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THE GROTESQUE TRADITION IN THE SHORT STORIES OF CHARLES BUKOWSKI

THESIS

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By

James M. Cooke, B.A.
Denton, Texas

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The style and themes central to Bukowski's prose have roots in the literary tradition of the grotesque. Bukowski uses grotesque imagery in his writings as a creative device, explaining the negative characteristics of modern life. His permanent mood of angry disgust at the world around him is similar to that of the eighteenth-century satirists, particularly Jonathan Swift. Bukowski confronts the reader with the uglier side of America--its grime, its corruption, the constricted lives of its lower class--all with a simplicity and directness of style impeccably and clearly distilled. Bukowski's style is ebullient, with grotesquely evocative descriptions, scatological detail, and dark humor.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> "It is a prose that has never been written. But it can be written, without tricks and without cheating. With nothing that will go bad afterwards."
> --Hemingway in Green Hills of Africa

Charles Bukowski is one of the profound and interesting innovators of modern prose and poetry today. To know the art of Bukowski is to know something about the problems that face modern man. He has the power to destroy complacency, to call into question pat answers to life's problems, to compel the reader to reasses the world around him.

Bukowski's literature, particularly his short stories, coalesces the raw experiences of his life into art. Bukowski's art consists of his having transformed his life into a lifestyle. His stories have the compact facility of a self-portrait. They are not truly an autobiography, not a confession or a justification of what he has done or felt; they read more like a condensed version of the screwing, drinking, writing, defecating, spewing that make up his life. The stories are presented as though the real world might be different but not abnormal. As Tony Quagliano states in "The Natural Shape of the Loner," Bukowski "offers no manifestos, either for writing poetry or for the living of one's life.

He knows that issuing prescriptions for right conduct is a fool's game" (3). The Bukowski short story collections that are used in this study, Notes of a Dirty Old Man, South of No North, Hot Water Music, and Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions, and General Tales of Ordinary Madness, provide good examples of Bukowski's use of the grotesque and the scatological. The stories are emblematic of his "black humor" techniques and of his own personal philosophy about the meaningless of life.

Gerald Locklin in "Setting Free the Buk" states that

> . . . the unevenness of his published work leaves Bukowski vulnerable to the critic with an axe to grind, who may select exclusively from the second-rate or from what he needs to prove his thesis. But such critics are easily refuted by anyone who has read along with Bukowski over the years. (29)

Whatever reservation one might have about Bukowski's work, it is not on the grounds of falseness. "He speaks no other language but the real. There is no swaying, no circumnavigating the issues. Bukowski is without sympathy in standing true to the world as it exists in front of him" (41), says Loss Glazier, another critic of Bukowski's works. All of Bukowski's characters, thinly disguised doppelgangers of Bukowski himself, are simple outcasts who mirror everything that has happened to him. The personae, sometimes

called "Henry Chinaski" or "Harry," are true representations of Bukowski the artist; they define his acts and his feelings and supply the clues to his unique ideology.

Bukowski's world view runs parallel to that of other great artists of the twentieth century. Discussing the life and death of Ernest Hemingway in a review of Islands in the Stream entitled "The Impotence of Being Ernest," Bukowski observed that

> all in all, Hemingway knows his men and his war and his food and his drinks . . . and he knows his death is coming. He's weak on his women but most of us are, and his conversations aren't quite real; they are Hemingway's conversations, but once you realize this you can accept them. (58)

The same statement may be applied to Bukowski himself. There is something absurdly exhilarating about Bukowski's staunch refusal to accept the parameters of "reality" and his equally stubborn insistence on living in his own personal universe. Many critics have compared Bukowski's style to that of Hemingway. One critic, John William Corrington, states that

> he knows, like Hemingway, that there are, really, no remedies for anything in this life. He knows that love and tenderness are in tragically short supply, and that there are more bulls killed in old Mexico than virgins honored in Phoenix. . . . He

> knows that bitterness and failure are beverages common as scotch and bourbon, and that a man drinks of one or all until he stumbles down the final stairs while a party of a rape transpires on the floor past which he falls, or smashes into a last phone pole while messages of congratulation and deceit yammer through the shivering wires overhead. (8)

Bukowski's inability to find a satisfactory answer to life's problems, in terms of himself and the society in which he lives, leads to an impasse. As a result, he experiences alienation and solitude. As his character Henry Chinaski indicates in the novel _Ham on Rye_, he often feels as if he has been set adrift on an unfriendly sea. Chinaski feels that he is "just a 50-cent turd floating in the green ocean of life" (168). The whole world is reduced to the fluidity of excrement, his misanthropy transforming the ocean into a sewer of life in which he remains an isolated, insoluble feces. The grotesque image of a human "turd" represents the animality of mankind. As Ernest Becker states in _The Denial of Death_,

> The prison of one's character is painstakingly built to deny one thing and one thing alone: one's creatureliness. The creatureliness is the terror. Once admit that you are a defecating creature and

> you invite the primeval ocean of creature anxiety, it is also man's anxiety, the anxiety that results from the human paradox that man is an animal who is conscious of his animal limitation. (87)

Bukowski wants to beguile his readers by enervating them and by rejecting conventional values. He seeks to revise the accepted notions of what is good, beautiful, truthful, just--views that, so far as Bukowski is concerned, are meaningless, at least as practiced in twentieth-century America. He sets about reversing standards and values in order to force people to think about their lot and their actions, to force them to look within themselves with clarity and honesty. By describing grotesque details of modern life, he exposes man's most intimate regions, both physical and moral. These associations are relevant for an understanding of Bukowski's constant preoccupation with filth in general and excretion in particular. The attempt to show his hostility toward society and toward himself is a creative process, an excruciating need for self-expression and involvement in the world. Many artists--Bukowski is a case in point--proceed in their creative powers more by means of their intuition than by their intellect. Bukowski's creative works, like those of many artists, may be considered not only as expressions of his personal chaos but also as exteriorizations of feelings and situations that touch everyone.

This Bukowski study is divided into two parts. The first part consists of a character study of Bukowski's responses to the conditions of modern life and delineates specific aspects of his style; his style is demonstrated as a sane response to the madness of the world. The second part of this study delineates specific grotesque imagery that Bukowski uses, particularly the scatological and the sexually perverse. Unquestionably, Charles Bukowski has succeeded in transforming his existence into a veritable work of ironic art, and he has done so with a dashing satirical bravado that has as much courage in it as humor.

CHAPTER II

STYLE AND THEMES

"Then to the Lip of this poor earthern Urn
I leaned, the Secret of my Life to learn;
  And Lip to Lip it murmured--'While you live,
Drink!--for, once dead, you never shall return.'"
                    --The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

Most of Charles Bukowski's work is autobiographical and inspired by a vast compassion for human suffering. In Contemporary Authors, Bukowski states that he believes

> life is a spider, we can dance in the web so long, the thing is gonna get us. . . . I am pretty well hooked-in now, have fallen into some traps, and speak mostly from the bent bone, the flogged spirit. I've had some wild and horrible years and electric and lucky years. ("Bukowski")

Bukowski has managed to describe his poverty-stricken boyhood, his experiences as a wandering bum, and his life as a skid-row poet in order to develop an image that Hugh Fox describes as a persecuted outsider: "In a sense this image serves him as a kind of shield. The artist-image shields him against the Terror, and--even more important--against his own failure to be accepted by a wide, 'general' public" (21). Bukowski also acknowledges that to write well about a subject

one must know and live with it. Solitary, anguished, he writes about his trials and tribulations in the land of the poor.

Bukowski's tough-minded sympathy with poverty is expressed quite eloquently in _Notes of a Dirty Old Man_ (1969), his collection of short stories and essays written for the underground newspaper _Open City_. He is at times enraged at the stupidity of the poor, but he suffers with them. He has been accused of nihilism and total pessimism, but much of his writing seems to be an authentic account of the senseless waste caused by modern civilization. No evocation of desolate city streets has surpassed Bukowski's in poetic intensity. Mockingly, he satirizes life in America, depicting the brutally funny picture of life in the U.S.A. and the dark, bleak life of Los Angeles slum-dwellers. His style, based on an inspired use of colloquial and scatological idiom is exactly suited to his ludicrous treatment of commonplace horror surrounding the world of poverty. Bukowski's satire, like Jonathan Swift's in, for example, "A Modest Proposal," is informed with a noble disgust at the lies with which civilization covers up its sores. Swift proposes a suitable solution of overpopulation:

> I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most

> delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricasse or a ragout.
>
> I do therefore humbly offer it to public consideration that . . . the remaining hundred thousand [children] may at a year old be offered in sale to the persons of quality and fortune through the kingdom, always advising the mother to let them such plentifully in the last month, so as to render them plump and fat for a good table. (2146)

Swift's elaborate strategem is carred to its logical extreme: Man becomes in every sense a commodity. Bukowski vents his satire against institutional madness with the same keen wit that Swift employs, and Bukowski's subject becomes a commodity as well:

> the madhouses will remain overlooked, and the cuts in the madhouse budgets by our good governor are taken by me to indirectly imply that those driven mad by society are not fit to be supported and cured by society. . . . and I have a splendid thought: why not assassinate the insane? think of the money we could save. even a madman eats too much and needs a place to sleep, and the bastards are disgusting--the way they scream and smear their

> shit on the walls, all that. all we'd need is a small medical board to make decisions and a couple of good-looking nurses (male or female) to keep the psychiatrists' extracurricular sexual activities satisfied. (Erections 440)

Society creates madness and poverty; its sores continue to fester. Without moral, rational institutions to believe in, Bukowski becomes the arbiter of his own fate, embracing little and questioning much. Not at all limited to traditional society and art, he creates forms that reflect his own probings. He knows that the absence of a final answer is a condition of life that must be accepted, not a crippling limitation.

Bukowski is, for the most part, Janus-faced, carefully scrutinizing the external world of reality and inwardly contemplating his reactions to the outside world. He sees no answer to man's problems, no redemption in either realm:

> we have wasted History like a bunch of drunks shooting dice back in the men's crapper of the local bar. I am ashamed to be a member of the human race but I don't want to add any more to that shame, I want to scrape a little of it off. (Notes 79)

There is no individual release or social reconciliation for Bukowski's characters. The protagonists remain at the end of

a Bukowski story as alienated from the human race as they were at the outset with no effort at rapprochement. The Bukowski figure persists in suffering disenchantment with himself and the world around him.

In most of Bukowski's short stories images of tenderness and the warmth of friendship are almost entirely lacking. His main characters are usually rejected as children by both family and society, causing a withering of burgeoning psychological characteristics within their personalities. The characters become stunted, stifled, muzzled, and can be described as psychologically maimed. As Glenn Esterly points out in a Rolling Stone article, Bukowski

> writes about what he has experienced: poverty, menial jobs, chronic hangovers, hard women, jails, fighting the system, failing, feeling bad. The impression created is of someone with his foot in a trap who's trying to gnaw himself free at the ankle. (3)

A medley of forces then come into play: hate, violence, fear, each grating on the other and affecting the character's rational outlook, actions, gestures, speech. His characters glimpse a world in which death, decay, and rot are the supreme activators, their reactions dependent upon the specific amount of grotesquerie found in each story.

The picaresque technique chosen by Bukowski offers the perfect vehicle to express his indolent nature and the lack of direction his life and his characters' lives take. The picaresque tradition, so well exploited by such eighteenth-century English writers as Swift, Defoe, and Smollet, permits protagonists to indulge their bent for wandering, their desire to escape, exhibiting all the while a certain dissatisfaction with self and the status quo. The eighteenth-century picaresque heroes are, for the most part, in search of fortune, prosperity, love, fame, happiness; they have a goal for themselves. The Bukowski figure has no such visions. He is, rather, a complex, chaotic mass of unfulfilled desires, bumbling and stumbling across America or the Los Angeles city streets. Only trying to survive another day, he succeeds in almost nothing. He has no illusions, no will to right the wrongs he sees about him: "for our choice is no choice. If we move too quickly, we are dead. If we do not move fast enough, we are dead" (Notes 85). Whatever he touches withers in his grasp and sinks from view into a muck of despair and nihilism. Only rarely does he escape or make his way into a creative realm and try to give purpose to his existence. He is horrified by the ugliness and absurdity of life, and his picaresque movement continues to push him further into darkness. His is the determined exploration of

the permutability of urban existence and the paralysis of human indifference.

Exaggeration of disasters, a warped vision of life, a tendency to dwell on the grotesque and sordid aspects of existence, a life viewed as cruelty make up the world view in Bukowski's picaresque stories. The best that Bukowski can offer as a summation of his experiences through this world is that "they beat you down with their factories, their booze, their women until you are no longer of any use to them or yourself" (Buk. Quote 48). With numbness of heart, Bukowski acknowledges that he is condemned to travel a long way by himself alone. Bukowski states that "if life seems horrible to you, it probably is" (File 48). Life describes a pointless journey with death as the only true destination.

The picaresque form, with short stories serving as loosely constructed episodes, expresses Bukowski's sense of restlessness, his utter dissatisfaction with prevailing social, economic, and philosophical conditions, his own directionless existence. The grotesque distortions and exaggerations, also characteristic of the picaresque form, signify Bukowski's own hatred of and despair about humanity and its condition--and his own condition.

A precursor of Lenny Bruce and Monty Python, Bukowski finds humor in the bleak absurdities and shocking incongruities of modern life. Rather than evoking

traditional humor, Bukowski elicits an outspoken language that indicates a secure sense of superiority to the restrictions of life. He acknowledges human limitations and refuses to indulge in unrealistic expectations. If it is true that humor must have a stable base from which to function, his lusty acceptance of the peaceful activities of humor, drink, and sex and his respect for even the weak hopefulness of art give him a stability that makes possible his liberating laughter. Bukowski uses grotesque laughter with its juxtaposition of horror and outrageous comedy to shatter the pat responses people use to buffer themselves against harsh reality:

> . . . and then they put on some old Laurel and Hardy flicks . . . there was one where the bastards were fighting for covers in the sleeper of a Pullman. I was the only one who laughed. People stared at me. I just cracked peanuts and kept laughing. Then Izzy began laughing. Then everybody started laughing at them fighting for the covers in the Pullman. I forgot all about Mad Jimmy and felt like a human being for the first time in hours. Living was easy--all you had to do was let go. Let the other men fight the wars, let the other men go to jail. (Erections 271)

His humor, which alleviates his extreme pessimism, is of a special type: lugubrious, cruel, black. It ranges from the laughter of a sadist to the witty statements enunciated by a man observing a degenerate society. Although there are some belly laughs, Bukowski's humor is almost always tinged with despair. He employs humor as an ultimate weapon of satire, a weapon designed to mock and deride humanity. In "3 Women," he uses humor to perfect advantage:

> and like all the days of final desperation, ours arrived, no more wine, no more luck, no more anything. . . . I decided to set the alarm clock . . . but even the clock didn't work right. . . . the shorter the spring is, the faster the minute and hour hands go around. It was some crazy clock, I'll tell you, and when we were worn out with fucking to stop from worrying we used to watch that clock and try to tell what time it **really** was. you could see that minute hand moving--we used to laugh at it. (Erections 59)

Bukowski's humor is designed to accentuate the brutality of certain situations, characters, and points of view and is, therefore, frequently injected into the dialogue or narrative in order to break up the rhythmic flow, the continuity of the emotion, characterizations, and episodes. While at times, the laughter is cataclysmic in intensity, in certain stories

it erupts like a volcano, increasing discordant relationships and furthering torment. As his own principal character, he finds himself stifling screams of terror with paroxysms of laughter.

Frequently, Bukowski's laughter is hysterical, springing directly from the unconscious as a reaction to a gruesome event. For example, a description of the events after a boxing match elicit gut-wrenching laughter:

> it was funny and poor Watson laying somewhere, his face slugged and pulpy, facing the Eternal Truth, facing the six rounders, the four rounders, then back to the factory with me, murdering eight or ten hours a day for pennies, getting nowhere, waiting on Papa Death, getting your mind kicked to hell and your spirit kicked to hell, we sneezed, . . . "you're blue all over, you've turned all BLUE! jesus look at yourself in the mirror!" and I was freezing and dying and I stood in front of the mirror and I was all BLUE! ridiculous! a skull and shit of bones! I began to laugh, I laughed so hard I fell down on the rug and she fell down on top of me and we both laughed laughed laughed, jesus christ we both laughed until I thought we were crazy . . . (Notes 48)

Discordant laughter also frequently represents the protagonist's inability to adapt to certain circumstances, such as when a cannibal brought to America by a love-sick writer, Miss Hester Adams, describes his new existence to a couple of magazine reporters:

> "Fuck, fuck fuck," he said, "that's all she want. She make me mad."
>
> "You miss the jungle, Maja?"
>
> "You just ain't just shittin' upstream, daddy."
>
> "But she loves you, Maja."
>
> "Ha, ha, ha!" (South 52)

The final joke in the story "Maja Thurup" is played out when the magazine photographer goes into the kitchen to retrieve a beer and finds a new item has been added to the refrigerator, the remains of Hester Adams. As in many other stories, the humor becomes macabre and bitter.

Bukowski's humor is cruelly satirical, and he can be ranked with the best of the modern satirists. For Bukowski, satire is an instrument of aggressiveness; it is used for insult and vituperation. Tone becomes extremely bold and the mood combatively abusive. He develops characters whose laughter is used to inflict pain by confronting man's weaknesses and his tragic side. In a sexual liason with a three-hundred pound whore, Bukowski continually laughs at her and derisively mocks her weight:

> I sat next to her, pressed next to her,sniffing and laughing and goading.
>
> "baby, baby, I could reach you with something that could make you cry instead of laugh!"
>
> "ah hahahahaha, ha" she said. (Notes 186)

But the final wicked laugh is on Bukowski, when the maid and the landlady replace Bukowski's broken bed, the bed broken because of the arduous and climactic tryste:

> I went down to the bathroom and had a good slow but steady beer--vodka--wine--whiskey shit. What a stink! I flushed it away and walked back toward my room. as I got near, I heard a final pounding then my landlady began to laugh and then they were both laughing together. then I walked in. their laughter stopped. (Notes 191)

Dr. Samuel Johnson denigrated satire as a technique because he found it cruel and feared its consequences, "Abuse is not so dangerous when there is no vehicle or wit or delicacy, nor subtle conveyance" (qtd. in Elliot 264). Bukowski, however, feels no compunction and even seems to enjoy this form of derision. As Rich Mangelsdorff states in "A Bukowski Sampler," "With Bukowski, the first thing you sensed was the bold initial gesture of his wading right into the bullshit; knee-deep, chest-deep, however thick the going got" (10). A master satirist, a fine humorist of the

"blackest" type, Bukowski uses his wit to express his vindictive and vitriolic contempt for humanity. For example, in "Dr. Nazi" Bukowski uses the usual long line at a grocery store as a metaphor for modern man's plight:

> I hated lines. I felt there should be a way to avoid them. Then the answer came to me. Have more **clerks.** Yes, that was the answer. Two clerks for every person. **Three** clerks. Let the clerks stand in line.
>
> I knew that the lines were killing me. I couldn't accept them, but everybody else did. Everybody else was normal. Life was beautiful for them. They could stand in line without feeling pain. . . . And I had to look at their ears and mouths and necks and legs and asses and nostrils, all that. I could feel death-rays oozing from their bodies like smog, and listening to their conversations I felt like screaming **"Jesus Christ, somebody help me! Do I have to suffer like this just to buy a pound of hamburger and a loaf of rye bread?"** (South 95)

Like Charles Chaplin, Bukowski ceaselessly creates his own image of the little man lost in the city jungle, surviving only by his ingenuity. Chaplin in Modern Times (1936) satirizes machine technology and mass production's

effects on the individual. This memorable beginning of the movie uses a basic device of satire, the juxtaposition of opposites as similar images. Sheep are led down a gangway, and then the camera cuts to workers entering a factory. The machines take over, and Charles "goes beserk while toiling on an assembly line. In a demented ballet, he whirls and twirls like a loon around the gears and levers of an enormous factory generator" (Giannetti 290). Bukowski produces the same effect in "Kid Stardust on the Porterhouse." When told to "process" dead steers at a meat packing plant, Kid Stardust must be able to hang a steer properly on a hook. The image is one of the Kid dancing with a huge carcass.

> they've just killed it, I thought, they've killed the damn thing. How can they tell a man from a steer? how do they know that I am not a steer?
>
> ALL RIGHT--SWING IT!
>
> swing it?
>
> that's right--DANCE WITH IT!. . .
>
> they put me under the next steer.
>
> ONE.
>
> TWO.
>
> THREE. (Erections 11)

Stardust finally admits defeat. His efforts are as useless as Chaplin's when faced with the odds of a system meant to

conquer and vanquish the strongest of men. Stardust's defeat is one of the many attached to the Bukowski persona:

> out of the shame of defeat in American schoolyards as a boy I knew that I must not drop the steer to the ground because this would show that I was a coward and not a man and that I didn't therefore deserve much, just sneers and laughs and beatings, you had to be a winner in America, there wasn't any way out, and you had to learn to fight for nothing, don't question, and besides if I dropped the steer I might have to pick it up. (Erections 12)

Both Chaplin's and Bukowski's despairingly funny scenes make a noble protest against dehumanization. Finally, Bukowski battles the inherent evil within the American system and walks away to do battle another day in another culture: "I walked out. I walked across the street to a Mexican bar and drank a beer and then got a bus to my place. the American schoolyard had beat me again" (Erections 14).

Bukowski is beaten by America, the land of the dollar, of sanitation, disinfectants, machines, factories; he encapsulates the whole country into the microcosm of Los Angeles. Los Angeles is an alienating, mindless place, that drives its inhabitants to despair, drugs, divorce, and violence. As Tony Quagliano states in the essay "The Natural Shape of the Loner," Los Angeles "is merely, in its tasteless

and quiet way, the city that all America is in danger of becoming" (5).

To attack Los Angeles is to participate in a debate over the direction of American culture, to objectify nightmares of chaos and collapse. Frank Lloyd Wright in The Living City (1958) compares cities in the past with the modern city: "the city then was not malignant. . . . To look at the cross-section of any plan of a big city (today) is to look at the section of a fibrous tumor" (qtd. in Sontag 1: 74). Bukowski also sees the city as a malignancy:

> Death and rot was everywhere. It was Los Angeles, near 7th and Broadway, the intersection where the dead snubbed the dead and didn't even know why. It was a taught [sic] game like jumprope or dissecting frogs or pissing in the mailbox or jacking off your pet dog. (Erections 56)

The city streets of America do not look very good to Bukowski; they fit within "a structure planned by rats and men and you had to live within it and die within it" (Notes 206).

Bukowski, the artist, depicts the savage destruction taking place within Los Angeles. As the last continental frontier, California has long been glorified as the land of opportunity in the national consciousness. Bukowski satirizes, within the Los Angeles setting, not only American

popular culture, but also the patterns that American scholars and artists have found central to the American Experience: manifest destiny, the frontier, the Garden of Eden. Ernest Fontant in a critical essay "Bukowski's Ham on Rye and the Los Angeles Novel" states that

> for Bukowski, Los Angeles is a given; it is the ordinary world that assaults one's freedom; it is the unexotic world of working-class deprivation or the stark marginality of the unemployed, . . . Bukowski takes us to the skin of Southern California; we see the skin of his society close-up like tiny Gulliver's unflattering microscopic vision of the skin of the Brobdingnagian maidens. (6)

The grotesqueness of Los Angeles has provided this epidermal vision. Los Angeles emerges as a definitive emblem of false promise and venality that underscores its ironic plight as the Fallen Garden. Walking along the city street, Bukowski visualizes the inherent wrongness of American society:

> stones, walls, wind. my pecker and balls dangling without feeling. I could scream out anything in the street and nobody would hear, nobody would care a tit. not that they should. I wasn't asking for love. but something was very odd. . . . I noticed

> for the first time that everything OWNED BY ANYBODY had a LOCK on it. everything was locked. a lesson for thieves and madmen, America the beautiful. (Notes 144)

Neither Los Angeles nor America represent an idyllic haven for the poor and the oppressed.

The national myths, the media output, the social indoctrination and other societal controls have ceased functioning for survivors in Bukowski's fiction. The chaotic state of affairs that Bukowski sees all about him in the course of his perignations may be viewed as both external or gratuitous events and as manifestations of his dismal and disquieting inner world. Sometimes he is so entrenched in his own concerns and fears that he is quite incapable of relating to other people in a serious manner. Even the prospect of a relationship with a women becomes an improbable task. He cannot experience love based on altruism and affection. Bukowski's women are "wholly mechanical and one-dimensioned; exploitable objects of a very elemental and ultimately destructive male drive which sees all too many things in terms of its own satisfaction" (Fulton 31). Women, for the most part, are objects--grasping, possessive, lustful types for whom Bukowski feels nothing except the most superficial attraction, which usually ends in disgust.

Bukowski freely admits to this interpretation regarding his chauvinistic attitude in his earlier stories:

> I've been accused of hating women but it's not true at all. It's just that most of the women I ran into for a long time weren't exactly prizes. I'd sleep with 'em and when I woke up, they'd be gone with my money. If a man goes into a whorehouse, he's gonna get a whore, that's all there is to it. (Esterly 34)

The women peopling Bukowski's stories, as perceived by Bukowski, are mere functions. They are, for the most part, extremely sensual, aggressive, ruthless, cruel and stupid. Strictly biological in their outlook, they possess little to admire. Both the sexual and animal sides of women are revealed, and Bukowski projects horror and attraction to their powerful display of animalism. The women are usually prostitutes or whores. Yet, Bukowski refuses to condemn his women for sexual transgressions, for to condemn them he must condemn himself. His relationship to them only increases his solitude and despair, making his loneliness even more painful:

> she walked out of the bedroom. I let them go; they let me go. everything is horrible really, and I add to it. they will never let us sleep until we are dead and then they will think up another trick.

> balls, yes, I almost cried, but then oriented by centuries, Christ's fuck-up, every sad and ripping thing, stupid, I leaped up and checked my only unripped pants. . . . I checked for $$$$$ and finding $7, I figured I had not been robbed. and giving a little ashamed smile in the mirror, I fell back upon the x-love bed and . . . slept. (Dirty 129)

Because Bukowski rejects so much of what belongs to humanity, because he cannot bear life going on around him, he frequently seeks to extricate himself from his anguish by one escape mechanism or another.

Religion, one possible escape hatch, does not offer him the solace he craves. On the contrary, according to Bukowski,

> 2,000 years of Christianity and what do you end up with? squad-car radios trying to hold rotting shit together, and what else? tons of wars, little air raids, muggers in streets, knifings, so many insane that you just forget it, you just let them run the streets in policeman's uniforms or out of them. (Erections 204)

The church, Bukowski maintains, is a hand tool of the politicians. In the past, heretics were burned at the stake for political, economic, and philosophical reasons. Today,

heretics rot in jail. For Bukowski, only the banners change; there are no good governments--only bad and worse. In the story "Politics is Like Trying to Screw a Cat in the Ass," he distinguishes the difference between a democracy and a dictatorship in that "a Democracy you vote first and take orders later; in a Dictatorship you don't have to waste your time voting" (Erections 176). If there is to be any escape from the ruling institutions and the inevitable nuclear catastrophe that threatens all of humanity, Bukowski offers only a small hope in man's rational capabilities:

> it's Man against govt. it's Man who can no longer quite be fooled by a white Christmas with a Bing Crosby voice and dyed Easter eggs that must be hidden from kids who must WORK TO FIND THEM. of future presidents of America whose faces on TV screens must make you run to the bathroom and puke. . . . we can kill them by simply becoming more real and more human and voting out the shits. (Notes 84)

Nor does sex offer Bukowski's character an adequate escape route. He sees nothing liberating in the sexual act, which affords only momentary release from anxiety. His faith in the power of love as a value is absent, for devotion to another person or persons makes the self vulnerable, susceptible to frustration and grotesqueness. He has

difficulty relating to people, and his capacity for lengthy rapport with others is virtually nil. Coupling is at random, and sex is mechanistic except at rare moments when the male character's ego is too battered to do anything other than give in to the mothering impulse of the occasional sympathetic female. He is unable to experience a warm relationship with a woman. When he speaks to her, there is an indication of hesitancy for any kind of commitment. He has already prejudged females as mere sexual objects and avoids any other form of companionship other than the sexual. When he does speak, the women is usually revolted by the disgusting things that are voiced:

> "baby, what's this?" I showed her the (divorce) paper. "don't you love me, baby?"
>
> she began to cry. she cried and cried and cried.
>
> "there, there, don't you worry, maybe Purple Stickpin will be the guy. I don't think he jacks off in the closet. he might well be the one."
>
> "ooooooh, ooooooh, ooooooh."
>
> "he probably jacks off in the bathtub."
>
> "oh, you rotten shit!" (Dirty 160)

In the same story from Notes of a Dirty Old Man this woman compares Bukowski to a "soiled beast creature" (174). No communication exists and no relationships last.

Insanity offers Bukowski's character a mode of escape. The fact that Bukowski considers himself a "soiled beast creature," an insane figure estranged in an even crazier world, raises the question of what "insanity" means. His characters consider where one draws the line between rational and irrational views, normal and quixotic behavior. One of the characters ponders the question and answers it as follows:

> what is madness?
> madness is ugliness
> what is ugly?
> to each man, something different.
> does ugliness belong?
> it's there. (Dirty 223)

Bukowski's characters are questionably insane observers, forever on the outside looking in. They spend many of their moments condemning everything in sight:

> . . . the foreman's insane face, the landlord's hand, the lover's dead sex; taxation, cancer, the blues; clothes that fall apart on a 3rd wearing, water that tastes like piss, doctors that run assembly-line and indecent offices, hospitals without the heart, politicians with skulls filled with puss . . . we can go on and on but would only be accused of being bitter and demented, but the

> world makes madmen (and women) of us all, and even the saints are demented, nothing is saved. (Notes 50)

The condemnation is unquestionably misanthropic in vision, and like Swift, Bukowski uses grotesque detail and scatological imagery to reinforce the persona of "soiled beast creature."

Bukowski's literature is primitive, and his deliberately disorderly syntax is utterly distinctive in its postmodern simplicity. There seems to be an influence of Rabelais and Swift in the tone of raucous vulgarity that pervades his writing, though a common interest in the grotesque and scatological hardly proves a definite influence. Perhaps, Bukowski's literature is simply anomalous. In the continuum of literary history, his literature suddenly appears out of the elements of his own uniquely slanted mind. His protest against the human condition is primitive and untutored, but the various scatological references and abundant grotesque images represent rebellion on its most instinctive and elementary level--the level of a child's refusal to bow to bathroom training. In order to show man's subjection to the hostile power of the world, Bukowski presents the continuing efforts of a grotesquely bloated and drunken human figure who breaks wind in the face of adversity. His characters are striking back at the television mentality, the mass

vegetation of the mind, soul, and heart. In a Time magazine article, Henry Miller observes that

> We are now passing through a period of what might be called 'cosmic insensitivity,' a period when God seems more than ever absent from the world and man is doomed to come face to face with the fate he has created for himself. ("New Porno" 28)

It is against this "cosmic insensitivity" that Bukowski's characters battle, and it is with full realization of the impending confrontation of his own fate that the Bukowski hero strives to make sense out of a senseless time.

CHAPTER III

THE GROTESQUE TRADITION

> "dog follows dog to estuary,
> the trumpets bring on gallows
> as small men rant at things
> they cannot do."
>
> --Bukowski in "A Poem is a City"

Any examination of the short stories of Charles Bukowski must begin with the identification of his characters as grotesques; they search endlessly for a way to exist within a society that shapes them into grotesque victims of their own dilemma. Bukowski's characters often appear obscene and ridiculous; they should because they are trying to find a way of living in an America whose ubiquitous and contradictory forces have made it an obscene and ridiculous place to live. As such, these grotesques become candidates for cultural heroes. As Ihab Hassan states:

> The contemporary hero . . . a grotesque effigy to the rule of chaos . . . still placates darkness with the light of human agony or human derision. Clowning his way to anarchy or immolation, his design is still to create a unity none can attain save in the momentary repose of artifice. (114)

In order to facilitate the rendering of Bukowski's characters as grotesque heroes, a serious consideration of the grotesque tradition must be made. Then, specific examples of the grotesque will be viewed in the short stories of Charles Bukowski.

Grotesque is a term that, in itself, is both slippery and difficult to define. This problem stems primarily from its valuative nature. As with beauty, it is often in the eye of the beholder. The most familiar definition of the grotesque refers to painting. As the OED states, it is

> . . . a kind of decorative painting or sculpture, consisting of portions of human and animal forms, fantastically combined and interwoven with foliage and flowers. (1214)

As to the literary grotesque, the OED specifies that it is

> . . . in popular language, figures or designs characterized by comic distortion or exaggeration. . . . In a wider sense, of designs or forms: characterized by distortion or unnatural combinations; fantastically extravagent; bizzare, quaint. (1214)

Perhaps the most useful and workable definition, which embodies both the subjective and the intentional natures of the term, is Carl Skrade's in God and the Grotesque:

> I define the grotesque according to the common usage of that term in literary and artistic criticism; i.e., the grotesque is that which deviates from the conventional and the normal, that which is incongruous with that deemed real according to consensual validation. (qtd. in O'Connor 4)

Obviously implicit in the term grotesque is a sense of the norm, for the norm informs the grotesque. Precisely at the point of departure from perceived reality, the grotesque is encountered; one more step leads to the absurd, and a final step leads to meaninglessness. The grotesque garners its powerful ability to affect the reader directly from its nearness to reality, not from its departure from it. For example, because Frankenstein's monster is so nearly human, yet at the same time a grotesque distortion of a human being, it is both frightening and pathetic.

The grotesque requires an emotional participation by the reader to have its effect. The reader especially must be able to enter the strange, unreal world of the story, in order to involve himself in a "willing suspension of disbelief," while at the same time casting an eye toward the referents of reality that allows that suspension. As well, the grotesque by its very nature may demand an emotional disassociation in the reader that calls for fear or terror of

the almost known, the not quite supernatural, or humor at the ludicrous risibility of a striking image or story that juxtaposes emotions or events that could almost be true:

> then Tanya put both her hands around Mike's cock.
>
> he moaned in glory.
>
> then she ripped the whole cock right out of and off his body. threw it to the side.
>
> I say the thing roll along the rug like an insane sausage, dribbling little sad trailets of blood. it rolled up against a wall. then stayed there like something with a head but no legs and no place to go . . . which was true enough.
> (Erections 42-43)

The grotesque is a large and clear subdivision of fantasy in literature. Not all works of fantasy are grotesque, but certainly all works which employ the grotesque are fantasies. As mentioned earlier, a departure from the norm of perceived reality commonly leads to the grotesque, and since most of the world's great works of literature are not scrupulously realistic, are in fact, clearly fantasies, the grotesque has been used as a technique quite frequently. Modern literature is preoccupied with the irrational, the unpredictable, and the bizzare. John Addington Symonds in "Caricature, The Fantastic, The Grotesque" views the

grotesque as modern writers do. "Nowhere," he says, "is there an abrupt chasm in man's sentient being. Touch, taste, smell, sex" (Essays 164-165) all run together. A litany of modern writers employing the grotesque--with such names as Harold Pinter, Samuel Beckett, William S. Burroughs, John Barth, and Thomas Pynchon--will attest to its present day popularity, but it is evident that the grotesque began earlier, even in classical literature. There is a similarity between the following passage by Homer and the previous one by Charles Bukowski:

> . . . he tore them to pieces to make his meal, which he devoured like a mountain lion, never pausing till entrails and flesh, marrow and bones, were all consumed, while we could do nothing but weep and lift up our hands to Zeus in horror at the ghastly sight, paralysed by our sense of utter helplessness. When the Cyclops had filled his great belly with this meal of human flesh, which he washed down with unwatered milk, he stretched himself out for sleep among his flocks inside the cave. (Homer 147)

In summary, in relation to literature, the term grotesque refers to

1. a frequently subjective value judgment concerning the unnatural and bizarre deviation from consensual norms of style,
2. a technique whose power to affect comes from its nearness to reality,
3. a method which relies on a minute deviation from reality and from expectation,
4. a requirement that a reader interact emotionally with the form to the expression of terror or humor,
5. and, finally, a form of fantasy, a tool used from the earliest writers of Western civilization to our own day.

With these definitions, an exploration of Bukowski's intellectual position and his own use of the grotesque may be further examined. The grotesque image is integral to Bukowski's major works, particularly his short stories. A typology of specific grotesque images will prove useful for considerations of both Bukowski's views and his purposes. Part IV of this study will be devoted to a definition of Bukowski's forms or types of grotesque images and the delineation of thematic content and use.

CHAPTER IV

GROTESQUE IMAGES OF THE BODY

> "I cannot but conclude the Bulk of your Natives, to be the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth."
>
> --Jonathan Swift in Gulliver's Travels

The grotesque image in its literal form most often conjures up an earthiness and a physicality beyond the bounds of the norm. In Bukowski's writing, the physical images of man are most striking and memorable. Just as one finds it uncomfortable to look on a severely handicapped person whom one doesn't know, one also finds it disconcerting to view a flawed replica of man. Each of the following types of the specific grotesque represents Bukowski's amplification of flaws or his dwelling on the more unflattering aspects of what being physically human means.

Afflicted with disfiguring acne and boils during adolescence, Bukowski understood at an early age what the words "social pariah" and "monster" signified. Like Swift's Yahoo, Bukowski was regarded as a creature so deformed as to be repellent to his own species:

> I was covered with boils the size of small apples. It was ridiculous and unbelievable. Worst case I

> ever saw, said one of the docs, and he was old. They'd gather around me like some freak. I was a freak. I'm still a freak. I rode the streetcar back and forth to the charity ward. Children on streetcars would stare and ask their mothers, "What's wrong with that man? Mother, what's wrong with that man's face?" (South 169)

The outside world defines Bukowski's difference from "normal" members of society; his manformation is an assault against the standard of proper physical appearance. The image of Frankenstein is analogous to Bukowski's plight:

> And what was I? Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant; . . . I was, besides, endued with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; I was not even of the same nature as man. . . . Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned? (Shelly 149)

Fear of intermingling and responding as a human in human relationshs gives him the feeling of being abnormal; he is something that makes people shudder. The aversion and withdrawal is a result of social condemnation of the grotesque that is seen as offensive and uncivilized. Bukowski and Frankenstein have two choices, either hide from

the world or stand up to the world. Bukowski initially chooses to hide:

> But I can't help thinking of the years in lonely rooms when the only people who knocked were the landladies asking for back rent, or the F.B.I. I lived with rats and mice and wine and my blood crawled the walls in a world I couldn't understand and still can't. Rather than live their life, I starved; I ran inside my own mind and hid. . . . I went for years without women, I lived on peanut butter and stale bread and boiled potatoes. I was the fool, the dolt, the idiot. I wanted to write but the typer was always in hock. I gave it up and drank. . . . (South 129)

Later, Bukowski chose to assert himself both physically and literarily against the world. In his writing he chooses to attack what most people would take to be normal and present it as monstrous. People are presented as sexually abnormal, demented, or eccentric. His world is portrayed as decayed, and everything in it moves at a lethargic pace.

The monstrous in a purely physical sense is a key component in Bukowski's short stories. His prose focuses on the grotesque disparities between himself and the world. The monstrous in itself serves to alienate the reader by presenting him with man viewed as gigantic or in the face of

the gigantic. The term "monstrous" refers primarily to size, but it includes a connotation of wrongness; in other words, monstrous might be defined as being out of proportion, being larger than is normal for whatever frame of reference. In the land of the Brobdingnagians, Gulliver comments on proportion:

> For as human Creatures are observed to be more Savage and cruel in Proportion to their bulk; what could I expect but to be a Morsel in the Mouth of the first among these enormous Barbarians who should happen to seize me? Undoubtedly Philosophers are in the right when they tell us, that nothing is great or little than by Comparison. (Swift 66)

Bukoswki describes a similar misproportion in "Six Inches." Goaded by an oppressive girlfriend, the main character is forced to lose an inordinate amount of weight and height, until he is only six inches long and can be used by Sarah for sexual gratification. The image of his repetitive voyage through Sarah's monstrous vagina is truly grotesque. The only opportunity to expunge the beast-creature meets with success:

> Then she kissed me with those horrible red and painted lips. I vomited. Then, spent in a swoon of wine and passion, she placed me between her

> breasts. I rested there and listened to her heart beat. . . . The heart of the witch. If I were the answer to the Population Explosion then why hadn't she used me as more than a thing of entertainment, a sexual toy? . . . Then I glanced up. Do you know what I saw? . . . A hat pin. . . . I lifted the pin and plunged it in. Just below the birthmark. (Erections 31-32)

Bukowski includes dwarfs, giants or other freaks of nature in his writings to indicate some kind of imbalance or lacuna within a human being and to illustrate certain inner motivations that may otherwise be invisible to the naked eye.

Finally, a comparison between Swift and Bukowski may be elicited by the exaggerated piling up of peculiarities. Compounded by accretion, the formulaic exaggeration becomes monstrously grotesque. In Gulliver's Travels, it is the vices and follies of the **Yahoo**-kind that are represented:

> I am not in the least provoked at the Sight of a Lawyer, a Pick-pocket, a Colonel, a Fool, a Lord, a Gamester, a Politician, a Whoremonger, a Physician, an Evidence, a Suborner, an Attorney, a Traytor, or the like: This is all according to the due Course of Things: But, when I behold a Lump of Deformity, and diseases both in the Body and Mind, smitten with **Pride**, it immediately breaks all the Measures

> of my Patience; neither shall I be ever able to comprehend how such an Animal and such a Vice could tally together. (Swift 260)

In Notes of a Dirty Old Man, it is the garbage-riddled world of man that is portrayed:

> I fell on down in that alley full of used rubbers, shreds of old newspapers, lost washers, nails, matchsticks, matchbooks, dried worms, I fell down in that alley of clammy blow jobs and sadistic wet shadows, of starving cats, prowlers, fags--it came to me then--the luck and the way was mine:
>
> the meek shall inherit the earth. (213)

In both the eighteenth and twentieth century, the trouble with society is that it consists of human beings. Both the Yahoos and Bukowski represent the lower half of the human personality; they are both imbedded in a state of conspicuous vileness:

> Harry walked into the bathroom and looked at his face in the mirror. My god, he had a kind face. Couldn't they see that? Understanding. Nobility. He spotted a blackhead in near his nose. He squeezed. Out it came, black and lovely, dragging a yellow tail of pus. The breakthrough, he thought, is in understanding women and love. He rolled the blackhead and the pus between his

> fingers. Or maybe the breakthrough was the ability to kill without caring. He sat down to take a shit while he thought it over. (Hot 171)

For Bukowski the scatological facts remain, and the misanthropic element is upheld.

The grotesque physique and the abnormal symbolize human estrangement. Physical freaks and psychological misfits are almost unavoidably socially suspect and, therefore, isolated. As Leslie Fiedler notes, "The characters are 'true' not in their own right but as they symbolize in outward terms an inward reality" (141). The monstrous image projects an inner loneliness but also reflects a modern world as twisted and as deformed as the body of a freak or the mind of a lunatic.

Physical deterioration as a result of sickness is also tremendously disturbing for Bukowski and becomes a visible expression of man's animal nature. Images of disease and illness run throughout Bukowski's stories; they are some of his most prevalent grotesque symbols. In his own words,

> I had been bothered with hemorrhoids, for 15 or 20 years; also perforated ulcers, bad liver, boils, anxiety--neurosis, various types of insanity, but you go on with things and just hope that everything doesn't fall apart at once. (South 153)

Most of his complaints are naturally aggravated by his preoccupation with the liquor bottle. It is interesting to

note, however, that three illnesses occur frequently in his literature: boils, ulcers, and hemorrhoids. His boils contribute to his malformation, but both boils and ulcers denote a festering and corruption beneath human flesh. According to Susan Sontag in Illness as Metaphor,

> The disease itself becomes a metaphor, then, in the name of the disease (that is, using it as a metaphor), that horror is imposed on other things. The disease becomes adjectival. Something is said to be disease--like, meaning that it is disgusting or ugly. . . . feelings about evil are projected onto a disease. And the disease (so enriched with meanings) is projected onto the world. (58)

Bukowski's childhood experiences with boils disfigured his face and psychologically branded him as an "open sore" by an indifferent society. Also, his ulcerous condition expressly fits his character's symbolic representation as a "sore" on the body of society.

Hemorrhoids provide the Bukowski characters with another outlet for scatological imagery and for social commentary. In "Cold Night," Leslie, the typical Bukowski prototype, returns home after slitting a man's throat in East Hollywood:

> Leslie finished the scotch, pulled his pants down and scratched his ass, digging his fingers in. People who cured their hemorrhoids were fools.

> When there wasn't anybody else around it beat being alone. (Hot 187)

In this instance, Bukowski presents a man who, while remaining a primitive scapegoat, sees the world as sinning but sees himself afflicted only with physical, nor moral ills. As a result, he is not able to transcend his condition, and as narrator he remains essentially a man curiously incapable of introspection. For Leslie, the act of rectum scratching is more rewarding and significant than the life of a fellow human being. The death of a man is negated and ignored, and in this case, the abnormality is a source of both the comic and the disgusting or fearful.

Another aspect of illness is the portrayal of men and women in varying degrees of madness. Madness according to Bukowski, does not imply permanent insanity; instead, it is something bred into the individual by a sick society. The flaws of the social order become internalized in its members; they appear as outcasts of society and seem unable to cope with life. In the asylum or hospital, the Bukowski character is in a wasteland, running in no real direction and never quite sure what he is running from.

In Bukowski's short stories the criminal, the con-man, and the madman, that small percentage of individuals which society has branded as "abnormal," occupy an important place in society. They are anti-heroes, men on the fringe of

society who are exploited and used for the advantage of the group, and it is this point of view that gives Bukowski's fiction its substance. According to Ihab Hassan,

> In fiction, the unnerving rubric "anti-hero" refers to a ragged assembly of victims: the fool, the clown, the hipster, the criminal, the poor sod, the freak, the outsider, the scapegoat, the scrubby opportunist, the rebel without a cause, the "hero" in the ashcan and "hero" on the leash. If the antihero seems nowadays to hold us in his spell, it is because the deep and disquieting insights revealed to us by modern literature often require that we project ourselves into the predicament of victims. (21)

Hassan's observation about the "insight" of the man who is victimized by society suggests the paradox of the two opposite but prevailing attitudes about madness--the madman as genius and the madman as scapegoat. The madman is associated with the imagination, inspiration, and insight of the artist; and on the other hand, the madman, like the criminal, the drunk, and the weakling, has been branded as a social outcast and a scapegoat for a self-righteous society.

Bukowski's characters exhibit both forms of madness, but the irony of their situation is that although they describe their condition and explain the causes for their insanity,

they never offer solutions to their problems. They point to the absurdity of the contemporary scene but recreate this absurdity in a confusing, disjointed view of reality as they escape the madness of their time and become engulfed in the darkness of their own personal schizophrenia:

> Like anybody can tell you, I am not a very nice man. I don't know the word. I have always admired the villain, the outlaw, the son of a bitch. I don't like the clean-shaven boy with the necktie and the good job. I like desperate men with broken teeth and broken minds and broken ways. They interest me. They are full of surprises and explosions. . . . I'm more interested in perverts than in saints. I can relax with bums because I am a bum. I don't like laws, morals, religions, rules. I don't like to be shaped by society. (South 119)

The Bukowski character comes to represent the contemporary man who rejects the insanity of modern life and at the same time captures the texture of this experience. Madness adds a twist to the problem of reliability because all the facts and the fantasies that make up Bukowski's stories have been filtered through an on-again, off-again madman. Out of touch with the mainstream of American life, handcuffed by his

chronic alcoholism, the protagonist may be just verbalizing the personal, tortured despair of one American failure.

The point of view of the madman, who lives at the edge of society and reality, creates a sense of life more vital and meaningful than the factual reality of the same member of society. The vision of failure, although tragic and depressing, is for Bukowski's characters and many others, the only reality that American life offers. Their withdrawal from society is a reaction to an environment that lacks the necessary elements that will foster their growth and development as human beings, an environment that very often is hostile and threatening to their very existence. Since the narrator can only point to the conditions of contemporary society, he is a grotesque victim both of the system, which causes him to withdraw from the world, and of his own madness, which shuts off personal contact, trapping him within his own fantasies:

> "it's so hot, I think I'm going crazy," he said.
>
> "the heat just makes you realize your true self," I told Tony.
>
> "wait a minute! you calling me a nut?"
>
> . . . "look," said Tony, "how do you know I'm nuts? how do we get away with it?"
>
> "well, since we are all insane there are only a few to control us, far too few, so they just let us

> run insane, for a while I thought they might find some place to live in outer space while they destroyed us. but now I know that the insane control space also."
>
> "how do you know?"
>
> "because they planted an American flag on the moon."
>
> "suppose the Russians had planted a Russian flag on the moon?"
>
> "same thing," I said.
>
> "then you're impartial?" Tony asked.
>
> "I am impartial to all degrees of madness."
>
> (Erections 36-37)

The narrator dwells on unknown forces, nightmares, and irrational phobias that he embodies in concrete forms in order to smoke out the devils that beset his mind.

In the asylum or in the hospital, the Bukowski character describes the modern condition, creating a world that is fantastic, yet familiar. It is a world that constantly draws attention to its contrived form because the narrator cannot distinguish life from illusion, fact from fiction. Insanity, as a point of view or a metaphor for the static condition of contemporary man, is a narrative technique that allows Bukowski to describe modern life in America. Insanity begins where life ends; madness and the creation of literature or

the interpretation of literature are mutually exclusive elements. Michael Foucault elaborates on this in his discussion of the artist in Madness and Civilization:

> A work of art opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without an answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself. . . . There is no madness except as the final instant of the work of art--the work endlessly drives madness to its limits; where there is a work of art, there is no madness. (288-289)

Beyond madness one can neither interpret nor create art, but because madness is contemporary with life, one element in the spectrum of human experience, it justly is the subject of Bukowski's art.

CHAPTER V

SCATOLOGY

"I will make their places of joy and love excrementitious."
--William Blake, Jerusalem

In regards to human privacy, there is not one act more private than that of elimination. Most men or women would rather talk at length about their sex lives than discuss with any candor their bowel movements. This taboo has existed tacitly throughout written history, for it is a topic absent from most literature. Other than eating and sleeping, humans engage in no other physical act more frequently than defecation, and yet, inhibitions against the subject run deep. Although twentieth-century writers are terribly preoccupied with the irrational, the unpredictable, and the bizarre, Bukowski is still well beyond the contemporary bound of propriety in using such unacceptable grotesque imagery as the scatological. Much like Jonathan Swift and Tobias Smollot, Bukowski frequently uses the scatological technique; all three writers use significant scatological detail in satirizing that which is human in mankind.

Reduction to flesh is one major rhetorical maneuver of satire. A history of satire shows that scatological

reductionism is one of its most frequent techniques. Geoffrey Chaucer laughs at the libidinous misadventures of the human race, Francois Rabelais talks of dung and codpieces, and Tobias Smollet describes the nacreous smells of chamber pots and human evacuation. The pervasiveness of the scatological in Bukowski's writing should be considered in the light of a statement made by Jae Num Lee in _Swift and Scatological Satire_, a key source for scatological investigation:

> The notoriety connected with Swift's scatological writings, I believe, stems from the reader's failure to appreciate the moral and humanistic character of his scatology, in particular his scatological humor, in which he may seem to invite only laughter at the expense of our anality. Often Swift not only provokes our boisterous laughter, but also forces our acceptance of the truth of our animal nature so that we may not be ashamed of our true selves, including our inescapable anality. In this respect Swift is a true humanist who attempts to free us from our prejudices and the futile denial of our basic nature; the more heartily we can laugh by means of scatological humor, the more completely we accept ourselves as human beings. (121-122)

Psychologically, the treatment of obscene material, an obsession with bodily functions such as vomiting and defecation, very often indicate a preoccupation with the physical organism and an inability to see beyond it--a kind of narcissism. Bukowski's vision, however, is not so nearsighted. Bukowski has a pessimistic vision of the world; he feels that the forces of the universe are working against man and that man's efforts to contend with them will always lead to absurdity. The helplessness of the situation leads Bukowski to the use of irony and humor in pursuit of a detachment from all the chaos around him. His preoccupation with the fecal permits him to fill the void, so to speak, which is his life by looking at everything he eliminates as a creative act and also as a means of hurling his hatred at society. William Packard, one of Bukowski's major critics, states that

> Bukowski's persona hits close to home for us. Our own animal manners are too repulsive to us in our own solitude. Bukowski owns up to them, all the farts and pimples. . . . Bukowski is so obsessed with immediate reality that he can't seem to get very far away from the body functions, shitting and fucking and sucking cocks and digging for cunts. Bukowski has called himself "a dirty old man"

> because he chooses to explore these immediate experiences. (12)

Defecating and copulating are things people do, and Bukowski faces these functions because they constitute life as he knows it. He speaks with a realness that has categorized him as "king of the meat and cement poets" by several editors of the small press. Bukowski's writing is relentlessly representative of the world around him. In two separate scenes, one from his novel, Post Office, and another in a short story from Notes of a Dirty Old Man, he posits a rational justification for the scatological image. In Post Office, Henry Chinaski has prepared fried snails for his girlfriend, and she finds the meal repulsive:

> "They all have tiny **assholes**! It's horrible! Horrible!"
>
> "What's horrible about assholes, baby?"
>
> She held a napkin to her mouth. Got up and ran to the bathroom. She began vomiting. I hollered in from the kitchen:
>
> "WHAT'S WRONG WITH ASSHOLES, BABY? YOU'VE GOT AN ASSHOLE, I'VE GOT AN ASSHOLE! YOU GO TO THE STORE AND BUY A PORTERHOUSE STEAK, THAT HAD AN ASSHOLE! ASSHOLES COVER THE EARTH! IN A WAY TREES HAVE ASSHOLES BUT YOU CAN'T FIND THEM, THEY JUST DROP THEIR LEAVES. YOUR ASSHOLE, MY ASSHOLE, THE

> WORLD IS FULL OF BILLIONS OF ASSHOLES, THE PRESIDENT HAS AN ASSHOLE, THE CARWASH BOY HAS AN ASSHOLE, THE JUDGE AND THE MURDERER HAVE ASSHOLES." (53)

In the untitled short story from Notes of a Dirty Old Man, the main character, Bukowski, says almost the same thing after his girl friend views a plate of cooked octopi and snails. However, this time he is no longer unaffected by what is happening around him:

> maybe I should have followed up that girl with tits in Art Class. but it's hard to please a woman. and she might not have liked the tiny assholes either. but you ought to try octopi. like babyfingers in melted butter. the spiders of the sea, dirty rats, and while you are sucking at those fingers you get revenge, kiss off a million, knock off a beer, and to hell with the light co., Fuller Brush, tape machines and the underbelly of Texas and her crazy women with nicks that won't turn, who cry and fuck you, leave you, write homey letters every Christmas, even tho you are now a stranger, won't let you forget, Bruegel, the flies, the '57 Plymouth outside your window, the waste and the terror, the sadness and the failure, the stage play and the horse play, all our lives, falling down,

> getting up, pretending it's ok, grinning, sobbing,
> we wipe our tiny assholes, and the other kind.
> (161)

Bukowski must speak out in his own voice, often dropping the mask of fiction, not in Swift's righteous indignation but rather in an attempt both to express personal responsibility and to reflect faithfully the complexity of the situation. Bukowski is detached from and affected by what happens around him. "Bukowski treads the razor's edge," says Bill Wantling, "between the ugliness of life and the rawness of his emotions" (Fulton 28). His gaze is more often than not concentrated on the terrors of the twentieth-century and of the self-knowledge that this leads toward. His skid row loneliness, forced upon him by existence, is reflective of Celine; it is a lonely journey to the end of the night.

> Bukowski wears brown b.v.d.'s. Bukowski is afraid of airplanes. Bukowski hates Santa Claus. Bukowski makes deformed figures out of typewriter erasers. when water drips, Bukowski cries. when Bukowski cries, water drips. o, sanctums of fountains, o scrotums, o fountaining scrotums, o man's great ugliness everywhere like that fresh dogturd that the morning shoe did not see again; o, the mighty police, o the mighty weapons, o the mighty dictators, o the mighty damn fools

> everywhere, o the lonely lonely octopus, o the clock-tick seeping each neat one of us balanced and unbalanced and holy and constipated, o the bums lying in the alleys of misery in a golden world, o the children to become ugly, o the ugly to become uglier, o the sadness and the sabres and the closing of the walls--no Santa Claus, no Pussy, no Magic Wand, no Cinderella, no Great Minds Ever; kukoo--just shit and the whipping of dogs and children, just shit and the wiping away of shit; just doctors without patients just clouds without rain just days without days, o god o mighty that you put this upon us. (Erections 392)

Bukowski expresses his anger and frustration by means of the scabrous. The scatological reference becomes a means of inflaming, repulsing, angering the reader as a representative of the society Bukowski hates and condemns. He tends to use scatology as a crowbar and as a last resort against the individual reader jaded to all other assaults. Like Samuel Beckett he presents an overwhelming shamelessness: "I went into the crapper and took myself a beautiful beershit. Then I went to bed, jacked off, and slept" (Erections 129). Beckett's character, the Unnameable, displays a similar desire to defecate: "I'll let down my trousers and shit stories on them, stories . . ." (380) The scabrous element

is equated to the art of writing, and both function as actions used to fight loneliness and fear.

> "I can't write," said Carl. "It's gone." Then he got up and went to the bathroom, closed the door, and took a shit. Carl took four or five shits a day. There was nothing else to do. (South 78)

Bukowski's words and his isolation point to the incurable isolation of the artist. The forces of the universe work against him like his bowels, and any effort to contend with the forces always leads to the absurdity of the artist's helplessness. Writing and defecating are necessary as forms of detachment from the chaos that Bukowski sees around him. Without them he is lost;

> . . . constipation has always been a greater fear to me than cancer. . . . If I miss one day without shitting, I can't go anywhere, do anything--I get so desparate when that happens that oftentimes I try to suck my own cock to unclog my system, to get things going again. (Erections 267)

His only recourse is oral self-gratification, a grotesque caricature of male wish fulfillment, and in an age when most people fail to acknowledge their own bowels without recourse to euphemism, it is little wonder that the reader cringes uncomfortably in the face of Bukowski's scatology.

The scatological serves other purposes than just making a reader ill at ease. Bukowski's scatological imagery also serves as a powerful reminder of the certainty of man's immolation. Jae Num Lee states that

> by reducing humanity to a scatological metaphor, the satirist seeks to instill in man a world view based on the theocentric rather than homocentric perspective. His ultimate aim is to deflate man's false sense of his own importance and superiority. (47)

With prominent suggestions of decay and contagion, Bukowski clearly demonstrates that all people have about them the stench of delusion:

> So I always had my walk along the beachfront. Since it was so early I did not have to view that giant spread of humanity wasted, stuffed side by side, gagging, croaking things of flesh, Frogs' tumors. I didn't have to see them walking or lounging about with their horrible bodies and sold-out lives--no eyes, no voices, nothing, and not knowing it--just the shit of the waste, the smear of the cross. (Erections 143-144)

Finally, Bukowski resorts to scatology as a device of harsh condemnation. As the above passage illustrates, the knowledge of this world's sickness and the futility of daily

existence is a bitter pill to swallow, and the characters in most of Bukowski's stories settle for another form of "oral self-gratification," less physical and more vocal. The Bukowski anti-hero is one who "rebels, curses, rants, and gives god the finger. There's a lot of the heroic Job in Bukowski's barroom fables, Job who picks his boils and sits there bitching at the way things are set up" (Packard 10). Drinking a six pack of beer, selecting a few choice words for social condemnation, and scratching at his hemorrhoids, the Bukowski character continues to fight the good fight:

> I don't know why I do on packing these here keys except that facing the poem takes a man and this is the lazy man's way and I have been high (on booze) for 5, 6 hours, which is a beginning and certainly one way to sleep, sometimes I only sleep 4 or 5 hours in a week and even stop shitting, fucking, thinking, everything, but drink opens everything up: write, sleep, shit, almost fuck. (_Notes_ 89)

CHAPTER VI

PERVERSE SEXUALITY

"Only the perverse fantasy can still save us."
--Goethe to Eckerman on March 11, 1828

In Love and Death in the American Novel, Leslie Fielder characterizes American fiction as "gothic" in nature, "a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation" (6). Bizarre new heroes dominate the American literary scene: Nabokov's Humbert Humbert, Roth's Portnoy, Pynchon's Profane, Bukowski's Chinaski. These and other sexual gargoyles stake out a new gothicism in American letters. Homosexuality, sadism, sodomy, voyeurism, onanism, exhibitionism, necrophilia, fetishism, and incest are increasingly apparent in literature by significant authors. Their forbiddenness is used as a **sause piquante**, heightening the thrill of sexual relations in American society. As William Van O'Connor states in The Grotesque: An American Genre, "Our writers believe that man carries in his unconscious mind not merely willfulness or the need to indulge himself, but a deep bestiality and dark irrationality" (17).

In Bukowski's short stories, sex is almost invariably perverse or abnormal in treatment, and as a type of the

specific grotesque, perverse sex appears repeatedly. The portrayal of sexual variations--homosexuality, masturbation, bestiality, oral sex, necrophilia--is a satiric tool, not an end to itself. Dr. Samuel Johnson states that satire is a kind of work which "censures wickedness and folly" (Johnson n.p.) and holds them up to ridicule. Like Smollet and Swift in the eighteenth century, Bukowski's world seems so steeped in depravity that any spontaneous overflowing of powerful feelings must be, for the Bukowski character, an overflowing of powerful feelings of moral disgust. Even three dead chickens can set him off:

> when we got inside my door I lifted Margy's dress to see what was holding her stockings up. then I gave her a big chummy whiskey-goose with long-finger right hand. she screamed and dropped the big pink bundle. it fell on the rug and the 3 chickens came out. those 3 chickens, all white-yellow with their 29 or 30 drooling dropping murdered human hairs sticking to them looked very strange gaping there on that worn rug of yellow and brown flowers and trees and Chinese dragons, under the electric light in los angeles at the end of the world near 6th street and Union.
>
> "ooh, the chickens."
>
> "fuck the chickens."

> her garter belt was dirty. it was perfect. I goosed her again. (Erections 71)

At times Bukowski does not satirize his target directly or explicitly; rather, he approaches it in an inconspicious way, in an incidental manner, often by way of digression. The sexual liason itself may not strike the reader with satiric significance, but the incorporation of the act within context is a Bukowskian device for satirizing certain vices, certain institutions, and certain attitudes toward life. For example, in the story "The Fuck Machine," a German scientist creates a mechanical woman, a machine named Tanya that can provide various sexual pleasures. Bukowski falls in love with her, but she is disassembled after having bitten off a person's penis. Bukowski is heartbroken but later purchases a rubber doll made by the German scientist. Bukowski hopes this doll will provide the same pleasure and love that Tanya gave him:

> then I flipped her over and put it back in. humped and humped. frankly, it was rather boring, I imagined male dogs screwing female cats; I imagined 2 people fucking through the air as they jumped from the Empire State Building. I imagined a pussy as large as an octopus, crawling toward me, wet and stinking and aching for an orgasm. I remembered all the panties, knees, legs, tits,

> pussies, I had ever seen. the rubber was sweating; I was sweating.
>
> "I love you, darling!" I whispered into one of her rubber ears.
>
> I hate to admit it, but I forced myself to come into that lousy hunk of rubber. it was no Tanya at all. (Erections 45)

Physically, the act is not very rewarding, but it does spur Bukowski into specific insights regarding a nation that makes and uses rubber dolls as sex objects:

> how many men in America bought those stupid things?
>
> or then you can pass half a hundred fuck machines in a 10 minute walk on almost any main sidewalk of America--the only difference **being** that they **pretended** that they were human.
>
> poor Indian Mike. with that 20 inch dead cock.
>
> all the poor Indian Mikes. all the climbers into Space. all the whores of Vietnam and Washington. . . .
>
> poor Tanya, who had only eaten a little--mostly cheap cheese and raisins. she had no desire for money or property or large new cars or overexpensive homes. she had never read the evening paper. had no desire for colored

> television, new hats, rain boots, backfence conversations with idiot wives; nor had she desired a husband who was a doctor, a stockbroker, a congressman or a cop. (Erections 45-46)

Bukowski's use of fleshly terms satirizes the shortcomings of institutions, customs, attitudes, and states of mind to which he objects.

Sex is also a means for Bukowski to explore the universal neurosis of mankind. In this respect, scatology objectifys Bukowski's aberrant sexual focus. In Life Against Death, Norman Brown analyzes Swift's psychological insights and defines one of Swift's major themes as the conflict between "our animal body, appropriately epitomized in the anal function, and our pretentious sublimations, more specifically the pretensions of sublimated or romantic-Platonic love" (186). For Bukowski, this dichotomy does not exist; he does not inflate sex to any higher realms of fancy. Women, typically objects, are to be identified with a single piece of their anatomy. The female body is treated as a structure whose plumbing is to be minutely examined, and like Swift, Bukowski is paradoxically repulsed and attracted by what he sees. The view is bestial, reinforced by the proximity of the sexual parts to, and their close association with, the process of elimination and waste. As Norman Brown states,

> Excremental things are all too intimately and inseparably bound up with sexual things; the position of the genital organs--**inter urinas et faeces**--remains the decisive and unchangeable factor. The genitals themselves have not undergone the development of the rest of the human form in the direction of beauty; they have retained their animal cast; and even so today love, too, is in essence as animal as it ever was. (187)

Beauty is an illusion fig-leafing the reality of the flesh, and Bukowski never lets the reader forget his vile flesh.

In Bukowski's stories, there is an attitude of disgust for the most deranged of all human relationships, the sexual one, but his disgust brings to light the concealed convention of disgust men find in copulation. As D.H. Lawrence states in his essay "Pornography and Obscenity," many men believe that after intercourse they feel they have done something dirty to the woman:

> Why? Because they have the grey disease of sex-hatred, coupled with the yellow disease of dirt-lust. The sex functions and the excrementory functions in the human body work so close together, yet they are, so to speak, utterly different in direction. Sex is a creative flow, the excrementory flow is towards dissolution,

> decreation, if we may use such a word. In the really healthy human being the distinction between the two is instant, our profoundest instincts are perhaps our instincts of opposition between the two flows. (76)

Bukowski knows that fulfilling sex requires human interaction and warmth, but his alienation sets him apart from both society and women. Although he takes his sexual transports seriously, he is consistently unable to deal seriously with sex in his writings, particularly with mature sexual relations between fully developed male and female characters; "Sex is interesting but not totally important. I mean, it's not even as important (physically) as excretion. a man can go 70 years without a piece of ass but he can die in a week without a bowel movement" (<u>Notes</u> 163).

In "The Copulating Mermaid of Venice, California," with its blend of necrophilia, scatology, and human despair, Bukowski clearly expresses his feelings toward women and love. In this story, two drunks, after managing to steal a dead female body from a hearse, have sex with the corpse:

> Bill rolled off, hit the edge of the sheet, wiped off.
>
> "You're right. Best fuck I **ever** had!"
>
> Then they both sat in their chairs and looked at her.

> "Wonder what her name was?" asked Tony. "I'm in love."
>
> Bill laughed. "Now I **know** you're drunk! Only a damn fool falls in love with a living women; now you gotta get hooked on a dead one." (Erections 160)

Tony is inexorably attracted to her, despite the later satirical detachment he manages to effect. He decides to discard her:

> . . . Tony pulled back the sheet and looked at the dead face in the seaweed twist and swirl, in the salty morning air. Tony looked at the face as Bill was pissing offshore. A lovely kind face, nose a little too sharp, but a very good mouth, and then with her body stiffening already, he leaned forward and kissed her very gently upon the mouth and said, "I love you, dead bitch." (161)

Human love has rarely been expressed in such an unlikely scene or in such unlikely language.

It is important that Bill is urinating at the same moment Tony decides to endear himself to a corpse for it integrates Bukowski's morbid fascination of women and his satirical use of scatology. Both elements revolve around death, and it is ultimately death that Bukowski finds so fascinating. As Norman Brown states:

> Excrement is the dead life of the body, and as long as humanity prefers a dead life to living, so long is humanity commited to treating as excement not only its own body but the surrounding world of objects, reducing all to dead matter and inorganic magnitudes. Our much prized "objectivity" toward our own bodies, other persons, and the universe, all our calculating "rationality," is, from the psychoanalytical point of view, an ambivalent mixture of love and hate, an attitude appropriate only toward excrement, and appropriate to excrement only in an animal that has lost his own body and life. (295)

For Bukowski, "sexual intercourse is kicking death in the ass while singing" (Notes 207). Sex becomes warfare, patently brutal and perverse, with people capable of a sexual response of inordinate violence. In "The Day We Talked about James Thurber," Bukowski's voice echoes the **machismo** inherent in one of Ernest Hemingway's fishing stories:

> Then, she quivered all over once, then once again, like something on a sacrificial altar. Then, knowing she was weakened and out of her senses, out of her being, I simply layed the whole thing into her like a hook, held it still, hung her there like some crazy sea-fish speared forever. In half a

> century I had learned a few tricks. She was out of consciousness. Then I leaned back and rammed rammed her, rammed her, had her head bobbing like some crazy puppet, and her ass, and she came again just as I did, and when we came I damn near died. Both of us damn near died. (Erections 146)

The demoniacal energies inherent in this sexual activity once again leads to immolation. The swaggering male ego has managed to conquer the willing sacrificial victim.

As victims, Bukowski's women can be seen as sympathetic characters. Due to his indifference to them, not to mention his chronic unfaithfulness, the women become so distraught that they seek vengeance. Failing at that, they seek other men. It is difficult to make any sense out of Bukowski's feelings about their actions. In "See Bukowski Run," Len Fulton considers Bukowski's knowledge of women to be "one vast and sniggering cliche":

> They are a dirty joke to him, a dirty joke on him. Inside the web of his booze-bull-and-broad exploits lurks a demon sexual jingoist, erupting and irrupting in self-punishing concatenations; hostile, frustrated, pugilistic--fearful of the role into which (he thinks) one is cast by fate of genitalia. (31)

He is so incapable of relating to women as anything else than annoyingly self-willed vessels for their urges that he favors fellatio as a form of sexual perversion. It may be argued that fellatio is a one-way transaction, but for Bukowski the act offers a quick physical release that requires little effort on his part, and he doesn't have to get personally involved with his partners. If he has no women to exploit, he settles for the impersonal act of masturbation, although he admits that "jerking off runs a distant second to the real thing" (South 79). His other alternatives are perverse and include sex with a department store mannequin, a flower vase, the mouthpiece of a telephone, and "four or five raw eggs and a pound of hamburger in a thin-necked flower bowl while listening to Vaughn Williams or Darius Milhaud" (Notes 220).

The hallmarks of Bukowski's sexual exploits are a mixture of horror and delight, and there is a brute emphasis on the organs themselves. In an essay entitled "The Pornographic Imagination," Susan Sontag states:

> Even on the level of simple physical sensation and mood, making love surely resembles having an epileptic fit at least as much, if not more, than it does eating a meal or conversing with someone. (Styles 152)

Bukowski is clearly as much repelled as pleased, though always fascinated, by the sexual gyrations and innovations of mankind. He is a dirty old man figure whose grotesque vision does not simply satirize the act of sex itself; he views human beings as "fucking" animals. His misanthropy betrays its ferity in "Animal Crackers in my Soup," a story about a woman who physically loves all the animals that inhabit her household including Bukowski, a tiger, and a snake. The satiric point is made that humans now relate to each other as animals do, without social consciousness of each other, and that love has been abandoned. Bukowski and his mate both call for not just a return to the wilderness, but a virtual abolition of civilization. Bukowski's judgment is fulfilled when neighbors destroy all the animals in the house, and nine months later the woman gives birth to a monster:

> It was totally impossible and it looked upon me and knew me, the Father, one of the fathers, one of the many many fathers . . . and the edge of the sun gripped the hospital and the whole hospital began to shake, the babies roared, lights went on and off, a flash of purple crossed the glass partition in front of me. . . . The nurse stood there holding my child and smiling as the first hydrogen bomb fell upon the city of San Francisco. (Erections 456)

The nature of normal human sexual relations creates its own kind of beast, one Bukowski does not want to father. The onanistic delight of a palm or a vase may be a bizarre alternative but rational nonetheless.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

> "outside, the world moves forward as a lice-smitten dog pisses against a beautiful lemon tree vibrating in the sun."
>
> --Bukowski in _Notes of a Dirty Old Man_

This study of the grotesque motif in Bukowski's major short stories is intended to establish the significance of a neglected area of Bukowski scholarship. Bukowski's development of the motif characterizes his enduring attempt to reconcile the conflict of man with the modern world:

> the public takes from a writer, or a writing, what it needs and lets the remainder go. but what they take is usually what they need least and what they let go is what they need most. however, all this allows me to execute my little holy turns unmolested if they understood these, then there wouldn't be any more creators, we'd all be in the same pot of shit. as it is now, I am in my pot of shit and they are in theirs, and I think mine stinks better. (_Notes_ 163)

Realizing the world will not change, Bukowski abandons the hope that his satire will be effectual.

In a totally degenerate society, Bukowski's appeal borders on that of cynical misanthrope, a label that Jonathan Swift was given by many of his critics. Bukowski, a fighter who is capable of satiric response in the face of enormous societal transgression, fights not only his personal demons but also the inherent demons found in his nation. The sarcasm and the bite in the tone of the various passages previously cited indicates just how vehemently opposed he is to what he himself finds absurdly grotesque. Most of the offensive or assaultive satire Bukowski employs is aimed at the non-personal elements of large societal institutions.

Bukowski, after confronting the insanity of modern life, has been forced to ponder the possibility of his own madness. While he sometimes denies the world's reality of suffering, death, madness, he never withdraws from this reality. In his struggle to come to terms with the world's absurdity, he suffers:

> I'm bawling, I'm having myself a ball, my tears taste real salty as they mingle with the blood & snot from my nose & down my hollow pock-marked cheeks into my mouth, goddam, I seem to be drippin from both ends, but that's Life, brother, Life in the raw, Life like old grey Walt celebrated it, I'm singing myself too, there's nothing like a good

> long cry to make you feel better. . . . (qtd. in Pollak 19)

Bukowski's suffering is so real that he weeps, and becomes a living sorrow. His anguish is at times so enormous that he cannot understand or react to anything that does not have a direct bearing upon it. Reaching down into the profoundest depths within himself, Bukowski bridges a gap that separates him from the rest of humanity. In the primitive and transpersonal region that he has now tapped, the walls isolating him from others vanish, and a sense of solidarity and oneness comes over him--at least temporarily:

> . . . it occurred to me that **everybody** suffers continually, including those who pretended they didn't. It seemed to me that this was quite a discovery. I looked at the newsboy and I thought, hmmmm, hmmmm, and I looked at the next person to pass and I thought hmmmm, hmmmm, hmmmmmm, at the traffic signal by the hospital a new black car turned the corner and knocked down a pretty young girl in a blue mini dress, and she was blond and had blue ribbons in her hair, and she sat up in the street in the sun and the scarlet ran from her nose. (South 98)

Although the romantic inclination might lean toward Walt Whitman on rare occasion, Bukowski's visionary madness

continues to define his precarious existence in a world of the mad and damned.

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