The 
Autobiography

The Blank Page

The Autobiography of the Puritan minister Thomas Shepard, Susan Howe says in The Birth-mark, was originally written in “one half of a small leather-bound pocket notebook”; if you turn the notebook over and upside down, you find what Howe calls “another narrative by the same author,” one that she characterizes as “more improvisational” and that Shepard’s editors call “notes.” In between the Autobiography and the “notes” are “eighty-six blank manuscript pages” (58). In both the major editions of the Autobiography, selections from the “notes” are included after the text of the Autobiography proper. “Neither editor,” Howe says, “saw fit to point out the fact that Shepard left two manuscripts in one book separated by many pages and positioned so that to read one you must turn the other upside down” (60). Neither editor, of course, included the eighty-six blank pages between the Autobiography and the notes. The reader of the manuscript “reads”—in addition to or as part of the Autobiography—eighty-six pages of “empty paper”; the reader of either edition does not. Are they reading the same text? Are the eighty-six blank pages part of the text? What do you have to think reading is to think that when you run your eyes over blank pages you are reading them? Or what do you have to think a text is to think that pages without any writing are part of it?
Deleting blank pages isn’t by any means the only or the most controversial of the editorial decisions that concern Howe in the essays that make up *The Birth-mark*, all of which she describes as “the direct and indirect results” of her “encounters” with Ralph Franklin’s facsimile editions of *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* and *The Master Letters of Emily Dickinson*, encounters which demonstrated to her that what Dickinson wrote had been destroyed rather than reproduced by Thomas Johnson’s edition of her poems. Where Howe believes, for example, that the irregular spacing between words and even letters is “a part of the meaning” of the poems, Johnson regularized the spacing and thus, she thinks, altered the meaning. Examining the facsimiles, Howe came to think of Dickinson as an antinomian in the tradition of Anne Hutchinson. She imagines Dickinson’s preference for leaving her poems unpublished as a form of rebellion, an expression of her commitment to a “covention of grace” (1), and she imagines the “reordering and revision” of her manuscripts by Johnson and, to a lesser extent, by Franklin as an expression of their commitment to a “covention of works” (2) in which the “production of meaning [is] brought under the control of social authority” (140). Thus editorial activities like arranging the poems in stanzas and editorial decisions like ignoring “stray marks” (132) seem to Howe to limit Dickinson’s meanings by “repress[ing] the physical immediacy” (146) of the poems.

But the alignment of Dickinson’s “meaning” with grace rather than works and, even more fundamentally, the commitment to meaning itself can only stand in a somewhat vexed relation to Howe’s objections to the Johnson edition and to her objections to editorial practice more generally. For *The Birth-mark’s* worry about the social control of meaning is complicated by its investment in the “physical immediacy” of Dickinson’s texts, in its investment, that is, in aspects of Dickinson’s texts that Howe herself thinks of as meaningless, in the “blots” and “dashes” (8) that she calls “marks” and that she identifies with “nonsense” (7) and “gibberish” (2). It’s one thing to object to editors who alter the meaning of the text; it’s not quite the same thing to object to editors who take out blank pages and stray marks, marks that seem to them, and to Howe too, not to have any meaning, to belong rather to what she calls “the other of meaning” (148). In fact, from this perspective, Howe looks more
hostile to antinomianism than Dickinson’s editors do, since she’s the one defending the letter—of the poem, if not the law. But it is also this defense of the literal, not only of the letter but of the “smudged letter” and not only of the mark but of the “space,” that leads *The Birth-mark* into its most original speculations about the ontology of the Dickinson text.

Howe’s earlier book *My Emily Dickinson* had made no criticism of the Johnson edition and, without manifesting much interest in its blots and marks, had expressed regret that so few readers would have access to the Franklin facsimile only because it was “necessary for a clearer understanding of her writing process.” In *The Birth-mark*, however, readers of the Johnson edition instead of the Franklin facsimile are no longer thought to be reading Dickinson at all. For, insofar as the Dickinson text is now to be understood as a “material object,” insofar, that is, as “the print on the page . . ., the shapes of the words . . ., the space of the paper itself” (157) are now understood as essential elements of the work, not even a corrected version of the Johnson could ever be adequate to it. Indeed, what must be wrong with any Dickinson edition, from Howe’s perspective, is the very idea of Dickinson’s poems as a text to be edited. Howe is interested here in features that “no printed version could match” (152) (like the way Dickinson “crosses her t’s”), which is to say that she is interested in the ways in which the poems, becoming “drawing,” cease to be text. This is the point of the redescription of text as “material object” (60). For the very idea of textuality depends upon the discrepancy between the text and its materiality, which is why two different copies of a book (two different material objects) may be said to be the same text. The text is understood to consist in certain crucial features (e.g., [and minimally] certain words in a certain order), and any object that reproduces those features (whatever they are thought to be) will reproduce the text. One way to criticize an edition, then, is to criticize it for failing to recognize and reproduce the crucial features, and some of Howe’s criticisms of Johnson take this form. But her sense of Dickinson’s poems as drawings and her commitment to the “physical immediacy” of them as objects involves a more radical critique, since insofar as the text is made identical to the “material object,” it ceases to be something that could be edited and thus ceases to be a text at all.
This is what it means for Howe to turn the written word into the mark and to value “blots, dashes, smudged letters, gaps” under the sign of “gibberish.” Blots and smudged letters cannot be edited; they can only be reproduced. Hence the only possible edition of the Dickinson text is the “facsimile,” an edition that is a reproduction instead of an edition. Because the text is disconnected from its meaning, no attempt to identify those features that are crucial to its meaning is possible—there are no such features. Or, to turn the point around, the fact that no features can be identified as crucial means that every feature is. For if it doesn’t make sense to think that the way Dickinson crossed her t’s matters to the meaning of her work—a t is a t no matter how it’s crossed—the point of the redescription of the letter as mark is to make it matter. The printed t and the handwritten (or “smudged”) t are the same letter but not the same mark, which is to say, they don’t have the same shape. And, of course, the same is true of all the features to which Howe points: the spaces between the words and letters, the quality of the paper, and so forth; to alter any of these is to change the text, not because you’ve changed its meaning but because you’ve changed what Paul de Man, in an essay written in the year before Howe began work on what would become The Birth-mark (“Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant” [1983]), calls its “sensory appearance.” And it is this appearance that the facsimile reproduces—the facsimile shows you what the letters look like and how far apart they are from each other. Its point is not just to convey the meaning of the text to the reader but also to reproduce the experience of its physical features.

But even transforming the poem (a text to be edited) into a drawing (to be reproduced instead of edited) does not produce a complete equation of the work of art with the “material object.” For the reproducibility even of the drawing depends on some notion of what is essential to it, some notion of what makes the drawing the drawing it is. (Indeed, thinking about what must be reproduced in order for the work of art to have been reproduced is just a device for thinking about what it is that makes the work of art the work of art it is.) And any such notion will involve distinguishing between the material object that is the drawing and the material object as such. The reproduction, for instance, will never be on the same piece of paper the drawing is on—does that mean it isn’t the
same drawing? We might want to call two prints of a photograph the same photograph, but the fact that they are the same photograph does not make them the same object. Even a facsimile of Dickinson’s poems will reproduce only the shapes of the marks she made; it won’t duplicate the ink she made them with. In this sense, the facsimile is no more committed to the material object than is the Johnson edition; it just has a different set of criteria for determining which aspects of that object count as the work of art. To be truly committed to the materiality of the object would be to suspend all such criteria. If we think of Dickinson as making poems, we will think that getting the right words in the right order is what matters; if we think of her as making drawings, then we will think that getting the right shapes in the right places will matter. But if we want the same object, then everything matters. We no longer care whether Dickinson was writing poems or making drawings.

Indeed, despite the fact that our interest in the text’s materiality was provoked first by an interest in Dickinson’s intention, we can no longer have any principled interest in Dickinson at all. Even though she played a no doubt crucial causal role in producing the object, our interest in its materiality requires our attention to every feature of the text, regardless of Dickinson’s involvement. Thus the most radical form of Howe’s commitment to Dickinson produces a certain indifference to Dickinson—for the things Dickinson didn’t care about (say, the kind of ink) must matter just as much as the things she did care about (say, the shapes of the letters). So to see the material object just as a material object is to make no distinction between what Dickinson cared about and what she didn’t. A thoroughgoing materialism needn’t deny that the object has been made by someone but must nevertheless treat it as if it had been made by no one. That’s why, in the essays on Kant at the heart of Aesthetic Ideology, de Man emphasizes those moments where Kant insisted on the importance of what de Man calls the “nonteleological.” The “wild man” who “sees a house of which he does not know the use” (81) counts as an exemplary instance of someone engaged in what de Man calls “material vision” precisely because, seeing the house “entirely severed from any purpose or use” (88), he sees only its “sensory appearance.” He sees things the way they appear “to the eye and not to the mind” (82), which is to say, he sees the house the way someone who did not know what
books were, or even what words were, would see Dickinson’s poems or Shepard’s *Autobiography*.

The eighty-six blank pages count here as part of the object (de Man mentions “the blank” between the two stanzas of Wordsworth’s “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal” as an example of the “pure materiality” he’s talking about) not because they are important to the “purpose” of the object’s maker but because—insofar as they are part of the object’s “sensuous appearance”—they are part of what the reader “reads” or “sees” without reference to the maker’s purpose. The purely material, in other words, is everything that can be seen by the reader. The question of which part of what the reader sees counts as part of the work of art (the question, say, of whether the eighty-six blank pages should be included in an edition of the *Autobiography*) is not so much answered as it is set aside. After all, the blank pages are part of what the reader sees whether or not they are understood to be part of the work of art. So the question of what’s in the work of art (a question about the object) is replaced by the question of what the reader sees (a question about the subject).

De Man’s insistence on what he calls “a *material* vision” (82) thus produces—inevitably, which is to say, necessarily—a replacement of the idea of the text’s meaning (and of the project of interpreting that meaning) with the idea of the reader’s experience and with a certain indifference to or, more radically, repudiation of meaning and interpretation both. For what “material vision” sees (it is the very mark of its materiality) is, as one of de Man’s commentators puts it, “completely emptied out of its meaning,” or, as de Man himself puts it: “the eye, left to itself, entirely ignores understanding” (127). Objects of understanding are objects not yet “severed from any purpose or use”; if we think of Shepard’s *Autobiography* as such an object, we will decide whether to reproduce the eighty-six blank pages by trying to decide whether we think they were meant to serve some purpose. An argument about whether to reproduce them would follow the same lines as the argument Howe conducts with Dickinson’s editor, Ralph Franklin, about whether an edition of her poems should reproduce the line breaks in the manuscripts. Franklin thinks they shouldn’t; in Howe’s formulation, he thinks that where the lines end in the manuscripts is a function of physical features like the size of the paper and of Dickinson’s handwriting, and that an editor of Dickinson’s
poems should follow the “form” of the poems “rather than accidents of physical line breaks on paper” (145). Howe, in response, insists that Dickinson was not “careless about line breaks” and that, “in the precinct of Poetry, a word, the space around a word, each letter, every mark, silence, or sound volatizes an inner law of form.” She insists, in other words, that the line breaks in the fascicles are not “accidents,” that they “represent an athematic compositional intention” (139), and the debate between her and Franklin is thus a debate about what is or isn’t accidental, what is or isn’t intentional.

From the standpoint of de Man’s “material vision,” however, this debate misses the point—which is not to decide what was done on purpose and what was done by accident but to treat the object as if nothing were done on purpose, as if everything were accidental. Marks and spaces produced by accident are not objects of “understanding”; the question of what Dickinson intended is made irrelevant by the materialist indifference to what she meant. Thus, de Man will, in his most radical moments, describe hard-to-interpret speech acts (speech acts that seem to suggest many possible meanings) as speech acts that have no meaning at all, as uninterpretable “noise.” And thus, as we have already seen, in her most radical moments, Howe too—insisting that Shepard’s eighty-six blank pages be reproduced and that every aspect (not just spelling and punctuation but stray marks, the space between the words and letters, random drops of ink) of the Dickinson text be reproduced—will be led to identify poetry not with what can be understood but with what can’t: with “nonsense” and “gibberish.”

But if this commitment to the meaningless is, as I have been suggesting, the most radical form of the commitment to the material object, it is by no means the only, or even the most common. Quoting Poe’s remark that “nonsense” is “the essential sense of the Marginal Note (7),” Howe distinguishes between what she calls “works” and what she calls “marginal notes”; unlike works, “marks in the margin are immediate reflections” (15). Marks that are not works—like birthmarks—are signs of the writer’s presence. When Russell Cheney finds a shopping list on the back of a letter sent him by F. O. Matthiessen, the shopping list, not the letter, produces the “actual scene” of Matthiessen’s life: “It sort of took my breath it was so real—as though I’d reached out and touched
you” (14). The power of the shopping list here derives not from its meaning but from its physical connection to Matthiessen; it affects Cheney not, in other words, as a representation of what Matthiessen meant (it might just as well be “stray” marks) but as evidence of his physical presence, as a trace of where he was. If the impossibility of understanding the mark sometimes looks like a kind of skepticism—you can’t know what the text means—here that skepticism about meaning is turned into an opportunity for experience; instead of understanding Mattheissen’s text, Cheney feels like he’s touching his body. It’s when the mark becomes meaningless that it becomes most “real.”

By far the most usual form taken by the transformation of text into material object, however, involves the emergence of the reader as what Howe (quoting Richard Sieburth) calls an “active participant” in rather than a “passive consumer” (19) of the meaning of the text. Here, of course, it’s the multiplicity of meaning rather than its absence that seems crucial; what’s being celebrated (or, sometimes, deplored) is the different meanings the same text can have for different readers in different situations. But it isn’t hard to see that the interest in the reader’s participation renders the text’s meaning as irrelevant as de Manian material vision does. Once we become interested in what we see, in what the text makes us think of, we become in principle as indifferent to the question of what the text means as de Man could wish. Indeed, it is hard to say whether de Man’s rigorous and even ascetic critique of interpretation is the deep truth of the sentimental celebration of different readers reading differently or whether their sentimentality is the deep truth of de Man’s asceticism. In any case, the claim that the text means nothing will turn out to have exactly the same cash value as the claim that it means different things to different people. Readers for whom the same text can have different meanings are not readers who have different beliefs about what the text means; they are readers who have different responses to the text, whatever it means. They do not, that is, have different interpretations of the text; they have different experiences of the text.4

The difference between interpreting a text and experiencing it is articulated by de Man as the difference between an encounter with “language” in its “cognitive” mode and an encounter with language as it “frees itself of its constraints and discovers within itself a power no longer
dependent on the restrictions of cognition” (79). The “language of cognition” (133) is language you understand—or misunderstand; you know (or think you know) what it means. But your relation to what de Man calls the “language of power” is one of “pure affect rather than cognition” (89). Indeed, that’s the point of calling it the language of power or, what de Man also calls it, of “force” (122); to understand a text is one thing, to feel its force is another. Language as force “has the materiality of something that actually happens, that actually occurs” (134). Like Howe’s material object (like the eighty-six blank pages “the reader reads”), de Man’s material event (say, “the blank between stanzas 1 and 2 of the Lucy poem ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’” [89]), “leaves a trace on the world.” But where Howe sometimes justifies her commitment to these traces on the grounds that they are intentional (not “careless”) and sometimes despite the fact that they are not intentional (even the “random” or “stray” mark must be preserved as trace of the author’s presence), de Man’s materialism is more thoroughgoing—it has nothing to do with what the author intended or what the reader believes, with the text’s meaning or with the reader’s interpretation of that meaning.

Indeed, the central point of those essays collected under the title *Aesthetic Ideology* is to identify that ideology—to identify ideology itself—with what from the standpoint of de Man’s materialism counts as the “illusion of meaning” and to identify the alternative to that illusion (what “actually happens”) with what he calls “history.” “History is . . . the emergence of a language of power out of a language of cognition” (133). So what the “materiality of the letter” is to knowledge, the “materiality of actual history” (11) is to ideology, and what *Aesthetic Ideology* calls for is thus a turn away from ideology and toward history. By the time *Aesthetic Ideology* got published, however (in 1996), what de Man had characterized as the emergence of history everyone else was characterizing as the end of history. For if, on Francis Fukuyama’s account, the end of the Cold War did not mean the end of ideology, it did mean what Fukuyama called the “end” of “mankind’s ideological evolution,” and it thus made ideology as irrelevant to action as de Man’s materialism had. In the posthistorical world, the struggle between socialism and liberalism would be replaced by “the endless solving of technical problems” and “the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands” (25). Replacing the question of
what people believe with the question of what they want, Fukuyama’s
posthistoricism repeated the de Manian replacement of the cognitive
with the affective. And this turn to affect at the end of history produced
the same result as the turn to affect at the beginning of history: the
primacy of the subject. Liberals and socialists have different beliefs about
the world, and the disagreement between them necessarily transcends
their subject positions, which is just to say that if the liberals are right,
then the socialists must be wrong. But once what people believe is re-
placed (as Fukuyama says) by what they want or (as de Man says) by
what they see, the difference between them requires no disagreement.
The difference between what you want and what I want is just a differ-
ence between you and me; the difference between what you see and
what I see is just the difference between where you’re standing and
where I’m standing—literally, a difference in subject position.10

This movement from questions about the ontology of the text to an
insistence on the primacy of the subject makes a single argument out of
what I have in my own writing treated as two separate arguments and
two separate projects. One, most fully articulated in the “Against The-
ory” essays (written in collaboration with Steven Knapp), is an argument
that texts can mean only what their authors intend them to mean. The
other, set out in my book Our America (1995), is an argument against
identity and, what’s particularly relevant to the present book, against the
idea that the things you do and the beliefs you hold can be justified by
a description of who you are. The reason, of course, that that way of
putting the point is relevant to the present project is that the appeal to
who you are has for many years been central to certain kinds of literary
theoretical arguments, explicit in claims that the reader plays a role in
determining the meaning of texts and implicit (at least, so The Shape of
the Signifier will argue) in claims that the meaning of the text is deter-
m定了 by the syntactic and semantic rules of the language in which it is
written. So, although I did not in writing it understand Our America’s
critique of identity to be in any significant way connected to the defense
of intention in “Against Theory,” the argument of the current book is
not only that they are connected but that each claim entails the other. If
you think that differences in belief cannot be described as differences in identity, you must also think that texts mean what their authors intend.

This argument is rehearsed in the preceding pages of this introduction but in the opposite direction and on the opposite side. The effort here has been to think through the question not only of what a text means but, even more fundamentally, of what the text is—of what is in it and what isn’t, what counts as part of it and what doesn’t—without the appeal to the author’s intention. And the point is that if you do this, you find yourself committed not only to the materiality of the text but also, by way of that materiality, to the subject position of the reader. You find yourself committed to the materiality of the text because, if you don’t think it matters whether the author of the text did or didn’t intend the eighty-six blank pages to count as part of it, the mere fact that they are there must be dispositive. And you find yourself committed to the primacy of the subject position because the question about what’s there will always turn out to be (this argument is made at length later) a question about what’s there to you, a question about what you see. Once, in other words, the eighty-six pages count not because some author meant them to count but because they are there, in front of you, then everything that is there must also count—the table the pages are on, the room the table is in, the way the pages, the table, and the room make you feel. Why? Because all these things are part of your experience of the pages, and once we abjure interest in what the author intended (once we no longer care whether or not the author intended us to count the room the work of art is in as part of the work of art), we have no principled reason not to count everything that’s part of our experience as part of the work. And, of course, while our experiences will often be very similar, they will always be a little different—where you stand will be a little different from where I stand, what you feel will be different from what I feel, who you are is not who I am.

So the argument, in miniature, is that if you think the intention of the author is what counts, then you don’t think the subject position of the reader matters, but if you don’t think the intention of the author is what counts, then the subject position of the reader will be the only thing that matters. This is a theoretical argument, not a historical one, and, of course, “Against Theory” was an entirely theoretical essay. But Our
America was meant not only as a critique of identity but also as a history of at least a certain crucial episode in its invention and deployment, and The Shape of the Signifier is meant to have a historical dimension as well. One way to put this would be to say that I am here interested in the historical simultaneity of (as well as the theoretical link between) the modern interest in the ontology of the text and the rise of what I characterized in Our America as a distinctively modern notion of identity. If, in other words, modernism is defined by its interest in the work of art as an object and by its preoccupation with the relation between that work of art and its reader or beholder, these aesthetic concerns are themselves produced in relation to the accompanying invention of racial identity and then of its transformation both into the pluralized form of cultural identity and into the privileging of the subject position as such. Our America was about what has turned out to be a relatively early moment in that history; The Shape of the Signifier is about a more recent one.

One name for this more recent moment is postmodernism. And one reason that The Shape of the Signifier is subtitled 1967 to the End of History is that 1967 was the year in which Michael Fried published “Art and Objecthood,” which for many writers marks the event that put the “post” in postmodernism; Fried’s is “a work of mourning,” as Craig Owens put it in 1982, and what it mourns is “the death of modernism.” In this sense, the two times in my subtitle might be said to mark not a beginning and an end but two ends—first of modernism, then of history. But the announcement of the end of ideological dispute has not ended ideological dispute; it has instead defined our period as one in which the question of dispute—are our clashes ideological, cultural, economic?—has become central. And the declaration of the end of modernism, coinciding as it did with an outpouring of remarkable painting and sculpture fundamentally concerned to decide what modernism was, served above all to mark the continuing urgency of modernism’s ontological preoccupations. Or, rather, a new urgency. Just as, in politics, the decline of a socialist alternative to capitalism has given the question of identity a whole new valence, in art, the rise of theory—which may be said, in the United States, to have begun with the invention of technologies designed to explain modernism and to have turned into technologies designed to
produce postmodernism—has made essential the question of what kinds of subjects are entailed by what kinds of objects.

That question can, of course, be asked as well as answered in different ways, as a question about the object or as a question about the subject. In *The Birth-mark*, as we have seen, it’s about the object—the mark—and in this form the same question is obviously central to debates about deconstruction in literary theory or about Minimalism in the art theory of the 1960s and 1970s. But is it also, in a slightly different form, just as central to the postpsychoanalytic interest in trauma or to the science fiction understanding of language on the model of the computer virus and of the person on the model of the computer. In literary theory, what Howe is interested in was often called the materiality of the signifier, and one way to put what I am arguing here is just to say that the commitment to the materiality of the signifier—the commitment to the idea that the text consists essentially of its physical features—was fundamental not only to the very few people who understood themselves actually to have made that commitment but also to the larger number of people who were critical of the materiality of the signifier and also to a great many people who had never even heard of the materiality of the signifier.

Another more controversial way to put it would be to say that this view of the ontology of the text carries with it—entails—a parallel or complementary view of the position of the reader. I am arguing that anyone who thinks the text consists of its physical features (of what Derrida calls its marks) will be required also to think that the meaning of the text is crucially determined by the experience of its readers, and so the question of who the reader is—and the commitment to the primacy of identity as such—is built into the commitment to the materiality of the signifier. What this means is that figures whose deepest commitments are to categories of racial or cultural difference (e.g., the political scientist Samuel B. Huntington and the novelist Toni Morrison) belong to the same formation as someone like de Man, who couldn’t have cared less about culture. To put the point in an implausible (but nonetheless, I will try to show, accurate) form, it means that if you hold, say, Judith Butler’s views on resignification, you will also be required to hold, say, George W. Bush’s views on terrorism—and, scarier still, if you hold
Bush’s views on terrorism, you must hold Butler’s view of resignification. The position, then, that you take about whether those eighty-six blank pages should count as part of the text will generate other positions—not only on terrorism but also on more obviously literary questions like whether texts have more than one meaning, as well as on more generally social questions like whether it is important that we should (or whether it is true that we can) remember historical events like slavery and the Holocaust. And, to turn things around, the position you hold on the significance of the Holocaust will generate a position on whether the eighty-six blank pages must count as part of Thomas Shepard’s Autobiography.

Of course, I do not claim that very many people actually hold all the positions that I do claim would follow from holding just one. This aspect of my argument is very much more theoretical than historical, since it involves describing what people ought, if they were consistent, to believe and to want in addition to (and sometimes instead of) describing what they actually do believe and want. For this reason, I originally thought to configure this book in purely theoretical terms, confining my discussion to theoretical arguments about theoretical texts. But it quickly became clear that these confines were too narrow. On the one hand, it’s true that the difference, as I describe it, between, for example, the interpretation of a text (the beliefs we have about its meaning) and the experience of a text (how it looks to us, how it makes us feel) is obviously not a historical phenomenon; the experience of a speech act and the interpretation of it have always been and will always be overlapping but not identical entities. On the other hand, the privileging of the experience, which is to say the widespread effort to redescribe the interpretation as the experience and, in effect (as I will argue), to get rid of the notion of interpretation altogether is a historical phenomenon. And the fact that this theoretical argument (or, as it seems to me, mistake) has been accompanied by a proliferation of novels (like Morrison’s Beloved or Leslie Marmon Silko’s Almanac of the Dead) that not only repeat the privileging of experience over belief but seek to extend it to the possibility of our experiencing (rather than learning about) things that never actually happened to us is also a historical phenomenon. So, although I haven’t exactly tried to produce enough accounts of enough works to
write what might plausibly count as a real history of recent American aesthetic and theoretical production, I have tried to give some suggestion of what that history might look like. I have tried, in other words, to lay out what is meant as a kind of grid on which not only the works I discuss but a great many other works could be located and in terms of which that history can be at least imagined.

The grid, the book, is arranged in three chapters. The first, “Posthistoricism,” centers on the years just before and just after the end of the Cold War and examines some of the technologies (e.g., multiculturalism) for reconfiguring ideological difference (i.e., disagreement) as cultural, linguistic, or even just geographical difference. It seeks also to demonstrate the reliance of such technologies on what I argue is a powerful but incoherently reductive materialism, deployed simultaneously in an array of interesting and ambitious novels (by Kathy Acker, Octavia Butler, Bret Easton Ellis, and Kim Stanley Robinson) and in the theoretical writings not only of Fukuyama and Huntington but of Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, and, especially, Richard Rorty.

The second chapter is called, is called “Prehistoricism,” both because it provides the actual prehistory of the primacy of the subject position and because it shows how that primacy is based on a characteristically unacknowledged appeal to nature. The chapter deals primarily with a set of theoretical issues raised in the late 1960s and through the 1970s, both in art theory (here Michael Fried and Robert Smithson—who in 1968 described “pre and post-history” as part of the same “consciousness”14—are the central protagonists) and in literary theory (here de Man is the central figure, but the argument is extended in passing to one of the major texts of Jacques Derrida). Some of the photographs of Cindy Sherman and James Welling are offered as examples of what was at stake for a certain art practice in the debate about meaning and representation, and the chapter concludes with a discussion of deep ecology and its affinity with the deconstructive critique of representation.

The third chapter, “Historicism,” begins with a discussion of what might be called the historicist novel—the novel not only about history but about the presence of the historical past—and moves on to what might then be called the antihistoricist novel. Morrison, Silko, Art Spiegelman, and Stephen Greenblatt are the main historicists; Ellis and Sam-
uel Delany, the antihistoricists. If the historicism involves what are by now familiar commitments to cultural identity and cultural heritage, and to events that are experienced and transmitted rather than represented and known, the antihistoricism turns out to involve a commitment to classes rather than cultures and to a simultaneously demonized and eroticized version both of liberal capitalism and of the principle—freedom of contract—that animates it. The chapter ends with a discussion of some of the arguments for and against the deeply historicist project of securing reparations for slavery and with an argument that seeks to disarticulate present justice from past injustice.

The book concludes with a coda, “Empires of the Senseless.” The central text here is Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*, and the central topic is the effort to imagine a political program without any political beliefs. The war on terrorism and weapons of mass destruction is one manifestation of this effort, but the coda’s primary interest is in the (re)emergence of the biopolitical as a synonym for and legitimation of what is also called the postpolitical. The differences between (and within) bodies may here be understood as underwriting the insistence on all the nonideological differences—or, more precisely, the insistence on the importance of difference as such—with which *The Shape of the Signifier* is concerned, including Howe’s and de Man’s materialisms. It is, in other words, those differences that have nothing to do with differences in belief—racial difference, sexual difference, linguistic difference, even (and, in a certain sense, especially) cultural difference—that emerge as foundational. None of these differences is, in the de Manian sense, “cognitive”; people with different bodies don’t thereby have different beliefs. And even people with different beliefs can be understood as not disagreeing with each other as long as their beliefs are understood to constitute a culture rather than an ideology; hence the extraordinary recent prestige of the notion of culture, and of the dramas of inclusion and exclusion, assimilation and extinction that accompany it. We don’t worry when people who have what seem to us false beliefs stop believing them (i.e., when false beliefs disappear); we do worry when cultures disappear. Culture, in other words, has become a primary technology for disarticulating difference from disagreement.
It has also become a primary technology for disarticulating difference from inequality. Elaborating on Alain Badiou’s remark that the term “worker” seems to have been largely replaced by the term “immigrant” in recent political discourse, Slavoj Žižek has usefully pointed out that “in this way, the class problematic of workers’ exploitation is transformed into the multiculturalist problematic of racism, intolerance, etc.” 15 The difference between these problematics is, as we used to say, essential, since insofar as exploitation is at the core of class difference, class difference is ineluctably linked to inequality, where cultural difference, of course, is not. Cultures, in theory if not always in practice, are equal; classes, in theory and in practice, are not. From this standpoint, the rise of culture, or of the so-called new social movements, or of the problem of identities and identification, or—most generally—of the problem of the subject has functioned as the Left’s way of learning to live with inequality. 16 Or, as Žižek says, of learning to live with “the advent of the global liberal democratic order,” which is what, as Žižek notes, Fukuyama called the end of history. 17 There are other names for it; some of the more recent political ones, as we have already begun to note, have included the clash of civilizations, the rise of Empire, and the war on terror. But the effort to imagine a world organized by subject positions instead of beliefs and divided into identities instead of classes has of course, under general rubrics like postmodernism or poststructuralism or posthistoricism, been widespread.

That effort, the construction of that world, is the subject of this book, and not exactly its deconstruction but something more like the dismantling of its theoretical framework is the book’s project. And although much of what follows will be concerned with questions of political and cultural theory, even more will be focused on a set of commitments that often find their most powerful expression in attempts like Susan Howe’s both to exemplify and to explain her theory of the text. Indeed, it’s not only the intensity of her engagement with the text as material object but also the lability of her explanations of that engagement that produce The Birth-mark’s power. Sometime Howe understands the mark or blank as a form of signification—the expression of an “athematic compositional intention”; sometimes she turns the mark into a “trace” that records or reflects a body rather than representing a meaning; and sometimes,
when the mark becomes “gibberish,” even what it reflects is rendered irrelevant. In contrast to this lability, it is the single-mindedness of de Man’s commitment to the mark instead of the sign—to the “purely material” as the “purely formal,” “void of any semantic depth”—that distinguishes Aesthetic Ideology. Indeed, the replacement of the sign by the mark articulated in (although by no means unique to) Aesthetic Ideology is foundational for and constitutive of the aesthetics of posthistoricism just as the emergence of the subject produced by the same process is—once the subject has thoroughly grasped itself as a structure of identification—constitutive of its politics.