CHARLES BUKOWSKI:
MAVERICK, MISFIT, AND ANOMALY

Vincent Walsh
Lehigh University
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Arriving at a fair and reasonable evaluation of Charles Bukowski's extensive body of poetry and prose constitutes a daunting challenge for the scholar and critic. On one hand, the style and structure of his writing seems primitive, raw, unformed, undisciplined; moreover, the content raises serious issues, legitimate concerns about what is appropriate as subject matter for literary expression. There are elements of misanthropy, misogyny, and even sexual perversion that must be addressed. The general response of the academy during his long career and since his death has been to ignore Bukowski as an important writer, and simply reject the notion that he should be regarded as a significant literary figure. The difficulty with this position, of course, lies in the unavoidable fact that interest in – one could even say *fascination* with -- his poems and novels only continues to grow as time passes. No contemporary American poet comes close to Bukowski's level of popular appeal, or financial success. None comes near equaling his productivity, either, which is staggering. Nevertheless, he has been excluded from the third edition of *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry;* given the vastness of his appeal, one has to wonder why.

One school of critical opinion maintains that, however popular Bukowski may be, his material just does not merit careful study. According to Adam Kirsch in a 2005 article in *The New Yorker,* Bukowski is "easy to love, especially for novice readers with little experience of the genuine challenges of poetry," but "for more demanding readers, he remains . . . hard to admire" (7). For Kirsch, Bukowski embodies, at best, a kind of literature-lite, a comic book version of the genuine article. He is nothing more than a "mythic roughneck, a figure out of a tall tale – brawler, gambler, companion of bums and whores, boozehound with an oceanic thirst" (2); his work is "a highly colored, morally

uncomplicated cartoon of the real thing" (3). One drawback with attempting such sweeping generalizations as this, of course, is that one tends to overstate the case. Just how "morally uncomplicated" Bukowski's work might be, is a matter to which we will devote significant attention in subsequent pages. What needs to be understood at this point is that for Kirsch, and others of his persuasion, no matter how broad-based and enthusiastic Bukowski's international clan of admiring fans might be, Bukowski's work is strictly for intellectual adolescents and literary amateurs.

Such skeptical, derogatory evaluation is nothing new. James R. Hepworth, reviewing *Love Is a Dog from Hell,* the book of poems published just prior to the release of *Women* in 1977, concluded that "at his best, Bukowski gives expression to the vitality and the aspirations of the common man. At his worst, he's a vulgar anti-intellectual who combines aggression with conformity and reverts to the crudest forms of frontier psychology;" his "relationship to literature is parasitic" (57). He is nothing but a "softy, a sentimental slob" (61). He has no real skill as a craftsman of words, no depth of sensitivity or insight. Hepworth connects his argument to a 1949 essay by Philip Rahv, who distinguishes between "palefaces and redskins," the "patricians" and the "plebians" of American literature: the former comprise the cultivated, highbrow writers among Boston and Concord intellectuals; the latter consist of lowlife types writing on the frontier and in less fashionable big city neighborhoods. Articulating these distinctions descriptively, Rahv believes there is a dichotomy in American letters "between experience and consciousness – a dissociation between energy and sensibility . . . life conceived as opportunity and life conceived as a discipline" (1). On one side we find Hawthorne, Melville, and James; on the other Whitman and Twain. From a certain

perspective, the latter are not such bad company; I am sure Bukowski would be pleased by the comparison, even if Hepworth did not intend his allusion to him as a "redskin" as a compliment.

It is precisely his redskin quality that attracts so many fans, of course, even among the critics. Kenneth K. Brandt extols what he perceives to be Bukowski's "abiding disdain for the various modes of social and literary conformity," and the fact that he "persistently registers his disenchantment with a status quo that squelches originality and spontaneity" (12). Simplicity and directness of language, rather than being considered anti-intellectual, lend value to the writing as a vehicle for understanding, for they reveal "the author's ability to express a vital psychological insight in a lyric that communicates directly with the reader – astutely bypassing the curators of the critical establishment predisposed to exhuming buried meanings" (13). Bukowski's merit is that he has the courage to "render his vision as compellingly and purely as possible, unvitiated by a contrived arrangement of form or a contorted elevation of diction" (14).

Other analysts concur wholeheartedly. Jeff Weddle perceives Bukowski's poetry as manifesting "unique and visionary scope which easily eclipses the more staid and strained verse celebrated by the cultural watchdogs in our university English departments" (19). Jim Harrison, in a *New York Times* book review essay in the fall of 2007, advises us that "Bukowski's strength is in the sheer bulk of his contents, the virulent anecdotal sprawl, the melodic spleen without the fetor of the parlor or the classroom, as if he were writing while straddling a cement wall or sitting on a bar stool, the seat of which is made of thorns. He never made that disastrous poet's act of asking permission for his irascible voice" (2). Doren Robbins claims that "Bukowski has made

an art out of . . . forthrightness" (282), his "language comes from the bottom, it is down and out, it is clear, it is masterfully manipulated and constructed to be such, and everything is permitted" (284-85).

Further praise and approbation emanates from Loss Glazier, who argues that it is Bukowski's very lack of "sophistication" that lends substance and depth to his message: "Without complex theories or expressions of insurmountable entanglements, Bukowski provides a clean and simple answer in a clear and direct style: the answer is right here. It's as easy as looking in the mirror" (42). Julian Smith goes even further, claiming that Bukowski's writing "shows enormous resource in working a subversive content on the linguistic level" (56), conveying a "satiric critique of capitalism, bourgeois morality and conventional culture" by means of a consciously contrived style comprised of "deliberately disorderly syntax . . . that creates its effect by a radical difference from smoother, more literary writing" through an "impression of artless spontaneity . . . a vigorous street language with no recourse to . . . complex words or intellectual concepts . . . by the cultivation of a no-bullshit approach, as though the speaker were too busy telling the truth to dilute it with high cultural values" (57).

By means of his anti-literary, anti-intellectual approach, Bukowski, Barry Mills informs us, "gave a voice to the disenfranchised, the marginalized, the mad and the dysfunctional, the factory hand, the working people, the drunk and disorderly. He made a point of always trying to write clearly so that people knew exactly what he was saying" (3). It precisely because he speaks to, and for, the lowly, Doren Robbins believes, that Bukowski makes the literary establishment so uncomfortable, so inclined to ignore him – not bothering to write disapproving commentary, but pretending he does not even

exist (despite the fact that he obviously crowds most other published poets right off the shelves of bookstores, even fourteen years after his demise):

> The majority of English departments, which for the most part comprises the Moral Majority of Literature, will always want to cook the complete poems of Charles Bukowski alive. I am sure Bukowski would be ashamed if they did not. And this is as it should be. . . . Bukowski's style attracts, or threatens. He tells it like it is. His language, and the reality his language conveys (which is an internationally recognizable language and reality of most of the urban world), is not so much a defence against, or even a disavowal of, the prevailing value systems, but a naked display of what it is like to be a conscious victim within a society that fails with virtually unrelieved aggression for those who are not rich, or can offer services to the rich. (283, 286)

Gerald Locklin echoes all of the above praises and tributes, and amplifies, extends, and places them in the context of literary history – r*edskin* literary history, of course:

> Bukowski's poems opened new avenues for American poets in terms of accessibility, the vernacular, humor, the L.A. urban landscape, the struggles of the working (and unemployed) class, the bar life, gender wars, and, most importantly, the rejection of the authority of the academic and literary (largely eastern) establishments. . . . he was a chronicler of the symptomatic phenomena of our times . . . the proletarian given a voice. He is probably the most gifted poet ever to speak from the infrared extreme of the socio-economic spectrum. . . . Bukowski's idiom is the product of a movement at least as old as Wordsworth's preface to the second edition to the *Lyrical Ballads*. In America it weaves its way through

> Whitman, Robinson, Frost, Masters, Lindsay, W.C. Williams, Oppen, Reznikov, Rakossi, Ginsberg, O'Hara, and Edward Field, to become the dominant mode of poets today, especially in Southern California. (354-55)

The basic argument among his admirers, then, is that Bukowski has been unfairly dismissed and eschewed by an elite literary establishment that disdains his simplicity and directness, his inattention to form, as well as his insistence on addressing the concerns of the dispossessed. Because he refuses to sugarcoat the harsh world he inhabits, he becomes a thorn in the conscience of those who rule, and those who serve their interests. He appears, half-mad, bearded and bedraggled, in the guise of a modern John the Baptist, a voice crying in the urban wilderness. Donald Masterson takes this notion one step further, asserting that it is Bukowski's excoriation of a corrupt world, and his apocalyptic vision of tragic outcomes that must necessarily attend contemporary decadence – a vision he shares with his hero and mentor Robinson Jeffers – that causes him to be spurned by elites who do not want to face the consequences of perverse willfulness:

> Clearly, both Bukowski and Jeffers still provoke enough anxiety among the canon makers to insure that these difficult, even intractable figures remain excluded. Among other issues, perhaps it is their shared apocalyptic vision that has most unnerved scholars and editors. Apocalyptics are rarely appreciated in their own time. . . . Both poets vehemently rejected the corrupt materialism that informed the American dream as it shaped this country's culture at mid-century. . . .each foresaw the cataclysmic outcome of a degraded society. (16)

There is persistent consternation among Bukowski's admirers over the fact that he remains excluded from the canon by academe and the literary establishment – the

Brahmins of American highbrow culture. The omission is glaring for many, and doubly insulting in that little explanation seems to be forthcoming, since mainstream critics and scholars not only dismiss the renegade writer, they tend to completely ignore him. Despite the fact that his novels and poetry remain in greater demand world-wide than ever, conducting an MLA search even today, more than a decade after his death, still reveals little scholarly or critical commentary. Most of what there is derives from those who argue earnestly in support of Bukowski's rightful place in the canon, and claim he ought to be awarded long overdue honor and recognition. So far, there has been only one serious book-length literary study undertaken (apart from a handful of biographies and memoirs from friends and associates) – Russell Harrison's *Against the American Dream: Essays on Charles Bukowski,* and, significantly, it was published just one year after the poet's death by Black Sparrow Press, which published the vast bulk Bukowski's writing during his lifetime. Therefore, we cannot feel assured that this attention comes from a neutral or impartial direction, either, or that it signals a wider critical and scholarly appreciation of the writer's value and importance.

Harrison believes that Bukowski has been rejected by the literary establishment because he reveals a side of America that, no matter how glaringly obvious, most citizens, and certainly elite sectors, simply do not want to admit exists. Bukowski's subjects and themes deal with the struggles of the working class and the poor, those countless individuals discarded, jettisoned, and left behind in the wake of promised prosperity. For Harrison, the "rejection and ignoring of Bukowski is a result of many Americans' reluctance to acknowledge the fact that ours is a class society, something Bukowski's work constantly reminds us of;" he is "the only major post-war American

writer who has denied the efficacy of the American Dream." His critique contains an "implicit demand for something more than material affluence." Bukowski scorns the notion of "consumption and accumulation as ends in themselves." As a result, he is "dismissed as a cynic, a chronic malcontent, an individual who has failed to 'adjust' " (12-13, 15).

Certainly numerous passages in Bukowski's poetry and prose reflect the sensibility and attitude Harrison is describing. One such excerpt from a short story entitled "Action" in *Septuagenarian Stew,* in particular, stands out as passionately and eloquently representative. Chinaski muses on the people around him at the racetrack, in the box seats where the elite preside, and reflects on the differences between them and the crowds of common people in the grandstands, with whom he is more comfortable, and familiar:

> The women all seemed younger, lithe, full of little jokes in this privileged section of the track. Even the older women looked pretty good. It saddened Henry. Why did the women of the poor have to look so bad? It wasn't fair. But what was fair? Had there ever been any fair time for the little guy? All that shit they were fed about democracy and opportunity was just to keep them from burning down the palace. Sure, once in a while a guy climbed out of the rubble and made it. But for each one of them there were hundreds of thousands down on skid row or in jail or in the madhouses, or suicided or drugged or drunk. And many more working pitiful low-paying jobs, throwing away their years for the merest subsistence. Slavery had not been eliminated, it had only been expanded to include nine-tenths of the population. Everywhere. Holy shit. (126)

There is a problem with Harrison's analysis, reflected in the final two words of this otherwise very moving passage. The street epithet "Holy shit" seems trite, and diminishes the overall impact, or at least conveys the sense that there is nothing that can be done about the situation, really, except to stand back and contemplate the absurd sadness of it all. "Holy shit" resonates with the nuance, "What do you know about that?", or "What's to be done?", or "Well, what can anyone do about it anyway?" The implicit answer to all these essentially rhetorical questions is, "Nothing. That's just the way it goes." Bukowski certainly does address the issue of injustice in the working place, especially in his first novel *Post Office,* and he constantly comments on the ravages of poverty, excoriating the rich, as in his poem "was Li Po wrong?" (*Pleasures of the Damned* 178-79*)*, aligning himself resolutely with the dispossessed. Yet it seems to me that he does not do so consistently or systematically. In fact, in some places he seems to blame individuals on the bottom of the social scale, to hold them solely responsible for their unhappy fate, rather than criticizing the economic system that oppresses them. We see examples of this in his scathing, essentially misanthropic poetic diatribe "the masses" (*Septuagenarian Stew* 282), and in his scolding political commentary "Democracy" (*Pleasures of the Damned* 216).

Loss Glazier maintains that *Post Office* "presents man as a curiosity, blind to his responsibility for creating the process of dehumanization through his own submission to it," and claims that, for Bukowski, "taking your fate into your own hands, despite the outcome, initiates the process of restoring man's humanity" (41-42). The poet does seem to ascribe to this notion, as we see in these lines from "the summing up" in *Septuagenarian Stew*:

I remember Mondays best, it
was when all the others were beginning their work-
week, stuck with the dream of industry, an industry
that would spit them out
when they were no longer
needed.
we had already spit ourselves out, believing in
none of that, we had cut away the threat of the
dreary overlords, we were very close to
freedom, we were Monday's millionaires and
we could never lose
that. (55)

The unanswered, and crucial question that remains is this: just what is an individual supposed to do if he or she does not possess the prodigious talent of a Charles Bukowski, and does not have the guarantee of a monthly stipend, however modest, from a local underground press that assures him or her of the means for subsistence after he or she has cast off the "threat of the dreary overlords"? It is precisely this problem that is addressed in a thoughtful article by Tamas Dobozy, who obviously takes Bukowski quite seriously as a contemporary literary figure, but with less of the uncritical, devoted enthusiasm we have seen from his advocates and admirers. For Dobozy, not only does Bukowski fail to take a consistent analytical approach to the problems he addresses (which perhaps confirms the criticism that he actually is anti-intellectual in the true sense of the word, as Kirsch and Hepworth assert), but he is also quite self-serving in the conclusions he draws,

and the convictions he espouses. (This raises the issue of why he chooses to employ the plural form of the first person pronoun in the lines cited above – who are these "we" who are so close to freedom? Bukowski seems to be operating very much on his own, sustained by a unique talent as well as irrepressible energy and will.) In Dobozy's view, Bukowski

> flaunts his disdain for consistency, logic, and accountability. He is not only conscious of contradiction within his text, but celebrates a willful hypocrisy, indiscriminately exhibiting (and conscripting to his own ends) the incongruities of postindustrial capital. Bukowski turns passivity into a subversive practice by self-consciously displaying his subjection to capital's indeterminacy, in effect replicating and co-opting that indeterminacy to empower himself. (1)

In essence, Bukowski solution to the conundrum of the American Dream constitutes a "radically individualistic approach," one that "prevents the emergence of a viable communal ideology" (1). Exactly contrary to Harrison's position, and those of other admiring fans, Dobozy asserts that "Bukowski is not a critical or social realist . . . but a dirty realist . . . alongside his identification with the working class, his sympathy for them . . . runs a contrary indifference to, or even delight in, their suffering" (6). In effect, Bukowski is every bit as much of a Social Darwinist as Andrew Carnegie (Adam Kirsch points out, with supreme irony, that the publishing rights to Bukowski's work are now controlled by Rupert Murdoch). Bukowski conveys the sense that, "Hey, if I made it out of the system and attained success, anybody can. And if people fail to do so, then it's their own fault." This notion is clearly reflected in the two poems, "the masses" and "Democracy," cited above. Dobozy believes that Bukowski paints a picture of "societal

struggle" that is not a matter of "class against class," but "an eternal struggle evident within all social strata . . . wherein standing results not from class but from inborn ability; those who rise to the top and those who stay at the bottom do so because of a biologically-determined surplus or deficiency of talent" (7). In the long run, it all comes down to "survival of the fittest."

Is this a fair approximation of what Bukowski is saying? Close examination of individual lines from "the masses" suggests that, insofar as Bukowski has any systematic intellectual approach at all, Dobozy comes uncomfortably close to describing what must be for admirers such as Harrison and Robbins an unpleasant truth:

> they blame life, they blame
> circumstance, they blame others while actually
> *they*
> are totally unappetizing, dutifully unoriginal, they are
> cowardly and placid, sunk in self-pity, having done
> nothing right, they still feel wronged, swarming the earth with
> their grievances, their hatreds –
> dead-eyed in the center of nowhere, these millions of human
> errors . . .

In "Democracy," Bukowski pontificates: "the next person you pass on the street, / multiply / him or / her by / 3 or 4 or30 or 40 million / and you will know / immediately / why things remain non-functional / for most of / us."

There are places where Bukowski seems to express sympathy and solidarity with oppressed workers and with the poor; in other passages, such as the lines cited above, he

comes across not only as elitist, but downright misanthropic. What is one to do with all these "human errors"? In one sense, it can be argued that the problem of why Bukowski is rejected from the canon and ignored by the literary establishment stems from confusion and uncertainty due to the sprawling, unconventional, anarchic, and irreverent body of his work. But there is also the very serious matter of discomfort, and dismay, at some of its unpleasant inferences and implications.

Confronting the contrasting reactions of sharp disapproval and unquestioning adulation that Bukowski's writing seems to elicit reminds me of Philip Rahv's description in 1949 of the same problem with regard to Henry Miller, whom Bukowski resembles in many ways:

> If Henry Miller's status in our literary community is still so very debatable, it is probably because he is the type of writer who cannot help exposing himself to extreme appraisals with every page that he adds to his collected works. He is easily overrated and with equal ease run down or ignored altogether. . . . With few exceptions the highbrow critics, bred almost to a man in Eliot's school of strict impersonal aesthetics, are bent on snubbing him. What with his spellbinder's tone, bawdy rites, plebian rudeness and disdain of formal standards, he makes bad copy for them and they know it. His admirers, on the other hand, are so hot-lipped in praise as to arouse the suspicion of cultist attachment. They evade the necessity of drawing distinctions between the art of exploiting one's personality and the art of exploiting material, from whatever source, for creative purposes. (159)

At least one of his admirers among the critics, Andrew J. Madigan, attests to just this phenomenon. Bukowski's "appeal," he informs us, "is cult-like in nature . . . readers tend

to consume his books with a religious voracity" (449). There may be good reasons why this is so. It is quite possible that Bukowski appeals because, like Miller before him, he liberates the crucial subject of sexuality, formerly repressed and forbidden in a Puritanical culture; he admits the beauty and mystery of physical love-making into the light of day. Moreover, he does so with a candor and hilarity that is both refreshing and emancipatory -- as in the "rape" episode connected to the special delivery letter and the falling geranium pots in *Post Office*, and the interruptions by children during Chinaski's initial sexual encounters with Lydia in *Women* (not to mention the battle between Lydia and Mindy, which ends with the cops asking, "Which of the two women do you want?").

Bukowski appeals to readers because, as Doren Robbins advises, "everything is allowed." One can indulge vicariously in all kinds of sexual exploits and expeditions, from anal intercourse to threesomes, pick-ups on the street and in local bars, paying prostitutes for fellatio, brawls with pimps, propositioning friends' wives, being accosted on stage by groupies at poetry readings (and banging on coeds' doors in college dorms after them), assignations with complete strangers at the airport, and sudden, unexpected appearances at one's front door of starry-eyed and eager young ladies from across the globe. The sky is the limit. Thrown into the mix are episodes of wild abandon with alcohol, reckless operating of automobiles, and indiscriminate indulgence in a wide, unspecified variety of drugs. Adam Kirsch sees the license provided by Bukowski's writing as a kind of adolescent fantasy: "there's no one to make you clean up your room, or get out of bed in the morning, or stop drinking before you pass out" (3).

I think it goes even further than this. One can experience the thrill of playing Russian roulette with one's life on a permanent basis – with endless booze and crazy broads,

countless cigarettes, unidentified pills, suspect airplanes, treacherous windowsills, icy highways, and out-of-control cars transformed during fits of jealous rage into lethal weapons on public sidewalks.

After one particularly violent and nasty confrontation with Lydia, when she finally succeeds in smashing his last pint bottle of Cutty Sark in the middle of the night, leaving him dry and not so high, our undaunted hero still finds a way to persevere in his obsessive self-destructiveness while he waits for the liquor stores to open again at dawn:

> In the bottom of what was left of the bottle I could see a swallow of scotch. Stretched out there on the pavement I reached for it and lifted it to my mouth. A long shard of glass almost poked out one of my eyes as I drank what remained. Then I got up and went inside. The thirst in me was terrible. I walked around picking up beer bottles and drinking the bit that remained in each one. Once I got a mouthful of ashes as I often used beer bottles for ashtrays. It was 4:14 AM. I sat and watched the clock. (*Women* 43)

Such heedless self-abandon can appear grimly comical, as well as darkly romantic and daring, in the pages of a book, of course, especially when there do not seem to be any unpleasant consequences for the protagonist besides the unpleasant taste of an occasional mouthful of ashes. In fact, as Adam Kirsch points out, "crucial to the myth, slobbery and drunkenness only increase Bukowski's appeal to women" (3). Still, all this out-of-control, insane recklessness naturally raises questions about the possible delusory effects such writing may have on impressionable, adoring readers. As Andrew J. Madigan cautions, "Bukowski's lives of rancorous desperation often condone – perhaps glorify – drug use, alcoholism, misanthropy" (449). One can only wonder if this is one of the many

reservations felt, rightly or wrongly, by members of the "literary establishment" about including Bukowski in the canon, or undertaking systematic study of his collected works. There are many critics and scholars, after all, who remain convinced, despite prevailing cynicism in mass markets, that the purpose and goal of literature, and of art generally, should be to reflect higher human values -- to uplift, inspire, and edify, not merely to titillate and entertain. It is certainly legitimate for a critic to feel and express concern over artistic work that possibly sensationalizes and distorts reality, especially if it does so in ways that can lead to serious harm for those gullible and naïve enough to misinterpret or misunderstand. Parents watching *Peter Pan* with young children are quite right to caution them that what they are witnessing is fantasy, and warn them against attempting to fly out of their bedroom windows after the lights are out for the night. Just because Chinaski escapes blinding himself with broken glass does not render his impulsive gesture an obvious example for facile emulation. Blind bravado has led many a fool to premature, ignominious death.

Perhaps the problem might lie, not merely in the fact that Bukowski writes sensationally about almost poking his eye out with a dagger-like shard of broken bottle glass, but that he seems so proud of the recklessness he has displayed, and so confident in his apparent invulnerability to injury – or so indifferent to potential catastrophe. He also often demonstrates a complete disregard for consequences, a total lack of caution, and compunction. At the end of a screaming match with Tammie, he picks up a pregnant cat and throws the hapless animal at her, without contrition or self-criticism, or any expression of concern for possible deleterious effects on the feline mother-to-be, or her babies. Elsewhere in the text, an enraged Lydia almost runs him down with her car on a

public street, missing him by inches. The protagonist's measured, uncomplicated response is to go home and have sex with her – all part of the game of love, it seems.

Alcohol is waved in the reader's face like a banner of defiance, a flag of independence. It makes life bearable; it is necessary for survival, and the only thing that makes writing possible. In a poem, "who needs it?" (*Pleasures of the Damned* 313) the answer to the title is unequivocal: he needs alcohol to be able to write, at least to write well. Without that fuel for the fire, or oil for the gears, the process will simply not work. If forced to encounter a Bukowski poem uninspired by booze, the reader will need a drink. That's just the way it is. But how are we to interpret aesthetic postulates like this? Often, one gets the impression that Bukowski is simply using the idea of writing to rationalize a personal obsession, to obfuscate a serious illness. Stan Theis wants us to believe that heavy drinking and great writing can somehow be correlated. Bukowski, he claims, seems to display

> more than a little pride in having become the best alcoholic possible while still preserving his ability to write effectively. He has no regrets about any of it. In fact, he relishes the possibility of being part of the lineage of the best writer-drinkers: O'Neill, Faulkner, Hemingway, London and others. Bukowski knows the strange and desperate lives drunks live better than most. And for him, as for Chinaski, the booze can only free up the typewriter keys for better service. (93)

Personally, I cannot help but wonder if this is not pure romanticization, a symptom of what Rahv describes when he opines about the exaggerations and idealizations that derive from "cultist attachment." We know that alcohol in excess dulls the mental faculties, it does not facilitate insight or understanding. We have every reason to suspect that

Faulkner and Hemingway were gradually destroyed as writers, and as human beings, because of their persistent drunkenness, not sustained or enhanced; that is why their best work came early in their careers, before the accumulating effects of steady debilitation had begun to catch up with them. Theis poses a rhetorical question regarding this issue, and then answers it for us, but his conclusion, at best, remains arguable. He quotes from *Hollywood,* Bukowski's novel published in 1989: "My fighting days were over. To think I had once weighed 144 pounds on a 6-foot frame: the grand old starving days when I was writing good stuff" (51), and then asks: "The 'good stuff' is *created* under conditions of maximum deprivation and adversity, the less-than-good *produced* on the downside of recognition, when mature complacency has fought off any urge to experiment? This sort of evolution doesn't apply to Bukowski's output" (90).

The evidence for Theis's facile assurance is not obvious. If one studies the style and density of the writing in *Hollywood,* and in most of the stories and poems in *Septuagenerian Stew,* published one year later, it soon becomes sadly clear that the quick wit, the high energy, the sparkle and explosive charm of earlier work like *Post Office, Women,* and *Love Is a Dog from Hell* has simply disappeared. *Hollywood* may provide satiric commentary on the American movie business, but it is hardly groundbreaking material, nothing that has not been said many times before, and more incisively. Mostly, the book seems to be about how the author likes to think well of himself, and the pride he takes in his seemingly limitless capacity for imbibing fine wine. He is complacent about his reputation as an underground literary star. He takes pleasure in making himself look important by casting disparaging, condescending aspersions about other well-known writers, including Sartre and Mailer. Supposedly, Mailer expresses gratitude and

appreciation to Chinaski's wife at one point for the fact that Chinaski has refrained from openly criticizing Mailer's writing; looking at the collected work of both men, this is just somewhat difficult to believe. Such arrogant self-congratulation and flagrant self-aggrandizement smack more of near-hallucinatory alcoholic self-delusion than thoughtful observation by a serious literary artist.

One gets the impression that Bukowski is well aware that he is an alcoholic, but typical of the extreme, incorrigible spectrum of that breed, he remains in denial, determined to defend his right to drink excessively, at the same time as he denies the liability this might entail for him as a person and an artist. The result is distorted self-appraisal, and cynical evaluation of others around him. In *Septuagenarian Stew* we find these lines in an ode to "my best friend": "reaching again / for the / bottle / not being / weak / but / strong: / taking that great / hit / setting the bottle down / again: each man / beats / the odds / in a different / fashion" (75). Maybe so. Still, none of this explains how alcohol actually *makes* one a better writer. This kind of stubborn denial and defensiveness takes on misanthropic proportions in another poem in the same volume, "cleansing the ranks," where the author angrily – one could even say viciously – excoriates alcoholics who go into treatment programs like AA, claiming that "they are horrible people / . . . what got them in a silly tizzy / alcoholic shit-state is what I use to taper-off / with. / some people just fail at everything . . . this is immensely resented by the true of the / tribe: we have earned our place here, feel worthy and / honored in our station, would prefer not to be / represented by worthless fakers: one can't give up / what one / never had" (117-18). It seems foolhardy and far-fetched to claim privileged status for a disease that destroys

the mind and twists the personality into snarling knots, and to pretend that the progressive process of decay somehow transforms one into a better writer.

This obsession with drinking is reflected throughout the poetry; we find another ode to his "best friend" in a later piece, "the last drink" (*Septuagenarian Stew* 360-61). The reader is invited to contemplate the merits of the final glass of wine of the evening (or morning), accompanied by the usual inference that without the precious booze the sacred source of poetic inspiration would simply evaporate. Bukowski, once again, defends his obsession, and solicits our corroboration and approval. Since the critic's focus must remain foremost on the artistic work and not so much on the author's personal habits, the message of the poem becomes essentially irrelevant; all we are left with is the possibility of an aesthetic judgment. While Bukowski's poetry *can* be eloquent, profound, and deeply moving at its best, here, and in many other places – particularly, I would argue, in the later work, when the accumulated effects of chronic, severe alcoholism had really begun to take their toll – the writing is flat, almost dull.

One wonders how Bukowski's poetic lines can be distinguished from prose, and whether the line breaks are not, in fact, often quite arbitrary, contrived merely to make the words on the printed page *look* like a poem. Adam Kirsch's comment in this regard is quite accurate, I think, even if it does not necessarily apply to all the poetry: "Bukowski's free verse is really a series of declarative sentences broken up into a long, narrow column, the short lines giving an impression of speed and terseness even when the language is sentimental and clichéd" (3). In my view, one would be hard pressed to find anything more "sentimental and clichéd" than the fond and addled meditation on a final glass of wine in "the last drink."

We see this same kind of hazy bemusement reflected in another poem from the same period, "drunk with the Buddha," which finds the poet feeling somewhat self-satisfied and benign: "we continue to work / knowing all about death and / demise . . . our limitations [like excessive drinking?] are our strengths . . . you've come a long way, baby . . . I type on / scattering any number of / horizons" (*Septuagenarian Stew* 254-55). As far as I can tell, the only line that even begins to approach poetic expression is the last, the one about "scattering horizons." The mention of the 70s feminist cliché does not merit comment, especially not its familiarity in connection with cigarette ads of that period. Russell Harrison argues that while Bukowski's later poems may appear to suffer from lack of figurative expression, the traditional hallmark of verse, and to seem quite literal instead (like a series of factual, declarative sentences arbitrarily parsed into short lines, with random, apparently haphazard breaks), this is actually the result of deliberate artistic intention. Bukowski eschews metaphor in favor of metonymy, Harrison claims, in order to underscore the image of the individual circumscribed by an impersonal world of senseless objects: "The absence of metaphor and the relentless metonymy further emphasize both the extent to which the physical world impinges on the threatened subject and the extent to which the subject is a part of that world: the subject becomes defined in narrative and through its contiguous relations to objects" (36-37).

It is not exactly clear to me what Harrison is referring to here. Metonymy, although distinct from metaphor as a literary device, remains a form of figurative language, for it substitutes words for other words, and therefore relies on analogy to convey meaning, just like simile and metaphor do. The fact is, in Bukowski's poems the diction often seems literal because it *is* literal. Furthermore, as Kirsch asserts, the "verse" reads like

expository prose. Is Harrison reading more into Bukowski work than is actually there? And does this stem from excess of admiration and eagerness to praise of the kind Rahv described? My sense is that Bukowski's prose and poetry in the earlier work was, in fact, more literary, more artistic; it dealt with raw, painful experience that defied easy comprehension, and naturally lent itself to – even *required* – figurative diction. Much of the later writing derived from a more complacent mood, a sensibility lulled by financial security and personal notoriety. Some critics have argued that Bukowski tapered off on his drinking due to his wife Linda's influence. Although it seems he did switch from the hard stuff to mostly wine, he consumed more alcohol than ever, as Barry Mills attests, and as Bukowski himself continues to proudly boast throughout his later work.

In one story in the latter pages of *Septuagenarian Stew*, "Mad Enough," Bukowski recounts what sounds like a real-life episode, one that reveals much about his drinking, his relationship with his wife, and his attitude toward writing. When he meets the people involved with producing and shooting a film of one of his books, his first gesture is to challenge the lead actor to a drinking contest. Later he is pressed as "the famous writer" by an interviewer to supply some sagacious observations about life, and he offers these gemstones of wisdom as evidence of his innate genius:

> We are all trapped by circumstance and become crippled trying to escape. . . . And there's always some son of a bitch trying to give you the business on the freeway and he doesn't know who you are and he doesn't care. Worse than not caring: he'd just as soon kill you. . . .Everything conspires and very little matters. And the big things seldom matter . . . What matters are the small things like making sure you have enough water in your car radiator, or getting your toenails

> clipped, or having enough toilet paper, or an extra light bulb, things like that. . . . Handle your trivial affairs well and gigantic matters will fall into place. . . .Even death will assume a perfect logic.

Just to assure us of the wisdom behind these remarks, the famous writer adds, when his interlocutor comments, dutifully, "I like that": "I like it too . . . even if it might not be true." (366). Ironic twists like this reinforce the image of mysterious wisdom possessed only by the genius, who remains aloof, above, and immune.

The celebrity author goes on with his drinking into the film's premiere, sneaking a couple of bottles of wine in a paper sack into the theatre, and proceeds to yell in drunken outrage when he does not approve of what he sees on the screen. The audience tries to silence him, but he angrily insists on his privilege, as screenwriter, to disrupt the viewing. On the drive home, he is pulled over by LAPD for drunken driving, and is forced to lie facedown on the pavement in the pouring rain while the cops cuff him, all the while shouting, "I'M THE GREATEST WRITER OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY! IS THIS HOW YOU TREAT YOUR IMMORTALS?" (369). Cleverly, Chinaski makes his getaway from the police station by means of a concealed car key; then, still drunk, he speeds along the freeway toward home. His wife pleads with him to slow down, then assaults him, while he is still at the wheel, in panic-stricken fury, scratching his face so badly it requires medical attention the next day. At story's end, the writer's tone is smug. He conveys no sense that he may have embarrassed himself, or endangered anyone else. Apparently, he *does* feel he is immortal, as well as beyond reproach.

It is sad to think that alcohol and ego may have caused Bukowski to remain enclosed within himself after his marriage to Linda Beighle. At the end of *Women*, one senses that

Chinaski feels he may at last have found a true soul mate. He has experienced an inner epiphany, of sorts, and expresses remorse for his carelessness in relationships: “What kind of a shit was I? I could certainly play some nasty, unreal games. What was my motive? Was I trying to get even for something? . . . I wasn’t considering anything but my own selfish, cheap pleasure. . . . I tinkered with lives and souls as if they were playthings” (236). More than any of the others, he realizes, Sara (Linda) is thoughtful, faithful, and devoted.

Linda Beighle, eventually Linda Bukowski, seems to have remained loyal, supportive, and caring throughout their life together, but their relationship was far from peaceful; Bukowski was verbally abusive, and there were frequent domestic disturbances, as well as periods of estrangement. Barry Mills recounts a disgraceful incident where Bukowski actually physically assaulted Linda during a videotaped interview. Clearly, much of Bukowski’s abusive behavior stemmed from his heavy drinking. He already suffered from a violent temper as a result of severe childhood abuse from his father, as Laura Weddle notes. Excess alcohol deadens the frontal lobes of the brain, the seat of judgment and self-control, leaving the person to function mainly on instinct; thus it is not surprising that Bukowski may have lapsed into primordial aggression of the type he had witnessed and been subjected to all his young life when he had too much too drink.

Bukowski reveals deep-seated resentment against his wife in one poem in *Septuagenerian Stew,* a kind of she-never-understood-me lament that corresponds, along with verbal and physical abuse, with what we know is often typical of alcoholic husbands, beyond whatever personal differences may have caused strain in the relationship. He appeals directly to the reader to corroborate that *he* is just a regular guy,

while *she* is the one who remains stubbornly unreasonable and myopic. She is the one who needs to look in the mirror. We see here the self-pity and denial of a drinker who is too agitated, befuddled, and self-involved to even consider the fact that he might play a role in the interpersonal dynamic of the relationship: "well, I hope *you* / understand this / when I tell you / that the wife is / the *last* person / to understand her / husband, it's as if she was / looking into a / mirror, / only she's so / *close* / (nose pressed flat) / that she can't see anything. / and this is no joke" (307-08). The terms used to characterize "the wife" infer derision and scorn as well as resentment; an objective, impartial reader might feel inclined to speculate about whether it is, in fact, "no joke" that it is actually the husband who fails to perceive the truth in this situation.

Regardless of the details of Bukowski's married life, we still must come to terms with the quality of the writing. In another poem from this same period, "celebrating this," we once again receive the impression of complacency, as well as exaggerated self-confidence and self-importance. "Writing," we are advised, "is one of the easiest jobs / going: so many hours to throw away, so many women to / get into trouble / with." One can only wonder, at this stage, if "so many women" are not faded memories of past glory, waved here like a worn and weathered battle flag. In any case, writing involves little or no strain: "you don't even think about being a / writer / you just blank out and zombie around / and / that's what life is / for: avoiding as much strain as / possible before your / death . . . I need nothing but my typing / fingers / and a / minimal / amount of / pain" (*Septuagenerian Stew* 356-57). It would seem that Bukowski was so sure of his reputation by this time that he believed the writing was on automatic pilot, that everything he produced would be considered wonderful, while the wine flowed and

served as anesthetic and artistic lubricant. The literary significance of words produced from "a minimal amount of pain," however, remains arguable. It is also disturbing to think of a concept of life with "so many hours to throw away."

The preoccupation with alcohol continued right through the final years; sitting at the typewriter with a bottle seems to have become a nightly ritual, a hobby, the way some men go down to the basement woodshop after a tough day at the office. Bukowski's office, of course, was the racetrack. It would be reasonable to expect, I think, that a poet intent on depicting apocalyptical matters, like those in "Dinosauria, we," "finish," and "something's knocking at the door" (*Pleasures of the Damned* 520, 412, 2), might want to spend significant time studying current events in the world. He or she would want to make sure that poetic vision is at least partially grounded and informed by factual knowledge, and not dependent solely on personal speculation, meandering imagination, momentary intuition, and perhaps a degree of alcoholic hallucination. Bukowski, apparently, considered his genius too massive and all-comprehensive to require such preparation. Perhaps, to a degree, he was correct. "Dinosauria, we" and "something's knocking" are amazing pieces of writing – lyrical, enchanting, incisive, and chilling.

I think it is fair to say that "finish," however, is less successful, less compelling, less true to experience. Yes, the world is falling apart, the poet seems to be lamenting, but this sad fact has little or nothing to do with me. I'll just sit here and eat my can of hash "and wait / without wonder" – I knew this was going to happen all along. "I hear the / shooting in the streets," but I needn't be concerned; they won't bring their guns in *my* kitchen. It's everybody else's fault this is happening, not mine; it's all due to people who have lived casual, careless, mindless lives – unlike the poetic genius who perceives the truth. People

are mediocre and stupid: “we have done this to ourselves, we / deserve this / we are like roses that have never bothered to / bloom . . . somehow I’m glad we’re through / finished . . . when the troops come up here / I don’t care what they do for / we already killed ourselves / each day we got out of bed.” Perhaps Bukowski could have read this one out to explain what was happening as Nazi soldiers burst into the Warsaw ghetto for the final purge. Maybe some admiring fan could have this published and distributed in Burma to the cyclone victims starving there as of this writing, so that they can at least take solace in the knowledge that their misery is really their own fault, because they are “roses who never bothered to bloom.” Poems like “finish” might be touted as manifestations of prophetic genius. But perhaps they can be more accurately evaluated as the ramblings of a genius who dissipated his talent and muddled his mind with excessive drink, and lapsed into misanthropic narcissism. When Bukowski bemoans the waste he sees among the “human errors” that comprise the masses, one cannot help think of the waste of talent his own career exemplifies. Clutching his glass of spirits, he exempts himself from the horrible consequences of the apocalypse he predicts, and pretends to welcome.

There will always be discussion, and disagreement, about what exactly constitutes a “poem,” what distinguishes it from prose. One thing I think we can safely say, however, with general consensus, is that good poetry is driven by emotion as well as guided by thought. Eliot’s conception of “felt thought” in relation to Donne’s verse is useful here. Regarded from this perspective, perhaps it will be revealing to compare an apocalyptic poem from the later period like “finish” with an earlier effort on a similar theme – “the crunch,” from *Love Is a Dog from Hell*. The style and structure of the two poems are

basically the same; we are once again still dealing with what are essentially declarative sentences broken somewhat arbitrarily into the appearance of poetic lines. There is little attention to cadence, and virtually no rhyme. Yet I would argue that "the crunch" is a more compelling piece of writing, for two reasons. First, the poet does not stand outside the experience, as if he is aloof and superior, and in a position because of his elite status to judge and excoriate everyone else, as seems to be happening in "the finish." Second, the emotion expressed resonates with a tone of lamentation and regret, mixed with stubborn hope for improvement in human prospects. In this regard it can be correlated with another poem that insists on the possibility of humans creating a better world – "we must" from *Septuagenerian Stew* (100-01), although I do not think that work reflects the same poignancy of tone; it is earnest, but also to some extent, more strident. The images also seem more forced, less integral, less convincing.

Lines in "the crunch" evoke nightmare apparitions of murderous soldiers running amok through the streets, just like "the finish" does, but here the poet expresses no blame, takes no grim satisfaction in scolding that "we have brought this on ourselves." Rather, there is a pervasive sense of sadness: "there is a loneliness in this world so great / that you can see it in the slow movement of / the hands of a clock. / people so tired / mutilated / either by love or no love . . . *we* are afraid" [my emphasis]. There is a feeling that the poet is very much part of the situation, that he is acting as a spokesperson for others in a similar predicament. He suggests a source for human woes: "People just are not good to each other / one on one," and implies that this is the source of our most urgent problem --our loneliness: "the terror of one person / aching in one place / alone." He evokes a simple but effective image of the beauty and possibility inherent in *our* lives:

"I look at young girls / stems / flowers of chance," and insists, "there must be a way. / surely there must be a way we have not yet / thought of" (162-64). This, in my opinion, is a far better piece of poetry than "the finish," not in a technical sense, but because the theme is more compassionate, more hopeful, more humane. The later poem seems bitter, sarcastic, and judgmental, and the writer seems to be pontificating from the clouds rather standing on the ground like everybody else.

Doren Robbins, an enthusiastic fan, as we have seen, admits to the anomaly of the alcohol-addled, less inspired work, suggesting that more careful editing may be required, but she minimizes the overall impact of such careful discrimination on an evaluation of the opus generally:

> Bukowski's less poetic alcoholic manias, the really comically lame machismo inflatedness, and general idealization of the raunchy might be edited out one day and forgotten as eccentricities in the less successful poems when they predominate. Maybe they won't. At worst they are harmless malfunctions which are a small portion of a larger and stronger body of work. (285)

I suppose whether one considers the aberrations in the writing a mere matter of "harmless malfunctions" is an issue of personal judgment, but it also remains relevant for aesthetic, ethical, and analytical estimation of the work, which is the central concern we are addressing in this paper. It seems to me that one might reasonably argue that, however obvious the talent and genius of the man – and both are undeniable, especially in the early material -- there is evidence of moral recklessness, intellectual irresponsibility, and artistic carelessness in some of the later writing which brings into question its worthiness for consideration as serious literary art. Furthermore, one can reasonably attribute this as

the cause for Bukowski's exclusion from the canon so far, and the lack of critical and scholarly attention. Personally, I think it is unfair to lump all of his work together; an editing process might help focus attention on those segments of Bukowski's writing that, in my opinion, stand with the best material in American literature.

Doren Robbins makes a reasonable claim when she asserts that the best of Bukowski's poems "are seldom equaled" (284). We see clear evidence of this, beyond the two apocalyptic verses already mentioned ("Dinosauria, we" and "something's knocking at the door") in "something for the touts, the nuns, the grocery clerks and you . . ." and also in "poem for personnel managers:"(*Pleasures of the Damned* 56, 265). There is also the very powerful, mysteriously moving poetical dialogue entitled "talk" in *Septuagenarian Stew*, which appears to be a conversation between two sides of the poet himself, or an interchange with a close alter ego, that contains truly lyrical, compelling, haunting lines such as these:

> the dogs of the years were after me and the music was bad / and the food was poisoned and the jails were / overcrowded. . . . I swilled countless bottles against the / constant / dread of waking up in the morning / chained to nowhere I / helpless to prayer and magic / drank enough booze to kill half a dozen healthy / oxen / but I still awakened, / my listless life ticking away, no chance for the heart, you / know. . . . as the sweet girls in gingham dresses suck at the roots / of monsters . . . advice to the helpless, I suggested, could be the terrifying / invention of sadistic pigs fat in their own dowdy / juice. . . . adding knowledge to knowledge is / insufficient . . . that rug eaten away / by the footsteps of the trapped who had already passed / through . . . those sad and bartered people . . .

> the rivers of immensity only / flow one way, they flow toward you, life doesn't
> give it to you and / death / can't take it away . . . (92-94, 97)

It is interesting to note here that while what Kirsch alleges about Bukowski's poetic lines may be largely true – that they consist of declarative sentences arbitrarily broken to make them appear to be in poetic form, the lines cited above can hardly be characterized as sentimental or clichéd. The inversion in "I / helpless to prayer and magic," and the startling diction employed in the phrase "*bartered* people" are just two examples of innovation and brilliance. Bukowski delivers here a powerful tone and truly innovative style that, as Robbins attests, stands with the best poetry ever written.

There is yet another striking example of this kind of accomplishment, another manifestation of Bukowski's genius, in an earlier poem from *Love Is a Dog from Hell,* written for a woman poet he never met, only corresponded with off and on until he learned of her suicide:

> so you went with the famous and wrote
> about the famous, and, of course, what you found out
> is that the famous are worried about
> their fame – not the beautiful young girl in bed
> with them, who gives them *that,* and then awakens
> in the morning to write upper case poems about
> ANGELS AND GOD, we know God is dead, they've told
> us, but listening to you I wasn't sure. Maybe
> it was the upper case. (47)

These lines are poignant, sad, nuanced, and beautiful. But then the years go by and the alcohol continues to flow. According to biographer Barry Mills, even though the genius eventually turned mostly to wine, at the insistence of his wife Linda, Bukowski's daily consumption was greater than ever, something about which the writer actually boasts, and gloats. We end up with poems that are less lyrical, less poetic, really, whether because the genius had become complacent or over-confident, or just a bit befuddled, it is impossible to tell. What is obvious, though, is that we have come a long step down with later poems like "my special craving," where the reader is regaled with an ode about how our hero admires lobsters and crabs for dinner when he goes out to dine on Sunday nights:

> even alive they make me hungry . . .
> they tell me that they boil them
> alive, and this does
> cause some minor disturbance within
> me, but outside of that
> lobsters and crabs are one of the few things
> that make the earth a happy place . . .
> crabs, beer, lobsters,
> an occasional lady . . .
> I say lighting my cigar,
> thinking about Sunday night lobster dinner,
> love love love
> running wild,
> it feels good sometimes just to be living

with something so nice

in store. (*Pleasures of the Damned* 416-17)

Perhaps this is one of the poems Doren Robbins has in mind when she suggests that some need to edited out, though it hardly a product of "alcoholic mania;" in any case, it is certainly harmless enough. Perhaps one could even fairly characterize it as trite and banal. Regardless, there is an obvious and striking difference here from the work being generated by the genius in earlier, less comfortable, less damaged years.

Contemporary, sometime friend, and fellow poet A.D. Winans urges us to look elsewhere for a full appreciation of Bukowski's genius, and his worthiness to be included in the literary canon:

> When friends and fellow writers raved about Bukowski's poetry, I urged them to read his prose. I find his prose to be fast, gripping, and frequently laced with humor. In my opinion, his prose is more concise and disciplined than his poetry, which at times has a tendency to ramble on and too often reflects forced endings. This does not diminish the fact that many of his poems are as powerful as any ever written. (19)

We have already noted examples of poetry that fit the category Winans describes in that last sentence (concurring with Robbins on this point as well) – although the question remains just how *many* of Bukowski's poems merit such praise, especially among those produced in the later years. So I think it might be instructive to follow his advice and turn to the prose to see if there seems to be any qualitative change in Bukowski's writing over time in that domain. My own sense is that there definitely is, and probably for similar reasons. Some of the early short stories, along with novels like *Post Office, Factotum,*

Women, and *Ham on Rye*, in my view, stand with the best fiction in American literature. If there is any controversy over that appraisal, it derives from the problematical nature of the content, not the writing itself.

It will require extensive research to date accurately all of pieces from the vast array of Bukowski materials that have been published so far (a task far beyond the scope of this paper), but it seems certain that a story like "Life of a Bum," from the beginning pages of *Septuagenerian Stew,* was composed significantly earlier than other pieces in the volume. Stories such as "Camus," "Fame," and "No Wing High," to mention only a few of the tales in the second half of the book, are more notable for their forced quality and lack of plausibility than their brilliance. But there is truly memorable writing in "Life of a Bum." Harry, we are informed, "moored at the bar. It was his one haven. It was merciless and exact" (59). He ponders the personality of McDuff, his drinking companion: "you couldn't hate him and you couldn't like him. He was like a calendar or a pen holder" (60). The atmosphere in the bar is one of uneasy but welcome camaraderie: "It got very deadly between drinks. The patrons, they just needed to sit and be somewhere. There was a general loneliness and a gentle fear and the need to be together and chat a bit; it eased them" (61).

Harry tags along with Monk, the window washer (whom he will soon push in front of a bus) when the latter goes for a haircut, and observes the banter in the barber chair: "Monk laughed. His laugh was like linoleum being sliced by a dull knife. Or maybe it was a death-cry" (63-64). Harry, almost crazy with craving as he waits for his next drink, cautions himself: "Don't play with madness, madness doesn't play" (64). He registers Monk's complacent conceit: "Self-love with only a twinge of doubt" (65). When the

belligerent chef in the cheap steak house leans over the counter toward Harry we are informed: “He had long nostril hairs, powerfully intimidating, like an unscheduled nightmare” (66). At story’s end we find Harry contemplating the early evening traffic passing by on the street: “Harry glanced at the drivers of the cars. They seemed unhappy. The world was unhappy. People were in the dark. People were terrified and disappointed. People were caught in traps. People were defensive and frantic. They felt as if their lives were being wasted. And they were right” (69).

The purpose of close textual analysis here is to demonstrate what strikes me as the fine literary quality of the writing in this story: the use of anaphora, the quick, clipped cadence of the lines, the pathos of the tone, and the sadness of the theme, which sounds like a lament for the tragic burden carried through daily life by all humanity. What is even more remarkable is that this is accomplished in just a few pages, which recount how a bum, a beer hustler at a neighborhood bar, attaches to a blissfully self-satisfied benefactor, pushes him in front of an oncoming bus, steals his wallet whiles he lays stricken, and then goes off to feast on a double order of greasy steak and fries in a fast-food dive. In subsequent stories in the volume, however, the quality of the writing declines. In “Camus,” for example, we are invited to believe that a college professor challenges a male student to a fist fight on the campus lawn, and is then offered sex for an A by a comely co-ed. Maybe, but it seems a bit of a stretch. What is more, there are no lines here that catch the eye like the ones cited in “Life of a Bum.” Not even close. And this pretty much generalizes for all the rest of the stories in the volume, with the possible exception of “Action,” and that one, too, seems to have been written earlier.

If we turn to *Women* for further examples of prose style and literary quality in the earlier fiction, we discover similar linguistic treasures – however bawdy, reckless, and irreverent the content. Some of Bukowski's images are not only uniquely original, but absolutely delightful. Lydia's sister, we are told, is an incessant, obsessive, monolithic conversationalist, and apparently it runs in the family:

> Glendoline pulled up a chair and started talking. She *could* talk. If she was a sphinx she could have talked, if she was a stone she could have talked. I wondered when she'd get tired and leave. Even after I stopped listening it was like being battered with tiny ping pong balls. . . . Then a sister act began. They began talking to each other. They were both standing up, waving their arms at each other. The voices pitched higher. They threatened each other with physical harm. At last – near the world's end – Glendoline did a gigantic twist of the torso and flung herself out of the doorway through the large flapbang of the screen door and was gone – but still heard, ignited and bemoaning – down to her apartment in the back of the court. (12)

The rhythm of the prose bounces zestfully along. The analogies are hilarious – "like being battered with ping pong balls" alone is worth the entire paragraph. Raucous humor of this kind pervades the text, especially the first half, where we are dealing with Lydia, who has to go down as one of the zaniest, craziest, dangerously sexiest female characters in all of literature. One could argue that her character is based on a real woman, Linda King, and that therefore she is not Bukowski's creation, but the brilliance of the story telling here – the timing, variation of tone and texture, layers of nuance, admixture of

humor and pathos, and intensity and interest of plot -- remains uncontroversial, and has been seldom equaled.

There are frequent passages in the novel that resonate with a cadence and energetic flow uniquely their own, and display personal and even philosophical reflections that are riveting and compelling, no matter how non-systematic and incidental the intellectual processing involved. They reveal an empathetic, compassionate, and earnest, *loving* dimension to the irascible and irreverent genius. Going to the fights with Katherine (the only one out of approximately twenty-three women he has sex with throughout the book – he propositions several more – whom he ever considers marrying) enables Chinaski to correlate women and writing and the struggles of the poor all at once, in a kind of free association meditation:

> Human relationships were strange. I mean, you were with one person a while, eating and sleeping and living with them, loving them, talking to them, going places together, and then it stopped. Then there was a short period when you weren't with anybody, then another woman arrived, and you ate with her and fucked her, and it all seemed so normal, as if you had been waiting just for her and she had been waiting for you. I never felt right being alone; sometimes it felt good but it never felt right.
>
> The first fight was a good one, lots of blood and courage. There was something to be learned about writing from watching boxing matches or going to the racetrack. The message wasn't clear but it helped me. That was the important part: the message wasn't clear. It was wordless, like a house burning, or an earthquake or a flood, or a woman getting out of a car, showing her legs. I didn't

> know what other writers needed; I didn't care, I couldn't read them anyway. I was locked into my own habits, my own prejudices. It wasn't bad being dumb *if* the ignorance was all your own. I knew that someday I would write about Katherine and that it would be hard. It was easy to write about whores, but to write about a good woman was much more difficult.
>
> The second fight was good, too. The crowd screamed and roared and swilled beer. They had temporarily escaped the factories, the warehouses, the slaughterhouses, the car washes – they'd be back in captivity the next day but *now* they were out – they were wild with freedom. They weren't thinking about the slavery of poverty. Or the slavery of welfare or foodstamps. The rest of us would be all right until the poor learned how to make atom bombs in their basements. (100-01)

There are numerous passages of similar quality that provide wit and insight and sheer delight in the pace and originality of the language, far too many to quote here. Suffice it to say, this is a novel one races through hoping it will never end, and then can read over and over with increasing pleasure. It is not possible to say that about many books.

Turning to *Hollywood*, published just over a decade later, we find something quite different. Although both novels are presented in first person narrative, the focus has changed. In the former story the narrator serves as foil to a brilliant cast of unforgettable characters – some, like Lydia and Tammie, among the most colorful to be found anywhere in fiction. The center of concentration in *Hollywood* has shifted; it is now on the writer – what genius he is, how he stands apart and aloof, looking down with condescending bemusement even on established artistic figures like Mailer, Sartre, and

Godard, patronizing film stars, and always, always bragging about how much alcohol he can consume and still remain overpoweringly, stunningly brilliant. The substance of the saga – the corruption of the film industry – is nothing new, and not recounted in any particularly innovative or memorable way. What resonates most after finishing the book, I think, is an impression of the author's insatiable craving for booze, and his apparently limitless capacity to imbibe. Naturally, the quality of the prose reflects the diminution in artistic intent, import, and effect, as in this rather representative passage:

> Of course, what made the whole thing smell was that many of the rich and the famous were actually dumb cunts and bastards. They had simply fallen off into a big pay-off somewhere. Or they were enriched by the stupidity of the general public. They were usually talentless, eyeless, soulless, they were walking pieces of dung, but to the public they were god-like, beautiful, and revered. Bad taste creates many more millionaires than good taste. It finally boiled down to a matter of who got the most votes. In the land of the moles a mole was king. (92)

Perhaps a devoted member of the cult would regard the last three sentences as momentous maxims; they strike me as obvious, superficial sentiments, and as therefore quite trite. In any case, there is nothing particularly original or interesting about the writing here. One wonders if Bukowski would have gained the fame he did if *Hollywood* had been published prior to *Women* or *Post Office*; this later book receives unwarranted praise and attention, in my view, because it comes from a writer of established notoriety and reputed marketability. Ironically, what Bukowski impugns so scathingly – one could say he walks a thin line between satire and misanthropy here – to others, applies just as much to him, though I suspect he would be the last to admit it.

Bukowski may have risen from the working class, and from time to time may express sympathy for the downtrodden, but none of this should be mistaken for espousal of solidarity or belief in a community of purpose. As Loss Glazier cautions: "Everyone is suspect . . . only the artist stands out, supreme from the rest of mankind. . . . Anything that savors of the 'regular guy,' the man in the streets, everyone's pal, is a pose. The real Bukowski is the isolated, demonic artist, alone and glorying in his aloneness" (46). With his success came increasing self-importance, and a kind of mean-spirited arrogance. His sweeping generalizations about contemporary writers in the poem "nowhere" reflect this without a doubt. He demands to know rhetorically where the current masters can be found, cataloguing the supposed greats (as determined from self-education in the LA Library) like an aggressive drunk dropping names at a cocktail party, clearly implying that he himself belongs among them. But no one else among living writers qualifies. He refers to his peers as "soft / flakes . . . these now, what are / they: practiced ineptness, what / boredom of / language, what a / crass bastardly trick / against print / against pages / against inhaling and / exhaling" (*Septuagenerian Stew* 160-61). As with his phrase about "human errors" in "the masses," one can only wonder what Bukowski has in mind when he rails against those he considers guilty of offenses against breathing. Eugenics?

Bukowski has a valid point, of course, in claiming the right to create on his own terms, to break free from formulations imposed by convention or tradition. Every artist has that right – one could even claim, that *responsibility,* for how else can human creative endeavor progress? But his poetic manifesto, "the Rape of the Holy Mother," however passionate and even eloquent, rings with an anger that seems to overstate the case for

freedom of expression. The artist casts aspersions that are such exaggerated characterizations that they border, once again, on misanthropy. The establishment critics belong to "the temple of / the snobs and the / fakers;" they lead a craven existence, constantly fearing loss of "their wives / their automobiles / their girlfriends / their University / jobs." They are, quite simply, "the Inbred / Dead" (*Septuagenerian Stew* 230-31). The tone is bold and angry, but it also conveys nuances of hatred and contempt. It is one thing to claim a place for one's own work, something quite different to do so with utter disregard for fellowship with others.

There can be no question that Charles Bukowski deserves to be considered a major literary figure, in my mind, but not without due allowance for his lapses and imperfections, the distortions precipitated by carelessness, complacency, severe alcoholism, and egomania. He can be viewed as the ultimate narcissist in a culture where self-engrossment and self-indulgence prevail and are posited as the inevitable and necessary norm. "Everything is permitted." Certainly one feels compelled to challenge the extremes to which he sometimes takes the idea of freedom of expression. In *Women*, for example, Chinaski addresses a boy eight years-old, Lydia's son Tonto, referring to the noise that emanates from the bedroom when he and the boy's mother are having sex: "You know that when your mother screams at night I'm not beating her. You know who's *really* in trouble . . . Why don't you come in and help me?" (36). This is naughty and irreverent, a bold violation of taboos, but it also raises concerns about risk of injury to a minor. There is reason to question whether this is a laughing matter.

There is also the issue of how far Chinaski goes in endorsing the notion of complete lack of inhibition, of how unscrupulous he allows himself to become. Sex often seems not

only violent in his world, but savagely primitive, even murderous. “The thought of sex as something forbidden excited me beyond all reason. It was like one animal knifing another into submission,” Chinaski confesses (77), and this idea repeats in various forms throughout the text. When Mercedes declines normal intercourse, Chinaski essentially assaults her, forcing her anally. Sex with Katherine, he informs us, “was like raping the Virgin Mary” (99). With Nicole he is scarcely more delicate: “I gave her 3 or 4 particularly mean rips and she gasped. Now she knew a writer firsthand. . . . I was fucking a culture-bitch. . . . I found I wasn’t particularly interested in her, it was just something to do” (70). Valerie has a vaginal infection, which he blithely ignores. He imposes intercourse on a semi-conscious Tammie in the Chelsea Hotel: “I went straight for Tammie’s core. Dog fashion. Dogs knew best. . . . I rocked and socked her body. Despite the pills she was trying to speak. ‘Hank . . .’ she said” (144) With Iris, the eager and lively young woman he meets at a reading in Vancouver, it is pretty much the same thing: “I just went ahead and gave her an old-fashioned horse fuck. . . . I’d always liked Canadian bacon. . . . That bitch with her red shoes and long stockings – she deserved what she was going to get from me. I tried to rip her apart, I tried to spilt her in half. . . . it was like murder. I had her” (246, 248).

In one of his blind assignations with a secret admirer, the woman’s physical appearance does not turn out as agreeable as he had anticipated (most of the time, they do, he gloats): “Valenica just wasn’t my type in any sense of the word. I disliked her. There are people like that – immediately upon meeting them you despise them” (258); but this is no deterrent: “One more fuck. Research. There was no sense of violation involved. Poverty and ignorance bred their own truth. She was mine. We were two

animals in the forest and I was murdering her" (260). Tanya looks like she would have trouble passing for eighteen, and this prompts Chinaski to play on the notion of pedophilia, in the most disturbing of terms: "I was being raped by a child. . . . Flesh alone, without love. We were filling the air with the stink of pure sex. My child, my child. How *can* your small body do these things? . . . And we were perfect strangers. It was like fucking your own *shit*" (281).

There can be no doubt that Bukowski's writing has contributed significantly to the liberation of the topic of human sexuality as a fit subject for literature, much as Henry Miller did before him. In this sense his work is stimulating and refreshing; sexual feelings are far more likely to transform into perversion when repressed and denied than when allowed into conscious awareness. But, as with any other crucial aspect of behavior and ethics, there can be a fine line between freedom and license, and this requires careful moral discrimination. Chinaski himself deliberates on this idea as he takes Iris to the airport to say goodbye for the final time:

> The sex had been fine . . . it had not been without feeling, dead meat coupled with dead meat. I detested that type of swinging . . . Strangers when you meet, strangers when you part – a gymnasium of bodies masturbating each other. People with no morals often considered themselves more free, but mostly they lacked the ability to feel or to love. So they became swingers. The dead fucking the dead. There was no gamble or humor in their game – it was corpse fucking corpse. Morals were restrictive, but they *were* grounded on human experience down through the centuries. Some morals tended to keep people slaves in factories, in churches and true to the State. Other morals simply made good sense. It was like a

> garden filled with poisoned fruit and good fruit. You had to know which to pick and eat, which to leave alone. (250)

All of this sounds reasonable enough, and one wants to give Bukowski the benefit of the doubt for successfully balancing on that thin line, because the liberation he provides from senseless puritanical restraint is so exhilarating. Still, there are disturbing indications in his writing, places where one wonders just how far Bukowski is willing to go, and where that will lead us. In a poem written just about the same time as *Women*, for example, entitled "waving and waving goodbye," we find these lines: "I stretched out and whacked-off / thinking about a little girl I had seen / on a red bicycle about a week ago" (*Love Is a Dog from Hell* 185). It is not certain who the poet is referring to, but the correlation of "little girl" and "bicycle" is very troubling. In "girls in pantyhose" in the same volume there is an explicit drive-by sexual fantasy about thirteen year-old schoolgirls sitting on a bench at a bus stop; perhaps this is harmless. But just a few pages further on we find another girl-on-a-bus stop-bench episode; this time the author tells us "I'm a peep-freak," and he circles the block and parks and stares and masturbates.

In a short story about writer's block, and trying to come up with another episode for his monthly installment in a porn magazine, the narrator considers the attractive possibilities of sexually assaulting a small child in the dentist's office as research material to break the deadlock: "*That's it, there's one,* thought Martin: *man molests little girl in dentist's waiting room while her mother is getting a wisdom tooth extracted. And make it realistic and terrible, yet humorous. Man wants to but doesn't want to, yet in her way little girl leads him on. When mother walks out he has little girl's panties on his head*" (246). The narrator approaches the child, but is interrupted by the mother, so ends up

groping the hygienist instead. It is difficult to determine the ethical dimensions and implications of a story like this, and attempting to do so here is not my purpose. My point simply is to examine yet one more reason why critical and scholarly evaluation of Bukowski's work, and estimation of his proper place in the literary canon, remains problematic. Blanket excoriation and exclusion is certainly unfair, but indiscriminate adulation as a cult idol is a glaring exaggeration, also. Quite a bit of thought, and careful sifting of material, will be required to draw realistic and sensible conclusions, in my view.

Most of all, I think it serves us ill to extol the man as a writer-drinker, as Jeffrey Gomez does in a 1992 article, with the cute but rather naïve and misleading title, "pen & drink":

> Few other literary legacies are as set in concrete as this one – the hazed-over image of "Hank" Bukowski and his beautiful bottle of drink. This peculiarly American linkage between writing and drinking may have been defined by Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Lowry but, more than anyone else, Bukowski has sustained the iconic myth of literary drunkenness. Despite their handful of great books, his loaded predecessors died as "victims of the bottle." Bukowski though just grinds on relentlessly at 71, writing and drinking, drinking and writing. (22-23)

Pardon me for lack of due reverence for the icon, but this is sheer nonsense. Much of what Bukowski produced under the influence was of inferior quality, and some of it is highly questionable in terms of taste, and basic morality. He denied his alcoholism, and gradually became enamored of his success, when it might have behooved him more, and

benefited us all, if he had remained assiduous, and conscious of his responsibility as an artist. Much of his work, and his personal behavior, resonate with drunken belligerence and bombast. He became captivated with the notion of his own genius, and began to act, and write, as if masterpieces generated naturally and effortlessly from his keyboard at every sitting with his "beautiful bottle."

Nevertheless, Charles Bukowski's genius was real, and remained a powerful force right up until the end. His last novel, *Pulp*, is brilliantly original in many ways, even though it lacks the powerful and colorful prose style of earlier work from the seventies and early eighties. It is also impressive, and moving, that the man continued to write poetry right through his final illness. I even feel that one of his last poems, "sun coming down," where he reflects on his impending death, ranks with some of the best poetry he ever produced. When he wrote this, the emotion driving the fingers on the keys connected strongly to the lyrical voice and the lion's heart that had produced such a prodigious volume of words over the decades, and generated some of the old rogue's finest lines ever:

> It bothers the young most, I think: an unviolent slow death.
> Still it makes any man dream;
> You wish for an old sailing ship,
> The white salt-crusted sail
> And the sea shaking out hints of immortality.
>
> Sea in the nose
> Sea in the hair

Sea in the marrow, in the eyes

And yes, there in the chest.

Will we miss

The love of a woman or music or food

Or the gambol of the great mad muscled

Horse, kicking clods and destinies

High and away

In just one moment of the sun coming down? (*Pleasures of the Damned* 540)

The genius of the man, like his indomitable courage and his uncompromising individuality, was enormous. But his brilliant mind was burdened more than liberated by all the alcohol, which began as his defense against pain but gradually became the castle walls he hid behind to keep out a world he disdained. His writing, and his readership, are the less for that. We can celebrate his greatest work without compunction or reservation, and must continue to argue for the attention, appreciation, and respect it so justly deserves. But we do the man no honor by setting him on a pedestal, or deluding ourselves about the dimensions, and limitations, of his considerable contribution to human letters.

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