In Memoriam

Louise M. Rosenblatt

The year I arrived to teach at New York University, 1971, began Louise's last year there, for federal legislation back then mandated a retirement age of sixty-eight for those in academia. How fortunate for all of us whose personal and professional lives have been profoundly inspired by her work that Louise never abided by such artificial time limits. Her extraordinary living presence as an English educator truly spanned generations. In working with each succeeding group of new teachers, it was singularly important for me to be able to assert an extended pattern of professional and intellectual continuity by pointing to the democratic reading principles championed by Louise. At any point, there she stood, the alpha and omega of English educators across the country committed to creating transactional experiences for their students. Glancing backward to what seemed like words from a distant Deweyan past, her pioneering text written in 1938, *Literature as Exploration*, served as the central precedent for our continuing journey of inquiry together. This meant that reading literature in ways that deeply honor student responses was never simply some vogueish educational “reform” or motivational scheme invented for the next cycle of curriculum half-lives. In the other direction, moving forward, I could continually point to Louise as a grand ally: in her seventies completing *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* while having an increasing influence on reading and literature at all levels of teaching, then onward into her eighties, her nineties, and finally reaching one hundred, still clearly articulating and extending the message of democratic living, her spirit never flagging, a beacon of hope even when the fortunes of progressivism seem on the wane.

Although her personal background can never adequately account for Louise’s seminal ideas that came to shape our practices in the teaching and learning of English, it is worth noting the important influence of her family and certain teachers on encouraging her to be an agnostic reader and to value intellectual endeavor. First-generation Jewish immigrants from Europe, Louise’s parents created a hard-working and modest household where serious conversation instilled a deep sense of social critique as a way of increasing the possibilities of equity and justice. Presciently, her parents named her after Louise Michel (1830–1905), a modern-day Joan of Arc for the downtrodden in France, who played a key role in the Paris Commune of 1871 and who, throughout her life as a teacher, wrote and organized on behalf of exploited workers. The conviction of Louise Michel’s strong feelings against tyranny and the injustice that results from it resonate in these lines of her poetry:

I have seen criminals and whores
And spoken with them. Now I inquire
If you believe them made as now they are
To drag their rags in blood and mire
Preordained, an evil race?

You to whom all men are prey
Have made them what they are today.

Such a heritage shaped and committed our Louise to a sensibility founded on fairness and dedicated to spreading democratic principles that would counter the corrupting force of privilege and unbridled political power.

In high school Louise actually excelled in mathematics. Her classroom instruction in English, she once confided to me, mostly involved a teacher reading from a text outlining the history of the English language. Most important, however, was the fact that her teacher explicitly connected with Louise beyond the immediate classroom lessons, and this
proved to be compelling as it challenged her in her reading and underscored how crucial the teacher-student relationship is for inviting the young into critical conversation. Also during this period Louise wrote a number of stories and articles for a school literary magazine, and the great deal of reading she did on her own was daily encouraged by her parents. In short, this was an ideal environment for establishing a democratic disposition toward reading, one that valued the agency of individual readers but always in a socially collaborative and exploratory way.

Later in her career, Sidney Ratner, her husband and supportive life partner, often kidded Louise when she spoke out strongly to make sure that misinterpretations of her ideas did not take root. “You’ve let the genie out of the bottle when you clarified for us that inevitably each reader will arrive at their particular reading of a text and so it is with Literature as Exploration—not everyone will make sense of it in the same way.” What especially irritated Louise was the academic tendency to lump her with what has been labeled the reader-response critics. This was totally inaccurate, as she explained, because the transactional approach she was advocating insisted equally on the role the words on the page play in constraining the act of meaning making. Further, this led her to emphasize discussion, with its central thrust of equitable social cohesion. While the consumption of any poem begins with individual acts of reading, it never simply ends there. This led Louise to focus on the dialogue occurring after each student reader’s response had been fully evoked. She saw as a central purpose of reading breaking out of our isolation and identifying our blind spots. Accordingly, the literary transaction for her does not confirm “everyone entitled to their own opinion”; rather, it asserts that interpretations need testing both by the text itself and the conventions shaping the surrounding context.

A driving question for the teacher is always how to mediate the voices competing for the “correct” interpretation. This difficult task requires, as Louise was the first to realize, a reconceptualization of what constitutes freedom and discipline in the English classroom, so they are intertwined rather than opposed. Before Louise, English lessons were dominated by discipline, which reinforced established hierarchies in the classroom—teacher over student, the wisdom and timelessness of the canon over the thoughtlessness and disposability of popular culture. The challenge Louise posed is how to be aware of both the possibilities and the pitfalls, once freedom enters the reading equation.

One of the greatest dangers to the development of reader satisfaction, confidence, and agency, as Louise taught us, is a closed or dogmatic interpersonal environment. Paradoxically, such a condition can emerge even as we are modeling and extolling the virtues of mutual respect and reciprocity. For, as student readers, often for the first time, come to express and assert their own strongly held responses and beliefs, they sometimes begin by articulating them with an exclusionary force. Without proper qualification or nuance, these views can come across in ways that intimidate other students into silence. Whether or not this is their intention, the effect can be devastating for some members of a discussion group, whether it be large or small. For those students whose pleasure of responding to the text has been taken away or reversed because it must now be hidden from sight, the irony is doubly cruel. The mixed signal consequently being sent by the classroom setting is that some student readers inevitably end up more equal than others. In such an unsafe climate rifts destructive to learning and comfort develop and intensify as the discussion space that once proclaimed the value of open response transforms into its opposite.

The weekend after Louise died, I was walking through Central Park with friends engaged in taking stock of Christo’s and Jeanne-Claude’s The Gates, a public art construction consisting of 7,500 rectangular gates, draped with saffron-colored fabric, and extending the twenty-three-mile marathon of the walkways that traverse this “natural” oasis in the middle of Manhattan. What meaning to make of this text? An endless number of conflicting enactments seemed possible for the viewer-participants of this engaging event as the letters published in the New York Times testified. They ranged from, “I was shocked that the park that I and many others adore had been turned into a horrifying ugly orange construction site” to “I’m so moved by the experience, and for some reason it gives me hope for the human future, reminding me that art is a worldly expression of the divine.” Louise would have loved the spectacle, the cacophony of responses, for in the best sense, the drama of conversation and controversy represented each citizen’s right to be involved democratically in the discussion of the work of art. Many statements included, “I would have done . . .” but this only added to the democratic principles on display. No reading trumped any other—the text that governed them all was accessible to all.
To sum up the democratic mission for reading literature that Louise continues to inspire within each of us, there are no better words than those she chose to conclude the fifth edition of Literature as Exploration: “We teachers of language and literature have a crucial role to play as educators and citizens. We phrase our goals as fostering the growth of the capacity for personally meaningful, self-critical literary experience. The educational process that achieves this aim most effectively will serve a broader purpose, the nurturing of men and women capable of building a fully democratic society. The prospect is invigorating!” (297).

Gordon M. Pradt
New York University
gmp1@nyu.edu

When the phone rang late in the afternoon of February 8 and I saw that it was Louise's son, Jonathan Ratner, I knew that the profession had lost one of its most passionately committed supporters, one of its most prolific contributors, one of its most brilliant leaders. Louise Rosenblatt had dedicated much of her one hundred years to our profession, thinking and writing especially about the teaching of literature. It was in the teaching of literature that she found hope for the future of our democratic society.

About ten years ago, during a telephone conversation between Louise Rosenblatt in Princeton, New Jersey, and about fifty English teachers in a school library in Anchorage, Alaska, Louise said, "I wrote Literature as Exploration as a defense of democracy." It surprised me at the time, though it shouldn't have. I'd come across the word democracy often enough in her writing that I should have expected it to appear again, but I'd always thought of Literature as Exploration as a theory of reading and a treatise on the teaching of literature. I hadn't thought of it as a political tract.

But of course it was. Teaching English is a political act; or, rather, it's an act with political consequences, as she pointed out in the opening pages of the fifth edition of Literature as Exploration:

In a turbulent age, our schools and colleges must prepare the student to meet unprecedented and unpreventable problems. He needs to understand himself; he needs to work out harmonious relationships with other people. He must achieve a philosophy, an inner center from which to view in perspective the shifting society about him; he will influence for good or ill its future development. Any knowledge about humankind and society that schools can give him should be assimilated into the stream of his actual life.

It is not only for some future way of life that he needs to be prepared. During his school years, he is already part of the larger world, meeting the impact of its domestic and international tensions, adjusting to adults who bear the marks of its successes and failures, discovering the possibilities it holds open to him. As he plays his youthful role, he is creating the personality and ideals that will shape his role as an adult. (3)

In other words, students are becoming citizens, thoughtful and responsible—we hope—capable of functioning in a democracy. She believed that if students learn to handle the language well, they'll be less easily manipulated by politicians who are all too happy to tell them how to think, how to vote, what to value, what to reject. They'll be able to analyze the arguments their leaders offer them when those leaders want to make peace or go to war, or to drastically modify social programs, or to raise or lower taxes. They'll know how to distinguish between appeals to reason and appeals to emotion. They'll know when elected or appointed leaders attempt to play on the prejudices and biases those leaders hope will substitute for rational thought. They'll be less trapped by those prejudices and biases because their linguistic sophistication will have revealed the inadequacy of such substitutes for thinking. They'll understand the dangers of stereotyping and overgeneralizing, of oversimplifying complex situations, of reducing complicated issues to slogans and clichés. They'll test claims, predictions, and promises against actual results, seeking evidence to justify or refute claims made. And they'll remember the lies and the truths they've been offered and hold their leaders—in politics, religion, education, and everywhere else—accountable for honest, preferably intelligent, and at the very least not intentionally deceitful
use of the language that shapes the world in which they live.

Louise hoped for such citizens. If we’ve taught our students to write and speak both effectively and responsibly, she knew, they might be able to participate in the discourse that shapes their society, raising questions, speculating about possible answers, pointing out illogic and corruption, imagining, articulating, and examining the implications of policies and decisions. If we’ve taught them well, they will have explored nuances, qualifications, alternatives, and ambiguities, and will have learned that the simple oppositions—us and them, friend and enemy, good and evil—the dichotomous arguments they are presented day in and day out, constitute an absurd reduction of the complexity of human experience. When they are offered a glowing and optimistic phrase, such as—to take an example at random—"No Child Left Behind," they will ask whether or not the policies such a phrase encapsulates do in fact leave no child behind. When they’re told something so simple and straightforward as—to choose an example for its brevity—"mission accomplished," they’ll ask the simple and obvious question, "Is it?"

And if we’ve taught them literature well, Louise hoped, our students will approach all of those complicated intellectual tasks with humanity and empathy, with a desire for the greater good for all people, with an appreciation of both the diversity and the commonalities obvious in our world. They will be more than skillful and articulate; they will be humane. They will have learned to feel for those in difficult circumstances, they will have learned to imagine what life might be like for other people in other places, other times, with other cultural forces shaping each day. "Teachers of literature," she wrote in Literature as Exploration, have been too modest about their possible contribution to these demands. Their task, she has felt, is to make their students more sensitive to the art of words, to induct them into our literary heritage. Leaving to others more mundane preoccupations, they had enough to do, it seemed, in busying themselves with purely literary matters.

They have not always realized that, willy-nilly, they affect the student’s sense of human personality and human society. More directly than most teachers, they foster general ideas or theories about human nature and conduct, definite moral attitudes, and habitual responses to people and situations. (4)

If the literature classroom does, in fact, influence our students’ “sense of human personality and human society,” then it has a huge responsibility, a great opportunity. It has the possibility of helping students become not only articulate and thoughtful people but good people as well. Louise devoted much of her life to helping teachers realize this humanistic potential in good literature thoughtfully read, openly and responsibly discussed. Looking back over her career roughly fifty years after the publication of Literature as Exploration, she said that she wrote it because

I felt that I could contribute something constructive—a philosophic or theoretical foundation for revising the teaching of literature, a foundation for setting up a process that would make personal response the basis for growth toward more and more balanced, self-critical, knowledgeable interpretation. Moreover, I could draw on my literary and interdisciplinary studies to provide students with frameworks for thinking about the social, psychological, and aesthetic assumptions implied by the literary work and by their own and others’ responses. ("Retrospect." Transactions with Literature: A Fifty-Year Perspective. Ed. Edmund J. Farrell and James R. Squire. Urbana: NCTE, 1990, p. 100.)

Louise devoted much of her life and her work to articulating that theory and to reminding English teachers of their significant responsibilities. When she came to the NCTE Annual Convention in Indianapolis last November, less than three months before her death, it was to receive the tribute for one hundred years of contribution and to celebrate the forthcoming publication of her latest—her last—book, Making Meaning with Texts: Selected Essays (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2005). But it perhaps served a more important purpose for those of us who teach, especially those of us who teach English, and all others who care about the future of our society. It reiterated for us that the goals implicit in her theory—and our teaching—are worth working for. She worked for them up to her last days. Indeed, her last book was published almost the day of her death. The greatest tribute we could pay her would be to continue to work and fight for those goals, to teach our students to read responsibly and responsibly, and to strive as she did to produce thoughtful, responsible, humane citizens able to sustain a democratic society.

Robert E. Probst
Florida International University
Miami, Florida
probstre@gsu.edu