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Tribute by Robert Silvers

When I was told of this memorial in Washington, I thought of the first long talk I had with Isaiah not far from here at the old Wardman Park Hotel when he was giving the Mellon lectures nearly thirty-three years ago. The New York Review had fairly recently been started, and I'd asked him to review a book, and he replied that he knew the author much too well for that, but that if I came to Washington, we could meet. So around four o'clock on a spring afternoon I went to the Wardman Park to see Aline and Isaiah, and found him reading an article on Trotsky in the New York Review by Philip Rahv, then editor of the Partisan Review, and it turned out that Isaiah knew Rahv and had an acute knowledge of the ex-Trotskyists and other intellectuals of the Partisan Review circle.

And did I realise, he said, that Rahv was one of the few people in that circle or indeed in America who had a close sense of the life and work of the Russian critic Vissarion Belinsky, and that if one was to understand Rahv's radicalism and his frustrations with American political life, and his interests in Henry James and T. S. Eliot, one would do well to understand the radicalism and frustrations and aestheticism of Belinsky in the 1840s?

And how different Rahv was, Isaiah said, from such a pure and sublimely learned scholar and critic as his friend Meyer Shapiro; and how different they both were from Edmund Wilson, with his wholly justified dislike for current literary theory, and with his marvellous ability to see works of literature as coming out of a social setting and out of a writer's personal history that he had himself brilliantly reconstructed. And, as he went on, I realised that Isaiah, from his Washington days and Harvard days, and his own original insights, had constructed one of the most penetrating pictures of the very different intellectual and political elements of the American scene that I had ever heard, or would, I rightly suspected, ever hear; and suddenly four hours had passed, and it was nearly eight o'clock, and Aline mentioned that they would be late for dinner.

As with so many others, I had been caught up in a flow of observations so interesting and instructive and funny, and so patient with my own ignorance, that they seemed indescribable, until some time later I read Isaiah's own comments on Alexander Herzen, the writer and thinker he admired perhaps more than any other – for his bravery, and his moral idealism, and his absolute scepticism about all political formulas and slogans, and for his luminous prose.

Of that prose, Isaiah wrote that it was 'a form of talk … eloquent, spontaneous, liable to the heightened tones … of the born story-teller', – the story-teller, he said, 'unable to resist digressions which themselves carry him into a network of memory or speculation, but always returning to the main stream of the story or the argument'. Above all, he said of Herzen, 'his prose has the vitality of spoken words …'.

The prose of the born story-teller – that seems to me quintessential in comprehending Isaiah's immensely various work. I felt this most directly the following autumn when he was in New York, and a book appeared on the work of the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, and Isaiah agreed to write on it. The days passed, and he told me that he was soon to leave, and we agreed he would come to the *Review* offices one evening after dinner, and he would dictate from a nearly finished draft. As I typed away, I realised that he had a passionate, detailed understanding of the Russian poetry of this century. Towards the beginning of his review, he wrote as follows:

Anna Akhmatova, and Mandelstam, founded the Guild of Poets, the very title of which conveys their conception of poetry not as a way of life and a source of revelation but as a craft, the art of placing words in lines, the creation of public objects independent of the private lives of their creators. Their verse with its exact images and firm, rigorously executed structure was equally remote from the civic poetry of the left-wing poets of the nineteenth century, the visionary, insistently personal, at times violently egotistic, art of the Symbolists, the lyrical self-intoxicated verse of the peasant-poets, and the frantic gestures of the Ego-Futurists, the Cubo-Futurists and other self-conscious revolutionaries. Among them Mandelstam was early acknowledged as a leader and a model. His poetry, although its scope was deliberately confined, possessed a purity and perfection of form never again attained in Russia.

And he went on to describe two photographs of Mandelstam, one taken around 1910, the other around 1936. The first, he wrote, shows a childlike, naïve, charming face, with the dandyish, slightly pretentious sideburns of a rising young intellectual of nineteen; the other is that of a broken, tormented, dying old tramp, but he was only forty-five at the time. The contrast is literally unbearable, and tells more than the memoirs of his friends and contemporaries.
When he finished and we walked out on 57th Street, with huge, black garbage trucks rumbling by, he looked at his watch and said, 'Three in the morning! Mandelstam! Will anyone here know who he is?!'

That Isaiah was capable of such powerful and evocative critical prose was not at all surprising. In The Hedgehog and the Fox, his study of Tolstoy's fierce, unresolvable quarrel with himself, which made him, as Isaiah put it, 'the most tragic of the great writers', he had already shown that he was a critic of the highest order. And if we read the full range of his works, looking back as far as a schoolboy story he wrote when he was twelve, and to his early Oxford days when he could explain recent Russian poetry to older scholars such as Maurice Bowra who had difficulty understanding it, and to his translation of Turgenev's *First Love*, and to his friendships with Auden, Stravinsky, Anna Akhmatova, Edmund Wilson, Jospeh Brodsky and Alfred Brendel, we can see that he was in some fundamental sense an artist. An artist who saw history, as he put it in an essay on Vico, as partly a matter of understanding 'what men made of the world in which they found themselves, … what their felt needs, aim, ideals were.' Such a Viconian understanding of history, Isaiah wrote, 'is more like the knowledge we claim of a friend, of his character, of his ways of thought or action, the intuitive sense of the nuances of personality or feeling or ideas'. And to arrive at such understanding one must possess, he said, summarising Vico, 'imaginative powers of a high degree, such as artists and novelists require'. And without this power of what Vico 'described as "entering into minds and situations" ', he wrote, 'the past will remain a dead collection of objects in museums for us'.

Without his ever saying so, for he refused to make any claims for himself, I think Isaiah in his Vico essay was describing something of himself and his own genius for entering into other minds, whether in his accounts of the ideas of such different thinkers as Machiavelli and de Maistre, or of such different political leaders as Weizmann and Churchill. I have no doubt his works will last for their wisdom and their original ideas in defense of negative liberty and political and cultural pluralism; but I believe that his writings on these and other subjects will also last because among them are genuine works of art.

If we are lucky, we find a friend whose sense of life is so intelligent and original and has such authority that we can't help thinking constantly of what *he* would think. We want to walk, so to speak, in the corridors of his mind. And then a panicky moment comes, as it did with Isaiah, when it seems the friend is no longer there. But he is.
