

Edward Dorn, *Collected Poems*. Edited by Jennifer Dunbar Dorn. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2012. ISBN 978 1 84777 126 1. 995 pages.

This is a superb new collection of the work of Edward Dorn, one of the much neglected masters of modern American poetry. At last it is possible to fully appreciate the literary achievement of this maverick, postmodernist poet in the almost one thousand pages of his poetry that span his whole writing life. In this digital age, when book publishing more and more turns to a quick popular fix, Carcanet Press have to be praised for their courage and audacity in making Dorn's poetry available in this massive, beautifully printed, meticulously edited and critically commented edition.

Dorn was a radical working-class writer who put his talents as a poet at the service of the poor and dispossessed, the ordinary people he grew up with, worked with as a labourer and lumberjack, and whose hopes and fears he gave a voice to in his poetry. Born in 1929, at the time of the Wall Street Crash and the ensuing Great Depression, Dorn's personal experience of grinding poverty gave him a rare insight into the lives of people who seldom appear on the literary horizons, especially those of poets. In contrast, Dorn never lost touch with his lower-class roots; they remained his personal, political and poetic point of departure for the rest of his life. As he wrote in the poem, *Tribe*, not long before he died in 1999:

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 morainal ridges
Of Wisconsin trash pile up
At the bottom of the prairie, socially
[...]
Where I was brought up off and on during
The intensity of the depression, parents
Wandering work search, up and down
The bleak grit avenues of Flint, following
Other exodus relatives, Belgian-in-laws
From another french connection
Michael Moore-land from the beginning
Manmade poisons in the cattle feed way
Before Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease and angry cows –
[...]
I'm with the Kurds and the Serbs and the Iraqis
And every defiant nation this jerk
Ethnic crazy country bombs –
World leaders can claim
What they want about terror,
As they wholesale helicopters
To the torturers –
 But I'm straight out
Of my tribe from my great grandma Merton
Pure Kentucky English – it would take more paper

Than I'll ever have to express how justified I feel

Dorn wrote consciously in the tradition of other radical American poets – from Whitman and Carl Sandburg, through to Alan Ginsberg and Adrian Rich. Through his own experience of working on the land, he sought in his poetry to explore both the physical and mythical expanses of the American West, not least in his long epic poem, *Gunslinger*, which he published in four books from 1968 to 1975. It is an extraordinary surreal comic masterpiece, featuring a quixotic journey across the Plains by an existentially angst-ridden cowboy, called Slinger, and his equally philosophically minded talking horse, named Levi-Strauss. This playful, postmodern, picaresque poem is probably the best place to start if one has not read anything by Dorn before. Just listen for instance to the Slinger and the Poet talking about who's the fastest gun in the West:

How fast are you?
Oh, average fast I suppose
or maybe a little more
than average fast, I ventured.
[...]
How is it then?
How can such speed be?
You make the air dark
with the beauty of your speed,
Gunslinger, the air
separates and reunites as if lightening
had cut past
leaving behind a simple experience.
How can such aching speed be?

The most accessible account of Dorn's life and work can be found in Tom Clark's sensitive and finely written biography of his friend and fellow-poet: *Edward Dorn. A World of Difference* (2002). But now we also have this magnificent collection to turn to. Without doubt, Dorn represents a unique and challenging presence within American literature, a writer whose commitment to his working-class roots continues to reverberate through the radical pathos of his poetry:

No hesitation
would stay me
from weeping this morning
for the miners of Hazard Kentucky.
The mine owners
extortionary skulls
whose eyes are diamonds don't float
down the rivers, as they should,
of the flood
The miners, cold
starved, driven from work, in
their homes float though and float
on the ribbed ships of their frail

bodies,
 Oh, go letter,
keep my own misery close to theirs
associate me with no other honor.
(*Mourning letter, March 29, 1963*)

Ronald Paul