The Transgressive Thrills of Charles Bukowski

The captain of a low-life odyssey, Bukowski accomplished something rare: he produced a large, completely distinctive, widely beloved body of work.

By Adam Kirsch   March 7, 2005

Photograph by Ulf Andersen / Getty

In the third edition of "The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry," in which poets appear in order of birth, the class of 1920 fields a strong team, including Howard Nemerov and Amy Clampitt. If you were to browse the poetry section of any large bookstore, you would probably find a book or two by each of those critically esteemed, prize-winning poets. Nowhere to be found in the canonizing Norton anthology, however, is the man who occupies the most shelf space of any American poet: Charles Bukowski. Bukowski's books make up a burly phalanx, with their stark covers and long, lurid titles: "Love Is a Dog from Hell"; "Play the Piano Drunk Like a Percussion Instrument Until the Fingers Begin to Bleed a Bit." They give the impression of an aloof, possibly belligerent empire in the middle of the republic of letters.

Bukowski himself, and his many, many readers, would not

have it any other way. John Martin, the founder of Black Sparrow Press, who was responsible for launching Bukowski's career, has explained that "he is not a mainstream author and he will never have a mainstream public." This is an odd thing to say about a poet who has sold millions of books and has been translated into more than a dozen languages—a commercial success of a kind hardly known in American poetry since the pre-modernist days of popular balladeers like Edgar A. Guest. Yet the sense of not being part of the mainstream, at least as the Norton anthology and most other authorities define it, is integral to Bukowski's appeal. He is one of those writers whom each new reader discovers with a transgressive thrill.

Fittingly, for a poet whose reputation was made in ephemeral underground journals, it is on the Internet that the Bukowski cult finds its most florid expression. There are hundreds of Web sites devoted to him, not just in America but in Germany, Spain, the Czech Republic, and Sweden, where one fan writes that, after reading him for the first time, "I felt there was a soul-mate in Mr. Bukowski." Such claims to intimacy are standard among Bukowski's admirers. On Amazon.com, the reader reviews of his books sound like a cross between love letters and revival-meeting testimonials: "This is the one that speaks to me to the point where each time I read certain pages, I cry"; "This book is one of the most influential books of poetry in my life"; or, most revealing

of all, “I hate poetry, but I love Buk’s poems.”

Today’s fans can no longer call up Bukowski on the phone or drop in on him at home in Los Angeles, where he lived most of his life. But before his death, from leukemia, in 1994, they could and did, with a regularity that the poet found flattering, if tiresome. As he told an interviewer in 1981, “I get many letters in the mail about my writing, and they say: ‘Bukowski, you are so fucked up and you still survive. I decided not to kill myself.’ . . . So in a way I save people. . . . Not that I want to save them: I have no desire to save anybody. . . . So these are my readers, you see? They buy my books—the defeated, the demented and the damned—and I am proud of it.”

This mixture of boast and complaint exactly mirrors the coyness of Bukowski’s poetry, which is at once misanthropic and comradely, aggressively vulgar and clandestinely sensitive. The readers who love him, and believe that he would love them in return, know how to look past the bluster of poems like “splashing”:

> dumb,
> Jesus Christ,
> some people are so dumb
> you can hear them
> splashing around in their dumbness. . . .
>
> I want to
> run and hide

> I want to
> escape their engulfing
> nullity.

Bukowski's fans realize that "some people," like E. E. Cummings's "mostpeople," or J. D. Salinger's hated "phonies," are never us, always them—those not perceptive enough to understand our merit, or our favorite author's. This is a typically adolescent emotion, and it is no coincidence that all three of these writers exert a special power over teen-agers. With all three, too, there is the sense that if the misanthrope could know us as we really are he would welcome our pilgrimage; as Holden Caulfield says, "What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it." Similarly, Bukowski might declare his contempt for humanity, and his alarm at its constant invasions of his privacy—"I have never welcomed the ring of a / telephone," he writes in "the telephone"—yet he titles another poem with his telephone number, "462-0614," and issues what sounds like an open invitation:

> I don't write out of knowledge.
> when the phone rings
> I too would like to hear words
> that might ease
> some of this.

> that's why my number's
> listed.

This sort of cri de coeur is not what first comes to mind when the name Charles Bukowski is mentioned. In the course of some fifty books, he transformed himself into a mythic roughneck, a figure out of a tall tale—brawler, gambler, companion of bums and whores, boozehound with an oceanic thirst. (This legend gained still wider exposure with the 1987 movie "Barfly," in which a version of Bukowski is portrayed by Mickey Rourke.) In his heavily autobiographical novels and some of his poems, he gave this alter ego the transparent pseudonym Hank Chinaski —Bukowski's full name was Henry Charles Bukowski, Jr., and he was known to friends as Hank—but since he almost always wrote in the first person, the line between Chinaski the character and Bukowski the man is blurred. This blurring is, in fact, the secret of Bukowski's appeal: he combines the confessional poet's promise of intimacy with the larger-than-life aplomb of a pulp-fiction hero.

Bukowski's poems are best appreciated not as individual verbal artifacts but as ongoing installments in the tale of his true adventures, like a comic book or a movie serial. They are strongly narrative, drawing from an endless supply of anecdotes that typically involve a bar, a skid-row hotel, a horse race, a girlfriend, or any permutation thereof. 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 or clichéd. The effect is as though some legendary tough guy, a cross between Philip Marlowe and Paul Bunyan, were to take the barstool next to you, buy a round, and start telling his life story: