

Iris Murdoch, Romanticism and Education

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To every natural form, rock, fruit or flower,
 Even the loose stones that cover the high-way
 I gave a moral life, I saw them feel,
 Or link'd them to some feeling; the great mass
 Lay bedded in a quickening soul, and all
 That I beheld respired with inward meaning.

—William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805)

In his well-researched and cleverly titled paper, “Bad Romance—Tendencies in Romanticism that hamper student learning,” Ilya Shodjaee-Zrudlo artfully weaves together two separate but related arguments. In the first, he establishes that attending to objects of understanding is necessary for learning by identifying three epistemic vices: (1) an inclination to always look ‘inward,’ (2) an attachment to freedom and spontaneity, and (3) a focus on authentic feeling. These epistemic vices thwart learning because they prevent students from directing their attention outward, away from themselves and towards such objects of understanding as persons, ideas and things. In a separate but related argument, Shodjaee-Zrudlo classifies the three epistemic vices under “a certain brand of modern individualism” that he traces to Romanticism.¹ Taking his lead from Charles Taylor and Isaiah Berlin, Shodjaee-Zrudlo argues that young North Americans have internalized quintessentially Romantic norms and values, which are exhibited in their approach to learning, i.e., the three epistemic vices. In summary, Shodjaee-Zrudlo is concerned that today’s youth are suffering from the pathologies of relativism and pessimism, which are constitutive of our Romantic inheritance.

Shodjaee-Zrudlo proposes Iris Murdoch’s philosophy as the antidote to this inheritance because she invites the view that “the fundamental problem with

Romantic individualism is that it fattens our ego and reinforces our tendency to focus our attention on ourselves.” Shodjaee-Zrudlo uses Murdoch’s philosophy to establish that the three epistemic vices are not necessary characteristics of subjectivity but are instead products of history, culture and inculturation. He retrieves her concept of attention as a process of unselfing, arguing that it is essential for learning. Shodjaee-Zrudlo’s positioning of Murdoch as an alternative to Romantic individualism builds upon her own criticisms of Romanticism, especially that they “transformed the idea of death into the idea of suffering” by taking “refuge in sublime emotions.”² It seems to me, however, that Shodjaee-Zrudlo’s criticisms of Romanticism are not always accurate nor fair. In fact, the term “Romanticism” itself is a tricky one that raises multiple questions, among them which thinkers it includes. Many ideas can and have been thought under its heading, and, although this is not the place for a comprehensive overview of Romanticism, there are good discussions of it in the scholarship of Frederick C. Beiser, Richard Eldridge, Nikolas Kompridis, and Terry Pinkard.³

In my response to Shodjaee-Zrudlo, I restrict my remarks to the first epistemic vice, an inclination to always look ‘inward,’ as what I say about it has implications for the other two. For example, Shodjaee-Zrudlo argues that the second epistemic vice—an attachment to freedom and spontaneity—compels students to oppose the discipline and authoritativeness necessary for learning. It should become apparent from my discussion of the first epistemic vice that I do not interpret the Romantics as being overly attached to freedom and consider the freedom they value as consonant with an obedient and disciplined responsiveness. In the case of the third epistemic vice, I imply that the Romantic focus on authentic feeling was not in opposition to reason; rather, the Romantics sought to enlist feeling and reason in an effort to discern the world’s meaning.

In what follows, I first address Shodjaee-Zrudlo’s formulation of what turning inward involves to suggest that it represents a misunderstanding of Romanticism. Whereas Shodjaee-Zrudlo characterizes the inward turn as being about the promotion of relativistic opinions, I characterize it as a focus on consciousness as the discernment of meaning. Having established the true character of the Romantic inward turn, I draw two related conclusions: Mur-

doch is closer to Romanticism than Shodjaee-Zrudlo would have us believe and Romanticism is part of the solution to the epistemic and educational problems that Shodjaee-Zrudlo evocatively conveys.

Shodjaee-Zrudlo characterizes the inward turn in the following manner: “When confronted with a new idea, we now tend to ask ourselves, ‘What do *I* think about this?’ as opposed to, ‘Is it true?’” He argues that our tendency is to consult our own thinking on such occasions because we assume that the meaning of any new idea can only be fully determined by us. In other words, humans are the measure of meaning because we interpret and evaluate ideas “*only* according to our own lights.” According to Shodjaee-Zrudlo, Romanticism’s artists, poets and philosophers did not conceive of reality as having an intelligible structure; for them, “there is only the subject, thrusting itself forward.” Shodjaee-Zrudlo concludes that it is “a [Romantic] mistake” to turn inwards, “to consult ourselves” by asking “What do *I* think?” when it comes to “confronting objects of understanding.” His formulation, however, makes it seem as if the inward turn is wholly about trafficking in relativist opinion. He even references the phrase “everyone has their own opinion,” as often being heard “among students who disengage from classroom discussion.”

Whereas I agree with Shodjaee-Zrudlo that students won’t learn if they are enthralled by their own opinion, I think that his characterization of this so-called ‘inward turn’ betrays a significant misunderstanding of Romanticism. I can bring out the difference with the epigraph to this paper: whereas Shodjaee-Zrudlo might interpret the lines by Wordsworth as being about the human projection of meaning—“*I gave*” and “*I saw*”—I interpret them as being about how natural and artistic *forms*—“rock, fruit or flower, Even the loose stones that cover the high-way”—reveal “moral life” and “inward meaning” by way of how they impact and alter consciousness i.e. how they make us feel and think. For the Romantics, the purpose of turning inward is not to circulate among subjective opinions nor is it to assert our subjective freedom by way of our independent thoughts or opinions. Rather, it is to attend to the fluctuations of consciousness as harbingers of meaning—the inner is a doorway to the meaning of the outer that must be walked through.

A clue to what I have in mind here is expressed by Shodjaee-Zrudlo's discussion of the second epistemic vice, when he writes that the Romantics were worried about "the gradual encroachment of a natural-scientific and deterministic picture of reality." They were concerned that this picture robbed reality of its mystery, magic and meaning. If there was to be meaning, it would have to happen inside the subject and be projected onto a natural-scientific reality—a picture of reality Max Weber aptly described as one of "disenchantment."⁴ Shodjaee-Zrudlo effectively describes and criticizes the hold of this disenchanted picture of reality on our students' minds. But this only underscores the sharp contrast between their epistemic vices and Romanticism's aspiration to reenchant the world, based on the conviction that *not* everything about our way of life can be scientifically accounted for.

In seeking to reenchant the world, Romantic artists, poets and philosophers struggled to resist both nostalgia for a prelapsarian time and a crude subjectivism. That Romanticism is routinely criticized for one or both of these vices reflects the significant challenge of the rechantment project: Romantic artists sought to reconceive all of Nature as a book waiting to be 'read' for its lessons: lessons that would be mediated by the individual's "inner depths" and otherwise "unexplored recesses."

My interpretation of the inner turn demonstrates that Murdoch is closer to Romanticism than Shodjaee-Zrudlo would have us think. Take Murdoch's example of learning Russian. Shodjaee-Zrudlo is right that Murdoch's love of Russian leads her away from herself towards something that is alien and authoritative. Yet Murdoch's inner life is not to be analyzed away, for she is doing more than going through the motions of learning Russian; vital changes are occurring 'within' her. The unselfing that Shodjaee-Zrudlo speaks of is mediated—even facilitated—by the transformational qualities of Murdoch's consciousness. She knows that her experience of feeling guided by the Russian that she is learning is not an illusion. Russian acquires greater and more nuanced meanings as her love for the language deepens—and vice-versa.

If I am right that Murdoch is much more a Romantic than she ac-

knowledge, and that Shodjaee-Zrudlo is attacking three epistemic vices that together comprise the legacy of a disenchanted picture of reality, then Romanticism, together with Murdoch's philosophy, might be just the antidote that our educators need.⁵

1 Ilya Shodjaee-Zrudlo, "Bad romance: Tendencies in Romanticism that hamper student learning," *Philosophy of Education* 77, no. 3 (same issue).

2 Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (London and New York: Penguin, 1997), 367-369; see Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London and New York: Penguin, 1992), 133, 499.

3 Frederick C. Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press); Richard Eldridge, *Literature, Life and Modernity* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008); Nikolas Kompridis, "Romanticism," *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 247-270; Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

4 See Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1958), 129-158.

5 I wish to thank René Arcilla, Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon, Maughn Rollins Gregory, and Rachel Longa for their instructive comments on earlier versions of this response.