

Prof. Rex Li's Writings

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Egan's Notion of Romantic Understanding (RU)

(1) Literacy and Greek alphabetic invention

Greeks use writing to aid thinking while others used only for recording, thus "Greek miracle".

brate in stylized form victories over traditional enemies, the Greeks began to exploit their writing system in ways none of its inventors could have imagined. Writing, after all, was simply a device for helping the memory with

for which they were designed but also open up new possibilities. In this regard there has been no tool within the historical period like alphabetic writing. Among much else, it opened up what we call the historical period. Fluent literacy is not simply a matter of thinking and then writing the product of one's thoughts; the writing, rather, becomes a part of the process of thinking. Extended discursive writing is not an external copy of a kind of thinking that goes on in the head; it represents a distinctive kind of literate thinking.

this century been romantically referred to as the "Greek miracle"—giving birth to democracy, logic, philosophy, history, drama, reflective introspection, and so on so suddenly—were explainable in large part as an implication of the development and spread of alphabetic literacy (Havelock, 1963, 1982, 1986;

and engaging area of study). The developments were not simply in the new kinds of texts being produced in ancient Greece, such as Herodotus's *Histories*, but were somehow in the kind of thinking that went into writing and reading such texts, or listening to such texts being read or performed.

(p. 76 – 77)

(2) Examples of literacy without deep thinking

- Via, Liberia (p.77)
- Cree, Canada (p.77)
- India (p.78)

R: The assumption of Greek alphabetic literacy as technological advance does not go unchallenged. Chinese, not alphabetic, can develop as much sophisticated thinking. Even in science, alphabets is not necessary, symbols are!

(3) Romantic understanding defining characteristics

An outgrowth from mythic to rational thinking.

He notes a number of precise recapitulations of this kind between the development of writing systems and children's development of literacy to-

thinking. What I will try to be sensitive to, and what is usually ignored, is the persistence of mythic elements in this initial foray into rationality. The mixture of the mythic with the rational constitutes the central defining feature of Romantic understanding.

(p. 81)

(4) Romantic understanding “does not provide a full understanding of events (p.84)

This is somewhat similar to romanticism with emotion, mythic.

romance in Western history. European Romanticism is notoriously the object of rather disparate descriptions, but no one can omit its “preoccupation with otherness, with what is different, remote, mysterious, inaccessible, exotic, even bizarre” (Ong, 1971, p. 255).

(p. 84)

(5) Egan’s conception of romantic understanding (p.85)

Young children (age 1 – 3 or 4) see themselves as a centre and things revolve around them; we call it egocentric (cry = someone comes over; “milk” = things to drink, move = things or vision changes, shut eyes = hiding = do not see things = nothing). As they grow older (aged 4 up) they realize an autonomous reality. Slowly, they want to establish or form a context.

If this autonomous reality were infinitely extensive, we would be infinitely insignificant. By discovering the real limits of the world and of human experience, we form a context that enables us to establish some security and to establish proportionate meaning within it. Knowing about the biggest and smallest people allows us, on the one hand, to wonder at their extreme sizes, but, on the other, to be reassured about our own scale. Once we have some sense of context, we can begin to develop some sense of the proportionate meaning of things.

Thus Egan challenged the conventional view that:

principle urged on teachers is that children’s learning moves “from the known to the unknown,” and that, to engage their interest and make new knowledge meaningful, one must begin with something relevant to their everyday experience and connect the new knowledge to that. If this indeed is

His argument:

how children learn most effectively, one must wonder what does the fattest person who ever lived have to do with their everyday experience, or the most expensive postage stamp, or the longest beard?

His view is that children want to establish a frame of limits of reality and then a sense of security.

(6) Romantic understanding as creating mental representation

It is a holographic picture to “represent stubborn reality”. Myths are part of its templates.

the way a jigsaw puts together a picture of something. The “romantic” alternative conception represents learning as building understanding by gradually clarifying a picture the way the pieces of a holographic plate work. If one

midgets no bigger than your thumbnail. They turn intellectually to discover who was really the biggest and smallest person who ever lived. Myth gives way to reality while also persisting in providing a template for the questions and interests that drive our inquiries. The simple binary structures of mythic understanding begin to fall away as we grasp an increasingly complex reality: “Such [binary] relationships are good for thinking, but reality does not

Romance deals with reality, but it does so with persisting mythic interests. It is a compromise with, rather than a capitulation to, reality.

(p. 86)

(7) Romantic understanding adds human qualities to provide security

tive, Eden-like acceptance of it—is no longer available. Romantic association offers one prominent technique for forging a new security in the face of this threatening reality; both Herodotus and the modern newly literate

A characteristic of Romantic understanding, then, is its ready association with transcendent human qualities, or human qualities exercised to transcendent degree. This observation is important for the education of chil-

(p. 90)

(8) Romantic understanding in Western tradition: Whitehead and Affective Component

Understanding now becomes a “holograph metaphor..... amenable to ever-increasing clarity” (p.91). Egan brought in Whitehead and the Western tradition to characterize romantic understanding.

A. N. Whitehead characterizes romance as an “excitement” following on the “vividness of novelty” and the “unexplored connections with possibilities half-disclosed by glimpses and half-concealed by the wealth of material. . . . Romantic emotion is essentially the excitement consequent on the transition from the bare facts to the first realisations of the import of their unexplored relationships” (1967, pp. 17–18). He adds that this “great romance is the flood which bears on the child towards the life of the spirit” (p. 22). While my interest is purely secular, one cannot talk casually about

(p. 91)

He also sees romantic understanding with an affective component.

played in the Western tradition. Romantic transcendence, even if we wish to avoid its mystical associations, does have an affective component. In addition, successfully associating with transcendent expressions or embodiments of such qualities as compassion, courage, pity, and so on, involves a recognition within others of the autonomy one recognizes in oneself. This

(p. 91)

(9) Romantic Understanding

p. 94 Point 35: Romantic Rationality

Romantic understanding as early form of rationality

“Romantic understanding is distinctively rational and distinctively non-mythic – apart from its lack of magic.” (p. 95)

Homer – tell story, poetic criteria

Herodotus – narrative and real

Both evoke emotion

While Herodotus also shapes his account into a narrative, his determination to represent what really happened and what really is the case generated a new form of expression.

Herodotus generated a new kind of narrative—a compromise between the poet's desire to evoke an emotional response and the rational desire to describe the world as it really is. We can describe it as a compromise because we know about the scientific method that is yet to come. Herodotus's rational inquiry mixes elements of poetry or myth and elements of science; it is

(p. 95)

R: In a sense, modern journalism is romantic understanding (p. 96)

(10) Point 39: Literacy supports romantic understanding but dismisses mythic view

Literacy, for example, not only stimulates and supports Romantic understanding but at the same time supports an alienation from characteristics of Mythic understanding. At a cultural level we can see this in the incomprehension literacy created about nonliterate societies. The literate Hecataeus's dismissal of his predecessors' myths as ridiculous strikes a chord that echoes again and again through Western cultural history. The primitive

(p. 97)

Western consciousness – away from Garden of Eden and “innocence lost” alienation

echoes again and again through Western cultural history. The primitive mind is made mysterious, even though it is our inheritance; Mythic understanding becomes alien and unrecapturable after the “paradigm shift” to literate rationality. An insistent theme of Western consciousness is that one cannot go home again, one cannot return to Eden or comprehend the heart of darkness. These images are so potent because they capture, however imprecisely, the sense of loss that is a part of literate rationality's heritage. “More than any other factor in human experience, it is the use of rational language which destroys the child's ‘intuitive’ relationship with the world” (Coe, 1984, p. 253). In developing more realistic and practically efficacious intellectual tools we run the danger, in Wordsworth's terms, of giving “our hearts away.” The sense of alienation that comes with the recognition of an autonomous reality is largely an alienation from the earlier sense of participating in nature. After that break, “little we see in Nature that is ours,” as Wordsworth

(p. 98)