

All corned-up

Jay McInerney

TOM DARDIS

The Thirsty Muse: Alcohol and the American writer

292pp. Abacus/Sphere. Paperback, £3.99.
 0349 10143 4

Towards the end of his short life, Raymond Carver was fond of saying that he believed the incidence of alcoholism among writers was no higher than among accountants or lawyers. Carver himself was nearly destroyed by drink, and though I'm loath to challenge him on a subject in which he possessed such intimate expertise, his pronouncement seems to fly in the face of empirical evidence. Another American fiction writer of Carver's generation told me recently that he'd given up trying to entertain male novelists in groups because they were all either conspicuously on the sauce or righteously on the wagon and you could never be sure who would be which. The alcoholic wreckage of an earlier generation of American poets, the doomed post-war bards – Berryman, Lowell, Roethke, Jarrell and Schwartz, was examined in Eileen Simpson's *Poets in Their Youth* (1982). Their fiction-writing contemporaries – Kerouac, Cheever and Capote, for instance – were hardly more abstemious. But the great American drinking writers were the modernists – the novelists who attained their majority more or less simultaneously with the passage of the Volstead Act, which banned the production and sale of the alcoholic beverages in the United States in 1920. It is by now widely accepted that F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner all had drinking problems. As one of the tragic icons of American culture, Fitzgerald was probably the first to be perceived as a victim of alcohol, among other afflictions. Hemingway spoke and wrote about drinking as one of the manly sports – a ritual that could be performed badly or well. There's enough liquor in *The Sun Also Rises* to give an entire generation a buzz. Faulkner proclaimed that "civilization begins with distillation". When questioned by Jonathan Cape about the meaning of a particularly difficult passage in one of his novels, he replied defiantly that he didn't exactly know what he had intended since he was "all corned-up" when he wrote it.

Advances in the scientific understanding of alcoholism as a disease, not to mention faddish American health consciousness, has led to increasing scrutiny of the links between drinking

and writing; recent biographers of all three have labelled them alcoholics. In *The Thirsty Muse*, Tom Dardis attempts to examine the role of alcohol in the lives and work of these three, as well as in that of Eugene O'Neill. Distilled to its essence, the thesis of this book is simple: all were alcoholics; alcohol prematurely destroyed their talent and their work.

Since Edgar Allan Poe collapsed in a gutter, an inordinate number of American writers have been alcoholic, Dardis says, "a malady that had much, if not all, to do with the erosion of their talents at ages that were characteristically far younger than their European counterparts". For Norman Mailer's generation, and for the next, the myth created by Hemingway and company was itself a powerful incentive to drink. It might seem that drinking was a necessary if not sufficient condition for literary greatness. Unfortunately, Dardis never explains why.

The evidence of alcoholism is overwhelming in the cases of all three prose writers discussed in *The Thirsty Muse*. It is hard to dispute the creative decline in the case of Hemingway, whose best writing was done between the mid-1920s and the early 1930s. The prodigious and prolific Faulkner is slightly more problematic, and in order to make his case that Faulkner lost his talent by the age of forty-five, Dardis has had to discount later books such as *Intruder in the Dust* and *The Reivers*. Likewise he is obliged to dismiss *The Last Tycoon*, the novel that Fitzgerald was working on when he died, never mind that some critics, including Edmund Wilson, have detected in it the foundations of a masterpiece. This kind of interpretation in the interest of a thesis, though by no means unfamiliar in literary criticism, reminds me of the devious self-sustaining logic of alcoholics, examples of which are abundant in these pages.

Dardis frequently refers to alcoholic strategies of denial, such as inflating the drinking problems of another in order to minimize one's own. But he chooses to take at face value Hemingway's poisonous and discredited portrait of Fitzgerald in *A Moveable Feast*, mainly, one imagines, because it shows the young Fitzgerald as an incipient alcoholic. He cites Hemingway's condescending description of their first meeting at the Dingo bar in which Fitzgerald became smashed on a couple of glasses of champagne, despite the fact that the other alleged witness, the Princeton baseball star Dunc Chaplin, who wasn't even in Europe that year, has denied that the incident ever took place – facts which Dardis could have

discovered in either of two recent biographies of Fitzgerald cited in his notes.

In his acknowledgements Dardis records that he "learned a great deal about the specifics of alcoholism by attending more than a hundred Alcoholics Anonymous meetings". His book is informed by the therapeutically successful AA line which holds that it is useless to inquire into the reasons for excessive drinking, which is simply a disease, like cancer, with genetic and environmental causes. This happily saves Dardis from the teetotaling moralism evident in James R. Mellow's biography of Fitzgerald, *Invented Lives* (1984), if not from the tendency to explain everything in terms of disease.

These portraits of the artist as alcoholic dispel the myth that drinking enhances creativity. But Dardis is less illuminating when he turns to literary criticism. "While still at Princeton," he tells us, "Fitzgerald developed all the characteristics of the writing style that was to make him famous at twenty-four." We are left to guess what those characteristics might be, early or late; Dardis's insistence on the absolute decline in the quality of the work, while hardly peculiar to alcoholic writers, is virtually unsupported by analysis of the texts. He dismisses Fitzgerald's stories outright, when some of them, such as "The Rich Boy", and "May Day", are among his finest work.

Of Dardis's case studies Eugene O'Neill is the relative success story, the dropout from the school of Bacchus. O'Neill drank furiously for more than twenty years, then gave up at the age of thirty-eight and went on to write his two best plays, *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Does this prove that Hemingway would have written something better than *A Farewell to Arms* if he'd quit? Or does it mean that playwrights have more willpower than novelists? And what, if anything, are we to make of the fact that two of these writers are of Irish descent and two of English? For every writer who drank himself into a premature grave most of us can cite another who quit drinking and lost his creative spark, Swinburne being only the most famous example. (Meanwhile, how come British rock and rollers, including notorious substance abusers such as Keith Richards and Eric Clapton, have such admirable longevity compared to American counterparts such as Hendrix, Joplin and Jim Morrison?) Anyone who has ever suffered a hangover in front of a typewriter will tell you that drinking is not an aid to writing. But all of the more interesting questions that this book raises remain unanswered.