

## CHARLES BUKOWSKI'S "HAM ON RYE", A KÜNSTLERROMAN

**Anca BĂDULESCU, Associate Professor PhD, Transilvania University of Braşov**

*Abstract: Bukowski's autobiographical novel, "Ham on Rye" tells the author's life story from early childhood to adulthood, from 1922 to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Henry Chinaski's relationship to his father, his loneliness, his pains, frustrations and anger contribute to his making as a tough adult. Beyond being a Bildungsroman, "Ham on Rye" qualifies more importantly as a Künstlerroman. This article aims at tracing back Chinaski's artistic apprenticeship, his becoming a writer. Poverty, his father's violent behavior, his solitude, the physical and spiritual scars did not only empower him as an independent resilient human being, but stirred his creativity and gave him the urge and tremendous power to write.*

*Keywords: razor strop, lawn mower, acne vulgaris, misfit, library*

Born in Germany in 1920, raised and educated in America, Bukowski lived most of his life in Los Angeles, the setting of "Ham on Rye", one of his best-known novels, published in 1982, when Bukowski was sixty-two years old. Its plot is episodic, organized in fifty-eight chapters (some of which are just one page and a half long) which follow in a chronological succession Henry Chinaski's childhood and early maturity. The title is a pun pointing at Bukowski's reputation as a 'ham'- a self-promoter- and his infamous reputation as a hard drinker.

While being an autobiography, "Ham on Rye" qualifies as a Bildungsroman in the tradition of James Joyce's "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" or Thomas Mann's "Tonio Kröger". Bukowski's novel, though, strikes by its humoristic, often sarcastic vein and by the crude straightforward, at times even vulgar, language. As they grow up, are educated, fall from innocence into experience Stephen Dedalus, Tonio Kröger and Henry Chinaski mature into buoyant young men. At the same time, the transition from blissful ignorance to a painful awakening of self-consciousness turns them into 'art creators', 'Künstler'. The emergence of the artists Stephen Dedalus, Tonio Kröger and Henry Chinaski gradually becomes the main concern of these 'Künstlerromane'.

The reader follows Henry Chinaski's evolution, starting with his early childhood in Germany, when he used to crawl under the table to watch the people's legs: "It was dark under there. It must have been in 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." (Bukowski 2015, 1) Very often during his childhood, adolescence and early maturity Chinaski would isolate himself, preferring to spend time with himself and the bottle, rather than socializing. From those remote times he also remembered his father screaming angrily at his mother: "Two people: one larger with curly hair, a big nose, a big mouth, much eyebrow; the larger person always seeming to be angry, often screaming; the smaller person quiet, round of face, paler, with large eyes. I was afraid of both of them." (Bukowski 2015, 2)

It proved that abuse and anger would be his father's only response to Henry's needs and plans. The boy realized very early that his father "...didn't like people. He didn't like me." (Bukowski 2015, 10) Frustration and silent despair grew as years passed by, and his father became more and more violent while his mother did not dare to take young Henry's side. He was regularly wildly beaten with the razor strop, most of the times without any real reason. His father, a large man of six feet two, gradually became the very embodiment of fury: "He was all ears, nose, mouth, I couldn't look at his eyes, there was only his red angry face." (Bukowski 2015, 39) At school he didn't have friends, and he didn't even want any, preferring to be alone. At home he liked to stay in bed for hours, the covers pulled to his face: "It was good in there, no people, no nothing." (Bukowski 2015, 38) Every Saturday he was supposed to mow the lawn meticulously while his mates were playing football.

Constantly ostracized by his family, teachers and school mates, Henry Chinaski grew into a tough defying young man, considered to be bizarre and unpredictable. When his father beat him savagely or the headmaster crushed the bones of his fingers expecting him to sob, he refrained from exposing his vulnerability. His only retaliation was to promise both his father and the principal that he would kill them. When attending Mt Justin Jr High he acquired "an evil look" (Bukowski 2015, 107) on his face, and deliberately kept falling out with teachers and fellow students: "I liked being picked out as one of the bad guys I liked to feel bad...Trying to be good made me sick." (Bukowski 2015, 108)

Most of the teachers disliked young Henry, although he never really confronted them. They claimed they didn't like his attitude or his tone of voice or the way he slouched in his seat or sneered. One of the teachers, Curly Wagner, in particular used to spy on him, trying to give him a hard time. Even on graduation day he expressed his hatred for Chinaski: "I'm going to follow you the rest of your life. I'm going to follow you to the ends of the earth and I'm going to get you." (Bukowski 2015, 147)

About the time he was beginning to be accepted as a tough guy by his colleagues, he was hit by a terrible case of juvenile acne, the worst in town. He got pimples and boils all over his face, neck, back, even his chest. The consequence was that he withdrew even deeper into his shell. He watched from afar his mates, the pretty girls, as if they were on the stage and he in the audience. During the graduation ceremony when the students were called on stage one by one, Henry was the only one who was not greeted with applause by parents and friends. His mother and father were not in the hall. He told himself: "A tough guy didn't need that," (Bukowski 2015, 148) and walked home by himself.

At his father's request Henry registered at Chelsey High, a school for rich kids, although his family had major financial difficulties. During the first semester Henry's acne got even worse and he had to be temporarily withdrawn from school: "They [the boils] were as large as walnuts and covered my face. I was very ashamed...Yellow pus would spurt and splatter on the mirror. And little white hard pits...I knew how hard it was for other people to look at me." (Bukowski 2015, 151) Just like Mary Shelley's Frankenstein or Franz Kafka's Gregor Samsa, Henry felt like a monster, a misfit around

his equals. A long period of shame and excruciating pain followed in Henry Chinaski's life. Not only did he have to endure the electric needle and burning ointments without even wincing, but doctors and nurses were discussing him and his acne vulgaris as if he was not there: "It was not simply a case of teenage acne. These were inflamed relentless, large, swollen boils filled with pus. I felt singled out, as if I had been *selected* to be this way." (Bukowski 2015, 165) The tough youngster grew even tougher but lonelier and bitterer too. He wanted to live alone and felt much better and cleaner in solitude.

The day of the Senior Prom he walked two and a half miles from his parents' house and watched the girls who were wearing glamorous long dresses and the boys in expensive tuxes from the outside, in the dark. He had neither the money for formal attire nor a date with whom to go to the party. One more time he was acutely aware of his 'otherness' and isolation. When he accidentally saw the reflection of his scarred, inflamed face, he felt like a "jungle animal" (Bukowski 2015, 237) marginalized, rejected by everyone. He no longer felt comfortable with his seclusion, and hated them all wholeheartedly. He suddenly hated their beauty, their unscathed complexions, their happiness and the magic of the dance. At that moment he promised himself and the world that he would be as happy as any of them. Pain, frustration, humiliation, ostracization, despair and hate became the driving power in Henry Chinaski's life.

Notwithstanding, things did not turn out well for Hank. He took a job as a stock clerk at Mears-Starbuck, but lost it after a few days. He then enrolled at LA City College, as there was no tuition fee and second-hand books. His father was ashamed of him not working and hoped he would gain some respectability by going back to school. He chose to study journalism, passed his exams without studying, and started drinking heavily and chain smoking. When his father threw him out, he rented a sordid grimy shack preferring the company of booze and, on rare occasions, that of drunkards like himself. On one such night he found himself throwing up in the rear of someone's car: "The whiskey had hit me all at once. I felt as if I couldn't get up. I had to get up. I was supposed to be a tough guy...Then I started to puke. It really came. It came and it came, it covered the rear floorboard." (Bukowski 2015, 288)

In the end of the novel Henry has dropped out of college and writes term papers for students. He is still poor, can hardly make both ends meet, has no friends, is addicted to whiskey and beer, but is determined to let his voice be heard: "As I watched them, I said to myself. Someday my dance will begin. When that day comes, I will have something that they don't have". (Bukowski 2015, 238) His 'Bildung' has brought with it the resolution not to be finished by the time he would be twenty-five, but to write himself out of despair and alienation.

"Ham on Rye" is not just a novel about the awakening of a young man's consciousness, though. More importantly, it is a story about the development of a young hero as an artist. We witness Henry Chinaski accumulating frustration and alienation only to create an interior life which ultimately enabled him to channel all the destructive energies for his own artistic growth rather than his self-annihilation.

Living in a poor environment during the Great Depression, the Chinaski family faced financial difficulties, and sank further into poverty. His father, who delivered milk,

eventually lost his job, and so did his mother some time later. As a grammar school student, as a teenager and as a young man Henry had to cope with financial shortcomings and very often humiliations. When Henry asked his father for a one-dollar weekly allowance instead of a fifty-cent one, he bluntly and harshly refused telling him that he would have to work one more hour every day in order to cover the sum. His disastrous relationship with his abusive father, the frequent horrific beatings, his mother's weakness and silent acquiescence caused the protagonist's refuge in a much safer, imagined universe.

As time passed, Hank became increasingly disillusioned with the American society and the idea that success was based on personal merit and hard work. He discovered very early in life that wellbeing and comfort depended on abuse of power, the obsession with appearance and the display of wealth: "A whole god-damned nation of assholes driving automobiles, eating, having babies, doing everything in the worst way possible, like voting for a presidential candidate who reminded them most of themselves." (Bukowski 2015, 174) By using humor and sarcasm he chose to denounce the shallowness of the society which had ostracized him.

Being in a constant and hurtful conflict with the representatives of societal norms, his father, school authorities Henry Chinaski did not only become a strong hardcore individual, but also an artist with well-defined principles and sharp 'weapons'.

The turning point in the making of Henry Chinaski the writer was his discovering the La Cienega Public Library and the authors who were to influence his own writing later on: "I read a book a day. I read all the D.H. Lawrence in the library...And Huxley, the youngest of the Huxleys, Lawrence's fiend. It all came rushing at me. One book led to the next one." (Bukowski 2015, 183) He immersed himself in Hemingway's, Dostoevsky's, Thurber's and Sherwood Anderson's fiction and his thirst for reading only increased. Reading gave him inspiration and the confidence to begin writing himself. He wrote his first short story in a large yellow notebook that had been meant for high school work and told the tale of Baron von Himmeln, a German pilot in World War I. Some time later he was given a typewriter by his parents and started creating dark short fiction pieces full of resentment.

The end of "Ham on Rye" leaves Hank all prepared to take the world by storm with his surprising sarcastically humorous work. Henry Chinaski (aka Charles Bukowski) not only survived but prevailed by transforming his unhappy childhood and teenage into an acclaimed novel. At the same time, the readers were given a glimpse into the formation of the artist Bukowski would eventually become.

And, yes, he has something they don't have, just as he promised when he was pushed away and mocked at.

### References:

- Bukowski, Charles, 2015: "Ham on Rye", Canongate Books  
 Brewer, Gay, 1997: "Charles Bukowski", New York  
 Calonne, David Stephen, 2012: "Charles Bukowski", Reaktion Books, London