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**The Poetry of Charles Bukowski: Narrative,  
Subjectivity and the Everyday**

By

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Master of Arts

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Christine Brandl

## Introduction

Charles Bukowski continues to be an enigmatic American writer. His rough, hard-boiled public persona and his no-nonsense approach to poetry has earned him the reputation as a limited writer with a stylistically restricted palette. Nevertheless, Bukowski is a superb storyteller who champions the everyday experiences of the working class in American society. Closer inspection of his work reveals an introverted, often psychologically beleaguered man, a sharp observer and a champion of the underdog. Bukowski remained little known in literary circles until his final success towards the end of his seventy-three years of life, which critics such as Russell Howard propose is due to Bukowski's writing about the American working class and criticising of the work ethic, which in an aspirational capitalist society, amounts to nothing more than treason.

The rejection and ignoring of Bukowski is a result of many Americans' reluctance to acknowledge the fact that ours is a class society, something Bukowski's work constantly reminds us of. [...] especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and most especially in the last twenty years, class barriers have risen and (upward) mobility has decreased. Americans don't like to be reminded of the barriers of social class [...] <sup>1</sup>

It is important to acknowledge the 'counterculture loser focus'<sup>2</sup> in Bukowski's writing. His opposition to societal values and his indictment of American dream mythology focuses his concern on the people excluded by mainstream capitalist ideology, the disenfranchised working-class and minority groups, those who 'lose out' in an apparently prosperous society. People including factory workers, farm hands, shoe-shine-boys, gamblers, drunks and prostitutes, earthy, often rebellious, carnivalesque characters whose downtrodden lives Bukowski portrays with empathy and satire in equal measure. Bukowski's sympathy for the marginalised as well as his 'gallows' humour<sup>3</sup> is his way of navigating the grim mundanity of working-class life and its everyday experiences. In this regard, although works are often related to Beat poetry or Confessionalism, Bukowski's poetry should be considered in the American literary tradition of proletarian writing.

The American proletarian literary movement began as an amalgam of immigrant European radicals, African American migrants and native working-class resistance to World War I, utilising experiences of biography as a foundation for creative expression, highlighting working-class culture during the economic collapse of the Depression, aiming to shape cultural debate through Marxist theory. Throughout his life, Bukowski resisted any political affiliations, never joining any particular party or trade union, and remained adamantly apolitical. However, his interest in the broader concepts of proletarian writing such as strikes, agricultural and industrial conditions, and persecution and oppression of the working class<sup>4</sup>, places him firmly in the realms of proletarian literature. Bukowski's poetry is also a response to American Modernism and the Romanticism imparted by writers such as Walt Whitman who placed importance on the interconnectedness of poet and society, 'the proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it'<sup>5</sup>. Following on from Whitman, poets such as William Carlos Williams, embraced this interconnectedness by highlighting everyday life in their poetry and by using the vernacular to highlight the mundane event, their works became accessible to even relatively

unsophisticated readers. Bukowski takes his use of the vernacular even further, littering his poems with unsentimental, coarse language, long passages of dialogue and little descriptive detail, causing him to be accused of selecting poetic form on a whim rather than purposeful consideration. This contributes to the assumption that there really is no form at all, therefore no craft and no underlying aesthetic of any sort. Bukowski however, is far from being a man without aesthetic sensibilities. His reason for writing poetry is the result of the coming together of three elements establishing a distinct body of works: his interest in the working-class everyday, his emphasis on subjectivity and his concern for the narrative.

Chapter one discusses the first of the three elements, Bukowski's preoccupation with everyday life experiences. Eating, drinking, defecating, simple everyday acts such as the morning ritual of fetching a newspaper, have all been interwoven in Bukowski's work. Nothing seems too trivial or too mundane in either the subjective or the objective world that it cannot be transformed into poetry. For Bukowski, as for Whitman, poetry reflects the world, no matter how mundane, and the world reflects poetry, as he states in *A Rambling Essay*, 'call me a hardhead if you wish, uncultured, drunken, whatever. The world has shaped me and I have shaped what I can. [...] Poetry must become, must right itself'<sup>6</sup>. In the introduction to Douglas Blazek's *Skull Juices*, Bukowski describes this as a poetry revolution, when poetry 'turn[s] from a diffuse and careful voice of formula and studied ineffectiveness to a voice of clarity and burnt toast and spilled olives and me and you and the spider in the corner'<sup>7</sup>. This chapter also sets out a range of useful theoretical perspectives in order to lay down the foundations for an understanding of the everyday. The notions of 'everyday' and 'quotidian' are explored in relation to theory and practice with particular reference to critical works by Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau and Georg Lukács, as well as in relation to American proletarian literature, which focuses on the worker's everyday. A large number of Bukowski's poems concern themselves with the realities of the downtrodden industrial worker, often stuck in mundane, dead-end occupations. Despite Bukowski's focus on individuals such as the Mexican day-labourer, the former mental hospital patient, the aging prostitute, or any individuals who find themselves existing at the bottom of the American economic system, their struggles retains a collective dimension. The Bukowskian subjects, men and women alike, are trapped in their daily existence and their social and political conditions have become existential problems. All these characters are in the same socio-economic boat. They have become powerless, oppressed by the everyday. Moreover, the principle of the everyday is explored in relation to modernist discourse. A theoretical debate is introduced that revolves around the tropes of modernism and realism, specifically in relation to writers such as William Carlos Williams. William Carlos Williams, in a letter to Marianne Moore states that 'always, to me, poetry seems limitless in its application to life'<sup>8</sup>. Famously, Williams writes about eating plums from an icebox. Bukowski writes about a dirty white dog that simply will not shit<sup>9</sup>. Such a discourse, with key concepts defined, highlights Bukowski as a realist writer who creates narratives involving working-class experiences, more importantly, the experiences of people ignored by society, the marginalised. His unflinching depictions of the bleak realities of working-class life led Bill Buford to regard Bukowski's work as 'dirty realism', where 'unadorned, unfurnished, low-rent tragedies about people'<sup>10</sup> are depicted without omissions. By describing everyday events and human behaviour, like the simple act of a young woman walking her dog, Bukowski integrates everyday life into his poetry.

A more detailed analysis of Bukowski's aesthetic is undertaken in chapter two. It critically evaluates the prevalence of subjectivity. Victor Burgin describes the idea of the self as an 'autonomous being, [...] an irreducible core of humanity and a human essence in which we all partake'<sup>11</sup>. Bukowski's self, the narrator, partakes in everyday experience and the social environment he finds himself in. He reveals his view of self only as defined through activity and interaction with the world, not through self-contemplation or meditation. This overarching principle stands in direct opposition to the modernist idea of the removed poet who refuses to reduce human experience by imposing his own vision upon it. Importantly, this chapter contains an analysis of philosophical ideas which have shaped the terms of poetry of experience, theoretical constructs that refer to subjectivity, objectivity and Hegelian dialectics. Following on from this there is a more sustained exploration of self-assertion, which represents a number of discourses including conflict, antagonism and resistance against society. Bukowski adopts 'the vantage point of the underclass'<sup>12</sup>, an underclass whose everyday experiences are full of conflicts, struggles and pressures so great, constant assertion of the self is necessary for survival. Typically poetry of experience means placing primary importance on immediate life experiences rather than carefully constructed ideas when writing. This category of poetry is evaluated to show how autobiography infuses Bukowski's work. His poetry of experience is explored in relation to modernist poetry where everyday experiences are abstracted and interactions are deemed significant only because of the importance of the poet's gaze. The term abstraction in this sense is applied to qualities which are philosophical and emotional, as opposed to tangible. The working-class experiences from which Bukowski's poetry originates, result in verse content depicting the lives of men and women in everyday situations and spaces. These outside spaces are also explored through Bukowski, who is the voice of the marginalised. His exaggerated stories embrace textual representations of socially excluded lifestyles, using his had-boiled narratives and self-effacing humour.

Chapter three focuses on the retelling of personal experience which comprises the third element of Bukowski's poetic endeavours, using narrative as its primary literary structure. Whether recollecting a past event or narrating a present-tense adventure, the majority of Bukowski's poems are stories. Stories which are steeped in the everyday and the mundane event. This chapter introduces and examines the complex linguistic structures of the narrative, then a broader investigation of aesthetic impersonality is undertaken to situate discourse surrounding modernist literature. Particular emphasis is placed on how Bukowski centres narratives on personal experience reconstructed through specific storytelling techniques and how he reconstructs the everyday life. This method is assessed by showing his storytelling style, economy of language and use of dialogue. The distinct lack of the imagination in Bukowski's verse shows he has little enthusiasm for creating alternative realities, or in inventing back-stories for the narrator or other characters. His preoccupation with observation, sometimes bordering on voyeurism, suggests disinterest in directly commenting on the greater picture, political or social. Bukowski is much more concerned with action and interaction of individuals. The anecdotal, 'he said', 'I said', element in the verse suggests Bukowski is in the thick of the action, revealing everyday working-class experience from the inside as opposed to a modernist observer looking on. He treats the reader as an acquaintance, a drinking buddy, a confidante and friend. Poetic textuality disappears and poems become speech, spontaneous and full of authorial candour. His

simple and idiosyncratic method of writing is evaluated with specific examples including the long poem *A Trainride in Hell*, revealing Bukowski's graphic everyday.



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<sup>1</sup> Russell Harrison, *Against the American Dream: Essays on Charles Bukowski* (Edinburgh: Rebel Inc./Canongate, 2001) p.12

<sup>2</sup> Paul Clements, *Charles Bukowski, Outsider Literature, and the Beat Movement*, (London: Routledge, 2013), p.3

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p.4

<sup>4</sup> James D. Hart, 'Proletarian literature', *The Concise Oxford Companion to American Literature* (Oxford: OU Press, 2002)

<http://www.oxfordreference.com.chain.kent.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780195047714.001.0001/acref-9780195047714-e-1624> [accessed 27 November 2018], para. 1

<sup>5</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings: Authoritative Texts, Other Poetry and Prose, Criticism*, ed. by Michael Moon, 2nd edn (New York: Norton, W. W. & Company, 2002), p.17

<sup>6</sup> Charles Bukowski, 'A Rambling Essay on Poetics and the Bleeding Life Written While Drinking a Six-Pack (tall)' in *Notes from a Wine-Stained Notebook: Uncollected Stories and Essays, 1944-1990*, ed. by David S. Calonne (San Francisco: City Lights, 2008), p.38

<sup>7</sup> Douglas Blazek, *Skull Juices* (Berkeley: Two Windows Press, 1970)

<sup>8</sup> William Carlos Williams, *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams*, ed. by John C. Thirlwall (New York: New Direction Books, 1957), p.155

<sup>9</sup> Charles Bukowski, 'the state of world affairs from a 3<sup>rd</sup> floor window' in *Burning in Water Drowning in Flame* (New York: Ecco, 1974) p.17

<sup>10</sup> Dirty Realism, *Granta* 8, (1983) p.4

<sup>11</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1988) p.226

<sup>12</sup> Frank N. Magill (ed.), *Critical Survey of Poetry. Volume 1*, (Amelia: Salem Press, 1987) p.355

## Chapter One: Bukowski and the everyday – making the unpoetic, poetic

*Time* magazine famously hailed Charles Bukowski as the laureate of the American lowlife<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, much emphasis has been placed on the grittiness of his scenes and the crassness of his subjects, leading to a populist image which, underpinned by traditional and social media, portrays him as the champion of the lewd and peddler of the grotesque, ‘a cult literary figure... decorating T-shirts and bumper stickers’<sup>2</sup>. Opinion on the significance of his work remains sharply divided and his extensive output draws scepticism as well as sharp critique. Bukowski’s poems are accused of containing ‘too much dross’<sup>3</sup> and monotony, while he has been dubiously described as ‘America’s sewer Shakespeare’, a ‘sloppy Narcissus’ and a ‘lazy bum with intellectual flair’<sup>4</sup>. This is not only a somewhat rash assessment of Bukowski and his work and context, but also denies him the deliberate craftsmanship present in his poetry. Bukowski’s apparent coarseness disguises a great capability for sharp social commentary and surprising humour, far removed from the naïve caricature of the hard-drinking, sub-literate misanthrope who has little command of literary technique. The lowlife of Bukowski’s concern is the American working-class and those on the economic margins. Clearly, the meaning of the term ‘working-class’ is open to contention as its definition depends on the political standpoint of individuals and is subject to restrictions of time and geography. Classically defined as the class which must sell its labour-power to survive<sup>5</sup>, there is not always economical homogeneity amongst Bukowski’s subjects, however, writing about people at the bottom of the societal hierarchy means his alliances lie with all those excluded from prosperity and its material rewards. The American underbelly recounted in Bukowski’s poetry includes daylabourers, factory workers, skid row inhabitants, gamblers, hustlers, prostitutes, alcoholics and other economic failures. Directly, or indirectly, through personal experiences, or by witnessing the experiences of others, Bukowski is familiar with the struggles and challenges affecting the working and the poor. He describes their lives and the grim realities of their working-class existence with reflection and social astuteness, focusing on the ordinary and mundane, ‘what I’ve tried to do, if you’ll pardon me, is bring in the factory-worker’s aspect of life... The basic realities of the everyman existence’<sup>6</sup>. This short statement encapsulates two important characteristics of Bukowski’s poetry: his concern with the everyday and his insistence on realism. The realism in Bukowski’s work constitutes an imaginative reality, a realised picture of the working-class everyday experience. It is however by no means imagined. Bukowski’s protagonist, be it the ‘I’ narrator or an alter ego such as the infamous Hank Chinaski, is always Bukowski, as autobiography drives his work. He does not affect to speak on behalf of the factory-worker, he *is* the factory worker.

Winter comes in a lot of places in August,  
like the railroad yards  
when we come over the bridge,  
hundreds of us,  
workers, like cattle,

[...]

[...] here we come,

hundreds of us,  
blank-faced and rough<sup>7</sup>

Bukowski's reality demonstrates what Ben Hickman calls an aesthetic of testimony<sup>8</sup> where testimony 'prioritizes the first hand, the *I-was-there*, the ways in which witness is tied up with experience'<sup>9</sup>. Voicing experiences of working-class life, Bukowski echoes writers such as Mike Gold who demands that writing must be done 'like an insider, not like a bourgeois intellectual observer'<sup>10</sup> and that writers need to have their 'roots in something real'<sup>11</sup>. In *termites on the page*, Bukowski reflects exactly such an attitude and affirms, 'poet (?):/ that word needs re-/ defining'<sup>12</sup>.

the problem that I've found with  
most poets I have known is that  
they've never had an 8 hour job  
and there is nothing  
that will put a person  
more in touch  
with the realities  
than  
an 8 hour job.

[...]  
they have been protected  
against the actualities  
from the beginning  
and they understand nothing  
[...]

their words are  
unlived, unfurnished, un-  
true, and worse – so  
fashionably  
dull.<sup>13</sup>

Working-class writing for Bukowski must stem from lived experience in order to represent the real world. Gold's 'something real' becomes Bukowski's own life as an American worker, his 'flesh and blood reality, however crude'<sup>14</sup>. This reality is ultimately defined by the everyday and it is of key importance to Bukowski to give the everyday expression.

The everyday, the ordinary, the banal, the mundane, terms that have been applied to denote what essentially are certain activities that are carried out day after day without much variation or change: quotidian activities such as eating, sleeping, washing, cooking, commuting to work, even work itself. It also includes interaction with aspects of popular culture such as listening to the radio or watching television. Engagement with the everyday aims to consider the entirety of individuals' multi-faceted lives, artefacts of daily use and interactions with other people. The idea of an aesthetic of the commonplace serves to question attitudes of what is deemed worthy of literary attention, aiming to move away

from a fixation on beauty and sublimity as an aesthetic characteristic, focusing instead on the universal qualities which permeate everyday human existence: qualities such as ugly, bawdy, dull, dirty, pretty, etc. which are present in daily life, regardless of a person's occupation, economic status or social class. As a concept, everyday life has a long history. There exists an extensive library of writing, most famously by authors such as Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre, but also by other philosophers and sociologists such as Georg Lukács. In *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, Lefebvre determines that there exists within the everyday a great potential for exploration of human experience. He insists that despite the apparent uniformity of the everyday, there underlie structures which prove it to be otherwise. This otherness within the most mundane aspects of life encompasses a new way of viewing the everyday and forms a basis for an argument through which the everyday can be disseminated and its semantic values differentiated. The undifferentiated whole of existence, the holistic, universal everydayness which forms part of every being and is recognisable by everybody, is merely an initial concept divided into differing aspects. This shows a moving away from universal principles to a more precisely defined aesthetic. For Lefebvre, the everyday relates directly to the impact of capitalism and industrialisation on human lives and experiences, and that some groups in society find themselves more heavily burdened by the everyday, such as the working class who are 'sentenced to everyday life'<sup>15</sup>.

Lefebvre's everyday life consists of two fundamental ideas: the quotidian and the commonplace. By definition, the quotidian denotes repeated actions or events, and by this also implies routine and monotony. The quotidian, as repetition, presents a point of contention for Lefebvre, who most prominently formulates its essence as 'the great problem'<sup>16</sup>. Repetition of daily activities whether physiological: eating, drinking, sleeping; or social: working, travelling; promote uniformity and reassurance. Initially, these characteristics seem unproblematic, after all, cycles of day and night, seasons and harvests are natural occurrences humans may derive pleasure from. However, the never-ending recurrence of these cycles without variety or change can also impose crushing monotony. This view of the quotidian highlights an important difference between Charles Bukowski and some of his modernist predecessors, who, like Wallace Stevens for example, celebrate this aspect of the everyday and, by own admission, value the quotidian: 'What a profound grace it is to have a destiny no matter what it is, even the destiny of the postman going the rounds and of the bus driver driving the bus.'<sup>17</sup> This idea of the everyday as comforting and reassuring is loathsome to Bukowski, echoing Henri Lefebvre who sees it as 'dull routine, the ongoing going-to-work, paying-the-bills, homeward trudge of daily existence'<sup>18</sup>. The oppressiveness of monotony also carries an implication of complicity and passivity, and passivity can ultimately lead to powerlessness. For Bukowski the quotidian weighs more heavily on the working class and those on the economic margins of society who are subjected to everyday life rather than have the liberty to pick and choose, and are 'surviving./.../but the price/is terrible'<sup>19</sup>. It is however possible to counter this oppression. De Certeau asserts that everyday life and its routine practices such as 'talking, reading moving about, shopping, cooking, etc.'<sup>20</sup> possess elements of resistance despite their often oppressing aspects in society, and that these elements of resistance can be used in opposition to society. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau distinguishes between what he calls 'strategies' and 'tactics'<sup>21</sup> in this act of resistance. To de Certeau, strategies are used by those within positions of societal power, from the large such as national governments and international corporations, to the small such as local employers and

landlords. These strategies are deployed to achieve compliance from those who are subject to those powers, to the point where the subjects' disempowerment results in a system 'too vast to be their own, too tightly woven for them to escape from it'<sup>22</sup>. However, in contrast to strategies, tactics can be used by those subjugated. By nature, tactics are defensive and must be employed 'on the wing', and whatever their achievements, they must 'constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into "opportunities"'<sup>23</sup>. This means, that de Certeau offers an everyday where routine, repetition and monotony can be countered by acts of subversion. It would be far-fetched to assume Bukowski consciously or directly channels Lefebvre's or de Certeau's aesthetic ideas about the everyday in his poetry, however the fundamental principles of such an interpretation of the everyday and everydayness are present in his work. Although not immediately obvious, on immersion in Bukowski's writing, his everyday begins to establish itself revealing its own structures and interpretations of terms. A dialectical discernment forms the key to interpreting Bukowski's own understanding of what *his* everyday is and whether he is satisfied by it or not.

Bukowski's ideas of what constitutes the everyday suggest the presence of normality and especially that of socially acceptable norms, echoing Lefebvre's fundamental aspect of the everyday, the commonplace, where ordinary experiences are uniform, at once 'connected and distinct', forming part of an 'undifferentiated whole'<sup>24</sup>. Here appears a point of contention when considering what an ordinary experience is. Surely, the concept of normalcy is relative. What may be mundane for some individuals differs from those of others. Normalcy for the President of the United States is a very different experience from that of a Mexican itinerant farm hand picking oranges. This paradox of the everyday and to what extent the commonplace is normative, forces poets such as Wallace Stevens to admit that it is unwise to think that 'the poet is normal or, for that matter, that anybody is'<sup>25</sup>. This affects a view in Bukowski of the commonplace as ordinary, personal experience removed from what is considered artistic, cultured and sophisticated. The modernist preoccupation with the democracy of the commonplace as a universally shared experience retains a sense of the everyday not by detailing quotidian activities but by transmitting a certain sensibility, an attitude towards the mundane which reflects that of others. Bukowski's framework does not follow this trope. His sometimes macabre, even carnivalesque, poems retain an individuality, almost an exclusivity, which seeks to reinforce the idea that there are aspects of life only he and his characters share, and appear to suggest that despite the vastness of commonplace experience, there are areas which are only known to him. Bukowski vehemently opposes uniformity, as he views it as a submission to authority and unfair social rules. He strives for and wants to retain autonomy, consistently challenging American middle-class normality and its exclusion of working class lives. At the crux of Lefebvre's dialectical everyday lies the distinction between 'the perennial and the ephemeral'<sup>26</sup>. In the modernist aesthetic, the extraordinary in the commonplace presents a moment in time, a fleeting chance encounter immortalised by the poet, ultimately ephemeral in nature. Bukowski, also has chance encounters and captures moments in time, but his concern is to highlight the perennial, which is often oppressive. It all seems to come down to meanings of purpose. The reader is not left with a feeling that chance encounters ultimately lead to some higher, epiphanic experience. The commonplace remains a 'dispassionate one'<sup>27</sup>, as Ben Hickman explains, without symbolism or analogy. Bukowski's commonplace ultimately remains concrete, without losing its meaningfulness. Poems such as *The shoelace* are an example of this aesthetic. The poem describes the mundane event of the snapping of a

shoelace which sparks the speaker's musings on the banality of commonplace existence. With the lines 'it's not the large things that/send a man to the/madhouse... no, it's the continuing series of *small* tragedies/that send a man to the/madhouse'<sup>28</sup>, Bukowski suggests that everyday life is an unremitting onslaught of misfortune and that its litany of miserable experiences is inescapable. The snapping of the shoelace is not an ephemeral moment and, regardless of how universal this moment may be, it is merely a link in a chain of perennial experiences.

the sink's stopped-up, the landlord's drunk,  
the president doesn't care and the governor's  
crazy.  
lightswitch broken, mattress like a  
porcupine;  
\$105 for a tune-up, carburetor and fuel pump at  
Sears Roebuck;  
and the phone bill's up and the market's  
down  
and the toilet chain is  
broken,  
and the light has burned out—<sup>29</sup>

Contrasting the modernist utopian view of the ephemeral commonplace, Bukowski engages with the mundane but simultaneously wonders how he may escape it, for him, there is no ethereal world underlying the everyday as the last lines of the poem utter a stark warning to all those afflicted by drudgery.

with each broken shoelace  
out of one hundred broken shoelaces,  
one man, one woman, one  
thing  
enters a  
madhouse.

so be careful  
when you  
bend over.<sup>30</sup>

Bukowskian characters may be diverse within the confines of the text, however, there is little diversity in their actual experiences. Whether they are a waitress, a hospital porter, a busboy or a thief, Bukowski suggests they all share the same struggles and have to suffer the same banalities. His insistence on the importance of the working-class commonplace as a concrete, normative experience means that no matter how colourful, exotic or even surreal Bukowski's characters are, there continues to be a concern for the perennial and a thematic exploration of the everyday. At its most fundamental level, Bukowski's poetry engages in what Bryony Randall calls the 'questioning or defamiliarisation of practices, objects and environments assumed to be "everyday" and thus often invisible'<sup>31</sup>. His preoccupation with the commonplace reflects that of classic modernist texts without being

directly referential. However, Bukowski searches for an extension to the modernist aesthetic, to not only value the ordinary as a poetic subject but to also concern himself with making the invisible working-class experience visible, as it is precisely this experience which is habitually excluded for being seen as too dull and too mundane to warrant literary recognition. The stance of Bukowski's everyday is one of allegiance with those American modernist writers who, in their differing ways, achieve a deep grounding in the ordinary and the mundane, and perhaps the most prominently placed to have done so is William Carlos Williams.

It has been suggested that Bukowski has little in common with modernists such as William Carlos Williams. Contrary to Williams, who is praised for his careful, sculpted writing, 'an extraordinary combination of aphorism, romanticism, philosophizing, obscurity, obsession, exhortation, reverie, beautiful lines and scary paragraphs'<sup>32</sup>, Bukowski is often accused of being slap-dash in his approach to it. This is however a misconception. Bukowski's casual stance to poetry does not represent an attitude of carelessness as he tells Robert Wennersten.

You get a bit dramatic when you're drunk, a bit corny. [...] You start drinking and write poems all night. You find them on the floor in the morning. You take out all the bad lines, and you have poems. About sixty percent of the lines are bad; but it seems like the remaining lines, when you drop them together, make a poem.<sup>33</sup>

It is false to propose Bukowski does not consider his line, but it is incorrect to assume this consideration equates to philosophising or meditation. There is a connection between Bukowski and William Carlos Williams, a writer who has most extensively permeated the same poetic territory Bukowski has chosen to explore. Though ultimately, Bukowski negotiates his way to formulate his own practice. It has been repeatedly suggested that William Carlos Williams is the American modernist most influential on Bukowski's work, this is only partly true. When considering each poet's respective treatment of the everyday as a literary aesthetic, Williams is concerned with the mystical revelations found in the everyday and its ephemeral qualities. His work insists on the temporality of the commonplace, whereas Bukowski's interests lie with the perennial's capacity for subversion and critique. Furthermore, for Williams, the mundane reserves a place within space and time and his poetry observes the familiar things in life with an exploration which seems more akin to the way somebody would approach a painting. Notably, his best known texts attest to a sense of rhopography, 'the depiction of those things which lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that "importance" constantly overlooks. It attends to the world ignored by the human impulse to create greatness'<sup>34</sup>. Reflecting on this definition, it is worthwhile to consider a passage from Williams' poem *Pastoral*:

I walk backstreets,  
admiring the houses  
of the very poor:  
roof out of line with sides  
the yards cluttered  
with old chicken wire, ashes,  
furniture gone wrong;

the fences and outhouses  
built of barrel-staves  
and parts of boxes...'<sup>35</sup>

In this poem the speaker knows the aesthetic significance of what he sees and the observations made confirm to the reader the topography woven into his poetry. Williams elevates the scene, the slum neighbourhood is both insignificant yet simultaneously highly important. However, using the word 'admiring' feels out of place here. It evokes an image of the poet looking at the scene through a lens of detached romanticism. This sentiment becomes even more problematic later in the poem, when Williams hopes he is 'fortunate' enough to spot some houses painted in a 'bluish-green/ that properly weathered/ pleases me best/ of all the colors'<sup>36</sup>. That he should gain pleasure from walking among the houses of the poor and disenfranchised seems somewhat patronising to those having to live under such conditions, regardless of its aesthetic value. The poet remains detached, an outside observer, transforming into an event the everyday which consists of inescapable repetition, monotony, even drudgery for those he observes. Like *Pastoral, Downtown* concentrates on observing disenfranchised everyday life, but ultimately, Bukowski displays different sensitivities, as the poet takes a walk downtown.

nobody goes downtown anymore  
the plants and trees have been cut away around  
Pershing Square  
the grass is brown  
and the street preachers are not as good  
as they used to be  
and down on Broadway  
the Latinos stand in colorful lines  
waiting to see Latino action movies.<sup>37</sup>

Although Bukowski is less descriptive than Williams in *Downtown*, the speaker elicits the same emotional response from the reader. Bukowski's understated topography does not detract from his concern for mundane details. A quick sketch of the surroundings of his dying neighbourhood with a lack of greenery and dying grass is enough to engage with the commonplace and to find value in a setting which others may dismiss as grotty and culturally bankrupt. However, Williams' insistence on transforming the everyday into moments of aesthetic greatness is absent in Bukowski. Later on in *Downtown*, he watches a group of 'young Latinos and Blacks', 'between the ages of six and/ fifteen'<sup>38</sup> playing various games at a penny arcade.

they fly spacecraft  
test their strength  
fight in the ring  
have horse races  
auto races  
but none of them want their fortunes told.<sup>39</sup>



None of the children want to know what awaits them in the future, as it is inevitable that their everyday lives will not be as exciting and full of opportunity as the games they are currently so eagerly engaged in. Bukowski knows this. Their everyday lives will not enable them to transcend their working-class limitations. He does not, like Williams, 'admire' the vanished greenery or the excitement witnessed in the arcade. Bukowski's attention to the everyday resists the idea of transformation. For him, highlighting the everyday serves as a way of finding the 'null moment' in contrast to the 'splendid moment'<sup>40</sup> Williams discovers in *Pastoral*. Bukowski's focus on the working-class environment creates an idiosyncratic 'ghetto pastoral'<sup>41</sup>. Telling of downward mobility, Bukowski's descriptive sketches such as those in *Downtown* seek to provide a portrayal of the everyday in contrast to traditional pastoral narratives through the 'yoking of naturalism and the pastoral, the slum and the shepherd'<sup>42</sup>, as Michael Denning defines it in *The Cultural Front*. According to Denning, these stories seek a more accurate portrayal of the working-class experience and the everyday life of those on the economic margins. Rather than observing the everyday from the outside, they seek to explore it from within, they are not 'explorations of how the other half lives', but they are 'tales of how *our* half lives'<sup>43</sup>. By focusing on the urban realities of 'working-class tenements, sweatshops and factory labor, and cheap mass entertainments'<sup>44</sup>, the Bukowskian ghetto pastoral challenges narratives such as those of William Carlos Williams, which aim to transcend the everyday and use it as a symbolic stockroom of meaning and value. Williams' poems deal with abstraction, as hyperrealism transforms artefacts of everyday life into objects of contemplation.

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens<sup>45</sup>

In *The Red Wheelbarrow*, Williams stresses that the poet need only look at the mundane and he will find beauty in the ordinary. He is determined to discover the universal in the particular and it is happy chance and accident which has placed the speaker into this precise situation. The red wheelbarrow and the white chickens become revelatory objects representing a moment frozen in time. The rhopography of this rural still life gives the reader a sense of Williams' world which has at its aesthetic centre, the epiphany. The everyday object offers an escape from the ordinary as its ultimate significance triggers a sense of heightened reality, a sudden spiritual awareness when 'its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the most commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant'<sup>46</sup>. This spiritual awareness is virtually absent in Bukowski's observational poems. Instead of dealing with abstractions, works such as *The state of world affairs from a 3<sup>rd</sup> floor window* concern themselves simply with what the speaker can see. This poem mixes descriptions of a girl 'in a light green sweater, blue

shorts, long black stockings;' as 'she watches her nails/ as her dirty white dog sniffs the grass/ in erratic circles;' <sup>47</sup> with lackadaisical observations of the narrator's general social environment, 'the Hollywood Hills stand there, stand there/ full of drunks and insane people and/ much kissing in automobiles' <sup>48</sup>. Contrary to Williams' speaker, the narrator is unable to take refuge in the small details of the everyday. The situation observed offers no escape from his working-class everyday and looking out of the window proves 'no good: *che sera, sera*' <sup>49</sup>, there is no 'radiance' in this chance encounter. Although Bukowski and Williams share the commonplace as an aesthetic principle in their poetry, Bukowski's work stands in direct contrast to Williams' epiphanous everyday, as Liesl Olson argues, 'the ordinary is not [always] transformed into something else, into something beyond our everyday world; the ordinary indeed may endure in and of itself' <sup>50</sup>. Discussing Bukowski's poetry as ghetto pastoral can only go a small way towards appraising his relationship with the everyday. He may share a sense of rhopography with Williams and his championing of the familiar, ordinary everyday, nevertheless, for Bukowski the commonplace remains concrete.

Fellow poet Wallace Steven writes about Williams: 'The anti-poetic is his spirit's cure. He needs it as a naked man need shelter or as an animal needs salt. To a man with a sentimental side the anti-poetic is that truth, the reality to which all of us are forever fleeing' <sup>51</sup>. This can also be said about Bukowski's efforts to include the quotidian in his poetry. All the same, his refusal of abstraction in favour of an anti-symbolism of content opposes Williams' imagism. In *Overhead mirrors*, the relationship Bukowski has with the commonplace is one of pragmatism, as mundane details tell of a speaker suffering from insomnia during 'one of those nights you remember' <sup>52</sup>. These details simply serve to provide context and in their innate triviality prove to be more effective than any abstraction. Indeed the narrator's obsessive repetition of banal activities drives the poem and communicates the speaker's desperation to the reader:

at times I  
got up  
and walked around  
turned the radio off and on, flushed the toilet  
now and then, ran all the faucets in the place,  
then shut them off, turned the lights off and  
on, got back on the bed, rested but not too long,  
got up, sipped water out of the tap,  
sat in a chair and took some coins  
out of my pocket and counted them: 25, 26, 27  
cents... <sup>53</sup>

Again, Lefebvre's dull routine is reflected here, contrasting Williams' utopianism of the epiphanic moment. It is not only the sense of the ethereal Bukowski objects to, it is also the extensive use of imagist abstraction. For Williams it is paramount that the everyday presents intellectual and emotional complexity, and at the heart of poems such as *This is Just to Say* lies the transformation of the commonplace. It begins innocuously enough with the assumption that the poem is based on the mundane action of the speaker leaving a note for his wife, informing her of his raiding their ice box. At first reading, the subject of this literary exercise seems satisfyingly obvious and banal: the consumption of plums, an

everyday occurrence. However, Williams' use of precise visual images and the plums' underlying rhopography, 'Forgive me/ they were delicious/ so sweet/ and so cold'<sup>54</sup>, removes it from the everyday, transforming the poem's subject into something beyond their mere physical reality. For Bukowski, on the other hand, reality means observational accuracy and his attention is directed at the unrelenting mundanity of everyday life. In this, Bukowski's approach is more inclusive than that of his canonical predecessors, as writers such as Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams rarely cover working-class subjects. Furthermore, in Bukowski's poems, the quotidian life often acquires an underlying futility and sense of fatalism. In his own *cold plums*, the everyday is subverted when the simple act of eating plums in bed turns into a moment of crushing banality:

eating cold plums in bed  
she told me about the German  
who owned everything on the block  
except the custom drapery shop  
and he tried to buy  
the custom drapery shop  
but the girls said, no.<sup>55</sup>

As her story continues increasing in detail and verbosity, the fact emerges that, ultimately, the story has no point and so only serves to underline its uselessness. The reader can only guess as to why the speaker is willing to listen to his companion for this long – the monologue runs for all but the last six lines of the poem – without interrupting her or requesting her to get to the crux of her tale. Contrary to Williams' *modus operandi*, there is no abstraction in this poem. The plums remain firmly anchored in the everyday, they are simply objects being consumed during the course of the poem, framing the narrative. In usual Bukowskian fashion, the quotidian remains merely an instrument with which the protagonist occupies his time, 'we finished the plums,/ "that was a sad story," I told her' and they do not prove themselves to be revelatory or epiphanic. Bukowski has little concern for celebrating a universal commonplace, his everyday is filled with inescapable drudgery of little aesthetic value. By portraying everyday mundanity and a 'willingness to describe the whole of life'<sup>56</sup>, Bukowski confronts the reader with the everyday normatively considered of limited significance: the habitually devalued commonplace, the dull, the routine and the insignificant, but unlike Williams, there is no sense of transformation or meditation present, as Bukowski's search for the everyday is underpinned by a drive to write about working-class experiences at their most limiting and base.

In this respect, the extensive, provocative everyday Bukowski presents in his poems, the fornication, masturbation, urination and defecation are all part of the same, crass commentary. In *shit times* readers find the speaker wandering around an unfamiliar neighbourhood the day after a night of heavy drinking.

I walked around, it was a  
Wednesday morning and I could  
see the ocean to the south.  
but all that drinking:  
the shit was about to pour

out of me.  
I walked towards the  
sea.  
I saw a brown brick  
structure at the edge  
of the sea.  
I walked in. there was an  
old guy groaning on one of  
the pots.  
[...]  
I wiped, flushed, pulled up my  
pants and walked over.  
the old man was still on his pot,  
groaning.<sup>57</sup>

With regards to the everyday, there is nothing more commonplace than the acts of defecation and urination. Other than sleeping and eating, no other activity is more frequently performed by humans, so if the everyday is to be engaged with honestly, these most basic of functions must be included. Bukowski refuses to accept any parameters to the commonplace and is equally adamant to embrace even the most basic necessities that make up human existence. However there exists a fundamental difference between the way modernists treat the commonplace and the way Bukowski does. For example, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the mundane, such as Bloom visiting 'the jakes', gains a cinematographic sensitivity.

Quietly he read, restraining himself, the first column and, yielding but resisting, began the second. Midway, his last resistance yielding, he allowed his bowels to ease themselves quietly as he read, reading still patiently, that slight constipation of yesterday quite gone. Hope it's not too big bring on piles again. No, just right. So. Ah! Costive one tabloid of cascara sagrada. Life might be so. It did not move or touch him but it was something quick and neat. Print anything now. Silly season. He read on, seated calm above his own rising smell.<sup>58</sup>

Joyce's heightened sensibility when engaging with the everyday retains an essence of stylism. The insignificant act of reading while sitting on the toilet is described in careful detail. The initial focus on the act of reading is textually framed as if in a close-up camera shot, then zooming out to see Bloom sitting, straining and still reading as if the entire action is being performed in slow-motion. The fact that this scene feels performed suggests the commonplace is transformed into something other-worldly, something removed, frozen in time by rhopography. With Joyce, as with Williams and others, there remains a drive to use observation of the everyday not only to describe its banality universally, but also to highlight its extraordinariness. To find something philosophically and aesthetically valuable in the mundane is of primary importance. In contrast, *The 9 horse* by Bukowski presents the banal as a different aesthetic.

I was at the race track one day  
and I had drunk much beer the night before  
and I was late for the first race  
but I parked, hustled in, and I could

feel this beershit really coming on,  
you know, not only coming on  
but I had to hold the cheeks of my ass  
together while walking real fast from  
the parking lot and through admissions  
and toward and in the crapper.  
Luckily, there was a stall and I got  
my pants and shorts down real fast  
and then it came: hot, glorious and  
stinking.<sup>59</sup>

Bukowski refuses to comply with the thought that the commonplace is anything more than real objectiveness. There is nothing extraordinary in the lives and actions of Bukowskian subjects. Contrary to the modernist aesthetic, the everyday possesses no universal transcendence, artefacts are images powerful in themselves without the need to represent some other truth or sentiment. Eating, drinking, dressing, defecating are unconscious actions with little connection to the world beyond the narrator's horizon. This absence of universality ultimately turns the everyday into a tool which can be effectively used to offer socio-cultural commentary and for Bukowski this means highlighting the working-class everyday.

There exists a body of work created by American realist writers who attempt through a collection of gritty, hard-nosed and unsentimental texts to capture the reality of proletarian lives and document social inequalities. These individuals formed part of a sociocultural movement which emerged during the height of the Great Depression when artists, writers, film makers and other creatives allied themselves with the ideologies and politics of the working-class. This 'Popular Front' was responsible for the opening of workers' theatres, the publication of proletarian literary magazines and the production and screening of political films<sup>60</sup>, and although it had a broad political focus, was nevertheless steeped in socialist as well as communist ideologies, and was decidedly anti-fascist, anti-racist in thinking. Short stories by Tillie Lerner Olson as well as novels by John Steinbeck and John Dos Passos among others established a 'cultural front'<sup>61</sup> who in turn, resonated with writers such as John Fante, Carson McCullers, Raymond Carver and noir writers such as Raymond Chandler. All these individuals show concern for 'dirt under its fingernails'<sup>62</sup> narratives: a literary style lacking embellishments, focusing on working-class lifestyles and culture, combining aspects of modern urbanity with the portrayal of psychological and socio-economic issues affecting certain individuals and groups. This approach to writing also underpins Bukowski's work and demonstrates his ability to depict the everyday in a convincing fashion. Bukowski's realism represents an attempt at authentically portraying the working-class experience. Concerned with work and the working class, he is never short of defending his standpoint and is swift in criticising what in his view are inaccurate descriptions of working life, as in this letter to his long-term editor and publisher John Martin.

You know where I came from. Even the people who try to write about that or make films about it, they don't get it right. They call it "9 to 5". It's never 9 to 5, there's no free lunch break at those places, in fact, at many of them in order to keep your job you don't take lunch. Then there's *overtime* and the books never seem to get the

overtime right and if you complain about *that*, there's another sucker to take your place.<sup>63</sup>

Despite writing narrative poems, Bukowski nevertheless gets it right detailing the drudgery and injustices of low-level employment. His poems question the promises of the American Dream and its implicit guarantee of upward social mobility and freedom of choice. This ethos of 'work hard and you will achieve great things' is quite clearly a fallacy in his eyes. Workers are expendable and the reality of their lives needs to be brought to light accurately. Georg Lukács insists that realistic narratives must reveal the historical and sociological processes which affect the working-class, and must express the relationship between individuals and their reality, highlighting injustices to augment social change<sup>64</sup>. Although habitually a politically inactive person, Bukowski never supported any political party nor joined a trade union, his poetry nevertheless lends itself to ideological interpretation, precisely because it reflects Lukács' ideas on realism. Be it an evening of bad weather in poems like *Trashcan lives*<sup>65</sup> or listening to *A radio with guts*<sup>66</sup>, Bukowski's realism penetrates to the underlying leftist social critique beneath an apparently mundane situation. In his work \$\$\$\$\$\$, an old coat worn by the narrator because 'it was raining very hard/ I didn't have a raincoat so/ I put on a very old coat I hadn't worn for/ months' becomes a vehicle for highlighting the unresolvable conflict between work, pay and individuals, as it describes the reactions of the speaker's co-workers when he discovers some forgotten-about money in one of its pockets.

I looked in the coat for some  
cigarettes  
and found a five dollar bill  
in the side pocket:  
"hey, look," I said, "I just found a 5 dollar  
bill I didn't know I had, that's  
funny"<sup>67</sup>

Surprisingly, this piece of unexpected good luck is not taken in the right spirit by his colleagues who greet him with 'hey, man knock off the/ shit!'<sup>68</sup>, 'you're not funny, son of/ a bitch...'<sup>69</sup> and 'sit down and get to/ work'<sup>70</sup>. Clearly at this point in the poem the hostile response of the workers indicates something amiss in their relationship with the narrator. It becomes clear when the reader finds out that 'some of them were working/ two jobs'<sup>71</sup> to survive and have therefore little affinity with someone who can afford to absent-mindedly leave hard-earned money behind in coat pockets. Clearly individual realities and Lukács's sentiments are reflected in \$\$\$\$\$\$, and Bukowski's ideology shows to be akin to classical Marxism. Although it is doubtful Bukowski ever actually read Marx's writings as he demonstratively avoided political books of any kind, he comes to the same conclusions as Marx. In his essay on the alienation of labour, Marx argues that in a capitalist society which is divided into property owners and property-less workers, the workers not only suffer impoverishment but also experience an estrangement or alienation from the world as a result. These estrangements occur because (1) workers are alienated from the products of their labour. The products do not belong to them, they are removed by capitalist society, meaning the more actual product workers create, the less they own, so the fruits of their labour become alien objects. Everything a workforce creates is appropriated by a world to

which the workers do not belong, alienating them further as their position in society shrinks in turn. Estrangement from the labour process (2) forces workers into the activity of production as a means of survival. The act of labour is forced, becomes unspontaneous and unnatural, and ultimately achieves no satisfaction or sense of pride, leading to a loss of self. This loss of self, or loss of connectedness to the self, reflects the alienation from 'species-being'<sup>72</sup>, the human identity (3). Work loses its sense of purpose for a person, if the transformation of an object through practical activity is taken away by the division of labour and private ownership. The removal of the physicality of creation alienates workers from their bodies, their physical existence and so, their human potential. Division of labour and private ownership also causes workers to become alienated from each other (4). As labour becomes a commodity to trade in capitalist society, the relationships between people disintegrate as competitiveness in production takes hold. This inevitably causes conflict among workers and dissolves any common effort for survival or betterment. This in turn pits worker against worker, alienating members of the same class from their mutual interest.

This seems to be exactly what is happening in \$\$\$\$\$\$. Bukowski portrays this alienation from labour as a psychologically and economically unfulfilling daily drudgery confronting readers with individuals who have become subhuman in their everyday functions, and their alienation is reflected in social relationships. Another sombre poem where workers are trapped, maimed and even destroyed by the unrelenting demands of their employment is *Transformation and Disfiguration*. Again, it is possible to apply a Marxist interpretation to the poet's thinking. Bukowski's workers have become a commodity and are so devalued, breakdowns and deaths seem to make little difference in the overall running of the organisation. Unfair dismissals are rife and apart from whispers among the mail clerks, there is no concern shown for those 'who after years of/ sticking letters/ just couldn't do it anymore'<sup>73</sup>. As desperation increases amongst the employees, they are pitted against the job and each other, making it easier for an oppressive company hierarchy to manipulate and to control them, 'the supervisors brutalized us/ and the supervisors/ were in turn brutalized/ by their supervisors who/ were in turn brutalized'<sup>74</sup>. This cycle of exploitation means that, exhausted from having to hold down two jobs, Louie, 'fell asleep in bed/ smoking a cigarette/ the mattress caught fire/ he burned to death'<sup>75</sup> after his life had become servitude to wage; or Ralph, whose wife is unfaithful to him partly because he has to work 'eleven-and-one-half hours a night'<sup>76</sup> leaving him little time to foster meaningful, personal relationships at home. Yet, they seem to be 'little tragedies'<sup>77</sup>, a favourite expression of Bukowski's, in the wider capitalist society.

it was death and transformation  
and disfigurement  
people found  
they couldn't walk anymore  
or they suddenly  
came up with speech defects  
or they were shaken by tremor or  
their eyes blinked or  
they came to work drugged or  
drunk or both

it was terror and dismemberment  
and the survivors  
hunched on their stools wondering  
who would be next<sup>78</sup>

A United States postal sorting office is not usually associated with the drudgery and dangers of industrial labour, indeed it is generally considered that a position in the postal service, a white-collar domain, is a significant improvement in employment. However, Bukowski's unpleasant picture of a group of workers, of which the narrator is a part, shows individuals that suffer, and as the poem progresses, members leave or die. This poem is particularly disheartening as Bukowski shows even in white-collar work there exists a class imbalance and it is obvious the entire system is broken. Exploitation fuels only more exploitation until the alienation becomes so oppressing, it leads to violence when a particularly despised supervisor is attacked with a knife. The only solution for the narrator is to reject labour all together, which he does at the end of the poem, by resigning from his post. However this ending is somewhat problematic, as it is clear to the reader that another equally demeaning workplace awaits the protagonist in the very near future. There are no opportunities for respite in the reality of Bukowskian subjects and the everyday only serves to dehumanise them further. Bukowski demonstrates the insidious unfairness which permeates the working environment where the power-imbalance between 'boss' and employee is not lost on the narrator, 'we climbed into our old/ automobiles to/ go to our places/ to drink half the night/ to fight with our women/ to return the next morning/ to punch in/ knowing we were/ suckers/ making the rich/ richer'<sup>79</sup> To imply however, that Bukowski holds overtly Marxist views is far-fetched. Where Bukowski's strength lies is in his focus on labour, and its detrimental effects on the individual *despite* wider societal affluence. Bukowski critiques the concept as a whole. He centres it on workers who are un-skilled, are reduced to mindless repetition and have little autonomy, therefore making it easy for them to be exploited by the system; a system where the persons in charge abuse their status to escalate an already imbalanced situation further, exploiting somebody who they consider expendable. Bukowski shows the predisposed attitudes of employers towards their workers, the supposition that punitive measures are necessary to keep the underpaid employees in line and productive.

But Bukowski does not only concern himself with the individual's struggle at the workplace. In poems such as *Cockroach*, he reveals the complexities of working-class life the individual has to face at home. In this poem, a blue-collar speaker discovers a cockroach in the bathroom of his shabby 'Hollywood and Western'<sup>80</sup> apartment where infestations are part of the everyday. He kills the creature, delighting in blasting it repeatedly with insect spray. The cockroach which unsuccessfully tries to 'haul his butt/ into a crack'<sup>81</sup> gives the narrator 'a dirty look'<sup>82</sup> before being exterminated by him 'with a subtle pleasure/ because I pay the rent/ and he didn't'<sup>83</sup>. It is important to note that both the speaker and the cockroach represent the working-class experience here. Bukowski again highlights the disconnectedness of the poor to each other in a capitalist society. The speaker kills the cockroach which is struggling for survival in exactly the same environment he is. In fact, they both share the same squalid living conditions as each other and are both unwanted, rejected creatures. However there is a brutal absence of comradeship between the two, and there is a strong sense of superiority emanating from the narrator. It is he who earns the money necessary for survival, the cockroach is merely a squatter contributing nothing. The



powerlessness felt by the narrator in a capitalist society is so absolute that the only way of gaining any kind of status and sense of self-worth is by crushing a similarly miserable creature. The macabre death of the cockroach is followed by the speaker flushing it unceremoniously down the toilet reminding the reader this will not be an isolated incident. The honesty of experience described in this poem not only serves to demonstrate working-class reality but also shows cultural sensitivity. Bukowski's tone is sombre, unsentimental, depicting a working-class everyday where individuals try to compensate for the humiliation they endure at work with a series of unsuccessful and unrewarding relationships with each other in the wider world. More often than not, the working-class person is the loser in Bukowski's poetry. *Flophouse*, a place of sheltered accommodation for the homeless or those with too little money to afford a cheap hotel room, is one of his most vivid poems illustrating the gritty realities of poverty. Here the narrator describes fifty-six men living and sleeping under one single lightbulb, compacted into one large, run-down room like sardines in a tin. Their place of rest is filled with grunts and snores which seem almost subhuman creating a picture of utter desperation, poverty and 'worst of/ all:/ the total/ absence of/ hope.'<sup>84</sup>

your mind  
almost breaks  
under those  
death-like sounds

and the intermingling  
odours:  
hard  
unwashed socks  
pissed and  
shitted  
underwear

[...]

bodies  
in the dark

fat and  
thin  
and  
bent

some

legless  
armless

some  
mindless<sup>85</sup>

The smelly, soiled clothes are uncompromising images creating a brutal realism which challenges and shocks to confront readers with the everyday existence on the economic margins. Bukowski sheds light on what is the ordinary, the commonplace for working-class people like those men who can no longer look after themselves, economically and physically due to disability or mental health problems, and are therefore forced to spend extended periods of time living rough on the streets. The poem's unsentimentality confirms what happens in a capitalist society when a person is no longer productive. Bukowski powerfully manipulates the everyday of the class struggle to create vivid and believable situations and there is an intimate knowledge of social and cultural spaces evident in the texts, and although those spaces may be removed from the reader by context, they are never too far removed to lose an opportunity for identification by the reader.

It is evident that Bukowski straddles both modernist and realist tropes in his work. His poems have realist qualities as their depictions of lifelike, believable characters and scenes show the everyday struggles of the working-class and poor in a convincing fashion. However, Bukowski owes much to modernism due to his concern with the mundane, his reflection of an objective world and his need for cultural legitimacy. There are obvious differences between social realism and aesthetic modernism however Bukowski's poetry manages to incorporate both, yet remains autonomous from either definitions. In his case, he experiences and writes about some of the worst aspects of the working-class everyday, whether it be poorly-paid, exploitative employment or poverty using realistic depictions which retain their contextual value. It is difficult to argue how accurate Bukowskian scenarios are, almost as impossible as defining how objective the objective world is, but this is not the point of his poetry. Bukowski gives a voice to lives of exclusion and it is his cultural engagement with the proletarian experience that has a profound impact on the reader as his reflective representations maintain a likeness and credibility usually reserved for non-fiction works. In Bukowskian poetry, the boundaries between realism and modernism become blurred as social realities become the working-class everyday.

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- <sup>1</sup> Pico Iyer, 'Celebrities Who Travel Well', *Time*, 127 (1986), 24 (p.78)
- <sup>2</sup> Caleb Daniloff, 'Hanging with Bukowski at the Gotlieb Center: He's in there, among seven miles of collections', *BU Today* (Boston: Boston University, 2010) <http://www.bu.edu/bostonia/web/bukowski/> [accessed 27 November 2018], para. 2
- <sup>3</sup> Jules Smith, *Art, Survival and So Forth. The Poetry of Charles Bukowski* (Hull: Wrecking Ball Press, 2000), p. 15
- <sup>4</sup> cited in Abel Debritto, *Charles Bukowski, King of the Underground: From Obscurity to Literary Icon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.27
- <sup>5</sup> John Scott and Gordon Marshall, 'working class', *A Dictionary of Sociology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) <http://www.oxfordreference.com.chain.kent.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780199533008.001.0001/acref-9780199533008-e-2514> [accessed 8 May 2017] (para 1)
- <sup>6</sup> Sean Penn, 'Tough Guys Write Poetry', *Interview*, XV11 (1987), 19 (p.96)
- <sup>7</sup> Charles Bukowski, 'Winer Comes to a Lot of Places in August' in *The Roominghouse Madrigals: Early Selected Poems, 1946-1966* (New York: Ecco, 1988) p.228
- <sup>8</sup> Ben Hickman, 'Life after the Avant-Garde: Proletarian Realism, Proletarian Modernism', *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 62, (2017): 4, p.591
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> Mike Gold, 'A New Program for Writers', *New Masses*, 5 (Jan 1930), 8, p.21
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> Charles Bukowski, *You Get So Alone At Times That It Just Makes Sense* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1986), p.49
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.48-49
- <sup>14</sup> Mike Gold, 'Go Left, Young Writers!', *New Masses*, 4 (Jan 1929), 8, p.3
- <sup>15</sup> Henri Lefebvre, 'The Everyday and Everydayness', *Yale French Studies*, 73 (1987), p.10
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> as quoted in Liesl Olson, 'Wallace Stevens' Commonplace', *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, Spring (2005), p.111
- <sup>18</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, (London: Continuum, 1971), p.vii
- <sup>19</sup> Charles Bukowski, 'safe' in *The Pleasures of the Damned: Poems, 1951-1993*, ed. by John Martin, (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007), p.272
- <sup>20</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1984), p.xix
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
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- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xix
- <sup>24</sup> Henri Lefebvre, 'The Everyday and Everydayness', *Yale French Studies*, 73 (1987), p.7
- <sup>25</sup> Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, ed. by Milton J. Bates, rev.ed. (New York: Vintage, 1991), p.193
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8
- <sup>27</sup> Ben Hickman, 'Life after the Avant-Garde: Proletarian Realism, Proletarian Modernism', *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 62, (2017): 4, p.595
- <sup>28</sup> Charles Bukowski, 'The shoelace', *Mockingbird Wish Me Luck* (New York: Ecco, 1972), p.114
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.114-115
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.116
- <sup>31</sup> Bryony Randall, 'Modernist Literature and the Everyday', *Literature Compass*, 7/9 (2010), 834-835, p.826
- <sup>32</sup> William Carlos Williams, *Imaginations*, ed. by Webster Schott (New York: New Directions, 1970), p.4
- <sup>33</sup> Robert Wennersten, 'Paying for Horses: An Interview with Charles Bukowski', *London Magazine*, (Dec 1974/ Jan 1975), p.49
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- <sup>35</sup> William Carlos Williams, 'Pastoral', *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume I: 1909-1939*, ed. by Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan, (New York: New Directions, 1986), p.64-65
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>37</sup> Charles Bukowski, *The Pleasures of the Damned: Poems, 1951-1993*, ed. by John Martin, (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007), p.172

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- <sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.173
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>40</sup> Bryony Randall, 'Modernist Literature and the Everyday', *Literature Compass*, 7/9 (2010), 834-835, p.831
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- <sup>42</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Labouring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (London: Verso, 1998), p.231
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- <sup>45</sup> William Carlos Williams, 'The Red Wheelbarrow', *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume I: 1909-1939*, ed. by Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan, (New York: New Directions, 1986), p.277
- <sup>46</sup> Anthony Libby, "'Claritas": William Carlos Williams' Epiphanies', *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts*, 14 (Winter 1972): 1, p.24
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- <sup>52</sup> Charles Bukowski, 'Overhead mirrors', *War All the Time*, (New York: Ecco, 1984), p.237
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- <sup>54</sup> William Carlos Williams, 'This is Just to Say', in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature: Volume D – American Literature Between the Wars 1914-1945*, 6th ed., ed. by Nina Baym (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 2003), p.1274
- <sup>55</sup> Charles Bukowski, *Love is a Dog from Hell*, (New York: Ecco, 1977), p. 263
- <sup>56</sup> Bryony Randall, 'Modernist Literature and the Everyday', *Literature Compass*, 7/9 (2010), 834-835, p.827
- <sup>57</sup> Charles Bukowski, *Love is a Dog from Hell*, (New York: Ecco, 1977), p. 280-281
- <sup>58</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, (Paris: Shakespeare and Company, 1922), p.66
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- <sup>61</sup> Ibid, p.xix
- <sup>62</sup> Paul Clements, *Charles Bukowski, Outsider Literature, and the Beat Movement*, (London: Routledge, 2013), p.16
- <sup>63</sup> 'Letter to John Martin, 8-12-86' in *Reach for the Sun: Selected Letters 1978-1994, Volume 3*, ed. by Seamus Cooney, (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1999), p. 83
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- <sup>65</sup> Charles Bukowski, 'Trashcan Lives', *You Get So Alone At Times That It Just Makes Sense*, (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1986), p.23
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- <sup>67</sup> Charles Bukowski, '\$\$\$\$\$\$', *Love is a Dog from Hell*, (New York: Ecco, 1977), p. 246
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid, p.247
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- <sup>72</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), p.75
- <sup>73</sup> Charles Bukowski, 'Transformation and Disfiguration', *War All the Time* (New York: Ecco, 1984), p.163
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid, p.164
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- <sup>78</sup> Ibid, p.163
- <sup>79</sup> Charles Bukowski, 'Sparks', *War All the Time*, (New York: Ecco, 1984), p.28
- <sup>80</sup> Charles Bukowski, 'Cockroach', *Love is a Dog from Hell*, (New York: Ecco, 1977), p.105

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Charles Bukowski, 'Flophouse', *The Last Night of the Earth Poems*, (New York: Ecco, 1992), p.102

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p.101

## Chapter Two: 'All the assholes in the world and mine'<sup>1</sup> – Bukowski and dialectical subjectivity

I am a being for itself which is for-itself only through another. Therefore the Other penetrates me to the heart. I cannot doubt him without doubting myself, since self-consciousness is real only in so far as it recognises its echo in another.<sup>2</sup>

In Hegel's notable description of self-consciousness in the *Propaedeutic*, the relationship between the self and the other and its consequent struggle for recognition takes the form of a dialectical narrative. In Bukowski's poems, his lyrical subjects are inevitably revealed situated in a social world with which they find themselves at odds, continually acknowledging this dialectical nature of the self. Traditionally and habitually, the lyric has lent itself to expressing what is most individual and personal, and although Bukowski's own version of 'lyrical realism'<sup>3</sup> in this sense dutifully complies, his insistence on focusing on the authorial self has caused critics and readers alike to adopt an over-emphatic view of Bukowski's representation of the individual. This in turn has almost certainly brought about the overlooking of the sizeable and significant social element in his work. The self in Charles Bukowski's poetry is inescapably defined through interaction with the other, resulting in poems which are more than the abstraction of an individual's consciousness, opposing the removed, distant self, predominantly found in modernist writing. The social world the narrator inhabits is inextricably woven into his self and both the protagonist and the social world are mutually defined through interaction with each other. More interestingly perhaps, there is little to no attempt by the narrator to transcend the social world. Ultimately, Bukowski's threatened subject both refuses and creates the social world, a world of exploitation and manipulation of the working-class. Bukowski's poetry shows acute awareness of the dialectical nature of the relationship between the self and the other, the individual and the social. His poems consist almost entirely of first-person, past-tense narratives which include the protagonist's subjective reactions to ordinary, everyday incidents. Such emphasis on subjectivity allows Bukowski's poems a certain romantic sensibility. However, it is not the romantic intensity of feelings which infuse his poems, it is the dialectical relationship between subject and object, a poetry of experience, which proves central to his work, as Robert Langbaum states:

Whether the poetry of experience starts out to be lyrical or dramatic, whether it deals with a natural or human object or a story that evolves out of someone's perception of a natural or human object, to the extent that it imitates the structure of experience, to the extent that its meaning is a movement of perception, it must be in final effect much the same – both lyrical and dramatic, subjective and objective: a poetry dealing with the object and the eye on the object.<sup>4</sup>

In Bukowski's poem *sweater*, the narrator is at a bank to 'do some business' but there seems to be a problem with the computer terminal at his service window and the cashier has to ask a more senior colleague for help. A long wait ensues as the older teller is found in conversation with a young man in a yellow sweater. The narrator takes an immediate dislike to this character and as his impatience grows, he begins to make assumptions about the young man with,

and these types usually wear  
sunglasses pushed back  
into their hair  
and I could sense  
that what he was talking about  
was utterly drab  
useless  
and probably  
untrue<sup>5</sup>

As their conversation continues, the wait to be served becomes intolerable and the narrator decides to take matters into his own hands. He resolves to walk over and speak to them. 'I had to make the first post/ at the racetrack/ and these three were/ being rude, dumb, as if it was a/ natural order of business'<sup>6</sup>,

I had no idea what I was going to  
say  
but it was going to be  
good.  
they stopped talking as I  
approached.  
then I heard the voice behind me:  
"Mr. Chinaski!"  
I stopped,  
turned.  
"I got the computer to  
function."<sup>7</sup>

Although it is a first-person narrative, this poem nevertheless presents an objective description of Mr Chinaski's reaction to an everyday event and it is his experience which is transmitted in the poem. Undoubtedly, readers will have encountered technical issues at a bank or a shop themselves, and at first view, this topic seems hardly worth of literary attention, yet Bukowski constructs this poem seemingly effortlessly, littering it with realistic dialogues and concrete observations. His almost nonchalant narrative lets his audience forget about its deliberate construction and mounting tension. Bukowski's effective melding of subjectivity and objectivity is accentuated by factual descriptions interspersed with the narrator's increasing impatience and frustration. The lengthy description of the event enables the reader to perceive the passing of time, and therefore the mental processes of the protagonist. This in turn evokes reader identification with the narrator and his long wait to be served. Therefore, details of both the narrative of a mundane event and the protagonist's reaction to it, become relevant. This is important to note because despite the suspense and frustration generated, there is no satisfactory resolution to the conflict. The expected closure of this scene, Chinaski's successful intervention, is taken away by refraction, a deflection of focus, and leaves the poem unresolved, as the sleeves of the young man's sweater 'no longer/ swung/ about/ we'd spoiled each others'/ fucking/ day'<sup>8</sup>. In Bukowski's shorter poem, *the man in the brown suit*, Chinaski is again plagued by the

mundanity of a visit to the bank, and again he has issues with a character there, this time it is the bank manager, who 'had this little moustache/ that drooped/ at the ends' and 'he sat there at his desk/ at the/ bank'<sup>9</sup>,

fuck, he was small  
maybe 5-3,  
135 pounds,  
I didn't like  
him,<sup>10</sup>

The narrator's antagonism towards the man in the brown suit steadily builds as the description continues, despite neither the narrator nor the reader being clear as to what the exact reason for the discord is, 'he seemed to have a way/ of glancing at/ me/ and I stared back/ I don't know what/ it was/ that caused the/ animosity'<sup>11</sup>. At this point in the narrative, Chinaski mentions a previously aborted act of challenging the man behind the desk, when 'one day I almost went/ over the railing/ to ask him/ what the hell/ was he looking/ at', but in Bukowskian, anti-climactic fashion, this is as far as the narrator only ever gets in his wish for self-assertion: 'almost' achieving something, so 'today I went in/ and stood in line'<sup>12</sup>.

It may be suggested that factual descriptions of non-events such as those in *sweater* and *the man in the brown suit* mean the focus on individual experience is lost. This is however not the case in Bukowski's poetry. His commitment to realism in the poem indicates his refusal to conjure up a resolution which feels fabricated and hollow, thus rendering the poem true to *his* mundane life experience and the anti-climactic resolutions to its conflicts. Chinaski the narrator is frustrated by the social world and the fact that it denies him his chance for autonomy and action. The ending in *sweater* in particular highlights the inescapable mutuality of the world but at the same time suggests there is an irreconcilable conflict with it and indeed within it. There are other moments of friction in *sweater*, although reduced, between the cashier and the other bank employee, as well as the man in the yellow sweater, representing a line of individuals all with their own competing desires. However, neither of the two poems offer reconciliation between the narrator and other characters, only the resolution of an inanimate machine starting up again in the case of *sweater* or the beginning of another working day in *the man in the brown suit*. The strong presence of human antagonism adds a sense of autobiography to the narrative, and, as is the case with most of Bukowski's poetry, both *sweater* and *the man in the brown suit* focus on the narrator's mundane, everyday experiences. Nevertheless, because the narrator's world is presented with such a great deal of realistic detail, and because the emphasis on the banality of the everyday is so prominent, the poem manages to reach beyond the straightforwardly subjective. Again, Langbaum proves to be of interest here, '[t]he poet talks about himself by talking about an object; and he talks about an object by talking about himself. Nor does he address either himself or the object, but both together'<sup>13</sup>. The sheer ordinariness of the content of both poems and the fact that Bukowski makes no attempt at abstraction or hyper-realism, means a distinct personality and voice are able to emerge. By continuously presenting the subject in relation to the social world, Bukowski avoids isolating it and much of what the reader learns about the narrator happens through his actions. In addition, the narrator is further defined through the characterisations he makes of others, such as the young man in the sweater who has 'the bland unworried face/ of somebody/ to



whom nothing had happened/ yet<sup>14</sup>, or the bank manager in his brown suit who 'had a non-committal/ yet self-important personality'<sup>15</sup>, both of which are decidedly critical.

Langbaum's earlier point, and the refraction of the narrator, implies a relationship between the narrator and the other characters which denotes a mutual characterisation where neither subject nor object can be examined independently of one another. The authorial self in Bukowski's work can never be isolated, it only exists through the interaction with others.

Bukowski's realism, as observed in *sweater* and *the man in the brown suit*, proves integral to his work and other poems such as *eating my senior citizen's dinner at the Sizzler* focus on the same everyday banality, like visiting a local diner to catch an early bird special where 'between 2 and 5 p.m. any day and any time on Sunday and/ Wednesday, it's 20% off for/ us old dogs approaching the sunset'. The poem begins with the narrator sitting alone, watching the other diners eat, drink unpalatable coffee, have conversations with each other, 'and just 5 or 6 blocks north is/ the cemetery'<sup>16</sup>. When he has finished his own meal and readies himself to leave, the narrator finds exiting the restaurant more challenging than expected.

I'm blocked by an old girl  
in a walker  
followed by another old girl  
whose back is bent  
like a bow.  
their faces, their arms  
their hands are like  
parchment  
as if they had already been  
embalmed  
but they leave quietly.<sup>17</sup>

As he tries to leave for a second time, his attempt is again thwarted and the narrator finds his way obstructed again, this time by an enormous wheelchair with 'the back tilted low/ it's almost like a bed/ a very expensive/ mechanism',

an awesome and glorious  
receptacle  
the chrome glitters  
and the thick tires are  
air-inflated  
and the lady in the chair and  
the lady pushing it  
look alike,  
sisters no doubt,  
one's lucky  
gets to ride,  
and they go by  
again very *white*.<sup>18</sup>

The poem's humanity stems from its unflinching engagement with the mental and physical afflictions of aging and the narrator's absence of any moralisation. He neither wishes away nor glosses over the struggles of the elderly he encounters. The humour in the lines 'one's lucky/ gets to ride' highlights the absurdity of the sisters' situation, but does so without ridicule, but with empathy and a degree of reverence as he waits for the 'lady' to leave. The narrator makes no subjective comments about his feelings, and as he weaves together threads of descriptions and observations on the subject of aging, he allows his consciousness to play freely with the mundane details of a banal, everyday moment. Although there is no conventional moral to this narrative poem of an everyday experience, it cannot be viewed as concrete, naturalistic description either. Russell Harrison points out that it is 'one individual's vividly realized perception of one life's poignant moments that attempts to do full justice to both the event and the subject's perception and reaction to it'<sup>19</sup>. Bukowski infuses his narrators and protagonists with both subjective expression as well as objective comment and this subjectivity/objectivity remains interdependent. The descriptions given by the protagonist of characters like the young man and the bank manager are both objective observations of physical attributes, yet at the same time the reader is able to decipher the narrator's opinion of or attitude towards these characters. Specifically, it is these descriptions which establish the relationship the subject has with the wider world, and whether this relationship is a positive or a negative one, and it is the subject's reaction to the relationship which constitutes part of the appeal of Bukowski's poetry. Works such as *sweater*, *the man in the brown suit* and *eating my senior citizen's dinner at the Sizzler* gain significance because of the fact that these poems present a working-class reaction to a predominantly middle-class social world, of which the narrator finds himself consistently on the periphery. The way Bukowski's poetry addresses this is by grounding subjectivity of the mundane and the banal in this unrelatable social world, with socio-political commentary. This commentary is important for the establishment of meaning in Bukowski's work where even seemingly casual lines hold significance. Such lines appear in the poem *the freeway life*, which centres on the narrator for whom 'it had been a terrible week already'<sup>20</sup>, getting into trouble in his battered car while driving along one of L.A.'s major freeways.

some fool kept blocking me and I finally got around him, and  
in the  
elation of freedom I ran it up to 85 (naturally, first checking  
the rear  
view for our blue suited protectors); then I felt and heard the  
SMASH of a hard  
object upon the bottom of my car, but wanting to make the  
track I willed  
myself to ignore it (as if that would make it vanish) even  
though I began  
to smell gasoline.  
I checked the gas gauge and it *seemed* to be holding. . .<sup>21</sup>

Bukowski uses these beginning lines to set up what turns out to be quite a journey for the protagonist as he negotiates heavy traffic and other motorists, while simultaneously trying to stay in control of the increasingly desperate situation. When traffic grounds to a halt

because a man '3 miles up/ on the Vernon overpass had one leg over the side and was/ threatening/ suicide', it becomes obvious to the narrator that he has to take charge of the situation, 'as people yelled at me that my tank was broken and pouring/ gasoline'<sup>22</sup>.

there was no motion in the traffic – the suicide was still trying  
to make  
up his mind and my gas gauge dipped into the red  
and then the necessity of being a proper citizen and waiting for  
opportunity  
vanished and I made my move  
up and over a cement abutment  
bending my right front wheel  
I mad it to the freeway exit which was totally  
clear<sup>23</sup>

Bukowski places the emphasis on the isolated subject besieged by the outside world. The protagonist is attempting to protect and recover subjectivity threatened by the Bukowskian 'small tragedy', in this case, traffic and other motorists. Tension runs throughout the entire poem as characters show nothing but antagonism towards each other, particularly those in more vulnerable positions, be it economical or psychological ones. The motorists have more concern for their own discomfort than for the man threatening suicide or for the narrator who is himself threatened with death by 'being blown to hell'<sup>24</sup>. Nobody offers the protagonist, or the man on the overpass, any assistance. Instead, they gesticulate and shout at him, struggling in his dilapidated car and the narrator is only too familiar with their abuse, shrugging off their anger with, 'yes, I nodded back, I know, I know'<sup>25</sup>. The Bukowskian protagonist knows his subjectivity is excluded from their middle-class social world and realises that the only way to assert himself is by resistance and his refusal of being 'a proper citizen'. Only then does he manage to break free, although not unscathed, as his car receives more damage, 'but, you know, defeat can strengthen just as victory can/ weaken, and if/ you have the proper luck and the holy endurance the gods just/ *might* deliver'<sup>26</sup>. Bukowski litters poems like *the freeway life* with subtle social references and for him, the recognition of subjectivity and its 'holy endurance' involves the recognition of, and ultimately the resistance to, the social world, in defence of its own working-class existence. Bukowski's poems retain their sense of working-class existence through experience, and from experience. A poem exemplifying this is *houses and dark streets*, in which the narrator loses his way on a return drive from the Santa Anita racetrack.

I swung off onto a side road to avoid the  
traffic and the side road started to curve sharply and I  
worried about that so cut off onto another side road  
and I don't know when it happened but the paved  
street vanished and I was driving along on a  
small dusty road and then the road started  
*climbing* as the evening darkened into night and  
I kept driving, feeling completely idiotic and  
vanquished.  
I tried to turn off the steep road but each

turn led me to a narrower road climbing even higher, and  
[...]

the road climbed higher and higher into the hills and  
then I was on top of wherever it was and there was a lovely  
little village brightly lit with neon signs and the language  
on all the signs was Chinese! and then I knew that  
I was both lost and insane!  
I had no idea what it all meant, so I just kept driving  
and then looking down I saw the Pasadena freeway  
a thousand feet below: all I had to do was find  
a way to get down there.  
and that was another nightmare trying to  
work my way down from those steep streets lined with  
expensive dark houses.  
the poor will never know how many rich hide out  
quietly in those hills.  
I finally reached the freeway after another 45  
minutes and, of course, I got on in the wrong  
direction.<sup>27</sup>

Again, the narrator is an isolated subject in a hostile wider world. In fact, the reason for the narrator losing his way is because he tries to assert himself in an environment he does not know and does not belong. Ironically however, his assertion only leads to more confusion and more isolation. As the scene unfolds, the narrator has to relinquish more and more of his governance over the situation and begins to be 'worried' and driving along, he is 'feeling completely idiotic and/ vanquished'. With each attempt at regaining autonomy, he is taken further and further away, up the hilly landscape. Finally, it becomes apparent the narrator has lost all control. Here again, as in *the freeway life*, the reader is reminded of the idea of conflict. Although there are no other characters in this poem, there nevertheless remains a sense of antagonism with the social world. The spontaneous feel of the narrative helps to legitimise the narrator's experience as something which is forced upon his consciousness rather than something meticulously injected into the poem. Forming a connection between Bukowski and romanticism, Langbaum notes of both romanticism and modern poetry, that 'the poet discovers his ideas through a dialectical interchange with the external world', placing it in direct opposition to the 'traditional lyric in which the poet sets forth his already formulated idea'<sup>28</sup>. The recognition of the social world is a major feature in Bukowskian poetry and the defining of the subject through the social world shapes a core for expression. The extent through which the self has to negotiate loyalty to a person and to society's will is reflected in the frequency with which personal assertion takes place. Bukowski's position is not an uncommon stance against the structures of domination in society and his narrators find themselves in direct opposition to the Whitmanian mode of 'I celebrate myself'<sup>29</sup>, rarely displaying positivity, instead presenting a subjectivity of steadfast defensiveness. The poem *education* is an example of such a joining of discourse and narration.

at that small inkwell desk  
I had trouble with the words

“sing” and “sign.”  
I don’t know why  
but  
“sing” and “sign”:  
it bothered me.

[...]  
there was something there  
I couldn’t  
overcome.<sup>30</sup>

As young Henry Chinaski continues to struggle with his writing, his teacher whose ‘very fierce face’ runs ‘sharply to a point’<sup>31</sup>, calls a meeting with him and his mother to discuss his apparent failures.

“he’s not learning  
anything,” the teacher  
told my  
mother.

[...]

“he’s not *trying*, Mrs.  
Chinaski!”

Walking home after the meeting, Chinaski is being told by his mother, ‘your father is so disappointed in/ you, I don’t know what we are/ going to do’<sup>32</sup>. This statement sparks an act of defiance, ‘I decided not to learn anything/ in that/ school’<sup>33</sup>. The fact that young Chinaski only stops ‘trying’ when he is forced to assert himself in resistance to an authoritarian force, makes it clear that any possible mediation between the refusal and the narration is subverted and all that remains is the issue of absence of choice. The subject has no other way of reacting when threatened by the dominant structures, non-cooperation is the only way to assert autonomy of self. In *I didn’t want to*, the insistence of autonomy of self is taken one step further.

I was always a bad typist and I never learned to spell  
because I didn’t want to.

I never learned properly how to drive an automobile  
and I bought  
my first one off a used car lot for \$35, got in with  
my drunken lady and almost ripped off the side of a  
hospital making my left turn.

I didn’t want to learn music because I disliked  
the teacher with her white wig and her powdered face.

I got stuck in ROTC because I didn't want to be an athlete and they put me in a manual of arms competition and I didn't want to win and I won and they gave me a medal and I threw it down a sewer.

I didn't learn music and now I listen to more classical music than the first hundred people you'll pass on the street.<sup>34</sup>

The subject asserts itself by refusing society's demands. Typing, spelling, driving, reading/playing music, military training, all typical requests involving often strict and specific rules put to an individual being socialised. The reasons for refusal are trivial and rather idiosyncratic but what is at the core of the issue is not the nature of the demands, but the fact that demands are being put forward in the first place. It is the loss of autonomy which is at stake for Bukowski and behind this loss is the narrator's sense that he is being exploited and/or manipulated. He may or may not want to do something, but whatever the requests, he wants to choose to do it, on his own terms. The dilemma faced by the Bukowskian protagonist is the mutual necessity of self and other, subject and object. Even if refusal is executed, it is an actuality the narrator cannot escape. There is also the condition that the social world is constituted in a hierarchy of power. The subject in Bukowski's poetry refuses authority by what Hegel calls the 'Annerkennung'<sup>35</sup>, the recognition of its power, without which it will collapse, while yet remaining within the social world. By refusing authority, Bukowski refuses exploitation. However, it is not always easy to avoid exploitation at the hands of authority. The stance Bukowski's subject takes is to pre-empt any threats of objectification and victimisation by immediately objectifying himself to the point of denying his own humanity, as well as those of others. The ending of *I didn't want to*, describes the death of a lover many years before at the same time as the demise of the first automobile:

I really did buy my first automobile for \$35 and I asked the man,  
"does the motor start? does it have a key?"  
it didn't have any springs or a reverse gear and to make the  
headlights work I'd have to hit a hard bump in the road.  
and I had to park it on a hill to get it started,  
it ran for two years without my changing the oil and when  
the car  
finally died I just left it and walked away. the  
drunken lady who had been along for that first ride past the  
hospital, she lived a little longer, with me and without me,  
but mostly with me, she died and I buried her one warm,  
afternoon north of Anaheim, and the best thing about  
her was she never said, "let's talk this thing out."

she was a typist for a large downtown furniture store  
and she had the most beautiful legs I have ever seen before  
or  
since.

I should have loved her more than I did but I didn't want to.<sup>36</sup>

This ending is poignant because to the very last line, the self is divided and the conflict resulting from this division is present in a troubling admission. In the last two lines the narrator utters he should have loved his companion more, the question now arises as to *why*. To say that it is because she had the most beautiful legs is a simplification, and too general, and too easy an interpretation. The idea persists that the 'should' links to the demands of the social world and conventions individuals are required to live by. It can be argued that in this instance, the narrator is trying to elicit understanding from the reader by equating his refusal with a rejection of idealised and romanticised relationship dynamics. However, it may be suggested that the phrase 'I didn't want to' can be substituted with the simple 'I couldn't'. This again, raises the issue of absence of choice. The narrator simply cannot offer more of his autonomy, as it would mean vulnerability and loss of control. If this argument is followed to its logical conclusion, in the last line as well as through the entirety of the poem, it becomes clear that a psychological truth lies behind the philosophical point Bukowski is making. Yet, typically for Bukowski, the resolution escapes the reader as it is neither clear if the narrator had a conscious choice nor whether he did not.

The narrators in most of Bukowski's works fear vulnerability and the involvement in authoritarian systems of domination. The stoic and unsentimental attitude of the subject, as in *I didn't want to*, is linked to his refusal to participate. This attitude is also an attempt to reject interpersonal relationships, events, as well as the wider social world, as, ultimately, involvement only ends in disappointment and exploitation. What is the crux here is the fact that Bukowski's poetry treats this issue seriously and that it presents his ongoing concerns of infusing his narratives with ideas of the self. His narrator's refusal to communicate, the feeling of relief when a lover never asks to talk about things, is striking throughout Bukowski's work, as he reminds one ex-partner in *out of the blue*, 'I never believed in discussions/ I said, there's nothing to/ discuss'<sup>37</sup>. But when she suggests to him to try and communicate, the narrator remains resolute.

" 'communicate' is an overused word like  
'love'," I told her

"but don't you think two people can  
'love'?" she asked.

"not if they try to 'communicate',"  
I answered.

*Rift* is another exemplar poem illustrating refusal of participation by, again, applying refraction. In this poem, the protagonist's lover challenges him on his non-compliance in discussing problems in their relationship. The narrator barely utters a word and is entirely characterised through her scathing comments:

*look at you!*  
*sitting in that god*

damned  
chair!  
your belly is sticking out  
of your  
underwear,  
you've got burnt cigarette  
holes in all your  
shirts!  
all you do is suck  
on that god damned  
beer<sup>38</sup>

The progression of the poem presents a dialectical reversal where the subject becomes the object in its own poem, completely alienated, a speechless, powerless object, entirely presented by the utterances of others. The woman's exasperation at the narrator's behaviour is palpable and the more she accuses him of non-communication, the more comical the poem becomes.

I laughed right into the  
bottle, gagged, spit a mouthful of  
beer across my  
undershirt.

"my god!" she  
said.

she slammed the door and  
was gone.<sup>39</sup>

It is the narrator's objectification of himself through which Bukowski achieves his humour. It is ultimately self-deprecating. In an odd way, this self-objectification, a self-loathing, represents a justification for his behaviour. There remains an important point however, in regards to this poem as well as many others, and that is the narrator's obvious inability to sustain relationships and his reluctance to engage in any kind of intimacy in an attempt for self-rule. Again, a parallel to issues of communication can be drawn here, after all, talking, as well as sex and intimacy, require mutuality to be fulfilling. However, for the Bukowskian subject any kind of dialogue ultimately means loss of autonomy, and can only end in anti-climactic dissatisfaction and utter vulnerability. The refusal to recognise the other and Bukowski's view of the individual become most problematic when approached from the perspective of work and working-class experience. Here, refusal and subjectivity become intertwined in class relationships. For Bukowski it remains a priority to give autonomy to the alienated subject in a materialistic, hostile social world.



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- <sup>1</sup> Charles Bukowski, *South of No North* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1973), p.152
- <sup>2</sup> G. F. W. Hegel, *The Philosophical Propaedeutic* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 1986), p.20
- <sup>3</sup> Tom Clark, *Edward Dorn: A World of Difference* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2002), p.24
- <sup>4</sup> Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1957), p.56
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.269
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.270
- <sup>9</sup> Charles Bukowski, *You Get So Alone At Times That It Just Makes Sense* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1986), p.59
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.60
- <sup>13</sup> Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1957), p.53
- <sup>14</sup> Charles Bukowski, *War All the Time* (New York: Ecco, 1984), p.268
- <sup>15</sup> Charles Bukowski, *You Get So Alone At Times That It Just Makes Sense* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1986), p.59
- <sup>16</sup> Charles Bukowski, 'Eating my senior citizen's dinner at the Sizzler', *War All the Time: Poems 1981-1984* (New York: Ecco, 1984), p.277
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.278
- <sup>18</sup> -279
- <sup>19</sup> Russell Harrison, *Against the American Dream: Essays on Charles Bukowski* (Edinburgh: Rebel Inc./Canongate, 2001), p.57
- <sup>20</sup> Charles Bukowski, *You Get So Alone At Times That It Just Makes Sense* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1986), p.80
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.81
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.80
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.81
- <sup>27</sup> Charles Bukowski, *Sifting Through the Madness for the Word, the Line, the Way* (New York: Ecco, 2004), p.103-104
- <sup>28</sup> Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1957), p.53
- <sup>29</sup> Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself', *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings: Authoritative Texts, Other Poetry and Prose, Criticism*, ed. by Michael Moon, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, W. W. & Company, 2002)
- <sup>30</sup> Charles Bukowski, *You Get So Alone At Times That It Just Makes Sense* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1986), p.29
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid, p.31
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> Charles Bukowski, *Dangling in the Tournefortia* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1981), p.35
- <sup>35</sup> Russell Harrison, *Against the American Dream: Essays on Charles Bukowski* (Edinburgh: Rebel Inc./Canongate, 2001), p.63
- <sup>36</sup> Charles Bukowski, *Dangling in the Tournefortia* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1981), p.37-38
- <sup>37</sup> Charles Bukowski, *War All the Time* (New York: Ecco, 1984), p.265
- <sup>38</sup> Charles Bukowski, *You Get So Alone At Times That It Just Makes Sense* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1986), p.70
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid, p.72

### Chapter Three: The storyteller – narrative and immanence in Bukowski's poetry

As highlighted in previous sections, differentiating between description and narrative is important when attempting to discuss Bukowski as a narrative poet. In linguistic terms, narrative is a place where sequence and language meet. 'Sequence' meaning order, or structure, and 'language' denoting vocabulary, the verbal communication. However narrative is more than simply sequencing. Describing a scene, or a picture or a person is also sequencing, but it is not the same as narrating it. To put anything into a logical word order is to sequence it, but, for example, to itemise the different parts of a bicycle is not to narrate them. A description of objects, regardless of how detailed and emotive, still forms a mere list, narration is a term which implicates its subject in its meaning. Narration also always carries an implication of time, and with this, action. Therefore, the only 'thing' which can ever really be narrated is the event. To summarise a definition by the linguist Robert Scholes: a narration is the symbolisation of a sequence of events, connected by a common theme, happening in time, constructed by an interpreter<sup>1</sup>. This interpreter, or storyteller, gives the narration a certain kind of shape and a certain level of human interest transforming narration into story. A story in turn possesses a specific syntactic shape, a beginning, a middle, and an end. The injection of human interest is achieved by projecting human values reflecting everyday life. The linearity is obvious in Bukowski's poems, however, the projection of human values is where issues surrounding storytelling emerge. If the projection of human values takes place, than acts of interpretation begin to occur. At this point a distinction between historical and fictional narrative takes place. The producer of a historical text relates events which have indeed happened prior to the narration. The producer of a fictional text formulates events which have only existed in his or her imagination, meaning events are created by the narration, and do not exist outside of the narration. Unsurprisingly, the moment these differences are established, they are being broken down. Writers such as Charles Bukowski aim to blur the lines between what is historical and fictional narrative, specifically, what elements of the story constitute retelling of real events and what elements embody imaginative flourishes and there are many exceptions where poets as well as novelists have re-interpreted actual, historical events. They consistently comprise of first person narratives, usually with a male protagonist, only thinly disguising Bukowski's own life and experiences. Perhaps it is more suitable to call what happens in Bukowskian narratives 'social drama', referred to by anthropologist Victor Turner as he attempts to distinguish between 'chronicles', factual records, and 'tales' which inherently possess an element of spectacle<sup>2</sup>. Social drama, or perhaps a better formulated term, melodrama is ever present in Bukowski's narratives, which are filled with vivid characters and events intended to challenge and often disconcert the reader. In Bukowski's narratives, readers find characterisation, conflict, irony, meditation, all interlaced with realistic detail and autobiographical vigour.

Many writers active in the 1950's and 1960's, like Edward Dorn and Frank O'Hara among others, were deeply engaged with narratives. This constitutes one of the main differences between modernist poetry and the writings which followed it. Donald Hall, when discussing the features of modernism, argues that it 'asked for a poetry of symmetry, intellect, irony and wit'<sup>3</sup> which established itself through academics and select literary magazines. It would

be unreasonable to suggest that non-modernist poets lack intellect and wit, however, their conscious revolt against the poetics of high modernism manifests itself through a decidedly anti-intellectual stance. In 1959, Bukowski writes in a letter to James Boyer May about his growing despondence of snobbish editorialism, insisting 'I do not feel it is pedantic or ignoble to demand freedom from the opiate of clannishness and leech-brotherhood that dominates', instead being compelled to 'promote a little scurvy rhyme'<sup>4</sup> even if this ultimately means rejection by the literary establishment. Poets like Charles Bukowski came of age during free-verse movements instigated by writers such as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, but ultimately reject their complex linguistic and formal conventions in favour of narratives with open forms. The centre of concern for modernist poets is an aesthetic principle of impersonality, underscored by meditative themes. Marjorie Perloff highlights several practices at work in modernist poetry which underline the pre-occupation with this particular kind of aestheticism: (1) Poems revolve around a solitary voice situated in a still, single moment in time and are (2) modally emotive. (3) Governing metaphors are used to convey meaning and (4) images form a symbolic, interconnected structure. (5) The narrator is turned away from the reader, rather than communicating. The 'I' of the poem is entirely engaged in his or her own presence<sup>5</sup>. These techniques together with the focus on the isolation of the narrator who meditates on aspects of existence and reaches some sort of epiphany, is ultimately counterintuitive to storylines and results in poems which form an antithesis of a story. This however does not mean that poets like Bukowski do not write self-reflective poetry, it is the way in which the lyric fabric of a poem is transmitted through narrative that establishes the difference in approach. Bukowski's 1968 poem *on going out to get the mail* tells of the mundane event of checking the letterbox for correspondence only to find it empty, not even containing bills or a vindictive letter from the narrator's ex-wife.

my hand searches the mailbox in a kind of  
disbelief long after the mind has  
given up.

there's not even a dead fly  
down in there.

I am a fool, I think, I should have known it  
works like this.

I go inside as all the flowers leap to  
please me.<sup>6</sup>

What Bukowski achieves in this poem is the exchange of self-reflection with narration. The event which constitutes the title of the poem, allows the narrator to humorously contemplate his relationship with the world and his place in the universe. When the protagonist first steps out the door, summer greenery which 'shoots color/ like an everlasting 4<sup>th</sup> of July' reassuringly greets him, allowing him to feel 'perhaps, that there isn't any/ enemy/ anywhere'<sup>7</sup>. Life tends to be full of bothersome communication, but the narrator's disbelief at not receiving any puts his own life into perspective as even the absence of a dead insect seems almost by design: he realises he has become reliant on life's challenges. The poem's narrative is also suggestive of more possible storylines. It is never

disclosed to the reader why the gas company may be planning to cut off the supply again, or what it is that makes his former wife so very content in her new life, these are simply fragments of other stories the narrator alludes to and whose details he does not follow up on. This way of presenting self-reflection does not offer a modernist lyric but a point of parody. The poem ends with what may best be described as a punchline, 'anything? the woman/ asks./ nothing, I answer, what's for/ breakfast?'<sup>8</sup>. Here, such technique places the narrator back at the house where the story initially begins, thus not only providing a sense of humour but also narrative symmetry or what Robert Scholes calls a 'specific syntactic shape'<sup>9</sup>, distinguishing it from the modernist convention of temporal stillness. For Bukowski, the only way of knowing himself and the world is to tell a story, and the ironic story of an empty letterbox thus illustrates the narrator's, as well as Bukowski's, relationship with circumstance without the need for modal emotiveness. It may be judged as difficult for writers such as Bukowski to express particular emotions in narrative poems since the use of images and metaphors is almost entirely avoided, however he never doubts the validity of his own storytelling and it is this validity which readers encounter in his longer poems.

A particularly engaging example is *A Trainride in Hell*, a narrative poem in which events and actions are consistently utilised to highlight the narrator's psychological beleaguering. On a train from the Del Mar racetrack to Los Angeles, the 'I' of the story meets various passengers, including 'an extrovert in a blue sports shirt' who 'moves around hugging and kissing all the women' and 'an old blond' who 'is wearing slacks and her belly presses out from the top/ of them'<sup>10</sup>. 'Blueshirt' evidently has been successful at the races and presents a curious blend of exuberant cheer and irritating smugness. The narrator is enticed by him as well as others to join them in dice games and dancing as they set out 'going one hundred miles home'<sup>11</sup>. Other people in the carriage include two prostitutes, the barman, as well as an array of non-descript fellow travellers, all noisily celebrating, except for a policeman who patrols the train to prevent solicitation and gambling. However, even he submits to the hubbub, realising the futility of such a task, 'he is smoking a cigarette and his cap is pushed back,/ he is grey and looks more drunkard than any of us,/ YAY!! YAY! they cheer him, and he walks on'<sup>12</sup>. Despite the lack of observational detail within the narrative, the reader is able to identify characters such as the policeman, the 'old blond' and 'Blueshirt' as antagonists, as it is the descriptions' inherent smallness, flippancy, even throwaway nature that are used to illustrate the narrator's disregard for these characters. The narrator has no desire to flesh out the descriptions of his fellow travellers, and the antagonism between him and the others only increases as the scene exponentially grows busier and noisier. Conversations between the narrator and the woman are almost impossible as constant shouts of YAY! YAY! and GO GO GO GO GO GO!!! echo around the bar car as travellers revel. Bukowski's phonetic representations of acts of shouting, cheering and cursing, woven into the narrative aim to absorb the reader into the story by sheer figurative aural bombardment. The narrator is desperate to escape the ruckus, but has literally nowhere to go. The gamblers travel north to Los Angeles, but despite the festivities, these are not fortunate winners but 'monkey[s]' with 'toadsheads'<sup>13</sup>, and this is not a poem of a great American trainride along the stunning Californian coast, it is as the title states, the narrator's chronicling of a trainride in hell. Although, the journey is traceable on a map by the reader, the act of travel is not the purpose of the poem since passengers merely return to 'jobs and no jobs, wives and no wives, lives and no lives' and to the narrator's despair 'the jack behind the bar has only beer,/ it floats in a trashcan of ice and he dumps the hot beer in'<sup>14</sup>. Half way

through the trainride, and half way through the poem, 'some crazy jack turns on the fire system/ and the lights go out/ and we are all under a cold shower' which provides relief for the narrator from the stifling atmosphere. This climactic event also marks a change of pace in the narrative and Bukowski continues his poem in a more measured tone. After order has been restored, the narrator finally relaxes, managing to 'find a dry cigarette and light up'. At the end, Los Angeles appears and all the passengers file off the train, including the narrator. The extrovert in the blue sports shirt steals a wheelchair from the station and he races his friend until the guards stop them 'running down the ramps/ YAY! GO, GO, GO, GO!' <sup>15</sup>. At this point all the passengers disperse into different directions. Again, the narrative mood changes as the blond woman follows the narrator to his car and they drive home together where he then ponders on the stillness outside his house. At the very end of the poem, the narrator tells the reader of the silence which surrounds him now and the narrative becomes more lyrical.

outside it is very still, and you can hear the bombers overhead,  
you can hear the mice making love; you can hear them digging  
the graves at the cemeteries, you can hear worms crawling into  
sockets, and the train we came in on, it sits very still now,  
it is quiet, the windows show nothing but moonlight,  
there is a sadness like old rivers, and it is more real  
than it has ever been.<sup>16</sup>

The role of the 'I' in this poem is particularly interesting to discuss, especially in opposition to the 'I' of the modernist lyric. At the beginning of *A Trainride in Hell*, the narrator is simply the person who tells a story, he relates events and interactions. As the poem progresses however, mere storytelling is interwoven with the narrator's attempts to interpret meaning behind the unfolding events. For example, when the blond woman asks him to walk her to the ladies toilets:

[...]  
and I wait outside the sign that says 'Women',  
and I am sweating and impatient for the little the beer is doing  
and I empty the can and throw it in the vestibule  
and I drink hers too, and in the other car  
the people are tired and miserable, re-dreaming their losses,  
strung out in their seats, stuffed things,  
taken – again – by the world<sup>17</sup>

With this, comes the centrality of the narrator. It is his interpretations of human values the reader experiences through his storytelling, and it is because the 'I' retains a sense of his own apart-ness, he is not only the narrator of the story but he also represents ardent antagonism as the narrative tension rises. Accordingly, although the narrative includes a vast array of characters, they all appear flat and two-dimensional with little attention being paid to their respective individualities. However, this is by no means a shortcoming. Bukowski deliberately leaves the identities of his characters undefined and non-descript, almost to the point where they become stereotypes. This is to lend focus to the narrative, the telling of the story. Bukowski's chronological sequencing and the passing of time within

the narrative, heightens the vividness of the locale and the people who interact within it. There is a sense of immediacy in Bukowski's storytelling and *A Trainride in Hell* contains everything Bukowski sees possible in narrative poetry: free-verse stanzas leading the reader through a story interspersed with dialogue and reflective interludes. It is true then, when at the end the narrator says 'it is more real/ than it has ever been' that the reader cannot but agree. In contrast to modernism, the conventions Bukowski uses take the reader away from an isolated 'I' in a frozen moment in time, away from a reliance on metaphor and images and away from emotive responses. It is the storyteller's conception of events and experiences of the world which he shares.

The sharing of personal experiences through narrative is underpinned by Bukowski's drive to transmit the actuality of events, and his poetry contains many assumptions and predispositions disputing the poetics of modernism. In his book *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960's*, Charles Altieri opposes the symbolic tradition of modern poetry with an immanentist tradition, tracing the former to Coleridge and the latter to Wordsworth. At the heart of the symbolist tradition is the central, form-giving imagination of the poet which affects meaning with the ultimate aim to create an ideal image, and symbolist poets such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound affirm the creative mind as the source of all value, '[w]hat matters is not what is there in immediate experience but what the mind can make of it'<sup>18</sup>. In contrast, the poet of the immanentist tradition places value in the forces at work in ordinary experience. The mind discovers and orders meaning already present in nature, and as such poetic creation recovers 'familiar realities in such a way that they appear dynamically present and invigorate the mind with a sense of powers and objective values'<sup>19</sup>. Immediate experience is therefore immanentist, not transcendental. Given the parameters of Altieri's definitions of symbolist and immanentist traditions, it becomes clear that Charles Bukowski can also be placed within immanentist poetics. In fact, an immanentist style is better suited to Bukowski's objectives than is the high modernist and intellectual style of writers such as Eliot and Pound. This commitment to immanentist experience requires, in Altieri's words 'radical presence'<sup>20</sup>, which he defines as 'the insistence that the moment immediately and intensely experienced can restore one to harmony with the world and provide ethical and psychological reward'<sup>21</sup>.

A term such as 'presence' can be worryingly abstract, so it is important to establish what it denotes in relationship to Bukowski's narratives. As discussed in the previous section, Bukowski's assertion of self remains of great importance in his poetry and it is presence as a reflective or dramatic action of the self which best defines Bukowski's work in Altieri's terms. Bukowski's poem *hot* helps to illustrate this interpretation. The poem revolves around two characters, the narrator and his girlfriend Miriam, who are involved in a volatile relationship in which Miriam undoubtedly holds the upper hand. On a day when the narrator does not manage to return home from work on time, Miriam walks out on the love affair, leaving him an angry good-bye letter. The entire narrative is a farce and Bukowski deliberately avoids any symbolism or psychological probing. He refuses to utilise any dramatic elements in the telling of the story: there are no desperate confrontations, no violence, no tears; the action happens entirely while the two characters are apart from each other. The poem is inherently funny and entertaining, precisely because Bukowski trivialises and highlights the absurdity of not only the characters' breakup but also their initial relationship, rendering nothing in the poem serious or complex. It is because of the slight treatment of the poem's material that the reader becomes interested in Bukowski's

everyday situation, its people and its ultimate insignificance. The ridiculousness of the narrator and Miriam's relationship creates a witty tale which offers relief from the reality of a dysfunctional, oppressive and ultimately doomed liaison. Bukowski's poem is not a morality tale, nor is the narrative designed to elicit sympathy from the reader. In *hot*, the narrator does not lose his girlfriend because of any ill behaviour or character faults, but simply because he fails to come home at the arranged time of eight o'clock, despite desperately trying to finish his workload. It is the little event of his absence which causes Miriam's rejection. This is her farewell note propped up against her purple teddy bear.

*sun of a bitch:  
I wated until 5 after ate  
you don't love me  
you sun of a bitch  
somebody will love me  
I been wateing all day<sup>22</sup>*

The jilted lover's responds is decidedly unphilosophical and filled with resignation as he prepares to take a bath in the last lines of the poem.

there were 5,000 bars in town  
and I'd make 25 of them  
looking for Miriam

[...]

I gave the bear a drink, myself a drink  
and got into the hot  
water.<sup>23</sup>

The value of storytelling, indeed the value of poetry itself, for Bukowski remains different from that of the modernist aesthetic. It is demystified, removed from a meditative gaze and so ultimately non-transcendental. This forces him to establish a narrative entirely by engaging in experiences, 'I can not tell you how much the careful boys rip me naked with their planned and worked-over creations. Creation is our gift and we are ill with it... well, rub your hands and prove that you are alive. seriousness will not do. walk the floor'<sup>24</sup>. He insists on writing poetry 'in which imagination mixes with reality, half and half'<sup>25</sup>. In *tv*, Bukowski playfully interweaves his reality and fantasy when two programmes on a television set interfere with one another and this jumble of fictional and factual events intrudes on the narrator's reality. From the very beginning of the poem, when the television is turned on and 'Alexander the Great' begins to screen, the emphasis is on story, and the telling of it. The narrator tries to keep up with describing plots and actions as the film is being interspersed with the live coverage of a roller derby. The seriousness of the epic of Alexander is little by little overpowered by the everydayness of the derby, until, eventually, the narrator cannot distinguish between the two and it becomes impossible to differentiate between the important and the trivial in the storyteller's narrative.

and here come the armies

they appear to be fighting in a cave, there's smoke and  
flame, swords,  
men falling –  
the Thunderbirds are behind,  
one girl dives under another girl's ass,  
throws her into the rail – <sup>26</sup>

In this poem matters of reality, the roller derby, merge with matters of the imagination, the retelling of the epic of Alexander by a narrator who watches both on a television. The television so becomes an emblem not only for triviality but also superficiality in his narrative, and Bukowski views both the epic as well as the everyday as part of the same. For Bukowski, the only way out of seriousness is through triviality in the story. For Bukowski, the everyday provides stories more interesting, and often more superficial, than any purely imagined tales. Bukowski enlivens his narratives by faithfulness to facts and qualities of his everyday experiences. Regarded as they appear, not as the ingredients for a larger, transcendental whole.

I'd like you to know no matter what the writing, that I've been through it – the park benches, the factories, the jails; guarded door at a wholesale in Fort Worth, worked in a dog biscuit factory, celled with Public Enemy #1 (what luck!); rolled and been rolled; the hospitals with my belly ripped open; . . . all the terrible jobs, . . . everything, . . . this comes out in my poetry. . . I need something to keep me going or I lag'<sup>27</sup>

It is in this context, of life continually providing materials for Bukowskian stories that it becomes important to examine Bukowski's close relationship with the city of Los Angeles, for it is this city which provides him with continuously interesting and engaging detail and lends his narratives and autobiographical and anecdotal feel. Although Bukowski was born in Germany, his family emigrated to L.A. when Bukowski was only two years of age. Thus, for Bukowski, the city and the state of California, do not represent the territory of exile other writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald or John Steinbeck perceive it as. For Bukowski, Los Angeles is neither wonderful nor strange and he has no desire to juxtapose the city of his poems with the actual reality of the locale. Los Angeles always remains both, the fictionalised 'home' of his story and the actual 'home' in which he lives, works and writes, 'if you're a man, Los Angeles is where you hang it up and/ battle; or if you're a woman, and you've got enough leg and/ the rest, you can sail against a mountain backdrop so/ when you grow grey you can hide in Beverly Hills/ in a mansion so nobody can see how you've decayed'<sup>28</sup>. For Bukowski, Los Angeles is a given. It is the everyday, the ordinary, the unexotic which finds its way into his stories, neither the city nor the Californian countryside present places for cosmic discovery. His narratives seldom give any exact description of locale, except when calling specific streets or places by name, and there are no sweeping vistas full of emotive adjectives. Bukowski's roaming through Los Angeles only serves to tell tales of personal alienation as characters in his poems are consistently threatened by immobility, physical as well as social. The details life in the city offers, very rarely inspire Bukowski to participation and although he habitually weaves proper names and places into the narrative, to give these details an identity, they do in no way help readers to understand anything about what has been named or their relevance in the story. A watch repair shop called Finkelstein's or a



person the narrator expects to wash his car, called Mike, 'a world war II veteran' whose 'wife worked as a nurse'<sup>29</sup> are details which only appear momentarily and remain fragmented, serving no other purpose in the narrative but to further illustrate the narrator's reluctance to engage in any inner workings, highlighting again his alienation to the reader. What makes Bukowski interesting as a storyteller is his mixing of presence and alienation. Blended with Bukowski's commitment to realistic detail and encounters, is a constant sense of threat and the need for self-assertion, as seen here in the last two stanzas of *a little sleep and peace and stillness*.

but the view from the street here is good –  
there are Japanese and old women and young girls and  
beggars.  
we have large palms  
plenty of birds  
and the parking's not bad . . .  
but our religious maniac does not work  
he's too clever to work  
and so we both lie around  
listen to the radio  
drink  
and I wonder which of us will get to hell first –  
him with his bible or me with my Racing Form  
but if I've got to hear him down there I know I'm going to have to  
have some help, and the next dance will be mine.

right now I wish I had something to sell so I could hide in a  
place  
with walls twelve feet high  
with moats  
and high-yellow mamas.  
but it looks like some long days and nights ahead,  
as always.  
at least I can only hope for the weakening of a radio tube,  
and the most for his death,  
which we are both praying and  
ready for.<sup>30</sup>

To 'hide' means to be all alone. Again, the self is threatened by city life, yet, the narrator never dwells too long on his imaginings or problems, but keeps his focus on the details of the scene and future possibilities. *Gamblers All* exemplifies this even further, capturing the triviality and everydayness of Bukowski's experience as well as the stoicism he musters in its response as neither he nor the reader can escape the extensive use throughout the narrative.

sometimes you climb out of bed in the morning and you think,  
I'm not going to make it, but you laugh inside  
remembering all the times you've felt that way, and

you walk to the bathroom, do your toilet, see that face  
in the mirror, oh my oh my oh my, but you comb your hair anyway,  
get into your street clothes, feed the cats, fetch the  
newspaper of horror, place it on the coffee table, kiss your  
wife goodbye, and then you are backing the car out into life itself,  
like millions of others you enter the arena once more.

you are on the freeway threading through traffic now,  
moving both towards something and towards nothing at all as you punch  
the radio on and get Mozart, which is something, and you will somehow  
get through the slow days and the busy days and the dull  
days and the hateful days and the rare days, all both so delightful  
and so disappointing because  
we are all so alike and so different.

you find the turn-off, drive through the most dangerous  
part of town, feel momentarily wonderful as Mozart works  
his way into your brain and slides down along your bones and  
out through your shoes.

it's been a tough fight worth fighting  
as we all drive along  
betting on another day.<sup>31</sup>

The narrator of this poem has to laugh, there is little alternative, but also because the sheer banality of his existence is at the same time entertaining. Bukowski has to laugh and the reader realises that there is more than simple stoicism at work in this narrative, it is the genuine human agony of the black humourist, and this in turn demystifies and breaks down the seriousness of tragedy. By infusing his storytelling with irony and other comedic elements, the reader laughs too and never gets the impression that the constantly lurking, 'small tragedies' get the better of him or his characters, and that despite much banality, there are genuine pleasures to be found in his narratives. Returning to the idea of the anecdotal narrative, all of Bukowski's poems are intensely personal, whether they are autobiographical, imagined or a mixture of both. They retain an intensely personal dimension, a sense of personal alienation, a quality of details which infuse his narratives. They do this without falling into the epic themes of modernism, but regard existentialism with ridicule and extensive irony. Bukowski's characters, and this is most true for the person of the narrator, are never heroic figures. Eventhough readers get the sense of an embattled ego throughout a Bukowskian tale, the narrator refuses to be pitied, '[a] little howl, when it has some humour mixed with it, is almost forgivable'<sup>32</sup>, 'your life is your life/ don't let it be clubbed into dank submission./ be on the watch./ there are ways out'<sup>33</sup>. The way out for Bukowski is by avoiding tragedy rather than simply surviving it. This ultimately presents an unheroic stance. Bukowski believes, that it would be false to suggest that everybody is able to successfully battle tragedy and emerge a changed or improved person and his characters are more likely to be defeated by their everyday experiences than triumph over them. The poem entitled *now*, summarises most of the features of Bukowskian presence and techniques, and makes evident his narrative strategies.

I had boils the size of tomatoes  
all over me  
they stuck a drill into me  
down at the county hospital,  
and  
just as the sun went down  
everyday  
there was a man in a nearby ward  
he'd start hollering for his friend Joe.  
JOE! he'd holler, OH JOE! JOE! J O E!  
COME GET ME, JOE!

Joe never came by.  
I've never heard such mournful  
sounds.

Joe was probably working off a  
piece of ass or  
attempting to solve a crossword puzzle.

I've always said  
if you want to find out who your friends are  
go to the madhouse or  
jail.

and if you want to find out where love is not  
be a perpetual loser.

I was very lucky with my boils  
being drilled and tortured  
against the backdrop of the Sierra Madre mountains  
while the sun went down;  
when that sun went down I knew what I would do  
when I finally got that drill in my hands  
like I have it  
now.<sup>34</sup>

As the narrator has no definitive way to successfully assess why Joe neglects his friend at the hospital, the poem can only counter his anxieties which continue to bother him by turning his mind to details and possibilities, which as humorous as they may be, are impossible to believe. The reader as well as the narrator know that the man in the nearby ward has been abandoned and there hovers a feeling of uneasiness. Bukowski's typical strategies are most noticeable in the last stanza of the poem. The narrator tries to counter his present sense of tragedy with a distracting focus on the landscape outside the hospital, however this attempt at escape does not work. He remains as a static version of himself being tormented by the medical procedure. The narrator only escapes by imagining a vision of his future where he

will be in control. As the poem switches from past to present in the last line, the narrator 'finally' wielding the drill convinces the reader of victory over tragedy achieving narrative closure. Despite the fact that the narrator does not advocate any action which may be universally imitated, the action is what *he* would do, not necessarily what everybody else would, Bukowski exemplifies an experience, which may connect with whatever experiences another person may have. The poem in effect becomes an example of the avoidance of tragedy through action.

The Bukowskian narrative is something which concerns itself with ways of acting – 'acting' as opposed to the modernist idea of 'being'. In Bukowski's poems, characters have little definition apart from basic descriptions. It is what the reader can gain through their actions which is of importance. The reality of their experiences, and Bukowski's experiences, give his storytelling its value. Most importantly perhaps is Bukowski's rejection that his worldview, or that of his characters, represents salvation for anyone. Readers must reconcile all actions that take place in the narrative with themselves because the Bukowskian universe is so often trivial and superficial. Bukowski's scepticism, use of humour and irony means he neither takes himself nor his poetry too seriously. However inherently funny narrative poems such as *big time loser* are, they remain rooted in everyday experience. This particular poem tells of a confrontation aboard a train between the narrator and a couple, whose seats he has taken over. The lengthy argument occupies almost two thirds of the poem with all parties concerned, adamant it is their seat.

"This is *my* seat!" I told the man.  
"it's bad enough he takes my seat," said the man  
looking  
around, "but now he's reading my Racing Form!"  
I looked up at him, he was puffing his chest out.  
"look at you," I said, "puffing your goddamned  
chest out!"  
"you're in my seat, buddy!" he told me.<sup>35</sup>

The tension builds in the poem as the story is entirely driven by the extensive use of dialogue. The narrator is put out by being asked to vacate the seat, in turn, the couple is affronted by his refusal to do so and the characters quickly become divorced by attitude. The readiness with which the narrator jumps to self-defensiveness is Bukowski's way of suggesting he, as well as the narrator, encounter opposition constantly in life and the expectation of confrontation has become the norm. The narrator only concedes when his attempt at self-assertion is undermined by other passengers siding with the couple, and he is forced to head to another carriage. There he realises he has made a mistake and the narrative irony takes over.

I got up and walked to the next train car.  
there was my empty seat by the window and there was  
my Racing Form.<sup>36</sup>

[...]

I walked back to my car, sat down and  
looked out the window  
pretending to be interested in the land-  
scape,  
happy that the people in my car didn't know what  
the people in the other car knew.<sup>37</sup>

Despite its sudden difference of mood, the poem never resorts to meditation. Only in the third stanza, after the narrator's realisation, does it become clear to the reader who the 'big time loser' of the title is. Only after the moment the narrator sits down in his own seat, with the recognition of how wrongly he behaved, does the poem switch from dialogue to narrative, leading to the last lines' description of the embarrassment felt by the protagonist and his inability to satisfactorily merge back into the scene. But it is not the faithful retelling of a trivial argument or the contrast between actions and the suddenness of realisation which makes this an engaging poem. The actual success of Bukowski's narrative lies in the vitality in which life calls attention to its own potential for disconnection.

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- <sup>1</sup> see Robert Scholes, 'Language, Narrative, and Anti-Narrative', *Critical Inquiry*, 7, 1, (Autumn, 1980)
- <sup>2</sup> Victor Turner, 'Social Dramas and Stories about Them', *Critical Inquiry*, 7, 1, (Autumn, 1980), p.146-147
- <sup>3</sup> Donald Hall, *Contemporary American Poetry* (London: Penguin 1972), p.17
- <sup>4</sup> Charles Bukowski, *On Writing*, edited by Abel Debritto (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2015), p.24-25
- <sup>5</sup> see Marjorie Perloff, 'From Image to Action: The Return of Story in Postmodern Poetry', *Contemporary Literature*, 30, 4, (Autumn, 1982), p.411-427
- <sup>6</sup> Charles Bukowski, *Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame: Selected Poems, 1955-1973* (New York: Ecco, 2003), p.106-107
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.106
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.107
- <sup>9</sup> Robert Scholes, 'Language, Narrative, and Anti-Narrative', *Critical Inquiry*, 7, 1, (Autumn, 1980), p.210
- <sup>10</sup> Charles Bukowski, *Storm for the Living and the Dead: Uncollected and Unpublished Poems*, edited by Abel Debritto (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), p.21
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20 and p.22
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.22
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960's* (Cranbury: Associated Universities Press, 1979), p.36
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.17
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.78
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> Charles Bukowski, *Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame: Selected Poems, 1955-1973* (New York: Ecco, 2003), p.162
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> Charles Bukowski, 'Letter to John W. Corrington, April 21, 1961' in *On Writing*, ed. by Abel Debritto (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2015), p.42-43
- <sup>25</sup> Douglas Howard, 'Interview: Charles Bukowski', in *Sunlight Here I Am: Interviews & Encounters, 1963-1993*, ed. by David S. Calonne (Northville: Sun Dog Press, 2003), p.115
- <sup>26</sup> Charles Bukowski, *Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame: Selected Poems, 1955-1973* (New York: Ecco, 2003), p.158
- <sup>27</sup> Charles Bukowski, 'Letter to Henry Miller, August 16, 1965' in *On Writing*, ed. by Abel Debritto (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2015), p.81-82
- <sup>28</sup> Charles Bukowski, 'a little sleep and peace and stillness' in *Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame: Selected Poems, 1955-1973* (New York: Ecco, 2003), p.137-138
- <sup>29</sup> 'wax job', *Ibid.*, p.187-189
- <sup>30</sup> 'a little sleep and peace and stillness', *Ibid.*, p.138
- <sup>31</sup> Charles Bukowski, *The Night Torn Mad With Footsteps* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 2001), p.319
- <sup>32</sup> Charles Bukowski, *Sunlight Here I Am: Interviews & Encounters, 1963-1993*, ed. by David S. Calonne (Northville: Sun Dog Press, 2003), p.96
- <sup>33</sup> Charles Bukowski, 'The laughing heart' in *Betting On the Muse* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1996), p.400
- <sup>34</sup> Charles Bukowski, *Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame: Selected Poems, 1955-1973* (New York: Ecco, 2003), p.155
- <sup>35</sup> Charles Bukowski, *The Pleasures of the Damned: Poems, 1951-1993*, ed. by John Martin (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007), p.181
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.182

## Conclusion

When trying to determine the causes behind the increasing popularity of Charles Bukowski's poetry and the specificity of its allure, the first points which need to be mentioned are its perhaps most prominent qualities: accessibility and irrepressible humour. Bukowski's inclusion of stories of human interest, which are often ironically funny to read, sets him apart from other poets of his time. The strikingly liberated aspects of his work continues to persuade a broad variety of native readers as well as international ones, while audio recordings of his poems such as *The Laughing Heart* by musician Tom Waits, have brought Bukowski's writing to a mass audience through advertisements and film scores, although sometimes in cannibalised forms.

One reason for the enthusiastic readerly response to his poems is Bukowski's ability to highlight the spiritual and physical exploitation of American working-class individuals and the downmarket, but nevertheless engaging, world they inhabit. A wish for escape from the everyday, banal routines, societal morals, norms and expectations leads to poems filled with satirical critiques and farcical dramas. Bukowski aims to shed light on the often chaotic and spontaneous vibrancy of their lives, particularly when the reader can claim the companionship of a seasoned and knowledgeable narrator. It is this narrator who dwells among the marginalised, the excluded and the poor, 'slumming it' as they do. It comes as no surprise then that almost all of the critical commentary on Bukowski's work has focused on his portrayal of low-life existence. However, Bukowski should not be regarded as simply a poet of plebeian wretchedness. Instead, his crudeness must be viewed as a tool for exposing the fallacy of the American dream, of a life filled with liberty, where choices can be made and social mobility is possible. This, of course, presents a continuity of writers' concerns throughout the history of American literature. As discussed in this thesis, Bukowski's concern for the aesthetics of the everyday reflects the poet's own view of himself and his practice as a writer, including the selection of subject matter and his oppositional stance to established literary conventions. This rejection of academic as well as mainstream literati can best explain Bukowski's relatively late entry to the world of poetry: he did not begin writing poetry until the age of thirty-five. Accordingly, the first part of his poetic career was lived out in relative obscurity through small press publications and chap books, with barely any critical attention and certainly no dependable income through his work. Bukowski however turned this potentially frustrating situation into advantage, permitting him to continue writing in and about his environs without the pressure from outside agencies, further enabling him to develop his idiosyncratic style. Throughout his poetry, Bukowski's objectives remain the focus on the mundane everyday, storytelling and the autonomy to compose poems on his own terms. This doggedly uncompromising stance to writing has been observed by contemporaries and critics alike, as Gerald Locklin suggests:

'Bukowski has no illusions about invitations to the White House. His books do not even appear among the finalists for the Los Angeles Times Book Prizes. Thus, [...] permanently alienated from the literary establishment, Bukowski has no reason to compromise what may be the greatest freedom enjoyed by any published writer in American history.'<sup>1</sup>

This independence as a poet empowers Bukowski to utilise language which some find blunt, crass and vulgar. But this is exactly the point. Bukowski aims to be shocking to the conservative, middle-class values of American society, with deliberate provocation designed to offend sensibilities, and he seldom cares about any affront he may cause. In works such as *Independence Day*, one of his later poems, Bukowski shows little restraint when an unemployed, alcoholic couple have a drunken argument:

'I miss my children', said the  
whore, 'I wonder if I'll ever  
see Ronnie and Lila again?'  
'will you stop that shit?'  
I asked. 'I heard that shit  
all last night long'.  
the whore began crying.  
I went to the bathroom and  
puked again,  
cracked a new can of ale and  
sat next to the whore  
in my bed.  
'don't mourn, Lilly', I said,  
'you give a great blowjob and  
that counts for something.'<sup>2</sup>

These lines, among many others littered throughout the poem, are designed to be harsh and exceptionally unsentimental, yet, there is an inherent humour present which is hard to ignore. The comedy may sit uncomfortably with the reader but the sheer absurdity of the two protagonists' existence, who incidentally, despite the apparent melodrama their life together is, have neither the inclination nor desire for change, does not fail to engage. In telling stories such as this one, Bukowski remains a calculatedly derisive poet.

Another reason for Bukowski's popularity is, though he always exerts his self-determination to write as uncompromisingly as he likes, that his prolific output never overshadows his care and meticulousness of production. Nevertheless, Bukowski is not a lingering modernist aesthete, spending much time deliberating, taking years to complete a volume of poetry. His literary stance is different to those of the modernists. Bukowski's collections are all-embracing, large, even overpowering at times, containing everything he produces, without any application of theme or chronology. They present a heavy mixture of existential concerns peppered with satire and social commentary, full of expressive characters and colourful locales. Bukowski also has no qualms about recycling material, happily repeating ideas, stories or anecdotes in poems – some even have same or similar titles! Despite this tendency, Bukowski manages to extract an enormous amount of variety from limited subject matters. The reader never tires of the small number of recurrent themes: the futility of the working-class existence, the need for self-rule and the temporary nature of human relationships. Bukowski's characters live through their actions rather than their thoughts – they exist by doing, not being. A remark by the poet George Baker illustrates Bukowskian thinking: 'Personally, I never met an idea that had long legs, yellow hair, and a taste for whisky. Therefore I have very little time for ideas'<sup>3</sup>. Bukowski's refusal of ideas, as well as



descriptions, in favour of actions underscore his narratives and highlight his desire for anti-intellectualism. This is most apparent in his avoidance of sophisticated vocabulary as well as his refusal of aestheticism and political ideology in anything other than everyday-life-related terms<sup>4</sup>. Unsurprisingly, the anti-intellectualism in his poetry has its origins in Bukowski's own life. Although he did attend Los Angeles College, his writerly development happened unaided, except for vigorous, self-directed reading at the L.A. Central Library and ferocious practice. This image of the autodidact is one Bukowski repeatedly and vehemently emphasised throughout his career, insisting that intuitive and true-to-life writing, and its communication with the reader is preferable to careful, considered, intellectual composition. Many of his editors and publishers have commented on this, including Joe Wolberg of City Light Books:

[Bukowski] lives and works by some semi-articulated strictures which he most often states in the negative. He has some very specific advice ... on what a writer should not do ... I do not believe he maintains an untutored image, merely a self-tutored one.<sup>5</sup>

In this sense, in this drive for autonomy and preoccupation with everyday mundanity, Bukowski lives for the story, the telling of which is, for him, the most important aspect of his work. He insists his writing is allowed to form itself aided by his experiences, that he sometimes merely 'listen[s] to sounds [...] this way I can work it out pretty good, in a kind of black cave of my mind, making little quiet adjustments like a tailor'<sup>6</sup>. This idea of a story teller quietly making adjustments in the re-telling of his own experiences and doing so committedly, lies in direct opposition to the persona often depicted in online fan art and social media forums, of Bukowski as a drunk chain-smoker, hacking away at his typewriter waiting for inspiration to strike. Despite the fact that there is obvious deliberation in his work, Bukowski nevertheless retains a sense of writing as therapy and the process of expelling daily experiences is as much of relevance to him as the narrative itself. This goes some way to explaining the feeling of compulsion and impulsivity in his poems and he reminds the reader that he 'write[s] as I please and as I must. I don't worry about critics or style or fame or lack of fame. All I want is the next line as it truly comes to me'<sup>7</sup>.

In all of Bukowski's work there remains an urgency to turn the ordinary, the everyday, the banal, into stories, using ordinary language to create something distinctive yet accessible. It is fair to say that his most successful poems are dispersed with a rawness and humour which energises his stories and renders them ultimately believable as well as entertaining. Fellow poet Randall Jarrell when discussing Wallace Stevens declares that to be a great poet one must be struck by lightning more than a dozen times<sup>8</sup>. Although consistent critical appraisal of Bukowski has only begun in the last ten years and is still in a state of development, it is feasible to say that Bukowski has written several poems which deserve to be called great. *The Genius of the Crowd* is only one such example, there are a dozen others which also deserve accolade: *Ice for the Eagles*; *Dinosauria*, *We*; *The Laughing Heart*; *Twins*; as well as the five poems written following the death of his then partner Jane Cooney Baker which warrant inclusion. There is a steadily growing interest within the American and European academy in Bukowski's poetry which has seen some engaging critical works being published since his death in 1994. An authoritative volume of uncollected poems has been published last year, illustrating his poetic voice and including manuscripts highlighting his development

as a poet. This comes not before time as Bukowski scholars are starting to lead the way in a rejection of the extremely controversial and habitual, posthumous over-editing practised by Bukowski's long-standing editor and some-time publisher John Martin in favour of a return to original materials. Although Bukowski is difficult to categorise, his work has become associated with the term post-modernism, in itself a loaded concept, which is usually reserved to classify avant-garde movements. The fact that he was prolifically active from the 1950's onwards means his name can often be found grouped together with the Beat poets. He may be of the same company, but he certainly cannot be classed as one of the Beats. Bukowski is of a different generation, actually and figuratively. He clearly owes much to predecessors such as William Carlos Williams, although ultimately, his poetry moves away from modernism in his use of narrative as well as the everyday, which lies in direct opposition to modernist meditative stillness. There is still a way to go in categorising Bukowski, if this may indeed be possible.

Despite the emerging interest by academics, Bukowski's residence remains with and is sustained by popular culture, as his work almost effortlessly lends itself to cinematography and film-making. European directors such as Jean-Luc Godard and Marco Ferreri have incorporated his words into their work. Bukowski himself wrote the screenplay for *Barfly*, a film which received international attention during the last decade of his life and, most recently, the television series *Californication* bases its main character of Hank Moody directly on Bukowski's literary character, his alter-ego, Hank Chinaski. This easy relationship with popular culture has often been used as an argument to debase the value of Bukowski's work, specifically his poetry. To some extent, it appears reasonable to see why. The Bukowskian narrator is an individualistic, no-nonsense, tough-guy, the kind of hard-boiled character famously associated with American culture, to the point where this type of persona has gained mythological status. If the entire focus remains on this almost cartoonish figure, it becomes very easy to dismiss Bukowski as a fluke poet. This decision however is rash and undeserved and completely overlooks his ability to engage in deeper issues such as the working-class realities of poverty and life in a capitalism society. Bukowski's characters and narrators are exaggerated, but never to the extent that the stories he tells become implausible. His insistence on everyday experience ultimately means Bukowski is a writer with a serious purpose, someone who delves beneath the farce and comedy to highlight an everyday life full of struggle which is yet vibrant and exhilarating.

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- <sup>1</sup> Gerald Locklin, 'Setting Free the Buk', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 3 (1985), 27-31, p.28
- <sup>2</sup> Charles Bukowski, *Dangling in the Tournefortia* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1981), p.26-27
- <sup>3</sup> George Barker, 'Asterisks', *Essays* (London: HarperCollins, 1970), p.148
- <sup>4</sup> see Julian P. Smith, *The Poetry of Charles Bukowski* (Hull: University of Hull, 1989)
- <sup>5</sup> Joe Walberg, 'Letter to Julian P. Smith, December 21, 1981' in *The Poetry of Charles Bukowski*, by Julian P. Smith (Hull: University of Hull, 1989), p.290-291
- <sup>6</sup> Charles Bukowski, 'Letter to Carl Weissner, 1967' in *Laugh Literary and Man the Humping Guns*, I (1969), 2
- <sup>7</sup> Charles Bukowski, *Sunlight Here I Am: Interviews & Encounters, 1963-1993*, ed. by David S. Calonne (Northville: Sun Dog Press, 2003), p.239
- <sup>8</sup> Randall Jarrell, 'Reflections on Wallace Steven', *Poetry and the Age* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), p.136

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