

## Notes on The Bukowski

1. Tony Quagliano writes me and asks will I write something on Bukowski for the *Small Press Review* he is putting together -

a review, a quick appraisal, whatever you like. Maybe from the angle of why you print his poems in your mag, especially since his apparent lack of concern with the technical aspects of craft seems to run counter to some of your stated aims in editing *NYQ*.

I write back and tell Tony Quagliano sure.

2. Bukowski's "apparent lack of concern with the technical aspects of craft"? Hell, he's technical to the point of making you think he has no craft at all, which I suppose is the ultimate technique, is the ultimate craft.
3. Bukowski's craft is the poem as poem. And the story as story. I mean, he has a gut notion of what a poem and story should be.
4. His poems and stories are anecdotal. They're like some beery barroom bard telling a long one, telling a good one. You can hear the voice. It takes skill to tell an anecdote well.
5. Here's an example of the anecdotal use of poem as poem. It's not Bukowski, it's Ezra Pound. Canto XII, where Pound tells an incredible shaggy dog story about "a pore honest sailor" who drinks himself into a hospital, and while he is there recuperating from a blind binge, they play a trick on him, they bring in a kid that has just been born in another ward and they tell him that *he* gave birth to it, that they took it out of *his* body when he came in stone drunk. Well, the sailor is so stupid or crazy that he believes them, and when he gets out of the hospital he gives up drink and he settles down to work for the rest of his life and he sends that kid through college, etc etc etc. until finally on his deathbed the sailor sees the kid come up to him and call him "father", and this pore honest sailor takes a long look at the kid and

he says:

"You called me your father, and I ain't.

"I ain't your daddy, no,

"I am not your fader but your moder," quod he,

"Your fader was a rich merchant in Stambouli."

- Canto XII

*Cantos*, New Directions

6. Thank god we've all come a long way from Tennyson when craft was seen as a lot of ta ta turn. And thank god Bukowski has spent most of his lifetime in bars and whorehouses, instead of in schools and universities.
7. Bukowski's craft is his *Style*. One that has been won. Like Hemingway, he earns his work. But he has said it for himself, in a poem entitled "Style" which appeared in issue 9 of *The New York Quarterly*:

### STYLE

style is the answer to everything --  
a fresh way to approach a dull or a  
dangerous thing.

to do a dull thing with style  
is preferable to doing a dangerous thing  
without it.

to do a dangerous thing with style  
is what I call Art.

bullfighting can be an Art.  
boxing can be an Art.  
loving can be an Art.  
opening a can of sardines can be an Art.

not many have style  
not many can keep style

I have seen dogs with more style than men  
although not many dogs have style,  
cats have it with  
abundance.

when Hemingway put his brains to the wall  
with a shotgun  
that was style.

or sometimes people give you style:  
Joan of Arc had style  
John the Baptist  
Christ  
Socrates  
Caesar,  
Garcia Lorca.

I've met men in jail with style  
I've met more men in jail with style  
than men out of jail.

style is the difference.

a way of doing,  
a way of being done.

6 heron standing quietly in a pool of water  
or you walking out of the bathroom naked  
without seeing  
me.

- issue 9 (winter 1972)  
*The New York Quarterly*

The whole poem is a good demonstration of  
Bukowski's style. How it moves from general  
statement to the stunning specifics of the last  
4 lines.

8. Here's another example of the Bukowski style  
in action, not in a poem but in a short story.  
He is describing a job he had once in a meat  
packing plant:

then several of the Black Muslims came running  
up with wheel-barrows painted a scabby and lumpy  
white, like white was mixed in white henshit. and  
each wheel-barrow was loaded with mounds of  
hams that floated in a thin and watery blood, no,  
they didn't float in the blood, they sat in it, like  
lead, like cannonballs, like death.

one of the boys jumped into the truck behind  
me and the other began throwing the hams at me  
and I caught them and threw them to the guy be-  
hind me who turned and threw the ham into the  
back of the truck, the hams came fast FAST and  
they were heavy and they got heavier. as soon as  
I threw one ham and turned another was already  
on the way to me through the air. I knew that  
they were trying to break me. I was soon sweat-  
ing as if faucets had been turned loose and my  
back ached, my wrists ached, my arms hurt.  
everything hurt and was down to the last impos-  
sible ounce of limp energy. I could barely see.  
barely summon myself to catch one more ham  
and throw it, one more ham and throw it. I was  
splashed in blood and kept getting the soft dead  
heavy FLUMP in my hands, the ham giving a lit-  
tle like a woman's butt, and I'm too weak to talk  
and say, hey, what the HELL'S the matter with  
you guys? the hams are coming and I am spinning,  
nailed, like a man on a cross under a tin helmet.  
and they are all empty, and I stand there swaying  
and breathing the yellow electric lights. it was a  
night in hell, well, I always liked night work.

- "Kid Stardust on the Porterhouse"  
*Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions*  
*and General Tales of Ordinary Madness*  
City Lights

The reader can see for himself what crazy  
things are working in this passage.....  
Action and life. If he can't see for himself, he  
ought to go back and reread..... If  
he still can't see it, no amount of explaining  
will help much.

9. I must admit there's one style problem I had  
with Bukowski's work. There seems to be a  
characteristic abatement at the end of any  
story or poem, like a shrugging off of the  
piece at the very end. It's sort of who-gives-  
a-fuck-anyway gesture that feels like a throw-  
away. At first I thought this was a defect, an  
unwillingness in Bukowski to go ahead and  
finish the job, realise whatever it was he was  
developing in the story or poem. Then I real-  
ised that this was a necessary settling of the  
voice of the poem, a return to the Persona.  
So maybe I ought to talk about his Persona.

10. Bukowski's Persona is himself, it's as if he uses  
himself like a piece of litmus paper which is  
reacting all over the place to some chemical  
situation. As writer, he lets us in on an exper-  
ience, all the while he holds himself there in  
the experience for us to check out his own  
reaction to the experience. This is not the  
same thing as seeing something through the  
writer's own eyes. With Bukowski, the writ-  
er's eyes are on the experience and also on  
himself in the act of the experience, both at  
the same time. Which makes for an eerie sort  
of lucidity. At times it can be downright  
frightening. Most of the time it works as a  
remarkable sanity.

11. I mentioned Hemingway. I think a couple of  
Bukowski's stories are as good - taut and real  
and unnerving - as any of Hemingway's. For  
example, "*All the Pussy We want*" I'd place  
on the same plane as "*The Killers*". Other  
Bukowski stories show he has learned a lot  
from Hemingway. Read over the first page  
of "*The White Beard*" and see how well he  
introducestheactionofthestoryascasually  
and as economically as Hemingway does  
in most of his stories.

12. Persona. Bukowski wrote a column for *Open  
City* called "*Notes of A Dirty Old Man*".  
Bukowski's Persona is this dirty old man  
watching himself go through experiences, act-  
ing and being acted upon. This Bukowski  
Persona has a lot in common with the Per-  
sona which W. C. Fields used to use in his  
comedy routines. But the dirty old man  
"mask" could just as easily be the bad little  
boy mask, or the Milton Satan mask who  
"durst defy the Omnipotent in arms", or a

Camus anti hero who rebels, curses, rants  
and gives god the finger. There's a lot of the  
heroic Job in Bukowski's barroom tables. Job  
who picks at his boils and sits there bitching  
at the way things are set up.

13. Here's one description of the Persona, in the  
open;ngofoneofBukowski'sbeststories,"*The Fiend*":



Martin Blanchard had married twice, divorced twice, shacked up many times. Now he was forty-five, lived alone on the fourth floor of an apartment house and had just lost his twenty-seventh job through absenteeism and disinterest.

He was living on his unemployment checks. His desires were simple - he liked to get drunk as much as possible, alone, and he liked to sleep long hours and stay in his apartment, alone. Another odd thing about Martin Blanchard was that he was never lonely. The longer he could remain separated from the human race, the better he felt. The marriages, the shackjobs, the one-night stands had made him feel that the sex act was not worth what the female demanded in return. Now he lived without the female and masturbated frequently.

- "The Fiend"  
Ibid

14. Behind this Persona is a hell of a lot of boredom with the ordinary goals which have been set up by our society. This is what makes the Bukowski Persona interesting as metaphor for our own lives.

"sorry, now, here, do you like overtime on a job?"

"oh, yes! I would like to work 7 days a week if possible, and 2 jobs if possible."

"why?"

"money, sir. money for a color tv. new autos, down payment on a home, silk pajamas, 2 dogs, an electric shave, life insurance, medical insurance, oh all kinds of insurance and college educations for my children if I have children and automatic doors on the garage and fine clothes and 45 dollar shoes, and cameras, wrist watches, rings, washers, refrigerators, new chairs, new beds, wall-to-wall carpeting, donations to the church, thermostat heating and . . . "

"all right, stop, now when are you going to use all this stuff?"

"I don't understand, sir."

"I mean, when you are working night and day and overtime, when are you going to enjoy these luxuries?"

"oh, there'll be a day, there'll be a day, sir!"

"and you don't think your kids will grow up some day and just think of you as an asshole?"

"after I've worked my fingers to the bone for them, sir! of course not!"

- "The Gut-Wrining Machine"  
Ibid

15. Persona. Beckett or Bukowski. They're playing different kinds of Endgame. Samuel Beckett in *Waiting For Godot* and *Kracpp's Last Tape* and *Happy Days*, presents us with characters who are at war with the futility of ex-

istence, on the brink of emptiness, vomiting out the void which is inside of them, talking to nothingness about nothingness, suffocating in the silence of their lives, pestered by their own impotence, and confronting impossibility with every gesture and syllable.

Bukowski's Endgame is a game of getting as many ends together as possible, his characters waste their lives chasing after each other's orifices, -fucking, farting, jerking off getting drunk, being broke, loafing around, getting picked up by cops, being beaten, betting on horses, spitting blood, and cruising for whores. They're also at war with the futility of existence, and Bukowski's sex is no more redemptive than Beckett's impotence is, in fact it's just as desperate and sterile. But Bukowski's characters do seem to get one hell of a bang out of a good lay. Count your blessings.

16. Beckett's Nihilism versus Bukowski's Resignation, Samuel Beckett is not strictly a nihilist, he does propose the "maybe" and the "perhaps". He takes Kierkegaard's "either/or" and makes it into "and/also". Beckett can be exasperating in his refusal to make an outright rejection of faith, based on the grim hope that there may be something somewhere that could turn up and work out. We can't close all our options.

Bukowski though has slammed the door on almost all experience outside his own carefully prescribed area of whores, horses, and booze. His apologia for this wholesale rejection is pretty persuasive:

are there good guys and bad guys? some that always lie. some that never lie? are there good and bad governments? no, there are only bad governments and worse governments. will there be the flash of light and heat that rips us apart one night while we are screwing or crapping or reading the comic strips or pasting blue-chip stamps into a book? instant death is nothing new, nor is mass instant death new. but we've improved the product; we've had these centuries of knowledge and culture and discovery to work with; the libraries are fat and crawling and overcrowded with books; great paintings sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars; medical science is transplanting the human heart; you can't tell a madman from a sane one upon the streets, and suddenly we find our lives, again, in the hands of the idiots. the bombs may never drop; the bombs might drop. eeney, meeney, miney, mo

....

now if you'll forgive me. dear readers, I'll get back to the whores and the horses and the booze, while there's time. If these contain death, then to me. it seems far less offensive to



be responsible for your own death than the other kind which is brought to you fringed with phrases of Freedom and Democracy and Humanity and/or any or all of the Bullshit.

first post, 12:30. first drink, now. and the whores will always be around. Claire. Penny, Alice, Jo ...

eeney, meeney, miney, mo ...

- "Politics is Like Trying to Screw a Cat in the Ass"  
Ibid

17. Bukowski's Persona hits close to home for us. Our own animal manners are too repulsive to us in our own solitude. Bukowski owns up to them, all the farts and pimples. For laughs, you might compare this Persona of Bukowski with the anxious and elegant character of Sir Peter Teazle in Sheridan's *The Sellout for Scandal*. That man suffers the pain of a spit-fire wife with such resignation and grace. Bukowski would just give her a boot in the ass, but would also suffer. He can be as deeply in love as Sir Peter, but he can't be as elegant about it. Which is why he seems to speak for so many of the divorced disinherited, and disaffected of us

18. As a poet, Bukowski hasn't been honored much. Tony Quagliano's invitation to me to write something here was even couched in perplexity — why the hell had we published the guy, anyway? Bukowski is in the tradition of intuitive poets, like Kenneth Patchen, and they've always been treated like a warm turd by the establishment. And it is true that Bukowski, like Patchen, writes quite a lot of bad poems. Intuitive poets usually do. But when he does write good poems, they're so embarrassingly well done that we have to say they were written in spite of the fact that the poet never bothered to learn anything about the craft of poetry. Which is a lot of shit.

19. My "stated aims in editing NYQ." All the incoming manuscripts are run through a Screening Committee, so I don't choose the poems by myself. And recently we established new NYQ Awards on *The New York Quarterly*, which are chosen from the out-

side. The Lucille Medwick Award is described as follows:

\$100 for a poem published in the preceding issue of NYQ which is the best expression of the concern of our ethnic minorities - their special heritage, their unique mythology, and their desperate appeal for social justice.

The Judge for this first NYQ Award was the poet Charles Levendosky, who is on our Advisory Board along with Auden, Ashbery, Lowell, Wilbur, and some others). Levendosky chose Bukowski's poem "Law" which appeared in issue 10, to receive the first Lucille Medwick Award. So it's nice to know I'm not alone in my estimate of Bukowski's work.

20. Bukowski as craftsman. He comes on like a real primitive, balls and all. Like Henry Miller and Kenneth Patchen and all those other great West Coast poets, Rexroth, Jeffers, etc. Bukowski is so obsessed with immediate reality that he can't seem to get very far away from the body functions, shitting and fucking and sucking cocks and digging for cunts. Bukowski has called himself "a dirty old man" because he chooses to explore these immediate experiences. Okay. Though the real irony is that Bukowski has one of the cleanest minds on the literary scene today. In fact he seems to be working towards the deDisneyfication of all of us - *someone* has to kick the Mickey Mouse out of our heads. And Bukowski does because unlike most post-romantics running around today, he sees love as the damned and demeaning adversary experience that it is. Bukowski stands like a child abashed at this outrage of love, and he teaches us magnanimity towards our own screw-ups.

-- William Packard

