



THEO DAVIS

**Formalism, Experience  
and the Making of  
American Literature  
in the Nineteenth Century**

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FORMALISM, EXPERIENCE,  
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AMERICAN LITERATURE IN  
THE NINETEENTH  
CENTURY

Theo Davis offers a new account of the emergence of a national literature in the United States. Taking American literature's universalism as an organizing force that must be explained rather than simply exposed, she contends that Emerson, Hawthorne, and Stowe's often noted investigations of experience are actually based in a belief that experience is an abstract category governed by typicality, not the property of the individual subject. Additionally, these authors locate the form of the literary work in the domain of abstract experience, projected out of – not embodied in – the text. After tracing the emergence of these beliefs from Scottish Common Sense philosophy and through early American literary criticism, Davis analyzes how American authors' prose seeks to work an art of abstract experience. In so doing, she reconsiders the place of form in literary studies today.

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## *Introduction: New Critical formalism and identity in Americanist criticism*

How are experience and literary form related in nineteenth-century American literature? I enter into that question, this book's central concern, through literary nationalists' counterintuitive assertion that America was a singularly uninteresting subject. In the words of one such critic, W. H. Gardiner, "You see cultivated farms, and neat villages, and populous towns, full of health, and labor, and happiness . . . Where then are the romantic associations, which are to plunge your reader, in spite of reason and common sense, into the depths of imaginary woe and wonder?"<sup>1</sup> From this barrenly cheerful land American literature magically blossomed – in the literary historical narrative envisioned by nineteenth-century nationalists, and adapted by early twentieth-century critics such as Van Wyck Brooks and F. O. Matthiessen.<sup>2</sup> Celebrating American literature's purported creation of a shared national identity has subsequently been dismantled as a falsely universalist construction obscuring the multiplicities and material negotiations of the lives of individuals and groups within the United States.<sup>3</sup> My intention is neither to revive the early twentieth-century celebration of American literature's role in founding a national culture (as in recent works that would rearticulate American national identity through reference to its literary history), nor to extend the critique of it (a critique which now includes analysis of the wider context of the Americas as constitutive of and obscured by the totalizing notion of "America").<sup>4</sup> For the ongoing commitment to dismantling in order to expand the definition of America, either within the nation's borders or in relation to the Americas at large, actually ingrains still more deeply the belief that some core American experience and identity is the fundamental concern of Americanist literary studies. I challenge that fundamental principle in this book through my accounts of what counts as "American experience," or rather of experience in America. To do so, I begin with the question, What would you have to believe about both literature and experience to think it would be so hard to write about upstate New York, Boston, or Virginia?

To nineteenth-century literary nationalists, the core problem was that recognizably American experiences had not been treated previously in literature: the very fact that American life was an unfamiliar subject meant that it was considered unsuitable for literature. To maintain that position, one must not believe that literature exists as a way to take the specific richness of personal experience, or local experience, with innate value in its very situation in place, time, matter, and self, and transform it into a universally resonant literary artwork. Instead, these writers and critics believed that experience is a repertoire of possible responses to typical objects and events, and that literature uses the written text to call up and then to shape a work of art out of those conceptual, possible experiences. Gardiner specified the conditions of making experience interesting in literature that produced the apparent problem in the first place: "The characters of fiction should be descriptive of classes, and not of individuals, or they will seem to want the touch of nature, and fail in that dramatic interest which results from a familiarity with the feelings and passions pourtrayed [sic] and a consciousness of their truth."<sup>5</sup> Gardiner advances a remarkable notion: the "touch of nature" and the "truth" of "feelings and passions" are to be found in classes of person, not particular individuals, and are evoked by the articulation of generalities. Without such generalities to draw upon, a writer has no hope of soliciting that "dramatic interest" that is consistently seen as central to the work of the writer in this time. (A later critic would approvingly note that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "seize[d] upon the attention" and held it fast "until the end" – thereby accomplishing "the chief object aimed at by the romancer.")<sup>6</sup> In this frame of belief, it actually would seem all but impossible to write a book using just language and an individual person's set of ideas and impressions of a particular place; the lack of a set of presumptively common ideas about what counted as an idea or a feeling that a person would have about typical events was to lack not the subject of literature, but its very medium.

My central contention in the chapters that follow is that a range of American writers, among them Emerson, Hawthorne, and Stowe, conceived of experience as a domain of hypothetical, typical responses, and that their central literary project was the evocation and shaping of such typical experience. I argue that the present-day theoretical premise that experience is by definition subjective, and that literary form embodies not only subjective experience but also historical context, is at odds with the framing conceptions of major American authors. In the first part of this introduction, I survey this claim about the operation of literature and experience in a significant portion of antebellum American texts. In the second part

of the introduction, I contend that current accounts of the relationship of experience to form are not only inaccurate to the texts under consideration, but are themselves untenable. In reconsidering the theoretical problem of form and experience, I suggest that we should no longer cast the study of American literature as the ongoing articulation of American identity.

## I

With political independence from Britain solidified by the War of 1812, nationalists increasingly sought to define an independent, recognizably American culture. In literature, this entailed a shift from eighteenth-century articulations of American literature through neoclassical abstraction and the literature of the public sphere, committed to disembodied citizens and universality, to articulations of American literature as a way to address life and experience in the nation in newly particular terms. At the same time, the rise of liberal individualism also drew on and fostered a literature devoted to the privacy and interiority of the subject. These two moves, towards the nationalist literature of American experience, and the liberal literature of personal experience, appear to work in harmony with one another, evoking an interconnection between the liberal subject and national identity. The three major authors I examine in this project have all been seen to exemplify this turn to a literature of experience, both personal and national: in Hawthorne's exploration of sexual, psychological, and national identity; Emerson's declaration of the self-reliance of both the individual and the nation; and Stowe's demand that a commitment to emancipation follow from shared sorrow over the destruction of the family. And the minor figures I discuss, Bronson Alcott and John Neal, seem exemplary in their commitment to rank individualism, which for Alcott opens beyond the nation to the universal, and for Neal is tied to the articulation of American identity. Nevertheless, I argue that these authors articulate experience as an object of disinterested contemplation, a typical experience governed by principles of normality and abstraction rather than the accumulation of an individual's particular life events and responses to them. That common understanding of experience is critical to these authors' conception of literature. Encompassing criticism, fiction, essays, even transcribed conversations, these texts work both to represent and to analyze experience, in so doing composing a writing of analytic invention which would shape and project experience.<sup>7</sup>

The major mode of American prose in the first half of the nineteenth century that I explore seeks to produce in its reader an ideal experience by deploying three main textual practices: first, by representing experiences in

terms of the hypothetical or the probable, as when a narrator refers to how a character would be likely to feel, and second, by focusing on types and emblems, such as the scarlet letter or the transparent eyeball. In some cases, authors proceed by generalizing actual experience into types, but they more often explore types and emblems as a medium through which to approach experience. Third, they investigate how emblems and types came to be and how they are likely to affect the reader. The tension between the hermetic image and the unbounded extension of its origins and potential impact characterizes the writing of all the authors I examine. These formal features of the text, however, all point away from themselves and towards the form of the experience of a hypothetical reader. And what is most surprising about literary form, in this body of literature, is the way it is conceived primarily as a property of experience, and only secondarily as a property of the text. Thus, as I suggest in the readings that follow, the formal features of the texts point toward formal features – shapes to be articulated – in the domain of abstracted experience.<sup>8</sup>

My account of experience in this literature contrasts with much of the most important Americanist criticism of past decades in departing from commitment to both the category of identity and subjective experience, and the idea that abstractions must be thought of in some dynamic relation with subjective experience. These commitments grow out of the poststructural critique of the Enlightenment's elevation of reason and the universal at the expense of the body and the contingent. That critique is then applied to the historical narrative of the transition of America from republic to nation, as if the emergence of nationalism evidenced the theoretically necessary resurgence of the material specificities denied by republicanism's rhetoric of abstracted citizenship. For example, in *American Incarnation*, Myra Jehlen argued that modernity freed individuals from their economic, bodily, historical, and social ties but also traumatically cut them off from the world; American ideology and literature would strive for a reunion she describes as incarnation, "incorporat[ion]," or "embodi[ment]."<sup>9</sup> For Jehlen, in America the liberal ideal of the abstracted subject is healed by its transformation into the identity of the American: "Grounded, literally, in American soil, liberalism's hitherto arguable theses metamorphosed into nature's material necessities."<sup>10</sup> Of course, Jehlen was hardly praising this transformation, and an enormous volume of scholarship in nineteenth-century American literature is organized around not only a categorical opposition of experience, framed as entirely personal, embodied, and material, to the abstract universal of reason, but also a dual imperative to unveil the untenability of this opposition, and to subvert it by bringing out the elided grain of

experience. Dana Nelson's *National Manhood* explains how the abstract, egalitarian definition of the citizen was replaced with the limited identity of the "white man," as "a nationally shared 'nature.'"<sup>11</sup> Russ Castronovo speaks of how the "abstract personhood" of the US citizen "is rhetorically, if not actually, financed by the experiences, memories, and stories of others; the privileges of (white male) citizenship are tied up with the hyper-embodiment of blacks, women, and workers."<sup>12</sup> And Lori Merish writes that "the abjected materiality of the Other's body (and the recognition of unfreedom) continued to haunt the edges of the subject's identity, threatening its fantasies of political liberty."<sup>13</sup> But whereas some critics saw this as revealing the essential corruption of the American individual, and of liberalism in general, it could also seem more like a descriptive assertion about the complex ways in which liberal individualism could be sustained, as in the work of not only Jehlen but also Richard Brodhead, Sacvan Bercovitch, and Lauren Berlant.<sup>14</sup>

Americanist scholarship has, in showing the imbrications of the abstract and the embodied, increasingly explored the connections between the public and the private, and between the rational and the emotional, in such a way as to revise the frame of a transition from the eighteenth-century's abstract citizen to the nineteenth-century's nationalist liberal. Jay Fliegelman's *Declaring Independence* deems "the age of reason" a "misleading rubric," and persuasively explores how public speaking in republican America worked out "the period's antirationalist preoccupation with ruling passions, desire, and an involuntary moral sense."<sup>15</sup> Criticism on the nineteenth century has also pursued the interconnection of private emotions and the public sphere even in the nineteenth century. A signal work in this direction was Gillian Brown's *Domestic Individualism*, which pointed out that "nineteenth-century American individualism takes on its peculiarly 'individualistic' properties as domesticity inflects it with these values of interiority, privacy, and psychology," and this is through conceiving of the ownership of objects as a form of emotional identification.<sup>16</sup> The implication that the private individual was in a dynamic interaction with the external workings of capitalism has been extended particularly in criticism concerned with sympathy and sentiment. Glenn Hendler's *Public Sentiments* argues that the novel is an institution of the public sphere, and explains how private emotional life is caught up in a drama of being in public.<sup>17</sup> Stacey Margolis's account of *The Public Life of Privacy* attacks the entire tradition of viewing the American novel as concerned with liberal individualism, maintaining that the novel and individualism alike understood the self to be defined only by "public effects."<sup>18</sup> If we once had a

historical account of a republican era committed to the Enlightenment citizen and his separation from material interests followed by a subsequent national period in which the citizen was replaced with the identity of the American, we now have an internecine account in which the citizen of the republic was always caught up with body, feeling, interest, and the American was also still engaged in efforts of publicity and universality.

Such reconfigurations of the subject in nineteenth-century America have emerged in tandem with theoretical investigations of feelings and experience as traveling between subjects, notably those by Rei Terada and Martin Jay. Terada argues that emotion and experience are by definition incompatible with the notion of a subject. The "ideology of emotion," writes Terada, "diagrams emotion as something lifted from a depth to surface." In this specious logic, "expression tropes" serve "to extrapolate a human subject circularly from the phenomenon of emotion."<sup>19</sup> Terada also attacks a content theory in which "emotions entail beliefs and apply to objects," as emotion is used to posit a link of inner to outer world. In contrast to the expression and content theories, Terada argues that emotion is the product of the interpretation of representations: "We are not ourselves without representations that mediate us, and it is through those representations that emotions get felt."<sup>20</sup> Terada's overarching claim is that the interpretation of mental representations splits the subject, and produces emotion and experience. In Terada's words, "experience is experience of self-differentiability. The idea of emotion is as compelling as it is because in the honest moments of philosophy it has served as the name of that experience."<sup>21</sup>

The idea that experience might not be tied to the individual subject is also central to Martin Jay's recent history of the concept of experience in Western philosophy. Jay aims to undo the basic sense that the Enlightenment wrested the contingent materiality of the subject from the abstract, universal function of reason; in so doing, he works against the identitarian, possessive account of experience. Jay points out that in broad terms the Enlightenment produced a "split" between "the psychological subject with all its personal history and idiosyncratic appetites" and the objectivity of experience in both empiricism and Kantian transcendentalism, in which experience constitutes "the imposition of categories and forms by the transcendental mind on the multiplicity of sensations."<sup>22</sup> Not only does experience, then, *include* subjectivity, objectivity, and transcendence as possible formations, the category of experience itself can be conceived of as the venue in which the split of universal and particular, and more locally of subject and object, might be integrated.<sup>23</sup> Later accounts of pragmatism and poststructuralism that Jay explores also investigate how

experience can appear to be the way in which the subjective and the universal are reconciled.

Jay takes a capacious survey of the term's incarnations in which, notwithstanding its myriad aspects, it always means a progressive openness to otherness. Opposing the "exclusivist fortresses" of possessive and identitarian experience, Jay concludes that experience "involve[s] a willingness to open the most seemingly integrated and self-contained subject to the outside, thus allowing the perilous, but potentially rewarding journey to begin."<sup>24</sup> For Terada, every account of emotion turns out to be an experience of self-differentiability, and this serves as a cumulative empirical demonstration of what experience is. Jay and Terada both offer theories of experience that they support through empirical analysis of a series of texts in temporal progression, as if proof of what experience is must be accrued through exemplification of what experience has been. But it's also critical that for Jay, the commitment to experience is a commitment to how experience structures belief; he is expressing a pragmatist account of experience as the ever-expanding ground of ever-changing beliefs, which is ultimately to posit what we are instead of what we believe, but only to do so on that grand scale – hence his commitment to a highly inclusive method, and to a subject who seems to open himself up to swallow the world whole and still have room for more. In his commitment to melding experience with belief, Jay shares much with Terada – for she too, envisioning a world where there are no subjects, only the self-representation of emotions, posits a fusion of meaning with being that represents the triumph of identitarianism, insofar as being committed to the connection of representation and belief to experience and affect is to be committed only to experience and affect. Hence historical accounts of how experience has always worked serve, for Jay and Terada, in place of arguments for what experience is or what we should believe about it. This is perhaps why, although Jay and Terada are both interested in experience without a subject, the subject remains central to each of their accounts, to be rather ecstatically annihilated, or cowered from, in Terada and to be gently exposed and transformed by an encounter with the world in Jay. Thus, these theoretical approaches are close to the historicism of the Americanists: for all, the historical location of cases in which the subject has been pried out of its isolation serve implicitly as arguments that the subject is always thus compromised and that the notion of possessive experience that has been so central not only to accounts of nineteenth-century America but to modern identity theory is theoretically, because historically, untenable. In so doing, of course, such works maintain the logic of possessive experience (you are what you've been through).

In the articulations of American literary experience that I analyze, there is a single, coherent understanding of a typical experience, not a negotiation of two differing registers, private and public, feeling and reason. In the account of experience, and of literary experience in particular, in American literature that I offer, the notion of the individual and his possessive relation to experience is marginal; the notion of “my experience” as somehow inherently relevant and interesting, because it is either different from or analogous to yours, is basically absent. The subject can appear to evaporate, to stand as a shadow, or to be a pedestal for the full formation of experience; it is used and abandoned with little fanfare. The subject is not so much critiqued, expanded, or revealed as imbricated in the market, the social, or the public sphere, as shown to be incidental to concerns about experience as literature can evoke and shape it. This means that the major recent accounts of American literature (as a falsely universal project rejecting the contingency of experience, or as a pragmatist and cosmopolitan negotiation of the contingent and the universal) share a commitment to the primacy of subjective experience in opposition to abstract universals that does not fit the texts they consider. In other words, I contend that the entire concept of the contingent as it relates to the universal is based on a mistaken conception about the framing terms for speaking of experience and literature in America in the first half of the nineteenth century.

The concept of literary tradition as an expression of national identity to which some critics have begun to return depends on a misreading of the operation of experience, nation, and literature in the very works most often marshaled for evidence of such accounts of American literature. My point is not that we can happily see that in fact American authors got it right, and thus pursue a corrected account of experience that is still an American tradition. Nor am I arguing that experience should be wiped aside; without a better account of it, we will not move beyond the current dynamic between universal reason and contingent experience. We can't move beyond that dynamic by picking one side over the other, or by collapsing them together – because neither approach really gets at the form of literary experience.

## II

To discuss experience as part of literature has been, in Americanist criticism and theory, to do one of two things: to talk about the experience of reading as a fact about the subject, or to talk about the experience of reading as a



way in which the meaning of the text is brought into being.<sup>25</sup> Experience is, in either case, seen as fundamentally subjective – defined by the person reading (the difference is whether the interest is just in the subject, or in the way the subject makes meaning). My concern with experience is, in the readings that comprise this book, neither with the subject, nor with the way the subject shapes meaning. It is, instead, with the proposition that experience is a projection out of – caused by, not shaping – certain texts. Such experience is crucially distinguished from the actual experience of any subjects.

My readings depend, in other words, on an account of experience different from that present in the criticism of two major Americanists, Walter Benn Michaels and Myra Jehlen. Both Michaels and Jehlen perceive the urgent question of this time to be the divide between the commitment to identity, as a commitment to experience, and a commitment to beliefs and meanings independent from identity. If commitment to identity embraces tolerance for the way each of us is differently shaped and has different access to cultural discourse, it is also inarguable and thus leads to either a peacefully fractured society or a global condition of violence between identities. Commitment to beliefs as knowledge that we have reasons for, and that we can argue our way into or out of (rather than just inhabit, as if we were all allegorical images of our pasts) offers the universalism of a world where all parties can speak with one another on the same terms. But it also depends, as has been frequently objected, on a belief in the irrelevance of experience to our beliefs (it is not all right for me to be Catholic and you Protestant just because we were brought up that way – one of us is going to hell), and a belief in the universality of reason, which can be heedless of the power of experience and identity, and even coercive in its commitment to the possibility or prospect of agreement. In the face of this broad problem, Michaels argues against identity *per se*, while Jehlen argues for the adjudication of the relations between identity and belief, and between the contingent and the universal. These concerns turn, in each case, on a commitment to a certain account of how experience is relevant to meaning: Michaels argues that we must not consider experience, only meaning; Jehlen argues that experience is necessarily part of and constitutive of meaning. However, their very opposition to one another about the relevance of experience to belief and to meaning is founded upon a shared commitment to experience as subjective in its entirety. Subjective experience is, in both their accounts of literature and of culture more broadly, a blanket term in which no distinctions can be made, in which everything must count, and count equally. For each, moreover, this account of experience as by definition subjective is

bound up in an interpretation of New Critical formalism as itself an appeal to the way that meaning can be fused into such experience, so that New Critical formalism's commitment to how a thing is expressed becomes a commitment to how a thing is experienced. Each critic frames identitarian commitment to the dependence of meaning and belief upon experience as a version of New Critical formalism's commitment to literature as a fusion of the concrete experience with the universal.

Yet to be committed to form does not necessarily involve either an elision of experience altogether or a surrender to subjective experience, even if these are the options presented in the work of Michaels, Jehlen, and new formalist criticism. Here I rely particularly on Steven Knapp's *Literary Interest*, a brilliant investigation of why literature might seem to matter. Knapp co-authored with Michaels the essay "Against Theory," which argued that the text's meaning was identical to the author's intention; thus, appeals to intention to explain meaning were empty.<sup>26</sup> Knapp and Michaels argued the impossibility of believing that different beliefs were equally true – the impossibility of really believing, in other words, that belief is relative. They explained that we really do believe what we believe (that's what makes a belief different from a surmise, a preference, or even an opinion), and that we believe it for reasons. Hence, we are always capable of being persuaded to change our beliefs by appeals to better reasons, and are not bound to them by our experience or identity. Notwithstanding the shared authorship of "Against Theory," Knapp's position in *Literary Interest* upon experience differs importantly from Michaels's in *The Shape of the Signifier*. And as I will discuss below, the difference between their accounts of experience turns on a difference in their accounts of the New Critical formalism of W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley.

In *The Shape of the Signifier*, Michaels maintains there are two mutually exclusive ways of looking at a text: interpreting its meaning or exploring one's experience of it. If we take the (mistaken) route of choosing to think our experience of a text matters, "we have no principled reason not to count everything that's part of our experience as part of the work."<sup>27</sup> This commitment to all of experience is, in Michaels's account, the ambition of Minimalist art: it wants everything around it to be part of it, as if a sculpture were no different in kind from a table. In Minimalist art practice, we see that to choose experience is to choose everything in it: "there are no boundaries *within* your experience, no boundaries other than the physical limits. Everything that is contributing to the experience (the wall on which the painting is hung as well as the painting) is as much a part of it as

everything else” (90). In contrast, Michaels argues that Robert Smithson’s work depends on making a distinction between art and the rest of our experience. In regard to Smithson’s framing of piles of rocks, Michaels observes: “it’s the act of containment that produces the concept of art. It is the ‘container’ (the frame) that makes the art because it is the frame that renders much of the experience of the beholder (his experience of everything outside the frame) and thus his experience as such irrelevant” (93). In this quotation, Michaels allows a possibility of a partitioning of experience in the phrasing of a boundary that “renders much of the experience of the beholder (his experience of everything outside the frame)” “irrelevant,” for if this is so, some part of his experience remains relevant. To say part of the experience matters and part of it doesn’t is to have departed from the original definition of experience as something that axiomatically matters in every aspect of its appearance to the individual subject. But Michaels asserts instead that “experience as such” is “irrelevant.” For Michaels, to propose that part of an experience matters and part of it doesn’t is to have represented a meaning and to have declared experience per se out of the question. As he puts it, this is so even just in *looking*: “[Smithson’s] glance leaves the shape of the ground – its topography – untouched but utterly alters its ontology; it is the difference between the infinite and a map of the infinite, between a thing and a thing that represents” (95). The claim that making a distinction within experience is to move out of experience and into representation also occurs in Michaels’s discussion of James Welling’s photographs. What concerns him is the way they bracket or crop the things they are photographs of, so that the photograph no longer reads as a view of that object per se. Once the photograph isn’t a view of an object, it is a “representation” (105). In Michaels’s account, abstraction (not representing something) is indistinguishable from Minimalism’s version of art as just objects; for form is just an object of experience. Once a distinction is made within experience, it has to be a shift into representation of meaning; it can’t be a marking of shape, of pure form.

In Michaels’s discussions of deconstruction’s commitment to the shape of the mark and New Criticism’s commitment to the rules of language, each of these is a commitment to the experience of the text rather than to its meaning. In regard to deconstruction: “as long as the relevant criterion [to deciding if marks are signs] is formal (is shape), the question of whether the formations really are letters is a question that is crucially about your perspective. Hence, the commitments to the primacy of the materiality of the signifier (to shape) is also a commitment to the primacy of experience (to the subject position)” (87). In this respect, deconstruction shares its

commitment to the experience of the thing that the text is, instead of what it means, with the New Critics. New Critical formalism was committed to the idea that the author's intention is irrelevant to the meaning, which has to be located in the text as a piece of language. Thus hermeneutic disputes would rely on the rules of the language, not on the appeal to the author, and, writes Michaels, this commitment to the rules of language is a commitment to the text as a thing that we experience – and, therefore, “the appeal to the rules of language is actually a way of committing rather than avoiding the affective fallacy” (115).

Describing form as an object of subjective experience and of the essential critical choice as one between meaning and experience is also to categorize the aesthetic as still more subjective experience. Kant's claim was that although it was an experience, the aesthetic judgment was nonetheless not private or personal – it was subjective and yet universal, something we would hold as true for all persons and not simply about our opinions or preferences. For Michaels, the idea that the experience of an artwork could be something different from our own private feelings and reactions, and yet not be identified as the work's meaning, must be a mistake. This much is evident in his discussion of a moment in “The Affective Fallacy” concerning Coleridge's disgust at some tourists' response to a waterfall. Wimsatt and Beardsley wrote:

The tourist who said a waterfall was pretty provoked the silent disgust of Coleridge, while the other who said it was sublime won his approval. This, as C. S. Lewis so well observes, was not the same as if the tourist had said, “I feel sick,” and Coleridge had thought, “No, I feel quite well.”<sup>28</sup>

Michaels comments in *Shape of the Signifier*:

The difference between sublime and pretty is a difference in the object, not in the response to it, and the point of the commitment to objectivity is not to find some method for determining whether the waterfall really is sublime or pretty, it's just to note that the question of whether something is sublime or pretty is a different kind of question from the question of how it makes you feel. If you say it's sublime and I say it's pretty, we disagree; if you say it makes you sick and I say it doesn't make me sick, we aren't disagreeing, we are just recording the difference between us. (72)

It's clear that Wimsatt and Beardsley are asserting that there are responses that are just about us, and these are precisely not things about we can be said to disagree. And the judgment of the waterfall as sublime or pretty is clearly something we can disagree about, and thus is different from a fact about us. But is the disagreement exactly “a difference in the object”? For

the fact that Coleridge feels disgust at the judgment of “pretty” suggests something more than a mistake – we don’t tend to be disgusted if someone is wrong about the plot in a novel, nor even if someone misreads a street sign. Another odd thing about the passage is that Coleridge is silent, rather than pointing out that the person is wrong or explaining why he thinks it’s sublime. Even if we were disgusted with someone for getting us lost or being unable to get *Moby-Dick’s* plot right, we would be able to explain to the person why he was wrong. With the aesthetic judgment, at least according to Kant, we can’t give such reasons – hence its dependence on the cultivation of taste through norms, and hence the fact that Coleridge is consumed with “silent disgust”: he knows the tourist is wrong, but there’s no way for him to argue the point.

Of course, aesthetics debates whether qualities of beauty and sublimity are experiences of the subject or qualities of the object. But even if we were to take the position that there are beautiful and sublime objects, and that we are able to explain to other people why something is or is not sublime, we still wouldn’t go so far as to say calling an object “sublime” is to say that the object means sublimity. But Michaels does imply that once we are making an objective judgment about the waterfall, as sublime not pretty, we are talking about an interpretation of its meaning: “the main idea of ‘The Affective Fallacy’ was that the question of a text’s meaning (like the question of the waterfall’s sublimity) is a question about it, whereas the question of its effect is a question about us – how are we feeling?” (72). However, when Wimsatt and Beardsley conflate the judgment of the object as sublime with an account of the object’s meaning (as they do later in the essay, but not in the waterfall passage) they contradict their own insight in this passage that the aesthetic is not a subjective experience, and yet is not a meaning. After all, the waterfall is a natural object: it is meaningless. There is a difficulty with questions about the waterfall’s sublimity, and the difficulty is that they seem to be accounts more of meaning than of our feeling, and yet (as Michaels’s parenthetical “[like the question of the waterfall’s sublimity]” recognizes) not precisely the same thing.

Quoting Anatole France with their characteristic aplomb – “To be quite frank . . . the critic ought to say: ‘Gentlemen, I am going to speak of myself apropos of Shakespeare’” – Wimsatt and Beardsley assert that in speaking of one’s experience of a text, one barely speaks of that text at all.<sup>29</sup> Wimsatt and Beardsley defend their polemic that the reader’s experience is irrelevant – evident in their approving citation of France – in part by noting that the experience is a “result” of the poem. This seems like another deployment of the genetic fallacy, but increasingly it seems that

for them this causal relationship is instructive. The experience is caused by the poem instead of by the person, for they write, “the more specific the account of the emotion induced by a poem, the more nearly it will be an account of the reasons for the emotion, the poem itself” (34). For Wimsatt and Beardsley, our experience of a poem, far from being a fact about us, is actually a fact about the poem. This is to say that they think we *can* make distinctions within our experience (between the parts of our experience of reading Shakespeare that are about ourselves, and the parts of it that are really about Shakespeare).

To make those distinctions, Wimsatt and Beardsley separate affects into two classes: those which are about the subject, and those which are about their object. The conclusion Wimsatt and Beardsley draw from the waterfall passage is: “A food or a poison causes pain or death, but for an emotion we have a reason or an object.” In other words, they suggest that there are *two* kinds of experiences: bodily experiences (“pain or death,” caused by physical objects and events) and emotions, which are judgments regarding objects outside oneself. The account of the tourist’s objective judgment of the waterfall is, according to Wimsatt and Beardsley, that it is an emotion, not a physical condition. On Wimsatt and Beardsley’s account, all that is really subjective is one’s body; other than that, one’s entire emotional life is an interpretation of one’s external conditions, an interpretation that can (moreover) be entirely mistaken. They hold what Terada calls the content theory of emotions – in which emotions are about objects, not about the subject. Wimsatt and Beardsley go even beyond the content theory, however, to maintain that our experience of a poem turns out to have nothing to do with us: there is no “evidence that what a word *does* to a person is to be ascribed to anything except what it *means*” (25–26). To talk about how Shakespeare makes you feel is actually to talk about Shakespeare, because (a) that’s what your emotion is about and (b) that’s what caused the emotion. The critic who speaks of himself “apropos of Shakespeare” has failed to really read Shakespeare – he’s not talking about the experience of reading Shakespeare at all, but about himself. “Apropos” is exactly the point: he doesn’t speak of his experience of Shakespeare, but of his experience in relation to, on the occasion of, Shakespeare.

When Wimsatt and Beardsley write, “the more specific the account of the emotion induced by a poem, the more nearly it will be an account of the reasons for the emotion, the poem itself” (34), they make a critical locutionary shift. As long as they are insisting that the experience of a poem is caused by the poem, and that the experience of a poem is about the poem (related but not identical claims), they are still maintaining a