Andreea Smedescu*

THE ODYSSEY OF CHARLES BUKOWSKI THROUGH THE CITY MAZE

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Abstract: the article sets out to analyse the process of mythologizing the city environment. Charles Bukowski reorganizes space and time according to his own perspective. The urban landscape stretches chaotically in a maze of streets and buildings which are symbols of the modern civilization; whereas time passes slowly, following the same rhythm of an automatic existence. The poet feels entrapped by society and the only way to escape is to set out on an archetypal journey through the urban landscape. The main objective of the article is to explore the paradigms of urban reality and the phenomenological concepts of modern city within the scope of individual self-knowledge. The urban topos is a psychological awareness of one’s individuality, and Bukowski ventures into a symbolic Homeric odyssey, enlivening the urban myths through metaphorical analogies. In Northrop Frye’s Anatomy of Criticism (1957), the symbol is perceived as a literary unity that is both a motif, and a sign. In Bukowski’s poems, the city is both a social image, but also the archetype of Babel like world of technology, and split personalities.

The methodology of the article is based upon the Fourfold Method (promoted by Dante who claimed that a literary text can be analysed on four levels: empirical, social, psychological, and spiritual), and psychoanalytic criticism. Therefore, the urban environment becomes a mental construction, and a literary representation of a person's inner, and outer self). Moreover, the article discusses the mythic image of urban life (the city is a symbol of one's affiliation to a certain community, and civilization), and the aesthetic trajectory of city life (Mihai Drăgănescu in Știință și Civilizație outlines that civilization means an aesthetic inner drive that reminds a person of his ontological condition). The psychoanalytic criticism imbues both the individual and collective consciousness with an allegorical meaning of life (Charles Mauron outlines that the soul of a writer can be revealed through the metaphors of his inner projection). For Bukowski, the city maze becomes the symbol of a technological world filled with chaos and order, sanctuary and dark recesses, and swarming with people.

Charles Bukowski’s poetry depicts the contemporary reality where the life of a typical American is ironically, sometimes pitifully construed in the environs of Los Angeles, thus providing the reader with a realistic analysis of the modern city. The poet describes the events that take place in his city, combining the stern reality with the hidden symbols of the urban ambience. He registers everything that goes on, commenting bitterly or sometimes with hope on the fate of the modern man and on the human civilization. The modern man is shown in both his private home as well as in his public sphere where civilization threatens to change the nature of man,
replacing humanity with machines and living corpses. The city becomes the major character, a sort of tyrant who imposes upon the masses a tough regime. Nevertheless, it is not without a peculiar fascination that Charles Bukowski tackles with the representation of the urban landscape. Caught between two extremes (a desire to stay indoors and observe the city life from the safety of his window, and a desire to wander the neighbourhoods), Bukowski emphasizes the rhetoric of the city whose discourse reveals the dangers and vices of modern society. It is not surprising why the poet seeks a way to escape, and the only solution is to dive deep into the clamorous sea of mankind. This involves an archetypal journey through the paved streets and urban landscapes. Nevertheless, it is a difficult path to follow, and Bukowski employs all his knowledge about the real image of the city. That is why his poems keep the ‘myth’ concept within the gray shades of modern reality. Life in the city echoes the humdrum of the tower of Babel, and the poet recreates the representation of the 20th century as an allegory of social isolation and life-in-death existence. Of course, there is also the cultural aspect of civilization, the city being regarded as a space of evolution and technology. Furthermore, Bukowski’s realism revolves around two major myths: progress and decay. Society is a dual coin which either shows the evolutionary side or the downfall of the human being (i.e. the fall from nature protective haven). The urban space is a psychological awareness of one’s self in relation with the other, and of one’s way to outline his difference and proclaim his right to dwell into a community. This leads to several conspicuous questions: How is the city defined by a modern poet like Bukowski? What is the influence of the environment over the creative spirit who battles with the dark sides of progress?

In order to answer the first question, we need to understand the mentality of the German-born American poet who carved Los Angeles in the granite of a dirty realism. For him, the city symbolizes the urban architecture of an enclosed space. Bukowski creates a poetical maze of streets crowded with puppet-like people, and with buildings and menacing machines. In this environment of progress, the poet witnesses with sadness the decay of the human spirit. But in order to fully estimate the urban reality, he prowls the neighborhoods, getting lost inside the maze, and in doing so the poet rewrites the history of a modern odyssey. In order to outline the real meaning and symbol of an urban odyssey, and consequently, the effect of the ambience over the human soul, the article employs both the Fourfold Method (promoted by Dante who claimed that a literary text can be analysed on four levels: empirical, social, psychological, and spiritual), as well as psychoanalytic criticism. Moreover, Bukowski’s urban poetry applies the literary device of metaphorical projection. The city we encounter is both real and unreal. We see men who have lost their dreams and run amok, prowling the streets. We pass by “machineguns towers” and the rhythms of civilization deafen the echoes of a pristine savagery. We may venture to ask: Is Bukowski more of a Dante than a Ulysses? Like Dante, he ascends into the valley of the city maze and contemplates the sinners, the damned. The greatest sin of the 20th century city inhabitant is having forgotten to actually live, and damnation comes under the form of a network enclosure. The network categorizes city people as social creatures who are ideologically determined by the notion of evolution and progress (Cardoso and Castells 5). In his turn, Charles Bukowski
compares the frame of progress with a “creation coffin” (Bukowski, *The People* 213), and his artistic soul is urged by an inner drive to return home, i.e. to a *topos* where people wear faces instead of masks.

there still might be a place
for us
somewhere. (Bukowski, *Sifting*, “The creation coffin” 330)

This ‘place’ Bukowski refers to is a sign of stability and balance where man has a real identity without being forced to simulate and act his sad role upon the stage of the modern society. The mask symbol bestows upon the poet a double identity. He is both the observer and the observant. He observes a dystopian city, while at the same time he is observed by the city which functions as a dynamic space. It is dynamic, because in its entanglements, the past and the present always meet. Bukowski’s antique alter-ego meets his modern self. They meet in the same quest. What Ulysses aims at is Ithaca, whilst the modern poet aims at a society of real civilization, habited by real people, and not by human automatons in the service of scientific dehumanization. The process of losing one’s individuality brings with it the plague of modern paranoia which shouldn’t be labeled as a mind disease, but as a feature of what city life has come to be (Bottez 39). The city maze assumes a confrontation of self-consciousness, collective consciousness, and urban consciousness, the latter always prevailing. If urban space, and its buildings are nothing but concepts that signify a contextual background of the city paradigm (Ziadeh 20), the paranoia claims a culture of its own. Charles Bukowski’s paranoia is directed towards “the new architecture”. The boulevards assert their own ideology, the streets speak of a swarming human condition, and the cafés have the role of evaluating the city’s rhythm (c.f. Ziadeh).

The rhythm is chaotic, far from the peace encountered in rural spaces. There is nothing idyllic about living in a compact space of concrete, buildings, and all sorts of modern machineries handled by people who appear to have lost their true identities. But this wavering of people, of noises, and of buildings that never cease to rise up, all these create the core of urban topos. The city becomes a “heraldic symbol”, a concept defined by Northrop Frye as the central image around which an ethos is built (Frye, *Anatomia* 112). The social ethos proclaims man as the instigator of urban energies, the human being becoming a whole new creature, a sort of modern Frankenstein. Of course, there have been voices that rise to proclaim the “infinite man” whose strength manifests itself in the social phenomenon (Faure, *Istoria* 180). And on this account, civilization triggers an archetypal ritual. The city is the Supreme Monad, out of which a series of Jungian anthropomorphic archetypes emerge. The image of the city becomes a maze, a system of nooks and corners, reminiscent of the primordial womb, and thus reenacting the Anima principle. Furthermore, the city dweller is first a revenant, a traveller born and reborn in the city and by the city, and moreover, since his birth, he is being mercilessly sentenced to a slow death. Despite the manacles of technology and of the pressure that modern life puts onto the city dweller, he is also a Utopian, manifesting his faith in the urban system and in his fellow citizens. After all, the city remains the supreme reflection of
a creative attempt of taming wilderness and changing nature. When dusty roads turn into freeways and green spaces grow into parks or other touristic attractions, the city becomes the greatest proof of man’s genius, representing “the apex of human achievement” (Harding IX). For Charles Bukowski, the “human achievement” is a symbol of the superiority of mind. Man has the power, however bleak his existence may be, to dream and create the perfect reality within the present life. For example, Charles Bukowski’s “A plausible finish” sets the Utopian archetype in the context of social intercourse: “those faces you see every day on the streets/were not created/entirely without/hope” (Bukowski, The People 201). Sadly, hope doesn’t suffice; and after encountering the others citizens the poet realizes that loneliness is also a reality of the modern days. The Utopian is also an Orphan, deprived of nature’s protective bosom, and of truth. He craves to reach the unity of diversity, although he is continually left aside. Despite his condition of outcast, The Orphan never gives up his beliefs, coming to realize that one’s real truth is always repelled by the masses (Bukowski, The People 16). Only after grasping this last real truth, The Orphan can become The Sage. The city dweller understands that living in the urban space undergoes the experience of the perfect endurance, i.e. the power to cope with civilization however deprived of illusions and dreams it may appear to be. Charles Bukowski, another Hemingway of American literature, knows that the forces of the city maze can break him, cage him, and whip his Apollonian inner self. Nonetheless, they fail to destroy him. His odyssey takes place under the sign of the “hummingbird chance”:

held to this life, neatly, walking free or caged,
held to this life, as if engraved in granite . . .
held to this, through the symphonies, and the traffic,
through the wash of the hours. (Bukowski, Open, “Hummingbird Chance” 310)

The Empirical Dimension of the City
Urban life asserts and validates the existence of a social topos. The space inhabited by the city dwellers is more than civilization. Nature has transformed itself, allowing the inventive human mind to project freeways and roads where woods and fields have once been. The City Archetype, according to Frye, ceases to be only a mere product of the human ideal, allowing its true nature to come alive. The City is a form of nature, and the entire nature is locked up inside the psyche of an infinite man (Frye, Anatomia 150-151). Therefore, we may talk in terms of a historical rite of passage, from the germs of thought to the city’s literal dimension. In literature, the city has been portrayed either as a space of decay and perverted innocence, or as a superior habitat. For Bukowski, the city receives its true dimensions only by comparison with the human scale: “Man-size and Man-life” (Bukowski, Burning 64). When the urban life is measured against the rhythm of everyday, the empirical dimension lacks depth “as if reality were the property/of little men” (Bukowski, Burning 64). People move in the ghost town of their own logic, devoid of dreams. If we analyse the poem “Dreamlessly”, we witness a process of slow death. People occupy the green spaces of the local parks the manner statues fill the halls of empty museums. They stand still, while the poet’s gaze
searches within them for a spark of humanity. But there is no all consuming fire, not even the ashes of a one last dream. The cafés are the territory of “old grey-haired waitresses”, while the roads display an endless procession of drivers who come and go, never stopping to admire the stoned beauty of buildings and houses. Supermarkets, boutiques, shops are tinny mazes where people wander in an automatic routine. They only focus upon the daily necessities, neglecting to feed the inner self, and “they concentrate/on that/dreamlessly” (Bukowski, Burning 230).

And dreams are important for the balance of the human psyche. If people stop dreaming, they are no longer alive, and neither is the city. The real plan misused by its very creators begins to reflect an upside down image. It is the “apocalyptic image” of Northrop Frye’s city, seen as a dwelling whose denizens are “living stones” (Frye, Anatomia 180).

The “stone” signifies the calcification of the human spirit. Through a perpetual contact with reality, the soul hardens and understands that his pairs, the other humans are all floating adrift, each cutting a way through their own mazes. In the empirical dimension, the poet is “alone with everybody”. The ontological apprehension of mankind is defined in simple terms, the matter being conspicuously outlined. Therefore, man becomes the product of his own civilization: “the flesh covers the bone/and they put a mind/in there and/sometimes a soul” (Bukowski, Love 98).

What is really interesting is the employment of the third person, plural. The creator is not a unity, but a system, a network of agents who have set an ideology of thought and reason for the common masses. The consequence of their machinations is a scaffold for the people who “are all trapped/by a singular/fate” (Bukowski, Love 99). This implacable fate is what most frightens Charles Bukowski.

The burden of collective existence falls heavy on the individual consciousness. Georg Lukács advocates the importance of a social and historical space for the development, or decay of the human personality. The city allows the interpenetration of “two dynamic complexes: man and society” (Lukács 179). The clash of these two complexes consolidates a Dionysian relationship. Man cannot live without society, and neither does society. We understand this dependable relationship when reading the poem “Houses and dark streets”. The pleasure of prowling down the streets, of hunting reality and its spectral shades of light and dark goes hand in hand with the fear of “getting lost”. A surreal outburst of mind turns the road into an animated antagonist, much like a gigantic snake that tries to catch the poet inside a maze of crossroads:

I swung off onto a side road to avoid the traffic and the side road started to curve sharply and I worried about that so I cut off onto another side road and I don’t know when it happened but the paved street vanished and I was driving along on a small dusty road and then the road started climbing as the evening darkened into night.
(Bukowski, Sifting, “Houses and dark streets” 103)

The above lines depict the inner fear of every city dweller. It is like a Freudian dream where the subconscious invades the conscious, rushed by the
instinctual awakening of the trapped social being. The city dweller drives down the mysterious roads of the unknown, because each attempt to change the route implies changing the destination. Once out of the city, the destination leads to the wild environs of a pristine world. The same idea appears in “Misbegotten paradise” where reality poisons hopes and dreams, and the city life runs the show of “nothingness”. Embittered, Bukowski recognizes his alien status:

I don’t seem to fit in anywhere
in cafés, restaurants . . .
on freeways I also seem
out of place . . .
I never seem to be in
sync with the rest of
humanity. (Bukowski, The Night, “Misbegotten paradise” 248)

A total synchronization with his fellow man would only alienate Bukowski’s true self. He is due to set aside and go on with his journey of lyrical urban adventures. Only the eyes of the poet prove capable of catching the light of modern truth, and only the lyrical mind can understand that the empirical dimension of the city has been built upon a mythical foundation. To define the city is to accept its true significance, i.e. a symbol of one’s affiliation to a certain community and civilization. Rejecting the city would only mean a return to the ancient scapegoat that after being branded by the society as an accursed being, it was banished from the society of men. It is not a fate desired by Bukowski who needs humanity, and implicitly the 20th century scenery, to philosophize about, mock or ridicule, and above all, fervently search.

The Social Dimension of the City

The community belief literally shapes the way a city is perceived. The city image is the product of the system of representations conceived by its inhabitants. If one inhabitant feels entrapped by the society, the city becomes the image of a hostile space. It is the case of Bukowski himself. To reach at the other end of evaluating the city image, the poet schematizes his own cultural and social values. The process of assimilating a culture and allowing to be assimilated is part of each human being desire to construct a durable identity and to mark the individuality of a modern species. But when this assimilation turns into a lack of social synchronization, individuality ascends to the status of a human within human topos, just like a Russian doll, each man swallowing and choking his inner being. Bukowski lives in himself, but out in the world as well. Nevertheless, it is only on the inside where he succeeds to keep the pace. Dumitru Ghișa postulates that in every human there are echoes of a society where one lives, and also personal values and beliefs, just like in an oyster the echo of the sea resounds (Ghișa 101). The image of a sea-like city also appears to Bachelard, for whom the sea signifies the concept of urbanity (Bachelard 28). We find ourselves in the immediate presence of the idea of “vastness” which is comprised of the endless social maze. The city is vast not because the space itself is vast, but because the diversity belongs to its inhabitants. Bukowski encounters
people of different class, gender, race, religion. And at this point, the social maze superimposes over the topos maze.

On the social level, a city represents the unity of its inhabitants and the networks of self versus the other. All the diversity reduces itself to an ontological policy. We may even talk about a city social self-awareness which possesses the same traits and functions as Benedict Anderson’s “imagined political community”. Bukowski’s city is an imagined community because the poet works with images. His odyssey is in itself the image of spatial knowledge. Bukowski crosses the maze, explores the city image, and learns its symbolic manifestations. This symbolism is directed out of the social intercourse. But for a social level to exist, it requires a mental image of a transgression from a solitary group of people who live in the wild regions of nature to the first human settlements (the collective group). After man accommodates himself with his fellow men, his mind creates the idea of a certain society, and this society is the offspring of civilization. What does civilization mean for the city dweller? It means the act of human creation, i.e. the understanding of the society of men as an alignment of principles, laws, and order (like an astral map where instead of stars there is the self/other dimension). Joseph Campbell assigns a “patriarchal” connotation to society, whereas the image of the universal mother or the Gaia principle governs over nature (Campbell 85). For a practical, ordinary man who is attuned to reality, civilization means an assurance of safety and a constant reminder of man’s superiority to nature. But for Charles Bukowski, the true meaning of progress is metaphorically revealed. The city comes to be regarded as a symbol of a microcosmic world where civilization has gathered all the vital energies of sustaining life on earth. However, we understand from the poem “A time to remember” that civilization has a spherical shape, resembling an orange that could be either sweet or bitter. The modern man has two options. He may receive the nourishment of evolution, or he may turn his back and reject being fashioned according to society’s rules.

Civilization is divided into parts, like an orange, and when you peel the skin off, pull the sections apart, chew it, the final result is a mouthful of pale pulp which you can either swallow or spit out. (Bukowski, The Night, “A time to remember” 280)

The image of the “orange” functions as a society in miniature, having the same attributes as Cyrano de Bergerac’s apple, analysed by Gaston Bachelard (151). In its interstices people parallel the a priori existence of the Homo sapiens. If in the past, man found shelter inside caves, up in the trees, and in any other natural nook or corner, now space and the objects that occupy space have gradually changed. Human mobility becomes immobility, a true permanence of life rhythm. The only home the modern man knows is the route on his way to work and back home. But he is not the one who moves through time and space, but the machines, i.e. cars. And this is the irony that hides behind the title of the poem “The lucky ones”. The victorious, those that fortune smiles at are in fact the men who plug their reason into reality, without losing themselves in speculative thinking or in past reflections:
this is our new civilization: as men
once lived in trees and caves now they live
in their automobiles and on freeways. (Bukowski, *The Night*, “The lucky ones” 306)

The future of the urban society has a petrified outcome. In “Runaway inflation”, the metaphorical image of the “future rolling toward us” which “paralyzes the wallet and the brain” (Bukowski, *Sifting* 208) reveals the analogy of a cataclysm impossible to avoid. The future is the stone set in motion by civilization; it is the scar of Goliath, returned to haunt its murderer. The city is now the Archetype of a “misbegotten paradise” where man lives without hope “into the mass of nothingness”, among the other “citizens of nothing” (Bukowski, *Sifting* 388). Nothingness comes to be associated with the urban society. The social network doesn’t leave much option in order to fully get to know the other. The city intertwines the social identity with the local identity. People live on the human level, but also as citizens who are constantly added or removed from the numeric series. The odyssey of Charles Bukowski does not only imply finding the most desirable topos (like in “Machineguns towers & timeclocks”, where the poet prepares himself for the final journey, armed with the knowledge derived from “a roadmap back”), but also finding The Man. Following the dream of Diogenes who would search for a real man even in day light, holding a candle in his hand to see better; Bukowski admits the possibility of never running into a genuine being, bristling with life. Nevertheless, the quest means everything. Edgar Allan Poe’s knight wandered after the dream of “El Dorado”, and Ulysses plunged into the perils of the vast sea to reach home. As for Bukowski, he walks the path of concrete and cement, following the tracks of civilization. His *Ecce Homo* is the illusion which makes life worth living by preserving the hope for a better social future. Unfortunately, Bukowski’s *Ecce Homo* is hard to find in the urban society where even the basic values of mankind have lost their true meaning. We understand this when reading “Poverty” which is the very metaphor of a society without society, where people have ceased to be alive for a long time, but nevertheless the poet searches through the city maze, through the buildings, and everywhere his genuine human being might show up. But the search always ends in deception, the “living man” manifesting himself as a Morgana mirage, appearing briefly only to disappear in the common beckoning of people afflicted by modern death:

you see his eyes
like the eyes of a tiger staring past
into the wind
but . . . it is always the other eyes. (Bukowski, *Burning*, “Poverty” 128)

The ‘eye’ image triggers the visual memory of Plato’s idea of intelligibility. The poet wants to see the Idea of The Man that generated the representation of man on earth. Perhaps the only living man Bukowski managed to find was “the violin player” from the homonymous poem. They meet at a horse race, and the musician stands apart from the crowd that is too lost in gambling speculations. The violin player plays his music, and nobody seems to hear, except of course the poet, who he himself is a child of Art. And the music he listens to pours into the havoc of horse
running and people shouting, filling the air with classical notes. In this poem we have two social planes that meet without touching themselves. Urban reality swells to a roar of present time, while the violin player lives in the classical era of his music. Yes, he is alive, but it is his music that breathes life upon him. Without his violin, he would have been just one of the crowds, of the conspicuous city members with whom the poet has been “caught alive together” in the poem “59 cents a pound”. Here, Charles Bukowski is an observant Ulysses, who “X-rays” people “in supermarkets/laundromats/café/s/street corners/bus stops/drug stores’ (Bukowski, Mockingbird 115). These are all urban loci where humans find themselves entrapped together, while they are waiting “in lines” for the outcome of civilization.

The Psychological Dimension of the City

The human psyche implies the notion of control, of coordination, like an astral plane. When Bukowski enters the city maze, he takes the first step mentally by feeling with his mind the world of shadowy ideologies. The sky above is the canopy of thoughts the poet builds metaphorically with every idea he expresses about the condition of living in the city. Now, if the heavenly bodies, i.e. the stars correspond to the human brain, it is because they reflect “the intelligence of a creating god” (Frye, The Secular 120). In the literary astral plane, Bukowski embodies the superior intelligence of a higher being, since he is the poet who builds his own landscapes and mazes, and consequently his city emanates from the image of a man-made society. The brain sets norms that compel one’s behaviour to perform individual and social justice. The City has also a psyche of its own, redirecting commandments to the people who have themselves set in motion the system of norms after which the city has designed its Decalogue. The modern society mass-produced prototypes of “men in black”. These men wear colourless garments, as if they lack the ability to experience existential joy. Black symbolizes negativity, death, sterile thought, and these men wearing black stand for the Archetype of Cain as they have suppressed their own natural positive feelings. We witness their amble in “5 men in black passing my window”. Charles Bukowski is watching them from inside the shelter of his house, a safety provided by the window which becomes a symbolic border between two different worlds. First there is the world of the conscious psyche filling the space of familiar objects. In this topos, Charles Bukowski stops being a social human being. He doesn’t socialize, just observes, reflects, and analyzes what happens outside the window. Outside, the animated urban space allows the irrational to walk loose. Anything can happen and any apparition is justifiable. Just like these “5 men in black” who “they’ve been to church” because “it’s Sunday” (Bukowski, Mockingbird 38). The colour of their clothes is black, because the unconscious dwells in darkness, in the shadows of the subconscious. They walk in pairs of five, each signifying the pentad of existence, the five universal elements. Of course, each element is “in black”, deprived of vitality. The fire that creates the flames of utter love has been extinguished by material love. The water that makes inner cells to thrive on fertile environment has now flooded the cerebral mechanism of mischievous deeds. The air that fills the lungs with oxygen has brought a poisonous fragrance of perversion. The earth that offers stability and growth has been reduced to a game of inconsistent chaos. And the very soul itself is now depicting the image
of the soulless. The pentad may lead to equilibrium when governed by the reason of the city network or to chaotic and reckless behaviour. Bukowski sets a clear time-space pattern. “It’s Sunday”, the day of rest, when the rhythm of urban life slows down, and the consciousness ceases to brood over the stream of logic ideas. The men are compared with “a tarantula”, caught up in the web of civilization, but marked by the irrational outcome of their hidden deeds:

each has done his horrible thing
during the week-
fired a stockboy, stolen from a partner,
cowardly horrible little men,
passing my window. (Bukowski, Mockingbird, “5 men in black” 38)

The window replaces the inner eye, i.e. the eye of mystical intuition. Gaston Bachelard in The Poetics of Space confers a privileged position on the house, and also on the window. If the city is the expanded house which encompasses all citizens, one’s home becomes the very embodiment of reason and logic. Bachelard imagines the house as a parallel correspondent to the human being. The house mimics its inhabitants, because it functions like the human brain. Any house has a mind of its own, because in each house there is a human being exercising all the physical and mental operations of the mind and body. In other words, as Bachelard outlines, a house “appeals to our consciousness of centrality” (Bachelard 17). The window is placed at the center, as a conscious eye. From up there consciousness explores all the corners of the city. Of course, there are opinions that contradict Bachelard’s view. For example, Henri Lefebvre rejects the theory of window perception as “a mental place”. Nevertheless, he admits the quality of this topos of working in the service of the consciousness. Since the city is an organic being of social manifestation, “the window suggests a number of hypotheses which . . . the street confirms or invalidates” (Lefebvre 224). Lefebvre talks about “an order of grandeur” imposed by the city design. Therefore, the pattern of urban logic synchronizes with the human consciousness, and man becomes the measure of all the things and pieces of construction that compose a human dwelling (Lefebvre 224).

Not only does the window offer a clear understanding of the city life, but also of the peripheral rhythm of the unconscious. Sometimes “the place to find the center is at the edge” (Bukowski, Mockingbird 96). What does the edge mean or where is it to be found? The edge assigns all irrational outbursts to the “substance and stink of being”, and is to be found at “boxing matches and the racetracks . . . where the guts are extracted/and rubbed into the cement” (Bukowski, Mockingbird 108). The poem “Horse and fist” assesses two types of human personality. There is the moral citizen, a true aesthete, the last of the dreamers and believers in a utopia. His antagonist is the immoral social predator, one of the many democratic tyrants created by the society. The conclusion is bitter for both parties:

there is no peace either for the
flower or the tiger. (Bukowski, Mockingbird, “Horse and fist” 108)
The image of the city dweller appears both in a positive and negative light. Seen as a “flower” the inhabitant is static, and his personality is cultivated by society. But as a “tiger”, the inhabitant tries to impose himself over society. Either way, peace is refused for both Archetypes. The city asserts its own nature of a “terminal modern city” which Spengler viewed as an entity which surpasses the good/evil dichotomy (qtd. in Harding 6). The city is not in itself good or evil, it cannot be polarized. Only the city image is subjected to polarization because the city is the total sum of multicultural people who have different values, opinions, and personalities.

Despite values and polarization, Bukowski’s odyssey tries to follow an impartial route. The poet has no agency. He cannot seed the idea of good and uproot evil. He can only observe the pair of opposites quenching men’s inner fire. Charles Bukowski reaches the understanding of a constant state of urban battle in the poem “And the moon, and the stars, and the world”. There, the habit of “peeking into windows/watching tired housewives/trying to fight/off/their beer-maddened/husbands” (Bukowski, Mockingbird 42) suggests a fall from the human norms and values. The logic of fist seems to govern the modern world, replacing the hatchet of the first man who turned against his fellow creature. City consciousness asserts the obedience of the swarming masses, and blind trust in the ineffable system. It is exactly what Bukowski views as a plunge into the irrational caused by personality attrition: “for me/obedience to another is the decay/of self” (Bukowski, Mockingbird 108). The two paradigms, human consciousness versus city consciousness fight for imposing their own ideology, and the truth one finds is denounced as falsity by the other. For Bukowski there can be only one truth, and this is the outcome of his consciousness that has been familiar with the subconscious and the unconscious of the city maze, i.e. “the boxing matches and the racetracks/temples of learning” (Bukowski, Mockingbird 108). Therefore, the maze affiliates itself to knowledge. One enters the maze in the pursuit of learning. Even the odyssey is a dynamic ‘temple of learning’, and the poet receives the metaphoric vision of the urban space.

Applying Mauron’s psychocritical stages to Bukowski’s poetry, we find “networks of obsessive metaphors” as Linda Hutcheon pinpoints (Hutcheon 22) that can either be “memory-images” or “imagination-images” (Russell 190). These two types of images are strongly linked to the belief in a string of events which have triggered a personal ethos (Russell 190-191). Urban civilization has often worked against its citizens, and this leads to a bestial archetype taken from Aristotle’s idea of zoon politikon (“social being”). The city is either turned into a “zoo” where people live an inferior, animal existence (Bukowski, Burning 157), or is a magical background where you “pull a string” and “a puppet moves” (Bukowski, Burning 221). The sensation of being mass asphyxiated, of living in buildings with too many flats reduces man to a mere product of consumption, “tougher than corned beef hash” (Bukowski, Burning 222). The city has replaced the “marching columns” - where every man walked alone, but not oppressed by the close intimacy with the other- with a “swarm culture”-where all people are grouped in an ontological pile and thrown in the city hole (c.f. Bauman 55). But in Charles Bukowski’s poetry, the
recurrent metaphor is that of the human automaton, as can easily be understood from the poem “A tree, a road, a toad”:

   a table of 7, all
   all laughing loudly, again and again,
   almost deafening,
   but there is no joy in their
   laughter, it seems machine
   made. (Bukowski, Sifting, “A tree, a road, a toad” 240)

The symbols are poignant. The table of 7 represents the sum of the week’s days, each person encompassing an entire existence of automatic laughter, resembling the mask of death, without a genuine spark of enthusiasm. Clement of Alexandria explains the number “7” as a motherless element. It symbolizes a barren numerical entity which cannot engender (Alexandrian, 2006). If Bukowski’s fellow men are metaphorically robotized, the poet keeps for himself the image of the “displaced” who is “not like other people”, but immersed into “the hell of myself” (Bukowski, Sifting 350-351). This ‘hell’ which is only a three layer construction (order, chaos, and feelings) constitutes the inner world, the realm of the psyche. Charles Mauron divides the psyche into three components: reason, inferior sensibility, and superior sensibility (Hutcheon 79). These parts are analogous to his “three-stage process of experimental method- observation, comparison, and interpretation” (Hutcheon 22).

Applying the experimental method to Charles Bukowski’s poetry has the effect of a magnifying glass. We clearly see and understand the ‘individual hell’ and the ‘social hell’. The observation stage may take place in the outer space of the city maze, or inside the nooks or corners of urban buildings. Outside, the poet finds himself “in a neighborhood of murder” (Bukowski, Love 228). Everything moves quickly, and the reader has to deal with a dynamic pace. The people oppressed by their modern habitat dress themselves in sorrow as if they were wearing a garment of joy. They are “running on empty” (Bukowski, Open 199), and their procession seems both “sad and sweet”. Inside, we have slow motion or total immobility. In the poem “Luck”, the observation takes place in a café, and people seem to be waiting for something that never reveals itself. The only living creatures in this antechamber of death are the flies that stand for the fleeting moments.

After the observation is completed, the poet uses comparison to get a full grasp of what city life really means. The psychological dimension of the city involves the idea of a Superior Intelligence working for the benefit of modern life. The image of a scientific God of Progress, often embodied by the bureaucratic and political agents replaces the natural intelligence. According to Tuan, people who have been moulded by civilization are grouped in two separate ways: “the elite” and “the individualists”. “The elite” members have the status of “demigods”, as they are above the common lot (Tuan 17). Whilst, “the individualists” divide themselves into three human types: “aesthete”, “hero”, and “saint” (Tuan 147). Bukowski is the only one who succeeds in being a complete ‘individualist’. His art turned his city into an inspirational hell, where he occupied both the hero and saint positions. And the God of Progress was reduced to silence. Charles Bukowski has observed the cycle of
evolution, and now he is able to make comparisons. If people have been compared to machines, it is obvious that the resemblance is mutual. In “Commerce”, the capitalistic society applies extensively the law of labour and gain. The smell of decay, of physical collapse takes over the buildings, and “you can feel the despair/escaping from their/machines” (Bukowski, Sifting 20). The comparison sharpens in the poem “Like a polluted river flowing”. There mankind is depicted in the havoc of the traffic jam:

the freeways are a psychological
entanglement of
warped souls . . .
all these represent
humanity in general, totally enraged, demented,
vengeful, spiteful, cheap denizens of our culture, vulture
jackals, sharks, suckerfish, stingrays, lice . . .
what you see on the freeway is just what there is,
a funeral procession of the dead,
the greatest horror of our time in motion.
(Bukowski, Sifting, “Like a polluted river flowing” 109-110)

Once one gets lost in the city maze, the way out is hard to find, rather impossible. Therefore, in “Hug the dark”, “turmoil”, and “madness” are compared and attached to the God of Progress, because “permanent living peace is/permanent living death” (Bukowski, Mockingbird 113).

The final stage of interpretation comes as a dyad. There is the self-interpretation and the other-interpretation. Bukowski’s self-interpretation of the city reinforces the law of the absurd. The system is corrupt (c.f. “The drunk tank judge”; “Riots”), the law that is meant to protect often breaks those who seek justice (c.f. “Law”), people are starving because of the inflation (c.f. “The proud thin dying”), and people have ceased to think for themselves (c.f. “Brainless eyes”). There is also the other side of the coin. The other-interpretation paints an idealistic colour over the rust of reality, thus helping to create the vision of an “ideal neighborhood”, and recklessly turning their eyes from “agony”, “confusion”, “horror”, “fear”, and “ignorance” (Bukowski, The Night 313).

The Spiritual Dimension of the City

The anagogical trajectory of city life ascends to the postulate of an environmental isolation. The poet shows the tendency to cultivate solitude, resenting the way the urban society has evolved. If he does descend to the city maze it is only with the purpose of seeking a meaning of this technological madness. This search keeps him alive, as well as the collision with the other. Mihai Drăgănescu outlines that civilization implies an aesthetic inner drive, reminding a person of his own ontological condition. Man is defined as an object of art for himself, as for the other. Placing himself at the center of the material world [in our case, the world of the city], man is ready to ascend to spirituality (Drăgănescu 102). The same idea is reinforced by Yi-Fu Tuan who after analyzing the essence of “polarized values”, comes with the concept of a “low-high” dichotomy. From culture, civilization, to the
city itself, there is a “high” and “low” spiritual dimension. In a romantic tone, Tuan outlines the “majesty” of the city, since the urban notion “began as an attempt to bring the order and majesty of heaven down to earth” (Tuan 113). Therefore at the beginning, the city had a “high” spiritual dimension that gradually descended to a “low” one. In a Kantian manner, Bukowski covets for the aesthetic purification of a sacred space and time: “I only want the sky/to burn me more and more/burn me out” (Bukowski, *Burning* 65). He has set on a journey of self discovery, and of apprehending the signified and signifiers of the urban topos. The poet wanders the streets of the New Age, and where nature was once in bloom, now glass walled buildings, factories with long trails of choking smoke rise in the strings of evolution. Is the spiritual dimension of the city a testimonial to a lack of spirituality? Bukowski keeps the count in his poem “AT&T”:

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now, you see,  
we have the buildings and  
we have the people and  
we put the people in the  
buildings. (Bukowski, *Open*, “AT&T” 294)
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The buildings have not been manufactured for a sacred purpose. They are destined for the ceremony of labour, and this does not imply spirituality. People work inside teeny offices, and when the day’s work is done they leave the buildings only to get home to other buildings, to those they call home. To Bukowski their movements within an iron circle of life resemble the crawling of “a plot of worms of worms” (Bukowski, *Burning* 131). The poet confers the image of the “worm” upon the human being in order to pinpoint man’s inability to ascend to light, to evolve in the environs of the city. Trapped inside the walls of the city life, a man can only crawl or wiggle like a worm upon the surface of the earth in a symbolic attempt of regaining back his human dignity. But sometimes, the only spirituality that is left to be grasped is the acquaintance with death. The final stage of matter decomposition becomes the emblem of city life condition. Under Emerson’s assumption that “every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact” (Cunlife 104); the poem “The sound of human lives” portrays the decomposition of the organic, and the fall of matter into nothingness. The streets become a choking funeral cloth of burning pavement, and factories smash the souls in the masher of system control:

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there are men and women dying under the sun  
there are men and women dying in factories  
for nothing, a pittance . . .  
I can hear the sound of human lives being ripped to pieces  
(Bukowski, *Burning*, “The sound of human lives” 214)
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The audible image of killing life turns out to be the voice of the city, crying for its lost spirituality. Thus, the spiritual dimension of the city encompasses the myth-symbol-archetype triad, paralleling the mind-body-soul connection. Moreover, unrevealed meanings hide behind any common fact, as Cunlife ingeniously pointed out that “hidden meaning can be wrung out of the most recalcitrant material”
The city is the spatial material which has been set on a profane ground. Nevertheless, the shadows of spirituality hide underneath the notion of progress. Civilization takes lives because society requires sacrifices. This is the symbol of death and transfiguration which Bukowski encounters. The noble savage dies to resurrect in the form of a civilized citizen. The only problem is that this rebirth is based on an act of oblivion. The noble savage and the spirituality of his environment have to be forgotten in order to allow the civilized to finish the construction of his new ‘temples of learning’, i.e. factories and buildings that cage the soul.

The City Seen as the Myth of the Trojan Horse

Charles Bukowski shows in his poems how living in the city has become the definition of modern betrayal. People were promised civilization, progress, evolution. But “the curtains are waving and people/walk through the afternoon here and in/Berlin and in New York City and in Mexico” (Bukowski, Burning 149). The sun is dimming the light of hope, and in every city of this world the displacement of souls sharpens and divides the society. The Trojan Horse has entered the city brought by the system of inflation, and scientific alluring. The poet understands the trick, but still “waits on life like a pregnancy” because “it’s all so common and hard! Impossible!”(Bukowski, Burning 149). The only remedy against a preordained urban system is madness, but not in the sense of losing one’s mind, but in the sense of losing the truths written on the city walls. The poet makes us now face a discourse of intricate symbols and signs.

The text of the city incorporates a range of traditional truths that have been systematically accepted. The first truth is that the world itself is a huge maze, and the city is merely a maze within a maze where people find themselves exiled from nature and brought close to progress. But the second truth, and the saddest of all, is that the city inhabitant becomes an atypical portrait of the civilized barbarian. Through madness, the city inhabitant crosses over to the realm of mystifications. Bukowski knows that this crossing over means displacement, a movement in space. The real madness consists in giving up political truth for a true “rhetoric of walking” (Certeau 151). Michel de Certeau analyses this “rhetoric of walking” as a system of “styles” and “uses”, each having its proper function. Therefore, “style specifies a linguistic structure that manifests on the symbolic level...an individual’s fundamental way of being in the world. Use defines the social phenomenon” (Certeau 161). In Bukowski’s poems, words flag and hurt the urban dystopia; while at the same time, through walking, his odyssey defines the social phenomenon. Certeau explains the travelling drive as a substitute for the legendary explorations “that used to open up space” (Certeau 161). Bukowski opens up space to an urban maze, inside of which The Trojan Horse of madness waits to be revealed.

What hides inside the Trojan Horse is the club used by the agents of the system against the credulous people. But the same weapon of destruction can be seized and used against those who helped to create it. Joseph Campbell describes Picasso’s “Minotauromachy”, an engraving of a raging bull that has killed the female matador, and now is threatening the life of the philosopher who climbed the ladder in order to avoid the danger. The awe is not derived from the ferocity of the
beast, but it is caused at the sight of a girl facing the bull with a flower (Campbell 22). The city is the grand arena where the Trojan Horse appears like a bull in disguise, its stillness being the perfect camouflage of the disaster that is about to be released. Of course, the raging bull will only appear at the flutter of the red cloth. This is the trick; the grand myth of all mankind consists in tempting the snake to spit its poison. After projecting the city as a lab for rats, the city will always test the endurance of those lost in its maze. Surely, some try to get away, by turning their back to madness, as Bukowski has noticed in “Some people”:

Some people never go crazy.
What truly horrible lives
they must lead. (Bukowski, Burning, “Some People” 190)

Opposed to the people rooted in reality, are those that reconstruct the image of the city as an urban ethos caught in a demythologized world that needs to be revivified. Acting like the little girl with the flower, the few chosen ones understand that “mythology is the song. It is the song of the imagination, inspired by the energies of the body”- (Campbell 26). Bukowski wants his city to be painted in the chiaroscuro of “the neon lights”, because his mythical odyssey is the song of Orpheus descending into the maze of the unconscious, is the song of the waves swaying Ulysses’ boat back to Ithaca’s shores, but furthermore is the song of one’s madness understanding a capital truth: “long walks at/night-/that’s what’s good/for the soul” (Bukowski, Mockingbird 42).

Why would Bukowski stress the importance of nocturnal walks? To give a clear answer, we have to analyse the word ‘night’. Night is opposed to day, as dark is opposed to light. During the day, everything is clearly seen, yet nothing is completely revealed. Let us examine the example provided by John Cage. He sees the world as a huge collage, as a metaphor of a bus full of people where all are strangers to each other. Well, this bus passes before a gothic cathedral, while a commercial panel advertizes a brand of cigars (qtd. in Baudrillard). During this bus travel, the gothic cathedral (which is in fact a metaphor of spirituality) loses its visibility in favour of the mundane side of life. This is what happens in bright daylight. The city dweller sees the city, its life, its rhythm. But during the night, he would have seen the gothic cathedral; he would have seen his self-image approaching sacred space. At night, the fear of the unknown awakens. Bukowski understands that walking at night reawakens the soul that during the day has lain dormant. It is the right time to question one’s existence, and to observe the symbols which occupy the space one has to live in.

In and Out the City Maze

Charles Bukowski began his odyssey very early, as the poet himself confesses in “through the streets of anywhere”. We learn that “in adolescent fire” the inner drive chased him out of the safety of common sense. At the beginning, he journeys in the society of his horse “Nothing” or “sometimes the horse was named Greyhound” (Bukowski, Sifting 115), and finally the horse reveals itself as Bukowski’s animal-ego. The Horse Archetype reveals Bukowski’s free spirit, prior
to being caught in the firm grip of society. When “they shot this horse from under”,
(Bukowski, 2002b: 36), the archetype underwent another metamorphosis. The horse
turned to a “blue bird” ready to spread his wings and venture into a symbolic
Homeric odyssey, enlivening the urban myths.

The road is tough, because the stake is high, i.e. “to be completely alive
every moment/in spite of the inevitable” (Bukowski, The Night 305). The
importance of a destination, of a special place to get lost in and out of the city’s
reach is vital for the sanity of mind. Thus we learn that “it’s not having that place to
go to/that creates the people now in madhouses” (Bukowski, The People 200). The
journey is equally important for the soul as well, the poet being aware of “this
hunger/to drive down the road” (Bukowski, The People 226). We find in Bukowski’s
urban depictions a disheveled reality, where he himself is a “stranger in a strange
city”, and the open road creates a gap between the culture of his own identity and the
quaint culture of the modern world:

that busy boulevard seemed to
stretch away endless
before me and
appeared to run
straight off to the edge of
the earth. (Bukowski, The People, “Stranger in a Strange City” 28)

There are two distinct “descent themes”, similar to the “high” and “low”
dimensions. Frye attributes the ‘high’ dimension to the act of descent from a
superior plane to the actual urban space one, whilst ‘low’ refers to the descent from
the social plane to an inferior one (Frye, The Secular 129). Charles Bukowski has
coped with both the descent into the maze of the city, but also with the difficult
ascent to a new Sisyphean beginning. The escape mirrors the laughter of illusion.
Lucian Boia analyzes the Escape Archetype as the result of a refusal of the human
condition, and an acceptance of historical dimension (Boia 34). Charles Bukowski’s
escape doesn’t refuse the human condition. He accepts it as a natural process of
ontological death. The poet only rejects the social human conditions, and the post-
war history.

Charles Bukowski’s odyssey demonstrates how “in one city, many cities
coexist” (Ziadeh 155), and in one individual live all the individualities of his fellow
men, echoing the construction of urban civilization as a poem filled with boulevards,
“saints, heroes, beggars, madmen” (Bukowski, “A poem is a city”). “Banality” is
drowned in “booze”, and the existential war sets the city on fire. God himself fights
against the decay of civilization, and “rides naked/through the streets like Lady
Godiva”, but he who fights the fiercest battle is the poet who journeys through the
city maze, and his poetry becomes a world of its own, a nation of its own, another
city of lyrical socio-mythology.

The reintegration of myth in Bukowski’s urban poetry implies the existence
of “an idyllic temporal trope” (Bahtin, 1982). In every poem, Bukowski creates a
universe in miniature, a space that has no connection with the rest of the world
(Bahtin 455). The city is a unique maze, and its uniqueness is given by the
journeying action of the poet who places its poetry at the core of the collective soul.
Moreover, Al. Tănase’s definition of the maze concept shows that the existence of the labyrinth is only possible through individual consciousness, as well as collective consciousness out of which the Ideas of Truth, Good, and Beautiful emerge from (Tănase 159-160).

The greatest work of art of Charles Bukowski is urban reality, for in its depiction one encounters patterns of human experience, and interstices of a symbolic maze. His odyssey performs the sacred act of travelling for knowledge. The cult of space becomes the cult of reflective mind, as the poet is getting used to see with the eyes of symbols and metaphors, and to speak the rhetoric of the city.

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