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GUN SLINGER

EDWARD
DORN

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American masterpiece."*

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"This is a jokey poem, high-spirited and good-tempered, carried forward on a steadily inventive play of puns and pleasantries."

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Gunslinger

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GUN SLING -ER

**EDWARD
DORN**

...
50th Anniversary
Edition
...

With an introduction and a new foreword by Marjorie Perloff

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS *Durham & London*

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Foreword

On the Fiftieth Anniversary

of Ed Dorn's Gunslinger

Book 1 of *Gunslinger*, published in the cataclysmic year 1968, begins with the Slinger's quest to find "an inscrutable Texan named Hughes / Howard," last seen in Boston but having, according to rumor, "*moved to Vegas / or bought Vegas and moved it.*" In my introduction to *Gunslinger* (1989), I noted that Dorn once referred to Hughes as an "extension of the earlier, nonelectronic, financial geniuses like [James] Fisk and [Jay] Gould." And I added, "Dorn's representation of Hughes anticipates, for that matter, the current 'legend' of Donald Trump and his empire."

When I reread these words recently I was quite startled. I can't remember having even known of Trump's existence back in the 1980s; I never paid attention to the endless tabloid stories about Trump Tower, the Trump divorces, and so on, and I must confess that I have never watched a reality show. Subliminally, however, Trump must have already been part of our collective unconscious and hence of my own. But celebrity is not, after

all, equivalent to fame: whereas Hughes, however sinister, was a genius in engineering, aeronautics, and film-making, Trump's appeal is closer to the circus world of Barnum & Bailey. From Hughes to Trump: it seems a clear-cut example of Marx's aphorism that great men always appear twice, the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.

Ed Dorn was unusually prescient in understanding how this evolution works: his Howard Hughes begins as a figure of mystery and charisma, but as the poem progresses, he increasingly becomes a Trumpian comic-book character, a mere cypher, who before long disappears from the poem's scene, as does its "Western" geography, which gives way to the "marvelous accidentalism" at the end of Book IIII, where the poet announces that he is "Moving to Montana soon / going to be a nose spray tycoon," even as the Slinger himself declares:

I'll go along with the tachyon showers
which are by definition faster than light
& faster than prime
I'll be home by supertime.

In his afterword to Dorn's *Collected Poems*, published by Carcanet in 2012, Amiri Baraka, one of Dorn's oldest poet-friends, reminds us that in a late poem called "Tribe," Dorn writes:

My tribe came from struggling labor
Depression South Eastern Illinois
Just before the southern hills start
To roll toward the coal country
Where the east/west morainial ridges
Of Wisconsin trash pile up
At the bottom of the prairie, socially

...

Where I was brought up of and on during
The intensity of the depression, parents
Wandering work search, up and down
The bleak grit avenues of Flint . . .

...

Michael Moore—land from the beginning

....

I'm with the Kurds and the Serbs and the Iraqis
And every defiant nation this jerk
Ethnic crazy country bombs—

...

But I'm straight out
of my tribe from my great grandma Merton
Pure Kentucky English. . . .

“What’s so interesting,” Baraka comments, “is that Dorn always reflected that tribal anguished sense of being somehow distanced from an America he was obviously deeply a part of.” It is that conflict, he posits, that put Dorn in a unique position to write his gestural epic about a “Wild West” that is actually refracted through endless media and pop-culture prisms. *Gunslinger* is itself a kind of reality show, anticipating, in an uncanny way, the rhetorical games and bizarre pronouncements that paved the road to the White House for Donald Trump in 2016. Dorn’s is indeed Michael Moore—land.

But—and this is what makes *Gunslinger* a unique long poem—however sharp the poet’s critique of the Western landscape and its denizens, its tale must be taken comically. Had Dorn been alive to witness the 2016 U.S. election, he would, I believe, have had no more patience with the solemn, self-righteous attacks on the president that flood our daily papers than with the mem-

bers of his own “tribe” in the hills above the coal country who voted for Trump. This point is astutely made by another Dorn poet-friend, the Cambridge don J. H. Prynne. Known for the difficulty of his learned and scientifically sophisticated poetry, for his reclusiveness, his refusal of all media presence, Prynne flew halfway around the world to attend Dorn’s memorial in Boulder in 1999. In his eulogy, transcribed for the *Collected Poems*, he emphasizes the “rare precious quality of absolute independence of voice” in Dorn. Even in the face of 1968 tragic frenzy—the LA and Chicago Riots, the Vietnam War, the French uprising, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy—Dorn’s voice, Prynne remarks, “was never political in the sense that there was ever any party he had any time for whatsoever. Whenever the party got to organize, he was out of it. There was no question. The only people he had time for were the people whom the parties professed to speak on behalf of, whom they would employ as part of their rhetorical argument to mobilize whatever advantages they wanted for themselves. His sense of hypocrisy was extremely acute.”

I think this is a very telling statement. Sometimes, Dorn’s satire can look unnecessarily harsh, too flatly negative. But as Prynne notes, the poet’s central purpose is “to keep the language from falling into the hands of those who want to promote it as an oppressive instrument.” To accomplish this, the poet must avoid the programmatic, the institutional, the endless claims for American exceptionalism made by both political parties. Only *comedy*, the poet of Slinger implies, can handle this state of affairs, and *Gunslinger* relies on parody, burlesque, a set of comic characters, and especially its brilliant verbal play to create the epic’s very special atmosphere. If, in this year of Oxycontin overdoses, its drug argot seems a bit dated, its critique of a money-mad society, in which highly trained physicians willfully distribute drugs like

Oxycontin to unsuspecting elderly people, is as sharp as ever. A poet genuinely ahead of his time and still largely unrecognized by the Verse Establishment, Dorn has given us a cartoon epic that eerily looks ahead to the Trump World of the twenty-first century in all its absurd dimensions. *Mar-a-Lago*: what a perfect name for the location—"the enormous space / between here and formerly," "the vacuum of social infinity"—where Slinger and Madam Lil, Kool Everything and Tonto Pronto, Dr. Jean Flamboyant, the Stoned Horse named Claude after Lévi-Strauss, and especially the earnest narrator named "I"—conduct one of their evenings of fun and games?

Marjorie Perloff

Introduction

Driving South to the Los Angeles International Airport on Highway 405 (the San Diego Freeway), one takes the Sepulveda exit only to find oneself on what seems to be another highway, this one called Howard Hughes Boulevard. Improbably wide, newly paved, and treelined, Howard Hughes Boulevard invites high-speed driving but then suddenly dead-ends with a sharp left turn onto Sepulveda. A mirage of sorts, the boulevard provides the motorist with a glimpse of empty lots behind a chain-link fence: the road map does not identify the territory, but Los Angeles motorists sometimes refer to it as the Howard Hughes Testing Range. But is anything actually being tested in all this emptiness? And what does Howard Hughes have to do with it?

These are questions Edward Dorn posed almost two decades ago in *Slinger*, his dazzling anti-epic of

the Wild West, in which the narrator (“I”), sets out with the “Cautious Gunslinger/of impeccable personal smoothness/and slender leather encased hands” (3), on a quest in search of “an inscrutable Texan named Hughes”:

Howard? I asked
The very same.
And what do you mean by inscrutable,
oh Gunslinger?
I mean to say that He
has not been seen since 1833. (6)

And again:

but I heard this Hughes
Howard? I asked
Right, *boy*
they say he moved to Vegas
or bought Vegas and
moved it.
I can't remember which. (9)

But of course by the time we reach the end of *Slinger*, we “can’t remember which” either. For Las Vegas turns out to be “*a vast decoy*” (169), a simulacrum deflecting the Slinger’s “timetrain,” just as the “real” Howard Hughes Boulevard is a simulated speedway that dead-ends almost as soon as it gets under way.

As an epic of contemporary celluloid America, with its cartoon versions of Capitalist Entrepreneurs and Outlaw Heroes, its simulated folksiness, its Sci-Fi allusions and reductive academic clichés, *Slinger* was a poem very much ahead of its time. When Book I

appeared in 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War, it was treated as something of an anomaly, even though the Black Sparrow edition of only 600 copies quickly became an underground classic and a collector's item. Neither confessional like Lowell's *Notebook 1967-68*, nor epiphanic and intensely subjective like Merwin's *The Lice*, nor even enigmatically ruminative like John Ashbery's *The Double Dream of Spring*, Book I of *Slinger* has more in common with Pop Art than with the mid-century American lyric, even the lyric of Black Mountain (Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov) with which Dorn has regularly been associated.

Like such Pop Artists of the sixties as Jim Dine and Larry Rivers, Dorn is concerned with the archaeology of mass-produced myths, specifically, in the case of *Slinger*, the Western myth of the frontier, with its sharpshooters and ranchers, its saloons and small towns, its ballads and brothels. But his West is not that of John Wayne or Gary Cooper; it is the plastic, gestural "West" we encounter on TV, in comic strips, rock songs, drug argot and pulp science fiction. As such, geography (what Dorn has called in an interview "the writing of earth, earth writing") imperceptibly becomes history: indeed, *place* (Mesilla, Truth or Consequences, the Rio Grande, Las Vegas) is itself a simulacrum, the TV screen presenting the same images in New York as in Four Corners, whereas *time*, the Vietnam War moment of the late sixties and early seventies, is central to Dorn's narrative.

Not that the poem is overtly about the war. In

Dorn's allegorical scheme, characters exist, not as particular individuals but as functions of a larger mechanism, relational properties that take on meaning only in their interaction. The Gunslinger himself, for instance, is presented as the classic comic-book outlaw hero, a macho sharpshooter who drinks tequila and punctuates his cryptic remarks with obscenities. But the Slinger is also a *Semidios*, who can "unroll the map of locations" (4), a phenomenologist who is given to burlesque treatises like the following:

Negative, says my Gunslinger,
no *thing* is omitted.
Time is more fundamental than space.
It is, indeed, the most pervasive
of all the categories
in other words
theres plenty of it.
And it stretches things themselves
until they blend into one,
so if youve seen one thing
youve seen them all. (4-5)

Slinger (in Britain the term refers to one who plays the stock market) or Zlinger, as he is later called, is also a Noble Bard of sorts, his farewell speech in Book IIII a slightly offbase iambic pentameter sonnet that splices together bits of Keats, Shakespeare, and Sci-Fi:

Many the wonders this day I have seen
the Zlinger addressed his friends
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
But it grieves me in some slight way
because this has been such fine play
and I'll miss this marvellous accidentalism (198)

The poem's "fine play," its "marvellous accidentalism" stems, as we shall see, from the interaction between the Slinger and his two primary foils. The first is "Hughes/Howard," also known by his middle name as Robart (i.e., *rob art*, the role of American capitalism being, so Dorn believes, to destroy the mainsprings of art), toward whom the Slinger is always tilting even as he never catches up with Hughes and indeed ultimately forgets that it is his aim to find the mysterious entrepreneur. One of the poem's ironies is that the counterculture Slinger himself cannot help admiring this "great singular," as Dorn calls Hughes in an interview, this "extension of the earlier, non-electronic, financial geniuses like Fisk and Gould." Dorn's representation of Hughes anticipates, for that matter, the current "legend" of Donald Trump and his empire.

The gunslinger's second foil is the poem's narrator, "I," who represents, in Michael Davidson's words, "the last vestige of the self-conscious, ration-

alizing ego” of Cartesianism, the unitary self whose trust in linear logic and rationality leads him into an endless series of questions that the Slinger and his friends find inappropriate if not ludicrous:

Heidigger? I asked
the Xtian statistician
is that who you are?
Are you trying
to “describe” me, boy? (25)

Or again:

Please don’t hold my shortcoming
against me oh Gunslinger
and may I enquire of you —
Enquire? he breathed
don’t do *that*
Well then may I . . .
no I wouldn’t do that Either (29)

As Slinger’s persistent interrogator, “I” wants to understand what things *mean* (28), what is *behind* statements made, and where propositions *lead*. As such, “I” is the object of everyone else’s ridicule, the poem’s phenomenological perspective denying First Principles and Transcendental Meanings and insisting that, in the words of the Slinger, it is wrong to “want to know/what something *means* after you’ve/seen it, after you’ve *been* there” (29). As the nagging Ego in a world of fragmented selves, “I” appropriately dies in Book II and is embalmed in a five gallon can of LSD, but he reappears in Book IIII in his post-LSD

incarnation as the secretary to the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides, a kind of cybernetic intelligence who no longer tries to mediate the information he receives, no longer insists on the sanctity of his ego.

The dismantling of "I"'s consciousness plays a literary role as well. No longer, Dorn implies, is poetry bound to the first-person mode, the narrative controlled by the unitary voice of the first person. Rather, selves collide, merge, and take on each other's identity; indeed, the group supercedes the individual. Between Slinger and "I," other voices position themselves: Lil, the quintessential Mae West frontier dance-hall madam, the Poet-Singer, whose lyrics are a mixture of Shelleyan ode and media-speak and whose dismantling of the language plays a major role in Dorn's epic, and the Stoned Horse (a parodic version of the cowboy's beast of burden), who smokes the giant marijuana cigars known as Tampico bombers and is a kind of Blakean "horse of instruction" sometimes called Claude Lévi-Strauss and sometimes Heidegger—both critics, of course, of the Cartesian rationalism the poem is at pains to debunk. In later books we also meet a comic-book version of the sixties' acid freak named Kool Everything ("my Head has been misplaced", 54) and a Dr. Jean Flamboyant (flamboyant gene), an all-promising mutant whose researches into "post-ephemeral" (82) subjects are designed to "fix anything" (81). In Book III, two new "speedy" characters are introduced: Taco Desoxin (Desoxin is a type of amphetamine) and his partner Tonto Pronto (the Lone Ranger's trusted

Indian). Together with Portland Bill and Dr. Flamboyant, this quartet of parody tv Western types specialize in "Pre-pour'd Scorn," by "burn[ing] telephone poles," "eat[ing] fur coats," and "suck[ing] air thru white sidewalls" (167-68).

The epic journey made by this "constellation" turns out to lead nowhere. Its ostensible purpose — to find Howard Hughes in Las Vegas — is deflected as the party travels northwest along the Rio Grande to the town of Truth or Consequences, N.M., and thence into Colorado. When Hughes finally turns up at Four Corners, he decoaches without encountering Slinger and abruptly heads for South America in search of new frontiers for his multinational empire. Indeed, by that time the Slinger has lost interest in the quest. Which is to say that we must give up a search for a Center, a logocentrism that privileges the Individual even as it creates an exploitative economic world of "centerless systems (computer banks, fast-food chains, corporate conglomerates) whose information is transferable and variable" (Davidson, 120).

Much has been made of the poem's political critique, its indirect but searching attack on the Vietnam War as the very emblem of the "Shortage Industry" created by industrial capitalism. But despite Dorn's glancing references to the Four Corners Power Plant, to the military takeover in Chile or the business deals effected in Saudi Arabia, *Slinger* invokes rather than analyzes the debacle of postmodern monopoly Capitalism. Indeed, it could be argued that Dorn's pop

narrative and campy characterization give rise to what is correspondingly a Pop critique of “the Great Cycle of the Enchanted Wallet” (89), a critique that may strike readers of the late eighties as slightly “sicksties” (159) in its assumption that rebellion against “them” can effect change and that the drug culture is an appropriate (and perhaps necessary) component of that rebellion.

Each of *Slinger*’s four books is devoted to a specific drug: the first to marijuana, the second to LSD, the third and fourth to cocaine (Lil is known as Cocaine Lil). In an interview with Steven Fredman, Dorn explains that “the drugs are like the facade or the molding on the building. I don’t mean that as enticements, in the sense that Hansel and Gretel’s witch had a lot of gingerbread around, but just as the facades that would be recognized as of the period. They were very much of the time.” And he adds, “The [Vietnam] war was a drug war, too. They were the same thing in a way. . . . There was the drug traffic, which established itself right at the chisel-edge of the war” (93–94). The “psychological problem” the United States was undergoing during the war “got expressed,” so Dorn suggests, “through drugs” (94).

Which is to say that drugs often express contradictory values in the poem. For even the sequences in which characters seem to perform more effectively when stoned:

Thus sat the four of us
at last a company it seemed

and the Bombed Horse took off his stetson
XX, and drew on the table
our future course (21)—

or those that present, say, the harvesting of the Erythroxyton coca shrub as an amusing and innocent ritual:

CO-KÁNG! is the way it begaine,
was a Girl from the montaine
raised on air and light
Erthralynn, painted with red clay
and dressed in leaves resembling myrtle
Erythra with a wig of roots
and she was vulgar and strong
as pure salt
and intuition came to her
like the red deer to a lick (172)

are characterized by a nice double irony: drugs, it turns out, are a sign, not only of counterculture, but a sign that is itself wholly mediated through the simulated “Western”-speak that permeates the landscape, so that “intuition” comes to a “vulgar and strong” Cocaine Lil “like the red deer to a lick.” The same doubleness characterizes Lil herself, whose archetypal status as Woman is repeatedly ironized by references to her expertise at running the show, an expertise that all but matches Hughes’s own:

Lil patted the Zlingers cheek
and asked him if he could speak
Looks like you slept
through most of that she said (196).

Indeed, as “the slave/of appearances” (27), Lil paradoxically functions as mistress in the literal sense of mastery, in that she never succumbs to the notion that, as Slinger is still wont to suppose, “There is but one Logos/tho many Images audition” (78). And in this sense Lil’s asides and expletives play an important role in what I take to be the real thrust of *Slinger*: its elaborate dismantling and deconstruction of our linguistic and poetic habits.

Dorn’s “ABSOLUTE LINGUATILT SURVEY SITE #1” (141) begins with the premise that there can be no accurate signification, that to be named is to be destroyed. For once you have a name:

you can be sold
you can be told
by that name leave, or come
you become, in short
a reference (32).

To be named or described is to be circumscribed and bound to a particular time and place, which is why Howard Hughes is also Robart and Slinger is called Sun God or Zlinger. The “Literate Projector” of Book II, which turns image into script rather than the other way around, is thus the ultimate useless technological tool, the emblem of the signifier tied narrowly to a single transcendental signified.

Consequently, language as communicative tool, as intentional circuit from A to B, gives way to the “spasm/of presyntactic metalinguistic urgency” (73) that everywhere animates the text. Puns (Dorn’s favorite trope), paragrams, homonyms, portmanteau

words, archaisms, nonsense words, parody tunes — these are spliced together with countless variations so to produce a “map of locations” in which meaning is endlessly deferred, endlessly called into question. Thus when the Slinger “parted the curtains/to have a look at the stereoscopic world,” he is “astoned” (48), while Lil complains to him that the Stoned Horse is “*scarin my girls with hostile talk*” (24). The Poet, a “drifting singer,” greets the horse with the words, “Hi! Digger” (25), and responds to the request “what song can you sing?” with a parody “song before parting”:

On a plane of this plain
stood a dark colonnade
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 damajuana,
on her arm an emotion
on her ankle a band
a slender ampersand (39)

Such parody ballads take literalism to its logical and absurd extreme. Consider the following syllogism: (1) in formulaic folk-ballad diction, lips are conventionally scarlet; (2) there is a bird called the scarlet tanager; therefore (3) “her mouth” is a “disturbed

tanager.” Again — this time a pun — the “empty damajuana” is both a large earthenware or glass bottle (*damajuana* is Spanish for *demijohn*), the perfect appurtenance for a girl standing under a dark colonnade in, say, a Manet painting, but the word also designated, given its literal translation as Lady Jane, a popular slang term for marijuana, an empty or used-up reefer.

The verbal ground of *Slinger* ranges over such “subjects” as Pindar’s theory of light, the horse as personification of knowledge, game theory, the nature of serial transmission, and the poet as authority figure, the epic’s “LINGUATILT” skidding precipitously from science-speak (“his minde/played over the austenitic horizon/and gaged the coefficient of expansion” — 186), to Shakespeare (“How like a winter hath my absence been” — 47), even as the Poet accompanies these words with the “STRUM” of his “abso-lute.” In the end, *Slinger* is perhaps best understood as a poetic Sourcebook on postmodern discourses — the discourses of atomic science and cybernetics, pop song and media-speak, Heideggerianism and high finance.

As such, Dorn’s long poem, happily reissued here, marks an important turning point in American poetry, a turn away from the monologic lyric of mid-century to the dialogic “parapoem” of fin de siècle, with its amalgam of “theory” and lyric, of prose narrative and sound-text, and especially of citation embedded in or superimposed upon the speech of a particular self. It is a nice paradox, and one that must amuse Dorn himself, that this seemingly quintessential

"sixties" Pop epic, this underground classic of the seventies, has had to wait until the late eighties to come into its own.

Marjorie Perloff

For Further Reading

The reader is urged to consult Edward Dorn, *Interviews*, ed. Donald Allen (Bolinas, Calif.: Four Seasons Foundation, 1980), especially Stephen Fredman's "Road-Testing the Language." A valuable introduction to Dorn's life and work is William McPheron's bibliographical essay, *Edward Dorn* (Boise State University Western Writers Series, 1988). Donald Wesling's *Internal Resistances: The Poetry of Edward Dorn* (University of California Press, 1985) contains important essays on *Slinger* by Robert von Hallberg, Paul Dresman, and Michael Davidson. I am especially indebted to Davidson's "'To eliminate the draw': Narrative and Language in *Slinger*."

B O O K I

*The curtain might rise
anywhere on a single speaker*

for Paul Dorn