

# Isaiah Berlin

*on*

# Edmund Wilson

*An interview by Lewis M. Dabney*



*Isaiah Berlin in 1996*

**E**dmund Wilson (1895–1972) and Isaiah Berlin (1909–97) were among the leading figures of 20th-century transatlantic intellectual life, Wilson the American critic and man of letters, and Berlin the British intellectual historian and political philosopher. The two met in 1946, when Wilson, the older by 14 years, was just over 50. “He spoke in a moving and imaginative fashion about the American writers of his generation, about Dante,” Berlin writes in a short memoir focused on Oxford and on London literary life in the fifties. “He then talked about Russian literature in general, and particularly about Chekhov and Gogol, as well as I have ever heard anyone talk on any literary topic. I was completely fascinated; I felt honored to

have met this greatly gifted and morally impressive man.” They would become fast friends, seeing each other throughout the 1950s and ’60s in London and Oxford as well as in Manhattan, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and at Wilson’s old stone house in upstate New York.

The following conversation took place in London on the afternoon of March 27, 1991. I had written to Berlin, telling him that I was editing Wilson’s last journal, *The Sixties*, and beginning a biography of the critic. Sir Isaiah suggested we meet at the Athenaeum Club in London. There, at a table in the long, elegant drawing room, I proposed that he fill out the account of Wilson begun in the memoir a few years before. In this piece, he offers an impression of Wilson’s “curiously strangled voice, with gaps between his sentences, as if ideas jostled and thrashed about inside him,” emerging in “short bursts, emitted staccato, interspersed with gentle, low-voiced, legato passages.” Sir Isaiah’s own deep, soft voice also came in bursts, trailing off at the end of a breath and emphatically resuming. For two and a half hours (with an intermission for tea) he displayed a penetrating intelligence, warmth of heart, and moral seriousness that reminded me of the same qualities in his old friend.

I began by asking whether Wilson had changed over the many years the two knew each other.

**Berlin:** No, I think he was exactly the same. Intent, intense, passionate, serious, had no small talk, and everything he said meant something. How wonderful to be a man, every one of whose sentences conveyed something! With no chatter.

**D:** His conversational self matched his literary persona?

**Berlin:** Yes, he spoke as he wrote.

*Berlin recalled arriving in the United States in February 1940 for a two-month stay, eager to meet the author of *Axel’s Castle* and *The Triple Thinkers*, “excellent books, wonderful books.” Talking in New York with people from *Partisan Review*, he was “shocked” to learn that they “were not pro-Edmund.” “I mean, he was my hero, continuously. And I used to ask them, ‘What about Edmund Wilson?’ They would answer, ‘Well. . . .’” At the time Berlin had no idea that Wilson had taken Mary McCarthy away from Philip Rahv, one of *Partisan Review*’s editors. Later, while serving as a British official in Washington during the war, he had expressed his interest in Wilson to Felix Frankfurter and others whom the critic knew, but it turned out that Wilson “was unwilling to meet somebody contaminated by working in an embassy, above all the British Embassy,” who “could only want to use him for propaganda purposes.” We discussed the reversal of the New Republic’s socialist isolationism by the magazine’s British owner, Leonard Elmhirst, who in 1940 descended on the editors and began printing letters that favored intervention in the European conflict, at which point Wilson resigned. His bitter talk of a British-Stalinist alliance would seem less foolish when Michael Straight, the son-in-law whom Elmhirst left in charge, confessed in his autobiography to having been recruited at Oxford by the KGB. Wilson’s *To the Finland Station* also appeared in 1940.*

**Berlin:** I didn’t read it then; it would have interested me. I would have disagreed with it, too, and did, in some ways. Afterwards I persuaded him to change the introduction, the last introduction. He didn’t need much persuasion. He had been to Russia, in the mid-’30s, and he used to preach to me.

**D:** About what it had really been?

**Berlin:** The horrors, yes. And in the end he said in a strangled voice, “Ah, you know those things you used to say about Lenin, and you thought I was too kind to him, didn’t you? Yes, well, well, yes, too kind to him. Yes, well, maybe I was.”

That was all. And when I read it after his death I saw that his line had indeed changed. The rest remained intact.

**D:** But were you never impressed by the idea that they were accomplishing something in Russia under Lenin's leadership?

**Berlin:** Never, never. Everybody around me was.

**D:** Tell me about your reservations.

**Berlin:** It was quite simply that I was born in Riga and was in Petrograd, as it was called, during the Revolution. My parents were timber merchants, who supplied timber to Russian railways under the tsar and under the Bolsheviks. We were never visited, never touched, and we left in 1919 quite legally, without difficulty. They simply left because they loathed it. And I remember 1918–19 clearly. I remember the horrors of innocent people being shot. Nothing like Stalin, but, I mean, it was known that atrocities went on.

**D:** So you were inoculated.

**Berlin:** That's all. I don't think I would have been anti-Soviet otherwise. I was surrounded by people who gravitated in that direction.

**D:** How did you become interested in Russian literature?

**Berlin:** When we came to England in 1919, I never spoke Russian, at all. My parents talked English to each other. But I went on reading it because I knew the language. I had one Russian friend at school, the son of a famous painter, whom I used to talk to in Russian once a fortnight, but that preserved it, to my own surprise, and then I began reading Russian criticism quite heavily, in the late '30s. In 1946 I went to the Soviet Union and met Pasternak, I met Akhmatova, I met all these people, I was very moved by it all, I read their works. They gave them to me, they read aloud to me. I had an extraordinary time with Russian writers—all this I reported, and it came back to Edmund, and he conceived of me as somebody who straddled—

**D:** When you told him about these experiences that fixed his image of you?

**Berlin:** Yes, he was not at all interested in any ideas that I had about philosophy, or politics, in my field. He was polite, but he was completely bored by it. He saw me as a bridge between Russia and the West. Sort of an interpreter, a good interpreter, who knew certain things about Russia that the West didn't quite. He always had to categorize people. I belonged to the category of some kind of bridge figure between two worlds. That's how he saw me.

**D:** And how do you see his need to categorize?

**Berlin:** I don't think he was very interested in people, as people. Only if they had something to give or stood for something. Books, ideas. Auden was a very good poet, Spender was a very nice man. Who else did he know here? Sylvester Gates was a friend from way back. Edmund met Maurice Bowra and hated him. In *Europe without Baedeker* (1966) he describes him, without giving him a name, as a snob, in very, very hostile colors. But everybody had to be something.

**D:** And where did this need for people to represent things come from, do you suppose?

**Berlin:** I never knew that. I have no idea. Was it back in Princeton, as a student? He adored his professors from those days, you know, Norman Kemp Smith and the dean, what was his name?

**D:** Dean [Christian] Gauss.

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**Berlin:** He was very important to him. Wilson's friends always had to have some sort of—it's difficult to describe—they didn't need to be people on stage, didn't need to wear masks, you see, didn't have to be actors, but they had to be expressive of love, hate, poetry, prose, England, America, honesty, dishonesty, falsehood, truth. Somerset Maugham for him was simply a vulgar philistine who was very good at promoting his own stuff and therefore a typical anti-art man, a sort of middle-brow writer.

**D:** He wrote an article called "Somerset Maugham and an Antidote," which is a nice title. He had a fierce prejudice against Maugham.

**Berlin:** Well, he was right about that. Maugham was not a great writer, and did more propaganda for himself than any other author ever did. He talked about his art—nonsense. Craft. Hard work. Realism. Life. But all that talk about art—there was no such thing.

**D:** What do you think of Wilson's criticism of Russian literature?

**Berlin:** He had some inner feeling, some extraordinary understanding of what the Russians meant. Sometimes he talked nonsense. For example, the two pieces on *Zhivago*. The first article—

**D:** Was wonderful. The second was lousy.

**Berlin:** Yes, all that philological stuff, he got from those two ladies, those two White Russian ladies, whoever they were, egged him on by saying "Ham-let," "Little Ham." He didn't really know the language well. In the famous row with Nabokov he was wrong.

**D:** Yes, he was wrong about words. But did you think he was wrong about Nabokov's translation? I thought the translation of *Eugene Onegin* was "perverse-pedantic-impossible," as Edmund said.

**Berlin:** Absolutely right about it. It was an absolute monstrosity. He was a moral being, Edmund was, whose approach to life was indelibly moral, as is that of the Russian writers. Ultimately, the Russian approach is the moral approach. Nabokov was purely aesthetic—Edmund admired him, liked him, was amused by him. Don't think he meant much to him. Still, anybody Russian was of interest to Edmund. He had this terrific sense of the greatness of Russian literature. Wonderful people, wonderful literature, he used to say.



*Edmund Wilson in 1963*

**D:** Did you like [Wilson's wife] Elena [of aristocratic Russian and German background]?

**Berlin:** Very much. She made him happy. She was a very nice woman, she was gentle, she was sensitive, she was aristocratic. She was sad, deeply sad.

**D:** Why?

**Berlin:** Who can tell? An unhappy first marriage. To a Canadian? And she was low—low spirited, rather, as opposed to high spirited.

**D:** Which Edmund was?

**Berlin:** Oh, Edmund boiled, you see. Why did she marry him? He got on with her, all right. He did with everybody. His passion for women was unquenchable.

*We returned to Wilson and the English.*

**Berlin:** He was defensive about America, is what it was. He didn't need these European snobs.

**D:** Because he had grown up in a time when America did not yet feel that it had a culture?

**Berlin:** Quite.

**D:** And it acquired that feeling through the work of the writers of the 1920s, but Edmund was old enough, being educated before World War I—he was educated in a provincial ambience that looked to Oxbridge, old Princeton kind of thing. His first trip to Europe was in the summer of 1914.

**Berlin:** Tell me, what happened to him then? Defiant Americanism?

**D:** I would say aspirant Americanism. He wanted to make a culture and—

**Berlin:** He was very conscious of the low rating, some kind of disparagement of American writers by English critics. "They think of themselves as superior to us, they think they're marvelous, and they think we're just provincials." There was a bit of that among us.

**D:** It came from before World War I.

**Berlin:** But the English went on thinking that in the 1930s and '40s. When Bowra said about Ezra Pound's essays, "He's a terrible bore and what is much worse, an American bore," that rightly aroused all Edmund's worst suspicions about the horrible way the English ran on.

*I reminded Sir Isaiah of Evelyn Waugh's famous snub of Wilson in 1945, when he had tried to interest Secker and Warburg in publishing *Memoirs of Hecate County in England*. When Wilson was out of the room at a London party, his hostess asked the other guests to be discreet about this subject. Instead, Waugh elicited from Wilson that the book had just been turned down because of "the laws relating to pornography," then pronounced, "In cases of this kind, we usually advise publication in Egypt." Did Sir Isaiah agree with Stephen Spender (whom I had interviewed the day before) "that Waugh's condescension shaped Wilson's later attitude toward literary England?"*

**Berlin:** No, no. I absolutely disagree.

**D:** Stephen told me that Waugh's rudeness—

**Berlin:** Had nothing to do with it. Wilson had a perfectly happy time during World War II, being against the war. Then he met the British, in 1946.

**D:** It was 1945 when he was sent abroad by the *New Yorker*.

**Berlin:** When he came to England he was already bristling. He said to me, in 1946, Churchill is nothing but a romantic American journalist. That isn't due to being offended by Waugh. I think Stephen's exaggerating. Edmund was offended, no doubt, and Waugh meant to offend him, and meant to offend him

because he was an American.

**D:** A Yank, as Waugh says in his journals.

**Berlin:** Waugh was very upset when he went to Boston and found a terrible thing there—I was at Harvard at the time and I saw him—nasty man, Waugh, genuinely nasty, deeply nasty, and I knew him—he didn’t like me and I didn’t like him, but I knew him. And what upset him was that the Unitarians were the top people in Boston, socially, the Catholics the bottom. An unnatural state of affairs, and that he couldn’t get over. He was terribly, tremendously indignant about that. No, Waugh was a sort of self-made romantic snob. He was expelled from some club for throwing something at one of the waiters because he thought a gentleman did that, had an imagined idea of how gentlemen behaved, and lived up to some kind of entirely made-up view of a country gentleman—assumed they disliked Jews. He was anything but, himself. Born in Golders Green. Yet Wilson knew that Evelyn Waugh was a small genius. He thought him [an] odious, dreadful fellow, but he knew he was gifted.

**D:** And it was the same with Bloomsbury?

**Berlin:** Wilson regarded the thin-blooded ghosts of Bloomsbury somewhat as D. H. Lawrence did. He did not enjoy himself with them as he did with the aged Compton Mackenzie, a jolly fellow who drank and womanized and had adventures and had wonderful times in Greece, and wrote books which had to be censored. None of this trembling aesthetic. But Wilson was an extremely penetrating and honest critic. If they wrote something good, he would say so.

*I suggested that Wilson valued British literary life “as he saw it in your generation, in your circle, yourself and Spender and Auden and others.”*

**Berlin:** Yes, yes.

**D:** Why do you think that it meant as much to him as it did?

**Berlin:** I think, just for obvious reasons, because the writers are good, because he enjoyed them, he liked it because he thought well of it. Not because they’re pleasant.

**D:** I think that in England he felt a cultural continuity hard to sustain in the United States.

**Berlin:** But there wasn’t, you know. It was an illusion. We’re talking about the 1930s. Spender, Auden, Day Lewis, even Aldous Huxley, don’t come out of some obvious—Eliot was a great influence on all these people, but they don’t go back to the ’20s.

**D:** Not, at any rate, as Edmund did.

**Berlin:** I think Edmund felt there was such a thing as literature, as the tradition. He was a man who lived entirely in books. If there was ever a man fixated on books, it was Edmund. Now, in this rich world of, as it were, advancing literature, England played a major part as far as English literature was concerned. America played a minor part; he knew it, and therefore, he was man enough, in a sense—I mean, that’s the world he valued, he was happy in, he breathed the air of. That’s the point, not so much the continuity as simply good books, interesting books, ideas.

**D:** He had a feeling, in his later years, that he was not in the swim of contemporary American culture.

**Berlin:** That’s right, but he was much more in the swim of ours. He was greatly admired, greatly admired by many of us. But when he was in England, he was like a cat on hot bricks.

**D:** A cat on hot bricks?

**Berlin:** Unfriendly country, unfriendly country; he was a genuine Anglophobe, in

spite of the glorious literature.

**D:** And he had been an Anglophile underneath, in his youth, which he had had to repudiate.

**Berlin:** Could be, could be. Pride in his ancestors, traveled down to see some church service in East Anglia [where Wilson's maternal forebears lived before sailing for the colony of Massachusetts Bay].

*I observed that in The Fifties Wilson was sometimes hard on Sir Isaiah.*

**Berlin:** So he was. Look, he liked catching one out, to begin with. I remember he was frightfully pleased when he discovered that in a book on Karl Marx I described someone as a physicist, when, in fact, he was a biologist; he was delighted by that inexactitude. He liked me, we were friends, but something about me irritated him, also. Something did.

**D:** I'll tell you what he thought it was, or at least what name he gave to it: "I love Isaiah and he's an international figure, but there's the Oxford-cliquish side of him."

**Berlin:** There was no clique, there was no Oxford clique, or any other. When he came to stay, that evening when I invited Iris Murdoch and John Bayley, disaster, disaster. He was talking about whom he wanted to see. In Magdalen, it was A. J. P. Taylor he liked. He said, "He's my kind of man. He's a hostile fellow." He liked A. J. P.'s *boutard* against the Establishment, and Cecil Roth because of the Jews. I tried to stop him from meeting Cecil Roth, who was one of the world's greatest bores. He really was. He wasn't what Edmund thought him—he was a very hard-working antiquarian. Knew nothing about books. Accurate, no inspiration, no historical sense, a great deal of sort of accumulation of quite uninteresting detail and for some reason Edmund conceived an admiration for him, because of his own interest in the Jews. I said to him, "Look, he's a most dreadful bore, do you really want to go and see him?" He decided I was deliberately preventing him from seeing Cecil Roth because he wasn't one of the clique.

**D:** Why do you think Edmund needed to jump in that way, to impose that category?

**Berlin:** Because he didn't like my friends, didn't like David Cecil.

**D:** There was something he thought was fishy about these British—

**Berlin:** Not fishy, no, but narrow, academic, snobbish, thought too well of themselves. Some kind of little thing, you know—conceited people, highest opinion, all they wanted was to please each other.

**D:** Is there any truth in it?

**Berlin:** Some. Well, everybody, you see, lives in a circle of friends; it's unavoidable, and my friends were . . . whoever they were. Edmund exaggerated. He always had to have some doctrine, some theory, to explain things.

**D:** His early criticism of American culture was different. It relied on detail and aesthetic judgment. I agree with you about that tendency in his later work.

**Berlin:** He was not intuitive, he was not intuitive. He made up theories. He built hypotheses, in all his writings, like that. As a critic, he would conceive some hypothesis and then he would support it with every argument he could. He didn't react directly, line by line, he wasn't an impressionist critic.

**D:** He needed to make a case.

**Berlin:** And in theoretical terms. He wanted to know why this happened. Until he made a theory, he wouldn't leave it.

**D:** Now, how is it possible that such a man could be wonderfully illuminating as a critic?

**Berlin:** Because, of course, he understood—he was extremely penetrating, had deep insight. No intuition, that's another thing. But when he read a book he

knew what it was saying, he understood, deep understanding—and not only books, but milieus, too. He understood what [Charles-Augustin] Sainte-Beuve came out of, what kind of society it was that generated these people. But all that is—and in the good sense—theory. He was an old-fashioned, 19th-century critic who, whenever he wanted to write about somebody, read all their works and accumulated an enormous amount of information until some shape emerged, built itself in his head.

*Berlin recalled not liking two of Wilson's friends. One was Hannah Arendt, another "that famous writer, you know, the left-wing dramatist in whose apartment the Wilsons stayed in New York."*

**D:** Lillian Hellman.

**Berlin:** I thought she was too awful, quite apart from her Stalinism and everything.

**D:** As a dramatist?

**Berlin:** Not that so much. I thought she was an awful woman. I was very put off. I met her exactly twice, once in Washington in 1941, when she defended the Soviet Union in the worst possible way—the worst things were what she defended. And once in Oxford, when she came to tea. They were doing *Candide*, for which she wrote the words and Bernstein wrote the music. I remember it was a kind of musical, and she invited herself to tea with me. I felt awkward because I thought she wasn't a nice person, that's all. Apart from the Stalinism, which didn't endear her either. Edmund defended her, I never knew why. She was a vulgar writer, she was gifted—quite gifted in a commercial way. But I was on Mary McCarthy's side when she insulted her.

**D:** When Mary said that every word she wrote was a lie, including the "ands" and "thes."

**Berlin:** Yes, "ands" and "thes," very funny.

**D:** But in what terms did Wilson defend her?

**Berlin:** Well, remember that he stayed for weeks in her apartment. He said, "No, no, she's all right, she's got good qualities. I know you don't like her. No, no, there's something to her, she's an old friend."

**D:** He would have credited her with standing up in the Joe McCarthy years. That she had been a Stalinist long after the Moscow Trials, at a time when it was disgraceful still to be a Stalinist: somehow he didn't hold this against her in a serious way.

**Berlin:** Evidently not. People make mistakes.

*Berlin recalled the pleasure of being asked "to write in diamond" on the windows of the old stone house at Talcottville, as other close friends of Wilson's later years were invited to do, with the diamond stylus Elena gave him.*

**D:** Did you carve that poem in the glass? Were you up there in the attic, on the third floor?

**Berlin:** He did it.

**D:** While you were there?

**Berlin:** Yes. From the prophet Isaiah. It's Hebrew, on the glass.

**D:** I've seen it, but I didn't know how to translate it.

**Berlin:** He talked nonsense to me about it. He thought I identified myself with the prophet Isaiah.

**D:** Did you think that he overly romanticized Hebrew and the Jews?

**Berlin:** Gravely. There's that rather bad story about the Messiah coming ["The Messiah at the Seder"].

**D:** Did he make too much of the Jewish intellectual tradition, the idea that the



Jews had helped keep the flame of the spirit alive? He sort of believed that.

**Berlin:** Maybe. He never said it to me. I'll tell you a funny story—two funny stories. He went to Jordan, and when he came back from Jordan, he had to pass through the Mandelbaum Gate. The Israeli passport officer looked at his passport, noticed it was Edmund Wilson, then said, "I think your dating of the Dead Sea scrolls is not quite right. I think it should have been 50 years before." And Edmund answered, and the chief officer said, "Stamp Mr. Wilson's passport. You can't discuss the scrolls here, not on the government's time." He talked to me about that afterwards, saying, "Only in Israel would I find a passport officer who wished to question the date of the scrolls." That pleased him.

**D:** It pleased him deeply.

**Berlin:** Then he went to see the man he most admired in Israel, who was a scholar called [David] Flusser in Jerusalem, who talked to him about the Bible and the scrolls. Edmund asked him what he thought of Israel. Flusser said, "*Israel est un très petit pays. Et je ne suis pas patriot.*" He was delighted with that. Anybody who said he wasn't a patriot went straight to his heart.

**D:** And yet, in a complex way—

**Berlin:** He was an American patriot. I remember it well, he once said to me, "The great thing about America is that there is a new generation coming, educated engineers. They're wonderful people, these people, not appreciated in Europe, but they're the people who are going to make America." And that's when he said, "One sometimes has one's best ideas in the bath. The bathroom is a great American invention."

**D:** Well, now, while we're waiting for our tea, do you feel that Edmund was a nice man, essentially—in spite of his sometimes putting down friends in his journals?

**Berlin:** Yes, I do. Because of course he had an enormous heart, and that's what made him the critic he was. He was all too human, Edmund. From time to time, he became angry and bristled, talked nonsense, and became grumpy and hostile, but that was all in the end unimportant. He could be offensive, but it was unimportant. He was deeply moved, he was deeply moved by whatever was moving. Deeply moved by books, deeply moved by individuals, by their circumstances.

**D:** If you thought that Edmund was great in any way, insofar as that word is not misused in his case, what would you think it was?

**Berlin:** He was the greatest critic of his time. For me.

**D:** And why?

**Berlin:** Because he went more deeply into the nature of the works about which he wrote, because he interpreted them.

**D:** In the light of the person and the times?

**Berlin:** Well, not even that, that was the method. Because somehow what he said was more interesting, more memorable, and above all, more profound. How to quantify depth? I mean, I ask you, would you mind telling me how to define the word *depth*? Or *deep*? But there is a definition: it comes from the nature of wells. That's what's deep. If I say to you, Dostoevsky is a deeper writer than Tolstoy, what does that mean? It's a little difficult to say. Yet we know what we mean. I think Edmund had an insight into books, into writers, and into social circumstances, the effect of both education and environment, and had ethical, critical views on writers deeper than those of any other contemporary critic. I can think of nobody—Eliot was a great critic, too, but that was from a point of view less sympathetic to me. I mean, he put together a very definite theory, an approach. I admired the approach, but it didn't speak to me. Wilson's did, from the beginning. When I read *Axel's Castle*, I understood something I hadn't understood before. That's very endearing.

D: And he kept that up for you over the years?

Berlin: Forever.

D: All the way to the end.

Berlin: Sometimes he talked nonsense, as I've told you, about [Boris Pasternak's] *Dr. Zhivago* (1958) and other things. He overestimated [André] Malraux grossly. Grossly. He was a gifted writer, but the *Musée Imaginaire* (1947)—at least what Wilson writes about in it—was not a great work.

D: Do you think he overestimated [Ignazio] Silone, on the basis of *Bread and Wine* (1937)?

Berlin: Yes, he was a nice man, very nice, decent, but not a great writer. Edmund was prepared to stand up for Malraux and Silone. They were Communists when he was left-wing. But Malraux became a Gaullist, and Silone worked for the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which from Edmund's point of view was no good.

D: And Wilson turned out to be right about that.

Berlin: Oh, yes.

D: On account of the secret CIA subsidy. If they'd only been open about it.

Berlin: Oh, I quite agree. Nothing would have been wrong. That was blown by Conor Cruise O'Brien, whom Edmund should have liked but never met. They would have gotten along.

D: He was not tolerant of Dos Passos, not when Dos—

Berlin: Dos went to the right.

D: Way over to the right and perhaps prostituted himself unconsciously to a political cause, as he had not when he was on the left.

Berlin: Exactly. Edmund very strongly disapproved of this. Yet he sometimes praised second-rate writers for political reasons. Solidarity of some kind. That's exceptional. In general, everything he wrote appeared to me to be wonderful. I was an unqualified admirer. Look, there's nobody else in America to equal him. Who else is there? Who else can you mention in that breath?

D: The New Critics taught people how to read poetry, which I'm afraid we may be forgetting now. For a while, in the 1950s, Lionel Trilling was more important than Wilson in New York intellectual circles.

Berlin: Trilling was nowhere near so good. I knew Trilling and his work.

D: Why nowhere near so good?

Berlin: Because he wasn't as penetrating, he wasn't as profound; he was a delicate, sensitive, extremely honest, and very communicative writer, but he understood far less. Edmund penetrated beneath the surface in an extraordinary way, and also he had great emotional understanding of the writers he wrote about. And conveyed it.

D: Could give himself to the subject.

Berlin: And conveyed it. I mean, let me tell you, he was full of prejudices, full of quirks, full of all kinds of nonsensical beliefs, all kinds of loves and hates of a ludicrous kind, but they didn't matter. He was a better writer in the sense that every sentence he wrote was more authentically thought and more authentically felt. In that way Trilling was like other critics, just intelligent sentences, but in Wilson's case, it was filled with some kind of personal content. That's why one would read him. I read Wilson compulsively. I read Trilling with pleasure, but it wasn't the same feeling. And Wilson was a very good writer. And he was serious. It's difficult to convey what the word *serious* means, but he was serious. He was the opposite of smart, the opposite of frivolous, the opposite of amusing, the opposite of brilliant. He was none of those things, simply a serious critic, of the first order. And of them, there are not many in the history of literature. Matthew Arnold was a great critic.

Sainte-Beuve was a great critic. . . . You can say about Edmund that everything he wrote in one way or another was memorable. It cannot be said of many people. Because he put his blood in it.

D: A book was the lifeblood of a spirit.

**Berlin:** Indeed. He shed his own blood in order to make others live. Somebody once said, [Ulrich von] Wilamowitz—great German critic—made a very profound statement, when he was writing about Greek and Latin authors. He said, “You know, we don’t really know what they meant. How can we, after two thousand years?” In Homer—you remember, Lewis?—Achilles can’t come and talk to Odysseus unless blood sacrifices are made, and when he is pumped with blood, then he can talk. And Wilamowitz said, we have to give our blood to these people, to make them speak. Then they speak with our blood, not theirs.

D: And that’s what Wilson was doing?

**Berlin:** Well, that’s what Wilamowitz meant, that maybe it wasn’t what they [the Greek and Latin authors] meant at all. Maybe it’s what we make them mean.

D: That’s right.

**Berlin:** In Edmund’s case the writers are more recent, are recent enough—

D: That we can be close to seeing them in their own terms, if we give our blood. Right?

**Berlin:** Precisely. But there are people who hate this kind of—my friend David Cecil, to whom I was devoted, didn’t like Edmund’s writings at all, because he thought that’s not what criticism was about. Criticism was to convey the artist’s process, how Virginia Woolf wrote, how a poet made his books, how Thomas Hardy composed, but not about where he was born or why he thought what he thought, or what the politics were or what his interest was in this or that, or what his inner life was. Cecil thought that criticism was what we did in the *conservatoire*. Edmund believed that art was communication. Art wasn’t simply contemplating a beautiful object and saying, “I’m not interested in whether the jeweler was a good husband, nice father, where he lived, and whether he made a lot of money.” What do you do if you contemplate the object?—you say how marvelous it is. And Edmund did not believe that, nor do I. He believed the opposite, that art was communication. The great thing about the good artist is what he communicates, and why.

*We speculated about the tensions in Wilson’s personality.*

**Berlin:** He would never have drunk as he did if he didn’t have to drown something. Unhappy man. I don’t know why, but he wasn’t comfortable in his own skin. He didn’t know quite how to get about. Elena was a great solace to him. She made him feel comfortable, kept his irritation down. He was terribly grateful to her. Terribly grateful.

D: But you felt there was something he was trying to get away from or drown?

**Berlin:** Well, there was something in him which made him uneasy. Of course, he was a highly neurotic man, as who can deny? Nervy. A little paranoid, thought somehow people were after him, all kinds of people wanted to do him down, bit of that. But he was lonely too, to some extent, in spite of Elena. And when he disliked, he disliked. When he despised, he despised. Poor Archie MacLeish went to bed—after that poem—“The Omelet of A. MacLeish.” For about a week [in 1938] he couldn’t get up. Well, he was crushed, crushed. I once asked Edmund, “Why did you do this to poor old Archie?” He said, “Oh, he’s just an idiot, you know.” That’s what he said. He’s an idiot. He didn’t say he was hateful, awful, or—

**D:** He felt that MacLeish was watering down the standard of the poets whom he imitated, corrupting taste. But there was a meanness in that piece. Not Evelyn Waugh meanness, but intellectual meanness.

**Berlin:** He had meanness. He wasn't unmean. As a human being he was somewhat difficult. If you say somebody's difficult, what does that mean? Difficult is exactly what he was. And there was all this Punch and Judy stuff.

**D:** That was a sublimation of something?

**Berlin:** Difficult to say what. The Punch and Judy stuff, all that; party tricks; all that sort of magic stuff.

**D:** Did you have an impression of his aging in the later years?

**Berlin:** Yes, when I saw him in the 1960s there was something old, old, about him. Not senile but old.

**D:** He had supported himself as a professional literary man through the cultural changes of 50 years, and his private life before Elena was as wearing as it was intense.

**Berlin:** There was something heavy and slow and sort of uncomfortable about him. But uncomfortableness was one of Edmund's attributes. He was an uncomfortable man, uncomfortable with himself; and that's what caused the friction, and the friction caused the genius. He was always worried about whether he thought this or that was true or false, he was always rubbing something on something inside himself, and that produced the sparks. He was not bland; he was the opposite of being peaceful, Goethe-like, the Olympian sage, for whom everything flowed in a harmonious manner. He was disharmonious. It was difficult for him, life was difficult, and writing was difficult. But it was all worthwhile, because of the triumph. He was a very, very honorable figure whichever way you looked at it.

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