

Henry Chinaski, Zen Master: *Factotum*, the Holy Fool, and the Critique of Work

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Abstract: *Factotum* (1975), by Charles Bukowski, exemplifies two important elements in the author's work. One, Bukowski is profoundly critical of the Protestant work ethic, American market capitalism, and how these things affect the individual and society. Two, his fictive alter-ego Henry Chinaski, who seems to be a lazy, vulgar buffoon, is actually a "holy fool." This essay examines both of these issues and explores how, and why, they interrelate.

Keywords: Charles Bukowski—*Factotum*—Work—Holy Fool

Charles Bukowski has, more than any writer I can think of, been unevenly and inaccurately represented. Scholars and critics have focused on his vulgarity, hard-boiled language, minimal style, lowbrow voice, and presumptive misanthropy/ misogyny. They are especially preoccupied with the extent to which the author identifies, or is in fact consubstantial, with Henry Chinaski, his fictive doppelganger. As with Hemingway and Mailer, we cannot get an unobstructed view of his work because Bukowski's image, and our own feelings about it, are blocking the way.

As a result, a great deal of serious, useful scholarship has been neglected. One area that has been touched on—by Russell Harrison, for example, in *Against the American Dream*—is Bukowski's critique of work. One of the main themes, found throughout his poems, stories and novels, is that everything we work for is pointless, foolish and soul-destroying. We work to

buy things that will not make us happy, and the work itself often makes us virulently unhappy, yet many of us seem unwilling or unable to escape from this absurd yet commonplace cycle.

In this essay, I will examine *Factotum* (1975), Bukowski's second novel, in terms of his critique of the American/Protestant work ethic. However, I will also read Henry Chinaski, the main character, as an archetypal "holy fool." His ostensible buffoonery is merely a carapace for his genuine, if unconventional, brand of wisdom. Moreover, it is Chinaski's status as holy fool that allows him to apprehend what others—with their putative intelligence and perspicacity—continually fail to recognize.

Peter Phan defines holy fool as "the paradoxical notion that the fool may be wise and that the wise may be foolish" (732). He¹ is not stupid, but rather fails to act and speak in a manner consistent with societal expectations. He is silly, odd, unconcerned with outward appearances. He is not wise despite a lack of formal education, but because of it. He is, according to Phan, "not expected to abide by the conventions and customs of society" (738). This "wisdom is not something earned and learned but granted and revealed" (738). *Revealed* is the key word. While the scholar, focusing on the acquisition of knowledge, sees nothing, and is like Faust the greatest of fools, the apparent imbecile, because he places no undue emphasis on mere fact, is open to genuine and profound revelation, the holy fool does not attempt to string together isolated units of fact into a synthetic body of knowledge, but rather has wisdom revealed organically as the result of spiritual/psychological readiness and childlike innocence. Tat'iana Kasatkina writes that, through his "freakishness," the holy fool is "separating from the workaday world and achieving rapport with the godhead" (82). These two functions are necessarily related; spiritual insight is the direct result of idiosyncratic behavior; the fool, operating outside of ordinary, socially-acceptable behavior patterns, is able to act in a more authentic, morally-pure manner. He is no longer corrupted by the social—and is thus more receptive to the spiritual—sphere.

The holy fool, who goes by many names and incarnations (fool-saint, wise fool, holy madman, divine idiot, sacred clown²), can be found in a multitude of cultures, languages, literary movements, cosmologies and

1 I'll use the masculine pronoun; the holy fool tends to be male, as in Chinaski's case.

2 In *On The Road*, Sal Paradise refers to the saintly-imbecilic Dean Moriarty as a "holy goof" (176), and in *Damascus Gate* Robert Stone calls the main character a "consecrated buffoon" (135).

time periods. There is a tradition, within Hinduism, of the “avadhuta,” who forsakes money, family, home and material possessions, who lives outside the social, cultural and political milieu, who rejects all responsibility and ambition. He lives in complete detachment and self-obfuscation, ridiculous but—or rather, therefore—holy. “Avadhuta” is Sanskrit for “the one who has cast off [all concerns]” (Phan 741). Similarly, the Zen³ tradition teaches “siddha,” which signifies strange, erratic or shocking behavior.

Socrates, Buddha and Jesus are classic examples of the holy fool. Jesus preached to scholars when he was still a child, and was consistently critical of the ignorance of Jewish leaders because of their preoccupation with the technical, scriptural and rational at the expense of revealed and intuited wisdom. He was considered insane and some claimed he was possessed by the devil (Phan 739). Socrates, who was considered a fool by the elite ruling class, did not write books or teach for money, and he claimed to know nothing. Plato’s Socratic dialogues depict a jesterlike sage who likes nothing better than to expose the ignorance and crooked knowledge, the sophistry, of the intellectual class.⁴ The Buddha valued playfulness, laughter and foolishness more than doctrine or dogma; he believed in silence, reflection and inactivity rather than the active quest for knowledge and salvation. All three were figures of mockery who rebelled against the prevailing ethos of their social systems, sought a more pure and naïve path to wisdom, and demonstrated the flaccidity of traditional logocentric conceptions of truth, virtue and justice.

Examples of the holy fool among religious groups are legion. The Bengali devotional tradition of “bhakti” leads to ecstatic states, resembling madness, which foster spiritual understanding (McDaniel). During the Second Great Awakening, and indeed today among Pentecostal Christians, “the holy laugh,” speaking in tongues, “treering the devil,” and other seemingly comic or peculiar behaviors are perceived, by the faithful, as manifestations of divine apperception (Tindall and Shi 517). Similar examples can be found among the Sufi “majzub” and visionary Medieval monks.

3 This concept was borrowed from Hinduism. “Siddha” is Sanskrit for “one who is accomplished.” According to Maithili Thayanithy, “The highest state of *yoga* [...] is marked by both the blissful vision of the pervasiveness of Siva, and the acquisition of power.” The person who reaches this spiritual plateau is called a “cittar” or siddha (10).

4 Nietzsche writes: “Socrates was rabble [...] how ugly he was” (40). He suffered from “auditory hallucinations” that were “religious” (41). Furthermore, “he is laughed at, he is not taken seriously—Socrates was the buffoon ...” (41).

Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly* is an obvious touchstone for the holy fool, as is the court jester. In Elizabethan theater the wise clown was so commonplace that, according to some, "there was no play without a fool" (Phan 732). In Russian folktales "Ivan the fool," another incarnation of the sacred clown, is a stock character. He appears lazy, stupid and foolish, but only because he is more at home in the supernatural milieu than in our material world; he is attuned to Platonic form, not matter, and "is a hero in the struggle between good and evil" (Heller and Volkova 153). In Native American mythology the "trickster" or "coyote" is an analogous figure (Heller and Volkova 157).

Henry "Hank" Chinaski appears in the novels *Post Office* (1971), *Factotum* (1975), *Women* (1978), *Ham on Rye* (1982), *Hollywood* (1989), the screenplay *Barfly* (1987), as well as in many poems and short stories. "Hank" was first used in the story "80 Airplanes Don't Put You in the Clear" (1957), a characteristic piece about writing and drinking, but his antecedents include "Chelaski" from "The Reason Behind Reason" (1946) and "Chuck" in "Love, Love, Love" (1946-47) (Calonne, *Absence*). Chinaski is a smart man who acts like a fool. He spent two years in college and does not like to work. He likes classical music, alcohol, women's legs and betting on horses. He is uninterested in the shiny and popular but finds beauty in obscure, underappreciated places. Bukowski's characterization of Chinaski did not appreciably change in 40 years.

Chinaski is an exaggerated version of reality. Bukowski inflates his foolishness in particular. He does this for comic reasons, to show the character's humanity, and because he wants to show that only a fool has the wisdom to see the world the way it really is. We'll return to this last issue in the conclusion. Chinaski, as first-person narrator, is complicit in presenting himself as a fool. Consider the opening of *Women*:

I was 50 years old and I hadn't been to bed with a woman for 4 years. I had no women friends. I looked at them as I passed them on the streets or wherever I saw them, but I looked at them without yearning and with a sense of futility. I masturbated regularly but the idea of having a relationship with a woman—even on non-sexual terms—was beyond my imagination. (7)

Chinaski portrays himself as lonely, friendless, unloved and emasculated. He takes every opportunity to be frank about his shortcomings and humiliations. *Post Office* is much the same, beginning with this single-line paragraph: "It began as a mistake" (13). The entire novel is *devoted* to Chi-

naski's error, to this one enormous blunder: working for the post office. For Bukowski, foolishness and work are necessarily covalent.

Factotum is also about work, foolishness, and the foolishness of work. The novel begins as Chinaski steps off a bus in New Orleans. There is no explanation for why he left home or why he has come to New Orleans, but Chinaski is not guided by reason, order, plans. He has no interest in getting a secure job and keeping it for 30 years, in trading his hours for a pension, in finding a June Cleaver wife or starting a conventional family. Chinaski walks through New Orleans in the rain, his cardboard suitcase falling apart. He put black shoe polish on the suitcase because the original coating had fallen off, but of course the polish begins running in the rain. A prostitute calls him "*poor white trash*" (1)⁵ three times before the end of the first page, quickly and vehemently denying his dignity, which is—comically but poignantly—analogous to Peter's thrice-denial of Christ.⁶ The scene ends: "Her laughter followed me down the street" (1).

This sets the tone for the novel; Chinaski is almost always an object of scorn and mockery. Even at home, to which he periodically returns from his travels, he is treated with derision. The father, upset that his son has been escorted home by the police, that he has not found a career—and, in a larger sense, that his son has not adopted his values—screams: "'You're drunk! You're drunk! My Son is a Drunk! My Son is a God Damned No-Good Drunk!'" (15). Henry Jr. responds by throwing up on a "*Persian Tree of Life rug*" (15). This bathetic response is significant in several ways. First, Henry Jr. displays his foolishness. Second, he is literally sickened by his father's rant, which represents his disdain for the man's values and beliefs. Third, the object he profanes is sacred in two fundamental ways. The *Tree of Life* pattern represents, in Iran, the path toward heaven, and in the Chinaski household it represents material comfort and domestic propriety. Henry Jr. is demonstrating that he rejects all conventional notions of virtue and proper behavior, both foreign and domestic.

Henry Sr. has more opportunities for disappointment, especially when

5 This entire episode, including these exact words, appeared in Dec. 1967, eight years before *Factotum*, in Bukowski's column "Notes Of a Dirty Old Man" (see *Absence* 60).

6 Bukowski constantly plays with Chinaski's Christlike and Buddhist qualities. The juxtaposition of his clearly un-holy lifestyle—fighting, drinking, gambling, etc.—with an often deeply spiritual and empathic essence, enriches both the tragic and comic elements of his work. This irony also serves to demonstrate the truth of his implicit claim, that only fools have access to true wisdom.

Henry Jr. is jailed for ““public intoxication and [...] blocking traffic”” (18). While driving him home from the L.A. County Jail, Henry Sr. says that he has ““disgraced”” (18) the family. He continues: ““It’s bad enough you don’t want to serve your country in time of War”” (19). Chinaski did not serve in the armed forces during World War II, which marks him as an outsider, someone worthless and pathetic. Moreover, he was excluded from service as the result of being declared psychologically unfit. Chinaski is perceived as crazy, even though he is not, which is characteristic of the holy fool. Like the prostitute’s laughter, not serving in the war strips away Chinaski’s masculinity. As *Factotum* progresses, we note that emasculation is a recurring and critical issue, one that is closely related to work: a man holds down a job; those without proper jobs are not properly masculine.

Heller and Volkova describe the holy fool as someone ugly who wears ragged, filthy clothing, someone who might appear naked or half-dressed (155). Chinaski’s ugliness is axiomatic. His face is old and worn, in contrast to the young, fresh, pristine faces of Southern California. In *Ham On Rye* he is skulking in a school hallway on prom night, without a date or a tuxedo. He peeks through the door at all the happy, beautiful people dancing inside: 100 feet away, they live in a world that, to Chinaski, seems quite distant. A custodian confronts him:

“Get your ass out of here before I call the cops!”

“What for? This is the Senior Prom and I’m a senior.”

“Bullshit!” he said “You’re at least 22 years old!” (194-95)

In *Factotum*, his looks get the same reaction: ““You have a strange face,” she said. ‘You’re not really ugly’” (41), which of course means that, according to the conventional wisdom, he is. Poignantly, Chinaski’s face is covered in scars from a devastating case of teenage acne.

Chinaski’s disheveled clothing is also an issue. Shortly after arriving in New York, he’s bullied into buying a second-hand suit:

I slipped into the coat. It was a tight fit. The coat seemed smaller than when I was in the tailor shop. Suddenly, there was a ripping sound. The coat had split open straight up the back. I took what remained of the coat off. I still had the pants. I worked my legs into them. There were buttons in the front instead of a zipper; as I tried to fasten them, the seam split in the seat. I reached in from behind and felt my shorts. (25)

Thus, Chinaski dresses like the holy fool, half-naked, in ridiculous, old,

torn clothes. The topic is reenacted throughout *Factotum*. Appearing before a dapper supervisor, Chinaski admits: "I was suddenly conscious of the nails in the soles of my scruffy shoes pressing up into the soles of my feet. Three buttons on my dirty shirt were missing. The zipper in my pants was jammed at half mast. My belt buckle was broken" (69). The holy fool's exterior represents his interior alienation from society and the inordinate value it places on superficial reality.

In another scene, Chinaski unashamedly confesses to his own squalor and poor hygiene, which are cognates of poverty and underemployment: "The shorts were stained—we wiped with newspapers that we crumpled and softened with our hands—and I often didn't get all of it cleaned off. My shorts were also ragged and had cigarette burns in them" (76). Chinaski makes this type of embarrassing admission quite regularly. It is metonymic of his honesty, lack of pretension, and refusal to conceal his authentic identity behind a mask; it also reinforces his status as fool and outcaste. Furthermore, Bukowski is using comedy, exploring indecorous subject matter, and appropriating the conventions of lowbrow writing in order to address serious issues, such as America's class system.

Heller and Volkova further explain the significance of outward appearance: "The fool's naked, dirty, ugly, strange and indecent appearance was a metaphor for humankind's soiled, 'naked,' sinful soul that has lost its 'wedding garments,' its innocence" (155). This is, of course, a perfect description of Chinaski. His foolish behavior, his refusal to work, and his wholesale rejection of conventional values is, at its root, a spiritual rebellion. Those who have power—teachers, policemen, bosses, fathers—are invariably corrupted by it, and normative social values are not objectively good and true but rather exist to shape and sustain the existing power structure. Chinaski is perpetually worried about the state of his soul, which he feels is more pure when he's not blindly mimicking the expectations of society. In *Hollywood*, for instance, Chinaski is concerned that working in the film industry will corrupt him: "'Look,' I said to Sarah, 'we have just landed upon the outpost of death. My soul is puking.' 'Will you stop worrying about your soul?' Sarah responded" (9).

Chinaski is unwilling to accept the implicit, seemingly arbitrary rules governing how we live. He flaunts those rules, which makes him appear foolish. *Factotum* is an almanac of hangovers, throwing up, awkward sex, getting fired, laziness, social diseases and assorted pratfalls. Others quickly notice that Chinaski is quiet, solitary, odd. A young woman who shares a

boardinghouse with him says: “‘You’re a strange guy. You stay alone a lot, don’t you?’” (39). On the next page, he calls himself a “nut” (40). A few pages later, a woman asks: “‘Listen, you’re not some kind of nut, are you?’” (49). Later, they’re sitting on the couch and Chinaski suddenly falls to the floor. “‘I’m a genius but nobody knows it but me.’” The woman replies: “‘Get up off the floor you damn fool’” (49).

Despite appearances, Chinaski is thoughtful, well-read and a devoted classical music enthusiast. As David Stephen Calonne argues, Chinaski’s learned references “are a kind of ‘winking’ by the narrator to the reader, signaling that our hapless anti-hero may be a clown, but he is smarter than he lets on” (*Absence* xix). He rejects pretension, logocentrism, formal education, the ostensible wisdom of his “superiors,” and traditional notions of the Good Life. Chinaski’s apparent foolishness is merely an unwillingness to deploy his intelligence toward the pursuit of wealth, stability and career; he makes critical, conscious decisions about the direction of his life rather than allowing normative expectations to decide for him. Chinaski does not care how he appears to others; he is concerned almost exclusively with his “soul.”

Chinaski is not a follower of Christ, to be sure, but he is not therefore un-Christlike or unholy. In fact, charity, tolerance and sympathy for sinners and pariahs are his most pronounced qualities. Early in the novel, when Chinaski is working for the railroad, he twice gives his hotel voucher to a bum, choosing to sleep on park benches (10, 11). He also shares cigarettes (155) and alcohol (161-62) with fellow down-and-outs. After waiting for work, picking tomatoes, he realizes that a “quite emotional” (159) woman might need the job more than he, so he lets her take the work, even boosting her onto the truck. Chinaski does not look or speak like your average holy man, and he does not always act like one, but his concerns are genuinely spiritual and many of his actions are unassailably pure. Bukowski intentionally portrays Chinaski as deeply flawed and outwardly impure, however, in order to better demonstrate the discrepancy between appearance and reality, to explore the idea that intelligence, goodness and other virtues can be found in unlikely places, and to show that the people who seem to be foolish may be the wisest. According to Phan, siddha, or “foolish wisdom” is used “to induce *satori* or enlightenment” (732) and, in Zen, “foolishness is a path to true wisdom” (742).

Chinaski appears like a fool for three reasons. The first we’ve already alluded to. He prefers playing the clown to worshipping a time-clock, to moral,

psychological and spiritual conformity. His apparent foolishness is, to a large extent, an act. We can see a different Chinaski—poet, sensitive introvert, classical music devotee—alternately smirking and hiding behind the macho, offensive, vulgar slob. Heller and Volkova assert that “[t]he holy fool is a person who pretends that he is mad in order to save his own soul and the souls of others. He chooses to become homeless, poor, disdained and persecuted as Christ himself was” (154). Chinaski’s extrinsic behavior should not dissuade us from reading him in this light, since “the holy fool teaches people by means of images of sin” (154). Thus, the apparent discrepancy between his seemingly iniquitous behavior and the purity of his intentions is not a contradiction but rather a necessary condition. The holy fool will surround himself with chaos and unpleasantness, much as Christ surrounded himself with prostitutes, tax collectors and miscreants of every stripe.

The holy fool will, moreover, pretend to be crazy. Chinaski does this continually. While suffering from a crabs-treatment gone awry, a supervisor asks why he’s walking strangely:

“I was frying some chicken in the pan and the grease exploded, it burned my legs.”

“I thought maybe you had war wounds.”

“No, the chicken did it.” (116)

Not only does Chinaski avoid providing an explanation that would make him look “normal” or even heroic—a war injury—he goes out of his way to invent a scenario that portrays himself as pathetic and foolish.

As Neeli Cherkovski writes, despite all the horrible things that befall Chinaski in *Factotum*, the novel is “curiously lighthearted” (vii), and Chinaski “is able to laugh at his own predicament, accept himself as a fall guy, and not let others judge his intrinsic sense of worth” (vii). This is quite true and crucial to our understanding of the text. In the following passage, Chinaski provides an analeptic sketch of his childhood “idiocy”:

I had first learned that I was an idiot in the school yard. I was taunted and poked at and jeered, as were the other one or two idiots. My only advantage over the other one or two, who were beaten and chased, was that I was sullen. When surrounded I was not terrified. They never attacked me but would finally turn on one of the others and beat them as I watched. (90)

Chinaski’s point-of-view is clearly ironic; he knows that he is not an idiot but he also knows that he is perceived as idiotic. He makes no effort to de-

fend himself, or to justify his supposedly mad and idiotic behavior, because he simply does not care. As we'll examine shortly, Chinaski also maintains a Zenlike calm, a detachment from the material world, while getting fired from jobs.

The second reason for Chinaski's foolishness is necessity. Poverty — this is a dominant theme in Bukowski's work — crushes a man. It makes him foolish when he has to wipe with newspaper, and it demeans him when he has to grovel for work. The third reason is the "crazy wisdom" of work itself. As Phan writes, "... adepts of Zen Buddhism make use of what can be called shock techniques such as sudden shouting, physical beatings, paradoxical verbal responses, and riddles in order to teach enlightenment" (742). Chinaski is perpetually confronted with such "techniques" from supervisors. They inadvertently teach him, through their corruption and cruelty, that the material world is chaotic, absurd, and unfathomable. This is a hard lesson, but it provides enlightenment; it helps Chinaski to place more value in what lies beyond the social and material spheres.

Work is central to Bukowski's fiction, both as a topic and a catalyst for his worldview. As Calonne notes in a recent letter to *The New York Times Book Review*, *Factotum*, like much of Bukowski's work, offers a "classic tragicomic vision[s] of the American blue-collar experience." His importance to "proletarian literature" is regularly overlooked, at least in America; his craft, and especially his views on labor, are more highly regarded in Europe. Bukowski's underground fiction was instrumental in paving the way for more critically accepted writers such as Raymond Carver, who would borrow elements of Chinaski for his own characters (Letter).⁷ Harry Crews, Larry Brown, Arthur Nersesian and many others have also borrowed heavily from Bukowski, especially regarding work, poverty, and blue-collar life.

Working-class misery has been central to Bukowski's work from the beginning. In "The Rapist's Story" (1957) we meet a downtrodden, lonely and possibly deranged man who is in trouble. As he narrates his story, he gives the reader momentary glimpses of his past:

7 Bukowski himself was deeply influenced by the critique of work, the depiction of hunger and poverty, and the underclass perspective found in John Fante's work, particularly *Ask the Dust* (1939). He was also influenced by Fante's straightforward and lucid prose, his vision of Los Angeles, and a hard-boiled persona that concealed a hesitant romanticism. For some of the same reasons, he was influenced by Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* and Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*.

I thought of when I had been married, of the four years with Kay, the various apartments, the lousy factory jobs. Those factories got me down and I began hitting the bottle at night—at first now and then, and after a while, most of the time. (*Absence* 15)

Work is the culprit, or rather the low-paying, low-prestige, self-obfuscating, variously stultifying or backbreaking work that Chinaski, a representative working-class man, is forced to take.

This issue recurs throughout the Bukowski canon. *Post Office* is a tribute to the horrors of being a low-level government functionary, to impossible tasks and petty vindictive supervisors. *Ham on Rye* is a bildungsroman without, it seems, any *bildung*. Chinaski does not develop in the traditional sense, and he does not apprentice himself to a career or calling. On the contrary, his journey is a process of reifying what he learned in the schoolyard, that life is nasty and occupations are pointless. At the end of the novel, when the hero should be preparing to take his place in society, Chinaski says: “I made practice runs down to skid row to get ready for my future” (274). This is as funny as it is tragic. Chinaski continues:

The life of the sane, average man was dull, worse than death. There seemed to be no possible alternative. Education also seemed to be a trap. [...] What were doctors, lawyers, scientists? They were just men who allowed themselves to be deprived of their freedom to think and act as individuals. (274)

This is an accurate summation of the Chinaskian ethos and, because Bukowski closes his autobiographical novel with the sentiment, we can interpret it as reflecting the author’s personal vision as well.

Factotum continues in this vein. The novel is an essay on economic predation, the drudgery of the workplace, and Chinaski’s promiscuous résumé. Set during World War II, the novel largely ignores the conflict itself, though Chinaski mentions, several times, that even though most of the able-bodied men are dead or overseas, he still cannot get a good job, not without connections or a college degree. The Great Depression, though also an absence in the text, looms over Chinaski and his class; the burgeoning affluence of the mid-1940s does not seem to affect the underclass. Bukowski is highlighting the limitations of American free enterprise. Chinaski’s father is another spectral presence in the novel. Henry Sr.’s obsession with affluence, career, propriety and domestic pride—especially because they exist in a home marked by anger and unhappiness—are disincentives, or rather incentives, for his son.

The text is brief and covers a short period of time, but Chinaski manages to take, and leave, 21 jobs.⁸ Early on, we discover that he thinks work is absurd and therefore treats it with absurdity. He has this to say about working at an auto parts warehouse: “The manager was a tall ugly man with no ass. He always told me whenever he fucked his wife the night before” (19). Chinaski does not judge or provide commentary on this fact; he simply accepts it as part of the working man’s white noise. Consider the following interview:

“Mr. Chinaski, what made you leave the railroad yards?”

“Well, I don’t see any future in the railroads.”

“They have good unions, medical care, retirement.”

“At my age, retirement might almost be considered superfluous.”

“Why did you come to New Orleans?”

“I had too many friends in Los Angeles, friends I felt were hindering my career.” (4)

Chinaski is satirizing the interview process. He needs money, and he’s willing to work for it, in sporadic bursts at any rate, but he cannot bring himself to flatter, beg or act obsequious. Instead, he plays the clown, appropriating the language (“superfluous”) and attitude (“hindering my career”) expected of a job applicant. Behind this scrim of earnestness, we find someone who knows how ridiculous his words are and how likely the employer is to be fooled by them. The pretend fool makes an actual fool of his ostensible superior.

Spectacularly inane conversations between Chinaski and his supervisors are a defining characteristic of *Factotum*. He is hired as a newspaper office gofer, working under a man whose “face had no interest or character” (7). The man keeps repeating ““This job usually goes to a student”” (7), or a close variant of this phrase, with obsessive frequency. The discursive mode—with its meaningless, insistent repetition; its detachment and dehumanization; its competing, isolated monologues in place of genuine dialogue—is reminiscent of Mamet, Ionesco or Pinter. The job does not entail much work, so Chinaski spends most of his time at a nearby bar. His manager accosts him:

“Where you been?”

“Out getting a beer.”

“This is a job for a student.”

“I’m not a student.” (8)

8 Including his work as a barroom dogsbody in Philadelphia—as portrayed in *Barfly*—and taking handouts from Wilbur, which is as demeaning and pointless as his “real” jobs.

The manager, described as “a little fat man with an unhealthy looking paunch” (7), has presumably been so worn down by years of work that he’s got nothing left but a rote catchphrase. His cognitive mechanism cannot seem to process Chinaski’s beer-drinking so he’s forced to repeat the “student” non-sequitur. He takes Chinaski to Belger, the supervisor: ““This is a job for a student, Mr. Belger. I’m afraid this man does not fit in. We need a student”” (8). Belger fires Chinaski and sends him to payroll for his back pay. ““Listen, Belger,”” Chinaski says, ““that old fuck is disgusting.’ Belger sighed. ‘Jesus Christ, don’t I know it?’” (8). The scene and chapter end: “I went down to payroll” (8). Resignation is the prevailing tone. Everyone knows how absurd things are, but no one cares. The ethics of work maintain that a man can be fired for no good reason, no matter how badly he needs the money.⁹

One of the absurd aspects of work, for Chinaski, is the systemic dishonesty. At one job, he is supposed to box three different types of brake shoe—standard, super and super durable—but he does not know how to tell them apart. His manager says: ““You don’t. They’re all the same”” (125). A few pages later, Chinaski lies his way into a new job, but his lie is promptly discovered and he’s fired. The corporation can lie all it wants to, Chinaski is taught, but the laboring class will be held accountable. After losing this job, Chinaski immediately lies his way into a new job at an art supply store. He claims to have already accepted a job that morning and is only interested in this job ““because it was nearby”” (134). Though he has no relevant training or experience, Chinaski is hired because the employer is susceptible to what should have been a transparent imposture: Chinaski makes himself desirable by claiming to be desired by others. The employer is easily fooled by a flimsy illusion, which is one of the novel’s motifs.

The struggle to earn money makes people corrupt: this is a central a priori assumption in Bukowski’s work. Though he can be steadfastly apolitical, Bukowski does use fiction—often and seriously—as a means of addressing the flaws of American market capitalism. *Factotum* is no exception. At the offices of Workmen For Industry, an employment agency, Chinaski meets someone who explains that the person who runs the organization was fired from the Farm Labor Market, a competing agency: ““Guy needs a boxcar

9 “No good reason” is convoluted here. There *are* legitimate reasons to fire Chinaski—drinking and leaving his post—but the actual reasons given are that he “doesn’t fit in” and is not a student. The logic here is not cogent, even though the argument is sound, which creates a state of meta-absurdity.

unloaded quick and cheap, he calls here. Guy who runs this place takes 50 per cent. We don't complain. We take what we can get'" (160). A man who once lost his job has turned to exploiting those who have lost theirs, and no one protests. In fact, Chinaski's interlocutor says: "'Guy who runs this place is sharp'" (160). Not exploitative, but *sharp*. The victims of market capitalism actually praise their victimizers, and given half a chance they become victimizers themselves, which, according to Bukowski, is the greatest tragedy.

One of Chinaski's many jobs is hanging posters in the New York subway. The work is dangerous: "We were forty feet above the ground with nothing but railroad ties to walk on" (27). The other workers are not concerned for their own safety, but Chinaski, during his first shift, scampers off to "a bar across the street" (28). He may look like a fool to his coworkers, but he is not willing to risk his life for a bad job and low pay. The powers-that-be are devoted to making money, at any cost, without regard for his safety. Chinaski directly addresses the employers' worldview:

Those in control always preferred to overwork a few men continually, instead of hiring more people so everyone might work less. You gave the boss eight hours, and he always asked for more. He never sent you home after six hours, for example. You might have time to think. (38)

Thinking is the crux of the issue. Chinaski, though outwardly foolish, weighs his options and makes conscious decisions; the other workers, and many supervisors, typically do not think at all, but rather adapt to the expectations of the employer, and in a broader view society, without argument.

Bukowski repeatedly describes blue-collar workers as automatons forced to sacrifice their identities in order to inhabit the repetitive, mindless, routinized nature of the job. Chinaski discusses his first day at a Manhattan sweatshop:

... row upon row of old Jewish ladies at their machines, laboring over piecework; the number one seamstress at the #1 machine, bent on maintaining her place; the number two girl at the #2 machine, ready to replace her should she falter. They never looked up or in any way acknowledged my presence as I entered. (100)

These conditions sound more like early-19th-century Lowell than mid-20th-century New York, but Bukowski reminds us that industrial conditions have only improved superficially. The workers are as desultory, anonymous and interchangeable as the work itself. They have become, like Chaplin in

Modern Times, cogs in their machines. They feel no compassion for one another, but only competition. Bukowski is not a didactic or heavy-handed writer, but he is vehemently critiquing industrialization, capitalism and working-class conditions. This suggests why he has achieved more acclaim in Europe, with its stronger tradition of socialism and class awareness, than America, which tends to be less critical of the socio-economic structure.

Factotum: the title itself evokes the self-obfuscation, debasement and subservience of the working class. The employer's objective is to keep the workers in perpetual fear and anxiety; this way, they will accept any conditions, no matter how bad, without comment: "The work was easy and dull but the clerks were in a constant state of turmoil. They were worried about their jobs" (5). Chinaski makes comments such as this throughout the novel. He admits that, regarding a job: "I had to demean myself to get that one . . ." (76). He's hired as an "extra ball-bearing" or all-around lackey: "A good extra ball-bearing man is faceless, sexless, sacrificial [...] He sees that the toilet paper is plentiful, especially in the ladies' crapper. That wastebaskets never overflow. That no grime coats the windows" (99). Chinaski's job is equated with filth, grime and trash, which is precisely how he is treated. It is evident that one of the reasons he keeps quitting or finding ways to get fired is that he cannot bear to witness the degradation, cruelty and inhumanity.

The image of work as violently competitive and self-obfuscating has been central to Bukowski since the beginning. The letter-essay "Peace, Baby, is Hard Sell" (1962) describes work as a manifestation of war:

There has been no such thing as *peace*. Now they let him out on a football field and tell him to knock somebody down. They teach him some more crap to narrow him down a niche and then rush him off to *work*—which is not *peace* either. They give him a couple of hours in which to sleep, eat, buy things, and mainly time to fuck, make more babies to keep the thing going, and then back to *work*. (*Absence* 36-7)

Chinaski's preoccupation with drinking and sex might seem inordinate, even offensive, but Bukowski would argue that drunkenness, while perhaps not noble or dignified, can numb the pain of work or, under the best conditions, make you feel more human again. Sex is much the same. Looking at beautiful Mexican girls working the assembly line, Chinaski says: "... if one of them was in bed with me tonight I could take all this shit a whole lot better" (149).

If work does not kill you, exploit you, or erase your personality, it might ruin your sex life. Impotence is a recurring theme in *Factotum*, and it is

often clearly attributable to working conditions rather than, say, Chinaski's drinking or poor health. At the end of the novel, after repeated failures to keep jobs, earn money and provide for himself and his girlfriend, he visits an employment agency. He is virtually unemployable, however, and the work he is suited for does not interest him. The text ends with Chinaski, alone, walking into a strip club. The final one-sentence paragraph concisely summarizes Chinaski's plight: "And I couldn't get it up" (163). Work has emasculated him. Earlier in the novel, a prostitute told him: "[Y]ou won't be able to get it up after all that work" (32). In another scene, Chinaski admits that he "fucked better as a bum than as a puncher of timeclocks" (82). Poverty, hunger, underemployment and the humiliation of the workplace are intellectually, psychologically and spiritually emasculating.

Another of Bukowski's criticisms of work is that it steals time, which, especially for the underclass, is one of the most valuable commodities. In the prenominate scene with the prostitute, for example, Chinaski looks for her after he has finished work, but he's too late. Work denies pleasure and leads to missed opportunity. Chinaski lays out his argument in detail while a supervisor is firing him:

"I've given you my *time*. It's all I've got to give—it's all any man has. And for a pitiful buck and a quarter an hour."

"Remember, you begged for this job. You said your job was your second home."

"... my time so that you can live in your big house on the hill and have all the things that go with it. If anybody has lost anything on this deal, on this arrangement ... I've been the loser." (84-5)

Of course, Chinaski had lied about the job being like a second home.¹⁰ In his experience, if you did not lie, you did not get the job.

Bukowski's critique of work culminates in a very simple idea: Chinaski avoids work because not-working makes him happy. The workplace is a web of lies, corruption and self-abasement, yes, but in much more simple and direct terms, it is boring and unpleasant. At the beginning of the novel, before he starts working, Chinaski says: "I went out on the street, as usual, one day and strolled along. I felt happy and relaxed. The sun was just right.

¹⁰ He was taught this lesson at a magazine distribution center, where his "attitude" was in question. Someone says to him: "[W]e know you think you're too good for this job" (5). Chinaski narrates: "That's when I first learned that it wasn't enough to just *do* your job, you had to have an interest in it, even a passion for it" (5). A passion for cleaning toilets or working in a dog biscuit factory?

Mellow. There was peace in the air” (2). As soon as he says this, someone approaches him with a job offer. The mood is immediately crushed. Chinaski ignores the offer, which makes him think of his father’s unhealthy attitude toward work:

I remembered how my father used to come home each night and talk about his job to my mother. The job talk began when he entered the door, continued over the dinner table, and ended in the bedroom where my father would scream ‘*Lights Out!*’ at 8 p.m., so he could get his rest and his full strength for the job the next day. There was no other subject except the job. (2-3)

Henry Sr. lost his identity to work, much like the old Jewish seamstresses mentioned earlier. He was consumed by a job, which brought him nothing but misery and which clearly informs Henry Jr.’s choice to reject social norms regarding work. Henry Sr.’s work ethic is a subject treated at length in *Factotum* and throughout Bukowski’s fiction. For instance, after Chinaski admits that he hasn’t been looking for a job, his father says: “I can hardly believe you’re my son. You don’t have any ambition, you don’t have any get-up-and-go. How the hell are you going to make it in this world?” (13).

Chinaski’s attitude toward work—both getting jobs and losing them—is exemplified by serenity, acceptance and resignation to his fate. Consider the following exchange, which is repeated several times, with only minor variation, in the text:

“Listen, we’re going to have to let you go.”
 “All right. This is my last day?”
 “Yes.”
 “Will the check be ready?”
 “No, we’ll mail it.”
 “All right.” (150)

Chinaski is remarkably tranquil here. Though he does occasionally get angry, he typically acts with silence, serenity and immobility, especially when confronted with “career setbacks.” Returning to the idea of Chinaski’s “holy” qualities, his demeanor is a manifestation of what Zen Buddhists call “wu wei” or “non-doing.” As Zhu Rui maintains, wu wei means that we distance ourselves from the material world; it further suggests “natural action or action restricted to what is necessary” (53). Rather than investing one’s hours in meaningless tasks undertaken to appear conventional,

earn money, or mimic acceptable behavior, the ideal Zen Buddhist acts only when necessary; his actions should bring pleasure, enlightenment, goodness. This is Chinaski. He does not care about career, comfort, material possessions, work as a goal in itself, social status, or the opinion of the crowd. This does not make him a fool, but rather allows him the freedom to focus on more intrinsically important matters: pleasure (music, drinking, sex), art (he is a struggling writer), his soul.

Bukowski's argument is that it takes someone who appears like a fool, who is willing to play the fool, to see the truth about life, work in particular. Chinaski may act like a clown, but he cares deeply about the dispossessed people he encounters. He is portrayed as smart but unambitious in contradistinction to the rich and successful, who are depicted as lucky, greedy, stupid, amoral or undeserving. "Were they that much more clever than I?" Chinaski asks. "The only difference was money, and the desire to accumulate it" (43). One of Bukowski's representative and dimwitted managers, who runs a lighting fixture company, orders his staff to load the heaviest fixtures on the highest shelf, which naturally means they will fall down. The blue-collar employees, who know how stupid their boss is, realize this. They follow his orders without comment because "[h]e was the boss" (106). Before the fixtures collapse, "The assembly line workers began to edge away, they were grinning" (106). A similar figure is Janeway Smithson, "a little, insane, grey-haired bantam rooster of a man" (128), Chinaski's instructor at the Yellow Cab Company. We're told that he "had been on the job for twenty-five years and was dumb enough to be proud of it" (128). Chinaski is realigning the signifiers, as he always does. The smart are stupid, the bedraggled are wise, career is a folly, immobility is virtuous, drunken clowns are saints. From a western rationalistic perspective, this seems paradoxical, but from a satiric or a Zen standpoint—neither of which assumes that the world turns on a logical axis—it makes perfect sense.

One of the lessons Chinaski learns at work is that the appearance of intelligence is more important than actual intelligence:

I wasn't very good. My idea was to wander about doing nothing, always avoiding the boss, and avoiding the stoolies who might report to the boss. I wasn't all that clever. It was more instinct than anything else. I always started a job with the feeling that I'd soon quit or be fired, and this gave me a relaxed manner that was mistaken for intelligence or some secret power. (99-100)

Chinaski often attributes his success to luck, the stupidity of others, or the fact that he doesn't care enough to try harder. This is another aspect of the Zen quality *wu wei*: success by not trying, reaching one's goal by not focusing on it. This is the thesis of *Zen in the Art of Archery* by Eugen Herrigel (1953, English; 1948, German). The ideal Zen adept—and, as we've discussed, Chinaski is a canny if also quite comic and unexpected embodiment of this type—is not fooled by the illusory nature of the material world. He focuses on the process of a journey or activity, not the reward to be reaped at the end.

In *Ham on Rye*, for example, he inadvertently wins a high school ROTC competition, something for which he is magnificently unsuited. The absurdity is heightened by the fact that, during the competition, Chinaski's boils are itching furiously under a thick wool uniform. He tells us: "I had no interests. I had no interest in anything. I had no idea how I was going to escape. At least the others had some taste for life. They seemed to understand something that I didn't understand. Maybe I was lacking. It was possible. I often felt inferior" (174). The young Chinaski feels like a fool because he is different than other people, but as he ages in *Factotum* he gains more confidence in his own attitudes and beliefs. Chinaski wins the competition even though he's scratching his boils, dreaming of beer and girls. His lack of effort and his detachment from material goals gives him a grace, and ultimately a "success," that the others, who desperately want to win, are lacking.

The corruption, lies, absurdity, boredom, humiliation, misery and identity-loss of the workplace are presented as facts that are self-evident yet which the overwhelming majority of people fail to see, or prefer not to. Most people, according to Bukowski-Chinaski, are afraid to stray from or question the norm and the assumptions surrounding it. Chinaski is indignant and silly, but, from Bukowski's perspective, he is not as foolish as those people who work a job they hate in order to earn a pension, unhappily collecting it each month until they die, selling themselves and their ethics a little bit each day. Bukowski makes Chinaski a fool and an outsider in order to create a character whose life is less ordinary and therefore, hopefully, less terrible.

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