

Charles Bukowski and the Savage Surfaces

"The poet's eye obscenely seeing
sees the surface of the round world . . ."
—Lawrence Ferlinghetti

The recent publication of Charles Bukowski's selected poems marks a kind of watershed in the career of one of the West Coast's most striking poets. In it, for the first time, a wide range of Bukowski's work is made available to readers who have previously had to form their acquaintance by purchasing small pamphlets or ransacking relatively obscure magazines in which the larger part of the early poems appeared.

As those who know his poetry will testify, Bukowski's poems go well enough one by one. But there is no substitute for reading a man's work in bulk. In individual poems and brief selections there has been a tendency on the part of editors and reviewers to emphasize Bukowski's admitted crudities and vulgarisms as central to his work, and some of the poems require setting in a larger selection in order to assume their dimensions in relation to the rest.

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

Perhaps the most crucial failure of Bukowski's critics is their general blindness to the sort of thing represented by his poetry. It is a vain error to damn oranges because they do not taste like apples—and it is equally profitless to decry what I call a "poetry of surfaces" because it fails to investigate and re-create the depths of human experience.

The phrase "poetry of surface" is not mine. So far as I know, Eliot coined it in an early discussion of Jonson's poetry. It distinguishes between the sort of "vertical" poetry—like *The Waste Land*—which probes the psychological, moral, religious and sociological center of man, and a "horizontal" poetry which concerns itself rather with delineating man in terms of his more visible, more immediate, more physical surroundings. This "horizontal" poetry makes little use of metaphysics. Rather than attempting an X-ray of man's moral skeleton, his spiritual viscera, this kind of poetry contents itself with the flesh, the surface of the human condition. As Fra Lippo Lippi informed his abbot, there is no better way to approach the soul than through a skillful rendering of the

it catches my heart in its hands, Loujon Press, New Orleans, 1963. \$3.25 unsigned, \$5.00 signed.

body surrounding it.

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

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

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

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

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

Not only are Bukowski's jobless, burned-out men not members of “the Party”—when they analyze their plight, it is in terms no revolutionist, economist, sociologist or political scientist would understand:

An old man asked me for a cigarette
and told me his troubles
and this
is what he said:
that Age was a crime
and that pity picked up all the marbles
and that hatred picked up all the
cash.

“We smoke, dead as fog,” Bukowski writes. And his vision of suffering is not adulterated with the academic jargon that, in the face of human agony, seems itself a part of the brutal instrumentality it describes. There is no withdrawal in Bukowski's work. All his poems have the memorable and terrible immediacy of the news broadcast from the scene of the *Hind-*

enberg crash. There is nothing of the sublimated social-worker or psychiatrist in him, and the endless gabble of the professional injustice-collector is totally absent from his work. In remaining on the surface—staying with sure and certain phenomena, a series of significant acts, events, actors and victims, Bukowski avoids the pitfalls of “motivation” and “meaning.” He remains in control of the indisputable, the unquestionable—and leaves the jungle of social and political and moral purpose and counter-purpose to those who find such abstract projections more significant than life itself.

II

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

With the growth of the pseudo-civilized as contemporary norm, “savage”—like “barbarian”—has become a pejorative rather than simply a term descriptive of certain attitudes, convictions, and responses. There is no need to dwell on the irony that our civilized world has, in some sixty years, been responsible for more violent death and unutterable human agony than all savage and barbarian ages before—or that such savages as the American Indians displayed consistently and regularly at least as high a moral standard as our own, and generally a much higher concept of honor. But pejoration aside, Bukowski stands nearer the world-view, say, of Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce than that of Henry Adams or Bernard Berenson. Bukowski’s world, scored and grooved by the impersonal instruments of civilized industrial society, by 20th-century knowledge and experience, remains essentially a world in which meditation and analysis have little part. There is act and observation. When these are rendered in other than descriptive terms, the language is likely to be the semi-mystical speech of surrealism:

I have seen wicked infants in blue tubs
wanting stems as beautiful as flowers,
and I have seen the barfly sick
over his last dead penny;
I have heard Domenico Theotocopoulos
on nights of frost, cough in his grave;
and God, no taller than a landlady,
hair dyed red, has asked me the time . . .
 (“The Sunday Artist”)

That middle stage between act and art, the stage at which one presumes a kind of intellectual gathering and synthesis antecedent to the shaping

of image and metaphor, simply does not exist in Bukowski's poetry. Act moves into image directly; feeling is articulated as figure and intellection is minimal. As the savage projects his world in terms of myth, with sight, sound—the natural order of phenomena—as its keystones, so Bukowski remains focused upon the concrete. If there is symbolic value in the work, the reader is spared a kind of burdensome awareness of that symbolism on the part of the writer. Thus, for example, in "The Tragedy of the Leaves,"

I awakened to dryness and the ferns were dead,
the potted plants yellow as corn;
my woman was gone
and the empty bottles like bled corpses
surrounded me with their uselessness;
the sun was still good, though,
and my landlady's note cracked in fine and
undemanding yellowness; what was needed now
was a good comedian, ancient style, a jester
with jokes upon absurd pain; pain is absurd
because it exists, nothing more;
I shaved carefully with an old razor
the man who had once been young and
said to have genius; but
that's the tragedy of the leaves,
the dead ferns, the dead plants;
and I walked into the dark hall
where the landlady stood
execrating and final,
sending me to hell,
waving her fat sweaty arms
and screaming
screaming for rent
because the world had failed us
both.

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

III

There is a kind of poetry in which one finds what may be called a resident ideational content. The greater bulk of Wallace Stevens' poetry is of this kind. However opaque the surface of "Disillusionment of Ten

O'Clock," a careful reading and a comparison with section VI of "Six Significant Landscapes," quickly shows that Stevens has an idea, a theory in mind, and that, despite the difficulties, he is attempting to transmit that theory through the agency of his verse. Such work presents, as it were, a series of problems to be solved, issues to be clarified, metaphoric complexes to be explicated. This kind of poetry is the proper subject of criticism.

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

the blossoms shake
sudden water
down my sleeve,
sudden water
cool and clean
as snow—
as the stem-sharp
swords
go in
against your breast
and the sweet wild
rocks
leap over
and lock us in.
("I Taste the Ashes of Your Death")

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

IV

I have not meant to suggest that Charles Bukowski's poetry represents something new or even something basically superior in modern American poetry. Nor have I intended to intimate that sublimation of the intellectual is a value in itself. What I do wish to suggest is that Bukowski's work represents a renewal of interest in the poet as something other

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

If it is argued that Bukowski lacks depth, one might do well to paraphrase Aristotle: "There is a degree of profundity suitable to every discipline. The wise man does not ask of an art-form that which is not proper to it." If depth is the ultimate criterion of literary value, then Shakespeare fades before Descartes; Coleridge before Kant. But if emotional and imaginative excitement is an acceptable purpose, the poetry of Charles Bukowski is unusually successful, and his surfaces are as valuable in their savage way as are the civilized depths of T. S. Eliot.

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[Ed. note—We have received *it catches my heart in its hands*, and it is an extraordinarily beautiful book. As Charles Bukowski wrote Jon Webb, the publisher: "Never such a book! Where? Where?? . . . in all the libraries . . . in all the cities I have never seen such a book put together in such a way, inventive creativeness and love. Where have the publishers been for centuries? You've done it."]

