

The Struggle Against Matrixing: Bukowski Fighting from the Corner

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Matrixing を乗り越えて

—— ブカウスキーのリング・コーナーからの逆襲 ——

カーニー マイケル

Introduction

“I have fallen into the sloth of formula” (Bukowski: 1988; 135)

In this line from the poem titled *Notations from a Muddled Indolence*, which is included in the book, *The Roominghouse Madrigals: Early Selected Poems 1946-1966* (Bukowski: 1988), Charles Bukowski displays the disdain for “the normal life” that was to mark all his work. For Bukowski, the expectations of family and society that he follow the rules, precepts, and conventions of their systems of control, which were the defining principles of “a good life,” were shackles upon the spirit of the human entity. In this article, the third installment in the series, the theories discussed in *Fundamental Theories Relevant to Identity Formation* (Kearney: 2003) will be applied to the works of Charles Bukowski in order to demonstrate Bukowski’s deep understanding of how the identity of the human entity is matrixed through cultural constructions, the Symbolic Order. The main theoretical levers upon which this analysis will operate are culled from the works of Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan. Derrida’s notions on logocentric systems of structure (Derrida: 1978) will be utilized to deconstruct the mechanisms of society and culture that program and control individuals, as they are represented in the works of Bukowski. Lacan’s theories on identity formation (Lacan: 1998b) will serve to reveal how these mechanisms are matrixed into the individual by examining the manners in which society and family attempt to control the protagonists in Bukowski’s works. Before focusing attention upon the texts of Bukowski, it is perhaps appropriate to give a biographical account.

Charles Bukowski

Bukowski was born on August 16, 1920 in Andernach, Germany, and named Heinrich Karl Bukowski after his father. The senior Bukowski, whose parents had emigrated to the United States from Germany and who could speak German, was a sergeant in the United States Army of occupation stationed in Germany after World War I. His mother, a local seamstress, was named Katharina Fett. While Katharina did not initially like Henry Bukowski, he was able to win over her parents, and thus gain access to her, by bring her parents food and conversing with them in German. Soon after Katharina and Henry began dating, she became pregnant, this is perhaps one reason why Charles Bukowski often stated that he “was born a bastard – that is, out of wedlock:” Bukowski often melded his life (fact?) and work (fiction?) together and played-up his image of not only being a rough, uncouth, womanizing, drunkard, but also a bastard, although records show that Katharina and Henry were married on July 15, 1920 (Sounes: 1998; 7-8).

The Bukowskis lived in Andernach for two years before moving to Coblenz and most probably would have remained in Germany if the German economy had not collapsed in 1923. Moving to the United States, the family first lived in Baltimore before settling in California, where the elder Henry “had been born and raised.” An important point to note here in relation to the formation of identity and its connections to the Symbolic Order (Lacan: 1998c) is that upon arrival in the United States Katharina began to call herself Kate, Heinrich, the younger, became Henry, and they altered the pronunciation of their family name from the German *Buk-ov-ski* to the more American English *Buk-cow-ski* (Sounes: 1998; 8). These alterations in names, and names are particularly imbedded in the psyche as part of one’s identity for they work towards situating identity as a transcendental signified (Derrida: 1997), were undertaken in order for the family to be more readily accepted as “American.” This is one of the first instances in the life of the young Charles where he experienced that in order to fit in to a society, a logocentric system of control (Derrida: 1982), one had to accept that society’s orders of structure: you can only be who you are, if who you are, fits the system. If you are outside the logocentric system of control, you are in conflict with it.

Another product of the move from Germany to the Los Angeles area that would have influenced young Charles was that the extended Bukowski family was a dysfunctional unit. Leonard, Charles’ grandfather, was a drunk and separated from his wife Emilie; the siblings were always fighting and were called “the battling Bukowskis” by their cousins (Sounes: 1998; 8). This model of “family life,” with which the young Charles was supplied, ensured that he would never have a settled family life of his own: if he adhered to the norms of the Symbolic Order of the United States, he would get married and have a family, which would most probably turn-out to be dysfunctional; if he did not adhere, he would be an outsider. This analysis proves true, for Bukowski, while a young man, had a marriage with a woman named Barbara Frye that was disastrous; had a child, named Mariana Louise, to whom he was always “a devoted father,” but never “a normal father,” for he and the mother, FrancEyE, never married and were estranged soon after the birth of the daughter on September 7, 1964; had various tumultuous alcohol filled

relationships with women; and only settled into a “semi-normal” domestic life at the age of sixty-five when he married Linda Lee Beighle, forty-one, in August 1985 (Sounes: 1998; 61-165); (Bukowski:1971, 1975, 1989 &1998). For Bukowski, familial relationships were always problematic: FrancEyE explained that he always “had difficulty expressing love” (Sounes: 1998; 61). The logocentric structures utilized by the Symbolic Order to control the entities functioning within it did not provide a safe *ergründen* for Bukowski to function upon; for him, they were painful restraints that evoked “negative emotions” (Sounes: 1998; 61).

Space: Beneath the Table

Ham on Rye opens with the narrator, Henry Chinaski, recalling images of early childhood. The immediate impact of these passages is of disconnectedness between Henry and the Other (people). This coincides with the concepts Lacan developed in *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience*. Henry has assumed a non-fragmented image of the I. In “the *infans* stage,” young Henry Chinaski is situated as a “total form” with a feeling of “the mental permanence of the I” (Lacan: 1998b; 179). Henry “between one and two years old” (Bukowski: 1982; 9) (this age adheres exactly to that at which Lacan positions the ‘mirror stage:’ “the age of eighteen months”) (Lacan: 1998b; 178) sits beneath a table in Germany in a completely removed yet satisfactory position:

The first thing I remember is being under something. It was a table, I saw a table leg, I saw the legs of the people, and a portion of the tablecloth hanging down. It was dark under there, I liked being under there. It must have been Germany. I must have been between one and two years old. It was 1922. I felt good under the table. Nobody seemed to know that I was there. There was sunlight upon the rug and on the legs of the people. I liked the sunlight. The legs of the people were not interesting, not like the tablecloth which hung down, not like the table leg, not like the sunlight (Bukowski: 1982; 9).

Henry feels no connection or link to “the legs of the people.” They hold no more significance than the table leg or the tablecloth, less significance in fact for the humans’ legs are not as interesting. There is also an immediate sense of detachment or removal from the people. Henry Chinaski has a feeling of being free from occupying the same “space” as the people. “Space” for Bukowski is an indicator of freedom or individuality. “Space” and this linking concept of individuality is the subject of the poem titled *it’s ours* in the book You Get So Alone At Times That It Just Makes Sense:

there is always that space there
just before they get to us
that space
that fine relaxer
the breather
while say
flopping on a bed

thinking of nothing
or say
pouring a glass of water from the spigot
while entranced by nothing

that
gentle pure
space

it's worth

centuries of
existence

say

just to scratch your neck
while looking out the window at
a bare branch

that space
there
before they get to us

ensures
that
when they do
they won't
get it all

ever. (Bukowski: 1986; 312-313).

In this poem Bukowski leaves the identity of the addressee ambiguous. It could be one of his lovers, or perhaps even one of his cats. However, the uniqueness of this ambiguity points toward the "us" of the poem being the writer and the reader. With most of his poetry Bukowski is quite direct with identifying any characters in the poem clearly for the reader. *it's ours*, however, is one of the few poems where Bukowski draws the reader into the poem with him. Bukowski coaxes the reader into an acknowledgement of the worth of the "space" where one can take a "breather," a "relaxer." For Bukowski this "space" is security. It "ensures" protection from the "they," the "they" being the Other. Being allowed this "space" provides a protection for the individual's identity, for when "they" come "they" will not be able to "get it all." "They" may get most of the individual, "they" may control him or her, but if one is allowed even the smallest "space" for a "breather," it is enough to protect part of the I. The space allows the individual to just be. For Bukowski "space" can be seen to have a similar function as the mirror has for Lacan. It is a medium where the subject forms the image of completeness. Lacan identified this connection between the mirror and space when he wrote that the individual gets "caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality" (Lacan: 1998b; 181). The subject comes to understand the I as being

complete in its representation of its spatial capacity as reflected through the mirror. While the mirror is absent from Bukowski's work, the same process occurs for Henry when he is under the table. Through his separateness he forms an image of completeness of the Self through spatial distance and removal from people. "Space" here does not entail great distance from people nor largeness. The "space" can be quite small and within the midst of millions as long as it provides a buffer from humanity. As Henry Chinaski explains this desire for "space" toward the end of Ham on Rye: "I liked being alone. It felt good to sit alone in a small space and smoke and drink. I had always been good company for myself" (Bukowski: 1982; 275). This liking for a confined isolating "space" in the young adult Henry can be traced back to the young Henry attaining a feeling of satisfaction while sitting under the table. Under the table, Henry was complete. He was the non-fragmented I or the "*imago*" of completeness that is formed at the beginning of Lacan's 'mirror stage.' However, Henry Chinaski's space is about to be taken from him. The "social determination" (Lacan: 1998b; 179), that he will undergo, will be brutal and alienating. It will encroach on his space and begin chipping away at the complete image of the Self.

"I Ate Too"

Henry's feeling that he is not part of the group of people, that he is a distinct, complete entity separate from them, is shattered, as Lacan postulated, by the socialization process. This shattering occurs through the performance of one of the primary functions common to all people: eating. Bukowski's portrayal of this first assault on Henry Chinaski's image of the complete Self utilizes simple language structures in an innovative arrangement. This technique makes the episode poignant. Bukowski uses a method of understating the important and traumatic experiences of Henry Chinaski's life. By doing this, Bukowski maintains the rhythm of the narrative while at the same time creating a distance between the situation and Chinaski. This distance from his own experience places Chinaski in the guise of a dispassionate observer reporting on the scene.

Bukowski's prose style, while consisting of short direct sentences, demonstrates a complexity and intricacy that makes Henry's realization of being human extremely powerful in its understatement. This intricacy works to move young Henry from a position beneath the table where "[n]obody seemed to know [he] was there" (Bukowski: 1982; 9), where he was not of the people, to the awareness that he too was a human. The next memory that Henry is able to recall after being under the table in Germany is of a Christmas argument. As with the table passage, Henry lies beyond, "beneath" the people, observing "[t]wo large people fighting, screaming. People eating, always people eating" (Bukowski: 1982; 9). Henry, "beneath" the table and the "large people," observes and derives meaning but does not interact. They are fighting and they are eating, and then the realization: "I ate too" (Bukowski: 1982; 9). These Others, people, eat, always eat, but the I eats too. The realization is immediate; the I is not other than the Other: the I is also an Other. It is fitting that Bukowski, the artist, places the impact of these two early recollections and the epiphany of humanness beneath the text, understated, for that is where it emerges from

for Henry: from beneath the table and the “large people.”

The “fictional direction” in which the ego had been situated, complete and separate, has come-up against the Symbolic Order. The I’s “social determination” process has begun. This process establishes the “discordance” between the centered complete I, which attempts to “remain irreducible,” in the Derridian sense of the transcendental signified of a logocentric system (Derrida: 1978 & 1997), and the exterior, the Symbolic Order (Lacan: 1998b; 179). This “discordance” or conflict between social determiners will remain unresolved.

Operating through the *sheaf* of Derridian *différance* (Derrida: 1982; 1-27) the imbalanced polarized functioning of the I and the Other will produce conflict and turmoil. Chinaski has been forced into a condition where the control systems of the Symbolic Order are adhered to in silence. They are endured while the I is negated, denied. In instances where the I is allowed to emerge, Chinaski acts upon it only by negating the Other, by trampling upon the structure of the Symbolic Order. The interplay of the two, the *différance* of the I and the Other, is stifled. How this imbalanced lack of interplay comes about can be seen in Ham on Rye, for this novel focuses on the particular brutality of Henry Chinaski’s “socialization” in both “the home environment” and in “the human relations developed” during his schooling and interaction with peers (Doi: 1988; 46).

Eating with Your Left Hand

It is fitting that since Henry Chinaski’s realization of his humanness comes through the shared process with other people of eating, that the first brutal attempt to matrix him is also connected with eating. Bukowski foreshadows the nature of Chinaski’s indoctrination to the ways of the Symbolic Order by following the line “I ate too” with the following passage:

My spoon was bent so that if I wanted to eat I had to pick the spoon up with my right hand. If I picked it up with my left hand, the spoon bent away from my mouth. I wanted to pick the spoon up with my left hand (Bukowski: 1982; 9).

Bukowski’s style of simplicity and directness are again evident in this passage. The matter of fact directness heightens the poignancy of the sentiment. The symbol of the bent spoon is vividly clear. The young child will be forced to conform to uncomfortable awkward rules even when performing the most rudimentary tasks. The “rules that have been established as natural and proper” (Doi: 1988; 36) are going to be overbearing for Henry Chinaski. They are going to quench what the “I wanted.” His own space will be encroached upon. Even the simplest things he wants to do, eat with his left hand, play, sit, speak, are going to be denied him. The logocentric control systems of his Symbolic Order, United States blue collar, or “the plebeian tradition” as Russell Harrison calls the Bukowski/Chinaski social position (Harrison: 1998; 178), as it is installed within young Henry by his family and the United States’ system, is going to litter his path through life with bent spoons: controls that will force him always away from his I.

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