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Second Thoughts of a Biographer

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Biographers work with a variety of complex motives, some of which surface only when their work is done. These days biographers come to bury their Caesars as often as they come to praise them. In my case, my ostensible motive was to praise, to remember a friendship, and to honour a life I had witnessed, at least over the last ten years of its span. It was, as critics have pointed out, a biographical essay, more than a biography, a preliminary report written in the last year of his life, and published in the year following his death.

He had asked me to do it, after all, and so I was honouring a promise and fulfilling an obligation of which I was proud. Selecting me as his biographer was a validation of me and so I had to take care not to turn my work into compensatory validation of him. I owed an obligation to him, but I owed an equal obligation to be truthful.

While I erased my own presence from the book, as a biographer should, the result was the tacit record of a friendship, one of the most important in my life. Because the project was personal, seen from my perspective, other friends, often more important to him, did not see 'their' Isaiah in mine. When the book was published, I was surprised to be told that I had missed some essential story or feature of his character. I even felt uneasy, a little jealous even, when friends imitated his inimitable voice better than I did, when they recalled some particularly telling story that I had either left out or never heard. In the years since his death, I've learned to be pleased to discover things about him of which I had no idea at the time. In this fashion, he lives on and I continue to learn about him.

Despite a sense of my sins of omission and commission, I believe I painted a true likeness of the man I knew. I'm delighted that the book itself and my interviews with him, now made available by the Berlin archive, have become a source to future scholars. I was also the first to read his letters, some still in envelopes, none in order. I still remember batches of them tumbling across a desk in Wolfson Library and realizing as I struggled with his handwriting that I would have to become a cryptographer. Henry Hardy's exemplary, exhaustive, and magnificent edition of the correspondence was still years away.

Now that four volumes of correspondence have appeared, I know I should revise my biography, but I also see how large a project this would be. Henry Hardy, with his habitual fastidiousness, has compiled, for his own amusement and mine, a list of the factual errors in the biography, and if I were to correct these in a new edition, I would have to add a small number of interpretive ones. So if I revisit the biography and produce a revised edition, it will require a long sojourn, changing my life once again as my first sojourn with him certainly did.

A new edition would also have to make sense of his continuing reputation. He has certainly enjoyed an extraordinary afterlife. The stock of many of his contemporaries may be declining, but his continues to rise. Much of this should be associated with the curatorial devotion of Henry Hardy. No one has been a truer keeper of the flame, and his editorial achievement guarantees that his life and work—like some National Trust home newly opened to the public—receive ever more visitors every year.

Since the publication of my biography in 1998, so much excellent interpretive work has followed that I struggle to keep up: Joshua Cherniss's deep account of his intellectual development; Arie Dubnov's reinterpretation of his Jewishness and its impact on his thought; Enrique Krause's account of the intellectual origins of *Freedom and its Betrayal*; William Galston's analysis of Berlin's heterodox insights into the psychology of political judgement; Hermione Lee's treatment of Berlin's personal impressions as a disguised autobiography; even David Caute's *Isaiah and Isaiah* adds a polemical dimension to our understanding of Isaiah as a Cold War liberal.¹ I say nothing of the ever more complicated debate in political theory about liberal pluralism and the incommensurability of values, in which Isaiah's work continues to have a controversial—and therefore fruitful—afterlife.

I'm delighted in this abundant afterlife, especially since it is short on hagiography and long on critical analysis. Jeremy Waldron—of whom I shall say more in a moment—says Berlin is worshipped, at least in America, as Churchill is worshipped. I'd dispute this as a factual claim, and just say, if it were true, that Berlin himself would have said no man is well served by worship.

A biographer, even of a friend, would betray them if admiration were to become worshipful. There is the matter of truth, and there is many a painful moment when you are trying to tell the truth about a friend. When conducted by a friend, biography is a trial between truth and loyalty, with the reader handing down the verdict.

¹ Joshua Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Arie Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012); Enrique Krause 'Foreword', in Isaiah Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); William Galston, *Liberal Pluralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); 'Moral Pluralism and Liberal Democracy: Isaiah Berlin's Heterodox Liberalism', *The Review of Politics*, 71 (2009), 85–99; Hermione Lee, 'Foreword', in Isaiah Berlin, *Personal Impressions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); David Caute, *Isaiah and Isaiah: The Covert Punishment of a Cold War Heretic* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2014).

Biography is an act of closure. When I finished, I thought that I was done with him. One wants simultaneously to commemorate and move on. Momentum is all in life and so after fixing stories on a page, transcribing memories, putting it all between covers, one hopes to both honour the task and get on with the rest of one's own life. A biographer needs to take care not to be taken over by his subject and to be able, once the duty is done, to resume life as it was before. A biography, at least one that began as a project during the life of a subject and was completed after his death, is a tombstone in the grass. Once it is placed in the ground, those who placed it there should walk away.

I certainly expected to walk away. Yet it soon became obvious that my work was not done, that closure is the last thing one should expect a completed biography to deliver. Once one role is completed, a new role emerges: defender and guardian of the flame. Here loyalty and truth come into conflict once again.

I don't keep close watch on what is happening to Berlin's reputation. Henry Hardy plays Cerberus. I do not. But I do stir when something disobliging is said about him. One example of this might be John Banville's recent observation, in a review of the third volume of Isaiah's letters, that Berlin, as a director of Covent Garden, was more hostile to Benjamin Britten's homosexuality than one might have expected.² At first my reaction was defensive: no one is perfect and none of us, certainly not this biographer, would get to heaven if all their own catty or disparaging sexual innuendos were entered into St Peter's ledger book.

Charity towards a biographical subject is as necessary as charity towards our own lives. But charity easily slips into apologia. Banville's remark set me re-evaluating Isaiah's remarks about the 'homintern', his phrase for the progressive, left-wing gay Englishmen—from Anthony Blunt to Guy Burgess—whom Berlin knew in the 1930s. Had I missed disapproval of their sexuality beneath Isaiah's jokes at their expense?

It would matter to our account of his politics if liberal tolerance stopped at homosexuality. I can't conclude that it did, but the question has been posed. What is the answer: that he was a child of his times in sexual matters and therefore in drawing up the boundaries of what he could tolerate? That he simply didn't like Britten's operas as music? Or that he was a hypocritical prig, pleasant to the faces of his homosexual friends, but lethal when their backs were turned, and business was being done in the committee rooms at Covent Garden? I see no evidence of this last possibility: he did not use his authority to spike Britten's career, but I cannot acquit him of being more deferential to the prejudices of his time than I had supposed.

The larger issue here is that Isaiah had one of the most successful liberal temperaments of all times—a rare public reputation combining wisdom, wit, charm, and good judgement. His central achievement, my biography argues, was to vindicate

² John Banville, 'Learning a Lot about Isaiah Berlin', *New York Review of Books*, 19 Dec. 2013.

the possibility, in his life and work, taken together, of a liberal temperament that was, in my concluding words, 'skeptical, ironical, dispassionate and free'.³

To the extent that Berlin's enduring influence relates not merely to what he wrote, but to the degree that he himself incarnated the tolerant virtues at the core of the liberal disposition, any failing in this area would condemn not just Berlin but the liberal temperament itself, suggesting that even in its most successful exemplar, liberal tolerance was a hypocritical mask, concealing heterosexual disdain and fear.

A similar accusation is at the heart of David Cauté's *Isaac and Isaiah*. Cauté's essential point is that despite an appearance of liberal tolerance towards communists and socialists, Berlin misused his intellectual authority to blackball Deutscher, a Trotskyist scholar, from a post at the University of Sussex in the early 1960s. The accusation is not just that Berlin's tolerance was hypocritical but that he abused the authority that Berlin's liberal temperament and worldly success had brought him by the mid-1960s.

Rushing to Isaiah's defence, in these situations, risks confusing impulses of friendship with obligations to truth. The charges in both cases must be answered directly. In the Deutscher case, Berlin did write a letter recommending against giving Deutscher a job at Sussex. Deutscher was, he wrote, 'the only man whose presence in the same academic community I should find morally intolerable' (L III 377–8). The question is why. Cauté claims the motive was fury at Deutscher's dismissive review of Berlin's lecture 'Historical Inevitability' in 1954. This adds vanity and vindictiveness to the charge against Berlin. There is no doubt that Berlin was thin-skinned about bad reviews. This merely illustrates that the temperamental achievement—sunny and amused detachment—was vulnerable rather than Olympian. But to put Berlin's decisions about Deutscher down to personal pique seems to miss the point: what he cared about was not Deutscher's review, but Deutscher's politics, and beyond that his ethics, his moral endorsement of Bolshevism and Trotskyism.

Deutscher's embrace of Trotsky as the heroic prophet of world revolution was everything that Berlin could not abide: beyond the hero worship was a consequentialist endorsement of the 'vast impersonal forces' of historical change, with lofty indifference to the human costs of Trotsky's revolutionary project. This, after all, had been his chief target in 'Historical Inevitability'. Berlin objected to the idea that a man could pass himself off as a scholar when he used his scholarship to endorse humanly unendurable costs.

This much is clear enough. What is more puzzling—and here Cauté's book strikes home—is why Berlin singled out Deutscher. After all, E. H. Carr, Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, and others were scholars whose Marxist politics led them to endorse similar positions that argued for the historical inevitability and desirability of revolutionary violence. Could it be true that Carr, Hill, and Hobsbawm escaped Berlin's wrath simply because they were more 'clubbable' Oxford or Cambridge types, not renegade outsiders like Deutscher?

³ Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), conclusion.

This is not an attractive thought. It suggests that Berlin's tolerance was bounded by the confines of Oxbridge and respectable London society. But that doesn't work either, since Deutscher was a clubbable member of that quintessentially English institution: the British Marxist counter-establishment. I suspect the dislike of Deutscher was not social or cultural, but temperamental: Deutscher was a fanatic masquerading as a scholar while other members of the Marxist counter-establishment were scholars first and last.

Caute's book strikes me as wrong-headed, but it has the virtue of recovering an aspect of British intellectual life in the post-war years that bears emphasizing: just how influential this counter-establishment of Marxist and socialist historians, philosophers, and economists was, and how central a role they played as an antithesis in the shaping of Berlin's liberal thought.

Thanks to Caute, Cherniss, and Dubnov we can now see that the very richness of Berlin's liberalism relates first of all to the intellectual power of the 'in-house opponent'—the British Marxists—and his emotional rejection of their consequentialist historical determinism; second, his recovery of Herzen and the Russian populists; third, his adaptation and modernization of Benjamin Constant's liberty of the ancient and moderns; fourth, his visceral reaction against the schematizing, paternalistic rationalism of the radical Enlightenment (of which more in a moment); and finally, the defining encounter with Anna Akhmatova, whose life and work served as a heroic vindication of the capacity of individuals to survive tyranny uncrushed and unbroken. His liberalism is distinctive in the range and depth of the sources that made it possible and hence the rich and complex moral psychology of the liberal temperament that he was able to create from these sources.

Berlin's politics is a Cold War liberalism, whose defining context is an argument with British Marxists and fellow-travellers about whether one could justify the immense moral costs of the Soviet experiment; and about where the impulses—to engineer souls—came from in the history of the Enlightenment. If it is a cold war liberalism, it was also haunted by what had come before, the fascist dictatorships of the 1930s. Like Bolshevism, these had abolished liberal constitutional regimes in the name of an ideal that fascinated and repelled Berlin: delivering humankind from the narrow horizon of bourgeois right and propelling them towards full human emancipation—positive liberty—experienced as the total fusion of the individual with society, state, and nation.

This is the historical context that is resolutely absent in Jeremy Waldron's contribution to this volume, taxing Berlin for neglect of Enlightenment constitutionalism. Neglect is the wrong word, it seems to me, since Berlin was quite explicit that negative liberty could only be secure within a framework of constitutionally entrenched and guaranteed rights. In a letter from 1991, he wrote:⁴

It seems to me that the only guarantee of civil liberties, or indeed any kind of freedom, negative or positive, is, in the end, their establishment by laws beyond the interference of

⁴ Isaiah Berlin to Frederick Rosen, 17 July 1991, L IV 427.

majorities, laws that guarantee Constant's minimum private space, and therefore [by] constitutions, whether written or as good as written, accepted without much question; bills of rights; basic principles and laws, perhaps of such a kind (if much more egalitarian, applying to all the inhabitants of a country) as a group of slave-owning American landowners (not keen supporters of total popular liberty) drew up for their country.

Berlin does not neglect constitutionalism so much as take it for granted. His allegiance to the liberal architecture of rights, first articulated by Montesquieu and Madison, is beyond doubt. This strain of thought saw the rule of law, checks and balances, separation of powers, as the solution to the problem of how to preserve political freedom—and all other freedoms besides—from the inveterate selfishness, egotism, avarice, lack of public spirit in ordinary men and women. Waldron is right to single this out as Enlightenment liberalism's great legacy, the insight that liberty did not require the republican ideal of virtue, did not require, as the twentieth-century Marxists and fascists proclaimed, the engineering of human souls. What liberty needed, Madison and Montesquieu so rightly understood, was resilient constitutional architecture.

Waldron believes that Berlin's neglect of constitutionalism is puzzling since this constitutional architecture is all that keeps liberty secure in any order where, as Berlin believed, human beings seek plural and incompatible goods. 'The give and take, live and let live, agree to disagree' of liberal tolerance was entirely dependent, Waldron argues, again rightly, on liberal constitutionalism.

Berlin took all of this for granted. He simply was not an institutionalist and did not teach liberal institutions or constitutionalism. He liked to say that he was not a political philosopher at all, but a moralist and a historian. Occupying the Chichele chair in political philosophy—Jeremy Waldron is one of his distinguished successors—was uncomfortable to him. He knew he ought to teach institutions, constitutions, and the machinery of liberal order and he just didn't.

Is this just a story of laziness or indifference? Waldron says no: Berlin ignores eighteenth-century constitutionalism for a reason. He was too invested in his story of the totalitarian dimensions of Enlightenment thought to pay due attention to Madison's saving constitutional liberalism. In Waldron's eyes, Berlin took the dark and coercive Enlightenment he wanted and neglected the light-filled Madisonian version, in effect twisting history for ideological purposes.

But hang on a minute. Waldron argues as if the only Enlightenment that matters is the constitutional Enlightenment. But there were at least two other Enlightenments that matter just as much. What about the 'disciplinary Enlightenment', the subject of my first book, *A Just Measure of Pain*, and of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*?⁵ Philadelphia is not just the site of Madison's and Jefferson's sublime constitutional inventions (and also their less than sublime accommodation of slavery); it is

⁵ Michael Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain: The Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, tr. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977).

also the site of the Philadelphia penitentiary and Benjamin Rush's asylum. The disciplinary rationalism of the Enlightenment cannot be so easily separated from the constitutional version. The Founders understood that disciplining the poor, the insane, the disorderly—and especially the slaves—was a precondition for white propertied males enjoying the blessings of constitutional liberty. This disciplinary Enlightenment—have we forgotten Bentham's Panopticon?—was emphatically interested in straightening out the crooked timber of humanity, at least of that part of humanity that threatened the liberal constitutional order.

There is a third Enlightenment, the radical Enlightenment, of Gracchus Babeuf, the Conspiracy of Equals, and the guillotine. Waldron argues as if the Enlightenment ends with the ratification of the US Constitution or the Tennis Court Oath of 1789. In fact the Enlightenment goes some distance further: to revolutionary war, to export freedom at the point of a gun, to the terror, the execution of counter-revolutionaries, to regicide, to Napoleon and the Empire. Waldron's Enlightenment runs from Montesquieu to Madison, but where, we might ask, are Marat, St Just, and Robespierre?

If Waldron accuses Berlin of choosing the Enlightenment that suits his purpose, Waldron is doing the same. A historian would say to both: you don't get to choose which Enlightenment you'd prefer. It is at least three conflicting strains that interweave but also pull against each other.

So then the question becomes, if Berlin can be accused of selectivity in his account of the Enlightenment why did he choose the radical version that ends with terror? Because his overriding preoccupation as a refugee from the Russian Revolution was to understand how the visions of human liberation that originate in the Enlightenment, that were nurtured by his beloved Russian radicals of the nineteenth century, Herzen and others, ended in the dismal tyrannies of Lenin, Stalin, and Trotsky. Waldron taxes Berlin with failing to spell out the necessary institutional prerequisites of the liberty he takes for granted. If you will allow me to ventriloquize for a second, Berlin's reply would be: I live in England, I know exactly what the institutional prerequisites of liberty are. That's not my problem, and as far as I can see, these prerequisites of liberty are not in danger from within, but from without.

When he goes to see Akhmatova in 1945, he sees that his work is to explain why and how the life-enhancing liberty that made the Russian silver age possible between 1870 and 1914 was replaced by the soul-crushing tyranny that followed. The radical Enlightenment and the Jacobin fanaticism that it unleashed, he argues, did not end with Napoleon. The impulses migrate into the Russian populists and early Marxists and attain their dire apotheosis in Lenin and the Bolshevik engineers of human souls. This line of historical descent remains his central subject: not as a historian, but as a moralist. And why as a moralist?

Because the challenge of his time, as he sees it, is not to lay out the institutional prerequisites of constitutional democracy—those are only too evident. What is more urgent is to refute the moral rationalization of tyranny and mass murder by

Deutscher and Co. What is striking about the British post-war milieu in which Berlin's thought took shape is the sheer number of Marxists and socialists he counted as colleagues, friends, or rivals. All of them lived within the constitutional order that allowed them to preach on behalf of their radiant tomorrow. Berlin maintained convivial relations with many of them, but he thought Marxism was a bastard child of the Enlightenment and he wanted to show how and why.

Waldron ignores the Cold War context, ignores the fact that Berlin is a refugee from the Revolution that most explicitly claimed its descent from the radical Enlightenment. He lived his intellectual life among social democrats, socialists, and communists—Christopher Hill, Maurice Dobb, R. H. Tawney, Eric Hobsbawm, G. D. H. Cole—who continued to believe in a political future beyond the frontiers of liberal constitutionalism. He was not interested in defending liberal constitutionalism: he took it for granted. His problem was to understand its enemies.

Waldron goes further and accuses Berlin not of taking it for granted, but of being actively hostile to it. Waldron speaks at one point of Berlin's 'general hostility to democracy and participatory liberty'. This, he says, is a matter of record.

What record, pray?

Waldron repeatedly accuses Berlin of 'sophomoric' 'Oxford tutorial common-places', so it seems only fair to reply that Waldron is making the same kind of mistake. He runs democracy and participatory liberty together, when they are two separate things. You can be a democrat without believing that democracy requires you to be an activist or even a participant. Berlin explicitly rejected the idea that to be a democrat required civic virtue or civic participation. If you believe in freedom and tolerance, you respect the freedom of free riders as well as the virtuous participation of solid citizens. If you believe that republican virtue should be the compulsory temperament of a free society, you have started on a journey that can lead to St Just and to a democratic despotism enforced by the guillotine.

Any commitment to constitutional liberalism is a commitment to let people alone, to leave them the choice to participate, to be good citizens, bad citizens, or even leave their citizenship behind altogether. His liberal pluralism means accepting that some citizens participate, some don't, some are actively enchanted with democracy, others not so much, and some actively cynical. Liberal tolerance commits you to tolerance even of those hostile to democracy, provided they do not engage in violence. This is what freedom entails and as Berlin said, many times, it is a chilly virtue. It was, he said to Stephen Spender, 'not particularly warm and not at all cosy' (L II 656). To move from this to the proposition that he was generally hostile to democracy leaves me wondering to what extent Waldron's liberal constitutional machinery actually requires a ghost in the machine: the participatory virtues. Berlin simply disagreed. Liberal constitutionalism has to work with the crooked timber of humanity, not with virtuously participatory citizens.

To sustain the argument that Berlin is hostile to democracy Waldron then quotes Berlin to the effect that 'enlightened despots' can and do allow their subjects a

measure of private freedom. This strikes me as a historical commonplace, rather than proof of any normative hostility to democracy. It recalls John Rawls's careful consideration in *The Law of Peoples* of an imaginary place called Kazanistan, a law-abiding despotism that allows private liberty without public participation or democracy.⁶ Would such a government be legitimate or at least a rightful member of a world of peoples? Rawls said yes. And so, I think, would Berlin.

Pluralism at home commits you, Rawls argued, to pluralism abroad, meaning that democracy is not the only government compatible with minimal observance of basic principles of justice. Berlin was merely saying the same, and to use a sentence in Berlin about enlightened despots to accuse him of hostility to democracy is to lay the same charge against Rawls.

Waldron blames Berlin's influence for the degree to which his discipline of political theory has become a branch of ethics, leading to a drastic neglect of politics and institutions. Apportioning nearly exclusive responsibility to Berlin for this neglects the constitutive role of others. In any event, we look to Jeremy Waldron to correct the problem, as he has been doing with signal success and distinction for more than thirty years.

Waldron concludes that 'the old man's reputation can take it'. Here at least we certainly agree. That we are having this argument at all is proof that the old man retains all his capacity to provoke and inspire.

⁶ John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 5, 75–8, 92.