Foreword

Before Reading in Its Own Terms

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Starting Points

While writing this foreword, I assumed that I should yield to the inevitable and title it “Before Reading Before Reading” or perhaps “Before Reading Squared.” I have now, however, decided to resist the inevitable in favor of the literal—and its implied challenge of giving a new spin to the common phrase “reading a book in its own terms.” Here’s why: As Peter J. Rabinowitz explains early in the introduction, the book’s purpose is “to explore . . . the ways in which Western readers’ prior knowledge of conventions of reading shapes their experiences and evaluations of the narratives they confront” (3). But much in Rabinowitz’s exploration of conventions, I gradually realized, can apply not just to narratives but also to critical texts. Consequently, Before Reading itself provides the most useful terms and concepts to illuminate Rabinowitz’s distinctive theoretical project.

The reading of Rabinowitz’s title refers to what he calls “authorial reading,” the activity by which actual readers seek to enter an author’s hypothetical, ideal audience. This foreword is an exercise in authorial reading, but one with an edge. By looking at Before Reading through the lenses the book itself provides, I hope not merely to summarize the book accurately but also to extend its insights and thus, paradoxically, sharpen our vision of the thing itself. Those lenses, I shall suggest, offer a way of seeing both the strategies by which Rabinowitz has constructed his complex argument
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and the significance of those strategies. This vision, in turn, enables us to comprehend more fully and appreciate more keenly the conclusions, the methods, the purposes, and the implications of *Before Reading*.

To start with the conclusions, the book offers three main theses:

1. Readers operate with a broad range of tacit conventions that significantly influence their experience and evaluation of narrative.
2. This range of conventions can be usefully grouped under four different readerly activities—attending to the most important details, assigning larger meanings to details, perceiving the text’s developing shape, and finding systems of unity among the details. Rabinowitz labels the conventions governing these activities the rules of notice, signification, configuration, and coherence.
3. The way in which readers apply these rules has political consequences because those applications are affected—again often tacitly—by readers’ ideologies. The interaction between convention and ideology illuminates the politics of interpretation, especially such phenomena as motives for misreading and the dynamics of canon formation.

To move from this general overview of the content to a more detailed analysis of the book’s methods and purposes, let us turn to an analysis of how the rules illuminate the book itself.

Notice

The key perception behind Rabinowitz’s formulation of the rules of notice clearly applies to critical texts: readers give greater attention to some parts of texts than others. Consequently, the specific rules of notice he identifies can be applied to non-narrative texts with very little modification. Rabinowitz focuses on “two interrelated aspects of noticeability: concentration and scaffolding” (53),

1. In adopting this approach to *Before Reading*, I am choosing to get inside the book’s workings as it appeared in 1987 rather than to emphasize my location in 1997 and so stand outside it and discuss how it might be different if Rabinowitz were writing it today. My choice of approach indicates that I believe the book holds up very well ten years later. Some of the issues that loom large in it—the need to shake off the shackles of the New Criticism, the need for canon reformation—do not loom as large in contemporary critical discourse, though it is arguable that they
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that is, places where writers expect or direct readers to pay special attention, and the arrangement of those places into a structure on which readers can hang an interpretation.

More specifically, Rabinowitz identifies three kinds of noticeability. (1) Basic gestures: these include—listen up!—explicit textual signals such as outright claims for importance, repetition ("concentration and scaffolding are interrelated aspects of noticeability"), and figurative language (these parenthetical remarks are as subtle as heavy metal music). (2) Privileged positions: these are "titles, beginnings and endings (not only of whole texts but of subsections as well—volumes, chapters, episodes), epigraphs, and descriptive sub-titles" (58) as well as key moments in the unfolding of plots. (3) Ruptures: these are of two kinds, intratextual and extratextual. Intratextual ruptures break patterns and continuities of style, characterization, theme, or plot. Extratextual ruptures either transgress the social norms the text initially assumes or invokes, or, through implicit or explicit intertextual reference, modify or even violate established literary norms. The "shocking novel" breaks certain proprieties defined by the larger society; the genre-bending narrative seeks to alter established generic norms. With critical texts, then, intratextual ruptures would break continuities of argument or style (I might disrupt this foreword by suddenly exclaiming, "Before Reading rules!" and then saying no more). Extratextual ruptures would modify or violate the conventions of critical argument, would revise or even repudiate received critical opinion. Attending to extratextual ruptures in Before Reading will mean addressing its implicit and explicit intertexts.

The scaffolding of notice in Before Reading is provided by its careful organizational divisions: a general introduction and two parts, the first given over to narrative conventions, the second to the politics of interpretation. Each part is further broken down into

should. I would venture to say that if he were writing the book today, Rabinowitz would choose different non-canonical texts to focus on in his discussion of the politics of interpretation—I imagine a text by an ethnic writer and one particularly illuminated by the insights of queer theory. But I believe that the essentials of his argument about conventions, politics, and their interrelationship would not need to change.

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chapters and each chapter into titled subsections. A look at just two of the privileged positions—the title and the introduction—in combination with extratextual rules of rupture will illustrate the interrelation between scaffolding and concentration in Before Reading.

The book's main title is deliberately arresting—and slightly, albeit appropriately, misleading. By 1987, the reader-response movement had been in full swing for two decades, and it had produced books and essays on The Dynamics of Literary Response, “The Semiotics of Reading,” Interpretive Conventions, The Implied Reader, The Resisting Reader, Readings and Feelings, and even on the question Is There a Text in This Class! Rabinowitz’s title is arresting because it indicates that the book is both continuous with and slightly disruptive of this tradition. It declares its interest in reading but identifies a spatiotemporal location that none of this previous work had noticed—and claims it to be deserving of a book-length treatment. The subtitle, however, pulls back from this mild disruption (no blurb for Before Reading would ever say “the outrageous new book from the shocking critic in upstate New York!”) and offers what by 1987 is more familiar fare: “Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation.” At the same time, the juxtaposition of these two concepts is intriguing, since previous discussions of conventions, such as those of Jonathan Culler and Steven Mailloux, had not made such a strong link to politics, and previous discussions of politics, such as those of Judith Fetterley, did not develop from an initial description of such formal matters as conventions but rather went right to the clashes and convergences between the critic’s ideology and that found in the text.

The title is slightly misleading because the spatiotemporal location it identifies has very permeable borders or, to put it another way, because Rabinowitz necessarily moves from “before reading” to “during reading” and even sometimes to “after reading.” That movement is necessary because Rabinowitz cannot show the importance of narrative conventions unless he also shows how they shape both the writing and reading of texts, and he cannot show that shaping unless he analyzes what happens during and after reading. But even as the title doesn’t fully capture the scope of Rabinowitz’s concerns, its inaccuracy appropriately functions to focus our attention on what is most new and significant within that
scope, the territory of “before,” the land in which our knowledge of conventions resides.

The next privileged position, the introduction, lays out Rabinowitz’s major principles and methods and defines his project both with and against prevailing critical norms. His most important methodological decision is to focus on authorial reading. This decision not only determines the scope of the book but also makes a major intervention in the reader-response movement. In order to appreciate that intervention, we should consider the prior history of Anglo-American reader-response theory. The story begins with the rise of the New Criticism in the 1940s and 1950s and gets interesting with its gradual loss of influence in the late 1960s. This loss of influence was a result both of reactions against it by Anglo-American critics and of the arrival of theory in England and America from the European continent, especially structuralism (itself influenced by Russian formalism of the 1920s) and then post-structuralism from France. The Anglo-American reactions came in the form of attacks on the twin pillars supporting the New Critical doctrine of the autonomy of the text: “The Affective Fallacy,” which ruled readers’ responses irrelevant to sound interpretation, and “The Intentional Fallacy,” which ruled authorial intention similarly irrelevant. In Validity in Interpretation, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., sought to overturn The Intentional Fallacy by arguing that reading for intention was the only way to arrive at a valid interpretation. In The Dynamics of Literary Response and Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost, Norman Holland and Stanley Fish, respectively, countered the argument of The Affective Fallacy, with Holland analyzing the way texts activate a reader’s fantasies and Fish maintaining that the reader’s work of processing Paradise Lost was equivalent to the poem’s meaning. In the twenty years between these three books and Before Reading, the reader-response movement and the case for authorial intention proceeded along nonintersecting tracks. Reader-response theorists, buttressed by structuralist and especially post-structuralist doctrines about texts as polysemous entities, explored

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2. What follows is obviously a schematic history, one that focuses on major texts and events and one that ignores such developments as Hans Robert Jauss’s work on reception theory.

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and celebrated the liberation of the reader, first, from the tyranny of The Affective Fallacy, and, second, from the imperative of reading for authorial intention. Roland Barthes, in fact, explicitly linked the Death of the Author and the birth of the reader. In the face of such developments, Hirsch's arguments became increasingly unpopular in advanced theoretical circles.

Before Reading intervenes in this history with a bold new move: a synthesis of the two kinds of attacks on the New Critical orthodoxy. This synthesis emerges from Rabinowitz's recognition, pace Barthes, that the reader-response movement need not be hostile to work concerned with authorial intention, that since most actual readers do try to understand "what the author is saying," reader-response theory should account for such reading. Rabinowitz is careful to point out, however, that his concept of authorial reading has significant differences from Hirsch's theory of reading for authorial intention. These differences derive from Rabinowitz's concern with conventions and rules, with what readers know and do before they read. Unlike authorial intentions, these conventions are the property of communities rather than individuals; they are socially constructed concepts available to authors and readers. Reading in the authorial audience, then, involves not an effort to decipher the writer's individual conscious intention but an effort to determine which conventions the writer is working with or against. When the reader's inferences about the conventions operating in a text match the author's implications about those conventions, successful authorial reading occurs.

In this way, Rabinowitz's model of interpretation assumes the possibility of—and places considerable value upon—reciprocity between authors and their audiences. However, because the conventions are social constructs and because readers' decisions about

3. Rabinowitz's use of the relation between reader response and authorial reading is generally compatible with the positions taken by the Chicago neo-Aristotelians during this period, especially as evident in the work of Wayne Booth, but none of these critics, including Booth, ever made the explicit connection between authorial reading and reader response that Rabinowitz does in Before Reading. In this connection, though, it is interesting to observe that Rabinowitz's first article, "Truth in Fiction: A Re-examination of Audiences" (1976), appeared in Critical Inquiry, at that time a new journal from Chicago, edited by Sheldon Sacks and co-edited by Booth.
which conventions a text is employing are affected by their starting points, readers’ inferences and an author’s implications may very well diverge. Furthermore, in some of these cases, the divergence may never be discovered because the interpretation the reader constructs will adequately account for the text. Such interpretations, in Rabinowitz’s view, are not invalid readings in need of correction, as they would be for Hirsch; instead, they are fascinating examples of how both conventions and texts operate. I will return to this point during my discussion of coherence.

The second important methodological point of the introduction plays off not just the New Criticism but many other theoretical projects as well. Rabinowitz deliberately chooses an eclectic corpus of texts, one that crosses the borders of genre, nationality, time period, and especially canonicity. In this way, he ensures that his generalizations about the grounds of interpretation will apply widely rather than narrowly. In this way, as I shall discuss below, he also implicitly invites us to invoke a rule of signification.

Rabinowitz’s most important principle is that the link between the two concepts of his subtitle is so tight as to be unbreakable. In adopting this principle, Before Reading claims kin with many other books and articles of the 1980s concerned with exposing the interconnections among literature, criticism, and politics (representative titles include The Politics of Interpretation, Criticism and Social Change, and “The Ideology of Speech Act Theory”). These works all contested the norms of the New Criticism, whose legacy was still strong in 1987 (and, indeed, is still strong as I write this foreword in 1997) and whose emphases on the autonomy of the individual text and the importance of theme tended to depoliticize interpretation. Rabinowitz’ contestation works like this: the social construction of conventions means that any interpretation will inevitably be tied to politics (defined as “the system of power relationships among groups” [5]) in two ways: “it is partially caused by . . . the political systems around it, and in turn it situates itself with respect to those systems” [6].

4. Of course, by the late 1980s and early 1990s the defenders of New Critical doctrine and the attackers of the contemporary university mounted a campaign against what they saw as the substitution of literary criticism for tests of political correctness. And so the culture wars began.
introduction is a crucial move because part 1 of the book, the longest section, does not discuss politics but focuses on identifying and explaining narrative conventions. The placement sets up our expectation that Rabinowitz will make the link before the book is over. I will return to this point during my discussion of configuration.

The second key principle in the introduction also plays off New Critical norms. Where the New Critics made the interpretation of individual texts the main task of criticism, Rabinowitz will focus not on interpretations but on “the grounds of interpretation,” not on the meanings of texts but on how they come to mean [8]. In this respect, his approach dovetails nicely with that of Jonathan Culler, who in 1976 issued a call for critics to get “beyond interpretation.” Culler, however, focuses less on conventions and the territory of “before” than on what readers do during and after reading.

Assigning significance to textual details, Rabinowitz explains, entails a kind of translation, a movement “from what appears to be said to what is really said, or at least from one level [which, if not more literal, is more immediate or more close at hand] to another [which is more distant, more mediated]” (77). Signification, in other words, works by assigning new, generally more abstract, meanings to textual details. Writers of critical texts do not rely upon rules of signification to the same extent that writers of narrative do, since the conventions of criticism dictate that critics should say what they mean (albeit in appropriate, and too often opaque, critical jargon) and to mean what they say. Readers seeking puzzles, plots, and moral dramas—and the interpretive task of assigning signification—know that they are far more likely to find what they seek in literature than in criticism and theory. Nevertheless, some of Rabinowitz’s findings about signification do shed light on his book. Rabinowitz identifies five kinds of rules of signification: rules of figurative language (discussed only briefly), of source, of moral judgment, of realism, and of cause. Of these, the rules of realism and of cause are not easily made relevant to Before Reading, but those of
source and moral judgment—provided we reconceive it as critical judgment—do apply, and the rule of figurative language plays a special role.

In narrative texts, rules of source guide our decisions about the authority and reliability of information, according to whether the information comes from characters, narrators, or implied authors. In critical texts, rules of source operate in conjunction with rules of critical judgment to establish the authority and reliability of the information provided by the source. Like most critical texts, Before Reading invokes two kinds of sources: works of literature and other works of criticism. With regard to the latter, the rules of critical judgment allow us to tell the good guys from the bad guys, that is, to distinguish between the critical sources authors position themselves with and those they position themselves against. The first rule of critical judgment we might call the rule of first impressions: the initial citation of a source is a reliable, although not infallible, guide to the critic's opinion of that source. In Rabinowitz's case, for example, when he cites with approval Mary Louise Pratt's criticism of reader-response theory, noting that she "was disturbed by what she saw as a tendency to depoliticize the study of literature" (3), he is not just making a local point but establishing Pratt as one of his authoritative sources. After this early citation in connection with a major point in his argument, the rule of first impressions tells us that we should expect any further citations of Pratt to be citations of her authority. And that is just what happens [see 8, 11, 24–25, 45, 78, 117–18, 151–52].

Rabinowitz's three references to John Cawelti show a different operation of the rule of first impressions. Rabinowitz initially uses Cawelti as a source when he wants to establish the claim that the formulaic detective story has a political function; he cites with approval Cawelti's point that the formula reassures the audience that human actions are rational and that "guilt is specific not ambiguous" (197). Shortly thereafter, as Rabinowitz makes his case about the common misreading of Raymond Chandler's The Big Sleep, he writes, "Even John Cawelti touts Marlowe in The Big Sleep as a hero who 'confronts, exposes, and destroys [the novel's] web of conspiracy and perversion'" (200, emphasis added). Then in the third citation, where Rabinowitz is opposing Cawelti's view, he writes...
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"John Cawelti, claiming that there is a single criminal in the hard-boiled formula . . . goes on to name Carmen as the criminal in The Big Sleep" (203). The rule of first impressions dictates this progression from approval to "even John Cawelti" to simply "John Cawelti": the "even" signals Rabinowitz's acknowledgment that he will be overturning the effect of the first citation, but once that is accomplished Cawelti can simply be lumped with the other misreaders.

Similarly, when Rabinowitz says early on that "New Criticism tended to obscure . . . relations between interpretation and politics" (6), the rule of first impressions tells us that he is not just making a local point but also establishing the New Criticism as an unreliable source. And all the references to the New Criticism are consistent with this initial treatment; all show that Rabinowitz is positioning himself against its norms. But in order to see more clearly how the New Criticism signifies within Before Reading, we need to attend to the interaction of this rule of first impressions with the rule of figurative language and with the extratextual rule of rupture.

The most prominent use of figurative language is Rabinowitz's announcement that he conceives of the literary text as an unassembled swing set. He builds up to this announcement with a half-ironic declaration: "Every literary theoretician these days needs a governing metaphor about texts: text as seduction, text as fabric, text as abyss, text as system. I suppose that my metaphor would have to be text as unassembled swing set" (37–38). In restricting the list to metaphors current in the 1980s, Rabinowitz leaves unspoken a very important intertext, indeed, the most famous modern textual metaphor, that championed in the title of W. K. Wimsatt, Jr.'s New Critical manifesto, The Verbal Icon. It is in this book that Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley erected those twin pillars of New Critical orthodoxy, The Intentional Fallacy and The Affective Fallacy, which I discussed above. Rabinowitz's choice of metaphor contributes to his contestation of these orthodoxies, as we can see by thematizing it. Where the New Critical metaphor treats the text as sacred, something to be worshiped as much as read, Rabinowitz's metaphor treats it as something to be used for pleasure and play. Furthermore, where the verbal icon is always already whole and inviolate, the
swing set needs the user to complete it. Indeed, Rabinowitz's metaphor itself is playful, an effort both to participate in and to puncture the convention of developing a metaphor, especially the solemnity associated with the most famous metaphor of all.

Rules of critical judgment also apply to Rabinowitz's second main source, his eclectic corpus of literary works. I noted above that the range of his selections works to ensure that his conclusions are widely applicable. But that very interest in having the conclusions be as applicable for popular fiction as for serious fiction indicates that he wants us to suspend our usual judgments about the automatic inferiority of popular fiction to canonical fiction. The relevant rule of critical judgment is what we might call the rule of equal respect: works treated with equal respect by the critic should be regarded as equally valuable by the reader.

Once we recognize the operation of the rule of equal respect, then we can also recognize much that remains implicit in the signification Rabinowitz assigns to his non-canonical sources. His most extended examples in his discussion of the politics of interpretation are two non-canonical texts, Chandler's *The Big Sleep* and Margaret Ayer Barnes's *Edna His Wife*. With Chandler's text, Rabinowitz explains the interactions between ideology and convention in common misreadings of it. These misreadings assume a popular novel could not make Chandler's thematic point about the ineradicability of society's evil; they scapegoat Carmen Sternwood as the main locus of evil on the basis of a masculinist convention that says readers should accentuate the negative traits of a female character. With Barnes's text, Rabinowitz contends that a masculinist bias affecting all four rules of reading renders the positive features of the novel almost invisible. The rule of equal respect helps us to see that while making these specific arguments, Rabinowitz wants to do more than just comment on the processes of misreading and canon formation. In treating these and other non-canonical texts with the respect usually reserved for works of high culture, Rabinowitz signifies that he wants *Before Reading* to intervene in processes of interpreting non-canonical fiction and of canon formation. The implicit message of part 2 is that the critical institution should re-read or rediscover not just Chandler and Barnes but a whole host of
non-canonical authors. In this way, Rabinowitz makes good on his promise in the introduction to have *Before Reading* be “one more tool to change the world” (9).

**Configuration**

Rules of configuration apply to the text as a developing entity, to the evolving pattern of readerly expectations. Rabinowitz identifies two metarules of configuration—something will happen, but not just anything will happen (117)—and three more specific rules: undermining, conventions by which situations or characters get set up only to be knocked down; balance with regard to focus, conventions that allow us to recognize that there is a limit on what may happen within the world of the narrative; and balance with regard to action, conventions that govern our expectations about what will happen. As with the rules of signification, the rules of configuration for reading narrative need to be modified for reading critical texts because of the difference between following an unfolding plot and tracking a developing argument. The rules of undermining, in particular, apply to narrative more readily than to critical argument. In critical arguments, readers tend to interpret such building up and tearing down as erecting and destroying straw men. Rabinowitz, happily, does not argue against any straw men.

Rabinowitz’s insights about rules of balance as they apply to focus and to action do have analogies in the configuration of critical argument. Just as focus in narrative puts some restrictions on what can happen in the narrative world, so focus in critical argument puts some limits on the range of issues taken up in the argument. And just as assumptions about the balance of actions influence our expectations about plots, so too do our assumptions about logical sequence affect our expectations about the direction of critical arguments.

Thus, the rules of balance related to focus help us understand that Rabinowitz’s concern is with authorial reading rather than, say, resistant reading or reading as a feminist, a Marxist, a psychoanalyst, or any other “ist.” The rules of balance related to action help us un-
derstand the argument of Before Reading as a plot in three acts. Act 1 is the general introduction, which signals that the sequence of the argument will involve what Rabinowitz calls the other-shoe rule, namely, that the engagement of one issue (narrative conventions) entails the engagement of another, related issue (the politics of interpretation). Interestingly, as we have seen in the discussion of notice, Rabinowitz first has to make the case that conventions and politics constitute a genuine pair, a right shoe that is not complete without a left. Then, in act 2 (or part 1), he drops that right shoe and walks it along an orderly path. In moving from notice to signification to configuration to coherence, he is moving from the early to the final stages of interpretation: notice deals with initial matters of emphasis, signification with translating those matters and other details into larger meanings, configuration with the developing shape of the whole text, coherence with its overall meanings as seen retrospectively. In act 3 (or part 2), Rabinowitz drops the left shoe as he builds on the findings about conventions to make his case about politics. The sequence in act 3 does not follow the steps of a single process, but in moving from the issue of misreading to that of canon formation, this act moves from an analysis of how politics affects the act of interpretation to how it affects a large institutional practice. The discussion of Edna His Wife also brings closure to the argument, because Rabinowitz addresses the way in which masculinist bias can affect the application of each of the four rules.

Thinking about configuration at a more local level, we can see how the rule of balance regarding focus affects Rabinowitz's placement and deployment of one of the book's most important—and most widely influential—concepts, that of the narrative audience. The narrative audience is, in a sense, the authorial audience moved inside the world of the narrative; just as an author has an ideal audience, so too does a narrator. In the authorial audience, we know that the events and characters of fiction are not real; in the narrative audience, we believe that they are. Furthermore, different fictions will ask us to take on different beliefs in our narrative audience role: in science fiction, for example, the narrative audience is frequently asked to believe many things that the authorial audience does not. Thus, one important way to understand the role of belief in any
narrative is to examine the relation between the beliefs of the au­
thorial audience and those of the narrative audience.5

The rule of balance with regard to focus means that Rabinowitz
must do more than lay out this concept: he needs to make it func­
tion within his developing argument about narrative conventions
and authorial reading. He does that very effectively by showing that
the concept of narrative audience is crucial to understanding how
the rule of realism works. When the only difference in belief be­
tween the narrative audience and the authorial audience is the be­
lief in the reality of the characters and events, we are in the
presence of a realistic narrative. When the beliefs of the two audi­
ences diverge, the narrative is no longer realistic.

Coherence

As noted above, rules of coherence guide readers' interpretations
of texts as completed wholes. Rabinowitz explains that academic
criticism gives the greatest value to the not obviously coherent
text, that is, to works in which the critic must overcome some
recalcitrant material to explain the implicit coherence. Conse­
quently, he identifies three main rules: for filling in apparent gaps
in the text; for taking apparently surplus significations and showing
their relevance to general patterns; and for taking disparate materi­
als and relating them through naming, bundling, or thematizing.
Once again, the difference between narrative texts and critical texts
matters. Rabinowitz astutely notes that in the realm of narrative,
readers, especially academics, gravitate toward the not-quite-coher­
ent text. In the realm of criticism, however, readers regard the not­
quite-coherent critical text as seriously deficient.

At the same time, any complex critical argument addressing a

5. Rabinowitz distinguishes the concept of narrative audience from the concept
of narratee developed by Gerald Prince by emphasizing that the narratee is a figure
different from the reader, while the narrative audience is a role that the actual
reader takes on. But when he talks about the narrative audience as “the imaginary
[one] for which the narrator is writing” [95], the distinction becomes less clear. I
have tried to sort out the relation between the two concepts, arguing that they
should be seen as complementary rather than competing: the narratee is the
narrator's addressee, while the narrative audience is the observer role we enter
within the world of the fiction. See chapter 7 of my Narrative as Rhetoric.
range of issues is likely to introduce ideas whose relation may not be entirely clear or, indeed, may even appear incompatible. In the case of Before Reading, the relation between Rabinowitz's ideas about authorial reading and his ideas about the reader's activity, including the influence of ideology on interpretation, may appear not-quite-coherent. If literary works can successfully convey the intentions of their authors, and if Rabinowitz wants to reassert the importance of authorial reading, then doesn't his attention not just to readerly activity but to the inescapable role of ideology in interpretation work against those ideas? Doesn't authorial reading require us to escape from our own ideologies in order to recognize those of the author and the text?

Perhaps the best way to recognize that Rabinowitz's positions remain coherent is to recognize that he is working with a variation of the rule of parallelism: authors' activities in writing are parallel to readers' activities in interpreting, but because both authors and readers are real people not ideal constructs, we should not expect the parallelism to be perfect. To put it another way, Rabinowitz rejects a coherence of the either/or in favor of a coherence of the both/and. In the discussion of notice, I observed that he rejects the either/or logic that led earlier reader theorists to assume that an emphasis on reader response was necessarily antithetical to an interest in authorial reading. Here we can see that he rejects the either/or logic that views author-reader communication as either perfect or impossible. For him such communication is possible and desirable—but far from automatic.

Rabinowitz's embrace of this both/and coherence helps us see what is perhaps the most revolutionary point in the whole book: his complication of the concept of literary form. Form, in his view, is more than just the identifiable features of a text, more even than an intrinsic principle that organizes those features into "these words in this order." Form also includes another dimension, one that exists in the interaction of an author's design and a reader's perception of that design, an interaction dependent on their mutual awareness of socially constructed conventions of writing and reading. Thus, form is not just a property of the text, the author's mind, or the reader's activity. It is something shared among author, text, reader, and culture.
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Strikingly, the playful metaphor of the unassembled swing set embodies the both/and coherence of Rabinowitz's argument and of his new conception of form. Just like that swing set, a text is packaged so that it can be put together into a functional whole. Just as the swing set may contain ambiguous directions, so may the text. When that happens, there will be more than one way to put it together, though the way chosen by any individual reader will be determined less by the directions than by the reader's starting point. Just as the swing set may fall into the hands of an especially determined but relatively unhandy assembler, so too may the text. When that happens, the assembler is likely to fashion something that works, though not in the way it was designed to and probably not as smoothly. Furthermore, the assembler won't recognize that there is another way to assemble the elements of the package until another assembler comes along and points that out. When presented with the reassembled materials, the determined but unhandy assembler should be able to recognize the superiority of this new alternative, but in some cases he may remain unconvinced.

Just as the swing set may fall into the hands of an especially creative assembler who may see possibilities in it that were not apparent to the designer, so too may the text. When that happens, the text is likely to become a more complicated object than it was designed to be; whether that complication makes it function better will vary from case to case.

In short, Rabinowitz's conception of author-reader communication complexly but coherently unites the ideal and the real. His vision of the ideal reaffirms the possibility of successful interpersonal communication through the medium of the text. His vision of the real leads him not to deplore failures to attain the ideal but to seek to understand how such failures shed light on ourselves, our culture, and our politics.

The Rules in Concert: The Conclusion of Before Reading

As in narrative, the rules of notice, signification, configuration, and coherence can operate in concert in critical texts. Perhaps the best example of this convergence in Before Reading occurs in the fi-
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nal two pages of the book, where Rabinowitz sketches a case against close reading, contending that the privileging of close reading means we value only certain kinds of texts, especially those already canonized, and that it limits the number and range of texts we read. He obviously chooses a privileged position for this case: beginnings and endings are the two parts of any text that receive the greatest notice. Once again he relies on the rules of critical judgment: his accurate identification of the privileging of close reading as a dogma of New Criticism is, by this point in the book, enough to make that privileging suspect. Furthermore, by going after what is arguably the most enduring legacy of that critical movement, he is completing with a flourish his pattern of contesting New Critical orthodoxies. Finally, the case for reading a wider range of texts coheres very well with both his explicit and implicit earlier arguments about the importance of canon reform. Indeed, because of the way Rabinowitz's conclusion enacts the convergence of notice, signification, configuration, and coherence, it seems a perfect way to end.

If Before Reading is itself an unassembled swing set, then this foreword has been effort both to assemble it and to climb on and start swinging. But to return to the point of my first paragraph, the assembled swing set itself has the shape of yet more directions for assembly. Thus, swinging on the set has turned out to mean performing further analysis of its assembly. Happily, this fate is not something that all assemblers of Before Reading must face; it is rather a consequence of my starting point, the decision to apply the book's findings to its own construction. I hope that my efforts at assembly and at swinging will provide new readers of the book with a deeper appreciation for its artful construction and launch them into some healthy and rewarding swings of their own. A book with a construction as sturdy as Before Reading is ready to support countless swingers.
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Works Cited


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