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THE TRANSACTIONAL THEORY: AGAINST DUALISMS

Louise M. Rosenblatt

When asked to give my personal reactions to developments in theory in the past decade, I was struck by the fact that the essay was for a book concerned explicitly with both writing theory and critical theory. In the decades after first expounding my literary theory in 1938, I received dozens of invitations to speak or write, usually about literature, sometimes about composition—but I had to wait forty-five years to be invited to discuss their “connections”! The 80s decade made up for this and other delays. In 1980, the widely-read anthology *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Poststructuralism* called me “the first among the present generation of critics in this country” to set forth the reader-response view (Tompkins xxvi). In 1983, the Modern Language Association published the fourth edition of *Literature as Exploration*. In that same year, I was asked to present a paper on “Writing and Reading” at a session of the MLA Division on the Teaching of Composition. In 1985, I was invited to give the keynote talk on “Writing and Reading” at the CCCC national conference. (In earlier decades, I had been a member of its Executive Committee.) In 1986, I was asked to give the opening theoretical paper at the conference on “Reading and Writing Connections” jointly sponsored by the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois and the Center for the Study of Writing at the University of California at Berkeley. Versions of this paper, entitled “Writing and Reading: the Transactional Theory,” were published as technical reports by each of the Centers. It was included in the volume of conference papers, *Reading and Writing Connections*, published in 1989. The continuing interest in this subject seemed to me a sign of a changing climate in university departments of English.

To discuss the developments in writing theory and critical theory in the 80s, I find I must sketch the decades-long perspective from which I view them. I began

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teaching in 1928 (yes!) at Barnard College as assistant in a course on Chaucer given by Professor Charles Sears Baldwin. He was Columbia University Professor of Rhetoric, had written texts on composition, and was to be the author of three standard volumes on ancient, medieval, and renaissance rhetoric. Composition was taken very seriously in the department. Everyone, from instructors to full professors, gave a composition course. Nevertheless, as I look back I see that, even in that department, the major emphasis was on literature, both for the English majors and for their instructors. This was true throughout my twenty years in university liberal arts departments.

The subsequent institutionalized separation between composition and literature in the universities may be to some extent explained by the problems created by the Depression and World War II, and by the increase in numbers of students. I do not need here to describe the situation that developed, with composition taught mainly by untenured teaching assistants, whereas the literature courses were the perquisite mainly of the professors.

Nor do I need to retell the story of how, despite these difficulties, dedicated teachers of composition reacted against traditional formulaic methods and mechanical theories of writing. By the 80s, the importance of writing was becoming widely recognized. Leaders in the field developed various views of the writing process. I was pleased that some of these writing theoreticians cited the parallelism between their theories and my transactional approach to reading.

Note that I have been restricting my comments to the college and university level. The story of composition in the schools is more complex, ranging from widespread neglect of composition to the use of workbooks that fragmented the language into mechanically testable units. Writing, when taught, served mainly the purpose of demonstrating command of conventional forms and “correct” mechanics. Reading was taught as a set of disparate skills to be demonstrated largely through answering multiple-choice questions. Stories, and even poems, were often used for that purpose. Literature at the high school level was taught with the assumption that there is a single “correct” interpretation (often according to Cliff’s Notes!). Of course, the separation of the two activities and the prescriptive emphasis owed their authority to the traditional theoretical approaches dominant in the universities.

But throughout the decades, I was aware of another, more congenial, strand of thinking in the schools—teachers and educators who never gave up an emphasis on the writer’s or reader’s role. Hence my decision, after World War II, to leave my post in a traditional liberal arts faculty, despite its considerable intellectual and financial rewards, and to accept an appointment to a school of education. This school was unusual because it did not limit itself to pedagogy, but offered a full undergraduate and graduate program in English, including courses in composition, speech, language, and literature, as well as “methods.” Ultimately, my

colleagues and I developed undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs, covering linguistics, semantics, composition, and literature, as well as writing theory and literary theory. The programs reflected my theoretical approach more fully than anything that I had published.

Almost from the very beginning of my work in the field, I have taken an unorthodox stance toward the established theoretical positions. Certain academic strands and experiences—my work in anthropology, research in aesthetics for my doctoral thesis, and reading of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey—fostered my tendency to transcend the conventional borders of the discipline of literary study.

Even as an undergraduate, while doing intensive honors work in English, I was also very much involved with discovering anthropology under the tutelage of Professors Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict. My electing to accept a graduate fellowship at the University of Grenoble, rather than a place at Oxford, and my decision to take a doctorate in Comparative Literature at the University of Paris reflected my desire to combine literary interests with the anthropologist's experience of a different language and culture.

At Grenoble, I attended lecture courses and seminars for French students, took a course in French composition given by a professor from a lycée, and joined French students in a course on translating Dickens from English into French. Having to immerse myself in French in order to write my doctoral dissertation in that language provided a realistic approach to semantics. The book dealt with French and English writers whose work I admired, but who defended the writer's freedom from social constraints by asserting that they wrote solely "for art's sake." My study revealed that this was mainly a defensive slogan; the literary work could have aesthetic value in itself, yet necessarily had social origins, implications, and effects. Tension between these two aspects would be reduced, I suggested, by the education of readers who understood the special nature of the artist's social role.

After completing the doctorate, and while teaching English at Barnard, I took work in ethnology and linguistics in the Columbia graduate department of Anthropology. I studied linguistics with Boas, working on American Indian languages, Kwakiutl and Maidu. This and my experience with French reinforced a sense of the reciprocal relationship between language and culture.

My work in the social sciences and literature led to membership in a commission charged with producing books presenting recent developments in the social sciences to adolescent readers. After completing my work for the commission, I came to the conclusion that, although books in sociology or psychology were needed, the kind of discussion of human relations that went on in my own literature classes could perform an important social as well as aesthetic function.

It was necessary to present a philosophy of literature and teaching that would explain why and under what circumstances the reading of literary works would both have an intrinsic aesthetic value and make possible the development and assimilation of insights into human relations. My classroom experiences helped me realize that essential to this result was a personal reading of the text rather than the traditional text-oriented promulgation of an interpretation by a teacher. And I had observed the value of interchange among students as a stimulant to the development of personally critical reading, essential to citizens of a democracy. Thus the book that I was moved to write, *Literature as Exploration* (1938), although it focused on literature, had back of it a view of language activity that encompassed all linguistic modes in their cultural contexts. *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (1978) presented more systematically and more fully the underlying theory of reading and criticism of the earlier book.

In an account of “The Turns of Reader-Response Criticism,” in *Conversations*, a volume published in 1990 by the National Council of Teachers of English, Steven Mailloux states that despite “Rosenblatt’s prior dismantling of the reader/text distinction,” literary theorists devoted the 70s to intense theoretical debate over whether the reader or the text determines interpretation (40). He goes on to explain that the question was kept alive by their continued acceptance of a dualistic epistemology, in contrast to my pragmatist anti-foundational epistemology.

The subtitle of my 1978 book explicitly underlined my continued rejection of the traditional epistemology and my differences with the other reader-response critics, a rubric used to cover the spectrum from psychoanalytic to structuralist, poststructuralist, and deconstructionist. All, however, no matter what their assertions, still in practice accorded dominance to either reader or text. In *Knowing and the Known* (1949), John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley suggested that the term “interaction” had become tied to the Cartesian dualistic paradigm that treats human beings and nature, subject and object, knower and known, as separate entities. In the light of post-Einsteinian developments, they proposed the term “transaction” to designate a relationship in which each element, instead of being fixed and predefined, conditions and is conditioned by the other. In a transaction, although we can distinguish between them, no sharp separation between perceiver and perception can be made, since the observer is part of the observation. The poem—the term I used to stand for “literary work”—“exists,” “happens,” I maintained, in the transaction between particular readers and the text (the signs on the page). We might refer to reader, text, and poem, but each was an aspect of a relationship occurring at a particular time under particular circumstances.

The situation Mailloux describes provides the backdrop for my remarks. He notes, it is true, that “Rosenblatt’s transactional approach finally seems to be

getting the attention in literary theory circles that it has long had among compositionists, educational reading theorists, and teachers of teachers" (51). In the 80s, as at any period, one could find in the universities the whole spectrum of theoretical positions, with many still under the sway of some modified version of the formalist approach. But I could feel pleased that some of the theoretical positions I had been expounding for years were now being quite widely espoused in university circles (though not often with Mailloux's scholarly conscientiousness).

Unfortunately, I found that similar anti-foundationalist or relativist premises (often derived from continental sources) were in various instances leading to quite different conclusions from mine. In most instances, it seemed to me, dualistic habits of mind persisted, e.g., language as a closed *or* open system, the individual *or* the social, subjective *or* objective, determinate *or* indeterminate meaning. Reactions from one questionable extreme too often led in a great pendulum-swing to an equally questionable opposite pole. Ideas that I espoused have been carried to what I consider fallacious extremes.

For example, both great pioneers of semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, saw language as mediating between the individual and the environment. But de Saussure's dyadic phrasing of the relation of word and object, "signifier" and "signified," combined with his emphasis on the arbitrary nature of the sign, gave rise to a view of language as a self-contained system. For some, this became the basis for asserting a Nietzschean view of "the prison-house of language," in which the writer is "written" by the language and the reader is circumscribed by her or his "interpretive community." Both author and reader are seen as simply conduits for arbitrary codes, conventions, and genres. The efforts of "process" writing theorists and reader-response theorists to do justice to the individual or personal were thus frustrated. This pendulum-swing, it seems to me, results in a preoccupation with the text even more total than in the formalist theory of the autonomous text, though with a "playfulness" that the New Critics would have found irresponsible.

In contrast to de Saussure's, Peirce's formulation is triadic—"The sign is related to its object only in consequence of a mental association, and depends on habit" (3.360). This explicitly human linkage of word, object, and "interpretant" (6.347) had from the beginning strengthened my transactional view of language. While I understood that language is socially generated, I saw that it is always individually internalized in transactions with the environment at particular times under particular circumstances. Each individual, whether speaker, listener, writer, or reader, brings to the transaction a personal linguistic-experiential reservoir, the residue of past transactions in life and language. As William James pointed out (1:284), each is carrying on a process of selective attention, choosing from the elements brought into the stream of consciousness during the transaction.

“Meaning” emerges from the reverberations of all these elements upon one another.

With other reader-response theorists, I rejected the notion of the autonomous text embodying a single determinate meaning. For some, unfortunately, the idea of the potentially pluralistic interpretation of the text induced a pendulum-swing to complete relativism. The polysemous character of language led them to see the possibilities of the text as infinite. Moreover, believing that each text carries its own self-contradiction, the deconstructionist ends in a logical impasse.

Again, pragmatism provides a solution for the dualism of absolute truth versus complete relativism. (At one point, I found my views under attack because I believed that some interpretations of a text may be found to be better than other interpretations!) John Dewey accepts the anti-foundational position that we cannot perceive an unmediated “reality,” but foregoes the quest for absolutes, and in his *Logic* contributes the idea of “warranted assertibility” in scientific inquiry. What conditions or operations warrant or justify an assertion as “true”? Agreed-upon criteria for what constitute sound methods of inquiry and judgment make possible agreement on “warranted,” though tentative, answers (9, 345).

Recognizing all the differences between scientific inquiry and literary interpretation, we can still adapt the concept of warranted assertibility to literary interpretation. We must indeed forego the wish for a single “correct” or absolute meaning for each text. *If we agree on criteria for validity of interpretation*, however, we can decide on the most defensible interpretation or interpretations. Of course, this leaves open the possibility of equally valid alternative interpretations as well as of alternative criteria for validity of interpretation. Such an approach enables us to present a sophisticated understanding of the openness and the constraints of language to our students without abnegating the possibility of responsible reading of texts (Rosenblatt, *The Reader*, ch. 7; *Literature*, 151ff).

In the account of my activities in the 80s, I should have recalled the MLA session in December 1980, when I presented a paper “On the Aesthetic as the Basic Model of the Reading Process.” Actually, with my somewhat mischievous title, I was gunning not only for the reader/text dichotomy, but also for the false aesthetic/nonaesthetic or art/science dichotomy. The dualistic view of the reader and the text led to the assumption that “literariness” or “poeticity” must reside in the words of the text. I argue that the aesthetic is not an inherent attribute of the text. The writer who wishes to write a work of art adopts an aesthetic stance in order to bring forth as many clues as possible for the hypothetical reader. But although a text, say, *Julius Caesar*, may offer great aesthetic potentialities, it can be read either as a work of art or as an example of Elizabethan syntax. And a weather report can be read as a poem. Such differences in purpose would be fulfilled by differences in what I call the writer’s or reader’s stance toward the contents of consciousness. That would guide the choice of what to pay attention

to, what to select out and synthesize, from among the elements stirred up in the stream of consciousness during the transaction with the text. The *efferent* stance (from L. *efferre*, to carry away) is involved primarily with analyzing, abstracting, and accumulating what will be retained after the reading. Examples would include reading to acquire information, directions for action, or solutions to a problem. In the *aesthetic* stance, attention is focused primarily on experiencing what is being evoked, lived through, during the reading.

Moreover, I stressed that there was not an opposition, a dichotomy, but a continuum between the two stances. We don't have the cognitive, the referential, the factual, the analytic, the abstract on one side and the affective, the emotive, the sensuous on the other. Instead, both aspects of meaning—which might be termed the public and the private—are always present in our transactions with the world.

The difference lies in “the mix,” the proportion of public and private aspects of meaning attended to during a reading. In readings that fall somewhere in the efferent half of the continuum, the reader selects out predominantly more public or cognitive elements than private. The aesthetic stance, in contrast, accords selective attention to predominantly more of the penumbra of private feelings, attitudes, sensations, and ideas than to the public aspects. The concept of the reader's stance in the efferent/aesthetic continuum, as well as the transactional paradigm, differentiates my theory both from the traditional and New Criticism approaches and from the other so-called reader-response theories.

We increasingly hear arguments for the reading of a wide range of genres in both writing and criticism courses. All the more reason why, in writing or reading, students need to learn to develop a guiding principle for choice at a point on the continuum appropriate to the situation and their purpose. If *Invisible Man* is to be interpreted as a work of art, it must first be read with attention primarily to what is being lived through. If the purpose is, say, to acquire information or analyze its structure, the reader must push to the periphery of attention personal responses and focus attention mainly on the public, verifiable aspects of what is being evoked during the transaction with the text. For an historical work or a political speech that uses many so-called literary devices, it will be especially important to decide what major stance to adopt.

My reminiscences thus far perhaps explain why I was ready when in the 1980s I was asked to discuss the relationship between writing theory and critical theory. Pragmatist transactionalism had led me to envision speaking and listening, writing and reading as interrelated aspects of the individual's transactions with the environment. Hence I was in tune with the incipient trend in the 80s toward questioning the writing/reading dichotomy. Reading, it was pointed out, is a “composing” activity, while the very act of writing involves reading. Again, dualism created the danger of a simple annulment of differences. There seemed

to be a swing toward seeing these as mirror images and assuming that there would be automatic transfer of learning from one to the other in such courses as the traditional formalistic introductions to literature.

In my various talks on the subject, therefore, I pointed out that "models" of the two linguistic activities overlap yet differ. Both writer and reader are drawing on personal linguistic/experiential reservoirs in a to-and-fro transaction with a text. Both writer and reader develop a framework, principle, or purpose, however nebulous or explicit, that guides selective attention and directs the synthesizing, organizing process of constitution of meaning. However, these parallelisms occur in very different contexts or situations. We should not forget that the writer encounters a blank page and the reader an already inscribed text. Their composing and reading activities are both complementary and different.

I have been especially interested in differentiating two kinds of "authorial reading" during the writing transaction: the first, expression-oriented, reading to test what has been written so far against an evolving inner purpose; the second, reception-oriented, reading the text through the eyes of potential readers. When communication is the aim, the first must provide a criterion for the second. This parallels in reverse the reader's, on the one hand, testing an evocation for its inner coherence and relevance to the text, as distinct from, on the other hand, seeking both intrinsic and extrinsic means to relate this evocation to "the author's intention."

Since it seemed that competence in one activity would not automatically produce competence in the other, I reflected on the social and educational conditions that would foster constructive cross-fertilization, through the development of generally useful linguistic habits and patterns of thought. The social and classroom environment, what the individual writer or reader brings to the activity, and the sensed purpose of the activity, all must be taken into account. Collaborative educational methods, I argued, would include spoken and written interchange among students, the development of metalinguistic insight into their own and others' linguistic processes, and the building of critical criteria.

As the 80s advanced, all of the questions raised began to pale in comparison with manifestations of the individual/social dichotomy. Again, premises that I shared—the recognition that each individual absorbs the assumptions and values of the society or culture—became the basis for seeing the individual as completely dominated by the society, the culture, or "the community." Thus for some cultural, historical, or Marxist critics, texts became the complicitous indoctrinators of the dominant ideology. At best, it seemed, the reader could be taught to "read against the grain" of the text in order to "tease out" and resist its affirmation of the status quo.

A philosophical and anthropological rationale makes it seem as fallacious to ignore the individual as it is to ignore the social aspect of any event. Each is

implicated in the other. But always there is an individual human being choosing, selectively constructing meaning, and consciously or unconsciously responding in terms of the factors, contextual and human, entering into that particular transaction. We can recognize the shaping power of the environment, the society, and the culture. Yet we should understand the possibilities of choice or aspiration within the parameters of our complex culture, with its many subcultures, its ethnic, religious, economic, and social groups, and the diversity of groupings any one individual represents or can join—to say nothing of awareness of alternatives provided by knowledge of other major cultural patterns!

The successive editions of *Literature as Exploration* have maintained my linking of reader-response theory with the need for readers to be critical of the assumptions embodied in the literary work as experienced and also of the culturally acquired assumptions they themselves brought to the transaction. But a critical attitude does not demand a swing to a completely negative or deconstructive approach. In the 80s, I have repeatedly felt the need to insist that to be truly critical is to be *selective*. What, in the views of the world presented to us in life or in literature, should be rejected or changed? Just as important, what should be accepted or reinforced? And, equally important, what positive alternative goals should be constructed and worked for?

We are frequently being reminded that no teaching is ever completely “innocent.” True, but should we accept the swing to the indoctrination of an unqualifiedly negative attitude, which fosters a sense of alienation, of being a powerless victim? And should we permit a simplistic view of “power” to trigger simplistic notions of alternatives and processes of social change? Instead, I argue, let us avowedly inculcate democratic values as the positive criteria for selecting among choices, whether literary or social, whether stemming from the dominant or a minority culture. Preoccupation with one or another of the many ills that call out for correction in our society and our world may lead us to neglect defense of the basic democratic freedoms that make possible any constructive remedies.

Pendulum swings in one direction unfortunately generate equally extreme backward swings. Threatened by the destructiveness of extreme—and in some academic quarters, fashionable—critical theories, traditionalists have too often rejected the sound premises along with the fallacious extremes. The more moderate positions, with their implications for rational change, tend to be ignored. One reason for this is that the formalists and their postmodern adversaries share the same dualistic ways of thinking. To escape reversion to the academic approaches that set the pendulum swinging, we need to ponder the dangers of false dualisms.

At this time of great upheavals in the world, whole nations are groping their way toward their definitions of freedom, democracy, socialism, capitalism. It is the essence of democracy that our own society, too, should be continuously

reviewing and refining its efforts to move closer to embodiment of our ideals. Writing and criticism involve us inexorably, I believe, in those broader social and political concerns. "Democracy," as Dewey said, "will have its consummation when free social inquiry is wedded to the art of full and moving communication" (*Public* 350). Such a vision of our role can free us from the polarities of academic and political debate, and inspire a fruitful meeting of minds in the 90s.

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