

Something about Bukowski

by Gerald Locklin

This is from a transcript of a large interview with Gerry Locklin at the Symposium of the Bukowski-Society in Andernach, Germany in 2002. He talked free about what came to mind and also answered peoples questions. Of course we had to shorten the thing – it would have made up a whole book. But the essentials are here. We don't reprint the questions of the audience but connect Gerrys words to one whole thing.

We transcribed this from a videotape filmed from some distance and besides are no native speakers. So there might be some slight mistakes in this text. But we take this and hope you're smart enough to extract the true meaning of all, that was said there, even if our presentation may lack good grammar (and by the way do not forgett, that this was not an elaborated speech but a free talk).

Something I discussed with Jules [Smith – author of "Art, Survival and so forth", who was also at this symposium] last night is, he thinks that there is the chance that Bukowski will be incorporated into the official literature in the United States and taught in schools. I'm not sure that will happen. He will always be read and always be loved by many readers. But he will be a favorite – as he is now – of those readers who are outside of the establishment, who resent the establishment, and who are a conter-culture to the establishment.

We teach Bukowski at our University and we have for 30 years at our English-department, but that's very unusual in American Universities. There are a view of them, where Bukowski is read now, and maybe, as a younger generation of teachers and professors comes in, he will be taught more. But there's still resistance to Bukowskis literature.

He didn't pay his dues to the academics, he didn't need them, he didn't ask for their help, he didn't come up through their ranks, he made it up too easy. Many of them are frustrated writers, were wonderful scholars and teachers and feel, because they are extremely intelligent, they should be very creative also.

It seems to them unfair: Why does this guy, who did have very little education – of course Hemingway had little also, or Faulkner – but very little education, and who lived the life he did, which was an unliterary life, why does he deserve to be a great writer and they don't deserve to be great writers. Even though they have studied so hard and they know language so well and they've read so much and they

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are so brilliant, and yet they are not the great writers that he is. It just seems unfair. It's like "How could god allow this to occur?", you know, "Why did god bless Bukowski?"

And some of his problems he made for himself. He could be very rascal, he could be irritating, especially when he was drinking. He was a very different person at different stages of the drinking.

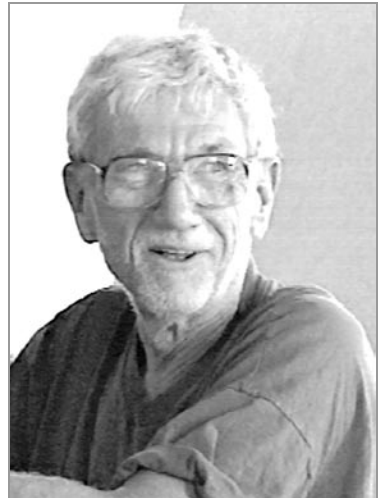
He could be very normal and kind and generous and friendly when he wasn't drunk. But if he went past a certain point in his drinking, he became aggressive and obnoxious and at those stages he was perhaps unnecessarily cruel and aggressive towards his hostesses.

I mean, he was simply a bad guest. You wouldn't want somebody, you invite in your house, to come and trash the whole place or whatever occurred - who resented your hospitality with abuse. And Bukowski was capable of doing that certainly.

And then justifying, maybe in the sense, that he was a genius or these people were too straight or conventional or whatever and so, you know, he was a revolutionary.

So, sometimes he made his own problems with the universities and professors and teachers and people in general. Sometimes they had a right to resent his behaviour towards them.

The universities invited him for readings, at a certain time, but they didn't do it twice.



Gerry Locklin at the Symposium (© roni)

You know WE did [at the California State University], 2 or 3 times, but at the third time, I had even my doubts about it too, because you realized, you were too much responsible for him. And a lot of places didn't twice.

And then, of course, he quit giving readings. He made himself so expensive that nobody could afford. And he didn't really want to do them, because it was so unhealthy for him.

He knew, he drank too much, to begin with. Not that he ever said he wanted to quit drinking, or anything; he did a lot of drinking and he always said, it saved his life. Wouldn't he discover alcohol he would have to commit suicide, he wouldn't be able to live out his life.

But he hated readings. He was so shy, that he went overboard. You know, he would drink way too much and he would get totally gone and then he'd feel awful the next day. There was a part of Bukowski, that was very normal and respectable and conventional and I'm sure when he woke up the morning, that part of him was embarrassed by the other part of him.

Like many of us, he had more than one self, more than one persona – in his days with Linda [Lee, the later Mrs. Bukowski], he was a good citizen: paid his bills, made out his will to make sure she was covered, he did all the right things that a good citizen would do. So there was that part of him, that was law obeying and not revolutionary. He was more sympathetic on revolutions than an actor-revolutionary.



Gerry with his daughter Vanessa at the Symposium (© roni)

Well, I was talking about readers in this anti-canon, this other canon. And of the contemporary authors today, the one that reminds me in some ways most of Bukowski is Michel Houellebecq. He's a young

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french writer and he's one surpriser. Very pessimistic about society. You know, he sees the end of the western world, an end-stage of civilisation, that all of the liberation movements and freedom is just decadence and a falling apart of the society.

He's a little bit more literal and more an avert social-critic, but his characters are kinda combination of Bukowski and Camus, I suppose. They break all the rules, they're amoral, they are enemy, you know, no motions, no pleasure really in pleasures.

They're just symptoms of what he would see as the decline or end-stage of western civilisation.



Gerry Locklin at the Symposium (© roni)

I don't think Bukowski was a deliberate or intentional Marxist, but I think he has very much of a working-class writer. He is very symptomatic for a working class writer. But he didn't make the theories - he lived the life.

He's more of an American romantic individual like Henry David Thoreau or Emerson, I think. Thoreau in particular. He just wanted to be left alone, he just wanted to do his own life, stay out of politics, politics leave him alone. And I think that's the way he felt about a lot of it.

Of the living authors of my own time, I think Bukowski and Edward Field were the two great influences. Edward Field is still alive, he's in his 70s now.

When I say of the ones who were alive, after, say 1961 or so, I'd say Bukowski and Edward Field and people like Ginsberg in his early work, Richard Brautigan, Philip Roth.

But of the others, I love Yeats, Dylan Thomas, D.H.Auden, Whitman, Emily Dickinson, E.A.Robinson, Robert Frost, W.C.Williams, Wallace Stevens, e.e.cummings, Robertson Jeffers, Crane, Wordsworth. All of these were big influences. Back in the Roman times: Catullus and Horaz and Roman poets like that.

And Shakespeare. Bukowski tended to put down Shakespeare. I got a little poem in a book about this theme. The title of it is "Was Charles Bukowski a greater writer than William Shakespeare?" And the poem is "No." It's just one word. I don't think it's really arguing. Shakespeare is magnificent and Bukowski is a wonderful writer, I love reading Bukowski!



Gerry Locklin at the Symposium (© roni)

He did teach all of us new ways we could write - that we could be more simple. That simplicity of style with Bukowski comes up from Mark Twain and from William Wordsworth, really. From Wordsworth up through Whitman and Dickinson, through a lot of those poets that I just mentioned. At least William Carlos Williams certainly, very strong influence, and Ginsberg and all those and THEN into people like Edward Field and Bukowski. So it's a very American thing, that common language poetry.

Probably we gotta be careful, we don't dump it down. You know we have a phrase in the United States: 'dumping down' - You're trying so hard to reach the lowest common denominator, cutting out this and

that and you dump it down to Homer Simpson, to literature that Homer Simpson would be able to understand. You gotta be careful to not going quite that far towards the lowest common denominator.

I'm sorry that Bukowski felt it necessary sometimes to banter [bantam?] other writers low, Hemingway and Shakespeare and all those, because he was giving students and young people an excuse for not putting any effort of reading writers, who would be very enrichening to their lives. They're a little more difficult, maybe, than Bukowski. But you gotta read Bukowski and then go to other writers too. It doesn't have to be an either-or, could be a both-and. You don't have to exclude other authors just to love Bukowski.

It wasn't the young poets then, talking about a new style in poetry, but it was the academic poets of the mid-century, the ones who had grown up reading T.S.Eliot, Ezra Pound and those very difficult poets. And they were always talking about: "How we're going to re-unite the drama and poetry? How we're going to put the narrator back in poetry?"

They were theorizing about this and Bukowski didn't theorize. He probably didn't know that this discussion was going on, he didn't even know, that it was a problem. He sat down, then he started writing - wrote narrators, wrote stories, wrote dialogue. And I think he got a lot of that from Hemingway.

He just did it. He sat down and wrote these things. There were their narrator, and their dramata, their dialogue. He was an instinctual writer - he was intelligent, very intelligent, but he wouldn't like some of the university poets, he wasn't that. He was very intelligent, very savvy and he knew how to write poems, stories and novels. He just had a gift, for how to do it. And he had some bottles as well.

A lot of people can't write poetry AND prose. They're two different ways of thinking. But in the case of Bukowski, he's writing a lot of a mesonymic-style anyway and so, I think it's obvious, Bukowski could write good prose and good poetry, there's no question about that.

Bukowski wrote both. Partly because Bukowski enjoyed the act of writing poems more than the act of writing novels. Novels were harder to work and Bukowski didn't like his writing to be hard work. He liked to do something that he enjoyed.

But he could do both. He loved to write poems, because he walked to his room, he took a couple of bottles of wine or some beer, he'd sit and he'd write. Most people if you asked them, if they drink when they write, say "Oh, No!" But he'd say: "Yes! I love to drink and I love to write, so why shouldn't I have both at the same time?"



Gerry Locklin at the Symposium (© roni)

Especially the poems, they just came out. He could work 20 in the evening. Novels - you can not be drunk when you're writing novels. You have to plan it out more and have a shape to it and structure. And you gotta sustain it for a number of days. He didn't like writing novels, but I'm glad he was forced to write them because I think they were his best work.

It's so amazing, how good he could be in the short-story, and so many of them. He'd been writing one a week for these magazines. In a "creative-writing"-class, they only write two stories in half a year!

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That's all they do have to write, it's two, four short stories. But Bukowski would write one a week! He'd write 26 in half a year!

It's really surprising. He had sense of basic archetypal comic situations. I think you could go back and find models. Not that he read necessarily Boccaccio and Chaucer and all those writers. But I think he went back to those early comic and bulging writers. You would find the same type of plots there in the "comedia del arte", find the same sexual comedy, that you'll find later in Bukowski. He had just instinctual sense for it.

To come to the end now - I'll tell you, what Bukowski would feel about a symposium like this. I think, I know exactly: One, I think, secretly inside he would love it. And I think he'd be very complimented and be very happy about it. But he'd never admit that! He'd say: "Oh, no, that's all bullshit!" or something. I hear him mentally.

He had a great psychological savvy. And part of that was knowing reverse psychology.

That is, if you say, for instance: "I hate to give readings.", so that people pay you more to be at readings. If you say: "I hate symposiums.", people gonna have symposiums about you.

He was a very savvy marketer AND a great writer. So, sure the answer is: Yeah, he'd love it, but he'd don't tell us that.

