

## Habitual Drunkards and Metaphysics : Four Case Studies from the Victorian Period

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# HABITUAL DRUNKARDS AND METAPHYSICS: FOUR CASE STUDIES FROM THE VICTORIAN PERIOD

STEVEN EARNSHAW

**Abstract.** The article considers four examples from the nineteenth century when the stereotype of the habitual drunkard appears to give way to a figure that bears closer resemblance to the twentieth century's "Existential drinker." These case studies offer different illustrations of a newly emerging metaphysical landscape around heavy drinking. First, in the 1872 Select Committee on Habitual Drunkards, the panel cannot understand why a repeat offender would choose to drink rather than be cared for. Second, the heroine of George Eliot's tale "Janet's Repentance" encounters a spiritual "despair" through her drinking habit. Third, a group of pictures by the artist Honoré Daumier features two drinkers in what are here interpreted as Existential tableaux. Fourth, Émile Zola's novel *L'Assommoir* is read as one of the first sustained accounts of excessive drinking that is both a visceral response to conditions under industrial capitalism, while also latching onto a type of metaphysical unsettling prompted by such drinking.

## INTRODUCTION

The figure of what might be called an "Existential drinker" fully emerges at the beginning of the twentieth century with Jack London's autobiographical *John Barleycorn: Alcoholic Memoirs* (1913).<sup>1</sup> Here is someone who believes that by drinking repeatedly to excess he will discover the truth about himself and the world, and his being-in-the-world. We can regard this drinker as "Existential" because he is concerned with such things as authenticity, the nature of being and of self, alienation, life as essentially meaningless, and the inevitability of his own death – the realisation of finitude.<sup>2</sup>

One of the things London asserts in *John Barleycorn* is that there are two types of drunk, the unimaginative, fall-in-the-gutter type, and the drinker who thinks about philosophical issues, a drinker such as himself who has "vision" and who "knows just where he is and what he is doing."<sup>3</sup> He argues that those who don't drink as he does live a lesser kind of life, that,

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in fact, they live a lie. This idea that the mass of people do not really truly exist, in the sense of being authentic to a true self, is a typical theme in Existentialism, going back to Kierkegaard in the 1840s,<sup>4</sup> but drawn in Jack London's case more probably from Nietzsche in the latter part of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

The figure of the Existential drinker may seem a long way removed from the images we are familiar with of nineteenth-century drunkenness and drunkards, treated *en masse* as types rather than unique, individuated souls. This essay sets out to find significant moments in the transition from the nineteenth-century's stereotyping of the habitual drunkard to the twentieth-century's Existential drinker.<sup>6</sup> In the nineteenth century the typical excessive drinker we see represented in different media is the first type of drinker that Jack London identifies, the unimaginative fall-in-the-gutter type, a ubiquitous figure of the period. The second type of drinker, the one who sees the truth of life's meaninglessness, the one who strives for an authentic self against a conventional public, is only to be glimpsed: the one who repeatedly confronts his own death through suicidal drinking is largely hidden from our view because of the prevailing temperance portrayals of drunkards and drunkenness, or yet is perhaps confined to a certain glamorised strain of Romantic drinking that begins with Charles Lamb's "Confessions of a Drunkard" at the beginning of the century.<sup>7</sup>

Victorian descriptions of habitual drunkards, including visual imagery, usually rest on a generic "story." That is, drunkenness is never just drunkenness, and a drunkard is never just a drunkard, but both are part of a narrative, so that the essence of drunkenness and being a drunkard is understood within a moral narrative framework, one that usually follows the decline of the drunkard or drunkards over a number of years, ending melodramatically in murder, insanity and destitution. George Cruikshank's *The Bottle* (1847), a book of eight tableaux with text, is a famous example. One of the things to note is that in the standard temperance narrative the drunkard loses his job, so that employment is always part of the narrative of intemperance – in Plate II of *The Bottle* the text reads: "He is discharged from his employment for drunkenness: they pawn their clothes to supply the bottle."<sup>8</sup> The question as to *why* excessive drunkenness should be a problem is rarely explicitly asked since the underlying assumption is that habitual drunkenness means you cannot hold down a job, and the consequence of that is ruination for your family or, if you are a young man, your future career.

In the remainder of the essay I give four instances where there is some deviation from the standard temperance narrative: Mary Thompson, a habitual drunkard identified in a Parliamentary Report; George Eliot's tale "Janet's Repentance"; Honoré Daumier's "Two drinkers" pictures ("Two drinkers" is my coinage for ease of reference); Zola's novel *L'Assommoir*.

The figures encountered here, both real and fictional, are “ordinary” people, rather than (Romantic) “others” or self-avowed “philosopher-drinkers,” and offer glimpses of the themes and representations which in the twentieth century contribute to the figure of the Existential drinker.

MARY THOMPSON

The 1872 Select Committee on Habitual Drunkards was “appointed to inquire into the best Plan for the Control and Management of Habitual Drunkards.”<sup>9</sup> Parliament had accepted that habitual drunkards were a significant problem in Britain and wanted to do something about it. The people it invited to give evidence were, in the main, high-ranking police officers and doctors, all male, of course, as was the Select Committee. No habitual drunkards were asked to give evidence.

One of the difficulties for the Select Committee was how to address the question that drunkenness in general prompted the Victorians to pose, and which is arguably still with us now: Why do people persist in drinking to excess? Or, to put it in the language of the nineteenth century, why are people habitual drunkards? The representatives of the police and the medical profession at the Select Committee provided plenty of statistics in their evidence, giving the impression that the question could be solved in a systematic, socially scientific and medically robust manner. The panel had its own particular lines of enquiry – the relationship between insanity and drunkenness, the possible role class played, biological inheritance, and the difficulty of deciding just how interrelated crime and drunkenness might be. A question usually put to witnesses was to ask if they thought a specially-designed asylum, something like a modern-day rehabilitation centre, would cure habitual drunkards. For example, James Crichton Browne was asked: “Supposing that it were desirable to establish public reformatories, furnished with legal powers to exclude drink and to include the inmates, in your opinion that presents the most probable means of curing a certain proportion of these cases?” to which he replied: “It is the only hope.”<sup>10</sup> One of the recommended outcomes – that such centres be built – must have seemed a foregone conclusion, even though a number of the witnesses, including police and doctors, said that it did not matter how long habitual drunkards were denied alcohol, they would always return to it.

I would just like to pick up on a few things pertinent to this essay’s line of enquiry. The Committee concluded that the problem of habitual drunkards was one that belonged to “large towns and populous districts,” and could be “attributed in some measure to the higher wages and shortened hours of labour.”<sup>11</sup> That is, the problem was one created by the growth of industrial capitalism. Oddly, there does not seem to be any recognition that the typical narrative about habitual drunkards, whereby the worker drinks to excess, ends up in poverty and dies, may actually be contradicted by this

feature of industrialisation: a worker earns enough in two days to keep him going for the whole week.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the habitual drunkard uses the other days to binge. The problem here then is that the workers simply are not disciplined in the new way of working, and are not attuned to working towards amassing capital. They spend rather than save. This type of behaviour is unacceptable to the State, although with nothing other than a very particular economic argument to support the State's view of its undesirability.

Another problem the Committee struggles with is the fact that only when drinking leads to criminal activity do habitual drunkards merit the full force of the law. The police representatives emphasise that there is a great reluctance to arrest people solely for being drunk; only if they are a public nuisance or committing a crime will they be detained. There is a perception on the part of the authorities that drunkenness is a problem in the new large towns, but they are at a loss to really pinpoint where the problem lies. It cannot lie in the product, for some level of drinking is acceptable, as it states in its conclusion: "the moderate use of alcoholic liquors is unattended by any bad effects."<sup>13</sup> If people are not impelled to become habitually excessive drinkers by poverty and attendant misery, why then do they do it? A similar example is provided by Dickens's short story, "The Drunkard's Death" (1836), a stereotypical temperance narrative which tells us that drunkards *choose* the abyss of drink, yet does not offer a reason why: "But by far the greater part have wilfully, and with open eyes, plunged into the gulf from which the man who once enters it never rises more, but into which he sinks deeper and deeper down, until recovery is hopeless."<sup>14</sup>

I return to the point that the Committee never seriously attempts to get to the bottom of why an individual drinks. The omission is partly because the Committee is looking for a pattern or patterns across the population, so that for any individual story to be of value to the Committee it has to operate in its anonymous typicality rather than its uniqueness. An example of this occurs with the very first witness, Mr William Smith, who is the Governor of Ripon Prison. He says that the habitual drunkards he sees are only there because of actions they commit when they are drunk, and he would not categorise them as criminals even though they have been caught in a criminal activity. He gives the example "of a woman who has been in Wakefield Gaol 17 times, for periods of from three days to three months; in Leeds Gaol 11 times, varying from eight days to one month; in Northallerton Gaol 15 times, varying from 14 days to one month; and in Ripon Gaol 15 times, varying from 14 days to two months; all for being drunk, drunk and disorderly."<sup>15</sup> This drunkard is taken in, not because she is drunken, but because she is "riotous" and "brawling."<sup>16</sup> Normally for the enquiry this would be the last we would hear of an individual story used to support a general perception, since she has the typical public profile of a habitual drunkard who is a repeat offender. Yet she reappears later on, identified as

Mary Thompson (she uses a number of names, depending upon which jail she is in). And then yet further on there is this exchange:

[Mr Mitchell Henry] You have not endeavoured to ascertain what induced these people to drink, whether misfortune, or broken health, or what?

[Smith] If the Committee will allow me, I will state that in the particular case of Thompson, she pronounced before she left the gaol, that if she had a home provided, and could get work in the town, she would never drink again. I repeated this to the visiting justices, and they allowed her a certain amount out of the gaol fund. I then wrote to several ladies and gentlemen, and I collected for this woman about 11 [pounds]. I took a house in my name. I bought the furniture and all the requisites for one person. I put her in the house and she signed the pledge. I got her work at different gentlemen's houses in charing and washing. I had a surplus of money left, so that if she was out of work we could maintain her. She retained that house for about two months, and she then got drunk; she said, that she could not bear it any longer. That was looked over by the ladies [*sic*] subscribers, and she was got sober again, and a further trial was given. I think that lasted about six weeks longer, and then she said that she would not live upon charity any longer. She then turned out, and she got drunk, and is in the gaol again now. That was thoroughly trying the woman; there was no excuse whatever; in fact, I may mention that she was promised by the ladies [*sic*] subscribers, that if she would refrain from this drink, they would keep her as long as she lived. In the face of all that, she said, that she would not live upon charity; she went to the drink again, and she is now in gaol.<sup>17</sup>

It is an almost perfect Victorian vignette: the philanthropic voice of authority, the good ladies clubbing together to help a poor unfortunate; the temperance element is strong – Mary signs the pledge and vows to stay off the drink. Even the backsliding might be accommodated by the typical narrative – she is lower class and so perhaps therefore of a weaker moral fibre, with the consequence that she will never escape the downward spiral of habitual drunkenness. But part of the story doesn't quite fit the temperance template. The reason she gives for opting out is that she won't live off charity, not that she has to drink. We could deduce that she is proud, but that doesn't seem plausible, because if she were that proud she would lay off the drink. We could say that she is deluded and that in modern parlance she is “addicted” or has “alcohol dependence syndrome.”<sup>18</sup> But that doesn't quite fit either: she is determined not to live the middle-class Victorian good life, and she is determined to drink despite the best efforts of the great and the good.

Mr Smith's response illustrates the problem the Committee has with habitual drunkards: even while his intention is to explain what the issue is through a story of a habitual drunkard he has tried to help, neither the Select Committee nor we are any the wiser. It is not misfortune, and it is not ill health, it is the mysterious “or what?” Further, there is nothing in the recommendations of the Report that, if put in place, could help Mary Thompson: she would be fined more money, be put on a register for ha-

bitual drunkards, and perhaps kept in an asylum until the alcohol was out of her and she was, theoretically at least, reformed.

The story is a rare breach in the Select Committee Report: it is noteworthy precisely because it has a unique, individualistic bump in it that cannot be ironed flat. Even though the Committee has perhaps pursued the right line of enquiry – asking the Governor of Ripon Gaol why a habitual drunkard *is* a habitual drunkard – it cannot get to the bottom of it. The Report thus makes recommendations that will address the symptoms, without getting at the cause, of habitual drunkenness. And yet, part of that cause may be a metaphysical response to the self-same environment they agree is where such people are to be found: the new industrial centres, which require a new kind of workforce, one which can discipline and subordinate the self to the social and economic demands of industrial capitalism. The Committee is set up in such a way that guarantees apprehension of habitual drunkards at the level of public aggregate, and cannot delve into their individual, inner lives.

#### GEORGE ELIOT, “JANET’S REPENTANCE”

As we have seen, the typical narrative around drunkenness is the temperance narrative, and whether the ending of such a narrative is death of the drunkard or repentance, the underlying moral is that drinking to excess is wrong. It might even be more specific, as in T. S. Arthur’s popular and influential American novel *Ten Nights in a Bar Room* (1854), where the Maine Law banning the sale of alcohol, which had come into force in the state of Maine in 1851, is both endorsed where it exists and promoted for other states.<sup>19</sup> Remember the question that Mr Mitchell Henry asks the Governor of Ripon Jail: “You have not endeavoured to ascertain what induced these people to drink, whether misfortune, or broken health, or what?” It is the “or what?” which remains hidden, unexplored or misunderstood. And here I think we can identify a certain metaphysical element that cannot be captured by typical nineteenth-century narratives of excessive drunkenness and habitual drunkards. There is some adjacency with the religious aspects of temperance, but the latter is more in keeping with the idea that a sheep has gone astray rather than a profound engagement with the spiritual, asking that drunkards replace alcohol with the Lord, as, for instance, in Mrs Charles Wightman’s account of her attempt to reform the drinkers of Shrewsbury in *Haste to the Rescue* (1859).<sup>20</sup>

One story which gives a glimpse into an alternative to a temperance narrative is George Eliot’s “Janet’s Repentance,” published at the end of the 1850s, and possibly the first serious treatment of a habitual female drunkard.<sup>21</sup> Janet is married to Dempster, and what began as a happy marriage is now characterised by Dempster’s brutish behaviour when drunk. Janet herself drinks, and is seen about the streets worse for wear. We do not actually

witness her drinking, and the intimation is that this is done in the home (her first drink is there, we learn later; when we see her struggling to overcome temptation again it is in the home that we see her smash a brandy decanter). Her repentance comes through the help of a clergyman she initially rejects, Mr Tryan. The tale itself, however, begins with a long description of the town and does not mention Janet at all, and the reader begins to wonder if she will ever appear. This is no doubt part of Eliot's realist aesthetic, to ensure that we understand character as part of the environment, because both here and in her other work, Eliot wants us to see how we are bound to our fellow creatures, and that change for the better can only be effected through the web of human sympathy.

More than this, Eliot is also unusual in asking us to see the inner lives of people we might otherwise disregard, in a move which is typical of her novel *Middlemarch*, going from the general public view to private perspective, and then back again, in order to make commentary on the human condition and humanity. In "Janet's Repentance" Eliot guides the reader into thinking about what the lives of people are like away from the public gaze, for example, at the end of Chapter Eight she asks us to stop sneering at the possibly calculating manner of Mr Tryan's clerical career and consider instead how Mr Tryan may be crying because he feels weak and a failure in the face of his struggles and sacrifice. So Eliot tries to get us to see the inner life, using the narrator's authoritative voice. A certain distance through public aggregation remains: we are all alike under the skin, with a basic allotment of human goodness – a point stressed on a number of occasions in the story – and through wise omniscience, we are able to see beyond each individual to our general humanity.

The ostensible reason Janet drinks is standard temperance fare: it is an anaesthetic against a life made miserable by her husband. A typical temperance narrative would often show that a woman takes to drink as a consequence of her husband's drinking, either to keep him company, as in Cruikshank's illustration, or to dull her consciousness of the beatings. However, it is the precise nature of her redemption, rather than her repentance, which is of interest here, because it opens up the possibility of a more metaphysical handling of the theme of repeated drunkenness than a usual straightforward temperance narrative allows. This is because Eliot's narrative pushes the religious dimension quite hard towards what borders on a religious metaphysical notion of alienation. For example: "Janet felt she was alone: no human soul had measured her anguish, had understood her self-despair, had entered into her sorrows and her sins with that deep-sighted sympathy which is wiser than all blame, more potent than all reproof – such sympathy as had swelled her own heart for many a sufferer."<sup>22</sup>

This is not quite the everyday Christian understanding that we might expect from the culture of the time. The foregrounding of "deep-sighted



sympathy” leans more towards Eliot’s humanism than a common Christianity, although of course there is significant overlap. The two other elements, aloneness and self-despair, can also be taken as strongly derived from a Christian viewpoint, but I think we can, within the context of the period and Eliot’s own reading, see that something else is afoot. “Self-despair,” although not to be understood quite in our present-day usage of the term “self,” nevertheless introduces a particular view of the drinker as an alienated being. The immediate context is what might be called an orthodox Christian alienation. At the end of the story, when the minister Mr Tryan is dead, the narrator says that there are two memorials to Tryan. The first is the gravestone, whereas the second memorial “bears a fuller record: it is Janet Dempster, rescued from self-despair.”<sup>23</sup> Although to the modern reader “despair” will simply signify somebody in a desperate situation, “despair” in Christian thought is one of the gravest of sins, if not *the* gravest. The *Catholic Encyclopedia*, for example, notes that despair is not regarded as a passive state, but an active, intellectual abandonment of God.<sup>24</sup> Aquinas considered whether “despair” was the gravest of sins: “Wherefore a gloss on Proverbs 24:10, ‘Nothing is more hateful than despair, for the man that has it loses his constancy both in the every day toils of this life, and, what is worse, in the battle of faith’ and Isidore says (*De Sum. Bono* ii, 14): ‘To commit a crime is to kill the soul, but to despair is to fall into hell.’”<sup>25</sup> By linking self-despair and drunkenness, Eliot takes the character Janet as close to hell, physically and metaphysically, as is possible. It could be argued that this is hardly out of character for a temperance narrative, since a standard feature is to insert a scene where the drunkard suffers *delirium tremens*, often rendered as an encounter with hell, full of snakes and demons. But that is usually done to show that drinking is bad and will more or less *literally* lead straight to hell, it is not the same as the religious-philosophical self-despair Eliot identifies with Janet. There is indeed a *delirium tremens* scene in “Janet’s Repentance,” but it is given to her husband, who is most definitely not a candidate for soul-searching or self-despair, as we will see.

In addition then to giving us the first female “alcoholic,” Eliot opens up the idea that drink can lead directly to the kind of metaphysical engagement we find in the figure of the Existential drinker in the following century. For self-despair is a form of alienation, and Eliot, familiar with Ludwig Feuerbach’s work, would have known that there is an argument to make that alienation from God is in effect self-alienation, since the God we claim to know is nothing other than a projection of ourselves.<sup>26</sup>

A logical extension might be to say that Eliot intends us to consider all habitual drunkards to be the same as Janet. After all, she guides us towards Janet’s inner life with the aim of showing us that Janet’s repentance under Tryan’s influence represents some transcendent humanity. And yet Eliot

does not extend this sympathy and insight to the other habitual drunkard in the story, Dempster, Janet's husband. Dempster, in contrast to Janet, is the wholly stereotypical drunk of temperance narratives, although more eighteenth-century than nineteenth in his character. Janet is certainly partly the drunken female of temperance narratives, although tellingly she is not a mother, but she is also partly a metaphysical figure.

Because Eliot herself is moving away from, or has already moved away from, Christianity at this point in her life, the metaphysical torment has to also be seen as proto-typically Existential, comparable perhaps to the way in which Kierkegaard's notion of a personal God opens up a distinctly metaphysical being in the world, rather than one defined in a more constrained religious manner. Janet's drunken self is a knowing self-despair, in contrast to Dempster, who is a drunkard and nothing else. It is the sloughing off of the religious context for the self, while retaining a belief in the self as a willed project outside of the pressure of that materialism which we see the Select Committee upholding. The despair associated with habitual drunkenness can thus later be seen, in the likes of Jack London, for instance, to hold out an attraction for the person who conceives of herself as wholly responsible for constituting her self, and is thus resistant to the new social pressures and social mores.

#### DAUMIER'S "TWO DRINKERS."

As noted by the authors of *Daumier Drawings*, "Daumier treated the subject of drinking with great frequency in his prints, depicting it as a social custom, a special pleasure, or a vice."<sup>27</sup> Amongst these many images there are three or four which stand out as pointing towards a rarer figure not captured by the categories of social custom, pleasure and vice, that of the nineteenth-century drinker beset by Existential "angst." In particular is a picture usually known as "Deux buveurs" ("Two Drinkers"), 1860-64, and what is striking about the picture in comparison to his other drinker pictures is the intense look of the figure on the left.<sup>28</sup> This image indicates, as I argue below, a metaphysical intent.<sup>29</sup> Whilst the downturned mouth recalls the old man in Daumier's "The Four Ages of Drinkers," as does a certain look of suspiciousness, and whilst the dark atmosphere of the setting is reminiscent of a couple of other "two drinkers" paintings, the goggle-eyed stare of this character is altogether new: it seems to express the recognition of an internal horror, in the same way that the central figure of Munch's "Shriek" will cry out to the viewer some thirty years later (1893). The setting in "Deux buveurs" is bare, as if "stripping back" the world to some primal social setting. The second drinker also has an intensity, but this is a watchfulness occasioned by the state of being of his companion, as if waiting to see what his confrere will do – which could be anything or nothing.<sup>30</sup>

Daumier's entire *oeuvre* shows an interest in drinking and drunkenness

in general, but this smaller group of pictures records a type of drinker who begins to pull away from social ties, journeying inwards to encounter the groundlessness of self. Elements of this are even evident in his painting “The Drunkenness of Silenus” where a podgy Silenus, head down, is in the act of being unwillingly dragged back into the festivities behind. His particular drunken state is not that of the others – they are revelling whereas his drunkenness appears to have taken him into a different realm altogether. They want to force him to join in the fun, but his face is not the festive face of the others and he looks isolated within the crowd.<sup>31</sup> It is this other realm that the wide-eyed drinker in “Deux buveurs” can be said to inhabit; although beginning in a world with others (that of his companion) his drinking and outlook ultimately takes him into a private, asocial consciousness.

In order to understand the full force of what Daumier achieves in the picture it is necessary to place it in the context of his other drinking pictures, and in relation to this small group of related images. Daumier’s work in general often deals with “types” drawn from everyday life, in the manner that Lukács argued literature should do, that is, creating characters which are representative without being a sociological “average.”<sup>32</sup> Taking the “drinkers” pictures in their entirety we see that Daumier provides a typology of drinking and drinkers between the 1830s-70s which is largely sympathetic to the drinker’s milieu; the absence of titles other than “drinkers” or “smokers” leaves any interpretation beyond that of a genre scene up to the viewer, but there is usually no hint of moralising or satirical intent. Drinkers are shown to be happy and singing, for instance, or we are shown pairs of drinkers, often respectable and serene in their mutual companionship, as in “Les bons amis.” In this painting two men sit at a table drinking, with the man in three-quarters profile attentive to his friend. The setting is outside and the atmosphere is bucolic, throwing into relief the way in which the gloomy interior of “Deux buveurs” enforces the feeling that we are entering the dark side of human affairs. A description of “Les bons amis” notes that the friends clink glasses, and that the mood is one of amiable understanding, engendered by the attuned tones, where words are not necessary for such companions.<sup>33</sup> In another Daumier painting, “The beer drinkers” (“Les buveurs de bière”), there is likewise an air of quiet understanding – one man reads the paper, the other smokes a pipe and watches over him, and two near-full glasses stand on the table, intimating that drunkenness is not part of this friendly dynamic.<sup>34</sup>

Other drinking pairs in Daumier’s work suggest that drink has got the upper hand, but even here Daumier is happy to simply observe the drunken state: the basic sketch “Les ivrognes” (“The drunks”) indicates two men struggling to rise from the bench, and another picture with two men sat at a table, “Les buveurs” has been described as showing them working hard to pour more drink and to keep upright.<sup>35</sup> Daumier’s painting “The Four Ages

of Drinkers,” already mentioned, is an exercise in the representation of the physiology and attitude of drinkers from childhood to old age, with a boy, a young man, a middle-aged man and an old man drinking together around a table.<sup>36</sup> The young man seems quite serene, whereas the two older men are sodden. The middle-aged man looks rather withdrawn and preoccupied (or simply stupefied) whereas the old man appears to be staring suspiciously at the younger men. There is an indifference to the young boy’s drinking, and so it would be possible to put a moral interpretation on the painting, but the overwhelming tone is again one of “showing” the viewer rather than hectoring. Even though there is the appearance of the middle-aged man sinking into himself, and a cynical, rather harsh look to the aged man, both of these attitudes suggest sullenness rather than anything philosophical.

Thus we return to the “Existential” group of images of drinkers which can be regarded as forming a coherent subset: 1. “Deux buveurs” (1860-64) with the wild-eyed drinker; 2. a similar painting (1859-69) also usually entitled “two drinkers”, but with significant differences – the related figures are switched round, there is no “goggle-eyed” look, and the man on the right appears to be relating a story or making a specific point; 3. a brooding “two drinkers” painting where the viewer is brought closer than in 1 and 2 to the figures (1858, in the Barnes Foundation; Figure 1); 4. “Smoker with Absinthe Drinker” (alternatively titled “Two men sitting

**Figure 1. Daumier’s Two drinkers.**

with a table, or the smokers”).

What connects these, other than the basic elements of two men seated at a table and the involvement of drink, is the intimation of emptiness, meaninglessness and angst, rather than leisure-time and relaxation (or, indeed, escape from poverty). The sombre “The two drinkers” of the Barnes Foundation has the men almost nose-to-nose, and in the face of the man on the right there is only a black hole where the eye should be. The men appear to be at some terrible impasse where neither will give ground. In “Smoker with Absinthe Drinker,” the latter, although sat upright, has his head fallen backwards against the wall and looks drugged and vacant, and his eyes are likewise signified by black holes. This appearance of being “drugged” rather than “drunk” is typical of depictions of absinthe drinkers from the period and later, but is also of a piece with the modern sense of “anomie” we see elsewhere, e.g. Degas’s “L’Absinthe” (1876), another “two drinkers” painting where the one drinker is “withdrawn” or contemplative.<sup>37</sup> All of these suggest a significant alteration in the way certain people “inhabit” the world, and while there is an obvious common connection of alcohol between absinthe drinkers and other drunks, Daumier would appear to be making a distinction between the drinker who is emptied out by having too much (absinthe) and the drinker whose experience of the world is intensified by drinking (“Deux buveurs” and the Barnes Foundation “The Two Drinkers”). The absinthe drinker is therefore the kind of drinker who becomes uncommunicative – a couple of lithographs in the series “Les Chinois de Paris” contrast the “dead-to-the-world” absinthe drinker with the more traditional drinker – whereas the “intense” drinker of “Deux buveurs” is self-consciously alert to the world that is opened up by his drinking.<sup>38</sup>

The final thing to note is that Daumier does not present us with lone drunks in these pictures – there is an insistent pairing – and so the images can be said to function as social commentary in the way we find in Eliot’s tale and in the story of Mary Thompson. The paired format highlights the way in which the one drinker becomes distinct and individuated, whereas the other, “normal” drinker, remains in the habituated social world which he also serves to represent. This small group of remarkable pictures is very much in keeping with these glimpses of the Existential drinker. The pairing means that he is shown in a social context, even if in the basic nature of the backgrounds there is a suggestion that the state of affairs for the drinkers transcends specific space or time. In other words, the “Existential two drinkers” pictures register the identification of a new individual within nineteenth century society who leans towards a more asocial, inward, psychological and philosophical sense of selfhood in a world which lacks authority and existential guarantees.

ÉMILE ZOLA, *L'ASSOMMOIR*

Zola's novel *L'Assommoir*, published in 1877, shares a broad literary intention with that of Eliot's work (and arguably that of the majority of Daumier's work) which is to depict in a largely realistic manner the effect of environment on character. He states in the preface: "my characters are not bad, they are only ignorant and ruined by the conditions of sweated toil and poverty in which they live."<sup>39</sup> Just as Eliot puts a good deal of effort into placing Janet very firmly within a community, and perhaps concluding that the alienation stemming from drink is an alienation from a common humanity more than an abandonment of God, Zola devotes a great deal of energy to portraying the Paris slum district in which his three main characters live. He too wants to show us how these people are circumscribed by environment, and we might say that this in its way is no different from what the panel of the Commission on Habitual Drunkards hoped to achieve through its interrogation of its witnesses.

But just as Eliot implicitly seems to be more interested in the "or what?" of that Select Committee statement, rather than the possible causes of misfortune and broken health, so Zola, despite his theoretical proclamations on naturalism, also seems to give us an approach to habitual drunkards which suggests something to one side of the temperance narrative.

The novel's story superficially indicates a variation on the temperance theme. Gervaise's lover Lantier leaves her, and, after some persuading, she marries Coupeau, a roofer. Gervaise sets up her own laundry business and thrives. Things go badly when Coupeau falls from a roof and following his recovery he takes to drink. Her former lover, Lantier, returns, and with Coupeau's blessing lives with them, thus establishing a *ménage à trois*. Gervaise's affections return to Lantier, but she also takes to drinking with Coupeau in the *assommoir*, a term utilised by Zola to indicate a low drinking den. Coupeau dies from his drinking, and at the end of the novel we see Gervaise in extreme penury, also dying.

This is the way the novel is often described, and at the time, as now, it was not uncommon to treat Zola's novel as a warning against drink. After all, drink would appear to be the ruination of two of the main characters, and the *assommoir* is itself a magnet for the ruin of many others. Such a view may have been reinforced by the hugely successful play version of it that appeared a couple of years after the novel's publication, which is a straightforward temperance narrative. On British shores, where Zola was deemed to be pure filth, such a view of *L'Assommoir* would have been nevertheless further reinforced by the most famous of the English sanitised dramatisations of the novel, Charles Reade's *Drink*, also launched in 1879 and another hugely successful play, with an even stronger temperance message than the French play version.<sup>40</sup> But any attentive reading of *L'Assommoir* will discover that it is not a temperance novel, not even in

diluted form.

It is relatively easy to show that this is the case by simply tracing through the plot. Coupeau falls from the roof, and *for reasons which are not explained*, he has no enthusiasm for work once he is recovered. He could work if he wished to, it is just that he has no appetite for it, and would rather be drinking. If anything, he adopts an anti-temperance stance in that his bitterness stems from the fact that he *didn't* drink before the fall, and yet such sobriety and endeavour is rewarded with an accident. He can understand why his father's life was miserable, because it reads like a standard temperance narrative – his father drank and fell off a roof – so that can be accounted just desserts; but here, unlike his father, Coupeau has done nothing untoward and still finds himself on the wrong side of fate. Temperance narratives stress that misfortune follows from drunkenness, but for Coupeau misfortune came his way when he was a sober and conscientious worker. And just as Coupeau's sudden dislike of work is not fully explained, or indeed explained at all, there is a parallel lack of clarity as to why Gervaise lets her business go downhill. It is certainly not because she takes to drink. If there is any explanation, it is to be found in this passage:

She went on counting out loud. She was used to filth, and didn't find it in the least disgusting; she plunged her bare pink arms right in among shirts yellow with dirt, cloths stiff with grease from washing-up water and socks eaten away and rotted by sweat. But, amid the penetrating fumes that hit her in the face as she bent over the piles, a kind of languor [*nonchalance*] came over her. Sitting doubled up on the edge of a stool and leaning towards the floor, she was stretching out her hands to left and right more and more slowly and smiling vaguely, her eyes dreamy, as if this human stench was making her drunk. And it seemed as though that was where her laziness [*ses paresse*s] first began, that it came from the stifling reek of dirty clothes poisoning the air round about her.<sup>41</sup>

It seems as though an unexplained lassitude descends upon her while she is washing. The term Zola uses is “paresse.” The English term “laziness” does not really catch a possible freighting which is religious and spiritual, for “paresse” is the French term for “sloth,” one of the seven deadly sins, and thus akin to Janet's self-despair.<sup>42</sup>

If Zola wanted to warn against the evils of drink, to make drink the cause of Coupeau's decline and Gervaise's decline, it would be easy enough, and *de rigueur* for temperance tales. But he doesn't. As a young girl of fourteen, Gervaise drank heavily and had her first child, but she was clearly able to not drink if she chose to, since we see her at the start of the novel as a sober person who doesn't like drink. The narrative has no predetermined temperance script – alcohol and drinking have no *innate* effect on the narrative. In the course of both Coupeau's and Gervaise's lives then it seems at some point work becomes meaningless, and this lassitude, this despair, exists without any direct physical or external cause, although it may be triggered

by external events. That is, the crisis of meaning comes from within as some kind of recognition of “the truth” about existence, leading to (or registering) alienation from others and from self. And because the style of narration is free indirect discourse in *L'Assommoir*, unlike Eliot's omniscient narration, if the cause of this despair is unknown to the character, it remains unknown to the reader. Returning to the passage here, note that there is a symbolic logic in that Gervaise is overwhelmed by the stench of humanity. On the one level there is the naturalist rendering of poverty, whilst on the other there is the invitation to read it metaphysically, with Gervaise burdened by the reality of what it is to be human, behind the scenes, such that she succumbs to a spiritual and mental slothfulness.

#### CONCLUSION

What can account for the behaviour of Gervaise and Coupeau, Janet Dempster, Daumier's drinkers, and Mary Thompson? It is here we might turn to the theme of alienation more directly for an explanation of what underlies these responses, a feeling of anxiety and meaninglessness prompted by the new connections between self and world as structured by industrial capitalism. Indeed, the “boozing machine” in *L'Assommoir* symbolises the industrialisation of drink and drunkenness: “The still worked silently on, with no flame visible, no cheerful play of light on its lack-lustre copper surface, sweating out its alcohol like a slow-flowing but relentless spring which would eventually flood the bar-room, spill over the outer boulevards and inundate the vast pit that was Paris.”<sup>43</sup> Both Karl Marx and Søren Kierkegaard identified “alienation” as a psychological and spiritual condition belonging to their age, even if they gave differing accounts. For Marx, labour was alienated from itself because work, in the form of sapping toil in the factory, had no connection to the human: “labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature.”<sup>44</sup> For Kierkegaard, “the public” “levelled” individuals into anonymity.<sup>45</sup> Although we may trace drinkers who are idle and who fail to abide by approved social norms prior to industrial capitalism (Falstaff springs to mind), and ideas of “despair,” “sloth” and “accidie” have a long, religious history, we can see that there is a particular configuration of this in relation to habitual drunkenness. In the middle of the nineteenth century onwards materialism makes inroads into the image of a being who is whole, either in Kierkegaard's spiritual and religious sense, or Marx's “human” (species-being) sense, and it is through the atypical representations of habitual drunkenness outlined here that we can see this new sensibility registered. Both “Janet's Repentance” and *L'Assommoir* narrate a kind of despair which, when further removed from any religious context, becomes the basis for Existential angst in the twentieth century.<sup>46</sup> While such despair in the nineteenth century, possibly the result of the pressures on self exerted by industrial capitalism, elicits



the need for some kind of public response to counter it – through Parliament, medicine, community, philanthropy – in the twentieth century and beyond, certain characters, both real and fictional, will embrace or confront their sense of alienation, facticity, angst, and God’s abandonment, through the freely chosen act of excessive drinking.

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#### ENDNOTES

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1. Jack London, *John Barleycorn* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
2. Later twentieth-century figures include the heroines of Jean Rhys’s interwar novels, Don Birnam in *The Lost Weekend* (Charles B. Jackson, 1944), Geoffrey Firmin in *Under the Volcano* (Malcolm Lowry, 1947), Fred Exley in *A Fan’s Notes* (Frederick Exley, 1968), and Ben Sanderson in *Leaving Las Vegas* (John O’Brien, 1990). There is often a blurring in these books between the life of the author and the main character.
3. London, *John Barleycorn*, 7.
4. “The story is told (by Kierkegaard) of the absent-minded man so abstracted from his own life that he hardly knows he exists until, one fine morning, he wakes up to find himself dead,” William Barrett, *Irrational Man. A Study in Existential Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1958), 3.
5. “[London] claimed that he had “been more stimulated by Nietzsche than any other writer in the world,”” Per Serritslev Petersen, “Jack London’s Dialectical Philosophy between Nietzsche’s Radical Nihilism and Jules de Gaultier’s *Bovarysme*,” *Partial Answers* 9, No. 1 (2011), 67.
6. In doing so it is largely contrary to Mariana Valverde’s argument in *Diseases of the Will*, which urges historians to see the idea of “habit” as a pragmatic guide to understanding alcoholism, e.g. 68-69. Mariana Valverde, *Diseases of the Will: Alcohol and the Dilemmas of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
7. See Anya Taylor, *Bacchus in Romantic England* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), and James Nicholls, especially on the emergence of confessional drinker narratives, *Drink, Modernity and Modernism. Representations of drinking and intoxication in James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway and Jean Rhys*. (PhD Diss., Liverpool John Moores University, 2002).
8. George Cruikshank, *The Bottle* (London: Cowans & Gray, 1906.) Available at archive.org
9. *Report from the Select Committee on Habitual Drunkards, Together with the Proceedings, Minutes of Evidence, Appendix and Index* (1872) (Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1968), iii.
10. *Report* (1872), 24 (qn. 464).
11. *Report* (1872), iii.
12. E.g. “He will perhaps work about two days a week, and he will drink during the remainder of the time; that is about his style of life,” *Report* (1872), 2 (qn. 23).

13. *Report* (1872), iii.
14. Charles Dickens, "The Drunkard's Death," in *Sketches by Boz* (London: Penguin, 1995), 555.
15. *Report* (1872), 1 (qn. 9).
16. *Report* (1872), 1, (qn. 10).
17. *Report* (1872), 3-4, (qn. 70).
18. See the WHO's "Lexicon of Alcohol and Drug Terms," [http://www.who.int/substance\\_abuse/terminology/who\\_lexicon/en/](http://www.who.int/substance_abuse/terminology/who_lexicon/en/) Last accessed 1 July 2015.
19. T. S. Arthur, *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* (Boston: L. P. Crown, 1854), e.g. 196.
20. Mrs Charles Wightman, *Haste to the Rescue, or, Work While It is Day* (London: James Nisbett, 1849).
21. See Sheila Shaw, "The Female Alcoholic in Victorian Fiction: George Eliot's Unpoetic Heroine," in *Nineteenth-Century Women Writers of the English-Speaking World*, ed. Rhoda B. Nathan (London: Greenwood Press, 1986).
22. George Eliot, "Janet's Repentance" in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (London: Penguin, 1998), 287. Annette Federico discusses some similar Existential aspects in "'I must have drink': Addiction, Angst and Victorian Realism," *Dionysos* 2 (Fall 1990): 11-25.
23. "Janet's Repentance," 350.
24. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, "Despair," <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04755a.htm> Last accessed 20 October 2014.
25. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. Second and Revised Edition, 1920. Literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Online Edition Copyright (2008), Kevin Knight. 2.2 Question 20. <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/3020.htm> Last accessed 20 October 2014.
26. See, for example, Moira Gatens "The Art and Philosophy of George Eliot," *Philosophy and Literature* 33 (April 2009), 73.
27. Colta Ives, Margret Stuffmann and Martin Sonnabend, *Daumier Drawings* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 154. The Daumier Register lists 276 images for the theme of "drinking," although this does not include "Deux buveurs," discussed below.
28. Ives *et al.*, *Daumier Drawings*, No. 59, p. 151; watercolour, pen and ink.
29. Others have observed the unusual nature of the "sketch," e.g. Michael Glover: "The exchange of gaze is terrible, unnerving, wild, pop-eyed. Bulbous eye stares at bulbous eye. The faces themselves are weirdly lit, in white. They appear stunned, mask-like. Those masks look loose enough to be peelable, to reveal the skull beneath"; "Great Works: Two Drinkers (Deux Buveurs) by Honoré Daumier, 1860-64." *The Independent*, 29 November, 2013. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/great-works/great-works-two-drinkers-deux-buveurs-by-honore-daumier-18604-8973036.html>. Last accessed 14 October 2014.
30. The dangerous pregnancy of the situation can be compared with Van Gogh's painting "Night Café at Arles" (1888), as Van Gogh describes it in a letter to his brother Theo: "In my picture... I have tried to express the idea that the café is a place where one can ruin oneself, go mad or commit a crime" (9 September, 1888), <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/>, Letter 677. See my "Drink, Dissolution, Antibiohistory: The Existential Drinker" in *Biographies of Drink* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015) for a discussion of this painting and the related letter.
31. Daumier Register 5996.
32. George Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* (London: Merlin Press, 1972), 6.
33. Ives *et al.*, *Daumier Drawings* 154-55. Catalogue details provided by Ives *et al.*
34. Daumier Register 7155, also known as "Le fumeur."
35. Daumier Register 7005; *Ibid.* 8030; Robert Rey, *Honoré Daumier* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966), 104.
36. Van Gogh's painting "The Drinkers" (1890) is a version of this sketch.
37. Also known as "The Absinthe Drinker" and "In a Café."
38. The lithographs are Daumier Register 3255 and 3256, both 1863.
39. Émile Zola "Preface," *L'Assommoir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4.

40. Charles Reade, *Drink*, ed. David Baguley (London, Ontario: Mestengo Press, 1991); William Busnach and Octave Gastineau. *L'Assommoir. Drame en cinq actes et neuf tableaux. Avec une Préface d'Émile Zola* (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1881).

41. Zola, *L'Assommoir*, 140. I have added in the original French from Émile Zola, *L'Assommoir* (Editions Gallimard, 1978; no place), 174-75.

42. For a full description of “paresse(s),” including its religious significance and literary use, see <http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/paresse>. Last accessed 24 June 2015.

43. Zola, *L'Assommoir*, 42.

44. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm>. Last accessed 6 November 2015.

45. See Kierkegaard's *The Public Age*, for example, or “The Crowd is Untruth.”

46. In “I must have drink,” Federico, discussing addiction (opium use as well as alcohol) in relation to *Mary Barton, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and “Janet's Repentance” says: “These are painful characters, severely disturbed by the world around them, by injustice, misery, and untruth, just as much as they are by the unknowable and the unseen – the nothingness they fear. The angst felt by the alcoholic character is genuine, not stereotypic” (p. 14).