

CHARLES BUKOWSKI, KING OF THE LITTLE MAGAZINES

Abel Debritto
Independent scholar
abel.debritto@gmail.com

The little magazines were instrumental in turning Charles Bukowski into a hugely popular figure in American letters and, yet, their significance in Bukowski's early career has been largely overlooked. The little magazines were the ideal outlet for Bukowski's prolific output, and their editors, who saw him as a spiritual leader, championed his work so vehemently that he eventually became the most published author of the 1960s. This previously uncharted territory –his indisputable rise to fame in the alternative literary scene– is here illustrated by means of several graphs, stressing the elusive nature of most 'little' and 'mimeo' periodicals as well as Bukowski's astounding literary productivity.

Keywords: Charles Bukowski, periodicals, little magazines, small press, poetry

Charles Bukowski was a product of the small press, an unparalleled phenomenon of the so-called little magazines that proliferated in the United States during the 60s. His long journey, his indefatigable odyssey through the 'littles' and the small press was finally rewarded after many a bitter battle in the back alleys of the American literary scene. He was scorned, sneered at and mocked by countless authors and critics, and he was largely rejected by academic quarterlies; his work was dismissed as the product of an ignorant drunk lecher who could not write poetry. Unconcerned, imperturbable, and possessed by an unstoppable urge to create, Bukowski, far from the madding crowd, slowly edged his way through the literary turmoil of the 60s and emerged as one of the main figures of that period, an indisputable international icon.

The fact that he was the most published author of the 60s can only be explained in terms of his prolific output. Bukowski wrote indefatigably almost daily over a period spanning fifty years, and he probably submitted his material to magazines of all sorts on a daily basis as well. It would be exceedingly difficult to establish the total amount of poems, stories, essays, columns, introductions, or letters Bukowski ever penned. His staggering literary production has not been properly analyzed and classified as of yet. According to long-time editor John Martin, Black Sparrow Press and Ecco have published 2,643 poems to date, but since there are many unintended duplicates in the posthumous collections, it is safe to assume that the actual figure is closer to 2,500. In any case, Martin claims that this amount is roughly half the total number of poems Bukowski actually wrote. Part of the other half appeared in the little magazines, and the remaining ones have not been published.

Tracking down Bukowski's work is definitely a risky business. This goal is hindered by two main factors. On the one hand, hundreds of poems were lost in the mail or were never returned to Bukowski. On the other, Bukowski rewrote many rejected poems and submitted them again to the "littles" under a different title. By way of illustration, Bukowski first sent "The Way to Review a Play and Keep Everybody Happy but Me:" to John Bryan's *Gusher* in 1959. Bryan finally published the poem in another magazine, *Renaissance*, in July 1961. During that two year lapse, Bukowski assumed the poem was either lost or that Bryan would

not return it to him as he had not replied to his inquiries. He rewrote the poem, changed the title to "Serlige" and submitted it to *Venture*, where it was published in late 1961. Thus, in characteristic *bukowskian* fashion, the same poem –with different titles and several changes– appeared in two little magazines in 1961. This recurring pattern makes it virtually impossible to determine exactly how many poems Bukowski wrote.

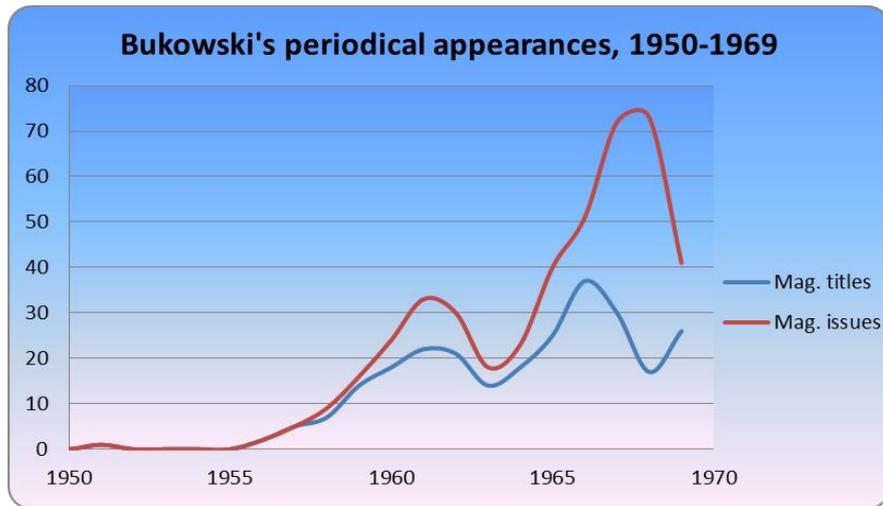
Likewise, Bukowski would rewrite poems first published in the little magazines for book publication. For example, "I Thought of Ships, of Armies, Hanging On..." was first rejected by *Northwest Review* in 1963 and then published that same year in *Targets*. The poem would finally appear in the book *The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills* (1969). However, the book version had undergone so many substantial changes that it could even be considered a 'new' poem. In this particular case, the title was preserved and it is relatively easy to compare the book version against the magazine one, but in many other instances titles were changed, which greatly complicates pinpointing the magazine version since the poems published by Black Sparrow Press provided no bibliographical information to do so. Therefore, many of those poems might have previously appeared in the little magazines under a different title; Martin's deliberate decision to not to provide dates does not facilitate the task of ascertaining the total number of poems Bukowski wrote and/or published.

Recycling old material was not a practice limited to poetry. Many of the "Notes of a Dirty Old Man" prose columns published in *Open City* during the 1967-69 period or in other underground newspapers, such as *Berkeley Tribe*, *Nola Express*, or *Los Angeles Free Press*, were subsequently incorporated into the novels Bukowski wrote in the 70s, most notably *Post Office* (1971) and *Factotum* (1975). To some critics, this practice could be both compelling and irritating: "Bukowski's willingness to write badly without embarrassment, to do the same thing over and over again in poems or in stories, is one of the exasperating and endearing things about him" (Kessler 1985: 62). Bukowski's habit of rewriting old material contributes considerably to further turn the total number of poems and stories into an unknown figure, which has attained by now a somewhat mythical status. However, scholars, bibliographers and critics alike have tried to record this elusive figure in their works. As early as 1970, Sanford Dorbin offered a painstaking breakdown, obviously drawn up from the bibliography he had compiled the previous year, claiming that Bukowski had already published "sixteen books and chapbooks, another dozen-and-a-half broadsides and pamphlets, some tape recordings, a phonograph record. Over six hundred periodical and anthology appearances in twenty-three states, the District of Columbia and six other countries" (1970: 21). Nevertheless, Dorbin failed to mention the total number of poems and stories printed in those periodicals.

Other attempts to establish that figure have been similarly imprecise. Brewer noted that "of the thousands of poems by Bukowski that appeared in predominantly small-press and underground publications over five decades, only approximately 50% are collected" (1997: 83). Though it is true, as a generalization, that only half of the poems published in the "littles" have been put out by Black Sparrow Press and Ecco, Brewer does not provide a detailed analysis. According to Ciotti, by 1987 Bukowski was "a disciplined and prolific writer who, over the past 30 years, has published more than 1,000 poems, 32 books of poetry, 5 books of short stories, 4 novels and an autobiographical screenplay" (12). Ciotti's breakdown is definitely more accurate than Brewer's, but bibliographer Al Fogel's 1999 count is probably the closest to the actual figure: "About three thousand original contributions in over one thousand books and periodicals spanning fifty years" (11).

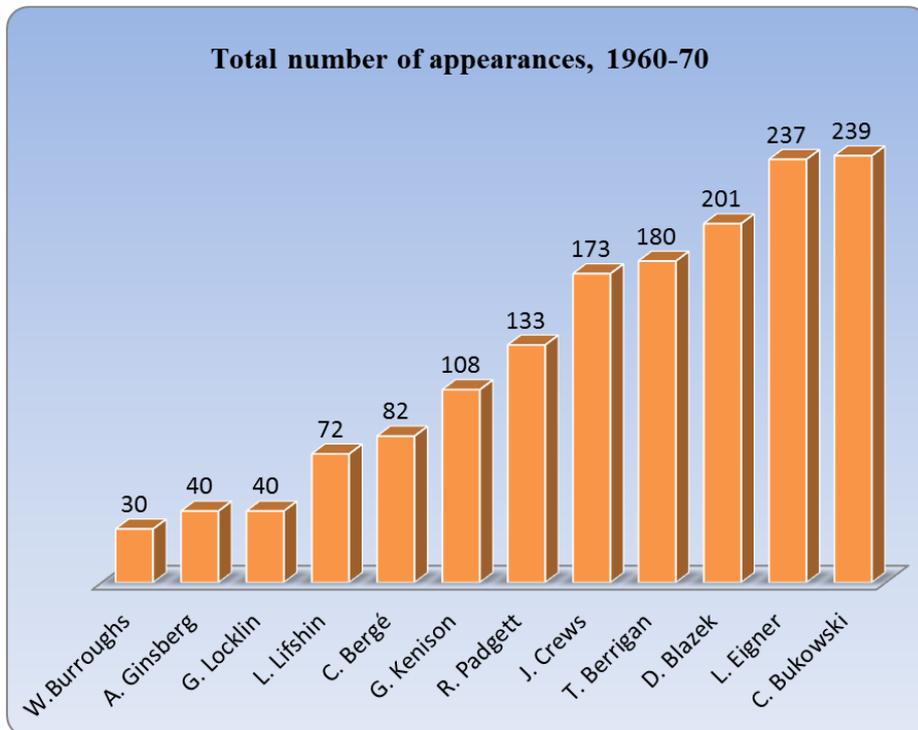
In any case, these estimates clearly indicate that Bukowski was an extremely prolific author by any standards. His industrious production during the 1950-69 period is reflected in the following graph:

Graph 1, based on all the Bukowski bibliographies published to date and on several hundred periodicals that I have personally reviewed in over a dozen American libraries, displays the chronological total number of magazine titles as well as the total number of magazine issues featuring Bukowski's work from 1950 to 1969.



Similarly, the 447 Bukowski entries in Harter's *An Author Index to Little Magazines of the Mimeograph Revolution* confirm his prolific nature. Even if Harter's index does not encompass the totality of his mammoth output in the 60s, it shows that Bukowski was the most published author of the period, clearly surpassing the literary efforts of other small press legends such as Judson Crews or Lyn Lifshin. It is as if Bukowski had foreseen the value of the "publish or perish" culture before it became an unavoidable reality.

Graph 2, based on Harter's index, displays the total number of appearances of the most widely published authors in the 60s. Since Harter's study does not include all the "mimeos" released in the period, the figures are not representative of the actual output or the actual number of periodical appearances of the authors in the graph. For instance, Bukowski was in over 100 underground newspaper issues in 1967-70, and that is not reflected in the graph. Similarly, Bukowski totals 239 appearances and Larry Eigner 237, but in 1971-80 Bukowski had 214 appearances and Eigner 39. Likewise, Lyn Lifshin has 72 appearances only in the graph and 357 in 1971-



80. Douglas Blazek's appearances, over 200 in the graph, drop to 22 in 1971-80. Judson Crews, including his

pseudonyms (Trumbull Drachler, Cerise Farallon, or Mason Jordan Mason) does not reach the 200 appearances because he was not especially popular in the mimeo scene, but his work appeared in hundreds of littles and journals not included in the graph. William Burroughs' work was extensively printed in alternative publications in the 60s, but not so much in the periodicals selected by Harter.

For a hyper-prolific author such as Bukowski, it came as no surprise that critics and scholars alike soon attacked him for producing and publishing so much material. In the early 60s, Bukowski was already aware of such criticism: "[S]ome people have said that I am too prolific, that I might be tending to write too much and that this could be dangerous" (Moore 2001: 331). Much criticism was directed at the inconsistent quality of the poetry and fiction published in the 'littles' and underground newspapers. Nevertheless, Bukowski knew that, being as prolific as he was, it was impossible to continually produce first-rate material. As he wrote in 1970, "this year I must have written 150 new poems, a novel and maybe 30 short stories. now this stuff is not excellent but some of it is" (Cooney 1995: 109). It seems that being such a prolific author did not always work to Bukowski's advantage. Besides the customary criticism of his work as being uneven in quality, it meant the occasional set-to with his long-time publisher –Martin believed that printing so many poems in the 'littles' could hurt Black Sparrow Press sales– as well as the realization that his hunger to be immediately published in the 'littles' could not be always satisfied –more often than not, Bukowski complained that magazines could not keep up with his output.

Two factors undermined Bukowski's potential rise in the small press. First, hundreds of poems were lost in the mail or were not returned to him. As early as 1961, Bukowski had already figured out the percentage of lost material: "Out of each 100 poems that I write, 60 of them disappear through acceptances that never jell or work mailed out and never returned" (Centenary Dec. 1961). By December 1962, the amount was very similar, but Bukowski was clearly frustrated by the inefficiency and slovenliness of the editors: "I've dropped 200-to-300 poems since 1955 and I used to try to get some of these poems back ... but I have found that the elongated keepers of poems or destroyers of poems *without exception* do not respond to polite and reasonable inquiry with proper stamped self-addressed envelope enclosed" (Cooney 1993: 50). While it is true that a large number of editors did not reply to Bukowski, others did return the material submitted, such as Clarence Major, editor of *Coercion Review*, Carl Larsen, editor of *Existaria*, *rongWrong* and other little magazines, to name a few.

By 1967, he had lost over 500 poems in the mail. Although the total number of poems lost in this fashion is not known, Pavillard mentions a similar figure in a 1967 interview: "[Bukowski] sends poems to the best and worst magazines, estimates between 300 and 400 are out somewhere - he doesn't know where until a check comes or, more frequently, a single copy of the magazine" (9). Precisely, as Baughan notes, "whether any of these works made their way into publication uncredited and uncompensated is something we will probably never know for certain" (2004: 33). Bukowski did not have copies of all his magazine appearances since some editors did not send him the customary contributor's copies, and, according to legend, his friends stole his magazines on a regular basis.

Second, the fact that little magazine editors constantly rejected Bukowski's work, even when he was a relatively known author in the alternative literary circles of the late 60s, might have prevented him from becoming more popular in the small press. Given his massive production, many publishers considered that some of his poems and stories were below average, and they rejected them with good reason. Bukowski was the first to admit that his literary output was not always first-rate: "I'd say that seventy-five percent of what I write is good; forty, forty-five percent is excellent; ten percent is immortal, and twenty-five percent is shit. Does it add up to one hundred?" (Bizio 1982: 34). Despite the humorous tone, Bukowski

was aware of the disparate quality of his own writing, and he was usually understanding towards those editors who rejected his subpar work. When Felix Stefanile returned some of his poems in early 1960, Bukowski's response was cordial: "I hope to submit to you again, and believe me, I far more appreciate your criticism than 'sorry' or 'no' or 'overstocked'" (Stefanile, 19 Sept. 1960). Two decades later, Bukowski's stance remained unchanged; he believed that most editors rightfully turned down his less accomplished work, arguing his submissions were probably mediocre.

Critics have claimed that Bukowski was the most published author of the 60s. If both the rejected work and the lost material were added to the total number of poems and stories on record, it would be safe to assume that he was, alongside Judson Crews and Lyn Lifshin, the most prolific and/or published author *ever*. Bukowski's work was steadily, and unflinchingly, printed in the 'littles' and underground newspapers during the 60s, which attests to the increasing interest in his output and it definitely accounts for the remarkable popularity he attained by the end of the decade. Bukowski was, unarguably, a product of the small press, the little magazine author *par excellence*; this notion is reinforced by the fact that *all* the editors and publishers who would eventually help Bukowski become an important figure in American letters discovered him in the little magazines published during this period.

Works cited

- Baughan, Michael Gray 2004: *Charles Bukowski*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers.
- Bizio, Silvia February 1982: "Charles Bukowski. Quotes of a Dirty Old Man." *High Times* 33-36: 98, 100.
- Brewer, Gaylord 2007: *Charles Bukowski*. New York: Twayne Publishers.
- Centenary: John William Corrington Papers & Manuscripts (Box 30A), Centenary College, Magale Memorial Library, Shreveport, Louisiana.
- Ciotti, Paul 22 March 1987: "Bukowski". *Los Angeles Times Magazine* 12-19, 23.
- Cooney, Seamus, ed. 1993: *Screams from the Balcony. Selected Letters 1960-1970*. Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press.
- _____. 1995: *Living on Luck. Selected Letters 1960s-1970s*. Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press.
- Dorbin, Sanford 1970: "Charles Bukowski and the Little Mag/Small Press Movement". *Soundings. Collections of the University Library* 2.1: 17-32.
- Fogel, Al 2000: *Charles Bukowski. A Comprehensive Price Guide & Check List 1944-1999*. Florida: The Sole Proprietor Press.
- Kessler, Stephen 1985: "Notes of a Dirty Old Man". *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 5.3: 60-63.
- Moore, Steve, ed. 2001: *Beerspit Night and Cursing. The Correspondence of Charles Bukowski and Sheri Martinelli 1960-1967*. Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press.
- Pavillard, Dan 1967: "The Loner As a Poet". *Tucson Daily Citizen* 15 July: 9.
- Stefanile, Felix. Unpublished correspondence made available to the author.



THIS TEXT IS PART OF THE VOLUME:

Martín Alegre, Sara (coord. and ed.), Melissa Moyer (ed.), Elisabet Pladevall (ed.) & Susagna Tubau (ed.). *At a Time of Crisis: English and American Studies in Spain*. Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona/AEDEAN, 2012. ISBN-10: 84-695-4273-7, ISBN-13: 978-84-695-4273-6. Available from www.aedean.org