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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The lived experience of reading

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Abstract

Using the work of Louise Rosenblatt and her transactional theory of reading, this article examines the experiential nature of literature. Challenging notions of literature that rely solely on fixed categories, the writings of Louise Rosenblatt emphasize the dynamic nature of the literary work. A poem, a novel, or a play, Rosenblatt argues, is not an object but a lived event requiring the reader's active participation. By exploring the concept of literary transaction, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the evolving role of the reader in producing and shaping the literary work. An analysis of the reader's engagement with the potentialities of the text reveals the literary work as an interactive process of assembling and sharing meanings.

Keywords Transactional theory · Aesthetic experience · Literary theories of reading · Phenomenology · Intersubjectivity

> *For the book is no longer a material reality. It has become a series of words, of images, of ideas which in their turn begin to exist.*
>
> (Poulet 1969, p. 54).

I have before me a copy of the novel *The Night Watch* (2006) by Sarah Waters. The novel is a physical object—a book that contains text. And yet, opening the book creates a sense of unexpected anticipation for a material object—as I immerse myself in the world of possibilities within the narrative, my surroundings fade, and I can temporarily escape to another world, a storyworld. I turn to the first chapter and start reading. At first, I am simply reading a text—symbols presented on a page. For now, my attention wavers, making my reading somewhat inconsistent. I am not yet familiar with the characters or the setting. I do not know which of the characters and which of the details are important enough to keep in mind, and I struggle to focus on the scenes portrayed by the narrator. As I continue reading, I feel a sense of connection with the text, as if I am participating

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in a silent conversation. The event of reading, the dynamic and intimate encounter with the text where the boundaries between reality and fiction start to blur, becomes a collective effort in making and re-making the fictional world. I become an active co-creator of the storyworld, shaping it with my imagination, knowledge, and experience. Ten pages into the novel, then fifty, then a hundred, and I notice that I no longer struggle to make connections between presented pieces of information. Instead, I am looking forward to the development of the unfolding narrative. Suddenly, as the lives of the characters before me begin to exist, I am no longer in an unfamiliar world.

Lived experience, in the broadest sense, refers to the unique subjective encounters and interactions an individual has with the world. The "miracle of literature" is revealed as

> the only form of communication capable of giving me the incommunicable— capable of giving me the taste of another life. I am thrown into a world that has its own values, its own colors. I do not annex it to myself; it remains separated from mine and yet it exists for me. And it exists for others who are also separated from it and with whom I communicate, through books, in their deepest intimacy. (Beauvoir 2011, p. 201).

An investigation into the experiential dimension of literature presents an opportunity to study the dynamic interplay between the subjective and intersubjective aspects of the literary work. Reading is a subjective experience, as the reader's individual experience plays a crucial role in shaping the interpretation and understanding of the literary work. The literary work is created through an aesthetic transaction combining textual cues with the reader's reflections and response. The reader's unique background, emotions, and personal history intertwine with the text, influencing the reader's interpretation of the text. However, the raw material of the text means that the literary work also exists as an intersubjective entity embedded in the broader cultural, social, and historical contexts of its creation and reception. Through this intersubjective lens, the literary work is a product of collective imagination and communication, reflecting and shaping the shared values of its place and time (Crossley 1996).

Beyond the surface-level comprehension of words, sentences, and paragraphs, the act of reading is a process of interactive meaning-making between the reader and the text. While commonly perceived as a means to obtain information, the lived experience of reading can produce far more than a mirror of reality, insights into an author, or an understanding of how language can evoke specific effects. The literary transaction, as "the lived-through process of building up the work under the guidance of the text," is the space where the work of art—the poem, the play, or the story—is created (Rosenblatt 1994, pp. 69–70). According to Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory, the reading process is an event producing experienced meanings (c.f. Smagorinsky 2001).

While the suggestion that the reading process contributes to literary meaning seems self-evident, the persistent emphasis on fixed aspects of literary texts has endured remarkably well, even within reader-oriented scholarship. Despite

multiple waves of debates, literary studies have yet to definitively resolve the question of how meaning emerges.[1] As considerations on the reader's agency have long been structured by an understanding that an individual reading should be differentiated from the literary work, discussions on the meaning of the literary work fall on a spectrum distinguishing between the subjectivist position and the formalist position.[2] Although the reader's role during the reading process was recognized early and even emphasized in the works of several theorists (for example, Roman Ingarden and Wolfgang Iser), the text has, to this day, mostly retained its position as the primary determinant of literary significance.[3] The artificial separation of the literary work from the process of reading, however, can be considered the main obstacle in understanding how literary meaning develops. A more

[1] The emergence of reader-response criticism and other reader-oriented theories during the 1960s and 1970s marked a seeming departure from the detached, formalist approach of the New Critics. As literary scholars started to challenge the limitations posed by New Criticism, several theoretical perspectives were developed to address the need for a more comprehensive approach to literary analysis and explore the reader's role in the reading process (e.g., Fish 1970, 1980; Iser 1978; Holland 1975, 1989; Bleich 1975; 1986). Reviews and critiques of reader-response theories preserved the central position of these debates within literary studies up until the 1980s (e.g., Tompkins 1980, Suleiman and Crosman 1980; Mailloux 1982). Since the early 2000s, however, we have begun to circle back to formalism (e.g., Wolfson 2000; Levinson 2007). A contemporary version of reading debates emerged in English-speaking academia after an influential essay by Best and Marcus (2009). Their focus on surface-level text analysis prompted a decade of essays, special issues in journals, and books on appropriate and effective ways of reading and analysing works of art. The method debates reopened dialogues on ways of reading and interpretation, advocating for various types of descriptive and/or subjectivist approaches to literary texts. Discussions on formalism, historicism, structuralism, and affect theory/phenomenology achieved almost the same enthusiasm as previously afforded to reading. The impact of the first wave of reading debates persists as the recent method debates are still discussing the role of the reader and rehashing similar issues: objective versus subjective criticism, the inclusivity of the literary canon, the advantages and disadvantages of text-oriented versus reader-centered approaches, and authorial intent versus reader's response (see Anderson 2020; Aubry 2021). As the latest method debates have overlooked the reading debates of the twentieth century, it could be argued that there is a failure to fully recognize that unresolved issues from past discussions continue to influence current disagreements.

[2] Highly critical of both the formalist approach of the New Critics as well as the subjectivist psychological models of her contemporaries, Rosenblatt remains among the few to have been able to break away from the formalist tradition. While reader-response theories also emerged as a reaction against New Criticism, the turn to the reader in the 1970s did not include a paradigm shift (Tompkins 1980, p. 201). Whereas some critics shifted towards the other end of the spectrum, embracing subjectivism wholeheartedly (e.g., Holland 1975, 1989; Bleich 1975; 1986), the majority of reading theories remained text-oriented and stood by the idea of literary objectivity (e.g., Fish 1970, 1980; Iser 1978). Although many of Rosenblatt's predecessors and contemporaries (e.g., William Empson, I.A. Richards, René Wellek and Austin Warren, Roman Ingarden, Roman Jakobson, as well as Roland Barthes) recognized the reader's role in the reading process, they still argued that the text itself includes established and unchanging meanings. The two final chapters of Rosenblatt's book *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (1994) are dedicated entirely to arguing against the prevalent idea of an isolated literary work and objectively verifiable meaning.

[3] For example, in the early 1930s, Roman Ingarden recognized that certain cognitive operations by the reader were essential to the unfolding of the literary work and its concretization. However, he still considered the reader's role as inferior to the creative operations of the writer. According to Ingarden (1973a, pp. 103, 353, 362), readers merely repeat and reconstruct what had already been produced by the writer. Conversely, the transactional theory emphasizes the reader's creative and constructive role in the reading process. The text may be a unique pattern of symbols produced by the writer but it is the reader, argues Rosenblatt, who constructs a meaningful literary work based on the text.

inclusive position that does not insist on differentiating between an individual reading and the text could expand the scope of discussion beyond the formalist confines that continue to dominate contemporary literary discourse.

In this context, the work of Louise Rosenblatt presents a promising alternative. As Rosenblatt's transactional theory emphasizes the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between the reader and the text, she dismisses the premise that a literary work exists in isolation, separated from the context of an individual reading of the text. Central to Rosenblatt's (1994, p. 105) thesis is her argument that neither the text alone nor the reader's experience alone constitutes the literary work. Since the literary work is created between the text and the reader, according to the transactional theory, it cannot be considered an independent entity. Rosenblatt's theory also challenges the traditional notion of reading as a passive, one-way process where the reader simply decodes the author's intended meaning. For a poem to become a poem, for a piece of text to become meaningful, a relationship between a stimulus and a response must be established and sustained (Rosenblatt 1994, p. 18). The transactional theory, therefore, rejects the conventional understanding that meaning is inherent within the text.

Instead, the meaning afforded to the text is determined by the reader's continued efforts in constructing the literary work. Working within a pragmatist frame, the works of John Dewey and William James inspire Rosenblatt's theory. However, a rather significant number of Rosenblatt's arguments about the reading activity also align with phenomenological literary theories (e.g., Husserl 1991; Poulet 1969; Iser 1978; Beauvoir 2005, 2011; Sartre 1988).[4] While acknowledging that text has material content, Rosenblatt (1994) argues that the literary work cannot be equated with the textual object and, thus, must be recognized as lived experience. The lived experience of reading provides the space for meaningful collaboration between text and reader (Rosenblatt 1994, p. 18; c.f. Beauvoir 2011).

While the brief focus on reading and readers during the twentieth century produced a handful of prominent reading theories, the transactional theory of reading has, to this day, received relatively limited attention. Although Rosenblatt's first book, *Literature as Exploration* (1938), received enough acclaim among teachers of literature to have warranted revised editions and reprints, her ideas about the transactional nature of the relationship between reader and text seem to have been largely overshadowed by the mid-century preoccupation with the -isms of the theory boom (see Harkin and Sosnoski 2003; Harkin 2005). When reader-response criticism gathered momentum in the late 1960s and 1970s, Rosenblatt's early ideas would echo throughout the writings of various reader-response theorists. However, engagement with and acknowledgment of Rosenblatt's transactional theory was practically non-existent.[5] Despite her early writings on the reader's role in the reading process,

[4] Rosenblatt (1994, p. 111) mentions that she believes Husserl's concepts to be in support of her arguments. However, as she disapproves of the application of Husserlian phenomenology by her contemporaries, she refrains from using a phenomenological framing in her work.

[5] Literary scholars David Bleich and Wayne Booth are among the few of Rosenblatt's contemporaries to praise and cite her work. Although her work was admired by educators, literary theorists did not engage

Rosenblatt does not appear to have been invited to contribute to the reading debates held in elite literary journals in the latter half of the twentieth century. The inclusion of Rosenblatt and her transactional theory would have certainly enriched the discussions on reading—compared to her contemporaries, Rosenblatt's position on the creative agency of the reader is considerably more egalitarian. Through a reading of Sarah Waters's novel *The Night Watch* (2006) below, I hope to demonstrate the continued relevance of Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading as a space for subjective experience and intersubjective interactions.

The multi-layered intersubjective affair

> The reader is engaged in a creative process at once intensely personal, since the poem is something lived-through, and intensely social, since the text, as a "control" can be shared with others.
> (Rosenblatt 1964, p. 126)

The literary work of art, argues Rosenblatt (1964, p. 126) "is what the reader, under the guidance of the text, crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, image, thought, and feeling which he brings to it." Combined with the context provided by the text, the reader's active participation is a necessary component in the transaction occurring during the reading process. The immediate reading process calls for a dyadic, reciprocal interaction as the reader requires something to respond to, and the text requires actualization (c.f. Iser 1978; Armstrong 2011; Eagleton 2012). But the lived experience of reading does not only remain in the immediate reading moment. The text has a history, and the reader, too, brings their personal past to the reading process.

The people we meet, the objects we interact with, and the events unfolding around us shape our lived experience, the "world of coexistence" (Crossley 1996, p. 40). In this interconnected network, we draw upon social resources to construct a shared reality of shared meanings. It is within this vast realm of coexistence, intricately intertwined with the socio-linguistic fabric that envelops us, that our subjective selves find their footing. As thrown beings, in the Heideggerian sense, we draw upon the collective knowledge, beliefs, and interpretations of the intersubjective space to make sense of our position in the world (Heidegger 1962; Gallagher and Zahavi 2012). While the act of reading may function as an escape from that shared reality, "the evocation of a work of art is itself a form of experience in the real world, one that can be related to the other forms of experience" (Rosenblatt 1994, p. 32; c.f. Crossley 1996, pp. 47–48). The "private space" of imagination does not isolate the

Footnote 5 (continued)

with Rosenblatt's writings. Bleich (1986, p. 402) speculates that Rosenblatt's exclusion within academic literary communities in the 1960s and 1970s might have had something to do "with her being a woman in a School of Education." While Rosenblatt is mentioned in articles reviewing reader-response theories (e.g. Harkin and Sosnoski 2003; Harkin 2005; Glover 2018), interest in her transactional theory seems to be limited, and her contribution to reading studies is undervalued.

reader from the world, as the realm of the imaginary is still constructed by "inter-subjective resources" that are employed by the reader (Crossley 1996, p. 47).

The literary work "represents the common work of two or more people who find themselves confronted with the same object" (Ingarden 1973b, p. 28). The literary object is first created by an author. Describing her practice, Sarah Waters (as cited in Cooke 2014, para. 13) explains that the writing process is "about starting with a very small idea and just letting it go where it wants to go. And reading, thinking, getting to know a period, following it through, then just lots and lots of rewriting." Through her work of thinking, writing, and rewriting, an idea about the loves, losses, sufferings, and scars left on men and women in post-war Britain transforms into *The Night Watch,* a novel spanning 503 pages. The novel becomes a tool enabling the author to create and produce something meaningful. While a direct connection between author and reader is severed by time and space, the author's appeal "to the reader's freedom to collaborate in the production of his work" remains part of the allure of the literary work (Sartre 1988, p.54; c.f. Rosenblatt 1994, p. 86). Through this, the author remains part of the literary work, but her relationship with the reader will be limited (Beauvoir 2011, p. 200). While the writing process shares a similar dynamic openness with the reading process, "there does come a point when that stops and the story is sealed within the pages of the book" (Waters, as cited in Cooke 2014, para. 4). When a story is sealed within the pages of a book by an author, the text becomes a fixed object and the "author's experiences cease to exist" (Ingarden 1973a, p. 14). It is transformed into a literary work once the reader engages with the physical text. As the author does not directly figure in the reading moment, her influence on literary meaning does not reach beyond her role as the creator of the object (Rosenblatt 1994, pp. 15–20). While the author's choices limit the potentials of meaning available for the reader, the text remains open for collaboration.

The function, of the text, according to Rosenblatt (1964, p. 125), is to provide "a context which regulates what should be in the forefront of consciousness in response to any one of its words." While engaged in the reading process, the literary work figures in the foreground of the reader's consciousness. It is not the physical object, the words and symbols in the book, that appear in the foreground of the reader's consciousness but, rather, the unfolding story that immerses the reader in the fictional world. While imagining the events portrayed in the narrative, readers will switch the storyworld into the foreground and the material text into the background (Carr 1987, pp. 257–258). If the literary work, however, does not engage the reader or if the reader is not able to imagine all aspects of the story, the words might instead settle into the foreground, with the story barely sustained by resonations coming from the text. If something else then captures the reader's attention, a noise, or a movement in the reader's real space, the storyworld, fickle as it is within the reader's mind, might fade away entirely and end up replaced in the foreground of the reader's consciousness by whatever else has captured the reader's attention. The literary work, however, requires a reading that can keep the aesthetic experience in the foreground. Only then does a text transform into an event revealing a poem, a novel, or a play.

Once the reader approaches the book (and, perhaps, even before that, when they choose the literary works they are about to read), the reading process becomes subject to the individual reader's personal background. Readers come to texts with a

lived-through past shaped by interactions with people, environments, and other texts (Ricœur 1984, 1988; Crossley 1996; Caracciolo 2014). Just as the reader's background strongly affects their understanding and interpretation of texts, so each subsequent text they read further contributes to the reader's store of knowledge, refining the reader's education and taste and forming a backdrop for the next text, thus creating a system of "reciprocal interplay" (Rosenblatt 1982, pp. 273–276; c.f. Iser 1978; Hughes 2013). Once the text is produced by an author and consumed by readers, the various discussions it generates become part of the history of the text (Ingarden 1973a; Bleich 1975; Fish 1980). As a physical object, the text "is both intersubjectively accessible and reproducible, so that it becomes an intersubjective intentional object, related to a community of readers" (Ingarden 1973b, p. 14; c.f. Levine 2015, p. 24).

The shared space created in *The Night Watch* (as well as in most other texts) allows readers to overcome the singularity limiting their experience of the world (see Beauvoir 2011, pp. 199–200). Once actualized, the literary work presents a possibility to reflect on "what we can never attain in real life: a calm contemplation of metaphysical qualities," and allows the reader to experience a reality beyond their everyday existence (Ingarden 1973a, p. 293). The storyworld unfolding in Waters's *The Night Watch* throws the reader into the grim reality of war-torn London. The novel presents a somber yet somewhat hopeful existence of four characters—Kay, Duncan, Viv, and Helen. While grappling with their own personal past and struggles, they form an intertwining network of characters through fleeting encounters, narrated to readers by a heterodiegetic narrator. The novel is divided into three parts: the first follows the characters for a short period in the late Summer of 1947, the second part unfolds during a German bombing campaign in 1944, and the third part covers a day during the Blitz in 1941. Each chapter focuses, in turn, on each of the four main characters, offering readers limited glimpses into their interconnected lives. Reading about another's experience encourages recognition and awareness of perspectives that may or may not coincide with the reader's own (Ritivoi 2016). Most readers may not know what it feels like to be annoyed and inconvenienced by curfews caused by bombings, what it means to sift through severed limbs on a mortuary run after a severe air raid, or what it feels like to fear the arrival of a conscription letter once you turn eighteen.[6] And yet, thanks to the portrayal of Helen sneaking around with her affair partner long after curfew, Kay tending to victims of the raids as an ambulance driver, and Duncan taking drastic measures to avoid the draft, the reader of *The Night Watch* is allowed to enter the "privileged place of intersubjectivity" and partake in those experiences (Beauvoir 2011, p. 201). While the events may be imaginary, they are no less valuable to the reader (Hughes 2013; Ritivoi 2016).

[6] Unfortunately, a sizable number of readers may still have first-hand experience comparable to the events depicted in the novel.

The text is not the story

Although the space created by the reading process is intersubjective, individual readings of the text, which produce literary works, are necessarily subjective. Since the ultimate potential of the text is revealed in the story created by the reader, the storyworld is accessible to the reader only through the subjective act of reading (Rosenblatt 1994; Rossi 2020). The text is transformed into a literary work only by individual transaction, meaning that the literary work, as an event, is rooted in a specific spatial and temporal context (Rosenblatt 1964, 1994; Bleich 1975). As each individual interaction with the text produces a distinct, singular experience, the spatiotemporal significance of the literary work lies in the transitory nature of the literary transaction—the literary work is produced only during the act of reading, with each subsequent reading producing subtle variations (Rosenblatt 1964).

The formation of the literary work, according to the transactional theory, depends on the stance adopted by the reader. Rosenblatt (1982; 1994) explains that the reader's activity is defined by either the efferent or the aesthetic reading stance. Efferent reading focuses on extracting information from the text, while aesthetic reading transforms the text into the literary work. The text does not impose a reading stance during the reading event; rather, the distinction reflects a "difference in the reader's focus of attention during the reading-event" (Rosenblatt 1994, p. 23). As efferent and aesthetic reading both represent types of intentional engagement with the text, readers may shift between the two, either consciously or subconsciously, depending on the reader's purpose for reading the text (Rosenblatt 1994, p. 184).

According to Rosenblatt (1982), the literary work transcends its static existence as text only when readers adopt the aesthetic reading stance. The aesthetic mode of reading prioritizes the reader's subjective response, aesthetic qualities of language, emotional evocation, and overall experientiality of the literary work. Efferent reading, on the other hand, focuses on the text as an object—what is being represented and what is to be gained from the text when the reading activity ends.[7] A reader adopting the efferent stance, according to Rosenblatt (1994, p. 27), "disengages his attention as much as possible from the personal and qualitative elements in his response to the verbal symbols." The emphasis of aesthetic reading, however, is precisely on those personal and qualitative elements, which, of course, vary from reader to reader. Rosenblatt (1994, pp. 139–143) emphasizes that all readers are equally capable of producing the literary work and stresses that the aesthetic experience is not reserved for "the virtuoso ideal critic-reader." A reader employing the aesthetic stance "will shift inward, will center on what is being created *during* the actual reading /…/ Out of these ideas and feelings, a new experience, the story or poem, is shaped and lived through" (Rosenblatt 1982, p. 269). While efferent reading is not in itself an impractical stance towards a text, especially in the contexts of, for example, journalistic, academic, or legal

[7] Rosenblatt (1982) explains that readers are more likely to adopt the efferent stance due to the encouragement this type of reading receives in the educational system. A heavy reliance on standardized assessment in educational settings has led to prioritizing measurable outcomes over nurturing an experiential relationship with literature.

texts, the making of the literary work requires the aesthetic reading stance. Once the aesthetic stance is adopted, the reader is able to inhabit the as-if world of the novel and feel along with the characters,

> [b]ewitched by the tale that he is told, the reader here reacts as if he were faced with lived events. He is moved, he approves, he becomes indignant, responding with a movement of his entire being before formulating judgments that he draws from himself and that are not presumptuously dictated to him (Beauvoir 2005, p. 270).

Since the narrative cannot contain the whole storyworld, which spills over the pages, and yet, at the same time, leaves blanks in the story, the reader's contribution becomes even more substantial (Iser 1978; Rossi 2020). The text can only represent a potential of a world, and without the reader's involvement, the storyworld inevitably remains incomplete. Empty gaps and places of indeterminacy within the text require a reader to establish a consistent pattern for a functioning fictional realm (Ingarden 1973b, pp. 50–53; Iser 1978, pp. 167–169). While the setting of *The Night Watch* is abundantly described, most of the scenes in the novel unfold through dialogue, leaving readers with little explicit knowledge of the characters' inner selves and requiring readers to provide their individual interpretations for the many indeterminacies left in the text. These indeterminacies.

> make the reader bring the story itself to life—he lives with the characters and experiences their activities. His lack of knowledge concerning the continuation of the story links him to the characters to the extent that their future appears to him as a palpable uncertainty (Iser 1978, pp. 191–192).

The activity of bringing characters to life and shaping their existence is a creative process entrusted to the reader. Out of the static words, immobile on paper, the reader will weave a dynamic picture, a moving story. Collaboration between text and reader is essential: the reader's responsibility during the reading process, then, is to construct, shape, and complete a fictional world expressed through words.

The text of *The Night Watch* transforms into a moving story when the reader becomes involved with the events and characters of the storyworld. Once the reader is immersed in the narrative, "meaning is no longer an object to be defined but is an effect to be experienced" (Iser 1978, p. 9). Waters's novel presents a linear sequence of events while utilizing a reverse chronology across three parts, which unfold in 1947, 1944, and finally, in 1941. The linear chapters feature shifting focalization as the narrator follows the characters of the novel over the course of a day. The movement forward within each chapter and the reverse chronology of the three parts is a temporal game meant for the novel's reader and not for the characters, the "paper-people" of the storyworld (Bal 2009). As a "schematic formation," the text is a static object; temporal effects of the text, therefore, are only experienced during the reading moment by an individual reader (Ingarden 1973b, p. 77).

The intermingled stories of the four main characters of *The Night Watch* are connected by at least one event during each of the three narrated periods. The connections between the characters, however, only become tangible if the reader

connects the three periods by reading through the novel. In 1947, Helen and Viv are acquainted through their work at a matchmaking agency; moving back in time, however, their relationship disappears as they only meet after the war. During this period, Helen lives with her partner, Julia, who, although not a main character, appears often in the meshed network of relationships. The siblings Viv and Duncan figure in each other's lives throughout the three parts as they navigate the circumstances thrust upon them. Viv is introduced to readers as the unhappy, other woman and Duncan as a factory worker living in a problematic situation with a predatory older man, Mr. Mundy. While mostly appearing alone in the first part of the novel, Kay meets Viv in a brief encounter in 1947, resulting in Viv giving Kay a gold ring, the significance of which is left unexplained to the reader during the episode. In part II, which takes place in 1944, Helen lives with Kay in a studio apartment, and both contribute to the war effort through their labor: Kay works as an ambulance driver, and Helen works in the Damage Assistance department. During the period narrated in part II, Vivian is able to escape her monotonous work as a typist in a ministry by meeting the married Reggie during his monthly leave. After work, Vivian occasionally visits Duncan, who is serving time in prison for what are unknown reasons in the first half of part II. Mr. Mundy appears in the narrative as a correctional officer at Duncan's prison.

Most of the significant events narrated in the novel unfold in 1944. It is the aftermath of these events that lingers and is still affecting the characters in 1947. After having previously been introduced to Kay's friend Julia, Helen develops a semi-secret friendship with her, which eventually grows into an affair. Viv, who is able to meet up with Reggie once a month, unexpectedly falls pregnant. Her illegal abortion results in complications, but her life is saved by Kay. On the way to the hospital, Kay, in order to disguise Viv as a married woman and her abortion as a miscarriage, gives Viv her gold ring. The same evening, Kay has her worst nightmare come true when her home burns down in the bombings. Finding Helen safe and sound is bittersweet for Kay as Helen avoided the fire due to spending the night with Julia.

While the narrator offers glimpses into the characters' thoughts, these are rather brief. Description is used to comment on circumstance and setting, but the formative events, the past that upsets and unsettles the characters in 1947, unravels through dialogue. In order to piece together a story from heavy dialogue and subtext, readers, positioned as clandestine witnesses to intimate conversations, must actively engage with the narrative. The small fragments of material knowledge will expand and sharpen as the reader progresses through the narrative. The hidden tragedies still impacting Kay, Viv, and Helen in 1947 are fully exposed by the end of part two. The only concrete mystery remaining in 1941 is the reason behind Duncan's incarceration. In the final part of the novel, Alec—whose name is constantly hinted at in previous parts but whose relationship with Duncan is never fully explained—and Duncan plan a double suicide over fears of conscription. While Duncan's situation in 1947 can be explained by his impulsive plans in 1941, the final chapter of the novel does not provide closure for Duncan's story. Even as the formative event of Duncan's life is revealed, the reason for his failure to follow Alec's actions is not narrated. Similarly, gaps are left in the narrative regarding Kay, Helen, and Viv. The text does not describe Kay and Helen's break up, nor does it elaborate on the consequences of Viv's abortion and hospitalization.

The reader's response to the novel's structure depends on their level of engagement, personal preference, and prior expectations. After reading the first chapter, a reader interested in the progression of events and the future of the characters may find the structure of the narrative disappointing as the events do not progress after the last chapter of the first part (1947) of the novel. However, a reader interested in the cause of the events unfolding in the first part of *The Night Watch* may find the novel's temporal strategy of going back in time intriguing. For such a reader, reaching the end of the novel may turn out to be quite satisfying as the subtle clues pointing to significant events in earlier periods will be contextualized within the narrative. For example, the exact reason why Duncan was in prison is kept from the reader until the very end of the novel. Readers interested in figuring out how Duncan ended up living with Mr. Mundy, why Duncan spent the war in prison, and how his imprisonment relates to the mysterious boy named Alec will find their answers in the final part of the novel, 1941. Prior to reaching the portrayal of the source event, the reader will have engaged in guesswork by carefully examining the dialogues for hints—for example, one may keep wondering throughout the novel whether Duncan was responsible in any way for Alec's death. Arriving at the anticipated event—in this case, a failed double suicide—provides the reader with a clear picture of the episode in question and successful guesswork can offer a sense of accomplishment (see Grethlein 2010).

Though the text remains ambiguous, the reader is able to construct an interpretation of the events already with the information provided in part one, 1947. The gaps in the events represented in *The Night Watch* have the effect of allowing various individual readings. Helen's jealousy and insecurity over Julia's friendships, for example, may be interpreted as a projection of her own actions in 1944. Duncan's crippling anxiety around people and his fear of others' judgment and rejection may derive from his abandonment issues that are related to witnessing his friend's suicide. Viv's distant demeanor in 1947 may be caused by the trauma of her abortion in 1944, as well as the isolation she must have experienced by having to conceal her relationship with Reggie for so many years. And yet, these conclusions are the interpretations of just one reader. Building the stories of Kay, Viv, Helen, and Duncan is a time-consuming process unfolding throughout the reading process, during pauses in reading, and even after the novel is placed back on the bookshelf. The potentialities of meaning evoked by a literary text are singular and intimately linked to each reader's distinct experiences. The literary transaction becomes an intimate dialogue between the text and the reader's inner world, ultimately yielding an array of unique understandings of the literary work. Eventually, the work of the reader produces an elaborate web of associations that entwines their own thoughts and reflections with the events and characters portrayed in the narrative.

Back to the (transitory) object

At the core of Rosenblatt's transactional theory is the aesthetic experience of the literary work. However, efferent reading, as a performative process guided by a reader's interest in the material of a given text, can also satisfy a particular type of reader. Once "[t]he text is viewed as a set of signs whose arrangement is to be described in some objectively verifiable way," it is read "efferently in order to make

a systematic classification of elements" (Rosenblatt 1994, p. 89; c.f. Ingarden 1973b, pp. 360–362). While still influenced by the intersubjective dimensions of the text and their own subjective reading experience, efferent readers focus on the text as an object. Efferent reading practices are prevalent within literary studies as critical readers disentangle literary works to "gain objective knowledge" of "the properties and structural characteristics" of the static text (Ingarden 1973b, p. 235). As a practice of extracting ideas, elements, patterns from the text, literary analysis does not investigate the literary work of art; rather, it analyses the static text through an efferent stance (Rosenblatt 1994, p. 167).

Framed by specific theories and research questions, a critical reader constructs a response to the text through the "work of writing" (Moi 2017, p. 201). The unchanging, static nature of the text becomes invaluable in this undertaking. Relying on memory only to provide an accurate overview of the reader's contribution to the creation of the literary work of art during the aesthetic reading experience would not be practical. Access to the fixed text, then, becomes essential, as it allows critical readers to discuss the elements and effects of the text that influenced their response and interpretation. However, separating the text from the reader's experience has also led to the illusion of the literary work as an isolated object.

Rosenblatt (1994, pp, 107–108) rightfully argues against calls for "appropriate" readings that must adhere to the "artistic spirit" of authorial intention (see Ingarden 1973b, pp. 54–58; 89–90, 337–342, 348–349).[8] The meaning and aesthetic value of the literary work are never solely determined by a single author or a reader. While interpretations of other readers and canonical understandings of texts may influence both aesthetic and efferent readings, each individual reader is responsible for actualizing the potentials of meaning provided by the text and integrating these into a coherent experience of the literary work (Rosenblatt 1994, pp. 49–56). The reluctance within academic circles to acknowledge one's emotional and affective ties to literary or theoretical works obscures the experiential aspect of the literary experience (Felski 2020). Critical readers tend to forget that their work of writing—observations on, extractions from, and interpretations of the text—is guided by very personal readings (Rosenblatt 1994; Auyoung 2020). Formal requirements of an academic text may conceal the critical reader's self, but their subjective response does not disappear; presented interpretations also reveal interpretive attachments (Moi 2017; Felski 2020).

The above overview of character connections and narrative temporality of *The Night Watch* does not represent my aesthetic reading of the novel. Instead, my "[r]eflection on the literary experience" became "a reexperiencing, a reenacting, of the work-as-evoked," followed by "an ordering and elaborating" of my response

[8] Ingarden (1973a, pp. 217, 248, 288; 1973b, pp. 88-90, 162-163, 342, 355), somewhat inexplicably, further argues that only a "faithful" reconstruction of the text by an educated reader can reveal the aesthetic object. An "unsophisticated" or naïve reader may not even be able to faithfully apprehend the literary work, especially if it is a true masterpiece (Ingarden 1973a, p. 24-25, 246, 340, 349). Although Ingarden (1973b, p. 411) admits that a genuinely faithful reading is difficult to confirm due to the "purely subjective, individual factors" influencing "the formation of a given literary work," his elitist views concerning correct readings of ideal readers are perplexing and seem at odds with his overall phenomenological perspective.

(Rosenblatt 1994, p. 134). An analysis of the text by a critical reader objectifies the text. While *The Night Watch* as a literary work was constructed through an aesthetic reading, my interaction with the novel was transformed once I turned it into an object of study. Instead of focusing on my immersion in the storyworld, reading to piece together a story, I did the opposite: I untangled formal properties of the narrative from the previously produced whole and sought ways to organize the disconnected elements into a new pattern (see Auyoung 2020). While analyzing the text, I was bound by my reading goals, and my work of writing was guided by particular personal and professional perspectives, emotional entanglements, and affective affiliations (see Bleich 1975; Felski 2020).

Despite recognizing my subjectivity in reading and interpreting the novel, the transitory nature of the reading event means that I cannot return to, share, or evaluate my lived experience of *The Night Watch*.[9] "True, the ephemeral personal evocation which is the literary work cannot be held static for later inspection," writes Rosenblatt (1994, p. 132), as it "cannot be shared directly with anyone else; it cannot be directly evaluated by others. Its transitory and inward character undeniably presents problems." The aesthetic experience remains a subject of speculation only (Caracciolo 2014, p. 13). I can, indeed, as explained above, discuss textual elements and what they represent in terms of content and form, but I cannot convey the effect these elements had on my immediate experience. I may attempt to describe the effects stimulated by the text, but this description would not be a portrayal of my experience since readers cannot access the immediate experience of the literary work after the event of reading (Rosenblatt 1982, p. 270). While my actual experience remains locked in the time and space of the reading event, the shared material of the text provides access to the elements that influence our readings and can offer insights into how textual properties impact our evocation and interpretation of literary works. An efferent reading may not fully capture the richness and complexity of the aesthetic reading experience, but it provides a point of entry to the literary transaction.

Reading *The Night Watch*, I switched between aesthetic and efferent readings. Employing the aesthetic stance during the first reading led to the formation of the story. My lived experience of the formal and thematic aspects of the text produced a literary work that existed during my continued interactions with the text. A second reading produced another distinct event, and any further ones would also be defined by the specific moments I would spend reading the novel. The suspense I felt during my first encounter with the narrative was replaced by knowledge of the plot in my second reading. Knowledge about the past of the characters and the continued impact of the war in 1947 altered my experience of the progression of the narrative in the second reading. I had new expectations of the text, which led to the development of new interpretations. For example, while Helen's distrust of Julia in 1947 seemed justified initially, a second reading produced another interpretation—I started to associate Helen's insecurity and jealousy with her own guilty conscience.

[9] While I would argue that it is challenging to fully recreate or represent the aesthetic experience of a reader, it's worth noting that empirical studies of audience response have been conducted within reception studies.

A different starting point produced two similar but distinct stories of the lives of Helen and Julia.

The efferent reading stance represents an entirely different type of attention afforded to the text: efferent reading essentially isolates the text. Approaching Waters's novel as an isolated literary object significantly altered the dynamics of my interaction with it. My efferent readings focused on the surface-level properties of the text. Reading critically became "an end in itself" as I identified, categorized, and structured an outline of textual elements that might have affected my response and interpretation of the story (Auyoung 2020, p. 94). I noted how the switching of focalization positioned me towards the characters, how the incomplete information provided in dialogue produced more questions than answers, and how the secret conversations between characters, so personal and intimate, almost felt uncomfortable to read. However, despite intentionally focusing on the static text, I could not always sustain an efferent stance. Occasionally, my efferent interaction with the text shifted into the aesthetic stance, transforming my personal dialogue with the novel into a transaction as intimate as the confidential exchanges I witnessed between the characters. While it may be "impossible for a writer to reduce reality to a fixed and completed spectacle that he might show in its totality," the writer's attempt at showing "but a moment of it: a partial truth" will enrich "the one to whom it is communicated" (Beauvoir 2011, p. 200). As I read through the complex narrative of *The Night Watch*, I uncovered a future and a past. Going forward in the narrative but back in time invited me to construct a history and produce a past. While I may have seen only a partial truth, brief moments of the lives of Kay, Viv, Helen, and Duncan, my transaction made their paper lives whole.

Lived transactions

> As the philosophers might say, 'literature' and 'weed' are functional rather than ontological terms: they tell us about what we do, not about the fixed being of things. They tell us about the role of a text or a thistle in a social context, its relations with and differences from its surroundings, the ways it behaves, the purposes it may be put to and the human practices clustered around it.
> (Eagleton 1996, p. 9).

Rosenblatt's emphasis on using the term transaction rather than immersion or enchantment (c.f. Woolf 1924; Poulet 1969; Felski 2008) might seem, at first, rather unappealing and even reductionist as the materialist and commercial connotations of the term can be seen to reduce the reading experience to a mere exchange. Readers and scholars of literature may not want to consider literature as a commodity or a means to an end. Rather than using language that emphasizes the utilitarian functions of literature, what most of us prefer is terminology that can capture the aesthetic, intellectual, and emotional dimensions of literature (see Eagleton 1996, pp. 181–182). However, not only is transactional an appropriate term for describing our relationship to objects, events, and other people in a 21st-century consumerist world, it also aptly describes the intersubjective exchange affecting all reading experiences.

What makes the transactional theory valuable is Rosenblatt's (1994, pp. 185–187) view that the lived experience of reading is not just subjective; it is also intersubjective. She presents a theory of a reader going back and forth within the text, constantly working to transform the text into a story. Insisting "that there is no such thing as a generic reader, that each reading involves a particular person at a particular time and place," Rosenblatt's (1994, p. viii) work "underlines the importance of such factors in the transaction as gender, ethnic and socioeconomic background, and cultural environment." By acknowledging the diverse set of factors influencing the literary transaction, emphasizing the value of the lived experience of reading, and considering all readers as equal participants in the reading process, Rosenblatt is advocating for a more inclusive and dynamic examination of literature. By now, most, if not all, readers are aware of the interactive nature of reading. However, even with this implicit understanding, literature is, to this day, still often discussed as "a distinct, bounded object of knowledge" (Eagleton 1996, p. 178).

Since the work of reading is individual, it is often taken for granted that "[w]ithin the setting of a particular time, culture, and social milieu, a group of readers or critics can bring a sufficiently similar experience to the text to be able to arrive at fairly homogenous readings" (Rosenblatt 1994, p. 128; c.f. Eagleton 1996, pp. 13–14, 76). A collectively produced understanding of the meaning of a literary work can easily lead to the idea of an ideal object with specific properties. Acting as a "control or norm," the static form of the text also reinforces the illusion of literary objectivity (Rosenblatt 1994, p. 129). The illusion of the fixed literary object has endured in theory and practice since the early twentieth century. For example, despite Ingarden's recognition of the transformative and creative work of the reader, he insisted that readers must remain faithful to the essence of the literary text in reconstruction. This idea of a faithful apprehension of the text has persisted over the years and discreetly made its way into the latest method debates.

The cyclical nature of our discussions on literature and theory ensures that formalism reappears after a period of heightened interest in subjectivist approaches and vice versa. As conceptual shifts occur, there is no denying the value of debate and dialogue. It is part of the process of theory construction (Friedman 2017, p. 349). However, is it productive to keep rehashing the same binary of "form contra aesthetics" (see Aubry 2021)? Notably, despite the widespread acknowledgment of the subjectivity of reading, much of literary theory is still operating under the premise of literary objectivity. While the work of Best and Marcus (2009), for example, was pivotal in facilitating a crucial dialogue on the nature and purpose of literary criticism, the emphasized focus on the surface of texts can be seen as yet another approach isolating the literary text from the literary transaction. The conviction that "texts can reveal their own truths" operates on the assumption that a literary work has a fixed meaning; the encouragement to focus on the "true and visible" aspects of the text advocates for fidelity to those fixed truths (Best and Marcus 2009, pp. 11, 12). Upholding the idea of literary objectivity "involves a fantasy of stepping outside the subject altogether" (Lesjak 2013, p. 28). As the literary work is produced in the transaction, it cannot be conceived as something fixed.

Whether it is through a focus on the formal aspects of the text or by relying on authorial intentions, the idea that a certain faithfulness to the literary work can be

maintained means that we still have some way to go in fully understanding that "local, 'subjective' differences of evaluation work within a particular, socially structured way of perceiving the world" (Eagleton 1996, p. 14). Efferent readings do not produce the literary work and cannot define literary meaning. Yet, overcompensating in the opposite direction will also produce an inaccurate view of the literary transaction. Heavily subjectivist approaches tend to hyperfocus on the reader's mind, producing an isolated reader figure. While Rosenblatt's focus on aesthetic reading gives prominence to the private and affective aspects of the reading process, aesthetic reading does not produce the literary work based on personal impressions alone. No reader can escape the influence of her particular time, culture, and social milieu, nor can she avoid the influence of various interpretive communities and her own past readings.

Within the subjective-intersubjective framing of the transactional theory, the reader and text collaborate to construct the literary work. Adopting the perspective that the literary work is dynamic and subject to negotiation and evolution through the work of reading, the transactional theory fosters a more inclusive view of literature. It is unfortunate that Rosenblatt's work is not widely read among literary theorists. It provides a much-needed balance to our understanding of the lived experience of reading. What is of value within the transactional theory is not the essence of the literary work nor the reader's personal response but what readers make of texts. Literature, according to the transactional theory, is not a fixed, ideal object, nor is it an abstraction. It has a use. Text is made into a novel, a poem, a play by the reader through the transactional work of reading. The reader is not alone in the reading transaction but is accompanied by the text and the weight of the cultural and historical present.

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