

Interview with Charles Bukowski

by Jay Dougherty

*On West German Success, Letters to Carl Weissner, and
Letter-Writing*

DOUGHERTY: Your books have sold over 2.5 million copies in West Germany. They're in every department store, every train station, and of course every book store. As Carl Weissner, your German translator, has said, at this point they sell by themselves; they need no advertising. To what do you attribute your phenomenal success there?

BUKOWSKI: I believe that the German public is more open to gamble and new ways of presentation. Why this is, I don't know. Here in the U.S. a more staid and safe literature seems preferred. Here people don't want to be shaken or awakened. They prefer to sleep through their lives. To them, what is safe and old seems good.

DOUGHERTY: But what do you feel the German reading public sees in your work? Do you really feel that, as you say in some of your poems, the success is solely attributable to the work of your translators?

BUKOWSKI: With the German public, I do believe it does help that I was born there. It doesn't help in the sale of

millions of copies. Maybe 100,000. I am a curiosity. My translators? Well, they are probably pretty damned good. The books seem to go well in France, Italy, and Spain. England, no. Who knows why? I don't know why. You know, I try to keep my wordage and my line structure simple and bare. This doesn't mean I don't say anything. It means that I say it rather directly without a smokescreen. The English and the Americans are used to the old literary bullshit--that is, being lulled to sleep by the same old crap. If they read something and find that it isn't interesting or that they can't understand it, they oftentimes presume it to be profound. Or so I tend to believe.

DOUGHERTY: Why do you think Americans have not embraced you so wholly? Is it a matter of circulation, that John Martin, your publisher, doesn't have the means of, say, a New York publisher to advertise your books and get them out to the most possible outlets?

BUKOWSKI: Yes, Black Sparrow Press has a limited circulation and this tends to hold down being known widely in the U.S. Yet they have published book after book of mine throughout the years, and most of the books are still *in print* and *available*. Black Sparrow and I almost began together and it is my hope that we will end together. It would be fitting.

If I had gone to a large New York publisher, I might have larger U.S. sales and I might be rich, but I doubt that I would continue writing in a workmanlike and joyful fashion. Also, I doubt that I would have the same uncensored

acceptability that I have at Black Sparrow. As a writer I consider myself in the best of worlds: famous elsewhere and working here. The gods have spared me many of the pitfalls of the average American writer. Black Sparrow came to me when nobody else would. This after years of working as a common laborer and a starving writer, being largely ignored by the large presses and most of the major magazines. It would be ungrateful of me to seek a large New York publisher now. In fact, I don't have the slightest desire to do so.

DOUGHERTY: Your early letters to Carl Weissner, letters which began in about 1961, are characterized by incredible energy and anger and insight. They are some of the most substantive letters by you that I've seen. And yet Weissner, at the time the correspondence began, was then but a student, one you had never met or heard of before the correspondence started. What were your motivations at the time for writing him these letters? What was your living situation like, your outlook on life?

BUKOWSKI: I have no idea how it all started with Carl Weissner; that was almost three decades ago. But somehow we got into contact. I believe he saw some of my work in the U.S. little magazines. We began corresponding. His letters were quite incisive, entertaining (lively as hell), and he bucked up my struggle in the darkness, no end. A letter from Carl always was and still is an *infusion* of life and hope and easy wisdom. I was in the post office at the time and living with a crazy and alcoholic woman and writing anyhow.

All our money went for booze. We lived in rags and a rage of despair. I remember I didn't even have money for shoes. The nails from my old shoes dug into my feet as I walked my routes hungover and mad. We drank all night and I had to get up at 5 a.m. When I wrote, the poems came out of this and the letters from Carl were the only good magic about.

DOUGHERTY: How did you picture Weissner?

BUKOWSKI: How did I picture him? Exactly as he looked and acted when I met him. One hell of a hell of an amazing human.

DOUGHERTY: What would you say has been the most important and substantial correspondence that you've been engaged in?

BUKOWSKI: Letters to Carl Weissner. I felt that with Carl I could say anything I wanted to, and I often did.

DOUGHERTY: Is there anyone today to whom you write letters of comparable length or energy?

BUKOWSKI: No.

DOUGHERTY: Did you see the letters that you wrote to Weissner or anyone else as a kind of practice ground, a testing ground for your writing or ideas?

BUKOWSKI: No, I never tested my writing abilities in letter

writing. For instance, I read that Hemingway often wrote letters when he couldn't write anything else. To me, this would be a betrayal of the person you were writing to. I wrote letters because they just came out. They were a need. A scream. A laugh. Something. I don't keep carbons.

DOUGHERTY: Did poems or stories ever evolve out of your letters?

BUKOWSKI: Few stories or poems came out of the letters. If they did, it was afterwards. A small thought: shit, maybe I ought to use that line or that idea elsewhere. But not too often, hardly at all. The letter came first. The letter was the letter as the letter.

DOUGHERTY: Carl Weissner has characterized your early letters to him as "soul food." Whom have you most enjoyed receiving letters from and why?

BUKOWSKI: As I said, Carl's letters were the best. They kept me going for weeks. I even wrote him at times to say something like, "God damn, man, you've saved my life." And it was true. Without Carl I would be dead or near dead or mad or near mad, or driveling into a slop pail somewhere, mouthing gibberish.

DOUGHERTY: You've always been fairly meticulous about dating your letters, and a lot of energy has gone into at least the Weissner letters. Did you ever at any point--before, that

is, you sold the letters to Santa Barbara--sense an audience outside of the person to whom you were writing? That is, do you think you wrote, consciously or unconsciously, with posterity in mind?

BUKOWSKI: Carl's letters were sold to Santa Barbara along with other things because that was survival. I didn't even have the letters. I asked Carl for them and he popped them over. Like that. No, I never thought of an audience outside of Carl in the letters. If I had, they would have been shitty letters. I was writing to Carl because I felt he knew what I was saying and that his answers would be joyous, crazy, brave and on the mark. I've read too many *literary* letters, published, that the famed writers have written. They do seem to write to *more* than one person, and that's their business unless they write to me.

DOUGHERTY: What do you enjoy most about writing letters? When do you write them?

BUKOWSKI: Writing letters, like writing poems, stories, novels, helps to keep me from going crazy or from quitting. I write letters at night when I am drinking, just as I write my other stuff.

On Poetry and Craft

DOUGHERTY: In your poems, you sometimes write about enjoying your time at the typewriter, how easy it is to be a writer, and so on. What are your feelings about the nine-to-five,

On Poetry and Craft

DOUGHERTY: In your poems, you sometimes write about enjoying your time at the typewriter, how easy it is to be a writer, and so on. What are your feelings about the nine-to-five, workaday world and the goals after which most strive?

BUKOWSKI: The nine-to-five is one of the greatest atrocities sprung upon mankind. You give your life away to a function that doesn't interest you. This situation so repelled me that I was driven to drink, starvation, and mad females, simply as an alternative. The ideal, for one like me, of course, is to make it off of your writing, your creativity. I found that I was unable to do this until the age of fifty, when I began to make just enough income to survive without the nine-to-five. Lucky, for me, of course, because at that time I was working for the United States Post Office, and most of the nights were eleven-and-a-half hours long, and most of the days off were canceled. I was near insanity, and my whole body was such a mass of nerves that almost any place I was touched could make me scream, and I had great trouble lifting my arms and turning my neck. I quit the job at fifty, and the writing seemed to arrive in better form.

DOUGHERTY: How do you feel that writing poetry--or writing in general--helps you cope with the mindlessness you perceive around you?

BUKOWSKI: Writing keeps you alive because it eases the

monsters in the brain by moving them to paper. The listing of horrors seems regenerative, and often comes out in the writing as a form of joy or humor. The typewriter often sings soothing songs to the sadness in the heart. It's wondrous.

DOUGHERTY: You have consistently refused to become political within the literary arena, refused to be associated with literary "schools" or trends. But in a recent poem directed against the "Academics" and the generally conservative poetry they profess, you say, "we don't care how they / write the poem // but we insist that there are / other voices / other ways of creating / other ways of living the / life // in this battle against the / Centuries of the Inbred / Dead // let it be known that / we have arrived and / intend to / stay." Do you see yourself as in the center of a kind of unheralded proletarian poetry that is finding more and more outlet within the small presses and little magazines?

BUKOWSKI: Regarding the poem in general, I don't see myself as the center of anything except myself. I travel alone. That particular poem you note was written more for others than for myself. That is, I feel that a more human, accessible yet true and vibrant poetry is gradually coming forth. I note it especially in some of the littles; there is a movement toward more clarity, reality...while the academics are still standing still, playing secret and staid games, snob and inbred games which are finally anti-life and anti-truth.

DOUGHERTY: Your work continues to be ignored by most anthologists in the U.S., with the notable exceptions of your appearing in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* and *A Geography of Poets* (Bantam). Why do you think this is, and how do you feel about being in *Norton*, probably the most widely-used college-level anthology?

BUKOWSKI: I didn't know that I was in the Norton. If I am, alright, I don't think it will kill anybody off. I am not an expert on anthologies. I suppose they are mostly the choice of one man. And my guess is that most of these men are university-connected, hence conservative, careful, and worried about their jobs. What they choose could hardly shock a nun or a bus driver, but it might put them to sleep.

DOUGHERTY: Outside of your books with Black Sparrow, you continue to publish your poetry mostly in little magazines. What do you think is the state of literary and little magazines? The established quarterlies versus the xeroxed occasionals?

BUKOWSKI: I don't read many established quarterlies except *The New York Quarterly*, and I am prejudiced toward them because I have appeared in every one of their issues from No. 7 through No. 34. I find that they are not afraid of newness or warmth, but like I say, sine they have been so good to me, I may not be the perfect judge here.

On the littles, I'd say that the greatest weakness is that they publish their own editors too often. Most of the

poems are not really fully evolved: an off-hand "so-what" attitude prevails. Yet, within many issues, there are poems that are really there, fully. Now and then, astonishing talents will appear. Most of them don't last too long; something in life swallows them up. But life renews: when you've just about given up on everybody, here comes another slashing through. The hope that's always there makes the littles worthwhile.

DOUGHERTY: To you, what characterizes the best and the worst poetry being written today?

BUKOWSKI: The worst poetry copies the best and worst of the past. Most poets come too much from protective environments. A poet must live before a poet can write, and sometimes the living must be almost enough to kill. I am not suggesting that poets seek dangerous situations, and neither am I suggesting that they avoid them.

DOUGHERTY: What contemporary or new writers do you see as holding promise? And what qualities of their work attract you?

BUKOWSKI: John Thomas. Gerald Locklin. What qualities? Read them.

DOUGHERTY: A few commentators have criticized your poetry, especially your recent poetry, as being little more than prose cut up into lines. Do you feel the same way? What qualities do you feel distinguish your poetry from your prose?

BUKOWSKI: The critics might be right. I'm not sure what the difference is between my poetry and my prose. Perhaps the styles are similar. The mood probably isn't. I mean, the mood is different in the poetry and the prose. That is, I can only write prose when I am feeling good. Poetry I can write when I am feeling bad, and I write most of it when I am feeling bad, even if the poem comes out in a humorous fashion.

DOUGHERTY: I personally disagree with those who say that even the recent poetry is prose cut up into lines, for I see either conscious or unconscious decisions being made with regard to, for example, line breaks--very often you seem to break a line either to force the poem to be read or stressed in a certain way or to push the reader into a temporary expectation that is then in the next line disappointed. How do you decide on line breaks in your poems?

BUKOWSKI: Subconsciously, I guess, I am trying to make my poetry more and more bare, essential. That is, to hang a lot on a little. This might give those critics vent to holler their dirty word "prose." That's what the critics are there

for: to complain. I don't write for the critics; I write for that little thing that sits just in and behind my forehead (ah, cancer?).

Line breaks? The lines break themselves and I don't know how.

DOUGHERTY: From what I understand, *Dangling in the Tournefortia* was one of the few books, if not the only book, *not* edited heavily or "selected" by John Martin. Did you insist on the continuity of the poems there?

BUKOWSKI: John Martin selects all the poems for all the books. I'm not sure a writer knows which of his work is best. If I were to get precious and fuck around with selecting my own poems, then there I would lose time which I could put to better use writing or being at the racetrack or taking a bath or doing nothing. John has a great eye in lining the poems up in order. He loves to have one lead rather into the other, more or less, and if you will check the books of poems you will find that there is almost a little story told, even though the poems are often about separate things. John loves to do this, in spite of all the work involved, and I am glad that somebody is noticing.

DOUGHERTY: You seem to be experimenting more in your poetry with a kind of fragmentary poem, composed solely of images, like "Lost in San Pedro." What changes do you sense or see occurring in your poetry, concerning either technique or subject?

BUKOWSKI: If the poems are changing in their way, it could be because I am getting closer to death. Poems about whores showing their panties and spilling beer on my fly no longer seem quite apt. I don't mind nearing death; in fact, it almost feels good. But different paints are needed for the damned canvas. Of course, many of the things that bothered me when I was seven years old still bother me now. On the other hand, when things were going the worst, I never felt cheated out of anything or wronged. I might have thought that I was a better writer than many famous writers living or dead, but I considered that a natural course of events-- oftentimes those on top show very little. The public creates its own gods and it often chooses badly because the public reflects its own image.

As I go on, I write as I please and as I must. I don't worry about critics or style or fame or lack of fame. All I want is the next line as it truly comes to me.

DOUGHERTY: What are your plans for future writing projects? What are you working on now?

BUKOWSKI: I am into a novel, *Hollywood*. Now, that's prose and I have to feel good and I haven't felt good lately, so I am only up to page fifty. But it's all there inside of my head, and I hope to feel good enough long enough to write it. I can only hope so because it's a real laugh. Hollywood is at least 400 times worse than anybody has ever written about it. Of course, if I ever finish it, then I'll

probably get sued, even though it's true. Then I can write another novel about the court system.