

**A REVIEW OF ISAIAH BERLIN'S BOOK *THE ROOTS OF ROMANTICISM* WITH  
A FOREWORD BY JOHN GRAY**

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**ABSTRACT:** *"The Roots of Romanticism"* by Isaiah Berlin edited by Henry Hardy, and with a Foreword by John Gray. It is the 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition, published in New Jersey by Princeton University Press on 29 July, 2014, paperback, 211 pages, \$ 12.95, ISBN 978-0-691-15620-0.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Originally a series of Berlin's lectures, *The Roots of Romanticism* has been recently published as a carefully reworked and expanded book based on the lectures. This new version is divided into six chapters in which Berlin attempts to prove that Romanticism deeply influenced thinking in the twentieth century and transformed Western consciousness by introducing ideas of originality into the arts and liberalism based on practice. The Romantic Movement was a radical transformation, after which nothing was ever the same, and it is still relevant even to our own day.

## **ADDITION TO THE BOOK**

In this new edition, the following are added: first, a new foreword by philosopher John Gray, in which he discusses Berlin's belief that the influence of Romanticism has been great and contradictory in fueling anti-liberal political movements while at the same time reinvigorating liberalism; second, the text is corrected with additional references; and finally, a new appendix has been added that includes some of Berlin's correspondence about his lectures and the reactions to them.

## **OVERVIEW OF PHILOSOPHERS AND ARTISTS WHO INFLUENCED ROMANTICISM**

Berlin gives a brief but concise overview of the philosophers and artists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who influenced Romanticism, including Kant, Rousseau, Diderot, Schiller, Schlegel, Novalis, Goethe, Heine, Marx, Taine, Beethoven and others. He proves that the Romantic Movement was a great revolution in its way of thinking, reflection of a particular pattern of life and attempts to destroy the traditional notions of received truths and values, particularly in ethics. Berlin attempts to define Romanticism, traces its developments, and shows how it influenced our own outlook and helped to shape twentieth-century ideas about nationalism, existentialism, democracy, totalitarianism, heroic individuals, individual self-

fulfillment, and the place of art. Moreover, he believed the Romantics changed our world by deeply transforming our politics, morals and outlook in modern times.

In the Century of Enlightenment, the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Fontenelle, the most representative of all the figures of the period, viewed nature as a rational entity to be conceived and understood. Others such as Vauvenargues complained bitterly about the appalling emptiness of life. Hume, who believed in science and reason, challenged the entire Enlightenment position and shattered the ideal of rationalism. Johann Georg Hamann, struck the most violent blow against the Enlightenment and began the Romantic process. Hamann believed that man laid his stamp on nature and that his endeavors must spring from his united powers; thus, all separation should be rejected. Kant believed that nature becomes at worst, an enemy and at best, a simply neutral matter to be molded.

The true fathers of Romanticism are lurking under the surface of the apparently coherent and elegant Enlightenment. William Blake considered Locke and Newton as his enemies, as they killed the spirit by dissecting reality into mathematically symmetrical pieces. Diderot was keenly aware of the irrational element in man and that there were two men in every man, the apparent and the genius within that tries to break out. Rousseau said that we live in a corrupt, evil society and the truth is revealed only by looking within the heart of the simple, uncorrupt human being: the noble savage or the child. Although Rousseau's ideas influenced the Romantics, he is not recognized as one of the fathers of Romanticism. Unlike Rousseau, Herder was one of the fathers of the Romantic Movement who plunged a dagger into the body of European rationalism from which it never recovered. He believed in the freedom of expression and that the world is what men have made of it. If man did not express himself fully, he did not express his nature. He asserted that each human group must strive for that which lies in its bones, which is part of its tradition. Every culture has its own center of gravity, and it is every man's responsibility to determine what that center of gravity is.

Ironically, Kant is regarded as one of the fathers of Romanticism despite his detestation of Romanticism and its extravagance, fantasy, mysticism and vagueness. Kant was virtually intoxicated by the ideas of human freedom and that man is man because he chooses. Enlightenment for Kant was the ability of men to determine their own lives. Schiller, like Kant, was intoxicated by the ideas of will, liberty and autonomy. Schiller effectively and convincingly refers back to the Kantian principle in which we can live with other humans in a happy, united, creative world. He believed that man goes through three stages and that what gives man his essence is the ability to rise above nature and mold her. For him, nature is indifferent to man and destroys us in the most ruthless and hideous fashion. In Nietzsche's opinion, man is an object in an uncontrollable stream. Fichte said that although external nature impinges upon us, it is clay for our creation and if we create, we have freedom again. To rise above, man must constantly generate and create, continuously creating themselves afresh and enabling the "I" to form an organic unity with other men. From the opinions of a number of philosophers, including Schiller, whose legacy deeply penetrated the souls of the Romantics, Berlin reached the crucial conclusion that ideals are not to be discovered but invented, and in some beautiful and frictionless way, nature permits us to follow and realize an ideal.

Romanticism was influenced deeply by Schlegel, Fichte's theory of knowledge, the French Revolution and Goethe's famous novel, *Wilhelm Meister*. Fichte glorifies the dynamic and imaginative self and expands his vision by saying that the creative self imposes forms upon

matter and penetrates other things. Thus, he dominated the imaginations of the Romantics. Schelling, who believed that nature is alive and brings the whole universe to a higher consciousness of itself, had a great influence on Coleridge. Schelling doctrine is that the function of the artist is to delve within himself, and above all, to delve within the dark and unconscious forces that move within him, and then, these forces to the consciousness via the most agonizing and violent internal struggle.

Influenced by Fichte and Freidrich Schlegel, symbolism becomes central in Romantic thinking. Because the universe around us is literally infinite, we cannot effectively convey what we are seeking to convey without using symbols. From Pascal and Goethe, the Romantics adopted the fundamental notion of depth. In this context, the finite stands for the infinite, material for the immaterial, and words represent something that is wordless. Schopenhauer influenced the Romantics with his idea that there is some canker, or worm in the bud, that dooms us with perpetual frustration. The Romantics adopted their concept of the appearance of the golden bird that emerges in their writings from Kafka and Tieck. The Romantics oscillated between extremes of mystical optimism and appalling pessimism, which gives their writings a peculiar uneven quality. The business of a work of art is to liberate us from the superficial symmetries of nature and rules. Berlin repeats several times that in all centuries prior to the Romantics, there is a structure to things. This is profoundly false for the Romantics, who believed that rules must be done away with, and crushed the very notion of a stable structure of anything.

Romanticism arose in Germany and then travelled beyond the confines of Germany, first to Eastern Europe and finally to England. Here, Byron led the entire Romantic Movement, emphasizing the indomitable will. Byron and Goethe are the eminent names. From Schopenhauer to Wagner, there is an emphasis on the appalling nature of unsatisfied desire, which leads to the most fearful suffering. This incurable disease is the heart of the Romantic Movement in Europe. On the surface, Romanticism appeared to say everything and its opposite in promoting the principles of necessity of the will and the absence of a structure of things. Therefore, the undiscoverable and the unattainable are the heart of the matter. The Romantics detested Aristotle's notion of order and those who followed him because this idea ends in a fearful delusion. At the heart of Romanticism, there is perpetual movement within oneself and out of the external world; this was neglected by Classicism.

Some ideas that the Romantics popularized have had a lasting effect on modern man's thinking. First, they attacked the old proposition that virtue is knowledge. They espoused that the organic unity of a work of art is essential, and to dissect is to murder. They also denied the existence of a divine law of nature as taught by the Roman Church and the 18<sup>th</sup>-century French philosophers. The Romantics influenced many with their tendency toward isolation and the creation of an ideal place to live, as they believed that our universe is as we choose to make it. They emphasized the artist's freedom and his similarity to nature; however, they did not think that the artist ought to be unbridled and that one should simply sing whatever comes into one's mind. Romanticism succeeded in transforming certain values to a very profound degree, particularly sincerity, which Existentialists called authenticity. Furthermore, the central sermons of Existentialism are essentially Romantic ones. Fascism developed from the Romantic Movement's nihilistic destruction of existing institutions because they confine the unlimited will.

Politically, some of the Romantics were revolutionaries and others were reactionaries. Thus, we cannot pin them down to any one political view.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

I recommend reading this book not only because it provides a good overview of the roots of Romanticism for those who are interested in the movement and literature, but also because it provides a clear, brief overview of the philosophers' concepts and ideas of the 18<sup>th</sup>-and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that can be easily understood and comprehended.