

(Introduction to my articles on Bukowski for the yearbooks of the Charles Bukowski Society)

The two following articles deal with mirrors (especially the first); they also illustrate this theme in many other ways – such as the mirror of translation - since the articles are based on a Master thesis I wrote in French, but more importantly because their themes mirror each other.

“Fingers, Hands and Feet” centers on the way the poet’s body evolves in Bukowski’s poetry, whereas my second article deals with the poetics of space in order to prove that the evolution of space mirrors that of the body, since enclosed spaces in this poetry are, in fact, only a metaphor of the body. “The Poetics of Space in Charles Bukowski’s Poetry” is the script of an address I gave in Andernach in August 2011, while “Fingers, Hands and Feet” was given at the same place last summer of 2012.

I had concluded the research for my first MA thesis (called “*Presence in Charles Bukowski’s early poetry*”) on the Lacanian notion of the mirror stage being the main dynamic at play in Bukowski’s early poetry. I will call this poetry “lyrical” as it is centered on the subject (“I”), who is a generally indeterminate subject with a fragmented body, as we will see.

After that, it only remained to discover what made Bukowski shift from lyrical poetry to what I will call “narrative poetry”.¹ In other words what internal logic in his writing made Bukowski turn the lyrical and solipsist subject into a character much akin to Chinaski in his short story (not to mention that he is often so named in the poems).

Jules Smith said that the turning point was the public readings, as Bukowski was obliged to write in a simpler way to catch the attention of his audience.² This reason makes sense, but I decided to take this idea further and to a deeper level- I wondered to what extent being directly confronted with his readers/audience made Bukowski change his poetic writing. This supposition was the departure point of a second Master thesis named “*From explosion to exposition: the body of the poet in Charles Bukowski’s poetry*”.

I based this work on two poetry collections only. The first of these is the lyrical poetry “*Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame*” (BWDF)³, a selection of Bukowski’s early books with poems ranging from 1955 to 1973⁴. For narrative poetry I picked “*Mockingbird, Wish me Luck*” (MWL)⁵ because these poems were published in 1972, which is approximately when Bukowski started giving public readings. It is also almost the only collection in which Bukowski mentions his first (and painful) experience of giving public readings.⁶ Here, the one who says “I”, will be called “the poet”, since he is more of a character in a narrative.

Of course Bukowski’s poetic writing evolved progressively, but it is for the sake of clarity that I have divided it into two distinct periods.

¹ If one looks closer, Bukowski did write some narrative poems at the beginning of his writing career. There will always be exceptions, but here I mean to focus on *tendencies*. The features of “lyrical” and “narrative” poetry are found in a great majority of poems, and I mention exceptions when they are relevant to my point.

² SMITH Jules, *Art, Survival and so Forth, the Poetry of Charles Bukowski*, Hull, Wrecking Ball Press, 2000.

³ BUKOWSKI Charles, *Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame: selected poems 1955-1973*, Santa Rosa, Black Sparrow Press, 1974, 240p.

⁴ The last part of the collection includes poems published between 1972 and 1973. Thus a couple of poems already tend to a more narrative style, although they still retain some features from the lyrical period.

⁵ BUKOWSKI Charles, *Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*, New York, Ecco, 1972 (nv.ed. Ecco 2002), 159p.

⁶ See the poem “*the public reading*” (MWL, 31)

Fingers, hands and feet: the fragmented body-poetry of Charles Bukowski

by Dina Moinzadeh

Written with the body

There's an idea found both in *Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame* and *Mockingbird Wish Me Luck* – though it is much more explicit in the latter, according to which a poem feeds itself on the poet's blood. I would like to quote two poems: the first is "he wrote in lonely blood" (MWL, 102). The title refers to a line within the poem which deals with the work of a poet whom Bukowski admired: Robinson Jeffers. Bukowski identifies with him in the sense that he was a "loner" too. Then, in "the poetry reading" (MWL, 31), the poet uses the phrase "blood money, blood money" on three occasions to refer to what he feels unwillingly obliged to do - give public readings. As if the latter was comparable to giving away his own blood.

The act of writing is always perceived as a physical effort. In "a literary romance" (*BWDF*,21), the subject establishes a parallel between writing and the sexual act: "i think that when a woman has kept her legs closed/for 35 years/it's too late/either for love/or for/poetry".

It is even more explicit in "lifting weights at 2 a.m." (MWL,62). At the beginning of the poem, the poet questions himself about the point of weight lifting exercises and ends up likening it to writing:

(...)
still, one needs the
exercise ---
this writing game :
only the brain and soul get
worked-out.
quit your bitching and
do it.
while other people are
sleeping
you're lifting a mountain
with rivers of poems
running off.

So writing is equivalent to lifting mountains, and if blood is absent from the poem, there is still a liquid metaphor in the sense that poems are like rivers.

Liquid is also present in “the poetry reading” (*MWL*, 31) in the form of the poet’s sweat (“the sweat running down my arms”) and the comforting drinks (“and later in my room/there’s scotch and beer:/ the blood of a coward”(32)).

It is clear, therefore, that to understand Bukowski’s poetry it is essential to examine the question of the poet’s body and the way it is described, written, and represented, as well as how it evolved from the early poems to the later ones.

Lyrical poetry and fragmentation

Fragmented bodies

One of the most important characteristics of Bukowski’s poetry is the abundance of dismembered, mutilated, and fragmented bodies. There are an innumerable number of poems dealing with that pattern, too many to name in fact. And even if a body isn’t being hurt there is still a form of violence taking place through writing, since the body is only described in a fragmented way and through its pieces.

The theme of dismemberment⁷ is present in both *BWDF* and *MWL*. There are, for example, similar poems, such as “a sound in the bush” (*MWL*,107) and “he even looked like a nice guy” (*BWDF*, 139). In the first one, a soldier has his throat cut, the gold fillings of his teeth stolen, his ears cut off and...a picture stolen. In the second poem, a killer cuts a woman into pieces and sends each part by mail all over the United-States.

Mutilation is a strong leitmotiv with Bukowski, and these mutilations are generally senseless and with no real logical cause, as is shown in “the flower lover” (*BWDF*, 134) :

(...) I found a flower
as large as my
head
and when I reached in to smell
it

⁷From a psychoanalytical point of view, the dismemberment fantasy is strongly related to the fear of castration (Leader&Groves, *Introducing Lacan*,p. 27).

I lost an ear lobe
part of my nose
one eye
and half a pack of
cigarettes.
(...)

Not only is there no explicit causal relationship at work in this poem, nothing is written either about the pain the subject should feel.

When it's the poet's body that is being mutilated, violence is arbitrary, the very act of mutilation is not actually described. Indeed, the subject has no explanation to give in one of the only two poems of *BWDF* where the word "body"⁸ is used. Body is also the title of the poem (*BWDF*, 98): "I have been/hanging here/headless/for so long/that the body has forgotten/why/or where or when it happened". Each body part seems to be autonomous: "and the toes/ walk along in shoes / that do not care", or "the fingers/ slice things and/ hold things and/move things and/touch/things (...)".

Thus the fragment ends up prevailing over the whole, and it has an existence of its own, much to the detriment of a coherent body .

One could say, like Roland Barthes, that the body can only be written in a fragmented manner and that writing can never permit us to visualize a whole body.⁹ However, in *BWDF*, Bukowski hardly uses the word "body"; so the latter is never unified, even in an abstract way. Moreover, there is often more than just simple mutilation. It is noticeable in the two previously quoted poems that the body pieces are fragments of fragments: in the "Flower Lover"(*BWDF*, 134), only an ear lobe, a part of a nose and only one of the two eyes are lost. In "the body", it is the toes and not the feet ("the toes/walk along in shoes/that do not/care"), the fingers and not the hands ("the fingers of the hand/are senseless to vibration"). So the subject leaves no chance for the reader to visualize either his body as a whole, or even a particular piece of the body in its entirety.

On the other hand, though the bodies remain mutilated, things still evolve between *BWDF* and *MWL*.

⁸The other poem is « for marylin m. » (*BWDF*, 18) in which the body is obviously that of Marilyn Monroe.

⁹BARTHES Roland, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, p.131

In *MWL*, except for one or two poems, it is no longer the subject's, but rather someone else's body that is in jeopardy.

Let's examine the two exceptions first.

In "a fine day and the world looks good" (*MWL*, 73) one can see the poet being slowly devoured by the lion, which is actually a symbolic name he gives to his disease.

someday the lion will
walk in
he'll grab an arm
just above the elbow
my old arm
my wrinkled dice-shooting arm
and
I'll scream
in my bedroom

So, for once, dismemberment has a logical as well as a rational (although metaphorical) cause. One can compare this poem with "the old poet" (*BWDF*, 29), the difference being that in the latter, he dies alone in his room, whereas in "a fine day..." he is (much to his dismay) surrounded by people he does not willingly want to be exposed to: "and people will walk in--/(...)/and/they will/watch". (73)

The approach of death is also palpable in "the last day of the suicide kid" (*MWL*, 35), where the poet sees himself at the end of his life - old, senile and disabled, sitting in a wheelchair ("there I am sitting upright in my wheelchair,/myself whiter than this sheet of paper,/bloodless,/brain gone, gamble gone, me, Bukowski,/gone..."(35)).

Both exceptions are fictional representations of his death and/or oldness.

If the poet's body in *MWL* escapes fragmentation in general, and mutilation in particular, this is due to a change of focus away from his own body to the body of someone else, a move from the inner to the outer space.

But before that, during what I call the lyrical period, the poem's style is similar to that fragmented body.

The lyrical poetry is at the image of the fragmented body

Fragmentation operates at every level of Bukowski's lyrical writing. I am now going to examine each aspect of this.

Parataxis

There is a strong tendency to parataxis - juxtaposing independent clauses - without any relation of subordination or even link words in between them.

Since we are dealing with coordination, rather than subordination (which implies a form of hierarchy), all elements are at the same level, but separated and independent from one another. That reminds us of the poem “the body” (*BWDF*, 98) where every body part is independent due to the absence of the head (which was cut off) and to which the rest of the body cannot be subjected any longer.

However, despite the evidence of parataxis, there is still one link word that is frequently used: “and”. It tends to reinforce parataxis in that it doesn’t so much establish a relation between the clauses as underline the juxtaposition.

There is another context where the word “and” proves to be important:

The anaphora

“and” often (and literally) comes back under the guise of anaphora, like here with “the house” (*BWDF*, 35):

(...) and I read about Castro and Cuba
and at night I walk by
and the ribs of the house show
and inside I can see cats walking
the way cats walk,
and then a boy rides by bicycle,
and still the house is not done
and in the morning the men
will be back (...)

An anaphora with “and” adds weight to the chopped and fragmented aspect of a poem with an already heavy rhythm. The chopped rhythm can be felt when the poem is read aloud. The anaphora also adds a certain circularity to the rhythm. Going back to the beginning only adds a new element.

Anaphora can also be employed with other words such as “ask” in “them, all of them, know” (*BWDF*, 89), a poem that goes way beyond the anaphoric norm.

The list

There is an esthetics of the list in all Bukowski's work, not just his poems. Take the following poem for example « they, all of them, know » (*BWDF*, 89):

ask the sidewalk painters of Paris
ask the sunlight on a sleeping dog
ask the 3 pigs
ask the paperboy
ask the music of Donizetti
ask the barber
ask the murderer
(...) ask the men who read all the newspaper editorials
ask the men who breed roses
ask the men who feel almost no pain
ask the dying
ask the mowers of lawns and the attenders
 of football games
(...)

Items having no logical connection with each other. The esthetics of the list is found on a smaller scale in many other poems. "machineguns towers & timeclocks" (*BWDF*, 64) is one of these:

(...)
and not wanting the
game, not wanting
machineguns and towers and
timeclocks,
not wanting a carwash
a toothpull
a wristwatch, cufflinks
a pocket radio
tweezers and cotton
a cabinet full of iodine,
not wanting cocktails parties
a front lawn
sing-togethers
new shoes, Christmas presents
life insurance, Newsweek
162 baseball games
a vacation in Bermuda.

Lists sometimes deal with body parts. Let's have another, closer look at "the body" (*BWDF*, 98) :

(...)
and although
the fingers
slice things and
hold things and
move things and
touch
things
such as
oranges
apples
onions
books
bodies
I am no longer
reasonably sure
what these things
are (...)

Here, bodies are placed on the same level as everyday objects. The same is true of "the flower lover" (*BWDF*, 134):

in the Valkerie Mountains
among the strutting peacocks
I found a flower
as large as my
head
and when I reached in to smell
it

I lost an ear lobe
part of my nose
one eye
and half a pack of

cigarettes. (...)

With body parts being treated as mere external objects, a form of dissociation between the subject “I” and the scattered pieces of his body becomes apparent. I will go back to that later.

Fragmentation can go as far as to the level of the word itself.

Choosing a lexicon

The English language comprises two great lexicon families: words with latin roots, and words with anglo-saxon roots. The first are words of a higher level, and their frequent use by a writer is a sign of a more cerebral and “intellectual” style. Those words are also much longer than the anglo-saxon ones, which means that there will always be a weak syllable. One example: “intelligent”.

On the other hand, anglo-saxon words are predominantly of a lower level, which is a priori less literary, but indisputably down to earth. They are also short words. Take the equivalent of “intelligent”, which is “clever”.

What is striking in Bukowski’s poetry is that his lexicon is almost exclusively Anglo-Saxon. This goes well with his usual topics, which are close to lowly everyday life (slums, alcohol, sex) but even better with the rhythm and the heaviness of the Bukowskian phrase.

It is thus the string of short words that allows an almost-spondaic rhythm, with strong syllables one after the others, just as in the preceding poem.

Now I am going to examine how fragmentation operates on time and space.

Time and especially space are apprehended through the body. But since the body is never whole in Bukowski’s lyrical poetry, the perception of time and space through the subject’s eyes can only be distorted. A spatiotemporal confusion is visible in “the body” (*BWDF*, 98): the body of the subject is deprived of its head with no logical reason, and when the subject touches objects, he says: “I am no longer/reasonably sure/what these things/are// they are mostly /like/ /lamplight / and/fog” (*BWDF*, 98).

Without a body in one piece, it is indeed difficult to correctly perceive material reality. And when the window opens onto an external landscape:

(...)

the fingers of the hand

are senseless to vibration
because they have no
ears
senseless to color because
they have no
eyes
senseless to smell
without a nose
(...)

In the absence of the head, it is the fingers, those writing tools, which are solicited; the eyes, which allow one to sense space, are gone, and the ears, which allow the perception of time¹⁰, cannot help the body find its marks. Here is one of the consequences:

the country goes by as
nonsense
the continents
(...)
while everywhere
moves

Those lines show a real loss of spatial landmarks. The countries move around, everything is “nonsense”, and the fact that “everywhere/moves” accentuates the dizziness felt by the headless body.

Time is blurred as well:

the daylights and evenings
shine
on my dirty
fingernails

¹⁰« Tandis que la vue a tendance à percevoir les choses d'une façon statique et invariable, l'ouïe saisit la dynamique de la genèse du temps. L'acte d'entendre est toujours lié à des successions temporelle. » : When sight tends to perceive things in a stactic and invariable way, hearing grasps the dynamics of time's genesis. The act of hearing is always related to temporal sequences.(My translation)(« Ouïe »,Christoph Wulf in *Dictionnaire du corps*,p.679).

There is confusion between day and night: they both shine and both do this on a surface...that cannot shine ("dirty fingernails"). As the alternation between day and night has been blurred out, there is no way to locate oneself in time.

One may wonder how a purely narrative poetry can take place with no clearly defined time and space definitions...

In Bukowski's *BWDF*, space is generally limited to the room, and this space often seems to be located outside ordinary time and space, just as in « View from the screen »(*BWDF*,51):

I cross the room
to the last wall
the last window
the last pink sun
with its arm around the world
with its arms around me
I hear the death-whisper of the heron
the bone-thoughts of sea-things
that are almost rock;
this screen caved like a soul
and scrawled with flies,
my tensions and damnations
are those of a pig,
pink sun pink sun
I hate your holiness
crawling your gilded cross of life
as my fingers and feet and face
come down to this
sleeping with the whore of your fancy wife
you must some day die for nothing
as I
have lived.

The line that says « with its arm around the world » suggests an inversion, or even a confusion between inner and outer space. Right from the start the atmosphere is apocalyptic: « the last wall/the last window/the last pink sun ». The subject hears things that are not in the room: « the death-whisper of the heron/the bone-thoughts of sea-things/that are almost rock ».

In the end, the closed space of the room is like a receptacle of the infinite (« this screen caved like a soul »). As with the body of the poet, it is made up of pieces: « my fingers and feet and face »

This feeling of being out of time is reinforced by a feature found in all Bukowski's lyrical poetry: the use of the simple present to suggest something that is always true (general truths in particular). The tense is used for what is present, and timeless, and it underlines the temporal ambiguity of some poems.

It is perhaps not surprising that Bukowski started making more use of the past simple during his narrative period. Not only it is the tense predominantly used for narrative, it also describes an action that is anchored in a precise moment of the past (that of the narrative).

Another example is found in "the curtains are waving and people walk through the afternoon here and in Berlin and in New York City and in Mexico" (*BWDF*, 149).

I wait on life like a pregnancy, put the stethoscope to
the gut
but all I hear now is
the piano slamming its teeth through areas of my
brain

(somebody in this neighborhood likes
Gershwin which is too bad
for
me)

and the woman sits behind me
sits there sits there
and keeps lighting cigarettes
and now the nurses leave the hospital near here
and they wear dresses that are naked in the sun
to cheer the dead and the dying and the doctors
but it does not help
me

if I could rip them with moans of delight it
would neither add or take away
anything

now now

a horn blows a tired
summer like a gladiola given up and leaning against a

house and
the bottles we have emptied would strangle
the sensibilities...of God

now I look up and see my face in the mirror:
if I could only kill the man who killed the
man

more than coffeepots and cheroots have done me
in more than myself has done me
in

madness comes like a mouse out of the cupboard and
they hand me a photograph of the
moon

the woman behind me has a daughter who falls in love
with men in beards and sandals and berets
who smoke pipes and carefully comb their hair and
play chess and talk continually of the
soul and of Art

this is good enough: you've got to love
something
now the landlord waters outside dripping the
plants with false rain
Gershwin is finished now it sounds lie
Greig

o, it's all so common and hard! Impossible!
I do wish somebody would go blackberry
wild

but no
I suppose it will be the
same : a beer and then another
 beer and then another
 beer
maybe then a halfpint of
scotch
three cigars – smoke smoke yes smoke
under the electric sun of night

hidden here in these walls with this woman and her
life while
the police are taking the drunks off the
streets

I do not know how much longer I can
last
but I keep thinking
 ow! my god!
 the
gladiola will straighten hard and
full of
color like an
arrow pointing at the
sun
Christ will shudder like
marmalade
my cat will look like Ghandi once
looked
 everything everything
 even the tiles in the men's room at the
Union Station will be
True

all the mirrors there
finally with faces in them

 roses
 forests
 no more policemen
no more
me.

Spatial confusion is already suggested by the title of the poem, as continents merge with each other. The title also suggests that we are in a room, as in the first lines the subject can hear a piano playing: "the piano slamming its teeth through areas of my brain". We don't know where the piano is until the subject complains about his neighbour's liking for Gerschwin. The poem exudes a

feeling of timelessness perhaps because the exact place is not clearly defined. First we get a smoking woman, then ramblings about nurses, then we go back to the first woman and the accurate description of the men her daughter prefers. The voice of the subject seems to go astray, without attempting to tie up the elements it is talking about. One feels afloat in an undefined area of time and space.

In fact the whole poem oscillates between the description of what is going on in the room, given that this room in itself is not really described, and a purely metaphorical, almost surrealistic level. At the end, we are on the verge of madness: “madness comes like a mouse out of the cupboard and/they hand me a photograph of the/moon”.

The comparison doesn't make sense as such and we do not know who “they” are. One could see the moon as a symbol of lurking madness (in an oblique reference to the word “lunatics”), but even this element of the referential world which serves as a temporal landmark (as the moon waxes and wanes) is absent and reduced to a mere image.

Madness and reality collide with each other in the small space of the room,¹¹ and at the end of the poem the subject hopes for a return to reality “everything everything/even the tiles in the men's room at the/Union Station will be/True”. Emphasis is put on the word “True”, which has a line to itself.

The question is: how is the return to reality being achieved ?

There are mirrors at the end of the poem: “all the mirrors there/finally with faces in them”. One must assume that until that moment mirrors did not reflect reality, especially faces. There are two preceding ambiguous lines that say: “now I look up and see my face in the mirror:/if I could only kill the man who killed the/man”. The face is not described, and when the subject looks at himself, a sort of double-dissociation occurs as well as a confusion of identity (who is “the man”? Him or someone else?). The *mise en abyme* of self-destruction is evident: “ (...) killed the man who killed the man”. Does he want to kill the person who took his place in the mirror?

The mirror image is also found at the end of “don't come round but if you do” (*BWDF*, 74).

Throughout the poem the subject tries to prevent any potential intruder from entering his room, which is thus presented as a closed and protective space and a sanctuary not to be violated. But another possibility presents itself at the end: “they cannot enter/until the rope is cut or knotted/or until I have shaven into/new mirrors, until the world is/stopped or opened/forever.” (*BWDF*, 75).

¹¹A room that could be seen as a metaphor for the Self...

In brief, the presence of other mirrors (new mirrors, or simply mirrors that can reflect) is shown as a way out of the spatial and temporal confusion that prevails in the lyrical poetry. This explains why it is necessary to further examine the pattern of the mirror in Bukowski's lyrical poetry.

The mirror and body image

Distorting mirrors

The mirror pattern appears in some other poems.

In "the body" (*BWDF*, 98): "and in some mirror my face/a block to vanish /scuffed part of a child's /ball".

In "the twins" (*BWDF*, 23): "very well. Grant us this moment: standing before a mirror/in my dead father's suit/waiting also/to die."

In "zoo" (*BWDF*, 157): "later in the mirror I saw/a strange type of monkey."

All those occurrences have a common point: the body of the poet is never truly reflected. He either sees something else (a monkey) or someone else (his father), or else his face is distorted (in "the body"). That would explain why in "the curtains are waving(...)" (*BWDF*, 149) mirrors ultimately reflect faces, even if it is not the subject's face that is reflected.

What does this absence of reflection mean? The lacanian concept of the mirror stage would prove of great help here.

Mirror stage and the body image

The body image is a psychoanalytical concept that was created around the time of Freud by a certain Paul Schilder, and was developed more comprehensively by Françoise Dolto. This concept is strongly related to Lacan's imaginary body – if for no other reason than that the word "imaginary" also suggests "image".

All psychoanalysts agree that perceiving one's body as a unit can only be done through an image. This process requires a real separation between the self and the representation of one's own body. It can be therefore suggested that the Bukowskian lyrical subject skipped that step. But before

continuing, I will briefly describe how the imaginary body is formed. The process was studied by Jacques Lacan who conceptualizes it through the idea of the mirror stage.¹²

According to him, the baby and the very young child both have a fragmented perception of their own body, only being aware of the parts of their bodies that provide pain or pleasure (sucking breast, defecating etc...). This limits them to what Lacan calls the real body. Next comes the mirror stage, which corresponds to the time when the child recognizes his image in the mirror as his own reflection. This proves that the body cannot be perceived as a unit but only through an image – such as the reflection in the mirror, which is no more than a metaphor for the body image. Indeed, no one can perceive or feel his body as a whole, one can only have a representation of it. The mirror itself is a metaphor.

The mirror represents the gaze of The Others - not only because a baby can see his reflection in his mother's eye (a famous example), but also because we shape our identity as individuals through contacts with The Others. It is the other entity which sees us as a whole body and sends this image back to us.

However, we had previously noted that the lyrical subject is often on his own, apart from his solipsist tendencies, and that he seeks to avoid the intrusion of other persons into his intimate space. This allows the lyrical subject to be limited to his real body, and to be deprived of an imaginary body.¹³

As a consequence, the absence of other characters is a first element of explanation for the corporal fragmentation of the subject; it is, after all, the gaze of The Other that allows the subject and his body to be whole, and stabilized.¹⁴

It is then legitimate to ask oneself to what extent the gaze of the audience (to which Bukowski had been literally exposed during his public readings) could have influenced a poetry that finds its balance through the absence of that gaze.

What is certain is that we can see the first outlines of the imaginary body in *Mockingbird Wish me Luck*; it is perceptible through the grain of the voice.

Being heard and being seen

¹²« Le stade du miroir » (1949) in *Ecrits* (1966), p.93

¹³Unless we consider that the poem is his imaginary body, but I am not dealing with that topic in this article.

¹⁴Jacques Lacan *ibid.* p.98

Being heard: the grain of the voice

If by “grain of the voice” one means having the impression of hearing the voice of the author, or sometimes even other voices, through his style, then one can find this grain of the voice in *MWL*. Unlike *BWDF*, it displays many traces of the oral that give the reader a feeling of immediacy.

First of all, other characters are often quoted, with interjections (such as “look!”), and slang is clearly transcribed, as in “a free 25 page booklet” (*MWL*, 11): “all ya gotta do is go out on the sidewalk/and let down”, or “the black poets” (*MWL*, 52): “ “look muthafucka, I been on the radio, I been printed in the L.A./ Times !””.

But traces of the oral are not just found within dialogues. There can also be found in the body of the poem, which enhances the ambiguity between oral and written language in Bukowski’s poetry. In “notes about the flaxen aspect”(*MWL*, 19) one stanza is introduced with the interjection “well”. Not to mention the frequent use of “now”.

Not only is such an interjection normally used in an oral context, it is also representative of a typical way that Bukowski has of blurring the limits between the oral and the written by referring to the place and the very time of the act of writing.

It is generally accepted that one of the main differences between oral and written language is that written language is detached from the here and now. By getting back to that here and now of writing¹⁵, Bukowski makes us feel as if his own voice was addressing us through time and space.

The feeling of immediacy is frequently intensified when the poem asks the reader to imagine the poet being “here”.

Being seen: the poet representing himself

In “ 3 :16 and one half...”(*MWL*, 77) :“ here I’m supposed to be a great poet/and I’m sleepy in the afternoon/here I am aware of death like a giant bull/charging at me/and I’m sleepy in the afternoon/(...)/I lean into the sunlight behind a yellow curtain/I wonder where the summer flies have gone/I remember the most bloody death of Hemingway/ and I’m sleepy in the afternoon.”.

The repetition of “here I am” continues throughout the poem, inviting the reader to visualize the poet sleeping. The whole poem seems to aim at replacing a pre-existing image (“I’m supposed to be a great poet”) with a more true-to-life image of the poet.

¹⁵ In linguistic jargon “the situation of enunciation”

Another example is “the last day of the suicide kid” (*MWL*,35) with its masochistic pleasure in the depiction of the rotting body of a very old Bukowski:

I can see myself now
after all these suicide days and nights,
being wheeled out of one of those sterile rest homes
(of course, this is only if I get famous and lucky)
by a subnormal and bored nurse...
there I am sitting upright in my wheelchair...
almost blind, eyes rolling backward into the dark part of my
skull
looking
for the mercy of death...

The grain of the voice leaves more space for the body of the poet and even allows us to visualize his body. In contrast to *BWDF* (where we saw that the mirror stage is not achieved), the poet allows himself to be seen in *MWL* within the poems. Not only does he exhibit his body, he also exhibits himself as a poet.

In this collection, there are plenty of references, either direct or indirect, to the act of writing and to his public status as “poet”. This status is only shown through the eyes of his admirers or detractors in the poems. Apart from one poem that I shall examine later, there is no narcissistic representation of the poet at work. I could mention “the White Poets” (*MWL*, 50) where amateur poets knock at Bukowski’s door waiting for him to praise their work. Then “the black poets” (*MWL*, 52) where Black poets do exactly the same. On “300 poems” (*MWL*, 60) another amateur poet asks for his opinion on some of his poems. In “story and poem” (*MWL*, 41) a friend of the poet reproaches him after having written a story where “everyone” could recognize him. So the poet decides to go further, forcing the issue and rubbing it in with another poem.

There are then many almost autobiographical references to what it means to be a famous poet. Bukowski seems to come to terms with his public image through his poems, even though his misanthropy remains steady - in his poems he is clearly weary of being solicited by mediocre poets. But there is one poem where being a poet is not limited to a public status. It is the only poem, either in *BWDF* or in *MWL*, where we catch a glimpse of the poet’s privacy while he is writing. This is something impossible with the lyrical subject (since his body cannot be represented as a whole). As

readers, we take up a voyeuristic position. This poem is called “he wrote in lonely blood” (*MWL*, 102), and here are a few extracts:

sitting here

typing

at a friend’s house

I find a black book by the typer:

Jeffers’: *Be Angry at the Sun*.

I think of Jeffers often,

of his rocks and his hawks and his

isolation.

Jeffers was a real loner.

yes, he had to write.

(...)

Jeffers was alive and a loner and

he made his statements.

his rocks and his hawks and his isolation

counted.

he wrote in lonely blood

a man trapped in a corner

but what a corner

fighting down to the last mark

“I’ve built my rock,” he sent the message to

the lovely girl who came to his door,

“you go build yours.”

this was the same girl who had screwed Ezra,

and she wrote me that Jeffers sent her away

like that.

BE ANGRY AT THE SUN

Jeffers was a rock who was not dead.

His book sits to my left now as I type.

(...)

I've run out of non-human forms,

I'm angry at Jeffers. no,

I'm not. and if the girl comes to my door

I'll send her away too. after all, who wants to follow old

Ez?

The poem tries to give the illusion of its being written as if we were attending an event where Bukowski is typing at his machine: "now as I type". The poem is in the here and now: "sitting here", and it's written in the simple present tense, not the preteritum. The poet is pondering upon a literary double who is also a role model to him. Jeffers is also a "loner" and Bukowski admires him for that. But there's a sort of contradiction between admiring this solitude ("isolation"), which would be the usual loneliness of the poet when he is writing, and the exceptional circumstance that the poet is letting the reader into his privacy.

That contradiction can be explained by the fact that the poem is dealing above all with literary filiation. The poet, himself a loner, sees Jeffers as a role model. The latter is present through his book: "his book sits to my left", and the verb "sit" adds an anthropomorphic slant.

Bukowski the poet sees himself as being part of a great literary family, which explains why Ezra Pound is only designated by his first name – or maybe it is a sign of condescension, since Jeffers' first name is not mentioned. Filiation is also shown through the anonymous character of the woman who supposedly slept with Pound, and supposedly tried her luck with Jeffers too. Bukowski implies that she could knock at his door too, just as she did with the other two great poets. But at the end of the poem, he implies that he would also send her away (despite his reputation as a womanizer) and thus follow the example of Jeffers (and not that of Pound). The body of the poet does not yield to carnal needs and is thus affiliated to that of Jeffers, whose body inhabits the poem through his blood: "he wrote in lonely blood". As we now know, the poem feeds itself on the poet's blood. So the presence of Jeffers' blood suggests that the latter is being mixed with Bukowski's blood, which is confirmed by the very oral tone of the poem, where Bukowski's grain of voice ("yes, he had to write (...) and I think, no, that's not strong(...) I'm angry at Jeffers. no,/I'm not.") alternates with quotations from Jeffers: " "I've built my rock" he sent the message to/ the lovely girl who came to his door, "you go build yours."".

So the poem doesn't show us Bukowski the Individual, but Bukowski the Writer, i.e. the universal side of his character. In this poem, his body doesn't completely belong to him, so his intimacy or privacy is not really exposed.

We can wonder to what extent the body of the poet is fictionalized. But this question can seem vain, since the imaginary body is fiction by definition, primarily because it requires a representation of the body. According to the dictionary of the body by the CNRS¹⁶: "Experimenting the body through representation becomes presence to consciousness.(...)The body would then become (during the psychic process) both present and absent at the same time (...). The representation of the body involves dividing the body itself in order to produce an absence which is otherwise impossible because the subject can never be separated from his own body. The division allows the subject to interrupt the experience of the body and can thus render absent what is always present"¹⁷.

Later the poems where Bukowski describes himself typing at the machines will become more and more numerous, as if he was opening up his intimacy to his readership, despite his ever-going real life misanthropy.

This is a whole game of hide-and-seek that Bukowski will play in front of his audience, between the "Real Self" and the presence of the homonymous fictional character.

¹⁶*Dictionnaire du corps en sciences humaines et sociales*, directed by Bernard Andrieu and Gilles Boëtsch, Paris, CNRS éditions, 2008, 369 p.

¹⁷MADIONI Franca, «Image du corps » in *Dictionnaire du corps en sciences humaines et sociales*, p.179-180