

Some Body's Story: The Novel as Instrument

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In some of my former novels the object proposed has been to trace the influence of circumstances on character. In the present story I have reversed the process. The attempt made here is to trace the influence of character on circumstances.

Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*

Not the slightest confusion or change of color; not the faintest trace of any secret consciousness of shame struggling to the surface, appeared in her.

Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*

It is perhaps appropriate that I begin this essay, itself a record of my speculations on writing and the body, with two epigraphs on the trace. The first passage considers the stated goal of the sensation novel: to trace the effects of experience on an individual life. The second reminds us that the trace is also a sign of what is hidden. Just as the rush of blood to the cheek signifies the presence of a secret knowledge and betrays an inward sensation, the trace, like the novel, writes on the surface what would otherwise be a "secret history." And as a secret history, hearkening back to those of the eighteenth century, it necessarily replaces "public history" with the history of an individual body.

Literary critics studying "sensation" in the sensation novel have often focused on these novels' effects on individual bodies, on their purported ability to create affect—specifically suspense, shock, and fear—in readers. Ron Thomas notes that the genre was important for its emphasis on "the 'effect' exerted by events upon a character's body" (504). And Alison Winter argues that "the route from page to nerve was direct" so readers experienced "a direct physiological response" to the stimuli—the "sensation incidents"—in the text (324). This interest in the physical and emotional effects of the novel on the reader follows that of Victorian critics, who recognized the sensation novel's central interest in producing, and reproducing, affect in the reader. Henry Mansel's influential article, "Sensation Novels," for the *Quarterly Review* considered that "our novels might be classified . . . according to what sensation they are calculated to produce. There are novels of the warming pan, and others of the galvanic battery type—some which gently stimulate a particular feeling, and others which carry the whole nervous system by steam" (487). Similarly, Margaret Oliphant's review of Collins's *The Woman in White* famously singles out the early scene where Anne Catherick suddenly touches Walter Hartright's shoulder from behind, and how the novel communicates Hartright's shock

to the reader. Indeed, whether sensation novels were praised or condemned, their physical and emotional effects on the reader were prominent in the analysis.

This convention is congruent with the emphasis in sentiment studies today on how the novel aims to produce sympathy in the reader. Critics from Catherine Gallagher to Audrey Jaffe to Fred Kaplan ground their inquiry in David Hume and Adam Smith to theorize how scenes of suffering are communicated to an audience so as to rouse the reader's (or viewer's) sympathy. Contemporary critics' focus on the effects of reading also reflects the continuing influence of Foucauldian analysis. Much criticism still views the novel as primarily functionalist or instrumentalist in that its social effects, whether regulatory or subversive, are privileged over its aesthetic ones. I suggest that while the novel may well be instrumental, it can also be considered literally an instrument, and its social role as instrument is not unrelated to its form and structure. Specifically, our current critical emphasis on how novels produce or reproduce affect in the reader underplays how they record affect, specifically the originary symptoms of affect in a character or narrator as opposed to the secondary response in a reader.

After all, if these novels accomplish the feat of producing sensation, they communicate it through their meticulous, unremitting record of sensation. Novelists like Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, or Ellen (Mrs. Henry) Wood produced texts that register and differentiate forms and levels of sensation as they play out over time. In *Basil*, for example, the protagonist chronicles his physiological symptoms:

Every nerve in my body, strung up to the extremest point of tension since the morning, now at last gave way. I felt my limbs quivering, till the bed shook under me. . . . [T]he thinking faculty seemed paralysed within me. . . . The physical and mental reaction, after the fever and agitation of the day, was so sudden and severe, that the faintest noise from the street now terrified—yes, literally terrified me. The whistling of the wind—which had risen since sunset—made me start up in bed, with my heart throbbing. . . . When no sounds were audible, then I listened for them to come—listened breathlessly, without daring to move. At last, the agony of nervous prostration grew more than I could bear. (100)

The passage forcefully registers not just Basil's sensations but precisely the kinds of physiological rhythms that a registering apparatus might be expected to record, in particular the standard triad in medical case histories: temperature, pulse, respiration. Collins thus seems to argue, here and elsewhere, that a necessary function of this kind of novel is to provide a sensitive record of sensation on and in the body. If, in fact, as Thomas argues, the sensation novel "redefin[es] the self as a legal construction and a medical case" by presenting the self through a series of documents, the archive those documents build is specifically an archive of the body (489).

And the body recorded here is a nervous body. Nicholas Daly notes that "nervousness . . . pervades" sensation novels "in excess of any actual narrative motivation; it is an affect looking for a cause" (41). But if an important aim of sensation fiction is to produce affect in the reader, why is it necessary for the

novel to build this archive of the body when it could evoke affect by other means? Scholars examining this twitchiness, this prominence of nervous sensation, have disagreed on its cause. I would like to suggest that, to consider why these novels trace the shocks and pulses of their characters so uninterruptedly, we should look to a technology of the body that emerged at the same cultural moment: the sphygmograph.

The sensation novel creates a continuous record of bodily experience attending to scale, timing, and source. This is precisely what physicians and physiologists working in Britain and Europe in the 1860s were now able to do and, more important, were now interested in doing. Improving on earlier, flawed designs that had not sparked much interest, Etienne-Jules Marey developed in 1859 a sphygmograph (a device to record the pulse wave on paper) that was relatively easy to use, reliable, and precise (Reiser 101). Marey's invention prompted a wave of new medical graphing instruments: the cardiograph (records heart volume and movements), the myograph (nerve and muscle movement), the thermograph (temperature changes), the plethysmograph (blood volume changes in limbs or organs), the haemodromograph (blood velocity), the stethograph (respiration frequency), the pneumograph (respiration volume), the ergograph (muscle strength), and the polygraph (pulse, heart versus artery expansion, respiration, and muscle contraction), although the sphygmograph remained the most commonly used. Each connected a registering apparatus from the subject to a pen resting on a gridded roll of paper so the subject's unique physiological experiences—and thus his or her sensations—were traced by the pen in a potentially endless, regularly divided narrative of bodily experience (see figure 1). It was finally possible to trace, over time, a record of the physiological changes that took place, hidden inside the body, and that were too subtle or too quick for accurate perception using human senses. The

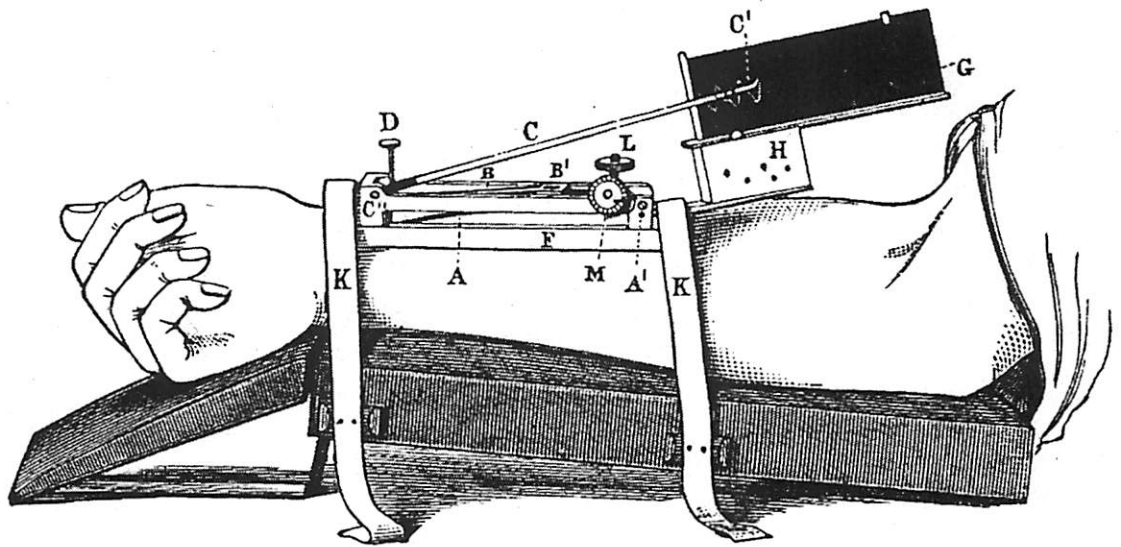


FIG. 6.—Marey's Sphygmograph applied to the wrist.

Figure 1 Marey's sphygmograph. Barnwell, Byrom. *Students' Guide to the Examination of the Pulse and Use of the Sphygmograph*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh: Machlachlan and Stewart, 1883, 11. Courtesy, Library of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia.

PLATE I. SOFT PULSES.



FIG. 1.—Pulse of irritative fever. (Pressure of spring, about 130 grammes; Frequency, 130 per minute.)



FIG. 2.—Undulatory pulse of typhus. (Pressure, about 160 grammes; Frequency, 160.)



FIG. 3.—Soft and frequent pulse of mild pyæmia. (Pressure, about 160 grammes; Frequency, 90.)



FIG. 4a.—Normal soft pulse. (Pressure, about 160 grammes; Frequency, 55-60.)



FIG. 4b.—Pulse of the same person after exercise and residence in the country. (Pressure, about 160 grammes; Frequency, 56.)



FIG. 4c.—The same. (Pressure, 90 grammes; Frequency, as before.)

PLATE II. HARD PULSES.



FIG. 1.—Wiry pulse of rheumatic carditis. (Frequency, 150; Pressure of spring, 170 grammes.)



FIG. 2.—Hard and long pulse of hypertrophy of the left ventricle, with dilatation. (P. dextræ, magnus, et tardus.) (Frequency, 84; Pressure, about 170 grammes.)

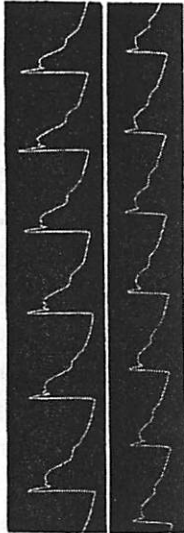


FIG. 3.—Hard pulse of chronic Bright's disease (contracted kidney). (Frequency, 70; Pressure of spring—upper line 300 grammes, lower line 150 grammes.)



FIG. 4.—Hard pulse of Bright's disease, similar to that represented in Fig. 3 but less vibratile. (Frequency, 90-100; Pressure—upper line 300 grammes, lower line 90 grammes.)



FIG. 5.—The firm and long pulse of vigorous health. (Frequency, 90; Pressure, about 170 grammes.)

[To be inserted after p. 33.

Figure 2 Sanderson, J. Burdon. *Handbook of the Sphygmograph: Being a Guide to Its Use in Clinical Research*. London: Robert Hardwicke, 1867. Courtesy, Library of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia.

tracings produced by sphygmographs and other medical graphing instruments could make visible what had previously been invisible, could continuously record a patient's hidden physiologic movements, his or her very sensations.

But the sphygmograph not only reads and records what is hidden in the body, it also translates the fleeting sound and touch of the pulse into a form that can be saved, read over at any speed, reread, and shown to others. It captures the fleeting and evanescent, and renders it visually in a record that is quantifiable and permanent, that can be compared with others, generalized, and examined again and again (see figure 2). In fact, articles about the device conceived of it as a kind of writing, a new kind of narrator.

Like the sphygmograph, sensation novels narrate the body. In doing so, they fetishize not just sensation but the pulse. The attention to characters' blushes and blanches was hardly new in the novel, as Mary Ann O'Farrell and others have pointed out, but the sensation novel directs a peculiar and unremitting focus to the tracing of blood flow, not so much the blush as the pulse, in the constantly throbbing body of the text. While Ellen Wood makes most constant use of the blush, the pulse also features prominently in critical moments of *East Lynne*: "Barbara Hare's heart leaped . . . into her mouth, and her face became deadly white in the moonlight" (31); "In the drawing room was Francis Levison, and [Isabel's] heart beat wildly" (121); "what was it that caused every nerve in [Isabel's] frame to vibrate, every pulse to quicken?" (205); and "[Isabel's] pulses were beating wildly. A powerful conviction that the words were true . . . was forcing its way to her brain" (305). In a novel centered on the passionate responses of one embodied subject to another, it is not surprising to find the text recording so insistently the surging blood and quivering nerves of these bodies.

Like the sensation novel, then, the sphygmograph promises to reincorporate the body through its trace, to capture the fleeting pulse of life and to body it forth again on the page for all to read, even after that heart itself might have ceased to beat. Indeed, for each of his recording instruments, Marey constructed a mechanical version of the human body part that the instrument was designed to measure (Dagognet 54). After taking a cardiographic tracing, he could set up his mechanical heart to replicate the phenomenon, thus completing a circuit in which the body produces a record that then calls forth a reproduction of that body. Daly talks about how in early film the human body "has been de-realized but also made magically present through its capture by the cinema machine" (57). Decades before cinematography was possible, the sphygmograph promised a similar narrative, one that could dematerialize and then magically rematerialize the body, even the absent body, and its movements. The sensation novel does likewise.

These concurrent technologies have consequences for the temporality as well as the materiality of narrative. The serialized sensation novel uniquely frames or structures that record of sensation as a sequence, as Collins makes clear by introducing his novel *Basil* as "the story of an error, innocent in its beginning, guilty in its progress, fatal in its results" (1). Likewise, in *The Woman in White*, he claims that his novel seeks to "trace the course of one complete series of events" (33). And the sphygmograph produces a serial record of the body's rhythms, recorded on an unreeling ribbon of sensitized paper.

Moreover, both technologies present a sequence that is potentially endless. They could conceivably continue to record the chronology of a subject for a lifetime, though both narratives would be punctuated by extradiegetic breaks dictated by units of time—hours, days, weeks, or months. Because many sensation novels were serialized, Mansel famously deplores how serialized literature is demarcated not by artistic demands but “determined by rigid boundaries of space and time. . . . [This] series of volumes . . . [has] no limit in their number . . . and . . . no other termination to their issue than the point at which they cease to be profitable” (484). What he distrusts and dislikes is the principle of letting the length of the novel be determined by the commodification of the novel, not by its inherent artistic form. He suggests that, without the internalized discipline of “divine” artistic form, the serial novel might just go on forever, in an incessant undulation of shock and response that—as is now well known—he associates with what is diseased and deformed. Indeed, G. W. M. Reynolds’s sensational penny crime serial *The Mysteries of London* was well nigh interminable, eventually reaching 4.5 million words and running in weekly installments for twelve years, from 1844 to 1856 (Thomas vii).

To say that the serial novel is potentially endless, however, is not to say that it is formless or changeless but simply that its form changes to one that can be accommodated by the serial format: not a single, conclusive climax but a series of climactic moments. Hughes and Lund associate the serial with the development of “uniformitarian rather than catastrophic principles” of change. They argue that, like evolution, the geological record, British political gradualism, the growth of industry and the railroads, and even the nineteenth-century understanding of fetal development, the serial demonstrated “steady, continuous, consistent development rather than abrupt, cataclysmic, revolutionary change” (6–7).

While the serial does “confute the ‘catastrophic’ notion of artistic inspiration,” as they argue (7)—that is, it does not spring forth from its author in one immense heave of artistic creation—the development it registers is not in fact continuous but is instead made up of a succession of actions and pauses, climactic events and moments of recovery. As Walter Kendrick argues, “The sequence of narrators [in *The Woman in White*] provides no step-by-step development of events, but rather a series of sudden revelations . . . a series of ‘sensations’” (26). Jonathan Loesberg characterizes the sequence of the sensation novel as a “series of reversals and transferences . . . sensational effects and climaxes” (130). Thus what is continuous in the sensational serial is its quality of repetition, its record of this series of small shocks and responses—surges and relaxations—over time: precisely what a sphygmograph also does.

Kendrick also argues that the sensation novel rests on a relational system of value in which individual points take on meaning only in relation to the system as a whole. If indeed “the value of the elements [in sequence] in [a sensation novel] depend[s] primarily, like that of links in a chain, on their relation to other elements in the same novel” (21), then these fictions share one final, crucial quality of the sphygmograph: its ability to make narrative out of a sequence of points of bodily experience, chronicled in graphical form, such that any individual point has meaning only relationally, in the context of the graph as a whole.

Let me make clear that I am not arguing for a causality between these two cultural touchstones so much as identifying a shared cultural moment between the rise of medical graphing instruments and the simultaneous explosion in the publication of sensational serials. Both medical graphing technology and serialized sensation novels achieve a sudden visibility in the 1860s. After decades in which sensation serials, like the sphygmograph, were available, both of these narrative technologies rapidly gained both popularity and cultural visibility during the same decade.

Why the 1860s? Critics have examined this timing with interest, suggesting links to the railway, working-class politicization, increasing modernity and technology, and a number of other cultural shifts. These analyses are useful, but reading the sensation novel in the company of the sphygmograph—reading both as instruments newly appreciated by the Victorian public—suggests a readiness, a receptivity, in that cultural moment around 1860 that helped catapult these forms of narrative into prominent use. While interest in the physiology of the brain and nerves had been building over the previous few decades, that alone would not account for the suddenness with which these narratives appear. Critics writing on the advent of the sensation novel use phrases like “exploded onto the scene” or “the immediate onslaught” of the sensation novel (Hughes and Lund 5, 23). Similarly, Marey’s innovation was “instantly and widely adopted” by physicians in Europe, England, and America who had largely ignored earlier versions of the device (Braun xix, 4).

I suggest one further cultural stressor, or stimulus, that might help account for the sudden emergence of these two body graphs, both suddenly and insistently writing the body on the page. If, as Daly and others have argued, a constitutive characteristic of modernity is its “disruption of a traditional social and political order” (15), that disruption was arguably instigated by the publication of Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* and Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. Both sensation fiction and medical graphing technology coincide with a climax of uniformitarian and evolutionary narrative in the greater culture. Lyell’s theory accounted for geological evidence by positing vast periods of gradual, connected change rather than sudden, disjunct “catastrophes.” While Lyell’s text was first published in 1830–33, debate over his uniformitarian principle resonated anew with the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* in 1859 because Lyell’s old-earth uniformitarianism underlies the mechanism of natural selection.

Although Darwin did not specifically address the place of the human within the natural world until he published *Descent of Man* in 1871, it was evident even to readers of *Origin* that natural selection had displaced “man” from the throne of nature. With Lyell’s uniformitarianism, Darwin’s theory disrupted history, and humanity’s privileged place within it, precisely by insisting on the length and continuity of history on Earth. His treatise represents a climax of speculation about the history—the fixity or development—of species. As a result, the 1860s were a decade in which questions of history, the length and rhythm of that history, the individual’s status as an animal body, and that body’s place in history were particularly relevant. The sensation serial and the sphygmograph independently

negotiate these troubling issues, and both succeed in re-placing the human form as a mindful, feeling body at the center of that endless history.

Considering the sensation novel in light of the sphygmograph suggests that the sensation novel's textual record of bodily experience helps not just to construct a subjectivity through emotion but also to assert the materiality of that subjectivity in a body. So while the sentimental novels that Catherine Gallagher examines may propound "nobody's story," sensation novels work very differently because they consider not "nobody's story" but "some body's story." This story strives to demonstrate how these emotions do belong to a particular body, a body that is nevertheless—thanks to the sensation novels' insistently biological perspective—assimilable to ours. If we consider Hume's belief that affect is communicated most readily where there is similarity, propinquity, or causality, one can imagine that a sensation novel might very well serve not only as the record of one individual body but also as a model for the beating hearts and pulsing veins of its individual readers.

The sphygmograph, like the sensation novel, then, offers a kind of history and their respective methods a kind of historiography. Both recreate an unending narrative of changes, like that which Darwin had proposed in his study of natural selection. But unlike Darwin's natural history, both the sphygmograph and the sensation novel recenter that history around the petty shocks and pulses of individual experience, out of concern with both the grand scale of animal history and the petite one of individual experience, something only these genres could do. Both the sphygmograph and the sensation novel re-connect the private individual to public history by way of their insistence on the inescapable prominence of individual sensation, which retakes the foreground of any scene he or she narrates. The chronograph tracing along the edge of the sphygmograph paper indicates that historical time is not absent but relegated to the margin. They replace the human form as a feeling body at the center of that endless history. That is, when these new narrative technologies both rise to prominence in the 1860s, after languishing for some decades, they promise to "read" and reproduce the incessant tracery of individual human sensation in a way that acknowledges the length and unending quality of uniformitarian history while still insisting on the centrality of the lived individual life within that history.

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