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Listening to Lazarus: the voices of America's first "reformed drunkards"

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There are historically obscure points where the fields of temperance history, alcohol studies, and addiction studies dramatically intersect. John Crowley has illuminated one of the earliest and most interesting of such intersections in his latest book, *Drunkard's Progress: Narratives of Addiction, Despair and Recovery*. This article reviews Crowley's latest contribution, analyzes the reform narratives presented in this work for their portrayal of the processes of addiction and recovery, and reflects on what these narratives tell us about the rise and fall of America's most celebrated 19th-century alcoholic mutual aid society.

I. Context: the Washingtonian Movement

Rising alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems during the late 18th and early 19th centuries triggered abstinence-based cultural revitalization movements among Native American tribes and the emergence of the American temperance movement. Published stories of addiction and recovery that began to appear in the 1820s and 1830s challenged the belief

that "There was hope for our friend, if the yellow fever or even the plague was upon him; but none if he became a drunkard." (1,2) Reform narratives emerged as something of a cultural phenomenon after six "hard cases" organized their own abstinence-based mutual aid society in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1840. This society was founded on the assumption that the reformed drunkard could reach his still-drinking brethren in ways that no one else could.

For the reformed inebriate knows each avenue to his brother's heart; he highly [sic] touches the strings on which hang all his sorrow; no rebuke mingles with his invitation of welcome...

The Washington Temperance Society that was launched in Baltimore spread rapidly through the United States and at its peak claimed a membership of some 600,000—of whom 150,000 were confirmed drunkards.^(3,4) The Washingtonian Movement reached its zenith in 1843 and then entered a period of rapid decline. This decline has been attributed to many factors:

conflict with existing religious and temperance groups, damaged credibility resulting from the relapse of prominent members, ineffective organization, failure to maintain the original closed (drunkards only) meeting structure, internal strife (particularly debates over the role of religion in personal reformation and the advisability of the legal prohibition of alcohol), and the lack of a clearly defined long-term program of recovery.⁽⁵⁾

The Washingtonian Temperance Society placed the reformed drunkard at the head of the temperance table and used the vivid portrayal of his own fall and rebirth as an invitation for others (drunkards and moderate tipplers) to pledge themselves to lifelong abstinence from all alcoholic drink. The Washingtonians placed “experience sharing” at the center of the process of personal reform. During the early 1840s, Washingtonian temperance missionaries carried a message of hope to the drunkard by reaching out to those still suffering (active recruitment), by serving as traveling temperance orators, and by telling their stories of personal decline and resurrection in newspaper articles, pamphlets and books.⁽⁶⁾ The most fully developed of the temperance narratives that emerged within the Washingtonian Movement are the focus of John Crowley’s *Drunkard’s Progress*.

II. A brief review

John Crowley is not a newcomer to the study of the portrayal of alcoholism within American literature. His book *The White Logic: Alcoholism and Gender in American Modernist Fiction* was a significant contribution.⁽⁷⁾ A more recent essay, comparing the narratives of John Gough and Frederick Douglass, is a remarkable piece of research that raised for the first time the question of whether Douglass should be classified as one who reformed himself from the excesses of drink and, as such, should be positioned historically as the first African American who framed abstinence within the context of cultural as well as personal survival.⁽⁸⁾ *Drunkard’s Progress* adds an important new chapter in Crowley’s

contributions to our understanding of the evolving characterization of alcoholism and the alcoholic in American literature.

Some 19th-century alcoholism recovery narratives were so popular and so widely reprinted that they remain reasonably accessible today. Searches of antiquarian booksellers can quickly provide a copy of T. S. Arthur’s *Six Nights with the Washingtonians* (1842); John Gough’s *Autobiography* (1845), *Sunlight and Shadow* (1881), or *Platform Echoes* (1887); the *Life of John Hawkins* (1859); or later reformed-drunkard tales such as Luther Benson’s *Fifteen Years in Hell* (1896); Claude Gunder’s *Saved by the Blood from a Drunkard’s Hell* (1908); or *Thomas Doughty: His Life Struggle and Triumph* (1903). What Crowley has skillfully done as the editor of *Drunkard’s Progress* is pull together and introduce some of the earliest and rarest of such narratives. Works such as *A Long Voyage on a Leaky Ship* (1842), *Confessions of a Female Inebriate* (1842), *Narrative of Charles T. Woodman, A Reformed Inebriate* (1843), and *Autobiography of a Reformed Drunkard* (1845) are so rare as to be virtually inaccessible; Crowley has provided an invaluable service by pulling the most salient elements from these narratives together in a single source. He also helps place these narratives in historical perspective with an engaging introductory essay and through his brief introduction of each excerpted work and its author. Following the eight excerpts is an appendix that provides a quite comprehensive listing of the reform narratives published in America between 1840 and 1915. If there is anything else one could ask from this book, it would be more of John Crowley’s own discussion of these works and their meaning. But wanting more from an author is, in the end, perhaps not a criticism but the ultimate compliment.

III. “Gradations in a drunkard’s career”

What do these narratives tell us about the nature and portrayal of alcoholism in the early 19th century? The most common thread in these tales is their portrayal of the

transition from drinker to “confirmed drunkard” (or “complete sot”⁽⁹⁾) as an ever-accelerating slippery slope. This insidious progression was portrayed in the 1840s temperance narratives as moving through three broad stages.

The first stage—initial exposure and habituation—describes the narrators’ initial encounters with alcohol and their gradual incorporation of drinking into their daily lives. Most notable in their depictions of this stage is the early (usually pre-adolescent) age of onset of drinking, their quick, if not instant, affinity to alcohol, and the rather casual view of the harmlessness of daily drinking. The initiation of daily drinking—the earliest etiological roots of alcoholism as portrayed in these narratives—is variously described as springing from the prescription of alcohol for a physical illness, a reflection of personal temperament or appetite, solace for socially constrained genius, or involvement in an alcohol-saturated occupational subculture. One gets a sense of the utter pervasiveness in which alcohol had penetrated American life in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Such pervasiveness is evident whether one is hearing from the “parlor drunkard” (secret drinker) or “bar-room sot.” Daily drinking is portrayed with an aura of innocence that places the drinker not within some deviant subculture, but within the mainstream of a norm that, while entrenched, was being challenged by a growing temperance movement.

During the second stage of the “drunkard’s career” we find that the drinker reaches a critical point of no return—a cumulative priming dose of alcohol—that triggers a marked acceleration in drinking and its consequences. Drinking increases in frequency and intensity (extended binges, blackouts, morning drinking), health problems begin (impaired sleep, decreased food intake, injuries, illnesses); personal hygiene declines; educational (school expulsions for drinking) and occupational functioning (lost employment) deteriorate, and family relationships suffer increasing strain. The lost intimacy with spouses and children is quite poignantly portrayed. The narrator writing under the pseudonym John

Cotton Mather sorrowfully confesses, “Though I loved her as I loved my own soul, I loved the wine cup more.” We also see during this stage of progression the beginning transformation in the drinker’s emotional health and character: increased resentments, suspiciousness of others, preoccupation with past misfortunes, a sense of being cursed, a growing feeling of dread, the loss of religious sentiment, and moral decline. Also emerging during this period is what in the vernacular of the modern recovery movement would be called denial. In the words of John Gough, “I did not consider myself to be what in reality I was—a drunkard.”

In the third stage of the “career of intemperance” portrayed in these narratives we find both an acceleration of alcohol-related consequences and a failure of efforts to bring drinking under control. The tales reflect here a dramatic downward spiral toward destitution: obsession with the bottle, failed efforts to substitute one type of alcohol for another (wine or cider for rum; whiskey for rum), failed promises to stop drinking, the inability to ask for help, resentment of those who try to help, maltreatment of family members, separation from family and old friends, extended binges, episodes of delirium tremens, feelings of misery during brief periods of self-imposed sobriety, lost reputation and the resulting loss of credit and employability, loss of shelter (living on the streets or in almshouses), association only with other depraved individuals, remorse and self-disgust, thoughts of suicide, and attempts at suicide. Some of the Washingtonian temperance reformers described their decline in quite colorful terms. A.V. Green depicted his own progress in alcoholism as a movement down a highway with visits at Jollification, Topsy Bay, Blackeye Town, Peelshin Alley, Hog Pond, Hickup [sic] Tavern, Puke City, and Death River.

Nearly a century after these temperance narratives were written, E.M. Jellinek of the Yale Center of Alcohol Studies utilized survey data collected on early members of Alcoholics Anonymous to construct a model of the phases of alcohol

addiction.⁽¹⁰⁾ What is quite striking today is the remarkable similarity between the stages and symptoms of progression of alcoholism noted in the self-reports of Washingtonian members in the mid-19th century and the self-reports of A.A. members reflected in Jellinek's mid-20th-century study.

In closing this discussion on the 19th-century characterization of the progression of alcoholism, it should be noted that the portrayal of alcoholism was based exclusively on the experiences of men. The only narrative that alludes to female drunkenness (*Confessions of a Female Inebriate*) was actually written by a man (Isaac Shephard), initiating a long-enduring trend in which the stories of addicted women are conveyed through the filters of male experience and male voice. One does find in Shephard's narrative of the female inebriate a vivid portrayal of the mid-19th-century stigma attached to drunkenness in women. In the following passage, Shephard compares the response of wives married to alcoholic husbands with the response of husbands married to alcoholic wives.

Oh how wide the difference with the heart of a woman! She may be forsaken, abused. Trampled on, but amid all, the thought of separation does not enter her heart; if the whole world scorn and forsake him, it is the reason why she clings more closely to the wreck, but let the wife be so scorned and forsaken by the world, and the husband will not abide the disgrace.

IV. Stages in the reform process

While 19th-century reformed drunkards, like their modern counterparts, are prone to offer more details about their drinking careers than about their recovery careers, one can still get a sense of the reform process by looking at common threads in the narratives that appear in *Drunkard's Progress*. These narratives reveal a process of personal transformation that unfolds within three overlapping stages.

The first stage is marked by a breakthrough of self-perception, a breakthrough of long-suppressed emotion,

and/or a breakthrough in contact with some other human being (often a reformed drunkard) who carries a message of respect and hope. This sudden interruption in the frozen compulsion of drinking binges is portrayed as potentially climactic. T.S. Arthur recounts one such experience:

I seemed to be suddenly awakened by someone laying a hand upon my shoulder, and calling my name aloud. Instantly, I was surrounded by a light, which appeared to emanate from three figures, all in white, that stood before me. . . . I could not mistake the face of Mary, nor the forms of my two children. . . . Then they fixed their eyes upon me reprovingly, and slowly faded from my sight. . . . My next perception was that of the rain falling heavily upon my face, as I lay on the ground. I was perfectly sobered—more so than I had been for years.

In reading of such experiences from the 1840s, one cannot help but think of a similar experience that befell another alcoholic, Bill Wilson, nearly a century later, setting in motion the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous. Recovery from alcoholism then and now can take the form of a quite singular conversion experience or the more common and slower process of developmental change. But what nearly all the reform/recovery narratives of past and present share is a three-part story style that depicts one's life as a drinker turned drunkard, reports one or more experiences that initiated a process of personal transformation, and describes how one's life has changed with the deepening of sobriety.

The breakthrough experiences noted in the reform narratives initiated a resolution for change that led to a second stage of reform. The action stage of the reform process was characterized by public confession, a public commitment to sobriety, and the act of signing the temperance pledge. This final act had enormous power and seems to have laid a foundation for many permanent recoveries. Some even carried a receipt on their person as proof that they had signed the pledge—an act perhaps representing the earliest precursor to today's

practice of carrying chips, coins, marbles, or similar tokens of commitment to recovery.

What is perhaps most interesting about these first two stages is that they were often not attributed to acts of individual will. John Gough reflected on this exact issue:

Unassisted human strength is utterly unable to afford adequate support in the hour of weakness and temptation. We are only so far safe when we depend on a mightier arm than our own for support. Our very strength lies in our sense of weakness....

In this sense, the Washingtonian Societies were not self-help groups, but rather a fellowship of individuals who were acknowledging that all efforts at self-help had failed and that sobriety rested not on an exercise of individual will but on a recognition of the need for resources and relationships beyond the self. A similar preference for referring to Alcoholics Anonymous as a mutual aid society rather than as a self-help group is based on this same distinction.⁽¹¹⁾

The third stage of reform depicted events in the lives of these men that endured longer than the Washingtonian Societies in which they were initiated. The third stage of reform was characterized by weathering the horrors of alcohol withdrawal, reconstructing one's personal identity (from drunkard to teetotaler), restoring one's physical health, restoring one's appearance to assure others that the pledge was being kept, reestablishing family relationships, participating in regular sober fellowship, and initiating acts of service to other drunkards. The last of these acts involved recruitment of other drunkards to attend Washingtonian meetings and, not uncommonly, work as a temperance orator or author. The tales of recovery Crowley shares with us were themselves created as strategies of change. They were written not to boast of sobriety, but to help achieve and sustain a commitment to sobriety and to extend that sobriety to others. Many of the dimensions of recovery noted in these tales—resolution, confession, commitment, sober fellowship, acts of service—continue to be mirrored in modern recovery movements.

V. The Washingtonian legacy

Drunkard's Progress provides insight into some of the factors that may have led to what is usually portrayed as the rapid rise and demise of the Washingtonian Movement. Contemporary critics of the Washingtonian Movement charged that it would likely be "an insect of a day that flutters by excitement, soon to die and be forgotten." Such critics must have gloated when it seemed this very process began unfolding after 1843. And one does get from these narratives a sense of the high emotional drama of the Washingtonian meeting—a drama so intense that it was unlikely to be personally or organizationally sustainable.

The Washingtonian Movement had found a way to reach the drunkard's heart and embolden him to initiate sobriety through what Charles Woodman called the "magic might of the PLEDGE." What this movement lacked was a fully developed framework to sustain sobriety. For that, the Washingtonians seeded new structures within the larger "temperance family"—the fraternal temperance societies and the later reform clubs—that historically bridged the Washingtonian revival and new sobriety-based support structures that emerged in the early 20th century.

The critics were wrong: The Washingtonian Movement did not die; it went underground and transformed itself into something more functional and more enduring. The sobriety of those who wrote the reform narratives of the 1840s, and the hope this movement aroused regarding the potential for recovery, endured long after the drama of the public Washingtonian meetings had faded from public notice. The Washingtonian legacy is a significant one that, defying the predictions of its critics, will not be forgotten; John Crowley's delightful new book will help ensure that. Drunkard's Progress brings some of the rarest and most essential primary sources to anyone interested in the early history of alcoholism and alcoholism recovery in America.

Notes

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2. Sigourney, L. and Smith, G. (1833). *The Intemperate and the Reformed: Shewing the Awful Consequences of Intemperance and the Blessed Effects of the Temperance Reform*, p. 24. Boston: Seth Bliss.
3. Maxwell, M. (1950). The Washingtonian Movement. *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 2:410-451.
4. Blumberg, L. with Pittman, W. (1991). *Beware the First Drink!* Seattle: Glen Abbey Books.
5. White, W. (1998). *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America*. Bloomington, IL: Chestnut Health Systems.
6. Baker, J. (1844). *The Washingtonian Reform: An Address Delivered Before the Hingham Total Abstinence Society*, June 16, 1844. Published by the Society.
7. Crowley, J. (1994). *The White Logic: Alcoholism and Gender in American Modernist Fiction*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
8. Crowley, J. (1997). Slaves to the Bottle: Gough's Autobiography and Douglass's Narrative. In: Reynolds, D. and Rosenthal, D. *The Serpent in the Cup: Temperance in American Literature*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, pp. 115-135.
9. The terms "alcoholism" and "alcoholic" had not yet been coined when these narratives were written.
10. Jellinek, E.M. (1952). The Phases of Alcohol Addiction. *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 13:672-684.
11. Miller, W. and Kurtz, E. (1994). Models of Alcoholism Used in Treatment: Contrasting AA and Other Perspectives with Which It Is Often Confused. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 55(2): 159-166.