

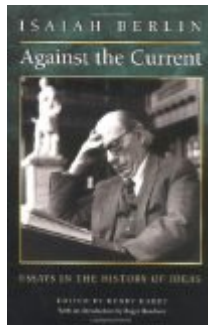
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**Nandini Ramachandran**

**Mystic Myna**

Conversations with Dead Folk



Isaiah Berlin was the 20th century's foremost preserver of forgotten genius. He can only be read, as Erasmus would say, spinning in the salon of your imagination. Voltaire argues with Bakunin, Herzen battles Hegel, Hume and Diderot team up in an unlikely alliance against Marx. Everyone despises and adores Rousseau in turns, almost everyone twists Kant into their personal utopia. The challenge, whilst reading Berlin, is in plotting a course. It is important to fix a firm question in one's head, a destination to aspire towards.

My Berlin-quest followed the "romantic exiles" of 19th century, navigating along Tom Stoppard's trilogy [The Coast of Utopia](#). Inspired by Berlin's [Russian Thinkers](#), Stoppard chronicles the lives of the intelligentsia that fled Russia during the "long night of obscurantism" between the Decemberists in 1825 and the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. The plays revolve around the debate between Mikhail Bakunin and Alexander Herzen about the Fate of Revolution, and are weighted (like Berlin's book) in favour of Herzen's gloomy liberalism. Bakunin, harbinger of modern anarchism, is thus dismissed by Berlin in a glorious sentence-paragraph:

Bakunin, with his gusto and his logic and his eloquence, his desire and capacity to undermine and burn and shiver to pieces, now disarmingly child-like, at other times pathological and inhuman; with his odd combination of analytical acuity and unbridled exhibitionism; carrying with him, with superb unconcern, the multi-coloured heritage of the 18th century, without troubling to consider whether some among his ideas contradicted others -- the "dialectic" would look after that -- or how many of them had become obsolete, discredited, or had been absurd from inception. Bakunin, the official friend of absolute liberty, has not bequeathed a single idea worth considering for its own sake; there is not a fresh thought, not even an authentic emotion, only amusing diatribes, high spirits, malicious vignettes, and a memorable epigram or two.

In Belinsky he finds a living legend and the instigator of the "Dostoevsky complex":

The original prototype of these sincere, sometimes childish, at other times angry, champions of persecuted humanity, the saints and martyrs in the cause of the humiliated and defeated -- the actual, historical embodiment of this most Russian type of moral and intellectual heroism -- is Vissarion Belinsky.

Belinsky is the thread that unites the disparate patterns within the tapestry of early socialism: German idealism, Russian lucidity, French decadence. Everyone, in *Russian Thinkers* and *The Coast of Utopia* alike, is perpetually debating Belinsky's ghost. This is convenient all around, for Belinsky said many contradictory things, as prolific and impoverished writers must. This combination of humble origins and elite approval ensured his place in Russian history, and his views about the "social" criticism of literature, were the battleground for the next century of Russian thought. Belinsky's premature death in early 1848 installed him as an icon for the next generation of "violent" thinkers like Chernyshevsky and Pisarev, officially the fathers of Bolshevism.

For much of his life an earnest Hegelian, Belinsky astutely overturned his mentor's dialectic. Hegel, he said, had discovered the algebra of revolution rather than its physics. History isn't ordained or governed, but formulated: millions of variables interacting within predictable (and partial) patterns. In a letter to the artist Vasily Botkin, Belinsky echoes Bertrand Russell, claiming the "unfolding of the World-Spirit in time" expects the cosmos to scramble towards Hegel's philosophy:

All Hegel's talk about morality is utter nonsense, since in the objective realm of thought there is no morality. Even if I attained to the top of the ladder of human development, I would still have to ask Hegel to account for all the victims of life and of history, all the victims of accident and superstition, of the Inquisition and Phillip II, otherwise I will have to throw myself head-downwards.

Herzen, the protagonist of Stoppard's plays, was as rich as Belinsky was poor. He was the illegitimate son of a Russian nobleman and a German lady, and declared himself "Polish at heart." Temperamentally, too, they were mismatched: Belinsky was dour and ardent; Herzen, convivial and mutable. Herzen was accused of speaking from the sidelines all his life, and by the end of it he had estranged the Left with his bitterness and the Right with his liberalism. Belinsky, for all his torment, was never tentative. Yet, it was these two thinkers -- the perplexed idealist and the flamboyant emigré -- who were to prove, together, their generation's most eloquent thinkers.

Herzen clarified and interpreted Belinsky's insight into Hegel's philosophy. Living in London during the disappointed 1850s, he founded the Bell, which proclaimed revolution as loudly as it decried it. Things had to change, Herzen agreed, but let us not delude ourselves into believing our sacrifices are in service to an abstract noun. Consider, as proof, Berlin's favourite paragraph of Herzen, which wound its way into a delicious joke (as well as a sad refrain) across *The Coast of Utopia*:

If progress is the goal, for whom are we working? Who is this Moloch who, as the toilers approach him, instead of rewarding them, draws back; and as a consolation to the exhausted and doomed multitudes can only give the mocking answer that after their death all will be beautiful on earth. Do you truly wish to condemn the human being to alive to the sad role of caryatids supporting a floor for others to dance on... wretched galley slaves who, up to their knees in mud, drag a barge with "progress in the future" upon its flag?... Not only does Nature never make one generation the means for the attainment of some future goal, but she doesn't concern herself with the future at all; like Cleopatra, she is ready to dissolve the pearl in wine for a moment's pleasure... (elsewhere) Who will finish us off? The senile barbarism of the sceptre or the wild barbarism of communism? A blood-stained sabre or the red flag?

...Logic when it comes of age detests canonised truths. It thinks nothing sacrosanct, and if the republic arrogates to itself the same rights as the monarchy, it will despise itself as much, nay, more... 'Tis not enough to despise the crown -- one must not be filled with awe before the Phrygian Cap; it is not enough to consider *lèse majesté* a crime: we must look on *salus populi* as being one.

I chose my unruly lot within *Russian Thinkers* -- Belinsky and Bakunin rather than Turgenev and Tolstoy -- for they resonated with my reading on the [Indian exile M.N. Roy](#). The parallels are uncanny: Roy was as virtuously poor as Belinsky, as flexibly fervent as Bakunin, as prophetic and peripatetic as Herzen. He shares their horrified fascination with the unraveling of revolution in their respective eras (Roy was a pivotal part of the early Comintern). As with Roy, these neglected Russians uncovered an essential truth controversially early in the "history of ideas." They suggested that the Spirit that animates both communism and nationalism -- Hegelian Inevitability -- was theosophy's latest fraud.

The Russians led me into the tradition that spawned them, and I began [The Roots of Romanticism](#), a voyage from "de Magus de Norden" (the mystic Johann Hamann) to Hegel. *Roots* is the chattiest of Berlin's books (perhaps because it began life in lectures) and full of the lively caricature he was

so skilled at. Herder considered the French "desiccated monkeys"; Hume abhorred the "hideous prison of the multiplication table"; "pity appears to Kant a detestable quality." Rousseau is "a dervish from the desert: the point was that no one could love as Rousseau did, nobody could hate as Rousseau hated, nobody could suffer as Rousseau suffered."

*Roots* is constructed chronologically and progressively, a tricky enterprise within a movement as frenetic as romanticism. The defining experience of the romantic, Berlin warns you, is contradiction. This is also the lesson he would have you learn from them -- the fine art of prevarication, of negotiating multiple and overlapping realities. If nothing can be established, everything can be argued. Romantics can be fascist or feminist, conservative or radical, existential or nihilist. What matters is the choice and the commitment, an assertion of Defiant Will against unpredictable Nature. Ends, sincerely chosen, justify their means. This was what the Russians were counting on, and the world-view they eventually dismembered.

The qualities Berlin admires most in Herzen are his clarity and his willingness to complete a logical argument without being bound by it. Unlike Belinsky, he didn't seek sublimation within the Truth. Unlike Marx he believed civilisation existed because of all the gore and misery it entailed. Unlike Bakunin he never confused contradiction and paradox. Pragmatic vacillation (which would pass in daily life as common sense) is a rare feat in philosophy, and it is an ability Berlin prizes. This sometimes encourages an odd taste in thinkers, such as Berlin's fondness for the sinister Joseph de Maistre.

Joseph de Maistre, a 'royalist Jacobin', was a Savoyard who found himself in Russia in the early 1800s. He lived through the high age of German idealism, and borrowed much of its rhetoric against the nobility of man and the natural sciences ('tissues of coherent falsehoods') in his fight to restore the feudal order of Europe. He stood for all the things Herzen despised -- serfdom, religion, monarchy -- yet they shared a "ruthlessly deflationary" approach to reality, which is why Berlin counsels his reader to respect Maistre's voice.

Maistre believed humans to be debased beings, serving out their time on the penal settlement of Earth. They were to be governed as slaves and monsters, purifying themselves to achieve the kingdom of Heaven. He thus dedicated his life to "razing Utopia to the ground." A Big Picture discernible by the proper use of intellect was, to him, blasphemy: the divine and the devil were inscrutable, and that was why they survived. He used the weapon of reason, Berlin argues, to defeat reason: "In an effort to disprove that history is Reason in Action, he multiplies examples of self-defeating rational institutions... To his contemporaries, perhaps to himself, he was gazing calmly into the classical or feudal past, but what he saw even more clearly proved to be a blood freezing vision of the future." ("Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism", [\*The Crooked Timber of Humanity\*](#))

Reading Maistre, especially after *Russian Thinkers*, is a disconcerting lesson in the art of spin. Compare, for instance, Herzen: to be the passive tools of forces independent of us, to be the blind instrument of fate, this is not for us. The scourge, the executioner of God, needs a naive faith, the simplicity of ignorance, wild fanaticism, a pure, uncontaminated, child-like quality of thought.

And Maistre, in his celebrated *Soirées*:

The Hangman is not a criminal. Nevertheless no tongues dares declare that he is virtuous, that he is an honest man, that he is estimable. No moral praise seems appropriate to him, for everyone else is assumed to have relations with human beings: he has none. And yet all greatness, all power, all subordination rest on the executioner. He is the terror and the bond of human association. Remove this mysterious agent from the world, and in an instant order yields to chaos: thrones fall, society disappears. God, who has created sovereignty, has also made punishment: "for Jehovah is master of the twin poles and upon them he maketh turn the world." ([1 Samuel] 2:8)

Both passages, you will notice, say the same thing. The public executioner is a figure in which the dilemma of human evil finds its definitive embodiment. Is killing, usually the worst of all evil, to

be considered a public service? Herzen passionately denies this and demands we evolve away from such brutality; Maistre proudly accepts it and demands we devolve back. Neither opinion, however, clouds their judgment about the present, and Ideology is a contemporary activity. We study the past and theorise the future only to find evidence of ourselves. The realisation that these selves are torn souls at odds with one another is, for Isaiah Berlin, the first step on a long ladder towards wisdom.

The next is the understanding that wisdom itself is a shifting category, that the shaman and the scientist both have something to contribute to our understanding of the world. Every intellectual choice one makes -- between Bakunin and Turgenev, or Maistre and Herzen -- demands the irreparable loss of equally valid alternatives. Once you grasp this, the vicissitudes of history and cartography fade. You realise how long (and, for the most part, well) humanity has endured. He calls this quiet epiphany *entrare*, the force of imaginative insight. Entrare, pioneered by Vico, is the window between cultures. In the house of human history there are many mansions, Berlin writes, and one shouldn't perpetuate anachronisms under the influence of national or epistemological vanity.

Praise of *entrare* is as close as Berlin gets to a moral core within his personal philosophy -- "Value Pluralism" -- a philosophic version of Fitzgerald's aphorism that the ability to hold incompatible beliefs is a symptom of intelligence. He clarifies that while it is one alternative to the "sonorous generalisations" of universality, pluralism isn't "relativism," with the quicksilver detachment that term implies. Pluralism isn't about accommodating the many breeds of men; it is about admitting that all people are, ultimately, only human. Out of the crooked timber of humanity, as Kant once said, no straight thing was ever made.