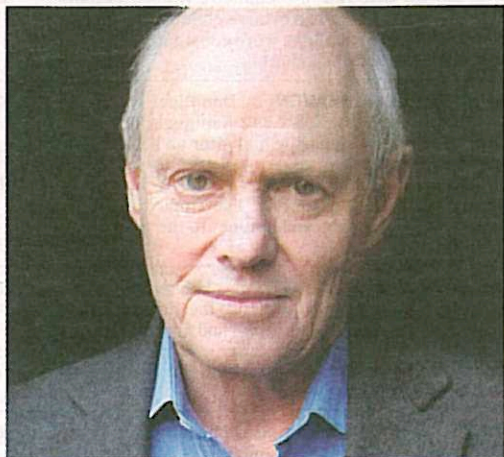


# Louder Than Words

*A novel explores the real link between a man of thought and a man of action.*



Jamie Turner

## THE SONG BEFORE IT IS SUNG

By Justin Cartwright.  
276 pp. Bloomsbury. \$24.95.

By JASCHA HOFFMAN

**I**N July 1944, a member of the German resistance slipped a briefcase of explosives under Hitler's table as part of a conspiracy to take down the Third Reich. The bomb went off, but someone had unwittingly edged the briefcase aside and Hitler of course survived. The conspirators were arrested, their failure confirming Hitler's belief that he had been chosen to make history. Among those rounded up was the German lawyer and aristocrat Adam von Trott, who as a Rhodes Scholar in prewar Oxford had been a friend of the British philosopher Isaiah Berlin.

Their troubled friendship is the basis for Justin Cartwright's ninth novel, a meditation on loyalty and fate that spans the 20th century. In his reimagining, the young German aristocrat, here named Axel von Gottberg, arrives in Oxford believing that history has chosen him to save his country from the Nazis. The Berlin character, named Elya Mendel, is wary of his friend's ambitions. We learn how a rift opened between them through the present-day perspective of Conrad Senior, a former student of Mendel's whose ob-

sessive efforts to write a book about the friendship drive his wife from the house and bring him to the verge of an early midlife crisis.

The novel gets its momentum from a rapid alternation between the present and the past: as Conrad's marriage unravels, he learns how the Oxford friendship soured in the years leading up to World War II. Conrad travels to Jerusalem to see the hotel where Mendel first slept with a woman he later lost to his German friend, but soon learns that the real breach was over politics. In 1934, von Gottberg claimed in a letter to a British newspaper that Jews were receiving equal treatment in the Hamburg courts, and Mendel was furious. On the eve of war von Gottberg returned to Oxford arguing that Britain should negotiate with Hitler — "There is another Germany, Elya ... a decent, a noble Germany" — and Mendel concluded that his friend was dangerously deluded.

Conrad, who knows that these statements may have been a calculated part of von Gottberg's plan for a coup, can't help feeling that Mendel's judgment was too severe. He imagines their last meeting in Oxford: "I have had to make compromises ... but I am not confused," the young conspirator says. Later, over dinner, Mendel quotes Turgenev, saying that while he is fascinated by radicals he could never be one: "I have no capacity for action. All I can do is talk." But this is not strictly true. Mendel, like Isaiah Berlin, goes on to work closely with British and American intelligence during the war. In the end, Mendel's skepticism about his German friend may have contributed to the conspirators' failure to get Allied support.

Cartwright's title refers to a question posed by the Russian philosopher Alexander Herzen, Berlin's favorite thinker: "Where is the song before it is sung?" The answer, Berlin wrote, was nowhere: people are free to make their own choices and history unfolds without a plan. It speaks to Cartwright's skill that even though it is clear from the beginning that our German aristocrat will be hanged when the plot fails, we still hope he might by some miracle survive. After Conrad finally uncovers gruesome proof of the execution in the form of a reel of film shot by a Jewish cameraman, he is paralyzed with horror, the death "inhabiting not just his mind, but his skin and his clothes." As he slips back into his old routine at Oxford and writes his book, however, Conrad comes to accept, as readers also must, that there will be no answers from the dead. □

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