

Wieseltier, Leon, contribution to 'An American Remembrance' of Isaiah Berlin held at the British Embassy in Washington on 28 January 1998

## Tribute by Leon Wieseltier

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*One must not mourn one's dead too stubbornly, the Jewish tradition instructs. He who weeps excessively, it says, weeps really for someone else. But the ancient rabbis add a stipulation. The inhibition of sorrow, they observe, pertains only to 'the rest of the people'. The mourning for wise men is another matter. Its magnitude is to be measured 'ha'kol le'fi hokhmatam' – that is, in proportion to the wisdom of the individual for whom we grieve.*

*How, then, may we take the measure of Isaiah Berlin's wisdom, so that we may mourn him fittingly? For this, too, we must turn to him. What follows are Isaiah's own words in praise of others. I offer them, in slightly adapted form, in praise of Isaiah; and I invite you to enjoy the music.*

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There is a line among the fragments of the Greek poet Archilochus which says: 'The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.' Scholars have differed about the correct interpretation of these dark words, which may mean no more than that the fox, for all his cunning, is defeated by the hedgehog's one defence. But, taken figuratively, the words can be made to yield a sense in which they mark one of the deepest differences which divide writers and thinkers, and, it may be, human beings in general. One kind of intellectual and artistic personality belongs to the hedgehogs, another to the foxes: and without insisting on a rigid classification, we may, without too much fear of contradiction, say that, in this sense, Dante belongs to the first category, Shakespeare to the second; Plato, Lucretius, Pascal, Hegel, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Ibsen, Proust are, in varying degrees, hedgehogs; Herodotus, Aristotle, Montaigne, Erasmus, Molière, Goethe, Pushkin, Balzac, Joyce – and Berlin – are foxes.

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Berlin believed that the ultimate goal of life was life itself; that the day and the hour were ends in themselves, not a means to another day or another experience. He believed that remote ends were a dream, that faith in them was a fatal illusion; that to sacrifice the present or the immediate and foreseeable future to these distant ends must always lead to cruel and futile forms of human sacrifice. He believed that values were not found in an impersonal, objective realm, but were created by human beings, changed with the generations of men, but were none the less binding on those who lived in their light; that suffering was inescapable, and infallible knowledge neither attainable nor needed. He believed in reason, individual action, empirically discovered truths; but he tended to suspect that faith in general formulas, laws, prescription in human affairs was an attempt, sometimes catastrophic, always irrational,

to escape from the uncertainty and unpredictable variety of life to the false security of our own symmetrical fantasies. He was fully conscious of what he believed, and he described what he saw in language of exceptional vitality, precision and poetry.

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He was intellectually (as indeed in every other respect) a man of complete integrity and did not, for any psychological or tactical reason, try to force the facts into some preconceived dogmatic pattern. The strongest single characteristic of his writings is a pure-hearted devotion to the truth. It is this that makes his words often devastating, and caused them to linger in the memory longer than the richer and weightier sentences of the more celebrated prophets of the age.

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He believed deeply in the faithful preservation of historical tradition. He spoke about this in language scarcely less fervent, but a good deal less biased and irrational, than Burke or Fichte. He did so not because he feared change, but because through his most extreme and radical beliefs there persists a conviction that there is never any duty to maim or impoverish oneself for the sake of an abstract ideal; that nobody can, or should, be required to vivisect himself, to throw away that which affords him the deepest spiritual satisfaction known to human beings – the right to self-expression, to personal relationships, to the love of familiar places or forms of life, of beautiful things, or the roots and symbols of one's own, or one's family's, or one's nation's past. He believed that nobody should be made to sacrifice his own individual pattern of the unanalysable relationships – the central emotional or intellectual experiences – of which human lives are compounded, to offer them up, even as a temporary expedient, for the sake of some tidy solution, deduced from abstract and impersonal premises, some form of life derived from an alien source, imposed upon men by artificial means, and felt to be the mechanical application of some general rule to a concrete situation for which it was not made. All that Berlin wrote or said rests on the assumption that to deny what inwardly one knows to be true, to do violence to the facts for whatever tactical or doctrinal motive, is at once degrading and doomed to futility.

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Because he believed in the importance of ideas, he was prepared to change his own if others could convince him of their inadequacy. He liked criticism for its own sake. He detested adulation, even praise of his own work. He attacked dogmatism in others and was genuinely free from it himself. He had a touching and pure-hearted readiness to learn from anyone, at any time. He lacked vanity and cared little for his reputation, and therefore did not cling to consistency for its own sake, nor to his own personal dignity, if a human issue was at stake. He was loyal to movements, to causes, and to parties, but could not be prevailed upon to support them at the price of saying what he did not think to be true.

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Because he had an exceptionally honest, open, and civilised mind, which found natural expression in lucid and admirable prose; because he combined an unswerving pursuit of the truth with the belief that its house had many mansions; because his conception of man was deeper, and his vision of history and life wider and less simple than that of his utilitarian

predecessors or liberal followers, he has emerged as a major political thinker in our own day. He broke with the pseudo-scientific model, inherited from the classical world and the age of reason, of a determined human nature, endowed at all times, everywhere, with the same unaltering needs, emotions, motives, responding differently only to differences of situation and stimulus, or evolving according to some unaltering pattern. For this he substituted the image of man as creative, incapable of self-completion, and therefore never wholly predictable: fallible, a complex combination of opposites, some reconcilable, others incapable of being resolved or harmonised; unable to cease from his search for truth, happiness, novelty, freedom, but with no guarantee, theological or logical or scientific, of being able to attain them: a free, imperfect being, capable of determining his own destiny in circumstances favourable to the development of his reason and his gifts. He believed that it is neither rational thought, nor domination over nature, but freedom to choose and to experiment that distinguishes men from the rest of nature; of all his ideas it is this view that has ensured his lasting fame.

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The sources of these texts are as follows: 'The Hedgehog and the Fox', PSM 436; 'Herzen and his Memoirs', AC 211; 'The Life and Opinions of Moses Hess', AC 242–3; *ibid.*, 250–1; 'John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life', FEL 203; *ibid.*, 205–6 ([abbreviations](#) of volume titles as in the bibliography).

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