

Testing the Quality of the Soil: Using Ethopoeia and Terroir to Interrogate Women's Experiences in AA

NOTE: I remove citation information in most cases because it helps me gauge how long a presentation will be, and it makes it easier to read aloud. Please see the separate bibliography for information about the sources used in this presentation.

The Big Book (officially titled *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism*), contains language that has not been updated since the late 1930s, even though pronouns and other references to alcoholism are directly mainly at men. However, the more concerning element of Wilson's authorship is the *seeming* inclusion of a woman's voice in this key text in the eighth chapter "To Wives." In this talk I will first explain how ethopoeia was originally used in ancient Greek rhetorical exercises. Second, I'll share a few passages of "To Wives" to reveal how extensive Wilson's pretense of the female perspective was and still is. I'll then refer to Monica Richardson's documentary *The 13th Step* and argue that the narratives put forth by both Wilson and Richardson are troubling; for, although Richardson does not engage in formal ethopoeia, she does attempt to speak for all women. Both texts reveal the need for ethopoeia to be linked to the concept terroir, or place/human relations.

Ethopoeia and Terroir

Ethopoeia's definition first receives attention in the progymnasmata. Aphthonius describes it as the "imitation of the character of a proposed person," one who is "known" in history. Christy Desmet says that ethopoeia depends on "the fledgling orator's ability to identify with others" and to put "himself in the 'place' of persons, real or imagined, who are remote from him in space and time" (301). Thomas Rickert puts it succinctly by defining ethopoeia as "using discourse to create a character" (202). John Hagaman returns to the use of the progymnasmata

when he explains that ethopoeia may be used today to help students “view their subjects from multiple perspectives” (25). In sum ethopoeia involves the use of imagination and written discourse to foster role play. The problem is that classical and contemporary definitions of ethopoeia both stress the importance of character as a portable device, one that may be easily divorced from place and context. Desmet says that the imitation is often “remote from [the rhetor] in both space and time.” In Lois’s memoirs and her writing she does the opposite; she returns repeatedly to her own emplacement or desire for emplacement through imagery associated with the home and with growth in nature. However, Bill Wilson fails to do either of these when he attempts to imitate her. This is where terroir should come in.

Terroir, as Thomas Rickert explains, is “priorit[izing] the somewhere-ness of the earth,” or the networks of humans and nonhumans in a given region (ix). It is also commonly used to discuss the process of making European wine (an ironic but appropriate term in relation to alcoholism). Sommeliers Cornelis Van Leeuwen and Gerard Seguin explain that the “socio-economic environment may be important in understanding why a given vineyard has emerged in a given site and why it has prospered.” The word has also received attention in popular fiction. Jeff Vandermeer, in his science fiction work, describes terroir as a “confluence” of forces that contribute to the annihilation of the individual ego. Rickert’s description is similar to Vandermeer when he stresses that terroir, along with ambience, “is not an I fitting into the world in order to do, say, and make, but an I-world hybrid.” Therefore, the imitation of any voice, separated from its natural habitat, will remain incomplete. The cultural work of depicting the AA experience of women must do the same: take into account local and regional forces, but “To Wives” proves otherwise.

Originally written in 1939 by Bill Wilson, who co-founded AA with Dr. Robert Smith, *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism*, has been translated into 68 languages. According to Hartigan, more than “twenty million copies have been sold,” with an average of one million or more copies being sold each year (113). Howard Markel reports that within AA groups worldwide exist “more than 2,131,549 members” and that the Big Book is AA’s “basic, and most important, text.” *Time* lists the text as one of the “100 most influential nonfiction books” of the twentieth century, and the Library of Congress deemed it “one of the 88 books that shaped America.”

This is a problem because when reading “To Wives,” the casual reader or newcomer, may assume that Lois Wilson wrote the chapter. However, although Lois wrote key texts for Al-Anon, her role here is nonexistent. She says, “I’ve never understood why he didn’t want me to write it,” Lois told [the author] when [he] asked. “I was so mad, and hurt. I don’t think I have ever gotten over it.” A close study of “To Wives” reveals the extent to which Wilson pretended to be Lois. To start, we see how he uses the pronoun “we”:

As wives of Alcoholics Anonymous, we would like you to feel that *we understand* as perhaps few can. We want to analyze mistakes we have made. . . . We have traveled a rocky road, and there is no mistake about that. We have had long rendezvous with hurt pride, frustration, self-pity, misunderstanding and fear. . . . We have been driven to maudlin sympathy, to bitter resentment. (italics mine, 104-05)

This use of “we” coupled with actions of identification—understanding, traveling together, being driven to desperation—suggests a connection with female readers that stems from being part of a sisterhood. The word “we” appears in in this chapter over 100 times, even more if we add the

iterations of “ours” and “us” to the tally. Wilson, pretending to be Lois, also instructs wives who feel resentment to change perspective and “count [their] blessings” (119). He goes on:

. . .[Y]ou may become jealous of the attention he bestows on other people, especially alcoholics. You have been starving for his companionship, yet he spends long hours helping other men and their families. You feel he should now be yours. The fact is that he should work with other people to maintain his own sobriety. Sometimes he will be so interested that he becomes really neglectful.

Wives are also instructed to “never be angry” (111) in order to help maintain their partner’s sobriety, to “be on guard not to embarrass or harm [their] husbands” (115), to “not expect too much” (118) from their partners, and to “[m]ake him feel absolutely free to come and go as he likes” (120).

We might then wonder what “To Wives” would have sounded like if Lois had written it. Lois’s memoir includes passages with rich description of different stops on her frequent travels with Bill, particularly during times when Bill was struggling: “To think things over, we decided to take an extended walking trip. . . . This started a lifelong habit. When we were tired or unable to solve some problem, we would go off by ourselves in the woods or occasionally by the sea.” Her descriptions become especially vivid when they camped out overnight: “When a car went by at night, its lights turned objects in between into fancy silhouettes. . . ; in moonlight grasses and boughs sketched decorative patterns on the walls; and seen from the outside where our electric light was lit inside, the green, translucent tent seemed eerie, like a fairy habitation that might fly away at any moment.” When Lois finally tells her story about Bill’s alcoholism, she describes her process of healing in terms of gardening: “Our inheritance and early environment compose the soil out of which grow our thoughts and actions, both flowers and weeds. To raise flowers we

must get rid of the weeds.” She then issues this statement about spouses: “[T]he garden of many a martyr, self-pitying wife or husband of an alcoholic can become choked and unproductive.” Just as grapes require healthy soil to grow into wine varietals, families affected by alcoholism require healing from an entire network of societal forces, not just the wife.

Lois’s frustration over constant relocation and lack of privacy was also a central theme. Tending a garden would be a rare occurrence for her: “I hadn’t let myself realize how deeply I longed for a home of our own, nor how tired I was of living around in other people’s houses. One day . . . as Bill and I were going through Grand Central Station, I suddenly sat down on the stairs and exploded, ‘Will we ever have our own home?’ I wept oceans right there in public.” The longing for home as a lived experience fuels her narrative in ways that Bill’s discourse omits in “To Wives.”

So what? Well, the Big Book remains the central text around which all meeting rituals and oral traditions circulate. Members of AA today revere the text as a “spiritual document” (Jensen 45). This form of identification is so powerful that the Big Book’s “promises” are a highlight of most meetings: “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). These promises are fulfilled as human endeavors grounded in spiritual principles, but the literal ground or “somewhereness” Rickert refers to is missing from the declaration. What will this serenity and peace look like? What might we compare it to? How do we maintain peace when our gardens are choked with proverbial weeds?

Former AA member and film director Monica Richardson would report that such promises could not help women feel safe. This led to the creation of her documentary called *The Thirteenth Step*. For the uninitiated, the Thirteenth Step refers to the practice of sexually

manipulating or harassing a newcomer under the pretense of offering guidance. Richardson interviews a series of women whose experiences in Alcoholics Anonymous resulted in tragedy or humiliation. Of note is Karla Mendez. Karla's parents tell the director that the man who murdered their daughter, Eric, had eight restraining orders and twenty-two years of criminal activity, yet the court allowed him to use AA as rehabilitation in place of prison time. Mrs. Mendez explains, "He would always sit next to her. He would never let anybody get close to her. He says that he has no money, no place to go, and so Karla took him in to stay with her. Four months later she was dead." Art Sanchez, another AA member, explains that while the effects of "thirteenth stepping" are rarely violent, the culture surrounding newcomers in AA is problematic. Sanchez says, "I know friends of mine down there that are doing stuff, you know. And newcomers come in and they just pounce on 'em." Still, in the above accounts, we uncover little information about the local communities. The very statement "He would never let anybody get close to her" invites more information about how the meeting was conducted at a specific location and why a certain population of alcoholics refused to see a problem. Literature from the General Service Office of AA addresses safety, yet it does not provide enough detail to explain how such safety may be maintained. The pamphlet on the "The Group" urges groups of AA to hold regular meetings during which members may vote on policies related to disruptive or predatory visitors. It encourages groups to ask "Are we doing all we can to provide a safe, attractive, and accessible meeting place?" and that "[a]nonymity is not a cloak protecting criminal or inappropriate behavior." In the case of Richardson's accounts, terroir would then serve as a frame to reveal how specific places achieve a toxic confluence and ignore these instructions. Terroir does not excuse such actions by predatory men, but the illumination of

setting in connection with such predators helps us understand how such tragedies are made possible.

Most of AA culture exists within the local group to which an alcoholic belongs, also called the “home group,” and this term “home group” does not appear in either the Big Book or the documentary. Neither do we find any similar terms to suggest how certain regions thrive as branches of the national organization and others die “on the vine,” to speak metaphorically. AA’s pamphlet explains that a home group is “the group where [members] accept service responsibilities and try to sustain friendships. . . . With membership comes the right to vote on issues that might affect the group.” In other words, concerns about gender equality, etiquette, safety, and the role of literature all remain the purview of thousands of local units. Like the wines of a specific region, the home groups in particular neighborhoods and towns reveal specific influences that set each group apart. Much depends on the composition of the soil in both.

Richardson details the risks of attending meetings with court-ordered visitors, many of whom have a record of violence or abuse toward women and children, but the rates of crime in a specific city or locality are ignored as contributing factors. She says that she has “received hundreds of emails from people who have been harmed sexually, psychologically, and emotionally” in AA. Although she interviews women in Louisville, Boulder, San Francisco Bay Area, and Cleveland, no information is given about what kind of place or type of group tolerated such men. All local AA groups occur within a specific socioeconomic neighborhood and court system; furthermore, other aspects of terroir might include time of day or night the meeting takes place, the facility in which the meeting occurs, the size of attendance in a room, and the ratio of women to men since women’s meetings do exist as an option in some locations.

The details about how a local group functions in a healthy or unhealthy manner are needed to provide context, not to make excuses for violence but to elucidate the “confluence” as Vandermeer says of natural and human elements that lead to such acts. In one interview a woman named Julie, who, after one meeting, met up with a fellow alcoholic she had known three years, explains that the man placed a drug in her drink and then assaulted her. When she reported this incident to her group, another member told her to “figure out your part in this.” Julie describes the experience as a “betrayal by a spiritual community.” The word community stands out and begs for elaboration so that similar events do not happen in the future. Certain questions arise: is the group to which Julie belongs still flourishing and, if so, where? Does this group consistently neglect the GSO’s recommendations for safety?

Despite the lack of emplacement and detail, this does not take away the problem of gender washing in early documents like “To Wives.” Gender washing may not lend itself to rape or murder, as is the case with victims discussed in Richardson’s film, but the ethopoeia found in “To Wives” sets a precedent in which others may assume that the female perspective in AA is easily imitated or understood. Men may be ignorant of the pressure women experience when unable to say “no” to unwelcome attention. More ethnographic research, the kind where terroir helps articulate what remote accounts do not, is needed to understand the power differential between men and women in such settings. Without knowledge of environmental factors that both limit and empower the ethos of any group, recovering alcoholics cannot make informed decisions about where to find support.

In examining Bill Wilson’s impersonation of his wife, we see how ethopoeia works to pacify (and even silence) women who are expected to work tirelessly for the husband or, as is more common today, risk unwanted advances. However, for real change to occur, our culture

must take terroir into account and examine how it intersects with the ethos of an individual or local site. The essentializing of the alcoholic experience and that of the wives involved makes this part of the problem. While the omission of Lois Wilson's voice is not surprising given the male-dominated culture at the time of 1939's *Big Book* publication, the pretense of a female perspective has had an effect on AA members who never investigated the book's history and accept "To Wives" as gospel. Using a rhetorical device like ethopoeia to further the perception that women like Lois *are* being heard may be contributing to the illusion that a "woman problem" in AA is over-exaggerated. Put plainly, as long as it *appears* that women have a voice, all should be well.

Without knowledge of both human and nonhuman forces of a given community space, experiences in AA may be dismissed, not because Richardson's interviewees fail to convince us of danger but because home group cultures make specific mistakes in treating women's safety as a priority. Knowledge of terroir, as Lois Wilson knew early on, would then help identify the quality of the soil surrounding each individual's growth. That way Bill Wilson's early mistake doesn't have to be repeated when we attempt to make change.