

THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH

Mario Vargas Llosa

In this sharp biographical sketch of Isaiah Berlin, Mario Vargas Llosa confirms the idea that probably only Popper and Hayek did as much for the culture of freedom as Berlin. On another level, Vargas Llosa emphasises the openness and elegance of Berlin's prose (comparing it with that of Stendhal), as well as the contagious humanity of his essays, which often, in the author's opinion, take on a novelistic quality.

If, apart from his geniality, Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) had not awakened so much sympathy and affection, it is probable that he would never have become the intellectually renowned figure that he was at the time of his death, and the body of his work would remain unknown to the great majority of his readers, except for the handful of his academic colleagues and disciples who used to frequent Oxford and the North American universities where he taught.. As far as I know, his case is unique in that he showed throughout his life an Olympian disinterestedness as to why his essays were published and read - he believed quite sincerely that they were

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not worth such an honour - and also in his decision not to write his autobiography or keep a diary, as if he did not have the slightest interest in what posterity would make of him ("Après moi, le deluge" he used to like to say).

Those of us who did not attend his classes and yet felt ourselves his students, can never thank Henry Hardy enough, the post graduate student of Philosophy at Woolfson College (which Isaiah Berlin founded and directed in Oxford between 1966 and 1974) who proposed to his teacher in 1974 that he collected together and edited or re-edited his writings. For incredible as it may seem, only three of his books had appeared in print up to that date: those dedicated to Marx, Vico and Herder, and his four essays on Liberty. The rest of his vast body of work was unedited, kept in dusty drawers up in his attic or buried in specialist magazines, *Festschriften*, circumstantial pamphlets - homages, treatises, reports, reviews, obituaries - or in official archives in institutions, feeding the moths. Thanks to the persuasive talents of Hardy, who managed to overcome the tenacious reticence of Berlin towards the biographical and archaeological enterprise of collecting together his own work which he felt was unjustified, and to his titanic undertaking of tracing it in libraries and rigorously editing it, appeared between 1978 and 1999 "Russian Thinkers", "Concepts and Categories", "Against the Current", "Personal Impressions", "The Crooked Timber of Humanity", "The Magus of the North", "The Sense of Reality and The Roots of Romanticism", i.e. the books which cemented the prestige of Isaiah Berlin both inside and outside the precincts of Universities together with volumes of his massive correspondence which would appear later. Without the devotion and tenacity of Henry Hardy the master of liberal thought who we know today would not exist. And, without Michael Ignatieff, another friend and a stubborn follower of his Latvian teacher, he would be a little less than a ghost without flesh and blood, hiding behind a confusing bibliography.

And so as the volumes compiled by Hardy proved that the insinuations of his adversaries were false, insinuations such as the fact Sir Isaiah was nothing more than a brilliant raconteur, a salon philosopher, without either the patience or the energy to undertake works of great intellectual breadth, so thanks to Ignatieff - a journalist and historian, born in Canada and a graduate of Toronto and Harvard living in England - we now know ("A Life: Isaiah Berlin", London, Chatto and Windus 1998) that the author of "The Hedgehog and the Fox" had an interesting and, at times, dramatic and adventurous life, that it did not pass by, as it seemed, submerged in the rituals and peaceful cloisters of the elegant irrelevance of Oxford, but that it

was bound up with the great events of the century, sometimes directly and other times on the edges, events such as the Russian Revolution, the persecution and extermination of the Jews in Europe, the creation of Israel, the Cold War and the great ideological clashes between Communism and Democracy which took place in our post-war world. The person who emerges from Ignatieff's book - a book both affectionate and loyal but independent which, faithful to Berlin's ethic principles, such as fair play, does not hesitate to point out the mistakes and defects together with the virtues and excellencies - is no less attractive and warm, the same modest, cordial, amenable and sociable human being as the legend that accompanied him all his life, but is at the same time more complicated and contradictory, more human and profound, an intellectual who, in spite of having gained the highest honours in England, his adopted country - President of the Academy, Rector of an Oxford College, recipient of the Medal of Honour, the highest British decoration, ennobled by the Queen - never gave up feeling, deep down inside himself, that he was an expatriate, a Jew, faithful to a tradition and a community over which discrimination, risk and prejudice has hung since time immemorial, a condition which contributed decisively to the insecurity which followed him like a shadow in every period of his life, and which also always helped to shape his prudence, his determination to integrate himself in the social milieu and to pass unnoticed, outside the great spotlights of power and success, and his systematic defence of tolerance, pluralism, political diversity, his hatred of the fanatic of whatever colour. Underneath the incessant conversation in which he bewitched his companions at meals and parties by his anecdotes, the fluency of his expression and the power of his memory, there hid a person who was torn by those moral conflicts he himself had described better than anybody else, those which put in opposition liberty and equality, justice and order, the atheistic Jew and the practitioner of his religion and the fearful liberal for whom unrestricted liberty would be like "putting the wolves in with the sheep". The clear, serene and brilliant thinker which his writings suggest, continues to be the same in the portrait which Michael Ignatieff draws of his personality, but underneath this glittering clarity of ideas and their rhetorical formulation appears a man, often overwhelmed by doubt, who makes mistakes and is distressed by them and who lives in a discreet but constant tension which prevents him from feeling totally integrated into any milieu, even though the outward signs of his civilian life make it appear totally the contrary.

In spite of refusing ever to write his autobiography, Isaiah Berlin agreed to talk to his friend, Michael Ignatieff, in front of a tape recorder,

about all the episodes in his life on the condition that the result would only be published after his death. The conversation lasted ten years, the last decade of Berlin, and finished the last week of October 1997, a few days before his death, when Sir Isaiah, very fragile and almost destroyed by his illness, invited his biographer to Headington House, his house in the country outside Oxford, to correct some facts which he had remembered and to record, with great insistence, that his wife, Aline, had been the centre of his life and that his debt to her was unpayable. Ignatieff completed the personal testimonies with a prolific investigation in Russia, United States, Israel and England, interviewing dozens, almost hundreds of people who had some ties with Berlin, and carrying out a detailed documentation of newspapers, books and archives, in such a way that his biography gives a very complete, if not definitive, idea of the vicissitudes of fortune in the life of the great thinker, interweaving them with the development of his curiosities, convictions, ideas and intellectual works. Because of this, his biography becomes a literary one, in which life and work become, like the two sides of a medal.

Although Isaiah Berlin only passed the first twelve years of life in Russia (he was born in 1909 in Riga, into a well-off Jewish family, at the time when Latvia belonged to the Russian Empire), the experiences of that first part of his infancy, affected by tremendous social convulsions and family turmoil, marked him for the rest of his life and left two indelible marks on his personality: his horror of totalitarianism and dictatorships and his Judaism. The major event of his childhood was, without doubt, the Bolshevik Revolution, which he saw at close range in St. Petersburg, to where his family had moved, fleeing from the insecurity and the threats which surrounded the Jewish community, and where he witnessed, at the age of seven and a half, scenes of street violence that inured him forever against enthusiasm for revolution and “political experiments”. His hostility towards Communism was born in this era, and he remained faithful to it all his life, even during those moments of the Cold War when the great majority of the intellectual community in which he was immersed were either close to or involved in Marxism. He never yielded to this temptation and his anti-Communism brought him to extreme positions (very rare for him) such as defending the United States during the unpopular Vietnam War and refusing to sign a manifesto protesting against the Bay of Pigs, the invasion of Cuba in May 1961 (“Castro might not be a Communist”, he wrote to Kenneth Tynan “but civil liberties mean as little to him as they did to Lenin or Trotsky”). This attitude led him to commit an act which had little in keeping with his pluralistic ethic: thanks to his academic influence he prevented Isaac Deutscher, an exiled Jew like himself but an anti-Zionist and left-

winger and author of the most famous biography of Trotsky, from being given a Chair in Political Studies at Sussex University. His somewhat debatable response to those who accused him of having undertaken “an anti-Communist witch hunt” was that he could not support giving a Chair to anyone who subordinated knowledge to ideology.

Fleeing once again, and this time not just from fear but from hunger as well, the Berlin family returned to Riga for a short time in 1920 and it was then, on the train that was taking them there, that they fell victim to insults and aggressive behaviour from anti-Semitic passengers and officials: for the first time, says Berlin, this made him realise that he was neither a Russian or a Lithuanian but a Jew and he never stopped being one. Although an atheist and educated at a lay school in England, he always showed sympathy for the society and culture of his ancestors, to the point of practising Jewish religious rites in the household. He was a curious non-believing believer. And, as a Zionist, he collaborated closely with one of the founders of the State of Israel, Chaim Weizmann, although he never once thought of emigrating and becoming an Israeli citizen, unlike a good number of his relatives. A good part of this collaboration took place at the same time that Isaiah Berlin was serving as an analyst and political advisor to the British government in New York and Washington, during the Second World War, which must have caused him not a few anxieties and moral dilemmas, taking into account the tense and sometimes antagonistic relations that existed between the Foreign Office, which was pro-Arab, and the Zionist leaders. To know in detail this sum of contradictions in the life of Isaiah Berlin helps us to understand the secret origin of one of his most lucid theories: that of “contradictory truths”.

The Jewish community in Lithuania, into which Isaiah was born, spoke Russian, Lithuanian and German, and although he learned these three languages as a child, his cultural identification was above all with Russian, a language and a literature which he studied and practised all his life. In England, at the same time as he was being educated, firstly at a well known Christian private school, St. Paul's, and then, thanks to his brilliant qualifications, at Oxford, he continued his studies of Russian with those of Philosophy to such an extent that although the umbilical cord which had bound him to Russia had been cut at 12 years of age, when he began to be a British citizen and to assimilate the cultural life of his adopted country, his intellectual sympathy for and love of the Russian language and its literature stayed with him, as can be seen in the remarkable confidence and knowledge which he brings to bear in numerous essays dedicated to Russian themes, writers and thinkers (“Russian Thinkers” is, to my mind, his best book)

such as those dedicated to Tolstoy, Turgenev or the model he most admired, Alexander Herzen. On his return to Russia for a few months in 1945, as a British diplomat - a journey which was to have incalculable consequences on his emotional and political life - the two great writers whom he got to know, Boris Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova were literally flabbergasted at the fluid elegance with which this professor, from another world, spoke such cultured Russian, and who also knew so much about a literature and authors that were beginning to become more and more invisible in a society subjected to the tyrannical censorship of Stalin.

The Second World War radically changed Isaiah Berlin's private horizon. Without it, it is probable that his life would have passed by, like other Oxford dons, between the classrooms where, at the beginning, he taught Philosophy and later social and political ideas, and his private apartment in that most prestigious and traditional of the University's colleges, All Souls, to which he had been elected a Fellow at the incredible age of 23 (the first Jew to be accepted into the institution). But when war broke out this "asexual and erudite" life experienced a sharp transformation: the young professor whose fame as a polyglot and specialist in European cultures - Russian and German in particular - was already great in the academic world, was sent to the United States by the British Government in order to send assessments of the daily political situation from New York and Washington to the Chancellery and the British embassy in the USA. Between 1941 and 1945 Sir Isaiah undertook an extraordinary labour on behalf of his adopted country, and not only for his analysis of the international situation and the delicate diplomatic relations between the Allies, perhaps the most widely read in the history of the Foreign Office. (Churchill himself was so impressed by them that, in 1944, he wanted to know who wrote them. Anthony Eden wrote back to him "Mr. Berlin, a Baltic Jew and a philosopher". And he added, in his own handwriting "They are very good, I agree, although perhaps they suffer from a certain Oriental aroma")¹. He also established a network of friendships in the most elevated social, academic and political circles of the United States, thanks to his personal charm and his worldly talents: a dazzling raconteur, he used to delight in dinners and diplomatic meetings, and apart from distracting and hypnotising everyone with his good humour, his anecdotes and his wisdom, he used to give his fellow guests the stimulating sensation that, mixing with him, they could

¹ Una selección de estos notables informes, verdaderos ensayos políticos muchos de ellos, fue publicada en 1981: *Washington Despatches, 1941-1945: Weekly Political Reports from the British Embassy*, editada por H. G. Nicholas, introducción de Isaiah Berlin (Londres, 1981).

gratify themselves by bathing in high culture. This snobbish aspect of his life - which was always full of social commitments, dinners, galas and receptions among the top people - curiously never affected his intellectual work, where he never made concessions or fell into banality. But there is no doubt that the social life made him happy and he used to enjoy himself at those banquets, surrounded by people who were not always the most cultured but were certainly powerful, rich or influential. It is not impossible to see in this a frivolous side to his personality, a compensation or substitute for a sexual life, which he seems not to have enjoyed, or to have scarcely known about until his maturity: all his friends at Oxford were convinced that he would always stay a bachelor. It was perhaps as a result of this that the night he spent in Leningrad on a freezing floor with the greatest living Russian poet, Anna Akhmatova, marked him so deeply. Isaiah Berlin, sent for a few months to the British Embassy in Moscow, had gone to Leningrad on a nostalgic visit in search of books and memories from his infancy, and someone in a bookshop, who had heard him asking for the poetess, casually offered to take him to her house which was nearby. Anna Akhmatova was 56 years of age, 20 years older than Berlin. She had been a great beauty and very famous since before the Revolution. At the moment she was in disgrace and since 1925 Stalin had not allowed her to publish a line or give recitals. Her tragic odyssey is one of the most distressing of those terrible years: the Soviet regime shot her first husband and let the third languish away his life in a forced labour camp in Siberia. Her son Lev - a talented young man who Berlin talked to briefly that night - was sent to a Gulag for thirteen years by Stalin, and by blackmailing her that he would not be killed, the Soviet authorities forced Akhmatova to write abject odes of adulation to the dictator who was tormenting her. As the sufferings of the poet increased considerably after that night, Isaiah Berlin never freed himself from the remorse of having been involuntarily responsible for them. (In the archives of the KGB there is a report on a conversation which Stalin had with Zhdanov, the Commissar for Culture, as follows "What do you think about our nun consoling herself with British spies ?").

Isaiah Berlin always emphatically insisted that the eleven or twelve hours that he and Akhmatova spent together were sexually virtuous, both of them involved in an intense and brilliant conversation, and that at one moment during it Anna recited a good number of celebrated poems from the book which, mocking her persecution, she wrote from memory "Requiem", which would become one of the greatest testimonies of spiritual and poetic resistance against the Stalinist tyranny. The conversation was a literary one, an evocation of the great pre-Revolution authors, many of them

dead or exiled, through which Berlin found out about the extremely difficult situation which Anna was passing through in her life, always walking a tightrope and seeing the repression fall on different people while waiting for it to fall on her at any moment. However it is clear that even though there was never the slightest physical contact between them, at midday the next day the austere Isaiah Berlin returned to the Hotel Astoria skipping along with happiness and exclaiming "I'm in love, I'm in love!!". From that time on until his death he asserted that the encounter had been the most important in his life. As for Akhmatova her impression of the visit was reflected in her beautiful poems of love, "Cinque". A story of impossible love from then on as the regime cut all ties and communication of the poetess with the outside world and in the following six years, Berlin could not even discover her whereabouts. (In answer to his pleas that they make enquiries, the British Embassy in Moscow replied that it would be better for Akhmatova if he did not try and communicate with her). Many years later, during the thaw in the Cold War, Isaiah Berlin and other professors managed to get an honorary doctorate for the great Russian poetess and the Soviet authorities allowed her to travel to England to receive it. She was now an old lady but her prolonged martyrdom had not broken her. The renewed encounter was a cold one and, on taking a look at the sumptuous residence, Headington House, where Berlin lived with his wife Aline, she could not help making the ironic and painful comment "And so I see the little bird has been imprisoned in a gold cage".

The fact that a professional bachelor such as Sir Isaiah ended up marrying Aline Halban, who belonged to a rich and aristocratic French Jewish family, in 1956 was not only a surprise for his innumerable friends but was also the culmination of a rambling sentimental affair that had touches of a delightful picaresque comedy. On the conclusion of his mission in 1945, Isaiah Berlin returned to Oxford, to his classes, his conferences and his intellectual chores. He began to be known on both sides of the Atlantic and so spent terms at North American universities, especially Harvard, as well as making periodic journeys to Jerusalem. Distinctions were showered on him and the British establishment opened its doors. And so it was only on entering his forties that sex seemed to have made an incursion into his life and in a way that can only be called both tortuous and academic: adulterous affairs with the wives of University colleagues. An irresistible sense of comedy runs through the pages where Ignatieff describes - with a lot of affection and geniality - a first liaison, lasting various years, with meetings in churches, libraries, passages, and parks, and concluding in the master bedroom of the philosopher. Berlin, spending a whole day of remorse-

se, goes to the husband and tells him the truth "I love your wife". The aggrieved party dismisses the affair with a forthright "That's impossible" and changes the topic of conversation.

The second affair is the serious one. Aline was married to a prominent physicist, Hans Halbam, of Austrian origin, who had worked on French nuclear programmes before teaching at Oxford. She was attractive, cultured, rich and passionate about music and social life, like Isaiah himself. The close friendship that was born between them because of the things they had in common, evolved into something more "guilty". The physicist, who had been warned as to what was happening, tried to put an end to Aline's going out. Isaiah Berlin went to visit him. While (I am sure) they had a cup of tea, they exchanged ideas about the problem which had arisen. In the meantime, Aline awaited the result of the conversation strolling around the garden. The philosopher's logic was persuasive and the physicist recognised it. Both of them got up and went walking amongst the rose bushes and the hydrangeas to advise Aline about the agreement they had reached: she could see her lover once a week, with the approval of her husband. And so things would continued functioning in a friendly and harmonious triangle, until Hans Halbam had to return to Paris. The couple then decided to divorce and Isaiah and Aline could now marry. The marriage was a happy one. In Aline Sir Isaiah found someone more than a tender wife: he found an accomplice who could share his tastes and interests and help him with his work, a woman capable of organising his life with all the confidence that fortune and experience brought, and able to create an agreeable and compartmentalised framework in which his worldly life - Italian summers in Paraggi, music festivals at Salzburg, Pesaro and Glyndbourne, dinners and excursions with well known people - could coexist with the mornings and afternoons dedicated to reading and drafting his essays.

An intellectual task, which although rich and luxuriant, with extraordinary results, concentrated on essays and articles or conferences and reviews and which avoided any great syntheses, organic work or profound ambitious projects. As Ignatieff shows very convincingly, this was not due to the diversity and multiplicity of obligations that almost always passed through Berlin's life: brevity, the lesser the format the better, was his unequivocal vocation. In the Eighties, so as to demonstrate that those critics who reproached him for not undertaking a great thematic work were mistaken, Berlin decided to expand his conferences in 1965 in Washington DC on the roots of Romanticism (published, posthumously, under the title "The Roots of Romanticism") and for many months he worked systematically in the British Library and filled up hundreds of index cards. Finally he aban-

doned it: grandiose projects were not for him. He lacked ambition, that boundless faith in himself, that touch of obsession and fanaticism that great works need. The essay was better suited to his modesty, to his sceptical opinion of himself, to his refusal to be or appear to be a genius or savant before people, to his conviction - and this was not a pose but something that was felt very deeply - that what he had done or was capable of doing meant, in the last instance, very little in the sparkling craft of thought and universal literary creation.

However this was not true. Because this born essayist - something that one can also say about that other great liberal, Jose Ortega y Gasset - left, in his relatively brief texts of interpretation and re-reading of the great thinkers, historians and writers of modern Europe, a work of capital importance for the culture of our times. One of the most provocative and fruitful in the liberal tradition, which has been updated and renewed such as few contemporary thinkers have been. Probably only Popper and Hayek have done as much as he has, in our day, for the culture of liberty. Of the three, the most artistic and the best writer was Isaiah Berlin. His prose is as transparent and stylish as Stendhal, another writer on a wide variety of subjects who never wrote but dictated his texts, and very often the richness and animation of his ideas, of his quotes and examples, the vivacity and elegance with which he unfolds his reasoning, give his essays a novelish quality of burning life and contagious humanity.

I saw him twice in my life. The first, during the Eighties, at a dinner in the house of Hugh Thomas, the historian, where the star guest was the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. Sir Isaiah was sat next to her and, throughout the whole night, the only one of the intellectuals present who made any effort to show her some affection and respect was Berlin. He appeared to be both overwhelmed and happy. At the end of the dinner, when Thatcher left, after spending a couple of hours being subjected to a subtle examination by his fellow guests, he announced "There's nothing to be ashamed of". The second was in Seville in 1992 at a congress on the 500th centenary of the discovery of America. People surrounded him with compliments, which he received blushing but with thanks. I had written a series of articles about him which would later be used as a prologue to the Spanish edition of "The Hedgehog and the Fox", in which I committed the barbaric error of saying that he had been born in Lithuania instead of Latvia. "Well, it's not that serious", he told me with his usual bonhomie, "because when I was born all of it was Russia". Thank you, master. ☐