A therapeutics of exile:† Isaiah Berlin, liberal pluralism and the psyche of assimilation

Jessica Dubow
Department of Geography, University of Sheffield, Winter Street, Sheffield S10 2TN, England; e-mail: j.dubow@sheffield.ac.uk
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Abstract: This paper focuses on the (now ‘unfashionable’) figure of the liberal political philosopher Isaiah Berlin. It argues the ways in which Berlin’s distinctive understanding of liberal pluralism carries a hidden spatial and therapeutic premise that bears upon the displaced life of the émigré/assimilated subject as upon the negotiations of internal dividedness and ‘nonviolent’ conflict effectuated by it. Set in the context of the meeting between Isaiah Berlin and the dissident Soviet poet, Anna Akhmatova, in St Petersburg in 1941, and reading Berlin via certain key concepts of another émigré subject, Sigmund Freud, I suggest that political pluralism and the therapeutic ‘cure’ share profound structural similarities. From this interpretative angle, I then draw a series of analogies which correlate the condition of exile to the state of melancholia and, conversely, the process of assimilation to the work of mourning. So understood, it becomes possible to translate Berlin’s political liberalism into psychoanalytic terms, viewing liberal identity as enabled by the subject’s release from the ‘monism’ of territorial attachment and thus by its enlivened embrace of psychic loss and dislocation.

Keywords: liberal pluralism, psychoanalysis, exile, assimilation, melancholy, mourning, Berlin, Freud, Akhmatova

“What does philosophy not have to do with psychoanalytic speculation?”
Jacques Derrida (1987, page 265)

Introduction: a meeting
Adapting the famous phrase of the celebrated 19th-century Russian writer and socialist radical, Alexander Herzen, Isaiah Berlin once wrote that “Jews have enjoyed rather too much history and too little geography” (2000, page 143). My aim is to reverse this claim. I do this in order to argue the ways in which Isaiah Berlin’s particular brand of liberal political philosophy can be seen to have a specific spatial basis. Indeed, contrary to Herzen’s claim, it is not the ‘too little’ but the ‘too much’ of geography—and, mostly, the attempt to minimise its excess—that, I suggest, secretly partners Berlin’s distinctive understanding of liberal pluralism and the concept of irremediable conflict that defines it.

Because my argument depends on a series of analogies, and because this is a necessarily speculative manoeuvre, I begin with a single event and a single date. No 34 Fontanny Dom (Fountain House) Leningrad, November 1945. It was here in a small and barely furnished third-floor room—the converted Baroque interior of the Sheremetev Palace—that Anna Akhmatova met Isaiah Berlin, then temporarily seconded to the British Embassy in Moscow. The resident: one of the last remaining figures of the ‘Silver Age’ of Russia’s prerevolutionary literary life; along with her first husband, Nikolay Gumilyov, and fellow poet, Osip Mandelstam, a founding

† My title is adapted from a chapter heading in Strangers to Ourselves in which Julia Kristeva analyses the cosmopolitan foundations of the community assembled around the Pauline Ecclesia. See Kristeva (1991, page 77).
member of the Acemist group formed in 1911; a leading light of St Petersburg’s wartime avant-garde; a semifabled dissident who, while publicly celebrated, had been deemed ‘politically problematic’ ever since the secret trial and judicial murder of Gumilyov in 1921.(1) The visitor: a Latvian Jew born in 1909 who as a young boy had fled Riga for Petrograd and, following the Social Democratic and Bolshevik Revolutions, had emigrated to England; an Oxford scholar who during his postwar career was to become Professor of Social and Political Theory and founding President of Wolfson College; a self-styled public intellectual beloved of the British political and cultural establishment. Seated on two wooden chairs, smoking, sharing a bowl of boiled potatoes, Akhmatova recalled the Black Sea coast and Odessa summers of her youth while Berlin recounted his Riga childhood and early years in Petrograd. In their shared native tongue, they argued about his love for the refined ironies of Chekhov and Turgenev and her preference for the darker interiors of Kafka and Dostoyevsky. She recited poetry and they talked about the Great Terror, of the suicide of the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, the murder of the theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold, of the suppression of Boris Pasternak, and of the purge, in Gulag transit and concentration camps, of that whole generation of artists, writers, and poets who, for them both, exemplified the last authentic Russian culture (Berlin, 1980a; Dalos, 1988; Ignatieff, 1988). “Leningrad after the war was for [Akhmatova] nothing but a vast cemetery”, Berlin later wrote, “it was like the aftermath of a forest fire—the few charred trees made the desolation still more desolate” (1980a, page 198).

That night in No 34 Fontanny Dom was to have enduring consequence. For Akhmatova, it is said, the meeting with Berlin resulted in the ‘Guest from the Future’: an image she hastily included in a stanza of the then unfinished Poem without a Hero, the most desolate and intricately structured of elegies to a pre-Soviet past that also foretold her denunciation by Zhdanov and the bleak decades of increasing internal isolation.(2) For Berlin, the following month of December was dedicated to writing A Note on Literature and the Arts in the Soviet Federated Soviet Republics in the Closing Months of 1945 (Berlin, 1946) for the British Embassy. Less immediately, as his biographer Michael Ignatieff (1988) suggests, the meeting was to be encrypted within all Berlin was later to write in defence of Western liberal pluralism and political freedom.

On one level, this paper is about the difference and distance between two spaces and two positions: that is, between Akhmatova’s Leningrad apartment with all its encrusted memories of prerevolutionary intellectual ferment and the many Oxford common rooms and London salons in which Berlin regularly held forth on revolutionary hope’s betrayal by various militant and messianic illiberalisms. On another level, this paper is about the delicate skein that weaves back and forth between them, entwining Leningrad with Oxford, connecting the displacements of the (internal) exile to the adaptations of the assimilated foreigner. Crucially, it is a connection best understood as politically ‘therapeutic’. I use the term provisionally but specifically: my aim is not only to suggest that Berlin’s liberalism describes a hidden spatial premise but that it shares structural similarities with the curative work of psychoanalysis. Thus although Berlin is the central protagonist of this paper, I read him through another exile to London: Sigmund Freud. In so doing, I will be imagining a conversation between two projects which on the face of it have little in common: Berlin’s political pluralism and

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(1) Although under constant surveillance—with her first husband shot for alleged anti-Bolshevik conspiracy, and her son, Lev, put under an extended prison camp sentence in 1949—it is unclear, as György Dalos (1988) notes, whether Akhmatova was ever officially subject to a Central Committee publication ban from 1925.

(2) In September 1946 Zhdanov’s speech at the Leningrad branch of the Union of Soviet Writers initiated a smear campaign against Akhmatova and Mikael Zoshchenko, both of whom were immediately expelled and all publication of their work banned. It was only in 1987, nineteen years after her death, that a complete text (Requiem) appeared in the Soviet Union (see Akhmatova, 1994).
Freud’s conception of the ‘reality principle’. The result, I hope, will be twofold. First, contra Herzen, that we understand what is constraining in living with ‘too much’ geography, how its surplus of bonds or excess of interior ties to space come paradoxically to haunt the figure of the exile, the outsider, the foreigner. Second, that in reading Berlin and Freud together, we might identify the ‘cure’ for this spatial ‘too muchness’ in the subject of the assimilated foreigner, or rather in the figuring of what I conceive as the liberal-therapeutics of spatial assimilation itself.(3)

Psychoanalysis and liberalism

It is perhaps inevitable that an argument that draws on the shared terrain of psychoanalysis and the political comes with a battalion of (symptomatic) caveats. The first is that there is nothing new in posing this relation. If Freud’s (2002) Civilization and its Discontents stands as the seminal theorisation of the psychic repressions necessary to the organisation of social life, then the history of post-Freudian analysis is the story of its critique—contesting the inherently destructive nature of the instincts, on the one hand, and refusing the view of society as opposed to human desire, on the other. Together with the groundbreaking study of the ‘authoritarian personality’ led by the Frankfurt School in the 1930s, it was the resurgence of interest in Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse in the 1960s and 1970s that first ordained the “unnatural marriage” (Jay, 1973, page 86) of Freud and Marx. Understanding the administrations of late capitalism to be coded into the structures of the individual psyche—eviscerating the creative energies of Eros and depleting pleasure of its subversive potentials—any stress on the adaptive relations between the self and society, it was argued, could only enfeeble psychoanalysis as an agent of social critique (Marcuse, 1966; Reich, 1946; 1983). Where such Freud-Marxism caught the spirit of the age, envisioning the unfettered resexualisation of social life as the basis of political liberation, its limits lay in disregarding the contradictions of internal life and their incorporation into equally contradictory social processes and structures. In the broadest of terms, the various uses of Kleinian object-relations theory, feminism, and Lacanian cultural theory have emerged over the past three decades as the clearest strands of a “political psychoanalysis” (Frosh, 1999) laying bare language and ideology as the generative axes around which psychic life is organised and its irrational passions performed. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the points of overlap and opposition and, much less, the substantive content of such frameworks, the collective effects of which, in the words of Stephen Frosh, have made the political well nigh “uninterpretable without examination of the fantasies into which it feeds and out of which it proceeds” (1999, page 193, original emphasis). Exemplary of Lacanian theory in this domain, Slavoj Žižek’s (1990) analysis of the self-destructive new nationalisms in Eastern Europe following the disintegration of the Soviet Bloc in the late 1980s, argues powerfully for understanding the structure of libidinal energies governing the shared relation of individuals to the fantasy object (the ‘Thing’) of the national or partisan cause. Emphasising the surplus nature of enjoyment efficient to social reality itself, Žižek is thus able to spell out the intensities of desire—and its kernel of traumatic menace—at work in the political process of national identification (Žižek, 1990).(4) In a related vocabulary, Jacqueline Rose (2005) offers a reading of political Zionism as an unanswerable
psychic force in the territorial aggressions of the Israel/Palestine conflict. Here, an analysis of state militancy turns on how “historically inflicted damage arms itself” (page 145). From its founding vision by secular intellectuals in the late 19th century, it is the “internal debris” (page 145) of shame and humiliation, Rose argues, which lies at the (repressed) heart of the Jewish nation-state, breeding a defensive violence that simultaneously denies and repeats the originary wound of anti-Semitism that drove its initial formation.

The political framework at issue in this paper is more benign and its emotional investments more modest. My interest is neither in the radical possibilities of psychoanalysis nor in mining the psychic contradictions internal to the constitution of political claims. Indeed, in focusing on the process of assimilation and refracting this through some key Freudian concepts, what follows is arguably in keeping with the very political and psychic quietism that so much post-Freudianism sets itself against. Thus, my argument not only shares little with those critiques which excoriate liberalism as the ideology of modern Western capitalism—liberal toleration, for Žižek, being the postpolitical impasse, par excellence—but pointedly embraces a liberalism that is more restrained in its critical impulses. Indeed, in choosing Isaiah Berlin as the chief protagonist I do not only want to affirm an authentic core to a certain liberal philosophy. I do this precisely to reveal what is most fragile and, at the same time, most determined in Berlin’s political model, taking his characteristic sobriety less as a prompt for critique than as a sensibility whose very moderation might give us pause. To be sure, this is a sensibility largely given by history. Writing through the 1950s and 1960s, in the middle of that “broken-backed century” in Osip Mandelstam’s (1973, page 130) memorable phrase, Berlin’s world was one in which Stalinism still raged and the cataclysm of German fascism had not long passed. Moreover, the dilemma that Berlin saw as the core of a modern history of ideas is still one of the most recondite of all: how did the moral and political liberations of the 18th and 19th centuries give way to the tyrannies of the 20th century? Or, in Mark Lilla’s words, “how did the Europe that produced Goethe and Kant, Voltaire and Rousseau, Tolstoy and Chekov also produce the Lager and the Gulag?” (2001, page 33). But, if Berlin’s political sensibilities are specifically historical, they are also implicitly spatial; or rather, as I will argue, they are given by a certain relation to space in which migration and assimilation are structured by a Freudian therapeutics, and liberalism becomes the foundation for the maintenance of a (functional) self.

Berlin: some basic concepts
Like so many analyses of liberalism, the central criticisms of Isaiah Berlin rest on the presuppositions—indeed, presuppose the presuppositions—of his philosophy itself. It is not just that Berlin makes no creative leaps and breaks no bold ground—“the ideas and arguments about which [he] writes are, as Bernard Williams observes, always someone else’s” (Lukes, 1994, page 690, original emphasis)—but that the abstractive stretch is precisely the move he disavows. If his work seems ‘unphilosophical’ or, at least, unfashionable—and to those more accustomed to the language of contemporary European philosophy and political theory it certainly does—it is because Berlin is a writer whose empirical attractions appear so hostile to conceptual thought, whose calls for moderation can read as incorrigibly uncritical, and whose self-appointed task is to check the temptation of anything maximal, magical, and immoderate (Lukes, 1994; Mouffe, 1993; 2005). But, if herein lies the dusty conservatism of which Berlin is often accused, it is also the result of an intellectual content indissociable

(5) Žižek himself insists on this: “Let us not forget that liberalism emerged in Europe after the catastrophe of the Thirty Years War between Catholics and Protestants … (2008, page 665).

(6) In a contemporaneous French context, the criticisms of Raymond Aron—from both right and left—resemble those launched against Berlin. For an interesting examination of this issue see Birnbaum (2008, chapter 4)
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from its form. Berlin’s essays, as Lilla (2001, page 32) notes, “are not only about liberalism; they are also displays of a liberal temperament … , an existential matter, a certain way of carrying oneself in the world” (original emphasis). Indeed, while his conceptual modesties—the acknowledgment, for example, that “there is no a priori reason for supposing that truth, when it is discovered, will necessarily prove interesting” (Berlin, 2003a, page 19, original emphasis)—might well mimic the (im)modest disguise of the urbane self-ironist, it is also of a piece with Berlin’s central case against the European Enlightenment. Specifically, it relates to his sustained critique of the monism of the French philosophes and their followers in the German Auklä rung whose moral universalism Berlin identifies as the origin of modern technocratic power. And the tracing of pedigree is key. For, if the immediate target of Berlin’s arguments was the scourge of Sovietism, his essays—especially those written at the height of the Cold War—interpret its threat less as a repudiation of human freedoms than as the expression of a perennial utopianism, both scientific and romantic, encrusted deep in the strata of Western intellectual history.

Thus, for example, in Freedom and its Betrayals (Berlin, 2003b), a collection of essays based on a series of BBC broadcasts in 1952, Berlin sets out to identify the precursors and “early preacher[s]” (page 153) of modern totalitarianism, recognising the “earliest thinkers [who] speak a language which is directly familiar to us” (page 2) and locating the remote source of later trajectories. Focusing on figures who all wrote within a fifty-year period of the French Revolution, Berlin’s critiques are acute even if unsurprising, featuring a cast of characters who, while foundational, are also broadly drawn. Thus, on his account, the 18th-century utilitarianism of Helvétius, like the utopian socialism of Saint-Simon, might well represent the earliest formulations of liberty but, in turning ethics into a type of technology, come to reduce it in an instrumental sense. Here freedom, qualified by the vision of social perfectibility, is inevitably “dehumanised” (Berlin, 1980b, page 348); its inherent radicalism diluted and ultimately ‘betrayed’ by a scientistic logic of new social and state efficiencies. Yet more grievous, for Berlin, are the rationalist philosophes who in holding liberty to be absolute come to invert it, effectively redefining it as its opposite (Berlin, 2002). Thus the paradox of Rousseau, as Berlin’s now more-or-less standard Counter-Enlightenment story has it, emerges at the fateful point at which liberty, taken as the essence of the human self, faces off the equally absolute value of the general will and the adherence to moral law; a contradiction only solvable by redefining freedom as social obedience itself. If such an inversion could eventually cast state oppression in the semblance of freedom—“there is not a dictatorship in the West who in the years after Rousseau did not use this monstrous paradox” (Berlin, 2003b, page 47)—then German idealism, in Berlin’s account, performs analogous betrayals. Thus, in Johann Gottlieb Fichte—more particularly the later Fichte—the precondition for a free-willing and self-conscious individual is that it recognises its limits and responds to the summons of an external world. Berlin’s concern lies with the nature of such an imperative. Indeed, if for Fichte’s thesis, self-positing depends on the ability to respond to an objective or outside ‘other’, then for Berlin it opens the way to a dangerous collectivist definition: making the essence of the ‘authentic self’ repose on its encounter with a higher, superpersonal self and ultimately a nationalist one. “Then the great paean begins”, Berlin writes, “… individual self-determination now becomes collective self-determination, and the nation a community of unified wills in pursuit of moral truth” (2003b, page 69). Unsurprisingly for a history of ideas undertaken in the early 1950s, it is Hegel’s apparent providentialism that casts the widest and deepest net. On Berlin’s view, structures built on Hegelian foundations are not only unattainable but rest on the myth of the unitary principle: if the first too easily evolves into dangerous unities (Utopia, for Berlin, is paradoxically a kind of agoraphobic space), the

(7) For the full development of the ‘inversion thesis’, see Berlin (2002).
second mistakes human society for a branch of the natural sciences. And so, freedom becomes compliant with the monism of world process, and rationality means accepting the theodicy of historical necessity. For Berlin, in clean contrast, “liberty is liberty” (Crowder, 2004, page 71). Its value depends on being an end in itself, irreducible to the reaches of knowledge or any “symmetrical fantasies” (Berlin, 1980b, page 211) of history. Nailing his progenitive colours firmly to the mast, Berlin is thus able to steer a direct course from Hegel through Marx to Stalin, locating modern totalitarianism within the mainstream of Enlightenment thought, and inveighing against the human freedoms sacrificed on the royal road to ideality.

If Berlin’s search for the explanatory ‘essence’ of a Western tradition tends to flatten its complex variables, either caricaturing its key figures or rendering them susceptible to celebrity (Anderson, 2009)—the readings of Rousseau and Hegel are particularly distilled—his task, as Lilla remarks, is “simply pedagogical” (2001, page 33). For Berlin, the thesis to be learnt is that history “has no libretto” (1978, page 92), to use Herzen’s famous phrase; that no metaphysics of the straight line can ever be made “out of the crooked timber of humanity” (Kant, in Berlin 1978, page 92), only that the permanence of uncertainty avoids the Platonic misconception according to which all questions are in principle answerable and “that life formed according to [such] answers could constitute the ideal society” (Berlin, 2003b, page 211).

Bringing the goal much closer, any genuine political morality, for Berlin, comes from an intensely immanent conception of reality (Berlin, 1978). It means living—in fact and in principle—in the intricate midst and middle of things without the lure of any ‘interesting’ solution. Distinguished from the rigid energies of the system-builders, it entails living and “suffering through” (Kelly, 1978, page xvii) the infinite textures of the day to day, or, better, in accepting that “the ultimate goal of life [is] life itself; that the day and the hour [are] ends in themselves, not the means to another day or another experience” (Berlin, 1980c, page xxiv). Berlin is thus against the archē and telos but not against the urgencies and agonisms of what he calls the “flow of life” (Berlin, 1980c, page xxiv) in between. “If we merely look to the end of the process, the purpose of all life is death” (page xxiv) is how Berlin, citing Herzen, understands the danger—indeed, the ‘death-drive’—of checking the vitality of human affairs by the pressure of abstract allegiance. Indeed, that Berlin takes moralities to be ungeneralisable and ideals to be finite and not futural, renders the present—and its own fulfillment—as his explicit profession of faith (Berlin, 1978). “Principles are not less sacred because their duration cannot be guaranteed” (2002, page 217), Berlin insists in “Two concepts of liberty”. Far from being a withdrawal from political alignment or moral commitment, it is a valuing of the political in immediate, empirical experience. Insisting that the “concrete situation is almost everything” (Berlin, 2003a, page 18) it is the realisation that each historical moment is its own complete reality and is thus its own “goal attained” (Berlin, 1980c, page xxiv), that moral responsibilities are not transferable and the contingencies of every situation too detailed and contradictory ever to be refined into rule. In short, scaling down our thought and action not only creates that “human-horizon” (Berlin, 2003b, page 18) without which morality and creativity cannot survive. Such diminutions also converge with the pluralism that lies at the heart of Berlin’s social and political thesis. Moreover, as I will come to argue, it is within the crowded, imperfect world of such pluralism that we might locate the therapeutic work implied in the concept of an assimilated subjectivity.

Let me be clear: what pluralism involves here is not any flat-footed cultural relativism—or its ultra-individualist variant—according to which particular cultures have particular values whose moral authority cannot therefore be judged by any external or common metric (Berlin, 2003a). Nor is Berlin’s pluralism generated through the repressive tolerance of some

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(8) While Berlin frequently uses Kant’s phrase and adapts it to a variety of contexts, the thesis from which it comes [Kant’s (1784) Idea for a Universal History in a Cosmopolitan Perspective] is paradoxically very different arguing, as it does, for a world order and history still to come.
brands of liberal multiculturalism—what Žižek calls liberalism’s “tolerant intolerance” (2008, page 662)—which nonetheless allows only the adjustable parts of foreign thought in and ensures that its threatening content stay outside. Finally, as I hope to show, it is only the most ahistorical of arguments which would confuse Berlin’s pluralism with a Žižkean “culturalization of politics” (Zizek, 2008, page 660) in which social inequalities, named and neutralised as cultural difference, become the basic ideology of a contemporary postpolitics.

But it is not just that Berlin comes from a different time and place. Nor is it merely that his empirical priorities set a limit to theoretical ambitions in political and ideological terms. Rather, with a humanism at once sceptical and radical, Berlin’s pluralism entails a world in which essential difference and dividedness—both private and public—means that we cannot escape the permanence of conflict existing without the interference of rational consensus or arbitration. Contrary to the monists who would fashion culminations the better to evade incompatibilities (Berlin, 1978) and opposed, too, to a traditional liberalism that holds to a consensual commonwealth generated out of a clash of interests, Berlin takes the conflict between equally compelling values to be ineliminable. Not a derivative or a multiplication of a singular good but precisely a pluralism, as Steven Lukes (1994) insists, the space in which all human goods converge is, for Berlin, not only practically impossible but formally incoherent. Here the choice between “ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute” makes conflict—and tragedy—inmanent and ineradicable (Berlin, 2002, pages 213–214). Here, too, irreducible difference occurs not only between opposing value systems but names the internal divisions of human subjectivity itself.

And so, the familiar liberal dilemma: What and how much must be weighed against what? Which goods should be emphasised at the expense of which others? Or, recasting the question in Berlin’s distinctive terms: If “the first public obligation is to avoid all suffering” (2003b, page 17), how does this task sit with the inescapability of conflict? If the realisation of one value can only be gained with the surrender of another, what of the irresolutions and remains that are inevitably incurred? In sum, if the price of liberty is permanent uncertainty, how do we hold to that “unstable equilibrium” (Berlin, 1978, page 200) poised between satisfaction on the one hand and loss on the other? To the extent that Berlin’s liberalism consists in a “certain way of thinking” (Lukes, 1994, page 698, original emphasis) about conflict rather than in offering any normative model for a liberal polity, such questions remain open. Their remit, however, extends beyond the ethics of value pluralism. Indeed, I suggest that Berlin’s sensibility not only bears on his distinctive political philosophy but also on a particular experience of space. Put differently, we cannot think about Berlin’s pluralism without also thinking what it means to be an assimilated subject: that is, a subject not only split between two geographic spaces and two incompatible states but one who might come to inhabit the midst and middle (Santner, 2001) of ultimate incompatibilities, holding to its incompletions and excesses, refusing native predicates and the voyage to dim and “distant ends” (Berlin, 1978, page 105). Indeed, in contrast to what Eric Santner calls the “‘conceived’ or ‘conceptualised’ worlds of the philosophers” (2001, page 15)—those very ideational allegiances that, for Berlin, keep us from “catch[ing] the flow of life” (1978, page 196)—assimilation-as-liberalism, I suggest, converges on all the agitations of a pluralist politics, as on the inherent dividedness in “any and every space we [might wish to] call home” (Santner, 2001, page 14).

(9) Berlin’s celebrated essay “Two concepts of liberty” (2002) sets the stage for this argument.

(10) The idea of occupying the ‘midst’ and ‘middle’ of life features centrally in Santner (2001, chapter 1). This essay owes a huge debt to Santner’s wide-ranging argument not only because it stages a conversation between two hitherto unlinked near contemporaries—in Santner’s case, Franz Rosenzweig and Freud; in mine, Berlin and Freud—but because Berlin’s liberalism uses a language very similar to that in Santner’s discussion.
Assimilation-as-liberalism, with a little help from Freud

The analogy I have in mind is not a direct one. It consists not simply in how the émigré’s departure from a native place for life in another calls on ideas of self-creation and subjective volition that are, of course, a part of a general liberal lexicon. Instead, as a kind of pragmatic meditation on Berlin’s political principles (the pragmatic being, in Berlin’s sense, the key ‘anti-ideological’ mode here), assimilation, I suggest, might be thought of as a certain cooperation with contradiction. Neither the stranger’s outsidersness, nor the exile’s distress—not any extremity in either attachment or detachment that would sacrifice being “in the midst of life” (Santner, 2001, page 11)—assimilation, in this sense, rests on the capacity to live with thoughts and “forms of life that are [properly] not one’s own” (Kelly, 2001, page 18). It describes a condition where incompatibility is not the excess of crisis but, in a Freudian sense, signals a “preparedness for anxiety” (Freud, 2001a, page 31). It aspires to the thin line where critique functions within compromise, and to a life where difference lives in the company of some important damage. In this context, assimilation is not just another word for cultural ‘adoption’ and ‘adaptation’ as a means towards some ultimate singularity or indistinguishability. Nor does it entail any political or psychic ‘nonposition’ in the manner of an evasive or resigned ‘making-do’. Rather, to be assimilated, This is to manage, though never master, the breach of a certain separation. It is to achieve a kind of nonviolent dividedness, or to open onto conciliation with conflict. What it signifies is not any final overcoming of incompatibility but the readiness to dismantle our metaphysical and political organisations of it. Catching something of Berlin’s pluralist model, assimilation thus involves less a “renunciation of passion or freedom [than] a minimalist view of their possibility” (Lilla, 2001, page 19). It is the inhabiting of what Berlin calls a “minimal area” (1978, page 200) in which ideality and adjustment coexist, a little place for the living-along with collisions and their losses. In short, assimilation denotes neither similarity nor passivity but the clarification and confrontation of ineliminable difference. Indeed, with Berlin as our guide, assimilation might be seen as a practice of reduced-stakes; or, as the self-limiting labour of becoming-liberal.

To secure the analogy between liberal pluralism and assimilation, however, it is not enough to simply look at how Berlin’s own spatial biography maps onto his political philosophy. Which is to say that it is not enough to be reminded of Berlin who, as a young boy traumatised by witnessing the violence of Bolshevik revolutions of 1917, fled St Petersburg for the newly independent Riga in 1920, and, on confronting anti-Semitism from the Latvian authorities, emigrated to England in 1921. And nor is it enough to focus on the encounter in November 1945 when Berlin travelled back to Leningrad to meet with Akhmatova and found, there, the seed of a position that was to inform his later political philosophy. Instead, we might splice Berlin’s liberal pluralism and assimilated subjectivity together, positing the relation not only in spatial terms but with an awareness of its hidden Freudian therapeutic dimension.

True, Berlin never mentions Freud. Although they were both Jewish émigrés forced to find eventual refuge in London, Freud’s fin-de-siècle Vienna and Berlin’s postrevolutionary Russia signal two distinct political and intellectual nativities. Yet, psychoanalysis and liberalism not only share resemblance as structural and historical models. In a brilliant analysis, Michael Steinberg (2007) demonstrates how Freud’s early association with classical liberalism, most notably his German-language translations of four essays of John Stuart Mill in 1879 and 1880, supplies a rich instance of their coherence. While Steinberg is not alone in speculating on the influence of Mill on Freud’s prepsychoanalytic work (Govrin, 2004; Molnar, 2002), his suggestion is that the same project be read as Freud’s personal and theoretical affiliation with English liberalism’s most celebrated “family romance” (Freud 2001b, page 235); that is, the displacement of the utilitarian fathers (James Mill and Jeremy Bentham) by the son and student’s insistence on the significance of an individual interior self. On this reading of paternal legacies repeated and replaced, Freud’s literal translation of Mill’s essays doubles as a “translation of political theory
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into psychology” (Steinberg, 2007, page 47). Indeed, for Steinberg, the passage from the first generation to the second generation of utilitarianism—the move from raw calculations of social good to the reassertion of human value—is not only the fateful account of filial attachment to and liberation from the source of authority and belief. Insofar as the Freudian narrative charts the process of the subject’s individuation itself, it also “deliver[s] a strong epistemology to the basic principles of English liberalism” (page 56).

That Mill’s (1989) *On Liberty* was to become central to Berlin’s own formulations of the necessity of fallibility to a free human society and subjectivity, will not detain us here (see Berlin, 2008). With Steinberg’s psychoanalytic ‘translations’ in mind, however, I suggest that the relationship of liberal pluralism and assimilation might meaningfully be described in terms of, what in a therapeutic paradigm, we know as the ‘reality principle’. The phrase is, of course, only one in a series of terms that Freud uses to characterise that most crucial and difficult of psychic tasks: How do we renounce instinctual life for the sake of a rational one under abstract law? How do we regulate our internal energies so that they accord with what the external world can tolerate? For Freud, such questions are alive to one overriding obligation: to avoid extremes of pain, to protect the ego whose role it is to manage the unconscious and the trauma of lost objects.

The problem of what Berlin (2002) calls the “One and the Many” that forms the final section of “Two Concepts of Liberty” shares the basic coordinates of these tensions. Like the reality principle that attunes instinctive drives to the demands of the social, the need to choose between ultimate goods is the very basis of pluralism’s perpetual rivalries. “That we cannot have everything”, says Berlin, is not “a necessary, not a contingent, truth” (2002, page 215). To yearn for more is fundamentally regressive; indeed, it is an allurement that Berlin, in terms reminiscent of Freud’s essay on “Family romances” (2001b), understands as both a fantasy and a defence. “[T]he very desire for guarantees that our values … are secure … is perhaps only a craving for the certainties of childhood or the absolute values of our primitive pasts” (Berlin, 2002, page 217). At best an anachronistic fantasy of an “ancient faith” (page 212) and at worst the pathology of a narcissistic wish or an omnipotence—in Berlin’s vast genealogies of an Enlightenment tradition the fear is that fantasy and pathology become one and the same—what such excess entails is a fundamental flight from conflict.

Whether a vision aims towards future fulfilment (cf Berlin’s 18th-century *philosophes* and their 20th-century inheritors) or involves a reversal (Berlin’s critique of Fichte and German historicism) thus do monist philosophies protect themselves: desiring that all needs be satisfiable, and all ends compatible. In contrast, the task of Berlin’s pluralism is not the elimination of social or individual conflict. It is to break down our aversions to it. Like the reality principle, its work lies in accommodating the sacrifices endemic to all relations between self and world, living with—and *being alive to*—their insufficiencies and inconstancies. Its function is to underwrite the painful precondition of loss; indeed, as George Crowder suggests, it is to translate and endorse loss as a “rational regret [precisely to] prevent it becoming damaging to [that] same precondition” (2004, page 147). Here, pluralism, like the Freudian ‘real’, not only defines individual and social lives on the ‘less pleasurable’ experience of difference, distance, and dissatisfaction. Their analogous ‘therapies’ involve the struggle of tolerating the unanswerability between self and world and, with this, living what Aileen Kelly calls “the messy, imperfect, unfinished prose of daily existence (2001, page 29). But if Berlin, like Freud, insists that all analysis proceed by concrete example, how might we argue the connection further?

(11) For Freud, the reality principle governs mental functioning together with the pleasure principle which it contradicts. As such, the reality principle does not so much *suppress* pleasure as accommodate it, turning the free instinctual energy into the *bound* energy of regulatory life.
Exile as melancholy, assimilation as mourning

This paper began with a description of a single night in November of 1946, a night spent in a Leningrad apartment where a poet in internal Soviet exile met an assimilated émigré political philosopher. As briefly noted, the meeting with Berlin inspired Akhmatova’s (1994) haunting formulation of the ‘Guest from the Future’—a line from her monumental Poem Without a Hero. Of all Akhmatova’s interpreters and biographers, no one has yet decided who that ghostly, futuristic figure might be. Emma Gerstein, a close friend and literary critic, claimed that the imagined ‘guest’ was Akhmatova’s current lover, and the ‘future’ was the life they planned together. Others, like György Dalos (1988), suggest that the addressee was Berlin himself, or at least an abstract summation of what this visitor from the West meant to her. Still others suggest that the spectral guest was a summons to an ideal reader or to virtual worlds and words; an appeal to a not-yet-existing community, or back to a past one for which there are no longer any speakers. Certainly, as Dalos (1988) reminds us, the image of some cryptic country was central to those Cubo-Futurist poets, like Mayakovsky and Velimir Khlebnikov, who in the first decade of the 20th century had called themselves ‘citizens of the future’, the budetlyane (from the Russian budet, ‘will be’).

For a poet persecuted by Zhdanovite diktat, however, the formulation of a ‘Guest from the Future’ is clearly born of the breakdown of the present. Or rather, it is about a hope that for reasons, at once structural and historical, can never be realised in the present tense: “a council of hopelessness which extols Messianic hope” (Rose, 1996, page 70). As a call with no respondent, as an appeal with no addressee, the ‘Guest from the Future’ has the paradoxical quality of a kind of empty excitation, a driven pointlessness. In this, Akhmatova’s key lyric has the status of what Santner describes as a “designated signifier” (2001, page 38). What Santner intends here is the expression of a certain paralysed content or hindered revelation; the generation of a “peculiar surplus of address” (page 38) or an “excess of validity over signification” (page 40) that speaks of a fundamental rupture in meaning. The psychoanalytic name for this, of course, is trauma. Trauma is an excess, a disorientation, and a persistence. As an occluded event it can never be properly located or temporalised. As an experience it thwarts translation, symbolisation, and signification. In Santner’s terms, trauma involves the “torsion” (page 39) of being constrained by an “uncanny sort of surplus animation”; it is about bearing the weight of a “too much’ of pressure” that is amplified and magnified but “unable to be assumed” (page 22).

If the validity of “force without signification” (Santner, 2001, page 42) relates to trauma as it positions the subject “outside of life” (page 21), it is also a phenomenon that, in Berlin’s anti-Utopian terms, is not just fantastic but, properly, illiberal. As an ideation, Akhmatova’s (1994) ‘Guest from the Future’ hails from a time outside of time and from a place strangely external to an extant present one. That such a time and place emerges out of the most urgent political coordinates does not, of course, mean that we cannot describe it in such terms—to do otherwise would be to separate Akhmatova’s fantasy of some hyperhistorical or transhistorical experience from its contingent historicity. For all her elegiac distancing, in other words, Akhmatova is what Hélène Cixous calls a “date-giving poet” (1993, page 205); her guest from an oblique far side of time is nonetheless framed by the specific disorientations of a present.

But if I have staged the association between liberal pluralism and psychoanalysis correctly, Akhmatova’s guest does not just embody a Utopian will or any other genre of political or psychic need which imagines a unity, a redemption, a revelation. It also signifies a fixation, a defence; it is an overidentification with loss that is, simultaneously, a withdrawal.

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(12) Santner’s phraseology draws on his reworking of Gershom Scholem’s well-known description of Kafka in his correspondence with Walter Benjamin (Gershom Scholem, Letter to Benjamin, 20 September 1934, in Smith and Lefevre, 1989, page 142). See also the description of the Kafkaesque subject in Žižek (1989, page 44).
from the world or a flight from conflict. In these terms Akhmatova’s guest might go by the Freudian name of melancholy. For whereas the labour of mourning, as Freud (2001c) explains in “Mourning and melancholia”, involves the ‘working through’ (Trauerarbeit) of loss and so demands its gradual abandonment, melancholy retards any such surrender. In a pathological misdirection of desire, melancholy binds itself to loss. Faithfully cathected and thus failing to mourn, it refuses to relinquish attachment or dismantle defence. So understood, melancholy resists the structured sacrifices that govern the reality principle; that is, it defends against the gradual decathexis of energies that, in confirming loss, enables the subject to reconstitute itself and thus ensure its sustained future life. Indeed, if the aim of mourning is, as Freud says, to “[declare] the object to be dead”, and so [offer] the ego the inducement of continuing to live” (2001c, page 257), it is, in effect, detachment and dislocation that allows the subject to be rehomed in what, for Berlin, is the conflictual “flow of life” (1978, page 22) or to re-inhabit “not beginning or end but centre of the world” (Santner, 2001, page 15, original emphasis).

Freud is explicit that the lost object may not be only a loved person, but also “an abstraction … such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (2001c, page 243). In Berlin’s recollections, Akhmatova’s enthrallment is explicitly marked as such:

“[H]er sustenance came not from [people] but from literature and images … . I asked whether the Renaissance was a real historical past to her, inhabited by imperfect human beings, or an idealised image of an imaginary world. She replied that it was of course the latter; all poetry and art, was to her … a form of nostalgia, a longing for a universal culture, as Goethe and Schlegel had conceived it, … of a reality which had no history, nothing outside itself. Again she spoke of St Petersburg [and] the long dark night which had covered her henceforth” (Berlin, 1980a, pages 198–199, my emphasis).

But if melancholia entails an inability to disinvest from loss, Akhmatova’s “historico-metaphysical vision” (Berlin, 1980a, page 202) is not incompatible with the attachment to another kind of politics. For in pulling back from the world, or in defensively assuming a position before or beyond it, melancholy not only withdraws from the events of the ‘middle’ in Berlin’s and Santner’s Freudian sense. As a fantasy—and fantasmatic—adaptation, sustained cathexis also holds open the possibility of an alternative world, or another absolute reality that would not demand such losses. Retaining the tendencies of the psyche before its past has been reorganised by separation, it is also a probe into the future, to a hope that might attest to a more bearable preservation. From this perspective, we may say that it is also melancholy that marks the ‘Guest from the Future’ as the work of a political dissident: it is a defence against loss that is also a distant stretch, an attachment to the salvific features of a past and future that a present reigning ideology—its miseries and deformations—makes impossible. Indeed, we may go further and suggest that it is also melancholy that makes Akhmatova exemplify the exceptional status of the exile: that is, the subject who refuses to relinquish the lost object because she resists the work of integration, its settlements and sunderings; the one who positions herself beyond Berlin’s ‘flow of things’ for fear of conceding to their claims. Suspended above all exigencies, denying the ‘reality’ of loss—and its legacy of ambivalence—melancholy is thus not only the safekeeping of a fantasy or fixation in the terms outlined above. Assuming a position “at the end of the world, outside of life” (Santner, 2001, page 21), it might simultaneously be seen as a marker of dissent, asserting the (dis)location of a radical outsidersness, maintaining an externality that refuses to reconcile. In short, Akhmatova’s melancholy might not merely signal a failure of the reality principle in senses offered by a Freudian reading of Berlin. It might also be another way of naming exile: a separation from daily life, a declared distance from its present terms.
and conditions; or, more forcefully, the displacement of the subject from a place *fantasised* as being rightful and proper to it (Said, 2003; Yerushalmi, 1991).\(^{(13)}\)

If melancholy is conceived as an exilic condition and thus points to the escapist effects produced, paradoxically, from static attachments, is mourning traceable in the liberal drama of assimilation? And if exile-as-melancholia is understood as both an attachment and escape to the “outer limit of . . . meaningful life” (Santner, 2001, page 13) can assimilation be conceived as its ‘liberal’ cure? Or, to formulate the question in the terms given by a Freudian reading of Berlin: Might assimilation signify a gradual ‘coming to terms’ with spaces and states that are no longer? Might it involve a break in the fantasmatic identification with a lost object and, therapeutically, an accession to what this sacrifice might cost? The question, in short, becomes whether an assimilated subjectivity can be defined in terms of Berlin’s model of liberal pluralism—embodying a history of loosened attachments, returning from the rigidity of ‘monist’ commitments to a politics of everyday displacements and the enlivened conflicts that sustain it. For at issue here, to be clear, is not any idea of an assimilative territory as ready host or impassive ground in which all connections to a lost home are disavowed or, indeed, in which adaptation to a new identity means the dissolution of a previous one. On the contrary: here the assimilated subject, always joined to a past, might nevertheless not be subsumed by it; here too, division and self-difference are what accounts for the capacity—and struggle—to assimilate. Indeed, it is precisely here that we might recall the particularity of Berlin’s pluralism, defining it not only as a politics that is riven from the start but one in which the rift is, itself, generative.

In “The ego and the id”, Freud (2001d) reevaluates his earlier account of bereavement to argue for a theory of mourning as a predicament, as an active problematic beyond the stasis of melancholia. Conceived properly as a *labour* rather than a relinquishment, what mourning now entails is not a conclusive grief process but an interminable one, affirming less a liberation from loss than—arduously, enduringly, functionally—the subject’s ambivalence to it. In this, I suggest, mourning finds its analogy in the work of assimilation: that is, the subject’s ability to live across movable boundaries, to ‘unseal’ the past and reenliven loss. It is the agility of traversing the affect-laden conditions of a disorientation and displacement no longer *preserved* as exilic. In short, in place of melancholia (fantasmatic, traumatised, abberated, out-of-place), mourning (laborious, riven, achieved in *and* beyond attachment) inaugurates a kind of credible practice of grief. Like an assimilated subjectivity, it involves no decisive severance or consolatory replacement in spatial and cultural bonds. As with Berlin’s liberalism, it demands only the resilience of living in a state of nonrevelation. It is life lived in the light of loss, and within the flow of its incompatibilities and pluralities. Or, better yet, we might adapt Steinberg’s formulation and say that assimilation is not the opposite of exile but, “exile *with a difference*” (2007, page 56, emphasis added). The qualifying phrase is of course Freudian, corresponding to the clinical practice of ‘working-through’; that is, the managed or staged expression of the pathological symptom, its bringing to representation or its reiteration ‘with a difference’ as a way of breaking the destructive cycle of its pure, compulsive repetition (Freud, 2001e). Indeed, if the clinical process seeks to avow trauma but cast its symptoms in a *different form*, then assimilation as exile ‘with a difference’ attests to an implicit therapeutic dimension: working through the bereavement of one homeland without rebinding the self to another, acknowledging a kind of dual citizenship in a world of internal displacement and division—in short, opening up to a life and space of unending mourning.

\(^{(13)}\) For Freud’s account of the symbolic politics of foreignness and doubling developed in *Moses and Monothelism* and the complex ways that this counterhistory of Moses’s Egyptian provenance links to his own relationship to Judaism and, relatedly, to his own exile biography, see, amongst many others, Yerushalmi (1991) and Said (2003).
St Petersburg/Oxford—redux

With exile-as-melancholy and mourning-as-assimilation understood as alternative responses to being out-of-place, Akhmatova’s Leningrad apartment and Berlin’s Oxford common room no longer stand as two discrete sites, separated as much by personal biography and historical trajectory as by geographic distance. Rather, as I have suggested, to put Leningrad and Oxford into relation is to find the basis of a political philosophy, and its therapeutic task, that seeks to release the subject from passionate attachment and posit it as both remnant and witness of such loss; installing a differential ‘otherness’ both within the self and in its mobile relation to other selves. In this sense, what Berlin’s liberalism entails is not just the clash between ultimate claims and mutually exclusive values. At once epistemic and existential, it involves that internalisation of loss which properly rids conflict of its violence and reinvigorates dividedness as the basis of living irresolvably—that is, plurally, incompatibly—with others. Indeed, if for Freud, the dismantling of fantasmatic bonds is the precondition of a functional subjectivity, then such an ‘unbinding’ is not unlike the liberal, and liberalising, logic of assimilation. At issue in both is not just the subject’s escape from one world—or, psychoanalytically, from the feeling of oceanic Oneness with the world—and its reabsorption elsewhere. It is the experience of the foreigner learning to live with the loss of being foreign. Or rather, if Berlin’s pluralism can be seen to answer Akhmatova’s lament, then assimilation is the name of this alleviation, converting a fixation to place into a manageable displacement, countering a ‘too muchness’ of geography with a political philosophy that always doubts which term to call ‘home’.

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