The Canonical Legacy of Anthologies: Reading and Being Read by Charles Bukowski

William Mohr, Ph.D.

At the end of a chapter in *Poetry Los Angeles* devoted solely to Charles Bukowski's poems, the poet-critic Laurence Goldstein delivers an unequivocal verdict on the bedrock value of the best-known poet who ever chose the self-aggrandizing center of the world's culture industry as a home base: "(H)e composed some poems–how many? a dozen? two or three dozen?–that readers of well-wrought poetry are fortunate to possess [...] We should be grateful they exist" (120). If the praise is understated, since Goldstein doesn't quantify the duration or intensity of our gratitude, he knows full well that any praise of Bukowski is seen as unwarranted by large cohorts of his fellow scholars in academic halls. The willingness of Professor Goldstein to speak up on behalf of Bukowski's poetry twenty years after his death should not be regarded as an assessment that did not carry any risk to his status as a widely admired critic. Hostility to Bukowski's poetry in the decades after his death has continued unabated both in places where it might be expected (*The New Yorker*, for instance) and from people from whom a more discerning assessment would normally be expected.

Camille Paglia, for instance, in *Break, Blow, Burn* (2006), offers both a confirmation of Bukowski's popularity and a "live mic" instance of how a critic unwittingly reveals her own self-imposed limitations. While admitting that Bukowski was "the poet I was most asked about on my book tours," Paglia claims that she could not settle on "a single poem to endorse in good faith to the general reader" (235). The problem, as far as Paglia was concerned, was entirely Bukowski's fault: "he obviously had no interest in disciplining or consolidating his garrulous, meandering poems" (235). The gap between Goldstein's several dozen and Paglia score of "zero" is staggering enough to make one want to invoke a general rule used in polling or normative grading sessions: one throws out the scores that are at the highest and lowest as outliers, and thereby gets a more balanced view. However, in this instance, one needs to remember that Goldstein's score should not necessarily be regarded as the "high" score. There are more than a handful of serious readers and critics who would find themselves pressed to draw up a list of Bukowski's best poems and to limit the list to just one hundred. I count myself among those whose estimate of Bukowski's best poems amounts to a list of over a hundred individual titles. The "problem" is that almost no one who would draw up such a list could ever

agree on which titles deserve to be nominated as the most enduring portion of his prolific output.

If anything marks the boundary between a very good poet and a merely competent master of verse, in fact, it is the difficulty that devoted readers have in correlating their preferences for one poem over another. The challenge in getting readers to agree on Bukowski's best poems is in and of itself the easiest way to establish his enduring value, for it is those readers who have read his work thoroughly enough to ascertain his dexterity in intertwining different kinds of imagery with a variety of themes. It is indeed those readers who are most likely to understand how heated the argument is likely to get when asked to draw up a list of his best poems. The starting point for such a list requires one to banish a number of assumptions about Bukowski, including the fantasy that because he is known for the frequency with which he addresses street life and the vagaries of those who are regulars at bars and race tracks that his best poems must be about those subjects. If anything hindered Paglia's search for a representative poem by Bukowski, for instance, it is this naïve assumption that a "general reader" who might not yet have read much poetry at all–let alone poems by Bukowski–would best be served by a poem with a "funny, squalid street or barroom" setting that featured "boorish knockdown brawling and half-clad shady ladies." In narrowing down the *mise-en-scène* expectations for a poem by Bukowski, Paglia places a halter and blinders on her search. In a frivolous, disrespectful manner, she insists on pursuing a topic with just the right dollop of frisson for what she imagines others want to read and is unwilling to pause and consider any poem that falls outside of a specific obsession. The question, therefore, of Bukowski's legacy is one that requires any critic to work in a multi-front literary way.

As a way of understanding the scope of the task that choosing the best 100–or 200 or even 300–poems by Bukowski involves, one would be well served to appropriate the work done by editors and publishers throughout the four decades in which Bukowski produced several thousand poems; there is, after all, an initial selection that has already taken place. Several dozen of his poems have stood out enough to catch the specific attention of anthologists. It is, in point of fact, anthologies that best illustrate a poet's maturation within the trajectories of canonical shifts. The tandem act of anthologies and reputation is pertinent enough to deliberations about Bukowski's enduring literary value that the first paragraph of the first chapter of Russell Harrison's book-length study of Bukowski, in 1994, concludes with the observation that "the fact that Bukowski has not appeared in any of the large mainstream anthologies that include American poetry of the last 30 years is remarkable" (29). Harrison's foregrounding of anthologies at the start of his opening statement indeed indicates that if anything shapes a legacy, it is a poet's continued appearances in anthologies that serve to register particular stances. Ah! But which anthologies should be categorized as "mainstream"

and how should "non-mainstream" or "marginal" anthologies affect the calculations of canonical discourse? Does mainstream signify the cultural largesse of a publisher solely because of the geographical location of its editorial headquarters?

It is the case that the two most important surveys of contemporary American poetry in the "anthology wars" that occurred in the second half of the 1950s and early 1960s were published by enterprises based in New York. *New Poets of England and America* (NPEA), published by Meridian, and Donald Allen's *New American Poetry,* published by Grove. The first edition of the former, which appeared in 1957 with an introduction by Robert Frost, temporarily reaffirmed the academic prevalence of traditional versification; the latter volume, launched in 1960, championed the emerging figures of what would become known as the New York School of Poets, along with Black Mountain, and Beat poets. The success of Allen's anthology in attracting a large readership, as attested to by its six-figure sales records, in turn did something that the *NPEA* anthology never came close to in terms of literary influence, for in choosing to privilege "underground" magazines, NAP encouraged people to start their own magazines and presses regardless of how much financial capital they might have with which to bolster their cultural capital. What followed in the two decades after NAP's appearance was a massive outpouring of "little" magazines and presses that often featured Bukowski's work. The anthologies that came out of these efforts were not mainstream in Harrison's sense of the word, but could be considered within the alternative mainstream that was first established by Allen's *New American Poetry*.

In discussing how to shape a list of Bukowski's most accomplished poems, the anthologies I want to emphasize in this article were primarily produced by small, independent (non-corporation owned) presses on the West Coast while Bukowski was alive and had considerable direct control over whether his poems could be part of the vision of an anthologist. After his death, of course, his writing was no longer under his personal aegis; it became an autonomous literary property, little different in its disposal than real estate. It is hard to imagine, for instance, why Bukowski is not in *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry* (1999) other than the reprint fees exceeded the budgetary limitations of a small press. As Abel Debritto notes in his conclusion to *Charles Bukowski, King of the Underground,* Bukowski adamantly stayed loyal to the little magazines and the independent small presses throughout all his decades of international fame. It would behoove, therefore, those who are committed to bolstering his legacy to adamantly keep the perspective of Bukowski's contemporaries front and center. Those in Bukowski's audience who still cherish his "outsider" status should simultaneously hold fast to the full implications of Bukowski's publication record. If anything, the non-mainstream status that these anthologies had–and still emanate–should reaffirm the

prominence current readers in the twenty-first century should give to the choices made by the editors of those anthologies.

Let's now consider a few examples of the choices made by Bukowski's closest readers between the mid-1960s and his death in 1994. Based in Paradise, California, Len Fulton (1934-2011), for example, who was one of the founders of COSMEP (Committee of Small Magazine Editors and Publishers) and the editor of the *Small Press Review*, devoted an entire issue to a consideration of Bukowski's work. Fulton was not a poet, but his *Small Press Review* for the most part featured reviews of books of poetry. Fulton leads off the special issue with a six page, double-columned essay that begins on the inside of the front cover. About a third of the way through, Fulton quotes an entire poem, "a poem is a city," and states "I consider it the best Bukowski poem I have ever seen." One has to take this nomination seriously, even if one were to hesitate to raise one's hand and say, "I second that nomination."

On the other hand, William Packard, the founding editor of the *New York Quarterly*, responded to guest editor Tony Quagliano's request for a piece on Bukowski in Fulton's special issue with a four page, double-column commentary. In section seven of twenty numbered paragraphs, he too quotes an entire poem, "Style," which turns out to have also been one of Bukowski's favorites, for he selected the poem as one of his most representative in an anthology he co-edited, *Anthology of L.A. Poets* (1972).

Finally, in the *Small Press Review* issue devoted to Bukowski, Walter Lowenfels said that he wanted to be known in Hell as the first poet to ever anthologize Charles Bukowski. Regardless of Lowenfels's nonchalance about eternal perdition, the decision to include Bukowski is hardly the only thing that makes *Poets of Today: A New American Anthology* (1964) a singular event in post-War publication of anthologies. It should be noted that even as Lowenfels's collection is a direct rebuke of Donald Allen's canonical anthology, *New American Poetry* (1960), in that it utterly demolishes Allen's racial tokenism, Lowenfels at the same time does not retaliate against the poets in Allen's collection by excluding them. In fact, many of the most prominent voices in Allen's collection, such as Denise Levertov and Lawrence Ferlinghetti are also included in *Poets of Today*. Given this roster, one has to take Lowenfels's choice of Bukowski's poem, "The Night I Was Going to Die," as a contender for the list of "Bukowski's Best 100" quite seriously, especially since that same poem is also included in Douglas Blazek's *A Bukowski Sampler*. It should be noted that Lowenfels also included an essay by Bukowski in a multi-issue "symposium" on contemporary poetry published in *Mainstream* (Debritto 80). Although this anthology is listed in "Works Cited," it receives no actual attention in the book.

In the next issue of Fulton's *Small Press Review (*Number 17, Volume 5, Number 1), Douglas Blazek, one of Bukowski's crucial supporters during his transition from "Outsider of the Year"

by Loujon Press to Black Sparrow's leading author, contributed a review of Bukowski's most recent titles at that time, one from Capra Press and the other from Black Sparrow. Halfway through his commentary, Blazek quotes the entirety of a poem entitled "340 cigarettes," but it's difficult to detect whether he believes this is one of Bukowski's best poems or one in which "there is more framework than house."

Blazek's review also contains one of the most compressed assessments of Bukowski I have yet to encounter:

> Bukowski's value is not so much in his language (title fight true, ingenuous) but in his antihistamine vision of humankind. His incorruptibility, lucidity and empiric understanding of our predatory ways make his reality a touchstone for this aspect of reality. Bukowski is a large man in his poetry, despite his shortcomings as a person. His poems have a reach, a breath, almost of epic quality. He knows what's going on behind facades and flak. He sees through gags and guises. He senses when there is a cover-up and when something is genuine. He gets beyond the superficial to the basics. He is one of the few writers who writes without tricks and gimmicks, poetics and bullshit. Who cuts through so many persuasive lies and rationalizations. Who writes about the gross amount of waste, stupidity, ugliness and pain that dominates our psychological and societal enterprises.
>
> True, other aspects of reality are better braved by different poets, but when his work is read collectively it exposes such huge masses of existence that clarity can't help but be achieved by all save those too immersed in gamesmanship. (19)

At this point, Harrison's comment on how few mainstream anthologies Bukowski appeared in needs to be reconsidered. There was, after all, one mainstream anthology that prominently featured Bukowski's poetry, and it is one of the most prominent anthologies to come out in the period between 1960 and 1990. As a Bantam paperback, it still remains on the shelves of over 400 libraries. Granted, that is only a fourth as many libraries as have Donald Allen's classic anthology on their shelves, but such a widespread availability testifies that this volume from a New York City based publisher managed to appeal to a substantial audience. As a capacious survey, Edward Field's *A Geography of Poets* (1979) provides us with an appreciative view of the context in which Bukowski's legacy will play out, for it contains not only the poetry of Gerald Locklin, Charles Stetler and John Thomas, but the poetry of Harold Norse. It's fair to say that this is the ONLY anthology to contain these four writers. Anthologies tend to repeat the bulk of their contributors: that's what makes them such powerful engines in inscribing the canon. Their distinctiveness can most often be assessed in the nod they make toward a singular ensemble not repeated by any other anthologist. It could be argued that anyone wanting to gain a judicious distance on the contextual shifts of Bukowski's appearance in anthologies would be best served by first looking at Lowenfels' and Field's anthologies. There is no other pair of anthologies, published between 1960 and 1980, that truly catches the groundswell of West Coast poetry renaissance that is inclusive of the poets working in Southern California in this

period, and therefore enables one to read Bukowski in a critical manner that avoids a provincial contextualization.

Nor is *A Geography of Poets* the only collection in which a first round of nominations for Bukowski's best poems should be sought. One of his most important instances of recognition when he was alive was his appearance in the Penguin Modern Poets series, which was structured to feature the work of three different poets in a single book. Bukowski's work appeared alongside that of Harold Norse and Philip Lamantia. The former's company was regarded as a pleasure and honor by Bukowski, but he was largely dismissive of Lamantia's poems. It is the Penguin anthology appearance, however, that may offer the best chance for Bukowski's readers to be active respondents to his work. Let us consider the fact that Bukowski did not have control over Lamantia's appearance in the Penguin collection, and let us then engage in a thought experiment: Which poet, for instance, would best fit into a *Penguin Modern Poets* if you were to choose a poet who complemented Norse and Bukowski. The answer might well be Al Purdy, and in that case, which poems by Purdy would you pick? For that matter, which poems do you believe that Bukowski might pick? If there's anything in Bukowski's legacy that has been egregiously neglected so far, it is the matter of his reading. Young poets often try to write like Bukowski, but if they were to violate his rule "Don't try" and try to do anything like him, it should be to try to read like him. As easy as it might seem to write like him, it is proportionately much more difficult to read with his level of discernment.

Reading Bukowski, however, should not be limited only to his poems if one is intrigued enough to compile a list of his essential poems. I would argue that the most judicious approach would involve respecting Bukowski enough to take his reading preferences as seriously as one might esteem his poems. The question, therefore, should not merely be which are Bukowski's hundred best poems, but which hundred poems by other poets Bukowski read would make his list? And I would even go so far as to say that I would find it hard to respect any list of Bukowski's best poems made by someone who had not engaged in this expanded level of reading. Bukowski, after all, read and respected specific poems and books of poetry by very specific poets, including several he appeared in anthologies with, such as Gerald Locklin and John Thomas. He also admired the work of poets such as Al Purdy, Harold Norse, and Neeli Cherkovski; nor should we overlook poets who appeared in his magazine, *Laugh Literary*, such as Gerda Penfold, as well as the poet FrancEye Dean Smith. Compiling a list of the poems by these poets would involve considerable research, for one would have to read a substantial trove of letters, both published and unpublished, to sketch even a first draft of such a list of poems by other poets, but either one is serious about the initial question posed by this paper, or one is just a dilettante, substituting the enthusiastic self-indulgence of being a fan of a writer for the hard work of fully comprehending the context of that writer's accomplishment.

With that perspective in mind, what would be Bukowski's take on some of the West Coast anthologies that included his work between 1973 and 1994? Let's start with an anthology edited by Paul Vangelisti, who was Bukowski's co-editor along with Neeli Cherry (later Cherkovski) of *Anthology of L.A. Poets*. *Specimen '73* was much larger than *Anthology of L.A. Poets*; in addition to the editor and Bukowski, the volume included two academics (Robert Peters and Charles Wright); two Venice West poets (Stuart Z. Perkoff and John Thomas); three women (Gerda Penfold; Holly Prado; Barbara Hughes); and three other men (Ron Koertge; Jack Hirschman, and Alvaro Cardona-Hine). Peters respected Bukowski and wrote a very enthusiastic report on what an impact *It Catches My Heart in Its Hands* (Bukowski 1963) had had on him. John Thomas, one of the more dissolute members of the Beat Generation, was very highly regarded by Bukowski and wrote a memorable poem about visiting him. Penfold appeared in all three issues of Bukowski's literary magazine, *Laugh Literary and Man the Humping Guns* (1969-71); and Bukowski wrote an appreciative review of Hirschman's translation of Antonin Artaud that appeared in the L.A. Free Press. In addition, Bukowski appeared in several early issues of Vangelisti's *Invisible City*, in which many of the poets just listed also appeared. In other words, Bukowski's choice of poems for Vangelisti to consider for *Specimen '73* is highly unlikely to have been a casual choice. He knew full well the ensemble of poets whose work his poems would be juxtaposed with, and we should take this anthology and those early issues of *Invisible City* as a primary source for drafting a list of his best work.

In addition to *Poets of Today,* there is another anthology that was inexplicably omitted from Jed Rasula's *American Poetry Wax Museum*. Perhaps the fact that the cover of Steve Kowit's *The Maverick Poets* featured a drawing by Charles Bukowski immediately disqualified Kowit's volume. It certainly is the case that Rasula has a low opinion of Bukowski. His book only makes two references to Bukowski, and both are snarky: "anti-stylistic posturings" (342) and "carnival geek antics" (390). Kowit's anthology, however, includes seven poems by Bukowski: "Beans with Garlic;" "The Insane Always Loved Me;" "The Drill;" "The History of a Tough Motherfucker;" "The Proud Thin Dying;" "Take It;" and "Clean Old Man." As with *Specimen '73*, the number of poets who can be directly aligned with Bukowski is remarkable. Among the 40 poets Kowit chose, we see his convergence on Field's and Vangelisti's anthologies in including the usual suspects: Gerald Locklin, Ron Koertge, and Harold Norse.

Two years after Kowit's anthology, Charles Harper Webb edited *Stand Up Poetry: The Poetry of Los Angeles and Beyond*. Carryovers from Kowit's anthology to this one include Laurel Ann Bogen and Wanda Coleman, as well as Locklin, Koertge, and Jack Grapes. Once again, the omission of the second edition of *Stand Up Poetry,* this time published by a university press, from Rasula's census leaves one a bit puzzled. A Language poetry anthology is included; an anthology focused on the St. Mark's Poetry Project scene in NYC is included; yet Kowit and

Webb are regarded as too negligible to deserve citation. It should be mentioned that forty percent of the contributors to Kowit's anthology were women, which is a significantly higher proportion than many other anthologies of the period.

A third Los Angeles-based anthology that also featured Bukowski also gets neglected in Rasula's report. My anthology, *Poetry Loves Poetry,* included many of the poets named above, but with one crucial addition: Suzanne Lummis, who will go on to edit yet another anthology featuring Bukowski. As one can see, the task of assembling a rough draft list of Bukowski's best poems is not impeded by a dependence on one's subjectivity. There is a substantial track record that one can draw on.

Anthologies cannot, of course, be the only resource for assembling a list. At a certain point, any serious reader of Bukowski will have to draw upon her or his own knowledge of what makes a poet memorable. My guess is that there are at least four dozen poems in *The Pleasures of the Damned* that would finish in many top 100 lists. Just as a reader must be relentless in expecting to be surprised by unusual subject matter in Bukowski's poetry, so too must one be indefatigable in adding to the list of poets whose work talks with and back to Bukowski's. In particular, I am thinking of Fred Voss, Joan Jobe Smith, and Linda King. Anyone not familiar with these poets cannot truly be said to be qualified to go public with their private speculations about Bukowski's best 100 poems.

In conclusion, I do want to bring up a question that might otherwise go begging: What exactly is the list for, other than to justify those who feel defensive about their fondness for his writing? There are, in fact, serious questions that the poems on any given list can be asked to respond to. One of them might make his fans uncomfortable due to its formal concerns, but I believe it would be welcomed by another "radical" poet whose work fearlessly went against the grain. The question? How it is that Bukowski's work fits within the theory of Williams's "variable foot"? It is at this juncture that we begin to see how Bukowski–very early on–began to challenge the stranglehold of iambic pentameter in ways that Williams only tentatively began to in his own poems. With that question, let us start composing lists of Bukowski's "best 100 poems," and let each list contain at least one poem that other readers realize that they are unfamiliar with. But of course, that sensation of realizing that one has overlooked a significant Bukowski poem will not catch any of his readers off-guard. A major part of Bukowski's poetics is to defamiliarize our expectations of what a poem is and who a reader of that poem might be.

Works Cited

Allen, Donald. *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*. Grove Press, 1960. Reprinted by the University of California Press, 1999.

Bukowski, Charles. *It Catches My Heart in Its Hands*. New Orleans, Loujon Press, 1963.

---. *The Pleasures of the Damned: Poems 1951-1993*. New York, Ecco, 2008.

---. (author), Blazek, Douglas (Ed.). *A Bukowski Sampler*. Madison, WI: Quixote Press, 1969.

Bukowski, Charles, Paul Vangelisti and Neeli Cherri. Anthology of Los Angeles Poets. Los Angeles, Laugh Literary, 1972.

Debritto, Abel. *Charles Bukowski, King of the Underground: From Obscurity to Literary Icon*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Field, Edward. *A Geography of Poets: An Anthology of the New Poetry*. New York, Bantam Books. 1979.

Goldstein, Laurence. *Poetry Los Angeles: Reading the Essential Poems of the City*. AnnArbor, University of Michigan Press, 2014.

Harrison, Russell. *Against the American Dream: Essays on Charles Bukowski*. Santa Rosa, Black Sparrow, 1994

Kowit, Steve. *The Maverick Poets: An Anthology*. San Diego, Gorilla Press, 1988.

Lowenfels, Walter. *Poets of Today; a New American Anthology*. New York City, International Publishers, 1964.

Lummis, Suzanne, ed. *Grand Passion: The Poetry of Los Angeles and Beyond*. Los Angeles, Los Angeles Poetry Festival anthology, 1995.

Mohr, Bill, ed. . *Poetry Loves Poetry: An Anthology of Los Angeles Poets*. Santa Monica, Momentum Press, 1985.

Paglia, Camille. *Break, Blow, Burn: Camille Paglia Reads Forty-three of the World's Best Poems*. Vintage (reprint), 2006.

Penguin Modern Poets 13: Charles Bukowski, Philip Lamantia, Harold Norse. Penguin Books, 1969.

Randolph, Len. Tables Need a Little Love, Too." *Small Press Review*. No. 17,vol. 5 , no. 1. "

Rasula, Jed. *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940-1990*. Urbana, National Council of Teachers of English, 1996.

Webb, Charles Harper. *Stand Up Poetry: An Expanded Anthology*. Iowa City, University of Iowa, 2002.