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Figure and affect in Collins

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Mario Ortiz-Robles

Figure and affect in Collins

'With my heart in my mouth'

Established critical commentary on Victorian sensation fiction has long assimilated the depiction of sensation to the production of bodily effects. These effects are sometimes understood as involuntary responses to narrative stimuli, as though the representation of blackmail, bigamy, adultery, murder, theft, impersonation, and the other unconventional acts that form the thematic core of the genre gave rise, like pornography, to predictable physiological events. At other times, they are understood to add up to a generalized state of nervousness that, as D.A. Miller argues, becomes a necessary condition for reading the psychosomatic mechanisms that otherwise work to resist the interpretation of sensation's embodiment as the expression of normative violence.¹ Criticism, in either case, has tended to focus on *what* sensation fiction does rather than on *how* it does it. Readings that focus on the hybridity of the form – a form that combines elements of realism, romance, melodrama, and the gothic – fail to account for the genre's ability to produce sensation. Indeed, the formal features usually adduced to make the case for its sensationalism – the subordination of character to plot; a plot structure organized around a secular mystery; the use of multiple narrators; accelerated storytelling pace; the deployment of detection as a general narrative logic; etc. – may well serve as structural analogues to the agitated body of the reader, but provide no functional rationale for how it might produce such a body.² Nor do historicist attempts to situate sensation fiction within the culture of sensationalism emergent in the 1860s, a culture, as Lynn Pykett notes, for which 'events' both private and public had become a spectacle,³ provide sufficient grounds for demonstrating how the literary representation of scandal could give rise to the bodily effects such accounts assume it produces. To be sure, the 1856 Police Bill Act and the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act (the two laws most commonly cited in these accounts) were instrumental in opening up the

private sphere to public scrutiny by placing domestic disputes under the jurisdiction of civil courts and its police apparatus, but this new interest in scandal does not in itself constitute a new order of sensation, and, if it did, it is not clear how fictional narrative could reproduce it *as* sensation other than by referring to it thematically.⁴ Similarly, cultural materialist descriptions of the conditions of production, dissemination, and consumption of sensation fiction provide valuable empirical evidence that sheds light on the nature and extent of Victorians' predilection for strong sensations, but they tend to bracket the question of sensation's own materiality in their attempt to situate the effects of sensation in, say, advertising practices or serial methods of publication without considering that to do so is to confuse sensationalism with sensation.⁵ In short, we know a lot about the effects of sensation fiction, its physiology, psychology, and sociology, but surprisingly little about its status as event.

Criticism's resistance to theorize sensation as an event is striking not least because sensation fiction has always been conceived of as an *eventful* genre, its busy narratives responding to and reflecting broad social investments in the event. Writing in 1862, Margaret Oliphant described sensation fiction in these terms: 'We who once did, and made, and declared ourselves masters of all things, have relapsed into the natural size of humanity before the great events which have given a new character to the age . . . [I]t is only natural that art and literature should, in an age which has turned out to [be] one of events, attempt a kindred depth of effect and shock of incident'.⁶ Here, Oliphant is offering a shrewd cultural reading of what had already been identified as one of sensation fiction's most troubling generic characteristics – its attention to incident. In a review of 1863, H.L. Mansel based his attack on sensation fiction on the grounds that, as a genre, it 'abounds in incident', adding that the 'human actors in the piece are, for the most part, but so many lay-figures on which to exhibit a drapery of incident'.⁷ That the 'eventness' of sensation fiction should have inspired from the outset some of the most virulent attacks on the genre, need not, however, prevent us from acknowledging it as its first principle of composition. When Wilkie Collins claims in the 1861 preface to the second edition of *The Woman in White* (1860) that 'the effect produced by any narrative of events is essentially dependent, not on the events themselves, but on the human interest which is directly connected with them', he is defending the 'old-fashioned opinion' that a work of fiction should be primarily concerned with telling a story and he is doing so by being defensive about the public's perception of sensation fiction's eventness.⁸ The association of sensation fiction with its eventness is in any case strong enough in the public imaginary that, seven years later, Collins feels obliged to make a further defence, which is included in the preface to the first edition of *The Moonstone* (1868): 'In some of my former novels,

the object proposed has been to trace the influence of circumstance upon character. In the present story I have reversed the process. The attempt made, here, is to trace the influence of character on circumstance'.⁹

In part, the resistance derives from the fact that most accounts of sensation fiction take for granted that the production of sensation is the exclusive work of representation. To be sure, sensation fiction, like the realism within whose parameters it operates, invites its readers to experience the life of its characters as though it were their own. The opposition established between character and event in the criticism of the genre tends to privilege the former even if the terms, as in Collins's odd chiasmus in the preface to *The Moonstone*, are themselves linked by their capacity to represent (or, as Collins put it, 'trace the influence of') each other. To maintain that events should be valued on account of their 'human interest', therefore, is to imply that character and reader alike are subject to their 'influence'. It is also true that sensation fiction, in having invented detection as a narrative device, inaugurated one of the most enduring methods used in modern literature to accomplish this form of identification. Emblemized in the figure of the professional detective [most famously, Inspector Bucket in Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852–1853) and Sergeant Cuff in Collins's *The Moonstone*], detection is in fact a diffusive function carried out by many different characters that, in its resemblance to reading, creates a virtual network of identifications through or by which the reader can be made to enter the world of the novel as one more participant in it.¹⁰ It differs from other devices that perform a similar function of identification in the realist novel – omniscience, free indirect style – in that detection is closely associated with raw sensation, as opposed to, say, sentiment or emotion, with which we tend to associate the more canonical novelistic genres. Similarly, the notion that detective fiction exercises our cognitive or analytical capacity is a red herring: sensation, not ratiocination, is what delivers us to the 'whodunit' (with the emphasis on the 'doing') insofar as we are guided through a problem at whose solution we could never by ourselves arrive.¹¹ What is not often acknowledged, in other words, is that the logic of identification in sensation fiction is based upon a principle of discovery (common to both reading and detection) according to which readers and characters alike experience the same bodily effects (accelerated pulse, bated breath, tingling in the hands, what have you) by virtue of having been exposed to the same order of events.¹² We catch 'detective fever' much in the same way that Gabriel Betteredge catches it in *The Moonstone*: 'I followed him (with my heart in my mouth)' (p. 160).¹³

This mode of identification is not necessarily mediated by the practice of interpretation unlike other, more complex emotive responses to literature that arise from the representation of events that do not in themselves

appeal to our nervous system. In contrast, the self-reflexive nature of affective discourse in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, for instance, creates identification by making the cognitive processing of emotion a principle of figural composition (the decoding of complex images – a pier glass, a microscope – is also an attempt at elucidating complex feelings) as well as the subject matter of its fiction (Dorothea's story as sentimental *Bildung*). Affect, in this case, is a precondition for emotion or, at least, a subsidiary event. Rei Terada makes a useful distinction between affect and emotion: '*Feelings* is a capacious term that connotes both physiological sensations (affects) and psychological states (emotions)'.¹⁴ The fact that sensation provides a more immediate means of identification than the conventional or cognitive modes of feeling (sentiment and emotion) precisely because it appears to be unmediated by its representations suggests that sensation should be considered an event in its own right. Only to the degree that sensation is an event, can sensation fiction be said to produce sensation, not as a result of a representation of sensation nor, for that matter, of its elaboration into complex emotions, but rather as a disruption in the very order of representation. The narrative devices usually associated with the production of sensation (surprises, interruptions, reversals, enigmas, thrills, chills, and spills) should be understood as narrative events rather than structural analogies to the shock endured by the reading body, or, if they are that, they are only analogous on account of their *eventness*. But what is the nature of these events? How does sensation come about?.

These considerations are not only of methodological interest, however; the stakes are theoretical as well as historical and have to do with the cultural, ideological, and ethical fate of the subject, and indeed its own status *as* subject. The analysis of literature's affective energy is a necessary correlative to our views concerning its historical impact, whether it is focused on the subject or on the material world it inhabits. Ever since at least Romanticism, we understand the exploration and expression of emotion ('emotion recollected in tranquility' as Wordsworth famously put it) to be one of the determining concerns of the literary.¹⁵ Yet, when it comes to our criticism of it, we are still beholden to the so-called 'affective fallacy' and forget or ignore that emotion and affect – feelings, more broadly construed – are an integral part of the literary experience. To be sure, recent criticism tends to no longer focus exclusively on the 'poem itself, attending instead to the historical, cultural, and material contexts within which it exists. The programmatic reversal is well-nigh symmetrical: Here is Wimsatt and Beardsely in 1959: 'The Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*');¹⁶ here is Lynch and Warner in 1996: novel studies have shifted 'from refining the definition of the novel as a literary type to

understanding how novels produce social divisions: from what a novel is to what novels do'.¹⁷ Other than for its irony, this state of affairs would in itself be of little theoretical interest if it were not for the fact that the turn of the critical tide has washed away affect along with the 'poem itself' and, as a result, our account of literature's cultural work constitutes a different sort of 'affective fallacy'. The problem is not, or not only, that affect is now considered to be an inconsequential or embarrassing or non-essential attribute of literature, a sort of vestigial appendage condemned to desuetude by the New Critical vocabulary we still employ; the problem is that the claims we routinely make about literature's historical impact assume but fail to acknowledge the cultural value of affect, which, though admittedly hard to quantify, is not a negligible factor in a work's popular appeal. Dickens's 'sentimentality', for example, is more likely to be dismissed as an artistic shortcoming than submitted to the critical scrutiny that its success as a novelistic device would surely merit if viewed in the context of the massive public it addressed.

Critical resistance to considering the sensation novel as an eventful genre no doubt stems to some degree from this state of affairs, but the immediacy of its corporeal appeal (closer to affect than to emotion in this respect) makes visible another unexamined assumption underlying our dismissal of feeling in literature: its *subjectivity*. The novel gives meaning and shape to the notion of interiority, but emotion, which together with thought, belief, and imagination constitute something like the four cardinal points on the map of novelistic interiority, is not seriously taken into consideration when criticism, no less than the novel itself, makes the claim that its cultural work entails the production of subjects. The point to be made is that the claims of literary historians about the novel's role in the formation of the subject very rarely take into consideration what I have called literature's eventness, an eventness that sensation fiction makes particularly evident. Instead, these claims are more often than not supported by appealing, directly or indirectly, to Foucault's disciplinary model, a model whose fundamental principles, visibility and self-regulation, are taken to be representational rather than performative. Careful readers of Foucault have noted that the principle of subjectification (*assujettissement*) operates under a discursive regime that puts into place limits on what can and cannot be said and that this form of censorship becomes a condition of possibility of subject formation. For novel critics, however, it is the novel's robust representational program that provides a suitable setting for showing how discipline works in a culture of surveillance and, in doing so, serves as an effective mechanism for achieving it.¹⁸ This model, which seems to conform more to the novel's program of representation than to Foucault's own formulations, fails in any case to take into account the role that the novel's non-representational, non-figurative, non-referential aspects might play in these processes.

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Affect (understood as corporeal sensation of the type elicited by the sensation novel) belongs to the non-representational dimensions of the novel, and is thus, as I hope to show in what follows, a crucial element in our understanding of the novel's mechanisms of subject formation. Affect characterizes a non-subjective element within the subject that, because it is involuntary and mechanical, tends to disrupt or undo subjectivity (understood as intentional, cognitive, emotional). And since affect drives the subject to its undoing (not precisely an Artaudian body-without-organs, but rather a body-as-organ, a raw nerve), it also establishes the conditions of possibility for the subject to be posited as an event, whatever the determinations (phenomenological, psychological, even physiological) such subject-event might accrue in the process of its subsequent novelizations. Affect acts as a form of utterance that posits its subsequent novelization as emotion; affect speaks, as Betteredge's phrase suggests, '(with my heart in my mouth)'.

The theoretical description of sensation in sensation fiction thus bears a double valence: on the one hand, the eventfulness of the genre points in the direction of corporeal affect as the privileged narrative instantiation of emotion in the novel; on the other, the novelistic project, understood in a general sense as the narrative elaboration of an emotional subject or a subject of emotion, undergoes in the case of sensation fiction a hyperbolic reinscription that makes visible the very mechanisms of its production *as* effects upon the body. Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* is particularly well suited to carry out such a description because, in staging an allegory of subject constitution in the form of an elaborate mystery plot involving a woman-in-white, the novel also allegorizes its own production as *The Woman in White* and, in doing so, offers one of the most dramatic instances we have of subject formation as a species of *novelization*. In this respect, Collins's novel is rather like an excessive melodramatic staging of Paul de Man's famous definition of prosopopeia as an endless process whereby 'the dead are made to have a face and a voice which tells the allegory of their demise and allows us to apostrophize them in our turn'.¹⁹

The touch

The narrative of Collins's *The Woman in White* begins with the touch of a hand:

I had mechanically turned in this latter direction, and was strolling along the lonely high-road – idly wondering, I remember, what the Cumberland young ladies would look like – when, in one

moment, every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind me. (p. 20)

The speaker, Walter Hartright, is returning to London after spending an evening in the suburbs at his mother's home when he is suddenly touched from behind by a woman dressed in white. This singular event is the point of departure for a narrative, the balance of whose energies will be directed towards discovering the identity of the woman who has just touched the narrator, as well as the events that have led her do so. To the extent that the episode brings together for the first time disparate elements (a woman dressed in white, the road, the Cumberland ladies, a touch), their juxtaposition or co-occurrence introduces an enigma or riddle that sets into motion, in the manner of Shklovsky, a multiplicity of possible solutions only one of which will turn out to be correct.²⁰ The fact that the event that inaugurates the narrative takes place at a crossroads in the middle of the night suggests as much: Hartright has 'mechanically turned' into a narrative crossroads of sorts where a number of possible pathways that had up to this point remained separate merge into one as though they were themselves roads converging on London. Indeed, the story of Walter Hartright and his family, the story of the 'Cumberland young ladies' about whom he is thinking as he is touched from behind, and the story of the woman in white who touches him will henceforth overlap and criss-cross each other as the novel inexorably advances towards what Shklovsky calls the 'true ending'.

But the narrative also begins by stopping. The event of touching arrests the narrator's physiology: 'every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop'. The touch thus inaugurates a narrative sequence whose agent, the narrator Walter Hartright, is in fact paralyzed and thus presumably unable to generate the narrative that he is nevertheless relating. Affect in this case does not seem to operate as a narrative principle, but rather as a stick in its wheel. The figure of the crossroads can be made to yield, in this context, not the convergence of different narrative strands, but rather the interruption of two different discursive orders: an order of representation that captures events and submits them to interpretation (the solution to an enigma) and an order of performance whereby the event being represented (the touch) impinges on the body as an involuntary sensation that stops narrative flow. The stop-start movement of this inaugural episode is thus also the material trace of the event, or, better, the eventness, of the touch, which is registered at the level of narrative as a 'coincidence' with long-term storytelling consequences while, at the level of affect, it is experienced as a short-lived moment whose sheer corporeality renders it inaccessible to narrative interpretation.

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Novelistic entropy tends to decrease as the narrative progresses and thus it is not surprising that representational stability and plot re-alignment become dominant in a system that might otherwise direct its expendable, non-narrative energy towards its own undoing. Nevertheless, the equivocal nature of the inaugural event – the touch is at once constative and performative, embodied and discursive, cognitive and affective, prolonged and instantaneous – extends across the episode it anchors, becoming formalized in a double configuration that corresponds, at least on the level of its telling, to a recurring pattern of iterations. The first of these configurations is the conventional speech act, which is thematically elaborated in the novel in its legal determinations (wills, deeds, certificates, depositions, etc.) but also operates without institutional validation in everyday situations. The second is the woman-in-white as rhetorical figure, which, in a novel whose truth claims are premised on the forensic exposition of the ‘case’ of the woman in white, becomes the focus of narrative attention.

The first instance in the novel of a formalized speech act occurs when the woman-in-white asks Hartright to promise to not interfere. The promise is staged in the form of repetition, with the woman-in-white asking Hartright ‘will you promise?’ on three separate occasions:

As she repeated the words for the third time, she came close to me, and she laid her hand, with a sudden gentle stealthiness, on my bosom – a thin hand; a cold hand (when I removed it with mine) even on that sultry night. Remember that I was young; remember that the hand which touched me was a woman’s.

‘Will you promise?’

‘Yes.’

One word! The little familiar word that is on everybody’s lips, every hour in the day. Oh me! And I tremble, now, when, I write it. (p. 23)

The passage restages the event of the touch, but this time the response, rather than being bodily (‘every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop’), is entirely verbal (‘One word!’). Since the touch of the woman-in-white upon the narrator’s body seals a promissory contract, the verbal act opens a temporal gap between the instant in which the promise is made and the moment in which it will be fulfilled, creating the conditions of possibility of narrative itself since the outcome is at this stage unknown. The narrative possibilities of the promise differ from those of the riddle in which the solution is known in advance (it is the contractual basis of the promise) and therefore its elaboration does not proceed by eliminating wrong solutions until it reaches its ‘true ending’. Instead, the promise plot follows a pre-established path even as

no guarantees exist that it will be brought to its terminus: as we all know, to make a promise is not by any means the same as keeping it.

The substitution of verbal for affective responses in the second staging of the touch confirms that affect in sensation fiction has performative force and is thus endowed with the power to both stop and start the narrative. In this passage, affect has been transposed to the act of writing, occurring no longer as a response to the woman-in-white's touch (it is only 'cold' in this passage) but rather as a consequence of writing: 'And I tremble, now, when I write it'. At a thematic level, the relation between writing and sensation is straightforward: the memory of his first encounter with the woman-in-white triggers an affective response. But the temporal ambiguity of the period suggests a different reading: the present of 'now' is extended by a 'when' that implies an imperfect present in which 'trembling' has become a condition of utterance as such. When we consider that Hartright's narrative is, like the other narratives in a novel that is told from the perspective of multiple first-person narrators, a quasi-legal document that is used to solve the mystery of the woman-in-white, we realize that 'writing', in addition to being the medium of narrative, is also a performative operation with the power to accomplish things in its fictional setting. Each of the individual narratives functions as a kind of deposition or affidavit: 'the story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offense against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness' (p. 5). The 'trembling' Hartright experiences in or by writing is therefore something like a performative affect that leaves a material trace in the world. The inscription in the signature that would seal and underwrite such a document, tells us as much: 'Hartright' can be read as 'someone with the heart in the right place' or as 'someone who writes from the heart', or perhaps 'of the heart' (as in, say, 'playwright'); in any case, it can be read as a literalization of affective utterance, like the phrase 'with my heart in my mouth'.

The link established between affect and performance in the practice of writing in this early scene is operative in the novel as a whole, articulating the complex plot structure and informing the thematic development of subject formation in the figure of the woman-in-white. Indeed, writing appears in a remarkable variety of forms: individual depositions by major and minor characters, letters, extended excerpts from Marian's private diary, Fosco's postscript to it (p. 343), scribbled notes, Sir Percival's writing on the sand (p. 240), wills, entry books, forgeries, title deeds, Laura's signature (p. 250), marriage entries, death certificates, medical certificates, Fosco's confession, a tombstone (p. 414), the letter T carved on Fosco's flesh (p. 640), and so on. Writing, as this partial list suggests, has the ability to determine the identity of characters and to seal their fate even if its instrumentality is at all times contingent and positional. As is well known, conventional speech acts are brought off successfully

when a number of fairly simple conditions are fulfilled, but in a novel remarkable for its treatment of duplicity, secrecy, and revenge this turns out to be an enormously difficult task to accomplish. It is no wonder that Walter Hartright, with an evident sense of relief, is able to declare at the end of the narrative, 'I now had in my possession all the papers that I wanted' (p. 631), as though closure could only be achieved by fulfilling all the conditions necessary for bringing off writing's performative potential and this alone could control affect's disruptive performance. Affect in the novel seems to be impervious to institutional determinations (narratives of interiority, at any rate, are premised on the autonomy of sensation), yet the imbrication of affective with performative events in the narrative suggests that the force of one is inseparable from the force of the other. But the law of forces in the novel – its physics or biophysics – is such that they can only appear as disruptions of established norms, reactions to previous forces, the indirect effects of words and deeds, all reabsorbed into an order of representation that thematizes these as 'incident' only the better to affirm the normalcy of sensible emotion.

The second formalization of the event that brings order and stability to the novel's representational program is, fittingly, an unconventional figure: the woman-in-white. A rhetorical trope serves as the ground for a narrative system that privileges experience and, in this case, offers its own blankness or emptiness as a placeholder for subjectivity as such. The identity of the woman dressed in white, whom Hartright meets on his way home, appears as a riddle to be solved not only because it invites narrative speculation: Who? Why? Where? How? It is also a riddle in that it stands in *for* speculation as a blank slate, a ghostly form, a 'woman-in-white'; which amounts to saying that she is a figure for figure. Consider the first description Hartright gives us of her:

There, in the middle of the broad, bright high-road – there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven – stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments; her face bent in grave inquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London, as I faced her. (p. 20)

This initial description, along with the few details Hartright next furnishes – colourless face, large eyes, nervous lips – is of no help in the task of specifying what she is like, much less in identifying her in a legal setting, and this despite the fact that the road is 'bright', that they are standing at most at arm's length from each other, and that they are facing each other attentively (in 'grave inquiry'). The absence of an adequate referent to the woman-in-white makes of this figure an instance of catachresis, a figure

that comes into being through, indeed constitutes, an act of positing. This is confirmed by the manner in which Hartright attempts to make sense of her surprising appearance – ‘sprung out of the earth’, ‘dropped from heaven’ – as though she in fact had no previous referent whatsoever. As catachresis, the figure of the-woman-in-white is functionally capable of resisting allegorical determinations (say, for instance, ‘bride’) but, as an empty subject position, it can also accommodate them in an iterative series: Laura Fairlie, Anne Catherick, and, by extension, ‘Woman’, as such. The positing force of the catachrestic figure ‘the-woman-in-white’ can thus be said to incite the adoption or assumption, in the narrative formalization of its mystery, the form of the traditional tropes metaphor and metonymy and their substitutive logic (resemblance and contiguity; displacement and condensation; and so on). It is for this reason, as we shall see later in greater detail, that the figure of the-woman-in-white also functions as a mechanism or *dispositif* of confinement. Regardless of the narrative outcome, the different iterations of the figure of the woman-in-white in the novel would alone suggest that its force of positing is performative in the stop–start manner of the touch.

The touch, to return to the novel’s primal or, at any rate, inaugural scene, registers this double valence in the manner in which the usage transforms its syntactic function. In the opening passage, mere lines away from the use of ‘touch’ as a noun, there appears the following phrase: ‘the loneliness and helplessness of the woman touched me’ (p. 22). The passage between the physical action of touching and the noun, touch, is straightforward; the juxtaposition of ‘touched’ as emotion with ‘touched’ as physical contact is not. It constitutes, within the figural economy of the passage, a syntactical slippage of the sort we find in the figure of anacoluthon: it makes grammatical sense but shifts the tropological register by making the physical act (the touch) a figure for emotion (I’m touched). The force of anacoluthon is therefore disruptive of the referential structure within which it operates and, like catachresis, performs a verbal operation that transcends or at any rate interrupts mimetic substitution. The discursive force of anacoluthon, in this case, creates a curious result: there is no logical distance separating cause (physical touch) from its effect (touching). Affect, this is to say, is a material event. In her book *Touching Feeling*, Eve Sedgwick coins the term ‘periperformative’ to designate a species of speech act that is not strictly performative, but which nevertheless operates ‘in the neighborhood’ of the performative. She proposes such terminology so as to offer a spatial, rather than a temporal, procedure for isolating performative speech acts in literature.²¹ It is not clear what analytical advantages this has over the Austinian nomenclature, since in the end they still depend on institutional determinations. Jacques Derrida’s more radical reading of performativity (neatly encapsulated in the slogan ‘materiality without matter’)

would in all likelihood, though not without some effort, accommodate the notion of periperformative as a condition of performativity itself: language as such is the neighbourhood of the performative and iterability a species of house-swapping. Sedgwick's attempt to mark affect with performative force is nevertheless welcome insofar as it brings into focus the production of affect as a non-institutional event of and in language. Under the rubric of the periperformative, therefore, we can place the figurative force of the touch/touch substitution as an event that transforms the subject by producing affect.

The production of affect in the novel follows discursive paths that criss-cross and interrupt each other as the narrative progresses. The two formalizations of the event I have been tracing thus far – the promise as conventional speech act and the-woman-in-white as figure – are themselves equivocal, oscillating between a performative order of acts and a constative system of description in an undecidable as well as necessary pattern of mutual implication. In both cases, we are approaching an originary or even pre-originary synthesis without which there would be no inscription, no materiality, no affect, no body. Indeed, the striking co-incident, at the level of the novel's discourse, of the figure of the woman-in-white and the performance of a speech act, a co-incident already occurring in the event of the touch itself through the affect it elicits, is all the more astonishing in that it is only the first instance in the novel of a general pattern whose recurrence, as we shall see, has wide-ranging implications for the thematics of identity and subject formation in which it is implicated. The extended episode of the touch puts into motion or inaugurates a narrative trajectory that features, as the fundamental mechanism of its movement, the stop-start oscillation of constative and performative registers that brings the subject of the narrative, the-woman-in-white, in and out of being.

Consider the following iterations. In one, we find Marian reading one of her mother's letters to Walter in which the 'accidental resemblance' between Anne Catherick and Laura is first made manifest. In the meantime, Laura, dressed in a 'snowy muslin dress' (p. 58), paces back and forth under the moon before the glass doors that open onto the terrace. The reading of the letter is interrupted every time Laura passes before them, creating in the process a suggestive parallelism between the subject of the letter and the woman walking outside. The force of this interruption is productive of sensation, which is itself a repetition of the originary affect that has set the narrative in motion:

I started up from the ottoman, before Miss Halcombe could pronounce the next words. A thrill of the same feeling which ran through me when the touch was laid upon my shoulder on the lonely high-road, chilled me again. (p. 60)

When Walter is finally made aware, following a number of further interruptions, that even after many years Laura and Anne Catherick are still remarkably similar, it is as though he had been touched again by the woman-in-white: 'There stood Miss Fairlie, a white figure, alone in the moonlight; in her attitude, in the turn of her head, in her complexion, in the shape of her face, the living image, at that distance and under those circumstances, of the woman in white!' (pp. 61–62).

The figure of the woman-in-white is doubled not only by virtue of being a representation, but also because it is a representation of the interchangeability of Laura and Anne Catherick, each of whom can come to occupy the blank (white?) subject position it comes to signify. Indeed, the figure often appears without apparent referent: 'Again the chance reference to the woman in white!' (p. 73), and, again, 'Anne Catherick again!' (p. 74), and, again, 'Again, and yet, again, the woman in white. There *was* a fatality in it' (p. 75). The insistence of the reference seems to bring her into being *as* figure, as though she were reaching across the space that separates them so as to touch him again. It is not until Walter finally sees Anne Catherick again in the flesh that the figure ceases, at least for the moment, to be a figure (her white dress is in fact now covered by a blue cloak). And, yet, no sooner is figure arrested by the presence of Anne Catherick than the bodily event that sets off the figural proliferation of the woman-in-white as figure is itself iterated: 'It was a welcome interruption to be roused by feeling Anne Catherick's hand laid on my shoulder. The touch was as stealthy and as sudden as that other touch which had petrified me from head to foot on the night when we had first met' (p. 97). The repetition of the event of touching makes Walter return to the stop–start movement of the initial occasion, but, instead of producing an affect that sets off a chain of tropological displacements that extends the figure of the woman-in-white into the narrative, the touch is, in this case, 'welcome' because it has roused him from his own thought process as he tries to make sense of Anne Catherick's resemblance to Laura. The interruption of the touch has come at a critical moment of his reflections in which he has realized that Anne Catherick's face is a 'worn weary' version of Laura's: 'If ever sorrow and suffering set their profaning marks on the youth and beauty of Miss Fairlie's face, then, and then only, Anne Catherick and she would be the twin-sisters of chance resemblance, the living reflections of one another' (p. 97). The difference between the first touch, which produces the proliferating figure of the woman-in-white, and the second, which seeks to arrest the rhetorical proliferation of the figure by endowing it with identity, is also a difference of affect insofar as Walter has fallen in love with Laura in the interim and is therefore 'touched' by the resemblance in ways that he could not have been 'touched' before.

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These iterations, each an interlacing of performative forces and constative hypostatizations, form part of an endless (or at least potentially endless) chain of iterations in a tireless writing machine that produces text, affect, and, as we shall now see, subject events. In the machine, the subject is novelized into existence, bearing the burden of a presence (emotion, intention, imagination, belief) that ceases to correspond to experience. The subject is materialized over time in an iterative stop–start process that is at once constative and performative as the posited ‘I’ is made to fit into a narrative of continuity that would help mask its inexorable fragmentariness. The story of Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie brings into relief this predicament with particular poignancy not least because it is the story of *this* predicament. If sensation is the fundamental narrative unit in the story, it is so in part due to its eventness, but also because it registers the force of its own posting as a powerful and often violent affect.

Touché!

In his book on the artist Francis Bacon, *The Logic of Sensation*, Gilles Deleuze defines Figure as a non-figurative, non-narrative, non-illustrative ‘record of the fact’.²² According to Deleuze, there are two possible ways of moving beyond the figurative: towards pure form, through abstraction; or towards the purely figural, through extraction and isolation. The figural is here opposed to the figurative: the figurative implies the relationship of an image to other images in a narrative logic of illustration that corresponds to the ‘realism’ of representation (this is the domain of the sensational or the cliché). The figural, in contrast, escapes illustration by means of narrative disruption, becoming quite literally a ‘matter of fact’ that acts immediately upon the nervous system. The violence of sensation is registered not in the narrative representation of an act, but in the action of invisible forces upon the body that cause Figure to tremble, twitch, vibrate. The primary function of the Figure is thus to make these invisible forces visible even as they remain inaccessible to the language of representation.

It is tempting to equate Figure with the numerous monstrous or monster-like figures that appear in realist fiction as though to provide an epistemological counterweight to the normative project of subject constitution that determines the novel’s social function. A quick roll-call of potential Figures in Victorian fiction – Heathcliff-as-animal, Bertha Mason, Krook, Hyde, Dorian Gray, Dracula, etc. – suggests that those Figures de-formed, dis-figured, and distorted by everyday acts of violence have something in common that isolates them or extracts them from the narrative order in which they exist: they are uneasily suspended within a field of

reference constituted by the plots and counterplots that, in the normative biographical progress of a novel's character, legitimate the subject's experience. Unable to gain access into the narrative structures to which they are nevertheless confined, these characters are indescribable, unfathomable within realism's epistemological parameters, but not for all that less material: the representational void they occupy is the place where language acts, materially, in the world. The concealment of Figure within plot is a testament to the violent nature of the forces that disfigure it insofar as narrative aims to neutralize them by operating within spatial and temporal coordinates that do not register them. The marriage plot and the inheritance plot are common narrative forms that give shape to experience; but, they also happen to be regulated, as normative *dispositifs*, by the performative speech acts that bring them about: 'I do'; 'I bequeath'; 'I promise'; perhaps 'I am'. The infelicity of conventional speech acts is the condition of possibility of narrative since stories are generated by frustrated marriages or contested wills rather than by straightforward transactions premised on consensus. Figure interrupts these plots, making them infelicitous, or, more radically, rendering visible the intrinsic infelicity of the rites of passage they formalize and the resulting violence with which they deform, dis-figure, or distort the subject.

Collins's *The Woman in White* makes an invaluable contribution to debates concerning subject formation by showing us that Figure is not monstrous at all, or, better, that is monstrous but unexceptional. The process of disfiguration by virtue of which the subject is deformed is in fact the condition of possibility of subject formation in the first place. In a narrative intent on restoring order and legitimating the norm, Figure appears not as a 'dark double' that must be eliminated lest a 'happy ending' be forever denied the heroine, who becomes so only by reason of having reached it. On the contrary, the figure of the-woman-in-white is Woman writ large ('... the story of what a Woman's patience can endure ...', etc.) even as, and indeed because, it is an empty figure upon which are inscribed the material traces of its various narrative determinations.

Consider this iteration of Figure in the form of Anne Catherick:

The instant I risked that chance reference to the person who had put her in the Asylum, she sprang up on her knees. A most extraordinary and startling change passed over her. Her face, at all ordinary times so touching to look at, in its nervous sensitiveness, weakness, and uncertainty, became suddenly darkened by an expression of maniacally intense hatred and fear, which communicated a wild, unnatural force to every feature. Her eyes dilated in the dim evening light, like the eyes of a wild animal. (p. 104)

The epistemological ambiguity of the Figure into which Anne Catherick is here transformed, not quite human nor yet altogether animal, invites an interpretive reading of the passage. To be sure, the animalization of Anne Catherick is not a negligible aspect within the fraught gender politics of the text – confinement, for one, is also a sort of caging – but consider for a moment the semantic void this reading would, in offering an interpretation of the woman-in-white, attempt to fill: the use of animal imagery marks a hesitation or difficulty in the novelistic project to render Figure visible, as though taking account of her alterity were beyond the novel's representational abilities. In her 'madness', Anne Catherick seems to act as a figure of or for unrepresentability as such, remaining inaccessible, like the figure of the animal itself, to the mimetic resources of the realist novel. The fact that her face is no longer 'touching to look at' suggests that the association between the two formalizations I analysed above – institutional speech acts and the woman-in-white as a recurring rhetorical figure – are no longer sufficient to capture (as in arrest) the material forces that violently produce her. The aberrant or inadequate Figure becomes a 'record of fact' that is violently inscribed in and as a subject-event, a non-narrative, non-representational form of subjectivity that emerges at the intersection of the novel's structures of reference.

Figure returns later in the same scene at the mention of the name 'Sir Percival Glyde', who, Walter concludes, must be the person who has imprisoned her: 'The instant I pronounced that name she started to her feet, and a scream burst from her that rang through the churchyard, and made my heart leap in me with the terror of it. The dark deformity of the expression which had just left her face lowered on it once more, with doubled and trebled intensity' (p. 105). The touch has been replaced with a name, an utterance, a shriek, in short, a verbal or pre-verbal act that arrests Walter (makes his heart leap, presumably, up to his mouth) but produces no chain of signification, no rhetorical proliferation, no iterability of speech acts; it exposes the sheer materiality of the force with which these acts (of speech, of sound) impinge upon the human body.

It is a particular merit of D.A. Miller's remarkable reading of *The Woman in White* to have identified confinement as a condition of possibility of gendered, familial subjectivity. For Miller, the description of the 'feminine carceral' as a form of escape through madness of the social constraints under which women were forced to live in the nineteenth century is insufficient to account for the 'terrific male aggression' that leads to confinement. The best way to read the figure of the madwoman, writes Miller, 'would be to not derive the diagnosis from her social psychology ("Who wouldn't go crazy under such conditions?") but rather to derive her psychology from her diagnosis: from the very category of madness

that, like fate, lies ever in wait to “cover” – account for and occlude – whatever behaviors, desires, or tendencies might be considered socially deviant, undesirable, or dangerous’ (p. 169). Nor is the option of reading the carceral as ‘aversion therapy’ designed to ‘redirect men’s desire for men onto women’ particularly persuasive. For Miller, it is the Oedipal family triangle upon which the novel finally settles that best describes the ideology of confinement insofar as it configures desire as a rivalry whose violence is all the more aggressive for being compulsory.

But the Oedipal triangle is only the last in a long series of structures of confinement that occur, indeed structure, the text and which include, at the thematic level, not only the Asylum, but also, among others, Mr Fairlie’s room, Marian’s sick room, Blackwater, Welmingham Church, and even Laura’s grave. It would be misleading to equate these structures with the iterative mechanisms of sensation I call subject events as though they were analogues or figures for socially determined institutional spaces of discipline. They are not in fact analogues. Subject events are themselves structures of confinement whose discursive or verbal nature does not imply a reduced sphere of action. The undecidability of the performative–constative doublet applies across the spectrum, from the microscopic reading of a word (say, ‘touch’) to the telescopic reading of plot patterns and cultural materials. It is for this reason that Figure is a more apt conceptual term than the categories traditionally used, under the general rubric of representation, to describe the violent event of becoming-subject.

According to Deleuze, Bacon isolates his Figures within oval areas or parallelepipeds so as ‘to avoid the *figurative*, *illustrative*, and *narrative* character Figure would necessarily have if it were not isolated’ (p. 6, emphases in original). This form of confinement makes visible the forces that operate beyond or despite or instead of constative determinations. In this scheme, the subject comes into being not because it is isolated, as a Foucauldian reading might assume, but rather because in isolation the forces that contribute to its becoming are visible. The violence with which subject-events are constituted is disfiguring, but not because that is the price we must pay in order to become who we are. This is Dorian Gray’s negative capability. The reason’s are material and have to do with physics, not metaphysics. Pressure, dilation, contraction, flattening, elongation, and compression are applications of force, not outcomes. The deformations to which they give rise register the violence with which force is applied, but they are not alchemical transformations. Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie may resemble each other, but this is a random occurrence, an ‘accidental resemblance’, as Laura’s mother puts it. They do not turn into each other by dint of, say, wearing each other’s clothes. This is a ‘figurative, illustrative, or narrative’ elaboration of resemblance which Fosco and Sir Percival exploit, but, they are able to do so because, as criminals, they understand violence.

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Balzac's *Vautrin*, for instance, is unrivaled in the obscure art of impersonation, but his notorious birthmark is a constant reminder that any 'birth' leaves its 'mark' upon the body and that, though it deforms it, the body remains the same no matter how violent the forces we apply to it.

Madness is the name the novel gives to the deformations of Figure when it is subjected to invisible social forces. It is one of the story's cruellest ironies that it is in the Asylum where identity is most stable. That this stability is what guarantees involuntary forms of confinement only confirms that, as an institution, it is a repository of identity. Confinement, as Foucault reminds us, has its roots in the conceptualization of the police as a force charged with disciplining subjects into fulfilling productive roles in society.²³ In a novel in which the police plays no role, the policing function devolves upon the characters themselves. To be sure, self-regulation, as the narrative strategy of multiple narrators suggests, works by the principle of visibility, but, since each narrator also performs acts in the practice of writing, one can say that self-policing also operates through the principle of mutual violence. Fosco's 'postscript' to Marian's diary, which Miller reads as a form of 'rape', illustrates the point forcefully. It is finally the social violence of the letter that becomes visible in the production of affect, a violence that the novel, pre-eminently invested in illustration, does its violent best to hide through sentiment, emotion, and sensationalism.

Accounts of the novel's role in the production of subjectivities have very often relied on mechanistic models of social discipline that, while usefully foregrounding the power of representations to shape its readers, who, unable to predict and much less control the effects of reading, fall under its influence, have rarely taken into consideration the discursive conditions of subject formation that render the realist novel into a peculiarly unreliable structure of address. The novel's power to influence, persuade, coerce, or otherwise shape its readers is of course an ability often promoted by the novel itself, from *Don Quijote* to *Madame Bovary*, and beyond. Novel critics may well disagree as to the specific mechanism of subjectification to which the novel submits its readers, some preferring the self-regulating techniques of 'discipline' over the mechanized procedures of 'interpellation' as a schematics of explanation, but the novel's role in the constitution of the subject does not in the main differ since all these models rely on, and are figures for, the assumed representational efficacy of the novel, whose agency, like that of state apparatuses, the power/knowledge doublet, or the psychic drives, we have no choice but to consider as unremitting, implacable, and universal. But even if we invoke the names of Foucault, Althusser, or Lacan to describe the novel's participation in processes of subject formation so as to include the broader cultural arena in which the novel lives, the operative assumption is still the same: the novel serves as a conduit or relay of institutional, ideological, or psychic forces

that act upon the subject and over which it can exercise little or no control. These accounts leave out the possibility that the novel is itself an event capable of effecting some of the discursive alterations that contribute to the subject's subjectification.

In the preceding argument, I have taken this possibility seriously by suggesting that the subject is materialized in and by the novel, considering it not as some undesirable yet inevitable by-product of reading, but rather as an event of narrative in its own right. My intention has been to show that no account of subjectivity in the novel can usefully proceed without considering the performativity of novelistic discourse and the equivocal nature of the subject to which it gives rise. The passage between the history the novel represents and the history it performs (its historicity, as such) encounters a disjunction or shift of registers between fact and act as two different linguistic orders (constative and performative) interrupt each other and create a disruption in the novel's structures of reference. If I have focused on only one such node – the performance of Affect – I have done so because it is an *eventful* phenomenon and not necessarily because it is unique. The writing machine produces texts with extremely varied configurations of performative and constative, representational and non-referential, discursive acts. In fact, all the cognitive effects we have traditionally ascribed to the novel – its mode of address, its appeal to the senses, its style of thought; in short, its whole structure of feeling – are in no straightforward sense strictly attributable to its powers of representation, formidable as these often prove to be. Many of the attributes we use to novelize the subject – voice, intention, gender, imagination, and, in the present reading, affect – can be traced back to the non-representational, non-figural, non-referential forces of novelistic discourse; they can be found in the violent force of the performativity that installs them as essential predicates of existence.

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Notes

- 1 See D.A. Miller, 'Cage aux folles: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*' in *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 146–191. [Hereafter cited parenthetically in the body of the text.]
- 2 For an historically and psychoanalytically informed description of the genre, see Patrick Brantlinger, 'What is "Sensational" about the "Sensation Novel"?', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 37 (1982), pp. 1–28; for a cultural description, see Lyn Pykett, 'Collins and the Sensation Novel' in *The*

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- Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 50–64. Ann Cvetkovich pursues the question of how affect is produced in sensation fiction, but her analysis remains within the narrative parameters established by the novel: formal mechanisms of sensation such as surprise and suspense work to consolidate male power. See ‘The Economy of Sensation and *The Woman in White*’, *Novel*, 23 (1988), pp. 24–43.
- 3 See Pykett, p. 50.
 - 4 See Lillian Nayder, ‘Collins and Empire’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 139–152; Nicholas Daly, ‘Railway Novels: Sensation Fiction and the Modernization of the Senses’, *English Literary History* 66 (1999), pp. 461–487; Nicholas Dames, *The Physiology of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
 - 5 See Deborah Wynne, *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); Graham Law, *Serializing Fiction in the Victorian Press* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000); Jenny Bourne Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative and Nineteenth Century Psychology* (London: Routledge, 1988).
 - 6 Margaret Oliphant, ‘Sensation Novels’, unsigned review in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 19 (1862), pp. 564–584. (qtd. in Pykett).
 - 7 H.L. Mansel, ‘Sensation Novels’, *Quarterly Review*, 113 (1863), p. 486.
 - 8 Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, ed. John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1998), 3. [Hereafter cited parenthetically in the body of the text.]
 - 9 Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*, J.I.M. Stewart (ed.) (New York: Penguin, 1999), p. 27. [Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.]
 - 10 It corresponds roughly to Todorov’s structuralist schematic concerning the fantastic: ‘First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living person and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader’s role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work – in the case of naïve reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character’. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 33.
 - 11 Auguste Dupin’s famed thought processes in Poe’s stories, for instance, remain inaccessible to the reader; we accept them for the effects they have on us rather than for their value as thought.
 - 12 Alison Winter encapsulates the physiological response readers reported after reading *The Woman in White* in these terms: ‘the route from page to nerve was direct’. With sensation fiction readers skipped the intermediary stage of reflection, the ‘as if’ of conjecture. See *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 324.
 - 13 Betteredge is of course a reader as well as a detective and, by looking for clues in *Robinson Crusoe* that might help him explain his current dilemmas, he confuses the two roles, making him a figure for/of identification itself.

- 14 Rei Terada, *Feeling in Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 4.
- 15 In the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth famously situates ‘frantic novels’ in the context of urban life, which ‘produces a craving for extraordinary incident’ and a ‘degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation’. *William Wordsworth*, Stephen Gill (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 599.
- 16 William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardley, *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), p. 21.
- 17 Deidre Lynch and William B. Warner (eds), *Cultural Institutions of the Novel* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 10.
- 18 The two most influential Foucauldian readings of the novel are D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, and Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
- 19 Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 122.
- 20 See Viktor Shklovsky, *Energy of Delusion: A Book on Plot*, trans. Shushan Avagyan (Champaign: Dalkey Archive, 2007), p. 91.
- 21 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 68.
- 22 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004). [Hereafter cited parenthetically in the body of the text.]
- 23 See Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage, 1965), p. 46.