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Meeting Isaiah Berlin

Michael Johnson

It was on 10 August 1966 that through chance I first came across the work of Isaiah Berlin. That summer I had bought a car with a radio and was driving home with my wife Esther when I switched on the radio in the middle of a programme only to be amazed at hearing a rich deep voice speaking with incredible speed about matters which thrilled and excited me. We parked the car and sat mesmerised for a further twenty minutes. I had never heard anyone speak like this before, both the voice and the torrent of ideas overwhelmed us. I learned that it was the second of his Mellon Lectures, originally given at the National Gallery of Art in Washington in 1965, and which were now being broadcast, called ‘Some Sources of Romanticism’. This second lecture was entitled ‘The First Attack on Enlightenment’ and lasted an hour, and I further learned that there were four more to come. Next day I went out and bought the best radio and tape recorder I could afford in preparation for the recording of the others. I can always remember waiting at seven o’clock in the evening of each subsequent week in great anticipation for the forthcoming broadcasts. This first introduction to Isaiah Berlin’s work was an unforgettable moment. Certainly for me – and one can never be very specific about this – it helped to change my life, because it gave a thrust to my ideas and interests.

In all there are six Mellon Lectures, and for our time and place they are definitive. Not only do they grasp the important changes which took place in European thinking and which affect us today but they have the aesthetic quality of a symphony; or a further analogy would be a vast canvas peopled with figures and ideas. And they are as relevant and modern today as they were thirty years ago. I always played the tapes of these lectures and introduced his published work to all my students and friends who were interested; and I must add that in most cases they had people sitting on the edges of their seats, straining to grasp the colour, form, and concepts of the complex ideas which were being so passionately expressed.

Twenty-one years later I had the good fortune to live in New York and met a New York painter called Phong Bui who introduced me to Meyer Schapiro, the eminent art historian. In 1991 Mr Bui visited us in Wiltshire with introductions from Meyer Schapiro to a number of prominent artists and thinkers who lived in England, including Isaiah Berlin who, it turned out, was a close friend of Meyer’s. Unfortunately Phong was not well and was unable to visit Isaiah Berlin, but he encouraged me to write to him and gave me his address. This I did a year later. My letter and his reply are included here.

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10 October 1992

Dear Isaiah Berlin,

I am writing to express my appreciation of your work. I first came across it by chance in 1966 when I switched on the radio broadcasting your six lectures, 'Some Sources of Romanticism', given in Washington. If my memory is correct I switched on I believe in the middle of your first lecture where you were discussing Hamann – amongst others – and I was completely amazed and inspired by the torrent of thoughts which overwhelmed me. There are very few occasions in life when one is stopped dead in one's tracks by the beauty and vividness of something. This occasion for me was one of them. Since that time I have read everything of yours that has been published, and also most of the people you have talked about; it has engaged and thrilled me for the last twenty-six years. Thus, whenever I think of your work, a warm and excited feeling overcomes me. I obtained your address from Phong Bui who is a close friend of Meyer and Lilian Schapiro in New York, whom I have met on several occasions. Mr Bui was intending to come and see you to give you their greetings when he visited me last Autumn, but unfortunately he was ill and could not do so. I don't know how many times we have both read your 'Russian Thinkers' but it must be almost as many times as it has pages. It remains an endless joy.

I feel it is too presumptuous of me to ask to meet you but if the opportunity ever occurred it would give me the greatest pleasure.

May I take this opportunity to wish you good health and to thank you once again for all that you have given me and many of my friends.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Johnson

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16 October 1992

Dear Mr Johnson,

In all my long life I have never had a letter as heart warming and nice, even if it goes far beyond my deserts, as yours of 10 October. I only hope you don't over-estimate me too far – that you do so is clear to me; but then my life has been entirely founded on a systematic over-estimate of my capacities – I do not quarrel with this, long may it last, nevertheless I am aware that it is true.

If ever you are in Oxford, or likely to come, please telephone me and I will see you with the greatest gratitude and pleasure.

Yours sincerely,

Isaiah Berlin

Esther suggested that I ring him immediately which I was reluctant to do as I was so moved

by his wonderful reply. Eventually however I allowed her to persuade me and rang his number. I asked to speak to Isaiah Berlin. He came on the telephone and when I gave him my name he replied, 'I don't know you.' I explained that I had written to him that week and had received that very morning his charming reply.

'I do know you, Mr Johnson, I do,' he broke in. 'I must apologise.'

I asked very reluctantly if it was possible to visit him.

'Of course,' he said. 'Now Sunday is a very bad day, why don't you come tomorrow?' (Sunday being 'tomorrow').

'That would be fine,' I replied. 'What time would be convenient?'

He said that he had an appointment at 11.45 a.m. and we agreed that we would meet at 11.00 a.m. When I told him that I would find his house he said that I wouldn't and gave me instructions which I didn't properly follow – after all I was talking to the author of *Russian Thinkers*, *Vico and Herder* and the commanding lectures of 'Some Sources of Romanticism'. How can you concentrate on the second set of traffic lights when you are talking with a man like this?

Sunday, 18 October 1992. We duly find our way after some wrong turnings and arrive at his house at 10.45 a.m. We turn in past the gatehouse and up the gravel drive off the Old High Street, Headington, and park beside a large Georgian house set, in my estimation, in one and a half acres. I am in a kind of trance, guided by inevitability, and I see that we are at the right spot as I pass the first ground floor window because he is there, sitting in an arm chair. My sensations race. This is the man who has profoundly affected my life for twenty-six years and I go up and ring the doorbell. Esther is with me – a kind of protection; she had already told me that she felt intuitively that what might have appeared to be presumptuous was very necessary. She is also nervous but full of expectancy. He opens the door and we enter. I say that we are a little early and we shake hands and I introduce Esther.

'How do you do, Mr Johnson's wife,' he says with a twinkle in his eye. He takes us through into his study, invites us to sit down and we accept his offer of coffee. Esther had said to me the day before that 11.00 a.m. was the time for the morning church service – very appropriate. We were meeting with God or at least with one of his prophets. The sense of this occasion is inexpressible, but those who know his work will understand. I notice he has a fine olive coloured skin with very few wrinkles. He is 83 and a little unsure on his feet but his mind, one quickly realises, is as sure as the earth is round. He is wearing a brown check suit with waistcoat, a white shirt without necktie, and brown highly polished shoes which are not svelte – not quite 'country' but very serviceable – and long black socks which leave no gap. I sit on the couch to his left, with a low table which restricts the movement of my legs; and Esther sits to my left, further away, in an armchair opposite him. I notice a painting in front of me between the two windows which appears rather modern. It appears to be a sort of collage, it's neither good nor bad but quite clearly modern and I can't identify it. Esther notices two small paintings propped up on the bookshelves to the left of the door which are simple and figurative – country landscapes, one with a few buildings. Behind Isaiah Berlin there are bookshelves quite conventionally arranged, reaching up close to the ceiling. I notice many pale-coloured volumes.

The conversation begins. Berlin says, ‘I must apologise to you for being most rude on the telephone yesterday. I must have appeared very rude indeed.’

‘Not at all,’ I counter. ‘Your reply to my letter was charming.’

‘Your letter was delightful,’ he goes on. ‘It deserved a reply.’

As we are taking our seats, he says, ‘Now you must tell me what it is about my work that you have found so interesting, I simply don’t understand it at all. What have you read of mine?’

In my nervous state of mind this is a question which makes me feel even more nervous. Am I expected to step over the edge, venture forth into metaphysics immediately? Blinded, I stumble and begin: ‘*Against the Current*; *Concepts and Categories*, which I found hard going …’

‘Oh that is very dull,’ he interrupts, ‘no wonder you found it hard going.’

‘… *Russian Thinkers* …’

‘Yes – that’s all right.’

‘… and your book on Winston Churchill …’

‘That’s not a book, it’s an essay,’ he interjects.

‘Well, I have a small hardback copy.’

‘Ah, that’s worth something. It was a very small printing – the ones that were left were remaindered. Where would we have been without him during the war – those marvellous speeches? We needed him, otherwise Halifax would have sought peace with Hitler, which would have lasted for a short time and then England would have been overrun. But I didn’t like him, he was a bully. Churchill, Beaverbrook, F. E. Smith, Brendan Bracken, Duff Cooper – all not very nice men. You see, there were two camps in those days: the Bloomsbury group – Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey, Keynes, Clive Bell etc., who did not believe in money and success. They hid from it but they supported T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden financially – very sensitive, very liberal – but rather twee. Then there was Churchill and his cronies; they formed the Other Club, which is a perfectly respectable club now, quite ordinary, but then they said “This is what we must do and this is how it should be”; and they bullied, they were materialistic. But of course we needed him – Churchill that is.’ (In 1941, Isaiah Berlin’s despatches from Washington were admired by Winston Churchill.) ‘Roosevelt was quite different, he was a very nice man. He had remarkable antennae – he did not bully, he listened. He gathered people around him and he listened to them. You see, in the 1930s where were we to look? In Italy there was Mussolini; Spain had Franco; Germany had Hitler; Russia had Stalin; Czechoslovakia was free, but all the other Baltic States had little dictators; France had Daladier and England had Chamberlain. Where were we to look? Roosevelt and the New Deal – that was the only place.’ He holds a paper tissue in his right hand and whilst speaking beats his clenched fist gently on the arm of the chair with a smile to give emphasis to his points.

He then turns to me and asks, ‘And what do you do, Mr Johnson?’ He focuses on me particularly throughout the visit, turning to Esther only when she asks him a direct question. It is as though he is boring into me, peering into the inner man.

‘I am a painter,’ I reply.

‘Oh – the greatest thing in life to be, creative. What kind of painting do you do?’

‘I’m a modern abstract painter.’

‘Who are your heroes?’

‘Picasso …’

‘Yes indeed, Pablo Picasso.’

‘Matisse …’

‘But he is not an abstract painter.’

‘No, but neither is Picasso …’

‘Kandinsky painted the first abstract pictures, I believe in 1906 …’ (I do not manage to get in here, because of the torrent of Berlin’s words, that marvellous anecdote of Kandinsky’s from ‘The Spiritual in Art’ when, as he says, he walked into his studio one evening in the half light and saw for the first time, because of the lack of light, that his paintings had lost their identity; and believed and recognised that the sensation came through more clearly, with greater force. I am eager to put it in but I am unable to stop Berlin’s flow, too eager to know what he has to say.)

‘Yes and Malevich …’ I pronounce the name the English way and he repeats it in Russian.

‘Malevich, yes, but Kandinsky did it before him. Do you exhibit your work?’

‘No, I haven’t done so for some time.’

‘Why is that?’

‘I cannot feel connected to any gallery because I feel they are all too commercial.’

He smiles rather mischievously. ‘Like Hockney?’

I feel that at last I can make a point and say to him, pointing my finger, ‘But he has drawn your portrait!’

He frowns a little and purses his lips. ‘Yes but All Souls commissioned that – I would not have done so. He took two hundred photographs of me, made forty drawings, destroyed twenty and then made a choice of ten of which All Souls chose the best. I didn’t like any of them but he was a very nice man and I enjoyed all our sessions together.’ As with all his discourses, he balances everything. Churchill was necessary and a great man, but a bully;

Hockney was celebrated but it was clear that he's not an enthusiast for his work, though he thinks he's a very nice man; the Bloomsbury Group were sensitive and liberal – but rather twee. Everything he says has perfect pitch. He gestures towards the wall behind me to a shelf. 'Look, there is a portrait of me by Lawrence Gowing, it is in the National Portrait Gallery, that is a photograph of it. Pull it out, pull it out and tell me what you think.'

I get up, walk over and pull out the copy and as I do so I notice by the side of it a large white canvas-covered folder with the name of Meyer Schapiro printed on it. I have met Meyer through my great friend Phong Bui. Meyer is perhaps the most eminent art historian alive and I realise that Berlin knows him intimately. I look at the portrait by Gowing and turning to Berlin I say, 'It's not good.'

To which he replies, 'No, but I am not allowed to say.' The conversation then moves to New York, Phong and Meyer.

Esther says, 'Michael has a funny story to tell you about Meyer.' She knows that Berlin will find the story amusing.

'Yes it's true. I introduced your work to Phong Bui and gave him several of your books. He read them and came back and told me that they were great. I explained yes, I have lived with them for half of my life. Then he goes to Meyer with whom he is very intimate – he sees Meyer and Lilian every week – and says to Meyer, 'I have just come across someone you must read – Isaiah Berlin!' It's hilarious, because Meyer Schapiro and Isaiah Berlin have known each other for over half a century and at that time neither Phong nor myself had realised this.

After the laughter Isaiah comments, 'Oh Meyer is a saintly man. I see him every year. He never comes to England, I always have to go to New York. I take a cab and go down to the village. I knock on the door and Lilian always answers. But you know,' Isaiah continues, 'he never likes it when I tell him something he does not know! What other art historian do you know who has befriended living painters? Gombrich never did. Meyer arranged the finances for the Chair of Fine Art at Columbia University; they needed a million dollars to support it. Four hundred thousand was collected through subscriptions and Meyer raised six hundred thousand by asking artists to donate their works. He is a saint. We used to say, "Does he look like the Chief Rabbi? Who does he remind us of?" ' And then with his right hand Isaiah pointed his two index fingers towards the ceiling and says, 'Maybe HIM; we never mentioned his name! I first stayed with them in 1941 in their house in New Hampshire – the worst food in the world! It was impossible.' Phong has always concurred with this. We have never eaten at Meyer's but Phong has always said that 'Lilian can't cook chicken.' It may be of interest that Meyer's house is a terraced brownstone in the Village and columns of books are on every surface including the floor. You have to manoeuvre your way around these columns. It is timeless – he doesn't even have a refrigerator. (Since this meeting I have spoken to Phong in New York concerning the delicacies and he tells me that it's all sorted out now. He brings in takeaways!)

As Isaiah talks I realise more pertinently than I have ever done before, although it's always been on the edge of my mind, that one is in the presence of genius – that strange word. What does it mean? From my point of view, it means that I am listening to a man who deals with ideas as a painter deals with colours, as a musician deals with instruments and sounds. His pitch is perfect; there is not one instance I can disagree with, frown over, or shout disorder.

You see for me he is original because he has painted portraits of both men and ideas which are three dimensional and which speak as a voice speaks to you across the room. He has made Vico and Herder, Herzen and Turgenev, Pasternak, Roosevelt, Churchill or Kant, live, breathe, become palpable; they stand before you: and of course, too, he positions society, puts it in the right spot, neither left nor right, but straight to the centre of the circle. This is no dry philosopher. He was born in Riga on the Baltic, came to England when he was ten, and I see in him now the boy, alive and exuberant. He sits well back in his chair, crossing and re-crossing his legs, clutching his tissue unconsciously. He continues to talk about Meyer, who when he was a Slade scholar at Oxford, refused to eat in the dining room because at that time women weren't allowed and Lilian and Meyer are inseparable.

'You have met Meyer?' asks Isaiah.

'Yes,' I reply. 'You are quite correct about his concern for living painters; he was the first person to show Jasper Johns' work in the Jewish Museum.'

'I didn't know that, it's probably true.'

'And he taught Robert Motherwell.'

'But Meyer was not a teacher of painting,' says Isaiah.

'This was at Columbia and he taught him art history and did not think he was too good, so he introduced him to the European Surrealists and encouraged him to become a painter.'

'Of course, of course. Meyer was a Trotskyist – he was persecuted because he was a Jew. He wasn't given a chair at Columbia for almost twenty years because of it and then of course because his influence became so great, he was. And his son was refused at Harvard, you know. The WASPS!'

As I have told him, when I first heard his Mellon lectures at the National Gallery in Washington on 'Some Sources of Romanticism' on the radio in 1966, they stopped me dead in my tracks. 'What!' I said at the time. 'Who is this? What is this?' So I ask him about how he composes his lectures because as I say, 'You are like a trunk with many branches which spring out in all directions.'

He smiles. 'Yes, you are quite right, I repeat myself endlessly, I know I do. I begin by writing forty or fifty pages and then I condense them to thirty and then I condense them to fifteen and then to eight; and then I put the headings on a post card, but while I am speaking I hardly ever refer to it. It's just there in case I need it – just a glance now and again. You must realise I have given fifteen hundred lectures in my life and I have hated every one of them. You see I am so nervous, I have hours of anxiety before each one. You must understand that I am very idle, I never do anything unless I am told to do it. It's like Turgenev when he lived with Pauline Viardot and her husband. You know, it's never been known whether or not they had sexual relations. The three of them lived together – Viardot and her husband who was a very nice man and Turgenev who worshipped her. She would lock him in a room and tell him to write, otherwise we would have had no books or stories! Who are we to thank – Pauline Viardot or Turgenev?'

'So how did you come to do the Mellon lectures?' I ask.

'You have asked me so I will tell you. The curator of the National Gallery in Washington was a very great friend of mine,' (he gives his name – Mr Walker), 'and he asked me to do the Mellon lectures, to which I replied, 'I am not qualified, I am not an art historian, I know nothing about it.' But he pressed me and at the time I was very interested in Romanticism and its influences, so I finally agreed. I was on at five o'clock every Sunday afternoon for six weeks: at three o'clock there was music, at four o'clock there were clowns and then there was me at five – and I always went over my time – and after me there was more music or something else. The doors were always open and in the gallery people came and went, but there was a very good attendance for my talks. Whenever I give a lecture, when I go in I never look into anyone's face because a frown or a smile would put me off completely. I always look up into the top right hand corner of the room …'

Esther pours me more coffee. It is very strong, obviously a good Colombian blend.

'… they sent the tapes as they were to the BBC and that's how they broadcast them.'

'Esther has made transcripts of them.'

'Really? I would be very interested to have them. I already have transcripts from the BBC, but they are awful.'

Esther is taken by surprise and thinks, oh my God, I must go through them with a fine-tooth comb. She says, 'My scripts are verbatim but my knowledge is inadequate and I don't know some of the names you mention.'

He replies, 'Oh that's no matter – I can put in the names.'

Esther goes on, 'I only have three to six, I am missing one and two.'

'That doesn't matter, I should still like to have them. We can get one and two.'

(Two days later, Esther has a telephone call from Sir Isaiah's secretary, telling her that Henry Hardy has the transcripts and they are available.) Esther says that she will contact Isaiah as soon as she has printed them out. Our feeling is that they must be verbatim – no editing at all. Even in typescript they express the anxiety and torrent of his thoughts, so full of colour, light and shade, wild, impressive expression which must not be ordered or tidied up. This is something we have not yet told him but we intend to do so. Berlin's hero is Herzen as we know and we are on that side. And also we believe there should be a package of both tapes and transcripts. We are aware when we visit the house that this is where Stravinsky came. As we sit in his study listening to Isaiah talk, Esther thinks of her musical hero. Where did he sit? Did he sit in the very chair on which she is sitting, or did he sit on the couch on which I perch? He called Berlin the Prophet of Headington. Where did Auden sit? Who else sat in this room? T. S. Eliot? Isherwood and Spender certainly. Wittgenstein? Alfred Brendel the pianist? Schnabel? Esther tells Isaiah that we were interested to read that he thinks there is something like an intelligentsia in New York today.

'Yes, I think it is partly Jewish. The word was invented in Russia of course. We have never had an intelligentsia here in England because we have never been sufficiently repressed by say the Church or the State, as say in Russia under the Tsars, and it certainly won't happen here under our present Prime Minister!' (At that time, John Major.)

We then talk about the collapse of Communism and how there is no real left wing politics in Britain today. (Meyer Schapiro was once asked what he most regretted and he replied, ‘The death of socialism.’)

‘Who is there on the left? Benn is out of it.’

‘Michael Foot?’ Esther asks.

‘Yes, but he’s too old. You see I am attacked from all sides; I am attacked from the left and I am attacked from the right,’ he adds.

At 11.45 a.m. I ask him if he should go to his appointment, to which he replies, ‘Yes I am having lunch with Stephen Spender at Stuart Hampshire’s – he has come to live in Oxford now. We too are all ancient but he’s not quite so ancient as me.’

Esther comments that Stephen Spender is having trouble with his biographer. (Spender is suing the writer of this unauthorised book to which he objects most strongly.)

Berlin replies, ‘Yes, it is terrible what is happening, poor Stephen is having an awful time. You know Stephen was bullied by Auden – Auden was a great poet but he was a bully. Whenever he went to stay with Stephen, he always said “We don’t want any other visitors”, so no one else was allowed. Auden thought that there were only two important things in life – writing poetry and going to bed with young boys – and he thought everyone should think the same! Of course he changed somewhat later in life. He loved Wagner; and if you didn’t, he would say, ‘Naughty, naughty!’ Berlin imitates Auden wagging his finger and frowning. ‘He never drank until six o’clock in the evening and then he would have four vodka martinis …’

‘And then he was out of it,’ I put in.

‘Absolutely! Quite out of it. But he was a great poet. You know I also have my biographer, but not to be published until after my death. But I have told him that there is nothing to say about me; my life has been very dull. I have done nothing except my lectures and writing so what can he say about me?’

‘Who is he?’ I ask.

‘Michael Ignatieff.’

We are familiar with him as he interviewed Berlin on *The Late Show* earlier this year and he writes for the *Observer*. Esther says that we saw him recently interviewing Jack Lang, the French Cultural Minister.

Berlin says, ‘Yes, that’s the last thing I watched, too.’ He didn’t like Jack Lang. Like us he thought, although none of us used the expression, that he is a bit of a cultural spiv. He then tells us about Ignatieff. ‘He is Russian Canadian. His grandfather was an economic advisor to the Tsar. They shot all the others but they let him escape because he was a very nice man and he went to Canada. Then his son, Michael’s father, became a student of mine at Oxford.’

Esther asks him if he travels much.

‘Not much now,’ he replies. ‘We have a house in Italy to which we go every summer, but not in August – it is too hot for me. September is better. I love the Italians. Each year we go to Salzburg for the music festival and this year we went to Baden Baden for the first time. I found it fascinating because it was locked in the past – everything the same as the twenties, little old ladies with their lace and canes. But though it was interesting, I wouldn’t want to go there again.’

The clock strikes 12 and I remind him of his appointment. ‘Yes, yes, I know,’ he replies with a smile, ‘but I love talking, I can’t help it, and I have you here now, you are my victims.’ He asks me if I like music.

‘Yes,’ I reply, ‘because the good pieces move me though I have no technical understanding.’

‘Oh yes, that’s the same with me.’

The conversation continues until the clock strikes 12.15 and then I say, ‘Now you must go for lunch.’

‘Yes, yes, I must.’

And we get up. As we are taking our leave and thanking him, Esther asks if instead of sending him the typescripts of the lectures, she can bring them to him. He smiles and says, ‘Of course. This is where I am; this is where I sit; this is where you will find me.’

Since this meeting, he asked his editor Henry Hardy to send us typescripts of lectures 1 and 2 which we were missing and he has gone to Israel for the opening of the Supreme Court of Justice building, which the Rothschilds have endowed. We have had a second letter from him saying that he is ‘blocked until after Christmas, but if you will telephone me early next year, I am sure we could meet for this or any other purpose. I enjoyed your last visit very much.’

Second visit, 3 April 1993

We set off in good time from Wiltshire to meet him at Headington at 5 o’clock – that was the arrangement. On the way there are many roadworks and I have the suspicion that we might be late. We arrive in Oxford at ten to five in the evening and drive through it in the normal Saturday rush hour. Approaching Headington we join an enormous traffic jam, caused, as we later discover, by the football fans leaving the stadium of Oxford United. I say to Esther, ‘The philistines are blocking our way.’ It is raining and we crawl at a snail’s pace up Headington Hill. Pedestrians overtake us. I take my watch out of my pocket – it’s a quarter past five. There is no movement; then a slow crawl and stop, then a slow crawl again. I have the courage to take the watch out of my pocket again. It’s twenty-five minutes past five and there is still no movement. I feel like the white rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*. How can we be late in meeting the greatest living philosopher? After my frustration, I smile and say to Esther, ‘It’s the unpredictability of being.’ We finally arrive at his house forty minutes late at twenty to six and ring the doorbell. He comes to the door with a big smile. He is wearing his usual three piece suit with a waistcoat, but this time in grey, a white shirt with a faint blue line running through it, and a blue tie. We apologise for our lateness, telling him of the tremendous traffic jam in Oxford.

He says, 'Oh yes, the traffic, it doesn't matter, I haven't been out all day. It is quite all right, I was perfectly happy sitting in my chair. Come this way,' and he leads us down the hallway where we have never been to a large comfortable living room. Isaiah pours both of us tea but doesn't take any himself, saying, 'I don't like tea, I drink coffee,' to which he helps himself and then takes his seat on a large soft red couch – he sort of plunges into it. We are all in a happy mood, it's very relaxed. It is quite clear that we're not going to go very deep into philosophy today; we're just going to enjoy each other's company even if only for a brief moment. I have the very strong feeling we all like each other. He pays as much attention to Esther this time as he pays to me.

Then Esther says to me, 'You have a butterfly on your shoulder,' and there's a little moment of surprise. I look to my left and find a large red bumble-bee sitting on my jacket and as soon as I look at it, it flies off onto the curtain.

Isaiah says, 'Where did it come from – did you bring it in with you?'

'I doubt it,' I reply.

Then he explains, 'I don't like flying insects, moths and things, and I hate bats – if I were in a room with bats, I should go completely crazy. I don't mind spiders; I used to be afraid of them, but I'm not now. When I was a boy, my mother took me to a German doctor, I think it was in Baden-Baden or somewhere, yes Baden-Baden; and my mother asked the doctor why I was afraid of moths and the doctor replied, "Bad education" – which is sort of true in a way.' We all fall about with laughter. 'Where is it? Where did it go?' he asks anxiously and Esther points it out at the bottom of the curtain. 'Oh, could you get rid of it?' he asks, 'I shan't be able to relax until it's gone,' but adds, 'but don't kill it!' I get up and go into another room and find a drinks trolley with straight tumblers. I take one, put it over the bee which is now crawling on the carpet and ask for a piece of paper which I can place underneath the glass to remove it. There is a little fuss while we all search for a piece of paper. I find one in my pocket which is an old receipt from the Hotel des Bergues, Geneva, place it under the glass and go to open one of the French windows.

'Oh, that won't open,' Berlin says, 'could you take it to the front door?' I do and it flies off.

Coming back I remember a question asked by Wittgenstein in his *Investigations*, where he asks, 'How do you show the fly the way out of the fly bottle?' (*Investigations* 309: 'What is your aim in philosophy? To show the fly the way out of the fly bottle') and I remember an incident which I begin to tell Berlin of, many years ago when Esther and I heard a loud buzzing and we discovered a large fly trapped in an empty wine bottle.

But at the mention of Wittgenstein, Berlin starts to talk about a film which has just been made of his life, which from what he's read appears appalling to him. He talks about Maynard Keynes, who in the movie is depicted as wearing bright blue trousers and a pink shirt. 'Not the Keynes I knew!' he says emphatically.

I have also read about this movie and it does sound dreadful, but I want to get my point in about the Wittgenstein fly in the fly bottle, so I interrupt and say, 'I haven't finished telling you,' and with a wave of his hand he allows me to continue. 'I discovered that the buzzing was a fly in an empty wine bottle and I said to Esther, 'This reminds me of Wittgenstein's

question.' So I took the bottle, and not in any knowledgeable way, showed the top of it to the light and the fly flew out.'

Isaiah listens and sinks back into the cushions. 'Yes,' he says, eyes wide open, 'the light, take it to the light! You found the answer! Moths go towards the light, all insects do, yes.' He then proceeds to tell us about June 1940 when he read a paper at Cambridge on solipsism to all the professors of philosophy there, which included Wittgenstein. 'It was 12 June 1940 and all the Oxford professors were down in the mouth, wearing long frowns because it was after Dunkirk, you see, and Paris had fallen. But at Cambridge everyone was indifferent. My host, a Professor Braithwaite, said, "Oh it's of no matter, the French never burn their bridges, it will all be all right in the end." Anyway I read my paper which was all about, "How do I know that your headache is worse than my headache?" and all that sort of thing – and there was no interval or a stop for coffee. Wittgenstein turned to me and said – and he was a very handsome man you know, thin face – "Can you see a clock in your mind, where the second hand is nailed down and the hour hand is nailed, but the clock face turns and the time is the same? My thought is on an ascending arc," Wittgenstein continued, "I'm thinking well today." He wholly dominated the philosophers at Cambridge. As soon as Wittgenstein spoke, everyone was silent. He thought I was a very dull philosopher but he liked me because I was not pompous, I did not show off, so he liked my morality. Not like Freddie – A. J. Ayer, that is, who is always clever all the time, which becomes rather dull. And then he said to Professor Braithwaite, "Let us say that Braithwaite has decaying teeth," and Braithwaite, who was asleep on the carpet, woke and said, "Wittgenstein, you are talking about me, what did you say?" and, on hearing what it was, promptly fell back asleep again.' He continues by saying that Wittgenstein was always surrounded by acolytes. When he visited Oxford he saw him in a street, and whenever he stopped a small group of acolytes stopped with him, and Wittgenstein would point something out and then they would move on. 'He was definitely a guru figure,' Berlin adds.

Esther then says to him, 'Can I ask your advice? Who is the best translator of Pushkin?'

To which he replies, 'There is no good translation of his lyric poetry – it comes out as third-rate Byron. The novels are OK, and the epic poem *Eugene Onegin* – anyone will do for them, but Johnson is probably the best.'

We discuss briefly the impossibility of translating lyric poetry from language to language and then Esther goes on to talk about Akhmatova and asks him if she was in love with him.

'Oh no,' he replies. 'She was not in love with me and I was not in love with her, but she had this thing about the two of us, that we had some spiritual connection, which of course was true, but then I got married, you see, and I committed a cardinal sin in her eyes. She came here to Oxford you know, to receive an honorary degree.'

'Did she stay here?' asks Esther.

'Oh no,' he replies, 'but she did visit. She saw the house and she said that I lived in a gilded cage. "No philosopher or poet or artist should live in a gilded cage," she pronounced.' He shrugs his shoulders.

We laughed and talked on; it seemed like we were old friends, everything very casual. There was a certain feeling of three children together, just enjoying each other's company and

eating macaroons. It appeared to me very inappropriate to bring up the serious questions which I wanted to ask him about his Mellon lectures, so I left it. At intervals he took out of his inside pocket a round box, like a large pill box, and proceeded to eat from it what appeared to be small delicacies. At first we thought they were pills, but then we realised that they may have been small nuts or pieces of chocolate – that's how casual it was.

Meyer Schapiro came up again and I said that my friend Phong Bui had told me that the problem of Lilian's cooking was solved since Phong now brought in takeaways.

'Oh you mean Chinese takeaways and things like that? So your friend gets the takeaways and takes them round and they eat them together? Whenever I visit them now they take me to a small Italian restaurant around the corner where I have spaghetti, which at least is edible.' He goes on to tell us the difficulties that Meyer has had in being Jewish; even after the war, Harvard didn't want him because he was Jewish, but then Columbia University in New York finally offered him a chair and he was 'enthroned'.

'It was a very good chair since he didn't have to do anything and was paid a large salary, but it came very late.' Then he mentions Rosenberg, a rich Jew who set up the Columbia Club – 'because there was a Harvard Club and a Yale Club – and when it was all set up he was denied membership because he was a Jew! And now the Jews are everywhere, Harvard is full of them. The next pogrom will begin any day now!'

Although this visit has been short it has been very happy; there has been much laughter and a genuine sense of being at home. As we take our leave, I go to open the front door a second time and find it stuck. He then tries to open it but cannot. We can't get out. I am thinking, 'Is this a technical question or a philosophic one? How do you show the guests the way out of the gilded cage?' The three of us fumble around and he goes off to find someone who can help. I try the door again and it opens and I call to him, 'I've got it open now.'

'How did you do it?' he asks coming back to us, and since I have no idea, I reply, 'Magic,' when I should have replied, 'Total ignorance!' He gestures in a genial dismissive way, 'Oh! …' This second meeting was so different from the first, less formal, more gay, and fun. I think we will definitely go to his garden party in the summer if we are invited, because I have to collar him again about the importance of his Mellon lectures. Not only are they rhapsodical, but one of the keys in my view to the peaceful co-existence of societies, a tour de force of the first order.

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