

1998

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Recommended Citation

McGinnis, Darin (1998) "The Epistemology and Anti-Metaphysics of Edward Dorn's *Slinger*," *Articulāte*: Vol. 3 , Article 10.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol3/iss1/10>

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THE EPISTEMOLOGY AND ANTI-METAPHYSICS OF EDWARD DORN'S

SLINGER

BY DARIN MCGINNIS '98

Edward Dorn's major poetic work, *Slinger*, is a mock epic of immense proportions. Two aspects of the poem make it such: the language used is a combination of language from soap operas, western movies, news programs, science journals, AM radio, and lyric poetry, and the narrative of the poem undercuts the traditional epic format because there is no great physical pilgrimage or journey that takes place, as usually occurs in epics. What Dorn is attempting to do with his four-part mock epic is to create a radical satire of the traditional philosophical beliefs that the Western world has held since Plato's concept of the World of the Forms. By using the American West as a microcosm for Western society, Dorn criticizes most of the fundamental American beliefs and assumptions with his use of language, character, and narrative; and, in its place, he asserts a new view of the universe that values experience over logic and denies a teleological motive to this experience. Dorn objects to the notion of the radically separated subject and object and endorses a way of thinking in keeping with a more radically empirical or phenomenological viewpoint. Before Dorn can implement his way of thought, however, he must have a space that is sufficient for an inquiry and critique of this sort: the American West of rugged individuals with personal strength and volition.

The West that Dorn uses is the West of exploration and exploitation where continuous movement and travel is possible (Davidson 118). Dorn says: "The American West is the place men of our local civilization travel into in wide arcs to reconstruct the present version of the Greek experience.... [The West] is where you will find the Stranger so dear to our whole experience" (*Views*, 58). This is, in fact, what Dorn is doing in *Slinger*; he is attempting to reconstruct traditional Western thought by meeting the gaze of the Stranger (the Slinger) and following the Stranger through experience. The West is able to meet Dorn's requirements because it is a space that he claims that people can migrate in; it is smooth

space. This space, seemingly without borders as the Slinger travels through it, is in opposition to the space, called striated space, that State power (the forces of capitalism in the poem, represented by Howard Hughes) divides and restricts to further its own power (Deleuze and Guattari 480). As the Slinger moves through the West, he deterritorializes the striated space by undermining the fundamental notions that the economic and philosophical landscape, controlled by Hughes, is built upon. Striated space is space that power has worked upon and encompassed, and it is clearly shown that Hughes has the power to modify the environment, as Lil states:

but I heard this Hughes

Howard? I asked

Right, *boy*

they say he moved to Vegas

or bought Vegas and

moved it. (Dorn, *Slinger*, 9)

The Slinger has the ability to deconstruct the space controlled by Hughes, but he cannot keep it open forever. The space must become closed by some sort of thought. One space does not exist apart from the other: "[T]he two spaces in fact exist only in mixture: smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space" (Deleuze and Guattari 474). The Slinger is tearing down the State of Hughes in order to replace it with another striated space; but it is a space where corrections to our world-view have been made and where many people are responsible for the creation of the space rather than a select few.

Having established place, Dorn's poem then concerns itself with language and language use for his explication of the new epistemology, beginning with the names of the characters themselves. "Slinger" is a British term for a person who plays the stock market (Davidson 119). A name like this immediately tells the reader that the Slinger is closely related to Hughes, the symbol for capitalism in the poem, as

Dorn says:

[Hughes is] more direct as a persona.... I think he is a rather pure metaphor of a kind of primitive, entrepreneurial capitalist take of what America is, which is still embedded in the political and social instincts of a lot of American activity. He's a great singular — in a strange way like a dinosaur, but nevertheless his lineage in speculator goes back to the seventies and eighties of the last century.... (*Interviews*, 51)

In fact, *Slinger* is involved in a sort of duel between himself and Hughes, as they are opposites or, at least, the positive and negative poles of the same axis:

You would not know

of the long plains night

where they carry on

and arrange their genetic duels

with men of other states — (Dorn, *Slinger*, 6)

As *Slinger*'s name associates him with Hughes, Howard Hughes' middle name, Robart, links him with the third member in Dorn's trinity, Robart.

Robart's existence is, in Dorn's words, "an echo of the psychological condition of the United States of America" (*Interviews*, 31). The way Robart (which also can be read as 'rob art') maintains his order is to attempt a unification of everything, the same totalitarian notion that is inherent to all metaphysical philosophy since Plato. This desire for unification can be seen in "The Cycle" as Robart's train runs along the tracks to Vegas:

The scream of the Accomplished Present

A conglomerate of Ends, The scream of Parallels

All ties down with spikes These are the spines

Of the cold citizens made to run wheels upon

Parallels are just two things

going to the same place that's a bore (Dorn,

Slinger, 97)

Again, this is the motion of acquiring space by power that results in the striation of space. In fact, the building of the railroads themselves are an effort to unify and "establish a network of communication no longer corresponding to the traditional network of roads" (Foucault 243). Robart's railroad is a new division of space, one that corresponds to Robart's wishes for acquisition. In real life, Dorn has used the railroad map as something "that began to reveal

America in a way that united the nation's economic and sociocultural determinants" (Wesling 1-2). Like his real-life counterpart, Robart abhors publicity and travels only in disguise, traveling across the country by rail from Boston to Vegas as the cheese in a cheeseburger (McPheron 40). After all, what can be more American than a cheeseburger, that symbol of fast-food mass capitalistic expansion where there is no center of power, but only an invisible network of franchises?

Robart also maintains his power by staying out of the observable universe and by refusing to be named:

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. (Dorn, *Slinger*, 6)

This is yet another similarity to the Slinger, who remains immortal because he cannot be named. The Slinger is referred to as "Gunslinger" in the first book, "Slinger" in the second and third books, and as "Zlinger" in the fourth book. Indeed, being named is the most serious danger that one in Dorn's West can face. Dorn is here addressing the traditional poetic problem of naming an object. To name something is always to limit the object because a name can only signify some aspect of the named, never the totality, as the Slinger says:

it is dangerous to be named

and it makes you mortal.

If you have a name

you can be sold

you can be told

by that name leave, or come

you become, in short

a reference (Dorn, *Slinger*, 32)

By allowing yourself to be inscribed with a name, as the character "I" does, is to be placed and bound to a single place. It is to be unable to migrate as the Slinger can. To have a name is to give authority a way to observe you and classify you:

I could

now place you

in a column from which

There is No Escape

and down which The Machine

will always recognize you.

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Or a bullet might be Inscribed
or I could build a maze
called a *social investigation*
and drop you in it
your name
into it — (Dorn, *Slinger*, 33)

Apart from his linguistic play on the cliché of 'having a bullet with your name on it', here Dorn seems to be identifying with what Foucault terms the "panopticon," a means where persons are controlled as Robart makes them visible. Power (Robart) will remain invisible and work on those who are visible, those who are named: "[P]ower... is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them" (Foucault 199). Hughes avoids the danger of being a subject to power by adopting many different names and identities and thus maintains his authority over characters like "I".

The linguistic play with the name of a character like "I" begins to focus Dorn's concern with creating a new view of the world. "I" is at once an "initial" and a "single", a pronoun and a name (Dorn, *Slinger*, 32). He is the highest evolution of the Cartesian separation of subject and object, the traditional ontological division in the Western world of mind from body. In the Cartesian system, the mind is elevated above the body and the rest of the physical world, as it is where all thinking and perception occurs. By this model, the rationalizing mind exists apart from the world and must perceive the physical and attempt to understand what is behind it, because the world could be illusory. The ideal is always the supra-sensuous; the real is sensuous. To this metaphysical attempt, the Slinger stands in opposition: What does the foregoing mean?

I asked. Mean?

my Gunslinger laughed
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? (Dorn, *Slinger*, 26-7)

The Slinger represents a more active way of knowing the universe — experience. "I" is the last

remnant of the self-conscious and cannot survive in Dorn's landscape where the subject and object are collapsed. In Book I, the reader is forced to see "I" as the paradox where a person's being is defined by thought and the ability to call his own thought into question (Davidson 121). As Book II opens, "I" is killed, apparently by the collapse of the subject and object that Dorn has attempted. The first-person narrative is no longer primary, being can now be defined by something other than thought, and thought can be described by means other than language which is what has traditionally connected the transcendent self to the physical world.

Even so, the death of "I" troubles some of the inhabitants of the stagecoach:

But it makes me sad
to see I go, he was,
I mean I was so perplexed
I's obsessions were almost real
me and I had an understanding
I don't like to see I die.

I don't wish to distract you
with the metaphysics of the situation Lil
yet be assured,
I ain't dead.
.....
But wheres he at
If I ain't dead?

Life and Death
are attributes of the Soul
not of things. The Ego
is costumed as the road manager
of the soul.... (Dorn, *Slinger*, 56-7)

What the Slinger is trying to tell Lil here is that "I" is dead and so are all of the assumptions that he carried with him, but the individual is not dead. The individuality of the Slinger "ain't dead" but is engaged in acts different than the acts that we normally attribute to the "I." The ego may present itself as "the road manager of the soul," but the individual like the Slinger needs no one to interpret what he experiences for his ego. Experience is real and in a directly perceived world. "I" is preserved in LSD for purposes of remembering, and "I" will reappear later as a new being more like the Slinger. The Slinger, however, must continue his quest for Hughes with the aid of the remaining passengers with him in the stage-

coach, the most important of which are the Poet-singer who plays the Abso-Lute and "can violate canons of fair-mindedness in order to push explanation beyond certain inhibiting barriers" and the Slinger's trusty steed (Von Hallberg 60).

The horse that Slinger rides with is a suitable companion to one who is tearing down the traditional structures of society and of the self. Slinger's horse is an anti-beast of burden who rides inside the coach with him, smokes marijuana, and goes by the names of Heidegger and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Although Dorn has said that his views on these two thinkers are not important, their presence in the text is meant to send off certain connotations with their work. Martin Heidegger's landmark book, *Being and Time*, provides a radical departure from the traditional Cartesian rationalist account of being by placing humans, which Heidegger dubs *Dasein*, in a temporal location. The position that Dorn will advocate is close to this, as the Slinger says:

Time is more fundamental than space.

It is, indeed, the most pervasive

of all the categories

in other words

theres plenty of it. (Dorn, *Slinger*, 5)

Traditional Cartesian duality has held space as all that is important, at the expense of temporality. Heidegger's critique sounds remarkably close to Slinger's:

Time must be brought to light — and genuinely conceived — as the horizon for all understanding of Being and for any way of interpreting it. In order for us to discern this, *time* needs to be *explicated* *primordially* as the horizon for the understanding of Being, and in terms of temporality as the Being of *Dasein*, which understands Being. (39)

The work of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss has focused on "kinship systems in terms of their differential and categorical status" and how this "violates the idea of a social contract with its attendant belief in the realm of inherent human values" (Davidson 119-20). Also, through his study of Amazon Indians, Lévi-Strauss claims that all cultural practices and relations are linguistic, at least at the symbolic level (305). As the Horse claims in *Slinger*: I study the savage mind.

.....
you are purely animal

sometimes purely plant
but mostly you're just a
classification, (Dorn, *Slinger*, 35)

The Horse is pointing out that there is no transcendent element to the human, as Descartes had claimed, and that most of what we think we are as humans is just a construction of society and language. As Hughes operates from a decentered network of power, it is necessary for the Slinger to be partners with a thinker who can provide analysis of these variable paths of authority: "Heidegger and Lévi-Strauss, as debunkers of privileged philosophical centers (the transcendental subject, a primordial Logos), become necessary sidekicks for the Slinger" (Davidson 120).

The last meeting between the Slinger and traditional metaphysics occurs in Universe City, where the party encounters the social center of the town: the Literate Projector. The Projector is the logocentric Western view in action as it takes images in and spits out a script (written words) which is supposedly the same as the idea behind the images that were placed in the Projector. This process allows one view to be justified for the entire realm of experience, a view that is controlled by Robart: "There is but one Logos / tho many Images audition" (Dorn, *Slinger*, 78). However, experience can also be altered to conform to a Logos: "They can distort the Projector / so that the script Departs / from the film, in Front!" (Dorn, *Slinger*, 78). This is what Dorn is saying that those in power have done throughout history. This gives reason for the Slinger to refer to Kool Everything's story of the Projector as "Ontology" (Dorn, *Slinger*, 78). Many of the abuses of power in history have been covered over by the use of the Projector:

put funny music next to Death

Or document something

about military committment

and let woodchucks play the parts

so say something quick about the war

in, well you know where the War is. (Dorn,

Slinger, 79)

In Dorn's only real reference to Vietnam in *Slinger*, he mainly criticizes the military-industrial complex behind the war, rather than specific events in the war directly. This mediation of experience at the hands of power is Dorn's main concern, as what underlies it is the structure of Western capitalism.

Part of the way that Dorn implements his plan to destabilize Western metaphysics is through the use

of multiple meanings of words. Metaphysics has sought to permanently fix the meanings of all things, including words. Rather than tell us what words have meant, Dorn has said that in *Slinger* he is concerned with finding "what the words can mean" (*Interviews* 47). Just as the Slinger is a migrating self, words and meanings can wander around with usage of puns and other word play. Notice the description of the Horse in Lil's bar:

and he had the texan's [Hughes'] hat on
a stetson XX sorta cockwise
on his head it was
I tell you Slinger you would of
split your levis and dropped you
beads to seen it. (Dorn, *Slinger*, 13)

The pun on levis equates the Slinger and his mount: Claude Lévi-Strauss — clawed levis' trousers. The Horse's name and the garments of the Slinger are the same. When "I" inquires about the Horse's name, more wordplay ensues: "Claude Lévi-Strauss is that — / Yes, you guessed it / a homonym" (Dorn, *Slinger*, 36). Claude Lévi-Strauss is now not only "clawed jeans" but "clawed genes" (Von Hallberg 67). This explains the way that the Horse is referred to when "I" calls him a "mare" in the beginning of the Book (Dorn, *Slinger*, 5). As the Horse's hat is a XX, he bears the female chromosome pairing, opposed to the XY that he should have. The use of "cockwise" only makes it stranger that a horse with the XX pair should wear the stetson. That the Horse is a mutant should come as no surprise as the entire poem is filled with mutant characters, references to "genetic duals", and mutant language. Dr. Jean Flamboyant (flamboyant gene) promises that he can "fix anything" (Dorn, *Slinger*, 81). But, as Von Hallberg says "there is the depressing possibility that all mutations have occurred in the past, that evolution is obsolete" (68). This is why the "Anti-Darwinism" Mogollones are such a threat in Book III. Robart, who secretly controls the Mogollones and their adversaries the Single Spacers, wants the appearance of change to disappear so that his power may be permanently consolidated.

Further linguistic confusion occurs when words take on significance and become material. Against what Robart is trying to accomplish in "The Cycle", Dorn creates contradiction everywhere in the narrative of the poem. In this exchange between "I" and the Horse, words take on actions in the real world:

Are you trying
to "describe" me, boy?
No, no I hastened to add.
And by the way boy
if there's any addin
to do around here
I'll do it, that's my stick
comprende? (Dorn, *Slinger*, 25)

"I" seems to be both narrating and performing addition with the use of one word. Throughout *Slinger*, the narration of the plot takes a back seat to the language employed. Sometimes the words come alive and turn on their speakers, becoming literal from the figurative. See this example from Jean Flamboyant:

Would you like a light
I see yor roach has gone out
continued the Doctor Catching his breath
Slinger, did you flash how
the PHD caught his breath,
never saw anybody do it with their hand

Yes agreed the Slinger, Brilliantly fast (Dorn, *Slinger*, 81)

"Catching" breath takes on a literal level, and this conversation shows that speed is one of the Slinger's most prized characteristics. It is this speed that he draws from his way of seeing through traditional metaphysics and epistemology that sets him apart from others. However, actions can also take grammatical form:

Uh, I'm not sure I get your question Lil
the Horse exhaled, but
are you speaking of the need for horsepower?

Yes, I suppose I am, In Horses!

How would you like poco coito, Lil?
Claude asked suddenly

My virtue is not presently on the market, fella
Lil glared, *which is bad timing of course*
because I might be amused
to make it with a horse.

Make It, Claude frownd
It ain't nothin but a neuter pronoun. (Dorn, *Slinger*, 170)

Flesh turns to grammar here because of the

Horse's embarrassment in being turned down. Dorn's use of all of this evasive language undermines the power of language and undermines what is real. Dorn has done this on many different levels — use of language, allegories for Western thought, and allusion to historical characters. Dorn's motive, though, is to create a new form of seeing the world.

When "I" reappears in Book III, he is a radically different character. He has learned from Parmenides (and probably changed from the LSD that was used to preserve him) and now lives more like the Slinger, in an affirmation of life rather than a questioning of life. "I" reappears as the secretary to Parmenides as the pilot in a biplane in yet another allusion to the real Howard Hughes. That Parmenides taught "I" is appropriate because "it was [Parmenides'] view that self and other are one and the same — that in order for one to conceive of sensible objects at all he must be *part* of those objects as well" (Davidson 131). "I" has now achieved the transformation of viewpoint that Dorn desired; he has become an active observer rather than a passive viewer. He now

feels like "trying to read a newspaper / from nothing but the ink poured into your ear" (Dorn, *Slinger*, 161). "I" can also now realize the true motive of Hughes' quest across America and the way out:

Entrapment is this society's
Sole activity, I whispered
and Only laughter
can blow it to rags (Dorn, *Slinger*, 155)

With the linguistic devices he has used, Dorn has done just that; and he has also shown how experience must be lived in time rather than mediated by some outside source. The lack of resolution only confirms this. Slinger and Hughes never duel, Hughes merely decoaches and leaves for South America to continue his appropriation of land and space now that this land is out of his grasp. The idea of closure itself is a Western ideal that is not achieved in experience. By placing the characters of *Slinger* in the directly perceived world and by satirizing Cartesian systems, Edward Dorn has shown a new way of seeing the world and a new epistemology for explaining it.

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