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THE EMERGENCE OF PRAGMATIC PHILOSOPHY'S INFLUENCE  
ON LITERARY THEORY: MAKING MEANING WITH TEXTS  
FROM A TRANSACTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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**ABSTRACT.** In this review essay, Jeanne Connell examines the influence of pragmatic philosophy on the scholarly works of twentieth-century literary theorist and English educator Louise Rosenblatt through the lens of a recent collection of her essays originally published between 1936 and 1999. Rosenblatt grounded her transactional theory of literature in pragmatic philosophy, particularly the epistemological constructs of John Dewey. While influential as a pioneer in the early development of reader-response theory, Rosenblatt's theory has only recently been given attention by philosophers of education. *Making Meaning with Texts: Selected Essays* is an important collection of articles and book chapters that highlights the evolution of her thinking in literary theory, pedagogy, and literary criticism. Rosenblatt positioned the construction of meaning in the personal lived-through quality of the literary experience, making central the generative relation between the text and the reader. Connell argues that the educational relevance of Rosenblatt's theory for contemporary education is that it provides a powerful critique of classroom approaches that promote shallow readings with little opportunity for critical reflection.

Meaning — whether scientific or aesthetic, whether a poem or a scientific report — happens during the interplay between particular signs and a particular reader at a particular time and place.

— Louise Rosenblatt, *Making Meaning with Texts*<sup>1</sup>

Educators share common concerns about how readers make meaning from their experiences with texts. Indeed, questions regarding how students make meaning, how they make sense of the world and how they make sense of texts, particularly those assigned in school, are crucial concerns for educators across disciplines. Education aims to promote in students habits of critical reflection as well as to shape beliefs and attitudes about what constitutes the good life in our society, which will eventually influence how students act. In the quotation that opens this essay, literary theorist and English educator Louise Rosenblatt positions meaning in a generative or “transactional” relation between reader and text, where the reader and meaning of a text are both constituted during a reading process that is dynamic rather than a process that takes place between separate, stable entities. Readers make sense of texts by applying, reorganizing, revising, or extending both private and public elements selected from their personal linguistic-experiential reservoirs (*MMT*, 5).

Rosenblatt's view of meaning making is firmly grounded in pragmatic philosophy — particularly John Dewey's radical empiricism — where the experiencing subject and experienced object constitute a primal, integral, relational unity.<sup>2</sup> In

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1. Louise Rosenblatt, *Making Meaning with Texts: Selected Essays* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 2005), xxxiii. This work will be cited as *MMT* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. John J. Stuhr, ed. *Classical American Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 4–11. Cited in Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 7.

fact, Rosenblatt's transactional theory of the literary work 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. A transactional perspective highlights the continuity between human beings and their social and natural worlds, and foregrounds the complexities attached to processes, situations, and events — or, as Rosenblatt indicates above, the “interplay between particular signs and a particular reader at a particular time and place.” Central to a pragmatic perspective is the belief that meaning is not an objective entity that is out there waiting to be uncovered, but rather meaning is located in human practices — in other words, it is a human construction based on communication, cooperative action, and community relations. Rosenblatt's transactional perspective begins by emphasizing personal experience and highlights an active, reciprocal relation between reader and text that brings together a complex mix of personal, textual, and contextual elements as the initial phase in a process of meaning making. After making a personal connection with a text, the reader then engages in a critical social process of examining interests and meanings of other readers, which serves to bring some elements of the personal aesthetic experience into a public realm of shared meanings.

Even though Rosenblatt's transactional theory of the literary work is firmly grounded in pragmatic philosophy, her work was virtually unknown in philosophy until recently, as Charlene Haddock Siegfried points out.<sup>3</sup> Examining the influence of pragmatic philosophy on Rosenblatt's transactional theory of the literary work is especially timely with the recent release of a selected collection of her essays that highlight the evolution of her thinking in literary theory and English education. *Making Meaning with Texts: Selected Essays* is an important collection of articles and book chapters because it exemplifies how philosophy contributes to questions of theory and practice in other fields.<sup>4</sup> This volume of selected essays, which were published between 1936 and 1999, furnishes readers with a useful introduction to her theoretical and her practical contributions to the fields of education and literary theory as her work evolved over time. In addition to numerous articles and book chapters published during her career, Rosenblatt authored two seminal books, which are essential reading for an in-depth understanding of her contributions. These two books divide along the same categories as this volume of essays. Her first book, *Literature as Exploration*, has the distinction of being in print since 1938 (now in its fifth edition) and is a practical handbook for teachers.<sup>5</sup>

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3. Siegfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism*, 30.

4. For a more comprehensive biography, see Jeanne M. Connell, “Continue to Explore: In Memory of Louise Rosenblatt (1904–2005),” *Education and Culture* 21, no. 2 (2005): 63–79.

5. Louise M. Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, 5th ed. (New York: Modern Language Association, 1995).

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Her second book, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*, which was reissued in paperback in 1994, details her transactional theory of reading.<sup>6</sup> While these two works are essential reading for those interested in Rosenblatt's scholarship, *Making Meaning with Texts* provides a useful complement to understanding her transactional perspective. The book's selections are grouped under three sections: (1) theory, (2) educational practice, and (3) literary criticism. These sections provide the organizational framework for this essay. Before proceeding with a discussion of this volume, we will first examine Rosenblatt's influence in the field of literary theory.

#### LITERARY THEORY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Rosenblatt's academic career began at the height of the progressive education era in the 1930s and spanned over seven decades. Rosenblatt's theory grew, in large part, out of her study of Dewey's major philosophical works, particularly *Human Nature and Conduct*, *Experience and Nature*, and *Art as Experience*. During the 1930s, Rosenblatt furthered her understanding of philosophy and of the social sciences by attending biannual meetings of the Conference on Method in Philosophy and Sciences, where Dewey was an organizer and a participant.<sup>7</sup> Rosenblatt even adopted Dewey's term *transaction* to name her theory and to solidify connections to a pragmatic view. And yet Rosenblatt's contributions to the philosophy of education have only recently received attention, even though she is recognized in the field of literary theory as one of the pioneering figures in the early development of reader-response theory.<sup>8</sup> In addition to her integration of Dewey's philosophy, Rosenblatt also drew from the epistemological and linguistic theories advanced by the prominent pragmatists Charles Sanders Peirce and William James. Rosenblatt noted that her theory emerged as an effort to address her concerns as a teacher, and thus "the theory emerges from a process highly appropriate to the pragmatist philosophy that it embodies" (*MMT*, 2). In pragmatic philosophy these processes are connected: practice needs a theoretical base, and theory needs to be tested by the consequences of action.

The history of modern literary theory has been characterized as occurring in three stages: a Romantic preoccupation with the author that dominated early in the twentieth century; a New Critical concern with the text that became prominent in the 1920s; and the more recent shift of attention to the reader.<sup>9</sup> In the 1930s, Rosenblatt applied a pragmatic perspective to the field of literary theory,

6. Louise M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, and the Poem: A Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978).

7. Connell, "Assessing the Influence of Dewey's Epistemology on Rosenblatt's Reader Response Theory," *Educational Theory* 46, no. 4 (1996): 399.

8. For a more detailed analysis of Rosenblatt's work, see Jeanne M. Connell, "Restoring Aesthetic Experiences in the School Curriculum: The Legacy of Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of Literature as Exploration," *Educational Foundations* 15, no. 1 (2001): 52; and Jeanne M. Connell, "Aesthetic Experiences in the School Curriculum: Assessing the Value of Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 34, no. 1 (2000): 27-35.

9. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

providing one of the first voices to challenge New Criticism's dominance.<sup>10</sup> New Critics advocated precise, technical, objective analysis of the text as a way to legitimate literary studies within the scientific arena of newly emerging fields in social and natural sciences.<sup>11</sup> The literary experience was purely a textual matter, according to New Criticism; its artistry was self-contained and not subject to change because of a reader's involvement. When Rosenblatt began her teaching career in English education, she was confronted with questions concerning the meaning-making processes of her students that were not satisfactorily addressed by New Criticism. In the 1940s and 1950s, Rosenblatt was a central figure in the development of early reader-response theory.<sup>12</sup> Other early reader-response theorists, such as I.A. Richards, D.W. Harding, James Britton, Walter Scatoff, and Norman Holland, joined with Rosenblatt in criticizing New Criticism's assumptions, which failed to consider the active role of the reader.<sup>13</sup> The combined efforts of these reader-response theorists helped to transform literary criticism and the teaching of literature in the second half of the twentieth century. Indeed, by the end of the twentieth century, reader-response criticism had become very influential in the field of literary theory.

While reader-response theorists are unified in their opposition to the belief that meaning inheres exclusively in the text, they do not provide a unified critical position. Instead, modern reader-response criticism offers a wide array of perspectives inspired by structuralism, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction, each with its own particular definition of the reader, interpretation, and the text.<sup>14</sup> Among the various reader-response theories, differences concerning the relative influence of the reader, the text, and the reading situation abound. Some ultimately privilege the text, some privilege the reader, some privilege discourse communities, and still others focus exclusively on the reader-text relation while ignoring the influence of social, cultural, or situational contexts. These differing perspectives produced new concerns about the reader-response classification, and by the 1980s, Rosenblatt began to disassociate her work from the general category of reader-response theory. Instead, Rosenblatt began to refer to her transactional theory as a reader-plus-text perspective. Recognizing the organic relation between reader and text in a meaning-making process that considers continuity and social contexts is crucial to the transactional perspective. These fundamental connections to Dewey's notion of the transactional nature of experience are important to understanding the evolving balance between reader and text in Rosenblatt's theory.

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10. Jane P. Tompkins, *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1980), x.

11. Richard Beach, *A Teacher's Introduction to Reader-Response Theories* (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1993), 15.

12. *Ibid.*, 49.

13. *Ibid.*, 16.

14. Tompkins, *Reader-Response Criticism*, ix, 201.

## ROSENBLATT AND DEWEY'S TRANSACTIONAL NATURE OF EXPERIENCE

At the heart of Rosenblatt's transactional theory of the literary work is a core belief in the transactional nature of all experiences. Rosenblatt credited Dewey with not only giving her an epistemological foundation, but also providing her with the term *transaction*, which, beginning in the 1930s, replaces the term *interaction* in Dewey's epistemological writings. In *Knowing and the Known*, Dewey and his coauthor Arthur Bentley clarified the transactional nature of experience and its implications for knowing within a process of inquiry based in experimentation: "what has been completely divided in philosophical discourse into man and world, inner and outer, self and not-self, subject and object...are in actuality parties in life-transactions." Fortified by advances in physics that challenged mechanistic views, Dewey and Bentley applied these principles to the transactional view of knowing: "in our general procedure of inquiry no radical separation is made between that which is observed and the observer in the way which is common in the epistemologies and in standard psychologies and psychological constructions. Instead observer and observed are held in close organization."<sup>15</sup> Raymond Boisvert describes Dewey's philosophical position: "Instead of a subject as spectator examining the realm of objects, there is now a biological environment, which involved participation of organisms in their surroundings."<sup>16</sup>

The transactional relation between knower and known described by Dewey and Bentley serves as the central philosophical reference point for Rosenblatt's distinctive positioning of the relation between reader and text. Dewey had long maintained an interconnectedness of knower and known in a way that undermines modernist epistemological assertions of detachment, passivity, certainty, and universality. This positioning of knower and known resonated with Rosenblatt, who also believed that knowing emerged from a more dynamic process. She noted that Dewey and Bentley "believed the term *interaction* was too much associated with the old positivistic paradigm" (*MMT*, 2). From a Deweyan perspective, constructing meaning begins with the organic and generative relation between the knower and the known during the process of inquiry. Rosenblatt views the reader and the text in the same dynamic, fluid, generative relation, which considers the *process* of making meaning a significant experience.

We now turn to an analysis of the selections in *Making Meaning with Texts: Selected Essays*.

## ROSENBLATT'S EARLY EDUCATION AND CAREER

*Making Meaning with Texts* begins with a 1999 interview that was conducted just after Rosenblatt received the Outstanding Educator in Language Arts from the National Council of Teachers of English, a professional organization for scholars and teachers of reading and literature that she had been actively involved with

15. John Dewey and Arthur Bentley, *Knowing and the Known* (1940; repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), 104 and 112.

16. Raymond Boisvert, *Dewey's Metaphysics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1988), 25.

since the 1930s. The interviewer, Nicholas Karolides, studied under Rosenblatt at New York University and went on to become a professor of English.<sup>17</sup> This interview is especially helpful for those not familiar with Rosenblatt because it provides a brief biographical sketch as well as an overview of her transactional theory of reading.

In this interview, Rosenblatt discussed some of the major intellectual figures that influenced her thinking, including pragmatic philosophers Dewey, James, and Peirce. As an undergraduate at Barnard College, Rosenblatt participated in the honors program in literature and read widely in the social sciences and philosophy. Even after completing her doctorate in comparative literature at the Sorbonne, Rosenblatt continued to study philosophy and began graduate training in anthropology under the well-known anthropologists Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict while she was teaching for the English Department at Barnard College. From this interview, we can sense Rosenblatt's intellectual intensity as a young scholar.

Another influential experience during this period was her work in 1935 as an advisor to a progressive education reform project. The Commission on Human Relations, a project funded by the General Education Board of the Rockefeller Foundation and administered through the Progressive Education Association, created a series of books on human relations for adolescents that incorporated the latest sociological and psychological findings of the time. Rosenblatt's experience with the Commission was significant because it gave her the opportunity to visit a number of innovative progressive schools, where she witnessed firsthand the effects of active learning techniques.<sup>18</sup> Following her work on the Commission, Rosenblatt decided to produce her own book, *Literature as Exploration* (originally published in 1938), because she concluded that literature was not living up to its potential in the school curriculum.

Next, we will examine the selections in *Making Meaning with Texts* that are grouped into three sections: (1) theory, (2) educational practice, and (3) literary criticism. We turn first to the section on transactional theory.

#### OVERVIEW OF A TRANSACTIONAL THEORY OF THE LITERARY WORK

The first section on theory contains two works by Rosenblatt that detail her transactional theory of the literary work. The first essay, "The Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing," was written for a research handbook for the International Reading Association and provides a comprehensive overview of her theory. This chapter offers additional insights into the intellectual roots of her theory beyond pragmatism, describing her interest in the work of psychologists such as Lev Vygotsky as well as Adelbert Ames and Hadley Cantril, linguistic anthropologist Shirley Brice Heath, and early linguists such as Ferdinand de Saussure.

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17. For a more detailed look at his work in reader-response theory, see Nicholas Karolides, ed., *Reader Response in the Classroom* (New York: Longman Press, 1992).

18. Louise M. Rosenblatt, "Retrospect," in *Transactions with Literature*, ed. Edmund J. Farrell and James R. Squire (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1990), 99.

What are the consequences when a theory of reading is built upon the notion that "'meaning' does not reside ready-made 'in' the text or 'in' the reader but comes into being during the transaction between reader and text" (*MMT*, 7)? Rosenblatt recognized that a radical change in the reading paradigm requires a new set of constructs for what it means to read and to make meaning. In this new paradigm, the idea of a generic reader is replaced by a recognition of millions of potential individual readers of individual literary works. From a transactional view, "'meaning' is what happens during the transaction; hence, the fallacy of thinking of them as separate and distinct entities instead of factors in a total situation" (*MMT*, 7). Reading is a complex mix of selection of cues in the text, purposive selective attention, evoked responses in a reader both during and after the reading event, an ongoing continuum of shifting purposes between efferent and aesthetic readings of the text, synthesis, and a second consideration of initial responses as works are discussed among various readers. These elements are processed through the reader's personal, social, linguistic, and cultural history. Crucial to the transactional perspective is that engagement with and personal response to a text are the starting point of a literary experience and the construction of meaning.

In addition, "the polysemous character of language invalidates any simplistic approach to meaning, creating the problem of the relationship between the reader's interpretation and the author's intention" (*MMT*, 22). This chapter also contains one of the more complete discussions by Rosenblatt of the position of the author in relation to the reader and text. The author's creative process of expression parallels the transactional approach of the reader. Rosenblatt noted that the author "first reads and carries on a spiral, transactional relationship with the very text emerging on the page" (*MMT*, 19), for "the writer, like readers of another's text, peruses the succession of verbal signs being inscribed on the page to see whether new words fit the preceding text...[and] they must be tested...against an inner gauge — the intention, or purpose" (*MMT*, 20). At some point in the writing process the author also considers the audience, "the problem always is to find verbal signs likely to activate linkages in prospective readers' linguistic reservoirs matching those of the writer" (*MMT*, 21). The author-reader relation is part of the background of the reading process, according to Rosenblatt: "interpretation brings with it the question of whether the reader has produced a meaning that is consonant with the author's probable intention" (*MMT*, 16).

As with any literary theory, a transactional approach must also address the key challenge of establishing criteria for what constitutes a valid reading. By rejecting the idea of a generic reader for a more individualized reading based on the reader's evoked response in light of unique social, ethnic, educational, and personal factors, Rosenblatt developed general criteria for a valid reading. A transactional approach rejects the idea that valid interpretation comes from a single correct meaning generated by an interpretive community, and it also rejects the claim of relativism, in which each and every personal interpretation is automatically acceptable.

Rosenblatt grounded her response to the question of criteria for a valid reading in Dewey's idea of *warranted assertions* as the end of controlled inquiry. Dewey preferred the term "warranted assertions" to "beliefs" or "knowledge" for addressing epistemological questions. Warranted assertions designate a "potentiality rather than an actuality [and involve] recognition that all special conclusions of special inquiries are parts of an enterprise that is continually renewed, or is a going concern."<sup>19</sup> Knowledge is tentative and inferences from experimental observations are starting points for new experimentation. Knowledge is also contextual, that is, it is based on inferences drawn from inquiry designed to test a solution to a particular problem.<sup>20</sup> Dewey's epistemological position has significant educational implications. Rosenblatt applied these core views concerning warranted assertions to questions about negotiating the validity of interpretations within the classroom. How does a group of readers assess the validity of various interpretations of a text? Rosenblatt maintained that through classroom discussions, students conduct interpretive inquiries that have the same tentative and contextual qualities Dewey delineated for the process of inquiry. As Deron Boyles points out, Dewey's position on warranted assertions suggests a need for classroom interactions that emphasize knowing and the habits of intelligence. Students make knowledge claims as they are engaged in knowing (inquiry). Moreover, Dewey's view means that students necessarily seek stability of beliefs rather than certainty, functionality of beliefs rather than universality.<sup>21</sup> In Dewey's epistemology of what constitutes knowing and knowledge, Rosenblatt found a flexible method of shared criteria that could be applied to linguistic interpretation. From the construct of Dewey's warranted assertibility, Rosenblatt generated three general criteria for determining a valid reading: (1) a consideration of the context and purpose of the reading event, (2) a need for the interpretation not to be contradicted by the full text, and (3) a need to avoid any interpretation that projects meanings that cannot be related to signs on the page (*MMT*, 23–24). This process, like Dewey's process of inquiry, requires engagement and active defense of knowledge claims. Rosenblatt stresses that "the reader is constantly faced with the responsibility of deciding whether an interpretation is acceptable" (*MMT*, 22). In essence, Rosenblatt is describing a radical epistemological shift in the classroom that actively involves students in the process of making inferences about meaning while also rejecting the idea of certainty of knowing, which is central to traditional epistemology.

The applicability of Dewey's concept of warranted assertibility for radically altering classroom interactions has recently been recognized. For example, Boyles observes that classroom interactions built upon an organic view of the environment provide students with opportunities to make knowledge claims as they are

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19. John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt, 1938), 9.

20. Tom Burke, *Dewey's New Logic: A Reply to Russell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 116 and 241–242.

21. Deron R. Boyles, "Dewey's Epistemology: An Argument for Warranted Assertions, Knowing, and Meaningful Classroom Practice," *Educational Theory* 56, no. 1 (2006): 65.

engaged in inquiry.<sup>22</sup> He further notes that in a classroom embracing warranted assertibility,

both teachers and students would become fallible knowers who must defend their claims to knowledge, where knowledge represents a temporal suspension point in the process of making judgments... [This approach serves] as a counterweight to the traditional emphasis on foundationalism and correspondence theories of truth.<sup>23</sup>

The point of warranted assertibility, according to Boyles, is to determine meanings and connections with other ideas that represent real problems to solve and to consider contexts that are required for understanding these problems.<sup>24</sup> Thus, Rosenblatt applied a Deweyan epistemology to the interpretation of literary works in which inquiry always contains multiple possibilities.

Using shared criteria for determining the validity of interpretations, within the framework of Dewey's warranted assertibility, recognizes that some readings may satisfy the criteria more fully than others. Without having to claim that a text has a single correct meaning, many readings may meet the minimum criteria, but some interpretations may be superior to others along certain criteria (*MMT*, 23). Readers must negotiate among these various readings and must clarify their judgments. The results of these negotiations and clarifications are that students learn how to construct knowledge as they are engaged in cooperative communicative efforts.

#### QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS RAISED BY ROSENBLATT'S TRANSACTIONAL THEORY

While one attraction of Rosenblatt's transactional theory is that it posits an active role for the individual reader, a limitation of her approach stems from its lack of an analysis of how the social conditions of the reader contribute to their responses. Rosenblatt's reluctance to address social conditions in detail was due, at least in part, to her efforts to counter the overly deterministic views of earlier text-based theories. In an effort to avoid any reliance on the idea of the generic reader, she provided only minimal insight into the impact of social and cultural conditions on readers' responses. She emphasized an experience-based approach that is intended to foster in readers intense feelings and personal connections with the text, but she did not articulate fully how the social position and cultural connections of a reader influence the reading process. Despite Rosenblatt's acknowledgment that language is a socially generated and socially generative phenomenon, she quickly moved on to emphasize that language must be internalized by each reader with all the special overtones that each unique person and situation entail.<sup>25</sup>

Rosenblatt saw her transactional approach as standing in opposition to other response-based theories developed over the past two decades in literary theory. Thus, she did not address contributions to meaning construction coming from the

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22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, 66 and 65.

24. *Ibid.*, 66.

25. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*.

views of modern response-based theories of poststructuralists and an array of ideologically driven theorists since these viewpoints would undermine the role of individual creativity by introducing the idea that meaning is influenced to some degree by society, culture, gender, or a discourse community.<sup>26</sup> Hence, throughout her work Rosenblatt emphasized the flexibility of language rather than its constraints in order to foreground the primacy of the unique reader.

I submit that considerations of both individual and social aspects of language are important for understanding meaning construction. Rosenblatt was perhaps too optimistic concerning young students' abilities to examine on their own what views of the world to accept, reject, or change. The educational value of the transactional relation between reader and text emerges in the tensions between internal meanings of a reader and the words of the text that are outside the reader's personal world. But how will students learn to challenge dominant assumptions that shape society as well as their own values and beliefs?<sup>27</sup>

While a transactional approach enables teachers to be more receptive to a variety of individual responses, there are practical concerns as teachers seek to move students beyond the broad range of their personal responses to literary works to address the question of what constitutes a valid reading. Thus, additional concerns arise regarding the adequacy of Rosenblatt's general criteria for valid readings. While Dewey's construct of warranted assertibility provides broad guidelines for teachers that encourage an enlivened personal connection with texts, Rosenblatt's transactional theory lacks specificity concerning how these criteria form judgments about sound readings. It is difficult, for example, to specify the degree of constraint placed on a given interpretation. In particular, how can these criteria for the validity of readings account for "difference, diversity, multiplicity, and conflict" within the community when judging valid readings in the classroom?<sup>28</sup>

Since transactional theory predicts that interpretations will vary among students based on their personal responses, the quest for determining more valid readings will not rest simply on properties inherent in an interpretation itself, but rather will be contingent on the agreement of others, just as with Dewey's process of warranting assertions through inquiry. Rosenblatt anticipated that this negotiation process would take place in the classroom and would need to be guided by an awareness of cultural and linguistic forces that tend to reinforce dominant points of view. In addition, she assumed that critical reflection would result from this

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26. Louise M. Rosenblatt, "The Transactional Theory: Against Dualisms," *College English* 55, no. 4 (1993): 385.

27. Other recent articles on Rosenblatt's influence in classrooms include the following: Mark A. Pike, "From Personal to Social Transaction: A Model of Aesthetic Reading in the Classroom," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 37, no. 2 (2003): 61-72; Patricia E. Calderwood, "Risking Aesthetic Reading," *International Journal of Education and the Arts* 6, no. 3 (2005); and Kathleen Gallagher, "The Aesthetics of Representation: Dramatic Texts and Dramatic Engagement," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 39, no. 4 (2005): 82-94.

28. Connell, "Assessing the Influence of Dewey's Epistemology on Rosenblatt's Reader Response Theory," 411.

negotiation, but she did not provide further insight concerning the operational details of the reading process.

In the second theoretically oriented article included in *Making Meaning with Texts*, Rosenblatt offered further insights into the challenges that confront a transactional approach to assessing a valid interpretation. This article not only provides the fundamental principles of Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading, but it also reinforces distinctions between Rosenblatt's work and the numerous response theories that emerged in the 1970s and early 1980s in the field of literary theory. In suggesting that she might have entitled her work "The Pleasures and Dangers of Being Cited," Rosenblatt playfully highlighted her frustration at being misread by some in the literary theory field as having common ground with an interactional model of reader-response theory. Indeed, she noted specifically that "I cannot accept a blurring of the distinctions between, on the one hand, *transaction*, *transactional*, and *transactional theory* and, on the other hand, *information-processing*, *interactive processing*, and *interaction*. The distinction between *interaction* and *transaction* is basic" (MMT, 39).

For Rosenblatt, the fundamental differences between transactional and interactional response theories are both clear and significant. An interactional approach emphasizes information processing, which rests upon a more mechanical metaphor and retains a mechanistic view of the reader as a passive observer, one who discovers fixed meanings contained within the text. Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading, on the other hand, suggests a personal, lived-through experience with the text as well as the reader's active role in constructing meaning, thus making multiple and divergent interpretations of the text inevitable. So why did Rosenblatt express surprise and even a little frustration upon encountering this seemingly expected result in response to her own writings? The "misreading" that Rosenblatt objected to reveals some of the limits of a transactional theory of reading: the task of creating criteria for what constitutes a valid reading presents some interesting challenges for a transactional perspective. I regard the difficulty experienced by Rosenblatt in having her theory misclassified as an example of a problem inherent in interpreting texts, and perhaps one that she should not have protested but should have expected and embraced as part of the ongoing public exchange in meaning making.

#### HOW ROSENBLATT'S TRANSACTIONAL THEORY OF LITERATURE WORKS IN CLASSROOMS

The second section of *Making Meaning with Texts* contains seven selections on educational practice, written between 1940 and 1991, that focus on how to teach literature from a transactional perspective. Throughout her career, Rosenblatt sought to restore aesthetic value to the study of literature in order to make it more central to achieving the broad humanistic goals of education in a democracy. Concern for the educational usefulness of her work was reflected in Rosenblatt's choice to leave the field of English in order to teach English Education in New York University's School of Education. She joined the faculty there in 1948, after teaching in English Departments at both Barnard College (1927–1938) and

Brooklyn College (1938–1948). To further solidify her connection with classroom teachers, Rosenblatt was active in the largest and most influential professional teaching organizations, such as the National Council of Teachers of English, the International Reading Association, and the Modern Language Association, where she connected with a large audience of teachers through her journal articles and through her annual conference presentations.

The selections on educational practice in this collection are primarily concerned with the social purposes of literature. Rosenblatt emphasized that literature classes 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.”<sup>29</sup> To be successful, literature classrooms need to be places where students receive supportive critical evaluation and encounter multiple perspectives through reading diverse kinds of books; such an environment helps young readers to engage with a whole range of beliefs and values in our culture.<sup>30</sup> These essays on practice explain the fundamental aspects of Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of the literary work and provide practical analysis regarding classroom approaches. Specifically, they provide teachers with useful discussions about the day-to-day operations of their literature classrooms, including what to teach as well as how to teach using a transactional approach. Throughout this section on educational practice from a transactional perspective, one of Rosenblatt’s more important pieces of advice for teachers is to nourish “a personal sense of literature as a mode of experience” (*MMT*, 69).

For Rosenblatt, the reader gains not so much additional information but additional experience through studying literature. The greatness of a work of art, according to her, resides in “its intensity or breadth of vision” (*MMT*, 110). In order to create classrooms that enable aesthetic experiences, teachers need to nourish the conditions that allow students to have lived-through experiences with texts as well as opportunities for open and free discussions that stimulate further reflection. Rosenblatt urged teachers to “be flexible, we need to understand where our pupils are in relation to books, and we need a sufficient command of books to see their potentialities in this developmental process” (*MMT*, 67).

Other practical considerations, such as how to choose texts and methods for promoting further reflection through class discussion, are also addressed in this section on educational practice. In her analysis of how to select literary texts, Rosenblatt challenged the dominant view that classic works from the “great books” canon are the best classroom readings. Instead, she maintained that no set reading list can be recommended because, in selecting texts, one must consider the particular circumstances of individual readers. From a transactional perspective, readers need literary texts that enable them to evoke personally “their past experiences and present preoccupations” (*MMT*, 67). Teachers need a way of deciding which texts connect with students’ lives and also facilitate the goals of the

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29. Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, 284.

30. *Ibid.*

study of literature. In "Moderns among the Masterpieces," Rosenblatt suggested that literary experiences need, at some level, to connect with or be clearly relevant to students' lives in order to promote and enrich their growth; therefore, "if the classics are to have value for us today, they must be proved meaningful for our present lives" (*MMT*, 107). Rosenblatt also cautioned, however, that if students' interests are read too narrowly, one might fail to lead young readers to experiences with texts that are beyond their immediate experiences. While connections to personal needs and preoccupations make aesthetic experiences in literature classes a potentially powerful force, personal growth is only possible as students undergo lived-through experiences with texts that (1) emphasize an organic connection with readers' prior beliefs and experiences, (2) stimulate feelings and connect with emotional drives, and (3) stimulate imagination in response to a wide range of literary works.<sup>31</sup> Students from all backgrounds can have lively interactions with both classic and contemporary works, according to Rosenblatt.

Several articles in this section of the book were written just after World War II, when the crisis of a rise in totalitarianism and the need to improve international relations loomed large. Here, Rosenblatt advocated not only teaching contemporary works by various American writers (including underrepresented groups such as women and minorities), but also selecting texts by writers from countries other than the United States, so that "through the study of foreign literature, then, we are seeking to help our students to broaden the vision of the varied images of life, of the different patterns of values, of the contrasting habits of emotional response" (*MMT*, 53).

Such multicultural study, according to Rosenblatt, yields a comparative approach that "opens the path to escape from unquestioning acceptance of the familiar and from consequent crude prejudice against all other ways" (*MMT*, 54). Students should recognize that cultures have both strengths, such as patterns of humane sensitivity, as well as weaknesses, such as blind spots regarding social prejudices. While Rosenblatt recognized the complexities of cultural differences with respect to values and ways of thinking, she hoped that reading a wide variety of cultural texts would diminish feelings of provincialism, extreme nationalism, and social prejudice against minority and foreign cultures among students. One aspiration is that students develop a critically appreciative eye to access their own as well as other cultures, and that they learn to discriminate between those elements that nourish the sense of a person's dignity and worth and those that do not (*MMT*, 58).

Lively interactions with this broad variety of literary texts provide students with the opportunity to develop their skills in judgment, which is to appreciate what is valuable and to recognize what is of little value. The development of a student's evaluative judgment is not facilitated when books are presented as pretested, pre-evaluated views of life and models of literary excellence. An important task of the teacher is to enable students to understand and to evaluate their own responses

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31. Connell, "Aesthetic Experiences in the School Curriculum," 34.

to books, to make "literature a medium of enjoyment and insight rather than an object of academic study" (*MMT*, 110). Engagement in literature classes should enable students to intelligently question, challenge, and appreciate the values and ideas offered within texts (*MMT*, 108). Rosenblatt emphasized that in order to achieve growth in both critical reflection and sensitivity, it is important to create a trusting environment where students feel comfortable expressing their views freely and engaging in discussions with the teacher and fellow students, which in turn lead them to reflect further on the meaning of the text under consideration (*MMT*, 85).

In the essays on educational practice collected here, Rosenblatt was consistently critical of traditional classroom teaching techniques, which almost exclusively emphasize an "efferent" reading of texts that is focused on facts, structural analysis, and a predetermined meaning. Rosenblatt asserted that "the quality of education in general is being diluted by neglect of, sacrifice of, the rich orgasmic, personal, experiential source of both efferent and aesthetic thinking" (*MMT*, 81). She critiqued traditional teaching methods for tending to produce "shallow and unquestioning readers who passively accepted the authority of the printed word" (*MMT*, ix). While both efferent and aesthetic stances contain educational value, and readers fluctuate between these two stances while reading any text, Rosenblatt maintained that the aesthetic stance is almost wholly absent in most classrooms. She directed teachers to attend to the reader's aesthetic stance by insisting that "our subject-matter, as teachers of literature then, is the transactions between readers and books" (*MMT*, 63). An aesthetic stance permits the reader to "live through some moment of feeling, to enter into some human personality, or to participate imaginatively in some situation or event" that evokes a work of literary art (*MMT*, 62–63). Rosenblatt reminded us that the book is not a separate, fixed entity, but part of a "live circuit" that stimulates a reader's awareness "of a certain part of the ongoing sequence of his life, as he seeks to marshal his resources and organize them under the stimulus of the printed page" (*MMT*, 63).

Literary scholar John Willinsky maintains that Louise Rosenblatt is one of the four most influential theorists in shaping how literature is taught in secondary schools today.<sup>32</sup> Her transactional approach, which emphasizes the importance of aesthetic experiences and personal engagement with texts in classrooms, has had wide appeal in schools over the past several decades and has contributed to challenging traditional views of knowledge and pedagogy.

#### CONCERNS AND QUESTIONS ABOUT PRACTICE

While a transactional reading theory and associated classroom practices are more student-centered and bring greater spontaneity to the classroom than traditional practices, the approach can also bring unpredictability to classroom discussions. In addition, teachers applying transactional practices in the classroom encounter a number of practical challenges. Critical to the success of a transactional approach is moving beyond readers' initial responses to explore, expand,

32. John Willinsky, *The Triumph of Literature/The Fate of Literacy* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1991), chap. 1.

reconsider, and refine meanings as different readers share their thoughts during the process of warranting judgments about texts. As Richard Beach notes, practitioners teaching large numbers of students may be tempted to generalize about the process of responding by assuming, based on the responses of a relatively small group of readers, that there is a particular way of responding to the text that is "most" valid.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, more attention needs to be given to the process of evaluating a valid reading.

An even more daunting task for the classroom teacher is the difficulty of coming to understand what student interests are and how to blend student interests with the subject matter of the curriculum in an evenhanded way that sacrifices neither. Achieving this delicate balance can be difficult, as philosopher Stephen Fishman discovered when he used his undergraduate philosophy class to experiment with teaching techniques that would, as Dewey advocated,<sup>34</sup> integrate student interests with subject matter. Even an accomplished Dewey scholar such as Fishman found it very difficult to figure out how to integrate student interests with curriculum goals in his introduction to philosophy class. Despite his intense focus over several semesters on the teaching-learning process, many of Fishman's attempts to modify his teaching methods failed to strengthen students' connection to the course material in class discussions and in their written assignments. Fishman's goal was to encourage his students to clarify and see the broader meaning of their personal problems by thinking philosophically about them. Lucille McCarthy teamed up with Fishman to conduct an in-depth qualitative study of the class. McCarthy conducted interviews with both Fishman and his students; observed ten class sessions; read Fishman's weekly reflections on his teaching, the students' reflection logs, and student papers along with Fishman's feedback on these; and observed student-teacher feedback sessions on major assignments.

Fishman and McCarthy conclude that even when students reached a point of exhibiting voluntary interest in the class topics, this accomplishment represented only one aspect of an effective education. To be a source of growth for students, which is crucial to Dewey's definition of an effective education, interests and attention need to lead students into new subject matter areas and to promote mastery of the curriculum.<sup>35</sup> Still, this classroom research on the integration of student interests and subject matter reenergized Fishman's teaching. Despite its significant challenges, Fishman suggests that by conducting such classroom-based research, teachers can fulfill Dewey's goal of taking the lead in designing, carrying out, and assessing student learning.<sup>36</sup> Fishman's experience provides important insights into

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33. Beach, *A Teacher's Introduction to Reader-Response Theories*, 68.

34. Some of the main sources of interest from Dewey cited by Stephen Fishman include John Dewey, *Interest and Effort in Education* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1913); *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916); *How We Think* (Lexington, Kentucky: Heath, 1933); and *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier, 1938).

35. Stephen M. Fishman and Lucille McCarthy, *John Dewey and the Challenge of Classroom Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998), 148.

36. *Ibid.*, 222.

the challenges of a teaching approach that expects to connect with students' interests — such as that required by Rosenblatt's transactional theory. Choosing literary texts that enable students to evoke personally "their past experiences and present preoccupations" is no simple task (*MMT*, 67). In a transactional approach to teaching literature, teachers will need some means for determining, through articulation of principles of learning and ongoing assessment, which texts connect with students' lives and also facilitate the goals of the study of literature.

Finally, Rosenblatt's focus on personal response at times overwhelms consideration of the process that follows, where readers share and negotiate the more valid readings for a particular text. As a result of the primacy of personal response in a transactional approach, Rosenblatt might be read as advocating an individualized reading program rather than a set of readings for a class. While providing opportunities for such an individualized approach to text selection would certainly be supported within a transactional model and would also be possible for some part of a literature class, the idea of selecting certain readings for the entire class is of central importance to fitting into the standard model for literature programs in schools. Rosenblatt acknowledged that teachers must make judgments about which texts to read since there are a number of ways to select texts based on such factors as a student's background, a student's personal interests, an assessment of the problems and interests of young readers in general, and a need to meet the larger social aims of using literature to stimulate imagination and understanding of culture in the service of our democratic values.

#### ROSENBLATT'S LITERARY CRITICISM

The final section of *Making Meaning with Texts* contains three essays that represent some of Rosenblatt's key contributions to the field of literary criticism. The first essay, "The Writer's Dilemma: A Case History and Critique," provides an elaborate discussion of the relation between the writer and the public, a topic closely connected to Rosenblatt's dissertation on the problem of art for art's sake in the Victorian era. This article examines successes and constraints on artistic expression experienced by well-known British author Robert Louis Stevenson, who in his writing career worked out a compromise between his own nature and his need for a significant readership that would support his writing (*MMT*, 115). Indeed, literary critics during the Victorian period placed significant pressure on novelists and poets to uphold and reinforce dominant moral attitudes.

Rosenblatt believed that such constraints on artists are counterproductive to society in general and damaging to the literary field. She acknowledged that even in modern democracies there are still considerable constraints on artistic creativity. Rosenblatt recognized that it will take "an aggressive public sense of the artist's right to tread on seemingly dangerous ground, and a willingness on the part of the reading public to have its fundamental prejudices and presumptions challenged" to allow unconstrained artistic expression (*MMT*, 125).

The second essay in this section provides a detailed analysis of Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*.<sup>37</sup> This article extends Rosenblatt's early work in comparative literature by examining a "broader context, in light of additional evidence, with a close analysis of fictional methods, and with deepened concern for such factors as the writer's receptivity" (*MMT*, 132). The main message here concerns the ways authors draw from each others' work. Rosenblatt agreed with Pater's belief that authors "do not live in isolation, but catch light and heat from each other's thoughts" (*MMT*, 143).

In the third and final essay of this section, Rosenblatt found that the poet Walt Whitman's writing on democracy expressed views similar to her own regarding how the arts might serve to strengthen democratic ideals. Throughout her career, Rosenblatt believed that literature was not living up to its potential within the school curriculum to make a vital social contribution to improving democratic life, particularly by cultivating a heightened sensitivity to the needs and problems of others and a greater imaginative capacity. In *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman critiqued the inequalities in American democracy and the pressures toward conformity that undermine the central democratic ideal of the "autonomous worth and uniqueness of the individual human being" (*MMT*, 144).<sup>38</sup> For Whitman, evidence of a true democracy rests upon the rich variance of personalities at all levels of society (*MMT*, 145). This cannot be achieved when society limits the rights and freedoms of certain groups, such as women, minorities, and the poor, Whitman recognized. For American democracy to fulfill its promises, certain attitudes and ideas needed to change, according to Whitman, and he emphasized the importance of the arts in helping to bring about this change. To facilitate change, art should connect to the lives of ordinary people such as laborers, farmers, and factory workers. Whitman's democratic vision seeks a balance that brings some level of unity to the nation and preserves the "autonomy of the individual against the forces of uniformity and conformity" (*MMT*, 147).

Whitman's views were particularly relevant, Rosenblatt contended, to the social concerns of the 1960s and 1970s with the rise of civil rights and ethnic identity movements, both of which also highlight this tension between individualism and conformity within our society. Rosenblatt noted that "Whitman's intense individualism seems to me both to support affirmation of the importance of ethnic roots and to qualify it" (*MMT*, 151). Individuals should be free to draw on group identity and perspectives that represent nonmainstream viewpoints, but it is also important that individuals not be solely defined by these group connections and prevented from seeking wider, more varied associations. Whitman's first call is to nourish self-pride and self-reliance based on background and experiences, but then he "enjoins upon us an active selectivity, a testing, a rejection of all derived from our ancestors that is alien to, and inimical to the special needs of a free society, all that cramps and confines the individual" (*MMT*, 152). For Rosenblatt, Whitman

37. Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean* (1885; repr. New York: Penguin Books, 1994).

38. Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas* (London: Walter Scott, 1888).

reminded us that one of the definitions of “democratic freedom is expressed in this multiplicity of associations open to us” (*MMT*, 153). In *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey concurred with Whitman’s assessment of democracy as a name for a life of free and enriching communion and called Whitman one of the “seers” of American democracy. Dewey agreed with Whitman that art has the potential for stimulating deeper inquiry by stirring emotions and breaking through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness. Both also agreed that the freeing of artists is a precondition for freeing social inquiry. According to Dewey, “artists have always been the real purveyors of news, for it is not the outward happening in itself which is new, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception, and appreciation.”<sup>39</sup>

#### CONCERNS AND QUESTIONS REGARDING ROSENBLATT’S LITERARY CRITICISM

Here, I raise two concerns about the views Rosenblatt articulates in her literary criticism. The first addresses her essay, “The Writer’s Dilemma: A Case History and Critique.” In it Rosenblatt provided an elaborate discussion of the relations between the writer and the public, but she did not explain how this kind of public self-conscious understanding could be cultivated, although she did explicitly recognize the difficulty of achieving such an open and tolerant stance even within a free society. Her basic message is that unrestrained artistic expression can be a source of raising self-consciousness in an open society. Individuals and society benefit when artists are free to create works for an open public, which then prompts self-criticism and self-reflection.

A second concern arises from Rosenblatt’s discussion of Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas*, where the focus remains on the individual without consideration of institutional barriers to change. Her analysis assumes that more democratically minded individuals working in cooperation for the good of the community will somehow transform the current politics of special interests and concentrated political power that stymies the free flow of discussion and exchange of views. Both Rosenblatt and Whitman emphasized the potential of our democracy to surmount some of the corruption and inequities of our institutions and both were perhaps overly optimistic about the capability of the arts to support and to educate for substantial social reform. While they both recognized the challenges that diversity and long-standing inequities bring to this endeavor, they did not acknowledge that the capacity to change individuals’ attitudes and ideas is inevitably limited by the more powerful social institutions that also play a significant role in shaping attitudes and ideas among members of the community. For Rosenblatt, increased sensitivity and growing imagination that enable students to sympathize or to identify with the needs and aspirations of other personalities and to envision how their actions affect the lives of others are indispensable attributes of citizens in a democracy.<sup>40</sup> While greater sensitivity to diversity and rejection of stereotypes are

39. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt, 1927), 183–184.

40. Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, 274.

conducive to improving understandings among different groups in our society, the road to democratic reconstruction and reform of its institutions is still a long one.

I concur with Whitman's and Rosenblatt's assessment that literature and the arts hold promise as a liberating force in a diverse society; however, there are limits to this promise. More thorough discussions of the implications of this promise of the liberating nature of the arts for society can be derived from Dewey's political theory. In *The Public and Its Problems* Dewey recognized the function of art in freeing social inquiry when it overturns routine consciousness and appeals to the public at a deeper, more meaningful level regarding issues of social concern. Dewey contended that new social conditions will emerge as inquiry takes place in a dynamic public arena, but, to be effective, inquiry must often be shaped by a new interest in the common good rather than being the byproduct of powerful self-interests. C. Wright Mills, along with other critics of modern liberal theory, challenged Dewey's vision as a romantic understanding of democracy, which Mills contended is neither cooperative nor inquiring and leaves little opportunity for the public to assert itself.<sup>41</sup> Taking this critique further, Alfonso Damico, in his analysis of Dewey's political theory, contends that Dewey underestimates issues of power and overlooks conflicting obligations created by different associations.<sup>42</sup> Engagement with the arts might bring — as Dewey, Whitman, and Rosenblatt contended — some changes in attitudes and ideas among individuals. But fulfillment of Whitman's broader democratic vision that seeks a balance between the individual and the collective seems to be threatened most by failing to discuss openly how established power relations will often work to prevent movement toward wider public engagement.

#### CONCLUSIONS

*Making Meaning with Texts* provides readers with a concise history of the emergence of pragmatic philosophy's influence on literary theory through the work of Louise Rosenblatt. This volume of collected essays will appeal both to philosophers of education interested in pragmatic philosophy and its educational significance, and to educators seeking theoretical and practical discussions that highlight students' involvement in the learning process. This collection of readings traces the persuasive case Rosenblatt made for a radical epistemological shift based, in large part, on Deweyan epistemology. Rosenblatt emphasized the importance of personal responses that stimulate emotions, connections, and imagination in readers, responses that constitute aesthetic experiences with literary texts and serve as a necessary condition for meaningful learning. One of her more important pieces of advice for teachers is to nourish a personal sense of literature as a mode of experience, a point often missing in many classrooms today. These aesthetic responses, however, are just the first step in the learning process. More is required.

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41. James Campbell, *Understanding John Dewey: Nature and Cooperative Intelligence* (New York: Open Court, 1995), 445. See also C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 274.

42. Alfonso Damico, *Individuality and Community: The Social and Political Thought of John Dewey* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1978), 57–61.

According to Rosenblatt's transactional theory, for learning to take place students must go on to clarify and to broaden their initial personal responses to the literary work in dialogue with others. The process of clarifying and broadening meaning provides students with opportunities to reflect more critically on their own meaning making as well as to appreciate other views that differ from their own. For Rosenblatt, fostering this kind of critical approach to all writings, no matter what their point of view, will help citizens in a diverse society to think critically about competing ideas. Since it is expected that interpretations will vary among students based on their personal responses, the quest to evaluate the relative validity of different readings does not rest simply on properties inherent in an interpretation itself, but rather is contingent on both the context and the agreement of others, as outlined in Dewey's process of warranting assertions through inquiry. This process of communicating ideas to achieve some type of agreement also enlivens both personal and collective engagement. As Boyles suggests, negotiations among teachers and students for determining valid readings suggest to all involved the contextual, fallible, and constructed nature of knowledge. This potential for multiple readings of a text by different students, however, presents both opportunities and challenges for classroom teachers. Crucial to Rosenblatt's transactional perspective is the assumption of an organic relation between reader and text in a meaning-making process that also considers continuity and social context, but the balance among these factors is a precarious one to achieve within a classroom setting, and subsequently guiding classroom practices is a complex task. It is clear that a transactional approach challenges teachers to assume a more active role in being able to design, to implement, and to assess the impact of curriculum on student learning.

Rosenblatt's work integrates Dewey's epistemology into a comprehensive approach for teaching and provides a powerful critique of classroom approaches that promote shallow readings and provide little opportunity for critical reflection. Even in her tenth decade, Rosenblatt continued to advocate for progressive school reform in a climate that was moving toward reinstating traditional teaching approaches in order to meet newly adopted standards of learning and achievement goals for all students. In 2000 she actively campaigned against many of the elements of the *No Child Left Behind Act* because she believed these policies would erase the progress that alternative teaching approaches had encouraged in schools during the 1980s and 1990s. Rosenblatt's concerns about schools narrowly focusing on approaches that encourage student passivity, rote learning, and transmission of knowledge as the core of educational practices seem more relevant to the educational landscape than ever before. As the living philosophy of Rosenblatt reaffirms, we can do better.

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