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## LET'S MAKE A NEW DEAL:

### LOUISE ROSENBLATT AND THE POLITICS OF LITERACY

by

Robert J. Graham

Like all good ideas whose time has come, Louise Rosenblatt's transactional model of the reading process now seems destined to exert a lasting effect over the daily business of many North American classrooms. To follow the course of Rosenblatt's career, as theorist and tireless apologist for the role readers play in evoking meaning from a text, is also to note how her gender may have contributed to her marginalization in the male dominated world of the academy and to her lengthy sojourn in the literary critical wilderness. However, what needs to be stressed here is that the renewed attention presently afforded her work in *educational* circles is the result of an accumulation of forces within and external to her program, forces whose dynamics will form the basis of this paper.

I want to speculate on some of the circumstances surrounding the current revival of interest in the educational importance of Rosenblatt's views; by so doing, I also want to consider those elements in her approach that have begun to cut across a variety of educational sites, subject areas and practices. Specifically, I want to argue that educators can not only reach a more satisfactory understanding of how important Rosenblatt's work is by inquiring into its unique internal features, but that by legitimately extending our range of vision to deal with external factors as well, we will be in a position to offer more general observations on the likelihood of its continuing appeal. Furthermore, the litmus test of this argument will involve the extent to which I am able to make out a case for some of the ideological assumptions that went into the initial construction of her theory, and also as I point out aspects from the contemporary social and educational scene which may have helped prepare the way for a more widespread interest in her position.

Consequently, I will organize this inquiry around three central questions: (1) What are the origins and central aspects of her terminology and what view of knowledge creation do the internal features of Rosenblatt's theory support? (2) Is Rosenblatt's theory reasonable; i.e., does it promote beliefs for which there is a great deal of evidence? And (3) Are there other socio-cultural factors at work which have provided a new source of life for her theory? It is answers to questions such as these that seem likely to supply us with a more general appreciation of the internal, external and ideological aspects attendant upon the transactional new deal that Rosenblatt envisions for all educators involved directly or indirectly in the teaching and promotion of literacy.

## Naming and Knowledge

Historically speaking, as Rosenblatt herself and commentators on her work have consistently pointed out, her use of the key terms "transaction" and "transactional" was inspired by Dewey and Bentley's (1949) book Knowing the Known. In many of her articles, and certainly in her most recent book The Reader, the Text, the Poem (1978), Rosenblatt repeats, with very little difference in wording, the key features of the term. "Transaction" is used "to designate situations in which the elements or factors are, one might say, aspects of the total situation in an ongoing process" (1969, p. 43); transaction is "an ongoing process in which the elements or factors are, one might say, aspects of a total situation, each conditioned by and conditioning the other" (1978, p. 17); a transaction "is used to designate a two-way relationship, in which each, one might say, shapes and is shaped by the other" (1981, p. 19). Clearly Rosenblatt feels that not only is she remaining faithful to the original formulation of the term by repeating it in this pledge-of-allegiance fashion, but if we take the work of Dewey and Bentley as warranting a major part of her argument, she is assigning a value to the term which is ideologically equivalent to a "hard core" belief that she is reluctant to modify or give up. Rosenblatt's selection of Dewey and Bentley's transactional terminology is an epistemological act of faith with immediate consequences for the paths of research and methods of teaching which develop from her commitment to that belief. As Rosenblatt (1978) herself has put it, schools of thought like behaviorism have attempted to eliminate "the human factor," whereas other schools such as phenomenology and existentialism have sought to "incorporate the human consciousness" (p. 26) into their theorizing. By consistently aligning herself with the latter camp, Rosenblatt's use of the term encloses within itself a commitment to specific epistemological and ideological positions. Her politics of literacy rests not upon the radical equality of readers when confronted by texts, since hers, like other models of the reading process, recognizes the importance of prior knowledge and literary competence in the transaction; rather it resides in seeing reading as a kind of on-going private tutorial available to all, where a willing reader, under benign guidance from the signs left by the author in the text, evokes the "poem" (See Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 12). In this way the unequal distribution of power in the reading event implied by other reading models such as information processing models can be circumvented and replaced by the more civilized give-and-take of democratic social actors. For Rosenblatt, as for other reader-response critics, the locus of meaning is in the author and in the reader. The text has the potential to call forth meaning but has no meaning of itself. As Goodman (1976) states, "Meaning does not pass between writer and reader. It is represented by a writer in a text and constructed from a text by a reader. Characteristics of writer, text, and reader will all influence the resultant meaning" (p. 815).

One can here begin to understand just how important this naming process is for Rosenblatt, as indeed it was for her epistemological mentors, Dewey and Bentley. Their work largely consists of creating, justifying and advocating a shift from an interactional to a transactional vocabulary, a shift which introduces a whole new relationship between the knower and the known. For example, Dewey and Bentley were well aware that the term transaction brings with it difficult-to-shake commercial connotations. Their treatment of this aspect of the term is worth attending to briefly for the additional dimension it brings to their own use, and to Rosenblatt's later appropriation of the term.

"Transaction" in ordinary description is used for the consideration as detached of a "deal" that has been "put across" by two or more actors. Such a verbal description is rarely objectionable for the practical point of view, but that is about all that can be said for it. For use in research adequate report of the full event is necessary, and for this again adequate behavioral description must be secured (Dewey & Bentley, 1949, p. 116).

It is easier to see how, that if, like Rosenblatt, one is personally committed to the notion of progressive education, one might wish to reconceptualize the mental operations involved in the act of reading along more democratic lines. In other words, like the enlightened schoolteacher, the text guides, it never chides. To guide, to direct, to proceed "with freedom toward the redetermination and re-naming of the objects comprised in the system" (Dewey & Bentley, 1949, p. 122), these are some of the key features which, when combined with the "past experience and present preoccupations" of the reader, sets up the "two-way or circular process" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 19) which is involved when a reader evokes the poem from the work.

If the term transaction forms something like the hard core of Rosenblatt's theory, so too does William James' notion of selective attention. Under James's view of the mind, a reader selectively attends to some aspects of the text and inhibits others. Thus reading involves a continuing stream of choices. Rosenblatt would not deny that hypotheses and experimentation should proceed with respect to clarifying such traditional "bottom-up" preoccupations as word recognition or syntactic categories. But the kind of research program that is generated from the transactional approach is more concerned with the broader, "top-down" process of how a reader makes meaning from the signs in the text. Her answer, which begins in the notion of selective attention, also posits the need for early decisions on the part of a reader. The reader, then, must selectively attend to a predominantly aesthetic or efferent transaction with the text. This "stance," Rosenblatt claims, can be situated on a continuum between the efferent and aesthetic poles and might be crudely characterized as follows:

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 (efferent)

(aesthetic)

[information gathering]

[lived through experience]

Likewise, a schematic outline of Rosenblatt's reading process might look like this:

1. Responses to cues in the text
2. Adoption of appropriate stance
3. Development of a tentative framework
4. Arousal of expectations
5. Fulfillment of reinforcement of expectations or their frustration, leading to
6. Revision of framework, and, if necessary, rereading

7. Arousal of further expectations
8. Final synthesis

Now the problems involved in the naming process outlined above were, as we have seen, allied to a view of knowledge creation which stressed its active and experiential nature. To evoke a poem from a text is an "event" which takes place in the private domain of the reader's mind. Yet this mind is no piece of blank paper upon which experience writes its name, but instead comes replete with prior knowledge, ready to negotiate with the text, ready to adopt the proper attitude (stance) which will facilitate the creation of meaning. Under an impressionist model of knowledge creation, as Scheffler (1975) notes, "the teacher had enormous power; by controlling the input of sensory units, he can, to a large degree, shape the mind" (p. 69). At a stroke Rosenblatt's theory dissolves the idea of a passive reader confronted by an all-powerful text; in its place she offers the notion of the text as simultaneously open yet subject to constraints, a text that does not become a poem until a reader works at the business of evoking the poem. Although the empirically-driven impressionist model is clearly useful in suggesting that the mind is capable of increased growth as a function of its particular experiences, it fails to account for what the reader makes of this sensory experience that would count as anything resembling knowledge as we might generally think of it. Therefore, the internal features of Rosenblatt's theory represent a fresh reconceptualization of the way we approach the act of reading, a move which offers a view of knowledge grounded in the actions of readers consciously aware of the shifting nature of their dealings with texts.

We can witness this alternative view of knowledge creation take shape if we begin by noting how Rosenblatt privileges the aesthetic as the basic model of the reading process. From this premise, and again following Scheffler's (1975) terminology, it is clear that the knowledge so produced can be captured in the phrase "a matter of vision" (p. 71). Vision in this instance "defines and organizes particular experiences, and points of their significance" (p. 71). Scheffler (1975) claims that this view of knowledge does justice to "the importance of firsthand inspection of realities by the student, the necessity for the student to earn his knowledge by his own efforts" (p. 72). The transactional model, then, is progressive in the sense that it not only appears to provide an adequate account of the reading process in both its efferent and aesthetic aspects, but it can also account for the production of new knowledge since it posits a learner actively involved in the appropriation of experience in a personal way. Knowledge here means more than information or being informed; it means "to have earned the right, through one's own effort or position, to an assurance of its truth" (Scheffler, 1975, pp. 73-74). Pedagogically, it squares with the notion that teachers must abandon striving for simple transfer in their teaching, and instead encourage individual insight into the meaning and use of particular experiences. Further, it invites a reader to spend the mental energy required in order to earn the right to personal possession of the text, to put in the required time before the poem is evoked and in that moment owned.

### Problems of Inductive Method

The second question asked if Rosenblatt's theory was reasonable; that is, did it accord well with the view that reasonableness consists in having beliefs for which there is

a great deal of evidence. In many articles, and in her major treatise, Rosenblatt returns often to her students' responses to the quatrain "It Bids Pretty Fair" by Robert Frost as evidence for the transactional theory she is expounding. In this instance her method resembles that of I.A. Richards whose book Practical Criticism (1929) exerted a strong and lasting effect on her work. So it is that after decades of presenting Frost's quatrain to literally hundreds of students, Rosenblatt has collected response protocols which demonstrate the activity of the reader in building up the poem out of the materials in the text. Now there is a well-hallowed version of inductivism that admonishes the researcher only to make generalizations after an extensive range of particulars has been collected and examined in a wide variety of circumstances. Presumably Rosenblatt feels that she has encountered in those myriad protocols sufficient proof to guarantee an air of authenticity to her statements, as well as to provide substantial backing for her belief in the transactional model. However, if Rosenblatt wants to claim that she has discovered the existence of readerly transactions based on the paper-and-pencil statements of a sample population composed entirely of college students, then her theory's claim to broad "scientific" status is clearly open to question. As Samuels and Kamil (1984) caution in the preamble to their chapter on the evaluation of models of the reading process, we need to know what models can and cannot do, as well as to realise that any given model may be adequate "for a particular set of conditions, but not for all conditions" (p. 190, original emphasis). Thus Rosenblatt's model may be adequate to account for the behavior of college readers, but may not account equally well for beginning readers in elementary schools for whom decoding skills are still rudimentary and undeveloped. And yet if this is a flaw in Rosenblatt's particular conception of what proof for her position might look like, Goodman is confident that the best method of getting at a unified theory of reading is to build such a project around the transactional model.

Goodman (1976) justifies his own synthesis of work in psycholinguistics, research into reading, speech act theory and literary research, on the premise that "regardless of differences in vantage point or focus, the phenomena of reading are the same for all who study them" (p. 814). The unity he finds is best explained by adopting a transactional perspective, one which sees the reader constructing a text even as "the reader's schemata are also transformed in the process" (p. 814). Clearly Goodman feels that the concepts which make up the hard core of Rosenblatt's theory hold out a significant degree of promise for further inquiry. Rosenblatt's approach lends theoretical support for more naturalistic research methods, ones which take the circumstances surrounding the literacy event into consideration, hence adding an element of ecological validity to their conclusions. Therefore, even though we might wish to question Rosenblatt's inductivist method with respect to proving the existence of a transaction in quite the form she proposes, her emphasis on the role of the reader in evoking the poem has been instrumental in creating research questions which foreground the contextually embedded nature of all literacy events.

### The Socio-Cultural Climate

Lastly, and in relation to the third question posed above, I want to advance some external, socio-cultural reasons for the renaissance of interest in Rosenblatt's theory. As John Willinsky makes clear in his assessment of Rosenblatt's contribution to public education, she belongs to the older critical tradition stemming from Matthew Arnold, one

"which imagined a widespread cultural imperative to their work with literature." As we have seen, Rosenblatt's view of knowledge supports the contention that her "cultural imperative" is politically democratic and valorizes as new additions to knowledge the public expressions of a reader's private and creative transactions with a text. Under Rosenblatt's scenario, readers become textual shareholders to the extent that they lay claim to their readerly rights. For readers to do so will not result in a species of "anarchic egalitarianism" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 140) but will rather encourage a reader's refusal "to abdicate his own role as a creator, or evoker, of a work from text" (p. 141).

Now it is clear that if one accepts Graff's (1982) view that the field of literary studies is currently in a period of crisis, one of the reasons he advances to account for this is the failure within academic literary study "to relate itself to a general body of ideas that might give it a relation to the social world" (p. 561). It is just those questions about the social and political implications of the acts of reading and interpretation that Rosenblatt's views keep constantly in front of us. Rosenblatt claims that not only does her method pay close attention to the words of the text, but that she assumes equal attention will be given to what the words stir up in ourselves and our students. Rosenblatt, along with other reader-oriented critics like Fish (1980) wishes to expose the "affective fallacy-fallacy" (p. 42) and to welcome a reader's emotional responses as an integral aspect of the meaning-making process.

Thus, the reader-response movement within contemporary literary theory that seeks to restore the reader to equal prominence in the traditional author-text-reader triad, seems to offer most in terms of revisioning the theory-practice relationship within a subject such as language arts. It is in this kind of area that Rosenblatt's contribution may ultimately prove of lasting educational value. By advancing a theory which helps to focus attention on this reader with this text under these circumstances, theory can be fruitfully placed in a dialogical relationship with pedagogy and with cultural and institutional practices. If we take this renewed interest in Rosenblatt's transactional model to represent a progressive element within the dual theory-series of research into reading and literacy studies, then we can begin to appreciate the kind of educational pay-off that could lie ahead as her theory gains further acceptance.

## Conclusion

I want to conclude by reaffirming the usefulness in adopting the twin perspectives of inquiring into the internal and external features of Rosenblatt's theory. Although we may not be able to judge her theory's chances of continued success in absolute terms, in relative terms it has been apparent that a transactional approach assists in clarifying our thinking about what is involved in the process of reading as well as the way in which students respond to different kinds of texts. Similarly, as a method around which to focus an approach to our teaching of literature in the classroom, transactional theory has a great deal to say. Even though the anomaly of how to distinguish between that first "pristine" and private transaction with a text and the subsequent social and public construction of meaning the interpretive community of the classroom has yet to be faced and dealt with, at least transactional theory can point a way towards addressing that urgent pedagogical issue.

Perhaps, as has been hinted at continually throughout this paper, Rosenblatt's theory, regardless of its relevance for a rising naturalistic research paradigm, may represent a concatenation of elements which speak to more general "in the air" notions regarding current cultural assumptions about individuals or about knowledge creation. In an age of retrenchment, when neo-conservative critics like Bloom (1978) and Hirsch (1987) utter jeremiads concerning students' lack of "cultural literacy," it may well be that models of the reading process like Rosenblatt's which stress what students bring to the reading event in terms of their own considerable knowledge are needed to restore some working order and faith to this aspect of the educational enterprise. Similarly, if one accepts Cain's (1984) argument that "for theory to have a deep and lasting influence, it has to make its way into pedagogy" (p. 276), then Rosenblatt's theory provides compelling powerful support for a pedagogy inspired by and based on ways of reinserting the personal, the affective and the creative into institutional settings which are in danger of being given over to largely efferent, information-gathering activities in the name of a narrowly utilitarian conception of education.

Throughout her life Rosenblatt has championed the cause of public education, and as a follower of John Dewey, has taken special interest in how literacy can function within a democracy. Her example is particularly germane in these days when one wants to make out a case for an active reader, historically situated and already in possession of an extensive repertoire of ways to make sense of the world. When the transactional view is fully understood, reading and literacy skills can no longer remain the unique possession of a privileged few; nor can literature remain a "spectator sport" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 140) for the majority of students previously condemned to abide by their teachers' interpretations. Transactional theory is emancipatory to the extent that it fosters the habits of self respect and the capacity to trust one's own responses in situations where heretofore unquestioning acceptance of interpretive authority has been the norm.

Finally, as Said (1983) has convincingly pointed out, texts are always "enmeshed in circumstances," they are "in the world, and hence worldly" (p. 35). In other words, there are no innocent texts just as there are no innocent readers. Therefore, at the moment when the world-in-the-text meets the world-in-the-reader, important business is at hand. If educators concerned with teaching literacy across the curriculum want to capitalize on that transaction in order to create an interpretive new deal for our students, perhaps we ought first of all to pursue with Rosenblatt's inimitable and unshakable sense of commitment, the ideas and methods contained by her transactional theory.

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