

## The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library

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### SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

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*The following letters do not appear in the fourth volume of Berlin's correspondence. Some of them are late discoveries, and would probably have been included had they come to light in time. Others were excluded because of the need to be selective. More annotation may be provided later, but for the time being the texts are made available here for the convenience of readers.*

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

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

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 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* ...

Yours ever,

I.B

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.

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

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 PATRICK NEILL

3 April 1978

Headington House

Dear Patrick,

*Euryanthe*, 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 may be that the Research Committee would in that case have to be slightly afforced. It obviously should do more than merely examine

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

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

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.

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

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 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

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

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

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

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.

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

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

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 17<sup>th</sup> & 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 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 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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; conse-

<sup>1</sup> All three letters missing.

quently, 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

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

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:

1. *Nechet* 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.

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

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 VANESSA THOMAS

27 October 1982 [*manuscript card*]

as from Headington House

I am still in a slight daze after that excellent party<sup>2</sup> (Tony Powell said to me, while being driven by Tony Quinton “how long, do you 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 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.

<sup>2</sup> A dinner party given by Margaret Thatcher.

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

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 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

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

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 HARRY JAFFA

24 May 1992 [*carbon*]<sup>3</sup>

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.

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

<sup>3</sup> There are some oddities in this letter which may have been corrected in the top copy. However, this never reached Jaffa, so we shall never know.

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 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*,<sup>4</sup> 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

<sup>4</sup> 'Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est.' *The Commonitorium of Vincentius of Lérins* (434 CE), ed. Reginald Stewart Moxon (Cambridge, 1915), 2. 3 (p. 10, lines 6–7).

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

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 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.

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

Published 21 October 1993

[Headington House]

Professor O’Flaherty<sup>5</sup> 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

<sup>5</sup> To whose letter in the same issue IB is replying.



SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

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. 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]

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

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 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

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS 1975–1997

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.

*Letters to the Wardens of All Souls (John Sparrow, Patrick Neill) are from IB's All Souls file; those to Isaac Stern and Derrick Puffett are from box 14 of the Isaac Stern Papers in the Library of Congress.*

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