

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 esthetic 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



parents are reading the label on the bottle of some poison that their child has just ingested (*Poem 23-24*). In this situation the parents' purpose is to get information about the antidote as quickly as possible. In this case, the parents have adopted an efferent stance, one in which they will carry away information from the text. At the other end of the continuum is the aesthetic stance: "in aesthetic reading, the reader's attention is

centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text" (25). Here's an illustrative example from Duane Roen's life: He once saw a production of Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. Sitting in front of Duane near the back of the theatre were four nuns. During the scene in which the alleged witches were given the opportunity to confess that they were indeed witches in return for leniency, one of the nuns shouted out loudly enough so that much of audience could hear her, "No! Don't confess!" This is the quintessential aesthetic experience.

Given these two extremes at either end of the continuum, Rosenblatt asserts that much of our reading falls into the middle of the continuum, the reader responding to cognitive as well as emotive aspects. She argues, however, that some materials—e.g., newspapers, political speeches, writings about social problems, advertisements—require a predominantly efferent stance while others—e.g., novels, poems, dramas—require the aesthetic. "We have to help students learn to handle the affective as well as cognitive aspects of meaning during every reading event." This applies to the teaching of reading across the middle of the continuum that creates the main teaching problem" (*Karolides 166*).

In her interview with Nicholas Karolides in 1999, Rosenblatt expressed a conviction that had been evident in the classes he had taken with her:

"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).

"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" (1999, 169).

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

Pelham Kortheuer, Hannah Kahn, Deborah Kaplan, and Viola Corrigan.

Louise Rosenblatt was professor of English education at New York University from 1948 to 1972. Earlier she taught English at Barnard, the women's college at Columbia University, and Brooklyn College. After her mandatory retirement from NYU, she continued teaching—at Rutgers University, Michigan State University, University of Pennsylvania, and others. During World War II she served the United States in the Foreign Broadcast Intelligence Service for the FCC in 1943-1944 and as Associate Chief of the Western European Section of the Bureau of Overseas Intelligence in the Office of War Information (OWI) in 1944. From 1944 to 1945 she served as Chief of the Central Reports Section of the OWI.

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 Outstand-

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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.

Duane Roen, professor of English, is Head of Humanities, Arts, and English at the East Campus of Arizona State University. He has written extensively about composition theory and pedagogy.

Nicholas J. Karolides, professor of English, serves as Associate Dean of

the College of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls. He has written widely in the areas of censorship and reader-response pedagogy.

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