

Transactional Teaching and

As I sat in a predictably garish convention room last December listening to Louise Rosenblatt debate David Bleich in what was billed as "NCTE meets at MLA" I started drifting, unable to focus on their topic, "Thinking About Readers." I had heard the discussion before, a long time ago and a feeling of *deja vu* was bittersweet. I wasn't bored and my mental wanderings weren't random, but I was drawn insistently to critical turning points in my own thinking about readers and the teaching of literature. The media-event title of Rosenblatt and Bleich's confrontation provided an overdramatic but accurate frame for my musings on how pendulum's swing, circles come round and how far a profession can go to get back to where it was.

I kept fading in and out of a tableau from a decade earlier when I sat with a dozen other doctoral students in a cozy seminar room overlooking Washington Square Park. We were waiting for Louise Rosenblatt. I was hoping that her seminar *Criticism and the Literary Experience* would offer some solace, some antidote to four frustrating years of graduate training in literary scholarship.

As an English major I never thought about readers. Although there was some talk about Aristotle's catharsis it was incidental. It was made abundantly clear that my main interest should be textual.

Critics didn't like readers much. And since the New Criticism dominated graduate study in the sixties, readers, as carriers of messy, untrained responses, were banished from the critical process. A serious interest in the response of readers, especially inexperienced students, would have been un scholarly, perhaps perverse. So I never thought much about readers.

The New Criticism had been slowly taking over graduate school since World War II. Its pedagogical focus was the literary product not the process of literary understanding. *Theory of Literature* (1949) Wellek and Warren's systematic analysis of critical inquiry became the most influential plea for studying the poem as "poem". By insisting on the normative character of the genuine poem, they left little room for considering how reading literature affects genuine people.

As a committed graduate student reading the best that was said, and thought I carefully avoided self-indulgent responses; I shuddered at such external matters as social usefulness. Armed with my new critical instruments I wrote antiseptic papers on irony in *Henry V*, chiaroscuro in Cooper, ambiguity in Pirandello: stuff like that, and lots of it. I was helping to keep American scholarship strong and vigorous. I was becoming a specialist, a member of the elite. And I enjoyed it, the way apprentices often do.

This closer reading and textual scrutiny slowly filtered down into college and high school curricula. Perhaps the originality and financial success of Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry* [1938] with its emphasis on treating the poem as an organic system of relationships helped the New Criticism's popularity. Perhaps it was an idea whose time had come. Certainly in high schools the time was ripe for more coherent and engaging content. The "experience and life adjustment" curricula of the thirties and forties with their inspirational and uplifting prose and poetry had become vapid and irrelevant. I had been bored into defiance by the character building, social-civic pitch of the anthology I studied in high school.

But the academic revival of the early sixties changed all that: no more real-life adventures from *Boys Life and Callers* no more deliberate catering to the adolescent mind. Spurred on by a national insecurity about our scientific pre-eminence a great cry went out for intellectually serious content. University English departments soon adopted the scientific, rigorous techniques of the New Critic. Here, the profession proclaimed was a discipline as demanding and precise as the scientific methodology it emulated. Unfortunately, their theory also reinforced and encouraged a formal and objective pedagogy. And so as tone, irony and organic unity echoed in the halls of academe, only the teachers voice of authority was heard in our classrooms.

When I began teaching in high school I enthusiastically carried my New Critic bag of tricks with me. Encouraged by Lynch and Evans' criticism of the topical and chronological approach I was sure what was needed was an emphasis on literature as literature. Readers? Personal growth? Literature as a criticism of life? No, these were too reality-oriented, too subjective. Rigorous scholarship came first. After all, I rationalized, our techniques were value-free.

And when the most sophisticated statement by the profession to date, *Freedom and Discipline* [1965] urged us to concentrate on questions about texts themselves—about how, not what poems meant, only the elementary school remained to be conquered by the all vanquishing dogma of *explication de texte*.

But things went sour quickly, messy realities beyond the text started complicating our insular schema. As my restless students started enjoying marijuana and understanding Dylan and the Stones, literary study devoid of social perspective seemed absurd and ivory towerish. Gradually as the brutality of Vietnam and the skepticism of militant students shattered the artificial tranquility of my working class high school, the important question no longer seemed how but what a poem means. "Who cares how?" the brightest cried and indeed, I was beginning to agree. Social relevance and personal involvement could no longer be denied. A seemingly liberating critical movement had become a stifling pedagogical box with no way out. I felt cheated and trapped.

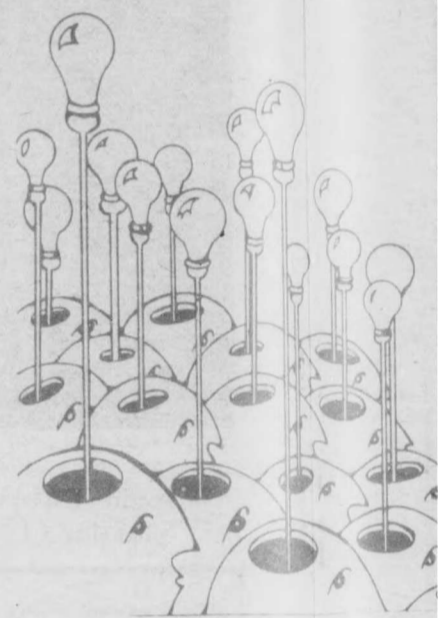
I shared Louis Kampf's disappointment that the New Criticism "affected no one." Developed as an admirable attempt to force a confrontation between the reader and the text, it had become a method for avoiding thought about the poem altogether. I abandoned my doctoral work in English, frustrated with finding myself more a critic than a teacher. Although there was an illuminating epiphany, I knew I desperately needed a new perspective on my teaching. The objective paradigm would no longer serve.

Fortunately I discovered Rosenblatt's *Literature As Exploration*: a sane, humanistic defense of the reader. Ironically it was first published in 1938 the year of Brooks and Warren's successful debut. Her belief that a spontaneous, emotional reaction to literature was an "absolutely necessary condition of sound literary judgement" had the ring of immediate truth. She put the New Critics into perspective:

Instead of hurrying the youngster into impersonal and so-called objective formulations as quickly as possible, the successful teacher of literature makes the classroom a place for critical sharing of personal responses...such exchanges of ideas, such scrutiny of the reason for response...will develop ability to handle more and more demanding texts. Discussion of personal responses of the text-as-lived through can give rise to a truly inductive study of literature.

Of course! I had been teaching literary criticism, substituting other aims for the experience of literature. Instead of creating a climate of sharing, I was analyzing; instead of encouraging emerging insights, I was telling. So I started to think more seriously about readers.

In the student-centered environment of the late sixties, Rosenblatt's transactional ideas flourished. Finally after years of neglect the invisible reader emerged out of the shadows. I could see clearly now the fallacy of viewing literature primarily as an object of study. I soon began implementing the ideas that exploded from the Dartmouth Seminar (1966) perhaps the sixties against technique was complete: "The dryness of schematic analysis of imagery, symbols, myth, structural relations...should be avoided passionately at school and often at college." (*Growth Through English* 1967). When James Britton and others at Dartmouth stressed the need for students and teachers to trust their uninhibited reactions to literature the future of the response centered movement seemed assured.



by John C. Clifton

