

Isaiah Berlin

‘Greek Orthodox or Armenian?’ The voice of Isaiah Berlin, when I told him I had been to Istanbul to meet the patriarch, was soft, swift and challenging; and it showed what the rest of the evening would be like, which it was. That was in Oxford in 1952. It was a perfectly fair question, and a friendly one, but its speed floored me, and for forty years and more I was content mainly to listen, which suited us both. I have always been good at listening, though not always at showing it, and Berlin was above all a voice.

His appearance mattered rather little. Someone once said he looked like a Russian clown with the eyes of a headmaster, but you used your ears rather than your eyes when you were with him, and the title of his book *The Magus of the North* might have been meant for him, since a magus or mage is a wise man who comes from afar. The word has a hint of the magician about it, too, as he did. When he died in November 1997, aged eighty-eight, the first thought was that one would never hear the sound of him again.

That, happily, is not strictly true. So much has survived in recording, including whole lectures, that the world might still listen if it chose, and it probably will. No need, then, to say much about the legendary rapidity of his delivery, which was praeternatural, like an academic version of Noël Coward – forcefully staccato but uninterrupted by any need to take breath, apparently, since he talked while breathing in as well as out. No need to describe his accent, either, which was less foreign than wildly idiosyncratic; and no need to speak of his instant rejoinders, like asking which patriarch, since they are the stuff of a thousand anecdotes. His talk was internationally famous. He was the champion. At dinner in a Cambridge college he was once carefully seated beside Richard Braithwaite, a philosopher locally credited with the ability to outtalk anyone. Both rose to the challenge, talking rapidly at the same time, till after some minutes Braithwaite’s voice faltered to a halt. The Oxford visitor triumphed over him and then turned to address his neighbour on the other side.

Berlin’s memory, too, was vast in several languages, and he could cap any quotation. When an affliction of the vocal chords diminished his volume in the 1980s, though not his speed, he remarked sadly that the doctors had found no cure for it, so I cheerfully quoted Hilaire Belloc:

They answered as they took their fees,
and he instantly completed the couplet:

There is no cure for this disease.

He did it with a good-natured air, as always. But, as always, he had had the last word. You never got the edge.

Fast talk was the Oxford style in post-war years, if not earlier, and Berlin was its most eminent exponent for a good half century. He was the fastest

tongue in the West, and in a wide variety of languages. Born in Riga in 1909, in Tsarist Latvia, where his father was a timber-merchant of some affluence, and brought up in St Petersburg, or rather Petrograd, where his Jewish family withdrew as the German imperial army advanced after 1914, he commonly spoke Russian and German as a boy. His mother was a woman of musical interests, at once a good soprano and an excellent manager of family affairs. Leonard Schapiro, another Latvian and eventually, as a London professor, the historian of the Bolshevik party, belonged to a family that had made a similar move, and used to speak of Mrs Berlin as almost a mother to himself. Together, as small boys in Petrograd, they watched two revolutions in 1917, their families greeting the first with delight, when Kerensky overthrew the Tsar in February and set up a provisional government. Lenin's revolution nine months later drove them to England, where Isaiah arrived in his twelfth year speaking only a few words of English. A fellow-schoolboy in London, he used to tell, tried to bully him, misled by his name into thinking him German, but the other boys prevented it. Then Oxford, his home for almost seventy years, where after 1932 he taught first philosophy and then intellectual history, with a Fellowship at All Souls, marrying a Frenchwoman in his late forties.

Oxford was his lifelong theatre. He greatly preferred it to Cambridge, which he found remote and unworldly. In the early summer of 1940, he used to claim, he had read a paper there as France fell. Oxford was agog with the tragic news. Cambridge, so he would say, had not even heard of it. Perhaps he allowed too little to the natural reticence of the place; at all events, he visited it infrequently. The last time I saw him there was in November 1984, when he came to hear his old friend Alfred Brendel, a pianist he greatly admired, lecturing on 'Does classical music have to be extremely serious?', delivered with comic illustrations from the piano. Composed in Berlin's summer home in Italy, it was mainly concerned with musical jokes in Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, and Berlin enjoyed it hugely. But he had earlier declined to look at a portrait I had there of Michael Speransky, an enlightened prime minister of Russia during the Napoleonic wars and a character in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* – an oil painting I had no room for. The story, however, had a happy ending. He urged me to put it into a London auction-room, saw it there on a visit while looking for something else, liked it and bought it. I remain wholly convinced that it suited his collection better than mine.

His aptitudes were various and prodigious, and seemingly cost him no effort. Theory – or anti-theory – never looked more amusing than in his hands. He was not a hard-working man, he would say, but pleasure-loving, never top of his class at school, and never learned Latin or Greek, beyond a little, though he seemed to speak and read all the great modern languages of Europe, not to mention (one may assume) Latvian – no doubt with the same eccentricity with which he spoke English. Leonard Schapiro used to say he was the same at eight as at eighty, which is hard to believe. He meant that all his life he was plump, many-sided in his interests, and voluble. When

Pasternak's *Dr Zhivago* appeared in English in 1958, to immense acclaim, I remember Berlin remarking casually that the Italian version was better. But then he had known Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova in Moscow in 1945; in fact she addressed poems to him. He was seemingly indifferent to food, wine and scenery. As for music, he adored it, but though he often said Bach was the greatest composer that had ever lived, his after-dinner records were more often Rossini, Verdi and Puccini. Schubert held a deep place in his affections. If he had not thought romanticism so variously and inconsistently defined as to be in some danger of becoming an incoherent and nebulous concept – it was a topic on which he wrote and lectured a lot in his last years – one might have dared to call him a romantic. Perhaps one should call him that in any case.

His acquaintance was vast. He appeared to know everyone, whether in academe, politics or the arts, and they him. During the war, as he loved to tell, Winston Churchill, who had admired his dispatches from the British embassy in Washington, addressed a series of solemn questions to Irving Berlin over lunch at Ten Downing Street in the spring of 1944, invited there under a natural misapprehension – ‘Will President Roosevelt be re-elected, do you think?’ and ‘When do you expect the European war to end?’ – and stumped off indignantly when the song-writer told him how proud he would be to tell his children, when he returned to New York, that the prime minister of Great Britain had asked him such questions. By his thirties he was so famous that you could think he was there even when he was not.

He adored meeting celebrities, but seemed to delight in all manner of company, perhaps because he greatly preferred talking to writing. Like many authors he hated his desk, and dictation was his preferred mode of composition. The honours that flowed in upon him – international prizes, honorary doctorates, a knighthood, the Order of Merit and the presidency of the British Academy – were all joyous events, as honours should be. He was as famous in the United States and in Israel as at home, and when he turned eighty, in June 1989, there was a public celebration attended by the great and the good, its guest of honour enjoying the occasion unashamedly and as much as anyone.

He loved England, where he had chosen out of all the world to live, as the most civilised and tolerant of societies – ‘fundamentally liberal and unshakable’ – with different people, he would say, pursuing different ideals in different ways, as if to illustrate his own rootedly pluralistic vision of virtue, and ‘left to go wrong in their own ways, provided they do not obstruct others.’ That, as long ago as the 1720s, had been the vision of another famous continental refugee in England called Voltaire, and Berlin had much in common with him. A latter-day Enlightenment man, he wrote and lectured amusingly and endlessly on freedom – a sort of Voltaire of the jet age – and his love of England was fully returned. He was a Voltaire who did not go home.

His name rang out, on both sides of the Atlantic, above all as a lecturer, and always before enormous audiences. No hall was big enough. His style was tense and incandescent, at once nervous and supremely confident. Speaking from notes he had carefully boiled down from forty pages to ten,

then to three, and finally to a mere page of headlines to pull him through, he would fix his eyes obsessively on the upper right-hand corner of the ceiling and talk at high speed for about an hour, like a Niagara unleashed. His nervousity was infectious, and it left both him and his audience in a state of high excitement. ‘Was I all right?’ he once asked me after a lecture, and I assured him that he was. ‘When I am about to lecture I tell myself: I must be calm, I must be tranquil, I must control myself – but it’s no use.’ Repetition was in any case characteristic of his diction, as if he had absorbed Lewis Carroll’s adage ‘What I tell you three times is true.’ One repetition, somehow, would not do. It was too weak. Of an erring colleague he once remarked, in his defence: ‘He is benevolent, benevolent, benevolent.’

What audiences heard, and knew that they had heard, was the voice of Europe.

Perhaps the tradition of the European intellectual refugee in Britain is worth a moment’s pause, since it is a land with an unearned reputation for insularity. That is no doubt because it is an island. It is an extremely hospitable island, however, as Karl Marx discovered in 1849, and three years later Alexander Herzen, the Russian revolutionary Berlin most deeply admired. As Sigmund Freud illustrated years later, in 1938, England is where many of the great innovative thinkers finally come to work and to die. The effects upon their chosen land are profound. English theory was never insular, and in the 1930s it turned irreversibly cosmopolitan. Lenin’s seizure of power, and later Hitler’s, spilled many thousands on the British shore, and by the 1940s the intellectual influence of central and eastern Europe on London literary life, and on academe, had largely replaced the traditional fascination of France. Art historians brought Aby Warburg’s library from Hamburg to London after his death and transformed the study of Renaissance art; Wittgenstein and Popper reshaped British philosophy; and Arthur Koestler, a Hungarian ex-Communist fresh from a Franco prison in Spain, landed around the beginning of the second world war and was befriended by George Orwell, who had recently fought in a civil war there. Freud, already a dying man, joined his daughter Anna in London after the Anschluss in 1938, bringing possessions from Vienna as well as a tradition, including a famous sofa. Totalitarian persecution – first Bolshevik, then Nazi, then Francoist – was by then the common talk of the British press and the British literary world; and when Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* appeared in 1949, a few years after the liberation of Hitler’s death-camps, the stark tragedy of the European experiment in total state power was no abstraction. It had been lived for years by people one knew, by friends made, by stories heard.

Berlin himself, whose two grandfathers had been murdered by the Nazis, did not readily speak of such matters, and they form almost no part of his writings except by implication. To mention the Holocaust in his hearing, or the Soviet camp system that preceded it and served as its model, was to sense a moment of embarrassment and a call for a quick change of subject. The reasons are likely to have been various. His sensibilities were in any case delicate, and his abundant sense of fun masked, one might reasonably guess,

an acute vulnerability. He was one of the funniest of men, but the fun was not there for fun, or not only for that, and those who exploited the most terrible events of the century to titillate their readers and their audiences must have shocked him, though I never heard him say so.

One seldom, then, asked his views of such issues; and to do so was usually to be told that there were others who knew better. That was often so. Though vastly well read he was not, in the strictest sense of the word, a scholar, whether in pretension or in fact. He was a savant, a type that the inexorable march of specialist scholarship had already by the 1930s rendered an endangered species and which has since become all but extinct. Perhaps Lionel Trilling is the nearest American equivalent. His passion was for general ideas rather than for specificities, and he was inclined to lose interest in what he had written after drafting and dictating it – mislaying it in a bottom drawer, perhaps – and certainly disinclined to equip it with footnotes; and he read books rather than learned articles. When in 1977, in *Politics and Literature*, I examined the long, unique and neglected socialist tradition of racialism and genocide, he was surprised by what I had found in early Marxist journalism – ‘I had no idea Marx and Engels went as far as that,’ he remarked of their genocidal proposals, candidly accepting that he had not read them through; and when I asked his view of Hitler’s probable debt to Marxism and its exterminatory traditions, he implied some distaste for the whole enterprise. The mind of a mere thug was unworthy, he very likely felt, of any such analysis. It is a sentiment to be understood, and one that has largely protected National Socialism, for over half a century, from the searching eye of the intellectual historian. Marx’s contribution to Nazism is not an enticing topic, so it is no wonder if the easy assumption that racialism is largely or wholly right-wing continues, unexamined, to flourish.

Large events, in any case, like revolutions and massacres, were hardly his hunting-ground. In conversation he preferred anecdotes, and his forte as a teacher was for general ideas excitedly but sceptically considered. He did not believe in much among the world’s great dogmas. His attachment to Judaism was purely tribal, though he is said to have celebrated Passover with his mother while she lived. His older contemporary E.M. Forster, another troubled figure of the late Enlightenment, once famously wrote that he did not believe in Belief – meaning, as Berlin might have meant if he had made the remark, that he distrusted absolute and all-embracing dogmas like immutable laws of history. It was the prime task of his life to expose and demolish such dogmas, and he went about it with a vengeance. The twentieth century, starting out in high promise, had wilfully wrecked itself by surrendering to the fallacies of small bands of shallow thinkers owing a thoughtless and irrational allegiance to nineteenth-century theorists – Anarchists, Positivists, Marxists, Nietzscheans – whom their own age had, on the whole, sensibly disregarded or, at most, seen as no more than a passing diversion. The bedsitter revolutionary of one age can so easily become the butcher of the next. But the mind of Europe, he believed, if summoned in due time – the enlightened mind of Diderot, of Kant

and of Goethe – can still expose the fallacies of murderous sages who had tried to block the road between the Enlightenment and us and to turn Europe into an abattoir for entire races and classes.

That claim came to look stronger as he aged. The emergence of the 1960s New Left, an obscenity too extravagant to mock, showed that there was some urgency, after all, in what he had to say; and his defence of negative liberty, as he called it – freedom from rather than freedom to – which in 1958 had been the theme of his *Two Concepts of Liberty*, looked more urgent than ever in the age of the Cuban crisis and the Vietnam war, when an intelligentsia reared on tolerance, and sustained by state funds, chanted the names of foreign dictators under the generous protection of liberal states.

It is seldom easy, as he knew, to be sceptical without cynicism, at least for long, and perhaps cynicism did touch his middle and later years. Or was it just a part of his fundamental love of laughter? Derision, at all events, was a principal element in his rhetoric, and his seminar on Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the Oxford of the 1950s, as I remember, was a diverting diatribe against anyone who thinks he understands the laws of history – any laws, as he believed, beyond the merely truistic. This was theory at its most iconoclastic. Though his passion was all for general ideas, it was a passion where fascination mingled with cheerful contempt. Perhaps that was inevitable. In the realm of modern controversy, at least, most general ideas are incomplete or downright false, sometimes dangerously so, and the spirit of negation haunts all critical enterprise. Berlin was too genial to be unreservedly called a cynic, and he heartily enjoyed the clash of ideas. But, like Karl Popper and C.S. Lewis, he thought most fashionable dogmas bunk, and dangerous bunk at that. The surge of derisive anecdotes was a constant entertainment to his listeners; it was also, by implication, an act of dismissal. If critics cannot begin to agree on what romanticism is, there is not much use in the concept. Specific questions may have their answers, but those who imagine they have found a single answer to the totality of the human condition, like sexual repression or the class war, had better be off; and in 1953, in his most famous essay, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, he created a powerful and unforgettable image of the folly of supposing that there is a key to all human understanding and that it is a duty, as Tolstoy vainly imagined, to seek it out. No doubt that echoes a lifelong horror of totalitarianism. If so, it involves a confusion, perhaps, though not one that invalidates his wider contention that it is better to know many things, like the fox, than to be a hedgehog who knows only one. There is no reason to think Lenin and Hitler were hedgehogs. One can believe in a one-party state and world conquest without believing that all virtues are compatible, and the great dictators of the age would surely have been puzzled by the accusation. True, they believed they had found in class or race the key to all human history – to the underlying laws that explain how mankind has evolved and how it will progress. It does not follow that they believed class or race explained everything in human behaviour, from day to day.

Berlin's secular liberalism, impregnable as it was, grew more conservative

with the years without ever quite losing itself in conservatism. That, after all, is the classic position of the refugee intellectual, as the years pass, and it is to be respected as well as understood. He knew the deep perils of triumphant ideology, and behind the demo he heard the cannon and the gun.

His great gift was for fiery exposition, and even the dullest of authors, stylistically speaking, like Kant's anti-Enlightenment adversary J.G. Hamann – an author whom even the most persevering of German researchers might find all but impenetrable – could turn to magic in his hands. 'Long as your sentences are,' an American visitor to Oxford once told him, in a compliment he rightly cherished, 'they always seem short.' The very survival of *The Magus of the North*, to tell the truth, was almost miraculous, since Berlin had lectured on Hamann at Columbia as long ago as 1965 and had long since been convinced that his notes were lost. Their rediscovery by his devoted editor Henry Hardy must have seemed wonderful to him, since he often reproached himself for his indolence – by which he meant no more than that he preferred reading and conversation to authorship, especially to authorship at any length. He had scarcely written a book at all since *Karl Marx* in 1939, his first, composed in his late twenties, his natural form being the single lecture or the long, roomy essay like his studies of Tolstoy, Vico and Herder. The *Magus*, which appeared in 1993, is a very short book, to be sure. But it is a book. It is also a little masterpiece. Incomplete as a draft but completed, with great editorial ingenuity, from recorded readings in the author's voice, some of them fragmentary, it is that improbable voice that you hear as you read. Characteristically generous of Berlin to give so ample an account of the intellectual enemy he called irrationalism, which Hamann exemplified, and the device works. The Enlightenment never looked more majestic than in the hands of one of its most dedicated adversaries. Along with a succession of Berlin's collected essays, all widely reviewed and read, and culminating in an anthology called *The Proper Study of Mankind*, the book guaranteed to him in old age a perpetuity of repute.

'I am like a taxi,' he would say, to excuse the lack of a great work, 'and I have to be hailed.' Perhaps he found it hard to accept that the essay, as a philosophical form, is often better as well as easier than a book. It encourages economy; and if Grand Theory is interesting rather than true, then the point is best made briefly, again and again and against many targets. His writings look well designed for an age of theory-credulity, for a century almost destroyed by rash Isms. There has never been an age like it, after all, in its disposition to take on and cast off general answers with such rapidity, and it ends with an intelligentsia shamed, as it should be, by its own infinite gullibility. Berlin was the great demolisher of Isms, whether in politics or critical theory. He was a sceptic even of scepticism.

The utopian fallacies he fought were the property of adolescent intellectuals, on the whole, not of professional philosophers, and his name will in all likelihood live as a polemicist rather than as an original thinker. One analytical philosopher, resolutely unimpressed by his lectures, once candidly told me

they left him as unsatisfied as a Chinese lunch, and his memory survives as a great original rather than as one who was greatly original. As for his writings, they belong to a composite liberal tradition, at once continental and British, where a cosmopolitan grasp of sources combines, almost uniquely, with a British love of laughter. On the other hand, it is hard to believe that many people became liberals by reading him or listening to him. His mind was too detached, early and late, to start a crusade or to join one. He thought the modern world, under the malign influence of misguided intellectuals, had gone wrong, but though he laboured to expose their errors he did not think himself the man to put the world to rights. Action was not his thing, though he spent much of his middle years on committees and in 1967 became the first President of Wolfson College in Oxford – ‘one can do so much with a secretary’ – and, it is said, a successful one. ‘I sit in a Victorian house in north Oxford all day long agonising, agonising, agonising.’

Meanwhile his doctrine of the fundamental incompatibility of human ideals, summed up in the title ‘The Crooked Timber of Humanity’, a phrase borrowed from Kant, is a doctrine only important to the extent that it is doubted or denied, and few professional philosophers are likely to doubt or deny it. It is a message to fanatics and militants, and to accept it is to feel puzzled and vulnerable rather than defiant, wondering – as old militants often do – how they had ever been silly enough to think otherwise. When the hedgehog discovers the poverty of theory, as the Marxist historian E.P. Thompson did, he is left feeling defeated and sad.

By now the problem is different. Tolstoy was a fox, in his abundant sense of reality, who had perversely wanted to be a hedgehog – to construct a single moral ideal out of the complex world he knew – dying, in the end, ‘a desperate old man, beyond human aid.’ That is a deathless image, like Lear on the heath. But to an age of multiculturalism and post-structuralism it has less to say. With the fading of Marx and Freud, and with the self-declared impotence of philosophers and critics to find a theoretical basis for agreed judgements in morality and the arts, advanced opinion turned foxy long before Berlin died. The fox has won, all the way, and anyone nowadays who claims in a seminar to have discovered the key to knowledge can expect, at best, a reaction of tolerant amusement. ‘Are you an absolutist?’ The modern fox, moreover, is not (like Tolstoy) a tormented being. In fact he rejoices in his foxiness, in his lack of a single all-explaining answer, and would feel constrained at the thought that there could ever be one. Who wants to be a hedgehog now?

Berlin was one of the prime creators of that mood. Early and late he offered no drum to march to, no flag to fly. Contradiction is the essence of the human condition. ‘Values may easily clash within the breast of an individual,’ he told an audience in Turin opera house in 1988, on accepting the Agnelli prize, ‘and it does not follow that, if they do, some must be true and others false.’ The search for perfection, he went on, is a recipe for bloodshed. Mankind cannot at once be just and merciful, since mercy and justice often conflict. No society can practise liberty and equality, since no

one forced to be equal can be free. In short, utopia is conceptually as well as practically impossible.

All that might leave one feeling there is nothing to be done, or at least that it is not clear that there is anything to be done. I do not suppose Berlin would have accepted that conclusion in just that form. The end of Grand Theory still leaves theories. The death of utopia still leaves choices to be made; you still have to choose which patriarch, Greek Orthodox or Armenian. When he died in Oxford in November 1997, the shock of the news was compounded with the sense that it was the first commonplace thing one had known him to have done. It was not like him to fall silent, or to be ordinary, or to leave without laughter.

SAMPLE