Reading and Disorder in Antebellum America

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Social Poetics

Let me again begin with three examples, this time involving relationships slightly more advanced than Carpenter’s. The first is from a series of letters that twenty-six-year-old Ada Shepard wrote from Rome to her fiancé, a teacher named Clay Badger. Shepard was nurse to the children of Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne, and in December, 1858, she began to write about an Italian doctor named Franco who over several months tried to seduce her. He does this with great passion, speaking openly of his desire and managing more than once to grasp her hand and even embrace her. Shepard relates the entire affair, which she cannot avoid because the doctor comes daily to treat one of the children. She also cannot tell her employers because it might cost her position. Describing Franco’s first attempt, she writes: “with that terrible passion in his eyes and his whole manner, of which I have read in books, but of which I never had a conception before, he poured forth such a storm of consuming and raging passion (I cannot give it the name of love which he applied to it) that I felt sick and dizzy.”1 Shepard is so distressed that she too becomes ill, waking delirious from erotic dreams and calling out her fiancé’s name for protection. But horrified as she is, she is also aroused by Franco’s attentions and later admits with an air of intense self-reproach that she enjoyed her power over him. The effect on Badger is unknown. While they married as planned, his half of the correspondence does not survive.

The second example is from the diary of Frank Ward, son of an Illinois mechanic, who would later become an esteemed sociologist. But in 1860, at age nineteen, he worked in a wheel factory in Myerstown, Pennsylvania. Frank

1. Ada Shepard, letter to Clay Badger, December 18, 1858.
also courted Lizzie Vought, the daughter of a shoemaker, whom he refers to only as “the girl,” perhaps, like Carpenter, to protect himself from risks inherent in such dealings. Frank and Lizzie progress quickly from acquaintance to affection, then physical intimacy: “That evening,” he writes in the fall of 1861, “we tasted the joys of love and happiness which only belong to a married life.”

Their sexual experiments are less surprising than his account of their activities. Having access to books, Frank sought information on sex and shared it with Lizzie, who was also curious. Sharing was not easy: “I spent most of my time today studying Hollick’s Physiology. I find it very interesting and instructive. I wish that I dared take it to the girl’s and read it with her. But no” (March 3, 1861). Over the next months Frank overcomes his anxiety and shows her the book, Frederick Hollick’s *The Origin of Life*, a treatise on the reproductive system that fifteen years before was the subject of a much publicized obscenity trial.

He first mentions it to her in a letter. Then one day he “forgot” it was in his satchel and brings it with them on a walk in the woods. This maneuver fails, however, when he finally pulls it out but is so excited he can’t read it to her: “I tried, but failed entirely.” So he leaves her with it and goes off “to cut canes.” Later still, he leaves it at her home, writing with relief afterword that she “read the book which I had left and was not angry” (May 13 & 18, 1861). The next year, two days after enlisting in the Union Army, Frank and Lizzie marry, after which he refers to her by name.

The last comes from the correspondence of James Bell and Augusta Elliot of Norton Hill, New York. Augusta teaches school; but James can’t find work, and in 1854 he sets off to look, first in Maine, then Illinois, where he is hired as a farm laborer. He is twenty and they are unofficially engaged. Later, he too enlists in the army, but unlike Frank who survives the war, Jim dies in 1863 of wounds received in battle. Between leaving home and his death, he visits Augusta only once, in 1857. During his lengthy absences the two write letters. At first, these are teasing and defensive. Insecurity surfaces in jealousy and erotic horseplay, which turns graphically violent: “if you don’t tell me ‘I will cut your head off,’” James writes on one occasion. On May 19, 1858, Augusta catalogues her various tricks, threatening to “tickle your neck, pull your nose, bite your ear, untie your neck’chief, blow in your face, steal your handkerchief, pull your hair (a little), kiss you with a pin my mouth, and daub ink in your face.” Such was intended to relieve the “glooms,” from which James often suf-

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2. Frank Lester Ward, *Young Ward’s Diary*, October 25, 1861. Further references are cited by date parenthetically in the text.


4. James Bell and Augusta Elliot letters, April 8, 1855. Further references are cited by date parenthetically in the text.
fered. But while cheering, Augusta is frustrated by his inability to find a job that will permit them to marry. Another problem is that he is not “converted,” a failing that comes to denote his collected inadequacies as a man and potential husband. “I know that I am unworthy of the love you bestow on me,” he gushes when he receives one of her many reassurances. “I do not know but that it was presumption in me to love you but I could not help but love you. You was so kind and good. And when I think how unworthy I am of your regard I almost wish I never saw you. I do not see how you could love such a graceless scamp as I am. I am not good enough for you Gusta” (April 20, 1856). A year later, he uses a metaphor we have seen before to frame what sounds like a proposal: “How would you like to take a school where there was but one scholar. I know of a school of that description that you can get” (April 19, 1857). But a “scholar” he never becomes, and she never his “school Marm.” Years pass filled with bickering and “glooms,” often prompted by hints that she has had enough.

Then James enlists. One letter a month becomes one a week. His are a storm of patriotism: “my heart burns with indignation, my blood leaps with quickened pulsations” (April 23, 1861). Hers are no less passionate: “Any man who would not respond to the call of his country,” she proclaims before a group of women in Norton Hill, “I did not consider worthy to be called my husband” (May 21, 1861). He admires her zeal, but his wanes after seeing action. Half a year later he learns that his brother wants to enlist: “he never shall with my consent,” he writes, “I can tell him things that will take the fever out of him double quick” (n.d., 1861). But for James there is no turning back; the war resolved all problems concerning “the old subject” (October 28, 1856). “O James you are nearer and dearer to me than ever,” Augusta writes in October of 1861, “and I tremble for your safety.” She begins one letter, “My Own Dear Golden Boy” (November 15, 1861). He signs another, “Your soldier Jim” (December 26, 1862). A week after the slaughter at Fredericksburg he writes, “in you I have always found a sympathy and encouragement to do my duty as a soldier” (December 22, 1862). He is wounded the next year in September and dies in a Washington hospital. Augusta is there.

Contrasts are many. The men and women whose stories I tell lived very different lives: education, experience, employment, gender, success—or failure. But they shared much too. All expressed insecurity, jealousy, doubt, and other feelings that sought conciliation in love. They also expressed passion, and as objects of emotional insecurity and sexual desire, their lovers are treated with ambivalence, which plays out in bizarre enactments of practical intimacy: Ada confessing her sexual adventures to a fiancé thousands of miles away who had also, no doubt, read of men like Franco; Lizzie sitting in the middle of the woods reading a book that tells her not only how humans reproduce, but what
her lover hopes to try when he returns from cutting canes; and the more sublimated violence of James and Augusta, which had he ever become a “scholar” in her “school” more than biting and nose pulling would have occurred, especially if their classroom relations were as ardent as their patriotism. Men regard each other with similar ambivalence. James has warm regard for the Irish at Fredericksburg, falling by the thousands in the terrible Union defeat. A like, albeit smaller, sacrifice occurs a year before: “The boys in our tent have adopted a resolution that there shall be no more card playing” (October 26, 1861). Their pledge anticipates this very concern in a letter from Augusta dated October 25, one day before: “It is a source of grief to me that you are surrounded by sin and wickedness. My prayers are for you and my thoughts constantly upon you. Why it seems to me the very bad part of camp life, this swearing, drinking and playing card business.” In addition to “the boys” he sleeps with each night, James refers to the Southerners they have come to reform. The intimacy of enemies is harder to conceive; but Augusta senses it, even if she too is baffled: “I imagine from the way you write that you would like to fight too. Well it beats all how all these soldiers like to get into that business” (December 31, 1861).

Such intimacies were contentious, transient, even alienating; and reading played a key role. Ada’s response to sexual passion depends on what she learned “in books.” Hollick’s *Physiology* helps Frank and Lizzie advance beyond foreplay. While it is not an explicit issue for James and Augusta, reading drives the eroticism of their letters. The teacher–student trope appears frequently and with it a relationship of growing dependency: he needs instruction, she provides it. As a teacher, Augusta assumes the source of power we have identified with disciplinary reading: violated femininity. James enacts this violation in his absence, which includes several months when he doesn’t write and, unknown to her, travels from Maine to Illinois. She is furious, and having no control over him, she remains in a constant state of rage. He is ashamed, but this gives her little control over what he does. The war changes this. Augusta is empowered when the rhetorical locus of instruction shifts from her violated self to their violated nation. She becomes, in effect, “the little lady who started this big war.”5 James’s absence becomes her doing (“Any man who would not respond to the call I did not consider worthy”), as does his sacrifice. “James I am thankful,” she writes. “You ask if I ever thought what an influence I had over you. I did not know really as I had. If I have, tho my example has’ent been what it should be, it is truly consoling” (n.d., 1861). Consoling produces its own passion: “James you don’t begin to know how much I think about you. I believe you are on my mind every moment almost. And it seems to me never until now have I fully

5. Lincoln’s alleged greeting to Harriet Beecher Stowe.
realized how much I loved you” (November 15, 1861). Attending him at his death, she records his last words, which amid the delirium of infection express like feelings: “Gusta kiss me,—kiss me closer. You will love me always wont you Gusta? . . . O I’m so so thankful . . . Gusta forgive all my sins. I left it all to your judgment” (n.d., 1863).

Relations like these can be treated the way we have other affective phenomena, within emotional contexts produced by reading. Reading created sexual anxiety for Frank Ward and Ada Shepard, and this anxiety heightened sexual excitement. But this involved more than an individual response to rhetorical conditions, especially as reading produced feelings whereby Americans regulated not only themselves, but each other. Gender relations were regulatory by definition; and, as I said, reform literature compelled men who were properly socialized to correct other men who were not. Reciprocity is largely missing from my first two examples, both of which are limited to the perspective of one; the third is not, however. Dependency and antagonism were mutual for James Bell and Augusta Elliot: she shames him for failing as a man to provide; he denies her the influence that “consoles” her as a woman. The same can be said of James’s relations with the other men in his tent who agree to police each other by disallowing card playing, and with those he meets in battle in order to correct the wrongs of which they are guilty. To find intimacy in the passions and pleasures of such encounters requires a social account of recreational reading.

Michael Herzfeld takes the idea of “social poetics” from literary theorist Roman Jakobson. By poetics, Jakobson means how rhetorical elaboration enriches the content of a message. He is mainly interested in poetic language, which in its extraordinary form produces pleasure by disrupting the denotative conventions of speech. Herzfeld looks to Jakobson for means to account for Cretan men who enact what he calls “cultural intimacy” by disrupting social conventions, often through acts of crime and violence. Herzfeld shifts from literary to social rhetoric through the larger use of the term to denote any persuasive act performed within a signifying system, from a wedding dance, to greetings at a coffeehouse. Such persuasion includes the performance of normality, which hides its own rhetoricity. It also includes violations of normality, which acknowledge “canons” of social action, while distinguishing individual actors in relation to them.

Performatives norms are violated in every social poetics. Doing so defines individual style as well as one’s place in the sphere of relations where violation

follows its own elusive, yet canonic rules. Not just any transgression will do. Indeed, transgression is less the point than seamless creativity, innovation, and flair in performing familiar actions, thus removing them from the everyday, yet remaining within limits set by the “ideological propositions and historical antecedents” of an implicit popular aesthetic. Herzfeld writes:

A successful performance of personal identity concentrates the audience’s attention on the performance itself: the implicit claims are accepted because their very outrageousness carries a revelatory kind of conviction. It is in this self-allusiveness of social performances, and the concomitant backgrounding of everyday considerations, that we can discern a poetics of social interaction. The self is not presented within everyday life so much as in front of it.7

Photographs follow: men posed in front of their arid mountain poverty, with guns, cigarettes, wry looks, and dark mustaches. We are reminded of Thompson and Mose: threatening and picturesque, floating above the ground beneath them. Indeed, shame’s role in such pretense may add emotional content to the largely schematic logic of Herzfeld’s Cretan performance.8 Or its social consequences: “To the extent that a man’s performance announces his personal excellence, it fits the poetic canon of Glendiot [the village] social life. Glendiot men engage in a constant struggle to gain a precarious and transitory advantage over each other. Each performance is an incident in that struggle, and the success or failure of each performance marks its progress.”9 Insofar as actions matter, the language of intimacy is provocation.

More important, Herzfeld socializes our account of male conduct. Having said that reading emotionally affected how workingmen behaved, social poetics locates that behavior in exchange relations: how they moved others and how others moved them. Herzfeld helps because his poetics is not literary in the romantic sense or romantic in the intimate sense. A key form of exchange for Glendiot men is stealing sheep, followed by various acts of escape, revenge,

8. The activities that Herzfeld treats appear oddly affectless, despite violent feelings usually being involved, and despite his turn to emotions on several occasions. In a chapter entitled “Sin and the Self,” he examines two terms “dropi (usually rendered as ‘shame’)” as a key element in identity and “eghoismos,” which “entails pride in the self that others have tried to denigrate” (*Poetics of Manhood*, 233, 235). *Eghoismos* has the same root as “ego,” but Herzfeld denies any fixed psychology, defining identity in performative terms. Emotions become tactical, such as when a man admits “shame” to withdraw from a contest he is in danger of losing (240). Yet if this denies the impulse to essentialize, it strips identity of affective content accumulated in the history of one’s actions. It also negates socialization in childhood (and after) that charges actions with feelings such as shame. By denying fixed features in inner life, Herzfeld leaves unexplained why one would feel “pride in the self that others have tried to denigrate” or why men would compete at all.
arrest, returning animals, or eating them. Afterward, stories circulate and shifts occur in the social landscape, especially when the deed is notable. When police arrived at the house of one thief, he invited them in and his wife cooked and served them the stolen animal, which they ate, thus eliminating the evidence. Or so the story goes. Being robbed in such a fashion is tricky. There is a loss of property and esteem; but it is also an honor to have such a worthy enemy. Mediation may be needed, often public gestures that require tact and skill. Time too is a factor; so is attitude, expressed in the tone of a greeting, or the seating arrangement at a wedding. Properly handled, theft can advance a man within the sphere of village affections, even supplying grounds for friendship with a once bitter foe.

Herzfeld helps navigate the move from the auto-poetics of style to the social poetics of intimacy. He also treats intimacy not as a given complex of practices and vulnerabilities, but as a form of exchange within a shared context. The cultural nature of this intimacy is expansive in Herzfeld’s account, joining the minutiae of private exchange to enactments of national identity. On the larger scale, cultural intimacy is

the recognition of those aspects of cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality, the familiarity with the bases of power that may at one moment assure the disenfranchised a degree of creative irreverence and at the next moment reinforce the effectiveness of intimidation.

In the same vein, he links cultural intimacy to “national traits” (Irish drunkenness, American folksiness) “that offer citizens a sense of defiant pride in the face of a more formal or official morality and, sometimes, of official disapproval too.” Such intimacy encompasses other identity categories, too, following the “identity-making” transgressive logic we have seen throughout.

Given the role I attribute to reading in producing “the bases of power” and staging the “creative irreverence” of workingmen, I have some excuse for treating Herzfeld’s language analogies literally. Victimization rhetoric produced conduct that, like eating a rival’s sheep or “back slapping, bath sharing, pseudo-erotic ritual,” violates our sense of what constitutes intimacy, especially as women likewise internalized its canons of social action and irreverence. In the examples I give, shame and hostility were tied to reading that made ante-

10. Herzfeld, Cultural Intimacy, 3. Cf. Cultural Intimacy, 1–36. When Herzfeld speaks of “embarrassment” that provides “assurance of common sociality,” he recalls bonds produced by other embarrassments we have seen: Franklin’s failed pledge to avoid “animal food,” for example, and the debauchery of the “Uncles and Nephews.”
bellum conjugal relations socially and materially dangerous. Yet these relations also bore love, loyalty, and physical pleasure, which I will seek to explain using seduction narratives whose recreational poetics included innuendo and other forms of connotative creativity that tested performative canons in ways that suggest an aesthetic as much bodily as textual. Male relations attracted similar creativity in temperance tracts that at once enforced and violated performative codes in a corrective circularity whereby, as in Crete, men engaged in an ongoing struggle for “a precarious and transitory advantage over each other.” James Bell identifies with men who live a clean life and with soldiers who die defending the Union. He also vies with men who play cards and other soldiers who die defending the Confederacy. That “the boys” of James’s tent appear on both lists and those who fall in battle against each other do so in fulfilling the same soldierly duties, suggests the unstable pleasures they shared—and Carpenter shared with Dexter when they returned home to sleep together after a dance.