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Charles Bukowski's *Barfly*

I photograph and record what I see and what happens to me. I am not a guru or leader of any sort. I am not a man who looks for solutions in God or politics. If somebody else wants to do the dirty work and create a better world for us and he can do it, I will accept it. In Europe where my work is having much luck, various groups have put a claim on me; revolutionaries, anarchists, so forth, because I have written of the common man of the streets, but in interviews over there I have had to disclaim a conscious working relationship with them because there isn't any. I have compassion for almost all the individuals of the world; at the same time, they repulse me.

--Charles Bukowski<sup>1</sup>

Taken from one of the few interviews of length that Charles Bukowski has given, this quotation underscores one of the primary paradoxes of his ideology: a simultaneous repugnance toward and attraction to the characters that populate his work. One manifestation of this ambivalent attitude surfaces in Bukowski's representation of his characters' emotive responses. Emotional outlet, depending upon the degree to which it is allied to or removed from a knowledge of "reality" as Bukowski depicts and understands it, can be either ennobling or debasing. And nowhere in the Bukowski canon does this attitude find better expression than in *Barfly*, Bukowski's first dramatic work, recently seen by audiences in Europe and America as a major motion picture. Throughout *Barfly*, Bukowski depicts both futile and worthwhile emotional responses, linking the latter to a concept of personal

dignity that entails rejecting the outside world and simply *enduring*.

At the play's beginning one is in a bar frequented purely by regulars, or "barflies." The bar is alive with the shouts and proddings of the regulars urging on an alley fight directly behind the bar. The fighters are Eddie, the quintessence of the stereotypical macho personality, who "must prove...something continually but...never asks himself why" (12) and who has beaten the other fighter, Henry Chinaski, the play's protagonist, many times in the past. Henry, at this early stage of the work, has tough words for his opponent ("Shit...that the best you can do? You better phone for help..." (17)) but is barely able to get such words out, much less hold his own in the fight. He is, to all present--the women, the other men, and the reader--a pitiful sight, the hopeless loser, and above all the one that most in society would consider of little interest. The scene ends with Henry lying alone in his own blood, the others jollily heading back to the bar with congratulations for Eddie.

So begins *Barfly*, and so begins the deft development of Bukowski's illustration of what constitutes the closest one can come to a meaningful existence in a world of superficiality. Henry Chinaski, we soon learn, is a loner and an outcast, even in the bar that he frequents. Despised by the women and the men alike as a perpetual "no-sayer," he sits alone and downs drink after drink, occasionally piping in with an unrequested retort or remark. He is always, in these <sup>inevitable</sup> perpetual bar brawls between himself and Eddie, the one the crowd does *not* cheer for. Often without work and ever without luck, he seems to be in a world going nowhere. But it becomes clear as the play proceeds that, to Henry Chinaski, we all live in such a world, whether we live from

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the bar or the yacht. It is a world of personal insincerity and dog-eat-dog existentialism, in which self-preservation and self-gratification are the only true ends toward which we all aspire.

Bukowski illustrates this vision primarily through Henry Chinaski's two relationships with women in the play, the first with Wanda, a woman of his own "class," and the second with Tully, a well-to-do editor from *The Contemporary Review of Art, Music, and Literature*. Chinaski is initially attracted to Wanda, the bar broad, because, as the bartender tells him, "she's crazy." (Page) Chinaski knows that craziness, as described by those generally considered "normal," is too often attributed to those who have simply seen too much of reality and no longer see the use of pretending in a world of pretenders. When Chinaski sees Wanda initially, she is sitting alone, although there are others in the bar, and she speaks to no one. He sits beside her and stares straight ahead. Wanda speaks first:

WANDA (still looking straight ahead)  
I can't stand people. I hate them.

HENRY  
Yeah.

WANDA  
You hate them?

HENRY  
No, but I seem to feel better when they're not around.  
(60)

This is, as it were, love at first sight for Chinaski. But the transcendent truth that all humans are self-seeking and selfish is again soon reinforced: after the two go home together and make love at Wanda's place, Chinaski learns that she has been living off of the money of a rich eccentric who apparently has his way with her from time to time in exchange for the freedom to

leave fairly often and the money to do it with. Wanda has no illusions about people and their motives, including her own, as she makes clear to Chinaski:

WANDA

Look, I have to tell you something. I like you, maybe it's only because you're so low down and useless. And if we're going to try living together I'm not going to try to burn you. But I've got to tell you, if some man came by with a fifth of whiskey I'm afraid I'd go with him.... (76)

This kind of brutal honesty is, to Bukowski, a sign of true style. But the reader learns this in a concrete way only after Henry Chinaski's second relationship, with Tully, transpires.

For the average person in this world of Chinaski's, Tully's arrival would be a God-send. She has a detective follow Henry to find out where he lives because she is so taken by the originality of the stories that he has been sending--handwritten and without a self-addressed, stamped envelope--to the magazine. Tully comes just after Wanda has indeed gone off with that man with the fifth (and the crowning blow is that the man was Eddie); she is well-off and truly interested in Chinaski as a person ("When I read your story I had to find out. It made me *feel*, and it made me curious, very curious..."(133)); and, after they go home together and make love, she offers Chinaski a way off of the bar-track: "...you can stay here. You can have your own room with a typer. Privacy. You can get your work done. You don't belong on the streets..."(143). And it is at this very point that Chinaski says "I've got to go" (143), realizing that he could never be happy with Tully, that she has not understood why he has lived as he has for as long as he has.

The telling, earlier conversations between Chinaski and

Tully--the ones that she herself could not understand--underscore Chinaski's credo of life, his reasons for rejecting the status quo, and help to define his seemingly paradoxical ideology. Almost from the beginning of her meeting Chinaski, Tully had questioned the rightness of his way of life:

TULLY  
Anybody can be a drunk...

HENRY  
Anybody can be a non-drunk. It takes a special talent to be a drunk. It takes endurance. Endurance is more important than truth. (124)

And later, as they're driving together toward her house, Chinaski tries to make her understand his credo:

HENRY  
You know, Tully, I'm not pretending to *be* anything, that's the point.

TULLY  
You mean, *not* being anything holds some kind of wisdom for you?

HENRY  
Yeah. And we get into the old revolving door and then 'what is wisdom' comes up and we need another drink.  
(138)

The subject soon changes to matters of driving, ones with which Chinaski can communicate with his companion. But Tully persists:

TULLY  
Listen, are you really that much against marriage and family and all that?

HENRY  
I don't know. I just think of my parents and other people I've known. It seems that most people get in too early. They get into it because they're bored or desperate or don't know what else to do. Then they're stuck in it, like a kind of slow quicksand.

TULLY  
So you just want to pop in and out of bed with women?

HENRY

There's a price to that, too. (140)

Tully insists on the black-or-white picture here: one is either a philanderer or a married-man, a drop-out or a mainstreamer, struggling with the majority on the majority's terms. Chinaski is neither/nor, and refuses to be categorized. He refuses to be a part of the mainstream, as Tully wishes him to be (in her own way), and he refuses to take part in the games of his so-called "peers," those with whom he must sit in the bars. Chinaski is, as he said earlier on, a man simply *enduring*. The relationships with Wanda and Tully illustrate that it matters not whether one moves within a circle of wealth or a circle of poverty. Personal class and style come not from without but from within. If Wanda, the alcoholic, is not deep enough to fully understand Chinaski's philosophy, at least she does not insist on one's conforming to a stereotype; her reactions and statements, unlike Tully's, are emotional and, therefore, for Bukowski, honest.

It is Wanda's quality of gut-level emotional responsiveness that tells Chinaski instinctively that she is the right woman for him, at least for now, when the choice is between Wanda and Tully. There is, it must be remembered, no *lasting* happiness in Bukowski's world, for the intelligent (who are also, by virtue of their intelligence, disillusioned) know that the nature of "individuals," as Bukowski pointedly refers to people, precludes their coexisting in harmony with one another. Chinaski and Wanda are both, obviously, disillusioned. And that is certainly one source of their attraction to each other. But Tully is disillusioned as well, as her searching out Chinaski and remaining with him, despite his having views and habits that appall her, demonstrates. The *crucial* difference, therefore,

between Tully and Wanda is that between intellectual posturing and natural, even atavistic emotiveness. (Bukowski's affirmation of the dignity of emotive response could indeed be compared to Lawrence's.<sup>2</sup>) And the fight between the two women in the play's final scene underscores their essential, fundamental differences. Wanda's reactions are instinctive, what many would call base and brutal; Tully, however, remains reasonably polite and diplomatic:

TULLY (*looking at Wanda*)

Pardon me, I don't mean to be rude. Are you a friend of Henry's. Haven't I seen you before?

(*Wanda leaves her seat, stands behind Tully*)

WANDA

Yeah, I'm a *real* good friend of Henry's. How about you?

(*Eddie brings the drink, puts it in front of Tully.*)

TULLY

Well, Henry and I are acquainted...

(*Wanda leans forward and smells at Tully's hair and neck.*)

WANDA

I'll say you are! That's the perfume!

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WANDA (*to Tully*)

I'm going to separate you from your parts, you Westside bitch!

TULLY

Just get away from me. I just want to talk to Henry for a minute. (159-60)

The two women end up in a bar brawl, rolling and lashing about on the floor, until they are pulled apart by the patrons. In the stage direction at this point, Bukowski writes, "Wanda and Tully roll upon the floor, kicking and gouging and biting. It is animalistic, horrifying and beautiful" (161). Such directions of course not only direct the action of the play but comment upon

it; and the comments ("horrificing and beautiful"), themselves paradoxical, suggest at once that Bukowski applauds this kind of visceral emotiveness and is apprehensive of it as well. This ambivalence, this paradox, runs throughout the play and provides the primary source of its tension and poignancy.

For it is the instinctive emotional reaction that also, Chinaski knows, leads one *into* relationships and tempts one to carry along expectations that are unrealistic. Reality dictates, in Chinaski's (and Bukowski's) vision, that expectations in human relationships which go beyond those that would include merely mutual gratification lead ineluctably to disappointment. And this "reality" Bukowski demonstrates most convincingly in the course of Chinaski's relationship with Wanda. Finally able to communicate, however briefly, with someone who also, as Bukowski details in his initial description of the major characters, "has an intelligence born out of disillusion" (9), Henry exults over the possibility of getting a job and having emotional "security." It is, ironically, only Wanda who keeps her sensibilities in, as Chinaski would say in other parts of the work, "reality." Here, Chinaski is about to go off and interview for a job:

WANDA

Look, Hank, why don't you go tomorrow? We just met. Last night was good. When you run off like this I feel like you're trying to get away from me.

HENRY

Baby, I'm doing it *for* you, for both of us. We'll be able to drink with class. We won't have to worry about the rent, we won't have to beg, we won't have to be barflies right down to the grave...

*(The drinks have arrived...Henry lifts his...)*

HENRY

A toast! To the working class! And to all the shackjobs in America, Mexico and Poland!

*(They lift their glasses...)*

WANDA

To us...with God's help. (84)

Chinaski's emotions for Wanda lead him, so Bukowski would have us believe, to desire the unnatural "security-granting" conventions of traditional male-female relationships, in which, for example, the male possesses the female and works to support them both, in exchange, presumably, for a guarantee (*false*, Bukowski would iterate) of emotional security. Just before the scene quoted directly above, for instance, Henry, in a move toward that state of possessing Wanda, intervenes irrationally in a phone conversation between Wanda and Wilbur, the rich but impotent eccentric who regularly supplies Wanda with money and booze--and who could have just as easily unknowingly supplied them *both*:

*(The phone rings. Wanda walks over, picks it up.)*

WANDA

Oh Wilbur...! Geez, I couldn't make it over, Wilbur. I got stinko and passed out, I went to bed. Tonight? Well, geez, I don't know. Let me think about it...

*(Henry grabs the phone)*

HENRY

Wilbur, you call this number again and I'm coming over to do a little tap dance on your skull!

*(Wanda grabs phone...)*

WANDA

Wilbur, please be careful! He's a very jealous man! He's a wrestler. He just sits around all day drinking barrels of beer. He drinks beer and farts and wrestles and lifts weights...

WANDA *(looking at Henry)*

He hung up.

*(Wanda puts phone down)*

WANDA

Boy, you really cut off a good source of supply.

HENRY

We'll get it somewhere else.

WANDA  
How?

HENRY  
Well, I'll get a job... (75-76)

Bukowski skillfully constructs such scenes to provide what amount to moral lessons, for both Chinaski and for, of course, the reader. There simply is, in Bukowski's scheme of things, no happiness to be found in commitments based upon a false understanding of human motivation, always self-oriented. This first attempt at a relationship between Chinaski and Wanda, then, of course, fails, and very quickly. As Chinaski is off looking for that job that is bound to set everything straight for the two of them, Wanda goes to the bar and then to bed with Eddie, the man with the fifth of whiskey. It's a matter of personal gratification, what Bukowski sees as a fundamental law of life. And in Chinaski's more "realistic" state he understands this as well. But it is this "depraved" side of emotional response (or so Bukowski sees is here) that is man's downfall, that ultimately leads to disappointment and despair.

Bukowski documents Henry's disappointment over the incident in two scenes, one of which is practically devoid of spoken words and one of which is the night-after confrontation with Wanda. Since the first scene represents the resounding blow to the romantic hopes of both the reader and Chinaski, it is central to the work's purpose (and it occurs, significantly, just after the middle of the book). It is thus worth recounting in its entirety:

#### INTERIOR OF WANDA'S APARTMENT

*(Henry is in the apartment alone, in bed. He has slept in his underwear. He kicks his legs out of bed, sits*

*up, looks very hung over. There are some sheets of paper and a pen on the bedstand. He picks up the pen and begins to hand-print on one of the sheets of paper. He reads what he has written, crumples it up, throws it on the nightstand next to the bed. He gets up and goes to the bathroom. He closes the door. Behind the door you can hear gagging. He doesn't vomit but comes close. Henry walks out...)*

HENRY (softly, almost exhaling)  
Shit...

*(He sits on the bed and places his hand on his stomach, then inhales and exhales rapidly. Then he stretches out on the bed, looks up at the ceiling. The telephone rings. It is on the coffee table in the middle of the room. He doesn't move. On the second ring he gives the phone the finger. The phone rings again, then four times, five times. On the sixth ring he leaps out of bed and runs to the phone, picks it up.)*

HENRY  
Hello? No, this isn't the S.S. Enterprise!...

*(Henry hangs up, goes back to bed, stares at the ceiling. He closes his eyes. Soon, in spite of his unhappiness, he is asleep...)* (91-92)

This scene marks Chinaski's lowest emotional point in the play. Indeed, nowhere else in the book does Bukowski use the word "unhappiness" to describe Chinaski's feelings, not even when Chinaski is steeped in his own blood, having been beaten by Eddie. It is this kind of unhappiness, Bukowski implies, that is the hardest to bear: an unhappiness borne of romantic disappointment, in which one is painfully reminded of the harsh truths of reality (or of human motivation) at a time of least resistance, when one has momentarily given in to the vain hope that man is not so self-oriented, that such abstract concepts as trust, honesty, and love do in fact have substance.

Chinaski's self-chastisement in the following scene, then, represents his re-awakening to the reality he had known before his interlude with Wanda:

HENRY

Every time I get with a woman something happens. It either happens sooner or it happens later. This time it happened pretty fast.

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WANDA

What the hell do you want? What the hell do you expect?

HENRY

I know. I expect too much. (94)

Wanda's words here, in an overview of the play, could just as easily be directed at the reader as at Chinaski. For, at this point in the work, the reader is the one who feels the real pain, the real disappointment, having hoped that Chinaski would--indeed *could*--find a piece of temporal happiness in this otherwise desolate setting. But the reader learns, just as Chinaski is reminded, that temporal happiness through misevaluations of humanity is both unrealistic and, because largely a creation of intellect, emotionally dishonest. In the *Bukowski/Purdy Letters*, Bukowski alludes to what he sees as the unfortunate propensity of Americans to obfuscate with intellectual distractions and abstractions the reality as perceived by the emotions (which are, at least with Bukowski, constantly disappointed). Although in the following passage he is speaking specifically of writers, the key terms to which I have been referring ("real," "true," "feeling," "reality") substantiate the points of this discussion as well:

(Americans) have fenders in their eyes, highways, glistening soap,...too much college--they simply can't lay down the real and true line of feeling and act and reality. Too conceited, too polished, too sophisticated, too dead. too bad. (79)

Honestly expressed or dignified emotional outlet, on the other hand, receives its illustration through Henry's fights with Eddie. Bukowski describes Eddie, the Night Bartender, as "quick

with the word, seems to know things but does not...good with the ladies...a man's man, black hairs jutting from his chest, his shirt open two or three buttons down...he's what a man is supposed to be, and if you don't like that, you know, then there's something wrong with you" (12). Eddie is thus of course symbolic of that status quo, those who live and act according to what they think is *supposed* to be without ever questioning values. And the fights themselves, two occurring at the beginning of the play and one which is to take place after the play ends, are indications that, so long as the dice are not loaded, those who do not, as Bukowski says of Eddie in the character description, "ask (themselves) why" (12) will always be the moral losers.

In the first fight, however, the one which opens the play, the dice *are* loaded: Henry Chinaski has not eaten for days, and his energy is at a nadir. Despite the disadvantage, Chinaski fights and goads for as long as possible, to the very point of unconsciousness:

HENRY (*gasping, wheezing it out*)  
Shit...that the best you can do? You better phone for help...

(*As Henry is doubled over, Eddie brings a karate chop down on the back of his neck. Henry falls forward, drops flat. Eddie stands over him a moment. Then he lands a very hard kick to Henry's side. Pauses. Then begins kicking, again and again...*) (17)

Eddie's fundamental fear and lack of dignity are underscored here, as he continues to beat a helpless man. Indeed, "Two men" (17) have to pull Eddie away from Chinaski, and Eddie's next words reveal the trepidation that underlies his inability to understand Henry: "...Why does he keep goading me? Where the hell's he coming from?" (17).

What, in hindsight, turns out to be the initial thematic statement of the *dignity* of emotion directed against those who are part of the hopelessness engendered and nurtured by the status quo is embodied in the second fight between Eddie and Chinaski. *This* time, the dice aren't loaded: Henry has, as he tells Eddie in his consternation over Chinaski's durability, "Fuel. I ate twice today" (54). And Chinaski does indeed, during this fight, *endure*. Henry allows Eddie to take his punches, give him his best, and become nervous over the no-sayer's resilience:

HENRY  
Okay, Eddie...

EDDIE  
Okay, what? What's 'okay?' You fuckin' rummy, What's 'okay?'

*(Eddie rushes in and begins throwing punches again. As Eddie continues to swing Henry looks at him, not flinching. Then Henry reaches out and grabs Eddie by the shirt collar. He picks him off the ground and whirls him against the bricks, lets go and begins punching at Eddie, very slowly but with hard and powerful blows.*

*Some of Henry's punches miss and his knuckles are smashed and bloody against the bricks but he continues to punch at his target, hitting Eddie brutally and with much force, landing with two punches out of three. Eddie can no longer swing back. Henry gives him a powerful blow to the stomach, then as Eddie doubles he uppercuts him, watches him fall to the alley, turns and walks back to the bar...)* (55-56)

Reminiscent of the kinds of deliberate and symbolic Hemingway-esque struggles between hunter and hunted, this scene shows a long-beaten Chinaski fighting, with as much spiritual as bodily energy, against a symbol as well as a man. Eddie goes down, representing, as Chinaski says to Wanda later in the book, "everything that disgusts me" (93). Unlike Eddie, Chinaski punches only until the job is done. He does not *fear* Eddie in

the way that Eddie fears him. He understands but, as he says, despises what Eddie represents. The moral battle is over when Eddie is beaten; there is no more that should or can be done. Unoriginality, blind devotion to a system or a way of life, following the way of least resistance whether or not it degrades the imagination or the spirit: these are the evils that fall, temporarily, with Eddie in the context of this work.

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There is never, in *Barfly* or in Bukowski's other works, the implication that the lies, the evils, will stay down. But it is important that the statement be made early on in the book, before the relationships with Wanda and Tully test the applied assertion that one cannot ascribe to the delusory ideals of the "unoriginal" (93) (a word that Chinaski uses in describing Eddie to Wanda) without falling prey to their consequences: a sacrifice of honesty to oneself, an attempt to mask the truth of self-gratification with the salve of public posturing. The relationships with Wanda and Tully dramatically demonstrate, as I have pointed out, the ineluctable dissapointment that accompanies an attempt at reconciling man's knowledge of his basic self-interest with the underlying lies of societal conventions (like marriage or simply a faithful co-existence with another). Man is, Bukowski insists, inexorably self-seeking. Thus, honesty to the self allows only either a kind of Lawrentian gut emotion or the Bukowskian acknowledgement of man's corruptibility, something that logically entails stoic rejection of society and most other humans.

Chinaski's displays of emotion in his fights with Eddie, therefore, are dignified, for he is fighting, however hopelessly, against a pervasive ideology that defies rationality, that cannot

without endless frustration be questioned. Bukowski indicates the conundrum in a discussion between Chinaski and Jim, the day barkeep:

HENRY

This is a world where everybody's got to *do* something. Somebody laid down this rule that everybody's got to *do* something, *be* something--a dentist, a glider pilot, a narc, a janitor, a preacher. All that. Sometimes I just get tired thinking of all the things I don't want to be, of all the things I don't want to do--like go to India, get my teeth cleaned, save the whale. All that. I don't understand it.

JIM

You're not supposed to think about it. I think the whole trick is not to think about it. (89)

"Not to think about it" is indeed the whole trick. But Chinaski knows that "not to think about it" equals either not being honest with oneself or not being intelligent enough at the start to want to question the "it," the status quo. The only characters in the play who *is* intelligent enough to "think about it"--Chinaski--flirts with the hope that there can exist honesty and sincerity in human relationships over and above the self-centeredness which we all must acknowledge. And he learns, in the painful course of things, *(namely in his relationship w/ Wanda)* Bukowski's primary pronouncement: self-gratification is "reality," a fact of humanity, and it effectively precludes *intellectual soc* attempts at partaking of the world in which Tully usually moves or the *non-thinking conformity* ~~lies~~ with which those like Eddie comfort themselves. *honest*

The fight in the final scene between Tully and Wanda *(thus arguments)* counterpoints those between Henry and Eddie, and it ~~underscores~~ Bukowski's dual view of emotional outlet. Whereas Henry's fights are simply emotional lashings out at the truth of existence (i.e., of the existence of Eddie) and therefore futile, the one between Tully and Wanda represents the illusion of both women that any lasting happiness would come to the winner of such a

fight. Chinaski's fights are acceptable, in Bukowski's view, because they are fought from blind emotion, with no hope that victory or defeat would substantially change the world or even the participant's state of being. It is thus a dignified emotional response, in the context of this work, for it is expressed with a fundamental base in "reality." The women fight, on the other hand, to gain what cannot, in "reality," be gained. This is, then, what Henry tries to communicate to the women just before they exchange blows:

HENRY

Look, girls, be realistic. None of us hardly knows the other. We're basically strangers to each other. We've passed in the night and met again in a bar. Be realistic: there's no reality in any of this. (160)

This knowledge of "reality" is of course important to Chinaski-- and to Bukowski. For it forms the basis upon which the seemingly paradoxical attitude toward emotional outlet in the work is made clear. And the evolution of the definitions of reality, as well as dignified and depraved emotional response, unfold gradually and systematically in the course of the book.

It is, finally, then, a bleak vision that Bukowski possesses, made all the more bleak by the ways in which he demonstrates it, with uninhibited (though realistic) diction and debasing details. And it is no doubt this *method*, that is, the literature's "surface," that has discouraged serious critical attention to this Los Angeles-based author, whose reputation as a serious writer is ironically better established in most European countries than in his own.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, many American critics have used Bukowski's approach against him in the same way they once used it against other now-respected authors whose approach was thought initially less than orthodox, from Whitman to <sup>Williams &</sup> Ginsberg

and Burroughs.

It is almost certain, however, that the current dearth of serious American criticism on Bukowski will one day be attributed not to the literature's shallowness but to early critics' inability to see far enough beyond the surface of the writing to ascertain its purpose. Gerald Locklin shares this assessment in a recent review of *Hot Water Music*, saying, "where but in the English-speaking countries could manners become elevated to such a powerful aesthetic criterion in the first place?" (159). And Diane Wakoski, writing of Bukowski, has made the astute observation that, " . " <sup>in some</sup> ~~in the early~~ <sub>criticism of Bukowski</sub> the degree to which much of the negative response arises out of perceived violations of etiquette--and thus out of reaction *only* to the surface--one begins to question the commentators' motives: i.e., are they informative or moral? Jascha Kessler, for example, reviewing *Mockingbird Wish Me Luck* for *Parnassus* in 1973, launches into indignant diatribes against Bukowski himself, one of which reads "I am not sure (Bukowski) wants to project the presence he does: a vain, irritable, miserable, self-indulgent and self-commiserating presence....A mean-minded, beery ghost damply haunting the place where he is...( ). Peter Ackroyd, reviewing *Life and Death in the Charity Ward* for The Spectator in 1974, also attacks the man rather than the work, writing "...only a frustrated man writes about sex with such prurient abandon. A dull character finally emerges, and it is dullness which spreads through these stories like a stain" ( ). And perhaps the most humorous example of what amounts to ~~merely~~ distaste for ~~little else than~~ the way in which Bukowski <sup>and ~~his~~ <sub>own</sub> <sup>insidiously</sup> <sub>deliberates</sub> <sup>to maintain the appropriate</sup> <sub>delivers</sub> his messages was provided in a perceptive article by John William Corrington in 1963: "A few weeks ago, Bukowski's</sup>

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work came up in the course of a conversation in Houston. A young woman shivered at the mention of his name. 'Bukowski? He's a savage,' she said vehemently. 'Nothing but a savage'" ( ). The shortcomings of such emotional response to the surface of Bukowski's work are easy enough to see, although Bukowski himself has recently broken his usual stance of indifference in the face of such criticism to speak out on its lack of substance:

I get bad-mouthed by people who have never read my work, and by some who have but but have read things into it. I'm supposed to have an evil tinge about me, strangle babies in their cribs, walk about in underwear a month unwashed, and so forth. Some of my stories are about lunatic and criminal people; therefore people think I am lunatic and criminal. The most ridiculous charge is that I'm a sexist pig. If one will read the body of my work, he will see that where ridicule or attack falls, the male receives just as much as the female.<sup>4</sup>

There are already, though, signs that a more thoughtful assessment of the canon will eventually materialize. Following the lead of the few thorough American critics to have written on Bukowski since ~~1963 or so~~<sup>the early 1960s</sup>,<sup>5</sup> one scholarly journal has recently devoted an issue to Bukowski's fiction,<sup>6</sup> and it is generally easier, especially in Europe, to find reviews that take for granted Bukowski's worthiness as a writer of serious literature.<sup>6</sup> *Barfly*, as I have demonstrated here, is indeed serious literature, the pronouncements of which are not merely contained within the work's surface, although they are authenticized by it.