

Genet, Miller, Sartre, and Bukowski: Unveiling the Myth

In the early 60s, Charles Bukowski's work was beginning to enjoy an unprecedented acceptance in the small press scene. His first four chapbooks, *Flower, Fist, and Bestial Wail* (1960), *Longshot Pomes from Broke Players* (1961), *Run with the Hunted* (1962), and *Poems and Drawings* (1962), showcasing his best poetry in the so-called little magazines, were a clear indication of his burgeoning fame and recognition in the American underground. The eagerness displayed by the editors of those early undertakings was indeed praiseworthy and it contributed to spreading his material in the alternative literary circles; in retrospect, however, those publications, and the preceding ones, such as the prestigious *Story* and *Portfolio* magazines in the 40s, the controversial *Harlequin* and *Beloit Poetry Journal* issues in the mid to late 50s or the myriad "littles" that unremittingly promoted his poetry, were paving the way for the arrival of Jon and Louise Webb, the indefatigable and self-sacrificing editors who would, via their Loujon Press, champion Bukowski's *oeuvre* unflaggingly.

The Webbs not only published several first-rate Bukowski poems in all *The Outsider* issues (1961-69), where he appeared alongside Henry Miller, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Gregory Corso, Leroi Jones, Michel McClure, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and other major American authors, but they also released the two seminal publications of the period, *It Catches My Heart in Its Hands* (1963) and *Crucifix in a Deathhand* (1965), which would become the first milestones in his literary career. Bukowski would overtly express his gratitude on several occasions, and he would compare Jon Webb to Whit Burnett and H. L. Mencken, the only other editors he would always refer to in flattering terms. Nevertheless, unbeknownst to most, the event which would

mostly reinforce his ever-growing popularity was an apparently apocryphal endorsement by French intellectuals Jean-Paul Sartre and Jean Genet, hailing him as “the best poet in America,” an accolade shrewdly conceived by Webb to boost sales.

Webb was a seasoned author/editor, and his carefully devised advertising campaigns were instrumental in drawing the attention of readers, collectors and libraries alike. After the release of *It Catches My Heart in Its Hands* in October 1963, the Webbs received dozens of congratulatory letters from well-known authors and publishers. In an attempt to sell the remaining copies of the book, Webb designed a promotional flyer where he reproduced several excerpts from those letters and he distributed it via the customary publishing channels. Henry Miller was quoted as saying that the book was “a treat to the eyes, and a beautiful gift ... Give my warmest to the good Bukowski.” Jean Genet comment was more succinct: “Beau livre, belle poesie!” Webb created similar promotional flyers with further comments from famous writers. Those excerpts were soon printed in the media, albeit substantially rephrased. For instance, as early as May 1964, an unnamed editor, possibly Jay Robert Nash or Ron Offen, claimed in the “editor’s note” accompanying an essay by Bukowski titled “Examining My Peers,” published in Chicago’s *Literary Times*, that “Charles Bukowski, author of the exquisitely-printed and famed *It Catches My Heart in Its Hands* ... has been hailed as one of the best in the field by Henry Miller, Genet, Offen, Patchen and others” (“Editor’s Note”). In all probability, the *Literary Times* editor had read Webb’s promotional flyer since the authors mentioned in both the note and the flyer are the same. While the writers quoted in the flyer did not literally assert that Bukowski was “one of the best in the field,” that was indeed the notion that Webb wanted to convey to enhance his reputation. Journalists

nurtured this misconception and in a November 1970 article by Ben Pleasants published in the *Los Angeles Times*, the snowball effect reached its climax: “Jean-Paul Sartre and Jean Genet have called him the best poet writing in America ... Henry Miller has praised him to the skies” (“3 Volumes” 31). Presumably, Bukowski was mischievously delighted to learn that such a large circulation newspaper had misinformed its readership to his own benefit; he would admit as much to Pleasants in the late 70s: “I just made it up. I think the Webbs said it first in one of their blurbs for *It Catches My Heart in Its Hands*, and now it’s in print for a million readers to see” (Pleasants, *Visceral* 190). Pleasants would insist on the fact that it had been Bukowski who had come up with the Genet/Sartre endorsement: “He told me Sartre and Genet were great fans of his. I put that in an *LA Times* piece, it got all over the world and he told me he was only kidding” (“Re: When Bukowski”). In his biography, Sounes expressed a similar view: “It is almost certainly another myth, possibly one created by Bukowski himself” (142). Sounes’ and Pleasants’ hypotheses notwithstanding, they did not seem to take into account Bukowski’s claim that the apparently apocryphal Genet/Sartre quotation had been first printed by Webb.

Barely a few months later, in early 1971, Bukowski and Lawrence Ferlinghetti were discussing the contents of a book to be titled *Bukowskiana*, a volume of his most accomplished short-stories and poetry to date, “the wildest shit since Boccaccio and Swift!,” as Bukowski proudly declared (Bancroft, 22 Apr. 1971). The project was never released as such since John Martin, Bukowski’s longtime publisher, did not allow the poems to be printed by City Lights, although the stories were published the following year in *Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and General Tales of Ordinary Madness*. Ferlinghetti suggested Bukowski that he

use the Genet/Sartre quote on the back cover of *Bukowskiana*, but Bukowski adamantly refused to do so: "I'm tired of the [quotation] about Sartre and Genet calling me the best poet in America. I don't know how that one ever got started. I doubt the truth of it. I think it was something Jon Webb blew up out of proportion and others picked it up. I don't know" (Bancroft, 30 Dec. 1971). Bukowski was obviously discontent with the overuse of the quotation, stressing it had been devised as part of Webb's marketing strategies.

It is not known whether Webb twisted the excerpts quoted in the *It Catches My Heart in Its Hand* promotional flyer to make them more appealing, or perhaps they were altered -with Webb's tacit consent- by the media. Be that as it may, Bukowski would reminisce about this episode in the late 80s, unequivocally disapproving of Webb's misuse of those comments:

So I asked [Webb] about this. And he said, 'Somebody read Genet your poem, 'Old Man Dead in a Room' and Genet said it was a great poem.'

'But that's not the same as the other. He didn't say I was the best poet in America. I don't want you to use this blurb.'

We were drinking and he just stared at me. Then I asked him about Sartre and he claimed he had actually said I was the best poet in America in an article. I never saw the article. But my present editor at Black Sparrow [John Martin] claims it is true. I don't know ... I think it's all horseshit and wish those blurbs had never been used. I don't need them and I don't want them. (*Reach* 100)

While in 1970 Bukowski had playfully persuaded Pleasants to publish the fake Genet/Sartre quotation in the *Los Angeles*

Times, it seems that he would later regret it, deploring its repeated exposure in newspapers and magazines. As Sounes (142) remarked, “this plaudit was widely reported in the underground press, becoming one of the most famous remarks about Bukowski.”

Indeed, after the mention in the 1970 article by Pleasants in the *Los Angeles Times*, the Genet/Sartre quote was printed in the biographical note for Bukowski’s *Post Office* (1971), the first work of fiction published by Black Sparrow Press. Incidentally, Martin maintained that he had first read that endorsement in an article about the “infamous” Democratic Convention published in a mainstream magazine, probably *Esquire*, in the late 60s, but efforts to find such a quote in *Esquire* have been unsuccessful to date; while it is true that the August 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention was duly covered by Terry Southern, William Burroughs and Jean Genet for *Esquire* in the November 1968 issue, the Genet/Sartre staunch support was conspicuous by its absence. Most likely, Martin had read the quote in the *Los Angeles Times* in November 1970 and, barely three months later, he cashed in on it by reprinting it in *Post Office*.

Two years later, the same quotation would be used in the promotional poster for *Bukowski* (1973), the first known documentary about his life (see fig. 1). Music journalist Lester Bangs (59) asserted that “Genet and Sartre think he’s the best poet in America” in *Creem* magazine in 1974. It was later famously reproduced in a 1976 *Rolling Stone* issue which featured a long interview with Bukowski; according to Baughan, the interview was the “first true sign of the nationwide cult of Bukowski” (87), hence reinforcing his indisputable popularity. Almost a decade later, actor Sean Penn would depict Bukowski as a “notorious boozier, brawler, and womanizer, both Genet and Sartre called him ‘the best poet in America’” in Andy Warhol’s *Interview* magazine

(94). The apparently fake quotation was reported not only in the underground press, but also in large circulation mainstream magazines, books, and promotional flyers for books and documentaries. Despite Bukowski's disapproval of the exposure received by the quote, it definitely contributed to consolidate his reputation as a major author in the American underground. Webb's advertising campaigns turned out to be considerably more efficient than what could have been possibly predicted.

The Genet/Sartre quotation would not be the only one used to promote Bukowski's books. Carl Weissner, a young editor/author who was to translate most of his books into German from 1970 onwards, authored a fictitious Henry Miller blurb to boost sales of the German version of *Notes of a Dirty Old Man*. Miller had expressed his admiration for Bukowski's work as early as 1963; shortly after reading *It Catches My Heart in Its Hands*, he wrote to Webb that "I do sincerely like Bukowski's poems. And I don't see why he is not published by a big publisher" (Loujon, 18 Dec. 1963). Similarly, after the release of *Crucifix in a Deathhand* in April 1965, the Webbs informed Bukowski of Miller's positive appraisal of the book, to which he replied in July 1965: "If Henry Miller liked *Crucifix* that's good enough for me, that's the best critic there is – a man who has lived that hard that long just can't learn to lie and also has no need to" (*Screams* 191). Bukowski and Miller would correspond briefly in August 1965, and Miller insisted on the quality of the Webbs' production: "The book is worth twice what the publishers are asking for it" ("Dear Friend").

In all likelihood, Weissner was aware of the Miller/Bukowski epistolary interchange and he had probably read Miller's laudatory comments in the promotional flyers designed by Webb; hence, he decided to impersonate Miller and compose a fake blurb for the German edition of

Bukowski's *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* which read: "Each line in Bukowski is infected by the terror of the American nightmare. He articulates the fears & agonies of the vast minority in the no-man's-land between inhuman brutalisation and helpless despair" (qtd. in *Living* 93). While in the late 80s Bukowski blatantly disapproved of the Genet/Sartre quotation, in 1970 he gave Weissner his consent to place the apocryphal Miller blurb on the back cover of *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* even if the idea did not enthuse him: "I'm not too happy with the fake H.M. quote, and I would not tell Martin about it or he'd flip -maybe. But if you think it will make a difference in selling 2,000 or 5,000, go ahead. It's best that we survive. By the way, I like the blurb itself. Quite accurate" (*Living* 93). Given the apparent confusion regarding the origin of the Genet/Sartre quotation, and the fact that Webb had also quoted Miller in his promotional flyers, it is somewhat understandable that some critics have mixed up both references: "The much-quoted endorsement of Bukowski by Jean-Paul Sartre and Jean Genet ('the best poet in America') was made up by Weissner for a German edition blurb" (Smith 212). However, it was Weissner who authored and published, with Bukowski's consent, the fake Miller blurb.

As in the case of the Genet/Sartre quote, the Miller one proved to be equally profitable. Weissner translations would unarguably turn Bukowski into a hugely popular figure in Germany in the 70s. *Poems Written Before Jumping Out of an 8 Story Window*, a title already used for a Bukowski chapbook in 1968, "paid off and it eventually sold more than 50,000 copies, a poetry bestseller that made Bukowski's name in Germany" (Miles 195). The translation of *Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and General Tales of Ordinary Madness* was also well received. Excerpts from Bukowski's *Post Office* and *Factotum* alongside several stories were

released as *Stories and Novels*; “it was better known as *The Blue Book* and sold almost a hundred thousand” (Soules 174). In an October 1977 letter to Martin, Bukowski could not conceal his joy, and he would acknowledge how instrumental Weissner had been in bringing about that success: “the blue book has gone into 53,000 copies. word from publisher: by the end of the year they will have 70,000 copies out. to me, those are astonishing figures, and so much of it is due to Weissner, his translation of the works and his getting it in front of people” (*Living* 233). The German sales of his books would substantially increase in time, and by 1988 “over 2.5 million copies [had been sold] in West Germany” (Dougherty 98). These were astounding figures for a small press author, and both Weissner’s and Webb’s cunningly conceived fake quotes unequivocally contributed to Bukowski’s rise to fame.

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