

# H-Net Reviews

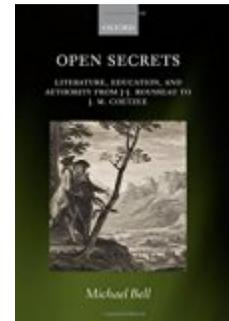
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael Bell. *Open Secrets: Literature, Education, and Authority from J.-J. Rousseau to J. M. Coetzee*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 254 pp. \$110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-920809-8.

Reviewed by Theodore Christou (Faculty of Education, University of New Brunswick)

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## Paradox and Relationship in Educational History and in Literature

Michael Bell's *Open Secrets* offers readers a beautifully scripted and contemplative study of "the limits of the teachable" (p. 1). It is difficult to categorize *Open Secrets* as history of education, for it draws its analyses, concepts, and sources mainly from literature. It is equally unjust to categorize the text as a study of literature, or of philosophy. *Open Secrets* cleverly, somewhat curiously, trespasses the borders of traditional genre definitions. Perhaps this is just and appropriate considering the sources, including the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, are similarly categorized with difficulty.

At the risk of delimiting the scope of the study too narrowly, Bell's work looks at the history of education in literature. Even this statement is burdened with caveats. With regard to literature, *Open Secrets* is primarily concerned with the Bildungsroman genre, of which more must be said later. Insofar as history of education is concerned, the literature explored in the book portrays only male teachers and students or, more narrowly even, male mentors and their pupils. Education of women and girls is peripheral, at best. The core question that Bell explores in each of the seven chapters that treat literary sources on the subject of teaching and learning is one that chafes educators, both contemporary and ancient. How do we teach for understanding? Alternatively, how does the learner challenge the authority of the teacher in order to achieve authentic, experiential understanding? Bell's introductory chapter invokes a resonant personal narra-

tive, which is drawn from the context of his own academic teaching. Having concluded what one may infer to be a general introductory course on poetry in literature, the author asked his students to summarize the principles gleaned over the term of study. The students wondered why these principles had not been proffered at the beginning of the term, thus enabling deeper and richer understanding of the materials read. These principles had, in fact, been set out early on in the course, only they had neither been understood, nor were they recalled.

Bell's story resonates, perhaps because it seizes on a universal principle inherent in teaching and learning contexts. It brings to mind the Buddhist maxim: "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." In my own teaching in the fields of educational history and social studies education, I approach the subjects by introducing my students to certain historical habits of mind or traits of historical thinking—various lists and sets of benchmarks have been established over the past century and I present these as coherent networks of ideas—before engaging the classes in authentic historical research. For instance, over the past year, we have been developing a history of science and social studies education in New Brunswick, Canada, over the twentieth century.

At the end of term, when research has been completed, projects have undergone peer review, and the studies have been published, I ask students to reflect on the extent to which they were able to operationalize the benchmarks and frameworks outlined at the outset of the

course. It is with great difficulty that these are recalled; when they are, it is only in fragments and in rudiments. Upon reflection and summary, we find that the principles of historical mindedness have indeed been operationalized. I might insist that certain principles be committed to memory and tested but I remain primarily concerned with the ideal that these be understood.

In practice, the benchmarks of historical thinking have been understood, albeit to varying degrees, but not so clearly itemized and memorized. It is such ambivalence and paradox that runs as a meandering current through the texts and literature that Bell submits to his study. In fact, this seems to be the open secret—captured by Goethe’s phrase “*offenes Geheimnis*”—that lends its title to the text; teaching, learning, and understanding are mysteries, which only initiates and devotees can undertake to penetrate, via experience.

Without appealing to empirical study, but by examining depiction of the student-teacher relationship in literature over time, Bell argues that direct instruction—depicted as a type of transfer model the likes of which Paulo Freire framed with his banking metaphor of teaching, wherein the teacher deposited learning in the student—is moribund, as well as unlikely to yield deep understanding. In a very clever move, Bell represents the transmission model of teaching as a counterpart to the philosopher’s hermeneutic circle, which imprisons even as it encircles. The teacher’s sphere of influence can thus be understood as a vicious circle. Only, no matter its intent or structure, it “is never entirely closed. The pupil is a centre of otherness and open to many other influences” (p. 3). The teacher somehow always inculcates and indoctrinates. The student’s task is to escape, or to negotiate the tensions of those ideas with which the teacher, inevitably, binds. Reflecting the themes of the literary sources examined, Bell notes: “Education does so much less damage than it might because some students, especially the good ones, can always be relied upon to do something quite different with it” (p. 3).

Historically, at least in the literature that this book considers, good teachers have found a way to practice the art of establishing relationships with students that respect the mysterious silence between instruction and understanding. It appears that there are no hard and fast rules of teaching and learning, nor are there eternal exemplars upon which we teachers might model our instruction so that learners can best understand. That education is complex, and requires careful attention to the individuals and context involved in each situation, is

made clear in the literary sources. Each story is unique. Bell seems to say that the mystery of teaching—taken in the medieval sense, here, of trade or craft that requires experience and practical wisdom to do with any degree of mastery—is the leitmotif of humanist literature.

As noted earlier, Bell is primarily concerned with texts that can loosely be characterized as fitting in the Bildungsroman genre, which traditionally depict central characters—again, these are predominately male protagonists—who encounter experiences that act as catalysts of their maturity and development. *Open Secrets* approaches the texts somewhat outside of convention, concentrating more on the mentor and on the learning context than on the pupil. Bell states, in the traditional Bildungsroman genre, “a recurrent fictional self-consciousness, and even artificiality, a deliberately oblique relation to realism, points up a constant philosophical reflection on the process of formation and imparts to it, I wish to argue, a significant bracketing as fictional. The mentor figure has a special prominence as a focus of this self-consciousness and, therefore, in contrast to the more usual critical focus on the standpoint of the young hero or of the author, I focus on the mediating and problematic standpoint of the mentor” (p. 5). Because education in its broadest and most humanist sense hinges on formative relationships established between mentor and tutor over time, the author believes that novels have been the most fruitful medium for treating the subject since their beginnings in the eighteenth century.

In exploring the interconnections of author and educator, which are hearkened to briefly in the above quotation, Bell seizes on Harold Bloom’s theory of the anxiety of influence. It not only offers a conceptual framework for understanding the tensions inherent in mediating the gap between instruction and understanding but also appears to give shape to the book insofar as the selection of texts to examine in the various chapters is concerned. The pupil begins in the mentor’s sphere of influence and must escape it in order to fully develop and grow in understanding. Even when such individual growth blossoms and is at its fullest, it still represents an overcoming of the teacher’s sphere of influence, sometimes explicitly and sometimes tacitly. The tutor who instructs Emile and nurtures his development is never deficient, even in silence and in absence.

Similarly, the anxiety of influence within the Bildungsroman tradition is a matter that Bell wishes to explore. The following quotation serves as an indicative example: “Nietzsche was to question *Bildung* even more

radically and yet even in so doing he retains much of the substance and structure of what he reverses. Nietzsche constitutes an ambiguous historical watershed, both cutting us off from the world of Goethe and providing a vital link with it" (p. 11). In *Open Secrets*, Rousseau gives way to Lawrence Stern, Goethe, Wilhelm Meister, and Nietzsche. The seminal influence of these writers is seen, albeit transmuted and altered, in D. H. Lawrence, F. R. Leavis, J. M. Coetzee, and Elizabeth Costello. Each text responds to its antecedents, reaching to rise above these in describing a different context with a variant stress; each is indebted to that which precedes it. Each has escaped the sphere of influence that bound it formatively. Each author here, for Bell, has achieved understanding. Each, then, is also educative. Bell's book offers the reader various examples of teaching and learning—or, mentorship and relationship—from novels in the Western Bildungsroman tradition. The text coheres well, exploring the complexities inherent in education with particular emphasis on the problematic, almost mysterious, association of instruction and understanding. The teacher has a formative relationship on the learner, sometimes for better, and often for worse. The learner must escape that influence, but never entirely can; understanding is, how-

ever, an attainable goal. Another problematic notion, experience, is a mediating factor in teaching and in learning.

Even as *Open Secrets* is a text that examines literature in order to reach understanding about education, it is also rumination on literature as an educative experience. This is a text that embraces the paradox it seeks to understand. As a consequence, I am left with the same ambiguities of categorization that existed at the beginning of this review. This is equal parts history of literature on education as it is a history of education in literature. As a consequence, the text should appeal to literary scholars as well as to educationists. Bell's prose resonates with and challenges the reader to reflect on the inadequacy of formulaic, so-called scientific, and proscriptive approaches to education and to human relationships. We are, teachers and learners equally, humans; it is those relationships that we build with each other—in context and over time, frequently complex and paradoxical—that we must ponder to further our understanding on the subject of education. Literature, the fountainhead of our collective stories and anxieties, returns us to questions of humanism, which contemporary educational dogma too infrequently consults.

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