Introduction: a complex causality of neglect

> Historical documents are not really the shards of lost memories, which, when read, innocently re-present the past. They are elaborately constructed representations, fused memories retold with understandings and intentions specific to the time of retelling.
>
> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Misprisoning Pamela"

In the first half of the nineteenth century, no single issue – not even the abolition of slavery – had a greater capacity for arousing the American passion than did the cause of temperance.[1] Throughout the country, in cities and in rural areas alike, people listened to their ministers vehemently denounce the evils of intemperance from the pulpit; enthusiastically attended meetings of the American Temperance Society, the Washingtonians, the Sons of Temperance and the Martha Washington Society; eagerly signed the Teetotal Pledge; and endeavored in their private lives to obtain what Jed Dannenbaum calls "worldly redemption" through abstinence from alcoholic beverages. Viewed from current historical perspective, the temperance movement was the first large-scale American reform movement of the nineteenth century, one that represented a "struggle for purity at [both] the individual and societal levels," and an issue deeply "embedded in the struggle . . . of the middle classes to enunciate the dominant life style in America."[2]

Although presently acknowledged as a foundation of all nineteenth-century reform and one of the principal building blocks of the American middle class, in the public mind temperance reform has been most often equated with Neal Dow and the Maine Laws, vigilantism and the widely publicized attacks on the saloon by Carrie Nation and her followers, the "unreasonable" constrictions of Prohibition, and the self-interested maneuverings of a fanatical minority characterized by its obsession with moral perfectionism, social control, class-conscious repressiveness and coercive

methods. On an individual level, the typical temperance activist came to be regarded as a "dour, cadaverous, puritanical" zealot – an extremist, "anti-democratic do-gooder" dedicated to meddling in other people's private affairs and to dictating everyone's morality.

While temperance activism was chronicled by the reformers themselves practically from its inception, until relatively recently scholarly investigation of temperance agitation was generally neglected by serious academics and was regarded as being of secondary importance when compared to abolitionism and even women's rights agitation, movements which in their own time were more limited and attracted less public attention than did temperance.[3] All too many American historians – the group routinely charged with conducting rigorous analyses of past events, institutions, constructions – regarded temperance reform as a near-marginal movement; one "on the periphery of major political events, [one] not clearly related to economic or political aims of classes in the economy."[4] Hence, it was not an especially attractive subject for concerted attention and analytical studies by impartial scholars were generally absent from the literature on temperance reform.

Fortunately, during the latter decades of the twentieth century, this "oversight" was rectified by the historical community as temperance reform has been thoughtfully and carefully reconsidered, revalued and afforded the respect it deserves. Major studies by Norman Clark, Jack Blocker, Jed Dannenbaum, Joseph Gusfield, W. J. Rorabaugh, Ian Tyrrell, Mark Edward Lender, James Kirby Martin, Thomas Pegram and others have documented the significant role of temperance reform in the rise of the American middle class, the protection of the nuclear family, the reinforcement of traditional family values and nineteenth-century reform (abolitionism, women's rights, public health, prison reform, etc.) in general.

Although scholars have been filling in the gaps in the history of American temperance reform, the same cannot be said for theatre historians and the myriad temperance entertainments which disseminated temperance imperatives and supported the anti-liquor cause, for (with a handful of notable exceptions) temperance narratives are invariably omitted from theatre history texts and literature anthologies. The problem here is threefold: (1) in American studies and American literature studies, theatre has been virtually excluded from the canon and from college syllabi; (2) within theatre studies itself, the overall significance of the nineteenth-century theatre and drama – melodrama in particular – has been routinely undervalued, even dismissed; (3) even those theatre historians who do recognize the value of nineteenth-century entertainments tend to regard temperance dramas as marginal to both temperance activism and the theatre.

As Susan Harris Smith has aptly noted in a 1989 article in *American Quarterly* and her recent book, *American Drama: The Bastard Art*, prose and poetry have traditionally dominated the "hierarchy of genres" in university literature courses to the extent that dramatic texts are conspicuously absent from most of the major literature anthologies, and when they are included, they are most often of foreign origin, with Beckett, Brecht, Wilde and Shakespeare the most frequent inclusions. The situation is thus critical in the case of "native-written" (i.e., American) dramas, which Smith feels hover "on the periphery" of literature studies. To illustrate her contention, she points to the first edition of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (1994), which contained no playtexts at all, and to *The New York Review of Books* which does not employ a critic to review plays.[5] This, it seems, is symptomatic of the fact that playtexts are rarely afforded legitimacy as literary works. It is almost as if the drama had never existed and, as a result, in the literary sphere, at least, American expressive culture remains a house divided and incomplete.

In a published response to Smith in *American Quarterly*, Joyce Flynn, who teaches in the history and literature concentration at Harvard, further examined the causality for plays being excluded from the canon. In addition to the standard root causes for the dismissal of American drama listed by Smith – the "culturally dominant Puritan distaste for and suspicion of the theatre . . . a persistent, unwavering allegiance to European models, slavish Anglophilia, and a predilection for heightened language" – Flynn points to widespread, endemic "negative associations involving ethnicity and class."[6] Agreeing with David Grimsted's notion that the indigenous dramatic art of the nineteenth century constituted "echoes of the historically voiceless" and hence was clearly popular in both its production and its reception, Flynn advances the theory that since the theatre was the "habitual sphere of outsiders in American culture . . . both literary and academic America have shared an aversion to the too-close scrutiny of art forms created in cooperation with democratic audiences."[7] In the case of melodrama, this has meant that "nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary evaluation . . . has all too often measured the genre in terms of prejudicial assumptions about its audience, thereby introducing social and political values into a critical methodology often considered by its practitioners to operate objectively."[8]

It is hardly fair, however, to castigate literature scholars for their "elitist vilifications" of nineteenth-century American dramaturgy when theatre historians exhibit similar attitudes and a similar blind spot. In a particularly cogent and comprehensive essay, Thomas Postlewait outlines and examines the now-familiar binarism that occurs when nineteenth-century

melodrama and twentieth-century realism are compared.[9] Although, as Postlewait contends, historically melodrama and realism developed during roughly the same time period, although realistic elements exist in melodrama, and although melodramatic elements are found in realistic dramas, melodrama and the nineteenth-century theatre are commonly regarded as constituting a "pre-history" for the more aesthetically advanced, modern realism to follow. In historical accounts that hint at some sort of aesthetic or artistic Darwinism, "nineteenth-century melodrama, spreading throughout the nation, is seen not only as a simpler (earlier, cruder, incomplete, or primary) form but also as a pervasive presence that limits or resists the development of realism, which must fight for its niche."[10] Viewed in the context of a cultural hierarchy which came to regard realism as the goal sought – the end product in an evolutionary process that stressed objective truth and intellectual honesty rather than romantic exaggeration – it is hardly surprising that melodrama is routinely depicted as being "frivolous and simple," whereas realism is characterized as "serious and complex."[11]

This is just one of many misapprehensions plaguing the constructive study of melodrama. Equally troubling is the belief that melodrama and realism are, or should be, adversarial. As Postlewait summarizes it, both forms: "responded to and were shaped by similar socio-political conditions in the modern industrial and imperial age of nationalism, capitalism, population explosion, urban growth, rapid change, technological advancements, massive migrations and resettlements, ethnic conflict, enslavement, massacres, revolutionary movements, authoritarian controls, and terrible wars. Here in these complex conditions both art forms found their many topics and themes."[12] In making this claim, Postlewait is supported by an unlikely ally, historian Arthur Schlesinger, who wrote that historically "realism and idealism [i.e., melodrama] were not enemies but allies, and . . . together they defined the morality of social change."[13] Thus, not only did melodrama and realism emerge and develop at approximately the same time, but they dealt with many of the same social issues, albeit the melodrama presented those issues symbolically.

Still, Postlewait warns, in order to maintain a discourse and "discuss melodramatic and realistic drama, we require generic definitions," even though such categories are "an abiding problem for critics and historians."[14] In generating a definition of melodrama, current scholars remain indebted to the pioneering work of Peter Brooks and David Grimsted, who laid the foundation upon which subsequent study of the genre has been based. To Brooks and Grimsted, melodrama, as "a mode of conception and

expression," is a heightened and hyperbolic drama characterized by high emotionalism, stark ethical conflict, polar concepts of good and evil, allegorical characterization and a hierarchy of truths presented in such a way that ideals become truisms. In the melodramatic structure, characters are placed at "the point of intersection of primal ethical forces" with the resultant tension generated by the constant threat of catastrophe – catastrophe that would result not only in individual disaster, but, by extension, in the collapse of an entire ethical system. Thus, in the moral tug-of-war between the representatives of salvation and damnation – a struggle exteriorized and played out in concentrated and heightened form – the spiritual destiny of society and universe was invariably put to the test. This "spiritual reality" has caused students of the genre to conclude that melodrama, more than other forms, "embodies the root impulse of drama" and deserves to be regarded as, "not only a moralistic drama, but as the drama of morality."[15]

During the last decade, another generation of scholars has expanded and elaborated upon Brooks' and Grimsted's conceptions of melodrama and has advanced our understanding of the genre. In separate papers at a Melodrama Conference, held at the Institute of Education, London in 1992, Jim Davis and Michael Hays advanced convincing arguments regarding the cultural importance of melodrama. Davis maintained that it "operates powerfully on the level of myth and allegory"; while Hays claimed for melodrama "a newly discovered subversive essence, a 'melodramatic' core that made it not only a genre coequal with tragedy and comedy, but the very marker of a disruptive, modern mode of consciousness and representation."[16]

In the United States, theatre and cultural historians Bruce McConachie, Rosemarie Bank, Jeffrey Mason and Elaine Hadley have published equally significant studies of the genre and the theatre(s) that housed it.[17] Bank has written on theatre culture, the ways peoples staged themselves, and has afforded us different ways of reading the social documents (melodramas included) they left behind them; Mason has examined the ways in which melodrama functioned in the construction of a national ideology and certain cultural myths; Hadley has identified in nineteenth-century culture what she terms the "melodramatic mode," which "reaffirmed the familial, hierarchal, and public grounds for ethical behavior and identity that characterized models of social exchange and organization"; while McConachie's scholarship, which chronicles the development of American melodrama and theatre from 1820 to 1870, has dispelled the misapprehension that the genre is monolithic in form and usage. In his studies, he has shown that the

genre is considerably more variable than most believed previously and, in the process, has created what amounts to a typology that accounts for differences within the genre – a typology that includes sensation melodramas, apocalyptic melodramas, moral reform melodramas, fairy-tale melodramas, domestic melodramas and gothic melodramas. To these, British historian Michael Booth would add the nautical melodrama, a form of the genre that fell between gothic and domestic melodrama and converted the melodrama from the supernatural to the domestic.[18]

Regardless of "type," there is a consensus that from its inception the melodrama has been utilized as an "affective vehicle." With its symbolical characterization, its either/or morality, its didactic rhetoric and its resolutions that reward hard work and virtue, the melodrama was the perfect fictional system for making sense of everyday experience. Given its emotionality and affective structure, when pitched to a popular audience that was struggling with the daily hardships of life, it was easily radicalized and readily "served as a crucial space in which the cultural, political, and economic exigencies of the century were played out and transformed into public discourses about issues ranging from the gender-specific dimensions of individual station and behavior to the role and status of the 'nation' in local as well as imperial terms."[19]

Yet sadly, despite admonitions that in assessing the relative contributions of melodrama and realism to the understanding and correction of social ills, "we make a categorical and historical mistake when we attempt to fix their identities . . . as if each had a controlling genetic code," and seemingly ignoring the work of Brooks, Grimsted, McConachie, Bank, Postlewait and the current generation of scholars that has revealed the depth and complexity of melodrama, the stereotypes persist and the genre is still significantly undervalued.[20] To many, melodrama still is what was written and produced while Americans waited for O'Neill.

Beginning as a critical response to both the old melodrama and the new realism around the beginning of the century, the stereotypical characterization of melodrama quickly assumed the position of historical orthodoxy, as assertions in a recent book on twentieth-century drama testify: "Melodrama invokes [visions of] shallow or excessive emotional effects. The American drama is, for all practical purposes, the twentieth-century American drama [i.e., realism]."[21] Such a binary is not only fallacious, but ironic as well, for in representing melodrama as an "evil" that must be overcome by "good" (realism), advocates of realism adopted the moral polarity of melodrama, the very form they were in the process of repudiating.[22]

The list of realism's defenders (and melodrama's detractors) is a long and distinguished one that includes such notables as William Dean Howells, Henry James, George Beiswanger, Sheldon Cheney, John Gassner and Eric Bentley. While individual differences as to the nature of realism may have existed between them, all agreed to one degree or another with art critic Leo Stein when he stated that "realism means the spirit of *fact* predominant, and the sheer acceptance of reality" (italics mine).[23] Furthermore, since they occupied the "bully pulpit" in the world of dramatic and/or literary criticism at a point in history when the two "adversarial" forms – melodrama and realism – were struggling, they possessed the authority to decide the debate and hence theirs became the dominant opinion. This, to Postlewait, was a critical factor in the melodrama/realism rift, for it meant that subsequent generations of scholars "have allowed the advocates for realism to determine many of the key terms and issues in our historical surveys."[24]

Part of the problem, it seems, can be traced to the erroneous belief that the ideology of nineteenth-century drama in general was "retrograde" and essentially conservative. Theatre historians have always been reluctant to pinpoint the beginnings of progressive thought in the American theatre, and downright loath to locate it in nineteenth-century drama. Most, like critic/historian John Gassner, summarizing American theatre history from Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787) to the dramaturgy of Eugene O'Neill, Elmer Rice, Clifford Odets, Irwin Shaw and other "serious" playwrights and the politically committed theatre of the 1930s, maintain that, while nineteenth-century American dramatists might have been sensitive to social problems, their innate sobriety, their penchant for moral reform and their optimism about the country's future disposed them toward "sentimentality and congenial resolutions" to complex social problems.[25] From this observation – that the vestigial Victorianism of American social and intellectual life discouraged playwrights from embracing a European-style realism – it is but a short hop to the seemingly standard conclusions that the nineteenth-century American theatre was somehow ideologically neutral, that dramaturgy before O'Neill, Rice, Odets, Irwin Shaw and their contemporaries contained no social imperatives, made no social impact, was of no cultural consequence, was certainly not progressive.[26]

The latter term, "progressive," evokes images of Teddy Roosevelt, the Bull Moose Party, muckrakers, the "Age of Reform" and other ideas and events in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; yet progressive thinking, as scholars from Richard Hofstadter to Raymond Williams tell us, had earlier, broader and less politicized meanings. As Williams has pointed

out in his ever-useful *Keywords*, the term "progressive," like its opposite "conservative," is a stereotype, is difficult to define because it has a complex history behind it and as both an attitude and as historical pattern is rather vague and not altogether cohesive or consistent. Its use to designate political positions and/or parties dates from the political and industrial revolutions of the eighteenth century and became widely accepted late in the nineteenth century. Prior to that, however, the "idea of progress, as a law of history," was used to denote (1) a set of attitudes that encouraged "a mood of hope" and advocated a social "going forward" (i.e., progress); and (2) "a discoverable historical pattern . . . [closely associated with] the ideas of civilization and improvement."[27]

Historians of American reform, most notably Hofstadter, Warren Susman and Arthur Schlesinger, have situated the roots of reform and progressive thought in Puritan teachings and beliefs and have postulated that from Puritan times onward, human progress has been equated with moral progress. Susman traced early reformist attitudes to Puritan beliefs in self-restraint and control over appetites and emotions, their strong sense of community and earthly order and their strict code of ethics and morality; while, to Schlesinger, "the core of Puritanism, once the theological husks are peeled away, was intense moral zeal both for one's own salvation and for that of the community."[28] Ironically, it was this latter desire that led to one of the most troubling aspects of nineteenth-century reform: reformers' persistent efforts at the social control of others.

Activists' attempts at controlling the thoughts and behavior of others are particularly vexing to historians of reform, for the conventional picture of the social reformer is one of a person working altruistically to afford others both moral salvation and economic possibilities, to free, in Eric Goldman's words, "the avenues of opportunity."[29] Instead, progressive reformers frequently did just the opposite, aggressively imposing their mores and standards of conduct upon others and, by so doing, actually restricted the avenues of opportunity. Evidence exists that indicates that even the earliest patriarchal reformers had a stake in controlling the behavior of others, especially their subordinates. While in retrospect such attempts might be considered unprogressive, given that those guilty of social control were by-and-large Christian, liberal and devoted to the welfare of others, they were, Steven Mintz tells us, also understandable since, like all people, reformers were prone to contradictions and inconsistencies in both thought and deed. Thus, Mintz continues, they "were often blind to the more coercive, paternalistic aspects and the class and ethnic biases of their reform program[s]."[30]

Given its shifting meaning(s), applying the term "progressive" to historical studies is not without hazards. To complicate matters, what people regard as progressive today may well become hegemonic a few years hence. In *Marxism and Literature*, cultural critic Raymond Williams has accounted for such cultural transformations and interrelations between movements and tendencies through a theory he calls "epochal analysis." Allowing for variations, Williams identified a cultural process wherein movements or tendencies first appear as "emergent," the phase where new meanings, values, practices and relationships are created; in time, these meanings, values, practices and relationships become "dominant"; and ultimately, although they may continue to exist and even function in culture, they fade from dominance and become "residual."[31] Employing Williams' epochal analysis, it is not difficult to envision how an ideological position considered radical in its emergent phase can become hegemonic in its dominant phase. In the case of woman suffrage and the equality of the sexes, to cite just one example, what we now consider common and orthodox was once so radical and extreme as to be thought of as impossible and unthinkable.

Applied to the study of temperance ideology and practices, Williams' theory affords equal insight. Taking just one aspect of nineteenth-century temperance strategy – "moral suasion" – epochal analysis allows the historian to track its historical journey from its entrance into the public consciousness in the 1830s (its emergent phase) to dominance in the 1840s and eventually to residual status in the 1850s as coercive tactics like prohibition gained ascendance. The notion of a residual ideology – one that is dormant but still present – also helps explain the return of moral suasion, in the form of Alcoholics Anonymous, to dominance following the repeal of Prohibition.

Contradictions, ambiguities and hazards notwithstanding, in the study of nineteenth-century reform movements the concept of progressivism, interpreted broadly as "a sense that Americans could intervene in both nature and society to shape a more moral, a more Protestant society," as an "idea of progress, as a law of history," is essential.[32] It is therefore in this larger, Christian/humanist sense – progressivism as "a broad impulse toward criticism and change [that was manifested in] a growing enthusiasm of middle-class people for social and economic reform" – that I use the term, progressive, and it is this very usage that Gassner overlooks in his criticism.[33]

Recent historiography has provided evidence that Gassner's contention, which was presaged by the writings of Walter Prichard Eaton, Arthur Hobson Quinn, Joseph Wood Krutch and others and which has been echoed

by historians after him, is problematical in two additional regards. First, it relies upon an either/or mentality. Playtexts were viewed either as revolutionary social protests or as being totally devoid of social content. No middle ground was allowable. Yet, in fact, many plays, especially those written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, occupied just such a middle ground or transitional space, moving toward the full social protest drama of the 1930s, but still rooted in the "local color realism" of the nineteenth century and dependent upon earlier conventions, values, ideology.[34]

Second, as recorded in *Dramatic Soundings: Evaluations and Retractions Culled from 30 Years of Dramatic Criticism*, Gassner's implications that social reform and moral reform were somehow mutually exclusive of one another fly in the face of a mountain of evidence that demonstrates that, in America as early as the 1820s, moral reform was the foundation upon which social reform rested and the majority of the early social reformers were theologically trained religious leaders. Hence, evolving from common roots in American religion, for many years social and moral reforms were, for all practical purposes, virtually indistinguishable. In this context, such revered nineteenth-century long-running box office hits as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Drunkard* and *Ten Nights in a Bar-room*, were thus both moral *and* social treatises – and clearly reformist in both intent and effect.

Such oversights, coupled with current assumptions that these plays were merely commodifications of issues prominent in the public consciousness at the time, have contributed to the historical devaluation of important reformist dramas. In the histories, these and other nineteenth-century reformist plays are routinely regarded as anomalies – as entrepreneurial exploitations of ideological issues – rather than as genuine attempts to effect social change. The implication was (and is) that nineteenth-century theatre artists were more interested in reaping profits from the dramatization of what were, at the time the plays were mounted, critical social issues, than they were in exposing and eradicating the social problems these plays examined.

Similar oversights and misapprehensions have plagued scholarship on the temperance-related entertainments and recreational activities that introduced and disseminated an anti-liquor message to a significant proportion of an eager and receptive public. While general and theatre histories may contain references to or brief treatments of the use of theatrical means to advance the temperance cause, there is just a handful of journal articles, a chapter in a book on theatre and the myth of America, one complete dissertation and a portion of a second on the topic.[35] This relative dearth