The Experience of Reading


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Reading Literature in a Democracy: The Challenge of Louise Rosenblatt

Although Louise Rosenblatt's transactional model of reading appears to be gaining increasingly wide influence, the force of its original intent has been significantly blunted by its inclusion in the realm of reader-response criticism. While discussions of such theory concentrate on the active mental processes involved in reading, they usually fail to question the attitudes and social relations fostered by the way literature is taught. The story that needs telling here concerns the broader campaign Rosenblatt has been waging since the 1920s on behalf of a critical literacy that is embedded in the values of democracy. To tell this story requires focusing attention on *Literature as Exploration* and its persistent challenge to the literary establishment.

The themes developed in that pioneering work have steadily marked Rosenblatt's writings over a sixty-five-year period. The earliest source we have for charting her thinking about education and its role in promoting the values of a democratic society are the editorials she wrote during her tenure as editor-in-chief of the *Barnard Bulletin* from April 27, 1923, to April 11, 1924, a position previously held by her friend Margaret Mead. During the heady intellectual days when Rosenblatt attended Barnard College (1921–1925), a debate was quickening over the students' responsibility for more active participation in their own education. In one of her editorials, Rosenblatt captured the
changes afoot both in knowledge and academia: "We are even now passing through a period of readjustment. Authoritarianism no longer holds full sway in matters of intellect. New attitudes in politics, in economics, in art, in education, are manifesting themselves. New values are seeping into the thought of the time." According to Rosenblatt, such a period of intellectual ferment provided students a rich "opportunity to gain a comprehensive view of our culture." Further, she urged, "The college student can contribute toward the development of standards by which to measure these new trends of opinions, and can prepare herself to participate intelligently in the formation of new values." Learning, in other words, called for a moment of openness to new experience in order to advance a student's understanding, and clearly Rosenblatt relished the challenge:

Periods of change, of transition, appeal to the imagination of youth, and we of to-day should be able to understand why Wordsworth said, "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,

But to be young was very Heaven!"

To seek out ideas, to interest oneself in the trends of thought in all fields of activity, is to see the college course in broader perspective, and to escape the "sins" of dullness and boredom. (February 29, 1924)

The list of speakers at Barnard as reported in the pages of the Bulletin confirms the range of social, cultural, and educational issues that distinguished the intellectual milieu in which Rosenblatt studied as an undergraduate: Roger Baldwin, Walter de la Mare, Alexander Meiklejohn, A. F. Pollard, Bertrand Russell, George Macaulay Trevelyan, Carl Van Doren, Stark Young. During her junior year, while editor-in-chief of the newspaper, Rosenblatt also chaired the executive committee in charge of the Forum Luncheon Series, which featured speakers such as Franz Boas addressing "Cultural Environment and Race" and John Dewey talking about "Education and Freedom."

Dewey's remarks, as reported in the Bulletin, strike a resonant progressive chord, which Rosenblatt was to take up in her own work a decade later. After attacking the idea that freedom was merely a "natural endowment," a state where restraint was absent, Dewey argued that freedom was something deliberately attained:

The counterpart of this false conception of freedom is found in those educational theories which believe that self-expression will come simply as the result of "laissez-faire" policy.... "Self-expression" can come only as the result of intellect and effort.

Although Dewey agreed that intellectual freedom in higher education was a desirable end, he argued that achieving such freedom would remain difficult as long as there was so much discontinuity between ideals and methods across the various educational levels from elementary schools to the university.

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The student cannot spend sixteen or eighteen years in... habit formation and then expect habits of intellectual freedom to suddenly appear. If intellectual curiosity and freedom are to be the dominating principles of higher education they must be equally prevalent in the lower schools. (March 28, 1924)

When Dewey's words come under close scrutiny, we see the extent to which his original ideas behind the progressive movement have been misrepresented: freedom and self-expression do not occur in a vacuum, but must be earned; intellectual curiosity must be encouraged from the earliest stages of development if it is in fact to be valued later. Rosenblatt's transactional theory parallels these key themes in the area of literature education. For a student's response to a text will not grow and mature if the teacher never allows it to be expressed in the first place. Nor can a student's response be validated in isolation without testing and negotiating other responses.

Another participant in the Forum discussions on educational problems was William Kilpatrick, professor at Teacher's College, who spoke on "The Signs of Good Teaching." In his talk, as reported by the Bulletin, Kilpatrick began by asserting that one can't describe teaching without also describing the learning that is attached to it. As part of his emphasis on the student's learning, Kilpatrick underscored that people "learn much more and much faster where they are interested." This principle he illustrated by telling of the superior results achieved by a teacher who threw out the formal curriculum and focused on only "four types of activity: games, story-telling and reading, excursions and construction. The problems of arithmetic, geography, history, and spelling which can be found in these natural activities would be dealt with as they arose." Kilpatrick then concluded with his two basics of good teaching: "First, that students learn in direct proportion as they have a definite aim which they wish to follow and do follow, and, secondly, some criterion must be furnished for telling them whether they succeed or not" (April 4, 1924). His message reinforces a primary progressive theme: the student's intentions and ideas need an avenue of expression, but always in a questioning verbal context, which, while encouraging self-reflection, provides meaningful criteria for their evaluation.1

The editorials Rosenblatt wrote during this period reflect her youthful exuberance and progressive idealism as she consistently hammered away at the theme of public dialogue. She was committed to such dialogue because she saw it as providing the necessary means of testing and refining the ideas and opinions of the individual. This
active process was, in fact, prerequisite for reaping the rewards of a democracy. At the core of her faith in democracy was her belief that "free" speech had not only to exist, but had also to be exercised. In this way only would the true benefits of democratic practice unfold: the continual improvement both of our understanding of the world and of our social relations within it.

In her inaugural editorial, Rosenblatt revealed the perspective that would underlie much of her later thinking. Recognizing that our representations of the world would only be as accurate as the kinds and sources of information we sought, she noted the special responsibility of the newspaper:

Walter Lippman [sic], in his recent book Public Opinion, speaks of the fact that, since we are not able personally to investigate everything in the world about us, the “Pictures in Our Heads” correspond to the “World Outside” only in proportion to the correctness of the information presented to us. Newspapers, as conveyors of information, thus contribute much to our mental images of the world, and so should give us an idea of the reality as possible.

Then after promising a Bulletin that "will reflect a student life even more active, intelligent, and constructive than ever before," Rosenblatt considered the issue of "insulated ideas." Skeptical of the "quite general belief in the omnipotence of 'systems,'" her vision focused on the kind of social relations which encouraged both a sharing and a scrutiny of the values which propelled the larger community. What she saw around her, however, seemed to be a tacit agreement between members of different groups to refrain from any inquiry into one another's ideas. . . . we have a large number of small group standards. Each group . . . engages in its own activities and is usually indifferent to— if not contemptuous of—the ideas and standards of the other groups. This insulation of ideas naturally vitiates the growth of a general college standard of values. (April 27, 1923)

In her very next editorial, Rosenblatt continued with this theme that education depended on an open community continually engaged in the testing of its ideas and opinions. While one should hold opinions enthusiastically, one needed to be

self-analytical enough to understand the basis for the enthusiasm, so that if new facts present themselves a change in opinion is still possible. The ideal of open-mindedness is too often translated into indifference or a continual postponement of decision. The higher ideal would be open-mindedness which meant the ability to change or modify one's enthusiasms. (May 4, 1923)

In commenting on a series of faculty-student curricular meetings Rosenblatt emphasized the value of public discussion because she saw college as a joint student-faculty venture, with both contributing their varying viewpoints. This ideal of collegiate intellectual life rested on a "partly unconscious desire to make of college and the experience it offers a unified, cohesive whole—a place where the various activities and studies are subordinate to, and the result of, some major idea or purpose." A unity of purpose vitalized education by "connecting it more definitely with actual life." But compartmentalization is an ever-present and powerful countervailing force:

Students come to college, acquire knowledge in various fields, and keep the types of information isolated in separate compartments of the mind, without ever correlating them, or realizing their inter-relationships. Educators have been relying on the assumption that the students would make the necessary correlations for themselves, but, evidently, for some reason or other, students have generally failed to do this.

Accordingly, Rosenblatt made a plea for a kind of college "learning" that is directly connected to the individual's attempt to understand the immediate demands of living. Education, in other words, must bear on what is required of individuals if they are to play a constructive role in the larger society which makes their gains and achievements possible:

"To understand life"—vague, general, perhaps, but broad enough to include all types of personality, interested in all phases of human activity, and worthy enough to induce into the college community the much-needed spirit of a common purpose, of enthusiasm for the experiences which it offers. If this purpose were but made a more integral part of college thinking, if, instead of being taken for granted, it were offered to the students, not in the form of a pre-digested course, but as the spirit, the motive for presenting all courses, methods for stimulating students to think would be less needed, and the students would necessarily attempt to correlate and connect up with actual life, the information which they were getting. Under such conditions, college would indeed be a community in which all felt themselves part of a common enterprise. (June 1, 1923)

The importance of public expression was again underscored when Rosenblatt extolled the virtues of debating because it "develops practice in the technique of acquiring information, fosters an interest in social questions, and gives students training in expressing themselves forcefully." Later in the same editorial she considered the "prevalent misconception" that college was "a place where experts are trained for the punctiliously accurate administration of our complex industrial machinery."
Although the organization of college life perhaps only mirrored the ideals of a liberal education were lost, where, Rosenblatt wondered, faced by students, such fragmentation needed resisting. For if the fragmentation of the larger society and the occupational pressures would the overarching vision and integrating values come from that made democracy possible by mediating the diverse and competing elements of society?

In another editorial, Rosenblatt supported diversity, yet she worried about how special interest groups kept insulating individuals (students) from its benefits:

We find a number of small, internally homogeneous groups, which tend to nullify much of what Barnard does offer in the way of valuable personal contacts. The Freshmen usually drift into a number of groups and develop within the small circles interests and standards of values which become more intensified each year... It is only natural that people who are interested in the same things should see much of one another. The danger lies in letting one's membership in a distinct group interfere with one's having wider experiences. It is appalling to realize how little the students in the various circles know about one another. The groups have a tendency to become insulated; the principle of "Osmosis," of interchange of elements should be applied. Much of our vaunted individualism at Barnard loses meaning and value if there is not to be the interaction between people of different interests and ideas.

In concluding, Rosenblatt once more emphasized the importance of a common purpose: "Undergraduate life might become extremely interesting if instead of being an aggregate of groups, it became a community where individualities reacted upon one another" (December 21, 1923).

In her penultimate editorial, Rosenblatt looked for a more vital and positive status for the role of "student." Students should be responsible for inquiring into the nature of their culture, for seeking to understand and appreciate what it had accomplished so far. The learning environment that best supported such students recognized the necessary but creative tension that existed between individuals and the community:

Those who desire a community feeling appeal for it usually on the grounds of institutional tradition, or college spirit. A more valuable community feeling, free of objectionable sentimentality, might be based on the sense of belonging to a definite group who, as students, have a common impulse to think, and learn, and act. The thinking and learning and action may take varied forms, as temperaments and personalities vary, but they will have in common an intensity of interest in something of intellectual value. This is a community feeling in which even the most consciously individualistic might share. (April 4, 1924)

Because Rosenblatt returned to this theme of the interdependence of the individual and the community consistently throughout her editorials, it seems reasonable to underscore the importance of such a social perspective to the theory of literature that she subsequently developed. If we ignore her concern for the conditions of public dialogue, we also fail to appreciate fully the weight she places on the real world consequences of how a person reads.

After graduating from Barnard, Rosenblatt went on to study at the University of Grenoble, before eventually ending up at the Sorbonne, where in 1931 she completed a dissertation for her doctorate in comparative literature entitled L'idée de l'art pour l'art dans la littérature anglaise pendant la période Victorienne. We might, naturally, expect that scholarly work in a literary discipline would have caused Rosenblatt to leave behind the social concerns expressed in her earlier editorials. Instead, she continued her project of exploring the dialogue conditions that best encouraged a vital democratic culture—in this instance, the crucial relation between writers and their reading public. Specifically her dissertation focused on "the theories of art for art's sake developed by nineteenth-century English and French writers to combat the pressures of an uncomprehending or hostile society" (Rosenblatt, The Reader xi). And it was in this study that Rosenblatt saw her life's work in literature education as unfolding:

In the concluding pages, I stated the need for a public of readers able to "participate fully in the poetic experience"—readers able to provide a nurturing, free environment for poets and other artists of the word. Their texts possess, I believed, the highest potentialities for bringing the whole human personality, as Coleridge had said, "into activity." Here already was the germ of an increasingly intense preoccupation with the importance, to the arts and to society, of the education of readers of literature. (xi)

In one published offshoot of her dissertation, Rosenblatt charted the compromised artistic course taken by Robert Louis Stevenson. Bowing to the prudishness of the Victorian English reading public, Stevenson produced a fiction based in "romance," a region of the
embodied imagination where “the writer need never meet the challenge of a moral issue; in which indeed, to avoid moral choices is an artistic merit” (“The Writer’s Dilemma” 204). Such a strategy, while ensuring his financial success, meant that he failed to apply his artistic talents and vision to explore any realm of intimate relations. In this sense Stevenson would be classed with those authors who out of expediency disavow their “artistic freedom.” He chose rather to cut himself “off from almost all the most significant and most profound materials of human life, consciously restricting himself to those aspects of experience which were safe precisely because of their lack of moral significance for his time” (207).

Such a denial of will was significant to Rosenblatt because it also denied society those critical voices that could imaginatively embody and survey the ethical landscape, the space within which a community’s values are tested, refined, and extended. Without this moral attention, living reduces to a matter of behavior as opposed to responsible conduct. The fundamental conversation between conscience and action is severed when a society’s artists are rendered mute. Rosenblatt again suggested the importance of the circumstances that made artistic expression or response possible. Public education, in other words, could help create the necessary audience for literature, an audience that should be open and receptive even as it is critical, able to connect the writer’s vision with the reader’s private concerns. As Rosenblatt explained,

The only guarantee against the necessity for the artist’s flight from the most vital materials of his time is an aggressive public sense of the artist’s right to tread seemingly dangerous ground, and a willingness on the part of the reading public to have its fundamental prejudices and presumptions challenged. Only under such circumstances could we feel sure that art might flourish with complete honesty and the writer seek out the materials entirely congenial to his mind and talent. (210)

Still, Rosenblatt acknowledged, numerous obstacles block the road to a society where such freedom might exist that institutions and traditions, both public and private, would be continually open to scrutiny.

Such propitious conditions will be created only when we become conscious of the automatic tendencies of our culture, when we see what taboos are imposed upon the artist, what intellectual barriers set up, and when we seek to counteract those automatic pressures. Otherwise, as we saw in the case of the Victorian attitude toward sex, excess and irrationality in one direction will stifle the free play of mind, and inevitably bring an equally excessive and irrational reaction. (210)

And though society might never become completely self-critical, citizens need enough self-consciousness to avoid becoming complacent about their tolerance for diversity. For without “a social atmosphere that welcomes challenge,” art has difficulty flourishing (211).

Given her unique combination of social and literary concerns, her doctorate in comparative literature, her undergraduate and graduate studies in anthropology, and her experience of teaching undergraduates at Barnard, Rosenblatt was especially well prepared to write a book that would attempt to offer a positive and practical demonstration of literature teaching, rather than the usual negative progressive attack on the existing traditional arrangements that dominated the schools. Literature as Exploration contained a deliberate social agenda for teaching literature in the schools, one that had been evolving in Rosenblatt’s mind since her editorials at Barnard. Specifically targeted for teachers of adolescents in college and secondary school, the book turned out to be equally appropriate for teachers at all levels.

If an author’s stated intentions are to be given any weight, it will pay to mark the words she wrote in her preface to the first edition:

My aim in this book is to demonstrate that the study of literature can have a very real, and even central, relation to the points of growth in the social and cultural life of a democracy. (ix)

Having tactically deployed the word “democracy,” she continued:

Viewing literature in its relations to the diverse needs of human beings, this book will seek to answer the questions: “How can the study of literature foster a sounder understanding of life and nourish the development of balanced, humane personalities?” “How can the teacher minister to the love of literature, initiate his students into its delights, and at the same time further these broader aims?” (x)

With these questions in mind, an educational proposal would only be appropriate if it included some kind of transactional process that began with the individual student and then had that student participate in sharing and contesting with other students as part of a dialogue of inquiry and interpretation. And although values are the province of literature, how they are understood, finally, depends very much on the way they are evoked and considered.

Like any text, Literature as Exploration can, of course, be interpreted from a variety of perspectives. Typically, when Rosenblatt speaks in the following tone, she is seen as offering a universal appeal for the importance of literature as a way of “exploring” and celebrating human experience:

The literary works that students are urged to read offer not only “literary” values, to use a currently favored abstraction, but also some
approach to life, some image of people working out a common fate, or some assertion that certain kinds of experiences, certain modes of feeling, are valuable. (20)

In turn, passages such as the following are pointed to as revealing her wisdom, with its characteristic "progressive" stamp, as to how literature should be taught in the schools:

A situation conducive to free exchange of ideas by no means represents a passive or negative attitude on the part of the teacher. . . . Certainly, lively, untrammeled discussion bespeaks an admirable educational setting. The fact that the student is articulate and eager to express himself is a wholesome sign. (71, 75)

Finally, when Rosenblatt directs our attention to an educational issue, as in her statement that "the problem that the teacher faces first of all is the creation of a situation favorable to a vital experience of literature" (61), her central lesson is seen as accentuating the teacher's obligation to respect and encourage the individual reading responses of the students.

The alternate interpretation that I am proposing does not deny these emphases; rather, it seeks to establish the social reasons behind her discovery of the reader. Rosenblatt's choice to emphasize "evocation and response" is not based on the results of some independent, "objective" investigation of a reader's processes of reading; instead, she privileges the individual reader only within a dynamic social context that fosters the values of a democracy. Indeed it is crucial that we do not lose sight of this word democracy in any discussion of Rosenblatt's work, though this is precisely what happened in the revision of Literature as Exploration. This key word (and also words such as freedom and character), although figuring prominently in the index of Literature as Exploration. This key word (and also words such as freedom and character), although figuring prominently in the index of the 1938 edition, is not listed in the second edition (1968). Similarly, when one looks up "values" in the 1938 edition one finds "in a democracy, 191-263," but under the same word in the later edition, the closest entry is "development in modern society, 164-165." We might question the extent to which this second index in fact represents a "re-reading" (or "mis-reading") of Rosenblatt.

Throughout Literature as Exploration Rosenblatt never sees literary training as existing in isolation, but instead stresses that what goes on in the literature classroom involves furthering "the assimilation of habits of thought conducive to social understanding" (22). The entire argument of the book, in fact, centers on the responsibility of the English teacher, who can play an important part in this process, since the student's social adjustments may be more deeply influenced by what he absorbs through literature than by what he learns through the theoretical materials of the usual social science course. (22)

This inevitably is what can happen in a transactional literature classroom where the teacher is never the sole and dominating reader. For, "when the student has been moved by a work of literature, he will be led to ponder on questions of right or wrong, of admirable or antisocial qualities, of justifiable or unjustifiable actions" (17). The literary work, in other words, concretely embodies the abstractions of other human disciplines and thus provides a direct means for students to entertain considerations of human actions and motives.

What can seem at times a ponderous dwelling on ethics and social values is only Rosenblatt's insistence that democracy is a function of the quality of life and relationships earned from below, not a result of privileges dogmatically dispensed from above. And naturally she fears for the fragility of these social arrangements, which the human temperament seems always on the verge of relinquishing. It is easier to be told what to do, yet if resistance to this urge is not developed early and often in our educational institutions, the risk of externally imposed "solutions" is great:

Obviously, a rigid set of dogmatic ideas and fixed responses to specific conditions is the worst kind of equipment for the contemporary youth. As soon as actual conditions prove that his passively acquired code is useless or even harmful, he has nothing else to cling to. Having been made dependent upon ready-made props, he will be precipitated into painful insecurity. This kind of insecurity, this craving for some easy, reassuring formula, makes the youth of other countries and sometimes our own a ready prey to those enemies of democracy who hold out the delusive bait of ready-made solutions to all problems. Unprepared to think independently, the young man and woman seek to return to the infantile state in which there is no responsibility to make decisions; they are thus willing to blindly follow some "leader" whose tools and prey they become. (129)

The best educational defense against the "true believer," against the mechanically automated student, is a transactional program of teaching/learning, which reinforces one's faith in one's own judgments, even as these judgments are open to question. This is always the delicate balance, how to keep belief from degenerating into dogma. The deepest tension that Rosenblatt identifies as animating the American experience is between "voluntarism" and "social determinism." The course of our behaviors can be plotted against the perils of these two shores, as on one occasion we cultivate personal interest and ignore the group and on the next we bow to social constraints and pledge blind allegiance. The danger, Rosenblatt points
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In the dialectical method of back and forth mediation between reader and text and then the reader outwitted to the social context, Rosenblatt's unique contribution is that the reader brings to the text an understanding and appreciation of the social context that informs the text. This relationship is reciprocal, with the text inspiring and challenging the reader to reflect on their own experiences and perspectives. Rosenblatt's model encourages a balance between the personal and the social, allowing for a deeper engagement with the text.

Rosenblatt's transactional approach to teaching literature has important implications for text selection when personal classroom dialogue is important. Writing in 1940, two years after the publication of Literature as Exploration, Rosenblatt argued for a balance between contemporary works and "timeless" classics. She suggested that judgment only grows through use—in a democracy it cannot be legislated or imparted from above. "Individual miniatures of the past," as she termed them, are essential for the development of the power to discriminate and to accept what is good and reject what is valueless in literature and in life.
Further, if we lived under a different set of social values, such as the absolute subordination of the self to the family that is characteristic of the East, our research and educational agenda would not be the same. Transactionalism is not for all societies, and indeed the different sides in the “reader-response” debates reflect not “reality” but alternate “socially constructed” experiences and traditions.

The transactional model, of course, describes how many people in contemporary times seem to go about reading—it has construct validity. Indeed, it settles the contest over how much “meaning” resides in the reader and how much is text-governed by revealing such arguments to be futile exercises in the first place, since neither category exists in isolation of the other. Such enerating, and false, dilemmas, including outlandish claims as “the words on the page offer no constraints to interpretation,” only come about when the context of social vision—democracy in this case—is forgotten or conveniently ignored. When we examine phenomena, we tend to have a synchronic perspective, and thus we frequently forget that the phenomenon came from somewhere, has a history that is the result of certain value choices. If we try to look at the reader/text relationship as a stationary absolute, we ignore that the relation is an artifact of a particular set of socially constituted values. It’s never just reader/text/poem, but readers testing readings in a public arena and then modifying accordingly—the essence of the democratic process. With respect to the interpretive maneuver, it’s the individual as part of a social game and the kinds of character and behavior this engenders that’s important, not any actual spoils of victory (some absolutely determined “meaning”). For what matters, Rosenblatt demonstrates over and over, is the balance or moderation that must be reinforced as part of the educational process of the young, as part of their coming to terms with the collaborative role of the text. And what better way than through the reading of literature, which yokes the self with the group by beginning with the wellsprings of the individual reader and ending with the dynamics of public validation, including the respective cycles of consensus and change.

Reader-response criticism that stops short of dialogue is not worthy of the name; it is something other than education for democracy. But critics and teachers get nervous when talk shifts to citizenship, democracy, or character development, so they retreat to the aesthetic back alleys of individual readings. Because Rosenblatt never wants to lose sight of our need for a verifying community to participate in, one that serves as an anchoring referent point for our readings, she separates herself from Holland and the other “egocentric” reader-response approaches to literature (The Reader xiii; see also “The Transactional Theory”). On the other hand, it seems appropriate to ask to what extent other critics in the reader-response domain—say someone like Wolfgang Iser, the leading Reception theorist—share a common agenda with Rosenblatt, since on the surface at least their work appears to be similarly engaged, even if there are disagreements as to specific features of the reading act. Yet despite the fact that both have long concentrated on the reader and the reader’s processes of reading, one resides in the fiction of the compartmentalized individual, an “implied reader” dominated by the conditions of indeterminacy provided by the text, while the other manifests a concern for the reader in a dynamic social matrix, one which forms the space wherein individual responses and interpretations emerge and evolve. Iser, in other words, at most offers the reader a dyadic conversation with an author and in doing so ignores the process of group “problem solving.” In contrast, Rosenblatt sees such group effort as supportive of individual human agency. Indeed it characterizes reading in nonhierarchial, democratic classrooms where students are continually part of the circle of praxis, moving from understanding to decision to action.

One reason Rosenblatt refuses to see reading and a literary education in isolation lies in her awareness of the forces inimical to the democratic traditions in America. In her remarkable essay on Whitman’s Democratic Vistas, published in 1978, the same year as The Reader, the Text, the Poem, Rosenblatt carries forward her preoccupation with the kind of social relations required to mediate American pluralism successfully. Consistent with the points she has been driving home since her 1923 editorials—the need through public forums for individuals to assert their unique positions and yet simultaneously to listen to and try to understand the beliefs of other groups—in this essay, she squarely faces the opportunities and dilemmas of democracy. While in 1923 she was promoting communication among the cliques surrounding her at Barnard, in 1978 she is still trying to encourage, with Whitmanesque largess, a rational conversation across the ethnic mixtures that make up America. Specifically, Rosenblatt addresses the question: “Is there room for the new ethnicity in Whitman’s view of the state as an aggregate whose prime justification is that it creates the stable environment within which the individual can freely and fully develop?” (197). If we are to maintain the creative tension of our culture, we must always be clear what it is competing against and how literature itself embodies a range of conflicting values:

... although Whitman accepts the perennial, universal elements derived from earlier literatures, he again and again reminds us that these older cultures embody much that is alien to, and inimical to, the ideal of democracy. Thus, he enjoins us an active selectivity, a
testing, a rejection of all derived from our ancestry that is alien to the special needs of a free society, all that cramps and confines the individual.

Through this aspect of his vision Whitman warns us against a possible danger in the new ethnicity, the danger that membership in the group may impose its own kind of rigid conformity upon the individual. (199)

The transactional teaching of literature becomes a primary way of protecting against the dangers of the new ethnicity, for by beginning with an individual reader's response the teacher establishes a countervailing force to work against the later constraining of interpretation by the group as a whole. If students are to experience the entire cycle of interpretation, it is important that the teacher not immediately contaminate or direct students toward preordained answers or meanings.

This need for the teacher to create a community that fosters individuality, not stifles it, Rosenblatt finds growing out of "Whitman's other fundamental principle of democracy":

...the need for unity, for an American identity that, though composite, pluralistic, including multitudes, still creates the solidarity which makes possible the freedom of each segment, and of each individual within it. (201)

Rosenblatt is, of course, aware of how much and how often we fall short of the goals of democracy in our classroom, but she maintains her spirit of optimism in closing her essay:

Whitman can be listened to because he, too, looked squarely at the distortions and defections of the society about him, and nevertheless could predict the ability of our democratic institutions to surmount them, to persist, and to advance. His vistas extend far beyond the century that separates us from him...Whitman calls equally on each of us to be ready to listen to those who, sharing his faith in the democratic idea, and refusing either complacency or despair, would seek to inspire us to create the symphony of a society of free, varied, mutually respecting men and women. (203-4)

This optimism characterizes an American faith in progress and the future, a feeling that we are part of an experiment that is continually unfolding. As Whitman spoke prophetically: "[Democracy] is a great word, whose history, I suppose, remains unwritten, because that history has yet to be enacted." (1157). Typically, Rosenblatt expresses this faith in ways such as, "There is the recurrent theme of aspiration toward an ever more democratic and humane way of life" (Literature 270). In the light of this kind of aspiration, her vision for literature education in a democracy remains steadfast: it must inevitably influence the character patterns citizens will need to exhibit if the possibilities of democracy are to continue.
Rosenblatt again asserts the primacy of the social context for her work: "The transactional theory, with its sense of the individual reader and the individual text as bearers of culture creating new cultural events in unique transactions provides a critical framework" (106).

Similarly, in Writing and Reading: The Transactional Theory, published in 1988 by the Center for the Study of Reading, Rosenblatt bases her consideration of the reciprocity of reading and composing on the fact that language in whatever mode does not "function in isolation, but always in particular verbal, personal, and social contexts" (3). As she continues, she stresses that personal meanings evolve out of social dialogue:

The individual's share in the language, then, is that part, or set of features, of the public system that has been internalized in the individual's experiences with words in life situations. The residue of such transactions in particular natural and social contexts constitutes a kind of linguistic-experiential reservoir. Embodying our funded assumptions, attitudes, and expectations about the world—and about language—this inner capital is all that each of us has to start from in speaking, listening, writing, and reading. We make meaning, we make sense of a new situation or transaction, by applying, reorganizing, revising, or extending elements drawn from, selected from, our personal linguistic experiential reservoir. (3)

On the reading side of the equation, after noting her distinction between efferent and aesthetic reading stances and the mixing of private and public meanings in each case, she uncovers a crucial reason why a broad-based reading of literature is foundational to a democratic society: "Someone else can read a text efferently for us, and acceptably paraphrase it. No one else can read aesthetically, that is, experience the evocation of, a literary work of art for us" (6). Literary texts are central to education for democracy because they affirm and confirm, through the personal acts of aesthetic evocation that are necessary to access them, the uniqueness of the individual even while insisting that such acts inevitably relate to sharing and participation in the action of a larger community—because literature is never merely knowledge or propaganda, one reader can never be substituted for another. And it is within this community, when we make our underlying assumptions explicit, that we come to understand "the tacit sources of disagreement. Hence the possibility of change and of revision of the criteria. Such self-awareness on the part of readers can also foster communication across social, cultural, and historical differences between reader and author, and among readers" (6–7).

Rosenblatt's social agenda for the reading of literature continues to place her outside of traditional academic literary concerns even with the rise of reader-response criticism, because she has refused to separate acts of interpretation from their social implications. As Jane Tompkins argues in her provocative analysis, the focus of reader-response criticism has for the most part only been an excuse for a new formalism, not a campaign for emphasizing how words are marshaled by authors to bring about specific social effects on readers. As Tompkins elaborates:

"Literature [during the Renaissance] exists in order to serve its clientele and is subject to the audience's judgment. In the modern period, on the other hand, the work is not written for a known constituency, nor is it intended to have such well-defined results. Instead of moving the audience and bringing pressure to bear on the world, the work is thought to present another separate and more perfect world, which the flawed reader must labor to appropriate. The work is not a gesture in a social situation, or an ideal model for human behavior, but an interplay of formal and thematic properties to be penetrated by the critic's mind. (210)

When both the reading and teaching of literature are disconnected from any vital relationship with how the forms of social life in a democracy are to be determined, "the art product loses its power to influence public opinion on matters of national importance" (213). In tracing the history of literature's declining influence, from the ancients to the present time, Tompkins sees the cultivation of the individual in splendid isolation, rather than in constant dialogue with others. For instance, the literature of feeling—sentimental and Gothic novels or the poetry of sensibility—can be viewed as having been "designed to give the reader certain kinds of emotional experience rather than to mold character or guide behavior, and is aimed at the psychic life of individuals rather than at collective standards of judgment on public issues" (215). By shifting the reader's attention from a course of action to "meaning" divination, most modern literary theorizing has created a safe zone away from any practical concerns regarding life in a democracy.

Not surprisingly, Tompkins herself, despite her radical position, is still steeped in a literary critical tradition that has found it convenient to ignore Rosenblatt's message. Rather than representing her with an essay in the collection Reader-Response Criticism, Tompkins only provides an afterthought footnote in her introduction:

Louise Rosenblatt deserves to be recognized as the first among the present generation of critics in this country to describe empirically the way the reader's reactions to a poem are responsible for any subsequent interpretation of it. Her work... raise[s] issues central to the debates that have arisen since. (xxvi)
Then, in her essay that concludes the collection, Tompkins uncritically lumps Rosenblatt with Fish and Holland when she remarks, “For although reader-oriented critics speak of the ‘poem as event’ and of ‘literature as experience,’ meaning is still for them the object of the critical act” (206). This reference to Rosenblatt’s College English article, “The Poem as Event,” fails to distinguish the context that would clearly separate her from these other critics, namely that there are important pedagogical consequences for a democracy when a student is not encouraged to join in the evocation and interpretation of the poem. Critics like Holland and Bleich do, of course, permit students the opportunity to evoke and interpret; however, their extreme focus on the reader’s identity pattern serves to retard the more complete reading cycle that the transactional model represents, and thus the student is frequently left with no bridge to the social consequences of a “reading” (see “The Transactional Theory”).

Tompkins’s essay also foreshadows the triumph of the “cultural critics” whose approach Rosenblatt’s own work both anticipated and transcended. With the sociopolitical emphasis that has emerged in the current post-deconstructionist phase of criticism, it is popular (especially among Marxists) to use the techniques of reading to disclose underlying assumptions, the network of ideological constraints that determine both a reader’s reading and being. Such a maneuver, however, is seldom innocent or neutral; its main interest is attacking “Western” ideology. Rosenblatt’s anthropological background and the frequency with which, in Literature as Exploration, she refers students to the social, moral, and psychological assumptions that are implicit and taken for granted in the literary work as experienced might initially lead us to include her with this group of critics. But there is a crucial difference: Rosenblatt has never fostered the notion that the individual is solely created, “written,” by the culture, by its codes and conventions. Unlike those critics who want “disclosure” to paint a negative picture of “Western” values, values which they see as subjugating individuals to subservience under capitalism, she insists on helping students to discriminate between what should be rejected and what should be retained and strengthened. This kind of critical discrimination requires, of course, some set of values, in this instance the values of democracy:

Any system of values can be scrutinized in terms of its consequences for human life. Any form of conduct, any social mechanism, any custom or institution, should be measured in terms of its actual effect on the individual personalities that make up the society. To use the culturally sanctioned terminology, every human being is entitled to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” . . . This rests upon the belief in the fundamental dignity and worth of the human being. It sets up the well-being and fulfillment of the individual in opposition to any abstractions for which might be claimed a superior reality or value such as the Elect, the Superman, the Proletariat, the Nation, the Race, or the State. This basic postulate of value is obviously one that receives support from many elements present in our cultural heritage. Implicit in various religious philosophies or in the democratic philosophy, it applies not only to our political but also to our social and economic life. (Literature 165–66; see also “Language” 72–74)

Rosenblatt answers the “cultural critics,” who justify their covert indoctrination of antidemocratic, anti-American attitudes by insisting that all teaching ultimately indoctrinates political attitudes, when in her writings she challenges us to openly “indoctrinate” the basic concepts of a democratic system. This avowed presentation of democratic principles helps to protect students from covert indoctrination of completely negative attitudes toward our society and to preserve students’ freedom to make up their own minds about what to accept and what to reject. Further, it sees literature study as part of a broader movement to foster constructive social transformation, while avoiding the “alienation” and antihuman values unwittingly invited by the “cultural critics.”

As I hope is now evident, the intention and force behind Rosenblatt’s ideas are most starkly revealed when she addresses broad cultural/social issues in order to provide a context for dwelling on specific problems of reading and the teaching of literature. What we read in such passages, beginning with her editorials at Barnard in 1923, allows us to see a consistent picture of her lifelong social vision and activism. Her readers are generally misled if they think they can understand the meaning and significance of her work by only concentrating on “objective” considerations of the reading act. While the interpretive and aesthetic processes of individual readers have been a central preoccupation of hers, this inquiry has always been in the service of her social/educational mission, one that has focused on her fundamental concern for how best to characterize and shape the citizenship roles required to further the unique democratic experiment that continues to take place on American shores. Her guiding question has consistently remained: “To what extent . . . is . . . literary study in the schools contributing to the persistent hold of habits of thought and images of behavior no longer appropriate to our present-day knowledge and our aspirations for a more democratic way of life?” (“Moderns” 106).

Teachers of English, Rosenblatt keeps reminding us, can contribute in an important way to creating the character of future citizens. They can model and encourage a social script for students who in turn must become members of a larger society, which, because it will never
have all the answers, depends on rational discourse as the basis for decision making and action taking. This is a society continually trying to understand how it is that an individual's freedom and possibilities are most expanded when there is a creative balance between self and group. In this sense Rosenblatt's seminal contribution to English education derives from her social concerns as they are translated into an agenda for individual readers. Unfortunately, a narrow research focus on "reader response" has deflected us from recognizing both the greatness of her work and its peculiarly American character. For as she has declared,

If we only do justice to the potentialities inherent in literature itself, we can make a vital social contribution. As the student vicariously shares through literature the emotions and aspirations of other human beings, he can gain heightened sensitivity to the needs and problems of others remote from him in temperament, in space, or in social environment; he can develop a greater imaginative capacity to grasp the meaning of abstract laws or political and social theories for actual human lives. Such sensitivity and imagination are part of the indispensable equipment of the citizen of a democracy. (Literature 274)

Rosenblatt's theory, like the democratic enterprise itself, seeks the benefits of the relationship that grows out of the tension between freedom and discipline. While other political configurations would deny this tension by submerging the "self" in hierarchical shackles, it is the American genius to try to respect the diversity of minority rights and views even as these appear to threaten the hegemony of dominant values. If such an American clearinghouse is to continue, there must be citizens with sufficient confidence to value and proclaim their own interpretations even as they tolerate and rationally discriminate among the interpretations of others. And further, in dialogue, such citizens must be willing to keep reexamining their own structures in the light of new and rational information. The transactional model of reading literature, the lived-through experience of the text, provides a self-renewing framework for realizing this goal.

Notes

1. "I was amazed to read your account of the reports of the Dewey and Kilpatrick lectures in the Bulletin. I have no recollection of hearing either. My recollections of Dewey date back to the thirties, but not before. Perhaps this documents the fact that my interest in teaching (rather than general social theory) dates from the time when I started teaching. Before then, I took what went on in classrooms pretty much for granted." (letter from Rosenblatt to the author, January 12, 1989)

2. As early as her sophomore year at Barnard, Rosenblatt was studying anthropology in a course taught by Franz Boas.

3. "Sidney Ratner did the first index. Noble and Noble had someone do the second—without any ideological 'influence,' but simply an impersonal indexer, I suspect." (letter from Rosenblatt to the author, January 12, 1989)

4. "This view is based on the idea that any behavior can be interpreted as having been willed by the actor. The assumption is that in all situations the individual is free to accept or reject various modes of behavior" (144).

5. "... the individual is merely a kind of automaton entirely at the mercy of external pressures" (155).

6. Of course, it is important to emphasize here that Rosenblatt herself never means to imply any mechanistic notion of influence. As she remarks in Literature as Exploration, "This view of literature study is completely alien to the old notion of 'character building through literature,' which consisted in giving the student, without any regard for his own needs and state of mind, a series of models of behavior to imitate. Equally unacceptable are attempts to treat literature as a body of documents that may be brought forth to illustrate various subtopics under the heading of human relations. Lists of books dealing with topics such as family, war, labor relations—let alone such moralistic topics as noble characters or great deeds of the past—will not in themselves do the job that has been formulated in this book" (247).

7. It is interesting to note that in this article Rosenblatt also speaks directly to the central role of public speaking in developing readers and writers: "In a favorable educational environment, speech is a vital ingredient. Its importance in the individual's acquisition of a linguistic/experiential capital is clear. Moreover, it can be an extremely important medium in the classroom. Interchange, dialogue, between teacher and students and among students, can foster growth and cross-fertilization in both the reading and writing processes. Such transactions can help students to develop metalinguistic insights in a highly personal and, hence, instructive way. The aim should be, not simple 'correct' or 'excellent' performance, but metalinguistic understanding of skills and conventions in meaningful contexts" (13).

Works Cited


On Behalf of Pedagogy

Mariolina Salvatori

Pedagogy always echoes epistemology: the way we teach reflects the conception we have of what knowledge is and does, the way we think about thinking.

Ann E. Berthoff, The Making of Meaning

In his foreword to the third edition of Literature as Exploration (1976), Alan Purves writes: “The nearly forty years since the first publication of Literature as Exploration have seen a number of shifts in literary theory and the practice of teaching literature in schools and colleges in the United States. Through these permutations, Louise Rosenblatt’s magnificent discussion of the relationship between reader and literary work has remained the major document on that subject. Critical and pedagogical theory being two fields noticeably subject to vicissitudes, one might be surprised that a book that bridges the two would have so long a life” (iii).

Indeed, I agree with Purves, one of the strengths of Literature as Exploration, and in fact its most significant feature, is the consistent integration of theory and practice, both in terms of what the text proposes and of how that is enacted. One might say, following Ann E. Berthoff, that Rosenblatt’s work lucidly demonstrates that theory is not the antithesis of practice, and in fact it serves an authentic purpose because it is continually brought into relationship with practice so that each informs the other. Yet, I will suggest, possibly because critical and pedagogical theories, for complex historical, ideological, and institutional reasons have been and still largely continue to be conceived as separate from, if not in opposition to, one another, this...