ISAIAH BERLIN: A COMMEMORATION

Presented as a celebratory lecture at the Harvard Club in New York on 2 June 1998

Robert Wokler

IN television parlance, Isaiah Berlin was what is called a 'talking head'. Not only that inimitable voice but his whole face was continually animated, his eyes sparkling – and they were beautiful eyes, as Greta Garbo once had occasion to remark. Those eyes had witnessed much calamity, particularly to Russians and Jews whose communal identity Isaiah shared, and they moistened as well at the loss of lifelong friends, like Stephen Spender, about whom Isaiah spoke with tender affection when we met two summers ago, by chance just a few days after Spender's death. But it was more generally the vitality of his enthusiasms – social, intellectual, perhaps above all musical – which his eyes displayed. He was continually bemused at his own good fortune, at the excess of the esteem in which he was held over his actual achievement, which he would not have failed to stress this very evening if he could speak for himself. 'What have I done in my life?' he used to ask when such honours as the Order of Merit or the Presidency of the British Academy were bestowed on him, even before Henry Hardy had begun so assiduously to assemble and edit his occasional publications and broadcasts for a wider audience. 'A little book on Marx and a handful of essays,' he would reply to his own question. 'Grossly overrated. Long may it last!'

It was of course his voice that we remember most of all – its richness, its humour, its velocity. If he completed a lecture in less than the allotted time, he might apologise for having arrived a fraction late by leaving early: 'Goodbye.' In virtually every one of his public lectures in Oxford, New York and elsewhere, his was the face that launched a thousand quips. I recall his hurtling through the twenty-eight alternative readings of Machiavelli which

were to become a chapter of *Against the Current*, as entranced students listened while the insecure stenographers among them hopelessly failed to get it all down. Isaiah himself, of course, had not brought along a text at all. He spoke from memory, without props, apart perhaps from a crumpled sheet of paper at the lectern or even in his pocket, which he seldom consulted. His voice alone was the overhead projector; from his mouth cascaded proper names and nouns and especially adjectives, layered one upon another like coats of varnish, each of a subtly nuanced, ever so slightly different, shade. I know of no academic figure who could intelligibly articulate more words in a shorter space of time. To his critics, there seemed occasionally to be too many words, insufficiently distinguished. In a close comparison of the different editions of *Two Concepts of Liberty*, Anthony Arblaster detected that Hobbes had replaced Aquinas in a particular passage, as if, for Isaiah, he remarked churlishly, any doubting Thomas would suffice. But when Michael Oakeshott once introduced him as 'a Paganini of ideas', there was a hint of envy as well as malice in that false compliment.

By way especially of the filmed interview with Göran Rosenberg, we have heard Isaiah's voice ourselves this evening. For more than thirty years after the War, it was the most widely mimicked voice not only in Oxford but perhaps in intellectual circles throughout the whole of the English-speaking world. In these very brief reflections, I should like to concentrate most of all, however, on Isaiah's ears. They had a refinement about them which I believe was central to his character. It was through them that he heard the voices around him, enabling him, while still a young man, to entertain his colleagues with stylish imitations of Maurice Bowra, for instance, or David Cecil, as well as many others among the most resonant voices of the Oxford he knew.

One of the reasons why a meeting with him proved so exhilarating was that Isaiah listened to his interlocutors so attentively. Even when it was difficult to get a word in edgeways, he somehow seemed to be all ears, warm, soothing, intimate. For all its brilliance, his talk was always conversational, never rhetorical or declamatory. It perpetually bore the trace of those exchanges he had had with his philosophically-minded friends at Oxford – J. L. Austin and Freddie Ayer chief among them – which could turn for hours around verbal and conceptual subtleties anchored in nothing

in particular because they sprang from no settled doctrines. Isaiah's voice in Oxford became progressively that of a historian of ideas among philosophers, but when he addressed the history of ideas, it was not contextually in the fashion of John Pocock or Quentin Skinner, but still philosophically quizzical or puzzled in the manner of Austin. In order to interpret the meaning of other thinkers, he interrogated them, undeterred by the methodological strictures which would confine what they had said to their own time and place. He gave them a hearing – he interviewed them, as it were – and, through his own voice, attuned to their arguments, he attempted to let them speak for themselves.

I stress that aspect of his personality because it bears most directly upon the subjects we discussed at length at our meetings for over thirty years, and around which his current reputation as an intellectual and cultural pluralist turns. It was Isaiah who put the expression 'the Counter-Enlightenment' into general circulation. By way of his essays on Vico, Hamann, Herder and de Maistre, he contributed much to our understanding of those distinctive thinkers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century who did not subscribe to the dictates of what, through Alasdair MacIntyre, has come to be termed 'the Enlightenment Project', which for Isaiah, as witnessed in the film we have just seen, was nothing other than a modern formulation of the central intellectual traditions of the West, with its familiar underlying presuppositions. This crucial element of his philosophy has endeared him to many contemporary critics of Enlightenment thought, who have blamed much of modernity's failures, including the Holocaust, on that philosophical movement's notions of universal truth, on its allegedly monolithic treatments of human nature and excessively zealous commitments – because too prone to abuse – to science and reason. In his attachment to the Counter-Enlightenment, Berlin has of late come to be portrayed as if he had been a postmodernist before his time, a precursor of Michel Foucault or Jacques Derrida who had needed no inspiration from Martin Heidegger to celebrate the difference between cultures and the incompatibility and incommensurability of their values.

This had not always been the case. In the 1950s and '60s, by way of his *Two Concepts of Liberty* in particular, he had instead been esteemed, or sometimes reviled, for articulating the philosophy of modern liberalism in what was taken to be its quintessentially

English voice. *The Hedgehog and the Fox* and his essay on *Historical Inevitability* had made his critique of determinism almost as conspicuous a feature of the then fashionable philosophy of history as were Karl Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies* or his *The Poverty of Historicism*. At All Souls or Wolfson College Isaiah had many pupils who were writing dissertations on such themes. I almost never discussed them with him. We instead talked at length about the Enlightenment and about the philosophy of Rousseau, for which, in each case, he displayed less enthusiasm than I did myself and, despite protests to the contrary, less than I had hoped he might share with me, if only by contagion.

Since Rousseau was himself the eighteenth-century's most formidable critic of the Enlightenment Project, I sometimes found it difficult to understand why Isaiah himself, in apparently distancing himself from the one, did not feel specially drawn to the other. His view of Rousseau seemed to me somewhat tinged by those interpretations of modern German or Russian totalitarianism, already fashionable in the period between the two World Wars, which traced their conceptual underpinnings to Rousseau's ideals of popular sovereignty. In that regard, Jacob Talmon's *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* owes him a great, and acknowledged, debt. Isaiah's conception of a uniformitarian Enlightenment Project, committed to the creation of an ideal society through the implementation of scientifically attested laws of human nature, struck me as cast in much the same mould. We argued at length about the Enlightenment and modernity, and about Rousseau's connection with both of these concepts together and with each of them separately. I told him that the Counter-Enlightenment was, to my mind, just another face of the Enlightenment; that Herder, who followed Montesquieu and Ferguson, was one of its pre-eminent spokesmen; and that notions of cultural pluralism lay at the heart of its critique of a monolithic Christian civilisation and its commitment to religious toleration.

If Isaiah was ever persuaded by any objection I put to his own views, he never showed me any sign of it. And yet I invariably felt, in his company, that however much he disagreed with me, he wanted my case to have a hearing even more than that the error of my ways should be corrected. In his rooms at All Souls, confronted by that beguiling smile and perpetual curiosity as to what I might have to say in defence of my misguided eighteenth-

century friends, I felt myself in the presence of Voltaire. While he insisted that he was no genuine Englishman himself, as an Anglophile Jew he surpassed even Lewis Namier in the breadth and profundity of his devotion to the country in which his career flourished, and whose intellectual classes, even whose Queen, adopted him as their favourite expatriate of all. In England, surrounded by otherness and difference, he was perfectly at home and at ease.

It is just that point about the sensitivity of Isaiah's ears that I wish to stress here, because to my mind it was the feature of his character that drew him towards the Enlightenment much more than it did away from it, that made this most urbane of all the polyglot figures of the international republic of letters that I ever knew an eighteenth-century *philosophe malgré lui*. In that regard I hold John Gray's virtual canonisation of Isaiah as a fundamentally anti-Enlightenment figure to be grievously mistaken, though Isaiah himself of course never much minded that his greatest admirers were so much at odds as to what it was in his philosophy that most merited their praise. Unlike so many postmodernist critics of eighteenth-century philosophy, Isaiah almost always displayed interpretative charity, even magnanimity, towards doctrines he found uncongenial. No pluralism of the Counter-Enlightenment ever won his esteem more than did Montesquieu, at the very heart of the so-called 'Enlightenment Project' itself. No political thinker of the nineteenth century commanded his admiration more than did Alexander Herzen, that ebullient Westerniser among dour Slavophils, that cosmopolitan Russian abroad, that generous spirit of enlightenment in a still benighted age.

Berlin's writings on Herzen are, I believe, his finest of all, but if pride of place had to be contested, I think his tributes to Namier and to Austin in his collection of *Personal Impressions* must count as among the best alternatives. His oldest surviving friend, Stuart Hampshire, has rightly remarked upon Isaiah's comprehensive mastery of that most enlightened form of discourse, the *oraison funèbre* or funeral oration, in the manner of Fontenelle or Condorcet. More than any of his contemporaries, Berlin could make the ideas and personalities of both past and contemporary thinkers vivid and compelling because in his fashion he came close to entering their own minds and to conveying their own thoughts. Such transitivity of ideas, such clairvoyance, is quite alien to the

prevailing critiques of the Enlightenment Project. In his ideals, his enthusiasms, his conversation; in his manner of speaking most distinctively in his own voice when conveying the ideas of other thinkers; most particularly, perhaps, in his reluctance to see his essentially oral contribution to literary and philosophical issues somewhat dulled by appearing in print, and especially books, Isaiah could make me feel that I was also in the company of our civilisation's Diderot.

That was not always a comfortable position for a student of Rousseau. But our friendship lasted longer than did that of Diderot and Rousseau, and I sometimes regret that in addition to receiving his knighthood and the Order of Merit Isaiah was not also made a corresponding fellow of the *Académie française*, because then, as was his due, he could join the ranks of the 'immortals', as members of that august society are rightly called, which would have enabled us this evening to hear his own voice rather than merely overhear it, as it were, by way of our collective reflections.

Posted 7 October 2006; amended 2 May 2008