

ISAIAH BERLIN (1909-1997)

Obituary for St. Antony's College, Oxford

'Ring Isaiah', my moral tutor said to me one evening in the fall of 1961, in a pub across from Queen's, shortly after I had arrived in Oxford to begin a B. Phil. - as the degree was then known - in Politics. I had just finished explaining to him what my interests were - roughly Political Theory - after he had informed me that his function had nothing to do with my moral well-being - a relief that, even at my then tender age - but that he had been merely assigned by Queen's to direct its handful of graduate students in Politics to the appropriate tutors outside the College. 'Ring Isaiah?', I retorted in astonishment. 'You mean Sir Isaiah Berlin?'. 'Yes', he said, 'here is his number at home, give him a ring tomorrow - after all it's not as if you had to call God - fix a meeting and tell him what you propose to do in the next two years'.

It took me three days to work up the courage to make that call and even then I hoped God would not be in; but my heart sank and my knees trembled in a public telephone booth in the High Street when the voice at the other end replied 'Yes, this is Isaiah Berlin' to my request to speak to 'Professor Sir Isaiah Berlin' - I had no idea what the proper form of address should be. I managed to introduce myself and to state the purpose of my call; this aroused the response 'Yes, why not, why not?', which did not sound entirely enthusiastic, though of course at the time I could hardly know that this was one of Berlin's characteristic speech forms. 'Come and see me tomorrow at four in my rooms in All Souls and we shall see', God said and that was that.

If I recall these events of nearly four decades ago in such precise detail it is because what ensued was so memorably excruciating and traumatic a saga. Needless to say, I did not sleep that night as I tried desperately to at least double my IQ within less than 24 hours in preparation for what would surely be my premature intellectual defrocking. But when I arrived precisely at four at All Souls and knocked on the green door above which his name appeared, my spirits rose and I let out an enormous sigh of relief - there was no reply! I decided I would wait 15 minutes and then run off before my luck ran out. But run out it did, for a minute or two before my planned escape a man wearing a very dark suit, carrying a black coat in one hand and a black umbrella in the other, arrived: he apologised for being late and for the fact that, since our telephone conversation the day before, it had transpired that he must go off to Paris forthwith and could we possibly have our little chat while walking to the train station as he must catch such and such a train to London in order to catch such and such a flight to Paris. Even in those days, the route from All Souls to the station was a nightmare of vehicles and noise, made all the more horrific by my sudden realisation that I could not quite make out Berlin's speech nor keep up with the rapidity of its delivery. He did most of the talking and I did most of the nodding as if I understood what was being said and as we arrived at the station I heard only his parting words: 'So do write that essay on Hobbes and leave it for me at All Souls.' And then he was gone.

An essay on Hobbes? On Hobbes in general? Or on some aspect of Hobbes? And of what length? And when was I expected to hand it in? Obviously I had missed - or nodded unknowingly at -

all these not entirely inconsequential details. In the event, as I recall anxiously even today, I took two weeks to produce a twenty-page essay - the work of my life - which would amount to nothing less than the final, albeit succinct, word on the entire work and thought of one Thomas Hobbes! Three days after depositing it at the lodge in All Souls, I received a hand-written note, signed Isaiah Berlin: 'Come and see me on... I hope this is convenient.'

I must have passed some kind of test, though, to tell the truth, I doubt whether the essay I had poured my life into was more than merely adequate: when we next met, Berlin made scant reference to it - something to the effect 'It will do' - and proceeded, first, to suggest what subjects I might do for my B. Phil.; and then to question me about my life which in the next two hours turned out to be far more interesting than I had ever noticed since the most commonplace detail of it sent him off into one of those famous free associations which left the listener feeling considerably more important than was in fact warranted. But at the end of this conversation the awe and anxiety which had first attacked me in that pub across from Queen's were completely gone, replaced by the sheer joy of being in the company of the most fascinating conversationalist I would ever encounter. Already then I had come to realise that Isaiah Berlin was the most approachable of human beings and, yes, the least pretentious or judgmental.

The reaction to the death of Isaiah Berlin has been astonishing; it is difficult to recall when was the last time that the death of an academic or intellectual engendered such an enormous outpouring of tributes and testimonials; perhaps when Jean-Paul Sartre died, but then the French - like the Germans - treat their 'great minds' with ominous seriousness, whereas the British - in a manner far more healthy - have never been known to overestimate the importance of 'men of ideas'. The scope of the reaction is thus all the more astonishing. I do not know how to explain this phenomenon, though two factors come to mind: one is that Berlin throughout his life wrote and spoke about the most complex dilemmas of modern history but in a manner that was readily recognisable and meaningful to anyone who had been touched by the tragic tribulations of our century and had intuitively grasped that these dilemmas were fundamentally irresolvable - for the ubiquitous theme of Berlin's work was that we must always choose between values or goals and that each choice entailed a price. The other factor which I think endeared Berlin to a wide audience is not unrelated to the first: he was perhaps the last of the great academics belonging to an intellectual, rather than a professional, era and milieu: since the Second World War our universities and scholars have become ever more expert, the latter writing for specialised journals read by a handful of colleagues but incomprehensible and mystifying to the rest, let alone to a general audience. The perhaps unavoidable professionalisation of our intellectual lives has by now embraced the humanities and the social sciences in a manner no different than had been the case much longer in the natural sciences. Although Berlin eschewed all simplifications - these, after all, were for him the source of all the century's false panaceas - he avoided academic jargon, obfuscation and obscurity. No one who has ever read a Berlin essay - a literary form of which he was without doubt the last great practitioner - could fail to be carried away by the style and sweep of the man and by the felicities of his language and expressive powers: whether the subject was an idea or a thinker, the wealth of detail never obscured the final portrait, and the former was never sacrificed for the sake of the latter.

He had an insatiable interest in people, which I think explains his well-known incapacity to turn down the prospect of an hour or two of conversation in the company of the countless visitors, some great and some somewhat less so, who sought him out. Inevitably, he also had to suffer fools but even that he seemed to do gladly. He liked eccentrics and took much pleasure in listening to mad and wild schemes or ideas. He was not himself particularly introspective - there was not a whit of *angst* in him - but he had inexhaustible empathy for the inner trials and tribulations of others, even when these were far removed from his own experience, a characteristic often noted about his writings on thinkers whose ideas he wholly rejected. Of course, in the course of his life he had also met virtually every great figure of the century, from Freud to Einstein to Wittgenstein, and not a few political leaders. He spoke of them for the most part with admiration but seldom with much deference; rather he revelled in stories about them and their eccentricities and remembered in detail not only what they said but how they dressed and behaved. (Two or three years ago, over lunch at All Souls, I heard him give a hilarious imitation of Einstein's Germanised English - which reminded me of an earlier account, no less uproarious, of his one meeting of many years ago with Henry Kissinger.) This fascination with the human face of human beings, great and small, was not only part and parcel of his refusal to be taken in by mystifications, whether of persons or the 'forces of history', but also of his love of diversity and difference (long before this latter term had assumed its 'deconstructionist' cult status). People were indeed at the centre of his life and concerns and he did not much like the kind of social theories in which they somehow disappeared. This, I think, explains why he took so little interest in sociology or political *science* as such; when, many years ago while he was supervising my D. Phil. thesis, I complained to him that there was no one at Oxford who taught Max Weber, he looked at me disconcertingly, as if to say, 'Why should there be?'

Oxford, of course, was his home for most of his life and he and Oxford will forever remain inextricably linked. All Souls, Wolfson, Headington House - Colleges and private residence which, when one recollects meetings with him, immediately give one a palpable sense of place and time. He endowed them with his ebullient personality and intellectual excitement as they in turn endowed him with their continuity of setting and frameworks of academic activity. But I also associate him, as he associated himself, with two other locations.

He often spoke with the greatest fondness for St. Antony's. When he undertook the creation of Wolfson College, St. Antony's was a model to be emulated, in terms of its spirit of openness, tolerance and international orientation. He admired its lack of stuffiness, the intense interaction it had always encouraged between fellows and students, its readiness to open its doors to visitors and guests from non-academic walks of life. When, after completing my B. Phil. at Queen's, I was accepted by St. Antony's to pursue the D. Phil., he was as overjoyed as I was. (When I told him I had also been turned down by another Oxford graduate college, he was no less overjoyed - though in this case considerably more so than my injured ego at the time; I do not know it for a fact, but I suspect he had something to do with both decisions.) He was very attached to a great number of the people associated with St. Antony's in both its early and later days: Bill Deakin, James Joll, Raymond Carr, to name just a few. I often saw him engaged in animated Russian conversation with George Katkov about some obscure

literary or political tract or figure from nineteenth-century Russia. He had a very deep affection, matched only by admiration, for Max Hayward, whose premature death was a great blow to him. He visited the College whenever he could; I think I last saw him there in 1993 on the occasion of the festivities celebrating Bill Deakin's 80th birthday ('You are a mere baby, in comparison with me' I heard him remark to Bill from the summit of his four extra years.) On a previous occasion, in the mid-1980's, when he could not attend an Antonians' Day dinner but had heard that Harold Macmillan had held forth, he demanded that I recount to him every detail of that brilliant and hilarious performance.

The other, in this case non-Oxford, location which I will also always associate him with is Jerusalem. There was hardly a year during which he did not visit here at least once, usually with Aline who took the same pleasure in the city's geographical and human munificence, beauty and history, intertwined though these continued to be with centuries of ordeals. Here too he gave of himself freely - the same mind-boggling generosity of time and patience devoted to the endless queue of Israelis from all walks of life who descended upon him for one reason or another. In 1979, when he received the Jerusalem Prize - awarded for literary contributions to liberty - he gave an intensely moving account of the 'three traditions' that had shaped him: his life-long interest in ideas, he said, derived from his Russian origins; his reverence for and devotion to liberty, civility and institutions, from his life in England and the British empirical tradition; and his sense of community and belonging, to his Jewish roots and upbringing. Isaiah embraced naturally and unambiguously what to others might appear to be a dissonant combination of irreconcilable identities.

But variety made for no dissonance in his life or thought or person. He had an acute sense of the tragedies wrought in our times by grand systems of thought dedicated to cultural and political uniformity on the perverse assumption that diversity was the source of alienation and irremediable discord. Since he also had a very robust sense of fun and humour - in a way it was his most endearing quality - he remained deeply imbedded in the richness of human reality. But his sensibility to this reality was also imaginative and artistic. Thus nothing gave so much pleasure as to hear him speak about music or watch him hum a tune from Rossini. In such moments he was as happy and self-sufficient as a child discovering for the first time the infinite wonders of the world. Having come to know him, I feel a fool to have been so much in awe of him before that first meeting in Oxford. But I am grateful that subsequently I became one of the fools whom he suffered, perhaps even gladly.

Baruch Knei-Paz

Jerusalem, July 1998