Chapter Ten

Clowns and Bedlam: The Dark Side of Alcoholic Humor

At one-thirty a drunk wandered in and passed a remark which was considered insulting to Doc. Mack hit him a clip which is still remembered and discussed. The man rose off his feet, described a small arc, and crashed through the packing case in among the frogs. Someone trying to change a record dropped the tone down and broke the crystal.

No one has studied the psychology of a dying party. It may be raging, howling, boiling, and then a fever sets in and a little silence and then quickly quickly it is gone, the guests go home or go to sleep or wander away to some other affair and they leave a dead body.

The lights blazed in the laboratory. The front door hung sideways by one hinge. The floor was littered with broken glass…. Whisky glasses lay sadly on their sides. Someone trying to climb the bookcases had pulled the whole section of books and spilled them in broken-backed confusion on the floor. And it was empty, it was over.

John Steinbeck, Cannery Row, 114–115.

Very little has been written about the dark side of contemporary alcoholic humor. The popular press has generally confined itself to advice on drinking and the nuances of recovery, and the few scholarly analyses that have been written have dealt almost exclusively with the strange connection between addiction and creativity. This is especially baffling because the penchant for self-debasement and pathological buffoonery is one of the most remarkable characteristics of the alcoholic mindset.

Alcoholic humor is both evasive and socially disarming and is generally derived from a litany of misanthropic attitudes and a passion for nonconformity. A comic perspective objectifies behavior by discounting the moral implications of an untenable situation and the consequences of addiction. As
John Berryman has noted in his first person narrative of the incorrigible persona, Mr. Bones,

> Nothin very bad happen to me lately.
> How you explain that? —I explain that, Mr. Bones,
> terms o’ your bafflin odd sobriety

(Henry’s Confession, 1–5)

For sad, old mischievous Bones, “Nothin” much happens in sobriety, as if life without a drink is necessarily dull, boring, and glum. The day just drags on—no thrills, no kicks or perversions, and no antisocial antics. It is an unbearable prospect, most especially because “Bones” seems to find a modicum of fascination in sex, marathon phone calls, miscues, and missed connections. His *joie d’vivre* is a correlative of petulance; and, given his love of mischief, sobriety is a mind-numbing prospect with nothing “bad,” no comic relief, no dunderheaded opportunities to make trouble, and no masochistic refuge from the tedium of sobriety.

Bones fascination with the nuances of antisocial behavior is typical of the alcoholic perception. Drunkenness is not simply a question of acrimony and mischief—indeed, given enough liquor, it may also involve a stumbling, incoherent train of exclamations and expletives. As E.E. Cummings has noted, such a person might be,

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 ng up some streetfu
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Cumming’s fractured, bumbling pilgrim is disjointed and angry; and the scattered syntax and typographical oddities drop some fifteen more chaotic lines before they stumble to a halt with the simple word, “pencils.” And, thus, we (or shall we say, the drunk) are compelled to wonder what could possibly be meant by

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 be pencils.
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