A Superficial Reading of Henry James

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Chapter Eight

The Color of Air

New Materialism

What color is Balzac’s air? That is the question James asks midway through his 1905 lecture “The Lesson of Balzac.” The question springs from an extended meditation on “the individual strong temperament in fiction,” the special character that marks a novelist’s work as recognizable his or her own, a question on which, James notes, “there would be much to say” (LC 2:125). James is attempting to catch “the nature of the man himself . . . his very presence, his spiritual presence, in his work.” Spirit proves elusive, however, so much so that eventually the long passage settles down into a litany of distinctive settings, some of which are architectural spaces and some of which are landscapes, both of which are further specified by time of day or season of the year. Dickens’s novels seem to James “always to go on in the morning . . . in a vast apartment that appears to have windows, large, uncurtained and rather unwashed windows, on all sides at once”; George Eliot’s “general landscape” is that of an autumn sunset, with long shadows; Jane Austen’s is that of an arrested spring; Thackeray evokes “the light . . . of rainy days in ‘residential’ streets” (LC 2:126). “The question of the color of Balzac’s air,” on the other hand, is less easily resolved: “rich and thick, the mixture of sun and shade diffused through the ‘Comédie Humaine’” represents “an absolutely greater quantity of ‘atmosphere,’ than we shall find prevailing within the compass of any other suspended frame.”

Thick and colored air, a great quantity of atmosphere: this book on James’s preoccupation with the material world ends with matter that is mostly not matter, at least not the kind of matter susceptible to the sense of touch nor the economy of acquisition nor the aesthetics of adornment and personal ornament. This book ends, then, with a figure that seems
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beyond the reach of the analyses and arguments developed in the preceding pages. Inasmuch as this image serves for James as the cynosure of the aesthetic, it might lead to a very belated worry that materialism is not the mode in which James characteristically thinks and that the present project has exaggerated some minor moments in the fictions and a minor set of intellectual habits of those fictions’ author.

I want to end with this image of air in order to show how the material can become, in James, a complex amalgam of physical qualities, visual impressions, representational practices, and signs of a larger political economy. More than that motive, however, what draws me to this figure is the resemblance between James’s strategies and those of a strand of very recent critical works that read the material world back into literature’s metaphors. Having argued in the previous chapter that the terms and methods of literary analysis typically presuppose an unacknowledged material model, I will close this book by examining the work of several scholars who strive to reattach literary studies to the world of things and the life of the senses.

The passage on the air, the atmosphere, of the novels of James’s predecessors may seem a moment where impressionistic criticism has deployed an evanescent image to maintain the aesthetic as a wholly autonomous realm of experience, a world one cannot touch. And yet when we begin to examine the passages that lie behind the figure of colored air, we find that it is produced by a whole system of objects, indeed that it is the figure of the object system itself. The material nature of James’s air becomes clear if we review several passages quoted in previous chapters. The “thick, coloured air” of Poynton is an effect of the reflected “light” of its “treasures” (10:146). Similarly, in The Other House, the “colour of the air” conveys a sense that the flowers and pictures, the florid, highly decorated effects of things, make the spaces between those objects material, themselves thick with decor. In A London Life, the dowager Lady Davenant’s drawing room has a “bright durable sociable air” that is the product of its homely, unfashionable appurtenances, which preserve the past at the expense of fashion (10:271). It is as if the air is itself a quasi-material medium that conveys the implications of objects, linking their physical qualities with the behavioral norms they connote, convey, even instill; the figure links a picturesque effect with a cultural code that is itself kept steadily present by the objects that make it real.

In The Ambassadors, James recurs to the figure so often that it seems he is consciously working out its implications as he uses air’s quasi-physical nature to give a sense of material reality to nuances that cannot otherwise be named, as when “the air . . . thicken[s]” with “intimations” as Chad and Madame de Vionnet come into view when Strether is taking in the riverscape late in the novel, or when Strether, unable to capture the “something”
that characterizes Madame de Vionnet’s drawing room, “come[s] nearest to naming” it “in speaking of it as the air of supreme respectability,” or when Strether sums up the Parisian morning (and somehow the French setting is crucial here) by reflecting that “the air had a taste as of something mixed with art” (22:256; 21:245, 79).

In that last usage, the passage elaborates its metaphor of taste by going on to imagine this “something” as the production of “a white-capped master-chef,” so that the sensory immediacy of taste is bestowed upon atmospheric effects—they might almost be eaten—even as the figure also suggests the elusiveness of a complex blend of flavors. What is it, exactly, that leads James to endow the nebulous with a solidity here that seems to deny its definitive nature?

In The American Scene, in the chapter on Baltimore, the boughs of the trees “create[e] in the upper air great classic serenities of shade” and “give breadth of style,” an effect “borrowed . . . straight from far-away Clauses and Turners.” Earlier, at West Point, the interpretive questions and incessant study of the Jamesian analyst over how such a blank landscape could possibly offer “romantic effect” are rendered irrelevant by the fact that it does: such questions are “shivered . . . to mere silver atoms” by “the mere blinding radiance” because “the very powers of the air” “transcend all argument” as they present a “tone good enough for Claude or Turner.” The thing-like quality of the atmosphere takes precedence over analysis, as even the most hazy and shapeless ontology makes epistemology seem secondary, over-intellectualized, belated.

This materiality of the air, The American Scene suggests, is firmed up by, or even produced by, the medium of painting—the medium in which an atmospheric effect has little or no physical difference from more solid-seeming rocks or buildings, as both kinds of stuff consist of a thin layer of oil on canvas. But this smoky, shimmering haze is hardly a natural phenomenon occurring apart from a political economy and observed with an innocent eye that simply takes in what it sees; rather, it is the now-naturalized sign of industry generated by a host of paintings—particularly French Impressionist landscapes—in which smoke is a figure for production, as T. J. Clark observes in The Painting of Modern Life. Commenting on Monet’s seashores, Clark notes that these paintings are “absolute with industry” as “the play of paint . . . absorb[s] the factories and weekend villas” alike “with scarcely a ripple”; economic activity builds rather than mars the coherence of the picture. Or, as James puts what is almost the same point in The American Scene, “in the splendid light, nature and science were joyously romping together” in the New York harbor; the harbor is blackened and smudged, but not so much so that “light of the picturesque” cannot “irradiate [such] fog and grime.” This passage from The
American Scene is unusual for James in that it makes explicit the link between his recurrent figure of air and the atmospheric effects that became a pictorial sign of industry. But even when his point of comparison is Claude, for example, we can speculate that the seventeenth-century haze of that painter is for James brought to newly heightened visibility by the painterly conventions governing the portrayal of nineteenth-century industry.

With his figure of “Balzac’s air,” then, James uses the concrete medium of one art to transform the material culture represented by another art into a critical concept: thinking of the air of a text as in some sense visible depends for its sense on one’s having seen the atmospheric effects of painting, which are themselves a sign of a still larger economy rapidly expanding in James’s time. This kind of largely dematerialized material character of each author—George Eliot’s sinking sun, Austen’s arrested spring, Thackeray’s “light . . . of rainy days”—becomes James’s way of telling them apart, becomes a critical tool for distinguishing their definitive attributes. Hence the figure of the air carries into the realm of the conceptual and the critical the matter of industrial production and the stuff of oil paint, as well as the perceptual habits reinforced by French landscape painting. Pushing back a little further in James’s career, I want to suggest that the figure of the air in the late Balzac essay brings to bear upon the literary text the motif with which James had in his fictions attempted to capture the decor—the systems of taste—that made up his various settings: the “thicken[ed]” air of The Ambassadors, the “thick, coloured air” of The Spoils of Poynton, is in turn used to scrutinize La Comédie Humaine. Hence a construction of objects itself becomes a tool of literary analysis, critical commentary, and aesthetic judgment. But far from acting as a dematerializing figure, James’s metaphor of the air draws lines of connection between industry, material culture, art, and novelistic discourse.

To grasp the nature of the Jamesian figure of air, then, is to understand that figure as definitively mixed, as maintained by a recursive movement between the material and the conceptual. This movement between the physical details of daily life and the metaphorical figures of theory and philosophy has guided this book from the beginning: A Superficial Reading of Henry James has attempted to uncover the material nature of such concepts as consciousness, portraiture, the text, and even culture. Perhaps the history of literary theory still needs a good deal of rewriting: perhaps the way we conceive of theory needs to be continually challenged, thinking of it, as we habitually do, as defined by the thinness of abstraction, as abstracted from the thickness of material life.

In her Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine (1987), Naomi Schor critiqued what she called “idealistic” aesthetics as a construct maintained at the
expense of women, the ornament, and the decorative; the tradition of literary theory, stretching from the Greeks to Reynolds and Dr. Johnson to Hegel and beyond, monumentalized in huge textbooks like Walter Jackson Bate's *Criticism: The Major Texts* and Hazard Adams's *Critical Theory Since Plato*, attains much of its coherence by sublimating the concrete, the minute, and the quotidian. When *Reading in Detail* appeared, it seemed far different from the new-historicist commitment to the anecdote and the new-historicist fascination with the workings of power that had come to dominate literary studies at that time. And in fact, Schor's book has never been fully assimilated within the discipline (the book is now out of print). Yet it brought together two related impulses in the humanities that I think will emerge as highly characteristic of our own fin de siècle and that will also emerge as having been genuinely useful and productive. One is a skepticism over the conceptual itself; the other is a new valuing of the physical matter of everyday life. When, in her book *Reinterpreting Property* (1993), the legal scholar Margaret Jane Radin defended a "thick theory of the self" that bestowed legal status upon the objects that are "so bound up with me that I would cease to be 'myself' if they were taken"; when the art historian Norman Bryson, in *Looking at the Overlooked* (1990), revalued the genre of still life by approaching it as a history of the table, a history of "the conditions of creaturality, of eating and drinking and domestic life"; when, in *On Longing* (1984), the literary critic and folklorist Susan Stewart wrested from the problem of literary form a material poetics, these scholars lowered the threshold of hermeneutic attention, coaxing into existence a new particularism that they posed against the abstractions of the foundational concepts of their disciplines—personhood, narrative, or even (in Bryson's case most explicitly, but all three writers just named do this in one way or another) subject matter.

This thickening of the conceptual is how I would define the new materialism that emerges in the work of these and other scholars. Such work resists the disciplinary mandates that I spoke of in the beginning of this book, the ones that hold that the material world must be brought forward but not for too long before it is abstracted away by critique (of commodification, say) and by an agreed-upon level of necessary generalization, a commitment to the assumption that episodes in the history of artistic and material practices can always be usefully restated as higher-order claims that can then take their place in what Schor critiqued as idealist aesthetics.

As it happens, contemporary criticism has recently evolved an idiom that captures the view of meaning I am attempting to describe, a cluster of terms and connotations which do some of the same work as James's figure of air. That idiom is the various shades of meaning carried by the word "sense," as in the titles of Bill Brown's *A Sense of Things* (2003), Diana Fuss's *The Sense of an Interior* (2004), and Susan Stewart's *Poetry and the Fate of
“Sense” and “the senses” might seem to pull in almost opposite directions, because they nominate on the one hand an understanding, an intelligence, even a wisdom and, on the other, one of the least rational, most immediate and physical zones of human experience. But it is crucial to the argument of these books that these senses of “sense” are not detachable from each other: these critics, so different from each other in many ways, nonetheless all oppose a decoupling of the literary figure from the world of sensory experience. Hence Brown characterizes his approach as exploring the “convergences of” “the sensation of thingness” and “the understanding” (17). Hence Fuss argues that the concrete domestic environment shapes the work of her chosen writers “in ways both intensely physical and deeply philosophical” (18). Hence Stewart seeks to demonstrate that “it is only by finding means of making sense impressions intelligible to others” that lyric poetry becomes readable in the first place (3).

As well as entailing a more concrete set of practices that I will detail in a moment, this continuum between sense and the senses is a view of meaning that may well represent a decisive shift in the critical understanding of the sign. Put most broadly, all of these critics suggest that the physical senses are what bind sign and signified. In Stewart’s radically synesthetic rereading of the lyric tradition, the words of erotic poems become a highly corporeal event in the reader’s experience: by evoking the senses of smell and taste—the senses of physical incorporation—language itself is identified with “the touch and feel of the object in the mouth,” is identified with “the liquification of” the object. “The melting words of the lover, the manipulation of words in the mouth as an extension of erotic manipulation through hands and limbs” are crucial “resources for the poet of erotic poems,” Stewart argues (32). This newly physicalized sense of language is also, I believe, what motivates Fuss to concentrate on Helen Keller in her study of writers and their rooms. For Fuss, it is crucial that Keller learned to read by touching raised letters printed on cardboard which were in turn placed on the objects they nominated. Hence, Fuss argues, “Keller’s tactile linguistics never presupposes the alienation of subject and object that both Saussure and Lacan identify as the central feature of the birth of ‘the speaking subject’” (112). In Brown’s account of the role of material culture in late-nineteenth-century American fiction, what Brown calls “the logic of reference” becomes a specific set of rhetorical practices that represent the physical objects of a specific moment, a fairly particularized cultural milieu (17). The techniques of fiction become “imaginative technologies for lifting and redeeming” the “substratum” of “the material everyday” into a reader’s awareness. In a complex reading of Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Brown reconsiders that text’s naturalism by emphasizing how the senses of taste, touch, and smell bridge the gap
between characters and natural phenomena: the aromas, flavors, and textures of the herbs that are so crucial in Jewett’s descriptions of coastal Maine are the means by which Jewett “establishes an overwhelming intimacy between natural and human matter” (90). Unlike sight, which distances perceiving subject and the object of attention, “smell . . . depends on proximity, on chemical contact, on physical infiltration.” This immediacy of sensation, on Brown’s reading, is what underwrites The Country of the Pointed Firs’s brand of naturalism, which assumes a continuity between people and natural objects, which figures characters as grasshoppers or trees. As Brown explains, “the metaphorization of the . . . villagers themselves as both flora and fauna seems so artless,” so inevitable, because “it simply reads like the rhetorical effect of the narrated fact of the intimacy between people and place” (90). That is “the way that objects become figures of thought and of speech,” to use the terms with which A Sense of Things explains its purpose as a whole (16).

I am struck by two intertwined aspects of Brown’s analysis of The Country of the Pointed Firs that are important for the working definition of new materialism I am developing here. One is the central role of the senses, which on this account do a lot of the work of Jewett’s text and which are considered explicitly, considered as topics in themselves. (You can write a lot about a text’s visual imagery, say, without considering the senses at all, without considering, as Brown does, that “the sight of objects always depends on sufficient distance” [90].) Indeed, if one looks at the prominent discussions of Jewett published a decade before Brown’s, one finds that the physical senses play no role in these analyses. Another crucial feature of Brown’s reading is the tight bind it discovers between the role of the senses and the working of language, between material culture and linguistic matters. The “logic of reference” is not, on this account, susceptible to the kind of homogenizing ahistoricism I analyzed in the preceding chapter; rather, language’s workings depend on a particular array of objects and on particular ways of being involved with those objects. In other words (and at the risk of exaggerating Brown’s position), an analysis of language in The Country of the Pointed Firs would have to work differently if that novel were about the proprietor of a general store rather than an herb-gatherer.

That is how a new concern for the physical senses reshapes the sense of the sign in the critics I am discussing here. There are some other shared intellectual habits, shared predilections, and shared aversions I want to name here, ones that have a lot to do with the way these critics do their work from one page to the next. Continuing the emphasis on practical aesthetics I have adopted in this book, I will bring my project to a close by itemizing three habits of reading that together characterize the approach here nominated as new materialism.
First is a newly intimate conception both of subject matter and of the task of interpretation. Thus Brown indicates that one goal of *A Sense of Things* is that of achieving a “grittier, materialist phenomenology of everyday life” (3), while Fuss thinks of her topic as “the everyday friction between people and things” (Fuss, 15). In practice, that topic leads Fuss to an extended discussion of the myriad treatments Proust kept on hand for his allergies, to the way the couch in Freud’s consulting room positions the patient’s body, to the precise dimensions of Emily Dickinson’s bedroom (191–92, 90–91, 55). As in Brown’s attention to the sense of smell in Jewett, “close reading” in these instances means a reading that stays close to the body. Arguing that “every literary figure has a literal base,” Fuss takes up the thematics that their several critical traditions have assigned to these authors—Proust’s shrinking from the world, Freud’s erotic conception of the interpersonal, Dickinson’s emphasis on confinement and liberation—and drives those themes back into their physical origins (7). Declining the diagrammatic clarity of previous work on the body and its habitats, such an approach seeks to discover a messy corporeality underlying the abstractions of critical truisms. Hence Fuss notes that while Georges Poulet was among the first to emphasize the significance of space in Proust’s time-obsessed novel, “Poulet’s investigation of Proustian space . . . remains curiously intangible and indefinite,” wholly focused on “metaphorical space” and wholly uninterested in “the space of the domestic interior”—an interior Fuss herself goes on to detail with extraordinary specificity (152).

Another example—another “sense” book I have not yet mentioned—will make clearer the kind of hermeneutic shift I am describing here. In *Common Scents: Comparative Encounters in High-Victorian Fiction* (2004), Janice Carlisle reconsiders nineteenth-century British codifications of class by analyzing how the sense of smell is used to create, convey, and sustain those distinctions. “Repeatedly in the fiction of the 1860s,” Carlisle observes, “encounters” between members of different classes “are depicted in terms of an inodorous perceiver of smells and his or her smelly other.” Like the other books on “sense,” Carlisle’s work shuttles between what she calls “the material and the immaterial,” “matter and spirit”: “Recognizing an odor, registering its effects, comparing what smells to what does not—all such perceptual activities when recorded in a novel of the 1860s provide access to the common sense of that decade, the rarely articulated, taken-for-granted result of experiences supposedly shared by all one’s fellows, if not by all humankind” (21, 5). Hence something as complex and mediated as what a culture believes goes without saying is sustained by innumerable, involuntary, immediate bodily responses. Sometimes the matter that Carlisle finds Victorian culture inspiriting is pleasant, like the rose leaves...
that scent the corridors of the best country homes, according to the olfac-
tory imagination of Rosamond Vincy in *Middlemarch* (153). But often
these smells are “gross,” as Carlisle says, evidence of messy bodies (“habili-
ments, impregnated with . . . the dirt of a life,” as one of the 1860s novels
quoted puts it) that one cannot shut out (32).

That messy body leads to a second distinguishing characteristic of the
new materialism, which is that it admits more concrete details than can be
contained by any neatly defined cultural logic. In the titles I am considering,
“sense” is the word that blurs the boundaries established by the more
schematic studies that precede these books; that word, in other words,
takes the place that “logic” would have occupied if these studies had
appeared fifteen years previously, as in Walter Benn Michaels’s *The Gold
Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (1987), or Fredric Jameson’s
is explicit about his interest in what “the cultural logic of capitalism” can-
not explain, arguing “that the human interaction with the nonhuman
world of objects, however mediated by the advance of consumer culture,
must be recognized as irreducible to that culture” (5–6, 13). This resist-
ance to the reduction of culture to a “logic” helps to explain the extraor-
dinarily sudden eclipse of Michel Foucault in many recent literary studies:
he appears in the text of only one of these four “sense” books, in a moment
where Brown distinguishes the taxonomic scheme Foucault theorized in
*The Order of Things* from Jewett’s far more sensuous take on natural his-
tory (90). This “sacrifice” of schematic “clarity,” as Brown calls it (5),
makes for a certain shift in the diction of criticism, away from the “logis-
tics” and “relays” with which Mark Seltzer systematized the material world
in *Bodies and Machines* (1992), and toward a language of material partic-
ularity and emotional affect. If part of the challenge of writing criticism
at the end of the twentieth century was to reduce the multiplicity of cul-
ture to a set of “logistics,” the challenge now seems to be to lower the
threshold of perception and, at least on occasion, to give up a tone of
steely detachment. Hence Brown shifts his tone in the introduction of his
book from language that posits the “limit of modernism” to ask, “why do
you find yourself talking to things? . . . is it simply because you’re lonely?”
(12). Similarly, Fuss details with extraordinarily minute particularity
Proust’s “passionate attachment to the somber and seemingly lifeless fur-
niture of his parents,” arguing that this “object-love” for his mother’s
Boulle worktable and his father’s armchair “operates . . . as the antidote to
lost time” by bestowing upon the mourned figures a physical presence
(164–65). The point is not merely that Fuss reports such details, but that
by specifying such material practices so carefully, Fuss implicitly identifies
her project with the emotions that led her subject to maintain this furniture

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in the first place. Even such simple moments as Carlisle’s words “smelly” and “gross” suggest a new relation to subject matter when matter is indeed the critic’s subject.

Here a comparison to Stewart will further clarify the point, since *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* concerns a different genre than the other texts I am considering, and since that focus on lyric carries with it less of a burden to work against commodification-driven or Foucauldian, discipline-centered analyses. In the introduction to her book, Stewart writes, “Aesthetic activity viewed in the light of the history of ideological ends is no longer aesthetic; it erases the free activity of pleasure and knowledge that the aesthetic brings to human life” (40). This position could easily, but wrongly, be critiqued as itself an instance of an aesthetic ideology, if one did not take into account the sense in which Stewart means “ideology,” and if one did not understand the claim in relation to the poetic analyses Stewart performs throughout this book. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes usefully defines “ideology” as “the idea insofar as it dominates: ideology can only be dominant.”14 Stewart’s strategy can be understood, then, as one of dilating and particularizing sensory experiences associated with poetry until they reach the point that no ideology can easily contain them. She is not saying that the senses cannot be rendered the object of ideology; indeed, the sentence I quote above comes in the midst of her discussion on the history of attempts to regulate and hierarchize those senses. But she is suggesting that the senses can be cultivated to resist ideology, that sensory experiences have the potential for generating experiences and pleasures that are not easy to keep within any political program. This is why *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* pauses so long over the “variegated chalcedony” of the agate named in an H. D. poem, why it goes on at such length over the way smell shapes and disorients readerly understanding in Jonathan Swift’s lyrics, why it seeks to relate such varied uses of the senses as speaking, listening, smelling, and touching to the workings of poetry (36, 30–32). For it is only through the force of accumulated examples in this long (447-page) book that enough variety can be detailed to keep the aesthetic open, beyond the reach of any reductive scheme.

The intimacy of the interpretations in question here and their resistance to schematics virtually entail a third characteristic of the criticism I am talking about, which is that it resists adopting the subject/object dichotomy as an explanatory device. Indeed, these critics argue—sometimes through the way they handle their materials and sometimes by direct statement—that *the distinction between subject and object cannot be a guiding principle of cultural history or literary studies*. Fuss states the point directly, asserting that the subject/object distinction is a “binary yet to be adequately challenged in cultural criticism” (15). She makes this assertion in part because the sense
of sight, which is so frequently inseparable from subject/object thinking, proves to get at only a small part of her topic: as William James intuited in the *Principles of Psychology*, inhabiting the physical world is an activity that engages hearing, smell, taste, and touch as much as it does sight. Hence a new interest emerges in the books under discussion in what Carlisle labels “the chemical” senses of taste and smell (4) and in what Stewart identifies as the “auto-centric” senses (smell, taste, and some forms of touch), the senses that are “physically localized on or in the body” (37). Though their topics would seem to differ tremendously, both Stewart and Carlisle write about these senses, so often coded as inferior ones, as ones that involve “fusion” or “exchange” between perceiver and perceived rather than involving distance and objectification (Stewart, 38; Carlisle, 10). This new sense of the exchange—whether psychological or material—of properties between subject and object is basic as well to Brown’s approach, which posits at the outset that the relation between human beings and things happens as an “indeterminate ontology where things seem slightly human and humans seem slightly thing-like” (13).

As that word “indeterminate” suggests, the language used to capture this fusion of human bodies and subjectivities with the material world is loosely deconstructive in its origin, as is the impulse to undermine a binary opposition like subject and object. Hence the sensual resistance to the subject/object dichotomy could be seen as a strictly philosophical argument, carrying with it the abstraction I have sought to identify in de Man and Scarry. That possibility makes it important to recognize the ways in which the large ambiguity I am discussing has a history, one these books seek to trace. One way in which that tracing happens is through a new attention to the nineteenth-century sciences that mixed matter and spirit, bodies and objects, as in Carlisle’s discussions of psychophysicists, who tried “to merge philosophic conceptions of the mind . . . with research on the anatomy and physiology of nerves and brain” (6), or Brown’s attention to the late-nineteenth-century school of physiological aesthetics (26). In the epistemology posited by these sciences, it is hard to know where objects stop and human beings begin, as is the case with Bernard Berenson and Vernon Lee, theorists of empathy I have discussed in preceding chapters. Another way in which the “the join between mind and matter” becomes a historical phenomenon is through the placement of the room, that privileged trope of explication, within larger political economies (Fuss, 16). Hence Fuss rereads the Proustian interior within the context of the Haussmannization of Paris, the violent process by which the old facades and shops were standardized into a uniform architecture that largely obliterated visual remnants of the past; Proustian longing, the “searching for the lost object,” emerges on this reading not (or not only)
as a general human emotion, but as a set of feelings that emerges in response to the work of the wrecking ball and the aesthetic-political program it imposed (156).

This understanding of the senses as the merging of subject and object becomes a historical narrative in Stewart as well, for Stewart’s whole book is an attempt to take literally Marx’s pronouncement that “the forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present” (40). Hence Stewart might be said to have rewritten the history of poetry according to the concerns I have been outlining in this chapter, concerns for the particularization of the senses. As in her chapter on the history of the romantic nocturne, poetic influence is re-understood as successive expansions of consciousness, so that the reception of a poem yields a broadening or fine-tuning of subsequent sensory experience: the atmospheric qualities of night, the way that human beings rely on kinaesthetic perception in the darkness, the qualities of the colors when glimpsed in faint illumination, and the synesthesia that leads the senses to merge with each other all become knowledge that is inherited by Wordsworth from Anne Finch, and by Keats from Wordsworth (259). In this way, “new modes of moving and attending, of using touch, sight, smell, and hearing, are the consequences as well as the source” of innovations in poetic form (291). That is how the history of poetry, on Stewart’s account, reflects Marx’s awareness that the senses themselves are historical artifacts.

I have marshaled together these recent critical studies in an attempt to capture something of the special quality of our own moment in the history of literary studies: my purpose here at the end has been to catch this shift in a way that others may find inspiring or in need of correction or (I hope) both. In his essay on “The Plates of the Encyclopedia,” Barthes began by reflecting on the fact that “Our literature has taken a long time to discover the object; we must wait till Balzac for the novel to be the space not only of pure human relations but also of substances and usages called upon to play their part in the story of passions.” At least in the English-speaking world, it seems criticism has taken a similarly long time even to begin to find terms adequate for the lives we lead in the material world. Resisting the imperative to abstract, efface, or ignore that realm of experience, I have taken Henry James as the focus of my attention because his texts have the power to unsettle preferences for the conceptual (over the material), the essential (over the ornamental), the theoretical (over the practical). Perhaps the criticism that emerges from the recent materialist turn will be radically recursive in its handling of those oppositions, accepting the ironies of a discipline that is definitively miscellaneous, sundry, itself a catachresis. Perhaps the dispensation in literary studies we
are now entering will be an eccentric hybrid of rhetorical analysis and material culture; it will do its work by means of swatches and samples of matter in conjunction with the linguistic, imaginative works that think their meanings, their aesthetic principles, their rhetorical structures, through those substances.