INTRODUCTION

Reading and Recreation
in Antebellum America

I have not been out of the shop today only to go to my meals. I am either at work or else reading Modern Romance.

—Edward Jenner Carpenter

REQUIRED READING

It was raining. It was also Thursday, and the town, Greenfield Massachusetts, while no country backwater, was not one of the nation’s hot spots either. So when Edward Carpenter, nineteen-year-old apprentice to the cabinetmaking firm of Miles and Lyons, wrote in his diary that he stayed in all day, working and reading and leaving only to eat, he may have had nothing better to do. But Carpenter often stayed in to read, even when the weather was fine, work was finished, and there were other things to do. His reading on these occasions was not limited to “Modern Romance,” a volume of condensed popular novels (Marrying for Money, The Fatal Whisper, The Game of Life, and three others) he bought for 25 cents three days before. A constant stream of newspapers and magazines crossed Carpenter’s workbench. Some he subscribed to; others he borrowed or obtained through networks of young men like himself who exchanged reading by mail. He also read tract and advice literature, to which he had access in a variety of forms. Novels had special appeal, though, and even when he took up history or popular reform, it was usually narrative, often fictional. More than any other, this kind of reading kept him in the shop. We

1. Journal of Edward Jenner Carpenter, August 22, 1844. Further references are cited by date parenthetically in the text as ECJ.
detect something of his enthusiasm in the gusto of pairing romance and labor in a day stripped of all but the barest essentials. More direct is the relish of his response to books like Eugene Sue’s *The Mysteries of Paris*, *Attila: A Romance* by G. P. R. James, and Alexander Stimson’s temperance novel *Easy Nat*. Carpenter was not alone. Many stayed in to read, for news and education, but also for recreation and pleasure. Carpenter saw opportunity in the trend. In 1849, with his craft in decline and soon to be married, he relocated to Brattleboro, Vermont, where he started a small bookshop and wholesale newspaper business. Later, he became town librarian. The living was modest, but sufficient to raise four children, one of whom followed his father’s professional lead. Edward, Jr., became a printer and editor in Amherst, MA. He even took a turn at authorship, writing the town’s first history, which he published in 1896, four years before his father’s death.²

Reading is the small topic of *Reading and Disorder*. Edward Carpenter exemplifies William Gilmore’s claim that by the mid-nineteenth century reading had become “a necessity of life” in the Upper Connecticut River Valley.³ Necessity was not limited to that corner of New England that Carpenter called home. Innumerable studies have traced the importance of reading throughout the United States before the Civil War, especially in the industrializing northeast.⁴ What some call the “reading revolution” involved changes in the style, quantity, and business of reading that occurred in relation to other developments, notably the rise of a market economy. These developments required significant changes in how Americans lived and where. Reading facilitated large-scale migration to cities, together with new forms of manufacturing, domestic relations, business practices, and the growth of knowledge-based professions.⁵ As this list suggests, more than bald utility placed reading at the


Reading and Recreation in Antebellum America • 3

foreground of common school curricula. Besides its technical and economic uses, reading served disciplinary needs. Styles of work associated with industrial capitalism required increased self-regulation. The same was true for urban living and changing social relations. Educators, clergy, and increasingly employers and the state turned to reading as a substitute for the family and other forms of social control undermined by geographical mobility, declining power of the church, financial independence, and erosion of the artisan system of training and production. Young men like Carpenter saw reading as a means of self-improvement and success, a way to recreate themselves in an economy that threatened not only traditional ways to earn a living, but the terms whereby boys became men and citizens. Literacy grew, print production was itself capitalized, and about the time Carpenter chose to stay in with *Modern Romance*, reading approached a level of determination hard to overstate.

What reading determined is the large topic. *Reading and Disorder* treats reading as a practice in order to better understand men like Carpenter: young, white workingmen of the northeastern United States for whom the shift from a predominantly rural, agricultural nation to one commercial, industrial, and urban profoundly affected lived experience. In helping to produce this shift, reading furnishes access to the more intimate negotiations required. If reading advanced technical and economic developments that affected where men worked, how, and for what, they had to be persuaded not just to submit to the new conditions, but to produce them. Reading furnished a primary means to internalize necessary obligations, and not in the discursively thin form associated with Foucault. Reading affected what men thought, how they felt, what they desired, and, most important, how they behaved, comported, and expressed themselves. It did this intentionally, and often brutally. Drawing on various affective rhetorics (sentimental, evangelical, populist, gothic), the writers Carpenter read developed persuasive idioms that 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. In coming chapters, I situate these idioms in the broader affective contexts of men's reading, projecting their rhetoric as new forms of embodied life and identification.

Not that the rhetorical causes and effects were simple. *Modern Romance* had, at best, a vexed relation to necessity, as critics of reading pointed out. “Black-lettered” is what Henry Ward Beecher called novels like *The Mysteries of Paris*, ranking them among the greatest dangers of modern life. Attacks like Beecher’s do not figure in Gilmore’s account of New England reading, which

---


ends in 1835, nine years before Carpenter began to keep a diary—and read *The Mysteries of Paris*. What changed was mass print culture. The American Tract Society pioneered large-scale philanthropic publishing in the 1820s, distributing millions of cheap tracts to advance Christian causes from evangelism to social reform. But profit was not the goal. This changed in 1833 when Benjamin Day founded his penny daily, the *New York Sun*. With the *Sun*, American publishing entered a period of competitive capitalization that would soon make a wide range of affordable reading available to men like Carpenter. Day's newspaper was followed by the *Herald, Transcript, Tribune*, and many others, in New York and elsewhere. While scale was important (by 1836, the *Sun*’s circulation was twenty-two thousand), technical and entrepreneurial innovations were also key to the industry's rapid rise. Steam in the 1830s, followed by high-speed cylinder presses, increased production from 200 to 20,000 sheets an hour. By 1860, mechanization cut the cost of paper in half. Centralization (New York, Boston, Philadelphia) increased efficiency. So did consolidation, as large firms like Harper & Brothers appeared. Content too was rationalized. Reprinting filled pages and met deadlines. Grub-street writers wrote at a furious pace, often in what were later called “fiction factories.” Philadelphia novelist George Lippard averaged over a million words a year, few of which he revised. Capacity required expanding distribution networks. Railroads gradually replaced canals and coastal shipping. George Foster’s 1850 exposé, *New York by Gas-Light*, was among the first books marketed nationally in the U.S., selling 200,000 copies. This is the wave Carpenter hoped to catch when as a young man with a family on the way he started a book and newspaper business.

More than necessity, reading became a way of life. Carpenter’s increasing involvement in the business of print culture figures the growing influence of reading on the lives of working Americans. No less than the nation described by Benedict Anderson, Carpenter imagined the world through reading. Again, causes and effects were not simple. Rhetoric that persuaded men to behave better also persuaded Carpenter to pay 25 cents for *Modern Romance*, a large sum for a young apprentice very careful with money. In the eyes of reformers like Beecher, mass print culture transformed reading into a key source of corruption—meaning enjoyment. I am less interested in the politics of this change than its recreational economy. If reading *recreated* men in accordance with new disciplinary needs, *recreationally* it helped them cope with the results. These functions were not mutually exclusive; nor were they confined to the immediate

---


act of reading, but extended to the larger world reading helped produce. It is my primary claim in *Reading and Disorder* that in the space between recreating and recreation, between reading to improve and reading to enjoy, men like Carpenter found new ways to live, work, and be men.\(^9\)

My selection of texts will seem idiosyncratic, and in many ways it is. There are two reasons for this. The first is my concern with the practice of reading, not the logic of its texts, which is how literary critics usually treat print culture in the period. Sensationalism, the dime novel, minstrel songsters: genre has provided a primary source of coherence, material and methodological.\(^10\) But such coherence misrepresents an activity that by any measure was anything but. People read promiscuously, then as much as today, and to reflect this, I range similarly across available categories, including most genres and some titles that Carpenter read: crime reports, exposés, pamphlet novels, reform tracts, lectures, memoirs, advice literature. Some authors I treat have already been mentioned; others include Henry Hazel, T. S. Arthur, Harriet Beecher Stowe, George Thompson, and various anonymous tract and magazine writers who wrote for periodicals such as *The Advocate of Moral Reform* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*.

The second reason my archive seems idiosyncratic stems from the form of organization I adopt in lieu of text centered categories such as genre. *Reading and Disorder* has three parts, each of which addresses a problem, or set of problems, in historical understanding, with texts selected to support my proposed resolutions, using whatever resources I have been able to find or construe as

---

9. Insofar as this constitutes a history of reading, then, I go beyond the approach Roger Chartier typifies in *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, his sweeping account of how Europeans responded to the vast increase in printed texts in the early modern period by trying “to set the world of the written word in order” (vii). Chartier reminds us that any effort by censors, critics, or writers to control how texts are used contends with the “infinite numbers of subterfuges” used by readers “to read between the lines, and to subvert the lessons imposed on them” (viii). While Chartier focuses on the act of reading, I am concerned with what happens when reading stops, books are closed, and lessons, as such, forgotten. I use reading as a window into life after signification becomes, to borrow from Foucault, the order of things, except that the things that concern me (bodies, feelings, comportments) were not orderly at all. This puts me at odds with another truism. Chartier quotes de Certeau to say: “In early times, the reader interiorized the text; he made his voice the body of the other; he was its actor. Today, the text no longer imposes its own rhythm on the subject, it no longer manifests itself through the reader’s voice. This withdrawal of the body, which is the condition of autonomy, is a distancing of the text. It is the reader’s *habeas corpus*” (17). This is very misleading. If reading aloud declined, as de Certeau says, the eighteenth century saw the development of various rhetorics that closed the gap between text and reader, imposing Gothic rhythms on reading bodies or spurring them to become evangelical actors. Texts appealed to the body at a time when they were increasingly called upon to serve the needs of politics and commerce, both of which explicitly sought to overcome the reader’s *habeas corpus*.

such. This means an opportunistic jumble not only of the texts men read, but of materials used to ground claims about the world such reading produced: letters, diaries, illustrations, statistical data, architecture, maps. Part 1, “City Crime,” explains the excitement of cities as the result not of inherent characteristics such as busy streets or declining morality, but of crime literature, which eroticized urban space, compensating for what was in fact the cramped, overregulated tedium of living there. Part 2, “Bodily Style,” argues that the coercive use of shame in popular reform literature explains the comportment of workingmen at a time when they began to exhibit a bodily style that simultaneously threatened and adorned public space. Part 3, “The Poetics of Intimacy,” extends the erotics of danger through the embodied effects of shame to treat working male intimacy, with women and with other men. I treat this intimacy as “social poetics,” a term borrowed from anthropologist Michael Herzfeld not so much to mediate literary sources, as to circumvent romantic expectations that workingmen rarely satisfy.

Before proceeding, however, I want to expand my introductory remarks in three areas: first, the role reading played in antebellum life, especially as a means of both social control and entertainment; second, the particular readership that concerns me, white workingmen of the urban northeast typified in the figure of Edward Jenner Carpenter; and lastly, how we now understand such men, who have appeared with some notoriety in recent criticism.

BOOKS THAT SEDUCE

Reading was not the only disciplinary response to changing times. Others included forms of control that served specific developments. In the shift from small to large shop production, machines, and eventually factories, employers became increasingly repressive, turning to women in many industries as a cheaper, more submissive workforce. Burgeoning cities hired police, built prisons, and adopted land-use policies that rationalized space. Less obvious were changes in education and child rearing. Emphasis on affective ties extended the family’s regulatory reach beyond homes that Americans were now compelled to leave. Common school education required that children sit for long hours in rows, studying quietly, and minding the teacher—ideal preparation for the repetitive, highly regulated work routines they would later encounter. Oratory predated reading as a form of popular instruction, and, like writers, preachers and lecturers relied on affect as a means of persuasion. Shame, rage, honor, fear: these were the feelings imparted by Beecher, temperance phenomenon John Gough, and a host of lesser temperance advocates, including Charles Jewett,
whose lecture Carpenter attended one summer evening. “[H]e’s a smart one,” Carpenter writes, “he did not show any mercy to the rumseller” (ECJ, June 4, 1845).

But another evening, Carpenter saved the price of a lecture, despite being sure it was “worth double the money” (ECJ, July 16, 1844). Admission was 12 ½¢, the same as he paid for East Nat; or, Boston Bars and Boston Boys. Modern Romance cost 25¢, “double.” For those in the business, print was increasingly the medium of choice. This was due to several factors, including developments in print culture itself. Mass publishing encouraged reform movements, dozens of which appeared in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Temperance and abolitionism rose to national prominence; others differed widely in longevity and what they opposed, from Catholicism and gambling, to spicy foods and various forms of sexual conduct: seduction, masturbation, prostitution, birth control. Reading was, in Ronald Walters’s words, a “powerful weapon” to advance such causes. As a rising star in the world of cultural commodities, reading advanced other things too. Innovation cut costs, Walters goes on, “to the point where a person could make a living editing a reform newspaper or writing for a limited, but expanding national audience.” And reformers were not merely reactive. They cultivated markets for their writing, catering to existing concerns and producing new ones. To compete with recreational genres, they also modified their product. Narrative became popular; so did violence, which was extreme in the Washingtonian temperance literature Carpenter read. Less so was T. S. Arthur’s moral fiction. Hugely successful with readers across the social spectrum, novels like Insubordination (also one of Carpenter’s13) relied on sentiment, tapping reservoirs fed by the new regime of family affection. Lecturers too drew on these reservoirs, and violence was again common. Gough and Beecher benefited greatly from an increasingly emotionalized and competitive cultural marketplace. But reading offered opportunities in range and profitability that public speaking could not begin to match.

Other factors that favored print stemmed from its form of address. Words on paper were disinterested, detached from an embodied voice. As such, they lent themselves to the intimate manipulation of conscience, especially when privately read. The purpose of reform literature was to intervene in what Raymond Williams famously called “structures of feeling.” Yet as an act conducted alone and in silent communion with a self-selected text—or “friend,” as the popular metaphor would have it—reading was tantamount to personal counsel.

---

11. Alexander Stimson, Easy Nat; or, Boston Bars and Boston Boys. Cited in ECJ, March 14, 1844.
This could be done without obvious moralizing in narratives that naturalized claims within the logics of character and plot. Fiction coded wrong emotionally, usually through its consequences: gambling led to ruin, masturbation to disease, fast friends to dissipation. The preeminent rhetorical device in antebellum disciplinary reading was suffering inflicted on a victim whose characterization elicited an emotional bond with readers. Uncle Tom is the obvious example; but thousands of such figures crowded the pages of popular reform, their pain attaching qualms to behavior that caused it: slavery, drunkenness, seduction. Carpenter took such counsel when he rested after lunch or in the hour he had to himself before bed. He read on Sundays, in the afternoon when church was out and work was not permitted. He read a lot at these times. Afterward, he shared what he read with friends, they discussed it among themselves, debated it formally in clubs, read other books, and gradually assimilated competing claims not so much as “structures,” but as shifting flows of anxiety and desire that propelled behavior. This was how reading became more than necessity, more even than a way of life.

Disciplinary reading supplied what was called “influence.” It did so by manipulating specific feelings in order to affect specific behaviors in ways still commonplace today. This manipulation spawned affective needs that became the chief market served by the recreational press. Treating recreational reading as a compensatory response to disciplinary culture makes working lives legible in ways that do not simply distinguish between disciplinary and recreational texts. There is no better example of the disciplinary work of recreational reading than when Carpenter writes: “There was an adjourned meeting of the ‘rabble’ (so called by the aristocrats) this evening, but I was so much engaged reading ‘the game of life’ I have not been out the shop” (ECJ, August 20, 1844). For all its corruption, reading Modern Romance kept Carpenter off the street and in “the shop.” Alternately, the recreation of reform is suggested by his breathless summary of temperance novel Easy Nat: “It is the life of three boys during their apprenticeship one of them is Easy Nat who was led into drunkenness & and all sorts of dissipation by his brother apprentice & and afterward became a Washingtonian & the other apprentice set his masters house on fire & then cut his throat” (ECJ, March 14, 1844). I treat this passage in detail later. Here suffice it to say that the lesson Carpenter took away—“This shows the evil of drunken Companions”—seems not to have interfered with his enjoyment of a book in which rabble burn down the house of an aristocrat.

The drift between reform and recreation stemmed from reading’s fraught relationship to itself as both a “weapon” of change and an object commoditized and mass produced. One form of this self-relation involved what Helen Horowitz calls the “blurred boundary” between reading that depicted wrong to
instruct and reading that depicted wrong to profit. At a period when obscenity was becoming a problem for American law, it was often hard to differentiate between the pornographic “sporting press” and legitimate advice on sex—and this worked both ways. Competition caused the “slide from reform physiology to erotica,” either to sell writing as such or to sell medical advertising. Conversely, pornographers disguised erotica as reform literature to avoid legal problems. The ongoing fusion of advice and suggestive style increased sexual openness and confused efforts to codify obscenity.14

Underlying the corrupting effects of the cultural free market was the nature of what was increasingly purchased there. If good reading improved conduct, recreational reading did not. Young men, William Eliot wrote, “rise very late; spend an unusual time over the newspaper; devote three or four hours to novel reading, and two or three more, perhaps, after the dinner hour has been prolonged as much as possible, to an afternoon ride, in the process of which it will be strange if something very much like dissipation does not occur.” Wrongs blamed on bad reading ranged from prostitution to poor work habits. Health too was a concern, and not just from reading induced dissipation. Jane Swisshelm warned that reading novels was “like eating opium, or drinking brandy.” Lydia Sigourney claimed they “form habits of desultory thought, and uproot mental discipline.” In Mental Hygiene, Isaac Ray speaks directly to men. A man “whose reading is calculated only to enflame the imagination with pictures of unhallowed enjoyment, to banish every manly thought and pure emotion, to extend the empire of passion, and induce him to fill his measure of happiness with things that perish in the using, is weakening all of the conservative principles of his mind.” William Alcott enters similar territory when he advises that if “exciting books are read at all, they should be read in the forenoon, not in the evening.”15

Reformers sought to regulate reading the way they did other practices, by attaching misgivings to it. But reading was also different. Alcott’s concern was sexual, based partly on the belief that solitary reading led to masturbation. But reading also posed a special threat: the power to seduce.16 Evidence of

16. Henry Ward Beecher is less elusive in warning that bad reading “circulates in this town, floats in our stores, nestles in the shops, is fingered and read nightly, and hatches in the young mind broods of salacious thoughts” (211). First published in 1844, “The Strange Woman” links the corruption of bad books to the blandishments of cities and finally to disease acquired in the house of prostitution.
this power appears in the diary of another young man, Michael Floy, son of a Bowery greenhouse keeper. Writing ten years before Carpenter, Floy displays like passion for reading, except he is more cautious—at least in the beginning.

I keep no money in my pocket for long, for when I see a book that takes my fancy, have it I must. And altho I have purchased a great lot of Books, I do not regret that I have done so, because I generally purchase what I perceive is useful. I never read a novel in my life and I do not think I ever will, for I find so many books daily published that are of real use, that all my leisure time is not sufficient for reading even them.\(^{17}\)

Lack of utility was not the only reason to avoid novels.

I fully believe the novels and romances have made a greater part of the prostitutes in the world, to say nothing of the many miserable matches. Many rush right into the married life after reading novels; they will do the same, they will be gallant, heroic, chivalric; but they find it to be a different matter from what they expected; they fret and foam but they are tied fast, and the poor lady is made miserable for life. This is supposing the best, but suppose the gentleman has no design to marry; he wins the heart of the foolish creature, seduces her, and then leaves her to her fate. Such things happen almost daily, and all, I believe, in consequence of novels. (March 27, 1835)

Floy’s views were typical. Yet if the record he left is any indication, his own reading began to slip. Five months later, Floy, fascinated by the “cameleon-like” quality of Laurence Sterne’s *Moral Essays*, reads *Tristram Shandy* (August 17, 1835). He greatly enjoys it, and several months later he purchases two Gothic novels: Clara Reeve’s *Old English Baron* and Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto* (May 13, 1836). His legitimate reading also looks suspect. Salma Hale’s *History of the United States* is filled with “heroic sentiment,” and he is “tolerably well pleased” with the *History of Charlemagne*, written by G. P. R. James, a popular British author whose histories contained decidedly more fiction than fact (August 24, 1835; May 19, 1836). Nine years later, Carpenter will write about another

---

Beecher was not alone in blaming the ills of adulthood on errors in youth, including “bad books” brought into the home as a harmless pastime. In an anonymous moral reform tract, “Henry—A Tale of Truth,” a young women identifies novels as the cause of her brother’s ruin. To gratify “his taste in reading, as well as to promote his improvement, my father obtained permission for him to draw books from one of the city libraries. Like too many of our youth, Henry thought he might with safety indulge in reading a LITTLE FICTION, and contrary to my father’s wishes, an ‘instructive’ novel too often became the companion of his leisure hours” (The Advocate of Moral Reform 9 [1843], 11).

17. Michael Floy, Jr., *The Diary of Michael Floy, Jr., Bowery Village, 1833–1837*, October 22, 1833. Further references are cited by date parenthetically in the text.
James “history,” *Attila*, “I like it much it is so full of wild romance” (*ECJ*, March 5, 1845).  

The lure of such reading, according to Beecher, was moral equivocation, including the “innuendo” that fueled the sales of reform and pornography alike. About authors like Sue and James, he writes: “Under a plea of humanity we have shown up to us, troops of harlots, to prove that they are not so bad as purists think; gangs of desperadoes, to show that there is nothing in crime inconsistent with the noblest feelings. We have in French and English novels of the infernal school, humane murderers, lascivious saints, holy infidels, honest robbers.” But if equivocation must be avoided, Beecher’s own writing was criticized for corrupting young minds.

These artists never seem lost, except when straining after a conception of religion. Their devotion is such as might be expected of thieves, in the purlieus of thrice-deformed vice. Exhausted libertines are our professors of morality. They scrape the very sentiment and muck of society to mould their creatures; and their volumes are monster galleries, in which the inhabitants of old Sodom would have felt at home as connoisseurs and critics. Over loathsome women, and unutterably vile men, huddled together in motley groups, and over all their monstrous deeds, their lies their plots their crimes, their dreadful pleasures, their glorying conversation, is thrown the checkered light of a hot imagination, until they glow with an infernal lustre. Novels of the French school, and of English imitators, are the common sewers of society, and into which drain the concentrated filth of the worst passions, of the worst creatures, of the worst cities.

18. The next night, Carpenter confesses, “I have not much to write tonight for I have been reading Attila till I can hardly think of anything else” (*ECJ*, March 6). James was a particular favorite. About his novel, *Arrah Neil*, Carpenter writes: “I have been reading a novel called *Arrah Neil* finished it this evening, it is a riveting thing, if a person begins it he do’nt want to stop till he finishes it” (October 18, 1844). Son of a gristmill worker, Jonathan Henry Hill liked James’s *Chivalry and the Crusades* so much he pledged to “soon read it again” (Jonathan Henry Hill diary, September 21, 1841). Allegheny lumberman Frances Baxter felt the same, declaring that James’s novel *The False Heir* was “the very best thing I’ve read in a long time” (“Rafting on the Alleghany and Ohio, 1844,” August 17, 1844). He also writes that another novel would be much improved if “G. P. R. James had had the handling of the materials” (September 6, 1844). Among Baxter’s other favorites was the infamous Paul DeKock, whose novels had “much obscenity about them” (August 16, 1844). Floy would seem to be treading dangerous ground. His diary ends early in 1837 (he died in May at twenty-nine), so it is impossible to say if his decline continued.


20. Beecher’s screed against Sue’s *The Mysteries of Paris* undoubtedly did more to publicize the novel than the brief review Carpenter likely read in the *Greenfield Gazette and Courier*, which called it “one of the most interesting romances of modern times” (November 7, 1843; cited in Clark and Scott, eds., “The Diary of an Apprentice Cabinetmaker,” 327n13).

Beecher had a remarkable capacity for this kind of language, which if denotatively clear, was as connotatively “hot” as anything he sought to condemn.

Beecher’s rhetoric operated at the juncture of political and capital interests that Jürgen Habermas identifies with nineteenth-century print culture. Beecher was not the only one; nor was he the first. A decade earlier, moral reformer John McDowell scandalized New Englanders with exposés of the sex trade in New York. So explicit were *The Magdelen Report* (1831) and his weekly newspaper, *McDowell’s Journal* (1833–34) that his tractarian bosses soon dismissed him. A women’s group took over, adopting a new title, *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, but retaining McDowell’s methods—and circulation. Like Beecher, *The Advocate*’s new editors insisted that charged language was needed to prevent evasion and the erotics of innuendo.22 Similar battles raged among abolitionists, many of whom objected to William Lloyd Garrison sensationalism. Others differed. While acknowledging the value of “thinking men,” Wendell Phillips saw in the “cold deductions of intellect” concessions that would prolong slavery rather than vanquish it. Phillips praised Beecher and his sister Harriet Beecher Stowe for using their talents not just to argue, but to incite political passions.23 Success paid well, especially for Henry, who by 1875 was collecting $100,000 a year to fill Brooklyn’s Plymouth Church with a paying congregation. Not that he played a game less dangerous than McDowell’s. Beecher may have better finessed public tolerance; but the rich, vertiginous sensuality that drew such crowds amplified the scandal that would finally deplete both his reputation and his fortune.24

Like Carpenter’s response to drunken violence in *Easy Nat*, Beecher’s excess emerged from epistemological instability of depicting corruption. It also emerged from the volatility of emotions used to effect social control—volatility heightened by their collateral consequences. Reading made men angry, ashamed, afraid, and depressed. It also succeeded in altering their behavior, producing myriad denials and sublimations, along with violence committed by men who were properly socialized against other men who were not. Here we move beyond words to the pain they caused. If reading produced order and

---

22. On McDowell, cf. Barbara Meil Hobson, Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition, 52. At the beginning of “The Strange Woman,” Beecher defends against charges that he oversteps himself in addressing the topic of prostitution. For earlier arguments made by the women editing the *Advocate of Moral Reform*, see “Our Object,” 2, and “Clerical Objections Considered,” 330. Both are discussed by Horowitz, Rereading Sex, 150–52.


productivity, it also caused bitterness and rage, feelings that could only be experienced covertly. In pressing her case for reform, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Little Eva justified the punishment she inflicted. How could one resent such a figure or oppose the compunction she produced? How did one relish crime or feel most like a man when ashamed? Such questions played out in working bodies where emotions used to channel conduct morphed into others that overflowed their legitimate boundaries and were reconciled on the other side.

THE ROMANCE OF EDWARD CARPENTER

Reading influenced how Edward Jenner Carpenter felt and behaved. This is clear from his many remarks on the evils of drink and repeated assurances that when he played cards it was only for fun. But as far as we know, he never drank or gambled, so improving himself in these ways involved no sacrifice to speak of. This was not the case with chewing tobacco, which he struggles to quit, declaring it “a filthy habit & it injures my health I think” (ECJ, March 23, 1844). Where he got these ideas he doesn’t say. But an entry four months later, gives us a sense of the grief they caused him, and the role reading played.

I cannot make up my mind to quit chewing tobacco yet. I have taken about two quids a day since my birthday, & it is almost impossible to reduce the quantity to nothing, nor even to one quid. Lyons brought up his Saturday Courier for me to read tonight, I read one good story in it entitled “where there is a will there is a way.” (ECJ, August 13, 1844)

Lyons was his boss. “Where There’s a Will There’s a Way,” by T. S. Arthur, was published in the Philadelphia Saturday Courier, August 10, three days before, and involves an unemployed journeyman who by taking menial labor saves enough to return to his trade and open his own shop. We never learn if Carpenter finds the will to quit chewing, or if Lyons and Arthur helped him do this. But three weeks later, Carpenter buys half a pound of top grade pipe tobacco because “I do not chew but a little, therefore I want the best” (ECJ, September 2, 1844). There is no indication that there was any link between chewing and smoking tobacco besides the one he himself makes. But somewhere between public denial and private excess, between the filth of chewing tobacco and the luxury of smoking it, lay Carpenter’s lived reconciliation with his time.

I cite numerous diaries in Reading and Disorder. But I begin with Carpenter’s and I return to it repeatedly. There are several reasons for this. One is that, unlike many diarists, Carpenter writes extensively about his reading. In addi-
tion to titles, he frequently says how he obtained them and the circumstances of their reading. Occasionally he remarks on whether he liked what he read, expressing himself with enthusiasm of the kind he uses to praise Attila. None of this suggests that he felt reading itself was a mark of character. Rather, he writes about it as a commonplace activity, one among many that constituted everyday life in Greenfield. About these Carpenter also writes, providing social and material context for his reading. Most entries begin with the weather. He also records progress in his work: a “panel end Bureau,” a “Butternut Secretary” (sic), a “cubbourd for one of the young law students” (sic). He makes coffins too. Carpenter records over twenty deaths in the sixteen months he keeps a diary, and as a cabinetmaker he is often called on to help. Marriages and births occur, as do more pedestrian comings and goings. Some evenings, friends come over for a hand of “high low.” When he does go out, he attends debates or lectures. With a group of mechanics and young women he takes dance lessons. After, they hold a ball. To raise money for the cemetery, they also have a fair, “independent of the Aristocracy.” “The ‘big bugs’ tried to get up one but they could not get anyone to do the work for them, so they had to give it up, but the Mechanics are not afraid to work” (ECJ, Sept 4, 1844). There are fires, crimes, and trouble with “nightly disturbances [. . .] made partly the village boys & partly by a lot of rowdies from Cambridge College” (ECJ, August 2, 1844). There is an election, a July Fourth celebration, and church on Sundays. He is close with money, keeping careful account of what he is owed and what he spends. Women begin to interest him and this interest is not unrequited. “I asked a girl to go to the Cotillion party with me tonight,” he writes coolly on March 30, 1845, “& did not get the mitten.”

If Edward Carpenter’s life had romance, it was in its sheer quotidian banality, which by his telling achieves a peculiar sublimity. In reading, he enjoyed romance of another kind, from “modern” tales of social corruption, to the “wild romance” of Europe in the Middle Ages, to inspirational narratives like the one he finds in the Saturday Courier. High feeling and banality meet in the encounter between chewing tobacco and Arthur’s story about a young man who triumphs under difficult circumstances. Neither raving drunkard, nor reckless gamester, nor even unemployed, Carpenter’s demons hardly qualify as such. It seems that spitting and bad breath (from chewing) embarrassed him, perhaps because his social activities began to include girls. He is only slightly less distressed about purchasing a pair of trousers too short, although this he fixes after a few weeks when he purchases a new pair, resolving to endure a one-dollar 87 ½¢ loss in selling the offending garment. Occasionally he sniffs at the anti-democratic behavior of the town’s “big bugs,” although he reports the doings of the “rabble” second hand rather than participate himself. At work,
he is more confrontational, complaining about the monotony of making the same items of furniture over and over: “[I]t is Bureaus & Secretary [sic] all the time[.] I have been working on them about a year & I begin to think it is about time to learn to make something else” (ECJ, June 11, 1844). His tasks are varied for a while, but soon he is back in the same routine. So he adjusts and stops complaining. After all, “where there is a will there is a way.” Perhaps the secret pleasure of a better smoke helped, especially when he paid for it with what his boss encouraged him to save on plug.

Carpenter lived his life like countless like him, in the absorptions of youth, monotony of work, insecurity, change, and search for dignity and pleasure. Reading his diary, it is hard not to be charmed by his plain, forthright style and unreflecting record of “what has occurred during the day worthy of note.” But worthy or not, what occurred during the day was dull, as he himself complains. This very dullness forms the basis of my argument in Part 1 that reading compensated by filling the towns and cities of urbanizing America with crime. More broadly, Carpenter’s life anchors a project about the everyday effects of reading, effects that many factors were likely to inflate, including reading itself. Many of the texts I examine in Reading and Disorder make the wild romance of G. P. R. James look tame. Many surpass the lurid vulgarity of drunkenness and murder in Easy Nat. Yet the effects I am concerned with were banal, like purchasing tobacco the narcotic pleasures of which bore others derived from waste and self-indulgence in a world increasingly ruled by efficiency and self-denial. These pleasures were also extended, in how Carpenter felt, for example, when he slid the package of tobacco into his pocket, how he walked as he left the shop, or how he looked that evening when, sitting around playing cards, he lit up and the others noticed it was “the best.”

Carpenter grounds the excesses of antebellum reading in the lives of men who did it, and who in large majority did not murder their wives, burn down their employers’ homes, rob, riot, or otherwise ruin themselves in drink and dissipation. Carpenter was ordinary, and the pleasures he enjoyed in reading affected him in ways that were modest, yet important, even formative. As an apprentice from a large town in western Massachusetts, Carpenter also occupies useful representative categories. He was young, but with the cares of adulthood close at hand. He was not from Greenfield, but migrated there from Bernardston, a village north of the town. His father, a physician, arranged for him to train with Miles and Lyons, and at sixteen he moved from his home to live in the shop where he worked. His formal education was limited to two years in country schools before his apprenticeship. Greenfield too has normative value, due not to its typicality so much as the fact that it was not New York, which had already begun to dominate the American urban imagination—as it
does our scholarship. Like the vast majority of such men, Carpenter did not live in the Bowery or Five Points. Efficient distribution meant that he read about such places on a regular basis. We have seen him receive a Philadelphia paper three days after its publication. On June 6, 1844, he subscribes by mail to a popular New York paper, the Dispatch, and receives the first issue in six days. The ease with which reading circulated allows considerable license in talking about its effects beyond place of publication. But the fact that sensationalism about big cities was readily available in towns like Greenfield reminds us that insofar as such literature transformed the lives of those who read it, those lives were rarely sensational, even when they were lived in big cities.

Carpenter was a tradesman, which placed him above unskilled labor in status, but with a divide forming in the popular view of manual and nonmanual labor that would not be to his advantage. Like many trades, cabinetmaking was affected by new trends in manufacturing, the division of labor and mechanization in particular. Wages were increasingly the rule, although being somewhat removed from larger centers, Carpenter’s masters continued to employ him under the terms of a traditional craft contract. For all the repetition he complains about, he was still making whole furniture and boarding on the premises—at least until he was twenty-one and his apprenticeship ended. After that, things looked decidedly hazy. Besides the perennial problem of a boom-bust economy, Miles and Lyons had already bought out a competitor and purchased property on a local stream, which would be dammed to supply power for machinery. In such a facility, skills counted for less. “These times are hard times for Cabinet Journeymen,” Carpenter writes when someone he knows can’t find a position (ECJ, April 23, 1844). Without work, journeymen could not attain “independence” as masters of their own shops. Carpenter notes the departure of several to Boston and New York where they hope to have better luck. He too considers such a move.

Many fared worse than cabinetmakers, whose trade didn’t mechanize as quickly as others. For weavers and shoemakers, deskilling began earlier and by mid-century was all but total. Some fared better, like coach makers, who remained largely unaffected. The boom in urban construction saw new trades appear like plumbing and plastering. And for unskilled Americans, change could have benefits. Factory jobs promised higher, steadier income than could be expected from agricultural labor, digging, or carting. Such jobs could also be a step up to semi-skilled occupations. Furniture making, for example, as it did industrialize, still required training, although of a kind that could be learned on the job. Even Carpenter finds advantages in rationalizing shop production. Making the same item repeatedly meant that he got faster, and when Lyons begins paying him by the piece, he earns more. He complains about time
allotments too, but then finds that when he finishes a task early, he can use the extra time for cash jobs of his own.

But advantages or not, everyone worried, and this stemmed as much from social as economic uncertainty. Arthur’s story is not about a young journeyman making money, but how money returns him to trade in his own shop. With it increasingly unlikely that Carpenter would become an independent proprietor, starting a business, even a modest one, suggests the problem of identity for tradesmen unable to fulfill traditional expectations. The alternative was almost certainly wage labor in a shop like the one Miles and Lyons were building. In addition to the respect due a master tradesman, Carpenter would lose his advantage over unskilled men. Perhaps significantly, he takes up shopkeeping on the eve of another change that traditionally marked passage into manhood. We have no way to know if marriage depended on closing the deal in Brattleboro. But little financial improvement could be expected from the new business, suggesting that more was at stake than money. Indeed, pressure may have come as much from within Carpenter’s family as from without. Edward was the first of five sons, three of whom were apprenticed as clerks by the time he had reached the rank of journeymen cabinetmaker. In the emerging hierarchy of occupations, this marked them better off than their older brother (figure 1).

Theoretically, what most recommends Carpenter to us is his proximity to many such lines of divergence, which while representing differences in how men lived their working lives, were also undercut by factors like economic insecurity, shared by clerks and shopkeepers as much as anyone. For Carpenter, family was also a factor undercutting an occupational divide that would eventually become class difference. That such a difference was already forming is clear insofar as insecurity bred more than anxiety. Terms like “aristocracy” and “big bugs” expressed resentment; but this was not yet proletarian. “Mechanic” is what Carpenter called himself, which means the labor he performed was not undifferentiated, and he knew it. He knew too that affiliation with a trade carried social value that distinguished him from unskilled laborers, as well as blacks, immigrants, and women. It would be the end of the century before the wage economy would sufficiently erode such distinctions to produce class-consciousness. By calling himself a mechanic, Carpenter drew on respect for craft that, while in decline, still lingered in the identities of working people and their relations. If he did open a shop out of social insecurity sharpened by family circumstances, residual feelings of status and respect eased that choice for those who did not. His brothers were not just clerks putatively better off than he; they were brothers, and a fourth, Timothy, was also a cabinetmaker, and he remained one. Further, if Edward was ambivalent about wages and other signs that his labor was being commodified, a varied work history meant
that he was already familiar with them. At thirteen, he worked for a year in a factory village in Amherst. His brothers may have too, as money was always scarce. Given the neighborhood, they probably did farm work, as did their father until he reached his twenties, when he took up school teaching. Only then did Elijah Carpenter begin to apprentice with a local physician, afterward setting up a practice in Bernardston, although teaching continued to supplement his income. With a family on the way, Carpenter probably did the same, continuing to ply his woodworking trade to make ends meet.

Carpenter’s life suggests the myriad affections that would confuse class identification for decades. This is not to deny hierarchy, which we detect even in such brief fragments. Also apparent is vertical desire, modestly realized—or not. When his father died in 1855, Timothy Carpenter moved home. When his mother died in 1873, he moved west to Toledo, leaving no indication that he ever advanced beyond semi-skilled labor. His migration, like Edward’s turn to business, may signal the division that occurred generally as vertical desires hardened into class differences. But that was later. In the 1840s, hierarchies had yet to assume clear formal and psychosocial markers, so boundaries remained permeable and identities fluid. Work had the same effect, tempering
desires and status divisions alike. Countless men who converged on American towns and cities in the first half of the century came from backgrounds that were as diverse as their expectations were vague. If Carpenter can be regarded as representative, it is in his varied experiences and ambitions, which were less ideological than opportunistic. While it was clear that occupation would determine one’s future, control was limited at best.

Good reading declared otherwise, of course: success required merit, which was earned through self-bettering. Such reading internalized scales of value, justifying status and trapping men like Carpenter between a romance of opportunity and the hard facts of life. It trapped him other ways too: between hunger and gratification, deference and envy, pain and sympathy. But reading also reconciled these oppositions. If advice literature located men in status hierarchies, the desires that sustained them constituted a recreational market par excellence. The lives of “big bugs” were the mainstay of cheap reading. Even novels like The Mysteries of Paris and Lippard’s The Quaker City that openly side with oppressed workers, took social elites as their protagonists. Such reading supplied promiscuous pleasures, with identifications multilayered and self-conflicted. It served desires denied by experience, by the emotional logic of affective disciplining, and by the range of feelings it had to draw upon, all deeply mixed. Novelists like Lippard and George Thompson devoted space equally to the perniciously respectable (lawyers, preachers) and the virtuously criminal (thieves, killers). Such characters committed violence against each other. They did so over the bodies of victims, usually women, often in cities, and while engaging in acts of intimate relationship. Such acts internalized the rights and wrongs of recreated material life. Between denial and excess—between the productivity of reading and the waste of enjoying it—lay the lived reconciliations of men like Edward Carpenter.

INQUISSIONS OF MEN

To address these reconciliations we must first acknowledge the difficulties they pose, two of which have long dogged our understanding of workingmen. The first is their elusive presence in the historical record. Unlike the wealth of manuscript evidence that aided the study of nineteenth-century women, little remains to document the inner lives of men who were reticent in both the quantity of their personal writing and what they revealed in it. Until recently, this reticence was of little account, our focus being on what did leave a record: labor strife, popular culture (as Americana), and class in terms more or less crudely economic. This changed with the cultural turn in labor history and
the development of methods that did not require direct access to social life in order to study it. The effects could be striking. Sean Wilentz’s *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* challenged the long-held view that U.S. workers developed class consciousness only late in the nineteenth century by locating it in cross-trade mutualism of the 1830s. Crucially, “artisan republicanism” was not erased by the 1837 panic, Wilentz argues, but sublimated, with hostility once aimed at masters returning in displaced forms such as racism and nativism. The idea that class conflict lay just beneath the surface of antebellum cultural life proved very appealing, especially for those trained in text interpretation, and even more because it provided a neat way to explain a wide range of what Andrew Ross calls “bad attitudes” in popular culture—racism, sexism, xenophobia—at a time when literary critics and historians alike sought greater political engagement in their work. The result has been some of the most significant cultural criticism in recent decades. But here lies our second problem with workingmen: by being so appealing, this criticism has reduced them to products—and, as such, stigmatized objects—of our political preoccupations.

I will conclude my introduction by reviewing several important studies from the last thirty years that project a view of workingmen falsely coherent as a class and limited largely to explaining the bad attitudes of their texts. I also locate my own account of these men in a field developed in no small part to oppose the excesses of textual criticism, the material history of the book. I do this by way of working bodies *materially moved* by reading, an unintended use of the term, perhaps, but one that embraces the demand for a more committed historicism in book history, while retaining interpretive tools that broaden our view of print culture beyond the empirically obvious, including how it operated via rhetoric that indeed moved bodies, and in manifestly material ways. While book historians increasingly scorn texts, I treat them as a vital historical

25. Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850*. Wilentz’s landmark study consolidates work by historians of U.S. labor such as David Montgomery and Herbert Gutman who, following E. P. Thompson in England, shifted the locus of labor studies to the sphere of culture. Before this, a materialist view held. Beginning with the work of John Common early in the century, labor historians saw little to indicate, in Walter Hugins’s words, “proletarian animosity to the existing order” (*Jacksonian Democracy and the Working Class: A Study of the New York Workingmen’s Movements, 1829–1837*, 220). As late as the 1960s, historians agreed that this order remained strong, and if workers may at times have resented their masters or organized against them, no ideological divide developed that could be construed in class terms. Workers wanted the opportunity to follow their masters as entrepreneurs. Some refined these arguments; others complicated them. Edward Pessen argued that Jacksonian labor activists were part of a general reformist impulse in the period, but not representative of workers. David Montgomery disagreed, saying that organizing stemmed from a growing sense of alienation. None, though, felt that broad class-consciousness appeared before the 1880s.

resource, and close reading them as what Carlo Ginzburg calls a “conjectural paradigm” needed to tease explanation from a past that has left little else to go on.27 Also with this paradigm I hope to relieve the moralism that is inherent in advocacy scholarship and that so often stigmatizes its object of study. Since the 1970s, cultural critics have adopted many of the tactics developed by nineteenth-century reformers, using rhetoric that leverages emotions like anger and shame to advance political agendas. Such criticism subjects men such as Carpenter to the same coercive reading that I will argue produced their bad attitudes in the first place, and produced the attitudes of those who sought to correct them. Insofar as our reformist rhetoric materially moves us, such men are obscured by an emotional barrier no easier to penetrate than the one Ginzburg found between Roman inquisitors and peasants they could explain only as witches.

As I suggested, labor historians were not alone in turning to the culture of antebellum workers. The 1980s saw great interest among literary critics in noncanonical literatures, and while cheap reading received nothing like the attention paid to the reading of women and African Americans, it was the subject of two important books, David S. Reynolds’s *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (1988), and Michael Denning’s *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working Class Culture in America* (1987). *Beneath the American Renaissance* was literary in approach, surveying a wide range of long-forgotten authors and texts that emerged “beneath” the established canon of U.S. period literature and that were “subversive” of it. Denning took a more analytical line, using Marxist theory and labor history to ask two questions about “dime novels,” a term he uses for cheap fiction generally from the 1840s to century’s end: “what can be learned about these popular narratives, their production and consumption, and their place and function within working class cultures; and, what can be learned from them, as symbolic actions, about working class culture and ideology.”28 Both books were instrumental in recovering authors such as George Lippard and George Thompson, who have since become established fixtures of antebellum literary study. Denning’s influence also extended to innovations in method, including his treatment of reading as a practice, readers as active rather than passive cultural consumers, and popular texts as imaginatively resolving problems experienced in the real world.29

Yet as sophisticated as it is, *Mechanic Accents* too is literary in approach,

meaning that while Denning aims to illuminate the conditions of reading, his object is a body of texts and the “mechanic accents” therein. This means adopting historical schemas that support interpretive aims, rather than working with the schemas themselves. The result is a degree of distortion, which has been amplified over time. Denning’s readings require a working class, they require it to struggle against capitalist exploitation, and they require texts to play a role in this struggle. He produces what he needs historically in part by representing his literary object the way he does. The dime novel appeared as a genre of mass formula fiction in 1860 as a way for fledgling corporate publishers to exert control over production and marketing. The sleek, slim dime had little in common with George Lippard’s big, baggy *The Quaker City* (1844), but locating them beneath the same rubric assumes a working-class audience based on the one identified later with dimes. A similar circularity occurs when Denning extracts a “three-tier public” from largely formal distinctions in literary production: serious literature, domestic fiction, and sensational cheap reading. Like others who make such distinctions, he qualifies them, saying that these publics overlapped and that his interest is not structural difference, but formation: “the rhetoric of class, the words, metaphors, and narratives by which people figure social cleavages.”

Still, fashioning an audience coherent enough to sustain a class critique of Lippard in the 1840s produces a social object that binarizes in spite of itself and in spite of what labor historians have long said was not the case.

To be fair, Denning does more than infer readers from texts. Among his innovations was his willingness to conduct empirical audience research, at least to the extent that he cites contemporary sources that identify working-class men as the primary dime readership. He also justifies his emphasis on culture as the “contested terrain” of class struggle by citing new labor historians like Wilentz who were themselves reassessing class identity in the period. Yet culturalist claims left many with reservations, and these eventually prevailed. Historians rejected artisan republicanism as the basis of broad identification among antebellum workers. African Americanists and feminists were first to resist, pointing out that blacks and women did most of the work, including much of the production. Historians of unskilled labor added that even among

---

31. Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 27–46. Generalizations about popular audiences are easier to make than maintain, even when social categories seem clear. Denning’s sources are commentators of the kind who identified sentimental literature as stereotypically women’s reading, a claim as false as any that identified sensational readers as working class. In both cases, linking a genre to a social group took part in a process that defined and subordinated—a process replicated by placing groups and genres in “tiers.”
white men, artisans were a minority. Seth Rockman observes that for most, class struggle “entailed trying to meet basic subsistence needs in the face of increasing economic exploitation and poverty.” If working Americans collectively endured the commodification of their labor, it would take decades for the wage system to erode differences in race, gender, and native origin. Rockman again: “Competing categories of social difference mediated class experience via structural barriers, but also through the identities that working people developed for themselves.”

I dwell on class partly because hard categories, while epistemologically convenient, rob us of fluidity in treating social relations at a time when market-based values remained muddled by residual codes of collective responsibility, family loyalty, ambivalence, deference, and love. Edward Carpenter stands as an embarrassment to any neat binary we might invoke. Not that anyone does—in so many words. Like Denning, Eric Lott admits inconsistency: “the development of each class (and its class fractions) was uneven, halting, not necessarily synchronous with the others.” Yet whatever language of disorder he uses, Lott is pristinely bifurcated in his treatment of minstrel texts. One reason for this is tautology: “For what is implied in the notion of middle-class formation is precisely the formation of a distinctive working-class culture or way of life.” Another is the teleology of formation, which tends to organize everything into a story of itself. And Lott too references Wilentz to argue that minstrel culture “masked and provided displaced terrain for the ever-volatile politics of class.” Citation has reified class identity. More, it has made the formation story redundant and its palpability abstract. Both story and palpability vanish from Shelley Streeby’s *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (2002), which locates fiction about the 1848 Mexican war in “the long U.S. history of nativism, empire-building, and white egalitarianism.” With formation no longer her explicit rationale, Streeby

35. Lott, *Love and Theft*, 70.
bases her account of class once again on “three tiers” of literary production. These “were not entirely separate,” Streeby writes in her nod to disorder: “in the 1840s and 1850s audiences overlapped, writers might contribute to different types of publications or issue their work in different formats, the various literary modes, conventions, genres, and devices crossed over or were mixed together within the different tiers.”\(^{39}\) Even if audiences were equivalent to writers, genres, and so forth, all wind up ideally classed, their “sensations” a cultural abstraction. While implicitly reception categories, the tiers on which readers encountered Mexican war literature are based on textual features, formal and ideological, with no proof who read them, what made them working class, how reading made them imperialistic, and if it did, how this transpired in lives lived far from foreign battlefields, in the home, on the street, and at work.

My criticism of these books is specific rather than general. Together, they define much of what we know about popular culture, class politics, racism, misogyny, and nativism in the antebellum United States. Lott’s speculative reconstructions of “genuine negro fun” constitute the most intimate and convincing accounts of working male life in the period. He achieves this by reading minstrel texts in close company with Wilentz’s narrative of artisanal decline, which, whatever its limits in proving the existence of working-class consciousness in the antebellum U.S., does figure material life into the cultural processes that would eventually produce it. In a few pages, I will outline my own approach to workingmen’s culture, and it will look much like *Love and Theft* in projecting a materialist role played by reading in their lives.

But in my version, racism will not play a significant part. Nor will class politics. The second reason I dwell on class is that the production of workingmen as a hard social category has been driven by social and professional investments rather than a wish to understand them in a world produced by practices such as reading—practices whereby we continue to interrogate them in much the way contemporary reformers did. Preoccupation with the class identity of workingmen says less about their politics than ours. On one hand, we look to such men for political inspiration. *Chants Democratic* is populist, romantic, rooted brilliantly in its cultural method. Building on the transcendent strains of Whitman’s poetry in the title and section epigraphs, Wilentz evokes a democratic promise thwarted when “working-class consciousness” in the early 1830s

never translated into a general association of New York’s wage earners, let alone a national confederation of all workers. But that consciousness flickered

in 1836, a mere three years after the journeymen had first set about organizing their own general union. It would burn long enough that the unionists, during the great wave of strikes in 1836, nearly found themselves at the head of an unprecedented kind of insurgency.

As much as anything, language like this has allowed Lott and Streeby to speak matter-of-factly about an antebellum working class. In addition to millennialist scope and fine writing, Wilentz recalls a dream of social justice that was defeated at its moment of mutualist revolution by the larger conservative forces of the time. The appeal for a generation of academics who came of age on American university campuses in the Nixon era should be obvious.

Since then, however, interest in Wilentz’s insurgents has shifted from their grassroots activism to how its failure spawned “displaced terrains” like racism, nativism, and misogyny. Race captured a special place when David Roediger published _The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class_ (1991), that sparked the boom in whiteness studies. Seeking to explain racism he witnessed as a boy in working-class Cairo, Illinois, Roediger cites a remark by W. E. B. Du Bois that underpaid white workers were compensated by a “psychological wage” of racial superiority. He then delivers an array of linguistic and anecdotal evidence to support his claim that white racial identity was central to working-class consciousness. Like artisan republicanism, whiteness attracted criticism, some remarkably harsh, suggesting conflict as much territorial as scholarly. “Few branches of the humanities and social sciences have escaped the increasing gravitational pull of ‘whiteness studies,’” charged labor historian Eric Arnesen.

Neither whiteness nor debates about its historical validity interest me. What does is the enthusiasm it produced, which as Arnesen suggests caused a storm of sometimes dubious work across periods and disciplines. Like artisan republicanism, whiteness obtained “gravitational pull” from interests that are

40. Wilentz, _Chants Democratic_, 253.
42. Eric Arnesen, “Whiteness and the Historical Imagination,” 4. Arnesen writes in an issue of _International Labor and Working-Class History_ on what whiteness has to offer as an analytical term. Arnesen continues: “Not surprisingly, literary critics and cultural studies theorists have led the way, with their disciplinary relatives in American Studies close behind. But scholars in history, anthropology, sociology, geography, law, film studies, education, and philosophy have also embraced whiteness as a concept and subject of inquiry. The scope of subject matter susceptible to analysis by whiteness scholars appears vast.”
43. David Brody, “Charismatic History: Pros and Cons,” 43.
social, professional, and finally emotional—how we feel about our working subjects. About the time *Chants Democratic* appeared, a more successful insurgency was consolidating gains in literary criticism as cultural politics gradually supplanted formalism as the dominant operational paradigm. Leading that revolt were feminists, soon followed by an array of subaltern identities. The bad attitudes of workingmen naturally disturbed a project that tapped emotional resources generated by the history of these attitudes and the pain they caused. The power of such feelings stemmed partly from the fact that many involved in the politicizing of literary criticism experienced firsthand the injustices of racism, nativism, and misogyny. In addition, rhetoric was used in advancing the new agenda that recruited through affective means such as rage and shame, producing solidarity of a kind Wendy Brown calls moralism, its views often rigid and intolerant. In *Reading and Disorder*, I argue that the same rhetoric was used to reform antebellum Americans, which in succeeding produced the attitudes in workingmen that we find offensive—as did contemporary observers for whom figures like Eva and Uncle Tom did their disciplinary work by emotionalizing conduct, generating views also rigid and intolerant.

My point is not that politicizing literary studies was a bad thing. Yet as Brown suggests, there are costs to leveraging emotions to change how people behave. On legal uses of emotion, Martha Nussbaum contends that shame penalties assessed by U.S. courts encourage recidivism and public stigma, as crime is thereby attached to identity. Shaming workingmen occurred long ago, so nothing we say will affect them. However, by adopting rhetoric similar to what produced their offensiveness, we erect barriers not simply moral or social, but which viscerally dissociate us from their attitudes and from them. The emotion that Nussbaum identifies with stigma is disgust, which given its logic of contamination explains the caricature we have generated of workingmen as pathologies of American social life—a caricature not unlike what Lott finds on the minstrel stage.

Beyond our preoccupation with bad attitudes, Lott suggests something of our affective difficulty in dealing with workingmen in the often turgid solidarity he negotiates with them. While he rejects “political disapprobation” and “aesthetic disdain” in addressing the “artifacts and social realities of popular life,” Lott is not neutral: “we must no longer be

45. Shaming purifies the shamer, producing a sense of righteousness in the moral context of law. Offenders are stigmatized, magically embodying, and so cleansing us of all we wish to deny in ourselves (Martha Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, 71–123).
46. “Disgust,” Nussbaum writes, “revolves around a wish to be a type of being one is not, namely nonanimal and immortal. Its thoughts about contamination serve the ambition of making ourselves nonhuman, and this ambition, however ubiquitous, is problematic and irrational, involving self-deception and vain aspiration” (*Nussbaum, Hiding from Humanity*, 102).
satisfied merely to condemn the terrible pleasures of cultural material such as minstrelsy, for their legacy is all around us.”

Only by beginning to inventory the deposits of feeling for which blackface performance has been responsible can we hope to acknowledge the social origins and psychological motives of “racial” impulses, reckonings, and unconscious reactions that lie so deep in most Caucasians as to feel inevitable and indeed natural. An equally urgent outcome of this undertaking will be to make ourselves aware of the resistant, oppositional, or emancipatory accents of the racial bad attitudes residing in American working-class culture today.47

Racism is not the only legacy all around us. The fraught relationship Andrew Ross describes between intellectuals and popular culture Lott endures trapped between two objects equally fetishized in American culture: suffering Negroes and the People in full democratic revolt. He buries their conflicting virulences beneath disembodied professionalism, here characterized in the bureaucratic language of “inventory.”

Not everyone dwells on the bad attitudes of workingmen, of course. Historians continue to study labor politics, local labor history, and the history of specific periods and groups. In *Advocating the Man: Masculinity, Organized Labor, and the Household in New York, 1800–1840,* Joshua Greenberg examines how domestic obligations affected male behavior in the workplace and in politics. Thomas Augst’s *The Clerk’s Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* treats young men who, like Carpenter’s brothers, sought employment not in craft, but in the period’s rapidly expanding mercantile concerns, and whose reading fostered character development needed in a maturing democracy and expanding market economy. And in *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature,* Glenn Hendler extends the traditionally women-focused study of sentimentalism to men, including antebellum workers whose temperance testimonials were driven by reading that placed sympathy at the heart of social life, producing relations at once joined by bonds of identification and divided by the threat that these affective fictions posed to individuality. Such efforts expand our view of working life in the period. In Greenberg’s case, it corrects a caricature of working homes as mere bastions of misogynist oppression.48 Those engaged in advocacy scholarship seem them-

---

47. Lott, *Love and Theft,* 4, 11.
48. The domestic relations of working couples suffer from sparse evidence and a tendency to assume the worst of husbands. In two separate studies, Christine Stansell and Pamela Haag generalize about working households based on the transcripts of trials where men were accused of murdering their spouses. Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860,* 76–102; Haag, “The ‘Ill-Use of a Wife’: Patterns of Working-Class Violence in Domestic and Public New
selves inclined to escape the tensions that burden Lott. One effect of Streeby’s retreat to the bad attitudes of texts is that they increase the distance between a nativist press and its bad social consequences.

I wish to do the opposite, to close this distance, while using a materialist emphasis and personal writing to buffer reformist passions that stigmatized workingmen in their time and do so still in ours. Carpenter reminds us that the readers we speak of were, in large majority, unassuming men who did not murder their wives or riot in the streets. Yet their texts were filled with such deeds, and worse. The prurient content of men’s culture is the elephant in the room of any account that simply ignores it. Augst’s often magisterial history of young men’s moral development confirms our regard for the progressive value of literacy; but it does so by disregarding the lurid vulgarity that so often characterized their reading and the imaginary life it produced. Lost by ignoring such content is the intimacy that Lott locates in minstrel mayhem, as the prudent self that young men presented in their letters and journals (Augst’s main sources) exploded in recreational public life. Bureaucracy aside, Lott’s speculative analyses produce dazzling accounts of that life, such as when he projects the performative inklings of class onto the actions of a shopkeeper who “raised a shout he may have retracted with a raised eyebrow. Amusement at the antics of the vulgar distanced them; petit-bourgeois mastery of minstrel show spectatorship, which included taking in the spectators as part of the show, was precisely the power of one class over the other.”49 The sheer energy of passages like this rises above bad attitudes and the disgust they provoke. Yet energy passes, and we are left to ask, as Hendler appears to, what do we do with such feelings in a profession that regards them, rightly enough, as a threat to objectivity.50

Questions like this are no easier to answer than those posed by a sparse historical record. Traditional approaches in History or literary criticism offer little, as protocols that constitute disciplinarity discourage innovation. Interdisciplines such as American and Cultural Studies are more flexible; yet both pursue political agendas in ways that have stigmatized workingmen. A more neutral field is the history of the book, which too is flexible—or has been until recently. Long the domain of bibliographers, book history attracted considerable interest following the turn to culture in History and to historicism in literary studies. What began in English departments as reader response theory and

49. Lott, Love and Theft, 158.
reception studies has gravitated in time toward more materialist approaches to textual production, consumption, and the wider role played by print culture in social and economic life. Like other mixed disciplinary fields, book history benefited greatly from cross-border trade in methods and materials. Especially fruitful has been the combination of History’s real-world objectives with literary criticism’s interpretative sophistication. And yet, the use of literary methods has declined significantly in the past decade, particularly where texts are involved. This decline reflects desire within the field for disciplinary recognition, a project that has excluded much of what historians find methodologically suspect. It has also been a response to what many believe were the excesses of textualism, in new historicism and in a general indifference to verifying historical claims based on theory and interpretation.

Materialism has given book history empirical credibility and analytical correctives remarkable for their revisionist implications. But it has also been used to purge the field of texts and textual methods essential to advance our understanding of print culture beyond the narrow limits of empiricism. To abandon texts is especially inappropriate in a period when the material history of the book was not limited to production and distribution, but included technologies of language that had unprecedented influence on material life. This ranged from the role genre assumed in managing the financial risks of mass publishing, to the effects of reform literature on activities like drinking and slavery. Lincoln’s observation that the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* “made this big war,” attests to the materiality of texts, with particular consequences for bodies—Lincoln’s included. This materiality depended, as literary critics have shown, on the effect of texts on readers and on the affective world reading produced.

Yet if literary critics understand the value of texts for materialist analysis, it is to an historian I turn in declaring my textual intensions. Carlo Ginzburg was not always an historian, however. He began a literature student, his influences the philologists Leo Spitzer and Erich Auerbach, whose expansive, fragment-driven interpretive scholarship spurred many beyond the formalism

53. See Trish Loughran’s challenge to the longstanding assumption that print culture was the basis for national identity formation, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770–1870.*
once dominant in literary studies. Ginzburg uses these roots to account for the
textuality of his historical method, best known from his work on witches, so
called by papal inquisitors in explaining what he says were remnants of ancient
shamanistic cults in European peasant culture. He bases such claims not on
verdicts delivered by inquisitional courts, or on demonological tracts written by
those who ran them. Rather, they emerge from transcripts kept with attention
to detail essential when the least word, glance, or shift in tone might betray an
agent of Satan. Ginzburg found these records in various ecclesiastical libraries
where they sat long ignored due to the then nature of History as a discipline.
In what would make him a leading exponent of microhistory and the cultural
turn, he entered this “unexplored gold mine” armed with methods learned in
reading fiction, “hermeneutics applied to literary texts and, more specifically,
the taste for telltale detail.” He also embraced rhetoric, morphology, typology,
and comparative methods not, by his account, properly historical.

Ginzburg subjected his archive to close reading, a method he calls “venatic,
divinatory, conjectural or semiotic,” depending on context. Such reading
disclosed evidence where there was none before. Instead of demonology and
church politics, all well documented and open to empirical review, Ginzburg
explained what baffled even the inquisitors: who were the accused men and
women called “benandanti” (literally, well-farers), and what did they do at
night when they claimed to leave their bodies and battle demons in defense
of their crops and villages? He did this by engaging obscurities of tone and
nuance, anxiety, and symbolic patterning, all of which required reading
through layers of meaning produced by language difference (judges did not
speak local dialect) and the evasions of defendants who knew very well that
every carefully worded question was meant to incriminate them. Ginzburg
combined interpretive speculation with evidence from existing historiography
to fashion plausible arguments about individual trials and about the wider cult
phenomenon. His success in close reading a diverse textual base to explain
shamanism and other mysteries of European peasant culture encouraged pro-
miscuous disciplinarity of the kind we find in Lott and others.

In addition to evidence, Ginzburg offers reflection on the problem of sub-

55. Ginzburg, Clues, viii.
56. Ginzburg, Clues, 117.
57. Ginzburg’s primary work on the benandanti is The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian
Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries.
58. Perhaps the best recent example of such disciplinarity is Saidiya V. Hartman’s Scenes of
Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America on black identity formation
in the nineteenth century. Hartman argues that forms of symbolic domination produced consistency
rather than change in constituting blackness, and she does this using a wide array of materials that
allow her to treat subjects just as obscure, if not as historically distant and Ginzburg’s benandanti.
ject position we encounter with workingmen. In “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm,” Ginzburg links his “taste for telltale detail” to rationalism and to efforts in the late nineteenth century to protect middle-class power. Fields such as criminology, psychoanalysis, and art history developed to authenticate value and determine guilt through the inadvertent residues of practice: the shape of a brushstroke, slips in speaking, a thief’s fingerprints. And yet “the same conjectural paradigm employed to develop ever more subtle and capillary forms of control,” he adds with a hint of self-consciousness, “can become a device to dissolve the ideological clouds which increasingly obscure such a complex social structure as fully developed capitalism.”

To say that one’s hegemonic method can be used for counterhegemonic ends appears disingenuous, much the way Lott’s bureaucratic language, interpretive ingenuity, and class critique cover for what is finally an exposé of the bad attitudes of workers. Yet Ginzburg knows this. He also knows that “ideological clouds” operate less as calculation than impulse. In another essay, “The Inquisitor as Anthropologist,” Ginzburg describes close reading the “archives of repression”:

I often felt as if I was looking over the judges’ shoulders, dogging their footsteps, hoping (as they presumably did) that the alleged offenders would be talkative about their beliefs—at the offender’s own risk, of course. This proximity to the inquisitor somewhat contradicted my emotional identification with the defendant.

While Ginzburg differentiates between emotional identification with victims and interests he shares with their persecutors, he ignores the extent to which these interests also bear feelings. The professional ambitions of a young historian may well resonate with the zeal of inquisitors, in particular when, armed with tracts on satanic lore that rationalized the empirical Christian world of the sixteenth century, they played a principal role in modernizing witchcraft out of existence, leading eventually to rationalistic methods like Ginzburg’s, which would do the same to theirs.

The impulse to identify with the judges becomes significantly less once we move beyond their professionalism. It is hard to sympathize with inquisitional justice—more so for Ginzburg, one would think, born a Jew in fascist Italy. Evil encountered in inquisitional courts is not greatly feared today, however. Replace witches with racists (or Nazis) and feelings change. Now the inquisitor is a reformer such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, and while her tract may today

59. Ginzburg, Clues, 123.
60. Ginzburg, Clues, 157–58.
cause political misgivings, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* still brilliantly illustrates how we are socialized to be “right feeling,” and how we judge others who are not. “Every time you hear an expansive white man drop into his version of black English,” Lott compellingly observes, “you are in the presence of blackface’s unconscious return.” Whatever mitigation this might afford later men, there was nothing unconscious about Carpenter’s May 21, 1844 entry: “I went down to the black barber’s tonight & heard him fiddle till 1/2 past 10, he is a good fiddler a ‘rale nigger fiddler.’” Professionally, a statement like this is a “gold mine.” To find one while plying the private papers of a young workingman produces the thrill Ginzburg felt when, looking over an inquisitor’s shoulder, he saw a defendant slip in his testimony, reveal more than he should, and consign himself to a day on the rack, or worse. Exploiting “telltale detail” is less divinatory here than “venatic.” If advocacy is involved, “emotional identification with the defendant” faces a further challenge. Like Lott, we are forced to finesse—and finally endure—solidarity with men who didn’t just have bad taste or no manners, but whose amusements produced some of the worst evils of our time.

*Reading and Disorder* takes a materialist approach in analyzing a wide range of textual materials—reading and otherwise—associated with working-men. I do this partly to discover evidence where there was none before. But I also do it to produce a less fraught account of these men, one that treats bad attitudes, but avoids making them a platform merely to pursue current critical objectives. By extension, I also eschew solidarity with my subjects, advocacy or attachments associated with populism or victimization. Sympathy is especially problematic in a period when it became a key social bond between Americans and, so, the basis for rhetoric used coercively to “re-form” workers to better serve changing market conditions. My central claim in chapter 5 is that, while a victim’s suffering provided emotional leverage that indeed changed how men behaved, it also generated retributive desires served by violence in reform literature itself and in recreational reading derived from it. Beyond texts that tortured countless wives and mothers as the preferred victims of disciplinary reading, feelings that were thereby produced also attracted ambivalence. “I understand that there is any quantity of sympathy afloat in the community for me,” declared labor advocate Mike Walsh on being jailed for libel in 1843. “I have no use for the disgusting and nauseating article. It may do for old women who are griped, but it is a poor thing for men to feed on.”

Yet tactical shifts do only so much. Even if we admit being rhetorically

---

62. Mike Walsh, “Sympathy.”
implicated in the stigmatizing of workingmen, choices are few, as they were for Ginzburg’s judges. Reading *The Night Battles* would not have reversed inquisitors’ rulings; shamanism was as heretical as witchcraft, and as threatening. Centuries of reading have persuaded us that racism and misogyny are bad, and it did so finally through fear, shame, and other feelings very difficult to negotiate with. Because such wrongs now define entire areas of academic study, we are also caught between effects such as moralism produced by emotionalized practice, and how to fix it without losing much of what now qualifies us as professional, especially in heavily politicized fields such as American Studies. Ginzburg’s shifting loyalties as an inquisitor himself suggest that affective conditioning situates us across a line from workingmen, a line not just temporal or rational, but of feelings deeply felt and, as such, largely inescapable. Certainly Mike Walsh would have preferred “political disapprobation” and “aesthetic disdain” to a social attachment that his entire life had been used to unman him. Instead of denial, we may better understand such men by letting bad feelings register difference across a transitional moment much like the benandanti’s in which one world was coercively superseded by another.