

Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME

18

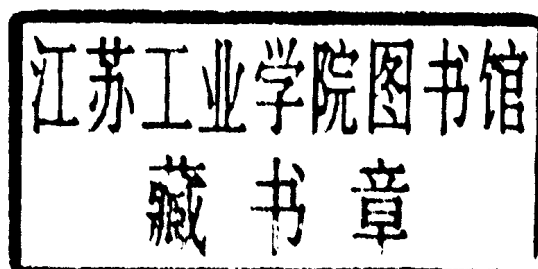


# Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works  
of the Most Significant and Widely  
Studied Poets of World Literature*

**VOLUME 18**

*Carol T. Gaffke*  
Editor



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# Preface

## A Comprehensive Information Source on World Poetry

**P**oetry Criticism (PC) provides substantial critical excerpts and biographical information on poets throughout the world who are most frequently studied in high school and undergraduate college courses. Each PC entry is supplemented by biographical and bibliographical material to help guide the user to a fuller understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism Series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, PC offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by PC supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

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In order to reflect the influence of tradition as well as innovation, poets of various nationalities, eras, and movements are represented in every volume of PC. Each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work; the length of an entry reflects the amount of critical attention that the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Since many poets have inspired a prodigious amount of critical explication, PC is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most significant published criticism to aid readers and students in their research. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors will sometimes reprint essays that have appeared in previous volumes of Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds fifteen percent of a PC volume.

## Organization

Each PC author entry consists of the following components:

- **Author Heading:** the name under which the author wrote appears at the beginning of the entry, followed by birth and death dates. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and his or her legal name given in parentheses in the lines immediately preceding the Introduction. Uncertainty as to birth or death dates is indicated by question marks.
- **Introduction:** a biographical and critical essay introduces readers to the author and the critical discussions surrounding his or her work.
- **Author Portrait:** a photograph or illustration of the author is included when available.
- **Principal Works:** the author's most important works are identified in a list ordered chronologically by first publication dates. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, original foreign-language publication information is provided, as well as the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.

- **Criticism:** critical excerpts chronologically arranged in each author entry provide perspective on changes in critical evaluation over the years. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type to enable a reader to ascertain without difficulty the works under discussion. For purposes of easy identification, the critic's name and the publication date of the essay are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the journal in which it originally appeared. Publication information (such as publisher names and book prices) and parenthetical numerical references (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of a work) have been deleted at the editor's discretion to enable smoother reading of the text.
- **Explanatory Notes:** introductory comments preface each critical excerpt, providing several types of useful information, including: the reputation of a critic, the importance of a work of criticism, and the specific type of criticism (biographical, psychoanalytic, historical, etc.).
- **Author Commentary:** insightful comments from the authors themselves and excerpts from author interviews are included when available.
- **Bibliographical Citations:** information preceding each piece of criticism guides the interested reader to the original essay or book.
- **Further Reading:** bibliographic references accompanied by descriptive notes at the end of each entry suggest additional materials for study of the author. Boxed material following the Further Reading provides references to other biographical and critical series published by Gale.

## Other Features

**Cumulative Author Index:** comprises all authors who have appeared in Gale's Literary Criticism Series, along with cross-references to such Gale biographical series as *Contemporary Authors* and *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. This cumulated index enables the user to locate an author within the various series.

**Cumulative Nationality Index:** includes all authors featured in *PC*, arranged alphabetically under their respective nationalities.

**Cumulative Title Index:** lists in alphabetical order all individual poems, book-length poems, and collection titles contained in the *PC* series. Titles of poetry collections and separately published poems are printed in italics, while titles of individual poems are printed in roman type with quotation marks. Each title is followed by the author's name and the volume and page number corresponding to the location of commentary on specific works. English-language translations of original foreign-language titles are cross-referenced to the foreign titles so that all references to discussion of a work are combined in one listing.

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<sup>2</sup>Pamela J. Annas, *A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (Greenwood Press, 1988);

excerpted and reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*, Vol. 1, ed. Robyn V. Young (Detroit: Gale Research, 1990), pp. 410-14.

## **Comments Are Welcome**

Readers who wish to suggest authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editors.

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# Charles Bukowski

## 1920-1994

(Full name Henry Charles Bukowski, Jr.) American poet, novelist, and essayist

### INTRODUCTION

Charles Bukowski was one of the most individual poets of the post-modern age. Influenced by Ernest Hemingway and Ezra Pound, his poetry reflected both the despair of the 1950s' Beat movement and the rebelliousness of the protesters of the 1960s. Although Bukowski lived most of his life in California, he did not belong to or associate with any of the literary circles of Los Angeles or San Francisco, such as the Beats or the Bay Area school. He was a lifelong outsider who mocked the pretensions of the literary elite and developed his own freewheeling, raw, and beligerent style as a means of expressing his dissatisfaction with traditional, middle-class morals and values. His main character-type (which is considered to be a self-portrait), the hard-drinking, womanizing, tough-talking man who associated with the "little people" in bars, race tracks and cheap hotels, came to represent the "Bukowski image" of the isolated individual at odds with society. Such "shock" poetry made Bukowski a seminal figure in underground literature. Within the scholarly community, however, little attention has been given to his poetry and prose.

### Biographical Information

Born in Andernach, Germany in 1920, Henry Charles Bukowski, Jr. was the only child of an American soldier and a German mother. The family immigrated to Los Angeles in 1922, and settled in a middle-class neighborhood, where Bukowski was teased by the other children because of his German heritage, making him feel as though he did not belong. Bukowski's father dominated his early life, controlling the household by way of unbreakable rules, reinforced with a strap or a ruler, that were imposed to maintain the façade of middle-class respectability. Bukowski hated his father and all that he represented: the economic and emotional success supposedly offered in return for hard work and patriotism: the American dream. Bukowski's disdain for his father and the lifestyle he embodied is prevalent in all of his poetry and fiction, as well as in his subsequent anti-authoritarian lifestyle. The beginning of the Depression coincided with Bukowski's entering high school, intensifying his father's abusive and tyrannical nature, and driving the young Bukowski to retreat into alcohol abuse. Bukowski attended Los Angeles City College from 1939 to 1941, but dropped out and spent a decade working at menial jobs while struggling with alcoholism. After being hospitalized with a bleeding ulcer in 1955, he curbed his alcoholism and turned to writing poetry.



From the late 1950s onward, Bukowski developed his distinctive montage style and published several long prose pieces in underground literary magazines. These experiments resulted in the irregular, disjointed, and fragmented form seen in *Notes of a Dirty Old Man*, and helped Bukowski to define his literary position as an arrogant, anarchistic, and defiant anti-hero aligned against the literary elite. The late 1960s and the early 1970s was a very productive and creative time for Bukowski, and much of the work produced during this time formed the basis for subsequent books, including *Confessions of a Man Insane Enough to Live with Beasts*; *Erections, Ejaculations, and General Tales of Ordinary Madness*; and *South of No North*. The 70s saw a tremendous increase in his readership and a growing reputation. Focusing on longer fiction, Bukowski produced a number of novels and memoirs in a type of transmogrified autobiographical narrative similar to Kerouac's. In 1987, his novel, *Barfly*, was made into a movie starring Mickey Rourke and Faye Dunaway, for which he wrote the screenplay. He later based a novel, *Hollywood*, on his experiences. Bukowski continued to write prolifically: his 1992 poetry collection *The Last Night of the Earth Poems* is over four hundred pages long. Bukowski died of leukemia in 1994.

## Major Works

Despite the number of Bukowski's early chapbooks, it was not until the collections *It Catches My Heart in Its Hands* (1963) and *Crucifix in a Deathhand* (1965) were published in the early 1960s that his poetry attracted critical attention. In his preface to *Crucifix in a Deathhand*, critic John William Corrington characterizes Bukowski's poetry as "the spoken voice nailed to paper." Bukowski's reputation grew as his essays and short fiction were collected and published in *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* (1969). His first novel, *Post Office* (1971), became a counter-cultural classic and helped to establish the "Bukowski image". The transformation of his novel *Barfly* from a novel into a successful film helped bring Bukowski to the attention of the younger "MTV" generation and again expanded his readership. Bukowski wrote prolifically throughout his life, and published poetry, short stories, and novels in underground journals and small presses. With the publication of *Septuagenarian Stew* (1990) and *The Last Night of the Earth Poems* (1992) came grudging acknowledgement by mainstream critics that Bukowski had earned a place in the literary canon. At the close of his life, then, Bukowski was perceived by the bourgeois critics he opposed as the patriarch and appointed spokesman of the newest generation of anti-establishment writers.

## Critical Reception

While small presses, literary magazines, and underground journals have published and reviewed Bukowski's work since the 1950s, academic critics and anthologists have largely ignored him. This is due in part to his producing a large number of small chapbooks, often containing only one longer work or a few short poems, rather than full-length books. Other factors influencing the critical neglect of his work include his subject matter and his language, both portraying drunks, bums, and down-and-outs who are street wise and trashy. It is precisely these qualities that has earned Bukowski his large following that cuts across generation lines and includes predominantly non-academic readers with eclectic and anti-establishment tastes. While his work has attracted such a diverse readership and a generation of imitators, acceptance and praise from the literary or academic establishments has been slow in coming, as Bukowski is seen as a writer of quantity not quality. His death in 1994 at the age of 74 has brought about the re-issuing of many of his books as well as a reappraisal of his position within the framework of mid-to-late-twentieth century American poetry.

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## PRINCIPAL WORKS

### Poetry

*Flower, Fist and Bestial Wail* 1960  
*Longshot Pomes for Broke Players* 1962

*Run with the Hunted* 1962  
*Poems and Drawings* 1962  
*It Catches My Heart in its Hands: New and Selected Poems, 1955-1963* 1963  
*Grip the Walls* 1964  
*Cold Dogs in the Courtyard* 1965  
*Crucifix in a Deathhand: New Poems, 1963-1965* 1965  
*Confessions of a Man Insane Enough to Live with Beasts* 1965  
*The Genius of the Crowd* 1966  
*True Story* 1966  
*On Going Out to Get the Mail* 1966  
*To Kiss the Worms Goodnight* 1966  
*The Girls* 1966  
*All the Assholes in the World and Mine* 1966  
*The Flower Lover* 1966  
*Night's Work* 1966  
*2 by Bukowski* 1967  
*The Curtains are Waving* 1967  
*At Terror Street and Agony Way* 1968  
*Poems Written before Jumping out of an 8-Story Window* 1968  
*If We Take....* 1969  
*The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses over the Hills* 1969  
*Another Academy* 1970  
*Fire Station* 1970  
*Mockingbird Wish Me Luck* 1972  
*Me and Your Sometimes Love Poems* 1973  
*While the Music Played* 1973  
*Love Poems to Marina* 1973  
*Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame: Selected Poems 1955-1973* 1974  
*Africa, Paris, Greece* 1975  
*Weather Report* 1975  
*Winter* 1975  
*Tough Company* 1976  
*Scarlet* 1976  
*Maybe Tomorrow* 1977  
*Love Is a Dog from Hell: Poems 1974-1977* 1977  
*Art* 1977  
*What They Want* 1977  
*We'll Take Them* 1978  
*Legs, Hips, and Behind* 1979  
*Play the Piano Drunk Like a Percussion Instrument until the Fingers Begin to Bleed a Bit* 1979  
*A Love Poem* 1979  
*Dangling in the Tournefortia* 1981  
*The Last Generation* 1982  
*Sparks* 1983  
*One for the Old Boy* 1984  
*War All the Time: Poems 1981-1984* 1984  
*Under the Influence* 1984  
*Alone in a Time of Armies* 1985  
*You Get So Alone at Times That It Just Makes Sense* 1986  
*Gold in Your Eye* 1986  
*The Day in Snowed in L.A.* 1986  
*Luck* 1987  
*The Movie Critics* 1988  
*Beautiful & Other Long Poems* 1988  
*The Rooming House Madrigals: Early Selected Poems 1946-1966* 1988



*Septuagenarian Stew* 1990  
*In the Morning and At Night and In Between* 1991  
*In the Shadow of the Rose* 1991  
*The Last Night of the Earth Poems* 1992  
*Run with the Hunted: A Charles Bukowski Reader* 1993  
*Confession of a Coward* 1995  
*Betting on the Muse: Poems & Stories* 1996

### Other Major Works

"Aftermath of a Lengthy Rejection Slip" (short story) 1944  
*A Bukowski Sampler* (short stories, poetry, essays) 1969  
*Notes of a Dirty Old Man* (short stories) 1969  
*Post Office* (novel) 1971  
*Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions, and General Tales of Ordinary Madness* (short stories) 1972  
*2 Letters from Charles Bukowski* (letters) 1972  
*South of No North: Stories of the Buried Life* (short stories) 1973  
*Life and Death in the Charity Ward* (short stories) 1974  
*Factorum* (novel) 1975  
*Women* (novel) 1978  
*You Kissed Lilly* (short stories) 1978  
*Ham on Rye* (novel) 1982  
*Horsemeat* (novel) 1982  
*Bring Me Your Love* (short stories) 1983  
*Hot Water Music* (short stories) 1983  
*The Bukowski/Purdy Letters: A Decade of Dialogue 1964-1974* [with Al Purdy] (letters) 1983  
*Barfly* (novel) 1984  
*There's No Business* (short stories) 1984  
*The Movie "BarFly"* (screenplay) 1987  
*Hollywood* (novel) 1989  
*Screams from the Balcony: Selected Letters 1960's-1970's* (letters) 1993  
*Pulp* 1994  
*Living on Luck: Selected Letters 1960's-1970's, Volume 2* (letters) 1995

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### CRITICISM

**Thomas McGrath** (essay date 1962)

SOURCE: "Variety in Verse," in *National Guardian*, May 21, 1962, p. 12.

[In the following review of *Longshot Pomes for Broke Players*, critic and poet McGrath finds Bukowski's wry humor admirable, despite his reservations about the poet's style.]

Here's Charles Bukowski's *Longshot Pomes for Broke Players*. The misspelling in the title will probably cause one set of potential readers to shy off. But there is nothing arch about the book. It is an example of what the Beat

was before it fell into holiness and hysteria. While much Beat poetry has gone dead or "commercial," it had in it once something of value which we can see clearly in Bukowski's work. Here is part of "The State of World Affairs from a Third Floor Window" offered as proof.

I am watching a girl dressed in a / light green sweater  
 . . . / as her dirty white dog sniffs the grass / . . . I  
 am upstairs in my underwear, / 3 day beard. pouring  
 a beer and waiting / for something literary or  
 symphonic to happen; / . . . and a thin old man / in his  
 last Winter rolls by pushed by a girl / in a Catholic  
 school dress; / somewhere there are Alps, and ships /  
 are now crossing the sea; / there are piles and piles of  
 H-and-A-bombs. / . . . and the Hollywood Hills stand  
 there, stand there / full of drunks and insane people  
 and / much kissing in automobiles / . . . well, from the  
 looks of things relax; / the bombs will never go off.

What Bukowski finds in his unlikely view from the third floor is the value of the quotidian, a kind of spiritual resistance which people put up even when they are not aware of it—as if it were almost a function of that unawareness. This is not far from Sandburg's *The People*, Yes point of view, but Bukowski is rarely sentimental and sees his people with a tough-tenderness. This may somewhat limit the point of view, but it sharpens the individual poem.

This third-floor view is the view of a man who sees through the deceptions of our society, who protests against a world where "death wants more death" at the same time that he is capable of accepting human follies with a wry smile—as, in fact, he accepts himself. The protest may be largely negative, but that, in certain things, can be a value. He dramatizes a world not far from that of the lumpen-proletariat.

Weaknesses? Mainly language. The loose free-verse is generally apt to the kind of story-poem Bukowski writes, but it has a tendency to amplify the anecdotal elements, to oppose condensation, to keep the poems flatter than they might have been. Some dead-opposed to the method would say that it offers the raw material of poems that are never worked out. The poems have to risk such a judgment, which would make it impossible to look at the work seriously, since Bukowski's method is primarily anti-lyrical.

**R. R. Cuscaden** (essay date 1963)

SOURCE: "Charles Bukowski: Poet in a Ruined Landscape," in *The Outsider*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Spring, 1963, pp. 62-5.

[In the following review of Bukowski's first three collections, Cuscaden discusses how the poet attempts to overcome despair through his verse.]

All of Bukowski's major interests and themes are in evidence in his first book, *Flower, Fist and Bestial Wail*; indeed, they are defined in the volume's title. These early

poems are not equally successful; too much reliance is placed upon a dated surrealistic technique and in neglecting the use of the first person singular Bukowski fails to employ a strength which gives unity to his later work. Nevertheless, everything is here: the obsession with music (his three books mention Bach, Hugo Wolf, Borodin, Brahms, Chopin, Berlioz, Beethoven) and art (Carot, Daumier, Orozco, Van Gogh), and, most importantly, the sense of a desolate, abandoned world.

In his poem in the first volume entitled **"I Cannot Stand Tears,"** the poet, always the non-participant, watches "several hundred fools / around the goose who broke his leg / trying to decide / what to do." A guard walks up, "pulled out his cannon / and the issue was finished." The details here are interesting. The crowd is composed of "fools", the goose implies the golden egg (poetry?), the (perhaps inevitable) guard has not merely a gun but a "cannon." And the issue is especially finished for the poet: "I folded my canvas / and went further down the road. / and bastards had ruined / my landscape. . . ."

A key poem in this first book is **"The Paper on the Floor."** The poet meditates on the enforced soap-opera quality of most lives: "The explanation usually comes in the morning / over the breakfast table," and the overwhelming "nothing nothing nothing nothing" of it all "pushes at the back of my eyes / and pulls my nerves taut-thin from toe to hair-line."

Can life grant only bogus emotions, manufactured experiences? "Very well," Bukowski says in **"The Twins"** (a moving poem about his father's death), but, if so: "grant us this moment: standing before a mirror / in my dead father's suit / waiting also / to die." Grant us, in other words, even occasional moments of meaning. Grant us, at least, the compensatory joy of being ignored. . . .

His second volume, ***Longshot Pomes for Broke Players*,** presents a more specific vision and definition of our curious world, as in the poem **"Where the Hell Would Chopin Be?"**: "indented most severely in my mind: the working secret / of a universe shot with flares and rockets, / monkeys jammed / with meteoritic registers of love in space." This is, of course, a kind of protest poetry, but Bukowski's protest is hardly political in the way that much of the poetry of Spender and Auden was during the thirties. Nor is it anti-political as much as it is non-political. This, it seems to me, is because Bukowski visualizes the political approach as impotent, as he indicates in **"Poem for Personnel Managers"**: "the world rocks down against us / and we / throw out arms / and we / throw out our legs / like the death kiss of the centipede: / / but they kindly snap our backs / and call our poison 'politics'."

There is a good deal of Jeffers-like pessimism in these poems and Bukowski himself admits this indebtedness: "If I have a god it is Robinson Jeffers, although I realize that I don't write as he does. . . ."

Bukowski rarely gives in completely to utter, hopeless despair, and this, not the variance in style and technique,

marks the essential difference between him and Jeffers. The despair of Bukowski exists just because he continually hopes; Jeffers' despair is the result of no hope at all. "I want trumpets and crowing, . . . I want the whir and tang of a simple living orange / in a simple living tree" Bukowski writes in **"Bring Down the Beams."** But, as he makes clear in the same poem, art—especially the Wednesday sonnet and the Sunday painting—is no substitute for life: ". . . we sit and piddle with charcoal / and talk about Picasso / and make collages: we are getting ready / to do nothing unusual, / and I alone am hungry / as I think about the sun clanging against the earth / and all the bones moving / but ours."

Too often, he feels, the world of art and letters is little more than a morass of gossip and back-biting, as in **"Letter from the North"**: "my friend writes of rejection and editors / and how he has visited K. or R. or W. / . . . write me, he says, / I got the blues. / / write you? about what, my friend? / I'm only interested in / poetry."

***Run with the Hunted*,** his most recently published volume of poems (the title, with its compassionate avowal of siding with those on the "wrong," or Algren side of the street, is significant), finds Bukowski far more mellow, far more mature, than in his first two books. It is not too much, even, to term these poems "late". In any case, his awareness of the world's patently obvious absurdities is here stated without what was previously a sort of surprise; he here looks around at a world grown familiar, and comments thereupon in an almost bemused fashion. There is an enlarged and personal vision of subtle horrors in **"The Priest and the Matador"**. . . , in which as always there is the awareness of estrangement, the concern with the failure of response. Although he has not given up hope that response might exist we read in **"Wrong Number"**: "carefully, I call voices on the phone, / measuring their sounds for humanity and laughter, / somewhere I am cut off, contact fails."

Without ceasing to fight, his course of action is now less direct; at times, perhaps, a bit more resigned. In **"Sundays Kill More Men than Bombs,"** a narrative of his divorce, he writes: "but that morning when she left / about 8 o'clock she looked / the same as ever, maybe even better. / I didn't even bother to shave, / I called in sick and went down / to the corner bar."

Bukowski is a poet of the permanent opposition. He opposes "the ruin" on a basis of personal anarchy which must attempt the impossible and create its own order. There is nothing about him of the "dumb ox" and he is certainly not a man without art. . . . In the best of his work may be found that quality of courage which, as Michael Roberts wrote, occurs "beyond the inhuman pattern" and persists in "men / broken, ephemeral, undismayed."

Joseph Swastek (essay date 1963)

SOURCE: A review of *Poems and Drawings*, in *Polish American Studies*, Vol. XX, No. 1, January-June, 1963, pp. 55-6.

[In the essay below, Swastek finds Bukowski's poetry eccentric but honest and authentic.]

Polish-American poetry, written in English, has had a variety of male and female voices pitched in different keys. The masculine contingent includes Uriel Joseph Piduch (*Autumn Leaves*, 1920), Raymond Kresensky (*Emmaus*, 1931), Edmond Kowalewski (*Deaf Walls*, 1933), Alan Edward Symanski (*Against Death in Spring*, 1934), John H. Drechney (*Nature Smiles*, 1947), Joseph Cherwinski (*No Blue Tomorrow*, 1952), Zygmunt Kurowski (*A Collection of Thoughts*, 1953), and Conrad Lancucki (*The House by the Sea*, 1958)—to mention only the more notable writers and their earliest published collections of poems and verses.

Recently a new voice has joined this male poetic chorus, and it sings not only in a different pitch but also a melody distinctively its own. It is the voice of Charles Bukowski, poem-maker, convention-breaker, and presently the only Polish-American literary beatnik.

If this sounds wild, listen to what's coming. Bukowski was born August 16, 1920, in Andornach, Germany, but was brought to the United States at the age of two. His family had lived in Germany for some time back, but was originally Polish. In any event, Bukowski speaks neither German nor Polish, but has no objection to being classified as a Polish-American: "I am not ashamed of Poland. It is a small nation caught between big nations and this, in history, makes it a loser. The people cannot help this, must only bear it while Paris, London, Berlin, Moscow, Washington, D. C. look good. Poland has poets and Poland has heroes, and, if you want to count me on your side, good."

Bukowski, who began writing at thirty-five, has thus far published three collections of poetry: *Flower, First and Bestial Wail*, *Longshot Pomes for Brave Players*, and *Run with the Hunted*. The volume under review [*Poems and Drawings*] is his fourth book of poems. A fifth collection is in preparation by *The Outsider*, a poetry magazine.

[The present] collection of Bukowski's work, a "one-man show", contains three ink drawings and fourteen poems. The poems are unlike anything so far written by Polish-Americans. The titles only faintly suggest the distinctive character of the poems they head: "With Vengeance Like a Tiger Crawls," "The Kings are Gone," "I Have Lived in England," "Goldfish," "On Going Back to the Street after Viewing an Art Show," "Suicide," "Rose, Rose," "Bull," "Where They So Fondly Go," "Spite," "Love & Fame & Death," "The Gift," "A Word on the Quick and Modern Poem-Makers," and "The Miracle."

When you open this volume, you enter a new dimension of Polish-American poetry, not a twilight zone of make-believe or poetic fantasy, but a hard, concrete corner of contemporary reality—a corner which at times appears to be on the brink of things, of conventions, of traditions, of belief, of everything—just way out, man! Bukowski is no stranger to Shakespeare (whose grandeur does not come

through to him), or to Milton (on whom he is wasted), or Frost ("licking the boots of politicians, / telling the pretty lies / of an addled mind), or to Ernie ("tagging himself when the time was ready"). He knows "Brahms / stole his First from Beethoven's / 9th"; "Rabelais out of his wits / chasing a rabbit / through the Brahms of my mind"; "Greco / or even a watersnake"; and that "the bull burned within me / my candle of / Jesus."

Bukowski feels contempt for the classics (which he has read) and for conventions (both literary and societal). He applies the mechanics of rhetoric with the abandon and eccentricity of e. e. cummings. His free-wheeling use of invective and profanity almost equals his personalized approach to metric and poesy, to punctuation and capitalization.

Yet some of these poems, which Bukowski has "pulled out of his head", have the authentic ring of reality, not so much because their language is racy and their imagery modern and flip, but because basically they reflect "an honesty of self born. . . . that will not allow me to pretend to be something which I am quite not." One thing for sure, Bukowski is "not cluttering up the exits" of Polish-American poetry, as he sits in his Los Angeles "apt. no. 303", dissecting life and literature with his poetic scalpel, sometimes glumly, sometimes gleefully.

John William Corrington (essay date 1963)

SOURCE: "Charles Bukowski and the Savage Surfaces," in *Northwest Review*, Vol. 6, No.4, Fall, 1963, pp. 123-29.

[In the review below of *It Catches My Heart in Its Hands*, Corrington characterizes Bukowski as a "surface" poet who "is capable of producing a poetry of pure emotion in which idea, information, the narrative or anecdote, is held to a minimum."]

The recent publication of Charles Bukowski's selected poems [*It Catches My Heart in Its Hands*] marks a kind of watershed in the career of one of the West Coast's most striking poets. . . .

As those who know his poetry will testify, Bukowski's poems go well enough one by one. But there is no substitute for reading a man's work in bulk. . . .

Faced with several score of Bukowski's best poems, the illusion of ignorance or perverse and directionless crudity dissolves like a tar-doll in August sun. Individual poems merge to form together a body of work unrivalled in kind and very nearly unequalled in quality by Bukowski's contemporaries.

Perhaps the most crucial failure of Bukowski's critics is their general blindness to the sort of thing represented by his poetry. It is a vain error to damn oranges because they do not taste like apples—and it is equally profitless to

decry what I call a "poetry of surfaces" because it fails to investigate and recreate the depths of human experience.

The phrase "poetry of surface" is not mine. So far as I know, Eliot coined it in an early discussion of Jonson's poetry. It distinguishes between the sort of "vertical" poetry—like *The Waste Land*—which probes the psychological, moral, religious and sociological center of man, and a "horizontal" poetry which concerns itself rather with delineating man in terms of his more visible, more immediate, more physical surroundings. This "horizontal" poetry makes little use of metaphysics. Rather than attempting an X-ray of man's moral skeleton, his spiritual viscera, this kind of poetry contents itself with the flesh, the surface of the human condition. . . .

Now in Bukowski's poetry, this concern for surface—for the color, texture and rhythm of modern life—reveals itself both in what he writes and in what he does not write. On the positive side, it underlies his attention to detail, his consistent presentation of physical minutia of seeming inconsequence:

. . . and the cat kept looking at me  
and crawling in the pantry  
amongst the clanking dishes  
with flowers and vines painted on them . . .  
("Love Is a Piece of Paper Torn to Bits")

The cat and dishes alone would suffice, but Bukowski adds flowers and vines as much from a kind of fidelity to the physical verities as because of the implications carried by flowers and vines in a poem about a collapsing marriage.

Again, in a long poem describing himself and others as the human refuse thrown up by depression and industrial society, "Poem for Personnel Managers," this concern with surface is manifested not by what Bukowski chooses to add to his portrait of hopeless men, but by his pointed avoidance of what might be called the "social implications" of the situation:

we are shot through with carrot tops  
and poppy seed and tilted grammar;  
we waste days like mad blackbirds  
and pray for alcoholic nights.  
our silk-sick human smiles wrap around  
us like somebody else's confetti:  
we do not even belong to the Party. . . .

"We smoke, dead as fog," Bukowski writes. And his vision of suffering is not adulterated with the academic jargon that, in the face of human agony, seems itself a part of the brutal instrumentality it describes. There is no withdrawal in Bukowski's work. All his poems have the memorable and terrible immediacy of the news broadcast from the scene of the *Hindenberg* crash. There is nothing of the sublimated social-worker or psychiatrist in him, and the endless gabble of the professional injustice-collector is totally absent from his work. In remaining on the surface—staying with sure and certain phenomena; a series of significant acts, events, actors and victims, Bukowski avoids

the pitfalls of "motivation" and "meaning." He remains in control of the indisputable, the unquestionable—and leaves the jungle of social and political and moral purpose and counter-purpose to those who find such abstract projections more significant than life itself.

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All Bukowski's poems have the memorable and terrible immediacy of the news broadcast of the *Hindenberg* crash.

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—John William Corrigan

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A few weeks ago, Bukowski's work came up in the course of a conversation in Houston. A young woman shivered at the mention of his name. "Bukowski? He's a savage," she said vehemently. "Nothing but a savage." The word "savage" properly applied to Bukowski's poetry may help solve the puzzle of his sensibility and the academic resistance to it.

With the growth of the pseudo-civilized as contemporary norm, "savage"—like "barbarian"—has become a pejorative rather than simply a term descriptive of certain attitudes, convictions, and responses. . . . But pejoration aside, Bukowski stands nearer the world-view, say, of Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce than that of Henry Adams or Bernard Berenson. Bukowski's world, scored and grooved by the impersonal instruments of civilized industrial society, by 20th-century knowledge and experience, remains essentially a world in which meditation and analysis have little part. There is act and observation. . . . That middle stage between act and art, the stage at which one presumes a kind of intellectual gathering and synthesis antecedent to the shaping of image and metaphor, simply does not exist in Bukowski's poetry. Act moves into image directly; feeling is articulated as figure and intellection is minimal. As the savage projects his world in terms of myth, with sight, sound—the natural order of phenomena—as its keystones, so Bukowski remains focused upon the concrete. If there is symbolic value in the work, the reader is spared a kind of burdensome awareness of that symbolism on the part of the writer. Thus, for example, in "The Tragedy of the Leaves,"

I awakened to dryness and the ferns were dead,  
the potted plants yellow as corn;  
my woman was gone  
and the empty bottles like bled corpses  
surrounded me with their uselessness;  
the sun was still good, though,  
and my landlady's note cracked in fine and  
undemanding yellowness; what was needed now  
was a good comedian, ancient style, a jester  
with jokes upon absurd pain; pain is absurd  
because it exists, nothing more;  
I shaved carefully with an old razor  
the man who had once been young and  
said to have genius; but



that's the tragedy of the leaves,  
the dead ferns, the dead plants;  
and I walked into the dark hall  
where the landlady stood  
execrating and final,  
sending me to hell,  
waving her fat sweaty arms  
and screaming  
screaming for rent  
because the world had failed us  
both.

It would be folly to try to read such a poem as simple description. But it would be equally foolish to suggest that the poem's surface is, as it were, simply an excuse for its symbolic significance. Symbol rises from event; a kind of 20th-century mythos stands like shadow over and above the specifics of Bukowski's dark hallway. Bukowski's poem is symbolic as all great work is symbolic: the verity of its surface is so nearly absolute that the situation it specifies produces the overtones of a world much vaster than that of the landlady's dark hall.

There is a kind of poetry in which one finds what may be called a resident ideational content. The greater bulk of Wallace Stevens' poetry is of this kind. However opaque the surface of "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," a careful reading and a comparison with section VI of "Six Significant Landscapes," quickly shows that Stevens has an idea, a theory in mind, and that, despite the difficulties, he is attempting to transmit that theory through the agency of his verse. Such work presents, as it were, a series of problems to be solved, issues to be clarified, metaphoric complexes to be explicated. This kind of poetry is the proper subject of criticism.

But there is another sort of poetry which, rather than containing ideas, projects a kind of structured emotional and imaginative form. In combination with the sensibility of a reader, this kind of poetry produces ideas not resident in it. An individual poem of this kind serves as a kind of trigger: it sets off a wave of responses in a given reader, and the resultant idea-emotion complex is, in Wordsworth's phrase, "half-created" by the reader—not simply dredged out of the poem's verbalization. Some of Bukowski's poems are of this sort. What, precisely, in terms of idea, are we to make from this:

the blossoms shake  
sudden water  
down my sleeve,  
sudden water  
cool and clean  
as snow—  
as the stem-sharp  
swords  
go in  
against your breast  
and the sweet wild  
rocks  
leap over

and lock us in.

("I Taste the Ashes of Your Death")

A poem of this kind, I think, is ample proof that however little thought Bukowski may give to his writing, he has mastered the literary lessons of the past century. In the tradition of Mallarmé and Lorca, he is capable of producing a poetry of pure emotion in which idea, information, the narrative or anecdotal, is held to a minimum. "The Ultimate Poem," Wallace Stevens has stated in one of his titles, "Is Abstract."

I have not meant to suggest that Charles Bukowski's poetry represents something new or even something basically superior in modern American poetry. Nor have I intended to intimate that sublimation of the intellectual is a value in itself. What I do wish to suggest is that Bukowski's work represents a renewal of interest in the poet as something other than thinker and civilized representative of the University Establishment. It is worth recalling that those poets who have most endured have rarely written the kind of geometric thing we find in contemporary "academic verse." Whatever uses we may find for poetry, the honing of the mind is not properly among them. Thus, in a sense, poetry remains—or should remain—the savage child of the arts. That poetry which fails to stir, which loses its appeal as a sensuous activity, fails, it seems to me, as poetry. Bukowski, standing in a mixed tradition of Whitman and Mallarmé, Jeffers and Lorca, brings back this evocative quality to modern verse. Compared to the work of most of his contemporaries, his poetry relies on the image and its emotional connotations much more than on the idea and its rational concomitants. . . .

It is precisely Bukowski's refusal to become trapped in the cerebral that marks the savage quality, the surface dynamism of his poetry. Whether one chooses to see all this as a reaction to the closely-reasoned and imaginatively sterile work of the academics, or—in a larger and less pointed context—as a predictable and timely revitalization of modern American poetry, Bukowski's work remains a significant force offsetting a recognized and widely lamented atrophy that has, for much of this century, rendered poetry a "sullen art," a series of super-conundrums, a game of the mind or a cultural ritual performed alone. Bukowski's increasing popularity seems to indicate that possibly it is not that people have abandoned poetry, but that poetry has tended to lose its audience by eschewing that savage vitality, that splendid surface that so long distinguished it from fiction or history or philosophy. Lacking imaginative and emotional immediacy, poetry cannot compete. But those poets who have worked more nearly as warlocks than as logicians still find a considerable readership: Dylan Thomas, e. e. cummings, and others. Bukowski, I believe, belongs in this company.

If it is argued that Bukowski lacks depth, one might do well to paraphrase Aristotle: "There is a degree of profundity suitable to every discipline. The wise man does not ask of an art-form that which is not proper to it." If depth is the ultimate criterion of literary value, then Shakespeare fades before Descartes; Coleridge before Kant. But if