The Sensation of the Signifier

Her mouth was open as if she had something to say;
But maybe my saying so is a figure of speech.
—David Ferry, “Lake Water”

Twenty-five years after its publication, we now know the intention of Knapp and Michaels’s “Against Theory,” something that, as the previous chapter showed, was not at all apparent during the furor that followed the piece’s claims about the irrelevance of theory and the unavoidable fact of meaning (or intention) in a text. Michaels’s 2004 work, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*, retrospectively connects this argument in “Against Theory” to the social commentary of another of Michaels’s books, *Our America* (1995). The result is a wide-ranging critique of postmodern (or, using Michaels’s preferred term, “post-historical”) left writing and artistic culture, along with a number of polemical observations about a variety of contemporary cultural and political issues, ranging from the meaning of recent sci-fi literature and contemporary photography to the arguments behind deep ecology and the movement to secure reparations for slavery.

This retroactive connection, however, involves a paradox, since Michaels acknowledges that his present understanding of “Against Theory” depends on a different temporal relation to the essay—what he later calls a different “subject position”—than what he had had previously.¹ But *The Shape* connects “Against Theory” to *Our America* by precisely attacking the overwhelming presence of the “subject position” in critical thought today, which it claims is the theoretical consequence of transforming texts with intentional meaning into sensory objects that we experience from different subject positions. The primacy of “subject positions” is also alleged to be the historical consequence (as recorded by Francis Fukuyama) of the triumph of liberal capitalism over communism, which signaled the end of struggles based on adversarial beliefs (what Michaels means by
ideologies). The result is a literary and political landscape in which one inhabits a culture or subject position that can only differ from, rather than disagree with, other cultures or positions; there is no way to say that one position is more true, or more false, than another.

Yet Michaels’s own intention rests on a difference. Michaels understands the purpose of “Against Theory” by seeing it from the vantage point—the subject position—of The Shape. (This is not to consider even the difference, or similarity, between Michaels’s and Knapp’s intentions. Does Michaels’s retrospective articulation of the intention of “Against Theory” also include the latter’s, so that Knapp’s intention can only be gleaned through a book that he did not write, twenty years later?) “Against Theory” is therefore haunted by the future writing of The Shape, whose own political argument depends on its preexistence in the now-understood intention of the essay’s more than twenty-five-year-old argument.

A certain logic to this future writing has ramifications beyond Michaels’s works. Discussions of language and meaning are always haunted by what is already implicit within them, the political and social world, with that haunting presence generating, as well as being made intelligible by, tropes of spatial and temporal difference. But Michaels would dismiss such language, as one further purpose of The Shape is to do away with ghosts, with the phantasmic nature of postmodern politics and culture: the ghostly memory of history in New Historicism, as well as in recent literature and social controversies. In a word, ghosts and a universal riven by difference (as opposed to being shored up by disagreement) are examples of sloppy thinking, of illegitimate forms of sensation. By dint of its very pervasiveness in post-history, its contamination of the constative, the sensory comes to be defined as the illegitimate. We can then agree with Michaels that the stakes involved in The Shape (as well as “Against Theory”) are indeed quite large. For the question is what form any critique of politics will take—whether there are such things as ghosts, and whether an uncanny politics exists.

The response to this question depends on how we register the intersection between sensation and meaning. Michaels’s tack in both “Against Theory” and The Shape is to disavow, or regulate, as much as possible that relation, to argue against any suggestion that one might imbricate the other. Unspoken in either work, although present in a number of ways, is how much this policing is a certain argument about Romanticism: about a non-Romantic understanding of literature in “Against Theory” and a non-Romantic politics in The Shape, about a Romantic generation of the literary that the previous chapter called a sensation of meaning. As I argued, the sensation of meaning is neither simply nor even necessarily phenomenal, something that Michaels does not consider in his account of
the sensory experience of different subject positions. This is itself part of another, more fundamental misunderstanding by *The Shape*, of the materiality of the signifier—and, specifically, de Manian materiality—as phenomenal experience. Misreading that term as the sheer meaninglessness of a sensory object, Michaels does not see how materiality is more the meaningless imposition of meaning through difference, and in disagreement. His distinction between meaning and the non-meaning of materiality, or sensation, does not allow for the possibility of materiality as the sensation of meaning, the sense of sense, the materiality (or shape) not simply of the signifier but of figure: of non-meaning’s resemblance to meaning, or to resemblance per se.

Extending the argument of the previous chapter, we will see that attending to such a dynamic, either to dramatize or soberly deny it, structures much of literary history’s self-representation after the Romantic era’s own texts. As Michaels’s polemics inadvertently clarify, the structuring of history, and post-history, is also involved. Indeed, the literary history underwriting the very polemics of *The Shape* comes from such a récit. Far from a Fukuyama-inspired postmodern condition, Michaels’s scenario actually adumbrates a basic problem between Romanticism and Modernism-as-modernity.

In a very odd way, Michaels’s book reworks Fredric Jameson’s classic study *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, a text whose earliest incarnations were contemporaries of Knapp and Michaels’s “Against Theory.” The oddity of this reworking comes from several sources: the replacement of Marxist Ernest Mandel by neo-conservative Francis Fukuyama as the founding theoretical visionary of capitalism at the end of the twentieth century, the discontinuity between the theoretical and historical conceptions of Michaels’s argument, and the neo-vulgar Marxist use of class that Michaels implicitly employs to argue his case against identitarian politics.

This is not to say that Michaels endorses or aligns himself with any of Fukuyama’s particular political convictions so much as to note that *The Shape* bases its diagnosis of postmodernism not on an economic but a political model of history. Jameson uses Mandel to outline the hyperbolic abstraction of value that inheres in late capitalism, a condition that underwrites a host of oftentimes contradictory cultural phenomena in postmodernism: the simulacrum, schizophrenia, the loss of historical consciousness, and so forth. Michaels, who has little to say about Jameson (or, curiously, the other left figure his polemic for modern universal argument most resembles, Jürgen Habermas), utilizes Fukuyama to see capitalism as a belief system that has won out against its most intractable nemesis, communism.
For Jameson, the historical event that defines postmodernism is the ubiquitous penetration of global capital into the mind and nature. For Michaels, the historical event that defines post-history is the fall of the Soviet Union, and thus the end of any real, sustained argument with capitalism. That one might analyze that fall through a Marxist model is not a question that Michaels, following Fukuyama, raises, as the point seems to be that the disintegration of the Soviet bloc ends, for good or ill, the communist argument and, therefore, Marxist analysis. In other words, Jameson’s is a Marxist account of capital, whereas Michaels’s is capitalism’s own self-representation of its triumph over the anteriority of Marxism.

Michaels does not share in this triumph (nor, truth be told, does Fukuyama, simply). For if modern history has in effect been an argument for capitalism, capital’s triumph means the end of both argument and history. Not that people have stopped arguing now, or that they avoided identity difference during the Cold War; still, the end of the Soviet Union becomes the “occasion to assert at the level of politics . . . the end of or the irrelevance of or, in its purest form, the impossibility of disagreement” (184). This position also seems odd from a left materialist vantage point, insofar as political argument is made synonymous with ideological disagreement; post-history is also the neo-conservative end of ideology, or, more precisely, of “mankind’s ideological evolution.” Of course, both Marxist and post-Marxist critiques have dispensed with ideology as a form of false consciousness. But Michaels understands ideology as a conscious set of beliefs, and its purpose as the choate articulation of those convictions. Michaels’s own argument against capitalist hegemony thus ignores a history of ideology—from Jameson to Slavoj Žižek to even de Man—that in a variety of ways positions ideology against the coherent, self-transparent statement. Whether ideological analysis even in its more complicated forms is a viable mode of inquiry in and beyond Romantic studies—this is a query the present book does take up, already in chapter 2 and again most notably in chapters 6 and 9. More immediately, I simply want to note how, for Michaels, ideology has to be a coherent set of beliefs because a more volatile yoking of the coherent and incoherent in language means a fatal (as well as mistaken) conflation of meaning and meaninglessness in language, as well as the collapse of language and belief into one another.

This insistence is connected to another odd way Michaels and Jameson compare. If for Jameson his theoretical argument is the dialectical expression of his historical argument, for Michaels the connection is not as clear. As Michaels seems to put it, the theoretical argument of “Against Theory” succeeded but needs to be revived in the form of a historical intervention:
But even if it is true that no one any longer thinks that capitalism is wrong, it is not true that no one thinks that anything is wrong, and it is certainly not true that anyone—except, perhaps, in theory—thinks that there are no more misinterpretations. Which is just to say that, if history has ended, it has only ended in theory. Theory is already over in history. (Shape, 81)

As “Against Theory” argued, people argue and disagree, which means that they necessarily interpret and understand meaning, which also means that theory as the meta-conception of interpretation is not needed. But the end of the Cold War and the onset of post-history mean that argument, or ideological disagreement, is in some key sense over. But this is only true in theory, as “it is certainly not true that anyone . . . thinks that there are no more misinterpretations.” Allegedly theory is already over, at least in the history of post-history. Yet it really isn’t if that history is defined by the political argument against disagreement and the theories of identity and culture that understand discord not as disagreement but as difference. So theory is both over and still persistent, inciting The Shape even as the book reaffirms the polemical trajectory of “Against Theory,” that theory is no more. Historically and theoretically, The Shape is against nothing. The historical argument of The Shape is haunted by “Against Theory” either because theory is over or because it’s not.6

One might also say that if people are still disagreeing in post-history, if Michaels himself is counting on people (or academics and artists, at least) disagreeing with The Shape, his polemic is needed as much as theory was in the world of “Against Theory.” The problem isn’t so much whether there’s too much difference and not enough disagreement as whether the difference between difference and disagreement, or between ideological difference and other forms of difference, is as unconditional as Michaels would like. Strangely enough, difference in this relational instance carries the possibility of absolute distinction that Michaels only confers onto disagreement, since the disagreement between difference and disagreement means that they might also agree more than Michaels wants to acknowledge. Things get no less complicated if we allegorize this as the relation between Michaels and those he critiques in The Shape. If Michaels disagrees with readers who (as he would describe it) only differ with each other and himself, what is their relation to him? If they disagree with him about difference, why does he need to argue for disagreement in the first place?7 If they and he differ over disagreement (and agreement), how does he overcome the way disagreement continually finds itself faced with something exterior to it? Put temporally instead of
spatially, how do he and they avoid the infinite spiral of differing about disagreeing about differing about disagreeing, and so forth?

I call Michaels’s relation with those readers of difference an allegory, since it expresses through the trope of individual agents an opposition that could also be figured as what occurs between two different discourses. This is exactly what Michaels argues against, of course, since in his formulation people can disagree while discourses, or languages, can merely differ. That is his point about Richard Rorty and Jean François Lyotard, who have sacrificed argumentation—and thus belief—for gaming:

Hence the difference between losing a game and losing an argument: you don’t lose at chess when you are convinced you cannot move your king out of check; you lose when, whatever your views, you cannot, within the rules of the game, move him. . . . Beating someone at chess has nothing to do with changing his or her mind. . . . That’s why the redescription [by Rorty and Lyotard] of people who have different beliefs as people who are playing different “language games” amounts to a repudiation of the idea that people actually have any beliefs. (189)

Beating someone at chess has nothing to do with changing his or her mind, which would more properly be beating him or her at an argument. For Michaels, then, a statement like “beating someone at an argument has nothing to do with changing his or her mind” would be nonsensical, which could very well be, except that what it describes happens all the time; as Hume once observed, people lose arguments and still don’t change their minds. (If Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion won’t do, academics can consider the last faculty meeting they attended.) Arguably, if the end of history exists only in theory, so does the changing of minds, or beliefs, by argument. In contrast, history is full of the discontinuity between an argument’s success and a change in belief, between the constative and the performative. There are many ways to approach this situation, of course, with one notable avenue being through the very Marxist tradition of ideology, as varied as it is, that Michaels ignores in his narrative about the end of communism and the post-history of capitalism’s triumph. From the perspective of that tradition, ideological analysis actually begins with the end of ideology, as Michaels knows the term.

This formulation is itself part of a larger issue about the way language and politics work in The Shape. Before facing this question through de Man’s own particular sense of aesthetic ideology, let us consider one final way the book seems oddly Marxist: how Michaels counters cultural and racial difference with class difference, the social discord of economic inequality. Here Michaels does
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seem to be making an economic argument, or a political argument about the economic, since class difference is perceived to be more readily of a weightier ontological texture than cultural difference:

The difference between these problematics is, as we used to say, essential, since insofar as exploitation is at the core of class difference, class difference is ineluctably linked to inequality, where cultural difference, of course, is not. Cultures, in theory if not always in practice, are equal; classes, in theory and in practice, are not. From this standpoint, the rise of culture, or of the so-called new social movements, or of the problem of identities and identification, or—more generally—of the problem of the subject, has functioned as the Left's way of learning to live with inequality. (17)

As Jameson himself noted a while back, this has been a debate in, beyond, and beside Marxism since Eduard Bernstein in 1899. This is not to say that the argument does not have its own force in contemporary postmodern left politics. The debate's extended history does highlight, however, the question of Michaels's own polemic, whether class analysis is a means or an end in relation to his assertion about universal disagreement. That the answer to this question is not explicitly part of Michaels's argument creates a dissonance in his book's analysis, insofar as we are asked either to agree or disagree with his polemic, without quite entirely knowing what it is—a situation made all the more strange by the apparent precision of Michaels's language and one that also quite famously, as we have seen, characterizes “Against Theory.” By in this case gesturing toward Marxism without really engaging with Marxism, Michaels also ignores arguments against the ontological purity of class, as well as treatments of social antagonism that don't simply see economic inequality and the conflict between two different classes of individual agents as given essences. But class inequality and class conflict have to be ontologically more stable than other relations that characterize the “problem of identity,” since for Michaels inequality and conflict are in seamless continuity with the constative action of (dis)agreement, whereas those others only evoke the experience of difference.

Hence, Michaels concludes The Shape by critiquing Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's Empire, where their putative “politics without beliefs” accedes to an “empire of the senseless” (or meaninglessness) and the poor are transformed into a culture that can be appreciated instead of a class whose inequality one can argue against. That Hardt and Negri are seizing upon in their particular way Marx's own sense of the difficulty of the poor becoming a class is not Michaels's concern. More pressing for him is how class inequality is in continuity with adversarial
class beliefs. Cultures are all equal, and thus their beliefs are also, whereas the opposite is true for the relations, and beliefs, among classes.\textsuperscript{10}

The sharp contrast in this formula explains the necessary role of class in \textit{The Shape} by pointing out what is conspicuously absent in Michaels’s adumbration of identitarian politics: gender. Michaels does discuss sexual identity by way of Samuel Delany’s novels, but again in a way that demonstrates how, in this instance, masochism functions like a cultural or ethnic identity. (Michaels also does engage with Judith Butler, but most keenly over Butler’s argument against hate speech laws.) Feminism, however, is notably absent from the variety of discourses of different bodies, languages, and histories explicitly critiqued in \textit{The Shape}. This is to be expected, given how much of the book’s critique about race and culture replicates the historical study of identity in \textit{Our America}.\textsuperscript{11} But another logic might also be at work, as the putatively stark, ontological contrast between class and cultural (or ethnic or racial) identity becomes immediately complicated by gender identity. Indeed, if economic inequality is not a given, that’s first and foremost because of how opening up analyses to gender inequality registers a more thorough (if not complete) sense of social antagonism. Likewise, of course, the study of gender has been exactly where the fact of essential identities has been most vigorously critiqued. The infelicity of characterizing gender as either ideological (in the way that Michaels defines class) or cultural (in the way that Michaels defines race and ethnicity) highlights this predicament. In theory and practice gender identity has marked the aporia of the equal and unequal, as opposed to their evenly calculable distribution.

This is also a question of figure. If the troping of race allows Michaels to argue against the role of race in arguments for social justice, that’s because a trope for Michaels means an ontological fiction, insofar as we don’t so much argue whether a figure is real as simply experience it. Troping is, in fact, what culture is, what makes an ethnic or racial identity an identity, and why Michaels thinks such forms of subjectivity can be undone by the real of universal argument. Culture is in turn the very trope (or experience) of the hegemony of subjective identity over objectively real, social discord. This is thus less about the reality of race than an argument about the limits of figure for political argument and analysis. Troping, however, is more the volatile interface between ontology and fiction than simply a fiction that stands in for, and thus crowds out questions about, reality. Bluntly, one dismisses tropes of gender, and the troping of gender, at one’s risk, something \textit{The Shape} implicitly acknowledges by not following through with such an interrogation. This is not to say, of course, that other tropes such as race cannot dramatize this condition, or that all tropes equally articulate this situation in a
homogenized manner. In theory and practice, all tropes interrogate the trope of
equality, which means that all tropes are not equal. This does not imply, however,
that one can then dismiss a particular operation of figure for simply being irre-
ducibly figural.

That is what Michaels is doing, since for him you don’t argue with a figure,
much in the same way that you don’t argue with a culture or language. You in-
stead identify it as such, expose it as something that is distracting us from arguing
about what really exists, such as class inequality. If figures do hold our attention,
it’s not because we’re arguing with them, or simply understanding them in order
to comprehend the meaning, or intention, of an author. It’s because we’re en-
thralled by their unregulated spectacle, which means that we’re enthralled by our
subjectively different reactions to writings, art, and politics, which now constitute
sensory objects linked to neither the constative nor the cognitive. Strictly speak-
ing, for Michaels, such objects are no longer even figures, or components of lan-
guage, but instead things of sheer sensation.

Hence, we have the final overdetermination for the basic absence of gender
in *The Shape*: it has been subsumed under the cultural body of a phenomenal
materiality that does not evoke thought about the object but the particularity
of experience by the subject. *The Shape* avoids the juncture between an explicit
critique of feminism’s relation to identitarian politics and a (gendered) argument
for disembodied thought over thoughtless sensation by... avoiding it. Appropriate-
ly, then, feminism is made missing while figure is rectified and sensation re-
sisted. Rather than through an engagement with feminism, Michaels’s exorcism
of sensation is by way of a de Manian materiality that comes to stand for the
linked postmodern mistakes of theoretical reading and identitarian politics. The
choice of de Man is not simply a prestidigitation, however. A narrative about
the politics of postmodernity does emerge from Michaels’s consideration of de
Man’s terms, but one that exceeds the possibility of a simple end of sensation and
a concomitant return to history and argument.

Writing on de Man, Michaels asserts that

it is the single-mindedness of de Man’s commitment to the mark instead of the
sign—to the “purely material” as the “purely formal,” “devoid of any semantic
depth”—that distinguishes *Aesthetic Ideology*. Indeed, the replacement of the
sign by the mark articulated in (although by no means unique to) *Aesthetic
Ideology* is foundational for and constitutive of the aesthetics of posthistoricism
just as the emergence of the subject produced by the same process is—once
the subject has thoroughly grasped itself as a structure of identification—
constitutive of its politics. (18)

To place de Man at the center of a serious discussion about postmodern left poli-
tics is all to the good. And “single-minded” does capture something of the relent-
less nature of reading that unfolds in de Man’s writings. That all said, it’s some-
what stunning to come across an account of de Man that makes him the exemplary
figure for the instantiation of an aesthetic subject at the start of the twenty-first
century, as one of the main arcs in Aesthetic Ideology is how the aesthetic records
its own disarticulation as a founding principle of mediation in, among others,
Kant and Hegel. As Andrezej Warminski points out in his introduction to the
book, this dynamic certainly has implications for the efficacy of their notions
(and ours) of a closed system of successful meaning (5). But this does not mean
that the aesthetic is meaningless because it’s intentionally opposed to meaning,
or that that is the case because the aesthetic is not about understanding but sen-
sory feeling—far from it. The aesthetic is rather for de Man the attempt to unite
such understanding and feeling; as Jonathan Culler puts it, aesthetic ideology
“imposes, even violently, continuity between perception and cognition, form and
idea.” As such an assertion, aesthetic ideology is neither a belief in nor an argu-
ment for the aesthetic as the positive identity of meaninglessness.

Michaels seems, however, to understand meaninglessness in de Man (if not
the title of de Man’s book) in precisely this way. There is the signifier and then
there is the material of the signifier, which is meaningless. De Man and others
valorize this material over signification, which means that we as readers are left
with only experiencing this material in different ways, from different perspectives,
instead of understanding, and arguing over, meaning. Similarly, the celebration
of the many meanings of multiculturalism is in fact the fetishization of experi-
cencing many cultures differently, as that is all we are left with after giving up on
meaning and disagreement. On one side lies language as the understanding of
meaning; on the other lies the physical materiality of language, which is not to
be confused with language. The two are not the same because such materiality
can only be experienced, neither read nor understood. It is not language but
literal matter, meaningless by definition. For Michaels’s de Man, the aesthetic is
constituted precisely by the valorized experience of this materiality.

It is certainly true that many understand the materiality of the signifier in
ways that resemble its exposition in The Shape. It is also true that, in the resurgent
textual studies of the last two decades, materiality is indeed about matter (paper,
ink, or screen), although a matter that is thought to be integral to language and
meaning. But, as the last chapter already notes, de Manian materiality is not in any simple way a materiality of matter, especially not phenomenal matter. Indeed, “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant,” the essay from which Michaels quotes the phrases “pure materiality” and the “purely formal, devoid of any semantic depth,” argues that the “material vision” of the sublime remains aggressively unreconciled with the desire in Kant’s third Critique to adequate the sublime’s inner noumenal generation with its exterior, phenomenal expression (Aesthetic, 83). This resistance is itself part of a larger blockage. As de Man concludes the essay, “The bottom line, in Kant as well as in Hegel, is the prosaic materiality of the letter and no degree of obfuscation or ideology can transform this materiality into the phenomenal cognition of aesthetic judgment” (90). The prosaic is not the quotidian fact of matter but language’s resistance to its own sublimation, its disarticulation of the achievement of phenomenal cognition, and thus of the aesthetic experience of the object that organizes Michaels’s polemic in The Shape.

Of course, Michaels’s aesthetic experience is not simply Kant’s, as the latter’s association of the universal with aesthetic judgment actually grounds the world of agreement that Michaels wants to champion against the relativity of sensory experience that defines his own sense of the aesthetic. Michaels gestures toward these connections himself when he approvingly uses W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley’s example of how Coleridge’s waterfall distinguishes between the questions of deciding whether something is really sublime and merely considering how something makes you particularly feel (72). Both questions, however, invoke a phenomenal dimension that de Man argues Kant’s materiality disrupts. As de Man says elsewhere in Aesthetic Ideology, the “formalism” of Kant’s materiality is not only “a-referential” but also “a-phenomenal” (128). The material in Aesthetic Ideology is not something one simply feels.

For Michaels, however, de Man’s material demonstration of the failure of phenomenal cognition as meaning must dramatize the triumph of sensory feeling over cognition, the instantiation of materiality as phenomenal meaninglessness. Thus, when de Man begins his key reading of Kant’s architectonic description of the sky and ocean as examples of the sublime and wonders how that account relates to other “allusions to sensory appearance” in Kant that try to describe the sublime, Michaels uses de Man’s phrase “sensory appearance” to authorize his understanding of Susan Howe’s analysis of an Emily Dickinson facsimile (sic) as “not just . . . convey[ing] the meaning of the text to the reader but also . . . reproduc[ing] the experience of its physical features” (4). For Michaels’s de Man, “the purely material . . . is everything [e.g., a blank page or border] that can be seen by the reader” (6). Is the experience of such physical properties really the
same, however, as regarding Kant’s ocean the way that the philosopher says poets do? For de Man, Kant’s description conveys “how things are to the eye, in the redundancy of their appearance to the eye and not to the mind, as in the redundant word Augenschein, to be understood in opposition to Hegel’s Ideenschein, or sensory appearance of the idea; Augenschein, in which the eye, tautologically, is named twice, as eye itself and what appears to the eye” (82). De Man’s point is to describe a material vision discontinuous with any cognitive or semantic action. But as the discontinuity between eye and mind escalates in his passage, it also becomes increasingly difficult to attach the eye to Michaels’s experiential subject. The eye stands alone, explicitly divorced from solar meaning but also detached from any seeing reader (or poet, for that matter), simply the “formal mathematization or geometrization of pure optics” (83).

This might be nonsensical to Michaels, but if that is the case, the reason is because the subjective experience he decries, the visual or tactile perception of a blank page, is still attached more to Hegel’s “sensory appearance of the idea” than to what de Man’s Kant describes. Materiality in de Man is by no means a simple notion. That Michaels translates the term into a physical substance speaks, however, to the very fact of different discourses that Michaels wants to deny. In the language of The Shape, Michaels neither understands nor disagrees with de Man so much as he differs from him. More than any sustained argument with what de Man actually says, this predicament enables Michaels to cast de Man in the central role of the book’s polemic.  

This difference can be measured in another way. As much as Michaels actually argues for meaning and intention in a text, he actually seems uninterested in what de Man might have intended or meant in Aesthetic Ideology. There is no indication in The Shape as to how much Michaels’s reading of de Man diverges radically from what Aesthetic Ideology argues about aesthetics and materiality, or from what others have said that argument to be. Michaels’s own reading of de Man’s intention achieves an odd state of being, less an unavoidable condition of what’s right arrived at by an inevitable line of reasoning and more a phantom form of denotation underwritten by the catachresis of what The Shape calls “mak[ing] sense” (47). Michaels labels this phantom form “meaning,” but it seems more about his difference from de Man than anything else.

Michaels’s and de Man’s difference does enable the severing of “sensory appearance” from “allusions to sensory appearance,” a mutilation quite like the severed Kantian human limb that Aesthetic Ideology uses to argue for the non-organic and non-teleological nature of materiality. (To the degree that Michaels restores
to the severed phrase the semantic wholeness of human perception, he actually
enacts the aesthetic ideology that the book describes.) That act transforms an
allusion to sensory appearance into, literally, sensory appearance. As de Man as-
serts, however, Kant’s materiality is neither literal nor figural, precisely because
of its supreme uninvolved with either transference or exchange, especially as
part of the key economic circulation between mind and nature. De Man makes
this clear by contrasting the third Critique with recordings of the sublime in
Wordsworth, where “exchange or anthropomorphism” allows the poet “to ad-
dress, in Book 5 of The Prelude, the ‘speaking face’ of nature” (82).

Wordsworth’s ability to address nature adds another register to the materiality
that de Man discovers in Kant. This dimension also comments on the argument
about nature tentatively begun in “Against Theory” and categorically developed
in The Shape. (As my previous chapter and this chapter’s concluding section
claim, this is also implicitly an argument about Wordsworth.) The story also has
another key coordinate: Knapp and Michaels’s decisive moment in their dispute
with de Man in “Against Theory,” how they argue that Rousseau’s mouthing of
“Marion” in Allegories of Reading is not an instance of unmotivated, meaningless
language, but meaningless “white noise” that simply resembles language. “Mar-
ion” in “Against Theory” has nothing to do with language; it’s a moment of sen-
sory static that is a precursor to the meaningless experience of sensual materiality
that The Shape identifies as the defining problem of de Manian aesthetics charac-
terizing post-historicist politics. In terms of the argument of “Against Theory,” the
white noise of “Marion” means that de Man is wrong to use Rousseau’s mouthing
to assert the coincidence between language and meaninglessness, as “Marion”
has literally nothing to say about language.

“Against Theory” itself has nothing extended to say, however, about the status
of the resemblance of “Marion” to language, of the resemblance of meaninglessness
to meaning. As the previous chapter asked, isn’t resemblance itself a form of
signification? Without posing the problem in quite those terms, The Shape an-
swers this question by chiefly critiquing the role of nature in recent science fiction
literature and the politics of deep ecology. Specifically, Michaels looks at several
recent works of sci-fi that take up the question of what it might mean for the
planet Mars to speak. This is first understood as the possibility of an indigenous
people speaking for a place, where a planet (or nature) confers onto a people (or
culture) an essential dignity and identity. But then, in Kim Stanley Robinson’s
Mars trilogy, a more radical proposition is explored, where the equation of nature
and culture implies the possibility of an uninhabited planet speaking a language.
In Robinson’s works there are thus not only moments when settlers from Earth
feel that their new planet allows them to speak culturally as Martians, but that the rocks of Mars—its very landscape—seem to speak. As in deep ecology, nature quite possibly is a culture with its own language, independent of any human coordinate.

For Michaels, of course, the key detail is that Robinson’s uninhabited Martian landscape only appears to convey meaning. Mars seems to speak because of the “natural accident” of the shape of its rocks, which from different vantage points (or subject positions) look like they might be something one could understand, a language (*Shape*, 57). Mars is the shape of the signifier, a physical materiality whose resemblance to meaning is only the effect of different perspectives, and whose replacement of meaning by meaninglessness incites the post-historicist trumping of sensory experience over understanding. Mars, or uninhabited nature, is the end point of deep ecology: the post-historical text and culture, the place of difference over disagreement and sensory effects over meaning. This is the predicament that Michaels refers to when he argues that the current post-historicist primacy of the subject position “is based on a characteristically unacknowledged appeal to nature” (15).

To drive home the point, Michaels reworks another key moment in “Against Theory,” the wave poem, the example of coming across what appears to be Wordsworth’s “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal” in the sand. In *The Shape* what resembles the lines of Wordsworth’s poem are now in Martian sand, or a formation of Martian rock. In “Against Theory” the discovery of the apparent lines forces us to choose between understanding them as lines, as writing “entirely determined by the intention of their author” (*Shape*, 57), and seeing them as marks of non-language that only accidentally resemble meaning. Transposing them to the dead Martian landscape, Michaels foregrounds the impossibility of seeing such squiggles as language, something that occurs only by mistaking the shape of such marks as language, when, in fact, shape’s sole presence evinces the absence of language. On Mars, the sense of that impossibility is so great that you don’t even need to see anything but what resembles the first stanza of Wordsworth’s poem to know that no one wrote it. In contrast, “On Earth . . . you might immediately think that someone had been before you writing” (*Shape*, 57). Indeed, as Knapp and Michaels “suggested” in “Against Theory,” “it was only when, seeing these shapes on a beach [on Earth], you then saw a wave wash up and recede, leaving behind [what appeared to be the second stanza of “A Slumber”] . . . that you realized no person made these marks” (*Shape*, 57).

The retrospective nature of this realization actually creates a dissonance between Knapp and Michaels’s argument and the one in *The Shape*, however. For,
as with the change in Michaels’s own understanding of “Against Theory” before and after his writing of Our America, this realization depends on the temporal change of one’s subject position, now, in the second stage of the wave example, a position oriented around the strange viewing of what appears to be the second stanza of Wordsworth’s poem, instead of around the more prosaic discovery of the first. Retrospective meaning is always in some irreducible way a matter of temporal perspective, which is simply another version of the interdependence between meaning and spatial perspective that The Shape attacks. The retroactive structure of Knapp and Michaels’s wave poem, the example’s ongoing reaction to changing empirical evidence, allegorizes this very situation, the unavoidable relation between meaning and positioning, temporal or otherwise.

The question of temporal location is also present in how the 1982 essay is understood through the vantage point of Michaels’s 2004 book. In the Earth of “Against Theory,” you might actually not immediately think someone had written the alleged first stanza—that’s the problem, your belief in an intentionless language. If, however, by the second stage of the wave poem you no longer believe in intentionless language, that’s a separate issue from believing in a specifically human “someone” responsible for the intentional meaning that putatively separates the writing of Wordsworth’s second stanza from accidental squiggles. The Shape uses “Against Theory” to force the choice between an assumed human author and no human author (and thus no meaning) at all. But the question of human authorship is actually neither simply assumed nor fully resolved in Knapp and Michaels’s earlier, more complicated argument against intentionless language.

The Shape thus neglects to mention the starkly absurd but also unavoidable character of the wave poem’s second-stage choice, as at that point in the example our only options for the marks’ genesis are Wordsworth’s ghost or a pantheistic sea somehow capable of authoring a poem, or the cosmic accident of squiggles resembling a poem being produced by the unintentional roiling of ocean wave and sandy beach. The Shape also leaves out the third stage of the wave poem example, the appearance of a submarine full of scientists watching our reactions to the squiggles, whose presence gives us (presumably, to our great relief) the empirical option of human intention. The coercive nature of such a pedagogical structure aside (given the choices, who would not accept the ontological authority of Michaels’s technocrats?), the deletion of the third stage is telling, as its absence highlights the incredible, imperative nature of the second stage’s demand: choose between intention and nothing, even if intention is disconnected from human agency.
Choosing intention, of course, could just as well be about not choosing the cosmic accident of wave and ocean that merely produces resemblance. The whole point of the Mars example, that we should choose nothing when faced with an uninhabited landscape, becomes much more difficult to assent to when the example becomes a wave first rolling up and then revealing what appears to be the second stanza of “A Slumber” in the sand. As Knapp and Michaels describe, choosing nothing, the mere resemblance of the marks to words, means choosing “some subtle and unprecedented process of erosion, percolation, etc.” (16; my emphasis). Choosing this process means agreeing not only to what Knapp and Michaels call the “mechanical operation” of the waves, but to the mechanical as the genesis of an unprecedented singularity, an “astonishing coincidence” that transforms our sense of what contingency actually is (16). The radical nature of such a contingency can only be conceived through its non-identity as well, as a contingency that is also at once a process or pattern with some yet-to-be-understood purpose or design. Contrary to Knapp and Michaels, we are “amazed” not because something we thought was language turns out merely to resemble language. We are amazed because resemblance has happened at all, and we cannot help but feel the uncanny intention of that accident. The extreme nature of their example points us in a direction altogether different from their normative definitions of intention, meaning, and language.

Intention is not rationed to one side of the second stage’s choice but distributed on both sides of the decision, although in such an unthinkable way that intention itself becomes transformed. Faced with the cosmic accident of the wave, of, indeed, resemblance, we are faced with an intentionality more like what de Man in the terminology of an early essay calls the “structure” that establishes the unity of a work; our very distance from that unity or design, however, places us in what de Man describes as a Heideggerian “hermeneutic circularity,” where the presence of such an intention can only be felt in terms of a “negative totalization” with which we can never quite coincide (Blindness, 25, 29, 35). Knapp and Michaels’s wave poem experiment leads to this same unsteady situation of contingency knotted with the form of design. The point of both “Against Theory” and The Shape, of course, is to cut that knot, to separate accident from intentional form, or to force the choice between such form and form as the accidental resemblance of shape. But the book’s own understanding of the essay freezes the latter around the impossible choice of what to think about the wave’s unveiling of the apparent second stanza. De Man’s early Heideggerian use of temporality as the aporetic element inciting endless hermeneutic circularity finds its counterpart in the temporal staging of the wave’s activity, a staging that makes the question of
intention deeply unthinkable in terms of its unavoidable necessity, especially when compared with our relatively easy dismissal of intention when facing the static, uninhabited rock formations of Mars. The very activity of the waves, their mechanical operation, incites, keeps alive, the question of intention.

The waves are a figure for some animating agency, or more exactly, a figure for an awareness of that figure. They are a figure for a temporal action, and therefore of temporality itself. But temporality is also a figure for a basic problem about meaning that de Man of course will elaborate in his other early essay, the seminal “Rhetoric of Temporality.” Likewise, all the phenomenal and spatial motifs that de Man and Derrida at times employ, the “sound” of “Marion” or “surface” of the mark, are themselves figures for, different avenues into, the problem of language that deconstruction has explicitly tried to think through over the last forty years. Michaels, however, takes such language literally as evidence of an argument for an immanent physicality, so much so that he is left with as the object of his critique the literally impossible belief that texts, bodies, and cultures operate as objects purely experienced in a sensual manner. This invisible domestication of the figural reaches its apotheosis in his critique of recent sci-fi and other types of literature that envision language as a code, information, or somatic transmission, a pure communication of sensation that dispenses with language as mediated meaning. Michaels asserts this pure sensation as the post-historicist end point of the physical tropes in deconstruction, without considering how such idealized physical sensation is simply another version of the self-present autarky of consciousness freed from the materiality of writing that the early Derrida interrogated so scrupulously in works such as Of Grammatology and “Plato’s Pharmacy.” That moments of idealized physical transmission would still leave a material remainder, now not figured as the physical character of language exiled by consciousness, and that that would be the mark of a deconstructive inquiry—these are not possibilities in The Shape. To say explicitly but also simply that invocations of the physical are not always actually about the physical is to change profoundly what Michaels reads, and targets, in his text.

Resemblances of non-meaning to meaning, on Mars, Earth, and anywhere else in the universe, are sensations of meaning that are neither the pure meaningless-ness of sensory experience nor the pure meaning of a language. Such sensation, neither simply nor even necessarily phenomenal, registers the yoking of meaning and meaninglessness, in a way that paradoxically extends the complications of a meaningless language that The Shape wants to dismiss, as the sensation of meaning also remakes such language as the site of intention, the second unthinkable
stage of the wave poem. Sensation is the figure for the possibility of such a meaningless, intentional language, where that possibility is the very sensation of such language. This is the sensation of sensation, the figure of figure, which resemblance intones. For Michaels, this is precisely the epistemological mistake that his argument against a physical sensation separate from meaning is supposed to dismiss. Conversely, however, the sensation of meaning is that dimension of figure that disarticulates figure’s generation from the absolute confines of Michaels’s human author. Such a separation opens up figure to the predicament of a dizzying, incalculable generation, which is why so many scenes in Robinson’s trilogy (and the wave poem’s choice, in its own parodic way) seem to touch upon the sublime—as well as the gothic—in terms of the possible choice of the return of Wordsworth’s ghost as author. The hyperbole of Michaels’s wave example is therefore exemplary as hyperbole, the excess of figure.

For Michaels, resemblance as the sensation of meaning is precisely the erroneous triumph of physical shapes and the experiential perspective of the subject position. Resemblance is a subjective effect, depending on one’s position in relation to the perceived object. For Michaels, however, meaning never changes, no matter from what perspective meaning is viewed. Hence, Michaels uses the artist Robert Smithson to assert the idea of a map as a model for both texts and paintings, since a map’s (authored) meaning doesn’t depend on your subjective relation to it; it just is. We might wonder, however, if misreading and then arguing over a map isn’t also a matter of perspective—who hasn’t tried to bring a map closer to their face when lost? And if we are mistaken, disagreeing over the map’s meaning when we’re actually just viewing it differently, how much might that epistemological lapse actually structure the arguments (as opposed to differences) we have over texts? And what is the status of being lost, when reading a text? How much does such a model, or figure, of map-as-text simply operate as a resemblance?

More fundamentally, there is the question of whether resemblance really even functions within the differential calculus of the objective meaning of an authored work and the identifiable view of an opposing subject position. The point of the resemblance of non-meaning to meaning is that it is in fact impossible to determine whether such resemblance rests within the empirical object or the phenomenally perceiving subject. We don’t know if it is there or if we’re imagining it to be; it is a relation radically dislocated from the constative underpinnings of each option. Resemblance is figure genetically unbound from the categories of human reader, viewer, and author, which is one way to understand de Man’s observation about the “inhuman” nature of language (Resistance, 86, 94–97, 99–102). This scission is itself simply another way of expressing the figurative nature of both
object and subject, as well as that of the spatial and temporal distance between
them; the impossibility of locating resemblance absolutely in either is itself a
trope for a specific condition in language and figure. That condition not only
includes the separation of resemblance from a human agency who is either the
recipient of subjective experience or the author of objective meaning. That con-
dition is also the simultaneous sensation of meaning or intention, the phantom
pattern of “negative totalization.” The resemblance of non-meaning to meaning
might actually be meaningful and, inconceivably, authored. The (literary) affects
associated with this sensation, of the uncanny, sublime, and gothic, are therefore
in continuity with a more accurate correlation of de Man’s inhuman language and
deep ecology, with the simultaneous evacuation of human meaning and instan-
tiation of resemblance to meaning in the natural object.

Michaels anticipates the problematic of this more vertiginous generation of
signification by distinguishing between meaning and effect, the latter already
present in “Against Theory” as the choice of seeing the squiggles in the sand as
simply the “nonintentional effects of mechanical processes” (16). In The Shape
effects are further aligned with the physical materiality of sensation and non-
meaning. Properly speaking, meaning is always intentionally caused, while ef-
fects are not. Since for Michaels meaning is always equated with intention, mean-
ing will always be confined to intention and found nowhere else. But, as much as
both “Against Theory” and The Shape assert the fundamental wrongness of find-
ing meaning in resemblance, the acknowledgment of effect sets off a dynamic
that Michaels’s distinction between meaning and effect can’t quite control. Thus,
in arguing with Derrida’s substitution of “intentional effect for intention” (Lim-
ited, 66), Michaels opines,

We don’t in general identify the meaning of an act with the effects it has; we
don’t think that the act performed by the assassin of Archduke Ferdinand at
Sarajevo was the act of starting World War I, even though we may believe that
World War I was indeed a consequence of this act. And we certainly don’t
decide the meanings of texts and speech acts with their effects. We don’t treat
the fact that it bores or amuses you as part of the meaning of my utterance; we
don’t treat the fact that it makes you think of one thing instead of another thing
as part of its meaning; we don’t even think the fact that it makes you think what
I want you to think (that it communicates what I mean) or that it doesn’t is part
of its meaning. (127)

Effects are caused by the tyranny of the experiential subject: our ability to feel
amusement and boredom, or to have thoughts we associate with a text, even a
thought that correctly reproduces the meaning of the author. Indeed, a “reader’s understanding of the text” is an effect of the text, but separate from the “meaning of the text,” even if they coincide (128). Resemblances would certainly be an effect, but, as the epistemological escalation of the passage indicates, so might almost everything else that passes for practical knowledge, or practical interest, in literary studies. Effects don’t even seem to be confined to the subject, if we are asked to consider the difference between an act starting World War I and World War I being merely an unintentional consequence of an act. (What intentional act did start World War I, then?) Such a distinction seems less about what we might individually think and more about a debate over historical causality. Conversely, if this really is about only us, the subjective effects of texts or utterances we experience, it’s difficult to see how post-history will end and we can begin once again to argue over the meaning of texts, if our separate understandings of a text are still just effects of the text. Michaels’s determination to separate meaning from the sensation of meaning basically turns everything into sensation, into a series of Derrida’s intentional effects. In that sense, everything becomes a resemblance. This overrunning of effect, or resemblance, into the world would then itself simply be a trope for the sensation of meaning as not being about either the subject or object in any aboriginally prelinguistic way.

In order to keep meaning distinct from effect, and the text separate from everything else, Michaels cedes everything to effect. This might seem less an askesis than simply, and somewhat ironically, the end of argument, as most might feel inclined to give Michaels his meaning and then go study everything else, the effects of the world. But, from Michaels’s standpoint, a text isn’t everything, an argument he associates with Michael Fried’s late Modernist appeal for the need to frame artwork (hence the full title of Michaels’s book, “1967” being when Fried published his influential essay, “Art and Objecthood,” about postmodernism and art). To disarticulate artwork and texts from framing is to open them up to the vertiginous generation of effects and thereby end their status as artwork or text. Alluding to a story about artist Tony Smith’s nighttime highway drive, Michaels comments, “As a producer of effects, the text is like the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike and like everything else in the world: you can’t put a frame around it” (127). Without a frame, you have neither text nor the text’s meaning—just everything else.

Earlier, Michaels makes clear that this is once again the problem of fetishizing physical materiality. Concerned with a frame as the “sensuous appearance of a text,” we don’t simply read the text. Indeed, trying to do so suddenly seems, is, arbitrary, as contingent as frames really are: “Conventions are arbitrary; if it is
only conventions that keep us from taking the surface of the paper . . . into what Derrida calls ‘our calculations,’ then every frame we place around the text, every limit we impose on it, will seem just that, an imposition—something that may be necessary but that cannot be justified” (112–13). And once we have dismissed frames for the contingent conventions that they are, or made them part of what we are experiencing, the text or artwork becomes part of everything else, simply another object whose variety of perception by different subjects is identical with the multiplicity of experience, instead of the univocality of interpretation.

The whole point of The Shape is, of course, that we shouldn’t make this mistake. But it’s unclear from Michaels’s argument how preserving frames that separate texts from the world might change the contingent nature of such entities. As Michaels himself seems to indicate, Fried’s entreaty for the “‘innumerable conventions both of art and of practical life’” is not an argument against perceiving the convention of the frame as something arbitrary (112). Framing a work might avoid the dire consequences of an out-of-control subject position that Michaels outlines; it might also be the outcome of shunning the sensuous appearance of a text in the first place; but it is also just that, an “imposition . . . that may be necessary but that cannot be justified” (113).27

In Michaels’s terms, moreover, frames ensure the status of a text or artwork as a “representation,” insofar as the piece as Modern art is distinct from everything around it (113). Representation is, of course, another way to talk about figure, although here in The Shape such figure operates in an intensely stable, functionalist manner. Figure as representation conveys the one meaning or intention of the author of the work. Indeed, one could in fact understand figure in Michaels as explicitly about representation, not resemblance. Yet what about that same figure, or representation, understood as an imposition? The contingent character of framing, not quite extinguished in Michaels’s argument, brings representation and resemblance into each other’s gravitational pull. Likewise, the distance between intention and imposition collapses. Indeed, Michaels’s discussion of framing inadvertently provides us with a perhaps more advantageous candidate for de Manian materiality, rather than Michaels’s incorrect use of the term as the physical property of language. Materiality is in fact the very imposition of figure, an action whose radical arbitrariness blunts the realization of figural representation as simple, intentional meaning. But figure, as the very site of transference and exchange, retroactively confers onto materiality the sensation of meaning, or the resemblance of an intention. Such temporal language would itself be an allegory for a condition of language that spatial images, especially of the sublime, also try to evoke. Kant’s ocean would then coincide with Knapp and Michaels’s sea, now
however roiling and inciting (or unveiling) figure, the imposed meaning of non-meaning’s resemblance to meaning.

Such a predicament is indeed often narrativized as an appeal to nature, explicit or otherwise, as Michaels notes. But if nature in all its nonhuman sensation is a placeholder for what can be, as de Man notes with Wordsworth, “addressed” in this situation, history can also occupy that position, as Marx’s famous dictum in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* reminds us. And the appeal to silent history is not as easily dismissed as a non-human Martian landscape that does not speak—although, as Robinson’s trilogy makes clear, understanding what Mars has to say is very much related to discerning the momentum of a planetary history encompassing both Earth and Mars. For Michaels such a desire again incites a choice, between knowing history as history and experiencing it as memory. Indeed, the problem of post-historical historicism in his book is not the absence of historical consciousness, as it is in Jameson, but the transformation of history into lived memory, a presentist lapse once again informed by the hegemony of the subject position. Such a miscue characterizes not only the argument for reparations for slavery and other issues about ethnic and racial identity, but also academic discourse as well, including both New Historicism and deconstruction’s engagements with history.

The figure of history as experienced memory is the ghost, present in such diverse works as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and the New Historicism that critically enables that very experience. Michaels argues that the ghost is not actually needed in deconstruction, as it is merely a figure for what deconstruction actually does, the withering of the historical sign into the performative mark, a physicality denuded of meaning and thus open to the experiential, subjective politics of difference. Thus, while a critique of presentism certainly does inform the complex politics of historicism, Michaels’s own version relies on once again a limited understanding of deconstruction as an argument for the phenomenal, as well as a strict separation between the physically immaterial (the ghost) and material (the sensory object as mark). He thus also separates the figural and literal—deconstruction literally does what the ghosts of New Historicism only figuratively do. Yet the sensation of meaning indicates a more phantasmic state than the regulated nature of this separation allows, a linguistic operation that focuses on the relation between the physical and non-physical, the literal and figural, as figure. Complicating Michaels’s adumbration of post-history, then, the ghost is not always simply a figure for historical memory; more difficultly, history can also be the ghostly, phantasmic operation of figure. Referencing chapter 3, we might say
that history is made up of figures, or resemblances, which as history perform a non-phenomenal literality.

This spectral formulation of history, with all its implications, is obviously the concern of a number of deconstructive writings, although it is certainly not relegated to such works per se. We can in fact apply this formula to the very historical knowledge that Michaels claims has been abandoned in favor of historical memory and that presumably informs his own book. We have already discussed the effects generated by the resemblance of his text to a more explicitly Marxist analysis, and how his own retroactive understanding of his 1982 essay seems based on resemblances left in the wake of a twenty-year gap, or difference, in temporal position. Knowledge of any author, necessarily past, brings intention and figure together; we do choose Wordsworth’s ghost all the time, as Knapp and Michaels say we must. But we also choose the intention of history-as-nature, since to say that history is an operation of figure is to say that its design is made up of resemblances. The shape of The Shape, its own historical knowledge, is based on the resemblance between its “theoretical” and “historical” arguments, the pre-historical structures of sensory non-intention espoused by de Man and others, and the post-historical ideological triumph of capitalism. The design of the book, its intention, is in fact a clever tri-part structure (aside from its coda on Hardt and Negri), founded on the resemblances among history, pre-history, and historicism. This is not so much to say that the design isn’t true (although I have been saying that about a number of its claims) as to point out that its own constative status rests on a relational structure to which Michaels’s descriptive term of “historical knowledge” seems inadequate. But neither does Michaels’s definition of memory as experience describe the history of The Shape. Walking on a beach and coming upon post-history, Michaels neither knows nor experiences the historical; he does read its intention, however, in the form of its sensation.

She had fallen in love with Mars for the same reason that Michel hated it: because it was dead.

—Kim Stanley Robinson, Red Mars

If The Shape is an argument over what form politics and historical understanding should take, it’s also a fight over what literature is, and should be. More precisely, it’s an argument about an epistemological lapse that literature consistently repeats, of finding meaning in non-meaning, of being obsessed by the gothic and uncanny structures of semantic generation. In that sense, literature would be the placeholder for precisely what in the design of The Shape exceeds the book’s own
self-representation as historical knowledge, what one might perversely admire as the book’s formal organization. (Whether as such a placeholder literature can attain the disciplinary status of an exclusive positive identity is another question entirely; see my discussion of this issue within the context of the relation of the literary to the debate between high theory and cultural studies in the last section of chap. 8 and the study of literature under global capitalism in the coda to this book.) Examples of the coincidence between literature and its own ostensibly worse instincts are both prosaic and profound and abound in both our scholarship and classrooms. The historical narrativization of this coincidence has its own name, of course, which is Romanticism. There are many versions of this récit, in the form of both opprobrium and identification, both within but also obviously beyond the era of Romantic writing itself, that make up literary history—that arguably make up the very object of that history. Michaels’s own work can thus be approached not simply through a comparison to Jameson’s Postmodernism, but also as the latest example of a Modernist appeal to repudiate the hold that the cognitive lapse of Romanticism has over literature, art, and politics. The narcissistic solipsism of Romanticism targeted by Irving Babbitt finds its corollary in the subject position of post-history critiqued in The Shape.

Michaels himself alludes to the Romantic underpinnings of fetishizing the subject’s senses when referring to the German Romantic character of Richard Rorty’s emphasis on feeling and “speaking differently,” approaches that together will mistakenly transform written text into sensory object (75–76). The empirical crisis that Michaels thus describes finds its psychological and epistemological parameters already anticipated by Romanticism’s own inquiries into the relation between subject and phenomenal world. But Romanticism also contains a larger, more complex description of this problem, through, among other trajectories, the one that de Man mentions between Kant’s ocean and Wordsworth’s address to nature, the latter a troping, or imposition, of the transference of mind and nature and therefore of an economy of figurative exchange. Critical readings of the volatility of that economy are different registerings of the sensation of meaning that Wordsworth poetizes in his work, an activity in his writing that explicitly includes the (non-)resemblances within and between nature and history, as a Romanticist generation of historicist scholarship from the 1980s has exploited, for and beyond studies of the particular poet. As the subjects of both wave and Martian poem indicate, and as the section headings for Michaels’s argument against post-history’s covert “appeal to nature” cleverly demonstrate (“rocks,” “and stones,” “and trees”), “Against Theory” and The Shape are themselves allegories for one way to read Romanticism-as-Wordsworth.
This is literally the case in terms of the canonical status of “A Slumber” as the poem that numerous critics have used throughout the past century to argue over what an interpretation of a poem might actually mean. But as the previous chapter argues, it is also the case because of the subject matter of “A Slumber” itself, one of many versions in Wordsworth of a poet facing the resemblance of non-meaning to meaning, of impossibly contemplating design in what Michaels dismisses. This chapter can return to “A Slumber” to consider how much the poem appears to dramatize the confusion between non-meaning and meaning in exactly the terms The Shape uses: a poet mistakes a dead body for a text to be understood, when in fact he is simply subjectively experiencing an object, confusing his position toward her as poetic meaning. Yet, in “A Slumber,” the spatial relation between poet and Lucy is actually radically indeterminate:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
   I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
   The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
   She neither hears nor sees,
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course
   With rocks and stones and trees. (Gill, 147)

Where the poem’s action takes place—at Lucy’s grave, in the poet’s mind, in the earth, or in the universe—is precisely one of the questions asked of the piece. Similarly, when the poem occurs is also highly unclear. The divide between the two stanzas creates a sense of spatial and temporal change that can be immediately complicated by asking whether Lucy is already in the ground at the start of the poem.

Neither the poet’s physical nor temporal location is fixed in the piece. He is literally disembodied, apparently bereft of any particular subject position aside from his relation to Lucy, someone who has become, as de Man notes, a thing. When she became such an object, whether the speaker’s perception of her or her death made her so, is also a question—one so conventional it defines in many ways the history of reading and teaching the poem. But the question also defines the very instability of subjective feeling and objective world that makes the sensation of meaning something else besides the despotism of the subject position. The objective status of Lucy as an object and the speaker’s interior relation to this external predicament are also both predicated on the same action, or more
exactly appearance of an action: “She seemed a thing that could not feel / The touch of earthly years” (lines 3–4; my emphasis). The speaker’s relation to Lucy does not create a perception. Rather, that relation is evidenced by a resemblance, the sensation of Lucy as a thing. He felt a certain way because of what she seemed to be. Dead, she seems to become something akin to what she seemed to be in life. Both subject position and object are based on an appeal to figure, what both shapes and blocks our (one) understanding of the poem’s action.

Even more emphatically than the aural engagement with the owls in “The Boy of Winander” that the last chapter examined, the sensation of Lucy is delinked from the phenomenal, with feeling itself reached either through figure (“The touch of earthly years”) or feeling’s negation: the speaker feels Lucy rolling round with the earth, which is him simultaneously feeling her neither seeing nor hearing anything. The combination of her utter stillness and intense movement at poem’s end is thus also a figure for the a-perceptual sensation of meaning that more properly describes the working of sense in the poem than any literally physical, sensory experience. Neither seeing nor hearing, Lucy has become an object like a rock, stone, or tree. But that does not mean that she is either seen or heard, much less experienced purely as an immediate, physical presence. (The same could, of course, be said of the poem’s own rocks, stones, and trees, metonymically realized by their proximity to Lucy.) Paradoxically, she is like Michaels’s map, intransigent in her location buried beneath the ground. Wherever we move, whatever we feel, she is simply there. But she is a moving map, as the ground itself rolls diurnally. She is meaning based on figure, and forever in relation to the positioning—the imposition—of her own movement.

Meaning as a non-phenomenal sensation tied to figure and resemblance, and therefore to the effects of non-meaning—“A Slumber” allegorizes our (which is to say, language’s) compulsive reading of this event, while The Shape and “Against Theory” narrate the sober, pragmatic end to such Romantic madness. Michaels’s book and coauthored essay are not the first. It is not much of a stretch to say that the literary (as well as political) history of modernity is based on countless attempts either to constrain or to do away with the cognitive and ethical lapses of a solipsistic Romantic sensation. That Wordsworth himself famously asks us to be vigilant against the despotic eye simply shows how much Romanticism itself helps formulate this problem in countless diverse versions, including up to this day equations that confuse a sensation of meaning not in debt to the subject with a physical meaninglessness both enthralling and enthralled by the narcissism of subjectivity.

To say this in another way: postmodernism has to be understood through
Romanticism because that is how Modernism understands itself. Postmodernisms that understand themselves simply as part of a binary with Modernism (that would be Fried’s and Michaels’s, but also Jameson’s) basically assume that Modernism has superseded Romanticism. But if Modernism is against postmodernism, the latter is beside Romanticism as well. Michaels’s “theoretical” argument is already “historical,” in that his argument about meaning is really about the history of literature as it is made intelligible by the (post)modernity of Romanticism.

This is not by any means to downplay the seriousness of the subject matter in *The Shape*, neither the complexity nor the urgency of the issues it tries to address. And this is not to deny the risks involved in the political inscriptions of sensations of meaning, the immense difficulty of navigating between Babbitt’s narcissistic Romantic self and the interminable call of, say, Žižek’s Big Other. But it is to say that political meaning—in, as Wordsworth himself shows, the interpersonal, the intelligibility of history, and the retroactive event of memory—is not simply meaning. It is the sensation of intention, belief, understanding, argument, and conflict as well. There is a politics to sensation that ineluctably informs the politics of meaning. If the sensation of meaning can now only congeal in the commodity object of late capital, the sensation of a contingent future still demands a revolutionary meaning beyond capital’s reach. Likewise, whatever impasses identitarian politics may evince, there is no going back to a politics that does not acknowledge the sensation of identity and the uncanniness of the same, that does not make room (however riskily) for sensations of meaning as composing a commons for political discussion and practice. As the next chapter argues, this spectral condition holds true even for the dialectical history that implicitly underpins Michaels’s class polemics and that would somehow subsume or move beyond late capital. There is no simple way to have subjects instead of ghosts, meaning instead of resemblance, knowledge instead of the uncanny. To try and do so is to indulge in an aestheticism—one based, however, not on sensory experience but on the phenomenal cognition of truth.