DEUTSCH VON CARL WEISSNER
An Interview

Carl Weissner was born in 1940 in Karlsruhe, West Germany. He attended the universities of Heidelberg and Bonn from 1961-1967, majoring in English and German. In 1967, he went to New York City on a Fulbright grant and stayed in the U.S. for a year and a half, working on a novel and documenting the New York poetry scene on tape. Upon his return to West Germany, he worked as a script-writer for WDR Radio, Cologne, and as an out-of-house editor for J. Melzer Publishers in Frankfurt.

In the Fall of 1969, Weissner showed Melzer a first edition copy of Notes of a Dirty Old Man by the then-obscure American writer Charles Bukowski. Bukowski and Weissner had been corresponding since 1966, when Weissner had started a little magazine and asked Bukowski for some poems. Their correspondence, much of which is now stored at the libraries of University of California at Santa Barbara and Northwestern University, contains some of the most rich and energetic epistolary exchanges of either man's career, and is especially interesting for the glimpses it gives the reader into Bukowski's struggles to become a self-sufficient writer and into the evolution of his eventual success, as well as his thoughts and feelings concerning art, writing, and life in general.

By the time, then, that Weissner appeared in the offices of Melzer Verlag with the Essex House (North Hollywood) edition of Notes of a Dirty Old Man, his understanding of Bukowski was obviously better than anyone else's in Germany, and when the publisher expressed enthusiasm about having it translated, Weissner was clearly the one for the job. So began both Carl Weissner's career as a translator and literary agent (he is representing Bukowski and Black Sparrow Press throughout Europe and South America), and the astonishing

success of Charles Bukowski in West Germany and other countries. (In 1983/84, three Bukowski titles appeared on the best-seller list in Brazil, two of them simultaneously.)

Bukowski's books, all but two of which Weissner has translated into German, have sold 2.5 million copies to date, more than in any other European country. The books, all of which are in print, can be found in virtually every department store, and of course every book store. Indeed, both the popular and critical response to Bukowski has been markedly more favorable in West Germany than in the U.S. itself, a fact that has precipitated much curiosity and many theories in explanation.

This interview, conducted in Mannheim, West Germany, where Carl Weissner lives, was compiled from roughly 12 hours of tape-recorded conversations with Weissner over a seven-day period, from December 23, 1978, through January 1, 1988. Congenial and outspoken, Weissner discussed a wide range of topics on which he better than anyone can provide information: Bukowski's popularity in West Germany and the reasons behind it, the German literary scene, his translation philosophies and practices, and the reception of other American writers he has translated.

In all, Weissner has translated close to 80 books from English into German, including books by Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Nelson Algren, Denton Welch, Bob Dylan, Frank Zappa, and Hunter S. Thompson. His work room, where he has but a desk and an old-model manual Typewriter, along with hundreds of books, is on the top floor of an apartment building on one of the main streets in Mannheim, where cars constantly rush back and forth, providing the city equivalent to the sound of ceaseless waves slapping the sand. The room has one lamp, and that bows over the typewriter onto which he translates directly from the book to the page , often long after light no longer pours in through the large windows overlooking the street.

Q. Your English is extraordinarily good. Did you learn it primarily in school?

A. In school and in the streets. After the war, most of the houses on our street were occupied by GIs, and there was a black Master Sergeant with his wife and kids living next to us. We were surrounded by Americans, and I was running around with their kids shouting "Hey! Ba-ba-re-bop!" Old Sarge would go on a pheasant hunt and bring us back one of those birds pumped full of lead and throw it over the fence. He used to play Duke Ellington and Woody Herman records for hours, full blast. I loved it. What a break after those bellowing Nazis with their awful music. I guess I didn't give any thought to the fact that these strange new neighborhood types were the same ones who'd been dropping tons of bombs on me. What mattered to me was that they really knew how to have a good time.

Later, in High School, I formed a band with a couple of friends, and we played at American NCO clubs around town. I picked up some more English that way. I mean, stuff they didn't teach you at Bismarck High.

Q. How did you find the academic life when you enrolled at Heidelberg University in '61?

A. Quaint, a little stuffy, easy, and largely irrelevant. They left you alone and didn't demand too much, outside of memorizing endless vowel shifts. Tuition was minimal, but then they really didn't have much to offer. American literature practically didn't exist for these people, and English lit. seemed to stop at Thomas Hardy, so you can imagine... I mean, here I was sitting around in cafeterias between classes, nursing a cup of coffee and reading Naked Lunch, On the Road, Tropic of Cancer... And after that, you know, going back to another seminar on Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience - on a level which seemed a throwback to Junior College days - well, that was rather discouraging.

Then, all of a sudden, things started to happen...

Q. You found out about the Underground.

A. Exactly. I think it was the Spring of '65 when Times Literary Supplement did those two fat special issues on the 'avantgarde'. They covered some of the littlemag scene in the States and England, France, South America. With addresses and everything. That was a real find. And I thought if I had a magazine of my own I could exchange copies with some of these editors and just take it from there. So I started a magazine. I called it Klactoveedsedsteen, after a Charlie Parker tune. Just a little mimeographed thing. My model was Jeff Nuttall's My Own Mag in London, probably the craziest and most adventurous mimeo rag of those years. And soon I was corresponding with, and publishing, people like Nuttall and Burroughs, Mary Beach and Claude Pelieu in New York, Harold Norse in Greece, Margaret Randall and Alexandro Jodorowski in Mexico City, Malay Roy Choudhuri and other poets of the 'Hungry Generation' in Calcutta, Douglas Blazek who was doing his Ole magazine in Bensenville, Illinois. Diane di Prima. Larry Eigner. I had a great time, saw very little of the University and used the campus largely as a short cut between the jazz club and a friend's place where we used to get together for some serious stud poker at 5 in the morning... Also, I was totally fascinated with William Burroughs' cut-up thing and I was doing all these cutup collaborations with Burroughs, Nuttall, Pelieu, Mary Beach. Tape experiments and whatnot.

Q. And how did you first come across Bukowski and his work?

A. In March '66 I got a magazine called Iconolatre, edited by Alex Hand in West Hartlepool, England, one of those out-of-the-way places in the North-East. It had some solid prose, the poetry didn't seem so hot...

until I came to this section of seven poems by one Charles Bukowski, and boy did they stick out! Jesus Christ. I remember, one of them was OFFICERS CLUB, A.P.O...."For those dishwashers in Germany, young, hanging around, delirious, on edge, perched like piss-ants on a cliff... you'll end up famous, you'll end up bankers, you'll end up dead, but now it's good thinking of you, in the stink of it, in the greasy slime and shit, alive enough to hang Christ by his heels, upside down, in the orange dirty morning..." Hell, I thought, who is this guy? Here was one who apparently didn't give a damn about poetic frills and niceties, he was pissed, he was mad, and he just let it all out. Great. And the next one, believe it or not, was called SWASTIKA STAR BUTTONED TO MY ASS! (laughter) "Sitting around here burning spiders to death with my cigar, I can hardly believe that all your pussies are as sweet as mine used to be.I did it in fireplaces, on fire escapes"..ah, ah..."in cornfields, in mother's bedroom (with mother) (sometimes)!" (laughter)..."between bomb explosions at Nantes and St. Etienne, over the sink of the men's crapper in a train passing through Utah..." God. On and on. Relentless. "I've done it sober, potted, crazy and sane...I've done it with animals, I've done it with dead meat..." And it ends with: "I am going to rob a bank or beat hell out of a blind man any day now, and they'll never know why."

Perfect. I absolutely had to find out more about this one. Got the address from the editor, wrote Bukowski a letter, asked him for some poems, and he promptly wrote back and stuffed in two or three he'd just pulled out of the typer.

So. That's how it all started.

Q. What were the personal situations of Bukowski and you at that time?

A. Well, Hank was working in the Post Office, stuffing letters for hours and hours, and it was driving him up the wall. The rest of the time he tried to stay drunk,

and when he wasn't at the racetrack, he was banging out poems and five-page letters to all kinds of people, enormous bursts of mad energy, anger, frustration, black humor. Just railing against the world and in a suicidal mood half the time. Or most of the time, I guess. Bad affairs with women, bad run-ins with the cops, just one thing after another.

As for me, I didn't have it half as bad. I had no problems except how to keep the magazine going and scrape by somehow, working odd shit jobs. At one time I was doing night shifts at the Institute of High-Energy Physics - at a buck and a quarter per hour, if you can believe it, and that was one of the better part-time jobs available then. In the basement they had a huge darkroom with all these scanning machines hooked up to a computer, and you had to scan endless films of bubble-chamber experiments where they tried to discover new sub-atomic particles. The films were rather dark, as if underexposed, and you had a hell of a time trying to locate the tiny little events they were looking for. I had to get out after seven or eight months of this because I noticed I was ruining my eyes.

I had enough of Germany [illegible], and the stifling atmosphere of the country was getting to me. I said to myself: Look, New York is where it's at, so what are you doing here? I didn't have the money, so I decided to apply for a Fulbright. And got it, in the summer of '67.

Q. What was your project?

A. A thesis on Olson. My English professor, who was supposed to be an authority on Pound, had never heard of Olson. But he did realize that this was something you can only do in the States...(laughter) When I got to New York I found out that at Buffalo alone there were at least five people who were working on practically the same thing and had a big headstart on me. So that was that. Why go on and be Number Six? Besides, I wasn't so hot for more academic work anyway.

Q. What did you do instead?

A. I wrote a book. (THE BRAILLE FILM, published by Jan Herman's Nova Broadcast Press, San Francisco 1970.) I edited a special issue of Allen DeLoach's INTREPID Magazine in Buffalo, with material I had collected from all kinds of 'underground' poets in India. And I documented a good part of the New York poetry scene on tape. For the German Avantgarde Archive which is run by an old friend of mine. I think I wound up with about a hundred hours of tape. It was a good cross-section. Ginsberg, Ted Berrigan, Diane DiPrima, Ray Bremser, Jackson MacLow, Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles. Ron Tavel. Jack Micheline. John Wieners. Ed Sanders.

Q. How do you think people like Bremser and Sanders saw you?

A. Oh, just as a strange, crew-cut, German heterosexual uh square (laughter). No, I mean, they knew the magazine I was putting out, some of them I had published or corresponded with, so they knew what I was about. Plus, I was living in the neighborhood, on the Lower East Side, East 6th and Avenue C, and my roaches were the same as theirs. Ginsberg a few blocks down, Ted Berrigan a few blocks in the other direction, Andrei Codrescu around the corner. Ray Bremser was around and occasionally hit me for a fiver, claiming he'd just gotten burned by his connection down at the corner. Jack Micheline used to drop by and try out his street songs on my fire escape. It was a great place to be, and I felt right at home in their company. More than I ever had back in Germany.

Q. And when did you first meet Bukowski in person?

A. In the summer of '68 I was staying at Jan Herman's place in San Francisco, he was editing THE SAN FRANCISCO EARTHQUAKE, one of the great magazines of the sixties, and I helped him a little with that. And of course I went to L.A. a couple of times to visit Bukowski.

Hank was still living on DeLongpre Avenue at the time — I remember the street looked like an abandoned air strip from World War Two — in an old ramshackle bungalow, one of the few that were left on the street. I guess the rent was cheap, and he got along fine with his landlord and landlady, an old couple that lived in back. He used to drink beer with them, and they would sing old time songs, and so forth. He had just published his first poetry book with Black Sparrow Press, AT TERROR STREET AND AGONY WAY. Which reminds me — he'd written this great poem about one of the other tenants of the old couple, a guy they called Buffalo Bill who always got in trouble because whenever somebody came to his door, a Jehova's Witness, say, he'd show them his thing, you know. So at one time the cops have come and gotten him again, and Hank is sitting with the old couple drinking beer, and after a while he says: "Who'd you rent his place to?" "Oh, we don't rent his place, we always keep it for him - we like him..." (laughter). He really must have hated it when the bulldozers finally came and he had to give up the old bungalow.

Meanwhile, he had started writing his column, NOTES OF A DIRTY OLD MAN, for Open City, one of the two underground papers in L.A. Against impossible odds. I mean, he had to deliver once a week, and the damn job at the post office was slowly killing him - those night shifts, with overtime, would regularly come to eleven hours or more. And what with making first post at the Hollywood racetrack at 1.30 p.m. or so, I have no idea when he slept or when he wrote all his stuff. Most of his columns came out as short stories - or long ones, rather - and he kept it up, producing this great material, one week after another. I could only admire the man. For me he was a fucking genius. Period.

Q. When you returned to Germany and worked as an editor for J. Melzer Publishers - was NOTES OF A DIRTY OLD MAN your first project?

A. Not quite. Let's see, I first did a cut-up anthology and one last issue of my magazine, in an oversized tabloid format this time, an international, ah, ah, revolutionary

cut-up issue (laughter) . I mean, half serious and half fun. Melzer put up the money for 3000 copies. And I translated J.G. Ballard's THE ATROCITY EXHIBITION which I consider to be one of the seminal books of the 20th century and which to me was every bit as important as Naked Lunch. Then, in the Fall of 1969, Bukowski sent me a copy of NOTES. I showed it to Melzer, he sat down, read the first one-and-a-half pages and said: "I want to do this. Can you get me a contract for the German rights? Will you translate it for me?"

The German edition was published in the Spring of 1970, got a handful of good reviews - even in our newsmagazine DER SPIEGEL - and sold exactly 1200 copies.

Q. What was your reaction?

A. Oh hell, I just sagged. I had done two radio programs on Bukowski, there had been write-ups by several of my friends in the alternative press, but it didn't make a dent. Of course, there hadn't been any advertising ~~campaign~~ worth writing home about. Melzer couldn't afford it because he was deep in the red and his creditors were crawling all over him. But the real reason was that the readers in this country weren't ready for someone like Bukowski. Particularly the students who were still in the throes of their '68 rebellion and practically didn't read any fiction. Yards and yards of Marcuse and Marx. That was the order of the day. So. Another book by an unknown author that didn't get off the ground. That's the way it looked.

Q. What was next? POST OFFICE?

A. Yes. Two years later. Ah, a novel, I thought. Now that should do it. A big publisher in Cologne did a first printing of 4000 copies - and they had trouble unloading them. A big pocketbook company in Frankfurt bought a license for NOTES OF A DIRTY OLD MAN. They did a first printing of 15,000. Which showed that they had

no confidence in the book. Meanwhile, City Lights Books had published a 480-page volume of Hank's stories. TALES OF ORDINARY MADNESS. I was totally overwhelmed by it and felt sure that this would do the trick. I sent it to some of the big publishers - not to Melzer, because he was about to go out of business. And they were offended! They wrote me angry letters. One of these editors actually said: "Spare us the unsavory ramblings of this low life drunk. Do you think young people want to read that?" And I wrote back: "Up yours, Schmidt." Today I would shrug it off, but I was new in the game then, and I just got livid. I mean, I had learned not to have a high opinion of our editors, but I assumed that at least they would be able to recognize a good solid story when they saw it. Naturally, I'd had a feeling all along that it was a shame to be relying on the established publishers. But there seemed to be no choice. The small presses, the underground, didn't offer any alternative. They came and went, they failed to get organized in terms of distribution. 150 copies. 200 copies. That didn't seem worth the trouble.

Q. So you felt that you had reached a dead end?

A. No. I thought, Weissner you are so stupid. The one thing we haven't tried is the poems - why? I mean, why not! It may have been an unconscious thing: Poetry doesn't sell, period. That's a given. But then Hank's poems were radically different from anything that was around. So I sat down and translated ~~maybe~~ 90 pages worth ~~of some~~ of his toughest and most sardonic poems. Serious ones, dirty ones, hilarious and desperate ones. And I gave them to a Bukowski ~~Friend~~ ~~of mine~~ fan down south, in Bavaria, who had just started a small press. Strictly a one man operation. He was excited about the poems and went ~~totally~~ completely overboard. This was going to be his first real book, and he was going to get behind it, one hundred percent. And he did. He put it out within 2 weeks, in a first printing of 2000 copies. Everybody thought he was nuts. Even books by well known German poets didn't sell more than 600 or a thousand copies. Big

anthologies of the New American Poetry had flopped. Okay, never mind. And while I was at it, I chose a looong title - which in German, of course, came out twice as long...(laughter). POEMS WRITTEN BEFORE JUMPING OUT OF AN 8th STORY WINDOW. It was the title of a small collection of Bukowski poems, published by somebody in Berkeley in '68. Another no-no in this racket: Never use a title that people can't read at a glance. This one you had to bend down for. But if you did, you were rewarded.

Q. We know that the book was Bukowski's breakthrough in Germany. Can you explain it?

A. It sold fifty thousand copies. And nobody, including me, has been able to come up with an explanation. Except that readers will always be unpredictable. And that, at least once in a while, it's still possible to make it on quality alone.

The Bavarian had sent out 150 review copies, it took eight or nine months to sell the first printing, then all of a sudden the book took off. Until then, the Publisher couldn't afford any ads except a few small ones, mostly in little magazines. There was a flurry of enthusiastic reviews in the alternative press. That, and word-of-mouth. Which is the only true test for a book and for an author.

I see it as a kind of poetic justice that Hank made his breakthrough in this country on the strength of his poems, and entirely on his own.

Q. What had changed since the publication of NOTES?

A. Well, obviously a couple ten thousand readers had gotten thoroughly disgusted with the flabby introspective blah of anemic characters like Peter Handke who were dominating the literary scene. I guess it also helped that poetry in this country, at that time, was just nowhere.

Q. Did Bukowski have an influence on contemporary German writers?

A. There were busloads of bad imitators, just like in the States. But he also encouraged some people with real talent - even some lady poets - to become more open, direct, and outspoken. All of a sudden there were lots of very personal, narrative poems. Loose, colloquial, even tough. He's been credited with practically triggering a poetry renaissance here. Among the prose writers, his influence is clearly visible in the work of Jörg Fauser, for instance, who came to prominence in the seventies with a bunch of really excellent short stories and with the columns he wrote for the leading magazine of the alternative press (TIP Magazine, Berlin). Incredible stuff. A direct result of Hank's NOTES OF A DIRTY OLD MAN.

Q. All right. Then...

A. Then, three volumes of stories, all from TALES OF ORDINARY MADNESS, all published by the Bavarian small press. 150 000 copies. And then an 800-page volume collecting NOTES, two novels (FACTOTUM, POST OFFICE) and SOUTH OF NO NORTH (stories). That was done by 2001 in Frankfurt, our ~~leading~~ top mail oder outfit for books and LPs. They had more than ten thousand advance orders before the binders could even deliver the first printing. They ultimately sold about 120 000 copies of that one. And parallel to the big book they offered part of the stories in SOUTH OF NO NORTH as a very low priced pocket-book, kind of an appetizer, which sold another 150 000. Saturation coverage in the media. TV documentaries. PLAYBOY interview. 8-page spread in STERN Magazine, which has a circulation of 1.8 million and is something like LIFE ~~AND~~ and PARIS MATCH rolled into one. Feature stories in DER SPIEGEL, in DIE ZEIT, the leading liberal weekly here, high-brow as hell. And the same kind of coverage in Austria and Switzerland. After that it was plain sailing.

Q. Who are Bukowski's readers in Germany?

A. Arno Schmidt, one of our best writers, used to say that there are no more an 350 serious readers in this country. Meaning that those were the ones he was writing for. Okay, he was an olympian. Forget it. But if a book of poems sells fifty thousand copies, it means that it is read not only by a majority of people who are into poetry, but also by a handsome percentage of those who will only pick up a book if it gives them something they find useful in their everyday life. And if a heavy load of fiction like that 800-page volume sells more than a hundred thousand copies in a small country like Germany, it means that you're really blanketing the area.

This friend of mine in Cologne, who did a TV documentary of Bukowski's reading in Hamburg, started it off with maybe six or seven minutes of random interviews in the streets - near his place in Cologne. Just walked up to them and stuck a microphone in their faces. [illegible] "You know Bukowski? Read any of his stuff?" He didn't have to search. He could take his pick: A cabdriver, a B-Girl, a rookie cop. An architect. Two girls from a highschool. A painter. The 75-year-old wife of a steel magnate. A street musician. A guy who'd just done ten years for armed robbery.

Q. I suppose there were also enviers and the usual ~~de~~ trac tors...

A. The list is endless. From a former speechwriter of Willy Brandt who called Bukowski the most over-rated writer of the century, to the right-wing Munich paper that tried to put him down as "a marginal figure of the U.S. porn scene". And the hardcore feminist writer who claimed that, unlike the dumb Germans, the Italians were smart enough to ignore him. This at a time when the Italian press had been full of Bukowski features for months and it took LA STAMPA two-and-a-half pages just to give an interim report on the clean sweep he was making down there.

Q. Can you tell me about his Hamburg reading in May 1978? A recent L.A. Times Magazine spread on Bukowski begins by saying that his European readings are held in sold-out concert halls, as if there haven been many. But this was in fact his only reading ever outside the U.S., wasn't it?

A. Yes. Except for one or two readings in Canada, I think. The Hamburg reading came about when Christoph Derschau, a Hamburg poet and a friend of Hank's, visited him in L.A. Hank mentioned that he was going to fly to Germany to visit his uncle and me — he had a 90-year-old uncle in Andernach-on-Rhine, where Hank was born — so Christoph persuaded him to give a reading. He knew this great place in Hamburg, run by a defrocked priest — they had rock concerts, political cabaret, and so forth. It was an old scruffy concert hall, the center of the alternative scene in Hamburg. And this was on rather short notice. I think they had only two weeks to print posters and plaster them all over town. A few short notices in the local papers. That was all. Nobody was even sure that Hank would show up. They kept calling us in Mannheim: "Is it on?"

Günther Grass, our literary big shot, had read there a few months before, in front of 300 people. For Hank's reading the place was crammed with 1200 people, and outside were several hundred who had to be turned away.

Q. What kind of a crowd was it?

A. Mostly young people. The kind of crowd you would see at a Joe Cocker concert. Whoever had the beer concession in this place made a small fortune that night. There were the usual hecklers. Some vociferous women's libbers among them. Hank trading insults with them in perfectly good humor. Everybody was having a great time. I remember there was a guy at the far end of the hall, sitting in the rafters, who kept yelling a question which Hank couldn't understand because of all the noise. Finally he leaned close to the mike and said: "Write me

a letter!" Brought down the house. "You Germans are too tough for me...hell, you're talking more than I do!"

Of course,word had somehow gotten around and there were also fans from Denmark and Sweden. I talked to some guys who had come over from Amsterdam. And the media had turned out in force - photographers, reporters, camera crews. Even a team from Austrian Television that had flown in from Vienna.

Q. Of all the European countries, is Germany indeed the country in which Bukowski is most popular?

A. Well, commercially he is most successful here, but his popularity is the same in France and Italy. Or Yugoslavia.

Q. To what do you attribute his relative obscurity in the U.S.?

A. Relative, yes. I mean, he gets reviewed in the major papers. New York Times, L.A. Times. He gets written up in PEOPLE Magazine, for god's sake. There was a big spread on him in Rolling Stone as far back as 1976. But I know what you mean. For instance, he refuses to get involved in the publicity hype and the reading circus. He stopped giving readings ten years ago. He prefers to stay near the typer and the racetrack. And he likes to be able to go to a restaurant without being accosted by a bunch of shrill groupies. In the wake of the Barfly movie, I think, he turned down invitations to "2o-20","60 Minutes", and the Johnny Carson Show. Because he knows that the constipated format of these shows doesn't allow you to be yourself. You can't even bring a bottle of wine. He drank two bottles on this live show in France, the most popular in the country, before the host could get him removed by two bulky security guys. On camera. Off camera, Hank pulled a knife on the two bullies. He got a great press the next day. For showing that overrated twerp that he wasn't taking him seriously. That would be unthinkable in the

States. I mean, Hank isn't interested in hyping his books and playing the game. And he's damn right. He even likes to downplay his U.S. sales. Which gets picked up by people who don't bother to check the facts. I remember this thing in TIME Magazine where they dutifully noted his European success and then invariably reproduced the old myth about his books "which typically sell only 5000 copies" in the States. Bullshit. His novel Women must have sold at least 100 000 copies. Post Office 150 000 or more. And some of his poetry collections are in their twentieth printing by now. And this without a big New York publisher, and without a single pocket-book edition. I guess some of his stuff would be too raw for the mass paperback companies anyhow. He's better off with his present publishers, City Lights Books and Black Sparrow Press. With them he can be as raw as he likes. Total freedom to write whatever he pleases. Well, okay, they may shy away from a story about a sudden out-break of coprophilia among dentists. (laughter)

Q. So you don't think he could be another J.D. Salinger if he had a big publisher?

A. Who knows. No, I guess not. For the above reasons. Plus, if you take the sheer dimensions of the country - it is easier to be visible in a small place like Germany where everything is so hyper-organized. You can go into the only bookstore of a small town near the Czechoslo-vakian border, and if they don't have the book on the shelf, they'll have it for you within 24 hours. Two days on the outside. Any books that's in print. Even if you're a small press, as soon as you have a book that sells, the two or three big distributers become interested, and once the book is in their catalog, it's available throughout the country. You don't have that in Barston, Muskogee, uh, uh, Kalamazoo. You don't even have it in New York City, for that matter.

Q. Has Bukowski's success here opend up the way for

other American writers in Germany?

A. Hunter S. Thompson and William Kotzwinkle, for instance, may have profited from it initially. They were picked up by German publishers in the wake of the Bukowski boom. The Bavarian small press man did stories by Jack Micheline and Gerald Locklin. And ~~xxdxdxaaxaxthaaa~~ Jack Kerouac's Book of Dreams, as well as his (Jack's) daughter's first novel, Baby Driver, which got great reviews - one of them by myself. Fabulous book. There was a renewed interest in the Beat writers. And of course a demand for people who were writing Bukowski's type of narrative poem. I did an anthology, with Hank as co-editor, which was called Turpentine on the Rocks. It had Diane DiPrima, Charles Plymell, Doug Blazek. Micheline. Harold Norse. Rochelle Owens. Nila NorthSun, a Shoshone indian, tough as nails. Koertge, Locklin, Sam Shepard, lots of others. Sold close to fifty thousand copies.

Q. Bukowski himself suggests, in more than one poem, that his success overseas must be due in great part to his translators - do you think there's anything to this?

A. That's something you'd have to ask the critics. I mean, okay, if you look at the reviews, some of them really went apeshit over my translations. Which was nice, although I couldn't quite understand it. I was simply trying to do a good job. Apparently that is already exceptional in this country.

I'm sure a good translation can help to get things rolling. But a good novel will sell even in a mediocre translation. Maybe not 100 000 copies, but it'll do okay. With poetry it's different. For instance, after the big Bukowski Reader, 2001 in Frankfurt decided to publish a 330-page Selected Poems. Now that is unheard-of, even in Germany. If you do a thing like that, the translation had better be damned good. Nobody is going to buy two kilos worth of poems in a bad translation.

Q. What changes do you feel at liberty to make in

translating a book?

A. None. I don't add anything, and I don't leave anything out. But I take whatever liberties are necessary to get it across. Not just the exact meaning, but the feeling. The sound. In some cases it's easy because you can put it three or four different ways, all of them okay. But in a lot of cases there's only one specific way that makes it. And you better find it.

Q. In translating Bukowski, or Burroughs - have you been able to come up with any 'firsts' in German?

A. No, not really. Although some people seem to think so. I remember this radio program I was on. The guy starts out by claiming that I have invented a whole new language to translate Bukowski. Or even that I'm making up a lot of things which are not in the original. He rattles off a few examples. "What's your problem, Arnfried?" I asked. "Don't you ever go into the pub around the corner? What kind of ivory tower are you inhabiting?" One of his exhibits was the inevitable "fuck you". For a casual "fuck you" the German equivalent is Leck mich am Arsch (lick my ass). Or just leck mich, for short. But if somebody says it viciously and with real conviction, I translate it as Fick dich ins Knie! Fuck yourself in the knee. In the hollow of the knee, I mean, which really takes some contortions. (laughter) Which is quite current and has been around for at least thirty years - I think I first picked it up in highschool, in the mid-fifties. So the guy thought it was something I had invented. He must have been moving in some pretty drab circles. All right. So, I don't make anything up (which would be counterproductive anyway), but I do try to make good use of what's there.

Q. Do you feel it's been primarily Bukowski who has made you as a translator?

A. Bukowski and Burroughs. They have been my most important authors. If you just look at the sheer bulk of the work alone. Let's see...the one I'm doing right now (The Western Lands) is my eleventh Burroughs book.

Q. Burroughs must be rather difficult...

A. He's considered insanely difficult to translate. With good reason. The profusion of different slangs. And of course the cutup method and some other tricks. Which I'm more or less familiar with, so I guess that gives me an edge. But there will always be things where I'm momentarily at a loss.

Q. Can you think of an example?

A. Junkie puts on his old black overcoat and decides, "time to cosq" — c-o-s-q. You won't find that in a dictionary of slang. At least I didn't. There was a slim chance that it might be a misprint for "score" which had somehow survived through all the different editions. But I wanted to be on the safe side, so I asked the man himself. "No", he wrote back, "it's cosq and it simply means 'to hit the street'." There. Probably an example of strictly local New York City lushworkers' slang of the 40s.

Q. If you can generalize, what do you think translators have the most trouble with?

A. Dialog. Not only slangy dialog, but just ordinary live dialog in colloquial English. Or French, whatever. Most of them can't handle it. It comes out flat, colorless, contrived. You have a lively character who's got a good rap, and they make him sound like a prissy bureaucrat who is talking down his nose. Hopeless. And if you have a story which is ninety percent dialog — Bukowski has some of these; Nelson Algren; Raymond Carver — then obviously you are ruining the entire story. Forget it.

Q. Do you still enjoy translating after all these years?

A. Certain books, yes. Of course, even if you like a book a lot, it's still hard work.

Q. How many pages do you translate, say, per month?

A. I do maybe a hundred pages. Book pages in the original, I mean. Sometimes more. Never less.

Q. What has been your toughest job so far?

A. Bob Dylan. Texts and Drawings, published by Alfred A. Knopf. Everything he had written between 1961 and 1972. 450 pages or so. What made it tough was that he insisted that the rhymes be kept whenever possible. And as you know...well, let's just say that some of his lyrics are less successful than others. And to make it all rhyme in German...my god. Took me almost half a year. It was worth it, though. The book was a success - 2001 in Frankfurt did it, in a 900-page bi-lingual edition, in 1975. And it encouraged them to go into publishing for real (until then, they had only done reprints). And thank god they did, because I was able to do several big editions for them: the major works of Burroughs, Algren, Denton Welch.

Q. What are your primary ambitions, your working guidelines, when translating a book?

A. My ambition is to make it sound as if it had been originally written in German. Which probably bothers certain of my colleagues whose ambition it is to get away with a lot less (laughter). But if I'm sacrificing three or four months of my life to translate a book, I want to be able to look at it ten years from now without having to blush.