

## "WHITMAN'S LITERARY INTEMPERANCE":<sup>1</sup>

### *Franklin Evans*, or The Power of Love

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*Franklin Evans* has repeatedly been censured as a second-rate example of a third-rate genre: Whitman himself was only the first in a long line of critics to condemn the novel as a poor sample of the moralizing propaganda of temperance.<sup>2</sup> But such moralizing forms only the overt message of a book which harbors a great deal of qualification, a novel which functions in fact as a parody of the reform crusade it openly advocates.

*Franklin Evans* is the story of a weak-willed country fool whose journeys engage him in one scene of folly after another. It is a tale of the picaresque variety, no *bildungsroman*: Evans does not change, does not acquire strength of purpose or character, but remains at the end of the novel the same feeble-minded fellow who began the autobiography.

Although the novel lacks a strong hero, it is the very weakness of this central character which allows for the development of Whitman's primary concern, and strongest theme: through *Franklin Evans*, Whitman advocates friendliness, love and sympathy for an erring man, and goes so far as to claim that such concern can "work a complete revolution in his character" (p. 181). Rather than denouncing the drinking man, Evans expresses his tender feeling for him; rather than dismissing the alcoholic, Evans defends him.<sup>3</sup> Such a completely unorthodox plea for sympathy for the intemperate places Whitman's novel outside the canon of temperance literature, and indeed challenges the very premises on which such fiction was based. In his call for a "little moderation perhaps, a little friendliness" (p. 181), Whitman avoids the extreme denunciation of classic teetotaling literature.

The narrative structure of *Franklin Evans* is didactic, to be sure: the novel moves inexorably from one lesson to the next. But the primary lesson Whitman has to teach is not the lesson of abstinence from drink, but rather the necessity of love and sympathy for other, and especially for weaker, human beings. Tied together by that lesson, *Franklin Evans* is a coherent, cohesive tale. Each stage in the story contributes to the expression of Whitman's primary concern: the necessity for sustained goodwill.

The main plot line of the story, indeed, differs insistently and increasingly from a concern with alcoholism. The novel begins conventionally enough, for a temperance tract, with the entrance of a weak man into the city. Beset by "a thousand temptations" (p. 145), Franklin Evans succumbs on his first night out on the town. As in all temperance fiction, ruin here follows inevitably from the first drink. Evans is successful, for a few months, in con-

cealing his habit from his employer. But the inevitable slip occurs, and his station in life begins to worsen step by step.

Until the halfway point of the novel, Franklin Evans clearly follows the archetypal path of "The Drunkard's Progress,"<sup>4</sup> around which most temperance novels were structured. His first drink, as he himself acknowledges, leads to a "chain of cause-and-effect"<sup>5</sup> which results in ever worse crime: he fails his employer, loses his job and his reputation; he next fails his wife, not only degrading her name, but indirectly causing her death as well. She dies, he reports, "the innocent victim of another's drunkenness" (p. 176). The next, inevitable step is one of attempted murder. Evans is prevented by bystanders from killing the man who first introduced him to drink.

Franklin Evans's path continues downward, if not precipitately so. He wanders, drinks, and is swindled in the country, then returns to New York, where, after a five-day spree, he tries his hand first at begging, then at burglary—remarking, the while, on "the easy road from intemperance to crime" (p. 192). He is caught, imprisoned and tried for robbery, and is released through the aid of a family whom he himself had aided in earlier days.

Temporarily reformed, Franklin Evans takes a trip South. It is there, in the final third of the novel, that Whitman's prime concern is made clear. For in Virginia the remainder of the downward path of the intemperate is trod, not by Evans himself, but by his second wife, a Creole named Margaret. Although Evans is the oblique cause of his wife's degradation, Margaret herself takes the final steps so common in temperance literature: those of unrestrained rage, murder and suicide. Such a resumption of the drunkard's progress by a woman who does not drink serves to point out Franklin Evans's primary fault: it is not, as Barton Levi St. Armand suggests, his lack of Ben Franklin's eager zeal,<sup>6</sup> nor is it, as Evans himself repeatedly says, his failure at abstinence, but it is rather his failure at love. Leslie Fiedler has observed that Margaret intrudes "inappropriately upon Whitman's temperance novel."<sup>7</sup> I think, rather, that her intrusion shows precisely the degree to which this book is not a temperance novel, but a call for intemperance of a different sort: the intemperate power of love.

Throughout his decline, Franklin Evans has begged for indulgence both for himself and for others as weak as he. But Evans himself fails in the very virtue he asks others to exhibit. At his first wife's death, for example, he berates himself for the loss of love caused by his intemperance: "To think that the affection of the early years . . . is given up merely for a beastly and gross appetite! . . . All my cruelty—all my former love—all my guilt—all my disregard of the sacred ties . . . [raged] in my breast" (pp. 175-176). Evans concentrates, in his remorse, not on his drinking, but on the transgressions against affection which that drinking has brought about.

He commits precisely that same transgression against his second wife as he did against the first. His failure this time has even more disastrous conse-

quences. Evans marries Margaret on a drunken whim, and wakes from a stupor of intoxication without any affection for his new wife. Margaret is outraged by his behavior, not only because it entails a loss of pleasure for her, but because it challenges as well her new-found freedom from slavery. An ambitious woman, she had exulted in her marriage as a means of rising above her fellow slaves. But when Evans proves his lack of affection for her, by giving her brother as servant to another woman, Margaret's anger is unbounded. When her subtle scheme of revenge fails to kill her rival, Margaret strangles her, confesses her crime, and kills herself.

This drunkard's progress ends here, as it did in most temperance fiction, with death. But the death in *Franklin Evans* is not that of the drunkard. The ultimate crimes in this novel are committed by the drunkard's wife, because he has failed to love her. Margaret's insanely jealous reaction to the intrusion of her competitor thus forms a fitting climax to a novel which concerns itself primarily with the saving power of love.

The events in Virginia illustrate the utter desolation which can result if love is withheld. Those events are followed almost immediately by the contrary example. On his return North, Franklin Evans receives a magnanimous reward which accomplishes finally what he has been unable to accomplish on his own: his complete reform. Marveling at the miraculous nature of his respectability, Evans observes in his concluding lines that, if liquor can destroy love, a true and abiding love can vitiate the need for stimulation:

The distaste I formed from [boarding-houses] . . . was never entirely done away with. The comforts of a home are to be had in very few of these places; and I have often thought that the cheerless method of their accommodation drives many a young man to the bar-room . . . whence the road to habits of intoxication is but too easy. . . . I would advise every young man to marry as soon as possible, and have a home of his own. (p. 236)

The causes of intemperance for Franklin Evans are numerous. He drinks, at first, presumably not only because of his cheerless accommodations, but also to be sociable and because of a desire for forbidden knowledge. He drinks with renewed zeal as a means of comforting thwarted ambition, when his speculative adventures fail, and yet again because of boredom and a lack of active employment. But the cure for these multiple causes, and for the evil to which they lead, is single: mercy. Whitman calls in *Franklin Evans* not for judgment against the drunkard, but for compassion for him. He accordingly sees the drunkard's greatest crime as the destruction of love.

Such a judgment is reinforced not only by the form of Evans's autobiographical adventure, but by the stories inserted into his tale. Gay Wilson Allen has shown that these interpolated bits were thrown in from materials Whitman had on hand.<sup>8</sup> Their effect has long been judged to be as haphazard as their inception.<sup>9</sup> But the four interpolated stories together form the thematic center of Whitman's book: they express the author's real direction

even before the overt moralizing against drunkenness gets well underway.

The first tale-within-the-tale, for example, does not deal with drink at all. "The Death of Wind-Foot" is prefaced with a short account of the debasement rum has brought to Native Americans: it has caused their loss of will and subsequent loss of property and self-respect. But the story proper does not mention intoxication by alcohol at all, and suggests in fact that there are more extensive causes for the Indians' loss of control. In this tale, the brave chief Unrelenting boasts of a murder he committed years ago. A guest overhears the story, and his rage is awakened: he determines to "fatten the grave of [his] murdered father" with the blood of Unrelenting's son (p. 140). Whitman makes much of the strong paternal feeling of Unrelenting for his child: his tracking ability "seemed sharp with paternal love" (p. 141), and he pursues his son's abductor "like a wolf deprived of her cubs" (p. 142). But such love is countered by the love the other warrior feels for his murdered father, and such loves, in conflict, produce "hate and measureless revenge" (p. 143). Love makes a man vulnerable if it is limited to his own family or tribe, to a community which lives in hostile relations with all other groups. It is surely significant that Whitman's first interpolated story concerns a Native American tribe. Whitman suggests here a pattern of violence and hatred, endemic to this country, which was not eradicated with the red man.<sup>10</sup>

The second interpolated story, told by Franklin Evans himself, is drawn not from ancient legend, but from his own rural experience. He recounts the demise of a schoolteacher who begins drinking "to be on even footing with the rest" (p. 182). His democratic wish is realized with a vengeance. The teacher lowers himself to the level of the farm workers, only to find himself scorned as he slips below them: "His frailties were visited by their virulence; they forgot entirely that common bond of friendship which . . . should have caused them to be lenient" (p. 184). Most damaging, however, is the treatment the schoolteacher receives from his family. Although the bloodlust of the Indian chief for other tribes eventually led to the death of his own son, he loved and ardently tried to protect his own family members. But the schoolmaster's family contributes directly to his decline, and Franklin Evans faults them for their lack of charity. Franklin Evans uses the case of the schoolteacher as a means to beg for sympathy for himself and for all the thousands of others who are too weak to save themselves: "I have seen so many cases of hopeless and confirmed intemperance, made thus by the injudicious severity of the neighbors and relatives of the unhappy victim" (p. 181).

Although the inset tales become successively more sodden, Whitman uses them to examine not the causes of drinking, but rather the failure of those resistant to the claims of liquor to help the weaker-willed. This failure of sympathy Whitman portrays as a central failing in a great republic, a failing which should not be tolerated.<sup>11</sup> His ardent belief in democracy qualified

his enthusiasm for the temperance cause, which spoke of denunciation, ostracism and judgment against the erring.

If the first two interpolated stories recount the failure of sympathy, the next two, and final, tales show its correct application. The story of "Little Jane" is told by Franklin Evans's benefactor Marchion. In it, an inebriate refuses to leave his revels to attend his dying sister's bedside. When he finally arrives, his father refuses him entry to the sickroom. The father's response is of course at one with that of the schoolmaster's family in the foregoing tale; but his sternness is overruled by his daughter, who insists that Mike be brought to her side, bestows on him a temperance tract, and dies: "From that night, the young man stepped no more in his wild course but was reformed" (p. 199). Whitman shifts, with this tale, from illustration of the ill-effects of ill will to a demonstration of the effects of generous sympathy. Mr. Marchion, who tells the story, is of course the reformed drunkard at its center; his reformation leads to at least a temporary reprieve for Franklin Evans.

The lesson thus introduced in the third tale is reinforced by the fourth, which is told not by a reformed drunkard but by one who has passively witnessed the gruesome effects of drink. Mr. Stephen Lee discovers, only a few months after the birth of his first child, that his wife is a habitual gin-drinker. Her habits lead eventually to the death of both her children and of herself. From the moment of discovery, Lee's response is one of shock "at this disgusting fact" (p. 231); he makes no effort to save his wife from her old practice and appetite. After the eradication of his family he recovers his equanimity in a study of "old traditions, and reminiscences of the earlier part of our American history" (pp. 231-232). It is he who recounts the first inserted tale, that of Unrelenting, as it is he who tells the last story, his own. Perhaps it is among the bloodthirsty tales of the earliest Americans that he discovers the lack of, and the need for, the unprovoked magnanimity which eventually proves Franklin Evans's salvation.

The totally unearned reward of Franklin Evans, in flaunting the conventions of consequential plotting, demonstrates the great rejuvenating power of unjustified, unqualified love. Franklin Evans's end reinforces the point made with increasing force by each of the interpolated stories: a man like him, whose "great failing is his weakness of resolution and liability to be led by others" (p. 212), can only be saved by charity.

During the course of his second night on the town, Franklin Evans made two errors in judgment: he mistook a waiter for "a gentleman of the highest order" (p. 157), and he became infatuated with the claims of an actress who proved, after her performance, not to be the beauty he imagined. "The occurrences of the night," he reflected, "taught me to question the reality of many things I afterward saw; and reflect that, though to appearance they were showy, they might prove, upon trial, as coarse as the eating-house waiter, or the blear-eyed actress" (p. 158).

Franklin Evans demonstrated, of course, by his behavior in Virginia, that he had not learned too well the lesson first offered to him in New York. A similar dictum could well have been observed by commentators on the novel, who have mistaken the showy appearance of a temperance novel for the real thing. The structure of Whitman's story clearly shows that it functions as a parody of the judgmental nature of the typical temperance tract, for which Whitman substitutes instead a call for compassion. He has used the format of the temperance novel to show its limitations, and has shown thereby, perhaps, those of his readers as well.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Alexander Cowie, *The Rise of the American Novel* (New York: American Book Company, 1948), p. 307.
- 2 Whitman's judgment is recorded in *Walt Whitman: The Early Poems and the Fiction*, ed. Thomas L. Brasher (New York: New York University Press, 1963), p. 124. (All subsequent references to *Franklin Evans* are to this text, and will be noted parenthetically.) See also Cowie, p. 306; Brasher, pp. vii, xvii; William White, "A Unique Franklin Evans?" *Walt Whitman Review*, 17 (March 1971), 31-32; and Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Stein and Day, 1975), p. 263. Cf. Barton Levi St. Armand, "Franklin Evans: A Sportive Temperance Novel," *Books at Brown*, 24 (1971), 136, who alone suggests Whitman's "lack of full commitment to the Temperance Cause."
- 3 See St. Armand, 137: "Evans genuinely warms to his subject . . . when he is breaking one of the holiest canons of cold-water literature by defending the drunkard."
- 4 See Herbert Ross Brown, *The Sentimental Novel in America, 1789-1860* (1940; rpt. Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), p. 237.
- 5 Brown, p. 218.
- 6 St. Armand, pp. 140-141.
- 7 Fiedler, p. 301.
- 8 Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), p. 57.
- 9 See Cowie, p. 308, and Emory Holloway, "Introduction," *Franklin Evans or the Inebriate* (New York: Random House, 1929), p. xiii, as quoted by Jean Downey, "Introduction," *Franklin Evans or the Inebriate* (New Haven, Connecticut: College and University Press, 1967), p. 21.
- 10 Cf. Marian Hollingsworth, who argues in "Americanism in *Franklin Evans*," *Walt Whitman Review*, 8 (December 1962), 88, that "American democracy and its implied superiority to other people and other governmental forms appear in various shapes throughout the novel."
- 11 Cf. St. Armand, who argues, pp. 146-147, that "Whitman's actual interest in the Temperance cause seems to be closely tied to his interest in firmly welding the states into one mystical union. . . . [I]t was Whitman's intense nationalism which led him to . . . enthusiasm for the temperance cause."