Louise Rosenblatt: A Life in Literacy

When Louise Rosenblatt’s *Literature as Exploration* appeared in 1938, it drew attention from many quarters. For instance, in the June 29, 1938 issue of *The New Republic* in the column “A Reader’s List,” the magazine’s reviewer offered this commentary: “A really important book, in spite of its insipid title. Writing chiefly for teachers of high-school and college English, the author has managed to show the relevance of social science to the aesthetic experience, and vice versa, in a way as yet unequaled by some of our best Marxists” (231).

For those who read *Literature as Exploration* today—now in its fifth edition, published by MLA in 1995—it is still “a really important book.” As one anonymous reviewer at Amazon.Com succinctly puts it, “If you teach literature (at any level) and haven’t read this book, you probably don’t know what you are doing.” Wayne Booth in his Foreword to the fifth edition amplifies this reviewer’s remark: “Has she been influential? Immensely so: how many other critical works first published in the late thirties have extended themselves, like this one, to five editions, proving themselves relevant to decade after decade of critical and pedagogical revolution? . . . She has in fact been attended to by thousands of teachers and students in each generation. She has probably influenced more teachers in their ways of dealing with literature than any other critic” (vii).

In *Literature as Exploration*, Rosenblatt reminds us that the reader plays a vital role in the life of any piece of literature: “There is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work; there are only the potential millions of individual readers or the potential millions of individual literary works. A novel or a poem or a play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols” (1995, 24).

A half century later in 1978, Rosenblatt published *The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. In this equally important book, Rosenblatt clearly demonstrates that “no one else, no matter how much more competent, more informed, nearer the ideal (whatever that might be), can read (perform) the poem or the story for us” (141). Further, Rosenblatt notes, “the poem, then, must be thought of as an event in time. It is not an object or an ideal entity. It happens during the coming-together, as compenetration of a reader and a text” (12).

Rosenblatt reminds us that readers transact with texts for different purposes, which fall along the efferent-aesthetic continuum. At one end of the continuum, for example, is the situation in which
“A novel or a poem or a play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols” (1995, 24).

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At the risk of sounding pompous, I have said that my efforts to expound my theory have been fueled by the belief that it serves the purposes of education for democracy . . . . If I have been involved with development of the ability to read critically across the whole intellectual spectrum, it is because such abilities are particularly important for citizens in a democracy. (169)

This comment represents both an underpinning and an outcome in the practice of her transactional theory of literature. It acknowledges the teacher not as an authority representing the meaning and background of the literary work but as a catalyst of discussion, encouraging a democracy of voices expressing preliminary responses to the text and building group and individual understandings. The teacher’s voice is at once that of the shepherd and of a partner participant. Student readers are empowered. The outcome—the genesis of a habit of mind: thoughtful, investigative, and evaluative of language and ideas. The importance of this concept to her is marked by the fact that she took the opportunity to focus attention on these goals at both the 1999 NCTE Award for Outstanding Educator in Language Arts ceremony and the 2004 “Birthday Tribute.”

More than a century after her birth on August 23, 1904, and just several weeks before her death on February 8, 2005, Louise Rosenblatt was still making scholarly contributions to the field when her book *Making Meaning with Texts: Selected Essays* was published. This collection includes essays that Rosenblatt wrote from the 1930s to the 1990s.

As the anthropologist Margaret Mead notes in her autobiographical *Blackberry Winter*, as a student at Barnard College in the 1920s, Louise was part of a group dubbed the “Ash Can Cats,” a name bestowed on them by one of their professors, Minor W. Latham. In addition to Rosenblatt and Mead, the group included Leonie Adams (the well known poet), Eleanor...
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Political engagement continued through Louise Rosenblatt’s life. A recent example occurred in 2001 during the deliberations in Congress about the No Child Left Behind bill promoted by the Bush administration. She was in frequent contact with her New Jersey representative to the House of Representatives—sending emails and conferring with him in his Washington office in attempts to reorient the bill and to diminish its focus on testing as a way to improve learning.

Rosenblatt’s many awards included a Guggenheim fellowship (1942), NCTE’s Distinguished Service Award (1973), NCTE’s David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in English Teaching (1980), Columbia University’s Leland Jacobs Award for Literature (1981), NCTE’s Assembly for Literature Award (1984), National Conference on Research in English Lifetime Research Award (1990), Doctor of Humane Letters from the University of Arizona (1992), the International Reading Association’s Reading Hall of Fame Award (1992), the NCTE Award for Outstanding Educator in Language Arts (1999).

The two of us, along with several hundred other members of the profession, saw Louise for the last time at the “Birthday Tribute to Louise Rosenblatt” at the annual NCTE convention in Indianapolis on November 20, 2004. In that session, she spoke eloquently about her life’s work—work that will influence teachers and students for many years to come.

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**Works Cited**


