



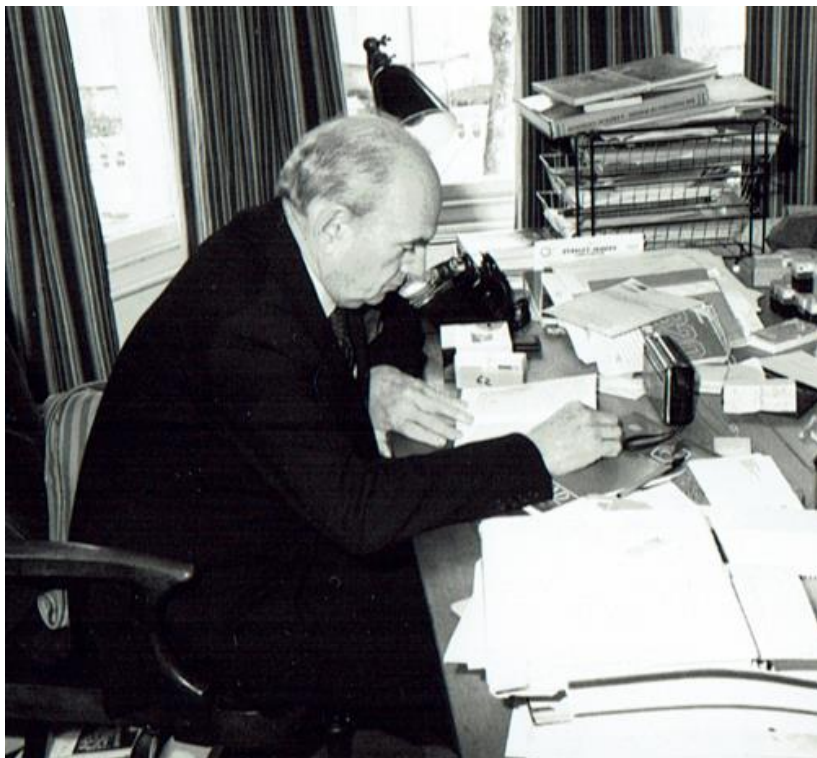
## **Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Richard Wollheim**

Isaiah Berlin Online aims to post, in the fullness of time, PDFs of all Berlin's uncollected and unpublished work, including lectures, interviews and broadcasts, so that it is conveniently readable and searchable online. The present PDF is part of this series.

The PDF is posted by the Isaiah Berlin Legacy Fellow at Wolfson College, Oxford, with the support of the Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust

All enquiries, including those concerning rights, should be directed to the Legacy Fellow at [berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk](mailto:berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk)

## Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Richard Wollheim



*Richard Wollheim at his desk in London*

*Photo: Rupert Wollheim*

The recordings transcribed here are held by the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust, and may be listened to via the following links:

18 June 1990 (beginning): **original** | **treble enhanced**

18 June 1990 (end) and 2 July 1990: **original** | **treble enhanced**

2 May 1991: **original** | **treble enhanced this**

Another copy of the recordings is part of the Richard Wollheim Interviews collection at the British Library (ref. C1021). The full collection can be consulted at the British Library. Interviewees include a range of influential

twentieth-century philosophers, artists and writers. The recordings were originally made for teaching purposes.

Copyright in the recordings is held jointly by the Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust and the British Library Board

Transcript by Esther Johnson and Henry Hardy © The Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust and Henry Hardy 2024

**First posted in Isaiah Berlin Online and the Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library**

**16 November 2024**

**Last revised 26 November 2024**

Conversation 1. 18 June 1990

*Side A*

RW Isaiah, you were born in 1909 and you came to England in 1920, and you went up to Oxford in 1928. Would you like to say something about how Oxford struck you when you arrived there from school?

IB Oh well, I'd never been – I'd never lived alone before in my life, of course. I lived with my parents, and so this was a kind of liberation which I very much enjoyed, and I met people somewhat unlike the people I was at school with. St Paul's was a somewhat cosmopolitan school, socially not very grand, but intelligent, and we were – the top form, in a which I was, had boys in it who knew all about T. S. Eliot, Joyce, Ezra Pound and so on, unlike, I think, most other English schools of that period. We went to concerts, exhibitions, the opera, and Old Paulines in Oxford, as they were called, were somewhat knowing and rather exhausted, and a good many of them didn't do any more work at all because they'd been rather driven at school. The people I met came from middling English public schools, were quite different socially from anyone

I'd been with before, but I got on perfectly well with them; and the sheer change of society had an exhilarating effect on me. But in the end I gravitated, as I suppose I was bound to do, back to literary characters and aesthetes and so on. So for one year I lived a rather enjoyable life among a lot of average Rugbeians, Wykehamists, Marlburians etc., and that was a completely different form of life from any I had known before; and, surprisingly enough, suited me quite well.

Corpus was a small College and everybody had to do everything. It was about eighty or ninety strong and all the undergraduates were supposed to take part in all games. I took part in none of them; nevertheless I was not persecuted or disapproved of and my relations were perfectly happy while I was there. I used to think of Oxford Colleges rather like countries in character. Christ Church was a kind of Paris, France – smart, important, full of brilliant and dangerous people, snobbish but setting the fashion. Balliol was like the United States – a very mixed population from everywhere, but intellectually highly enterprising. New College was like England, stolid, stodgy, quite comfortable, no possibility of revolution. Corpus, my College, was rather like Denmark – good passport, respectable country, small, not terribly important but thoroughly decent and respected. That's what it was like, living on the edges of Christ Church of which on the whole we were all rather frightened.

The general atmosphere in Oxford, if you'd like me to go on about that – the beautiful city period was over; I mean the period when people like Harold Acton, Cyril Connolly, Betjeman, Brian Howard had gone. There were a great many aesthetes still, but it was a silver age, they weren't as gifted or as enterprising or as violent as they had been before. But the thing went on: there was Louis MacNeice; there was Stephen Spender. The general tone – although this is not true of Louis MacNeice in the least – was homosexual; that is to say, I used to be astonished by the fact that perfectly respectable boys, say prefects from Marlborough who

were perfectly heterosexual, in order to get into what might be called the upper section of highbrow Oxford society, had to pretend to have homosexual tendencies and in the end perhaps became it, as was liable to happen. But I never liked them very much, I used to feel uncomfortable among them. But still I was I suppose on the edges of that world because I was ultimately asked to be the editor of a magazine called *Oxford Outlook*, which had been edited by Auden (who had gone by the time I came up), then by Arthur Calder-Marshall, who was at school with me (perhaps that is why it was given to me), who became a novelist in later years, who, as far as I know, is still amongst the living.

The aesthetes of the time I can describe to you. I remember meeting a young man whose name I asked. He said, 'My name is François Capel.' His name in fact was Frank Curtis; he was the son of a Colonel in Malta. I said to him, 'What college are you at?' He said, 'My dear, I simply can't remember.' That was the tone. It was amusing, it was outré, but I didn't really like it very very much, I must admit; I thought in the end it was affected and silly. But I did make friends with a very definite aesthete: that was my friend Bernard Spencer, who was at college with me; he was a minor British poet of some merit to whom I remained attached all my life.

RW Who taught me at school.

IB I didn't know that – you went to Westminster did you? He was an awfully nice man. He was heterosexual entirely, but his ambience was not. But still he was the kind of man who imported *transition* from Paris, which was *the* highbrow periodical, spelled with a little 't',<sup>1</sup> and who drew slightly obscene drawings on lampshades in his room. But he was persecuted as an aesthete even

<sup>1</sup> The journal *Transition*, which began life in Paris in 1927, styled itself without an initial capital on its cover.

at the gentle college of Corpus. I remember the most terrible thing I ever saw was one fine morning I was woken up and I was told something amusing was going to happen next door. I didn't know what 'next door' meant but I went; it was Bernard Spencer's bedroom, and he was asleep, and the young men surrounded him, undergraduates, and woke him, and then cut off one of his whiskers. It was like an assassination: his fright on being woken up was quite genuine. I thought it was the most horrible thing I'd ever witnessed; it was exactly like someone being murdered in his bed. But he was very brave, he never shaved off the other whisker, he kept it on until the first one grew, and for that I greatly respected him.

RW Now Stephen: when did you meet Stephen?

IB About – towards the end of my – probably towards the end of my first year, or perhaps the beginning of my second year, about 1929, I should say. I can tell you who introduced us: Bernard Spencer, I would guess. Louis MacNeice I met about the same time but he was very cold to me and we never made friends; I never really liked him though I admired his poetry. There was a periodical which they all published; it was called *Sir Galahad*, a symbol of purity. I remember MacNeice's poem: he signed his name John Bogus Rosifer. 'There was an old woman who lived in a shoe; she did her bit.'<sup>2</sup> That was the kind of verse; it was I think based on the Sitwells, Edith Sitwell more particularly, not on Eliot at all at that time. I met Stephen, I suppose with my friend Spencer; we made friends, and I then visited him in his house in Hampstead, where also my parents lived. We went for a walk on Hampstead Heath; it

<sup>2</sup> IB misremembers. The poem published under that pseudonym was 'Paradise Lost'. The poem he refers to is 'Beginning of a Comic-Delirious Drama', from MacNeice's collection *Blind Fireworks* (London, 1929), and contains the line 'There was an old woman and she didn't know what to do' (3 times); its last line is '“That old woman is doing her bit.”'

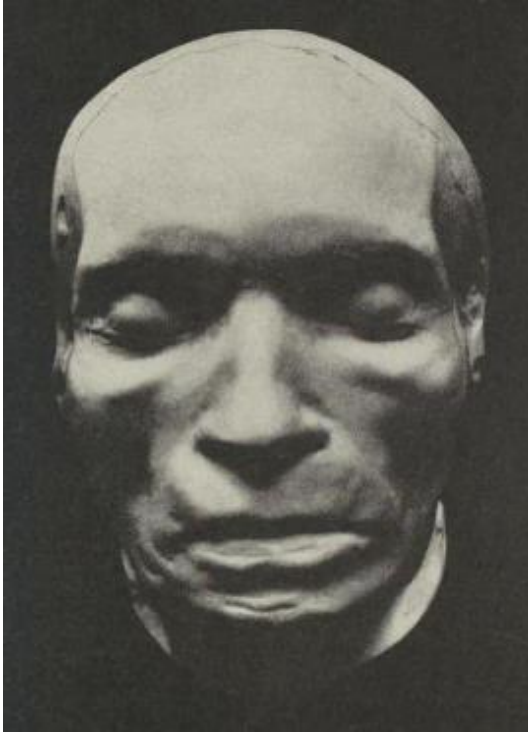
was winter, with a good deal of ice on the Heath, and Stephen said, speaking slowly, ‘This ice is crunching rather like the singing of birds.’ I was very impressed. But I liked him very much from the beginning. He’s now remained a great friend of mine from then on: extremely – very very nice man, and gifted as a man of letters.

RW So after Stephen left Oxford you – how did you go on seeing him?

IB Well of course I must tell you, Stephen didn’t – apropos of nothing – he didn’t get a degree of course, because I think he failed in his German unseen, shortly after which of course he translated Rilke, and I dare say George, but I think Rilke particularly. But the point was that he gave – there was a wonderful scene before he was leaving; he gave away all his books and all kinds of properties in a very anarchist sort of way, generous giving away. Crossman, I remember, removed a large portion of these – I don’t know what happened. He gave me one of his books and inscribed in it, ‘To Isaiah Berlin, this book made valuable by the author.’ It was one of his own books; he meant by the signature of the author I think. Then I saw Stephen afterwards in – when he lived in Hampstead in his parent’s house and we saw each other a good deal; we went for walks, we took meals together, we became intimate friends really. One of his poems, I remember, was on Beethoven’s death mask;<sup>3</sup> that was due to a book I’d given him of death masks,<sup>4</sup> which he was deeply impressed by. I asked him to review it because I was at the *Oxford Outlook*. He didn’t do that but he wrote a beautiful poem.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Beethoven’s Death Mask’, 1930.

<sup>4</sup> Ernst Benckard, *Undying Faces: A Collection of Death Masks*, trans. from the German by Margaret M. Green (London, 1929). IB reviewed it in *Oxford Outlook* 10 no. 53 (November 1930), 628–30, referring to ‘Beethoven’s cast, perhaps the most famous of all masks, and certainly the most indescribable. At any rate, it has never been done in prose.’



*One of two photographs by H. Rose of Beethoven's death mask in Ernst Benckard's Dying Faces (plate 49)*

RW Now you went to All Souls in what year?

IB 1932. I was elected with two other people – one of triplets. One is Lord Wilberforce, a very eminent and perhaps the most eminent of living British judges; the other was Patrick Riley, who went to the Foreign Office and was Ambassador in various places like Moscow and Paris.



RW And what was the character of All Souls when you arrived there?

IB It was curious. It was divided into young men and old men; there was a predominance of the young, because there were two fellows elected, as a rule, every year, and they stayed for at least five years, whereas people who were married tended to drop off. The system was that you were kept in All Souls so long as you were a bachelor, or even a widower perhaps, but had to leave after a time if you were not academic. The academics remained. They had to be re-examined every five years about fitness to remain, but they could remain indefinitely, and they could be married. But the people who went into the wide world tended to drop off after marriage, and that meant that there was a tremendous numerical predominance of the young. The old men of my time – when I say ‘old’, I have to explain to you that I never in my life before met anybody of eighty: that struck me as a completely unreal age; ‘the old’ meant people in their early sixties – some of them were certainly important politically, and by simply listening to them talk in the Common Room – there was a great deal of political talk in All Souls then, as there is not now – one learnt how England was governed; one was brought in touch with the governing class.

Let me explain to you the kind of people I mean. There was a, had been a fellow and had been made a fellow again; there was Geoffrey Dawson, the editor of *The Times*; there was Lionel Curtis, who was a famous *éminence grise* who founded Chatham House and was involved in all kinds of political arrangements, with the *Round Table*, which was the paper of the so-called liberal imperialists – he was Lothian’s greatest friend – there was Bob Brand, who was a banker. Most of these people had been with Milner in South Africa. There was Dougal Malcolm, who I think succeeded Rhodes as

head of the South Africa Company;<sup>5</sup> there was Amery; there was Steel-Maitland, a rather forgotten cabinet minister of the early 1930s<sup>6</sup> who died young.

Let me see. These people brought guests with them at weekends; they lived in London, of course, and were engaged in all kinds of activities, but they used to bring one or two guests with them at weekends who were, like themselves, involved in politics, and when these people talked to each other, one suddenly became aware at first hand the kind of people they were and the kind of way England was governed in those days. It was absolutely unique in that respect. Rowse, my colleague Rowse, wrote a book on *All Souls* and appeasement, and while it's quite true that some of these people, the majority of those I have mentioned, were appeasers at the time [?] during Munich, it isn't true that appeasement was cooked up loud in *All Souls*. The former Bursar of *All Souls* made a very elaborate study of who was present at what weekends; the number of these people present at one and the same time wasn't that great, so that it isn't true that deep plots were laid in secret rooms in *All Souls*, although the bulk of them were appeasers. So indeed was Donald Somervell, who was, I think, either Solicitor or Attorney General<sup>7</sup> in Baldwin's government; and he was a deeply involved political personality of considerable charm. But it was an extraordinary society to belong to. The younger fellows were on the whole on the other side, left of centre, with exceptions: Quintin Hogg was always a conservative; so, I think, was Wilberforce really.

RW And the old people were almost universally on the right, or were there – do you get the sense of disagreement that people had political discussions, political disagreements?

<sup>5</sup> Rhodes died in 1902; Malcolm became President of the British South Africa Company in 1937.

<sup>6</sup> 1924–9.

<sup>7</sup> Both, successively.

IB Yes, but not very sharp ones. The thing which fascinated me – before I answer this question – is that they talked terribly freely, they talked on the assumption that the stories would never get out of school, and they were right. There was Christopher Hill, elected two years after me, and he was a Communist; I don't think he, as far as I know, ever repeated – at least it never appeared in public, in the press – repeated any of the extraordinary things which these people said, which were of some political interest. No, the [RW Such as what? What kind of things?] Well, I'll give you an example. [RW Yes] I forgot to add Sir John Simon, who was the heart of appeasement, and a highly conservative figure by that time, however he may have begun. He said to us in 1936 – we, the young Fauves, the young men, that is to say people like Goronwy Rees, John Austin – I'm trying to think who they were – Christopher Hill, myself, somebody called Ian Bowen, Con O'Neill, all of them were there then, surrounded him and asked him why he had not imposed oil sanctions on Italy during the Abyssinian war – must have been round 1936. He said, 'You young men want me to impose oil sanctions. Supposing I do? What will happen then? Mussolini will fall, and then what? Communism?' That never got out. Years later I think I repeated it to the great Italian [anti-]Fascist Salvemini, but by that time that was old history and I've never seen it anywhere else; that's the kind of thing I mean.

Let me give you another example. In 1938, no, perhaps even 1939 – Lord Halifax was Foreign Secretary. He used to come quite often and he talked very freely and this was wonderful, that was a very English thing; amongst fellows of All Souls where he had memories of his youth and where he found congenial people and where the people could rest from their labours and the atmosphere was very unstiff, they talked very freely. Well, in the middle of 1939 we said to him, 'If you really want an agreement with the Soviet Union, why didn't you go to Moscow yourself? Why did you send an official, however respectable, called William Strang?' – who as you know, as everyone knows, went to Moscow and was probably

there when the Russo–German pact was made, Soviet–German pact. He said, ‘I’ll tell you. The reason is simple. If the Russians have to go to the help of the Czechs,’ which was the issue then, ‘they would have to march through intermediate countries. The Poles would never let them through, and they wouldn’t take them on. They might have to go through Romania; that wouldn’t work either, because I know from the Romanian Ambassador that that would never be allowed, they’d fight rather than let them. So they would march through the weaker countries like Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, that sort of thing. Well, we’re under treaty to these countries, we guarantee their independence, their frontiers: if that happened and the Russians violated these countries, I don’t think I could remain as Foreign Secretary.’ That was fascinating, but in that case why send Strang if he really didn’t want, couldn’t bear the thought of a proper agreement being made? That was never solved.

I merely give you these stories, examples of complete candour on the part of these people. That’s what taught one about how English politics were conducted. You asked before whether there was any opposition. Yes, there was. Someone like Salter, for example, who was a League of Nations official, who was a liberal by conviction though he became extremely conservative later, did argue with these people in the middle 1930s. So did Hubert Henderson, who had been editor of *The Nation*, and who was certainly liberal by conviction. He did not accept these views and from time to time argued – never very acrimonious but quite sharp – did occur and was quite interesting, and the junior fellows argued like mad. I ought to add that the story of A. L. Rowse, who was in those days a socialist – I think he remained one until fairly late in the 1930s, and he certainly took on the conservatives and argued with great passion and vigour – I remember on Sunday mornings, Denis Rickett, who was not exactly a conservative but was certainly highly moderate in his views, used to argue political themes, and Rowse used to attack him, and this went on and on and on; and I remember writing to my friend Adam von Trott, a German who

was later executed for taking part in the 1944 plot against Hitler – writing him a letter which I think was reproduced in Sykes’s biography of von Trott in which I said, ‘As I write, Rowse and Rickett are saying the same things for the fourteenth time, I think I really will have to leave the room if this goes on much longer.’<sup>8</sup> That’s only to indicate that arguments did occur. People like Douglas Jay, who was a stout member of the Labour Party, so were several others. I never was a socialist, although I certainly voted for the Labour Party in those days, simply out of distaste, mainly for Chamberlain’s government and indeed to some degree for Baldwin’s government too. I belonged to something called the Pink Lunch, which was founded by G. D. H. Cole when he became a fellow of All Souls after the war, and liked it to a very surprising degree; and the members of that – that’s fairly typical of Oxford of the late 1930s, of the young progressives. The members of that were Frank Pakenham, Gordon Walker, Rowse, Richard Pares, Geoffrey Hudson, Roy Harrod, Christopher Hill, Stuart Hampshire, John Austin, the Roman historian Hugo Jones, and I should think about five or six others. We met once a week and listened to left-of-centre speakers both from home and abroad. I remember particularly Sidney Webb, Lord Passfield, came to address us. He informed us that ‘You young men’, he said, ‘think that one day, if you’re in power, you’ll be able to reform, change everything. That’s a pure illusion. Let me tell you, the people I know best are the civil service. They’re quite wonderful, they really do understand everything, and they don’t want a great deal of change, and they’re perfectly right.’ It was the most defeatist speech from this well-known socialist leader that anyone ever heard and was not

<sup>8</sup> ‘As I write the usual All Souls scene is going on. By the fire Rowse & Rees are discussing the prospects of politics in Germany. I am unable to listen, Rowse is again saying the same things. This conversation rotates in ever-recurrent cycles, 3 or 4 are over the fifth is beginning, the same thing is being said for the fifth time.’ Letter to Adam von Trott, 26 October 1933, F 62.

untypical of the older members of the Labour Party by that stage of history.

RW Meanwhile, Isaiah, you were a philosopher, you studied philosophy, you then taught philosophy. Now philosophy must have changed a very great deal under your very eyes from the time when you arrived in Oxford in 1928 to the end of the 1930s. How did these changes strike you, and what were the noticeable features in them?

IB You're quite right to ask me this, because although I gave the impression that I lived among politicians in All Souls, basically I was not interested in politics. Obviously I had attitudes and opinions, because nobody could help having them, but my life was not lived at a political level, and I was very remote from politics, really all my life; although I have strong opinions from time to time, I've never taken part in any political activity, too little perhaps, some may say. But I lived among philosophers.

Now who were the philosophers? First of all there were my contemporaries, young contemporaries: there was Freddie Ayer, who was an exact contemporary of mine; there was a man called Winston Barnes, who is still alive, who then taught in Oxford; there was Ryle and Price; there was Kneale; there was Austin. It's among them that my true life was lived, no doubt, and among other dons of the same kind. I was much more academic than anything else; neither politics nor London in those days played a part in my life. When I was an undergraduate I was taught by an admirable tutor called Frank Hardie in Corpus Christi College, where I was a scholar, and he made me read Hegelian philosophers like Bradley and Bosanquet and people who wrote about them. I couldn't understand a word of what these persons were saying, it was totally obscure to me. I did my best, I struggled. I could understand Descartes, I could understand Locke, I could understand Berkeley, I could even understand Kant; but Bosanquet, McTaggart, that was

beyond me in those days. It was not until I read G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* that I realised one could write English in a lucid style intended to be understood, as Keynes once said about Cambridge writers. That made a great deal of difference to me, and then I became an Oxford realist.

Oxford realists were Price, up to a point Ryle, Kneale, I think three or four other people. Freddie Ayer was a maverick, of course, among them. He had been converted to philosophy, as he told me, by reading Hume and by nothing else, and then went to Vienna at the end of 1932; there he imbibed the views of the Vienna Circle, who were disciples of Bertrand Russell, and came back and preached these doctrines at Oxford far and wide. He was extremely disapproved of by the older philosophers. There was Professor Joachim, who was a very honourable Hegelian; there was Mr H. W. B. Joseph, the most powerful philosophy tutor of his day, who was extremely intolerant of what he regarded as immoral, almost immoral, disgusting views of this kind; and there were others; there was Prichard, who was an extremely clever man but whose basic views were somewhat naive. He was clever in the sense that his power of reasoning and of deduction were extremely fine, and I think he influenced my hero Austin in that respect to some degree. When Freddie Ayer talked at the philosophical society, Prichard, who was professor of moral philosophy, couldn't bring himself to answer him directly, because he disapproved of him so violently. He would turn to someone like me and say, 'Tell him that what he says isn't right', and then produce the argument, turning his face away from this immoral figure who couldn't be spoken to in respectable society. But in the end Freddie Ayer's influence was very considerable, and penetrated these conservative circles in the end, and by the time we reached the second part of the 1930s, logical positivism hadn't got going in any wide sense, but had become a totally respectable position.

What happened then was that there were various circles of philosophers who would meet: there was a little group with Ryle

and Price and Kneale and Maclagan and other people of that kind who used to meet, eight or nine of them, in rooms of their own and talk to each other, because they were more comfortable than with their elders, whom Ryle used to refer to as the Rabbis. And then there was a little group in my rooms in All Souls which consisted of Austin, Freddie Ayer, Stuart Hampshire, a man called Macnabb, who wrote about Hume, and perhaps one or two others who used to come in occasionally; and we argued passionately about three or four issues which preoccupied us; and the real trouble was that if we could convince each other, that was enough in itself, we didn't feel we had to publish. Triumph was – we thought we were very – we thought we had discovered things for the first time, rather as Keynes reported about similar discussions in his youth in Cambridge; and this was a very inward-looking, in a way rather arrogant, little society which thought that if we could convince each other, that was the highest that anyone could hope for. But from it did emerge the so-called Oxford philosophy of post-war Oxford, which had its day and attracted a great many disciples from America and elsewhere to its side.

RW Now of course in the late 1940s, early 1950s, which is when I know more about Oxford philosophy, Austin was the great opponent of Freddie, and he lectured – his *Sense and Sensibilia* was designed to refute the major views of Freddie and phenomenism. Were the seeds of that already there in these early meetings?

IB Oh indeed, oh certainly. You see, Austin began, as many young philosophers in those days, as a kind of disciple of Freddie Ayer for a year or two; he really had great respect for him and shared his views, which were totally opposed to the views of his tutors in Balliol – Charles Morris, who was some sort of idealist, and Fulton, who didn't have any identifiable philosophical position at all; and certainly Lindsay, who loathed positivism with a bitter hatred, with an almost theological degree of odium. In the discussions in my



rooms on those evenings, Ayer and Austin became opponents at quite an early stage. Their views [?] ...

*Side B*

IB ... in a cool measured way, with a certain touch of dogmatism. Ayer's words flew like a missile with unstoppable force. Austin's words in answer were like an impenetrable obstacle, and stopped everything dead, but it was very exciting, and a great deal emerged for the listeners, although we didn't interrupt too much in those great duels, when both were young and both ambitious and both filled with the thought of putting forward original ideas. It was quite an exciting time intellectually, for me. If you want an example of Austin's character, let me give it to you. He used to go to the classes of Professor Prichard, whom he greatly admired, on some philosophical topic, I can't remember what it was. At a certain point his tutor, Charles Morris, who was teaching him as an undergraduate, who had himself been a pupil of Prichard, said to him something like, 'I'm terribly sorry to say all this but I've got a message for you; I hope you won't mind; it's rather difficult to convey, but you know what old Prichard is like. He says you ask him a great many questions during these classes. Quite right of course, so one should, that's what these classes are for, but he finds that you rather knock him off balance, he finds it difficult to connect his ideas, he finds it a bit disturbing. Do you mind very much, that's what he wants to know, if you don't go on going to his classes?' Austin listened to this quietly, made no answer at all, no comment of any kind, and continued going to Prichard's classes, and interrupting exactly as before.

RW This was when Austin was already a fellow of All Souls?

IB No, he was an undergraduate at Balliol – this is, I should think, about 1931 or 1932.

RW Of course there wasn't in those days the same urge to write philosophy as there has been since then, maybe more in American universities than in English universities, but still it exists nowadays. So there wasn't that, but nevertheless of course you did write a certain amount of philosophy, and perhaps you'd like to say something about that.

IB You're quite right, I didn't do much writing [?] because I was occupied with a task which wasn't my proper task at all, which was to write a book about Karl Marx, which occupied me in the 1930s. I can tell you how that happened,<sup>9</sup> and – there was a thing called

<sup>99</sup> The story that IB now tells is one of his favourites, and different versions appear elsewhere: see, e.g., F 67, CIB 11. None of his versions is accurate, as I discovered by consulting the surviving letters to and from H. A. L. Fisher, one of the series editors. As Joshua Cherniss puts it in a footnote in a draft of his 2009 Oxford DPhil thesis (dates of letters omitted here): 'Each account offers a different list of the others who were asked to write the biography before Berlin: these are variously identified as Harold Laski, Frank Pakenham, later Lord Longford, G. D. H. Cole, Richard Crossman and the Webbs. The real story, as told by the H. A. L. Fisher Papers in the Bodleian Library [in Oxford], is as follows. Fisher first invited Harold Laski to write the book; Laski declined. [Fisher] then discussed asking both A. L. Rowse, then a socialist, and Beatrice and Sidney Webb, with Gilbert Murray, the other editor of the Home University Library. The Webbs also declined, and Fisher considered asking Pakenham, then a conservative; [Sir Tresham] Lever, the publisher at Thornton Butterworth, preferred someone on the Left, and suggested Tawney, but Fisher had already asked Pakenham, who agreed. There is no record of Pakenham withdrawing, though he would later deny ever having seriously contemplated writing the book. Fisher then suggested Berlin to Murray and Lever as preferable to Rowse. Fisher then approached Berlin about writing the book.' When I mentioned these findings to Berlin, he was not terribly interested in abandoning the version(s) of the story he had become used to. H.H.

the Home University Library, I don't know if it still exists.<sup>10</sup> Mr Fisher, Warden of New College, who was one of the editors with Gilbert Murray of that, said it was intended for squash professionals, something they would understand, popularisation. He felt that something ought to be written about Karl Marx. He first offered it to Laski, who declined, having already written a little book on Communism for that series; he then offered it to Frank Pakenham, now Lord Longford, who also declined. He then offered it, I should think, to three or four other people, all of whom refused; and finally, in desperation, he came to me. I was then in my first year as a lecturer at New College and in All Souls, and I thought, well, Marxism, I know nothing about it. It's likely to be of more [?] importance in the future than not; it was clear that things were going in that direction both in England and in other countries, let alone the Soviet Union. If I don't write about Marx, I'll never read it, because I'd tried once or twice and it seemed to me fantastically boring; but if I'm forced to write about it, then I will read it, and I will know what this important movement is about. So, rather rashly, I accepted. I did write a book in the end. It was originally twice its length<sup>11</sup> and I had to shorten it, the most agonising process I'd ever been through of its kind: each page had to be shortened by half, page by page, one couldn't leave out chunks because it was [in] strict chronological order.

But I did write about philosophy proper: I must have written two or three papers of no great interest. I remember one episode. That was the joint meeting of the Aristotelian Society and the Mind Association which occurred in Bristol, I should think about 1937 or so; and Ryle and a lady called Miss MacDonald and I were the

<sup>10</sup> Renamed OPUS (Oxford Paperback University Series) in 1966, the series has now been discontinued, though some of the books first published in it are still in print.

<sup>11</sup> An exaggeration. The original contractual allowance was 50,000 words, increased in 1938 in response to Berlin's pleas to 65,000 words. Berlin wrote over 100,000 words, which he cut to the published length of 75,000 words.

symposia in a tripartite discussion of induction and probability. Well, I had read my paper, or no, I'd rather – one didn't read them – I summarised it and asked [?] objections. At a certain point the chairman,<sup>12</sup> who was G. E. Moore, whom I respected profoundly and still do – he got up and, after making a few slightly sharp remarks about the others, turned towards me and said, 'What Mr Berlin said was true, entirely true, absolutely true.' I must have looked very pleased. He then went on, 'But in saying that, what has he said? He has said absolutely nothing.' I was put in my place: that I've always remembered. He was quite right too, I should think.

Then I can tell you another story about philosophical papers. I wrote one in 1939 – I read two papers to the Moral Sciences Club in Cambridge. The first paper was on Pleasure. I went to dine at King's with my friend Braithwaite, who was a Fellow of King's, and in their combination room I sat next to Keynes, the first time I'd ever met him. He said, 'What are you doing here?' I said, 'I'm talking to the Moral Sciences Club.' 'What about?' It sounded idiotic: I said, 'Pleasure.' He said, 'Oh, we're drinking, I think, Madeira at the moment: you might just as well have been talking about that',<sup>13</sup> and turned to his other neighbour. I felt very snubbed, which indeed I was. He then turned back to me and was much nicer. He said, 'Do you ever read any Cambridge philosophers?' I said, 'Well of course Moore.' 'Yes, who else?' 'Whitehead.' 'Oh, you read Whitehead, do you? I thought he just brooded at you.' I met Keynes in later years and he was charming, and very brilliant and interesting, and I more or less made friends with him, but rather shortly before his death.

But then my second paper was about other minds, the famous problem: how can I tell that your headache is more violent than mine if I couldn't verify it by direct inspection of some kind, or

<sup>12</sup> The chairman was in fact Leonard J. Russell, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Birmingham 1925–50. The session was held on 10 July 1937.

<sup>13</sup> In other tellings of the story it is the soup that plays the role assigned here to Madeira.

deduction of a rigid kind from some act of direct empirical knowledge? Well, I went to the Moral Sciences Club, the date was about 12 June,<sup>14</sup> I should say, the day before the Germans – 1940 – the day before the Germans marched into Paris, I think, a day or two before. In Oxford you could tell that something not very good was happening to our country; even the philosophers who were fairly remote from life – Ryle, Price – had long faces and talked about what may happen. In Cambridge, at least among the people I was [with] that evening, there was not the faintest sense of anything happening outside Cambridge anywhere at all: it was the most remote, totally unworldly, society I'd ever been in.

The paper occurred in the rooms of Professor Broad; the entire Cambridge philosophy faculty appeared to be present; there was Broad, there was Moore, there was Ewing, there was Braithwaite, there was Wisdom, there were a good many graduate students; and so I read my paper. It lasted an hour. In Cambridge at the Moral Sciences Club there was no interval between the paper and discussion, so discussion began more or less at once. Wisdom, who I knew, said, 'Supposing there were a doll on the table, and inside the doll there was a brownie.' It was the way people talked in those days. Then a man who I hadn't noticed said, 'No, no, that is not the way to go about it at all. Let me, let me.' And I saw that the great Master Wittgenstein was present. I was terrified. He was very handsome, had a very handsome face with wonderful blue eyes which fixed on me; and he said, 'Now, we don't talk philosophy, you and I, do not let us talk philosophy, we will talk business, ordinary business. Now in ordinary circs' – circs – 'I say to you, "Imagine a clock. Have you imagined a clock?"' I said, 'Yes, I've imagined a clock.' 'Do you see its face?' 'Yes, I see its face.' 'Now, there is a minute hand and there is an hour hand, yes?' 'Yes.' 'The minute hand is nailed to the face, and so is the hour hand, yes?'

<sup>14</sup> 23 May 1940. The Germans occupied Paris on 14 June 1940.

‘Yes.’ ‘The whole clock face goes round, but the time remains the same, no?’ I said, ‘Yes.’ ‘That is solipsism.’

I was impressed; it was a rather brilliant metaphor; I thought it was rather well done. Afterwards he and I were the only people who spoke; nobody else dared interrupt. Moore sat there with his open mouth, everyone else listened in reverent silence, I did my best to reply to his questions, or enter into discussion with him; it was rather terrifying but extremely exciting, indeed thrilling. And then Braithwaite, who did not find it so, fell asleep. At this point Wittgenstein said, ‘Supposing I say, “Braithwaite has decaying teeth.”’ Braithwaite woke up and said, ‘Wittgenstein, you said something about me, what did you say?’ Wittgenstein said, ‘I said, “Supposing Braithwaite has decaying teeth.”’ You could see Braithwaite wondered if he ought to take this up or not, decided not to, and closed his eyes again. After which we talked for another half-hour; then he rose and said, ‘Thank you, very interesting discussion’, and shook hands with me. He was followed out of the room by acolytes. That was the end of the evening. Everyone surrounded me and said, ‘He’s [?] so polite, how interesting, he really must respect you, how wonderful’, etc. etc. I knew very well what Wittgenstein – the impression I made, somehow one knows these things. He thought that philosophically I was rather primitive, not well taught and not particularly bright. But morally I was OK; I didn’t try to show off, I didn’t try to win, I didn’t try to be brilliant, I didn’t try to be paradoxical, I was a humble seeker after truth, and that was wholly approved of. That is why his disciples, in later years, were quite polite to me, because I’d passed the moral test before the Master.

RW Now, one of the things which we’ve not talked about at all in the 1930s was an event which certainly, in my childhood – that was what it was – had an enormously significant part to play, and that was the Spanish Civil War. Would you like to say something about

how that impinged upon you, upon Oxford – whether it impinged upon Oxford more than the outbreak of the war finally did?

IB Yes, the Spanish Civil War. Oh, it had an enormous effect upon, I think, a great many people, in my world anyhow, the people I knew, I can't tell you whether for everybody. Our view of the Spanish Civil War – this has often been said before, I think – really did move people towards the left, because it was a war of Fascists against anti-Fascists. I think a rather simplified view of what was at stake [was] that what we saw before us – when I say 'we', I mean comparatively unpolitical people who believed in a decent democratic society – we thought on the one side were the good, that is liberals, democrats, students, intellectuals, idealistic people, the army of the good; on the other side soldiers, bankers, priests, the black hundreds, the reactionaries who still lived in some kind of medieval darkness; that's how the picture presented itself to us. Later, after we read Orwell and other writers, it was clear that the whole thing was much more complicated; we certainly didn't know that Communists were engaged in shooting anarchists, or things of that sort, as it later transpired. And so my friends and I packed parcels for the Republic, very conscientiously and with great enthusiasm. But it didn't mean that we were brought nearer to Communism. Some people clearly were. But my immediate friends, however anti-conservative they were, were not very precipitated towards Communism by it, but certainly towards the Labour Party, which was regarded as much more rational and decent in its attitudes towards the Spanish Civil War than were the conservatives. Events really set a stamp in Oxford, so that the right and the left really were divided by this. The Pink Lunch, which I mentioned before, consisted of exactly the kind of people who automatically detested Franco, detested Fascism, and detested the part which the Catholic Church had in these events. But this was extended far more widely. Take, for example, the man I mentioned before, Arthur Salter, who was professor of politics in Oxford in

that day. He was a League of Nations official; later he became a very solid conservative, was a minister in Churchill's caretaker government, but at this period he was of course anti-Franco. I remember Geoffrey Dawson saying to me, 'Look at Salter sitting over there. He's the kind of man who wants to put weapons in the hands of the rabble of Madrid.' Which shows that it wasn't just a question of left wing versus right wing in the ordinary sense, but of reactionaries against progressives. I'd really like to think of it in those terms, which I think are valid for that period. But it certainly formed the views of a great many people at that time.

The second event which of course made its impression at Oxford was the famous post-Munich election of 1938 for Oxford City, where the candidates were the Master of Balliol, put forward by a kind of popular front from the left-wing conservatives to, I suppose, the Communists; people like Macmillan and the President of the Union, Ted Heath, were anti-Hogg and they were pro-Lindsay, whereas the true blue conservatives were of course in favour of Quintin Hogg. That also was a tremendous determiner of people's colour about the general political attitudes which they had, so it was quite an exciting election. Quintin Hogg won by a huge majority, as was inevitable, I think, in the post-Munich period, in which, I suppose, the election was entirely about Munich. I remember my father said something to me which was also said by Léon Blum about Munich. Blum said he felt 'shame and relief', and I dare say quite a lot of quite good people probably felt the same. I have to say, in a rather self-righteous fashion, I did not feel that, only shame.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Léon Blum (1872–1950), Prime Minister of France 1936–7, March–April 1938, and December 1946–January 1947, the first Jew and socialist to hold that post; pragmatically supported Daladier over the Munich Agreement, September 1938, while professing himself unhappy with the methods by which it had been achieved. He wrote that he felt 'divided between a cowardly relief and shame' ('je me sens partagé entre un lâche soulagement et la honte': *Le Populaire de Paris*,



Quoi qu'il advienne, les conséquences iront loin, en Europe et en France. La guerre est probablement écartée. Mais dans des conditions telles que moi, qui n'ai cessé de lutter pour la paix, qui depuis bien des années lui avais fait d'avance le sacrifice de ma vie, je n'en puis éprouver de joie et que je me sens partagé entre un lâche soulagement et la honte.

LEON BLUM.

Whatever may happen, the consequences will be far-reaching in Europe and in France. War has probably been averted, but in such conditions that I, who have never ceased to strive for peace, who for many years past have sanctified my life to its cause—I can experience no joy, but feel myself divided between a cowardly relief and shame.

RW Now your life in the war, at any rate after the time you were actually involved in it, was spent in Washington. Would you like to say something about that?

IB For slightly absurd reasons, which I needn't go into, I was first sent to New York as a British propagandist, and learned a good deal about American society then. My clients – the purpose was to give information about the British war effort, but of course the ultimate purpose was to draw America into the war on our side, which as you know we succeeded in doing with some help from the Japanese. But at that time my clients, to whom I had to offer ticks[?] of a suitable kind sent to me by the Ministry of Information, were the non-U, as they may be called, the non-WASP section of US opinion, namely Catholics, Jews, Blacks,

20 September 1938, 1; cited in 'Anxieties in Paris: "Dangerous Moral Humiliation"', *The Times*, 21 September 1938, 10b).

Mormons, Irishmen; the WASP population was looked after by other people; and I quite enjoyed it in a way, although I felt I didn't really like New York in 1941 particularly, I felt rather lonely there. I remember sitting on top of the 52nd floor of the Rockefeller Building looking out of the window and seeing people like tiny ants walking along the pavements and thinking one more and one less of these can't make a difference – a strong desire to throw myself out of the window, which however, fortunately for myself, I managed to check.

Then I was transferred, after America entered the war; my job was done, I would go home and get drunk. And I was then moved to the Embassy, with the opposite task of reporting on the currents of American opinion, once a week, both of Congress and of the White House and the press and other opinion-forming groups. The thing which I found fascinating was that American politics was much more like the politics of Oxford than the politics of England, and was highly personalised. That is to say, if you asked an American official what he did, he didn't say, 'I'm in the Department of the Interior' or 'I am in the Agriculture Department': they said, 'I work for Mr Wallace; I work for Mr Ickes.' The State Department did say, 'The State Department'; they didn't say, 'I work for Mr Hull.' The Treasury usually didn't say, 'I work for Mr Morgenthau', though they might; [they said] 'I'm in the Treasury.' But they were stolid, steady [?] departments mainly consisting of officials with continuous careers; the others were supplied from outside to a large extent, ad hoc, and they said, 'I work for Mr Nelson'; 'I work for Harry Hopkins'; 'I work for X and Y.' And if you read newspapers, and you saw that some columnist, let us say the dreadful Arthur Krock, who was attacking the War Department, you knew that that was because he had a friend in the Navy Department who wanted just these things said. The whole thing revolved round personalities to an enormous degree, personalities who wanted to secure the favour of the President, who vied for his attention and the like. In England,

departments were impersonal, and in so far as political history was – some plans[?] were settled, they were probably settled by important people in country houses, all of whom knew each other, during the conservative administration. In America they were settled by sharp tensions between individual ministers and their immediate followings. There were a lot of warlords who were usually at some loggerheads with each other. There was Mr Wallace, who was a left-wing head of, let us say, the Department of Agriculture, or TWA, or something of that sort – no, not TWA, [?] it was called, Agriculture Department; later he was Vice President. No, I think in the middle he was head of another department. Then there was some banker who was appointed by Roosevelt to do much the same thing in order to keep them in tension against each other. Government was done by appointing people opposed to each other, to pull a kind of tug of war, which made the President's policies much easier to conduct because he always looked as if he was a moderate appeasing power in the middle, neither too far to the right, nor too far to the left. But that made Washington politics very intelligible to me. If you knew about Colleges and dons in Oxford, that was a very good training for understanding American politics.

So I spent four extremely interesting years in Washington. Then I was sent to Moscow. That was in 1945, shortly after Potsdam. I spoke Russian because I was born there, and the British Ambassador in Moscow, whose name was Clark Kerr, passed through Washington on the way to the San Francisco Conference; and indeed I attended that conference too, but that's another story; and we got on quite well, and he asked me if I wouldn't like to come to his Embassy in Moscow, because he alleged that they were short-handed. I said nothing would please me more: I hadn't been in that country since I was a child in Petrograd in 1917–18,<sup>16</sup> and

<sup>16</sup> The family lived in Petrograd 1916–20.

he arranged for me to come, and I arrived roughly at the end of September 1945.<sup>17</sup>

There wasn't a great deal of work at the British Embassy then; relations with the Soviet Union were correct but not enormously time-consuming, so I found that I had plenty of time on my hands, and I contrived to meet a good many of the writers and artists. I met Pasternak, I met the poetess Akhmatova, I met painters, I met – oh, other poets as well – I used to go to the writers' village, where I would meet more than one writer and used to have discussions with them, a kind of Russian Bloomsbury, as my colleagues at the British Embassy tended to call it; and I had what's called a very good time and made some very lasting friendships.

It was a most interesting time. In a way, that period in Moscow, for the Russians I used to know, was a kind of fool's paradise. It was soon after the war, the British were allies, nobody knew who was friend, who was foe, everything was rather mixed up, people came back from the front with all kinds of stories, with goods which they'd robbed, I mean war booty of various kinds, sometimes with foreign wives, even wives[?] they were forced to divorce soon afterwards; and somehow these people thought it was safe to see foreigners, which it was not, and I saw a good many more of them than, if they'd been wise, they would have allowed me to see. From my point of view it was extremely interesting. The thing about Russians then, and I dare say now, is there's no small talk, you didn't have to talk about the weather, you didn't have to enquire about their health. They immediately said, 'Do you read Dickens? I think he's a rather boring writer, Thackeray is much better.' Or, 'I think Oscar Wilde is the best English writer of the nineteenth century. I know that he was in disgrace, but I like that, I've often been near that myself', and so on. The only other people who talk like that, in my view, are the Southern Irish. I remember going to an Irish train, going from Dublin somewhere, with only

<sup>17</sup> It was early September.

one other man in the compartment. The man said to me, 'I don't know if you go to parties, but I find that if one goes, they're very dull unless there's a strong personality there, then it's all right. What do you think?' That was extremely refreshing and I found that in Russia, whatever the place: they were direct, they were rather candid, they liked talking about subjects near their hearts, and the whole thing was both warm-hearted and interesting. I've never had emotionally a better time, or culturally. Four months was the only period during which I stayed but it lingers in my memory.

RW Isaiah, you've talked about the comparison that people made between Moscow and Bloomsbury. Now did you know Bloomsbury at all?

IB No. I met individual members of it but I never went to a Bloomsbury party, except I think once, when Ben Nicolson moved into a new flat and gave a sort of party for them all, but that was very late in life – it must have been about 1939. No, I met Virginia Woolf in 1933. She was a first cousin of the Warden of New College, H. A. L. Fisher, who'd been a Cabinet Minister in Lloyd George's government. I think their mothers were sisters. Mrs Fisher said to me, 'Herbert' – her husband – 'has invited his cousin Virginia here for the weekend. I can't think why, he doesn't really know her that well, and I think she's a very tiresome, arrogant lady. However, he has invited her, so I suppose we'll have to have her. Would you like to come to dinner?'

I came to dinner: I sat opposite her, petrified. She was one of the most beautiful people I have ever seen in my life. She had these light blue eye[s] and a kind of wandering gypsy look which I'd never seen on anyone else, exquisite in appearance and indeed in dress and in talk. She talked in images of a really wonderful kind. However, conversation didn't really go too well, and Fisher tried his best. He said to her, 'Virginia, do you read Scott at all?' 'No, I think he's very silly.' 'Oh, but David Cecil has just written quite an

interesting essay on him.’ ‘I know he has. Ridiculous thing to have done, can’t think why he or anyone would want to do it.’ Silence. Then, ‘Do you go for walks much?’ ‘Yes, I do.’ ‘In town or in country?’ ‘In country mainly.’ ‘What do you notice on those walks?’ ‘The goats mainly, they look so ecclesiastical.’ You can see the conversation didn’t really flourish tremendously. At the other end was Crossman, and C. S. Lewis, because he was the lecturer in English at New College when he was a fellow of Magdalen; and they of course couldn’t bear Mrs Woolf, and all I heard from the other end was, ‘Uppingham is a hearty school: I like Uppingham.’ It was highly unsuitable for my very gentle and rather refined end of the table. Then we went into the library, where forty or fifty undergraduates were assembled to meet the great lady. She looked like a nervous dog who didn’t know where to turn, finally said – she was a like a bishop about, I think, to confirm a huge class, stood there, said, ‘Has anyone ever read Jane Eyre?’

*Side C*

RW This is the third side of Isaiah Berlin.

IB Then, very painfully, she said, ‘Can anyone tell me the plot of *Shirley*?’ Somebody could even do that. She went on from novel to novel, and finally stopped. Mrs Fisher then said in a loud voice, ‘Time is getting on, it’s about ten o’clock, I’m off to bed, and I recommend everyone else do the same. Still, you can stay if you want to.’ And we did [?] stay and then Virginia became much more relaxed, Virginia Woolf, I don’t know why I call her ‘Virginia’. And then I met her once or twice after that, and then she asked me to dinner. That I do remember. That was arranged by a girl called, in those days, Sally Graves – later became Mrs Chilver and the head of Lady Margaret Hall. She said to me, ‘What book are you reading at the moment?’ I said, ‘I’m reading a book by Henry James on Hawthorne.’ ‘Ah,’ she said, ‘Henry James, yes, Henry James. By the

time I met him he was nothing but a frozen-up old monster', and then turned to Ben Nicolson, who was there, who was a friend of her friends, son of her great friend Vita Sackville-West, and said, 'Ben, you used to have something to do with the King's pictures. When you see the Queen, do you walk backwards and bend on one knee?' and went on like this; she always geyed somebody, on this occasion it was he. On an earlier occasion, when Hugh Walpole was there, Stephen Spender told me, she said, 'Hugh, is your car lined with gold?' That's the kind of thing. However, she then went on from this. 'Royalty we're talking about,' she said cheerfully, 'I remember when Princess Beatrice' – or somebody – 'came to Duncan's [Duncan Grant's] studio, that was marvellous. Leonard [Woolf] was trying to light the gas fire with a trembling hand and said, 'I don't know why you say this, Virginia: royalty are just like everybody else, there's no difference between them and ordinary human beings.' 'You're quite wrong, Leonard, there is an enormous difference, they're quite wonderful.' Then after that we had a silence, then I think we talked about something else.

Then I was invited only once again to dinner. By this time I was in America, the war had started, and in 1941 I was in America, and I think the letter arrived about a fortnight after she'd committed suicide, which was rather macabre. Who else in Bloomsbury? I met Keynes. I was introduced – I remember, Bob Brand the banker was a friend of his and asked me to dinner with him and he was very intelligent and very charming and certainly the cleverest man I've ever met in my life: it was very plain. There are only two equally clever men I ever met whose cleverness emerged immediately in conversation: one was Oppenheimer, the physicist; the other was Edgar Wind, the art historian; clever is exactly what they were, not wise, perhaps, but clever. And I went to dinner with the Ambassador, Lord Halifax, with whom Keynes flirted rather towards the end of his life, and I was supposed to know about American politics. This was the evening before, the evening of the day on which President Roosevelt was elected to his fourth term,

and I was supposed to bring copies of the *Washington Post*, which had all the districts we were meant to mark as we listened to the radio. I brought forth[?] all these copies; the only people dining were Lord and Lady Halifax, Lord Keynes as he already was then, and Lady Keynes, and I think the Social Secretary [at the Embassy], Irene Boyle. That was all. Irene Boyle introduced me to Keynes, whom in fact by then I knew quite well, and said, 'That's Professor Berlin, do you know him?' I said, 'I'm not a professor', because I wasn't. Keynes said, 'As you may imagine, I'm often introduced as 'Professor'. Invariably I say on those occasions, 'I reject the indignity without the emolument.' After that we went into the Ambassador's study. I talked to his wife Lydia in Russian, which Keynes didn't much like because he couldn't understand a word, and then we settled down to listen to the results. Alabama came in and it said, 490 districts Roosevelt, 15 districts for Dewey, that's [?]. At this point Lydia said to me, 'Do you like Archibald MacLeish?', who was Librarian of Congress, I think, at this time. Keynes said, 'Not now, Lydia, not now.' Then silence. Forty more districts came in. She got frightfully bored, naturally enough, and said, 'Do you like Roosevelt? I like Rosie, everybody likes Rosie, do you like Rosie?' 'Shh, Lydia, not now,' said Maynard. Another hundred districts came in. At this point she turned to me – Halifax, I should think, was about three feet away – and said, 'Do you like Lord Halifax?' I think I produced a neighing sound; I doubt if I spoke words.

At that point Keynes didn't stop her. She said, 'You know everybody likes him now. I've asked questions about him in Washington; I know quite a lot of people, they like him, they all say they do, but it was not always so. Do you remember Munich? Appeasement? It was terrible.' Halifax was a trifle embarrassed, patted his dog, and said, 'Now, Frankie, you aren't interested in politics, are you? I'm going to talk to Harry Hopkins, find out what's going on', came back and said, 'I've talked to Harry, it's in the bag.'



After that we left. I could see that Keynes was amused, by the time he thought something funny would happen; anyhow he liked the idea of the pompous being slightly blown up; that's why he allowed her to go on like this. I never met him afterwards: I knew her quite well. I used to meet her a certain amount afterwards: she was charming, a child of nature she was. Bloomsbury didn't like her much. I don't know that I met anybody else at the – I know I met Roger Fry, I met Clive Bell, whom I didn't much like; I met – who else were they? – yes, I met Leonard Woolf, certainly, whom I liked very much indeed. He was the one man in the 1930s who was equally anti-Communist and anti-Fascist, which I greatly admired. He kept his balance precisely, he was not tipped in the direction of the left by hatred of the right, and I thought that was quite admirable. Exactly my position, too: has been, is, and I hope will be to the end of my days. I think we stop there.

RW That is the end of my conversation with Isaiah Berlin on the afternoon of 18 June 1990.

*Conversation 2. 2 July 1990*

RW This is a conversation with Isaiah Berlin on 2 July 1990. Isaiah, when we last spoke you talked about a number of friends of yours, people who were part of your life in Oxford in the 1930s. It may be there are people who I'd like to hear you talk about more, perhaps who didn't come into the last conversation, Maurice Bowra or David Cecil or Dick Crossman or whoever you want to talk about. But before that, I'd like to put this question to you. I think that if you had gone on talking for very much longer there are two names that almost certainly wouldn't have turned up in the conversation; and yet there are people, not necessarily the same people, but there are people who, when they think of Oxford in the 1930s, associate it very much with these two people. One is R. G. Collingwood and the other is C. S. Lewis.

IB You're quite right to say that they were not part of my life, but I knew them. Collingwood was really quite an interesting man. I can't tell you what went on before the war, before the First World War, which is when he began, but he was an isolated figure by the time I arrived: on his own, not in much contact with other colleagues. He had disciples, pupils, some of whom became colleagues afterwards, for example T. M. Knox, who edited his works; but he was at Pembroke and he was rather lofty and rather Olympian and rather looked down on them; they were vaguely proud of him but also rather resented the rather lordly airs he gave himself. He was an interesting man, that is to say he knew quite a lot, he had read a great many books, and of course his mother, I think, was Jewish, I think either from Vienna or from Switzerland, which gave him a certain cosmopolitan quality in Oxford. His father was Ruskin's secretary. And from these sources he derived a much wider horizon than most Oxford dons, who were for all practical purposes ordinary members of the English middle class. The man he most admired was Benedetto Croce, of whom he was a direct disciple: he envied Croce the fact which, as he told me – here was this man: he had means of his own, he didn't have to spend his time, wear himself out, in teaching stupid pupils. Pembroke was not a very distinguished college, and most of the pupils probably were rather dull, he didn't take much trouble over them, there were very few of them.

He was conceited, in a comical way, in the sense that he began sentences by saying, 'Speaking as a philosopher ...', or 'Speaking as a Roman historian ...' – because of course he knew a certain amount about Roman Britain and his great friend Stevens, an eminent Roman historian in Magdalen, said about him – who worshipped him – said that most of the facts, theories which he advanced were false, but the questions which he asked were very good and penetrating and important. Well he – 'Speaking as a Roman historian ...' or 'Speaking as a boat builder ...', because he

used to go to the East Indies, where he sailed boats, or ‘Speaking as a chicken farmer ...’, whatever it might be. But he saw himself as lifted above the ordinary ruck of what he regarded as a rather provincial set of logic-choppers, people influenced by Russell, for whom he had no respect. He was a kind of British Hegelian, and mainly interested in the development of human history, above all in the form of human ideas, of thought, of the development of the spirit, which is an essential Hegelian notion; and that’s what he wrote about, for the most part.

His lectures, to which I went, were beautifully delivered in a very special kind of rather – I wouldn’t say oleaginous – they were delivered in this rather well-oiled voice. He told me once that he never enjoyed a lecture until he’d done it seven or eight times, rather like a teller. He said, ‘After I’ve got it rolled round my tongue, that’s when I like delivering it.’ He was – when I say conceited, yes; for example, he delivered lectures in Pembroke garden in the summer, which wasn’t necessary because Pembroke lecture halls weren’t all that hot, simply because the gardener would be curious, or the stoa, or wherever it was that Aristotle walked up and down with his pupils; there was that image, and he saw himself as part of a great tradition, and, as I say – and he very seldom came to the Philosophical Society, because he thought that most of the subjects were dry, and verbal or logical stuff. But he admired, for example, Freddie Ayer, because he thought he wrote beautiful English; but of course what he said in his very resentful autobiography, in which he talked about his isolation, of his contempt; and what he said about him and philosophers like him was that they led to Fascism because people had certain spiritual needs and they were not satisfied by this kind of dry stuff; the hungry sheep looked up and were fed stones by people like Ayer. Nevertheless he thought he was very influential because he wrote so beautifully, and he knew that style, words, sentences were half the game in philosophy; that he knew about himself, that’s what he admired about Croce, about Ayer and so forth.

Well what more can I tell you about him? He gradually went off his head, it's true; he was married to a rather – very respectable, rather conventional wife. I used to go to dinner with him in his house. Then he left her, with a pupil, and lived with her in open sin, which in those days was a scandalous thing in the Oxford academic community, and then gradually, gradually something happened – I think either a combination of some kind of disease of the brain with some kind of psychological malaise – he was married to her finally, I think on a stretcher, shortly before he died. He wasn't Professor of Metaphysics for very long; I think he died during the war in great misery and pain. But I liked him because he was very agreeable to talk to, and he *was* civilised, and he *had* met interesting people, and he talked well, and I was very flattered by the fact he used to come to my rooms in All Souls; so far as I knew he didn't go to any other philosopher, and he used to put himself in an armchair and say, 'I can talk to you because you are a man of considerable culture. So am I; but as for the rest ....' But I won't dilate about his actual philosophical views, that's not very important. Still, he was a philosopher. After his death, interest in his writings was and still is taken and he had something to say. The autobiography is a work of appalling egomania. The most peculiar thing in it is when he describes his discovery of genius, how – it took him two or three days, I think, to do it day and night; he was forced to write while this idea, this important idea, which was a great contribution – obsessed him. The difficulty is to know what the idea of genius was.

'What about the famous C. S. Lewis?' [?].

RW And C. S. Lewis?

IB He was probably – he was a member of the so-called – what are they called? There was a book, wasn't there, called *Inklings* I think.<sup>18</sup> friend of Tolkien; friend of a man I never met, Williams I think his name was, who was a kind of religious figure to these people; and several others. He was – I can tell you about him. The nastiest thing ever said about his appearance was said by my malicious but witty friend Maurice Bowra, who said, 'He looks like a butler in a not very good college.' Precisely what he looked like: red-faced, not pot-bellied but rather plump with a rather awkward manner. There's no doubt that he was a scholar of the first water. *The Allegory of Love* is a very considerable work, a very remarkable one. But I'll tell you, the secret of him as a literary personality was this: he had exactly the tastes of the Pre-Raphaelites. He was a belated Pre-Raphaelite; what they liked, he liked. They liked Italian poets of the Renaissance, people like Ariosto, people like Boiardo, possibly Tasso; so did he. Late medieval art is precisely what he liked; after that, very little, the eighteenth century didn't exist for him. He was a devoted tutor but intolerant of anything which he regarded as smart or modern or fashionable or sophisticated. He looked down on anything which looked like – I don't know – what seemed to him, anyhow, to be some kind of artificial modern stuff. T. S. Eliot he despised. I don't know what view he took of Yeats – might for all I know have liked him.

He had two pupils who didn't take to him; one was Betjeman, the other was Pryce-Jones, both of whom went down before their time. Betjeman he got rid of: he wrote him a letter saying, after he'd failed, probably, an examination or two, or wrote essays which he didn't approve of – he couldn't have approved of Betjeman, he was exactly what he hated, whimsical with a fantasy very unlike his own, and in a way rather smart, rather glossy – but he wrote him a letter saying, in the long vacation, 'If I were you I wouldn't bother to

<sup>18</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Their Friends* (London, 1978).

come back.' And Betjeman of course took that advice, he had to. In effect it was a kind of expulsion. Many years later – and Betjeman was made an honorary fellow of Magdalen. He loathed C. S. Lewis probably more than he loathed anybody in his life. Lewis by this time was retired, otherwise I doubt if Betjeman could have got through the College meeting of the fellows as far as the election was concerned. But he tended to come back for breakfast occasionally to the Magdalen Common Room and read *Punch*, nothing else ever, so I was told. One day he had forgotten something in the Common Room; Betjeman had spent the night there after a gaudy, and was breakfasting peacefully. Lewis suddenly appeared – perhaps it wasn't breakfast, perhaps he was sitting in the Common Room – at any rate they appeared in the same room. Betjeman took one look at him, screamed loudly, and ran from the room. This is not a legend, there are at least two very trustworthy and unimaginative witnesses who saw this scene, were totally astonished by it, and didn't know why it had happened, and I explained it to them, to one of them at least, afterwards.

Lewis was a heavy, slow talker who took a deep interest in philosophy in a very naive way, and the story goes that he stopped talking about philosophy after Miss Anscombe, who was a Wittgensteinian philosopher towards the end of his time, knocked him out in some philosophical society. Of that I have no direct knowledge. But all I can say is that he was a kind of semi-Hegelian idealist, and tried to explain to me that the idea of more than one time was perfectly plausible, because here, for example, were the plays of Shakespeare; they occurred in one time series; he would stop writing about Henry V, let's say, and then he would go off to the inn and quaff a lot of beer, which is how certainly Collingwood would have put it; then came back, and Shakespeare's time, the time of the play, continued. This was time within a time: why shouldn't that be a metaphysical notion? So there are many times in many times and that's how the universe was formed. I tried to argue him out of that but I could see that we were getting on rather

thin ice at a certain point, and desisted. But I liked him quite well. He was very courteous to me and he was intensely serious, he had no small talk, and what he said was founded on wide literary knowledge and expressed original personal opinions which he didn't borrow from anyone else.

RW Right. Do you want to talk about Maurice now?

IB Maurice Bowra. Well, yes. He was a great friend of mine but I was really an acquired taste on his part, I don't think I was a natural taste. But he did acquire it. [RW Who would have been a natural taste for him?] Oh, he was a great friend of Adrian Bishop, who nobody now remembers, who was a very lively, imaginative Irishman who was a classical scholar and then went to Persia and served various – I think a Persian oil company – and then – was full of imagination and likewise himself had homosexual tastes. I think they went about together in the summer and perhaps made friends with Greek sailors. He was a man who was entirely after his [?]; Bob Boothby was a natural taste to him. John Sparrow was a natural taste, although he was rather leery of him in later life because he thought he was wild and uncontrolled; he thought Sparrow might do anything, might say anything, might do something compromising. But still he liked him by nature because he liked strong temperament, recklessness, imagination, and above all lack of normal inhibitions. He invented a manner for himself – I don't think it can have been entirely natural – and a special voice, a special drawl which then had a powerful effect on his friends during the 1920s particularly, partly the 1930s, which I think I imitated unconsciously for a number of years: I think I may have lost it now. He had a very powerful influence on the bright young men of Oxford in the 1920s, not for example on – who shall we say? – Cyril Radcliffe, who was a friend of his, became a famous lawyer, though they had been intimate friends; not on Harold Acton, who I think was entirely his own man; on Evelyn Waugh,

considerable, although they weren't great friends when Evelyn was at Oxford, became so later; on Cyril Connolly, decisive; on Osbert Lancaster, who was not a great friend of his, but who caught his voice, which remained with him for the rest of his life; he couldn't shake it off, nor, as far as I know, did he try.

The point about Maurice Bowra was that he was a man of powerful personality, very lively wit and oppositional temperament. He liked what he called the Immoral Front. The Immoral Front consisted of minorities who were kept out to some degree by the Philistine Majority. Who were the Immoral Front? Jews, homosexuals, pacifists, anarchists, left-wing persons in general of a non-doctrinaire kind; I don't think he cared for Marxists much, or knew much about it; and these were the people he felt a natural alliance with against the Establishment, although he wanted to become a member of the Establishment in a kind of way, and did become it towards the end. Nevertheless, by nature he was a poacher, later turned gamekeeper of a not very successful kind. That's really the story of his life.

The manner, the thing which he invented as far as we were all concerned, was deliberate bad taste. Before him, people might make highly malicious or risqué remarks, but always within certain conventions, so that the words weren't actually spoken, and you got as near the edge of what was non-speakable as you could. Maurice Bowra stepped over it in a bold and firm fashion, and we were all to some degree influenced by that. As an influence on young men – well, there were two sides to that. One was, parents trembled to think that their sons might come under his influence in the 1920s, 'mad – bad – and dangerous to know',<sup>19</sup> a kind of Oxford Byron. He wasn't mad at all; bad only if you disapproved of his particular kind of amorality, though he had a morality. He had a sense of honour and he knew the difference between right

<sup>19</sup> Lady Caroline Lamb's first impression of Byron, originally recorded by Lady (Sydney) Morgan, *Lady Morgan's Memoirs: Autobiography, Diaries and Correspondence* (London, 1862) ii 200.



and wrong, good and bad, even if he didn't always follow it. Dangerous to know, yes, because I think in the 1920s he wanted to break open all kinds of doors and windows which had been discreetly closed at previous times – which sometimes went too far. At his dinner parties he was a liberating force; that is, by saying the unsayable he stimulated young men into saying all the things they hadn't thought of saying before, which they longed to say, and of course made them drunk, and they went beyond the limit of what they really wanted to say, and sometimes exaggerated, and sometimes regretted what they'd said, and sometimes said, 'My mother is a bearded woman in a circus', whatever they might not have said normally, and afterwards perhaps regretted it. But the psychological effect was highly liberating: there's no doubt he broke through a kind of priggish fence, priggish framework. Cyril Connolly always said about himself that he would have been a Maurice Baring Etonian if it hadn't been for the wonderful influence of this great liberator.

There are liberators in history of that kind; I'm sure Voltaire was a liberator who made people say all kinds of blasphemous things which they otherwise might not have said; and Anatole France was a liberator of sorts, all kinds of anti-conventional things which might other.... Well, Maurice Bowra in Oxford terms was that.

At the same time he was of course a scholar. After his death there was a kind of – sort of Festschrift<sup>20</sup> [in which] various pieces were written about him including the eulogy I had to deliver for him at his memorial service in St Mary's church, and various pieces by Noel Annan and Anthony Powell and various other people who'd known him at various times in his life, and this was reviewed by the Merton Professor of English, who said about him in the review, I can't remember where, *Spectator* I expect, maybe the

<sup>20</sup> Hugh Lloyd-Jones (ed.), *Maurice Bowra: A Celebration* (London, 1974).

*Sunday Times*,<sup>21</sup> for which he writes, that he was a great scholar who knew many languages and wrote remarkably about a great number of literatures which other people didn't know about, but in private life was a snob and really rather contemptible. Both propositions are precisely false. He was not a great scholar; he read these languages, certainly, because he had great imaginative ambitions and wanted to be a kind of great literary scholar; he learned Russian, he learned German, he could certainly read French, but although he loved literature more than anything else in the world, I think, as Edmund Wilson rather cruelly said, he had nothing of great interest to say about any of it. His book on Homer was much the best; that was a serious and I dare say – I don't know about these things – first-rate scholarly work. But the other books were really – read to me like a collection of encyclopedia articles. They were well researched, they were clear, they were accurate, but they were dull, and they didn't really expound ideas which had any life in them. What he did do marvellously well was to write private verse, often of a rather obscene kind. That can never be published, I dare say,<sup>22</sup> but that did have immense imagination and he read it privately to his friends, and that really had a great deal of talent and wit about it – certainly the most gifted thing he ever did in that way. Snob: well I dare say in the 1920s perhaps he was one in the sense that he used to have young Lords ...

### *Side D*

RW This is side 4 of Isaiah Berlin.

<sup>21</sup> John Carey, 'Down with Dons', *New Review* 1 No. 10 (January 1975), 5–10; excerpted under the same title in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 21 February 1975, 15; repr. in John Carey, *Original Copy: Selected Reviews and Journalism 1969–1986* (London and Boston, 1987), 10–24. Cary was not yet Professor when the article was published.

<sup>22</sup> It was published as Maurice Bowra, *New Bats in Old Belfries, or Some Loose Tiles*, ed. Henry Hardy and Jennifer Holmes (Oxford, 2005).

IB Yes, he did invite young Lords to dinner, perhaps because he thought they were livelier, more interesting; but in the end of course there was snobbery. In some way it was a Proustian thing about him, that the world of the aristocracy excited him partly because it was morally freer than the bourgeoisie in which he was brought up. His father was head of Chinese, which was then under British control, and he somehow, rather as Oscar Wilde, liked it, for much the same reasons. In some way he felt it to be freer, more exciting, more – it had some kind of, to him, irresistible charm. But snobbery it certainly was, it's idle to deny it. Nevertheless there was a certain point at which he decided that he would become a learned man properly, perhaps because he was mainly aiming to become Professor of Greek, which he never did become.

Then he broke off relations with most of these people, and began to entertain dons, worked very hard, cultivated the company of the great Greek scholar Gilbert Murray, who obviously couldn't possibly have liked him in any sort of way, and one of the great disappointments of his life was not being made Professor of Greek; partly because it would have made him a member of the High Table of Christ Church, which was a college far more to his taste than Wadham, which – but nevertheless, as he grew older he became totally devoted to his College and his reputation had something curious about it. He was very, very deeply admired in Wadham, who knew – they had a kind of – great man of extraordinary character, famous, marvellous, remarkable, they took pride in him. I don't think he took much interest in College government, but they adored him, there's no doubt about that, with certain exceptions. Next, in Oxford, where he was very well known indeed, the man more often talked about than any other don at all in his lifetime. After that came London, where he was rather less known. After that came the wide world, where he wasn't known at all, or hardly. His works weren't greatly admired, so that his reputation dwindled as the circle grew larger.

What more could I tell you about him? His wit was verbal and very quick. I can't give you an example of it because I can't remember any. If you asked him what he thought of the performance of the Oxford University Dramatic Society, he said, 'I thought it was as good as a play' – that kind of thing. I think most of his great many obscene jokes, which I wouldn't dare to repeat even if I remembered them. He was a centre of energy and life, no doubt about that. His personality had an electric quality to it which enlivened any table he was at. He had a short temper, great hatreds, great loves. On the whole his morality was that of one of the suggested definitions of justice in the first book of Plato's *Republic*, namely: you do good to your friends, harm to your enemies. That's what his life was founded upon. If he thought that people disliked him, or disliked them, then he was quite prepared to trip them up in any kind of way; but if he liked you, then he liked you. The virtue he most liked, the thing he was most devoted to, was loyalty, because fundamentally he was deeply insecure and therefore wanted to feel safe, and if his friends were loyal to him, he was immensely loyal to them. If he thought they betrayed him, the friendship was broken.

I remember there was a very lively contemporary of mine called Goronwy Rees, who was a friend of Maurice's because he thought he was bright and gay and charming and full of life, all of which is true, and very good company and exceedingly clever. Well, one day when Goronwy Rees became a writer for the *Manchester Guardian* there was one of those centre-page articles of a kind of feuilleton type in which – somebody read it aloud at dinner to Maurice Bowra: it was clearly about him. Roy Harrod, with a singular lack of tact, perhaps some malice, suddenly began reading it aloud after dinner. He was described as looking like a little Roman Emperor, which was true, with staccato utterance who produced epigram after epigram of the following kind: 'Dostoevsky is like hock – heaven to begin with, hell at the end.' Well, Maurice Bowra was deeply offended by this, the paper was ridiculous, the description

was impertinent, and after that Goronwy Rees never became as much a friend of his as before. He was crossed off the list, in effect. But those who were loyal to him – Cyril Connolly, who was not by nature a very loyal character, he adored to the end; they adored each other, in fact, partly because of the Immoral Front; there was a certain solidarity, they were in defiance of respectable society.

I don't think I've painted a portrait of him: I think it's rather a difficult thing to do. He was cosy, he could be intimate, he was affectionate, he was impulsively generous, not continuously; to people he didn't like he could be very mean. He was a marvellous Vice Chancellor; once he decided to devote himself to Oxford he took it very seriously and governed the University with extreme skill, devotion and success. But again, let me give you an example of the kind of thing that happened. There was a meeting of Congregation, which was the University assembly of all the Academics, and somebody made a speech about their need for money, and said that perhaps the Treasury might fork out some for some particular purpose. He was Vice Chancellor at the time. He rose from his majestic seat and said, 'The Treasury? Never. I know those purple-faced brutes; they hate learning, they hate culture, they'll never do anything for us. Forget them.' This is the kind of thing which both amused and shocked people, but it was unique. I don't think any other Vice Chancellor would quite have used those words in a solemn University assembly.

He loved literature, as I said; he read Russian poetry with a passion. His translations from Russian – he was one of the few people in England who did translate them – were not totally felicitous. The curious thing was that – I think I said this in my obituary speech<sup>23</sup> – if the poets were very complicated, difficult, euphuistic; if they were very difficult to make out because of the extreme complexity both of style and of imagination, then he

<sup>23</sup> 'He learnt Russian as a literary language, and virtually alone in England happily (and successfully) parsed the obscurest lines of modern Russian poets as he did the verse of Pindar or Alcaeus.' PI3 152.

translated them brilliantly because his art – he treated them like Sappho, Alcaeus; these Ancient Greek poets, lyric poets, were a very complex [?]. But when they were lucid, simple, noble, Mozart-like, like Pushkin, his versions read like flat doggerel, and that was the curious thing. His Russian was imperfect; he didn't speak it, but he read it fairly freely, and where he didn't know, he guessed. I think that's roughly true of German, too. In Germany – he had German friends, he went to Germany, where he was very happy in the circle of the poet Stefan George, who I think may have been dead by the time he went there – no, I think he wasn't; no, he was alive, it was in the early 1930s, certainly; he made great friends with the poetic circle because they were romantic, they were homosexual, they were highly literary, they were politically not particularly left-wing, they were imaginative and they were disreputable.

What more can I tell you about him? He'd fought in the First World War, and I think he hated it, that very much, I think he'd been in it perhaps a little too long. When I said he was homosexual, let me make it clear: by nature I don't think he was. I think his manner with women was unfortunate: he didn't quite know how to treat them. He had a strong sexual desire, so that as a great many people in smart Oxford in the 1920s before my time were liable to be homosexual, he simply drifted into it quite naturally. We all know now that psychologists have written about it, that everyone is partly hetero- and partly homosexual, it might go either way. In his case it simply was a question of fashion: it was easier for him to do that. But I think he would have made a perfectly good father and husband, myself. He proposed to various ladies, but in the end was never accepted; each time he was jilted, he was acutely miserable, felt humiliated, unhappy, and that God, as he put it, had decided to punish him. As I say, his love of literature was very moving, but he just was confined to love of it. His criticism, as I say – for example there's a book about the Greeks, Home

University Library, very good book for schoolboys to read;<sup>24</sup> so is a book called *The Greek Experience*. There's a book about Symbolists<sup>25</sup> which gives you a great deal of information; insights, few. His lectures, to which I went once or twice, were delivered in a loud and confident voice, but one could never remember a single word he said; at least that, I'm afraid, was true of me – perhaps other people derived more from it. But his central importance was as a powerful, liberating influence of a highly temperamental, unique, warm-hearted, rude, bullying, friendly and window- and door-opening kind.

You asked me about David Cecil. He was a great friend of mine, in a way as great a friend of mine as Maurice. They didn't get on: that explains something. David Cecil, when he was a fellow of Wadham, which was in the late 1920s and perhaps very early 1930s,<sup>26</sup> was a Christian, a believing member of the Church of England, and rather proper, and that to Maurice was the end. He hated respectability, and above all conventional religion, as he thought of it, more than anything. At the same time he realised that David Cecil was a clever, distinguished and interesting man of great charm and reputation; and Maurice was ashamed of the fact that – David Cecil in a way was to him the kind of person in terms of whom he thought of people as presentable or unpresentable. In Proust there's a very good definition of snobbery in which he says it's entirely a matter of presentability; you think of people as being presentable or not presentable, either to a real or to an imaginary princely figure, who sets the tone. To Maurice, David Cecil for some years was that, and he was terribly angry with himself because he felt that – ashamed and angry – and that didn't really make for a good relation between them.

I met David Cecil in Elizabeth Bowen's house in Ireland, where we made friends more or less at once. He was a man of irresistible

<sup>24</sup> *Ancient Greek Literature* (London, 1933).

<sup>25</sup> *The Heritage of Symbolism* (London, 1943).

<sup>26</sup> 1924–30.

charm, great intelligence, cleverness, psychological penetration into people's characters, and an extreme sense of the ridiculous, which of course Maurice Bowra also possessed in a different way. Again, as in the case of Maurice, you can't say that David Cecil made many original statements about literature or about history, but what he did say he said in a very inimitable fashion, with great charm, and it could be said [that] it might have been said before but ne'er so well said. I don't think he sought after boldness or originality. He was conventional, yes, in a way; he was a very good talker, and a very spontaneous and lively one. He loved talking about people, he was extremely shrewd and extremely amusing and amused. He was very happy: he was very happily married; he loved his wife, she loved him. He once told me that he was not in love when he married, but fell in love with her later. She of course was in love with him before he married, and was only too delighted when he proposed. He didn't move in strictly literary circles. He was much approved of by C. S. Lewis and his lot because he was conventional, and he wasn't an aesthete, and he wasn't what they didn't like.

At the same time he moved very freely in Bloomsbury because his wife was the daughter of Desmond McCarthy, who was a very central figure in Bloomsbury, but towards them he always had a certain ironical attitude. He thought that they were a kind of sect, always had their own experts for everything. If you asked questions, if it was psychology, Sebastian Sprott would know; if it was history, you had to ask Lytton; if it was criticism, you asked Desmond; if it was music, I don't know who it might be, perhaps in later years someone like Desmond Shawe-Taylor; if it was politics or economics, Maynard would tell you; and so on. And David said it's just like the Catholic Church, they have their experts; it's just like the Communist Party, they have their experts.

The person he worshipped was Virginia Woolf, both because he loved her personally – and she liked him very much; there was more than a touch of snobbery in her constitution – and partly



because he thought that her criticism was as criticism should be. He didn't think that criticism should be historical, namely to attempt to put a writer in his historical context or to find out who his family was or who the influences upon him were or what kind of milieu he lived in; the exact opposite of Sainte-Beuve, who believed in all these things, or Edmund Wilson, who always tried to put writers in some kind of social context and derive some kind of social content from their works. He believed, on the contrary, that the business of a critic was rather like somebody in a musical conservatoire, to explain the creative process, what the writer, poet or prose-writer, was actually doing, what the process of creation might be in order to convey the actual quality of the objective creation which a writer was engaged in, but ignoring whether he was a good father or a good husband or the kind of man he was, except in so far as it entered into the actual work of art. And that is why I remember having my only real quarrel with him, which was about the election of a don, of an English tutor in New College.

David Cecil was made professor and then there was a vacancy of the job which he had occupied before, and I had a great friend called Humphry House, who had written about Gerard Manley Hopkins and written a remarkable book about Dickens called *The Dickens World*, which went in rather deeply into the social aspects of Dickens's world, into his social views, into his influence and so forth. He wasn't a Marxist, but to some extent it was an analogous approach, in the sense that class meant something, and the society which Dickens was both born into and wrote about played a great part in his analysis of what Dickens's novels were about, and what they were. And David Cecil detested that, he thought that was no good at all, he thought it was exactly what was wrong; and when I tried to explain to him that my idea of criticism was rather like that of Humphrey House, he almost paled, and said, 'I detest that, it's exactly what I don't like, it's exactly what I'm against.' For the first time he became passionate, for the first time he became totally

serious about what his life was devoted to, what kind of books he wrote, what they were about and were meant to be. In a way there was a *froidueur* about that, coldness which lasted perhaps for three or four months, then everything was all right again, and we became great friends again.

I think I miss him more than anybody in Oxford, even more than Maurice Bowra, because he was delightful company. Every time he entered the room, things looked up, I felt I was going to have an amusing, interesting conversation about people, situations; he'd make brilliant jokes, he'd score off people on the whole unmaliciously but with great wit; and his literary and his musical and his artistic tastes were something I could understand and sympathise with. On the other hand it has to be admitted that he was a conservative; he did not believe in equality, he wanted society to be hierarchical, the kind of society he was born into. But he did once explain that very few aristocrats could become major literary figures: Byron and Tolstoy to him were in that sense exceptions, because one was taught, if one was born into a noble family, to be all things to all men, to adjust oneself to all kinds of persons who [one] might come across, because that was a kind of *noblesse oblige* kind of duty; and that scattered one's gifts – it dissipated one's personality and the kind of concentrated depth which a man had to be, in order to be a writer of genius, was difficult for people who were taught to dissipate themselves in this fashion. I don't know if it's true or not, but at least it's quite an interesting doctrine.

He liked being a Lord and he adored his family, I think more than anybody else in the world. He was kind, he was generous, he was sympathetic, he was imaginative, certainly, but I remember all the same a letter which he wrote to *The Times* before I knew him, when his friend A. L. Rowse, in those days a Marxist, or perhaps some other Marxist, wrote a letter about the class war being central to the evolution of society. I don't know how it got into *The Times*, but it did. He wrote a letter saying he fully accepted this analysis, but he was on the other side, which was very typical. At the time

of Munich he was more violently opposed to Chamberlain and the whole collection of appeasers than anybody I'd ever met. He said, 'I can't recognise my country, I don't understand England.' He was in a state of violent and unceasing humiliation as an Englishman, but he analysed Churchill almost better than anyone I've ever known: he'd met him and he knew him, and so on. But it's his accounts of people, their marital relations, their relations with their parents, their tastes, everything else that were, I suppose, the sharpest, most amusing, most penetrating and in a way truest, most exact I've ever known as far as conversation is concerned. Elizabeth Bowen was a great great friend of his, and I think was in love with him, but he didn't wish to marry her. I remember he told me that after – they didn't break, because there was no engagement, but after he became engaged to be married to his future wife, she wrote him a letter saying, 'You always were a masterly letter-writer.' He never forgot that: that caused a wound. He used to refer to it about every three years during my friendship with him. But let me finish by saying he was a very nice man and of irresistible charm, and that's a great deal.

Conversation 3. *2 May 1991*

RW This is a conversation with Isaiah Berlin, Albany, 2 May 1991. Isaiah, you returned to Oxford in 1946 [IB Yes], and we met just about that time.

IB Yes, quite true. I'd been to Moscow and then back to Washington, and I came back in a boat called the *Queen Elizabeth*, I think, where I shared a cabin with a man called Lord Brownlow, who was rather jolly; said, 'You ought to know all about me. I'm a friend of the Prince of Wales and of Lord Beaverbrook too, touched the beaver's brush, I can tell you that', and we went on in this style, which was quite all right of its kind. And then came back to Oxford: but then I had a brief, fairly brief, social fling, if I can

call it that – that is to say, I moved about with a section of London society for a year or two. That was due to the fact that before the war I knew none of these people at all, I had no contact with what might be called smart life. I think I'd only been inside one country house in all, at lunch, perhaps twice, at James de Rothschild's house in Waddesdon, but otherwise I'd never seen the inside of one. Indeed, I was asked once or twice by well-born pupils, but declined. And then during the war I met a man called Ronald Tree, who was at that time connected with the Ministry of Information. He was a Member of Parliament, friend of Eden's, American by origin, educated in England, and a perfectly nice man, not over-intelligent, but an honest fellow; and he invited me to stay at a house called Ditchley near Oxford, which he owned. And there I met, I think, Duff Cooper and Brendan Bracken, various characters of that kind involved in the war; and then they in their turn – at least Duff Cooper – proceeded to ask me to a meal or two in London. In this way – then I met his wife, Diana Cooper, and I did have a friend called Raimund Hofmannsthal, son of the famous Austrian poet, who was already a friend of hers.

From this beginning I graduated to the table – first to Lady Cunard and later to Lady Colefax. They were very different. Lady Colefax was a straight hostess, nothing but. She burned with a very low flame, which had the effect of making the guests talk very easily and continuously, because she didn't interfere in any way and she had far less vitality than they did, which encouraged vitality in the guests; it's one kind of hostess. She was a pure snob in the sense that she invited anybody who had acquired any degree of fame in any quarter, but her handwriting was illegible, and I used to get letters from her inviting me to three or four meals. It was very difficult to make out which, but the figures were easier to make out than the words, and if one strained very hard, one could make out the word 'lunch', and then the date; and sometimes I could make out the word[s] 'Winston may be there.' He never was. In some logical sense it was [?] victory that he would be there, but

there was no record that he'd ever been present. My friend Lord Berners once played a joke on her. He invited her to lunch and said the P of W would be there, which she naturally took to mean the Prince of Wales. She came with some eagerness, [he] turned out to be the Provost of Worcester – it's a very typical Berners joke – who was an old clergyman exactly like somebody in a novel by P. G. Wodehouse, and a rather ludicrous old party whom Lady Colefax was not at all anxious to meet. Dr Lys was his name.

However, to go back, Lady Cunard was somebody quite different. She was a strong personality. She was a Californian by origin and she was mercilessly persecuted by the Sitwells for being a social climber, which in some sense, no doubt, she was. She married a man called Sir Bache Cunard, who was a landowner, I think, in Lincolnshire, that kind of thing. I don't think he played a great part in her life. She had a daughter called Nancy Cunard, who was a great friend and supporter of various black men and women before it was fashionable to do so, and she gave dinner parties – by the time I came to know her, in the Dorchester Hotel. She dominated her dinner table in a very firm and continuous way. Her style of talking was like somebody from the Regency or the Restoration: she had an elaborate prose style which was entirely, as far as I could see, unique to her at that time. She would turn to, let us say, Sir Anthony Eden, who might be at dinner; she would say, 'Sir Anthony, you will surely acquaint us with some of the more fascinating aspects of our foreign policy, of which you are in charge. There must be many details of it which would delight us by their peculiarity or their natural interest. Won't you tell us some of these things, which would give us great pleasure and excite our interest?' That's how she talked. It wasn't always responded to fully. Or alternatively she would victimise somebody. Lady Pamela Berry, let us say, who would be at the dinner and she would say, 'Now Pamela, we all know upon whom your eye has fallen, we all know who your favourite is at the moment. Everyone knows who it is, you needn't tell us, because everyone knows. I hope it makes

you very happy.’ Poor Pamela Berry, who was tough enough in herself, never knew if the name was going to be mentioned or not, was therefore on tenterhooks. She went on in this style, keeping her frying on the frying pan for some time but in the end did not reveal whatever name she had in mind. But that gave the dinner parties a certain flavour.

I remember when my friend Joseph Alsop, famous American journalist, was in London. She asked him to dinner, he was socially very acceptable, and she said to him, ‘Mr Alsop, you are well acquainted with the affairs in my poor country. Won’t you tell us about the most important aspects of life in it, whether it’s relations with foreign powers or the complicated internal politics to which it is liable?’ My friend Alsop was only too pleased to be asked that, cleared his throat, and said, ‘Well, Lady Cunard, I think your position is this ...’. It was quite clear to us, everyone round the table, that a short lecture – perhaps not so short – was going to be delivered. After the first few minutes Lady Cunard realised that we were in danger of a monologue, so she turned away from Mr Alsop to her friend Lady Weymouth and said, ‘Oh Diana, I am told you know about the man in the trunk.’ There was a famous murder and the body was found in a trunk, I think at Paddington Station or Waterloo, in the lost property department or somewhere – or maybe just an ordinary luggage department. And poor Alsop didn’t realise what had hit him. Suddenly, in the middle of what was going to be a very proper oration, suddenly the conversation changed; he was left open-mouthed, deeply insulted, unable to speak, changed colour, and never spoke another word after that. That was Lady Cunard: boredom is what she wished to avoid at all costs.

She was amusing, but if I’d known that she’d been a friend of Ribbentrop before the war, I might not have frequented her society. But I didn’t know that, she was very nice to me, and she used to telephone at about half past one in the morning to my parents’ house, and would then talk about literature, books she’d read. She would ask about – she’d been reading George Eliot or

Aldous Huxley or perhaps Hemingway, and would then discourse about this in quite an intelligent and interesting way. David Cecil once described her appearance as that of a ‘canary of prey’, which is exactly right. She had dyed yellow hair and at the same time a sharp little nose and there was an element of a bird of prey in her entire personality.

Well, that was Lady Cunard. Lady Colefax was of no interest. She was kindly and quite amiable, and her great favourite was Harold Nicolson, who was always present. The tone there was more agreeable but not this rather special, heightened and sometimes quite amusing quality which attended the elaborate and somehow electrified dinner parties of Lady Cunard.

But I didn’t remain a figure in London society for long. I was always rather afraid when asked to country houses, to which I on the whole didn’t go, that I’d be regarded just as an amusing talker, a sort of social Fool to amuse the company, and perhaps that was too self-conscious or too vain of me, but I refused all invitations of that kind for that reason. Perhaps I might have enjoyed myself, who can tell? But Lord Berners was somebody else I knew at that time; but him I met during the war, when he was a paying guest in the lodgings of the Warden of Wadham, Maurice Bowra. That didn’t last very long; he soon moved to a room in St Aldate’s – no, in St Giles’ in Oxford, where he kept a piano which he used to play. He was a genuine composer. His works, which are admired by a rather small circle of cognoscenti, are nothing much, it must be admitted, although Stravinsky once said he was the best composer in England. That was because they’d both been in Rome during the First World War, when I think Berners was a [?] attaché at the British embassy and Stravinsky was there in exile, and they made friends on the basis of a certain frivolity, modernity, general aestheticism, all of which they did have in common. No, he was not a gifted composer, that can’t be said. I remember when Bridges, the Poet Laureate, died, Berners suddenly appeared in a large motor car outside Mrs Bridges’s house. He extracted from his

car a clavichord. He took this clavichord into the drawing room and proceeded – bowed to Mrs Bridges, didn't say a word – and then proceeded to play a dirge for the late Poet Laureate. After that, he folded the legs of the clavichord, carried it off into the car, and drove off. No words were exchanged at all: so lady Bridges reported.

Stravinsky, talking of musicians, I knew quite well. I didn't really know many composers or conductors. I met Toscanini, whom I worshipped, about twice. There's nothing very special about him except that he was always in a state of electric tension, and he was a hero to me, and therefore I was shy and silent in his presence. I knew one or two conductors in England: Beecham, who used to come to Oxford, whom I never knew. He used to come to Oxford about twice a year. He only came if the organist of New College, who was a man called Dr Andrews, who was a friend of his, invited him, and then he would give a concert. He would tend to address the audience before the concert began. He would say something of this sort: 'Ladies and gentlemen, in this great seat of learning, perhaps the intellectual capital of the universe, where more men of genius are gathered together and more intellectual activity goes on than perhaps anywhere else in this wonderful assembly of talent and brilliance, the like of which has seldom been seen gathered together in one place, it is sad to see a programme in which there are no fewer than sixteen misprints. For that reason I shall not conduct the work by Haydn which is stated on the programme, but shall offer you the inferior joys of a work by the composer Grétry[?].'<sup>27</sup> That was fairly typical, very enjoyable, people then clapped like mad – of course they liked that.

He did make funny jokes, Beecham. I think perhaps one of the funnier ones was when he was conducting a rehearsal of *Tristan und Isolde*, by Wagner. He said to the orchestra, 'Gentlemen, the work we're attempting to play is called *Tristan und Isolde*. It is not called

<sup>27</sup> Sounds like 'Gréty'.



*Darby and Joan.* There are endless anecdotes about him which I won't repeat. Among the composers I knew – I knew Constant Lambert a little bit: didn't like him very much. He was a little too maybe far gone by the time I knew him, rather farouche.

Berners was charming and his geese [sc. pigeons] in his house in Faringdon were painted all kinds of brilliant colours, which gave a sort of peculiar look. As you walked to the lawn there were geese with half gold, half red; half green, half blue; and every kind of



*'Peering through the skeleton of the dinoceras, or it may have been the iguanodon, they espied the Professor and Mrs Postlethwaite fondling one another.'*

Mr Jericho (modelled on IB) in *Far from the Madding War* (London, 1941), 84; the Professor's name is 'Trumper

brilliant colours. That he enjoyed very much. He wrote a novel which we all figure in various ways. It was typical of him to have made a pretty elaborate drawing of the Natural History museum: there's a large skeleton of a dinosaur behind which the ugliest man he'd ever seen in Oxford, who was a very eminent Professor of History in London, was engaged in planting a kiss upon a thin and rather hideous-looking lady. That can be found in the illustrations to this novel. But I mustn't go on like this.

Stravinsky: him I met because I was a friend of – in the Savoy Hotel – I was a friend of a Russian composer called Nicolas Nabokov. He was not a very good composer, but a delightful, witty, warm-hearted and altogether infinitely agreeable man and warm-hearted friend, whom I liked, and who was a great friend of mine for a great many years. He promoted festivals, he'd known a great many musicians, his own music was not of the front rank – not first-class by any means. But he was amusing, he was extremely genuine: nothing was false, nothing was smart. He was altogether a rather aristocratic figure in exile, and that gave him a certain melancholy, which added dignity to what otherwise was already a rather noble character.

He thought it would be nice for me to meet Stravinsky, so I was summoned by the great composer to the Savoy Hotel. I was terrified of him, naturally. He was certainly the greatest man of genius I think I'd ever made friends with, as I did afterwards. I was silent, so was he. He had no idea who I was, why I was there. Nabokov had told him that I was Russian, [?] could talk Russian to him, but he didn't know what I was doing. He vaguely thought I was some kind of intellectual, but he was obviously ill at ease. So was I. Nothing happened for five minutes or so. Five minutes is a very long time in circumstances of that kind. Finally he spoke, and he said, 'You take an interest in Russian art.' I said, 'Yes, yes, yes, yes.' He said, 'Tell me, why is it that Russians, who are rather good at music, good composers, are so bad at painting? Since the icons, there hasn't been much good Russian painting.'

I didn't know what to answer but there came into my mind an essay by Virginia Woolf from which I plagiarised. I said, 'Well, I'll tell you. I think my view is this: you see, the Russians aren't really greatly interested in external nature. They're fundamentally interested in inner states of mind, and when there *is* a description of nature, for example in Turgenev, of, as it were, a forest, or a meadow, or clouds moving across the sky, it's always relevant to the emotional condition of the people speaking, or to something in the story. It's never done as a sensuous object in itself, which the author enjoys in painting. It's always relevant in some way to some kind of psychological situation or character. And that shows that painting, which after all depends upon a certain relationship with outer nature, is not really a thing in which the Russians, who are deeply psychologically interested – at least their writers are .... Whereas music is an inward art and far more to do with moods and inner states ...'.

I was going on like this. I thought I was doing quite well, developing a thesis. I wasn't *quite* sure that I believed in it, but anyway it was some kind of answer. He then stopped me and said, 'Would you say what you've just said is true of Molotov?' That stopped me dead in my tracks. I did not pursue this particular topic any further. We then talked about this and that, and he talked about his compositions and the situation in America, how difficult it was; and he talked about California, talked about Gerald Heard, talked about Aldous Huxley, said the only English author he thought anything of was Evelyn Waugh, whom he called 'Vog', and he thought he might set something by him to music. He also thought well of T. S. Eliot – they were the only English authors he had the slightest feeling for, otherwise nobody at all. Among Russian writers, he hated anything to do with populism, anything faintly left-wing, faintly democratic in tone. He loathed that: hence Tolstoy – no good really, and Dostoevsky worse. Turgenev he tolerated. What he liked was Pushkin, who was an aristocratic writer, and Chekhov, who was not prone to social meditations,

which is true enough, I think, although it's always interpreted differently nowadays. He was right: he was a very, very unpolitical writer.

Well, we talked about that a little, and that was the end of my first encounter with him, which was then followed by others, because when he came – I went to New York shortly after that – he was kind enough to ask me to visit them and I did. I met him and his wife and then we talked about, I don't know, Russian topics, music. I remember I said to him, 'I hear there's a programme in the Carnegie Hall tomorrow night to which I don't want to go, but someone's given me a ticket. There's a work by Villa Lobos, a Brazilian composer, I think.' He said, 'It's a curious thing. Whenever music is very bad, it's always by Villa Lobos.' That was the way in which he tended to talk. I asked him about Benjamin Britten. He said, 'Oh, you ask about Benjamin Britten. I will tell you what I think of Benjamin Britten. There is no doubt that he is the world's best accompanist. I don't know if you've ever heard him as an accompanist. Simply wonderful.' No more. His compositions he paid no attention to whatever. I think contemporary composers – he only liked them [?] genius, [?], something he could learn from, like Boulez, for whom he had respect, Alban Berg, who he thought was deeply decadent, but he said, 'I like that.' He said, 'The violin concerto is a deeply decadent work, but that's partly why I think it marvellous.' And we talked in that sort of strain.

There's a story which I can tell you, which I have told on other occasions, which is in a way quite funny. The thing is, his great composition, the *Sacre du printemps*, was performed in Paris in 1913. I knew somebody who danced in it called Marie Rambert, who afterwards became head of a ballet school in London. She was a minor dancer who danced in 1913 with the Russian Diaghilev Ballet. She told me all about it. She said, 'Diaghilev knew there would be a row about it, there would be a tremendous scandal, people would probably protest against it, because it was a *very*

revolutionary work it its day, certainly the most revolutionary work that anyone had ever heard in Paris. Schoenberg wasn't performed much. And so he said to the orchestra, 'You will go on playing to the end, whatever happens; but if you don't play to the end, no money.' That was that. Then the thing was put on with Nijinsky counting numbers off-stage behind the – in the coulisses – and then there's a moment at which the girl (as you know, it's a story of pagan rites in pre-Christian Russia) – at which the girl who is about to be brought as a sacrifice starts to shiver and to tremble in front of the altar when she's about to be slaughtered. And at that point, somebody in the audience got up and said, 'Un dentiste!' Somebody else got up and said, 'Un docteur!' After that pandemonium broke loose. The orchestra went on playing, the thing was in fact completed, that was that.

Fifty years later, the conductor Monsieur Monteux, who was a perfectly good French conductor, was going to perform an anniversary performance of fifty years later, in 1963, in the Albert Hall. Stravinsky was in London. Naturally he was invited. He said, 'No, Monteux is a dreadful conductor, he will murder the work, he murders every work.' Stravinsky loathed conductors, and said: 'I don't see the need for them,' he said: 'what is the use of them? They don't do anything.' He conducted his own works when he could and did not do it terribly well. But anyway – and anyhow he obviously paid no attention to Monteux and thought he was inferior. He said, 'He will murder my work. I will not go.' Then he telephoned me – I knew nothing of this – in Oxford and said, 'What are they doing in the Royal Opera House on whatever it was, the 17th?'<sup>28</sup> I looked at the programme and said, 'They're performing a work called *Le nozze di Figaro*.' He said, 'Can we all go?' I'd never heard of Stravinsky going to the opera before to hear works by other composers. However, orders is orders, so I bought five

<sup>28</sup> 29 May 1963.

tickets: for Stravinsky, his wife Vera, his friend who is his amanuensis and friend, Robert Craft, and my wife and myself.

We appeared in the foyer before the performance in Covent Garden. At that point Craft approached me and said, 'Look, let me explain the situation. Tonight is the night when the *Sacre* is being done in the Albert Hall and the Maestro refuses to go. People said to him, "You know, if you stay in the Savoy, it may not be so bad; but if you're deliberately seen in another place when this is going on, that will do your reputation very little good, I think that's rather too provocative." So he wouldn't agree to hear it played, that was more than he could bear, but he agreed to go after the performance. We've calculated it metronomically and he knows that it's likely to be finished, roughly speaking, after the first act of *Figaro*. We've got a car waiting for him to take him to the Albert Hall.'

We listened to an act of *Figaro*, conducted by Solti, and then we began moving towards the exit. And an usherette came to meet us and said, 'It's not an interval, it's only a ...' – what is it called? I think not a fade-out but something which is not the full lights, it's got a name [dim-out]. Anyway, 'It's not an interval, please go back.' We were then flush with about the sixth row of the stalls on the way out towards the side exit. Stravinsky said in a loud voice, 'We all have diarrhoea.' She practically fell over backwards, the well-educated usherette. Anyway we went in and there was a car waiting. My wife and I went back to *Figaro*, he was transported to the Albert Hall. There were photographs – Stravinsky embracing Monteux, Monteux embracing Stravinsky. Not a dry eye in the hall. That was pretty typical.

RW Cut.