

A DRUNKARD'S PROGRESS

AA and the sobering strength of myth

By "Elpenor"

For souls it is death to become water, for water it is death to become earth; from earth water comes-to-be, and from water, soul.

A man when he is drunk is led like an unfledged boy, stumbling and not knowing where he goes, having his soul moist.

A dry soul is wisest and best.

- Heraclitus

Of all the things that happened on my last binge before going to Alcoholics Anonymous, I remember clearly only one: a powerful, somewhat surprising surge of fellow feeling for a couple standing next to me at a Manhattan bar. The bar was not one of my favourite watering holes. I had none but that time, not much caring where I drank or with whom. But this place was more familiar than most, filled with an ill-assorted crowd of professional people, Hispanics, street people, and the odd preppie. The couple, too, seemed haphazardly matched, and it was evident that before this moment they had never spoken to each other.

The man was black, with a Cheberet and wispy chin whiskers. A law school textbook lay open beside his beer. She was drinking spritzers: a woman in her late twenties, in tweeds, and with plain gold hoops in her earlobes. She was white and, as I subsequently overheard, of Irish descent. They

were making friends, talking about his ancestors, and it came out that one of his great-great-grandfathers had been a ship captain on the Liverpool - West Indies run. And so, miraculously, had one of hers. Alas, they couldn't prove the link beyond a doubt, for the law school student could not remember his ancestor's last name. But I remember how delighted they were to establish the possibility of one, and how their joy touched off something like it in me, their secret sharer. I felt buoyed up as if on the gentle swells of the sea they'd been taking about: the old oceanic feeling, you might say, but in my condition, rather poignant. Then the couple went on to talk of other things (police brutality, as I recall) and I went back to my bourbon and water.

There are more synonyms for "drunk" than for any other word in the English language. Wentworth and Flexner's *Dictionary of American Slang* has to resort to an appendix to cover them all. There are 313 words in it. Most of us could add one or two to the collection. I like *misjudged*, for example: a splendid equivocation by which the drunk manages to suggest that he has merely underestimated the potency of the liquor, or that his behavior is being sadly misunderstood. At any rate, the clear implication of this vast vocabulary is that drunkenness is the most verbal of human conditions - until it becomes the most unspeakable.

What intrigues me is the allusion that so many of these words make to the *liquidity* of drunkenness. We drunks are all sailors, stumbling and reeling from tavern to tavern. But to us it is the world that totters and plunges. Nothing stands still for us, no more than deck furniture stands still in a storm at sea. Everything spins - the faces of friends, the bar, the streets, the bushes in the front yard, the stairs, the toilet, the bed. A drunk's world is hopelessly fluid, now rocking us gently, now breaking over us with blind and cruel force.

Perhaps my fascination with the liquidity of drunkenness is idiosyncratic. It certainly doesn't seem to be shared by my fellow drunks in A.A. At a meeting once, I tried to convey a sense of my drinking career by comparing it to a salmon's epic voyage to the swimming pool. "I drank like that fish swam," I said. I told them how I dived into the tumbling waters with fervour and rose in glory. What was my quest? It was infraverbal, instinctual. And when I got there, where the waters were still and warm, I found a dreamy breeding ground of the self, with the bright air just above, attainable (wasn't it?) by a mere flick of the tail. But then, immersed in the pool, it seemed that my flesh was flaking off and floating away before my eyes, until at last I was all nerves and eyesight, staring into the fireplace, drinking Gallo from a gallon jug, trying to remember or forget, neither of which I could do, and weeping into my glass.

It seemed a terrific analogy when I launched into it at the meeting, almost a fable. But long before I reached the spawning pool I sensed that many of my fellow alcoholics had gone onto a different wavelength, and

thereafter I kept my story plain. An analogy is a way of fishing for the unfamiliar, of catching it on the hook of the familiar. But nothing about drunkenness is unfamiliar to the people at an A.A. gathering. They want only to have the familiar made vivid, sharp, personal, immediate. They want concreteness: the kind of booze, the names of bars, what your wife said then, what the cop looked like, how much, when, how long. They want stories.

Drinking, all we did was tell stories, if only to ourselves. Drinking, we built ourselves a drunk's ladder of words, one end propped on clouds, the other floating on water. The whole ladder is important if you understand drunkards, but the fluid footing is where you begin to understand A.A. The fellowship exists to ground the drunk's ladder on solid earth, on common ground, and whether we extend one end of it back up into the heavens or simply lay it down to bridge the chasms between ourselves and others, it is still made of words.*

* *Elpenor, the youngest of Odysseus's companions, is described in The Odyssey as an ordinary fellow, not overly brave, not particularly wise. He was also the first to die, doing so even before the ordeal of the great captain and his crew had properly begun. The circumstances, however, make his name irresistibly appealing to the writer of this essay, as a pseudonym.*

What happened to Elpenor could have been funny. For nine long years Circe, the goddess of human speech, held the Ithacans captive on her remote island, transforming them into dumb animals, slaves of their most ignoble appetites. But then at last Odysseus persuaded Circe to give them speech again, to make them men, and to let them begin their voyage home. One whole day, before setting sail, they spent feasting on meat and wine; then at nightfall they lay down to sleep in Circe's great hall. All but Elpenor: heavy with wine, hot, he found a ladder and climbed up onto the roof. He was still there when Odysseus, down below, roused his comrades in the morning. Poor Elpenor! Springing up at

the sound of voices, befuddled, he forgot the ladder he'd come up by and pitched headlong from the roof. "His neck," as T.A. Murray translates Homer's lines, "was broken away from his spine, and his spirit went down to the house of Hades."

But this was not the end of Elpenor's story. When Odysseus's turn came to make his own descent into Hell, Elpenor was the first of all the shades to greet him. "Son of Laertes, sprung from Zeus, Odysseus of many devices," he cried, "an evil doom of some god was my undoing, and measureless wine." He begged a favour of his captain, that when Odysseus gained again the common ground of mortals, "heap up a mound for me on the shore of the grey sea, in memory of an unhappy man, that men yet to be may learn of me. Fulfil this prayer, and fix upon the mound my oar wherewith I rowed in life when I was among my comrades."

An A.A. meeting is an answer to a plea which everyone has heard and spoken:

My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me. Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.

The ground rules differ from meeting to meeting. Some are for alcoholics only, others for anyone at all. Some are "beginners' meetings," but because beginners often tell the most touching and dramatic stories, and because veteran alcoholics want to keep their memories fresh and help those less experienced in the ways of sobriety than they are, these meetings are usually packed with old-timers as well. The number of people varies greatly. In New York I've seen meetings of Twenty-odd people jammed into the cellar of a brownstone, and more than 200 crowded into the basement of a cathedral-sized church. Where I live now, meetings seldom draw more than fifty and sometimes only two or three. Twenty seems to be the average.

This is a good number, to my taste, and the meeting where I feel most at home attracts about that many once a week. We have

beginners, too, vanned in from a drying out farm back in the hills. The format of the meeting is the open discussion group, with a lead-off-speaker telling his tale, the other members following up with bits and pieces of their own stories. I always speak, whether I want to or not. I think of it as a kind of spiritual discipline: to attend to what's being said, to keep one's mind open to the spark of recognition, to wait in mounting tension for the moment when one will be called on, then finally to hazard a link between one's own story and another's. The sensation, when I have said my bit, is what most of us came for, serenity.

But no one is under any compulsion to speak. On the contrary, old-timers tell you again and again that one of the great virtues they discovered in the program is the capacity to listen, without making assumptions or jumping to conclusions, without analyzing, categorizing, glossing, or comparing (what I'm doing now, for example), but with appetite, imagination, and sympathy. At an A.A. meeting, good listeners become as little children listening to fairy tales. And a fairy tale of sorts is what, typically we hear.

I imagine many of my fellow drunks would be infuriated to hear their stories, "true" stories recalled with anguish and told quite literally in fear and trembling, described as fairy tales. Yet that's what they are to the listeners and I don't mean to belittle them. After all, as Walter Benjamin has told us, a fairy tale is usually the story of a quest, through which as children we may learn to confront the forces of the mythical world, the dreadful projection of our fears, our hurts, and our mistrust. In quest stories a child goes forth, a child much like the listening child in his secret conviction of helplessness

and oppression. And along the way he discovers that the real world of experience is much like the mythical world of apprehension: peopled with witches, ogres, and tyrants, rife with duplicity, danger, evil, and death.

But as the child battles through his ordeal, he also finds that nature is in secret complicity with his struggle. Life himself wants him to survive the ordeal, to defeat his enormous adversaries, to come into his kingdom. Little people, common people, all denizens of the earth, appear to help him. And the child must let nature's secret complicitors in, trust them, and with them trust himself, his wits and his high resolve. And with this access of trust, the last liberating secret is revealed: that freedom is a gift of strength, and strength a gift of going forth and suffering. The gift of the story to the listener is hope.

Point for point, this is the story one hears over and over again at A.A. meetings. Not that anyone orders us to tell them in this form. All we're told is to share our "experience, strength, and hope" for ten or twenty minutes. There are no other instructions: no one prompts, analyzes, jeers, breaks in to tell his own story, or criticizes.

But that's the way they usually come out, as quest stories, and one reason they do is that it's so easy to construe the actual course of a drunk's career in that way. The ism, alcoholism, is a disease. (I prefer to think of it as a gift, like the gift for music, but malign. Becoming an alcoholic is like winning a recital at Carnegie Hall: you must have the gift, but you must also practice. Still, most drunks take it as a disease.) But because the disease of alcoholism goes its way in a seemingly purposeful fashion, it is a simple matter to personify it. In

A.A. we call it "cunning, baffling, and insidious," and having gone that far, we might as well call it the demon. When he first appears on the scene, he is frisky and cute as Faust's poodle, found on an idle stroll. Later, revealed for what he is (charming, helpful, always available at the crook of an elbow), he begins making promises and deals. And this Demon knows how to make a deal, how to keep a promise. The stories I've heard! Hardworking foremen, corporate swashbucklers, surgeons, interior decorators, bus drivers, librarians, fishermen, submarine skippers, mongers of all sorts and kinds of things, all of them stewed to the gills morning, noon, and night, yet never faltering on their upward climb, never losing their jobs, never falling in the esteem of their fellows.

But we all lost our souls, and in the typical story, sooner or later, everything else as well: jobs, money, family, friends, health, the lot. We end up in a barroom, say, screaming a challenge to take on any man in the place. Ludicrous: we might be blowing bubbles in the bathtub. There are no takers. But out on the street, the Demon's little helpers are waiting, a bunch of pint-sized muggers come to collect. The deal was that you hold the liquor. With the grip reversed, you lose.

So begins the most crucial episode in the drunk's career: hitting bottom. Everyone finds his own bottom. It might be on the carpet of an executive suite or in the backyard where the pints of vodka are buried; it might be the gutter, the slammer, or the bin. Wherever it is, it seems somehow more textured with the actual than anything we've known since we first set out on this voyage. And the Demon is down there as well, delighted as always to help a drowning man. Voices reach us,

urgent voices. One, heroic in timbre (though strangely demonic), cries out, "Hold on!" Another, so close to the bottom we're lying on that it might be coming from there, speaks in a croak. "Let's go," it says, "let go." These voices, this site, are the drama of Alcoholics Anonymous.

What quest were we on when we set forth? What was it we wanted, really wanted? It wasn't anything in particular. That was the trouble. All we had was neediness and vision, bottomless neediness and wondrous vision. Out of these we conjured a god - the god, in fact, whose servant is the Demon. W.H. Auden called him Possibility, and said that his idolaters were legion in modern societies. But drunks have always known about that god, long before there were modern societies, for on the downward leg of the drunkard's quest it is Possibility who fills the sails.

Possibility, after all, is simultaneously the one great true thing (anything can happen), the great half-truth (I can do anything I want to), and the great lie (I can be anyone I want to). There are moments of Possibility-worship in everyone's story. In most people's lives, however, Possibility makes itself felt as more or less fixed object of desire, not the wind but the compass: riches, celebrity, a lively love life. The more concrete the desire, in fact, the more coherent the voyage, the story, and the "I" who is telling it. In a drunk's story, Possibility appears as it is to the true idolater: the achingly elusive element in which we live and move and have our dreams, the pool, the drowning pool, of the self.

I don't know how many times I've heard an A.A. storyteller begin his story with the assertion that he began drinking to "get along," because he was shy and ill

at ease at parties and a snootful made it easier for him. I would never identify with this until a few months ago. I was at a party, a small dinner where there was a man who I instantly realized was clever, more articulate, more entertaining, and more forceful than I could ever be. This would have been hard to bear under the best of circumstances, but these were especially difficult. For one thing, the hostess was a woman whose attentions I coveted and my "rival" was winning. For another, I had stopped smoking three weeks before; this was my first foray into unfamiliar social territory without cigarettes.

By dessert, I was in such a rage of envy that I grabbed a cigarette. (One of his cigarettes, needless to say.) I think I'd have grabbed his wine bottle, too, if there hadn't been another recovering alcoholic at the table. Still, I smoked, which was bad enough, I smoked out of envy. *Cleverer than I could ever be? Ever? Dear God, say it isn't so! Say that I could if I tried. That I could if I made myself new. That I could, by some miracle, be someone else.* But now, wafted onward on my nicotine afflatus, I was another man - if nothing else, a man who had not smoked but did now. Exhaling, I could see my self I wished in the moist clouds of smoke, and a good deal less of the man I envied.

Booze, I now realize, did the same thing for me. Looking back to when I began drinking, I can see that I was no different from those others who say they drink to make themselves agreeable, lovable, clever. We drank to spawn new selves, to be reborn in Possibility, more charming, more persuasive, more resolute, more high-spirited - until at last our new selves swam away and lost

themselves in the darkness and silence of the bottom.

If spawning Possible selves is what the drunk was up to during the first part of his quest, then "re-collecting" and "re-remembering" those selves is what he is doing when he tells us about it. Recalling himself as he was, prostrate before the idol, he remembers daring great deeds and speaking resounding words. But even if he did and said half of what he dreamed, even if he was the selves he gave birth to, the lived experience eluded him, forever being dissolved in the solvent of alcoholic Possibility. God does save drunks and fools, but what he saves them from is experience. The story of a life devoted to Possibility sounds like a quest story with the ordeals left out. It's just a haphazard accumulation of endings: triumphs or catastrophes, as the case might be (for anything can happen), but completely severed from the necessary middle, the travelled ground of experience.

In the rooms, then, where A.A. people tell their stories, there are really two dramas going on, the events recounted in the narrative and the narrator's struggle to recover his experience, to build a new ladder of words on a firmer footing. The story emerges rung by rung, sometimes as farce, sometimes as melodrama: a situation comedy or a horror show. Often it is both. At one meeting I used to go to, for example, a tough little Irishman convulsed us with an inexhaustible series of disaster stories involving run-ins with the police, tractor trailers, frosty bank managers, night nurses in the drunk ward. He used to tell how he was cured of the gambling addiction that overcame him after he went into A.A. He and his wife were at a Florida racetrack, and each had bet on a different horse. His

horse, which had been in the lead, stumbled and fell. His wife's horse, which was second, tripped over the fallen favourite and broke its neck. "I took it as a sign," he would say, "a bad sign."

But farce is easily transmuted into horror. There are meetings where one feels beaten, physically and morally, by the ingenuity, the persistence, the cruelty that human beings bring to the task of destroying themselves. Again and again you find yourself saying, "Now, dear God, surly he's reached his bottom!" He has not. But the storyteller has. The storyteller is here now, warm and dry and safe, perhaps with a firm grip on sobriety, perhaps just digging his fingers into the beach against the pull of the slamming sucking surf. So the end of the story is always both happy and tragic. Now, right this minute, he is in these rooms, telling his story among common people, close to the world's center of gravity. (Meetings seem always to be held in basements.) But after the meeting he must go out again into the fluid world of Possibility. And out there, as he and every member of the gathering know, waits the certainty of death.

In some stories, the presence of death is almost palpable. In these versions the hero hits bottom and goes into A.A. The quest should move on from there, a quest for sobriety, but it does not. Instead, we see the drunkard lifting himself up from the bottom time and again, only to slip back. The pity of it is unbearable: the rehab centers, halfway houses, asylums, prisons, A.A. itself, in and out, in and out. These are epics, heroic and terrible. The terror, of course, comes from the hero's willed participation in his own doom. The heroism is the storyteller's. Telling that story, groping in agonizing silence for words, the speaker becomes an actor in his

real life, the protagonist in a struggle between cynicism and trust, despair and hope, death and life, death and love - now enacted, in these rooms, in an agon of remembrance.

Therapies of the word, of course, are almost as easy to come by as a drink. And it might be asked, as alcoholics in A.A. meetings do often ask, why it is that these other therapies, psychoanalysis in particular, were never able to help them stop drinking. It's a good question, and I think the answer tells something about the kinds of people alcoholics are. (The question of whether we were always that kind of person, or became that way as a result of drinking, is a chicken-and-egg question, and not a good one.)

What goes on in an analytic session is quite similar to what goes on in an A.A. meeting. Analyst and patient meet periodically, the patient bearing his anxieties, some too deeply rooted or too painful for words, others already fixed in words - too fixed, like a published text. The analyst brings his own experience, and in the encounter between the two, the patient undergoes a kind of conversion, or rather a series of conversions, in the course of which he works out a new, illuminating, and presumably helpful version of his life story. So, too, at an A.A. meeting: there, the newcomer learns to channel the maelstrom of his experience along the lines of a quest story. And there are parallels, as well, between the dramas played out in each kind of session. In A.A. there is the drunk's mortal struggle to compose his life in words and the counterinsurgent denial of his need to stop drinking, as well as of the proffered way to stop. In analysis the drama is the patient's painful ordeal to become a maker of sense

and his fierce resistance to the analyst who can help him.

But it's just there, in that element of drama, that the alcoholic finds analysis wanting. We alcoholics are intensely social, constantly threatened by loneliness: we need to go out, mix it up with the crowd, see and be seen, perform. What can an audience of one man or woman do for us?

And we want sacrifice. Once we sacrificed ourselves on the alter of Possibility; now, giving ourselves to others like ourselves, we learn a new form of sacrifice, one with life itself as the gift for giving. In analysis there's nothing like that, nothing so dramatic: if anybody is being sacrificed it is the therapist, who may be dying of boredom. But he is being paid for it, which rather spoils the fun.

Considered as theatre, moreover, psychotherapy in general (as a drunk might say) is pretty small stuff, as primal as the quest story. Sophocles' Oedipus is what we want; Freud's is too refined, too limited. Lacking experience, and in that sense childlike, we like our theatre crude and dirty and full of miracles. But we also like it formal. If a psychotherapeutic treatment has any form, it's usually apparent only to the therapist, and not necessarily even to him. The A.A. drama seems as simple and straightforward a container of meaning as the mind could devise. It has to be, for containing is precisely what it must do for us. We are the incontinent, those whom Dante found wallowing in putrid slop, and what we crave is integrity, coherence, simplicity. A.A. drama is oral, a tribal culture which gets passed on by means of stories and maxims. There's an A.A. maxim for every contingency: *Count your blessing, One day at a time, Easy does it,*

Live and let live, First things first. The beginner finds them stupefyingly banal. Then he learns that they are nothing more than condensed stories waiting to be brought to life by his own experience.

Some of our tribes even have bards. I think of Ted, a regular at some of the meetings I go to. The first time I heard him speak I thought the Ancient Mariner had grabbed me by the arm. His voice rumbles along the edge of a cough and his story emerges with the beat and power of epic verse. He takes us from the loafing idyll of his youth to the horrors of a bin for the criminally insane. In his story Ted is always moving, stumbling from bar to bar, from doorway to alley to flophouse, from courthouse to prison, always on foot. Fondly, wryly, he ticks off the names of the bars, their proprietors, their regulars. Sober now, on the upward curve, he is still moving, still on foot. "you've all seen me, haven't you?" he says. Everyone has. once a month., perhaps, they catch a glimpse of him, day or night, walking with his easy stride from town to town along the shore road. He is walking to meetings mostly, and now in his story he names the meetings, recalls anecdotes he's heard at them, laments the dead, sings the praises of those members who stopped and gave him a lift. Sometimes he'll fix the date of an incident by something he read in the papers. "It was the day they buried old Patrick P., " says Ted, or "the night they had that terrible fire up in Galahanty."

Ted is a mythmaker. In the usual fairy-tale quest, the only name you hear is that of the hero (I'm Susan, and I'm an alcoholic"), a name so rudimentary that every individual can identify with it. And the action of these stories takes place anywhere, somewhere in

such and such a kingdom, but really in the good listener's head. Myth, however, occurs in historical time, in a real country, among real people, and the men and women of myth are the real heroes of that country and people. A myth is constitutive: it makes for a collective identification. That's what Ted's stories do. They weave a magic circle of words around our meetings, making a tribe out of a group of lonely quest-heroes. In his own story, Ted is Odysseus; but in his manner of telling it, he is our Homer. He offers himself up, a creature as wretched and glorious as the powers of speech, for us to identify with, to be at one with, to die with or to live with, if he can only go on telling his story.

I have never yet had a slip. Ordinarily, I think no more of slipping than I think of my dead mother, who had a fatal one. Drink is something I kissed goodbye. But one evening a man was telling us how he and his wife (also an alcoholic) were driving home from a meeting when they decided to stop off at a roadside restaurant for a steak. It was a wonderful steak, he said, and they had just been to a wonderful meeting, and the two things coming together, the spiritual and the physical well-being, left him feeling, as he ominously put it, "on top of the world."

Suddenly, the thought of how wonderful it would be to cap off the evening with a creme de menthe slashed through his mind. Now, as it happens, he didn't have a creme de menthe. It also happens that I detest creme de menthe. Yet the word, the mere sound, gave me a taste of it, as real as the taste of the coffee in my hand, and the taste struck me with terror. The essence of A.A. is contained in that incident. What happened was something so simple as to be almost

barbaric: a ritual drama that transformed our anxiety into pity and terror, our pity and terror into awe.

Awe is a reflex of the spirit, I think, and the spiritual is a dimension of existence that drunks are especially vulnerable to. There are many of us, however, myself included, for whom *spirit* in all its uses (except, naturally, the liquid) had become a meaningless, a tiresome, even a threatening word. By the time I went into A.A., I'd pretty well dropped it from my vocabulary. The booze had been one cause of this, of course, having drowned my spirit along with everything else, but my background had helped, too. Where I come from, all the actualities and potentialities of being human are parcelled out to disciplined licensees: mind the philosophers, psyche to the psychologists, language to the linguists, and so on. Spirit, according to this scheme of things, belonged to the religionists, the devotees of a god, and my spirit's experience at the hands of religionists had been uniformly depressing.

A.A. did nothing at first to disabuse me of this. It is true that when I went into A.A. I miraculously rediscovered my spirit. But for a great many days thereafter, I could not have told you what I meant by the word. *Spirits* (as in "high spirits") got at part of it. So did *morale*. Yet there was always something hollow in the sound of the word when I spoke it, some dead spot of failed resonance when I heard it spoken, where there should have been, though I hardly knew why, a full and joyful understanding.

My difficulty lay in my laggard belief that spirit had something to do with religion, that it had to be in the most

conventional sense transcendent, that it had to be somehow always straining upward, higher than man, toward God. Most A.A. people have no difficulty with these thoughts. Like nine-tenths of their fellow Americans, they are happy to declare (to pollsters, for example) that they believe in God and that their God is in some sense a higher power. At meetings, "Higher Power" is the way God is most frequently referred to: "My Higher Power, whom I choose to call God." The locution is tactfully existential. Still, at first I could never hear that word, *God*, without the abyss opening up just beneath my heart. There is no question that the Higher Power most A.A. people have in mind is the Judeo-Christian one; and neither is there any question about what this power, this high god, does for me. He gives me the jitters. He's bad for my nerves, the affliction with which I went into A.A. in the first place; and speech between us is quite impossible.

But the interesting thing is not only that I had difficulty getting the word *spirit* to sound right in my mind and heart. It is also that no one in A.A. has ever attempted to "help" me by pointing the way to his notion of God. Never, for example, have I heard anyone in A.A. refer to Jesus Christ. This is astonishing, for most A.A. people are Christian (like most Americans). Moreover, Jesus' "story" has some rather close parallels to the typical A.A. story. Surely the drunk's agony of remembrance is also an atonement; surely, too, the first leg of this quest is a descent into death, the second a transfiguration, though one that's always at risk. To me this only goes to show that the Crucifixion is not our only passion play, but a model, so to speak, of the genre. But I am not a

Christian, and Christians, I should have thought, might find the temptation almost irresistible to call upon the story of Jesus' Agony and Resurrection to illuminate, perhaps to confirm, their own. But in A.A. they never do. They never speak of it.

The reason, when I found it out, revealed to me what I had been missing in my sense of the spirit that moves in A.A. One day I took a friend of mine, a poet, not an alcoholic, to a meeting in New York. It's a meeting that attracts a large contingent of theatre people, which probably accounts for its being especially emotional, even for A.A. I thought my friend would be amused and moved. At the same time, I was a little afraid of what he might say. He is a man whose language is extraordinarily precise, and one who ordinarily demands the same precision of his friends. He is also an agnostic, and these two qualities gave me pause. My hold on sobriety was then even more feeble than it is now (I'd been "in" for less than a

month), and I was high, rapturously high, on A.A., and felt I could take no criticism of it. I thought my friend might despise the wide groping for words he'd hear from these people, and scorn the trite maxims by which we all tried to live. And I thought he'd be embarrassed by all those references to "my Higher Power, whom I choose to call God."

In the event, my fears proved groundless. For it was the talk that most touched my friend: the stories told in the diction of the suffering, the eloquence of shared experience, the rhetoric of hope against hope. In the taxi on the way back to his apartment he said, "The talk of God? Well, what moved in that room is the best working definition of God I've ever heard." And it was then that I began to see that the true spirit of these rooms is the spirit of human life; a thing godlike, perhaps, but not transcendent; not "high;" a thing altogether human. In A.A. we dry moist souls on the *logos*, the Word.