Introduction

Intimacies of Disorder

I went down to the Literary Club tonight held in the Fellensburg Schoolhouse and listened to a debate on the question Which is productive of the most happiness Married life or Single life, it was decided by the President in the negative. (ECJ, March 5, 1844)

I got Albert Field to sleep with me last night, & I must go and get somebody to sleep with me tonight for it is rather lonesome to sleep alone. (ECJ, July 10, 1844)

They have had a wrestle tonight. Taylor the shoemaker & a chap named White a great brag. Taylor threw. (ECJ, May 2, 1844)

On May 13, White took another licking, this one from a "chap" named Rundel. "& I was glad of it," writes Carpenter, who clearly disliked White. Not that he would have fought him himself. While pleased to see a "saucy fellow" get "some hard knocks," Carpenter was not quarrelsome. Indeed, he seems to have been quite sociable. But he would not have slept with the "great brag," no matter how promiscuous his bedding habits. His usual partner was fellow apprentice Dexter Hosley, and when he was absent others took his place. Sex aside, the nature of relations between young men who worked and consorted together in Greenfield is not easy to determine from Carpenter's inexpensive prose and the kind of chumship they shared. But there are moments that suggest what we would call intimacy, like when someone had to leave, usually for work-related reasons. "Warren Curtiss an apprentice to David Long left him for home yesterday," he writes, "I am sorry for he was a first rate fellow" (ECJ, June 2, 1844). In another, a firm fails with like results: "Willis is going to sleep
with us tonight, he going home to Boston on the stage tomorrow morning” (*ECJ*, Feb 18, 1845). “These times are hard times for Cabinet Journeymen,” he comments when Frederick Pierce cannot find a position (*ECJ*, April 23, 1844). Small wonder White was unpopular. Boasting and “sauce” must have been doubly offensive in a circle of attachments based to a large degree on mutual insecurity.

Dexter was also away March 30, 1844, prompting another alternate plan for the night: “I got Joseph Moore to come & sleep with me tonight, therefore I will drop my pen & go to bed with him.” This was unusual the first year Carpenter kept his diary; even nights he had a guest he rarely missed writing. By the next winter this changed, however, and we find him increasingly inclined to drop his pen. There were two reasons for this: more time working, and an expanding social life. “I asked a girl to go to the Cotillion party with me tonight,” he writes March 30, 1845, “& did not get the mitten.” We can’t read too much into Carpenter’s romantic success. While reformers identified lewdness behind every door, relations between the sexes were highly regulated, especially in communities outside large cities. This is not to say these relations were dull—the party Carpenter attended featured dancing. This he learned at a dance school, where one evening the class permitted spectators. But of the fifteen who came, most were men who, not satisfied to watch, asked if they too could take a turn, much to the disgust of those forced to sit out. Girls too were inconvenienced, though perhaps less disagreeably: “there was so many there tonight without partners that it tired what girls there were all out” (*ECJ*, Feb. 7, 1845). It was twelve by the time they got home. This is what cut most into Carpenter’s writing—and much else. As much fun as he had attending “balls” and other mixed activities, he finally decided that marriage was indeed “productive of the most happiness.” This ended sleeping with Dexter, needless to say, although if the dance school party is any indication, girls had already begun to complicate relations between men.

Carpenter’s remarks on sleeping, fighting, and girls suggest how young workingmen experienced peer relations in the antebellum U.S. They also suggest how intimacy in these relations might be examined through the kind of recreational lens I used to treat danger and shame in the disciplinary world produced by reading. Like N. Beekley, the clerk who sought “beautiful faces” at the Franklin Institute, Carpenter enacts an erotics of obligation in dealing with the opposite sex. This was literal in the case of dancing and parties, formal activities where men properly pursued women, and women properly responded. But the recreational contents of such activities were amplified by the wider risks they entailed, which may explain why he declines to name the girl he invites to the party, or why the Literary Club arrived at such an ambiguous “negative”
in their debate: was “happiness” found in being married or single—or neither, as Carpenter’s entry seems to indicate? Women represented risks that ranged from rejection and betrayal, to the responsibility to provide and protect, to diseases that filled popular medical literature, to women’s moral authority in a culture convinced of their innate virtue. Women were as dangerous as city streets, which is where the worst of them were found. The opposite sex was as difficult as it was desirable, and like urban space these desires were socially charged. Mechanics began to hold dance parties in Greenfield when the town’s “big bugs” barred them from attending theirs.¹

We find the same play between duty and transgression in male relations, now outside the monogamous expectations of courtship. “Big bugs” and “great brags” offended men who valued understatement and mutuality. But mutuality had a twist figured in the promiscuous eroticism of male homosocial life. If Carpenter omits the name of his Cotillion date, he says just who he sleeps with when Dexter is away, often openly pleased with the prospect of a new partner. Carpenter’s candor suggests pleasure derived from his reticence about women. By this I don’t mean that with men he simply escaped constraints that restricted relations with women, although this was certainly true. But Carpenter implies more. Competition made women the measure of men, who to become “scholars” had to best their republican chums. At stake was not just winning or losing a girl. As we saw in the last chapter, Henry Stuart and Flash Bill (best and bested in Thompson’s novel, The House Breaker) compete before the violated body of Stuart’s sister. Both prove themselves in the encounter: Bill, by denouncing codes enforced by feminine suffering (“I killed your sister—curse her!”), and Henry, by punishing him for it. The values they represent are less important than play between their respective ambiguities: for all his newfound respectability, Henry is now an emasculated “big bug,” and as vile as he is, Bill is manfully defiant. He also possesses an intact libido, albeit one just as frustrated as Stuart’s. The pleasures of men—what I call their intimacies—were enjoyed across lines set by women and eroticized by rhetoric that made every man both “evil genius” and agent of correction.

Intimacy in the antebellum U.S. has not lacked attention, although the focus has been mainly on women and mainly on the middle class. Studies

¹. “After 9 this evening I went over to the Town Hall to see the Aristocracy of this village dance or make an attempt to dance” (ECJ, March 11, 1844). “The ‘big bugs’ had a picnic this afternoon & they are dancing now in the town hall, they would not let the mechanics in” (ECJ, July 17, 1844). There was also concern that dancing and socializing interfered with work. “I don’t know but the bosses will think it is too much to go [out] every night in the week. I have not worked but one evening this week, and probably shall not work another, for dancing school is Friday night” (ECJ, February 26, 1845). “We got through dancing this morning about five o’clock & I have been so sleepy & and tired that I have not struck a blow all day” (ECJ, March 13, 1945).
that treat male intimacy have done so in the context of homosocial institutions like lodges and voluntary associations, with emphasis on the psychosocial needs served and whether members behaved in ways that can truly be called intimate given their high level of formality. Our tendency to see intimacy as a natural rather than structured social phenomenon makes it easier to identify outside of institutions. While nothing has emerged as definitive as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s “The Female World of Love and Ritual,” scholars have found examples of male relations in the nineteenth century that ranged from friendship to physical intimacy, including sex. Heterosexual intimacy has also attracted interest. Love, courtship, sex, marriage: all have profited from a boom in studies of gender and the family. Here again though, the focus is middle class.

Little has been said about the affective relations of workingmen not openly dependent on stereotypes of working-class masculinity. In fire companies, prizefights, and minstrel shows, men were violent, vulgar, and racist. The same is true for the domestic relations of such men, who as husbands are invariably depicted as faithless bullies. Karen Hansen offers a rare alternative account when she suggests that intimacy was less class specific than we have assumed. In “Our Eyes Behold Each Other’: Masculinity and Intimate Friendship in Antebellum New England,” Hansen challenges “the notion that working men did not have intimate relationships,” arguing that the “boundaries of accept-

2. Cf. Mark Carnes, Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America; Mary Ann Clawson, Constructing Brotherhood: Class, Gender, and Fraternalism.


5. Amy Greenberg, Cause for Alarm: The Volunteer Fire Department in the Nineteenth-Century City; Elliott J. Gorn, The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America; Eric Lott, Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class.

able masculine behavior” were more “elastic” than we imagine. The letters and diaries she draws upon contain little of the vulgarity and homophobia usually associated with such men. While few in number, her examples display a striking range of attachments, from small jealousies and intimations of affection, to full-scale avowals of love. Hansen’s men daydreamed of each other, wept when they parted, and slept in loving embrace. Why we are surprised by such feelings stems from long held views concerning the emotional limitations of men generally, along with an equally venerable regard for sensibility as a marker of social value. Hansen complicates our understanding not only of workingmen, but of a principal measure of vertical distinction, between genders and classes.

I am not unconcerned with the intimacy Hansen identifies. Again, reading provides a window into such feelings, which turn up obliquely in the expressive moments of Carpenter’s journal, and which even Hansen concedes rarely appear. Again, too, reading allows us to treat the recreational nature of this intimacy, which was less a result of “elastic” masculinity than the problem of male identity at a time when masculinity itself emerged to replace traditional forms of manhood threatened by social and economic change. Romantic intimacy was not extra-masculine, but an adaptation in men who found it increasingly difficult “to accomplish” gender. Anthropologist Charles Lindholm argues that in cultures structurally prone to insecurity romantic love provides stability in reproductive relations. Yet Hansen’s findings suggest that men also sought this stability with other men. I have attributed the often destabilizing effect of women to their function as socializing agents. This was rhetorical, I argued in chapter 5, in that men were socialized through the persuasive force of victimized femininity. But it was also social, I will argue here, insofar as it was performed in intimate relations conditioned by that rhetoric. Ambivalence toward women stemmed from using the vulnerabilities of romantic love to create obligations that workingmen experienced as structural insecurity—in struggling to provide for their families, for example. The result was the kind of triangulation found in The House Breaker, where the dangers of women provide grounds for men to have feelings for each other.

But if the contest between Stuart and Bill is eroticized, the implication is not romance, but rape. When Henry strips the skin from his face, drives his “iron rod” through his cheek, and discharges hot lead in his ear, he violates Bill the very way Bill tried unsuccessfully to violate his sister. Stuart and Bill,

like the men who competed for partners in Carpenter’s dance class and slept together after, enjoyed competitive intimacy, where the contested object of desire was women. That one involves violence and the other lacks declarative expression represents a problem not with the form of this contact, but our expectation. Intimacy is usually seen as a relationship between individuals where the protective barriers that divide public and private are removed: what is hidden is disclosed. Yet if transparency is the aim, practices that enact it are highly codified in form and content. Not any disclosure will do, at least insofar as the result is intimate and not just crude. Andrew Parker acknowledges bonding in men’s sports: “back slapping, bath sharing, pseudo-erotic ritual”; yet “meaningful emotional relations with other males, are out of the question.” By “meaningful,” he means expressive forms that signify candor, forms that Karen Halttunen identifies with an antebellum middle class that developed them as a means of social authentication. Sincerity was confirmed by expressive reserve, sensitivity, modesty, fidelity—all of which still ground intimate relationship. This explains why Hansen chooses the examples she does, why they are emotionally romantic, and why they turn up so rarely in records left by working-men.

The intimacies of such men require something else. Hansen clearly sympathizes with her subjects. But her aim is, after all, to authenticate them: workingmen did have feelings—meaningful feelings. So while denying their emotional limitations, she still subjects them to a hierarchy of values that, if Halttunen is correct, was meant to prove such men anything but authentic. This opens a significant gap between tender sentiments found in Hansen’s samples and animated physicality typical of working male relations. Furthermore, when they entered that relationship “productive of the most happiness,” such men were often rough, unreliable, even abusive. Consequently, such men appear more than ever what they first seem: insecure, emotionally volatile, walking pathologies of antebellum social life. How then do we regard them as intimate, with each other or anyone else?

In the concluding chapters of *Recreating Men*, I will try to answer this question, first, in the context of domestic sexuality, where conjugal risk and the formal alienation of genders seem obstacles to affection; and second, in chumship such as we find between Carpenter and his friends, where loyalties could be brief and the imminence of conflict again seems opposed to friendship. I argue that intimacy in both cases can best be understood as cultural, a notion developed by ethnographer Michael Herzfeld. “Cultural intimacy”

and its correlative “social poetics” facilitate talking about intimacy outside the confines of what we have come to view as “meaningful emotional relations.” Herzfeld identifies intimacy in the very differences that seem to deny it. Insofar as reading advanced behavioral legitimacy by internalizing affective restraints, it also created the means within social relations for policing, especially when those relations were based on emotional and material dependency, such as in marriage. We have already seen mother love used to discipline men. Here I am interested in the vulnerabilities produced by such love and how they influenced other relations. We have long treated domesticity as contested, male relations as competitive, and both as culturally constructed. That they were also enjoyed as such does not deny their conflict; rather, conflict was the effect of a poetics enacted within the social world of their production, disorderly play across limits of mutual vulnerability, based on codes internalized in reading and enforced by spouses, chums, and other intimates whose own reading assigned them the task.