
—he will unroll the map of locations

Like his shape-shifting protagonist Gunslinger, that archetypal hero of the Wild West who also happens to be a Greek Sun God and a sophisticated New Philosopher expounding on Heidegger (“Hi! Digger”), the “pre-emption of the ultra-specific,” and “Holy xit,” Edward Dorn has been unrolling the map of locations for some 20 years now, and the publication of these two books, the first his collected lyric poetry, the second his extraordinary narrative poem Slinger, should finally earn Dorn the reputation he deserves as one of a handful of important poets writing in America today.

If Dorn has never been widely known (Richard Howard, for example, does not include him among the “41 leading contemporary poets” discussed in Alone in America), the reasons are not hard to find. Dorn began his career at Black Mountain College in the shadow of Charles Olson, his acknowledged master. Both poets were deeply influenced by the geographer Carl Sauer’s essay, “The Morphology of Landscape” (1925), deriving from Sauer the conviction that “The thing to be known is the natural landscape. It becomes known through the totality of its forms”—a statement that Dorn uses as the epigraph for his long poem “Idaho Out.” In an essay called “What I see in The Maximum Poems” (1960), Dorn praises Olson’s attempt to give in language a map of one place (in this case, Gloucester, Mass.), and Dorn’s fourth book (1965) is appropriately called Geography, a word he defined in a recent interview for Contemporary Literature as “the writing of earth, earth writing.”
Yet despite such thematic links, Dorn is really quite unlike Olson; he is, for that matter, quite unlike any poet writing today. To call him a “regional poet” (he refers to himself as “a poet of the West”—not by nativity but by orientation”), misses the mark, for his central concerns are metaphysical and have, finally, nothing to do with his chosen region, the American West. Indeed, some of his best poems, written while he was teaching at the University of Essex, are “about” the topography of Oxford and the Cotswolds. Again, it is not with the San Francisco school or the Beats; unlike Gary Snyder, he seems to have no particular interest in Zen and the East, and despite his use of drug-world argot and political invective, his poetry is decidedly more tempered, more detached, more humorous than that of, say, Allen Ginsberg. Finally, and most important, Dorn, as he himself insists, is a narrative poet—an unusual condition today when the norm tends to be the fragmented lyric or open-ended sequence.

What, then, is Dorn’s poetry like? “The Rick of Green Wood” (1956), which opens *The Collected Poems*, contains most of Dorn’s typical stylistic traits. It begins:

*In the woodyard were green and dry
woods fanning out, behind
a valley below
a pleasure for the eye to go.*

*Woodpile by the buzzsaw. I heard
the woodsman down in the thicket. I don’t
want a rick of green wood, I told him*
I want cherry or alder or something
   strong
and thin, or thick if dry, but I don’t
want the green wood, my wife would die

Her back is slender
and the wood I get must not
bend her too much through the day.

Aye, the wood is some green
and some dry, the cherry thin of bark
cut in July.

My name is Burlingame
said the woodcutter.
My name is Dorn, I said.
I buzz on Friday if the weather cools
said Burlingame, enough of names.

Compare this to Frost’s famed “The Woodpile” and Dorn’s originality becomes apparent. What begins in low key as a narrative about the purchases of some firewood is made new by Dorn’s idiosyncratic syntax and lineation, his offbeat rhymes, his peculiar mixture of high and low styles, of realism and fantasy. It makes no sense, for example, for the poet to say, “I don’t / want the green wood, my wife would die," especially since he is himself obviously drawn to it. But the non sequitur underscores Dorn’s theme, which is the “pied beauty” and fragility of this
special moment in November, before the cold sets in, before things “bend.” And so Dorn’s pastoral emphasizes uncertainty. The preposition “behind” in line two is oddly ambiguous: does it refer to the “woods fanning out” or to “the valley below”? This construction is followed by the phrase, “a pleasure for the eye to go,” where we would expect the verb “to see”; and the laconic free verse pattern of the opening line is broken by the exact rhyme “below” / “go.” Dorn has a habit of introducing rhymes where we least expect them; note the buried internal rhymes, “dry” / “die” / “July”; “slender” / “bend her”; “Burlingame” / “names.” Especially interesting is the abrupt shift from shorthand sentences like “Woodpile by the buzzsaw,” to the lyric archaism of “Aye, the wood is some green / and some dry,” to the down-to-earth colloquial tone of the Burlingame passage, which modulates, in turn, into the high lyric mode of the poem’s conclusion, with its slow stately rhythms and verbal repetitions:

-Out of the thicket my daughter was
walking
singing—
backtracking the horse hoof
gone in earlier this morning, the
woodcutter’s horse
pulling the alder, the fir, the
hemlock
above the valley

            in the november

           air, in the world, that was getting
colder

as we stood there in the woodyard
talking

pleasantly, of the green wood and the dry.

The one Dorn “signature” absent from “The Rick of Green Wood” but very important in the poetry is his wonderful sense of humor, sometimes black as in “The Hide of my Mother,” sometimes delicate irony as in “Time to Burn,” a witty account of the morning-after-the-night-before, when the poet’s girl is making up to the local swell in a small town bar, and he must mark time in what seems like “3 days to midnight.” Dorn’s sense of the comic absurdity of ordinary situations is nowhere more evident than in “The First Note (From London),” which describes the reaction of the poet and his wife to the peculiar intimacy and sense of enclosure of British trains:

We got into one of those old coaches

which has no access
forward or back but is self contained

and it was strained being so enclosed and

locked off
by the speed of passage, alone

and even though
she was my wife we flirted

almost, we were almost in our confusion

shy
scarcely believing our situation so sealed off.

We considered of course making it then and there while moving

but settled for a quiet kiss when halfway through it abruptly and to our amazement we found ourselves in some small station smiling into the equally smiling face of a railway man idling on that minor and unremembered platform, nonetheless we were sober and chaste and slightly disappointed from thence to Croyden . . .

Here the effect of geography on human behavior is rendered with delicate irony. The American husband and wife, unfamiliar with the custom of the country, and not quite knowing whether to take advantage of “a situation so sealed off,” ultimately become as “sober and chaste and slightly disappointed” as the landscape through which they travel. Smiling into the “equally smiling face” of the railway man, they blend into the topography.
Dorn is less successful when he tries to incorporate history into his poems. “The Land Below,” for example, contains fine passages anatomizing the landscape of Taos, with its Fourth of July picnic in the Plaza, its tourist carrying travel kits bearing Christ’s image and jostling with the native Indians. But when Dorn tries to relate this landscape of Schliemann’s Troy, the Troy of Hector, the results are not happy, for Dorn lacks Pound’s ability to revivify historical material, to make it part of the ongoing present. His is the lyric of geography, not of history. Accordingly, his overtly political poems are often simplistic and one-dimensional: “Whit Sunday,” which begins with the lines, “England beware / the cliff of 1945 / turns a natural insularity / into a late, and out of joint / naturalism of inbred / industrial indecision,” is invective rather than poetry.

Yet in the same years that Dorn was writing such angry political poems, he also composed some of the freshest, most natural love poems of our time—lyrics full of warmth, wit and gentle self-deprecation. In “Song” (1967), he recalls a girl met only once in England and realizes wistfully that although he was no more than “An occupier / Of one of the waves of her intensity,” his wrist still bears “The banding of her slightsmiling lassitude.” “Slightsmiling lassitude” neatly sums up the comic futility of the poet’s love. The 24 “Love Songs” of 1969, which must be read as a sequence, are full of such witty wordplay and nuance.

But charming as Dorn’s short lyrics are, in terms of scope and accomplishment, they must take second place to Slinger, Dorn’s four-part epic poem begun in 1968, which is, I believe, one of the masterpieces of contemporary poetry. In the little New Mexico town of Mesilla, the narrator (“I”) meets “The Cautious Gunslinger / of impeccable personal smoothness / and slender leather
encased hands / folded casually / to make his knock.” “I” sets out on a quest, ostensibly for “Hughes / Howard” but actually for something nameless, with this mysterious sharpshooter, his talking horse, his sometime mistress, the whorehouse madam, Lil, and a travelling bard known only as “The Poet.” Other characters appear and disappear, but plot and characterization are subordinated throughout to Dorn’s theme, which is the opaqueness of language, the mystery of human identity, the impossibility of getting meaningful answers to one’s questions. At one point, “I” asks Gunslinger: “What does the foregoing mean?” To which Slinger replies, “Mean? / Questioner, you got some strange / obsessions, you want to know / what something means after you’ve seen it, after you’ve been there / or were you out during / That time? No. / and you want some reason.”

To mean, in Gunslinger’s world, is “a mortal sin,” and “I” is always getting into trouble because he is “constructed of questions,” wanting to know who’s who, what’s happening, and why. Gunslinger won’t have it: “The mortal can be described,” he insists, “That’s all mortality is / in fact.” There are no laws governing the universe, no abstract principles: “never mind he said, are these/men men . . . . Is my horse a horse?” And indeed, how can one tell? For when, in a wonderfully absurd sequence, the horse gets stoned, he turns into Claude Lévi-Strauss and informs the perplexed narrator that he studies “the savage mind.” “The Horse,” says Slinger wryly, “is a double agent.”

If Book I were just a clever attack on current hermeneutic theories, it would soon become tiresome, but Dorn’s feat is that he incorporates his phenomenological esthetic into the frame of the familiar Western. The “STRUM” of the guitar punctuates all events and movements, and the characters perform ordinary human
functions just when we least expect it. In Book I, for example, Slinger announces loftily that “Time is more fundamental than space” and then “goes into the desert to pee.” “Yes, he reflected / when he returned, that’s less.” The poem accommodates both the realistic low-class conversation of Lil (“Shit, Slinger! you still got that / marvelous creature, and who is this / funny talker, you pick him up / in some sludgy seat of higher / learnin, Creeps! You always did / hang out with some curious refugees”) and the mock-heroic Houyhnhnm—like talk of Horse, who rebukes the narrator with the words, “Mortal, what do you mean . . .?” It also contains a number of parody Western ballads like the Poet’s “Song about a woman”:

On a plane of this plane  
stood a dark colonmade  
which cast its black shadows  
in the form of a conception made  
where I first saw your love  
her elbows at angles

her elbows at black angles

her mouth  
a disturbed tanager, and  
in her hand an empty dmajuana  
on her arm an emotion  
on her ankle a band  
a slender ampersand. . . .
Gunslinger is a collage of all these things. The epigraph for Book III is “The inside real / and the outside-real”; and when Gunslinger regards “the stereoscopic world,” he is “astonished,” while Lil rebukes him for his “hostile talk.” The poem’s form perfectly embodies Dorn’s theme that nothing is what it seems to be. “only appearance. Perceive / not know.” Indeed, one cannot know anyone else because, as Dorn explains in the interview, today “the ego is pretty obviously dead.” Names like “Heidegger” are not used referentially; rather, they function as “widely understood and widely evocable intellectual signs” that “don’t really mean anything.”

In Book II, the Poet announces that “I is dead.” “I” must disappear because he is too rational, too logical and human to participate in Gunslinger’s bizarre quest journey. But even this disappearance is not meant to be taken too seriously. Lil’s only response to the news is “That ain’t grammatical, poet.” And in Book III “I” is allowed to return “from the cultural collective,” purged of his questioning spirit. He “comes through the door” of the Café Sahagun in downtown Cortez, Colorado, “twirling his psychognosis / in his fingers / and throws it at effective intervals / into the air / like a texan cheerleader.”

The quest, not surprisingly, leads nowhere. In an unnamed desert, the pilgrims part company. Slinger (now Zlinger) addresses his friends in a marvelous parody of English poets, beginning with Keats:
Keen, fitful gusts are whispering here
and there
The mesas quiver above the withdrawing
sunne
Among the bushes half leafless and dry
The smallest things now have their time
The stars look very cold about the sky
And I have grown to love your local star
But now niños, it is time for me to go
inside
I must catch the timetrain
The parabolas are in sympathy.

Lil ("Dear Lillian") goes back to Wyoming; the Poet announces that he is "Moving to Montana soon / going to be a nose spray tycoon"; and "I" is given a last warning by Slinger:

Goodbye I, keep your eye
on the local species
they’re nothing
but a warehouse full of peanuts

Slinger runs to more than 200 pages (maddeningly unnumbered!), and there are inevitably some dull stretches, particularly in “The Cycle” (Book III), which often seems too abstract, too clever in its parodies of Blake, and its allusions to modern physics and Parmenides. Dorn himself recognizes that the later books are
more abstract than the first, which is filmlike in its intensity. But *Slinger* is surely one of the most ambitious and interesting long poems of our time, a truly original cowboy-and-Indian saga, rendered in the most ingenious mix of scientific jargon, Structuralist terminology, junkie slang, Elizabethan sonneteering, Western dialect, and tough talk about kicking “a gorilla in the balls.” Indeed, the real hero of *Slinger* is neither Gunslinger nor the curious “I” but language itself, the language of our time, refracted, distorted, heightened, but always recognizable as the jumble of speech we hear around us and see in print. When, at the end of the poem, Slinger announces his departure:

*But it grieves me in some slight way*

*because this has been such fine play*

*and I’ll miss this marvelous accidentalism*

the reader can only agree. The “fine play” of *Slinger*—its “marvelous accidentalism”—is quite literally *horse play*, but horse play so learned and witty that it makes most of our long poetic sequences, with their obsessive confessional momentum, look like child’s play. In Book II, Gunslinger and his party come across an ingenious machine called a *Literate Projector*, which turns 35 mm. film into script rather than vice-versa. Like this *Literate Projector*, Dorn’s comic epic “will Invent a whole new literachure / which was Already There.”
duplicity stands Vidal in generous stead; from society drawing-rooms to the floor of the Senate, from political campaigns to the persona of Mark Twain, a pantomime of betrayals is the order of the day. The cityscape America has become is a landscape of double entendres; there can be a whorehouse behind every cigar-store Indian, the famed "Astoracry" is a bunch of boors and bores, and the mansion of a wealthy abstentionist stares mockingly across at St. Patrick's Cathedral. These dualities merge into an almost verbatim retelling, in spirit if not in each word, of Henry Adams' political novel, Democracy (his Baron Jacobi actually puts in an appearance), a disguise which makes Vidal's cast of literary allusions quite complete.

Charles Schuyler has an insatiable appetite for two things, politics and rich food. With the first, however, he only skims the surface of American life. By consuming the second in huge and graphic quantities, he seems to develop a discomfiting awareness of the innards of the American physique; we are treated ad nauseam to the dyspeptic belchings of several prominent gentlemen. By their stomachs shall ye know them? Vidal never achieves a happy median between superficiality and schatological depths. Schuyler, a confirmed glutton, condemns Americans for being overweight, American society for being gross, but he, too, can't see his feet for his own obesity.

His America may have been vulgar, but it was also grandiose, magnificent even in the unprecedented confusions, contrasts and contradictions of the era, which made it the prototype of our own. Everything seemed headed in opposite directions; exuberant science was belied by brooding and nostalgic works of art, romance fought realism in literature, the popularity of spiritualistic seances officiated at the birth of William James' philosophy. But Vidal will have none of this, as if a country so crassly prosperous and politically destitute must be culturally and socially lacking—better yet, society and culture do not exist at all. His Schuyler is surrounded by some of the most outgrowful, eclectic and weirdly imaginative architecture ever designed; you wouldn't know this from Vidal. Admittedly, "1876" means different things to different people, but I am still puzzled at how Schuyler could visit the wonderful Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition with hardly a comment to show for it. It was an age, too, of great villains. Schuyler's response: querulousness.

The fault lies not with the period but with the vantage point. There isn't any. Burr was centered around one figure, Aaron Burr, but in 1876 Vidal can't seem to focus, and the burden of both action and reaction comes to rest on poor Charlie Schuyler whose eye is no longer fresh. He may be the first person to come to the now all-too-familiar realization that "no one can solve all the problems," but he doesn't even pretend to understand them. He would also be the first to say that he should not be the one to stand in the spotlight; he is a likeable enough fellow but not a little dull. Feints at comic relief fall flat. The book cracks parlor-jokes. Its humor, its humanity arise instead at moments of high seriousness, when Schuyler, unlike his compatriots, tries to get at the truth rather than avoid it. "The great leaders," as Henry Adams wrote, "could not be burlesqued; they were more grotesque than ridicule could make them." 1876 remains the voluminous notes and jottings of an old man who, self-exiled, talks mostly to himself. But the glimmers of truth Vidal does filter down from the 1870s are painfully clear and unchanged 100 years later.

Celia Betsky

Celia Betsy is a graduate student in American Studies at Yale.

The Collected Poems 1956-1974
by Edward Dorn
(Four Seasons Foundation; $5)

Slinger
by Edward Dorn
(Wingbow Press; $5)

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Compare this to Frost’s famed “The Woodpile” and Dorn’s originality becomes apparent. What begins in low key as a narrative about the purchases of some firewood is made new by Dorn’s idiosyncratic syntax and lineation, his offbeat rhymes, his peculiar mixture of high and low styles, of realism and fantasy. It makes no sense, for example, for the poet to say, “I don’t want the green wood, my wife would die,” especially since he is himself obviously drawn to it. But the non sequitur underscores Dorn’s theme, which is the “pied beauty” and fragility of this special moment in November, before the cold sets in, before things “bend.” And so Dorn’s pastoral emphasizes uncertainty. The preposition “behind” in line two is oddly ambiguous: does it refer to the “woods fanning out” or to “the valley below?” This construction is followed by the phrase, “a pleasure for the eye to go,” where we would expect the verb “to see”; and the iacocic free verse pattern of the opening line is broken by the exact rhyme “below” / “go.” Dorn has a habit of introducing rhymes where we least expect them; note the buried internal rhymes, “dry” / “dye” / “July”; “slender” / “bend her;” “Burlingame” / “names.” Especially interesting is the abrupt shift from shorthand sentences like “Woodpile by the buzzsaw,” to the lyric archaisms of “Aye, the wood is some green / and some dry,” to the down-to-

Invest in art and the Great Bear Wilderness.

Although the grizzly stands eight feet tall and weighs half a ton, it can cover 100 yards in six seconds. For thousands of years it was the unchallenged master of America’s West. Until the white man came.

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To help fund this project, Friends of the Earth commissioned noted Swedish sculptor Maria Ericson to capture the grizzly in stoneware. Each piece is cast, painted, and glazed by hand under her watchful eye. Pieces which meet her standards are signed; the rest are broken and recycled.

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Enclosed find check or money order for $ ___
Or, charge □ BankAmericard □ Master Charge. M/C Interbank # ___

Acct. # ___ Exp. ___

Signature __________________________

Name ______________________________

Address ______________________________

City/State/ZIP ________________________
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A UNION LABEL COMPANY'S RESPONSE TO A GREAT INTERNATIONAL OCW

February 10, 1976
Mr. Bernard Rapoport, President
AMERICAN INCOME LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY
P.O. Box 206
Waco, Texas 76703

Dear Mr. Rapoport:

Probably the most frightening statistic to be released recently was the 5% increase in cancer. The labor movement, and our union in particular, anticipated it. Our own experience has demonstrated that occupational carcinomas is not confined to the workplace. In fact, the recent Cancer Atlas issued by the National Cancer Institute shows clusters of cancer around industrial sites.

Of course, people who die before their time are more than statistics; they are tragedies felt by all. Statistically, however, they are of serious concern to insurance companies such as your own. What the community ultimately pays for untimely deaths and, needless to say, the human and financial considerations, require that we do everything possible to develop preventive cancer programs.

The proposal described to you by our Legislative Director for a slide show about the effects of asbestosis is the first in a series of such efforts that will be made by our union. The end result, we hope, will be a program of prevention based on awareness.

Your company would be an excellent sponsor for this proposed slide program. It is my hope that you will approve the proposal.

Sincerely yours,
A. F. Grospiron, President

February 24, 1976
A. F. Grospiron, President
INTERNATIONAL UNION OF OIL WORKERS
Post Office Box 212
Denver, Colorado 80201

Dear Mr. Grospiron,

In view of the thousands of members of our union that we have insured, Mr. Grospiron, our company will provide your International with $6,000 for a film which, hopefully, will be instrumental in reducing mortality.

We appreciate the opportunity to participate in this project.

Sincerely,

Bernard Rapoport

American Income Life Insurance Company—A union label company serving America’s union families. It is publicly owned with 4800 stockholders and with assets in excess of 70 million dollars. If you would like an annual report, write to Kenneth W. Phillips, Vice President and Controller, P.O. Box 208, Waco, Texas 76703.
Correspondence

The New Republic

To the editors:

In your issue of March 6, 1976, Thomas Szasz revealed his ignorance of the considerable psychiatric literature on coercive persuasion and traumatic neurosis ("Some Call it Brainwashing"). In your March 13 issue ("Mercenary Psychiatry") he demonstrated a disregard for truth that can only be considered dishonest if he knew the facts, or dishonestable if he chose not to learn them. For example, Szasz refers to me as a forensic psychiatrist, or testimony-chaser; in fact I have testified at only three trials in more than 25 years as a psychiatrist. Szasz declares that my testimony was purchased by the Hearst family in the case of their daughter, Patricia; in fact I have never in my life accepted a fee for testimony or consultation in a criminal trial.

I examined Patricia Hearst as one of the panel of four (with Drs. Donald T. Lunde, Seymour Pollack and Margaret Thaler Singer) appointed by Judge Oliver J. Carter in September, 1975, prior to her trial. Each of us independently found Ms. Hearst to be legally sane but psychiatrically impaired and in need of treatment. Each of us was available to either prosecution or defense; our reports went to both. When he requested my assistance I advised Judge Carter that I had written a sympathetic letter to the Hearst family—one of thousands they received from strangers like myself—in June, 1974 (not 1975 as stated by Szasz). The Judge asked me to serve anyway, in the legitimate expectation that a psychiatrist can be both objective and honest. For years Szasz has been notorious for shrill polemics crying that psychiatrists are neither.

The two distinguished psychiatrists who were engaged by the Hearst defense (Professors Robert J. Lifton of Yale and Martin T. Orne of Penn) are men of such professional accomplishment and impeccable character that scurrilous suggestions about their motives can only reflect on the source. Were I, like Szasz, a psychoanalyst, I might propose that his renegade view of such colleagues as biased, dishonest or venal is merely a projection—seeing in others that which is present but not admitted in the self. But a simpler explanation may

Marjorie Perloff

Marjorie Perloff is professor of English at the University of Maryland and author most recently of Rhyme & Meaning in the Poetry of Yeats (Humanities).

The Brainwashed Heiress

Sanger runs to more than 200 pages (maddeningly unnumbered), and there are inevitably some dull stretches, particularly in "The Cycle" (Book III), which often seems too abstract, too clever in its parables of Blake, and its allusions to modern physics and Parmenides. Dorn himself recognizes that the later books are more abstract than the first, which is filmlike in its intensity. But Sanger is surely one of the most ambitious and interesting long poems of our time, a truly original cowboy-and-Indian saga, rendered in the most ingenious mix of scientific jargon, structuralist terminology, junkie slang, Elizabethan sonneteering, Western dialect, and tough talk about kicking "a gorilla in the balls." Indeed, the real hero of Sanger is neither Gunslinger nor the curious "I" but language itself, the language of our time, refracted, distorted, heightened, but always recognizable as the jumble of speech we hear around us and see in print. When, at the end of the poem, Sanger announces his departure:

But it grieves me in some slight way because this has been such fine play and I'll miss this marvellous accidentalism

the reader can only agree. The "fine play" of Sanger—its "marvellous accidentalism"—is quite literally horse play, but horse play so learned and witty that it makes most of our long poetic sequences, with their obsessive confessional momentum, look like child's play. In Book II, Gunslinger and his party come across an ingenious machine called a Literate Projector, which turns 35 mm. film into script rather than verse-versa. Like this Literate Projector, Dorn's comic epic "will invent a whole new literature which was Already There."

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