DOREEN B. TOWNSEND CENTER OCCASIONAL PAPERS • 16

BERLIN IN AUTUMN
THE PHILOSOPHER IN OLD AGE

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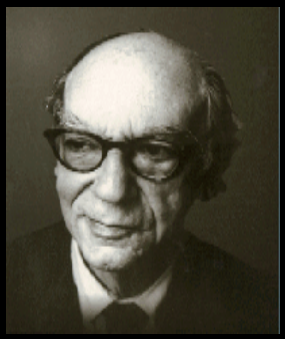

Berlin in Autumn

The Philosopher in Old Age

THE DOREEN B. TOWNSEND CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES was established at the University of California at Berkeley in 1987 in order to promote interdisciplinary studies in the humanities. Endowed by Doreen B. Townsend, the Center awards fellowships to advanced graduate students and untenured faculty on the Berkeley campus, and supports interdisciplinary working groups, lectures, and team-taught graduate seminars. It also sponsors symposia and conferences which strengthen research and teaching in the humanities, arts, and related social science fields. The Center is directed by Randolph Starn, Professor of History and Italian Studies. Christina M. Gillis has been Associate Director of the Townsend Center since 1988.

BERLIN IN AUTUMN: THE PHILOSOPHER IN OLD AGE is an edited version of a talk delivered by noted writer and broadcaster Michael Ignatieff when he visited Berkeley in the spring of 1998 under the Townsend Center's program, "Humanities Perspectives on Aging." Drawing on his then current work on the biography of Isaiah Berlin (later published as *Isaiah Berlin: A Life*), Michael Ignatieff delivered a lecture he titled "The Philosophical Life: Isaiah Berlin in Old Age"; he then joined Berkeley Professors Robert Alter and Michael Bernstein in a follow-up panel discussion that addressed "Aging and the Consolations of the Philosophical Life." The Townsend Center is pleased to include in this issue of the Occasional Papers both the edited lecture and the panelists' remarks. "Humanities Perspectives on Aging" is made possible by support from the Academic Geriatric Resource Program.

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Preface

In the humanities we are blessed with the fact that our work is reflexive—and reflective—by nature, and the range of possible topics and methodologies to which we can turn our attention is large. "Humanities Perspectives on Aging" is a case in point. The programs we have presented and the Occasional Papers we have published deriving from those programs have enabled us to view aging in many historical and cultural settings: as I look over our archive, I see film-makers David Collier and Deborah Kaufman, literary critic Kathleen Woodward, historians Thomas Laqueur, Andrew Achenbaum, Tom Cole, and David Troyansky; writer Jessica Mitford, sociologists Arlene Skolnick, John Clausen, and Stephen Katz, anthropologists Sharon Kaufman, Lawrence Cohen, and Margaret Lock, psychiatrist and anthropologist Arthur Kleinman, legal scholars Marjorie Shultz and Alexander Capron, neurologist and opera/theater director Jonathan Miller, art historian T.J. Clark, physicians Frank Gonzalez-Crussi, Guy Micco, Michael Thaler, Caroline Tanner, and Lauren White — all have presented visions and versions of aging.

Ironically, however, even as we have considered issues in the interpretation of the stages in the life cycle, we had not, prior to Michael Ignatieff's residency under the program, taken into account the biographer's task in representing the life of an individual. In inviting the biographer of the noted philosopher Isaiah Berlin, we sought to overcome that important omission. It was particularly fortuitous that at the time of his visit, Michael Ignatieff was writing the final chapters in his book, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life*.

Michael Ignatieff, essayist, novelist, historian, and broadcaster, bears the title "public intellectual" in the best sense. Previous to his residency with us in the "Aging" program, he had visited Berkeley as Una's Lecturer, delivering a series of lectures and seminars growing out of his project on the history of the moral imagination in the twentieth century. Ignatieff, who was born and educated in Toronto, later earning a doctorate in history from Harvard, takes on large subjects. His novel, *Scar Tissue*, nominated for the prestigious Booker Prize in 1993, is an account a son's coping with the dementia of a parent, a work of fiction that is also a memoir of illness. It also explores the search for meaning in illness: an attempt to find the "metaphor."

How Michael Ignatieff came to write the biography of Isaiah Berlin, the eminent historian of ideas and exponent of traditional liberalism, is perhaps another story. The "metaphor" he found for the final chapters of that biography, of that life, is his subject in the essay reproduced here. Professors Robert Alter and Michael Bernstein, from the faculty at Berkeley, comment upon that endeavor, assessing the role of philosophical reflection at any stage in a life trajectory. In a panel discussion with Micheal Ignatieff, they too provided valuable "metaphors" for understanding the "autumn" of a life.

—Christina M. Gillis
Associate Director, Townsend Center for the Humanities

Berlin in Autumn:
The Philosopher in Old Age

Michael Ignatieff

By common consent Isaiah Berlin enjoyed a happy old age. The autumn of his life was a time of serenity. But serenity in old age is a philosophical puzzle. Why did he manage to avoid the shipwreck which is the more common fate of us all?

The obvious answer is that he was exceedingly fortunate. He married happily, late in life, and he enjoyed good health, good fortune and a growing reputation. His life between 1974, when he retired from the Presidency of Wolfson College, Oxford, and his death in 1997, were years both of ease and increasing public recognition. Berlin's editor, Henry Hardy, began editing and re-publishing his previously unpublished essays and lectures, and this transformed Berlin's reputation, giving the lie to Maurice Bowra's joke that like our Lord and Socrates, Berlin talked much but published little.[1] He lived long enough to see his reputation, which had been in relative eclipse, blossom into what he referred to as a "posthumous fame."

Certainly, Berlin's serenity in his final years owed a great deal to good fortune. But there are temperaments which frown even when fortune shines, and even those with sunny temperaments find mortal decline a depressing experience. So Berlin's serenity is worth trying to explain, both for what it tells us about him and for what it tells us about how to face our own aging. I want to ask whether his

serenity was a matter of temperament or a result of conviction, whether it was a capacity he inherited or a goal he achieved, and in particular whether his convictions—liberal, skeptical, agnostic, and moderate—helped to fortify him against the ordeals of later life.

Being philosophical about old age implies being reconciled or being resigned or some combination of the two. I want to ask whether Isaiah was resigned or reconciled and in what sense philosophy helped him to be philosophical in either of these senses.

From Socrates onwards, philosophy—especially the Stoic tradition— has made the question of how to die well one of its central pre-occupations. Indeed until philosophers became academic specialists devoted to instruction of the young and maintenance of that walled garden known as professional philosophy—in other words until the second half of the l9th century—one of the central tests of a philosophy was whether it helped its adherents to live and die in an instructively rational and inspirational fashion. The great modern example of the philosophical death is David Hume, whose good humored skepticism made him one of Isaiah's favorite philosophers. The story of Hume's death, told in James Boswell's *Journals* and in Adam Smith's *Memoir*, became a cause célèbre in the Enlightenment.[2] In the summer of 1776, Boswell returned repeatedly to Hume's house in the final days, awaiting some wavering which would indicate that the philosopher had recanted and embraced the Christian faith. No such wavering occurred. Hume went to his death with all the good humor of Socrates, joking with Boswell about what he might say to Charon the boatman when they met at the banks of the Styx. The jokes sent a shiver through every fiber of Boswell's errant but Christian soul. After visiting Hume for the last time, he found a whore in the streets of Edinburgh and coupled with her within sight of Hume's bedroom, as if wishing to embrace the carnal in order to drive the tormenting fear of death out of his mind. So a philosophical death was both a noble spectacle and a metaphysical puzzle.

Hume's death placed him securely in this grand philosophical tradition going back to Socrates. But his philosophical positions broke with the assumption that philosophy should teach men how to live and die well. His philosophical writings maintained—and his own experience of life deepened this into a settled conviction—that while philosophy could clarify the terms of mental and moral

debate, it could not generate meaningful reasons to live or die.[3] In particular, it was not a substitute source for the consolations provided by religion. Indeed, the search for metaphysical consolations was bound to be insatiable and profoundly unsettling. If men were seeking for serenity in their final hours, they should not seek it in philosophy. Hume himself had little to say about the sources of his own serenity, but they seem to have owed more to temperament than to conviction, more to the sense of a life fully lived and enjoyed than to any received or formulated set of stoic opinions.

The same proved true of Isaiah Berlin. He was a Humean skeptic from the time he came up to Oxford in 1928, an agnostic in religion and a skeptic in philosophy. As it happened, a modern twentieth century form of Humean skepticism was just then coming into the ascendant in Oxford analytical philosophy. While still in his twenties in Oxford, Berlin became one of the founding fathers of "logical positivism." While the immediate origins of this view were the Vienna School—Wittgenstein, Carnap, Schlick and Weisman—Hume remains the grandfather of this view of philosophy and its most characteristic Anglo-Saxon exponent.[4] Logical positivism strengthened Berlin's Humean distrust of metaphysics and what the Germans called *Lebensphilosophie*. Philosophy, as the logical positivists conceived it, had to emancipate itself from the Socratic heritage of asking questions about the meaning of life and the manner of a good death. It would never achieve results, it would never make progress as a discipline unless it rigorously excluded unanswerable questions from its research program. This view of philosophy was in turn a view of life. It was central to this view that if you persisted in asking questions about the meaning of life, you had not understood life in any degree. Life was life and its plausibility was a matter of sentiment not a matter of argument. Philosophical propositions were of no use at all in living or dying and to ask philosophy to console was to mistake what it was.

Although Berlin eventually broke with the scientistic and reductive style of logical positivism, he was deeply marked by its anti-metaphysical bent. Philosophy's function was to clarify common terms of argument, to elucidate the nature of moral choices, and to interpret certain puzzles in the relation between the mind and the world. It was not a substitute for religion and had nothing to say about death or how we should face it. Like most of the analytical

philosophers of his generation, Berlin felt that unless philosophy kept the demarcation line with metaphysics clear, it would lose all claim to rigor, seriousness and self-respect.

These views, developed in late adolescence, made him deeply skeptical, by the time he reached his eighties, about the very possibility that philosophy could assist one to be philosophical about old age. He was not scornful of those who sought comforting systems of belief but he did not stand in need of one himself. He thought of aging and death in consistently materialist terms and believed, accordingly, that death held no terrors since, logically speaking, it was not an event in life. This formulation, adapted from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, implied both that death was not to be feared, since it could not be experienced, and also that death was only the end, not the defining property of life.[5]

Yet we cannot leave the matter there. Berlin the anti-metaphysical philosopher may have been skeptical of the very idea that philosophical propositions can shape the encounter with death, but when it came to deciding upon his own funeral, he chose the Jewish Orthodox form of service rather than the Reform or non-denominational service his agnostic beliefs might have logically entailed. This reflected a choice of allegiance and belonging, rather than a commitment of faith. He could subscribe to the rituals of Judaism without subscribing to their content. He did so serenely, refusing to see any contradiction. The faith of his fathers had disposed of these matters of burial and mourning very well for centuries. Why should he quarrel with any of it? His skepticism about matters religious was more respectful than many of his more bone-dry skeptical friends—Alfred Ayer or Stuart Hampshire, for example. Why this is so is not easy to explain. As a refugee and exile, he perhaps needed the reassurance of religious ritual more than his English colleagues; just possibly, he thought that there was a sort of arid presumption in the modernist dismissal of ritual as superstition.

He also differed from his colleagues, ultimately, in his view of the relation between philosophical propositions and life. As a logical positivist, he was skeptical about the very attempt to justify life philosophically. But he turned away from philosophy proper in his late twenties in part because he had become fascinated precisely by the ways in which men did use ideas to justify, explain and even modify their lives. As a historian of ideas, he was keenly aware that men do

live and die by their ideas. Few philosophers had such a keen sense of the intense interaction between propositions, convictions and temperament. If we are going to look at the impact of Berlin's thought on the manner of his own aging we shall have to look beyond the impact of logical positivism itself.

All of his thinking associated serenity with belonging, and belonging with self-knowledge. If he was serene in old age it was because he knew who he was and where he belonged. This personal sense of the necessity of roots informed all of his writing on nationalism. He always located the origins of nationalist feeling in the passion to be understood. People need to live in communities where they are understood—and not merely for what they say, but for what they mean. To have a national home was to live in a world of such tacitly shared meanings.[6]

He attached more importance to belonging than any other modern liberal philosopher. He had a clear sense his own origins, as the son of a Baltic timber merchant born in the Jewish community of Riga in the twilight of the Czarist Empire. Despite going into exile he kept a strong sense of connection to these roots throughout his adult life. This organic connection was possible because his mother remained alive until he was well into his sixties. It so happened that he retired in the year of his mother's death, 1974. When he tried to speak about losing her, he used the German verb *zerreißen*, meaning "to tear in pieces." In the letters he wrote in the week after her death in 1974, he went on to say that without such living links to his past he felt accidental, contingent, directionless.[7] Life briefly lost its momentum and point. In time, he recovered it again: his organic capacities for repair and recovery were formidable. It is doubtful that he had more than several months experience of genuine depression in his whole life, and if his mother's death occasioned one such occasion, it was brief.

His equanimity in old age had a great deal to do with the degree to which he made his own life—its needs and cravings—the tacit subject of his work, and through apparently abstract writings about nationalism explored the needs for belonging which were central to his own identity. If this produced equanimity it was because it was done tacitly, with a minimum of self-disclosure, so that his work both revealed his inner pre-occupations and helped him to resolve them, without exposing him to ridicule or shame.

Among expatriates like Berlin, identities soldered together in exile often come apart in old age. In retirement and old age, people are brought up short with the realization of how far they have come from their beginnings. Often their past is now in another country and in another time. When this realization dawns, identity comes under strain. They begin to go to church or synagogue more often, they begin to dream in their languages of origin in an attempt to recover past connections; more often than not, they begin to have a sense of inner fragmentation. They are not able to pull past, present and future together. The span of life is simply too long. There are too many twists and turns in the road.

This did not happen to Berlin. In fact, old age represented a coming together of the Russian, Jewish and English skeins of his identity. During his years as a school boy and then as a young Oxford don, he assimilated thoroughly. His accent, for example, impersonated the upper middle class Oxford dons of his acquaintance. But with old age, the Russian and Jewish parts of his identity began to return. His voice became less English with time and more Russian in its vowel sounds. He himself was aware of this. It cannot be accidental that his most extended excursion into autobiography, the Jerusalem prize speech, was given as he turned 70.[8] In it, he made a point of saying that his identity consisted of three elements, English, Russian and Jewish, all braided together into one skein. The philosophical equanimity of his old age owed a great deal to this recovery of all the elements of his past, this braiding of the skein of selfhood. It made him an exceedingly economical persona: no energy was wasted in repression or denial of the origins which made him up.

There was no question of a return to Judaism in old age, because he had never left. While he did not keep a kosher table, he observed the major Jewish festivals and liked to joke that the orthodox synagogue was the synagogue he did not attend. He had no time for reformed Judaism because he thought it was incoherent to combine religion and rationalism, to reduce an ancient faith to nothing more than an agreeable and modern ethical content. He respected the claims of the ancient Jewish tradition precisely because of their irrational and inhuman content. Igor Stravinsky came to lunch in 1963 and asked Isaiah to suggest a religious subject for a composition he had been commissioned to write for the Jerusalem Festival. Berlin went upstairs, returned with his bible and read

Stravinsky the passage in Hebrew describing Abraham's binding of Isaac. Stravinsky took Berlin's advice and went on to compose a cantata on the theme. The Abraham and Isaac story was a parable for Berlin about the inscrutability both of God's commands and of human life itself. Unlike many of his fellow agnostics, Berlin had a healthy respect for the religious dimension in human consciousness. It also helped to sustain his ultimately metaphysical view that there were a lot of things about the shape of human life which we cannot know.[9]

Because he was a famous man, he would be asked, sometimes by complete strangers, to pronounce on the meaning of life. He found this very comic, but his replies were terse and matter of fact. When he was 75, he replied to one such questioner, "as for the meaning of life I do not believe it has any. I do not at all ask what it is but I suspect it has none, and this is a source of great comfort to me. We make of it what we can and that is all there is about it. Those who seek for some deep cosmic all-embracing libretto are, believe me, pathetically mistaken."[10]

These then were the metaphysical sources of his serenity: a deep and abiding sense of who he was and where he came from, coupled with a cool and skeptical refusal to entertain questions about the meaning of life which he thought were beyond the reach of reason.

This is about as far as doctrine and mature conviction will take us in explaining his autumnal serenity and they do not take us very far. We need to look at his temperament, at the attitudes to self and habits of mind, which made it easy for him to greet old age with relative calm.

As his biographer I had expected that when he left Wolfson College, when he was no longer president of the British Academy, no longer Chichele Professor of Social Thought, no longer a Fellow at Old Soul's, that he might have felt bereft and denuded, as professional men often do at the end of their careers. Retirement can initiate a period of lonely inner questioning. This did not happen for Berlin. This is because he was never heavily invested in these roles in the first place. He did not lack ambition, he liked to be taken seriously, he could be prickly if he felt his dignity or reputation were attacked—but he also stood outside himself and mocked his own desires for recognition. When T.S. Eliot wrote to congratulate him on his knighthood in 1956, Isaiah replied that he felt as silly as if he were

wearing a paper hat at a children's party.[11] He liked recognition—the knighthood mattered deeply—but he held some part of himself back. Irony and a sense of the ridiculous, therefore, were important components of the serenity his friends admired in the autumn of his life.

Of course irony and a sense of humor about the scramble for honor and fame are easier if you've had your share of both. He always said his success had been based on a systematic overestimation of his abilities. "Long may this continue," he would say. He had very little to be bitter about, very little to regret. Yet even those who have known a success equivalent to his are often bitter and depressed in old age. He was not.

He always insisted that he was not an essentially introspective man; he was an observer, certainly, but fundamentally directed outwards rather than inwards. He never kept a diary and his most characteristic forms of self-revelation were addressed outwards in letters and conversation. He thought more about what other people made of him than he thought about himself. He found it easy to take a distance from his own life, to be ironical about himself, because he wasn't imprisoned in his own self to begin with.

He had a particular talent for imagining other lives and that gave him a vantage point from which to see his own. He loved reading in order to lose himself in some other person, often someone radically alien to his own temperament. He had a fascination with ideas and temperaments opposite to his own: figures like Joseph De Maistre, the counter-revolutionary theorist and fanatical hater of bourgeois liberal reformism.[12] In entering into De Maistre's inner world, he could see himself as De Maistre might have seen him, and this capacity for self-distanciation freed him from excessive or burdening investment in his own roles.

Keeping himself apart from his roles followed, I think, from being a Jew and an exile. His belonging in England was both secure and conditional. Irony, self-distanciation and self-deprecation had survival value for any Jewish exile in England. This is one of the reasons that he remained, even in secure old age, a watchful character, acutely aware that he was a sojourner and a stranger even in the Establishment which took him to its heart.

He also refused to vest his own commitments, ideas and values with existential or historical importance. After the fall of Communism, he was

constantly asked whether he felt vindicated, and his replies always challenged the premise of the question itself. Why, he asked, should any liberal feel vindicated? History, he always said, had no libretto. To claim that it vindicated him or his liberalism seemed an absurd inflation of both himself and the doctrines with which he was associated. He was also self-knowing enough to realize that he had never risked anything decisive in the struggle against Communist tyranny, as Koestler, Orwell, Milosz or Akhmatova had. Since that was the case, it was unbecoming to make a show of rejoicing at its fall. He did take quiet pleasure in the fact that Communism ended as his own life came to a close. He could look back across the century and feel that the intellectuals with whom he felt the closest spiritual kinship: the anti-Bolshevik writers and artists of Russia's Silver Age, 1896–1917—chiefly Pasternak and Akhmatova—would have rejoiced to have lived the hours he had been lucky enough to see. In this sense, history did shine on him in his final years.

He was distanciated from his roles, from his own ideas and from his own posterity. He was fond of saying, "*Apres moi le deluge*." Of course, there was an element of pose in this, a very Oxford style of appearing not to care about reputation. In fact, of course, he was a careful custodian of his reputation—worrying whether he should accept such and such an honor, sit at such and such a table, with such and such a person, give his name to such and such an appeal. All of this indicates a concern to husband the coinage of his fame. But as to what came after, he always purported to be indifferent.

His attitude to my work on his biography, for example, was complex. Initially, he thought it was a ludicrous idea. "Why would I want to do such a thing?," I can remember him asking me. It was only after three years of oral interviewing—in which I would ask him a question at the beginning of the hour and get to ask him another one at the end—that he broached the issue of what would become of the tapes. The idea of a biography grew upon him as he came to trust me and grow comfortable in my company. As the years passed, he engaged with the project, checking with me about this or that detail, re-telling certain stories with a new twist or nuance in order that I would appreciate its significance. But he took a fundamentally passive approach to my project, waiting for the right question before proffering the answer, and I had to wait for years for him to disclose

what he took to be the essential elements of his life and thought. He seemed to have little anxiety about posterity. When I asked him how he thought he would be remembered, his replies were always of the form "how can we possibly know?" and "why should it matter?"

This attitude towards posterity was reinforced by the fact that he had no children of his own. He was quite content to be a step-father to his wife's children, but he never evinced a very strong desire to have any of his own. The patriarchal and paternal instincts—all of which usually go with a desire to shape and mold posterity—were absent in him.

He also never had disciples. There were many former students, friends and associates who liked to say "*Ich bin ein Berliner,*" but he never sought to create a circle of followers who would propagate his ideas and safeguard his reputation. There was no Berlin school, tendency or faction. He disliked the idea of having to take responsibility for a Berlinian doctrine, with orthodoxy to defend and disciples to promote it.

He watched Henry Hardy, a young graduate student in philosophy, attach himself to his work; he supported Hardy's editions of his works and greatly enjoyed the revival of his reputation which Hardy's work achieved, but never took any initiative in the relationship beyond benign approval. The same genial detachment characterized his relationship to my biography. Neither Hardy nor I ever thought of ourselves as surrogate sons, disciples or acolytes. Isaiah simply did not want this kind of entourage around him—did not want the responsibility.

The final source of his equanimity, I believe, was in relation to aging itself. Almost all of us have a quarrel with how old we actually are, and present ourselves as younger or older than our biological age. Biological and phenomenological age are never exactly the same. Isaiah was a complex instance of this. All the people who remember him from his early youth always said that he was the oldest person in any room. When he was twenty he was already behaving as if he were a middle-aged man. Stephen Spender, one of his oldest friends, once said to me that he had trouble thinking of Isaiah as having aged at all. He was always "a baby elephant, always the same baby elephant."[13] In early pictures of him, he is wearing the same kind of three-piece suit that he wore to the end of his life. He valued continuity in the details: the same kind of polished shoes, the same look of

cautious bourgeois sobriety as his father. He dressed like his father all his life, and he did so from adolescence onwards. The paradox of his extraordinary youthfulness and vitality, therefore, was that he always thought of himself as a middle-aged man. He always seemed older than he was and he always remained younger than he seemed.

Age did him many favors. He was not a prepossessing twenty- or thirty- or even forty-year old. It wasn't until he was in his sixties that he looked fully at ease with what he had become. He thinned down, his whole face acquired a certain nobility, as if he were finally growing into the age at which he was most himself.

His vernacular of odd behavior—going to parties with crisp bread in a match-box in his pocket so that he could have his own little snacks—belonged more to the personality of an indulged child than of a sage. In a restaurant he would suddenly begin humming some little yiddish ditty that he had heard in Hebrew school in 1915. That ability to recover his childhood and be a child again was one of the reasons that he was much loved and that he was never weighed down by life.

The other element of his aging—which he noticed himself—was that it rendered him more—not less—susceptible to pity. In a letter written late in life, he said, "the proposition that the longer one lives the more indifferent one becomes to the ills that beset one or one's dearests is totally false. I suffer much more from this than I used to and I now realize that there must have been a long period of my life when I was, comparatively speaking, too little sensitive to the misfortunes of others, however close, certainly, of my friends."

In 1993, one year before his death, Steven Spender sent Isaiah the following poem, written in China in AD 835. It commemorated their sixty years of friendship:

> We are growing old together, you and I
> Let us ask ourselves "what is age like?"
> The idle head still uncombed at noon
> Propped on a staff sometimes a walk abroad
> Or all day sitting with closed doors.

One dares not look in the mirror's polished face.
One cannot read small letter books.
Deeper and deeper one's love of old friends,
Fewer and fewer one's dealing with young men.
One thing only: the pleasure of idle talk
Is great as ever, when you and I meet.[14]

That does catch perhaps the final element of what kept both of them young: the pleasure of idle talk, and the idler the better. Memory, word games and puns, the sheer pleasure of orality, which connected him to the pleasures of infancy all his life. There was nothing that meant more to him than the pleasure of talk. He died tragically of esophageal constriction, literally unable to get words out of his throat. The condition was terrible to him, and it was the only time I ever saw him depressed, because it made it difficult for him to speak to other human beings and that was what made life worth living.

What he seemed to vindicate by his life was life itself. Life could not be philosophically justified; it could only be lived. He trusted life and certainly helped those who loved him to trust it more themselves.

ENDNOTES

1. Maurice Bowra to Noel Annan, undated, 1971; see Noel Annan "A Man I Loved," in H. Lloyd-Jones (ed.), *Maurice Bowra: A Celebration* (London: 1974), 53.

2. I have discussed Hume's death in my *The Needs of Strangers*, ch. 3 (London: 1984). See also James Boswell, *Boswell in Extremes, 1776-1778* (New Haven: 1971), 11-15; Adam Smith, *Correspondence* (Oxford: 1977), 203-221.

3. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: 1978), 264.

4. See Ben Rogers, *A.J. Ayer: A Life* (London: 1999); my own *Isaiah Berlin: A Life*, (London: 1998), 80-90.

5. *Berlin: A Life*, 83

6. See "Nationalism: Past Neglect and Present Power" and "The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will" in Isaiah Berlin *The Proper Study of Mankind*, edited by Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (London: 1998), 553-605.

7. *Berlin: A Life*, 272.

8. Isaiah Berlin, "The Three Strands in My Life" in *Personal Impressions* (London: 1998), 255-261.

9. *Berlin: A Life*, 237-238.

10. *Berlin: A Life*, 279.

11. *Berlin: A Life*, 222.

12. "Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism" in Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, edited by Henry Hardy, (New York: 1991), 91-175.

13. *Berlin: A Life*, 3.

14. *Berlin: A Life*, 287-8.

Audience Comments

Audience Comment: I understood that Berlin saw a relation between moral pluralism and liberalism, and I am wondering what makes this relation possible or necessary.

Ignatieff: Well, now the secret can be told. I was simply praying that no one would raise that question, since the question is very complicated. I think that Isaiah's sense of moral pluralism—as a biographer you have to be very careful about not being reductive—came out of his sense of the pluralism of his own identity, the sense that within himself there were competing and conflicting claims. The claims of his Jewishness, of his respect for the propositional content of English liberalism, of his adoration of things Russian—his sense that those identities were worlds, cultural and conceptual worlds, that occasionally you would be forced to choose between them and you were dealing with incommensurables. That is, it was impossible to rank these identities because they were lived, part of you, part of your flesh, so that a rationalist approach to value-conflicts simply didn't begin to understand the sense in which values were embedded in you, in your history and your life and your convictions. I'm not answering the substance of your point but taking the biographer's timid way out, which is to connect why he put such emphasis on value pluralism.

First it has to do with a divided identity, the kind that produced a liberalism which had a deeper sense of the dividedness of human subjectivity and agency than most liberalisms do. Rawls has written many wonderful things but he doesn't have that sense of the intersubjective agent that's very deep in Isaiah. He had none of Rawls' or other neo-Kantians' propositional capacity, the capacity to generate logical structures of analysis, and he felt that as a tremendous weakness in his own thought. But what he did have was a sense of intersubjectivity, the sense of what it is like to be a choosing agent and to feel conflict.

What is complicated from a biographer's point of view is the question why a person who led by and large a triumphantly untragic life should have had such a strong sense of tragic choice—by tragic he meant: you choose one thing you lose another, that every time you make a commitment you forego something, and loss is built into all forms of political choosing and all kinds of moral choosing. That emphasis on loss was very deep. But as I've said to you in talking about his mother, his was a life that triumphantly braided all the identities together, a life without shattering, awful human loss. So, in a sense, his emphasis on tragic choice is an example of his capacity to project himself into states of mind and views that he had not actually lived himself; it is an imaginative projection that produces a rather deep sense of how people choose.

He backed into some of these issues—moral pluralism and liberal freedom—because he thought about substantive questions, and always did, and thought about them seriously. But I don't think he was fully aware of what he thought himself into. One of the interesting things about him biographically—and I said earlier that he thought himself a fox and discovered that he was a hedgehog— he discovered that he was a hedgehog with one big central idea only because everyone else was telling him it was there. Earnest graduate students were putting it together and he was suddenly seeing it. Interestingly, one of the places where people saw this first was in Eastern Europe. Some of the most important dialogues that he had with his work were with Poles in Marshall Law Poland. People saw something about negative liberty, something about moral pluralism, that nobody in the West saw. And out of those dialogues, which is a whole other subject of this concluding chapter, he began to work out the sense in which was a moral pluralist who believed in liberalism.

But I don't think, in answer to your question, that his analysis of why pluralism entails liberalism is satisfactory.

Audience Comment: I am very interested in your talk's implications about symmetry in a life: the happy old age and the happy childhood. I remember that Berlin was once asked why he had never become a revolutionary; and his answer was that his childhood was simply so happy that he did not detest anything. I think that doesn't work so well with other figures—Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin—who also had privileged, happy childhoods and yet used them as a counterpoint to what is, as Benjamin said, a damaged life, after the childhood. I wonder why this effect is not the same. It seems to me off the top of my head that Berlin had a much more oblique relationship to the Holocaust, that one thinks of Berlin as a European Jew of the 20th century who rarely if ever dealt with the Holocaust. Perhaps this is how he was able to keep a continuity, a symmetry, between the old and young ages.

Ignatieff: I think that is very well put, and it is one of the biographical puzzles I dealt with. In fact his connection to the Holocaust was very brutal and very direct. His maternal grandfather, his maternal grandmother, his two uncles and three cousins, were killed by the *Einsatzgruppen* in December 1941 in Riga. That is the first biographical fact, the second is that he was in Washington right throughout 1942-45, as was Rabbi Steven Wise and Nahum Goldman and Chaim Weitzmann—and Isaiah was a terribly close and intimate friend to Weitzmann—as the full facts of what was happening to European Jewry began to come out. He was at the center of those few people who would know the full extent of what was being done, and at one point he played a quite important historical role in the politics of all that. But the key fact is that there is no sustained reflection or contemplation of the Holocaust in his work. And some of it, if you ever asked him, was that it was simply too painful to do; he could not deal with it, could not face it. But, like all these things, he did face it in his way. There is a great deal of subterranean encounter with the Holocaust in his work.

There is a long letter of tremendous importance where George Kennan oddly picks up the passion in Isaiah's denunciation of Soviet totalitarianism and

says, "why aren't you talking about the Holocaust?" And Isaiah then begins to talk about the Holocaust, and interestingly what excites his moral fury, rage and despair is not simply the fact of this criminal destruction of a people, but the precise modalities by which they were deceived as to their fate. What he as a philosopher found so insupportable, what he couldn't face, was the prospect of his own grandparents' being deceived as to their destination. The modalities of deception, the ways not merely in which human beings were killed but in which the human right to know one's fate and meet it with open eyes was denied. It is a slightly odd way to view what is an abomination about the Holocaust, but it is the part of it that he couldn't stand, and I think it figures in his lifelong loathing of all forms and theories of false consciousness (though this is a longer discussion). He felt that unless you put your trust in the human capacity to understand your own interest and needs, you couldn't put your trust in anything, and one of the things that he hated, consequently, about the engineers of the Holocaust, was the ways in which they preyed on and exploited human credulity.

There is no doubt there is in a sense a silence, but, whenever I talked to him, there was simply a physical recoil. He couldn't watch *Shoah*, for example, he simply could not watch any of it. And then he had a quite principled loathing of Holocaust kitsch. He hated the industry, the identity politics, the victim politics, all that. He also felt that there was a kind of moral vanity involved in participating in any way in discussion about it. He couldn't figure out an honest way to say a word about it. So it's a complex thing. He thought about it more than he let on. There was real pain at the heart of it, the loss of these family members.

Audience Comment: Can you say something about his writing style, how he developed it, how it was cultivated, how he found editors, etc. I've heard so many comments along the lines of "what a wonderful writer," "we'll never see another writer like this," "American academia could never produce someone like Isaiah Berlin."

Ignatieff: Well sometimes he wrote well and sometimes he didn't. I think some of the work is uneven. The literal answer to your question is that he is one of the pioneers of the dictabelt. Very early on, when he was a civil servant in Washington

during the war, he acquired the habit of striding up and down his room dictating to secretaries. And since he spoke with terrifying rapidity, the literal transcripts of those dictabelts are comic, there are large lacunae wherein desperate American typists effectively threw up their hands, and then he would have to pencil in what he intended to say. But he gradually found marvelous secretaries who were able to follow, to keep up with him. That had a tremendous effect on the prose you read. These enormous sentences that start and meander into subclause and subclause and wind to a point in the end are the product of a certain dictating style.

In terms of formal models, he loved Macauley, he loved the nineteenth century essayists. The whole business of how he entered into language is terribly complicated. *The New York Review of Books*—I'm not sure wisely, but anyway they will be doing so—will publish the very first thing he wrote, at age 11. It is a piece of fiction inspired by the assassination of the head of the Jaka in 1918. In 1921, sitting in a hotel in London, Isaiah wrote this fictionalized account of the murder, and already he has entered the English language. He had this preternatural facility with the language. But if you look closely, it is still full of quite characteristic use or non-use of English prepositions; all the ways in which you can tell a person is a second-language speaker are still there, but by the 1930s and 40s he is in to his oral style.

I'm sure a tremendous part of the sunniness of his disposition had to do with verbal acuity. It was semi-genetic. There are some intelligences where you have a sense that there is an enormous kind of "spark gap" or a distance between thought and word, and a lot of what's going on is the laborious effort to get the thought across that spark gap. And, in fact, the effort is what guarantees that the result will be sharp and hard and focused—Wittgenstein might be an example of someone whose mental world starts with pure speechlessness and then works towards the exteriorization of thought. But with Isaiah there is no spark gap at all. It's just "whoom," and it is slightly terrifying to look at the dictabelts and see that he would dictate 9000 words in a day. Some of it was rubbish—I don't want to make him into a genius—but if you wanted to add to the reasons why he had a happy life, it had to do with this freakish verbal facility which never deserted him, which was like having a piano. He just played all the time, in any key, any tune.

The question of whether he will have a future, whether people will read him, depends partly on whether the substantive questions he raised matter. He's

had an enormous revival because everybody is interested in pluralism. Whether he survives as a writer is a much more complicated question. I think he is a wonderful writer. The end of *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, this image of Tolstoy, like *Oedipus at Colonus*, has a tremendous moral grandeur to me and to many people who have read it, and there are moments of great grandeur in his writing, but it is a very nineteenth century prose. It makes no concessions to late modernity. It may be that your students and mine will simply pick up this stuff and think, "what is this?", unable to read it because the discursive traditions have disappeared. I was raised on Macauley's essays as a child, so I pick this up and I can immediately read it, but we are not training kids that way anymore.

Audience Comment: I have a question I am dying to ask. I came to see the author of *Scar Tissue* speak, and I'm wondering how autobiographical that work was.

Ignatieff: *Scar Tissue* is a novel I wrote in 1993 about a woman going into the wilderness, the blizzard, of a neurological condition that looks a lot like Alzheimer's. The connection is very close. My mother did die of Alzheimer's disease and so did my grandmother. I had two generations of experience with this. One of the reasons that you can tell I have such an investment in the last years of Isaiah's life is that I think anybody who has cared for people who go through Alzheimer's can—I'm not saying must—but can come out with a sense that all old age must be like this, that this is where we are all headed, into this particular kind of blizzard, and it was a constant source of encouragement to me that Isaiah's lucidity never weakened, not even when he was face to face with death. That was self-evidently very comforting to me. I don't want to be negative about Alzheimer's disease. Well that's a strange way to put it. [laughter.]

I did want to write a book that tried, as it were, to salvage something from the experience, and I felt that there was an enormous amount to salvage, that is, there were intellectual things—this sounds cold and heartless—to salvage from Alzheimer's, that my mother remained a person when she could no longer speak, when she babbled like a bird, when she couldn't remember who I was. And I found it fantastically interesting and important; it changed my view of what a person is, to realize that she remained a person when no attribute of personhood

remained. Go figure, as they say. Very complicated why it was that she remained who she was when nothing that she was remained. So, that was the impulsion behind the book, to try to do that, and I think that Alzheimer's disease and all neurological disabilities of this kind, degenerative conditions, are of the most intense intellectual interest and importance, and it seems to me slightly scandalous that with very few exceptions like Oliver Sacks who has popularized this stuff, it has not been made a properly philosophical subject, because these people are taking us to places we would rather not think about and what they have to say—to the degree that they can say anything at all—should teach us something about what a person is, what human identity is.

It taught me, for example, to be less sentimental about memory as a carrier of human continuity. My mother had no memory whatever, but she was the same person. There were continuities that remained in the way she said the word "coffee." She said the word coffee as caw-fey. She said caw-fey because there was an American friend of hers, forty years before, who spoke thus. At the end, that was what was left. And because I am her son I could see it. Her identity resided in the end in one word of the English language, and I found that very interesting, peculiar, and so I tried to write about it, and I wrote about it in fiction because it was too painful to do it simply as memoir and because I needed to transpose and turn things around. I had to disguise what I was doing for various reasons.

I'm going on this way because I think one of the things about gerontology, old age, Alzheimer's, the whole "dreary" field, is that it's very important to rescue its intense intellectual interest. I'm convinced that compassion, not to mention commitment, or funding towards developing cures, therapies, etc., depends on people being intellectually interested in these questions. I think there is a deep connection between compassion and intellectual interest. I am being deliberately cold-hearted. One of the reasons that I stuck by my mother—I didn't stick by her very well, my brother stuck by her much better than I—and showed compassion, was that she was so interesting. This is something that bears thinking about. One of the ways in which you cease to care well for someone, and also cease to love them in the way that you should, is that you cease to find them interesting, and there is a much deeper connection between being intellectually perplexed by

someone's fate, and your capacity to help them and show pity and compassion and solidarity.

I think one of the great things about what has happened to Alzheimer's as a subject is that it has become interesting. When my grandmother died in 1959 it was just something boring and unmentionable called senility. Now it seems to hold huge secrets to neurological functioning, etc.That cold-hearted Western rationalism is a very good thing, much more connected to compassion than we suppose.

Audience Comment: You've talked a little about Berlin's sense of irony, and in reading him he strikes me as a very funny person. I wonder if he took any interest in the profession of comedy or comic performance.

Ignatieff: I think the answer is No because what he valued particularly was his amateur status. What he loved was the accidental character of comedy. He particularly specialized in taking stories from one context and putting them in another, like the story about "Father, I have killed them all."—his sense of taking from the vast open-pit mine of his brain some story and suddenly putting it, off the top of his head, into some other context, and everybody falling about. But it is also interesting—you're on to something—because one of the things he absolutely hated was telling jokes. He hated the ritual formulae of jokes. What he liked was this peculiar spontaneous ricochet of humor, that goes around and spirals up in some delirious invention. But he never, as far as I know, went to a comedy performance, never liked comic shows or movies, and hated people saying, in that lugubrious way, "I'm going to tell you a funny story."

Audience Comment: Who would you compare to Berlin, who were his real contemporaries?

Ignatieff: I think all this pious claptrap after his death about how he was one of a kind is probably wrong. I did compare him to Popper, and I think that comparison is important. You can compare him to Gombrich, to the degree that they are both exiles. But Gombrich is a fascinatingly different character from a

different milieu with a different relationship to Jewishness, and a much more closed personality, a great scholar, but a totally different kind of human being. The interesting thing is that Isaiah never identified with others—Perry Anderson, Paul Hogan, a number of people tried to do a sort of sociology of where he fit amongst all these emigré exile Central Europeans who either came to America or Britain, and I always found it slightly unsatisfactory, because what he didn't share with them was more interesting than what he did. Because I think he made an absolutely particular identification with Britain, and with his Jewishness. And it's a very odd business, because at his memorial service at Hamstead synagogue, the entire British elite above a certain age, Dame, Lord this and that, they all sat there and listened to the cantor sing, and listened to the chief rabbi, and they thought, where the hell are we? [laughter] and yet that was clearly his final joke. And he was the only emigré to be able to hold within himself a world which included Lord Carrington and Lord Heard and the cantor singing the immemorial words of consolation. In other words, comparison can take you some of the way but I still want to insist on singularity.

Audience Comment: Are there particular biographies or biographers whom you or whom Isaiah admired?

Ignatieff: That's a good question. I'd have to think about it. For myself, I think Ray Monk's biography of Wittgenstein is a very fine book, you really do see a life and a work brought together. Isaiah was very much more struck by autobiography; the canonical work for him was Herdson's *Life and Thoughts*. And certain of Turgenev's autobiographical writings, and he was sweet to me, but was very glad that it was *après lui le deluge*, and he didn't have to read it and he didn't have to know what travesties I would be producing as I speak.

Audience Comment: Regarding pluralism, did he have any opinion on the debates going on in U.S. university campuses about the subject currently?

Ignatieff: I think no. And I am glad that this is so because if he had he would probably have been roundly misunderstood or roundly boo'ed. He was of Arthur Schlesinger's generation, so when Schlesinger put out this polemic against

multiculturalism, the loosening of America or whatever it is called, I think Isaiah was quite sympathetic in a way to the sense that you simply can't have culture unless you have a set of core commitments. But where that would position him in these debates I don't know. He was very impatient about the extent to which his own community—the Jewish community—began to identify themselves as victims. He found that a tragic mistake. For a pluralist he was actually much less "let 1000 flowers bloom" than you might suggest. He believed that what he loved about Britain was that the claims it made were very strong. There was a commitment to the rule of law, parliamentary sovereignty, the Queen, the vast institutional integument. He liked Britain not because it made weak claims on you, but because it made very strong ones. And I think you can by extrapolation say that what he loved about America was that it made very strong republican claims. In the list of things that he said moved him to tears, item two was the Gettysburg Address. From that he had a strong sense that the America that he loved was an America that made a very strong civic republican demand that every emigré to speak and understand that rhetoric, whatever other language they spoke.

Aging and the Consolations of the Philosophical Life

A Panel Discussion

Michael Ignatieff

Michael Bernstein

Robert Alter

Michael Ignatieff

It's very very nice to be back at the Townsend Center where I had a kind of experience of the Elysian fields last year for two weeks in February when I came from London.

I have a problem now in that some of you were at my talk yesterday and some of you weren't, and I don't want to bore those who were there and I don't want to puzzle those who weren't, so I have to figure out some *via media* here in which I recap what I said yesterday without putting those who endured it to sleep.

I am the biographer of Isaiah Berlin, and, having reached the last twenty-five years of his life in writing this biography, I was asked to come here and talk in the context of a seminar on aging. It certainly made me think about the question of how this old philosopher thought about his own aging and about the relationship between philosophy and aging. My question yesterday was: If Isaiah had a very happy old age—which he did—to what degree did being a philosopher have something to do with it? What was the relationship between philosophy and a happy life, if any? If he was "philosophical" about old age, what did philosophy have to do with being "philosophical" in that sense of being reconciled to old age? I had in my mind a number of images of the aging process in which the aging process is a kind of savage and increasingly embittered encounter with the futility of life—I have in my mind the wonderful image in Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* of Peer Gynt

peeling back the onion of his life, and peeling it back and peeling it back and finding nothing and little. Which is one way in which people live the metaphysics of old age, that is, a sense of "what did their life amount to" in the end.

And there was another image which was much more relevant to Isaiah. I didn't mention this yesterday, and I should have. One of his favorite quotations was from Henry James' *The Ambassadors*, in which a character says at one point: "If you have not had your life, what have you had?" He found that a very haunting thing all his life. He said when his father died in 1953 that what was very poignant about his father was that he had never really lived his life. His father, to whom he was very devoted, was an agreeable merchant in the bristles trade. He imported bristles for brushes and he imported timber, he loved the operettas of Franz Lehar and he was a kindly gentleman emigré who had no very deep apparent connection to his Jewish origins. He was happy in English life but lived on the surface of his own life in some sense. Isaiah found his father a very poignant figure in that as he aged he had a kind of mournfulness to him, of a person who had somehow not lived his life.

When his mother died in 1974, at the beginning of this period that forms the basis of my final chapter, Isaiah said that she had emphatically lived her life. There was something about his mother's engagement with her life which was more existentially rooted somehow. His image of her was of a Jewish woman sitting in Ellis Island on her suitcase with her family all around her, rooted, planted, implacable. In the aftermath of his mother's death, he asked himself the Jamesian question, had he lived his life, and he said he had. That was an important part of his sense of his life: that it had been lived and not merely passed through, that it hadn't been some kind of film that went on in front of his eyes; it was something that he had fashioned and shaped and created with his own hands, talents and abilities. He might have thrown himself away, but he didn't.

In these indirect ways—in the canonical importance of the James quotation, in his occasional references to *Peer Gynt*—you get a sense in Isaiah that he did think about the metaphysics of life, the meaning of life, but one of the things that you have to set against this—and this is why it is a complicated subject—is that he came from a particular metaphysical tradition, a philosophical tradition, which is very skeptical of the possibility of philosophy saying anything about

ultimate questions about life. As I discussed in my talk yesterday, he was very influenced by the philosophy of David Hume, and the Humean philosophy that meant most to him was very anti-metaphysical. It was a philosophy that was hostile to the idea that philosophy could ask questions about the ultimate meaning, direction and purpose of Life. It was a philosophy that tried to create its own boundaries by ruling out a series of unanswerable questions as not belonging to philosophy at all, and that had a life-long influence on Isaiah's sense of what philosophy could do, and I think it also had a life-long influence on what he felt he could ask about human life. I think he was personally very moved by Hume's own death. Hume died in 1775, and on his deathbed was visited by James Boswell—one of the great scenes of the late enlightenment—and Boswell wanted to know how it was that a person who didn't believe in God could go to his maker or go across the river Styx with such apparent equanimity and calm. And Hume simply said he was asking all the wrong questions; it just wasn't an issue. Boswell was very shocked by the sense in which Hume made light of these ultimate questions and the way in which Hume joked about dying and just said "it's a matter of courage and good humor and stoic calm, but there's no philosophical answer to the purposes of this operation and there is no answer to where I am going afterwards."

I think such a philosophical point of view inflected Isaiah's whole life. You all know the title of Boethius' wonderful book, *The Consolations of Philosophy*—Isaiah just didn't think philosophy was in the business of consolation at all, and to the degree that it was it was wasting its time. Poetry, music—he was interested in consolation, but not from philosophy.

So, in what respect was Isaiah philosophical about the experience of aging and dying and getting old if it didn't repose on some set of philosophical principles in a formal sense? There was something about his temperament, something about his character, that we have to think about, if we want to understand why he had the triumphant old age that he had. I'm not sure in my own mind whether I've got the balance between philosophy and temperament right, because I came away from my own talk yesterday feeling that I was almost in the business of naturalizing his good humor and his temperament. I was saying that it was something about Isaiah's nature, that he had always been like that. But I think

that that temperament was also the product of reflection and thought. Obviously a person who has picked up that wonderful sentence in James—"If you haven't had your life, what have you had?"—is a person who is thinking very hard, and the thoughts that he has form his temperament, form his character.

So I don't want to say that his equanimity was simply a kind of natural fact about him. I want to open up the puzzle about why this was apparently a natural fact, why he was so cheerful, so happy, why he was so funny, during a period in which his physical powers failed, most of his beloved friends died, all of the ills that flesh is heir to eventually fell upon him—yet they didn't crush him, they didn't depress or overwhelm him. Yesterday I suggested a few things that I think were constitutive of that equanimity, and one of them was self-distanciation or irony. If you look in his correspondence for signs of traditional male depression on losing an occupational position (he ceases to be president of this, he ceases to be fellow of that, he ceases to have the right to have the Royal Box in Covent Garden, endless bits of occupational prestige slip away from him as they slip away from all men and women in retirement), and if you ask: where's the moment where he just gets depressed and low about it, where is the moment where he feels sad?, it just doesn't show up in his correspondence. I think that some of that had to do with a self-conscious distanciation from occupational success and achievement, from his roles, from the famous Isaiah Berlin, from the "Sir" Isaiah Berlin.

I told the story of his getting his knighthood in 1956 and replying to almost all his correspondence, but especially to T.S. Eliot, that he regarded his knighthood with the same emotions that an adult regards wearing a paper hat at a children's party—he had the sense that it was a kind of a decoration; it just wasn't him. Whereas there is a way of absorbing your roles, becoming "Sir" Isaiah, becoming the president of the British Academy, becoming the founding president of Wolfson, that kind of goes into your temperament, goes into your character and who you are. It never did with him, and it seems to me that this is one of the reasons why it didn't make any essential existential difference when he lost all those things. That is something I took out of my life with him that seemed to me of very practical moment. Irony in this case was one of the things that kept him youthful, kept him unencumbered. Some of the irony and some of the self-distanciation it seemed to me was specifically Jewish; he was absolutely

self-conscious all his life of the dangers of a Jew becoming too grand, of a Jew becoming his roles and therefore inviting scorn and ridicule from the gentiles. I think his Jewishness was part of his irony, a saving irony.

The most mysterious aspect of his aging was this very peculiar relationship between physical aging and phenomenological aging, between mental age and biological age, between how old he felt and how old he was. This is at the crux of a mystery of what aging is, because the two are never in sync, and human beings as a species have a quarrel with their biological age—which no other species does—because we have consciousness. The nature of his quarrel with aging was very complicated. Aging had its difficult moments for him. He said it was not a slow downward ramp, it was rather a step you were pushed off. You fell with a thump. It was difficult for him. But there was some way in which he was never his biological age, ever. When he was a young man everybody said he was the oldest man in the room, twenty-one-going-on-sixty-five. His whole life as a young adult was spent anticipating the old man he would actually become. But the irony is that instead of making him older, by the time he got to be sixty-five, it somehow made him younger. He somehow came into himself—you see it in the photographs that he just doesn't look like a man who fully inhabits himself at forty and fifty, but at sixty-five he suddenly looked absolutely terrific. He looked handsome, majestic, powerful, strong. It was as if the whole story had been to get him to this moment. The best photographs taken of him are taken in his seventies and his eighties when he fully becomes himself in some mysterious way.

And then there's the infantilism at the heart of it, the sense in which he kept within himself and very close to the surface the adored, treasured, only-son of his adoring mother. I hesitate in saying that because I can feel you shuddering at the evocation of the inner child and all the sentimentality that goes with it—and I don't know how to give this hard propositional shape—but I do feel that one of the things that was delightful about him and his company was how childish he could be, how much pleasure he took in things that children take pleasure in, how accessible childhood songs—old Hebrew songs from his childhood—were, as well as old stories from his childhood, little childish habits—he was a compulsive nibbler, being with him was like being with a little squirrel. He chattered and nibbled and reached into his pocked for biscuits. There was a whole side of him that was very

surprising if you expected a grand old man. And I felt that some of that was an unreconstructed child in the middle of this eighty-year old body. It was part of what made him youthful and alive almost until the end. I say "almost until the end" because he suffered many health difficulties, but from July 1997 he suddenly began to suffer acute esophageal constriction and lost weight very rapidly, and then suddenly for the first and only time he looked both old and frightened—that is, he acquired that look that is so hard to bear when one's loved ones enter into the zone of death. He suddenly lost the qualities I spoke about—he looked tired, vexed, suddenly had that look of a kind of hunted pitiable animal. He did not panic, but in typical fashion he made it very clear he had had enough, that this was no longer fun, and he just wanted it to stop, please.

I hope that in talking about Isaiah I've raised a couple of issues about aging itself. I suppose the issues I am raising have to do with distanciation from roles as a key to youthfulness in old age. And secondly, there is something important in the very complex relationship between physical aging and lived aging, between biological aging and phenomenological aging, and this becomes incredibly complicated when you're doing a biography. Isaiah seemed to have some way of keeping physical aging at bay by remaining in some other spiritual age until the last week of his life.

That is what I was talking about yesterday at my talk, and now I submit myself to the judgment of my esteemed peers. [laughter]

Michael André Bernstein

Yesterday after dinner, Michael Ignatieff said something like "the flesh-eating rapacious colleagues." I said, at Berkeley of course everyone is a mandatory vegetarian [laughter] so he had nothing to fear.

It is strange. When Tina Gillis of the Townsend Center first called me and mentioned this program, except for the joy of being on a panel with Michael Ignatieff and Robert Alter, I was decidedly untempted by the topic because, having turned fifty, I thought for me to think about or study aging made as much sense as for a bird to be involved with ornithology [laughter]. I simply saw no reason to think about it. What struck me among the many things with Michael Ignatieff's talk—quite apart from the specifics on Sir Isaiah—was that it actually opened up an area and made it interesting for speculative thought in a way that hadn't occurred to me. One of the things that most struck me, for those who were there, because this is one of the points that Michael Ignatieff didn't recapitulate, was that there's a link—and an often unacknowledged one—between finding something intellectually engaging and being able to summon a requisite degree of emotional compassion about it. I think, particularly out here, we tend to separate the two, in fact, we see them as antithetical: that intellectual engagement is a limiting factor for emotional compassion, or that the two are in some kind of a conflict rather than one feeding and nourishing the other. I think that is true not

only vis à vis Michael Ignatieff's point that the two are deeply linked, but also vis à vis ourselves as parents, as friends, as lovers, and virtually all our roles, that the compassion we can feel requires, strangely enough, a certain degree of interest that one can completely legitimately call intellectual. That we have to be actually interested as a phenomenon, as a series of experiences that we are observing, without deluding ourselves that they are happening to us, that they are interesting precisely because they are happening to someone else, and that that is something that we observe with a distance, and a nearness, an observation the notion of observation requires, and I've been haunted by that as with many other aspects of what Michael Ignatieff said.

But the title of today's symposium is "The Philosophical Consolations of Aging." I wondered what that could possibly mean, and I didn't come up with much. What I though was that, if anyone has been reading the newspapers lately, since the FDA has licensed Viagra for consumption, we might talk about the pharmacological consolations of aging [laughter].

What's interesting—any time you think about the notion of consolation, if you just play with the dictionary for a moment, you only console when something dreadful is happening. You don't console in any of the usual uses of the word for something that doesn't feel catastrophic. The OED gives the definition: "to free from the sense of misery; to alleviate from sorrow," and I suppose that right at the end, when Michael Ignatieff was talking today, we suddenly got a glimpse of something dreadful, even if only for the last weeks, of a suffocation that prevents speech for someone for whom speech was so central. I suddenly thought of Kafka's horribly constricting death. So it seemed that consolation at that moment was hard to envisage, that there were consolations available up to a certain point but that there came a point when the notion of consolation became in one sense trivial and in another, to someone undergoing that, potentially offensive—I don't mean "offensive" in the mild way we use it here, but in the sense of "heartless," where the term simply doesn't apply. And that made me think, just listening to Michael Ignatieff, that perhaps we shouldn't see it as a continuum. There come many stages where the notion of consolation, whether it be philosophical, consolation by being interested, by being engaged in what one is engaged in, and I mean that quite that tautologically, that that itself is consoling

because it means you belong in one domain. But from Michael's description today, but was more elaborated today, it struck me that it sounds like there come moments that no matter what life one has had, what distanciations, what ironies, what successes, there comes a moment when consolation no longer has any applicability. And I don't know whether any terms would have applicability because one has entered some kind of another order of being about which I want to think about no more.

What strikes me about what Michael said—I hadn't realized until today when you related the anecdote about writing to T.S. Eliot that getting a knighthood is like getting a little paper crown on yourself in a child's game—the malice of sending that to T.S. Eliot is so clear [laughter], I mean, take that letter not as a self-reflection of Sir Isaiah only, but as a rebuke to a man who lusted after honors with a passion that for a self-proclaimed religious thinker was one of the main problematic aspects of Eliot's career. But I think what struck me, what I was thinking about last night the most—I'd say at least since the romantics, and when I talked about this with Bob after he gave a Solomonic parallel, we have had a particular narrative about aging and experience, and it's one that I think the first place that I'd really read it strongly is in Wordsworth—and of course this is a *déformation professionel*—I teach in a literature department so that is what I tend towards, but you can find I think the same model, very powerfully, in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. It's some notion of seeing a grand narrative, a continuing narrative in which human consciousness moves along and through a linear, time-determined sequence from an initial stage of un-self-reflexive spontaneity and immediacy, through the loss of that untroubled instinctiveness of response due to the emerging of self conciousness and self-awareness, with finally a compensatory new fullness of consciousness in which the loss of immediacy is more than made up for by the increased wisdom and knowledge that the passage through time and experience has wrought. This is the ripening of "innocence" into what Blake calls "experience"; the German idealists gave it a series of different names, but it always implies some notion of a self-division, a self-alienation, an alienation also within the self and between self and world. With the goal, as sometimes obtained, of some kind of a step beyond that, some not second innocence and it's not clear to me what that sense would feel like for a person, though in *Tinturn Abbey*

Wordsworth describes it rather eloquently. He says "I am no longer what I then was, but I don't regret it because I can now revisit those scenes and feel them powerfully with a mind enriched by knowledge."

So it's some kind of—since we're talking about consolation, compensation would seem to me to be just as useful a word in this context—some compensatory gift that comes from the passage of time and that is attainable only by going through that fall from an unmediated self into a divided self and ideally (and I mean ideally in the strict sense) to reemerge in some kind of a stronger, deeper, more knowledgeable—Wordsworth has a magnificently eloquent series of descriptions about what it's like to go back and revisit these scenes with first responses not available but with deeper level responses by dint of that human companionship and human experience. I think you can find that model governing many descriptions of aging and the process of a successful life. It is almost the ideal model that our culture has provided for a successful transition through the stages of life. I think that we don't believe that model anymore with anything like the cultural confidence that we had. I spent some amount of time wondering why not; I have a whole set of reasons why we don't, but they are anecdotal and impressionistic and I don't think worth going into at this point, but it seems to me to be an interesting question.

The problem that it raised for me, though, is that I saw that we no longer have that kind of a story: one of the things of which I am absolutely deeply convinced is that we are story dwellers as well as story tellers. We live in the stories we tell. We make sense of our lives and our experience through the stories that we tell. They don't have to be grand narratives or librettos, as Michael Ignatieff so wonderfully put it, of Isaiah Berlin's distrust in grand librettos. We don't need to believe them about either Life or History and our own lives and histories—but I wonder if we can throw them out quite so easily either. There is somewhere in between saying we don't believe in them and saying we can do without them entirely. A lot of my own work has been spent trying to figure out what percentage of the two is at issue, because clearly we don't believe in grand narratives anymore except in literature departments in anglo-america, but in most other places, the grand narratives that have sustained our thinking for about 200 years they have no plausibility, either intellectually or historically, or experientially. But I

don't think that simply saying we don't believe in them anymore is helpful or in fact completely true, because we are desperately looking for alternative narratives of some sort, and, of course, if we say "grand," by definition, it's like saying "put up your hand if you believe in grand narratives,"—nobody is going to. But can you do without a libretto, a narrative, at all? I think we don't believe *that* either, because then we can't tell the story of what's happening to ourselves, we can't make sense of our own lives.

The problem in the aging issue is that I don't know right now of any but the most trivial and vulgar stories that our culture is giving us. The models our culture is giving us and the rhetoric they use are so distasteful. You pick up any American magazine on a given weekend and we are told about the number of stages we have to traverse at virtually any moment of our lives—and I don't mean that strictly anecdotally, I mean, this seems to be a desperate search for some kind of narrative in order to do without the grand ones and I'm not sure that a set of assorted small ones is much of a substitute or an improvement, and that is in fact what we are getting—it is the absence of a way to make sense of our aging that is part of the reason that it can be experienced as so frightening and alienating. We don't know exactly what story to tell ourselves to help integrate aging, and the solution we're told to embrace—I shudder much more at the word "embrace" by now than I do even at the "inner child," because you're supposed to embrace your inner child, embrace your aging, there's not a bloody thing that happens to you that you're not supposed to embrace. I don't quite understand that. There seems to be quite a bit that could happen in a life that seems eminently not worth embracing, slow strangulation being high on the list.

The other point that strikes me is that the philosophical life we've been talking about, how Michael Ignatieff felt anxiety about naturalizing what happened to Berlin, I wouldn't be anxious about it. I think that naturalizing it is not necessarily the wrong direction, and it's not just being clever at all. I would say that the philosophical temperament is a natural attribute. It is a natural attribute of that particular man anyway, and even if for the sake of a discussion the two can be separated, I suspect that within the person embodying those qualities there is no distinction. It's not that it's a hollow distinction, but it's a distinction with no real resonance. It's useful for us to think about, but a certain kind of temperament

that is inclined to reflect and derive pleasure from reflection will continue to do it not because it is consoling for aging but because that is simply, as we might say, how it's hard wired, that is *what it does*. I would say that a temperament like that derives as much consolation from the sorrows of being young as it does from the sorrows of being old.

I think there is another risk to what we call the philosophical life, the reflective life, and it is one in the other direction from Wordsworth. What if life leaves you at the end feeling that you haven't lived at all? Wallace Stevens, who I think writes the most moving late-life poems that I know of in this century in English, is over and over again haunted by the question of "Have I ever lived?" Has my fascination with questions, final, ultimate questions, questions of being, questions of language, questions of the imagination, has it meant that I have never lived? Have I lived a shadow among bones? He concludes tentatively, nervously that he has not lived a shadow among bones. But he is not totally sure. And of course he does this in poems. He continues to produce poems, which is not a way of in fact confirming that he hasn't spent his life as a shadow. My point here is that it may be a temperamental question, not a theoretical one, whether or not you experience your constant fall into theory as living or as perhaps fleeing from life. That you will continue to reflect and meditate but that it is temperamental not philosophical if that makes you anxious. It fascinates me that early on Stevens was anxious about it, but not in terms of "have I ever been alive?" The urge to reflect, to meditate will obviously use as its subject whatever happens to one: old age when one is old, the sorrows of early passion if one is young, the other kinds of mixed sorrows and pleasures of middle age. Whatever it is, a temperament so inclined, and a mind so self-trained, self-fashioned, is going to reflect on it, but the temperament, at some fundamental level, will decide whether to give that a positive or negative emotional resonance within one.

There is something clearly exemplary in a temperament like Sir Isaiah's as Michael described it, that can turn all those issues into sources of joy. I miss the hauntingness of what you described of Stevens' late elegies—quite literally I am shattered by them to think that somebody who has done what this man has at the end of his life is worried about whether he was ever alive.

A final point—thinking about death is not the same as, is in fact quite different from, thinking about aging. It sounds as though one should link the two and obviously if prolonged enough aging modulates into death, but so does youth. There is no reason to link those, the history of philosophy has shown clearly enough. You can think about dying seriously and hard at virtually any age and in fact it's been done by young people for rather obvious reasons moreso than by the very old. And yet we tend to collapse the two together, and so what I wanted to think about at the end was that wonderful moment in Book Two of Montaigne's essays where he falls off a horse and everybody thinks he's dead and he's not there to himself for two hours. He reflects on that a great deal after. He says, "you know there I was, I was essentially dead," and what is his conclusion? This is someone who was raised and kept repeating the Socratic as modulated through Cicero, the line "To philosophize is to learn how to die," you should live always in preparation for death, that is what makes you serious, gives you *gravitas*. And one of his conclusions is to say that what it taught him was to think more about life—basically to continue being Montaigne, rather than trying to modulate into being Socrates, which was a tremendously freeing moment for Montaigne and for his writing, and I think for our cultural model of what one can think about. I think about Montaigne falling off his horse and the conclusion he derives when he wakes up as at least as powerful a picture as Socrates on his deathbed. I want to stop there because I thought that anything resembling a conclusion in a subject on death and aging would be exactly the wrong direction. As for consolation, if there is a consolation I suspect it is precisely the same consolation that applies at every stage of your life, and sitting here talking with people like Michael Ignatieff and Robert Alter, insofar as consolation or compensations are called for, that's it. That's as good as it gets.

Robert Alter

I speak as the last contributor to this panel and also, I'm sure many of you notice, as the odd-man-out on the panel, in that I'm the only member whose name is not Michael. I will try to overcome that handicap [laughter]. One might say I'm Michael-ly challenged.

I thought that Michael Ignatieff's presentation yesterday and his more informal remarks today were a wonderful example of what I would call the biographical imagination, and having tried it once myself, as some of you know, I would just in a few brief phrases say that it involves a kind of finely discriminating intuitive sense of a person, which is illustrated wonderfully in his discussion of Sir Isaiah. And therefore I don't have any issues to take with the presentation, and like the other Michael I will simply share a few reflections because the presentation was full of points of suggestion.

First, like Michael Bernstein, I was struck quite independently, listening to the talk yesterday, that there really is a rather sharp distinction between the philosophy of death and the philosophy of old age. And I would put it even more bluntly. It seems to me much easier to develop a philosophy of death, a philosophy that helps one to confront death, than a philosophy of old age, because death is an ultimate. When a human being, whether that person is twenty-five or seventy-five, thinks about the moment of extinction, that person is compelled

to define certain very large frameworks of value: what is a human life, what is eternity, is there some kind of realm of transcendence beyond the here and now that we inhabit, and so forth. Whereas old age is a much more amorphous thing, and more elusive. It's sort of what we've been doing all along only with more decades added on. And actually although I don't know that this was Michael Ignatieff's express purpose and perhaps the consideration of old age is also slightly pushed by the announced rubric which has to do with the sponsorship of his appearance, I came away convinced that there probably was not such a thing as a philosophy of old age, although perhaps there might be a philosophic old age, which is not quite the same thing. And, therefore, on the temperament/philosophy issue, I would also come down fairly strongly on the temperament side. Ignatieff made a very vivid case for the distinctive resources of temperament, or, as my mother would have called it, "character," that Sir Isaiah had.

Now, of course, temperament is not only the way you are disposed but the way you use the materials around you, and if you happen to be a thinking, reading person, you are going to use the philosophers that speak to you, the poets that move you, and so forth, so it's not an absolutely sharp distinction. I, too, have a few quotes that I always carry around in my mental pocket, and one that I think about a lot, maybe more as the years go by, is a moment at the end of *Don Quixote*, when Don Quixote is on his deathbed and he is recanting in Sancho's presence all his previous nonsense of chasing over the countryside after dragons to redeem damsels in distress. And Sancho in effect says, "Boss, don't do this, come on!", don't give up on it all, and he concludes, "*Hasta la muerte todo es vida*," Until death, everything is life. Except for those terrible last few months, the evocation of Sir Isaiah Berlin's last two decades of life that Michael Ignatieff gave us exemplifies Sancho's maxim, and I think that the connection here probably has a lot to do—I'm thinking of other instances—with having had a happy childhood, as Michael described it, and having had an adoring mother, which always helps. I think, for example, of Nabokov. One of his two greatest books is his autobiography *Speak Memory*, which he did not write in his old age but in his middle years. In a way this sense of being in touch with the vividness and the luminous quality of one's early years, I think, sustained him until the end, so that all these things that he was interested in and therefore passionately cared about, from lepidoptery to good prose, carried through to the very end.

I guess this is something that either you have or you haven't, and that you can't properly aspire to. I'd like to share another image of it from one of my favorite poets, the contemporary Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai, who when he was quite young, in his first collection of poetry, wrote a little poem about Juda Halevi, the great twelfth century Hebrew poet. Now, Halevi, toward the end of his life, in his sixties, which was, I think we'll all agree, old age in the twelfth century, set out on a trip to the land of Israel, leaving Spain and all its luxuries. In the course of that trip he wrote a cycle of sea poems that I think are among the pinnacles of medieval lyric poetry. It's not clear whether he ever got to Palestine. We know he reached Alexandria, and there's a legend about his getting to Palestine, but that's neither here nor there. The sensual warmth and brightness and the brilliant wit of his early poetry, his early nature and love poetry, are still there in the late poems, and I'm just going to read you the last four lines of the Amichai poem on Juda Halevi. He writes as follows:

> But in the white fist of his brain
> He holds the black seeds of his merry youth
> When he gets to the beloved parched land
> He will sow.

It is at least an enheartening human possibility to contemplate.

The one other point I want to touch on before we move into some general discussion or exchange amongst us has to do with turning back to sources of faith or not turning back to sources of faith in old age. This is something that Michael Ignatieff did not mention in his recapitulation, but to which he devoted a few minutes yesterday when he did express a sense that Isaiah Berlin made a kind of move back to the sources of Jewish tradition that he remembered from his youth as he embarked upon old age. This is a fairly familiar phenomenon. I recently had occasion to mention to Michael Bernstein that a couple of the old, most unreconstructed secularists among the Hebrew writers in Odessa around the turn of the twentieth century, when they got into their eighties, started doing suspect things like reciting the grace after meals in Hebrew, which they remembered from their childhood. But I don't think that this is inevitable, that is, I would resist the idea that this is something that awaits us all, and I'd like to mention two instances in my personal acquaintance, both dear friends, who were dear friends into their nineties. Many of you here in the Berkeley community

will know, that is, Leo Lowenthal, who remained a kind of *bon vivant*, worldly, wryly satirical, shrewd, secular intelligence right until the end, and that is something that I deeply admire about him. I remember that my wife and I visited him in the hospital in 1990 or 91 when he had his gall bladder removed, and he knew that it had to be removed or he couldn't survive, but, considering his old age and frailty, the doctors gave him a fifty/fifty chance of getting through the operation. (He did survive and lived another three years.) He said to me: "Bob, if you're going to your synagogue this Saturday morning, I want you to have them put in a prayer for me." But I knew that he was being ironic. [laughter]

The other instance, and with this I'll close, is my friend Stanley Burnshaw, the poet and—at a certain famous point, a kind of adversary of Wallace Stevens—the critic, editor and general man of letters, who is now ninety-one and rather gnarled but still mentally very vigorous and getting along just fine. Stanley is a very good friend. We carry on a steady correspondence. He is also a good friend of Alfred Kazin, and Alfred Kazin is in his late eighties and terminally ill. His last two works are *Selected Diaries* and a book about God in American literature, and both these last books have focused on Alfred Kazin's search for God, and Alfred Kazin's search for God in American literature. Stanley Burnshaw tells me that his friend is now trying to write a very theological book, a book about God, as he nears his end, and Burnshaw writes to me, "I don't understand it; it makes no sense whatever to me... I know that it is the way that Alfred has of seeking consolation, but it seems plain foolishness to me." The 91-year-old Burnshaw remains, as he has always been, a kind of open-minded secular humanist, and he remains rooted in his early self, rather the way that Michael Ignatieff describes Sir Isaiah. This, too, is something that I hope some of us can do when we get there.

Audience Comments

Audience Comment: I share your views on mental age differing from physical age, and, unfortunately, I can get caught up in comparing my physical abilities with what I think my mental age is, and I get caught up short, so I must modify... [laughter] This thinking of mental age, a thinking philosophically or idealistically that cannot measure against any other standard, I am wondering, is it just a "senior moment," is it good?

Michael Ignatieff: I think you've coined a really good phrase: The "senior moment." I'm looking forward to such moments. And I don't mean to make light of what's being said. Sir Isaiah did encounter his own growing old. For instance, he knew that he was supposed to write the great book about romanticism. He was supposed to take the lectures he had given in Washington in 1965 and turn them into a towering great book. He even made a room at the top of his house called "the romanticism room," and it was full of stuff, and suddenly in his seventies he discoved he just couldn't bring it all together, he couldn't sustain the kind of self-conviction, concentration, and sheer intellectual firepower it took to bring that thing together, and that was an encounter with some kind of mental wall that he found very distressing. That was a "senior moment." But interestingly he did not make a production out of that. He just said, "That's the story; that's

what were dealing with here, I can't do this." There are people who regard that as a great failure of his, that he never wrote the great book, but I think on the contrary what I rather admired about him is that he renounced that ambition, gave it up, didn't give himself a hard time. And he made a great contrast between heavy minds and light minds, people who float at the surface of their consciousness and people who dwell on the bottom of their consciousness, and he always thought of himself as a light person, one who danced light at the top of his mind, that is, he had a sense that there were depths, but he liked to stay up on the bright surface of the water. He always regarded that as a sign that he was ultimately not a very deep and profound person, but I've always felt that that was another of his temperamental assets, that he was very heavily into what Kundera called "the lightness of being," the lighter the better. In the way we think about ourselves we associate profundity with depth, we associate profundity with struggle, we associate profundity with Promethean combat against limits. Whereas he thought, "No, a lot of the most profound things you do are at the surface of the water, in the bright shallows," and he had a strong sense of creativity as play, working out a range of associations at once. And if it wasn't fun you shouldn't do it. He felt that was an important principle of intellectual life. He trusted his own superficiality, if you get my meaning, he trusted his lightness. And when life became very hard, it wasn't simply that he gave up—he didn't trust the struggle, if you see what I mean. And I think it means that there are quite deep contrasts in various kinds of intellectual styles; people who trust their intuitions, who trust the surface, who trust first go, trust the first draft, trust what is light, trust when it's easy. And those who simply distrust that as principle of their of intellectual life, and go for the depth, the struggle, where the resistance is. He had a very pre-psychoanalytic view of this, in other words. I think that made renunciation easier.

Audience Comment: I was thinking about what Michael Bernstein said about the model of the narrative, the story that has a beginning, middle and end, and in which the end defines the value of the whole thing. Perhaps this model has fallen on hard times and is not very useful to us because we have such a cumulative vision now of things that, of course, if you get to the end and say, "it all adds up to where I am now," then it all adds up to nothing, or soon will be if you're talking

about death, but even if you're talking about old age, it's depletion, it's all gone. This would render the narrative model not very useful—James was very aware of this, he says, not only in *The Ambassadors* but in *The Beast in the Jungle*, where John Marcher waits around for ages to see what narrative he's going to fit into and he's so busy waiting for his narrative that he doesn't have time to live a life—it might be more useful to imagine ourselves as living a long Walt Whitman poem where every moment is the one that you're in, and there are highs and lows. You don't get to the end of a Walt Whitman poem or even a Milton poem, and say, "well that's what it all adds up to." And so what you're calling "lightness," which can be used in the pejorative sense by people who favor heaviness, has much more of a sense of focusing on the moments as they arrive and having them be the meaning as they go by, not as you look at them from the end, seeing what it all added up to.

Michael Ignatieff: Just on that point, it's very significant that Isaiah Berlin never wanted to write an autobiography.

Audience Comment: You can see why he'd have trouble with the romantics that way, because for them the beginning, middle and end story is what they were working with, and that was brought into the Victorian novel as well, and so to have written off that vision would make it difficult to say something about it.

Michael Bernstein: I am deeply suspicious of the notion that the end of life is somehow the appropriate way to judge it. A lot of what I write and think about is designed against that very powerful model. I still think in fact that we cling to this model, that we see that the extreme moment—the whole notion that someone "made a good death," you know, nothing fitted life like the leaving of it—this notion that somehow the last moments are how we judge, and that if your last moments are of one kind it casts a retrospective light on how you lived your whole life and is some kind of legitimate judgment. I think that in many ways that is a deeply disastrous model, both for thinking about individuals, and about communities and historical events. The moment by moment approach to life, the quotidian, is much more pertinent. One of the things that strikes me about Michael

Ignateff's presentation on Sir Isaiah is the moment to moment derivation of pleasures rather than the looking for ultimates. I don't think that the two need to be linked. You don't have to see everything in terms of some final resolution. In Classical times people compose these deathbed speeches, which in case they were too ga-ga to be able to make one up, they could whip it out and read it, just so that you make a really good exit. This was very important, and that kind of retrospective life from a death scene, I think, is not available to us anymore, and yet there is a kind of hypnotic fascination about it still.

Robert Alter: Just a footnote: it's not a retrospective light, it is a prospective light. We are so much in this world that we don't think about the notion in the old sense of, "as the tree falls, so shall it lie," as what is interesting about the death.

Audience Comment: What about the concept of secular freedom?

Michael Ignatieff: That's directly relevant to Isaiah in the sense that he was a philosopher of freedom, and an historian of freedom, but what is very absent from his writing is a sense that freedom is a story, that it is the meaning of a long historical story. Benedetto Croce, the Italian philosopher of history, wrote an essay during the second World War which states that "history is the story of liberty." That was one of the librettos Isaiah did not believe. He thought that liberty had arisen in a particular place in a particular time, mostly England and Anglo-America, and for contingent historical reasons, and that there is absolutely no guarantee that that libretto would go into the future. There is no sense that that story made sense of history. So when the Communist regime fell in 1989, what was very interesting was how terribly pleased Isaiah was. But he didn't think it was the culmination of a big long story.

Audience Comment: What about the other, older story of justice and freedom?

Michael Ignatieff: He just wouldn't have talked that language. He would have said to you that it "wouldn't do."

Audience Comment: I'm thinking about old age as a category, what is said about the loss of personal narratives. One can think of old age in the way you were describing, as wisdom and acquisition and all that. And on the other hand you can think of it as a process of disintegration. But does old age then disintegrate as a category? What's left of that as a classification? Are we dealing with a certain structural dislocation? How would you begin to think about the category, and what does it mean to think the category?

Michael Ignatieff: I think that's a very good question, particularly because I simply didn't know what to do with the last twenty-five years of this man's life. It's an interesting thing about biography. You think, well, once he's written the great books—he'd written them all pretty well by 1965, when he gave the Mellon Lectures on Romanticism at the National Gallery—he has come, in a sense, to the end of his productive intellectual life. What do you then do with those remaining years? You could write it as a kind of diminuendo. He went to a lot of concerts and he got old and he died. [laughter] I think there is some sense in which I don't want to take it for granted that this chapter is called "old age." I don't want to accept it as a category, given especially the point I made earlier that Isaiah was old all his life, as it were, that is, that there was this very odd way in which he conceived himself as being in a continuous old age, so that when he turned sixty-five and seventy, it didn't mean very much to him. I wanted to re-problematize it, as it were, in terms of these old narratives, that is, you know, the philosophical life/the philosophical death, the summing up that must make sense of the whole story retrospectively—none of that made any sense to him. He didn't live it that way. He didn't peel back the onion or ask himself what it was all about.

The micro-narrative—this is not a trivial point—was the keeping of his diary. In other words, the way to re-focus discussion is to look at him much more closely, at how he organized his time. What some of the people who lived closest to him and loved him best liked best about him was when he sat down with his secretary to plan his year, and he would sit down and say, "The Puccini festival in 2004—what shall we do," and he would book tickets, an 86-year-old man, ludicrously far in advance. This was Isaiah putting his money down on red

number seven. [laughter] The booking of concert tickets, it seems to me, was a major statement about how he lived his life. And it was very touching. His secretary would occasionally come back in tears because she found it such a poignant business. She would have to say, "yes, Isaiah, we'll book the Puccini festival in the year 2000, and I will book Covent Garden in 2001 because I know you want to hear that concert," and she would believe that he wouldn't be there. But he believed he would, and that gamble on the future was one of the most charming, and I think also instructive, aspects of his life. He made tremendous plans for the future. They all took the forms of pleasurable evenings of Rossini.

Audience Comment: According to Pascal's wager, think of how terrible it would be to make it to 2000 and not have those tickets....

Michael Ignatieff: Exactly. I'm sure he thought of it exactly that way.

Audience Comment: I was struck by Michael Bernstein's noticing the malice in the letter to T.S. Eliot, and wanted to ask how much malice is allowed in a happy old age. Isaiah Berlin was certainly one of the warmest and most generous people that ever lived; he was very generous to me, far more than I ever had reason to expect him to be.

Michael Ignatieff: It was a kind of exuberant, life-affirming malice. [laughter]

Audience Comment: ...I was wondering, how do you balance that?

Michael Ignatieff: Well, I think that Michael Bernstein, with his customary acuity, has seen something I didn't see about the letter to T.S. Eliot, the paper hats, because Isaiah and T.S. Eliot had a long and very controversial, difficult history. Isaiah in 1949 writes Eliot a letter, "what about this lecture in 1934 when you talked about the fact that you couldn't have an organic culture in modern civilization because there were all these quarrelsome Jews in it..." I don't know whether that is the exact phrase...

Audience Comment: Freethinking Jews.

Michael Ignatieff: That's it. And Isaiah decided to go right into the lion's den with this, and got this extraordinary letter from T.S. Eliot, saying, basically, the thing that you Jews don't understand (in the nicest possible way) is that your religious history ought to have ended with the birth of Christ, that you're laboring under an exceedingly important theological delusion. You have a great tradition. It has enriched the Anglo-Catholic tradition immeasurably, but unfortunately it ought to end and you have to wake up to this fact. And the fact that you haven't has made you unreconciled to the Anglo-Catholic culture which has succeeded you.

And Isaiah wrote back and very politely said, "give me a break." And given that Isaiah was famous for timidity and splitting the difference and never standing up and being counted on anything, this is a moment in which he really does stand up and have himself counted. And then T.S. Eliot writes back and says, "I'm not a racial anti-Semite." And Isaiah replies, "That's not what I was saying." And then they kept corresponding as two patriarchs bending across the room at each other, but it's clear, I think, now that I think about it, that all that history is in this exchange of letters over the paper hats.

But to the substance of your question, one of the reasons Isaiah didn't want my biography published in his lifetime is that he feared his own malice. He would occasionally take the paint off the walls with a remark, but the occasions were few. I think it is clear that George Steiner was not an intellectual figure he held in the highest esteem. I think also, more controversially, that Hannah Arendt was not a figure he held in the highest esteem, which I find much harder to figure out. Occasionally there were remarks about people, but although I don't want to heroize him, what's very astonishing about having sixty-five years of Isaiah's corres-pondence is that the number of malicious derogatory and unkind remarks behind people's backs can be numbered on the fingers of half a hand.

Some of it is complicated; some of it again is this tremendous sense that he is always an expatriot, always an exile, always a Jew in a gentile world.

Audience Comment: A tremendous acceptance of otherness.

Michael Ignatieff: Yes, A tremendous acceptance of otherness, coupled with a capacity to enter into the minds of other people. He was a genius at the business of imagining what it would be to be another person, and that undercut malice, because if you went into another mind and saw the world from the way they saw it, then you wouldn't cut the ground from under their feet.

So some of it is prudential: I am a Jew in a foreign land and I can't afford to let my tongue be careless. The more positive aspect would be empathy, a genuine entering into the lives of people he disagreed with and argued with, and a capacity to see their point of view. The Nabakovian malice, on the other hand, had something to do with verbal pleasure, aristocratic élan, not suffering fools gladly, and a tremendous sense of courage. He loved to take no prisoners. It is a completely different psychology of expatriation, and when Nabokov and Berlin met, it was not a meeting of minds, but a terrible evening.

There was one terrible moment in which Berlin asked Nabokov for help with a translation of a Turgenieff story, and the issue was how you would describe the sensation of your heart when you see your love for the first time, what happens to your heart? And Nabokov got tremendously pedantic about it and sat down and said, alright, now what's the word, and they went over it, and Nabokov insisted that the right word was "pitapat." [laughter] And Isaiah sort of politely said, "Thank you, o sage, o master," and in his version wrote, "his heart turned over," which I think is rather good.

Audience Comment: I'd like to inject a little footnote of personal history which you may find helpful for the last thirty years of his biography. I was born just before the Great Depression, and one of the main events in the lives of those of us who were in World War Two was the commencement of talking pictures and radio, and one of the most important events of radio was the twice-a-week serial called "The Lone Ranger," whose theme music most people know was by Rossini. Several years ago there was a Rossini festival and a year or two after that I happened to look up a biography of Rossini and he must have one of the most exceptional biographies of any artist.

Michael Ignatieff: Yes, and were Isaiah here he would be the first to agree with you. One of the ways a biographer gets into the deepest, not the surface but the deepest, levels of someone's emotions is to look at what music they loved best, and he loved Rossini because he loved tunes. I think he loved tunes because he loved stories. Rossini had a genius for the musical equivalent of narrative. He also had a genius for lightness and brightness, and a tremendous sense of clarity, and all of those features of Isaiah found resonance in Rossini. I pursued the Jewish roots of his sense that reason had its limits when I talked about the binding of Isaac yesterday. He had a tremendous respect for religious language that said that it is the nature of God's commands that they make demands upon you that exceed all human reason. One of the reasons he adored music was that it was the end of talk, the end of reason. And when I once said to him, in my callow biographical way, "Well, wouldn't you say that music is the secret language of your emotions?", he looked at me as if I was completely insane, and said "Music is not a language of anything. Music is what it is." And one of his canonical statements was this wonderful quotation from Bishop Butler: "Everything is what it is and not another thing." The memorial service for Isaiah ended with Alfred Brendl playing the andantino from the Schubert Sonata 958, but it ended also with Bernard Williams' most touching moment of recalling Isaiah, that the image that Bernard would keep of Isaiah was not of Isaiah talking but of Isaiah with his hand like this listening to music.

Audience Comment: Last night you talked about finding the idea of a grand libretto a little false, that it failed to explain things accurately. I wonder whether you, as a biographer and writer, feel that this is in any way an injunction, stylistically, structurally, in composing this biography of the thinker, particularly as you are coming to its close, and how you deal with that, and whether you want to reflect that or have it manifest itself somehow?

Michael Ignatieff: I partly ignore the injunction, in the sense that I think a biographer is in the business of finding a pattern, and I feel that there is a pattern, there is a story to be told on how identities get braided together, how a Jewish identity is braided with an attachment to English constitutionalism and English

traditions braided into a passion for certain kinds of Russian ideas. How that is done, I think, can be observed and studied, and I have a sense of a life having a shape, and I feel unapologetic about that.

Where I feel counseled by Isaiah's aid is in the business about Butler's "everything is what it is and not another thing," that is, you shouldn't take bits from one part of his life and then use them to interpret other bits. You have to treat his musical passion as an autonomous thing, you can't reduce it to his emotional life. You can't assume that because he loves a certain kind of Schubert sonata that this tells you something you can't find anywhere else. You have to be very careful about that kind of thing. I just feel I am not under any obligation at the end to reach some sense of what it all added up to. I think I can pull out certain threads, but his own injunctions, his sense that there is no grand libretto, emancipate me from worrying about whether anyone will care about him or not in even as short a time as twnety-five years.

If you're a biographer, you write books because you think the person you are writing about is terribly important, terribly important for some posterity you want to name. I think the fact that I knew him, that in some sense the biography is an attempt simply to preserve what it was that seemed to be unique about him, irrespective of whether anybody else in a generation or two reads these words, is what drives me. My private view is that he has a posterity, a long one. But again the thing that is so interesting about history is that the posterity that we now think he will have is not at all the posterity that we thought he would have in 1952.

Your question is well put. Being his biographer means that you write a slightly different biography than you would write were you writing the biography of Popper, for instance, who would make much larger plans for himself and have his posterity mapped out. I can't refrain from telling my Popper story if you'll allow me, as a study in character difference.

I don't mean to cast aspersion on Popper, who was a great man, but I once went to interview him for British television. And Popper was in his late 80s/ early 90s, and he greeted me at the door in a kind of blue running suit and Nike trainers, a tiny little man, like a sort of bantam cock, and he says "So pleased to see you. I am ready for your interview, here are your questions." [laughter]

I'm not kidding. He had written up in longhand, which I will treasure and sell for a vast price, an eighteen-page interview including all "my" questions and all his answers. All I had to do was turn on the tape recorder and we would read it. That is what he thought an interview ought to be. And I can't imagine Isaiah doing that in a million years. It is the only time I've had to stand up for myself. I said, "I am terribly sorry, Mr. Popper. I am not reading that script."

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