Bad romance: Tendencies in Romanticism that hamper student learning

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The central claim of my essay is that certain ways of thinking and feeling associated with Romanticism, and widely disseminated in North American culture, have a broadly negative influence on the capacity of students to learn. Much has been written about the link between Romanticism and progressivism in education. For example, the historian William Reese has argued that child-centered pedagogies were popularized in America by reformers who drew heavily on thinkers such as Pestalozzi and Froebel, who were themselves deeply indebted to the Romantic tradition.[1] The philosophers Richard Peters and Paul Hirst have characterized progressive education as a romantic revolt against traditional education, one that emphasized method over content.[2] More recently, David Diehl has pointed to the ongoing influence of Romanticism on the structure of contemporary schooling, which is infused with goals such as diversity and creativity.[3] Far less attention, however, has been given to the influence of Romanticism on the ways in which *students themselves* approach learning.

The Romantic tendencies I will analyze in this essay are (1) the tendency to look 'inward,' (2) the attachment to freedom and spontaneity, and (3) the focus on authentic feeling.[4] Drawing primarily on Iris Murdoch's work, I will argue that these individualistic tendencies can prevent students from paying close attention to objects of understanding, therefore hampering the process of learning. That being said, each tendency also has a certain 'rationale' motivating it; in some cases, in fact, we can salvage important insights about learning by pointing out this rationale. In this sense, my critique of Romanticism can also be understood as a retrieval of sorts—bringing out insights that these naïve tendencies obscure. That each tendency has a rationale also makes it somewhat understandable why they have become widespread among students. However, we are mistaken if we assume that these tendencies represent essential characteristics of young people or a necessary stage in their development. The upshot of my

analysis is that, if educators become more conscious of these tendencies and the motivations underlying them, they will be better equipped to assist students to develop more effective attitudes towards learning.

THE TENDENCY TO LOOK 'INWARD'

Charles Taylor associates Western modernity with an "inward turn" in our truth- and knowledge-seeking sensibilities.[5] For Plato, by contrast, knowledge was obtained by contemplating the Forms. While Taylor argues that the inward turn began well before the dawn of Romanticism, he suggests that the latter accentuated this tendency and added to it the idea that each of us has "inner depths" with dark and unexplored recesses.[6] These developments combined to fortify a tendency to look 'inward' when engaging in the quest for knowledge. When confronted with a new idea, we now tend to ask ourselves, 'What do *I* think about this?' as opposed to, 'Is it true?' Iris Murdoch reminds us that Kant himself presents a version of this tendency in the *Grundlegung* in his portrait of the man "who confronted even with Christ turns away to consider the judgment of his own conscience and to hear the voice of his own reason."[7] In other words, the 'inward turn' is manifest in Kant's conviction that, confronted with the truth itself, one still ought to consult oneself to confirm that it is indeed the truth. This tendency is of course exacerbated when we are under the thrall of a disenchanting naturalism that banishes meaning from the world, confining it to our minds and/or hearts. If we take the natural-scientific picture of the world to be the only objectively meaningful one, we may be inclined to think that there is nothing 'out there' to understand per se, since we ourselves 'project' meaning onto the world.[8]

This tendency to look inward can interfere with our ability to properly 'attend' to objects of understanding, most of which are 'outside' of us in an important sense. Murdoch illustrates the link between 'attention' and understanding through the example of learning a new language (Russian in her case): "My work is a progressive revelation of something which exists independently of me. Attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality. Love of Russian leads me away from myself towards something alien to me, something which my consciousness

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cannot take over, swallow up, deny, or make unreal."[9] There is therefore a sense in which to look 'inward' when confronting objects of understanding is a mistake. If our instinct when confronting an 'alien' object is to retreat 'inside' to consult ourselves, our attention appears to be misplaced. In fact, we will not be able to do *justice* to objects of understanding if we do not pay very close attention to them and instead turn inward to ask ourselves, 'what do *I* think?' Murdoch argues that true learning both requires and encourages a gradual lessening of the attention we naturally prefer to give to ourselves—a process which she calls "unselfing."[10] She describes this as a difficult and ultimately moral exercise that both demands and helps us develop virtues such as humility.

We can appreciate Murdoch's insight without denying that there is in fact a sense in which meaningful learning *does* necessitate an inner process. In order to seriously attend to an object of understanding outside of oneself, one does, after all, have to consider it in light of one's present conceptual framework. The problem is when we deny *reality* to the objects of learning, in the sense that we fail to take note of the light they themselves shed on our consideration of them and measure them *only* according to our own lights—which are, especially in the case of students, still in the process of formation. Important objects of understanding, outside of us, can and should improve the quality of 'our own lights.' Drawing on Gadamerian hermeneutics, Paul Fairfield puts it like this: "One acquires new items of knowledge by absorbing them within a prior framework of language and experience, a framework that is in turn modified by the addition."[11] If we do not allow new objects of understanding to 'modify' our own framework, it is unlikely that we will be able to appreciate novel insights.

In addition to making it difficult for students to focus their attention on objects of understanding 'outside of them,' the inward turn can also take a tragic turn, so to speak, and slide into relativism and pessimism. From the perspective of some of the more "unbridled" Romantics, [12] who emphasized the indomitable will and assumed that the universe had no intelligible structure, the very term "understanding" no longer fits, because "here there is no object, there is only the subject, thrusting itself forward."[13] Given this perspective, there is no point in exercising the power of understanding: "to attempt to see

things as submissive to some kind of intellectualisation, some sort of plan, to attempt to draw up a set of rules, or a set of laws, or a formula, is a form of self-indulgence."[14]

Douglas Yacek describes how relativism and pessimism can be seen as "corruptions of reason."[15] He argues that relativism "has become a widespread rational pathology of the modern world, one that results when our (justified) embrace of values pluralism overextends into the epistemic domain."[16] As a result, we find it difficult to seriously consider the reasonable claims put forward by various objects of understanding; they are unable to get a purchase on us. Pessimism is described as "a global loss of confidence in the powers of reason," and results in a "listless detachment" from rational inquiry.[17] Why put so much effort into understanding when reality itself is either unstructured or beyond our power of understanding? 'Everyone has their own opinion,' as we often hear among students who disengage from classroom discussion. Clearly, pessimism and relativism both interfere with the process of understanding.

Murdoch speaks to the rationale behind relativism and pessimism and offers us some ideas as to how we might overcome them. Attention to that which is outside of us, especially other people, quickly loosens the hold of any kind of "false unity," helping us recognize "the great surprising variety of the world."[18] Recognizing plurality is therefore a moral and intellectual achievement. As Yacek suggested above, however, this achievement can sometimes descend into full-blown relativism. With regard to pessimism, Murdoch indicates that we need to find out how to "connect the realism which must involve a clear-eyed contemplation of the misery and evil of the world with a sense of an uncorrupted good without the latter idea becoming the merest consolatory dream."[19] In terms of solutions, Murdoch suggests that "the intellect naturally seeks unity; and in the sciences, for instance, the assumption of unity consistently rewards the seeker."[20] Similarly, pointing to the connections we can discover between the virtues, she indicates that "reflection rightly tends to unify the moral world, and that increasing moral sophistication reveals increasing unity."[21] The certitude that there is an order to things—that, fundamentally, reality is one,[22] and that this can be increasingly perceived at higher levels of understanding—keeps relativism

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and pessimism at bay and enables understanding to proceed.

THE ATTACHMENT TO FREEDOM AND SPONTANEITY

Carving out moral and intellectual space for freedom and spontaneity was a major concern for the Romantics. There were at least two motivations for this. One was the gradual encroachment of a natural-scientific and deterministic picture of reality that would, in theory, leave little room for free will. Kant, for example, is worried about this, especially in his moral philosophy, where the 'good will' plays such an important role.[23] The other was the conforming pressure of traditional authorities and social convention, but also, for some Romantics, of reason itself. Combined with a modern sense of justice and liberty, nearly all rules and authorities can be seen as unjustified restrictions on one's freedom. The solution is to carve out a space for spontaneous, natural self-expression, free from the stultifying effects of outside pressures.[24]

One potential issue with this suspicious attitude towards authority is that there is a sense in which a genuine object of understanding is an 'authority' vis-à-vis the student. To return to Murdoch's example: "If I am learning, for instance, Russian, I am confronted by an authoritative structure which commands my respect."[25] It is easy for the sensibility I described above to (mistakenly) identify objects of understanding as *oppressive* authorities that might quash one's freedom and spontaneity. A peculiar kind of resentment can build up toward certain concepts to which one is being introduced as a student (or toward the teacher as the conveyor of these concepts). I might think, for example, that I am being tyrannized by the Pythagorean theorem— 'why is it making my life so difficult?' —or that learning rules of grammar is squeezing out my ability to be spontaneous, confining me in every direction. This way of relating to objects of understanding obviously interferes with learning.

In this connection, David Bakhurst has argued, drawing on John McDowell's work, that 'responsiveness' is an important feature of the life of reason: we need to be responsive to reasons (again, existing 'out there') for thinking or doing this rather than that.[26] To be able to understand a given object, a student needs to be *receptive* to it—to let it shape his or her thinking. This notion of

receptivity can seem to be in tension with the ideals of freedom and spontaneity. However, to assume that yielding to the object in this way entails a diminishment of freedom is to hold a rather narrow view of freedom. In fact, if we think carefully about the process of learning something, we come to see that the freedom of the learner is a necessary ingredient: when we recognize some new insight, we still need to *make it our own* by integrating it into our conceptual framework, to return to Fairfield's point above. To do so requires free effort on the part of the learner—the integration of new concepts can be facilitated by a teacher, but it cannot properly be imposed upon a student. A student may be forced to memorize a fact or piece of information but cannot be compelled to understand a profound insight.

On a related note, Louis Arnaud Reid distinguishes between three kinds of freedom and suggests that all three have a place in education, if they are properly related to one another. He illustrates this in the following phrase, which includes all three freedoms: "We must leave children a large measure of freedom that they may be free to become (or not become) free."[27] The first kind is freedom from external restraint (such as might be imposed by an authoritarian teacher), while the second refers to freedom of choice (say, the effort the student puts into learning). The third and most important freedom is "attained when, being in some measure released from restrain, and having exercised one's freedom of thinking and choosing, one attains, or 'wins,' or 'enters into,' a state of 'freedom' which is achieved through voluntary acceptance of some kind of *order* or *law*."[28] In terms entirely congenial to Murdoch's outlook, Reid argues that submission to the discipline of a given craft, art, or other discipline endows us with new powers and opens up new possibilities for thought and action—it grants us more freedom. For example, by freely submitting to the discipline of reading great works of literature, my linguistic palette expands, granting me access to new ways of thinking and feeling well beyond my previous confined state. A naively Romantic sensibility that opposes freedom to discipline or authority obscures these insights entirely from view.

THE FOCUS ON AUTHENTIC FEELING

Romanticism also encouraged us to pay close attention to authentic

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feeling. Drawing on Berlin again: "Since we must be free, and since we must be ourselves to the fullest possible degree, the great virtue—the greatest virtue of all—is what existentialists call authenticity, and what the Romantics called sincerity."[29] This orientation tends to exalt feelings over reason, reifying a crude dichotomy between the two. How does this sensibility interfere with the process of understanding?

Bialystok and Kukar point out that the focus on authenticity in education (conveyed in slogans such as 'Be yourself!') may "give students the message that any beliefs or inclinations are morally acceptable, as long as they listen to their 'inner voice'."[30] The irony here is that some of the inclinations young people hold, especially in a materialistic culture, can be traced to various forms of commercial propaganda—they do not necessarily well up from a pure source within. Even if a belief or inclination really did arise from within, this is not necessarily a marker of its truth or goodness. An inclination to be selfish or feel entitled, for example, would certainly distort one's 'inner voice.' To assume that everything that wells up from within is good or true may prevent us from progressing epistemically or morally. Moreover, if one's chief criteria when it comes to truth is how one 'feels' about a given item of knowledge, one will likely struggle to connect with important objects of understanding. In general, learning often (though not necessarily) involves some degree of struggle, difficulty, or discomfort;[31] if I am overly focused on how I feel about this, especially if I have imbibed from my culture a fear of discomfort, I might be erecting barriers to my own learning.

Far from being irrelevant to the process of understanding, however, the emotions and passions are a vital part of it. Richard Peters argues that emotions are forms of cognition and involve appraisals of the conditions in which we find ourselves.[32] In some cases, particular emotions might be unwarranted. I can imagine a case in which I am angry, but that, upon further reflection, I assess the situation afresh and realize that there was no reason for me to be angry—the emotion then gradually dissipates. In this case, one could say that reason has triumphed over emotion, but one could equally say that other passions aided in my reflection: say, my desire for the truth. Fostering understanding therefore

involves developing *the right kinds* of emotions and passions. How would we connect with objects of understanding at all without a passionate concern for the truth—what Murdoch calls truthfulness?[33] How could we excel in analytical chemistry without a hatred of inaccuracy and a love of precision? This perspective helps us preserve the Romantic insight that feelings matter, but without placing them in opposition to reason, or jettisoning reason entirely; what emerges is a less intellectualistic or rationalistic conception of the life of reason, one that includes what Peters called "the passionate side of the life of reason."[34]

Closely tied to the idea of authenticity, Taylor argues that the Romantic period also brought with it the conviction that our individual differences "entail that each one of us has an original path which we ought to tread" and that we need to "live up to our originality."[35] It is easy to see the link between this conviction and statements we sometimes hear from students, such as, 'I'm not a math person' or 'I'm more of a visual learner.' The idea of 'learning styles'—which, although it persists in various spheres, has been thoroughly debunked as a myth—is certainly tied to this tendency within Romanticism.[36] As should be obvious, coming to think that one learns better according to a certain *style* can certainly interfere with the process of understanding: it can cause one to erect obstacles to essential educational practices (e.g., reading) that do not 'match' with one's supposed learning style.

Not infrequently, placing too much attention on one's uniqueness can also drag young people into a kind of solipsism where they become convinced that no one understands them better than themselves. (I have heard this from many students.) A little reflection is sufficient to question this conviction. We are not typically transparent to ourselves, especially in certain moods. Often, for example, our parents or close friends will have a better grasp of what is happening to us, how we are feeling, or what we need, than we ourselves do. Even someone who does not know us very well may—if they have a good sense of the kinds of forces at work in our environment and a lot of experience conversing with people our age—be able to understand us better than we are able to at a given moment.

It is of course true that we are each unique. However, it is equally

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true that all of us, as human beings, have a great deal in common. To overemphasize our uniqueness may obscure the ways in which we are alike. Bakhurst, drawing on Sebastian Rödl's work, suggests that a broad education can offer us self-knowledge—not necessarily that we are '*one* of a kind' but that we are 'one of *a kind*': "light cast on the nature of the human condition by the study of literature, history, politics, biology, and so on should increase our understanding of the kinds of beings we are and thereby enhance our self-understanding. To understand your particularity, you have to understand yourself as one of a kind, as a human being."[37] Thus, even the quest for self-understanding, which might be conceived of as an inward quest, turns out to depend on our ability to connect with relevant objects of understanding 'out there,' scattered among various disciplines such as literature and history.

Murdoch would agree with Bakhurst. She might add that it is not morally or intellectually helpful to pay so much attention to our own, unique selves. The objects of our attention, she explains, have a great deal of influence on the quality of our consciousness and our ability to grasp reality. Focusing attention on the self tends to obscure truth, burying it in projected fantasies and illusions.[38] She illustrates this beautifully in many of her novels, such as *Under the Net*, where the protagonist, Jake, who is also the narrator, is almost entirely self-absorbed in his own thoughts and feelings, hopes and aspirations.[39] Not only does he therefore often act somewhat callously and unjustly toward those around him, he also suffers from a severe lack of self-understanding, and his friends need to constantly assist him to see himself more clearly. Instead of thinking about how unique we are, Murdoch insists that we should pay attention to the irreducible uniqueness of *others*. Indeed, this kind of effort—attending to the particularities of centers of consciousness outside of oneself—is crucial for moral progress.[40] If turned outwards, then, a sensitivity to the uniqueness of individuals may even be useful in fostering understanding.

CONCLUSION

The thread that runs through the three tendencies explored above is a certain brand of modern individualism, which was given a peculiar expression during the Romantic period, and which, through various iterations, now

influences how we in North America think about, feel, and perceive ourselves. Young people who grow up in North American families, who consume North American media, and attend North American schools are influenced by modern individualism of a Romantic kind. If we follow Murdoch, the fundamental problem with this kind of individualism is that it fattens our ego and reinforces our tendency to focus our attention on ourselves. This interferes with our vision—our ability to see others with "a just and loving gaze" and to perceive reality itself clearly, including all the objects of understanding we encounter at school. [41] Too much concern with the self acts as a kind of veil, blocking our sight. To put this is in an Aristotelian key, we might conceive of individualism as a kind of epistemic vice that prevents us from learning.[42] This is the fundamental danger of Romanticism. Its opposite is humility or selflessness, which increases our responsiveness to reasons. Paying close attention to the integrity of the process of understanding—especially to the conditions that the subject of understanding has to fulfil in order to connect with or reach various objects of understanding—can help educators identify and overcome the influence of educationally harmful forces emanating from Romanticism.

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1 William Reese, "The Origins of Progressive Education," *History of Education Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2001): 1-24. See David Labaree, *The Trouble with Ed Schools* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 140-141, for further references.

2 Richard Peters and Paul Hirst, *The Logic of Education* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 30-32.

3 David Diehl, "Re-enchantment of School Bureaucracy: The Historical Relationship Between Rationality and Romanticism," *Educational Theory* 67, no. 3 (2017): 291-307.

4 These tendencies are interrelated and there are certainly other valid ways of dividing them up; moreover, this short list does not exhaust the gamut

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of Romantic sensibilities. My conception of Romanticism is shaped by a number of sources, but Charles Taylor and Isaiah Berlin's accounts, to which I will refer throughout, loom large in my mind. I will not dwell on the debate about the proper way of delimiting or defining Romanticism as a movement or period of intellectual history. Given my focus on specific tendencies and sensibilities, whether or not they are tied to what is *essential* to Romanticism does not have much of an impact on the substance of my essay.

5 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), Part II.

6 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 111-112.

7 Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Ark, 1970), 80. Kant is not usually considered a Romantic, but there are many Romantic themes in his work; see Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 68-78.

8 Due to lack of space, I cannot adequately address naturalism in this essay. The reader can refer to John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), for a convincing critique of naturalism.

9 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good,* 89.

10 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 84.

11 Paul Fairfield, *Education after Dewey* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2009), 45.

12 This is part of the title of one of Berlin's chapters in *The Roots of Romanticism*.

13 Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, 120.

14 Berlin, 120.

15 Douglas Yacek, "Thinking Controversially: The Psychological Condition

for Teaching Controversial Issues," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 52, no. 1 (2018): 83.

16 Yacek, "Thinking Controversially," 79.

17 Yacek, 79.

18 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good,* 66.

19 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good ,* 61.

20 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good ,* 57.

21 Murdoch*,* 57.

22 David Bakhurst, *The Formation of Reason* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 68: "Reality is one, but it is diverse, and it takes diverse means to render it intelligible in all its aspects." This certitude must, of course, be combined with humility, born from an appreciation of the limits to human understanding.

23 Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, 68-78. While Berlin admits that Kant "hated romanticism" (68), he was "virtually intoxicated by the idea of human freedom" (69).

24 Berlin quotes, in this connection, a passage from *Lucinde*, a novel by Friedrich Schlegel. The hero is describing a baby, "who throws her legs in the air in a very free and unrestrained manner:" "This is how one should live! Here is a little child, naked and unrestrained by convention. It wears no clothes, it bows to no authority, it believes in no conventional directors of its life … Freedom, the capacity to throw one's legs in the air, to do anything one wishes, that is the last privilege that we have in this fearful world, this awful causal treadmill when nature presses upon us with such fearful savagery" (113).

25 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good,* 89.

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26 Bakhurst, *The Formation of Reason*, The entire book deals with this theme in various ways, but Chapters 4 and 6 are especially relevant to the themes of freedom and spontaneity.

27 Louis Arnaud Reid, *Philosophy and Education* (London: Heinemann, 1962), 110.

28 Reid, *Philosophy and Education*, 125.

29 Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, 139.

30 Lauren Bialystok and Polina Kukar, "Authenticity and Empathy in Education," *Theory and Research in Education* 16, no. 1 (2018): 29.

31 Avi Mintz, "The Happy and Suffering Student? Rousseau's *Emile* and the Path Not Taken in Progressive Educational Thought," *Educational Theory* 62, no. 3 (2012): 249-265.

32 Richard Peters, "Education of the Emotions," in *Education and the Development of Reason*, eds. R. F. Dearden, P. H. Hirst, and R. S. Peters (London: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1972), 467.

33 Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), 399.

34 Richard Peters, *Moral Development and Moral Education* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), 68.

35 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 375.

36 There is a wealth of literature on this topic. See, for example, Paul Kirschner, "Stop Propagating the Learning Styles Myth," *Computers & Education*, 106 (2017): 166-171.

37 Bakhurst, *The Formation of Reason*, 161.

38 See, for example, Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 59.

39 Iris Murdoch, *Under the Net* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1954).

40 Murdoch, "Against Dryness," in *Existentialists and Mystics*, ed. Peter Conradi (New York, NY: Penguin, 1997), 293-295.

41 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 34.

42 For the idea of vice epistemology, see Quassim Cassam, "Vice Epistemology," *The Monist* 99, no. 2 (2016): 159-180.

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