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A Memorial to Louise Michelle Rosenblatt August 23, 1904–February 8, 2005

Duane Roen and Nicholas Karolidis

We begin with a story about Louise Rosenblatt's undergraduate life at Barnard College at Columbia University in the early 1920s. 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 of 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*.

After her years as an "Ash Can Cat," Louise Rosenblatt had a long and productive career. In 1931, she earned her doctorate in literature from the Sorbonne, The University of Paris. Her dissertation, written in French, titled *L'idée de l'Art pour l'Art dans la Littérature Anglaise pendant la Période Victorienne*, was published in the same year. Her book *Literature as Exploration*, published in 1938, did much to lay the groundwork for reader-response criticism. (Subsequently, at the 1939 NCTE convention, she addressed more than 3,000 members in the Manhattan Opera House.) As such, this work was decades ahead of its time, establishing Louise Rosenblatt as a major force in the field of teaching literature. At a time when New Criticism was the major theory in the field, Rosenblatt presented a strong albeit minority voice calling for the legitimacy of personal response to the reading of literature.

Over the decades, however, Rosenblatt's voice has achieved significant presence. As Wayne Booth acknowledges in his foreword to the fifth edition of *Literature as Exploration* in 1995, Rosenblatt has had "powerful influence." He notes, "Immensely [influential]: 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?" (vii).

Outside of the academy, Rosenblatt was a member of the Foreign Broadcast Intelligence Service for the FCC in 1943–1944. In 1944 she also served as Associate

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Chief of the Western European Section of the Bureau of Overseas Intelligence in the Office of War Information (OWI). In 1944–1945 she was Chief of the Central Reports Section of the OWI.

With the publication of *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* in 1978, Rosenblatt refined her own thinking on the reading of literary texts. That work presents some of the most interesting and certainly some of the most lucid thinking in reader-response theory and pedagogy. It has become a frequently cited work. In the journal *Reader: Essays in Reader-Oriented Theory, Criticism, and Pedagogy*, for example, Rosenblatt's book ranks as the most frequently cited work. *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* has greatly influenced the fields of literature, reading, rhetoric and composition, discourse analysis, and English education. In an online search of *Dissertation Abstracts International*, we found dozens of dissertations that focus on Rosenblatt's work—all written since her retirement in 1972. Further, several festschrifts have honored her. In 1991 for instance, John Clifford edited *The Experience of Reading: Louise Rosenblatt and Reader Response Theory*. In 1988, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Literature as Exploration*, NCTE published Edmund Farrell and James Squire's *Transactions with Literature: A Fifty-Year Perspective*. In 1992 Nicholas Karolides edited another collection in her honor, *Reader Response in the Classroom: Evoking and Interpreting Meaning in Literature*; a second edition, *Reader Response in Secondary and College Classrooms*, was issued in 2000. In 2005, just weeks before her death, Heinemann published Rosenblatt's *Making Meaning with Texts: Selected Essays*.

Because of her major contributions to the profession, Louise Rosenblatt has earned many forms of recognition. She is listed in at least eight volumes of biographies of scholars. In 1942 she was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship. In 1980 NCTE awarded her the David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in English Teaching for her work in literary theory and reading. In 1981 Columbia University honored her with the Leland Jacobs Award for Literature. In 1992 the University of Arizona awarded her an honorary doctorate. Also in 1992 the International Reading Association elected her to the Reading Hall of Fame. In 1997 the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy devoted a plenary session to her work at its national convention. In 1999 she received the NCTE Award for Outstanding Educator in Language Arts.

Her humane beliefs about literature and its teaching may be summarized with the following excerpt from a May 1977 article that she published in *English Journal*:

Our aim was to help people acquire the capacity to use language in all its modes, to organize their sense of their worlds, to communicate it to others, and to participate in the experiences and ideas of others. We might find ourselves at times involved more deeply in fostering one or another linguistic activity—speaking or writing or reading of literary works of art, say—but these were to be seen as aspects of the individual's total life in language [. . .]. In the teaching of literature, some the schools tried to adapt the analytic close reading approach of the New Critics, with their relative ne-

glect of the social and biographical contexts of literature and their skepticism concerning the reader's response. If only the influence had been reciprocal and the academic community had felt more keenly their responsibility toward the whole range of elementary and secondary pupils! It required, alas, an unpopular war and civil rights upheavals to start the process going. And then, perhaps because the social realities were perceived so suddenly and without adequate theoretical preparation, the reaction sometimes tended to swing too far in an anti-intellectual direction. (88–89)

In her acceptance speech of the NCTE Award for Outstanding Educator in Language Arts in 1999 and again when responding to panelists' comments at the 100th birthday celebration at the 2004 NCTE annual convention, Rosenblatt vigorously and eloquently asserted another central feature of her exploration of the teaching of reading/literature: the advancement of democracy. She writes in the preface of *Making Meaning with Texts: Selected Essays*:

Traditional teaching methods, passed on from generation to generation, were, I felt, producing shallow and unquestioning readers who passively accepted the authority of the printed word. In my own classroom, I had developed collaborative methods of teaching reading of all types, fiction and nonfiction, scientific and aesthetic, based on a theory of reading process. It seemed that students could be helped to develop the ability to read independently, purposively and critically. Such an approach was very different from their passively receiving indoctrination from a biased reading list. 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 [. . .]. In our tumultuous, changing world, beset by poverty, pollution, and war, unthinking, ready-made responses are dangerous. Sometimes we must choose between alternative positive values, such as security and freedom of speech. How much should we give up of one or the other, in order to have both? There must be a weighing of priorities. (ix)

In a preliminary draft of her preface (dated June 29, 2004), Rosenblatt asserted, "The citizens of a democracy need the ability to imaginatively put themselves in the place of others and to realize the human consequences of alternative policies. This is not an end in itself, but an essential first step toward intelligently humane decisions." She envisioned classroom conditions under which "teachers could seek to gradually empower students to fulfill these emotional and intellectual potentialities of the written word."

This democratic development, this empowerment of students, emerges both from the transactional reading process and from the classroom conversations about the text. Readers actively relating to/engaged with the text consider its evolving evidence: they measure traits of characters, taking account of their behaviors and appraising their statements; they weigh the import of language nuances; and they contemplate and begin to interpret emerging ideas. A response begins to take shape, these dynamics stimulating the expression of multiple viewpoints to be reconsidered

and tested against the text. Such recursive weighing and balancing, natural to the reading process, helps the reader to raise questions, to sort out understandings and confusions in reflecting on the resolution (or irresolution) of the text. This process promotes a democratic frame of mind, at once discouraging automatic adherence to a presented idea from an authority and encouraging the development of independent reading and thinking.

Classroom dialogue is comparable: reader-oriented discussion enhances the empowerment of readers. In the context of shared responses, individual perspectives and insights, including those of the teacher, a vital partner participant, who may additionally offer appropriate background materials, are compared and evaluated. The atmosphere of such discussion—the implicit challenges or disagreement with a stated viewpoint, the seeking of textual support or clarification of assertions—may affirm or enhance a reader's individual response or may cause some readers to recognize that their own responses were “confused or impoverished, and [they] may then be stimulated to attempt to call forth from the text a better poem” (*Reader* 105). This democratic process projects a thoughtful habit of mind less willing to accept superficial comments, more assertive in expressing informed opinion, more critical and evaluative of language and ideas.

In short, she devoted her career to promoting the notion that reading, especially the reading of literature, helps to define us as human beings, that it helps us to understand human existence, and that it enables us to live richer lives. With these significant learnings, she envisioned a citizenry capable and active, energized and committed to reading and thinking critically. Further, she dedicated herself to helping teachers use their knowledge to enrich the lives of their students through reading.

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