Reading and Disorder in Antebellum America

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CHAPTER 6

Men in Public

Henry Stuart too is vindicated in a public trial. And like Nat, he becomes a good husband happily installed in the recovered patriarchal home. Thompson is as critical of this outcome as Stimson is approving, of course. *The House Breaker* sympathizes with the rage to which Tom Braxton spoke in murdering his family and destroying his master’s house. This rage descends upon Stuart’s beautiful sister, who is beaten to death because she bites her would-be rapist. Sweet, pure, vulnerable: she is still capable of defending her virtue, and with remarkable savagery. Her violence, like Mrs. Raymond’s, represents the power of violated femininity to inflict corrective pain by internalizing emotional constraints or, when that fails, demanding the guilty be punished: violence by men who were properly socialized against others who were not. “Men will applaud me,” Stuart proclaims as he puts Bill to death.

The costs of domestication were real, for Stuart as much as Bill—or Nat, whose debts are assumed by Braxton. Stuart pays for his “regeneration” in a scene earlier in *The House Breaker* when another man is executed, this time by the state, and Thompson figures the hero’s looming respectability as emasculating. While awaiting the trial that will finally legitimate him, Stuart occupies a cell that his mistress, Anna Mowbray, furnishes with luxuries he will soon enjoy in his new home. One evening, after a visit from Mowbray and Jane Carr, the girl Stuart who will eventually share that home as his wife, Anna leaves while Jane remains. What follows underlines the point that respectability is a prison of self-denial. The cell has only one bed, and when the time comes Jane lies on one side and goes to sleep. Henry lies on the other, and while tempted by “sensual gratification,” he is saved by a “principle of honor within him” (38).
Not that honor is the only inducement. Rising in the night, Stuart notices a light in the cell below. He looks through a crack in the floor and sees the corpse of a man hung for raping and murdering a young girl. What he sees rivals what he will later do to Bill: “There it lay, in its shroud, its jaw distended, its black swollen tongue protruding, its white eyes starting from their sockets, its neck fearfully stretched!” A woman sits beside the dead man guarding it from rats.

Peering through the hole in the floor, Stuart views his new life: honor strung around his neck like a noose and a wife who functions in a supervisory capacity scaring rats away from a bloated, lifeless body. Revenge lay in the epistemological instability of violence that produced this honor: later, Stuart’s sister dies as ferociously as her killer. The degree of this violence suggests the distress caused when emotional bonds were used to regulate not only traditional work and leisure practices, but sexual and other bodily functions. At the end of *A Glance at New York*, Baker locates Mose between donut-gobbling Lize, “eatin’ up all de man has in de house,” and the fight she urges him to join. Thompson ends *The House Breaker* with Stuart similarly situated between his sister and her rapist—between all he has been raised to honor and protect and his bodily interests as a man. If readers couldn’t laugh and cheer, as they did Mose, Stuart suggests another form of retribution. In torturing Bill, Stuart is eerily calm, as though fixation of the kind produced by extreme violence releases him from emotions goaded into disciplinary service only to be turned agonizingly against each other.

Together, Warner, Brodhead, Scarry, and Thompson help us imagine the pleasures obtained from novels like *Easy Nat* and *The House Breaker*. By thinking of them as closing a working self split between bodily pretence and bodily fact, we understand their enjoyment within a disciplinary context palpably embodied both rhetorically and in the conduct it was meant to influence. Yet we remain confined to the consuming act. Elusive still are what I earlier called adaptations that were metabolized in reading and played out in a bodily style that would become widely associated with workingmen. Covers of a book, like the ropes of a boxing ring, figure a commonplace in cultural theory, that consumers enjoy transgressive pleasures because dangers they pose are recontained by practice. But ropes, covers, even language and its reading serve as emblems of this containment that limit what we are able to project once they disappear.

Insofar as working selves were split not by calculation, but by emotions, one of these is identified more than others with social discipline. Summarizing recent work on the theory and psychology of shame, Eve Sedgwick says that its bodily signs—eyes down, head averted—appear early, once a child is able recognize its caregiver, and that these signs occur “at a particular moment
in a particular repeated narrative.”¹ That moment is when the identity-constituting circuit between child and caregiver is broken. She cites Michael Franz Basch:

The infant’s behavioral adaptation is quite totally dependent on maintaining effective communication with the executive and coordinating part of the infant-mother system. The shame-humiliation response, when it appears, represents the failure or absence of the smile of contact, a reaction to the loss of feedback from others, indicating social isolation and signally the need for relief from that condition.²

This “need for relief” drives a narrative that begins when the other’s recognition, which the child relies on for a sense of self, is lost, and then proceeds through panic and the struggle to recover.

Shame is not confined to infancy, childhood, or caregiver relations. When Basch refers to “feedback” and “social isolation,” he suggests the degree to which shame always relies on the look of others, including the self-critical other we find in Franklin. Yet the look between child and caregiver is the primary form, especially when our topic is reading that used mother love as a disciplinary instrument. Writing about her son, Sophia Hawthorne provides a typical shame narrative that begins when Julian is scolded, breaks eye contact, and looks away.

Julian cried hard to get out at noon when it was red hot & I could not quiet him, till at last I said—“Here is a little boy who I believe pretends he loves his mother—” He interrupted me with “I don’t pretend.”—“Well I think you do not & and yet what love is this that gives his mother so much pain instead of happiness?—Because his mother will not let him get sick, if she can help it, he cries & complains so as to hurt her very much, especially as today she is not well. If I did not love you, I would say—“Go & play in the hot sun as much as you like—it is nothing to me.” He stopped & was perfectly still & when I saw his face again, a smile was struggling out of his beautiful eyes.—I never saw a sweeter effort to prove real love and it lasted all the rest of the day.³

Standing perfectly still, Julian did not perform the calculation of a “reasonable

Creature.” In his eyes was frustration at staying inside and fear of losing the love that sustained him.

Julian was very young. A less one-sided mother-son exchange occurs in the dairy of Francis Bennett, the seventeen-year-old son of a merchant seaman, who records what occurs the day he leaves his home in Gloucester Massachusetts to “seek my fortune in the ‘city of Nations’ [Boston].”

Arose about 5 o’clock. Mother got up about 5 ½ clock and covered my trunk for me. Had breakfast a little after six. Cogswell came after my trunk and valise about 20 min past 6. About ½ past, I left home. I found it pretty hard to keep from crying on leaving the home of my childhood. But I have resolved to be as manly as possible about it. Mother would not say good bye. . . . I felt pretty full starting off. However I got along better than I thought I should.⁴

Bennett’s telegraphic style suggests distress, which he confirms when he admits wanting to cry. His mother’s feelings remain vague, but her refusal to say good-bye (and his recording the fact) indicates that the circuit between them operated both ways. Resentment may also pertain, if only in his reticence and her pain, which, like Sophia Hawthorne, causes her to withholding recognition (goodbye), thus holding him accountable. Not immaterial, perhaps, is Bennett’s entry several weeks before when he “finished reading the Lamplighter. It was a beautiful story. I got very much interested in it” (July 2). Also suggestive is his less than enthusiastic response to another book, especially given his father’s occupation: “I have been reading ‘Two years before the mast’ for a few days past. I have got but a little way in it however as I don’t get time to read much” (June 6).

Bennett’s entry for the day of his departure continues for over two pages, easily the longest to date in the diary. His effort to be “as manly as possible” not only got him beyond bad feelings, but it seems to have given him an emphatic new place in the world, which he feels compelled to record. One wonders what Julian felt in addition to anxiety when, having argued with his mother, he stood so still. Sedgwick also tells us that shame is not only the self denied and cut adrift. As identity-deconstituting as it is, shame also demarcates “the space wherein a sense of self can develop.” On the difference between guilt and shame, Sedgwick writes: “shame attaches to and sharpens the sense of what one is, while guilt attaches to what one does.”⁵ What one is does not exclude what one does. But separating them distinguishes between regret for bad acts and

⁴. Francis Bennett diary, August 28, 1854. Further references are cited by date parenthetically in the text.

the “sense of self” that such acts produce. Shame is not identity, but a somatic boundary that, in Julian’s case, separates him from what he is not: namely, what his mother wants him to be—or as he sees it, a boy who loves his mother and so denies himself for her sake. Julian submits, recovering her look and relieving his pain. But Bennett leaves despite his mother’s anguish and without a goodbye. Mrs. Bennett’s look remains suspended, then, and he must fashion a substitute.

So if shame “makes identity,” as Sedgwick puts it, it does so by way of distress that demands one of two things: a new self constituted amid that distress and so partly based on it (Bennett), or that the old self be recovered at the cost of sacrificing what caused it to be lost in the first place (Julian). There is considerable room for ambiguity, needless to say, in particular where a self is made that has, in effect, a negative relationship to itself. In that Julian can perform actions that satisfy Sophia and so recover her look, these actions carry irony: guiltless acts may hide shameful desire. This suggests Franklin’s self-splitting, except that bad desire is not gone, but remains as that self which is banished from the circuit of recognition, but which still haunts the psychic life of respectability. (Like the various “evil geniuses” we have seen who plague the lives of their fictional protagonists.) Actions such as Bennett’s that do not please mother assume a related irony in that they produce identity based on a boundary that makes all such actions self-constituting. One is insofar as one is bad. Shame is the bodily fact of this boundary and as such the sign of life, for adults no less than children. Being reminded of our faults causes uneasiness, feelings recalled from affective memory of moments when shame threatened our very existence, making the desire to live—and so to misbehave—desperate and irresistible.

As specific pain caused by antebellum reading, shame takes us past the consuming act to reading metabolized as male bodily life. Affective memory is not the only way we relive panic from our earliest disciplinary moments. To the extent that mothers socialize children, their work is reinforced by a host of cultural practices. In a time when mothers were delegated the task of child rearing as their main social function, reading was a way to extend their reach outside the home. In sentimental reading, workingmen returned time and again to the scene of mother’s shame. The suffering of proxy-mothers like Mrs. Mudge or Stuart’s sister broke the identity-constituting circuit, re-inciting childhood disciplinary crisis for readers like Francis Bennett, who in leaving their homes opened a self not just split, but wounded, and whose wish to close that wound provided leverage to manipulate conduct. That he survived by way of “manly” reticence reflects his obligation to treat women with no thought of “expense” (Mose), “honor” (Stuart), and with abject self-denial figured in the killing of self-projections like Jack Slack and Tom Braxton. Bennett also uses manliness
to protect himself from that love which makes his departure so painful. His refusal to admit this pain in open display (tears), and her refusal to absolve him (goodbye), suggest that manliness depended on her pain, or the pain of any figure that (Mrs. Mudge) or who (future intimate relations) assumed the power of motherly affection.

Here again Thompson provides a recreational gloss: in dying, Henry Stuart’s sister gives him life. Her screams in her bed wake him just as he is about to be murdered in his. While Stuart is not directly responsible, his sister dies as a result of a quintessentially male crime, drunken lust, and he fails in his quintessentially male duty to protect her. After, Stuart enters a post-loss reconstituting space: “Overcome with grief at the untimely death of his unfortunate sister, he retired for a season from the world” (House Breaker, 48). Like feeling “pretty full” or Julian’s struggling eyes, retiring reconciles Stuart to the loss of his sister—and of the manly life her death stigmatized. Abject moments of this kind proliferated in antebellum reform. That they did in recreational reading as well suggests that shame indeed served reconstituting or recreational needs.

What this entailed for bodily life outside reading may be gathered from Thompson’s last words on Stuart and Jane Carr. They come in a brief afterword following—indeed, on the same page as—the sadistic violence that ended the main story.

Another soft Spring came, with its blossoms, its bright hopes and its whispered promises of happiness. A fair young lady, arrayed in bridal attire, stands before the altar of the magnificent church of St. Paul—jewels sparkle in her costly robe, and white roses are in her hair. This is Jane Carr. At her side stands a young gentleman, of distinguished appearance, with a countenance of extraordinary beauty; this is of course Henry Stuart. The ceremony is performed, which forever unites them in wedlock’s holy bands; and as the organ fills the vast dome with its pealing harmony, they enter a splendid carriage, which conveys them to their happy home. (48)

When Stuart returns, his face displays the same quality Sophia Hawthorne finds in Julian after his humiliation: beauty. Henry too seeks recovery from the shame of failing his sister. He does not assume the manliness that serves Bennett, but instead looks to the affections of Jane Carr, who replaces his sister as the obligation that gives his life meaning.

That this means self-denial is clear from the prison episode, where honor opposes “sensual gratification.” In the wedding passage, denial takes the form of a genre shift all the more apparent by being juxtaposed with Bill’s execution. This is not the first such shift. A few pages earlier, Henry courts Jane with
language quite different from before: “Spring had come, with its sunshine and flowers, and the earth was clad in the glorious livery of revived Nature. Day was softly melting into twilight, and that beautiful promenade, the Battery, was filled with ladies and their attendant cavaliers, who had repaired thither to enjoy the soothing influence of the quiet hour” (48). Description finally comes to rest on the happy couple “seated upon a rustic bench” in a secluded spot beneath “the rich foliage of a fine old tree.” Thompson loathed what he called the “trashy nonsense” and “dreamy figments” of popular romance that represented love as impossibly pure. Soon after, Henry’s sister is beaten to death preserving her purity and he honors her by pealing the skin from her killer’s face and pouring molten lead in his ear. But here amid “sunshine and flowers,” he professes love to Jane, now fifteen and old enough to marry. She objects that he is already taken; but Stuart dismisses Anna as a mere passion: “The love I feel for you is based on admiration of your purity and worth—the love you feel for me is the offspring of gratitude—formed of such ingredients, our mutual affection is holy, and far superior to that based on love that is born of lust, and fed upon sensuality” (43).

Stuart’s “extraordinary beauty” crystallizes his turn from dashing housebreaker to effeminate “cavalier.” Yet treating him this way did not constitute outright scorn. The same can be said of the spectacle Thompson makes of himself walking down the street dressed as Falstaff. In adapting shame theory to queer theory, Sedgwick proposes that “shame consciousness and shame creativity” operate within various “performative identity vernaculars” associated with “flaming.”

And activism.

Shame interests me politically, then, because it generates and legitimates the place of identity—the question of identity—at the origin of the impulse of the performative, but does so without giving that identity space the standing of an essence. It constitutes it as a to-be-constituted, which is also to say, as already there for the (necessary, productive) misconstrual and misrecognition. Shame—living, as it does, on and in the muscles and capillaries of the face—seems to be uniquely contagious from one person to another. And the contagiousness of shame is only facilitated by its anamorphic, protean, susceptibility to new expressive grammars.

6. Cf. George Thompson, The Countess; or, Memoirs of Women of Leisure, 7–8. Included is a mawkish parody similar to passages involving Stuart and Carr. Thompson distains “forms beautiful and lovely, minds pure and unvitiated, nought offensive, or imperfect, being seen, in body or soul.” His “romance of the real” exposes the true corruption of life, including the “mysteries of woman’s heart, the immensity of intrigues she is capable of practicing upon men” (7).
Particularly apropos an “expressive grammar” like Thompson’s is Sedgwick’s claim that “shame/performativity may get us a lot further with the cluster of phenomenon generally called ‘camp’ than the notion of parody will.”

The identity-constituting dynamics of shame also get us further in accounting for Thompson’s shift in self-characterization from Franklin to Falstaff. If My Life references The Autobiography by way of criticizing Franklin-inspired behavioral codes, shame allows us to retain the Falstaffian negativity enacted in relation to them. Thompson remains ambivalent to his fast life. He expresses no regret for killing Jack Slack, which he insists was an act of “self-defense” (My Life, 41). He also remains deeply attached to Mrs. Raymond, even after she murders her seducer and he sets about philosophical thinking. And when the “Uncles and Nephews” are jailed for engaging in a drunken brawl, he leaves little doubt they got what they deserved, even if it was Independence Day.

But unlike Julian Hawthorne, Thompson’s release does not require capitulation to motherly approval—which doesn’t mean such approval is bad. Among the men locked in their cell beaten and forlorn, one “fondly presses the portrait of his Katy to his lips [saying] ‘so long as this blessed consolation is left me, this world may do its worst! Frown on ye fiends of misfortune! I defy ye all, so long as my Katy Darling remains but true!’” At the command of “an ‘usher’ at the National Theater,” all the men sing:

from the depths of that gloomy dungeon rolled forth the words, in tones of thunder—

“Did they tell thee I was false, Katy Darling?”

Suddenly, to our great joy, the ponderous iron door of the dungeon was unlocked and thrown open. (84)

Liberty is based on a question posed to a wronged but forgiving Katy, a question of identity asked, but not answered. And this question becomes others: How have the men been false? Who are “they”? Does Katy believe them? Does she weep? Outside, such questions persist: Were they guilty? Can they be trusted? Will Katy remain faithful? And more: When Thompson “dashes off” his poem to liberty, is he true to “Manner in writing”? Is he a mere “verse-maker”? Is he a citizen? Is he a man?

Thompson is insofar as he is bad—insofar as he writes fast, lives fast, Katy weeps, and he poses questions never answered. The operative word is pose, its double meaning suggesting the posturing wherein workingmen were “to-be-constituted” publically. Reading provided a place to strike this pose, as did other

practices the value of which was undercut by creative modification: top hats worn cocked to one side, or the lavish Bowery B’hoys soap locks, both pictured in another lithograph of Mose posed opposite gentlemen who wear their hair and hats in a more respectable fashion (figure 18). Thompson’s posing took generic form in *The House Breaker’s* concluding chapters, which is to say, in the “Manner” of his writing. The popular romance to which Stuart rises grants him the approval he yearns for, much like the young Thompson. Emasculating Stuart creates a false “place of identity” in the circuit (or camp contract) between Thompson and “ordinary laboring men” Stuart betrays. In reading like Thompson’s, these men enjoyed the “shame consciousness and shame creativity” not just of romance fiction, but reform and self-improvement literature. *My Life* advises young men how to drink but avoid the DTs. *The House Breaker*, if not openly seditious, was not what educators had in mind when they advocated mass literacy. Reformers saw reading perverted from its socializing function as a chief source of corruption—and they were right, in a sense. If reformers reviled drink and other bad appetites, recreational reading showed them in a more appealing light. Not that readers then did these things. Shame worked. As the century progressed, men behaved better, worked harder, stayed in more.

But insofar as it produced these changes, shame delineated space where men enacted themselves recreationally. Something of their bodily falsity we find in an 1855 engraving of Thompson published on page one of *The Broadway Belle*, a pornographic weekly he often edited (fig. 14). The image depicts Thompson ascending the steps of The Tombs, New York’s city jail, to inquire about charges against him for printing lewd material. He succeeded in having these charges dropped by showing that the book in question only collected excerpts already in print.8 Again, Thompson walked a fine line as purveyor of reading, his lewdness most apparent perhaps in the joy he displays finessing the “ponderous iron door” between codes of prohibition and conduct that transgressed them. Beyond legal duties that day, the cartoon shows him literally approaching such a door, his manliness somewhat a question. His dress, posture, and, of course, his fat suggest softness, even femininity, we would hardly expect in a neighborhood where Mose lounged menacingly on every corner.

Yet if we turn to Mose, especially Frank Chanfrau’s striking portrait as the character he made famous (figure 13), we find him like Thompson in many ways: they wear similar top hats tilted forward and to the side; Thompson lacks the B’hoys’ signature soap locks, but he combs his hair fashionably forward at the sides; he has a strong jaw typical in pictures of Mose. Both images

show men particular in their dress, with special attention to trousers (striped, skin-tight, carefully rolled) and accessories (cane, tie, flower, suspenders, buttons, cigar). Mose's shirt is bright red. Their footwear is narrow, almost pretty, and standing or walking, both float above the ground. To the extent that they both appear feminine, the effect stems less from their postures, than how they occupy space—to be seen. This is not to say, to be approved, though neither is retiring in their self-display. But the key features of this display—Thompson's size, Mose's hard stare—are confrontational insofar as they demand recognition, but which they would disdain on any account. Or so is the pretense, which Thompson's performs by publically flouting the law, posing the question of his decency (“Did they tell thee I was lewd?”) and skirting the answer on a technicality. From walk to dress to lewd undertaking, he is equally flaming. Fat betrays him—and makes him—by admitting with bald extravagance what he is as a man and is not.

Mose is more wary. Only Lize betrays what is soft behind his impenetrable look. When author Ned Buntline, who one year before was jailed for his part in the Astor House Riot, wrote Mose into a sequel of The Mysteries and Miseries of New York, he met Lize for the first time while saving her from a burning building, which she refused to leave without her sick mother. Afterward, Mose mutters to himself, “I'd like to know that 'ere g'hal! I like her. I'll bet my life on her goin' to heaven!” In his hyperbolic hardness, Mose defies the very recognition he dreams of, which Buntline objectifies in the sentiment that compels such defiance: a sweet, motherly girl sure to go to heaven. Mose's vulnerability resides, like Thompson's, in the line he walks between prohibitions enforced by such girls, and the violations they require, a line not well finessed the night at Astor Place. Mose's fat emerges in the meticulousness of his dress and the studied to-be-seenness of his posture, which, as Northall tells us, was widely imitated.

Most telling is Mose's look. Eye contact is made, but much rides on its obscurity, a response it demands but doesn't specify. In the next chapter, I address the problem of intimacy in a world where circuits of recognition operated across lines of risk and intimidation. Stuart's relationship to Flash Bill might not fit our usual understanding of the term, but they do display intimacy of a kind greater than the formality Stuart shows his sister. Bill has a name.

9. Buntline, Ned [Judson, Edward], Three Years After; A Sequel to the Mysteries and Miseries of New York, 16.
The nature of this intimacy I take up later, once again. Here though, it can be inferred from an encounter that, while anti-romantic, is graphically eroticized as Stuart strips the skin from Bill’s body, then thrusts his “iron rod” through his cheek. Bill, “who dared not look Stuart in the face,” pleads for his life. But tormented to the brink of death, “the victim turns his blood-glistening eyes upon his tormenter” and explodes in defiant rage: “I killed your sister—curse her! I’d do it again, fifty times over, if I could!” At this, Stuart fills him with hot lead. Intimacy emerges from a shifting contest back and forth across a disciplinary threshold defined by the sister’s corpse, drawing manhood from its violation. Mose invited this kind of contest.

Testimonials aside, it is tricky to join Mose’s emblematic styling to the texts men read, much less their comportment on antebellum streets. Not all streets were in the Bowery, and not all men were B’hoys. Public celebrity can hardly be taken at face value to indicate how a journeyman mechanic strolled about a Massachusetts factory town in his spare time. Our second lithograph of Mose offers a more quotidian view of how such men comported themselves (fig. 18). Relaxed, firmly grounded, almost genial—much like Henry Stuart in the early chapters of *The House Breaker*—Mose attends a gathering like Carpenter’s when he “went down to the black barber’s tonight & heard him fiddle” (ECJ, May 22, 1844). Mainly men of mixed age and social status, participants
are democratic in their use of public space. But there were contests. Dress and grooming were one form of “shame creativity,” as I said. Mose’s posture suggests another. The men opposite stand alike, together, and in a row. Walking, they no doubt followed instructions that one New Englander received from his father: “do not swing your arms too far.’ ‘Do not sway your body from side to side.’ ‘Do not raise your body and drop it at every step.’ ‘Walk with a steady and even motion, as if you had a pail of water on your head and did not wish to spill it.’”

It’s a wonder Mose keeps his hat on his head. Lounging comfortably, arms jutting, brazenly self-assured, Mose, like Thompson, occupies the space he occupies.

But Brown’s rendering of the scene supplies another clue as to the bodily lives of those who admired its subject. Mose is notably larger than those across from him, despite being farther away, distortion that suggests an insecure viewer, a young man like Carpenter, who sought assurance in a figure larger than any life he could hope to have in a town where he was tolerated only as the engine of an economy that had little use for him otherwise. For such men, shame demarcated space where an embodied self was constituted, a working male *habitus* characterized in part by despair and regret, and in part by the exhilaration of being what one was, not despite, but *in spite* of the established terms of social legitimacy. If shame lives, as Sedgwick says, “in the muscles and capillaries of the face,” by way of the same muscles and capillaries men smirked. They strutted, swaggered, and boxed the air. They burst into their homes. They struck their wives. Beyond covers that circumscribed practice, reading ingested limits across which men enjoyed the way their bad attitudes made them feel and move, in potency and pretense, defiance and bravado.

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11. Brown Thurston journal, June 16, 1843. Thurston worked as a mechanic and printer in Lowell. He continues: “How often I have thought of these instructions since coming to mature years. For a graceful carriage walking is really a fine-art, and wins respect and encomiums from all genteel people, while a stiff, shuffling, slouchy, or uncouth carriage is remarked upon and has more or less influence in ones estimation of character and position in life.”