more agonising name, which I went through at the time of the death of my father is perhaps somewhat similar to your condition now. At first, there

was too much to do, and this acted as a wall between me and the event. But then waves of despair used to come upon me, the banisters between which my life had been lived became loosened, I became very *décousu*, and it was only in that state that I was able to make a declaration to Aline which determined the rest of my life – that was the silver lining, but the cloud was exceedingly black and lasted for a long time. It is, I am sure, better to be a widow than a widower: I do not know how I could have kept my father going without my mother, who bulled him but was all in all to him. My mother had sufficient inner resources to establish a gloomy but firm life for herself. But for me, nothing was ever the same. I only hope it will not take you quite so badly, but I fear that if one is as affectionate and devoted as you are by nature, the wound will take a long time to heal. I wish you would come here and see Aline and me and the Hampshires (Renée actually visited us at Paraggi and admired absolutely everything, rather as if she had been warned not not to do it) and the Margalits, charming, and all the others whom you know. It really might cheer you up: when the oldest root in one's life goes, it is a mutation like no other, and words are not much good – they are like dry sticks and convey too little. So I'll stop: do ring up, apropos of nothing at all, if you feel in the mood – I should like that very much indeed.

I enclose Einstein. If you want any changes, do let me know. Could you, if you publish it, say that it is an address delivered on 14 March of this year at the opening of a symposium held in Jerusalem to mark the centenary of the birth of Albert Einstein, that it is reproduced by courtesy of the editors of the proceedings of the symposium – I do not know if you have to mention their names or not, but they are Professors Yehuda Elkana and Gerald Holton (of Harvard). I only hope there will not be an angry buzzing of German Jewish bees protesting against my illegitimate annexation of this world citizen for the benefit of Mr Begin's nationalist outfit. I really do not look for the kind of polemics of which correspondences in journals consist. Talking of which, did I tell you – I think I did – that my paper at Pisa, confuting Arnaldo's strictures on my failure to deal with Vico's and Herder's relativism,

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and presided over by Arnaldo himself, produced no reaction whatever, either from him or from any member of the audience: 'I find this unbelievable!' he cried, and disbanded the meeting. I was much relieved. That paper will be published in a journal devoted to eighteenth-century studies, and I shall gladly send you an offprint, and one to him too.

Yours,

Isaiah

⟨Frank & Fritzie Manuel: Utopian thought: Apart from the fact that it wd take months to read it, I cannot write about the Manuels: he is a very learned & enthusiastic & exuberant scholar, but there is (as you know too well) a streak of vulgarity (destroy this letter, I beg you: it will not do for a file) which I find it difficult to stomach; & if I say anything critical, he will attribute this to his strictures on my paper at the Vico symposium; & so on. So better not. Shall I forward the book to someone else?

IB⟩

TO EDWARD WEEKS

1 January 1980

Headington House

Dear Ted,

Thank you ever so much for your letter of 19 December. To answer your two queries: I never did begin on the project of the history of ideas in Europe³⁸ – instead, I concentrated on the origins of Romanticism, at least its intellectual origins, which indeed form the material of six Mellon Lectures delivered God knows how many years ago³⁹ (the only Mellon Lectures never published,⁴⁰ of course, because I never delivered the manuscript), and then repeated over the BBC.

³⁸ See E 708.

³⁹ Fifteen: the lectures were delivered in 1965.

⁴⁰ Until 1999.

In my declining years I shall make one final gallant attempt to write the book founded on these lectures: it is a more interesting and more manageable subject than the history of ideas in the nineteenth century, which is beyond my powers – I should always have known that it was so.

As for that Signet Address, it is perhaps a little hard on Dr Arnold. I do not think I actually mentioned his name, but people may remember otherwise. All I remember doing was saying that the Soviet Union was like a particularly harsh combination of British public school and a theological establishment at their worst; and the purpose of the school magazine was not to give news but to bolster morale – hence the praise for the way ‘our side’ had done, and no dubious items about the doings of the masters or analyses of their characters or general gossip unsuitable for the boys. I think I said that politics in the Soviet Union was rather like sex in schools – often thought about; gone about in a very privy manner; if talked about, leading to punishment, and, if practised and discovered, to immediate expulsion.

The ideology, I thought, was rather like official religion at a school of this type, which was taken for granted by everyone, but the boys who took it really seriously and talked about it were regarded as priggish, ‘pi’ and uncomfortable from the point of view of the other boys, although everybody trooped off to chapel quite automatically without bothering about what the words of the services meant.

I did say that, terrible as the school was, and given to corporal punishment, both by the masters and the prefects, of a frequent and often arbitrary and unjust kind, boys did not actually *like* to be expelled. If things got too awful they tended to run away, but often slunk back, save for a few brave spirits who rebelled and took pride in defying the authorities, although some of them found the exciting outer world in the end somewhat disappointing.

And I went on like that. I suspect that what got the biggest laugh was the comparison of politics with sex. I may have mentioned Dr Arnold as the founder of the system – Lenin, as it were. I remember that Edmund Wilson in *To the Finland Station* called him

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‘the Great Headmaster’ – over-generously, I thought. Stalin was more like Dr Keate of Eton, who beat the boys severely and indiscriminately, and forced them to tip him at the end of term, and if over-tipped by mistake – if a ten-pound note fell from their purses instead of the usual one pound (this is at the very beginning of the nineteenth century) – would put his heavy foot on it, and glare at the boy until he went away.

Do come and see us: we are very unaltered, and I am sure you are.

Yours ever,
Isaiah

TO GEORGE KENNAN

12 February 1980

Institute For Advanced Study, Princeton

Dear George,

I read your piece with [the] greatest interest and fascination. Quite apart from the unique quality of the contents (you do not need me to tell you that) you are a most wonderful writer of English prose, especially narrative prose, but every other kind of prose as well; you are intensely readable, as only the best novelists are, and if asked, I do not know that I could mention any one of them today who writes so well. This is the last thing that I could say to you (or anyone) directly – to your face, I mean – but I’m glad of the opportunity of saying it in less embarrassing fashion.

I have made one or two notes of very minor points that struck me as I was reading the essay: [...]

13. p. 16, para. 3, 1. 4 – ‘salon-socialist’ – I think this is somewhat unfair to Lassalle. Of course, he liked to dazzle ladies and was something of a lion of the German drawing-rooms, and was a dandy and irritated Marx (according to his letter to Engels) by spending more on cigars when staying with him in London than he, Marx, could afford to spend for an entire week on himself and his family – that is true – but since, in fact, he did find more or

less single-handedly the German Worker's Party – the most effective worker's organisation anywhere in the world – in the 1860s, and thereby provoked great jealousy in Marx's breast, he could be regarded as about the most effective socialist of his time in Europe or anywhere. He was one of the most intelligent men he had ever met (and in fact took him in completely, as you know). The presentation of him as a salon-socialist - which implies 'a parlour pink', as they used to be called, is, I think, somewhat misleading; the entire history of political workers' movements, at least on the continent of Europe, seems to me unthinkable without the base Lassalle provided; the fact that he was [a] dashing, rather unattractive, vulgar, showy, in many respects superficial kind of man, who died in a duel, killed by a rival in love (although this provoked extreme disapproval from Bertrand Russell) is nevertheless not incompatible with formidable achievements. In some respects he was, I think, rather like Trotsky, whom Plekhanov disliked for just those kind[s] of vulgarly ostentatious qualities.

14. p. 18, 1. 6 from the bottom, anti-Semitism an invention of the Third Republic? Surely not. The organised press campaign against the Jews, particularly Jewish bankers as representing {as} an international conspiracy mainly directed towards supporting Germany against France, and the idea of Jews as rootless cosmopolitans who did not have the national interests of France at heart, did of course start after 1871. But the personal literary and social anti-Semitism in France, as everywhere in Europe, started long before that and was particularly violent among socialists, e.g. Fourier, Marx's friends Ruge and Bruno Bauer and Proudhon, who more or less wished to 'liquidate' them – to these the Jews stood for capitalism, the Stock Exchange, bourgeois vulgarity, everything that both nostalgic medievalists and the champions of the working classes, more particularly of the proletariat, most hated. It is enough to read Karl Marx himself on the subject on the one hand, and German nationalists in the 1850s and early 1860s on the other, to realise this. The young Treitschke was by no means alone in the depth and intensity of these opinions. [...]

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This is all. I do apologise for all these tiny little points. As I said above, I read it all with the most intense enjoyment and look forward to the entire piece. Will it appear in the *New Yorker*? Do you know when? I will write or telephone you or call on you before we finally leave on Wednesday – we saw you on TV Sunday night – it was wonderful to hear your calm and rational voice (even though I am not sure that I agree about where the line between defensive and offensive policies lies in the midst of all of this hullabaloo). Aline and I and Fritz Stern, who watched you together, thought you spoke beautifully. But you must be used to such compliments. Still, it is a pleasure to pay them sincerely – the opportunity does not arise so very often.

Yours ever, with much gratitude,
Isaiah

FROM GEORGE KENNAN

31 March 1980 [*manuscript*]

Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton

Dear Isaiah:

This is a dreadfully delayed response to your kind words of comment on the very sloppy unfinished piece about Cyon which you were good enough to send before leaving Princeton. The reason for such delay is that I have assumed, perhaps wrongly, that you were travelling about, here & there, for a time, after you left us.

The detailed comments were, as always, a delight to read, as well as greatly useful. And I don't need to tell you how appreciative I was for what you said about my writing. There is no one from whom such words could have meant more.

Diplomatic history does not, in order to be history, have to be literature as well. But there is nothing that says it cannot be; my ideal, inspired originally by Harold Nicolson, is to make it so. It is more useful that way, as history, in addition to sharing and whatever other values literature has.

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

We are off to Paris, tomorrow – where we shall be spending April and May. We have, for this period, a flat there – something we never had before; so I'm looking forward to it, this time, with particular pleasure. The address, should you happen to come there, is 8 Rue Poulletier, IV^{-ème}. I shall be glad to get away, for a time, from this hyper-active, busybody country, where one's predicament is like that of the young girl at her first ball:– either no one wants her, or everyone does.

With affectionate greetings to you both –
George K.

TO ROBERT SILVERS

1 April 1980

Headington House

Dear Bob,

I saw Stuart yesterday, and in some curious way he is behaving absolutely normally: he talks a little too much and is in an odd state – in a kind of bubble in which he performs all his duties conscientiously, and talks to Aline, me, Tess Rothschild, Emma, the Haskells, about Renée, does all that she would wish him to do religiously – but is aware that sooner or later this heightened state will be succeeded by a descent into something like a depression. I hope this does not happen, but it may. He is very grateful to you for inviting him to New York – I do not think he will go, because he thinks that he does not wish to meet – at the moment – Tom Nagel or Sidney or some of the other Princeton friends, and at the same time would feel embarrassed about avoiding them – all of which I understand well. He has gone to stay at Lyme Regis because he once stayed there and liked it and it has no associations with Renée. Julian has behaved nobly, and Freddie has not intervened in any way – anyhow, he is preoccupied with his own forthcoming third marriage, I suppose.

Talking of Sidney: I have just dictated a long letter to him about what seemed to me mistakes or inaccuracies in that noble essay,

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which really has done me proud. I have expressed every kind of gratitude, and apologised for looking at even the smallest part of so splendid a gift horse, compared his thin skin to my own, and tried to make the whole thing as harmless as possible. I said that you would probably be interested in what I had to say, and that I would supply him with two extra copies of my letter, one for Lieberson and one – if he chooses to send it to you – for yourself, but that I would not send it directly to you. That, I am sure, is right – he would be put out if I sent you a copy – and, above all, I am not telling you that he has an extra copy which he can send to you if he chooses (this is all a comical echo of the already comical enough triangular position you and I and he got into about the review itself). So don't know that there is a copy for you – I really do not think I ought to send you one, however secretly, in case this somehow leaked. If he doesn't say anything to you about [it] for a sufficient time, let me know, and I shall, *coûte que coûte*, send you a copy just for information. I am sure I ought not to send a letter to the NYRB itself on the lines of 'I am most grateful for the very generous and full account of my writings, but I think it is right for the sake of the record to point out ...', etc.

When are we meeting? Are you coming here before the summer? Please do. I can then tell you about the latest condition of the Blunt affair – it has, so far as the public is concerned, died down, but my Academy is not out of the wood in this matter. Efforts will probably be made to persuade him to resign and save us all embarrassment, but he will, from his point of view quite rightly, I think, decline – he is certainly tough enough to do this – and then we shall have to have a vote. We shall be sworn to the most appalling secrecy, but something is bound to leak out in the end, if only because Plumb will see to that. Are we not to meet in Salzburg? When and where are we meeting? Perhaps you have told me: would you say it again and give Aline and me one of our greatest pleasures to look forward to: and if you come, and if Grace comes too, I shall tell you about my letter from Svetlana.

Yours <with love to Grace>

Isaiah

TO HENRY HARDY

9 June 1980

Headington House

Dear Henry,

Thank you for your letters of 30 May and 4 June, and copy of your letter to Mr Meeuws.⁴¹ Let me answer them in order. The *Pelican* has arrived but I have not had time to read it yet. H. G. Nicholas has indeed finished – some people work fast. Do let Segal have the galleys, as you suggest. Thank you for the reviews of Herzen and for your kind words about the sales conference – I am glad that others enjoyed it more than I did.

Now, about your letter of 4 June. Let me begin by saying that I fully understand why you should think that your revision of my ‘footnote’ on the Guest from the Future is wholly reasonable – it would have been so but for the peculiar circumstances which surround the text of AA’s poems. I am, of course, grateful to you for following Pat’s suggestion and letting me look at the relevant text.

Your typed version of my footnote, as sent to the printer, seems to me *prima facie* correct, although I have not checked it word for word. I should still prefer it to be a footnote, long as it is, in type however small, but if you think an appendix is indispensable, so be it.

The transliteration is whatever you wish it to be; the only thing I would like to insist on is that you keep – in this article only – the apostrophe for the soft sign: it is so concerned with words in Russian – far more than *Russian Thinkers* – that I should like to make the transliteration as exact as possible, since there is in it material for scholars, as there is not in the other essays. But in the case of names well known abroad, perhaps the Western version has better be used, e.g. Nijinsky, not Nizhinski.

⁴¹ All three letters missing.

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Now, the longer v. the shorter version of the footnote. Although I have based myself on the Zhirmunsky edition as being more authoritative, it is quite difficult to procure – it exists in libraries, of course, but scholars can no longer obtain it from the Soviet Union, as everything there goes out of print rapidly, particularly editions of not too well approved-of writers; consequently, I notice that the great majority of those who write about AA use Struve–Filippov. This alone is a reason for the cross-references. Moreover, there are scholars who do not read Russian who write about AA, whom they read in translation only, and these for the most part, I tend to think, refer to S–F only. In addition to this, Struve is acutely sensitive about Akhmatova texts, writes me letters about all this, and would be bitterly offended if I ignored his edition in these references, and this would to some degree affect reviewers, to whom he would certainly – and from his own point of view justifiably – vehemently complain. The last thing I wish to do is to fall out with him, as he has been most considerate in letting me know all kinds of things in connection with his editions of Russian poets. And another point: neither edition, whatever it may claim, is complete; Z leaves out, honourably, the pro-Stalin poems extorted from her in an effort to save her son, and her translations of non-Russian poets; S–F includes the Stalin poems and omits the poems which ‘I cannot find’. Consequently the omission of either edition is wrong in principle.

This is complicated further by the following. An American correspondent quotes to me certain lines which he says are from ‘Epilogue’ in *Poem without a Hero* (1946–56), beginning with the words *Za tebya zaplatila Chistoganom*, which clearly refer to my visit: I cannot find these words in Z, and propose to look for them in S–F, vol. 2, which I do not possess (it seems to have been stolen by someone) – if I can find these lines, they should certainly be referred to in my S–F references.

I accept your point about not saying ‘I cannot find’ this or that ‘in S–F’ – as you say, it is either there or not there – but one cannot be certain that it is not tucked away somewhere. I therefore deem it best simply to omit references to Z or S–F, as the case may be,

where lines seem to be missing, and let the reader infer their absence from the relevant edition – I would rather not say ‘not in Z’ or ‘not in S–F’, for I cannot be certain; although if you want me to do that I am ready to write to Struve and ask him whether indeed the missing texts are truly missing from his edition.

There is also this further point. The order of the stanzas, poems, etc. in Z and S–F is sometimes different – again, if scholars wish to consult the original texts, Z alone is not sufficient. The differences in order are not arbitrary: Z and S–F grouped the poems as they did for various reasons of their own – relevance, date, AA’s instructions, order in original publication, etc. – and this makes a difference to their interpretation, i.e. to scholars seeking to unravel some of the truly dark mysteries of her poems (she admits that she uses a triple bottom in her box).

For all these reasons the cross-references must be kept.

As to the titles of the poems, their names in English and Russian, their date and place of composition, page refs to the editorial notes, etc., these must be kept because Z is not easily available and because the translations are the basis of much writing about AA. I don’t want to take a haughty line whereby only those who read Russian can be regarded as interested in what I have to say. Hence the need for all these pedantic details. I don’t think we are obstructing rather than aiding researches of scholars by the fullness of references – no scholar known to me has ever complained of this in any field of knowledge (reviewers may do so, but to hell with them – in this connection).

I am truly grateful to you for realising that I might disagree with you on this issue. I must now go and try to trace the new lines which my American correspondent has sent me: I shall ask Pat to ask you where vol. 2 of the second edition of S–F is most easily accessible. If I cannot find the lines even there, I shall have to write to Chicago – do bear with me over this, the lines are worth recording if only for completeness’ sake – it would be absurd to make such a pile of references and then omit material lines.

Now with regard to your specific points:

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1. *Nebet* is the title of poems 451–6, that is quite clear in Z, I have not bothered to look at S–F. It is the title of a cycle – if we quote such titles elsewhere, why not here?

2. ‘The White Hall’: you are right, it is indeed the title of a single stanza, to her of immense importance as it is a historic room in the Sheremetev Palace, next door to her own room there. It should therefore be referred to as the title of the italicised verses in question, as you have done in the version sent to the printer.

3. You are quite right about Z pp. 412–13: this is my mistake, misplaced by me. The reference should read ‘(Z pp. 235-7, notes pp. 412–13 and 488;)’.

4. I cannot answer this until I have seen S–F vol. 2 – I may well be wrong again.

Could you add to the list of references to ‘me’ the following: ‘“Prichitaniye”, 555, 27 January 1946 (Z p. 296)’ – and I may be able to give you an S–F reference after seeing vol. 2.

Yours,

Isaiah

TO SIDNEY HOOK

9 July 1980

Headington House

Dear Sidney,

Your piece on *Against the Current* in *Commentary*⁴² has just reached me, and I have every reason to thank you for it: it is courteous and kind, based on wide and solid knowledge of the issues with which I tried to deal; the criticisms it makes are penetrating and often just; but above all you truly understand what it is that I am trying to say – for that alone I am, like everyone who tries to say something, deeply grateful.

There are three or four points, however, on which, I think, I evidently failed to make myself clear. I do not believe that in fact

⁴² ‘Isaiah Berlin’s Enlightenment’, *Commentary* 69 no. 5 (May 1980), 61–4.

we differ about them, but I think you sometimes misinterpret what I endeavoured to say. Your review is so kind and generous that I do not want to write a letter to *Commentary* – I would much rather address myself to you in order to find out whether we do not in fact, as I suspect, agree. It may be that we do not, but I doubt if the readers of the periodical could be expected to take a lively interest in what are, in any case, not central disagreements (no need to answer – I do this only for the private record between us).

The first point comes at the top of the first column on the second page⁴³ of the review (the xerox sent to me reveals no page numbers). You rightly say: ‘how can we test the truth of an insight or attribution of motives without ultimate reference to behavior? – but they are not here explored.’ My only comment on this is that Vico, whom I am discussing, does indeed seek to test the truth of his insights precisely by studying behaviour, whether burial customs, linguistic usage, physical ritual or activity – art, gestures – or whatever. Before Marx, he certainly assumed, if he did not explicitly state, the unity of theory and practice. The historian’s first duty, if I read Vico aright, is to grasp what attitudes, conception of the world, etc. the various types of behaviour of primitive men, etc., embody and express – much more than than questions of explicit belief or self-descriptive verbal data on the part of individuals and societies the behaviour of which he seeks to interpret.

At the bottom of that column, in connection with Machiavelli, you ask, very reasonably, why we do not experience ‘the same horror and revulsion when we immerse ourselves in the study of antiquity as when we read Machiavelli’s advice to those who would rule the state?’ Also why traditional classical education does not induce this reaction in its beneficiaries. It seems to me that what Machiavelli did was to select the most (to us) morally unpalatable aspects of the pagan world, and exaggerate these enormously; and then contrast them with the moral and political beliefs of men ostensibly brought up as Christians, at any rate as professed. When

⁴³ 62.

one actually studies the classical world, it does not in fact present that spectacle of continuous violence, treachery, mendacity, or, for that matter, virility, self-assertiveness, which Machiavelli extols. I do not look on him as a dependable historian of antiquity: if men were as he describes them, it is difficult to understand how societies could have come into existence at all. Nevertheless, there is enough contrast between Christian, or even Judaeo-Christian, ethics and some of the values held up by pagan authors to entail that the idea of a Christian state – as ‘state’ was understood in Graeco-Roman terms – is necessarily a contradiction: and to point this out explicitly, I think, *was* upsetting. Nobody but the ancient sceptics, not Augustine (who did, after all, believe that enough justice would prevent States from being ‘huge robber bands’), nor Pascal (who lived after Machiavelli), ever quite said that. The idea that political success was literally impossible if the citizens all practised Christian virtues, that Christians, including Christian princes, must avoid political ‘realism’ of any kind if they are to escape perdition – that was a pretty tough (if in fact implausible) analysis. (It is one thing to contemplate the splendid heroes of the classical past & concede that some ruthlessness was indispensable to their glories: another to say that altruism, worthy in itself, is the path to political ruin.)

In col. 2 of that page, para. 3, you say that I mention J. N. Figgis’s view ‘only to dismiss it out of hand’. Do I? The idea that Machiavelli suspended ‘the Habeas Corpus Act of the whole human race’ is precisely what I do think that he did. Figgis is right, as you say, to allow that *raison d’état* in desperate situations is one thing, but that to regard it as the normal method of operation is horrifying. Surely I did draw precisely that contrast: what Machiavelli regarded as normal, let us say Bellarmine (on Hus), or those who commit judicial murder, regard as only permissible in the direst predicaments.

I move to the third page – Marx and Disraeli. In col. 2 you say ‘Berlin maintains that the psychological need to overcome the taint of their origins was largely at the root of Disraeli’s’ ideologies etc. Surely not. Neither thought it to be an actual ‘taint’. The search for

identity, a sense of dubious status, being unmoored from one bank and not moored to the other – this kind of uneasiness is something different from consciousness of a ‘taint’. You say ‘Surely not all Jews to whom Orthodoxy was no longer credible, or who were nurtured in a secular environment, were compelled to seek a new identity?’ Were they not? Everyone whom I have ever met in that condition was less or more in that situation – sometimes in a perfectly open-eyed and un-neurotic way, but sometimes embarrassed to various degrees. You go on: ‘are we to infer the phenomenon of self-hatred as an inescapable consequence of anti-Semitism?’ I do not know about ‘inescapable’, but it is very common, surely? You say that ‘there is not a line to indicate that Marx had any doubts, uneasiness and self-questioning about himself as a Jew’. I think this is true, and if I imply the opposite I am surely wrong. What I wanted to stress was that, given the similarity of his origins and social position to those of Heine, Börne, Lassalle etc., and the anti-Semitism to which he was undoubtedly exposed (not only from Bakunin), his total failure, save on one fleeting occasion, to indicate in any way that he sprang so recently from a discriminated-against Jewish community is, to say the least, abnormal, and surely implies – if it does not demonstrate – repression of embarrassing attributes. As for Disraeli, according to my view of him, he suffered from no self-hatred, only from self-consciousness, about being a Jew.

Col. 3. You are perfectly right that the need to belong is not a need to belong to *a* nation, but to *this* nation. But to value something, not because it is good or bad, or right and wrong, but solely because it is ‘mine’ or ‘ours’, *is* new. Arguments hitherto sought to demonstrate that this or that characteristic or policy or group or act was good or bad, right or wrong; after Herder & Co. an act or a quality of character was justified because it was German, and expressed the outlook of my or your nation, a class, a race – that is not simply ‘the love of our children and parents because they are our own’. ‘My country right or wrong’ is the opposite of what *bons patriotes* means in the French Revolution – pride in the fact that it was my country, France, which expressed all these

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objectively right and noble truths. ‹Unamerican’ is bad because it is unamerican, not because ‘American’ = universally good, always, everywhere.)

p. 4, col. 2. You are absolutely right that critics of the Enlightenment are different from its enemies. When I delivered some lectures in Columbia on Vico, Hamann and de Maistre, I vaguely thought of publishing them as a book (in fact, I was committed to doing so, and alas, reneged on my obligation). I realised that Vico was a critic, while Hamann and de Maistre were real enemies of the Enlightenment, who hated everything about it – unlike Herder, and of course Rousseau or Kant, who were critical, but, as you say, were taking part in a family quarrel, not a bitter onslaught from another land. In the end I found I was more interested in the critics than in the enemies, and my essays on Hamann and de Maistre remain unpublished.⁴⁴ Hence the book entitled *Vico and Herder*, not, as originally intended, *Three Enemies of the Enlightenment*.

I do not know why I go on at such length – this must bore you fearfully, and I apologise. But your review showed such understanding of what I was trying to say that I felt impelled to send you a handful of explanatory footnotes. I shall not send this to *Commentary*, although it is in no degree confidential. Of course you must not reply, this is only a token of respect and gratitude.

Yours sincerely,
Isaiah

TO ROBERT SILVERS

24 July 1980 [*manuscript*]

Headington House

Dear Bob

We too are extremely sorry not to see you and Grace here this year; I only hope Munich was worth while: our *Semiramide*

⁴⁴ No longer: they appear in TCE and CTH respectively.

(chauvinistically called *Sémiramis*, despite the Italian libretto as sung) was, on the whole, not much: it rained in the middle (the audience ran like hares & so did I, but listened, without looking – Pizzi’s décor was actually rather beautiful – from under cover) – & none too soon. Third rate Rossini is inferior to third rate Verdi or Mozart: about like second rate Brahms. I wonder what Salzburg will be like with all those tycoons and Goodman fresh from his triumphs as a negotiator with the Musicians Union. Karajan is to conduct a concert in Oxford with the Berlin Philharmonic next year; I shall not boycott it, but shall criticize it unfairly. Stuart will have told you about the “Blunt” meeting of our Academy; I wish I could have ‘filled you in’ about the preliminary conversations between myself and (a) Richard (b) Ronnie (c) Lord Robbins (d) Dame [Helen] Gardner and our President’s annual report, skilfully composed to fit either a condemnation or an acquittal. Neither A. J. P. Taylor nor Dr Plumb were in form: the occasion lacked great flights of rhetoric: the man of genius⁴⁵ who brought it to an end deserves immortal fame. There have been, so far, two resignations:⁴⁶ and one question in Parliament. [...]

Love

Isaiah

⁴⁵ The legal scholar Laurence Cecil Bartlett (‘Jim’) Gower (1913–97), who after forty minutes of discussion proposed that the meeting should proceed to the next item on the agenda without taking any votes. Kenneth Dover wrote to Plumb (14 August 1980) of ‘the extraordinary wave of relief and relaxation that went through the rows of faces when he proposed it’: David Cannadine (ed.), *A Question of Retribution? The British Academy and the Matter of Anthony Blunt* (Oxford, 2020), 69.

⁴⁶ In fact three: Theodore Skeat on 4 July, John Crook on 6 July, and Colin Roberts on 10 July. *ibid.*, 51–5.

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TO ROBERT SILVERS

28 August 1980 [*manuscript*]

~~Hotel Cottage Salzburg~~

As from American Embassy, Vienna (which we leave on 1st Sept.
– back to Paraggi (S. Margh. Lig. 88441) until Sept 16, then back
to Oxford)

Dear Bob,

[...] The Blunt case, which I got a certain amount of illicit enjoyment from, has now gone sour on me: the victory of Messrs Blake and Plumb because of the hapless sincerity and Kerensky like behaviour of Dover is irritating: I have, as you know, no sympathy for Anthony Blunt's conduct – I am not convinced by Stuart's argument that we know too little of what occurred – I think we know quite enough – but the motives of the persecutors seem to me disreputable; & I applaud [the?] gesture:⁴⁷ I do not wish to humiliate Dover by following it, but I think it is gallant and good: I wonder what Richard, James Joll, & Eric will do

yrs

Isaiah.

P.S. *Your physical condition:* are you taking sufficient care? wd you not knock off for a bit & come to Oxford/London & *rest* in Headington or Claridges in the second half of Sept? Salzburg was exhausting: all those rich men – our kinsfolk – forming & reforming groups in the cafés – Weinstocks, Kayes, Goodman, Mosers, & financial factotums from Egypt – Buda-Pest – R[onald] Grierson – all complaining at the Goldener Hirsch that their rooms are not good enough – (one of them actually had to stay in our hotel: but when asked where he was staying, denied it).

Karajan's performance of Verdi's *Requiem* was sensational. The tension was inhuman: like a Mephistopheles he held the orchestra,

⁴⁷ Possibly A. J. P. Taylor's resignation on 19 August as a protest against the anti-Blunt camp. But IB does not mention Taylor; nor does Silvers.

singers (Freni & Baltsa & Raimondi sang marvellously: Carreras nearly so) in an icy grip, a sinister Svengali – I suspect Paganini was a bit like that: a horrid kind of genius, but genius: I shall be *relieved* when he ceases to conduct, but while he was conducting the Requiem, I too was spell bound, painfully. Do say if you are coming before February –

love

Isaiah

FROM JUDITH SHKLAR⁴⁸

14 November 1980

Dept of Government, Harvard

Dear Isaiah,

Let me add my voice to what must surely be a chorus of admiration for your wonderful essay about your meetings with Pasternak and Akhmatova. I have just read it in the NYRB and am still shaken by its intensity – not usual in your other essays. It was not just beautifully written and important as history, but also the self-revelation (was it self-discovery?) of a good and honest man. Among very intelligent people these qualities are, as you know, very rare. And though I have often heard you praised for kindness and loyalty and had no reason to doubt it, this essay made your virtues obvious to anyone able to read and feel. The Nijinsky illustration of genius would have served old Kant well – for I think that is just what he had in mind. And the picture of Pasternak says more than a volume of biography. It is all there. Who could not laugh at Churchill *films* or cry over Akhmatova's life – or for that matter, your looking at your old house in Petersburg?

⁴⁸ Judith ('Dita') Nisse Shklar (1928–92) née Yudita Nisse, Latvian-born political theorist; instructor, dept of government, Harvard, 1955–71, John Cowles Prof. of Government 1971–92; author of 'The Liberalism of Fear', in Nancy L. Rosenblum (ed.), *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1989).

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May I ask a question? How did these encounters alter your life, as you say at the end? Is it this that made you write some twenty odd years ago that even if it could not be demonstrated logically, sticking pins into people is wrong? I was not very impressed by the argument itself, but very much so by your willingness to state it. Was all that massive evil in the USSR really a revelation to you? I find it hard to believe, since I was, in effect, born knowing that and worse. But I am sure that your account is true, for when we first came to America no one believed anything we said, although in fact it was all perfectly accurate.

I am, as you have by now discovered, not the best of correspondents. Faithful in my fashion, to be sure, but hardly prompt. I realize that I had meant to write you half a year ago to tell you how enormously I enjoyed your detailed reply to my brief review of your essays. I have no decent excuse and explanations are egotistical and tedious. Since I last saw you, I have been reading Montaigne and trying to write something about what is involved in making cruelty the *summum malum*. It is not going all that well, but I have become rather obsessed by it. Someday I would very much like to talk to you about it.

I have considered all your objections to my remarks, and, as you guessed, have not changed my mind at all. I do not in the least expect to alter yours: surely that is not the end of conversation or friendship, which really do not have any aim at all. Herzen's populism does not marr *My Past and Thoughts*, but it is all over his *Letter to Michelet* and other places. *From Another Shore* is hysterical about the masses, who did not, it seems to me, perpetrate the horrors of our age. These were the work of brutal and irresponsible elites, both old and new, who differed from their predecessors in being under fewer restraints. But my main objection to 'the masses' is that it is a notion that expressed cultural anxiety and has no place in political analysis. Even as aesthetic woe it may be false. The Romantic style may have disintegrated because of a new public, but its inherent instability, the passion for the 'new', has nothing to do with that. So even there 'the masses' are overdone. I must, of course, confess to simple antipathy for Herzen's overwrought

mentality, and illusions. Clearly, I do have a preference for democrats without illusions – such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, about whom I am trying to write a piece.

Machiavelli certainly thought that most men were poor specimens – just see *Mandragola* – and that Christianity was what they deserved. All they care about is property and sex unless whipped into shape by princes. The workable alternative is a pagan–public–glory–bound ethos which he clearly preferred, even if armed Christian prophets might succeed as Savonarola did not. He does not challenge the value of a traditional private morality, to be sure, and that is why there are two moralities here. I cannot imagine why you think de Maistre invented them. All of *raison d'état* depends on there being two. That is why Weber and other role theorists quite rightly acknowledge Machiavelli as their ancestor. That, however, has nothing to do with the philosophical proposition that no *summum bonum* can possibly be established. A small point, but there is a difference, and you blur it. Not that I do not share your abhorrence of the utopian temper. As you say: one chooses and one pays.

As for Disraeli and Marx, I simply think they were significantly alike, while you thought of them as opposites. Court Jews are no longer Jud Süß since there are no courts left. But courtiers as flatterers have survived – and the old impulse to attach oneself for emotional and social profit to aristocratic visions and groups remains. In America especially there is something degrading about all this fluttering around the local Brahmins and their counterparts elsewhere. Bad policy and bad manners, it is also self-destructive.

That reminds me of something in your essay. Both Pasternak and Akhmatova seem to have suffered from the fantasy that they were “world-historical” individuals whose actions could or did alter the whole course of history. Why did they think so? Was it a part of their genius, a sort of necessary madness, or were they deluded because they lived in a wholly insane world? Of all the things you said about both of them that seemed to me the most startling. To be sure, artists and intellectuals generally suffer from a degree of megalomania, but this is different. Why did they have this

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expectation of being capable of altering Stalin's course, or the general trend of events? I suppose despotism infects everything.

I have gone on too long, and I fear I must bore you. Let me just say again how wonderful your essay is and thank you for it. Will you be in the US this year at all? If so, let me know.

Love,
Dita

TO JUDITH SHKLAR

31 December 1980

Headington House

Dear Dita,

Could I be anything but deeply grateful to you for your letter of 14 November? Your kind words about my piece on the Russian poets moved me particularly, since you know the circumstances – who better? We know these things both by [experience?] and heredity – knowledge by acquaintance, as Russell pointed out, is quite different from knowledge by description, and it is that that I was trying to convey. The behaviour of both Pasternak and Akhmatova, and others, in the face of what they lived through, does vividly transform one's (at any rate my) notions about moral freedom and dignity (beyond which, unlike Professor B. F. Skinner, I do not wish to go). It was not the 'massive evil' in Russia that was news to me; although, of course, if one sees it face to face, as it were (knowledge by acquaintance again), it makes a difference. It was the quality of the survivors of the pre-1914 culture under conditions of persecution which brought out its full grandeur, not, for obvious reasons, so patent in the émigrés. It is a platitude to say that critical situations exhibit the moral texture of individuals – in this case, I was affected for life by seeing a combination of genius with nobility of character and courage, virtues which do not necessarily go with artistic gifts. These people were not only martyrs – blind fanatics, innocent children, ordinary people with no special attributes can be that – but by luck, or something else,

we cannot tell what, they had the opportunity of rising above the world in which they lived, and did so. The moral effect is literally indescribable. So much for that terrible world, which I do not wish to visit again. I shall never go to the Soviet Union⁴⁹ – the mere thought that talking to people may have compromised them, even if ever so little, is too oppressive and guilt-inducing. I shall continue to watch from outside.

Now about Herzen (if I may go on – but if you would rather I stopped, I shall – in any case, when I am in Princeton in February, can we talk about Montaigne?). Why is cultural anxiety not a part of political analysis? Can one really divide things so sharply? I think I am attracted to Herzen precisely because he is not professorial in these matters, as for example Chicherin was. I don't want to go so far in mixing moulds and creating a kind of rich mist, which I think nowadays Sheldon Wolin tends to do, where each sentence and paragraph is intelligent and sometimes acute, but the total effect, to me at least, seems to generate as much darkness as light; but I do think that there is a connection between political goals and concepts and structures, and cultural experience and direction.

As for the 'masses' of whom Herzen was so afraid, which he thought had a natural and intelligible motive for sweeping away Western civilisation – rather as Blok did sixty or seventy years later – it is surely not quite so simple. Of course what you rightly call brutal and irresponsible elites did it all; but they could only have done what they did in countries where there was huge, pent-up resentment among the masses, which followed them more willingly, and not under direct coercion, than they did their liberal opponents – because their emotional condition was one on which these brutes could play, and the civilised people could not; which was not the case, or not to such an extent, in Germany or England or America or France. No sane man would deny that Herzen had illusions about the peasants etc. – his descriptions of some of the central figures in France in 1848 are not at all romantic or deluded, but very ironical and sharp and dry – his horror of 'isms', his

⁴⁹ IB visited the USSR with Aline in March 1988 (A 336–8).

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understanding of what frightful consequences the alibi of an abstract doctrine which mutes moral responsibility could bring about, seem to me at least as realistic as, say, Heine's or Tocqueville's or Constant's, even if in part it does derive from Stirner: his moral insight seems to me greater than that of any Russian political writer in the nineteenth century, indeed, of any other than J. S. Mill.

You will think this all madly exaggerated; but one's sympathies lie where they lie. I have the greatest sympathy and admiration for Constant – more than for anybody else I know – but he is too negative to be effective: Herzen has at least a positive vision before him, not fanatical, not brutal, not extreme, not stylised, morally acceptable, with Utopian elements but re-statable without them. There now, I won't go on about that – except, of course, that we both probably will all the same.

As for Machiavelli, I too think that he is concerned with two moralities – surely I did not say that de Maistre invented them: that honour belongs to Machiavelli. All I was concerned to deny was that Machiavelli drew a line between morals and politics (the common view) – I was concerned to say (as you do) that the pagan morality, however pessimistic and cynical at times, which he obviously prefers, is a morality, not just a set of technical notes about how to get things done, recommended to Princes or Republics. I think that Skinner (who is good on Machiavelli but not entirely right) does not allow enough to how clear Machiavelli was about the frightfulness from a Christian point of view – or even that of the humanists – of some of the courses he advocated. But the omelette for which the eggs are broken embodies ultimate, i.e. moral, values for him. But you don't disagree with this? Why has this nothing to do with the proposition that no *summum bonum* can be established if there really is no criterion for establishing which morality is superior, i.e. no overarching morality? If the two moral systems are incompatible with each other, then there might be a *summum* of either, but not of both, no super-*summum*. If this is true, it undermines a good deal of traditional moral and political thought. I could not agree more strongly about Bacon or the liberal

Hofjuden; in spite of all his detachment and calm, Olympian air, there was something of it in Walter Lippmann, not brought out in his biography by Steel, who had never seen him in the company of Learned Hand or Lord Halifax.

You ask if Pasternak and Akhmatova thought that they were ‘world-historical individuals’. Goodness knows: this is not confined to them, or to Russians. Robert Lowell⁵⁰ was rather like that too. I do not mean that any of them actually thought that they were fateful figures called upon to change the course of things, though Akhmatova did believe that she and I started the Cold War;⁵¹ but that they were prone to a mythological view of life, in which everybody played certain parts, and if one departed from one’s assigned role (as I did in Akhmatova’s great fantasy, when I married),⁵² it caused annoyance. I do not think that the horrors of Soviet, or even Russian, life were directly responsible for this: self-romanticisation and self-dramatisation have probably existed at all times. Hegel certainly thought of himself in these terms, so did M. Kojève,⁵³ who wished to have an influence on Stalin – or, at least, the kind of relation which he imagined Hegel had to Napoleon,⁵⁴ not so much personal, as of two actors in the same cosmic drama.

⁵⁰ Robert Traill Spence (‘Cal’) Lowell (1917–77), US poet known for his liberalism and opposition to the Vietnam war, regarded by contemporaries as the greatest US poet of his generation, comparable to Yeats, though this estimate now seems dated; ‘Lowell seems to me very like some Tolstoyan character, blindly stumbling through and among groups of people greatly inferior to himself, don’t you think?’ (to Morton White, 3 December 1965).

⁵¹ cf. A 51–2, 113.

⁵² It was inconsistent with Akhmatova’s somewhat mystical, world-historical view of her relationship with IB that he should have married: ‘the fact that I had gone and got married in the most ordinary, banal fashion, insulted her’ (to Lidiya Chukovskaya, 16–17 June 1981).

⁵³ Alexandre Kojève (1902–68) né Aleksandr Vladimirovich Kozhevnikov, Russian-born French philosopher and politician of a somewhat megalomaniac stripe who helped create the European Union and declared himself (with some irony) a Stalinist; noted interpreter of Hegel.

⁵⁴ Napoleon I (1769–1821) né Napoleone di Buonaparte, Corsican-born Emperor of the French 1804–15, one of the greatest historical figures of modern times, and admired as such by Hegel.

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I have a feeling that George Kennan is liable to fantasies of this kind too – he once told me that Gandhi⁵⁵ and he were the only men of any stature in political life who had spiritual vision. If you come to see me in Princeton in February, I'll tell you what he is saying now.

Much love,
Isaiah

FROM JUDITH SHKLAR

11 February 1981

Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Harvard

Dear Isaiah,

I am so sorry that you will not be coming to the States this year. Our last meeting was not merely 'useful', as you put it, for me. That sounds almost as if I were to think of you as some sort of kitchen gadget. Your company gives me far too much pleasure for that and I shall miss you because I shall miss you and for no other reason beyond that simple fact. Perhaps I mind more this year because I enjoyed our lunch last year so much, but also because I really did want to talk to you about Montaigne. It seems to me entirely plausible that you are his reincarnation – except for your being less introspective; in public, at least, you seem to have an almost identical psychic structure. Since I really want to know more about Montaigne I could hardly wait to put some questions to you. But it can all wait. The real issue is of course a rational opposition to Machiavelli, who is, as you write, more shocking than Quentin Skinner and most current commentary admits, and is so not only from a Christian point of view. The question is cruelty, and I do not see why one should gloss over that suffocating actuality. I have written about one half of what I think Montaigne had to say on cruelty, and it is of course troubling, since to say absolutely 'no' is

⁵⁵ Mohandas Karamchand ('Mahatma', 'venerable') Gandhi (1869–1948), Indian political leader, religious and social reformer, apostle of non-violence, led India to independence 1947.

very paralyzing. As you say, one must choose one's morals and pay, but one may end up paying most of all if one simply cannot choose at all, because of self-division and doubt. In any event, that is the sort of thing we will sooner or later talk about.

I cannot see myself coming to Oxford before the late spring term of the academic year 1982–3. Our last child will be just finishing school then, so it would not be difficult, but I really would not care to stay for more than a term, because I simply get homesick. Nothing sophisticated and not much of an excuse, but there it is. I am, after all, among other things a Jewish mother.

Your remarks about Akhmatova and Pasternak in your December letter were very illuminating. It is hard for prose people to enter into the mythical world of poets, but you obviously can do it with ease, and it seems natural and right when you explain them and their nobility. World-historical aspirations look rather different in a politician or even a philosopher. Kojève was silly about Hegel by the way, as about everything else. I think that all these people left and right who lived in Heidegger's shadow were and are a mess. But I may be wrong, of course.

I have sent you Harry Hirsch's biography of Felix Frankfurter. I think it should interest you to see how he looks to a very bright young intellectual from an observant family from the American Midwest, seen through psychoanalytic lenses. It is the only book I can think of that you might want to read just now, but I keep looking, since your fund rather burns a hole in my pocket. I'll be glad when I'll have spent it all. Then I can send you books as gifts, which I should like much better.

Try not to get sick again, and tell me what you think about Montaigne. You do not have to address your letters to any department at Harvard at all when you write me. In fact, I get your letters sooner if you just send them to my office:

Widener Library 712
Harvard University
Cambridge, MA 02138

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I am lucky enough to have a study in Widener where I can keep all the books I want at any moment around me.

All my love,
[Dita]

TO KARL MILLER⁵⁶

12 October 1981

Headington House

Dear Karl,

I enclose this vast counter-indictment,⁵⁷ probably longer than the original article; but you did tell me not to worry about length (dangerous advice to someone like me), so I hope you publish it. I recommend as a title for it ‘Aarsleff and Vico’ (and not vice versa), and that it be printed below Aarsleff’s piece – I do hope it can go in the same issue.

I realise that these academic duels are a source of pure entertainment to the reader, who doesn’t much care where the truth lies, and usually has no idea of what it is all about, but enjoys the spectacle of academics hitting out at each other. I do not, I admit, enjoy being put in this position, but in view of the violent exasperation, indeed, indignation with which Aarsleff has written, I thought it would be cowardly to say nothing: so I have probably said too much. I really do not know what can have come over him – what annoys me most is the snide, not to say sugary, letter with which he accompanied the copy he sent to me, telling me how pleasant it had been and would be again to see me, talk to me, etc. I wonder why he did not send this piece to, say, the *Journal of the*

⁵⁶ Karl Fergus Connor Miller (1931–2014), British literary editor, critic and writer; Lord Northcliffe Prof. of Modern English Literature, UCL, 1974–92; founding editor, *London Review of Books*, 1979–88, later (1988–92) co-editor.

⁵⁷ **Reply to Hans Aarsleff**, ‘Vico and Berlin’, *London Review of Books*, 5–18 November 1981, 7–8, (**Aarsleff** 6–7); cf. **letter**, *ibid.*, 3–16 June 1982, 5. Hans Christian Aarsleff (b. 1925), Danish-born US scholar of linguistics; prof. of linguistics, dept of English, Princeton.

History of Ideas or *History and Theory* or the *Modern Languages* [sc. *Language*] *Review* or the *History of European Ideas*: I suspect that he feels he is in a library pegging away, adding brick to brick in defence of genuine learning, while I get away with it with windy generalisations and rhetoric in lecture rooms, a charlatan but a jack-of-all-trades and clearly master of none that he knows about – yet I pretend to produce monographs with pretensions of scholarship. All this must have been building up for months and perhaps years, and perhaps he wants the most public possible platform for his cry of injustice.

You may think all this rather exaggerated, but I suspect – and so does Stuart – that it is true.

Will you be sending me proofs? Aarsleff has kindly informed me that he has corrected his.

May I tell you how much I enjoy reading and how greatly I admire the *LRB* whenever I get to see it (I am a subscriber, but it seems to arrive a little irregularly* – there is nothing you can do about that, I am sure – I borrow Stuart's copies)?

Yours ever,
Isaiah

*As Prof A thinks I exaggerate: the last one has just arrived, so let me modify this

IB>

PS Could you be kind enough to see that I am sent, say, six copies of the issue in which Aarsleff's piece and my rejoinder appear? – for which, of course, I shall pay.

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TO MARJORIE PLAMENATZ

16 November 1981

Headington House

Dear Mrs Plamenatz,

It is my turn to apologise to you for an unconscionable delay in replying. I am terribly sorry you had an accident – I do hope you are better: I was always getting messages from the late Shoshtakovich, the Russian composer, telling me to walk carefully, not to trip over branches or let my foot slip over kerbs – what can I do but press this excellent advice on you too? Save that it is too late.

Thank you ever so much for all those details about John – it is exactly what I needed. I am not sure whether to spell his parents' names in the Serbian or English way, but it does not matter. I shall get to work on the piece now and send you a copy before I send it to the Editors of the *DNB*. Thank you ever so much.

Yours sincerely,
Isaiah Berlin

PS On Marivaux: I don't remember a review, but there [may] well have been an unsigned one in the old, unsigned days of the *TLS*; but I do remember a letter defending him against some critic, and a very good letter it was too. I feel sure, as you do, that he must have written on Marivaux and Beaumarchais – I think I said something about his taste in French eighteenth-century literature in All Souls Chapel, but I shall say it again.

TO KARL MILLER

7 December 1981

Headington House

Dear Karl,

Thank you ever so much for sending me £125, but I cannot in conscience accept it: all I did was to defend myself against a

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somewhat peculiar piece by my Danish acquaintance, which, had it appeared in the form of a letter, you would not have been obliged to pay for – or, indeed, publish. It was a favour to me that you printed so long a piece, even if, according to some, this might have helped to sell an extra copy or two of the *Review*. So how can I accept payment? Adding reward to favour? I return the cheque. If, of course, you think this over-punctilious, or even silly, I should be glad to have it back, rather than incur the mildest raising of your eyebrow.

Yours ever,
Isaiah

TO MARJORIE PLAMENATZ

11 January 1982

Headington House

Dear Mrs Plamenatz,

Thank you ever so much for your letter of 5 January, which is most helpful – I am very grateful to you. I will certainly put in something about John's love of French literature. I am deeply moved [that] you understand my feelings for him, and that he reciprocated them, as I had always hoped: he never spoke about such things, as you may well imagine, which was of a piece with his dignified and reticent nature.

Of course I shall send you a copy of the completed piece.

Yours sincerely,
Isaiah Berlin

PS I shall do my best to identify Northholt Park.

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TO JUDITH SHKLAR

9 March 1982

Headington House

Dear Dita,

Thank you ever so much for your letter. At the time when you wrote it, I was, in fact, in New York, and meant to ring you. But then my wife fell ill, and this absorbed everything – all my plans went awry, so did hers, she went off to hospital, the whole thing was quite awful but thank God it is now over, and I have recovered from my mumps (unheard of at my enormous age, allegedly lethal). But do not let me bore you with all the details – hospital life in New York is not entirely enjoyable. I left the States without doing anything I had meant to do.

I shall be delighted to welcome you here when you come – let me know the precise date. You could come straight from the airport to lunch or dinner or whatever.

You speak of Annan's piece about All Souls. It is inaccurate (e.g. not one woman for one year, but two for five years each) and gratuitously mocking, and, as you say, mean-spirited. Yet he thinks that he has been nice about his old friend John Sparrow – evidently there was quite a lot about me in it, too, initially, but he crossed it all out; and although my sole appearance is in the noble role of a frustrated liberal reformer, that, too, is historically not quite right. But never mind about that: I think you will find All Souls much nicer than you might think from that. Some of my colleagues are worried about what effect this piece might produce on potential American visitors to All Souls – I wonder how the impression can be dissipated, as it deserves to be.

I think my wartime despatches are frightfully boring and superficial – I really do think that, and would not ever have thought of publishing them myself, but could not stop my first pupil and colleague, Herbert Nicholas, from doing it, as all the papers were in the public domain. It seems to me they have been treated too kindly – I cannot look at the book myself! Thank you for your

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generous words. I wish that it was this April rather than next that you were coming.

Yours,

Dictated but not signed by Isaiah Berlin

P.U.

TO LANA PETERS

15 March 1982

Headington House

Dear Svetlana,

I was glad to receive your letter, with the concrete plans it contains; and all the conditions you impose seem to me entirely reasonable, and a great defence of human decency and dignity – the only conditions under which serious people can work, whether they are scholars or creative writers.

The publisher I spoke about was Lord Weidenfeld. He is an imaginative, energetic, lively, tremendously enterprising man of action, but while some authors are very pleased with him, others complain that, he promises more than he can deliver: not out of a conscious desire to deceive, but because his thoughts move on to something else, he forgets what he has promised and when reminded seeks to escape – that is the ‘unsympathetic’ view of him. Nevertheless, he is certainly not to be ignored, and might do this very well. But on second thoughts I would much rather you went to my own publisher, Chatto & Windus, to whose Chairman, Hugo Brunner, I have spoken. They treat me very nicely, their books look very well indeed, they are very honourable, discriminating and civilised publishers. He seemed enthusiastic when I explained your ideas, I hope correctly. I have given him your address, and he said he would write to you. I asked him how much he would mind if I got in touch at the same time with a rival publisher – say a friend of mine, Mark Bonham Carter, who works for Messrs Collins, also excellent publishers (they published *Zhivago*, Solzhenitsyn etc.) He obviously did not like this much, and so enthusiastic he was about

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the terms he would offer you for the ‘big’ book that I agreed to speak to nobody else for the time being. I feel hopeful: but I daresay it is better to feel sceptical and be agreeable surprised.

I shall, of course, be delighted to see you when you come – and so will Aline, who is recovering from her horrid illness slowly. New York is not a good town to be ill in; Oxford is better. I fundamentally agree with you – the likelihood of a left-wing, collectivist takeover of Great Britain, despite all the current symptoms, seems to me remote. Whatever England was or was not doing or was headed for, Muggeridge would surely still complain – that is his *métier* and he does it well.

A bientôt – do telephone me as soon as you reach these shores.

Yours,

[Isaiah]

TO MICHAEL MORAN⁵⁸

7 July 1982

The Athenaeum; as from Headington House

Dear Moran

Did I ever reply – or in any way acknowledge – the two *admirable* pieces on Hegel in the Listener or Nietzsche? Both seem to me excellent: but the one on Hegel particularly original and illuminating: the hypnotic nature of Hegel’s style (*what* did the Russian intelligentsia of the 1840ies e.g. my hero Herzen mean by the “iron laws of Hegel’s inexorable logic”?) and his attraction to Mallarmé, or for that matter to some sincere “God-seekers” in our time? I apologize if I did not reply: & shd love to see you (& read you) again. I am off to Italy in a week or so, but back in late

⁵⁸ (John) Michael Patrick Moran (1935–2016), assistant lecturer in philosophy, Keele, 1960–2; lecturer in philosophy and intellectual history, Sussex (where IB attended some of his lectures), 1962–88, professorial fellow, Eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus, 1989–93; academic adviser to Rauf Denктаş, President, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, 1991–2000.

September. Will you be in London or Oxford in October, November, December? I shd be grateful if you wd let me know

yrs sincerely

Isaiah Berlin

The Peruvian writer and Nobel Laureate Mario Vargas Llosa recalled attending 'a dinner for intellectuals' given in October 1982 by Mrs Thatcher at the London home of his friends Hugh and Vanessa Thomas, to which IB had also been invited.⁵⁹

The conversation was a test to which the intellectuals present subjected the Prime Minister. British delicacy, good manners, and courtesy did little to conceal an unspoken hostility. The host, Hugh Thomas, launched the first salvo, asking Mrs Thatcher if she was interested in the opinions of historians, and whether they were any use to her when it came to government. She answered the questions clearly, without being intimidated and without striking a pose, with great confidence in most cases, but occasionally admitting to doubts. After dinner, when she had left, Isaiah Berlin summed up the view of most of those present rather well, I think: 'We have nothing to be ashamed of.' But we are right, I thought, to take great pride in having a prime minister of such mettle, culture and firm opinions.⁶⁰

IB wrote a note of thanks to Vanessa afterwards:

TO VANESSA THOMAS

27 October 1982 [*manuscript card*]

as from Headington House

I am still in a slight daze after that excellent party (Tony Powell said to me, while being driven by Tony Quinton "how long, do you

⁵⁹ Hugh Swynnerton Thomas (1931–2017), life peer 1981, historian and writer; professor of history, Reading, 1966–76, noted for his *The Spanish Civil War* (London, 1961); married 1962 the painter Vanessa Mary Jebb (b. 1931), daughter of IB's Foreign Office friend Gladwyn Jebb, 1st Baron Gladwyn.

⁶⁰ *La lamada de la tribu* (Barcelona, 2018), 20–1, translated by the editors.

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think, will it take us to digest this evening's experience?") which I enjoyed *very* much indeed. I am grateful to you for inviting me. When next we meet I *must* quote to you (if I haven't already) Philip Larkin's words about the Berlin Wall. I think Jack Plumb was more himself than ever – he really is a character from the stage: Sheridan, I think. Thank you again ever so much.

Isaiah

TO PATRICIA BLAKE

21 October 1983 [*carbon sent to Robert Silvers*]

[Headington House]

Dear Patricia,

I enclose a self-explanatory letter to George Katkov.⁶¹ In the same Introduction you say that the late Professor Konovalov arranged for Max Hayward to be taught by David Cecil and myself, according to your informant to obtain some smattering of cultural polish. This is, of course, pure invention. I know nothing of any approach to David Cecil, although I have never heard that he had anything to do with Max in the way suggested; but I am quite clear that Konovalov did not invite me to instruct Max: I never had any academic connection with him; he came to see me off and on, on his own initiative. He sent me a note to say that he wished to go to Russia, and since I had just returned from Moscow thought I might be of help to him. I was. I recommended him (as you report) to the Foreign Office, and that is how he got to Moscow. The stuff about 'the Lords' is nothing but someone's malicious anecdote, with no basis in fact. But the statement which you claim to have been quoted to you by George Katkov is, of course, much worse, and an outrageous falsehood, and I intend to put the record straight wherever I can. Since, so far as I know, I have never done you an ill turn, I cannot hope to guess what possessed you to

⁶¹ For the letter to Katkov, and the background to this letter to Patricia Blake and the next to Richard and Anne Kindersley, see A 218–19.

publish so lying and defamatory a statement about me. Katkov is an honourable man, of total integrity – he could never have stooped to this.

Yours sincerely,
[Isaiah]

TO RICHARD AND ANNE KINDERSLEY

6 November 1983 [*carbon sent to Robert Silvers*]

[Headington House]

Dear Richard, Dear Anne,

Thank you ever so much for both your letters of 1 November. I am of course, glad to hear that Max's feelings about me corresponded to mine about him – as you must know, I liked and admired him very much, ever since our first meeting in 1946. I am not at all surprised about his feelings about sitting between David Cecil and myself in the Common Room in New College – he must have attended as Konovalov's guest – or was it mine? No doubt our patter must have seemed very different from anything he was used to – he was a very rough diamond when I first met him, but certainly a diamond. But the story as told by the man who so strongly relies on his memories of thirty-five years ago is just wrong (say I, relying on my memory, of course) – what is reported did not happen, or anything like it.

My grievance is, of course, not against Max, but against Pat Blake. I have known her pretty well since the mid-1950s, and if there is a certain lack of sympathy between us that must be due to, as much as anything else, her impression of my view of the way in which she treated Nicolas Nabokov, to whom she was married, and, in addition, to the fact that although I recognise she has considerable gifts as a journalist and an organiser, neither integrity nor humanity are among them – of that, my evidence is more than sufficient. Still, as she evidently made Max, Voznesensky, etc. happy at various moments, and you speak as if she were a friend

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of yours, I must not go on in this strain. Believe me, I do not blame you in the smallest degree for the offensive fabrication about which I feel so strongly – how could you possibly have known the facts? I only feel some surprise at the fact that you should have accepted any statement by Patricia as *prima facie* true. I never have, and never will (for good reasons) – perhaps that is part of the trouble.

So let me assure you that all is well between us, and always will be, I am sure. It was very nice of you to write.

Yours,
[Isaiah]

TO ROBERT SILVERS

12 December 1983

Headington House

Dear Bob,

[...] When are you coming? There is nothing to report. Stuart remains lovelorn, and slightly depressed about his forthcoming exile from England, although the new pastures are likely to be richer than the old in some respects. Richard Wollheim has written a most rhapsodical piece (modelled, I shd say, on Pater, his old love: really fine writing!) on the Venetian Exhibition, full of passion of a most genuine kind – he spent about seventeen hours at it, during two visits, and is in a state of high tension about the whole thing. I am in a state of high tension too, about the filling of the research posts in *All Souls*: the mass of conglobulated philistinism in *All Souls*, which grew under John Sparrow and is growing still – as the famous physical chemist Hinshelwood once remarked, ‘There is no quicker way of making a first-class institution into a third-class one than by electing second-class men.’

What can you tell me, if anything, about Conrad Russell, Bertie’s son, now a Professor at Yale, who is said to have revolutionised seventeenth-century history by blowing up the whole ‘gentry’ controversy by Namier-like methods, examining the behaviour of the various individuals, groups etc., destroying various

generalisations about behaviour of parties, movements etc. by saying that it is all far more complicated, that there are too many cross-currents, as there always are? Is he accounted wonderful by American historians? He is presumably Hexter's successor. What about a Greek scholar called West, the greatest living authority on Hesiod – he has discovered no fewer than eighty nature myths in the *Works and Days* – he is said to be not at all nice; he is backed tremendously by Lloyd-Jones. What about Screech, a great authority on Rabelais? He has testimonials from both Momigliano and Gombrich – he is, however, possibly a mediocrity? For once Arnaldo is not telling the truth, and knows it: just because he was a colleague at University College, he found it difficult to refuse. Oh dear – there are some truly awful people at All Souls, as there were not when I was young, or even middle-aged.

Your note about Leonard Schapiro was very dignified and fine – the *Times* obituary was merely adequate, but did well enough. Who will replace him in your pages? Oh, I had almost forgotten – I am most grateful to John Bayley for his noble defence – I must write to him. But the rest of the article – oh dear, how can one avoid looking gift horses in the mouth – I won't, I won't – it is all splendidly fanciful, as always, and cannot do any possible harm to any reader, only excite him to a greater interest in the subject, which is, after all, something – if some of them do not find in it all of the attributes ascribed, what does that matter, provided they are lured into a degree of interest at all? At any rate, I prefer that to the life in death of almost every Professor of Russian in this county, although Gifford is an exception – and so, I think, having just discovered him, is the editor of those Turgenev letters, Knowles, to whom I propose to give a mild puff in the *Sunday Times* in their selection of 'Best Books'.

I mustn't go on. When are you coming? Please come very soon – our meetings are a pleasure which I cannot exaggerate, as you know.

Yours ever,
Isaiah

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*TO KARL MILLER

24 February 1984

Headington House

Dear Karl,

I *have* had a bad time with the *London Review!* First Aarsleff⁶² (I did not much like Nigel Hamilton's wholly contemptuous review of 'my' Washington dispatches,⁶³ but I thought that what he said was quite just); then a nasty piece about the domination of America by the 'Elders of Zion', with their mysterious, unlimited power, by the fanatical Ian Gilmour,⁶⁴ who obviously really does think there is a conspiracy and that American senators are manipulated – even in States like Idaho, where there are virtually no Jews – by horrid methods that he only mysteriously hints at, but I know what he means, and it won't do. [On the same page there was an even more obsessed piece by Malise Ruthven, who really must be a little crazy, in which he declares that the famous Kahan Report on the massacres in the Lebanon – which had an enormous impact on Israel – was nothing but a cynical whitewash which could not take in a cat. These are surely the outpourings of pure fanaticism. The](#)

⁶² See .

⁶³ (Charles) Nigel Hamilton (b. 1944), British-born US biographer; in 'In the Field', LRB, 5 November 1981, 16–17, a review of H. G. Nicholas (ed.), *Washington Despatches 1941–45: Weekly Political Reports from the British Embassy* (London/Chicago, 1981) and 5 other books, he asks: 'Why should this gifted man have failed to deliver something more rewarding? The answer is, of course, censorship. Not imposed – though that, too, possibly – so much as self-imposed' (16).

⁶⁴ Ian Hedworth John Little Gilmour (1926–2007), 2nd Bt 1977, life peer 1992; Conservative MP 1962–92; secretary of state for defence 1974, lord privy seal 1979–81. Gilmour was disturbed by Eden's Suez venture 1956 and later 'was to be accused of over-zealousness in his Arab sympathies'; he had been deeply affected by a visit to the defeated Arab side after the Six Day War, and 'having seen at first hand the treatment of the Palestinians, [...] made theirs a lifelong cause' ('Lord Gilmour of Craigmillar', obituary, *Times*, 24 September 2007, 60a–e at 60a, 60b). The 'nasty piece' is 'America and Israel', LRB, 18 February to 3 March 1982, 7–9.

present government of Israel is, in my view, wicked and odious, but that is not the point. Your Middle Eastern experts seem to me possessed – and have been for some time – by a hatred beyond reason of the entire horrid enterprise of Zionism, of the springs and nature of which they show not the slightest knowledge, as if it was something frightful, exploding out of nothing.

Stuart telephoned me the other day and asked me if I had seen the latest copy of the LRB. I said I had not. He begged me not to look at it, since the article by Edward Said⁶⁵ would surely cause me to cancel my subscription, and would send me into a sharp decline. I did, of course, read it at once. Stuart's disapproval was concerned not too much with the first part of the article, which, we agreed, was routine PLO stuff, only more repetitive, pretentious and confused than the shorter and clearer statements by Arafat, but with the encomium to Chomsky.⁶⁶ I know Chomsky quite well, and like him – he is a man of brilliant gifts and great personal charm; but his polemical writings are not exactly notable for scruple or unswerving adherence to the truth. This is true about all his writings, including linguistics,⁶⁷ but he lost all political credibility after he maintained that the reports of massacres by the Khmer

⁶⁵ 'Permission to Narrate' (LRB, 16 February 1984, 13–17), a review of 8 books on the Palestinians, including Noam Chomsky, *The Fateful Triangle: Israel, the United States and the Palestinians* (Boston/London, 1983).

⁶⁶ After expressing reverberations about Chomsky's approach – 'his work is not only deeply and unacceptably pessimistic: it is also a work not critical and reflective enough about its own premisses' – Said writes: 'These criticisms cannot be made at all lightly, or without acknowledging the unparalleled energy and honesty of his achievement. There is something deeply moving about a mind of such noble ideals repeatedly stirred on behalf of human suffering and injustice. One thinks here of Voltaire, of Benda, or Russell, although more than any of them, Chomsky commands what he calls "reality" – facts – over a breathtaking range' (16).

⁶⁷ An unfair comment: Chomsky's achievement in linguistics is widely recognised.

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Rouge were largely inventions of the American media,⁶⁸ and after a piece by him⁶⁹ was published, with his permission, as an introduction to a book by a man called Faurisson,⁷⁰ who said that the Holocaust had never occurred, but was a Zionist invention. (He said that this was intended only to support the right to free speech, but it went too far even for his followers.) The tribute to Chomsky's integrity irritated Stuart because of its patent falsity. One cannot, of course, blame any Palestinian Arab for hating Israel, whatever he writes; but so far as serious students of the subject are concerned, Said was laid out once and for all by the formidable Bernard Lewis,⁷¹ in an article in the NYRB:⁷² his Harold-Bloom-hypnotised critical essays seem to me, in their own

⁶⁸ In his writings on Cambodia during and directly after the period of Khmer Rouge rule – e.g. his article with Edward S. Herman, 'Distortions at Fourth Hand', *Nation*, 6 June 1977, 789–94; and *After the Cataclysm: Postwar Indochina and the Reconstruction of Imperial Ideology* [*The Political Economy of Human Rights* ii] (Boston, 1979) – Chomsky kept an open mind on the total number of Cambodians murdered by the Pol Pot regime, but viewed with scepticism Western media reports depicting state-sponsored genocide, later proved to have occurred. Steven Lukes's highly critical commentary on this position – 'Chomsky's Betrayal of the Truths', *THES*, 7 November 1980, 31 – met with several emphatic rebuttals (e.g. Laura J. Summers, letter to the editor, 19 December 1980, 22), and there was later a direct exchange between Chomsky and Lukes (Chomsky, 'The Truth about Indochina', 6 March 1981, 13; Lukes, 'Suspending Chomsky's Disbeliefs', 27 March 1981, 31; Chomsky, 'The Dispute about Atrocities in Kampuchea', letter, 12 June 1981, 35).

⁶⁹ 'Some Elementary Comments on the Rights of Freedom of Expression', published in French translation as a preface to Robert Faurisson, *Mémoire en défense, contre ceux qui m'accusent de falsifier l'histoire: la question des chambres à gaz* (Paris, [1980]), and in English in Noam Chomsky, *Chomsky on Democracy and Education*, ed. C. P. Otero (NY and London, 2003).

⁷⁰ Robert Faurisson (1929–2018), British-born French academic and Holocaust denier; taught French literature, Lyon II, 1973–91; deprived of his professorship in 1991 after conviction under the 1990 Gayssot Act, which makes it an offence to deny officially recognised crimes against humanity.

⁷¹ Bernard Lewis (1916–2018), Cleveland E. Dodge Prof. of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton, 1974–86; director, Annenberg Research Institute, Philadelphia, 1986–90.

⁷² 'The Question of Orientalism', *NYRB*, 24 June 1982, 49–56.

silly way, no better (though I expect Frank K[ermode]⁷³ might defend them on principle).

What I really want to ask you is: Must you use only zealots in writing about the Middle East? If you employ members of the Council of the PLO or CAABU,⁷⁴ should not this be balanced with pieces by some ghastly ex-member of the Irgun⁷⁵ or the Stern Gang?⁷⁶ It is clear that nobody can be neutral about either the Soviet Union or Israel. Nevertheless, there are degrees of rabidity – there must be more temperate people who can write. In Israel itself there exists a movement called ‘Peace Now’, which is entirely decent and very moderate – prepared to talk to the PLO, give up the West Bank, etc. They organised huge meetings to protest about the invasion of Lebanon, the treatment of Arabs, and everything that goes with it (one of its members, the novelist Amos Oz,⁷⁷ who is a genuinely brave protester, is one of the people whom Chomsky – approved by Said – regards as a greater menace than the nationalist fanatics).⁷⁸ These people are not favoured by the government, nor even by sections of the Israel Labour Party, for whom they go too far, but I admire them greatly. Can’t there be something by, or at least about, them? (there are no other

⁷³ (John) Frank Kermode (1919–2010) Kt 1991; Lord Northcliffe Prof. of Modern English Literature, UCL, 1967–74; King Edward VII Prof. of English Literature, Cambridge, 1974–82, and fellow, King’s, 1974–87.

⁷⁴ Council for Arab–British Understanding.

⁷⁵ Irgun Ts’vai L’umi, or Etsel (National Military Organization), right-wing Zionist paramilitary group founded 1931.

⁷⁶ Lohamei Herut Israel, or Lehi (Fighters for the Freedom of Israel), founded by Avraham Stern 1940 after a split in the Irgun, and known as the ‘Stern Gang’.

⁷⁷ Amos Oz (1939–2018) né Klausner, Israeli writer, novelist, journalist and intellectual; prof. of Hebrew literature, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 1987–2005; since 1967 a prominent advocate of a 2-state solution to the Israel–Palestine conflict, and one of the founders of the Peace Now movement 1978.

⁷⁸ ‘The truth of the matter is that Amos Oz is no more an advocate for peace than the mainstream of the PLO, maybe less so’: **Chomsky interviewed** in May 1988 by Burton Levine, *Shmate: A Journal of Progressive Jewish Thought*, 20 (Summer 1988), 24–32.

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moderates in the Middle East) – they write calmly and well. **I wish I could offer you something – even if you declined it – but I am no expert.**

But why am I going on like this? What right have I to write a letter simply to say that I keep having an awful time with your otherwise excellent periodical? – **my** unfortunate experience is probably unique. It is only that I wanted to get all this stuff off my chest, but there is no reason why you should be subjected to a tirade. Please forgive me. I should have preferred to *say* this to you, but we see each other, sadly, so seldom, that the only way of dealing with this is in writing. No doubt the Edwards – Said, Mortimer etc. – would say that my letter is precisely the kind of attempt at censorship that the wicked Zionists are so good at. **The bitterly committed seem to me** impervious to argument. Anyway, Stuart encouraged me to write to you, else I don't think I should have. *Dixi, et salvavi animam meam.*

Yours, in unbroken friendship **I actually said 'affection', but this will do as well,**
Isaiah

TO MARY-KAY WILMERS⁷⁹

30 March 1984

Headington House

Dear Mary Kay –

Thank you ever so much for your letter. David Vital's⁸⁰ address is 42 Kendal Steps, St. George's Fields, W.2. (Tel: 723.8330). I met

⁷⁹ Mary-Kay Wilmers (b. 1938), co-founder with Karl Miller of the *London Review of Books* 1979, later co-editor (1989) and editor (1992).

⁸⁰ David Vital (b. 1927) né David Vital Grossman, son of the Zionist leader and journalist Meir Grossman; Israeli political scientist and historian of post-Emancipation Jewry; in government service 1954–66 (Foreign Ministry and Intelligence Service) before returning to academia; Nahum Goldmann Prof. of Diplomacy, Tel Aviv, 1977–95. An undergraduate pupil of IB's at New College, Vital undertook his 3-vol. history of the Zionist movement (Oxford, 1975, 1982, 1987) at IB's pressing.

him in the British Museum Reading Room: yesterday: he looks on me as a hopeless dove: I see him as a rigid, committed hawk. He is an able man – his history of Zionism is a serious & very solid book, the best on its subject – but he is too nationalistic for me: and too hawkish and too touchy and too contemptuous of the liberal, the “soft”, those lacking in national pride & resolution

Believe me, there *are* less furious people than Gilmour⁸¹ or Said⁸² or Vital (though V. is not as far gone as the other two). Still one should not, I suppose, look a gift horse so much in the mouth – & it *is* a gift – & I *am* grateful for this concession to balance – Likud v. Arabomania.

I enclose a fragment of a letter⁸³ from a *New Republic* journalist – a gifted youth called Wieseltier⁸⁴ (who I suspect has written a

⁸¹ Ian Hedworth John Little Gilmour (1926–2007), 2nd Bt 1977, life peer 1992; Conservative MP 1962–92; secretary of state for defence 1974, lord privy seal 1979–81. Gilmour was disturbed by Eden’s Suez venture 1956 and later ‘was to be accused of over-zealousness in his Arab sympathies’; he had been deeply affected by a visit to the defeated Arab side after the Six Day War, and ‘having seen at first hand the treatment of the Palestinians, [...] made theirs a lifelong cause’ (‘Lord Gilmour of Craigmillar’, obituary, *Times*, 24 September 2007, 60a–e at 60a, 60b). The ‘nasty piece’ is ‘America and Israel’, LRB, 18 February to 3 March 1982, 7–9.

⁸² Edward Wadie Said (1935–2003), Jerusalem-born Palestinian American literary critic and political activist, internationally known for his advocacy of the rights of the Palestinian people; joined faculty, Columbia, 1963, full prof. 1970, later University Prof. (1992–2003).

⁸³ ‘You saw Prof Said’s piece in the London Review, I presume. Nasty masquerading as noble, like all his work. But can you explain why that journal has become so intensely hospitable to anti-Zionism? It is its most respectable regular address.’

⁸⁴ Leon Sol Wieseltier (b. 1952), Jewish-American author, critic and public intellectual; literary editor, *New Republic*, 1983–2014; later, author of *Kaddish* (NY, 1998) and, since 2015, Isaiah Berlin Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution, Washington. A close bond with IB began when LW was a BLitt student at Balliol, 1974–6.

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horrid but funny letter to Richard Wollheim⁸⁵ who has suddenly begun to adore America, I hear) – you may think the New Republic too pro-Zionist. Anyway I enclose it just to show that I am not quite alone in my plaintive cry. Love to Karl:⁸⁶ & indeed to yourself too. It was very nice of you to write to me.

yrs ever
Isaiah

TO ROBERT SILVERS

27 April 1984 [*manuscript*]

Headington House

Dear Bob,

I have read Kundera: it is impressive and moving: his thesis that the Western (Catholic) Slavs – Czechs, Slovaks, Austrian Poles (& to some extent Russian ones too), Hungarians, to a limited extent Croats have all been pushed out of the West, to which constantly & religiously they have belonged, behind the Curtain: this is just: the dividing line being really that of a Rome v. Byzantium: ie. the Greek Orthodox suppressed under the Turks (including Greece in the 19th century, tho' less than the others – they recovered a certain traditional Europeanism on which, like Jews on Solomon's temple they were nurtured) – v. the Austro–Holy Roman Empire ones. And he is right to cry out: there has been a brutal repression: & retrogression – Czech patriotism, and Hungarian, are like Zionism, a Western phenomenon. Not at all part of some anti-rationalist wave of illiberalism à la Schorske – he has all the idealism & feebleness which undermined Weimar Germany – it is difficult to think of Scholem or (the later) Momigliano or Einstein as proto-fascists – but Kundera is right. The step backwards, pace

⁸⁵ Richard Arthur Wollheim (1923–2003), FBA 1972, lecturer in philosophy, UCL, 1951–60, reader 1960–3, Grote Prof. of Philosophy of Mind and Logic 1963–82; prof. of philosophy, Columbia 1982–5, later Berkeley (1985–2002).

⁸⁶ Karl Fergus Connor Miller (1931–2014), British literary editor, critic and writer; Lord Northcliffe Prof. of Modern English Literature, UCL, 1974–92; founding editor, *London Review of Books*, 1979–89, later co-editor (1989–92).

Hobsbawm & Finley, is enormous & tragic. I am very glad you printed the piece.

He complains that there are no voices speaking for culture: to whom does one appeal, who can make his/her voice heard, if outrages are perpetrated? Sartre helped his friends, but if he made a difference, it was only because he stood well with the nasty left; but where were these voices earlier? In our time? He means Thomas Mann: Einstein & who else? not Croce, not Gide – none of Stuart Hughes’s Italians came to much: leftism alone is not enough: the fact that various editors after the war found it impossible to publish Silone because he was critical of Togliatti is horrifying enough: but who *were* these voices with world audiences, since Mill or Carlyle or Tolstoy or Dr Nansen? Only Mrs Roosevelt: Dr Niebuhr? I think the idea that [there] were once powerful champions of justice, liberty, decency is perhaps a pathetic illusion. Who speaks for Stephen, Meyer, Stuart, NYRB? – only NYRB itself – not Karl Miller’s journal,⁸⁷ not at all. I’ll certainly tell Teddy that Kundera is his man. Still, unpolitical voices – au dessus de la mêlée – Romain Rolland & Stefan Zweig in 1915 (in Switzerland) – a lot of good *that* did – made Rolland into a Stalinist & Zweig into the very paradigm of an impotent liberal unable to take in what Hitler was – so how can one “rise above” politics? You & I don’t believe *that*: even Sidney Hook is preferable to people who say “I am unpolitical. I don’t understand all that” – which 2^d generation Bloomsbury tended to say when they weren’t communists. I have just, under terrible pressure, written a review for the S. Times of a life of Ivy Litvinov – a curious monster: & failed to review Iris Origo’s book – despite her pressing requests – on de Bosis, Ruth Draper, Salvemini, Silone. This is Iris’s certificate of anti-fascism, like my friendship with N. O. Brown, Ollman, Hobsbawm etc. The chapter on Salvemini has marvellous quotations from him. I adored him. Walter Lippmann did not.

love

Isaiah

⁸⁷ The *London Review of Books*.

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P.S. *Pesaro: Comte Ory*; Mosè; *Viaggio a Reims* (not Rheims in Italian?) do let us go: Grace will surely discover the dates, at present obscure. Did you see that Cap[p]uccilli withdrew from Lyubimov's production of *Rigoletto* in Florence because of *Rigoletto* in bowler not à la Charlie Chaplin + cut outs of Mao, Hitler, Napoleon, Mussolini (not Stalin) – + Gilda on a swing – *after* being killed? & Gruberova said she was ill? & Sinopoli cancelled? sad that Empson is dead. The obits did *not* describe him as I knew him.

§TO ROBERT SILVERS

15 May 1984

Headington House

Dear Bob,

The Parfit party is less pessimistic than it was, and now feel that they have about a 53½ per cent chance of victory.⁸⁸ The Strawson review, whether in proof or final version before the end of the month, will considerably add to the ammunition of the party of virtue and truth.⁸⁹ Apart from Mary Warnock's idiotic review, all the others so far are favourable in various degrees.⁹⁰

Meanwhile, Brian Urquhart came to stay the night before going on to some conference in Ditchley.⁹¹ It seemed to me the kind of pointless exchange of views which he cannot help attending, and

⁸⁸ Derek Parfit (1942–2017), British philosopher at Oxford specialising in personal identity, rationality and ethics. His position at All Souls was in question because of his failure to publish – redeemed (just in time) by his *Reasons and Persons* (1984).

⁸⁹ Peter Frederick Strawson (1919–2006), usually cited as P. F. Strawson, Kt 1977, British philosopher at Oxford.

⁹⁰ Mary Warnock (1924–2019), Baroness Warnock 1985, British philosopher who taught at Oxford, friend of IB.

⁹¹ Brian Urquhart (1919–2021), Kt 1986, author and international civil servant.

in this case presiding over. His whole life is a vain pursuit of unattainable political ends based on decent but unrealistic premises. His political analysis of e.g. the Middle East seems to me perfectly well informed and intelligent; so is his appreciation of individuals; but no action can ever be expected to follow from this. But don't let me go on about this. Anyway, he asked me to tell him the truth about Arthur Herzberg, but the conversation wandered off into something else and I never did.⁹² Herzberg is constantly dropping my name when talking to him, hence the enquiry. The only relevance of Herzberg is that he is to some degree a supporter of Peace Now. I enclose a letter from that excellent man and eminent mathematician and morally very superior figure – certainly the most distinguished man in that movement – Prof. Aryeh Dvoretzky.⁹³ I don't want to telephone Brian at Ditchley: I have no idea where he goes on to after that – maybe the Middle East, for all I know. To call him out of some conference in order to say 'We didn't finish about Herzberg; he is a harmless busybody with quite liberal ideas and his advocacy of Peace Now should be taken seriously, as it is a very virtuous and excellent body ...' is not really possible. May I leave it to you to get hold of Brian when he is next in New York? Tell him the truth about Herzberg – his buzzing around certainly does no harm, and possibly some good – and instruct him about Peace Now.

We must, we must, we must meet on 5 June.

Yours ever,

Isaiah

⁹² Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg (1921–2006), Jewish American scholar and public intellectual.

⁹³ Aryeh Dvoretzky (1916–2008), Russian-born Israeli mathematician.

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TO BRYAN MAGEE

9 June 1984

Headington House

Dear Bryan,

Thank you ever so much for your congratulations on my birthday. I don't quite understand how I have come to reach this venerable age, given the life – something between unorganised and disorganised – that I have always lived. Still, I am quite pleased – I do not wish to end it just yet. (Thank you again very much.) ← you give me till 90: O.K: I'll settle for that: but to die just 1 year short of the 21st century! Und nichts für die Unsterblichkeit gethan!⁹⁴ the next line – “Mich ruft die Weltgeschichte”⁹⁵ I have never felt: have you?

yrs ever

Isaiah

TO BRYAN MAGEE

9 July 1985

Headington House

Dear Bryan,

The answers to your questions are these.

1. Jewish population: I recommend the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* – a second-rate work, with remarkable articles in it but in general very undistinguished – but miles better than the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. It has an article on population which will certainly give you what you want. It is published by Macmillan's – I should think most good libraries might have it – surely the London Library or University College would.

⁹⁴ ‘And have done nothing for immortality!’ Friedrich Schiller, *Don Karlos* (1787), act 2, scene 2.

⁹⁵ ‘World history calls me.’ Not the next line, but eight lines later.

2. The same work contains an article on Nobel Prizes – there is a list of Jewish prizewinners, which is certainly not up to date: it starts, I think, in 1910 or 1911 (I daresay there were no Jewish prizewinners before that), and goes to 1970 – but it leaves out names, for example Perutz (at Cambridge) and the great Pauli, Feynman etc.; and there are plenty after 1970 – four in Literature and I should say at least six or seven in the sciences. Do you count Peace Prizes? Kissinger? Begin(!)? If you could produce a list of Nobel Prizes to date, I could easily pick out the Jews, but I am leaving for abroad at the end of the week. Still, if you were to telephone me one fine morning in Albany (437 7603) between, let us say, 9.00 and 9.30 (or at about 11.30 here in Headington next Saturday morning), and read me a list of names, I could infallibly pick them out for you.

I am glad the OUP is behaving so sensibly. As for Wagner, as you know, I am not convinced by your interpretation of his attitude to the Jews. I agree with Auden, a fanatical Wagnerite, if ever there was one, who I think got it right. As for the Jews who worked with Wagner, you should look at the letters of poor Hermann Levi (or Lewi?) to his father the Rabbi, saying that he is insulted and humiliated daily, but that Wagner's genius is so marvellous that he simply cannot bring himself to break away. He conducted *Parsifal*, of course, but Wagner did point out that he would be quite unable to understand it properly, because of his unfortunate origin. I daresay Cosima was more virulent than even Richard, but while one cannot say that Wagner is responsible for Hitler, it is plausible to say that Hitler would not have been Hitler without Wagner plus Houston Stewart Chamberlin, who, according to Wagner himself, embodied his views very faithfully. But we shall never agree about that.

Yours ever,
Isaiah

PS Brendel is quite definitely not a Jew.

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PPS I don't think there is any evidence that the Niebelungs are intended to be Jews, nor Alberich, etc., but the very idea of *Untermensch* «surely nobody else's? not Gobineau's.» is disgusting, and not at all irrelevant to Nazi (not Fascist) theories.

«PPPS I am off to Italy – have a v. nice summer. No Salzburg?»

We spoke: nothing here that we did not discuss
IB»

TO GEORGE WEIDENFELD

3 December 1985

Headington House

Dear George,

I think your list for lunch is very good indeed. As the vainest man I ever knew used to say, 'I could not have done better myself!' Which he regarded as the highest imaginable compliment.

The only names I would «add» are «those of» Antonia Pinter, Mrs Jean Floud (very friendly, ex-Principal of Newnham College, Cambridge), Prof. Kolakowski (great friend); and I wonder why John Wells's – he is a friend of mine and very nice, but does he take the slightest interest in Israel? – *Private Eye* is not exactly friendly: the editor doesn't deny his antipathy. Despite his friendliness, I doubt if Tony Quinton is really interested; friend of mine as he is, I find myself quite unable to talk to him about Israel – he displays no interest in it whatever, and his wife, surprisingly enough, even less – they have never been there and so far as I know have no great intention of going (did they go after your Nile tour? I suspect not). Norman Stone, whom we both like, disliked his time in Israel, according to his friends, and I would not include him, for that reason – if he came, it would be out of friendship for «him» and politeness, and that is not, perhaps, the central consideration «wd he be sober?». Nor, I suspect, is Bernard Williams really

interested, but still, let him come – he is much more interested in Alfonsin than in anything in Israel, and having been repeatedly invited (he has friends there), has never managed to go – I have reproached him about this more than once. What about Lever? Naipaul won't come (I suspect). I suppose Kenneth Lindsay is too old and too decayed. Some of these people, e.g. Thomas and Annan, are about to be asked to one of the dinners which are given for Peres, but there is no harm in an overlap.

I am thinking aloud into my recorder. Peter Pulzer would be quite a good person to ask, since Mrs Thatcher, having been attacked by him in public, will certainly not ask him to dinner – he is at All Souls now, as Professor of Government and Public Administration; also Peter Mathias, who is a tremendous pro-Israeli, and has never been asked to anything like that, and I think would feel pleased and honoured – he is also at All Souls, as Professor of Economic History. All these I put in in case there are refusals. John Wells, Norman Stone and Bernard Williams seem to me the least relevant, although my friendly feelings towards them, like your own, are very warm. I don't think Kitaj will contribute much, even though he is obsessed by his Jewish origins at the moment – but it may give pleasure to Peres to meet a famous painter. Derek Hill would certainly come if asked; he has painted Teddy and scenery in Jerusalem and everything else – but maybe a semi-political gathering of this sort is not for him.

These are the only ideas that pass through my mind – I hope they are faintly helpful.

Yours,

Isaiah

delighted to see you to-morrow – what an extraordinary collection last night for “Bob”! Whence his charisma for us all? Is it just wealth? I feel ashamed.

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*TO BEATA POLANOWSKA-SYGULSKA⁹⁶

24 February 1986

Headington House

Dear Mrs Polanowska-Sygulska,

Thank you very much for your most interesting letter, which I read with great pleasure and attention, and have since mislaid. Although I think I remember its contents well, having read it twice, it may be that my answer will not precisely answer any of your questions – but I shall do my best – if I find it in the meantime, I shall try to modify this letter accordingly.

First, then, let me talk about the difficult question of ‘human nature’. Do I believe in a fixed and unalterable human nature? You rightly quote me as saying that I do not, and then again rightly quote me as referring to it as the basis of human communication. What, then, do I believe? I wish I could answer this question with extreme precision, but it does not seem to me to lend itself to that. What, I think, I believe is that there are thinkers, principally believers in natural law, who propose that all men are created, whether by God or nature, endowed with innate knowledge of certain truths – some ‘factual’, some normative. The lists differ, from Aristotle, the Stoics, Isidore of Seville, Gratian, Grotius⁹⁷ etc., but for the most part they include the existence of God, the knowledge of good and evil, right and wrong, the obligation to tell the truth, return debts, keep promises (*pacta sunt servanda*),⁹⁸ some or all of the Biblical ten commandments, and so on. I do not know

⁹⁶ Beata Maria *Polanowska-Sygulska (b. 1954), philosophically inclined lawyer.

⁹⁷ Isidore (c.560–636), Archbishop of Seville, author of the *Etymologiae*, an etymological encyclopedia drawn from classical sources; Gratian (b. C11th, d. not later than 1159), author of the *Decretum Gratiani*, the major source of Roman Catholic canon law; Hugo Grotius (also Huig/Hugeianus/Hugh de Groot) (1583–1645), Dutch jurist and theologian.

⁹⁸ ‘Agreements must be kept’, a principle deriving from Roman civil law.

who first questioned this – I dare say Epicurus or Lucretius.⁹⁹ But in modern times the main attack upon this was delivered by thinkers like Vico and Herder and Marx (and, indeed, Hegel and his followers), and, of course, the empiricists – not Locke, but Hume and his followers – according to whom, whatever the status of these natural laws, primitive men did not possess knowledge or even awareness of them, and they came into consciousness, or, indeed, formed objects of belief or certainty, in the course of evolution, or under the influence of changes in material circumstances and the growth of culture (whatever factors enter into that). For this entails that human beings go through a process of moral or metaphysical growth and development; and this is as valid as that empirical knowledge is an onward-going process, whether one believes that it tends to progressive development towards some kind of perfection (which it may never reach) or not – that it is cumulative but possesses no identifiable structure or teleological tendency.

This is certainly what Vico and Marx believed. That is, they believed that what is called human nature varies and differs from culture to culture, or even within cultures – that various factors play a part in the modification of human responses to nature and each other; and that therefore the idea that all men, at all times, in all places, are endowed with actual or potential knowledge of universal, timeless, unalterable truths (whether such truths exist or not, though for the most part such people did not believe them to exist) is simply false. The belief in such a priori knowledge and such unalterable truths does form the heart of the central European tradition, from Plato and the Stoics, through the Middle Ages, and perhaps in the Enlightenment as well, to our own day, indeed.

But if Vico and Marx etc. are right, and I think they are, this is not a valid conception. Human beings differ, their values differ, their understanding of the world differs; and some kind of

⁹⁹ (Titus) Lucretius (Carus) (c.95–55 BCE), Latin poet whose long poem *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*) presents and defends the philosophy of Epicurus.

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historical or anthropological explanation of why such differences arise is in principle possible, though that explanation itself may to some degree reflect the particular concepts and categories of the particular culture to which these students of this subject belong. I do not think this leads to relativism of any kind; indeed, I have an essay on the alleged relativism of the eighteenth century, of which I enclose an offprint.¹⁰⁰

But even though there is no basic human nature in this sense¹⁰¹ – in the sense in which, for example, Rousseau believed that if you strip off all the increments, all the modifications, corruption, distortion etc. (as he thought of it) brought about by society and civilisation, there will be discovered a basic natural man, sometimes identified with, say, Red Indians, who have not had the unfortunate experience of having their natures distorted by European culture – this is the position attacked, for example, by Edmund Burke, who says that the idea that there is a natural man (about whom he thinks the French revolutionaries speak, and whose rights they wish to restore) is false, that there is no such creature; that the arts, which according to Rousseau are a later and perhaps disastrous development, are, as he says, parts of man's nature;¹⁰² that there is no central, pure, natural being who emerges after you have scraped off all the artificial beliefs, habits, values, forms of life and behaviour which have been, as it were, superimposed on this pure, natural being – that is what I mean by denying a fixed human nature: I do not believe that all men are in the relevant respects the

¹⁰⁰ A 276/1.

¹⁰¹ The completion of (the sense of) this sentence is lost sight of until the next paragraph.

¹⁰² 'The state of civil society [...] is a state of nature; and much more truly so than a savage and incoherent mode of life; for man is by nature reasonable, and he is never perfectly in his natural state, but when he is placed where reason may be best cultivated, and most predominates. Art is man's nature. We are as much, at least, in a state of nature in formed manhood, as in immature and helpless infancy.' Edmund Burke, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs, in Consequence of Some Late Discussions in Parliament, Relative to the Reflections on the French Revolution* (London, 1791), 130–1.

same ‘beneath the skin’, i.e. I believe that variety is part of human existence and in fact (though this is quite irrelevant) that this is a valuable attribute, though that is a very late idea, probably not to be met much before the eighteenth century.

What, then, do I mean by saying that men do have a common nature? Well, I think that common ground between human beings must exist if there is to be any meaning in the concept of ‘human being’ at all. I think that it is true to say that there are certain basic needs – for example, for food, shelter, security and, if we accept Herder, for belonging to a group of one’s own – which anyone qualifying for the description of ‘human being’ must be held to possess. These are only the most basic properties. One might be able to add the need for a certain minimum of liberty, for the opportunity to pursue happiness or the realisation of one’s potentialities for self-expression, for creation (however elementary), for love, for worship (as religious thinkers have maintained), for communication, and for some means of conceiving and describing themselves, perhaps in highly symbolic and mythological forms, [and] their own relationship to the environment, natural and human, in which they live. Unless there is that, communication between human beings, even within a society, let alone understanding of what others have wished to communicate in other ages and cultures, would become impossible.

I believe in the permanent possibility of change, modification, variety, without being able to state that there is some central kernel which is what is being modified or changed. But there must be enough in common between all the various individuals and groups who are going through various modifications for communication to be possible; and this can be expressed by listing, almost mechanically, various basic needs – ‘basic’ for that reason – the various forms and varieties of which belong to different persons, cultures, societies etc. The need for food is universal, but the way I satisfy it, the particular foods I crave, the steps I take to obtain them, will vary. So with all the other basic needs: my mythology, metaphysics, religion, language, gestures will widely vary, but not

the fact that these are attempted ways of trying to explain to myself, to find myself at home in, a puzzling and possibly unfriendly environment or, indeed, world.

Wittgenstein once explained the concept of ‘family face’:¹⁰³ that is, among the portraits of ancestors, face A resembles face B, face B resembles face C, face C resembles face D, etc., but there is not a central face, the ‘family face’, of which these are identifiable modifications. Nevertheless, when I say ‘family face’ I do not mean nothing, I mean precisely that A resembles B, B resembles C and so on, in various respects, and that they form a continuum, a series, which can be attributed to family X, not to family Y. So with the various natures of various cultures, societies, groups etc. This is what I mean: that there is not a fixed, and yet there is a common, human nature. Without the latter there would be no possibility of talking about human beings, or, indeed, of intercommunication, on which all thought depends; and not only thought, but feeling, imagination, action. I do not know if I make myself clear, but that, I think, is what I believe. *This may, indeed, be confused or open to criticism, and if you wish to produce criticisms, as you have already, please feel free to do so – I should be only grateful, I do not regard anything that I think as so true as not to be totally falsifiable sooner or later – although I hope not.*

Then you ask me about negative liberty. Why do I define it on the one hand as the absence of external obstacles, and on the other suddenly begin talking about inner obstacles, drives, neuroses as obstacles to free activity? The reason for it is, as I am sure I have not made clear in my writings (and as you are perfectly justified in pointing out), that in the lecture on ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ I was concerned with political liberty; and the basic sense of political liberty, in my view, is precisely the absence of man-made obstacles, and the struggle for it is the struggle for their removal. When my critics have said that liberty is fundamentally a triadic relation – namely, that to want to be free is to want the removal of obstacle X in order to be able to perform action Y, and not simply the

¹⁰³ Usually translated as ‘family resemblance’: cf. A 209/2.

removal of X – I do not agree. A man who is in chains wants the striking off of those chains – what he will do when they are struck off, what he wants to do once they are removed, is another matter. His motive for wishing to remove the chains is to remove the chains which hamper his free movement, and that seems to me to apply throughout. Political liberty means the removal of obstacles created, whether deliberately or not, whether directly or indirectly, by other human beings – *not* by nature. The fact that I cannot buy an expensive wine because I lack the money with which to do so is, in ordinary usage, not an absence of political freedom, because nobody is actually stopping me from buying this wine, nobody is forbidding me, there is no law against it, no threats to me if I try to buy it; but, if socialists are right, it is a real deprivation of liberty, because my lack of money is due to a man-made system, whether brought about deliberately, or by ‘the forces of history’, which places me among the poor and gives the rich power over me, which is in fact a removable obstacle to my free functioning – and therefore a lack of liberty in my sense, the negative sense, because it is other human beings who are preventing me; a political sense of non-liberty, because political lack of liberty is the liberty which I am prevented from having by the actions of human beings, living or dead, and preserved by living human beings.

But there are thinkers, Hebrew and Christian – Jesus, who said ‘Ye shall know and the knowledge shall make you free’,¹⁰⁴ by which I think he meant that knowledge of God frees one from the errors of idolatry; Spinoza; Kant; Freud; etc. – for whom freedom is moral and intellectual freedom, which is blocked by fantasies or false ideas in people’s heads, or biological or physiological or psychological factors. This, of course, enters deeply into the discussions of what I call positive liberty, by which the Stoic sage, once he has taught himself to ignore, not to mind, pain, poverty, oppression etc., is free, has attained to inner freedom, like Buddhists, or the martyr whose thoughts, or whose love of God

¹⁰⁴ ‘And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.’ John 8: 32. Cf. L 252 (= CC2 226, PSM 91).

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and intense concentration upon all that matters spiritually, 'liberates' him from whatever might disturb or oppress or frustrate others. But whatever validity there is in this idea – and the word 'freedom' has certainly been used in this way and clearly means a great deal (neither of us, I imagine, would wish to deny that), it is not *political* freedom, which is to do only with human beings coercing other human beings, whether physically or socially, politically, through institutions, laws or however.

You would, I suspect, like to believe (at this point, I cannot recollect what you said in your letter) that there are, if not 'natural', then some kind of fundamental human rights, which all human beings are entitled to qua human, and the deprivation of which is a basic sense of the loss of liberty. I think I believe in that too. My only difficulty is that I do not think one can give a list of these. To say this to me means that a minimal human existence can be led only if these rights are reasonably protected, that to diminish them leads to dehumanisation, and that the real removal of them presumably leads to a reduction to the condition of animals, insanity, death. All this I also believe – that is what I mean by saying that there is a sphere in which human beings are entitled to do what they wish to do without interference; but what this sphere is, what its dimensions are, despite common human characteristics in virtue of which human beings are human, will, perhaps, differ from [sc. with?] the natures of these beings in different cultures, circumstances, conditions. But there must be some common thread of humanity running through them, as in the Wittgenstein 'family face' example that I gave. Is this vague? Obscure? Unsatisfactory? Do tell me if so – I expect it is.

Let me now say how grateful I am to you for taking my work seriously and for writing to me the letter that you have. I should love to talk to you about these things, which I am sure would be very useful to me and may be of some use to you. I enclose, therefore, a kind of annexe¹⁰⁵ to this letter, which explains the machinery whereby you might be able to come to Oxford for a

¹⁰⁵ Not reproduced here.

month or longer, in which case I could talk to you ‘freely’ (in the negative sense) from time to time, and you could also meet other philosophers who might be of even greater interest and profit to you.

Yours sincerely,
Isaiah Berlin

PS I think I have now recollected something else in your letter – namely, the two main philosophical conceptions of man – inasmuch as you quite correctly say that I maintain that our values depend on our conception of human nature (I do indeed believe that at the base of ethical, political and every other normative idea is always one’s notion of human nature, i.e. some kind of, usually not too empirical, conception of man). I am not quite clear what the difference between ‘substantialist’ and ‘activist’ consists in. Does the former mean some unchanging substratum, Rousseau’s ‘natural man’? And does the latter mean that man is to be conceived as a series, or pattern, of activities and dispositions to such activities (the word ‘dispositions’ is obscure enough in itself)? I am not sure that I fully understand this distinction – but the notion of a self, or human nature, is one of the most agonising problems even in contemporary philosophy, let alone in Plato and Aristotle and Hume and Kant, and the subject of the ‘cogito’. Is human nature a compound of sensations, memories, anticipations, imagination, dispositions, connected in some fashion (or, according to some thinkers, virtually identical) with physical, biological, physiological characteristics? Or do we mean something different by ‘self’, something, some entity, conceived in realistic terms, continuous through time, with differing characteristics but possessing an unvarying ‘inner’ constitution? I would rather not pronounce on that, at any rate in this letter; but if you come to Oxford, we can talk about it and about everything else, with enough time at our disposal.

I hope I have got all the points in your full letter – but perhaps I have not.

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TO JEAN HALPÉRIN

14 July 1986

Headington House

Chérissime Cousin Jean,

I hope you will forgive me for not sending you a handwritten letter, but my writing is, by now, indecipherable by the most expert cryptographers, and I do not wish to add to your distress.

I only want to say that I am deeply grieved by the fact that your mother, whom, as you know, I met on more than one occasion and deeply admired and respected, and who was very nice to me, and who spoke to me so interestingly, so wonderfully, indeed, about her own life in St Petersburg and in Paris – I shall never forget her story about the Baron Salomon – that your mother should be no more. What can I say but what I said when my mother died, to whom I was very deeply attached, and though she was ninety-three, *baruch dayan emet*.¹⁰⁶

It is a most painful thing, I know, when one's last link with one's origins is snapped: whether one is young or old, one feels a cold wind, a sense of loneliness. I know how close you were to your mother, and she to you. Your marvellous education is surely due to her wisdom and care.

I am firmly convinced that the Russian Jews are intellectually and morally superior to all other Jews, that they have more imagination, humanity, creative capacity, *neshama*,¹⁰⁷ and that the German, French, Italian Jews are dehydrated relics in comparison. This chauvinism will last me my lifetime. Your family was, as you well know, the most distinguished family of all, and your mother was a most noble representative of what I most love and respect.

This entire culture is at an end – my friend, the very gifted poet Joseph Brodsky, for instance, knows little or nothing of it. You, your brother and I alone carry that tattered flag. But do not let me

¹⁰⁶ 'Blessed be the one true Judge', the customary response of a Jew to news of a death.

¹⁰⁷ 'Spirit'.

go on in this strain. When really fateful things happen, words are of very little use, and I can only apologise for the inadequacy of all this. I realise how terribly distressed you must be – I can only wish you to recover from it as best you can – of course, nothing will ever be the same – and to live for many years of noble and productive activity, in which I personally feel deep pride.

Yours,

¹⁰⁸ישעיהו

TO MICHAEL MORAN

10 October 1986

Headington House

Dear Moran,

I am perfectly willing to write to Christ Church about you, but I must say that you are unfortunately right: I doubt if you would get even as far as a short list. Jobs in philosophy now are so few, and the number of main-line philosophers with good degrees, in Oxford alone, is so great, and the pressure so immense, that I think that they are in any case likely to choose somebody whom they think will teach the main topics in the present Oxford philosophy curriculum. Of course, Montefiore, Gardiner etc. are wider in their outlook than the Oxford analysts, but ours is still a fringe subject here, and I therefore doubt if Christ Church could think it could afford it. Still, I will do as you say – but you really must pitch your hopes rather low. I sincerely hope that I am mistaken.

Yours sincerely,

Isaiah Berlin

PS Thank you ever so much for sending me the review – I am now very old and suffer from rapidly advancing amnesia – I am not comforted by the newest discoveries in physiology/ psychology which say that memory is not an accumulation of data stored by

¹⁰⁸ 'Isaiah'.

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the neurones, but a far more subjective imposition of patterns upon the past, each somewhat different in each individual case from others; and therefore dependent on all kinds of uninvestigated personal socio-psychological factors. Whatever the cause, the effect is gloomy. I re-read your review with, I fear, somewhat complacent pleasure, and feel renewed gratitude for being understood so well. I also read your two other reviews with great amusement and pleasure – I am so glad you despise Derrida – for all that he is one of Montefiore’s close friends, or so he says. I think he is a genuine old-fashioned charlatan, rather a clever man as only such can be. Also your remarks about Bamborough must be right for all I know him. And as for Lewis ... Anyway, I read it with pleasure and profit. And so I did your kind review of Hinchman – I feel so ignorant of the inner lanes [sc. lines?] of Hegel’s thought that I thought perhaps I would read it, taking your advice to heart, and ignore his discipleship to Hegel, just to find out what Hegel actually said, or even meant. Anyway, thank you very much for all this.

I.B

TO ROBERT SILVERS

24 October 1986

Headington House

Dear Bob,

You will be astonished to hear that I am still meditating writing a piece for you on Vico, namely, a review of two books which I don’t think have been noticed in the *NYRB* – one distinguished and interesting, the other dry and in my view almost worthless (but I can’t quite say that – too cruel).

I have done an odd thing: I have written a piece on Edmund Wilson’s visit to Oxford in, I think, 1954 or thereabouts. I was written to by the *Yale Review*, which wanted a contribution on something they called ‘encounters’ – odd episodes in one’s life, odd meetings, etc. At first, of course, I thought I wouldn’t do it – waste

of time, other things, why should I?, boring, difficult, at my enormous age, etc. Then I thought: Why not? First I thought of my visit to Freud; then my first meeting with Stravinsky in the Savoy Hotel, which had its comic moments; then I suddenly remembered about Edmund's extraordinary behaviour at Oxford, only partly reflected in the 1950 volume of the letters edited by Leon Edel (who has behaved very well – he left in everything that I could not controvert, and left out the most monstrous of Edmund's sentences – which anyway were not numerous and very brief – anyway, I am grateful to him). I'll send you a copy of that if it is printed – it may be too long for their collection of 'encounters' but I think they may print it separately – at least, Mr Erikson seems willing.

I am thinking of going to Jerusalem – I like any excuse for going there, even in the present horrible atmosphere – for one of the Weidenfeld–Getty get-togethers about orchestras; but that will be partly compensated for by the fact that I think the Brendels will go, there will be concerts by Stern, Rostropovich and the boys – Perlman, Zuckermann, Barenboim et al. – for the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra's 50th anniversary. In which case, I don't think I will come to New York as well – too old, too much of what Aline calls *bousculer*¹⁰⁹ – she is going in November, and I doubt if she will want to go again in December. But the purpose of all this – apart from reporting to you that I am going to meet Sidney Morgenbesser with Magee in London (a ridiculous occasion – how can I see them both in the same place at the same time? – can you imagine it?) – is to ask whether you will not come here in December, particularly just after Christmas, or in early January: or when you like? Do – otherwise, when are we to meet? The months and years pass, the brain-drain (Williams, the excellent MacDowell, Alan Ryan, Sen – the depredation is terrible – the pauperisation of this country is happening by leaps and bounds) goes on: so, before the worst happens, before the desert, do come here – with Grace if possible, or alone, or however. The best I can offer you in the

¹⁰⁹ 'Jostling'.

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way of entertainment would be our forthcoming *Otello*, with Kleiber and Domingo, which should be marvellous – that is in January, and if you want tickets they must be ordered yesterday: this is on 13, 17, 20, 23 and 25 January – our Box, obtained by a terrible shedding of blood, is on Saturday the 17th. We have asked Bernard and Patricia Williams – I cannot remember if anyone else, the Brendels will take their own tickets and certainly come to dinner – if you want to come, telephone immediately and I'll see what I can do – if I don't hear, I shall draw a gloomy conclusion.

Where is Brodsky? He was in ill health here, and is probably in Venice now. He will not go to a posh doctor, and I think is hastening his own end while being extremely frightened of it – I think he wants to live and yet cannot take steps to look after himself. I think he would be better off in London in a way – anyway, we can talk about that if and when we meet: one's duty to preserve him is very, very plain. Why don't you telephone one of these days? You may well ask, why don't I, just because I have this new talking machine – and like to keep Pat Utechin occupied (that is said for her benefit, not without irony).

Love to everybody – as Provost of King's Sheppard used to say if anyone said they were going to Venice.

Yours ever,

Isaiah

[...]

TO STEPHEN BROOK¹¹⁰

11 January 1987

Headington House

Dear Mr Brook ,

Thank you for your letter of 16 December. I am sure your book deals with an interesting subject, and I hope that you will find as much material for it as possible. I am perfectly willing to talk to you about your 'pet theories' about British Jews. But I feel that I

¹¹⁰ Stephen Brook (b. 1947), wine expert, journalist, publisher and author, was researching his book *The Club: The Jews of Modern Britain* (London, 1989).

ought to warn you, in my turn, that I take very little interest in the British Jewish community as such. I belong to it, I belong to several of its associations, one way or another, but I find it an extremely dull topic – my pet theory is that Jews in England have largely escaped persecution in modern days, or indeed, excesses of anti-Semitism, by being so very socially and intellectually dim: until roughly speaking the present, and now their chief cause of publicity seems to lie in their impact on the business world, and indeed, their notoriety in it – their intellectual and artistic input cannot be taken seriously, at least not [if they are viewed] as Jews. This sounds rather extreme, but I feel convinced that intellectually the Jewish community comes lowest in the scale of any larger communities in the world. So far as I know, not a single Jewish scholar outside the natural sciences and mathematics – with perhaps the exception of my colleague Herbert Hart in Oxford and, let us say, four others (not that I can name them) – was born on British soil.

If you would telephone me one morning, we can make a date to discuss this topic, if you wish. But I do not believe that I shall contribute anything to your field of study, only casual remarks of someone profoundly uninterested in it.

Yours sincerely,
Isaiah Berlin

TO HOWARD N. MEYER¹¹¹

28 April 1987

Headington House

Dear Mr Meyer,

I read your piece on Edmund Wilson and *Patriotic Gore* with the greatest interest. I have not read *Patriotic Gore*, I am ashamed to say, but from your pages I received a very vivid impression of what the general tenor and thrust of it must be. It does not surprise me in the least. There was an element of permanent, as it were, uncritical

¹¹¹ Howard N. Meyer (b. 1914), civil rights attorney and author.

radicalism in Wilson – hatred of establishments, suspicion of the motives of all public men, natural reaction to slogans and clarion calls and eloquence in political or national causes within the framework of the establishments of what he regarded as hopelessly bourgeois countries. He thought that all wars, certainly since Napoleon, were monstrous bloodshed of a horrible kind in the interests of groups disguised as ideals – all that he got from Marx and similar writers. This applied to both World Wars and obviously to the Civil War, and rather more plausibly to Vietnam. He obviously did not mind sheer killing as such, because that does not emerge in, for example, *To the Finland Station*. It was only towards the end of his life, partly under the influence of Solzhenitsyn and other irrefutable evidence, that he turned against the Soviet Union, and became nauseated by Stalin and everything to do with him – and his distaste even turned to the once-hallowed Lenin. I had a conversation with him in which he reminded me that I had said that he was too nice about Lenin – he agreed, and the Introduction to the second, or a later, edition of *To the Finland Station* altered this approach.

I am only saying all this to you to show that I realise the basis of what you write, and from my knowledge of Edmund, whose memory I still revere and of whom I was deeply fond, it seems entirely plausible. That is why, for example, he liked so much the writings of our own A. J. P. Taylor, whose task simply consisted in praising trouble-giving minorities as such and putting banana skins under the feet of revered political and public personalities. Irreverence towards established Western values delighted him as such: but his loss of faith in Russia, which I suppose began after his visit in the 1930s, but still persisted when I first met him, and only became total disillusionment and indignation in the last years of his life, was, I suppose, true of an entire generation of American leftists – and British ones too – for perfectly natural intelligible reasons, but it was a marvellous mass delusion which I think, perhaps, has no parallel in history, unless you think that Voltaire's worship of an imaginary China is rather like that.

Of course he must have been right in part about the crushing of the Southern states – the cant, the exploitation, the bullying, no doubt did occur. But you are obviously right in underlining the nervous respect for anything that Wilson said, even on the part of historians who ought to know better, simply because he was a morally respected figure and dominated American criticism, quite justifiably. But this should not have extended to respect for his violent and irrational political prejudices, ferocious suspicion and desire to discredit honourable human motives, just wars, genuine idealism – above all, Lincoln’s reputation. He simply wanted to attack icons and fetishes as such – and in the course of this said a great many untrue, unjust and silly things. Still, he remains a wonderful critic and a most lovable and in many ways disarming human being. [...]

Yours sincerely,
Isaiah Berlin

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

12 January 1988

Headington House

I am happy to testify that Mr Salvatore Santagati, whose doctoral thesis on Max Stirner I have read with attention and profit, chapter by chapter (Mr Santagati had informally sought my advice on this topic), is a man of clear and lively mind, considerable imaginative power, and exceptional aesthetic sensibility. His thesis on Stirner makes it clear that he has a capacity for organisation of unusual material, drawn from many sources, and for clear and cogent argument – it is an original and interesting piece of work of high quality.

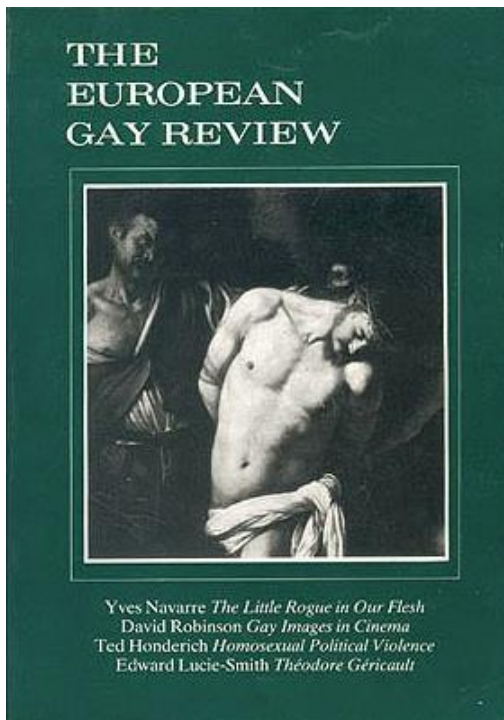
Mr Santagati has wide literary interests – he responds to modern poetry, both in English and, so far as I can judge, in Italian, with discrimination, intelligence and genuine insight. He is the editor of

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an English periodical – the *Gay European Review*¹¹² – and considering the somewhat selective method of obtaining contributors, the standard of this publication seems to me remarkably high. The whole thing seems to me a highly professional job: the material is better organised, and the journal physically more attractive, than the usual ‘little review’, which usually enjoys a very short existence. In short, he impresses me as being a highly civilised, sensitive, intelligent, alert and efficient man (qualities which do not always go together), likely to enliven and enhance any organisation concerned with literature in the languages in which he is competent.

Isaiah Berlin

Sir Isaiah Berlin, OM, FBA, Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford



¹¹² In fact the *European Gay Review*.

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TO ROBERT SILVERS

27 May 1988

Headington House

Dear Bob,

Thank you ever so much for Milosz. I did indeed get an account of Lisbon from Reni – she was pro Brodsky, whereas Treglown thought that Tolstaya and her friends did not do very well in answering the charges that they paid no attention to Budapest, Prague etc. My friend Litvinov's daughter Tania is also somewhat contemptuous about 'inner freedom' when other freedoms are being crushed; but she is totally pro Brodsky, who she says was never a dissident, any more than Akhmatova, Pasternak etc., or, indeed, the noble Chukovskaya – unlike Tania and her brother, both of whom demonstrated.

I have received a visit from the Soviet Cultural Attaché, who asked about Akhmatova in Oxford – he asked for a copy of my notorious piece, which you know – after he has read it I may not hear from him again.

As for *To the Memory of Childhood*, I promise to read it; it looks sweet, touching, noble, but not terribly interesting – but I may be wrong – if I am moved to write, I promise to let you know.

Yours ever,
Isaiah

TO JOHN RAWLS

31 August 1988

Headington House

Dear Jack,

Thank you ever so much for 'The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus'. I read it with the greatest pleasure, and as always with deep and constant admiration. As you may imagine, your defence of pluralism speaks to both my heart and my mind – it is to me, as

it is to you, ‘a permanent feature of [the] public culture of modern democracies’. And I share your apprehensions about the effects of ‘general and comprehensive doctrines’ which lead to oppression – and can do even in the civilised forms of the philosophies of Kant and Mill. And of course I think in the end everything depends on an acceptance of certain ‘fundamental intuitive ideas latent in the political culture’ of a given society, what you call the democratic tradition.

My only doubts arise about the degree of your optimism in the possibility of offering your views, with which I totally agree, as a permanent basis within which disagreements can be resolved. I fully realise that you are aware of the strength of, let us say, people’s religious convictions, which lead to fanaticism – to the view, let us say, that since the salvation of souls is after all the most important issue that can be, how can you compromise it, or the attempt to save souls if need be by coercive means, simply in order to preserve democracy, social peace, fairness, justice and the like? I have no doubt that certain social evils are so great – let us say, e.g., slavery or racial hatreds – that violence is justified in suppressing these things, even if it undermines the basis of social consensus, and so on. But I believe, with you, that so long as what you call *very great virtues* (p. 17) prevail, our proposals can and should be regarded as right, and supported. As you may imagine, Sections VII and VIII are entirely admirable, I agree with every syllable of them. The only thing that worries me, as I said above, is that you are, I think, thinking mainly of Anglo-Saxon societies, in which there really is a genuine democratic condition [sc. tradition?] since the late seventeenth century, in which all that you say is both applicable and feasible. But so much of the world has grown up on ideas, values and principles so different from these that the attempt to offer them your view would I think in places be regarded as unintelligible. Which plunges me into deep pessimism – I think of Israel, for example, with which I feel an emotional connection – and the fanaticism there is such that the prevalence of your ideas and mine seems unlikely to prevail in the immediately foreseeable future. Still, the truth! Let it go forward! We can but say what we

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believe and hope for agreement, if not now then in some enlightened future. Thank you ever so much again for sending me your piece.

Yours ever, «with *warmest* good wishes»

Isaiah

PS I ought to add that your reference to my views on p. 7, n. 13, seems to me entirely correct – I am flattered that you should have mentioned it, and believe that your last line, in which you suppose that the general scheme you outline might coincide with my moral-political *Weltanschauung*, might well be right. I sincerely hope so! But I think I trust your intuitive certainties more than my own. I hope the conference in Italy in June went agreeably for you. I wish I could have come while we were here, it would have been marvellous to see you both.

TO GEORGE KENNAN

13 December 1988

Headington House

Dear George,

Thank you ever so much for your piece on Toynbee. I could not agree with you more than I do. He was an amiable man, wrote at times quite well, but whether he was really as great [a] scholar – I mean as great a historian – as he was taken to be in a straightforward sense I rather doubt. Certainly he was a first-rate classical historian – he knew more about Greece and Rome than almost anyone of his generation, perhaps; he was a typical product of pre-First World War Balliol and the influence of Gilbert Murray, whose daughter he married. But specialists as a rule, when they come to read his chapters on what they know about, find fault with it – certainly Obolensky doesn't much like his writings on Russia, or even Byzantium, although perhaps the book on Porphyrogenitus is a genuinely learned work. I have the same feeling when browsing through the later volumes. But you are absolutely right,

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and I am so glad that you think it: his historiosophical theories are not of very great value. *Challenge and Response* is a fairly obvious idea, and in a way rather platitudinous. The division of civilisations is very arbitrary, and the fact that he had to retreat about Judaism being merely a fossil and reviving it was not, I think, merely due to local political pressure. He was really a seeker after a religion – the peculiar amalgam of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and bits of Islam which he finally generated simply represents the spiritual search of a sincere but somehow rather pathetic kind.

The footnotes in the book are fascinating: they contain a great deal of unfamiliar information which has taught me a good deal. But the text is somehow too prophetic, too solemn and metaphysically organised. This may be an injustice to a great historian, but I shall never think of him in these terms and never have. I suspect that you don't go quite so far, but I do congratulate you on seeing through the fog to the real truth, as you have so often done.

It was a great pleasure to see you again and I am very sorry it happens so seldom. All that you said about the Soviet Union, and Stalin in particular, seemed to me wonderfully vivid and true and original.

Yours ever,
Isaiah Berlin

FROM GEORGE KENNAN

14 January 1989 [*manuscript*]

Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton

Dear Isaiah:

Thank you so much for your kind and understanding note of December.

Some day (it does not have to be now) if you chance to read the piece about 'le docteur Cyon', I would love to have your reactions. It seemed to me that his fate had in much of the tragedy of the highly cultivated Russian Jews of the assimilationist tendency.

Sincerely,
George K.

TO GEORGE KENNAN

1 February 1989

Headington House

Dear George,

I read your essay on Tsion-Cyon¹¹³ with absolute fascination. What an extraordinary story, and how wonderfully you tell it – believe me, not mere friendship speaks here but pure and disinterested admiration.

I don't believe that he was typical of the cultivated, assimilated Russian Jews. There were baptised Jews who wrote for reactionary Russian journals, e.g. [Aleksandr Rafailovich] Kugel and the like, who were pretty straightforward Russian nationalists but not at all mixed up in the twisted and probably somewhat sinister career of M. Cyon (what a marvellous spelling). If there are no other links connection [sc. connecting] him with the Black Hundreds, I don't believe, whatever [Boris Ivanovich] Nikolaevsky may have thought – he was immensely learned and totally honest, but not very intelligent – that he could have invented the Protocols. What about Nilus, the mysterious Russian who is commonly thought to have produced them? Do you know that when Nikolaevsky appeared as a witness in the libel suit brought by the Jewish community of Switzerland against the Swiss Nazi Colonel Scheidegger, who defended the Protocols, and the opposing lawyer tried to discredit Nikolaevsky by maintaining that he was partly Jewish, or deeply involved with Jews, he leapt from his seat to his full height, and said 'Ich bin popin zon'! He was the son of a Siberian priest.

To go back to the assimilated Jews. My wife's family were exactly that, and lived model lives, always hoping that the

¹¹³ Elias von/Elie de Cyon (1843–1912), né Il'ya Fadeevich Tsion, Russian French physiologist. Kennan's essay is 'The Curious Monsieur Cyon', *American Scholar* 55 no. 4 (Autumn 1986), 449–75.

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government was gradually becoming more liberal, that pogroms were aberrations in diminishing numbers, thinking that revolutionaries were terrible people; they wrung their hands over the drift to socialism or Zionism of young Jews, and behaved pathetically as model citizens, later becoming émigrés or being exterminated. Someone like Goldenweiser, the brother of the musician who was a great friend of Tolstoy, and himself became a high official of the Federal Reserve in Washington, whom I just met, was pretty typical. I daresay Pasvolsky was descended from such ones. The best printed thing on East European Jews seems to me to be an essay by Namier,¹¹⁴ in which he describes them as a frozen mass of religious believers, insulated from the rest of society; then, when the rays of the Enlightenment began to beat on it, some evaporated (assimilated), some remained frozen (the great bulk in Russian and Poland), and some became swollen streams, socialist or Zionist. That seems to me about right. My father-in-law, the Baron Gunzburg, looked on Zionists as I look on Fascists. There – I must not go on – but what a wonderful piece.

Yours ever,
Isaiah B.

TO ROBERT SILVERS

1 May 1989

Headington House

Dear Bob,

[...] The courting of me by what my friend Jock Balfour used to call ‘the Soviet Onion’ continues. The most moving letters from Moscow, begging me to come to their Akhmatova celebrations, in Moscow, Leningrad, Pushkin (Tsarskoe Selo), Kiev and, for some reason, Tver. But I won’t go, it would be exhausting and pointless and I have said all I could say. Nevertheless, I did submit to the Soviet TV, which interviewed me about Akhmatova, Pasternak

¹¹⁴ ‘Zionism’, *New Statesman*, 5 November 1927, 103–4, reprinted in Namier’s *Skyscrapers and Other Essays* (London, 1931).

etc., and was assured that fifty million Soviet citizens would gaze, though not for more than, say, two minutes, on my unforgettable features. Elena C[hukovskaya] told me that when Brodsky was ill in hospital, pale, silent, someone came and told him that Yevtushenko was against collective farms; he said ‘If he’s against, I am for’ – he never disappoints one – please give him my love. [...]

Yours ever,
Isaiah

To mark IB’s eightieth birthday in 1989, The Times published an article by Roger Scruton entitled ‘Freedom’s Cautious Defender’.¹¹⁵ Alongside a not too grudging meed of praise it contained some nasty barbs, among which these two stand out:

Re-reading Sir Isaiah’s essays, I find myself both impressed by their abundance and repelled by it. Berlin’s ideas circle round the great white hope of liberation, but beneath the elegant fabric of his sentences, the self-confident rhythm of which has an almost automatic character, I sense a dearth of those experiences in which the suspicion of the liberal idea is rooted: experiences of the sacred and the erotic, of mourning and holy dread.

I feel drawn to the cause that he defends. But looking at the second-rate bigots who have advanced through the academic world during his ‘reign’ over it, I wonder how effective a bastion he has been against the intellectual corruption which he condemns with such cautious eloquence?

IB’s already existing antipathy to Scruton and his views was greatly reinforced by the article. One of those who read it was the Berlins’ friend David Pryce-Jones, who takes up the story:

¹¹⁵ *The Times*, Saturday 3 June 1989, 10.

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Richard Willson's illustration for Scruton's article

Publication of this piece was in itself quite enough to rattle Isaiah, but there was much more. Apart from one paragraph of incomprehensible speculation about Isaiah's personality,¹¹⁶ Scruton's line was clear, his tone regretful: thanks to the Cold War, Britain and its democratic values were under sustained assault and Isaiah had not taken his due place as champion *honoris causa* of right-thinking people. That Sunday, I dined with friends in London and one of them must have denounced me for saying that, alas, I did think that Isaiah lacked civil courage and therefore didn't do justice to himself or his convictions. On the Monday, Isaiah telephoned to say that he had heard I agreed with Scruton, and could this be true? A long typewritten letter followed. In his words, the article was absolutely

¹¹⁶ Presumably the first passage quoted above.

odious, deeply offensive, loathsome, making false accusations, reminiscent of the kind of accusation right-wing liberals in pre-1914 Russia had to put up with from the Black Hundreds, also Goebbels-like. My response was upsetting, he said, because he had known me for so long and held me in such affection. I felt obliged to point out to him that Goebbels would have stopped him writing and excluded him completely from public life, while Scruton wished him to write more and be more active in public life. One must carry on as before, he concluded in his letter to me, adding in ink, ‘So be it’ – and so it was.¹¹⁷

Two contemporary letters from Pryce-Jones to IB about Scruton’s piece survive, and enable us to fill in some details. On 12 June Aline Berlin telephoned Pryce-Jones,¹¹⁸ obviously concerned about the episode, and he tried to reassure her. The next day he wrote to IB to clarify his view:

FROM DAVID PRYCE-JONES

13 June 1989 [*manuscript*]

1 Phillimore Terrace, Allen Street, London

Dear Isaiah,

Aline telephoned me yesterday and I heard from her voice how agitated she was about the Scruton article. I told her that in my opinion the article does you no harm, on the contrary. But since I could hear that she was upset, I want to tell you why I think this is no cause for unhappy reactions, and of course I should hate for any misunderstanding to arise between you and I. That would be a wretched by-product.

You dislike to read your name in print, I know, but it’s unavoidable for someone in your position and with your reputation. That any article at all appears is in itself only a compliment, even had it been altogether malign – i.e. it would prove you to be a target

¹¹⁷ David Pryce-Jones, ‘Isaiah Berlin’, in his *Signatures: Literary Encounters of a Lifetime* (New York and London, 2020), 39–40.

¹¹⁸ Did Pryce-Jones misremember this call as one from IB a week earlier, or did both IB and Aline telephone him on separate occasions?

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worth going for. In fact Scruton says the one thing which matters, that you continue to write as though the human world were shaped by ideas when others have lost this habit. The degree to which he differs or dissents from your opinion is altogether secondary to this main statement, whose effect can only be to impel readers to turn to your writings to find out what the ideas are. You will acquire readers of the right kind, and the net effect can only be a strengthening of the fabric of society.

My book about the Arabs has led me to be called in print a racist and a warmonger, and author (this in a Jewish journal) of a book akin to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. It may be that my skin has become insufficiently thin where insults are concerned. But again, Scruton says that you write with self-confidence (the only real ingredient of style). When I read the article, therefore, I felt that he was putting you and a wide general audience in touch. There is a sense in which he is marching you towards his battles, and conscripting you for the purpose, but you have no need to let yourself be conscripted, though that he should want to do so is again only a compliment to you. Debate about how to live as though ideas mattered can only be to your advantage, and to the benefit of all of us.

With all possible affection,
as ever
David

IB replied as follows.

TO DAVID PRYCE-JONES

19 June 1989

Headington House

Dear David,

Thank you for your letter. I realise that it is your purpose to wish that no abyss should open between us – and that is my wish too. I was taken aback, and indeed somewhat upset, by your reported defence of Scruton's piece. When I opened *The Times* and

came across it, it came as a total surprise, and indeed shock, to me. I thought it an absolutely odious piece – the tone and content were more like the kind of articles against the poor right-wing liberals in Russia before 1914, which came from what I can only call the Black Hundreds, who played their part in precipitating all kinds of moderates into the revolutionary camp – quite different from hostile reviews, of which you speak.

I think every single one of my political writings was attacked, sometimes very savagely, both from the right and mainly from the left: ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ and ‘Historical Inevitability’ received some very violent onslaughts from Marxists, Catholics, historians, sociologists of various stripes, and virtually no defenders – so I am perfectly used to that, and regard it as disagreeable but inevitable, and in a free society not only permissible but, I suppose, virtually to be encouraged. This sounds priggish, but given my views on liberty I cannot think otherwise. Scruton’s piece was very different, making false accusations (which my two defenders in *The Times* duly pointed out);¹¹⁹ it was, and obviously was intended to be, deeply offensive.

I sat next to Peter Carrington the other night, not exactly a man of the left, indeed, distinctly on the right wing of the Conservative Party as far as his real convictions are concerned. Somebody mentioned *The Times*: he turned to me and, oddly enough, flushed a little beyond his usual dark red complexion, and said ‘Scruton and his gang have given a very bad name to right-wing thought in England – they are a gift to the left. As for you, if I were you I should cancel your subscription to *The Times* – tell me that you will, and I will too.’ <not, I fear seriously meant, but don’t pass this on to anyone? Privacy is sacred.> It was very unexpected and slightly embarrassing, because all the other Tories round the table (it wasn’t a large dinner party, but there were four or five tycoons and

¹¹⁹ There were three supportive letters to the editor: Peter Pulzer, ‘Sir Isaiah Berlin’, *The Times*, 9 June 1989, 15c; Noel Annan and Michael Ignatieff (separately), ‘Birthday Honours for Sir Isaiah’, 13 June, 17d–e. A further letter, also published on 13 June, from David Selbourne, was more equivocal.

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someone closer to Mrs T, apparently, than anyone else) all chimed in and said what a hideous embarrassment *The Spectator*, *Private Eye*, the *Salisbury Review* gang were to them. I don't think that was just said for my benefit: nobody need have said anything. (I daresay they would rather not be quoted in *Private Eye* or the *New Statesman*.)

In Oxford the reaction was somewhat different: people apparently didn't want to mention it to me, for fear of touching upon a terrible wound – it was regarded as so unspeakable as not to be discussable at all. The one exception anywhere was Sir Sigmund Sternberg, who said he read the article with interest and it threw a great deal of light on me for him, and he then congratulated me on my birthday in very sugary terms.

As you probably know, I have never met Scruton: but I am quite clear that I don't wish to be in the same room with him, or Casey,¹²⁰ his *eminence grise*, either. Horror figures in my life – Begin, Shamir, most pro-Soviet Communists of the 1930s and '40s and '50s (of my list all but one have repented), and indeed figures like Deutscher, Lillian Hellman; the nasty left and the nasty right – how can you bear to find something favourable to say about the latter, to exonerate them, be on friendly terms with them? Even about them I would not use such phrases as 'polluting the air', or stream, or whatever it is that Scruton said¹²¹ – Goebbels-like talk.

You are perfectly right, I hate personal publicity and am extremely, almost pathologically, allergic to things about me in the press, whether good or bad. But this was not a case of that. For *The Times* to publish in honour of my birthday an offensive, loathsome piece of writing (whoever it was written about) like this is something I have never experienced before. I have never known anyone else to have been subjected to such a thing. Carr was

¹²⁰ John Casey (b. 1939), academic and journalist; former lecturer in English, Gonville and Caius, Cambridge; co-founder with Scruton of the Conservative Philosophy Group.

¹²¹ Scruton had written that E. H. Carr, Eric Hobsbawm and Christopher Hill 'polluted the world of scholarship with their commitments' (10g).

offensive enough about me, but still within the framework of academic controversy.

I must stop. For once, I sustained no real wound: I must be growing older. The outpouring of sympathy embarrassed me. It is awful to be the object of, the occasion for, righteous indignation. Now I don't really mind at all. But I cannot deny that a friendly attitude towards the author on the part of people whom I like and respect, in particular someone like yourself, whom I have known for so long and held in such affection, does upset me. Still, there is nothing to be done about that – things are what they are and so are people, and one must get used, particularly at my age, to them, and carry on peacefully as before. So be it.

Yours ever,

Isaiah

Pryce-Jones replied in turn.

FROM DAVID PRYCE-JONES

29 June 1989 [*manuscript*]

1 Phillimore Terrace, Allen Street, London

Dear Isaiah,

A conference in Budapest has held me in thrall this past week – never again, I hope. Returning, I find your letter, as interesting as it is generous. I'm so glad to hear from you that any rift between us would be painful. It's very kind of you to mention your affection for me, and I hope I don't have to repeat that I feel not only affection but long-standing admiration for you.

Upon seeing the article, I wondered if you would consider it by definition an invasion of privacy. But when I read it, in spite of that element, I concluded that the article would do you and all you (and I) stand for nothing but good. I've long thought that your writings ought to have entered more widely into the current debate upon ideas and society; and that their reception (in the publication of the collected essays) was inadequate. This article acknowledges the primacy of ideas where you are concerned. Scruton is on your side.

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You may not wish to have him on your side, but he is not engaged in attacking what you stand for, as Carr was. I think Carr did indeed have what Scruton calls a “vile commitment”. So did Hill, in his book on Lenin in the series in which you presented Marx. So did Hobsbawm in justifying the Soviet repression of Hungary in 1956. You were not included in that passage, nor held responsible for their commitments, and to call Scruton’s language “Goebbels-like” seems to me in all candour to be overstated. Similarly Carrington seems mistaken to lump together the Salisbury Review, the Spectator and Private Eye. The Salisbury Review has a serious running argument about the damage communism has done to the USSR and Eastern Europe, and how it might be replaced by social democracy. I certainly share this view of communism, and so do you. The Spectator is a parochial affair for a mutually self-regarding clique. Private Eye is a thoroughly nasty scandal sheet with overtones of blackmail and anti-semitism. No common denominator exists in the 3 publications.

You ask me how I can bear to associate with Scruton. When first I met him, about eighteen months ago, he was reading Szymanowski’s letters in Polish, and we discussed him and his music. We find we share the same Arabic teacher. He has also taught himself Turkish and the Slav languages. I think you would appreciate a personal culture which has been hard fought for. His difficult childhood makes him convert the need to be loved into a corresponding justification for being hated. You may well be the victim of this confusion, and were you to say that you can’t be expected to make allowances for that kind of thing, you’d also be right. I was therefore greatly relieved to hear you say that you sustained no real wound from the article. I think that indeed there was none, in fact the opposite, that you have been paid a compliment *à sa façon*. I’m not alone among your friends and admirers to think this. The price you may have to pay is to find your work increasingly referred to, but that, as I said before, is to the good of us all.

as ever

David

Ten years later another account of the episode appeared in print. In his 'A Dissent on Isaiah Berlin',¹²² Pryce-Jones's friend Norman Podhoretz offers the following version of events as evidence that IB was 'thin-skinned':

On the occasion of his eightieth birthday, when tributes were pouring in from all over the world and the British press could hardly find enough space to report on the encomia coming his way, a lone voice – that of the conservative philosopher Roger Scruton – piped up in one paper with a tribute that was not wholly free of a few mildly critical remarks. The scandal this article created within the British intellectual establishment was so disproportionate – Berlin's friends being as thin-skinned on his behalf as he was on his own – that a man who had been close to Berlin for many years was puzzled: what, he was heard to wonder at a private dinner party, was so terrible about Scruton's piece? This question was immediately relayed by the drum-beaters in the London jungle to Berlin, who responded to it the very next day with an eighteen-page handwritten letter full of hurt feelings and accusations of betrayal. Berlin even compared Scruton to Goebbels, and refused to retract when challenged by his morally stunned correspondent.

The 'man who had been close to Berlin for many years' was Pryce-Jones. IB's letter (not written 'the very next day') was typed and ran to only three small pages. The comparison to Goebbels, as can be seen above, was restricted to a particular phrase, which was indeed reminiscent of that egregious Nazi's language.

¹²² *Commentary* 107 no. 2 (February 1999), 25–37 (quoted passage at 29); see also 'Isaiah Berlin' (letters from Roger Scruton and others, and response by Podhoretz), *ibid.* 107 no. 5 (May 1999), 20–3.

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TO ROBERT SILVERS

11 October 1989

Headington House

[...]

PS You will be interested to hear – I get this information from the wicked [Peregrine] Worsthorne – that Maurice Cowling's last volume (you remember that major history of the evolution of England, in which all ills are ascribed to the anti-Christianity of the nineteenth century and the erosion of the Church as the heart of all that is good in England?) there will be a chapter devoted apparently exclusively to me as the instigator of the war against Hitler – which in his opinion was against the interests of the United Kingdom – which would have done far, far better to have remained neutral, would not have lost the Empire or its resources, etc., and for which I must be in some sense if not the literal at any rate the symbolic culprit, inasmuch as I typify the ghastly, soft, atheistical, liberal, intellectual establishment, which betrayed England into a course of action deeply inimical to its true interests. I cannot wait. Do you think Noel will go to battle again? Or Bernard? Cowling is at Columbia at the moment – in the Religious Affairs Dept – arranged by [David] Cannadine – all this from his ex-Master, H[ugh] T[revor-]Roper.

TO ROBERT SILVERS

30 October 1989

Headington House

Dear Bob,

Thank you very much for Mandelstam – I'll try and get it to Lydia Chukovskaya somehow.

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

My information about Cowling/Cannadine comes entirely from Lord Dacre, who said, “That idiot Cannadine has imported Cowling to Columbia – what a dreadful thing!”, etc.



*Joe Alsop at Headington House, 1987
(photo by Kay Graham)*

Now to more serious matters. Joe: the photograph was taken here in 1987 – and in Aline’s and my view it was taken by Kay Graham. We certainly have no negative, but she may well have, so do apply to her. The piece is quite marvellous, unlike anything by anyone else.¹²³ It will not improve the opinion of Joe held by those

¹²³ Joseph W. Alsop with Adam Platt, ‘The Wasp Ascendancy’, NYRB, 9 November 1989, 48–56. Alsop died on 28 August 1989; this article is adapted from his memoirs, written with his New York journalist friend Platt, and published as *I’ve Seen the Best of It* (New York, 1992).

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who felt snubbed by him and disliked him for other reasons; but it warms my heart, as I am sure it does yours. What fascinates me, among other things, is that all the old Wasp usages which he quotes, as against the ones which grate on him, are normal English usage to this day, not particularly U: nobody in England ever talks about ‘caskets’, ‘morticians’, ‘funeral directors’, ‘homes’, ‘gracious living’ etc. – except in inverted commas; but I did learn from Jerry Cohen the other day that in Canada, in Montreal, and also in the relevant parts of New York, i.e. East Side, if you lived in a house it was certainly called a home, but if you lived in an apartment in a house it was called a house.

I’ll tell Ignatieff that he should go to Riga, on all grounds. I hear that he has been offered the *Observer* slot occupied by Neal Ascherson – I wonder if he ought to take it – maybe – he writes well, but has he enough thoughts for a weekly *feuilleton*? (anyway he *has*. We’ll hope for the best.)

Yours ever,
Isaiah

PS When are you coming – as I hope – via England? Do let us know.

Lady Patricia Douglas, IB’s first (unrequited) love, dedicatee of his 1950 translation of Turgenev’s novella First Love,¹²⁴ died on 10 January 1991 at the age of seventy-two (she was born on Christmas Eve 1918). A biographical note on her appears at F 786–7, and what may be IB’s only surviving written communication to her at E 41–2. The following unpublished memoir of her by him may perhaps have been commissioned for the memorial service on 16 March 1991 at Holy Trinity Church, Clapham. It is prefaced by this note: ‘This is a very personal, perhaps over-personal, attempt at commemoration. To those to whom it may seem insufficient, I can only apologise.’

¹²⁴ Published in London by Hamish Hamilton with Alex Brown’s translation of Turgenev’s novel *Rudin*.



I met Patricia during the war, in 1942, at a dinner in Washington to which I was taken by friends who told me that I would there meet a Countess de Bendor whom they did not know. I imagined that the Countess would turn out to be a middle-aged, humourless Central European lady, probably rather snobbish and pretentious, quite likely to ruin the party. My surprise may be imagined when I found myself sitting next to a very beautiful young English girl, a student at Harvard, of great vitality, sharp intelligence, and in every respect wildly attractive. Rather surprisingly, she insisted on talking about dons, lectures and academic life, presumably solely for my benefit, which I was only too delighted to do. I liked her very much, but had no expectation of meeting her ever again. However, she returned to Washington, telephoned me, and we had lunch.

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Her charm seemed to me irresistible; I met her with mounting pleasure every time she came to stay with friends in Washington, but it was only about a year later, when I went to stay with her in Cambridge, Massachusetts, that I realised that I was deeply and hopelessly in love with her. Hopelessly in two senses: because I realised that my feeling was not returned, and because I then believed that my condition would be lifelong and totally incurable.

During the next three years I saw her often. She had a fairly wide social life in New York, Washington, Boston, and we met to my unending, if painful, delight, in restaurants, trains, aeroplanes and her house in Cambridge. Her society was in general such as might be expected of someone of her origins. But in Cambridge she entertained academics with unshakable, if somewhat unfocused, enthusiasm for intellectual issues. I remember meeting at dinner with her the famous Italian leader of the anti-Fascists, Professor Gaetano Salvemini, a great Harvard light; Ralph Barton Perry, the disciple and biographer of the great philosopher William James; W. G. Constable, who had been head of the Courtauld Institute in London, and was then Keeper of Paintings in the Boston Fine Arts Museum, plus two professors of English literature and a world-famous authority on Dante – all elderly scholars, all, it seemed to me, totally infatuated by their youthful hostess. I do not think any other young Harvard student ever enjoyed this kind of company. No doubt her title had something to do with it in that not unsnobbish community, but her beauty, her insatiable curiosity and lively wit, her wayward charm, and the look, manner and voice of an innocent *enfant perdu* were sufficient to account for this wide field of improbable academic conquests. I never met any young people in her house: perhaps she thought that I lacked humour and preferred solemn company. The fact that my feelings were not requited did not prevent the growth of a warm friendship during our years in America, indeed, until 1944. This was the year in which her husband, who had been a prisoner of war in Italy, was liberated, and she returned to him in England. We spent her last evening in New York together, and after a mildly sentimental parting I saw her rather more seldom.

In the summer of 1945 I fell ill in London on the way to Moscow. She came to see me often in my parents' house, and in 1946 I stayed with her and her husband in Paris, and did so again in the following year, and I think perhaps the year after that. Her husband was at the time one of the British Ambassador's secretaries, but she took little interest in the social life of Duff and Diana Cooper. She detested the idea of playing the part of a lady attached to that famous court, and led her own, not unadventurous, life. After the years in Paris she wrote to me occasionally, but I do not think I saw her again until she came to lunch with my wife and me in Oxford in the early 1960s. After one more meeting I never saw her again. My recollections of her cover only 1942 to 1947, and scarcely anything after that. We became, I think, remote memories to each other. I used to hear about her from time to time from Alastair Forbes, who I think kept in touch with her. Her death came as a shock to me.

Patricia, when I knew her, was very beautiful, and was loved by many: to love and be loved was indeed the centre of her life. She had a very strong personality; her presence in a room could not be ignored by anyone, no matter how large the company; she was deeply aesthetic, had marvellous natural taste in the arts, and responded to originality and authenticity in everything – life, thought, literature, human qualities, events. She adored music, and I remember long conversations with her about the different styles of the great cellists of those days – Casals, Piatigorsky, Feuermann. She was completely free from the slightest touch of snobbery; if anything, she had a taste for the odder forms of low life. She had an exceedingly sharp and often disconcerting, and, at times, wounding, insight into the character and behaviour of her friends, which she expressed with mordant wit. She hated all establishments, and was wildly happy (I was staying with her in the country that morning) at the news of the Labour victory in England in June 1945. She was in some respects spiritually disturbed – that was obvious at all times – and that, no doubt, is what caused her to seek for some form of inner experience during her visits to India and New Mexico. All in all, she was one of the

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most delightful, attractive, independent, original human beings whom anyone could have met – free from concern with the trammels and trappings of the ordinary life of most of us. No one who met her could possibly ever forget her, or, indeed, wish to do so.

TO JUAN GARCÍA DE OTEYZA¹²⁵

19 April 1991

Headington House

Dear Mr García,

Thank you very much for sending me *Lieutenant Kijé*. It will be some time before I have time to read either that or its neighbouring story,¹²⁶ but I think it is a very good thing to have done, and you deserve the thanks of the public.

If you want something on Tynyanov, perhaps the following would do:

I am so glad that Tynyanov's brilliant talent, both as a critic and as a creative writer, which was allowed to find expression during the relatively brief period of comparative literary freedom in the early years of the Soviet Union, is now made available by Eridanos to English-speaking readers. This is a notable service to literature. Tynyanov was a master of irony, and anything ironical about the ancien regime was permitted to appear in the early days of the Soviet Union; the result was a series of masterpieces, in which his extraordinary combination of high spirits, exquisite sense of satire, great charm and literary skill created, particularly in *Lieutenant Kijé*, a delightful fantasy, of which Prokofiev's famous ballet (too seldom performed) is a wonderfully ironical and delightful expression.

I hope this will do as a blurb.

¹²⁵ Juan García de Oteyza (1962–2013), publisher of Eridanos Press.

¹²⁶ Yury Tynyanov, *Young Vityushnikov*, published with his *Lieutenant Kijé* by Eridanos in a translation by Mirra Ginsburg in 1990. Yury Nikolaevich Tynyanov (1894–1943), Soviet writer.

Yours sincerely,
Isaiah Berlin

TO ROBERT SILVERS

16 October 1991

Headington House

Dear Bob,

I have received, I can't remember from whom, the following quotation, which I reproduce:

Sadistic pornography is disgusting, but it is not widely distributed, and looked at. It would not be surprising if research showed that greater harm to the image of the Woman was caused by the manner in which women are portrayed in advertisement and 'soaps'.

The *New York Review of Books*, 'Freedom, Liberty and Porno', based on an essay in *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration*¹²⁷

What is this about? I have no idea who wrote it, but am somewhat astonished by the reference. I imagine that since it is *A Celebration* which is referred to, it has nothing to do with anything I have written. But still, is there something in that book which supports this? No hurry, no need to answer rapidly.

I hope you are well. I am at present engaged in a complicated battle against some very undesirable and aggressive Hassidim in this University. But that is another story. I keep racking my brain about what I can say about Charles Taylor, for a kind of Festschrift

¹²⁷ *Recte*: 'Sadistic pornography is revolting, but it is not in [any] general circulation, except for its milder, soft-porn manifestations. It seems unlikely that it has remotely the influence over how women's sexuality or character or talents are conceived by men, and indeed by women, that commercial advertising and soap operas have.' Ronald Dworkin, 'Liberty and Pornography', NYRB, 15 August 1991 (without 'any'); from his 'Two Concepts of Liberty', in Edna and Avishai Margalit (eds), *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration* (London/Chicago, 1991), 106 (with 'any').

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addressed to him: I said I wouldn't contribute but would write an 'appreciation'. I think I shall have to write a little personal tribute, in very general terms – his central beliefs are widely different from mine, although he, charitably, thinks not.

In the meanwhile, we have read with guilty pleasure a disgusting article in *Vanity Fair* about Mrs Gutfreund and her husband,¹²⁸ whom I am glad not to know – Jacob loyally defends them. Loyalty is a great virtue, as Maurice Bowra used to say, but it does not necessarily lead to truth or justice.

Yours ever,
Isaiah

PS I suddenly asked myself the question who were the leading philosophers in the Anglo-Saxon world. Leading political philosophers, yes – Charles Taylor, Rawls, up to a point Nozick, Walzer (even though against the others), and certainly one or two others. But in 'pure' philosophy – Davidson? Nothing has been heard from Kripke. Who are these leaders? I mean, is there anyone more authoritative, more greatly admired than, let us say, Bernard Williams? Anybody like Ryle or Quine or even, however undeservedly, Freddie Ayer, or John Austin, as they used to be? I think there has been some decline, at least in public estimation – or am I wrong?

*TO ROBERT SILVERS

18 November 1991

Headington House

Dear Bob,

[Thank you very much for printing my letter.](#)¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Maureen Orth, 'Educating Susan', *Vanity Fair*, November 1991, on Susan and John Gutfreund.

¹²⁹ Corrections (NYRB issue dated 5 December 1991, 58) to his interview with Nathan Gardels, '**Two Concepts of Nationalism**', NYRB, 21 November 1991, 19–23. The text linked to contains the corrections.

Dahrendorf came to lunch the other day, and complained about what was going on in connection with the Oxford Europaeum – do you know about that? Weidenfeld, Grierson, the Grand Duke of Lichtenstein – Flick, three other millionaires, etc. – had complained about Claus Moser, Roy Jenkins etc. and the unsuitable ideas which they are putting forward. All this I listened to with amusement and patience – at the age of eighty-two I don't care what they do.

Let me now turn to Marietta's memorial service. It was perfectly nice. The eulogy was spoken by Nico Henderson pretty well; he quoted me as saying that, like Franklin Roosevelt, he was a class traitor – I don't remember when I said it, or to whom, but I am perfectly willing to father this sentence. I think he added that I had said 'People have gone to heaven for less' – that was spoken by Oscar Wilde, not me, in the first place, when Robbie Ross, who went to Reading Gaol when Wilde was released, and when he saw him pass, took off his hat. Wilde said 'Men have gone to heaven for less.'¹³⁰ A lot of people came who did not know Marietta particularly well, largely because of what Cyril Connolly once said about memorial services – 'Cocktail parties of the old' – I quite liked to mingle among the interesting and possibly well-born persons whom I had assumed, rightly, might be present. Roy Jenkins placed himself firmly in the front row; behind him was Mrs Hewitt, who had been married to Ronnie's half-brother, Lord Beatty. Behind that, Aline, me, Jacob Rothschild and the Duke of Beaufort – not very great friends. But otherwise, everyone you would expect. Behind me, Lords Zuckerman and Sheffield – perfectly right to be there – but I won't go on, there is really nothing to report except that it was dignified, the church was full

¹³⁰ Robert Baldwin ('Robbie') Ross (1869–1918), journalist and gallery owner, intimate and steadfast friend of Oscar Wilde. The incident to which IB here refers actually occurred in 1895, early in Wilde's term in Reading gaol, when Ross waited in a corridor of the bankruptcy court in Carey Street (at which Wilde was obliged to appear), so that he could raise his hat to him. Wilde wrote: 'Men have gone to heaven for smaller things than that.' *De Profundis* (London, 1905), 17. Cf. B 226.

and all went very well. Michael and Jeremy Tree organised it, they did quite well, and Michael said terrible things to me about Marietta just before the service – rather typical.

Now let me turn to a very different subject. I am visited occasionally by a young man of about 28, from Alma-Ata in Kazakhstan. The astonishing thing about him is that he speaks English perfectly, studies political theory, is very civilised, very Western in the way he thinks, delightful to be with, confident, intelligent, Westernised – all in Alma-Ata. He spent some time in Moscow but not long, and then came to Oxford for three weeks and longs to come back. I was deeply impressed. He said to me that Kazakhstan was divided into three sections: the Muslims of his sort, who were gentle and decent; the Russians, who are perfectly reasonable; and the Muslim bigots, who are unspeakable but have great influence and could easily ruin the country. He also says that corruption is everywhere, and that the oil companies from Europe and America, which have now pounced on his country, which is the second largest oil repository, after Saudi Arabia, have created a world of bribes and pressures such as that peaceful country had never known. All this makes him lament. I asked him if there were many people like him in the country: he said ‘Yes, we form quite a decent intelligentsia but there are not many of us – we hope to have some influence, but goodness me, we have a lot of opponents – still, we struggle, we try, and we are not persecuted’.

Anyway I am telling you about him partly because he is what is called a phenomenon, and Amartya Sen says he might get him to come to Harvard for a term or so – if you are in touch with Amartya, do remind him and tell him that I think it a very good idea – meanwhile I shall try and get him back to Oxford for a month or so – it may not be impossible, as he has friends in St Antony’s. His difficulty is that he can’t get any books in Alma-Ata, so I wonder if you could do me a favour. Could you (only at my expense, if you will send me a proper bill, otherwise it won’t work), send him some books [...]. [*a list of books follows*]

The rest I think I can provide from England; but if you could get some bookshop to send these to him it would be a great service.

And now I must gird my loins and go and watch the frightful *Les Huguenots* by Meyerbeer, which has never been produced at Covent Garden – producer, Dew, Englishman in Berlin – much praised in Berlin. Not a critic in London but has let fly, and said it is the most frightful production any human being had ever seen, even at Covent Garden – I think this must be true – still, to see something so terrible has its own attraction, so I shall go, against all possible advice.

We may come to America in January – I think that that is quite probable – but will you be here before? If not, don't bother to reply to this letter, but fulfil my request if you can, and you must bill me – I shall send you dollars with pleasure – as I really want to be of use to this remarkable young man, who could hold a job in any Oxford college immediately, in my view.

Yours,

Isaiah

[...]

TO SHIRLEY LETWIN

24 November 1991 [*transcript by SL of untraced original*]

[Headington House?]

Dear Shirley,

Thank you for sending me *Rationalism and Politics*.¹³¹ I confess that I have never read a word of his. I know that his way of thinking is in some ways similar to mine, but ...

I first met him at lunch at Nuffield. It was a friendly lunch. But when I said that he should write something on Hegel, he seemed to resent it and then things went badly. When I came to the LSE to give a lecture, he gave a very bitchy introduction, which upset

¹³¹ Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism and Politics and Other Essays* (London, 1962; 2nd ed., Indianapolis, 1991). Presumably SL gave IB the new (expanded) edition.

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me very much, and ruined the lecture.¹³² But when the lecture was published (on historicism)¹³³ there were no criticisms of Oakeshott. He told people that he had beaten me for the chair at LSE, for which I never applied. So things did not go well.

I met him again some twenty years later. He was very affectionate, in a tipsy sort of way. He asked me who is the greatest French thinker of the twentieth century and brushed aside my suggestions – [the answer was] Paul Valéry – which upset me, but not gravely.

Thanks to your present I shall now set sail on this boundless sea without seeking harbour. In your brilliant essay on Hume and Oakeshott, I think you exaggerated his quality. I adore Hume. Perhaps I will now come to adore Oakeshott.

Yours,
Isaiah

TO ROBERT SILVERS

10 December 1991

Headington House

Dear Bob,

I have a feeling that some attempt may be made to get you to include some portion of the book containing interviews with me by Mr. R. Jahanbegloo, which is to appear in English, published by my stepson Peter, in England and also in the USA (it has already appeared in France). Please don't. Too much has appeared too often, in all kinds of contexts, and the market is saturated with my views. If you want to extract something from it for 1993, I shall mind less; but at the moment it really would produce a naturally

¹³² The handwritten text on which Oakeshott based his introduction survives. The passage IB refers to is this: 'Listening to him you may be tempted to think that you are in the presence of one of the great intellectual *virtuosos* of our time, a Paganini of ideas' [LSE Archives, Oakeshott 1/3].

¹³³ *Historical Inevitability* (London, 1954). The lecture was delivered on 12 May 1953.

counter-effective condition in the reader. Enough really is enough. I couldn't stop the book in English, because Peter persuaded me to do it: my habit is not to mind what appears in Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, Czech, Polish, Russian, but to be very embarrassed about what appears in English – naturally enough. However, as the original interview was recorded in English, corrected by me, I couldn't exactly stop it, much as I should have liked to. But at least do not expose me to inevitable negative reactions just yet.

As you know, we are coming to New York on 13 January – can we have our traditional dinner with you that night? Or would you prefer to see us later? You know our telephone number, so we shall live in hopes.

Maxwell! Did you ever meet him? The state funeral in Jerusalem is a very disgraceful – not merely ridiculous – event. I feel ashamed of my co-racials, as Namier used to call the Jews, since he claimed to have no religion until his conversion to the Anglican Church – a very, very odd man.

Yours ever,
Isaiah

TO JEAN HALPÉRIN

2 January 1992

Headington House

Dear Jean,

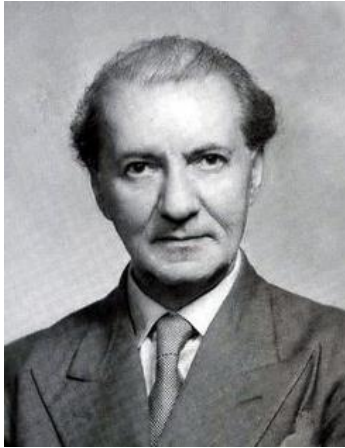
Thank you very much for sending me that piece by our old friend Steinberg.¹³⁴ He talked often about his time before and after the Revolution and the philosophico-religious society and Volfil,¹³⁵ etc., and I listened to him with fascination – he taught me a good deal about the atmosphere in his circles of the time.

¹³⁴ Aaron Zakharovich Steinberg (1891–1975), Russian Jewish philosopher and Jewish activist.

¹³⁵ sc. Vol'fila: Free Philosophical Association, Petrograd NGO 1919–24.

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I am glad to think that I am partly responsible for these memoirs,¹³⁶ since it was I who I think persuaded him to dictate them to a Russian-speaking pupil of mine. No doubt they were revised by others later, and I look forward immensely to reading them.



Aaron Steinberg

He was a charming, high-minded, deeply spiritual figure, and I am glad to have known him. I remember his brother¹³⁷ too, who was Minister of Justice in Lenin's first, coalition, government. He came to see me in New York during the war – a bearded, blue-eyed, innocent old gentleman, clearly of no great intelligence, who was trying to get Jews to a Freeland establishment in north Australia, to create a rival state to Israel. How naive he is is perhaps

¹³⁶ Published posthumously in Russian as A. Shteinberg, *Druz'ya moikh rannikh let (1911–1928)* [*Friends of My Early Years (1911–1928)*] (Paris, 1991).

¹³⁷ Aaron's elder brother Isaac Nachman Steinberg (1888–1957), lawyer, Socialist Revolutionary, Jewish Territorialist.

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shown by the very title of his book, *Als ich Kommissar war*.¹³⁸ His brother, our friend, was far more intelligent.



Isaac Steinberg

Thank you ever so much again for sending this to me.
Yours ever, with cousinly love,
Isaiah

¹³⁸ J. Steinberg, *Als ich Volkskommissar war: Episoden aus der russischen Oktoberrevolution* [*When I was a People's Commissar: Episodes in the October Russian Revolution*] (Munich 1929).

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TO ROBERT SILVERS

20 April 1992

Headington House

Dear Bob,

I am delighted to hear that you may be coming to Salzburg – do come for longer than just one day: there are at least two or three things worth hearing about then.

I enclose a programme forwarded to me by Arthur Schlesinger, I think because it would entertain me. You will find your name among the chairmen of this conference organised by Claudio Véliz, whom I have just seen in Spain at an affair organised by Hugh Thomas. Véliz is an amiable fellow – a left-wing Peruvian who shot to the right as a result of disagreements with Allende, and now, of course, like all ex-leftists of his type, is on the extreme right. He is very polite to me, quotes me, praises me, etc., which causes me a degree of embarrassment. [...] The conference seems to me somewhat ludicrous, and I cannot believe for a moment that you would agree to preside over Scruton & co. I wonder if our old friend Bernard Lewis would, out of pure vanity, accept it nevertheless. I can't believe that he will – I think he is intelligent enough to see through the whole thing. Is it possible that Havel would come? I think the whole thing is a fly-by-night affair, don't you? I send it to you purely for entertainment value.

I have just seen several things on TV. E.g. a very bad programme about T. E. Lawrence and the FO officials – if it comes to USA, ignore it; a very good programme, which I think I mentioned to you, about Nietzsche – with mistakes, but nevertheless interesting and highly creditable to Miss Pryce-Jones, who did it; and an absolutely appalling one, under my dear friend Ignatieff, with George Steiner, Attali and a very nice Czech intellectual now in Paris, whose name I have forgotten¹³⁹ and who may or may not be Jewish – the subject was culture, or something

¹³⁹ Jacques Rupnik. The programme was a discussion on *The Late Show* on BBC2, produced by David Herman.

of the sort. Attali knows very little about that, and talked a kind of neutral, slightly meaningless anti-American patter about the need for European culture as opposed to national cultures, the need for an integrated European imagination and presumably poetry in a European language – Esperanto? Steiner was, even for him, appalling: his thesis was – and I listened fascinated to see what kind of bottom he was likely to have reached – that far better literature was written in Eastern Europe under Communism than in the West – that oppression at any rate keeps pornography from people’s eyes, and develops a kind of stern purity of character that produces a profound inward vision, etc., etc. The Czech, I must say, did his best, as politely as possible, to deny all this. After all, said Steiner, when poetry was published in the Soviet Union it was printed in editions of 250,000, whereas in the West ... What poets? Not even the most violently conformist and official ones were printed in editions of this kind. As for the ones we admire, goodness me ... Then someone said: Well, you know, the God did fail – to which he replied ‘Better the God that failed than the Stock Exchange which failed’, and went on to talk about the Disneylandisation of Europe, which is now inevitable, which would lead to a barbarism far worse than any known in the Soviet Union, Romania, Kazakhstan or anywhere else. He has become really a little too intolerable, even for the kind of quack that he is. I don’t know why I looked at it – some kind of sadistic impulse to see how low people can fall.

That is about all I have to report to you. I have just listened with sinking spirits to my performance on *Desert Island Discs* – not utterly shameful, but such things embarrass me a great deal. Why on earth do I accept them? Just before, I received a telephone call from Karl Miller, who informed me that he was devoted to me and wanted nothing better than to have lunch with me since he hadn’t seen me for a long time, always felt much improved by conversation with me, etc. I didn’t, on the telephone, tell him that an article by a man whose name I can’t remember but who is the accountant of the LRB, a hysterical encomium to Glen Gould, and a denunciation of Alfred Brendel as the idol of fashionable intellectuals – who, it was

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implied, knew very little about music – nor did I tell him that I asked Peter not to send the *Conversations* with me to that periodical for review. But I will; I will take courage in both hands, see Karl and, as Edmund Wilson used to say, give him a piece of my mind – not that that'll terrify him much, I fear, but it may speed his departure from the periodical, which is much rumored. Poor Alfred, from who I tried to keep the news of this ghastly and degrading attack on him, was of course told about it by Frank Kermode – ostensibly in order to clear him, Kermode, of any guilt in promoting it – that was the first he heard of it, and although he knows his own value, more or less, it depressed him terribly – so it would me, had it appeared about me: I was depressed by even Scruton, despise him though I did and do. I wish one could grow a carapace which would protect one against things like that. Virginia Woolf said that she never read reviews of her books – her letters prove that this was a total lie. But I doubt if Iris Murdoch, who says she doesn't, actually does: she has no time – novel after novel after novel; and from John review after review after review. As a firm, they are unbelievable. I oughtn't to say it, but I think that Max Beerbohm's joke about Dr (and Mrs Constance) Garnett as Mr and Mrs Pegaway applies to them too, fond of them as I am.

Yours ever,
Isaiah

TO ROBERT SILVERS

19 May 1992

Headington House

Dear Bob,

This is what arrived.¹⁴⁰ As you can see, the only name visible is that of my admirer Roger Scruton.

¹⁴⁰ Unidentified. Possibly a conference programme?

Charles Taylor and Morgenbesser are both here. The intellectual temperature has risen considerably – in spite of the monstrous award of a Cambridge hon. degree to Derrida.

Yours ever,

Isaiah

*On 18 May 1992 Harry V. Jaffa¹⁴¹ wrote to IB about Leo Strauss's 1961 article on relativism,¹⁴² enclosing the following letter of 13 May to the editors of the NYRB, which he had written in response to IB's remarks about Strauss in Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Philosophy and Life: An Interview [with IB]*' (extracts from CIB published in the issue dated 28 May):*

Dear Sirs,

Sir Isaiah Berlin's comments on Leo Strauss (NYR, 18 [sc. 28] May 1992) are a welcome addition to the growing literature – and growing controversy – about this unique figure in twentieth-century political philosophy.

Shadia Drury's *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (Macmillan, 1988) has gained great currency in publicising the view that Strauss's esoteric teaching – his real teaching – was that of a disciple of Machiavelli and of Nietzsche. According to Drury, he was an atheist, nihilist and immoralist, a Pied Piper who cleverly misled the young by baiting his teaching with the discovery that, whatever conventional morality might preach, neither God nor nature objected to forbidden pleasures.

Sir Isaiah, on the contrary, calls Strauss 'a genuine classical and Talmudic scholar, who thought that political philosophy went gravely wrong with Machiavelli – "the teacher of evil" – and had

¹⁴¹ Harry Victor Jaffa (1918–2015), doctoral student and disciple of Leo Strauss; Professor Emeritus of Political Philosophy, Claremont McKenna College and Claremont Graduate School.

¹⁴² "Relativism", in Helmut Schoeck and James W. Wiggins (eds), *Relativism and the Study of Man* (Princeton, 1961), 135–57; repr. in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. T. L. Pangle (Chicago and London, 1989).

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never recovered since'.¹⁴³ According to Sir Isaiah, Strauss tried 'to convert me in many conversations when I was a visitor in Chicago, but he could not get me to believe in eternal, immutable, absolute values, true for all men everywhere at all times, God-given Natural Law and the like'.¹⁴⁴ It is difficult to believe that the same man could have led Drury and Berlin to such opposite conclusions. I attended nearly every one of Strauss's classes for seven years, and spent perhaps as much time with him alone as in class. I must say that the Strauss I knew was much closer to the one Sir Isaiah knew.

Sir Isaiah is however mistaken in saying that according to Strauss 'no political thinker since the Middle Ages had found the true path'.¹⁴⁵ The American Founders, Lincoln, and Churchill – whether or not they are to be called political philosophers – were certainly political thinkers of a very high order. According to Strauss, Aristotle's political philosophy is itself based upon what it is that non-philosophic and pre-philosophic wise and good men do. Strauss himself once wrote that he was unable to understand what Aristotle meant by magnanimity, until he concluded that Churchill was a perfect example of it. No one can understand Strauss who does not understand why, and in what sense, Churchill – not Maimonides or Thomas Aquinas – enabled him to understand Aristotle!

In saying why Strauss failed to 'convert' him, Sir Isaiah writes: 'Perhaps there is a world of eternal truths, values, which the magic eye of the true thinker can perceive – surely this can only belong to an elite to which I fear I have never been admitted.'¹⁴⁶ But Leo Strauss began *Natural Right and History* by quoting the magisterial words of the Declaration of Independence, beginning 'We hold these truths to be self-evident'. Strauss then echoed the Gettysburg Address, in speaking of the 'nation dedicated to this proposition', and he asked, 'Does this nation in its maturity still cherish the faith in which it was conceived and raised? Does it still hold those "truths to be self-evident"?'¹⁴⁷ In 1774 Jefferson, in addressing the King of

¹⁴³ CIB 31.

¹⁴⁴ CIB 32.

¹⁴⁵ CIB 31.

¹⁴⁶ CIB 32.

¹⁴⁷ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (New York, 1953), 1.

England, had affirmed that ‘The great principles of right and wrong are legible to every reader.’¹⁴⁸ Jefferson’s great disciple, Abraham Lincoln, had saluted Jefferson on his birthday in 1859: ‘All honor to Jefferson – to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times.’¹⁴⁹ The idea of a truth ‘applicable to all men and all times’ was not something Strauss found only in classical and medieval philosophy. Carl Becker, however, in his 1922 book, says that ‘To ask whether the natural rights philosophy of the Declaration of Independence is true or false is essentially a meaningless question.’¹⁵⁰ It had indeed become meaningless to our academic elites, but it has never been such to the common man, to whom and for whom Jefferson and Lincoln and Churchill spoke.

Leo Strauss’s great achievement was to restore – to those with eyes that could see – the authority of those moral perceptions which are inherent in classical political philosophy because they are inherent in political life. They are the ground of wise statesmanship, and good citizenship, everywhere and always. That an invincible ignorance – bred of historicism and relativism – has descended upon the elites of our time is the cause of the crisis of our time. Strauss’s teachings would break the power of those elites, which is why his detractors see him as a traitor to his class.

Harry V. Jaffa

In a letter to Robert Silvers, IB described Jaffa’s letter to the NYRB as ‘silly’, adding that he was not a relativist or, ‘in his sense’, a historicist.¹⁵¹ Presumably as a result, the letter was not published. IB sent Silvers a copy of his reply to Jaffa on the same day, writing:

¹⁴⁸ *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* (Philadelphia, 1774), 22.

¹⁴⁹ Letter to Henry L. Pierce and others, 6 April 1859, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ, 1953–5), iii 376.

¹⁵⁰ *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (New York, 1922), 277.

¹⁵¹ IB to Robert Silvers, 22 May 1992.

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Here is a very courteous answer to Professor Jaffa, who sent me a long article by himself which I cannot get through, the piece by Strauss attacking me, and, finally, a long encouragement to me to publish my comments on Strauss's criticisms, on the grounds that Strauss was becoming more and more important after his death, and everything he says is worthy of the widest and most important notice – and so on and so on.

On 8 June IB repeated himself:

As for the Straussian, I have sent him a long letter in reply to a long letter from him – you might ask him whether he still wants to print his letter, and if so, would he like extracts of my letter to him to be attached as a reply? – in the circumstances, he may drop the whole thing, as I hope.

P.S. I enclose a copy of my reply to Jaffa – perhaps he won't insist on going on –

TO HARRY JAFFA

24 May 1992 [*carbon*]¹⁵²

Headington House

Dear Professor Jaffa,

Thank you for your letter of 18 May and also for the copy of your letter of 13 May to the *New York Review of Books*. I am glad that my estimate of Leo Strauss is more or less similar to your own, and not to [that of] Strauss's principal detractors.

I think that my estimate, both of his character and of his writings, is probably more balanced and well-grounded than that of those who detest his doctrines. Nevertheless, I must confess that I do not accept his views either, in part or in whole.

¹⁵² There are some oddities in this letter which may have been corrected in the top copy (they were not corrected in the copy sent to Silvers). However, the letter never reached Jaffa, so we shall never know.

I must also thank you for sending me a copy of his essay on relativism, critical of my views. I had no idea that this essay had appeared – all I knew is that someone, perhaps the late Professor Momigliano, told me something of the sort was in the making. It is clear to me that Strauss radically misunderstood my position. I am not and never have been either a relativist or, in his sense of the word, a historicist (although the latter could be disputed – but not by me). It is true that, like him, I believe that there are ultimate human values which have been accepted by men. I say (in the quotation give by Strauss) that they are ‘accepted so widely, and [are] grounded so deeply in the actual nature of men as they have developed through history, as to be, by now, an essential part of what we mean by being a normal human being’ [L 210]. And I speak of absolute stands [ibid.]. The point on which I differ from Strauss is that of course, being an empiricist, I do not believe in any a priori basis for these beliefs – what I mean by ‘absolute’, ‘final’ beliefs, defending them if need be with one’s life, etc., are beliefs grounded in values which have been believed so widely for so long in so many human communities that they can be regarded as natural to human beings. This does not mean that they could not in principle alter, although this, in view of the past, seems very unlikely; and if they do, we cannot, being as we are, anticipate what they could possibly be. The difference between Strauss and me is simply between the absolute, a priori basis in which he believes, and the virtually, if only virtually, universal basis on which I ground these values. But, in addition to these, I was speaking of values which are products of their own time and culture, and to those who belong to these cultures these can be equally sacred, e.g. my concept of negative liberty, about which there is not much in the ancient world; or the value of sincerity, which I do not think can be found much, if at all, before the end of the seventeenth century; the rights of the individual, which *pace* Pericles’ speech in Thucydides and the Latin *iura*, which does not mean ‘rights’, can be found at the very earliest perhaps in Occam and as a result of nominalism; or for that matter, and related to the last, negative liberty. These are indeed products of a historical phase and can for

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the most part be accounted for as elements in total constellations of values which characterise ages, cultures, periods. Strauss will have none of this. He believes that there are eternal values, valid for all men at all times – *quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*,¹⁵³ which, since I do not believe in a faculty which can unveil eternal verities of that kind, I cannot accept. I can only accept very close approximations to them, as I have said above.

Moreover, I believe that ultimate values sometimes collide – mercy, which is certainly a final absolute value for many, is incompatible with total justice; complete liberty and complete equality – and so on. The only universal values (in my sense, at any rate) are good and bad, true and false, and their derivatives such as right and wrong, beautiful and ugly – and so on. Since Strauss does not recognise the incompatibility of absolute values – for, according to him, all absolute values must be harmonious with each other, else what in his sense can be meant by saying that they are absolutely known a priori? – we disagree profoundly. My complaint is that he accuses me of relativism and, in effect, some kind of historicism, not in Popper’s sense, but in the sense that values depend on history and have no permanent status – which is not true of certain of my beliefs, let alone his complete neglect of the collision of equally final values. I do not think that anything I could possibly say in reply to your letter to the *New York Review of Books* would either convince yourself and other disciples of Strauss, or be news to those who accept or favour my beliefs. For that reason I see no purpose in replying to your courteous letter, and shall tell Silvers that apart from a note to the effect that I am neither a relativist nor a historicist, there is nothing that I would wish to comment upon.

I hope you will forgive me for this silence, and can only thank you for trying to persuade me to explain my position vis-à-vis

¹⁵³ ‘Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est’ (‘What is believed everywhere, always, by everyone’). *The Commonitorium of Vincentius of Lérins* (434 CE), ed. Reginald Stewart Moxon (Cambridge, 1915), 2. 3 (p. 10, lines 6–7).

Strauss, for the purpose of the advance of the human spirit and the discovery of the truth – but I do not think that anything I can write now can possibly convey what in all my writings since ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ I have tried to emphasise. Anyone who reads most of these will know where I stand, what my reasons are, and where Strauss has got me wrong. That is all I ask for. Thank you again for your letter and all its enclosures – it was very good of you to take me up on my remarks to the Iranian interviewer, which you had a perfect right, and indeed a perfectly estimable motive, for doing.

Yours sincerely,
Isaiah Berlin

PS I ought to add that his attack on positivism and existentialism seems to me perfectly valid, although I wish he had gone further in explaining what it was that Heidegger – whose student he was and whom he evidently respected – had added to the sum of political thought; but I have never discovered it.

On 9 December 1992 Elżbieta Ettinger,¹⁵⁴ a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto, and professor of writing at MIT, wrote to IB asking if he would be prepared to tell her his thoughts about Hannah Arendt, ‘beyond the published ones’ – a reference to IB’s comments on Arendt in Ramin Jahanbegloo’s recently published Conversations with Isaiah Berlin.¹⁵⁵ She explained that she was working on a biography of ‘Arendt, the person’:¹⁵⁶ ‘One of the main topics I will explore is Arendt’s ambivalence about her

¹⁵⁴ Elżbieta Ettinger (1924–2005), émigré Polish novelist and biographer; professor of writing at MIT 1975–96; author of *Rosa Luxemburg: A Life* (Boston, Mass., 1987).

¹⁵⁵ Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Isaiah Berlin en toutes libertés: entretiens avec Isaiah Berlin*, trans. Gérard Lorimy (Paris, 1991); repr. in its original English form as *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London, 1992). IB’s comments are at 81–5.

¹⁵⁶ This biography never materialised, although Ettinger was working on it at the time of her death.

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Jewishness, her attitude towards the Jews, Zionism, the State of Israel, etc. (Your essay “Benjamin Disraeli & Karl Marx” is invaluable to me.)¹⁵⁷ Her personal opinion, that ‘at heart Arendt never was a Zionist’, was based on ‘having read Arendt’s correspondence with Kurt Blumenfeld, Gershom Scholem, & a German Zionist Erwin Loewenson – in 1927 she wrote to him: “Mein Interesse fuer den Zionismus gilt immer doch nur dem Menschen, nie der Sache Ich bin hoffnungslos assimiliert.”¹⁵⁸ Ettinger’s enquiry led to a short but interesting correspondence with IB: published below, in their chronological place, are his five letters from the exchange.

TO ELŻBIETA ETTINGER

19 December 1992

Headington House

Dear Mrs Ettinger,

Thank you for your letter of 9 December about Hannah Arendt. I understand why Professor Mazlish¹⁵⁹ suggested that you might get in touch with me, and I do indeed have views on Miss Arendt. I am a profound non-admirer of both her work and her personality (she knew this). However, it would take me too long to write about all this, even if I could bring myself to recollect all that made her virtually a *bête noire* for me. But if you were in this country, and it was in time for your work, I should be happy to talk to you at some length about this – if you wished it.

¹⁵⁷ ‘Benjamin Disraeli, Karl Marx, and the Search for Identity’, in *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England 22 (1968–9)* (London, 1970), reprinted in AC.

¹⁵⁸ ‘I am interested in Zionism only for the people, never for the cause [...]. I am hopelessly assimilated.’

¹⁵⁹ Bruce Mazlish (1923–2016), US historian; instructor at MIT 1955, professor 1960–2003; co-author with Jacob Bronowski of *The Western Intellectual from Leonardo to Hegel* (New York/London, 1960).

I will only add one brief note. My views both of *The Human Condition*¹⁶⁰ and of the Russian section of the book on totalitarianism are based on my awareness of her wide ignorance both of Greek classics (other than Aristotle), of the Talmud, and of modern Russian history; of the book on Eichmann, her unbelievable arrogance in telling the Jewish victims of the Nazis how they should have behaved.

Do come and see me if you can.

Yours sincerely,

Isaiah Berlin

TO RUTH CHANG

4 January 1993

Headington House

Dear Miss Chang,

Thank you for your letter of 1 January. The plan you describe¹⁶¹ is a complete surprise, and a very welcome one, to me. I do not recollect Bernard's having mentioned it to me, and I am sure that I would not have agreed so readily to write a preface even if he had.

Naturally I am delighted that this topic is to be addressed. Although you generously attribute its authorship to me, I cannot believe that I was the first to raise it, as it seems so obvious – surely someone must have thought of it before me, although I cannot think of anyone who did: Karl Popper told Magee that he had thought of it, but evidently did not record it anywhere; John Austin certainly spoke of incompatibility of values, to which I paid more

¹⁶⁰ IB had submitted a damning report on the book to Faber & Faber, who were considering publishing it in the UK in 1958 (there has been no separate UK edition): see E 676/4. The report is included in the **online supplement to E**.

¹⁶¹ For a volume edited by Chang, *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997).

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attention than to incommensurability, but that was after several conversations with me in which I offered him my thoughts on this.

Be that as it may, I wish I could think of something to say in a preface that I have not said far too often in almost everything I have written since my ‘discovery’. If you would like to me say not more than ‘I am delighted that this important topic should be discussed by so many exceedingly distinguished thinkers, since I have for many years thought the problem of incommensurability, and still more the incompatibility, of some values to be central to all ethical, social, political and aesthetic issues, and could never find any treatment of this topic in what is commonly called “the literature”. I should like to congratulate Miss [Dr?] Chang on this excellent initiative’ – if this, or something like it, would be sufficient, it is as much, I think, as I can do, without going into the subject once again at great and tedious length.¹⁶²

My memory is by now pretty poor, but I truly cannot remember talking to Bernard Williams about anything like this.

Yours sincerely,
Isaiah Berlin

TO ELŻBIETA ETTINGER

14 January 1993

Headington House

Dear Dr Ettinger,

Thank you for your letter of 7 January. I hope to be in England in mid-August, and unless something goes wrong I should be glad to see you on Thursday the 19th at a cafe called Richoux in Piccadilly, roughly opposite the Royal Academy – and shall be glad then to talk to you about my *bête noire*.

¹⁶² The remarks offered by IB do not appear in the published book.

Did you see the article on Heidegger by Sheehan, in the penultimate number of the *NYRB*?¹⁶³ It completely disposes of the story spread by Miss Arendt that Heidegger was not a Nazi for long, or alternatively did it as a piece of mild opportunism.¹⁶⁴ Nolte is an awful man, but on this point obviously trustworthy.

Yours sincerely,
Isaiah Berlin

*Elżbieta Ettinger wrote to IB on 25 January 1993 to arrange a meeting in London that August. She told him she was working on an ‘essay’ on the relationship between Heidegger and Arendt, having been given access to their correspondence (1925–75). The essay aimed ‘to cast more light on their largely unknown story. I would be honored if you read it and grateful for your criticism.’*¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Ernst Nolte and Thomas Sheehan, **‘Heidegger and Nazism: An Exchange’**, *New York Review of Books*, issue dated 8 April 1993 but published before Berlin wrote his letter.

¹⁶⁴ IB is likely to have in mind the essay Arendt wrote for Heidegger’s eightieth birthday: ‘Martin Heidegger ist achtzig Jahre alt’, *Mercur* 10 (1969), 893–902. The first English translation to be published was **‘Martin Heidegger at Eighty’**, *New York Review of Books*, 21 October 1971. Some of Arendt’s critics have argued that this essay minimises the extent of Heidegger’s Nazi involvement.

¹⁶⁵ This was published as Elżbieta Ettinger, *Hannah Arendt/Martin Heidegger* (New Haven, 1995). Ettinger sent IB her draft later that month, but it is unclear if he read it; she nevertheless thanked him for his help in the book (at ix). Richard Bernstein wrote in the *New York Times*, ‘Ms Ettinger’s tale is absorbing and cruelly fascinating. She is scrupulously attentive to the known facts and unsparing in her exposure of both Heidegger’s mendacity and Arendt’s propensity for self-deception where the philosopher was concerned’: ‘Obsession Transcends “The Banality of Evil”’, 11 September 1995, C16. See too Wendy Steiner, ‘The Banality of Love: Why Did Hannah Arendt Remain Devoted to Heidegger?’, *ibid.*, 24 September 1995, BR41.

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TO ELŻBIETA ETTINGER

8 February 1993

Headington House

Dear Dr Ettinger,

Thank you for your letter of 25 January. I'm afraid that I won't be in England between 30 July and 3 August – I shall probably leave for abroad on the 30th itself, and shall then only be back on 12 or 13 August, when I fear you will not be in England. Have you any other suggestions? I shall be in Salzburg from 3 to 11 August, and after that in England for the rest of August, and then in Italy during September. Is there any gap for our meeting that you can detect? I should love to see you and talk about Arendt, Heidegger etc. But I don't want to drag you here at great inconvenience to yourself, since I suspect that I have very little to tell you that would be of use to you, much as I would enjoy our conversation.

I should love to read your essay on Arendt/Heidegger, but I doubt if I would have time to read it until my 'free' period in August; if you could simply supply me with it two or three days before we meet (if we do), it would be fresh in my mind.

Yours sincerely,
Isaiah Berlin

Ettinger replied on 15 February 1993 that she was 'overjoyed' at the prospect of a meeting with IB:

And, however 'little' you can tell me, I know that little from you (this is based on reading your works), weighs more than volumes from other people, even well versed in Arendt's thought. As a rule these people know pretty little about life, and life is what I'm striving to write about.

You and I will differ on Arendt's Eichmann book (and it is best to exclude this topic from our conversation), because I have lived in the Warsaw Ghetto, fought in the uprising, dealt with the Judenrat, with the Jewish police, etc. [...] Arendt is dead wrong on some crucial points, but right on others. I will write about this. This book, you see, is my last settlement of accounts with my past.

TO SHIRLEY LETWIN

20 April 1993

Headington House

Dear Shirley,

I ought to have thanked you for your ‘Oakeshott’¹⁶⁶ a long time ago. People keep asking me why, given a certain community of views on some topics, I have never mentioned him, written about him, etc. There is something that gets in the way. Maybe it is more psychological than anything else, ever since the extreme froideur which followed upon an innocent remark of mine when we first met, which unfortunately he wholly misinterpreted.¹⁶⁷ He punished me later by an extremely ironical, not to say wounding, introduction to a lecture I gave at LSE over which he presided.¹⁶⁸ His name remained under a cloud in my mind. Still, I should have risen above this, and may do so yet.

I realise that I agree with quite a lot of what he thought, but think it violently exaggerated – a curious word to use about so impressionist a writer. Still, I shall try again, and in the meanwhile hope that when we meet you will allow me to tell you the story of that first meeting and his subsequent revenge. I do admit that when I heard him at the Carlyle Club, his views seemed to me a little deranged.

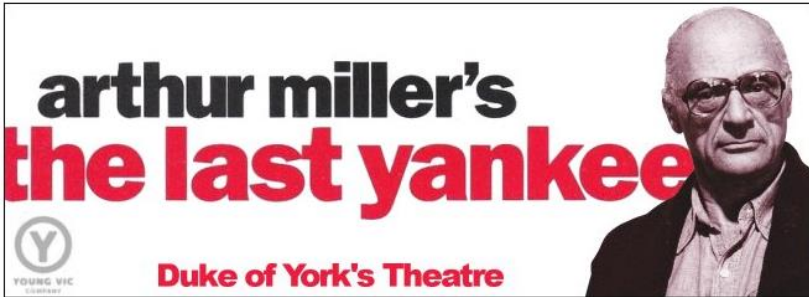
Yours,

Isaiah

¹⁶⁶ Michael Oakeshott, *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe: The Harvard Lectures*, ed. Shirley Robin Letwin (New Haven and London, 1993).

¹⁶⁷ At a lunch with Oakeshott and others in Oxford in the late 1940s IB said to Oakeshott: ‘I think you ought to write a book about Hegel.’ Later during the same lunch, forgetting what he had said earlier, he remarked: ‘You know, somebody ought to write a book about Hegel; even a half-charlatan book about Hegel would be better than nothing.’ Oakeshott took this personally, and relations were thenceforth cool. Related [here](#) and [here](#).

¹⁶⁸ See [above](#).



TO ARTHUR MILLER

26 April 1993

Headington House

Dear Mr Miller,

First things first: may I say how very, very good I thought *The Last Yankee* is.¹⁶⁹ My wife and I were riveted from the first moment to the last, and profoundly moved: the depth, subtlety and wonderful insight into human character seem to me absolutely marvellous. The acting was superb: only one American, I think (perhaps he was the best actor of them all), but they all acted wonderfully. In short, what can I say to you but that we had a totally unforgettable evening? My wife will certainly go again. I shall if I can, but meanwhile this is simply to offer you the homage which you so richly and uniquely deserve. I have never written a letter like this to anyone, I think, however much I admired them, but on this occasion I felt I could not but say what I have – and that is inadequate. Words are not very good instruments of communication – except your own, perhaps.

After this, let me say how much I enjoyed the evening at All Souls, and conversation with you. Indeed, the whole thing has enhanced my life. Thank you.

¹⁶⁹ Arthur Miller's play premiered in New York and London in January 1993. IB and Aline appear to have seen the 20 April preview at the Duke of York's Theatre, in London's West End, where the London production opened on 4 May after a run at the Young Vic, in the South Bank area, which ended on 17 April.

Yours sincerely,
Isaiah Berlin

IB's next extant letter to Elżbieta Ettinger was written in September 1993, by which date their plans for a London meeting had fallen through.

TO ELŻBIETA ETTINGER

29 September 1993

Headington House

Dear Mrs Ettinger,

I was terribly sorry not to be able to see you in London, but I really was quite ill, and remained so for some time; but finally a few weeks in Italy cured me, I think completely.

I am sorry we weren't able to talk about Miss Arendt – not that I have anything to say about her that you don't already know. I think there is some truth in her attachment to Judaism,¹⁷⁰ but it was of a peculiar kind – very similar to that of the milieu in which she grew up – Scholem, Benjamin, Marcuse, the children of rich Jewish families who rebelled, quite naturally, against their parents' bourgeois mode of life, shot either to the left, like Benjamin, or into Jewish nationalism and mysticism, like Scholem; retained links with Judaism but weren't systematically involved in it. I think that she probably saw herself as a kind of cross between Rahel Varnhagen – the brilliant Jewish hostess about whom she wrote a very self-identifying book – on the one hand, and Rosa Luxemburg on the other, a sharp-witted, passionate, honest, left-wing revolutionary intellectual, who in the case of Miss Arendt

¹⁷⁰ Ettinger had written to IB, 8 September 1993, and mentioned an interview with 'a once removed niece' of Arendt, 'an Israeli married to a German, who, ironically works for the Alte Synagogue in Essen, & who wrote an article about Arendt pointing to her close ties to Judaism. What can I say? I was glad nevertheless I talked to her, because I have never before met anyone who per fas et nefas made Arendt (or sees Arend[t]) into a conscientious [*sic*], devoted Jew. Perhaps there is some truth to it; perhaps I'm prejudiced'.

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obviously reacted violently against Stalinism and tried to find a kind of individual path for herself – in my opinion, as you know, a fearful failure.

The fact that she had an affair with Kurt Blumenfeld – a leader of German Zionism, who indeed introduced me to her in New York in 1941 – leads me to believe that at that time she was still half Zionist; later, as you know, she turned very sharply against the wickedness of Israel, more so than any of the other German Zionists whom I ever met or have heard of. Scholem, in that famous correspondence, accused her, as you know, of lack of love for the Jewish people.¹⁷¹ I think he was perfectly right. I think she was and remained a German Jewish intellectual of a certain milieu and period, and everything that jarred on this outlook she rejected and denounced. However, don't let me go on so, you know all this much better than I.

Yours sincerely,
Isaiah Berlin

TO THE EDITORS OF THE *NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS*

Published 21 October 1993

[Headington House]

Professor O'Flaherty¹⁷² is one of the most distinguished living students of Hamann's thought, and, as my friend and editor Dr Henry Hardy wrote in his preface to my book, we are both most grateful to him for the generous help he has given us in preparing my text for publication. I am only too glad to reiterate my thanks to him, but I must point out that, as Dr Hardy also made clear in his preface, there are issues on which we are not in agreement.

¹⁷¹ '“Eichmann in Jerusalem”: An Exchange of Letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt', *Encounter*, January 1964, 51–6. In this exchange Scholem wrote: 'In the Jewish tradition there is a concept, hard to define and yet concrete enough, which we know as *Ababath Israel*: “Love of the Jewish people. ...” In you, dear Hannah, as in so many intellectuals who came from the German Left, I find little trace of this' (51).

¹⁷² To whose letter in the same issue IB is replying.

In the letter from which Professor O’Flaherty quotes I also stated that the notion of ‘intuitive reason’ of which he speaks is not one that I understand. Intuition and intuitive understanding are conceptions which I believe I do understand, and which I have indeed discussed; but ‘intuitive reason’, whether in Hamann (as interpreted by Professor O’Flaherty) or Jacobi, in Schelling or Fichte or, apparently, Lukács, is opaque to me.

To call Hamann an anti-rationalist is to say that he attacked the methods by which the great rationalists of the seventeenth century, and their descendants and critics in the French Enlightenment (and after them such rational thinkers as Bentham, Mill, William James, Moore, Russell, and the great majority of English-speaking philosophers of our time), stated, analysed and sought to justify their views, and by which they criticized those of their opponents. It is this that makes the fact that Hamann is the first and most vehement opponent of the French Enlightenment and its descendants a phenomenon of historical importance.

It may be that my failure to identify the faculty of intuitive reason (a term not used, Professor O’Flaherty seems to say in his book *Johann Georg Hamann*, by Hamann himself) is due to some deficiency in my intellect or imagination: but it seems that Kant suffered equally from this fault. The phrase cited by Professor O’Flaherty occurs in a letter to Hamann in which Kant asks for his help in interpreting a dark passage in Hamann’s disciple Herder, but begs him to reply ‘in human language, if possible; for I, poor mortal, am not at all organised to understand the divine language of *intuitive reason*’ (as translated by Professor O’Flaherty in the same book). Nor am I so organised.

The best of all modern historians of ideas, A. O. Lovejoy, is plainly equally puzzled by this peculiar conception of reason in his book *The Reason, The Understanding, and Time*. On this issue I am happy to ally myself with Kant, Mill, Lovejoy and the admirable scholar Rudolf Unger, whose work on Hamann, no matter what the modern interpreters referred to by Professor O’Flaherty may say, seems to me (may he forgive me) entirely convincing.

[Isaiah Berlin]

MORE AFFIRMING

IB's last and longest letter to Elżbieta Ettinger was written on 5 November 1993. It ends 'That is all I can tell you', which Ettinger annotates 'that's plenty'.

TO ELŻBIETA ETTINGER

5 November 1993

Headington House

Dear Mrs Ettinger,

Thank you for your letter of 5 October.¹⁷³ I am sure you understand Hannah Arendt much better than I ever will; but be that as it may, if you would like to come and see me early next year I should certainly be glad to meet you. Will you suggest some possible dates? But I doubt if the journey will be worth it from your point of view unless you have other things to do in England – I should be happy to meet you but shall be of very little use to you in the things that you are engaged on, let me assure you of that. So I beg you not to waste your time unnecessarily.

I, too, don't understand what Miss Arendt means by 'Spass':¹⁷⁴ does she mean that she is 'amused' by the terrible fracas created by her book on Eichmann? Is it an ironical reference to all that scandal? It could be that.

About Kurt Blumenfeld. I believe that it was the late Mrs Miriam Sambursky who told me about the affair, the wife of an eminent historian of science at the Hebrew University in

¹⁷³ In fact 25 October.

¹⁷⁴ 'Fun'. Ettinger had written, 25 October 1993: 'Yet she puzzles me constantly; some facts escape my understanding. Just to give you an example: "Ich habe grosse Lust auf eine gruendliche Arbeitspause, obwohl ich nicht leugnen kann, dass die Eichmanngeschichte mir Spass macht" ["I have a great longing for a solid break from work, though I cannot deny that the Eichmann story is fun for me"]. So Arendt wrote to Jaspers in July/August 1962. I would like to understand how and why writing about Eichmann could be fun for a Jew, or for anyone who disagreed with Eichmann and his ideology. Do I interpret the word "Spass" too narrowly? too literally? Or do I see everything in dark colours?'

Jerusalem. I don't think she knew Hannah Arendt herself, but she did edit Blumenfeld's letters, and knew him very well. Nobody else could have said this to me, so I assume it must be she who did – but whether she knew it for a fact or merely conjectured it I cannot say – still, she knew Blumenfeld very well, and knew that he was very, very fond of ladies – he once said to her 'I truly loved only twelve ladies' (apart from all the others). As for Miss Arendt's Zionism, it may be no more than active work, on which she was certainly engaged, for Youth Aliyah – the transporting of Jewish children from Nazi-occupied lands to Palestine; she was certainly engaged on this, in Europe and America. But I suspect that if she was intimate with Blumenfeld she could not well have avoided knowing a great deal more about Zionism and being to some extent drawn into the movement – but again, I may be mistaken.

My meeting with her in Blumenfeld's rooms occurred, I should say, in 1941. As for Miss Arendt's 'attachment to Judaism', I know nothing about that: of course, she was on very familiar terms with a number of Jewish intellectuals of her period, all those Marxists from Frankfurt, etc. So I think she was part of what might be called an assimilated German Jewish circle – however assimilated they may have felt, they remained Jewish through and through, for better and for worse.

You ask about Rosa Luxemburg: she probably became a heroine and martyr to left-wing, or just left-of-centre, Jewish socialist intellectuals in Germany – a world to which Miss Arendt certainly belonged. Her line was that there was a legend in her family about Rosa Luxemburg which she greatly valued – but more than that I do not know. What you quote me as saying about Miss Arendt regarding herself as a cross between Rahel and Rosa is indeed my opinion – again, founded on nothing but casual impressions.¹⁷⁵

As for my view of Miss Arendt in general, I did not know her well, far from it – I must have met her not above three times; and

¹⁷⁵ Ettinger had quoted back to IB the sentence in his letter of 29 September beginning 'I think that she probably saw herself as'.

from the very first she struck me as profoundly unsympathetic – arrogant, self-important, pretending to knowledge she clearly did not possess (all her knowledge of the ancient Greeks reduces only to Aristotle, and not all of that);¹⁷⁶ finally, one of those once-left-wing¹⁷⁷ Jewish half-anti-Semites of whom you and I must have met some in our lives. I asked people in New York who were friends of hers why she made such an impact: what they said came to explaining that she was for them an important European political intellectual, such as was not known in New York before the war, and stood for some mysterious but rich European culture which she in some way stood for and imparted, relatively new to them and impressive because of its reports about unknown territory – the culture of the West – which they all admired but had not come face to face with before such arrivals as hers. But some of these people did finally say to me that they thought they had to some degree been taken in; still, some remained loyal, not only Mary West¹⁷⁸ (as in her last marriage she became) but one or two others also.

My main intellectual objection to her – quite apart from my personal distaste for her as a human being – is founded on the fact that her writings are based on a good deal of ignorance which she takes for knowledge, and that she acquired a reputation for learning which she did not possess; she obviously had a talent for talking and lecturing and impressing people with learned references, however baseless some of them turned out to be. The book that shocked me most was *The Human Condition*, which deeply impressed the poets Auden, Lowell and perhaps others, but about which her ex-friend Gerhard Scholem said to me ‘But these are *littérateurs*, not scholars or philosophers – people who know nothing about true knowledge or true thought, they are the only ones to be impressed’: but he had once been a friend of hers, and

¹⁷⁶ EE annotates this parenthesis ‘not true’.

¹⁷⁷ EE underlines ‘left-wing’, writing in the margin ‘NO’.

¹⁷⁸ Mary Therese McCarthy (1912–89) novelist, critic and social commentator; m. 1961 the diplomat James R. West; Arendt’s literary executor.

claimed to have been totally disillusioned by her writings. That is all I can tell you.

Yours sincerely,
Isaiah Berlin

On 11 February 1994 Steven Lukes sent IB 'The Singular and the Plural', the English original of his introduction to a reissue, in book form, of a long 1991 interview with IB first published in an Italian translation in 1992,¹⁷⁹ and reprinted in revised form later that year with the subtitle 'On the Distinctive Liberalism of Isaiah Berlin' in Social Research.¹⁸⁰ In his covering letter he wrote: 'If you have any reactions (I can't imagine you will not) I'll be very interested.'

TO STEVEN LUKES

28 February 1994

Headington House

Dear Steven,

I cannot describe to you with what gratification – blushes of pleasure – I read the opening pages of ‘The Singular and the Plural’. Your compliments only show that my proposition that my entire reputation is founded on being systematically overestimated remains true – I have nothing against it, long may it continue – but I cannot deny that secretly I do not think I deserve so much. The fact that I think a great many other people don’t deserve their reputations either takes nothing away from my own perfectly

¹⁷⁹ ‘Isaiah Berlin: Tra la filosofia e la storia delle idee’ [‘Between Philosophy and the History of Ideas’], *Iride* 8 (January–April 1992), 82–136; repr. in Isaiah Berlin, *Tra la filosofia e la storia delle idee.*, ed. Steven Lukes (Florence, 1994); part of the English original was published in *Prospect*, October 1997, 46–53, accompanied by a false claim that it was IB’s last interview (an extract from this version appeared as ‘The Wisest Man in Britain’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 21 September 1997, *Review*, 1–2, 4); the whole English original appeared as **‘Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes’** in *Salmagundi* no. 120 (Fall 1998), 52–134.

¹⁸⁰ 61 no. 3 (Fall 1994), 687–718.

rational self-depreciation. Anyway, we go ahead. <You are, of course, quite right: I *have* reacted!>

First, a stern note: please do not let this be published in English, for the reasons I gave you: to have a series of dialogues with me, within a year or two of each other,¹⁸¹ would, I think, render the whole thing absurd – believe me, both you and the publisher would suffer, the reviewers would do nothing but mock at it – I know them well, and so do you, but perhaps I know them even better <although I have discovered that Henry H shows it to people: of this I wish to know nothing>. Now to the text itself – I swallow the first four of your pages with undisguised pleasure.

p. 5, para. 2 [693]:¹⁸² ‘He is not interested [in linking metaphysics and] morals’, and that I do not seek to ‘elaborate a set of principles [with wide application across different intellectual disciplines or spheres of] social life’. To this, I say yes and no. I do think that value judgements, whether in morals or politics, are as a rule founded on metaphysics, i.e. on the general picture of the world of a given thinker; and I say this from time to time. Let me elaborate. The two central themes, which as you know go through everything I write <principles?> – sometimes too repetitively – are (a) the incommensurability and incompatibility of some ultimate values, and (b), connected with this, not merely the impossibility but the conceptual incoherence of the idea of a perfect harmony which, at any rate in principle, rational policies can create. But this does rest on metaphysical suppositions, and would not work without them: it implies that there is a basic harmonious structure of the universe – for some, e.g. the *philosophes* of the eighteenth century, it is a static harmony – Nature, Dame Nature, Mistress Nature – which, if it is rationally studied, would tell humanity how to live. For others, it is an evolving process – subject to unalterable laws, as unalterable as those of the physical world, spiritual for Hegel, material for Marx,

¹⁸¹ CIB was published in English in 1992.

¹⁸² IB’s references are to the pages of the draft typescript, on which he has written marginal comments. Page references to *Social Research* are provided in square brackets, as are the words represented by ellipses in IB’s quotations.

the understanding of which can – and for those who believe in the inexorable laws of progress will – lead to a rational, harmonious society. For thinkers of this kind, especially social thinkers, all conflict, failure, misery – everything that is unsatisfactory about social change – is due in the end to human error or ignorance or blindness – for some thinkers, incurable, for others, capable of being overcome, which could lead to sane, rational human life, individual and social. This rests on the belief that to all genuine questions there must be true answers, only one true answer for each; and that all these truths are compatible, or even mutually entailing – the former is an obvious logical truth (one truth cannot conflict with another), and therefore, if we knew them all and acted accordingly, which if we are rational we cannot help doing, once we know what there is in the world and how it is organised and moves – and therefore must lead to the ideal. Some thinkers may think that we shall never answer these questions, because we are weak or because of original sin, which makes us imperfect and our knowledge incapable of perfection, etc., and there are the conflicts in zoological nature, due in their turn to some kind of curable imperfections of biological organisms. So in principle the lion *can* be conditioned to lie with the lamb; but, in short, it is all due to human defects – ignorance, stupidity, irrational fears, greed, what Spinoza called negative emotions, which reason cannot dissipate. This is certainly a doctrine of what there is and how things are and change – a *metaphysical* vision – an ontology which I reject on empirical grounds. Hence my admiration for William James, Hume, Herzen etc.; I do not believe { that }, whatever may be the case with the external world – physical or biological nature or even certain provinces of physiology and psychology – that social change obeys inexorable laws, and according to most of those who do believe this, is therefore moving, no doubt through much chaos, pain and disaster, to a final harmonious solution. That is the ‘final solution’, which I used in *total* unconsciousness, or forgetfulness, that the Nazis used this formula <you are wrong about this!> – it is equally applicable to Communism or even, perhaps, socialism, or

the great world religions, provided that Paradise is where all these things are resolved.

In other words, I do believe, strongly, that ethical and political views are grounded in a view of the nature of man and the universe, and that is metaphysics when it involves a priori necessities, inevitabilities, a basic pattern against which no empirical discoveries can offend – what Popper has against Marx, and for that matter against Freud too, with less reason. These doctrines cannot be refuted by empirical evidence; they are in some sense basic and objective and given to whatever special faculty – sometimes called reason, at other times faith – it is which reveals this fundamental structure. The crooked timber, and many other empirical factors, seem to me to render this implausible, quite apart from my general rejection of a priori knowledge – although I believe that there are what might be called basic human categories – frameworks in which men in many lands, at many times, in many circumstances have lived and could not help living: all ultimately *de facto*, empirical, but so large, so wide, so ancient, so ubiquitous that they could reasonably be called categories. But in principle they could change. That is my faith, and it is an empirical, anti-metaphysical vision, I suppose, which I share with Hume and the entire tradition of British empiricism, as against what I might broadly call continental metaphysics. Existentialism is akin to this, but Sartre in the end betrayed it.

p. 21, para. 2 [709, para. beginning ‘More deeply’]: I am not guilty of relativism. My entire doctrine of pluralism is meant to preclude that. It was Spengler who thought of cultures as mutually exclusive – bubbles between which there were no windows, so that one culture could literally not understand another. I believe the opposite of this. If it were true, we wouldn’t understand a word of Plato or the Bible. No, I believe, of course, that there is your ‘the shared background [of criteria of truth and falsity and standards of reasoning but also of common concepts and dispositions,] beliefs and practices’. Unless there is enough common ground, we could not understand cultures remote in time and space, even to the extent to which we claim to understand them. But understanding

is not acceptance – I can detest the Homeric world, as Vico nearly did, but I can understand it, and understand its achievements, even when I reject them because they conflict with the values that I or my society or my culture pursue, and are, indeed, often founded on. That is empathy, *Einfühlung* – Vico, Herder – hence your last paragraph on this page seems to me wholly incorrect: ‘objectively valid’, ‘reasonable’, ‘rationally justifiable’ are *not* purely internal to a given cultural whole, otherwise no understanding could occur, we could not write the history of the classical past or China or the like with any degree of understanding of their values, quite apart from whether we approve of them or accept them. I am not, believe me, guilty of ethnocentric relativism. Herder seems to me right, if perhaps slightly exaggerating, when he says that every culture has its own centre of gravity – there are many flowers which constitute the garden – but that does not mean that one culture cannot reject those of another culture in terms of its own values, while understanding what it is that makes societies unlike itself hold the values that it does, because of circumstances or traditions or ideas, shallow or profound, which rule such societies. In other words, pluralism means capacity for understanding how one might still be a human being and yet be different from, and perhaps very repellent to, oneself and one’s culture, etc. <Ultimate ends & values differ, but one culture, faith etc. can ‘enter’, to use Vico’s expression, the mind of another.>

p. 22 [710]: Of course monist theories can inspire benevolent and beneficent conduct – like the Utilitarians, who tried to cure human ills; but if one accepts utilitarianism absolutely, then it is difficult to see, on a utilitarian basis, why minorities should not be slaughtered in order to produce the greatest happiness of the greatest number (whatever that may mean). If happiness is the only criterion, then all the other values go by the board – however tolerant, humane etc. utilitarianism may seek to be; I am only saying that pushed to its proper, logical conclusion it *can* lead to what seem to me to be monstrosities. <(If it doesn’t, this is because, without admitting or perhaps realising it, the Utilitarians in fact follow other principles too: most people are like that!> After all,

utilitarianism plus the Marxist theory of history, or plus some other metaphysical doctrine, can lead to Stalinism – not to fascism, because for fascists happiness is not a central value, if one at all.

That is why I think that Wolin, whom you mention, after writing a brilliant account of political thought in the past, got entangled in his own funny anarchist monism, and in the end came to nothing, poor man.

I agree that liberalism may not lead to pluralist conclusions, but pluralism does lead to liberalism¹⁸³ <– pluralists *must* accept variety: understanding, communication must lead to toleration, which monism can preclude: even monistic liberalism.> When you speak of ‘fanatical one-sidedness’ etc. I simply don’t follow what it is you mean. As for Carl Schmidt, his ‘pluralism’, although it throws a great deal of genuine light on what the Romantics believed (I learnt a good deal from him), is a form of arbitrary irrationalism – it does not rest upon commonly accepted values which underlie even differing cultural systems – and leads to genuine relativism – I believe in my doctrine and you believe in yours, and I kill you

¹⁸³ SL had written: ‘Nor is it clear that the pluralism he so eloquently defends leads naturally to liberal conclusions’ (710). IB’s sentence was originally typed by Pat Utechin as ‘I agree that pluralism may not lead to liberal conclusions, but liberalism does lead to pluralism.’ The second part of this sentence is inconsistent with what IB says elsewhere, e.g. ‘There are liberal theories which are not pluralistic’ (CIB 44). There must be a misdictation or mistranscription, or both. Berlin changed three words by hand, yielding ‘I agree that liberalism may not lead to liberal conclusions, but pluralism does lead to liberalism.’ This makes the first part (virtually) self-contradictory, and we believe that IB meant to correct ‘liberal’ to ‘pluralist’, giving ‘I agree that liberalism may not lead to pluralist conclusions, but pluralism does lead to liberalism.’ This reading is supported by the manuscript addition to the sentence (from the dash to ‘monistic liberalism’), and constitutes an important late (and perhaps definitive) statement on his view of the relationship between pluralism and liberalism (endlessly discussed in the literature), on which he had previously been unclear or equivocal, writing, e.g. ‘I believe in both liberalism and pluralism, but they are not logically connected’ (ibid.), but also referring to ‘Pluralism, with the measure of “negative” liberty that it entails’ (L 216). These earlier remarks are not quite formally contradictory, but they are uncomfortable bedfellows, and the present passage may help us to resolve the tension between them.

before you kill me – which is the very essence of anti-liberalism and, if properly understood, anti-pluralism too. ‹I may be unable to convert real fanatics; but if the people I am against are rational at all, I can try to persuade even in terms of their values.›

p. 24, para. 2, line 1 [712]: ‘unchanging’?¹⁸⁴ ‘Evolving’ will do, provided there are family likeness[es], in Wittgenstein’s sense, of which I spoke above. ‹Pat [Utechin] seems to have left out 2 paragraphs at least. What W[ittgenstein] said is that portrait A resembles portrait B, B resembles C, C r[esembles] D – no single *common* feature can be abstracted, but there is a continuity of likeness: apart from omnipresent central characteristics Greeks are like Romans, Chinese are like Afghans, A[fgghans] like Persians, then Armenians, then Russians & so to us all.› But certainly I believe that there is a human nature, and not simply one damned nature after another. You are right to emphasise that I believe that communication is the essence of pluralism, that to be human is to be able in some measure to communicate, that communication (I daresay in not a strictly Habermas sense) is the presupposition both of pluralism and of being human – at least, that is what I certainly believe.

p. 25, the first quotation [713]:¹⁸⁵ that is indeed what I believe, and a very good central quotation, for which I am grateful.

p. 26, at the top [713–14]: that is a perfectly correct report of my views – values conflict, but compromises and trade-offs are possible, in most cases though not in all – where they are literally impossible, for [an] ideological or any other reason, conflict is

¹⁸⁴ ‘Berlin is, therefore, prepared to contemplate the existence of an unchanging human nature.’

¹⁸⁵ ‘There is a finite variety of values and attitudes, some of which one society, some another, have made their own, attitudes and values which members of other societies may admire or condemn (in the light of their own value-systems) but can always, if they are sufficiently imaginative and try hard enough, contrive to understand – that is, see to be intelligible ends of life for human beings situated as these men were.’ CTH2 82–3.

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unavoidable.¹⁸⁶ But I don't personally believe that it is ever unavoidable. The excellent Amos Oz recently, in a brilliant lecture on the attitude of the Jews to God, and finally in answering questions about Jews and Arabs, said there are two ways of ending tragedies: the Shakespearian and the Chekhovian – in the first, everybody in the end is dead; in Chekhov they are all miserable, but alive. The second is preferable, and the first is never unavoidable – that is the degree of his and my optimism – but still it is something. Romantics, fascists, fanatics of every kind, reject compromise as bare-faced betrayal of one's values – hence the view that a duel is nobler than some feeble attempt to slur over the differences. I believe the exact opposite of this, and so, I suspect, do you.

That is all. I am most grateful. But do modify your text unless you think my representation of my view is incoherent, inconsistent, or in some way a falsification – none of which, of course, I think; but still, one never knows about oneself, one's own consistency, integrity and in fact what one really believes – I think I do, but who can tell? Anyway, thank you again very much, our interviews did a great deal to clarify myself to myself, and self-understanding – there is nothing more important – one of the ultimate values if you like.

Yours ever, with much love
Isaiah

¹⁸⁶ '[M]any conflicts between incompatible values, even where incommensurable, are capable of resolution through "trade-offs", especially in the field of public policy, where the principle of resolution appealed to is utilitarian in a very broad sense (minimising suffering or not frustrating too many people's ultimate ends). The hard cases are dilemmas where both choices are morally binding, where there is no way of not doing wrong.'

TO GRETA LEIBOWITZ

1 September 1994

Headington House

Dear Mrs Leibowitz,

I was truly distressed to see that your husband was no more. As you know, I admired him immensely – I wrote a very sincere encomium to him when he was, I think, eighty, which on the whole pleased him. I remember a wonderful letter from him, in which he thanked me and said ‘I have a feeling that you think I am some kind of liberal intellectual, even Tolstoyan, or even perhaps a pacifist. Certainly not. I am nothing of the kind. I believe in wars if they are absolutely necessary. My reasons for being in Israel are very simple: it is in my opinion where God wished us to be, and I wanted to be a citizen of a Jewish state, preferably democratic, but even regrettably undemocratic if the majority insisted on this. What I do not want is to live in a state which contains and governs and oppresses Arabs. This is rank imperialism, and odious to me. I want a state of Jews, governed by Jews, for Jews – let there be minorities, but do not let them be maltreated and despised and hated in the way in which we seem to hate Arabs and they us.’ And so on. I was extremely pleased to receive this interesting letter, which gave me a view of him that I did not previously possess.

What can I say but what I wrote in my tribute to him? He was a man of total integrity, unswerving pursuit of the truth, uncompromising courage, a degree of uprightness which I have never known in anyone else – a moral model not only to Jews but to mankind in general. All this apart from his great intellectual gifts, his passionate interest in philosophy – about which he talked with and wrote to me. He was always nice to me in his few letters, and I felt very proud of this; I felt that if he approved of me I had a chance of Heaven despite everything. His courage was, of course, proverbial. True, he sometimes deliberately went too far – the remark he was always criticised for, about the Nazi-like conduct of the soldiers in the Occupied Territories, did go too far, I think, but

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I understand why he made it – not only to attract attention to what he was saying, but for the reason once given by John Stuart Mill for making strong speeches in Parliament in favour of causes in which he believed: stronger than he felt, because he felt the pendulum had gone so far in the other direction that one had to give it a very strong swing in the right direction. Exaggeration is a fault of many great thinkers – Plato, Descartes, Hume, Kant, Russell, Wittgenstein, Hegel – only Aristotle and Locke did not.

Yours,

Isaiah Berlin

PS I ought to add that I realise that if one is possessed by [a] vision, as your husband was, one must speak passionately, and sometimes violently. Anyway, I have no criticism of him. One of the reasons why I felt so drawn to him is, of course, our family relationship.

TO LEON WIESELTIER

3 January 1995 [*carbon*]

Headington House

Dear Leon,

Thank you for your letter and enclosure about Meyer [Schapiro] – the encomium is thoroughly deserved, of course, and I read it with genuine pleasure. I wish, however, the author had not suddenly brought in a string of charlatans at the end (and for once I don't mean Hannah Arendt): there's no need to speculate on what his answers would have been to Derrida or Althusser or Lacan – the last of whom he refused to meet when Lacan tried to see him in Paris; rightly refused, I think. Anyway, it's nice to come into one's own at the age of ninety. Who knows? – the same may happen to me.

Meanwhile a book has been written about me by an intelligent man called John Gray, Fellow of Jesus College – I don't know that it needs reviews, but if you think someone would like to do it I

could perhaps get him to send you a copy – do let me know. It is a book dealing with my ideas, not uncritical but broadly correct. The author is an odd man, began by being a strong conservative, then switched to a species of communalism, and is now suspended between various doctrines; but I like him and think him to be a very clever man – a fact that his many opponents refuse to recognise.

I feel embarrassed about Avishai. The idea of pushing you to publish something about myself seems to me a piece of inexcusable self-promotion, but I really did it for him rather than for myself (so I tell myself), so I am glad that it is to appear. I hope it will not stimulate a storm of critical protest.

As for Weidenfeld, you are quite right – after his childhood and youth it simply becomes a kind of Social Register of an exceedingly mechanical kind. I used not to like him much, but lately I have come round to him, and see him a certain amount: he is very good company, wonderful gossip, knows a great deal, curiously enough, about German literature (about English and American literature, scarcely anything). He is quite an interesting man, but integrity is not, perhaps, his central quality – and social life and life are synonymous for him. The only genuine thing in his life is his love for Israel – right-wing, left-wing governments equally. When Aline asked him how this could be (Begin and Peres), he said, ‘You don’t understand – I am like a Catholic. Good Pope, bad Pope, a Pope is a Pope – that is how the government of Israel is for me.’ Nevertheless, his Beginism was pretty disgraceful.

Yours ever,
[Isaiah]

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TO ROBERT SILVERS

28 September 1995

Headington House

Dear Bob,

I read Michael Walzer's review¹⁸⁷ with obvious pleasure – certainly the best thing that has appeared about me for a long time (obviously, because it pleased me so much). There are one or two small points which I don't understand and shall write to him about – but I shall thank him for his generosity.

I hope you have read the admirable article about the book on Miss Arendt and Heidegger in the *New Republic* – I don't know who the man is, but if anything he doesn't go far enough. God knows why you all admired her so much, I still cannot understand.

There is something for which I should be grateful. In the second column of Michael Walzer's review, p. 28, he says 'Berlin's essays ... have been collected in a series of volumes by friends and colleagues ...'. My friend Dr Henry Hardy, to whom it seems to me I owe my entire reputation, has worked with wonderful devotion and success in collecting all my bits and pieces. He has done it entirely on his own, with little assistance from anyone. He is a sensitive man, and naturally feels miffed when his part in the editing of my works is not mentioned at all. It would therefore be a favour both to me and to him if you would put in a short note¹⁸⁸ referring to the fact that it is Hardy alone who is responsible for my collected essays.

I had lunch with Buruma the other day – I know you are seeing him this week – what an excellent man he is and how much I enjoy

¹⁸⁷ 'Are there Limits to Liberalism?', NYRB, 19 October 1995, 28–31. The passage IB refers to reads: 'Characteristically, Berlin's essays have been scattered to the winds, appearing in so many, often obscure, places that few readers had any idea of their number or range until, in recent years, they have been collected in a series of volumes by friends and colleagues.'

¹⁸⁸ Such a note was published in the issue dated 2 November. A letter from Henry Hardy pointing out that *Russian Thinkers* was co-edited with Aileen Kelly appeared in the issue dated 16 November.

meeting him. I am about to have a pacemaker – I look forward to that. In the meanwhile I can think of nothing but Aline’s operation, which is rather more serious. You will be amused to hear that Derek Hill, after complaining that we did not reply to his telephone calls (the fact that we were in Italy he thought no excuse), told Aline that he was lunching with Lady Somebody, who had had the shoulder operation, and ‘it went completely wrong’. What a man.

Yours ever, with much love,

Isaiah

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George Weidenfeld: Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MS. Berlin; Thomas Harding, author of *The Maverick: George Weidenfeld and the Golden Age of Publishing* (London, 2023: Weidenfeld and Nicolson), to whom we are most grateful, kindly supplied copies of letters from the Weidenfeld & Nicolson Records, C1615, Manuscripts Division, Department of Special Collections, Princeton University Library, and from George Weidenfeld's private archive, London

Other letters were supplied by their recipients