

**EDWARD DORN**



**EDWARD DORN**

**TWO INTERVIEWS**

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Cover photographs: (*Left*) Edward Dorn at the National Poetry Festival,  
Thomas Jefferson College, Allendale, Michigan, June 1973; photograph by  
Craig Vander Lende; courtesy of Robert Vas Dias. (*Right*) Edward Dorn at  
the Poetry Society / National Poetry Centre, Earl’s Court, London, June  
1981; photograph by Alan Burgis; courtesy of Gavin Selerie.

Back cover text: from ‘*The Riverside Interview*’ (1981).

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## PREFACE

As its title announces, this book collects two interviews with the American poet Edward Dorn. ‘*The Peak Interview*’ (1971), conducted by Robin Blaser’s students Tom McGauley, Brian Fawcett, and John Scoggan, was published in Simon Fraser University’s student newspaper *The Peak*, and contains contributions from J.H. Prynne, Stan Persky, and Ralph Maud. We have followed up the interview with a short selection of texts from *The Day & Night Report* (Dorn’s unpublished daybook from 1971), hopefully in advance of a full publication of that work in the near future. ‘*The Riverside Interview*’ (1981) was intended for publication in the *Riverside Interviews* series and is supplemented here with an introduction by Gavin Selerie, the interviewer. Following it is a selection of two chapters from Dorn’s unpublished prose work *Juneau in June* (1980–81), as well three uncollected poems (including a draft of one of them) from the English magazine *Spectacular Diseases* (1981). The interviews add to what has been available for some time, mostly in Dorn’s *Interviews* (1980), and more recently in Joseph Richey’s compilation *Ed Dorn Live* (2007); but they also participate in a wider renewal of interest in the work of this singular poet.

2004 saw the publication of a special Dorn issue of the *Chicago Review*, edited by Eirik Steinhoff; as well as the American poetry issue of *Edinburgh Review*, featuring Sam Ladkin’s excellent essay on *Gunslinger*. These works benefitted from an early look into Dorn’s papers, held in the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center at the University of Connecticut, an archive not catalogued until 2005. A few more scholars have since made forays into those papers, the fruits of which labour are beginning to emerge, amidst the more general enterprise of Dorn publishing. In 2010, Optic Nerve and Birkbeck College released a CD of otherwise unavailable readings, entitled *Idaho Out: Poems 1964–1967*. A special Dorn issue of *Hot Gun!* was published in 2011, edited with an extended introduction by Joshua Stanley, with essays and transcriptions of unpublished or obscure texts, along with poems by contemporary British and American poets. Reitha Pattison’s *Edward Dorn: Geography, Capitalism and Cosmology*, forthcoming

from Peter Lang, will be the first Dorn monograph since James K. Elmborg's 1998 study of *Gunslinger*. Kyle Waugh is preparing Dorn's *Collected Prose*, and for CUNY's Lost & Found project he is editing the unpublished screenplay from the '60s/'70s, *Abilene! Abilene!*. Other Lost & Found projects include Claudia Pisano's 2009 selection of Dorn's correspondence with Amiri Baraka (which publication promises a forthcoming full collection of the Dorn/Baraka letters) and Lindsey M. Freer's 2012 edition of Dorn's 1981 *Charles Olson Memorial Lectures* (though the second of these three lectures remains available only on *Pennsound*). Matt Hofer, through the University of New Mexico, is preparing a new edition of *The Shoshoneans*. Etruscan Books has this year published an edition of the unfinished long poem *Westward Haut*. And finally, Carcanet Press has just published Edward Dorn's first *Collected Poems* since 1983, edited by Jennifer Dunbar Dorn and co-edited by Reitha Pattison, Kyle Waugh, and myself. A volume of poems not included in the Carcanet publication is being planned by the editors.

That the posthumous *Collected Poems* of a major American poet should be first published in England is testament to the transatlantic asymmetry of concern for Dorn's writing. In part, his international appeal is amplified because, to some extent, he crossed over: in both of the interviews published here, Dorn explicitly reaffirms the importance of his time in England, where all in all he lived on and off for half a decade, in Colchester, London, and Cambridge. Much of his most brilliant work was written or first published in England in the sixties, and as he wrote towards the end of his life, in his introduction to *High West Rendezvous* (1996): "my sojourn in England nearly half a life-time ago... set me on a new course". The shape and speed of Dorn's imagination changed in proportion with the shift of his geographical coordinates. This shift is mapped out in *The North Atlantic Turbine*, Dorn's painful account of cultural disorientation and loss, perhaps the most equally difficult and beautiful of his books. Stating at the opening of 'The Peak Interview' that *The North Atlantic Turbine* was "one of the most important books, most necessary books I'll ever do", Dorn goes on to say that "I never read it, and I never read from it. Or want to see it." Dorn's contemporaneous recordings of this



work are extraordinary,<sup>1</sup> which is not surprising because *The North Atlantic Turbine* is a desperate book, a record of the shock of Dorn's American dealignment (as well as the origin of his most acclaimed work, *Gunslinger*). His refusal to countenance the reckless precision of *The North Atlantic Turbine* four years after its publication has its counterpart monstrosity in America's failure to celebrate one of the greatest products of its strange interior.

The interviews and writing published here span a decade of adjustment for Dorn. The opening strokes of *Gunslinger*, written before 1968, were impatient for their impossible closure in the 1970s. The epigrammatic style characterising *Abhorrences* and earlier books was just beginning to emerge in Dorn's readings and magazine publications; this was a product both of the overflow into Dorn's general poetic consciousness of *Gunslinger's* rolling dialogic comedy, and of his practice of keeping a daybook in 1971. By 1971, Dorn's language was no longer American English, nor was it quite the English with which he began *Gunslinger*. Dorn's first family was effectively left behind, and his teacher Charles Olson lived only ten days into the seventies. Dorn emerged out of the sixties with a new family, formed with his English wife Jennifer Dunbar Dorn (who kept a parallel 1971 daybook, one of the couple's various collaborations). In so many other ways was the continent on which Dorn became a poet in the fifties not the continent he returned to in the late sixties. And accordingly, he did not hesitate to give the full expanse of his "home" a thorough inspection, reading his poetry at venues across the country, teaching and writing in New England, Kansas, Chicago, Ohio, and California (where he spent considerable time with Tom Raworth and the printers who would set the complete *Slinger*), living in cities and towns and mountain retreats across the United States, consuming a wide variety of drugs, travelling through Mexico with his family (who later took a cross-country road trip with J.H. Prynne), returning to England for another teaching stint at Essex, then back to California, and finally landing a permanent job in Colorado.

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<sup>1</sup> There are two sources for these: the 1967 Livingdisc/Stream Records LP *Edward Dorn reads from The North Atlantic Turbine*, available online at *Ubuweb*; and the Optic Nerve CD *Idaho Out*.

It was in the summer of 1971 that Prynne and the Dorns drove across America, from Boston, through Chicago (where the Dorns were then living) and up across the border to Vancouver. Jennifer Dunbar Dorn's daybook (in Box 39 of Connecticut's Dorn Papers) is, apart from being a literary work in its own right, a useful source of information about that trip. The band of travelers arrived in Vancouver on 20 July, staying for a fortnight as the guests of Stan Persky (who in 1964 was editor of the San Francisco magazine *Open Space*). Persky lived at the York Street Commune, a writers' house in Vancouver's Kitsilano district, which area is named in the first line of Dorn's 24 July poem 'Day Report, 205th day' (p. 32). On top of the writing they all did—parts of Prynne's *Into the Day* were grown if not germinated in Vancouver—their two weeks at York Street were, in certain ways, a busy time. On 27 July, Prynne lectured 'On Maximus IV, V & VI', organised by Ralph Maud; that this now rather infamous talk was improvised gives one a sense of the kind of conversation that must have gone on during Prynne and the Dorns' leisurely drive across the States. On the same day, Stan Persky and the augmented York Street family released the eighth number of *Writing*, a "mass poetry newsprint supplement" inserted into the underground newspaper *Georgia Straight*. Next to a photograph of the Dorn family and Prynne piled up in a "totem pole" in the York Street backyard, the cover of *Writing* 8 is written so as to read *Writing* ∞, reflecting Prynne and Dorn's then interest in the mathematician Georg Cantor. *Writing* ∞ includes work by Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser, and George Stanley, and also includes the Dorns' collaboration 'Door County—South Dakota Time', extracts from Edward Dorn's *Day & Night Report*, his poem 'Thesis', his story 'Of Eastern Newfoundland, Its Inns and Outs', and two poems from Prynne's *Brass*, 'The Blade Given Back' and 'Of Sanguine Fire'.<sup>2</sup> According to references in Jennifer Dunbar

<sup>2</sup> Regarding the collages of William Blake's designs and photographs of scientific/natural objects running along the right-hand margins of 'Of Sanguine Fire', which are finely coordinated with the text, note that though the collages throughout *Writing* ∞ have been acknowledged in correspondence with Stan Persky as being made by Persky's partner Brian DeBeck, there is nonetheless a miniscule line of Prynne's handwriting on the first page of 'Of Sanguine Fire'—running beneath 'The Skeleton Re-Animated', one of Blake's illustrations to Robert Blair's poem *The Grave*—which marginalium records the

Dorn's daybook, as well as Dorn and Prynne's correspondence, a critique of *Writing ∞*, potentially written by George Stanley, appeared in the parent organ *Georgia Straight*, even before the invaders from the East could skip town.

Dorn and Prynne each gave readings during their stay in Vancouver, recordings of most of which have recently been unearthed by Fred Wah. On 29 July, at the York Street Commune, Dorn read *Gunslinger: Book I* and selections from *The Day & Night Report*. At Intermedia, on 30 July, Prynne read from *Brass* ('Thinking of You' and 'Royal Fern') and *The White Stones* ('In Cimmerian Darkness', 'Moon Poem', 'The Glacial Question, Unsolved', 'A Dream of Retained Colour', 'Star Damage at Home', 'Frost and Snow, Falling', 'A Stone Called Nothing', and 'Aristeas, in Seven Years'). Following Prynne, Dorn read *Gunslinger: Book II*, opening his reading by way of transition: "We've had the divine, I guess; that's certainly true. Maybe we can have the vulgar now". Again at York Street, on 31 July, Dorn read *The Cycle* and *Gunslinger: Book III (The Winterbook)*, which Dorn had just put the finishing touches on during the course of their road trip, as Dorn and Prynne's correspondence implies). Then on 1 August, at York Street, Prynne read from *Kitchen Poems* ('Numbers in Time of Trouble'), *The White Stones* ('Quality in that Case as Pressure', 'Shadow Songs', 'On the Matter of Thermal Packing', 'Oil', 'From End to End', 'A Sonnet to Famous Hopes', 'The Corn Burned by Syrius', 'Starvation / Dream', 'Crown', and 'As It Were An Attendant'), the entirety of *A Night Square*, and *Brass* ('Es Lebe der König', 'The Kirghiz Disasters', 'The Five Hindrances', and 'Of Sanguine Fire'). The travelers left Vancouver the following day, swinging down to California before returning to Chicago, where Prynne flew out on 23 August, leaving for his friends this handwritten token of a hyper-farewell, an undeniable homage to the author of *The Winterbook's* 'NIGHTLETTER':

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city, date, and venue of publication ('Vancouver, Published July 27 by Georgia Straight'). This acknowledgment provides the only textual indication of any of the possibly several (co-)authorships of *Writing ∞*'s visual designs.

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 Amiri Lederer

Now, nearly fifteen years after Edward Dorn's death, with a fuller range of his work and influence pulling slowly into more and more finite view, it is timely to contribute to the body of those texts where he speaks most casually and freely. But Dorn is almost always flirting on the rim of casually dislocating his readers from their precious expectations, as in the jacket note to *The North Atlantic Turbine* (reprinted in the *Collected Poems*), or his introductory note to *The Book of Daniel Drew* (reprinted in *Hot Gun!*), to cite two examples from the late 1960s. But even in those cases, there is still the Dornian sense of formality and occasion, the voice of this man addressing himself to this world. That sense is not so present in his interviews and lectures, when he is addressing himself to the people before him. There is less of the universal; and for this, Dorn's interviews will not always be the most reliable tool for the task of sorting out which of his writing to study for instruction and which of it to understand as a mockery of its author's visionary intellect and passion for truth. Amiri

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Baraka has likened Edward Dorn's mind to a buzz saw; its hum is a sound the world could do with a Hell of a lot more of.

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The editors wish to thank: Jennifer Dunbar Dorn, for making available the *Juneau in June* extracts and for granting us permission to publish the work presented here; J.H. Prynne, for providing files from his Dorn correspondence, from which 'The Peak Interview', and two poems from *The Day & Night Report* were transcribed, and Prynne's own 'NY251423MSGSTART/' sourced; Robert Vas Dias, for providing Dorn correspondence files related to *Manchester Square*; Melissa Watterworth Batt, at the University of Connecticut's Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, for locating and making available the draft of 'How Small Can Awesome Get?'; Neil Pattison, for serendipitously producing the sixth issue of *Spectacular Diseases*; Stan Persky, for information on the *Georgia Straight Writing Supplement* and the Dorns' and Prynne's visit to Vancouver; Brian Fawcett, for his recollections of the same; Fred Wah, for information about Dorn and Prynne's Vancouver readings; Tony Power at Simon Fraser University's Bennett Library, Matt ffytche, Pete Smith, and Ian Brinton, for helping to source copies of the *Georgia Straight Writing Supplement*; Richard Berengarten, Kyle Waugh, Michael Tencer, Colin Still, and Ralph Maud, for various information or help with the provisional bibliography at the end of this book; and Keston Sutherland, Christina Chalmers, Keith Tuma, Ian Patterson, and Isolde Mayer for their helpful comments on drafts of this preface.