Louise M. Rosenblatt’s ideas not only revolutionized our teaching–learning practices in English, they continue to inspire us in these contentious political times. In 1948, when Louise joined the faculty of the School of Education at New York University, she was making a profound commitment to a broad and inclusive vision of public education, especially as it affected the lives of each and every student in the English classroom. Previously she had been an assistant professor of English at Brooklyn College and could have held her own in any liberal arts English faculty at the university level. Her move to a school of education, however, involved her overtly making a statement about our need to bridge the gap between the professional study of English literature and the general teaching of English at the secondary level.

While at NYU, Louise devoted herself to making sure that preservice teachers experienced directly the kind of literature instruction that they should be practicing with students once they entered their own classrooms. Recognizing that teachers tend to replicate how they themselves have been taught as students, even when it frustrated and silenced them, Louise insisted that the traditional monologue of literature instruction at the college level be transformed into a dialogue, whereby professor and student engage jointly in exploring and challenging the literary works being read together. This approach, of course, represented a radical departure from the normal experience of college English majors, who for the most part had been connected to works of literature through the authoritative, expert reading interpretations of their professors.

Louise’s development of and commitment to the democratization of the reading process directly paralleled her dedication to her students through open acts of teaching and learning in the classroom. At NYU, she received a prestigious “Great Teacher Award” and continued teaching there until her so-called retirement in 1972. Of course, Louise could not simply leave her chief passion, the stimulating discussion environment of the classroom, so she subsequently continued work as a visiting professor at a number of institutions, including Rutgers and the University of Miami. For Louise, there was always one more student who needed attending to, always one more idea requiring clarification, always one more point to be made in the ongoing great debate between the reader and the text. Indeed, I am tempted to conclude that Louise’s remarkable vitality and longevity in part derived from, to borrow a phrase from Robert Frost, her lover’s quarrel with the world. For she realized that the traditional patterns of authority that she was resisting would never yield willingly. Yet the sheer joy of living amid the diversity of human encounter kept her will resolute, and till the end she remained an active participant on the barricades.

Louise’s impact on the teaching of English at all levels has of course been extraordinary. Having articulated the transactional theory of reading...
literature in her first published book in 1938, *Literature as Exploration*, Louise went on to champion this democratic approach to teaching English through numerous publications. In 1978, her second important book, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, introduced us to the concept of an *efferent* and *aesthetic* reading continuum. Further, the book helped us understand that her transactional theory was different than what was being advocated by the so-called reader-response theorists. When we begin with a focus on the reader’s enactment of the literary text, or any text for that matter, we are beginning an important cycle, one that can only be completed by some social act of *discussion*. Checking and extending our readings with the readings of others helps overcome our blind spots. In this way, Louise was telling us that democratic teaching in the English classroom involves the patient but insistent mediation of self and others, of the individual and the group. For democratic teaching in its various forms is always seeking to honor, even as it critiques, multiple points of view, testing. What, both internally and externally, gave rise to the response? And what are the personal and social consequences of the response or interpretation? In other words, honoring a reader’s subjectivity and personal connection never ends an interpretive journey; rather, it should be the first step in welcoming the reality of other reader subjectivities. This plurality of subjectivities, along with the constraints of the words of the text, requires careful attention, because the *individual* reader is simultaneously a *social* reader working within both the confines and possibilities of a shared language and culture. Thus, one thing we might strive to understand better as teachers of literature, and of literacy, is how the acceptance and subsequent critiquing of any student response can be carried out in ways that do not undercut the student reader’s confidence, something we have been trying hard to foster in the first place.

Not surprisingly, much in our society and our schools conspires against the kind of *discussion* approach to the teaching of literature that Louise so strongly advocated for all of her life. As she persistently maintained, no one can read the poem for you, and this stubborn fact has a way of subverting the carefully constructed lesson. As Louise warned in her article, “The Acid Test for Literature Teaching” (1956; reprinted in *Making Meaning with Texts*, Heinemann, chap. 5), written half a century ago:

It is much easier in the classroom to deal with ideas and information about literature than it is with literature itself, as it resides in the myriad transactions between individuals and books. To help a young reader to reflect critically on his own response is indeed challenging to him and to the teacher. Naturally, the tendency is to concentrate on the easily checked “facts” of the story or play, or to present information about literary history, or to discuss the often entertaining items about the life of the author. Hence it is that in many classrooms pupils learn to ignore or even distrust their own responses to literature. They may therefore reject literature altogether as irrelevant to themselves. Or they may divert their original interest in literature to studies around and about literature.

Yet, if the reading responses offered by individual students pose a threat to the orderly procedures of classroom instruction, what is perhaps even more troubling are the undeveloped scripts of democratic practice itself, for as far as Louise was concerned, democracy was foundational to our teaching efforts.
During my conversations with Louise as we prepared for the panel presentation to celebrate her 100th birthday at the NCTE Annual Convention in November 2004, she frequently reiterated how distraught she had become over the current political and educational climate, which was attempting to muffle dissent, and accordingly silencing what should be democracy’s plurality of voices. She was deeply worried about the state of our public discourse, how it too often degenerated into dogmatic lines of demarcation—us versus them—rather than worked to establish a zone of “neutral” but vigorous dialogue where considerations of reason and evidence, not raw wealth and power, might prevail. Having lived through all of the wars of the twentieth century in which the United States has fought, Louise commented to me how each war seemed to serve as

... an excuse for various factions of the government—convinced somehow, despite our Constitution with its Bill of Rights, that free access to information regarding how the war effort was being conducted would fuel criticism of what they took to be the correctness of their position—to attempt to limit our freedom by restricting what could be read (and thus what was open to interpretation), and to dampen what was written and spoken about the war, especially if it was negative. Equating criticism with the “unpatriotic” was a way of coercing silence and sending the message that someone in authority was more properly prepared to speak on behalf of what the government was doing.

The stifling of dissent during times of war is a long way, of course, from English teachers enforcing a dominant “reading” of the literary text in their English classrooms; however, the similarity in pattern and intention should not escape our notice. For surely we must wonder: what kinds of social order and privileged hierarchy are being set in motion in teacher-centered classrooms? How does the disrespecting and eventual silencing of response allow learning to be replaced with testing and accountability? Indeed, might the open expression of student interpretations actually be seen as a form of dissent and thus as a challenge to the existing moral order?

Louise knew that what John Dewey termed “the vital habits” of democracy—the ability to follow an argument, grasp the point of view of another, expand the boundaries of understanding, debate the alternative purposes that might be pursued—must be actively promoted and practiced in our schools if we were going to develop the kind of citizens who are able to keep alive a tradition of productive dissent.1 By authorizing each student reader within a context of supportive criticism and multiple perspectives, Louise’s legacy permits us to remember the necessary linkage between a mindful education and the strengthening of democratic values. Each time we live her theory alongside the offerings of our own students—“I’m having responses to and problems with this poem, myself!”—we keep Louise’s memory alive and pass along her wisdom to succeeding generations.

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