BUKOWSKI, Charles. American. Born in Andernach, Germany, 16 August 1920; brought to the United States in 1922. Attended Los Angeles City College, 1939–41. Divorced; one daughter. Post office worker, Los Angeles, for 12 years. Formerly, Editor, *Harlequin*, Wheeler, Texas, then Los Angeles, and *Laugh Literary* and *Man the Humping Guns*, both Los Angeles; columnist ("Notes of a Dirty Old Man"), *Open City*, Los Angeles, then Los Angeles *Free Press*. Recipient: Loujon Press award; National Endowment for the Arts grant, 1974. Address: P.O. Box 132, San Pedro, California 90731, U.S.A.

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Charles Bukowski's world, as John William Corrington aptly stated in the introduction to *It Catches My Heart in Its Hands* (1963), "is an alley, a dark hallway; it is a park or a trashlittered road alongside the Pacific—or the Mississippi. And its tenants are not actors. They are derelicts, convicts, whores, dogs, paupers, roaches, drunks, and the rest of the lower end of the American spectrum." This is both a fair assessment of the world represented through Bukowski's prose and poetry (Bukowski is most famous as a poet) and representative itself of the "compliments" that Bukowski's admirers pay him. Bukowski writes of the "lower end" of America and the people who inhabit this sphere perhaps more honestly and bluntly—sparing no four-lettered words, no unpleasant detail—than any American writer ever has. "The spoken word nailed to the page" is how Corrington describes Bukowski's style. It is because of his no-holds-barred depiction of a heretofore ignored stratum of America that Bukowski has come to be loved particularly by those bored with the "safe" subjects and the formal, etiquette-burdened prose of most of Bukowski's contemporaries. Bukowski has never been supported by a university or a large publisher; he has come from and largely remained in the world of which he writes. Published by small, underground presses and ephemeral mimeographed little magazines, Bukowski has gained popularity, in a sense, through word of mouth.

Bukowski's first full-length book of short stories was called *Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and General Tales of Ordinary Madness.* The themes in this early book are perhaps best described by Thomas Edward of the *New York Review*, who paraphrases Bukowski's attitude as, "Politics is bullshit, since work is as brutalizing and unrewarding in a liberal order as in any totalitarian one; artists and intellectuals are mostly fakes, smugly enjoying the blessings of the society they carp at; the radical young are spiritless asses, insulated by drugs and their own endless cant from any authentic experience of mind or body; most women are whores, though *honest* whores are good and desirable; no life finally works, but the best one possibly involves plenty of six packs, enough money to go to the track, and a willing woman of any age and shape in a good old-fashioned garter belt and high heels."

Bukowski despises phoniness and pretension on any level, and his style, accordingly, is simple and straightforward, shunning the ornate or "literary" usage. Bukowski's sentences are mostly short and direct (no metaphor, no allusion, no "devices"), and he prefers, like Hemingway, with whom he is sometimes compared, the simple adjective. But *Erections,*

Ejaculations also reveals a Bukowski who, while maintaining a simple, direct prose style, is experimenting on other levels. In the book there are stories in third person and first person (in later books Bukowski will stay with first-person narration), stories in which no capitalization of proper nouns is used, and stories in which every letter of dialogue is capitalized; there are also stories—clearly autobiographical—in which Bukowski will use his own name for the protagonist and others, also autobiographical, in which the protagonist is named Henry Chinaski, a name Bukowski will use solely in all later stories and novels. They are clearly the stories of a still-developing writer.

An important element in *Erections, Ejaculations*, as in all of Bukowski's writings, is humor. Bukowski's is a lowbrow, tough-guy humor which belittles and degrades just about anything or anyone—from feminists to homosexuals to writers to politicians. Many do not find Bukowski funny at all, but, for others, Bukowski's humor is the main attraction of his writing, enlivening his otherwise utterly depressing outlook. A few lines of one story in *Erections, Ejaculations*, "Great Poets Die in Steaming Pots of Shit," give a taste of the humor and the way in which Bukowski uses it to make serious statements. At the beginning of the story, Bukowski is in a typical condition: "with sick hangover I crawled out from under the sheets the other day to get to the store, buy some food, place food inside of me and make the job I hate." He gets to the grocery store and meets a man who recognizes Bukowski as the great underground poet. The man insists on starting a conversation with Bukowski, who, as usual, is not interested but tolerates the man while Bukowski, hungover, throws food into his basket. The story is made up mostly of their dialogue, signified throughout by upper case letters, and through the dialogue Bukowski's position concerning himself and others who have "made it" comes through in one-line quips. The man nagging Bukowski, recognizing Bukowski's deplorable condition, asks, "CAN'T YOU GET A GRANT OR SOMETHING." Bukowski says, "I TRIED LAST YEAR. THE HUMANITIES. ALL I GOT BACK WAS A FORM-LETTER OF REJECTION." "BUT EVERY ASS IN THE COUNTRY IS LIVING ON A GRANT," the man says. "YOU FINALLY SAID SOMETHING," Bukowski replies.

Bukowski's first novel, *Post Office*, shows, if not a change in overall attitude or "theme," a coalescing of style and point of view which Bukowski maintains to the present day. His protagonist is Henry Chinaski, a thinly-disguised alter-ego, and the novel is, as usual, roughly autobiographical, since Bukowski did work for a post office in Los Angeles as, first, a substitute carrier and, later, a clerk for nearly 12 years—his only steady job, other than that of writer. The tale begins when Chinaski, a drunk, needing a temporary job (again), learns from "the drunk up the hill" that the post office will hire "damned near anybody" near Christmas as a temporary carrier. The novel ends when, many hassles with the supervisors, drunken days and nights, and several women later, Chinaski, finally leaving the post office for good, decides to write his first novel. *Post Office* is, like all of Bukowski's novels, very episodic, written in short sections of often little more than a page which recount, for instance, a mail-carrying mishap, a run-in with the boss, a drunken spree, or a fight with the woman. Yet the novel coheres because of its overall purpose of telling the story of Chinaski's days with the post office, and each section, though a little "episode" in itself, depends upon the others to complete the overall story.

Post Office makes clear that Chinaski/Bukowski is a terminal loner. And it brings out a recurring theme in Bukowski: that human relationships, because of inevitably conflicting egos and desires, never work. Chinaski, time and again, begins alone, encounters others (usually a woman), with whom he begins a relationship. But the relationships inevitably fail, and Chinaksi ends up alone, again. Chinaski is not rueful about this inevitability; he is accepting. He is a supreme existentialist, and the words which end the chapters of *Post Office* often illuminate this attitude: "I got up, walked to the car and I rented the first place I saw with a sign. I moved in that night. I had just lost 3 women and a dog"; "She even helped me pack . . . I got into the car and began cruising up and down the streets looking for a For Rent sign. It didn't seem to be an unusual thing to do"; "We drank a little and then we went to bed, but it wasn't the same, it never was . . . We slept without touching. We had both been robbed." *Post Office* is, appropriately, "dedicated to nobody."

After reading much Bukowski (and there is much to read: though he has written only four novels, his output thus far has been over 60 books, including poetry and short fiction), one senses that, behind this inexorable existential stoicism, there is a Bukowski who has indeed, somewhere along the way, "been robbed" emotionally himself. Bukowski's most recent novel, *Ham on Rye*, confirms this suspicion, as it recounts the story of Henry Chinaski as a child and adolescent. It is autobiographical, and its mixture of poignance, humor, and honesty have made it Bukowski's most highly acclaimed work. It also marks the first time Bukowski has written about his childhood.

The story is told, as usual, by Chinaski himself, starting with his earliest memories of his childhood. As in *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Catcher in the Rye*, the vantage point of a young person is perhaps the best one from which to expose the hypocrisy, pretensions, and vanity of a "grown-up" world, the main things Bukowski sets out to expose. *Ham on Rye* takes on a much more touching, human dimension than his earlier works, for here it is the young, impressionable, and vulnerable Chinaski having to cope with the evils and sicknesses of grown-up people.

Ham on Rye takes place mostly during the Depression years and ends at the outbreak of World War II. Chinaski is raised in a household where the father, chronically unemployed, is stereotypically stern and overbearing ("He didn't like me. 'Children should be seen and not heard,' he told me") and the mother is characterless and obeying ("'The father,' she said, 'is always right'"). Chinaski's parents—like most grown-ups in the novel—live their lives based on false ideals and erroneous perceptions of how life "should be." Their ideals and perceptions have little to do with reality and they make life, for those who, like Chinaski, see the phoniness and wish for truth and honesty, a game of little interest. The novel unfolds as a series of incidents—often tragic, often hilarious—through which Chinaski sees these shortcomings in his parents and people of the "real" world and comes to accept his situation as hopeless. Chinaski first fully understands the phoniness with which people cloak themselves when he fabricates what was supposed to be a factual account of President Hoover's visit to Los Angeles and submits it to his English teacher. After his English teacher discovers that his supposedly "factual" paper—a paper she had read to the class and praised as exemplary—is a fraud, she, to save face, praises Chinaski anyway, saying "That makes it all the more remarkable." Chinaski comments: "So that's what they wanted: lies. Beautiful lies. That's what they needed. People were fools."

Knowing that people prefer the comfortable lie to the uncomfortable truth makes encounters with all but understanding outsiders (like himself) unbearable for Chinaski. With the "outsiders" Chinaski finds himself inevitably allied. Because

however, the human relationship—even among outsiders like Chinaski—is ineluctably ephemeral. Chinaski soon finds that the only things that make life bearable are masturbating, dreaming of sex (Chinaski never does, in *Ham on Rye*, actually have intercourse with a woman), and, above all, alcohol: "'Without drink,' Chinaski says to his buddy near the end of the novel, 'I would have long ago cut my god-damned throat.'" Charles Bukowski's ability to present in a language directly from the people about whom he writes the hypocrisies, the intellectual shortcomings, and the sadness of those trying to live out the American Dream makes *Ham on Rye*—and most of Bukowski's fiction—relevant and moving.

—Jay Dougherty