



Reading Bukowski in the Mirror of his Psychocutaneous Acne Illness

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In our psychobiographic study, we try to understand the impact Charles Bukowski's severe acne, his violent father and his submissive mother had on his life and his work.

From a dermatological and psychological point of view, Bukowski's autobiography "Ham on Rye" is of particular interest, wherein he describes the first sixteen years of his life. (Bukowski *Das Schlimmste*, 1-349). This book, which he later would call his best work (Bukowski *Schreie vom Balkon*, 423), contains a detailed description of his physical suffering from acne, as well as the mental suffering at the hands of his brutal father, his passive mother and the empathy-less fellow human beings. It is not by chance that this book carries the dedication: "For All Fathers".

In his introduction to the German edition of *Ham on Rye*, Carl Weissner hit the nail on the head when pointing out:

At the age of fourteen, [he] developed wild acne and boils all over his body: battered-child syndrome gave vent. ... Teenagers run over by fate in this way later become beating family fathers, sociopaths in the city administration, misogynistic Boderliner, Berbers with compulsion to wash. This one became a letter sorter and a poet. (Weissner ii)

The acne Bukowski develops at the age of thirteen is by no means the common puberal acne consisting of "simple pimples" of the kind his peers had, but an extreme form with "pus bumps" on the face and back, some of them as large as "walnuts". In the medical language, this type of acne is designated as *cystic acne* or *acne conglobata* (Fig. 1 and 2.), leaving severe, disfiguring scars upon healing (Fritsch, Schwarz 914-923).



Fig.1 : cystic acne or acne conglobata, picture from Friedrich Bahmer, 2025



Fig.2 : cystic acne or acne conglobata, picture from Friedrich Bahmer, 2025

For the pathogenesis of acne, a genetic disposition, changes of the metabolism of both the sexual hormone testosterone as well as lipid metabolism are responsible (Zouboulis et al.). The increased production of testosterone, mediated somewhat by stress, not only affects the sebaceous glands with the formation of acne, but also the psychological status. Studies show that antisocial, aggressive or criminal behaviour is often associated with increased testosterone levels (Giammanco et al). Bukowski indirectly confirms that testosterone is produced mainly in the testicles, when he noticed at a shower with classmates: "... I had the biggest balls of all" (Bukowski, *Das Schlimmste* 105). Since alcohol consumption and cigarette smoking are considered to contribute to the severity of acne (Zouboulis et al.), one could speculate whether these factors played a role for Bukowski's acne, as he started early in life both with alcohol drinking and cigarette smoking.

In the 1930s, at the time Bukowski developed his acne, treatment consisted of peeling pastes, ultraviolet light radiation, and of opening the abscesses with the so-called "hot needle", i.e. a needle heated by electric current, a time-consuming procedure. To save time, therapy was carried out without local anesthesia, an extremely painful procedure. Bukowski describes in detail his extreme suffering for several weeks, as newly appearing abscesses had to be opened, apparently leading to a kind of post-traumatic stress disorder.

An important aspect of his suffering is his experience with doctors and nurses. Among the medical staff, only one nurse shows empathy (Bukowski *Das Schlimmste* 158). Without exception, the doctors are distant and pitiless, only interested in commenting and demonstrating this extreme case of acne.

Bukowski feels humiliated; he wonders how some people have managed to become doctors. His statement "The doctors were kings, the patients trash" (Bukowski *Stories* 210) demonstrates his experience with doctors, somewhat akin to those of the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard (1931 - 1989), who also had suffered from severe acne as a teenager (Bahmer 2005).

When Bukowski occasionally squeezes an abscess in front of the mirror, he not only feels disgust, but also fascination in a horrible way. Pus, perceived as a disgusting substance by almost all people, evokes a kind of pleasure in Bukowski. This sensation, described as "disgusting lust" (Krebs 1997), is a reminiscence of the polymorphic-perverse form of sexuality of early childhood and the accompanying joy to all bodily secretions (Freud 1972).

This feeling is a prominent feature in Charlotte Roches bestseller *Wetlands* (Bahmer and Bahmer 2005). Helen, her protagonist, describes in detail the pleasure of dealing with secretions and decay products not only of her own, but also the body of strangers. This *disgusting lust* might also be a component of itching in skin diseases such as psoriasis, outlined by the American writer John Updike (1932-2008). Suffering almost all of his life from itchy

psoriasis, he sometimes felt this lust and a kind of furtive pleasure too, when scratching his skin lesions (Updike 1987). Bukowski describes the same pleasure, when his girlfriend Linda squeezed out his pimples in the glow of the bedside lamp, giving him an erection now and then. (Bukowski *Liebesleben* 44)

For Bukowski's pathography, in addition to his acne, his violent and sadistic father is decisive. Once, Bukowski senior takes his son's acne as an opportunity to torment him further, by forcing him to leave an aggressive, painful peeling paste on his skin for hours instead of only thirty minutes. Predictably, Bukowski junior develops a negative emotional relationship with this father whom he characterizes as a "brain-cracking, stupid monster" (Bukowski *Roter Mercedes* 22).

From the other family members, his paternal grandmother deserves mention. She, as a Polish Catholic, considers the acne of her grandson to be the devil in disguise. Bukowski describes in detail an highly amusing scene of exorcism, however fugitive. As far as is known, Bukowski, who never turned either to psychologists nor to psychiatrists, was convinced that they were only paid for their lies to guarantee the continued existence of social disorder (*Das Schlimmste kommt noch*). Why pay people like psychiatrists money to hear from them what to do, was his opinion (*Western Avenue* 11).

The torments young Bukowski has to endure evoke fantasies of patricide. He did not kill his father, yet he put his plan to defend himself into action. After a night-long drinking spree, the final break with his parents occurs. Bukowski writes: "In one fell swoop, at the age of 16 1/2, I knocked out my father, a violent, sweating bastard with bad breath" (Bukowski *Flinke Killer* 94).

It is common sense that acne stigmatizes and leads to social exclusion (Harth & Gieler, *Psychosomatic* 91). In Bukowski's case, social isolation occurs well before his acne develops, when his father radically restricts social contacts with neighbouring children. In addition to the deprivation imposed externally, Bukowski himself notes withdrawal tendencies long before the onset of acne when reporting that he lost his "enthusiasm for the masses" at the age of four (Bukowski *Nicht mit sechzig* 235).

From a psychoanalytic point of view, this temporal assignment fits into the anal, active-forming, exploratory and also aggressively tinged phase of the development of sexual autonomy, peculiar to this age group (Freud). So, it is not surprising that Bukowski junior anxiously avoids going to the toilet in kindergarten. Ironically, he later writes that he had the feeling that there was something inside of him. Even if it is only "hardened shit": it is more than what his peers had in them (Bukowski *Das Schlimmste* 35).

After his acne has healed, his face is marked by deep and disfiguring scars which make him feel like suffering from leprosy. He himself as well as his love affairs compare his appearance with animals like monkeys, alligators, dogs and hyenas. A person stigmatized by scars is, at least initially, unable to distance himself from the flaw. The disfigured skin impedes the much-desired intimacy and closeness.

Last but not least, this contact blockade decreases with age when Bukowski learns that his appearance does not stand in the way of his success with women. Amused, he notes the envy of a colleague who did not believe that he could attract so many women in 24 hours (Bukowski *Letzte Meldungen* 205). This success with women reconciles him somewhat with his appearance. He justifies his interest in women with the emotional deficits of his childhood: “No love, no nest warmth. ... I have a lot of catching up to do” (Bukowski *Liebesleben* 299).

People with scarred faces are sometimes considered ugly or repulsive (Harth & Gieler, *Psychosomatik* 91), as did Bukowski quite often (Bahmer and Bahmer, 2015). However, equating scars with ugliness and smooth skin with beauty is superficial, since ugliness is not defined as the absence of beauty. Here, the flat but apt statement comes to mind that beauty is mainly created in the eye of the beholder. Deformities of the face, especially congenital malformations, and pronounced scars after plastic surgery, do have a negative effect on attractiveness (Rankin, Borah). However, this does not apply to male acne scars, which on the contrary tend to increase attractiveness, at least for those women who are more interested in a short-term relationship than a long-term one (Burris et al.). When Bukowski points out that other men did not whistle at his girlfriend or did not make ambiguous gestures, he alludes to the idea that a scarface is considered a sign of particular masculinity.

Bukowski turns his stigma and his unhappy childhood, which according to Hemingway is the best school for a writer (Hemingway, *49 Depeschen* 194), into creativity. The concept of “epigenetic modeling” in recent neuroscientific research shows that a chaotic childhood can indeed be a source of particular creativity (Damasio). As a self-determined, unattached loner, Bukowski is a true “philobat”, that is a person who overcomes his inner tensions, his emotional fluctuations and strokes of fate as well as the horror of hopelessness by a particular activity (Raeithel). In Bukowski’s case, this creativity consists in writing, his vital tool to overcome his inner conflicts and to control the demons from the past. In his own words: “poetry is survival” (Bukowski, *Schreie* 144).

Bukowski’s literary productivity seems paradoxical in view of his lifestyle. Ironically, his extreme discipline is based on his father, the crucial figure for the formation of his superego (Freud). He realizes this at an older age when he writes: “... without knowing what he was doing, my father shaped what creative power I have within me.” (Bukowski *Nicht mit Sechzig* 280) His creative power with writing, expressed in the “magic of words”, surpasses everything

else in importance: “no woman so beautiful, no wealth greater” (Bukowski *Nicht mit Sechzig* 280). Finally, he also addresses his outward resemblance to his father in a poem entitled “Twins” (Bukowski *Flinke Killer* 74).

Like many writers, Bukowski tries to make sense of his illness when he writes: “Man sometimes gets sick just to get out of the wheels of everyday life for a while” (Bukowski *Schreie* 483). However, his acne and his other illnesses (Bahmer 2017) do not seem have the same significance for writing as for writers with life-threatening illnesses (Dietrich von Engelhardt).

Bukowski’s work reflects the interactions of genetic, psychological, and social factors. The power of observation and the pitiless, almost dissecting precision with which he describes the *American Way of Life* of his time is striking. Unlike Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs and others, Bukowski does not belong to the writers of the Beat Generation describing attitudes of a Hippie-life. Bukowski’s work deals with human beings on the fringes of society: the whores, the alcoholics, and the disadvantaged by life. His work reminds us of George Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London*, who some decades before had erected a monument to the same human beings.

In the mirror Bukowski holds up, his compatriots are unable to recognize their true selves and the society in which they live. This is one of the reasons why he is not only rejected by the vast majority of his contemporaries, but reviled as the true “Dirty Old Man”. Bukowski never allows himself to be co-opted, neither for a cause, nor for a party, nor for a movement. Throughout his life he is, like his *alter ego* Henry Chinaski, a poet and chronicler living in the urban jungle of Los Angeles, obsessed with writing, sex, alcohol, cigarettes, and horse betting.

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