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TEMPERANCE

The antebellum period was famously a time of social reform. Reformers agitated for the abolition of slavery and the expansion of women's rights, but they also renovated prisons and poorhouses and instituted mental asylums and schools for the deaf and the blind. They passed out religious tracts and insisted that the Sabbath be observed. They improved sewers and drains, inspected the homes of the poor, and campaigned against the death penalty and for world peace. They lived in communes, rejected fashion in favor of rational dress, and took all sorts of water cures. But above all else, they advocated temperance reform. Antebellum temperance reform was the largest mass movement in United States history—and certainly one of the most influential.

Temperance reform unfolded in five sometimes overlapping phases: (1) the licensing movement of the eighteenth century, (2) the moderationist societies of the early nineteenth century, (3) the temperance societies of the early to mid-nineteenth century, (4) the teetotal societies of the mid-nineteenth century, and (5) the prohibitionist movement of the mid-nineteenth century. The essay that follows will sketch out the history of temperance reform, pausing to consider four milestone temperance texts, and will conclude by discussing the effects that temperance reform had on the non-canonical and canonical literary texts of the antebellum period.

THE PREHISTORY OF TEMPERANCE REFORM: LICENSING

Throughout the seventeenth century and much of the eighteenth, drinking was frequent and alcohol was abundant. Beer or cider was served at every meal, to children as well as adults, and various liquors and cordials were used as medicines; many families distilled their own spirits and brewed their own beer. Church meetings, town elections, and militia trainings were all occasions for drinking, while the tavern was the site for all the communal activities that could not take place in the church, from business meetings and newspaper reading to cockfighting and bear baiting. Historians estimate that Americans drank more than twice as much alcohol in the colonial period as they do now, but no one at the time thought of this as a problem. On the contrary, alcohol was celebrated as salutary and drinking as convivial. Alcohol was understood not only to deaden pain and induce sleep but also to cure colds, break fevers, aid digestion, and, more generally, sustain the body's constitution; moreover, it served as a reliable alternative for an often impure water supply. The drinking of alcohol was understood to reaffirm communal ties—on holidays, at harvest time, and during all the rituals that punctuate a life, such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Communal ties were reaffirmed daily as well in the informal political debates that sprang up among the men who gathered every evening in taverns, gatherings that were as democratic as the revolution such debates would ultimately foment.

This happy conception of alcohol and drink was first challenged in the United States in 1673, when the Puritan minister Increase Mather published a pair of sermons entitled "Wo to Drunkards: Two Sermons Testifying against the Sin of Drunkenness." Mather voices the then current view of alcohol when he takes for granted the fact that "drink is in itself a good creature of God," but he attempts to alter the contemporary view of drinking by arguing that "the abuse of drink is from Satan" (p. 23). In introducing the category of "abuse" Mather is drawing a new distinction between moderate and excessive drinking. The consequences of excessive drinking fall on individual drunkards: their reason is destroyed and their souls are imperiled; their time and money are wasted, and they are often drawn into crime. But the fate of individual drunkards has become a concern for the Puritan community more generally because, Mather believes, excessive drinking has recently become more prevalent. For this reason, he exhorts the elders of Boston to monitor the drinking of others in order to ensure that it does not become excessive; more specifically, he calls on the elders to regulate the number of taverns and alehouses in the city and to supervise them more closely. In emphasizing regulation and supervision, Mather is anticipating the form that temperance activity would take throughout the eighteenth century, when the so-called licensing movement would seek to ensure that drinking houses and the drink trade remained in the hands of a respectable elite.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century two texts argued that licensing was not enough: Anthony Benezet's *The Potent Enemies of America Laid Open* (1774) and Benjamin Rush's *An Inquiry into the Effects of Spirituous Liquors on the Human Body* (1790). The two texts are medical treatises that differ from Mather's sermons both in argument and in rhetoric. Where Mather had drawn a distinction between excessive and moderate drinking, Benezet and Rush instead distinguish among forms of alcohol: they condemn distilled spirits while praising beer, wine, and hard cider. Where Mather had relied on scriptural authority for his arguments, quoting Isaiah's attack on drunkards, Benezet and Rush rely instead on the authority of medicine and science. And where Mather had focused on the spiritual and moral effects of drunkenness, Benezet and Rush attend to the effects that spirits have on the body as well as on the mind and the character. Indeed, Rush establishes a remarkably precise set of correlations between various alcoholic and nonalcoholic drinks and various bodily and moral states. He depicts these correlations visually through what he calls the "Moral and Physical Thermometer," which arranges drinks according to their specific "hotness," from water through punch to pepper in rum, and then displays the specific "diseases," "vices" and "punishments" to which the hotter drinks give rise (p. 4). A toddy, for instance, leads to gout, idleness, and debt, while morning drams lead to melancholy, "hatred of just gov't" and jail or the whipping post (p. 4).

MODERATIONISM AND TEMPERANCE

Taken together, Mather's sermons and Benezet's and Rush's treatises laid the conceptual foundation for temperance reform. But reform did not seize the public imagination until the early nineteenth century, when people became troubled by a sudden rise in drinking rates. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries people had drunk at a rate more than double our own; in the first third of the nineteenth century, however, they suddenly began drinking at a rate more than triple. More specifically, the annual per capita consumption of distilled alcohol was six gallons a year; with the rise of temperance reform at mid-century, that rate would fall to two gallons a year, where it has held steady ever since. What these numbers obscure, however, is the fact that many women, children, and slaves did not drink at all in the period, which means that the

The Drunkard's House. Illustration from the book *The National Temperance Offering and Sons and Daughters of the Temperance Gift,* edited by S. F. Cary and published in 1850. Such visual imagery greatly enhanced the message of temperance literature. BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

typical drinker was consuming nearly half a pint of distilled alcohol every day.

Historians argue that the causes of this sudden rise in alcohol consumption were largely agricultural. A number of farmers had moved west, across the Allegheny mountains, only to find that the nation's infrastructure was not adequate to transporting their crops back to the cities and ports of the east. As a result, they needed to convert the grain they grew into something more portable: some began feeding their grain to livestock, while many more began distilling it into spirits. Spirits were easily transported back to the East, and they also circulated widely in the western territories, where a shortage of hard money made alcohol the most common currency. At the same time as the spread of agriculture was causing a national drinking binge, however, the rise of industrialization was making sobriety seem newly necessary. In the colonial period, labor had been spasmodic: agricultural labor followed cycles of activity and rest, harvest time followed by harvest festival; and artisanal labor too was oriented to tasks rather than time. Factory work, by contrast, required a disciplined labor force, one that would show up for work on time, every day—and sober.

Agricultural expansion thus created a situation that industrialization felt compelled to control. The first attempt to do so took the form of the moderationist movement of the early to mid-nineteenth century. This movement began in 1813, with the founding of the Massachusetts Society for the Suppression of Intemperance and the Connecticut Society

for the Reformation of Morals. These groups emerged, historians argue, in response to the depression that was caused in New England by the War of 1812 and the consequent naval embargo; there was a fear that the newly unemployed would fall into drunkenness, and the moderationists sought to forestall this possibility by instilling what they called the habits of moderation. Moderation was defined in one of two ways: either as moderate, rather than excessive, drinking, or more commonly, as the drinking of fermented, rather than distilled, alcohol. That these two distinctions were sometimes confused with one another points to the fact that the moderationist societies were far more deeply concerned with a third distinction, the distinction of class. The moderationist societies drew their leaders and most of their members from the traditional New England elite, from the ranks of men who belonged to the Federalist Party and to the Congregationalist or the Unitarian Church. These men viewed alcohol and drinking through the lens of their own elite status, and as a result they tended to believe that problematic drinking—whether it be excessive drinking or the drinking of spirits—was a phenomenon particular to the lower classes. In the event, neither moderationist society proved to be very influential, and both had faded away by the early 1820s.

In 1826 a new group emerged, the American Temperance Society (ATS), which drew its members from a variety of evangelical denominations and included nearly as many women as men. The ATS followed the moderationists in taking excessive spirit-drinking to be primarily a lower-class phenomenon, but it argued that the responsibility for having caused this drinking, and thus the responsibility for ending it, lay squarely with the moderate drinkers of the upper classes. These drinkers had set an example that the lower classes were following at great peril; they were therefore obligated, the ATS argued, to set a new and better example by abstaining from spirits entirely. In this way, the third phase of temperance reform, temperance proper, began. The ATS was remarkably influential, in large part because many of its evangelical members had already been involved in mission work of various kinds and therefore knew how to disseminate their message much more broadly than previous reformers had been able to do. Where Mather addressed the church fathers of Boston and Benezet and Rush addressed the political leaders of the emerging United States, the ATS spoke directly, through illustrated tracts and weekly newspapers, to the moderate drinkers it was attempting to persuade. And persuaded they were: by 1833 more than six thousand local societies were affiliated with the ATS and more than a million men and women had signed the temperance pledge.

Temperance was quickly radicalized in two different ways. Some ATS groups began arguing that the sale of spirits should simply be outlawed, and in this way they inaugurated the prohibitionist phase that would come into prominence in the 1850s. Others began arguing that beer and wine—ultimately, even communion wine—were as dangerous as spirits. This latter line of argument gave rise, in 1836, to a group that ultimately replaced the ATS, the American Temperance Union; more generally, it gave rise to teetotalism, the fourth phase of temperance reform.

TEETOTALISM AND PROHIBITION

One of the earliest and most influential teetotal texts is Lyman Beecher's *Six Sermons on the Nature, Occasions, Signs, Evils, and Remedy of Intemperance* (1827). In these sermons Beecher erases all the distinctions that Mather, Benezet, and Rush had carefully drawn. There is no difference, for Beecher, between the strongest spirits and the weakest wine, no difference between a binge and a sip, because the weaker lead inevitably to the stronger and the sip leads inevitably to the binge. For this reason, Beecher insists on total abstinence from all forms of alcohol for everyone. "A flag must be planted at the entrance of [the drunkard's] course," he writes, "proclaiming in waving capitals—THIS IS THE WAY TO DEATH!!" (p. 39). Even as Beecher radicalizes temperance reform, he also borrows and combines the rhetorical strategies that had been used by earlier temperance texts. Specifically, he combines a medical analysis of what alcohol does to the body with religious claims about what it does to the soul, and he exhorts the nation to begin collecting the data that will reveal what alcohol is doing to the economy as well. He insists, in particular, on statistics, which he believes have a unique power to make visible "the height, and depth, and length, and breadth of this mighty evil" (p. 71).

Beecher and the American Temperance Union focused on saving the sober, just as earlier reformers had focused on saving the moderate drinker, in large part because no one believed that confirmed drunkards could be reclaimed. In 1840 a group called the Washingtonians began to do just that. Begun by six formerly hard-drinking artisans and laborers who agreed to support one another in their efforts to remain sober, the Washingtonian movement made a place not only for reformed drunkards but also for working-class men and women within temperance

reform. The effects were astonishing: by 1843 the Washingtonians could claim 500,000 members. The Washingtonians differed from other groups not only in the focus of their efforts but also in their methods. Where the members of other temperance and teetotal societies gathered to listen to professional lecturers, the Washingtonians held what they called "experience meetings." In these meetings, the speakers were reformed drunkards who described in often harrowing detail what their lives had been like when they were drinking, why they decided to abstain, and what their lives had been like since—a narrative model that continues to structure Alcoholics Anonymous meetings even today. These meetings were supplemented by teetotal fairs and picnics, teetotal concerts and balls, and most popular of all, Fourth of July celebrations in which men and women would declare their independence from King Alcohol.

From the beginning, the more established temperance and teetotal societies were shocked by the Washingtonians: they condemned the vulgarity of the teetotal festivities and, even more, the luridness of the experience meetings. Increasingly, some of the Washingtonians themselves came to share this view. Many working-class men and women had turned to teetotalism in the hopes of improving their social and economic status, and they began to want the meetings they attended to display the respectability to which they aspired. In response to this desire, the Sons of Temperance emerged in 1842 and gradually took the place of the Washingtonians. Eschewing experience speeches and teetotal songs, the Sons of Temperance offered less entertainment but more concrete aid. Indeed, they remade temperance reform according to the model of the mutual aid societies that working-class men and women had first started forming in the 1830s.

Because the Washingtonians, and later the Sons of Temperance, believed that drunkards could be reclaimed by example, they continued to rely on the power of moral suasion. By contrast, the middle-class temperance and teetotal societies, believing as they did that drunkards were beyond redemption, increasingly began to argue that sobriety would be possible only when alcohol was outlawed. Prohibition first emerged as a possibility in the 1830s, when temperance societies in New England sought to deny licenses to taverns that sold liquor, but it came into real prominence in the 1850s. By 1850 Massachusetts had succeeded in transforming itself, county by county, into a teetotal state, and in 1851 Maine was the first state to vote itself teetotal all at once. Twelve states and territories had followed by 1855. That year, however, marked the high point of nineteenth-century prohibition—and of nineteenth-century temperance reform more generally. In the 1860s a number of states repealed their so-called Maine Laws; by the late 1870s only New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine itself remained dry. The Maine Laws were repealed in part because they proved impossible to enforce, given the very rudimentary state of police forces in the period, but more importantly because they had failed to fulfill the promise of temperance reform. Once the sale of alcohol was made illegal, it became increasingly clear that drinking was not in fact the sole cause of declining morals, rising crime, and growing unemployment. Some temperance activity persisted throughout the postbellum period, but for the most part the nation would not begin to think of alcohol and drinking as uniquely dangerous for another fifty years—until the early-twentieth-century agitation that would lead to fourteen years of national prohibition.

TEMPERANCE IN LITERATURE

In 1865 the National Temperance Society established its own publishing house. "The demand of the present is *books,* Books, BOOKS!," its members proclaimed. "Men *must* have books, women *will* have books, and children *should* have books." In making this proclamation the National Temperance Society was implicitly acknowledging that books had already played an enormous role in antebellum temperance reform. The illustrated tracts and newspapers that the American Temperance Society had begun distributing in the 1820s and 1830s had quickly been joined by a huge number of texts from a wide range of genres: there were novels, stories, poems, and plays as well as magazines directed to various ages and even alphabet books. The most popular temperance texts proved to be Timothy Shay Arthur's *Ten Nights in a Bar-room* (1854), a best-selling novel, and John Gough's *Autobiography* (1845), which recorded the life story of one of the Washingtonians' most famous speakers. Arthur's play focuses on the damaging consequences of drinking: its protagonist decides to open a tavern, and, as a result, his daughter is killed in an accident, his wife is driven mad, and he is himself killed by his own son. Gough's *Autobiography,* by contrast, focuses on the benefits of sobriety. His own conversion from drinking and his subsequent career as a temperance speaker demonstrates the peace and prosperity that sobriety brings.

The effects of temperance reform on literature are not confined, however, to these explicitly didactic texts; nearly all the canonical authors of the period stand in some kind of relation to temperance reform. Some were straightforward advocates of teetotalism,

The Drunkard's Progress. Lithograph by Nathaniel Currier, c. 1846. Currier depicts what many believed was the all-too-common fate of those who consumed alcohol: escalating consumption and degradation culminating in a miserable death. THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

among them the daughter of Lyman Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe. Particularly devoted to teetotalism were antislavery writers, who equated drunkenness with other forms of bondage. Indeed, Frederick Douglass argued, in his autobiography, that owners encouraged their slaves to drink on the rare days of holiday so as to "disgust their slaves with freedom" (p. 115). And Frances Harper, in her novel, *Iola Leroy* (1892), argued for temperance on the grounds that "the colored man has escaped from one slavery" and should be careful not "to fall into another" (p. 170). Other writers, specifically the transcendentalists, were drawn to some idea of temperate living or moderation, even as they were repelled by certain aspects of the cause. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for instance, saw the value of regulating the bodily appetites, but he also recognized that the careful distinctions of temperance reform could serve as a distraction from more fundamental issues: "The curious ethics of the pledge, of the Wine-question [is]," he wryly observed, "a gymnastic training to the casuistry and conscience of the time." And Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) can be read as an idiosyncratic celebration of cool, clear water by a lifelong water drinker, one who has retreated to the woods in large part to escape from the organized activities of reform.

Other authors made drunkenness and temperance an explicit topic in their own writing. Some did this for cynical reasons, writing didactic temperance fiction solely in order to make money or to ensure the publication of their work. Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance, wrote a temperance short story early in his career, "A Rill from a Town Pump" (1835), but later parodied the representational practices of temperance reform in his anti-reformist novel, *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). Walt Whitman wrote temperance stories, as well as an entire temperance novel, *Franklin Evans* (1842); later in his life he would insist not only that he had written the novel solely for money but also that he had done so entirely drunk. Still other authors treated temperance reform as one remarkable social phenomenon among others, as when Herman Melville satirized it mildly in *Moby-Dick* (1851) and exposed its inadequacies in *Redburn* (1849). Finally, some authors used drunkenness to

articulate seemingly unrelated concerns, as when Emily Dickinson, in "I taste a liquor never brewed—," used drunkenness as a figure for visionary experience or when Elizabeth Stoddard, in *The Morgesons* (1862), used it to figure sexual desire and generational decline. The protagonist of *The Morgesons* first feels desire when she first drinks mulled wine, and she will later insist that her lover conquer his inherited tendency to dissipation before she agrees to marry him. In all of these ways, temperance reform left its mark not only on cultural attitudes toward drinking and alcohol but also on the nation's literature.

See also Evangelicals; Health and Medicine; Puritanism; Reform; Religion; Sensational Fiction; Unitarians

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Amanda Claybaug

THEATER

Most American writers of the nineteenth century ha an important stake in the theater. Edgar Allan Poe whose parents were actors, wrote theater reviews, ha a story adapted to the stage, and refers to himself i "The Philosophy of Composition" as a "literar *histrio"* (p. 530). Many others, including Washingto Irving, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Walt Whitman Mark Twain, Bret Harte, Louisa May Alcott, Willian Dean Howells, and Henry James were, at some point professional drama critics or playwrights. Specific ref erences to theater of their day may also be found i the writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herma Melville, and James Fenimore Cooper. "I ought t acknowledge my debt to actors, singers, public speak ers, conventions, and the Stage in New York," Whitman (1819–1992) confessed toward the end o his life, "and to plays and operas generally" (*Complet Poetry and Collected Prose,* p. 1289).

For Whitman the importance of the antebellum stage is wrapped up with all of the public culture o the 1830s and 1840s, the speeches and sermons, political rallies, circuses, songs, and parades. As Rosemarie Bank has written, for dignitaries and even presidents, visiting theaters to receive acclamations or to address the people was a common use of these places of assembly (p. 12). And Whitman did not hesitate to lump together performers as diverse as the actors Fanny Kemble and Junius Booth, the Quaker demagogue Elias Hicks, and the seaman-preacher Father Taylor, who was also the model for Melville's Father Mapple (Emerson called him "the Shakespeare of the sailor & the poor"). So in spite of Whitman's acknowledgment of "theatricals in literature" and his memory of the leading authors, poets, editors, and other important