In this article, Nicholas Karolides has a conversation with distinguished educator Louise Rosenblatt, this year’s Outstanding Educator in the Language Arts. Recipients of this annual award are selected by members of the Elementary Section of the National Council of Teachers of English.

Long recognized as a preeminent leader in our profession, Louise M. Rosenblatt has been chosen to receive the fourth NCTE Award for Outstanding Educator in the Language Arts. Her presence in our field and her influence can be measured by the frequency with which she is cited, not only in NCTE periodicals, but also in the texts of our discipline and others. As a writer and speaker, as a creative thinker, Rosenblatt’s energetic and dedicated espousal of a theoretical doctrine and its application in our classrooms has indeed been massively influential since Literature as Exploration burst upon the language arts scene in 1938.

In “Reaffirmations,” her epilogue to the fifth edition of Literature as Exploration (1995), Louise reveals features of her background that prepared her for developing her transactional theory. She highlights, first, her family’s role. Intellectually influenced by antiauthoritarian, European writers and such Americans as Emerson and Thoreau, she was “saved from acquiring lingering Victorian attitudes—especially about gender, class, and ethnic differences.” Peter Kropotkin’s ideas about “mutual aid” supplanted the struggle-for-survival ideas of social Darwinism.

Rosenblatt’s undergraduate experience at Barnard, the women’s college at Columbia University in New York, was not conventional. An “honor student” during her last two years, she did not follow the traditional liberal arts English program but instead read, mainly on her own, intensively in English and American literature and widely in the social sciences. Upon graduation, she accepted a graduate fellowship at the University of Grenoble. In the following years, she was accepted as a doctoral candidate in Comparative Literature at the Sorbonne, the faculty of letters of the University of Paris. She received her doctorate in 1931; her dissertation, written in French, L’idée de l’art pour l’art dans la littérature anglaise pendant la période victorienne, was published the same year. Sub-
LOUISE ROSENBLATT

subsequently, while teaching at Barnard College, Rosenblatt undertook graduate studies in anthropology with Professors Franz Boas, the great founder of American anthropology, and Ruth Benedict.

During her Barnard affiliation, Rosenblatt's combined training in literature, anthropology, and the other social sciences led, in 1935, to her appointment to the Commission on Human Relations of the Progressive Education Association. An independent outgrowth of her work with the commission was the writing of her Literature as Exploration (first published in 1938, reissued in 1968, 1976, 1983, and 1995). Her contacts with education specialists and her visits to schools where innovative ideas had been introduced supported the decision to write this text, as did her own teaching experiences in introductory courses. In these courses she had begun to develop insights about the nature of the reading experience as well as discussion strategies in contrast to the traditional teacher-dominated lecture which was oriented toward future English majors.

Louise Rosenblatt has been teaching and actively engaged in advancing reforms in education for six decades, starting in 1927 with her first decade of teaching experience at Barnard College. After twenty years in liberal arts departments at Columbia University (Barnard) and Brooklyn College, she taught at New York University's School of Education from 1948 to 1972, after which she reached mandatory retirement age. (It was my great good fortune to have been both her student and her doctoral candidate during this period.) She has also taught, after 1972, at Rutgers University, Michigan State University, University of Pennsylvania, and others. For the past several winters, she has been lecturing and working with doctoral candidates at the University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida.

During World War II, Louise took a leave of absence from Brooklyn College to become Associate Chief of the Western European section and Chief of the Central Reports section of the Bureau of Overseas Intelligence of the Office of War Information. Thus, from 1943 to 1945, she was immersed in information gathering and propaganda analysis of radio texts and published documents (e.g., newspapers) that had been smuggled out of occupied countries.

Louise Rosenblatt's name is well known among teachers of English language arts, chiefly because of Literature as Exploration. Indeed, its immediate positive reception propelled her toward her first major presentation for NCTE, addressing 3,000 teachers in the Manhattan Opera House at the 1939 annual convention in New York. Secondary and elementary school teachers persisted in their interest in her approach during the post-WWII years, although New Criticism gained dominance among college and university faculties. A resurgence of attention occurred in the 1970s, steadily increasing since then, encompassing all levels of instruction.

Many presentations and publications have established, in the words of Wayne Booth, Rosenblatt's "powerful influence" and her theory has proven to be "relevant to decade after decade of critical and pedagogical revolution" (as cited in Rosenblatt, 1995, p. vii). Chief among these publications, The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work (1978, revised paperback edition 1994) expresses her theoretical vision as does "The Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing" (1994). (A selection of her publications follows the interview.)

Louise Rosenblatt has served the profession in other ways as well. She was appointed to the Commission on English of the College Entrance Examination Board as well as the Commission on the English Curriculum of the National Council of Teachers of English. For the latter, she was chair of the committee on the first two years of college; she contributed to the five-volume set of texts that emerged from the commission's work. She has also served as a member of the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Additionally, she has been a consultant for state boards of education.

Among the many honors that Rosenblatt has received are the Franco-American Exchange Fellow, 1925–1926; Guggenheim Fellow, 1942–1943; NYU Great Teacher Award, 1972; NCTE Distinguished Research, 1980; Leland Jacobs Award for English, 1981; the Assembly on Adolescent Literature Award, 1984; and the IRA Reading Hall of Fame, 1992. The Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy devoted a plenary session to her work at its 1997 national convention.

All of this is on the record. I want to add to the record a few words about Louise M. Rosenblatt, the teacher. Intense. Her classes were invariably intense, whether they focused on literary works, criticism, or theory. Louise herself was engaging and receptive; she encouraged response, asking reflective and stimulating questions. She managed to create a classroom ambiance that was both welcoming and demanding. Certainly, she practiced what she preached. Wayne Booth's judgment applies here, too: she has been a "powerful influence" on her students!

I interviewed Louise M. Rosenblatt at her home in Princeton, New Jersey, in May of 1999.

NICHOLAS: Congratulations on the Outstanding Educator in the Language Arts award, additional evidence of the widespread influence of your work.

LOUISE: I am tremendously pleased at being given this award. Although my own teaching experience has been in college and university, I have thought that if I could start all over again, I would again choose the noble profession of teacher, but for the earliest years. As for the acceptance of this approach in many classrooms and schools, I know that many people have contributed to the changes over the years. And I must admit, my tendency, as always, is to dwell, not so much on rewards for past efforts, no matter how much appreciated, as on what...
remains to be done, on current problems and controversies.

NICHOLAS: As you look back, can you discern any generative ideas that brought you to write *Literature as Exploration*?

LOUISE: I like your phrase “generative ideas”—it helps me to link up different strands in my thinking. I have been interested in turn-of-the-millennium talk about the changes that have come about in this century. There have been great changes in science, in the physical sciences, for example, after Einstein, with tremendous effect on technology and our practical life. The way we think of our relation to our world has changed. There has been the emergence of the social sciences. The sufferings of a great Depression earned us its legacy of acceptance of government’s responsibility for the economy and the welfare of its citizens. There have been terrible wars, totalitarian threats to democracy, whether from the left or the right. And there still continue to be conflicts over alternatives to democracy. There has been great diversification in the ethnic background of American citizens.

Somehow, I’ve always been so involved in the present and the future that only recently have I actually realized that I have lived through almost the whole span of the century. It helps me to see that in my little corner of the picture I was trying to deal with some of the repercussions of those changes in the way we look at the world, and with the recurrent threats to democracy.

Within that context, I would say the truly “generative” ideas have been the value of democracy for human beings, and the importance of preserving and improving our democratic way of life. This is what colored my thinking about literature and led to my becoming involved with education, with trying to understand how schools can contribute to the growth of people able to preserve and carry into greater fulfillment the democratic society, imperfect as it may be, that we are now benefiting from.

NICHOLAS: Would you elaborate on your remarks about changing ways of looking at the world?

LOUISE: The traditional way assumed that the “self,” the observer, was completely separate from nature. This produced the Newtonian stimulus-response paradigm, which still has its uses, and which studies an “interaction” between things viewed as distinct and self-contained. Einsteinian theory brought about a challenge to this. It opened the way to increasing recognition that the observer must always be taken into account in any observation, that human beings are the mediators in the perception of their world. They have come to be seen as constantly in mutual interplay with their physical and human environment.

John Dewey and other Pragmatist philosophers had developed this approach early in the century. In 1949 John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley suggested that the term “interaction” was too much involved with the older stimulus-and-response approach. They suggested “transaction” for the idea of a continuing to-and-fro, back and forth, give-and-take reciprocal or spiral relationship in which each conditions the other. “Transaction” has implications for all aspects of life. Ecology offers an easily-understood illustration of the transactional relationship between human beings and their natural environment. “Transaction” also applies to individuals’ relations to one another, whether we think of them in the family, the classroom, the school or in the broader society and culture.

This approach had been an important part of my thinking, so that I welcomed the term transaction, to emphasize that the meaning is being built up through the back-and-forth relationship between reader and text during a reading event.

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NICHOLAS: You are often said to be at least 30 years ahead of your time in your response to the changes. Can you explain how that happened?

LOUISE: I was fortunate, I guess. You know the saying about the right place at the right time. It’s hard for me to weigh all the influences—family (which was extremely important), education, friends—that converged to make me receptive to the new ideas in the exciting intellectual environment of the 20s and 30s. I was fortunate in being at Barnard, the women’s college at Columbia University in New York City, both for my undergraduate years and, after taking my doctorate at the Sorbonne, as an instructor in the Barnard English department. Those were the years when while teaching composition and literature, I was studying linguistics and ethnography in the graduate anthropology department. I was encountering the most innovative thinking in the arts, philosophy, and the social sciences, as well as in education. Those were the years also when I was a member of a philosophical conference organized by John Dewey, Horace Kallen and other Pragmatist
NICHOLAS: What were the circumstances that brought you to the writing of Literature as Exploration?

LOUISE: In the course of my undergraduate years at Barnard, I found myself very much interested in literature, but also discovering the social sciences, especially anthropology. When I approached graduation, I was torn between doing graduate work in literature or anthropology. I chose literature. But, in order to satisfy my anthropological interest in different cultures, I chose to go abroad to a country with a different language. Even after I had my doctorate in Comparative Literature and had started to teach in the Barnard College English Department, I did two years of graduate work in anthropology.

And because I could draw on both literature and the social sciences, in 1935 I was appointed to a Commission on Human Relations. Its purpose was to publish a group of books about such topics as family relations, human development, and psychology for late high school or early college readers. My function was to help plan the books. Others, skilled in popular writing, were to do the actual writing. That gave me my first contact with the schools.

When my part of the work was done, I reflected on the difference between reading about human relations in these books and the discussions of human relations in my classes after the reading of literary works of art. I had great respect for the impersonal, scientific approach of the books we had planned. In contrast, the class discussions of problems in human relations arose out of what the readers had thought and felt in reading the text, and were efforts to think rationally about such topics in an emotionally colored context. It seemed to me that the resulting insights might be more personally felt, perhaps more lasting. Both approaches seemed to me to be needed.

There was no provision for any Commission book on the teaching of literature. But I felt impelled to express these ideas. I went out to the country with a secretary and dictated most of the book. Recall that this was in the 30s, when both Nazism and Stalinism were powerful. I was motivated to relate all of these concerns to their role in a democracy. My work for the Commission gave me the opportunity to organize my ideas about the relation of literary experience to thinking about human relations.

NICHOLAS: What had gone on in your classes that brought these things to the surface of your thinking?

LOUISE: I recall a moment early in my teaching. I found myself in a classroom in which I had taken an undergraduate class in 18th century literature. It was taught by a tall Englishman in a three-piece suit, who spoke rather formally, with occasionally a slight catch in his speech. Standing at the same podium, holding forth, I suddenly heard a little catch in my speech! I realized that I was subconsciously imitating my professors’ lectures—that it was not me talking! It’s natural to teach the way we’ve been taught. I understand how much we are dominated by what we have assimilated from our environment—that even after we accept new ideas, it’s not easy to develop new patterns of behavior.

Although the Barnard department was mainly traditional, there was some experimentation, mostly imitative of the British universities. In addition to the usual courses, I was given the opportunity to meet students in small groups. These evidently were supposed simply to fulfill the usual traditional teacher-dominated functions. However, I was free to carry on my classes in my own way, and gradually over about a decade I had arrived at the ideas expressed in my book. Actually, many of the examples in the book came from my own classes, yet I was always very much aware of how much I failed to achieve.

I recall discussions in my classes about relations between the generations in Romeo and Juliet. Or a student who declared that she did not consider the play a tragedy, because Romeo and Juliet would certainly be reunited in heaven. Or about the lively arguments about A Doll’s House concerning the tension between Nora’s need to become an independent person and her responsibilities as a mother.

Such interchanges demonstrated to me how much what readers make of their interplay with a text depends on what they bring to it, in linguistic and life experiences, in assumptions about the world, and in personal preoccupations. I was amazed at the differences in the actual works the readers lived through as well as in their reactions to them. I couldn’t ignore the fact that each brought different personal experiences and sometimes very different assumptions about people and society to the reading. I couldn’t simply be handing out neat little definitions of tragedy and comedy or asking students to analyze and classify the technique of a supposedly already-made literary work.

I learned the most from the small-group discussions and from spontaneous written responses, although I welcome any kind of effective classroom practice or combination of...
lecture and discussion methods, so long as it is productive of interchanges with the teacher and among the students. Reflecting on and discussing what they had lived through in reading could, under proper conditions, I decided, lead to self-criticism and to growth in reading ability. It could also lead to more lasting insights into human relations than would more impersonal scientific presentations, important though they were.

NICHOLAS: Some might have been satisfied simply to settle for advocating a change in teaching methods, for more small group discussions. How did your teaching experience lead to the development of a whole literary theory?

LOUISE: My work for the doctorate had already involved me in theory. However, my thinking about the nature of the literary work and the social role of literature had been primarily from the point of view of the creative process carried on by the author, the poet or novelist. My literature classes gave me the opportunity to observe and reflect on the relationships between readers and texts. I saw ways in which teaching should be changed. My hope was above all to influence actual teaching. But I felt that this could happen only if I explained the theoretical basis for my ideas. The traditional approaches were based on assumptions, not only about education but about language and literature, that I questioned. Hence the chapter on the nature of the literary experience. John Dewey had published Art as Experience in 1934, and, as I stated in my book, his influence is obvious. However, it is hard to be very specific about this. I think I have already spoken at various times of how so many influences converged and reinforced one another in those years.

I dictated most of the book away from libraries, and there were no boxes of notes and quotations such as had been the preparation for writing my dissertation. The book was a distillation, rather, of all the reading and reflection of those years.

NICHOLAS: You earlier mentioned the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce as an influence. As I recall, you quote his definition of science in Literature as Exploration, but later mention him mainly in connection with your views on language.

LOUISE: Nowadays, Peirce is being cited as a founder of what he called semiology, and is now called semiotics. In the early 30s, my husband and I had read his letters to a fellow semiotics pioneer (who should be more often remembered), Lady Welby, in which he sets forth his triadic concept of language. Although I didn’t write about it until later, his triadic view of language already permeated my thinking.

Then—as, alas, for many, even now—the traditional either/or notions about language prevailed. Meaning was somehow assumed to be already there “in” the text, like the kernel of a nut waiting to be pried out. The signifier and what it signified were treated as a dual, self-contained system apart from its human context.

I was immune to this, because I had assimilated Peirce’s triadic concept of language—sign, object, interpretant—a sign and its object linked by a mental association. A sign is simply squiggles on a page or vibrations in the air until an idea in somebody’s mind links the sign with what it points to. The triadic view of language explains why we can’t just concentrate on the words and their meaning apart from particular linguistic events. This firmly grounds literature in its human context.

Both Peirce and Dewey reinforced my recognition that, before there can be a scientific report or a novel or poem, there must be both a text, a set of signs, and a reader (if only the author) who will transact with it to make meaning. Meaning happens during the reading. When we talk about the interpretation or the work, we are talking about what is evoked during the reading event.

There is always a personal and a social context within which the reading event occurs. The individual internalizes, draws on, a socially produced language presented by the family and society. We have not only a particular moment in the personal life of the reader, but also a particular social and cultural environment. Hence my insistence from the beginning on reading as a unique event in time.

NICHOLAS: Nevertheless, students often assume that the text alone determines whether the reading produces a literary work or a scientific report. They point to Hamlet in a collection entitled Tragedies and the general assumption that it should be read as poetry.

LOUISE: That’s the kind of confusion remaining from traditional conceptions of language. When we speak of Shakespeare’s tragedies, I believe we mean that he probably intended that the text should be
read (or listened to) in a certain way and should produce certain effects called "tragedy." But there is not absolute agreement even about that. For instance, should a certain text be classified as history play or tragedy? New evidence may lead us to modify our ideas about how the texts were regarded by author and readers.

**NICHOLAS:** But how about inculcating respect for the author’s intention?

**LOUISE:** We can inculcate respect for the author’s intention without inculcating confusing assumptions about how language works. We should talk about the author’s probable intention, since we can never enter into the author’s mind. That doesn’t mean there can be no responsible reading. Usually, we try to find a coherent organization for what the signs on the page stir up in our consciousness. We look for clues that may reflect the intention that guided the actual writing process. We may look for external “background” information that will suggest or confirm the intention.

However, even if we have clues as to the writer’s intention, perhaps even statements by the author, we can’t just argue “That’s what the author says is the intention, so that’s what the text says.” We still have to decide whether the particular signs on the pages permit us to fulfill that intention.

Moreover, readers may find various possible interpretations different from the author’s and different from each other. While we were talking about Shakespeare, I was reminded of when I was a graduate student and was asked to help someone who was doing research on Shakespeare’s metaphors as a possible source of clues to Shakespeare’s biography. I was supposed to help classify and count the metaphors—metaphors derived from nature, law, food, clothing, medicine, etc. If I had done this, I certainly would not have been reading Hamlet as a tragedy or as poetry. I would not have been sharing his experiences. I would have had potential categories such as nature or law in mind. I would have been scanning the pages for items to classify and record—in other words, with a mindset akin to that of a scientist recording data.

Important as the text may be, you can’t explain these differences by simply looking at the text. The pattern of signs on the page remains the same; the difference is in the reader’s activity in relation to those signs.

My interpretation of the text of Hamlet in the light of today’s world, I recognize, must be different from that of a contemporary of Shakespeare. And it may be different from yours. That’s all right, so long as we recognize that different transactions between readers and texts at different times under different circumstances and for different purposes may produce different interpretations, different “works.”

**NICHOLAS:** When I present this point of view to my class, their immediate deduction is that anything goes. What is your reaction to that?

**LOUISE:** I don’t blame them for that misconception. Actually, some postmodernists or deconstructionists and their disciples have made exactly that leap from “No single, absolute, ‘correct’ interpretation” to “All interpretations are equally acceptable.” The narrow view of “comprehension” fostered by the notions of “correct” or “incorrect” interpretation of a static meaning hidden in the text has led to a pendulum, either/or, swinging to extreme relativism. That is not a necessary, unavoidable conclusion.

Although there isn’t a single “correct” interpretation of any text for all circumstances, that doesn’t necessarily rule out responsible reading. We can consider some interpretations better or poorer than others. Or we can find that readers bringing different knowledge and assumptions or in different social and historical contexts may have equally defensible interpretations.

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**Meaning “happens” during the interplay between the text and a reader.**

**NICHOLAS:** Once you speak of “better” or “poorer,” you are, of course, consciously or unconsciously assuming some criteria or standards by which you are judging the interpretations.

**LOUISE:** Exactly. For example, for me, as an adult, the interpretation that takes into account more of the text would have more weight than one that ignores parts of the text—such as an interpretation of a sentence that ignored an important word, or an interpretation of Hamlet that ignores the scene between him and his mother. Or, I would not accept an interpretation, or parts of an interpretation, for which no basis can be found in the text. Or, I might prefer an interpretation that organizes, relates, the elements or ideas in a more plausible or more mature or more discriminating way. We might find two different interpretations equally justifiable according to such criteria. Unlike those deconstructionists, most experienced readers accept and apply such broad basic requirements, although they may disagree about others.
NIcholas: I believe that someone has argued that that takes us back to the traditional view of the text as dominant.

Louise: No, I might speak of returning to the text, but that is because the signs on the page are the only observable, empirical aspect shared by readers. Meaning "happens" during the interplay between the text and a reader. Actually, as soon as we start to say what a text means, we are reporting and analyzing the transaction we have just engaged in. We return to the text to see how, drawing on a personal reservoir to transact with the text, we arrived at our particular interpretation. Comparison of our interpretations and the application of criteria such as I have suggested can lead to self-criticism and increased reading ability. That's what should be going on when we "return to the text."

Although I emphasize the importance of the personal aspect, because it had been taken for granted and largely ignored, Literature as Exploration and my other publications devote many pages to the assumptions and beliefs involved in such reflection on the transaction.

Nicholas: That leads back to the question: How did your general view of transaction lead to the detailed model of the reading process set forth in The Reader, the Text, the Poem and later publications?

Louise: William James and Lev Vygotsky gave me formulations for the psychological processes or strategies involved. For the triadic linkage of sign and object, Vygotsky says that the meaning of a sign--I can quote exactly--is "the sum of all the psychological events aroused in our consciousness by that word. The sign is not only linked to a referent, but this is embedded in a complex web of associations, sensations, feelings, and ideas. Encountering a printed sign, for example, c-a-t, the readers have to draw on, select from, the residue of experiences of that linguistic sign in their individual, past life-situations--a unique mix of referent, associations, feelings, sensations, ideas, and attitudes in which the sign is embedded.

William James--I don't recall when I read his Principles of Psychology--William James's ideas about "the stream of consciousness" as a "choosing activity" were wondrously helpful. It became possible to show that the text stirred up, brought into the stream, a complex welter of sensations, thoughts, and feelings. "Selective attention" brings some elements into the center of attention and pushes others into the background or ignores them.

"Selective attention" was very important in explaining my transactional view of reading as a dynamic, fluid process in time. It helped to show that reading is a selecting, organizing, synthesizing activity. It helped to explain the back-and-forth, spiraling influence of the reader and the text on the emerging meaning: the creation of tentative meanings, their influence on the possibilities to be considered for the following signs, the modification as new signs enter the focus of attention. Sometimes, as signs emerge that can't be fitted into what we have constructed, we have to look back and revise.

"Selective attention" was also important in explaining the difference between a reading that produced a scientific report and a reading that produced a poem.

Nicholas: But why the new terminology? Why "efferent" and "aesthetic" instead of a choice between simply "scientific" or "poetic" stances? Why the other special terminology--public, private, etc.?

Louise: A theory, since it will be tested, needs precise terminology. I suppose that it is more important to someone doing research, whereas the teacher needs it mainly to understand the reasons for the pedagogical implications of the model. That's why I believe that one doesn't have to worry about the terminology, once the general approach is assimilated. One develops habits of selection.

The terminology was necessary for thinking about the reading process without being hampered by old unexamined assumptions. For example, the difference between the two ways of reading is implicitly recognized by many contrasting terms--science/art, nonliterary/literary, prose/poetry, expository/imaginative, etc. These classify the result, the kind of meaning produced, whereas I was concerned with the process that goes on during the actual reading event.

Moreover, I had to counteract the either/or misconception that throughout any reading event, attention is given completely to one or the other aspect. It's easy to forget that a transaction is an event over time, and that there is always a mix of kinds of attention to different aspects of meaning. Attention may shift back and forth many times during any reading. The very absorption in a powerful feeling may lead to a shift to reflection about it or about the author's technique, before returning to the narrative. I had to have a vocabulary for talking about where the attention was mainly directed, about proportions.
Vygotsky, if I recall correctly, speaks of “intellectual and affective” aspects of meaning. Some of the other terms applied to these two aspects are denotation/connotation, cognitive/affective, empirical/qualitative, impersonal/personal. None of these, I found, could be used to cover all such paired possibilities, so for general terms, I settled on “public” and “private” aspects of meaning or sense. Then it was possible to talk about the two major kinds of activity that produce a scientific report or a poetic experience.

NICHOLAS: The distinction between scientific and poetic seems especially hard to define.

LOUISE: Yes, if we look in the text for words or syntax or content that are exclusively either scientific or poetic, we are lost. Instead, we should be thinking about different psychological processes. Hence, I looked at what readers do in those two kinds of reading transactions.

I decided that the proportion or mix of selective attention to the “public” and “private” aspects of language determined whether it would be an efficient or an aesthetic reading.

I looked for particular reading acts that would illuminate the difference between the two kinds of selective activity. A favorite illustration has been the mother whose child had swallowed a poisonous liquid and who was frantically reading the label to discover what to do. She would be transacting with the signs, of course, but with attention focused on learning what to do after the reading was over. The word “water” might appear. She would pay attention to what it pointed to, its referent, its public aspect. She would not pay attention to her many associations with the word, from sensations of refreshing coolness to “water, water everywhere” and other oft-repeated lines of verse. She would push these into the fringes of attention. She would ignore her own emotional state, even though she might recall it later. Her attention would be centered on the most abstract referential aspects of meaning—what objects to reach for, what actions to perform after the reading ends.

I call this the “efferent” approach or “stance” in the selective process, from the Latin efferre, to carry away. In efferent reading, a greater proportion of attention is centered on the public, generally shared meanings, and less on the privately felt aspects. This is the kind of meaning the scientist aspires to—impersonal, repeatable, verifiable. I say, “aspires to,” because we postmoderns know that the observer cannot be completely banished from the observation.

As for the poetic readings, instead of attention mainly to facts and ideas abstracted for use afterwards, the reader of, say, a lyric by Keats would focus on what was being lived through during the reading, on the ideas as they are embodied in the images, the sensations, the feelings, the changing moods. Attention would be given to the public, referential aspect, but mainly to the aura of feelings and attitudes surrounding it. I called this aesthetic reading.

The tendency in the teaching of literature has been to turn the student’s attention away from the actual experience, and to focus on presenting a “correct,” traditional interpretation, and on knowledge about technical devices or biographical or historical background.

NICHOLAS: That explains the difference between the two stances, but why do you emphasize the idea of an efferent/aesthetic continuum?

Theory should help us provide the conditions, the contexts, that will foster growth toward competent reading.

LOUISE: Again, because of the pedagogical implications. I am emphasizing the range of possible stances between the efferent and the aesthetic poles. Between the two poles, there is a sequence of possible proportions of attention to public and private aspects of sense. I have been citing reading events whose selective attention clearly placed them at one or the other end of the continuum. But there are many, perhaps most, reading events with the proportion falling nearer the middle. Thinking of different reading transactions as places on a continuum solves the problem most theorists have about such texts as Emerson’s essays, or The Book of Isaiah, or Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address.

NICHOLAS: That reminds me of your use of the wave metaphors in your IRA essay to illustrate the idea of the efferent/aesthetic continuum.

LOUISE: I can recall the metaphors. A scientific reading of “the wave theory of light” clearly falls near the efferent end of the continuum. And it’s easy to place near the aesthetic end of the continuum a reading of Shakespeare, “Like as the wave makes toward the pebbled shore, / So do our minutes hasten to their end.” But how about an author who says of fascism, “There is no fighting the wave of
The either/or response is the ridiculous assumption that this constitutes a denial that skills are essential.

Much of our reading falls into this middle area—from newspapers, political speeches, writings about social problems, advertisements—many kinds of writing with a strong affective appeal, but where the predominate stance should be efferent. 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 whole scientific/literary spectrum. And it’s the middle of the continuum that creates the main teaching problem. How do we help students develop the ability to adopt the appropriate stance?

NICHOLAS: You mention teaching. Could we look more closely at the application of theory to practice?

LOUISE: Students don’t need theory. It’s the teacher who needs to assimilate the theory in order to act on it. Once the transactional approach is assimilated, its pedagogical implications are not complex. Theory should help us provide the conditions, the contexts, that will foster growth toward competent reading. Most important, theory should help us to avoid methods and strategies that may satisfy short-term goals but obstruct growth.

I’ll repeat a story that I’ve told many times. When my son was in the third grade, he brought home a workbook. From across the table, I saw the broad margins and uneven lines of text that led me to exclaim, “At last, your class is reading a poem!” Then I read the question that preaced it: “What facts does this poem teach you?”

The question implicitly told the students that you read a poem in the same way you would read a railroad timetable. It happened to be a description of a scene with cows standing in a brook. Would the students have paid more attention to details such as the number of cows or to the feelings of calm and quiet that would create a mood? A question, like all methods and strategies, also implicitly teaches and reflects its underlying, often unacknowledged, unexamined theoretical base. This anecdote exemplifies, perhaps in rather blatant form, the failure to do justice to this matter of adoption of an appropriate stance.

What would be more influential in setting the reader's stance, for example: the teacher's statement that expression of “personal response” would be welcomed, or her addition that there would be a five-minute quiz before such discussion, “just to test whether the work had actually been read.” The general reliance on mechanistic, multiple-choice testing reinforces the implicit pressure to treat literature as a body of knowledge rather than of potential experiences. Failure to take this matter of stance into account and to give a clear sense of purpose, or the giving of mixed or contradictory signals, produces, in general, shallow, unproductive readings, and uncritical acceptance of emotional appeals or unsound analogies.

Not only the teacher, but the total school environment, the types of teaching strategies, and the types of assessment influence the student by their tacit “messages” about what is really important. The transactional approach provides the basis for thinking about both the direct and the indirect, tacit effects.

Is that why you prefer “transactional theory” to “reader response theory”?

LOUISE: Precisely I recall first formally using “transactional theory” in an article in 1969. In the reaction against the New Criticism in the 70s and 80s, the term “reader response” came to be applied to a wide range of theories that actually differed in their treatment of the reader/text relationship. Some, such as the psychoanalytic critics, were mainly subjectivist, reader-oriented. The structuralists and deconstructionists were ultimately, like the New Critics, mainly text-oriented, treating language as autonomous, without reference to author or reader. Text-oriented theories are least likely to challenge the traditional pedagogy.

When I published The Reader, the Text, the Poem, I called my theory “transactional” to differentiate it from both of these approaches and
LOUISE: They don't. But especially personal response, even with emphasis second, what to comparison knowledge they and approach recall up, we've first, to freely, reading. expression implications, reader college entire personal response, rather to think learned to be factual thought been lost, the teacher's fears, why the concept of the aesthetic/efficient continuum had to be developed. Some people seem to think simply of using complete works, rather than anthologized snippets. Others who espouse this program assume works written primarily to be experienced, to be read aesthetically. At any rate, therein lies the source of potential problems, and therein lies the need for at least setting up some danger signals.

As I have for years felt that the aesthetic was neglected or underemphasized in our society, my first impulse is to welcome what seems to be a pendulum-swing effort to do justice to the aesthetic. But my next thought is of the importance of providing, as early as possible and as consistently as possible, a sense of alternative ways of transacting with texts.

If the literary work is used simply to sweeten the teaching of skills, if traditional methods of teaching and testing are continued, the whole value of the emphasis on so-called literature is negated. It will lead as usual to the feeling that, in school, the really important things are the skills to be acquired and demonstrated. The value of the text seen as a source either of information or experience is lost through its use primarily as the basis for teaching skills.

The either/or response is the ridiculous assumption that this constitutes a denial that skills are essential. It's a question of how they are to be acquired. So many youngsters acquire them automatically that it is wasteful to put everyone through dead end drills, instead of providing them at the proper time for those who need the more systematic drill. The important thing is that the reading be learned as a means of making meaning, either predominately efferent or predominately aesthetic, and that skills be acquired as tools in a really meaningful activity. The problem, then, is to create a situation in which students from the
beginning and throughout their education, see reading as a purposive activity.

People in the primary years have often been extraordinarily successful at this. Habits and skills are built up through meaningful reading experiences and opportunity to express reactions and reflect freely, verbally or otherwise. Some texts have been written to incorporate drill in a skill, but they provide really meaningful experiences. Long before the fourth-grade, the students understand that reading is a matter of inferring, creating meaning.

Despite your reluctance to encourage formulaic methods, you have addressed teachers about instruction at different academic levels, for example, in their professional journals.

Your comment leads me to think back. It seems to me that I tried to suggest a whole new way of thinking, that I was concerned with indicating the concepts about language, about the process of making meaning, about the processes of reading and writing—understandings that would enable the teacher to choose among possible patterns of instruction, possible paths that would enable their particular students to advance toward increased ability to transact with texts. That usually involved changes in the teacher’s assumptions and attitudes, as well as changes in classroom procedures. But it left the implementation, the specific strategies, to be worked out by people working at the different levels; primary, elementary, secondary, college, and university.

I have greatly admired the many books and articles that have shared the experience of implementing such an approach at specific levels, whether the first grade, the high school, or college, sometimes in year-long, day-by-day detail.

We have been talking about reading, but in recent articles and presentations you have dealt with reading and writing.

Yes, I have always been interested in the processes involved in creating, as well as reading a text. Also, I was usually teaching both reading and writing. My transactional view of language applies to all modes of language behavior. A speaker assumes a listener; and a reader assumes a writer, and vice versa.

At first, I wrote almost exclusively about reading, because that is what I was asked to do. Fortunately, many composition teachers didn’t have to be addressed directly, and they were very receptive from the very beginning. In the late 80s, when reading and writing experts organized a conference on the connections among the various language activities, I was delighted to be asked to contribute. After that, I decided that I could no longer write about reading without also dealing more fully with writing. Perhaps I should add that the reverse also holds: I find I can’t deal with writing without talking about reading.

Both writer and reader transact with texts, both compose meanings. That is why all the transactional concepts hold for both. But there are differences that should be kept in mind. The reader starts with the author’s text and tries to build a meaning consonant with it. The writer starts with a blank page; as the text emerges on the page, its author is its first reader. Reading is part of the writing process.

Actually, I find there are two kinds of authorial reading—first, expression-oriented, when the writer is testing the emerging text in the light of a more or less clear intention; and second, reception-oriented, when the writer reads the text in the light of whether it assumes knowledge or experience potential readers may not bring to it.

Both types of authorial reading may bring revisions. The more experienced the writer, the more likely these two types of reading will occur throughout the writing process, and the more automatically they will alternate. Sometimes the writer may have to decide between words that are personally more satisfying, more expressive, and words that will be more effective links with the linguistic and life experience of prospective readers. A word might be too technical, or a metaphor based on the game of chess might not be understood by many potential readers.

The traditional preoccupation with reading in the early years seems to be waning as more and more schools recognize the importance of writing. The opportunity to engage purposefully in these parallel linguistic activities should reinforce habits that are important for both writing and reading.
so long as I can do anything, slight as it may be, to
influence what's happening in the political arena
right now. Lately, my time at the computer has
been spent writing letters to legislators and drafting
suggestions to officers of our professional organi-
sations about ways of increasing our political clout.

My belief in the importance of the schools in a
democracy has not only evolved but also increased
over the years. In 1938, democracy was being
threatened by forces and ideologies from outside.
Today, I believe it is again seriously threatened,
this time mainly by converging forces from within.
From local schools to state standards to Supreme
Court cases, education has become an arena for
this ideological struggle. Special interest groups
have been organized to achieve domination of
local school boards; topics such as methods of
teaching reading or allocation of funds to research
have become political issues at all levels.

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 purpose of
education for democracy. Ultimately, if I have been
concerned about methods of teaching literature,
about ensuring that it should indeed be personally
experienced, it is because, as Shelley said, it helps
readers develop the imaginative capacity to put
themselves in the place of others—a capacity
essential in a democracy, where we need to rise
above narrow self-interest and envision the broader
human consequences of political decisions. If I
have been involved with development of the ability
to read critically across the whole intellectual
spectrum, it is because such abilities are particu-
larly important for citizens in a democracy.

Of course, the schools cannot do the whole
job, but they are essential. We are already over-
burdened as teachers, yet as citizens we need to
promote and defend the social, economic, and
political conditions that make it possible for us to
carry on our democratic tasks in the classroom.

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