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Originally delivered in the spring of 1965 and subsequently broadcast several times over the BBC, Berlin’s lectures on romanticism have long been esteemed by his admirers. Berlin nevertheless resisted their publication, hoping one day to write a book on romanticism. His literary executor Henry Hardy reports, however, that “not so much as a sentence of the intended work was ever written” (x). Thus Hardy’s edition of these lectures constitutes Berlin’s most extended reflection on a theme that loomed large in his understanding of the modern world: the romantic critique of the Enlightenment.

Surprisingly few romantics actually appear in these pages. Those who do arrive late, linger briefly, and are usually German. Fichte enters on page 88, followed by Schelling (97) and the Schlegel brothers (104), with brief appearances by E. T. A. Hoffman and Johann Ludwig Tieck (114-6). Only in his closing ruminations on the impact of romanticism does Berlin cast a glance at Byron, Chateaubriand, and Sir Walter Scott. Most of the book explores what Berlin takes to be romanticism’s “roots,” which he locates in a few eighteenth-century German writers who, when romanticism finally burst upon the scene, were either disgusted by it (Jacobi, Schiller, and Goethe) or dead (Hamann). A few years Berlin made these proto-romantics the charter members of the movement he dubbed “the Counter-Enlightenment” — a concept that would have a considerable career of its own. Berlin’s concern is thus less with romanticism per se than “with the revolution of which romanticism, at any rate in some of its guises, is the strongest expression and symptom” [xiii].

As Berlin saw it, this revolution involved a rejection of the idea that 1) “all genuine questions can be answered,” 2) “all these answers are knowable,” and 3) “all these answers must be compatible with one another” (21-2). Upon these three principles, he insists, “the whole
Western tradition rested” (21), and their rejection constitutes “the greatest single shift in the consciousness of the West” (1). Berlin holds that the Enlightenment left these principles unshaken. It was the romantics who questioned the “ruinous” belief that “there is one single solution to all human ills” (which carries the insidious corollary that “you must impose this solution no matter what cost”) and thus laid the foundations for “liberalism, toleration, decency and the appreciation of the imperfections of life” (146-7), causes which are usually associated (wrongly, according to Berlin) with the Enlightenment.

These arguments will not be unfamiliar to those who know Berlin’s works. Reading him is a bit like listening to Vivaldi: taken individually, his essays are clever, vigorously argued, and elegantly crafted; but reading them in sequence soon leads to a nagging sense of having heard it all before. Berlin’s work was animated by an awareness of the diversity of plausible answers that could be given to the question of how life should be lived and by an impassioned defense of this plurality of possibilities against the illusion of an ultimate solution. One can admire the defense of liberalism that Berlin drew from these convictions and yet have reservations about the historical accuracy of his account of the relationship between romanticism and the Enlightenment. It is hard to see Hamann as a supporter of pluralism and harder still to see the philosophes — who rejected the dogmatic esprit de systèm in favor of an experimentalist esprit systématique — as oblivious to the multiplicity of ways in which good lives could be lived. Lessing’s views on religious questions were a good deal more skeptical and open-ended than Jacobi’s. Fichte and Schelling sought to bring a greater systematic coherence to Kant’s philosophy, not to dismantle it. Once one moves from general claims about “romanticism” and “the Enlightenment” to assess specific thinkers, the picture becomes a good deal messier than Berlin lets on. Early romantics, as Manfred Frank and Frederick Beiser have stressed, share much with late Aufklärers, just as Joseph Priestley points the way to William Blake’s New Jerusalem.

The fox, as Berlin explained in the most famous version of his dichotomy, “knows many
things” while the hedgehog “knows one big thing.” Those who first heard Berlin’s torrent of words, bristling with strange names and biting ironies, must have felt themselves in the presence of a master fox. Yet in black and white they read like a hedgehog’s guide to the eighteenth century. A complex and fascinating age winds up shoe-horned onto one side of a familiar dichotomy. Those interested in tracing the roots of Berlin’s political vision will find much of interest here. Those hoping to learn about the relationship between romanticism and the Enlightenment would be advised to seek out foxier historians.

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