

Bibliotherapy: *Literature as Exploration* Reconsidered

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“Some among the Great Goods cannot live together. That is a conceptual truth. We are doomed to choose, and every choice entails an irreparable loss.”
—Isaiah Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal”¹

Remarkably, the document that underwrites the teaching of literature in American high schools dates to 1938. Published at a time when it represented a minority opinion and in print ever since, Louise Rosenblatt’s *Literature as Exploration* possesses a polemical energy and progressivist ardor on which the profession that gathered around it has drawn for decades.² *Literature as Exploration* treats both the theory and practice of teaching literature, and in part because it justifies what came to be established practices with a resonant theory, it has acquired the status of a classic. Its thesis has impressed itself not only on practicing teachers but college students on the path to becoming teachers, which is to say it is built into the way many think. For many, *Literature as Exploration* serves as a statement of first principles. A Festschrift dedicated to Rosenblatt on the occasion of the book’s fiftieth anniversary cites “the extraordinary influence of Rosenblatt’s work on the teaching of literature, on literary theory, and on educational research in all English-speaking countries.”³

¹Isaiah Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: John Murray, 1990), 13.

²Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, 5th ed. (New York: Modern Language Association, 1995). Further references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text.

³Edmund J. Farrell and James R. Squire, *Transactions with Literature: A Fifty-Year Perspective: For Louise Rosenblatt* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1990), vii.

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In the foreword to the fifth edition of *Literature as Exploration*, published by the Modern Language Association in 1995, Wayne Booth writes: “[Rosenblatt] has...been attended to by thousands of teachers and students in each generation. She has probably influenced more teachers in their ways of dealing with literature than any other critic” (vii). To Booth this is all to the good, but can he possibly believe, as Rosenblatt does, that “specialists in the field of mental hygiene” (159) have the last word on the teaching of, say, Shakespeare? It is in the name of such authorities that Rosenblatt writes in *Literature as Exploration*.

Rooted in the thought of John Dewey, *Literature as Exploration* proclaims an emancipation from the heavy hand of the past, rejecting the idea of the student as a recipient of knowledge and setting up an opposition between the traditional, the prescriptive, the static on the one hand and the modern, the enlightened, the fluid on the other. No competing goods here. Experts like the unnamed “specialists in the field of mental hygiene” are cited throughout *Literature as Exploration*, because it is they who lead the way out of the Egypt of tradition, and who guide and inform the teacher’s endeavor to mold students into “emotionally liberated individuals” (262). Literature proves a “potent force” (262) in this liberation narrative in that it awakens the reader’s creativity: such is Rosenblatt’s argument. While *Literature as Exploration* did not singlehandedly determine the course of literature instruction in our schools, it did launch the pedagogical doctrine that the reader creates the text, a theory that poses an open invitation to abuse and has been taken further than Rosenblatt herself intended or approved. Perhaps because it serves as both manifesto and charter and mantles itself in the authority of “contemporary thought” (121) including, incredibly, that of Einstein (xviii, 131), *Literature as Exploration* has enjoyed an exemption from criticism. This lack I propose to remedy forthwith.

With the canonization of *Literature as Exploration* the oddity of its title, possibly modeled on Dewey’s *Art as Experience*, has lost its glare.⁴ Surely only the act of reading, not literature as such—that body of “writing which has claim to consideration on the ground of beauty of form or emotional effect” (Oxford English Dictionary)—might be likened to an exploration. In point of fact the reader, the “explorer” of literature, stands at the center of Rosenblatt’s concern. “The most important thing is what literature means to [students] and does for them” (64). If students in the Rosenblatt classroom

⁴John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; New York: Perigee, 2005). Further references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text.

are assigned a novel or poem, it is to elicit their reaction, help them mature, or indeed kindle their own creativity, for according to the “transactional” theory, the reader co-authors the literary work.⁵ “Every time a reader experiences a work of art, it is in a sense created anew” (107). “We...create what we understand to be the work” (108). Though Rosenblatt foregrounds literature in her title and refers to literary works, often in batches, in the course of argument literature matters to her primarily as a means to something else—the activation of the student’s psyche. Literature is a mental health booster. “Fundamentally, the goal is the development of individuals who will function less as automatic bundles of habits and more as flexible, discriminating personalities” (100).

In reviewing, many years later, how she came to write *Literature as Exploration*, Rosenblatt makes it clear that even as an undergraduate she was drawn to the study of literature and the social sciences alike.⁶ She does not pause to explain how the vision of freeing society of the prejudices and fallacies of the past, which is plainly what attracted her to the social sciences, squares with study of the literature of the past. It seems that being interested in both, Rosenblatt just assumed they cohere. So in *Literature as Exploration*. Attaching importance both to literary instruction and mental health, Rosenblatt takes it for granted that (a) these ends agree and (b) serving the second means serving the first. I believe these assumptions are groundless and that in reality the Rosenblatt doctrine subordinates the teaching of literature to the imperative of mental well-being. “Fundamentally,” her goal is to alter students’ “personalities.” The presumption that only the healthy mind can fully appreciate literature affords an ideal pretext for turning reading into an inquiry into the mind of the reader.⁷

⁵An event that may sound like something out of Bakhtin, but is not. According to Bakhtin, the reason a great work of literature cannot be limited to the meaning intended by the author is that it taps into a genre of unfathomable richness. No author of such a work “could fully command all its important implications, because great literary works exploit resources that have developed over centuries and contain potentials for development over centuries to come. The most important of these resources is genres.” Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 285. Bakhtin’s thinking about active reading thus bespeaks a profound respect for tradition.

⁶See part IV of the 1995 edition of *Literature as Exploration*.

⁷After laying down the principle that the goal of literary instruction is to “develop” people with “flexible, discriminating personalities,” Rosenblatt contends: “Our great heritage of literary experiences can be fully enjoyed and understood only by such personalities” (100). I have encountered the analogous argument that because in today’s world only people with civic consciousness can write well, composition classes should teach civic consciousness.

To mark the provisional quality of a period falling between the more traditional estates of the child and the adult, we sometimes say that adolescents experiment or indeed explore. Rosenblatt thinks of literature as a habitat ideally suited to the explorations of adolescent readers by virtue of being suspended somewhere between the real and the unreal. Lifelike without being life itself, literature allows such readers to imagine their way into it and, so the theory goes, see themselves and their problems from an aesthetic distance or learn things that would be too costly to learn in the flesh. Like much of the rhetoric of *Literature as Exploration*, the word “explore,” with its aura of the adventurous and the morally commendable in one, courts assent, but what students actually do when they explore literature in the Rosenblatt manner is hard to say. The metaphor suggests a certain vague play with possibilities. So too, when Rosenblatt speaks of the “experience” of literature (and the word does such heavy duty in *Literature as Exploration* that if it were deleted, the book would look as if it had been gone over by an industrious censor), she means nothing like experience as the world knows the word; extending the use of the term in *Art as Experience*, she means entertaining a fantasy, playing in imagination with the possible. Maybe the adolescents exploring or experiencing literature are just looking into a reflecting pool of their own uncertainties.

This is all the more probable in that Rosenblatt students undergo a kind of psychotherapy, whether or not it goes by that name and whether or not they are aware of or have consented to it. Just as *Literature as Exploration* was written before its own thesis became received doctrine, so did it recommend the probing of students’ minds in the name of their own growth decades before psychotherapy became fully institutionalized in American life. In *The Psychological Mystique* (Northwestern University Press, 1998) I examine some of the sources and manifestations of the therapeutic culture of which Rosenblatt’s book is a tributary, and which now, some seventy years after publication, gives its arguments the sound of self-evident truths.⁸ Originally, however, the ambition of turning the classroom into a venue for psychological exploration—Rosenblatt’s

⁸*Literature as Exploration* abounds with pseudo-clinical pronouncements on the tyranny of society (241), the damage wrought by our “cultural pattern” (160), and the corrosive effects of guilt (164, 192) that are all but indistinguishable from pop psychology. On the pop psychology movement see my *Fool’s Paradise: The Unreal World of Pop Psychology* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005). On the ascendancy of the therapeutic culture, see the works of Philip Rieff.

ambition—was audacious. According to a theory cited by Rosenblatt with approval, “ideally a series of literary experiences could perform something approaching a psychoanalysis [*sic*] if the reader were encouraged to react fully and freely” (191). “Psychologists and psychiatrists” (195), “behavioral scientists” (163), “marriage consultants” (154), “authorities on family problems and mental hygiene” (219): these are Rosenblatt’s sages, sources of a wisdom that equips us to descend into the literature of the past the better to free ourselves of old ideas. Under their guidance the teacher will use literature as a hook to draw out the insecurities, confusions, and conflicts that adolescent readers need to work on: “Once the student has responded freely [to the literary work], a process of growth can be initiated” (102; cf. 196). Students read so that they can be brought to investigate their own attitudes, a process that providentially results in making them better readers in the end, because the same “stereotyped ideas and conventional feelings” (96), the same “blind spots and emotional fixations” (108) that, until overcome, dominate their mental lives also happen to impede their understanding of the text. The claim that as students study themselves their understanding of literature will only become more accurate exemplifies the peremptory argumentation of *Literature as Exploration*. The good reader is the evolved reader. Yet I wonder how good the readings of literature authorized by the Rosenblatt doctrine really are.

To take but one example, Rosenblatt tells of “a young college graduate” who felt no sympathy for Anna Karenina because Anna

was so preoccupied with her own affairs and...did not appreciate her husband; he was undoubtedly the kind of man who loves deeply but is unable to communicate his feelings to others. When asked to point out in the text itself the basis for her interpretation, she replied, “But there are people like that, with very warm hearts and intense affections, who are unable to let others know it. Why, my own father is like that!” (76)

Because *Anna Karenina*, according to Rosenblatt, offers no support for the student’s defense of Karenin, the student must have simply projected the figure of her father into the text. The case seems to be presented as a victory for the Rosenblatt method, with the student coming to recognize the grounds of her misreading like the patient in therapy who learns it was all in her head.

However, as Gary Saul Morson recently demonstrated in a superb study of *Anna Karenina* and its critics, in fact it is those who make the same

assumptions about Tolstoy's novel that Rosenblatt does who manhandle the evidence:

No matter what Tolstoy explicitly says, and no matter how much counterevidence he provides, [critics] have preferred to see Anna as she sees herself. A tragic tale of a vital woman who defies traditional morality to pursue true love but comes to grief because of the cruelty of her unfeeling husband and the hypocrisy of conventional society: this story is too familiar, and too dear, to suspect.⁹

By all indications Rosenblatt adheres to the same fable, just as she loads words like “vital,” “traditional,” and “conventional” in the same way as the critics who buy into Anna Karenina's image of herself. It is only to be expected that at some point such pronounced biases would interfere with reading literature.

Given her professed allegiance to “the newer theories” of social science (154) and her use of “old” as an epithet of contempt— “the old approach to people and affairs” (155), “the old attitudes [and] the old habits of response” (162)—it is surprising that Rosenblatt has time for a literary tradition that reaches into the past, though not so surprising that she reduces it to the subordinate status of a means to an end. Literature in the Rosenblatt classroom is harnessed to draw students toward their own maturation—but also, more implicitly, toward the political doctrine presumed to underpin human well-being: liberalism. According to the story told by *Literature as Exploration*, liberalism isn't just one set of political beliefs among many, it is the set you arrive at by breaking through things other people don't think about—prejudices and unexamined assumptions. It is the supreme creed, the sun that burns off error. Adolescents make good candidates for liberal beliefs because in their transitional state they are ready to question formulas and notions hitherto taken for granted. Literature catches adolescents at the propitious moment and forwards the growth of their civic selves, serving well as bait precisely because, being virtual and not actual, it entices us to play with it. So it is that political opinions appropriate to newsprint are brought into the classroom under the warrant of “science” and recommended to students under something other than their own name.

“Once the student has responded freely, a process of growth can be initiated” (102). Like free association in the analyst's office, literature in the Rosenblatt

⁹Gary Saul Morson, “Anna Karenina” in *Our Time: Reading More Wisely* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 87.

classroom serves to evoke reactions for students to explore, a process that, it is tendentiously assumed, will not fail to bring them closer to an accurate understanding of the text. The therapy they undergo consists of the discovery of what it is in themselves that resists progress toward their own enlightenment—whose political name is liberalism—and the overcoming of such resistance. Of course this therapy is to be conducted with some subtlety. Rosenblatt doesn't preach liberalism outright. She speaks, always in the same apodictic tone, of healthy people who are "flexible" and not-so-healthy ones who are "too rigid" (100); of "breadth of choice and challenge to personal creativity" (84); of the cause of "civil and social rights" (78) and the "struggle for human rights" (194); of freedom from "culturally imposed feelings of guilt or shame" (151); of the "economic and social changes" authored by "government" to satisfy "needs" (151); of "maximum social welfare" (160)—this in a work on teaching literature. She dismisses "moralists" and "reactionary groups" (166), declaring it axiomatic that "the criminal is a symptom of weaknesses in our educational and social systems and should be cured, not simply punished" (122). In the name of liberation from the tyranny of conventional responses, the student is to be introduced to ordinary op-ed liberalism. And just as Rosenblatt never considers that psychic exploration and the attentive reading of literature might not amount to the same thing, so it never occurs to her that there might be a conflict between her professed sympathies and the profound contempt she holds for people who act like "automatic bundles of habit," i.e., her fellow citizens.

Before undergoing therapy, students too are presumed to be prisoners of habit. "In the choices open to him, [the student] needs to be guided not by the blind reflex of unconsciously absorbed prejudices but by ideas based on scientifically valid facts" (168). Who would prefer being blind and brainwashed to being enlightened and self-determining? Typical of the rhetoric of *Literature as Exploration*, this sentence simply contradicts itself, calling on an automatic reaction to its own phrasing while it decries "reflex" and posing a false, coercive choice in the name of choice. The claim that a science of human liberation exists (one based on Einstein, if you please) is also an imposture and an abuse of language. It is this spurious science that allows Rosenblatt to argue ex cathedra and to make one manifestly political judgment after another in the name of something theoretically indisputable.

All but declaring a political creed even as she alleges a virtually psychiatric authority for her pedagogy, Rosenblatt doesn't realize how close she comes to the dangerous fallacy of believing that those who hold the

wrong political views have something wrong with them. At the same time, the Rosenblatt doctrine denatures literature by ascribing exactly the same wholesome tendency to everything students read. One and all, the dozens of works and authors referred to, almost never in detail and often in lots, somehow promote “growth” and an enhanced capacity for “choice”—terms vague enough to be sure, but, like many others in *Literature as Exploration*, echoes of the language of the classic statement of the liberal position, J. S. Mill’s *On Liberty*; though unlike Mill Rosenblatt believes growth is achieved under close professional supervision.

As Rosenblatt uses it, “choice” suggests not a decision with costs, a hard choice, but something more like a selection from a menu. Who wants to argue against “choice,” or “growth” for that matter? In *Literature as Exploration* such terms act as charms, lending an aura of the progressive, wooing assent, and securing immunity from criticism. Other terms and formulations are repeated ad infinitum, as if the author were so locked into them that she just could not let go. From the first to the fifth edition, Rosenblatt had half a century to edit out the leaden repetition of:

There has been a revival of interest in biography—all the more reason for helping students develop from this reading some general framework of ideas concerning the growth and development of the human being. (254)

She never did. The argumentation of *Literature as Exploration* is that sentence writ large—a forest of redundancy.

Mill doesn’t drone the reader into submission and, committed as he is to discussion, argues out words like “develop” and “grow” and “choose” rather than intoning them to foreclose argument itself. The virtue of argument, he believes, is that it keeps thought alive. According to Mill, freedom of speech is indispensable not least because ideas decline into mere formulas unless renewed by the spirit of controversy. In the case of “almost all ethical doctrines and religious creeds,” he maintains, principles

are full of meaning and vitality to those who originate them, and to the direct disciples of the originators. Their meaning continues to be felt in undiminished strength, and is perhaps brought out into even fuller consciousness, so long as the struggle lasts to give the doctrine or creed an ascendancy over other creeds.¹⁰

¹⁰John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859; New York: Norton, 1975), 39.

Success in the struggle spells failure, for once the victorious creed is established it becomes received opinion and suffers a sad “decline in...living power.”

In outline this is the story of the Rosenblatt doctrine itself, once insurgent, now enshrined—a cooling star. One reason students who explore literature under its aegis may not learn much is that they are laboring under the effects of orthodoxy much as Mill describes them (with Rosenblatt herself as a direct disciple of Dewey). Not only are students fed clichés, but clichés seductively packaged as liberation pedagogy. Another reason is that under the Rosenblatt doctrine even in its original form, literature serves as a decoy to engage students psychologically and get them to reflect on themselves—the act on which their well-being supposedly depends: “Through discussion and reflection on his response to literature, the student may learn to order his emotions and to rationally face people and situations he is emotionally involved in” (227). Note that the student isn’t said to learn anything about literature.

Despite Rosenblatt’s implicit faith that teaching literature and fostering mental health go hand-in-hand, the second takes actual precedence. Characteristically, rather than speaking of biography as interesting in itself, Rosenblatt recommends that the teacher take advantage of the interest in biography to help students develop ideas about how people develop. And just as biography serves this allegedly higher social purpose, so is literature, under the Rosenblatt doctrine, of lesser importance than the theorized social good it serves. The pages of *Literature as Exploration* are speckled with the names of innumerable authors from Sophocles to Shakespeare, from George Eliot to T.S. Eliot. How many are read in classrooms whose pedagogy derives ultimately from *Literature as Exploration*? (A Rosenblatt disciple I knew liked to say, “We don’t teach Shakespeare, we teach students.”) The esteem in which *Literature as Exploration* continues to be held bespeaks a certain fantasy that literature lives on in the Rosenblatt classroom as in the founding document, as well as a certain denial of the consequences that ensued when mental health—or the nurturing of “flexible, discriminating personalities”—went to the top of the list of Great Goods.

It is characteristic of *Literature as Exploration* that at one point Rosenblatt cautions that “the wise teacher does not attempt to be a psychiatrist” (198), contradicting the entire import and tendency of her own argument. In the same way, even while framing her pedagogy unmistakably in language of

liberalism she warns that “however satisfactory may be the system of values the teacher has worked out for himself, he is not justified in teaching it to his students” (123). Rosenblatt has everything both ways, not because she is shifty but because she casually assumes good things agree, making it possible to explore the student’s obsessions and blind spots without overstepping the writ of a teacher, or to teach by the book of liberal doctrine without preaching the doctrine itself, or to set up the reader as the creator of the text while holding the reader to the text. None of these contradictions concern the author of *Literature as Exploration*, because she doesn’t recognize their existence.

Taking its terms from Dewey and applying them with a kind of literal-minded fervor, *Literature as Exploration* possesses the certainty of the doctrinaire. Rosenblatt dislikes all “dogmatic ideas and fixed responses” (123) except her own. Dewey: “a work of art...is recreated every time it is esthetically experienced” (113). Rosenblatt: “Every time a reader experiences a work of art, it is in a sense created anew” (107). Where Dewey argues that poetry discloses “a sense of possibilities that are unrealized and that might be realized” (360), Rosenblatt has students explore “the possible alternatives from which to choose” (184) under the watchful eye of the teacher acting as mental health specialist. It bears noting that Dewey too was “less willing than he ought to have been to confront the fact that not all good things can be had together, however ‘experimentally minded’ we are in their pursuit.”¹¹ In Rosenblatt this unwillingness goes along with a tendency to posit a happy ending to any right educational endeavor. “[Students] will come to understand better... Thus they will gain a profounder sense... The desire to understand a particular work will produce ever-widening circles of interest,” circles that in turn “will involve him in still deeper concern with human relations” (111–12). The student unsympathetic to Anna Karenina, we are given to believe, discovered the error of her reading.

Strangely for a theory of pedagogy inspired by pragmatism, the Rosenblatt doctrine presumes its own success, just as it presumes that the student who comes to understand better has become healthier. That so enlightened a philosophy might go awry is a contingency too ironic for

¹¹Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Noon of American Liberalism* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995), 25. On Dewey’s belief that “a new poem is created by everyone who reads poetically,” see 255.

Rosenblatt to contemplate. Indeed, her book contains not one flicker of irony. (Yet isn't irony itself the sign of alternative possibility?) *Literature as Exploration* is a work of a single idea solemnly repeated, a six-hour sermon, a state procession of ponderous generalities. The educational results might be better if teachers abandoned such cant in favor of something more modest, and instead of posing as psychotherapists and liberators contented themselves with being teachers.

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