

BENEATH  
THE AMERICAN  
RENAISSANCE

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*The Subversive Imagination  
in the Age of Emerson and Melville*

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Temperance fiction, under the influence of the Washingtonians, continued to move increasingly away from the didactic toward the sensational. Earlier temperance novels, such as *Edmund and Margaret* and *The Lottery Ticket* (both 1822), had been characterized by quietness and rationality in their accounts of alcoholics recovering as result of Bible reading and domestic piety. By the early 1840s a school of powerful dark-temperance fiction had emerged. Just as Washingtonian lecturers wallowed publicly in past wrongdoing, so popular temperance novelists stressed the shattered homes, crime, and perversity resulting from their favorite vice. *Letters from the Almshouse* and *John Elliott* (both 1841) contain several sketches of drunken husbands dragging their wives about by the hair, driving their families outdoors, or chopping up family and friends with an ax. Whitman's temperance novel *Franklin Evans* (1842), written on commission for the Washingtonians, created a sensation with its bleak portrait of the countless evils flowing from alcohol. *Confessions of a Reformed Inebriate* (1844) showed the psychological ravages of intemperance, as its author described the loathsome visions endured by a sufferer of the d.t.'s. In *The Confessions of a Rum-Seller* (1845) a drunken man murders his own daughter when she cries; after he is hanged for murder, his wife becomes a raving maniac. Maria Lamas's *The Glass* (1849) gives dark temperance an unusual twist by describing a young boy, locked by his drunken mother in a closet, bleeding to death after having chewed his own arm to the bone in an effort to save himself from starvation. The temperance fiction of Thurlow Weed Brown abounded in such scenes of broken homes, insanity, and bestial violence.

The dark-temperance style illustrates well how the puritanical protest against vice, when carried to an extreme, could in fact turn into its opposite—a gloating over the grim details of vice that signaled the triumph of the Subversive sensibility. Because of this ethical fluidity of immoral reformers, it is small wonder that several of them were friends and inspirers of major writers. The Conventional moralist could, by amplifying the reformist zeal of his age, turn into the brash bohemian. This kind of flip-flop was most evident in the crowd surrounding Whitman and Poe. Whitman himself moved from Conventional reform writing (“The Sun-Down Pa-

pers") through dark temperance (*Franklin Evans*) to rebellious, morally liberated poetry (*Leaves of Grass*). Whitman's close friend Henry Clapp, the leader of a bohemian group that met at Pfaff's saloon in the mid-1850s, had early in life been a rabid temperance lecturer and editor but then became a Fourierist rebel who sang praise to free enjoyment of sensual pleasures. The death of a friend drove Clapp to suicidal drinking—one writer said Clapp "lived to preach in his own life a better temperance lecture than he ever delivered in his younger days."<sup>26</sup> Two other Pfaff bohemians, Fitz-James O'Brien and Fitz-Hugh Ludlow, were driven to write moralistic literature despite their iconoclastic lifestyle. O'Brien loved boxing but wrote a flaming protest against boxing, a reform story called "The Prize Fight," on commission for a New York editor. Ludlow's best-selling record of his drug experiences, *The Hasheesh Eater* (1857), was ostensibly a moral protest against the use of drugs, but its reformist intent was belied by its long, dazzling accounts of marvelous drug visions; Ludlow proved indeed to be an immoral reformer, since he continued to drink and take drugs until his death.

Given the antididactic tendency of immoral-reform writings, it is small wonder that Edgar Allan Poe's fiction, for example, was influenced by the rhetorical changes that were going on around him. Poe is known to have joined the Sons of Temperance and written a temperance article in the last year of his life, and he had developed close connections with reformers long before that. In Baltimore in the late 1830s he befriended the alcoholic and opium addict John Lofland, who wrote popular fiction and delivered temperance lectures even though, like other backsliding reformers of the period, he continued to drink and take drugs in private. Another member of Poe's Baltimore set, Timothy Shay Arthur, went on to produce two of the biggest-selling (and darkest) temperance works of the period, *Six Nights with the Washingtonians* (1842) and *Ten Nights in a Bar-room* (1854). The latter novel sold more than 400,000 copies as a result of its titillatingly horrific portrayal of the collapse of a respectable community into complete moral degradation after the establishment of a saloon and a distillery.

The overall tendency of the dark-temperance mode was to discard moralization altogether on behalf of bold explorations of psychopathic states. The antimoralistic implications of popular dark-temperance literature were evident in many statements made by the reformers themselves, such as the following introduction to *Easy Nat* (1844), a widely read temperance novel: "I will not stay to *preach* to [readers]. I will not tarry even to *point a moral*. There is not time. I will simply and hurriedly inform them of the steps" by which a drunkard descends from falsehood through murder to suicide.<sup>27</sup> In a review of William Leete Stone's *Ups and Downs* (1836) Poe singled out for praise a dark-temperance scene about a drunken man

pawning his wife's clothes despite her pathetic lamentations, a scene Poe said was useful "to one who would study human nature, especially in its darker features."<sup>28</sup> Other dark-reform fictionists Poe greatly admired were John Neal, Elizabeth Ellett, and George Lippard. The reformers he admired were precisely those who had initiated a process he would complete: the transference of reform imagery from the didactic to the psychological. Given his attraction to dark-temperance devices, we may surmise that the impulse behind his joining a temperance group was less a sincere desire for total abstinence than an instinctive attraction to a movement that had provided him with images of perversity and terror.

Dark-temperance imagery is scattered throughout many Poe tales, especially those written after 1840, when the Washingtonians notably darkened popular reform rhetoric. In particular, "The Black Cat" (1843) is a tale fully in the dark-temperance tradition, with reform images retained but an explicit moral message now totally eclipsed. Many dark-temperance tales of the day dramatized the shattering of a happy family after the husband takes up the bottle. By exaggerating both the happy prologue and the horrific aftermath of the husband's tipping, Poe converts a popular reform formula into an intriguing study of disintegration of the Conventional sensibility through the agency of Subversive forces unleashed by alcohol. Since youth the narrator has epitomized the Conventional: he tells us he had been famous for his docility, gentleness, humaneness. His good nature is especially displayed by his affection for his pet cat. But he recalls that his temperament—"through the instrumentality of the Fiend Intemperance—had (I blush to confess it) experienced a radical alteration for the worse. I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others."<sup>29</sup> To describe his mental change, Poe uses dark-temperance metaphors: the narrator says that "my disease grew upon me—for what disease is like Alcohol!" One night, when "a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fibre of my being," the narrator cuts out his cat's eye with a penknife. To forget the deed, "I again plunged into excess, and soon drowned in wine all memory of the deed." In the crescendoing perversity that leads to the murder of his cat and finally his wife, the narrator is driven by alcohol to the depths of paranoia, misanthropy, and criminality. The climax of the story, in which the narrator's grisly murder of his wife is revealed to the police by his own perverse game playing and cockiness, has a somewhat moralistic overtone recalling the conclusion of many dark-temperance tales—the drunkard, after all, will get his due and is already crying out in fear of "the fangs of the Arch-Fiend!" But Poe, who in many tales exploited different popular genres purely for the *effect* they could produce, is here avoiding didactic statement and exploring the shattered homes and self-lacerating demonism made available by the dark-temperance mode.

An equally inventive reapplication of dark-temperance imagery occurs in another Poe tale, "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846). It has long been known that the immediate source of this tale was Joel Tyler Headley's article "A Man Built in a Wall" (*Columbian Magazine*, 1844) and that Poe probably also knew of Honoré de Balzac's tale "Apropos of Bores" (*New York Mirror*, 1837). But to compare "The Cask of Amontillado" with these pieces is to recognize how Poe's addition of dark-temperance imagery enabled him to produce a tale far superior to its predecessors. "A Man Built in a Wall" is merely a sketch of Headley's grisly discovery, while touring an Italian church, of the skeleton of a man who had died by suffocation after having been walled up in a crypt. Balzac's "Apropos of Bores" is, likewise, just a sensational story, without much resonance, about two people at a party who tell the story of a time they nearly died while being accidentally locked in a cellar vault. Neither of these tales has the psychological intensity or ironic inevitability of Poe's tale, primarily because Poe alone made use of the dark-temperance mode.

In "The Cask of Amontillado" Poe fused a sensational adventure plot with psychologically suggestive dark-temperance images to produce a classic tale of terror. Unlike either of its lesser prototypes, "The Cask" centers on the diseased psychology associated with alcoholism. Everything in the main narrative pertains to the ill results of alcohol. The object of the descent into the vault is a bottle of wine. Both of the main characters are wine connoisseurs, as is their mentioned friend Luchesi. Although the narrator's exact motive for revenge is unclear, a nineteenth-century reader accustomed to alcohol-related criminality would find in Montresor a familiar kind of vindictive psychopath who boasts: "I was skilful in the Italian vintages myself, and bought largely whenever I could."<sup>30</sup> As for Fortunato, the victim of the revenge plot, the double pun on his name ("lucky" and "fated") had meaning in the dark-temperance sense: from his own viewpoint, the devoted wine lover Fortunato feels "lucky" to have a friend with a valued bottle of wine; from the reader's viewpoint, he is "fated" (in the deterministic symbology of dark temperance) to be sucked to his doom by his affection for liquor. Like many victims of alcohol obsession in dark-temperance stories, Fortunato journeys to his demise with full inevitability. He falls easy prey to the wily Montresor because he maniacally loves wines and takes fierce competitive pride in his connoisseurship. Fortunato is indeed fated by his fascination with the Amontillado. Moreover, he is inebriated at the start and becomes progressively more as the tale proceeds; the more wine he drinks, the more his interest in the Amontillado intensifies. Given the dark-temperance fatalism that governs the story, the narrator, Montresor, is just as degraded as Fortunato. There occurs a kind of evil communion between dissolutes when Montresor breaks open a bottle of Médoc and offers it to Fortunato, who "raised it to his lips with

a leer." Poe's contemporary readers would naturally have contemplated the universality of desolation caused by alcohol when they read that the skeleton-filled wine vault showed the Montresors to have been "a great and numerous family"—by implication, a family of wine lovers now reduced to bones scattered amidst wine casks. They would also have felt at home with the symbolic interweaving of alcohol and death images, as when Poe described "long walls of piled bones, with casks and puncheons intermingling." They would have appreciated the coupling of drinking and clown-like stupidity in the portrayal of Fortunato (his eyes sparkling with wine as his cap bells jingle), and they would see the appropriateness in the terse tautological exchange that takes place as soon as Fortunato is chained to the wall:

"The Amontillado!" ejaculated my friend, not yet recovered from his astonishment.

"True," I replied; "the Amontillado."

The dreary circularity of this conversation, with the repetition of the wine's name, reminds us that all aspects of this crime—the motive, the criminal and his victim, the foil, the instigation—have been tied closely to alcohol obsession and alcohol expertise. The horrid shrieks of both the victim and the murderer as the deadly masonwork is completed suggest the hellish end to which this misled expertise has led. We are left with a tale so morally complex that a modern Poe expert like Thomas Olive Mabbott can write equivocally: "'The Cask,' on its surface completely amoral, is perhaps the most moral of his Tales."<sup>31</sup> Actually, when viewed in terms of its contemporary popular culture, the tale is a memorable portrait of amorality precisely because it takes to an innovative extreme the twisted dark-temperance morality of its day. The intensification of dark-temperance themes and images, released by Poe from the vestiges of overt moralization, gives rise to an enduring portrait of psychopathic criminality and self-dooming obsession.

Poe's nondidactic manipulation of temperance images—an improvement upon similar manipulation by popular reformers—suggests that temperance reform was destined to run into grave trouble with Conventional commentators, which it did. The sensational lectures and fiction produced by reformed drunkards prompted a backlash of adverse criticism by those who believed a worthy reform was being ruined by money-making histrionics and gross sensationalism. As early as 1833 one pamphleteer complained: "Temperance societies have become excessively intemperate in their language and aim. . . . The excited imagination of the ultra-moralist . . . fancied and multiplied evil upon evil, until he saw Ossa heaped upon



Pelion.”<sup>32</sup> In “A Rill from a Town Pump” (1835) Hawthorne both adopted and modified popular temperance rhetoric, noting the extremely ironic phenomenon of Americans who “get tipsy with zeal for temperance . . . in the style of a toper fighting for his brandy-bottle.”<sup>33</sup> Three years later, David Reese in *Humbugs of New-York*, to underscore his argument that this was “the *age of ultraism*,” pointed to the “tales of lust, and blood, and murder . . . with which the ultra-protestant press is teeming.”<sup>34</sup> The rise of the Washingtonians in the 1840s brought antitemperance paranoia to nearly fever pitch. The liberal leader William Ellery Channing pointed to rabid temperance evangelical lecturers as proof that “a dangerous fanaticism threatens destruction to the world under the name of reform.”<sup>35</sup> In *Something for Every Body* (1846) Bayard Rust Hall decried the many “itinerants, who wander about in very eccentric orbits and narrate their *rum* days at so much *per diem*.” America was crowded, Hall complained, with “lecturers who tell what all know and yet find it profitable—with ‘moral’ play-actors—with ‘moral’ singers—with ‘moral’ stages—‘moral’ ferry-boats—while all the time these ‘moralists’ are often infidel in sentiment and sometimes licentious in practice.”<sup>36</sup>

By 1846 Theodore Parker could make the generalization that there had been “more preaching against the temperance movement than in its favor.”<sup>37</sup> This comment might startle those who accept the common notion that temperance literature was conventional moral pablum light-years distant from the dense texts of the major writers. But the fact is that temperance literature, in its dark manifestations, was an energetically subversive mode that had a demonstrable influence upon several major works, including, as will be seen, *Moby-Dick*.

An equally subversive literature also arose around another popular reform: antislavery. In the same breath that he made the above comment on hostility to temperance writings, Parker declared: “I think there has been more clerical preaching against the abolitionists than against slavery.”<sup>38</sup> There was, in fact, good reason for discomfort with popular antislavery writing, for much of it contained quite dark commentary on metaphysical and social issues. On the deepest level, the existence of slavery brought into question the veracity of the Bible, the applicability of the American Constitution, and indeed the very existence of God. Several slave narratives and antislavery novels of the period launch a vigorous protest against the slave system, a protest that, in its ferocity, gives rise to savage indictments of the religious and social norms of mainstream America. At the same time, slavery was—horribly enough—exploited for its sensationalism by some reformers and editors who wished to provide arousing, masochistic fantasies to an American public accustomed to having its reform well spiced with violence and sex. By the late 1840s, aboli-