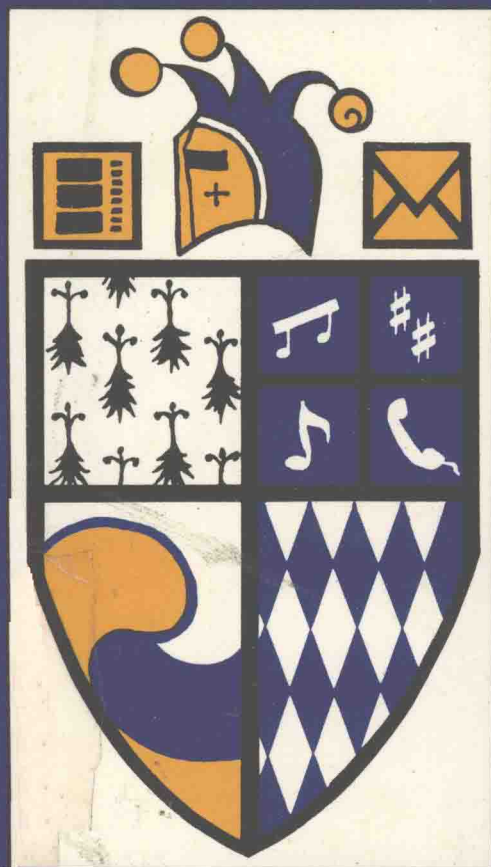


# Romantic Understanding

The Development of Rationality  
and Imagination, Ages 8-15

KIERAN EGAN



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# Introduction

My aim for this book can be divided into three overlapping parts: first, to characterize a somewhat distinct kind of understanding, which I call romantic (and also to clarify what I mean by a kind of understanding); second, to establish that this kind of understanding can and should be evoked, stimulated, and developed during the middle-school years (approximately ages eight to fifteen); and, third, to show that, in attaining romantic understanding, students today recapitulate its prior attainment in cultural history, particularly as it appeared in Romanticism during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Throughout, I hope to make clear that focusing on the recapitulation of a “kind of understanding” can provide a new way of addressing some persistent educational problems, a way that takes us past some of the difficulties that currently hinder our ability to make educational practice more generally effective.

By romance I do not mean simply those attitudes and forms of expression one sees in “romantic novels” or “love stories” but rather those intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, and other characteristics that come to the fore during the period of Romanticism. It is relatively easy to list some of these characteristics; they include delight in the exotic, emphasis on individualism, revolt against the conventional, stress on the importance of imagination, intoxication with the sublime in nature, intense inquiry about the self, resistance to order and reason, glorification of transcendent human qualities, and so on. It is less easy, however, to build a coherent picture of Romanticism and romance. The difficulty is in part due to another of their prominent characteristics being a protean intellectual and emotional ferment, seen more in its shifting, troubled energy than in any distinct and stable properties; in part it is due to the limited grasp we have on complex cultural movements and on complex forms of understanding, and to the limited vocabulary that has been developed to articulate that limited grasp.

The nature of romance, and the defining characteristics of Romanti-

cism, are matters of dispute in literary criticism and literary history. This is an area of scholarly inquiry marked by an unusual range of disagreement, extending even to what phenomena constitute its subject matter. There is an inherited canon of romantic writers and artists, central to which—to take only English literature—are Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, and, in the following literary generation, Shelley, Keats, and Byron. But one cannot precisely mark what they have in common which clearly excludes, say, Jane Austen (for this dispute see McGann, 1983) or Robert Southey (see Butler, 1987, for an argument for enrolling Southey centrally in the canon). If we turn to the critical literature for a description of precisely what was new in their work we find a similar range of disagreement and difficulty in characterizing it. That Romanticism represented something powerful and new, though that something is very hard to pin down precisely, was evident long ago. Matthew Arnold, reflecting in 1850 on Byron's impact on a yet later literary generation, observed:

He taught us little; but our soul  
Had *felt* him like the thunder's roll. (cited in Allott and  
Super, 1986, p. 138)

In Chapters 1 and 2, nevertheless, I will begin to characterize what I mean by romantic understanding by plunging first into the literature on, and constitutive of, Romanticism. My aim is not to give an abbreviated account of the disputes about Romanticism, nor to give an abbreviated account of Romanticism itself—though it might prove useful to start with one. Rather I want to consider Romanticism in terms of the new intellectual capacities that were generated within it, and I will try to characterize these as far as possible in terms of the technical resources that were generated to aid thinking. This rather opaque phrase, whose meaning will, I trust, become clearer as we go along, is intended to alert the reader to expect a focus on Romanticism that does not dwell on the more familiar literary and artistic categories. Second, as my aim is the elucidation of what I mean by romantic understanding, my focus will be on how native mental powers—which seem to be much the same for all people everywhere—are shaped into very distinct forms and uses in particular cultures due to the technical resources generated in the culture's history to aid thinking. It is, then, some particular technical resources whose development supported the movement we know as Romanticism that provides my starting point. In "technical resources that aid thinking" I include both the technological and material conditions of a society which affect how people make sense of the world and of



their experience, and also the related developments in literary, artistic, philosophical, scientific techniques and in means for their communication and for the dissemination of ideas.

From this plunge into Romanticism I will try to emerge with some ideas that will help towards a better grasp on romantic understanding. Before leaving Chapter 1, I will indicate why any of this might have relevance to the practical problems of modern education.

In Chapter 2, I will take further this pursuit of the technical resources of thought that give Romanticism and romantic understanding their particular character. I will focus on the technologies of writing and the printing press, and consider how the resources they provided to thinking affected the development of Romanticism and romance. In particular I will explore the sense in which romance might be seen as a kind of aftershock of widespread literacy. These might seem somewhat exotic inquiries for a book devoted to practical problems of middle-school education, but I hope the results will show rather that dealing with such cultural stuff provides a direct route to central educational problems.

Additionally, and relatedly, I will try to show in Chapter 2 that while in common usage "romance" tends to be contrasted with "rationality" (another complex and troubled term) the notion of romantic understanding that I will elaborate involves not only a sense of imaginative wonder but also the rational capacities to explore systematically whatever is the object of imaginative engagement. Indeed, I will try to show that the sense of imaginative wonder which is a significant constituent of romantic understanding is in large part a product of the evocation, stimulation, and development of the basic tools of rationality.

The second part of my aim is to establish that the middle-school years are the appropriate period for the development of romantic understanding. In the process of education students cannot, of course, learn everything at once. We have to break down what we think it is important for them to learn into some sequence. The sequencing of the curriculum typically embodies in varying proportions two principles which we might simply call logical and psychological.

The logical principle operates by disclosing prerequisite sequences in areas of knowledge and accommodating the curriculum to these. The structuring of the curriculum according to this principle is largely an epistemological problem. The task facing someone hoping to have a practical impact on the curriculum by drawing on this principle has been described as follows: "What is needed is a much more careful examination of what the logically necessary features of areas of knowledge are and, in particular, the extent to which learning a subject involves adherence to what can loosely be called rules of logical order" (Hirst,

1974, p. 120). In the more exclusively logical schemes, such as Plato's, the ages at which particular knowledge or experience are engaged is determined by estimates of the time it will take to master each segment of the curriculum.

One difficulty in using the logical principle for sequencing the curriculum is that, even in the case of a logically tight field such as mathematics, it seems possible to begin at almost any point to build the network of skills and knowledge that accumulate to mathematical understanding. In other words, as Philip Phenix has made clear, even establishing logical priority in a discipline does not entail temporal priority in instruction (Phenix, 1964, p. 285). Any complex field of knowledge is, furthermore, amenable to an indeterminate variety of structural characterizations—in some of which prerequisite logical orders will be quite different from those of others. The kind of prerequisite logical orders that might be useful for determining the sequences of the curriculum might seem discernible in some restricted areas of mathematics and the physical sciences but remain so elusive in fields such as history or the visual arts that we cannot hope to derive clear guidance from them for the sequencing of the curriculum.

Applying the psychological principle involves trying to sequence the curriculum in a manner that conforms with the intellectual development of the student. From a study of what tasks students are typically able and unable to perform at different ages, inferences are made about sequences of intellectual development. From these, in turn, inferences are made about the kind of knowledge that students will be able or "ready" to learn at various stages of the developmental process being elucidated.

One difficulty with the psychological principle, evident with even the most sophisticated developmental theories such as Piaget's and Vygotsky's, and their current convergence, lies in the imprecision with which characterizations of intellectual development impact on subject matter. However fully we might want to accommodate the sequence of the curriculum to the cognitive dispositions apparent at various ages, the difference between how we describe cognitive processes and intellectual development and how we characterize knowledge makes the task of conforming the latter to the former problematic. The educator who wants to draw on such theories for sequencing curriculum is further bedevilled by the disputes persisting among psychologists about how secure their generalizations may be about what students can and cannot learn at particular ages. Especially pertinent are the claims that the psychological theories are in some significant degree not describing some natural developmental process to which educators must conform, but rather are

describing a process which is in part at least a product of social and cultural contingencies, prominent among which are what educators have been doing. To try to conform to apparent implications of such theories, consequently, would be to try to conform to the results of past socializing and educational practices—which, for the most part, any curriculum revision is deliberately trying to improve on.

But clearly some logical and some psychological principles are indispensable if we are to sequence the curriculum sensibly. Educationalists have constantly tried to bring both kinds of principle to bear, though this has not proved at all as straightforward a task as it seems it should be. It seems that we ought to be able to bring together—to take just a couple of modern examples—the epistemological principles articulated by Paul Hirst and the psychological principles elaborated by Jean Piaget, and let each play its appropriate role. But the difficulties that attend each separately still obtain, and furthermore they seem quite resistant to coming together. At a profound level they seem to embody assumptions or presuppositions that act like magnetic poles that repel each other. The most influential attempts to find a way of articulating a principle that embodies both a logical and psychological dimension are derived from John Locke. From perceptual experience, he argued, come simple ideas which the mind has the power to compare, unite, elaborate in an almost infinite variety of ways, and so use to construct new complex ideas (Locke, 1690/1961). From his development of this notion we have inherited a very general principle that has profoundly influenced curriculum design. It finds its starkest twentieth century form in the notion that we should begin with the simple and move towards the complex. This notion involves a logical principle for organizing knowledge into sequential structures and a psychological principle based on a conception of how the mind works and, in particular, learns.

It continues to have a profound influence on educational practice even though the ideas it was derived from—especially Locke's conception of the mind as a *tabula rasa* amenable to almost infinite environmental determining—are no longer taken seriously. The flaw at its basis opens it up to serious question at the level of present day implementation.

Even so, I want to try to clamber onto Locke's shoulders and articulate principles for sequencing the curriculum that involve both logical and psychological components and that transcend the problems that attend each component when pursued separately. Focusing on the recapitulation of kinds of understanding, I think, makes this possible. Indeed I have used "understanding" in my title because it entails an epistemological and psychological dimension. One must have some knowledge in order to understand something, but in order to understand that knowledge we

need to integrate it into some meaning structure; its significance must be grasped, it must take a place in the life of the knower. A metaphorical way of putting it is to say that, once understood, knowledge becomes a part of what we think with, before incorporation into a network of understanding it is what we think about (Gowin, 1981). And, indeed, understanding "is the highest goal of learning" (Scriven, 1976, p. 217).

Romantic understanding, then, will be elaborated in such a way that it will provide principles for sequencing the curriculum that are unlike those presently current. In particular I will try to show that coalescing logical and psychological principles can provide us with a new way of sequencing and structuring the middle-school curriculum. In Chapters 3 to 7 I will describe characteristics of students' understanding in the middle-school years, and try to show why it makes sense also to see, during those years, a predisposition towards what I am calling romantic understanding.

The use of "romantic understanding" as the overall label for students' thinking, feeling, perception, etc., between approximately ages eight and fifteen suggests that sufficient common features across the age range justify the single term. This is not to deny, however, that there are also significant changes within romantic understanding. I will attend to some of these changes, particularly in Chapter 6.

Supporting the claim that romantic understanding represents a predisposition for middle-school students is the third part of my aim, and forms the crux of the recapitulation argument. I will argue that students are predisposed to develop particular kinds of understanding in a particular sequence because of the logical and psychological forces that constrain and shape the process of acculturation. I will try to show that the same constraining and shaping forces operate both in cultural history and in individual students' educational development. Cultural history can thus provide us with important insights into how to construct a curriculum.

I realize that this may well seem a peculiar kind of argument and a very odd way of approaching how history or science should be organized and taught during the middle-school years. Even so, I will prepare this argument during the first seven chapters and elaborate it explicitly in Chapter 8. I will try to show that empirically we can observe a range of common features in the kind of understanding prominent during the Romantic period and prominent in students during their middle-school years today. Obviously this will not appear as an overall likeness between, say, Coleridge's mind and the minds of typical adolescents today in Putney, Peoria, and Perth. But if we focus quite precisely on the technical resources of thought, and the typical kind of understanding they

entail, I think we will see a number of perhaps surprising correlations. To proceed from a set of more or less interesting correlations in the direction of establishing causal relationships, and so the basis for the recapitulation theory, I will need to engage in the analytic work that will establish necessary relationships between particular technical resources of thought and particular cultural effects, such as kinds of understanding. If the relationship is necessary it will operate whenever and wherever these technical resources of thought are developed—whether in the process of cultural history or of student's education today. I will further try to show that not only are students predisposed towards romantic understanding during the middle-school years due to the influence of our cultural history on the nature and structure of the present cultural conditions into which they grow, but also that they both can and should attain romantic understanding on educational grounds.

The general shape of this book is a move from the rather abstract discussion of Romanticism and the attempt to characterize romantic understanding towards increasingly detailed observations of its features during the middle-school years and then to concrete implications for the curriculum in Chapter 9 and for teaching in Chapter 10. These two final chapters will describe the kind of curriculum and the kind of teaching that seem to me best able to evoke, stimulate, and develop romantic understanding. The curriculum chapter will include in outline a curriculum for the middle school years, moving from a year of transition to romantic understanding at about age eight to a year of transition at about age fifteen to a further distinctive kind of understanding. The chapter on teaching will include a framework for planning teaching to be engaging and stimulating to students during these years, and to make the curriculum content most meaningful and educationally useful.

It is fashionable today, perhaps it has always been fashionable, to bewail the failures of our educational institutions. We are constantly told that the schools are in crisis, that students seem to be learning next to nothing despite massive and growing expenditures. And indeed, particularly during the middle-school years, many students show little interest in learning the contents of typical school curricula. They commonly give little of their intellectual and emotional energy to the objectives of the school. Many seem to experience considerable difficulties in learning to think abstractly with any ease. Teaching is hard work, the schools pressure students to learn, and teachers and schools bear marks of the fatigue that applying constant pressure on reluctant learners exacts. It is salutary to keep in mind the anecdote reported in the front of the

British Newsom Report on Education (1963): "A boy who had just left school was asked by his former headmaster what he thought of the new buildings, "It could be all marble, sir," he replied, "but it would still be a bloody school."

There are, of course, the rewards of those students who learn well, who show imagination and creativity in their use of what they learn, and who come to understand and delight in their cultural inheritance. But why are these rewards for teaching effort, these educational successes, so relatively rare? Why do not all students, or many more, learn much more? The optimistic Enlightenment project to make the benefits of education available to all children is running aground against the apparent reluctance or inability of so many students to find point or meaning in significant parts of the typical middle-school curriculum. "What's the medieval papacy, or Hecuba, to me?" they ask, and the answers carry little conviction.

We find no shortage of diagnoses, and prescriptions for cures. It is, we hear, the nature of many children to learn ill and little; or, it is social conditions that make much knowledge meaningless, irrelevant, or even alienating; or, it is the incompetence of the school and its agents to educate effectively; and so on. Such diagnoses, and the different prescriptions they seem to imply, contribute to the sense of crisis concerning education. The diagnoses are so different in their identification of the causes and even the symptoms of the disease that it is hard to hold to any clear sense of what the organism should look like when it is well.

Some of the present difficulties seem to be due to considerable disagreement and some confusion about what schools are supported to do. We consider them primarily educational institutions, crucial parts of educational systems. But "education" is a label we put on a bag of ideas about how to treat the young which do not fit well together and which seem indeed in significant part to be mutually repelling. Let me mention briefly just three components of our idea of "education". (By "our" I mean most people in countries with large-scale state-overseen educational systems.)

In all societies children are initiated into the particular norms and conventions around them, and are encouraged to respect these cultural contingencies as though they are almost natural conditions. The more or less arbitrary forms of social life that have existed across the world, in time and space, have all been supported by strict sanctions. Human groups have developed powerful techniques for encouraging in their members strong emotional commitments to the group, and all use a range of punishments for members who transgress the conventions that maintain the groups' distinctive identities. In all oral cultures the norms

and conventions that preserve the continuing identity of the group have to be sustained in the individual memories of their members. All oral cultures place considerable emphasis on the faithful transmission of the lore about appropriate social relationships, behaviors, economic status and activities, and so on, to the young. The techniques that aid reliable memorization are thus highly prized, and initiation into the lore of the social group tends to involve rhythmic chanting of vivid stories in a highly charged ritual context. The stories, or myths, carry the lore of the social group in coded forms (see, e.g.: Durkheim, 1965; Havelock, 1963; Lévi-Bruhl, 1985; Lévi-Strauss, 1966). In such societies the young are socialized to the norms and conventions of the group. A prominent feature of socialization is that it tends to make people more alike; it brings them to share beliefs, attitudes, norms of behavior and thought, and so on. This process of socializing children is one component of the general conception of education that informs our sense of the school's role. We do not today use the same techniques that were and are common in oral cultures throughout the world, but we share in an important sense the process of initiating the young into our social conventions and encouraging in them a commitment to those conventions.

A second component that survives in our general conception of education was first articulated after the relatively widespread use of the technology of writing in a society. Once one could write and so have ready visual access to records of various kinds, the social importance of memory, and of the techniques such as rhythm, meter, and story which helped maintain things in memory, was greatly reduced. With the reduced pressure to remember, and so to think in terms of story, proverb, and formula, the mind was in a sense freed for other tasks. This is to put it simplistically, of course, but the development of writing made possible new ways of thinking (see, e.g.: Goody, 1977; Goody, 1986; Goody and Watt, 1968; Havelock, 1986; Ong, 1982). One way of characterizing a part of Plato's immense achievement is to say that he worked out how to think once one could write. Perhaps he did not get it all correct, and one might see the history of Western philosophy as attempts to clarify and fill out how literate people should think. This odd way of looking at philosophy may appear less odd when we recognize rationality as one of the consequences of literacy (Goody and Watt, 1968), or, at least, as giving Western rationality its distinctive form, and a central task of philosophy as teasing out the nature of this rationality and its entailments. In working out this new form of thinking, Plato elaborated a new conception of education: knowledge was to be accumulated in particular sequences in order to form the mind to enable people to think rationally. The curriculum provided the logically organized

forms of knowledge that carried the mind from conventional and confused beliefs to that clarity of reason that gives a privileged view of reality. The achievement of Plato's aim for education involved a constant critical reflection on the norms and conventions of social life.

Plato represented his conception of education as irreconcilably opposed to the older forms of initiation into prevailing conventions—to the point of waging a battle against the rhetoricians who preserved in their teaching many of the techniques developed in oral cultures. Plato argued incessantly that they seduced the mind away from the kind of abstract concepts through which alone the mind could gain access to what was real and true about the world and about experience. We, however, include both aims into our general conception of education. We expect the schools both to socialize children to the prevailing social conventions and develop commitments to those conventions, and also to make headway in the Platonic program of critical rationality which involves skepticism of all conventions and encourages intellectual contempt for the kinds of commitments socialization induces.

A third component of our general conception of education was given its most distinctive articulation by Rousseau. Gathering together ideas from a number of sources, including Plato and John Locke, Rousseau pointed out that if one thought of education largely in terms of the knowledge to be accumulated, one saw childhood and adolescence merely as incomplete forms of one's ideal end. Such a view, he argued, had a number of disadvantages that undermined one's ability to achieve that end. It blinded one to the fact that childhood and adolescence were not merely stages on a journey towards educated adulthood but also had their own distinctive forms. The aim of education was thus only in part some adult achievement; the aim was also the fullest achievement of each stage of life. So the aim of education is constantly and immediately to hand, whatever the age of the students with whom we are dealing. A range of pedagogical disadvantages thus followed from not recognizing the different natures of childhood and adolescence, and from not realizing that people are engaged by different kinds of knowledge and experience at different ages. The way to discover these differences and so increase pedagogical effectiveness was to study closely the *nature* of the developing child and adolescent, and arrange conditions so that that nature would be allowed optimal opportunity for development. Only when we have discovered the true nature of the learner will we be able to achieve our educational goals.

Rousseau agreed with Plato's general program for shaping the mind by means of carefully selected and organized knowledge and experiences. His eventual aim, no less than Plato's, was the making of what



we might call a moral and cultured adult. But there are significant differences between the two. Plato made no distinction between the education of the individual and that of the citizen; society and individual were reflections of each other, at different scales of magnitude. For Rousseau, society was the source of potential corruption. It had to be kept at bay until the individual had grown, in concert with nature, sufficiently strong and self-reliant to be able to withstand its corruption. Plato and Rousseau also differ profoundly in locating the dynamic of the educational process. In Plato's scheme, knowledge drives the educational process, and its stages are recognized by the amount and kind of knowledge that has been accumulated. In Rousseau's scheme, the "internal" developing nature of the learner is critical, and the accumulation of knowledge and experience will further the educational process only if they cohere with the natural maturation of the individual.

Our general conception of education struggles to contain these conflicting components—along with a number of others, of course. But these three alone are enough to undermine any attempt at implementing this conception of education. If we try to implement one component rigorously, we conflict with requirements of the others. If we try to balance them, giving each proportionate importance, we can only reach flaccid compromises at a level that removes from each component its distinctive character and force. This I fear is the general condition of our attempts to implement our conception of education in state-run educational systems. We aim to socialize students, engaging their commitment to a range of attitudes, beliefs, values, and social conventions, and so make them more alike. We aim also to educate them in both the Platonic and Rousseauian senses, developing each individual's different potentials, making them more distinct, and also training them in the use of reason to dissolve beliefs and to be critical of social conventions. So we try to socialize students, but not so much that would risk accusations of indoctrination; we try to incorporate the Platonic program, but not so much that would risk accusations of elitism; and we try to develop the uniqueness of each student ensuring that the nature of the developing individual determines what learning and experience are most appropriate at any time, but not so much that would risk accusations of replacing education by entertainment or psychotherapy or solipsism. We allow each component inadequate scope for its proper implementation, and adequate scope only to undermine each other.

And yet we cannot dispense with the wisdom developed in oral cultures about socialization, nor can we dispense with Plato's and Rousseau's great insights about education. We cannot ignore socializing and its intellectual requirements, we cannot ignore the liberal tradition of