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*Reading and Disorder in Antebellum America* by David M.  
Stewart (review)

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David M. Stewart. *Reading and Disorder in Antebellum America*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011. 264 pages. \$59.95 (cloth).

Those interested in antebellum reception and hermeneutics will find David Stewart's sprawling exploration of working-class reading practices and their relation to the control of antisocial behavior by working-class men puzzling, if at times compelling. According to Stewart, reading is the "small topic" of his study. The larger topic is how reading affected the bodies of white male manual laborers from the northeastern United States in a period when reading was becoming an increasingly important means of social control. As young men from rural areas migrated to the cities to seek work, traditional restraints on antisocial behavior (the "disorder" of the book's title), such as the internalized feelings produced by familial affection (for example, shame), were fast becoming inadequate. According to Stewart, geographic mobility, the decline of religious influence, financial independence, and separation from the family meant that clergy, educators, employers, and the state believed that reading and the feelings reading produced were necessary to foster civil and ethical behavior among the growing numbers of young manual laborers. Young men themselves believed reading was both a form of entertainment and an important tool for self-improvement. There was thus a significant tension between reading as social control and reading as pleasure. Authority figures such as Henry Ward Beecher warned of the dangers of a mass print culture whose depictions of sex and violence might foster disorderly conduct in young men living far from traditional behavioral restraints. Yet the burgeoning working class increasingly sought relief in such books in response to the constrictive tedium and routine of factory and shop work. Stewart argues that "in the space between recreating and recreation, between reading to improve and reading to enjoy, men . . . found new ways to live, work, and be men" (5).

At first glance, Stewart's major claim is both vague and less than groundbreaking. As the above summary might suggest, much of the historical and contextual evidence the book presents will be familiar to scholars of the period. And certainly the books that working-class men read must have impacted their sense of themselves *as men*—leaving aside for a moment the question of what Stewart means by the latter. Where he attempts to break with the established consensus is in his focus on what he terms "affective rhetorics." Stewart's view is that while historians and to a lesser extent literary critics and scholars have directed significant attention to working-class men, such work has failed adequately to capture a sense of the inner emotional life and (in his

view) emotional violence perpetrated on working-class readers as a result of their encounter with texts intended to coerce them to behave properly. Stewart holds that dominant discourses associated with such genres as sentimentality, crime reporting, and temperance fiction functioned culturally as forms of disciplinary coercion. Further, the emotional experience of such works—and the internalization of the behavioral codes such rhetorics produced—had bodily and psychic effects on young men that were harmful. In his words, dominant rhetorics “targeted working bodies and sought to elicit feelings like fear and shame in order to re-form the somatic structures that determined how they behaved” (3). Stewart sees his work as a recovered history, one he compares to the work of those scholars from the last few decades who have attempted to recover the lost histories of women, slaves, and other marginalized groups from early American and U.S. history. The book is divided into three sections: one focusing on how working-class reading practices influenced the perception of urban spaces by working-class readers, one focusing on how working-class reading practices influenced the “bodily style” of working-class subjects or how they carried and expressed themselves somatically in response to what they read, and a final section devoted to the “poetics of intimacy” or working-class reading and sexual desire.

Given its goals, one might expect *Reading and Disorder* to follow established methods in reception studies, the history of the book, and historical hermeneutics. That it does not is to a large extent what makes it puzzling. Readers cannot be blamed for expecting a close study of material evidence of working-class reading practices and/or actual responses to the texts working-class readers may have read. Diaries, letters, book reviews, and other relevant articles from working-class periodicals are a few examples. Instead, what follows the introduction are several close readings of a relatively small number of texts, a collection Stewart himself admits is “idiosyncratic.” This collection includes examples of fiction and drama that depict working-class characters, crime fiction, reform literature, and news accounts, as well as considerable discussion of the journal of one actual working-class reader, Edward Jenner Carpenter, a skilled cabinet maker from Massachusetts. The result is a study that ranges across a wide range of antebellum cultural history, one whose breadth and depth of knowledge is impressive. Stewart discusses a variety of topics relevant to a detailed account of the material contexts of the texts he examines, from architecture and urban design to male homosocial interaction and friendship. The book also is steeped in relevant contemporary theory, including especially performance theory and gender studies and (for lack of a better term) post-Marxist materialism. In short, the historical and theoretical scholarship the book represents is impressive.

In the end, however, the close readings fail to do the hefty work Stewart asks them to do. This shortcoming results in part from the book’s very difficult if noble goal: to recover a history of the emotional life of actual working-class

men—in effect, to reason back from texts and their respective rhetorics to the inner lives of real readers. Working back from the close study of a work's rhetoric to a historical understanding of readers, reading practices, and material history falls under the broad umbrella of reception studies. But Stewart's methodology, which he admits intentionally cuts across a number of established approaches, violates certain key critical principles in ways many scholars will find difficult to accept. For example, most reception theorists accept the distinction between response criticism or the study of hermeneutic processing on the one hand and the study of reception proper. Each approach has its own set of critical tools and evidentiary standards. Stewart's work ignores this distinction, resulting in claims for which many readers will find Stewart's evidence thin at best, speculative at worst.

One example must suffice. At one point Stewart argues that “in reform literature filled with violence against women, working men revisited again and again the terrifying moment of childhood disciplinary shame. But doing so also revisited a moment when they first experienced themselves as selves, deriving their most assured sense of identity by being implicated in wrongs that shame forced them to deny. Men *were* . . . in so far as men were bad” (100). It is one thing to claim that the rhetoric of reform literature was structured in a way to evoke feelings of shame in the implied audience. It is another to offer evidence that such works were in fact highly successful at shaming actual male working-class readers to such an extent that once they closed their books and went off to the factories to work, they saw themselves as inherently “bad.” *Reading and Disorder*, however, provides neither a thorough survey of reform literature showing how important shame was to its affective rhetorics, nor extensive primary evidence of the sort of reception he claims such texts produced. To study closely the rhetoric of reform fiction, taking care to historicize how the emotional responses asked of a hypothetical implied reader *may* have functioned at a given moment in history is to stake a claim about interpretive *possibility*. Contrastingly, evidence of the responses of real readers typically comes from readers themselves. In each section of *Reading and Disorder*, however, Stewart chooses to ignore these and other principles. The result is a book whose major claims, although historically and theoretically plausible—even potentially compelling—are seldom satisfactorily evidenced.

Although at times *Reading and Disorder* offers interesting readings of antebellum working-class culture, especially when it focuses on the semiotics of working-class life, including language, dress, and social behavior, many readers will find the book's attempt to uncover the emotional life of antebellum working-class men unconvincing and its attempts to break new methodological ground in reception studies theoretically problematic.

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