

# *How Literature Works: Poetry and the Phenomenology of Reader Response*

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## **Abstract**

Reader response literary theory dominates the study of literature in the K -12 school curriculum. Because this theory reflects the student - centered, constructivist orientation currently driving curriculum development, reader response literary theory is central to guiding the literary experiences of children in schools. Student readers creatively engage in a *transaction* with a text driven by their personal purposes and experiences that leads to the construction of new, alternative voices and perspectives. This study employs hermeneutic phenomenology to inquire into the experiencing of the transactive space of literary engagement to understand more fully how the transaction is lived and felt. Phenomenology can allow a better understanding of the lived, embodied experiencing in the transactive space created between reader and text and provide a fresh and meaningful account of how literature ‘works.’

## **The Promise of Literature**

Through symbol, sound, and the magic of meaning literature transports readers into imaginary realms and fosters complex reading behaviors that invite children to experience emotional and intellectual invocations far greater than the sum of the factual constituents on any given page. The Atlantic Canada Curriculum Guide (1997) for Language Arts states:

Creating or responding to literary text is an aesthetic act involving complex interactions of emotion and intellect. Experiences centered on interpreting and creating literacy texts enable students to participate in other lives and worlds beyond their own. Students reflect on their own identities and on the ways in which social and cultural contexts define and shape those identities.  
(p. 117)

Nell Noddings (1991; 2002) argues for the use of literature and the “general recognition that stories have enormous power” (2002, p. 45) in the development of the moral imagination. Literature provides empathetic insights into the imagined experiences of others across time, space, gender, culture and species. Poetry, for instance, offers the opportunity to interrupt, to de-

familiarize the familiar in ways that challenge the clichéd, the stereotypical, and the status quo (Howard, 2006). In poetry, life stands still for a moment, and we can take time to examine it, to have conversations about values, ideas, and insights. Mark Doty writes, “One of poetry’s great powers is its preservative ability to take a moment in time and attempt to hold it... That’s an extraordinary thing, that something as small as a poem extends our lives” (in Moyers, 1999, p. 59). Literature offers the reflective stance, inviting students to formulate moral and philosophical understanding of the meaning of life (Dewey, 1916; Green, 1973).

Reader response literary theory focuses on active readers and the literary text actually existing in the transaction between reader and text. It is the dominant theory guiding the literary response of student readers in schools. This transaction signals a mutualism in which reader and text act on each other. I position my interests and this inquiry within the scope of ‘experiential’ theories of reader response. It is my hope to elaborate on the work of theorists who concern themselves with the *experience* of literary engagement. At the center of this study is a primary interest in describing readers’ experience of engagement with literature, specifically poetry, and their involvement in what Judith Langer (1992) has called their own “envisionments.”

What is the experience of having powerful new feelings, ideas and insights aroused by what we read? What is the nature of this life-forwarding capacity of literature? How do stories and poems exercise the moral imagination? To fully understand the essential place of literature in the curriculum it is important to investigate phenomenologically the experiencing interaction between feelings and word- symbols and describe experientially the power of language to move our lives forward.

## The Transactive Space

The grade 9 class is exploring a selection of poems by writers of the geographic region who have, as the teacher is fond of saying, “given voice to the essential fullness of life and landscape.” The students are exploring their place through local and regional poetry. Rain runs in tiny rivulets and pools on the blackened sills. Heads turn toward the windows when the gusts slant forcefully, audibly washing clean an autumn’s grime. The teacher reads a final stanza, his voice rhythmically invoking the pull of place as written by poet John S. Mitchell:

boats upside down  
on red wharf  
cliffs surround and close  
centuries of eyes  
in each eye  
whispers and whispers  
in me

The teacher’s voice trails off quietly in diminuendo holding the last syllable. A hand goes up but not before a boy blurts out, “It’s like he’s being watched or something, it’s a creepy feeling, isn’t it?”

“Yes?” the teacher acknowledges a boy who has raised his hand.

“I think that the speaker feels there is a lot history in that place- there are people, but it seems to be a much longer history, centuries - or... it’s like geological time.”

Katie, a girl near the window adds, “And it seems to be speaking to him, a feeling or, like, a spirit of the place whispering... it’s hard to explain.”

Outside now, the bay and surrounding hills have become obscured- a thin skein of fog envelops all imperceptibly, as roads and houses fade; the light is forced, squeezed and burnishes roof lines and fence posts.

The teacher holds comment and chooses another poem *Watching My Grandmother Pick a Late Flower* by New Brunswick poet Allan Cooper. Once again his voice quickly adopts the cadence and flow of word and line as he begins to read. The poem tells of a memory, a longing for another place and time:

She wanted to pick the last fading iris  
in a field  
across the road,  
she spoke of old homesteads,  
now gone...

She walked out into the field.  
She carried the past with her.  
her presence stirred  
the grass...

The last word seems to hang in the air. He closes the book and walks toward the window. “What I would like you to do is to write about what you were thinking when I read these poems? Did it remind you of something you experienced? Where were you? What was it like? Write quietly in your journals for the next ten minutes.” The students are familiar with the journal writing activity; there is some rustling in desks, but most are busy already.

The girl by the window, Katie, twirls her yellow pencil, the poets’ words still reverberating, “field,” “homestead,” “presence,” “stirred”... a felt-sense, a memory, an image arises and she begins to write in her journal:

*I remember seeing my grandfather, sitting and rocking, his hands with their big blunt fingers resting in his lap like two old dogs. I remember thinking how he loved the water, his boat and how his hands tell the story of his life on the sea their creases, scars, deep lines are story lines. His hands were formed by hard work, always soaked by cold salt water (but not preserved!). Big and quick they knit twine, braid rope, haul nets filled with fish, countless cuts from fileting (sic) knives. Strong and gentle at the same time- hands to fix a doll and to build a boat. Wethered (sic), eroded like the cliffs, old like the drift wood... tired now, trembling and turning the crinkled thin paper of his worn black Bible... I can’t help but think my grandfather belongs to the sea and the sea to him.*

The bell rings to end the period. Outside a herring gull swoops on an empty potato chip bag skittering across the parking lot.

What is happening when Katie responds to the poems as an invocation of her relationship with her grandfather? There seems to be a dynamism, a meeting place between the child and the texts out of which arises the possibility to generate certain pools of experience, knowledge and

feeling. It is a relational space, a Gadamerian “fusion of horizons,” of sorts, in which, “the reader’s world becomes re-woven, and it is this re-weaving of the reader’s self that alters the reader’s interactions with the world. “It is an infinite chain of significance” (Sumara, 1994, p. 49). At that moment, in that unique situation, Katie is part of the history of the text; she belongs to the poems, and the poems to her. We will return to Katie and her Grade 9 classroom later. But first a clear explication is required of the experiential, life forwarding dimension of the transactive space between reader and text as it is described by reader response theory.

## **Experiential Reader Response Theory**

Rosenblatt (1995) introduced the term *transaction* to describe the reader-text relationship. The term is generative, inclusive and emerges out of Rosenblatt’s idea of *mutualism*, the reader and the text act on each other, “each affecting and conditioning the other” (Karolides, 2000, p. 5):

Through the medium of words, the text brings into the reader’s consciousness certain concepts, certain sensuous experiences, certain images of things, people, actions, scenes. The special meanings, and more particularly, the submerged associations that the words and the images have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates... The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs... and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination enter into the reader’s relationship with the text. (Rosenblatt 1978, pp. 30, 31)

Rosenblatt’s theory, formulated in the 1920s and 30s, is considered today to have been far ahead of its time (Clifford, 1990), as it indicates a vital, dynamic relationship between reader and text. This unique relationship between reader and literary text and the existence of an imaginative, generative space is the central premise of reader response literary theory. Since Rosenblatt’s initial theory was introduced other theorists have extended her ideas. Richard Beach (1993) imposes some structure to the loose collection of critics who may be considered to fall under the name “reader response.” Beach outlines five theoretical perspectives on response according to how a theorist falls within one of the five primary theoretical orientations; the *textual*, *psychological*, *social*, *cultural* and *experiential*. Experiential theorists focus on the phenomenal nature of readers’ engagement or experience with texts. Such theorists are particularly interested in the ways readers identify with characters, visualize images, or construct the world of the text.

Still other theorists have elaborated the notion of “transaction” picking up Rosenblatt’s strands and weaving them still further. Sumara (1994; 2000; 2002) puts forward the idea of a complex, evolutionary, intertextual relationality of reader and text as represented by a “commonplace location” (2000, p. 33). This commonplace location does not exist “in” the reader, or “in” the text, but in the swirl and array of experiences, associations, and memories that arise before, during and after the interpretative activity. Sumara posits that engaging with literary texts can be considered a focal practice out of which may emerge deep meaning and personal insight. Engagement with texts results in “associational complexities” (Sumara, 2002,

xv) that when attended to create transformative opportunities to re-create, re-imagine and re-interpret human identity.

Inquiring further into the transactive space and the experience of literary engagement, Sumara draws on recent research in cognitive science and evolutionary biology. The experience of engagement is viewed through recognition that human perception is inextricably linked to both body and mind. Sumara's theory is firmly grounded in the entwining of the human body "in other bodies; the social, the cultural, the epistemic" (Sumara, 2002, p. 137). In attempting to understand the implications of the science of human perception on the transactive space between reader and text, Sumara probes deeply into the potential of texts or "literary places" to interrupt the everyday, the mundane, and the familiar. Our everyday lives, our daily experiences are most often rendered invisible, precluding the learning of anything new from what is often closest to us. The space of literary engagement can serve to "de-familiarize" the familiar. The Russian critic Victor Shklovsky wrote of Tolstoy's novels as having just this ability to interrupt the everyday, the "invisible:"

After being perceived several times, objects acquire the status of 'recognition.' An object appears before us. We know it's there but we do not see it, and, for that reason, we can know nothing about it... The achievement of art is the transformation of the object, describing it as though for the first time, communicating its particularities... The purpose of the image is not to draw our understanding closer to what the image stands for, but rather to allow us to perceive the object in a special way, in short, to lead us to a 'vision' of this object rather than mere 'recognition.' (in Masturzo, 2000, p. 132)

How is it possible for literary engagement to allow us to see uniquely, to challenge us in a process of *estrangement*?

## **The Ecology of Reader Response**

It is in the lived, embodied dimension of reader response theory that I am most interested and on which, in this study, I will try to elaborate. It is *in* the transactive character of our relationship with a literary text, through the perceiving, emotional, imaginative, thinking, dreaming and embodied encounter that we experience, invent and discover the meanings by which we grow and make sense of the world in which we find ourselves "set down." In the transaction there is an embodied, participatory engagement – contact; ex-change, meeting, transmission, a fusion across difference, an encounter; a relational, interactive understanding that potentially disrupts the belief system of the culture allowing a more authentic self-understanding to arise. The transaction is the experiencing *in* the interaction, the inward sentience, as an internal relationship between symbols and feelings. It is our *being* potentially changed by the transaction with the different space of the text. In the science of ecology the term "ecotone" is used to describe a place where landscapes meet – a field with a forest, the ocean with the land. It is a place of great richness and diversity with a wealth of unique life forms existing as a result of the co-mingling of communities. It is a place where contact yields change. It is as in an intertidal zone where the land and sea merge and meld to create unique life; a fusion-across-difference that is never the same in the ebb and flow of endless flux. So too, I propose, is the space between reader and text

and what happens when we live there. Sumara (1994) believes that reading does not only change the way we think and act:

it affects, in every way, *who we are*. And if reading affects who we are, it necessarily affects what we *know* and what we do. We could say then, that the experience of reading has not only altered us *phenomenologically*, it has altered us *biologically*. (emphasis in original, p. 66)

There is a commitment in Sumara's words that meaning is grounded in the life process. The idea of "embodied realism" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), or an "intelligent body" (Fisher, 2002), the "felt sense" (Gendlin, 1992b), and the "situational body" (Gendlin, 1997a) all point to a precisely attuned intentional relationship with the world as we experience it from "within." The goal of this inquiry is to better understand literary engagement as nested in a larger web of relations that includes both the cognitive, the biological, even the spiritual. At this point, it is important to consider how reading may be placed within a broader process of a bodily living-in-the-world that includes language and participatory engagement.

## The Phenomenology of Literary Engagement

Rosenblatt's transactive space is a meeting of the reader and the text; the text brings concepts, images, characters, scenes, emotions and feelings to the reader's consciousness. The reader brings to the text a unique personal history and personality. "These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination enter into the reader's relationship with the text" (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 37). Rosenblatt is aware of the bodily situatedness inherent in reading and response; however it is separated out from the conceptual or emotional. "The reading of any work of literature is of necessity, an individual and unique occurrence involving the mind and emotions of some particular reader" (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 32). With these words Rosenblatt binds the experience of the reader and text in a dualistic, mind/body split:

Because the literary work is organized and self-contained, it concentrates our attention and regulates what will enter our consciousness. Out of this arises a sense of an organized structure of *perception and feelings* which constitutes the esthetic experience." (emphasis added, Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 40)

Is it possible to inquire phenomenologically into the experience of the transactive space, into the lived meaning of literary engagement and the "esthetic experience?" In doing so, we must reflect deeply on the fact that we are biological, embodied beings. As such we are always already attuned to Being (Levin, 1985). This embodiment informs our perceptiveness and responsiveness to the world. How might it be possible to elaborate on this "structure of perception and feelings" that, according to Rosenblatt, characterizes the engagement with the literary text?

To help better understand the notion of perception as it relates to experience, I turn to the work of Eugene Gendlin (1981; 1987; 1988; 1991; 1992a; 1992b; 1996; 1997a; 1997b). Gendlin attempts to move beyond perception as a starting point, asserting that it is an ancient but incorrect taken-for-grantedness that experience starts with perception:

Perception is never first, and never alone. It is not the way we are in our situations. Perception divides your perception of me from mine of you. But interaction is more than two perceptions. And interaction is not inherently divided... We will move beyond the subject/object distinction if we become able to speak from how we interact bodily in our situations. (1997a, p. 15)

Gendlin's philosophy, building on the work of Wittgenstein and Heidegger, describes phenomenologically our bodily sense of living in our situations and provides a language and a way of thinking from the implicit felt-sense inherent in our bodily living-in situations. We are challenged to think more creatively and in a fresh way about experiential theories of reader response. It promises to open new concepts and insights while deepening literacy educators' understanding of literary engagement, of how literature "works" as a powerful relational, interactive agent of change in students' lives.

When Katie, in her Grade 9 Language Arts class, for instance, responds to the poem as an invocation of her relationship with her grandfather, her response, as Gendlin uses the phrase, "carries forward" an insight, a connection, something new that has never been said before. It is in this sense that literary engagement is at its most profound – in carrying our lives forward in meaningful ways. It is "a coming to understanding" (Gadamer, 1997, p. 446). On this Gadamer writes:

This is not to be understood as if it were the purpose of language. Coming to understanding is not mere action, a purposeful activity, a setting up of signs through which I will transmit my will to others. Coming to understanding as such, rather, does not need any tools, in the proper sense of the word. It is a life process in which a community of life is lived out. (1997, p. 446)

The "life process" referred to by Gadamer includes the "sensuous experiences," the "physical condition," "the special kind of intense and ordered experience" alluded to by Rosenblatt and other experiential reader response theorists, but never fully described experientially. Gendlin's philosophy helps us think phenomenologically about the nature of the transactive space. His philosophy seeks a way to think about, with the bodily carrying forward, the felt meaning of the body, that which has been hidden, or concealed, by conceptual thought. Gendlin's sensitive phenomenological attention to the "mesh" among body, situation and language may provide a deeply meaningful account of how literature "works," something that is implicitly present in experiential reader response theory, but not clearly explicated. His writing opens up an understanding of how the dynamic, living space between reader and text can carry our lives forward in a process of change and continuity, affecting in every sense who we are. For the purposes of this article, it provides a clear and compelling means to think about the creative and generative power of literature to nurture the moral imagination. Understanding this power requires careful description.

### **Literary Engagement and Implicit Intricacy**

Rosenblatt sees the literary text as concentrating our attention and regulating what will enter our consciousness. The text imposes concepts, images, characters and these work with and in "the submerged associations," "the personality traits," "memories of past events," "present needs and

preoccupations,” “a particular mood of the moment and a particular physical condition” (1995, p. 37) of the reader. According to Rosenblatt, “Just as the personality and concerns of the reader are largely socially acquired and socially patterned, so the literary work, like language itself, is the result of the fact that man is a social being” (1995, p. 34). The idea that social patterns are an order imposed upon humans who are solely molded and made malleable by this imposition is a premise that Gendlin’s philosophy sets out to challenge.

Gendlin posits that patterns, concepts, rules, and forms never work alone, but always within a wider more intricate order. Forms and social patterns are incapable of encompassing the intricacy of people and situations. In his thinking, this more intricate order includes social patterns. While the patterns and rules are always at work, they are at work *within* a wider, more intricate, bodily experiencing. Rules and social patterns function within a “wider saying” (Gendlin, 1991):

Western philosophy... by overstating the role of forms ... quite lost what is more than form. Everything is taken as ordered by imposed forms, patterns, rules. Most modern philosophers have utterly lost an order of nature, the person, the practice, the body. They deny that anything could have an order of its own. All order is assumed to be entirely imposed by a history, a culture, or a conceptual interpretation... But what is this imposed order imposed upon? (pp. 24, 25)

Gendlin attempts to use language to describe the “more” than patterns, to elucidate what the intricacy of bodily-felt meaning can bring to theoretical thinking. He is not making an appeal for some “pure” realm of experiencing unaffected by specific social practices and cultural forms. While acknowledging that social patterns, rules, and forms do function even in our deepest and seemingly most private experience, he reminds us that these concepts, social forms, cultural expectations fall short of guiding what we do. These patterns do not work in a one-way determination; something “talks back” (Gendlin, 1991). Everyday we must improvise and create more intricate ways to act in many situations making these situations more intricate than identifiable concepts or patterns.

Experiential reader response theories may be elaborated by being read with a deeper sense of the intricacy of the “more than forms.” What is imposed by the text functions in and with our deepest, pre-reflective experience. When I read a poem, the words, the structure, the images, the author’s skill are at work ordering my experience. But there is something else at work – something implicit in the situation. It is an implying that is at once “vague and more precise” (Gendlin, 1991, p. 56) – a felt-sense. I have a sense what the poem is saying to me. But how does it say? I re-read the words, the lines, pause at certain phrases; there is a vague sense, something is there; yet the words won’t come that will allow me to say it. I re-read; a line is puzzling, confusing; ideas arise, thoughts come. I reject these until the right fit is found. The implying demands, wants, and as Gendlin says, is “vague yet more precise” in its calling forth.

I know I cannot just attribute any meaning to a line from a poem. I may try on different possibilities. But how do I know when I have the possibility that is right? When it is accepted there is a sense, a felt-sense and a change occurs. The implying, the demanding, no longer implies or demands in the same way, but is “carried forward” (Gendlin, 1991, p. 66). The change has been described by Gendlin as becoming “unstuck” (1991, p.63); the felt-sense carries life forward possibly into a deeper intricacy always leading further into itself.

Perhaps the poem, line, or word poses no puzzlement or confusion. I read, understand or simply dismiss any feeling or implying that may arise. Much of what I read during the day is this type of experience. It is straight-forward, boring, irrelevant, or read for information purposes. Most often it passes right by. But sometimes what I read unsettles, provokes, results in a gnawing, grasping, a vague, indefinable sense that I can choose to stay with, inquire into, or dismiss. However, Gendlin reminds us “a feeling is never there for nothing... a feeling is an interaction in some situation... it is a body-sense that is unclear in form but implicitly more precise than emotions” (1997a, p. 15). This body-sense adds intricacy to Rosenblatt’s “structure of perception and feelings which constitutes for us the esthetic experience” (1995, p. 40). Gendlin reminds us that it is an old and false assumption that experience begins with perception. “Perception is never first, never alone” (Gendlin, 1997a, p. 15). It is not the primary way we are in our situations; we exist in terms of living and interacting. I sense my situation – my whole situation – and perception is part of a wider body-environment interaction. To illustrate this idea, Gendlin uses the example of seeing a person in the street, but you don’t remember who it is. The person gives you a familiar feeling. You know that you know but the person’s identity escapes you. You know by the gnawing feeling in your body. “That gnawing feeling does know. Your body knows who it is” (1997a, p. 16). That knowing is the implying, the felt-sense, a whole sense in your body. The body sense and the situation are not two separate things. We are in the situation; the situation is in us. Concepts and patterns are implicit in the situation that is always already more than any number of details.

If we read the word “text” in place of Gendlin’s “situation” we may be led into a deeper sense of the experience of literary engagement. Texts are indeed “situations,” not existing without readers who come to them; as Albert Borgmann (1997) said, “a text by itself is helpless” (p. 117). Our body-sense happens in, is part of, makes and re-makes the text. Body-sense and text carry each other forward. If we are willing to stay with the feeling, the body-sense, for it is never present before us, rather it requires us to “go into a murky sort of down and in” (Gendlin, 1997a, p. 16) perhaps something new can come from the body-sense. How can this description provide more to the transactive space of reader-response theory as it contributes the bodily-implicating in and of that space? The feeling arising out of this space and so often referred to by Rosenblatt and other experiential reader response theorists is now fleshed out, so to speak. It is a felt-sense, the murky implicating that is located spatially in the center of the body. This uneasiness, warmth, fluttery, or jumpy sense or quality “is not subjective, not just internal, not private, it is the implicit situation” (Gendlin, 1991, p. 82). The body has the situation implicit in it. We can access the felt-sense to inquire into it by quieting the conceptual mind.

The text demands, wants something, some sense, implicating feelings that carry forward in the same direction. Possibilities arise, images, memories, connections, narratives, and thoughts move the sense forward, but not forward in a spatial direction. All my previous connections, possibilities, images that come out of the text are like steps that are not wrong, or incorrect, even as they are rejected by the strength of the implicating. This is not to be understood as a linear or logical progression toward the “right” answer. The word “right” comes to mean something else. The steps, however, are life forwarding - forwarding in the direction of the implicating. The implicating evoked by the poem wants, demands, and I just cannot *will* a meaning; it must come, emerge, follow out of the progression and “make sense.” When this happens I know it; I feel it; I become “unstuck” in a sense. The poem, line, or phrase seems true, right in some way, and there is a relief, an excitement, as meaning is carried forward. Of course this is not to say that the

“change” will always come and that we will become unstuck. The implying is very precise and I may choose the next step and therefore go wrong or I can dismiss the implying altogether.

### **Texts as ‘Situations’**

When we speak of *interpreting* stories, *analyzing* poems, *finding* meaning and themes in poems, plays or essays, our language may be concealing the intricate, embodied nature of the reader-text relationship. The matrix present in the relationship between the text, the reader and language can say something about how a response is evoked, how words come. A short story, for instance, is more than a series of words, sentences, paragraphs, details, or narrative techniques. When we read we enter the story on the level of general impression. The story happens, when we are involved, in much the same way as any situation happens. Our situations are far more intricately ordered than our conceptual patterns, or even as given to us by our five senses. When reading we may be aware of literary techniques and devices, but our experiencing is always much more. In the moment, as I read, I am taken up in the story, in a general impression. Later, I may reflect on the many different details. But these ‘many details’ were implicit in the impression before they were noticed.

Gendlin (1991) calls this a pre-separated multiplicity. Each situation is not one or many different details and most are never separate. They function implicitly – “pre-separatedly.” I can reflect later to separate them out – but each detail, image, phrase, action can specify itself further and further. The most minute detail can evoke a further implying – a felt-sense that can carry forward into meaning, insight, into something new. Each little detail is a pre-separated multiplicity also.

The felt-sense, an implicitly intricate body-sense functions in every situation in a highly ordered way. In everything we do we are always bodily aware; there is an implicit sense of the whole intricacy of each situation. We can physically sense our body’s implying the situation. “And we can make the transition from the unreflected to the reflected body-sense anytime” (Gendlin, 1991, p. 90). We can focus on this body-sense, stay with its implying to move toward a deeper self-understanding. This attunement can be taught as a means of contact and to feel in a body-sensible way the gift of our embodiment (Gendlin, 1981; Perl, 2004). When we focus on our own body of experience, it never leaves us unchanged. We reflect on this experience, this body-sense, as it is lived and felt and it moves our lives forward within the organic, self-ordering wisdom of the body.

When reading I am struck or touched in some way by a word, image or detail and stop to re-read, or ponder. My eyes come up from the page to stare out the window; they look without seeing. The stopping, the staring in space, implies what will happen. The felt-sense adjudicates my response to it. But to reiterate, this is not a sequence of steps to be followed, a logical progression, for each possibility that enters into my pondering potentially re-makes the “possibility system.” My stopping is a demanding, but not an indeterminate one, because there is a precision or “truth” which must be met if I am to carry forward and meet the implying. I deliberate, further possibilities can be implied; I can stay with the implying or move on – and I can go wrong. But I can’t “give” meaning, or simply add interpretation as if the text is mere Silly Putty out of which I can mold or stamp on whatever meaning I like. The implied intricacy of the text is “crossed” with the implied intricacy of my felt sense to create a demanding truth that can carry forward.

The transactive space of reader response may be seen as truly mutualistic, as Rosenblatt suggested when the processes of engagement and involvement are inclusive of the responsive order – a deepening sense of our biological nature as truly embodied beings.

### **Language Comes in the Body**

It is important to see that this “crossed” sense-making occurs implicitly. As I read the poem many possibilities are implied, but their implying is also “the focal” implying of the next one. In life we do not usually stop to select from possibilities- we act, we do, we “decide” rather seamlessly or pre-reflectively. This is what Gendlin calls “focaled steps” (1991, p.101). He uses the example of a common situation- smiling or saying hello to a passerby in the hallway. Without thinking, the tone of the hello and the nuanced quality of the smile is focaled from our history and recent interaction with that person. The focaled step forms out of the crossing – out of the implicit intricacy of the situation that the body knows. As the example illustrates most often the next step just comes and we are saying or doing it before we are even aware – we just “say” or “do.”

But sometimes no next step comes. There may be confusion, puzzlement – and then a felt-sense forms out of the confusion. “The coming of a felt-sense is a large change from the confused condition. We feel relief. Now in a way we know what to do, but the words and actions have not actually formed yet” (Gendlin, 1991, p. 101). The felt-sense is a step, a crossing, a making sense; a decision comes. Having to decide means we don’t know. We pay attention to the felt-sense and that will “imply further doable steps” (1991, p. 100). Gendlin warns that focusing can miss much and does not include all considerations of everything relevant. When something we think, hear, or read makes sense, this sense-making is a fresh focusing that carries forward the implicit intricacy of the whole context. We cannot *will* something to make sense. The focusing has to come. It is in this coming that lies the bodily character of language, action, thought and images. They are not separated dimensions. All are “crossed” in the making of one next implied speech, action, thought or image. This is why Gendlin asserts we cannot begin with perception, but we must move away from the subject/object approach that comes from perception. He says, “Perception always divides what is seemingly over there from a perceiver here. Perception is never first and never alone. It is not the main way we are in situations” (Gendlin, 1991, p. 105). We are encouraged to move beyond the subject/object distinction by becoming able to speak from how we interact bodily in situations. His attention to experiential detail is the greatest strength of his work. It is this attention to experiential detail that provides a language by which we may describe phenomenologically the intricacy of the transactive space that is at the center of experiential reader response theory. Gendlin provides us with a language for how, ostensibly, the literary text “works.” His theory and practice of language speaks to and can be applied to literary engagement and how it can be placed within a participative, bodily engagement. Gendlin’s philosophy promises to deepen our phenomenological understanding of the nurturing the moral imagination in children by bringing this phenomenological understanding to bear on the process of literary engagement and by focusing our attention on the living responsiveness of the intelligent body precisely attuned for relationship with the world. Gendlin’s work has profound implications for helping children experience their natural “intertwining” (Levin, 1982, p. 293), a deeply sensed interdependency and kinship with a larger living field that they can find within themselves. It promises to

contribute to a revitalized understanding of experiential theories of reader response as it grounds language in the body and moves us toward a deeper sense of a “living literacy”- one that is embodied and honours our inherent need for relationship and belonging; one that is implicitly life-affirming.

And so I return, a last time, to Katie sitting by the window in the grade 9 language arts classroom. Outside the late November light hardens as the wind and tides obey the pull and tilt of the planet in an eternal rhythmic turn of the season, cycling as nearly every system does, from the human body to a galactic cluster.

Today her body deepened  
As she picked a late flower  
And behind her  
The dust rose on the backroad  
Like a remembrance of her life.

The words, contained in Allan Cooper’s poem call up, lift out, a memory, an association, a felt-sense. “I can’t help thinking that my grandfather belongs to the sea and the sea to him,” the girl writes. She describes her grandfather’s hands as being “eroded like the cliffs” and “old like the driftwood.” Does her language reveal a permeability of boundaries, a breaking down of perceived separateness, an identification with the greater rhythms of life? Her grandfather (and, presumably, she too) emerges as part of a greater community, a common ground or kinship. There is also a challenge in her words to a Sartrean existential isolation that becomes an unreality when we realize ourselves a part of larger life forces, when we discover the subtle organizing patterns of the universe and move toward a resonant relationship with them. The young writer chooses the image of her grandfather “turning the crinkled thin pages of his worn black Bible.” Could this be a sense of her grandfather’s life as an infusion into greater life processes that confront death? Katie’s short piece is imbued with a completeness, a spirituality that touches on, and in some way, brings to the fore the interplay between birth and death in the larger stream of life.

It could be argued that the girl’s response is not *about* the poem at all. There is no analysis of metaphor or personification in her response, or word choice, repetition, poetic style, form or structure. The response does reflect, however, the “lived-through” experience and the richness of the space between the young reader and the text as it emerges in the moment. Iser (1978) says of this experience, “The significance of the work, then, does not lie in the meaning sealed within the text, but in the fact that meaning brings out what had been previously sealed within us” (p. 157). The poem is generative; it serves to nurture and encourage understandings that lay within the student as she wrote “from” (Probst, 2000) the poem to call forth personal memories, associations, anecdotes and meanings.

When the teacher reads the lines from the second poem by John S. Mitchell, he is allowing for the voices of other presences, for a sentient landscape to emerge into a growing field of significant relations.

boats upside down  
on red wharf  
cliffs surround and close  
centuries of eyes

in each eye  
whispers and whispers  
in me

Katie responds with the beginnings of a beautiful piece of writing that nests her grandfather in an intimate interconnection with the life force of the ocean. The space of contact, of experience, between child, teacher and text is one of mediation, a place of exchange, a flow-through of the voices of the young and the old. The poet Gary Snyder (1990) writes, “In this huge old occidental culture our teaching elders are books. *Books are our grandparents*” (emphasis added, p. 61). Rachel Carson (1964), the pre-eminent marine biologist, who ushered in our contemporary environmental movement with the publication of her book *Silent Spring* in 1962, wrote in a short essay *The Sense of Wonder* (1964) of the pedagogical significance of the adult in the life of a child:

If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, re-discovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in. (p. 7)

Perhaps, then, it is perfectly fitting that the young girl chose to respond to the poem by writing about her grandfather. It is a response that speaks to the intergenerational dynamic that renews the life process. It helps the child focus on what she has always already “known” and in its coming it is bound to carry the child’s life forward, bound to educe and bound to eventuate a deeper self-understanding through the force of moral imagination. Simone Weil (1987) describes the imagination as, “a knot of action and reaction that attaches us to the world” (p. 50). Katie seems firmly anchored. Gendlin’s theory of embodiment and felt-sense allows us to describe phenomenally the dynamic ‘knots’ of imagination, text and body that help us think about how literature ‘works’ and thereby articulate more fully and accurately its value and importance in the curriculum.

## **Conclusion**

Reader response theories posit that the relationship between reader and text is dynamic. However, for decades, the study of literature and literary engagement has been understood as a passive act. The text lies before us inert, awaiting interpretation as the reader opens it up to discover what the author has hidden inside. Reader response theory positions the reading act as a co-mingling of reader and text. Phenomenology allows us to grasp this potentially transformative experience to open it up and describe how texts speak to us and how we in turn respond out of a space of bodily implying that moves our lives forward in an array of possibilities, images, memories, connections and insights. Phenomenology calls forth the intricate, embodied nature of the reader - text relationship allowing literacy educators a deeper understanding of how texts speak to children as it describes the lived, felt sense that orders the reading experience of children who respond as embodied beings precisely attuned for relationship with the world.

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