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Published version. *The Raymond Carver Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Winter 2008): 19-32. [Publisher link](#). © 2018 Kent State University. Used with permission.

Raymond Carver's Poetry and the Temperance Tradition

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In mid-nineteenth century America, one of the most popular speakers on the lyceum circuit was John B. Gough, a temperance lecturer who made his own struggles with alcohol the centerpiece of his act. In his autobiography, Gough draws a sharp contrast between his two lives: his pre-1842 alcoholic life, and his post-1842 life after he had “signed the pledge” of abstinence. And yet, as he implicitly acknowledges, to draw a sharp line is, to some extent, to keep both halves of the self in constant play:

As I look back to 1842—27 years ago—it seems almost a hideous dream; I hardly realize my identity with the staggering, hopeless victim of the terrible vice of intemperance; but the scars remain to testify the reality; yes, scars and marks never to be eradicated, never to be removed in this life. . . . I never rise to speak, but I think of it; the more I mingle with the wise, the pure, the true—the higher my aspirations—the more intense is my disgust and abhorrence of the damning degradation of those seven years of my life from eighteen to twenty-five (Gough 125-26).

Ironically enough, Gough climbed the class scale and achieved his highest aspirations by exhibiting his scars, turning his alcoholic past into a kind of moral (and yet morally ambiguous) theater. His story captivated middle-class audiences who thrilled to his descriptions of drunken debauchery even as they identified with his Horatio Algerian recovery narrative.

In a 1983 *Paris Review* interview, Raymond Carver also affirmed the remoteness of his past drinking self, asserting that “The life back then is gone just as surely—it’s as remote to me as if it had happened to somebody I read about in a nineteenth-century novel” (Carver *Interview* 207). And yet, to posit the alcoholic/post-alcoholic self as doubled—as a sort of Jekyll-and-Hyde character—is to deploy a nineteenth-century Gothic strategy that has persisted beyond the nineteenth century. So how remote is the nineteenth century, really? As Mikail Bakhtin argues, writers and readers participate, consciously and unconsciously, in historically-determined cultural discourses. Utterances—even poetic utterances—are not private property; every word of every poem is drawn from a larger sociohistorical context which the author may or may not entirely understand, but which he nevertheless channels and changes. This insight is especially important when applied to Raymond Carver, whose poems are so often read through the limiting lens of his life. Arthur Bethea, for instance, notes some of the “awkwardness” associated with identifying speaker and author in Carver’s poems, but he still falls back on biography to read those poems associated with alcohol abuse (210-216). To move beyond biography, it is helpful to keep in mind that when Carver wrote his “drinking” poems, he engaged, deliberately or not, with the vast and contradictory history of American alcoholism, which has been variously understood as a disease, as a moral condition, and even as a class marker. In this essay I will suggest that the nineteenth-century temperance tradition is not remote in Carver’s alcohol poems, but rather haunts these poems formally and thematically, keeping them ambiguous as they explore issues of class, aspiration and addiction.

The most obvious cultural context for Carver’s alcohol poems is Alcoholics Anonymous, and numerous critics, including Hamilton Cochrane and Chad Wriglesworth, have used A. A. as a lens through which to read Carver’s work. Wriglesworth, for instance, astutely maps selected

Carver stories onto “key stages” in the A. A. recovery program, noting that “As with any structured program, all steps within the Alcoholics Anonymous sequence are vital—none can be circumvented or left out” (Wrigglsworth, n.p.; see also Cochrane). Such approaches produce useful but perhaps incomplete visions of Carver’s work—visions that are reverent, spiritual, and optimistic. My aim is not to undermine such visions but to complicate them via the often irreverent, materialistic, and chronically backsliding history of the American temperance movement. A. A.’s founder, Bill Wilson, was all too aware of this history. A. A.’s Sixth Tradition forbids members from publicizing or profiting from the meetings “lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose” (*Big Book* n.p.). The Sixth Tradition was Bill Wilson’s deliberate response to earlier troubles encountered by the largest nineteenth-century temperance group, the Washingtonians, which claimed over a half-million members in the 1840s before collapsing under the weight of shameless profiteering and bad publicity. As Wilson wrote in 1950, “I wish every A. A. could indelibly burn the history of the Washingtonian into his memory. It is an outstanding example of how, and how not, we ought to conduct ourselves” (qtd. in Jensen 15).

The Washingtonians’ main strength was also their downfall: the group’s proponents (including, predictably, P.T. Barnum) were highly entertaining, depicting their struggles onstage in poems, stories, songs, and dramas. Individual Washingtonians, such as John B. Gough, achieved a celebrity status which backfired when they backslid. In Gough’s case, he was discovered, drunk and disoriented, at a New York City brothel, where he claimed to have been dragged against his will after having been slipped a drugged soda. By the 1850s, the Washingtonians were under fire for sensationalism and hypocrisy; having lost credibility, they finally dissolved. But if the Washingtonians faltered as a temperance movement, they succeeded

as a literary force. As David Reynolds has argued, almost every major writer in the nineteenth-century canon was inspired by temperance narratives and images, from Poe to Melville to Whitman to Dickinson (22-3). Authors were drawn to temperance discourses, not for their therapeutic value, which many found laughable, but for their raw depictions of human duplicity, domestic instability, and class conflict. In other words, the very ambiguities and failures that doomed the Washingtonians made them a trove of richly theatrical tropes for writers.

What, then, does this checkered history have to do with Raymond Carver? To unpack the temperance connection is to explicate some of the ways that Carver was a moral (but not moralistic) craftsman, engaging in explorations rather than step-by-step journeys or programs. A.A. confessions form therapeutic bonds among equals, moving along a predictable path. By contrast, Washingtonian performances sold dramas to paying audiences and readers who were not necessarily alcoholics themselves. While temperance narratives were often formulaic, the problems and emotions they unleashed were attractive (to audiences, readers, and writers) because they were socially subversive. In this crucial respect, Carver's alcohol poems are steeped in the nineteenth-century temperance tradition, a tradition that is also a *literary* tradition, and that enlivens the poems with flashes of showmanship and subversiveness.

Washingtonian narratives tended to dwell on the lurid details of rum-fueled domestic destruction; for instance, in "Death in Disguise," a best-selling poem by Walt Whitman's friend McDonald Clarke, hungry children must fend for themselves:

Through each patched and dirty pane,
The wind blows in the bleak night rain,
See the lean little ones crawl round
The cold scant embers on the ground,

Whilst the sick mother on her straw

Sighs—Babes, what are you crying for? (472-77)

Domestic destruction, of course, is ever-present in Carver's alcohol poems, such as "From the East, Light," which begins,

The house rocked and shouted all night.

Toward morning, grew quiet. The children,

looking for something to eat, make

their way through the crazy living room

in order to get to the crazy kitchen.

There's Father, asleep on the couch.

Sure they stop to look. Who wouldn't? (1-7)

The spectacle of innocent children adrift in a ruined domestic sphere is a staple of temperance literature. As Karen Sanchez-Eppler notes, victimized children act as agents of "moral suasion" in texts such as "Death in Disguise," shaming and seducing errant fathers (60-92). Sanchez-Eppler links this strategy to the emergence of what Richard Brodhead has called "disciplinary intimacy": beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, middle-class American families abandoned the authoritarian model of discipline for a system of control based on internal bonds of affection. One of the problems with disciplinary intimacy, though, is that power structures did not really shift when they became invisible or metaphorically inverted: children remain legally and economically dependent on their fathers. Moral suasion may give children symbolic power over adults, but this is a "power" granted only to the powerless.

In "From the East, Light," metaphorical power inversions are evident in the very first line: the house "rock[s]" all night, like a cradle, but the adults are rocking themselves. The

children discover a wrecked Christmas tree, and a rope half out of its box; this leads them to think, about their parents, “Let them go hang themselves” and “To hell with it, and them” (20-22). By imposing these thoughts on the children, the speaker of the poem reinforces the damage done by the drunken parents: he takes away their childhood, replacing it with his own adult cynicism. In this way, sentimental temperance conventions are upended: “disciplinary intimacy,” a mode that still dominates middle-class families, fails. Love is not enough. The poem’s ending both echoes and subverts stereotypical temperance narratives, in which children redeem their dissolute parents. Here, the children symbolically resurrect the father by turning up the television “so he’ll for sure know/he’s alive. He raises his head. Morning begins” (31). But it is telling that the children cannot wake the father with their own voices; instead, they need the outside authority of the media. The children may appear to be in control, but they are still powerless. In “From the East, Light” (a title that recollects the Star of Bethlehem) the father collapses into a parody of infancy and the children adopt adult roles, but salvation is elusive. In this and other poems, Carver poses implicit questions that were subversive in the nineteenth century and remain subversive today: is the nuclear family really a bastion of security? Can families “save” individuals?

Another poem, “My Daughter and Apple Pie” also deploys—and subverts—the model of sentimental salvation, using an iconic dessert as a metonym for the ideal “apple pie” American family. The daughter feeds the father pie, and the father is reminded of a nineteenth-century rhyme: “Sugar and spice and everything nice/That’s what little girls are made of” (Halliwell-Phillipps 190). But domestic clichés of sugar and spice are undermined by the specter of domestic violence: the girl is a victim. Can she be saved? The father cannot, or will not, intervene: “I fork the pie in/and tell myself to stay out of it” (11-12). He is implicitly sober in

this poem while his daughter struggles with alcoholism, but even when sober he refuses the role of benign *paterfamilias*. The problem, here, is not just the ravages of alcohol. Rather, “My Daughter and Apple Pie” uses sentimental images to interrogate the very *idea* of the family as a safe haven and the man as a protective (but potentially abusive) authority figure.

In a nineteenth-century milieu that sentimentalized parent-child relationships, temperance writers dwelt, not just on the harm done to “lean little ones,” but also on the potential psychopathology of the American family *as an institution*. Non-alcoholics were drawn to temperance narratives not just for their sensational otherness but also for the familiar but forbidden impulses that they uncovered. For instance, the nuclear family structure is organized to support a nine-to-five, out-of-the-home work schedule. But what about work—like writing—that requires concentration, creativity, and personal space within the domestic sphere? Carver’s poem, “Cheers,” explores this dilemma in the paranoid voice of an alcoholic. The speaker hangs a sign on his door (“OUT TO LUNCH”) that uses the language of the office, but still thoughts of his family obligations, and indeed actual family members, intrude:

Once my son, that bastard,
slipped in and left me a colored egg
and a walking stick.

I think he drank some of my vodka. (9-12)

Here, the alcohol-drinking son competes with the alcoholic father for vodka, but the deeper issue lies with the son’s intrusion into the father’s workspace. And the talismans the son leaves behind are telling, representing the two kinds of discipline the father has abjured: redemptive love (an Easter egg) and authority (a walking stick). Redemption is impossible, not just because the speaker is an alcoholic but also, more significantly, because he does not want to be integrated

into traditional family life. Domesticity is not a saving grace but a disruptive threat. The speaker refuses to be patriarchal—even referring to his son as a fatherless “bastard”—and his abdication is subversive because it dismantles and questions the cultural norm of the good family.

The increasing visibility of the sentimentalized American family was a byproduct of the rising middle class; it represents, in many ways, a utopian vision of bourgeois individualism. It is no accident, then, that alcoholism was framed as a threat not just to family life but also to middle-class aspirations. Issues of class haunt the history of American addiction. A. A. meetings are determinedly classless in theory, if not always in practice; the success of the model depends, as the Twelve Traditions stress, on rotating leadership, a non-hierarchical organization, and the practice of personal humility. The deliberate exclusion of class status from A. A. makes sense in light of the ways that earlier temperance movements were embroiled in class conflict. The Washingtonians, for instance, addressed a working-class constituency, leading the New England Brahmin Theodore Parker to dismiss them as “violent, ill-bred and theatrical” (qtd. in Reynolds 26). But, as Harry Levine has argued, the Washingtonians and other temperance advocates were not just working class; they were working class and aspirational—and perhaps it was this aspirational quality that threatened Parker. Learning to control their impulses was linked to a broader social transformation as Americans began to identify, *en masse*, as middle class. Levine elaborates:

In the Jacksonian era, the 1830s, Americans troubled by the disorder they perceived in their society built almshouses, penitentiaries, orphan asylums and reformatories to administer “moral treatment” to the dependent and deviant. . . . Like asylum advocates, temperance supporters were interested in helping people

develop and maintain control over their behavior and actions. Temperance supporters, however, believed they had located, in liquor, the source of most social problems. The temperance movement, it should be remembered, was the largest enduring mass movement in 19th-century America. And it was an eminently mainstream middle-class affair. The temperance movement appealed to so many people, in part, because it had become a “fact of life” that one could lose control of one’s behavior. Even the use of the word “temperance” for a total abstinence movement is understandable when we realize that the chief concern of temperance advocates, and of the middle class in general, was self-restraint (504).

To move out of alcohol addiction was to move into the middle class, and to adopt, not just a new restraint, but a new *habitus*—a new way of thinking and acting.

In temperance narratives, this transition is often stark and uncomplicated: drunken people fall and sober people rise—and in the case of reformed drunkards, a split or doubled protagonist emerges who is both working class and middle class. Clarke’s “Death in Disguise” conveniently follows the nineteenth-century convention of outlining its plot under the title; I can thus share the arc of the narrative in the poet’s own words:

Boys let loose from School — A skating (sic) frolic — SamSub, the genius —
Orva, his cousin and sweetheart — Dawn of Affection — Love scene by
moonlight on the river’s side — Aunt Pat’s tea party — Laugh at old
Puddy the sottish Pedagogue — Sub’s elevation to fame and rank,
distinction in the Senate, and battle field — Description of his
marriage with his young Cousin — Dizziness of high stations — Sudden
fall to drunkenness and disgrace — His ribbons changed for rags —

Young wife turned from a palace to a poor house — Sick mother and
starving children — Bleak winds blowing the rain on their bed of straw
— Father found frozen to death with a stone for his pillow, and his
white hairs covered with dirt — Satan peeps in at the window and
whispers with a sneer — So much for wine! (Clarke, 2-3)

This ribbons-to-rags, palace-to-poorhouse spectacle relies on the emergent, Jacksonian assumption that class is not innate but behavioral. To tell temperance stories is to depict class crossings; by the 1840s, this clearly irked the elite establishment. Leonard Woolsey Bacon, an elite contemporary of Theodore Parker, decried the “narration of horrible experiences. . . by the scurrilous army of ditch-delivered reformed drunkards whose glory was in their shame” (qtd. in Reynolds 26). But the implicit point of poems like “Death in Disguise”—and part of their appeal to middle class readers—was that no one is inherently ill bred or ditch delivered: anyone can rise, and anyone can fall.

Carver’s alcohol poems are also infused with this sense of class mobility and its shadow side, class insecurity. In “Drinking While Driving,” the speaker makes his intellectual ambitions clear even as he undercuts them in the opening lines: “It’s August, and I have not/read a book in six months/except something called *The Retreat from Moscow*/by Caulaincourt” (1-3). Having established and dismissed his credentials, he continues: “Nevertheless, I am happy/riding in a car with my brother/And drinking from a pint of Old Crow” (4-6). This is a blue-collar, in-the-moment drive, but the structure of the poem is anxiously ambitious as signaled by that transitional word, “nevertheless”: the speaker is happy *despite* having gotten so little reading done. In other words, he can not entirely stop thinking about his own lack of self-restraint and middle-class discipline. Moreover, he takes the time to tell us the book he did read—a famously

weighty historical account by one of Napoleon's generals. Perhaps it is pressing the point to note that Napoleon was Europe's first truly bourgeois hero, representing the triumph of the middle class over the Parisian communards. But certainly, "The Retreat from Moscow" is a sign, not of aimlessness, but of middle class ambition through education. The pint of old Crow—and the brother—are detours, not destinations. Like all Horatio Algiers, Carver's speaker is on his way out of his family of origins and up the class scale; for precisely this reason, the scale itself, and its lower registers, remains visible and accessible to his imagination.

At the same time, alcohol is not simply coded as lower class or blue collar in Carver's poems. In another "double" poem, titled simply "Alcohol," the speaker pictures a bohemian escape into what John Crowley has called the "modernist mode" of drunkenness: "That painting next to the brocaded drapery/is a Delacroix. This is called a divan, not a davenport; this item is a settee" (Carver1-3; Crowley 165). The character wears a red cummerbund in this poem; it is Paris, April 1934. But the whole modernist setup turns out to be a sham, as revealed in the poem's second half: "It's afternoon, August, sun striking/the hood of a dusty Ford/parked in your driveway in San Jose" (28-30). Nevertheless, the same patient, detached voice addresses "you" in both halves of the poem. In Paris, that voice is didactic, lecturing the seemingly clueless drunk about antique furniture and paintings; in the second half, the voice is documentary, reminding the drunk about his ho-hum Californian life. The "you," then, is a subject with an unfixed class position, who can be imagined as either bohemian or working class. But alcohol is a common thread: for the Parisian modernist, it promises an escape from the middle class, and, for the San Jose drunk, it threatens a fall from the middle class. The "you" in the poem is not ill-bred or ditch-delivered; he can, or must, move between identities.

But who is this “I,” who speaks to the “you” in “Alcohol,” and who narrates, at a distance, so many of Carver’s alcohol poems? Like a temperance lecturer, he defines himself through alcohol and yet abstains from it; he displays, but does not practice, a loss of control; he is a productive artist whose art requires open access to a chaotic former self. The class valences of this balancing act emerge in Carver’s poem, “The Possible”:

I spent years, on and off, in academe.
Taught at places I couldn’t get near
as a student. But never wrote a line
about that time. Never. Nothing stayed
with me in those days. I was a stranger
and an imposter, even to myself. Except
at that one school. That distinguished
institution in the Midwest. Where
my only friend, and my colleague,
the Chaucerian, was arrested for beating his wife.
And threatening her life over the phone,
a misdemeanor. He wanted to put her eyes out.
Set her on fire for cheating. (1-13)

Like the horrifyingly entertaining drunks in temperance texts, this Chaucerian is not just an inebriate but a nut. Temperance writers made the same moves; T. S. Arthur’s famous *Ten Nights in a Bar-room* was a best-seller, surely because of (not despite) three murders, a case of the delirium tremens, and an eye-stabbing. But also, in this poem, the speaker admits to feeling like an imposter at every university except the one where he found the Chaucerian. Somehow, that

Chaucerian—that drunk, that eye-stabber—made him feel authentic, even if he was just an observer of the mostly rhetorical violence. His moderate, middle-class self, now secure in middle age, does not use his old friend (or his old self) as a moral lesson. Rather, like dark-temperance reformers, he displays his friend’s excesses as a way to contemplate the strangely magnetic unpredictability of lives that subvert domestic and professional norms. To read Carver through the temperance tradition is to acknowledge not just the survival of horrifying impulses and appetites within all of us, but also to note their perhaps equally horrifying attractiveness—and thus the poem earns its puzzling title: “The Possible.” Even middle-class academics can lose all sense of propriety, slipping into chaos and violence, and, the poem implies, this possibility is necessary to remember or even to cherish.

Carver evokes the figure of the morally ambiguous double in his late poem, “Artaud”:
“Among the hieroglyphs, the masks, the unfinished poems,/ The spectacle unfolds: *Antonin et son double*./ They are at work now, calling up the old demons” (1-3). While the spectacle of a demon might appear to advance a species of rigid moralism, “Artaud” is clearly also about the process of making art, and the way that art, unlike therapy, courts demons instead of exorcizing them. If the “old demons” are Satanic, they also work as compelling psychological images, hieroglyphs, or masks, as T. S. Arthur and Walt Whitman, Antonin Artaud and Raymond Carver all understood. Like a classic temperance writer, Carver exploits “the monster,” embracing it as a spectacle even as he disavows it. The stakes are evident in another poem, “The Author of Her Misfortune”: “I am not the man she claims. But/ This much is true: the past is/ distant, a receding coastline/ and we’re all in the same boat . . .” (1-4). *I am not my old self*, the speaker protests, *and yet my old self haunts me*. Moreover, as the title of the poem suggests, his old self is necessary to him *as an author*.

The drunken “other” troubles—and entertains—the reader, who is not a fellow drunk but a spectator, or (to draw on another major trope in Carver’s work) a voyeur. In “Nyquil,” for instance, we watch two men who will drink almost anything:

I knew a man
whose drink of choice was Listerine.
He was coming down off Scotch.
He bought Listerine by the case,
and drank it by the case. The back seat
of his car was piled high with dead soldiers.
Those empty bottles of Listerine
gleaming in his scalding back seat!
The sight of it sent me home soul-searching.
I did that once or twice. Everybody does.
Go way down inside and look around.
I spent hours there, but
didn’t meet anyone, or see anything
of interest. I came back to the here and now,
and put on my slippers. Fixed
myself a nice glass of NyQuil. (5-20)

The irony of the poem is that the narrator is in denial, convincing himself that NyQuil is somehow less pathetic than Listerine, but a further irony is generated as the reader is invited to see both men as interchangeable. Is the speaker’s generic quality due simply to his being an alcoholic? Or is it a function of consumer society, with its brand names and its proliferating

“choices” (NyQuil vs. Listerine) that are not really choices at all? In the end, the speaker remains immobile, and this is critical to the success of the poem: “I waited through hours of darkness with NyQuil./ And then, sweet Jesus! the first sliver/ of light” (24-26). If the light is supposed to be hopeful, its promise is undercut by the narrator’s passivity: he just waits for things to get better, without working to better himself. This poem is despairing not just because the speaker is a drunk but also because he has lost his aspirations and sense of upward mobility.

Gunter Leypoldt, writing about Carver’s stories, has described his “arrested epiphanies” in which nothing, or at least nothing significant, is finally revealed (531-49). To appreciate how arrested epiphanies work in his poems, it is necessary to read them against the redemptive arc of his public life. This is a counterintuitive move, because, unlike his stories, his poems are often framed as documentaries, naming real names and citing real life events. However, the poems have the real merit of being fragments; they are not a grand life narrative, but rather a series of tableaux that depict some problems (domestic troubles, class insecurities) as irresolvable. There is a productive tension in Carver’s poems between the need to practice restraint and the impulse to embrace chaos—a tension that dissipates if readers mine Carver’s life for an exogenous happy ending.

In linking Carver with the temperance movement, I do not mean to assert that he ever curled up with “Death in Disguise” or *Ten Nights in a Bar-room*. The connection is not so direct, although McDonald Clarke did influence Walt Whitman, who even eulogized him in a poem, “The Death and Burial of McDonald Clarke” (Whitman 652). And Whitman, in turn, clearly influenced Carver. Yet my larger objective is to expand our understanding of his place in literary history by showing how he borrowed words and images—whether consciously or unconsciously—from an historical archive that predates him. To draw on this archive is to draw,

not just on personal memories, but on cultural memories that are embedded in speech and literary genres. Before the 1930s—the decade when A. A. was founded and Carver was born—cultural assumptions about alcohol abuse were being established and naturalized. An historicized understanding of Carver’s assumptions might help to wrest his “drinking” poems from the writer’s fixed biography, allowing these remarkable texts to register the ambiguities of the still-unfixed American middle class.

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