Dispatches from an older war

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for

SIMON WOOLNER

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I

Don't ask me for formulas to open worlds
for you: all I have are gnarled syllables,
branch-dry. All I can tell you now is this:
what we are not, *what we do* not *want.*

Eugenio Montale

Koans for the Millennium

1) If alone on a desert island,
never to be found except by birds
and maggots, would you take a stick
and scratch words in the sand?

2) Arising out of the billions and billions
of zeroes produced and reproduced,
you take a man really strong enough:
He can look around at age four,
take some instrument and kill himself.
Swimming pool, anything else.

3) I worry about motor tuneups and
the death of sparrows; I am angry
with white Spanish walls and the sound
of tires on the pavement.

4) My revolution is a one-man revolution –
almost everybody is the enemy. I may
not be doing a great deal of damage,
tuning my crap-detector
on myself.

5) It's a matter of pace and tide
and hidden elements. I can afford
to wait: I have my stick and
I have my sand.

Twisted into nothing

Each day I get a little simpler:
I believe less, I feel less, realize less.
I like to watch flies now, look at
coffeepots or listen to refrigerators,
sounds like god-voices.
I want it easy, don't even want to win.

I wish I had the guts and style
of Lowell – clean through rock into
an eagle's eye, and then behind stone,
hacking, sounding. I have some of this,
but not enough. Meanwhile I jump through
weird hoops, get rammed and trapped bit
my god by bit until I am hanging
by a finger, by a thin gut-string in the middle
of an empty sky. And here I go down
to poke my smashed head into a doorway.

I really don't want to go, don't want to
do anything. I lose 3 days in bed, on
sidewalks, at dinner-tables. I could
weep for quiet freedom, yet there I will
be getting on that train 12:30pm Thursday,
playing it through, my face twisted into
nothing, sitting and waiting for the thing to roll.

Yet maybe I am just talking, talking, talking.
The longer I live the less I know. Maybe
death is just eliminating everything: life is a
turd – you pop it out and off you go.
Wish me luck, baby, wish me everything.

Much of anything

Reading Marx, I find that the utility of labour
can only be calculated by maintaining a strict distinction
between what counts as leisure and what as labour.
So then I begin to wonder about my status,
and about how Marx would feel if I never sold any poetry,
or whether poetry could ever be anything but bourgeois...
It could, I suppose, if everybody wrote poetry, or maybe
if I wrote poetry that inspired revolution, or that could
be put to music – a tune to whistle while you work.

But soon the tune might drift over the fields, across
the assembly lines, finding its way into every living room.
Neatly pressed and packaged, my debut disk would
support any activity: pressing clothes, peeling onions, even
the telephonic transactions of power-brokers on Wall Street.
It could even be remixed by transpersonal psychotherapists,
who would add subliminal rhythms to alleviate stress
and conflict in the workplace. Much later, I might
even become a corporation, and sell shares in my creation.

I suspect that Marx would not request my services.
And that leaves me wondering who might...
I could never write for Mao – those tunics and slippers
lack a certain grace. As for the caps: well, caps never
seem to fit the form of my face. I could go on:
FDR would have me building roads and dams;
Clinton would require contrite speeches, circumlocutions.
I might end up as Mobutu's hairdresser, or Canaan's
pet banana. For Botha I was forced to study the design
of the terrorist limpet mine, and Mandela has me
fortifying my home against pipe bombs, rising damp.

So there is rarely enough time for much of anything,
and I hide in the suburbs for fear of fynbos and random
encounters with assorted characters from an alleged past.
I have never felt comfortable with political issues,
rarely finding the strength to care about this debate,
or that cause. No flag seems to deserve hoisting,
no banner or button boasts an attractive shade.
There are no bluebirds in my skies, and the sun
blinks on and off. Yet it seems that much of this
could happen anywhere, and that it often does.

The geography of today

You ask for more – I give you less
than you thought possible. You ask me to love.
But beyond these walls are few that I could love,
fewer that should be loved. Love must come
like a hungry cat at the door, not through
persuasion or policy. Beyond these walls, they
plead personality; assorted virtues. But once outside,

Snared by electric light, the common white seethe
of deadness takes hold inside me. Sudden faces appear
on the street, goring my peace. These things, again
and again, tearing us to pieces that could be
felt as final. I am not hard; I would like to be harder.
I am caught in their machine,
but I needn't swallow all the grease.

My bedroom walls are glued with quiet
experimental screams, framed in blue and grey,
and even when the bombs come, city shakes,
electric light blinks off and on, even when
the cat puffs up in anger under the palm tree,
even then the screams hold their places,
like places on a map –
like tattoos.

Local exile

Lacking in social graces,
he did not pretend
to be like them, to enjoy
the company of strangers
over dinner, drinks, a Friday
outing for this week's dose of culture.

Lacking in political concern,
he was never convinced
that his heart was a traitor,
and that he should take a place
among the outraged artists,
sharing his pain, making his name.

He could not say pretty things
or make reality rhyme. Sometimes,
all he could see was himself,
and the way he slowly sank
out of sight, as something similar
to the way a fly might be treated
in a bowl of fruit –
if the fruit could only speak.

Fable in a contemporary mode

On the side of the path sits
an old man – tired, worn-out,
used up. He tells you: Well,
they all left me, you know –
wife, kids, even the goddamn
dog. A smile crosses his face,
and yours in return.

And as I lose my footing
and fall, they try to catch me,
rescue me, bring me back
to their world. But as I fall,

I see the white corridors,
padded walls, and the soft
footsteps of the dull minds
in their white coats.

Finally, a place
where you are allowed to scream.

Shooting stars and epitaphs

Rarely risking the soul-flattening
inflicted by groups of strangers,
yet unable to resist the promise
of some version of meaningful exchange,

I accept the invitation for Saturday night –
leaving two days to brood, to worry
about what to say, how much to drink
to overcome my reticence and discomfort.

It was her friends that invited us – as usual
I will be the only smoker, but one tells me:
"Our balcony overlooks a road, and the mountain."
The potential diversion of traffic reassures me.

The door is lime-green, and conceals
a worn carpet that directs us down
the narrow hallway like cheap dignitaries.
Slothful cats hide in the shadows.

Over drinks the questions begin. I struggle
to seem interested, to play my part.
If people think me an egotist and a crank,
they may be right – but I have some thoughts
for them too. Amen.

I wish for strangers to treat me as a stranger.
I hope for patience and a commitment to truth.
I plead for an end to insincerity, and
I pray for sanctuary and a painless death.

I walk to the balcony door and open it.
The cars go by and a bird turns on the wire
and looks at me. I think a century ahead,
of myself dead that long.

Maybe I could return black as Africa,
shooting stars and epitaphs, my pockets full
of dirt and worms. Maybe I could smile
and say great words of kings and life.

Then maybe I could take the masses – bitter, lonely,
swarming the earth with their grievances –
and lead them to my grave, so
eliminating the horror of all this waste.

II

I could stand and sway like a palm,
or rooted like a campanile, crumbling slightly
each time the bells tolled, not real bells
but recordings of former bells, and never for me.

Michael Hofmann, "Guanajuato Two Times"

Not my hamster's keeper

Hammy, Rambo and Houdini spent
a month, two weeks, a year
on the treadmill, or curled in
cardboard amongst shredded paper.
While my ten-year fingers poked,
stroked, their inky eyes sought
shelter and their bodies squirmed.

The cage door carelessly unlatched,
Hammy nosed out, silently skittering
across acres of linoleum, busily
sniffing out refuge. The Kelvinator's
hum must have called, as we
found him behind the fridge, decaying
amongst shreds of Sunday's news.

For reasons I cannot recall,
Rambo and his cage were kept
in a bedroom closet. Maybe
I feared his escape, or thought
to keep him to myself. I wonder
what he felt as the days went by,
distracting me with sunshine and
schoolwork, until I finally remembered
and found him, lifeless
in sawdust and starvation.

It seldom surprised me to find
Houdini's cage empty, and I soon learnt
his favourite places, then trailed
lettuce to lure him home.
Our game ended soon after
our new pet, a cat, found him
before me. Burying Houdini,
I should have realised one thing:
at ten, it's best to have a self-reliant pet –
one that ignores you when
you ignore it, can find it's own food,
and doesn't need a cage.

Dark beneath the skin

It seemed that her heart was the first
to go. Maybe somewhere near the Rubicon,
or as her child's son lost the *moedertaal*,
forsook his heritage with instant cakes, the trimming
of fat from slices of Sunday's roast.

Her words were always few: wheezed
from diseased lips, imperatives and
questions conveying fears I could
never comprehend, seeking sympathies
more puzzling, perhaps, than undeserved.

Her memories – what I would have liked
to hear – before betrayals, paranoia, pain:
my father's childhood, following Oupa
from one lighthouse to the next, his hands casting
slight shadows of ducks and demons across the bay.

In the dark beneath the skin, three beats
secret the hours and days away. Still
my heart beats. And still my words
race to make memory true.

Calvinia, 1976

Kicking pebbles along cracked pavements,
my brother and I strolled through this Karoo town.
Past pale houses, dusky streets, past the *Saamstaan* store
where we could always find a spinning top, stop
to listen for the sound of windmills, or watch
the trucks pass by with their smell of sheep;
their cargo destined for a place alongside potatoes
and an occasional vegetable on blue china plates.

In Calvinia, I slept in my Oupa's bed, both of us tired
from mending farm fences, or from circling this small town
in the hours between the day's labour, evening's quiet.
We would wake at dawn, when he led me to the kitchen
to pour five spoons of sugar into my enamel coffee mug.
Strangely, the thermos was always full and waiting –
waiting to be emptied, along with the small jars of lard
that lined one pantry shelf; lard to spread on our toast,
or to fry the bacon and eggs of a Sunday feast.

My brother and I found a chest of drawers
in Oupa's room one day – inside lay his store of treats:
Wilson's toffees, the peppermint creams he placed
in our palms after dinner, or presented in small plastic bags
when he came to visit us in Cape Town. As he grew older,
and I grew older, I began to realise the purpose of these trips
to the Cape – not the gift of sweets, but a hospital bed,
transfusions, chemotherapy.

He began to visit once a week, but only to sit, drink tea,
smile weakly at my brother, me. Before long
he no longer visited, but became a regular shadow
on the living-room wall. It wasn't too long
before the hospital became his home, and the hospital
was not his home for long.

The simple misery of survival

You were an émigré for the millennium,
forsaking all the benefits of your rise
to local fortune, arriving on the Eastern seaboard
not only with American dreams, but also a bankroll
of promise. You tried to conquer a new world,
only to find that the hand of bureaucracy
also rests heavy on the brave and the free.

You went in search of a new life, a new job.
You found both, but also discovered no luck,
no visa. You met her just in time
to spend 10 months, the last of your money
with her. You returned, as you had to, but also
to celebrate my marriage. She also attended,
and later you told us of your proposal, your mutual joy.

When she left, you must have taken her to the airport
with sadness, yet glad that in six weeks you would follow,
hoping to be first in line when the US Government
awarded visas to their selection of supplicants.
Until then, you would remain connected by telephone
lines, love and firm intent. She called and wrote,
you called and wrote – then for five days,
she was silent. It was your birthday.

Later that night, your guests would arrive,
and you would smile and talk and laugh and
remember that morning's phone call:
"My life has changed. You can still come to LA
(if you want to, that is)
but you can't stay here with me".
You would also remember, distinctly:
"Have a happy birthday".

Tonight is the evening before you leave –
still for LA, though you'll only be there long enough
to catch a hastily arranged connection to New York,
where a midnight taxi will find you, and take you
to the couch of a sympathetic friend.
Our mother, you and I sit at the dinner table
and try to understand – not the end of your engagement
(we all understand how people can change),
but the coldness of her tone,
the sudden disintegration of all your history.

You find the strength to reflect on something
you read – how disruptions in life, the tensions
you invoke, and the quality and depth of your inner conflict
can drive or define you as a writer. Sometimes, though,
it seems that being a writer is small comfort.

You say that you can now finish "Letters to Jenny",
those songs of devotion you began during summer
months labouring in our father's basement.
Each letter, A to Z – twenty-six poems to finish
before your story would be told.
The first letters must have been no struggle at all.

"A" for the beginning, the passion you knew
on first knowing her. Other letters came in bits
and pieces as the months went by.
But what of the X, the Z, the Y?
You never really knew, yet now it seems
that you at least know their function:
catharsis, revenge, the snarl in the surprise
letter she will eventually receive, sent by you,
there, to the home you thought was yours.

Elegy

i.m. Simon Woolner

I once thought you elemental, the answer
to my unspoken prayer for fury and grace.
You had the red blood,
the bull blood to carry you
past the matador, but soon realised that
living becomes easier the less you try –
so you turned your back, gave in,
long before your life was stopped...

...gone for three years – the fig in the garden
my only reminder of you, your desire
for release. I still cannot imagine your choice,
see your need. Maybe it's a becoming
thing, and becoming things fit me like
snowstorms in April, or like the mild face
I wore when your friends gathered
to bury you.

I too thought we could never
win the game. But learn the rules, and you soon
find another way to go: just saw off
a corner of the action, a very tiny corner,
and sit there and wait
for them to come and get you.

Rising to meet god

We live almost with a sense of shame,
as if getting away with something –
and mostly we are: moving
onward and unward, learning survival
by surviving, idly twisting the rocks in our scotch
while waiting for anything.

You can piss on death,
forget it till it finds you.
Most people do this – that
is why they cry at funerals.

I have waited: for diamond eyes,
concrete lines, for objects of beauty
and for enough chances to notice.
Now, the boogie man is drunk
and I have picked his pockets,
dusted the lint off the hourglass
and

All our average days

And Floyd was on the stereo when you called –
I still remember reaching out to turn down the volume
before walking over to the phone. You were hesitant,
trying to find an abstract way of saying something kind
about something that was not kind at all.

I tested my defenses, found a fragility that was
instantly subdued. Grieving in the manner of Zeno,
my passions were discarded as malfunctions of reason.
Our friend had been distant for years –
what did it matter that he was dead?

I poured another cup of coffee, turned up the music,
tried to continue reading... but it did not help.
The mind cannot overcome instinct, and I soon felt
raw again, staring at a hole that must be filled
without knowing how it could be done or who could do it.

It is our own deaths that will be easiest to take;
the other deaths, the coming of them, are hardest.
I have tried, in these cases, to apply history –
the history of death, the fact of death.
I have tried to think of Napoleon gone, the cat,
the movie star, the hero, names of things, of things
that once were... but it did not help.

The ways are hard, whether they are god's ways
or simply ways. Death is eternally everywhere,
I need not tell you that. To say that I understand
the machinery of it would be a lie, or to say anything
to help you through similar moments would also be a lie.

Nothing is easy: not staring down at the white paper,
nor the general works of all our average days.
So it is for all of us; and some of us, a few of us,
will come through. But the mind cannot overcome instinct –
we will be raw again; we will begin again.

III

In the earthquakes to come, I very much hope
I shall keep my cigar alight, embittered or no.

Bertold Brecht, "Of Poor B.B."

Lamentations

It's past closing time, I'm tired and ungathered,
and in walks this man with methylated
breath – wide-eyed, no-eyed, dull and
gibbering. He tells me that life is hard
for him, and it's true, yes it is. Then I
recall the hours and days spent studying for
a job I know I won't want when
I have it. O Weep for him!

Earlier tonight H and her poetry group
walked in. H and two males, one short
and fidgety and egocentric, the other
tall and dull in necktie, a comfortable
well-fed slab of meat. Pity me, pray
for me. What do these people do with
their time? Wandering around, knocking
on doors, sitting on chairs, talking about
nothing at great length. I don't have any time!

Where do all the dead come from?
I don't understand! I can't run them out,
because as K says: "They come to see
you because they know that you are
lonely". Or they come to see K, and I can't
run her out. Can you hold the line while
I wail? Time going, I've got to cut this.
somewhat sick but no more blood. Pity
me, pray for me? Burn candles, yes.

Lament

Disregard my last call. Things came undone.
Paper everywhere. Trivial bits of paper.
Flooded sink. Nothing ever done.
Insomnia. Toothache. Job trouble –
these things can fetch anyone.

Earlier tonight H and her group walked in.
They read their poetry – I saw clouds
coming over fake paper mountains,
and came away dull.
Let the baker compromise, the cop
and the mailman – some of us
must hold the hallowed ground.

They never realise what kind of cage
it is that we crawl around in, or even
that we are slaves at all. Yes, they talk
of freedom, but you've heard all this before.
Anarchy replaces crap with other crap –
these are only people, and even if we put them
in different jars with different labels
they will remain only people.

We should force them to write
in a room full of skulls, bits of raw
meat hanging, nibbled by fat slothy
rats, while the rockets, the flares
and the chains of history wing like bats,
bat-flap and smoke and skulls forevermore.

Tomorrow I will walk in the sun.
I will simply walk in the sun.

Life during wartime

We are tested when we lace our shoes,
or in the manner in which we scratch
our back. It gets hard to move on,
to open a door, to get dressed, think
of ways to make money, to try to sleep,
to love to listen. It's the faces that kill
us too: faces like putty granite with
raisin eyes snapped in, and the way they walk
and the way they laugh and love and hate,
drive their cars and piss in the diminished
areas of our lives. There are many
ways to die, but I still have a finger
on the ledge, I think. I will stay here
until they come and get me, or until
the meat disappears from the bones
and I am beautiful again.

Never talk to strangers

Fragments of conversation limp toward me –
you sound terse, tense, the failure to keep
my attention finally realised. You turn
to trivia – sure that you are still capable
of that, at least. Wrong... I cannot avoid
hearing you, and I marvel at how you warm
to the conspiracies: news of subtle plottings
between multinationals and their stooges.
They have no time for your imaginings, and
I lack the patience to hear them described.
Now, you don't even need your drugs –
they have done no physical damage, yet
you are now conditioned toward banality.

Your name is still familiar, and I sometimes
hear reports of you, sightings in unlikely
places: bookstores, cafes. How can I ask,
when the perceived insult merely reminds
me of what you have become, the friend
I have lost? I once amused you with my
intolerance – you liked to watch my graceless
conversation. Have you forgotten? Have I?
Why do I listen, endure what causes such
frustration? Once, you could have helped
me find that answer. But I have lost a friend,
and then found an acquaintance – it's difficult
to know which is worse.

Dispatches from an older war

The war is still on, but it's much nicer
to be defeated on my ground than
on theirs. So I keep studying embankments,
snakes, the dogs, whores, people and streets.
It's all bound to cut in and take a bite
now and then – mostly now.

You, steel and fragile harlot, wrestle
with the hours like an octopus in a tank.
I answer the bell for the 9th round,
breaking anything that reflects your face. Mercy,
reason and logic have very little place in my life.

We are dumb but not quite damned – we
can still pity the dead, sitting on their palms
just as they were meant to do.

Sacrament

The price of creation
is never too high;
the price of living
with other people often is.

Yet I wait upon you
like a plumed falcon,
with beak, song and talon
for my caged blood.

It's good that we are creatures
of gesture, not reality, as few of us
can stand either reality or life –
it's so easy, almost nobody can do it.

I tend to linger
just to see
how many more odd turns
the gods can throw at me.

The future in retrospect

Finally, the pins and tumblers
resign themselves to their uncomfortable union,
letting the key turn, the engine fire.
Kicking the stand back, I felt you
settling in behind me.

We travelled for hours, past truck-stops
And billboards, past roof-racks
supporting desperate lives
piled one on top of another.

I remembered our life, and days
when we could stay in one place –
not needing the continual escape
from our past.
I remembered our life, and
feeling alive.

Staring at the road's white lines,
I remember feeling tired –
tired of the motion, tired of me
and tired of you.
I also remember wanting you
to put your hands over my eyes.

But I don't remember
when you did so.

IV

and failure was nothing but a
trick
to keep us going,

and fame and love
a trick to dull our bleeding.

Charles Bukowski, "A Trick to Dull Our Bleeding"

Wedding day

The light here seems as thin as the air
as he sits on an outcrop of rock, miles beyond
the city they had left behind, their single lives
eroding with Transkei towns that faded
in a haze of sun-baked dust.
Now, after a week in Ixopo, these Natal mountains
feel nothing like home – not even as he watches
dawn break over a silence richer than any in memory.

The couple and the spectators file into the hall,
and the ceremony begins. He occasionally
loses sight of himself – trapped in the moment,
in the awareness of her consummating gaze.
He cannot identify his emotions, yet he trembles
with their power, and feels a sweat that defies
the icy air of these mountains. Later, he may
even recall his joy, his fear, his vow.

That night, he awakens and thinks:
My wrists are here, I'm here, my toes,
my body, there's the wall and there
are the streets outside – I know them.
He thinks it's still good going on a while,
working with the word and the way. He thinks:
I owe much of this to you. Yet when he tries
to return to the page, to capture this day,
he feels her gaze resting on him still,
and wonders whether he has the strength
to find shade from both himself and her.

(Buddhist Retreat Centre, Ixopo, 10/07/98)

Swimming in the (almost human) soup

Forgive me, for I am not so good at talking
on the phone, or talking at all; and though I say
small things, it is only shame and lack of heart and lack
of ability that keeps me from expressing what should be,
and when the phone is put down I always feel
as if I have failed – not only the ordinary failure
but a failure that affects everything:
myself and you, tomorrow morning and
any way the smoke blows.

Forgive me, for I can never forget that what I say,
what I write, is only one-tenth of myself – the other
nine-tenths are floundering in a swirl of cheap damnation.
I wish that I could only suffer in the classic style,
and carve out of great marble that would last centuries
beyond this dog's bark I hear outside my window.

It's not the cutting off of air and light and love that counts –
it's the itch they put into making us wonder why the hell
we are here. I don't know, I don't know, and it seems
so... I hardly know what to do, but you should probably
go ahead: verse
or phone calls
or cards
or death
or love
or vast areas of bathing in arenas of sound and midnight moments.
I thank you for going on and I, too,
go on a little while more.

Of course

The most magic year
came late, but will never be
forgotten. It may be beyond
the imagination, but by living
carefully – fighting the slow
retreat – I hope to squeeze out
3 or 4 years more before I have
to get a job, face some unloving
creature across a desk.

Of course it's going to end, but
since I gave away at least 20
years, this part is very strange.
Indeed, this morning I stood on
the balcony, sun coming down.
I was barefoot, nobody around –
everybody off somewhere staring
at crosses, and I stood there in
the sun, unshaven, uncombed,
smoking a cigarette and grinning
into the world, knowing its blood
and its plan, but in this special
space, somewhere, for a moment.

Of course, the butcher knife is still
in the kitchen, and I keep it good
and sharp on the stone steps and
that's part of it, too. One part magic,
twenty undercut – yielded to buy this
trench in the sun, this tin medal I ransom
for our diplomacy.

Epilogue: Small testimony of an anarchist

The story is so worn, I could place myself anywhere
and still feel misfit. First I turned from family,
tired of the accumulation of social debt,
repayments in houses with elephant feet
for umbrella stands; large caliber shells
used as doorstops, or to prop up an uncle's
hopes of saving his clan from Communist invasion,
his fantasies of scattering shots over some
shantytown. His training was in conventional arms,
yet he believed his weapons were chemical,
fit for disinfecting our parasite-ridden land.

Next I turned from the world, trying first to find
sense through my sense of God, then forsaking
sense in worlds of fiction. Emerging for a few hours
of every day, I blinked and frowned like a burrowing
creature surfacing at his antipode, speaking first
of mystery and faith, then dragons, safe-drops,
ways of detecting lies. I thought my lies untraceable,
yet my words began to sound increasingly hollow –
not least to me – so I turned to spite and sarcasm,
convinced that if I could subdue my surroundings,
then speak of anything (or nothing), some version
of meaning would survive.

Later I turned from hope, finding contradiction
in every opinion, constancy only in doubt.
I began to fear conviction, arming myself with syllogisms
and refutations. I withdrew from dogmatic conversations.
Lately, I turn from myself – tired of the vigilance,
tired of the way the ordinary so quickly becomes horrific.
I see sharp claws stored in the coffee can,
conspiracy in every action of any man.
I grow tired of my part in this polite exchange –
if you want to own the world, pay your share of the mortgage.

Appendices

The past seven years or so have consisted largely of an uncomfortable attempt at finding a balance between two conflicting impulses: an affinity toward philosophical abstraction, and a desire to directly convey a personal conception of the nature of the relationship between the individual and society. The fluctuations around this balance have resulted in this curious blend of the intellectual and anti-intellectual, evidenced in the analytic nature of the appendices versus the colloquialism of the poetry.

Considered independently of the poetry, the appendices also reflect this dualism, in that they account for what I would consider my major influences on both sides of the divide. Even though much of my early philosophical education consisted of the study of logic and ethics, I gradually shifted my attention almost exclusively to literary aesthetics and problems of interpretation – and it was in this field that I discovered Stanley Fish, who has most informed my conception of the processes by which we write, read, and communicate about literary texts. My major influence from the literary side is undoubtedly Charles Bukowski, with whom I share not only certain stylistic traits (explored in Appendix 2), but also an antipathy towards many aspects of the University and the game of academia, as well as a fundamental distrust of human nature. Whenever I have felt in need of something concrete rather than the abstractions of intellectualism, Bukowski has been a ready companion, although I am reasonably sure that were he given the opportunity to express his opinion, this relationship would probably remain one-sided.

Appendix 1

Authorial intention and Reader-response analysis

The issue of what, if anything, a poem might *mean* is, for better or worse, a central concern for many readers of poetry. Even though the investigative ground surrounding this issue has shifted somewhat over the years – ranging from direct inquiries into what the author was trying to say, through to inquiries regarding which possible set of interpretations a particular text might support – at bedrock, the admission must be made that the study of literature in fact *presupposes* that literary texts have some meaning or other, or can be read in a way as to support such meaning. If this were not the case, all we could do when offering a critique of a particular poem would be to convey our emotive response – to say "I liked this" or "this one made me sad". Granted, we do say such things, yet we also go to great lengths to justify the stipulated emotive response with reference to the text, or to the author's supposed intentions as gleaned from sources such as biographical information. And in the absence of such justification, a belief that we are communicating something about a poem (rather than about ourselves) when saying "I liked this" is badly misplaced, as what could a potential respondent say, given that he has no insight into why you respond favourably to the poem? But it is easy to obtain agreement that literary works, as well as other works of art, have some meaning – what is difficult is to determine just what that meaning is.

While it is generally accepted that, in order to understand ordinary speech and writing, the reader (or auditor) needs to take possible intentions underlying the speech-act[1] into consideration, much interpretive activity relies on the idea that the speaker's *actual* intention is at least *potentially* available to the interpreters of any given speech-act. Stanley Fish, however, makes the disturbing claim that the intentions we ascribe to the producer of a speech-act are nothing more than constructs of the interpreter himself, and that it is therefore possible for different interpreters to ascribe different intentions to a speech-act. This claim, if true, has fundamental implications regarding the ways in which we conceptualise any communicative activity, not least the interpretation of literary texts. Furthermore, the *marks* present in the speech-act (the letters or sounds which physically constitute it) are not independent of the interpreter's activity (although they can be granted more stability than something like the reader's supposition as to the author's intention) – resulting in the impossibility of arriving at a *correct* interpretation of any speech act. The notion of a correct interpretation is *itself*, for Fish, the result of applying a particular interpretive strategy, and is in no way something essential to interpretive activity.

Fundamental among Fish's claims is the denial that texts exist as independent objects about which we can ask various questions. Rather, "the field of inquiry is *constituted* by the questions we are able to ask because the entities that populate it come into being as the presuppositions – they are discourse-

[1] I intend "speech-act" to cover both spoken and written varieties of linguistic communication.

specific entities – of those questions".[2] So, notions such as "text" and "author" (the "entities" populating the field of enquiry) are discourse-specific, and are presupposed by the questions asked in the discourse. Fish would like to show that the text is actually *not* a self-sufficient entity, which would result in the activities of the reader gaining a prominence they had previously lacked. The reader's role would no longer be to grasp the meaning embedded in the text, but rather to *develop* the meaning of a text through interpretive activity.

If the reader *makes* the meaning of a text, how does Fish deal with the possibility that, considering that there are as many possible interpretations of a text as there are readers, any given interpretation would be of little use, and possibly make little sense, to other interpreters? His strategy here has two prongs: the first is the claim that, at least at the bare level of *perception*, readers have a common experience of a text. It is only subsequent to the initial perception of a text that interpretive strategies come into play. The distinction is "between the actual reading *experience* and whatever one might feel or say about it in *retrospect*".[3] Fish's second prong is the notion of *interpretive communities*, which consist of readers who share a common set of assumptions regarding the nature of texts as well as the interpretive strategies appropriate to those texts. Both merit further consideration.

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[2]Fish. Is There a Text in this Class?. 1.
[3]Fish. 5. My emphasis.

Fish claims that "the basic data of the meaning experience" is objective and shared. He admits that there exists a brute physical item, the empirically knowable subject of interpretation. It is possible to catalogue the formal features of that subject by making comments as to things like the size and shape of the letters, and their relation to one another. But these formal features, while being necessary for interpretation, are not sufficient for it: the "value of [these] features [can] only be determined by determining their function in the developing experience of the reader".[4] While all readers *experience* the same object, their interpretation of that experience is what classifies the object as a novel, a poem, or whatever, and constitutes their interpretation of that object taken as a novel or a poem. There is thus a distinction between description and interpretation, with Fish allowing for an independent object which we can subject to descriptive activity.

But the fact that this *describable* independent object exists does not imply that there is a stable object of *interpretation*. The text is not independent in a way that would give rise to a stable or determined *meaning* for that text, as the only independence it can claim is one which enables us to give an extremely limited description of the object – a description restricted to aspects such as the physical appearance of the letters themselves, enabled by the way in which we commonly perceive things.

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[4]Fish. 8.

The second prong, that of the *interpretive community*, proceeds as follows: the strategies by which a reader interprets a text are not his own subjective strategies, but strategies which are considered appropriate to interpretation by a *community* of readers. These communities are made up of readers who share interpretive strategies by which they appropriate the brute object, describe it as being subject to interpretation, and then interpret it. The interpretive community provides the background against which a text[5] is worked with, and which constitutes the very properties of that text. The interpretive strategies shared by such a community "exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around".[6]

Because interpretation is an activity of communities rather than individuals, it is possible for more than one reader to constitute a text in the same way, or to "read" the same text. It is furthermore also possible for members of different interpretive communities to communicate regarding their interpretations of a text, but this is "not because of a stability in texts, but because of a stability in the makeup of interpretive communities".[7] This stability is provided partly via the abovementioned first prong, and partly from the fact that individuals may move from one community to another, providing temporary, but useful, possibilities for inter-community communication. Indeed, although Fish does not characterise interpretive communities in this way, they could be pictured

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[5]The use of the word "text" would here naturally imply that the object in question is actually *considered to be* a text, not that it can *objectively* be described as such.
[6]Fish, 14.
[7]Fish, 171.

as a group of overlapping circles – each largely independent but with a small, yet significant, common character. This common character would not be due to anything in the text itself, but rather to some innate feature that all humans possess. Fish claims that "the ability to interpret is not acquired – it is constitutive of being human",[8] and if this is true, it is at least feasible that this ability has some element common to all interpreters of texts.

With the above in consideration, let us examine the passage of the text from its creation to the point of interpretation. If readers belong to interpretive communities, writers must also belong to such communities – even if for no reason apart from the fact that they read and interpret their *own* writing. Fish asserts that what writers do "is give ... readers the opportunity to make meanings (and texts) by inviting them to put into execution a set of strategies"[9], where these strategies can usually be characterised as the strategies the writer himself would apply "if confronted by the sounds or marks he is uttering or setting down". The writer belongs to an interpretive community in which certain marks express certain things and, if the reader belonged to the same community, he would be able to read the same text as the one produced by the writer.

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[8]Fish. 172.
[9]Fish. 173.

Interlude: An Authorial perspective on Reader-response analysis

It would be difficult to attempt a catalogue of moments in my poetry where I feel that this conception of interpretation has affected the poem itself. The difficulties involved in doing so are not exceptional – talking about one's own writing is rarely easy, and becomes even less so when the poetry in question resists certain traditional forms and conventions. Yet my fear of self-misinterpretation does, I think, provide a useful starting point, in that this fear stems mainly from the fact that my own intentions are frequently opaque when writing a poem. My method frequently consists of finding a theme or direction to suit a number of pre-existing lines, then editing and adding to expand on that theme. It is rare for me to write a poem that begins with an overall intention, and the finished poem frequently disclaims authorial responsibility for the sentiments of the poem – evidenced by ironic closures or throwaway gestures which undercut the sentiments of the poem.

Causation is naturally difficult to trace, and I have frequently wondered whether I was drawn to Fish because I already did not feel confident about what I was asserting, and therefore found in Fish a method of deflecting an intentionalist reading of my poetry, or whether my immersion in this field of literary aesthetics has gradually led to a lack of confidence regarding the virtues of attempting to direct the reader to my authorial stance.

When reading the poems in this collection, it is therefore frequently difficult for me to identify a possible authorial intention, or at least one that I feel confident asserting was my intention when *writing* the poem, rather than *retrospectively* plausible intentions, given that I have some memories of the process involved in writing a particular poem. There are two poems in the collection that may be usefully investigated in order to illuminate these concerns. The first is *Never talk to strangers*, a poem which provides an instance of those occasions where I do have an intention in mind, but where a non-intentionalist reading seems far more fruitful.

Never talk to strangers was conceived of as a lament for the loss of a certain closeness and respect in a particular relationship, and was one of the poems I felt slightly uncomfortable in both writing and allowing to be read, as I felt sure that the addressee of the poem would not only be aware of his/her identity, but would also feel offended by the poem, resulting in a natural escalation of the discomfort that occasionally exists between us. Yet, curiously to me, of the small audience that has read this poem to date, no less than three readers firmly believed that this poem was addressed to them, even though the details of the poem strongly refer to only one of those readers, are compatible with another if interpreted very loosely, and almost completely exclude the third.

A further curiosity was provided by the fact that all three of these readers are well acquainted with one another, and should (I felt) have been able to recognise the references to the true addressee. When I discovered this, it seemed to illuminate two issues: one, that these readers seemed compelled,

perhaps out of interpretive habit, to ascribe intentionality to their reading of the poem, to assume that (in the case of one reader) even though the reference to drugs would then be nonsensical, the poem *must* be referring to him/her, and that I was merely disguising his/her presence in the poem through these inaccuracies, perhaps as a way of avoiding offence. Secondly, this reaction illustrated the strength of what Fish describes as interpretive communities, in that these three different readings of the poem made sense to these three individuals, due to the beliefs and knowledge that they were in possession of when initially encountering the poem.

The reason, however, that I considered a reader-response reading to be more fruitful here only became apparent to me subsequent to this reaction, and on further readings of my own poem. The truth is that it is hypothetically possible for the poem to refer to not only all three of these readers, but also to all potential readers of the poem, in that it occasionally seems to be far more about the author of the poem than the subject – it gives insight into a certain kind of antisocial intolerance that doesn't really admit to a fixed subject, as I never really give strong reason for my intolerance in this *particular* case. Conspiracy theories are mentioned, along with banality, but are these factors strong enough to dilute a friendship to the extent expressed in the poem? I think not, and have come to see the poem as serving more as an articulation of the personality behind the poems in the collection as a whole, rather than my satisfying my initial intention of making a point about a certain person.

So in the case of this poem, I feel that my intention has changed[10] to the extent that I now see every reader as a potential addressee (although one is still privileged), as I shall probably respond in similar fashion to any potential reader who evidences the banality described in the poem. An intentionalist reading would always have been misleading in the case of this poem, not only because my intentions have changed, but also because different interpretive communities have, in this case, produced conflicting but equally useful (in light of my redefined intentions) interpretations of the same poem.

The second poem that I shall address is *Swimming in the (almost human) soup*, which provides an example of the way in which my theoretical framework acts to liberate me from the constraints of my personal viewpoint. On reading this collection, you would find that most of the poems are expressions of a personal viewpoint, and on the surface, this poem appears to be of the same type. Yet, in this case, the viewpoint expressed is not mine at all, and any intentionalist reading of this poem would either require impressive insight into my character, or would be doomed to result in a quite inaccurate conception of that character.

It is of course nothing new or exceptional to write a poem from a foreign perspective, although I would like to think that the foreignness is usually more marked than is the case with this poem. The reason that it is not marked in

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[10] And here is the problem: I'm not at all confident in saying that my intention has changed, as I consider it just as likely that this was part of my intention all along, and that I have only come to realise it now. To say that "my intention has changed" should, therefore, not be read as an indication that I am confident as to the nature of my intentions, then or now.

this poem, or that no overt denial of the sentiments of the poem are present in the poem itself, is that this poem is something of a private joke. The joke plays on my belief that readers will read the text they want to read, or that is most comfortable for them to read, even in the face of contrary evidence. Again, not a particularly novel or striking belief, yet one which I was interested in confirming for myself.

My primary goal in writing this poem was, in a sense, to produce something with mass appeal. The sentiments of the poem are everyday, yet grandiose in the way that it seems many people would prefer, at least if you believe the style of their accounts of everyday misfortunes. In this poem, the speaker adopts a melodramatic tone that seems entirely inappropriate to the textual evidence of his misfortune, yet expresses such general and universal concerns that it seemed likely that most readers would identify with those concerns. The general insecurities and universal questions that appear in the poem are intended to inform a satire for an audience of one, and soap-opera for the rest. The point, however, is that something written almost entirely for my amusement is easily read as expressing the viewpoint of the author, and is also easily exportable to the lives and psychologies of many.

The poem began as an attempt to update the apparently groundless despair of Antonio's opening soliloquy in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. I say "apparently" because the play eventually makes it clear why Antonio is sad, yet we do not know at the outset. That particular soliloquy has haunted me for at least 10 years now – remembered from school days, but then

coming to mind at irregular and surprisingly unsuitable moments. I wanted to write something equally sincere in appearance, but with as little information as to the cause of the speaker's sadness as Antonio's speech (read in isolation) contains. The poem, then, not only addresses concerns too universal to be truly compelling, but also too universal to be entirely trivial. The only clues that are provided which might indicate that this poem is a thought-experiment more than anything else are the throwaway lines ("any way the smoke blows"), the random details (stanza 4's catalogue of human activities), and the title (suggested by another reader of the poem), which accurately mirrors this attempt of mine to address and satirise everyday concerns.

As in the case of *Never talk to strangers*, *Swimming in the (almost human) soup* points to the reader's capacity to make the poetic experience meaningful for himself, irrespective of the actual intentions of the author. As the author of these poems, the knowledge that readers do this is liberating, as I feel that they can read the poems for their purposes, and that this may, in cases like *Swimming*, suit my purposes entirely. In other cases, there may be a far greater overlap between my interpretive community and theirs, and I might find that the reader actually does extract something similar to my intention from a reading of the poem. But in all cases, I am relieved of the burden of striving to convey a particular sentiment in a manner intelligible to all. My sentiments will be intelligible to some, and some other sentiment might be intelligible to others, but in all cases, so long as the reader has something to do, and so long as that something is worthwhile for that reader, my obligations as a "reader-response writer" have been sufficiently fulfilled.

While the above analyses serve to demonstrate how a reader-response critic might interpret my poems, they also point to the more subtle, yet also more fundamental, influence that Fish's philosophy of aesthetics has had on my poetic *sensibility* itself. The case for his brand of reader-response criticism is built, at least in part, on the claim that even the decisions taken by readers as to the *nature* of the text are semantically undetermined – that there is no interpretation-independent fact of the matter regarding the *identity* of a text as poem. These decisions are taken by readers on the basis of the interpretive community to which they belong, where that community influences the very *recognition* of a certain type of text as poem. This claim then has the further consequence that interpretive activity regarding a given poem is also semantically open-ended or undetermined – a consequence that is directly reflected in some of my poems by their open-endedness or resistance towards interpretation.

The means by which my poems sometimes resist interpretation are found mainly in the ironic *stance* of the speaker, in that the reader is rarely confident of the speaker's sincerity, and can also sometimes not be sure just what point *is* being made in a particular poem. This stance is frequently expressed by the aforementioned undercutting of sentiments through verbal gestures which, while seemingly irrelevant or trivial, may sometimes have more significance than is immediately apparent. The poetry also resists interpretation through the self-implosive nature of some of the closures, where the reader is again left uncertain as to what he should believe – the sentiments expressed in the

preceding stanzas, or their denial as expressed in the closure. Examples of poems which overtly refuse definite meaning or closure are "Sacrament", "Dark beneath the skin", and "Never talk to strangers", yet most of the poems in this collection evidence this refusal to some degree.

Conclusion

Although critics like Mele and Livingston claim that Fish is an "antirealist" regarding authorial intention (that he believes there is no interpretation-independent fact of the matter about what the author intended), nothing Fish says rules out the possibility that he believes there is such a fact; however, we can never have access to it. They quote this passage to prove their point:

> Interpretation is the source of texts, facts, authors, and intentions. Or to put it another way, the entities that were once seen as competing for the right to constrain interpretation (text, reader, author) are now all seen to be *products* of interpretation.[11]

If this passage was read more charitably, it could be taken to express the belief that anything we *describe* as texts, facts, authors, and intentions, are products of interpretation. This still leaves room for an intention, albeit one that we can only construct hypothetically, and that is therefore not very useful for the business of interpretation. I am not entirely sure whether Fish would agree to the above, but would like to expand on it to show that it is at least compatible with what he says, and possibly even useful for his purposes.

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[11] *Intentions and Interpretations*. Modern Language Notes. 107 (1992). 932.

If we imagine an author in the process of making "marks" on a piece of paper – marks which will later be interpreted – it is plausible to suggest that he has some design or intention. But are these intentions themselves accessible or interpretable? I would like to suggest that they are not – not even to the author himself. When we frame an intention in our minds, for example "I am going to walk the dog", it is undeniable that we use words in doing so. But before we *frame* that intention, it seems that there exists a pure, unexpressed (for framed thoughts, insofar as they use words to express something, are expressions) *thought* or impulse. Something prompts me to think "I am going to walk the dog", but this thing is never accessible, as any attempt to describe it (even in my thoughts) would require framing it or defining it with words. And as soon as something is expressed with words, the interpretive activities practised by virtue of the interpretive community I belong to come into effect. I choose certain words to frame my impulse because those words, *according to the strategies of my interpretive community*, come closest to expressing my impulse. The impulse itself, however, is never available for inspection or description. This pure impulse is the author's intention, and readers of his text (including himself) can never access that impulse via the text. There may therefore be room for Fish to grant the existence of interpreter-independent facts about what authors intend, without making those facts essential components of interpretive activity.

So, at the moment of setting marks down on paper, the author uses interpretive strategies, just as the reader will when he later has access to the text. The act of labelling something as a "text" is, furthermore, a result of the application of an interpretive strategy. An interpretive community can appropriate any given written object as a text, therefore it is the reader (acting in his capacity as a member of an interpretive community) who "makes" literature, and "the act of recognising literature is not constrained by something in the text[12], nor does it issue from an independent and arbitrary will; rather, it proceeds from a collective decision as to what will count as literature".[13]

Stanley Fish undoubtedly served as my primary philosophical and aesthetic influence at the time these poems were being written, and I have as such attempted to not only clarify Fish's position on certain issues, but also to show how Fish provides a coherent account of the way in which interpretive activity should best be construed, in that it seems to match up to our actual interpretive practises as in the case of my poems analysed above. Finally, it should be noted that in offering an exegesis of Fish's claims, I have made the necessary assumption that I belong to the same interpretive community as he does. Hopefully, my readers will be similarly situated.

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[12]It is therefore hypothetically possible for a given interpretive community to appropriate Henry Moore's shopping list as literature. Such tendencies would however be discouraged by their own pointlessness, in that there would be few interesting interpretive statements that could be made regarding such an "artwork".
[13]Fish, 11.

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Appendix 2

The Poetry of Charles Bukowski: An Appreciation

"Why can't you be decent to people?" she asked.
"Fear," I said.

– Charles Bukowski, Women. p. 54

The poetry of Charles Bukowski (1912-1994) could be considered a natural culmination of an ongoing revolt against formalism, the academic and the intellectual in American poetry, with Bukowski representing the antithesis of the academic poet. For Bukowski, the poem was not sacred or particularly precious – its purpose was to record events and emotions with a directness not possible in prose. His life, as well as his work, evidence a remarkably consistent commitment to the goal of stripping away the barriers imposed on communication by the various roles society commits the individual to playing. His role was that of the outsider – the alcoholic, skid-row misanthrope captured in the movie *Barfly* – yet the collision of his gruff, idiomatic, and often humourous voice with the random incidents of his daily life have left us with a substantial body of work that critically addresses the relationship of the individual to society, in particular class-structure and the American Dream's obfuscation of the individual's unhappy role in the relations of production.

In the light of his work's criticism of the American Dream, it is hardly surprising that his critical reception has been centered primarily in Europe, in particular

his native Germany. American audiences were alienated by his constant reminders of the banality of the lives that many are subjected to, and by his violent anti-consumerism, which struck at the heart of what many might have considered most desirable about being a working-class American: that the possibility existed to satisfy material desires in a way that might not be possible in other, non-capitalistic societies.

Bukowski was consistent in his demand for something more than material affluence, a position which was granted authority through his own working-class background, the decades of tedium he endured as an employee of the United States Postal Service before his poetry was first published in the late 1950's. What followed was years of struggling for recognition through the little magazines and chapbooks in which his work appeared through the 1960's, before John Martin founded Black Sparrow press and granted Bukowski a stipend that allowed him to quit his job and focus on writing. A substantial body of work was eventually produced – 41 books, including 5 novels, collections of short-stories, newspaper articles and correspondence – all of which depict a reality frequently derided by critics as the expression of a particularly idiosyncratic individual's viewpoint. Bukowski was undeniably idiosyncratic, yet his viewpoint serves to illuminate a reality that, while perhaps alienating to middle-class sensibilities, is the reality of the working-class, and which is therefore as valid a subject for poetry as any other.

It was important to Bukowski that his poetry was read as an expression of class experience, rather than as merely confessional material, as the latter

would privilege his experience in ways antithetical to Bukowski's broad political stance. The emphasis on impersonality prevalent in high modernist poetry was a strong force in shaping Bukowski's voice, as he felt that such poetry was providing a specious objectivity – for Bukowski, objectivity was to be found in a poetry which shunned the "diffuse and careful voice of formula and studied ineffectiveness" in favour of "a voice of clarity and burnt toast and spilled olives and me and you and the spider in the corner".[14]

There are two elements to this statement that I would like to expand on in attempting to describe the uniqueness and value of his poetry. The first element is Bukowski's choice of subject matter and the relationship between the self, the subject and the external world in general. The second relates to the form of his poetry, in his almost exclusive preference for metonymy over metaphor in dealing with that subject matter.

As indicated, Bukowski denied the validity of the stereotypically "poetic" experience, and believed that poetry should address any detail of everyday life. He believed that the imaginative apprehension gained through immediate experience is primary and certain, while the analytic reflection that invariably follows is secondary and philosophical, and that an emphasis on particularity is the only guarantee of presenting an authentic experience.

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[14]Harrison, R. Against the American Dream: Essays on Charles Bukowski. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow 1995. p. 33.

Confessional poetry can be said to have paved the way for a poetry like Bukowski's, as it broadened the scope of possible poetic concerns in emphasising the personal. A marked point of contrast between Bukowski's poetry and Confessional poetry, however, is in Bukowski's refusal to privilege his own experience as particularly critical or culturally symbolic. One of his techniques for rejecting this privilege was to avoid emphasising the subjective, preferring to focus on action and concrete, objective detail.

Bukowski's narratives, with their lyrical subject being revealed as part of an objective social world, acknowledge the dialectical nature of self-consciousness – that the self is defined through the other, and through the concrete details of daily experience. The subjects of his poetry are made interesting through Bukowski's reaction to them – a reaction which (in keeping with his mistrust of subjectivity) expresses few normative judgements, but rather serves to portray a sensibility that is not only plausible but also coherent and frequently illuminating.

Thus we see the subject in Bukowski's poetry being defined both in narrative and through it's contiguous relation to objects, with the narrative frequently beginning in the 3rd-person, sketching objective detail, before shifting gradually to a 1st-person viewpoint. In this way, Bukowski's presents a coherent expression of a possible way of life – one that is not only real for some of the American working-class, but also intelligible to those outside of it in its authenticity and reliance on concrete details that a wider audience would be familiar with.

Bukowski provides both social commentary and an accurate depiction of a certain state of mind in his poetry – a characteristic exasperation with the world and its inhabitants. Yet this psychological state is rarely explicitly defined or described, but rather sketched through depicting the circumstances leading to it. These circumstances also frequently involve morally problematic situations, which are set up and then defused as Bukowski defies the reader's expectations by neither committing himself to the position the reader might expect, nor by offering any moral interpretation whatsoever. In fact, this is one of the central virtues in Bukowski's poetry, as he presents us with an outsider's view of human activity, enabling a reader to (ideally) view the situation apart from their learned or conventional responses.

Bukowski's poetry is also remarkable in that it provides social commentary in his preference for metonymy over metaphor. This preference, however, does more than that – it also further informs Bukowski's conception of the role of poetry in exploring human relations. Metaphor is still perhaps the dominant poetic device, serving to disclose the unity behind the apparent diversity of phenomena, yet is has been subjected to occasional revolts in favour of simpler, more natural diction.

Bukowski's poetry could be considered the culmination of that revolt, as while his early work made extensive use of a figurative, sometimes surrealistic language, this later yielded to an almost completely non-metaphorical language. Metaphor essentially *substitutes*, and Bukowski did not want

substitutes. His solution was to rely on metonymy, which has the virtue of avoiding the portrayal of the world as consisting in the unity of things; that *this* is similar to *that*. His poetry relies on detail and specifics, and the absence of metaphor and the reliance on metonymy emphasise both the extent to which the physical world impinges on the narrator, as well as the extent to which the subject is part of that world. Bukowski's desire to avoid overt or prescriptive social comment is also well served through metonymy, for so long as the poet does not impose his own single interpretive structure on the chosen images, the poet himself remains concealed in the absence they evoke – the reader needs to make up his own mind as to the opinions or attitudes of the narrator.

Direct (authorial) comment on the narrative detail in Bukowski's poetry may frequently be absent, yet comment does emerge in the choice of the detail and action described. This avoidance of direct comment and moralising adjectives, allied to his reliance on the chronicle (where the psychological connections between events are not forced on the reader, but left open to interpretation), results in a poetry which is in turn completely trivial and profoundly insightful. His implausibly high rate of production, along with this feature, has made it easy for critics to dismiss or ignore his work. Yet, in poems like "A Love Poem" (quoted in full below), Bukowski's use of metonymy and his particular narrative style combine to produce a poem which refuses such trivialisation in its ironic humour and keen social commentary.

A Love Poem

all the women
all their kisses the
different ways they love and
talk and need.

their ears they all have
ears and
throats and dresses
and shoes and
automobiles and ex-
husbands.

mostly
the women are very
warm they remind me of
buttered toast with the butter
melted
in.

there is a look in the
eye: they have been
taken they have been
fooled. I don't quite know what to
do for
them.

I am
a fair cook a good
listener
but I never learned to
dance – I was busy
then with larger things.

but I've enjoyed their different
beds
smoking cigarettes
staring at the
ceilings. I was neither vicious nor
unfair. only
a student.

I know they all have these
feet and barefoot they go across the floor as
I watch their bashful buttocks in the
dark. I know that they like me, some even
love me
but I love very
few.

some give me oranges and vitamin pills;
others talk quietly of
childhood and fathers and
landscapes; some are almost
crazy but none of them are without
meaning; some love
well, others not
so; the best at sex are not always the
best in other
ways; each has limits as I have
limits and we learn
each other
quickly.

all the women all the
women all the
bedrooms
the rugs the
photos the
curtains, it's
sometimes like a church only
at times there's
laughter.

those ears those
arms those
elbows those eyes
looking, the fondness and
the wanting I have been
held I have been
held. [15]

Absent from Bukowski's poem is any overt comment on women or on the relationships between individuals. Such comment as there is is disguised in the choice of facts, details, and actions described, as well as in the manner in which they are described. The reader gains an impression of Bukowski's attitude toward women in general by phrases like the repeated "all the women", but clues such as these only allow us to infer, rather than know, what Bukowski's attitude may be.

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[15]Bukowski, H.C. War All The Time: Poems 1981-1984. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow 1984. pp. 33-34.

In Bukowski's poetry, the refusal to psychologise is connected to his preference for metonymy, for *things* rather than explanations. Explanation would involve the overt interjection of a subject, and Bukowski here objectifies his description not only by refusing overt comment but also by refusing the implicit comment of moralising adjectives.

In "A Love Poem", Bukowski immediately subverts the reader's expectations by beginning with "all the women", indicating that this is a love poem to women in general, rather than the specific addressee of a conventional love poem. The poem then begins to metonymically suggest the different lives that these women live, reinforcing Bukowski's psychological ambiguity by simultaneously rendering the women somewhat generic through his use of the repeated "all". The women all have shoes, automobiles and ex-husbands – apparently trivial details which disguise and simultaneously suggest the differences which exist between them. In stanza three, just as we expect Bukowski to begin making personal observations or judgements, his analysis of the warmth of women deflates in the comparison to "buttered toast with the butter/melted in".

The women are also similar in the respect that they seem aware that "they have been/taken they have been/fooled", a situation which gives Bukowski the opportunity to deflate another of the reader's expectations: that this poem, in its apparent trivialisation of the differences between women, indicates a lack of concern or respect on Bukowski's part. It seems, rather, that he is concerned, and furthermore that his concern relates to the possibility that *he*

might be fooling them too, and that while this may trouble him, he still doesn't "quite know what to/do for/them".

The poem functions as an artful presentation of a certain kind of self, but one that is nonetheless difficult to pin down. Morally, Bukowski presents himself ambiguously here – the poem could perhaps be an admission of guilt for the lack of respect he has for "all the women", or it could be an acknowledgement that all that matters, in relation to women, is that he "has been held", that women, in other words, exist merely to satisfy his needs. The introduction of the "church" in stanza nine could perhaps support the first interpretation, though, as it seems to introduce feelings of guilt and/or respect: "it's/something like a church only/at times there's/laughter". Furthermore, the general anti-romantic tone of the poem, in the light of the final lines, seems to suggest that the poem is at least in part a trademark ironic jibe at himself, at his "tough-guy" image as well as the general anti-romanticism of his work.

The force of this poem, as is the case with many of Bukowski's poems, rests largely on the presentation of Bukowski in one of various modes, with the reader engaged in a constant effort to determine just when Bukowski is ever being sincere, or what (if anything) he is willing to assert without an ironic disclaimer. The poems are investigations of situations which are concrete and particular, yet that are, in a sense, so generic as to ensure some measure of objective validity. Bukowski disguises himself and denies responsibility for the sentiments of his poems in various ways, and it is here that we find his central influence on my writing.

Negation (evidenced here by the continual undercutting of universals, such as "warm" in stanza three, as well as the ironic closure) and the refusal of identity (made possible through metonymy) are central to Bukowski's achievement in this poem and, with the possible exception of the use of metonymy, are also devices frequently found in my poetry, for example in the juxtaposition of the serious and the trivial in stanza four of "All our average days".

A second influence on my work is the characteristically Bukowskian device of the "throwaway" gesture. Especially in his more existentialist moods, but quite frequently throughout his career, Bukowski has made use of pseudo-universal statements or profound claims that sometimes seem out of place in a given poem. In "A Love Poem", one such moment is in stanza five, where after specifying some of his skills (or deficiencies thereof) in asserting "I am/a fair cook a good/listener/but I never learned to dance", Bukowski claims that he "was busy/then with larger things", without bothering to specify what those "larger" things are, and without giving the reader any evidence to support the claim that they are, in fact, "large" at all.

Irrelevant, such claims come out of nowhere and quickly return there in much of Bukowski's poetry, unsupported by anything in the poem. Yet it is precisely their irrelevance that underscores the materialism of the depiction in the rest of the poem – their superficial presence that suggests all the more that the nexus of the poem lies elsewhere, that these "larger things" have no bearing on the conception of human relations that he is sketching, and that we should

focus on the particular rather than the universal. They are, in fact, a decoy whose very emptiness serves to redirect the reader's attention, while simultaneously articulating the distinctive persona of Bukowski. These "throwaway" gestures function, in Bukowski's poetry as well as mine, as tongue-in-cheek plays on the audiences' assumptions – they mock poetic pretensions by deliberately underscoring their own triviality, thus appealing to the sympathy of the audience against the inflated nature of "intellectual" poetry.

In my poetry, this device also serves the function of redirecting the reader's attention through creating uncertainty as to the *sincerity* of the lines surrounding the "throwaway" gesture, thereby problematising the reader's conception of the author of the poem. Furthermore, my reading of Bukowski suggests that a further effect of this device, in both Bukowski's poetry and mine, is to obstruct the *interpretability* of the poem itself – to create a situation in which meaning is necessarily deferred due to textual features which are difficult to reconcile with other elements of the poem.

Charles Bukowski died on March 9, 1994 in San Pedro, California. His headstone reads "Don't Try", which, just like the dedication to his final novel ("Dedicated to bad writing"[16]), directs a final jab at those he liked to refer to as "the clean fingernail boys"[17], the writers of formula fiction and poetry. Bukowski claimed that "if you have to fight with your words, something's wrong. Trust your instinct. Don't pull back. Even if you fail, you can get up and

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[16]Bukowski, H.C. Pulp. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow 1994.

try again". While this approach certainly resulted in a very uneven body of work, its virtues are considerable, as Bukowski has provided a constant counterweight to a safer, more stabilising literature, thereby cautioning both readers and writers against complacency while simultaneously entertaining and informing that same audience.

While my "intellectual" half has made it impossible for me to trust instinct to the extent Bukowski did, this appeal against complacency is as vital to my poetry as to Bukowski's. It was his ironic humour and artful misanthropy that led me to realise that uncomfortable sentiments regarding human relations could function as the nexus of a poetic sensibility, and that poetry could deal with the particular and personal while still retaining objective validity.

A small following remains interested in Bukowski's work, with journals and little magazines still publishing those manuscripts that have emerged since his death. Yet it seems that, even though the literary "establishment" is now thoroughly fragmented, he will never be more than the antipode to the collective canon. His response to an unsuccessful Pulitzer Prize nomination reveals his likely response to this continued role as "outsider": "well, what's all this prize and grant shit, anyhow? for the profs, for the goody-goodies. I ought to know better".[18]

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[17] Cherkovski, N. Bukowski: A Life. South Royalton: Steerforth 1997. p.324
[18] Bukowski, H.C. (ed. S. Cooney) Screams from the Balcony: Selected Letters 1960-1970. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow 1993. p. 306

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