Reading and Disorder in Antebellum America

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CHAPTER 1

Theorizing Disorder

Before proceeding, however, I must say more about the object of such reading and the space it produced. Contrary to what was said about crime in the nineteenth century, Roger Lane argues that the increase in size and number of American cities had, in fact, "a settling, literally a civilizing effect." In doing this, Lane shuns newspapers and books that declared that crime pervaded American cities, turning instead to court records and statistical evidence to show that throughout the century crime rates declined, particularly violent crime. Lane explains his findings as a result of social and economic factors that curbed disorderly behavior. These included higher standards of conduct, the creation of professional police forces, public schooling, close living conditions, and increasingly regular work habits required by new production methods. Despite the "black record of crime" that Gerard read about in his daily paper, he was safer walking the streets of New York in the 1850s than ever before.

Besides questions this raises with respect to the status of crime and its relation to print, Lane makes another point worth considering. Concurrent with the decline of urban crime in the nineteenth century was an increase in suicide, and Lane not only matches the contours of these trends with surprising precision, he links them to occupational and demographic factors. What emerges is something like this: when men lived in large cities and worked long hours in heavily regulated jobs, they tended to commit fewer crimes but kill themselves more. To put a finer point on it, one that emphasizes the kind of trade-off that

1. Roger Lane, "Urbanization and Criminal Violence in the Nineteenth Century: Massachusetts as a Test Case," 469.
2. Roger Lane, Violent Death in the City: Suicide, Accident Murder in Nineteenth-Century

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seems to have been was made: men whose occupations entailed high levels of supervision, regularity, efficiency, and/or more specialized training and education, displayed levels of psychosocial distress greater than those who had “old styles” of work that were “self-directed, unevenly paced, and performed alone or in small groups” (127). Lane maintains that style of work, rather than class affiliation, was more likely to cause stress leading to suicide. He shows that male factory workers had suicide rates comparable to lawyers and bookkeepers, while rates among farmers and merchants were much lower (127). Besides further eroding the usefulness of class distinction, Lane’s hypothesis suggests that stress we usually associate with middle-class professionals also occurred in laborers who were physically active, but performed tasks highly repetitive and tightly controlled (119–34).

I cite Lane on crime and suicide in the nineteenth century because his findings bear on the link I suggest between reading and urban space, namely, that the productive rationalization of antebellum working life caused stress, which reading helped relieve by producing city crime as a source of negative or nonproductive pleasure. My clumsy formulation is due partly to the logical problem of describing how distress caused by crime functioned as a positive good while remaining distressful. Again, attempts to explain the pleasure of culturally induced pain have a long history; and this gets harder when fear is not contained by practice, but infects life after books are closed and papers put away. Negative pleasure has become still more difficult due to our democratization of value. From the pieties of constructivism to strain evident in Eric Lott’s wish to avoid “political disapprobation” and “aesthetic distain,” negative categories have become nearly impossible to sustain.

We are first interested in the economic problem of negative pleasure. This can best be seen if we try to explain city crime using an approach of the kind Jane Tompkins used to justify literature long regarded as subliterary and so beneath academic consideration. Her tactics in Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860 are well known: first she shows that “modernist” values used to canonize some texts while excluding others were not universal, but socially constructed; then she shows how “fruitful” it would be to treat literature in terms of how it functioned in the lives of historical consumers. Tompkins construes value in economic terms: interests served, needs filled, “work” performed. Literature is how “a culture thinks about itself,” she says, “articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular

Philadelphia, 28–29. Lane’s study is not confined to men, although adult white men had by far the highest rates of suicide, five times that of women after the Civil War, the earliest period for which he makes a comparison. Further references are cited parenthetically in the text.
historical moment.”3 This eliminated exclusionary standards so successfully that recovery projects ever since either cite Tompkins or reproduce the logic of her argument.

While suitably contingent, this logic does not eliminate value as an exclusionary category; instead, it replaces the modernist aesthetic with a work ethic. As a critical term, cultural work derives much of its force from its democratic appeal. More important, it infers value that, if not transcendent in the modernist sense, is still axiomatic insofar as it assumes that human desire is universally productive. This is troubling for several reasons. As a legitimating device, cultural work reinforces a deep mistrust of any activity that falls outside what Richard Dyer calls “the business of producing and reproducing, work and family.” This mistrust distorts recreational life by leaving its functional categories unexamined. When a popular genre is treated at all, we are not told why it excites, horrifies, or makes us weep, but why it “also deal[s] with history, society, psychology, gender roles, indeed, the meaning of life.”4

Worse is when such categories are explained and productivity supplies not just validity, but theory. Linda Williams examines “excess” in what she calls “body genres,” saying that, as reviled as they often are, such genres perform valuable social work. Pornography, melodrama, and horror “address persistent problems in our culture, in our sexualities, in our very identities. The deployment of sex, violence, and emotion is thus no way gratuitous and in no way strictly limited to these genres; it is instead a cultural form of problem solving.”5 Williams validates her material the same way as Tompkins, by reducing it to work. Characterizing body genres in this way elides their origins in bodily interests that conflict with “producing and reproducing, work and family.” While this succeeds in validating activities once despised, it does little to disrupt the bias that continues to disown their enjoyment.

The problem of negative pleasure is neither new, nor limited to treating bad culture. Many of our most widely credited critical concepts (ideology, subjectivity, symbolic action, the fetish) locate their critical objects in economies of desire that assume a definitive need to effect order, fix problems, obtain power, or otherwise generate productive gain. Even when we acknowledge extra-economic pleasures we recontain them in productivist schemes. Bakhtin’s “carnivalesque” was as popular a notion as it was in the 1980s because it helped locate agency in the cultures of the oppressed. The term cultural work makes recontainment obvious—and so all the more incompatible with city crime as the not-work outcome of reading. A cultural-work account of urban print

5. Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” 9.
culture like Henkin’s or Blumin’s ignores crime literature by default, while a Tompkins style recovery distorts the negative logic of its enjoyment.

This distortion is significant given the context. For increasing numbers of Americans, antebellum reading was not work. It was enjoyed precisely during those times free from work, whether paid employment or other forms of labor like housekeeping and raising children. The distinction is crucial at a time when work and family became preferred, even oppositional categories to leisure and pleasure. While mass reading was first regarded as an adjunct of the former, by mid-nineteenth-century it was a key form of the latter. The contradiction explains the ambivalence of cultural authorities who saw large amounts of reform and instructional literature circulating beside growing quantities of rubbish and moral contagion. To describe reading as just another form of work obscures its relationship to productivity as the dominant value in the period. To describe city crime as the cultural work of reading obscures its relation to the city as the primary locus of distress.

If we take Lane’s findings to suggest that reading about crime relieved this distress, we must understand it in ways that resist its recuperation as work. This is not easy. Helpful may be the following passage from The Voice of Industry, a worker-run paper more critical of life in New England mill towns than its better-known rival, The Lowell Offering. The writer, a mill worker, defends popular culture as compensatory, but in terms that confuse its economic logic. The writer calls the “moral and intellectual advantages” workers allegedly enjoyed in factory towns a “Romance of Labor,” adding that “tho’ they hunger and thirst” for lectures, sermons, and “well selected books,” mill workers rarely profit from them. Why?

> Simply from physical and mental exhaustion. The unremitted toil of thirteen long hours, drains off the vital energy and unfit[s] for study and reflection. They need amusement, relaxation, rest, and not mental exertion of any kind. A really sound and instructive lecture cannot, under such circumstances, be appreciated, and the lecture fails, to a great extent, in making an impression.—“Jim Crow” performances are much better patronized than scientific lectures, and the trashy, milk-and-water sentimentalities of the Lady’s Book and Olive Branch, are more read than the works of Gibbon, or Goldsmith, or Bancroft.6

Work and leisure form a natural economy based in workers’ bodies. Productive labor “drains off the vital energy,” which must be replenished before they can work again.

6. “Factory Life—Romance and Reality” (original emphasis).
Clear so far. Where it gets hazy is the form “rest” takes. Neither minstrel shows nor sentimental reading replenishes. They usually do the opposite. Laughter burns energy; so do weeping, clapping, and grief. As for “relaxation,” here too we find not a process of draining and refilling, but opposed forms of expenditure: one, the retentive management of resources to control costs and maximize productivity; the other, the relaxations of those controls to feed an (oxymoronic) appetite for dissipation. But as uncontrolled expenditure, the latter discredits the writer’s appeal on behalf of spent workers. It also discredits itself logically. As an appetite, dissipation produces its own productive economy. No matter how privileged a value, no matter how reviled its opposite, desire transforms negative value into a new object of positive interest. As if to affirm this process, and surely encouraged by the profitability of new culture industries, Americans gradually accepted claims of the kind made by The Voice of Industry, domesticating dissipation in formalized amusements, and embracing these amusements as leisure, the effects of which were deemed beneficial. Cultural work would seem to be unavoidable.

Not everyone is willing to leave it at that, however. Georges Bataille spent much of his life circumventing the inevitable recuperation of not-work as positive gain. He also did this through writing, which makes him useful in fathoming the “curious mixture of indictment and celebration” that characterized antebellum crime literature. Perhaps best known for his theory of transgression, Bataille locates the pleasure of transgressing between the human desire for security, on one hand, and on the other, interest in the “bursting plethora” of waste, ruin, and self propelled into the larger discontinuities of time and space. Such pleasure is obtained by violating limits feared because doing so is taboo. Taboos protect bodily space, personal property, and physical safety; they regulate sex, pattern social relations, and, via displacement, determine countless everyday choices of food, dress, and so forth. Transgression does not validate wrong; nor does it eliminate taboo, which produces the impulse to violate it. Rather, transgression sustains, reinforces, and “completes” a taboo.

Transgression provides a neat way to explain the celebration of crime-filled streets, pleasure similar to what exhausted mill workers obtained from

7. Negative desire has attracted interest in many fields: psychology, Freud on the death instinct (Beyond the Pleasure Principle) and D. W. Winnicott on play (Playing and Reality); history, Michel Foucault on unreason (History of Madness); anthropology, Mary Douglas on dirt (Purity and Danger); cinema studies, Steven Shaviro on spectatorship (The Cinematic Body); management, Joanna Brewis and Stephen Linstead on organizational abjection (Sex, Work and Sex Work: Eroticizing Organization); economics, Tibor Scitovsky on pain and consumption (The Joyless Economy: The Psychology of Human Satisfaction); physiology, Marvin Zuckerman on boredom (Sensation Seeking and Risky Behavior).


popular amusement. Like *The Voice of Industry*, Bataille admits the value of “well selected books,” even as he too criticizes how they dominate a world that “recognizes the right to acquire, to conserve, and to consume rationally, but [. . . ] excludes in principle nonproductive expenditure.”\(^{10}\) Important, however, is that nonproductive expenditure does not interest him as a compensatory object, thus turning negative to positive, once again. Rather he seeks to engage negativity in its own right as the basis of mystical experience. He also resists trivializing negativity in middle-class slumming or, as occurred with Bakhtin’s work, where the hierarchical inversions of carnival politicized mass culture. On the wrong side of taboo is not titillation, but disaster, which serves not the physical need for rest, but “interest in considerable losses, in catastrophes that, while conforming to well defined needs, provoke tumultuous depressions, crises of dread, and, in the final analysis, a certain orgiastic state.”\(^{11}\)

Bataille theorizes a principle of expenditure manifested in everything from the sun that “dispenses energy—wealth—without any return,” to the impulse to act against self-interest.\(^{12}\) Bataille has been criticized, notably by Barbara Herrnstein Smith, who in her 1988 polemic, *Contingencies of Value*, dismissed negative expenditure as axiomatic, arguing that all negativity acquires positive value through desire, even if that desire is only to articulate it.\(^{13}\) Yet as Steven Connor points out, Bataille knew this; often he admitted it: extra-economic experience cannot be represented, much less explained, because doing so subjects it to language and other forms of epistemological rationalization.\(^{14}\) Be this as it may, Bataille devised various schemes to elude negativity’s recuperation as productive value. Connor identifies one of these in the essay, “The Use-Value of D.A.F. de Sade,” in which Bataille disrupts positive recuperation by inverting the uselessness that his surrealist friends valued in Sade. Bataille tries “to bluff the system into producing negativity” by reversing the logic of his audience’s assumptions.\(^{15}\) Unable to defeat recuperation, Bataille uses Sade’s “use-value” to produce a cognitive double take that permits a glimpse of an unrecouped negative.

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14. Steven Connor, *Theory and Cultural Value*, 77–80. “A squandering of energy,” Bataille writes, “is always the opposite of a thing, but it enters into consideration only once it enters into the order of things, once it has been changed into a thing” (*Accursed Share*, 193n25) (original emphasis). Bataille makes the same point about writing: “Writing this book in which I was saying that energy finally can only be wasted, I myself was using my energy, my time, working; my research answered in a fundamental way the desire to add to the amount of wealth acquired for mankind” (*Accursed Share*, 11). See also his *Erotism*, 252–65.
While “the cultural work of city crime” may provide a similar glimpse of negativity on antebellum streets, Bataille suggests a more useful approach when, like crime literature, he appeals to the body as a less mediated register of the orgiastic. However disorderly his logic, his writing is worse. Unlike Bakhtin, whose carnivalesque terminology inevitably appears festive, Bataille sustains the disaster of transgression through representation. Rape, nausea, the smell of urine, the taste of vomit, the body pierced, corrupted, and smeared with semen: all appear in Bataille’s academic writing, often unexpectedly and in righteous company. Surprise then delays recuperation: “The sexual channels are also the body’s sewers; we think of them as shameful and connect the anal orifice with them. St. Augustine was at pains to insist on the obscenity of the organs and function of reproduction. ‘Inter faeces et urinam nascimur,’ he said—‘we are born between faeces and urine.’”¹⁶ Such moments in Bataille’s scholarly work give way to more sustained passages in his fiction. His novel, *Story of the Eye*, steadfastly refuses to efface the “busting plethora” of sexual oblivion.

Antebellum reading often featured the kind of prurient lyricism Bataille uses to coax the orgiastic into view. Health reformer Sylvester Graham likens workers to “Hindus” who took tobacco and other drugs “to excess,” and who lived amid “goats, rams and buffaloes, savagely butchered, and men rolling on the ground, besmeared with blood and dirt.”¹⁷ Artist George Catlin described in remarkable detail the “disgusting” customs of Plains Indians who, among other things, hung young men for days by cords looped through their chest muscles.¹⁸ Even technical writing inclined toward prurient content. An otherwise dry 1830 article on steam boilers begins by describing various “horrible catastrophes” caused by poor safety. “The limbs of one of the workmen killed were separated from the body,” we learn of one incident, “the limbs remained in the distillery while the body was found out of the building, amidst the fragments.” Bosses, workers, passersby: all are killed, some by flying debris, some cooked in their skins by clouds of superheated steam.¹⁹

And such accounts were tame compared to coverage of the murder of Mary Rogers in 1841, which included a coroner’s report that described her putrefying corpse pulled from the Hudson River.²⁰ Referred to as the “Beautiful Cigar Girl,” Rogers was thought by some to have been victim of a botched abortion, thus cloaking the entire affair in an air of sexual mystery hardly less lurid than *Story of the Eye*. In fiction, George Lippard’s *The Quaker City* doesn’t theorize

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²⁰. Amy Gilman Srebnick writes on media and the Mary Rogers murder in *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers: Sex and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York*. 
orgiastic experience; but he does anticipate it in response to extreme violence. Devil-Bug, the repulsive, though oddly compelling, main character, is caught stealing from an old lady, who defends herself with pistols, only to have them misfire. Seizing her by the feet, he then dashes her against the mantle.

He raised her body in the air to repeat the blow, but the effort was needless. The brains of the old woman lay scattered over the hearth, and the body which Devil-Bug raised in the air, was a headless trunk, with the bleeding fragments of a face and skull, clinging to the quivering neck.

“B’lieve me soul, the old ‘ooman’s hurt,” muttered Devil-Bug, with a ghastly smile, as he flung the body, yet trembling with life, to the floor—“Ha! Ha!” he shouted, standing as still as though suddenly frozen to stone.21

Devil-Bug seems to have been created for the very purpose of poking holes in a recuperative notion like cultural work.

He also poked holes in cities as the dominant productive technology of the time, and in city reading as an instrument that helped police them. If reading made antebellum cities legible, it also made them catastrophic. Like Bataille, Lippard and others targeted the body as a less mediated register of the orgiastic, using prurience and disgust to glimpse urban catastrophe in city reading and in the pervasive sense of immanence that Carpenter called what was “going on.” This marks bodies and body rhetorics as sites to examine the cultural work of city crime. The notion of nonproductive expenditure, together with the still moving rhetoric that produced it, also permits us to examine its desired object, while refusing to grant it the productive value of work. For transgression to be transgressive, it must transgress, Bataille maintains, and thrill as they might to Devil-Bug’s deeds or the latest news about Mary Rogers, readers were angry about crime. Gerard’s views were representative; so were those of Greenfield’s mechanics. What remains then is to explain how the productivity of city reading produced nonproductive space, and how feelings in that space bore noncompensatory pleasure and spatial ambivalence.