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Tribute by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

It is felicitous, it seems to me, that this American remembrance is taking place here at the British Embassy in Washington. For it was in this city, well over half a century ago, that Katharine Graham and I and many others met the brilliant young Embassy attaché who, to so marked a degree, thereafter changed our lives.

I first encountered Isaiah in the winter of 1942–3. He was then only thirty-three years old. One was startled from the beginning by the glittering rush of words and wit, the dazzling command of ideas, the graceful and unforced erudition, the penetrating assessments of personalities, the passion for music, the talent for merriment and, most remarkable of all, the generosity of spirit that led him to treat all of us as his intellectual equals. He had the exciting quality of *intensifying* life so that one perceived more and thought more and understood more.

Isaiah had arrived in Washington by bureaucratic accident. He spoke Russian, and in 1940 the Foreign Office sent him to New York en route to the British Embassy in Moscow as press attaché. But the Moscow embassy decided it had no need for Isaiah's services. Stranded in the United States, he did some jobs for the Ministry of Information in New York before going back to Oxford.

There, in November 1940, he was surprised one day by a notice from the Ministry that he had overstayed his home leave. He discovered to his astonishment that, though no one had bothered to inform him, he had been appointed to the Ministry's New York office. He returned to New York and in the spring of 1942 was transferred to the Washington embassy and charged with writing weekly reports on political developments in the United States.

He protested his lack of qualifications, but in fact, long before he first came here, he had shown a sympathetic interest in America. This may be the time and place to say a few words about Isaiah and the United States. He had greatly enjoyed the American pupils who had come his way at Oxford, recalling 'the openness, the responsiveness, the warmth, the uninhibited natural candour of American students and colleagues.' He also had, in his words, an 'unbroken addiction [to American magazines], perhaps somewhat rare in England in those days, especially in academic circles.' He had been a subscriber to the *New Yorker* and *Time*, the latter since his first term at Oxford in 1928. He was by temperament an Americanophile.

I once asked him whom among all the philosophers of the ages he would most like to have known. He answered promptly, 'David Hume and William James.' As a philosopher, he was of course in the Humean tradition of empiricism, skepticism, genial irony and historical reference. And he shared with William James not only verbal lucidity and elegance but a profound aversion to monism in all forms, a rejection of the idea that there is a single system of value and knowledge in which all conflicts are harmonized and resolved.

His years in Washington confirmed him in his view of the benefits of pragmatism in political affairs. He was delighted by the young men and women of the New Deal and exhilarated by the spirit and effectiveness of Franklin D. Roosevelt's humane experimentalism. The New Deal, he later said, was 'the most constructive compromise between individual liberty and economic security which our own time has witnessed'. He regarded FDR as 'the most genuine and unswerving spokesman of democracy of his time, the most contemporary, the most outward-looking, the boldest, most imaginative, most large-spirited, free from the obsessions of an inner life, with an unparalleled capacity for creating confidence in the power of his insight, his foresight, and his capacity genuinely to identify himself with the ideals of humble people'. As Roger Hausheer writes in the introduction to the recently published Berlin anthology *The Proper Study of Mankind*, 'Berlin has always been an enthusiastic New Dealer – a natural allegiance, surely, for an objective pluralist.' His love and hope for America survived even the vicissitudes of the post-war years.

An 'objective pluralist' – this phrase refers to Isaiah's conviction that human values are objective but pluralistic; that is, that they are real, public and authentic but they are diverse and very often incompatible, clashing, irreconcilable. The delusion that ultimate ends can be merged into a single majestic monolithic architectonic philosophical bloc – this, he believed, is the perennial source of fanaticism, destruction, bloodshed and misery in human history. From this standpoint he attacked the other great delusions that have bedeviled humankind – relativism, that values are subjective, mere matters of taste, more or less equally valid; and determinism, that the individual is the slave of vast anonymous historical forces.

Because ultimate ends are so often in conflict, human beings are confronted by the agony of choice. Here Isaiah added a darker dimension that one misses in those other great anti-monists, the ironical Hume and the ebullient James. 'If you choose one value, you must sacrifice another,' Isaiah said. '... No gain could be made without a corresponding loss.' Choice imposes costs.

The ineluctable clash of values is tragic in its implication and its effect. At the same time, it places a premium on tolerance and compromise in human affairs. But tolerance and compromise, Isaiah emphasized, do not enjoin appeasement and capitulation. In the sentence he liked so much from Joseph Schumpeter: 'To realize the relative validity of one's convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian.'

Isaiah was above all a most civilised man in this horribly uncivilised century – the 'most terrible century in Western history', he called it. Wise, brave, kind, unaffected, an exemplar of moral courage, unalterably committed to the politics of decency, he was himself a stirring prediction of what a truly civilised world might be.

Now he is lost to us. But in a way we can never lose him. He is imperishable in memory. Those who are loved are never entirely lost. As for myself, I would borrow a phrase from President Kennedy and say only, ‘Ich bin ein Berliner.’