



I think that my title probably needs a few words of explanation. Some years ago a very distinguished Oxford philosopher, Isaiah (now Sir Isaiah) Berlin, published a study of Tolstoy which he called "The Hedgehog and the Fox". His title came from a Greek writer named Archilochus who once wrote the following epigram: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." (The hedgehog's trick of rolling itself up into a prickly ball when some larger animal threatens to attack it is presumably the "one big thing" it knows.) Since Isaiah Berlin's book came out, its title has been used (and often misused) to draw attention to two basically opposed character types: The person whose mind ranges far and wide over a broad range of interests and who is convinced that no single set of beliefs constitutes the whole truth—in other words, the fox; and the person who is passionately aware of just one thing and believes that that thing holds the secret to all truth—in other words, the hedgehog.

Perhaps everyone has a little of the fox or the hedgehog in his or her nature, though usually one or the other quality predominates—which is what makes the attempt to distinguish between hedgehogs and foxes interesting. One could (for fun) distinguish between foxy and hedgehoggy tendencies in a whole range of activities: politics, or religion, or friendship, or sport, for example. In politics a fox is undoubtedly a liberal—that is, a person who likes to take into account the complexity of human motivations and who therefore makes allowance for them in his view of the world; in practice he is usually a believer in democracy and in what social scientists call "social pluralism". By contrast, a hedgehog is someone with a single all-embracing political idea who applies this idea to virtually all situations; in practice he is likely to be a dogmatic Marxist who knows the answer to everything before you open your mouth, because he is on the side of "history" and history can never be wrong; or a member of the Moral

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Majority who *knows* that children shouldn't be allowed to read Salinger's "Catcher in the Rye" and therefore sees to it that the book is taken off the bookshelves. In sport the fox is the all-rounder who enjoys surfing, baseball, tennis, etc. without feeling the need to excel in any of them, and the hedgehog is the champion weight-lifter or sprinter who trains every evening until he can win a silver cup. My father, being an Englishman, believes that the point of sports is to enjoy oneself and my mother, being an American, believes that the point of sports is to win; there we have the fox and the hedgehog temperaments in a nutshell.

Now when we turn to literature, we find that the two best exemplars of hedgehog and fox are also the two greatest writers Western civilization ever produced: Dante and Shakespeare. Shakespeare the fox was a man whose sympathies seem all-embracing. He convinces us that he could enter imaginatively into every type of situation and understand every type of man or woman, without feeling the need to rush to judgement or to explain everything in the light of some overriding idea or ideal. For me he has always been the supreme example of that kind of man John Keats mentioned, in one of his letters, as possessing "Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." In another letter he says that "a Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually... filling some other Body." Shakespeare too has no "Identity" in this sense; we look for him and all we find is thin air; it is only in "filling some other Body" (Hamlet, Falstaff, Rosalind) that he exists.

Of course there are patterns in his work and we can see that Shakespeare was deeply committed to certain truths, like the need for order in the individual psyche and in the cosmos, the harmful effects of egotism and self-deception, and the power of love to heal wounds and give life meaning. But these concerns don't add up to a consistent view of life which we could dignify with the name of a belief-system or "ideology". In fact it's extremely difficult to know what exactly Shakespeare *did* believe, and people have been taking guesses at it for the past four hundred years.

When we turn to Dante, however, we know exactly what he believed in. Never was there a man less capable of "being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts" or more irritable in the way he reached after

fact and reason! The spinal cord of this confident dogmatism is of course the Christian religion and Dante accepted without a tremor its austere (and to our minds, rather inhuman) view that sins uncanceled by repentance (however late) were punishable by eternal suffering, whereas those sinners who *had* repented could work off their debt in Purgatory and thereby win the grace to wash off the memory of their sins in the river Lethe and so pass on to an eternal bliss in Paradise. (And even eternal bliss can be made accessible to fact, reason and sense perception; when Dante finally sees God at the end of his great poem he tells us that it was like looking into the heart of a blinding light.)

Accept this basic vision of the world and everything immediately falls into place. The afterlife—Hell, Purgatory, Heaven—its tripartite, to match the Trinity. Within each of these main divisions everyone is assigned a place depending on the nature of his sin (in Hell), or of what he has to expiate (in Purgatory) or of the nature of the eternal bliss he enjoys (in Heaven). Every punishment in Hell is proportionate to the offense, so that if you wasted your possessions on earth (by gambling them away for example) you will have to spend eternity running through a wood being chased by hounds, which when they catch you, will tear you to pieces and scatter your limbs just as you scattered your possessions. (Careful with that pocket money!) On earth too everything "fits", although the machinery here is in rather worse working order. Theoretically power should be shared between Pope (responsible for man's spiritual state) and Holy Roman Emperor (responsible for man's temporal state), but human greed and ambition have interfered and corruptions have crept in, the worst being the Pope's claim to temporal authority. (It was this claim that was ultimately responsible for getting Dante exiled from his home town Florence, with the result that he had to spend the rest of his life wandering from one friend's house to the next.) I could go on cataloguing Dante's intense concern to fit everything—every kind of temperament, every kind of relationship, every kind of activity—into one all-inclusive scheme, but probably I've already said enough to convince you that never has there been a writer so dominated by "one big idea" as Dante. He is the greatest literary hedgehog of them all.

Maybe it would be easier to appreciate the differences between hedgehog-Dante and fox-Shakespeare if we compare an episode from each of their works. First a hedgehoggy episode from the "Inferno". Dante and his guide Virgil have clambered down circle after circle into

deeper darkness and intensifying despair until they reach the circle of sinners damned for treason to friends and guests (for Dante, who had been the victim of such treasons in his native Florence, the worst of all possible sins). The punishment in this circle is an intense cold which freezes the tears of sinners and so prevents them from expressing their remorse or rage through weeping—in fact rather like those photos we've been seeing recently of New England postmen with icicles hanging from their eyebrows. One of these sinners calls out to Dante and Virgil as they pass (and I'm going to read it in the original Italian so that you can hear how it sounds):

*"O anime crudeli  
tanto che data v'è l'ultima posta,  
levatimi dal viso i duri veli,  
sí ch'io sfoghi 'l duol che'l cor m'impregna,  
un poco, pria che 'l pianto si raggeli."*

"O cruel souls—who must be cruel otherwise you wouldn't have been sent down to this last circle (a false assumption in fact, but we have to remember that the poor man can't see)... Scrape these hard veils from my eyes so that I can relieve some of the sorrow with which I am congested before my tears again begin to freeze." Dante replies very reasonably: "Fine, but only if you tell me who you are—and then may I go to the bottom of the ice if I don't fulfil my part of the bargain" (a rather hypocritical remark since he knows that he has to go on to the bottom of the ice in any case). The shade then identifies himself as Friar Alberigo who once revenged an insult by murdering a close relative and his son at a banquet. (The password for the assassins was "Bring the fruit" so that "Brother Alberigo's bad fruit" has passed into Italian as a proverb.) Eventually Fra Alberigo asks Dante to keep his side of the bargain, whereupon Dante says that he *won't* and walks away, "for to be rude to such a devil was in fact a courtesy" ("e cortesia fu lui esser villano"). By the fox's standards Dante is behaving like a spoilt child, but hedgehogs don't see it that way at all. If you have "one big idea"—in this case the idea that you are allowed to punish treason by treason, deceit by deceit—you are justified in all kinds of behavior which might seem brutal or unprincipled to wishy-washy liberals like you and me. It's the sort of mentality, in fact, which justified the expulsion of the Moors from Spain in the sixteenth century, or the

masacre of the Taino Indians in Puerto Rico, or in our own day the Soviet policy of sending political dissenters to mental hospitals.

Now compare Dante's behavior in Hell with that of Falstaff at the battle of Shrewsbury. Prince Hal has just killed his great opponent Hotspur and Falstaff, to avoid getting killed by Douglas, falls to the ground pretending to be dead. As soon as the coast is clear he gets to his feet, spots Hotspur's dead body, and stabs it with his sword just to make sure. At his point Prince Hal and his brother John return to the scene and see Falstaff trying to carry Hotspur's body on his back, whereupon the Prince exclaims: "Why, Percy (i.e. Hotspur) I killed myself, and saw thee dead!" to which Falstaff answers:

*Didst thou? Lord, Lord, how this world is given to lying.  
I grant you I was down, and out of breath, and so was he;  
but we rose both at an instant and fought a long hour by  
Shrewsbury clock. If I may be believed, so; if not, let  
them that should reward valor bear the sin upon their  
own heads.*

*I'll take it upon my death, I have him this wound in the  
thigh. If the man were alive and would deny it, zounds! I  
would make him eat a piece of my sword.*

Falstaff here, in the course of two dozen lines, has shown himself to be a coward, a mutilator of dead bodies, a boaster, and a liar—traitor to his country, to his prince, and to his own reputation as a knight and a gentleman. Does Shakespeare punish him, "for to be rude to such a devil was in fact a courtesy"? Not a bit of it! Prince Hal allows Falstaff to take credit for Hotspur's death, even though it means he won't get the credit himself. He says to Falstaff: "For my part, if a lie may do thee grace, / I'll gild it with the happiest terms I have". In other words, "You deserve a reward for sheer effrontery—and I'll make sure you get it." Even though we are left in no doubt as to the limits of Falstaff's charm and "see through him", just as Prince Hal sees through him and moves beyond him in "Henry IV, part 2", yet there is never any "one big idea" that condemns Falstaff and sentences him to a cold punishment in a cold place. That just isn't the way Shakespeare's mind works, fox that he is.

Shakespeare's art is one of check and balances where nothing is seen as wholly bad or as wholly good, but instead as spotted with a

mixture of good and bad as so often it is in life. Shakespeare likes to *compare* things and to set one thing against another, so that we can clearly see the strengths and limitations of each. In particular, he likes to compare people—basically different types, like Othello and Iago, or (more subtly) types who at first *seem* alike but aren't. I was made keenly aware of this the other evening watching "Timon of Athens" on Channel 6, where Shakespeare gives us a pair of grumblers in a single play so that we can compare Apemantus's mean, corrosive cynicism to Timon's noble, though excessive, misanthropy—that way each casts a revelatory light upon the other. Look for these pairs of like-but-unlike characters in Shakespeare and one finds them everywhere. In "As You Like it" they are "outsiders" or mis-fits, one because he is a professional clown (Touchstone) and the other because he is a professional cynic (Jaques). In "Love's Labors Lost" the pair are Boyet and Berowne, examples of what might be called the heartfelt and the heartless wit. In the play I've just mentioned, "Henry IV, part 1" they are Prince Hal and Harry Hotspur, both young men athirst for honor although Hotspur's "honor" is egotistical whereas Hal's is held in trust for his kingdom, later to shine out brilliantly on the battlefield of Agincourt. (But in this play there is a *third* point of view on honor, Falstaff's:

*Can honor set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away  
the grief of a wound? No. Honor hath no skill in surgery  
then? No. What is honor? A word.*

Hedgehogs of course know which of these definitions of honor is the correct one but foxes air all the possibilities and then let you the reader decide between them. Certainly there's something to be said for Falstaff's point of view when you are invited to die for a word and it is the general who will get the credit, and doubtless many G.I.s often felt that way in Vietnam.)

In Shakespeare, love is an amazingly vivid but also amazingly unstable emotion, ranging from the passionate single-mindedness of Romeo and Juliet, through the almost lunatic "doting" of Helena in "A Midsummer Night's Dream", to the mature and rational relationship between Theseus and Hippolyta in the same play. Things are never what they seem where love is concerned as in the play I am now reading with a class at U.P.R., "As You Like It", where a boy falls in

love with a girl, who dresses as a boy, but pretends to be a girl so as to cure the boy of his love, but turns out at the end to be a girl after all. The ambiguity of all this is intensified by the fact that there were no women on the Elizabethan stage so that Rosalind's part would have been taken by a boy. So that we have to swallow the fiction of a boy, pretending to be a girl, who pretends to be a boy, who pretends to be a girl, but who turns out to be a girl although she's (I mean, he's) really a boy. What a muddle! But then it's an expressive muddle since the illusory nature of love is largely what the play's about anyway and Shakespeare's job is merely (but what a merely!) to show us a variety of different "loves" and let us choose between them.

By contrast, Dante allows us no choice. For him love is a clear-cut thing with steps (rather like a staircase), from carnal love in the basement to the highest range of spiritual love in the attic. Dante *knew* as much as any man, and certainly as much as Shakespeare—but it's just that a hedgehog he has to arrange everything in order, in the light of his "big idea." Take that supreme moment in the fifth canto of "Inferno" when the beautiful Francesca, wife of the ugly and deformed Giancotto Malatesta, falls in love with Giancotto's brother Paolo. One day Paolo and Francesca sit together reading the story of Launcelot's courtship of Guinevere, wife of King Arthur. When they get to the place where Launcelot kisses Guinevere, their own lips meet in a kiss:

*Quando leggemo il disiato riso  
esser baciato da cotanto amante,  
questi, che mai da me non fia diviso,  
la bocca mi baciò tutto tremante.*

"When we read how that longed-for laughing mouth was kissed by so great lover, this one (it is unbearably poignant that throughout this episode she never names Paolo by name), who may never more leave me, kissed me trembling on the mouth." The canto ends: "Quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante" ("that was the last reading we did that day").

It would be hard to beat this for beauty or tenderness so that it comes as a shock to remember that Paolo and Francesca are in *hell*. For Dante there are no mitigating circumstances; should one have the misfortune to fall in love with someone else's wife, the only way to cope, if you want to avoid being blown about by winds for eternity, is to

sublimate this love so that this woman becomes a spiritual being, to be admired from a distance as though she were an angel. That's just what Dante himself did with Beatrice Portinari, who became for him the symbol of theology while Mrs. Dante Alighieri bore him children. For foxes things are seldom quite that simple—or that difficult.

I could carry the contrasts between these two great poets much much further, but I think I've already said enough to distinguish between the man who knew many things and the man who knew one big thing. Both forms of knowledge create poetic effects of the greatest possible intensity and I should hate to have to choose between them in terms of quality, although I know which is more congenial to me personally and which of the two writers I'd rather sit next to in the course of a three-hour plane journey to New York. But the difference between Dante and Shakespeare isn't just a matter of vision, or ideas, or congeniality—it's also a matter of language and I'd like to say something about this before I finish.

Dante, the man who knows one big thing, uses language like a searchlight, directing a brilliant beam of light at whatever he wants to say. Really you'd all have to learn Italian (not such an impossible task and much easier than learning how to dance in my experience) if you want to enjoy the full radiance of this beam of light. Here's an example from Canto 5 of the "Purgatorio":

*"Deh, quando tu sarai tornato al mondo  
e riposato de la lunga via,"  
seguitó 'l terzo spirito al secondo,  
"ricorditi di me, che son la Pia;  
Siena mi fé, disfecemi Maremma:  
salsi colui che 'nmanellata pria  
disposando m'avea la sua gemma."*

"Well then, when you return to earth and are rested from your long journey... remember me, who am la Pia. Siena made me, Maremma unmade me, as he well knows who wedded me with his ring." La Pia was apparently a Siennese lady whose husband, wanting to marry another wife, pushed her out of the window of his castle in the Maremma, that strange, formerly mosquito-ridden country south of Pisa on the west Italian coast. Could anything be more touching than that discreet way she refers to herself without mentioning her name, like a Puerto Rican woman might refer to herself in the third person as

"la negrita" or "la gorda"? Or the economy of the line (impossible to translate into English): "Siena mi fé, disfecemi Maremma" with its reminder of how is in fact an "un-making"? Or the tactful way she reminds us of how her husband wedded her by putting a ring upon her finger without the benefit of a church service? Presumably he was in such a hurry to have her that he couldn't wait for a priest, just as later he was in such a hurry to get rid of her that he couldn't wait for her to die a natural death.

Where Dante is like a searchlight, Shakespeare in his great passages is like an X-ray which slices through the surface to what lies hidden beneath. Or to vary the metaphor, his language invites us into a deep dark wood with roots often so deep that it takes a lifetime's reading to see where they lead. Let's balance la Pia's posthumous memories with a passage from Shakespeare where someone imagines what it might be like to be posthumous. In "Measure for Measure" Claudio is condemned to death for a sexual offense and the bad ruler Angelo promises Claudio freedom if his sister, Isabella, will forfeit her virginity. Isabella, who is a bit of a prude, says No and tells Claudio to prepare for death. At this point Claudio breaks out into a great speech of which I'll give you only the first six lines:

*Ay, but to die, and go we know not where,  
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot,  
This sensible warm motion to become  
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit  
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside  
In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice...*

Whenever I hear these lines I shudder. When I try to explain why, I can only come out with: "Because they make me feel *in my bones* what it must be like to lie in the cold ground after death." "Obstruction" is a word which sounds like what it means: thick, heavy, clinging, difficult to cut through—like clay clinging to putrefying flesh. And how final that word "rot" seems! There's just no arguing with that decisive monosyllable. The phrase "sensible warm motion" would need more explanation than I have time for; in just three words Shakespeare sums up the Elizabethan notion of what constitutes human life, distinguishing it from the angelic life at one extreme and animal life at the other. And as for "kneaded clod"—well! If you think of the normal uses of the word "kneaded" (kneading clay to make a pot, kneading

dough to make bread) you get a vision of the body decomposing in the earth, sticky and runny like uncooked noodles. "Clod" too is hideously death—much more so than "soil" or "loam" would have been. No wonder a highly imaginative man like Claudio was appalled at the prospect of having to die.

To have to choose between gifts like these is like having to choose between Boston cream pie and chocolate chip ice cream; as soon as you have the one, you wish that you had chosen the other. Moreover the choice we make is particularly difficult as it has to do with what we are, as well as with what we like. To be broad and understanding in life we have to give up being narrow and decisive, and vice versa. The motor of history has often been set in motion by just those people who *are* narrow and decisive and who know "one big thing" to the exclusion (or at least limitation) of everything else: Plato, Alexander the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, Oliver Cromwell, Napoleon, Karl Marx, Lenin. The "big thing" they know and do has a way of imposing itself on the imagination of other people, so that we get Platonists, or Lutherans, or Cromwellian Puritans, or Marxists. That "big thing" creates its own energy and sense of urgency and the result is the Reformation or the Russian Revolution. Certainly those people who are broad and understanding—Socrates, Horace, Montaigne, Dr. Johnson, Keats, Lincoln—are much *nicer* to be with, though they seldom lead mass movements or collect disciples. (I've never heard of Socratesians, or Montaignists, or Johnsonians, have you?) Just possibly what makes them so agreeable is that they all see truth and reality as many-facted, like a diamond which flashes in so many ways that no one can ever see more than a few reflections at any one time. (If that's a true way to see the world, then maybe the foxes have their own "one big truth" to hold on to after all.)

Well, I seem now to have wandered away from my original brief—which was to talk to you about Dante and Shakespeare. Let me now return to them with some final remarks. The man who write lines like

*"le cose tutte quante  
hanno ordine tra loro, e questo é forma  
che l'universo a Dio fa simigliante"*

("all things have order among themselves and this is the form that makes the universe just like God") was obviously neither inferior in

genius or vision to the man who wrote lines like these:

*To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time,  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
They way to dusty death.*

Both poets are as great as could be—but the difference between them is that Dante, in comparing the order of the cosmos to the sublime order which is God Himself, is giving us in a nutshell the "one great idea" that inspired his poem in its totality and in its every detail, whereas Shakespeare merely tells us what Macbeth felt at one particular moment, one truth among many truths and which may seem less "true" when we set it in the context of a love relationship, or even the temporary exhilaration of a good meal. Macbeth's speech, *and* the good meal, *and* the love relationship, are what constitute total truth in Shakespeare's vision of things.

Well, that's what I meant by calling Dante a hedgehog and Shakespeare a fox. I still hope for thirty years good reading ahead of me to get to the bottom of this distinction in life as in literature, although I've wasted a lot of time already and fear I may never have enough time (or enough energy) to dig my way to the bottom of this particular mine. Some mines just take a lifetime to dig properly and so I wouldn't wait too long to grab a pick and shovel, if I were you. However hard you have to work and however profusely you sweat, just remember that at the bottom of this particular mineshaft lies gold!