

Continue to Explore

In Memory of Louise Rosenblatt (1904–2005)

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On February 8, 2005, Louise Michelle Rosenblatt passed away at the age of 100. Professor Rosenblatt's pioneering scholarship not only changed the conversation within the field of literary theory, but also has had a profound influence on the teaching of reading and English literature in classrooms nationwide over the past four decades. Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading, grounded philosophically in the path-breaking works of William James and John Dewey, was first described in her seminal work *Literature as Exploration* (1938) and later expanded in her second major work, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (1978). An examination of Rosenblatt's illustrious career demonstrates that she took the notion of exploration seriously. Throughout her career, Rosenblatt sought to restore the aesthetic value to literature and to make literature more central to achieving the broad humanistic goals of education (Connell, 2000, 27). When teachers follow the guidance provided by Rosenblatt's transactional theory, reading becomes an essential mode of personal experience that involves a potentially powerful combination of intellect and emotion that enlivens the learning process. A priority within Rosenblatt's scholarly work was the goal of encouraging her readers to live fully in the reading experience by seeking ways to remain actively engaged as a learner. Louise



Rosenblatt reminded me many times in both word and deed to continue to explore.

Professor Rosenblatt's academic career began at the height of the Progressive Education Era in the 1930s and spanned over seven decades. Rosenblatt possesses an admirable scholarly record, having had a long and distinguished academic career, which includes her years of research, teaching, and service at Barnard College, Brooklyn College and New York University, an extensive list of publications, numerous professional affiliations, a substantial number of academic honors, and many accomplished students who currently influence the field of literary theory and English education.

Moreover, her career after her retirement in 1972 is perhaps even more remarkable. Indeed, Professor Rosenblatt maintained an active academic career until the end of her life this past February. In her retirement years she continued to teach as a Visiting Professor at Rutgers University and at the University of Miami. She was also a member of faculty institutes in English at Northwestern University, Michigan State University, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Alabama, the University of Alberta, Auburn University, and the University of Massachusetts (NYU Office of Public Affairs, 2005). During these three "retirement" decades, she published extensively, attended professional meetings, mentored students, and even engaged in lobbying efforts concerning Federal school policy in 2001. Rosenblatt strongly opposed the Bush Administration's proposed testing component contained in the bill to re-authorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) known as No Child Left Behind.

Rosenblatt's impassioned political engagement late in her life is telling of her lifelong commitment to activism that began during the progressive education era when democracy was threatened from the forces of fascism and the rise of Nazi Germany (Rosenblatt, 1990, 107). During World War II, both Rosenblatt and her husband Sidney Ratner worked in the war effort. Ratner worked as an economist for the State Department and Rosenblatt worked for the U. S. Intelligence Agency, the Office of War Information, analyzing information from Nazi occupied France since she was fluent in French (Devitt, 2005, 1).

In 2001, Rosenblatt spoke again about a threat to democracy, but this time she identified the threat from within, internal government policies that regulate public schools. She believed that democracy was threatened again, but this time by misguided testing policies contained in No Child Left Behind that she believed would negatively impact every school in the country. Rosenblatt campaigned vigorously, voicing her grave concerns to Congressional leaders and calling on educators to become actively involved in opposing the proposed testing regulations. She objected to sweeping changes in testing requirements that relied on a single test to assess student achievement, a policy that she believed would undermine the fundamentally democratic aims of schooling and would interfere with decisions about curriculum and good teaching practices.

Throughout 2001, Rosenblatt took every opportunity to both persuade and to encourage educators to voice their concerns to Congress about the testing provisions contained in the bill. Rosenblatt had the opportunity to make a direct call for action when she spoke at the John Dewey Society Annual Lecture at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). As the 2001 recipient of John Dewey Society's lifetime achievement award, Rosenblatt made the long trip from her home in Princeton, New Jersey to Seattle, Washington primarily to have the opportunity to speak to educators about the urgent need for political involvement in the re-authorization process of ESEA. Upon accepting her award, Rosenblatt spoke eloquently to an audience of well over three hundred conference attendees, who were clearly both delighted and energized by Rosenblatt's passion for the cause of students' growth and development. The main message of her acceptance speech was not about her career, but rather was about how educators needed to become a more powerful voice against the proposed testing requirements in the ESEA bill.

Throughout 2001, Rosenblatt continued to lobby for changes and took on the task of voicing her concerns in a timely way to prominent politicians. To facilitate these discussions with members of Congress, she purchased her first fax machine. In this way, she could communicate easily and often with congressional members from her home state of New Jersey as well as with members of Congress who sat on an education subcommittee working to revise the bill. During my visit to her home at Princeton in June of that year, I recall that she checked her fax machine several times for incoming correspondence from her New Jersey contacts working on the bill. Her campaign to replace a single test score with multiple forms of assessment (including instructionally supportive assessments) of school progress and student achievement continued up until the time that the final draft of ESEA was passed in December. Even in late November, Rosenblatt was still working to persuade key policy makers in Congress to make changes in the testing requirements. In the archives of the listserv "Assessment Reform Network Mailing List," dated November 28, 2001, Rosenblatt calls for a massive campaign to voice objections to using a single test as the sole basis for accurately and meaningfully measuring yearly progress for individual schools. Within this email she included a copy of the main part of a faxed message to Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy urging him to modify the bill to allow States to use multiple sources of student assessment. She was disappointed that the final version of the bill, which retained annual assessment in reading and math in grades three through eight, was based upon a single test determined by each state. High stakes testing, like that included in the 2001 ESEA, was closely linked to traditional teaching methods and rote learning that Rosenblatt believed would produce shallow and unquestioning readers who passively accepted the authority of the printed word (Rosenblatt, 2005, ix). While Rosenblatt had succeeded in becoming an influential voice in changing both reading theory and the way that literature is taught in schools, her broader message of how aesthetic ex-

periences might form the core of the general school curriculum and of shaping approaches to teaching in all subject matter, which she articulated in *Literature as Exploration*, had little impact in the broader school reform debates over the past two decades that culminated in this federal school reform policy that mandated annual testing (Connell, 2000, 28).

Even as her physical health began to decline during this past year, Rosenblatt still maintained contacts with colleagues and friends. In November 2004, Rosenblatt attended the meeting of the National Council of the Teachers of English (NCTE), where she participated on a panel. At this meeting NCTE members also honored Rosenblatt with a special celebration to mark her 100th birthday.¹ Her son Jonathan accompanied her to the meeting in Indianapolis. He recounts this experience in an essay contained in the March 2005 issue of NCTE's *Voices from the Middle*, an issue dedicated to remembering Louise Rosenblatt's life and works. Jonathan, who works as a health economist for a federal agency, reported feeling his mother's celebrity status among conference attendees. When they entered the convention hall, where Rosenblatt was to deliver an address, five or six hundred people stood up and cheered. That evening he commented to her: "Mom, now I know what it's like to travel with a rock star!" (Ratner, 2005, 6).

During 2004, Rosenblatt took on another substantial project, a new book of collected essays. The project was a clear indication of her desire to remain active in the ongoing conversation concerning the direction of reading theory and English education. In fact, on February 1, 2005 just one week before she died, Heinemann Press published her final book: *Making Meaning with Texts: Selected Essays*.

I began my study of Louise Rosenblatt's work in 1990 as a doctoral student in the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, under the direction of my dissertation advisor, Ralph Page (who enhanced my appreciation of philosopher John Dewey) and my doctoral committee member, Bertram Bruce (who first introduced me to some of the works of Louise Rosenblatt in an advanced seminar). It was at this time that I began to examine the Dewey/Rosenblatt connection. Through this early exploration I came to recognize that Rosenblatt's use of Dewey's pragmatic philosophy in understanding the activity of reading was noticeably underappreciated in the field of philosophy of education (Connell, 1996). Rosenblatt's theory of reading is one of the more successful responses to Dewey's call for an educational theory to be built upon a permanent frame of reference to the organic nature of experience by locating meaning in a generative or "transactional" relationship between reader and text (Connell, 1996, 396).

Rosenblatt's work in literary theory drew from a number of fields, but there was a strong philosophical connection to the epistemological constructs in pragmatic philosophy. In fact, Rosenblatt cites Dewey's influence early in her career in the 1930s, particularly noting the impact of *Human Nature and Conduct*, *Experience and Nature*, and *Art as Experience* on her thinking. Still later, in 1949,

she read *Knowing and the Known*, which was perhaps the most significant influence on Rosenblatt's theory because this book in pragmatic philosophy provided Rosenblatt with the necessary terminology for her transactional theory of the literary work. In *Knowing and the Known*, coauthored with Arthur Bentley, Dewey provided a *transactional view* that stressed the organic and generative relationship between knower and known. Rosenblatt adopted this fundamental theoretical position as central to the relationship between the reader and the text.

My research on Rosenblatt was made even more interesting to me when I found that Rosenblatt's connection with Dewey was also a personal one. Her position as a member of the John Dewey Society is truly unique. Professor Rosenblatt was not only the oldest member of the John Dewey Society, but she was also most likely one of the few members, if not the only living member of the Society, who had known John Dewey personally. Her acquaintance with John Dewey began when she attended biannual meetings that began in 1932 and continued in the 1930s of the Conference on Method in Philosophy and the Sciences, where Dewey was an organizer and a participant.² She recalled some of her memories about Dewey in the documentary film *John Dewey: His Life and Work* (2001). In her comments about Dewey for the documentary, Rosenblatt stated that "in committee groups, Dewey was unassuming but always could sum up the discussion and offer cogent suggestions to overcome perceived problems" (Hickman, 2001, 3). When Rosenblatt received the 2001 John Dewey Society Lifetime Achievement Award in Seattle, she recounted one of her last memories of seeing Dewey. In Rosenblatt's acceptance speech she recalled her vivid recollection of being in attendance in 1949 for Dewey's ninetieth birthday dinner. The celebration banquet was held on October 20, 1949 at the Commodore Hotel in New York City with over fifteen hundred guests in attendance, including a host of famous people such as Jawaharlal Nehru (first prime minister of India). Dewey had received congratulatory notes from leaders and dignitaries from China, Britain, Austria, the Netherlands, Chile, and from President Truman, as well as scores of notes and letters from scholars throughout the world (Dykhuisen, 1973, 214–215). In his biography of Dewey, Dykhuisen (1973) described Dewey's speech that night as brief, touching on his career, reaffirming his faith in democracy, and looking to the future. Dewey expressed that he regarded himself as being "first, last, and all the time, engaged in the vocation of philosophy" despite the many fields that he had addressed in his career. In looking ahead, Dewey declared that he would like to think that "the significance of this celebration consists not in warming over of the past years, even though they were four score years and ten, but in dedication to the work that lies ahead" (Dykhuisen, 1973, 215). Dewey emphasized his belief that "Democracy begins in conversation" (Lamont, 1959, 58).

It is clear that Dewey and Rosenblatt shared many beliefs and values, in addition to achieving long and distinguished careers. There is no doubt that Rosenblatt's long career as an influential literary theorist and educator, and her

continued acknowledgement of Dewey's influence on her work, combined to make Louise Rosenblatt one of John Dewey Society's most distinguished members.

There was also a connection to Dewey's work through Rosenblatt's husband Sidney Ratner, a professor of history at Rutgers University, who was known primarily as an economic historian and secondarily for his work in political science. Rosenblatt and Ratner were married for sixty-three years before his death in 1996. Ratner published a number of works on Dewey. Ratner contributed to a volume of essays that emerged from a symposium series to honor of Dewey's ninetieth birthday. His essay was entitled "Dewey's Contribution to Historical Theory" in *John Dewey: Philosopher of Science and Freedom* (1950) examining Dewey's influence in intellectual climate of the time, which was edited by Sidney Hook, one of Dewey's former students at Columbia University who later held a faculty position in philosophy at New York University. Ratner also coedited with Jules Altman the book *John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley: A Philosophical Correspondence 1932–1951* (1964), where in the acknowledgments the editors thank Professor Louise Rosenblatt for her constructive criticism and sound advice. Late in his retirement, Ratner (1992a, 1992b) published two articles on Dewey's influence in math education, "John Dewey's Empiricism and Experimentalism in Recent Philosophy of Mathematics" and "John Dewey, E. H. Moore, and Philosophy of Mathematics Education in the Twentieth Century."

Rosenblatt's study of pragmatic philosophy began in her undergraduate years at Barnard College, and continued throughout her early career as she developed her own views about literary theory, teaching and learning, and the potential impact that literature could have on the development of a democratic society. Rosenblatt's philosophical affinity with both William James and John Dewey was articulated most clearly in her most theoretical work *The Reader, the Text, and the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (1978). Here, Rosenblatt provided a detailed discussion of the philosophical roots of her transactional theory of reading. She credits Dewey with providing the term that best captured the relationship that she found between the reader and the text. Rosenblatt states that "The reading act is simply an exemplification, with highly rarified complications, of the basic transactional character of all human activity, especially linguistic activity" (1978, 20). The term "transaction," used throughout *Knowing and the Known* (1949) replaced the word "interaction," which Dewey used in his earlier writings. In *Knowing and the Known*, Dewey and Bentley stressed that knowers and knowns should not be viewed dualistically as isolated elements, but rather as transactively related, integrated and coordinated in their relationship where thoughts, actions, and feelings transact within a context of ongoing behavior and with a particular matrix of experience (Connell, 1996, 401).

While text-based literary theories dominated until the 1960s, in the past four decades reader-based theories have gradually become the more dominant

approach in large part because of Rosenblatt's work. Beginning with her seminal work *Literature as Exploration* published in 1938, Rosenblatt throughout her career advanced a transactional theory of the literary work, which highlights the dynamic, generative relationship between the reader and the text in the formation of meaning. Rosenblatt's primary contribution to literary theory is to draw attention to the active involvement of the reader, making "personal response the basis for growth towards a more balanced, self-critical, knowledgeable interpretation [of the text]" (Rosenblatt, 1990, 100).

Based on her work over the past four decades, Rosenblatt was recognized as a key player in the field of literary theory. James Squire places Rosenblatt's transactional perspective among the ten great ideas in the teaching of literature (Chorney, 1985, 9). In the foreword of the fifth edition of *Literature as Exploration*, noted literary theorist Wayne Booth calls Rosenblatt's influence on the field powerful not only because of her influence among literary theorists, but because of her influence directly on teachers of reading and English literature (Rosenblatt, 1995, vii). Literary scholar John Willinsky (1991) argues that Rosenblatt is one of the four key theorists influencing how literature is taught in secondary schools today. Given such success, the question we now turn to concerns: How did Rosenblatt emerge as a leader in her field? In beginning to answer this question, we consider next her early years.

Rosenblatt's Early Years

Louise Michelle Rosenblatt was born August 23, 1904 in Atlantic City, New Jersey, the only child of first generation Jewish immigrant parents, Samuel Rosenblatt and Jennie Berman Rosenblatt. She was named 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" (Probst, 2005a, 11). While Rosenblatt's parents had limited formal education, she characterized her family as progressive. Recently, Rosenblatt shared some personal stories about her early family life. In a 2001 address at the International Scholars' Forum in Literacy Studies at Hofstra University, Rosenblatt described the influence of her father on her views about social relationships and social responsibility.

My father—Jewish, working class, self-educated came from Russia young enough to acquire English. English has always been my language. My father was very much concerned about socioeconomic and political affairs and the plight of poor people. That was the atmosphere that I grew up in. We didn't have many books, but there were books, and books that were important to me because my father talked to me about them. In those days, the Darwinian idea of "survival of the fittest" was being used to justify unbridled economic competition. The government

accepted no responsibility for the inequality of opportunities for individuals. (Taylor, 2004, 348)

Additionally, in several of her writings where she assessed intellectual influences stemming from her early years, she mentioned the influence of Peter Kropotkin's (1902) *Mutual Aid* where he discusses the evolutionary benefits of cooperation. "For me," Rosenblatt recently commented, "to make meaningful an idea such as mutual aid was very important" (Taylor, 2004, 348).

After high school, Rosenblatt attended Barnard College from 1921 to 1925. In higher education at this time there were barriers in the form of strict quotas at some institutions for those applicants of Jewish background. Rosenblatt reported that perhaps she was helped by the fact that she did not live in New York. She stated that: "Getting into Barnard, by the way, they had a quota for Jews, but I lived in New Jersey so I wasn't both a Jew and from New York" (Taylor, 2004, 348). Once at Barnard College, Rosenblatt began her academic career in earnest. Rosenblatt majored in English and she was a participant in her final two years in an experimental honors program. She read widely in both English and American literature as well as in the new social sciences, particularly psychology, sociology, and anthropology. In the honors program, Rosenblatt reports that she was

. . . released from the traditional liberal arts English program, with its array of period courses. [I read] mainly on my own, intensively in English and American literature and widely in the social sciences. I conferred once a week with a professor. A week-long series of written examinations at the end of the senior year rendered the usual work for the M. A. superfluous. (Rosenblatt, 1990, 97–98)

Barnard College brought other valuable experiences. During her sophomore year Rosenblatt's roommate was then senior Margaret Mead, who after graduation went on to become a well-known anthropologist. In a recent memorial article, Roen and Karolides (2005) provide this personal story about Rosenblatt's undergraduate life at Barnard College:

Among her best friends there were Deborah Kaplan, Leonie Adams (poet), Viola Corrigan, Eleanor Pelham Hortheuer, Hannah Kahn, and the well-known anthropologist Margaret Mead (Louise's roommate)). After one particularly late night studying, they showed up for a morning class looking a little fatigued. The professor, Minor W. Latham, looked at them and commented, "You look like a bunch of ash can cats." That label stuck, and the group came to be called "The Ash Can Cats," which Margaret Mead recounts fondly in her autobiography, *Blackberry Winter: My Earlier Years*. (Roen and Karolides, 2005, 565)

After graduating from Barnard College, Rosenblatt was drawn to the idea of the study of culture in graduate school and considered switching her field of

study to anthropology. She was influenced by her study of anthropology with Professor Franz Boas as well as by her association with Margaret Mead, who had gone on to advanced study in anthropology after graduating from Barnard College.

Instead of anthropology, however, Rosenblatt chose to continue her study of literature. Her decision to travel to France and to study comparative literature was a compromise between her two fields of interest, a compromise that included consideration of her parents' concern about travel to remote areas of the world that would be required in anthropology (Rosenblatt, 1990, 98). After studying for one year at the University of Grenoble in France on a scholarship, Rosenblatt then enrolled at the University of Paris at the Sorbonne where she received her doctorate in 1931. In her doctoral dissertation, Rosenblatt challenges the then popular idea of art for art's sake. Many nineteenth-century writers sought to free themselves from the social, moral, and aesthetic constraints imposed by an uncomprehending public. Instead of seeking isolation from the public, Rosenblatt suggests in her dissertation, *L'idée de l'art pour l'art dans la littérature anglaise pendant la période victorienne* (The Idea of Art for Art's Sake in English Literature during the Victorian Period), that the solution is to raise the level of the reading public so that they might participate more fully in the poetic experience and learn to appreciate the distinction between aesthetic and other modes of experience (Rosenblatt, 1978, 34). After receiving her doctorate, Rosenblatt began her academic career in 1929 as an instructor and then later as a professor of English at her alma mater Barnard College. Barnard College's affiliation with Columbia University allowed Rosenblatt to enroll in graduate courses at Columbia University in anthropology and linguistics with Boas and Benedict (Rosenblatt, 1990, 98).

While it is difficult to pinpoint precisely the roots of any person's thinking, Rosenblatt lists a number of diverse sources influencing her philosophical base that grounded her work in literary theory that began in earnest in the 1930s. She was influenced intellectually by her family background, anti-authoritarian European sources and by American writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, her work in the 1920s with anthropologists Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict, her doctoral research in comparative literary theory at the Sorbonne, her experiences teaching college English and her reading in the 1920s and 1930s of prominent pragmatists, especially Charles S. Peirce, William James and John Dewey (Rosenblatt, 1978, xi). After nine years at Barnard College, Rosenblatt taught English at Brooklyn College for the next ten years beginning in 1938. Rosenblatt then spent twenty-four years as a professor of English education at New York University. Even though Rosenblatt published numerous scholarly articles during her long and distinguished career, *Literature as Exploration* remains one of her more definitive statements on aesthetic experience.

Rosenblatt's Seminal Work: Literature as Exploration (1938)

In 1935, Rosenblatt took a leave of absence from teaching English at Barnard College to participate as an advisor on the Commission on Human Relations, a project that was funded by the General Education Board of the Rockefeller Foundation and administered through the Progressive Education Association (PEA). This experience with the Commission on Human Relations was pivotal in her career, because it served as the impetus for her first major work *Literature as Exploration* published in 1938.

The appointment to the Commission gave Rosenblatt the opportunity to meet with numerous educators and to visit a number of innovative progressive schools (Rosenblatt, 1990, 101). Rosenblatt was especially captivated by the “lively expression of opinion, and the excitement of freedom from conventional methods” that characterized the students’ responses to learning in the progressive schools that she visited (Farrell and Squire, 1990, 100). The project developed books on human relations for adolescents—late high school and early college students—that incorporated the latest advances in sociology and psychology of this time period. Rosenblatt’s role was to draw upon her literary and social science background for the planning but not the actual writing of these books. These discipline-based books were written in a popular style to enhance their appeal and usefulness to young adults.

After completing her appointment as Commission advisor, Rosenblatt decided to produce her own book *Literature as Exploration* because at the end of the project Rosenblatt concluded that the teaching of literature in schools was not living up to its potential in the school curriculum. While Rosenblatt acknowledged that high quality discipline-based textbooks would make valuable contributions towards students’ understanding, she believed that discussion of human relations that took place in literature classes could perform a distinctive and vital function in the education of citizens in a democracy (Connell, 2001, 40). Rosenblatt contended that

If we only do justice to the potentialities inherent in literature itself, we can make a vital social contribution . . . [a student] 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. (1983, 274)

Literature as Exploration was written as a practical handbook for classroom teachers. Rosenblatt focused specifically on promoting aesthetic experiences for students that can foster a critical “linkage between intellectual perception and emotional drive that is essential for any vital learning process” (1983, 182). Traditional approaches in the teaching of all subject matter at this time promoted the invisibility of the reader.

Rosenblatt was particularly concerned about the lack of reader involvement in literature classes “for in many English classes today, the instructor never even glimpses at the student’s personal sense of the work discussed” (1983, 61). In Rosenblatt’s view “the reader counts for at least as much as the book or poem itself; he responds to some of its aspects and not others” (1983, v) and the “personal contribution of the reader is an essential element of any vital reading of literature” (1983, 108). She contends that

There is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work; there are only the potential millions of individual readers of the potential millions of literary works. A novel or poem or play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols. The literary work exists in the live circuit set up between reader and text; the reader infuses intellectual and emotional meanings into the pattern of verbal symbols, and those symbols channel his thoughts and feelings. (1983, 25)

Rosenblatt submits that “Dewey had confirmed that literary works of art exist in unique personal experiences. The reader attends not only to the formal aspects of the work, but also, perhaps primarily, to the situations, thoughts, and emotions called forth during the reading” (1990, 100). Rosenblatt stressed how reading was *an experience*. For Rosenblatt, the reader gains “not so much additional *information* as additional *experience*. . . . Literature provides a *living through*, not simply *knowledge about*” (1983, 38). Thus, aesthetic experiences reside in the synthesis of what a reader already knows, feels, and desires with what the literary text offers (1983, 272). Her main message was to convince English teachers of the broader social role that literature classes could serve. Aesthetic experiences, Rosenblatt argued, obtained though the study of literary texts can foster the “kind of imagination needed in a democracy—the ability to participate in the needs and aspirations of other personalities and to envision the effect of our actions on their lives” (1983, 222). The essence of a carefully chosen program in literature, according to Rosenblatt, is a “rejection of stereotyped, superficial and unshaded reactions to the mere outlines of situations or to the appeal of vague and generalized concepts” (1983, 104). The more varied the readings are for students, the greater is the potential for these texts to serve as an educationally liberating force, even if students read about social and moral codes very different from the ones that a particular school is committed to perpetuate (1983, 214–215). These kinds of diverse reading experiences provide students with an appreciation for the complexity of human life. For Rosenblatt, imagination that connects readers emotionally and intellectually with the lives of others serves an important function in a democratic society.

These kinds of experiences, according to Rosenblatt, are critical to maintaining and improving democratic life. Thus her challenge to educators, particularly English teachers, was to seek ways to connect to the life experiences of stu-

dents while students undergo a new experience with the text. While the richness of personal experience is crucial, there is a need to connect literary experiences to the broad humanistic goals of education in a democratic society. Rosenblatt believes that the “give-and-take of ideas and the interplay between different personalities will in itself have a liberalizing influence” (1983, 246). Pradl emphasizes how Rosenblatt’s theory connects education and democracy, observing that “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” (2005, 42). For Rosenblatt the goal of literature is to lead the “young reader to learn how to enter through the printed page into the whole culture” (1983, 284). Towards this objective, Rosenblatt recommends drawing on a wide range of literary works from previous underrepresented authors, particularly minority and women writers (1983, 38–39). Thus, the intensely personal nature of the literary work is simultaneously an event that serves to bring a reader beyond the personal response into a wide array of social practices and concerns (Connell, 2001, 48).

Even though *Literature as Exploration* was published over sixty years ago, it is still in print today in a fifth edition and continues to be used widely in English education. Rosenblatt’s life-long purpose was to rescue literature from its diminished status in the curriculum and to emphasize literature’s powerful potential to contribute to growth and development of students. Rosenblatt’s primary contribution to literary theory was to emphasize the intensely personal nature of the learning process in a way to challenged text-based literary theory dominant in the 1920s and 1930s. Forty years after the publication of *Literature as Exploration*, Rosenblatt published her second major work, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*, a more theoretically grounded explanation of the relationship between reader and text first articulated by Rosenblatt in *Literature as Exploration*.

The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work

In 1971, Rosenblatt was forced to retire from NYU because of a federal law that mandated retirement at age sixty-eight for those in academia (Probst, 2005a, 11). It is possible that retirement gave her more time to complete her second book, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (1978). In this highly theoretical work, Rosenblatt drew on the pragmatic philosophy of William James and John Dewey to provide philosophical roots for her transactional theory of reading and the literary experience.

The transactional relationship between knower and know described by Dewey and Bentley in *Knower and the Known* (1949) served as one of the central philosophical reference points for Rosenblatt’s unique positioning of the relationship between the reader and the text (1978, 17). Dewey and Bentley’s ac-

count of the organic and generative relationship between subject and object was a restatement of Dewey's early work on the reflex arc where he advocates for a more unified and dynamic account of behavior (Dewey, 1972). Rosenblatt concurs with Dewey's position and extends this account to reading. A "sharp demarcation between objective and subjective becomes irrelevant, since they are rather, aspects of the same transaction—a reader looks to the text, and the text is modified, each in a sense are different by virtue of the relationship" (1978, 43). The reader experiences by envisioning characters, participating in their uttered thoughts and emotions, and weaving a sequence of events into a plot. Rosenblatt describes the relationship of the reader, the text, and the poem as more like a dialogue where a reader (1) develops a tentative framework in response to the "cues" of the text; (2) forms expectations that influence selection and synthesis of further responses; (3) experiences either fulfillment or frustration of those expectations; (4) adjusts expectations further; and (5) synthesizes some kind of meaning (1978, 54). A reader's initial engagement with the text and the reader's subsequent responses to that text become the starting point of a literary experience and the construction of meaning.

In the past three decades the reader has become visible within literary theory. A number of reader-based literary theories aligned with poststructuralism, feminism, psychoanalysis, and neo-Marxist perspectives have emerged along with Rosenblatt's transactional theory of the literary work. While these reader-based theories accomplish Rosenblatt's original goal of challenging the dominance of text-based theories, she raised concerns about the limits of reading theories that advance a purely personal and subjective approach to meaning. In response to this debate among reader-based theories, many of which focus on the reader without much consideration of the text, Rosenblatt found herself in the early 1990s having to defend the text as a crucial part of the process of meaning construction. One significant move by Rosenblatt was to distance her work from the term reader-response theory and instead to emphasize a transactional approach that maintains the reader-plus-text elements of the reading experience (Rosenblatt, 1991, 59). Indeed, Rosenblatt emphasized this distinction in her 2001 address to the John Dewey Society. Rosenblatt reminded the audience that the distinctive character of her theory is the *transaction*, which aligned her theory closely with Dewey's epistemology, and served to take her theory beyond a narrow reader-response perspective.

Recognitions

Her son Jonathan reports that while his mother felt some level of satisfaction as she began to be recognized for her work, she "always felt deeply skeptical of the significance of this recognition. What did it matter, she would say to me, if she received an award and yet her granddaughter's English class was fixated on mechanical rules for writing expository essays?" (Ratner, 2005, 8). But recognition

was part of her life. Her long career as a literary theorist and an educator brought Rosenblatt a significant number of honors and awards. Rosenblatt received awards from New York University, the International Reading Association, Columbia University, National Council of Teachers of English, and the John Dewey Society. In 1997 the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy devoted a plenary session to her work at its annual convention, a distinction for a scholar in literary theory. In addition to her two major books, her recent collection of essays, and numerous book chapters, Rosenblatt also published numerous articles in a wide range of scholarly journals including: *College English*, *English Journal*, *Journal of Reading Behavior*, *Language Arts*, and *Journal of Aesthetic Education*.³

Concluding Comments

I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to develop a personal relationship with Louise after we met for the first time in Seattle in 2001. Earlier in my graduate student years, we had corresponded by letter when I was conducting research on my doctoral dissertation and we had even spoken by telephone several times as I clarified her responses to my written questions about her work and her connection with John Dewey. Before we met in Seattle, I pictured Rosenblatt as a tall (I got that wrong), intense, well-known scholar (that was correct) who would keep our meetings prior to the Dewey Annual Lecture cordial, brief, and formal (wrong again). While I did find Rosenblatt an intense intellectual who loved to talk about ideas, she was also a warm and engaging person. She cared about teaching and she cared about teachers, as indicated when she made a career change in 1948, moving from teaching college English to teaching teachers of English when she joined the faculty at the Steinhardt School of Education at New York University. Her son Jonathan stresses that his mother's "interests in teachers was genuine and personal" (Ratner, 2005, 7). After I met Rosenblatt at the John Dewey Society Lecture in Seattle in 2001, we continued to keep in touch through email and I made several visits to her Princeton home when I traveled to the East Coast from the Midwest in the summer. I received my last email from Louise in December 22, 2004, when she wished me a good holiday and let me know about her forthcoming book of selected essays soon to be published by Heinemann Press.

In preparation for writing this essay, I read the many heartfelt tributes to Rosenblatt that were published right after her death. I had to smile when I read Kent Williamson assessment of Jonathan Ratner's view of his mother's rock star status at the NCTE annual meeting. Williamson concurred with Jonathan's characterization and observed that "At 100 years of age, she had acquired 'rock star' status . . . because her ideas and beliefs were just as fresh, as liberating, and as relevant to the challenges that teachers face today as they had been so many years ago" (Devitt, 2005, 2). Louise Rosenblatt certainly lived long enough to

have simply become a remote icon in the history in literary theory, but instead, her work looms large as she continued to be a major force in her field even as she reached her one-hundredth year. Rosenblatt remained an intellectual force and as literary theorist Robert Probst observes: “ideas mattered to her” (Probst, 2005b, 9). To the end Rosenblatt remained resolute in her ideas concerning how reading experiences could serve democracy. Rosenblatt opens her collected essays with this thought: “Fostering a critical approach to all writings, no matter what their point of view, would in itself, I believed, serve their advancement of democracy. I have constantly been energized by the tacit belief that language engages the whole person and can enable us to reach out beyond ourselves as we make the choices that compose our lives” (Rosenblatt, 2005, ix). By addressing how the study of literature contributes to democracy, Rosenblatt highlights a fundamental educational concern of how schools contribute to the development of a capable, democratically minded citizenry (Connell, 2000, 35). This challenge is one that all educators need to continue to explore as we strive for improvements in school policies and practices as we move forward in the next hundred years following Professor Louise Rosenblatt.⁴

Notes

1. The March issue of *Voices from the Middle*, 2005, 12 (3) a publication of the National Council of Teachers of English was dedicated in remembrance of Louise Rosenblatt by NCTE members, many of whom are Rosenblatt’s former students and colleagues.
2. Professor Louise Rosenblatt’s personal correspondence to me is dated April 12, 1992.
3. In 1942, Rosenblatt received a Guggenheim fellowship, in 1972 she was awarded New York University’s “Great Teacher Award” and NCTE’s distinguished service award, in 1980 NCTE awarded her the David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in English Teaching, in 1981 Columbia University awarded her the Leland Jacobs Award for Literature, in 1992 the International Reading Association elected Rosenblatt to the reading hall of fame, in 1999 she received NCTE Award for Outstanding Educator in Language Arts, in 2001 the John Dewey Society’s Lifetime Achievement Award, and in 2002 the James R. Squire Award for Extraordinary Contributions to Teaching and Learning the English Language Arts (Devitt, 2005, 1).
4. I thank Professors Joseph Mahoney of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and A. G. Rud of Purdue University for their willingness to read early drafts of this essay and for providing constructive comments and helpful editing suggestions. The usual disclaimer applies.

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