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PHILOSOPHER THE GENIUS AND HIS EDITOR

“Systematically overestimated” is not a description of Isaiah Berlin (1922-28) that one expects, least of all from himself.

Yet feeling like a fraud is the most significant characteristic of his that emerges from an interview with Henry Hardy, editor of Berlin’s work. Before the screening of a film about his time as Berlin’s editor, Hardy kindly agreed to talk to a Berlin layman with a generosity of spirit that, it seems, was typical of Isaiah too.

The founding of Wolfson College and a series of books on a range of subjects including liberty, Romanticism, and J. G. Hamann, an eighteenth-century pietist of whom I had never heard, have cemented Berlin’s legacy. All I knew about Berlin was that he attended the same school as I did and was a charismatic debater, and a successful philosopher and historian of ideas. An insight into his self-doubt therefore fascinates.

He suffered from imposter syndrome about what Hardy called the “tendency to deify him”, which appears to have been both affectation and genuine feeling: if you disagreed with him about being a fraud, he disagreed back at you; if you agreed with him, he wasn’t too

pleased. I am aware that if I say “very relatable”, it implies (incorrectly) that I have experience of being deified; I mean that it is only too human to be plagued by a sense that you are valued beyond your competence, and simultaneously secretly to adore that validation.

It is easy to see how Berlin could be deified. A wealth of brilliant ideas poured passionately forth whenever one spoke to him. He could discuss a wide range of cultural topics, evidenced not least by an anecdote in Hardy’s 2018 book *In Search of Isaiah Berlin: A Literary Adventure*, in which Berlin began to recite Milton’s *Lycidas* in the Wolfson common room from memory. Hardy concludes that this was the result of memorising it at School.

He remarks that Berlin rarely talked about his time at St Paul’s, but that it was clear he looked back on it with affection. During his time at School, Berlin experienced no anti-Semitism, so it seems baffling that he should experience it years after leaving. “He found it difficult to take a condemnatory attitude to anything he disapproved of”, Hardy notes, but it appears he made an

exception for the quota on Jewish pupils at St Paul’s.

We come on to Hardy’s role as editor, at once rewarding and frustrating. Berlin frequently hesitated to print material that Hardy rated highly, and would suggest changing or deleting passages very late in the day. This self-deprecatory vacillation provided a real challenge to Hardy, but Berlin often articulated it as blunt realism, balking at requests for him to publish more. He would say to Hardy “I know what I’m worth”, and claim that he was not sitting on a mine of untapped potential, that people “do what they’re capable of”.

Hardy’s role has been an intense occupation. He has transcribed many lectures and interviews, and, assuming the duties of a classical textual critic, has combed through stenographers’ and secretaries’ erroneous transcriptions to piece together what Berlin actually said. He has also had to identify deleterious amendments by Berlin himself; a typical example is in *The Magus of the North*. Occasionally Berlin’s typist, Olive Sheldon, left blanks in her transcript,

as she could not hear what Berlin was saying on the recording. In one instance, Berlin refers to religious apologetics as “an attempt to domesticate God, to place him in some tame [] of one’s own.” Correcting the transcript, Berlin wrote in “harmless formula” where he had dictated the more economical and pointed “herbarium”. Anecdotes like this provide a fascinating glimpse into the rewards of working closely with an author like Berlin.

Berlin’s writing is a rewarding corpus to edit. His prose is crisp and sophisticated without being obscure. Hardy describes his style as belletristic, created by dictating freely and taking a bird’s eye view of human nature; but he also comments that this would not pass muster today. Indeed, he wonders whether Berlin would have been as successful if he were pursuing an academic career now, as the scholarly rigour that is now a standard expectation was frequently lacking in Berlin’s routine.

Why Balliol rejected him is a mystery to both Hardy and me, although one certainty is that they made a mistake.

It is remarkable that a man of Berlin’s talents was not admitted to his chosen university and college on his first attempt. Rejected by Balliol as a scholar and a commoner, he successfully applied for a scholarship at Corpus Christi. Why Balliol rejected him is a mystery to both Hardy and me, although one certainty is that they made a mistake: Berlin thrived at Corpus. Furthermore, Hardy speculates that he may have become lost in the enormity of Balliol; he was “more naturally a Corpuscle”.

Oxford gave him a formative experience, for which he felt a great debt. The lack of a great work on, for example, the history of Romanticism left him with a sense that he had not given back in a way that was commensurate with what he had derived from Oxford; the founding of Wolfson College was a way

of saying thank you. It is good that he did found Wolfson, because that is where Hardy and Berlin met in 1972; without that meeting, the years-long, fruitful relationship between the two may not have existed.

To sum up Berlin in a single, pithy sentence would be too difficult, and would also go against the pluralism

(the rejection of single-valued, reductive theories of culture, religion and philosophy) he so often advocated. It is clear from our conversation and the film that Berlin typified this pluralism: an irreducible and at times inconsistent personality, and a giant intellect. “You couldn’t pin him down”, Hardy chuckles.

■ Orlando Gibbs (2008-13)

