PART III

The Matter of Literary Criticism
The previous chapters have offered a redefinition of Jamesian ambiguity as a matter of the body, its habitat, and its objects; in doing so, these chapters have frequently mixed their idiom and their practice, sliding between vocabularies and methods that emphasize trope and rhetoric and those that emphasize embodiment as they make claims for identifying historically specific formations. On the one hand, these chapters have tried to physicalize James’s meanings and imagery, for example, replacing the materially amorphous concept of point of view with a shell of material things that defines consciousness; on the other hand, these chapters have repeatedly made use of a terminology of figure, of missed reference, and of linguistic indeterminacy. In other words, the turning body has brought with it a methodological ambiguity, a slippage between the methods associated with turns of phrase and those associated with the embodiment of meaning—methods associated with deconstruction and those associated with the history and politics of the body.

Rather than defending my own eclecticism (or the catachrestic diction of contemporary literary studies in general), in this chapter I would like to explore the relation between the two large movements in literary studies upon which I have drawn; I want especially to reveal what they share, and what the convergence of their terms means. As we will see, transformations of the body—the body’s shifting shapes, the interplay between personal identity and the concrete objects that nestle against it, and the architectural spaces that supply it with a habitat and a definition—are crucial and definitive (they define discourses that might otherwise seem to compete with each other) for both deconstruction and materialism. This convergence is not accidental; rather, it suggests that there is a material model
powerfully at work at the centers of both deconstruction and materialism, a model that is given its definitive shape in the late-nineteenth-century aesthetics of daily life that I have been describing. The argument here will be that we imagine and organize literary meaning and literary language by means of conceptual structures, models derived from historically specific complexes of objects in the physical world. In other words, I will be trying to identify “the material unconscious” of much criticism produced in North America in the last 30 years or so—to use the term by which Bill Brown designates “literature’s repository of disparate and fragmentary, unevenly developed, even contradictory images of the material everyday.”

In the course of critiquing the emptiness of the concept of “the materiality of the signifier,” a stock phrase by which a great deal of theory laid claim to deal with the realm of physical things, John Guillory argues that the criticism that endlessly employed that term “produced no supporting analysis of the concept of materiality itself.” What Guillory is pointing out can be taken as the presence of an unnamed, unanalyzed concept of materiality at the heart of literary studies; some of the features of that concept are what I want to identify here. The purpose here, then, is to outline the *habitus* that much literary criticism inhabits, the “structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices,” as Pierre Bourdieu has named it. To give my claims focus, I will emphasize the work of Elaine Scarry and Paul de Man.

The choice of de Man is problematic, perhaps at this date unwarranted—or even “bizarre,” as one reader of an early version of these pages put it. It is especially problematic because I regard de Man’s work neither as a historical artifact nor as a still-viable critical resource, but uneasily as both. De Man has emerged as the bad conscience within the recesses of the discipline’s psyche; he is the figure whose career, after the discovery of the anti-Semitic journalism written during World War II, presents us with the anxiety that methods of interpretation have no ethical grounding; more specifically, his example presents us with the worry that the philosophically informed, rigorous close reading so valorized in the discipline in the era before cultural studies can proceed with a perfect unawareness of its own political assumptions, implications, even its own moral grounding. For the scandal of de Man is neither that the mature work is clearly continuous with the very early fascist writings, nor that the mature work privately critiques those early writings, but instead that it is impossible to know which is the case.

As Catherine Gallagher put it, in an essay written shortly after the discovery of the wartime journalism became public knowledge, “We have not yet learned what it is we have to learn from the example of de Man.” But de Man functions as a bad conscience—a part of the past one does not
want to examine—for another reason as well, at least for those scholars who worry, whether openly or privately, that the various abilities and approaches that characterize his work are in danger of being lost, and that the books have been prematurely closed on deconstruction and even on theory. As Avital Ronell has recently written, “his ghost took something down with it,” something like “an unprecedented insistence on rigor.”

Perhaps, then, de Man’s example is still influential enough that it needs to be read while also having receded enough that we can gain some purchase on it. In any event, my goal here is to identify a conception of literary meaning in de Man that has received no attention in the voluminous commentary on his work, a conception that is also at work in a more recent and enormously influential account of language and the body. I will be emphasizing the material models by which de Man and Scarry structure their work and focus their analyses; I will be looking at the concrete things that give the conceptual its shape. As in the previous chapters, my emphasis will be on the turning body, the array of objects that surround that body, and the house that contains and blends into all of them.

In a sense, de Man and Scarry put opposite emphases on a phenomenon that they conceptualize very similarly. Both see the matter of reference as what is at stake in the twists and transformations the body can be made to undergo. For de Man, the turning body is a textual moment where language confesses its hugely figurative nature; the turning body and its accessories become the locus of “referential aberration,” places where the undecidability between language as rhetorical trope and language as signification distills itself in its most dramatic form. Hence in “Semiology and Rhetoric,” it is the inseparability of the body and the body’s motions—the dancer and the dance—that epitomizes the intertwined and mutually incompatible rhetorical and semiological sides of a text (11). In “Aesthetic Formalization in Kleist,” it is the fencer who exemplifies the ways in which language “always refers but never to the right referent,” and the Marionettentheater, with its puppets turning on their lines, that exemplifies the formalized nature of textuality and the accompanying loss of reference. In the famous reading of Rousseau’s Confessions, the purloined ribbon is the epitome of a “free signifier” (Allegories 289). In these examples, language’s potential for endless signification is identified with the body and its appurtenances. De Man’s late essays assemble a kind of catalog, a collection of things that turn or spin or fold over; they collate a set of objects oddly similar to the Jamesian ones I have been describing and find in those objects properties that advance an argument of referential skepticism.

The body in Elaine Scarry’s The Body in Pain has a far more stubborn, far denser materiality than the de Manian body seems to have; far from being a figure that reveals the undecidability of linguistic propositions, it
is a substance that makes reference stick. In Scarry’s account of wounding and warfare, the incontestable reality of the wounded body “anchors” the disputed issue that led to that wounding; abstract ideas and rhetorical structures become real and convincing when they are tied to bodies that have been damaged or destroyed, when they can be seen as reflected in a horrific view of a battlefield strewn with corpses, for instance. But what is important to note here is that the wounded body itself is “nonreferential”; whatever reference it held to the culture that shaped and identified it has been undone by injury, and it will take on a new referential function only when it is tied to the outcome of a war, when its materiality is linked with an idea, a piece of language, a political position (119). The process of “making” works in precisely opposite fashion because it relieves persons of pain, makes of them something more than the burden of their embodiment, unlike wounding, which reduces persons to nothing but their corporeality. What it means to have a body is only knowable if it is externalized, projected into the made things around it that mime its structure, like a chair that mimes the backbone, the legs, the distribution of bodily weight (290–91). As poems and paintings do more overtly, ordinary things carry with them, on Scarry’s account, a representation of the body; as William James says in a passage I quoted earlier, Scarry would say that the body is never known by itself, but always through the mediation of some other object (PP, 286).

In this entirely superficial survey, I have tried to emphasize a material grain in the rhetorical critic and to emphasize the referential and hence linguistic argument of the materialist one. This doubling of materialist and rhetorical techniques becomes even more pronounced when de Man and Scarry take up the same image. Early in The Body in Pain, Scarry analyzes the room, “the simplest form of shelter,” as simultaneously an “enlargement of the body” and a “miniaturization of the world, of civilization” (38–39). The room’s material attributes replicate yet “stand apart from and free of” the body’s structure and functions. Walls, for example, mimic the body’s potential to protect the self and so they externalize the need to keep something internal and private; at the same time, windows let in some of the outer world and so lead the room’s inhabitant to internalize something exterior to herself. Although she does not say so, Scarry perceives the room as a lyric structure, endowing it with the hermetic permeability of a small poem in which a speaker simultaneously turns away from and speaks to—closes off from and opens up to—a social world.

When de Man takes up the image of Marcel’s room in Proust’s Du côté de chez Swann, he takes up a passage that accords perfectly with the way Scarry would later conceive of the fluctuating privacy of the room: for Marcel, the room’s “almost closed blinds” that admit just “a glimmer of
daylight” permit him to grasp “the total spectacle of the summer” in a way he could not if he were taking a walk outside. This passage is specifically about language—Marcel has retreated to his room to read—and its odd claim that one can comprehend a totality in a “glimmer,” whereas immersing oneself in that totality means experiencing it “by fragments,” becomes in de Man’s reading a master-image for his account of figurative language as he goes over the passage not once but twice in *Allegories of Reading* (14). For de Man, the passage asserts the superiority of metaphor over metonymy but advances that claim by means of the metonymic structure it disavows. It hears in the sound of buzzing flies what Marcel calls a “necessary link” to the summer day, and so claims a metaphorical identity between them (A is B), yet it goes on to define that identity in images that depend for their sense not on identity, but on the adjacency of metonym, contingent associations like the “running brook” which, at the end of the passage, relays the cool darkness of the room and which depends not on a necessary connection, but on mere adjacency (13, 66). The room becomes for de Man a physicalization of how literary language undoes itself; it becomes the concrete image of deconstruction and the undecidabilities that are that method’s indispensable foci.

The point I want to draw from this structure in de Man and its resemblance to Scarry’s materialism is fairly simple. A material structure that might seem to stabilize historical criticism turns out to be a master image of cultural and rhetorical ambiguity, turns out to keep on turning inside into outside, keeps turning into each other a stubborn sense of the concrete and a slippery sense of rhetorical play. Turning to theory, we find it repeating at a higher level of abstraction the oscillations I have been describing in the first sections of this book: Scarry’s and de Man’s analyses of the room find it a space halfway between the actual and the imaginary (like Hawthorne’s parlor in “The Custom-House”), halfway between outer and inner, halfway between a figure that epitomizes material shelter and a figure that epitomizes a linguistic activity like reading.

I want to argue that James and his culture understand this oscillation as itself a material process: the relation between rhetorical and bodily figure is in James’s texts and milieu a matter of ceaseless “embl[ish]ment” and “disfigur[ation]” (to adapt terms I quoted earlier from the preface to *Daisy Miller*), a matter of matter rubbing off on bodies, of artifact lending its material properties to the persons who handle or violate or merely look at it (*LC* 2:1277). Scarry and de Man present their rooms as endlessly generalizable images, transhistorical models for how culture and literature work; each theorist is completely frank about this claim, de Man writing that “there is absolutely no reason why analyses of the kind here suggested for Proust would not be applicable, with proper modifications of technique,
to Milton or to Dante” (16–17), and Scarry generalizing her model of the room into a structure of the city and then to the process of “civilization” itself (39). But behind these images of the room hovers one more room that de Man and Scarry never mention but that nevertheless guides their interpretations; for this conception of domestic space as one that is simultaneously physical and “half-spiritualised,” that seems “actually to . . . become a part of the texture of [the] mind,” epitomizes late-nineteenth-century aestheticism, as the phrases I have just quoted from Walter Pater’s “The Child in the House” suggest. For Pater, the relation between the room and its inhabitant is one in which “inward and outward being” are “woven through and through each other into one inextricable texture—half, tint and trace and accident of homely colour and form, from the wood and the bricks; half, mere soul-stuff, floated thither from who knows how far.” This “inextricable texture” melds inner and outer, weaves together body and appurtenance so tightly the seams barely show.

My point in bringing forward this image from Pater, and in noting its similarities to the spatial images of Scarry and de Man, is to suggest that these critics partake of and come at the end of a historical movement toward the non-anxious identification of bodies and objects. The material relationships that are formed and re-formed in the rooms of Hawthorne and William and Henry James and Pater yield, in both the deconstructive and the materialist critic, an aesthetic that presents itself as endlessly generalizable and so detaches itself from the history of production and reproduction to which James himself is far more alert. In other words, both de Man and Scarry present as a philosophical argument something that, I have been indicating, is a historical formation. That history of bodies and things—a contingent, variable, microeconomic reshaping of matter—becomes in the work of these critics a conceptual, abstract way of organizing literary meaning. This abstraction is what makes their work powerful; it is also one that in Scarry is a source of some tension or conflictedness, while in de Man it becomes a formation that occludes his method’s material foundations.

For while in The Body in Pain, Scarry developed a philosophy of making easily transported across different economies and different material worlds, ones separated by centuries, in the long essay “Work and the Body in Hardy and Other Nineteenth-Century Novelists,” published the same year she examined that aesthetic within and showed it arising out of a late-nineteenth-century economy and a late-nineteenth-century cultural poetics. Much more specifically, as Scarry reads Hardy, Dickens, Zola, and George Eliot, it is those novelists’ concrete micrornarratives that generate what at the end of the essay she will frame as the diaphanous image of beauty, the epitome of the aesthetic image. The “many small moments” of
material precision in nineteenth-century realism—the genre’s ability to take in a touch of fresh paint that gives off on passers-by as they enter through a gate, or the intimate contact between an orchard-keeper’s hands and the branches of his trees as the keeper prunes the branches and the branches scratch his hands—are what underwrite the much larger claims of *The Body in Pain*.13 As Scarry puts it with characteristic recursiveness, the “human creature” is “forever rubbing up against and leaving traces of itself . . . on the world, as the world is forever rubbing up against and leaving traces of itself . . . on the human creature” (50).

Human creature/world/world/human creature: this chiasmus forms the very center of Scarry’s aesthetic, as the reversal of *The Body in Pain*’s subtitle—*The Making and Unmaking of the World*—suggests. What the Hardy essay makes clear about this theoretical model is that it transforms into a general aesthetic a nineteenth-century philosophy of the body; alternatively, it translates and condenses into a rhetorical trope the ways in which in the nineteenth century real physical conditions were coded. This is true first of all because the trace is crucial to Scarry’s thought: in focusing so microscopically and so insistently on Dickens’s dirt or Hardy’s smudges of paint or, in *The Body in Pain*, on Marx’s conception of the commodity as “the materialized objectification of bodily labor” (247), Scarry imports into contemporary aesthetics a nineteenth-century conviction that events leave behind a material fragment as evidence that they have occurred, that actions leave residues, that nothing is ever lost.14 It is true second of all because the hand and the sense of touch are crucial and privileged for Scarry’s attempts to embody meaning. In *The Body in Pain*, Scarry explicitly follows Engels in his emphasis on the hand as “the direct agent of making” (253). But the Hardy essay reveals a less-obvious assumption that sustains the aesthetics at work in both texts: all the senses are reconceived according to the model of touch and reaching-out (“seeing” and “hearing” are “forms of reach,” Scarry writes [74]). Hence the bodily experience and the acts of making that Scarry generalizes so broadly in her book take as their norm a tactile model, one that conceives of the body as interacting with a world that is very close to it, a world in which objects are handcrafted and in which things that are seen and heard are within the body’s grasp; the large model at work here cannot readily assimilate the society of the spectacle, for example, or a culture in which much of the work is done by pushing buttons.15 Accompanying this emphasis on the sense of touch is a third continuity between Scarry’s work and nineteenth-century thought about the body—a conception arising out of Marx, but given greater specificity by sensation psychology—of the tool as a prosthesis, an extension of the physical senses. Citing the psychologist James Gibson’s *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*, Scarry writes in both the Hardy essay and
in *The Body in Pain* of the fact that “a person can literally ‘feel’ at the end of a walking stick the grass and stones that are three feet away from his hand, just as a person holding the handle of a scissors actually feels the ‘cutting action’ of the blades a few inches away.”\(^{16}\) This knitting-together of human physiology with external implement is the continuity that Mark Seltzer has named “the body-machine complex”; it is a habit of thought that typifies both nineteenth-century realism’s way of treating the world of objects, tools, and appurtenances and nineteenth-century psychology’s focus on the sensorium.\(^{17}\) As has been noticed in chapter 2, in the *Principles of Psychology* William James makes exactly the same observation as Gibson does about the walking-stick effect and other tools, such as a pencil or a knife, writing that sensations “migrate from their original locality” into the implements that link—and blur the difference between—the perceiving body and the perceived world (685). Hence when in *The Body in Pain* Scarry writes of the “reach of sentience, and the unity of sentience with the things it reaches,” she transforms into a trope the metamorphic and mixed quality of the nineteenth-century body, the body whose edges blur into a material margin that surrounds them, one from which they cannot be easily distinguished (249).

A fourth way in which Scarry’s chiastic figuring of the body and its habitat abstracts into a rhetorical pattern a nineteenth-century cultural poetics is more general and more all-encompassing: it lies in Scarry’s focus on the body itself, her reduplication of the “intense somatic bias” of nineteenth-century thought (as Cynthia Eagle Russett has called it), her assumption that bodily shape and cultural change will be interrelated and that the latter will always somehow involve the former.\(^{18}\) As Scarry concludes in the penultimate paragraph of the Hardy essay, “all human acts take place through and out of [the] body,” a claim that may be true but that places no limits on the body as an explanatory device (82). In *The Body in Pain*, this body is almost breathtakingly generalized into a hermeneutically all-purpose body. One moment where this abstraction of the historically specific into a generally applicable and hence philosophical language becomes most apparent is when Scarry quite frankly detaches Marx’s thought from its thorough critique of the inequities of nineteenth-century capitalism—Marx is too “often narrowly perceived in his capacity as critic of western economic structures,” Scarry writes—and instead views his work as a widely valid theory of the nature of things, “our major philosoph[y] on the nature of material objects” (179). In this moment (and admittedly it is an unusually broad one, for there are other passages where Scarry does not suspend Marx’s involvement with the specificities of factory labor and the workings of capital), Scarry simultaneously crosses out nineteenth-century contexts and adopts one of the
nineteenth-century’s precepts, the one that makes the body the explanation for everything or, more specifically, the one that holds that all compelling explanations must involve and appeal to the materiality of the body.

To grasp this move is to understand how the philosophical abstraction of the body is itself a product of specific historical processes; it is to understand that innumerable material processes underlie and keep current and shade the usage of a term that can seem to stand apart from history. In the *Grundrisse*, in a passage that Scarry does not consider, Marx theorizes abstraction in ways that can be used to analyze the logic and even the historical significance of her project. The passage is a powerful one because in it Marx seeks to historicize not any particular economic manifestation but the concepts of political economy itself. Alternately put, he seeks to reveal as particular manifestations of economic history the abstractions that govern his own discipline. Taking labor as his example, Marx argues that this abstraction, so basic to the thought processes of political economy, only appears in its most general form when the types of labor have arrived at the multiplicity of the kinds of work found in his own time: “As a rule, the most general abstractions arise only in the midst of the richest possible concrete development, where one thing appears as common to many, to all.”19 Crucial to Marx’s explanation of how abstractions emerge is the teemingness, the variegated and specialized nature of nineteenth-century life, of “bourgeois society,” which is “the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production”; labor becomes thinkable as a general concept when “individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another” and “the specific kind is a matter of chance for them.”20 The abstract concepts of political economy thus reflect a culture of material flux, concrete change, and social randomness.

Applying Marx’s precept to the matter at hand, we can say that the body in the nineteenth century becomes thinkable in abstract ways through the incessant material changes it undergoes and the stylistic variations it takes on. The freestanding body, susceptible to the generalizations of theoretical claims, is generated by contingency; Charlotte’s scarf in *The Europeans*, Rose-Agathe’s earrings and coiffures, Madame Merle’s clothes, Mrs. Gereth’s treasures, Mrs. Churchley’s enormous red-feathered fan in “The Marriages,” and Maria Gostrey’s red ribbon in *The Ambassadors* all produce the body as a concept. These specific processes of adornment and personal stylization—specific in terms of their class, fairly specific in terms of gender, and materially specific in the kinds of things at work—are what Scarry renames “the body.” In other words, when Scarry conceives of objects as “fragments of self-extension,” when she posits the “artifact’s inherent freedom of reference,” when she speculates that “freestanding
artifact[s] close to the body” are where invention begins, she generalizes on the fungible, pliable, mobile materials that nineteenth-century bourgeois culture first saturated with significance (196, 317, 321). Indeed, those objects’ multiplicity and mobility are what made generalization possible in the first place. Rhetoric in this instance lifts the body out of history and transforms it into a philosophical entity: Scarry’s chiasmus becomes a widely portable trope derived from the specific material conditions, and ways of thinking about those conditions, that it nonetheless leaves behind.21

I want to identify these conditions and their effects more precisely by turning back to de Man; I want to consider de Man in more detail because I wish to show that specific material models can shape critical practices that have no overt or announced interest in the material world. In a way, the point here is simpler than those made about Scarry, since de Man’s project is far less multilayered; in large part, the power his writings once had came from his relentless focus on the figures of rhetoric. In a way, the point is more challenging, however, since it must ferret out the traces of bodily and material styles that in de Man’s writings often (but not always) verge on disappearing. I will seek to show, however, that the air of philosophical abstraction in de Man turns out to be an allegation that renders nearly invisible his adherence—even his devotion—to a fairly specific material model. More particularly, the ambiguity of literary language is only conceivable for de Man in the material terms of the body, its accessories, and its domicile—only conceivable, that is, according to the contours of a material model specific to a certain (admittedly large) historical formation (the privatization of experience and the growth of commodity culture), a historical particularity de Man often takes pains to deny, as in the essay on lyric in Blindsight.22

Indeed, the turn to problems of language in de Man’s later work brings with it a turn to the body. In de Man’s later work, the turn to rhetoric means that “we are no longer within a thematic context dominated by selfhood but in a figural representation of a structure of tropes” (Allegories, 186). The discursive centrality of the self, its (failed) function as a psychological principle of unity, is replaced by an economy, one that de Man identifies—and cannot imagine except by means of—the body, its extensions, its appendages, its shell. When de Man writes in the early 1960s of Montaigne, the issue is rather insistently or even obsessively one of “subjectivity”; when he writes of Montaigne in one of the late essays on Kant and materialism, the associations are with that strand of the essayist that imagines the body as severed parts, as “limbs, hands, toes, breasts, or what Montaigne so cheerfully referred to as ‘Monsieur ma partie.’”23 While it is probably true, as Terry Eagleton has observed, that “few critics have been
more bleakly unenthused by bodiliness—by the whole prospect of a cre-
ative development of the sensuous, creaturely aspects of human existence”
than de Man, it is also true that de Man depends on the body, its surrogates
and doubles, its habitats and accessories, for making clear his most basic
meanings.  

This dependence on and denial of physicality both emerge with extraor-
dinary clarity in de Man’s reading of Rousseau’s *Pygmalion*, a reading that
centers on—and attempts to cancel—the text’s immoderate interest in the
human body. On the one hand, material properties play a large role in the
analysis: de Man quotes Rousseau’s descriptions of the coldness of the mar-
ble and the trembling touches Pygmalion and Galathea exchange; he argues
that “the intrinsic quality of the self is borrowed from the surface of its phys-
ical shape” when Pygmalion extols the beauty of Galathea’s soul; indeed, he
seems to move against any dematerialization of the signifier as he indicates
that “the abstraction and the generality of a linguistic figure manifests itself
necessarily in the most physical of modes” (*Allegories* 182). On the other
hand, the materiality at work is explicitly denied: the coldness of the marble
becomes a figure for the shock Pygmalion experiences at finding his own
work of self-expression standing before him—“entirely alienated,” as de Man
puts it—and so neither exclusively himself nor exclusively other but baffling-
ly both. Indeed, de Man goes well out of his way to transform into a matter
of rhetoric Rousseau’s strongly sensory interests, to conceptualize the corpo-
reality of this Pygmalion story: “this coldness [Pygmalion’s emotional state]
has nothing in common with the coldness of the original stone; Bachelard’s
thermodynamics of the material imagination would find nothing to feed on
in *Pygmalion*. ‘Hot’ and ‘cold’ are not, in this text, derived from material
properties but from a transference from the figural to the literal that stems
from the ambivalent relationship between the work as an extension of the
self and as a quasi-divine otherness” (178). Because he wants to maintain this
reading of *Pygmalion* as a text in which “the deconstructive discourse of truth
and falsehood . . . undoes selfhood . . . and replaces it by the knowledge of
its figural and epistemologically unreliable structure” (187), de Man is forced
to suppress Rousseau’s climax: one would never know from *Allegories of
Reading* that the moment when Pygmalion first feels Galathea’s flesh coming
alive is when he chisels away some of the draperies that hide the figure’s
breasts. This final touch needs to be suppressed because it would reveal the
materiality of the reciprocity that de Man treats as purely rhetorical: it would
be hard, in other words, to ignore the extraordinary abstraction of de Man’s
formulations if this moment were brought into play, hard not to instill in the
reader a sense that something—too much—was lost in this critical allegory,
or that the allegory de Man reveals brings to the foreground matters his
method is ill-equipped to elucidate.
Examining de Man’s reading of *Pygmalion* reveals a material basis within his method, a source of illustrations and examples without which that method’s results would make little sense. This examination has revealed, as well, two sources of anxiety for that method’s dematerializing materialism, two points that threaten to make the physical world very hard to abstract away. One, epitomized by Galathea’s breasts, is the female body. The other, which makes its presence felt in the dismissal of Gaston Bachelard, is the phenomenological strain of twentieth-century French criticism. Although it may seem that these two entities are wholly unrelated, I will argue that in de Man’s thinking they are tightly intertwined, not only because they both exert a kind of materialist pressure on his method but also because when, in the mid 1960s, de Man edited and revised a translation of Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, he encountered them together. Since this phase of his career was also the moment in which de Man developed the viselike method of rhetorical analysis that became his most influential style, it is plausible to suggest that this encounter was a transformative one.

More specifically, in *Madame Bovary* and in the critical commentary on that novel, de Man finds a repertoire of images by which he will go on to organize literary meaning, a material economy that he will turn into a matter of rhetoric. The physical particularity of nineteenth-century French realism serves as an occulted source for his later work: he never writes about Stendhal or Balzac, and never writes about Flaubert again after editing the Norton Critical Edition, published in 1965, that I will focus on. Similarly, de Man’s production of this edition is totally absent from critical commentary on his career, even from the two important book-length studies, those by Christopher Norris and Rodolphe Gasché. Hence in several different ways, or rather at several different levels, de Man’s career epitomizes the privilege accorded to general hermeneutics and the detachment of idealist aesthetics from the arts of everyday life: even as a material culture gets renamed as theory, so too is a text like *Blindness and Insight* accorded a prominence denied to a critical edition.

Against these powerful sublimations of the material world, *Madame Bovary* can serve as a powerful weapon; it can desublimate the physicality of the abstract critical methods that it itself helped to shape. Flaubert’s representations of desire and consumption entail a scrupulous attention to bodily gesture, to nervous mannerism, to the tiny acts of use; no physical motion is too small, and so the novel takes in Emma ecstatically “scratching the velvet of the [theatre] box with her nails” at the melodrama in Rouen, or pricking her finger on the wire of her wedding bouquet as she rediscovers it shortly after the dance at Vaubyessard, or admiring the way “young beaux” so unlike her own Charles lean “the tight-drawn palm of
their yellow gloves on the golden knobs of their canes.”26 Such processes of friction seem indispensable to the production of meaning in Madame Bovary because they are crucial both to the novel’s account of material life and to its account of psychological life; in fact, they link these two levels of the text so tightly that they appear to merge together. One of Flaubert’s terms for this chafing action is frottement—“rubbing,” “friction,” and, more figuratively, “contact,” “interaction”—as when, after dancing, Emma finds that the ballroom floor’s wax has left a residue on her shoes even as the experience has left its imprint on her desires: “. . . ses souliers de satin, dont la semelle s’était jaunie à la cire glissante du parquet. Son cœur était comme eux: au frottement de la richesse, il s’était placé dessus quelque chose qui ne s’effacerait pas” (”. . . the satin shoes whose soles were yellowed with the slippery wax of the dancing floor. Her heart resembled them: in its contact with wealth, something had rubbed off on it that could not be removed,” in de Man’s translation).27 Similarly, as Rodolphe contemplates his letter breaking off his affair with Emma, he looks at Emma’s miniature as he recalls his memories of her, until memory and visual image somehow efface each other—“comme si la figure vivante et la figure peinte, se frottant l’une contre l’autre, se fussent réciproquement effacées” (“as if the living and painted face, rubbing one against the other, had erased each other”).28 Finally, a more abstract example comes when Emma grows tired of Léon and analyzes his faults; the narrator reflects that “le dénigrement de ceux que nous aimons toujours nous en détache quelque peu. Il ne faut pas toucher aux idoles: la dorure en reste aux mains” (“the picking apart of those we love always alienates us from them. One must not touch one’s idols, a little of the gilt always comes off on one’s fingers”).29

As the progressive abstraction of these quotations suggests, a material process—one specific to the nineteenth-century body, as I have argued above—governs the text’s sense of significance. The more figurative entities of Emma’s “cœur,” of Rodolphe’s mental images, of an idealized Léon carry a materiality that, Madame Bovary insists, nothing can efface (“quelque chose qui ne s’effacerait pas,” as the passage on the dancing shoes puts it). This strong sense of materiality is the focus for a strand of Flaubert criticism that begins with Charles du Bos in the 1920s and develops in the 1950s into a more sophisticated version with the work of two members of the Geneva School of phenomenological critics, Georges Poulet and Jean-Pierre Richard. While there are important differences among these critics and their accounts of Madame Bovary, three common characteristics need to be noted here. They all take the novel’s material processes as images for how consciousness works in the physical world, treating the relation between subject and object as a frottement, a friction, a swapping of attributes, a “giving off on,” as de Man sometimes translates it in Flaubert’s text.
(the nearly oxymoronic English idiom of “off” plus “on” captures the sense of incessant, irresolvable quality of this back and forth movement fairly precisely). Hence du Bos’s early explanation of Flaubert’s “genius for materiality” as the “power to identify himself with matter” becomes, in Poulet’s account, “a deliberate confusion . . . between the subjective and the objective” “as if, by penetrating Emma’s soul, the images of things had lost their objectivity and been transformed into feelings, or as if Emma, by becoming affected by material things, had become also somehow material.” In Richard, this crisscross movement between subject and object is characterized as a blending of sensation and memory, a “mélange,” a “fusion,” as he calls it.

Second, all these critics identify this material consciousness with the female figure. In Poulet’s reading, Emma epitomizes Flaubert’s own psychic disorientations by materializing her author’s emotional vicissitudes; Flaubert’s very conceptual-seeming vertiginous “whirl of ideas” becomes Emma’s very physical-seeming fragmentation, dispersed as she is among the various objects of her desires. In du Bos, this dispersal of male identity is associated—in ways du Bos does not quite rationalize—with both “a feminine scent” and with the “genius” for “materiality” du Bos so values in Flaubert. In Richard, the reciprocity of matter and consciousness is figured as a process akin to touching—the one necessarily reciprocal physical sense—and specifically as the touch of a woman (“Woman attracts as if she were water, and water caresses like a woman,” Richard writes as he characterizes a description of bathing in one of Flaubert’s letters, a letter that becomes a point of orientation for the argument of Richard’s Littérature et Sensation). In ways that are neither directly acknowledged nor totally obscured, women give substance to the enterprise of phenomenological criticism; even when, as in du Bos, the substance at work is as amorphous as a scent, the female figure is a crucial physicalization for these critics, the figure that bestows definition upon the theme of consciousness, which might otherwise seem too amorphous to conceive clearly.

A third thing these three essays have in common is that they are all selected by de Man for the critical essays section of his edition of Madame Bovary. While an edition produced mainly for college courses might seem mere journeyman work, there are suggestions in the introduction that de Man thought of this book as something more than that: de Man writes that his “principle of . . . selection” for the essays has “very definitely been oriented towards problems of method that are important in the contemporary criticism of fiction” (xii). Inasmuch as the essays comment on each other and react to each others’ claims, the selection “gives insight into the unified development of critical thought in the twentieth century” (xii).
Self-consciously producing a primer on literary criticism, then, de Man might also be seen here as constructing a lineage of his crucial predecessors, one that includes Saint-Beuve, Baudelaire, James (whose identification of “the real” in Flaubert with “the accessories” in the passage reprinted from Notes on Novelists merges the problem of bodily boundaries with the problem of literary significance as the phenomenologists would later do), Sartre, and Auerbach, as well as du Bos, Richard, and Poulet. In commenting on these latter writers, de Man credits them with the ability to “recaptur[e] the creative consciousness of the writer,” even as he suggests their limitations in their indifference to narrative structures (xii). But he is still quarreling with their legacy as late as the revised edition of Blindness and Insight, and still working through problems of materiality in what is virtually his last essay. All of which suggests that de Man’s deconstruction is in part produced by a phenomenological and materialist inheritance lost sight of in much commentary on that deconstruction itself, a sense of literary significance that cannot be fully abstracted from what de Man in his introduction to Madame Bovary calls the “material imagination” (xiii).

For if we turn to Allegories of Reading, we find that the fluctuations in meaning, which are what that book is really about, are conceived according to the material fluctuations in Flaubert, ones that de Man labored over as he revised Eleanor Marx Aveling’s translation, ones that the phenomenologists had made their focal point. Indeed, these fluctuations—these rhetorical and grammatical ambiguities—are practically inconceivable apart from the physical objects and processes that, for Flaubert and many other nineteenth-century novelists, compose everyday life. This tight bond between meaning and a specific materiality is not so surprising in the chapter on Proust, where, as I argued above, linguistic structures and the architectural structure of the bourgeois home become in de Man’s reading totally inextricable. It is more surprising—and so more revealing—to find the same material model at work in the chapter on Rilke, a writer whose work would seem far less invested in the physical matter of everyday life and whose favored genre of the lyric has so often seemed to preclude a strong concern with substance. In de Man’s reading, linguistic processes are described as physical ones; in reaching for specific and so sharable characterizations of the conceptual intricacies of language, de Man draws on a repertoire of metaphors that do their work almost unnoticeably in his text but that bespeak the presumption of a shared sense of the material world.

There are, first of all, some relatively unremarkable moments—but I am here trying to alienate somewhat our usual metaphors for what a text is—in which de Man draws on circulatory, knotted, and spatial figures in order to explain the workings of Rilke’s lyrics. Poems’ metaphors “do not connote objects, sensations, or qualities of objects”; instead, they “evolve” an
“activity that circulates between” voice and poetic topic (Alleegories 29, 30). “There is . . . nothing in the poem that would entitle us to escape beyond its boundaries in search of evidence that would not be part of it” because the “interlacing” of theme and speaker “that constitutes the text” is “so tight that it leaves no room for any other system of relationships” (31). At some moments, the argument of Rilke’s poems is carried by pure sound as each sound effect is “enclose[d]” into another, “as a larger box can enclose in its turn a smaller one” (31). In each of these instances, de Man explicitly cancels the material world and then reintroduces it as a characterization of language; purely rhetorical matters turn out to be a matter of small and private spaces, of worked and crafted (or corseted) ornament, of a transfer of properties between two things. If we are not explicitly in a world of Flaubertian frottement here, then we are in a material world nonetheless, one with some properties in keeping with Flaubert’s very physicalized sense of how the literary text makes its meanings.

In the pivotal analysis of the chapter on Rilke, de Man’s substitution of a general truth about language for a historically specific material formation emerges with even more clarity. The analysis—of “Am Rande der Nacht” (“At the borderline of the night”)—is pivotal because it establishes the chiasmus as “the determining figure of Rilke’s poetry,” determining because it is “the crossing that reverses the attributes of words and of things” (38). As my preceding analysis of the chiasmus in Elaine Scarry’s work might lead one to expect, at issue here are the exchanges of attributes between person and artifact that are central to a nineteenth-century aesthetic of everyday life. The poem is quite explicitly about the speaker’s room (“Meine Stube”) and about the status of personal objects (“Die Dinge”); as in his discussions of Proust, so here too, de Man formulates his theory not in terms of the machine—as other commentators have suggested—but in terms of domestic space. Perceptively noting the dynamism of the objects in comparison to the flatness of the voice that describes them, de Man argues that the “inwardness that should belong, per definition, to the subject is located instead within things”; that the “usual structure has been reversed: the outside of things has become internalized” (36). Yet because these objects seem expressive without being fully assimilated to the poem’s speaker, de Man characterizes the poem as representing “objects as containers of a subjectivity which is not that of the self that considers them,” a paradox that, he asserts, is “difficult to comprehend . . . on the level of the themes” (37). This discrepancy is what opens the way for the interpretation of the poem as about “the coming into being of metaphor”; since the thematic reading of the poem makes no sense, the poem must be about “a potential inherent in language,” in this case “the outside-directed turn that occurs in all metaphorical representations” (37).
I emphasize this moment in *Allegories of Reading* because it is one in which de Man almost straightforwardly renames a particular historical and material formation as an exclusively linguistic one. The reversals in Rilke's poem of inside and outside, in which “the outside of things has become internalized” while objects serve as “containers” of “subjectivity,” are not unique discoveries of this poem, but instead constitute a definitive paradox of the discourse of decor (36, 37). An allegory of reading—for this chapter contains the broadest possible claims about “a paradox that is inherent in all literature”—is shaped by a specific sense of the objects of consumption, decor and personal ornament (50). In other words, the conundrum of the expressive power of objects, the *personality* of objects, is here not a purely philosophical point nor purely a question of rhetoric: it is Madame Merle's question much more particularly (“What shall we call our ‘self’” when “we’re each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances”?), taking that moment from *Portrait of a Lady* as a summation of the cultural movements sketched in the previous chapters. At this moment in de Man's work, the very terms of literary criticism are formed by a specific material model—the hermeneutics of the accessory, the detailing of decor, the newly intimate sense of one's belongings.

So powerful are these material formations that they supply the terms when de Man seeks to cancel or circumvent the thematic criticism that could otherwise lead to an analysis of Rilke's place in the history of things, the history of personal property. Writing of Rilke's shortest and most opaque later lyrics, de Man argues that these poems “impl[y] a complete drying up of thematic possibilities.” They are poems of “pure ‘figure’” in which Rilke comes as close as any poet can to “the purity” of “semantic askesis”:

> The figure stripped of any seduction besides that of its rhetorical elasticity can form, together with other figures, constellations of figures that are inaccessible to meaning and to the senses, located far beyond any concern for life or for death in the hollow space of an unreal sky.

(48)

De Man asserts the complete abstraction of the rhetorical figure by means of a specific materiality; this exclusion of reference from the figure is itself figured through the historically particular physicality it is said to preclude. It is not just that the “elasticity” mentioned here links the passage to the pliable accessory of dress and ornament, an association that operates crucially as well in the later chapter in *Allegories of Reading* in the discussion of the purloined ribbon of Rousseau's *Confessions*. Nor is it only a matter of realizing that the passage practically defines real and rigorous reading as
the purging of those ornaments, the “stripping” away of obsfucatory lay-
ers—an implication that means that the sense this passage makes depends
on the material world the passage would deny. What really involves the
passage with a specific materiality is the figure—the bodily one—that
holds its own figures together.

For if positing the “elasticity” of a “stripped” and “seduc[ive]” “figure”
strikes one as a hopelessly mixed metaphor, then one must also acknowl-
edge that women hold this catachresis together, and that the flexibility of
language and the flexibility of the nineteenth-century female body—part-
icularly an adulterous one like Emma Bovary or Charlotte Stant or A
London Life’s Selina—have become impossible to distinguish. It is as if the
nearly-naked female body never mentioned in Allegories of Reading’s chap-
ter on Rousseau’s Pygmalion has migrated to another place in de Man’s
book, where it serves as an account of rhetoric, serves to encapsulate and
substantiate the master terms of de Man’s critical practice. Or it is as if all
rhetoric has taken on the properties of a stretchy and seductive falsifica-
tion that Flaubert imagines a laminating or embossing machine might
produce. Early in Part Three of Madame Bovary, when the reunited Emma
and Léon exchange exaggerated professions of their own passions,
Flaubert’s narrator observes that “speech is like a rolling machine that
always stretches the sentiment it expresses” (“la parole est un laminoir qui
allonge toujours les sentiments”). The metaphor receives its literalization
as Léon fabricates a desire to be buried in a coverlet (“un couvre-pied”)
given to him by Emma: the flexibility of rhetoric and the versatility of the
stuff that accessorizes the body are inseparable for Flaubert, an insepara-
bility that de Man and other twentieth-century critics absorb, adopt,
inherit.

What is at stake for literary criticism in the study of material culture,
the surfaces of the everyday world, the most superficial layer of civiliza-
tion? My answer has been that literary criticism’s own logic has repeated-
ly and often unnoticeably incorporated within itself aspects of the materi-
al world by relying on those aspects for its sense of what language and lit-
terature are. Literary criticism has come to think of such all-encompassing
categories as textuality itself in terms derived from specific material mod-
els, ones that idealist aesthetics would sublimate to the point of invisibili-
ty. One could argue at this point that there has been very little materialist
literary criticism because, if we survey Anglo-American criticism of the last
100 years, we find very few studies that do not prefer and privilege the
conceptual over the concrete aesthetic practices that make the conceptual
legible and sharable. Or one could argue that all literary criticism has been
materialist and usually failed to recognize itself as such; as de Man so fre-
quently does in the passages I have canvassed, criticism relies on a shared
model of the material world in order to make its meanings clear, in order to sustain its relation to its audience.

Attempting to achieve a truly superficial reading of Henry James, the preceding chapters have focused their attention on objects and surfaces crucial to the shaping of literary terms, concepts, and categories; they have uncovered the specific material forms that critical constructs both depend on and efface. By reading the world of decor back into the concept of consciousness, I have tried to show how much material history is embedded in an idea that has shaped Jamesian criticism for most of the last century; I have tried to show how thoroughly the contingent surfaces of the fin-de-siècle drawing room are interwoven with what counts as reading in depth.