

LOUISE ROSENBLATT LITERATURE AS EXPLORATION (1938)

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Chapter 2 "The Literary Experience" (pp. 25-53)

Influenced in particular by the work of the philosopher John Dewey and the school of thought Pragmatism more generally, Rosenblatt argues that there is "no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work; there are only the potential millions of individual readers of the potential millions of individual literary works" (25). A work "remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols" (25). The work "exists in the live circuit set up between reader and text" (25) in that it is the reader which "infuses intellectual and emotional meanings into the pattern of verbal symbols" (25). Out of this "complex process emerges a more or less organised imaginative experience" (25) so that when the reader refers to a "poem, say Byzantium, he is designating such an experience in relation to a text" (25).

The reader, Rosenblatt argues, "draws on past experience of life and language to elicit meaning from the printed words" (26) and thereby "reorganises past experience to attain new understanding" (26). She contends that "past experience with life and language" (26) serve as the "raw materials out of which to shape the new experience symbolised on the page" (26). From this point of view, teaching becomes a "matter of improving the individual's capacity to evoke meaning from the text by leading him to reflect self-critically on this process" (26). The teacher's "task is to foster fruitful interactions – or, more precisely, transactions – between individual readers and individual literary works" (26-27). Rosenblatt is at pains to stress in a footnote that she prefers the term 'transaction' over 'interaction' because the latter suggests the "impact of distinct and fixed entities" (27) on each other, whereas the former refers to the "interrelationship between the *knower* and the *known*" (27) (an allusion here to the title of a famous book by Dewey). Distinguishing between 'text' (the "sequence of printed or voiced symbols" [27]) and 'work' ("the *poem*, the novel, etc." [27]), Rosenblatt contends that the "*poem* is the transaction that goes on between reader and text" (27).

Rosenblatt admits that there are many facts attendant on a literary work, facts to do with the "social, economic, and intellectual history of the age in which literary works were written" (27), the "responses of contemporary readers" (27), the "author and his life" (27), the "literary traditions he inherited" (27), and the "form, structure, and method of the work" (27) in question, but all such "facts are expendable unless they demonstrably help to clarify or enrich individual experiences" (27) of specific works. Moreover, she argues, the "uniqueness of the transaction between reader and text" (27) is linked to the "fact that both elements in this relationship have social origins and social effects" (27). She acknowledges that if "each author were completely different from every other human being, and if each reader were totally unique, there could . . . be no communication" (27-28). This is because of the "many experiences we all have in common" (28). However, this "common core of experience" (28) is supplemented by "infinite personal variations" (28) for the simple reason that humans "participate in particular social systems and fall into groups such as age, sex, occupation, nation" (28). Such categories also "offer general patterns upon which individual variations can be played" (28) because the "forces of social conditioning are also pervasive in the formation of specific emotional drives and intellectual concepts" (28). By the same token, just as the "personality and concerns of the reader are largely socially patterned, so the literary work, like language itself, is a social product" (28). The "genesis of literary techniques occurs in a social matrix" (28). In short, both

the "creation and reception of literary works are influenced by literary tradition" (28). However, Rosenblatt insists that "ultimately, any literary work gains its significance from the way in which the minds and emotions of particular readers respond to the verbal stimuli" (28).

In the past, Rosenblatt points out, the danger has been that one or other of these aspects of the literary experience, that is, either the moral function of literature or the formal properties of the work itself, has been emphasised to the detriment of the other. On the one hand, she points out, "literature deals with and ministers to human life and human needs" (28) while on the other, "this is accomplished by means of artistic form, through the exercise of literary craftsmanship creating works of high aesthetic appeal" (28). She contends that to "treat literature as a collection of moralistic pamphlets, a series of disquisitions on man and society, is to ignore that the artist is concerned not with indirect commentary on life but with the addition of a new experience in life, namely, the work of art" (28). What Rosenblatt terms "critical confusion" (29) ensues when one confuses "concern with the human elements in literature . . . with the purely practical approach to those elements in life itself" (29). Works have been judged "solely in terms of their conformity to conventional aims and standards" (29) when the "nature of literature as an art is forgotten" (29). On the other hand, an "equally disastrous distortion" (29) has also resulted when "usually in reaction against the practical point of view, only the formal and technical elements of the work have been considered important" (29). The "excessive preoccupation with the externals of form and technical brilliance" (29) has been exemplified by the attitude of Oscar Wilde in whose hands the "literary craftsman is elevated above the true artist" (29) and the "very remoteness of a work from the living core of human preoccupations comes to be considered a merit" (29). She also has in mind in this regard the "influence of the 'New Criticism'" (29) and their "stress on 'close reading'" (29), the "'impersonality' of the poet" (29) and the "parallel impersonality of the critic" (29). "'The work itself' was said to be the critic's prime concern, as though it existed apart from any reader" (29). From this point of view, "[a]nalysis of the technique of the work, concern with tone, metaphor, symbol, and myth, has therefore tended to crowd out the ultimate questions concerning relevance or value to the reader in his ongoing life" (29-30). Such a view of literature, Rosenblatt argues, which seeks to lead the reader to "ignore either the aesthetic or the social elements of his experience is to cripple him" (30).

Rosenblatt turns her attention at this point to what exactly "happens in the reading of a literary work" (30). Through

the medium of words, the text brings into the reader's consciousness certain concepts, certain sensuous experiences, certain images of things, people, actions, scenes. The special meanings and, more particularly, the submerged associations that these words have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates to him. The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, [resent needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his response to the peculiar contribution of the text. (30-31)

The intrinsic variability of the reader's response is also determined by the "great diversity in the nature of the literary works themselves" (31). There is a great difference between the emotional impact of different lyric poems, far less different genres. This is why Rosenblatt insists that the "infinite diversity of literature plus the complexity of human personality and background justify insistence on the special nature of the literary

experience" (31) and the "highly personal process of evoking the literary work from the text" (31).

Rosenblatt hastens to emphasise that she is not equating "psychological or social interests with a narrow didacticism" (31). She is concerned, rather, with "social and psychological insights as they flower from the actual aesthetic experience" (31). Literary works not "treatises on sociology or psychology" (31). Rather, the text "embodies verbal stimuli toward a special kind of intense and ordered experience – sensuous, intellectual, emotional – out of which social insights may arise" (31-32). Confusion results from a "fixation *either* on something called pure art *or* on the social implications of literature, cut off from their roots in personal aesthetic experience" (32).

Philosophers have defined the "aesthetic experience in many ways" (32), seeking to fit art into "previously developed metaphysical systems" (32) or emphasising "one out of the many springs of aesthetic enjoyment" (32), such as the "play impulse, the instinct for imitation, the urge for self-expression, the desire to communicate, the religious or the mythic impulse" (32). These are merely proof that art "satisfies a great many different human needs and . . . personal and social concerns" (32). More often than not, absorbed as we are in "accomplishing some task or attaining some goal" (32), we "ignore the quality of the moment as it passes" (32). We select from the "confused mass of details . . . only those related to our practical concerns" (32). In literary criticism, our "interest is centered precisely on the nature and quality of what is offered us" (32). There is a difference between "ordinary reading" (32) and reading a literary work. In the case of the former, "we read for some practical purpose" (32-33) for which reason "our attention is focused on the information or ideas or directions for action" (33). By contrast, "no one can read a poem for us. The reader of the poem must have the experience for himself" (33): because the text is

organised and self-contained, it concentrates the reader's attention and regulates what will enter into his consciousness. His business for the moment is to apprehend as fully as possible these images and concepts in relation to one another. Out of this arises a sense of an organised structure of perceptions and feelings which constitutes for him the aesthetic experience. (33)

Some definitions of the aesthetic experience "postulate that art provides a more complete fulfillment of human impulses and needs than does ordinary life with its frustrations and irrelevancies" (33). This sense is derived from the "intense, structured and coherent nature of what is apprehended under the guidance of the text" (33). Any such "complete experience depends not only on the work itself, but also on the reader's capacities and readiness" (33), something which cannot be manufactured.

Rosenblatt argues that every time we utter a comment like 'How tragic!' we are "engaged in an embryonic artistic process" (34), having "juxtaposed certain events in our minds, . . . perceived relationships, and . . . thus disengaged their humour our tragic tragedy" (34). Authors do this "in a more completely creative form" (34) before proceeding to "share his vision" (34) of the world with us. The writer does

more than passively reflect experiences as through a photographic lens.

There has been a selective force at work. From the welter of impressions with life bombards us, the writer chooses those particular elements that have significant relevance to his insight. He leads us to perceive selected images, personalities, and events in special relation to one another. (34)

"The reader, too, is creative" (34), Rosenblatt asserts. There is no question of pure "passivity on the reader's part" (34) for the "literary experience" (34) is a "*transaction* between the reader and the text" (35) with "selective factors moulding the reader's

response. He comes to the book from life. He turns for a moment from his direct concern with the various problems and satisfactions of his own life. . . . Even while he is reading, these things are present as probably the most important guiding factors in his experience" (35).

The result is that the "same text will have a very different meaning and value to us at different times or under different circumstances" (35). There are a number of "selective factors" (35) shaping the "reader's response to literature" (35). Literature may offer us an emotional outlet. It may enable us to exercise our sense more intensely and more fully than we otherwise have time or opportunity to. Through literature we may enjoy the beauty or grandeur of nature and the exotic splendour of scenes in far distant lands. (36)

There are any number of things which readers get out of literature, both positive and negative. One of the most important gifts of great literature is the "opportunity to feel more profoundly and generously, to perceive more fully the implications of experience, than the constricted and fragmentary conditions of life permit" (37). Literature "contributes to the enlargement of experience. We participate in imaginary situations, we look on at characters living through crises, we explore ourselves and the world about us, through the medium of literature" (37). Literature cultivates in us the "capacity to sympathise or to identify with the experiences of others" (37). In so doing, we may "focus on those characters and situations through which we may achieve the satisfactions, the balanced vision, perhaps merely the unequivocal motives attained in our own lives" (38). Literature enlarges not so much our "knowledge of the world, because through literature they acquire not so much additional *information* as additional *experience*. . . . Literature provides a *living-through*, not simply *knowledge about*" (38). Literature also offers readers the opportunity to "escape" (39). Another benefit is the "possibility of compensating for lacks or failures through identification with a character who possesses qualities other than our own or who makes fuller use of capacities similar to our own" (40). The "ability to understand and sympathise with others" (40) is one of the factors which "enables us to seek through literature an enlargement of our experience" (40). Another value is "its objective presentation of our own problems. It places them outside ourselves, enables us to see them with a certain detachment and to understand our own situation and motivation more objectively" (41). The work need not "treat circumstances overtly similar to the reader's situation" (41), its "power" (41) residing in its configuration of human drives" (41). Rosenblatt contends that an "intense response to a work will have its roots in capacities and experiences already present in the personality and mind of the reader" (42). This is something to which the teacher must cater. Literature, last but not least, takes "[m]uch that in life itself might seem disorganised and meaningless" (42) and provides it with "order and significance when it comes under the organising and vitalising influence of the artist" (42).

Rosenblatt argues that the "psychological process involved in the relationship between book and reader" (42) is linked to the "problem of form and style" (42). For example, the reaction to the "human concerns . . . embodied in the aesthetic experience" (43) depends on the fact that the work in question is a "work of art" (43) with a particular form: the "entire experience has a structure and an inner logic . . . that only the great work of art can offer" (43). The "*enhancement of these human values will . . . depend upon the intensification and enrichment of the individual's aesthetic experience*" (44). Any theory of art which "tends to break up the response to literature into distinct segments, whether under the headings 'social' versus 'aesthetic' or 'form' versus 'content,' is misleading" (44). Form cannot be experienced apart from content and vice versa. The "formal relationships in the literary work – the verse form, rhyme scheme, sentence

structure, plot structure – . . . do not have a separable or even a clearly distinguishable effect" (46). "How can we legitimately dissociate anything called the content of a poem from the interplay of sensations and concepts and emotional overtones produced by the particular words in the particular relations to one another in which they are found in the text itself?" (46), Rosenblatt wonders. It is "essential to hold firm to the totality of the reader's experience of the literary work whenever we are tempted to speak as though the structure of a play or novel were distinct from the specific sensations, emotions, personalities, events, presented in the work" (46). This because the "sense of the form or structure of the play or novel results from the fact that these particular elements and no others are *experienced* in particular relations to one another" (46). We find ourselves in a "circular argument" (47): if we "start with form or structure, we find that we are merely talking about the particular relationships of certain human sensations, concepts, and emotions. If we talk about so-called content, we find that we are merely dealing with the significance that arises from a particular series of relationships among certain sensations, concepts, and emotions" (47). We need to de-emphasise to our students that the "formal relationships in a literary work exist apart from, and are merely superimposed upon, something called the *content*" (47). They need to realise, rather, "how organically interfused are these two phases of the work of art" (48). We need to ensure that students "understand the nature of the diverse literary forms – the lyric, the epic, the novel, the essay, the drama" (48) which writers utilise. "Pleasure arises from discovering the kind of structure that the artist is creating, from seeing things fall into a pattern" (48). One of the best ways to do is by encouraging students to try their hands at the various literary forms.

The "reader's role" (49), Rosenblatt reminds us, is an "active, not a passive one. To "make his appeal primarily to the senses" (49) and to "reach the secret spring of responsive emotions" (49), she argues, the writer "must select significant images that will stimulate his reader to undertake the process of sensuous and intellectual recreation" (49). The child must be encouraged to respond not only to the sensuousness of the words themselves but to understand "what a word implies the external world" (50). The goal is to "develop the student's sensuous endowment" (50) and to foster his or her relationship to the "world of sight and sound" (50) and their "effect upon his own moods" (50). Greater "receptivity to the sensuous stimuli offered by literature" (50) is "paralleled by enriched emotional associations" (50). Emphasis on "abstract verbalisation, on intellectual concepts cut off from their roots in concrete sensuous experience, is destructive of responsiveness to literature" (50-51).

Rosenblatt argues that to help students develop a vital sense of literature requires that one "understand the personalities who are to experience this literature" (51). Students' "reactions will inevitably be in terms of his own temperament and background" (51). The student's "primary experience of the work will have had meaning for him in these personal terms and no others" (51). The "individual reader brings the pressure of his personality and needs to ear on the inextricably interwoven 'human' and 'formal' elements of the work" (51). Any 'warm and enjoyable participation in the literary work will necessarily involve the sensuous and emotional responsiveness, the human sympathies, of the reader" (52). "Knowledge of literary forms is empty without an accompanying humanity" (52). Responding to the "sensuous, technical, and formal aspects of the literary work" (52) must be supplemented by "responses to those elements in the work that meet the reader's need for psychological satisfactions and social insights" (52). Growth in "human understanding and literary sophistication sustain and nourish one another" (53).