

Notes on Bukowski and Hemingway

by Gerald Locklin

Gerry Locklin, longtime-friend of Bukowski and poet himself is also an English-teacher at California State University, Long Beach. One of his other favorite authors is Ernest Hemingway. The idea wasn't so far away to write something about Bukowski's correlation to Hemingway. It is presented here in loose notes augmented by an additional 'appendix'.

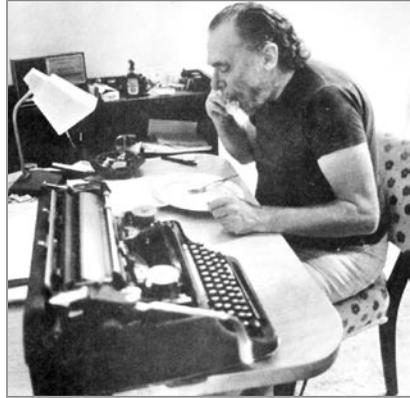
A key to understanding Charles Bukowski's relationship to Ernest Hemingway is Harold Bloom's Oedipal concept of the killing by the literary "son" (or author) of the "father," the major influence on his work. A great deal of literature is dominated by feminine sensibility, especially poems and stories intended for the young. Hemingway himself had to overcome the effete literature (and dress) foisted upon him by his domineering mother, and Bukowski, alienated (like James Joyce) from his father, no doubt found in Hemingway (to whom he prolifically refers) a validation that it is all right to write of traditionally manly activities in a masculine voice from the nature and hormones of a man. Also, while greatly appreciated by many female readers (and vilified by extreme feminists) both writers have always held a special appeal for young male readers, who find in them father-figures of their own. But just as the Freudian son must symbolically "kill" the domination of the father in order to become a man himself, so the emerging author must deny the preeminence of his literary father in an attempt to equal or surpass him.

Thus we find Bukowski more critical of Hemingway than of any of his other noteworthy influences: Hamsun, Jeffers, Celine, even Fante - although he apparently managed to "forget" Fante entirely until an early acolyte brought to his attention the obvious modeling he had discerned upon discovering Fante's novels in the Los Angeles Public Library. I never heard Bukowski mention Fante, whose works were out of print, until the young man told me he had confronted Buk with the obvious resemblances. It was after this, apparently, that Bukowski began to champion to Black Sparrow Press the reprinting of Fante's own great works, a phenomenon for which he has been accorded great credit.

Thus, Bukowski allegedly “forgot” (repressed?) one major literary father and seemed almost to glory in the alleged suicide of the other and the attempt of academic critics and feminists (ironically Bukowski’s own arch-enemies) to slander Hemingway’s literary reputation.

This dynamic (which Bloom terms the Anxiety of Influence) may strike us as irrational: surely all writers have learned from literary “fathers”—consider the innumerable models for Shakespeare’s plays and the centuries of rhetorical and oratorical echoes of the biblical authors—and this should no more detract from the accomplishments of the literary progeny than would a great athlete’s having had a similarly athletic father. But as Freud taught us: Man is NOT primarily the RATIONAL ANIMAL. Man is perhaps the LEAST rational of animals because he so strongly believes in his rationality and because his ego demands the denial of influence. This might be even more true of Bukowski, who as a young man had so little else with which to prop up his self-regard: he did not, for instance, have Hemingway’s attractiveness to women, his social skills, his mainstream literary success, his travels, his war experiences, his aptitudes for hunting and fishing, his aficion for bullfighting, not even his prizefighting skills or his capacity to hold his booze. About the only thing he could do better than Hemingway was get falling-down drunk and get beaten up in fights. And, he told himself, and his readers, he could write better than the Old Man ever had. And he hadn’t committed suicide ... although he had apparently tried to many times ... and he may have been, with his drinking, smoking, and other habits, seeking Death (as Celine would have said) on the Installment Plan.

Hemingway (in his first novel) and Faulkner (in his second) both trashed the writer who had not only been a major influence but who had been instrumental in their achieving early publication: Sherwood Anderson. In revenge and envy Gertrude Stein, in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, abused Hemingway ... who had promoted the publication of her virtually unreadable *Making of Americans*. She said he had learned to write from typing its interminable manuscript. But we will leave the analyses of literary mothers, sons, and daughters, to others.



Two true heavyweight-champs at the typer ...

Was Bukowski a greater writer than Hemingway? No, not in my estimation, and my esteem for Bukowski was enormous. He wasn't greater than Shakespeare either. Whether one measures in terms of length, breadth, or depth, Bukowski does not really measure up to their achievements. Bukowski was a great writer, and possibly the greatest of his type: the Underground Writer, the Voice from the Lower Depths, but he is simply not in the Greatest Writer Sweepstakes. He is more limited, more repetitious, more uneven. He may indeed be the easiest-to-read great writer of all time ... but, again, one of his limitations was that of vocabulary. He was articulate within the discourse he had mastered - truly inimitable in the populist voice he had made his own - but he did not speak in very many voices.

Let me be the first to warn you, though, that my own judgments may be an example of the Anxiety of Influence. I really only knew my own father for thirteen years. He served in the navy during the first four years of my life and died during the seventeenth, a week before my graduation from high school. He was a wonderful father during the years I knew him, but he was severely ill with diabetes during those years, and I was extremely busy with sports, academics, and friends. My mother dominated the household, and I was often all-but-adopted by my many childless aunts. I loved my father and I was devastated

by his death, but I consequently appropriated to myself many surrogate fathers thereafter.

One of those, in a literary and epistolary relationship, was Charles Bukowski. We already had much in common when I met him, and I never considered myself in competition with him because I was twenty years younger, of an entirely different generation, as was the case between Hemingway and Joyce, who also got along well. He was one of the living writers from whom I most learned how to be the sort of writer I ended up being, and even more about how to be conduct an underground literary career. I've always tried to give him full credit for that, and I am sincerely grateful to him. In addition we shared many attitudes, enjoyed many of the same things, found many of the same things funny, were uncomfortable with literary pretense. But who knows what lurks in the unconscious mind, my own included. Take what I say with the proverbial grain of salt.

Read Buk and Hem and Shakespeare yourselves and form your own preferences. I hope you will embrace them all, and many others who have written in English, but be wary of adopting the biases of the writers you admire. And while Bukowski and I got along well throughout most of the years of our friendship, we did have our fallings-out in the early years, and I was reluctant to bother him with correspondence once his years of serious illnesses commenced.

Both writers exercised international appeal, though Hemingway roamed the globe and Bukowski, like Thoreau, stayed home. Each had his ties with Europe, Bukowski having been born in Germany. I suspect their appeal to international readers has more to do with their both being so American: plainspoken, outspoken, democratic, unapologetically male in an era of gender ambiguities.

Hemingway was, ironically, farther to the left in his politics: not a communist but assuredly anti-fascist: in Italy, in Spain, in Cuba, in his "personal liberation" of Paris. Bukowski was apparently (according to Ben Pleasants' *Visceral Bukowski*, Sun Dog Press, 2004) caught up in "Aryan" politics as a teenager, no doubt as a result of his extreme alienation at the time, and probably as a result of that unhappy

experience with activist politics became virtually apolitical from then on.

His works depict the conditions of the working man (or unemployed man), but he was no longer a “joiner” or “demonstrator”: he had learned his lesson. I cannot remember ever hearing him make an anti-semitic or racist remark – and in his work he was an “equal opportunity misanthropist,” not discriminating on the basis of color, gender, class, etc. ... except to the extent of favoring Chinaski in most fictional confrontations, which were often thinly veiled versions of encounters in “real life.” I certainly do not consider either writer to be racist, homophobic, or “sexist” – not by my definitions anyway.

Both Hem and Buk frequently became embattled with other writers, with critics, with professors, and such. But how many authors don't find themselves involved in such disputes. It is hard for writers to get along well for very long because they inevitably use each other's material, portray each other in ways they would prefer not to have been portrayed (we all prefer our own versions of ourselves), become jealous of each other's successes or rejoice in each other's failures, “borrow” each other's ideas, fight over objects of desire, or in some other way step on each other's toes. Writers are in general a very insecure and competitive lot—Bukowski certainly portrayed most other writers as such.

Religion? Hemingway rejected his mother's Christian Science in favor of his physician father's empiricism and love of nature. While he ostensibly embraced Catholicism to facilitate his second marriage, Hemingway seems in his novels and stories to evolve a religion of nature, a sort of pagan, pre-Christian attempt to identify with the seasons of the earth, the cycles of life, the rituals and ages of man. He was, like many (perhaps most) writers and athletes, superstitious. He stayed close to the most basic elements of life: the sea, the mountains, the animals. His empiricism led him to experience warfare, bullfighting, and sexual behavior close-up. He was a skeptic – suspicious of generalizations – probably skeptical even of skepticism. He was engaged in a life-long search for the answer to the greatest philosophical question: How should the good man live?

Gerald Locklin: Notes on Bukowski and Hemingway

Bukowski's life was to a great extent determined for him by his strict upbringing, his scarring, his poverty and jobs, his literary talent and compulsion, his first-frustrated and later-indulged libido, and the urban Darwinian jungle he inhabited as a young man. He was exempted or disqualified from military service. He couldn't afford much travel, and he didn't enjoy it. He seems to have had no religion until the end of his life. He seems to have been either investigating or practicing Buddhism at the time of his death. His funeral was conducted by Buddhist priests. He is said to have been assigned his personal mantra.

Perhaps he was moving from nihilism towards humility and the desire for transcendence at the end.



... and in competition. (© Arnold and Montfort)

Both men drank a lot. Some would say both drank a bit too much. I would not presume to say that. After all, both also wrote a lot, and their lives afforded them much about which to write. I drank a lot myself for thirty years.

Also both enjoyed going to the race track.

As far as specific analysis of the influence of Hemingway upon Bukowski the most thorough critical and scholarly treatment is to be found in *Art, Survival, and So Forth*, by Dr. Jules Smith of Hull, England, Wrecking Ball Press, 1997. *Charles Bukowski*, by Professor Gay Brewer, in the Twayne United States Authors Series, is also essential. I do not feel the definitive biography of either man has yet been written. And may never be.

It would be enlightening to compare and contrast the writings of both against the chart of Modernist/Postmodernist oppositions proposed by Ihab Hassan in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, Oxford University Press, 1982, and quoted on pp. 111-112 of *Postmodernist Culture*, by Philip Connor, Blackwell Publishers, 1989, categories such as Form versus Anti-Form, Purpose versus Play, Design versus Chance, Hierarchy versus Anarchy, Logos versus Silence, Finished Work versus Process /Performance/Happening, Distance versus Participation, Paradigm versus Syntagm, Presence versus Absence, Metaphor versus Metonymy, Centering versus Dispersal, Signified versus Signifier, Grande Histoire versus Petit Histoire, Phallic versus Androgynous, Paranoia versus Schizophrenia, Determinacy versus Indeterminacy, and Transcendence versus Immanence.

I think you may find Hemingway to be in varying works a modernist, romantic, realist, and precursor of postmodernism. You may find Bukowski to be, variously, a realist, surrealist, romantic, seldom a modernist, but frequently the veritable definition of at least one branch of postmodernism, that which blurs the distinction between fiction and autobiography.

But, as usual, I only point the way for younger, more energetic, less lazy, less selfish (I have my own poems and fictions to write) scholars to pursue. In my earlier years, in collaboration with Charles Stetler, I published a number of essays on Hemingway as environmentalist, postmodernist, and so forth, and, on my own, the book *Charles Bukowski: A Sure Bet* (Water Row Press, 1995). My novella, *The First Time He Saw Paris* (in *Two Novellas*) and the prose poem travel-sequence, *Hemingway Colloquium: The Poet Goes to Cuba* (both

from Event Horizon Press) pay homage to America's greatest novelist. The latter contains a version of the essay "Hemingway as Environmentalist," co-authored with Charles Stetler.

I am a member of the Hemingway Society and, of course, your own Bukowski Society. Hemingway has been my literary god. I knew Bukowski too well to see him as godlike or even as satanic. He was, rather, a man I looked up to, except when he made that impossible, one for whom I will always retain a great affection and gratitude, one whose best works will continue to make me laugh, and one who, facing death as just another human being, rose above it.

And now I must say, in the manner of both Buk and Hem: "That, Gentlemen (and Ladies), is the best, today, that I can do."

'Appendix':

I don't consider Hemingway a poet at all - his early pieces were Dadaistic and fun, and his later poems to Mary Hemingway were gracefully done, but his poetry was not central in his career. On the other hand, I don't consider Buk to be at his best in his poems either, although he did demonstrate a great freedom and breadth in them that broadened the conception of the poetic for everyone.

I always felt Buk was by far at his best in his novels. He had to be forced to write them - because it's a lot easier to go upstairs with a bottle of wine and rattle off a string of poems - fiction requires much more discipline than the sort of poems that Bukowski wrote.

As far as his stories are concerned, I'm amazed that they turned out as well as they did, considering how many of them he had to write very quickly to meet deadlines. And, of course, he often used the same materials in poems, stories, and novels because he was essentially a NARRATIVE WRITER, whether in poetry or prose.

So I suppose it was as a narrative writer that I was comparing him to Hemingway, and as such and overall I feel that Hemingway's achievement was simply greater.

The concepts of modernism and postmodernism are important here, though, because Hemingway was essentially a modernist who was at times a precursor of postmodernism – and those were his works that were most often underrated by critics – who were judging them by modernist criteria. Bukowski was, as I said, a preeminent example of the strain of postmodernism that went in the direction of popular accessibility, rather than the postmodernist strain that was self-consciously theoretical, metafictional. A good introduction to these notions in English, though Bukowski is not mentioned, is *Metafiction*, by Patricia Waugh, published thirty years ago by Routledge press.

Both Hemingway and Bukowski often embody a latter-day romanticism as well: movements do not become immediately extinguished, even when superseded. And since both authors wrote a great deal over many years, it's important to be wary of reductionism in categorizing their works. Each of Buk's novels does focus on a different aspect of his life – from the Post Office to Hollywood--but they are all infused with Chinaski's sensibility and style. I think Bukowski is usually characterized as a Poet, because The Poet has more romantic connotations but that his novels are much more apt to live on. All of his novels are classics, with the exception of Pulp, and even that has its ingratiating qualities, but only a few of his poems stand up well line-by-line when scrutinized individually, and most of them could as easily be typed up as well phrased rhythmic prose.

I think his poems probably survive translation much better than most poetry because the language is much simpler – less densely metaphorical, compressed, allusive, lyrical – though they are indeed poems. But they are metonymical, narrative. Poets like Hart Crane and Wallace Stevens are no doubt almost possible to render fairly in foreign languages because, as it is often said, "the poetic is what is lost in the translation." A translator does, of course, have to be well versed in the American demotic vernacular – the "common language" – in order to convey Buk's wonderful humor and the wisdom and irony that characterize idiomatic English or American.

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Imagine how much harder it is to understand Rilke in English than even a great but more narrative poet such as Goethe.

Well, I didn't mean to go on at such length, but I wanted to clarify a few of my bases of comparison.

I would recommend that anyone begin their reading of Hemingway with *The Sun Also Rises*, *The Stories*, and *The Old Man and the Sea*, and then go on to read everything. I love even the novels that all the critics consider awful: *Across the River and Into the Trees*, *To Have and Have Not*, *Islands in the Stream*, *True at First Light*, etc. And I love *A Moveable Feast*. All of it - well, maybe not all of the parts of the posthumous works that seem to have been written by editors.

I always suggest that a new reader start Buk with *Post Office*, and this almost always makes them want to read more. There's an awful lot of repetition in the poems, though. You know, people who drink a lot do have a tendency to tell you the same story or joke over and over - sometimes, in a bar, every ten minutes.

