

Introduction: The Word "Aesthetic"

Of all the scientific terms in common use, perhaps no one conveys to the mind a more vague and indeterminable sense than this, at the same time that the user is always conscious of a meaning and appropriateness; so that he is in the position of one who endeavors to convey his sense of the real presence of an idea, which still he cannot himself fully grasp and account for.

—Elizabeth Peabody, "The Word 'Aesthetic'" (1849)¹

Thus, Elizabeth Peabody opens *Aesthetic Papers*, one of the first American volumes to use the word in its title. Most famous for publishing Henry David Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government" ("Civil Disobedience"), *Aesthetic Papers* emphasizes the very problem of defining its chief term, a word everyone understands and uses, according to Peabody, with his own sense of "appropriateness." This problem remains central to the debates over aesthetics and, in particular, the ideologies and politics of aesthetics, in the wake of the "linguistic," "historical," and "cultural" turns in literary criticism. Peabody's description of the problem points to the difficulty of defining a kind of experience that, seemingly by definition, is beyond definition, that is a "real presence" but merely "an idea." In addition to this constitutive difficulty, the problem of defining aesthetics has at least two related dimensions: distinguishing different historically specific ideas about aesthetics and differentiating the various topics sometimes grouped under the term, including aesthetic *objects*, aesthetic *judgments* (or *values*), aesthetic *theory*, aesthetic *experience* (or *effects*), aesthetic *attitude* (or *function*), and aesthetic *practice*.²

Over the last few decades, dominant academic literary criticism has analyzed, demystified, and dismissed aesthetics largely by de-historicizing and

de-materializing aesthetic experience. This ironic turn has taken place, in large part, through the ahistorical equation of New Critical formalism with aesthetics *in toto* and through the reduction of aesthetics to a history of its modern theoretical considerations, beginning with Alexander Baumgarten's naming of a new philosophical discipline in 1735, continuing through Immanuel Kant's third *Critique*, Friedrich Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, G. W. F. Hegel's lectures on aesthetics, the treatises of the various British and American romantics, and finally ending with twentieth-century New Criticism. Such criticism has dismantled the New Criticism's idea of a transhistoric aesthetic object, the ideal of the art-object as a transcendent, self-sufficient unity detached from the social world, by revealing the sociopolitical interestedness of aesthetic judgments supposedly based on objective formal properties. These critiques are not so much wrong—attempts to define the objective characteristics of artworks that *universally* evoke a certain kind of experience seem doomed merely to valorize a class-specific critical practice reinforcing the sociopolitical status quo—as they are limited in historical and thematic scope. Recent materialist/political critiques of aesthetics have tended, paradoxically, to eschew the material experience that aesthetic theories attempt to make sense of and, instead, have focused on the theories themselves. In place of an attention to the sensuous experience and material existence that might give rise to notions of the aesthetic, they provide a critique of aesthetics as ideology and an unveiling of the deep power structures lying behind such ideology. They have confused, to use Robert Kaufman's formulation, *aesthetics* with *aestheticization*.³

Where the return to aesthetics in literary criticism in the last decade has been described as a kind of new formalism, a revival of formalism, or a recovery of the formalism implicit to much new historicism and cultural studies, it is important to distinguish formal approaches from aesthetics in avoiding a reduction of aesthetics to aestheticization.⁴ Thus, even as a new aesthetics addresses questions of literary form, we need to recognize form as merely one element in the intersection of audience, world, and text that might yield or help to articulate aesthetic experience. Historically, in fact, "aesthetics" in the United States did not refer to an explicitly apolitical sphere, the apotheosis of literary form, or a specific artistic canon of great works. Nineteenth-century critics often assailed transcendentalist aesthetics for neglecting these very areas. Only sparingly used in American publications of the 1820s and the 1830s to refer broadly to the study of the arts, "aesthetics," by the 1840s, began to be used more frequently to evoke the dangers of an approach to both art and life connected with roman-

ticism and German idealism.⁵ Critics worried that, with its focus on the individual, subjective judgment rather than on the critic's or artist's role as cultural arbiter, aesthetics abandoned the moral and political project of literature. *The American Whig Review*, for example, devoted its 1846 review of Margaret Fuller's volume of essays *Papers on Literature and Art* to describing this "new kind of criticism—*aesthetic criticism*." In summation, the review dismissed Fuller's essays and their aesthetic critical method by noting that "There is nothing in them of the practical; nothing is said of counter-point, or chiaro-oscuro, subject or composition, style or choice of words." Rather than accounting for the mechanical workings of art and guiding the tastes of the uninstructed, Fuller—with the "transcendental school" that "embrac[ed] the new aesthetic method of criticism"—simply "affects to discover and reproduce the veritable spirit of an author or literature."⁶ The problem with aesthetics, from this point of view, was that it did not offer universally valid, objective judgments but rather indulged in a subjective (or, at best, an intersubjective) attempt at accessing the experience of another:

Despite the recent tendency to "conflate the New Critical version of aesthetic value with the issue of aesthetics in general," a move Winfried Fluck aptly describes as "ahistorical," New Critics distinguished their "objective criticism of works of art" from aesthetics.⁷ Most notably, in their famous account of the Affective Fallacy (1946), W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley contend that "It may well be that the contemplation of this object, or pattern of emotive knowledge, which is the poem, is the ground for some ultimate emotional state which may be termed the aesthetic (some empathy, some synaesthesia, some objectified feeling of pleasure). It may well be. The belief is attractive; it may exalt our view of poetry. But it is of no concern of criticism, no part of criteria."⁸ According to Wimsatt and Beardsley, criticism must concern itself with non-aesthetic phenomena, with the supposedly objective structures of literature, the formal features that transcend any specific reading or any particular historical moment.

In rejecting it as a basis for criticism, Wimsatt and Beardsley's imprecise definition of aesthetic experience—"some ultimate emotional state . . . some empathy, some synaesthesia, some objectified feeling of pleasure"—echoes that offered by thinkers from Alexander Baumgarten forward. In particular, in suggesting the aesthetic's personal and sensuous yet objective nature, their definition parallels Peabody's claims for the importance of the aesthetic.⁹ In her introduction to *Aesthetic Papers*, she extends the term's "vague and indeterminable sense" beyond a dictionary definition

of the “‘philosophy of poetry and the fine arts’”: “The ‘aesthetic element,’ then, is in our view neither a theory of the beautiful, nor a philosophy of art, but a component and indivisible part in all human creations which are not mere works of necessity; in other words, which are based on idea, as distinguished from appetite.” Aesthetic considerations are linked by their “reference to the central fact of the constant relation of the individual to the universal, and of their equally constant separation” (1–2). Aesthetics thus refers to “the unpersonal,” to an individual experience “which sinks and subordinates the observer to the object,—which, by putting my personality aside, enables me to see the object in pure uncolored light” (3).

Peabody’s definition at first seems to refute the subjective nature of aesthetic experience. Most famously, Kant insists that the judgment of taste is “indifferent to the existence of the object,” that an aesthetic judgment “designates nothing whatsoever in the object, but here the subject feels himself, [namely] how he is affected by the presentation” of the object.¹⁰ But the subjective nature of the experience takes on a distinctly transcendent aura for it appears not to derive from the individual’s particular interests, desires, or needs. As Kant puts it, although based in subjective experience, a person’s liking of something he designates as beautiful appears *as if* it were universal because he “is conscious that he himself [feels so] without any interest. . . . because he cannot discover, underlying this liking, any private conditions, on which only he might be dependent” (54 §6). In this context, Peabody’s contention that the aesthetic “sinks and subordinates the observer to the object,—which, by putting my personality aside, enables me to see the object in pure uncolored light” reflects rather than contradicts Kant’s definition. Because one’s personality—individual interests, particular needs or desires—seems not to play a role in aesthetic judgment, the object, purely in itself, seems to cause our reactions, despite the fact that they are subjective.

As Robert Kaufman has argued, for Kant the aesthetic judgment does *not* lead to universally applicable values, but rather individuals experiencing the beautiful feel as though the object conjuring such feelings must be beautiful for all because they see no personal, self-interested causes for their pleasure. The feeling of universal acceptance is not one declared to be true, but rather a recording of what the subject feels must be true, although it cannot be: “We can see, at this point, that nothing is postulated in a judgment of taste except such a *universal voice* about a liking unmediated by concepts. . . . all that is postulated is the *possibility* of a judgment that is aesthetic and yet can be considered valid for everyone. The judgment of taste

itself does not *postulate* everyone's agreement" (Kant 60 §8). Kant does not claim that the reaction or judgment is or should be universal but only that the observer, the participant in the experience, feels *as if* the judgment must be universal. The aesthetic experience, in this way, "must involve a claim to subjective universality" (Kant 54 § 6).

This book builds on this understanding of aesthetics as primarily experiential in insisting on the distinction between aesthetic experience and normative aesthetic judgments. I take it as axiomatic that something distinguishable as aesthetic experience is potentially accessible to any sentient human and that no objective standard can or should exist for defining what objects or phenomena constitute such an experience. Rather than delineating how specific formal features meshed with sociohistorical conditions to produce such experiences for specific groups of readers, I focus on how a variety of romantic writers delineated aesthetic experience in the terms I have begun to sketch out—as sensuous and individualizing, yet seemingly universal; as the product of specific, yet indeterminate material conditions that would not necessarily give rise to a similar experience in others. In particular, I will argue that a distinct strain of romantic thinking helps to bracket aesthetic experience as distinctly pre-political, as occupying a moment determined by sociohistorical conditions yet yielding no definite political effect in and of itself.

Electricity and the Matter of Materiality

Suffusing the works of British and American romantic poets and thinkers, metaphors of electricity frequently came to figure this kind of subjective universality, a kind of embodied transcendence, from the late eighteenth century through the middle of the nineteenth century. Alluding to either an intense, nearly physical emotion, a shocking sense of sympathy, or an ecstatic feeling of transcendence, electricity served a variety of writers as a vehicle for imagining aesthetic experience in scientific, sociopolitical, and spiritual terms. While Whitman's body electric is perhaps the best-known example of poetic electricity, the idea that an "electric spirit and mysterious principle . . . distinguish[es] the off-spring of genius from that of talent and industry" appeared frequently in American literary criticism and popular discourse by the mid-nineteenth century.¹¹ To cite some of the more famous examples, Ralph Waldo Emerson speaks of the poet drawing on "a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the con-

ductor of the whole river of electricity"; Margaret Fuller repeatedly refers to "the especial genius of woman" as "electrical in movement, intuitive in function, spiritual in tendency," equating the lyrical and the electric; and Edgar Allan Poe describes those "moods of the keenest appetency, when the film from the mental vision departs" as occurring when "the intellect, electrified, surpasses . . . its every-day condition."¹² What Whitman's figure of this poetic electricity captures best, and what this study will foreground, is the bodily physicality and sociohistorical materiality of this electric experience.

Metaphors of aesthetic electricity, I argue, were outgrowths of residual and emergent literary, popular, and scientific understandings of electricity, and these sources for aesthetic electricity point to the attempt of many to imagine aesthetics as a sensuous experience of the individual body embedded in specific social situations that somehow led to the momentary suspension of the individual in a sense of a larger whole. Electricity was simultaneously and variously conceived of as a material fluid, as a spiritual medium, as a disembodied force, and these various conceptions supported considerations about the relationship between physical vitality and electricity, as it came to be seen as identical to or analogous with both the nervous fluid and life itself. In the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, such ideas and scientific and technological investigations into electricity gave rise to its metaphoric and symbolic use to represent the human potential to harness the natural world and to free humanity from the chains of the past. With the invention and widespread diffusion of the telegraph in the middle-third of the nineteenth century, electricity became more fully linked both to language and communication and to the socioeconomic changes of industrialization transforming western Europe and the United States. In these various ways, electricity was seen to link the world together—technologically, commercially, spiritually, linguistically, physically. A review of a book on electrical medicine expressed this broadly held sentiment in 1861: "pervading all matter, existing in all mineral, vegetable, and animal bodies, not only acting in the combinations of the elements and molecules, but also serving as a means for their separation from each other[,] this imponderable fluid or power, whatever it may be . . . is one of the most active agencies known to man."¹³ In aesthetic discourse, electricity could serve to describe aesthetic experience as linking individuals to the universe and to a universal humanity while also emphasizing both its power and its potential to disconnect them from the world and from the larger community. To understand how these figures of electricity operated, then, we need to exam-

ine their discursive use alongside the material and scientific developments and economic structures from which they emerged.

The book review on electrical medicine emphasizes one of the central reasons for electricity's prominence in thinking through and describing aesthetic experience. While other figures for the operation of the imagination or the mind more broadly or for aesthetic experience circulated throughout this era in Anglo-American literature—the Acolian harp, the lamp (or light in general), machinery (including springs, trains, etc.), to name a few—electricity proves a particularly important figure for this study because of the ways it seemed to bridge the spiritual and the material, the natural and the technological. Because electricity troubled Newtonian understandings of the objective world, it spurred questions about the very nature of the material world. Even through the middle of the nineteenth century, electricity remained for most people and some scientists a mysterious substance or power. It seemed to be imponderable—lacking in weight and mass and everything else that would seem to distinguish matter—yet it also seemed to pervade all matter. It was famously destructive, yet seemed akin to some vital life force. It was capable of being used by humans in their most advanced technological marvels, yet its exact properties continued to elude their full understanding.

Metaphors of electrical effect and affect were more than just metaphors. Figures of electricity were not simply used to conjure some analogous relationship between aesthetic experience and electrical phenomena. Rather, aesthetic experience itself was often imagined to be, in fact, electrical itself, as the product of nervous impulses viewed as electrical, or the result of words or thoughts conveyed through electrical technology or through a spiritual medium itself envisioned as electric. Equally important, electricity served, in the eighteenth century, as an analogue to the flow of commerce, thus naturalizing an emergent capitalist world. With the invention of the telegraph and its use in the growth and development of global markets, the figure of electricity increasingly represented sophisticated market methods and mechanisms. This conflation of the figural and the literal (or the material) parallels the imprecise nature of aesthetic experience, its quality of having a universal or shared quality and its intense specificity. In what follows, I emphasize how electrical figures and allusions refer to, ground themselves in, and metaphorize the various material and ideological conditions giving rise to the modern discourse of aesthetics—the democratic revolutions, rational science and technology, market developments, global systems, and atomization of individuals that define modernity.

Above all, *Aesthetic Materialism* focuses on electricity to explore how writers such as Percy Shelley, Emerson, and Whitman imagined aesthetics as both material and transcendent. To speak of aesthetics as material contradicts the predominant critique of recent decades, that aesthetics is not simply an ideology, but the epitome of ideology. According to most recent critiques, aesthetics consistently, if not necessarily, ends up in formalist or idealist abstraction. Or, perhaps more accurately, the most prominent recent critiques of the aesthetic, most notably those of Paul de Man and Terry Eagleton, do not so much dismiss it for its immateriality as they fault aesthetic theory for not living up to its potential or for abandoning its originary materialism. De Man reads Kant and all of modern aesthetic theory as attempting to discover “the articulation that would guarantee the architectonic unity of the [philosophical] system,” the articulation of some sort of organic structure or experience capable of unifying the varieties of human experience, humanity itself, and human existence with the natural world. Yet Kant’s architectonic figures reveal “the material disarticulation not only of nature but of the body,” leaving us “with a materialism that Kant’s posterity has not yet begun to face up to.” In this way, “the critique of the aesthetic ends up, in Kant, in a formal materialism that runs counter to all values and characteristics associated with aesthetic experience, including the aesthetic experience of the beautiful and the sublime as described by Kant and Hegel themselves.”¹⁴ A pure, materialist aesthetics for de Man would foreground the “disarticulation” experienced through the encounter with language, in particular literary language, and thus the radical formalism of this aesthetics marks a continuation of a kind of critical semiology, which “more than any other mode of inquiry, including economics . . . is a powerful and indispensable tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations, as well as a determining factor in accounting for their occurrence.”¹⁵

As Eagleton has argued, de Man’s materialist aesthetics finally abandons the ground of modern philosophical aesthetics—the sensuous, perceiving body—thus dismissing the aesthetic’s promise of “a creative development of the sensuous, creaturely aspects of human existence” in favor of a type of critical reflection on language and the self’s articulation through language.¹⁶ From a Marxist perspective, Eagleton reads the aesthetic, as developed in Britain and Germany in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, as actually providing “the first stirrings of a primitive materialism” (13) as it “mediates between the generalities of reason and the particulars of sense” (15), the individual’s specific experience and universal truths accessed through reason. Yet, despite distinguishing himself from the “drastically undialectical thought of a vulgar Marxist or ‘post-Marxist’ trend

of thought” that would condemn “the aesthetic [as] simply ‘bourgeois ideology’” (8), Eagleton repeatedly concludes that the attempt to build on the specificity of the individual’s embodied experience to create a larger, coherent social collectivity becomes a model of consensual discipline, a model for integrating the particular into a hegemonic whole that tends to abandon its grounding in the socially enmeshed historical body for some transhistoric, idealist conception of “pure form” (196). Where de Man ignores the bodiliness of aesthetic experience in favor of a process of critical reflection spurred by the engagement with literary language, Eagleton, despite his insistence on the individual body’s centrality to the aesthetic, fails to address the particular conditions under which an aesthetic experience takes place, instead offering a thorough if perhaps reductive account of the sociohistorical forces underlying the articulation of various aesthetic theories. As Isobel Armstrong argues, in the end “Nothing less than the impossibility of the category of the aesthetic is [Eagleton’s] theme.”¹⁷

From de Man’s and Eagleton’s opposing positions, aesthetics similarly ends up reifying its material basis in language or the sociohistorical body. The same theoretical problem, however, haunts materialism. As Raymond Williams frames it, “material investigation, grounded in the rejection of categorical hypotheses of an unverifiable kind . . . finds itself pulled nevertheless towards closed generalizing systems: finds itself *materialism* or *a* materialism. There is thus a tendency for any materialism . . . to suppose that it is a system like others, of a presumptive explanatory kind . . . at the level not of procedures but of its own past ‘findings’ or ‘laws.’”¹⁸ If, as de Man and Eagleton assess it, aesthetics tends towards aestheticization or aestheticism, defining materialism presents nearly as many problems as defining aesthetics and is, as Williams suggests, nearly as prone to ideological abstraction.¹⁹ I want to suggest that one of the problems with various materialist critiques of aesthetics is that they tend to ground themselves in the laws of their own version of materiality, in a reduction of the determining factors to a series of findings drawn on the investigation of one structure, process, or element above all others. As Louis Althusser asserted in arguing that ideology has a material existence, “‘matter is discussed in many senses,’ or rather that it exists in different modalities, all rooted in the last instance in ‘physical’ matter.”²⁰ Aesthetic experience, I will insist, is not founded in simply one kind of materiality, but rather takes place in the interstices of different materialities.

I argue that a re-orientation of aesthetics has to address four interrelated kinds of materiality, while refusing any one kind of materiality a determining or preeminent role: de Man’s materiality of the signifier, the material na-

ture of language itself; Eagleton's Marxist historical materialism concerned with the limitations imposed by the social world of economics and politics; the materiality of the perceiving subject, the body through which an aesthetic experience occurs; and, finally, the represented object in response to which—and the object-world within which—that experience takes place. Instead of granting final determining power to one form of materiality, this study emphasizes their interrelationship, the feedback loops running among them and the gaps between them. Thus, the individual body is the site of aesthetic experience, but that experience occurs due to the stimulus produced by some object or a representation of an object whose history is grounded in the broader sociohistorical situation. That sociohistorical situation similarly structures the senses that apperceive the object, while the representation of the object itself is only accessed through the material structures of the medium itself—for literary studies, language—which, once again, are to a large extent the product of the historical situation. Thoroughly historicizing these various materialities fosters a recognition of their relative autonomy. Because the aesthetic challenges our notions of materiality, even as it constitutes itself in materiality, I call my project “aesthetic materialism” rather than “materialist aesthetics,” a terminology contingent on our preconceived idea of what materiality is. “Aesthetic materialism,” then, ascribes determining agency to material reality, even as it compels us to reconceive that very materiality. Just as I focus on aesthetics in terms of experience, as the product of certain processes, so, in echoing Raymond Williams, I want similarly to build a materialism based on a procedure of examining the various forces and objects underlying any sense of materiality. It follows that any account of the aesthetic needs to address both the broader sociohistorical grounds of aesthetic experience and the more specific material events registered on individual bodies. It must attend to the larger sociohistorical forces at work in creating and fostering aesthetic experience while not ignoring the distinctly somatic nature of that experience. Electricity, for many of the writers I study, allowed them to imagine aesthetic experience in exactly those terms.

Aesthetic Experience and the Polarities of Romantic Electricity

Because aesthetic experience occupies the space between individual experience and social reality, the space created by the intersection of the various materialities evoked by electricity, it is both subjective and universal. The subjective nature of this universality provides both the utopian impulse

in aesthetic politics and aesthetic ideology's coercive power. *Aesthetic Materialism* attempts to navigate between these poles by maintaining its focus on this very experience of subjective universality. In the aesthetic experience, the self seems to recede, as individuals give themselves over to the object (or, more properly, the perception of the object), and thus are left feeling as though anyone would have the same reaction. In that moment, it is inconceivable that anyone would *not* recognize the beauty, the sublimity, the humor, the ugliness of the thing perceived. The perceiving subject, in other words, recognizes no basis for this judgment in his or her particular interests, investments, desires. As such, this experience seems to place the individual outside civil society, the modern arena "of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks—formed for the sake of family, faith, interest, and ideology—that fill this space."²¹ While an aesthetic experience might occur only because of one's place within society—one's social background, age, education, location, or privilege in relation to particular institutions—it does not directly or immediately involve the self in the negotiations, struggles, and identifications attendant in the working of civil society. Individuals may feel moved by a Picasso painting or Eliot's "The Waste Land" only as a result of the training and education they have received due to their class position, their own individual histories crisscrossed by relations of power involving gender, nationality, and sexuality. Others may be touched by a renaissance Pietà or be moved by the beauty of a Thomas Kinkade painting due to a similar confluence of different overdetermined reasons. Yet that does not mean that the individual's aesthetic experience of those objects necessarily feeds back into or undermines the social structures and ideologies giving rise to those particular encounters.

In its intense focus on the sensuous perception of the object itself, the aesthetic momentarily interrupts both the dominant sense of the self as interested and autonomous and an instrumentalized orientation towards the world. In this way, aesthetics leads to "putting into question the individual's 'ordinary' relation to *all* spheres of existence, and of reconstituting them as sites of aesthetic incompleteness," "the ceaseless problematization of and withdrawal from all normative judgment itself."²² The most compelling attempts at revitalizing aesthetics have understood aesthetics in these terms, but have tended to move, too quickly, it seems to me, towards reading aesthetics as constituting a progressive politics focused on indeterminacy.²³ Even in its recognition of the contingency of experience and identity, of the ambivalence of representation, the aesthetic experience's political effects—or even its tendencies—remain indeterminate.

That is not to say that aesthetic experience remains permanently outside

the political. Instead, as “subjective universality” indicates, aesthetic experience always posits a reference to other people. In the aesthetic moment, the individual feels at one with some universal humanity who must have the same reaction. Yet the subjective nature of the event reiterates the observer’s detachment both from the object—as a result of language’s mediation, the nervous system, and individual experience—and from any imagined universal community. These elements come together in the almost involuntary need to share this response—“Isn’t that beautiful? Isn’t that horrifying?” The question is simultaneously rhetorical—of course it’s beautiful—and is in need of confirmation because the experience’s universality is already in doubt. If the first moment of the aesthetic experience seems, in its apparent disinterestedness, to lie completely outside of both society and politics, the immediacy of the second moment indicates that such an experience inexorably moves towards the recognition of a larger community and the recognition that others might not share the reaction. It is through these second-level reflections or responses that aesthetics leads to the political.²⁴

While this experience can possibly lead to a celebration of difference, a skepticism towards any universalizing or normalizing claims, it is equally or more likely that it will feed into a reactionary response wherein the experience is taken to define what is truly human or what links a particular group together. To cordon off aesthetic experiences that lead to specific, exclusionary identifications—nationalistic, racist, class-bound—or that lead to an easy sort of universal humanism is to return, in different form, to a norm for judging such experience. Not to recognize those uses of or responses to aesthetic experience as possible, if not predominant, is to engage in a naïve celebration of aesthetics forgetful of the work of the past decades that has outlined the ways aesthetic experience is frequently made to be complicit with narrowly defined interests. It is essential, then, to bracket this first moment of sociopolitical indeterminacy in examining aesthetic experience. In reconsidering contemporary ideas and claims about aesthetics, this book focuses on writers who attempted to hold onto the first ambiguous moment of aesthetic experience, to hold in abeyance both the move towards the political and the subsequent defining and delimiting of the ineffability of the experience.

Electricity, for these writers, suggested the fleeting, instantaneous, and elusive qualities of such aesthetic encounters. Yet electricity only works to figure aesthetic experience in these ways due to its sociohistorical location, due, that is, to the scientific and popular understandings of electricity during a period stretching, roughly, from the late eighteenth century

to the middle of the nineteenth. My argument runs in two directions to convey both the possible uses of electricity for figuring aesthetic experience and the historical transitions that enabled and limited those uses. From an historical perspective, I move from the mid-eighteenth century, tracing the relationship between the transatlantic investigation of electricity and the development of romantic aesthetics, through the invention of the telegraph and the utopian visions it fostered, to the end of the nineteenth century and the telegraph's thorough embeddedness in monopoly capitalism. Throughout this period, electric phenomena were frequently used to describe or were seen as particular manifestations of the various materialities I locate at the center of aesthetic experience: the volatility and power of language, the shocking confusion of individual boundaries ensuing from the contact—especially sexual contact—of human bodies, and the networks of social, political, and economic power underlying individual experience. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, those connotations largely derived from analogies of electricity with commerce, from considerations of electricity as spiritual, and from speculations about the electrical nature of the body. These disparate ideas contributed to the development of electrical science and technology, and with the invention and development of the telegraph, electricity became an even more potent figure for social and political connection, the power of language, and the link between the spiritual and the physical. By the end of the century, however, the thorough corporatization of telegraphy, the diffusion of other electrical technology, and the demystification of electricity largely sapped the power of electricity to suggest the transformative power of imagination or the shocking effect of aesthetic experience.

The first two chapters of this book outline two trajectories for understanding aesthetic experience as electrical. In both cases I move from the late-eighteenth century through the middle of the nineteenth and from a transatlantic context to a more specifically American one, examining texts addressing literary aesthetics as well as works on electricity, telegraphy, and their relationship to the human body, society, and language. Recognizing the international context of discussions about aesthetics and electricity reveals fresh connections among the authors, movements, and ideologies I examine. In particular, re-examining American romanticism through the different varieties of British and European romanticism augments our understanding of the complex relationship between transcendentalism and materialism in the works of writers such as Fuller, Melville, and Emerson. In the first chapter, I explore the friendship between Samuel T. Coleridge

and Samuel F. B. Morse to reconstruct the transatlantic uses of electricity as a figure for imagining the politically conservative ends of art in modern society. The chapter moves on to examine the two dominant modes of understanding the telegraph that emerged in the 1840s and 1850s, arguing that they bridge the idealism of Coleridge and the technological utopianism of Morse. On the one hand, spiritualists grasped the telegraph as a material instrument revealing the immaterial interconnectedness of all humanity, all life, all creation. On the other hand, techno-utopianists envisioned the telegraph, along with the railroad and the steamship, accomplishing the material, commercial unification of the world, a world union that would be run by the intellectually and spiritually gifted races of Europe. I end this chapter by examining James W. Taylor's *The Useful and the Beautiful* (1844), an otherwise unnoteworthy pamphlet that exemplifies how these various lines of thinking—Coleridge's romantic idealism, Morse's republicanism, American techno-utopianism, and spiritualism—could come together. What is finally at work in this disparate group is an attempt to delimit the material indeterminacy of aesthetic experience by conjoining it to a specific ideology. As such, this chapter describes a tendency to codify the step from the initial aesthetic experience to its social moment by using electricity, its laws, and its technological uses to universalize the terms, the conditions, and effects, of such experience.

Recent critiques of aesthetics have emphasized such universalizing, ideological claims, but in doing so they have tended to read this response as constituting aesthetics, not as simply one possible response to aesthetic experience. By more thoroughly historicizing and materializing this movement, by suggesting the basis of this particular response to the problematic of the aesthetic in the economic, scientific, and political developments of the age, the first chapter allows us to discern the other possible readings of aesthetic experience that comprise the remainder of the book. The second chapter thus runs counter to the first by describing an interconnected, but distinctly different, line of thought that emphasizes the disruptive, unpredictable nature of aesthetic and electric connection.

Unlike Coleridge who retreated from his more materialist and radical youth into a conservative idealism, Percy Shelley built on hypotheses about the mind and nervous system as electric to imagine electricity as a more indeterminate, generative, natural force capable of spurring radical socio-political change, a force he equated with the potential of poetry itself. For many, the invention of the telegraph suggested the potential elimination of exactly that kind of physiological, cultural, and linguistic unpredictabil-

ity and opacity. Telegraphic networks played an essential role in the consolidation of capital and political power. Yet they enabled the imagining of new sorts of social connections and emblemized a type of interconnectedness—used in theorizing the permeability of the body itself and its intersection with the world through the nervous system—that challenged dominant notions of the discrete self. This chapter outlines two reactions to this challenge, one represented by Nathaniel Hawthorne, where the destabilizing potential of electrical technology and connection are rejected for their possible violation of the intrinsic self, the other figured in elements of Thoreau’s works, where, despite his anti-technological tendencies, electricity comes to mirror the ability of art to shock individuals into a recognition of their ever-shifting, fluid relationship to the world. More profoundly, in *Pierre*, Herman Melville repeatedly emphasizes the instability of the knowledge, connections, and insights allowed by a kind of aesthetic electricity, hinting at the futility of ideological attempts—from the left and the right—to delineate the precise limits and effects of a material aesthetic experience. In this way, these various writers—Shelley and Thoreau as well as Hawthorne and Melville—come together to indicate how the views elaborated in the first chapter attempted to paper over the fluid, dynamic nature of aesthetic experience. As such, they gesture to the ways that aesthetic experience disrupts any attempt to be limited in its political or social effects.

In the final two chapters, I build on the first two chapters to explore the particular uses of electricity to figure aesthetic experience and its indeterminate political implications in antebellum America. While Frederick Douglass’s antebellum autobiographies, journalism, and fiction aimed specifically at ending slavery, he draws on an aesthetic understanding of electricity to problematize the universalizing discourses of human rights that his anti-slavery politics depended on. In his novella, “The Heroic Slave,” and his two antebellum autobiographies, Douglass uses electrical imagery both to suggest the slave’s embodied possession of a universal desire for freedom and a universal appreciation for beauty and to indicate the distance between the slave’s experience and that of the white readers. Contrasting Douglass’s denial of white readers’ complete understanding of the slave experience with Harriet Beecher Stowe’s use of electricity in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, this chapter links his use of electricity to Emerson’s transcendentalist view of electricity as emblemizing the relationships between the self and the world and between art and politics. The fourth chapter builds on this foundation to produce a close-reading of “I Sing the Body Electric.” Drawing on technological, spiritualist, and aesthetic understandings of electricity, Whitman

refuses any easy relationship between body and identity, insisting, instead, on the transient experience of connection, identification, and comprehension. In particular, the slave auction scenes and the final catalogue of the poem elaborate Whitman's intensely corporeal understanding of aesthetic experience as electric and as potentially transformative of the perspectives and assumptions that underlie, but do not constitute, political commitment and action.

Whitman's postbellum poetry presents the most thorough late-century attempt at grounding aesthetic experience in electrical thought. In the conclusion, I turn to probably the most famous telegraphic work in American literary history, Henry James's *In the Cage*, to complete my historical analysis of the range of aesthetic electricity. While the novella foregrounds the linguistic and social gaps that telegraphy is supposed to overcome but in reality exposes, it never suggests the potential of art or technology, of language or electricity, to close those gaps in meaningful ways. James's text imagines the telegraph as reinforcing the "iron cage" of the capitalist ethos rather than truly enabling a way of reimagining the self and its relationships to the world and society. Pointing to developments in the consolidation of the telegraphy industry in the United States and Europe and to the growing knowledge about and domestication of electricity as well as to James's formalism, I argue that James's novella reflects the exhaustion of electricity as a material emblem for aesthetic experience by the end of the nineteenth century. Yet, despite reflecting significant cultural, social, and economic changes in the Anglo-American world, James's example does not represent the foreclosure of aesthetic experience as potentially leading to a more energized form of social engagement. While electricity would largely, but not completely, retreat as a vehicle for thinking about aesthetic experience, alternative concrete figures—based in the changing material realities and our perceptions of them—would continue to offer the possibility of constructing aesthetic experience in the terms I have described.

My narrative moves, then, from the use of aesthetic electricity to render art an instrument for the use of social engineering to electricity and telegraphy to figure the gap between art and the social world. As I travel from didacticism to aestheticism, I emphasize a third way of understanding aesthetic experience through electricity, an understanding that recognizes the entrenchment of aesthetics within the social, material world but insists on the uncertainty of the effects produced by the intersection of the economic, the physiological, and the linguistic. That experience both challenges the sociopolitical status quo by fostering the recognition of a common human-

ity and the limits of that commonality and remains politically uncommitted due to its erasure of the interests, identities, and rights at the core of modern politics. Critical practice in the past decades has demonstrated the all-too-powerful ways that aesthetics has historically been used to reinforce social, economic, and political distinctions by placing particular groups outside of the universal humanity aesthetic claims involve. By recovering the attempts of a variety of writers to figure aesthetic experience as material through electrical science, technology, and imagery, *Aesthetic Materialism* acknowledges the force of the political uses of aesthetics while emphasizing the difference between aesthetic experience proper and its mobilization for political ends. Moving beyond notions of the aesthetic as form—as canonized (and thereby fossilized) thought and practice, as secular sacralization—to consider aesthetic experience as recorded and inculcated by certain literary practices within specific historical situations would constitute the next step in, rather than a retreat from, cultural and historical approaches to the literary sphere.