

GADFLY TO THE ERA

Edward Dorn. *Way More West, New and Selected Poems*. Penguin Books, 2007.

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With the publication of *Way More West*, Edward Dorn's posthumous collection of new and selected poems, there has been both grudging admiration and sniping from the politically pious among the poesy set. The premise by two reviewers, for example, one in the mainstream press and one in the blogosphere, is that after *Gunslinger*, Dorn's great mock epic of the '60s and early '70s, his work devolved to "political agitprop" and, what's worse, to "not very interesting prose." This is the opinion of a cognate cyborg I shall call Silianus, who suspects that Dorn's early reputation was a product of Black Mountain hype because all he sees in the later poems is "a macho attitude toward violence" that is "shallow" at best and supports "the Bush policy in Iraq" at worst. Silianus is a bit nervous that this assessment "may seem like a cheap shot," so he undertakes explication which confirms that it *is* a cheap shot and indicates Silianus spends too much time taking his own pulse.

It is particularly galling to him that, although the political poetry of Amiri Baraka, Denise Levertov and others of their generation is "relatively clear," he can't get a grip on Dorn, who is politically "all over the map." Time and again Silianus whines that "it's hard to know what point Dorn is making." True enough, particularly if what you require of poetry is a "point." Dorn himself noted in the Preface to his 1975 *Collected Poems* that "From near the beginning I have known my work to be theoretical in nature and poetic by virtue of its inherent tone." And tonality in Dorn's work is imperative, tonality and improvisational intellection.

The Collected Poems of 1984 being long out of print, *Way More West* provides a useful parabola of Dorn's career from 1956 to almost the day of his death in December 1999. The selections from *Chemo Sabe*, the adroitly entitled concluding sequence that chronicles his three year agon with pancreatic cancer, reveal the poised dignity and penetrating incisiveness with which he not only faced but held off the inevitable. "Chemo du Jour: The Impeachment on Decadron" is characteristic. While undergoing chemotherapy, from the injection of Decadron ("sharpens the senses / around the optic nerve and the neocortex, / enabling one to see through walls and into / the present...") to the "onslaught" of Taxol, Dorn's attentions not only docu-

ment chemical effects but move out to scan the landscape surrounding Bill Clinton's penuclear folly. Before the drugs take hold, looking over his Roman notes [he was ever a tireless worker] he recalls Keats' last day, brooding "on the pallor / of the Spanish Steps and the moist brow / of Keats's struggle to die...." This is about as close as he comes to personal sentiment, quoting an intense prose description of Keats's struggle, which he then neutralizes by footnoting the source. As the Decadron surges he envisions Clinton and "St. Monica panting in the pantry," then an extended Dantesque image that evolves into a purgatorial evocation of "the prozac shrouds of D.C." and U.S. foreign policy until, "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," concluding with that prophetic image.

For the most part in these poems of a dying man the focus is on tactical life preservation rather than death. The strategic failure of medication is of course understood from the beginning. Meanwhile the chemicals are described and evaluated, likewise their administration by various sorts of hospital technicians. Dorn's cancer itself is referred to as "the alien," an objectification which permits him a similar perspective: "We had saluted the day when / Jenny said WHITE RABBIT. / I lay for awhile trying to think / what would I wish for if such a genie / really delivered—a dismissal of the alien? / . . .no. There are wishes too complex to be granted." What he wishes for is "a needle worker / to set up my infusion lines / without blowing a vein." In his mortal battle Dorn never loses track of the world or poetry's function in it. "Oh my dear auditor, how can I put this? / The drugs are very bad, / but more refined than civilian drugs / the 'dope' from which / the agencies draw their unholy levies, / their off-the-books war loot...." In "The Dull Relief of General Pain" he notes North Korea's food shortages, starvation where 85% of the children are malnourished and corpses line the streets to be cannibalized: "where's Bob Geldof?-- / are these people not the world?...? Doesn't Michael Jackson like children anymore? / Or did he never like communist children? / What's going on? This is poetry calling! / Poetry is waiting for an answer."

As for death, there are a couple of perspectives. In one the alien is "like your own private third world / she arrives and breeds like guinea pigs" and makes demands on "Your territory. But then I see her / puzzled misapprehension and know / what she can never anticipate when my spirit / will watch this Bitch burn at my deliverance / in the furnace of my joyful cremation." The other is lyrical allegory, "The Garden of the White Rose"—

Lord, your mercy is stretched so thin
 to accommodate the need
 of the trembling earth—
 How can I solicit even
 a particle of it
 for the relief of my singularity
 the single White Rose
 across the garden will
 return next year
 identical to your faith—
 the White Rose, whose
 house is light against the
 threatening darkness.

The polarity of these tonalities is vintage Dorn. On the one hand a raw image of his own death, as elegant in its way as, on the other hand, God and the White Rose balanced poignantly on the figural fulcrum of “the relief of my singularity.”

While Dorn was not a Theory enthusiast, his poetics were, as he said, theoretical. Charles Olson’s dialectical and disciplinary practices indelibly marked Dorn’s intellectual habits and topical attentions. Geographical anthropology, for example, was an abiding preoccupation and was largely responsible for his cultivation of a kind of ‘western’ poetics, in *Geography* (1965) of course but especially conspicuous in *Gunslinger* (1968-’74) and *Recollections of Gran Apacheria* (1974). Dorn’s incisive intellection reflects Olson’s influence, but where Olson’s thought frequently implies a dialectical sequence, Dorn’s thought inclines to the improvisational. “Sensibility is no substitute for consciousness,” he observed in 1986, and that predicated his rational poetics and their focus on the world rather than the poet. Six years later he added a dimension, poetry exhibiting “a certain kind of aggression toward the reader,” to the end of jolting the reader into consciousness—as in the epithet, If you’re not angry you’re not paying attention. “Given where we’re at,” he said, “nobody is going to be aesthetically enlightening.” Hence, his poetic theory is to the end of inducing ratiocination about and frequently enough irritation with the social matrix rather than celebration or even lamentation.

One manifestation is *Recollections of Gran Apacheria*, a documentary threnody for the Apache: “So The infant is bound / hand & foot / to the cradle board ... / balcony onto the World... / They began life in this manner / devoted to pure observation...

Because, it is from witness,

they made no natural cause
 to fear the future
 Their art was
 of cosmic physical proportion
 the scale proposed for everything
 and reflected in their landform

Their leading ideas
 Come directly from the landform.

The geographical anthropology here clearly has an Olsonian resonance, as does the ratiocination grounding the verse. The reader is invited to apprehend the Apache ethos by way of implicitly comparing it to the ‘civilized’ alternative. But the tone is after all elegiac, and in “The Whole European Distinction” he coolly analyzes the fact that its very virtue is the source of the tribe’s defeat. The long resistance of the Apache “can only be attributed to / the superiority of Native / over Alien Thinking,

Yet they had not invented Mind
 and as we know
 their domain was by Mind over-ridden

In all the treaties
 The Native assented
To the Thinking
 And never, and
 have not yet discovered
 the predictive Mind.”

And moreover, if “Gen. Miles imagined / That Geronimo / Didn’t know / The function of the heliograph,” there were worse indignities to come, as in “Fifteen Hundred Tons of Hay @ 1c per Pound,” where “Gen. Crook proved to a skeptical world / that even the Apaches were corruptible / He put them to work in the hills / at Fort Apache / with small sickles & butcher knives.” There may be sympathetic touchstones in history, but sentiment is no substitute for consciousness.

Dorn’s poetics, alpha to omega, are geared to consistently attack the dozing consciousness of the demos. Amiri Baraka once noted that Dorn would rather make an enemy of you than lie to you. As noted, he made more than his share of enemies. Dorn himself had little time for highly aestheticized poetry and preferred an aggressive stance toward the reader. From the late ’70s through the ’80s—from *Hello La Jolla* (1978) through *Abhorrences* (1990)—he practiced a poetry of short sharp jabs to the cortex, which he thought of as small essays. The latter volume is a journalistic record

of the '80s, the reign of Reaganomics and “Invaditude, Contramentality, Meesagoguery, Demobuggery...” and ultimately a “Deep Coma Aroma.” It was during this period that Dorn consciously adopted the mantle of Protestantism, adapting the Reformation to what he called the “Rawhide Era”: “The Protestant View: / that eternal dissent / and the ravages of / faction are preferable / to the voluntary / servitude of blind / obedience.” While he jabs right and left alike, he is far more concerned with what both sides share, the reduction of democracy to consumerism. “Harvesting Organs: On the Head-Injury Death of a 24 Year Old Boy in Vermont” recounts “Specialists” flying like “carrion birds” to the scene,

Whereupon they tore the fucker apart,
 called him Skin & Bones.
 They freeze-dried his butt,
 chilled his skin. Somebody else
 is wearing it now—who *is* wearing it now?
 Probably some lawyer in Topeka.
 Or Maybe a wag in Wichita.
 The fat from his posterior
 now fills out an anorexic gal in Scranton...

the boy's parts were scattered through
 the vast black market of the medical abattoir,
 thrifty now as the Hormel slaughterhouses
 of Austin Minnesota. Yet very few, if any,
 of the “recipients” would be black.

Note: the very first attempts to put
 the hearts of baboons in the human breast
 occurred in South Africa—the surgical anxiety
 to find a primate substitute
 for the scandal of the obvious.

Ah well, even as we repose here
 studying the ramifications
 of this cryogenic express,
 they're out there, under the flashy lights,
 gleaning the fallen fruit, the strange fruit—
 and this time it's the bourgeoisie who are gathered.
 After all, they run around the most,
 they are the fittest.

Consumerism may assume the guise of medical humanitarianism, but Dorn reminds us which class owns this cryogenic express. In “Free Market Chinoiserie” he addresses its international mutation: “There will never be enough BMWs / for the stated Billion, there will never / even be enough

paper towel / or gas barbecues or ever enough ribs / or sauce for those short ribs. There will never / be enough... / Someone should tell them.” What attracts readers to these essayistic pieces is their precise insight into cultural malaise and the resonance of their scalpel sharp articulations. Dorn improvised on an old form, the verse essay, and transformed it with contemporary wit and tonality.

If ever a poet took Ezra Pound’s imperative to “make it new,” Dorn did. Formally he ranges from high lyricism to music hall parody, “road testing the language,” as he put it, from an Elizabethan sonority to the flat reportage of modern journalism and, when pertinent, the eloquent vulgarity of the street: “Whereupon they tore the fucker apart.” But if he adapted his styles to the needs of the times, his politics were never “all over the place.” His critical eye always reflected the populist socialism with which he grew up. He was never dewy eyed about the working class, but he was very clear about capitalist dynamics, and in that contretemps he knew where he stood. If the *Abhorrence* mode was quick hard jabs and body punches to capitalist excesses, *Gunslinger* was the knockout punch to the profiteering of the military-industrial complex in its satirically surgical strike on Howard Hughes, the very paradigm of cowboy capitalism, and his fellow Texan Lyndon Johnson, who rode to infamy on a military policy in Vietnam.

This edition includes only Book I of *Gunslinger*, presumably because the whole is available in the Duke University Press edition, but that is enough to introduce the narrative premise, the dramatis personae, and the voice. The premise is that “The Cautious Gunslinger / of impeccable personal smoothness / and slender leather encased hands” is on the trail from Mesilla to Las Vegas in search of the notoriously covert Hughes, who, like the entrails of capitalism, “has not been seen since 1833.” Enroute he meets with I, the narrator who is grammatically disappeared half way through the story, Gaudy Lil, the ubiquitous madame of westerns, Claude Levi-Strauss, the articulate Stoned Horse who expertly rolls Tampico Bombers with his hooves, and The Drifter, a poet who plays an Absolute. The names suggest the possibilities for jokes, puns, mimicry, parody and satire, all exploited extravagantly by Dorn’s inventive voice but always informed with intriguing intellection: e.g. in regard to the speed of Gunslinger’s draw, a phenomenon distinctly modified by the fact that the ammo in his .44 is not conventional bullets but *straight information*: “To eliminate the draw / permits an unmatchable Speed / a syzygy which hangs tight / just back of the curtain / of the reality theater / down the street, / speed is not necessarily fast. / Bullets are not necessarily specific. / When the act is / so self contained / and so dazzling in itself / the target then / can disappear / in the heated tension /

which is an area between here / and formerly / In some parts of the western world / men have mistakenly / called that phenomenology.”

The incisiveness of Dorn’s wit recalls Pound’s definition of beauty, that rush in the gut one gets from a fast paced thought in Plato. Combine that with the resonance of his frequently elegant vocabulary and syntax, and Dorn’s appeal to writers and poets in general and Thomas McGuane, Stephen King, Amiri Baraka, Allen Ginsberg and Robert Creeley in particular is understandable. Edward Dorn’s is an eloquent voice of a definitively singular and independent consciousness. His prickly perspective, unpredictable at any given moment, is especially suited to be gadfly to an age of intellectual facility and politically righteous idols of the mind. This volume, the first in which his works have popular distribution, will go a long way toward broadening the public awareness of one of the most distinctive and important voices of postmodern literature. It will whet the appetite of readers, who may then well want the whole story. They will join many of us in anticipating an edition of *The Complete Works*.