

Forum

In Memoriam: Louise M. Rosenblatt, 1904–2005

TO THE EDITOR:

Louise Rosenblatt thought longer and harder about the central practice of our discipline than anyone else in the twentieth century. Reading was the focus of her pedagogy and scholarship during a remarkable seven decades of professional life in literary studies and English education. An early advocate of what came to be called reader-response criticism, Rosenblatt published her seminal *Literature as Exploration* in 1938. This wonderfully eloquent book profoundly affected generations of teachers and scholars through its five editions, the latest published in 1995 by the MLA. In his foreword to this edition, Wayne Booth declared that Rosenblatt “has probably influenced more teachers in their ways of dealing with literature than any other critic.”

Many today can testify to that powerful influence. My own relationship with Louise began when she generously contributed an essay to a volume I edited as an assistant professor twenty-five years ago. I was always extremely grateful for that early support, even when (especially when) she reminded some of us that as early chroniclers of reader-oriented criticism from the seventies, we did not always get the history right. That is, blinded by the newest theory on the block, we sometimes overlooked the groundbreaking contributions to reader theory in the not-too-distant past during the reign of old historicisms and formalisms. Louise had been there first.

With the publication of a second edition of *Literature as Exploration* in 1968 and *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* in 1978, Louise was rediscovered by a whole new generation of teachers and scholars in college English departments. But her work had never been lost in education schools. Elementary and secondary teachers of reading found inspiration in her student-centered, transactional theory, as my wife pointed out to me while she was working on her master’s degree as a reading specialist in the eight-

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ies. During that time, Louise encouraged both of us in our studies of readers reading and always saw herself as contributing to reading education at all academic levels.

In our phone conversations over many years, Louise was most interested in discussing the current state of literary theory. We kept in regular contact at first about reader-response theory and then later about all the other forms of theory emerging on the critical scene. As enthusiasm for reader talk diminished in theory debates of the late eighties, Louise resolutely maintained her focus on a transactional theory of reading as she explained that hers was not vulnerable to the criticisms leveled against other readerly theories from sociopolitical and poststructuralist perspectives. Her transactional theory did not assume an isolated reader responding to an independent text in an apolitical vacuum. Indeed, those of us that turned to a form of neopragmatism to respond to these critiques found that Louise had once again beaten us to the point. As she noted in her introduction to *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, she had adopted the term *transaction* (instead of *interaction*) from the pragmatist work of John Dewey and Arthur Bentley. "I was amused," she wrote, "to discover that in a letter of April 20, 1950, Bentley had told Dewey that I was 'all excited about application of *Knowing and the Known* to literature.' Their book provided my transactional terminology." Unlike most reader-response critics and other literary theorists, Louise developed a transactional model of reading that denied the subject-object split and did not reify either readers or texts. Furthermore, her reader was always situated in a social community, and she never forgot the political implications of reading.

Those political implications were present from the first edition of *Literature as Exploration* through the publication of *Making Meaning with Texts*, a collection of her selected essays, which appeared just days before her death at one hundred. In an introduction to the latter volume, dated 15 September 2004, Louise recalled the political situation of her earliest work: "I began teaching in the nineteen-thirties, a time when our democratic way of life was being subjected to external threats from antidemocratic, totalitarian forces, which were in turn being made the excuse for internal

practices limiting our democratic freedoms." She believed that her student-centered, discussion-oriented "collaborative methods of teaching reading of all types . . . based on a theory of the reading process" enabled her students "to read independently, purposively and critically." And this "critical approach to all writings, no matter what their point of view," would in itself, she believed, serve the "advancement of democracy." Louise held to these views throughout her long career, realizing, as the good pragmatist she was, that there was no necessary, guaranteed relation between the theory and the practice but rather that, as she used it, her transactional theory grounded a critical reading practice that encouraged a democratic politics.

Shortly after completing the introduction to *Making Meaning with Texts*, Louise attended the NCTE celebration of her hundredth birthday. Some attendees noted that she was treated like a rock star and others that she did not disappoint her admirers as she spoke with her usual wit and insight. After the convention, she wryly noted how pleased she was to have been present at "what was usually a posthumous event." More seriously, she observed that the occasion reassured her that her "work had not been entirely in vain." The ongoing significance of that work and her example as a thinker and advocate can perhaps best be judged by the standard she herself described in the final words of *Making Meaning with Texts*:

Whitman's declaration of the importance of . . . the "image-makers" and thinkers of all kinds . . . articulates our present-day need for writers, scholars, scientists, professional people, and political leaders, who will do more than express our disillusionments, intensify our alienation, or dwell on our separateness. Whitman calls equally on each of us to be ready to listen to those who, sharing his faith in the democratic idea, and refusing either complacency or despair, would seek to inspire us to create the symphony of a society of free, varied, mutually respecting men and women.

Louise Rosenblatt certainly answered that call.

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