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and Addiction

*Seattle University  
Addiction Studies Program*

Spring 2001  
Vol. 11, #1



# **DIONYSOS**

Journal of Literature and Addiction  
Spring 2001 Vol. 11, No. 1

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## A Note from the Editor

This is the last issue of *Dionysos* under our auspices. We have always produced the magazine at a loss, and our subscription base has continued to shrink. In addition, we no longer receive enough submissions to publish a journal of the quality we would like: this is my excuse for including a chapter from an unpublished book of mine in this last issue. Finally, the Addiction Studies Program that has sponsored the journal—one of the oldest such programs of its kind—is being phased out by Seattle University.

I would like to thank many people for their support during the years, including Joe Monda, who first suggested we take on the publication of this journal; our readers and reviewers, including John Crowley, Marty Roth, and Connie Perry; the poet Dave Roskos, who graced our first and last issues, and many in between; our most faithful contributors, especially Kevin McCarron, Matts Djos, and the late George Wedge (the latter two have pieces in this issue); and above all our editor emeritus, Roger Forseth, who supported us in so many ways, among them the "Notes and Comment" he supplied for every one of our issues.

Finally, I would like to thank my co-editor and boss, Steve Morris, without whom publishing *Dionysos* would have remained a vague notion in my head.

And of course, you, the readers we still have.

Jim Harbaugh, S.J.

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**Dionysos: Spring 2001 Issue**  
**Journal of Literature and Addiction**

**T a b l e   o f   C o n t e n t s**

Addiction and Spirituality in Contemporary American Poetry: A Study in Frustration and Paradox Matts Djos.....	5
Neo-Prohibitionism and the Drinking Writer George Wedge.....	18
Untitled Poem	
On the Road to the Contagious Crack House Dave Roskos.....	29
Review of <u>Bill W. and Mr. Wilson,</u> Jim Harbaugh.....	32
Literature (and Other Arts): What We Talk about When We Talk about Spirituality and Recovery Jim Harbaugh .....	35
Notes and Comment	
Roger Forseth.....	47
About the Contributors.....	51

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Addiction Studies Program  
Department of Society, Justice & Culture  
Seattle University, Seattle, Washington

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## Addiction and Spirituality in Contemporary American Poetry: A Study in Frustration and Paradox

Matts Djos

Mesa State College, Grand Junction, CO

*An earlier version of this article was presented at the twelfth Annual Meeting of the Far West Popular Culture and Far West American Culture Associations, Imperial Palace Hotel, Las Vegas, Nevada, February 5, 2000*

Alcoholic writers may imagine themselves both irresistibly attractive and strangely repulsive, both eloquent and stupefied, sublimely prophetic and hopelessly inadequate. In religious matters, they are typically dichotomies. On the one hand, they may curse fate and question even the existence of a higher power; the next instant, they may insist that they are sublimely, divinely fulfilled and have been sanctioned in blessedness. In either case, however, their religious perspective is likely to fluctuate wildly between rhapsodic exhilaration and agonizing depression. That fluctuation, coupled with an astonishing degree of confusion and fear, may well account for the peculiar blend of hope, anger, and rejection that ultimately characterizes a significant portion of contemporary addictive writing.

The religious and spiritual poetry of Theodore Roethke, Robert Lowell, Charles Olson, John Berryman, Alan Dugan, and Philip Larkin is especially notable in this regard. While such well-known scholars as Thomas Gilmore, Donald Goodwin, and Tom Dardis have presented numerous first-rate analyses of the ethical and psychological concerns of these writers, the religious perspective has yet to be fully considered. This is remarkable because the spiritual perspective endemic to many contemporary alcoholic writers could well prove to be an important area for

academic study and analysis. Each of these writers can provide us with an excellent opportunity to learn something about the questions and fears that perplex and distract alcoholics in their search for some higher meaning in life, and each of them can give us some idea of the peculiar spiritual focus common to the alcoholic perception.

This is especially true with regard to an alcoholic's instability, confusion, and raucous impatience. In his poem "Wants," for example, Philip Larkin makes it very clear that he is fed up with the pointlessness of life since he can't discover any kind of spiritual underpinning or higher significance in the scheme of things. Rather, he complains of deadening routines, of his nihilistic and unfocused existence, and of the need to find some means of escaping the mind-dulling conventionality of time plodding ever onward from day to day. He writes,

Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs:  
 Despite the artful tensions of the calendar,  
 The life insurance, the tabled fertility rites,  
 The costly aversion of the eyes from death—  
 Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs. (6-10)

In his search for a way of life—perhaps even a reason for living—that involves something more than ritual, than the meaningless passage of the hours and sexuality and responsibility, Larkin claims that he is fed up with the status quo and the mechanistic routine of getting on from day to day. There is no point or zest, no reason for even stepping outside the norm and taking an interest in life. So he considers a catastrophic option: suicide—the "desire of oblivion."

It is a misanthropic gesture; but when considered in an alcoholic context, it is hardly extraordinary. Indeed, the alcoholic perspective frequently involves the conviction that life comprises a mind-dulling regimen of drudgery. That drudgery can provide a major impetus to the alcoholic longing to discover

some means of escape from the diurnal, most especially when that escape takes the form of the power-centered acts of self-abasement, self-destruction, and anger which characterize the alcoholic temperament.

Disgust with life's tedium and a desire to withdraw from it are also major themes in John Berryman's "Love & Fame, #6." In this poem, Berryman, who did indeed commit suicide a number of years later, not only sets out his double nature, his passion for self-sufficiency, and his inflated preoccupation with satisfying personal needs; he also questions them. In this case, the poet feels the necessity to acquire some means of defusing his unmitigated self-centeredness. It is a questionable step, however, since he realizes that any attempt to modify his behavior may require a catastrophic personal housecleaning. He writes,

Under new management, Your Majesty:  
 Thine. I have solo'd mine since childhood, since  
 my father's blow-it-all when I was twelve  
 blew out my most bright candle faith, and look at  
 me. (1-4)

Here, the poet reviews his isolation since childhood, attributes his loss of faith to his father's suicide, promises to revise his priorities, and anticipates the onset of benevolent guidance under a divine counselor of sorts. Yet he also appears to undermine his choice by denying some personal responsibility for his behavior on the grounds that he grew up painfully alone. Indeed, one wonders if his personal inventory—"look at me"—is a necessary and honest prerequisite to his reform, or if it simply manifests a love of braggadocio.

The poem then proceeds to mix images of violence with a sense of awe as the writer recalls the power and beauty of Christ's suffering. He recalls how Jesus,

... pierced the roof  
twice & again. Finally you opened my eyes.

My double nature fused in that point of time  
three weeks ago day before yesterday. (11-14)

Although Berryman presents an undeniable image of the redemptive power of the Passion—"you opened my eyes"—its overall impact is strangely paradoxical, perhaps because the description of his relationship to Christ is expressed in terms of repetitive exclamations and irreconcilable opposites. Specifically, in confessing his own double nature, Berryman seems only to replicate the image of the Crucifix with its apparent opposition of the eternal and the temporal. From his point of view, this opposition undermines his petition to experience some kind of perfection within the limits of the material world because it denies any chance for perfection in a temporal context. Thus, because it constitutes an impossible demand, his ambition to experience some kind of character reform is ultimately self-defeating and can lead only to further spiritual confusion and personal deterioration.

In "Eleven Addresses to the Lord, #1," Berryman expresses a somewhat less earthbound perspective. In this particular poem he describes his yearning for a savior who is intimate and mortal:

Master of beauty, craftsman of the snowflake,  
inimitable contriver,  
endower of Earth so gorgeous . . . (1-3)

Here, the poet adopts a more rhapsodic note and commends the radiance and measureless perfection of a God who is an exquisite creator. He is then described as incomparable, extravagant, omnipotent, whole; and thus, because of His overwhelming divinity, the writer cannot help but capitulate

“according” to his will. This proposed “capitulation” is remarkable, if for no other reason than that it involves a paradoxical mix of compromise, acclamation, and surrender. The poet recalls,

You have come to my rescue again & again  
in my impassable, sometimes despairing years.  
You have allowed my brilliant friends to destroy  
themselves  
and I am still here, severely damaged, but  
functioning.

Unknowable, as I am unknown to my guinea pigs;  
how can I “love” you?  
I only as far as gratitude & awe  
confidently & absolutely go. . . . (9-16)

We see here a highly personal focus on God as mysteriously powerful, even arbitrary. Perhaps these images recall the enigmatic rigidity of Berryman’s early Catholicism. It seems impossible to the poet to love such a God. In addition, despite all his claims of ecstasy, humility, and submission, it is nevertheless apparent that the narrator cannot distance himself from the destructive power of his carnal appetites. On the one hand, he states that he is willing to submit and surrender; yet he aspires to a personal connectedness with God on terms that are very much of his own making. Granted even that qualification, he apparently still cannot act on his petition, perhaps because he is restrained by the prospect of God’s appalling power; hence, we witness the self-serving equivocations implicit in his prayer and his strange preoccupation with manifesting some kind of highly qualified act of personal degradation as a form of penance—as God’s “guinea pig.”

To some alcoholics, then, moral and theological beliefs are equivocal, often hobbled by the suspicion that, no matter what

they do, they are still likely to experience the terrors of eternal retribution because of their horrendous behavior. This fear of divine vengeance as an inevitable consequence of human frailty is not unusual among alcoholics, especially when they ponder issues of guilt and power, and paradoxically their own self-deification. Thus, in "Elegy for a Puritan Conscience," Alan Dugan, an alcoholic contemporary of Berryman's, describes his degradation to a point of spiritual catastrophe in masochistic terms. He writes,

I locked my jaw with rusty nails  
and cured my tongue in lime  
but ate and drank in garbage pails  
and said these words in crime.

I crushed my scrotum with two stones  
and drew my penis in  
but felt your wound expect its own  
and fell in love with sin. (5-12)

Here, Dugan's persona appears to integrate the idea of rebellion with pain, obscenity, and self-mutilation. Of course, the poem is not so much a petition as an angry rejection of Divinity. In that sense, it has very little to do with a higher power and everything to do with self-hate and compulsion. Indeed, Dugan's rebellious nature is vividly expressed in his fascination with the violence implicit in self-degradation and self-administered retribution, retribution on his own terms. The poet is as fascinated with the idea of retribution as with redemption. It is a circumstance not unlike that of Robert Lowell, an alcoholic and bipolar contemporary of Dugan's. During an especially trying moment of his own, Lowell wondered if he was locked into his fate:

... [is] there no way to cast my hook  
Out of this dynamited brook?  
 ("The Drunken Fisherman," 21-22)

Lowell suspects that fishing in the stream of life is a rotten prospect, perhaps because it is impossible to catch anything on his own initiative or through will power. As a consequence, he insists that he will catch what he will by putting aside his fishing line, with its overtones of the Gospel, and dynamiting the stream of life. Thus, fisherman Lowell hopes to counterman divine will by taking control, blowing up fate, and revising life's game to suit his own purposes. He will then be in a position to deal with Christ and Satan on a level playing field of his own making. He writes,

I will catch Christ with a greased worm,  
 And when the Prince of Darkness stalks  
 My bloodstream to its Stygian term . . .  
 On water the Man-Fisher walks. (23-26)

The narrator claims that he "will catch Christ" with the "greased worm" of his own sinfulness. Christ will then transform him, despite all that Satan, "the Prince of Darkness," may do, into a fisher king, in Christ's image. It is an interesting strategy, although it is hardly redemptive; it serves only to confirm Lowell's remarkable appetite for control and his decision to find some means of evading the hammer of divine justice at just about any price.

Charles Olson adopts a more elevated posture in his strategy for dealing with the capriciousness of divine will. Rather than trying to level the playing field, he chooses the redemptive power of psychosis by equating madness with divine grace and nobility of the soul. In his poem "In a Dark Time," the correspondences of nature are contrasted with the poet's insatiable hunger for a transforming connectedness with God.

That hunger is a tall order that leaves the writer hanging precariously between absolute despair and the sublime beauty of a resurrected spirituality. He writes,

The edge is what I have.

A steady storm of correspondences!  
 A night flowing with birds, a ragged moon,  
 And in broad day the midnight come again!  
 A man goes far to find out what he is—  
 0  
 Death of the self in a long, tearless night,  
 All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.

Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.  
 My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,  
 Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I?  
 A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.  
 The mind enters itself, and God the mind,  
 And one is One, free in the tearing wind. (12-24)

Olson recognizes the integrity and power of divine correspondences, but they are qualified, oblique, and disjointed—a night flowing with birds, midnight in broad daylight, all “shapes blazing unnatural light.” From Olson’s perspective, natural appearances are twisted and uncertain when they are perceived in a spiritual context. Thus, his soul is equated with a “heat-maddened” summer fly who is indeterminate, uncertain, hyperactive, and minute—“keeps buzzing at the sill.” Even so, he appears to contradict himself by rejecting these limitations. Rather, he will set aside the image of poet as heat-maddened fly in order to be transmuted into his own redeemer. Thus, with typical alcoholic self-indulgence and grandiosity, he will climb out of himself and exceed his mortality until he is self-sustained and self-contained. Then, as

this miraculous act of will is actualized, he claims that his mind will enter itself to become invested with God until he becomes God. Thus, Olson adopts a strikingly gnostic perspective on man's prospects for divinity, although—in this case—he appears to have exceeded even the highest ambitions of the gnostics by claiming that he is capable of acts by which he can transmute himself into God.

Rather than aspire upwards like Olson, Robert Lowell moves in the opposite direction by perceiving the human condition in terms of a diminished, penultimate low. In his poem "After the Surprising Conversions," the poet writes of melancholy Christian souls, "Good people of too much or little wit" (12) who lived in Northampton, Massachusetts. Their bland religious certitude was extinguished by the suicide of their pastor. Then,

... a noisome stir  
 Palsied our village. At Jehovah's nod  
 Satan seemed more let loose amongst us: God  
 Abandoned us to Satan, . . . (30-33)

Lowell based his poem on an incident described in Jonathan Edwards' narratives. He chose to underscore in that incident loneliness, discouragement, and suicidal behavior. And these provide no small clue to the poet's own fascination with a religion that has become moribund. Like most alcoholic writers, he is profoundly skilled at evoking a spiritual perspective that is devastating and cataclysmic. He writes,

We were undone.

The breath of God had carried out a planned  
 And sensible withdrawal from this land;  
 The multitude, once unconcerned with doubt,  
 Once neither callous, curious nor devout,  
 Jumped at broad noon, as though some peddler groaned  
 At it in its familiar twang: "My friend,

Cut your own throat. Cut your own throat. Now! Now!"  
 (36-42)

Lowell permits no middle ground. Instead, he insists that unquestioning mediocrity and lukewarm spirituality lead inevitably to a sudden descent into the pit, because they are inadequate to the horrors of real life.

Finally, in "What Can I Tell My Bones?" Theodore Roethke, like Lowell, expresses a good many doubts about the sustaining power of faith and the benefits of taking a personal, spiritual inventory. He writes,

Beginner,  
 Perpetual beginner,  
 The soul knows not what to believe  
 ("What Can I Tell My Bones?" 1-3).

As Roethke sees it, man struggles with his own darkness on an elementary plane. He is a beginner in perpetuity, and so there is no redemptive security to be gained by a spiritual pilgrimage, because it cannot assuage the conflicting claims of the body and the soul. Yet, rather than resort to the self-destructive denial and violence we see in Lowell, Olson, and Dugan, he is rather wistful and apologetic about his confusing double nature:

Loved heart, what can I say?  
 When I was a lark, I sang;  
 When I was a worm, I devoured.

The self says, I am;  
 The heart says, I am less;  
 The spirit says, you are nothing.

.....

The wide streams go their way,

The pond lapses back into a glassy silence.  
The cause of God in me—has it gone?  
Do these bones live: Can I live with these bones?  
(“What Can I Tell My Bones?” 38-43, 49-52)

Roethke puzzles over the spiritual foundations of perfection—“the cause of God in me”—while hungering for some kind of intimate connectedness with a First Cause. Do all things material go their own way, do they lapse into “silence,” including streams, the pond, his own bones? He ponders his own spiritual essence: did it betray him when his rational mind delivered him into confusion and denied him purity and perfection? From Roethke’s point of view, the manifestations of God are somehow denied. Life itself is something daft, sluggish, and terrifying. As a consequence, the poet is left only with shadows, the circular impression of sense and materiality, the passions of the worm and the irredeemable wound of love. In this case, the barest expression of any kind of truth is thus inherently flawed and transient.

As long as writers like Alan Dugan, Charles Olson, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, and Philip Larkin—all of whom were problem drinkers—continue to write about issues of religious belief and the rigors of trying to understand man’s relationship to a higher power, they will likely depict a series of catastrophic emotional clashes. Their poetry expresses their own experiences of sublime transcendence on the one hand and an astonishing degree of spiritual frustration and anger on the other. As a result, their writing presents a powerful and enduring record of the alcohol abuser’s fascination with appropriating divine sanctions to his own purposes. At the same time, it also reveals the alcoholic fascination with maintaining some element of control even in spiritual realms. In all its contradictions, it stands as a record of the intensity of the alcoholic’s religious perceptions, of the alcoholic’s appetite for discovering some

kind of meaning that exceeds mere appearances and the apparent transience of things. It is thus a memorable testimony, not only to the human need for some higher meaning and purpose, but also to the unique texture of that need when it is interwoven with the distorted perceptions of the drunk.

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## Neo-Prohibitionism and the Drinking Writer

### George Wedge

In a 1994 letter seeking to establish an MLA discussion group for Addiction Studies, Roger Forseth described the field as "the systematic study of the effects of addiction and intoxication on literature." He characterized these studies as the exploration and analysis of the effects of addiction and intoxication on "creativity, biography, and aesthetic artifacts." Norman Kiell's bibliography "Drink In Literature" lists 110 items prior to Donald Goodwin's 1970 article "The Alcoholism of F. Scott Fitzgerald." By 1995, Kiell could add 330 more articles and book length studies, an astonishing 39 percent (129) published in the five years between 1990 and 1999. Although the quality is mixed—some items being little more than notes—the bulk of this material is of high quality and the field would seem to have come of age.

But the promise of the word "systematic" in Forseth's statement has not been realized. Nearly every general article about the subject lists between forty and sixty authors believed to have been alcoholic, and my own collation of such lists is now over two hundred names long—and counting. Yet a mere handful have been studied at any depth. Mostly male. Mostly American. Mostly 20<sup>th</sup> century. The most notable and flagrant cases: to wit, O'Neill and Faulkner, Hemingway and poor "Scott," Cheever, Carver, and Berryman. How do we know that the other usual suspects were in fact "alcoholics"? Within our narrow field of study, there is no agreed upon definition. The only international conference on the subject, in 1981 at the University of Sheffield, revealed striking differences from culture to culture in how participants from the United States and those from England and Europe view addiction itself, let alone its "effects on creativity, biography and aesthetic artifacts."

It is probably not a coincidence that addiction studies have flourished in a period during which American society, both cultural and political, has been deeply concerned about the use of recreational drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. One must, the current wisdom states, say "no" and "thank you for not smoking" to be safe from addiction. In the

80s and 90s, abstinence has come to be perceived as the sole responsible way to deal with addictive substances. Any problem—from a drunken episode or hangover to a bad cough—has become a sure sign of incipient addiction. Our age may not be yet an age of prohibition, but we are several miles down the road to repeating the disaster of the 1920s. Unfortunately, this attitude, accompanied by a general appeal to various treatment modalities, has led to a number of false positions and misleading statements in addiction studies.

Within the field of addiction studies, at least three sorts of error reflect this neo-prohibitionist attitude:

1. It is claimed that any connection between drinking alcohol and literary creativity is a “myth.” If this were true and provable, one could hardly study the effects of addiction on “creativity, biography, and aesthetic artifacts.”
2. It is claimed that literary creativity requires a “healthy” mind, that in theory there cannot be a link between alcohol and creativity.
3. It is asserted that authors in recovery from addiction produce literary works superior to those they produced during their drinking years. This highly subversive position runs counter to nearly all current critical theories, which consider the author’s life irrelevant to critical judgment.

Individually and collectively, these errors can be stated more subtly, and, in the hands of skilful scholars and writers on the subject, they have gained a wide currency. But they are each demonstrably false and contribute to unfortunate biographical distortions and misleading critical judgments.

When one says that the relationship between booze and the muse is a myth, one is speaking metaphorically—as the word “muse” suggests. The observation is analogous to the “Just Say No” campaign: if one does not use, one cannot abuse, and so one cannot become an addict. No one can argue against that logic. But the facts about how a society uses alcohol, and how authors, as part of that society, use it, are matters of record, neither true nor false, simply facts. And the simple fact about drinking writers is that they write and they drink.

They also eat, sleep, fall in love and grow a day older every twenty-four hours. Sometimes use slips into abuse, or alcohol dependence.

A few years ago, shortly after Thomas Gilmore's Equivocal Spirits came out, I remarked to William Burroughs that Gilmore had characterized F. Scott Fitzgerald's denial of his alcoholism as compromising his integrity as a writer. Burroughs' response startled me, both in its immediacy and its firmness:

What's that got to do with it? Coleridge had an opium problem and couldn't do anything about it. That's just very philistine. He's criticizing the man not the work. But anyone's weaknesses are an integral part of their whole character. Look at Proust and the snobbery from which he made a very great work. Although snobbery is generally, and I think rightly, considered a weakness, a lack of integrity. . . . But what I was saying is that anyone's weaknesses are a part of their talent; without the weaknesses there wouldn't have been any talent. Now, it's not that weaknesses make talent, or anything like that, but it's part of a whole character. You can't say just take out this little piece here and this little piece there. There wouldn't be anything left.

Among the now illegal drugs, as it happens, opium is one for which we have copious data relating to drugs and creativity. It is also the drug on which a first-rate scholarly study, a model for the kind of work we need on alcohol, has been written. Alethea Haytor in Opium and the Romantic Imagination studies eight writers known or believed to have used opium. She attends closely to both biography and literary production and to the known clinical facts of opium use and addiction. Her conclusion, while negative, is qualified and closely related to differences Gilmore and Burroughs may intend by the word "integrity":

We know that De Quincey took opium. We know what he afterwards wrote. We do not know what he might have written if he had never taken it. It can be no more than a hypothesis that the action of opium, though it can never be a substitute for innate imagination, can uncover that imagination while it is

at work in a way which might enable an exceptionally gifted and self-aware writer to observe and learn from his own mental processes.

But it could do so only at a price which no writer of integrity would ultimately be prepared to pay. I am not referring to moral integrity, but to the poet's responsibility to his own art. One of the most obvious effects of opium addiction on a writer's powers is that it induces indolence, absence of feeling, a state in which the power to observe is detached from the power to sympathize with what is observed. At its very outset, this state of mind can be useful to a poet; there are times when he needs detachment. But in the long run it is deadly.

Haytor's use of the word "integrity" is closer to what Gilmore intends than to what Burroughs heard in my paraphrase. Nonetheless, Burroughs' point is well taken. Our study of literature and of authors must maintain a perspective that affirms or denies the wholeness, the oneness of the work, of the author, and of the canon of the author's work.

Even for those authors who become alcohol dependent, there are three possible ways in which drinking may relate to their work habits. The writing and the drinking may be simultaneous; writing may occupy one part of a day and drinking another part, for example, frequently as a means of relaxation after work; the drinking may take place only in the months or weeks preceding and following the actual writing. There is abundant evidence that authors of some note have followed one or another of each of these patterns. That evidence is factual, well attested, often in the authors' own words. Their behavior may be considered legendary, but it is real, not fancied, behavior. All that can be meant in calling the connection between these writers' drinking and the works they produced a "myth" is that drinking did not cause the writer to be great. But the word "myth" is too grand for such a narrow meaning and comes to imply that the authors are of weak and unstable character, unable to produce works of true literary quality.

Even when the term "myth" is intended only to advise novices to concentrate on their writing, it is a dangerous fiction. Novices are

not as naive as we may wish, and they are quite capable of responding, "Who needs a long life? I'd gladly die young if I could write like Fitzgerald or Kerouac or Hemingway!" Faustian contracts are written daily. In other words, as is regularly the case with benevolent fictions, those who are supposed to benefit see right through the advice.

According to the clinical psychiatrist Albert Rothenberg, no significant literary work can be or ever has been written by an alcohol dependent author, since creativity is only possible for "healthy" persons. This conclusion is based on 2000 hours of interviews with artists, authors and others knowledgeable about specific artists' lives (e.g., Carlotta O'Neill). Most of the informants remain unidentified, and the research data consists primarily of conversational anecdotes about drinking writers and the contradictory accounts of authors who have not found drinking to be helpful to them. The possibility that individuals differ from one another in how they work does not enter into the discussion. Nor are we privy to what safeguards were invoked to prevent participants' prejudices from skewing the results.

A skeptical reader would note that Rothenberg barely mentions increasing evidence that there may be genetic as well as environmental causes behind the unfortunate alcoholic misery suffered by some of our most gifted authors. His list of authors so afflicted is shorter than usual, and this brevity leads to the curious statement that "alcohol indulgence is not itself of special literary interest because with the notable exception of Jack Kerouac, Jack London, Eugene O'Neill, and Malcolm Lowry, none of the writers mentioned has made any remarkable literary hash from plots regarding alcoholism." This is a curious statement because his list includes Cheever, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Lewis, and O'Hara, and, although he does not mention her alcoholism, he concedes that alcohol is the subject of Dorothy Parker's "Big Blonde." He continues: "[N]or is the psychology of addiction a very trendy literary or artistic topic." As noted above, the twenty years preceding his book produced over 200 articles and books on that topic.

Rothenberg believes that when authors say that alcohol has sometimes been helpful in the creative process, they are merely establishing the public image they think a writer requires. They want to appear "macho." Yet that is hardly the impression one gets from

Hemingway's description in A Moveable Feast of how he wrote one of the stories for In Our Time while drinking in a Paris café. The story was, of course, an early one, but Hemingway's memory of the event seems convincingly clear. By the time he wrote the memoir, he knew that alcohol had turned on him: still he gave the devil his due and wrote this lyrical passage in tribute to the creative benefits of a moderate drink.

Those who hold the links between drink and literary creativity to be a myth or who, like Rothenberg, see drinking as always destructive of creativity are, at the very least, imposing the prohibitionist morality of our times on the voices of past generations.

Whatever the relationship may be between addiction and writing, it is an unstable one. We should keep Haytor's conclusions about opium and writing constantly in mind, for we do not know, will never know, what Fitzgerald might have written as a last section of Tender Is the Night if he had not been drinking when he wrote it. That it was not satisfactory to Fitzgerald himself, we know, for he said so—and blamed the drinking. What we have is the book he wrote; we must deal with it critically as it is. Surely, if it were an utter failure or no more interesting than a pop novel of the 30s, it would not have attracted so much critical attention or been sent through more than one edition.

The most perplexing influence of neo-prohibitionism on addiction studies is the claim that authors who successfully stop drinking produce masterpieces far superior to their prior work. It is a truly wonderful thing, for example, that recovering from his alcohol dependency made it possible for John Cheever to complete the novel Falconer. But comparing initial reviews of that novel with those for Bullet Park does not constitute responsible literary criticism. Over time, Bullet Park has come to have a much higher estimation than at first, and some of the flaws of Falconer have become more apparent. According to Rothenberg, Cheever "received the Pulitzer Prize for his collection of short stories the year after Falconer was published because, it is generally acknowledged, of that novel's boost to his reputation." Dan Wakefield states the matter with better proportion, speaking of Falconer only as Cheever's "most important novel." But in speaking both of Cheever and of Raymond Carver, Wakefield's

enthusiasm for their personal triumphs over alcohol dependency leads to understating the value and importance of their earlier work.

In recovery circles, people adopt an unfortunate habit of saying that everything they did during their drinking years was tainted by their dependency. Wilfrid Sheed comments briefly on this attitude in his memoir In Love with Daylight:

My standard pipe dream [during treatment] usually took the form of picturing my old life pretty much as before, but tackled from a new angle—instead of slurring my way past the hostess and the cops on the way home I would dazzle them with epigrams. And I would sniff the night air as never before, and thrill to the scrambled eggs I planned to make when I got home.

But if there was one thing Happy Valley frowned on more than any other, it was your old life, which to them was a tracery of pitfalls and potholes. Obviously, we must start all over—the great American temptation: we must be born again and yet again, as often as it takes.

Insistence on this wonder of rebirth in recovery underlies Wakefield's praise of the positive theme and general brightness of Cheever's Oh What a Paradise It Seems, a long short story rather than a fully developed novel. It is not, of course, wrong to look for a more positive and bright story line in choosing the books one wishes to have for companions. Indeed, a similar, perhaps more telling critical judgment is in Lewis Hyde's opinion of the whole of Cheever's work, as well as, by implication, the work of other alcohol dependent writers:

For myself, I look to literature for enchantment, beauty, and wisdom, but also for solace and hope. Those works matter to me which have given me courage for living, which have helped me bear suffering and the knowledge of death. In those terms a writer such as John Cheever, while I have admired and learned from his craft, does not appear in the canon inscribed on my heart.

Whether a story like "The Sorrows of Gin" measures up to these criteria remains open to discussion; Hyde's view is highly personal and dependent upon more, one would guess, than reading experience.

Raymond Carver did return to some of his minimalist short

stories and round them out more fully, making their themes more positive and the general impression a bit brighter. He considered his later work "all gravy" and was fully conscious of a contrast between works of the two periods. But he did not reject the earlier work. Nor did Cheever overtly reject his earlier work. Without the name and fame they had already earned, would the late work of either Cheever or Carver have found publication? If published, would these books have created the stir they did? made the year end best books lists? been adopted for classroom use? These are not rhetorical questions. If the late work were all we had from these authors, they might still be perceived as among their generation's best writers. But just as we must deal with the state of Tender Is the Night in the form Fitzgerald left us, we may only deal with the Cheever and Carver oeuvres as they stand.

Other major authors who have written about recovering from dependency do not appear ready to reject their earlier works either. William Styron's alcohol dependency was part of a problem with depression, a frequently encountered combination. Although alcohol is a depressant, Styron says that he used alcohol as a "shield against anxiety." Then suddenly he "could no longer drink." And he explains how the drinking had been related to his writing:

Like a great many American writers, whose sometimes lethal addiction to alcohol has become so legendary as to provide in itself a stream of studies and books, I used alcohol as the magical conduit to fantasy and euphoria, and to the enhancement of the imagination. There is no need to either rue or apologize for my use of this soothing, often sublime agent, which had contributed greatly to my writing; though I never set down a line while under its influence, I did use it—often in conjunction with music—as a means to let my mind conceive visions that the unaltered, sober brain has no access to. Alcohol was an invaluable senior partner of my intellect, besides being a friend whose ministrations I sought daily....

Treatment for Styron consisted of hospitalization, psychotherapy, and antidepressant drug therapy. Unlike Carver and Cheever, who became strong adherents of the AA program and its group therapy, Styron

reports that while he “would never want to derogate any concept shown to be effective for certain individuals,” it did nothing for him.

Sheed resisted group therapy of the AA style, finding the AA program as practiced at the center he calls “Happy Valley” akin to brainwashing. Of its attempts to make him feel humility he remarks, “If I didn’t have low self-esteem when I got here, I’d sure as heck have it by the time I left.” Yet he did stick it out and did continue to attend meetings until recovery kicked in. “Believing in A.A.,” Sheed says, “obviously helps many alcoholics, and bless them, but criticizing it can be just the ticket for recovering depressives—a service I’m sure it wouldn’t mind providing.” In the end, he sounds curiously like Hyde in the passage quoted above:

So one of the several gifts that nobody so much as hinted at down in Happy Valley has turned out to be the best of all, namely the gift of gifts—the ability to face sickness and death with something like equanimity. This was another instrument I’d never played before, and I’d say it was worth the price of admission, although it was a ridiculous price, and if you can get there by just imagining it, I would recommend trying that first—starting perhaps with the lost souls, the Garlands and Levants, the Kurt Cobains and River Phoenixes, who went through all the misery but never got to the other side of it. If you can imagine even half the horror of that, I believe there is little left to fear in life, and a lot more to celebrate than I would have thought remotely possible when this story began.

Pete Hamill offers a slightly different take on the end of drinking in his account of A Drinking Life. Like Sheed and Styron, Hamill reached a place where he could see that drinking was affecting his life in a negative way, but the interference for him was specifically with how drinking related to his writing. After years of evenings spent swapping stories in taprooms and using the material gathered in the evening for the following day’s writing, Hamill found that he was no longer able to remember the details of the night before on the morning after. He did not seek treatment but, when alcohol caused a problem, he simply stopped drinking. The difference in his story is significant:

he did not drink as Sheed and Styron did in order to ease the pain of depression.

Hamill is not unique. Several contemporary writers have reported their personal conclusions about alcohol in relation to their craft. In A Day at the Beach Geoffrey Wolff engages in some interesting discussion of why writers drink, offering an account of his own behavior as he matured from a young man interested in jazz and literature to a distinguished writer. His own turnaround, like Hamill's, was sudden. On the day things went ugly, he tells us, he was on the verge of giving words to his grievances against life, directing them at his wife. Instead, he "put a sock in it, corked the bottle, shut up, and turned in." He did meet a few times with a counselor, and attend one AA meeting, but says, "Whether I am or ain't is not a question I want anymore to ask, not a question I can answer." He does drink a little but does not get drunk. At the end of this essay Wolff observes:

Malcolm Lowry . . . said he felt as though he had been born without a skin. Indeed, I write to take off my skin, lay my nerves bare. I write to hear unwelcome voices. Booze will send me to never-never land, dress me in thick wool, earmuff me against the voices, blink off the lights, give rest and sleep and peace. Just what I must have wanted. Just what I don't want.

Carolyn See, in her account of her family's life called Dreaming, tells it as it was:

And talk about being a product of the times! if this is 1967, we must be doing acid, right? I have to admit it; our whole family tried as hard as it could to be "different" and ended up being exactly like everybody else. We ate tuna casseroles in the fifties and painted everything chartreuse and dark green. I named my elder daughter Lisa and thought I was the only mother in America to think of it. We were unwitting slaves to every fashion. When I gave up acid and smoking joints to become a responsible mother, the rest of the world was changing too, only lots of them went over to cocaine.

And why don't I just come out against demon rum once and for all? Why don't I endorse AA with all my

heart and pitch out this glass of white wine and switch to Snapple? Because I can't and I won't. To write something for or against drugs and drink just adds to the mountains of material for or against them. The American manifestation of this is so much bigger than any set of opinions about it.

Still another writer who recounts his drinking history and has concluded that he will continue to drink is Michael Ventura, whose essay "In Defense of Alcohol" appears in Letters at 3 AM. He is, perhaps correctly, impatient with addiction theorists whose theories are challenged by things that happen only "sometimes." That they leave out "how marvelous it can feel to be drunk," it seems to him "amounts to denial." It is an outspoken essay and one that dares to consider the hard spirits themselves as spiritual guides—a rather surprising short-circuiting of AA philosophy. So, at least at 3 AM, there are more things than addiction studies has yet dreamt of.

Different individuals drink for different reasons, derive different benefits, and incur different liabilities. That is why we must beware of the easy conclusions implicit in neo-prohibitionism. The writers we discuss in addiction studies present different insights on the lives they report in their fiction and poetry. To suppose that their visions are influenced only by their inappropriate use of alcohol is foolish. It takes a while for alcohol dependency to kick in and the effects of dependency come and go over time—things change daily for everyone. Some visions labor under difficulties worse than alcohol dependency. To understand clearly the condition of the writer can help in interpreting the work. Ultimately, as Glenway Westcott said of Fitzgerald, "[Their] strength is only in print, and [their] weakness of no account, except for our instruction."

**Dave Roskos**

the young woman  
with the Chinese  
character tattooed  
to the back of her  
neck says she's  
grateful for these  
meetings, that we  
are all really cool  
& that she's grateful  
we're always here  
for her despite  
the fact that  
she's always  
in & out,  
she says she's grateful  
she only has  
hepatitis C  
& not HIV,  
that she's really  
trying to be good  
because she knows  
if she keeps  
getting high  
she's gonna get real sick  
& maybe even die

maybe even die

after the meeting  
a kind soul  
with over ten

years clean  
points out to  
her that she  
isn't bad  
trying to get good,  
she's sick  
trying to get well  
& she blushes  
like a little girl  
& says *thank you*

3-16-2000

## On the Road to the Contagious Crack House

row houses  
occupied by their original owners  
first generation Hungarian  
immigrants brought in  
to the states by johnson  
& johnson early in the  
20<sup>th</sup> century

plaster Madonnas  
& no shortage  
of shrines

an occasional  
goldfish pond  
gone brackish  
with dis-  
ease

4 foot high  
chain link  
fences

gates  
off kilter  
scratching  
grooves into  
the sidewalk—

& everything  
leaning a little.

(reprinted from Fall & All: Book One. Iniquity Press/Vendetta Books, Manasquan, NJ 2000)

**Review of Bill W. and Mr. Wilson: The Legend and Life of A.A.'s Cofounder.** "Matthew J. Raphael." Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000.

### Jim Harbaugh

In a prologue to this book called "Founders' Day 1998," the author, with characteristic wit, remarks that he had thought of calling the book In Quest of the Historical Bill W. (13). That captures both the method and the tone of this remarkable work, which Roger Forseth, editor emeritus of this journal, rightly described to this reviewer as "of the first importance for our field." "Matthew Raphael" is trying to tell Bill Wilson's story as factually as possible, which means stripping away some of the accreted legends that have grown up around AA's cofounder, during his lifetime and even more since his death in 1971.

"Raphael" does so in part by using the methods of Biblical scholars, like comparing texts that give variants of the same incident, and by sketching the culture in which the history took place and the stories later were shaped, often by oral transmission. However, as his use of a pseudonym suggests, the author is writing from "within the hermeneutical circle," as Biblical scholars might say. He is in fact a member of AA, which in his case works out to just the right tone. He is not uncritically credulous, on the one hand. But on the other hand he writes with the wry affection of an insider. Too often those who study AA from outside either misread important elements or adopt a snide or bullying tone.

The resulting book has many qualities that justify Forseth's praise. First, it is scrupulously fair. My co-editor, Steve Morris, and I are delighted with this feature, because it gives us a solid basis for the presentations we make from time to time on the history of addictions treatment. Such presentations are, we think, useful, particularly at this turn of the millennium, when not a

few clinicians seem ready to abandon any feature of treatment that ultimately springs from AA. It would not do to base our defense of more traditional approaches on well-meaning but dubious legends.

Second, the book is as well-written as a Top Ten page-turner. There have been excellent biographies of Wilson and histories of AA and of treatment before, but these were often intended for scholars, and functioned and read like reference works. "Raphael's" lucidity, and his gift for the fluently witty phrase and the telling allusion to historical and literary analogues, makes the book a quick and memorable read.

Third, the insider's perspective—particularly in the prologue and the epilogue, "Stepping Stones 1998"—make the book warm and persuasive. In that epilogue, "Raphael" sums up what he learned by writing the book: he had always suspected that Wilson was "too slick by half: a hustler and a self-promoter." Nevertheless, "What I came to understand was that Wilson himself was intensely aware of his own shortcomings and that he made heroic efforts to surmount them through self-awareness and spiritual discipline" (172). I think most readers will arrive at the same understanding in reading this book.

And this is finally the great paradox of Wilson's life, and, by implication, of AA itself. The more one strips off the legendary accretions and discerns the "historical" Wilson beneath them, the more—not the less—remarkable does his life become. "Raphael" is spot on to cite one of America's first great thinkers, Jonathan Edwards, just after his homage to Bill, for Wilson was surely an example of grace abounding, and abounding the more in what was clearly a difficult case. And Wilson's story is just as impressive from the very different, but just as American, viewpoint of William James. Bill never insisted that his conversion experience was the genuine article; like James he pointed only to its pragmatic benefits in his remaining alcohol-free for the rest of his life.

“Raphael’s” complex final judgment of Bill W., and implicitly of AA itself, is more than earned by the care and the verve of all that comes before it in this now indispensable book.

## Literature (and Other Arts): What We Talk about When We Talk about Spirituality and Recovery

**Jim Harbaugh, S.J.**

*Note: What follows is the concluding chapter of an unpublished book of mine, which I have called A Great, Clean Wind, after a phrase Bill Wilson used to describe the transforming spiritual experience he underwent in late 1934 (see "Matthew Raphael's" excellent Chapter 5 on this). The first part of my book tries to give some precision to the concept of spirituality; the second studies the use to which spirituality has been put, by AA and to some extent by the addictions treatment profession that, at least at first, derived much of its spirit from AA. In this final chapter, I try to suggest how literature and the other arts could be used in an addictions treatment setting to communicate ideas about spirituality and recovery which otherwise might seem too abstruse or repellent to the client.*

*Including this piece in Dionysos does two things, I hope: it certainly draws together the disparate strands of my own life, as Jesuit priest, student and teacher of literature, and student and teacher of the treatment of addiction. But it also serves to strengthen the connection between literature and addiction, the connection which has always been the focus of Dionysos.*

### **Literature and Spirituality**

It would be neither practical nor particularly useful to try to communicate to someone who was just beginning a journey into recovery the reasons advanced in this book in favor of spirituality in recovery. Detoxing drug abusers will have too much neuro-chemical disturbance, and other kinds of addicts too much mental confusion, to grasp the philosophical and historical arguments I've employed here. They are primarily intended for professionals, who (at least on good days) can be presumed to have their wits about them.

What might be practical and useful would be to spell out for such professional counselors how to incorporate the concepts in this book in their practice with the addicted. A tactic that I have found successful in giving 12 Step retreats may be relevant here: in a milieu

where religious ideas would be too tendentious and philosophical ideas too abstract, I have found stories, literary and orally-transmitted, and even poetry to be effective. I would even argue that what sacred texts are to religion, poetry is to spirituality (Kathleen Norris frequently says something along these lines). Poetry has the paradoxical quality of being at once highly particular—one person's story or experience—and highly universal—aside from details, or better through details, it speaks to the experiences that most humans have had.

There might be advantages to having clients write up a list of their values, or of experiences that have seemed transcendent in some sense to them. But it might be gentler and less bewildering to have them read or listen to stories or poetry, and then use them to reflect on their own lives. If people new to recovery are members of a group, 12 Step and/or professionally facilitated, they will be hearing lots of stories in any case; reading more stories should only enhance the overall experience.

I should acknowledge that I do not offer particular strategies for dealing with the Resistant Client, resistant either to treatment in general or to reflections on spirituality or values in particular. In fact, I think that using stories is a way to finesse such resistance. Clients may identify with the feelings and the experiences of literary characters, that is, they may become aware of a re-awakening of feeling, and especially of compassion. And this is more to the point than their being badgered into accepting terms like “addiction” or “spirituality” after a tiresome wrangle about definitions.

### **First Example: The Fiction of Raymond Carver**

Let me cite a particularly telling example. Unless clients are very confused or very lacking in English language skills, they might be asked to read two versions of a story by Raymond Carver. The version published first was called “The Bath.” A much longer version published later was retitled “A Small, Good Thing.”<sup>1</sup>

Some background: Carver is an appropriate choice for several reasons. He came from a blue-collar background; he was very openly an alcoholic who found quality recovery in part with the help of both professional treatment and A.A.; his diction is deliberately ordinary,

and reflects the lives of the very ordinary people who appear in his stories. Many addicts will identify strongly both with the style and the content of Carver's stories, and for that matter with his poetry as well, which shares the same qualities as his fiction.

All of this may start them reading. If they finish both stories, they will necessarily be struck by the difference between them, as have many literary critics. The second version is longer because, very simply, it includes compassion. The plot, in either version, is about a couple devastated by what happens to their only child, a boy, who is hit by a car near his birthday. A baker who had gotten an order to make the child a birthday cake keeps calling them about picking it up, but speaks so cryptically that it only increases the misery of their vigil with their son; in their shock they have naturally forgotten all about the cake.

"The Bath" is written in the stripped-down style Carver was praised for early in his career. The effect is that we are constantly distanced from the couple in their affliction; Carver avoids having us feel what they are feeling, and the baker's calls are just another element in their meaningless pain. "A Small, Good Thing," by contrast, describes things and events and people much more fully, so that we are drawn to empathy with the parents and even, at the end, with the unintentionally cruel baker.

Even more to the point, "A Small, Good Thing" continues well after the point where "The Bath," without any sort of resolution or point, simply trails off. In the longer version, curiously, the child dies, horribly; but in fact this is probably less excruciating than "The Bath," in which we simply don't know what happens to him. But the story continues even after "Scotty's" death: the parents go home from the hospital, hollowed out by sorrow, only to be tortured by yet another call from the baker. But this time they find out why the baker has been calling, and go to his bakery in the middle of the night to excoriate him. However, once both they and the baker realize their mutual mistake, the baker movingly apologizes, and offers them some of his fresh-baked bread as reparation and a token of reconciliation. The story's new title comes good when the baker notes of his sacramental offer of bread that it is "a small, good thing" at such a harrowing time.

As several critics have pointed out, the story ends with a kind of secular Eucharist, as the three break bread together.<sup>2</sup>

Why the versions are so different I will explain later—it's a more complex story than critics (like me) at first thought. But for clinical purposes what matters is that the versions are different, and the way they're different. All that need be added is that the first version appeared shortly after Carver stopped drinking, the second some time later, when he had been in recovery a while.

Clients who had read both versions might be asked to try to state the differences. They would probably mention the length, say that the second version was "more descriptive," and react, in most cases favorably, to the sense of closure in the second. A counselor's next question would be, simply, "How did the stories make you feel?" This should eventually lead to a statement that "A Small, Good Thing," while more painful, is also more fulfilling or uplifting. In time a client might be able to articulate that the difference between the emotional effect of the two is that the second invites compassion.

From compassion the path might eventually go two ways. First, clients might be asked which version of the story "feels" like they felt when they were in the darkest phases of their addiction, and which feels like they are beginning to feel in recovery, particularly at meetings. Second, if the difference between active addiction and recovery turns in part on the reawakening of compassion, then a counselor might now turn the conversation to values and choices.<sup>3</sup>

"A Small, Good Thing" somehow seems, or feels, more "moral" than "The Bath." If the clients' compassion, and thus their moral sense, is awakening again, how will they use this revived faculty? One might want to tie in Steps 4 through 9 at this point.

Even people with little use for religion, or for spirituality, might stay with a counselor who had so far restricted the discussion to feelings and values. Clients could be encouraged to tell stories of how they had felt compassion before their addiction stifled their moral sense, and how they might be feeling it anew, particularly for the others in their group. With compassion as a polestar, what kinds of choices might they want to make in their new life of recovery?

The topic of spirituality might be broached at this point without having to define the word. A counselor could simply ask, "Which

version of the story is more spiritual? And what qualities in that version lead you to your choice?" Even the rare client who might choose "The Bath," like a few critics, for its brutal realism, would still consider "A Small, Good Thing" more spiritual. In the event that Ernest Hemingway's name comes up—"Hemingway would have liked 'The Bath' better"—it may be worth noting that Hemingway took his life in part because he couldn't get past his drinking (and depression), and thus is not a model for recovery.

The "spiritual" qualities clients find in the later version might be a good way to describe spirituality without defining it in a way that puts off either religious or non-religious people. Spiritual is as spiritual does, and particularly as the characters do in "A Small, Good Thing." Helpful themes like growth and forgiveness, like the ability to heal and learn from pain, would all emerge as qualities of spiritual experience. And these qualities are very consonant with the qualities of the recovering person as described in 12 Step literature.

Again, I think this tactic is better than beginning with an abstract definition of "spirituality" that gets embroiled in controversies like the spirituality vs. religion debate. Also, this approach should lead clients to perceive "spiritual" elements that are already present in their lives, rather than creating the impression that they will only become spiritual at a much later date, after a great deal of effortful self-improvement.

### **Second Example: A Poem by Raymond Carver**

If reading two stories is too laborious, the same effect can be attained more economically by studying one of Carver's poems. I would recommend "Where Water Comes Together with Other Water," available in several earlier collections, as well as in All of Us—suggestive title—which contains all of Carver's poetry.<sup>4</sup> This poem was a favorite of Carver's: he chose it to read when he was interviewed on public radio. On retreats I read it aloud, explaining and explicating it as I go.

Note that this poem does not mention drinking, alcoholism, or recovery. In fact that makes it more effective, since it is not preachy. Instead, the poem turns on the contrast between parched and flowing, dried up and vital: Carver uses only two "poetic" words in the poem, "sere" and "rill," thus underlining that contrast. "Sere" is archaic

diction for “dried up”; it is usually used to describe dead leaves. A “rill” is a small stream, as in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s essay “A Rill from the Town Pump.” Carver is not just trying to sound highfalutin; elsewhere in the poem he is perfectly content to use the more ordinary words “river,” “stream,” or “creek.”

In the first, longer part of the poem Carver simply describes water flowing; but his description is not as random as it may at first seem. In fact he moves in a specific direction, from “the source” down through ever larger streams to the sea. He also makes his description very specific by noting that the streams he loves are the streams of his native Northwest U.S.

In the second part, as is often the case with lyric poetry, he moves from the scene outside to his inside, and sets out a connection between the two. One reason, then, why he is reflecting on streams is that they seem a metaphor for the way he is currently feeling, on what turns out to be his 45<sup>th</sup> birthday. At this time in his life, he is “flowing”; this is noteworthy because only a few years before he was “dry” to the point of death. Carver ends by saying that he will continue to ponder the stream next to which he is sitting, and by implication the change in himself, simply because to do so “pleases me.” And what pleases him about “loving rivers . . . all the way back / to their source” is that this love “increases me.” The second half of the poem reverses the journey of the first half: with Carver we return “to their source.”

As a critic has noted,<sup>5</sup> this poem has the sensory clarity of much of Carver’s poetry, mostly written after he entered recovery. This clarity and the simplicity of the diction may help clients to understand and to empathize with Carver in this poem. Once they have grasped the poem, after several readings aloud or to themselves, they could be asked some follow-up questions.

As with the two versions of the Carver story, what seem to be the emotional differences between Carver then (when he was “sere”) and the river-loving Carver of the “now” of the poem? Indeed, isn’t the difference between the two Carvers the fact that the recovering Carver can feel at all, much less the rich feeling for nature that the poem evinces? Carver says it was his “heart” that was “sere” back then; it’s his heart that is “flow[ing] again” now.

Have the clients experienced a similar change in their feeling state? Do they feel like their hearts are flowing again? What are some of Carver's feelings? Gratitude?<sup>6</sup> Awe in the presence of nature? Even sexual appreciation (he says he has "a thing" for rivers, as some people do for "glamorous women")? Then, are clients now experiencing any of these feelings, probably for the first time n a long time?

The step from here to values could be taken by asking what Carver's attitude to water is. He doesn't want anything from it, he doesn't seek to use it or control it or resist it. He only wants to watch it, and love it. It would be easy to extend this attitude to relationships to people. Indeed, the title of the poem perhaps invites us to that extension. The title is in fact a quotation from the poem (ll. 11-12): in the next line Carver says of these meeting places that they are "holy." The poem, I think, invites us to call "holy" any place where things—or people—"come together."

This interpretation not only puts a moral spin on the poem, but also opens it up to considerations of spirituality. Water is an ancient symbol, in many religious/spiritual traditions, for grace, life, change, renewal. The coming together of streams that the poem celebrates speaks to the communal nature of a life of high quality, a "spiritual" life. "Coming together," according to the poem's last line, has two effects on the poet: it "increases" him, and it makes him love all the things, like water, that increase him.

So a counselor can use either Carver's prose or his poetry to get at a powerful depiction of spirituality in everyday life. In the interests of full disclosure, I should state that I once followed critics in believing that it was precisely the journey from "sere" to "flowing" in Carver's recovery that explained the difference between his earlier and his later fiction. Like other critics, I particularly cited the differences between earlier and later versions of the same story (not just "The Bath" and "A Small, Good Thing").

However, a critic who had access to Carver's manuscripts reported in the New York Times during the summer of 1999 that the longer versions published later were in fact the first versions Carver wrote.<sup>7</sup> It was Carver's long-time editor—who, the article strongly suggests, may have had troubles like the ones Carver solved—who insisted on shortening the versions published earlier so as to give them

a more hard-boiled, Hemingway-esque tone. In short, like some addicts, Carver had wanted, futilely, to be compassionate while he was still drinking. He found the power to be publicly compassionate only after he entered recovery and insisted on his own vision, “firing” his editor.

In any event, I hope this chapter so far has shown how a counselor could use both Carver’s fiction and his poetry as a way to lead clients into questions about values, spirituality, and recovery. One can think of his work as the dry prose of the Big Book or of other central recovery texts set to music.

### **Other Poets, Drunk and Sober**

And Carver is far from unique. Heaven knows there are plenty of other novelists and poets whose lives were affected by addictions, their own or others’. I edit a literary journal, *Dionysos*, which never runs out of things to say about these creative people and their demons. Drinking and drugging, and sometimes recovery, are central to the understanding of literary figures as significant as John Berryman and Sharon Olds (poets), or F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Cheever (novels and short stories). An excellent anthology, Last Call, is described in its subtitle: “Poems on Addiction and Deliverance.”<sup>8</sup>

Nor would I want to give the impression that only a writer whose life and work were shaped as Carver’s, or some of these other authors’, were by addiction and recovery can serve a purpose like mine in this book. Addiction and recovery embrace the most basic human emotions and experiences; so does great poetry, from every time and place. I have used poets like Wendell Berry and William Stafford on retreats.

I have also used the work of Wislawa Szymborska, a Polish woman who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996. The jury that awarded her the prize was criticized on the grounds that her poetry was too easy to understand, which makes it perfect for newly clean and sober addicts.

Take for example her brief lyric “In Praise of Feeling Bad About Yourself.”<sup>9</sup> As is usually the case with Ms. Szymborska’s work, the tone is witty and lucid: the paradoxical title flatly gives the moral, but the charm resides in the details. She names several animals, from the

off-putting (buzzards and piranhas) to the more conventionally noble, or at least impressive (panthers and killer whales). In one remarkable phrase, in which, at least in English, the sound underscores the linkage of the crummy to the grand, she cites “lions and lice.”

What she predicates of this motley menagerie is one simple fact, amusingly spelled out: animals don’t have consciences. Only human beings do. Hence the title: be glad you “feel bad about [your]self,” despite the soothing pronouncements of the flakier New Age gurus, because “a clear conscience” is in fact a sign of “bestiality.”

From here it’s a quick step to the moral self-scrutiny which, as I have tried to show earlier, is at the heart of holistic recovery. Newly sober people who are feeling guilty can use this sprightly little poem to see how truly salutary their feelings are, and this can lead to a discussion of how adult consciences work “on this third planet of the sun” (Szymborska, l. 10). Another wonderful poem of hers, “On Death, Without Exaggeration” (reprinted from The People on the Bridge, 138-140) can move the discussion from values to a spiritual perspective on life—and death. Again, Szymborska’s whimsical, piercing details in this poem can bring to life the spiritually useful 12 Step slogan “One Day at a Time.” (Szymborska, at least in this collection, doesn’t touch on addiction much; but see her tart gem “Advertisement,” [from Could Have, 72-73]: spoken by a tranquilizer (!), it ends with the pill asking the prospective user to sell his/her soul to it, since “there is no other devil anymore,” l. 28).

### **From the Verbal to the Visual**

As the reader will surely have grasped by now, I am a very verbal person. For counselors and clients who are more visual, I would recommend using famous photographs and other artworks. (As with Szymborska’s poetry, these pictures need not be overtly about either addiction or recovery; perhaps it’s better that they instead depict some universal human experience.)

I think for instance of a famous painting, widely reproduced, by the French Impressionist Edgar Degas. It is called The Glass of Absinthe: absinthe, which is now making a comeback, was an alcoholic beverage, nicknamed “The Green Fairy,” that may have included a hallucinogen as an artifact of its distillation process. It was

extraordinarily popular with the working classes, and with bohemian artists, in France in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It was considered so destructive, beyond other forms of alcohol, that the French government finally outlawed its production.<sup>10</sup>

The painting shows a couple—or perhaps I should say a man and a woman who may have no connection at all. Although they are sitting next to each other in a bistro, they are both staring straight ahead, to the side of the viewer, and not at each other. They are both presumably more or less drunk; their eyes are glassy, their posture slumped and defeated. The only spot of color in the painting is the poisonous green of the glass of absinthe on the table before them.

A counselor could show this picture to a client, or a group, or, perhaps most tellingly, to a couple. Then the clients could be asked to describe what they are seeing. A good question to focus the discussion might be precisely the one I began with—are these people in fact a couple? Given their state—and should we presume that this is their usual state?—will they ever be a couple? Even the creation of a simple list of the feelings that the painting depicts or evokes in the viewer could be a helpful task for the clients. Do they see themselves in these people? If not, do they at least empathize with them despite their differences? From empathy the discussion can move to values and to spiritual issues.

Since this painting depicts a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Parisian setting, some clients may find it too alien—or not, of course—its very strangeness might speak to them more than a contemporary picture. However, if Degas's masterwork doesn't appeal to them, the counselor might employ pictures, and especially photographs, nearer the clients' world in terms of setting, kind of people (including ethnicity and socioeconomic status), and behavior. I would avoid sentimental or blatant pictures; open-ended pictures of ambiguous situations might be more effective. Using such pictures is of course a long-standing technique in psychological diagnosis; here I am suggesting that they be employed instead as artwork sometimes is in child therapy, as a way to help less verbal people to express what's going on inside them. Not being very visual myself, I admit freely that in this area I would gladly defer to counselors more attuned to art-therapy.

Let me end this chapter where I began it. The goal of the exercises I have been describing here is not that clients should reach deep philosophical or spiritual insights and then articulate them. The counselor is the only person in the office or the group room who understands the larger perspective within which these stories are being read or these pictures are being viewed. The goal instead is to give the clients a way to make sense of the experiences they may be having in early recovery. Above all, the point of these exercises is to help them become comfortable with the talk about God and spirituality and moral inventory that they may be hearing, perhaps with equal parts confusion and irritation, in 12 Step settings.

As counselors, we need to have some clear ideas of what spirituality is, and of how it can give meaning and support to the enormous effort it almost always takes to begin a life in recovery. It has been my purpose in this book to provide such ideas. But our clients need only have the relevant "experiences," in William James's sense of that term; and in this chapter I have suggested some ways to evoke anew in the client, or to add to their stock of, such experiences. It is our task to help them to understand their experiences, and to use them to lay the foundation for a new life.

<sup>1</sup>"The Bath" can be found in What We Talk about When We Talk about Love.

New York: Vintage-Random House, 1982. "A Small, Good Thing" is in Cathedral. New York: Vintage-Random House, 1984.

<sup>2</sup>See William Stull, "Beyond Hopelessville: Another Side of Raymond Carver," Philological Quarterly 64 (1985), 6, and especially Mark Facknitz, "'The Calm,' 'A Small, Good Thing,' and 'Cathedral': Raymond Carver and the Rediscovery of Human Worth," Studies in Short Fiction 23 (1986), rpt. in Ewing Campbell, ed. Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction. New York: Twayne, 1992 (in Twayne Studies in Short Fiction Series), 292.

<sup>3</sup>Charles Shelton's Achieving Moral Health (New York: Crossroad, 2000) contains many useful hands-on exercises to help clients deepen their sense of their own values, particularly as these spring from compassion.

<sup>4</sup>Raymond Carver, All of Us: The Collected Poems. New York: Knopf, 1998, 63-64. "Where Water Comes Together with Other Water" was the title poem in an earlier collection of Carver's poetry.

<sup>5</sup>See Philip McGowan, "Drinking to Anonymity," in James Nicholls and Susan J. Owen, eds., A Babel of Bottles: Drink, Drinkers & Drinking Places in Literature. Sheffield, England: Academic Press, 2000, quoted in my review in Dionysos: Journal of Literature and Addiction. Vol. 10, # 2 (Summer, 2000), 40.

<sup>6</sup>One of Carver's best-loved poems, written near the end of his life, uses an effectively homespun metaphor for a sense of gratitude: "Gravy" (All of Us, 292).

<sup>7</sup>D. T. Max, "The Carver Chronicles," New York Times Magazine. Aug. 9, 1998, 34-40. Before Max's article appeared, I read my paper on the subject of the changes in Carver's fiction, "'The Word, Honestly Uttered': Is Later Carver Better?" at the American Literature Association Conference in San Diego, May 28<sup>th</sup>, 1998. The epigraph to that paper was a quotation from Carver's poem "Where Water Comes Together with Other Water," studied later in this article. Some material from that paper is included in this article, although Max's argument negates my central thesis to some extent.

<sup>8</sup>Eds. Sarah Gorham and Jeffrey Skinner, Louisville, KY: Sarabande Books, 1997. It contains several selections by Carver and his widow, Tess Gallagher.

<sup>9</sup>In A Large Number. 1976; reprinted in View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems. Stanislas Baranczak and Clare Cavanaugh, eds. and trans., New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995, 124.

<sup>10</sup>For more on absinthe, see James Nicholls, "Barflies and Bohemians: Drink, Paris and Modernity," Dionysos. Vol. 10, #1 (Winter, 2000), 5-21, especially 15-17.

## Notes and Comment

Roger Forseth

Marty Roth's "Anacreon' and Drink Poetry; or, the Art of Feeling Very Very Good" appeared in the Fall 2000 issue of TSLL: Texas Studies in Literature and Language. . . . The Bishop of Books issued The Collected Ernie Kurtz (Wheeling, WV 1999), a collection of 11 essays published over the last 20 years. . . . St. Martin's/Thomas Dunne has just published Sport. Mick Cochrane's second novel. His first novel, Flesh Wounds (Doubleday 1997), was a finalist for Barnes and Noble's Discover Great New Writers Competition. . . . Dan Wakefield appears as himself in Betsy Blankenbaker's documentary film New York in the 50's (Avatar Films), based on Dan's memoir of the same name (see the review in NY Times 9 Feb: B10). Dan provided the Introduction to C. Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings (U California P 2000). . . . John Crowley's Drunkard's Progress was reviewed by Jon Miller in The Social History of Alcohol Review 38-39 (1999): 56-63. John's The Dean of American Letters: The Late Career of William Dean Howells (U Mass P) appeared last year. . . . Dick Uhlig reports that the Brown University Library AA Collection now has his archive of chemical dependency research materials. . . . Ellen Lansky read her paper, "Hollywood and Babylon: Sheilah Graham and F. Scott Fitzgerald Under the Influence of Alcohol," at the M/MLA convention last November. . . . The International Council of Alcohol and Addictions (founded in 1907 in Stockholm) will hold its meeting this year in Heidelberg, Germany ("Science Meets Practice," 2-6 Sept [ICAA, Case postale 189, CH-1001 Lausanne, Switzerland]). . . . "There was no moment of crisis, no particular cataclysm that forced the novelist Will Self finally to renounce the destructive habits that were overrunning his life. Unless you count the time he was caught taking heroin on Prime Minister John Major's campaign plane. . . . That was three years ago. It was sometime last year that Mr. Self decided he had had enough of the drinking, enough of the explosive argumentative nights and the inevitable fallings-out with friends. His latest novel, How the Dead Live, is the first book he has written, he said recently, while under the influence of no illegal substance of any kind" (Sarah Lyall, "Tale of Recovery From a Bad Boy of Letters: Will Self Explores the Dangers of Obsession and Drugs in a Dark, Impudent Satire," NY Times 6 Nov 2000: B1). . . . Reconsidering Drugs: Mapping Victorian and Modern Drug Discourses by Lawrence Driscoll was published by Palgrave/St. Martin's (2000). . . . "'People were asking me about where the movie came from, where I got the characters and

situations for Traffic, and I found myself starting to speak in code,' [Stephen Gaghan] said. He would talk about research he had done in the drug culture, about unnamed acquaintances, but he never admitted the core truth: that a lot of it came from his own life" (Rick Lyman, "Gritty Portrayal of the Abyss from a Survivor," NY Times 5 Feb: B1. [Editor's note: Mr. Gaghan has since won the Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay for Traffic]). . . . George H. Jensen published Storytelling in Alcoholics Anonymous: A Rhetorical Analysis (Southern Illinois UP 2000). . . . "In 1987 alone, when he was in the combined grip of alcoholism and a cocaine addiction, he published The Eyes of the Dragon, Misery, The Drawing of the Three, and The Tommyknockers, which he wrote with cotton wool up his nostrils to stem the cocaine bleeding" (John Connolly, "Stephen King Is a Recovering Alcoholic & Cocaine Addict," The Irish Times 21 Oct 2000 [[www.ireland.com](http://www.ireland.com)]). . . . Carson McCullers: A Life, by Josyane Savigneau, was issued in March by Houghton Mifflin. . . . "A self-described 'scream looking for a mouth,' Hubert Selby, Jr., is the literary godfather of the inner demon. . . . He is probably best recognized for his 1964 book Last Exit to Brooklyn, and its 1989 big screen adaptation. Once again, his work has been cinematically rendered . . . in the upcoming Requiem for a Dream . . . an emotional horror story of addiction (to heroin, diet pills, television, and pride)" (Lauren Sandler, "Hubert Selby," Feedback Inc 2000 [[www.feedmag.com](http://www.feedmag.com)]). . . . "The poems in Heroin [W. W. Norton], Charlie Smith's new collection, explore an unnamed narrator's struggles with and eventual recovery from heroin addiction, and they are as mournful as any song Hank Williams wrote, and often as lovely" (David Kirby, "Anesthesiology," NY Times Book Review 28 Jan: 14). . . . "[P. J.] Clarke's, on Third Avenue at 55<sup>th</sup> Street, was the setting for the movie classic The Lost Weekend with Ray Milland; . . . Charles R. Jackson, who wrote the novel on which the film was based, stopped by for years afterward" (Douglas Martin, "Daniel H. Lavezzo, Jr., 83, Owner of Famed Saloon, Dies," NY Times 15 Oct 2000: 54). . . . "'It's just like I'm dead,' says a former heroin addict who has been living at the paradoxically named Sunshine Hotel on the Bowery for eight years. 'Every day is the same.' His is one of the 50 haunting voices and faces in four Bowery dives found in Elophouse: Life on the Bowery (Random House), written by David Isay and Stacy Abramson, two radio producers, with photographs by Harvey Wang" (Andrea Higbie, "Last on the Skids," NY Times Book Review 20 Oct 2000: 22). . . . "The number of dope-smoking college students is getting higher, with nearly 22 percent more college students lighting up in 1999 than just six years earlier, said a recent Harvard University report" (The Chronicle of Higher Education 10 Nov 2000: A10). . . . "A majority of those [college students surveyed by the Harvard School of Public Health] who abstained

from drinking or who did not binge, considered alcohol use to be an issue at their campuses. Conversely, a minority of binge drinkers considered it to be an issue, and frequent binge drinkers were least likely to do so" (Henry Wechsler, "Binge Drinking: Should We Attack the Name or the Problem?" *Ibid.* 20 Oct 2000: B13). . . . "As anyone who has ever tried to write anything after partaking of psychoactive substances knows, altered states of consciousness go into words the way a tsunami goes into a squirt gun. Your synapses may be firing like Gatling guns, your mind soaring through the empyrean, but what you succeed in getting down on paper are incoherent gestures, endless digressions and fragments of fragments" (from an anonymous review of Gary Kamiya's Writing High. Salon [www.salon.com 4 Aug 2000]). . . . In her review of On Broken Glass: Loving and Losing John Gardner (Carroll & Graf), Laura Ciolkowski writes, memoirist Susan Thornton "builds an intimate portrait of a writer whose alcoholism seemed to feed his literary powers even as it threatened to destroy his life" (NY Times Book Review 18 Feb: 20). . . . "In Forces of Habit (Harvard UP), University of North Florida's historian David Courtwright shows that drugs—from caffeine to cocaine—are woven more tightly into Western history than we recognize in this modern era of moralistic prohibition" (Christopher Caldwell), "The Opiates of the Masses . . . and the War They've Provoked," Wall Street Journal 14 March: A10). . . . Steven Earnshaw is the author of The Pub in Literature: England's Altered State (Manchester UP/Palgrave/St. Martin's). . . . "'He would drink anything. I had thrown out the rubbing alcohol I'd used to massage his back, but he gulped the contents of a bottle he thought contained hair tonic but which Josefina had refilled with cooking oil'" (Jan Gabrial, Inside the Volcano: My Life with Malcolm Lowry [St. Martin's 2000]; quoted in Lindsay Duguid's review: NY Times Book Review 10 Dec 2000: 27). . . . "Several 17<sup>th</sup>-century clay pipes found on the site of William Shakespeare's home may have been used to smoke marijuana, scientists in Johannesburg, South Africa, reported Thursday" ("Did Bill Shakespeare Pack a Bong? Scientists Find Drug Paraphernalia on Site of Shakespeare's Home," Associated Press 1 March [www.FoxNews.com]). . . . "Controlled Drinking" (renamed "Moderation Management") is in the news: Jeffrey A. Schaler, Addiction Is a Choice (Open Court 2000); Sam Howe Verhovek, "Advocate of Moderate-Drinking Plan Learns Tragic Lesson," Minneapolis Star Tribune 16 July 2000: E4; Stanton Peele, "After the Crash: The Alcoholism Treatment Establishment Uses a Drunk Driving Accident to Silence Dissent," Reason Nov 2000: 41-44. . . . "The writers Sadie Plant discusses in Writing on Drugs [Farrar, Straus & Giroux 2000], like Thomas De Quincey and Charles Baudelaire, were not just looking for a high. They wanted to experience that 'certain indescribable feeling' and capture it on paper" Catherine Saint Louis,

NY Times Book Review 27 Aug 2000: 19). . . . "Do you love chocolate? According to new research, chemicals in chocolate may explain why some people crave the tasty treats. What's more, these same compounds—called tetrahydro-beta-carbolines (THBCs)—have previously been investigated for a possible role in alcoholism" ("Drinkers, Chocolate Lovers May Share Same Craving," New York Daily News 2 Nov 2000 [dailynews.yahoo.com]). . . . Matthew Klam described the effects of the drug called Ecstasy in "Experiencing Ecstasy: MDMA Is Different from All the Drugs That Came Before It—which Explains Why It Has Become the Fastest-Growing Illegal Substance in America," NY Times Magazine 21 Jan: 38-43, 64-79. . . . Barnaby Conrad II has published The Martini: An Illustrated History of an American Classic (1995), a companion to his Absinthe: History in a Bottle (1988); both are issued by Chronicle Books. . . . "When I knew Hemingway he drank steadily and strongly, but I had not realized what his standards were until I analyzed the alcoholic intake of Colonel Cantwell and his teen-aged beloved, Renata, during their first evening together in Across the River. Before meeting Renata, the Colonel drinks three double dry martinis with the headwaiter and has a double gin and Campari in his bedroom. In Harry's Bar he and his girl share eight double 'Montgomerys' (dry martinis at a ratio of 15 to one, this being the ratio of superiority at which, according to Hemingway, Field-Marshal Montgomery preferred to do battle). Over dinner at the Gritti the couple drink one bottle of Capri Bianco, one of Valpolicella and two of Roederer Brut '42. Later in a gondola they down a bottle of Perrier-Jouet. Total: Seven double martinis and one double gin for the Colonel, four double martinis for the girl, plus five shared bottles of wine. Finally, the Colonel retires to his room and empties another bottle of Valpolicella" (Kenneth Tynan, "The Journals of Kenneth Tynan," The New Yorker 7 Aug 2000: 51). . . . Laura L. Phillips, in Bolsheviks and the Bottle: Drink and Worker Culture in St. Petersburg, 1900-1929 (Northern Illinois UP 2000) argues that the 1917 Revolution empowered both champions and opponents of temperance. . . . "When, by force of will, [James Dickey] suddenly stopped drinking but refused to take drugs to ease his withdrawal, he suffered a seizure, bit off part of his tongue and nearly bled to death. Incisive about his own failings but unable to help himself, Dickey observed: 'People say that the good feeling that alcohol gives you is false—but all you have to do is live a human life to know that, in many instances, a false good feeling is better than none at all.' . . . [W]hen Dickey's later poetry failed to correspond to his self-generated hype and the burden of honors he'd received, the old navigator lost his bearings and tried to obliterate his sense of unworthiness with alcohol" (Jeffrey Meyers, "What the Monsters Know," The New Criterion May 2000: 73).

## **ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS**

**Matts Djos** (Ph.D., Texas A & M, 1975) is a Professor of English at Mesa State College in Grand Junction, Colorado, specializing in American literature. His personal familiarity with many of the problems of alcoholism has led to a scholarly concern about the connection between alcohol abuse and modern American writing. He is also a free-lance writer, particularly of articles about sailing.

**Jim Harbaugh, S.J.**, is the author of A 12 Step Approach to the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola (Sheed and Ward, 1998). He teaches in the Addiction Studies Program at Seattle University, and is scholar in residence at the S.U. School of Law.

**David Roskos** lives in his home state of New Jersey, where he edits and publishes Big Hammer magazine and other publications under the imprint of Iniquity Press/Vendetta Books. He works as a furniture mover and has been published approximately one hundred times over the past 20 years, most recently in the Outlaw Bible of American Poetry. He is a regular contributor to Dionysos.

**George Webb** was a frequent contributor to Dionysos, as well as to many other journals. He taught literature for many years at the University of Kansas. The article in this issue was sent to Dionysos by his widow, Margaret; it was presented as a paper at the American Literature Association Conference in San Diego, May 28<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup>, 1998.

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