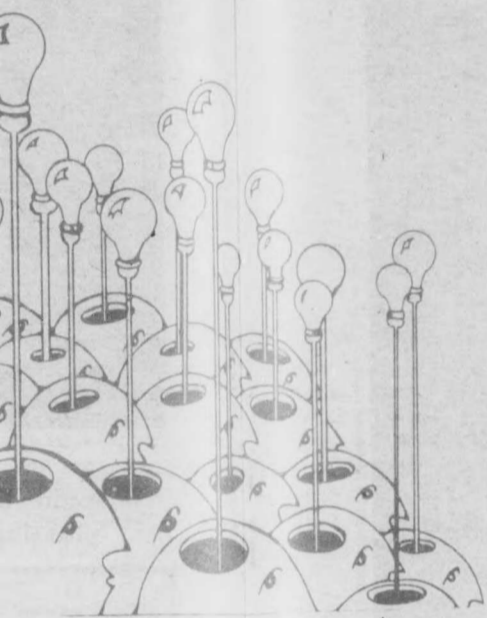


ing and The Literary Experience



Growth Through English and Literature as Exploration offered our professional humanistic alternative to the excesses of close reading. Accordingly my emphasis shifted from analyzing texts to helping students experience texts which, in turn, suggested more participatory strategies for teaching. Since students came to my classes with their own unique emotional baggage, their own variegated values and biases, it should have been obvious that they would see Holden and Nora in different ways. We all see what we can, what our personal histories permit. A reader must pay attention, then, not only to the images, ideas, and sensations that the words in a text point to, but also to the feelings, attitudes, associations and ideas that these referents arouse within him. (Rosenblatt, *Literature and the Invisible Reader*, 1970)

Students don't have to rush to judgement, analyzing shifts in imagery and nuances; in style; they need, instead, to listen, trust and develop their early responses. The graduate school obsession with the cognitive does not develop confidence in high school students just learning to respond maturely. They are intimidated by premature analysis. And without a solid emotional foundation, inexperienced readers have nothing to build on, like a two story house with no foundation.

Most of us went to graduate school to understand more fully the literature that had moved us. Why, then do we forget that without that emotional basis we would probably not have felt the need to move beyond our earlier, unsophisticated encounters with literature.

by John C Clifford

My transition from English to English education from being text-oriented to reader-oriented, was not smooth. Disillusioned with the aesthetic trivia and political remoteness of literary scholarship, I got stuck in another cul-de-sac: a deep subjectivity which holds that any response will do. But this global relativity denied too much, eliminated too many important voices. Twain and Dylan, Ibsen and Baraka are muted when only the reader's response mattered. No, both the reader and the text needed to be considered for the interaction to be creative, for it to make a difference in the life of the reader.

And so the last three years of the sixties changed the shape of the profession: the inductive strategies of Bruner, Postman, and Weingartner's subversive strategies, phase electives, and the dynamic influence of NCTE made me heady with the momentum of reform, dizzy from exploring new ways to teach. As chairman of a determinedly progressive department, I enjoyed being in the vanguard of change. During these years the old order was simply swept away. In retrospect, perhaps too much was thrown out, but the humanistic and pedagogical strength of transactional teaching is still rock-solid.

I still hold that when we help students to read and write we teach a "performing art" to use Rosenblatt's phrase. And that does not mean we do the performing. We need not be merely dispensers of information or evaluators of competence. There is a greater challenge a more pressing need: to be guides through the informing and clarifying processes of reading and writing. And the critical process of reading can begin with the students first, intuitive response to literature. Our critical insights are through training, telescoped but my first reaction to Plath and Prufrock was not analytical; it was a rush, a gaping awe. It was this enthrallment with reading that urged me to study literature seriously. But my high school students did not see what literature had to do with their lives. And until they did, the scaffolding of literary study was built on shifting sands. With no grounding in their world, the critical techniques soon washed away.

A philosophy of teaching literature then, focuses sharply on the complex web of emotions, feelings and memories that each of us spins under the guidance of the text. Since passive reading ignores vital, inevitable associations, it needs to be avoided in favor of an intense, personal activity. Our students need a philosophy of teaching that encourages them to begin the critical process with uninhibited responses. For surely, readers count as much as texts.

But I see now that the New Criticism wasn't really the enemy. An attitude was. Graduate professors find it difficult to get promoted or tenured for developing teaching strategies for high school teachers, certainly in traditional English departments. Consequently, serious sustained thinking about teaching, plays a decidedly minor part in the intellectual life of most universities. And this preference for content still prevails, but now there are new gurus, new critical schools eager for prominence. Many still follow the formalist, objective stance, this time focusing on structural patterns that often reduce the sweetness and light of literature to formulas and paradigms. Not that such an interest is not very disciplined, informed and scholarly. But while these pursuits are understandable for those deep in their profession, they seem of little value for anybody else.

Rosenblatt's adversary last December, David Bleich, has been instrumental in demonstrating the subjectivity of critical interpretation, reminding us that poems do not have meaning, people do. Apparently, we see what we need to find. Yet, Bleich's approach makes me wary. For him the reader is all, the text merely a *tabula rasa*; a perfect criticism for the "me-decade."

And the tug of war among the reader, the text and the author rages still. In that tacky conference room, Bleich was pulling hard for the reader, too hard. In Subjective Criticism the text is a Rorschach upon which we project feelings, ideas and scenes from our own minds. With the text so static, there is little of the self-ordering, self-corrective interaction between text and reader that makes transactional criticism such a useful strategy for high school teachers.

Bleich's scholarly rival, Norman Holland is more useful since his transactional criticism does encompass the creative interaction of the reader and text. But his Freudian bias and his concentration on the reader's illusions and defenses makes his work inappropriate for use in high school. Even through the lure of scholarship and the illusion of technique will draw many to his work, let's hope it stays where it can really be useful, in graduate schools among sophisticated readers.

Important research in reader response supports Rosenblatt's early contention that each reading is an individual event, that the reader recreates the work of art through an active mingling of both reader and text. It is a creative act our students can experience when we remove the impediments of objective literary criticism. As uninformed pressure builds for more competence through the basics, there is a danger that reader-response will again be seen as a frill, instead of a necessary basis for critical inquiry.

Fortunately a new bridge to the humanism of Sapir, Boaz and Dewey is the response-centered movement's strongest ally to date. *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* [1978] is Louise Rosenblatt's mature explanation of the validity of grounding the teaching of literary experience. Rooted in the specialness of our lives, other, more analytical readings can flourish, transactional criticism is now strong enough to withstand the seductive illusions of objective literary scholarship. Readers need never again be separated from themselves or the text.

We do not, I am sure, have to wander around for another forty years, looking for an appropriate theory for enhancing literary experience in high school. A transactional approach still offers high school teachers the best hope for a balanced harmonious pedagogy for an effective alternative to the eccentricities of critical trends. By blending emotions and reason, intuition and analysis, we can achieve the freedom and discipline necessary for literature to have "a liberating and fortifying effect on the ongoing life of the reader." (*Literature As Exploration*) 1976.

