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## ISAIAH BERLIN AND THE 'HISTORY OF IDEAS' Some Personal Impressions

*Michael Moran*

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# ISAIAH BERLIN AND THE ‘HISTORY OF IDEAS’

*Michael Moran*

## I

I first came across a book by Isaiah Berlin in 1955 when I was a first-year undergraduate at what eventually became Keele University. The College had an excellent bookshop in the basement of Keele Hall, a huge Victorian mansion set in vast grounds. Unlike many university bookshops in the twenty-first century, which increasingly confine themselves to selling student textbooks, printing paper, earphones and T-shirts, our shop displayed a reasonable selection of new scholarly works, especially in the humanities. And there I discovered a small hardback entitled *Historical Inevitability*.

I learned from the first page that this was a lecture delivered by Berlin two years earlier at LSE, the first of the Auguste Comte Memorial Lectures. Having started, I could hardly put the book down. I retired to my room with my rapidly purchased item to absorb more. Long lists of names at first baffled me. I knew vaguely who Comte was, but Vico, Herder, Ranke and Michelet, not to mention Spinoza, Godwin, Saint-Simon, Condorcet and Hegel, meant little to me at that time, though the way Berlin could reel these and many other apparently significant names off, in a variety of intriguing and seemingly still urgent contexts, kept me riveted for at least an hour. It made me realise how very much I needed to learn.

The issue of whether men could really be ‘free’ – at least free enough to make moral decisions, to be meaningfully praised or blamed for what they did – was obviously important too. And I was disturbed to hear about all those ‘vast impersonal forces’,<sup>1</sup> biological, psychological, sociological, historical, as envisaged by numerous theorists, and which, if really operative, must surely, as these theorists alleged, rob us of the freedom common sense tells us we have. Berlin’s own dismissal of all such forms of determinism was welcome, if not entirely convincing, I thought. But perhaps what struck me most during this first experience of

<sup>1</sup> [I. S. Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (London, 1948), 88. See Isaiah Berlin, ‘Historical Inevitability’, in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford, 2002), 94, 127, 128.]

his writing was his ability to raise and discuss such issues in a variety of historical contexts: his capacity to enliven the debate with extraordinarily knowledgeable references to a great range of past thinkers, historians, imaginative writers, politicians, even scientists. My own philosophy tutors were all competent men, I had no doubt; but they had nothing like Berlin's awareness of the history of thought. Here, at last, I felt was an 'Oxford philosopher' who possessed the kind of erudition – and not least the stylistic brilliance – that I myself might vaguely hope, many years hence, to aspire to.

I continued to read Berlin, but didn't actually meet him until November 1963, when he came to the University of Sussex, where I was teaching, to give a lecture on Machiavelli. Even then it was just a brief handshake. This was, however, a memorable occasion for another reason. On that very day President Kennedy was assassinated. In fact we heard about this event minutes before Berlin was due to speak, and the lecture had to be delayed for a quarter of an hour or so while Berlin recovered from the shock. He had known and liked Kennedy, having first met him several times when engaged in his own semi-diplomatic work for the British government in Washington during the war.<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, this early experience of how politics is actually conducted, in a time of great crisis, was something that was to give a certain feel of authenticity to many of Berlin's later discussions of political thought, something not always detectable in the writings of other academic philosophers. It was from this eventually spontaneously delivered lecture about Machiavelli – Berlin carried no manuscript to the podium, and seemed to have no notes – that I first heard about one of his favourite doctrines: that ultimate values need not always be compatible, that 'truth', at any rate in matters of morals and politics, cannot invariably be conceived (in the way, he held, that all thinkers up to the time of the Renaissance, and most since, *had* conceived of it) as one undivided whole. For in fact liberty, say, may not always be compatible with equality, tolerance with social order, rebellion with prudence. But more of this later.

I didn't manage to communicate significantly with Berlin until three years later. This was when a recording of his Mellon Lectures on romanticism, delivered at the National Gallery of Art in Washington in March and April 1965, was played on the BBC's

<sup>2</sup> [In fact Berlin did not meet Kennedy until 1962.]

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Third Programme in August and September 1966. I wrote to him to say how much I, and many of my colleagues, had enjoyed listening to him. And I took the liberty of enclosing a copy of an article I had just finished on Coleridge, for Paul Edwards's *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967).

Berlin's rapid reply was both personally gratifying and objectively interesting.

Headington House, Oxford, 19 September 1966

Dear Mr Moran,

First of all I must thank you for your kind remarks about my lectures; I delivered them with great nervousness, and am glad that you liked them.

I read your piece on Coleridge with the greatest interest; I had to read it rather rapidly, but I do want to make a few comments on it if I may. Firstly, let me say that it seems to me to be one of the most perceptive pieces on Coleridge that I have ever read in English. No doubt Richards is very interesting too, and the occasional pieces by Humphrey House, but, in general, people who have written about Coleridge have either not had any philosophical insight, or not known the degree of his indebtedness to the Germans. I wonder if you know a book by Lovejoy – the last that he ever wrote – whose name I cannot remember.<sup>3</sup> It mainly deals with Schelling, to whom he is of course not very sympathetic, but whom he treats with great scruple and fairness; he gives evidence of whole pages of Schelling copied out consciously or unconsciously by Coleridge. Indeed I think there is literally nothing original in Coleridge's basic views; what is original is the application – I think this is also your view – to a theory of poetry or art in general, in the particular way that he made it, and the 'infusion' of the personality of Coleridge himself – the quality of his own vivid self-expression and the authenticity and first-handedness of the whole thing, which is very different from some of the German theorists. But idea for idea, this can all, I think, be found more or less literally both in Schlegel and Schelling. 'The Great I Am' and the Primary Imagination, in different terms, are all there. Lovejoy stresses the importance of Jacobi, now almost utterly forgotten, but in his day, according to Lovejoy, more famous than anyone other than Kant. Certainly his theories of the intuition correspond almost precisely to certain strains in Coleridge. It is the Anglican parts, or, generally, the more Christian elements in Coleridge (although there are, of course, analogues among the Germans) which

<sup>3</sup> Berlin is referring to Arthur O. Lovejoy's *The Reason, the Understanding, and Time* (Baltimore, [1961]).

often are, it seems to me, fairly original; and you are quite right to emphasise all that, and certainly the notion of the clerisy – a kind of Saint-Simonism, of a very English sort – which is peculiar and unique.

The thing I was going to emphasise particularly, however is this: should you not perhaps go a little more into the whole division of Reason v. Understanding – what you quite rightly call the laudatory as opposed to the pejorative names for the two ‘faculties’? I do not know where this begins, but from the beginning of roughly the second third of the eighteenth century the Germans begin to distinguish two faculties or methods or approaches or casts of mind – one analytic, scientific, tending towards the division of nature and everything else into uniform, artificial units, or pulverising, deathly – bad; the other, synthetic, creative, intuitive, organic, full of insight, delving into the essence of things, etc. – good. This is certainly not Kant’s division of reason and understanding; but it is there in the Schlegels, in Schelling, in Fichte, in Hegel, in Nietzsche and in a perverted form entered into a good deal of Nazi patter; ‘analytic’ as a term of abuse – as indeed it is more or less also used by Burke – with all its aesthetic, ethical, political and theological implications, was certainly an important phase of European thought. French Catholic reactionaries by 1815 are full of it. Bergson is only the most eloquent, though not the clearest, expositor of it. I do not know of anyone else who, in English, has stated this so plainly. The difference between Secondary Imagination and Fancy revolves around this, and so does every anti-positivist doctrine since that day.

I am off to America now for four months; but at the end of that, when I get back in England in January, I should greatly like it if we could meet and discuss these matters. For I know few people who are interested in these matters, and am always glad to meet anyone who is; especially as you have shown such extraordinary insight and, if I may say so, knowledge and imaginative understanding in this matter.

Yours sincerely,  
Isaiah Berlin

At that time Berlin was in fact preoccupied with setting up a new Oxford college, eventually called Wolfson College (after one of its chief benefactors, Sir Isaac Wolfson, a Jewish Scottish businessman who had made a vast fortune in the retail trade). This project involved elaborate negotiations not only with the Oxford authorities and wealthy Jews in various places, but with representatives of both the British and American governments. When I managed to visit him in Oxford a few months later Berlin was still very absorbed in these matters, but I think it must have been at this time that I asked him if he could nevertheless see his

way to acting as the external examiner for a new course the historian Peter Burke and I had set up at Sussex a year or so earlier, our MA programme in the History of Ideas. Berlin agreed, provided, he said, he didn't have to attend examiners' meetings at Sussex. Under the circumstances this was kind of him. He was, however, obviously glad to help us: the history of ideas had become his own acknowledged special field, and although in America it was already a growing concern – notably among Lovejoy's disciples, such as Philip Wiener, the then editor of the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, and certain people teaching at Brandeis, among others – ours was the first attempt to create a unit devoted to this area in Britain. So Berlin could easily identify a little with our efforts, and indeed helped us in a number of ways. I have space here to include only one anecdote about his spell as Sussex external examiner.

This was the time when many British universities, especially the so-called 'new' universities, places like Sussex, Essex and Kent, were becoming tiresomely inundated with Marxism. We had a number of graduate students opting to do our History of Ideas MA who had been indoctrinated in one or another version of this then trendy *Weltanschauung*, and we had to try to find a way of dealing with them as fairly as possible. My own view was that, given the intellectual climate we – or, more accurately, many of the young – were now living in, if someone wrote a dissertation taking for granted all sorts of contestable Marxist assumptions, it would be unfair simply to dismiss his or her efforts as intellectually absurd. What one had to do in assessing students with this disability, I contended, was imaginatively to pretend one was oneself an intelligent and knowledgeable Marxist of the better kind, and try to decide whether this candidate was making interesting use of the received mythology. If so, we could award a decent grade.

Berlin himself was not averse to this posture when adopted in the name of justice. And he agreed that, in all fairness, we had to award one such candidate, who had written a dissertation on George Orwell, with a B-. The candidate's own prose was 'pompous, inelegant, often incoherent, not always grammatical, and peppered with barbarous Germanic abstractions', Berlin noted. 'Yet the quotations from Orwell himself were quite apposite and constituted such a marvellously familiar relief from

the candidate's own artless writing that I feel we have to give him some reward for discovering and choosing them.'

My next encounter with him occurred sometime in 1968, when he invited me to lunch at one of his London clubs, the Athenaeum. I don't remember the lunch, but I do recall that the place seemed full of elderly gentlemen, some admittedly distinguished-looking, wearing dark suits, relieved only by the presence of two bishops clad in gaiters. Berlin himself found the bishops amusing. But he assured me that no less a religious sceptic than J. S. Mill himself had once been a member. The atmosphere was such that one could easily imagine Mill might *still* be. As we smoked our pipes, sitting in leather armchairs, Berlin asked me what I was working on at the moment.

'Well,' I said, 'I've been thinking a little about the concept of imagination and wondering also if anything can be salvaged from the ruins of metaphysics after the positivistic attacks on it, leading to its "elimination", as your friend Ayer famously put it. In both these connections I'm reading quite a bit of Cassirer.'

'Good. Look,' he said, 'I've taken on the job of trying to find British contributors to the proposed *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, edited by Philip Wiener, and to be published in a few years' time in America. Why don't you write an article for the *Dictionary* (which will be a vast work in a number of volumes) on "Metaphysical Imagination"? Think you could do it?'

'Well, I suppose so. But what does "Metaphysical Imagination" mean?' I asked.

'That's entirely up to you. But whatever you let it mean, don't forget your article must be historical as well as philosophical, and you must cover within it as much of the history of thought as you can manage.'

This turned out to be the most difficult thing I ever wrote, and if it hadn't been for an encouraging visit from Wiener himself, about two years later, I doubt if I would have ever finished the article.

## II

By the mid 1970s Berlin's international reputation had long been established, but it was then that Dr Henry Hardy, a meticulous and enterprising scholar, took on the difficult task of putting together all Berlin's miscellaneous and widely dispersed essays, lectures, reviews, unpublished notes and even letters, editing or sometimes re-editing them so as ultimately to produce a complete set of Berlin's writings.<sup>4</sup> Today Hardy is well on his way to completing this large project, for which we must all be grateful. One such volume of collected essays was Berlin's *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, which appeared in 1979. I was asked to review it for a then new journal called *History of European Ideas*, at that time produced in Israel. I decided to use this opportunity to make some assessment of Berlin as an intellectual historian, at least as I saw him. Believing he was unlikely to come across such an obscure journal (even though issuing from a country he took some interest in), I sent him an offprint of my review<sup>5</sup> when it appeared in 1981, on which I wrote, in a rather tremulous hand, 'I hope I haven't got it wrong!' This is what I said about *Against the Current*:

This is the third of four volumes of Sir Isaiah Berlin's lectures and essays which have been very sensibly selected and collected together by Henry Hardy. In fact, it contains perhaps the most interesting and representative selection of the writings of one of the very great teachers and scholars in the humanities of our time. Certainly within the English-speaking world Sir Isaiah has few, if any, equals: not so much in virtue of his possessing unprecedented scholarly erudition, for although he displays plenty of learning the extensive range of his interests often compels him to rely on the detailed research of others; rather, the quite exceptional merits of this book are soon seen to lie elsewhere. They lie in Berlin's almost universal susceptibility of mind, in his very sound grasp of conceptual and epistemological issues, in the moral seriousness which informs and in some degree, I shall suggest, gives rise to his historical investigations and textual exegeses. But most striking of all are his astonishing powers of self-expression. Berlin's prose has truly virtuoso qualities. Consider the following entirely typical passage from the essay on 'Georges Sorel' in the present volume:

<sup>4</sup> [This something of an exaggeration. The volumes in question were selective.]

<sup>5</sup> *History of European Ideas* 1 no. 2 (January 1981), 185–90.



An agonised sense of suffocation in the commercialised, jaunty, insolent, dishonourable, easy-going, cowardly, mindless bourgeois society of the nineteenth century fills the writings of the age: the works of Proudhon, Carlyle, Ibsen, Marx, Baudelaire, Nietzsche, almost the whole of the best-known Russian literature of the time, are one vast indictment of it. This is the tradition to which Sorel belongs from the beginning to the end of his life as a writer. The corruption of public life appears to him to have gone deeper than during the decadence of classical Greece, or the end of the Roman Empire. Parliamentary democracy, with its fraudulence and hypocrisy, appeared to him to be an odious insult to human dignity, a mockery of the proper ends of men. Democratic politics resembled a huge stock exchange in which votes were bought and sold without shame or fear, men were bamboozled or betrayed by scheming politicians, ruthless bankers, crooked businessmen, *avocasserie* and *écrivasserie* – lawyers, journalists, professors, all scrambling for money, recognition, power, in a world of contemptible fools and cunning knaves, deceivers and deceived, living off the exploited workers ‘in a democratic bog’ in a Europe ‘stupefied by humanitarianism’ (378).<sup>6</sup>

Here the easy control of large syntactical structures is impressive enough. But where else, in the works of intellectual historians, can one find such musicality of tempo and cadence, or such a novelistic vocabulary of abuse so deftly handled? The answer is nowhere. Almost unknown today also is the old-fashioned but brilliantly successful technique of empathetically conveying a thinker’s ideas and feelings from within: often using the thinker’s own favourite expressions, dramatically reproducing the very nuances of his mood or prejudices, without immediate comment or criticism; in this case, avoiding the humdrum rituals of extensive quotation and footnoting, and simply letting us experience for a page or two a compressed re-enactment of Sorel’s enraged and rankled outlook. All this is happily reminiscent of the great nineteenth-century periodical writers, of Carlyle, of J. S. Mill, of Sainte-Beuve. So whatever one may think of Berlin’s historical aperçus, or of the subtly insinuated moral and political values which are always present in his forays into the history of ideas, as a writer he is here in this volume at his very best, an utter delight, the most perfect antidote to that all too familiar impersonal, crabbed, tepid and inflexible prose deriving from, let us say, the Chicago University Press’s *Manual of Style*.

<sup>6</sup> [Page references are to the revised second edition (Princeton, 2013). A concordance relating the pagination of the two editions is to be found [here](#).]

The book's title is, of course, significant. Most of the essays are concerned with writers or movements at odds with the official outlook of their time. About half the book is devoted to reactions against the Enlightenment. Thus 'The Counter-Enlightenment' explains succinctly how Vico, Hamann, Rousseau, Herder, the leaders of *Sturm und Drang*, Jacobi, Schelling, de Maistre and many others, poets as well as thinkers, revolted against what Berlin takes to be 'the central dogma of the entire Enlightenment'. According to him, this is the view that there exists one set of universal and unalterable principles, that 'these laws governed inanimate and animate nature, facts and events, means and ends, private life and public, all societies, epochs and civilisations', together with the conviction that it was solely by departing from these laws 'that men fell into crime, vice, misery. Thinkers might differ about what these laws were, or how to discover them', but, says Berlin, that there were such discoverable natural laws of life, mind and society, as well as of inorganic matter, was the central belief of the eighteenth century which the 'Counter-Enlightenment' sought particularly to overthrow (4).

Of course, Berlin is aware that unlike the *philosophes* themselves, the decidedly miscellaneous thinkers he lists under the heading of the 'Counter-Enlightenment' were, with the exception of certain German Romantics, in no sense a unified group, self-consciously collaborating in launching what he calls their 'formidable' attack on the ideals of the Enlightenment (*ibid.*). This is clear from the four other essays here on particular eighteenth century thinkers: two essays on Vico, one on Montesquieu, and an especially valuable piece on Hume.

What is also clear from these essays is that Berlin's interest in singular, anomalous, subversive, 'antinomian' (235) thinkers is inspired – and some more conventional historians might think occasionally distorted – by his undisguised preoccupation with the moral and political perplexities of our own time. Thus Montesquieu, Berlin tells us, didn't seem to have realised that 'differences of ultimate values themselves might be questioned by equally civilised men' (182). But 'what seems of particular interest in the present day [...] is his very clear perception of the fact that no degree of knowledge, or of skill, or of logical power, can produce automatic solutions of social problems, of a final and universal kind'. Montesquieu is against all those 'terrible simplifiers' who are ready 'to sacrifice mankind [...] in the name of vast abstractions upon altars served by imaginary sciences of human behaviour'. It is above all else against this, says Berlin, near the end of his essay, characteristically underlining for us the moral in Montesquieu most relevant to our present discontents, 'that Montesquieu's cautious empiricism, his distrust of laws of universal application, his acute sense of the limits of human powers, stand up so well' (201–2).

Berlin's views on the significance (contemporary as well as historical) of Vico are now well known from his *Vico and Herder*,<sup>7</sup> and I need not mention them here; however it should be noted that the essays 'Vico's Concept of Knowledge' and 'Vico and the Ideal of the Enlightenment'<sup>8</sup> are not as such contained in that book.

In 'Hume and the Sources of German anti-Rationalism' Berlin traces the effect of some of Hume's doctrines on Hamann and Jacobi. Hamann, a lifelong student of Hume, was deeply impressed by what he took to be Hume's view about the role of 'belief' in the psychology of human knowledge and further developed his own Pauline–Lutheran concept of *Glaube*, partly under the influence of Hume's epistemology. Essentially, Hume's scepticism about the place of reason in our knowledge of the external world, of other minds, morality and God pleased Hamann (unlike his friend Immanuel Kant, whom it 'roused') because it confirmed his own religious conviction that the only true organ of knowledge is faith. This curious, and historically exceedingly interesting, use of Hume was continued in the writings of Hamann's disciple, F. H. Jacobi, especially in his dialogue *David Hume über den Glauben, oder Realismus und Idealismus* (1786). Hence, Berlin points out, we have the paradox of Hume as 'one of the patron saints of German fideism and irrationalism' (228).

Now, needless to say, Berlin himself is far from being in favour of this, or of any other, irrationalism. Yet throughout this book, as elsewhere in his wide-ranging output, we encounter a feature of Berlin's writings which would need to be very carefully considered – more carefully than I can do it here – in any proper assessment of his status as an intellectual historian. As we know from many of his other works, for example, from his discussion of the influence of de Maistre on Tolstoy in *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (London, 1953), thinkers very much outside the main Anglo-Saxon liberal, empiricist tradition do plainly fascinate Berlin. And to put the point bluntly, it seems to me that sometimes he shows himself to be vicariously spellbound by them. Sometimes doesn't he perhaps carry his incomparable capacity for *Einführung*<sup>9</sup> too far? The question is a delicate one, for whether he carries it too far or not, this capacity is one of his greatest charms. But I will hazard an answer that bears yet again on the extra-historical aims in Berlin's essays. I suggest that his brilliant recreation of illiberal ideas and subversive moods, his seemingly partial or temporary suspension of disbelief in such – for most of us today – publicly forbidden thoughts and feelings, is meant to serve a moral purpose. Berlin is undoubtedly interested in the history of

<sup>7</sup> London and New York, 1976. [Now superseded by TCE.]

<sup>8</sup> [Both included in *Against the Current*.]

<sup>9</sup> ['Empathetic insight.']

thought intrinsically. But it is to be noted that, except via the respectable detour of intellectual history, it would be difficult for a moralist to bring forward many of these ideas today, especially with such articulate vivacity.

The moral purpose, and the technique Berlin employs to achieve it, is not altogether new among liberal thinkers. As everybody knows, J. S. Mill felt the need to temper the utilitarianism of his father and Bentham with ideas derived from the 'Germano-Coleridgean School', what he called 'that series of great writers and thinkers, from Herder to Michelet'<sup>10</sup> but which also included, for Mill, the writings of Coleridge and Carlyle, the two major disseminators of German thought in England in the early nineteenth century. Mill's attempted fusion of Benthamite and continental (especially German) modes of thought was, for the most part, notoriously unsuccessful. Nor was his understanding of the German thinkers – as distinct from the French, upon whom he was a great expert – particularly good.

Berlin is incomparably better informed on German (as on many other historical) matters than Mill was or could be. Yet it is instructive to see how Berlin and Mill are so often concerned with broadly the same, largely but not exclusively German, reaction against the philosophy of the Enlightenment, even though it was during that very Enlightenment, of course, that their own more central and fundamental beliefs originated. Both of them, it would seem – Mill rather more directly and polemically in his early articles in the *Westminster Review*; Berlin, I am suggesting, more covertly and almost by well-chosen innuendo in his role as intellectual historian – have much the same aim, and similar problems in carrying it out. Both feel the need to lend the English intellectual climate of their time something that it lacks. They wish to infuse into it certain styles of thought and certain potentialities for feeling which, despite a prima facie incompatibility with the established outlook, will in reality, they believe, be beneficial and invigorating, conducive to a more rounded and humane sense of the true complexities of life and values: always provided, however, that these new ingredients are taken in the requisite, that is to say not too large, dosage.

Important among these ideas for Berlin is the need for an awareness of untidy paradoxes or inescapable conceptual and moral antinomies not sufficiently acknowledged by rational or empiricist thinkers, and hence still often not properly absorbed or provided for in the mainstream of our own intellectual culture. In one of the best essays here, 'The Originality of Machiavelli', Berlin attributes to Machiavelli the discovery of one such antinomy. Indeed, he tells us, it is precisely in this discovery

<sup>10</sup> 'Coleridge' (1840), *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J. M. Robson and others (Toronto/London, 1963–91) (hereafter CW), x 139.

that Machiavelli's 'originality' lies. For, according to Berlin, Machiavelli saw what even such a cultural relativist as Montesquieu, over two hundred years later, still failed to grasp. He realised 'that there might exist ends – ends in themselves in terms of which alone everything else was justified – which were equally ultimate, but incompatible with one another, that there might exist no single universal overarching standard that would enable a man to choose rationally between them' (87).

It is significant that Berlin, just like Mill, is not even faintly attracted by continental 'metaphysics'; both remain firmly wedded to a broadly empiricist theory of knowledge and a relatively modest conception of the legitimate function and goals of philosophy. For both it is, above all, what Mill called 'the philosophy of human culture' (loc. cit.), including the philosophy of history, which is of central interest. Where Mill cautiously, but enthusiastically, informed Victorian England about, say, the Saint-Simonians, or Guizot, or Tocqueville, Berlin, in the later essays of the present volume, tells us about, for example, Herzen, Moses Hess ('a communist and a Zionist') and Sorel. And, of course, elsewhere Berlin has written about very many other continental (and notably Russian) thinkers whose thoughts swam, sometimes uncontrollably and self-destructively, against the current of their time. It can be no accident that his first book was on *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment* (1939), written while he was still a young Oxford philosopher whose first professional article, published two years previously in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, dutifully discussed 'Induction and Hypothesis'.<sup>11</sup>

My comparison with Mill must not be pushed too hard, for there are important differences. Still, the fact that this parallel occurs to one so naturally is a striking tribute to the breadth and quality of mind which is everywhere present in this work. Inevitably in a work of this scope one could argue with Berlin about many things; for example, about his characterisation of the allegedly 'central dogma' of the Enlightenment I have quoted. More generally, some scholars will ask whether intellectual history can legitimately be done as Berlin tries to do it. I am tempted to reply for him that if this is not a legitimate way to do intellectual history, then so much the worse for intellectual history. Yet this answer is, of course, evasive and I shall try to rectify it.

*Against the Current* could well have borne the following quotation from Mill as a sort of aphoristic prefix: 'the first question in regard to any man of speculation is what is his theory of human life?'<sup>12</sup> If I am right about Berlin's 'extra-historical' concerns in these essays, it will hardly come as a surprise that we can gather something of what is doubtless Berlin's own theory of life from a description he gives

<sup>11</sup> [*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* supplementary vol. 16 (1937), 63–102.]

<sup>12</sup> 'Bentham' (1838), CW x 94.

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ostensibly – and I do not question plausibly enough – about the leading ideas of Alexander Herzen:

He believed that the ultimate goal of life was life itself; that the day and the hour were ends in themselves, not a means to another day or another experience. He believed that remote ends were a dream, that faith in them was a fatal illusion; that to sacrifice the present or the immediate and foreseeable future to these distant ends must always lead to cruel and futile forms of human sacrifice. He believed that values were not found in an impersonal, objective realm, but were created by human beings, changed with the generations of men, but were none the less binding upon those who lived in their light; that suffering was inescapable, and infallible knowledge neither attainable nor needed. He believed in reason, scientific methods, individual action, empirically discovered truths; but he tended to suspect that faith in general formulas, laws, prescription in human affairs was an attempt, sometimes catastrophic, always irrational, to escape from the uncertainty and unpredictable variety of life to the false security of our own symmetrical fantasies. (265)

I do not wish to suggest for a moment that in any crude way Berlin misrepresents historical truth in passages of this kind. Any false security of subjective as well as 'symmetrical' fantasies is most certainly not something to be found anywhere in these essays. True, we always feel the stamp of Berlin's own personality in the manner he grasps and expresses the *idée maîtresse*, or a recurrent mood, or a half-conscious, fluctuating intuition in the minds of the thinkers he treats; yet we are also made aware that he has immersed himself in these writers (as well as in much of the scholarship that has grown up around them), so that there is a freshness, a first-handedness, a sensitivity to relevant detail throughout Berlin's expositions which carries a conviction all of its own. For this reason alone every reader of this journal will wish to read this book, and I cannot conceive that any of them will fail, as scholars, to profit from it. Nevertheless we have something more than scholarship here; let us frankly call it a kind of wisdom. And isn't it the same wisdom that Berlin himself attributed, quite accurately, to Mill when he said that Mill's 'conception of man was deeper, and his vision of history and life wider and less simple than that of his Utilitarian predecessors or liberal followers'.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> 'J. S. Mill and the Ends of Life', now in Berlin's own *Liberty* (p. 2 above, note), 250.

For some readers the tension between Berlin the historian and Berlin the philosopher may seem to work to the disadvantage of both. This is far from being my own feeling. Still, I cannot resist turning finally once again to Mill for a somewhat exaggerated warning about the potential danger inherent in this very special historical genre of which Berlin is undoubtedly the greatest exponent in our time: ‘In the minds of many philosophers, whatever theory [of life] they have [...] is latent, and it would be a revelation to themselves to have it pointed out to them in their writings as others can see it, unconsciously moulding everything to its own likeness.’<sup>14</sup>

The book contains an excellent bibliography of practically all Berlin’s writings to date. The long introduction by Roger Hausheer is very good; in so far as it can be said to have any faults they are eminently forgivable, viz., its sustained and very passable imitation of Berlin’s own style, and its almost total lack of criticism.

Berlin’s reply to my review turned out to be even more gratifying to me than his appraisal, many years earlier, of my article on Coleridge. Nevertheless I didn’t allow myself to be carried away by his kind words. Naturally he was very pleased with the positive things I had said about him, and this led him to exaggerate my powers of perception. But the letter he sent me is primarily interesting because of how much it tells us about Berlin himself, about his intellectual aims, and about his genuine and perhaps commendable self-doubts, even when he was already, in the eyes of many, one of the most celebrated thinkers in the twentieth century.

Headington House, Oxford, 29 September 1981

Dear Moran,

Thank you ever so much for sending me your review of *Against the Current*. What can I say? It is at once the most generous, penetrating, interesting and to me – as you might well imagine – unbelievably welcome review of anything I have ever written (my memory is not very good, but I believe this to be absolutely true). It shows more *Einfühlung* into the character and purpose of what I think and believe than anyone has ever shown. Consequently, what can I do but express the most unlimited gratitude to you?

You wonder whether you are perhaps ‘wrong’ about me? Not at all – at least, so far as I can tell. I think the quotation from Mill about the

<sup>14</sup> loc. cit. (p. 13 above, note).

possibility of revealing to writers that about themselves which can only be perceived by another observer – which no introspection discloses – is absolutely true in this case. And the critical remarks, expressed with the greatest courtesy and concern for my feelings as a human being, seem to me to have much justice in them.

Firstly, you wonder whether my dogmatic summaries of the doctrines of the Enlightenment are valid. I am sure you are right: so far as they are valid, they apply to some (at most), not all, of the eighteenth-century French thinkers among the *philosophes* – it does not allow for the pessimism of many of them, or the scepticism of even so committed a thinker as Voltaire – and certainly not to e.g. Diderot, who cannot possibly be excluded from the Enlightenment. And in the nineteenth century it perhaps applies only to Comte and his immediate allies and followers. But there is more to the Enlightenment than that, especially on its negative side: the war against irrationalism, prejudice, oppression, cruelty, intolerance and stupidity, in both theory and practice, [and] its often frightful consequences. I tried to say some of this in the brief and not particularly illuminating introduction to the little anthology called *The Age of Enlightenment*<sup>15</sup> – I do not recommend you or anyone else to look at it now: it is harmless, but rather flat. The positive element, and the rich variety and undogmatic humanism of much of the Enlightenment, is, for obviously polemical reasons, not allowed enough by me; and perhaps the picture of the Enlightenment is too much of an Aunt Sally, and I do not deny that it is the rectilinear, emotionally blind, unimaginative, rationalist dogmatism – what Hayek called 'scientism'<sup>16</sup> (my views are sometimes described as analogous to Hayek's, to my extreme dissatisfaction) – that I think has caused havoc. This is the dominant theology of the West during the last two hundred years, despite all the attacks upon it, clerical or Romantic or populist or

<sup>15</sup> [*The Age of Enlightenment: The Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (Boston/ NY, 1956; 2nd ed., ed. Henry Hardy [Oxford, 2017], [online on this site](#)), whose introduction appears as 'The Philosophers of the Enlightenment' in POI.]

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich August von Hayek (1899–1992), Austrian-born British economist; Tooke Professor of Economic Science and Statistics, LSE, 1931–50; prof. of social and moral science, Chicago, 1950–62; prof. of economics, Freiburg, 1962–69; Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel 1974 with Gunnar Myrdal; his *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago, 1944) had a profound influence on Margaret Thatcher, and his ideas on the free market were precursors of Thatcherism. In his *The Counter-Revolution of Science: Studies on the Abuse of Reason* (Glencoe, 1952) he defines 'scientism' as 'slavish imitation of the method and language of Science' (15) – 'an attitude which is decidedly unscientific in the true sense of the word, since it involves a mechanical and uncritical application of habits of thought to fields different from those in which they have been formed' (15–16).



sceptical; it is still what you and I and people we respect and admire rightly believe ourselves to be on the side of; yet the protest against it of my irrationalist ‘clients’ seems to me – even though it does, of course, go too far and produce nonsense and ghastly obscurantism and awful practice of its own – to bring out weaknesses much more sharply than ‘constructive’ criticism by allies. But you are perfectly right: I am obviously concerned with present discontents. The fact that there is a line between the denial of human rights in totalitarian Communist countries and the noble defence of reason in the eighteenth century is not accidental. It is, of course, terribly wrong and unhistorical and altogether disreputable to blame Bentham<sup>17</sup> or Helvétius<sup>18</sup> for Stalin, or Hegel and Nietzsche for Nazism, etc. Nevertheless, the tracing of roots does fascinate me, as I am sure it engages your interest. My basic objection is, I suppose, the Dickens–Tolstoyan one: the *lumières* did not, and do not, for the most part, know what it is that men live by.<sup>19</sup> The bathwater is, *particularly* now, extremely filthy & infected: but the baby needs more nurture.

Again, you are quite right to wonder whether my ‘empathy’ does not go too far. When I write about someone to whom it seems to me historical justice has not been done, whose ideas are more original, have more in them, are more important and sometimes even valid, than is allowed for by conventional accounts, I do probably get carried away and begin to speak with their voices, or at least their voices as I hear them; this must make it seem to some people that I am too empathetic, for Hamann or de Maistre<sup>20</sup> and their progeny *are* real and dangerous

<sup>17</sup> Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), British philosopher, jurist and social reformer who argued that social policy should adhere to the theory of Utilitarianism by promoting ‘*the greatest happiness of the greatest number*’. [Jeremy Bentham], *A Fragment on Government* (London, 1776), preface, ii; *A Comment on the Commentaries and A Fragment on Government*, ed. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (London, 1977), 393.

<sup>18</sup> Claude Adrien Helvétius (1715–71), French philosopher, one of the principal figures behind the *Encyclopédie*; his *De l’esprit* (1758) influenced Jeremy Bentham and the development of Utilitarianism. The 1st of the 6 main subjects of FIB.

<sup>19</sup> Charles John Huffam Dickens (1812–1870), novelist; a favourite author of Tolstoy’s. Both Dickens and Tolstoy might be seen as aligned with the ‘Counter-Enlightenment’ figures who so fascinated IB because they stressed the crucial aspects of life that the tidy scientific systems of the *philosophes* neglected.

<sup>20</sup> ‘The sympathy for de Maistre’s views, which you rightly detect, is due to my general inclination to deal with the enemy, and not with allies in thought; it is they who see the shortcomings and insert blades between the ribs, who teach one something. Hence my interest in Machiavelli, Hamann, Sorel, as well as de Maistre, all of whom I dislike a good deal but from whom I derive genuine intellectual profit’ (to Morton White, 24 December 1990).

enemies of the Enlightenment and against what I myself believe in; and since I write with equal enthusiasm about unquestionable 'progressives' like J. S. Mill or Herzen or Belinsky, or a sceptical but sufficiently anti-reactionary liberal like Turgenev, the reader doesn't know what to think; I seem to be 'representing' all these opposed clients. I think the charge, mild and generous as it is, that you basically make, and that perhaps should be made against my method, is rather like that which some of the radical *philosophes* made against Montesquieu,<sup>21</sup> when he was accused of being more interested in describing the customs of men than in pointing out their defects and seeking to suggest improvements. At least, the tone is too ambiguous, so that nobody is quite clear where I stand, and this must irritate all the committed. But I cannot help it. My favourite quotation is one I've got into the *Oxford Book of Quotations* (I think) – Kant's (in Collingwood's version) 'Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.'<sup>22</sup> Some histories of ideas pay no heed to that.

You are quite right, also, in supposing that most historians of thought must regard my methods as insufficiently academic and detached, too descriptive, insufficiently accurate, analytic, cautious, detailed. That, too, I cannot help. You very sweetly condone this and let me get away with it; I can imagine that you know of people who do not. I remember a review of *Vico and Herder* by Mary Warnock, in which she made it plain that my exposition might at times be beguiling, but it was not critical in the proper sense, and simply wouldn't do: it was really just rhetoric.<sup>23</sup>

I return to my profound gratitude for your understanding, which, I repeat, seems to me to go beyond that of others. I often suspect that I have been overestimated all my life, and that therefore you are perhaps among those who overrate me. Of course, I hope this is not so, but I cannot persuade myself that I am as good as you say I am – yet, of course, this delights me. Since we take an interest in the same topics, and

<sup>21</sup> Charles Louis de Secondat (1689–1755), baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, French political philosopher, historian and novelist; one of the most influential French Enlightenment writers.

<sup>22</sup> ['Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht' ('Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose', 1784), *Kant's gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin, 1900– ), viii 23.22. The quotation was added to *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (*sic*) in its 3rd edition (1979) as 'Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing can ever be made' (the unnecessary, pedantic, alteration being Henry Hardy's).]

<sup>23</sup> [In her review ('History of Ideas', *New Society*, 26 February 1976, 446) Warnock writes: 'one can hear the voice of the brilliant lecturer, who totally convinces, persuades and excites his audience at the time, but leaves them afterwards wondering whether the brilliance of the lecture was not rather greater than the interest of the text'.]

MICHAEL MORAN

can talk to each other, why is it that we never meet? Surely there would be much to talk about, profitably and enjoyably. Do you ever come to Oxford? I have no business in Sussex, but perhaps we might at least meet in London. Do let me know whether such opportunities exist – you could perhaps simply telephone me, and we could make a date.

Yours very sincerely,  
Isaiah Berlin

III

I will end these reminiscences with an account of my last meeting with Berlin, which I have dramatised from memory, taking great care, however, to record our conversation as accurately as I can. A preliminary note about my changed circumstances at that time is perhaps necessary.

In 1988 I took early retirement from Sussex University and emigrated to Cyprus, where I bought a traditional house in the village of Bellapais. In those days, to the eyes of a foreign visitor ignorant of the ‘Cyprus problem’, Northern Cyprus hadn’t changed much since the 1960s, or even the 1950s – except that the population was now largely Turkish. Still, the relative lack of cars, tourists, air pollution, noise (except from nocturnal dogs!), together with the great beauty of the mountains, the Mediterranean, the birds, lizards and orange and lemon trees, made it a splendid place to get on with some writing, which is what I wanted to do. Largely in order to meet a few people, I got a part-time job at the local university.

I had kept up some correspondence with Berlin, sometimes sending him an article or review of mine. His response to one of these might be worth mentioning. In this piece I had made some critical remarks about Jacques Derrida, at that time the most favoured French philosopher in the Anglo-American world. I had always found him pretentious and often hardly intelligible myself, and said something to that effect in a review of a book to which Derrida had contributed. To my delight, Berlin obviously felt something similar. ‘I’m glad you despise Derrida’, he wrote to me: ‘I think he may be a genuine charlatan, though a clever man.’ Of course, I didn’t actually *despise* Derrida, I just deeply regretted the extent of his baneful influence, which seemed to me to be a symptom of a deep contemporary malaise. But I was intrigued by Berlin’s notion of a *genuine* charlatan. Could there be, I wondered,

## ISAIAH BERLIN AND THE ‘HISTORY OF IDEAS’

charlatans who were not quite genuine ones, perhaps just pretending to be charlatans?

After about a year in Cyprus I returned to England for a vacation and Berlin invited me to tea at his house. What follows is my somewhat imaginative reconstruction of that occasion. Our conversation, however, is pretty close to what actually occurred (to ensure this I made some notes immediately after leaving him).

### TEA WITH ISAIAH

It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, mid-October, with the sun not shining and a look of hard wet rain in the clearness of the foothills. I was wearing my powder-blue suit, with dark blue shirt, tie and display handkerchief [...]. The main hallway of the Sternwood place was two stories high. Over the entrance doors, which would have let in a troop of Indian elephants, there was a broad stained-glass panel showing a knight in dark armor rescuing a lady who was tied to a tree [...]. There were French doors at the back of the hall [...]. On the east side of the hall a free staircase, tile-paved, rose to a gallery with a wrought-iron railing and another piece of stained-glass romance.

Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (New York, 1939), opening words

Somehow I was reminded of Philip Marlowe's visit to General Sternwood as I opened the gate leading to Headington House, about a mile and a half outside Oxford. But any similarities were slight. It was actually on a clear summer's afternoon in 1989. And I knew Berlin hadn't any daughters like the General's.

Built, I should guess, about 1820,<sup>24</sup> the three-story house was certainly what estate agents call, or used to call, 'a gentleman's residence'. The brass bell and other fittings on the double doors were obviously cleaned every day, and the front garden, with its spacious circular drive, was immaculately maintained. A prim lady in early middle age,<sup>25</sup> carrying keys on a chain, emerged from a side-door and enquired who I was. As I told her, I imagined she was regarding my suntan and my perfectly fitting, double-breasted, very light fawn suit (bearing the invisible label 'Osman, Nicosia' on the inside pocket) with approval. I didn't have a 'display handkerchief', but who does nowadays? We were soon in the

<sup>24</sup> [Actually 1783.]

<sup>25</sup> [Possibly Pat Utechin (1927–2008), Berlin's longtime private secretary. Otherwise Claudina Botelho, the Berlins' Portuguese cook and housekeeper.]

elegant hall. Not as big as Chandler's, but impressive enough. Nicely furnished. Some of the pieces might have been Venetian. A stone-flagged floor led, on the right, to a leisurely winding staircase with a resplendent polished teak handrail.

'Wait here a moment, sir,' she said, 'and I'll tell Sir Isaiah you've arrived. You're sure he's expecting you?'

'He should be,' I muttered, rather brusquely. With what I took to be a more sceptical glance at my suit, she vanished up the staircase.

Anticipating a full five-minute wait, as a standard part of the status ritual, I surveyed the spotless environment. Tapestries of some antiquity adorned the walls. A striking painting (which Berlin himself later described to me, somewhat philistinely, as 'School of Goya: no commercial value') hung above a small carved table upon which rested a hat of the kind Oxford dons wore in the 1930s. It looked new and had been well brushed. Berlin, now eighty, had enjoyed a most brilliant academic career. But it was clear that even the upkeep of these hallowed surroundings would far outstrip anything provided by his university pension. Evidently he had 'married well', as the saying goes.

To the left, near the open door of a room bathed in sunlight, an eyeless Grecian bust (perhaps of Pericles) strove, in vain, to stare at me.

After only three minutes Berlin came down the stairs. He was dressed, as always in my experience, in a dark suit with waistcoat and watch-chain in a style which would have passed unnoticed fifty years ago although now it was bordering on the ostentatious. Doubtless he had had the suit made last Christmas. (I thought of this apparel a few years later when, in a review of one of Berlin's books, Ernest Gellner maliciously referred to him as 'the Savile Row postmodernist'.)<sup>26</sup> We shook hands and he ushered me into a study on the ground floor.

I sat at one end of what might have been a Louis XV sofa (a bright copy in pastel colours and surprisingly comfortable) while he sat in what was obviously his usual armchair, a few feet away.

A room, perhaps twenty-five by twenty feet, looking on to the drive through Georgian windows. The walls of the study were completely lined with books, in various languages (not least of

<sup>26</sup> ['Sauce for the Liberal Goose' (review of John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*), *Prospect*, November 1995, 56–61 at 61.]

course in Russian), providing the requisite symbolism of erudition; though, on closer inspection, a predominance of many-volumed *Gesammelte Schriften* and *éditions complètes*, and the absence of paperbacks, or books piled on top of each other, or pieces of paper stuck between pages here and there, and all the other signs of ongoing scholarly activity, made one feel the study had either been created, or later purloined, for social effect rather than for work.

All the decor was in light colours. A state of the art TV, video and phone were prominent. (It was just a bit too early for expensive laptops to have become compulsory objects for display in the homes of the British upper classes; and, to the end of his life, Berlin always used a fairly ancient typewriter.)<sup>27</sup> All this was rather too tidy and poised for my taste. Yet the clinical cleanliness and juxtaposition of the traditional with the electronic was not, in its own way, unpleasing.

I knew he would have forgotten who exactly I was, so I wasn't surprised when he asked me where I had been before going to the Eastern Mediterranean University in Cyprus. I quickly reminded him of the salient points in my external life. All of a sudden he seemed to recognise me. We talked a little about the current situation in Cyprus. He was surprisingly well informed. Apparently he had met the then Greek and Turkish leaders – Glafcos Clerides and Rauf Denktash – sometime in the mid-1970s while attending a philosophical conference on the island.

We spoke briefly of Tony Flew, my first philosophy teacher and later colleague and friend, with whom I'd just been staying in nearby Reading. I asked him why Tony's Studentship (Fellowship) at Christ Church hadn't been renewed when he was a young Oxford don many years ago.

'I can't really recall the reasons,' said Berlin. 'It may have been something to do with Flew's atheism, but I don't know. He was a favourite pupil of Ryle's. Pity he had to make a name for himself outside Oxford. Whatever some people may say against Flew, he's an absolutely honest chap with the courage of his convictions. And he isn't a vain man, quite unlike some other philosophers one could mention.'

'Quite true,' I said.

<sup>27</sup> [Berlin did not type himself; his secretary used an electric typewriter.]

‘Take Freddie Ayer,’ Berlin continued. ‘People say you shouldn’t speak negatively about the dead, and Freddie’s dead now. But it seems to me that now’s the one time his vanity will be least affected. He was the best stylist in technical philosophy since Hume. Better than Russell. Extremely bright. And almost totally unoriginal. Everything in *Language, Truth and Logic* came from Vienna, you know. It was crude stuff and consequently a bestseller. His later books were all much better but equally unoriginal. He liked to mix work with pleasure, claiming he had slept with over three hundred women. I’m not sure this wasn’t something of an exaggeration, but it might not have been.’

‘That’s an awful lot of women,’ I said (thinking of my own meagre thirty or so).

‘One hundred would be a lot!’ retorted Berlin (with a degree of emphasis possibly resulting, I conjectured, from some half-acknowledged ancient envy).

‘I suppose it would be. But tell me,’ I went on, moving rapidly away from this unfruitful area, ‘was R.G. Collingwood vain?’

‘Oh yes, but perhaps he had some reasons to be. As you know, he was an archaeologist and leading expert on Roman Britain as well as a distinguished philosopher. Great friend of Benedetto Croce. Used to stay with him in Naples. At that time Croce dominated Italian culture to an almost unimaginable extent. Not Voltaire in eighteenth-century France, not Goethe in Germany a little later, not even Luther during the Reformation had the same hold over a nation as Croce had over Italy. Collingwood used to talk to me about Croce. He was deeply impressed by Croce’s wealth, independence and influence, at least as much, I gathered, as he was by Croce’s ideas. He didn’t like Oxford much. “These provincial college dons here,” Collingwood would say, “with their sycophantic conformities, their tepid tutoring of tiresome English public-school boys, how can they be supposed to understand anything? Think of a man of independent means, living in a truly cosmopolitan city, his time his own, surrounded by all the remains of antiquity, with an immediate *entrée* to all government departments, the highest social circles, friend and correspondent of the greatest intellects of Europe: compared with him, most of our Oxford colleagues are little more than servile crammers.”’

‘One can see his point,’ I said.

'Collingwood did philosophy largely in his own way, for the most part regarding his colleagues as intellectually a pretty unsophisticated lot. In this he was quite unjust to a number of them, of course. I gained much from his lectures as an undergraduate. I'd never heard of Vico until Collingwood mentioned him. Later, when I became a Fellow, he rather approved of me and used to come and see me in my rooms now and again, even though at that time I was, or thought I was, very much an "analytic" philosopher. But he told me I wasn't as bad as the rest, probably because I was Russian.'

'What was he like personally?'

'Gracious, sympathetic, a little over-self-obsessed. Very dapper in appearance. Bow tie, highly polished shoes, etc.'

'Who else influenced you when you were an undergraduate?'

'You might well ask. Hardie, my tutor, was one. Nobody remembers him now. Wrote a book on Plato which few people read even then. But he was a great mental disciplinarian. Wouldn't let you get away with the slightest obscurity or intellectual slovenliness. This was very good for me. I attended Price's lectures on perception and profited from them.'

'Ryle?'

'Up to a point, yes.'

'How about Wittgenstein?'

'Well, of course, everyone was affected by Wittgenstein, whether they knew it or not. He was a great genius, an original philosopher of almost unique distinction. Bit of a charlatan personally, of course, but everyone tolerated that. I met him only once when I gave a paper to the Moral Sciences Club in Cambridge. It was 12 June 1940. Where were you then?'

'I was a very small boy in Doncaster.'

'Still, you may remember what a state of crisis England was in at that time. Dunkirk had just happened. Everything was in a paroxysm of uncertainty. I was soon to go and do my own bit in the war. When I arrived at Cambridge no one seemed to realise there was a war on at all. Everything was calm and collected and seemingly insulated from the rest of the world. I got to the room where I was to read my paper, appropriately enough on "Other Minds", and all the great Cambridge philosophers (except Russell, who was in America) were there: Moore, Braithwaite, Ewing, Wisdom – a distinguished gathering. I read my paper and



Braithwaite began to formulate some objections. He had spoken only a few sentences when an irritated voice with a strong Austrian accent broke in. “No, no, don’t zay it like zat to him. Let *me* zay it!” Braithwaite immediately stood aside. The room became hushed, the atmosphere tense. And Wittgenstein – who was a very good-looking chap, incidentally – proceeded to demolish my argument by means of ingenious counterexamples. Afterwards he shook my hand warmly and said he’d enjoyed it a lot. When he left the room his entourage of disciples followed him. Later I was told that, compared with what he usually did to visiting philosophers, he had treated me kindly. He told Braithwaite I was a very bad philosopher but a nice fellow who didn’t try to show off.’

‘When you were a young don you must have met Ernst Cassirer, who, I believe, escaped from Germany in 1933 and spent some time at All Souls.’

‘Oh yes, I knew him. He resigned from Hamburg, where he was Rector, as Hitler came to power, and spent two years at All Souls – then six in Sweden, and finally four years at Yale and Columbia. Never returned to Germany. He was an outstanding historian not only of philosophy but of European ideas more generally. When he first arrived at Oxford he could read English but couldn’t really speak it. So he lectured in German. Those of us who knew German attended. He seemed to know everything: not only about the history of philosophy, ancient, medieval and especially renaissance, as well as modern, but about the philosophy of science, aesthetics, about mythology, German literature – you name it. However, he was not in tune with our way of doing philosophy, which was, as you know, at that time rapidly developing into what became known as “analytic” or “linguistic” philosophy. For example, if someone asked Cassirer: “If it could be shown that there were no synthetic a priori judgements wouldn’t Kant’s whole programme collapse?”, he would smile sweetly and say “That’s a very interesting question”, and then just carry on as before. His particular form of idealism was something he, in effect, took for granted. His aim was to construct a vast perspective on human history, life, and cultural achievements based upon it.’

At that moment the study door suddenly opened and Berlin rose saying, ‘My wife.’

I rose too and shook hands with an angular, tallish woman, thin and probably in her early seventies. She eyed me with what seemed to be a fierce indifference. I imagined she wasn't used to having to compromise and might have an aptitude for hard bargaining. She had on that sort of expensive braided two-piece and, in moderation, jewellery that some older women use as a power-substitute for looks. Once she may very well have been quite pretty. In any case, Aline Berlin, the daughter of baron Pierre de Gunzbourg, retained a certain old-world aristocratic demeanour I found a trifle disconcerting.

'I need this room, you know,' she purported to remind Berlin. 'I must use the desk and other things.'

Thinking this might be my cue to go, I offered to take my leave.

'No, no, don't go,' he said. 'You may have the room,' he told her. 'And we will go elsewhere. Would you like some tea?' he asked me. 'Right, we'll have some tea,' he informed his wife (somewhat turning the tables, I thought). He led me back into the hall, past a positively smirking Grecian, and into a delightful little parlour, furnished in the usual impeccable manner.

A gentleman's gentleman (whom I took to be Italian, though I believe now he was actually Portuguese)<sup>28</sup> wearing a dark jacket brought in various sorts of tea in various sorts of pots on a silver tray. There was also hot water, small packets of Nescafé, a variety of chocolate biscuits, plus the usual milk and sugar. I opted for china tea and a biscuit. Berlin had nothing.

He talked about how people who criticised his work often got very personal about it, something he naturally found upsetting. He mentioned how Karl Popper had recently written a rather odd letter to him imploring him not to sign any petitions either for or against the Rushdie affair.

'Popper also claims that he has recently made important discoveries in quantum mechanics.'

'What kind of discoveries?' I asked incredulously.

'Who knows?' he replied with a smile. 'He's obviously going dotty. It's only to be expected, of course. He's even older than me. Must be eighty-six.'

We talked about his lectures on 'Some Sources of Romanticism', delivered and recorded in Washington in 1965 and

<sup>28</sup> [The Portuguese Casimiro Botelho, husband of Claudina (p. 21 above, note), the Berlins' Figaro.]

later broadcast by the BBC. Apparently they had been repeated on Radio 3 quite recently, but I hadn't been in the country to hear them. A great pity, I told him, because listening to them on the radio back in 1966 had been a most memorable experience. He smiled (though I felt he hardly remembered it was my original hearing of these lectures that led to my first letter to him all those years ago). He said he was seriously thinking of writing them up properly as a book, with some additional material.

'But I've become incredibly lazy about writing and, indeed, to some extent about reading. We're off to Italy soon and I'm taking loads of books with me. But I can't guarantee I'll read even one of them. It's a good thing I've got the services of that amiable chap, Henry Hardy, to sort out most of my writings and get them into book form. Yet I have my doubts about the public value of his going to all that trouble.'

'Believe me,' I assured him, 'Hardy's doing an excellent job, and we are all looking forward with real interest to each collection of your essays as they come out. (It seemed strange that he genuinely seemed to need this assurance. But I think he did. Modesty, bordering on real self-doubt, was one of his characteristics.)

We talked about the now vast literature, both old and new, on romanticism, and I asked him if he'd ever come across an article by Croce called something like 'Vico and the History of Modern Philosophy', an article, I said, that did for Vico something like Valéry's essays on Descartes did for Descartes. He couldn't recall the article offhand but asked me to send him a copy (which I did, a week later).

He pointed out that although, as a liberal, he was regularly attacked here and in America, both from the right and from the left, since the new attitude in Russia he was now apparently firmly in favour over there.

'Russian Ambassador's been here twice recently,' he reported, with irrepressible satisfaction. 'For some reason I've also been awarded a prestigious prize in Italy.<sup>29</sup> They rang me to say they were giving me the prize and all I had to do was to deliver a lecture to them on "industrial society". I told them that since I know

<sup>29</sup> This was the Agnelli Prize, awarded to him in 1988, in fact for his supposed 'contribution to the ethical understanding of advanced societies'. For a somewhat different account of this episode see Michael Ignatieff's *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (London, 1998), 284.

nothing about industrial society they'd better not give me the prize. No, no, they said. It's all decided. Just lecture on anything you like, in English, and no one will notice. So I did. And, true enough, no one noticed I wasn't talking about industrial society!

'When you lecture, some of the sentences are so superbly constructed that you must work on them beforehand?'

'I never work on sentences. *Never*. For one lecture I write out at first perhaps seventy pages of ideas, quotes etc. I eventually condense this down to about seven pages, and I walk into the lecture hall with something like a postcard with just a few points written on it. I may also bring along a few quotations. Then I begin, very nervously, and somehow it all pours out, more or less coherently.'

'What about other writers? Which ones would you say had influenced your own way of writing?'

'I am aware of one influence only: my hero Alexander Herzen. And, of course, I read him in Russian. So what he does to my English I can't be sure about.'

'Do you find that age brings wisdom? I mean do you feel wiser, even intellectually more confident, now than you did, say, forty or fifty years ago?'

'Not in the least. I'm even more confused in some ways. Take reason. What is rationality? Following a deductive argument, yes. Relating means to ends, yes. But what else is it? People think there is more to it than that. But I can't tell them what it is. I don't know what to say about human rights either. We know we've got them, but it's very hard to say what they are.'

I passed out with him into the hall. When I remarked how much I liked the 'Goya' he characterised it as nice but financially worthless. A curious assessment, I thought. I asked him if I could call round about the same time next year.

'Yes, of course, and for a bit longer – if I'm alive.'

The manservant held open the front door, and just before I passed him I glanced again at Pericles, but his expression was now Sphinx-like in the shadow.

#### POSTSCRIPT

I never managed actually to meet Isaiah Berlin again. Until his death in 1997 we exchanged occasional notes. Among other things, I told him something more about my new preoccupation

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with the international politics of Cyprus, which I believe he found interesting. Although it may seem strange to say this, I probably felt I knew enough of him as a real person. I felt no need to supplement or deepen the image of him I already had. Unlike me, he was an upper-middle-class intellectual, of great distinction and many personal charms, with, in addition, acquired wealth, living a very full social life, not quite as he described Croce's, but certainly one in which diplomats, politicians, statesmen (not least Israeli statesmen), musicians, theatre directors, distinguished writers, poets as well as novelists, and not merely academics, were prominent. This was not exactly my own scene, though I had enjoyed briefly entering it. On balance, I preferred simply to continue reading him in the shade of my jacaranda tree.

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