Review Essay

Jackson, P.W. & Haroutunian-Gordon, S. (Eds.). (1989). *From Socrates to software: The teacher as text and the text as teacher.* 89th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part I. Chicago: NSSE. Distributed by University of Chicago Press.

Education, inconveniently, is about how best to live. Educational theory and research are about how best to live with literacy, with texts. In oral cultures the problems of education focus on how to convey the lore that defines and supports the social group so that it will be securely held in the living memories of new generations. Oral cultures throughout the world have developed sophisticated techniques for communicating their sacred bodies of hard-won knowledge through time. Elaborate rituals that heighten emotional intensity, myth stories that carry the lore in codes, rhyme, rhythm, and meter, reinforcement by a battery of charged and frequently repeated verbal formulae, are among the techniques commonly deployed. But with the invention of writing this load on the memory, this anxiety of forgetting, was changed utterly.

The book under review begins with Socrates as teacher. You may recall that in the *Phaedrus* Socrates tells the story of the invention of writing. The god-King of Naucratis in ancient Egypt, Theuth, was an entrepreneur very much in the spirit of our times. He invented many things — among them arithmetic, astronomy, draughts, dice, and writing. In need of research and development money, he submitted a number of proposals to the god Thamus, who was the king of the whole of Egypt. Thamus funded a number of Theuth's projects, enabling him to hire a small angelic army of research assistants to get astronomy off the ground and dice rolling, and so on. But Theuth was most surprised to discover that Thamus had turned down the proposal for funds to develop writing. He lodged an appeal to have the decision reviewed, and was granted an interview during which Thamus outlined the reasons for the divine committee's decision. The bottom line, said Thamus, is that the committee concluded your claim, that writing would help the memory and solve the problem of preserving lore securely, is too facile. Rather he said:

> the discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is not an aid to memory . . . you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be the hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and generally know nothing (*Phaedrus*, 275. Jowett's translation).

To make best sense of this perhaps surprising judgment, we need to remember that to the Greeks Memory was the goddess who was mother to the Muses. That is, the distinction Thamus makes between memory and reminiscence we might cast as between "rote memory" for "reminiscence" and the active, energetic source of imaginative power for "memory." In oral cultures generally the techniques that make the memory effective do so by vivid stimulation of the imagination.

Theuth clearly thought that writing, apart from having, like computers, obvious benefits to the business world of his time, could also solve its educational problems. Instead of this terrific effort that went into passing on the lore securely, one could simply write it down, teach the young to read it, and — hey, presto! — problem solved. He failed to realize, though, what was very clear to Thamus and Socrates, that freeing the memory also disconnected the imagination from the learning process. What you are left with, as Rousseau so eloquently put it, is "Words! Words! Words!"

And educational theory has been dealing with the problem ever since. Plato realized that having the lore written down is all very well, but one also needs to be able to bring the written lore to life in the mind of the learner. His solution was a tightly organized curriculum of lore, on the one hand, and, on the other, a method for encouraging the learner constantly to reflect on it and prod it into life. Rousseau, with a kind of desperation, recommended positively preventing students from learning to read and write until their teens, keeping them quite apart from the illusory knowledge texts profer so prodigally. The text, that seemed so wonderful a solution to the problems of education, is itself our central problem. Somehow the coded lore of texts has to be brought to life in the mind of the learner, and we have generally concluded that this task is to be performed by teachers. So how can the teacher as text and the text as teacher best enhance our lives?

Aspects of this question are the subject of the text under review. *From Socrates to Software* is divided into two sections. Section One, "The Teacher in the Text," involves four meditations on the role of the teacher. Teacher and text work together in our system of education. The text contains the coded lore and the teacher's job is to act as a kind of Socratic midwife, helping students to bring the lore to new life in their minds and experience. The disturbing undercurrent that none of us can escape is expressed by Haroutunian-Gordon in her introduction as: "Does formal education deaden rather than illuminate? Stultify rather than liberate?" (p. 3). We all know that it need not deaden and stultify, because we see cases where formal education illuminates and liberates. But it seems never to do so without our wanting to quality even such claims about our successes, and no one can avoid the awful and unqualifiable fact that in so many cases it neither illuminates nor liberates. What *can* the teacher do with texts to enhance students' lives?

The book begins with images of teachers *in* texts — Plato's Socrates in the dialogues, the ideal teacher as envisioned by John Dewey, Charles Dickens's many and diverse, and indelibly etched, teachers, and Charlotte Brontë as teacher and writer about teaching. The editors sort-of apologize for not offering the kind of systematic coverage of a topic that is the common format for the NSSE Yearbooks. This sort-of apology seems unnecessary, at least for Section One. Though made up of a set of essays by different authors with different interests and perspectives, Section One seems to be best read whole in a single sitting. It provides a kalaidescope of images of teachers and it succeeds well, I think, in provoking, almost compelling, reflection about, in the editor's words, "the nature of the ideal teacher, the effects of teachers upon students, and the consequences of teaching for the teachers themselves" (p. 1).

Haroutunian-Gordon gives us a detailed examination of Socrates' method of teaching. She examines a number of attempts to characterize *the* "Socratic method" and shows each of them to be too simple to catch the diversity of his manouvering, each open to too many counter-examples. As a teacher, Socrates remains something of an enigma, certainly not the inexorable truth-seeker and honest "midwife" of the standard view. And yet he commands our attention. He is serious one minute, joking the next, misleading us, then pulling us up short with sudden insights; he dazzles us. Oddly perhaps, as in the story from the *Phaedrus* with which I began, his most profoundly educative achievements seem to lie less in the dialectical arguments and more in the asides and summations, in those stories, allegories, legends, and so on, that grip our imaginations and spark to life profound ideas in our minds. Perhaps it is in part the interplay between dialectical argument and vivid exemplifying story that makes him so compelling a teacher.

Haroutunian-Gordon reaches her conclusion about the importance of the character of Socrates in the dramatic context of living, human conversation, through a rejection of some earlier attempts to characterize the "Socratic method." If a reviewer has to be critical of an essay much admired and enjoyed, I might suggest it suffers just a tad from that mild educational disease called "philosophy of education." Its symptoms you would recognize in the author's focus being attracted a little bit more towards the things on which a neat analytical job can be done and a tiny bit away from the central question of what Plato is telling us about teaching by having Socrates perform as he does in those remarkable dialogues. Clearly the analytical job of the first two thirds of the paper leads us into the final third, examining Socrates in the *Protagoras*, and to the final page of meditation on Socrates' power as teacher, but I must confess I would have preferred the final part to have been expanded considerably, pushing out or contracting the first part. Her final page of meditation I thought rich and insightful, and inviting elaboration.

Maxine Greene moves with fluency and familiarity across a wide range of John Dewey's writings and practice, gradually composing an image of the ideal

Deweyian teacher. She picks from his writings a series of those pregnant phrases that have made him a storehouse of educational ideas. When contemplating Dewey's ideal of the teacher, she says, we "constantly come upon talk of inquiry and communication, talk of expansion and communion, talk of becoming a self among others, a self in the light of possibilities" (p. 34). His sensitivity to the demands of everyday social life and to the ways we can expand the means whereby we respond to those demands for further educational growth is one crucial reason for his importance today. As Greene selects for highlighting, she concludes that deliberate teaching can "free capacities formed by social demands for fuller exercise and . . . furnish those objects most likely to make student activity productive of meaning" (p. 28). Greene sees Dewey's conception of teacher emerge from "the convergence of his lived experience and intellectual history" (p. 24), from the convergence particularly of the vividness of his childhood experience which he held onto even while engaging the coded lore of texts. He made an educational theory from their fusion.

Dewey is such an American phenomenon that perhaps non-Americans would be wiser to say nothing directly about him. But it has appeared to me over some years of reading Americans writing about Dewey that he serves as a kind of educationalists' Rorschach test — in that his rich and complex texts allow multiple diverse interpretations to be supported. I have a sneaking sense that the sensitive and energetic teacher that Greene has conjured from his texts is actually composed at least as much of Greene as of Dewey, and that she can provide so powerful a portrait of what it takes to be a great teacher simply because it takes one to recognize one. Greene's essay, like all her writing, refuses to let go of the central issue; however tough the going gets, she searches for a language that can capture and express the image of an ideal teacher.

Terrence Whaley begins with the interesting observation that Dickens's characters have for us a kind of mythic power. One of Dickens's legacies, Whaley laments, is those mythic stereotypes of awful teachers — Wackford Squeers, Mr. Creacle, Dr. Blimber, McChoakumchild, and Gradgrind. And Dotheboys Hall lingers in the mind as the archetype of the school when its educational function is neglected. When these awful, grinding teachers take their task seriously they conceive of education as slamming facts into children's minds — a parody of education that seems not to have much impacted on the modern educational industries whose conception of "learning" is memorization of appropriate stacks of information and acquisition of sets of things commonly, if mysteriously, called "skills."

The antidote to these terrible parodies of education Whaley sees in Dickens's account of Sleary's circus, which captures the children's imaginations and enhances their lives. But, Whaley concludes, Dickens shows us no way in which we can readily incorporate the bright engagement of the circus into schooling today. And he ends by worrying that, "It is a curious Dickensian legacy to offer us nothing concrete to substitute for those dismal teachers and schools in his novels and, at the same time, to render us apprehensive that we invite his scorn and the laughter

of the world in our own attempts to improve teachers and their practice'' (p. 57). I think this is a salutary observation to poke in our eyes, so to speak, but I was sorry the essay ended there. The combination of imaginative vitality and formal education is the task at hand and to leave us with the question, however powerfully put, is a little less than one might have hoped for — though perhaps the powerful restatement helps us to address it more clearly.

Margaret Buchmann considers an ordinary, even reluctant, teacher who is neither great like Socrates nor weird like those of Dickens. Charlotte Brontë is considered largely through the lens of Mrs. Gaskell's biography and the novel *Villette*. Gaskell catches Brontë's reluctance to teach in her early perception of children as ''the troublesome necessities of humanity'' (p. 66). Being a governess and teacher meant drudgery for Brontë, partly because it involved removal from that immensely vivid imaginative life she shared with her sisters at home. Buchmann shows us so clearly the malaise of teaching, what we might consider rather rapid ''burn-out,'' as Brontë dutifully and somewhat fearfully faces her students. In Mrs. Gaskell's words, Brontë ''liked to learn, but hated to teach'' (p. 80). During her main stint of teaching, as fictionalized in *Villette*, she describes how teachers were ''more stringently tasked, as all the real head-labour was to be done by them, in order to save the pupils'' (p. 70). Hardly a prescription for educational success one might feel. Buchmann adds richly to the kalaidescope of images of teachers, though some readers might prefer less plot summary and biographical detail and more of the ''Reflections'' with which the essay concludes.

Section Two is called ''The Teacher's Use of Texts'' and here the sort-of apology about the eclectic nature of the book and its lack of coherent structure is perhaps a little more appropriate. It seems to me that Section One, taken as a whole, is something more than the sum of its parts, whereas Section Two seems pretty much equal to the sum of its parts. This is not meant to be a deprecatory comment, but merely a descriptive one. The parts all succeed, if in varying degrees, to achieve what Jackson describes as their intent to ''invite . . . readers to extend the limits of their imagination to entertain the possibility of new practices with old texts and to think about how some new and different kinds of texts might enliven old practices'' (p. 89).

The first three essays of Section Two invite us to consider new patterns with old literary texts. Amy Kass begins by noting the ambivalence that has surrounded civics in schools, due to the suspicion of ideologizing or indoctrination that seems in some degree inescapable. She poses the dilemmas in these terms: ''though we do not want to educate for citizenship, we do want people to be good citizens; though we spurn civic studies in our schools, we have high praise for those civic-minded citizens in our midst'' (p. 91). She reviews and criticizes the main proposals for civics teaching and then offers as an alternative the study of those autobiographies that make vivid to students what is distinctive and valuable in American history and life. The autobiographer, she notes, is first storyteller who employs a ''detached attachment'' (p. 102). Autobiography ''necessarily

shows and mades explicit the formative meaning of relations with the outer world, and especially with the institutions and beliefs, customs and expectations, that have, otherwise silently, shaped one's life'' (p. 103). Reading carefully selected autobiographies also ''makes us better knowers of ourselves'' (p. 106).

Kass's argument leads to one of those complicated empirical questions that are so common in education and for whose resolution we have no adequate methods, apart from trying it and assessing with care and sensitivity what of value results. She does convince, me at least, that this approach is worth trying.

Harvey Siegel's aim is to show ''the pedagogical possibilities of philosophical fiction'' (p. 115). He argues that such fiction, exemplified here by Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, ''affords access to a particular class or type of reasons'' — 'felt' reasons (which are basic to rationality and which fiction is particularly well suited to exploit and utilize'' (p. 115). ''Felt reasons,'' he argues, ''are not a different *kind* of reason; they are rather a particular kind of *presentation* of reasons'' (p. 129), and one whose moving force has a direct impact on the reader.

It is a little sobering to move from Siegel's convincing argument to George Hillocks's essay. Hillocks warms us up, or, after Siegel, cools us down, by citing various findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress results for literature, which indicate that devastating percentages of late high school students seem unable to grasp in even the vaguest sense the meaning or point of even relatively straightforward poems. Appreciation of poetry seems to be fixed at about the greeting card level and any conceptual sophistication and call on inference seems entirely beyond the great majority of students. One must wonder what such students will make of Dostoyevsky. But perhaps Hillocks's recommendations for teaching literary texts can prepare an audience for Siegel's use of philosophical fiction.

Hillocks compares what he calls ''A Standard Pattern of Teaching Literature'' with ''An Alternative Pattern of Teaching Literature.'' In the former case the teacher does nearly all the talking, students rarely speak more than a few words in response to questions, and only a small proportion of the students do any talking at all. The teacher-talk is generally low-level inference and provides much background information, assuming that the text is quite remote from students' experience and so ability to understand. In the alternative case, the teacher talks less, the students talk more, and more students talk. The teacher's talk has much more respect for students' experience and assumes it can provide them with access to the meaning of the literary texts. A notable curriculum difference between the two cases is that in the former more or less random but exemplary texts are selected and treated more or less as discrete items. In the alternative case a sequential curriculum is in place, in which a theme like satire is developed, beginning perhaps with cartoons, comic routines, and moving gradually through carefully chosen texts using satire and irony to Orwell's *Animal Farm*, T.S.

Elliot's "Hollow Men," and so on. It is clear that the "alternative" teacher is doing the better job here, and the credit must be split among the structured curriculum, the teacher's respect for and sensitivity to, students' experience, reflected in the manner of discussion, and, rather more ambiguously, the quantifications of talk Hillocks provides.

Susan Stodolsky's essay addresses the general assumption that textbooks "drive instruction." She analyses past studies, and reports on her own work that increases the "empirical base" for addressing the question. She concludes that overall the "popular vision of slavish adherence to texts does not seem supportable" (p. 181). Her essay helps to enrich our sense of the variety of ways in which teachers commonly use textbooks. I must, however, confess to being unsurprised by her findings, not because I have remarkable empirical sensors but because slavish page-by-page following of a textbook seems to me pretty well impossible in any normal classroom. No doubt we might reasonably disagree about what people are generally concerned with when they complain about textbooks driving instruction, but I suspect many people are concerned about rather more subtle ideological influences that affect both teaching and the curriculum. If we earlier saw a hint of "philosophy of education," there is here just a touch of that other educational disease called "psychology of education." Its most common symptom is the answering with great precision of a question that is not quite the question that is of educational concern.

Elizabeth Vallance considers three disparate responses to art. The first, in a gallery of contemporary art, involves a man pulling his wife away with what ought to become the immortal words: "Come on, Helen. This is the room where the monkey threw the paint pot." Second, responses to the erection of eight contemporary pieces of nonrepresentational sculpture on Interstate 80 in Nebraska. And the third involves some beautiful forgeries of ancient artifacts which remain on display, attracting at least as much attention as the genuine artifacts around them.

Vallance uses these cases to consider the ways in which art objects present a challenge to our critical capacities, to our power to describe, analyze, interpret, and judge objects placed before us as art. She refers to Dewey's observation that "the process of criticism . . . is the re-education of perception" (p. 200), and considers how the teacher can use art objects as texts for this re-educative purpose. She concludes first that art is a more generally engaging public phenomenon than is often recognized, that art elicits strong reactions because of the challenge someone's ascription of aesthetic value to particular objects poses, and that it is not easy to talk about art. She concludes also that the social importance of art is not reflected in the school curriculum. For this to occur we need to prepare teachers who can "be critics and who can help children to see critically" (p. 199). Also teachers must integrate works of art into both the "regular" curriculum and children's lives, "demystifying" works of art and returning to them a sense of context and 'normalcy'" (p. 199).

This is a thoughtful essay which brings into focus the problem of the teacher-critic's role in vivifying experience through texts. Perhaps ironically, it is in considering objects as texts that the challenges to teachers to handle the alien language of texts, to decode them into the experience of students, are brought out most clearly. The diversity of the "textual" objects Vallance deals with and the kinds of contextual information she shows can be drawn on to make any text "a comfortable part of everyday life for children and for adults" (p. 199) certainly contributes to the aim of extending our imagination "to entertain the possibility of new practices," and provides insights into the ways teachers and texts working together can enhance students' lives.

No book on texts today would be complete without some reference to electronic media's powers to manipulate text and provide new kinds of access to texts. Stephen Kerr begins with the observation: "for those interested in instructional materials, perhaps no feature of twentieth-century educational practice has been more puzzling than the gap between what technology has promised and what it has delivered" (p. 202). He shows how each new technology has been greeted with immense enthusiasm, adopted with fertile and intricate descriptions of how it can lead to revolutions in teaching, only to become a victim of successive disillusionment and be used marginally while teachers revert to the *status quo ante* of the teacher and text.

Kerr describes the range of computerized technologies, now available or on the horizon for manipulating texts and for manipulating all previous technologies in the process. He provides a balanced view of the attractions, problems, and dangers that accompany this latest technology and discusses the state of teacher training to use it well. He points out that "electronic texts contradict established patterns of classroom life" (p. 211), and paints a generally rather discouraging picture of the present readiness and ability to take advantage of computers' powers. Longer term effects are unknowable, of course, but Kerr focuses on four possible influences of microcomputers on texts. First that texts may be seen as more malleable and impermanent rather than canonical. (If I might introduce a personal example of relevance here; I recently published a book that now has a supplement available on computer disk. Along with additional material, the disk contains my electronic-mail address and the invitation to send comments, questions, or whatever about the book. I respond to each comment or question and also "upload" the set of other comments, questions, and responses already on file. The initial book is no longer a canonical statement, but serves rather like the opening round of a conversation, during which qualification, revision, elaboration by others is all a part). Kerr considers the possibility of changes in the nature of professional discourse encouraged by electronic communication; (I was mildly irritated this semester to discover that the professor whose textbook I was using with a graduate class was not on e-mail and so unavailable for a few crucial problems students had with his text). A kind of indiscriminateness tends to be encouraged, Kerr observes, by the ways data bases yield information — any

finding tends to be considered both valuable and exhaustive of the topic. And finally electronic media encourage students no longer to think of text as linear; "hypertext" increasingly encourages branching associations as appropriate for exploring a text.

Yet, unfortunately, in this case the book's subject index is not adequate to allow the reader much of a "hypertext" access to its conceptual structure. Does this book tell us how to live best with texts? Well, it helps. Its eclectic structure is supported by essays that generally support an eclectic view of teaching and the use of texts. It is a book rich in variety and in ideas. As a Socratic cattle-prod to our thinking about teaching and texts it seems to me a considerable success.

One theme constantly recurs — unsurprisingly, given the book's title. That is the teacher's role in bringing texts to life in students' minds. For this to be done successfully texts must first be alive in teachers' minds. Another way of saying this is that teaching is properly a learnèd profession. As long as teachers are considered mere facilitators of the text or as technicians in an instructional process, and are not given the time and encouragement constantly to pursue their own educational development and imaginative renewal, then their role as vivifiers of our cultural lore cannot be adequately carried out. *From Socrates to Software* explores many ways in which teaching can be inhibited or helped: It makes clear that there are as many ways of teaching well as there are of living well.

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