INTRODUCTION

Beyond Readings/Before Reading

For literature to happen, the reader is quite as vital as the author.
Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory

Literature is political. It is painful to have to insist on this fact, but the necessity of such insistence indicates the dimensions of the problem.
Judith Fetterley, The Resisting Reader

Whatever critical affiliations we may proclaim, we are all New Critics, in that it requires a strenuous effort to escape notions of the autonomy of the literary work, the importance of demonstrating its unity, and the requirement of “close reading.”
Jonathan Culler, The Pursuit of Signs

As its subtitle suggests, this book has a double focus. On the one hand, it is intended as a contribution to the continuing project of developing a coherent theory of how people read narrative—a project that has engaged critics as diverse as Wayne Booth and Roland Barthes, Judith Fetterley and Wolfgang Iser. It starts from the assumption that one can study narrative structure not only in terms of concrete textual features but also in terms of the shared interpretive strategies by which readers make sense of them. More specifically, the book focuses on a particular temporal moment in the act of interpretation. Very roughly, one can divide interpretation into three phases; while their boundaries are often fuzzy, and while much valuable criticism tends to merge them unsystematically, it is possible to discriminate among them both in theory and in practice. One can study interpretation in terms of what happens after reading has finished, taking more or less completed in-
terpretations as a starting point (David Bleich, for instance, toward the end of Readings and Feelings, studies the ways in which communities negotiate among interpretations that individuals have already produced). One can also look at what happens while the process of reading is taking place (as Kenneth Burke, in his pioneering essay “Psychology and Form,” charts the changing moment-to-moment experience of a text). In this book, I concentrate primarily on an earlier phase, moving one step further back to see what happens before the act of reading even starts. Readers need to stand somewhere before they pick up a book, and the nature of that “somewhere,” I argue, significantly influences the ways in which they interpret (and consequently evaluate) texts. Thus, while I will often need, in the course of my argument, to describe what readers do both while they read and after they finish reading, my fundamental concern will be with the ways in which those activities are already limited by decisions made before the book is even begun.

 Needless to say, any complete discussion of this subject would have to account for the ways that, for instance, readers’ medical presuppositions shape readings of such texts as The Magic Mountain and The Death of Ivan Ilych, the ways that historical knowledge shapes readings of Civil War novels (for example, Gone with the Wind or Margaret Walker’s Jubilee), the ways that attitudes...
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toward imperialism shape readings of Kipling and Mahasveta Devi, or the ways that attitudes toward women shape readings of practically everything. It would also have to account for the ways that readers' knowledge of Shakespeare influences their readings of The Sound and the Fury, the ways that fear of death by burial helps form experiences of "The Fall of the House of Usher," the ways that knowledge of comic tradition influences readings of Catch-22. It would also have to account for the differences (including psychological, gender, historical, cultural, racial, economic) among readers, both as individuals and as classes. As Janice Radway has pointed out in Reading the Romance, for instance, the initial assumptions (and as a consequence, the very processes of reading) are different for the women who read paperback romances and for academic critics. This is all, obviously, too much for a single work, and my aim here will be considerably narrower: to explore, through concrete analysis of particular texts, the ways in which Western readers' prior knowledge of conventions of reading shapes their experiences and evaluations of the narratives they confront.

In other words, this book is neither a complete theory of reading nor a complete taxonomy of narrative conventions, and it focuses less on the abstract possibilities of reading and writing than on what readers and writers have in fact done with narratives. Despite this strong emphasis on practical criticism, though, I do see Before Reading as part of ongoing theoretical conversations centered around reading and narrative, and I am therefore mindful of the criticism lodged against much reader-oriented theory a few years ago by Mary Louise Pratt in "Interpretive Strategies/Strategic Interpretations." Pratt was disturbed by what she saw as a tendency among reader critics to depoliticize the study of literature—and the second aim of this book is to help reverse that tendency by showing how study of reading and reading conventions can in fact help uncover the political presuppositions behind our literary practices. In particular, looking at readers' starting points can help us understand how interpretation comes about and what its implications are—not the implications of the particular texts at hand, but the implications of the very means we use as we go about making sense of them. In other words, in arguing that literature is political, I will be less concerned with the attitudes of particular authors
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than with the ways in which the very act of interpretation is inev­itably a political act.

This position—that interpretation is political—remains more controversial than it ought to be. To be sure, in the past few years, partly because of the pressure of feminist scholars, the study of literature has become more self-consciously political. Nonetheless, as Fetterley points out, those who argue for the political nature of literary study still meet considerable resistance in many quarters. For all the increased interest in the “politics of interpretation”—as evidenced, for instance, by a special issue of Critical Inquiry [September 1982] devoted exclusively to the subject—the recognition that no reading can be politically neutral is far from universal. Indeed, Edward W. Said goes so far as to claim that “an implicit consensus has been building for the past decade in which the study of literature is considered to be profoundly, even constitutively non-political”—and though one can debate whether this consensus has in fact been gaining ground, there is little doubt that it still has considerable sway in the academy.4

The persistence of the belief that it is possible (and even proper) to develop a nonpolitical interpretive practice stems in part from the continuing influence of New Critical assumptions. Recently, of course, it has become increasingly common to pledge dis-allege from New Criticism: feminists, Marxists, structuralists, Derrideans, Lacanians, and subjectivists all agree (if on nothing else) that it has outlived its usefulness and that we are living, in Frank Lentricchia’s phrase, “After the New Criticism.” Yet deeply ingrained ideologies are no more easily escaped when they are aesthetic than when they are political, and New Criticism remains a pedal point beneath our literary studies. It is not only, as Lentricchia points out, that one can find the “traces or scars” of New Criticism in the work of contemporary theorists.5 Beyond that, New Criticism, in fairly unmodified form, still provides, among other things, the basis for secondary and undergraduate education in America, including the education that molded most American

5. Lentricchia, After the New Criticism, xiii. As he neatly puts it, New Criticism “is dead in the way that an imposing and repressive father-figure is dead.”
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"post–New Critics" and that continues to mold the students they now teach. And it continues as a lingua franca among literary scholars even today. No matter how forcefully contemporary critics insist on their distance from their forefathers (and I use the masculine advisedly), most of them maintain that distance only, as Jonathan Culler puts it, "with strenuous effort."

In order to understand how New Critical principles represented what Richard Ohmann calls "a flight from politics," let me begin by explaining more precisely what I mean by the politics of interpretation, since the phrase has come to mean different things to different people: note, for instance, the bewildering variety of definitions proposed in the special issue of Critical Inquiry. In this book, I will be using the term politics in a more limited way than, say, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., does in that collection, when he broadly equates politics and values; I will be using it in a less restricted sense than Walter Benn Michaels does, when he suggests that politics is at stake only when one is talking about free choice. Politics, as used here, refers to the systems of power relations among groups (genders, races, nationalities, social classes, among others) in any social situation—systems that may be in part formalized (for instance, through law), but that are always in part invisible. (Indeed, one of the functions of ideology—and literature helps in this function—is to naturalize these power relationships. As Gayatri Spivak puts it, "Ideology in action is what a group takes to be natural and self-evident.") And in my examination of the politics of interpretation, I will focus not so much, as Richard Ohmann and Steven Mailloux have so effectively done, on the specific academic politics that have led certain interpretive practices to prevail, but more broadly on some of the ways in which any interpretive practice is always politically engaged. More specifically, I hope that my arguments will help us recognize that any interpretive practice is intertwined with politics as I have defined

6. Ohmann, English in America, 79.
7. Hirsch, "Politics of Theories of Interpretation"; Michaels, "Is There a Politics of Interpretation?"
9. See, for instance, Ohmann, English in America, and Mailloux, "Rhetorical Hermeneutics."
it in at least two ways: it is partially caused by (although not completely determined by) the political systems around it, and in turn it situates itself with respect to those systems (for instance, by reinforcing or by contesting them).

New Criticism obscured these relations between interpretation and politics in several ways. Most obviously, New Criticism tended to dehistoricize literary texts. David Daiches' claim that "ideally... every poem, as a self-contained work of art, should be regarded as though it were contemporary and anonymous"\(^\text{10}\) may be an exaggerated version of a New Critical principle. But it is an exaggerated version of a principle still embedded in much academic practice, and it makes discussion of extratextual political relationships (including those that influenced the writer and his or her intended readers, as well as those that affect modern readers) by definition nonliterary.

But New Criticism depoliticized the study of literature in other, more subtle ways, too. Most important for my purposes was its treatment of reading, specifically its blurring of the distinction between the activity of the critic and that of the reader. True, New Critical theory suggested that the function of criticism was to describe the formal unity of a text; but in practice, especially when New Critics were studying fiction, description often gave way to interpretation. Literary critics, to a large extent, were considered expert readers who were expected to produce model interpretations, and academic publication turned more and more into the production of new readings.

This move from description to explication resulted, in part, from the New Critics' conception of theme, which they defined in such a way that it was quite close to what, in everyday speech, is called meaning. According to Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in their extremely influential *Understanding Fiction*, for instance, theme is "what a piece of fiction stacks up to," "the pervasive and unifying view of life which is embodied in the total narrative."\(^\text{11}\) Theme or idea was not simply one literary element among others; rather it was the dominant force in the New Critics' view of fic-
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tion, in much the same way that “end” was the shaping force in Aristotle’s view of tragedy. Thus, despite claims to the contrary, there was a covert hierarchy in Brooks and Warren’s first article of faith, “that the structure of a piece of fiction, in so far as that piece of fiction is successful, must involve a vital and functional relationship between the idea and the other elements in that structure.” As a consequence, they insisted “that to be good, a piece of fiction must involve an idea of some real significance for mature and thoughtful human beings,” and they therefore tended to equate aesthetic and philosophical value, broadly construed.12 It may have often been labeled formalism, but New Critical analysis of fiction in fact steered more toward interpretation than toward formal description.

As Culler has argued, this emphasis on interpretation offered enormous pedagogical benefits, for it brought a refreshing democracy to the classroom.13 The teacher was no longer a scholar whose task was to dispense information that students could never accumulate on their own; instead, he or she became the first among equals, engaged in the sharing of a learnable skill. This, especially when combined with New Criticism’s ahistorical slant, tended to make the individual student count by promising that he or she too could, with practice, read well. But the scholarly impact was less salutary, for by equating the positions of the critic and the reader, New Criticism offered no perspective from which the act of reading itself could be critically examined.

Explication, of course, is not necessarily inimical to political analysis, and it would not be fair to say that New Criticism refused to touch at all on such concerns. But to the extent that they did treat politics, New Critics remained focused on the world view manifested by an individual author in the themes of a specific text or texts. Thus, while they were able and willing to discuss the value of the particular ideas expressed in a narrative, their analyses

12. Ibid., xvii.
13. Culler, Pursuit of Signs, esp. 3–5. Even among critics antagonistic to New Criticism, there is widespread appreciation of its democratic tendencies. See Ohmann’s claim that New Criticism “at least aimed toward a democracy of critical ideas, available to all” [English in America, 85], and Said’s claim that “New Criticism, for all its elitism, was strangely populist in intention” (“Opponents, Audiences,” 4–5).
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did not touch on the broader area of the politics of interpretation itself, did not touch on the ways that interpretive strategies, for instance, might be considered among the “practices” and “rituals” that Louis Althusser sees as part of the “material existence” of ideology. For those shared interpretive practices were viewed as the basis, not the subject matter, for inquiry. New Criticism, in the end, was a style, not an analysis, of reading.

Of course, since Aristotle, there have always been critics whose work led, in Culler’s phrase, “beyond interpretation” to an examination of the grounds of interpretation itself—to a study not of what a work means but of how it comes to mean. But when New Criticism dominated the American academy, such directions for study were the exception rather than the rule. It is only since perhaps the 1960s or 1970s that noninterpretive criticism has begun to reassert itself and that broader ideological questions, beyond the ideas of the author, have again become widely available as areas for extensive exploration. Not accidentally, this shift away from interpretation has gone hand in hand with a growing interest in reading—reading not as the end of criticism but as its very subject matter.

As Pratt’s critiques make clear, however, the study of reading and interpretation as activities in their own right doesn’t necessarily lead to a recognition of the politics of interpretation. Thus, for instance, although Wolfgang Iser does talk about the ways in which ideological commitment influences readers, he treats ideology much as the New Critics did, as something that simply interferes with proper reading. And it might not at first seem that my central interest here—narrative conventions—would yield a particularly fruitful political harvest. Indeed, much of my description of reading conventions per se (Chapters 2–5) may not initially appear to bear directly on politics at all. But as Hayden White puts it, the politics of interpretation “arises in those interpretive prac-

15. Specifically, Iser claims that commitment reduces the reader’s ability “to accept the basic theme-and-horizon structure of comprehension which regulates the text-reader interaction” (The Act of Reading, 202)—as if the kind of commitment to prior norms that he espouses were not an ideological commitment of its own.
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Practices which are ostensibly most remote from overtly political concerns, practices which are carried out under the aegis of a purely disinterested search for the truth.' 16 Conventions, in other words, are one of the grounds on which the politics of art is mapped out; often invisible, they serve as enabling conditions for literature's ideological structures. Thus, study of literary conventions can help illuminate the connections between politics on the one hand and interpretation and evaluation, as the academy currently practices them, on the other.

The last two chapters reveal some of those connections. Let me say from the outset that I do not offer my analyses in a spirit of purely disinterested pursuit of knowledge. Rather, I hope to provide one more tool to help us change our world. As Spivak puts it, "One cannot . . . 'choose' to step out of ideology. The most responsible 'choice' seems to be to know it as best one can, recognize it as best one can, and through one's necessarily inadequate interpretation, to work to change it." 17 Study of conventions, that is, can help us escape some of the more confining effects of our culture by unmasking them, and can thus help us transform both reading and teaching into more liberating activities than they currently are. Not that I am proposing a specific program of social changes; nor, for that matter, am I attempting anything like an exhaustive account of the connections between literary conventions and political power. Rather, my analyses of specific texts and the ways readers approach them are intended as exemplifications of a kind of criticism that can be used more generally to make literature a source of social transformation. Thus, for instance, while I try to reveal some of the ways in which present practices of canon formation in the American academy influence our view of women's

16. White, "Politics of Historical Interpretation," 113. Although I agree with White about where politics is found, however, I do not follow his lead with regard to what it is. "This 'politics' has to do with the kind of authority the interpreter claims vis-à-vis the established political authorities . . . on the one side, and vis-à-vis other interpreters . . . on the other, as the basis of whatever rights he conceives himself to possess and whatever duties he feels obliged to discharge as a professional seeker of truth" [emphasis in original]. This notion of politics seems quite restricted; it has little to do, say, with the activities of a nonprofessional reader as he or she happens to be "interpreting" a Harlequin Romance on the subway.

literature (and hence influence our gender relations), I would hope
that the analysis might not only change what and how we read, but
might also encourage a change in the way we live. I would hope, as
well, that the analysis would be expanded by others to deal with
the ways in which our academic practice marginalizes or excludes
other types of literature (and hence other groups): literature from
what is called the third world, for instance.

A word about my choice of texts. There is a complex rela-
tionship, not only between what you value and what you read, but
also between what you read and how you read. As Geoffrey
Hartman has argued, “We do not possess a careful study of theories
of criticism in the light of their text-milieu: how theory depends
on a canon, on a limited group of texts, often culture-specific or
national.” Still, even without that kind of study, it seems safe to
claim that the relationship between a theory and the texts called
upon to exemplify it works both ways. Once you know a reader’s
critical principles, you can, within limits, predict what texts he or
she will gravitate toward. Given the theoretical perspective of The
Rhetoric of Fiction, it is not surprising that Wayne Booth refers to
Jane Austen and Henry James more often than he does to Gertrude
Stein. But you can also infer critical principles from a critic’s basic
reading list. “To take the metaphysical poets as one’s base or
touchstone,” notes Hartman, “and to extend their ‘poetics’ toward
modern poetry and then all poetry, will produce a very different
result from working from Cervantes toward Pyncheon, or from
Hölderlin toward Heidegger.” Or—he might have added—from
Ann Radcliffe toward Joyce Carol Oates.

I will speak in more detail in Chapter 7 about how the rela-
tionships among what you value, what you read, and how you read
(specifically, the interpretive strategies you use to make sense of
texts) help perpetuate canons. Meanwhile, let me point out that in
choosing my examples for this book, I have been wary of the ways
in which a presupposed set of exemplary texts can distort the theo-
reries built upon it. Thus, although I have drawn my examples

18. Hartman, Criticism in the Wilderness, 5. See also Eagleton’s claim that
“most literary theories . . . unconsciously ‘foreground’ a particular literary genre,
and derive their general pronouncements from this” [Literary Theory, 51].
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largely from narrative fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I have tried to make sure that they do not fall within the boundaries of any generally recognized text-milieu. My hope is that in making Chandler dance with Chekhov, Robbe-Grillet with Southworth, I have been able to sidestep at least one limitation of most contemporary practice.

I have been especially attentive to the noncanonical, including [but not limited to] popular fiction, for three reasons. First—and this is intended as a descriptive, not an evaluative, claim—the academy tends to favor complexity; as a result, the modern classics of our culture tend to be elaborate. Therefore, if one wants to examine literature that is more formulaic because its underlying principles are easier to spot, one is almost forced to study the noncanonical. Second, any study of reading will depend, implicitly or explicitly, in part on records of readings by others, including those public readings that take the form of articles and reviews. And it helps if those records are fundamentally accurate. Noncanonical literature has been less subject to willfully eccentric reading than the canon has, because it has [until recently] been less frequently studied in academic journals, which encourage novelty even at the expense of sincerity. Third, and most important, it is impossible to examine the mechanism of literary evaluation itself without studying both texts that are highly regarded by our literary judges and texts that are generally deemed inferior. Mary Louise Pratt has demonstrated how arguments about the distinction between “literary” and “nonliterary” language have been flawed by critics’ tendency to scrutinize only the first half of the dichotomy.20 The same charge could be leveled against much study of so-called literary quality: it tends to take, as its evidence, those works that are deemed good to begin with, assuming that the qualities discovered in them are the cause of that goodness. But there is no reason to believe that canonical texts are simply high-quality representatives of literature as whole, or that their goodness resides in discoverable features within them. Indeed, as I argue in Chapter 7, texts become canonized in part because they work with particular reading strategies. But if canonical texts are studied by themselves,

those strategies are never put to the test. Instead, they are implicitly universalized—treated as the way to read—a process that in the end serves to justify the initial canonical choice rather than to examine it.

As it is, my selection of texts—tied as it is to my own experiences—is narrower than it ought to be. Even beyond the focus on narrative (a narrow focus to begin with), even beyond the historical limits, there is little discussion of folklore, of oral literature, of literature from Asia, Africa, or Latin America, or even from parts of Europe with which I am unfamiliar. The conclusions I draw will therefore need to be refined or developed by others with different areas of expertise. Still, I hope that the book that follows will be one more step in the academy's slow retreat from the position that professional readings of Moby Dick and Ulysses are appropriate paradigms for the experience of reading narrative.

Let me point out, too, that the range of texts is more restricted in the last chapter and a half, where I engage in more sustained analyses of particular novels. Here, where I try to draw inferences about culture from the ways that people read texts, it seems appropriate to center on texts from the culture with which I have had the most experience—but also from a period from which I have some historical distance. I have therefore chosen my examples from American fiction of the 1920s and 1930s. However, although this is the most textually concentrated part of my argument, my concerns are methodological even here: I am less interested in the texts themselves than in providing concrete instances of a type of analysis through which we can become more self-conscious about what lies behind the ways we appropriate them. I therefore hope that my arguments will be of use even to readers with little interest in those novels or that period.

I have so far, rather disingenuously, used the words reading, reader, and convention as if they were unproblematic. Of course, they are not, as the various types of reader criticism now current make clear. Before getting to the conventions of reading in detail, it is therefore necessary to take a shorter detour to survey the process of reading more generally, to explain more fully what reading is, who readers are, and what kind of conventions they depend on as they read and interpret.