Edward Dorn, Charles Olson, and the American West

Edward Dorn, Charles Olson, and the American West:

Beatniks and Cowboys

^{By} Paul Varner

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



Edward Dorn, Charles Olson, and the American West: Beatniks and Cowboys

By Paul Varner

This book first published 2020

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2020 by Paul Varner

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-4671-3 ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-4671-4 Dedicated to Jeanine Baker Varner

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	viii
Chapter One The Beat West of Edward Dorn and Charles Olson	1
Chapter Two The New American Poetry	10
Chapter Three Charles Olson and the West	30
Chapter Four Ed Dorn and the West	52
Chapter Five Responding to the Myth of the West: <i>Newly Fallen</i> and Other Ea	
Chapter Six The Weird West of <i>Gunslinger</i>	99
Chapter Seven The End of the Century West: Edward Dorn's Later Poetry	153
Chapter Eight Ambrosia for the Living: Poetic Voices in Chemo Sábe	174
Bibliography	183
Index	191

PREFACE

I am excited about this book because I believe in the importance of Edward Dorn, Charles Olson, the Beat Movement, and their contributions to understanding the American West. For the United States and all of North America, the Western states and territories have always been crucially influential in forming national identities of the conquering Europeans as well as the indigenous peoples living there for centuries before the conquest. While most no longer hold to idealistic and nostalgic views of an American frontier forming character, or to ideas of the closing of the West or the winning of the West, or even to the idea of a pervasive frontier at all, we still must accede the dominance and importance, for good or bad, of the American West in national and even world cultures.

This book examines an ambitious agenda of creative study of the West developed by Charles Olson and assigned directly to his student Edward Dorn to set out on a lifelong journey of discovering the intellectual and cultural West for himself.

Edward Dorn early on set out on his quest, but his objective always was not merely to study the West as a student or a scholar but as a poet of the West. The result through the years is that Dorn's quest led to his epic poem *Gunslinger* and with it a poetic vision for the West—not coherent, of course—but an evolving vision over a long career.

I will not pretend toward unbiased judgment for this book. Edward Dorn's poetry has long intrigued me, and I have written numerous conference papers and published previous work on Dorn's work as a Beat Poet of the West. Then, since my earliest days as an undergraduate, Charles Olson's poetry and work have occupied a place in my thinking about twentieth-century avant-garde poetry and similar radical literary movements.¹

¹ Terminology can be elusive and confusing, but for the purposes of this book I use the term avant-garde to refer in the most general way to any of the literary and arts movements opposed to establishment rules from the nineteenth century to the present, including the Romantic, Symbolist, Surrealist-Dada movements as well as the Beat Movement.

Moreover, the literature and imaginative interpretation of the American West have been at the forefront of my scholarship for many years. I also have long worked with the nineteenth-century Romantic Movement in literature and published a substantial history of Romanticism. In this book on Edward Dorn and Charles Olson and the American West I am bringing these disparate areas of my scholarship together in application to understanding two major poets of early postmodern literature of the United States. Thus, some of the material here has appeared in various forms elsewhere.

I make no pretense to stand aloof with detached emotional objectivity. Too often I think literary scholars succumb to a pressure in a publish or perish academic establishment to observe literary texts as specimens to be poked and prodded the way our colleagues in research science disciplines approach their subjects when writing. Instead, in agreement with fellow Olson literary scholar Shahar Bram, "My argument is poetic rather than historical or philosophical" (2004:16).

If you want to learn about Ed Dorn's and Charles Olson's poetry and prose, read it. All of it is in print and readily accessible. But if you are curious as to how I read these works, stay with me through this short book. I am simply showing you how, after years of working with these texts and their contexts, I read these two poets—especially how I read Ed Dorn.

The argument is often made that all that really matters is the poetry itself. Just look at the poem printed on the page with no footnotes or annotations, as you would look at a masterpiece hanging on the wall at the Museum of Modern Art. But ultimately there is no such thing for those who care for art or poetry. Art demands a receiver, and the facts of life are that art depends on a tradition of criticism for its life. Here are my views. I hope they will prove valuable and helpful to you and to the fast developing tradition of Dorn and Olson readings.

Charles Olson's and Edward Dorn's reputations do not need this book. Their reputations are solid if for no other reason than that they wrote two of the greatest long poems of the United States since World War II— *The Maximus Poems* and *Gunslinger*. Both have established significant canonical works beyond their two epic poems.

Charles Olson (1910-1970) was Rector at the famous experimental Black Mountain College in the 1950s. The school was a genius factory with Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, John Cage, Willem and Elaine de Kooning among its illustrious faculty. Olson, an acclaimed Herman Melville scholar, ultimately became the intellectual leader of the Beat Movement with the development of a revolutionary kind of poetry—crazy Beatnik poetry to the crowd but projective verse to the initiated. Besides

Preface

The Maximus Poems his poetry, influenced by the Pound tradition, is collected in *The Distances* and his influential theoretical work in *Human Universe and Other Essays*. Olson's most famous student from Black Mountain College was Edward Dorn.

Dorn (1929-1999) came also under the early influence of and companionship with such Beat poets as Creeley, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, and LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka).² His *Collected Poems*, published in 2012, runs to 994 pages, and his *Derelict Air*, published in 2015, runs to 590 pages. Dorn also wrote short fiction, a novel, a screenplay, and a nonfiction narrative-*The Shoshoneans*, concerning Native America in the Plateau Basin. So, his literary output is considerable. I will concentrate primarily on his poetry for this study, however.

After his student days at Black Mountain College, Dorn entered into the New York and San Francisco Beat scenes for a time with his wife Helene, and then spent a career as university faculty member in institutions throughout the West and for a time in England as well. While in England, working under Donald Davie at the University of Essex, he married Jennifer Dunbar who, as Jennifer Dunbar Dorn, collaborated with him and serves now as editor of his work. From 1977 to his death in 1999 he taught on the faculty of the University of Colorado, Boulder, eventually as tenured professor and director of the creative writing program.

While this book is about Charles Olson, Edward Dorn, and the American West, it is primarily devoted to Dorn and his work in connection with his mentor from Black Mountain. I will not merely arrange the familiar works into the usual categories, and although I will provide chronological contexts, I will rarely speculate as to the phases of Dorn's career and how it progressed from one period to another. Important work with Dorn and Olson research is always in progress, and all such matters already receive considerable attention.³

My focus is on a selection of works by Edward Dorn and Charles Olson as a poetry of and a poetics for the American West in the late twentieth century. Thus matters of biography and contemporary relations to other poets will be limited to connections within the Beat Movement as a movement. I certainly do not intend this book to be used to replace Dorn's and Olson's large demand on their readers through the full-length texts that, obviously, will not be reproduced here.

²I will refer to LeRoi Jones hereafter exclusively as Amiri Baraka except when noting bibliographical references.

³ William McPheron (1988) first developed a scheme of progression for the various phases of Dorn's career up to the last decade of his life that still seems to be accepted in the general scholarship.

Edward Dorn, Charles Olson, and the American West: Beatniks and Cowboys

Instead, this is a book about exploration. I really do not care just to inventory and describe Dorn's poetry or its relationship to Olson. I want to explore the poetry, the ideas, the art of Olson and Dorn, and hopefully explore it together with you the reader. Certainly as a scholar I will provide new perspectives on my subject matter, but as a writer writing about some of the most exciting poetry of the twentieth century I will be asking as many questions as I answer. And I hope to provoke you my readers to respond, maybe to me a bit, but more so to the actual poetry and ideas of these two great poets of the expansive Beat Movement of United States literature.

Edward Dorn's poetry and Charles Olson's ideas are inexhaustibly compelling, yet often, admittedly, frustrating. All I can do as a scholar and writer, all anyone can do with the great art of major artists, is to keep in motion an ever-developing tradition of never-completed interpretations and understanding.

Chapter One treats Dorn and Olson within the context of the Beat Movement of which they were major figures. Here are two poets, Beatniks from the beginning, working within the most important arts and literature movement after World War II, a movement still relevant in the twenty-first century.

Chapter Two introduces the revolutionary importance to Dorn and Olson of Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*, the anthology that has come to define the canon of early Beat poetry. It was the book that introduced Olson's manifesto "Projective Verse" to the world. Postmodernism as we know it in the United States began with the Beats and with this anthology.

Chapter Three works with Charles Olson himself and the American West, his significance, and his work in general. Specifically, this chapter will consider Olson's seminal prose poem *A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn* for its relevance to the career of Ed Dorn and for its relevance to avant-garde projections of the West.

Chapter Four will treat how Dorn responded in his work to Olson. It will deal with Dorn's essay "What I See in the Maximus Poems" and how Dorn began to develop his own poetic vision for the American West.

Chapters Five through Eight examine in detail Dorn's poetic vision of the West, a vision of Beatniks and cowboys, as I examine some of the poetry, including early poems of *The Newly Fallen* and *Geography*, *Gunslinger*, of course, and later poems including *Recollections of Gran Apachería* and *Chemo Sábe*.

I wish to express gratitude and thanks to the Western Literature Association and to the Southwest and Texas Popular Culture Association,

Preface

two organizations that for years have provided support, fellowship, intellectual stimulation, and numerous opportunities for professional growth and publication. Finally, I can never be grateful enough to my wife, Dr. Jeanine Varner, to whom I dedicate this book, for her daily support through every phase of the writing process.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BEAT WEST OF EDWARD DORN AND CHARLES OLSON

The Beat Movement

In 1942, during the dark days of World War II, two university students, Joan Vollmer and Edie Parker, rented a large pad on 115th Street near Columbia University in New York City. The apartment soon attracted a number of Columbia students and assorted young intellectuals. Young Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and the somewhat older William S. Burroughs at various times shared space in Vollmer's and Parker's pad. Close quarters brought much intellectual and philosophical debate among all the residents, with Vollmer often leading the way. Kerouac was working on a novel of the early years of his life, Ginsberg was a poet, and Burroughs felt his mission was to educate everybody in the ways of the world. The residents spent many evenings in jazz clubs listening to the new bebop sounds that were developing a select following.

Even after abandoning the apartment after one of their group was indicted for murder and after authorities began exerting pressure because of their persistent drug use, the group remained close. John Clellon Holmes came into the picture. As the war wound down and as the atomic age, as they called the early 1950s, loomed, the group began attempting to define what they were as a generation. They began using the term "beat," as in beaten down, but also in its spiritual sense as beatific. They were beat. The unique thing about their generation, they observed after finding others who shared their sensibilities, was that they were beat. They were the Beat Generation.

Meanwhile, at a little college in Black Mountain, North Carolina, a group of artists and poets began in 1951 experimenting with new forms of discourse, new structures of textual language. These poets, such as Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Edward Dorn, and the rector of Black Mountain College, Charles Olson, looked back to the recent innovations of the early modernist poet Ezra Pound and his new *Pisan Cantos*, published in 1948.

They too observed their own postwar generation as something unique, something totally different from what since has been often labeled the "Greatest Generation." The term "beat" was not yet part of their vocabulary, but they would soon find close alliances with their New York counterparts.

At the University of California at Berkeley and in the North Beach district of San Francisco, poets and artists also were at work creating new ways of expressing their generational angst. Kenneth Rexroth, Josephine Miles, Kenneth Patchen, and Jack Spicer began promoting new communities of non-traditional artists and poets. Lawrence Ferlinghetti opened a new kind of bookstore, one that sold paperbacks and other kinds of books not usually found in mainstream stores. His City Lights Bookstore by 1955 was becoming a center for radical poetics and politics.

When Black Mountain College closed in 1957, its faculty and students for the most part moved either to Greenwich Village in New York City or to San Francisco. They already had heard about the emerging new movements developing in these places. The New York Beats traveled to San Francisco and found like-minded poets and novelists. One night in October 1955, five poets, led by Allen Ginsberg, stood up in front of a large crowd at the Six Gallery and read their new poetry. Local media coverage soon led to national media coverage of this new generation of writers.

By 1958, when Jack Kerouac published *On the Road*, thousands of young people began migrating first to San Francisco and New York, but then to Chicago and virtually every metropolitan center and establishing Beat pads, hanging out in coffee houses and reading poetry aloud to jazz accompaniment or to rhythms of quiet bongo drums. Suddenly across America and into England the public became aware of the Beatniks, a new generation of young people ready to flaunt the conventions of their parents relating to sexual practices and drugs. Hollywood captured the new fad. Pictorial magazines such as *Life* and *Look* gave full coverage. But then, by 1960 or 1961, the Beatniks left the scene to be replaced by other media hyped cultural phenomena, and the Beatnik period ended.

Traditional histories of the movement stress its New York beginnings and center all things Beat with Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs. In those histories the San Francisco Renaissance and the Black Mountain poets were tangential to the New York Beats. Early establishment attacks on the Beat writers were so intense that many sought to distance themselves from the Beat Generation, from the Beatniks.

Such is the traditional history of the Beat Generation. The next generation of young people moved on to other concerns, so the argument goes. As years progressed, a number of original generation Beats attempted to distance themselves from what in the late 1970s and 1980s was becoming characterized in media as the old cartoonish Beatnik days.

But the Beat Movement did not end. It was just beginning. The Beat Movement, as opposed to the Beat Generation, was not a cultural movement, was not merely the stirrings of a new subculture. The Beat Movement was and is a literary and arts movement, the most radical and innovative of the 20th century, and because it was so open to new ideas of poetics and aesthetics, it has adapted from decade to decade. The Beat Movement was one of the earliest manifestations of postmodernism.

New Beat History

Since the 1990s, however, a New Beat History has begun developing, one that no longer privileges the historical dominance of a few major male writers—Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs, especially. With the late 20th century writings of women Beats such as Hettie Jones, Joyce Johnson, Diane di Prima, and Brenda Frazer, new understandings by such scholars as Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace are developing about what it really means to be Beat, both in the 1950s and now. Traditional histories of the movement see the old-fashioned Beats giving way in the 1960s to the new politically active Hippie Movement. Today scholars such as Ann Charters see a continuous movement that began in the 1950s, true, but that has continued through the century and to some degree remains today with vibrant Beat literature being generated from San Francisco and now from Boulder, Colorado.

As time has passed and as older voices have died away, new literary scholars and historians see a greater complexity to the movement than heretofore considered. We now see a movement that contained many women writers whose work was either neglected or de-centered as well as women writers who chose not to publish until later in life. The movement we now know includes Christian writers as well as those who worked within Eastern religions. Writers as diverse as Charles Bukowski and Denise Levertov, who distanced themselves from the early Beats, are now being interpreted again within the Beat Movement in which they originally began.

The major Beat writers may no longer be considered to be only Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs. Others of relatively the same importance are Holmes, Ferlinghetti, Olson, Duncan, Creeley, Gary Snyder, Levertov, LeRoi and Hettie Jones, William Everson, Dorn, di Prima, and Johnson. Women poets and writers today are interpreted as equal to the males, and the intellectual patriarch of the Beat Movement today is usually considered to be Charles Olson. Formerly, the term Beatnik was a pejorative term, yet today many casually embrace the term. Regardless, the Beatnik era from roughly 1955 to 1961 is only a small episode in the total history of the Beat Movement.

Just as new interpretations of Beat history have been developing in recent years, new considerations about the canon of Beat literature are changing approaches to the major texts. Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* remains the dominant poem of the Beat Movement. *Howl* is the major American poem of the second half of the 20th century just as T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" is the major American poem of the first half of the century. But John Clellon Holmes's novel *Go* we now see as a defining novel of the movement on a level with Kerouac's *On the Road*. The major turning point toward postmodernism was not so much Kerouac's spontaneous novels as Donald Allen's anthology *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*. The New American poets identified by Allen shifted the paradigm of American poetry toward postmodernism permanently and clearly by their embracing of open-endedness, open field poetics, and projective verse.

The history of the Beat Movement is still being written in the early years of the twenty-first century. Unlike other kinds of literary and artistic movements such as those of the Lost Generation, the French Symbolists. or the Dada poets, the Beat Movement is self-perpetuating. After the 1950s generation, a new generation arose in the 1960s led by writers such as Diane Wakowski, Anne Waldman, and poets from the East Side Scene. In the 1970s and 1980s writers from the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church and contributors to *World* magazine continued the movement. The 1980s and 1990s Language Movement saw itself as an outgrowth and progression of previous Beat aesthetics. Today poets and writers in San Francisco still gather at City Lights Bookstore and in Boulder. Colorado. at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics and continue the movement. It is now a postmodern movement and probably would be unrecognizable to the earliest Beats. It may even be in the process of finally shedding the name Beat. But the Movement continues.⁴ And here is where we pick up one of the most prolific of the early Beat poets.

Ed Dorn, Beat Poet

From 1957 to approximately 1962 much of the United States was fixated upon the phenomenon of the Beatnik craze, begun arguably when

⁴ See my *Historical Dictionary of the Beat Movement* (2012: 1-4), where I have developed this distinction more fully.

Viking Press published Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and ending by 1962, as Kerouac was arguing in *The Dharma Bums*. The days of the Beatniks were crazy times dominated by cartoon-like stereotypes of beret-wearing beatniks in dark glasses thumping on bongo drums in a haze-filled underground coffee house with a name like The Purple Onion, the requisite girl in black silently but coolly lounging in the background.⁵

During these heady days, two characters especially seemed to rule over the New York Greenwich Village/ East Side scene: Hettie and Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones). Together they ran Totem Press, one of the early small presses promoting the new Beat poetry. In her memoir *How I Became Hettie Jones*, Jones tells about the evening in the fall of 1960 when "I came home and found [Roi] with Allen [Ginsberg], Joel Oppenheimer. . . and some others, as well as two tall fair strangers introduced as Edward Dorn and his wife, Helene. Ed, a former Black Mountain student now living in Santa Fe, had come to New York to read at the 92nd Street Y, which was having an avant-garde poetry series. He and Roi had been corresponding. Raised on Midwestern farms, Ed wrote about the West with insight and compassion He was a handsome man, with a bony, focused look and a clear sense of his physical self, very elegant in a raw silk jacket" (128).

Edward Dorn was one of the Beat poets who is most often associated with the Black Mountain poets Charles Olson and Robert Duncan. He graduated from Black Mountain College in 1955 with Robert Creeley as one of his examiners. Olson's long poem, *A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn* (1964), a prose poem attacking the then-dominant interpretation of the West by Walter Prescott Webb, pays obvious tribute to his former student. While he was most closely associated with the Greenwich Village Scene, Dorn also had earlier made the San Francisco Beat Scene associated with his friends Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg.

Subsequently, Dorn followed the typical arc in the professional career of other Beat writers who lived long after the early day Beatnik craze. He moved west and became involved in eco political activities while continuing to write poetry and publish in small press and literary magazine media. And, of course, as with many anti-academic Beat writers, he entered the life of a university faculty member. From 1961 until his death in Boulder, Colorado, in 1999, Dorn served on various university creative writing faculties, culminating in his work as the head of the University of Colorado's writing program.

⁵ Disclaimer: I am describing a media created image. The actual Beat Movement was and remains an infinitely complex movement.

The Avant-Garde Scene

Post World War II was a most dynamic time in the twentieth century United States for developing new arts. There was the avant-garde jazz craze that came about during the war years. Jazz clubs appeared along and about 52nd Street after the war, and bebop sounded everywhere in jazz clubs like the Five Spot, the Three Deuces, and Charlie Parker's Birdland. Here was a new sound based around small combos, not Tommy Dorsey and Glenn Miller big bands. Here were jazz artists like Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, Dizzy Gillespie, and some, like Jack Teagarden, with Western roots in the big city. For the really cool Beats, jazz became the true indicator of sophistication.

In the painting world, Abstract Expressionism developed, and the center of the art world shifted from Paris to New York. The new poetry, the avant-garde, learned much from the Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock and the de Koonings, Wilhem and Elaine, perhaps not so much in matters of technique as in artistic derring do. Mere mention of such painterly matters as action painting, gesture painting, or just the whole aesthetics of action itself gave the new poets power over their words to start a movement in the United States.

Similarly, Europe, for obvious reasons, dropped from sight in the literary world—save for a few persistent French Existentialists—and the Beat Movement began to dominate the New York and San Francisco literary scenes.

We know the legends of the early Beat Movement—Jack Kerouac and his scroll, William S. Burroughs and his cut ups, John Clellon Holmes and jazz clubs, Allen Ginsberg and the Six Gallery. What was happening in a very small space of time was that a generation of ground breaking writers led by Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Kenneth Rexroth in San Francisco, Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan at Black Mountain College, Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch in New York, Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Charles Olson in New York and the World, found new inspiration in a particular time and place and drew from every art form around them—painting, jazz, performance art, even the Bach revival in record stores.

Suddenly, in all the underground scenes, a whole generation of artists appeared, devoted to radical innovation and uninhibited personal expression. Many have chronicled the tremendous creative charge of energy with the New York and San Francisco art and literary scenes in the 1950s and 1960s. This energy was directed not toward political revolution—that would come later—but toward new ways of seeing, of perceiving, of imagining strikingly altered postwar consciousness through art. A dilemma was how art can portray non-objectivity and remain obsessively personal to life experience. Mark Rothko's often quoted declaration "Art was not about an experience but was itself an experience" applied to the innovative poetry of Robert Duncan and Charles Olson and to the innovative fiction of Kerouac and Burroughs as well. The Beat Movement's literary and visual artists considered the actual creation itself of the poem or painting to be the point, the object, the effect, and not the supposed subject matter, or content represented.

Thus, at their most beat, the Beat poets, similar to their painter and jazz colleagues, set out to create poems with unperceivable subject matter, freed of bourgeois reality through techniques as association, automation, and surrealism. Donald Allen, the Grove Press editor and literary canon-maker, claimed early on that the true subject of the new kind of poem was "the mind of the poet, rather than the world" (1960: xi-xii). The new poem would "chronicle the history of its own making," and "it was possible for a poem to be (or to perform) a statement without making a statement" (1960: xi-xii).

Freed from restraints imposed on others by academic and cultural establishments, the Beat poets felt as free as Charlie Parker with his crazy saxophone to subsume themselves physically and imaginatively into their embodied poems as such. To lose oneself in the act of creation right now—typing words on pages this moment—gave the poet unthinkable permission to explore feeling frenzied with unimaginable excitement.

As painters such as Pollock, the de Koonings, Rothko, and Grace Hartigan thought of their processes and their paintings as action paintings, poets like Olson, Kerouac, Duncan, and Dorn often saw poetry as action of the moment. And in some sort of Alfred Whiteheadian cosmology drifted down to young imaginative intellectuals, what mattered for a piece of art, for a specific poem, was now. Not then, not some other time, but now. If such was to be the case for art, what was to be the role of the perceiver, the reader, except to experience, to engage as much as the artist?⁶

The major difference between visual art culture and literary culture, however, can sometimes be seen as a wide, impassable gulf. And, true, that difference is one of outlook and worldview of humanity. The seriousness from a near despair exhibited by Pollock and Rothko rarely is seen in the work of American Beat poets. Wit, humor, wordplay, delightful sarcasm—irony even—appear throughout the canon of early Beat writing. But even with that, we will see Edward Dorn applying

⁶ Obviously, anything I say here about the art scene of the 1950s and 1960s, about the Abstract Expressionists, and, for this moment, is said only superficially. And others have been developing these kinds of ideas from the beginning.

essentially the medium of painterly collage often in his work. And in *Gunslinger* Dorn will seem to fling words in play onto the typescript like a Grace Hartigan slinging a paintbrush.

The Beat West

The Beat Movement has been associated with the East Coast and the West Coast. But in Edward Dorn we are going to see the Beat Movement at work in the West. Clearly, no remarkable innovative or avant-garde art and literary scene was developing in the 1950s West, at least away from San Francisco and Santa Fe. as Dorn and Olson were beginning their work-unless one were to consider the Bizarro world of Hollywood B Westerns that threw away all the rules in the rulebook of realistic narrative. There was Gene Autry's The Phantom Empire. made in 1936 but cut up and re-produced for television in the 1950s, a very early science fiction Western. Autry plays a radio performer who, along with a couple of youngsters, stumbles into a plot involving, first, evil professors trying to steal the ranch to mine radium and, second, an underground lost kingdom of Murania, ruled by Queen Tika. The film displays great stunt riding, robots, ray guns, and cliffhanger escapes. Through it all Gene, along with sidekick Smiley Burnett, finds ingenious ways to get to a microphone and perform songs on a national radio show.

Nowadays the film has become a cult favorite because in many ways it is so utterly preposterous as to be camp. The robots clearly are actors dressed in aluminum foil-like costumes, for example. On the other hand, the film typifies an element of many B Westerns that rejects classic Western myths and seeks, in an almost postmodern manner, to question norms of reality.

Of course, audiences at the time probably just wanted to have a good time. Ed Dorn, however, surely began getting ideas from mass culture somewhere along the way for his own Bizarro world of *Gunslinger* years later.

So what kind of American West would matter for Beat poets such as Dorn and Olson? We will see later the academic questioning of the West and the idea of a western frontier. But the West that mattered was not a West that mattered to popular audiences of both literature and movies at the time. Good Western films were being made in the conventional realistic mode accepted by mainstream audiences of the time. *High Noon*, Fred Zinnemann's 1952 noir Western, certainly impacted its time. And good Western novels were being written as well in hyper-realistic modes. Walter Van Tilburg's *The Ox-Bow Incident* from 1940 maintained a steady reputation among the mainstream literary establishment for decades.

But these realistic, mythic interpretations of the American West receive little notice in Olson's or Dorn's works. What does seem to matter, as we will see more of later, is the conflicting claims for the West by academic historians and by writers, filmmakers, and artists.

By the middle of the twentieth century, academia was calling into question the very existence of anything that could be considered a distinct American West as opposed to a geographic area west of the Mississippi River. "Is there a twentieth-century West?" Michael E. McGerr asked in the title of an article at the end of the century as he surveyed the scholarship of the earlier decades: "Influenced by the rise of social history in all its varieties, Western historians opened up topics and reworked old ones in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. A host of books and articles studied communities, women, racial and ethnic minorities, and private life as well as politics. As a result we now have a more pluralistic West, fascinating in its variety" (1992: 242).

McGerr is referring to what we now term New Western History after the substantial scholarship of Patricia Limerick. A scholar with the University of Colorado, her tenure overlapping Dorn's career there, Limerick has had a profound influence on the way we now think of the American West. Her groundbreaking and revolutionary study *The Legacy* of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West (1987) among other things refuted the traditional paradigm of Western history based on the assumptions of Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis that I will take up in Chapter Four.

The West that Dorn and Olson addressed as part of the Beat Movement, we shall see, is a West that breaks away from mainstream movie interpretations but is also at odds with mainstream historical interpretations as well. The West that Ed Dorn lived in, that Jack Kerouac raced across in his quest for beatitude, that Allen Ginsburg spent most of his life in, seems to have been left to artists and writers to interpret rather than conventional historians. The lifelong task of Edward Dorn taken, as we shall see, from his mentor Charles Olson was to develop a poetics for interpreting the American West in new ways with a new poetic vision that was to develop over a long career.

CHAPTER TWO

THE NEW AMERICAN POETRY

Donald Allen and The New American Poetry 1945-1960

The popular British poet Roger McGough remembers that when Donald Allen's revolutionary anthology The New American Poetry: 1945-1960 with its famous red and white jacket design first appeared in Liverpool, "everybody in town who was interested in writing seemed to have a copy of it, and they were shouting poems out of it to one another across crowded pubs" (atd. in Cook 1971: 154). It seems every member of the 1950s generation who was coming to awareness about literature and the Beat Movement remembers when or where he or she first encountered The New American Poetry. Hettie Jones, in her memoir How I Became Hettie Jones, recalls her initial reaction to the appearance of The New American Poetry, spending long hours absorbing the poems she already knew so well from having published them in Yugen. The anthology inspired her own writing (1990, 116). Similarly, Joyce Johnson, Jack Kerouac's partner, wrote in Minor Characters of the day The New American Poetry came out. More recently, Ron Silliman in his blog considers "Donald Allen's The New American Poetry, unquestionably [to bel the most influential single anthology of the last century. It's a great book, an epoch-making one in many ways. If you didn't live anywhere near a location that might carry the small press books of the 1950s & early '60s, the Allen anthology was the place where you got to hear what all the fuss was about with the Beatniks, the New York School, the Black Mountain poets & so forth" (Silliman 11 June 2007).

It was the anthology of the San Francisco Renaissance, the poetry anthology of the Beat Movement. Allen recognized the new movement of coffeehouse and jazz club poetry that was sweeping the nation, and he decided to give the movement a national presence with an anthology. He saw and heard the flamboyant use of language or furious expression common among his contemporaries who sought a kind of literary parallel to the chaotic artfulness of bebop jazz and the monumental canvases of action painters such as Jackson Pollock. So, his anthology included not only the certified rebels and outlaws of American literary society like Kerouac and Ginsberg but also intellectuals and academics, such as Olson, Duncan, and Kenneth Koch. Donald Allen shifted the landscape of contemporary American literature. The major turning point of the Beat Movement toward postmodernism was not so much Kerouac's spontaneous novels such as *Visions of Cody*, *Dr. Sax*, or even *Tristessa*, as it was *The New American Poetry*, 1945-1960, from Grove Press.

But perhaps what really made a difference among young radical poets of the 1950s and 1960s was that the poets in that red and white anthology were all new. In fact, in 1960 the anthology that had actually identified the canon of contemporary poetry and thus established which poets were worthy of serious attention by serious people was that venerable textbook New Poets of England and America, edited by Donald Hall and Robert Pack. Not one poet included in The New American Poetry, 1945-1960 was found in Donald Hall's anthology, nor Hall and Pack's poets in Donald Allen's anthology. There was no overlapping whatever. Instead, New Poets of England and America includes such poets as Anthony Hecht, Robert Lowell, W. S. Merwin, May Swenson, and James Wright, all of whom developed distinguished careers in later life and all of whom received early academic recognition. The difference between the two anthologies was simply that one anthology represented the academic poets favored by the New Critics and the other represented poets outside the academic mainstream. The poets of Allen's anthology came to be known as the New American poets, and their poetry as the New American poetry.

What we as a community of scholars need to do sixty years and counting after the publication of *The New American Poetry*, and what I would like to begin doing here, is to examine generally the concept of New American Poetry, the anthology's historical significance, and then pose the question: is it time now as literary scholars that we reconsider the terminology "New" American Poetry?

After the success of the original New American Poetry 1945-1960 through the decade of the 1960s, Donald Allen created a franchise of updated anthologies. Beginning in 1973 Allen issued The Poetics of the New American Poetry, another anthology in which he collected every statement on the poetic craft and theory he could from 1950s-1960s avant-garde poets. Then in 1982 he updated his anthology altogether, making it more inclusive of women and poets of color, titled The Postmoderns: The New American Poetry Revisited. Also Ekbert Faas published in 1978 Towards a New American Poetics: Essays and Interviews, a widely quoted critical work that ultimately gave the term "New American Poetry"

credence. Today, virtually any study of the poetry of such writers as Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Charles Olson, and Allen Ginsberg still refers to the idea of New American Poetry.

What is New American Poetry? Allen himself was an editor for Grove Press beginning in 1949. Grove Press was a small press featuring avantgarde titles from the U.S. as well as from the U.K. and the continent. But Allen was also the co-editor of Grove's literary journal, the *Evergreen Review*. He was editor until 1970, first in New York and later in San Francisco. Thus Allen had already established a reputation as an editor of innovative literature before he began work in 1958 on the *New American Poetry* anthology. He had edited *Evergreen Review* in 1957 to include work of new poets from San Francisco including Brother Antoninus (William Everson), Duncan, and Gary Snyder. He began working on his new anthology in 1958 with much consultation from Charles Olson, Kenneth Rexroth, and Robert Duncan.

Particularly with Olson's and Duncan's help, Allen began looking for a specific kind of poetry. He did not call it New American Poetry. But he was looking for a certain kind of open form poetry that Duncan and Olson variously called field composition or projective verse. Olson described the compositional method of the new poets in his manifesto "Projective Verse," printed in full in the Statements on Poetics section in *The New American Poetry*. We will take up this essay later in the chapter.

What's in a Name?

This poetry Allen labeled New American Poetry—not merely because it was current or recent or even novelty poetry. The term evidently came from Charles Olson himself. In fact Donald Allen originally intended to title his collection *Anthology of Modern American Poetry (1948 to 1958-59)* (Golding 1995, 183).

But Allen's anthology came out in 1960 and popularized a fair array of different factions of experimental poets then writing. The term "New" is a bit worn out. It is like the term New Critics, referring to those close reading theorists from the same period. Everything was new in the 1950s. But these terms have no descriptive power anymore.

From the beginning, critical reviews and studies of the literature of the Beat Movement rarely defined Beat literature narrowly as referring almost exclusively to the works of Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Jack Kerouac, and the very early New York Beats. But Allen's anthology considered the Beats, the Black Mountain Poets, the New York School, and the San Francisco Renaissance as all being part of the same movement. Thus New American Poetry developed into a broader term including a much wider range of writers beyond the early Beats. One of the appeals of his anthology was that it reprinted Ginsberg's *Howl* for the first time in an anthology. And he included Jack Kerouac's poetry, not yet well-known (Choruses from *Mexico City Blues*).

Through the years and with the regular issuing of anthologies and critical studies combining all the elements of the innovative literary movement, as opposed to the established and accepted canon, and with the huge increase in studies of the literature of the Beat Movement since the 1980s, the poets of all these factions—San Francisco Renaissance, Black Mountain, New York School, City Lights poets—have been jumbled together in many minds anyway as part of the Beat Movement. Thus writers such as Denise Levertov, Robert Duncan, or Frank O'Hara, all of whom at one point or another distanced themselves from the early Beats, nevertheless today can be considered part of the Beat Movement as much as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. Eckbert Faas even attempts to place the establishment poet Robert Bly among the New American poets and, thus, the Beats.

The Beats were always included in the label of New American Poets. Values of the 1950s New Critics such as self-containment, tension, irony, metaphor, or complexity of form are not values held by New American Poets. Their poetry is as free as the lifestyle it reflects. The better way today to refer to all of this poetry is simply to include it into what has over the last few decades become a much bigger category—the Beat Movement itself.

The reason many poets who later became part of the establishment poetry scene—like Levertov and Duncan—was because of the negative connotations of Beatnik poetry and Beatniks so mischaracterized by popular media. Those connotations no longer have much weight. It is time to discard the term New American poets and just refer to poets of the Beat Movement. The Beats have all become part of whatever we call the mainstream canon anyway today. Allen and George F. Butterick, in *The Postmoderns: The New American Poetry Revisited*, attempted to make the transition from the term New American to the term Postmodern. But the idea of postmodern seems to be on the wane as well.

Again, the Beat Movement extended outward to others beyond the early New York and San Francisco origins to arguably what became the dominant avant-garde movement of the 20th century and into our own time as well. Perhaps it is time we dropped labels that keep the poetry of the Beat Movement stuck in the 1950s and 1960s.

Charles Olson's and Ed Dorn's Poems Included in *The New American Poetry*

Donald Allen established the original canon of early Beat poetry with his anthology. He identified the major works of the already great writers such as Allen Ginsberg with his *Howl* (in its first anthology appearance) and Jack Kerouac with his quickly famous *Mexico City Blues*. Then for nearly all the other writers in the anthology Allen provided the first significant exposure in the U.S. and Britain. Olson, for instance, was already developing his reputation as a power in the movement, but his works had not been readily available. Allen gave Olson plenty of page exposure in this 1960 literary event, however.

The very first line of *The New American Poetry* is of Olson's opening poem "The Kingfishers." The first line shows an obvious, for the time, visual influence from Ezra Pound's recently published *The Pisan Cantos*, the slant line that imposes a caesura where it would not naturally occur:

What does not change/ is the will to change

Also from Pound, Olson works snatches of quotation and speech from other languages into his rather lengthy poem for such an anthology. Throughout the poem Olson stamps recurring motifs—the ancient symbol "E, rudely cut on an old runestone; an inspiring quote from Chairman Mao—inflammatory in the Cold War era; and the over-all symbol of the sensuous kingfisher. in this case presented in sensuous action. Straight out of Olson's archeological explorations he presents the mystery of the "E" as the mystery of interchanging identical symbols and objects. The kingfisher, valued for its feathers in earlier Mexican cultures, possesses totemistic meaning exalting the bird and other animals. This would be the poem that would pair perfectly with what Olson advocated in his projective verse manifesto at the end of the anthology in its famous "Statements on Poetics" from the poets themselves.

"The Lordly and Isolate Satyrs" would become one of Olson's most popular poems for its easy accessibility. The speaker sees a motorcycle gang's abrupt invasion of a crowded beach in terms of grand mythical satyrs romping through a pastoral setting. The appeal of motorcycles probably makes the poem as far as the Beat crowd was concerned. The loud roar and commotion, obnoxious to the beachgoers, appears to the poet as a grand moment severing the beach landscape into reality and vision.

The lordly and isolate Satyrs—look at them come in on the left side of the beach . . . Wow, did you ever see even in a museum such a collection of boddisatvahs . . . (82)

The other poem of Olson's in *The New American Poetry* is the selfreflexively Beat "The Distances," which would later conclude his volume of poetry by the same title. The poem explores the Beatness of the 1950s, the alienation from Western culture, through explorations of the separateness found in nature and in myth. Unfulfilled relationships of the past presage unfulfillment of the present: "old Zeus—young Augustus" (94), for example. Or a German inventor in Florida who, Faulkner-like, kept his dead Cuban girl in his bed until her parents retrieved the body, only for it to be stolen again by the inventor.

Donald Allen also included a few poems from *The Maximus Poems*, Olson's epic poem, still in a state of flux in 1959 and 1960 when the anthology was coming together. The poem titled "I, Maximus of Gloucester to You," for example, is an excerpt from a longer poem among several with this title as part of their actual title in the published *The Maximus Poems*. Other Maximus Poems in the anthology, which we will return to later, are "The Songs of Maximus" and "Maximus to Himself." Allen gave Olson space in the anthology with far more pages of poetry and poetics statements than any of the other poets. The other poems included in the anthology, some of which I will take up later, are "The Death of Europe," "A Newly Discovered Homeric Hymn," "As the Dead Prey Upon Us," and "Variations done for Gerald van de Wiele." In his revision of the anthology, *The Postmoderns*, Allen changed the roster of Olson poems considerably.

Olson directly affiliated himself with the other elements of the Beat movement after Donald Allen in *The New American Poets* made the connection. Writing to Cid Corman in Kyoto, Japan, he acknowledged ""Ginzy [Ginsberg] making the sole public sense. And beautiful verse. Otherwise the world is presently catching up with what was published by you in *Origin*: In fact there is (tho no one sees it) the two groups: Origin, and Beat" (Christiansen, 1983:428). Paul Christiansen has also documented Olson's recognition of William S. Burroughs' work.

Certainly, Allen's inclusion of six poems by Ed Dorn both discovered Dorn to the world of the avant-garde and also established his reputation from the beginning. From our perspective in the early twenty-first century, these poems may not appear overly radical or particularly innovative. But in context of what college courses were pushing off as well-made poems of the day to the readers of Donald Allen's explosive anthology, these poems stand out.

Of the six poems five have been anthologized often and received adequate attention from scholars through the years. One is rarely reprinted and did not even make the cut when Allen rebranded his *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* as *The Postmoderns: The New American Poetry Revised* (1982).

"The Rick of Green Wood" from 1956 for many years was Ed Dorn's most anthologized poem. Although most of the poems in *The New American Poetry* had a distinct urban New York or San Francisco feel, this poem comes out of the West. Readers discovered a Beatnik who, along with Gary Snyder in the collection, was really a westerner writing of western landscapes and close-to-nature living.

Here the speaker negotiates a sale of a rick of wood from a woodcutter. The wily sawyer thinks to sucker the erstwhile Easterner by providing green wood that he cannot easily be rid of quickly. Dorn identifies himself directly as the speaker: "My name is Dorn, I said." And he warns the woodcutter: "I want cherry or alder or something strong/ and thin, or thick if dry..." (Allen 1960: 97).⁷ Dorn establishes that he is not naïve. He knows what his wife. Helene, would think of the heavy wood that would not easily burn.

For Sherman Paul Dorn, "establishes, in part by means of the poem's balladic quality, the human measure of his care." Here, early in his career, we observe Dorn "roadtesting the language" (1981: 78).

After negotiating for the dry wood Dorn notices "Out of the thicket my daughter was walking/ singing...as we stood there in the woodyard talking/ pleasantly, of the green wood and the dry." This is not some Robert Frost wannabe we are listening to in "Rick of Green Wood." Here are beginnings of the projective verse project Charles Olson details in the "Statements on Poetics" at the back of the anthology. One perception moves out of a previous perception. It is a poem of tactile detail on the part of both the poet and of the reader. "The speaker also attends to his own form of singing: this poem's amazingly (for free verse) intricate structure of sound recurrence is what principally conveys to the reader the pleasurable fragility of paying attention, of life and thought in and against 'the world'" (Wesling 1985: 28).

This early poem also establishes the theme of resistance that, as it turns out, will inform virtually all Ed Dorn's poetry from the beginning.

⁷ Since I am referring to poems from *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*, I am giving citations to Dorn's and Olson's poems from the anthology rather than from their later printed works that I will use for later citations.

Resistance against authority in any possible manifestation. Here Dorn resists the presumed superiority of a seasoned westerner, identified as "My name is Burlingame," toward what he sees as Easternness, insulting Dorn so much that he puts off the woodcutter by pivoting to his wife who "would die" because

Her back is slender And the wood I get must not Bend her too much through the day.

Another poem of Dorn's that appeared in *The New American Poetry* in 1960 is "Vaquero." The poem describes a cheap, possibly velvet painting type picture of a cowboy with an "oblong head" and blue hair standing underneath "a brick-orange moon." Slim-waisted, he wears blue jeans. Perhaps it is just a cheap painting or maybe a comic book illustration, but the poem aims directly at the reader. Here "Your delicate cowboy stands quite still" (98). There is no motion in this flat still life. The cowboy is just still. Why this is my cowboy, or yours, is up for conjecture. Then, in the last stanza, the cowboy's eyes are, yes, blue. The top of the sky is blue. This is a blue vaquero standing underneath a "brickorange moon" on a "dark brown night" in front of a house with "a blue chimney top." Donald Wesling calls this poem a "language song" (39). "Vaquero" would appear later as the opening poem to *Hands Up* in 1964.

In "Vaquero," then, Dorn is doing what good poets do, positing an image, a poem, uneasily balancing the said with the unsaid. Who is the poem addressed to? You? Me? An unnamed reader? A character in the poem looking at the picture, much like the speaker in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess"? Whatever is to be understood here is what is unsaid. What might be understandable. We probably do not want to know what is left out of the poem. Like nearly all Dorn poems to come, "Vaquero" does not let the reader feel easy.

"The Hide of My Mother," one of the longer poems in *The New American Poetry*, shows off a new poet working competently with the language of resistance and accommodation while creating lots of laughs. The situation is the visit of the poet's mother from Illinois to Ed and Helene in Washington State. Dorn plays with language strategies of comic exaggeration. My mother has a hide. She is a tough old gal, he seems to be saying. And she talks tough too. The Dorn children: what "a nice rug or robe/ my young kids would make" (98). Send them back to Illinois with her "when we had them butchered" and ready for tanning. This sounds like Jonathan Swift in "A Modest Proposal." The Dorns play along with his mother and ask which child—"which one?" But with a clot of phrase that would typify his work, the speaker asks which one "amusedly" in order "to conceal the fist in my heart." It was a great visit with a mother and mother-in-law they loved. Nevertheless--. Like "The Rick of Wood" Dorn never placed "The Hide of My Mother" in one of his collections, perhaps because they received plenty of circulation in the anthology.

The fourth poem included in *The New American Poetry* is "Are They Dancing" with its "mad fiesta along the river." It surely is no stretch to associate the dances at the "sad carnival" with the West:

I wonder, what instruments are playing And whose eyes are straying over the mountain Over the desert And they are dancing: or gazing at the earth. (104)

This may be a poem in a radically revolutionary anthology of a new kind of poetry, but it still shows us a bit of boyish romanticism and the autobiographical obsession that characterizes Dorn's early work, all with an appealing intimacy and freshness.

The title of "The Air of June Sings," later collected in *Hands Up!*, suggests a lovely June day when life is good and celebration is in order. Instead, the poem points scornfully toward a pioneer past usually celebrated but instead deserving contempt. Here Ed Dorn pays homage to Walt Whitman with a rare long line poem replete with grass imagery throughout. The speaker makes a rare visit to the local cemetery and walks about the plots reading tombstones. "Time Wanderers" he calls the local inhabitants. After considering numerous common sentiments in the epitaphs, he makes up a few himself:

I am going off to heaven and I won't see you anymore. I am Going back into the country and I won't be here anymore. I am Going to die in 1937. (104)

But he is taken aback from his levity when he notices the pauper section of the cemetery, graves with tin markers with dates printed on paper attached, the ink usually faded to illegibility. Now he thinks not of Time Wanderers but of lives diminished and erased. And above this plot stands an outsized stone marker for one of the town's pioneers, named Miller. The same name the speaker knows of the "overlord" who owns the large farm adjacent, the farm where he notices children, presumably poor, filching fruit for their suppers. Miller: a name on many of the fine stone markers before him. So pretentious is the marker that it boasts no familiar sentimental epitaph. No need. The monument speaks for itself.