# **Affecting Fictions**



MIND, BODY, AND EMOTION IN AMERICAN LITERARY REALISM

JANE F. THRAILKILL

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# Introduction

The "Affective Fallacy" Fallacy

This book is a sustained argument in defense of the Affective Fallacy. The term was coined in 1946 by the literary critics W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, who contended that "affective criticism"—criticism that took seriously literature's effects on readers—led to impressionism and relativism.1 They pointed out that emotional responses to different objects, especially but not only literary works, varied wildly across cultures, historical periods, and even one individual's lifespan (21). At the heart of this problem was emotion itself, for as articulated by Wimsatt and Beardsley, feelings were not only private and subjective but also distorting of reason and cognition. "Emotion," they wrote, "... has a well known capacity to fortify opinion, to inflame cognition, and to grow upon itself in surprising proportions to grains of reason" (26). Feelings, manifested in the "shiver down the spine,' the sensation in 'the pit of the stomach" (30), were rooted in the body—therefore, for these critics, they occluded the operation of cognition and the ascription of meaning, processes centered in the mind.

Reproduced in a book by Wimsatt entitled *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (1954), the essay entitled "The Affective Fallacy" was presented for the explicit purpose of stabilizing and making public the meanings conveyed by works of literature. While any given literary work might have a multitude of idiosyncratic, "physiological and psychologically vague" (34) effects on particular individuals, these influential New Critics argued that dispassionate, objective, cognition-based interpretation might overcome the material differences of bodies,

societies, and historical periods. Their argument against affective criticism sought to affirm the primacy of interpretation, and indeed culture itself, over the unpredictable and potentially solipsistic motions of the body. Wimsatt and Beardsley would assent to anthropologist Catherine Lutz's observation that "nothing...appear[s] more natural and hence less cultural than emotions, nothing more private and hence less amenable to public scrutiny, nothing more inchoate and less compatible" with the collective study of culture and the interpretation of its artifacts—especially (as they refer to works of literature) its "Verbal Icon[s]." In an unstable world, in which "cultures have changed and will change" (39), the New Critics cast the verbal icon as a solid levee holding back "mob psychology, psychosis, and neurosis" (27). For Wimsatt and Beardsley, affective response involved precultural visceral reactions that threatened coherent principles of order and epistemological stability.

Yet Wimsatt and Beardsley's argument produced a tantalizing paradox: why, in an essay urging the irrelevance of feeling to literary studies, is the rhetorical register of such emotional intensity? Despite its brevity, "The Affective Fallacy" offers up a lengthy inventory of perils associated with emotion: including such "obsolete or exotic customs" as "exposing babies"; a variety of menaces, such as "a cyclone, a mob, a holdup man"; viciousness and vice ("robbery, fornication, horse racing, war"); predatory nature ("the crow that kills small birds and animals or feeds on carrion"); and barbarism as such ("murder... atrocity . . . wholesale butchery") (39, 26, 27, 33, 36, 37). This intensity, I believe, directs us to an important fear motivating the New Critics' discussion of literary interpretation: that a world without a stabilizing principle—whether that "world" is a work of literature, or the culture of literary studies, or a broader geopolitical entity—would have no foundation for discussion, much less agreement, about the validity of acts of interpretation. Their use of metaphor suggests that such a world, fractured by material and perceptual differences (and ruled by the very entity, the body, that encapsulates these essential divisions), would amount to a Hobbesian state of nature.

Recognition of this underlying anxiety helps to explain the ominous terms Wimsatt and Beardsley use to describe the problems attendant on the Affective Fallacy, as when they hint that attentiveness to what literature "does" to us (its corporeal appeal) and not just what it means (its cognitive aspect) might authorize vivisection as a form of criticism: "If

animals could read poetry," they muse, "the affective critic" might be tempted to experiment on animal bodies to monitor "the increased liberation of sugar from the liver, the secretion of adrenin from the adrenal gland" (21, 31). A literary/interpretive world governed by feelings could, they indicate, devolve into a grim battle of wills, producing a situation where "cognitively untranslatable" (34) meanings could only be passed along corporeally. The critics' figures for this sort of corporeal communication range from unpleasant to gruesome: meanings, on this model, must be understood as "communicated to the reader like an infection or disease, ... inflicted mechanically like a bullet or knife wound, ... administered like a poison, ... expressed as by expletives or grimaces or rhythms" (38).3 (Notably, the meaning of a literary work is never "absorbed like sunlight," "passed along as by the clasp of a hand," or "imbibed like a fine wine.") The metaphors underscore that, for Wimsatt and Beardsley, not just literary interpretation but something like civilization itself was at stake.

The critic Walter Benn Michaels, in The Shape of the Signifier (2004), has recently taken up the New Critics' line of reasoning. Like Wimsatt and Beardsley, he distinguishes between the meaning of a literary work, which is attainable through reason and cognition (i.e. a person's interpretation), and an individual's actual reception of a literary work (i.e. a person's experience). Michaels's formulation suggests that while interpretations may be cast into language and reasonably conveyed to others, the experience of a literary work—its "physiological and psychologically vague" effects ("Affective Fallacy," 34)—cannot. To imagine that it could, Michaels suggests, is to think of textual meaning as a material entity capable of entering a person's body without cerebral engagement, on "the model of a virus." Or on the model of a nail gun: Michaels echoes Wimsatt's and Beardsley's comments regarding knife wounds and grimaces as exemplary affective modes of communication when he observes that in Brett Easton Ellis's American Psycho (1991) "the moan of pain from the woman the psycho shoots with a nail gun really does give him information about how she's feeling" (123). Michaels argues that the actions of Ellis's narrator betray something like a commitment to the Affective Fallacy, for the psycho requires that "meanings" transpire experientially, which is to say corporeally, bypassing the mind and evading the vicissitudes of both speech and interpretation.

While Michaels's point in bringing up Ellis's novel is that one has to

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go to extraordinary lengths to imagine interpretation without cognition,<sup>5</sup> I would venture a different reading: that the rather sanguinary examples of critics who argue against committing the Affective Fallacy suggest the extraordinary lengths one must go to imagine that the experience of a literary work—how it makes us feel—is irrelevant to its interpretation. In the chapters that follow, I elaborate the ways in which, for writers, readers, and theorists of the late nineteenth century, affective experience was conceptualized as both rooted in the body and as mindful. To put this point in terms pertinent to current debates over the role of affect in literary studies: attentiveness to the experience of a literary work need not eradicate meaning (or its concomitant, civilized society) if we come to accept that feeling is not opposed to interpretation but is part of it.

### The Entanglements of Two Cultures

Since the 1980s, work by scholars and theorists interested in the history of the body can be seen as a response to the anxieties first expressed by the New Critics. Whereas Wimsatt and Beardsley understood the body-with its unspecifiable, idiosyncratic, and irrational emotional responses—to be at odds with culture and interpretation, influential thinkers such as Catherine Lutz, Judith Butler, Thomas Lacqueur, Elaine Showalter, Jane Tompkins, and Julie Ellison have argued that the body's textures, habits, and responses (especially those pertinent to sex and gender) must themselves be understood as the expressions of culture.6 As the psychoanalytic critic Julia Kristeva puts it, these accounts acknowledge "the relativity of [a person's] symbolic as well as biological existence." Catherine Lutz has written, "After deconstruction, emotion retains value as a way of talking about the intensely meaningful as that is culturally defined, socially enacted, and personally articulated" (5). While Lutz acknowledges that emotion is experienced as "something that rises and falls within the boundaries of our bodies" (5), she recasts feelings as essentially cultural and interpretive modes of "negotiation over the meaning of events, over rights and moralities" (5). "Talk about emotions," Lutz affirms, "is simultaneously talk about society" (6). Whereas Wimsatt and Beardsley cast the body as dangerously antithetical to culture, more recent thinking about the constructed character of biological existence—a position underwritten by, among others, the theories of Sigmund Freud and Michel Foucault-has cast the body and its attendant emotions as eloquent expressions of culture. For a range of cultural critics, the study of the body, even in its material form, must indeed attend to meanings rather than (as the New Critics had predicted) adrenal secretions. The body was reconceived as a text that could be read without recourse to scientific knowledge or methods of inquiry.

Yet the ascendance of the culture concept in literary and historical study appears to have shifted, rather than solved, the essential problem that preoccupied Wimsatt and Beardsley: that "cognitively untranslatable" reactions to literary works were an index of the larger problem of incommensurability of meaning and value from "culture to culture" (38). In 1959, just five years after The Verbal Icon was published, C. P. Snow in the Rede Lectures coined the term "two cultures" to encapsulate the widening gulf between scientists and scholars in the humanities.8 Judging by today's widespread discussion of the "Science Wars" (a close cousin of the "Culture Wars") in academic and popular media, the critical work of the past few decades has if anything exacerbated rather than assuaged the anxiety, vividly expressed a half century earlier, about the problems of relativism, the stability and communicability of knowledge, and the incommensurability of the disciplines. This incommensurability took dramatic form in 1996, when physicist Alan Sokal submitted a sham article to the "Science Wars" issue of the critical theory journal Social Text. The piece was published, Sokal repudiated it, and a storm of controversy followed. So while the emphasis on the cultural construction of biological and physical entities may have dissolved the strong distinction between the biological body and culture as such, it has nonetheless helped to drive a wedge between the sciences and the humanities.

As Wai Chee Dimock and Priscilla Wald have argued, institutional collaboration and communication are somewhat rare between the humanities and the sciences. Yet, they observe, the spheres that humanities scholars have claimed as their own—the realms of literary production, cultural practices, and historical meanings—are now saturated with the practical consequences of specialized scientific knowledges, "from reproductive technologies to electronic archives, from bioterrorism to gene therapy." <sup>10</sup> "Science illiteracy," Dimock and Wald affirm, "[is] no longer an option. Scholars in the humanities simply have to come to terms with these forces of change. Unpersuaded by the language of crisis with which some cultural observers have responded to the current situation, we see an opportunity for creative and productive responses

to the emergence of new forms of knowledge, of cross-disciplinary conversations and collaborations, all born of the necessity to address the growing *entanglement* of culture, technology, and science" (705–706; emphasis added). Literary study has been slow to import the insights of these other fields, and not without good reason: traditionally, biological accounts of the body have been wielded with a heavy hand, used to justify existing social inequalities based on sex and race, or to produce reductive and deterministic accounts of human behavior.

In discussions of emotion, however, the entanglement Dimock and Wald delineate is unusually knotty-and for this reason, as I have found, especially productive. This book engages with scientific work, not only through analyzing its rhetorical and ideological force but also by taking seriously its range of ideas, models, and practices pertinent to the biological human body. There are historical grounds for such a project, for literary realism in the United States reached its height during the dynamic, post-Civil War decades, when a range of sciences of the human mind and body were in the process of disaggregating into discrete disciplines: neurology out of/alongside physiology, scientific medicine out of/alongside other healing practices, psychology out of/alongside philosophical pragmatism. Such an approach may also, however, have broader theoretical and practical salience. Certain literary-critical paradigms of the twentieth century, sponsored by both New Critics and poststructuralists, have had the paradoxical effect of helping to alienate the humanities from the sciences even as they have fostered critical work that in many ways draws on the sciences: methodologically, in the emphasis on "rigor," arcane terminology, and expertise; in the object of study, which frequently attends to the rhetorical and cultural impact of scientific discourses; and institutionally, in our credentialing procedures and emphasis on research over teaching, and specialization over general knowledge. It is the premise of this book that, by tracing the complex allegiances among discourses that are focused on the human interaction with others and with the material world, we can align without conflating the work of literary scholars with that of investigators in other fields.

So instead of simply disparaging scientific knowledge of the body (as with the New Critics) or deconstructing it (as with poststructuralists), a reenergized attentiveness to the distinctions between the sciences and the humanities opens up exciting possibilities for substantive crossfertilization. In recent years, critics in the humanities have actively taken up findings of researchers in fields such as evolutionary biology

and artificial intelligence, even as writers and literary critics are increasingly making contributions to an understanding of human perception, production, and flourishing that are valuable to other fields of inquiry, such as cognitive neuroscience and medicine. In other words, while necessarily respectful of the important differences in our objects of inquiry, methodologies, and institutional histories, investigators in the humanities and in the sciences can find common ground. This common ground, in the words of Donna Haraway, must embrace both "an account of radical historical contingency" and the "no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real' world, one that can be partially shared and friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness." Approached from such an orientation, the study of literature and our responses to it could be an occasion for connection and conversation, both within and across disciplines.

### Literature and Neurology, 1860–1910

The central claims of this book are, in short, theoretical as well as literary and historical; they also gesture toward a methodological imperative. This study advances the proposition that the literature of the late nineteenth century requires us to commit to the Affective Fallacy. Read in the context of discourses focused on sensory perception, emotional receptivity, and the embodied mind, these works of fiction contribute, both experientially and conceptually, to our understanding of the nature of aesthetic experience and, more generally, to our appreciation of the human engagement with the material world. This literary examination of mind-body connections is centered on the historical period when emotion itself emerged as an object of scientific as well as philosophical inquiry. With the illumination provided by work being done in the twenty-first century, we can see how writers of realist fiction actively engaged with ideas about the mindful corporeality of affective experience, as theorized by Charles Darwin, William James, and John Dewey. A focus on the exemplary realist emotions of pity, fear, nervousness, pleasure, and wonder reveals how attention to bodily response placed literature and aesthetic experience at the center of nineteenth-century explorations into human consciousness. As the physiologist Thomas Laycock announced in 1860, "It is the man in his twofold constitution who is conscious, not the mind as apart from the man."13

This inquiry is situated in the conceptual space designated by the philosopher and psychologist William James, who was writing in the late nineteenth century, and the literary scholar I. A. Richards, writing early in the twentieth. In "What Is an Emotion?" (1884) James noted that physiologists, while "industriously exploring the functions of the brain," had not yet attended to "the aesthetic sphere of the mind, its longing, its pleasures and pains, and its emotions."14 Richards, in Principles of Literary Criticism (1924), offered the flip side of James's point, urging that literary critics had themselves overlooked scientific hypotheses about the human nervous system, including findings pertinent to "the understanding of poetic, musical, and other experiences," 15 So while James suggested that neurology had not attended sufficiently to the aesthetic aspects of experience, Richards indicated that aesthetics could profit from more attentiveness to neurology. Both men deputized these concerns to future generations of investigators, whose knowledge about the operations of mind embedded in the human nervous system would fruitfully supplement the current understanding of the experience of literary works. Both anticipated a time when scientists and scholars might collaborate to give a more satisfactory account of what happens when, for instance, we feel our way into works of fiction. The novelist and critic Richard Powers has recently posed the question this way: "Why wouldn't a literary scholar want to know everything that neurologists are discovering about the way the brain works?"16

This book affirms that the time is ripe for such an endeavor, and that the stimulating half century of William James's adult life, roughly 1860 to 1910, is the most fruitful period in which to ground such an inquiry. The chapters that follow make the case for the centrality of emotion to American literary realism, and to literary study more broadly construed, by taking into account the affective enlistments of fictional works by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Mark Twain, S. Weir Mitchell, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin, Harold Frederic, and Henry lames. As we shall see, cultural developments of the late nineteenth century-including the emergence of evolutionary biology, physiological psychology, neurology, pragmatist philosophy, formalist aesthetics, comparative anthropology, and mental therapeutics—were crucial to a new way of thinking about the interanimation of the human mind and body, in which emotion was increasingly understood to mediate our experience of the exterior world. Realist writers, attentive to the corporeal components of human perception, sought both to represent in their

work and to exemplify in their readers the way that, in the words of the contemporary neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, "emotions play out in the theater of the body." Indeed, the recent work of Damasio and other twenty-first-century investigators of embodied emotion draws on ideas about the human nervous system that were developed during the second half of the nineteenth century.

I argue that literary realists were first and foremost committed to elaborating what William James (whose writing and thinking provide a cornerstone for this study) described as "feelings of reality." The story fleshed out in these chapters is, therefore, integrally concerned with the philosophy and science of the period—to which the writers discussed made active contributions—as well as its literature and aesthetic theory. So while this study engages with a wide range of writings and genres, it is not properly a book "about" literature and science, or literature and philosophy. Its multidisciplinary nature emerges from the shifting historical and cultural topography of the late nineteenth century, a period in which—as figures such as Oliver Wendell Holmes and Charlotte Perkins Gilman attest—fields of knowledge were in a process of uneven disaggregation and emergent institutionalization.

After Chapter 1, which provides a theoretical and historical overview of the project, each chapter analyzes a set of texts from a specific historical moment that are united in treating a particular affective response. These "focal feelings" can be situated within the broad categories of emotional experience articulated by the turn-of-the-century psychologist Théodule Ribot, whose thinking was influenced by the writings of both lames and Holmes. In The Psychology of the Emotions (1897) Ribot suggested that while we have myriad sorts of sensations, generally speaking, states of feeling can be grouped into four principle types: a painful state, a state of fear, a state of excitability, and an agreeable state. To the list of four anatomized in Ribot's text is added a fifth, to which he alludes: a state of wonder, the feeling that most vividly unites the aesthetic, the philosophical, and the scientific in describing a particular stance of open-ended interest in the world outside the self. Wonder is exemplary, to quote Ribot, as "not being provoked by, but, on the contrary provoking [the intellectual state]."19

Chapter 1 provides a conceptual genealogy for a new understanding of literary realism. This chapter argues that attentiveness to the neurological and affective components of human experience downplays the usual critical preoccupation with mimesis, referentiality, and fixity and instead emphasizes mediation, relationality, and above all motion. "From this standpoint," Ribot wrote, "feelings and emotions are no longer a superficial manifestation, a simple efflorescence; they plunge into the individual's depths; they have their roots in needs and instincts, that is to say, in movements."20 This chapter examines how a set of founding dualisms, which became most firmly established for the humanities in the early decades of the twentieth century within the influential discourses of psychoanalysis and modernism, have tended both to structure and to limit our critical conversations about literary realism and, more broadly, the ends of literary studies and the nature of aesthetic experience. These include dichotomies between thoughts and things, between the physical and the psychological, between voluntary and involuntary actions, between thinking and feeling, between the public and the private, between realism and sentimentalism, and between the scientific and the aesthetic. New work in a variety of fields, including cognitive science, affect theory, aesthetics, and neuroscience, provides a set of tools for recovering the ways that literary realists, along with their contemporaries in philosophy and the emergent sciences of the body, actively challenged a number of conceptual divisions that had been central to the Western philosophical tradition.

Chapter 2, which centers on the "painful state" articulated by Ribot, and is the first of the affective case studies treated in this book, examines the earliest of the self-proclaimed "medicated novels" of Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. Critics have puzzled over the generic status of Elsie Venner: A Romance of Destiny (1861), noting its focus on embodied feelings, even as it almost ludicrously undercuts sentimental conventions by creating a hot-tempered, part-snake heroine. By reading Elsie Venner in light of Holmes's proto-epidemiological study of women dying in childbirth, I show how the physician-novelist exposed the dangers of what Marianne Noble has called sentimental masochism, an epistemology predicated on too much fellow feeling.<sup>21</sup> Holmes revealed that for sympathetic doctors, "touching scenes" of maternal distress authorized actual touching, which in turn passed along deadly disease to parturient patients. In his fictional and scientific writings, Holmes demonstrated that the pity enlisted by statistical data, in being ontologically agnostic, provided therapeutic insight in spite of medical ignorance. Holmes, in short, developed a physically detached yet affectively engaged mode for "realizing" material connections among what appeared as disconnected, incomparable personal tragedies.

The seemingly oxymoronic conception of statistical pity brought together two ways of apprehending the world: the abstractly intellectual and the viscerally emotional. Both were for Holmes essential to human intelligence, and also to a literary realism predicated on preserving and treasuring, as well as representing, individual lives. Indeed, attentiveness to the compatibility of these modes of mindfulness forced nineteenth-century *accoucheurs* to turn their often pejorative attention away from their dying patients and diagnose themselves as unwitting murderers. This contributed to what I, following Ian Hacking, term a "forensics of self," in which the seemingly detached perceiver comes to recognize his involvement in what he had, ostensibly, been merely reporting.<sup>22</sup> The novelistic practice of Oliver Wendell Holmes, in emphasizing both the passive and the constructive aspects of "realization," troubles the distinction between objective and subjective experience that has subtended many critical accounts of American literary realism.

Chapter 3 explicitly engages Ribot's "state of fear" and its relation to knowledge. Emily Dickinson famously asserted, "I like a look of Agony / Because I know it's true"; or, in the words of the nineteenthcentury physiologist Xavier Bichat, "If you wish to know whether the pain is real, examine the pulse."23 Through a reading of the psychophysiology of thinkers such as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Thomas Laycock, and Herbert Spencer, and the medico-legal debate over a baffling injury known as "railway spine," this chapter argues that literary realists' conception of an unconscious embodied memory contributes to the historical construction of a modern understanding of trauma. In The Senses and the Intellect (1855) the physiologist Alexander Bain affirmed that "the organ of mind is not the brain by itself; it is the brain, nerves, muscles, and organs of sense." A memory does not, by this account, consist solely in the retrieval of a mental image: rather, "the train of feeling is re-instated on the same parts as first vibrated to the original stimulus."24

For writers and scientists, railway accidents provided the exemplary catalyst for such a "train of feeling": it both figured and enacted modernity's impingement on the body, producing fear that reverberated along the spinal column, mediating between body and mind. Only after the Civil War did neurologists begin to speculate that "male hysteria"—which, in lieu of a uterus, had seemed a contradiction in terms—was prompted not by wandering wombs or wounded body parts but by extreme fright. Realist literature, such as Holmes's *A Mortal Antipathy* (1885) and Kate

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Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" (1894), used narrative to bring together the corporeal etiology of physical trauma (wombs and wounds) with its emotional counterpart (psychological fear) to produce a conception of "impression" that translated a physiological experience into a mental state by way of the autonomic nervous system. Nineteenth-century literary realists, in mapping the experiential terrain between private bodies and public events, helped to engender a new form of subjectivity in which external mediation—the forensic narrative—worked to authenticate and bring to consciousness bodily feelings.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus to Ribot's "state of excitability," as exemplified by the neurasthenic housewife and the apprehensive soldier, and analyzes how a range of writers and thinkers conceived of even the most banal actions as requiring physical exertion that was at once cerebral and corporeal. As the philosopher John Dewey wrote in his "Psychology of Effort," "Surely everyone is familiar, in dealing with unfamiliar occupations, ... [with a sensation] of effort, out of all proportion to the objective significance of the end."25 Mundane concerns, such as worrying over home decorations, are recast as miniature "struggle[s] for realization" (155) that are embodied, mindful, and constructive. Nervousness, in Darwinian terms, registered the creative attempt-often conservative, but potentially rebellious—to bring a person and her environment into harmonious relation. In elaborating the paradigm, at once evolutionary and neurological, that underlies this thinking, Chapter 4 unsettles the now traditional opposition of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and her nerve doctor, S. Weir Mitchell. They, in fact, agreed that the discordant design of the middle-class home damaged its inhabitants in ways analogous to the way war had injured the shell-shocked Civil War soldiers Mitchell had treated. Both housewife and soldier suffered from a discrepancy between a familiar image—a happy home, a noble field of battle—and jarring sensory stimuli: "The two sets of sensations," Dewey noted, "refuse to coincide," thereby producing "divided activity of the self" (154, 155).

In pathological cases of nervousness, therefore, the projections of mind and the experience of the body remain disparate, unsubsumed in a coherent "whole." The psychologist Pierre Janet, accordingly, instituted what could be termed art homeopathy: small doses of aesthetic work (such as learning to play the piano) that reintegrated a person's sensations, thereby producing the embodied experience of calm attendant on what Dewey called "effective realization" (155). Janet's attentiveness to mind-body connections led him to almost precisely the