

an excruciating trial of letting herself be twisted out of shape by the blathering inherent in postmodernist discourse, which is itself becoming as grand a narrative as those it wishes to replace. It is truly a gift that she is willing to publicly go through these painful, painstaking, and often downright annoying convolutions on our behalf and on behalf of the women who are the hope of her book.

Mary Sheridan and
David W. Jardine
University of Calgary

Egan, K. (1990). *Romantic understanding: The development of rationality and imagination, ages 8-15*. New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 300 pp., \$16.95 (softcover).

Romantic Understanding is the second volume in a proposed series of four and is part of a project which rests on two important but controversial philosophical principles. The first principle, borrowed from MacIntyre, is that:

Human life has a determinate form, the form of a certain kind of story . . . it is not just that poems and sagas narrate what happens to men and women, but that in their narrative form poems and saga capture a form that was already present in the lives which they relate. (1981, p. 230)

The second is that, in history but also in other subjects, "abstractions are built from the reality of endless individual lives and their intentions, hopes, fears, etc. At the romantic stage it is this basic reality that needs to be grasped clearly" (p. 263).

Egan's project is nothing less than the replacement of the traditional model of curriculum selection and lesson planning (dating from the work of Tyler) with an "alternative or supplement" (p. 250) which "transcends" (p. 258) the false and unhelpful underlying dichotomy between epistemology and psychology (p. 183) — the former represented by Plato, the latter by Rousseau. Egan began reporting the results of this work in *Teaching as Storytelling* (1986) and continued it with the presentation of four kinds of understanding (mythic, romantic, philosophic, and ironic) in *Primary Understanding* (1988). In *Romantic Understanding*, Egan further develops the second of these four kinds; therefore, this book cannot really be appreciated unless the reader is familiar with these prior works.

Yet *Romantic Understanding* has its integrity and contains enough summary of the earlier volumes to be read on its own. Even for admirers of the general

project there is plenty to ponder: a philosophical thesis about Romanticism and a psychological thesis about its appropriateness for adolescents, and two notions, *romantic understanding* and *recapitulation*, which are bound to provoke debate. Egan has a story to tell about these, one which requires “not new information but . . . rearranging what we have known all along” (p. 281) and recognizing the significance of the “uncontentious” observation that certain features of child development are both “possible” and “not uncommon” (p. 91).

Egan offers an explanation for the common observation that children tend to come to school curious and eager to learn but that this attitude does not last long and is often said to be killed by the school itself. Instead of becoming able to think critically, “their minds become dull mirrors of the ideas, opinions, confusions, bigotry, and general stupidity that passed for adult thinking according to the conventions of society at large” (p. 286). Conceiving of education as an ideal to be accomplished has blinded us to the processes of childhood and adolescence — in this case to the romantic nature of adolescent understanding. Egan is not the first to take childhood seriously; but he argues that if education can be given a form appropriate to the child’s way of thinking, it can achieve the understanding, capacity for critical reflection, and interest we believe it rightly has.

And so we come to Egan’s view of Romanticism, the nature of romantic understanding, and the place in it of recapitulation. This story begins with mythic understanding, Egan’s basis for primary education: stories which are more poetic than literal (p. 94), which logically and psychologically precede romantic understanding (p. 13), and which need to be less elaborately consistent with an external reality (p. 88). Indeed,

the story is of crucial importance as a foundation of *all* sense-making . . . The *form* of stories gives us clues about how to make material we want to teach more engaging and meaningful to children. The *content* of the great stories of the world helps to stimulate a range of basic capacities — intellectual, effective, moral — that can form a significant part of the foundation of education. (*Primary Understanding* (1988), p. 129; italics added)

Narrative as a sense-making technique begins as poetic, even fantastic, but moves to “a more *literal* sense of the world and experience” as we develop a

variety of ways in which thought will seek to conform with reality rather than shape it into story patterns. Not that the story-shaping will disappear, but . . . non-narrative structures will become increasingly important in making sense of the world and of experience . . . non-narrative sense-making techniques, such as lists, formulae, recipes, tables . . . theories. (pp. 94-95)

Thus,

romantic understanding is compounded of a literal grasp on the particulars of the world and experience within a context that uses some of the significant

sense-making functions of the story form So myth, in the sense used in the previous volume, does not leave us; rather, it is domesticated to reality. (p. 105)

In this way, we do justice to adolescents' knowing too: "We will then ensure that they do not merely internalize codes, but will bring them to life in their minds by seeing what makes them humanly meaningful and humanly worthwhile" (p. 139).

It is the adolescent's fascination with the extremes and limits of human experience and nature which makes plausible Egan's psychological thesis that romantic understanding is appropriate for the curriculum for 8 to 15 year-old students. "There results a kind of ambivalence that focuses attention on details of reality while also preserving an urge to transcend reality; an ambivalence also common in the works and lives of romantic poets and artists" (p. 111). Romantic this understanding is, then, for "self-definition is central to romance" and "it is indeed by knowledge of others and of the diversity of the world that we define ourselves" (p. 110).

That the late 18th and early 19th centuries should be characterized by writers sharing the romantic

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 (p. 1) . . .

is not an accident but a product of the possibilities for communication entailed and made possible by the oral, written, and print traditions. "Not only was Romanticism a product of printing in this view but so was the whole Industrial Revolution" (p. 73). There was "a protean intellectual and emotional ferment" (p. 1) — it does remind one of adolescence — which Egan wishes "to consider . . . in terms of the new intellectual capacities that were generated within it, and . . . to characterize . . . as far as possible in terms of the technical resources that were generated to aid thinking" (p. 2). Thus, Romanticism is not merely a rebellion against a print-bound literacy characteristic of the Enlightenment but "a decisive cultural achievement (p. 83), "the insight that the 'springs of fancy' were the key to making reason serve human life" (p. 81) — nothing less than "discovering a key to harmony and balance in our cultural lives" (p. 83). Two things are at issue: how and why "particular technologies influence thought in particular ways at particular times in particular circumstances" (p. 53) and "how profoundly or superficially literacy affects the mind" (p. 55). This fascinating story, while provocative, is probably less shocking to the prospective reader than the suggestion that it required or implied in addition a theory of cultural recapitulation. That step in the argument is made plausible by the same basic epistemological and educational principle which makes it possible to talk of romantic understanding at all, namely that narrative and nonnarrative structures

alike are sense-making techniques, an “imaginative search for meaning” (p. 190).

Education in this scheme, then, is the sequential accumulation of the sense-making capacities, *and associated capacities to communicate*, available in our culture. This is a recapitulational scheme because it embodies an argument that the sequence in which these capacities can be accumulated by the individual reflects the sequence in which there were generated in our cultural history. The tie between the two . . . is located in *the logical and psychological constraints that have influenced the historical generation of these capacities and that also constrain the sequence in which the individual can accumulate them.* (p. 187, italics added)

Readers may be reassured that this escapes the rather widespread ill repute into which recapitulation theories have tended to fall; Egan defends the claim as arising from any account of “our cultural heritage as some kind of causal sequence, which one can hardly avoid” (p. 185).

The author concludes with chapters on curriculum and teaching which show his use of the philosophical and psychological theses. Perhaps a truly great teacher can take almost any material, make it exciting, and turn it to good educational ends. Egan is such a teacher, showing us how he would design a curriculum from his particular views; it is important that children meet teachers who have such enthusiasms and interests. Any of us would be pleased to have the results for our children because they are so rich — a richness whose educational potential Egan shows well. I have the profoundest respect for Egan’s work, for this project, and for the underlying philosophical principles; but I suspect that, even if those principles and the project itself were shown to be wrong, the interests and enthusiasms of a great teacher would still come through. That was the original claim in *Teaching as Story Telling* (p. 115).

The book is unfortunately marred by a few difficulties in production: the occasional nonagreement of subject and verb (e.g., p. 240); the occasional wrong word (e.g., p. 234); an unclear reference to tabular material (p. 245); and, I think, one sentence which though grammatically correct cannot mean what it says (p. 248). Such are the perils of modern publishing.

References

- Egan, K. (1986). *Teaching as story telling: An alternative approach to teaching and curriculum in the elementary school*. London, ON: Althouse Press.
- Egan, K. (1988). *Primary understanding: Education in early childhood*. New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall.
- MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After virtue: A study in moral theory*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Michael J.B. Jackson
Concordia University