Reading and Disorder in Antebellum America

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Introduction

City Reading

*Cyrus came after me last night about 5 o'clock & I come home with him. I went to meeting at the Unitarian Church all day. I was homesick before night for there is not so much going on here as in Greenfield. (EC), June 2, 1844*

There is nothing so strange about Carpenter's remark one weekend while visiting his parents that he was homesick for Greenfield, the town in northwestern Massachusetts where he moved two years before for employment. His reason was simple: "there is not so much going on here." He means Bernardston, a rural community just north of Greenfield where he was born and raised. We would hardly expect anything else from a young man used to living on his own with money in his pocket and surrounded by others in similar circumstances.

But these circumstances were not all we imagine. Certainly, things did "go on" in Greenfield. As a growing town of several thousand, it was a center of social and economic life in the region. There were cabinetmakers, shoemakers, printers, jewelers, tailors, bookbinders, blacksmiths, tinsmiths, and harness makers. Greenfield had a foundry, a bakery, a barber, a lumber shop, planing shop, carriage shop, cutlery works, a woolen mill, various professional services, banks, and general retail establishments. Carpenter records events ranging from business deals, elections, and parades to fires, thefts, and occasional public disorder. But few involved him, even as a spectator. He obtained news about what was going on through word of mouth; important events were covered by the *Greenfield Gazette and Courier*. But personally he took part in little that was newsworthy.

It would have been strange if he had. What Carpenter did most was work: six days a week, twelve hours a day. This was not the noisy, machine-driven labor increasingly common in larger centers like Lowell and Worcester. But
it did occupy most of his time, and he leaves no doubt it was dull. When not working, he slept, ate meals, and did chores like purchasing clothes and keeping account of his money. He took dance lessons and enjoyed an occasional party or hand of “high low” in his shop. He joined a debating club, mainly as a spectator. Sundays he went to church, often twice. Town life may have given him a sense of independence away from home. But his masters kept a close eye on him, and were he involved in anything unseemly, his family would have soon stepped in. Not that he was inclined to dissipation. The great evils of town life, drink and gaming, were not his, a fact he notes repeatedly. Anxiety about such activities had various sources. But the main one was his favorite pastime, reading, which among other things convinced him of the evil of drinking and gambling in towns like Greenfield.

So what was Carpenter homesick for? To answer this question, we must locate him less in the real than the imagined space of antebellum towns and cities. Carpenter missed not what he did in Greenfield, but what it was like to occupy it as space. Boston mechanic Timothy Claxton writes in 1839 that cities acted “as a sort of stimulus to [urban newcomers], so that they can seldom endure the quiet country life afterward.” Claxton identified the cause of this stimulus as the “noise and activity of large cities.” But Carpenter experienced it in Greenfield, a town that hardly compares to Boston, New York, and Philadelphia as the preeminent urban centers of the period. So its cause was not simply noise and activity, which, Claxton notes, one gets used to anyway. Carpenter’s exhilaration stemmed not from what was “going on” in the streets of Greenfield, so much as what he imagined was going on. And what he imagined was going on was based on what he read.

David Henkin reminds us that the relationship between reading and cities is an old one. It also needs more attention, he says, insofar as it involves the production of imagined space. Henkin argues that signs, handbills, and paper currency gave cities a literal textuality different from the figurative “legibility” identified in recent work on urban spectatorship. But different or not, Henkin shares basic suppositions with this work on the relationship between print culture and urban life, especially in the nineteenth century when reading was a key response to problems caused by mass urbanization. Signs “helped to decode
and demystify urban spaces” for millions who found them alien and bewilder-
ing. Reading “explained the new metropolis” for recent arrivals and for those
who found their cities and towns so changed from what they knew before.
This reading included guidebooks, advice books, maps, advertisements, daily
papers, and “flaneur narratives.” All gave readers a sense of epistemological
control over the otherwise problematic world in which they found themselves.

The strength of this approach is its functional positivism: reading supplied
information that enabled urban inhabitants to live safer, more productive lives.
But this is its weakness too. Missing is the slippage inherent in all interpretive
acts, especially when the object is as elusive as space. By including this slippage
in their analysis, others explain the relationship between reading and cities in
ways less concrete, yet more analytically useful. Karen Halttunen does this with
urban performative identity, where if behavior could be codified and published,
it could also be purchased and counterfeited. Peter Brooks does it with scopic
desire, where amid the flow of people and faces on city streets, recognition was
subject to erasure and loss. And Dana Brand does it with writers who embraced
urban illegibility as one more contemplative void upon which to project roman-
tic imagination. All identify a complex and reciprocal link between what resi-
dents read about urban space and what they experienced in occupying it.

Yet neither of these approaches accounts for the kind of urban reading that
dominated all others. “Look any and every day of the week, at your morning
paper,” wrote James Gerard in 1853, “and see what a black record of crime
has been committed in your public streets the day and the night before, what
stabbings, what shootings, what knockings down, what assaults by slung shots
and otherwise; insults to women and other disgusting details of violence!”
He was not exaggerating. Based on what they read in newspapers and elsewhere,
many concluded there was no law and order at all. The National Police Gazette
proclaimed on October 16, 1845 that “the whole country, swarms with hordes
of English and other thieves, burglars, pickpockets, and swindlers, whose daily
and nightly exploits give continual employment to our officers, and whose

number. From 1820 to 1870, communities with 2,500 or more residents grew by a factor of ten in the
northeastern U.S. New York State went from having 7 cities to 88, while seeing the proportion of
urban residents go from 11.7 to 50 percent. Figures in other parts of the country were also impressive.
Ohio went from having 1 city in 1820 to 59 in 1870, while its urban population climbed from 1.7
to 25.6 percent. Only in the agricultural South did urban numbers remain low. (Bayrd Still,
Urban America: A History with Documents, 77–79, 118–19.)

5. Henkin, City Reading, 51.
6. Stuart Blumin, “Explaining the New Metropolis: Perception, Depiction, and Analysis in
Mid-Nineteenth-Century New York City.”
7. Karen Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in
America, 1830–1870; Peter Brooks, “The Text of the City”; Dana Brand, The Spectator and the City in
Nineteenth-Century American Literature.
course through the land, whatever direction they may take, may be traced by
their depredations.” Crime thrived due to the “ignorance of the community,”
which to remedy the Gazette provided a weekly chronicle of crime. Beginning
in the 1830s, a flood of reading told Americans that cities were threatened by
assaults, robberies, gangs, riots, fires, explosions, and disease. Such news was
essential in the competitive periodical marketplace. Even respectable journals
made room for “horrid murders” among their foreign reports, shipping news,
theses, sermons, medical advice, and commercial ads. Many ran serial novels
of the kind popularized in Europe by Eugene Sue that portrayed the city as a
domain filled with corruption and danger. George Lippard’s The Quaker City;
or, The Monks of Monk Hall: A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery and Crime
(1845) was the most widely read novel published to date in the United States.
As appalled as Americans were by crime in their streets, they liked to read
about it, and at some length.

The paradox of crime’s popularity appears in what Stuart Blumin calls
the “curious mixture of indictment and celebration” found in George Foster’s
widely read collection of urban exposés, New York by Gas-Light.9

NEW YORK BY GAS-LIGHT! What a task we have undertaken! To pen-
etrate beneath the thick veil of night and lay bare the fearful mysteries of dark-
ness in the metropolis—the festivities of prostitution, the orgies of pauperism,
the haunts of theft and murder, the scenes of beastly debauch, and all the sad
realities that go to make up the lower stratum—the under-ground story—of
life in New York! What may have been our motive for invading these dismal
realms and thus wrenching from them their terrible secrets? Go on with us
and see. The duty of the present age is to discover the real facts of the actual
condition of the wicked and wretched classes—so that Philanthropy and Jus-
tice may plant their blows aright.10

Strictly as reading, Foster’s relish for his topic raises questions that have long
preoccupied us about pleasure derived from the negative feelings of tragedy
and horror. Yet insofar as Foster celebrated “real facts” that caused fear on real
American streets, he celebrated a form of this pleasure that cannot be explained
in terms of circumscribed cultural practice.

It also cannot be explained using either of the approaches to city reading I
indicated. Both assume a positivist epistemology: city dwellers read to “decode
and demystify.” Beyond slippage at the point they did this, hard semiotic data

10. George Foster, New York by Gas-Light, 69. Further references are cited parenthetically in the
text.
seem not to have been the object. *New York by Gas-Light* takes the reader on a tour of various establishments, some identified, most not, describing their operations and the people who frequent them. Foster exposes corruption wherever he finds it, which is everywhere he looks. Crime becomes the underside of all urban activity. His method is to tie everyday experience to narratives of violation. While this indeed constitutes a semiotic project, it hardly eliminates mystery. *New York by Gas-Light* constructs an urban register that locates thieves in every alley and vice behind every door. Concealed in darkness and behind storefronts that “presented no other appearances than might legitimately belong to such a concern,” events that Foster locates nowhere specifically become dispersed in a lurking, protean criminal presence (146). Ordinary houses are brothels; shops are the haunts of thieves. Beneath a stable is a dancehall, a “terrible place” where prostitutes revel, gamblers play, and the innocent are doomed (147). Some can read this world, but they, like Foster, inhabit the dark side of an epistemological divide that manifestly excludes the reader.

*New York by Gas-Light* undermined the safe pleasures of disembodied voyeurism by threatening the personal security of readers, and not just New Yorkers. Foster often addresses farmers, and given the book’s circulation we can assume it was read well beyond its immediate urban market.11 There was plenty of such reading in smaller towns and rural areas, and much suggests the same ambivalence found in Foster. Urban crime figured notably in Carpenter’s reading, from temperance narratives like *Easy Nat*, to novels such as Sue’s *Mysteries of Paris*. And these are not always set in distant places. Harry Hazel’s *The Burglars; or, The Mysteries of the League of Honor* shifts between Boston and Deerfield.12 The 1840s saw fiction about crime in many places outside the large metropolitan centers: Lowell, Fitchburg, Nashua, Manchester.13 Readers in these places found crime in their daily papers too, and at levels close to those that scandalize Gerard. Carpenter often recorded this kind of news, making as


12. Carpenter cites *The Burglars* on September 6, 1844. “I think it is first rate,” he writes, and notes that the “scene is laid in Boston, & Deerfield. I gave 12 ½ cents for it.” Deerfield is not named in the novel, but Carpenter recognizes it from Hazel’s description. It also passes through “a hotel in Greenfield, a village, perhaps, more noted for its extreme beauty than any other in New England” (Harry Hazel, *The Burglars*, 45).

13. On New England city-mystery fiction, see Ronald and Mary Zboray, “The Mysteries of New England: Eugene Sue’s American ‘Imitators,’ 1844.” Many cities and towns became settings for such fiction, from 20-page pamphlets to novels first serialized, then sold in bound editions. Lippard’s *The Quaker City* is the best known. Ned Buntline’s *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York* had sequels. They also ranged widely in content, some dominated by sex and violence, others concerned with love and commercial intrigues.
much room for local disturbances as for those far away. He reads newspapers everyday from neighboring cities, commenting on riots in Philadelphia and noting that the Greenfield Gazette and Courier put out an “extra” on the murder of Joseph Smith in Illinois (ECJ, July 9, 1844). Mobs were of special interest.¹⁴

Even the young were not immune. A paperbound children’s book, New-York Scenes, follows a boy named Jack whose uncle takes him on a tour of the town. “In a bustling city,” Jack learns, “a costly dress often covers over a very vile person: as workmen do their brass and pine, when the heart is very hollow, or very corrupt.”¹⁵ Again, peril lurks behind respectable appearances. Worse are the material dangers of city life. From burning buildings people flee, “children often hardly escaping with their lives, running here and there with bitter bewailings; furniture and wares hurried out into the streets: in short, such confusion, noise and distress, at which nature itself revolts! Now again we behold the hook and lad-

Figure 2. Illustration. From New-York Scenes: Designed for the Entertainment and Instruction of Children of City and Country (New York: Mahlon Day, 1830), 33.

¹⁴. In remarking on Smith’s murder, Carpenter also notes rioting in Philadelphia and fear that “there will be considerable bloodshed.” His preoccupation with crime was typical. Many diaries from the period do little more than record such news.


Here “indictment and celebration” are joined in the title: “Designed for the Entertainment and Instruction of Children of City and Country.” A similar tract, The New-York Guide, instructs in verse, often with illustrations such as the nightmarish “A Walk around the City” (figure 3). On the facing page is the following greeting:

Welcome to New-York, young friends,
    The air of it to try;
Perhaps some caution you may need;
    Give heed—I’ll tell you why.

Astonishment is apt to fill
    The mind of every stranger;
And little folks who look about,
    Will often be in danger.17

For older children, more sophisticated reading told the story. Reuben Kent’s First Winter in the City, by Helen Knight, depicts the temptations that threaten

young men who seek employment in the city. Reuben survives, though others do not, including his friend Alfred, whom Reuben nurses when he suffers the ill effects of dissipation. Alfred’s health is too far-gone, however, and Reuben takes him home to die in his mother’s arms.

What Americans thought was going on in antebellum cities was determined by more than what occurred there. Yet how they felt followed only obliquely from fates like Alfred’s. A greenhorn’s ruin was one of the period’s most popular comic plots. This is not to say that city crime was of concern only to social reformers and children’s authors. The risks of city life were deeply felt. They also emerged from palpable causes related to mass urbanization and the displacement of large numbers of young people from their homes and the social controls they represented. “James Haining leaves tonight for New York,” wrote Lowell diarist Susan Forbes about a young man of her acquaintance, “Poor boy! I am afraid that his course is a downward one.” Forbes’s concern stemmed in part from suspicions about James’s character; but they were also based on a vast literature that warned of an urban world where individuals would have to take care of themselves. Nor was fear limited to elites like Gerard, who in New York advocated forming a professional police force. A decade earlier, Carpenter noted like feelings when the Greenfield town council met “to choose a committee of ten to act as a kind of police” because local rowdies were disturbing the peace. Four days later mechanics held their own meeting. Apparently even more concerned about these disturbances, they opted for a force of twenty-five (ECJ, August 2 and 6, 1844).

If Americans feared crime in their cities, how did they also enjoy it? In a sense, my answer is simple: the popular press sensationalized city crime not to explain or eliminate it, but as a source of excitement that overflowed the pages of countless exposés, pamphlet novels, and daily papers to eroticize an urban landscape that for most was not stimulating at all. In this landscape, where

18. Foster includes an example of such ruin with the tongue-in-cheek story of “Zerubbabel Green, eldest son and hope of Thankful Green, and his wife, all of Stephentown, New York state, [who] arrived in the city last night by the Albany boat, on his first visit to town . . . ” (New York by Gas-Light, 178). A great success of the nineteenth-century stage, Benjamin Baker’s A Glance at New York, also concerns the follies of a newcomer to the city, George Parcells, who is tricked and cheated at every turn.

19. Susan Forbes diary, August 18, 1859. Forbes was a teacher from Lowell and Haining once stayed in her boardinghouse. But he moved, and Forbes was not the only one concerned about his future. On May 11, she writes, “Mr Haining called, and removed his things, saying to Mrs. H. that he was going out of town. We are sorry to see him going the way of destruction. Young, talented, handsome, he might be an ornament to society.” On May 22, Forbes “[w]rote a note to James Haining, and sent him ‘The Young Men of the Bible.’ He called this morning and bade us goodbye.” Wherever he originated, New York was the next step in a “downward course” that began when Haining left home to work in Lowell. Several of Carpenter friends set out for New York in search of employment, an option he too considered.
order and productivity in fact made life safer, city crime supplied men like Edward Carpenter with a field of emotional exhilaration that, to borrow from George Bataille, “completed” an urban existence that was confining, constraining, and mind-numbingly dull.20

That Americans were distressed by the growing constraints of urban-industrial life is not hard to show. Nor is it hard to show that they turned to reading to relieve these constraints. More difficult, however, is to say that reading performed the way I suggest. In chapter 2, “The Erotics of Space,” I argue that it does by way of tracts that used city crime to frighten men into behaving. In the lurid prose of reformers like John Todd and Henry Ward Beecher, we find ambivalence much like Foster’s, except that the starker inconsistencies help us generalize their origins and how they functioned rhetorically to eroticize urban space. Such rhetoric supplied an internalized counterpart to what was called the “gridiron plan,” urban streets laid out in the familiar checkerboard pattern of modern cities. Grids rationalized land use at a time of rapid urban growth, extending new manufacturing techniques to planning and architecture, especially in factory towns ruled by profit and productivity. If order increased efficiency, however, it also increased boredom, a form of stress that one labor activist tied to reading, urban design, and work routines that demanded unprecedented levels of application. Yet the same reading and planning provided the basis for a pervasive criminal imaginary that urban dwellers found as exhilarating as they did frightening. Relief provided by this threat is best appreciated in the hyperbole of Todd and Beecher, who in creating it were the first it constrained, and thrilled.

Crime furnished more than indiscriminate affect, however. It occurred in specific places, took specific forms, involved specific characters, and produced emotions that bore meaning beyond adrenalin. When Greenfield’s mechanics appointed twenty-five officers, it was not because the Selectmen’s ten were insufficient. Town streets were contested terrain (literally), and if workers vowed to abolish disorder, as disaffected labor, their feelings were decidedly mixed. Carpenter was both troubled and aroused by this disorder, which often involved mechanics themselves who opposed what they saw as Greenfield’s anti-republican elites. The larger mechanic police force reflected a wish to enact civic virtue, while the threat of unrest represented what little real power they had. Chapter 3, “Narrating Excess,” argues that reading filled cities with not just crime, but crime stories, which made urban risks as much social as material.
