

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE ISLANDS  
AND THE ROLES OF RESEARCH AND HIGHER EDUCATION

DÉVELOPPEMENT DURABLE DES ÎLES ET ZONES CÔTIÈRES  
ET RÔLES DE LA RECHERCHE ET DE LA FORMATION

ΑΕΙΦΟΡΟΣ ΑΝΑΠΤΥΞΗ ΣΤΑ ΝΗΣΙΑ:  
Ο ΡΟΛΟΣ ΤΗΣ ΕΡΕΥΝΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΤΗΣ ΕΚΠΑΙΔΕΥΣΗΣ

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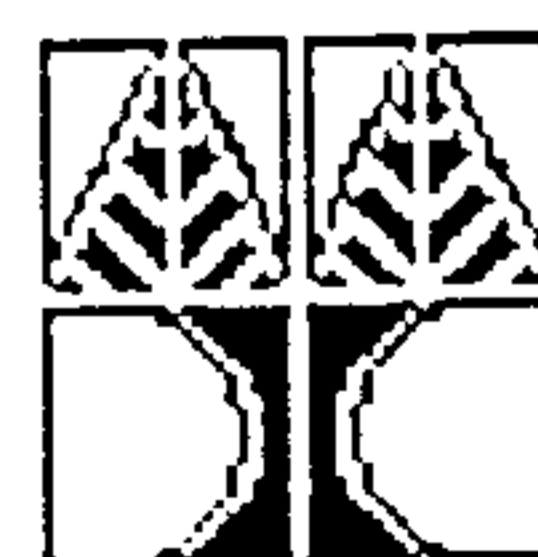
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PRELUDE

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# The school literary experience as a possibility of cognitive development and reading maturity.

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## **Abstract**

The failure of traditional teaching practice to present the literary event, namely the text's encounter with the reader, as a dynamic function and a cultural phenomenon "in time", as a reader's creative action-experience and anthropological knowledge, as perception and response, has moved the research interest from the application of static teaching models to the study of reading responses as a more reliable way of understanding the nature of literature as well as the reading experience itself.

The questioning of the old tendency for a didactic exploitation of literature in the classroom, has also led to the questioning of the control teachers exercise over the literary event, while it redefined the dynamics of the teacher's new role in which s/he is not a dominating factor but serves both as an intermediary and as a collaborator.

In conclusion, the new point of view which has emerged and which regards the literary experience as the main point of the communication that literature constitutes, enriched with knowledge from different disciplines - such as that of the *literary theory* for the viewing of each literary text as a "living through" experience, or that of *cognitive psychology* for the intellectual and cognitive development of the individual - has the ability to transform the school place, and especially that of the classroom, into a place of continuous elevation of the "subjective paradigm" and its parameters.

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The encounter of the reader with the literary text, be it prose or poetry, constitutes the literary experience. Being a dynamic process as well as a communicative event, this experience becomes both complex and important, the more so, when it takes place in school as part of the teaching of literature. At least so it appears, judging by the heated theoretical debates and the various teaching experimentations it has given rise to so far. Despite the various suggestions put forward however, I discern some reluctance - due to a theoretical 'inability' or practical difficulties - to fully answer questions related to the nature of the 'teaching' of the literary text.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of the Greek educational (teaching) context in particular, the reasons that create this situation, appear to be many. I am going to touch upon the main one, which is also indicative of the contrastive nature of the views which determine or underlie teaching practice in the Greek Primary School - namely, the '*Analytika Programmata Mathimaton tou Dimotikou Scholeiou*' (the Primary School Curriculum) for the teaching of the Modern Greek

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<sup>1</sup> These issues have been the subject of numerous conferences, seminars and discussions among theoreticians and teachers in Greece. However, the teaching of literature especially in primary education is still under discussion, while the problems which crop up are occasionally addressed, but I feel never fully solved.

Language.<sup>2</sup> In the latter, the role of literature is confused on the theoretical level and ultimately conflicts on the practical level with the language teaching objectives, under which subject literature is subsumed there being no 'Literature' subject per se. In the main, however, the literary experience of students ends with their 'sensitisation' "...towards the literary texts, so that they may grow to enjoy and love them, and ultimately to seek on their own the company of a good literature book" (p. 9). What is not specified however, is how, within the existing rigid framework according to which every complete text, literary or non-literary is to be pressed to the service of the teaching of language, the students are to "enjoy a well-written text and develop a liking for good books" (p. 11). On the other hand, what can be discerned is confusion of terms and uncertainty of method.

Although in the rationale of the Greek context there is no explicit rejection of 'teaching' in the sense of 'approaching' or 'initiation' or even of 'enjoyment', the danger exists of the student-reader being even further removed from what is understood as the objective of the 'literary game' namely the 'enjoyment of literature'. Thus it becomes imperative that we reconsider our old attitude towards the exploitation of the literary text for teaching purposes, while there is the need to extend the semantic scope of 'literature' in order to exploit its potential to the full. Mainly however, it appears necessary to redefine the interpretive-teaching process as followed at present, and to recognise the importance of the role of the main factor in the literary communication, i.e. the reader, whose personal experience should not be distorted.

The fact that until lately the recent discoveries whether theoretical or not, (of the theory of literature, or scientific branches like developmental or cognitive psychology) had not been exploited in this direction by the Greek theoreticians (among others) is to be attributed mainly to the hegemony of a text-oriented view of literature, that is, in the overstressing of the 'artistic pole' and the overlooking or underrating of the 'aesthetic pole' - Wolfgang Iser's terms (1978) - which is identified with the reader, more specifically the child-reader, who is involved in the literary experience by realising or taking cognizance of the literary work through his/her own apprehension sensitivity and receptivity. Theory however has always informed the teaching of literature although it has never clearly disclosed its origins.

Since the 1960's, due to the strengthening of post-structuralist ideas, the primacy of the text has declined. Many theoreticians reacting to the idea of an objectively independent literary work, have attributed to it the characteristics of an event in time, which has to be experienced. They also question the validity of the one and only 'correct' interpretation talking instead of many possible 'correct' ones. Thus is signaled a shift from the text to the reader, a new attitude towards the nature of the literary work and the communication it constitutes. Reading is perceived not as an one-way process, but instead as a two-way one, involving three elements: the reader, the text and their interrelation which, through the textual signs, is able to activate the abilities both perceptual and cognitive of the reader. These, by functioning as structures embodying social as well as literary codes, conventions and experiences taken from life or other texts - N. Frye (1957) has shown that a work of literature is as much an imitation of other works of art as it is of life - invite the reader to respond. S/he, in turn, activates his/her own experience of life and literature and contributes it to the reading event. S/he attempts to structure meaning by making use of cognitive schemata, or other structures at

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<sup>2</sup> The 'Analytika Programmata' (curricula) are issued by the Ministry of Education, they cover what is to be taught in all subjects, and are the same all over Greece. The translation of both the term and the extracts is mine.

his/her disposal, s/he combines them and expands them, thus developing and maturing both cognitively and as a reader.

Consequently, the call for a theory applied to the teaching of literature should take into account not just the two 'poles' mentioned above, but therefore, elevate the essential factor of the literary communication, i.e. the reader's involvement in the literary experience, to a position of primary importance.

Assuming the reader-oriented theory, and more particularly the various versions of reader-response theory, is able to fulfill such aspects as the above-mentioned ones, it is worth examining in greater detail one of its important versions, the 'subjective' one, advocated by such scholars as L.M. Rosenblatt (on whose main views I draw upon) David Bleich, or Norman Holland.

Although the response theory in general, as Steven Lynn (1994) states: "...authorises and encourages readers to begin where, really, readers always must begin: with an individual response" (p.52), the subjective version is of exceptional interest. This version - which, as Susan Suleiman (1980) has classified it is associated, not accidentally, with the psychoanalytical one - makes greater use of the psychological experience, which it identifies with the personal one, while, in claiming priority not for the typical and the general but for the idiosyncratic and singular, it expands it. It clearly places emphasis on the reader's experience as an individual (memories of past events, present needs and worries), but it focuses on the reading process itself and its offshoots. The reader becomes a familiar and friendly person, rather than an 'intellectual decoder', while the literary work functions both as a "stimulus" and as a "blueprint" ("tentative framework").

As a "stimulus" it activates elements of the reader's past experiences both of life and of literature, especially during the phase of "evocation" of the text, that is, the reader's first encounter with the textual signs (Rosenblatt, 1937 [1970], pp. 17,25). It invites him/her to seek the meaning and establishes with him a 'live circuit' (Rosenblatt, 1978, p.14). As a "blueprint" it defines some limits to the literary experience and essentially leads the reader to check them and assess them according to his/her hypotheses and expectations (Rosenblatt, 1937 [1970], p.54). By wishing to fulfill his/her expectations as painlessly as s/he can, s/he marshals his/her defenses and invests them with his/her imagination ultimately aiming at their transformation to a complete experience (Holland, 1976, p. 341). Hence, the text does not exist as a series of printed characters on a page, as an object or an "ideal entity" but operates like a "poem", according to Rosenblatt (1978, p.12) as an "event in time", which we experience not only while reading, but also afterwards. Thus the text becomes in its turn the process which itself initiates and the experience it constitutes for the reader who moves to the second phase of the reading process, the "response" itself. S/he judges him/herself in order to find out whether the emphasis s/he gives to the textual elements reflects the dynamics of the text itself, and ultimately, by becoming aware of his/her reaction s/he makes his/her life more comprehensible. In this case, the reader will need to transcend many times the limits of his/her own immediate experience and knowledge in order to take part in more complex and fuller experiences like the ones literature has to offer. In other words, it is possible for the reader to resort to techniques like the ones described by Piaget (1969) and adopted by Rosenblatt, namely "assimilation" and "accommodation".

Both "assimilation" - the transformation of external reality so that it can be embodied each time in the existing mental structures - and "accommodation" - as the modification each time of the

existing structures so that they can assimilate new elements from the environment - ensure the adaptation of the cognitive schemata, thus restoring the equilibrium between the stimuli of the environment and the internal (cognitive) structures developed each time. Thus, the basic premise of cognitive psychology that an organism interacts with the environment, and the related one that children are active rather than passive participants in their own development tallies with the nature of the reading relationship as described by theoreticians of reading - mostly Rosenblatt. This view is reflected by Nicholas Tucker (1981 [1982]) when he points out that the major intellectual task facing children is their constant need to make sense of everything, including the books they read.

Whether the reader perceives the text as a “stimulus” or uses it as a “blueprint” s/he essentially “recreates” it. S/he tries to appropriate its structured feel, and to synthesise what s/he already knows, feels and desires, with what the literary text offers, thus structuring knowledge in a “spiral” fashion (Rosenblatt, 1937 [1970], p. 276).

The reader, having to move continuously between textual signs and his/her expectations as a reader, is involved in a relation of give-and-take. Rosenblatt calls this relationship a “transaction” implying the equality between the participants in the relation she describes, and rejecting the conflicts that another term, for instance “interaction” by - Iser, introduces (Rosenblatt, 1985, pp. 34-35). The individual becomes a reader through his/her relationship with the text and by reacting to textual signs. The text exists and comes to life through its relation with the reader. Each one becomes the other’s environment. From the moment the reader will manage to structure some kind of meaning, it is likely that s/he may misinterpret the ‘former feel of things’ in the light of his/her new experience (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 18). There exists however the possibility that the reading relation may be interrupted or frustrated because of a number of intrusions, such as the reader’s fixation or shift back to older experiences, unfamiliar signs, unusual combinations, preconceptions and misconceptions, when the reader is forced to review or abandon his/her usual reading tactics and becomes disconcerted (Ibid. p. 38).

This observation tallies with Erik Erikson’s view for a non-linear process of development. Thus, a failed attempt at structuring meaning may block development, or give rise to a new one. In other words, the reader has the option of selectively weighing his reaction (“selective attention”) to the various possibilities offered by the text depending on the openness or the constraints of the text itself (Rosenblatt, 1978, pp. 42-43, 46). S/he can even determine the degree of realisation of the process s/he experiences and the referential concepts, i.e. whether s/he will be content with the textual signs or s/he will expand them by respectively adopting an “efferent” or an “aesthetic” attitude towards the literary text.

In the “efferent” reading (“non-aesthetic”, “instrumental”) the reader is only interested in what s/he can get from the text directly. This kind of reading is essentially impersonal, since, in order to be more efficient, it disregards the style and rhythm of the text, the way it is held together, or the relevant weighing of the various words - much like a manual is read (Ibid. p. 24). In the ‘aesthetic’ reading however, the reader focuses his/her attention to what s/he experiences personally in relation to the text, while his/her activity can reach the level of ‘creative exploration’; s/he may decode the textual codes and perceive the text and its meanings as a unity of form and content (Ibid. pp. 23-28, 52-70, 93, 107). Although there are texts which, according to Rosenblatt impose or suggest the way they are read, children as readers learn from their experience how to read different texts in correspondingly different

ways depending on their maturity and the stage of growth they are going through. Beyond all this however, the text never gets to be viewed as an (aesthetic) object which needs to be analysed, decoded and defined; it always operates as a stimulus for 'aesthetic contemplation' which ultimately salvages the pleasure of reading literature and the essence of the process which needs to be experienced.

The various ideas / views that have been put forward so far do provide of course a theoretical framework capable of interpreting the experience of reading literature. However, there is no intention of constructing a compact model of teaching, some sort of 'prescription'. There are very few theoreticians who attempt something like this, while most focus their efforts on the formulation of a framework of general principles of perception and organisation of literature as an object of study and teaching. Rosenblatt, for instance, although clearly stating her intention of renegotiating the teaching methodology of literature, never gets to the point of actually offering a 'prescription' for teaching purposes, despite the fact that she, herself engages in readings with students. Through her views however, she attains a new level of perception of the reading process and its potential, while leaving others to transfer her theoretical principles to the teaching practice. Besides, the aim is not the teaching of the theory of literature as an independent subject at school (at least not at Primary School level, and especially in Greece, where theory has a bad 'record'). What is necessary is the assimilation of the theoretical experience into the teaching process, which is both feasible and can be done more effectively.

First of all, the important distinction between an "aesthetic" and a "non-aesthetic" attitude during reading constitutes the most obvious application of the 'transactional' theory in the procedures happening during the 'teaching' of literature in school. Although Rosenblatt considers the 'non-aesthetic' attitude as the most frequent and relates it to the phase of 'evocation' of the (literary) text, she obviously advocates the 'aesthetic' one, since she identifies it with the actualised reaction of the student-reader. When s/he realises the dynamic nature of his/her relation with the literary text, s/he will also be able to understand the way in which s/he will be able to approach it. By controlling this reaction not only will s/he be able to understand his/her personal attitude, but s/he will be able to lend to this attitude the perspective which will assure him/her of a deeper and fuller experience. Rosenblatt warns us however that this should happen in an unhurried manner, so that the student, emotionally unconstrained, will be able to react in his/her own terms and to experience more complex pleasures from literature (Rosenblatt, 1937 [1970], p. 75).

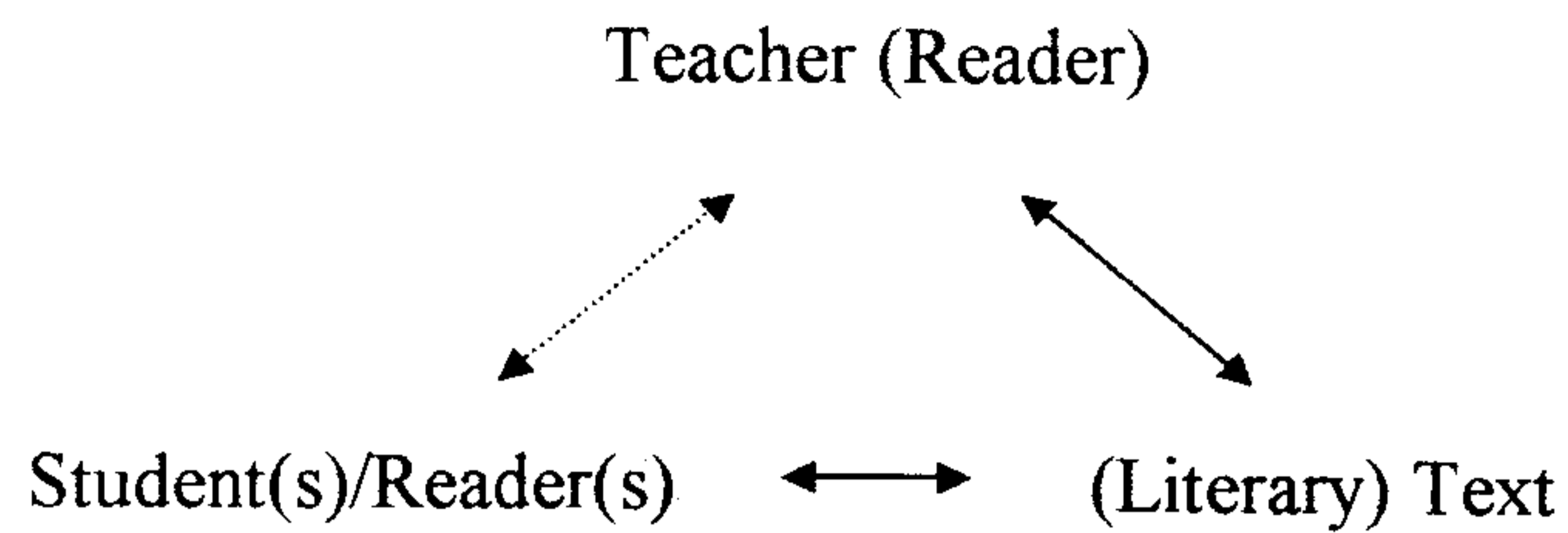
The student should generally be encouraged to approach literature in a personal way, to 'let himself go' so that the text can make immediate sense to him/her. S/he should feel that his/her own reaction is worth expressing, even if it differs from his/her classmates' views, or that of his/her teacher. Through a feeling of security derived from his/her relation with the teacher and the class in general, the student will regain his/her spontaneity and will confidently build each subsequent literary experience. Those subsequent complete experiences will eventually make up the student's background and make possible the 'consummation' of each following reading relation. Because for the proponents of the subjective version of the response theory this is what the 'transactional' nature of reading refers to: the 'completion and consummation' of the experience (Holland, 1978, p. 211). However, as Hunt (1991 [1992]) notes: "The realisation of a text, especially a text for children, is closely involved with questions of control, and of techniques through which power is exercised over, or shared with the reader" (p. 81). The question here is who exercises control? Is it the teacher?

Rosenblatt attributes to the teacher the role of an intermediary. Given his/her educational relation with the student, she considers him/her as the most suitable to establish a procedure through which the student, by contributing from his/her own stock of (literary and other) experience, will become aware of his/her participation and will express his reaction in a number of ways.

The teacher, being aware of his/her students' individuality which could influence the reading event, has to take care that the way they approach the literary text corresponds to their real life and is proportionate to the incentives the literary text offers. S/he also needs to be aware of a considerable number of literary texts, so that s/he can choose each time the ones which best meet the above-mentioned specifications. Naturally, such a thing cannot happen within the rigid framework of the school curriculum but only on the basis of a 'freer' relation with the literary works. If we take into account the fact that the student is usually called upon to write or to think beyond the experience s/he has had with the literary text we understand how catalytic the role of the teacher can be in ensuring that this relationship is indeed a 'free' one. Of course, this by no means excludes overt 'teaching' through the use of traditional activities which have mostly to do with the understanding of the form of the text, like the spotting of literary devices and figures of speech, imagery etc. There is no question that these have to be taught at some stage in order to facilitate the completion of the literary experience. However this should not be turned into an end in itself or to be 'taught' each time, but only when this is deemed necessary. After all, every reading relation, whether at school or elsewhere, has to begin and end in a pleasurable way.

It is important for the teacher to have critically realised and evaluated his/her own reactions to the works s/he offers his/her class, and to have understood that both his/her own views and these of others will be of value to the student (at this age) only if s/he understands them as similar and not contradictory to his own, or at least familiar or accessible to him/her. Thus the teacher will be able to shed his/her prejudices - or at least to avoid to project them - thus turning the relation between the student and the literary work into an exchange of experience with other readers or him/herself. Then s/he will be able both to help the students - readers in their attempt to organise their (confused or mixed) reactions and to extend them through the reaction of others (Rosenblatt, 1937 [1970] pp. 77-78).

David Bleich (1978) calls this process of exchange of reactions between readers 'negotiation' in which a common ground is sought where one can learn and benefit from the others' reactions. In such a process Chambers (1985) believes that children understand their thoughts and reactions only when they start to talk about them. He also believes that an effective booktalk involves "three sharings": the sharing of enthusiasm, the sharing of puzzles and the sharing of connections". Within these sharings he discovers a set of functions called "The Four Levels of Saying": Saying for yourself, (hearing what you have so far only inwardly thought); saying for others (sharing my views with others, publicising them); saying together (to sort out ideas too difficult and complex to comprehend alone); saying the new (the understanding and evaluation of thoughts from the group go beyond what each member on his/her own can achieve) (pp. 138, 142-143). Rosenblatt, also in the same vein - though a long time before - used to urge her students to note down whatever they wished, in anyway they wished on the literary text (usually a poem) which she handed out to each one. These 'free' and spontaneous reactions subsequently formed the basis for a deeper, more profound approach and further discussion. On the basis of the above, and with special reference to Rosenblatt's basic views, if we want to formulate a teaching proposal for literature we could represent it as follows:



The relation of the student-reader with the literary text is immediate, just as is that of the relation of the teacher-reader with the (literary) text. The readers (teacher and students) transact with the text directly, in a two-way process established between them. The fact that the student-reader transacts with the (literary) text on the same level, (the two apexes of the triangle) indicates the equality of the relation. The fact however that the teacher occupies the top apex does not mean that he is in charge of the whole 'literary game', but that he operates from a different basis than the one on which the other two participants in the literary relation are. The relation of the teacher with the student is represented with a dotted line in order to emphasise that they communicate but no one (in particular the teacher) has a dominant position in the relation. The teacher by sticking to his role as an intermediary (supervisory role) has as his/her main objective to maintain the literary experience in the centre of each attempt to access it, and to protect the individuality of each student-reader by considering him/her to be the "norm" in the reading event.<sup>3</sup> After all, Rosenblatt claims, the main aim of literature is to help readers become not well-conditioned and passive people but to develop their flexibility and individuality (Rosenblatt, 1938, p. 50). As G.D. Sloan (1984) states, literature does not begin from the head, but from the heart; thus it gives the reader the opportunity to develop and to adapt continuously, seeking not only the possibilities and the potentialities of the literary text but those inside him/her as well.

To sum up, I would say that both the theory of literature and its teaching implications cannot and should not become "narcissistic" fields of knowledge; as an attitude towards literature and the literary experience this has already been checked and we need to avoid falling into the same trap. The new view that seems to be emerging signals a different general way of viewing both the literary phenomenon and the teaching event, a different philosophy operating on many levels. It restrains the insistence of traditional teaching practice to persuade the student-reader about the validity of the one and only literary interpretation, it recognises the possibility of multiple valid interpretations, and it draws on the findings of theory in order to bring the literary experience of the school closer to the real conditions in which literature is "produced" and "consumed".

It presents the literary event as a dynamic process and a creative action - experience on the part of the reader, while it attributes to it the qualities of a cultural phenomenon and the validity of anthropological knowledge. It avoids the application of static instructional models advocating instead freer forms of teaching, during which the participants of the 'literary game' are released from constraints and are able to 'breathe'. Finally, by focusing its interest on the study of the reader's reactions - since it links the literary text not just with its reception but mainly with the reaction it provokes - as the most reliable way of realising the nature of

<sup>3</sup> The fullest development and application of Rosenblatt's theory has been done by Michael Benton in his book: *Young Readers Responding to Poems*. London: Routledge, 1988 (especially on p. 205).



literature and its experience, it is able to ensure reliability in every critical process and to expand every kind of teaching practice.

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