

# Prof. Rex Li's Writings

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**Title:** Summary and Review of Egan's *The Educated Mind*  
Chapter 3 (1997: p. 94 - 103)

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**Summary/ Abstract:** This is a summary and review of Egan's ideas on romantic understanding.

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## Summary and Review of Egan's *The Educated Mind* Chapter 3 (1997: p. 94 - 103)

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### 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

1985), but Homer's account is primarily loyal to *poetic* criteria rather than to describing precisely what happened: the vividness and emotional impact of his story are paramount; its need to convey universal truths about human life in general is uppermost. 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)

p. 96 Point 36: Romanticism as humanistic, emotion, nature, imagination plus detail in description (reality)

tive of a romantic view. It is well to remember that reality was the main discovery of Romanticism in European cultural history, as far as its participants were concerned. They saw their great achievement as a sweeping away of the clutter of artificiality that prevented people from engaging directly with nature in all its uniqueness and particularity. The excitement of Romanticism was not simply a product of the sense of the imagination being free, but of being free to explore afresh the reality of human experience and the natural world. Blake expressed this engagement with reality in terms of

p. 96 | Point 37: Descriptive of reality with drawings, etc.

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more closely their sense of reality (Gombrich, 1960). The making/matching process can lead to increasingly precise representations of reality, in pictures, maps, and written descriptions. It is a rational process that can be quite untheoretic or nonscientific. It is a form of “romantic” rational activity that is common, focused on the particular, and also prerequisite to theoretic scientific thinking. When Darwin wondered at the diversity of species of finch on

p. 97 | Point 38: Egan against progressive view on education.

I believe it is a serious mistake to view education as an inevitably progressive process, as an enterprise in which we succeed to the degree that children learn more, become more skilled in literacy and numeracy, give evidence of higher stages of psychological development, and so on, while ignoring or neglecting the losses associated with each gain. To beleaguered schools and

p. 97 | Point 39: Literacy supports romantic understanding but dismisses mythic view

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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

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 | Point 40: Plato's concern of loss because of literacy

The discovery of the alphabet will create forgetfulness in the learner's souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. Your invention is not an aid to memory. . . . You give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing. (Plato, *Phaedrus*)

p. 99 | Point 41: Decrease and rejection of metaphor at age 8 – 10

p. 101 Point 42: Egan explored Romanticism and romantic understanding (1990)

gradually detaching itself from the external world. This very complex change in the way the mind stands in relation to “external” reality is difficult to grasp and represent, and I have chosen the metaphors of “mythic” and “romantic” understanding as the best I can find to point to some important and somewhat neglected features of the change.

Point 43: Wordsworth’s sense of loss in intimations of immortality. Something survives:

In *Intimations of Immortality* Wordsworth makes two responses to this development of a sense of reality. On the one hand, there is a profound and irredeemable sense of loss: “But yet I know, where’er I go, / That there hath passed away a glory from the earth.” On the other hand, he recognizes that something survives after all, something of the early splendor that is “a master-light of all our seeing” and that can continue to vivify the “years that bring the philosophic mind.” Wordsworth resisted the easy contrast of the romantic imagination with dull rationality, a theme common among other romantic writers such as Coleridge. The philosophic mind, in Wordsworth’s developmental theory (and in mine that borrows from him), comprises as far as possible the freshness of early understanding along with imagination and rationality. Imagination is crucial to preserving the capacities of Mythic understanding, but imagination is not in any sense in conflict with developing rationality and its view of reality, seen in the light of common day. Rather, “Imagination is . . . Reason in her most exalted mood” (*The Prelude*, bk. XIV, line 192). One of the weaker and more mischievous inheritances of Roman-

p. 102 Point 44: Apparently Egan gets his inspiration from Wordsworth, including terms and ideas (philosophic mind)

Egan stressed romantic understanding with “imagination and reason” which can be quoted from Wordsworth. Romanticism which stressed freedom, human inner feelings, against enlightenment / rationality, sensibilities, boredom, are part and parcel of Egan’s romantic understanding.

I have touched on just a few characteristics of Romantic understanding, ignoring the revolt and idealism, the distinctive boredom and the sensibilities that are features of a romantic sense of the world. I have even neglected the sense of the self that develops as a kind of side effect of the discovery of autonomous reality; we come to recognize that it is from our “self” that reality is autonomous. But I hope this brief characterization is