

American Odyssey (Book Review)

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American Odyssey

CHARLES MUNDY

Edward Dorn, Collected Poems, Carcanet, £25, ISBN 9781847771261

I was first introduced to the poetry of Ed Dorn by Roger Langley, an English experimental

poet writing in a rural tradition. I can still hear Langley's voice reading out Dorn's poem 'The Rick of Green Wood', which is one of the earliest in this extraordinary *Collected Poems*:

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

Langley was discussing this American landscape poetry with me and my fellow students at Bishop Vesey's Grammar School, where he was Head of English. It was part of a giddy discourse on American modernist poetics, in which he introduced us to projective verse, composition by field, Charles Olson and Dorn himself. In one of his rare interviews, Langley credited Olson, and Dorn's "areal poetry", with helping him to find his own poetic direction. The influence is marked in Langley's early poem, 'Matthew Glover', which describes the environs of a Staffordshire village and its developing organisational landscape, from an early "open field" system through the changes effected by eighteenth-century land enclosures. The recognition of a complex relationship between landscape and its inhabitants is at the heart of this poem, as is the further connection between the scope of the poem on the page and the object landscape it recreates. Langley gives us Matthew Glover's voice in elegiac mood, describing the relationship between self and geography in ways that would be directly recognisable to Dorn himself:

All is lost
by such an arrangement
took a walk in the fields and
saw an old wood stile
taken away
all my life
a favourite spot

This poetic inheritance, and the inclusion in the *Collected Poems* of an afterword by Dorn's lifelong friend J.H. Prynne, speaks to the range of Dorn's influence. He was an American poet respected by his contemporaries on both sides of the Atlantic, and by poets of very different temperament.

Langley was getting us fired up by Dorn's connection to a sense of things having a season and proportion, and just mattering in their own right, and, in the instance of 'The Rick of Green Wood', by the music expressed in the different harmonies of the simple consciousness of the woodcutter and the child. Reading the poem again I am struck by its humour, for Dorn is a great comic writer in the broadest sense of the term, capable of sardonic anger, but also of the gentle comedy captured here in a fleeting internal rhyme:

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

Elsewhere, Dorn battles with the dominant political discourses and practices of the West, and he often correspondingly moves away from lyricism towards epic, satire, polemic and invective. A student at the experimentalist Black Mountain College in the nineteen fifties, Dorn was a protégé of Charles Olson, whose own commitment to the poetic mapping of an American

geography, and to the importance of dissent, finds resonance in Dorn's work. Born in the year of the Great Crash, Dorn was brought up in the American Midwest during the Depression. By the mid sixties he had published two volumes of poetry, and had come to the attention of Donald Davie who invited Dorn to teach at the University of Essex. Dorn's biographer, Tom Clark, recalls an earlier seminar at Cambridge in which Davie was reading Dorn's poem about New Mexico, 'The Land Below', alongside Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. Such a seemingly unlikely and brilliant pairing of two poets further indicates the relationships between landscape, belonging and origins that are present from the beginning of Dorn's career. His poetry engages with an inclusive geography that draws on the anthropological, the mythical and the geological, and his 1965 collection, itself entitled *Geography* and dedicated to Olson, is a case in point. The opening poem 'Song: The astronauts' imagines a first moon landing, and a human violation of untouched and sacred ground: "but as you dig you will not hear / the marriage flutes / you will be killed in your sleep". Such a sacrilege echoes in Dorn's American psyche, which in turn is haunted by the violence wrought by the expansion of the Western frontier. On Idaho, he writes:

she is

cut off by geologies she says

I'm sure

are natural

but it is truly the West

as no other place,

ruined by an ambition and religion

cut, by a cowboy use of her nearly virgin self ('Idaho Out')

But the move to sixties England further complicated Dorn's sense of geography. Dedicated to Prynne, Davie and Raworth, *The North Atlantic Turbine* (1967) in particular negotiates new geographical, political and poetic possibilities afforded by transatlantic experience. In a long poem prompted by Oxford he writes: "To love / that, and retain an ear for / the atrocities of my own hemisphere / more relevant and major for both of us now / England / is the labor".

This period also saw the beginning of Dorn's most sustained and important work, *Gunslinger*, an epic in four books published from 1968 (that most revolutionary of years) to 1975.

It is a two-hundred-page "discourse on / the parameters of reality". Book I has an epigraph: "The curtain might rise anywhere on a single speaker", but the "I" with which the poem opens is famously not a straightforward pronoun denoting the single lyrical voice; "I" becomes the terse name of one of several characters surrounding the Gunslinger himself. At one point I dies: "I is dead, the poet said. / *That ain't grammatical, Poet.* / Maybe. However Certain it seems". It might seem certain, but in this imagined landscape certainty is the last thing you should trust. Dorn's Wild West is a mythography, as all versions of the American West ultimately are. But this is complex satire too, a love poem to familiar archetypes that are represented in a narrative of grotesque comedic surrealism. It charts the bankruptcy, corruption and fascination of the American, and indeed, more broadly, the human, condition. Dorn's cast of characters has a talking horse to rival that other Mister Ed, although Dorn's horse, named after Claude Lévi-Strauss, smokes Mexican weed from his saddlebags and skilfully deals cards. Lil is another standard from the saloon bar, a Madam with a heart of gold, who won't make what she terms as "it" with the horse despite his asking, even though the thought of it amuses her, as her use of the neuter pronoun in this instance provokes equine puzzlement and scorn. Such multiplying linguistic confusions are compounded with the arrival of Kool Everything, a character protective of his batch, a 5 gallon can of pure LSD, which he sees as a kind of retirement fund. Everything's presence makes even more interesting work of construing lines that would be at home in the linguistic knockabout of pantomime: "oh what is THAT [...] What, Whats outside? [...] I agree with Everything the Horse said".

This unlikely gang journey to an imaginary suburb, which prompts the horse to reflect on the lost mind-blowing opportunities presented by the average front plot: "Holy shit, *Lawn* grass... / from that great tribe / they selected something to *Mow*". At one point Everything's LSD is expropriated as a formaldehyde substitute to preserve I. Unsurprisingly this brings I back to life,

to the knee-jerk distrust of the suburban “citizens” who witness his difference: “and tho / they had nought invested, an old appetite / for the Destruction of the Strange / governed the massed impulse of their tongues / for they could never comprehend / what the container contained”. In such moments we see to the heart of Dorn’s political interests in the dispossessed, in the outsider and in the importance of providing a tongue to contradict the mass impulse.

The poem is at times pragmatic, surreal, deeply philosophical and, most of all, very funny. Justifying his shooting of a café manager who presents the bill by jamming his finger into Everything’s ear, I invokes the spirit of a different kind of table talk, from Dr Johnson: “if Public war be allowed / to be consistent with morality / Private war must be equally so”, which is either a defence of duelling or an attack on state warfare, depending on how you look at it. Everything’s reaction is more immediately to the point and demonstrates Dorn’s comic timing at its best: “I don’t give a fuck about that / Everything panicked, get this / finger outa my ear”. The finger stays in for some time.

Occasionally we are alerted to some of the anxieties and benefits of influence that lie behind Dorn’s writing. “Then sat we mid aftermath,” writes I in the saloon, surrounded by the stoned horse’s maps and spliffs. This is a fine location to hear an echo from Ezra Pound’s first Canto, a line translated out of Homer via a well-documented circuitous route, giving us the words of Odysseus on the strangest leg of his own epic journey, to Hades: “Then sat we amidships, wind jamming the tiller”. In such moments Dorn suggests his connections to a tradition, and his aspirations to his own form of epic. He acknowledges the allied archetype of the quest narrative, although the stated purpose of the quest, to find the elusive Howard Hughes, is largely forgotten in the process of the journey itself. The journey has a landscape of geographical referents, but distance is not measured in miles: “How far is it Claude?” asks the Slinger: “Across / two states / of mind” replies the talking horse. In this landscape, naming, according to the Slinger (himself referred to only by the sign of his pure profession) is where it gets dangerous: “Nevertheless, / it is dangerous to be named / and makes you mortal”, a lesson known to Odysseus who famously takes away his own name to become ‘Nobody’ at the point of maximum danger. In this way Dorn marries the legend of the man with no name, embodied most famously in Western iconography by Clint Eastwood, to that earlier epic and finally solitary traveller, Odysseus. Dorn’s poetry of the later nineteen seventies and eighties is often waspishly epigrammatic, the work of a natural contrarian whose targets are plentiful. In *Abhorrences: A Chronicle of the Eighties*, he holds up the spirit of the age to various kinds of ridicule: “one bullet / is worth / a thousand bulletins [Motto, 9th decade]”. In another poem he reflects on a Reaganite argument in support of prayer in schools. Apparently, according to Reagan, it all went wrong for the Greeks and Romans when they stopped praying to their gods. What, Dorn wonders, if their culture could be more generally reinstated? “And what about sacrifices? / I wouldn’t mind seeing Cap Weinberger on a spit”. The title of his final collection, *Chemo Sábe*, published posthumously in 2001, returns us through the pun in the title to the archetype of the Lone Ranger, and to the effects of, in this case pharmaceutical, drugs used to fight his terminal cancer. These are intense poems, but they are not merely self-elegiac, as the cancer is metaphorical. It is portrayed as both agent and product of the Western will to power, and it provides an efficient poetic symbol for the deathly results of warmongering invasion. The poems are also shot through with Dorn’s characteristic humour:

And then,
there’s Atavan, Shelley Winters says
makes her life wonderful, which is O.K.
but way low on Wonder. If it is wonder
ye seek, knock on the door of a wizard
not the hollow counter

of the pharmacist at Rite Aid. (“The Drugs Are Over-rated”)

As I says in *Gunslinger*, “entrapment is this society’s / Sole activity [...] / and Only laughter, / can blow it to rags”. Dorn’s laughter persists throughout all of his poetic explorations of displacement, persecution and subjugation, and the fire of his intelligence lights the darkest of

historical and imaginary states that he conjures throughout. This is a big, contentious and important book.

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