

Ed Dorn and the politics of the New American Poetry

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Edward Dorn, Collected Poems, eds. Jennifer Dunbar Dorn, Justin Katko, Reitha Pattison and Kyle Waugh, Carcanet paperback, 995 pp.

In an increasingly insolvent age with publishing in deep crisis, it seems something of a miracle that Britain's Carcanet Press has brought out in an almost 1,000-page, well-annotated volume, the *Collected Poems* of an American poet of Allen Ginsberg's post-war "generation of war"—Edward Dorn, who died in December 1999.

Jennifer Dunbar Dorn, the poet's wife for decades, leading a team wonderfully attuned to the twist and turns of his career, makes sense through attached essays and appendices of a difficult and brilliant man whose work followed in an almost patriarchal transmission from a teacher of an equally fiery temperament, fellow American poet Charles Olson (1910-1970). These are figures who deserve to be better known and read than they are today.

Born in small-town Illinois in 1929, six months before the Wall Street Crash and the Great Depression (he was "born under a dark star," observed poet Robert Duncan), Dorn settled with his poverty-stricken family in Washington State, which became the setting for *By the Sound* (1969), his autobiographical novel. In the documentary-style novel, originally published as *Rites of Passage* (1965), Dorn describes the grinding poverty that brought out in his work a rare compassion for the poor and dispossessed for whom he gave voice to the end of his life, with the exception perhaps of a period of ironic detachment fueled by drugs characteristic of his and other writing of the late 1960s.

After working as a lumberjack and day laborer, Dorn somehow wound up with Olson as his teacher at North Carolina's experimental Black Mountain College (founded in 1933 and at which John Dewey's theories of education played an important role) in its last days, in the early 1950s. Clearly, "downtown New York in North Carolina," as painter Franz Kline called the school, was doomed when composer John Cage, architect Buckminster Fuller, artists Ben Shahn, Josef and Anni Albers and Robert Motherwell and dancer-choreographer Merce Cunningham, not nearly exhausting the faculty notable for artistic innovation if not common sense, thought Olson as provost would save the progressive college!

An apprentice poet walking past the first geodesic dome, exposed to musical works performed by chance, action painting and modernist dance, on the way to Professor Olson's class on anthropology...all that may seem appealing now, but it took place in North Carolina near a hostile town at a time (April 1953) when President Dwight Eisenhower issued Directive 10450 removing from federal government service every "security risk," all those who had been soft on communism, drug addicts and homosexuals, even members of nudist colonies. (Dorn may have had an aversion to presidents, as he

later referred to Ronald Reagan as one of the "greatest hirelings of the dark powers the world has ever known.")

When Ed Dorn burst into prominence among the interlinked circles of poets in Donald Allen's seminal *New American Poets* (1960) anthology, he was far from the bohemian colonies of his associates. His brilliant "What I See in the Maximus Poems," dated 1959-1960, follows his teacher Olson's aversion to the "lyrical interferences of the ego" and the latter's advocacy of immediate experience in which "eyes are in all heads to be looked out of."

Showing what he has learned from his classes with Olson, Dorn tells us nothing in that work either about himself or the *Maximus Poems*, for that matter. Rather, we follow the sounds and sights of Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he was on the job as poet and laborer, its weather, people and geography, content seeking form in the essay and the beginning of a lifelong obsession with the West as Olson had with Gloucester, Massachusetts, and its geography, the people, land and history.

Dorn's first works in prose and words burnt with anger and anguish for the trapped miners who starved to death in Hazard, Kentucky, in 1963, the desperate poor on the breadlines of Los Alamos in 1960, the talk of gandy dancers (rail workers) at the edge of the Western Plains, so liberating to read when the very reactionary literary criticism of the 1950s thought Allen Tate's odious and parochial "Ode to the Confederate Dead" a masterpiece. There is a relationship to land and people in Dorn's lifelong obsession with the West so distinct from Tate's affiliations with an imagined plantation culture of the Old South.

Dorn went from poverty to professorship, campus to campus (Idaho State, Northeastern Illinois, University of Kansas, Kent State, etc.), eventually to guide (or occasionally misdirect) generations of youngsters from a teaching post at the University of Colorado where he spent his last days (1977 to 1999).

Unfortunately for him, Dorn attracted an impressive following over the years, many of postmodern tastes from the time his long poem *Gunslinger* (1968-1975), later *Slinger*, unfolded in a serial publishing format in five huge volumes that roughly correspond to his years teaching in Britain and conclude, or rather close shop unfinished, when the poem was published in 1975 to rave reviews.

The eminent poet-critic-academic, Donald Davie, had sought to create a department to shake things up at the University of Essex, and so in 1965, Ed Dorn, itinerant laborer, became professor. Soon enough, by all accounts, Sussex "swung like a pendulum do," in the hopeful language of those days.

As his friend and associate, the British poet Jeremy Prynne, puts the dominant view of *Gunslinger* in his "Afterword" to the *Collected*

Poems, “the entire American adventure is laid out there with great wit and humour.” That’s the majority view. *Slinger*, to be sure, is a hippie masterpiece, but to this reviewer’s ears as dated as the era, with its cast of characters who come on the “stage” coach on which a troubled and indistinct “I” lifted from space and time explains that he really doesn’t know what is going on, dies unexpectedly, only to come back to life when drip-fed five gallons of LSD.

Along the way we follow this displaced “I” of postmodernism or his alter ego Slinger as one or the other, or neither, ride a “Stoned Horse,” who is also called Heidegger (Hi Digger) and Levi Strauss, searching for the elusive Howard Hughes in Las Vegas.

Dorn, apparently tired of the poem, forgot all about its original conceits to retreat into a very self-centered solipsistic lyricism about failed love and the groundlessness of existence. The cast of characters, Kool Everything, Tonto Pronto, Taco Desoxin and Dr. Flamboyant, disappear. As Abraham Lincoln might have said diplomatically, this is the kind of book for people who like this kind of book, which the eminent critic Marjorie Perloff thought the paradigmatic text of postmodernist poetry.

The earlier Dorn had such an ear for common speech, the equal of William Carlos Williams and more. Now, he sounds phony, putting on the style: “you don’t want none of your sacred/quatraps packin no Honky Bi-peds to/ the top of no sierras for a look at whets/ left of their more prominent hysterias!” For comparison, here is how Dorn sounded in a poem published in 1960, “Los Mineros”: “Now it is the winter and the fallen snow/ has made its stand on the mountains, making dunes/of white on the hills, and the cold cover/has got us to look for fuel.”

He is now in the relatively good years mounted on a postmodernist talking horse who, asked how far it is from Mesilla to Vegas, replies, “Across/two states/of mind.” Nothing is real and nothing to get hung up about. No wonder *Gunslinger* is that mythologizer Stephen King’s favorite poem and title of the first novel of *The Dark Tower* series.

Then, to the surprise of many, Dorn utterly changed his poetry from the ground up, again the historical content of the epoch seeking new forms in art to express itself, as it does in life, in contradictory ways. Responding very differently, radicals from many confused political streams of the 1960s poured out of graduate schools and surrounding coffee houses abuzz with the newspeak of postmodernism, and rose over the next decades to pre-eminent positions over disintegrating English departments.

There were many who were startled and made unhappy by Dorn’s political poems after his return to the US, especially in his second long poem, *Languedoc Variorum: A Defense of Heresy and Heretics*, written starting in 1990 to the end of his days in 1999 specifically in opposition to the imperialistic looting presented as “liberation” from Kosovo onward. Indeed, Dorn lost a lot of fans when postmodernism from many diverse skeptical trends of French intellectuals gathered force over American campuses. “The political urgency of the later writing seems to overtake the poetry and, finally, to undermine it,” one prominent reviewer of an earlier collection disapprovingly commented.

With this volume, we have a wonderful opportunity to observe how Dorn’s late work of overt political engagement was in fact a return at the higher, structurally more complex level to the concerns he displayed when leading in youth, and throughout his career, the life of an itinerant laborer become itinerant professor with deep roots and sympathy for working people, so rare in today’s artistic productions. Ed Dorn was always a little different, a poet of the American working

class, writing in its voice and blessedly without “Populist Front,” condescending imitation.

Dorn turned those eyes Olson said were in each head to be looked out of sharply and with great anger toward the events unfolding in time, real time, at a time when the working class, betrayed by its unions and ever more financially successful “left” allies, suffered serious defeats.

The poet Tom Clark describes Dorn, his teacher, in 1979 as Dorn woke up from his hippie-era stupor and remembered where he came from: “I learned quite a bit from travelling with him across the upper Plains in 1979 on what was supposed to be a reporting assignment. We were ‘covering’ the Wyoming energy boom for a magazine, but Ed’s coverage always went deeper, wider, longer. We crested the Wind River range in white light and came down to Moorcroft, Wyoming, where Ed drove me past the old New Moorcroft Hotel, a landmark in his great early story ‘C. B. & Q.’ We found Tiny’s restaurant, back of which the half desert still begins, just as it does in that story. In Ed’s day crews of gandy dancers hung out there between shifts. Ed was remembering his wandering working-life circa 1951, when ‘You could work endless hours but it was dangerous.’ ”

Dorn lived in a “human universe,” in which what is expressed is also physically experienced. These lines from early 1999 link Dorn’s cancer treatment with the impeachment of Bill Clinton and the US bombing of Iraq: “...as the drip is connected to the pump I see W. J. Clinton... / I see him in the Taxol pooling over my brow / move his arky hand from the arm rest / to the Iraqi button... / an experimental / missile vibrates and flames and then launches / from the carrier, and Oh Good Lord, minutes later, / as the nurse strips away the Medusan tubes of my oncology, / American dumb missile arrives with punity / in the southern suburbs of Baghdad, ruined Cradle of Civilization, / just north of the Garden of Eden... / And Lo now the Taxol infusion clears the atmosphere / where I see the Superbowl completely superseded / by the *superblow*, O yes, praise the Tree Lord, / now it is time to go.”

This is from Dorn’s very last interview in 1999: “Where the next war will be, of the Kosovo kind, we don’t really know. It could be the sources of the Tigris and the Euphrates because the Kurds are a lot more numerous than anybody else who is in that situation. They’re surrounded by enemies because they’ve got the Syrians and the Turks and the Iraqis. And, to one extent or another, the Iranians a little bit off that. We’re talking about the prime conditions for creating everlasting powerful, intense and intensified enemies.” Talk about poets as the “antennae of the race.”



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