



# GREEN EYED MONSTER

BY J. R. PATTERSON

*Monsieur Boileau at the Café, 1893*  
*At the Moulin Rouge: The Dance, 1890*  
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

*The Absinthe Drinker*, 1901

*Prague Nooks*, 1918

Viktor Oliva

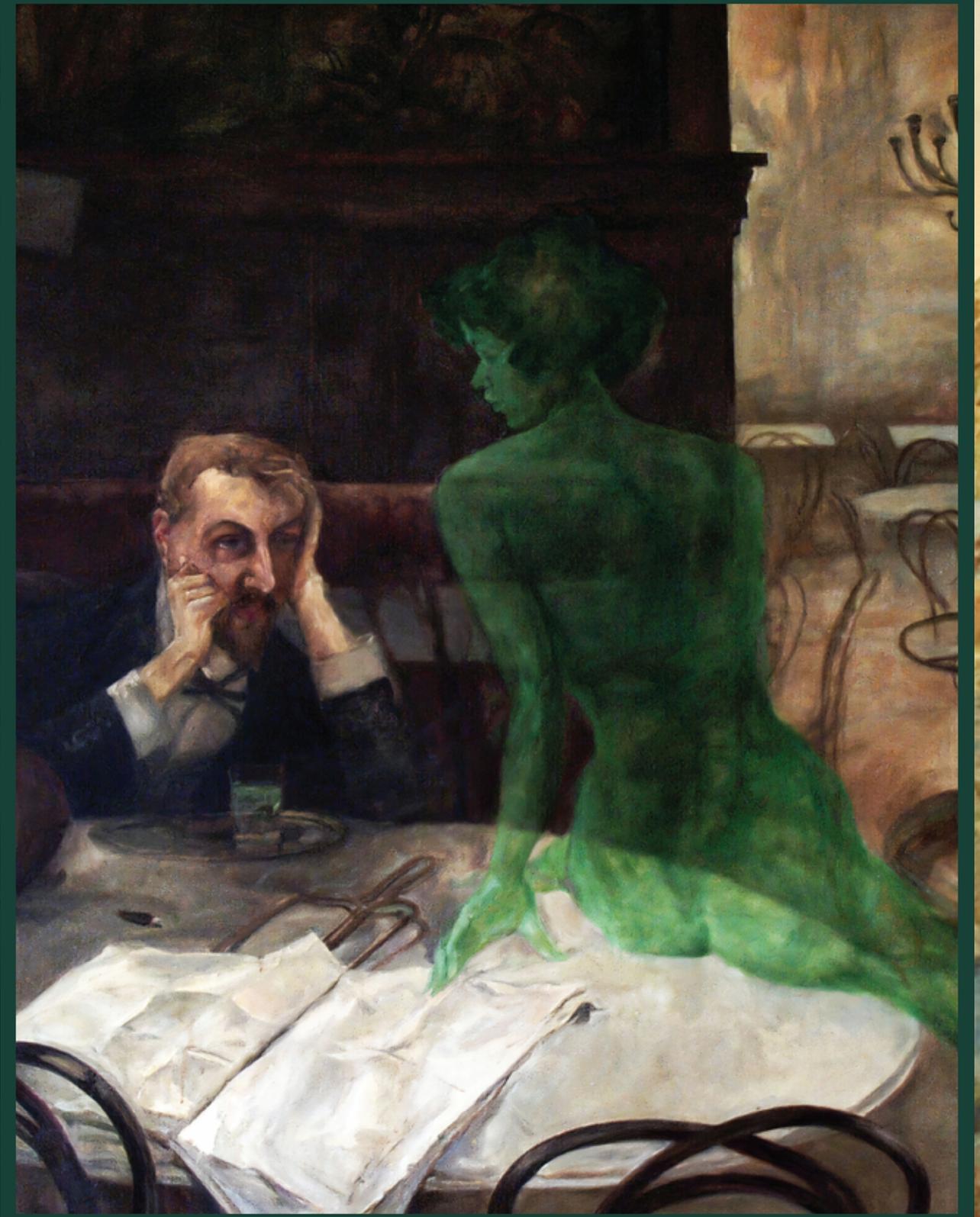


kind of mania developed in the France of the late 19th century, a progressive obsession with electric lighting, cancan dancing, *haute couture*, bicycle riding, and a hedonistic appetite for alcohol. One associates it with the Impressionists; with Van Gogh, Matisse, and the titillating cabaret posters of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec; with the lilting strings of Bizet's *Carmen*, Massenet's *Thaïs*, and the hammering piano chords of the Moulin Rouge; with top-hatted gentlemen taking absent-minded strolls along the Seine under a pastiche sky swirling with blues and yellows.

While the colonial scramble for Africa and the Manifest Destiny of the American West ensured the world at large remained an unpredictable meat-grinder, the nations of Europe found themselves in a time of relative peace and *joie de vivre*. After its loss in 1871 to the German Confederation in the Franco-Prussian war, France sought to cleanse itself of its recent defeat, and announced the beginning of

its Third Republic. Reality and warmongering were *passé*; refined depravity was the new vogue. The country emerged as a global center of culture, commerce, and politics. To advertise their high hopes for this new *Belle Époque*, France hosted four World's Fairs in 1867, 1878, 1889, and 1900, inviting the world into Paris, the City of Light. With its streets newly cleared of medieval rubble by Georges-Eugène Haussmann's city-wide renovations and subsequently decorated with the Eiffel Tower, the Grand Palais, and the Statue of Liberty in its first public exhibition, Paris set the new world standard for scale and art. And as the world's visiting citizens filled the *brasseries* and *bouillon* cafés, they sought to quench their thirst with a tot of the French *boire du jour*, absinthe.

The green spirit was present in France well before the 1870s, having been introduced into the country thirty years before by soldiers fresh from conquering Algeria, where absinthe had been prescribed by the French military as a malaria and dysentery preventative. Its medical origins stemmed from its use as an all-purpose cure-all in French-speaking





*Café Table with Absinthe, 1887*  
*Starry Night Over the Rhône, 1888*  
Vincent Van Gogh

Switzerland's Val de Travers. From the beginning, a measure of absinthe has been referred to as a "dose" rather than a "shot." It was there, in the Swiss valleys, where absinthe was first designated *La Fée Verte*, or The Green Fairy, on account of its seemingly magical curative properties.

Absinthe was originally a peasant's hillside drink, strong in content and made with common herbs of the Alps and the Mediterranean: anise and fennel for licorice flavor; hyssop for color; and wormwood, both grand and petite (but particularly *Artemisia absinthium*, from which the name is drawn), for the essential bitter tang. From wormwood also comes the compound thujone, the cause of absinthe's supposed hallucinogenic, mind-altering effects.

It was the myth of those effects as much as absinthe's smooth bitterness which made the drink hugely popular in France. Improvements in film and photographic technology had created a generalized taste for mystery and allusion in both the affluent *Tout-Paris* class and the growing numbers of poor underclass. Romanticized rumors of the enchanting, hallucinogenic world behind absinthe's green-tinted door enticed those eager to partake in the populist wave of decadence. As a cheaper, more alcoholic substitute to wine, the uncommon braindrip absinthe promised proved too tempting. Absinthe was soon nationally loved,

taking its place beside wine, bread, and cheese as a naturalized Francophone foodstuff. Orders for the drink were soon so popular that the hour when workers piled into bars and cafés for an apéritif became known as *l'heure verte*, the green hour.

Unsurprisingly, absinthe made an early and lasting effect on artists, who found themselves drawn by the allure of its reputation as a creative stimulus. References to the drink are found scattered throughout the literary works of Arthur Rimbaud, Guy de Maupassant, August Strindberg, and Émile Zola. Undoubtedly, it's Oscar Wilde's (third-hand) quote that has made the most glaring impression of absinthe's effects. Wilde, no stranger to the Green Fairy, commented to a friend that, "After the first glass of absinthe, you see things as you wish they were. After the second, you see them as they are not. Finally, you see things as they really are, and that is the most horrible thing in the world."

It's this view—the horrible, true world—that dripped so tellingly into the work of the Impressionists. Some of the era's most influential

*The Absinthe Drinker*, 1859

*The Bullfight*, 1865

Édouard Manet

painters, including Édouard Manet (1877's *Le Suicidé*), Émile Bernard (1888's *Brothel Scene for Vincent*), and Pablo Picasso (1901's *Buveur d'Absinthe*), all produced works illustrating absinthe's supposed lethargic and reality-distorting effects. Not all homages to wormwood were so directly negative—Degas' collection of ballet paintings, with their olivine-tutued dancers flitting across the canvas like so many lovely green fairies, being one such example—but more often than not, the paintings presented the drink and its effects at its most addictive and degenerative. Their new style of free, fine brush strokes created the hazy sense of glazed movement, movement some critics smugly linked to the edifying effects of absinthe addiction. Works which directly reference absinthe by Manet, Picasso, and Oliva are shadowy and obtuse, depicting their subjects in dark alleys and cafés under a pall of alcohol.

The critics were largely dismissive of *l'art apéritif*. Manet's 1859 painting *The Absinthe Drinker* was famously rejected for inclusion in the Paris Salon. Seventeen years later, Edgar Degas' *L'Absinthe* was likewise panned by critics who considered

his portrayals of absinthe drinkers a tribute to debauchery. Even the Czech painter Viktor Oliva (whose immigration to Paris from his home in Austria-Hungary's Bohemia region gave rise to the original Bohemian movement), a regular critical darling despite his renowned absinthe drinking, received blowback for his exploration into the topic. His *The Absinthe Drinker*, a portrait of a bug-eyed man hallucinating an apparition of a green-tinged Circe, was ignored by collectors and critics alike. It was ultimately hung on a back wall of his favorite Prague haunt, Café Slavia.

Art critics were not the only subset of French society perturbed by a changing milieu. The arrival of Oliva and his kin set many French on edge as Bohemians, first in nationality and then in ethos, flooded to Paris. Their philosophy of free love and escapism fell in line with the Parisian artistic lifestyle but not with Parisians writ large, and they were soon a demographic detested by the aristocracy. The Bohemians took to absinthe like fish to water, drinking it as much for its high alcohol content as for its taste. For the self-possessed traditionalists among the bourgeoisie, who either drank and savored absinthe one glass at a time, or were teetotalers, absinthe's increasing association with hedonism represented a direct challenge to the restraint that French nationalists sought to uphold in the face of increasing social modernization.





*L'Absinthe*, early 20th c.  
*Au café, dit l'Absinthe*, 1909  
Jean Béraud

Decadence led to disapproval, which gave way to demonization. Absinthe's nationalistic associations had turned towards the negative. *La fée verte* had flown too high and was to have her wings clipped.

As early as the 1850s, the temperance movement had decided on absinthe as the root of all ills and the cause of France's moral decay. To prove the drink's defects, the movement turned to the scientists among them and subsequent pseudoscientific experiments on animals dubiously proved absinthe the particular trigger for hyperexcitability, epileptic fits, and hallucinations. Dr. Valentin Magnan, teetotaler and leading French psychiatrist, aided the cause with a clinical definition of "absinthism" as a particular syndrome apart from alcoholism.

The wine industry was equally eager to edge out their bitter rivals. From the late 1850s to the 1870s, French winemakers suffered as their grapes endured subsequent outbreaks of oidium (a kind of mildew) and phylloxera (an incurable aphid infestation), in what came to be called the Great French Wine Blight. A vast majority of the country's vineyards needed to be replanted, meaning wine production slowed to a trickle. Into that vacuum in French drink had flowed absinthe, a space the powerful wine industry was desperate to reclaim.

Their chance to strike at the heart of their rivals came soon thereafter, in the small Swiss village of Commugny, located just one valley over from absinthe's birthplace. On August 28, 1905, French laborer Jean Lanfray began his day by taking his regular dose of absinthe. By 5 pm, he had downed a *creme de menthe*, a cognac, several brandy coffees, countless glasses of his homemade wine, and three shots of absinthe. By 5:30 pm, his wife was dead by his hand, as were their two children.

Advocates of the powerful wine industry quickly laid the blame for Lanfray's psychotic episode at the feet of absinthe. Linking absinthe to crime did for these abolitionists what advocating for the benefits of health, sobriety, and self-control could not. The iron was hot, and the temperance movement struck a resounding blow.

The press jumped on the opportunity, printing advertisements of bare-breasted women suckling their babies with bottles of absinthe and layabouts looking on as the spectre of death

*Absinthe*, 1902  
*The White Birch*, 1902  
Axel Törneman

poured them glassfuls of murky green liquid. A rolling spate of anti-dipsomania proclamations ensued, as absinthe was sequentially outlawed in the Netherlands, Switzerland, Belgium, the United States, and, in 1914, on the eve of World War I, in France.

But still absinthe lost none of its attraction as an illegal substance. Imitations like Pernod rose in popularity but were still seen as weak substitutes in light of the legend of the wormwood spirit. As it had with Toulouse-Lautrec and his pack of Impressionists, alcohol played a strong role in the work of the Modernists, the “lost generation” of writers who inhabited Europe throughout the 1920s. Absinthe’s rise and subsequent disgrace mirrored the tumultuous era for artists. Their creativity and experimentation were stifled and unappreciated, their bodies were wrecked and mangled by the bombs and trenches of the Great War. Their perseverance in accepting the abject, amoral beauty of the world left them drained, pessimistic, in need of numbing. How cruel then, to have absinthe’s acerbic escape taken from them. For the Modernist writers, absinthe was never

simply absinthe; in its illegality, it broke the barrier of folklore and became legend.

Capitalizing on its illegality elsewhere in Europe, Spain, which never banned the drink, became a mass producer and supplier of bootlegged absinthe. Visiting artists eagerly took advantage of this new source and waxed poetic about it in their works.

James Joyce, in his 1922 novel *Ulysses*, recalls a moment his hero Leopold Bloom meets a drunkard: “He doesn’t know what he’s saying. Taken a little more than is good for him. Absinthe. Greeneyed monster.” In another scene: “...a fellow I knew once in Barcelona, queer fellow, used to call it his postprandial... His breath hangs over out saucestained (*sic*) plates, the green fairy’s fang thrusting between his lips.”

Ernest Hemingway, who came to embody the artist-as-consummate-drinker figure, also took advantage of looser laws during his many visits to Spain. For Hemingway, absinthe became a symbol of control and seeking out the real thing epitomised the determined sweetening of a bitter life plagued by bad memories. In his 1927 novel *The Sun Also Rises*, protagonist (and Hemingway proxy) Jake Barnes, bemoans the cheap wormwood substitutes found in Paris: “Pernod is greenish imitation absinthe. When you add water it turns milky. It tastes like licorice and it has a good uplift, but it drops you just as far. We sat



*L'Absinthe* 1873  
*The Rehearsal*, c. 1873-1878  
Edgar Degas



and drank it, and the girl looked sullen.” When in Spain, Barnes gets his hands on the real stuff, and the effect is palpable: “The absinthe made everything seem better. I drank it without sugar in the dripping glass, and it was pleasantly bitter.”

in cafes,... of all the things he had enjoyed and forgotten and that came back to him when he tasted that opaque, bitter, tongue-numbing, brain-warming, stomach-warming, idea-changing, liquid alchemy.” ■

Rather than the decadent laxity so readily embraced by the *Belle Époque* crowd, those living through Europe’s interwar years didn’t use absinthe to “see the horrible world,” as Wilde suggested, but rather to make it disappear from sight. From out the trenches of WWI, absinthe presented the “lost generation” with a way to sink into a warm Alpine embrace and forget the world for a brief moment before being called back by their duty to report on it.

Early on in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), in his last written reference to the drink, Hemingway shows us what absinthe meant for him, for modernism, perhaps for all those who sipped on the Green Fairy: “It was a milky yellow now with the water, and he hoped the gypsy would not take more than a swallow. There was very little of it left and one cup of it took the place of the evening papers, of all the old evenings

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# ABSINTHE ROBETTE



Ernest Hemingway's

## DEATH IN THE AFTERNOON

Pour one jigger of absinthe into a champagne glass, add iced champagne until it attains the proper opalescent milkiness. Drink 3 to 5 of these slowly.

Ernest Hemingway writes, "This was arrived at by the author and three officers of H.M.S. *Danae* after having spent seven hours overboard trying to get Capt. Bra Saunders' fishing boat off a bank where she had gone with us in a N.W. gale."

It takes a man with hair on his chest to drink five Absinthe and Champagne Cocktails and still handle the English language in the Hemingway fashion. But Ernest has proved his valor, not alone in his cups. Captain of the swimming team at Oak Park high school—first American to be wounded on the Italian front during the World War (with 227 individual wounds to his credit)—tossed by a bull in the streets of Pamplona while rescuing his friend Donald Ogden Steward—deep-sea fisherman—big game hunter—and one of the first citizens of Key West—Hemingway is the man who can hold his Absinthe like a postwar novelist.

EDITOR'S NOTE: After six of these cocktails *The Sun Also Rises*.

From *So Red the Nose or Breath in the Afternoon*  
Edited by Sterling North and Carl Koch, 1934

*Absinthe Robette*, 1896  
Henri Privat-Livemont