

**Drug Regimes**

Addiction, Biopolitics, American Literature

1820-1940

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of Minnesota by

Brendan McGillicuddy

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Co-advisors: Dr. Robert Brown, Dr. Rembert Hüser

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Drug Regimes: Literature, Pharmacology, Biopolitics  
St Paul, MN

1. *Never give anything away for nothing.*
2. *Never give away more than you have to give (always catch the buyer hungry and always make him wait.)*
3. *Always take everything back if you possibly can.*

"The Algebra of Need," William Burroughs<sup>1</sup>

A slogan for the American war on drugs: *statum contra pharmakon*. The state against drugs and drugs against the state. Inscribed in this simple opposition is a historically specific understanding of the general drug economy - a complex arrangement of bodies and drugs defined by relations of production, consumption, and exchange - that understands drugs, along with their users and their traffickers, as existing in necessary conflict with the aims of the state. As such, it is the responsibility and duty of state power, in the name of the people and the culture they represent, to "wage war" on drugs. In its most general contemporary sense, a "drug war" describes a situation in which central state power claims the bodies and minds of its citizens as "territory," and purports to

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<sup>1</sup> Burroughs, William. "Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness." In *Naked Lunch*. Grove Press: New York City, NY. 1959. P. x

defend this territory against incursion of drugs and its attendant dangers, the almost instinctual connotations made between drugs to crime, corruption, and disease. "War on drugs" describes an ideological paradigm of state power that attempts to define illicit drugs and police their exchange, with the ultimate goal of eradicating them from the national territory. The horizon of the drug war is the imagined sober homeland, a fantasy that turns drug users and dealers into anti-social actors. This logic is widespread on "both" sides of the drug war. Consumers, producers, and merchants in the illegal drug economy often coincide with repressive and ideological state institutions in viewing drugs as necessarily a site of social conflict, where the American social body struggles against a radical pharmacological other. The perverse result of this warfare has been a commodity whose extraordinary economic value and quasi-mystical cultural status owes precisely to its status as a persecuted object. And so a historical law of drug war thinking: to the extent that it has been state policy to attempt to expel drugs from the American nation, repressive intervention in the pharmacological economy has become a central axis of the maintenance of state power.

Such a way of viewing things is so common to contemporary experience that we have a difficult time

imagining any different arrangement: any way of understanding the organization of drugs, health, bodies, money, and power that is not organized under the sign of war. It seems of particular import, then, to describe how novel this particular link between "drugs" and "war" has been from a historical perspective. Throughout human history, it would have been far more common to view drugs as the profits or "spoils" of war: as late as the nineteenth century the British Empire was waging war to open the Chinese markets to its Indian opium trade. States have also viewed drugs as an incitement to war, pharmacological interventions to produce fearless soldiers immune to the brutality of conflict: the United States army, for instance, has distributed steroids, amphetamines and painkillers to infantry and airborne soldiers in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, among other theatres. Or consider state reliance on drugs as therapy to ameliorate the pain and destruction of warfare: surgeons named the newly discovered wonder drug, which made painless surgical intervention possible to wounded soldiers during the carnage of the American Civil War, after Morpheus, the god of dreams. Many more examples could be cited, but the point is that the particular logic of governance by which we wage "war on drugs" is surprisingly modern. Rather than this

particular relation of opposition, by which the presence of the one necessarily precludes the other - drugs destroy the basis of social life, as such, it is society's responsibility to defend itself against this assault - throughout human history, it has been at least as common to describe a more intimate relation of drugs and state projects of war: as conquest, as incitement, as weaponry, or as therapy.

The writings I have assembled here are based on the intuition that the logic of conflict has driven structures of pharmacological power to multiply, increase and intensify, and that for this reason, analysis of drug rhetoric has significance for political and cultural theory that extends beyond the direct implications for national narcotics policy. The goal of these writing is to historicize and analyze the cultural meanings of modern drug war within a general political, economic, and cultural theory. I argue that we should pay attention to the pre-history of the concept of "drug war," which emerges in American rhetoric long before the present period of accelerated military and police conflict. To do this, I have organized a series of writings produced within a specific literary tradition that traces the outlines of a particularly modern, and particularly American, form of

drug regime. The origin of the specific rhetoric of *socius contra pharmakon* can be traced with considerable accuracy to the early North American republic, when it referred to specifically to alcohol and belonged to the political organization that we today remember as the "temperance" movement. The thematic, emotional, and political resemblance between the nineteenth century rhetoric of alcoholic intemperance and the contemporary politics of narcotic addiction is striking. In the American nineteenth-century we can see familiar images with direct relevance to contemporary debates: gateway drugs that lead to increasingly vicious spirals of vice and crime; institutional integrity corrupted and eroded by the presence of addicts; drug dealers as objects of fascination and fear; and the elusive logic of the "disease concept of addiction" - these were all topics increasingly central to the national politics of the nineteenth century, debated with vehemence, passion and urgency.

Alcohol is, of course, a paradoxical case to be studying here, precisely because it is now legal, and it is the collapse of national prohibition that characterizes the contemporary meaning of alcohol in American cultural life. We might say that alcohol use and sale in the United States today is governed by under a "liberal" drug regime, the



assumption of the individual's freedom of pharmacological choice. The free citizen is thought to be ultimately responsible for the decision to use or not use alcohol, a liberty ultimately mandated by the right to pursue happiness. Given certain limits (one must be of legal age, one can't drive motor vehicles or operate firearms or heavy machinery, etc.) a free citizen of the United States is permitted to choose: drunkenness or sobriety. Furthermore, the alcoholic economy is governed by the free market; as long as the enterprise is profitable producers can freely make, vendors can freely sell, and consumers can freely buy.

In this respect, alcohol is unique among non-medical psychoactive compounds available in the contemporary United States. Most other "recreational drugs" have been governed by a "repressive" regime, in which the danger of the poison justifies state intervention, bolstered by medical, juridical, and carceral institutions. Federally, the United States does not recognize the free traffic in cannabis, the right to use heroin in public or private, or the ability to seek profit through trade with cocaine exporters. The justification for state repression is thought to reside in the essential nature of these policed substances, which are believed to undermine the ability to make free choice. The

state thus appropriates authority to regulate the desires of drug consumers, with the stated aim of protecting individual and social bodies from the dangers of these substances.

Alcohol is a striking exception to this rule; a state of affairs that seems to have far less to do with its pharmacological properties than with its central role in American cultural life. Studying alcohol in the nineteenth century is a vertiginous experience: if one simply substitutes crack cocaine for whiskey, the result is that nineteenth century jeremiads do not differ significantly in their political theory from Office of National Drug Control Policy under Ronald Reagan. The repressive paradigm foisted by the temperance movement has collapsed with respect to alcohol, a historical moment marked by the passage of the 21<sup>st</sup> Amendment and the repeal of national Prohibition. However, it has had an afterlife in the twentieth century, as its political imaginary continues to adhere to the substances that today are the targets of the "war on drugs." For this reason, alcohol in the nineteenth century is a fascinating case study in political systems of pharmacological control, through which we can see the struggle between a model of liberal freedom and a model of state coercion. The fluid mutual interplay between these

systems might even suggest that drugs are governed by a state of exception, articulating moments when liberalism fails and becomes its opposite, or when repressed memories of violence traumatically emerge within the political theory of liberalism. It is not only that liberalism seems to contain its opposite, it is that alcohol tends to announce precisely how and where liberalism permits itself to be unaware of its undemocratic unconscious.

Each chapter in this book might be thought of as a "drug regime" - rules for the governance of self and others, occurring through *pharmacia*, that link the individual to the community and the nation. "Drug regime" is the central critical term that I use to describe the general form of pharmacological power, as well as its particular instantiation in the United States. A "drug regime" is a hegemonic regime of cultural control that incites or prohibits the use and sale of *pharmacia*. A drug (a *pharmakon*) is a border object, the function of any drug is to move between the inside and the outside of the human self, transforming them both.<sup>2</sup> For the terms of this study, this movement might be understood as an essential quality of a drug: an external object that traverses the borders of

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<sup>2</sup> Gootenberg, Paul. "Talking About the Flow: Drugs, Borders, and Discourses of Drug Control" in *Cultural Critique*. Winter 2009, p 13-46

the human body to produce an internal, subjective change. Drugs assume their meaning by crossing the borders of the human self, defining its boundaries through their transgression, as in everyday vocabulary, one is "not oneself" under the influence of drugs.

As exteriority, a drug regime is the power wielded by a state over the movement of psychoactive commodities, the ability of the state to regulate flows of a particular commodity by restricting their production, exchange, or consumption. This could describe the power to police, to surveil, to arrest, or even to exterminate; it could equally apply to the authority to produce, to manage or to treat, as an illness. It exists in constant relation to a drug regime considered as interiority, by which an individual subject is positioned with relation to the available *pharmacia*. In this sense, "regime" is taken in the sense of "regimen:" a prescribed course of medical treatment, and describes an individual's culturally regulated choice to consume, abstain, and so on. The concept of a "drug regime" expresses the concatenation between interior and exterior selves as a term within social theory. It describes the relationship between the "self" and the "social," between "subjectivity" and "ideology," as an interdependent relation of reciprocal

influence. The concatenation between these two realms is the most general form of a drug economy: a system that links the mode of pharmacological production with to the desire to consume (or to not consume) drugs. In this study, I assume that it is the "drug economy" that is the object of a "drug regime." The function of a drug regime is to produce authority within the system of social relations that connects the labor of drug producers and the subjectivity of drug consumers. Indeed, the goal is to reach the one by means of the other.

The writings presented here trace the life cycle of one particular drug regime from its origin to its collapse. I follow anti-alcohol writing in the United States from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century - post-Independence to the inter-war period - charting the evolution of the political movement known as temperance into contemporary programs of recovery. In these writings, alcohol is represented as a highly potent and volatile substance, marked by desire and fear, which posed a danger to social existence in America as such and called for organized political opposition. In the late eighteenth century, this was a politically marginal position espoused by radical reformers. By the middle of the twentieth century, many of its assumptions had become

institutionalized common sense for the majority of the nation. Most importantly, this tradition was accepted by much of the white middle class, who continue to be the most faithful adherents to American drug war ideology, despite also being the world largest drug market, for substances both legal and illegal. The hegemony of drug war ideology tracks closely with broader changes in American political subjectivity, most specifically among this class, the growth of the Protestant Ethic into the Spirit of Capitalism. As such, reading alcohol as a contested symbol of everyday American life in the nineteenth century - a commodity fetish, in which a vast network of political and economic relations become visible - permits a powerful materialist perspective on the relations between drugs and political power. It outlines how the white American middle class began to imagine their drug-free bodies as pure and sober, and how this perspective constructed drugs as exterior: as contamination, invasion, and the object of struggle. Understanding this deeply felt sensibility of petite bourgeoisie whiteness helps us understand how pharmacological power became an important terrain to defend in the development of racial capitalism. This, in turn, may begin to explain how drug war thought has persisted, even

thrived, in the modern United States far beyond its rational utility.

My goal here is not to outline the complete history of this movement. Instead, I am interested in uncovering the forms of thought that underlie drug war and reinforce its deadly logic, and to select texts that, to me, have circumscribed a particular aspect of the problem. Although my writings here seem to be about the past, referring to people, places, and ideas that have long since gone by, the reference of this work as absolutely contemporary. Its object is a better understanding of the sedimented structures of feeling contained within our historical present.

## CHAPTER 1

### BESTIARY

#### Philadelphia, PA

*Pythagoras, we are told, maintained that the souls of men after death expiated the crimes committed by them in this world by animating certain brute animals: and the souls of those animals in their turn entered into men and carried with them their peculiar qualities and vices. This doctrine of one of the wisest Greek Philosophers was probably only intended to create a lively idea of the changes in the body and mind of man by a fit of drunkenness. In folly, it causes him to resemble a calf - in stupidity, an ass - in roaring, a mad bull - in quarreling and fighting, a tiger - in feter, a skunk - in filthiness, a hog - and in obscenity, a he goat.<sup>3</sup>*

In this passage from his *Inquiry*, Benjamin Rush rehearses one of the oldest stereotypes found in American anti-drug propaganda; the motif of the addict's animality. His metaphor is a chronicle of human folly, in which are visible the caricatured forms of the American poor, the sick, the insane, the criminal, and other types besides. The imagery of this passage reflects the mysterious power of spirits to affect a change in human character, rendered as a literal metamorphosis into an animal state. These types are crudely and comically sketched as if in a

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<sup>3</sup> Rush, Benjamin. *An Inquiry into the Effects of Ardent Spirits upon the Human Body and Mind : With an Account of the Means of Preventing, and of the Remedies for Curing them.* Printed by Thomas Dickman, 1817. Springfield, MA.



barnyard; the spirit of man excised out of the house and into the cultivated yet strange space of the farm. It is a parodic twist on an obscure Greek doctrine of reincarnation; as if God were playing a practical joke on the drunkard, reincarnating them as literal expression of their worst self; the drunkard is asked to recognize their familiar in the form of their livestock as a form of moral pedagogy. Vices are represents as multitudinous as the variety of the kingdom of fauna, in implicit contrast to the rational unity of divine law. These vices are desires that continually play the same trick on humanity; spirits trick us to lose our humanity and revert to our animal selves, the multitudinous and yet discrete types of human folly as bizarre and yet as intimate as the animals of a bestiary.

Although Rush cites Pythagoras here, an equally relevant reference, indeed, something of a controlling metaphor in his text is the account of the expulsion of the Gerasene demoniac: the casting out of demons into a herd of swine, who immediately commit mass suicide:<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine. The herd of about two thousand rushed down a steep bank into the sea where they were drowned" Mark 5:12. Luke 8:30. The New American Bible. Saint Joseph edition. Catholic Book Publishing Company, New York. 1970.

*The demoralizing effects of distilled spirits do not stop here. They produce not only falsehood, but fraud, theft, uncleanness, and murder. Like the demoniac mentioned in the New Testament, their name is Legion, for they convey into the soul a host of vices and crimes.*<sup>5</sup>

Sin is as a "legion" of crime, a multiplicity of disorder and chaos that exists in contrast to the divine unity of the state. The reference to Mark authorizes a contemporary scientific relevance to the Biblical motif of disease, now understood not as leprosy but as a drug epidemic. Exorcism figures both a battle between an earthly plague and the spiritual authority to cast it away, and the negative image the "host of vices and crimes" borne by distilled "spirits" is the oneness and purity of the godhead. The theology contains the logic of the gateway drug: drink is the symbol of a primary lie, an original sin that repeats itself in the thousands of crimes committed by addicted humanity.

This political position would have had radical implications within Protestant America. In the traditional reading of the Gospel, wine symbolizes the mystical union of transcendence between God, the church, and the people. Human limitation stripped away by wine, that becomes blood, that becomes spirit, was a vision of spiritual connection held in common both by state religion and by folk

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<sup>5</sup> *Ardent Spirits* p 2

mythology.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, 19<sup>th</sup> century Calvinists in New England understood these "spirits" within the doctrine of the fall. In this counter-theology, the transience of "being on drugs" is a sign of its profane origins; a simulacrum of divine knowledge without its sacred content<sup>7</sup> It signifies earthly transience, human estrangement from divine knowledge, and the illusive dream of redemption, bound up in man's repetitive and futile attempts to attain divine knowledge through "artificial stimulus." Elaborated from this iconography, the first medical theory of drugs in the United States becomes a demonology. Drugs speak through people the polyglot language of Legion, a confused polyphony that conforms neither to the authority nor to the divinity of the law. In Rush's metaphor, this is the rational speech of man descending into the noise of animals.

This language is characteristic of both its time and ours, an early modern form of "drug war discourse." To the multitudinous nature of vice, nineteenth century American congregationalism responded with a radical reassertion of the holistic oneness of the individual, the community, and the kingdom of God: hordes of demons expelled by the unity

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<sup>6</sup> Mark 14:22; Matthew 22:29; Luke 22:20; John 6:55

<sup>7</sup> Derrida, Jacques. "The Rhetoric of Drugs" in *Points: Interviews*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA. 1995. p. 228

of the divine, whose authority on Earth was the true Church of the dominion of America. And insofar as American literature uses drugs as a figure of experiential "truth," it has provided had to deal, in one way or another, with this literature's conflict with a political structure that deals with drugs as an extension of the ultimate untruth - the Great Lie and the presence of the deceiver in the world.<sup>8</sup>

Let us begin with the received wisdom. The *Inquiry into Ardent Spirits* appears within the context of what we might today call an epidemic of alcoholism in colonial America. It is a pamphlet by Benjamin Rush, a physician, polymath, and radical republican whose scientific writings are today seen as blazing an early trail for modern psychiatry to follow. He was a collaborator with Thomas Paine, a signatory to the Declaration of Independence and a representative at the first Constitutional Convention, and an anti-slavery activist who attempted to apply the precepts of Christianity and the Enlightenment to the problem of human bondage in the United States. He was also perhaps the most famous physician in post-independence America. In addition to providing a general framework for

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, the entirety of *Naked Lunch* might be interpreted as a parodic counter-theology in response to this position.

the development of modern psychiatry, he is often specifically credited as the first American physician to work within the "disease concept of addiction."<sup>9</sup> His *Inquiry Into Ardent Spirits* appears within the context of what we might retrospectively call a "drug epidemic"; the public health consequences of a dramatic increase in the potency and quantity of the alcohol consumed in the early Republic of the United States.

His term of art, "ardent spirits," is specific to the context of a rapidly improving distillation technology (in a country where many did not have reliable access to clean water) that led to an alarming increase in the available potency of American drinks, most specifically, whiskey and rum. Improvements in distillation had given agricultural producers a cheap and efficient way to process their surpluses into a transportable commodity. Mercantile slave capitalism made whiskey and rum valuable products, useful as barter currency, that began to push aside more traditionally "American" fare such as cider and small beer. Rum, for instance, underwent several phases of commodification along the Atlantic economy. Sugar was grown on Caribbean slave plantations, distilled in New England

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<sup>9</sup> Levine, Harry. "The Discovery of Addiction: Changing Conceptions of Habitual Drunkenness in America." *Journal of Alcohol Studies*. Vol. 39, No. 1, pp. 143-174, January 1978

and shipped to England, who traded the bottled drinks for more alcohol. (In other words, slaves worked on sugar, which became rum, which accumulated as capital, which was again used to purchase slave labor.<sup>10</sup>) The effect of this glut on existing American drinking customs was unpredictable and chaotic. Ardent spirits had profoundly changed American drinking behavior, and the result was a moral panic; the historical record of the early republic clogged with angry denunciations of public drunkenness.<sup>11</sup>

Rush's contribution to addiction science occurred in the context of his more general work on the "moral disorders";<sup>12</sup> his term of art for what the vocabulary of his time would have more readily called "sin," "vice" or "crime." His psychological work attempted to reconcile "sin" within an emergent framework of organic, biological causality. Rush hypothesized that wounds to the mind - what will come to be called "traumas" - could have permanent effects on "the moral faculty": the capacity in the human

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<sup>10</sup> The complexity of the politics and culture of the maritime Atlantic economy could be an entirely different project. For a very interesting account of this specific point, and more, see Mintz, Stanley. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. Viking Press, New York, NY. 1985, a comparative history which relates the commodification of sugar from the simultaneous perspective of Caribbean slavery and European diet.

<sup>11</sup> Rorabaugh, W.J. *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition*. Oxford University Press. Oxford, England; New York, NY. 1979

<sup>12</sup> Rush, Benjamin. *Medical Inquiries and Observations Upon the Diseases of the Mind*. Printed by Kimber and Washington; Philadelphia, PA. 1812

mind of choosing and distinguishing good and evil."<sup>13</sup> To understand the importance of this position, a useful contrast might be made with Johnathan Edwards opus, *Freedom of the Will*, which contains an extended defense of individual's ultimate responsibility, before the community and before God, for their own willful actions. It is impossible for one to desire against one's will, Edwards argues, and gives the drunkard as an example of one who freely chooses sin, crime, and vice; this philosophy is at the basis of the common sense wisdom that the drunkard is the man with an "excessive love" for drink, assuming desire and will are equivalent.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, Rush argues that "moral disorders" can have physical causes, and describes etiological factors that range from climate, to brain, to exercise and diet, and even to what we today may call "traumatic events," psychological wounds that affect a person's "moral character." Organic diseases may compromise and inhibit the innate freedom of the individual to choose the law written in their hearts, the observable effect is disturbed, disorderly behavior.

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<sup>13</sup> Rush, Benjamin. *Concerning An Inquiry into the Influence of Physical Causes Upon the Moral Faculty*. Printed by Charles Cist. Philadelphia, PA. 1786. p. 1

<sup>14</sup> "The Discovery of Addiction" p. 47. Cites Edwards, Jonathan *Freedom of the will*. In: Edwards, J. Basic writings. New York; New American Library; 1966

Intemperance had a political importance within Rush's medical work, which might be seen as an attempt to summon the tools of medical science to the exigencies of a public health crisis. In this sense, it is adjacent to his texts on yellow fever, and not significantly different in method or rhetorical aim. His important contribution, medically, is to describe "intemperance" as a "chronic" medical condition. There are the immediate physical symptoms caused by the ingestion of a toxin - "drunkenness" - but there is also the psychological compulsion to repeat this poisoning. The originality of this perspective is difficult to see today, but Rush is making an implicit argument for a powerful new form of medical rationality. Against Edwards, this hypothesis implies a break or division in the will. Rush suggests that the "effects of chronic drunkenness divide themselves" into two categories: "such that are of a prompt and those of a chronic character."

A prompt symptom "such that discover themselves in drunkenness" is the immediate effect of overconsumption. Rush refers to a bout of drunkenness as a "paroxysm," a "temporary state of madness," central to the etiology of a broad range of mental disorders, such as epileptic attacks or a "fit" of hysteria. Description of the paroxysms is often both grim and comic as Rush navigates through a



series of symptoms of drunkenness "which delicacy forbids me to mention." The behavioral symptoms show the writer and attempting to group familiar human behavior into a new scientific understanding of the topic (while managing his own distaste for the subject.) Fond of lists, he begins with a grouping of behavioral symptoms:

1. Unusual garrulity. 2. Unusual silence. 3. Captiousness, and a disposition to quarrel. 4. Uncommon good humor, or a disposition to laugh. 5. Profane swearing, and cursing. 7. [sic] A disclosure of their, or other's secrets. 8. A rude disposition to tell the persons they know their faults. 9. Certain immodest actions. I am sorry to say, this sign of chronic drunkenness often appears in women, who, when sober, are universally known for their chaste and decent manners. 11. Fighting or a black eye or swelled nose. 12. Certain extravagant acts which indicate a temporary fit of madness. These are singing, hallooing, roaring, imitating the noises of brute animals, jumping, tearing off clothes, dashing naked, breaking glass and china, and dashing articles of furniture on the floor.<sup>15</sup>

There is nothing new about this description; it would have been a familiar litany of human error in any Sunday sermon in Philadelphia. And yet there is a new technique of medical perception that organizes the objectivity of the gaze.<sup>16</sup> Rush is not merely interested in a catalog of human folly, but in demonstrating the scientific causality that

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<sup>15</sup> *Ardent Spirits*. p. 2

<sup>16</sup> Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception*. Translated: A.M Sheridan Smith. Vintage Books. New York, NY. 1975. 22

underlies it. The organization of this heterogynous, often contradictory set of violations of probity and order - both talkativeness and silence; both good humor and rudeness; a propensity for violence and an unexpected promiscuity - are located together through the postulate of an underlying causality. And so, instead of explaining the intemperate illness through reference to the drunkard's "character" or "will," Rush organizes these symptoms around a new understanding of physical causality, somatic reactions empirically observable in the body itself:

*These behavioral characteristics are reinforced by a set of physical symptoms: After a while the paroxysm is completely formed, the face now becomes flushed, the eyes project and are somewhat watery, winking is less frequent than is natural, the under lip is protruded, the head inclines a bit to one shoulder, the jaw falls belchings [sic] and hiccups take place, the limbs totter, the whole body staggers. The unfortunate subject of this history next falls on his seat, he looks around him with a vacant countenance, and mutters inarticulate sounds to himself; he attempts to rise and walk. In this attempt, he falls upon his side, from which he gradually turns upon his back. He now closes his eyes, and falls into a profound sleep, frequently attended with snoring and profuse sweats, and sometimes with such a relaxation of the muscles, which confine the bladder and the lower bowels, as to produce a symptom which delicacy forbids me to mention.<sup>17</sup>*

In pointing towards the concatenation of the physical and psychological, Rush is also pointing away from a theory of

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<sup>17</sup> *Ardent Spirits* p. 3

moral or divine causality. The category of the paroxysm attempts to explain both the physiological and the moral, the visible and the invisible, and thus to demonstrate "the influence of physical causes upon that moral power of the mind, which is concerned with volition."<sup>18</sup> He is thus able to theorize intemperance as an illness or disability in the "faculty of volition," in other words, compulsive drinking implies the existence of a will that acts against the Will. As the paroxysm is a "temporary fit of madness," that worsens in severity and degree as the drunkard continues to imbibe, the disease known as "intemperance" has a similar effect, but on the life-course of the organism itself:

*It belongs to the history of drunkenness to remark, that its paroxysms occur, like the paroxysms of many disease, at certain periods, and after longer or shorter intervals. They often begin with annual, and gradually increase in their frequency, until they appear in quarterly, monthly, weekly and quotidian, or daily periods. Finally they afford scarcely any marks of remission during the day or night.*<sup>19</sup>

There remain significant differences between Rush's work and modern medical science. Most significantly, contemporary theories tend to regard addiction as a "relational" illness, not inherent in the substance itself

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<sup>18</sup> *Moral Faculty*. p. 2

<sup>19</sup> *Ardent Spirits*. p. 5

but within the pattern of usage that the addict forms in the consumption of the substance. By contrast, Rush treats alcohol as inherently poisonous; repeatedly and loudly warning against "temptation," the innocuous beginnings of a progressive degeneracy. However, we can still clearly recognize the characteristics of the modern theory of addiction - a chronic disease whose primary symptoms are behavioral, which occurs against the expressed will of the afflicted, and which progresses with increasing force and severity. This "drunkards progress" was calculated along the "Moral and Physical Thermometer" that charted the drinker's downward trajectory towards insanity, ruin, and death. It was understood within the context of a medical theory that understood the human body as a state of dynamic equilibrium, a divinely placed system of balances.

Modern pharmacology classifies alcohol as a "depressant." In the *Inquiry*, however, the operative term is "stimulus." Drinking in excess is thought to be an immoderate application of stimulus to the body's system; the resulting paroxysm would deplete the stores of bodily energy. Over time, the result was inevitably the degeneracy of the life force itself. Stimulus should not be thought of in the modern sense of "stimulant," although it is true that Rush believed that alcohol caused a sudden

rush of mental and corporal energy. Yet the theory of stimuli is broader, it can be thought of as any sort of external force or substance applied to the human body. Food, cold, and emotion were equally "stimuli," and thus one could likewise be equally "intemperate" with regard to food (gluttony) or anger (ire.) Temperance thus not only meant abstinence with respect to alcohol, it also meant the rational application of the principles of balance and equilibrium to achieve a moderation in all practical life. The specific danger of alcohol was thus its propensity to "weaken the moral fiber," through the creation the further desire for itself. The effects of this weakening would become literal on the body of the drunk as the symptoms of a worsening illness.

This text is noteworthy today, however, not for its relevance to contemporary medical practice but for Rush's his assessment of the political and social meanings of medical acumen. Take his reference to Pythagoras, not at all a piece of empirical science, but rather a commonplace that demonstrates the writer's education in Greek philosophy, a comic riff that subtly flatters his own intelligence. It is characteristic of this text to deal with scientific problems this way, to yoke a random Greek as bulwark for empirical observation, and we are not

surprised that to find this early medical text is filled with illogical theory, anecdotal evidence, and random conjecture. This is precisely what we would expect to find in an early medical text at the beginning of the development of a field, indeed, it would be somewhat surprising if this were not the case. And yet this does not explain entirely explain how we are still able to decipher the origin myth of addiction science into these theosophical tangles, or how we are able to straighten them out into empirical scientific truths. Posing the question this way is more cultural than medical: Rush falls short in an entirely predictable, indeed, in a manner absolutely characteristic of 19<sup>th</sup> century social theory. For what is striking about this new psychological framework is how quickly and easily Rush is able to place it in a familiar social context, to stage the *Inquiry* as an explicit argument about the relationship between drunkenness and the state of social order:

*No less destructive are the effects of ardent spirits on the human mind. They impair the memory, debilitate the understanding, and pervert the moral faculties. It was probably from observing these effects in drinking upon the mind that a law was formerly passed in Spain which excluded drunkards from being witnesses in a court of justice.*<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Ardent Spirits* p. 5

It is evidence of the relative obscurity of this theory at this moment that Rush needs recourse to Spanish law for evidence of his theory; he notes that the authorities had wisely recognized that the "effects of ardent spirits to impair the memory, debilitate the understanding, and pervert the moral facilities,"<sup>21</sup> and observing these effects had chosen "to exclude drunkards from being witness in a court of judgment." If this seems unremarkable; this is because we have since grown comfortable with a normative regime that assumes that public rationality is contingent on sobriety. Rush announces the central importance of a particular discursive mode of drug experience - "temperance" or "sobriety" - in which competence, expertise and mastery are exactly contingent on a lack of experience with speech's purported object. This structure is so pervasive today - for instance, it has a very contemporary resonance in the disenfranchisement of drug felons - that it is difficult to accept the radical way that his argument is in fact moving against Jonathon Edwards and the accepted wisdom of his time. The key theme that Rush strikes here is the deceptive nature of the drunken mind and its corrosive effect on social institutions. It is the symptom not only

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<sup>21</sup> *Ardent Spirits* p. 5

of the moral disorder, but of a larger corrosion of the social:

*A more affecting spectacle cannot be exhibited than a person into whom this infernal spirit, generated by habits of intemperance has entered; it is more or less affecting, according to the station the person fills in a family, or in society, who is possessed by it. Is he a husband? How deep the anguish which rends the bosom of his wife! Is she a wife? Who can measure the shame and aversion which she excites in her husband? Is he the father or is she the mother of a family of children? See their averted looks at their parent, and their blushing looks at each other! Is he a magistrate? What humiliating fears of corruption in the administration of the laws, and of the subversion of public order and happiness, appear in the countenances of all who see him! Is he a minister of the Gospel? Here language fails me. If angels weep, it is at such a sight.<sup>22</sup>*

The critique is aimed at addiction's ability to corrupt the very foundations of the social. Rush sketches an ascending dissolution of social institutions - beginning with the family, he moves towards the state and then to the clergy, reaching the sacred space, "language fails" to express the blasphemy of a drunken minister. Notably, it seems to be not only the actions of the drunk individuals themselves that prompt this dissolution, but the shame that these actions cause in their intimate relations, who turn away in fear and disgust. Neither the husband, nor the representative, nor the minister, are competent in their public position inasmuch as they are "on" drugs. And so

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<sup>22</sup> *Ardent Spirits* p. 5



expertise in drug discourse - be it medical, political, or judicial - will come to be governed by a regime of abstinence; drug professionals themselves will need to announce their sobriety in order to perform as professionals. It announces a peculiarity of drug discourse; it is one of the few discursive modes in which competence, expertise, and mastery is contingent on a lack of experience with speech's purported object.

*In pointing out the evils produced by ardent spirits, let us not pass by their effects on the estates of the persons who are addicted to them. Are they inhabitants of cities? Behold! their houses stripped gradually of their furniture, and pawned or sold by a constable, to pay tavern debts. See! Are they inhabitants of country places? Behold! their houses with shattered windows, - their barns with leady roofs - their gardens overrun with weeds - their hogs without yokes - their cattle and forces without fat - and their children, filthy and half-clad, without manners, principles and morals.<sup>23</sup>*

Rush asks the reader to "Behold! the consequences of moral disorder, as if bringing to light a known secret that the community would rather ignore. The effects of Rush's theory of disease are shared communally, and more specifically, with the specific effect of draining the wealth of the community; enriching only tavern owners and behind leaving decrepit houses and urchin children. The dissolution of the

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<sup>23</sup> *Ardent Spirits* p. 6

state therefore not only refers to a failure of governance, but its broader effects in the inability to hold and maintain private property. Behold! the pharmacological economy expresses itself as parasitic on the "real" economy, its consequences are the undoing of work and labor. As opposed to a productive economy of exchange; its endpoint is the neglect of property and the dissolution of wealth. The visible effect of this neglect is poverty, and the nature of the treatise itself makes this private destitution a matter of public concern. Yet it is precisely the nature of addiction to express the negation of the social, in the form of an ultimate withdrawal.

*I have classed death among the consequences of hard drinking. But it is not death from the immediate hand of the Deity, nor from any of the instruments of it which were created by him; it is death by suicide. Yes - thou poor degraded creature who art daily lifting the poisoned bowl to thy lips - cease to avoid the unhallowed ground in which the self-murderer is interred, and wonder no longer that the sun should shine, and the rain fall, and the grass look green upon his grave. Thou art perpetuating, gradually, by the use of ardent spirits, what he has affected suddenly by opium or a halter. Considering how many circumstances from surprise, or derangement, may palliate his guilt, or that (unlike yours) it was not preceded and accompanied by any other crime, it is probable that his condemnation will be less than yours at the day of judgment.<sup>24</sup>*

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<sup>24</sup> *Ardent Spirits* p. 16

Who is ultimately responsible for the addict's death? What is striking about this nascent medical theory of addiction is how quickly this discursive mode is able to move from individual pathology to social diagnosis. The disease concept is immediately political, and contains within it an economic theory of labor, commodity exchange, and class hierarchy. The negative image of Rush's bestiary is the Protestant ethic of the sober middle-class citizen, who maintains the integrity of their individual health and wealth through the conscious choice to avoid temptation. Elaborations of this response to Rush often specifically condemned alcohol traders as parasites or as slavers, who lived off of other men's wealth and traded in their souls. The health of this population is isomorphic with the constitutional strength of the nation, a point that Rush makes, significantly, with reference to the image of the vanishing Indian:

*Should they continue to exert this deadly influence upon our population, where will their evils terminate? This question may be answered, by asking, where are all the Indian tribes, whose numbers formerly spread terror among their civilized neighbors. They have perished, not by pestilence, nor by war, but by greater foe to human life than either of them - Ardent Spirits!<sup>25</sup>*

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<sup>25</sup> *Ardent Spirits* p. 17-18

Rush uses the rhetoric of intemperance to duck a painful question of American history; the mass death of colonization - war and pestilence - folded into a cause that obviates the guilt of the American nation in the "perishing" of native tribes. Instead, intemperance allows a mode of explanation by biological destiny; the savage Indians vanish because of their "natural" inferiority in confrontation with a civilized population.<sup>26</sup> Less evident is how Rush uses the category of "population" to apply a new biopolitical principle to treat alcoholism as a problem of public health<sup>27</sup>. The death toll, the economic costs, the problems of public governance; these are supra-individual issues, they cease to refer to the health of the individual as to the vigor of the nation. In this context, they are treated as existential threats, which put the very existence of the American experiment in jeopardy.

*And should the customs of civilized life preserve our nation from extinction, and even from an increase of mortality, by those liquors, they cannot prevent our country being governed by men chosen by intemperate and corrupted voters. From such legislators, the republic itself would be in danger.*

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<sup>26</sup> See "The Present State and the Probable Future of the Indian Tribes Inhabiting the Territory of the Union" in De Tocqueville, Alexis, *Democracy in America*. Translated by George Lawrence. Harper & Row, New York, NY. 1966. for a contemporary critique of this theory.

<sup>27</sup> Foucault, Michel. "25 January 1978" in *Security, Territory, Population*. Translated by Graham Burchell. Picador Press, New York, NY. 2003. p. 55

The logic here is brilliantly obfuscatory. Rush uses the historical image of the vanishing Indian to describe an equivalent threat to the American nation; the extermination of the population through a biological agent. Yet whereas for the "savage" tribes this is understood as a return to a natural state, for the white population this implies a threat to "civilization:" the American system of law, custom, economy, etc.

Moreover, Rush then says, this threat would exist even without the immediate danger of biological extinction. The drunken crowd is another stock image of 19<sup>th</sup> century temperance thought, Rush's rhetoric legitimizes and escalates this fear of mob rule through a scientific understanding of the intemperate disease. His metaphor moves seamlessly from the medical "corruption" of the body to a political understanding of "corruption" in the body politic. It is a danger inherent in democracy: it is precisely the freedom of the people to pursue desire that leaves open the possibility that people will willingly choose a corrupt, intemperate government and so undo the nation itself. For this reason, Rush encourages the curtailment of the citizen's rights in precisely this respect:

*To avert this evil - let good men of every class unite and besiege the general and state governments - to impose heavy duties upon ardent spirits - to inflict a mark of disgrace, or a temporary curtailment of civil rights, upon every man convicted of drunkenness; and finally to secure the property of habitual drunkards, for the benefit of their families, by placing it in the hands of trustees, appointed for that purpose, by a court of justice.<sup>28</sup>*

The basic actions of the drug regime are already put in place. Social stigma against the user, juridical mechanisms to protect private property, and economic security measures to police drug traffic. Of crucial importance is that these measures are not themselves justified with reference to the "will of the people" or any sort of democratically chosen principle: indeed, they tend to override the free choice of the people. Yet this is because drug health is imagined as a precondition of democracy; the evil desires of the *demos* must be curtailed if the republic is to exist at all, a state of affairs which requires "good men of every class" to establish a security state that forcibly encroaches on the wants of their fellow citizens.

By this point, medicine has ceased to define a domain of scientific inquiry about the human body. Instead, it is leveraged as political authority towards the establishment of an unpopular political program. The *Inquiry* moves from

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<sup>28</sup> *Ardent Spirits* p. 18

pathologies of the somatic and psychological to the problems of political economy in a manner that should set off alarm bells. Yet there is no sense in which these are thought to be incompatible domains, indeed the opposite, medical authority is explicitly leveraged within an unpopular political position to give it the objective rhetoric of scientific truth. Rush is any sort of outlier in this sense, indeed the opposite, he is profoundly in step with the bulk of the official literature produced in the nineteenth century. Rush is recognizable as an early moment within a specific drug regime, a normative abstinence that, applied to a more general "drug problem" has since become hegemonic globally.

Virtually every text treated in this study is compromised in this exact same way: scientific findings which are symptomatically expressive of contradictions in philosophy, politics, and aesthetics. This structure is so pervasive that it often renders the idea of "drug literature" as hopelessly compromised. The idea of narrating this history as the rational subject of the intellect is absurd, precisely because it has been the function of political power to cast drug experience in terms of an intellect that experiences them as irrational, because of demons or pathologies, it makes no difference.

The result is a situation in which the researcher can trust neither the distorted speech of drug users, nor the authority that decides them to be insane.

At this moment, a hypothesis like "the rational application of empirically demonstrated procedures of public health" seems less able to explain this consistent position expressed in two hundred years of America's drug policy than the Occam's razor of "mass collective delusion." The method through this mess is expressed in the paradoxically titled *Histoire de Folie*. Foucault understood that *histoire* and *folie* were incompatible terms, words which exerted an impossible pressure upon each other. Because it is the social function of reason to "exclude" madness, it is precisely the function of *folie* to be inaccessible to the rationality of *histoire*. And so a book within the disciplinary rules of "history" cannot represent the experience of madness. The logical converse also follows; a book of "madness" cannot be a true history. *Histoire de Folie* is thus a paradox, an impossibility, unless one recognizes that the paradox here is the independent relation that each term has to the concept of "truth." What then becomes visible is that *le vrai* itself is not constant; it acquires a sense so different in relation to *histoire* and *folie* as to be an entirely



different concept. And so a principle for the study of the emergent discipline of psychiatry: one studies the psychiatric texts not for the truth about madness, but to demonstrate how empirical universalizing science comes to assume the language of partisan political power. Foucault's texts have the precise effect of revealing the negative image of madness, one is able to study what is not there, to picture the repressions and exclusions necessary to produce a "true" history book about insanity.

This book is an inverted form of Foucault's project - asking the question about drugs and literature is immediately to ask about the multitudinous genres of "lying" that have grown out this relationship. In this work, I am less interested in why drugs lie than I am in the structure that produces untruth. My case study is the disease concept of alcoholism, a concept whose apotheosis I find in *Alcoholics Anonymous* mode of treating denial and self-deception through a program of rigorous self-examination. Workers in this tradition tend to be white middle-class Protestant males from the North; their works track the transformation of the Protestant Ethic into the Spirit of Capitalism, through the desires and dangers expressed by the image of spirits. I argue that it is impossible to understand this tradition as any sort of

progress towards a more empirical science without understanding how at every step of the way, alcohol was an immediately recognizable symbol of the inevitability of pathology that demanded social control. In other words, the theory of addiction from its very first days with the motto of drug war: *socius contra pharmakon*.

## CHAPTER 2

### The First American Drug Warrior

#### Litchfield, CT

*Then I walked on about a mile, and as soon I got within the city, the word of the Lord came to me again, saying: "Cry, wo to the bloody city of Lichfield." So I went up and down the streets, crying with a loud voice, "Woe to the bloody city of Litchfield!" It being market day, I went to the marketplace, and to and fro in several parts of it, and made stands, crying as before, "Wo to the bloody city of Lichfield!" And no one laid hands on me. As I went thus crying through the streets, there seemed to me to be a channel of blood running through the streets, and the market-place appeared like a pool of blood. When I had declared what was upon me, I felt myself clear...After this a deep consideration came upon me, for what reason I should be sent to cry against that city, and call it The Bloody City. But I came to understand that in the Emperor Diocletian's time one thousand Christians were martyr'd in Lichfield. So I was to go, without my shoes, through the channel of their blood, and into the pool of their blood in the marketplace, that I might raise up the memorial of the blood of those martyrs, which had been shed above a thousand years before, and lay cold in their streets. So the sense of this blood was upon me, and I obeyed the word of the Lord.*

- *George Fox, journal entry.*<sup>29</sup>

Preliminary shots in the long American drug war were fired in 1826 in Litchfield, Connecticut. Lyman Beecher's *Six Sermons on Intemperance* takes a shockingly radical position on the danger of drug abuse to the health of the

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<sup>29</sup> Cited in James, William. *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature. Being The Gifford Lectures in Natural History Delivered at Edinburgh. 1901-1902.* Random House, New York. 2002. p. 10-

American nation; the themes it announces have taken centuries to be worked through. *Six Sermons* also marks the emergence of the medical theory of chemical dependency within the political rhetoric of the American pulpit, the drug scene described with the language of plague, scourge, and apocalypse. Beecher describes a sober America subsumed by an epidemic of intemperance, which he interpreted simultaneously as a raging public health crisis and a hellish supernatural affliction. The *Six Sermons* were an intellectual and spiritual response to the exigencies of this moment, a mobilization of his ecclesiastical authority to contain this threat to the Christian principles of the American republic.

The *Six Sermons* are jeremiads - the traditional rhetorical form American Protestantism used to address problems of collective sin.<sup>30</sup> The theme of the jeremiad is the communal betrayal of the divine covenant, a sin that threatens to bring divine wrath upon the guilty congregation. In the New World, this rhetoric had a particular salience, as sin was understood specifically in the context of the failure of the church to carry out their historical mission in America: the city on a hill destined

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<sup>30</sup> Bercovitch, Sacvan. *The American Jeremiad*. University of Wisconsin Press. Madison, WI. 1978

to become a beacon of righteousness for the world. In the context of this failure, the most salient characteristic of the jeremiad is its use of holy terror to threaten the audience with divine retribution for its misdeeds. It deploys a dialectic of sin and salvation, of fear and faith, materializing the fires of hell, and using the fear of the flames to bring the congregation towards a renewed commitment to God's covenant and its earthly expression in the Christian church. For this reason, like alcohol itself, it might be thought of as a purgative: a ritual form in which the community addresses and meditates on the wages of sin before expelling it from the community. And in this sense, it is an eminently political genre of theological thought, whose specific project is the mobilization of the community around the threat of an impending catastrophe.

In this tradition, Beecher has not moved far from Puritan ancestors such as Cotton Mather or Jonathon Winthrop. *Six Sermons* evidences both the stark fears and the lurid attractions characteristic of the Protestant relationship to alcohol, understood through a framework of sin in which the pleasures of the body are understood as ephemera of the corruptible body that places the immortal soul in danger. What makes this text remarkable is that, for perhaps the first time, this Calvinist morality is

deployed within a modern sense of a drug epidemic, an emergent medical paradigm that was beginning to understand alcohol dependency through Rush's vocabulary of "moral disorder."

*Intemperance is the sin of our land, and with our boundless prosperity, is coming up on us like a flood. And if anything shall defeat the hopes of the world, which hang upon our experiment of civil liberty, it is that river of fire which is rolling through the land, destroying the vital air, and extending an atmosphere of death.<sup>31</sup>*

What is striking in this passage is the apocalyptic language that Beecher uses to describe this disease, a pestilence laying waste to prelapsarian America. Against the nation's teleological destiny, intemperance is imagined as a poisoning of the earth itself, a toxicity that despoils the air, fouls the land, and sets the river alight. Beecher's language of toxicity and ruin draws its imagistic power from Revelation, but is also remarkable for evidencing a nascent ecological awareness, an apocalyptic sense of human presence itself as destructive to the world it inhabits. *Six Sermons* sutures together a biblical sensibility of the wages of sin - the collective punishment that befalls a community which turns away from God - a contemporary awareness of and anxiety about poison and

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<sup>31</sup> Beecher, Lyman. *Six Sermons on the Nature, Occasions, Signs, Evils, and Remedy of Intemperance*. American Tract Society, New York City. 1827. p. 6

toxicity. It synthesizes theology and biology: an ancient awareness of man's fallible nature with a strikingly modern fear that poison is at the root of the contemporary panic. This language contains a radical reimagining of biology as itself toxic, to a drive within human beings that leads us to undermine our own means of survival.

Yet what is important to Beecher is ultimately not the ruin of nature. Rather, natural destruction is a metaphor for the corruption of the "experiment of civil liberty" that contains it. In other words, the crime is not only a crime against the social body, it is an existential threat to the nation itself. Extremely significantly, Beecher associates the flood of intemperance with "our boundless prosperity," a key mode for understanding the particular modernity of the sin that he describes. The nineteenth century associated the litany of sins of excessive consumption - gluttony, intemperance, lust - as particularly pertaining to societies of affluence and plenty, as if caused by a surplus of resources and leisure available to the contemporary world. Affluence emerges as a strangely doubled term, used to describe both the conditions and the wages of sin. It is simultaneously the threat to American liberty and the thing that is being threatened. In other words, American wealth is a danger to

itself.

*It is a war upon the human constitution, carried on by an auxiliary, but which never fails to subtract more vital power than it imparts. Like the letting out of waters little by little, the breach widens, until life itself is poured out. If all diseases which terminate in death, could speak out at the grave, or tell their origin upon the coffin, we would witness the most appalling and unexpected disclosures.<sup>32</sup>*

Like Rush, Beecher imagines human sin, vice, and crime as returning from beyond the grave to call attention to the sins committed by men in this life. Unlike Rush, he imagines not a Rabelaisian barnyard scene but an appalling cemetery of corpses, called back into the world to revenge themselves on the diseases that killed them. The idea of a "human constitution" also has a dual meaning. It refers to both the individual human and her health, but it is immediately tied to the motif of the body politic, undermined by the struggles of a great war that relentlessly assaults this community.

And yet this war has a peculiar character; it is being "carried out by an auxiliary," meaning that the nation does not confront the nemesis directly, but only in the occulted form of the *pharmakon*: a simulacrum as the masked face of Satan in all its duplicities and falsities. It is not coincidental that this military metaphor evidences some

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<sup>32</sup> *Six Sermons*. p. 4



confusion about the lines on which the drug struggle should be fought. On the one hand, drugs are understood as an "alien agent," a foreign body penetrating or invading the sober homeland. This invasion requires mobilization and fortifications, battle lines that will protect those within and exclude those without. Yet the passage also suggests seems to be that the soldiers who are meant to join the battle are themselves not to be entirely trusted with temptation. In this sense, the fear is not invasion but domestic subversion. It is a corruption, a moral rot that seizes a society from within, a ruin that causes the soldier to be weakened on the battlements in the very position that his country needs him to be strong. There is no direct combat at the "breach," rather, the "breach" describes not what is being let in but what is allowed to leave, a diminution of the "vital forces" that will be understood not only as national health but as the economic system that produce health. The war itself changes character. The conquering army reveals itself to be already embedded within the nation, which remains shockingly unaware of the fact that it is already losing the battle.

From a historical perspective, what we see is the very beginning of a remarkable social program. It begins with "intemperance," a hybrid object of knowledge, constructed

at the overlap of theological revelation and medical science. The friction between these two discourses - the apocalyptic rhetoric of the sermon tinged with the dread of epidemic disease - produces a remarkable textual power. Inclined to alternate quickly between the medical and the moral, indeed, to understand them as somewhat interchangeable, this anxiety surrounding the *pharmakon* relies both on theological terror and medical rationality to justify collective mobilization. "Intemperance is a national sin, carrying destruction from the center to every extremity of the empire, and calling upon the nation to array itself, en masse, against it." *Six Sermons* is one of the first American texts to outline a modern discourse of drug war: *pharmakon* against *socius* in a holy war for the defense of the national homeland.

The *Six Sermons* begin with an exegesis on Proverbs 23, a description of the lure of the *pharmakon* to entice and seduce the unaware. This was a favorite passage of temperance preachers in the nineteenth century, who tended to elide the New Testament symbolism of wine - as sacrifice, unity, and communion in Christ - in favor of this obscure piece of mystical poetry about the "serpent in

the cup."<sup>33</sup> This piece chosen from Proverbs harkens back to the myth of the fall, an interpretation of sensual pleasure as an extension of the dominion of Satan. The toxicity of wine and the seduction of women are the key images of this piece of mystical poetry, interpreted as metaphor for the hypnotic call of evil:

*Who hath wo? Who hath sorrow? Who hath contentions? What hath babbling? Who hath wounds without cause? Who hath redness of eyes?*

*They that tarry long at the wine; they that go to drink mixed wine.*

*Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright. At the last it will biteth like a serpent and stingeth like an adder. Thine eyes shall behold strange women, and thine heart shall utter perverse things. Yea, thou shalt be as he that lieth down in the midst of the sea, or he that lieth on the top of a mast. They have striken me, shalt thou say, and I was not sick; they have beaten me, and I felt it not; when shall I awake? I shall seek it again.<sup>34</sup>*

"This is a glowing description of the sin of intemperance," writes the preacher, "None but the pencil of inspiration could have thrown upon the canvas so many and such vivid traits of this complicated evil."<sup>35</sup> Sidestepping his mixed metaphor, we might develop a certain contradictory relationship introduced through Beecher's

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<sup>33</sup> Reynolds, David & Rosenthal, Debra. *The Serpent in the Cup: Temperance in American Literature*. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, MA. 1997

<sup>34</sup> Proverbs 23:29-35. Cited in "Six Sermons." p. 1-2

<sup>35</sup> *Six Sermons*. p. 2

unusual phrasing that allows us to bring this epigraph beyond the commonplace. At the same time that he uses the proverb to present a "complicated evil," he praises the "glowing" Biblical passage for its aesthetic qualities. Inasmuch as it is rhetorically necessary to praise the wisdom of the ancient proverb, we might wish to slough this off as an unremarkable flourish. Yet there is something else happening in this line, by which Beecher signals, consciously or not, the uncannily modern quality to the verses.

The modifier "glowing" opens this ambivalence. Like the snake's eyes, the proverb itself is "glowing;" it is luminescent, radiant, hallucinatory, describing a wondrous, terrifying journey of the disintegration of the self and of perception. Beecher obviously intends to praise to the well-crafted accuracy of the description, the talent of the scribe to sketch a disquieting description of drunkenness as demonic possession. And yet the word signals to a different quality of the biblical language; its intense colors, its fierce luminescence, which signify its relation to desire. Red is the focal point from which the description begins; it is the color of the communion and the passion, but also of blood and of the devil. One images a deep rich burgundy that arrests the eye, that hypnotizes,

seduces and causes the drinker to "tarry." And as one looks, a change in the reddened cup, which begins to move, as if the wine itself was possessed of an interior life, a strange motive force of transformation that beguilingly swirls as the drinker looks more deeply into the inscrutable color.

The idea that drugs have a life of their own - an occult vegetal power that exists adjacent to the kingdom of man - is an ancient motif within drug literature; Beecher renders this pagan motif as satanic. What one sees in the deep red is the Evil One, a death that wears the face of life, a serpent that tempts and seduces one into permitting its lethal bite. Its venom brings forth a vivid erotic hallucination. "Strange women" appear as spirits from the cup, "thine eyes" behold them, as if they were incorporeal, and the "perversity" of the tongue and of the heart is loosed. The motif emphasized here is the phantasms of sensuality. Like fornication, wine is a delirious mistress that promises pleasure at the same time that it sets one adrift into the turmoil of the sea. The insidiousness of this seduction is that the drinker is caught unaware: stricken while not being sick, beaten without sensation, and leaving one with only the lingering desire to make the trip again. All this is contained within the temptation of

the adder's "glowing eye," symbol of a strange mysticism, a heathen ecstasy, and a poisonous danger.

The rational necessity of this program is based upon "a philosophical analysis of its mechanical effects on the animal system." Much like Rush, Beecher's "science" is an amalgamation of observed behavior and citations from Scripture and other ancient sources; it is based in an understanding of the human body as a dynamic and harmonious balance of forces. Within this happy mechanism, different parts of the body complement each other according to a strict proportionality expressive of a divine equilibrium. Each part of the body has a role and function, and no part dominates the functioning of the whole. There is a natural correspondence between science, aesthetics, affect, and morality; in each sphere a harmonious ordering of parts complements the movement of the beautiful, healthy, and happy whole. In this sense, the human body is a physical expression of the ideal Christian congregation, a spiritual body composed by the placement of its members within the hierarchy of the total system.

*The stomach is the great organ of accelerated circulation to the blood, of elasticity to the animal spirits, of pleasurable or painful vibration to the nerves, of vigor to the mind, and of fullness to the cheerful affections of the soul. Here is the silver cord of life, and the golden bowl at the fountain, and the wheel at the cistern; and as they fulfill their duty, the muscular and*

*mental and moral powers act in unison and fill the system with delight.*<sup>36</sup>

The luminescent symbol of precious metals introduces a central motif of Beecher's; health, purity, and prosperity as interrelated qualities, each necessary for the proper functioning of the entire human system. The reference to a "golden bowl" is from Ecclesiastes,<sup>37</sup> it describes the stomach as a symbol of fullness, wealth, and plenty, from which happiness issues. Its "duty" is as an integrated, connected part of the body; it connects the circulatory system, nervous system, cerebrum, and ultimately, to the soul itself. Like a silver cord that draws a wheel to the fountain, the stomach works to bring pleasure and fullness to the functioning of the entire system, producing a divine harmony and "filling the system with delight." This image from Scripture is overlaid with a more contemporary theory of biological vitalism; the body as organic machine, whose independent parts act in unison based on "animal correspondences:" vibrations, elasticity, and vigor. The sublime actions of the divine are realized in this rationally planned system of mechanical laws, which express

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<sup>36</sup> *Six Sermons*. p. 13

<sup>37</sup> Ecclesiastes 12:6

God's goodness in the proportion, balance, and moderation of the human body's function.

Within this schema, spirits act as an external agent that throws the natural operation of the body out of order. Today we are accustomed to classifying alcohol as a "depressant," a classification which describes the drug's inhibitory effects on the central nervous system, producing drowsiness, loss of motor control, and sleep. In the nineteenth century it was a "stimulus," a description of alcohol's ability to "provoke an energetic reaction in the physical and moral system." Alcohol is understood as a "shock" to the system, in the sense that the strong "energetic reactions" that it provokes are ultimately destabilizing to the body's system of balance.

*There are two evils incurred by the use of stimulating drinks. The first is their positive effect on the human system, in such a way that all the functions of the body are accelerated, so they all move quicker than their natural speed. This quickened motion of the animal fluids always produces an agreeable sensation in the mind.<sup>38</sup>*

The pharmacological effect of alcohol is here rendered as a "quickenning," an animation or livening, related directly to the flow of "animal fluids." However, this artificial sense of acceleration produces a reciprocal

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<sup>38</sup> Beecher, Catherine. "On Healthful Drinks," in *Treatise on Domestic Economy*. 1841. Published by Schocken Books, New York. 1977. P. 85



contraction. Because there is a finite economy of energy on which the body operates, expending it unnecessarily will necessarily correspond to a subsequent dissipation: "This temporary invigoration of the system is always followed by a diminution of the powers of the stimulated organs...It may be set down as a rule of physiology, that stimulating drinks deduct from the power of the constitution in exactly the proportion in which they operate to produce temporary invigoration."<sup>39</sup> The result is a chronic dependence, which leads to the body's degeneration:

*The life-giving power of the stomach falls of course as much below the tone of cheerfulness and health as it was injudiciously raised above it. If the experiment be repeated often, it produces an artificial tone of stomach, essential to cheerfulness and muscular vigor, entirely above the power of the regular substance of nature to sustain, which nothing can fill, but the destructive power that made it - and when protracted use has made this difference great, between the natural and this artificial tone, and habit has made it second nature, the man is a drunkard, and, in ninety-nine instances in a hundred, is irretrievably undone.<sup>40</sup>*

Beecher here gives an etiology of drug dependence, which follows Rush closely. Despite the pseudo-scientific language characteristic of 19<sup>th</sup> century "wellness" programs, he also puts forward the basic structure of a chronic understanding of addiction as a deepening cycle of

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<sup>39</sup> "On Healthful Drinks" p. 85

<sup>40</sup> *Six Sermons* p. 14

intoxication and withdrawal that culminates in dependence. We should pay particular attention to the characterization of this dependence as artificial, unnatural, out of alignment with the proper function of the system. This is a central trope of addiction, the *pharmakon* as *simulacra*, which takes its deceptive power from its uncanny ability to mimic real human needs and substitute them with synthetic processes.<sup>41</sup> Drug dependence replaces natural desire with artificial need: "The demand for artificial stimulus to supply the deficiencies of healthful ailment, is like the rage of thirst and the ravenous demand of famine. It is famine: for now the artificial excitement has become as essential to strength as cheerfulness as simple nutrition once was."<sup>42</sup> Hunger and thirst arise from the process of nature, but the desire for "artificial excitement" is a manufactured desire that arises because of the user's own actions. Once introduced, however, this artificial need assumes a reality indistinguishable from natural need; the balance of nature has been altered.

*Nature, taught by habit to require what once she did not need, demands gratification with a decision inexorable as death...Sinking nature calls upon this wretched man with trumpet tongue to dispel this darkness and raise the ebbing tide of life, by the application of the cause which produced these woes, and after a momentary alleviation will*

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<sup>41</sup> "The Rhetoric of Drugs," p. 233

<sup>42</sup> *Six Sermons* p. 14

*produce them again with deeper terrors and more urgent  
importunity.*<sup>43</sup>

The introduction of "what nature once did not need" perverts the divine course of things from its proper function. Instead of sustaining life, it begins to demand the "application" of the poison that will bring about death. This describes a state of "second nature,"<sup>44</sup> in which nature has been taught to attack itself, through precisely the application of the poison that is the cause of one's "woes." Yet it is the deceptive nature of the pharmakon to only allay these woes momentarily, an oscillating structure of medicine and poison that produces the terrors that it attempts to forestall.

*So long as men suppose that there is neither crime nor danger in drinking, short of what they denominate drunkenness, they will cast off fear and move onward to ruin by a silent, certain course until destruction comes upon them and they cannot escape. It should be known therefore and admitted, that to drink daily at stated times, any quantity of ardent spirits, is intemperance, or to drink periodically as often as days, and times, and seasons, may furnish temptation and opportunity, is intemperance. It may not be for any one time the intemperance of animal or mental excitement, but it is an innovation on the system, and the beginning of a habit which cannot fail to generate disease and will not be produced by one hundred men without producing many drunkards. It is not therefore enough to erect the flag ahead, to mark the spot where the drunkard dies. It must be planted at the entrance of his course, proclaiming in waving capitals THIS IS THE WAY TO DEATH. Over the whole territory of "prudent use" it must wave and warn. For if we cannot stop men in the beginning, we cannot*

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<sup>43</sup> *Six Sermons* p. 15

<sup>44</sup> *Six Sermons*. p. 13

*separate between that and the end. He who lets ardent spirits alone before it is meddled with is safe, and he alone. It should be in every family a contraband article, or if it is admitted, it should be allowed for medical purposes only. It should be labeled as we label laudanum, and TOUCH NOT, TASTE NOT, HANDLE NOT, should meet the eye on every vessel which contains it.<sup>45</sup>*

Within the context of these mystical temptations, "temperance" emerges as a key principle of moral order. Temperance describes a program of total abstinence (outside of medical usage, a point that Beecher underlines with reference to the contemporary laudanum, calling for a strict distinction between licit dosage and dangerous "recreational" usage) a complete cordoning of the self from the possibility of temptation that leads progressively to disease, sin and death. His caution specifically refers to the location of alcohol within the home, "waving capitals" which loudly warn against temptation, in fact, which signal a certain pathway towards death. The necessity for this lies in the progressive "silent, certain course" of the illness, which seduces with pleasure and leads to an inevitable ruin, of which the victim is not aware until past the point of redemption.

Significantly, Beecher follows Rush in treating "drunkenness" and "intemperance" as conceptually distinct;

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<sup>45</sup> *Six Sermons*, p. 40

the paroxysm of drunkenness as symptomatic of an underlying condition.

*However much a man may consume of ardent spirits, if he can command his mind, his utterance, and his bodily members, he is not reputed intemperate. And yet drinking within these limits, he may be intemperate in respect to inordinate desire, the quantity consumed, the expense incurred, the present effect on his health and temper, and moral sensibilities, and what is more, in respect to the ultimate and inevitable results of bodily and mental imbecility, or sottish drunkenness.<sup>46</sup>*

In Beecher's account, one can be "intemperate" without ever being "drunk" - it is not a matter of the "visible signs" of intoxication but of the invisible order of an "inordinate desire." He follows Rush in treating the "paroxysm" as conceptually distinct from "intemperance," symptomatic of the chronic condition. This allows Beecher to treat the concept of "intemperance" as simultaneously medical, psychiatric and moral, indeed, there is no significant space between these domains in his account. "Sobriety" and "temperance" were simultaneously descriptions of health and precepts for moral behavior, spheres which were considered to be strictly homologous, as are the categories of "disease" and "crime" simultaneous in the concept of "intemperance." Faithfully observing this principle is proper Christian behavior, in accordance with

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<sup>46</sup> *Six Sermons*, p. 8

the precepts of moral law, but moreover, it is an important defense of the community against an insidious danger.

*A part of this heedlessness arises from the undefined nature of the crime in its early stages, and the ignorance of men, concerning what might be termed of its approach. Theft and falsehood are definite actions. But intemperance is a state of internal sensations, and the indications may exist long, and multiply, and the subject of them not be aware that they are the signs of intemperance. It is not infrequent that men become unreclaimable in their habits without suspicion of danger. Nothing, therefore seems to be more important than a description of this broad way, thronged by so many travelers, that the temperate, when they come in site of it, may know danger and turn away.* <sup>47</sup>

One of the hallmarks through which Beecher understands intemperance is through its deceptive nature, which brings "destruction" upon the drinker too late to be redeemed. As opposed to crimes of "action," easily recognizable and punished, intemperance is a mysterious "state of internal sensations," which can be hidden, ignored, or dissembled. This is the particular danger of the addictive disease; like the serpent, it tends to hide itself, poisoning without the victim being aware. A central symptom is what would today be referred to "denial;" the subject's inability to recognize the nature of disease is precisely a symptom of its progression. This represents an important advancement in the theory of addiction, as it seems to

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<sup>47</sup> *Six Sermons.* p. 6-7

describe the nature of the intemperate disease as not inherent to the drink but to the person consuming it. (It is worth noting that this logic is not strictly applied; other passages will refer to alcohol simply as "poison.") The rhetoric of jeremiad sounds an alarm against this ever-present danger, a call to bring the moral power of the church against this creeping vice. However, this moral power should not be directed only against the "definite actions," but towards the invisible order of desire that underlies human behavior. Beecher uses it to announce a new scrutiny amongst the congregation, the need to explore the "sensation" in its "interiority" and find vice where there was previously thought to be none.

*There should be extended through the community an all-pervading sense of the danger there is of falling into this sin. Intemperance is a disease as well as a crime, and were any other disease as contagious, of as marked symptoms, and as mortal to pervade the land, it would cause great consternation, for the plague is scarcely more contagious or deadly, and yet we mingle fearlessly with the diseased, and in spite of admonition bring into our dwellings the contagion and receive it into the system.*

What is striking about Beecher's rhetoric is the uncanny description of a disease that issues from the of the American home itself. The disturbing imagery describes the plague itself being brought into the domestic realm and cheerfully consumed - the serpent's death head appearing at the bottom of the family chalice. The terror of this

description takes a particular power from a new understanding of the family as the basic unit of social life in the early republic; a bulwark around which concepts of domesticity and privacy were beginning to be understood as foundational to the solidity of the American nation. The danger that Beecher describes contrasts implicitly with emergent cultural values surrounding the family: imagery of purity, sanctity, and innocence. As in Rush, one of the most horrific manifestations is the fact that the family is cheerfully unaware of the destruction they bring upon themselves when they bring alcohol into the household, Unaware of the fact that they pass plague among each other, the family itself becomes a site of contagion, in a subversion of their social mission to protect mutual and social health. It is an entirely new understanding of disease and danger, that requires a re-interpretation of American customs of domesticity and hospitality:

*Ardent spirits, given as a matter of hospitality, is not unfrequently [sic] the occasion of intemperance. In this case the temptation is a stated inmate of the family. The utensils are present, and the occasions for their use is not infrequent. And when there is no guest, the sight of the liquor, the state of the health, or even lassitude of spirits, may indicate the propriety of the "prudent use," until the "prudent use," by repetition, habitual use becomes irreclaimable intemperance. In this manner,*



*doubtless, has many a father, and mother, and son, and daughter, been ruined forever.*<sup>48</sup>

To the problem of epidemic, Beecher's recommends prophylactic measures applied to nodes of contagion. The sites along which disease is spread are precisely moments of sociality: between family members, guests, laborers, and other social intimates. Whereas alcohol was before seen as an important symbol of social connectivity in these connected social sites, Beecher is urging a new sense of discipline and vigilance that would redefine the behavioral norms of these spaces in awareness of the constant temptation of malignant forces. In the early republican domestic economy, alcohol was a familiar "inmate" of the family, central to American customs of nutrition, conviviality, and well-being. Instead, Beecher describes the familial scene as the breeding ground of "ruin," where disease is allowed to germinate and flourish. The solution is a new sense of scrutiny upon the family, which must be constantly vigilant against the seductive intrusions of temptation. Temperance brings principle of surveillance upon the domestic space, a vigilant gaze that will not allow sin a toe-hold: "No family, it is believed, accustomed to the daily use of ardent spirits, ever failed

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<sup>48</sup> *Six Sermons*. p. 17

to plant the seeds of that dreadful disease, which sooner or later produced a harvest of woe. The material of so much temptation and mischief ought not be allowed a place in the family."<sup>49</sup> The metaphor of the family as the cradle of fecundity and prosperity is inverted as a "harvest of woe," a space that allows death inside to flourish and prosper. In response, Rush calls for the family to be cordoned off, protective barriers instituted that will insulate its privacy, security, and fertility.

Family acts as an intermediate term that links the individual to the social, such that the idea of "constitution" might be said to run between them both, connecting the biological body to the political compact. Extremely significantly from a biopolitical perspective, the progressive degeneration that Beecher describes on the level of the familial is replicated on a larger scale on the level of the nation. "The free and universal use of intoxicating liquors for a few centuries cannot fail to bring down our race from the majestic, athletic forms of our fathers, to the similitude of a despicable, puny race of men. Already the commencement of the decline is manifest, and the consummation of it, should the causes

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<sup>49</sup> *Six Sermons*, p. 18

continue, will not linger."<sup>50</sup> "Race" here is the extrapolation of "family" on a large scale; members of a nation are seen as having a biological connection that replicates the familial bonds over the national territory.<sup>51</sup> This allows an individual decline, observable in an individual, to be interpreted on the level of civilization itself, as a modern period of decadence. The rhetoric of jeremiad particularly describes a nation that has "fallen," exhorting it to return to a past state of imagined purity.

*No fact is more certain than the transmission of temperate and of physical constitution according to the predominant moral condition of society from age to age. Luxury produces effeminacy and transmits to other generations imbecility and disease. Bring up the generation of the Romans who carried victory over the world and place them beside the effeminate Italians of the present day, and the effect of crime upon constitution will be sufficiently apparent. Excesses unmake the man. The stature dwindles, the joints are loosely compacted, and the muscular fiber loses its elastic tone. No giants' bones will be found in the cemeteries of a nation over whom, for centuries, the waves of intemperance have rolled and no unwieldy iron armor, the annoyance and defense of other days, will be dug up as memorials of departed glory.<sup>52</sup>*

This frankly bizarre theory posits intemperance as the cause of the decline of the great ancient civilizations - the imagined glories of Roman "giants" contrasted with the feuding states of Italy. (This point is likely an anti-

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<sup>50</sup> *Six Sermons*, p. 49

<sup>51</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977=1978*. Translated by Graham Berchel. Edited by Arnold Davidson. Picador Press, New York, NY. 2004

<sup>52</sup> "Six Sermons" p. 48

Catholic, nativist smear.<sup>53</sup>) This is imagined as having a particular effect on the body of the nation - "stature," "joints" and "muscular fiber" - which is no longer understood as pertaining to an individual man but to a collective racial "constitution." This constitution is characterized as "effeminate," that is, not pertaining to the stoic masculine virtues of the warrior or the statesman, but to the decadent temptations of women. It implies a feminine weakness in the public national character, a weakness that will prove fatal on the breach, that holds the potential to "unmake" both individual men and the glory of the nation.

The particular process of this decadence begins with "luxury," an economic theory that invokes a particular relation to capital that will become characteristic of the discourse of drug war. Beecher follows Rush in arguing that the decadence of drunkenness implies the existence of an economic surplus, and the specific economic effect of addiction is to squander this collected wealth. The economic fact of "luxury" leads to the cultural value of "effeminacy," which becomes a biological and social fact

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<sup>53</sup> For anti-Catholicism, see Beecher, Lyman. *A Plea for the West*. Truman & Smith. Cincinnati, OH. 1835. p. 57, which argues that the morality of the nation is endangered by Catholic immigration towards the U.S. frontier. 65

for the next generations as "disease and crime." In this way, the effect of wealth is to "unmake" itself, to produce the cultural values that contain the condition of its own dissolution.

*In the inventory of national loss by intemperance may be set down the labor prevented by indolence, by debility, by sickness, by quarrels and litigation, by gambling and idleness, by mistakes and misdirected effort, by improvidence and wastefulness, and by the shortened date of human life and activity. Little wastes in great establishments constantly occurring may defeat the energies of a mighty capital. But where the intellectual and muscular energies are raised to the working point daily by ardent spirits, until the agriculture, and commerce, and acts of a nation move on by artificial stimulus, that moral power cannot be maintained, which will guaranty fidelity, and that physical power cannot be well preserved and well directed. The nation whose immense enterprise is thrust forward by the stimulus of ardent spirits cannot ultimately escape debility and bankruptcy.<sup>54</sup>*

What is at stake in this passage is the necessity to supervise and control labor. Its logic moves from smaller instances of economic loss towards a general theory of addiction as national economy. It is not merely the quantitative "inventory of national loss" as a sum total of capital squandered, but that the entire "physical power" of the economy has become a simulacrum of itself, running only on "unnatural stimulus." The "moral power" of the labor force has been squandered, and the natural basis of labor

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<sup>54</sup> *Six Sermons* p. 55

power supplanted by an artificial mechanism. To this unnatural incentive, the economy responds exactly as the individual body does when thrown out of balance, the excessive expansion of energy leads to a corresponding contraction. The entire basis of national wealth is "thrust forward by the stimulus of ardent spirits;" the natural consequence of this artificial stimulus is a reciprocal subtraction, a debt crisis, a deepening spiral of "debility and bankruptcy." The physical weakness of the labor force thus finds expression in the national coffers themselves. Two economies are imagined: a real economy that runs on honest labor and serves natural human need, and an illicit or "underground" economy, fueled by criminal labor and perverted desire. The ideology of is that these two economies can be maintained as conceptually distinct, such that persecuting the bad economy will cause the good economy to flourish.

"Already a portion of the entire capital of the nation is mortgaged for the support of drunkards. There seems to be no other fast property in the land, but this inheritance of the intemperate, all other riches may make to themselves wings and fly away." Within this system, addicts are treated as a distinct economic class, a criminal faction that has broken from the proper role of

labor. They act as a parasitic class, living off of the national surplus without contributing work, a piece of propaganda that will be familiar to anyone who watches the nightly news. This dependence, Beecher argues, is particularly dangerous in a democratic system of governance, indeed, it contains the possibility of turning the laboring classes into a mob, an undemocratic block that acts to destroy the American system of "liberties" - the integrity and protection of the system of private property.

*Should the evil advance as it has done, the day is not far distant when the great body of the laboring classes of the community, the bones and sinews of the nation, will be contaminated, and when this is accomplished, the right of suffrage becomes the engine of self-destruction. For the laboring classes constitute an immense majority, and when these are perverted by intemperance, ambition needs no better implements to dig the grave of our liberties and entomb our glory.<sup>55</sup>*

Again, the metaphor of the "national body" reappears, and is used to transform what had been an issue of public health into a political crisis. The "sinews and bones" of labor are the very economic basis of American prosperity, dissipated by an immoral "luxury," however, they work against the very condition of American freedom. What is striking here is the extreme threat that intemperance poses to the very existence of democracy, a danger rooted in the

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<sup>55</sup> *Six Sermons*. p 57

laboring classes and the fear of mob rule. Indeed, Beecher suggests that the intemperate multitude has the power to turn the American promise of liberty against itself.

This "immense majority" of the "laboring classes" are the "bones and sinews of the nation," the motive force, the labor power that drives the national economy. The economy is thus prior to government; there is no democracy without a sober labor force, a situation which calls for an intervention on the level of political economy.<sup>56</sup> The political economic fact of labor exists prior to governance; government must therefore secure the labor force as the condition of its existence. The barrier methods that Beecher recommended for the family are extended over the nation. As the family needed preventative defenses against intemperance, new techniques of surveillance and control, so does the entire economic system need to apply prophylaxis against the liquor trade: "What then is this universal, natural, and national remedy for intemperance. IT IS THE BANISHMENT OF ARDENT SPIRITS FROM THE LIST OF LAWFUL ARTICLES OF COMMERCE BY A CORRECT AND EFFICIENT PUBLIC SENTIMENT, SUCH AS TURNED SLAVERY OUT

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<sup>56</sup> Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979*. Translated by Graham Burchell. Edited by Arnold Davidson. Picador Press, New York, NY. 2004.



OF HALF OF OUR LAND, AND WILL YET EXPELL IT FROM THE  
WORLD."<sup>57</sup>

At this moment, the economy becomes not only the most general symptom of the disease, it also becomes the target of a public health intervention. This intervention occurs on the level of national political economy, for the purpose of saving this economy from itself.

*What drop of good does it pour into the ocean of misery which it creates. And is all this expense of capital, and time, and effort, to be sustained for nothing. Look at the mighty system of useless operations, the fleet of vessels running to and fro, the sooty buildings throughout the land, darkening the heavens with their steam and smoke, the innumerable company, of boats, and wagons, and horses, and men, a more numerous cavalry than ever shook the blood stained plains of Europe, a larger convoy than ever bore on the waves the baggage of an army, and more men than were ever devoted at once to the work of desolation of blood. All these begin, continue, and end their days in their production and distribution of a liquid, the entire consumption of which is useless. Should all the capital thus employed, and all the gains acquired, be melted into one mass and thrown into the sea, nothing would be subtracted from national wealth or enjoyment.<sup>58</sup>*

Here Beecher's martial imagery is repeated on the level of global economy: the entire economic system engaged in a war being conducted against humanity itself. It is a remarkable image of futility; the system of industry working in concert to create a product that would be better "thrown

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<sup>57</sup> *Six Sermons*, p. 64. Capitalization in the original.

<sup>58</sup> *Six Sermons*. p. 65-66

into the sea." What is remarkable in this passage is how close Beecher comes to indicting the entire world market system as corrupted. If the product described here were not "a liquid" but something more like "surplus value," the entire passage would read as a militant piece of proto-Marxism, and this text would be read as an indictment of a world economic system that works in concert to produce profit for expropriation. Yet the *pharmakon* in this context works towards a precisely inverted function. The focus on the addictive economy has the effect of deflecting the attention from the "real" economy. It promises that the massive and criminal waste of labor in the world economy can be overcome by a return to an imaginary sphere of honest and reciprocal economic relations.

For this reason, it is analogous to his rhetoric on slavery, which he is extremely careful to distinguish from a lawful system of capitalist free labor. Beecher's criticisms of the alcohol trade, indeed, fall along the same lines on as his criticisms of the slave trade. For him, intemperance and slavery belong to an America that he is already able to imagine as past: anachronistic, inefficient, a parasitic form of dependence upon the actual

productive energy of the nation. Remarkably, this economic motif is folded back into his description of the disease:

*Yes, in this nation, there is a middle passage of slavery, and darkness, and chains, and disease, and death. But it is a middle passage not from Africa to America, but from time to eternity, and not of slaves whom death will release from suffering, but of those whose sufferings at death do but just begin. Could the sighs of all these captives be wafted on one breeze, it would be as loud as thunder. Could all their tears be assembled, they would be like the sea.<sup>59</sup>*

This doctrine is shocking: Beecher here is positing that there is a moral equivalence between the bondage of the slave and that of the addict, both fettered by the laws of an unjust land. Indeed, the slave is in a certain way luckier than the addict; his forced servitude is merely physical, and ends with death, upon which he is released to Providence. Death is not a release, however, from the freely chosen bondage of the drunkard; his slavery is not only of the body but of the soul and persists after death.

As we will pursue in the next chapter, his daughter's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is an elaborate working out of this thesis, with significant implications for the racial politics of drug war. For now, it is only necessary to note that slavery and intemperance, rhetorically, are equivalent

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<sup>59</sup> *Six Sermons* p. 72

targets of mobilization. They precisely describe a parasitic dependence on the nation; an unlawful system of cruel trade that diminishes the national wealth, and indeed, places the liberty of every American in jeopardy. Beecher's jeremiad is a call for mobilization against this implacable foe, a call to arms and national defense against an enemy that has already taken root within the national territory. Significantly, the target of this war tends to slip from the system to the individual, from the alcohol trade to the drunk, from the system of slavery to the slave himself. Moreover, alcohol itself is a movable, mobile enemy, that seems to be the projective object of a broader social critique. Beecher's feverish essay contains damning moments of critique against American institutions, yet these moments are always through a reference to a sin that can be met martially and overcome. Through an attack on the American system, the American system can be preserved<sup>60</sup> Once this evil swept away, the redemption and renewal of the land promised in the jeremiad will become actual, revealing the real America behind the simulacra.

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<sup>60</sup> *American Jeremiad*. 6-7

### CHAPTER 3

Old Kentucky Home: The Racial Politics of the Long American  
Drug War  
Cincinnati, OH.

*Sinnerman where you going to run to  
Oh sinnerman, where you going to run to now  
Where you going to run to now child  
All along that day  
Well I run to the devil, he was waiting  
I run to the devil, he was waiting.  
The devil was waiting for me down there  
All along that day<sup>61</sup>*

- Nina Simone

"You'd better drink," said Cassy, "I hated it too, and now I can't live without it. One must have something - things don't look as bad when you take that."<sup>62</sup> Cassy's is talking to the young Emmaline, fifteen, who Simon Legree has purchased and brought back to his plantation in Texas. Cassy's cynicism at the extremity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* moral world is vicious; dispossessed of property, lovers, and even her children, she squanders her relative privilege drinking as the mistress on the infernal plantation of Simon Legree in East Texas. Her first marriage was to a gambler who betrayed her. The marriage ended when he sold her, and her child, over the matter of some gambling debts. In her second marriage it was Cassy who betrayed her child.

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<sup>61</sup> Simone, Nina. "Sinnerman" *Pastel Blues*. Phillips Recording, 1965.

<sup>62</sup> Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Norton and Company, New York. 2018. P. 353

Driven mad or haunted, she ended her baby's life with a fatal dose of opium: "I took the little fellow in my arms, and kissed him, and cried over him; and then I gave him laudanum, and held him close to my bosom where he slept unto death."<sup>63</sup> Her secret murder contrasts implicitly with the sainted death of little Evangeline, Augustine St. Clair's "beloved angel," who wastes away from tuberculosis surrounded by friends and family, an event that all witnesses experience as divinely touched. By contrast, Cassy confronts her searing loss by herself, taking upon her soul the guilt of infanticide and going to war against God. The narration of her life after this crime is a whirlwind blur of disease and tragedy, as though she has become insensate to the catastrophe that she is living through: "After a while the cholera came, and everyone that wanted to live died - and I, though I went down to death's door, I lived! Then I was sold, and passed from hand to hand, and grew faded and wrinkled, and I had a fever, and this wretch bought me and brought me here."<sup>64</sup> On Legree's plantation she is the mistress, a position of relative security and power, yet this half-blessing only compounds her misery. Saved from the burden of labor through her

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<sup>63</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. p. 344

<sup>64</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* p. 345

sexuality, she manages her pain through hard drink – whisky and brandy – a treatment for psychological pain that she passes along to her innocent charge. Cassy is a “quadroon,” one quarter black.

Alcohol is a potent and multivalent symbol of Cassy’s trauma, a site where Stowe’s moral outrage reaches towards the extremity of abjection. Her use of alcohol recalls the murder of Prue in New Orleans, another “poor crittur” whose masters have her whipped to death for her drunkenness: Prue also drinks for a child lost. “It cried itself to death. It did, and I tuck to drinkin’, to keep its crying out of my ears. I did- and I will drink! I will – if I do go to torment for it.”<sup>65</sup> Unlike Chloe in Kentucky, who bears the loss of her husband stoically and does not rebel against her masters, scenes of black women who drink are marked by the death of children; unjust, criminal deaths that remain in the memory as a haunting. The double-edged action of drink heals memory’s pain with an interiorizing violence, a revenge against the world perversely enacted against the self, the past, and the capacity for memory. Alcohol promises an end to the connection to the past, and so a way to manage a ruined present. In these scenes the interiority

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<sup>65</sup> *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* p. 208

of maternal pain is foreclosed to the reader; we only grasp the mother's suffering through the violence she realizes against herself. These are interior moments of the novel that don't fit well with its ideological positioning as respectability politics. Instead, they point towards abjection, horror, an unnamable evil suffused in the place itself that blights Louisiana with its curse.

Implicit in this representation is the motif of alcohol in relation to trauma, which it is almost impossible to understand in Stowe without also writing about gender and sexual violence. In broad strokes Stowe's pattern is this: drink dulls the senses of rough men and incites them to violence; drink is used by violated women to cope with their wounds. The result is a cycle of violence, alcohol as both cause and cure of violent trauma, a taboo subject marked by the simultaneous motifs of desire and fear. It also might be read as the apotheosis of Stowe's outrage at the overlapping systems of slavery and patriarchy: in the body of the abused black woman we reach a point of horror that is the inherence of the nation itself. Alcohol is the substance through which this horror is both managed and reexperienced. The body of the drinking woman is a site in whom the horrific intersection of white supremacist terror and sexual violence becomes manifest,



legible in her survival, a testimony to the injustices that she has endured. Yet in her drinking we see that she has learned to turn the violence of the world against herself, a self-immolation that Stowe represents as an ultimate estrangement from the divine: "When I was a girl, I used to think I was religious; I used to love God and prayer. Now I'm a lost soul, pursued by devils that torment me day and night, and I'll do it, too, one of these days."<sup>66</sup> Drinking brings Cassie to an abyss over hellfire, the fearful temptation of suicide in this world figuring an eternal torment in the beyond.

It is at this awful moment that the melodramatic structure of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* provides a miraculous resolution to Cassie's trauma. The chapter called "Strategem" is when this happens, a very disappointing chapter indeed. *Deus ex machina*, Cassy is shoehorned into the mechanics of an implausible redemption plot that scoops her out of Texas and sends her to Canada, at which point *Uncle Tom's Cabin* becomes impossible with miracles and coincidences. There is a ghost story, there is a garret, there is an impossible reunification on a steamboat North. There is George Shelby from the Shelby plantation who comes

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<sup>66</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. p. 345

to give a speech at Tom's grave: "Oh! Witness that at this hour, I will do what *one man can* to drive slavery from the land." In the next chapter Cassy is brought together with one Madame de Thoux - who is George Harris' lost sister, and who reunites Cassy with her lost daughter, Eliza. In terms of the mythology of the time, the Hand of Providence has reached down to the poor sinner at her most abject, which only seems possible if we ignore the stage machinery tearing her out of Louisiana and swinging her North. At points "Strategem" seems to be trying for a sort of Southern Gothic mode, but it only is able to transmute the actual horror of the plot into a campy "fear of ghosts:" Cassy and Emmeline hide in a secluded garret of the house and pretend to "haunt" it; the superstitious Legree avoids the spot, which allows the women cover as they flee. She meets George Shelby on a steamboat north, one of whose passengers happens to be the sister of George Harris. And so a tearful reunification of the family in Canada, a cathartic resolution to the narrative conflict, and now it is George Harris giving a speech, from free Canadian territory, about Liberia: "We have *more than the rights of common men*; - we have the claim of an injured race for reparation. *But I do not want it*; I want a country, a nation, of my own. I think that the African race has

peculiarities yet to be unfolded in the light of civilization and Christianity, which, if not the same with those of the Anglo Saxon, may prove to be, morally, a higher type.. I trust the development of Africa to be a Christian one."<sup>67</sup>

At a certain point the details here are not worth recounting, but the important thing here is the structure of the novel that redeems her drunken abjection. An inexplicable force - it is both divine providence and the plot itself - guides her out of the drunken abyss, on a south-to-north journey, which in Stowe's theology of the Underground Railroad is the way to Heaven. Her body is liberated, her family is reunified, and her soul is saved. Freedom, family, and grace: these are the axes upon which Cassie's journey is described. "And indeed, in two or three days, such a change came over Cassy, that our readers would hardly know her. The despairing, haggard expression of her face seemed to give way to one of gentle trust. She seemed to sink at once into the bosom of the family and to take the little ones to heart."<sup>68</sup>

This trip to hell and back is characteristic of an American aesthetic today remembered as "melodrama" or

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<sup>67</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. p. 395

<sup>68</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. p. 403

"sentimental fiction," a tradition that has roots in the value system of the emergent American middle class.<sup>69</sup> Linda Williams argues that mass discourse about the color line tended almost inevitably towards the mode of melodrama that Stowe pioneered, which provides a legible code for the airing of racial injury and its redress through representation.<sup>70</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, both the novel and the many iterations on the stage and cinema, used melodrama to organize the American around the moral crisis of American chattel slavery. (The term "melodrama" - drama with melody - quite literally describes the minstrel show.)<sup>71</sup> Melodrama tends to render racism as rooted in racial antipathy, specifically, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the origin of racism is in the emotions. Racism is a hatred for difference expressed across the color line, an ideology that is not as self-evident as it first appears, as it locates the cause of racism in the individual's moral sensibility and not the socio-economic structure. Sentimental politics suggested that the solution to the national crisis of slavery could be found in a return to Christian principles of universal

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<sup>69</sup> "The Meaning of Little Eva." In: Douglas, Ann. *The Feminization of American Culture*. Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux: New York. 1977. p. 3-16

<sup>70</sup> Williams, Linda. *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 81 NJ. 2001.

<sup>71</sup> "The American Melodramatic Mode" in *Playing the Race Card*. p. 10-45

love available to white and black, men and women, northern and southern. Social struggle is coded within the universalizing virtues of charity, benevolence and empathy, often represented as an extension of familial love or Christian recognition across the lines of conflict. The rhetoric of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is characterized by a reliance on the emotional appeal; the belief that the goal of literature is to move the heart towards the good.

This Christian liberalism is extremely characteristic of Stowe's generation. The dream of American Christians was that the nation would abolish slavery peacefully through a full realization of their values that would rectify the sin against the African by welcoming him into an American kingdom that was already becoming an empire. For Stowe injustice, and therefore racism, does not arise out of any fundamental flaw in the moral pact - a rationalization that allows questions of political economy to be almost entirely ducked - but through the incomplete realization of the national promise of universalism. Moral progress, "awakening," would end racial oppression; this strong assertion of the inherent goodness of the American family would be a defense against a tidal wave of violence that

would forestall the dissolution of the republic into mob rule.<sup>72</sup>

A strange paradox emerges here. There is almost nothing "militant" about *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which understands social change as issuing most directly from religious interiority. And yet the cultural memory of this work is profoundly marked by the memory of the cataclysmic conflict it is said to have inspired. Read, as it often is, in the context of the American Civil War, it has become canonical as a model of the efficacy and potency of politically engaged literature and remains one of the most complete documents of the ideology and moral position of the victors. For this reason, *Uncle Tom* has a heroic place in the American literary canon; we use it to teach children literature's power to mobilize for the causes of liberty and justice: the power of words to move the world. And yet references to this impending conflict are entirely absent from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which imagines a wholesale transformation of society without anticipating the political conflict that would be necessary to achieve it.

The stakes of this essay are that the "liberalism" in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is inscribed within the coordinates of

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<sup>72</sup> These fears are often glossed in the text through a series of ominous references to the slave rebellion in Haiti

what I am calling "drug war," *socius contra pharmakon*, and that drug conflict is central to Stowe's representation of political conflict. Lyman Beecher's influence on his daughter's Harriet and Catherine is central to this argument. I argue that his theory of "intemperance" was a clear and consistent politics of the human body and its social function, and that Stowe drew on temperance motifs in her representation of racial conflict. For this reason, I believe that reading the text as, on a fundamental level, "about" drug conflict - as centrally as it is about abolition, or the doctrine of gendered "separate spheres" - brings a new set of ideological coordinates into sharp focus. Understanding the red thread that runs through her inconsistent themes of sexuality, race, and class as marked by a sort of holy terror of the altered body, reflective of a consistent anti-drug thematic, complicates the received wisdom about this canonical work.

In my reading of *Uncle Tom*, I explore this question through a treatment of melodrama itself as a pharmacological genre: a mode of writing whose most salient characteristic is its ability to bring about a heightened emotional state. Racial melodrama is located in the emotive identification with the suffering victim of racialized violence; a particularly American affective structure that

simultaneously prompts a lurid fascination and a repulsed denial that is at the core of this literature's political aesthetic.<sup>73</sup> The aesthetics of racial melodrama bear an uncanny resemblance to Lyman Beecher's *pharmakon*.

Literature is a powerful stimulus that upsets the delicate balance of bodies individual and social, and which must be dealt with through communal rituals of expulsion.

In advancing this reading, I emphasize the work of James Baldwin, the critic who perhaps most thoroughly grappled with the vicissitudes of racial melodrama. Baldwin returned to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1949, as if it had needed a whole century for Tom's mask to slip. "Everybody's Protest Novel" is a radical re-examination of the American dialectic between white writers and their black subjects, and a shot across the bow to the liberal theories of the political efficacy of literature. He scorns the pieties and mythmaking that surround this sacrosanct text of abolitionism, according to Baldwin, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a "very bad novel" marred by a "self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality."<sup>74</sup> and for this reason, a hypocritical, deceitful work both aesthetically and politically.

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<sup>73</sup> *Playing the Race Card*.

<sup>74</sup> Baldwin, James. "Everybody's Protest Novel" in *Notes of a Native Son*. Beacon Press, Boston, MA. 1955. p. 14



The efficacy of Stowe's pedagogical sentimentality is the target of Baldwin's most sustained attack.

"Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart, and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity; the mask of cruelty."<sup>75</sup> There is a repressed center, Baldwin argues, within *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: sentimentality itself acts as a reaction formation that masks its exact opposite. An unnamable guilt, only visible through its perpetual denials and evasions, permeates the representation of the suffering black body as it becomes the object of white concern. Baldwin suspects that the sentimental novel prefers the performance of virtue to virtue itself, a structure of denial that masks the perpetual American attempt to disavow liberal complicity in the national system of racial violence. If what Baldwin charges is the case, this genre itself is shot through with the ideology of white privilege, and *Uncle Tom* contested a particularly American system of racial inequality at the

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<sup>75</sup> "Everybody's Protest Novel" p. 14

very same time that it worked all the more powerfully within it.

If we understand Stowe's work as a moral exhortation against racial antipathy, Baldwin calls us to understand how this very call takes its symbolic power from within a symbolic system of racial fantasy and fear that it never transgresses. "Black, white, the devil, the next world - the alternatives between heaven and the flames - were realities for [Saint Claire and Ophelia] as much as they were for their creator."<sup>76</sup> Baldwin identifies this "medieval morality" as the primary emotional structure of the work, white and black are ephemeral manifestations of a more existential struggle between the light and the darkness; Cassy's drinking is one of the realizations of this struggle. Within this holy war, the purpose of literature is to work towards the mission of salvation. Ostensibly an honest, unflinching examination of black suffering, the novel's real subject is a meditation on the author's own prospects for salvation and damnation, which perpetually needs to demonstrate white innocence for America's crimes against the black body. "The virtuous rage of Mrs. Stowe is motivated by nothing so temporal as the relationship of men

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<sup>76</sup> "Everybody's Protest Novel," p. 16

to one another - or even, as she would have claimed, by a concern for their relationship to God - but merely by a panic of being hurled into the flames, of being caught in traffic with the devil."<sup>77</sup> Baldwin notices a powerful taboo that is the primary emotional center: a theological contradiction, readable throughout American literature, inscribed in the relationship between the black body and the white soul. This is the repressed center of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: the suffering black body is only important to Stowe insofar as it places the white soul in eternal jeopardy. In this sense, the goal of *Uncle Tom* is not so much to analyze or to understand slavery as to exorcise it, to remove the stain of sin and free the land from its curse: "Considered from this aspect, Miss Ophelia's exclamation achieves a bright, almost lurid significance, like the light from a fire which consumes a witch."<sup>78</sup>

It is not a coincidence that the language of the *pharmakon* - sorcery, scapegoating, and exorcism - appears at this moment in Baldwin's essay. Indeed, one of the motifs that can be used to map the structure of avoidance that I have called "taboo" are these images of "spirits:" hauntings and possessions. These ambivalent, oscillating

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<sup>77</sup> "Everybody's Protest Novel," p. 16

<sup>78</sup> "Everybody's Protest Novel," p. 14

structures of remedy and poison, health and sickness, care and neglect that underlie the demarcation of black and white, good and evil, God and the devil, are the source of the novel's affective power, its ability to "move" its reading audience. We can source this gestural repertoire to the temperance tale: one of the most popular printed genres in the nineteenth century, and a catalogue of the morals and customs of the progressive middle-class. Not only does the style, topos, and aesthetic of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* closely mimic the temperance tearjerker, but the appearance of alcohol in the text is strongly associated with perfidy, violence, and crime. Moreover, the ability to both identify with and dissociate from *Uncle Tom's* traumatic violence is central to the political argument. Temperance literature offers a model of negative morality to its readers, a cautionary tale that seems to mix fear and desire, in this sense, there is an uncanny parallelism with the structure of racial taboo that Baldwin notes. In other words, what I am suggesting is Baldwin is correct in perceiving a "theological terror" that seems to be the unconscious obverse of the structure of racial sympathy, and that this structure uncannily tracks to the contours of the holy war that her father announced against "ardent spirits." I argue that, for this reason, a focus on the motif of alcohol in

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* sheds an unexpected light on a very contemporary problem: the submerged ideological relationship between white middle-class liberalism and the project of drug war.

Tracing the aesthetic lineage between Lyman Beecher to his daughter Harriet is to follow the beginning of a sea change in American cultural power. In moving from the jeremiad to the sentimental novel, we are also watching the Protestant Ethic grow into the Spirit of Capitalism.<sup>79</sup> The moral power of Lyman's words were invested with his ministry in intimate relation to a flock. He lived in a nation where pastoral power remains the most important cultural force in everyday life, as such, his vision of an America was personal, local, and patriarchal. By contrast, his children were national celebrities in an emergent market of mass culture. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became the most popular cultural commodity in antebellum America, and the fame of this "leaping fish" was assured by the minstrel stage and later the cinema.<sup>80</sup> And so whereas Lyman tended to treat the nation as basically an extension of his homogenous congregation, Harriet reckons with a mass

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<sup>79</sup> "The Meaning of Little Eva."

<sup>80</sup> *Playing the Race Card*. p. 45. Williams cites James, Henry. *A Small Boy and Others*. Reprint. New York City: Teacher's College Press.

audience, with the diversity of America and the great conflicts that threatened to tear them apart.

In bridging the generational gap between Lyman and his Harriet, there are two texts worth brief mention for their ability to track thematic and formal transformations. The first is a jeremiad by Henan Humphrey, president of Amherst College, who delivered the impossibly titled "Parallel Between Intemperance and the Slave Trade" at the college's 1828 Independence Day celebration. Like Lyman, the theme of his sermon is the classic motif of a community that has tempted God by straying from the covenant, accompanied by a litany of afflictions that plague this fallen congregation. Freedom and liberty have been betrayed by the twin evils of drinking and slavery, which place the American nation under the yoke of a new kind of dependence:

*"Slavery, and not Independence, will be my theme. Would it be that there was no such discord in the jubilant sounds of the day we celebrate. The mortifying truth is, and the world knows it, that after the lapse of fifty years of undisputed political freedom, the blood-freezing clank of a cruel bondage is still heard amid our loudest rejoicings."*<sup>81</sup>

The thesis of this sermon is astounding. Humphrey sets himself to proving that "intemperance is worse than the

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<sup>81</sup> Humphrey, Henan. *Parallel Between Intemperance and the Slave Trade*. Printed: C.S. & J. Adams: Amherst, MA. 1828. p 4.

slave trade - more heavy with woe, guilt, and death, both 'being put in the balances together.'"<sup>82</sup> The address takes its audience through a "catalog of horrors"<sup>83</sup> in which the tortured abjection of the drunkard is seen to exceed, though not by much, the foul business of slavery. He is hardly alone in developing this idea: this is merely one of the more baldly stated examples of a commonplace in nineteenth century drug theory. It is nearly impossible for the contemporary American reader to come to terms with the straight-faced insanity with which Humphrey develops this analogy, and it is not worth going too deeply his exposition of this extremely dubious thesis. Yet what is important to see here is the epistemic condition by which this idea can be staged at all. Nineteenth century temperance had begun to think of addiction as essentially related to the "bondage" of slavery; the alcoholic is dependent on the bottle in the same way that the slave is dependent on a master. Indeed, there is a sense in which the drunkard is even worse off than the slave; the slave's bondage is merely physical and ends with his death. "It seals not the Bible, nor blots out the Sabbath, nor removes men from the House of God. It hardens not their hearts."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> *Parallel*. p. 4-5

<sup>83</sup> *Everybody's Protest Novel*. p 13

<sup>84</sup> *Parallel*, p. 12

By contrast, the alcoholic's torment is not only physical, it is metaphysical and eternal. The precise danger of intemperance is its ability to ensnare the soul, binding it to oblivion in the same way that slavery ensnares one's physical liberty.

Baldwin's reading strategy is useful here, for there is a sense in which this text does not really concern slaves or drunks, who do not appear in this address possessed of reason and volition, but as the debased and brutalized objects of projective sympathy for the Amherst congregation. We misunderstand the politics of the jeremiad if we interpret this address as mainly concerned with the suffering body of the other, for it might be seen that it is neither African body nor the intemperate soul that is the true subject of the address. Rather, these characters serve as a pre-text, they are the occasion for raising the question of a collective American sin: "A sober people might be temporarily enslaved, but an intemperate people cannot long remain free."<sup>85</sup>

It is worth thinking of this point in terms of the novel's conspicuous emphasis on Tom's sobriety, which he wears as a talisman on his odyssey south, abjuring the

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<sup>85</sup> Parallel, p 14



temptation of alcohol even during the extremity of brutality on Legree's plantation. Sobriety marks him as good, pious, and honest; perversely, this is the very "servility" that increases his value among slave traders. Yet the principle that Stowe is emphasizing is a value that is more important to her than economics, a value system that can have a wicked double-edge. Tom's sobriety marks him as spiritually free, set off from the other characters of the work by his absolute faith in the world beyond. In his great faith, he and Evangeline form a dyad; they are both characters who bear the world's suffering unto death, so that others may be liberated by their example. Stowe valorizes this spiritual purity above all other qualities, and she describes it as a faith that extends beyond the earthly condition of bondage.

If Humphrey's sermon gives us a historical and ideological context that thematically connects Lyman to Harriet, T.S. Arthur's best-selling novel *Ten Nights in a Bar Room*<sup>86</sup>, on the other hand, is useful to trace the shifting politics of aesthetic form. *Ten Nights* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* books were among the first American best-sellers, and their deep aesthetic likeness - which modern

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<sup>86</sup> Shay, Timothy. *Ten Nights in a Bar Room*. H.M Caldwell & Company, New York City. 1829

criticism has found almost impossibly cliché - chart the political and literary taste of the literate American middle class that we are calling "sentimental" or "melodramatic" culture. For instance, one might compare the relationship between Augustine St. Claire and his daughter Evangeline to Arthur's Joe Morgan and his daughter Mary. The purpose of these characters is not realism. They are symbols, they stand for the deeply felt moral truths of this culture, placed in dramatic relief that provokes the reader to moral action.<sup>87</sup> Their dyad - in which the sins of the drunken father are realized on the body of the drunken daughter - was a stock trope of temperance fiction, to the extent that it would be difficult to imagine these works without this relationship. It incarnates a central myth of American culture that enshrined a sacred relation of purity, chastity, and health around the father's recovery from intemperance - a family relation that Stowe will elaborate around the theme of race.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Tompkins, Jane. *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of Literary History*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, United Kingdom. 1985

<sup>88</sup> Sánchez-Eppler, Karen. "Temperance in the Bed of a Child: Incest and Social Order in Nineteenth Century America." In *Serpent in the Cup*. University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst, MA. 1997. Sanchez-Eppler argues that these themes of chastity and purity so persistently repeated in temperance literature that one is tempted to read them as reaction formations: they mark sites of libidinal energy, taboo, and thus incest.

The event that opens *Ten Nights* is the opening of a new tavern, the Sickle and Sheaf, a name that refers to the keeper's former employment as the town miller. The transition from mill to tavern allows Arthur to set up a set of transformations that repeat the familiar themes of the addictive economy: from cornmeal to whiskey, from work to leisure, from subsistence to surplus. The result is a familiar pattern of degeneration and decadence; the tavern acts as a miasma,<sup>89</sup> tempting the men of the town to their ultimate ruin. What is remarkable about this book is Arthur's perception of alcoholism as a problem of the collective and the social, immediately connected to labor, exchange and the means of production. In Stowe's work, this insight will be worked through the critique of the slave system, which is most visible in her treatment of domestic economy, represented with the same motifs with which Arthur treats the tavern: decadence, degeneration, and unaccountable luxury.

The drug economy is present in the very first line of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In the first chapter, in which Master Shelby drunkenly trades away two of his most faithful servants, Stowe uses alcohol as a split subjectivity (or

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<sup>89</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France: 1977-1978*. Basingstoke, New York. 2007.

double consciousness) explicitly figured in dualist terms as the estrangement of a true, godly self from a radical evil. A vile temptation masquerading as hospitality, wine announces Shelby's betrayal of the Kentucky home to the slave trader Hadley. The structure of the *pharmakon* can be used to interpret the elaborate layering of the structure of truth and lie in this scenario, composed of several layers of perfidy, deception, and bad faith. "Late in the afternoon of a chilly day in February, two gentleman were sitting alone over their wine in a well-furnished dining parlor, in the town of P- in Kentucky. There were no servants present, and the gentlemen, with chairs closely approaching, were seen to be discussing some subject with great earnestness."<sup>90</sup>

Seemingly prosaic and unremarkable, this sentence contains a dense layering of the novel's key concepts and symbols. The old Kentucky home is the spiritual center of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; the point from where the plot issues, and to which it attempts to symbolically return. The nineteenth century doctrine of separate spheres associated the private space of this home with specifically feminine virtues: comfort, care, intimacy and the family. In this

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<sup>90</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* p. 1

sense, it often became a synecdoche for the interiority of the American territory, a private space where public virtue was replicated. Henan Humphrey has it this way: "Each family is a little state, or empire within itself, bound together by the most endearing attractions, and governed by its patriarchal head, with which whose prerogative no power on earth has a right to interfere." Accepting the separate spheres of public life, the Beecher sisters argued that the political role of women was as the foundation of national morality, which Catherine Beecher developed as a theory of domestic governance:

*In this country it is established, both by opinion and by practice, that woman has an equal interest in all social and civil concern: and that no domestic, civil, or political institution is right, which sacrifices her interest to promote that of the other sex. But in order to secure her the more firmly in all these privileges, it is decided that, in the domestic relation, she take a subordinate station, and that, in civil and political concerns, her interests be entrusted to the other sex, without her taking any part in voting, or in making and administering laws." Central to women's power in this system was family education and the development of a healthy, principled human being, and the political arguments of Uncle Tom's Cabin tend to emphasize the centrality of this domestic virtue.<sup>91</sup>*

Political arguments thus do not occur in traditionally defined "public" American spaces. Rather, the novel's politics is developed as a series of private exchanges

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<sup>91</sup> *Treatise on Domestic Economy* p. 10

between intimates in which the woman wields moral authority; Ophelia and Augustine, George and Emily Shelby, or the chapter titled "In Which It Appears that A Senator is Nothing but a Man," in which Senator Bird, who voted against the Fugitive Slave Act, is persuaded by his wife to harbor the fleeing Eliza.

The political significance of the domestic extends to the quality of the prose itself: Harriet Beecher Stowe is at her best as a writer when she is describing interiors. Whereas her public spaces tend to be faceless and unmarked, depictions of houses and family spaces are intimate and meticulous, rendered in a warm, crackling prose that is a pleasure to read:

*Let us enter the dwelling. The evening meal at the house is over and Aunt Chloe, who presided over its preparation as head cook, has left to inferior officers the business of clearing away and washing dishes, and come out into her own snug territories to 'get her ole man's supper;' therefore, doubt not that it is her that you see by the fire, presiding with anxious interest over certain puzzling items in a stew pan, and anon with grave consideration lifting the cover a bake-kettle, from whence steam forth indubitably intimations of something good.<sup>92</sup>*

The passage itself is warming, nourishing, sustaining; the love that is put into domestic work is made manifest in the bonds of affections that exist between the family. The

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<sup>92</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. p. 28

aesthetics of this prose are also an important means by which Stowe's attempts to describe black virtue. Implicitly, Stowe is implying that on the Shelby plantation, the "big house" and the cabin are alike in their difference. Stowe seems to be to describe the cabin as a miniature version of the mansion, where can be found the same virtues, all the lovelier for their humbler form. Inasmuch as Arthur Shelby and his wife are sketched as "good masters," this owes to the fact that both master's house and slave quarters operate harmoniously in a relation of mutual affection. Chloe's cabin is a testament to her own virtue but also to Mrs. Shelby's good domestic governance, the virtues of Christian education expressed in the love that suffuses all in the house, from high to low.

The appearance of "wine" in this setting, however places this whole matter of domestic virtue into radical doubt. It recalls Lyman Beecher's screeds against "temptation," which inveigh against the mortal dangers implied in the innocuous rites of American hospitality. On its face, the sharing of wine seems to signify conviviality, but this masks the symbolism of wine as a volatile, uncontrollable poison, deployed as a weapon in a holy war on American soil. Wine precisely initiates the second sense of "domestic" - homeland - inasmuch as it

signifies something radically foreign: a radical evil that ruptures the domestic space and places all present within the dominion of a dark power, the devil freed in the earthly kingdom of Kentucky.

"For convenience sake, we have said, hitherto, two *gentlemen*. One of the parties, however, when critically examined, did not seem, strictly speaking, to come under the species."<sup>93</sup> The word "species" in this context throbs, saying both too much and too little. In this context, the word "species" refers, surprisingly, not to race but to social class, the system of honor that categorizes and orders the ways in which men make their money. The drunken slave-trader Mr. Haley is a "low man who is trying to elbow his way up in the world." He is tolerated by the plantation class, but ultimately of a different species. He would not be allowed inside the Shelby plantation if he did not have its owner dead to rights, "I'd like to be able to kick the fellow down the steps, but he knows he has me as an advantage."<sup>94</sup> but Shelby is in bad financial trouble with Haley (unspecified financial losses in Natchez, TX) and so he must suffer the trader as he finishes his host's wine and moves on to the brandy.

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<sup>93</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* p. 1

<sup>94</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* p. 10



Haley is Mephistophelian, an imposter gentleman who boldly exposes unpleasant truths and forces Shelby into sin. Sharing a bottle with this man is not an incidental; it is a ready symbol for Stowe's characterization of a process of social degeneration. Drinking is represented as a trauma in the public sphere itself, marking what is unspeakable or unnamable within respectable middle-class home. Heavy drinkers in *Uncle Tom* are rogues: thieves, slave traders, overseers, and cruel masters.<sup>95</sup> They are brutal men, and drinking leads directly to a dull, unthinking violence. They are a different "species" than the upright Shelby's, the decent Quakers, or even the neurotic St. Claire's. When they speak their words are illogical and confused, when they act, it is with dull repetitive violence. The rub is that the slave system grants these men a certain amount of power over the actions of others. Respectable white culture attempts to disavow these men, but ultimately will rely on their relentless amorality.

The dialogue between the two men acts out this grim thesis, as the men get drunker, Hadley's conversation drifts further into obscenity, as he begins to outline the

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<sup>95</sup> Importantly, this only applies to men.

precepts of what he calls the "humane management"<sup>96</sup> of the slave trade. Shelby raises the issue with respect to Eliza's young son: "I would rather not sell him. The fact is, sir, I'm a humane man and I hate to take the boy from his mother," Haley's response is the more chilling for the fact that it is meant to be reassuring: "It is mighty onpleasant getting on with women [when their children are taken] sometimes, I al'ays hates yer screechin', screamin' times." Nonetheless, Haley argues, Shelby can trust that he will care for the Shelby's faithful servants: he is above all a businessman, and treating slaves kindly is bad business: "Now, they say that this kind o' trade is hardening to the feelings, but I never found it to be so. Fact is, I never could do things the way some fellers manage the business. I've seen 'em as would pull a child out of her arms, and set him down to sell, and she screeching like mad all the time - very bad for business - damages the article, makes them quite unfit for service sometimes."<sup>97</sup> Shelby argues that he is a "humane man" and Haley agrees with him, arguing "it's always best to do the humane thing," because it makes good business sense: "it kinder makes my blood run cold to think on't; and when they

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<sup>96</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* p. 10

<sup>97</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* p. 5

carried off the child, she jest went ravin' mad, and died in a week. Clear waste, sir, of a thousand dollars, just for want of management."

Alcohol here marks an important moral hierarchy. It allows Stowe to preserve a sense of class distinction, between the bad man who is compelled to do wrong by an innate evil and the good man who is compelled to do wrong by social forces. The respectable member of the landed aristocracy and the repressive agent of the plantation system face each other as obverses, mirror images who each reveal the deceptions of the other. Haley's presence is an obscene mockery of his hosts' pretensions to good taste and respectability. His monstrous argument - kidnapping children from their mothers as a waste of money and bad business - is a grim parody of Shelby's financial situation. Shelby's mien and heritage contrast with the cheap pretensions of a two-bit thug like Haley, who has no compunction about dressing up his grim idiocies with a pretentious claim to "feeling" and "humanity." This stratification is marked by a strong class prejudice: put simply, Haley is damnable, but Shelby is redeemable. Yet Haley's impostures, dialectally, disclose Shelby's own bad faith. Hadley has the nerve to openly express, without guilt, a philosophy that implicates Shelby's own sin. The

peculiar ideological space of this argument takes its contours from Haley's askew claims to "humanity" and "feelings." As Shelby pleads his humanity and begs economic necessity as the justification for selling his trusted servants, so does Hadley respond with his own version of humanity, a grim parody of ethical business practice and good economic sense.

*'Hulloa, Jim Crow!' bellows Shelby upon the urchin's entrance: 'show the man how you can dance and sing!' The boy commenced one of those wild, grotesque songs among the negroes, in a rich, clear voice, accompanying his singing with many comic evolutions of the hands, feet, and whole body, all in time to the music.<sup>98</sup>*

The grotesquery of the dialogue is underscored by the performance of a young black slave, Eliza's son Harry, "whose charm rather puts one in mind of a darky boot black doing a buck and wing to the clatter of condescending coins,"<sup>99</sup> for the appraisal and drunken entertainment of Shelby's customer. The overlapping motifs of drunkenness and blackface overlap in a remarkably double-edged staging of the first black character of the novel, an *aproria* which seems to escape or contradict Stowe's intended meaning in this sequence. Quite literally a mask of American racial performance, blackface is ultimately a discourse on the lie

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<sup>98</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* p. 10

<sup>99</sup> "Everybody's Protest Novel" p. 15

of skin color, a "dishonesty" which underlies the duplicity being staged in the conversation between the master and the trader of slaves. And inasmuch as the humor in these passages derives from the behavior of black bodies placed in white domestic space, they exist in reciprocal relationship with the more ribald performances of the minstrel stage. On one level, Harry's appearance is a discourse on the "good nature" of the African child, whose entire being seems to become a song and dance for the benefit of the adult white spectators:

*'Now, Jim, show this gentleman how you can dance and sing.' The boy commenced one of those wild, grotesque songs common among the negroes, in a rich, clear voice, accompanying his singing with many comic evolutions of the hands, feet and whole body, all in perfect time to the music.<sup>100</sup>*

Stowe's representation of black children often aims for this kind of light comedy, a gentle send-up of improper black manners with an ultimate assurance of their innate goodness that often serves to mask a deep darkness. Ophelia tends to find traces of savagery and the devil in Topsy's small acts of rebellion against domestic governance. Topsy has no parentage, no birthday, and no Christian name; she is a "little heathen," a "savage," and her naïvities are

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<sup>100</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. p 13

chilling: "I's just wicked I guess." Yet behind this comedy Ophelia's literal revulsion at Topsy's black body is an innate and physical antipathy: "She was dressed in a single filthy, ragged garment, made of bagging, and stood with her hands demurely folded before her. Altogether there was something odd and goblin-like about her appearance, something, as Miss Ophelia afterward said, 'so heathenish' as to inspire that good lady with utter dismay."<sup>101</sup> This also is the "grotesquery" that Stowe hears in Harry's song: although charming, there is also the suggestion of an uncanny wildness, a pagan savagery, one that calls to the white adults in the room for education and discipline. Drunk, they do not respond.

The structure of this scene is in direct analog to the minstrel stage's deployment of performer and audience: dependent African children singing for a drunken white audience. On the one hand, Stowe has recourse to the motifs of minstrelsy, which allow a certain comedic range: children as naturally talented but in need of education, discipline, and culture. However, on a deeper level, she seems to abjure the entire cultural situation of the minstrel stage, and to disavow complicity in this

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<sup>101</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* p. 218

situation. Significantly at this moment, Shelby's wife acts as the conscience of the household, bewailing the dreadful danger that Haley has brought upon them: "This is God's curse on slavery - a bitter, bitter, most accursed thing - a curse to the master and a curse to the slave! I was a fool to think I could make anything good out of such a deadly evil. It is a sin to hold a slave under laws like ours!"<sup>102</sup> Again we notice pharmacological language of the curse. Haley's debauchery brings the scourge of slavery to the respectable Kentucky plantation. Emily Shelby bases her argument not only on the immediate physical threat to the black family, but on the metaphysical threat to the white family. Haley's presence there threatens the moral foundation of their domestic life, invoking an ancient American curse and placing their souls in mortal peril.

Her husband's drunken deal with the trader signifies the dissolution of the "old Kentucky home," the narrative energy tends to return to this nostalgic site. The deal sets into motion the two primary plot arcs in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which trace two psycho-geographic lines of flight away from the earthly kingdom of Kentucky. North across the Ohio and up to Canada, which leads to salvation, or South

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<sup>102</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* p. 31

down the Mississippi to Louisiana, a descent into hell. These mirrored narratives enact two complementary temporalities characteristic of melodramatic action: "in the nick of time" and "a minute too late,"<sup>103</sup> which also model rival modes of the temperance story: the "exemplary" tale and the "dark temperance" yarn.<sup>104</sup> On the Northern narrative one is always one step ahead of the devil, on the Southern narrative the angels are always arriving just a moment too late. It is not simply that these narratives move away from each other. Rather, they tend to alternate scenes of dramatic action, as if their actions were reciprocally related: the sacrifice of the sober, patient, pious Tom is necessary for the Harris family to begin to imagine themselves as repatriated Africans in a Christian Liberia. And as the old generation is symbolically sacrificed to permit the emergence of the young family, the death of Tom in the deep south seems to figure the Harris' family newfound nationalism.

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<sup>103</sup> *Playing the Race Card*. p. 23-26

<sup>104</sup> Reynolds, David. "Black Cats and Delirium Tremens: Temperance in the American Renaissance." In *Serpent in the Cup*. p. 22-23. Both "exemplary" and "dark" temperance stories are "warnings" against the danger of drink; the difference seems to be the libidinal investment. "Dark" temperance is the mode that is fascinated by the lurid details of the vice it describes, and uses the moralistic rhetoric as cover for the its investment in the salacious details of sin. 109



The northern journey follows the Harris family on a journey of redemption. Trailed by Master Hadley, who organizes a posse of slave hunters, George and Eliza are passed from house to house among a loosely connected structure of friends (literally, many are Quakers) and perpetually redeemed "in the nick of time" only by God's grace, until, reunited in Canada, George Harris dreams of Liberia and a new black homeland. "On the shores of Africa I see a republic - a republic formed of picked men, who, by energy and educating force, have, in many cases, individually raised themselves up above a condition of slavery."<sup>105</sup> The oft-criticized re-colonialist ending has the fingerprints of Lyman Beecher, who as president of Lane Seminary in Cincinnati explicitly advocated re-colonization against a dissident rump of radical abolitionist students. The resulting schism led to the resignation of the radical wing of his faculty and the founding of Oberlin College. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin* Liberia is a magical solution to the fears of racial conflict and miscegenation that have been a motif throughout the novel, it permits the African to enter the national family without the uncomfortable reality of race-mixing. The fantasy of Liberia symbolically resolves

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<sup>105</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* p. 395

the major anxieties of the novel. The whites are absolved of the sin of slavery, the Africans are liberated from the sin of their blackness, and the emblem of this redemption is the middle-class family.

Along this narrative, Eliza's escape over the icy Ohio River was one of the novel's most celebrated scenes of dramatic action. Linda Williams describes it as pre-cinematic in its vividness and immediacy: it was one of the most commonly adapted sequences on the minstrel stage, and the climax of the first screen version of *Uncle Tom*.<sup>106</sup> It mobilizes the spectacular logic of the escape "in the nick of time" as a mechanism to encourage identification with the danger and peril that Eliza faces; in its cinematic adaptation, it functions as a *deus ex machina*, as if Eliza were saved through the intervention of the cinematic apparatus itself.<sup>107</sup> Hadley's pursuit ends at the edge of the river, significantly, this brings him to a tavern, where he meets fellow slave catchers Marks and Tom Loker and begins to regroup.

As opposed to her vivid kitchens, Stowe's barroom scenes are stiff and wooden. They are sketched awkwardly, the atmosphere reduced to a broad sketch outlined with a

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<sup>106</sup> *Playing the Race Card*

<sup>107</sup> *Playing the Race Card*

paucity of detail, giving the distinct impression of a subject that the author would prefer not to write about and of which the reader will disapprove. And yet they perform an important function within the melodrama; alcohol is used to represent an endemic atmosphere of random and almost ceaseless violence that exists outside the comfort of the domestic space. “‘So now, old coon’ said he to the man of the bar, ‘give us hot water, and sugar, and cigars, and plenty of *the real stuff*, and we’ll have a blow-out.’” The awkwardly emphasized “real stuff” refers not only to the strength and potency of the whiskey being drunk, but to Tom Loker’s character itself, a malevolent force of pure violence that admits no justice or redemption in the world. And so as Haley disclosed Shelby’s hypocrisy, so too does Tom Loker show up Haley’s image of himself as a “humane man:” “Stop that ar jaw o’ yourn, there,’ said Tom, gruffly. ‘I can stand almost any talk o’ yourn, but your pious talk, that kills me right up. After all, what’s the difference between me and you? Tain’t that you care one bit more - it’s clear, dog meanness, wanting to cheat the devil and save your own skin: don’t I see through it? Run up a bill with the devil all your life, and then sneak out when pay time comes!” As opposed to the hypocrisy of Haley and Shelby, Loker’s rough, drunken monologue has the virtue of

honesty,<sup>108</sup> he fully admits that his work is the administration of a regime of devilish violence; and alcohol is a symbol of the relentless chase that this implacable hellhound will give to Eliza and her family. The only defense is the strength and security of the sober Christian family. Harry and Eliza, with the help of the communities they find along the way, and specifically the sober Quakers, are able to defend this family unit; a state that Stowe strongly implies is the precondition of black nationhood.

By contrast, the "southern narrative" traces the collapse of the family structure. Pharmacological signifiers multiply on the river south as the journey brings Tom inexorably closer to death, tracked closely to a climate of degeneration and insanity. It follows Tom's exodus to New Orleans, upon which coincidence perpetually delays his promised manumission until he is murdered on Legree's plantation. The primary signifiers of the southern narrative are miasma, madness and degeneration. As the story veers south, devils proliferate, until the story becomes fully gothic on Legree's plantation, ending with a tale of an actual haunting. Tom's narrative function along

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<sup>108</sup> He will be rescued and redeemed by the sober Quakers by the end of the novel.

this road is to bear the suffering of others, and through this suffering, to bring about a moral transcendence.

The encroachment of vice is evident everywhere on the St. Claire plantation in New Orleans, a sort of middle ground between the home of the Shelby's and the hell of Legree's cotton plantation. In this house, the neuroses of the masters expresses itself as a dissolution of order, care, and wealth. Both Augustine St. Claire and his wife Marie are "morally disordered" characters, they incarnate the failure of the moral system of the land in their own domestic governance. Augustine freely admits that his vices are the result of an incapacity for moral action: he advances the most cynical, penetrating analyses of the slave system of the novel, but lacks the will or the industry to put his moral vision into action. Instead, he dissipates energy and bleeds money at the card table. His wife Marie is less sympathetic even. A hysteric hypochondriac, Marie seems fundamentally obsessed with her own health, battling depression constantly, she is unable to see the suffering of her fellow humans. Meanwhile, her young, beautiful daughter Eva dies of tuberculosis, a "wasting disease" that was often associated with a keen

spiritual insight.<sup>109</sup> The burden of this spiritual perspicuity, however, is a physically "weak constitution," and the sins of her family become literally visible on her body as she shrinks away from life and towards heaven. She is a stock character from temperance literature, the martyred daughter who absorbs the sins of the drunken father; this pairing forms a domestic economy of guilt and innocence, in which the sins of the father are borne by the child. As the father's disease worsens, the suffering child grows both frailer and closer to God, until she is finally taken, a sentimental climax that brings about the father's redemption.<sup>110</sup> Eva's death anticipates the sacrifice of Tom, a Christ figure beset on all sides by violence, whose willing death is a redemption, a final moment of moral recognition at the extremes of sickness and madness. The result of the masters' neuroses is a breakdown of moral governance throughout the household; failure is seen repeatedly in the behavior of the servants:

*When St. Claire first returned from the north, impressed with the system and order of his uncle's kitchen arrangements, he had largely provided his own with an array of cupboards, drawers, and various apparatus, to introduce systematic regulation, under the sanguine illusion that it would be of any possible assistance to Dinah in her arrangements. He might have well provided them for a squirrel or magpie. The more drawers and closets there*

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<sup>109</sup> Sontag, Susan *Illness as Metaphor*. Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, New York City. 1978

<sup>110</sup> See *Ten Nights in a Barroom*.

were, the more hiding-holes could Dinah make for the accommodation of old rags, hair-combs, old shoes, cast off flowers, and other objects of vertu, wherein her soul delighted.<sup>111</sup>

Reading these small violations of household decorum is complicated. On one level they are repeated moments of "comic relief," where give the author an opportunity to "gently" laugh at the foibles and eccentricities of black American custom - for instance, the clumsy vernacular rendering of the term "vertu," which here refers to the household scraps that Dinah has accumulated. Yet this comic relief has a "serious message," which relates this disorder to the problem of domestic governance. It is implied that the middle-class norms of domesticity are and should be the standard for black morality, and the "disordered" psychology - the neurosis - of the masters is expressed in the literal disorder of the slave quarters on the St. Claire Estate.

These concerns are central in Chapter XVIII, "Miss Ophelia's Experiences and Opinions," a passage that James Baldwin singles out for particular scorn. Ophelia's scandalous outrage at the state of disorder in Dinah's kitchen causes her to confront her cousin Augustine with a different problem of black virtue: "I can't help but fear

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<sup>111</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p. 190

that these servants were not *strictly honest*." Baldwin renders Augustine's response as such:

*The kindly master, remarks to his coldly disapproving Yankee cousin, Miss Ophelia that, so far as he is able to tell, the blacks have been turned over to the devil in this world - however, he adds thoughtfully, it may turn out in the next.*"<sup>112</sup> "Miss Ophelia's reaction" continues Baldwin "is, at least, perfectly right-minded. 'This is perfectly horrible!' she exclaims. 'You all should be ashamed of yourselves!' Miss Ophelia, we may suppose, was speaking for the author"<sup>113</sup>, her explanation is the moral, neatly framed, and incontestable as one of those morals found hanging on the walls of finished rooms.<sup>114</sup>

At this moment, Baldwin has his finger on the structure of the work's taboo. Augustine advances a materialist line of thinking that verges towards the unnamable; the naked facts of a wealth and power built on exploitation and the sin at the origin of American history. For Augustine, there is no justice to be found in the world, only the fact of naked power, a hard truth that

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<sup>112</sup> *Everybody's Protest Novel*. p. 13

<sup>113</sup> It is interesting that Baldwin relies on the intentional fallacy here - the belief that the character of Ophelia "speaks for" the author. It is a notable misstep in what is otherwise a penetrating piece of literary criticism. As Jane Tompkins has demonstrated, this claim is characteristic of the modernist tendency to treat the works of feminine culture as simplistic and easily decipherable. Baldwin's claim is easily disprovable: even within the chapter he cites from, the more ironic, pessimistic perspective voiced by Augustine is equally the author's invention. The effect of assuming this equivalence is a flattening of the polyphonic dimension of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which is reduced to a simple, stereotyped position. A more complex reading strategy would locate Baldwin's critique beyond the problem of authorial intention towards the discursive structure within which Stowe worked. Tompkins, Jane. "Sentimental Power: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Politics of Literary History." in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of Literary History*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, United Kingdom. 1985

<sup>114</sup> "Everybody's Protest Novel," p. 13



drives him to drink. Ophelia, provoked into fear, draws a limit: a moral authority that, in this novel, specifically belongs to white womanhood. She puts an end to Augustine's ruminations, and reasserts the primacy of the good. Baldwin reads this exchange as expressive of a will to forgetfulness, a mode of thought that, horrified, seeks to expel sin before it understands sin's internal meaning.

It is not surprising that this passage would be bookended, in Chapter XVIII, by motifs of temperance and intemperance. The moral relationship between St. Claire and Tom is put into motion through the bond of a temperance pledge. Returning home from a "convivial party of choice spirits" St. Claire arrives "in a condition when the physical had decidedly attained the upper hand of the intellectual."<sup>115</sup> He is helped to bed by Tom and Adolph, who "laughs heartily at the rusticity of Tom's horror, who really was simple enough to lie awake most of the rest of the night, praying for his master."<sup>116</sup> As opposed to the dandy Adolph and the ironically self-aware St. Claire, Tom appears backwards and "rustic" in his concern for his master's drinking. When he raises the matter, his speech is slow, laborious and almost painfully naïve. He speaks in

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<sup>115</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. p. 185

<sup>116</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. p. 197

dialect, repeats simple words and phrases, and negates his own self-interest in favor of a piteous concern for St. Claire's soul. Yet it is precisely through this simplicity, a moral awareness that Stowe understood as the "natural Christianity" of the African race, that the slave is able to turn the tables on his master, to deflate his ironic wit and address him directly.

- *"I feel very bad, Mas'r. I allays have thought that Mas'r would be good to everybody."*
- *"Well, Tom, haven't I been? Come, now, what do you want? There's something you haven't got, I suppose, and this is the preface."*
- *"Mas'r allays been good to me. I haven't nothing to complain of, on that head. But there is one that Mas'r isn't good to. "*
- *"Why, Tom, what's got into you. Speak out; what do you mean?"*
- *"Last night. Between one and two, I thought so. I studied upon the matter then. Mas'r isn't good to himself."*  
*Tom said this with his back to his master, and his hand on the door-knob. St. Claire felt his faith flush crimson, but he laughed. "O, that's all, is it?" he said, gayly.*
- *"All!" said Tom, turning suddenly around and falling on his knees. "O, my dear young Mas'r. I'm 'fraid it will be loss of all - all - body and soul. The good book says, it biteth like a serpent and stingeth like an adder! My dear Mas'r! Tom's voice choked, and the tears ran down his cheeks.*
- *"You poor, silly fool!" said St. Claire, with tears in his own eyes. "Get up, Tom. I'm not worth crying over, But Tom wouldn't rise, and looked imploring.*
- *"Well, I won't go to any more of their cursed nonsense, Tom" said St. Claire: "on my honor, I won't. I don't know why I haven't stopped long ago. I've always despised it, and myself for it - so now, Tom, wipe up your eyes, and go about your errands. Come, come," he added, "no blessings. I'm not so wonderfully good, now," he said, as he gently pushed Tom to the door. There, I'll pledge my honor to it,*

- Tom, you won't see me so again," he said; and Tom went off, wiping his eyes, with great satisfaction."*
- *"And I'll keep my faith with him too" said St. Claire as he closed the door, and St. Claire did so, for gross sensualism, in any form, was not the peculiar temptation of his nature.<sup>117</sup>*

The temperance pledge had been popularized by the "Washington Temperance Society of Baltimore," a group that Alcoholics Anonymous would come to regard as a spiritual ancestor of their organization. Tom uses this pledge to raise a complex theme of the relation between health, governance and subjectivity; one cannot govern others if one cannot govern oneself. This is the favored mode of moral address in American melodrama: a mode of powerful, piercing speech that pierces the rationalizations of intellect and offers plain spiritual truths. St. Claire may not truly be able to care for Tom, or his daughter, or any of his dependents, because he is not able to care for himself. Drinking is this dissolution, this "ebbing out of life" of the soldier at the breach who is not aware of the mortal combat he is engaged in. The result is a creeping proliferation of vice in the household: not crime but mischief, not theft but pilfering, not disobedience but laziness. Tom, who studies scripture, is able to recognize the danger of this situation from the psalmist's warning:

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<sup>117</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. P. 187

"They have striken me, shalt thou say, and I was not sick; they have beaten me, and I felt it not; when shall I awake? I shall seek it again."<sup>118</sup> The perspicacious Tom is able to see the pattern behind the behavior, the sin, the vice, the disease, moreover, he is able to get St. Claire to admit that at the root of his drinking is shame and self-hatred: "I've always despised it, and myself for it." The temperance pact signifies a new order of governance; most centrally concerning the master's relation to himself, it is meant to extend the balance to the rest of the house. St. Claire becomes a different sort of master, begins to take an interest in religion, and even entertains the idea of freeing his slaves.

It is therefore not a surprise when the violation of this temperance pact leads immediately to St. Claire's death and to the dissolution of his estate. Like Eva, he seems to foreshadow his own passing "'DEATH! Strange that there should be such a word' he said 'and such a thing, and that we ever forget it, that one should be living, warm and beautiful, full of hopes, desires and wants, one day, and the next be gone, utterly gone, and forever!"<sup>119</sup> His melodramatic *memento mori* foreshadows his own demise "a

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<sup>118</sup> Proverbs 23:29-35. Cited in "Six Sermons." p. 1-2

<sup>119</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* p. 284

minute to late"; Tom's manumission papers are sitting on St. Claire's desk when he is drawn away to a tavern, intervening in a brawl "between two gentleman in the room who were partially intoxicated" he "received a fatal stab in the side from a bowie knife."<sup>120</sup> and is excised neatly from the narrative, *deus ex machina*. Again, alcohol seems to signify this random American violence that seems to manifest whenever one leaves the safety of the domestic space, and to bring this brutality suddenly, frighteningly, into the action of the narrative.

Yet even before the pledge is violated, the entrance of the drunken slave Prue grimly foreshadows the disaster that awaits the family. The well-mannered servants on the St. Claire plantation regard Prue as a "disgusting old beast" and a "horrid creature;<sup>121</sup>" dressed in rags, she makes her whiskey money selling away her master's property. Prue occupies all of three pages of the narrative. She enters the St. Claire plantation, is mocked and rebuffed, returns home to her house, where "Prue, she got drunk agin' - and they had her down cellar - and I hearn 'em saying *the flies had got to her - and she's dead*<sup>122</sup>" It is a brief interlude that interrupts the philosophical conversation

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<sup>120</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* p. 289

<sup>121</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. p. 197

<sup>122</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* p 200

between Ophelia and Augustine, punctuating it with this staccato moment of abuse and misery. Alcohol is used to render the interiority of cruelty and madness, treating the tragedy of Prue as ultimately inviolable and unnamable.

The only way that the tragedy is registered in the plot of the work is through little Eva's witness: "Tom, in simple earnest phrase, told Eva the woman's history. She did not exclaim, or wonder, or weep, as other children do. Her cheeks grew pale, and a deep, earnest shadow passed over her eyes. She laid both hands on her bosom and sighed heavily."<sup>123</sup> Prue's death precedes Eva's and announces it: "No, papa, I'm not nervous, but these things *sink into my heart*."<sup>124</sup> In both Prue and Eva, slavery appears as a literal disease. The sin of the community registers in these feminine bodies - the old black drunk and the young white innocent - as alcoholism in Prue and as consumption in Eva. Prue drinks because she cannot bear suffering the loss of her child, and Eva wastes away because she cannot bear to see Prue suffering.

The motif of alcohol in these mirrored deaths contrasts the visible signs of white innocence with the interiority of black abjection. Discourses of blackface and

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<sup>123</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* p. 199

<sup>124</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* p. 215

drunkenness overlap, reinforcing their meaning, reflecting their lies back upon each other. The marks of the devil's presence are everywhere in Kentucky within this dense coding of meaning, bounded on all sides by exploitation and latent violence, temperance provides Stowe with a powerful discourse of purification and redemption. The promise is that this sin can be exorcized from the community, and both the sinners and the heathens can find salvation: "Wash me, cried the slave to his master, and I shall be white, whiter than snow!"<sup>125</sup> Temperance promises cleansing, purity and stability; it promises that evil can be understood and corrected. The expulsion of the scapegoat is the symbol of this victory, which inscribes *Uncle Tom* with the motto of drug war: *socius contra pharmakon*.

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<sup>125</sup> "Everybody's Protest Novel" p. 18

## CHAPTER 4

### Wolf Palace: The War Inside

#### Oakland, CA

*For many minutes, for many hours, for a bleak eternity, he lay awake, shivering, reduced to primitive terror, comprehending that he had won freedom, and wondering what he could do with anything so unknown and embarrassing as freedom.*  
- Sinclair Lewis

In her study of the racial unconscious of American literature, "Romancing the Shadow," Toni Morrison calls attention to a characteristic image of American modernism: "the visualized but somehow closed and unknowable white form that arises from the mists at the end of the journey."<sup>126</sup> Morrison argues that this "closed and unknowable white form" is an image of remarkable power and durability within American high modernism, and traces its appearance in Poe, Melville, Wharton, Hemmingway, Cather, and a host of other Anglo-American writers. She argues that figures of whiteness consistently tend to appear at a particular moment within these American texts: "figurations of impenetrable whiteness occur whenever a figure of Africanist presence is engaged. Closed white images are found frequently, though not always, at the end of the

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<sup>126</sup> Morrison, Toni. "Romancing the Shadow." In: *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Vintage Books; New York. 1992. P. 30



text. They appear so often and in such particular circumstances that they give pause."<sup>127</sup> It is as if the presence of the racialized Other elicited a powerful reaction formation from the writing subject, evoking an almost mystical imagistic response. These images allow us to explore the psychological experience of embodied race as an object of fear and fascination in the Anglo-American text. In the imagistic deployment of mystical whiteness, the social and historical value of racism is apotheosized as existentialist meditation.<sup>128</sup> It represents racial domination not as social process but as a metaphysical given, a melancholy fact of the world's awe and terror. "These images of blinding whiteness serve as both antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness - a dark and abiding shadow that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with a secret longing."<sup>129</sup>

We might take Jack London's bizarre autobiographic novella *John Barleycorn* as a case study in this deployment of whiteness at the end of the author's journey. Jack London's work founds the genre of the "addiction memoir;" the autobiographical account of a struggle with chemical

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<sup>127</sup> "Romancing the Shadow" p. 32

<sup>128</sup> Derrida, Jacques. "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy. In *New Literary History*, vol. 6, issue 1. August 1974. p. 5-74.

<sup>129</sup> "Romancing the Shadow" p. 35

dependency as an act of self-making, in which an authentic ego emerges through the recounting of struggle and the mastery of one's demons. Despite the picaresque yarns that take up the bulk of the prose, this memoir is a story of interiority, a journey towards the human moral core that culminates in a stark encounter with the anti-human, annihilating force of addiction, which London dubs the "White Logic." London is often credited as the first modern American writer to work in this genre, and *John Barleycorn* anticipates many of this genre's central concerns.

Most strikingly, *Barleycorn* documents the extremely ambivalent problematic of "influence" that transpires between the writer and the reader. The motto of such a novel might be "there but for the grace of God go I;" its stated goal is to serve as a warning to the inexperienced reader. The drug text represents a sort of tutelage, framed as a dialectic relationship between experience and innocence; one reads this text precisely to discover how not to live, to learn from the author's example and to choose otherwise. And yet this moralism is undercut by the substance of the drug text itself, whose satisfactions come from a vicarious access to excess, a figure of hedonistic extremity commodified in the mass-market form of the best-seller. In other words, there is a hypocrisy stamped on the

face of the addiction memoir, a "do as I say, not as I do," that ultimately is a disavowal of its own sense of pleasure.

In such a critique, the issue of literary quality is unavoidable, so let us take the received critical opinion as a given and start with the fact that *John Barleycorn* is, in many ways, not a very good book. It is a baffling, confounding work whose apparent simplicity is rent open by the deep psychological contradictions that the writing exposes. *John Barleycorn* is a hellsbroth of myth, lore, and lie from which the truth seems to emerge only if by accident. It was cranked out one- thousand words per morning, without virtually no revision; the results of this Taylorist process are evident in a series of strange repetitions and a jarring disconnection between its chapters, often as if the author were unaware of what he had written the day before. Unpopular at the time, *Barleycorn* has since only declined in critical reputation. Pete Hamill's introduction, which places London in the context of American pre-modernism, compares London to a "kind of first draft of Ernest Hemingway," only to arrive at the simple, unhappy conclusion that "Hemingway was a

great literary artist, and London was not."<sup>130</sup> *Barleycorn* is funny when it tries to be honest, tragic when it tries to be funny, and maudlin when it tries to be tragic. It is wildly inconsistent: both a gripping read and a maddeningly frustrating one, a personal, intimate account of alcoholism that completely misunderstands the basic facts of the illness, a terrifying, scorching description of a descent into madness that is often unintentionally comic in its naiveté. It is extremely humorous, but unintentionally so, and for this reason is also an incredibly sad book, for the humor typically arises from the complete failure of the memoir writer to grasp the terms of his own existence.

It is the failures of London's memoir, however, that are the object of this study; its aesthetic limits speak to the larger social limits in which it works. If denial is symptomatic of the alcoholic's self-consciousness, this work is emblematic of this process: "At last he sat down to write his alcoholic memoirs, insisting all the time that he wasn't an alcoholic."<sup>131</sup> The lessons of a work like *John Barleycorn* become apparent when we note the repetitive, insistent quality of its lacunas, and are able to read the author's blind spots as themselves sites for analysis. When

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<sup>130</sup> Hammil, Peter. "Jack London and John Barleycorn." In: London, Jack. *John Barleycorn*. The Modern Library: New York. 2001. p. xiv 129

<sup>131</sup> "Jack London and John Barleycorn." p. xviii

we do this, *Barleycorn's* limits appear not only aesthetic but social and political. London's self-mythologization is characteristic of an American memory that nostalgically grasps America's past through identification with an ego that conquers all obstacles, natural or man-made, through determination, grit, and will. In *Barleycorn* this narrator repeatedly stumbles uncomfortably into reality, symptomatic of a trauma at the center of this ego-ideal that eventually subsumes the entire project. Alcohol is the symbol of this trauma, it marks both the need to perpetually evade and the compulsion to perpetually return. Eventually, this trauma is posited as universal, the wounded male ego apotheosized in the terrifying language of a spectral whiteness triumphant over the world.

In 1913 Jack London was one of the most commercially successful and recognizable authors in the United States; he was also entirely overextended financially. His dream house, the "Wolf Palace," a Sonoma ranch built as an homage to the author's self-conception, had become a "voracious money pit."<sup>132</sup> Permanently under construction, Wolf Palace would burn to the ground before it would ever be completed, a tragedy that deepened his cynicism. His dark mood seemed

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<sup>132</sup> "Jack London and John Barleycorn." p. xvii

to transform his politics, the idealistic socialism of his youth became a paranoid "racism, some of it virulent, which infected his work as a writer."<sup>133</sup> One of his final writing projects concerned a "pedigree Irish terrier named Jerry, a 'white man's dog' who was trained to pursue n-s."<sup>134</sup> Moreover, his vaunted physical vigor was in stark decline; he was drinking prodigiously, beginning a morphine habit, and "eating gluttonously - including vast quantities of undercooked duck."<sup>135</sup> In five years' time London would be dead of uremia, a death many have seen as a possible suicide.

In this context, London's "alcoholic memoirs" appear to have been an attempt to write himself out of his predicaments. There was an economic imperative behind this work, and London responded to this imperative by selling the only thing he had to sell: words. More specifically, his stock in trade were a few specific kinds of words, boilerplate styles which he knew would be popular and which he could write in his sleep. The bulk of *John Barleycorn* is a hybrid of several middlebrow genres: the ripping yarns of adventure that he had made his name writing, mixed with real-life details about the celebrity writer and a strong

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<sup>133</sup> "Jack London and John Barleycorn." p. xxiv

<sup>134</sup> "Jack London and John Barleycorn." p. xxvii

<sup>135</sup> "Jack London and John Barleycorn." p. xxvi

dose of moralistic anti-alcohol propaganda. London's description of his writing process is obsessive to the point of mania: "I plunged into writing. I am afraid I always was an extremist. Early and late I was at it - writing, typing, studying grammar, studying writing, and all the forms of writing, and studying the writers who succeeded. I managed on five hours' sleep in the twenty-four, and came pretty close to working the nineteen waking hours left to me."<sup>136</sup> It is an account not dissimilar from his description of his job at a steam laundry: "so relentlessly did my partner and I spring into our work throughout the week that by Saturday night we were both frazzled wrecks."<sup>137</sup> an electrician: "night after night I limped home, fell asleep before I could eat my supper, and was helped into bed<sup>138</sup>" on the Oakland docks, and so on. The narrator succeeds in every endeavor, it seems, because of his furious, manic energy. He is the most energetic, the most-strong willed, the most determined; a furious will that is central to London's representation of working-class virtue. He is Horatio Alger set loose at the typewriter,

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<sup>136</sup> London, Jack. *John Barleycorn*. The Modern Library: New York. 2001. p. 147

<sup>137</sup> *John Barleycorn*. p. 138

<sup>138</sup> *John Barleycorn*. p. 119

single-mindedly laboring away at the mythology that he built, and that he imagines will be his salvation.

And yet in the first chapter, London's own account of the inspiration for *Barleycorn* puts the economic realities of this work in sharp relief. According to London, he is not writing for profit but for the nation itself; an altruistic political ambition for which he gives half-credit to his wife, Charmaine, who pitched him an idea for an "alcoholic memoir" on November 8, 1811. "Why not write all this up for the sake of the young women and men coming?" Charmian asked. "Why not write it so as to help the wives and sisters and mothers to the way they should vote... Write it up and call it 'Alcoholic Memoirs'" We can be fairly certain about this day because it was Election Day, a traditional day of public patriotic drunkenness that London uses to play up the motifs of whiskey barrel democracy: both a fierce independence and a rowdy, bawdy sociality as characteristically American qualities of egalitarian gathering. Manipulation of the vote by pharmacological bribe was part of the mythos of Election Day: "You see, in election time, aspirants for office, have a way of making the rounds of the saloon to get votes. One is sitting at a table, in a dry condition, wondering who is going to turn up and buy him a drink, or if his credit is



good, when suddenly the saloon doors swing open and enters a bevy of well-dressed men. And don't you know, when these politicians swing wide the doors and come in, with their broad shoulders, deep chests, and generous stomachs, which can't help making them optimists and masters of life, why you perk right up. It's going to be a warm evening after all, and you know you'll get a souse started at the very least."<sup>139</sup> London recounts his role as part of the Hancock Fire Brigade, a mob plied with free whiskey and beer to march with torches through downtown Oakland that eventually erupts into a street brawl. The politics of this scenario are intentionally obscure: "I can't remember whether the Hancock Fire Brigade was a Republican or Democratic organization," London says winkingly, "but anyway, the politicians who ran it were short of torch-bearers, and anyone who would parade could get drunk if he wanted to."<sup>140</sup> This sort of description is characteristic of *Barleycorn's* politics; the image of a drunken torchlit mob parading through the Oakland waterfront is frankly alarming, but London cheekily pleads ignorance to the politics behind the march and its violent connotations. Instead, the important fact in his memory is a drunken camaraderie that pre-exists

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<sup>139</sup> *John Barleycorn*. p. 81

<sup>140</sup> *John Barleycorn*. p. 82

politics: a boisterous male proletariat identity that refuses political positioning: "This method of jamming and struggling in front of the bar was too slow for us. The drink was ours. The politicians had paid for it. We'd paraded and earned it, hadn't we? So we made a flank attack on the bar, shoved the protesting bartenders aside, and helped ourselves to bottles."<sup>141</sup>

Things have changed, but not too much, when we are introduced to the prosperous writer Jack London, who has relocated from urban Oakland to the Sonoma Valley. He is not too insulated, however, to have spent Election Day drinking in a saloon in Valley of the Moon: "because of the warmth of the day I had several drinks before casting my ballot, and divers drinks after,"<sup>142</sup> before heading home on his steed Outlaw, insisting the whole time on his sobriety: "I'd like to see any drunken man ride her." Charmian is waiting for him when he arrives home: "And how shall I say? I was lighted up. I was feeling good, I was pleasantly jingled"<sup>143</sup> in what will be her only chapter in the novel.

The scenario is more than a bit awkward, as Charmaine's meek, submissive sobriety "ignoring John Barleycorn's roughness as so many women have learned to

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<sup>141</sup> *John Barleycorn*. p. 82

<sup>142</sup> *John Barleycorn*. p. 3

<sup>143</sup> *John Barleycorn*. p. 4

do"<sup>144</sup> counterbalances Jack's expansive, drunken dynamism as they settle into an uneven conversation that rehearses some of the oldest American saws about gender, drink, and democracy. Or rather, it is Jack who rehearses these saws; Charmaine is a patient foil, a sober prescience that gives sense to Jack's drunken outpouring. "Every thought was a vision, bright-imaged, sharp cut, unmistakable. My brain was illuminated by the clear white light of alcohol. John Barleycorn was on a truth-telling rampage, giving away the choicest secrets on himself. And I was his spokesman."<sup>145</sup>

The topic of the conversation is London's vote "yes" on the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the California constitution, and sober Charmian is in somewhat awed discomfort as her soused husband extrapolates to her the meaning of women's suffrage "she uttered an exclamation of surprise for it be known, in my younger years, despite my ardent democracy, I had been opposed to women's suffrage. In my later and more tolerant years I had been unenthusiastic in my acceptance of it as an inevitable social phenomenon."<sup>146</sup> Jack London did not vote out of anything as modern as a belief in gender equality. His logic, a drinker's logic, is somewhat stranger than that:

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<sup>144</sup> *John Barleycorn*. p. 7

<sup>145</sup> *John Barleycorn*. p. 4

<sup>146</sup> *John Barleycorn*. p. 3

*'When the women get the ballot, they will vote for Prohibition,' I said. 'It is the wives, and the sisters, and the mothers, they and they only, who will drive the nails into the coffin of John Barleycorn.'*<sup>147</sup>

Women's suffrage and prohibition were both imagined as progressive movements of reform and modernization; London understands the one as strategic means to the other. Suffrage is not an end in itself, it is a means to the larger political project of national temperance and the fantasy of the sober nation: "The only rational thing for the twentieth century to do is to cover up the well; to make the twentieth century in truth the twentieth century, and to relegate to the nineteenth century and all the preceding centuries the things of those centuries, the witch-burnings, the intolerances, the fetishes, and not least among such barbarisms, John Barleycorn."<sup>148</sup> He imagines women as a sober political block, and votes to give them the vote so they will vote an end to the tyranny of the saloon; women's emancipation seen as a step on the way to pharmacological emancipation.

To put it lightly, Charmain seems baffled by this turn of events: "But I thought you were a friend to John

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<sup>147</sup> *John Barleycorn*. p. 4

<sup>148</sup> *John Barleycorn*. p. 96

Barleycorn."<sup>149</sup> London begins his ambivalent rationalization:

*"I am. I was. I am not. I never am. I am never less his friend than when he is with me and I seem most his friend. He is the king of liars. He is the frankest truth-sayer. He is also in league with the Noseless One. His way leads to truth naked, and to death. He gives clear vision, and muddy dreams. He is the enemy of life, and the teacher of wisdom beyond life's vision. He is a red-handed killer, and he slays use."<sup>150</sup>*

Immediately evident in this confusing piece is the impression that London is unloading a weighty piece of truth upon a feminine mind ill-equipped to understand it. "And Charmian looked at me, and I knew she wondered where I got it."<sup>151</sup> The married couple inscribes an archetypal gendered dyad; London extends their personalities as a metaphor for political forces in the American nation. Jack stands for lust, adventure, activity, and action, a traditional mode of masculine heroism forged on the vanishing frontier. On the other side of this pair, Charmaine is chaste, prudent, and passive, a pragmatic modern morality coded as feminine. She is prudence as opposed to his recklessness, domestic against his adventurism, and even-tempered against his violent romanticism.

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<sup>149</sup> John Barleycorn. p. 4

<sup>150</sup> John Barleycorn. p. 6

<sup>151</sup> John Barleycorn. p. 4

The irony of the situation, which hangs over the entire novel, is that London represents himself as on Charmain's side, with a deeper understanding of her own position; with his vote, he expresses a will to legislate himself out of existence. Like many of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he regards a nation of drunkards as ungovernable, and casts his vote with the women and the futurity of a sober nation: "The women know the game. They pay for it - the wives, and sisters, and mothers. And the best of it is that there will be no hardship worked on the coming generation. Never having access to alcohol, not being predisposed to alcohol, it will never miss alcohol."<sup>152</sup>

This is the moralistic alibi with which London justifies his writing about his addiction; it inscribes the work with a fundamental hypocrisy, as Upton Sinclair would note, "That the work of a drinker who had no intention of stopping drinking should become a major propaganda piece in the campaign for Prohibition is surely one of the choice ironies in the history of alcohol."<sup>153</sup> It creates a basic literary problem on which *John Barleycorn* will repeatedly stumble: the sober narration of the addicted self. The trustworthy sober subject is obligated to narrate and

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<sup>152</sup> *John Barleycorn*. p. 6

<sup>153</sup> Upton Sinclair cited in "Jack London and John Barleycorn." p. xxv

justify the actions of a disreputable drunken shadow, thus constituting the subject of the recovery as a split self: the young healthy man and the bottle that drains him, the independent man and his increasingly dependent relationship with alcohol, the healthy man and the sickness that dogs him. London handles this problem worse than most. It is characteristic of his prose to deny the existence of any contradiction in his mythological sense of a dynamic, autonomous masculinity that creates himself out of force of will; the energy of American frontier mythology placed within the cultural market.

The strangely cheerful Charmain is the first to prompt this contradiction, as she helpfully prompts Jack to put his experience into a novel: "Why not write all this up for the sake of the young men and women coming? Why not write it so to help the wives and sisters and mothers to the way they should vote."<sup>154</sup> Her suggestion is rudely rebuffed by the soused London: "'The 'Memoirs of an Alcoholic,' I sneered' - or rather, John Barleycorn sneered, for he sat with me at table, and it is a trick of John Barleycorn to turn a smile to a sneer without an instant's warning."<sup>155</sup> Charmain's enabling response to this piece of nastiness

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<sup>154</sup> *John Barleycorn*. p. 7

<sup>155</sup> *John Barleycorn*. p. 7

begins one of the most maddening motifs in the book: "'No' said Charmain, ignoring John Barleycorn's roughness as so many women have learned to do. 'You have shown yourself no alcoholic, no dipsomaniac, but merely a habitual drinker, one who has made John Barleycorn's acquaintance through long years of rubbing shoulders with him. Write it up and call it 'Alcoholic Memoirs'"

Extunt Charmain; she will not return. What remains is a long, nostalgic account of Jack's drinking adventures, transformed from the "memoirs of an alcoholic" to "alcoholic memoirs" so that London can maintain a flimsy denial that he has never been dependent: "There was no spiritual deterrence. My loathing for alcohol was purely physiological. I didn't like the taste of the damned stuff,"<sup>156</sup> all read under the melancholy sign of a progressivism that wishes itself out of existence. I choose Chapter XIII almost at random, a section that describes a shore leave at the bars in Yokohama, as typical of London's rhetoric of the drinking life. In this scene alcohol is the symbol of this relentless masculine energy: the initiation to a fantasy of desperately desired homosocial comradery:

*The captain had given money for us to the hunters, and the hunters were waiting in a certain Japanese public house*

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<sup>156</sup> John Barleycorn. p. 23



*for us to come get it. We rode to the place in rickshaws. Our own crowd had taken possession of it. Drink was glowing. Everybody had money and everybody was treating.*

*After the hundred days of hard toil and absolute assistance, in the pink of physical condition, bulging with health, over-spilling with spirits that had been long pent by discipline and circumstance, of course we would have a drink or two, and after that we would see the town. And then it was the old story. There were so many drinks to be drunk and as the warm magic poured through our veins and mellowed our voices and affectations it was no time to make distinctions, and forgot our fights and wordy squabbles, and knew each other for the best fellows in the world<sup>157</sup>*

Of course, the sailors never see much of Japan outside of the pub. This type of description becomes so worn throughout the novel that it is a wonder London does not run out of adjectives. It is an economic cycle familiar from Rush, in which a period of hard work and stored accumulation is dissipated suddenly and impulsively in a binge, with an erotic energy that resembles an orgasmic release. The value of the sailor's hard work - both the literal wages and the "physical condition" - is squandered in a riotous "orgy" whose very brilliance owes to its transience and effervescence. Even in the midst of this chaotic expulsion of sailor's joy London, of course, manages to distinguish himself by a particularly daring feat: "swimming to the schooner one dark midnight and going soundly to sleep while the water-police searched the harbor

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<sup>157</sup> John Barleycorn. p. 98

for my body and brought my clothes out for identification.<sup>158</sup>” It is a jag that earns him a bit of local fame “All the harbor talked about it. I enjoyed several days of fame among the Japanese boatmen and ashore in the pubs. It was a red-letter event.<sup>159</sup>” but more than this, it has all the qualities of London’s mythological sense of himself: a relentless physical force that expresses its freedom through triumph in a series of meaningless challenges almost sociopathic in their indefatigable boyishness. The lesson that London learns from this memory is astonishingly tone-deaf:

*The point is that the charm of John Barleycorn was still a mystery to me. I was so organically a non-alcoholic that alcohol itself made no appeal; the chemical satisfactions it produced in me were not satisfying, because I possessed no need for such chemical satisfaction. I drank because the men I was with drank, and because my nature was such that I could not permit myself to be less of a man than other men at their favorite pastime. And I still had a sweet tooth, and on privy occasions when there was no man to see, bought candy and blissfully devoured it.*

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The denial is so thick that it is almost impossible to take anything in this passage at face value. What London seems to be after is a disavowal of his need for “chemical satisfaction,” a disavowal which is obscurely important to the authenticity of the fable of the legendary swimmer. It

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<sup>158</sup> *John Barleycorn*. p. 98

<sup>159</sup> *John Barleycorn*. p. 98

<sup>160</sup> *John Barleycorn*. p. 99

is necessary to preserve the distinction between an authentic London who waded out to the schooner and the chemical prompts of Barleycorn's lies. And so London absurdly denies that this drunkenness gives him any pleasure, or that he has any need for "chemical satisfaction," a need that would probe his "dipsomania." Instead, he pleads the case of the pleasures of men, the "rough company" of sailors, workers, and drinkers. This sense of masculine bonhomie quickly becomes a struggle for dominance, "I could not permit myself to be less than a man," an attitude that contains more than a whiff of projective homophobia. Feelings of male intimacy are channeled into an aggressive contest of superiority; drinking is a proving ground where he is ultimately able to prove his mastery over the hardest of men - whereas women, improbably, do not appear at all in the Yokohama sequence.<sup>161</sup> Finally, in a fairly desperate attempt to resolve the brutality of the ritual into a space of childishness and innocence, the sequence closes with the perverse "admission" of what London to believes to be his real vice: he hides from the others and secretly stuffs himself with candy.

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<sup>161</sup> Pete Hammil "Jack London and John Barleycorn." In: *John Barleycorn*. The Modern Library: New York. 2001. p. xxxi

It would be difficult to find a passage in this book that does not echo the frustrating pattern above: a seemingly inexhaustible repression, often provoked by a maniacal work ethic, that expresses itself in a ferocious drunkenness threatening to explode into violence, and all this shoehorned into a bootstrapping narrative of triumph and heroism by a myopic optimism that simply refuses to see that there may be a problem. And so, when a lifetime of alcoholic addiction catches up to London, he sees it not as an inevitable progress of disease but as an action far more metaphysical; a relentless, anti-life force that he refers to as the "White Logic." The power and insight of these passages are truly surprising, the more so because they seem so out of place within the London mythology.<sup>162</sup> Much of *John Barleycorn* is dominated by autobiographical tall tales: the author casting his drinking adventures within mythological yarns of the seas, the wilderness and the frontier, the jocund reminiscences of virile American masculinity which London made his name by crafting and marketing. His dialogue with the "White Logic" marks a startling shift in tone and subject. Inspired by London's

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<sup>162</sup> "But for me the most powerful section of the book is a duologue, Jack London and the ghostly presence he calls the White Logic." "Jack London and John Barleycorn." p. xix

readings of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche,<sup>163</sup> the White Logic is a voice that appears to London when he is melancholic and in his cups: "Back to personal experiences, and to the effects of in the past of John Barleycorn's White Logic on me. On my lovely ranch in the Valley of the Moon, brain-soaked with many months of alcohol, I am oppressed by the cosmic sadness that has always been the heritage of man."<sup>164</sup> In contrast to the dynamic, adventurous persona, vigorously active to the point of mania, that characterizes London's self-mythologizing for the bulk of the novel, the "noseless one" espouses a stark nihilistic philosophy of entropy and disintegration. "I am aware that within this disintegrating body which has been dying since I was born I carry a skeleton; that under the rind of flesh which is called my face is a bony, noseless death's head. All of which does not shudder me. To be afraid is healthy. But the curse of the White Logic is that it does not make one afraid. The world-sickness of the White Logic makes one grin jocosely into the face of the Noseless One and to sneer at all the phantasmagoria of living."

These chilling passages force a reconsideration of what we think we know about this Jack London. The White

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<sup>163</sup> "John Barleycorn and Jack London" p. xxii

<sup>164</sup> *John Barleycorn*. p. 190

Logic reveals a paralyzing psychological depth behind the heroic mask: the morbid takes the place of the vital; cynicism replaces hope; sincerity is supplanted by deception and irony. Translating the Veil of Maya from Schopenhauer, London insists that this fascination with inevitable death is the real truth of human existence, next to which all human action eventually reveals itself in its meaninglessness:

*'Let the doctors of all the schools condemn me'" White Logic whispers as I ride along. 'What of it? I am truth. You know it. You cannot combat me. They say I make for death. What of it? It is truth. Life lies in order to live. Life is a perpetually lie-telling process. Life is a made dance in the domain of flux, wherein appearances in mighty tides ebb and flow, chained to the wheels of moons beyond our ken. Appearances are ghosts. Life is ghost land, where appearances change, transfuse, permeate each other and all the others, that are, that are not, that always flicker, fade and pass, only to come again as new appearances. You are such an appearance, composed of countless appearances out of the past. All an appearance can know is a mirage. You know mirages of desire.'*<sup>165</sup>

For a writer so closely associated with the dynamic and active representation of man's heroic struggle against nature, the nihilism of this passage is shocking. Alcohol is the figuration of this unconscious desire for, and struggle against, submergence in the death drive. It is personified in the titular character, John Barleycorn, a doppelganger for the London persona, who acts to frustrate

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<sup>165</sup> *John Barleycorn*. p. 194

and confound Jack's best impulses, pushing London perpetually towards dishonesty, violence, and death. The hokey name belies the savagery of this persona; the charming and seductive John Barleycorn will lose his seductive charms throughout the novel, as if taking off a costume, until he emerges resplendent as the hermetically sealed, relentlessly nihilistic Noseless One - the White Logic. Throughout the novel, the Barleycorn persona acts as a trickster figure, as when, exuberant after a night of besting rivals at drinking games in Benicia saloons, the young London falls into the Carquienez Straight and decides to let the tide carry him out to the bay:

*"And then John Barleycorn played his maniacal trick. Some maundering fancy of going out with the tide suddenly obsessed me. I had never been morbid. Thoughts of suicide had never entered my head. And now that they entered, I thought it fine, a perfect rounding off of my short but exciting career. I, who had never know girl's love, nor woman's love, nor the love of children; who had never played in the wide joy-fields of art, nor climbed the star-cool heights of philosophy, nor seen with my eyes more than a pin-point surface of the gorgeous world; I decided that this was all, that I had seen all, lived all, been all, that was worthwhile, and now was time to cesase. This was the trick of John Barleycorn, laying me by the heels of my imagination and in a drug-dream dragging me to death.<sup>166</sup>"*

Noteworthy in this passage is the simultaneous intimacy and distance with which Barleycorn is treated. On the one hand,

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<sup>166</sup> John Barleycorn. p. 69

he is an intimate confidant, one who discloses the deepest known secrets of being. On the other hand, he is a hostile alien presence, a trickster who appears precisely to confound and destroy London's better awareness. He is a double of London, the drinker's second self, but one whose precise function is to lead him away from healthy desire towards madness and death: "John Barleycorn changed the tune he played in my drink maddened brain. Away with tears and regret. It was a hero's death, and by the hero's own hand and will."<sup>167</sup> London's own will is literally submerged, and an alter ego leads him inexorably towards suicide.

This treatment of the Barleycorn persona is characteristically modern, expressive of a deep sense of alienation. The Barleycorn cycle of traditional song dates to 16<sup>th</sup> century English folk culture. James Fraser cites the Barleycorn myth as evidence of pagan worship in England; he is a vegetable god who is sacrificed to bring fertility to the fields, and whose intoxicating properties are avatar of the fertile rhythms of the earth.<sup>168</sup> Barleycorn was a harvest spirit, a trickster figure that expressed the spiritual mysteries of people working the land. The most popular version comes from the Scottish poet Robert Burns,

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<sup>167</sup> John Barleycorn. p. 70

<sup>168</sup> Frazer, George. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Macmillan Publishing: New York. 1922. p. 338



whose mystical verses begin: "There was three kings into the east/ Three kings both great and high/ And they hae' sworn a solemn oath/ John Barleycorn must die."<sup>169</sup> The motif of the three eastern kings is Biblical, however, the resurrection of Barleycorn recasts the Christian myth of resurrection as a carnivalesque pagan festival of Earth's cyclical nature. Left for dead in a field "with clods upon his head" his spirit enters into the crops themselves, and Barleycorn "surprises them all" by staging a miraculous return, which occurs as a personification of the work of the harvest. Barleycorn is rained and sunned upon, he is cut, he is boiled in water, he is distilled, and eventually returns to the people as a spirit of conviviality and intoxication:

*John Barleycorn was a hero bold  
Of Noble Enterprise  
for if you Do but Taste his Blood  
'Twill Make your Courage Rise  
'Twill Make a Man Forget His Woe  
'Twill Highten All his Joy  
Twill make a Widow's Heart to Sing  
'Tho the Tear Be in Her Eye.*

This is a lyrical paen to the values of drunkenness - comfort, courage, relief, and even joy - but what is also important to grasp is how the myth expresses communal

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<sup>169</sup> Burns, Robert. "John Barleycorn: A Ballad" In *The Complete Songs of Robert Burns*. Phillips, Samson, & Company: Boston. 1855. p. 220

values as rooted in the land and the cyclical process of death and rebirth. Barleycorn is killed by the tyrant kings to return to the people as a spirit, as the collective expression of their labor transmuted into their values.

London's treatment of this figure could not be more different. Instead of a collective, communal spirit, in London we find a figure of absolute alienation: a psyche uprooted from a communal lifeworld that judges existence from the aspect of eternity and finds it wanting. If the English peasantry experienced the trickster "spirit" of alcohol as latent in the community, the land, and in work; London experiences it as a lifeless transcendence of this material, an abstracted mind that experiences humanity "pulseless and frozen as absolute zero." Its appearance at the end of the novel has the powerful effect of casting judgment on the petty adventures that characterize the novella, finding there nothing but transient, fleeting effusions that mask a final emptiness. And for this reason, the "truth" of the White Logic is a rationality too powerful for life to bear:

*Alcohol tells truth, but truth is not normal. What is normal is healthful. What is healthful tends towards life. Normal truth is of a different, lesser order than absolute truth... Countless men have passed through the long sickness and lived to tell of it and deliberately to forget it to the end of their days. They lived. They realized life, for life is what they were. And now comes John Barleycorn with*

*the curse he lays on the imaginative man who is lusty with life and desire to live. John Barleycorn sends his White Logic, the ardent message of truth beyond truth, the antithesis of life, cruel and bleak as interstellar space, pulseless and frozen as absolute zero.*<sup>170</sup>

This passage casts a Nietzschean pessimism as characteristic of the alcoholic sickness: the importance of forgetting for good health, the desire for truth as an impulse that springs from life only to undermine it, and the very metaphor of the sick soul all are likely drawn from London's readings of *Zarathustra*. It is not a coincidence that these gnawing reflections occur while he is at the peak of his nominal power; riding his horses resplendent at the palatial Sonoma estate he himself has constructed, for this is a perspective that undoes the myth of the self-made man. In doing so, it implies an annihilating reflection on the life-force expressed in the novel itself, a reduction of its own energy to "absolute zero."

And yet we notice something odd - the White Logic rehearses the wish that London expressed in the opening dialogue with Charmaine; the will towards non-existence. "And so like a survivor of old red War who cries out 'Let there be no more war' so I cry out 'Let there be no more

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<sup>170</sup> John Barleycorn. p. 195

poison-fighting among our youths.' The way to stop war is to stop it. The way to stop drinking is to stop it. It was for this reason, more than any other that I rode to Valley of the Moon, all a-jingle, and voted for women's suffrage. The women are the true conservers of the race.<sup>171</sup> Instead of occurring within the context of the domestic drama or the American political theatre, however, it has been transposed into pure abstraction, escaping the social context to culminate in a deathly force of pure whiteness. It is as if the encounter with the Other - first experienced in Charmain's femininity and iterated through various classed and racialized encounters throughout the work - has become radically internalized as the relentless force of an alcoholic superego expressing itself as supernatural finality. It is both the ultimate destiny of the race and its ultimate undoing. Behind the moralism of temperance is the terrifying specter of apocalypse, the social struggle against the bottle transposed into a cosmic war for life itself.

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<sup>171</sup> John Barleycorn. p. 205-26

## CHAPTER 5

### Molloch: The Political Theology of Alcoholics Anonymous

#### New York City, NY

*Some say the world will end in fire  
Some others say ice  
From what I've tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favor fire  
But if it had to perish twice  
I think I know enough of hate  
To say that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice.*

- Robert Frost. "Fire and Ice"

"What has been America's most nurturing contribution to this planet so far? Many would say jazz. I, who love jazz, will say this instead: Alcoholics Anonymous."<sup>172</sup> At first glance Vonnegut's pairing of jazz and A.A. is strange. If anything, this couplet seems to first speak to each other as opposites: they relate as Saturday night and Sunday morning, the speakeasy and the storefront church, or the boom and the bust. Yet Vonnegut senses a secret and deep spiritual affinity between these two seemingly incongruous cultural forms - they both have "nurtured" the people in special, profound, and unique ways. Moreover,

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<sup>172</sup> Vonnegut, Kurt. "The Worst Addiction of All." In *Fates Worse than Death*. Putnam Publishing, New York City. 1991. p. 132

Vonnegut is right when he characterizes this mutual spirit as distinctly, if idiosyncratically, American, and his first instinct is to praise this spirit. Jazz and A.A. both are formed within the context of a deeply felt American alienation; a sense of anomic tragedy rooted in the history and culture of the United States. Both respond with a deep affirmation of the human, generating a cultural movement that reworks the raw materials of American life into an impossible form that, despite all odds, promises transcendence. At their best, they are forms that promise to rest the dead weight of history and bring into being a transformed nation; a promise that feels to the settlers here to be as old as the land itself.

To back up. The 1939 publication of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, and the social movement that it announced, was a watershed in addiction science. For better and for worse, the premises of this text fixed a certain set of meanings around the ideas of addiction and recovery in the second half of the twentieth century that millions would learn to emulate and repeat. The Big Book is a startlingly syncretic text of American religion, practical philosophy, and social custom. It was woven out of New Testament scripture, management psychology, philosophical pragmatism, and a shine of Barnumesque hokum by a stockbroker in Brooklyn and

his alcoholic "squad," a kind of Bible-study group that had evolved Frank Buchannan's movement for "moral rearmament" into a national program of addiction recovery.<sup>173</sup> The Big Book would become American myth, an ur-narrative around which millions of recovering addicts - a group that will grow to include gamblers, codependents, people with eating disorders, and so on - would learn to organize their experience. Like Vonnegut, I will be frank in my admiration for what this work has accomplished. At its best, *Alcoholics Anonymous* is a remarkable text of modern psychology and social organization. For many, this is a book that does what it promises; it produces miracles, showing a path towards life that begins from "rock bottom," from the extremity of chemical dependence. In this writing, I am particularly concerned with the particular cultural meanings of the A.A. deity, "a power greater than ourselves that could restore our sanity,"<sup>174</sup> which I use to analyze the political theology of A.A.'s "miracle cure."

As with many objects of American culture of this

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<sup>173</sup> Kurtz, Ernest. *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous*. Hazelden Education Services. Center City, MN. 1979 is the authoritative history of A.A. and the recovery movement. For the Oxford groups, see: Hadley Cantril *The Psychology of Social Movements*. Wiley and Sons Publishing, New York. 1941

<sup>174</sup> W, Bill. *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered From Alcoholism*. Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, New York. 1939. p. 22. Hereafter cited as *The Big Book*.

period, *Alcoholics Anonymous* finds its origin in England. The enlisted man who will grow up to be known as Bill W., on leave from service in the Great War, stands in front of an unknown soldier's gravestone where he has been sent to serve. In beginning his story in England, Wilson seems to be channeling his intellectual master William James. James was the Gifford Lecturer of Natural History at the University of Edinburgh when he gave the talks that would become *Varieties of Religious Experience*, and he began his Edinburgh lectures with a reflection on the paucity of American philosophy in comparison to the European tradition, "It seems the natural thing for us to listen while Europeans talk. The contrary habit, of talking while Europeans listen, we have not acquired." He imagines, though, that "the current of philosophical ideas has begun to flow from West to East, and I hope it will continue."<sup>175</sup> By beginning in the United Kingdom, the Big Book replicates this gesture, placing its thinking within an imaginary geography that links Europe and America, understanding the New World as the site of the renewal of the spirit of western history, which, precisely because of its newness, was beginning to overtake Europe as the pinnacle of

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<sup>175</sup> James, William. *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature. Being The Gifford Lectures in Natural History Delivered at Edinburgh. 1901-1902.* Random House, New York. 2002.



civilizational progress. This geo-temporal metaphor - Europe as past and America as future - would have had a specific resonance in the inter-war period. If the battlefields of Europe represented the catastrophic telos of human civilization, the imagery of the New World promises that the weight of history's destruction might be transcended.

It is fitting, then, that the Big Book opens with the narrator, Bill Wilson, standing before the grave of an unknown soldier. This opening is astonishingly brief: in my edition, this story entirely fits on the first page of the book, with space for the chapter heading: "1. Bill's Story."<sup>176</sup> The details of Bill's early life in Vermont are sketched with almost impossible brevity; we learn that he marries young and immediately enlists. "War fever ran high in the small town"<sup>177</sup> is his entire summary of the national mood. Shipped abroad soon after, "in the midst of the excitement I discovered liquor."<sup>178</sup> And with that, we find him in England, where he has an experience so profoundly staggering that, some thirty years later, he will use it to announce his life story to the recovery community. His revelation occurs on Winchester Cathedral grounds, in the

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<sup>176</sup> *The Big Book*. p. 1.

<sup>177</sup> *The Big Book*, p. 1

<sup>178</sup> *The Big Book*, p. 1

cemetery, where "much moved,"<sup>179</sup> he comes across the gravestone of an anonymous soldier.<sup>180</sup> Instead of being moved by the sublime majesty of the Gothic cathedral, Wilson's spirit is drawn towards this humble gravestone of the forgotten man that sits in its shadow. On the stone is printed an epitaph, a piece of low verse, which Wilson refers to as "doggerel:"

*Here lies a Hampshire Grenadier  
Who caught his death  
From cold small beer  
A good soldier is never forgot  
Whether he die by musket or by pot*

Placing this moment at the beginning, Wilson aligns his own experience with this forgotten soldier. In doing so, he references a theme in the literature of addiction that extends back to Lyman Beecher: the intuition that the hidden dangers of alcoholism become known in certain foreseeable signs. In literature, these often take the form of intuitions, portents, or omens. Within a work in which the spiritual experience will take a central role, what is described here is a missed moment of revelation. In contrast with the infectious enthusiasm of the patriotic

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<sup>179</sup> *The Big Book*, p. 1

<sup>180</sup> Alcoholics Anonymous historians have located the tombstone. It belonged to a Thomas Thetcher, dates from 1764, and was placed at the Cathedral by Thetcher's regimen. The poem is a loose rendition of the actual epitaph. Although the specific gravesite that Wilson visited is known, however, it seems important that his name is elided in the text of the *Big Book*. I will refer to him simply as "the grenadier"

"war fever" of his homeland: "Here was love, applause, war; moments sublime with intervals hilarious. I was part of life at last,"<sup>181</sup> the "doggerel" of the forgotten English soldier seems to impress Wilson with its existential finality. And yet this lesson will be ignored until years later, the moment abandoned, the revelation forgotten, with disastrous consequences for Wilson's health and happiness.

To understand this moment of graveside identification, we might look at the two modes of death circumscribed for the unhappy grenadier; by bullet or by the bottle. Violent death seems an inevitability: the bleak alternative to a futile death as cannon fodder is to drink oneself to death before being shot. A violent, fiery end on the battlefield, or a cold, watery end by drink. Two forces of human bondage are thus figured; the self-inflicted bondage of addiction is a metaphor for the regimented servitude of the military, and both place the powerless individual in abstract servitude to a larger potentiate that leads ultimately to a meaningless, insignificant death. Addiction is an internalized continuation of the war, not on the battleground but on a spiritual plane; the violence of the battlefield internalized a war against one's own self. So

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<sup>181</sup> *The Big Book*, p. 1

too Bill Wilson will take the vast, senseless atrocity of the Great War home with him when he returns from England and begins fighting the great campaign to save the national soul on the home front of America.

The grenadier's story foreshadows the theme of "anonymity" as a central fact of the experience of addiction. This aspect of A.A. is often thought as primarily a principle of secrecy, an organizational rule that protects the identity of those who seek it. Yet in A.A. thinking, it is common to find terms that express a polyvalent truth, which operate simultaneously on several material, intellectual and spiritual levels. Terms that begin as a description of the alcoholic's individual struggle with drinking are developed as the spiritual universe of the text broadens, so that similar concepts are seen to be operational on the level of the family, the social world, and eventually on the level of theology or cosmology. Such is "anonymity;" it first appears in the Big Book as a jarring experience of estrangement and alienation, so powerful that it can even be deadly. In this sense, an alcoholic is "anonymous" even before they come into the fold: "Those of us who live in large cities are overcome by the reflection that close by, hundreds are

dropping into oblivion every day."<sup>182</sup> Addiction is part of the fabric of mass urban life. One knows that this "oblivion" - a slow descent into a lonely death - exists everywhere among the urban masses, and yet this does not possess one with the agency to alleviate it. And the community is "overcome" with the weight of this reflection, an experience projected onto Wilson's consideration of the grenadier's lonely, abject demise.

Yet ultimately, the grenadier's death is not entirely futile. A strange optimism comes from the fact that the soldier's story has not been entirely forgotten, that it is remembered, obscurely and strangely, by another addict who identifies with this lost soul. His nameless death introduces a lesson in transcendence, an inexplicable fellowship by which grief can be overcome. The grenadier's tale introduces a strange principle of A.A. mysticism: addicts can communicate the spiritual facts of addiction with other addicts in ways that that the well cannot fully ken. It is a revision of Beecher's doctrine of signs, but here the sign is recast, not as otherworldly portent but as the human experience of empathy. "Strangely enough, wives, parents, and intimate friends usually find us even more

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<sup>182</sup> *The Big Book*, p. 19

unapproachable as do the psychiatrist and doctor. But the ex-problem drinker, armed with a few facts about himself, can generally win the confidence of another alcoholic within a few hours."<sup>183</sup> From this, A.A. organizes itself as a democratic, lay movement - not organized by medical or psychological professionals but by the experience of those in recovery themselves.

Bill Wilson's explicit commentary on this verse is frustratingly brief: "Ominous warning" he blurts "which I failed to heed!" and plunges into the narration of his alcoholic life. The brief anecdote stands alone as the frontispiece to the *Big Book*, only loosely connected to the development of the story. Even geographically it is set apart; it is the only page in the work whose events occur outside of the United States. This grenadier never appears again in the text, nor is the Great War treated again with anything more than a few oblique references. We know Bill saw violence in the war, which profoundly affected his thinking about God: "Judging by what I had seen in the war, the power of God in the affairs of man was negligible, the Brotherhood of Man a grim jest,"<sup>184</sup> and yet by and large the experience is elided, not described with any sort of real

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<sup>183</sup> *The Big Book*, p. 18

<sup>184</sup> *The Big Book*. p. 11

detail. If there is a specific reason for this, it well may be that Bill Wilson resisted any inference that his alcoholism could be traced to or caused by war trauma. This is consistent with the wisdom of the A.A. program, which pragmatically encourages its adherents to not focus on the origin of their traumatic wounds as much as the destructive habits they have cultivated to care for them. As we will see, this is central to the narrative economy of the recovery narrative, which treats the attempt to trace trauma to an origin as ultimately futile and counter-productive.

The "doggerel's" function in the text, then, is not narrative but thematic and historical. The grenadier's tombstone locates the reader within a definable history and its cultural meanings; the existential malaise around the civilizational progress that had lead mankind inexorably to the battlefields of Europe. Moreover, it implies that alcohol is the connection between the great struggle of empires and the individual struggle on the home front - the addict's struggle rendered through the dramatic of confrontation of battle, but without hope of honor or glory; simple remembrance is the only redemption.

It is important to see how this particular contextualization might, however, be an evasion of a more

direct and pressing political context. The grenadier's story is an appeal to the dignity of humanity in the abstract unity of the war effort; the enemy is always the implacable death, to which all life is naturally opposed. But this common-sense logic can be seen as a savvy, self-aware way of papering over more immediate questions of national conflict. The post-prohibition context is the implicit reference of the principle of non-affiliation codified in the Tenth Tradition: "Alcoholics Anonymous has no position on outside issues, and hence the A.A. name should never be drawn into public controversy<sup>185</sup>" which defines the "politics" of A.A. as precisely apolitical. The most pressing "public controversy" of the time was the failure of national prohibition; the collapse of a disciplinary regime and the beginning of a comparative liberalism that, to many, had proven that the hopes that the alcohol trade could be driven from the United States were entirely quixotic. This was the defeat of a certain kind of utopian progressivism, as well as the religious right and the increasingly nativist, anti-urban movements that organized around the question of prohibition.

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<sup>185</sup> *The Big Book*. p. 270



In this context, the principle of non-affiliation treats the question of national prohibition as a settled question upon which the organization is not willing or able to speak. As such, it is able to address both "wets" and "drys," while ducking the loaded questions of gender, race, urbanity, and economy that came with it, recasting of a movement of social reform into a program of personal recovery. At this moment, a new drug regime is formed. As opposed to temperance thought, this is a liberal model of drug governance rooted in the individual's capacity and responsibility for self-governance: *laissez-faire*. For this reason, A.A. theology expresses and works within a particular correspondence between the individual and the state inscribed by ascendant liberal capitalism.

It is not a coincidence that A.A. does important work to institutionalize the hegemony of the "disease concept" precisely at this moment. Indeed, the medical model of the Big Book seems specifically defined to preserve temperance theology in the absence of the reform movement that had been connected to it. A.A. is able both to accept the premises of the disease concept and to promise a recovery program whose truth exists beyond medical rationality. There is almost no position advanced during the endless 19<sup>th</sup> century debates on alcohol that is not addressed somehow in

*Alcoholics Anonymous*, and yet it also appears *sui generis*, proffering an entirely new solution to a crisis as old as the American republic. The genius of this document - and this brilliance can have a wicked underside - was to define the cultural ill of addiction in specific relation to the user's personal relation to a spiritual power, and to base the organizational relationships of recovery on this spiritual connection as a first principle. In doing so, *Alcoholics Anonymous* was able to circumvent almost the entire conflict by reformulating the locus of the Calvinist dialectic in the interiorizing actions of the drug consumer.

So that we can focus on the essential structure of the recovery narrative, I would like to temporarily disconnect *Alcoholics Anonymous* from its master signifier - alcohol - so that the conceptual problems that the text poses can be seen in relief. This method is in keeping with the polyvalent logic of the work itself, which apprehends alcohol simultaneously in terms of a literal relationship of biological dependence and the symbolic expression of a deeper spiritual truth. It is also faithful to the notion of the iterability of this story, which exists as a rhetorical template through which any addict's experience might be narrated. Removing the idea of alcohol from the

text, this is Wilson's story:

A young man from rural New England serves his country during World War One, after which moves to New York City to pursue business. He is young and intelligent, and his success seems assured. He does not yet know or understand that he is afflicted by mysterious disease, poorly understood by the medical establishment, in fact, incurable. The development of this disease will undermine his endeavors for over a decade, sabotaging his business, his marriage, and threatening his life. He is able to pass as well for a certain period, but it soon becomes impossible for anyone around him to ignore his frequent fits. There is pain, sickness, and increasing bouts of convalescence. Even more terrifying, the disease often presents as a powerful force of irrationality or insanity. It acts as a malevolent, toxic force, and his good fortune is transformed into misery. He squanders his fortune, loses close friends, alienates his wife, and is close to losing his life. His own efforts to cure himself are of no avail, neither can the experts cure him. He is a chronic case, and this amounts to a death sentence. At his lowest, at a moment when there is nothing to do but hope for a painless death, there is a miracle. Faith intervenes where knowledge has failed. Sick in a hospital bed, the possibility of a new relationship with a Higher Power changes his life. His sickness is removed through his newfound faith, and he is given to understand that he owes his very life to his faith. The deadly necessity of maintaining this faith leads him to enter into spiritual community with others who share his disease. Sustaining his own belief involves working with others and bringing them awareness of their condition, and upon this basis he founds a new spiritual community to bring the message of healing to others.

The tradition of the miracle cure is ancient, it reflects an understanding of body and soul developed primarily within a Judeo-Christian reflection on sin and affliction. Bill's Story draws on this ancient vocabulary of spiritual power and transforms it; generating an

entirely new paradigm for understanding chemical dependency. Indeed, it succeeds so that this framework will, for some time, become the hallmark of a modern approach to addiction science. The central motif is God's power to act where human understanding has failed, as Christ makes his healing manifest through intervention in a problem for which rational understanding has no solution. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him."<sup>186</sup> Yet in place of a demonology, disease is located within the authority of medical science and its rational understanding. The Manichaeistic struggle between God and the devil in the kingdom of this world is transposed into the mind's struggle to control the vicissitudes of the body; the devil and original sin become concepts of chronic disease and psychological compulsion.

Yet the limits of medical understanding occur precisely at a moment that puts a cure perpetually out of reach and condemn the drinker to an early death. This appears in the text as a dramatic failure of medical rationality. The most salient characteristic of the alcoholic disease, says the text, is the inability to act

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<sup>186</sup> John 9:3

on rational knowledge - one knows that one needs to quit drinking, and yet finds oneself continually compelled otherwise. A.A. theology argues that at this moment, faith must intervene where reason has failed. Instead of fighting the disease, the addict must admit that they are, in fact, powerless over their illness, and reach to a spiritual power that they do not fully understand for a miraculous cure. Faith is the only weapon that remains to the addict in this struggle, faith as God's power to heal a broken world precisely at the moment where human will is overcome. The key term for this faith is "power" - a multivalent concept that has both a metaphysical and a political referent. At this moment, the central feature of the recovery narrative is a reorganization of the power of the individual, famously articulated as the first steps of recovery, which articulate the concepts of surrender and acceptance.

What has struck many critics is the circularity of this explanation, in which the meanings of faith converge strikingly with the progress of the disease. It is as if salvation occurred simultaneously on the psychological and the spiritual plane. In what might be seen as a modern liberal extrapolation of Beecher's theory of equilibrium, exigencies of health exist in miraculous correspondence

with the divinity of God: such that by choosing God, one simultaneously chooses life, health, and morality. In making the intellectual case for this paradoxical faith, it is difficult to overstate the influence of the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, which at moments seems to have been worked whole-cloth into the Big Book. It is literally the only work cited directly in Alcoholics Anonymous, and many of the concepts that James advances in the Edinburgh lectures find direct expression in A.A. terminology: "the Sick Soul" as the concept of a "rock bottom," for instance, "Conversion" rephrased as "surrender," or "the Religion of Healthy Mindedness" as the fusion of health and wisdom that A.A. promises. *Varieties* is a text of religious psychology, which explicates the science that studies the mysteries of the religious life in terms of rationalist paradigms of psychological causality. The major conceptual problem in *Varieties* is the need to describe the relationship between religious experience and abnormal psychology without reducing either problem to the terms of the other. James gives the example of the ecstasies of Saint Theresa, which might be "explained" if we can trace her hallucinations to the presence of lesions on her occipital lobe. However, this medical truth does not imply any sort of judgment on the "meaning" of her visions as

spiritual truth. Her philosophy may derive from the extremity of delirium and still be sound religious counsel.

The most direct reference to alcoholism in *Varieties* is an analysis the miracle cure practiced by Jerry McCauley, founder of the Water Street Mission on the Lower East Side, which James recounts in a chapter titled "Conversion."<sup>187</sup> The stories that came from these missions tended to deal with the urban proletariat: the vices of "lowest of the low," described in appalled but vivid detail by a middle class narrator who often seems both fascinated and revolted by the social situation of the poor.<sup>188</sup> Unexpectedly, these degenerate characters are completely rehabilitated through their interaction with an encounter with God at the mission - they become progressive reformers themselves and take up the crusade against the sin that they were once mired in. In many ways, Bill's recovery story is a recasting of this discourse that mediated between middle-class reformers and working-class drinkers; he repeats this narrative structure with one major difference: the class position of the narrator. Instead of a socially marginal drunkard, the hero of A.A.

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<sup>187</sup> *Varieties*. p. 223

<sup>188</sup> Calhoun, Eoin. *The Saloon and the Mission: Addiction, Conversion, and the Politics of Redemption in American Culture*. University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst, MA. 2013

is an educated member of the American bourgeois on a trajectory of downward mobility. Importantly, this seems to involve a reworking of the theological address itself. The drunks at the mission are cast as victims of their ignorance, the thrust of McCauley's mission is the classic evangelizing theme of dispelling sin through the knowledge of the Gospel's. By contrast, the Big Book is addressed to "We, Agnostics;" the worldly skeptic, the cosmopolitan man of the world who thinks that he can reason beyond God.

Significantly, "medical materialism" is the name that James gives to this doctrine of scientific skepticism - a doctrine whose relation to "historical materialism" begs for exploration. Medical materialism is the mode of explanation that locates the ultimate value of all spiritual truth can be located, at a certain point, in its organic origin. Mysteries of faith will always resolve themselves into "materialist" facts of the human organism. As opposed to this materialism, that discovers the atheism that it presumes, James recommends pragmatism. The value of religious teachings should not be judged by materialist "origins," be they healthy or morbid, but from results: the test of a spiritual program is its capacity to instruct us about the meaning of the good life. And so the interiority of religious experience is preserved. It remains ineffable



to the categories of psychological science, which creates a certain space for the autonomous actions of faith. A.A. adopts this perspective quite literally, and uses it to explain how the alcoholics' first knowledge of God comes from the experience of material necessity. Faith finds its necessity in the peculiarity of the alcoholic disease; it occurs both as a divine miracle and a psychological intervention.

James' psychology allows A.A.'s addiction science to make an extremely important advance beyond temperance theology. In earlier thinking, alcohol is thought of as essentially toxic and addictive, leading inevitably to decline and degeneration: temperance literature tends to treat it as ultimately linked to the devil and an object of the severest taboo. By contrast, the modern paradigm focuses not on the substance but the drinker: the alcoholic is the specific person unable to resist alcohol. A.A. is clear on this point - not all who drink are destined to become drunks. This seemingly minor revision in fact changes the entire locus of the disease; the defining feature of addiction does not exist in the toxicity of the substance, but in the relation between the subject and the substance. "Opinions vary considerably as to why the alcoholic differs from normal people. We cannot answer the

riddle.<sup>189</sup>” There is no real sense in looking for the “origin” of this drive; it appears as an irrational form of desire, of obscure or unconscious motivation, and often occurs in direct contradiction to the expressed will of the drinker. The alcoholic is the one who wishes to quit drinking but can’t. The drive towards intoxication is described as an innate psychological feature, of unknown cause, that the addict has little or no control over. For this reason, relapse is the defining feature of alcoholism as illness. Long periods of abstinence are inevitably disrupted by the first drink, which leads, more or less immediately, to a catastrophic relapse. This ever-present threat of relapse is why A.A. argues that alcoholism is a chronic, or life-long, condition, for which complete abstinence is indicated, but seemingly impossible to maintain.

*Renewing my resolve, I tried again. Some time passed, and confidence began to be replaced by cocksureness. I could laugh at the gin mills. Now I had what it takes! One day I walked into a cafe to telephone. In no time, I found myself beating on the bar, asking myself how it happened. As the whiskey rose in my head, I told myself I would manage better the next time, but I better get good and drunk then. And I did.<sup>190</sup>*

It is helpful to consider this prose in the context of

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<sup>189</sup> *The Big Book*. p. 22

<sup>190</sup> *The Big Book*. p. 6

Hemingway's hardboiled minimalism.<sup>191</sup> Characterized by short, terse sentences, written in an urban American vernacular that creates a mood of cynical fatalism. Wilson's words seem to gesture towards an unknowable interiority, expressive of a trauma that exists outside of language, unable to be verbalized. It is able to create the impression of the remarkable suddenness with which the toxic compulsion takes hold, as if the decision to drink whiskey was taken in absence of any conscious volition on Wilson's part. There is nothing inherent in the statement "I walked into a cafe to telephone" that explains the disastrous result of this action. Moreover, there is no description of the cafe at all, it occurs as if it were an incidental feature of the urban landscape itself, neither is there recourse here either to psychology, to history, or to environment. There is no explanation at all, instead, there is a frightening suggestion of a deadly compulsion that acts independently of the self and overpowers it. The possibility of self-control seems logically excluded, as if alcoholism were a power operating somehow beyond the self, independently controlling it.

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<sup>191</sup> Tolkien, Michael. "Alcoholics Anonymous." *A New Literary History of America*. Edited by Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA. 2009. 176

"These observations would be academic and pointless if our friend never took the first drink, thereby setting the terrible cycle in motion. Therefore, the main problem of the alcoholic centers in his mind, rather than in his body.<sup>192</sup>" This is "the problem of the first drink," out of which the concept of God will be developed. How is it, with my knowledge of myself and my disease, that I still repeatedly and irrationally succumb to temptation? It is a frighteningly familiar problem; the alcoholic will repeatedly swear off drink, only to find themselves returning to intoxication once more, as if the first drink compromised the will to sobriety so completely that a complete relapse is inevitable: "Once in a while he may tell the truth. And the truth is, strange to say, is that he usually has no more idea why he took that first drink than you do."<sup>193</sup> It becomes absurd to speak of "will" in this context; A.A. hypothesizes that it is in the nature of the addictive illness to compromise the will itself; the alcoholic is precisely the person who cannot use "control" in this setting. And so there is a limit to the will, such that "I can control my drinking" is not only a wildly ambitious thesis but a dangerously misleading one; it

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<sup>192</sup> *The Big Book*. p. 23

<sup>193</sup> *The Big Book*. p. 23

hypothesizes an agency in the self that it is precisely the nature of the addictive disease to disable.

It is extremely instructive at this point to look at A.A. theology through Gregory Bateson's systems theory.<sup>194</sup> In this paradigm, alcoholic "surrender" functions through a fundamental and radical change to the epistemological paradigm. The program of Alcoholics Anonymous, in Bateson's terms, might be described as a sort of therapeutic technology, a method of analyzing the self and working it into a different set of relations through a revision of the first principles through which the world itself is apprehended. "Simple but not easy; a price had to be paid. It meant the destruction of self-centeredness. I had to turn all things over to the Father of Light who presides over us all."<sup>195</sup> The goal of this acquiescence is the production of a health no longer in antagonistic relation with the external world or with one's own desires. Doing this requires the production of a new understanding of the self, one very different from the illusions of mastery characteristic of "Western" culture. What Alcoholics Anonymous provides to the recovering alcoholic, Bateson

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<sup>194</sup> Bateson, Gregory. "The Cybernetics of Self: A Theory of Alcoholism." In *Steps Towards an Ecology of Mind*. Ballentine Books: New York, NY. p. 178  
308-339

<sup>195</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous* p. 14

argues, is a counter-epistemology, a transformation of self, phrased in theological terms as the renewal of a relationship between the recovering alcoholic and the deity.<sup>196</sup> This theology, Bateson says, modifies or rejects many of the assumptions of hegemonic Western epistemology but is consistent with an "ecological"<sup>197</sup> understanding of mind within a system. Surrender to what A.A. terms the Higher Power is the first fundamental step in a revised theory of knowledge, which produces a profoundly different relationship between the self and the external world.

Entering into a new relationship with God is the basis of a new understanding of the self; what emerges from the admission of one's own powerlessness is, eventually, an increased understanding of the interconnected nature of this self. The human being is no longer the center of knowledge about the external world, instead, knowledge occurs within a system that describes the human being in

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<sup>196</sup> Whether the Higher Power must be, in fact, understood as "divine," other-worldly, or transcendent is actually a matter of some debate within A.A. In fact, the phrasing of the third step: "turned our lives over to the care of God as we understood him" (emphasis original) reflects a compromise among early A.A. members between "religious" and "psychologist" factions, who wanted to emphasize different aspects of the program. Many in A.A. understand the Higher Power as a Christian God; many others understand it in more secular terms.

<sup>197</sup> An "ecological" perspective is one which apprehends "mind" as a property of the material system that contains it - a "pathology" tends towards destruction of this living system. Bateson, Gregory. "Pathologies of Epistemology." In *Steps Towards an Ecology of Mind*. p. 478-488

constant interaction with a social world and a natural home. Western epistemology, according to Bateson, significantly errs when it considers the human consciousness as the center of knowledge about an external world. This assumption of conscious mastery is dangerously erroneous, and indeed, the illusion of mastery is central to the nature of the disease. The "problem of the first drink" instead reveals the self as ultimately impotent, at the whims of a world that is impossible to control.

Insanity lies in a perpetually receding re-fortification of the powers of the self, sanity is surrender and a strategic alliance with a Higher Power greater still than one's foe. This power is the instrument of a greater will of which the human subject is not capable. The injunction becomes:

NOT: I must summon all the power I am capable of to resist drink.

BUT: I am powerless to resist drink (and therefore, I must summon a counter-power against the power of drink.)

Instead of an egocentric understanding, which understands the individual as in control of their own destiny and able to will their own sobriety and salvation, A.A. posits an ego-less conception that understands the human as at the mercy of forces far more powerful than themselves. Drink is therefore the first figuration of the Higher Power

within the text. The realization that alcohol has a power over me leads to the realization that I exist in a world constituted by God's power. Lack of control over drinking thus leads to a larger reckoning with the futility of the desire for "control". It is typical of the style of the text to synthesize the prosaic lesson and the spiritual lesson in this fashion, which belongs to the parable.

The concept of the Higher Power thus has a very specific dual reference: both a transcendent deity and drink itself. Even the specific injunction to faith, "We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to God as we understand him" reflects a compromise made among early members between those who wanted to emphasize the transcendent aspect of spirituality, and those who wanted to emphasize psychological factors and who argued that the mental fact of conversion was than the specific deity to which one converted. For this reason, a secularized thinking of the deity is essential to A.A. theology.

Wilson extrapolates this most clearly from the epistle of James. "Faith without works is dead, he said. And how appallingly true for the alcoholic! For if an alcoholic failed to perfect and enlarge his spiritual life through work and self-sacrifice for others, he could not survive the trials and low spots ahead. And then faith would be



dead indeed. With us it is just like that.”<sup>198</sup> The founders of Alcoholics Anonymous often identified themselves with early Christians; devoted readers of the Bible, their favorite books seem to have been the works of the evangelists. They too understood themselves as a small community of outsiders and misfits, with values often subversive to those in power, trying to find a way to maintain and grow their faith in a world that seems hostile to their very existence.<sup>199</sup> In these words, the apostle is working towards defining the Christian relationship between the realms of the spiritual and the material. There is a duty, James tells us, which corresponds to each, and under the new covenant, it is not enough to only care for the soul, to purify the spiritual condition through ritual observation and obedience to the law. Faith cannot remain on the level of the ideal: it must be made real in the world if it is not to be extinguished. His concept of “works” defines the actions that bridge the gap between heaven and earth, that establish the kingdom of God in the material world. James’s maxim has been interpreted as reacting against a theology of the world beyond, which understands the ephemerality of the body as insignificant,

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<sup>198</sup> *The Big Book*. p 14

<sup>199</sup> *Not-God*. P. 7-37

in relation to the majesty of the divine. Against this interpretation, James posits a theology that begins with the material. It is founded on a model of Christian charity: alms-giving, as a means of caring both for the body and the soul. For James, attention to material needs should no longer be thought of as a neglect of spiritual care: such attention is, in fact, the true realization of the spirit.

As the Son of God had to take the form of man, so must all spiritual reality express itself materially to be given new life. If not, this faith is "dead," a phrase that has an interesting double meaning. It would first seem to refer to a man who does not grasp the inner reality of the new covenant, who fulfills the letter of the law without giving thought to its spirit: such a man is spiritually dead. Yet there is a more concrete reference at work in James the evangelist, who relates the problem of faith to the struggle for subsistence: "If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,' but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?"<sup>200</sup> There can be no faith without

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<sup>200</sup>James 2:15-16

bread, for there is no home for the church without a material incarnation, the body. Religious life, for James, thus begins with the body. "Works" define the site of exchange between the material and the spiritual, in which care of the body is simultaneously care for the soul.

The thought of the evangelist, for Wilson, is a way of explaining the unique necessity of the organizational structure of *Alcoholics Anonymous*. Faith as a first principle, beyond an intellectual understanding, gives the drinker the power to maintain sobriety and is the absolute minimal condition for recovery. Yet as James teaches, this faith will die if it is not consistently worked on. If the alcoholic does not consistently recreate the reality of faith in the material world, the faith will be extinguished. Under the threat of death, then, faith must always be worked upon and realized anew. The genius of A.A. is to locate the precise structure of this work in terms of organizational practice; one's own recovery is based on work with others in recovery. "For if an alcoholic failed to perfect and enlarge his spiritual life through work and self-sacrifice for others, he could not survive the certain trials and low spots ahead. If he did not work, he would surely drink again, and if he drank, he would surely die. Then faith would be dead indeed. With us

it is just that."<sup>201</sup>

Theology is therefore founded on the condition of the body and its immediate needs; however, it does not rest there. For this miracle to endure, it must be reproduced, not through divine intercession but through a new sort of repetition that replaces the old compulsions. Thus is founded a spiritual community, in which the act of ministering to the material needs of the other is simultaneously care of the spiritual needs of the self. Spiritual work occurs on both the material and the divine simultaneously, as if the various relationships between body, mind, community, soul, and the divine were simultaneously met through the same act of ministry, which begins with the body and moves towards the realm of the spirit.<sup>202</sup> The mundane facts of the work are transcended - work within A.A. is simultaneously work on oneself, for the community, and for the glory of God.

And yet we must also notice how A.A. gives a precise inversion to the meaning of the biblical text. In James, the important problem is one of Christian charity, the giving of one's own wealth to one who is in need. The imagery in James is therefore of scarcity and lack: a

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<sup>201</sup> *The Big Book*. p 25

<sup>202</sup> See Emerson, Ralph Waldo, "Nature." *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. The Modern Library. 2000. p. 364-377

beggar, in danger of death, given new life through an act of Christian charity. Death is a matter of not having means to subsistence, and charity is a means to preserve the health of the spiritual community; it provides even the weakest members of this community with means for subsistence. In *Alcoholics Anonymous*, however, the threat to community health is no longer a problem of lack but of excess. Death is not being unable to secure the substances of subsistence. In fact, it is the opposite, it is an excess of subsistence, of medicine, it is the inability to abstain from the palliative that threatens to kill. Spiritual work is not a matter of sharing plenty but avoiding it. The problem is not "How can we avoid succumbing to death" but "How can we avoid killing ourselves?"

The meaning and nature of suicide is a key operational concept within this text. Figures of suicide mark the A.A. text as a limit point to which A.A. theology is exterior. It is this dark compulsion that exists on the other side of the injunction to faith that has led many to critique A.A. theology as "cultish": surrender or suicide: these are the options that *Alcoholics Anonymous* presents to addicts. A complicated question of agency arises here. The concept of suicide requires a differentiation between self-inflicted

death and death by another's hand, and temperance thinkers had little hesitation in ascribing thousands of deaths to the flesh merchants who traded in poison. Yet this kind of moral responsibility is not possible in the modern concept of disease. Within a condition characterized by a total loss of self-control, it becomes impossible to ascribe the same kind of moral agency to the individual. When we speak of addiction, it becomes difficult to articulate any kind of concept of a unified self, as if the self that destroys and the self that is destroyed were not the same person. There is one literal sense in which the addict's death is self-caused, and another quite separate sense in which her death is caused by an external agent:

*Golf permitted drinking every day and every night. It was fun to carom around the exclusive course which had inspired such awe in me as a lad. I acquired the impeccable coat of tan one sees on the well-to-do. The local banker watched me whirl fat checks in and out of his till with amused skepticism.*

*Abruptly in October 1929 hell broke loose on the New York Stock Exchange. After one of those days of inferno, I wobbled from a hotel bar to a brokerage office. It was eight o'clock - five hours after the market closed. The ticker still clattered. I was starting at an inch of the tape which bore the inscription XYZ-32. It had been 52 that morning. I was finished and so were many friends. The papers reported men jumping to death from the towers of high finance. That disgusted me. I would not jump. I went back to the bar. My friends had dropped several million since ten o'clock - so what? Tomorrow was another day. As I*

*drank, the old fierce determination to win came back.*<sup>203</sup>

This is a remarkable description of the way that Wilson experiences death as cathected to an addictive economy. Again, the language is schematic, it sketches a life of privilege and affluence in broad strokes, with the golf course as symbol of a detached space of leisure, a place where the ordinary rules of adulthood are suspended, and a perpetual state of suspended adolescence is enabled. Life is just a game. The market crash interrupts this space of fantasy "abruptly." Like the phantom telephone call that triggers Wilson's relapse in the café, the market crash occurs suddenly, randomly, and without warning it brings "hell" down on Wall Street. Suicides from the high-rises<sup>204</sup> mimic the falling numbers on the ticker-tape, as if the dissipation of financial value had become directly visible on the social body. In turn, the crash foreshadows Wilson's own dissolution into drink, alcohol at first appears to be the remedy; it in fact announces a larger collapse: "no one could guess that I would have no real employment for the next five years, or hardly draw a sober breath."<sup>205</sup> The end

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<sup>203</sup> *The Big Book. p. 4*

<sup>204</sup> It is worth noting that reports of these suicides were largely apocryphal; though suicides did increase after the crash, reports of waves of "jumpers" are largely mythological, an exaggeration by the press that has become part of the popular lore. But what is important to Wilson here is not as much the reality of the crash but its mythology.

<sup>205</sup> *The Big Book. p.*

of affluence comes suddenly and without warning, as if this "inferno" had been present the entire time waiting to consume Bill and his friends: "There is nothing that keeps wicked men at any one moment out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God. By the mere pleasure of God, I mean his sovereign pleasure, his arbitrary will, restrained by no obligation, hindered by no manner of difficulty, any more than if nothing else but God's mere will had in the least degree any hand in the preservation of wicked men for one moment."<sup>206</sup> It is as if God suddenly withdrew his support of the market, and the result is pandemonium on the streets of New York.

It is important to see that in this ideology of an addictive economy, the behavior of the alcoholic modelled on financial speculation. The important theme here is the "illusions" of prosperity, security, and stability that the addictive economy produces, yet this is a fake wealth; it is an empire of paper and numbers with no real basis, likely to suddenly evaporate, leaving only chaos and wreckage. Capitalism thus appears as an arbitrary system of power whose illogical cataclysms crush individual human subjects with caprice. This is the inner meaning of

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<sup>206</sup> Jonathon Edwards "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God: A Sermon Preached at Enfield, July 8, 1741." Kneeland & Green, Boston. 1741



"anonymity;" an individual is powerless in the face of these awesome and terrifying catastrophes. In this sense, James' epistle becomes a specific critique, which replaces the false economy of speculation with a "real" economy grounded in the principle of spiritual work. Faith becomes more than an inward system of belief. Instead, faith is about actively building salvation in the belly of the beast, precisely under conditions that try to crush the individual and tear the community asunder. The principle of A.A. is precisely this sense of solidarity and perpetual struggle in the face of an implacable, omnipresent enemy.

It is at this moment that we might see the way that A.A. both preserves and transcends the temperance doctrine of holy war. The entire social itself is at war against the addict; it is a ruthless, implacably hostile system whose grand machinations seem to target their very being. From the depths, A.A. promises transcendence. Improbably, victory in this war comes not through confrontation but through "surrender;" a refusal to accept the terms on which the conflict is being waged. Instead, A.A. reconfigures the very human self that is simultaneously combatant, terrain and spoils of the war - its program reinscribes the conflict into an ever-interiorizing struggle against the self. It has often been suggested - indeed, it is indicated

in the program itself - that this theology is necessarily apolitical, that it resolves the real existence of social struggle into an imagined cathexis with the deity. Yet this line of critique might miss the point, for the self that is under attack is precisely the ego as it has been constructed out of an impossibly destructive culture. A.A. does reparative action against the central concept of this culture - work as it is constituted by a ruthlessly inhuman system. A.A. transforms this concept by positing a different kind of work - no less arduous, but towards an entirely different end. For this reason, it is best grasped as "nurture;" the paradoxical discovery that selfless care for others is the only means of individual survival.

## **CODA**

### **The Silver Bullet and the Little Red Button**

**St. Paul, MN**

Within Gregory Bateson's systems theory, a "schismogenic" process is a relation between two forces or entities that tends towards escalation. When these processes are also "symmetrical," or "matching," this means that behavior of one entity (A) will be met reciprocally by the same behavior from its relational partner (B.) This is as opposed to a "complementary" or "fitting" relationship, in which A's behavior will elicit opposite, dissimilar behavior from B. Dominance, for instance, will be met by submission. When acted out through mass military industrial capacities, this relationship is called an arms race.<sup>207</sup> The danger that an arms race poses, argues Bateson, arises paradoxically out of the very need for security. Perceiving nation A as a threat, nation B will stockpile weapons as defense. Seeing this B's action will cause A to take reciprocal action and fortify its own military strength. The endpoint - both feared and desired - of symmetrical conflict is the doctrine of "mutually assured destruction,"

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<sup>207</sup> Bateson, Gregory. "Culture Contact and Schisomgenesis" in *Steps Towards an Ecology of Mind*. Ballentine Books: New York. 1977. p. 71-82

in which the conditions of security are folded into the possibility of apocalyptic destruction.

This sort of relationship is what Bateson calls a "pathology of epistemology," an error in mind that assumes the character of an illness or disease in its ability to spread disorder throughout a living system, eventually placing the very conditions for epistemology - life itself - in jeopardy.<sup>208</sup> Characteristic of western scientific thought is the technique of abstracting the observing mind from the natural world that it observes, thereby gaining power over it, a paradigm whose origins are visible in the Cartesian postulate of a divinely inspired mind observing an inert material object. It appears on a world-historical level in the atomic age, which produces the paradoxical condition that a nation might "win" a war by destroying the conditions of its own existence. This teleological tendency towards apocalypse, Bateson argues, is inherent in the nature of a mind that abstracts itself from the living system in which it exists. A series of epistemological errors - faith that one can exert unlimited control and power over the natural world, belief in the transcendence of the national body, perception of the monstrous

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<sup>208</sup> Bateson, Gregory. "Pathologies of Epistemology" in *Steps Towards an Ecology of Mind*. p. 484-493

inhumanity of the enemy - are replicated in the global defense system itself, creating a highly precarious conflict that today is the situation for human life itself.

It is characteristic of Bateson's perpetual search for the structure of mind that he finds the pattern of an arms race in the addict's relationship to a poisonous substance.<sup>209</sup> Like an arms race, the struggle against addiction is a matching, schizmogonic relationship. It takes the form of adversarial confrontation and escalates to increasingly high levels of risk. The "pathological" level of the alcoholic's thinking is the fantastic belief that, by force of will, they will be able to vanquish their enemies, real or imaginary, and triumph over their dependence: in the same way that nation A fantasizes about being powerful enough, armed enough, to one day vanquish nation B for good. It is because addiction is subject to these patterns of escalation that Bateson finds such value in A.A. virtues such as "surrender" and "acceptance;" they are a psychological solution to addiction's double-binds. The power of the substance cannot be defeated in open confrontation; this is a suicidal wish to be subsumed. Instead, one must accept one's own powerlessness, and in

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<sup>209</sup> Bateson, Gregory. "The Cybernetics of Self: A Theory of Alcoholism" in *Steps Towards an Ecology of Mind*. p. 315-344

doing so, avoid the schizmogetic relationship itself; the escalating conflict against an indefatigable foe that can only end in self-destruction.

This peculiar insight into the interior relationship between chemical dependency and fantasies of apocalypse reappears in "The Worst Addiction of All," published by American humorist Kurt Vonnegut in 1983, a remarkable document within any consideration of the political meanings of drug use.<sup>210</sup> Images of poison, toxicity, and bad chemicals were central to Vonnegut's work throughout the 1980's. Throughout this decade, Vonnegut wrote extensively about personal and familial struggles with mental illness: suicidal depression, chemical dependency, and suicide. Rescuing humor from a bleak decade, he redeploys these images of mental illness as metaphors in a dark, sardonic critique of imperialist American capitalism, racism, and imperialism. Throughout *Fates Worse than Death*, toxicity is a theme that gets developed both on the level of personal and national consciousness, as if the idea of addiction permitted him to see the one reflected in the other. In doing so, he is working within a long tradition of dissident writing that inscribes the terrain of social

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<sup>210</sup> Vonnegut, Kurt. "The Worst Addiction of them All" in *Fates Worse than Death*. GP Putnam Sons: New York City. 1991. p 129-138

conflict on the body of the addict, describing mental pathology as a central problem of political philosophy. It is not a peripheral phenomenon that political reason can contain, but a founding structure on which politics is built.

The immediate context of "The Worst Addiction of All" is the American invasion of the island of Grenada. Vonnegut responds to this puerile display of American military might with a bizzare Strangelovean parody of the nuclear horizon of a nation hell-bent on its own destruction. He asks the reader to "direct your attention to another form of addiction that has not been previously identified. The people afflicted are ravenous for situations that cause their bodies to release toxic chemicals into their bloodstreams. I am persuaded that there among us people who are tragically hooked on preparations for war.<sup>211</sup>" In a tone somewhere between Terry Southern and Monty Python, Vonnegut argues that only a poisoned mind could understand modern military systems as a rational means of self-defense, and that if we understand this as rational or natural, this may be because we are quite intoxicated ourselves. What we are witnessing is in fact the manifestation of a deeply

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<sup>211</sup> "The Worst Addiction of them All" p. 133-134

compulsive behavior on the level of the American nation, the collective development of profoundly destructive technological systems that contain the potential for our own undoing. The only way to maintain this addiction is the constant development of new weapons systems - planes, submarines, missiles and tanks - which purchase will assuage the addict, but only for a time. The slaver chronic war preparer will constantly return to the social and ask for more: "I swear, man, just lay enough bread on me for twenty multiple re-entry vehicles and a fleet of B-1 bombers, and I'll never bother you again."<sup>212</sup>

The punchline of this essay is worth quoting in full. Reversing the analogy, Vonnegut asks us to consider an alcoholic U.S. President. In A.A. terminology, this man is a "dry drunk." He has obtained a period of nerve-racking, white-knuckled sobriety, but his behavioral change has not resulted in any sort of corresponding change in mental attitudes. He still imagines his sobriety as an adversarial relationship with the bottle, as the perpetual struggle of his will against his chemical other. In short, he has not had a spiritual awakening, and without a fundamental change in this basis of existence, A.A. believes, relapse is

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<sup>212</sup> The Worst Addiction of them All" p. 136



almost inevitable. Now, the particularly destructive, rapacious nature of this addiction has been made abundantly clear to this president in the following terms: "Suppose it were a fact, made absolutely clear to him, that if he took just one more drink the whole planet would blow up."

*So he has all the liquor thrown out of the White House, including his Aqua-Velva shaving lotion. So late at night he is terribly restless, crazy for a drink but proud of not drinking. So he opens the White House refrigerator, looking for a Tab or a Diet Pepsi, he tells himself. And there, half-hidden by a family-size jar of French's mustard, is an unopened can of Coors beer.*

*What do you think he'll do?<sup>213</sup>*

The Silver Bullet and the Little Red Button.

Neurotransmitters and uranium, alkoxides and absolute power. Planetary annihilation as the last, ultimate bender. It is a deeply American image, Slim Pickens cracking a beer as he plummets towards Crimea. A whole bad country full of its bad chemicals.

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<sup>213</sup> The Worst Addiction of them All" p. 138

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