Reading and Disorder in Antebellum America

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CHAPTER 5

Accusing Victims

The same year as the Astor House Riot, another print shop worker, N. Beekley, quit his job as a typesetter and took one keeping books for a Philadelphia manufacturing firm, "where by diligence and attention to business, I hope to remain."1 But despite the higher salary and apparent success in the new position, Beekley is depressed by "the monotonous and tediousness of the counting room" (August 9). To compensate, he turns to amusements in his free time. As befits his new station, none is more offensive than a minstrel show. Most are self-improving; the Fine Art Academy, lectures on learned subjects, Sunday sermons. But if his aim is bettering, Beekley puts an erotic spin on many of these outings. "Visited the Apprentice Library this evening," he writes, "with the Librarian Miss F. C——t, and assisted in registering and numbering some books. This is a very useful institution and has a large number of readers" (April 21). He is only vaguely conscious of romance seeping into the evening’s serious purpose. This is not the case a few months later when he recounts an evening at the Franklin Institute. "There is such a variety of articles to look at," he says of the exhibits. "It would take a good many visits to see all. Besides in the evening there are so many beautiful faces to be seen" (October 18).

Like Thompson, Beekley’s "fast" tendencies conflict with Franklin’s example, here with the offending appetite not dietary, but libidinal. As delinquent as it is, this appetite takes as its object the preeminent disciplinary apparatus in the period. It also moves past Thompson’s prurient surface, while staying focused on his dietary appeal. Beekley wants to marry. In casting about for beautiful faces, he repeatedly speculates about their eligibility. Marriage, as I said, posed

1. N. Beekley diary, January 4, 1849.
problems for workingmen as wage scales and a boom-bust economy made family life difficult. Beekley’s new job, dull as it was, improved his prospects. So if his erotic motive in attending the Franklin Institute conflicted with its improving mission, it also played coyly off of the fact that it was through such activities that he hoped to find a wife. Beekley’s enjoyment in secretly eyeing women among the Institute’s educational displays joined ambivalence toward Franklin and prospective wives as mutually sustaining disciplinary fixtures. For the hand of a woman, he suffered the “monotony and tediousness” of his new job, and possibly the monotony and tediousness of cataloguing books with “Miss F. C—t.” Women represented a wide range of liabilities for antebellum men, and these neither began nor ended with the loss of pleasure that a one-time printer might have enjoyed on an evening out with the “Uncles and Nephews.”

These liabilities were first and foremost rhetorical. I am less concerned with the beautiful faces Beekley encountered at the Franklin Institute, than ones he encountered reading. Unfortunately, he left no record of this reading, good or bad. Yet having argued that Thompson served appetites of the kind Beekley experienced girl watching, I believe we can say more about how reading served these appetites, and further, how it affected the bodily lives of men like Beekley. Working selves were split not by reason, but by feelings produced by reading that used injured women, children, and other figures to leverage conduct. Shame or honor inserted between impulse and action revises Warner’s argument, though less than one might think. Franklin rejected animal food for reasons supplied by a book that persuaded him to worry about health and wealth. Feminine suffering caused different worries that generated different emotional responses. To understand these responses, which included retaliatory desires against the agents of their persuasion, we must move beyond tropes of diet and publication to the consequences of coercive domestication.

That pain functions as a disciplining device is hardly news. That it functions this way in noncorporeal disciplinary practices as indeed pain is less well established. Yet the arbitrary nature of the distinction is clear if we examine the antebellum shift from physical to emotional forms of correction. In 1850, reformers succeeded in having the government ban flogging in the navy. But discipline was still required, and one person who supplied it in the merchant fleet was Joseph Harris, a Presbyterian missionary to seamen in New York. Harris’s diary records many pastoral successes, all involving the calculated manipulation of emotional pain. One time, he asks a ship’s Captain “aware that Consumption has fastened its deadly fangs upon him” if he can hold prayers on his behalf. He is pleased when further goading causes the man to weep.

Harris’s method was to discover emotional vulnerabilities, then use them to bring the errant to their knees, often literally. One afternoon aboard The City of Washington, he confronts a man who he learns is planning an evening ashore.

“I wonder who told you. I did think of going to the Theatre tonight,—but I wont go. . . . Oh! I wont! I wont! . . . Oh! God forgive me, do forgive me. . . . I wont go to the Theatre anymore Jesus! I wont get drunk again God help me! Oh don't let me swear again, I've got such a habit of it, I shall forget, unless thou enable me not to do it. Lord help me for Jesus Christ sake.” Many tears gave evidence that he felt all he said. (40–43)

A member of the American Tract Society, Harris takes bundles of “good reading” to ships in the harbor. Arriving one day, he is greeted by an officer: “Ah! Sir I'm very glad to see you, for if that sort of reading did no other good—one thing I know, about it, which is our crews are quieter than they used to be, and it prevents a deal of trouble” (44).

Fear, grief, shame, despair: these were the affects of disciplinary reading and how it changed the behavior of workingmen. Harris’s tracts “quieted” by exploiting emotional weakness the same way he did, but using a more generalized coercive rhetoric. Again, this involved female and other feminized figures whose pain attached misgivings to the activities that caused it. Brodhead attributes the force of this device to a shift in child rearing practices, where parents “spared the rod,” turning instead to emotional attachments cultivated in the home to serve changing disciplinary needs. Such attachments were internal and so had an advantage over traditional forms of control whose reliance on direct supervision was undermined by the growing mobility and financial autonomy of youth. Brodhead describes the social response as the “relocation of authority relations in the realm of emotion and a conscious intensification of the emotional bond between the authority figure and its charge.”

The principal authority was the mother, whose role in socializing children had grown dramatically, as did her use of love for this purpose. The Advocate of Moral Reform imagines such dependency fostered as the basis for influence in innumerable stories of young men alone in the city but “brought up [. . .] near a mother’s heart and under the paternal eye, and who has never passed the ancestral threshold without the knowledge of the ‘loved ones,’ and then only to be followed by prayerful hearts all through his wanderings.”

And such love did travel, often with the help of the postal service. When

4. “Solitude in the City,” 261.
twenty-three-year-old Henry Johnson moved to New Orleans in 1849, his mother, Patty, expressed concern. “You must be the artificer of your own fate and fortune,” she wrote. “I have never intended to place barriers in your way to prevent your doing whatever you have thought would conduce to your happiness or benefit.” She does, however, help him erect barriers of his own: “All cities present strong temptations to vice to young men, none more than New Orleans. And it will require you to put a constant guard upon your thoughts and actions to enable you to abstain from participation in them. The Gaming table, the wine cup, and last, though not least, the Syren’s voice are ready to allure you from the path of rectitude.” “I have much confidence in you,” Patty concludes, “guard yourself firmly and ‘take heed lest you fall.’”

His mother’s expectation suggests more at stake than Henry’s security. He confirms this several years later when he writes about their relationship. “I was alone with you when I was a little boy,” he writes, “and at the age of twenty eight I am again.—I knew no other’s love then, and I know no others now. God grant that if I am worthy of nothing else I may be worthy of a mother’s affection.”

Family ties did more than travel well; they were redeployed by different means for different purposes. Brodhead treats sentimental literature, which harnessed such ties by way of motherly figures like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s little Eva whose suffering recruited for abolitionism. Educators appropriated filial affection in place of corporal punishment, at least for students. Elizabeth Palmer Peabody’s recalls Bronson Alcott forcing children to whip him when they were bad. The entire class wept as he insisted that he be struck harder and harder, his pain threatening the loss of love due to their misconduct.7 Mary Peabody Mann, who “little scholars [called] mother,” used tenderness to persuade, with like consequences.8 Taking a difficult girl aside, Mann tells her of “the lovely character of her mother, who died at her birth.”9 The girl colors, her lips quiver, she weeps, and submits. Alcott and Mann represent something of an educational avant-garde; but as Harris indicates, their ideas were in wide circulation.10

5. Patty Garrett to Henry Johnson, November 4, 1849, Henry Johnson and Patty Garrett letters; original emphasis.
9. Mann and Peabody, Moral Culture of Infancy, 176.
10. Horace Mann, Mary’s husband, spoke regularly on these ideas. After attending one such talk, Caleb Wall, a twenty-year-old employee of the Worcester Spy, wrote in his diary: “Friend Mann at this time discoursed to us on the Management of Children (as well as adults) in regards to punishment. . . . Whipping is a rather poor way to drive knowledge into the heads of the young urchins, or even to make them mind” (Caleb Wall diary, November 28, 1840; original emphasis). On emotion and education in
The regime of family affection was not produced solely in the middle-class home, an impression produced by treating sentimental literature as an extension of child rearing. Our sense of how working families raised children may not include coddling and dependency. Yet working parents also read tracts that condemned corporal punishment, and there is no reason to believe that mill girls who read *Godey's Lady's Book* were not influenced by it when they married and had families. Family relations were also conditioned as much by sentimental reading as the reverse, changing in effect how adult children felt about family. While sentimentalism was a key middle-class form in the eighteenth century, the coming of mass-produced tract literature subjected working people no less to its persuasion. The loss of mother love was metabolized through characters like Eva and Uncle Tom, who by dying caused grief, then rage and remorse in the extent to which Stowe implicated readers in the wrongs that caused their suffering. Mother love may be limited in explaining this response; identification along Lacanian lines may be more compelling. But the fact remains that such figures pervaded the reform press, producing attachments that internalized behavioral codes and stigmatized those who broke them.

Examples abound. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* made slavery hateful by depicting the victims it produced, directly by destroying families, and indirectly through associated wrongs such as drinking and rape. Among these victims is Simon Legree's mother, who suffered due to his conduct while she lived and now returns to haunt him. Such haunting figured the ability of maternal affection to police conduct across time, space, even lifetimes. The protagonist in John Todd's story, "Influence of a Praying Mother," credits his mother for the good life he now leads, saying that long after her passing, he remained "chained by a remembrance of her faithfulness and her love." Such chains were usually

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12. Jürgen Habermas writes, "On the one hand, the empathetic reader repeated within himself the private relationships displayed before him in literature; from his experience of real familiarity (Intimität), he gave life to the fictional one, and in the latter he prepared himself for the former. On the other hand, the familiarity (Intimität) whose vehicle was the written word, the subjectivity that had become fit to print, had in fact become the literature appealing to a wide public of readers" (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, 50–51). Sentimentalism's public was not restricted to women or the middle class. Anna Warner cites letters from readers that report men and boys weeping over her sister's novel *The Wide, Wide World* (*Susan Warner*, 342–45). And seventeen-year-old seaman's son Francis Bennett writes that another sentimental favorite, *The Lamplighter*, deeply engaged him—after saying a month before that Richard Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* did not (Francis Bennett, Jr., diary, June 6 and July 2, 1854). Cf. Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler, eds., *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture*.

13. John Todd, "Influence of a Praying Mother," 41–43. Joseph Harris provides another example,
negative, however, when life fell short of expectations; and those harmed were wives. It is through Legree’s mistress, Cassie, that his mother haunts him (figure 15). The drunkard terrorizing his family is the most elaborately staged and illustrated scene in temperance literature, for adults and children (figures 16, 17). A wide range of actions were made shameful insofar as they caused the suffering of sweet, vulnerable characters, along with the wives, sisters, mothers, and daughters with whom they were identified. As the ultimate measure of his degradation before taking the pledge, reformed drunkard John Gough cites his poor wife’s misery and death.\(^{14}\)

George Thompson allegorizes the coercive power of the sentimental victim in his relationship with Mrs. Raymond, a young widow he first encounters

If our little readers have carefully read the foregoing pages, they have by this time a pretty correct idea of the manner in which strong drinks are made, and of the characters of the men by whom they are sold. In the following pages I will give them some account of what children are made to suffer whose parents become drunkards.

The Drunkard at home.

Look at that hard-hearted man. He is holding his little boy by the hair with one hand, while the other is raised to give him a blow. And see that anxious mother, doing what she can to save her poor boy from the blow which is aimed at his head, while his little sister is running away in a fright. Are they not all objects of pity? Thousands of children are beaten every day by intemperate parents. Strong drink makes men even more cruel than wild beasts, for they are good to their young. Here is a picture of a

Figure 16. “The Drunkard at Home.” From Charles Jewett, Youth’s Temperance Lecture (Boston: Wipple and Damrell, 1841), 20. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.
boarding in the house of his master, Mr. Romaine. It is with Mrs. Raymond that Romaine has an affair before he murders his wife for the same offense. Thompson loses track of her for several years, but shortly after he kills Jack Slack, they meet once again in Philadelphia, this time under very different circumstances. Once comfortably well off, Mrs. Raymond has been seduced and robbed by a lawyer. She also now dresses in white and plays the harp. Thompson responds predictably: “Like a knight errant of old, [I] became the champion of beauty.” 15 Raymond’s “musical voice,” “humility,” and her harp caricature the appeal of feminine virtue. She also embodies the hypocrisy and violence of justice driven by sentimental victimization. At Mrs. Raymond’s request, he takes her to Pittsburgh where the lawyer lives. He asks her to forego revenge; but she justifies her mission based on principles similar to those Thompson used in killing Jack, his “evil genius.” She also threatens him should

15. George Thompson, My Life; or, The Adventures of Geo. Thompson, 43.
he attempt to stop her. So he arranges a meeting on the pretext of business, thinking that when the time comes he can still restrain her. Beauty will not be denied, however. Entering the lawyer's office, Mrs. Raymond leaps forward and, while Thompson watches in horror, she kills him with a knife.

Horror or not, Thompson is helpless to resist, even after when, misgivings aside, he helps Mrs. Raymond escape. Her persuasive power as a victim suggests how femininity convinced men to embrace the “monotony and tediousness” of Beekley’s counting room, Mose’s responsibility to provide and protect, and Henry Stuart’s emasculated social respectability. Domestication joined other liabilities of sentimental reform, whose myriad victims metabolized behavioral norms and social obligations, managing retaliatory impulses while sustaining the wrong that justified pain. Deeply committed to the sentimental victim, workingmen just as deeply resented it as instrument of that pain and objectification of the regime it served.

Elaine Scarry suggests how readers responded to emotional manipulation in her famous account of physical suffering, The Body in Pain: The Unmaking and Making of the World. Specifically, Scarry describes how pain becomes injury by spontaneously producing an explanation of itself, one that assigns blame and arranges its cause-effect relations in narrative form. Key to this narrative is the “weapon,” a term that refers to both the literal instrument that inflicts pain, as in torture, and the sufferer’s cognitive response to it.

As an actual physical fact, a weapon is an object that goes into the body and produces pain. As a perceptual fact, it lifts the pain out of the body and makes it visible or, more precisely, it acts as a bridge or mechanism across which some of pain’s attributes—its uncontestable reality, its totality, its ability to eclipse all else, its power of dramatic alteration and world dissolution—can be lifted away from their source, can be separated from the sufferer and referred to power, broken off from the body and attached instead to the regime.16

Lacking an objective referent, pain is identified with the weapon. As the immediate causal object, the weapon is also identified with the wider coercive power that controls it.

There are two points here. The first concerns the weapon’s persuasive function to “unmake and make the world” in the image of the regime that wields it. This is easy enough to imagine in the context of torture, Scarry’s stated object, where the weapon destroys and remakes subjectivity. It is only slightly less easy to see the sentimental victim as “an object that goes into the body” for

the same purpose. The second point is that insofar as such pain is identified with the weapon that causes it, and insofar that weapon is set within a narrative of intentionality, this narrative describes the world destroyed and remade. By assigning blame, it also triggers a “revenge impulse,” what Oliver Wendell Holmes described as “hatred for anything giving us pain, which wreaks itself on the manifest cause, and which leads even civilized man to kick a door when it pinches his finger.” Retaliatory desire is an afterthought for Scarry; here it explains the vast quantity of graphic violence wreaked on figures like Uncle Tom and Stuart’s sister. While sentimental narratives advanced reform by blaming readers, such violence simultaneously fed retaliatory desire produced by the tactic’s coercive pain.

How did this play out in reading? Carpenter records the titles of many books in his journal; but he summarizes only one: Alexander Stimson’s temperance novel, *Easy Nat; or, Boston Bars and Boston Boys: A Tale of Home Trials.*

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. This shows the evil of drunken Companions. I finished the Bureau today that I began a week ago last Monday and began another just like it & I hope it will not take quite as long to make it. (*ECJ*, March 14, 1844)

That Carpenter concludes his story of bad workers by working faster himself may be a coincidence. But there is no shortage of other evidence that reading affected his conduct. A subscriber to the Hampton Washingtonian, Carpenter often comments on the evils of drink, leaving no doubt he agreed with Stimson that it was a “tyrannical APPETITE” that “good citizens should unite to abate.” While not a drinker himself, Carpenter did play cards, and after every game he writes that he did so “just for amusement for I never play for money” (*ECJ*, April 18, 1844). Self-consciousness turns to embarrassment with his ongoing effort to stop chewing tobacco, “a filthy habit & it injures my health I think” (*ECJ*, March 23, 1844). And on August 13, we again find text and

17. Oliver Wendell Holmes, “Early Forms of Liability,” Lecture 1 of *The Common Law* (cited in Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 295). Nietzsche writes, “every sufferer instinctively seeks a cause for his suffering; more exactly, an agent; still more specifically, a guilty agent who is susceptible to suffering—in short, some living thing upon which he can, on some pretext or other, vent his affects, actually or in effigy: for the venting of his affects represents the greatest effort on the part of the suffering to win relief, anaesthesia—the narcotic he cannot help desiring to deaden pain of any kind” (*The Genealogy of Morals*, 563). Cf. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, 45.

18. Alexander Stimson, *Easy Nat; or, Boston Bars and Boston Boys*, 2. Further references are cited parenthetically in the text.
practice suggestively juxtaposed, except that this time the text is given to Carpenter by his boss: “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.’”

Yet Carpenter’s actual behavior aside, a thrill runs through his summary of Easy Nat, one only amplified by the dreary moral: “This shows the evil of drunken Companions.” In addition to the novel’s own enthusiasm in describing Nat’s intemperate life, a syntactical slip suggests ambivalence in the pleasure Carpenter obtained reading it. The bad apprentice, Tom Braxton, doesn’t cut his master’s throat, as the summary infers, he cuts his own; and his reason is not guilt for burning down his master’s house, but for doing so after he locked his wife and child inside. The error is significant if we recall that it occurs as Carpenter recounts a story about a young man approximately his age whose existence is each day measured by how much pain he causes his family and employer, who together form a web of disciplinary accusation. After many “home trials,” Nathan Mudge eventually learns “the evil of drunken Companions,” becoming “a good husband and a happy father!” while living “in the bosom of his joyful wife, and the household of Giles Godwin [his master],” which Nat rebuilds after the fire (48). And the leader of those drunken companions is punished in an act of “self-splitting” (Braxton cuts his own throat) that literalizes the denial that Nat must enact to become “a good husband and a happy father!”

This is not the first time we have seen home and work conflated. In reporting the murder of Bartholomew Burke, Frank Leslie’s emphasized its location: Burke’s company apartment where he was killed using the tools of his trade.19 In Easy Nat, conflating home and work relies on debts that operate through women. Sagely and kind, but capable of great physical strength, Giles Godwin employs Nat as a favor to his mother, an old friend. Mrs. Mudge worries about Nat’s easy nature and bad friends. His sister, Susan, is everything he is not: steady, hardworking, unimpressed by the smooth-talking Braxton. Susan will marry the senior apprentice in Nat’s shop, Edwin Fairbanks, who works hard, studies in his free time, and eventually enrolls in law school. Godwin’s daughter, Kate, is romantic at heart and marries Nat determined to save him. Braxton marries a domestic in the Godwin home with whom he has taken sexual liberties. For the men in Godwin’s shop, work is one with their domestic relations.

To the extent that these relations spawned retaliatory desire, all begin with

Nat and his mother, whose story manages impulses that she provokes as the story's first victim. At home a good son, Nat becomes dissolute the moment he steps out the door. Mrs. Mudge is ill and upset “occasioned by her son's irregularities was not, by any means, conducive to its cure” (33). Nat's failure becomes acute one night when he goes carousing even as her health worsens. “Nathan, Nathan!” admonishes Godwin, who meets him on the street, “I knew you to be thoughtless and dissipated, but I could not have believed you to be so lost to all filial feeling!” (37). Godwin has been called to attend Nat's mother, who it turns out is dying. When Nat finally returns, Godwin is there holding her hand. She cries for her son, but rejects him deliriously when he appears. “His dress was tidy,—yours is disordered and torn. His cheeks were blooming like the red rose,—yours are blanched white as the snow-flake! His eyes were as blue and fair as the brightest sky in June,—yours are black and swollen. . . . Go, go, guilty one. . . . You are not my son.” Her words “fell like sparks of fire upon his bleeding heart” (37).

As Scarry would lead us to expect, death comes in great scopophilic detail: “a sudden gurgling took place in the sick woman's throat. It was the mucus or phlegm, rising from her decayed lungs, and now nearly strangling her, because she was at length too weak, even for the effort of expectoration.” Still holding her hand, Godwin asks, “Are you not in great pain, my poor friend?” (38). His interest in Mrs. Mudge's pain, and their alliance against Nat, converge moments later when she finally recognizes him:

"My dear—dear Nathan!” rather shrieked than exclaimed, his mother, opening her eyes and recognizing him for the first time; “come nearer—nearer!” Her voice fell, and though her lips continued to move for a few moments, they had uttered the last sound which would ever issue from them until that appalling note which announces death! But her gaze was still upon him, and to whatever part of the room he went during the short hour which still intervened between life and the emancipation of her pure spirit, her eyes followed her son with a mournful expression, which even the temporary oblivion of the drunkard's bowl, years after, did not always succeed in banishing from his memory. (38)

Mrs. Mudge's gaze supplies a more pointed account of mother love than Todd's chains of remembrance. Hand in hand with his boss, she supplied means for unmaking and making men like her son, while serving retaliatory needs produced when she entered them for that purpose.

As for wives, Tom Braxton hopes to lure them all into Godwin’s house before setting it ablaze (47). He succeeds only in trapping his wife and Nat’s inside; both had turned to Godwin to escape their husband’s drinking. Nat's
first act of redemption is to weep outside for causing Kate’s misery. His second is to race into the house to rescue her once the fire starts. Third, he stands before the smoldering ruin and identifies Braxton as the cause. Yet at this moment, Tom mysteriously vanishes, and witnesses see only Nat, suggesting incrimination more self-directed. Like Stuart’s Flash Bill or Thompson’s Jack Slack, Braxton objectifies Nat’s wayward desires and the errata they produce—errata measured by the suffering of his wife. As with Franklin, hope lies in revision, which occurs at his trial for arson and murder. There, with his life hanging in the balance, Braxton suddenly reappears, confessing even as he splits head from body, an act that absolves Nat beyond his factual innocence by enacting, once again, the self-denial that returns him to the now joint bosom of work and family.

Like Beekley, whose roving eye compensated for what he surrendered for a wife, Nat too gets his revenge, and in ocular form. What’s more, he shares it with Carpenter, who accompanies the two inebriates the night of the fire. Suspicious of Braxton’s plan to sneak into Godwin’s house, Nat asks “You’re only to get your child, I s’pose Brax?” “Only my child!” he replies—adding, however, in a whisper heard only by the reader: “for revenge is the only child I cherish! It has hungered all its days, but now it shall feed till it is gorged!” (47). After linking the interests of wife and master, Stimson characterizes Braxton’s rage as an intemperate appetite, which in gorging he narrates for the reader’s benefit. “I promised that you should see my child!” he says once the fire is set and his wife emerges onto a rooftop “observatory [. . . ] her hair disheveled, and her person but half clothed—walking wildly, with her child in her arms.”

“That’ll teach her,” Braxton concludes, again in a whisper, “to run away to my enemies, and lie about me!” (47–48)