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Saved by Storytelling: Donald Harington's *Farther Along*
as a Recovery Narrative

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**Saved by Storytelling: Donald Harrington's *Farther Along*
as a Recovery Narrative**

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Despite a devoted cult following and high praise from a handful of reviewers, Donald Harington has received scant attention in the academic literature. Harington (1935-2009) published 14 novels, most of them centered around the fictional Ozark hamlet of Stay More, Arkansas. Because he wrote mostly about a single town and because his novels contain a folkloric magical realism, he has often been compared to William Faulkner and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, but his works defy easy classification.

This report argues that Harington's novel *Farther Along* is a recovery narrative structurally and thematically congruent with the recovery narratives told at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. The storyteller establishes his "qualifications" as an addictive drinker and depicts alcoholism as a symptom of underlying problems manifested not only in drinking but also in self-pity and resentment. The drinker reaches a crisis, or bottom, and begins to recover after going to meetings and hearing someone else's autobiographical story that reveals truths about the nature of addiction. Continued attendance at meetings, during which one identifies with the stories of others, ends alcoholic isolation. Help from some type of higher power becomes crucial to achieving sobriety. And recovery includes service to others as a safeguard against the return of self-pity.

However, in *Farther Along* it is not AA's twelve-step program that leads the protagonist to sobriety. Instead, it is storytelling in itself – fiction – that functions as the "program" of recovery. More particularly, Harington, himself an alcoholic who remained sober for more than two decades, found an alternative to AA in his bizarre brand of magical realism. Thus, the novel is a testament to the healing power of stories.

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Introduction

Donald Harington (1935-2009) published fourteen novels between 1965 and 2009, most of which centered around the fictional Ozark hamlet of Stay More, Arkansas. He received a B.A. in art and an M.F.A. in printmaking from the University of Arkansas, and, in 1959, an M.A. in art history from Boston University. Over the next 20 years Harington taught art history in New York and Vermont, and then briefly at three other schools. From 1986 until his retirement in 2008 he was Professor of Art at the University of Arkansas (*Arkansas Encyclopedia*).

Harington's fiction is difficult to classify. His blending of myth, folklore, and magical realism sometimes suggests Gabriel Garcia Marquez. His "postage stamp" focus brings comparisons to Faulkner and, inevitably, a "regional" label, a term to which he objected. "Regionalism," he once stated, "is a term of opprobrium, condescension, or contempt. The term 'regionalist' doesn't really say anything...except that the writer prefers writing about a specific place"(Grimes). "Regionalism" has in fact often been used casually to dismiss writers as provincial, but it is also a highly problematic term that theorists have discussed at length.¹

Superficially at least, "regional" suggests a certain anthropological fidelity, however mediated by the author. On the one hand, Harington's village of "Stay Morons," as he affectionately called them, certainly looks and sounds like the remote Ozarks: the inhabitants speak with a rural Arkansan dialect, manufacture moonshine, and live in "bigeminal" cabins.² Harington's ability to render dialect was all the more remarkable considering that meningitis left him mostly deaf at the age of 12. On the other hand, though, one of the great pleasures of reading Harington is the facility with which he swings from these

¹ To give just a few examples: Edward L. Ayers, et al., *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. Jeff Karem, *The Romance of Authenticity: The Cultural Politics of Regional and Ethnic Literatures*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004. Philip Joseph, *American Literary Regionalism in a Global Age*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007. Charles Crow, ed. *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*. Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 2007.

² "Two-pens-and-a-passage, a double house divided (or conjoined) by an open breezeway." *The Architecture of The Arkansas Ozarks*, 69.

grounded specifics of time and place to the unexpected, oxymoronic, and fantastical. Sure, there are banjoes and incest in *Stay More*, but Harington also gives us: shrewd, erudite millionaire hillbillies; reincarnated woodsmen; a doctor who cures people through dreams; “in-habits,” or spirits of people and animals who remain behind after their physical manifestations have departed; and, in one novel, a sub-society of *Stay More* cockroaches, complete with retiring bachelors, charlatan ministers, and a mouse-obsessed physician.

In other words, Harington cannot be pinned down with the term “regional author” or any other ready classification. As the novelist James Sallis has written, “Harington’s works are of a piece – the quirkiest, most original body of work in contemporary American letters” (*Arkansas Encyclopedia*). Somehow, in Harington’s world, when cockroaches use a manual typewriter to write a letter to the human next door, it is every bit as believable as the aroma of fatback and buttermilk biscuits emanating from a *Stay Moron’s* kitchen.

Although he never approached best-seller status, Harington developed a cult following and received some critical success. A member of the Arkansas Writers Hall of Fame, he won a Porter Prize for Literary Excellence (1987), a Robert Penn Warren Award for Fiction (2003), and an *Oxford American* Lifetime Award for Contributions to Southern Literature (2006). *Entertainment Weekly* called him “America’s greatest unknown writer” (*Arkansas Encyclopedia*), and Fred Chappell, former Poet Laureate of North Carolina and well-regarded regional author, says, “Don Harington is not an underappreciated novelist. He is an undiscovered continent” (Quoted in Grimes).

Despite such praise, Harington is almost absent from the academic literature. The main exception to this dearth is the Winter 2002 “Donald Harington Special Issue” of the *Southern Quarterly*. However, even this tribute consists primarily of interviews, encomia, and selections of his correspondence with William Styron. The issue contains three critical articles: one compares Harington’s marginalized Ozark outsiders to Sir Walter Scott’s marginalized Scottish outsiders; one examines *When*

Angels Rest as a story of lost innocence with an ironic twist; and one, particularly relevant here, discusses the nature of storytelling in Harington's fiction (Hughes, Walter, Vonalt).

This thesis aims to bring some needed attention to Harington by analyzing his novel *Farther Along* (2009). More specifically, I want to focus on the main character's recovery from alcoholism, a recovery at the heart of the novel and yet unmentioned in the few existing reviews. While perhaps not his most entertaining or ingenious work, *Farther Along* is a fine, complex novel worth discussing for at least two reasons. First and most important, it treats storytelling, rather than twelve-step ideology, as a vehicle of recovery from addiction. Similarly, as a work about the healing power of stories, the novel represents Harington's reflections on the nature of fiction. It therefore serves as a good introduction to an unjustifiably obscure author.

Harington was himself an alcoholic whose drinking reached its worst in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the same time he bounced around from schools in South Dakota, Pennsylvania, and Missouri. He published nothing between *The Architecture of the Arkansas Ozarks* (1975) and *Let Us Build Us a City* (1986), but in the early 1980s, with the help of his soon-to-be second wife Kim McClish, he quit drinking. Although he never entered a rehabilitation program and never attended Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or any other formal recovery program, he stayed sober throughout the rest of his life.

Since the main character in *Farther Along* is an art historian who recovers from alcoholism, the novel certainly contains an autobiographical component, but this is the case with all of Harington's work. Often, these autobiographical elements are winks that remind readers of the presence of a storyteller, perhaps by plugging one of the Stay More novels. At a deeper level, both storyteller and reader are characters in Harington's books, a point of considerable significance in describing how storytelling fosters recovery from addiction in *Farther Along*.

Also, *Farther Along* is a Stay More novel but not explicitly so. Harington's readers will recognize people, places, and events, but none of these are named directly, including the town (referred to only as

the nearby village). The novel tells the story of a man, known as the Bluff-dweller, who leaves his job as curator of a New England museum devoted to America's "vanishing past" and moves to an unnamed remote region, near an almost abandoned town where his parents once lived, to dwell alone in a cavern. He lives like the ancient bluff dwellers who once inhabited the area, except for one modern luxury, toilet paper, which he uses for the obvious purpose and also to play "hair-comb-and-tissue." For six years, the Bluff-dweller plucks this homemade instrument, hunts, corresponds with his ex-wife, keeps a journal that denounces modern American life, and drinks great quantities of local moonshine. Twice a year he hikes seven miles to the village, buys twelve six-packs of toilet paper, and carries them back "high above my shoulders in a heap like Bunyan's Pilgrim's load." (3)

I will be arguing that, although Harington never attended AA meetings, *Farther Along* shares striking characteristics with the "recovery narrative," or the autobiographical stories that constitute the heart of AA and have received significant attention in the academic literature. The typical narrative structure of these stories is as follows: "Our stories disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now."³ This three-part structure – tracing one's drinking history, recounting one's alcoholic "bottom" and exposure to AA, and describing the blessings of sobriety – loosely governs AA narratives told at countless meetings across the country.⁴ *Farther Along* follows the same pattern. Further, it diagnoses the causes of alcoholism and depicts the nature of sobriety in a way fully congruent with AA principles. However, the novel never references AA in any way. It therefore can be read as a recovery narrative that presents an alternative "program" for achieving recovery. In

³ *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism*. New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 3rd edition, 1976, 58. This text is commonly known as the "Big Book."

⁴ For the most part, I have quoted AA literature to discuss the principles of that particular 12-step program. AA, however, is a program based primarily on meeting attendance. While some of these are "closed" meetings, attended by problem drinkers only, many are also "open" for anyone interested. Typically, the academic literature focuses on open "speakers' meetings," at which a participant relates his or her "story" for anywhere from 30 minutes to the full hour. But there are many other types of open meetings as well.

addition, both *Farther Along* and Harington's steady sobriety suggest that this alternative worked, and that it consisted of storytelling itself, rather than storytelling aimed at reinforcing twelve-step ideology.

Part I of *Farther Along* corresponds to the first part of the recovery narrative, or "what we used to be like." Often referred to as a "drunkalogue," this segment details the speaker's drinking history and resulting problems. Drunkalogues themselves are frequently told in three-parts: introduction to drinking, drinking escapades, and drink as necessity. When *Farther Along* begins, the Bluff-dweller is at the third stage. He does not drink to have fun or release inhibition. He never describes the physical act of drinking, the mental effects of drinking, or drunken behavior, but rather notes only that he drinks every night in order to pass out.

Part I of *Farther Along* shares other characteristics with drunkalogues. Like the novel, they are narrated from the vantage point of sobriety, and typically contain some distanced diagnosis of the pre-recovery self. Like most of these diagnoses, *Farther Along* presents drinking as a symptom, names as the root problem resentment deriving from some sort of childhood alienation, and depicts failed relationships and isolation as the effects of trying to drink that problem away.

Part II follows a trajectory like that of the second, or "what happened," section of a recovery narrative, wherein the story teller recounts how the turn toward sobriety began. The turning point typically includes exposure to AA meetings, at which new attendees "identify" with the stories of other speakers, or fellow addicts who through relating their autobiographies tell of events and thought processes familiar to the newcomer. In this way, narrative reveals to newcomers truths about their drinking behavior they did not previously grasp. Such truths can include the fact that a drinking pattern does actually constitute alcoholism, and that resentment and self-pity dominate one's thinking. Recovery, then, involves not only a cessation of drinking, but also awareness of the "defects of character" feeding the need to drink.

Each of these revelations occur during the transition to Part II, through a series of “meetings” at which the Bluff-dweller listens to stories. Here he develops a relationship with the Old Woman, a lifelong resident and former postmistress of the nearly abandoned town. Careful readers of Harington know this unnamed character as Latha Bourne, the protagonist in both the first and last Stay More novels and the personification of the tragi-arcadian past the town represents in Harington’s fiction. The Bluff-dweller becomes fascinated with the Old Woman’s life story, and he keeps coming back to her house and asking her to tell more. Just like an AA “old-timer,” the Old Woman stuns the Bluff-dweller with her perceptive insight into his drinking, bitterness, and resentment.

Two additional occurrences lead the Bluff-dweller to his “bottom,” that point (mentioned in recovery narratives) at which the drinker becomes sufficiently desperate to seek help. First, the Bluff-dweller learns that his father, in a jealous rage, once attempted to kill him and then threatened to kill both he and his mother if she ever showed the then five-year-old boy any overt affection again. The Bluff-dweller begins to interpret his inability to find satisfying relationships, his consequent need to drink, and the Old Woman’s commentary on his resentments in light of this childhood trauma. Second, the Old Woman enlists the help of the local moonshiner in a plan to stop the Bluff-dweller’s drinking by progressively watering down the homemade booze. Ultimately that plan succeeds.

I am arguing, then, that *Farther Along* is a forceful and moving testimony to the power of stories to help one recover from dysfunction. The Bluff-dweller goes to meetings and listens to autobiographical narratives through which he learns the truth about his alcoholism. This sounds strikingly similar to Alcoholics Anonymous and the twelve steps. But in *Farther Along*, storytelling itself is the “program” of recovery. In other words, it is the Old Woman and by extension Stay More – Harington’s entire oeuvre – that replace drinking. The Old Woman’s stratagem of watering down the moonshine directly represents that replacement: the more prominent her story, the weaker the booze.

At the same time as the Old Woman tries to stop the Bluff-dweller's drinking, an attractive, single, female historian arrives to inquire about the diaries kept by the mistress of the state's Reconstruction-era governor, a man from the village. Also, the Old Woman's grandson, his common-law wife, and two other residents plan to hire the Bluff-dweller to rebuild the town as it existed in its heyday in the 1920s. Their discussions are interrupted when the Bluff-dweller drinks himself into a coma and is rushed to the nearest hospital, where he dies but is resurrected by the Narrator, a character who appears in Part II of the novel. This new character not only replaces the Bluff-dweller as Narrator but also chats with Old Woman telepathically. The Bluff-dweller convalesces under the care of the historian. They fall in love and find their vocational niches, she editing the mistress' old diaries for publication and he reworking his journals into a cogent denunciation of modernity.

In my reading, the Narrator in *Farther Along* represents the sober storyteller, or the person who delivers the recovery narrative. Whereas the Bluff-dweller hears the Old Woman's story, the Narrator frequently relates it. In other words, a sober participant in AA and the Narrator in *Farther Along* are both active agents in the story, while the active alcoholic and Bluff-dweller are both passive victims of their addiction. Further, while the Old Woman helps rescue the Bluff-dweller, she interacts in a mutual, creative relationship with the Narrator: whereas Part I is titled "Solo for Hair-Comb-and-Tissue," Part II is titled "Duet for Harmonica [Old Woman] and French Horn [Narrator]." The two characters also discuss how to save the Bluff-dweller, and in fact the Narrator promises to tell the story in such a way as to save him from the alcohol-induced coma. In short, the Narrator functions like the "new" person who appears at that point in the recovery narrative when the alcoholic bottoms out and is "reborn."

Yet another striking correlation between *Farther Along* and the recovery narrative is the role of a "higher power," designated in the novel as Kind. All twelve-step programs suggest that participants rely on god "as we understand him," a concept AA co-founder Bill Wilson seized upon so potential members would not associate the group with any particular organized religion. Second, the higher

power concept encourages the alcoholic to ask for help. Unaided, few alcoholics stop drinking, no matter how hard they try; finding some power stronger than the unaided will is often necessary. In *Farther Along*, Kind helps give the Bluff-dweller that power. There is nothing theologically or devotionally striking about Kind, which (who?) is little more than basic human decency, or interpersonal connection, as the word suggests. But the Narrator's renewed relationship with Kind is instrumental in saving the Bluff-dweller.

In *Farther Along*, alcohol, inspiration, and Kind are interrelated in ways relevant to both the recovery narrative and the tradition of writers exploring the effects of drinking. Nicholas Warner shows that nineteenth-century American writers distinguished between physical and spiritual intoxication and also explored the spectrum running from alcohol-induced heightened perception to the ravages of addiction. *Farther Along* follows in that tradition, and as should be expected from Harington, it does so eccentrically. The Bluff-dweller gets his booze and later its replacement – the material for his new art and work – from the same source: the local moonshiner. Further, the moonshiner is one conduit through which Kind helps the Bluff-dweller stop drinking. Just as alcoholics futilely seek creativity, connection, and transcendence through booze, they often reach those spiritual aspirations through recovery. *Farther Along* indicates that both spirits and the spiritual derive from a common source.

Part III of *Farther Along* resembles the “what we are like now” section of a recovery narrative. While the novel does not move far beyond the Bluff-dweller's convalescence, it is clear that his new circumstances are those most conducive to finding satisfaction in his relationships and labor. Part of his ongoing recovery involves reconciliation with the past, both his own and America's. Passages in Part III read like a recovery narrative focused on the *Big Book* promise that “We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it” (83). As for the “vanishing American past,” the Bluff-dweller will preserve some part of it, not by reconstructing the nearly lifeless village as its remaining residents hoped, but by writing about it.

In addition to these structural and thematic correlations with the recovery narrative, *Farther Along* exhibits the shifts in affinity and consciousness that scholars cite when examining the nature of recovery in AA. Edmund O'Reilly has written of alcoholism as a disease of authority that often manifests itself in a contrarian self-marginalization: the Bluff-dweller, alone in his cavern, stretches this marginalization to its logical conclusion. O'Reilly also notes the frequency in AA narratives of "disrupted relationships between fathers and children" (107), another central part in the Bluff-dweller's story. Both O'Reilly and George Jensen discuss the recovering alcoholic's affinitive, cognitive shift away from this antagonistic isolation toward complementary connectedness. Both believe the shift occurs in that moment when a practicing alcoholic listens to the story of a recovering alcoholic. As I have noted, the story that initiates this change in the Bluff-dweller works much as it does in AA, only it is not told by a recovering alcoholic *per se*.

I assert that the novel's portrayal of both active addiction and recovery demonstrate an understanding of alcoholism the Bluff-dweller *cannot* possess, even at the story's end when he has been sober a few months. *Farther Along* is the only novel Harington revised significantly. He tried and failed to write it in the 1970s when he was still drinking, and finished it only after he had been sober for more than 20 years. The Bluff-dweller's awareness of the causes of his addiction and the novel's depiction of the cognitive changes he undergoes must be read as a recovery narrative told from the vantage point of someone who had been sober a long time.

In sum, *Farther Along* is a recovery narrative that describes alcoholism and its cure in ways congruent with AA principles, yet it offers an alternative strategy for achieving sustainable sobriety. There is a drunkalogue that tells of isolation, an awareness of the underlying causes of addiction, a turning point based on identification with an autobiographical story, and a promise of eventual healing. And the substance of that healing is much more than "putting the plug in the jug," as it also consists of cognitive changes that facilitate purposeful work and connection with others. Yet despite these parallels

with recovery narratives, AA has no presence in the novel. There are no 12 steps, no AA terminology (e.g. powerlessness, the disease concept, higher power, spiritual awakening, one day at a time). Instead, storytelling in itself enables sobriety. Telling the story of the lost past functions like the twelve steps, becoming a way to “Clear away the wreckage of the past”(*Big Book*, 164).

The Drunkalogue: “What We Used to Be Like,” or “Solo for Hair-Comb-and-Tissue”

Although it uses none of the terminology, clichés, or slogans of Alcoholics Anonymous, Part I of *Farther Along* reads much like an extended “drunkalogue” as told in AA meetings and literature. The drunkalogue is the first of a three-part story about “what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now.” As scholars and AA participants have noted, it can serve several functions.⁵ First, it establishes the story-teller’s “qualifications” that his or her past drinking meets the criteria for alcoholism. The drunkalogue also helps the audience, especially newcomers, to “identify” with the speaker, to recognize similarities in one’s own drinking, thinking, and behavior. This recognition establishes (or reinforces) the listeners’ belief that they too are alcoholics. Drunkalogues are also often funny, as speakers relate some of their more bizarre and outlandish drinking exploits. Typically, these moments of humor are interspersed with or followed by comments on the drinker’s increasing familial and perhaps legal troubles, alienation, and despair. Finally, a drunkalogue depicts the descent to a “bottom,” or the point at which the drinker becomes desperate enough to seek help.⁶

The Bluff-dweller clearly “qualifies” as alcoholic,⁷ and *Farther Along* begins at a point typically related at the end of a drunkalogue, when drinking has stopped providing any positive benefits. AA drunkalogues vary; some drinkers may qualify themselves in one sentence. But generally, one common element of stories about drinking in both AA and literature is the effects of consumption.⁸ Recovering

⁵ This quotation is from the *Big Book*, in the section referred to as “How it Works,” which is frequently read aloud at the beginning of AA meetings. See 58.

⁶ See John W. Crowley, ed. *Drunkard’s Progress: Narratives of Addiction, Despair, and Recovery*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. George H. Jensen, *Storytelling in Alcoholics Anonymous: A Rhetorical Analysis*. Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000. Edmund B. O’Reilly, *Sobering Tales: Narratives of Alcoholism and Recovery*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997. Maria Gabrielle Swora. “Narrating Community: The Creation of Social Structure in Alcoholics Anonymous Through the Performance of Autobiography.” *Narrative Inquiry* 11(2), 2001: 363-384. Robyn R. Warhol and Helena Michie, “Twelve-Step Teleology: Narratives of Recovery/Recovery as Narrative.” In *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*. Edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, 327-50.

⁷ The variety of definitions for alcoholism all include uncontrolled or addictive drinking despite increasingly negative effects.

⁸ See especially Nicholas O. Warner, *Spirits of America: Intoxication in 19th-Century American Literature*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997. Warner examines how writers, both alcoholic and non-alcoholic, have

alcoholics from the mid-nineteenth century to the present have described the sometimes comic, sometimes pathetic antics associated with their drinking. But in *Farther Along* there are no drunken antics or parties, no release from inhibition. Effects, psychological or physical, are simply not addressed, even though there are 15 references to drinking in the first 63 pages of the novel. The protagonist notes that he: drank while watching his wife pack her belongings; consumed “several snifters” of brandy (13); “finished half a bottle of scotch alone”(20) and then drank more with company; “really tied one on”(28); and “took a quart of bourbon and drank half of it, and went to sleep”(49). In the narrative present, the Bluff-dweller notes only that he drinks a lot of moonshine every night in order to sleep.

In other words, the protagonist is at that point in his addiction when he no longer enjoys drinking but he must continue to drink. As AA founder Bill Wilson stated in his own story, “Liquor ceased to become a luxury; it became a necessity”(*Big Book* 5). Alcohol threads its way through the Bluff-dweller’s life, its presence always felt and frequently mentioned. Yet there is never a story directly about drinking. Its existence seems parenthetical, but as the subject of so many parentheses, it becomes the dominant characteristic of living. To an outsider, this indirectness is a painfully obvious form of denial, perhaps most obvious in the Bluff-dweller’s description of his living arrangements. He avers that toilet paper is his one convenience more modern than those the ancient Bluff-dwellers possessed. Yet he relies equally on a still.

In addition to these typical elements of addiction and denial, the novel’s depiction of the nature of active alcoholism likewise corresponds with the drunkalogue and twelve-step ideology. “Our liquor,” the *Big Book* asserts, “was but a symptom. So we had to get down to causes and conditions.” Most

compared physical to spiritual intoxication, explored imbibing as a means to transcendence, observed its effect on perception and the imagination, and connected intoxication to life’s indeterminacy. John W. Crowley shows how modernist writers consumed booze to demonstrate dissent from American bourgeois values, in “Alcoholism and the Modern Temper.” In David S. Reynolds and Deborah J. Rosenthal, eds., *The Serpent in the Cup: Temperance in American Literature*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997, 165-179. The classic depiction of a late-stage alcoholic’s mental state is Charles Jackson’s *The Lost Weekend*.

frequently, those causes are resentment (“the ‘number one’ offender”), self-pity, fear, and failed relationships(64). *Farther Along* reads like that part of a drunkalogue focused more on the isolation and resentment than on excessive drinking itself.

Part I of the novel is explicitly a tale of isolation. The Bluff-dweller’s “withdrawal into the wilderness”(5) occurred six years before the narrative present. The bluff is described as “a monolith escarpment of sandstone jutting out from the mountainside. The land in front of it was level; the land on top of it was level....I could sleep in the deeply recessed cavern”(50). The town in the valley below is “an abandoned village, lifeless .” A road can be seen from the bluff, but the bluff cannot be seen from the road; likewise, none of the few occupied houses in the area can be seen from the bluff. “My nearest known neighbor is three miles away”(8). He has no friends. The few remaining villagers mock him on his semi-annual toilet paper forays, cracking “That feller shore must bowel off ever hour on the hour.” Even kids join in, calling him “The Giasticutus...a huge mythical bird of prey who carries off large articles on its back”(3).

Other aspects of the Bluff-dweller attest to his isolation. He dresses in a “deerskin robe, sandals, leggings, breechclout: all authentic...with the exception of the headgear. The true Bluff-dweller usually wore no head gear, but I have a sentimental attachment for the leather helmet, topless, that I wore in sparring practice as a boxer in my youth”(26). In Ozark ghost towns one could expect to encounter people on the fringes of mainstream American culture, but the Bluff-dweller is something of a freak even among outsiders, a bizarre prehistoric pugilist.

Another indication of his alcoholic isolation is the title of the novel’s first section: “Solo for Hair-Comb-and-Tissue.” To play this homemade instrument, one wraps tissue paper over the teeth of a comb, gently holds the comb in place with the lips, and hums a tune. The materials themselves attest to the Bluff-dweller’s separation. The comb, with which he brushes his hair only twice a year, and the toilet paper, represent a bare essentials hygiene maintained by one fully cut off from civilization. Further, as a

soloist in a cavern, he shares his creative labor with no one. If a song is played in the woods and no one hears, is it music? In fact, the Bluff-dweller's dog "doesn't appreciate [my playing] and leaves our bluff cavern to hide in the woods far out of earshot until I'm finished" (4). These pathetic circumstances exemplify what AA founder Bill Wilson described as the point when "our isolation had become complete" (*Twelve and Twelve* 116). However, even Wilson probably never conceived of a separation so total as that of being abandoned by your own dog.⁹

Autobiographical drunkalogues trace the history leading up to such wretched loneliness, and *Farther Along* does so with chapters that alternate between the narrative present and the Bluff-dweller's previous relationships, both intimate and professional. After eight years of marriage, disagreements about having children led to mutual estrangement from his wife. Affairs ensued. Once he became chief curator of the museum, "it was easy enough for me to use (and abuse) my position to lure fresh-out-of-Seven-Sisters researchers into labyrinthine basement storerooms, seduce a secretary or two, pick up auction groupies at Sotheby Park Bernet...but somehow my wife always found out." She eventually left him for her own boss(11).

His next serious relationship ends when his girlfriend finds him cheating with a mannequin. During the divorce, in return for letting her take his cherry wood writing-box, his soon-to-be ex-wife agrees to let him measure her: "not just her bust and waist and hips, her height and beam and boom, but her neck and clavicles, calves and femurs and jawbone, cranium...and humerus, instep and outstep and heel, the distance between her eyes....From astralagalus to zygoma, from anklebone to cheekbone, I had her all down." He takes the measurements to "the most accomplished artisan-upholsterer in the east" (13-14), who makes a life-sized, uncannily accurate copy of the Bluff-dweller's wife, with real hair and teeth, electrical components so she can be "thermostatically maintained" at a normal body

⁹ Alcoholics Anonymous, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Service, Inc., 1981.

temperature, and even an “inconspicuous panel which conceals a built-in tape recorder, wired to tiny microphones in both her ears,” so she can “listen”(20).

One night the protagonist’s girlfriend walks into the apartment and finds him on the couch with his mannequin companion. Thinking the mannequin is real, the girlfriend says:

“Oh, excuse me. I should have knocked.” That’s all right, I said, she’s only a doll.
“Well, aren’t we all?” she said, retreating into the hall. I followed her...saying, No, seriously, she’s not real. “Am I ‘real’?” she asked, laughing....”All your women are dolls, darling. Don’t you know that?”(28).

In what is the most telling example of the absurdity to which his relational dysfunction extends, the Bluff-dweller eventually breaks up with his mannequin. The “doll wife made increasing claims on my time, and that was her undoing.” Despite her “cheerful and honest smile, I sometimes felt that her eyes were accusatory, resentful....I think she ‘knew’ that I was becoming her total captive”(35). He leaves her in a locker at the museum, inside a rarely used storeroom marked “Misc. Culled Ephemera & Curios.” Her fate testifies to the quality of his intimate relationships, in which women are dolls, objects collected and discarded after the inevitable breakdown. In this way, the anecdote shares a central characteristic with the drunkalogue: an attestation that the alcoholic himself, rather than circumstances or people, is at the root of his own problems. The Bluff-dweller cannot even forge relationships with inanimate objects.

Professional relationships also baffle the Bluff-dweller. As an alcoholic, he never directly connects these failures to alcohol, because that would suggest a need to stop drinking – the one option the addict refuses to consider. Yet the problems in his work life clearly derive from his addiction. Edmund O’Reilly writes that alcoholism is a “disease of authority” in which “the texture of human life – situated, interwoven, dependent – is ignored.” Likewise, “social criticism has tended to take the form of self-marginalization – a disconsolate withdrawal from the field of conflict”(106-107). “Disconsolate withdrawal” perfectly describes the Bluff-dweller’s response to the mess his career eventually became.

As sexual liaisons among the employees complicated work at the museum, he would periodically “declare, to my new woman, to her boss, my associate curator, to my secretary, to anyone in earshot...’Lord, I’d like to build myself a log castle out in the deep woods somewhere, anywhere, and just hole up in it” (38). At one office Christmas party, his employees presented him with a model of a log castle, and that evening he asked a tipsy employee if they were trying to tell him something. “She could only reply, wearily, not really meaning it (I hoped), ‘Of course, you dummy. You keep talking about losing yourself in the woods, so they’re telling you to get lost’” (39). Soon afterwards, he does just that.

A turning point in the Bluff-dweller’s recovery occurs when his sister tells him of a childhood trauma he had either forgotten or repressed. He was “Momma’s darling little boy...[and] she was holding you and loving you all the time. And...it nearly drove Daddy crazy, for him to watch the way she was cuddling you.” Then one night “when you were asleep in her bed...he came in and tried to smother you with a pillow.” His mother awoke “just in time,” but his father “told her that if she ever even *touched* you again, he would kill both of you” (33-34). After hearing about this, the Bluff-dweller writes his ex-wife, saying that perhaps “during the rocky years of our marriage, there was always inside me that five-year-old boy sending out desperate signals for affection” (62). As Edmund O’Reilly has noted, this theme of “disrupted relationships between fathers and children” (107) is common among alcoholics’ stories, and *Farther Along* explicitly connects drinking to such disruption. That same night, the Bluff-dweller “cannot sleep, for obvious reasons, and [I] must rise again and again for more help from the jug” (63-64).

These passages suggest a conception of alcoholism consistent with that in AA recovery narratives. The anecdote treats addiction as a symptom arising from more fundamental causes. Similarly, alcoholism is not deemed an inexorable consequence; it just happens to be the chosen escape. Thus, the Bluff-dweller never says, “I drink because my father mistreated me.” But while neither *Farther Along* nor recovery narratives depict drinking as a necessary result of distress, both do depict drinking as

a manifestation of a problem that physical sobriety will not solve. In short, both suggest that alcoholism is a predictable way of dealing with a problem that is inevitable.

The Bluff-dweller's awareness of his self-pity is another striking similarity between *Farther Along* and the recovery narrative's description of "causes and conditions." In a typical *Big Book* passage, Bill Wilson wrote of the "waves of self-pity and resentment"(15) that exacerbated his need to drink. The Bluff-dweller likewise frequently mentions his self-pity, as do those around him. Again, I believe this recognition derives from Harington's own sobriety. Although it may be possible for active addicts to be aware of their self-pity, comprehending its many manifestations typically derives from attending meetings and "working" the fourth and fifth steps (*Big Book* 64-71). In other words, awareness develops along with continued sobriety.

Harington explicitly uses the rhetoric of self-pity in *Farther Along*. When his girlfriend left after catching him cheating with his mannequin, the Bluff-dweller "really tied one on, wallowing in self-pity and lovelessness..."(28). His sister tells him that, considering his father's anger toward him, he is lucky to be alive, and he moans "I wouldn't call it luck"(33). One night in his cavern he cries "tears of self-pity, thinking that I was doomed never, ever to have a woman again"(56). When he wakes, always hung over, he often dwells "overmuch on my mistreatment by the world"(64). And later, one of the women in the village says "It sounds as if he is hopelessly mired in self-pity"(126). Clearly, Harington wanted to emphasize the underlying psychological roots of the Bluff-dweller's alcoholism.

Two references to self-pity sound especially like AA discourse. The Bluff-dweller writes a letter to his ex-wife and rejects the first draft because it "is too self-pitying, and she had never tolerated my moments of cursing my lot or bemoaning my fate." Like so many AA members, the Bluff-dweller is acknowledging a long-standing character flaw. The second draft of the letter "is too analytical, too psychological, as if I am trying to explain away my *defective character*(61, emphasis mine). While this

may be coincidental it is a phonetic match with the “defect of character” mentioned in the sixth of the twelve steps.¹⁰

In sum, Part I of *Farther Along* contains each of the major elements of a drunkalogue, or the first section of an AA recovery narrative as told by a sober alcoholic. References to the amount of alcohol consumed clearly “qualify” the drinker as an alcoholic, and the Bluff-dweller has reached the point where he cannot control his drinking. He is still in denial and wracked with self-pity and resentment, although, as I have argued, it is a sober storyteller rather than the Bluff-dweller himself who recognizes these underlying causes of addiction. Further, the mishaps and failures arising from his dysfunction are related anecdotally with a self-deprecating humor. Thus the Bluff-dweller is about to reach the alcoholic’s ultimate dilemma: he must continue to drink, and yet drinking is going to kill him.

¹⁰ The sixth step in AA, as in all twelve-step programs, is “Became entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character [identified in Steps 4 and 5].”

The Recovery Narrative Part II: “What Happened,” or “Duet for Harmonica and French Horn”

At the end of a drunkalogue the alcoholic is mired in untethered isolation, uncontrolled consumption, and unfettered self-pity. Some key event turns the drinker toward sobriety. This is the “what happened” section of the recovery narrative. The event can be almost anything – a drinking-related trauma, an intervention, or a simple realization that one cannot drink in moderation – and it does not have to occur in a single moment. In AA recovery stories, the shift almost inevitably involves exposure to Alcoholics Anonymous, either at meetings or by talking to an AA member. It is through listening to the stories of other alcoholics and through help from a “higher power” that one sees drinking behavior and its attendant thought processes with a new clarity.

For the Bluff-dweller, that key event and new clarity arrive as he begins to develop a relationship with the Old Woman in the village. In a number of “meetings” with this woman (who Harington readers know to be Latha Bourne), he listens to her story and begins to understand the reality of his drinking problem and how his baffling emotional difficulties have fed his need to drink. His newfound objectivity is represented in part by the introduction of a new character, a Narrator (or “French horn”), who not only narrates but also communicates telepathically with the Old Woman.

This narrative absurdity is a tactic typical of Harington’s magical realism, even though “typical Harington” may be an oxymoron. It serves two particular functions here. For one, the shift is disconcerting. When the Narrator simply conveys plot, the text is in normal font, but the telepathic communications with the Old Woman are in bold letters. The confusion mirrors the disruption occurring in the Bluff-dweller’s existence, the alcohol-induced fog through which he struggles to interpret the new knowledge of his past in relation to his current problems. Second, the shift is a metafictional maneuver, putting the reader into the story. It is of considerable significance then, as it indicates that readers will participate in the Bluff-dweller’s eventual recovery.

Finding himself in the town after dark one night, the Bluff-dweller goes to the Old Woman's house to borrow a lantern "so I can find my way home." He finds that her laugh "is youthful, not the high cackle of an old woman....she seems to deny her years," and he believes "she must have been exquisitely beautiful in her youth." She has fried chicken "on the stove, keeping warm," as though she had been waiting for him. He notes "Her collection of books...is larger than mine." After he mentions his miseries, he expects her to ask for elaboration, but she "simply looks at me with sympathy"(42-44). In short, she represents to the Bluff-dweller what AA represents to many drunks: attractiveness ("exquisitely beautiful"), sustenance (fried chicken), knowledge (books), sympathy, and guidance (a lantern).

Their ensuing exchange marks the beginning of the Bluff-dweller's turn toward sobriety. The Old Woman asks:

"Who – or what – are you hiding from?"
"Myself." The answer is so immediate and unpremeditated that it surprises me. It is as if a third person is present....
"I'd think that would be all the harder if there was nobody but yourself to be with...."
"I don't get along with myself," I declare. "In fact, we're hardly on speaking terms any longer."

When the old woman invites him to stay rather than trudge back to his bluff in the dark, he says:

"You wouldn't happen to have any booze...? Every night I have to drink myself to sleep."
"I wondered if you were keeping a mistress," she says.
"A mistress? No, unfortunately, I'm not."
"Yes, unfortunately you are. Booze is your mistress. She...helps you escape yourself." I think about that; it had not occurred to me before. "I guess you're right," I say. "Do you have a lantern?"(45-46).

This passage epitomizes what scholars have identified as the defining moment at which recovery begins. Gregory Bateson, for example, and more recently Edmund O'Reilly, have written of advanced alcoholism as a "symmetrical" struggle. As Bateson says, an active alcoholic who stays dry for some

period experiences “an unusually disastrous variant” of the “division between mind and matter,” or between “conscious will...and the remainder of the personality”(2). This mental state is characterized by a continuous and ineffective internal battle to manage drinking so that it will provide the benefits without the costs. The Bluff-dweller acknowledges this fruitless, symmetrical struggle: “I don’t get along with myself.”

Both Bateson and O’Reilly argue that sobriety shifts cognitive processes from this dualistic symmetry to interdependent “complementarity.” Competition, isolation, and self-serving interaction characterize symmetry, but cooperation, unity, and sympathy characterize complementarity. The act of one alcoholic talking to another about the nature of addiction initiates that transformation, as it requires externalization on the part of the active drinker, a move to mutuality(O’Reilly, 105). An isolated, fruitless insistence on controlled drinking gives way to an experience shared with someone else: the inability to manage one’s drinking.

In AA as in *Farther Along*, the transformation occurs through story telling. A “historicized and globalized version of personal recovery” occurred at the founding moment of AA, when a sober Bill Wilson first told his story of recovery to a hung over Dr. Bob Smith(O’Reilly, 105). Alcoholics from “Dr. Bob” on often describe their first moments of identification as listening to someone else “tell my story.” In *Farther Along*, the Old Woman does precisely this, telling the Bluff-dweller his story by noting that booze is his “mistress,” something “that had not occurred to me before.” The Old Woman’s assertion is especially pertinent to the Bluff-dweller. It is his story, in that “mistress” pinpoints the exact nature of his addiction as an escape from failed intimate relationships. However, while those previous relationships were characterized by symmetrical resistance, his response this time is “I guess you’re right.” It is analogous to that point in the recovery narrative where the drinker finally concedes to the first of the twelve steps: “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol.” The concession itself denotes connection, as “you” tell “my” story and “we” admit to powerlessness.

The Bluff-dweller's concession at this first "meeting" initiates other shifts in consciousness, especially concerning identity. In his analysis of storytelling in AA, George Jensen asserts that admitting one is an alcoholic changes one's identity. Other scholars agree but mistakenly believe this new identity as alcoholic supersedes all other identities, for instance those based on, say, race or gender.¹¹ Jensen's analysis is less absolutist, as he argues that identity shifts in numerous ways rather than simply from one thing to another, and that it remains dynamic. For Jensen as for Bateson and O'Reilly, the first meeting between Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob initiates the change (Jensen Ch. 8). Jensen writes, "It is this...listening with a sense of identification that draws the drinker into the [AA] program"(3-4).

Similarly, the Bluff-dweller's perpetual bewilderment during the first visit with the Old Woman testifies to his new possibilities for identity. At the museum and in his previous marriage, he was the misunderstood, misused, put upon victim, a role that breaks down at the Old Woman's house. Her question "Did you know your father" comes unexpectedly and he responds with a joke: but "She does not laugh." When she tells him that escape is even more difficult when one is alone, he thinks "I don't know how to respond." His current identity collapses as well: "I wait for her to ask me why I became a Bluff-dweller, but she does not"(44-45). She offers him no opportunity to pontificate and lament about how he came to be who he thinks he is.

This sense of liminality opens new cognitive possibilities for the Bluff-dweller. As a with a newcomer to AA, the move toward complementarity that the Bluff-dweller experiences includes a shift from dualistic to "trichotomous" thought processes. AA is full of trichotomies, or three-part concepts that derive from the interaction between dualisms. To name just a few, participants share their "experience, strength, and hope;" the recovery narrative follows "what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now;" and alcoholism is called a "physical, mental, and spiritual"

¹¹ See especially Karen Kopelson, "Sloganeering Our Way to Serenity: AA and the Language(s) of America." JAC (JACC) 27.3-4 (2007): 591-636. Also Robyn R. Warhol and Helena Michie, "Twelve-Step Teleology: Narratives of Recovery/Recovery as Narrative." In *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*. Edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, 327-350.

disease. O'Reilly notes that while similar trichotomies pervade the "occidental cognitive landscape," in AA they seem "to play a special, integrated, structural role. To put it succinctly (and in only three words): trichotomy subverts symmetry"(114). The Bluff-dweller observes this change; when he blurts out that he drinks to escape himself, "it is as if a third person is present." In fact this third person utters the insight, which the Bluff-dweller calls "immediate and unpremeditated." The growing perceptiveness is a natural and spontaneous product of the new person's existence. In AA, a struggling drunk identifies with a sober one and finds a new perspective that offers hope. This same phenomenon occurs in *Farther Along*. The Bluff-dweller's meeting with the Old Woman changes everything by providing an objective distance from which to view the alcoholic self.

The breakthrough insight the Bluff-dweller receives from the Old Woman leads him to commit to the "program." That night he writes his ex-wife, mentioning his childhood trauma and the "five-year-old boy sending out desperate signals for affection"(62). Now that boy is "in a deep sleep, a coma, chloroformed by this rare mountain-woods air, anesthetized by a nearly total lack of human contact...although after my sister had left I went to the house (or cabin) of one of my nearest neighbors, the recently widowed elderly lady, to borrow a lantern to find my way home"(62). The ellipsis is in the original, demonstrating the direct connection between the Bluff-dweller's "chloroformed," "anesthetized" (read: drunken) state on the one hand and, on the other, the Old Woman's ability to light his way "home." In fact, immediately after he concedes to her claim that booze is his mistress, he asks for her guidance: "Do you have a lantern?"(46). He may not have seen the light yet, but he knows who (or what) has it. He tells his ex-wife, the Old Woman is "almost twice my age, but lovely....Perhaps I will begin to see her quite often"(62). He has decided, in short, that she can show him the light as long as he keeps attending meetings.

Over the next few weeks, he visits the Old Woman regularly, eventually finding in her story his way to sobriety, sanity, and human connection. At his second meeting, he gains another crucial insight

in learning to live sober – the connection between drinking and resentment. The *Big Book* calls resentment the “number one offender. It destroys more alcoholics than anything else” (64). Similarly, the Old Woman states, “it pleases you to feel you’ve been done wrong....What’s the way they put it? ‘Injustice collector.’” The Bluff-dweller responds that, having spent the last six years in a cave, he has found no new resentments. “No,” she responds, “but you have plenty of time to dwell on all the ones you’ve already collected” (68-69).

The Old Woman’s word choice – “dwell” – is significant. It indicates that the protagonist’s name contains layers of meaning and wordplay that are common in Harington’s novels. As I discuss below, one intentional meaning of “Bluff-dweller” refers to Plato’s allegory of the cave. The name also suggests a self-deprecating outlook on one’s alcoholism typical of recovery narratives. Dwell means not only to reside but also to fixate; in the Old Woman’s usage, the Bluff-dweller is wallowing in his victimhood. Finally, Harington could have chosen “cave” or “cavern” rather than bluff, a word that suggests the Bluff-dweller is full of more than just alcohol.

And just like an AA “old-timer,” the Old Woman calls the bluff: “Just remember...that nothing is as bad as you would like for it to be” (68-69). Recovering alcoholics often talk about entering AA full of self-righteous indignation, only to be told that things would be better if they hadn’t such an inflated opinion of themselves in the first place. The point is often ironically referred to as “rule number 56,” or “Don’t take yourself too seriously.”¹² *Farther Along*’s passages on resentment would fit seamlessly in any recovery narrative recounting first contact with AA.

Part II of *Farther Along*, which begins after these initial meetings between the Bluff-dweller and the Old Woman, also introduces a new “character,” a Narrator whose presence is known only by the Old Woman. While Part I is titled “Solo for Hair-Comb-And-Tissue” – with the Bluff-dweller as the soloist – Part II is “Duet for Harmonica and French Horn” – with the Old Woman and the new Narrator as the

¹² Depending on the place, it is sometimes referred to as rule number 62, or various other numbers. It is intentionally ironic in that in AA there are no set rules.

duettists. It is as if the Old Woman, by revealing her story, has brought a new person into existence. The two of them interact in a mutually creative process, and their “music,” or artistic labor, leads the Bluff-dweller to sobriety. The second section of the recovery narrative similarly introduces a new character whose very purpose is to tell a story, or “what happened.” The suffering alcoholic, the sober alcoholic, and the story interact and change over time as recovery progresses.¹³ Unlike the story of the Bluff-dweller or active alcoholic, with its focus on self-pity and resentment, this story of recovery is always *becoming* in new, creative ways.

In their first conversation, the Old Woman, grieving over the recent loss of her husband, asks the Narrator what she might do now. The Narrator answers, “Well, for openers, you might give some thought to the Bluff-dweller, and how you are going to save him” (82). In response to a similar question he replies, “Nothing, beloved, except *be*” (83, emphasis in original). Later, the Old Woman asks if the Bluff-dweller is “just a living metaphor for yourself?” (94). The Narrator says no, “for I am lost....He never gets lost” (94). As we will see, the Narrator may be lost, but he also helps to save the Bluff-dweller from an alcoholic death.

This shift in point of view is a perfect example of what both George Jensen and Edmund O’Reilly describe, in slightly different ways, as the key alteration AA causes within the drinker. Borrowing from literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, Jensen distinguishes between the author (teller) and hero (subject) in AA autobiographies. While not the same persona, author and hero “are coeval and can, in effect, change rhetorical places. The author identifies with and speaks for the hero...but the hero also speaks for the author as the audience associates the consummate hero...with the unconsummated author” (111). Thus, the story functions “to ritually transform the drinking self while maintaining an identity with it” (114-

¹³ See Jensen, esp. 44 and Chapter 7. Jensen emphasizes the simple but important fact, often ignored in the literature on AA, that people change. They continually reinterpret their pasts in the light new knowledge. Even the *Big Book* presents a limited view of AA, as it was written early in Bill Wilson’s sobriety. It therefore “may or may not reflect the spiritual maturity of many old-timers” (44).

115). In other words, the former self is not shed and replaced with a new identity, but is rather kept alive and known more fully.

O'Reilly writes of a similar psychological transition that likewise occurs through storytelling. He argues that recovery involves the "transcendence of dualism" to the "unifying power of complementarity." Those antagonist polarities characteristic of symmetry (drunk/not drunk) give way to inclusive, complementary trichotomies. Trichotomies derive from polarities and introduce a third element that is "perhaps a transcendence" (e.g. drunk/not drunk/recovering). Stated another way, "jagged symmetry" gives way to "community, integration, and acceptance." These in turn enable and facilitate "new patterns of cognitive practice" that develop "primarily the narrative modes"(116-117).

The Narrator in *Farther Along* represents this synthesis in the dialectic that both Jensen and O'Reilly acknowledge. The Narrator's appearance creates a trichotomy in that he depends on but is distinct from the Bluff-dweller, as evidenced by his insistence that he is not simply a "living metaphor." At the same time, the Old Woman is not simply the Narrator's imagination. "Once I liked to think that I was your creator," the Narrator tells her, "but I have never been your puppeteer, for your own will is too strong for anyone to manipulate it"(94). This means that the Old Woman – and by extension Stay More – has her own agency; the narrative always develops, or as Jensen puts it, is "kept alive and known more fully." The Old Woman thereby creates O'Reilly's "new patterns of cognitive practice" through "the narrative modes." In short, her story opens the new ways of thinking that scholars have identified as the substance of sobriety.

Over the next few weeks, the Bluff-dweller continues to go to the Old Woman's house to hear her story, and we see the process by which inclusive connection replaces dualistic, antagonistic symmetry. One night after dinner, "he leaned across the table and rested one of his hands" on hers and said "tell me the story of your life"(103). This storytelling takes days. During this process, the Bluff-

dweller continues drinking but forces himself to wake every morning and go to another meeting. The Narrator notes “He would come and have breakfast with you and ask you questions about your life. He could not get enough of your life!”(105).

Whereas O’Reilly calls such inclusiveness a shift from “jagged symmetry,” Bill Wilson called it being relieved of “the bondage of self”(*Big Book*, 63). At one point the Bluff-dweller touches the Old Woman’s hand and asks “tenderly” for her story. He gets angry about the wrongs she faced, asking once, while “shrieking” and pounding his fist on the table, “Why did your sister have you committed to an insane asylum?...You weren’t the least bit crazy”(106). Later, when she becomes too upset to continue, he “looked at you and listened to you with compassion, one of the rare times in his whole adult life that he had experienced genuine compassion...the deep feeling of sharing the suffering of another”(133). Finally, he even explicitly steps outside of himself, once interrupting the old woman to say, “That reminds me of a girl I knew who...But this is *your* story. Go on.”(106, ellipsis and italics in original). In sum, he is no longer *dwelling* on his story of isolation, self-pity, and resentment. Rather, he is listening to her story and that of the town: In becoming free of the “bondage of self,” he finds something to replace the liquor.

The distinguishing characteristic of *Farther Along* is this: stories themselves become the program for sobriety. In AA, recovery begins when one identifies with another’s story. This externalization dissipates the “dissonance between identity and role,” or between self and persona, that characterizes active alcoholics (Jensen 3-4). The Bluff-dweller identifies with the Old Woman’s story, returning to her house every day to hear more. Whereas alcohol has induced an “anesthetizing” “coma,” her story instigates an externalization, a “genuine compassion” the Bluff-dweller has so rarely felt. Similarly, AA distinguishes between dryness and sobriety. “Dry-drunk” refers to someone who has stopped drinking but still manifests the same “defects of character,” such as self-pity and resentment, that drove the need to drink in the first place (O’Reilly 154). To achieve sobriety, alcoholics must replace

drinking with something that effectively manages these underlying flaws. In AA, the replacement is a “design for living” that includes helping others and working the steps, both of which change one’s perspective on one’s own problems (*Big Book* 15, 28, 81).

This very change occurs in *Farther Along*. In the Old Woman’s story, the Bluff-dweller finds something to replace drinking and dwelling on his “mistreatment by the world.” The Narrator shows this change of perspective from self-centered to sympathetic when he notes that the Bluff-dweller “would come and...ask you questions about your life. He could not get enough of your life!” (105). This last sentence is especially telling: rather than alcohol, it is now the story that the Bluff-dweller desires in increasing amounts.

Others have argued that stories in themselves constitute the substance of sobriety. Robyn Warhol’s and Helena Michie’s “Twelve-Step Teleology” argues that a “master narrative,” or an “autobiography-in-common,” is itself the higher power AA participants find. Admitting to an addiction, seeking help from a higher power, and benefitting from the program all form a structure to which stories of recovery generally conform. This master structure, in turn, relates to a “coherence system” that AAs use to interpret their experience. The coherence system derives from the 12 steps, the drunkalogue format, and pressure to identify primarily as an alcoholic. The story itself is the higher power, and “The acquisition and continual retelling of the story becomes the very process that constitutes the alcoholic’s self” (340).

As do a number of scholars, Warhol and Michie overstate the homogeneity of AA based on attending a few meetings at a few places. Nonetheless, their argument – that the story itself constitutes the program of recovery – applies elegantly to *Farther Along*. While they emphasize a pressure to match stories to a master narrative, I emphasize the fluidity and flexibility of the stories, regardless of their structural similarities. *Farther Along* addresses this issue directly, as the Narrator tells the Old Woman, “I have never been your puppeteer, for your own will is too strong for anyone to manipulate it” (94).

Many key passages in *Farther Along* connect alcohol and the story-as-higher-power to a common source. That source is exactly what one might expect, in a Donald Harington novel, at least: the illiterate, self-effacing, teenaged hermit moonshiner-cum-spirit medium. In addition to providing booze, the moonshiner also channels artistic inspiration and provides the Bluff-dweller with the material for his creative endeavors – the literal substance that will replace moonshine. In *Farther Along*, alcohol never spawns creativity, a connection numerous artists have desperately sought. Rather, the alcohol that will kill the Bluff-dweller and the imagination that will save him derive from the same mysterious source.

Early in the novel, when the moonshiner only provides booze, a sort of logistical estrangement exists between the two men. The Bluff-dweller leaves ten dollars under a designated rock and returns later to find the money “replaced by an earthenware jug of colorless but quite potable and potent corn spirits”(53). At this point the moonshiner is a merely a metonymy for alcohol. The Bluff-dweller leaves ten dollars under a designated rock and returns later to find the money “replaced by an earthenware jug of colorless but quite potable and potent corn spirits”(53). One day the men accidentally meet, and their conversation reveals that the moonshiner also lives alone. The Bluff-dweller “could not avoid feeling some resentment...as if I had discovered a young competitor, a challenger for the title of Loner-In-Residence.” Here again is the Bluff-dweller’s self-centered “resentment.” He revels in being the outcast to the extent that he must compete with any threat to his title. He then thinks, “This country aint big enough for you and me both”(57). The phrasing, which suggests a standoff at high noon, shows beautifully the symmetrical antagonism between the man and his effort to control booze. It likewise suggests the Bluff-dweller’s nascent awareness that he and booze cannot coexist peacefully.

The Bluff-dweller discovers, though, that the moonshiner possesses something more compelling than booze. “I took note of his long-fingered, almost delicate hands in contrast to the pudgy body: he was not simply clasping them but allowing the thumbs and fingers to play, to interreact, almost to dance with one another”(59). When the moonshiner noticed the Bluff-dweller’s “absorption with his fingers,”

he “held them up, pressed together as if in prayer. ‘These here’s my friends,’ he said.” The moonshiner introduces Tricky Jick, Large George, Day Digit, Diana Banana, Learnin Vernon, Jeleny Wieny, Every Clever, and Latha the Way. These are all spoofs of character names from Stay More novels. The Bluff-dweller realizes the young man “was no mere uncouth teenaged moonshining hermit....He was a sorcerer, possibly a wizard or warlock an illusionist....He did not frighten me at all”(59).

Their meeting represents a crucial, even life and death choice for the Bluff-dweller. As a “young competitor,” the moonshiner is a menace. The Bluff-dweller can decide the country “aint big enough” for the two of them, but the booze will always win that battle. If, however, the Bluff-dweller stops competing with the moonshine and starts working with the “warlock,” then they can create magic. The wizard does “not frighten me at all.” In this way, the desire to escape merges with the storytelling illusionist. In short, magical realism replaces alcohol.

This happens literally in the novel. As their friendship grows, the moonshiner provides the Bluff-dweller with a new substance that will eventually supersede alcohol. One day when the Bluff-dweller mentions the town’s unoccupied general store, the moonshiner says, “Not occupied, naw, but it shore aint empty.” The two walk toward the store, through the “ruined village. The moonshiner, we are told, “had a *story* to tell about everything we passed”(72, emphasis added). In those stories is the history of Stay More: the earliest dwellings, the post office, the stone bank, the doctors’ offices, the hotel. The moonshiner has become the sorcerer, conjuring the town’s fanciful history of physicians who work cures in dreams, peddlers who sell crystal ball clocks, and cockroaches who worship drunken literary critics.

Once inside the store, the Bluff-dweller stands in stunned amazement. It is as though the place contains the entire material history of the town. There is a “slant-top bookkeeping desk...an interesting vernacular piece which I would have happily obtained for the Foundation.” There are glass cases containing old candy, “sundries of every sort...condiments and canned goods, dyes and snuffs,” horse harnesses and farming equipment. Most thrilling for the Bluff-dweller are the boxes of combs. “Celluloid

combs for twenty-five cents, black hard rubber combs for four cents more, and, best of all, eight-inch French horn combs.” In addition, there are three types of toilet paper he can use with the combs. “I would greatly broaden the range and timbre of my instrumentation, *I would make a new music*” (74, last emphasis added). For six years, the Bluff-dweller has drunk himself into a nightly coma, journaled his bitter denunciations of modern America, and written self-pitying letters to his ex-wife. Now, for the first time in perhaps decades, he has found both a new direction and a new range for his creative efforts.

In other words, the moonshiner, who had previously provided the liquor that will eventually kill the Bluff-dweller, has now led him to the materials for the artistic inspiration that will save him. The moonshiner says, “It’s still for sale,” and points to an antique cash drawer: “You find anything you can use, jist leave the money here ” (72-73). This shows that the Bluff-dweller must pay his dues for the source material, just as he must pay for liquor. But he will make a music much more layered than the kazoo-like laments currently scaring off his dog.

The moonshiner represents the desire for and channel of inspiration, creative labor, and transcendence. This desire can lead to comically arbitrary pursuits (as in Albert Brooks’ film *The Muse*), and it can lead to debilitating and even fatal measures (as in addiction). Alcoholism has been referred to as the writer’s disease, and the Dionysian association of drink and transcendence has led not only writers but many other artists to seek brilliance in a bottle.¹⁴ However, if transcendence were as simple as buying a jug and gritting one’s teeth through alcohol’s soothing burn, everyone would reach it. As it is, the Bluff-dweller must meticulously sift through bins, drawers, shelves, and storerooms of endless material containing entire histories. But the effect of his labor is an artistic transcendence, in music he was previously unable to play. His willingness to follow the moonshiner in a new direction leads him to a substantive, rather than liquid, awe.

¹⁴ See Crowley, “Alcoholism and the Modern Temper,” and Warner, *Spirits of America*, esp. Ch. 1 and 3.

In addition to these connections among storytelling and inspiration in the novel and recovery, a “god of one’s own understanding” is instrumental in the Bluff-dweller’s path to sobriety.¹⁵ This higher power, referred to as Kind, threads its way throughout the novel. For example, in a wordplay, Harington dedicates the book “To My Kindred.” The Old Woman’s husband, who Harington readers know as Every Dill, is mentioned as “a good man, a man of Kind”(83), and the moonshiner talks about Every “meeting up with Kind”(91). The Old Woman also mentions that her husband once converted two visiting Jehovah’s Witness to the Kindred. In the novel, Kind is regularly capitalized, which means that even when someone asks for a “Kind favor,” or says something “Kindly,” the listener knows the referent.

Kind plays a direct role in the Bluff-dweller’s recovery. When the Old Woman asks the moonshiner if he believes in Kind, he responds, “I reckon so. I shore caint believe in no God.” She asks, “Would you do a Kind favor?” She then requests that he “put a little more water, each and every week, into the jug of whiskey that you sell to the Bluff-dweller.” The moonshiner objects, saying he has “never cheated on nobody in my whole life.” She reiterates, “It wouldn’t be cheating...You would be doing him a favor. A Kind favor”(91-92).

The moonshiner agrees, and the plan, which seems to backfire at first, ultimately works. The Bluff-dweller drinks more to fall asleep, but at the same time he loses his capacity to know how much he consumes. He finally drinks himself into a coma, and he is rushed to the hospital and diagnosed with acute necrotic pancreatitis. This is the moment when he “hits bottom” and stops drinking.

Thus, the moonshiner, the Old Woman, and Kind all become instruments of sobriety. Recall that one of the moonshiner’s fingers includes “Latha the way”(59), a sign that the Old Woman, or her story, is for the Bluff-dweller a way out of his misery. The moonshiner and Old Woman together represent inspired storytelling, and they quite literally put an end to his drinking days. This occurs as the Bluff-

¹⁵ The second of AA’s twelve steps reads, “Came to believe that a *power greater than ourselves* could restore us to sanity.” The third step reads, “Turned our will and our lives over to the care of *God as we understood him*”(my emphases).

dweller wallows less in his own past and becomes interested in someone else's. In other words, the brighter the story, the weaker the booze.

In *Farther Along*, Kind is nothing more profound than authentic connection and decency. Kind is referred to in a number of ways: two of the town's residents are mentioned as the "Re-discoverer and co-discoverer" of Kind(113); there is a *Book of Kind*, a "loose-leaf bound anthology," which includes many authors; the Old Woman once says Kind "is not...male or as any sort of sex. Kind *is* sex..."(203); and at another point the Narrator says to the Old Woman, "You *are* Kind"(150).

As these and other passages suggest, there is no particular theological consistency to Kind. In fact, inconsistency, or at least learning to live with it, is kind of the whole point. In *Farther Along*, consistency is a matter for theology and God, which are human inventions that provide satisfactory answers to understandable problems. However, life's baffling injustices defy our answers, and one must somehow learn to live with the rift. The hymn after which the novel is named acknowledges this mystery:

Tempted and tried we're oft made to wonder
Why it should be thus all the day long,
While there are others living about us,
Never molested tho in the wrong.
(Chorus) Farther along we'll know all about it,
Farther along we'll understand why;
Cheer up, my brother, live in the sunshine,
We'll understand it all by and by.
When death has come and taken our loved ones,
It leaves our home so lonely and drear;
Then do we wonder why others prosper,
Living so wicked year after year.
(Chorus)

Kind provides no answer, but only a process, or better, a manner. As the Narrator says to the Old Woman, "You wanted to say a prayer, but knew that Kind neither listens to nor answers prayers"(150).

The novel insists that Kind is not belief, understanding, or even results, but the basic action of relating to one another with simple decency. When the Bluff-dweller listens to the Old Woman's story with sympathy, his small act of kindness eases her pain. It eases his as well, as he has momentarily forgotten his own problems.

While Kind may not intervene directly in human affairs, it does provide the higher power to save the Bluff-dweller from an alcoholic death. After the Bluff-dweller has drunk himself into a coma and lay dying in his hospital bed, the Old Woman asks the Narrator, “And not even you...can save him?”

I thought about that [question]. I went away and spent years thinking about that. My French horn rusted. I didn't practice enough....I dwelt too much on my own problems....I could never appear to you. Some years I could never even make you appear to me.... At one point I almost considered pawning my French horn....Somewhere in the woods, finally, I rediscovered Kind, whom (or rather which) I had forgotten. I remembered how your husband...turned to Kind as a more acceptable substitute for 'God,' because Kind had long predated 'God,' and because 'God' had been invented as a kind of front man for Kind....I could not pray to Kind....But I could *be* Kind....Farther along, I became Kind” (166-167).

The Narrator then answers the Old Woman: “Yes, I suppose I could save him”(167).

This remarkable passage is itself a recovery narrative in miniature. Much like the Bluff-dweller, the Narrator became isolated, as he “went away and spent years thinking.”The Narrator likewise “dwelt” excessively on his “own problems.” Eventually his self-pity cost him his creativity, his ability to interact imaginatively with the Old Woman and her story: “I could never even make you appear to me.” Lost “somewhere in the woods,” he hit bottom; he even considered pawning his French horn.

The Narrator's turning point occurred when he “rediscovered Kind,” a statement congruent with AA's second step: “Came to believe a power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity.” One of the defining moments in AA's establishment occurred when a friend suggested that Bill Wilson choose his “own conception of God.” Wilson's doubts about the efficacy of religious belief disappeared when he realized that he need only be “willing to believe in a Power greater than myself”(*Big Book*, 12). In the same way, the Narrator's concept of Kind, “as a more acceptable substitute for God,” provides access to that power by which the Narrator is healed. After saying he “became Kind,” the Narrator relents, “Yes, I suppose I could save him.”

Harington novels frequently use multi-layered meanings for key terms, suggesting the relevance of “Kind” to all of the recovery story in *Farther Along*.¹⁶ For example, the *Book of Kind* includes a page from Aldous Huxley, noting that “It’s a bit embarrassing to have been concerned with the human problem all one’s life and find at the end that one has no more to offer by way of advice than ‘Try to be a little Kinder’” (180). This is an example of Harington’s beautiful wordplay; the simple capitalization of Kinder broadens the meaning of Huxley’s quotation to include not only acting decently but also becoming more like Kind.

In addition, as a synonym for friendly or decent, the word kind derives from the Old English *gecyned*, meaning natural. In this way, a natural Kind can predate a manmade God who is a “front man” for an ordinary element. Also, the natural friendliness suggested by *gecyned* is derived from familial attachment. The Bluff-dweller’s estrangement from his father therefore indicates a spiritual disruption, a problem that requires a spiritual solution. Harington’s dedication of the book to “my Kindred” similarly points to the innate, familial, spiritual connections among people. Yet another meaning of kind, as in “sort of,” reflects one main theme of the novel, that our questions about life’s mysteries and dissatisfactions will not be answered until farther along. The best we can do is to let go of our resentments in order to be kind, to “live in the sunshine,” as the hymn “Farther Along” exhorts.

Finally, this extended passage can also be read autobiographically. It poignantly describes the writer’s block, depression, and alcoholism Harington suffered through in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and how he found a means to recovery. He published nothing between 1975 and 1985, as he could no longer make Latha Bourne or Stay More “appear” to him. Fortunately for his readers, he never did pawn his French horn, or at least he never lost his pawn ticket.

¹⁶ See for example the discussion of *bois d’arc* in *The Architecture of the Arkansas Ozarks*, 14-15.

The Recovery Narrative Part III: “What We are Like Now,” or “Trio for Harmonica, Hair-Comb-And-Tissue, and Hammered Dulcimer”

The Bluff-dweller is in fact saved, literally rising from the dead at the end of Part II. The beautiful historian who helps restore him to health, Liz Cunningham, is the only person given a full name in the novel, and she shares that name with the mistress of Arkansas’ Reconstruction-era governor. Together, Liz and the Bluff-dweller find satisfying work related to the town’s history. Part III of *Farther Along* reads, then, much like the “what we are like now” section of a recovery narrative. Once sober, the Bluff-dweller can find fulfilling relationships and work. He can also reconcile himself to both his past and *the* past, restoring it (or re-story-ing it) through tales about vanished past histories and things to be revealed farther along.

The discussion of Steps 8 and 9 in the *Big Book* ends with what is described as “the promises,” a paragraph often read aloud at AA meetings. It includes the following declaration: “We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace”(83-84). Similarly, Part III of *Farther Along* begins with an excerpt from David Ray’s “Thanks, Robert Frost.”

Do you have hope for the future?
Someone asked Robert Frost, toward the end.
Yes, and even for the past, he replied,
that it will turn out to have been all right
for what it was, something we can accept,
mistakes made by the selves we had to be....(171)

For the Bluff-dweller, recovery – living contentedly and without the need to escape through alcohol – involves periodically escaping to the past, which in turn involves recreating the past in a way that reconciles one to loss, change, and regrets. The Bluff-dweller first calls the town “abandoned, lifeless,” and the Old Woman notes “the mortal sickness of this hopeless old town,” which she says believes “tottered past saving”(8, 65). Later however, she tells him that her wealthy grandson is considering reconstructing the entire village and may hire the Bluff-dweller to supervise the project. The

Old Woman claims it would give the Bluff-dweller “something worthwhile to do”(99). The Narrator then interjects the various meanings of the town for each of its remaining inhabitants, all of whom are main characters in other Harington novels:

[The Bluff-dweller] realized that all moments pass away, and there is never any turning back. The Forest Ranger feels that this lost village is the culminating image of those lost places in his heart, his and his Mistress’ hearts, and he doesn’t wish to regain or restore them, although she would like to have them recaptured....Your grandson...has...come to understand that change and progress are inevitable and that there is no stopping the process of decay, although his Mistress cherishes her image of the town as it appeared in her childhood....”(100)

This passage connects sobriety to the related matters of loss, memory, change, and progress. The Bluff-dweller had forged a successful career as a museum curator devoted to these very issues of America’s “vanishing past.” He then spent six years in his bluff writing a journal that denounces modernity. But as he becomes sober, his perspective changes. He “realized,” just as the Forest Ranger and the grandson, that the past can never be restored. At the same time, the two mistresses cherish and want to evoke images of that past. As all these people are main characters in Harington’s novels, this passage can be read as a kind of statement of purpose about telling stories of earlier times: one must become reconciled to the inevitable loss of a cherished past, yet one can find “something worthwhile to do” in recapturing its images.

The nature of the conflict between past and progress is yet another element of *Farther Along* congruent with recovery in AA. Early AA literature in particular reveals a rejection of competitive individualism in favor of what Trysh Travis calls an “alcoholic egalitarianism” that emphasizes compassion and human imperfection. The 12 steps comprise “a humanist critique of the alienating structures of modern market capitalism, arguing for the transformative potential of the recognition of an essential human sameness”(101). The Bluff-dweller’s dissatisfaction with the modern workplace and retreat into a primitive past represent a rejection of modern market capitalism – a rejection that, we are told, he explicitly reiterates through the many volumes of his journals. His recovery begins with

compassion for the Old Woman, a bond he recognizes as fundamentally different from the empty workplace liaisons in which he previously sought connection. Again, the wordplay in the book's dedication "to my Kindred" connects the spiritual ideal to kin; the notion that everyone is related suggests the novel's belief in the "essential human sameness" Travis has identified.

The third part of the recovery narrative, or the "what we are like now" section, deals with this effort to live contentedly in a world from which one has felt so alienated. Likewise, in the third part of *Farther Along*, the Bluff-dweller's struggle to accept the realities of the present day without losing the cherished past is played out in his discovery of the "world's oldest man." Harington readers recognize this character as Eli Willard, a travelling peddler from Connecticut who in the 1800s and early 1900s brought "progress" to Stay More annually through the sale of ever more modern goods, and who, after his death, was encased in glass and displayed in Stay More's general store. As a Yankee peddler, the old man epitomizes market forces, and his permanence in Stay More indicates the onward, inevitable "process of decay" that the Old Woman's grandson has noted. After discovering the glass case in the abandoned general store and learning Willard's story from the moonshiner, the Bluff-dweller decides to bury the old man at the bluff.

As one might expect (in a Donald Harington novel), the plan goes awry. As the Bluff-dweller and the moonshiner dig the grave, they discover the remains of an ancient bluff-dwelling woman and agree to bury the two together. In the process, "From the near woods, hidden people began to sing." These include the Narrator, the Old Woman and her grandson, and "all of the people who still lived in the near abandoned town" (145). As they sing the chorus of "Farther Along," the Bluff-dweller, suffering from alcohol poisoning, passes out and falls into the grave. He has quite literally hit bottom. He has also merged with both the decayed past and inevitable progress, and as he is pulled from the grave, he represents a triune being consisting of past, present, and future. He is rushed to the hospital, and it is as he lay dying that the Narrator promises the Old Woman to save him, with the help of Kind.

When the Bluff-dweller is resurrected, the Narrator goes away. "If he survives," the Narrator says to the Old Woman, "my horn couldn't very well play with his hair-comb-and-tissue....So I had better return to being lost." When the Old Woman worries that she cannot communicate effectively with the Bluff-dweller, the Narrator responds, "You'll learn how"(167-168).

These events all indicate that the Bluff-dweller's sobriety will follow a course very similar to that described in the final section of a recovery narrative. The drinker has died and been buried with the irretrievable past and unpredictable future. And now the new, sober Bluff-dweller will continue to go to meetings, at which he will "learn how" to talk to the Old Woman. He will participate, in short, in the program of recovery. In fact, the Old Woman brings meetings to the Bluff-dweller while he detoxes, visiting every day to tell him "the story of the rest of her life"(185). AA's founding moment occurred when Bill Wilson told his story to Dr. Bob in the hospital. In this moment, then, *Farther Along* presents its variation on twelve-step recovery.

In addition, the Bluff-dweller can now become reconciled to the fact that the past he cherishes cannot be retrieved and the past he regrets will, as the David Ray poem quoted at Part III says, "turn out to have been all right." In that poem, past errors take on an inexorable, purposeful nature: "mistakes made by the selves we had to be." They become, tellingly, "something we can accept." These could certainly be excerpts from the *Big Book*. One of the most frequently quoted passage in the *Big Book* states that "acceptance is the answer to all my problems today," and "unless I accept life completely on life's terms, I cannot be happy"(449). Another passage declares that the recovering alcoholic can "turn the past to good account" and make it into "the principal asset" of a new life (124).

The third part of recovery narratives typically focuses not only on reconciliation with the past but also serenity in the ever-changing present. George Jensen writes that AA stories "are unfinished tales about learning to live with uncertainty"(73). As Liz Cunningham nurses the Bluff-dweller through his convalescence, she notes that the Old Woman's grandson has given up reconstructing the town, and

“adroitly laid out the main argument, that there is no going back. So everything will have to be a matter of going forward.” But, the Bluff-dweller says, “we can always go back to the past in our minds....Like a good work of fiction...the past can offer us temporary refuge from the dross of contemporary life”(220). Liz decides to edit for publication an old diary, and the Bluff-dweller reworks his notebooks, written over the last six years, “with a view toward eventual publication as a sweeping indictment of modern American life.” Liz says to a friend, “We are both busy...in the day-to-day humdrum of these labors”(220).

This completes the recovery narrative. The Bluff-dweller has emerged from his isolation and found purposeful, creative labor. He has rejected alcohol’s deceptive promise of easy inspiration for a more tedious “day-to-day humdrum of these labors.” His work nonetheless offers imaginative achievement at a high level, a “sweeping indictment of modern American life.” Likewise, now that he is sober the symmetrical, antagonist relationships of his past give way to the complementary, cooperative relationship with Liz and the Old Woman. He has thus found a meaningful substitution for the alcohol he previously used to escape the “dross” of modern life: activity that functions “like a good work of fiction.” The novel insists that the replacement is direct. Alcohol is a deadly escape from the reality of the modern workplace and failed relationships, whereas stories are a periodic refuge from the reality one must engage. Like a devoted member of AA, the Bluff-dweller still goes to meetings (at the Old Woman’s) to hear stories, many of which remind him that others’ troubles are sometimes worse than his own.

As does AA in general, the “what we are like now” part of recovery narratives emphasizes the importance of service, of “usefulness” to others. *Farther Along* likewise suggests that the Bluff-dweller will be able to help others. Curious about his lifestyle and also motivated by her “self-centeredness,” Liz hikes to the Bluff-dweller’s cavern “in the hope of finding out something about herself”(156). Among her discoveries is the “almost too-obvious metaphor of Plato’s myth-of-the cave, of projections of illusions,

of selves and life too insubstantially seen, of the rift or gap between ‘reality’ as we would like for it to be and as it often so sadly is.” Here is the root of Liz’s yearning for a contentment she currently seeks through egocentric academic pursuits and men. When she thinks of Plato’s cave, “she began to feel compassion for the...Bluff-dweller, as well as compassion for herself”(156-157). Just as the Old Woman’s story evoked sympathy in a self-pitying Bluff-dweller, his own story engenders compassion in Liz. The Bluff-dweller therefore “carries the message,” as they say in AA, which means that recovery includes helping others. In this way, *Farther Along* expresses hope that the compassion evoked by good stories, rather than the temporary high produced by substances, can help us cope with the rift between desire and reality.

AA’s twelfth tradition states, “Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles above personalities”(*Big Book*, Appendix 1b). Like AA members, the people in *Farther Along* are anonymous. They too might be read as expression of principles, not mere characters. They show that inspiration is offered to those who work for it, that resentments hurt the resenter rather than the resented, and that interest in another’s life diminishes one’s own problems. Perhaps most of all, these anonymous people show that there is a solution to the dysfunctions that so often arise from life’s inevitable disappointments. Even the Old Woman is anonymous in *Farther Along*. In fact, she is no particular person in any of Harington’s stories. He said of Latha Bourne, “she is neither ‘living and breathing’ nor based in any form or fashion on anybody I ever knew.”¹⁷ She is instead a story.

¹⁷ Email to author, April 7, 2008.

Conclusion

Donald Harington's novel *Farther Along* is a recovery narrative structurally and thematically congruent with the recovery narratives told at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings across the world. The storyteller establishes his "qualifications" as an addictive drinker and depicts alcoholism as a symptom of underlying problems manifested not only in drinking but also in self-pity and resentment. The drinker reaches a crisis, or bottom, and begins to recover after going to meetings and hearing someone else's autobiographical story that reveals truths about the nature of addiction. Continued attendance at meetings, during which one identifies with the stories of others, ends alcoholic isolation. Help from some type of higher power becomes crucial to achieving sobriety. And recovery includes service to others as a safeguard against the return of self-pity.

I assert that *Farther Along* could be told, like a well-developed recovery narrative, only from the vantage point of sobriety. The Bluff-dweller possesses an understanding of his addiction that is improbable at best, which is one reason why it makes sense that Harington tried and failed to write the novel while he was still drinking. Sober for more than 20 years, however, he was able to complete it. The cognitive and psychological – some say spiritual – changes exhibited in sobriety are present in 2009 in a way they could not have been in the late 1970s. I am not suggesting that active addicts can have no perceptiveness about the causes and consequences of their addictions, but rather that the novel demonstrates the characteristics that AA participants, rehabilitation professionals, and scholars associate with long-term recovery.

In AA, the "program" of recovery – which includes attending meetings and listening to others' stories, reading recovery literature, and working the twelve steps – replaces drinking. The program is based on the belief that if one simply stops drinking and does not follow some spiritual regimen, or at least honestly attempt it, then a return to drinking is much more likely. "We are not cured of

alcoholism,” the *Big Book* states. “What we really have is a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition”(85).

Harington never participated in AA, but he remained sober the last 25 years of his life, and so he clearly found some alternative method for managing the disappointments and resentments that previously led him to drink. That alternative, presented directly in *Farther Along*, was storytelling itself. In all of Harington’s novels, stories heal. Those who tell them “carry the vital spirit of the past, present, and future of the local community and of humankind” which means that “keeping a story alive is crucial to the well-being of us all”(Vonalt 24). In part, Harington’s stories heal by making readers storytellers themselves. Through direct address, an emphasis on the orality of storytelling, and other techniques, he turned readers into participants and showed “how storytelling works to restore, to renew, to heal”(Vonalt, 32). Again, the parallels with Alcoholics Anonymous are clear. Through identification, listeners participate in the storyteller’s world. Also, while AA printed material contains stories, the vast majority are told orally at meetings. And they help heal both the listeners and the tellers.

More particularly, Harington’s alternative to AA was his bizarre brand of magical realism. His stories seem a particularly fitting substitute for addiction: all in one novel, we have Bluff-dwelling diarists, storytellers who narrate via French horns, immortal peddlers, children who use words like Giasticutus, possessive mannequins, deserted but perfectly preserved general stores, reincarnated forest rangers, and moonshiner spirit mediums. These seem to indicate, if we didn’t know better, a mind altered by some very special drug indeed. In addition, as the novel ingeniously illustrates through the connections among Kind, a higher power, and the moonshiner, the line between hallucinatory and spiritual is a fine one. In short, magical realism gave Harington both the higher power and the fix he needed.

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