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*Seattle University  
Addiction Studies Program*

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# DIONYSOS

Journal of Literature and Addiction  
Summer 2000 Vol. 10, No. 2

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## A Note from the Editor

An emerging theme in this summer's issue is the connection between alcoholism/addiction and religion/spirituality. This theme is particularly pronounced in the article on spiritual autobiographies by our Seattle U. colleague Dave Leigh, S.J., but it also appears toward the end of Kevin McCarron's piece on begging in recent British fiction/non-fiction. Indeed, the secularizing of the nineteenth-century temperance narrative has been one connecting thread in all of McCarron's pieces in *Dionysos* over the past few years, and particularly the mind/body distinction as it applies to narratives of addiction.

Perhaps it's this emerging theme that has evoked my own comments on a new anthology on literature and addiction, *A Babel of Bottles*. Or perhaps it's just because the interplay of spirituality and addiction is my area of special focus. Certainly Marty Roth's cautions about neglecting the complex clinical aspects of addiction are well-taken. But I hope there can be a continued debate in this journal on whether "spirituality," however defined, is a help, a hindrance, or an irrelevance to recovery from addiction.

**N.B.:** in the Winter issue I inadvertently gave Prof. McCarron's life facts to a contributor to that issue, Prof. James Nicholls. Prof. Nicholls is with John Moores University in Liverpool; my apologies to him for the misinformation.

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## “For to Beg for the Price of a Jar”: Begging and Alcoholism in the Contemporary British Temperance Narrative

Kevin McCarron  
University of Surrey, Roehampton

Old Tommy the Leaf varies the touch; not seeing himself as a beggar he helps women to carry their bags. Ask him if he ever begs them and he replies, “I keep myself to myself.” He keeps drink to himself too.

John Healy, Streets Above Us

Beggars should be abolished entirely! Verily, it is annoying to give to them and it is annoying not to give to them.

Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra

Nietzsche’s exasperation with beggars exemplifies a pervasive cultural attitude. Begging is represented within Western culture generally, and particularly textually, in thoroughly equivocal terms. On the one hand harmless, in that it indicates failure for someone else, it is, on the other, a dramatization of the horrors of failure, an allegory of possible personal disaster.

In his novel Sabbath’s Theater, Philip Roth places begging next to two major contemporary anxieties, sex and drugs, to demonstrate just how unsettling the beggar can be to the educated, affluent middle classes. Micky Sabbath, fallen on hard times, is staying with an old friend and his wife, Michelle. Their young daughter is at college and Sabbath has her room. The wife responds favorably to Sabbath’s sexual advances and they agree to meet later in the week for sex. When Sabbath wakes up the following morning, however, his friend tells him to leave. Michelle has emptied the pockets of Sabbath’s filthy jacket so that it can be dry cleaned; within its pockets are a block of crack cocaine, a begging bowl, and a pair of the daughter’s bikini underpants, which Sabbath has been using as a masturbatory aid. Sabbath understands immediately which of the objects has caused

the most disgust:

The cup did it. Of course. The beggar's cup. That's what terrified her—the begging. Ten to one the panties took her to a new edge of excitement. It's the cup she shrank from; the social odium of the cup went beyond even her impudence. Better a man who didn't wash than a man who begged with a cup. That was further out than even she wished to go. There was stimulation for her in many things that were scandalous, indecent, unfamiliar, strange, things bordering on the dangerous, but there was only steep effrontery in the cup. Here at last was degradation without a single redeeming thrill. At the beggar's cup Michelle's daring drew the line. The cup had betrayed their secret hallway pact, igniting in her a panicked fury that made her physically ill. She pictured in the cup all the lowly evils leading to destruction, the unleashed force that could wreck everything. And probably she wasn't wrong.<sup>1</sup>

This article will focus on the link between begging and alcoholism in several contemporary novels and autobiographies. These books, it will be claimed, are all contemporary forms of what is generally considered a predominantly nineteenth-century literary genre: the Temperance Narrative. These contemporary temperance narratives depict beggars as manifestations of the degradation inseparable from excessive drinking. It will be suggested that, in these contemporary temperance narratives, begging is not represented as a criticism of capitalism, as it is in many other narratives which feature beggars, but instead as an abhorrent and degraded activity to which addiction to alcohol alone has reduced the alcoholic. It will further be suggested that these texts, although stressing degradation, endorse the protagonists' ascetical energy in transforming themselves, and ultimately concentrate on the renunciation of alcohol and eventual sobriety.

Although the temperance narrative is usually assumed to be a nineteenth century phenomenon, and a predominantly American one, these contemporary texts, all but Roth's British, can clearly

be seen as evidence of the genre's tenacious survival, at least in England, until well into the late twentieth century. Edmund B. O'Reilly writes: "The motifs of temperance fiction—domestic violence, self-destructiveness, shame and guilt, deviance, futility—have remained with us, reiterated in fiction through the present century."<sup>2</sup> This is true, however, not only of fiction, and indeed the primacy of these motifs in autobiography signals a shift from fiction to fact-based narrative between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. All of the books under discussion here privilege precisely these motifs; some contain all of them.

Not only are all these books temperance narratives, they all belong to a particular category of temperance narrative. David Reynolds suggests that, during the period 1835-1860, the so-called American Renaissance, "four main types of temperance-related discourse developed. . . what may be called conventional, dark temperance, ironic, and transcendental."<sup>3</sup> Of the first category, he writes: "Conventional temperance literature featured straightforward, didactic expositions or exempla against drinking, with emphasis on the benign rewards of virtue rather than the brutal results of vice."<sup>4</sup> All of the books I want to discuss belong to this category of "conventional temperance": within these books begging is viewed as one of the most ugly "exempla" of the horrors of drink. Actually, it is striking that there is so little begging in nineteenth-century temperance narrative: characters move from a first innocent sip, to alcoholism, insanity, and/or murder or suicide at such a fearsome speed that there is no time to beg for money to buy drink. By contrast, not the least interesting aspect of these contemporary temperance narratives is the way in which they index contemporary culture's obsession with capital, an obsession observed without comment, however, since while money, or the lack of it, is absolutely central to the narratives, the books never actually criticize capitalism itself. In the modern welfare state, to be reduced to begging is indeed, as Roth suggests in *Sabbath's Theater*, to have fallen very far from grace indeed.

Again, capitalism itself is never seriously criticized in the contemporary temperance narrative. The various reasons that are offered for alcoholism, and hence for begging, are invariably domestic, or psychological, never economic, and no blame is ever

laid at the monolithic feet of capitalism. Indeed, these narratives consistently support capitalism, while rejecting the work ethic, by their strenuous attempts to portray begging as work. Within these texts begging is viewed as work solely because it requires effort. Certainly, when the transformative and the communal dimensions of the work ethic have been totally eroded and work is defined solely as what one does to obtain money, then begging will be seen as work, as will stealing, another ubiquitous activity within these texts.

The simple relationship between alcoholism and begging is eloquently put by John Healy, in his 1990 autobiography The Grass Arena:

Winos usually have another string to their bow such as shop-lifting, thieving, mugging, prostitution—all these acts committed later in the day when you've got some wine down. But begging is the drunk's stock-in-trade. It starts you off. It's got many aspects: it gets your courage up, gets you communicating with normal people—perhaps the only communication many winos have. But, most importantly, it gets the first drink of the day with which to cure the shakes. The day always begins with the shakes, sickness, fear, paranoia, constipation, dry retch and complete loss of memory, which only a drink will cure.<sup>5</sup>

However, although Healy depicts begging as an uncomplicated practice in itself, it is a complex issue within the contemporary temperance narrative. In only one of these books, Robert McLiam Wilson's novel Ripley Bogle, does a central character attempt to justify begging:

I service the rich. Wealth is, of course, merely a gauge of one's distance from poverty. It is how much you are not poor. A Croesus only knows he is Croesus when he can see a vagabond like me shlepping about outside his mansion. He needs me. What would his riches be without me?<sup>6</sup>

This consideration of begging may recall Max Weber's observation: "Medieval ethics not only tolerated begging but actually glorified it in the mendicant orders. Even secular beggars, since they gave the person of means opportunity for good works through giving alms, were sometimes considered an estate and treated as such."<sup>7</sup> It is also not far removed from Wordsworth's depiction of the beggar who links the community through individual acts of generosity to him.

Strikingly, however, within the very large majority of these contemporary texts, begging has lost its supplicatory status and is represented, by contrast, as a virile, masculine activity. Within these contemporary temperance narratives, begging is presented as the unqualified equivalent of "work," as conventionally understood. Indeed, traditional "work" is an activity so persistently elided and erased within these texts that it virtually disappears as an alternative to begging. If narrative formulas index cultural obsessions, the ubiquity of begging in these books reflects a massive diminution of the work ethic, in any meaningful sense of the word "ethic," in contemporary society.

This was not the prevailing view at the time of the earlier temperance narratives. Consider Emerson's comments on work in his essay "Self-Reliance": "There is a great responsible Thinker and Actor working wherever a man works . . . a true man belongs to no other time or place, but is the center of things . . . Do your work and you shall reinforce yourself."<sup>8</sup> Clearly, for Emerson, work is a transformative experience, a concept fundamental to the work ethic. Within modern temperance narratives, however, work becomes less an activity which both enriches the community and the self, and more one in which individuals exchange labor, or effort, in return for money—and for nothing else. In this, these contemporary narratives are absolutely representative of their capitalistic age.

Two forms of "work," begging and stealing, are always linked within the genre, but they are invariably represented as hierarchically distinct activities. The hierarchy, however, is the reverse of that which is often encountered in contemporary capitalist society.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the popular view within contemporary society has now reversed the second opposition constructed by the terms used within this well-known couplet:

“Rich Man, Poor Man / Beggar Man, Thief”: the beggar is now often seen in capitalist cultures as actually inferior to the thief because the beggar does not “work.” But in contemporary accounts of the down-and-out, stealing, which is often discussed as a possible source of income, never receives the same descriptive attention as begging does. Like the idea of “work” itself, stealing within the contemporary temperance narrative is gradually displaced by the reconstruction of begging as work, and, moreover, as harder work than stealing.

In The Grass Arena, for example, Healy writes: “A cold wind had come up, giving me the shakes. A bit too fucked up to beg! Decided to nick a bottle.”<sup>10</sup> That asking for money to buy a bottle is somehow harder work than stealing a bottle is a characteristic position for the contemporary temperance narrative to adopt. Again and again the genre constructs begging not only as work but as arduous and even skilled work. In Healy’s first novel, Streets Above Us, the omniscient narrator notes of the protagonist, Finn: “He sinks on to a seat. Even beggars need a little rest sometimes. After a short spell he resumes his work.”<sup>11</sup> In Sabbath’s Theater, Sabbath is approached by a beggar: “The beggar shook his cup like a tambourine, causing the change to rattle dramatically. A heavy odor of rot polluted his breath as into Sabbath’s beard he whispered conspiratorially, ‘It’s just a job, man—somebody’s got to do it.’”<sup>12</sup>

The suggestion that begging is “just a job” is insufficient for Joe Cannon in his novel Cardboard City. Cannon moves effortlessly from the conventional generic depiction of begging as work to its being a profession, and the novel culminates in a reference to begging as an art. The alcoholic beggar Matt Dixon is described begging thus: “Once on the thoroughfare Matt went to work with an ease born of long experience . . .”<sup>13</sup> Later, the protagonist, Tommy Hutton, stops outside an off-licence: “[H]e counted his worldly wealth. The previous day had been good for the begging business.”<sup>14</sup> Of the character “Wicked Campbell,” Cannon writes: “He carried the art of begging to the point of extortion . . .”<sup>15</sup>

From work, to profession, to art: this (risible) gradation, is also offered by Healy, in Streets Above Us: “Every artist needs some form of recognition; most produce their best work with

encouragement. Beggars are no exception, their need being more immediate, though."<sup>16</sup> The beggar can receive no higher assessment of value than this; from being an abject and unproductive figure generating equal measures of pity and contempt, the beggar is now an artist—on a par with the producer of the text within which he figures.

Not only are these narratives committed to the notion of begging as work, they are also preoccupied with representing begging as a virile and masculine activity. This is done primarily in three ways: through elision and suppression of the actual description of begging, through syntactical construction and metaphor, and through graphic descriptions of sexual fantasies and violent physical brutality which in all cases emerge organically from the act of begging, and which reject the implied feminine passivity of begging. Several narrators and characters never describe themselves as actually begging in any active sense, but, paradoxically, this serves to render them less abject to the reader.

In his 1990 autobiography To the Gutter and Back, Leonard Bromby is particularly evasive about begging. When he describes sitting with two alcoholic Scots beggars, he writes: "When a passer-by was not being abused he or she was being asked, 'Spare a few coppers towards a bed for the night.' I shall always be grateful to Georgie and Hughie (both now dead) for teaching me the art of survival."<sup>17</sup> It is noticeable here that "survival," like begging itself, is now also an art. The implication is that his mentors taught the narrator how to beg, but Bromby only describes himself begging once; money is usually being given to him without his having to ask for it: "As I managed to obtain a drink after meeting some old acquaintance who would give me a hand-out . . ."<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, in Ripley Bogle, Bogle observes: "I'm growing replete with jaded beggary,"<sup>19</sup> but he never describes himself actually begging, only drinking up the proceeds after begging. In Cardboard City, too, the protagonist never actually begs himself; like Bromby he is always being given money without having to even ask: "[H]e often had money pressed into his hand so he was never without the wherewithal to buy the liquor to satisfy his craving,"<sup>20</sup> and later: "He made no attempt at begging, but was

nevertheless halted several times by more fortunate citizens who pressed money into his hand."<sup>21</sup>

The Grass Arena is a virtual encyclopedia of narrative strategies designed to reconstruct begging as an active, virile occupation. Although often an eloquent writer, Healy, in his prose, becomes concentrated and elliptical when he describes himself begging. He describes meeting another alcoholic beggar, Scarface Mick, thus: "I was begging in the Euston Road. Met him. He was in rags."<sup>22</sup> Later in the same chapter, he writes: "Dipper and I went begging from everything that moved: men, women, and children . . . fight a dog for its bone. Dip pulled a smart young bloke."<sup>23</sup> Here it is noticeable that it is not the two beggars who have lost their humanity, but the people from whom they beg: "everything that moved." The image of fighting a dog for its bone, although squalid, privileges aggression rather than passivity. The final sentence, "Dip pulled a smart young bloke," is remarkable for the way in which it links sexual power with the act of begging: in colloquial English the infinitive "to pull" means to sexually attract. Every aspect of Healy's lines here works to persuade the reader that begging is aggressive and masculine.

When Healy and Mad Jerry go to the Convent of the Virgin Mary, Jerry begs a beautiful young nun for money while Healy, under instructions from Jerry, remains silent: "I noticed the way her mouth gave a little pout, and the shadow of very fine black hairs over her upper lip added to her beauty. Did she ever think of sex?"<sup>24</sup> His sexual fantasies restore the masculinity eroded by the passive act of begging, here metaphorically reinforced by his muteness; his manliness is returned to him, and reinforced for the reader, as he imagines having sex with her. In Streets Above Us, Healy writes of Finn, who is begging: "His next victim is a businessman."<sup>25</sup> Here, the beggar is constructed as predatory, rather than pitiable. Similarly, Roth describes two beggars with an ostensibly inappropriate image, but one which characteristically serves to equate begging with masculinity: "two beggars who were no further from the puppeteer than one corner of the boxing ring is from the other."<sup>26</sup>

In two of these books begging is replaced by an assertion of masculinity unequivocally represented in terms of physical violence. In To the Gutter and Back, Bromby rejects the abject

nature of begging in decisively physical terms:

George told me which door to knock on for a handout from a priest. I was given ten pence. I was not in the habit of begging. Hughie said to me, "If you are not going to panhandle [beg] then you'll get no bloody booze from me!" Hughie pushed me as he spoke. I launched a vicious retaliation. People who had known me before my decline into dereliction would not have recognized the snarling animal who attacked in self-defence. I punched and I kicked and I spat.<sup>27</sup>

It is clearly the reduction to begging which prompts the subsequent violence. In Cardboard City, the two alcoholic beggars Tommy and Natty avenge the rape and murder of Tommy's girlfriend by dealing with the killer in this way: "First the ankles were shattered, then the shins as the hammers rose and fell. Kneecaps were reduced to a splintered mess, ribs were stove in and the elbow joints on both arms smashed to a bloody pulp."<sup>28</sup> This episode is emphatically represented as a necessary affirmation of masculinity, one which dramatizes Tommy's rehabilitation and his return to the world of sobriety and work, away from that of begging and alcoholism.

Beggars are also used to advance another primary function of the genre: the ultimate rejection of metonymic signification. Metonymy may well be the dominant rhetorical trope within the genre. Again and again the alcoholic beggars within these texts are reduced to nothing more than hands, eyes, beards, mouths, and feet. In Cardboard City, Tommy passes the bottle from his pocket to "the grimy hand which had materialized from the bundle of rags beside him."<sup>29</sup> In Sabbath's Theater, a beggar appears to Sabbath as if he had no body: "A grizzled black face, wild and wasted, eyes bereft of any desire to see—blurred muzzy eyes . . . appeared only inches from his own grizzled face."<sup>30</sup>

However, it is feet, legs, and the absence of them which dominate the contemporary temperance narrative. In The Grass Arena, Healy writes: "Joined a queue of shabbily dressed, battered-featured vagrants, some with limbs missing, others on crutches."<sup>31</sup> In Streets Above Us, a beggar known as The Limp is

forced to give up begging for the evening: "It's too cold. He walks quickly in the direction of the tube. As quickly as his feet will allow, that is."<sup>32</sup> In Ripley Bogle, the protagonist greets his only friend: "Perry manoeuvres his crutches and hobbles fantastically to a seated position."<sup>33</sup> In Cardboard City, a character called Ironfoot Jack, because of the corrective surgical boot he wears, actually has the leg amputated after an accident. Again, in The Grass Arena, Healy writes: "Talking of legs, I shared a cell with Tin Legs Alex, an old wino. He fell on a railway line in Scotland dead drunk one night and only woke when a train had gone over his feet. He had to have them both off."<sup>34</sup>

On one level, such incidents serve the genre's primary *raison d'être*, the hortatory one of demonstrating through bodily mutilation, both to the principal characters and to the reader, the horrors of excessive drinking. However, it is noticeable that the loss of a limb is rarely seen as anything other than a fortunate addition to the beggar's armory—the martial metaphor here is appropriate. Healy's observation in The Grass Arena is absolutely characteristic of the genre's attitude to amputation and mutilation: "Heard the Sham was in hospital; got run over by a lorry. He's lost the will to live; he's also lost an arm, poor cunt. He should do well begging, though."<sup>35</sup> Within all these books, it is clear that the loss of a limb or two is a perfectly acceptable price to pay if it helps to satisfy the craving for alcohol. The principal characters, however, are not reduced to a purely metonymic signification; their eventual sobriety gains for them a complete body.

The issue of limb loss, and of mutilation in general, within these texts, also reflects the genre's interest in the mind/body distinction. Throughout these books the conflict between mind and body is always present. In his introduction to The Grass Arena, Colin McCabe writes: "To think, even briefly, about addiction is to disturb one of the West's crucial constitutive divisions: that between body and mind."<sup>36</sup> In Cardboard City, Cannon writes of Tommy in the early stages of his alcoholism: "He was still drunk, but it was not the hallucinatory intoxication of the night but another kind of alcoholic infection that permitted his mind to operate divorced from a body over which it had almost no control."<sup>37</sup> Later, when describing Ironfoot Jack after the amputation of his leg, Cannon writes: "Ironfoot Jack had

always held to the belief that what happened to the body was of little or no importance, so long as the mind was not impaired."<sup>38</sup>

This insouciance about limb loss underscores the attraction of the genre to the fundamental inessentiality of the body. Ripley Bogle begins his story by announcing: "Now I'm nothing. Nobody knows me and I barely exist. I'm going the way of all flesh, i.e. fading into reality."<sup>39</sup> However, this drive toward incorporeality, dissolution, death, is always successfully resisted in contemporary temperance texts by the principal characters, although their resistance is not religious. Indeed, these texts can be seen to reject the religious dynamic of nineteenth-century temperance narratives. Just as these contemporary narratives reflect the modern rejection of the work ethic, so too they bear witness to a contemporary rejection of religion as a source of spiritual enrichment. Within these books the numerous convents, missions, churches, religious hostels, and denominational soup kitchens are represented, paradoxically, solely as sources of material comfort: food and shelter. The only vaguely epiphanic or spiritual moments which occur do so under the influence of alcohol, or as a direct result of human fellowship. This amounts to a rejection of the numinous aspect of religion, a rejection which is also pervasive throughout contemporary Western society.

The grotesque parade of maimed and crippled beggars which crowd the pages of these texts demonstrates the dying flickers of a transcendental yearning which was foregrounded in earlier temperance narratives, but is now distributed among subsidiary characters. The contemporary temperance narrative steers its protagonist safely past the siren call of bodily inessentiality, with its fundamentally religious transcendental implications, but does so by stressing the pragmatic rewards of discipline and sobriety. These books are striking for their insistence on "self reliance" in achieving sobriety. Along the same lines, violence, in one form or another, underlies all of the accounts of eventual sobriety; in each case an act of compensatory aggression overwrites the earlier depictions of the subservient beggar, now displaced by the sober, productive citizen. In virtually every case, sobriety is achieved without the support of AA.

Bromby's receptivity to the ethos of Alcoholics Anonymous

is unusual. He is actually so receptive that the closing lines of his book adopt the brevity and the rhythms of AA's language: "I am in control of myself and my actions. I am not controlled by alcohol. It is essential for addicts to choose not to drink."<sup>40</sup> Characteristically, though, when he considers becoming sober, he employs martial imagery: "The battle for sobriety was not to be an easy one."<sup>41</sup> In The Grass Arena, Healy attends an AA meeting only because he is attracted to the two young women who organize a meeting in prison. His own faith in "will-power" is stressed when he observes the session: "Everyone in the room seemed intent on what was being said, perhaps hoping that talk would replace will-power in the fight against drink."<sup>42</sup> Again, the rhetoric of violence is noticeable here. Healy is unmoved by AA and only renounces alcohol when he becomes passionate about chess, a particularly war-like pursuit, as indeed a fellow prisoner points out to him: "'It's not really a game though—more like olden day warfare. It's called chess."<sup>43</sup> Healy's own depiction of chess represents chess as female, and he emphatically rejects a supernatural God:

Chess is a jealous lover. Will tolerate no other, especially in the form of too much drink. I gave myself to her completely, body and soul, and for the first time in my life I began to live without a constant nagging desire for drink. I was like a person who finds God, only this God was a warrior made out of wood who derives his power from Man.<sup>44</sup>

In Ripley Bogle, the narrator gives up drink when he is offered a place at Cambridge University, and, again, what is noticeable is the protagonist's rejection of religion: "This is what stopped my drinking. It wasn't the monks with their humanist platitudes and humble aspirations. It was the extremity of ambition. The alcoholic down and out waltzing along to the premier university in Europe. I liked that."<sup>45</sup> Bogle's sobriety is achieved without assistance from any self-help group, and is driven by malice, violence, and hatred:

The bastards who had despised my poverty, my religion and my class. I was now superior to them by their very own diseased system of

evaluation. A Cambridge undergraduate, no matter how poor, was a lot bloody posher than a jumped-up shopkeeper and his spawn, no matter how wealthy! The sweet bliss of revenge lit upon my body—the thought of my long parade of enemies and oppressors. I dedicated my success to them. I saw, enjoyably, the gall and wormwood that would fester in the hearts of those who hated me.<sup>46</sup>

Tommy Hutton, in Cardboard City, is also unmoved by self-help programs. He achieves sobriety, initially, by falling in love with Anne, who is herself intelligent enough to remain uneasy about the long-term value of such motivation: “Ever present in her mind was the fear that one day Tommy would fall victim to the habit that had led to his downfall, would take that one drink which, in any reformed alcoholic, would be the first step on the road back to dependency.”<sup>47</sup> After she is murdered, however, and Tommy has taken his revenge in the violent and brutal manner cited earlier, he becomes sufficiently empowered at the novel’s conclusion to run a hostel for the homeless, with the help of a philanthropic philosopher—not, significantly, a member of the clergy. Although the most Utopian of these books, Cardboard City, too, is resolutely pragmatic and worldly.

All of the principal characters in these contemporary temperance narratives remain in full possession of all their limbs at the narratives’ conclusions, sober and rehabilitated, both feet firmly upon the ground—a ground upon which they need beg no longer.

### Endnotes

1. Philip Roth, Sabbath’s Theater (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), 348.
2. Edmund B. O’Reilly, Sobriety Tales: Narratives of Alcoholism and Recovery (Amherst, U of Massachusetts P, 1997), 53.
3. David S. Reynolds and Debra J. Rosenthal (eds.), The Serpent in the Cup: Temperance in American Literature (Amherst, U of Massachusetts P, 1997), 22.
4. Reynolds, The Serpent in the Cup, 22.
5. John Healy, The Grass Arena (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 58.
6. Robert McLiam Wilson, Ripley Bogle (London: Picador, 1989), 16.
7. Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Unwin, 1965), 177.

8. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Essays: First and Second Series (New York: Library of America, 1983), 37 and 34.
9. William Ray cites Derrida on hierarchies: "[A]n opposition of metaphysical concepts (e.g.: speech/writing, presence/absence, etc.) is NEVER the confrontation of two terms, but a hierarchy and the order of a subordination." William Ray, Literary Meaning: From Phenomenology to Deconstruction (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1984), 143.
10. Healy, The Grass Arena. 131.
11. John Healy, Streets Above Us (London: Paladin, 1991), 38.
12. Roth, Sabbath's Theater. 205.
13. Joe Cannon, Cardboard City (London: Yellow Brick Publishers, 1993), 48.
14. Cannon, Cardboard City. 64.
15. Cannon, Cardboard City. 119.
16. Healy, Streets Above Us. 38.
17. Leonard Bromby, To the Gutter and Back (Beverly: Highgate Publishers, 1990), 81.
18. Bromby, To the Gutter and Back. 78.
19. Wilson, Ripley Bogle. 187.
20. Cannon, Cardboard City. 54.
21. Cannon, Cardboard City. 67.
22. Healy, The Grass Arena. 76.
23. Healy, The Grass Arena. 77.
24. Healy, The Grass Arena. 75.
25. Healy, Streets Above Us. 37.
26. Roth, Sabbath's Theater. 206.
27. Bromby, To the Gutter and Back. 91.
28. Cannon, Cardboard City. 227.
29. Cannon, Cardboard City. 43.
30. Roth, Sabbath's Theater. 205.
31. Healy, The Grass Arena. 154.
32. Healy, Streets Above Us. 65.
33. Wilson, Ripley Bogle. 72.
34. Healy, The Grass Arena. 130.
35. Healy, The Grass Arena. 124.
36. Colin McCabe, introduction to Healy, The Grass Arena. x.
37. Cannon, Cardboard City, 36.
38. Cannon, Cardboard City. 144. For a more comprehensive examination of the mind/body dichotomy in "Addiction Narratives" see my "The Disenchanted Circle: Slave Narratives and Junk Narratives" (Dionysos: vol. 8, #1, Winter '98).
39. Wilson, Ripley Bogle. 8.
40. Bromby, To the Gutter and Back, 98.
41. Bromby, To the Gutter and Back. 94.
42. Healy, The Grass Arena, 138.

43. Healy, The Grass Arena. 167.
44. Healy, The Grass Arena. 169.
45. Wilson, Ripley Bogle. 155.
46. Wilson, Ripley Bogle. 157.
47. Cannon, Cardboard City. 159.

## Addiction and Modern Spiritual Autobiography

### David Leigh, S. J.

Although several recent autobiographies by Pete Hamill, William Styron, and Wilfrid Sheed have focused on the authors' addictions, these life stories are not primarily spiritual journeys. Similarly, several studies on literature and addiction have given very little attention to the genre of spiritual autobiography (e.g., works by Donald Goodwin, Tom Dardis, Thomas Gilmore, Linda Schierse, John W. Crowley, and others). In this article, I will explore three modern spiritual autobiographies to see how addiction to alcohol or drugs was overcome but later led to the substitution of less harmful types of addiction. The autobiographies are Thomas Merton's Seven Storey Mountain (1948), Dorothy Day's The Long Loneliness (1955), and Malcolm X's The Autobiography of Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley (1965). In these life stories, we will discover how the escape from alcohol/drug addiction led to an obsession with writing in Merton, to an obsession with love in Day, and to a pursuit of racial power in Malcolm X. However, in all three, the transference of their addiction indirectly strengthened their fascination with words, a fascination that made them important modern guides to the spiritual journey.

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In Merton's early autobiography, published when he was a thirty-three year old Trappist monk, he casually mentions that drinking was a part of his high school and college wanderings at Oakham and Cambridge in England and at Columbia University in New York City. But he never gives the subject the close analysis that he devotes to other aspects of his journey up the purgatorial mountain of his title. He admits he is reluctant "to dig up all this old scenery and reconstruct the stews of my own mental Pompeii," i.e., of the evenings spent in the pubs of Cambridge. Nevertheless, his biographers refer to his public school days at Oakham as a time of secret drinking, and his university friends describe his life there as filled with "drinking and wenching" that led to his being grounded (Furlong 41, 50, 58). Merton himself

describes his year at Cambridge as filled with “the sweet stench of corruption,” of a “cloudy semi-liquid medium in whose dregs I was ultimately destined to settle” (SSM 118-119).

Using imagery from the one author he studied carefully at Cambridge—Dante—Merton describes his life there as movements of falling and descent, imagery expressing his own private purgatory: “I was to be punished for my sins by my sins themselves . . . in the flames of my own hell” (123). Merton, however, passes quickly over the “damp and fetid mists” of his drinking to focus on a more serious “capital sin” by which he felt himself entrapped—that of sexual excess, which led him to get sent down from university and banished to America by his guardian. Later biographers would uncover evidence that the Dantesque imagery of this section of the autobiography was covering up an episode in which Merton is guilty of getting a young woman pregnant (cf. Mott 83-85).

When he eventually enrolls at Columbia University, Merton finds a group of friends who enlarge his intellectual interests and encourage him to be a writer and artist, but even they spend four or five nights a week “crawling around the tiny, noisy and expensive nightclubs” of midtown Manhattan:

It was not that we got drunk. No, it was this strange business of sitting in a room full of people and drinking without much speech, and letting yourself be deafened by the jazz that throbbed through the whole sea of bodies binding them all together in a kind of fluid medium. It was a strange, animal travesty of mysticism, sitting in those booming rooms, with the noise pouring through you, and the rhythm jumping and throbbing in the marrow of your bones. (157)

What hangovers he admits to came as much from exhaustion as from drinking. Even in this passage, Merton seems to have difficulty acknowledging the specific power of alcohol in his college life. He sums up his religious life at this point in very general terms, “I was already dreaming of mystical union when I did not even keep the simplest rudiments of the moral law.”

During the year after his graduation and his conversion to Catholicism, he confesses only that he participated in “incomplete drunkenness,” which he considered, only from a moral standpoint, to be a “venial sin.” What he does admit, however, is that he is once again trapped in the contradictions of the fundamental self-image which he had discovered in his youth—that he was a perpetual traveler seeking an ever-vanishing home. He had taken important steps on a journey but was still captured by his inner lack of freedom, one aspect of which was his drinking habit.

This habit would continue during his summers spent writing novels with his friends in upstate New York. His journals of 1939-40 are peppered with references to getting sick on beer, to “rum, scotch, beer,” to a drunken party in Virginia. But the same journals suggest that Merton was becoming aware of his inner contradictions, and perhaps of his problem drinking. He argues with his friends that it is difficult to pray and to love God “if you were attached to drink and women and pleasures and ambitions” (Run to the Mountain 72). He rereads his 1931 journals and notices that his primary goal at that time was “to be drunk” (86). On his pilgrimage to Cuba in early 1940, he reflects on the fact that Cubans can drink without needing to get drunk. This leads to further reflections on the compulsive drinking of Americans in bars and at parties (175).

Beneath these journal passages lies at least a subliminal awareness in Merton that his personality is not suited to drinking moderately in the New York scene. Even his first decision to become a priest occurs after an evening of talk and drink “sitting at the curved bar while the room rocked with jazz” at Nick’s on Sheridan Square. After arriving back at his apartment with a couple of friends, he sleeps on the floor for several hours, goes out to get a take-out breakfast, and then takes a walk along the docks. As he says, “Somewhere in the midst of all this, an idea had come to me . . . I was going to be a priest” (252-253). It is only after this decision—the second step in his religious conversion—that Merton gives up smoking and heavy drinking in preparation for searching out his possible vocation as a Franciscan priest. There is little evidence that he returned to drinking during his final two years of teaching, writing, and social work in

Harlem before he entered the Trappist monastery in December 1941. His vulnerability to addictions, however, does not disappear with his entrance into the cloister.

Although none of his biographers makes much of Merton's addictions during his twenty-seven years as a monk, a closer look at his recently published journals suggests that the major crisis of his later years included a brief return to some heavy drinking. This crisis occurs while he is living in a private hermitage on the grounds of Gethsemane Trappist Monastery, where he had been granted permission to live in late 1965. During these hermit years, Merton grew as a master of prayer and as a writer but found it difficult to keep to a schedule because of heavy mail and a stream of visitors. He also suffered from several physical ailments, including spinal problems that called for a cervical fusion in March, 1966. During his recovery, he became emotionally involved for several months with a young nurse who had helped him during his hospital recovery. Although they met only a few times privately during his visits to the doctor, Merton became extremely attached to the nurse, who began to dominate his journals of 1966. Although he soon came to see the delusions involved in the involvement, he also learned of his deep need for affection and for humility.

Always a man of extremes, Merton exhibited addictive behavior during those months, including a return to an uncontrolled pattern of drinking. While living in the monastery for twenty-five years, he had had few opportunities to drink alcoholic beverages except for medicinal purposes. In his hermitage, however, he was allowed to keep gifts of alcohol, which he shared with his visitors. What was not apparent even to his biographers was the extent of his problem drinking during the period of his emotional turmoil in 1966. The recently published fifth volume of his journals, Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom (1997) reveals a pattern of drinking that was at times out of control. Just as his infatuation is beginning to cause him sleep problems in late April, Merton gets a sleeping pill and "some old bourbon" from the monastery's infirmarian in order to get a full night's sleep. A couple of days later, he visits Louisville with a psychologist friend, who helps him to meet and have a brandy with the nurse, but Merton notes only that the psychologist is

drinking too much. During two meetings with her and other friends in May, Merton notes that they were drinking wine as part of a picnic (54, 66). During their meeting in the psychologist's office the next month, Merton again notes that he brought along a bottle of wine (81), which may have contributed to his dalliance with her and to a discussion of his possibly leaving the monastery to get married.

Although he tries to call off meetings with her after this, Merton shows his inner dividedness by "excesses" in drinking during the visit of other friends in July (92). A July 10 entry includes the startling admission: "I see that I am better off without any alcohol. At least in this kind of situation. Drank some heavy, dull Californian sherry Dan gave me and it put me in a stupor. Only made the heat harder to bear and meditation impossible" (93). Despite this awareness of his weakness for drink, Merton admits in his journal that he drank beer a week later with his psychologist friend and two days later that he drank half a bottle of wine with the nurse in their last long encounter (97). As he reflects back in a September 4 entry in his journal, after a note about his continued but now distanced love for the nurse (who is engaged to be married to someone else), "The overall impression: awareness of my own fantastic instability, complexity, frailty, and the nearness to disaster in May and early June. Providentially we were saved from real danger . . . The worst thing was that afternoon with Linda Parsons [a writer who visited around July 1st] when I got drunk and was irresponsibly misbehaving in a way that made me very ashamed." This episode of excessive drinking was mentioned to others and eventually got back to the Abbot, with whom he had had many conflicts, but who, Merton admits in the same entry, "was more right than I was willing to admit and after all pretty kind and not too unreasonable" (124).

Although he confesses to an occasional spell of drinking with friends in the city during August and November, Merton rarely mentions alcohol during the rest of his journals. One exception is a brief mention of having some bourbon in April 1967, after he remembers the anniversary of meeting the nurse by celebrating Mass for her and her fiancé: ". . . I am convinced that the real love is more or less over between us, . . . so in a way it is a liberation day—and I have made up my mind to be what I am

supposed to be. (Finally!)” (223). His drinking continues at times when he has visitors at the hermitage, as he confesses in July 1967: “But just visiting and socializing is not OK. Especially if I sit around drinking” (263).

Merton seems to have come to at least an oblique awareness that he cannot drink well and live an authentic monastic life, especially when he is undergoing inner conflicts and restlessness. During the final year of his life, when he was preparing for and carrying out the one major final journey of his adult life—a trip to India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand to study and speak on monasticism at an international conference—Merton apparently moved beyond problem drinking.

What is of interest in examining his entire monastic life, however, is to find a sort of transferred addiction in his major inner struggle—the struggle between his life as a monk and his life as a writer. This struggle emerges in the last pages of his early autobiography and then becomes central to his middle journals, published as The Sign of Jonas in 1953. In this latter book, he describes himself as a Jonas traveling in the belly of a paradox—the paradoxical tensions of being both a monk vowed to silence and a writer committed to communicate. What is interesting for our study of Merton’s addictive behavior is the judgment made by the one psychiatrist whom he consulted just after writing The Sign of Jonas. During this period, as Master of Novices, he had become interested in psychoanalysis as one way of enlightening himself in the guidance of the younger monks. When his friends suggested to the abbot that Merton get some psychological help, the name of Dr. Gregory Zilboorg came up as a possibility, especially since Zilboorg was to address a conference on psychiatry and religious life at a Benedictine monastery at St. John’s University in Minnesota. The famous Russian convert to Catholicism had read Merton’s work but was not predisposed to favor his amateur attempts to write about psychology. In the notorious encounter of the two famous converts, Zilboorg accused Merton of being a megalomaniac narcissist who was addicted to words as “substitutes for reality.” Merton was devastated by the accusation (in the presence of his abbot) of being “verbological,” of being addicted to writing as a medium that is cut off from its meaning and of seeking to be a

hermit in order to get publicity. Fortunately, Zilboorg did not think Merton needed psychotherapy but only firm guidance from his superiors in the monastery. The diagnosis of addiction to words, however, left Merton with the lifelong struggle of integrating his vocations as monk and as writer. This addiction to words may have been a transferred form of his earlier and later problem drinking.

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The autobiography of Dorothy Day provides a greater puzzle than that of Merton for the study of covert alcoholism and the addiction to words. Although Day asserts in the opening chapter of The Long Loneliness that she intends to admit her sins, she later glosses over some of her sexual liaisons (and totally omits the fact of an abortion, which her biographer later uncovered). In describing her life during her wandering years in Greenwich Village, Day admits that she found herself, at age twenty-one, "sitting all night in taverns" in "an atmosphere of drink and smoke" with Eugene O'Neill, Michael Gold, and other "constant companions." She goes on to describe this period as a "wavering life" in which "the life of the flesh called to me" until "a succession of incidents and the tragic aspect of life in general began to overwhelm me and I could no longer endure the life I was leading" (Long Loneliness 95-99).

Other than in these passages and in her novel The Eleventh Virgin, Day was very reluctant after her conversion to Catholicism to discuss her years in Greenwich Village. She often said that she did not want to mislead young people into thinking that a life of drinking and sensuality was a necessary step in the process of searching for God. When the literary critic Malcolm Cowley wrote in 1934 that he remembered Dorothy Day as a bohemian young woman in Greenwich saloons with rough men who could "drink them under the table," Day was outraged. Later in life, thirty years after her conversion, she wrote up a reply to Cowley in which she lamented the dissemination of his sentence about her early drinking. She was especially upset that the remark had been used by critics of the Catholic Worker movement to put down her credibility and to mislead her friends, even the psychiatrist Karl

Stern, into asking "whether I was an alcoholic and had been hiding this from him" (Miller 104). (Cowley himself admitted in 1976 that he meant only that Day could control her heavy drinking but not that she was an alcoholic).

What is more intriguing is not Day's unproved reputation for addiction to alcohol but her subsequent addiction to love. As the title of her autobiography indicates, she saw the directional image of her life as a struggle with personal and spiritual loneliness, with the resolution eventually being various forms of "communion." During her struggles, she was vulnerable to self-destructive patterns of escaping from her long loneliness. For example, during the period just after her Village years, a period she refers to as filled with tragic incidents, she had an affair with a heavy drinker, Lionel Moise, whom she met in her work as a nurse in 1918. This destructive relationship with a hard-boiled, womanizing newspaperman has reminded some critics of Day's own unhappy relationship to her autocratic father, also an alcoholic journalist who loved to dominate the women in his family (Miller 127).

When the affair with Moise ended badly due to his jealousy and machismo, she drifted into another addictive relationship, this time a brief marriage with Barkeley Tobey in 1920, which she admitted was "on the rebound . . . after an unhappy love affair" (Miller 143). This marriage to a man who was subsequently to marry seven women in succession was a mistake that Day admitted after traveling in Europe with him for a year.

When she left him upon their return to New York, she began two years of working as a secretary and journalist in Chicago before she returned to New York. In New York she met the young anarchist Forster Batterham, with whom she entered "a common law marriage." In this marriage, she found herself moving beyond addictive love to a true mutuality, but unfortunately Batterham did not believe in marriage or family life, and when, after they had a child, he refused to allow Day to follow through on her conversion to Catholicism and her desire to baptize their child, she found no alternative but to leave him. For the rest of her life, she remained celibate but professed an abiding love for Batterham. This abiding love may account for the fact that there is no evidence that she ever got into drinking during her

years with Batterham or during the rest of her life as a founder of the Catholic Worker movement. In the light of the many years of healthy—some would say saintly—life that she led, one might conclude that Day's reluctance to discuss her early drinking habits and her love addiction came more from her Victorian and early Catholic reticence about sins of the flesh rather than from dishonesty or denial.

In any event, throughout her life, and especially during her period of heavy drinking with the Village crowd and of her wandering in an addictive search for emotional love, Day used her writing as a way to free herself. Always the daughter of a journalist, she admitted that during their childhood she and her sister solved their problems by writing about them (Long Loneliness 132). After her destructive relationships in New York, she wrote her one novel, The Eleventh Virgin, which deals with the "fatal passion" of its heroine. Although the writing of a fictional account of her addictive love did not free her from Moise, it did provide her in 1924 with enough money from the film rights to allow her to move back east and buy a house on Staten Island, where, she says, "I could settle down to study and 'to write'" (126). It was here that the "natural happiness" of her non-addictive love for Batterham would lead her, as a woman and a writer, to faith. As she describes this stage of her religious conversion: "I have always felt that it was life with him that brought me natural happiness, that brought me to God. His ardent love of creation brought me to the Creator of all things" (154).

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The Autobiography of Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley, paints a bold picture of alcohol and drug addiction as a major expression of the author's period of wandering before his conversion to Islam. What is significantly different about this spiritual autobiography is that the young Malcolm Little uses drugs as a method of deadening the pain of racial and personal conflicts, as well as of gaining money and power over others in the hustler worlds of Roxbury in Boston and Harlem in New York. After dropping out of school at fourteen, Malcolm first moves to the city, to Boston, where he craves and earns

acceptance by joining the drug culture. As he describes himself at that time, “The first liquor I drank, my first cigarettes, even my first reefers, I can’t specifically remember. . . . I still was country, I know now, but it all felt so great because I was accepted. . . . we’d be turning on, the reefers making everybody’s head light, or the whisky aglow in our middles” (Malcolm X 51). After he masters the Roxbury subculture by becoming a master lindy-dancer (while high on liquor and reefers), he gets a job that takes him to Harlem, which he admits “just about narcotized me”: “I drank liquor, smoked marijuana, painted the Big Apple red with increasing numbers of friends” (75, 78). Before long, he finds himself making most of his money by “peddling reefers” in Harlem, a practice which leads him into small-time robbery and bootlegging liquor—and onto the narcotics squad hit list. The tensions of petty crime drive him into hard dope and the life of a professional “hustler”: “I was a true hustler—uneducated, unskilled at anything honorable, and I considered myself nervy and cunning enough to live by my wits, exploiting any prey that presented itself” (108).

After his criminal life leads him into isolation (except for his only trusted friend, his sixteen-year old brother Reginald) and into a deadly battle with another hustler, Malcolm leaves Harlem to return to Boston. Here he surrenders to his twenty-five-dollar-a-day cocaine habit, which he admits gave him “an illusion of supreme well-being” (134) that eventually allowed him to get caught for robbing suburban homes. Sentenced to ten years in a Massachusetts prison, he immediately begins fighting the system by attempting to buy drugs from the prison guards.

Just at the moment that he has gained the nickname of “Satan” in prison for his antireligious attitude, Malcolm undergoes a radical metamorphosis that begins with a linguistic conversion and ends with a spiritual transformation that frees him from his addictions. The change in his language begins when he meets a very eloquent fellow prisoner, Bimbi, who challenges Malcolm to make something of his mind in prison. Fascinated by Bimbi’s power with words, Malcolm begins memorizing the dictionary and reading widely in the large prison library. He begins taking correspondence courses and participating in prison debates on social and academic subjects. As he gains power through words,

he gives up the attempt to gain power through drugs. What makes this movement from addiction possible, however, is his religious conversion to the Nation of Islam, a small but influential American version of the Moslem religion with an idiosyncratic emphasis on black supremacy and black nationalism. Like Merton, Malcolm overcomes his addiction primarily by separation from the sources of drugs and by religious transformation to a commitment to a higher ideal. Within the Nation of Islam (later called Black Muslims by the American press), the moral code was very strict—no use of tobacco, alcohol, or narcotics. This strictness was enforced by a tight wall of support from the members of the sect, all of whom pledged to give up these addictive substances through the help of Allah.

In his movement from the pro-drug culture of Harlem to the anti-drug culture of the Nation of Islam outside of prison, Malcolm X exhibits a radical spiritual conversion, but a conversion that retains some of the desire for power over others that he had shown during his ghetto years. His search for power, as before, involves words. Where he had once showed his power over others by his mastery of the street lingo and ghetto slang of Harlem, he now shows it through his mastery of the theological language and religious rhetoric of the Black Muslims. When he is made one of the local, and later national, leaders in the Nation of Islam by its prophetic leader, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X transforms the negative black/white directional image of his youth into a positive black-over-white image of the “white man is the devil” mythology of this sect.

In fact, he uses the powerful rhetoric and beliefs of the Nation of Islam specifically to free black people from the addictions of the ghettos. He goes out of his way in his autobiography to emphasize the racist basis for addiction in American cities: “Most black junkies really are trying to narcotize themselves against being a black man in the white man’s America . . . the black man taking dope is only helping the white man to ‘prove’ that the black man is nothing” (260). Malcolm X describes in vivid prose how the Black Muslims stay with junkies through the six steps of the therapeutic process, including the withdrawal period. Thus, as a result, “The ex-addict . . . will never forget that it was the Nation of Islam’s program which rescued him from the

special hell of dope” (262). The “phenomenal record” of cures from addiction that Malcolm X records among the Nation of Islam bolsters his affirmation of his new religion and of its liberating effect on him.

This connection between liberation from drugs and liberation from white supremacy remains with Malcolm X even after his second conversion, that from the sect of the Nation of Islam to universal Islam in 1964. After being restricted in his work by the leadership of the Nation of Islam and then becoming disillusioned by the moral hypocrisy of Elijah Muhammad’s life, Malcolm breaks from the movement. But he retains his strict anti-drug life and searches for a way to live out his spiritual conversion to universal Islam through a new political party that will work toward “honest white-black brotherhood.” Implicitly at least, he seems near the end of his life to be moving away from the abuses of power he believed he had discerned in the Nation of Islam. The writing, and indeed the language, of his Autobiography—written, be it noted, with the stylistic help of an established writer—adumbrates his ongoing transformation and the leaving behind of addictions.

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What might we conclude from this brief survey of three important spiritual autobiographies of the twentieth century that involve struggles with addiction? We notice, of course, that the importance of alcohol or drugs varies greatly in these three life stories. For Merton and Day, drinking was during some phases of their lives excessive and out of control, but they believed that their problem drinking was more important as a symptom of deeper unresolved tensions and desires. This is demonstrated, perhaps, for both of them in that the temporary drinking problems mutated into other addictive behaviors later in life. Another similarity is that both use writing as part of the solution.

Malcolm X’s drug problems, by contrast, were part of a pervasive lifestyle, and therefore presumably more difficult to arrest. However, for Malcolm as for Merton we learn that a total separation from the addictive situation and culture can create a space in which these drug abusers can undergo a radical religious

and moral conversion. The monastery for Merton and the prison for Malcolm X provided them with a culture of liberation that led them to a positive transformation toward a higher spiritual goal. Despite later lapses and relapses for both men, on the whole they manage to persevere on their new paths for the remainder of their lives. For both Merton and Malcolm X, the telling of their stories in writing or dictation becomes part of their ongoing recovery—a recovery foreshortened by the sudden, early deaths of both. Day, who lived well into old age, found the healing she needed for her addictions in the chief fruit of her conversion, her radical option for the poor.

In broad outline, then, the conversion stories of these three well-known modern spiritual figures replicate the master narratives of addiction recovery in the twentieth century. These stories resemble, for instance, the stories of Bill Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, or of Dan Wakefield, author of Returning: A Spiritual Journey. Wilson and Wakefield find the power in their conversions initially to escape drugs, but find that other addictions—Wilson calls them “defects of character”—surface, or that alcohol still lies in wait for them. But, like Wilson and Wakefield, Merton and Day and Malcolm find that telling their own stories helps to bring them back to a place of equipoise (see Leigh, Circuitous Journeys, for a study of Wakefield, as well as more complete studies of the autobiographies of Merton, Day, and Malcolm X).

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## Alcoholism and the Novel

### Marty Roth

Reading Alcoholisms, by Jane Lilienfeld [St. Martin's Press], is a thorough and sensible reading of three British novels (Thomas Hardy's The Mayor of Casterbridge [1886], James Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man [1916], and Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse [1927]) in their relation to twentieth-century studies of addiction. It is organized by a neat division that lines these novels up with the three victims of alcoholism: the alcoholic (Michael Henchard), the child of alcoholic parents (Stephen Dedalus), and the co-dependent (Mrs. Ramsey). I found the treatment of Joyce's novel the most stimulating: Lilienthal reads the family history in Portrait against Stanislaus Joyce's Complete Dublin Diary and skillfully excavates in the novel the lost history of alcoholic domination by a ruthless patriarch. Stanislaus is the child who remembers the trauma.

I have no quarrel with a diagnostic reading of the modern novel; in fact, I find it a welcome relief from the conventional aestheticizing of this body of fiction. I do, however, have serious concerns about what Lilienthal is pressing into service as "addiction theory": a contemporary psychological archive that is treated as if it provided solid ground across which interpretation could flow. However, the clinical literature consists of an amalgam of disorganized and unsorted approaches, directions, and conclusions—it often seems to include both the positive and negative of any formulations. The problem with looking to clinical psychology for literary definition is that it answers every question yes. Consequently, the applications often seem quite arbitrary.

Howard Blane, for example, suggests that "alcoholics can be categorized into three types: openly dependent alcoholics who expect others to meet their primary needs, counterdependent alcoholics who cannot admit dependency except under the influence of alcohol, and dependent-independent alcoholics who swing from one extreme to the other" (44). Such an open-ended declaration can hardly serve as a critical compass. On the other hand, clinical wisdom can be confusingly partial, as in the statement that "Self-hatred turned into an equal aggression against others, arrogance, and the use of a grandiose self-defense to prevent acknowledging one's actual status—all of the attributes

found in *some* twentieth-century North American male alcoholics—are *partial* motivations for Michael Henchard’s drunken welcoming of the Royal Personage” (68; italics mine). On page 42, I read that Michael Henchard’s refusal to lie and discredit the furmity woman indicates “low self-esteem and lack of impulse control.” Why not a residue of honesty? The alcoholics I have known (and over the years there have been many) are self-confessed liars, tremendous liars, lying when they had no need to. There is no question about Henchard’s alcoholism, but it is not, I believe, going to be “proved” by such equations. And on page 131, I am told that “Stephanie Brown and other North American psychologists note that the rigid imposition of order and the search for consistent boundaries between the self and the trauma-producing world is a frequent response to a parent’s alcoholic drinking,” but the adult children and codependents of my acquaintance usually had the opposite response to a parent’s drinking, i.e., losing any boundary between themselves and the alcoholic.

Given this confusion, the author does not feel that the clinical literature needs to be read as much as the critical literature does. Although she will acknowledge that her doctors disagree, she usually sidesteps any differences in order to choose a congenial position—that there is an alcoholic personality, that codependence is not a misogynistic structure, etc. But if there is controversy on the clinical side, what controls which expert you align your argument with at what moment in your presentation?

There are also a series of paths not taken that clouded my reading. I wanted some mention of the relationship between alcoholism and a general theory of patriarchal civilization. Many of the behavioral traits most crucial to Lilienthal’s analysis extend well beyond alcoholism. Is alcoholism, then, an exemplary subset of this larger malaise, or the secret name for the whole—a clearly demarcated area of pathology or a shadow map of civilization and its discontents? I would have welcomed an argument that went in either direction. Lacking this, alcoholism comes to stand as the sign of any imbalance. Denial is not specific to addiction even though it is a major feature of that disease; still, you can’t just step from the fact of denial to the fact of addiction. Depression is similarly ubiquitous. The middle-class wife as a self-sacrificing

figure certainly extends beyond the literally alcoholic family. Is the metaphoric alcoholic family the patriarchal family, as Anne Wilson Schaef (When Society Becomes an Addict [1988]) suggests? “Far from being considered unhealthy,” Lilienthal writes, “a codependent middle-class female in Victorian England was performing her socially defined role” (172). Were all British matrons codependent whether they were attached to an alcoholic system or not?

If I mention my surprise at the absence of any reference to Hardy’s Tess of the D’Urbervilles, in my opinion the supreme nineteenth-century novel about a codependent, it is to point to a narrowness in the range of the study—three novels and no more, as if they were three patients under diagnosis and their family history were of no significance whatsoever. Why should Lilienthal locate the alcoholic, adult child and codependent so firmly in the literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries if she’s not going to wonder about their presence there? Reading Alcoholisms contains no theory of the novel and addiction. Space for reflection on the novel and alcoholism would allow the question of Hardy’s counter-intuitive structure to arise: whereas Charles Dickens’s “The Drunkard’s Death” or Emile Zola’s L’Assommoir or Joris-Karl Huysman’s Marthe all have a straightforward “Rake’s Progress” structure, Hardy’s novel does alcoholism in a seemingly backwards way, taking a protagonist on the verge of bottoming out, watching him clean up his act for twenty-one years, and then plunging him into his disease with a vengeance.

Despite the symmetry of her structure, one might well ask what does literature add to this brew? Cui bono, who gains from this study, literature or clinical psychology? Can literature resolve any of the clinical disagreements or pragmatic indeterminacies? Does literature do alcoholism particularly well? Do authors tend to be alcoholic?

There is one exception to the lack of cultural speculation, an effort to make the complex machine of modernist narrative imitate paternal drinking. Making Joyce’s symbolist technique the literary equivalent of alcoholic behavior in the family is a grand idea, but it often feels a little too ordinary in execution. Even so, the possibility that modernist narratives are alcoholic structures is not

raised in its general form. I also miss speculation about modernism, which has been identified with addiction by John Crowley (The White Logic [1994]) and Alina Clej (A Genealogy of the Modern Self [1995] ).

Despite all these concerns of mine, Reading Alcoholisms does its good work. It provides a valuable perspective on this period of British fiction and society, humanizing rather than pathologizing the three main characters. It is a perspective that needs to be represented in literary history and Lilienthal does it well.

A second book from Lilienthal on addiction and literature is an essay collection, The Languages of Addiction, edited by her and by Jeffrey Oxford [St. Martin's Press]. It has the honor of being the first culture and addiction "reader" as opposed to a special edition of a journal, and this makes the generally uneven and low quality of its essays even more distressing. A few of the essays are worthwhile; most, however, are unnecessary make-work pieces; and some are downright awful. Only one essay seems to have heard of work on addiction by Avital Ronell or Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

**Review of A Babel of Bottles: Drink, Drinkers & Drinking Places in Literature.** James Nicholls & Susan J. Owen, eds. Academic Press: Sheffield, England, 2000

## **Jim Harbaugh**

As Prof. Nicholls notes in his introduction, A Babel of Bottles is the fruit of a November, 1997 conference at Sheffield University. Earlier such conferences, and the articles and the books that resulted from them, have been featured in past issues of this magazine. According to Nicholls, the 1997 conference differed from past ones in its concentration on where and how alcoholic beverages are consumed. Nicholls' article in last Winter's Dionysos on drinking in Paris before and after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is a fine example of this emphasis, although Prof. Nicholls is represented in A Babel of Bottles by a more text oriented article on Ernest Hemingway.

Nicholls details this shift in emphasis this way. "Up to now, work on [drinking and literature] has dealt primarily with alcoholism in fiction . . . [with] the relationship between literary representation and alcohol as a source of addiction or on the role of particular narrative patterns in the process of recovery from addiction." I would add that this is a fair description of much of what has appeared in this journal since its inception a decade ago. The newer emphasis, at Sheffield and in A Babel of Bottles—and perhaps in future issues of Dionysos?—is on "the spaces in which drinking takes place; the significance of what is drunk and with whom; and how the experience of drinking and drunkenness conditions the narrative forms by which it is represented" (A Babel, 12-13, 13). By analogy this sounds a bit like the shift from the focus on the text in itself of the New Criticism and its offspring to the interest in sociological context of the New Historicism and other recent literary trends.

I find this shift particularly intriguing because of my work as a teacher of Addiction Studies. As I begin my eighth year in this role—the same number of years I worked as a teacher of composition and literature—the single most significant thing that I have learned is that the social aspect of addiction is the most neglected. The first, and for some people still the only, aspect of

addiction that has been studied was the moral: why do addicts behave so badly? At a certain point explanations shifted to the psychological: addicts act that way because of psychic aberrations. Then, particularly after the advent of Alcoholics Anonymous, people focused on the physical causes and effects of addiction, which are often quite difficult to tell apart. But by and large the study of addiction, and the study of literature and addiction as well, has focused on the individual.

But drinking and other drug use usually take place in a social context which can greatly modify how the drug use or misuse is perceived or experienced. What one society or sub-culture perceives as deviant drug use, another sub-culture considers the norm. The very concept of addiction, and even more of recovery, is by no means shared by many societies, or even by all segments within U.S. society. So the new social emphasis that Nicholls discerns in the study of literature and addiction seems to me very welcome.

The topics under discussion in A Babel of Bottles range freely in space and time, from the drama of Ben Jonson to the poetry of Berryman, Sexton, and Carver. Some of the figures studied are very familiar to the readers of Dionysos, including T. S. Eliot and Hemingway. A particularly striking article, by Joe Brooker, studies patterns of drinking in Joyce's Ulysses, concluding that Leopold Bloom's antihero status is confirmed by his comparative abstemiousness.

But the article that most intrigued me was the final piece, by Philip McGowan, of Goldsmiths College, University of London. McGowan, like our frequent contributor Matts Djos, is especially interested in John Berryman, but also takes up Anne Sexton and Raymond Carver. The hard drinking of all three of these poets has been the subject of literary discussion practically since their work began to be published, and certainly since their deaths—the first two by their own hands, Carver of cancer after a decade of recovery. McGowan's particular focus is contained in his title, "Drinking to Anonymity."

I find McGowan's article fascinating on two opposing scores. In his study of Berryman and Sexton he does a splendid job of drawing on their poetry to demonstrate how the deterioration caused by their alcoholism brought them to a point

where they seemed to themselves no longer to have an individual identity, to have attained anonymity with a vengeance by losing themselves. As Berryman says succinctly of his alter ego, "Henry," in one of his "Dream Songs," "Henry is vanishing. . . ." (A Babel, 188).

Oddly enough, coupled with his persuasive study of "anonymity" as a result of addiction, McGowan in my judgment completely misreads the function of "anonymity" in AA belief and in the poetry of Raymond Carver. McGowan seems to feel that the "anonymity" embraced by AA is just as malign as the anonymity caused by self-destroying drinking (see pp. 181-184, in which McGowan tellingly misidentifies AA as a "treatment agency"). Yet when he studies the poetry that Carver produced primarily after the poet achieved permanent sobriety in part with the help of AA, he has only words of praise for Carver's achievement. As he puts it, in what I consider a most judicious summary of Carver's poetry, "The close detailing of the vivid substantiality of the visible world becomes the central focus of his later poems which repeat a thanksgiving for his survival and continued existence."

This is very true to Carver's spirit in his later poetry, poetry that has captured the imagination of other substantial writers—Carver's "Late Fragment" is the epigraph of Andrew Miller's much-admired novel Ingenious Pain, as well as a section of Anne LaMott's best-selling collection of spiritual essays Traveling Mercies. But I find it difficult to put this together with McGowan's strictures at the beginning of his article on AA-style anonymity. Far from stifling Carver's voice, the anonymity of recovery enabled him to sing as he never had before, particularly during the years when his voice in his short stories had been muffled by his editor, Gordon Lisk.

Of Carver's poetry I would say instead that he found a quite different kind of anonymity than the deadly version of it that in the end silenced Berryman and Sexton. Perhaps this is a secular version of the biblical conundrum that one must lose one's self to find it. But we need not resort to religious parallels; what of the phrase of Keats' that T. S. Eliot fashioned into a literary-critical touchstone: "negative capability"? It makes more sense to me to think of Carver as surmounting the deadly entrapment in self-

absorption that addiction brings and thus attaining a kind of beautiful emptiness, a welcoming space in which “[t]he close detailing of the vivid substantiality of the visible world” could find a site. For this kind of anonymity, “thanksgiving” would surely be the most appropriate response.

In any case, I hope other readers, and especially the readers of Dionysos, will find some part of A Babel of Bottles as powerful a spur to reflection as I did.

## Notes and Comment

### Roger Forseth

Catherine MacGregor has received her Ph.D. degree from the University of Ottawa. Two chapters of her dissertation, "Writing Lives of Addiction: A Context for Literary Biography and Criticism," originally appeared in Dionysos (Fall 1991 and Fall 1992). . . . Sue Vice, the European Editor of Dionysos, has published Introducing Bakhtin (Manchester UP, 1998). . . . "A truly impressive amount of liquor disappears in these pages; this crew spends so much time at Payne Whitney it could pass for a writers' colony" (Stacy Schiff, "The Group" (review of David Laskin, Partisans: Marriage, Politics, and Betrayal Among the New York Intellectuals [Simon & Schuster]), NY Times Book Review 23 Jan 10). . . . "Pete Hamill, Nat Hentoff, Norman Podhoretz, and other writers who came of age in the '50s have testified to being told then, as I was, that if you wanted to be a serious writer, you had to be a serious drinker" (Dan Wakefield, "Soul Man: My 'Spiritually Incorrect' Journey Back to God," Modern Maturity Jan-Feb: 36). . . . "Mister Jenkins's Last Martini," the "web's first alcoholic haiku contest, starring everyone's favorite gin shill, the distinguished Mr. Jenkins," welcomes entries (<http://www.zelman.com/aal.html>); samples: "Mr. Jenkins finds / Some gin in the morning stops / His hand from shaking"; "Mr. Jenkins was, / therefore Mr. Jenkins drank. / That's philosophy." . . . Brown University's Center for Alcohol and Addiction Studies has announced the availability of fellowships to assist those who want to study the Kirk Collection on Alcoholism and Alcoholics Anonymous. Submit letters-of-intent to Kirk Fellowships, Center for Alcohol and Addiction Studies, Brown University, Box G-BH, Providence, RI 02912. To view the contents of the Kirk Collection, go to <<http://library.brown.edu/search/a>>, type in "Kirk Collection"; or call Tovah Reis, 401/863-3334. . . . Terence McKenna "had a grand theory: that psychedelic mushrooms are the missing link in the story of human evolution. Not until our primate ancestors began eating hallucinatory psilocybin mushrooms, he contended, did they begin to acquire human qualities" (Douglas Martin, "Terence

McKenna, 53, Dies; Patron of Psychedelic Drugs,” NY Times. 9 Apr: 43). . . . John Crowley reviewed Anya Taylor’s Bacchus in Romantic England for the Winter 2000 issue of Sewanee Review (see Dionysos Summer 1999: 47-50). . . . “For a biography of William Griffith Wilson, also known as Bill W., co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, I would appreciate hearing from anyone who has personal recollections or archival materials relating to his life.” Susan Cheever, 110 East End Ave., New York, NY 10029 (NY Times Book Review 23 Jan: 29). . . . Augsburg Fortress has published Jim Klobuchar’s Pursued by Grace: A Newspaperman’s Own Story of Spiritual Recovery (1998). . . . “Beowulf, Ecgtheow’s son, replied: / ‘Well, friend Unferth, you have had your say / about Breca and me. But it was mostly beer / that was doing the talking” (Beowulf, trans. Seamus Heaney [Farrar, Straus and Giroux]: ll. 529-532). . . . George Eliot and Intoxication, by Kathleen McCormack (St. Martin’s), treats “Eliot’s depiction of characters whose perceptions and reason are distorted by alcohol, opium, or patent medicines.” . . . Lightning on the Sun (Doubleday), “founded on a bedrock of addiction,” “is the first and last novel of Robert Bingham, a scion of the Kentucky newspaper dynasty, who died of what appeared to be a heroin overdose last year at the age of 33” (Stacey D’Erasmus, “Wasted,” NY Times Book Review 23 Apr: 12). . . . “Let outsiders snicker and make cracks about appealing to a higher power. In Buryatia, a region of southern Siberia that is an outpost of the mystical Mongol religion called shamanism, vodka is not simply an après-prayer unwinder. It is, quite literally, holy water—sprinkled, dabbed and most of all, drunk as an integral part of religious rites (Michael Wines, “Intoxicated with Religion [and Quite Literally],” NY Times 26 Apr: A4). . . . Catherine MacGregor writes that Inside the Volcano, the memoirs of Jan Gabriel Lowry Singer, the first wife of Malcolm Lowry, will be published by St. Martin’s in the fall. . . . “Tax collectors call . . . illegal whiskey non-tax-paid liquor. Those who produce and consume it call it white lightning, rotgut, skull cracker, happy Sally or stump, but most often moonshine, . . . produced in the light of the moon, out of sight of government agents. The OED traces its etymology to 1785, citing a reference that says, ‘The white brandy on the coasts of Kent and Sussex is called

moonshine” (Peter T. Kilborn, “U.S. Cracks Down on Rise of Appalachia Moonshine,” NY Times 23 March: A18). . . . “Eugene O’Neill, a playwright of souls in search of forgiveness, is given an absolution of sorts himself today, in the pages of [The New England Journal of Medicine]. Contrary to O’Neill’s own suspicion that heavy drinking in his youth had caused the brain disease that crippled him later in life, a new report confirms that he died of a rare brain disorder, but says alcohol was not to blame” (Denise Grady, “Medical Researchers Revise O’Neill’s Death Tale,” NY Times 13 April: A19). . . . Journal of Ethnicity in Substance Abuse (formerly titled Drugs & Society) is published by The Haworth Press, 10 Alice St., Binghamton, NY 13904. The journal is a “forum for scholarly articles on ethnicity and cultural variation in alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use and abuse, drawn from many disciplines and interdisciplinary areas.” . . . Researchers from UC-Berkeley “have learned a little about what went on inside the heads of some of the more creative artists and poets the world has known. [They] have identified the mechanism by which absinthe, the liquor of choice for the likes of van Gogh, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Toulouse-Lautrec and others . . . affects the brain. It makes neurons fire like mad” (Henry Fountain, “Secrets of Fuel for Creative Fires Unlocked,” NY Times 18 April) . . . “It’s turning out to be really hard to revive Workaholics Anonymous. Everybody is too busy” (The Wall Street Journal 8 Feb: A1). . . . South of No North (Stories of the Buried Life), a play adapted by the co-directors Leo Farley and Jonathan Powers from [Charles Bukowski’s] 1973 short story collection of the same name, dramatizes nine tales of the drunk, brutal, ridiculous and downtrodden characters who populate Bukowski’s prose” (David DeWitt, “Tales of the Wretched with a Seedy Author,” NY Times 17 March: B4). . . . Coleridge’s drug addiction and his marital problems “would not vow us to the assertion that ‘you cannot understand The Ancient Mariner unless you know of Coleridge’s drug addiction and marriage problems.’ You can give a perfectly accurate account of its structure on the basis of the one poem alone. But in studying the full nature of a symbolic act you are entitled, if the material is available, to disclose also the things that the act is doing for the poet and no one else. Such private goads stimulate the artist, yet we may

respond to imagery of guilt from totally different private goads of our own. We do not have to be drug addicts to respond to the guilt of a drug addict. The addiction is private, the guilt public. It is in such ways that the private and public areas of a symbolic act at once overlap and diverge” (Kenneth Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [Louisiana State UP, 1967]: 25). . . . “[Pete] Hamill and I used to drink, when we were younger, at a dark place down a short flight of stairs in the Village called the Lion’s Head. There were book jackets covering the walls, jackets that I looked at with envy, books by the newspapermen and novelists who used to drink there. But then I got older, and when I passed the Head I sometimes thought of how many books had never been written at all because of the drinking” (Anna Quindlen, Minneapolis Star Tribune 6 April: A21). . . . “To Karl Sorenson, there was no deep mystery about why people drink. ‘It’s fun,’ he said . . . Becky Kunkel, a bartender at Briggs Tavern [in Janesville], said there is an explanation for the ability of Wisconsin residents to drink large amounts of alcohol. ‘We start young,’ she said . . . ‘It’s just something to do to pass the time,’ said Dawn Johnson, who drank a couple of beers and knocked back a shot of tequila” (Dirk Johnson, “Wisconsin Again Leads U.S. in Adult Drinking,” NY Times 25 Apr: A12). . . . “The International Convention of Alcoholics Anonymous will bring [50,000] people from more than 75 countries to the Twin Cities. . . . ‘We’ve been known to drink every drop of coffee in a town during these conventions,’ said Greg M.” For more information: <http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org> (“This Huge Convention Won’t Fill Bars.” Minneapolis Star Tribune 27 May: B1). . . . “I enjoyed seeing the July 1 story about Ringo Starr’s concert at the Taste of Minnesota. I, too, was at the concert. Your reporter Jon Bream did a good job except when he stated that Ringo ‘dedicated “No No Song” to all the friends of President Clinton in the audience.’ What Ringo actually said was he dedicated the ‘No No Song’ to ‘Friends of Bill in the audience.’ He was not referring to Bill Clinton. He was referring to the folks in Alcoholics Anonymous and the folks attending the International AA convention in Minneapolis” (Keating DuGarm, “Letters from Readers,” Minneapolis Star Tribune 4 July: A10).

## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

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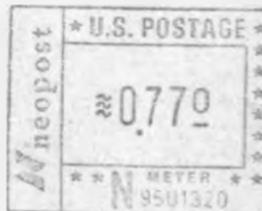
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