

THE IDEA OF FREEDOM: Essays in Honour of Isaiah Berlin, edited by Alan Ryan, Oxford University Press, 297 pp., \$15.95.

AGAINST THE CURRENT: Essays in the History of Ideas, by Isaiah Berlin. Edited by Henry Hardy, with an Introduction by Robert Hausheer. Viking Press, 448 pp., \$16.95.

Subtle doctor

J. N. GRAY

IT WAS SAID OF MAXIM Gorky that he was "not a man, but a universe." Aside from any suggestion of impersonality such a description might convey, it applies with full force to Isaiah Berlin. The range and scope of his interests and achievements in philosophy, in political theory, and in cultural history are legendary. Still more striking, if possible, is the almost clairvoyant facility with which he has entered into the spirit of thinkers very remote in temperament from his own—thinkers like Marx, Fichte, Bakunin, and Belinsky. The extent of Berlin's intellectual sympathies is reflected in the breadth and complexity of his influence on those of radically different outlooks, in diverse disciplines. Faced with such a subject, the editor of a *Festschrift* confronts a daunting task, as Alan Ryan observes when he says that "to cover all of Isaiah Berlin's interests in one volume would have resulted in something which I imagine would have been unique among *Festschriften*—a volume physically too large and too heavy for its contributors to have offered to its subject." Instead we have a volume of fifteen essays on themes evoked by Berlin's *Four Essays on Liberty*.

The choice of *Four Essays* is a happy one, since that book contains all the major ideas with which Berlin's work has come to be identified, including Berlin's theme that, historically, at least two different conceptions of liberty may be seen as quarreling offspring of a common parent. One of these, the positive conception, soon mutated from being a bona

fide view of freedom as self-determination into a pseudoconcept in which values distinct from freedom are misrepresented as aspects or dimensions of it. Thus it was that a conception of freedom with an honorable pedigree in the writings of Plato, the Stoics, Spinoza, and Kant became conflated with the idea of rational self-government under the aegis of strong public authority, which is the chief support of despotism in the modern world.

Contrary to the misinterpretations of many of its critics, *Four Essays* does not maintain that only negative liberty—the liberty in which a man's choices and activities are not obstructed by other men—is liberty proper. Rather, its argument is that there are compelling reasons for favoring the negative over the positive view. Among these reasons Berlin assigns priority to his claim that the positive view consecrates an immemorial error—the error, informing all the dominant traditions of Western civilization, according to which all genuine values and virtues cohere to form a harmonious whole. This is the presumption of Greco-Roman nationalism, as transmitted through the Scholastics to the French Enlightenment, which still largely dominates moral and political thought and sentiment. It implies that, at least in principle, there is for every moral and political dilemma a unique solution, so that real tragedy (where wrong is done whatever happens) is disqualified as involving a metaphysical impossibility. In *Four Essays*, as in all of his writings on social philosophy, Berlin is determined to undermine this ancient presumption. It may well be, indeed, that Berlin's outstanding achievement is to have subverted this common presumption of ancient and modern ration-

alism.

The fifteen essays in this volume approach the central theme of the connection between negative freedom, human choice, and the conflict of values from several angles. Three essays address directly the question of the nature of liberty. Gerry Cohen in his "Capitalism, Freedom and the Proletariat" argues that, notwithstanding its avowedly contractual character, the capitalist market economy necessarily involves limiting the liberty of workers. His essay states in a powerful form the classic argument against libertarianism—that voluntary exchange in the context of private ownership of productive resources presupposes the drastic and inequitable abridgment of social freedom. Radically misconceived as I believe Cohen's perspective to be, I have not seen a more cogent case for the view he expounds. Larry Siedentop contends in "Two Liberal Traditions" that French liberalism, with its more positive and sociological conception of liberty, captures insight denied to the narrower individualism of the British tradition. Charles Taylor, in a brisk piece entitled "What's Wrong With Negative Liberty," develops the idea that the negative view of liberty embodied in the writings of some of the leading British liberals is overly mechanistic and neglects essential dimensions of human action. Each of the three essays presents an ingenious argument, but one that is finally unpersuasive and fails to take the full measure of Berlin's exposition of classical liberalism. It is a pity that this collection includes no systematic defense of Berlin's conception of liberty.

It is no accident, perhaps, that the most provocative and important of the essays collected in this volume are concerned with Berlin's central doctrine of value-pluralism. Plainly enough, the claim that some central values are not merely uncombinable in the real world, but incommensurable—that there is no common measure or single standard to which appeal may be made to resolve moral dilemmas—has far-reaching implications for social philosophy. It may be, indeed, that the prospects for systematic theory in moral and political affairs are severely curtailed by such a

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claim. In a masterly essay, the distinguished jurist H. L. A. Hart considers the doctrines of rights recently advanced by Ronald Dworkin and Robert Nozick, and concludes (in my view correctly) that, whereas each of these statements represents an advance on the crudities of utilitarianism, they fail to find an adequate foundation for a theory of rights because they are still conducted in the shadow of utilitarianism.

Hart's view that the way forward in political philosophy lies in decisively breaking with the utilitarian tradition is implicitly contested by Richard Wollheim; in an essay of formidable and characteristic subtlety he maintains that a form of indirect utilitarianism, traces of which he finds in the works of John Stuart Mill, can accommodate the competing values on which Berlin has always laid stress. In the most explicit and systematic consideration of Berlin's thesis of value-pluralism in this volume, Bernard Williams endorses the view that there are irreconcilable conflicts of value and suggests that this insight must give to moral and political theory a largely new shape and intent. The aspiration toward a moral geometry or a calculus in which all moral dilemmas can be expressed and resolved, must be abandoned, and political theory must be seen as an essentially public, practical (and indeed, political) enterprise.

I HAVE NOT AIMED TO COMMENT on every essay in this valuable collection, but rather to assess those contributions in which Berlin's distinctive ideas are criticized or developed. If there is any single thought inspired by the volume as a whole, it is that Berlin's writings suggest a new path of justification of a liberal order. If Berlin is correct in his doctrine of value-pluralism, then the rationalistic variants of liberal doctrine, first advanced by John Locke and Immanuel Kant and now exhumed by John Rawls and Robert Nozick, are philosophical dead ends. Equally misconceived, if Berlin's arguments are sound, are the skeptical traditions of liberal thought, which try to ground the value of freedom in universal doubt. For Berlin's argument, far from expressing a form of skepticism, presupposes that there are values the conflicting demands of which are for us a matter of knowledge. The liberal society is then defended as one in which this knowledge is not suppressed or shirked, but rather, propagated and embraced. Authoritarian societies, resting on the chimera of universal rational harmony,

are then condemned as expressing a sort of inauthenticity or bad faith, analogous to that analyzed by such existentialist and phenomenological writers as Sartre and Heidegger. Thus it is Berlin's central thesis that although the growth of knowledge does not necessarily or always promote the cause of freedom, only in a free society can it be acknowledged as a basic truth about the human situation that men must choose between ultimate ends.

In *Against the Current*, the third volume of Berlin's collected essays, his pluralism about values and his criticism of the rationalist assumptions of the Enlightenment surface in a variety of contexts. Berlin never imposes the pattern of his own preoccupations on any of the thinkers discussed in the thirteen essays in this volume, but it can be viewed as a coherent argument in its own right. The argument is directed against the most fundamental assumption of our intellectual tradition, the notion that reality constitutes a single unified field, capable in principle of being rendered fully intelligible in terms of a system of immutable and universal principles. Several of the essays are concerned with important antinomian thinkers who, often in great isolation, stood outside the frontiers of that tradition. Their writings have in the last four hundred years dealt blow after blow to what Roger Hausheer, in the marvelously perspicuous and sympathetic introduction to this volume, calls the "proud and shining column" of the Western rationalist tradition.

In his analysis in "The Counter-Enlightenment," Berlin sees such thinkers as Rousseau, Herder, and Hamann as undermining the secularized variant of the Western tradition that prevailed in France in the latter part of the eighteenth century. In their revolt against the cosmopolitanism of the French Enlightenment, these thinkers emphasized that men's personalities came to flower fully only in an enduring and specific cultural environment in which feeling is satisfied as well as intellect. Such thinkers identified the erosion of men's sense of moral security in the most progressive development of the modern world—in the growth of knowledge and commerce especially. Implicitly they contested the redemptive view that sees human history as tending toward some final perfection, which the thinkers of the Enlightenment—Condorcet, Turgot, Diderot—absorbed from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Indeed, as Berlin shows in a deeply interesting essay, "Hume and the Sources of German Anti-Rationalism,"

the opponents of the Enlightenment turned against it some of its most powerful weapons. Thus the philosophical defense of German mysticism was strengthened, paradoxically and fatefully, by the impact of Hume, whose "euthanasia of reason" seemed to bring the tradition of the Enlightenment to a skeptical impasse.

Berlin devotes two essays to a neglected thinker for whose passionate originality he clearly feels deep admiration—Giambattista Vico, the Neapolitan philosopher and historian who died in 1744. In "Vico's Concept of Knowledge" and "Vico and the Ideal of Enlightenment" he shows how Vico's distinction between two kinds of knowledge—the knowledge we have of things we have made ourselves and the knowledge we have of the natural world, which is given to us as a brute fact—shattered the ideal of a single scheme of concepts and categories that could contain all phenomena. In Vico Berlin also finds an innovation that was to inform much later social thought: Vico abandoned, for perhaps the first time in intellectual history, the assumption of a universal and in its essential aspects unvarying human nature, and initiated a current of thought in which it is acknowledged that men of different epochs and different cultures have radically different needs, values, and even perceptions. His innovations founded the modern tradition that subverts the idea of a single unified world-view and a universal civilization.

As Berlin himself doubtless intends, these wonderful essays leave a great many deep and difficult questions unanswered. His profound attachment to liberal values coexists with an equally profound doubt as to the rationalist schemes by which these values have typically been supported. How can liberal civilization retain (or regain) its self-confidence if its old philosophical supports are snatched away? Berlin's work points in a direction in which new foundations for liberal society may be laid; but, as he would be the first to admit, almost everything remains to be done. More specifically, liberal civilization, wherever it has flourished, has depended on economic freedom—on the institutions of private property and market competition. Without them all formal and legal guarantees of liberty become worthless. Berlin's writings show that the intellectual defense of the institutions on which the prospects of freedom depend is sorely in need of repair. It will be a hopeful augury if, among the many who derive benefit from reading

his essays, there are some who seek to meet the challenge he poses to the philosophical and moral assumptions of the old liberalism. □

A WRITER'S BRITAIN: Landscape in Literature, by Margaret Drabble, photographed by Jorge Lewinski. Alfred A. Knopf, 287 pp., \$22.50.

English in context

DONALD DAVIE

THIS HANDSOME VOLUME looks at first sight like an unusually sumptuous brochure for the British tourist industry, but it is something else. Those who know Margaret Drabble from her novels as above all a dogged-as-does-it author, nothing if not deliberate and thorough, will realize that, unlike other writers of repute, she is probably incapable of supplying what used to be called "the letterpress" for a coffee-table picture-book. And indeed she has turned in something quite different. *A Writer's Britain* will disappoint anyone who buys it as a gift for someone who uses books as interior decoration, or as stimulus for casual conversation. Though it comes with clear and useful maps of England, Scotland, and Wales (Ireland isn't dealt with, not even Northern Ireland), it couldn't conveniently be taken along on travels in Britain; and even the armchair traveler will need to settle for several hours at a time in an armchair that is not of the softest.

Jorge Lewinski's excellent illustrations are what should give the clue. We all know by now that the camera *can* lie, and that it is the normal business of the professional photographer to make it lie most seductively; but Lewinski's photographs are, though expert and attractive, unspectacular. They are also, we discover when we start to read, keyed very scrupulously and self-effacingly to passages of the text—so much so that many of the pictures don't, in isolation from the text, explain themselves. The

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illustrations in fact illustrate. Whereas in coffee-table books photographer and writer collaborate on equal terms, if indeed it isn't the photographer who calls the shots, here the writer is firmly in the saddle and the photographer runs at her stirrup.

A Writer's Britain is more about writers than it is about Britain. That is not quite true; for it *is* about Britain, but Britain as a physical entity constant though changing through centuries, rather than Britain in the here-and-now around the tourist as he leaves his aircraft at Heathrow or Gatwick. In the first of five quite massive chapters—there is a sixth, less daunting, about British writers and British landscape in the present century—we know what we are in for as soon as our author takes on Sir Kenneth Clark, no less, challenging out of English and Welsh literature of the Dark Ages and the Middle Ages his contention that the experience of landscape as an aesthetic object or aesthetic stimulus is a relatively late-come phenomenon, not to be encountered before the Renaissance and rare still in the seventeenth century. This chapter is called "Sacred Places," and concerns itself with how the religious mind comes to terms with the seductiveness of the British earth, rang-

poem on Penshurst idealizes the hierarchical society symbolized by the manorial great country house. I suspect that she, like Raymond Williams who has wrestled with this problem before her, underestimates the extent to which not just pastoral literature but *all* literature (including for instance her own novels) is necessarily and unavoidably idealizing in tendency; how wide a gulf there is between the truth that honest literature deals with, and the sort of truth that we call "documentary."

She is admirably fair-minded as she forces herself to acknowledge the truth and the beauty of *The Seasons* of James Thomson, who in a vulgar Marxist view would have to be denounced as a Scottish lackey of the English ruling class; but we can sense her relief and enthusiasm when she's able to turn to those writers—John Clare, more dubiously Burns, and in a different way Cobbett—who see the landscape through the eyes of the agricultural *worker*, not the eyes of the privileged visitor to the manor. Her pages on Clare are really admirable, and at many points I think they genuinely break new ground in the appreciation of this very great and still neglected poet. After judicious looks at the novelists Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Trol-



ing from anecdotes told of the heroic anchorites and missionaries of the Dark Ages, through to Gerard Manley Hopkins and T. S. Eliot.

In the next chapter, "The Pastoral Vision," Margaret Drabble's sympathy with the egalitarian aspirations and resentments of British socialism gives her trouble as she is forced to struggle with the undoubtedly idealizing procedures of all pastoral literature, for instance with the way Ben Jonson in his great

lope, and Hardy, this chapter ends surprisingly yet naturally with two poets of the present day, R. S. Thomas in Wales and Alasdair Maclean in Scotland, both writing of harsh and unrewarding landscapes.

In the next two chapters, "Landscape as Art" (largely about English gardens, and contrived or uncontrived "beauty-spots") and "The Romantics," the narrative pace at times deteriorates into a dutiful *trudge* through the names and ti-