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Run-of-the-Mill Lunacy

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In her 1980 interview with Charles Bukowski, Italian journalist Fernanda Pivano posed what seemed at first an innocuous question: "Why are you called Charles in the books and Hank in your private life?"

BUKOWSKI: Well, you see, that goes back to the old childhood again. My parents used to call me Henry. My full name is Henry Charles Bukowski, Junior. I got very tired of Henry, you know, Henry.

PIVANO: Why did you get tired?

BUKOWSKI: Because my parents were not nice people. And when they called me by my name, I didn't want to hear it, because the only time they called me was to either come eat, or do some task, or I had done something wrong, and I was due for a beating. In other words, I got to dislike the name Henry. So when I first started writing, I thought, Henry Bukowski? There was another reason. Now, if you take Henry and put it with Bukowski, what do you get? Hen-er-y Bu-kow-ski. You see, that jumps too much. It has little curls, Henry and Bukowski, it has little curls. You know what I mean?

PIVANO: Yes.

BUKOWSKI: Henry Bukowski. I thought, Henry Bukowski, that doesn't even sound right. Then I tried Charles Bukowski. Now, Charles is a straight line, and Bukowski wiggles up and down. So, one counteracts the other. I said, "Now that sounds like a writer. Charles Bukowski."[1]

It is hardly surprising that Bukowski chose not to be identified publicly by the name with which his father had violently reprimanded him as a child for such heinous transgressions as unevenly mowing the lawn. But the second part of his answer, not to be mistaken for mere frivolity, captures what is

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[1] Pivano, 75–76.

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perhaps *the* defining feature of the author's public persona. Bukowski's strictly contrary disposition has been noted frequently. Julian Smith describes his writing as "typically individualist, anti-formal, anarchistic,"[2] and Russell Harrison goes as far as to say that he is the "only major post-War American writer who has denied the efficacy of the American dream."[3] Bukowski himself, in the same interview with Pivano, points out that, while constantly critical of conservative thinking, he is democratically dismissive of factual claims about himself: "I never acknowledge facts, or I don't go about thinking 'I don't love nature,' or 'I do love nature.' I don't go around accumulating facts about myself. Most of the time I don't think at all."[4] The role of the author, according to Bukowski, is to be a "blank page,"[5] to avoid reductive answers and react to situations as they come up.

Bukowski is no simple nihilist, however. This peculiar law of contradiction[6] suggests a nuanced conception of the writer's role in cultural production, one that would prompt an "unthinking man" who never acknowledges facts about himself – apart from *that* fact – to claim that he prefers the name "Charles" to "Henry" because its linearity counteracts the curliness of his last name, rendering his nominal identity a formal embodiment of contradiction. That Bukowski did not want to be reminded of his horrific childhood would have sufficed as an answer to Pivano's question, but his explanation was more calculated than that, alluding to a closely held definition of the terms of cultural progress. I would like to argue here that this view of progress, as evidenced in the author's works, is notably dialectical, that it is even suggestive of – and here things get funny as I invoke a quintessentially Bukowskian contradiction, setting his fiercely anti-academic disposition against a highly academic trope – Hegel's dialectical model of history. For Bukowski, progress is achieved by way of contradiction, where a *thesis* ("culture") is contradicted by an *antithesis* ("counterculture") and gives rise to a more perfect *synthesis* ("progressive culture"), one that reflects and to a certain extent resolves the antecedent contradiction. Herein lies the key to explaining Bukowski's resistance to identifying himself politically, as well as to his penchant for inhabiting contradiction. In this article, I will investigate a few illustrative contradictions from *Tales of Ordinary Madness*.

A selection from the 1975 City Lights collection *Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and General Tales of Ordinary Madness*, the stories in *Tales of Ordinary Madness* originally appeared in "Notes of a Dirty Old Man," a column

[2] Smith, 56. [3] Harrison, 13. [4] Pivano, 43. [5] Ibid., 56.

[6] As opposed to, say, Aristotle's law of noncontradiction, which holds that a statement "X" cannot be both true and not true: ∼("X" & "∼X").

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Bukowski began writing in 1967 for the alternative Los Angeles paper *Open City*. According to Smith, Bukowski's autobiographical stories, essays, and other musings were published alongside "coverage of student unrest, the New Left, black power, civic and police corruption, the draft resistance, drug information, and adverts for sexual contacts and services."[7] The journalistic context for Bukowski's ostensibly unaligned, apolitical tales had, then, a powerfully political valence, one not easily taken to be anarchistic, individualistic or even necessarily ironic. A quick perusal of the collection reveals the influence of this context, as stories such as "A .45 to Pay the Rent," "Doing Time with Public Enemy No. 1," and "Scenes from the Big Time" address, both directly and indirectly, the themes of draft resistance, imprisonment, and police corruption and ineptitude. While these street-talking diaristic reveries may strike a reader collectively as an individualistic, misogynistic, almost avant-garde declaration of character, in the pages of *Open City*, where the target reader was a literate, politically oriented Los Angelean, they must have served a special function: a kind of fun house mirror to all the serious political discussion of the late-60s Los Angeles underground, a "blank page" from which Bukowski reflected back in wavy, exaggerated form the contradictions and earnestness of the liberal institution. This context of earnest political and literary discourse, a foil to Bukowski's ostensibly apolitical and antiliterary sentiments, is the most accurate framework in which to couch the stories of *Tales of Ordinary Madness*. Still, the Bukowskian narrator must not be understood as an apolitical voice, but as an "avoider," one who refuses to acknowledge the "facts" while insisting upon a lead role in the comi-tragedy he depicts.

Sometimes Bukowski narrates his stories straight. At other times, he narrates them curly. In "A .45 to Pay the Rent," for instance, when his wife Meg refers to his having "fucked up" and landed in prison, Duke flies into a psychotic rage, vehemently protesting the institutionalized thievery of the rich and their "chickenshit rules" of crime and punishment.

> REHABILITATE that's the word, those Beverly Hills cock-suckers. they're so god damned decent and HUMANE. their wives listen to Mahler at the Music Center and donate to charity, tax-free. and are elected the ten best women of the year by the *L.A. Times*. and you know what their HUSBANDS do to you? cuss you like a dog down at their crooked plant. cut your paycheck, pocket the difference, and no questions answered. everything's such shit, can't anybody see it? can't anybody SEE it?[8]

[7] Smith. Ibid.

[8] Bukowski, *Tales of Ordinary Madness*. 4. Subsequent references to the collection will be indicated by a parenthetical reference to the citation's page number.

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Following a touching Socratic exchange with his daughter Lala, Duke, notwithstanding the vicious language he plies at his wife, plays a tune of indignation and protest familiar to his sympathetic readership in *Open City*: a critique of penal rehabilitation, upper-crust "humanity," capitalistic inequities and pandering journalism. Nevertheless, his harangue comes packaged in offensive epithets and unsympathetic decision-making. Like Bukowski's authorial name, "A .45 to Pay the Rent" features internal contradiction, an ethical incoherence illustrated by the words and deeds of the story's protagonist, which makes him less a pawn in a social commentary and more a multifaceted, complex human being. Bukowski's raging countercultural cowboy is simultaneously a social reformer, doting father, blatant woman-hater and unrepenting criminal.

The best-known of Bukowski's contractions, one recounted in nearly all autobiographical accounts of his life, makes its way into the second story in *Tales*, "Doing Time with Public Enemy No. 1." In his biography of Bukowski, long-time friend Neeli Cherkovski relates the account of how the author was arrested by FBI agents in a Philadelphia rooming house for allegedly attempting to dodge the draft and then taken to Moyamensing Prison, where he spent seventeen days. Confiscating and reading through his manuscripts, the agents decided to send him to a prison psychiatrist. Bukowski was reportedly released and exempted from service after the following exchange with the penal shrink, depicted in the story itself.

> do you believe in the war? he asked me.
> no.
> are you willing to go to war?
> yes.
> (I had some crazy idea of getting up out of a trench and walking forward into gunfire until I was killed.)
> he didn't say anything for a long time and kept writing on a piece of paper. then he looked up.
> by the way, next Wednesday night we're having a party of doctors and artists and writers. I want to invite you. will you come?
> no.
> all right, he said, you don't have to go.
> go where?
> to the war. (12-13)

Now consider the previously cited comment Bukowski makes – one that admittedly post-dates this event by forty years and the story's composition by at least ten – that he never observes facts about himself. Notice how the dialogue, which plays out an exercise in the rote contradiction of expectations, both conforms and fails to conform to the claim. The questions the psychiatrist asks seem straightforward, and, individually,

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Bukowski's answers *are* factual: it *is not* the case that he believes in war; it *is* the case that he is willing to go to war. The pregnant pause, allowing time for the narrator's parenthetical commentary, stems, one assumes, from an apparent contradiction. That one who does not believe in war is willing to go to war implies that he is in some sense mad: for one would assume a sane person would refuse to take part in a war if he did not believe in it. That Bukowski is nevertheless willing to kill or be killed without an ethical framework for its justification casts doubt on the premises that conventionally underpin arguments both for and against war.

What diagnosis, then, follows this show of madness? Rather than deeming him insane, the psychiatrist diagnoses Bukowski as an artist and invites him to a party. It is worth mentioning that the version of the story in Cherkovski's *Bukowski: A Life* is embellished differently, and that the parenthetical comment about committing suicide on the frontline is absent.[9] On the one hand, the comment suggests a determination to pursue the irrational; Bukowski infers that he would be willing to go to war not for the sake of defending his country, but instead to kill himself and perhaps even to stage an aesthetic event. On the other hand, the description of that event, "some crazy idea of getting up out of a trench and walking forward into gunfire until I was killed," alludes to the shock troops who, advancing before the rest of a ground offensive, meet the first wave of enemy gunfire. It is literally upon the backs of these troops that the remaining legions progress and pursue their battle. This act of self-sacrifice to which Bukowski alludes is of course the act after which the avant-garde is named.

Bukowski's exchange with the psychiatrist dramatizes the dialectical process by which the statement of seemingly contradictory views forces a re-evaluation of underlying premises. In "Nut Ward East of Hollywood," Bukowski juxtaposes and consequently suggests an analogous conflict between high and low culture. The story is set in the first-person narrator's apartment at 1:30 in the afternoon. "Mad Jimmy," of a simultaneously mad and ordinary name, knocks and Hank comes to the door in his bathrobe. We soon learn that Hank has brought familiar logic to bear on his friend's name: "When I came back he said, 'you changed my name from "Crazy Jimmy" to "Mad Jimmy." I think you're right – "Mad Jimmy" is much better'" (19). One assumes "crazy" was too curly, while "mad" was straight and monosyllabic, offsetting the curliness of "Jimmy." Together Hank and Mad Jimmy sit and shoot the shit, talking about their jobs, books, women, and legal troubles. Then, at one point, Hank mentions his attempts to perform

[9] Cherkovski, 71–72.

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fellatio on himself to cure constipation, attempts that, according to the narrator, consistently fall an eighth of an inch short. At the end of the rambling narrative, we are offered a glimpse of the aesthetic principles these "ordinarily mad" artists hold.

> We finished the wine and then walked down to Shakey's and drank the deep brown beer by the pitcherful and watched the old-time fights – we saw Louis get dumped by the Dutchman; the third Zale–Rocky G. fight; Braddock–Baer; Dempsey–Firpo, all of them, and then they put on some old Laurel and Hardy flicks. (31)

Juxtapose boxing and Laurel and Hardy flicks, both of which fall under the rubric of physical conflict as spectacle, with Hank's reference to listening to Hayden's Symphony No. 102 (27), as well as to the frequent references the stories' narrators make to classical music throughout *Tales of Ordinary Madness*. Together these suggest that Bukowski's cultural ideal, if there is such a thing, represents an admixture of the high and low, a violent and often contradictory amalgamation of class-oriented aesthetic values. The aforementioned fights in this context become allegories of powerful social conflicts, conflicts that resolve themselves in a process of cultural progression staged on the blank page of the author.

After the pizza joint closes, Hank abandons Mad Jimmy and heads home, where once again he attempts the impossible, as a coda to this overstuffed, carnivalesque story, and to relieve himself from the onset of constipation, resulting, one assumes, from his consumption of pizza and beer. His failure was fated.

> I stripped, worked up a lather, hooked my toes in the bed rungs and doubled in a circle. It was the same – an eighth of an inch short. Well, you couldn't have it all. I reached over, opened it in the middle, and began reading Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Nothing had changed. It was still a lousy book. (31)

Bukowski's attitude toward learning, despite his attempt to fictionalize himself otherwise, is clear-cut. As Cherkovsky relates, the local library of his childhood, an old brownstone near 21st Street and La Brea Avenue, became in his early teens a "safe haven" from the oppressive environments of his home and school, and it was here that Bukowski discovered and learned to admire such writers as Sinclair Lewis, D. H. Lawrence, and Ernest Hemingway.[10] His taste in music was no less conventional. In the early 40s, living in San Francisco, Bukowski recalls, "I used to go into these record stores where you bought three records, and then you would turn two back in later, something like that. I was able to hear a lot of the great composers."[11]

[10] Ibid., 34–36. [11] Ibid., 66.

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Though drawn to the classics of literature and music, Bukowski rejected the academic machine that manufactured an audience for such culture. His cynicism was in part a reaction to his parents' specious cultural standards. Cherkovski observes that Bukowski's parents showed little interest in his academic progress, except when it clashed with his mother's "petit bourgeois" upbringing, which on one occasion led her to panic when she received a note from the principal that Bukowski had been involved in a scuffle: "His mother began crying loudly: '*You have disgraced us! You have brought shame on us!*'"[12] According to Cherkovsky, as Katherine Bukowski was growing up in Andernach, Germany, teachers and school administrators enjoyed a VIP social status. Bukowski's reaction to his mother's attitude consequently informed his narrators' attitudes toward academia; it was not so much the content of the culture he dismissed, but its function as a form of elitist cachet.

In "Notes of a Potential Suicide," comprised of a series of musings and fictive vignettes, Bukowski at one point paints the scene of an opera, the audience full of Pavlovian dogs that scream "bravo" in response to a "grammar school" selection of music, including Offenbach's *La Vie Parisienne*, Ravel's *Bolero*, Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite*, Bizet's *Carmen*, Copland's *El Salon Mexico*, Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance March*, and Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, among others (190). To illustrate his distaste, he then depicts a married couple's post-performance commentary on such music:

> and driving home, you get a scene something like this. the old man about 52, owner of 3 furniture stores, feeling intelligent:
> "by god, you've got to hand it to - - - -, there's a man who really knows music! he can really make you feel it!"
> wife:
> "yes, I always feel so uplifted! by the way, should we eat at home or out!" (191)

As Harrison indicates in *Against the American Dream*, Bukowski emphasizes use value over exchange value, if only because the exchange value economy of music and literature gives precedence to the historically contingent, arbitrarily designated value of a work of art.[13] Dismissing great works in the stories, then, becomes a frequently relied-upon method of counteracting this function of culture.

[12] Ibid., 15.

[13] Harrison. "The late accumulation to the contrary notwithstanding, the Chinaskian ethos embodies a rejection of clothes, gadgets and a new car every other year and the refusal to live on credit – of consumption for the sake of consumption … Consumption and accumulation as ends in themselves were never part of the Chinaskian project. Use-value takes precedence over exchange-value in Bukowski's work" Ibid.

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Bukowski's critique of culture as cachet is perhaps no more direct in any of the stories in *Tales of Ordinary Madness* than in "Would You Suggest Writing As a Career?" where the narrator, curiously named Henry, recounts a trip he makes to Seattle to give a couple of poetry readings. Arriving at the airport, he is met by a student escort, a young man named Belford who, a veritable Virgilian analogue leading the poet through hell, takes Henry to a bar to meet a few professors.

> I followed him in. He knew some people at the table. Lo, here was a professor of something. And there was a professor of something. And there was this and there was that. A tableful of them. Some women. Somehow the women looked like margarine. Everybody sat there drinking this green poison beer in big mugs. (35)

The beer and women, off-color imitations, radiate toxicity. The professors are simply professors, defined by their titles and not by scholarly passions. This economy of culture defines academia for Bukowski, pervading the story and distinguishing the teachers from the students: "College students were all right anyhow. They only asked one thing – that you didn't purposely lie to them. I thought that was fair" (36). After the first day's reading, Henry attends a party at the house of one of the professors he has met:

> This professor looked just like Hemingway. Of course, Hemingway was dead. The professor was rather dead too. He kept on talking about literature and writing – of all the disgusting fucking subjects. No matter where I went he trailed me. He followed me everywhere but the bathroom. Everytime I turned around, there he was (37)

This particular professor fancies the Hemingway persona and wants to project it onto Bukowski; his interest in Hemingway's and Bukowski's fiction, however, is by implication lifeless. The professor discusses "literature and writing," not the ideas contained therein, and is consequently as "dead" as the author (notably, Bukowski once described his mother's heart as dead).[14] Even the professor's marriage is a simulacrum, implied by his apparent approval of Henry's "screwing" his wife. Compare this sentiment to that expressed by the student, Belford, who comments the following morning, "it's your words not your piss that I'm interested in" (39). The student's interest is in the poetry; the professor's is in the author and his bodily functions.

The stories collected in *Tales of Ordinary Madness* feature a host of contradictions Bukowski seems eager to inhabit. His characters are at once cultured and counter-cultural, political and apolitical, opinionated and unwilling to acknowledge facts, literary and opposed to literature, didactic and

[14] "My mother's heart is dead." Quoted in Cherkovski, 71.

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anti-academic. Asked by Pivano to define himself and his writing, the author asserts, "I don't want to learn. I feel perfectly normal in my own mad way,"[15] which brings us to the most constitutive contradiction in the stories, and perhaps for the looming figure of Bukowski as a counterculture writer: Bukowski claims, even in the title of his book, that he is at once normal *and* mad, implying either that the two terms are not opposites, as they are typically taken to be, or that they are one and the same, that madness is normalcy and vice versa.

Another telling remark Bukowski makes in his 1980 interview with Pivano suggests how he may have conceptualized madness and normalcy. As Joe Wolberg recalls comments the author made in a documentary they had seen earlier that morning, Bukowski proposes a key distinction between "style" and "truth."

WOLBERG: You said that style was more important than truth.

PIVANO: But I did not quite realize what you meant by style. Was it as Hemingway referred to style – as a way of life, or the style in which we.

BUKOWSKI: Well, let's leave Hemingway out of it. Style – I probably meant writing style, whatever you're doing.

PIVANO: Probably living style, because you were mentioning it connected with truth.

BUKOWSKI: Well, truth has a way of changing every day, every second. You hold on to your style, truth changes around you. While you have style, you have your own method going, while other things are wavering. Follow?[16]

By "truth," Bukowski means an historically conditioned discourse, the process of definition that characterizes the use of language and development of culture. Accordingly, transcendental perspectives have no place in his truth, only familiar and fleeting theses and antitheses locked in fruitful opposition, rendering through interpenetration more nuanced syntheses, which in turn become new theses against which their opposites are tested, and so on. Bukowski's ordinary madness operates at the center of this dialectic; his "style" or "method" is to contradict constantly in an effort to generate lyrical insight, swinging back and forth between staged opposites, often contradicting his own likes and dislikes, just to keep you guessing. This style, this tone, this melancholy sneer in the stories never changes, even while the factual content does.

[15] Pivano, 49. [16] Ibid., 35.

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"Animal Crackers in My Soup," the last story I will take into account, allegorizes this conflict between normalcy and madness and its resolution through "rebirth." The first-person narrator, Gordon, wakes up in an alley and begins walking "without purpose" through a nameless city until he reaches its suburbs. Feeling thirsty, he decides to stop at a random house and ask for a glass of water; the woman he meets, Carol, is a picture of kindness, among the most benevolent characters you will ever encounter in a Bukowski story. Her only blemish: she keeps a house full of wild animals and, as Gordon will soon discover, has sexual intercourse with all of them. Before passing judgement on Carol, consider this passage, which describes what Gordon sees the first time he stumbles upon his hostess in the act.

> At moments, the snake's body would slide ever so slightly about Carol's body; it seemed to caress, that movement, and after the caress, the snake would contract lightly, squeezing her, coiling there about her body. Carol would gasp, pulsate, shiver; the snake would slide down by her ear, then rise, look at her nose, her lips, her eyes, and then repeat his movements. The snake's tongue flicked rapidly and Carol's cunt was open, the hairs begging, red and beautiful, in the lamplight. (208)

Unlike other descriptions and insinuations of sex in *Tales of Ordinary Madness*, this one, though raw, is notably sensual and almost romantic. The movements of the two lovers are "slight," "light," and "caressing"; both participants, from the narrator's point of view, enjoy their contact shamelessly. Subsequent descriptions of Carol's sex with the animals in her menagerie, Gordon included, are equally sensual and intense.

"Animal Crackers," in its blurring of the sexual and spiritual boundaries between humans and animals, amounts to a searing indictment of the human race, idealizing in its place the futuristic figure of Carol, who is at once animal and human (209). To put it differently, one might consider Carol an Hegelian synthesis of contradictory impulses, a figure who, in her advanced state of being and knowledge, holds the power to predict the fate of humanity. "The world is tired," she observes.

> Some end is coming about. People have deadened into inconsequence – rock people. They are tired of themselves. They are praying for death and their prayers will be answered. I'm – I'm – well – I'm rather preparing a new creature to inhabit what is left of the earth. I feel that somewhere somebody else is preparing the new creature. Perhaps in several other places. These creatures will meet and breed and survive, you see? But they must contain the *best* of all the creatures, including man, in order to survive within the small particle of life which will remain … My dreams, my dreams … Do you think I'm mad? (211)

Gordon both believes and disbelieves Carol's prediction. At one point, he says, "Carol was serious, and I believed her. You had to believe Carol. Carol

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was all there was to believe" (210). At another point, when Carol asks if he thinks she's "Crazy Carol," he answers "'I don't know … there's no way of telling'" (211). Despite this routine mirror play, one senses the profound affection and admiration Gordon feels for Carol, a respect that stems from her insight into the stagnancy of contemporary culture, as well as her recognition that the promise of survival is linked to a harboring of opposite points of view in an effort to create a more sustainable political, biological and cultural synthesis.

And so Gordon goes along with the plan, living with Carol and willfully enlisting in her bestial harem. Her pregnancy, the physical manifestation of her plan's coming to fruition, raises the story's tempo to a fevered pitch. Then the inevitable happens; when Gordon and Carol are in town buying supplies, her neighbors break in and murder the animals. This act, described as if it were a lynching, presages the historical "end" of which Carol has dreamed. Still, she has already managed to produce the creature of the future, just in time, no less, as evidenced by Gordon's description of the child after its birth.

> I looked at the child – impossible, medically impossible: it was a tiger, a bear, a snake and a human. It was an elk, a coyote, a lynx and a human. It did not cry. Its eyes looked upon me and knew me, and I knew it. It was unbearable, Man and Superman, Superman and Superbeast. It was totally impossible and it looked upon me, the Father, one of the fathers, one of the many many fathers … and the edge of the sun gripped the hospital and the whole hospital began to shake, the babies roared, lights went on and off, a flash of purple crossed the glass partition in front of me. The nurses screamed. Three florescent light fixtures fell from their chains and down upon the babies. The nurse stood there holding my child and smiling as the first hydrogen bomb fell upon the city of San Francisco. (216)

Those who marry Bukowski to a particular ideology – variably labeling him misogynist, proletarian, fascist, countercultural antihero, and so on – ultimately stray from the central feature of the work. Appropriating Bukowski as a stand-in for an idea, or even as a lashing out against all ideologies, is no different than treating the author the way Hemingway attempts to appropriate Henry in "Would You Suggest Writing as a Career?" Such a move, common among Bukowski's fans and detractors alike, ignores an essential preference for contradiction at the center of the stories and poems, a far more enlightened "sneer" that sets him apart from the Beats and confessionals. But let this simply be a critic's observation. I refuse to defend Bukowski. The author's acceptance of fate, his recurring laughter in the collective face of the world, in truth the *amor fati* of a Nietzschean *Übermensch*, would render such a defense inconsequential.

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