INTERVIEW WITH ERIC DARTON BY SUSAN TEPPER

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Darton at Le 57, Montparnasse. Photo: Gwendolyn Kehrig-Darton

YOU ARE THE QUINTESSENTIAL NEW YORKER, YOU WERE BORN IN THAT CITY AND CONTINUE TO MAKE IT YOUR HOME. HOW HAS NEW YORK INFORMED YOUR WRITING?

Some of my earliest memories are aural impressions of naptimes. The old tenement I lived in was bookended by industrial buildings and I recall the rhythms of various machines as a kind of dreamscape. Also, across the back alley stood another tenement where women used to hang out

washing on clotheslines, so through the window came the sound of pulleys and their conversations, audible, but not comprehensable. Construction sites nearby – a boom-shish, boom-shish noise which I later learned was a pile driver. At a very basic level, before language, those sounds mapped out my world. So even though I'm a prose writer, my bedrock reality is the sound of whatever's happening.

Later, of course, one swam through a multitude of distinct voices and voicings. I grew up in an Italian-American – really Sicilian-American – neighborhood and the city was Puerto Ricanizing fast, so there was a mix of those tongues and a host of Englishes. Not to mention my Yiddish-speaking relatives. No one spoke the same as the next person! So I got the idea that language could be very ductile and symphonic and was, at bottom, a more or less interesting amalgam of sounds.

The heroic scale of the city then too, and the changes that were then taking place in it. The fifties! Vast clearances and ambitious constructions. The era of the great skyscrapers not long past and incredible modernizations still going strong. A glass bank branch through whose huge windows one could see an enormous safe – right there in plain view on Fifth Avenue. A sculptor, Jean Tinguely, created a machine that destroyed itself to enthusiastic applause of the audience in the garden at the Museum of Modern Art. They broadcast the whole event on the radio, the arrival of the fire deparment and all. Later, I learned the sculpture was called "Homage to New York."

Museums of all sorts and parks, and dangerous streets. Some real squalor. The place was a bloody cornucopia. Anything generous in my writing has to derive from a combination of the wordplay in my family and the mixed messages in the surrounding blocks and boroughs. And then too, you could tune into WNYC radio and hear the United Nations General Assembly. All this domestic chatter and a world of babel out there too. Freighters docking not half a mile away, and ocean liners that went to all the places whose names one heard voting on this or that resolution. Street fairs down the block with dollars plastered to saints effigies hauled through the streets. Knife grinders, live poultry, clubs with strippers along Bleecker Street whose windows sometimes were low enough to peek through if you jumped high enough and grabbed onto the sills with your fingertips. If one didn't go mad with stimulations, one became a writer.

THE BOOKS YOU WRITE SEEM QUITE DIFFERENT, ONE FROM THE OTHER. OR DO YOU FEEL THERE IS AN UNDERLYING COMMON THREAD?

Oy, the sixty-four thousand dollar question. Well, you're right, they are quite different. *Free City* is a fantastical novel. After which came *Divided We Stand*, a cultural history of the World Trade Center. The second novel, *Orogene*, does not, at first glance, resemble the first novel. And the book I just finished, *Notes of a New York Son*, is a memoir that constantly shifts focal length from the narrator's self to the observed and witnessed city to the wider world and back again.

It's a monster – eleven years of New York life beginning in late 1995, running through 9/11 and concluding early this year – fourteen hundred odd pages worth wherein the narrative strata all resonate against one another in a way that's more associated with the novel than nonfiction. So the texts, taken individually, would seem to be a mixed litter: one a piglet, another a kitten, still another a puppy, maybe a porpoise in there too, or a composite beast.

But the common element is that the books work through, in varying forms, certain consistent themes. From my perspective, everything I write, at bottom, explores some aspect of the relationship among beauty, power and freedom. And, reciprocally, the obverse of these. One pretty clear analogue among them is that they all narrate these forces playing out in real or invented cities. I try to fuse beauty, power and freedom in the language too. Down to the sentence level. Which makes me a slow writer, at least in the revision and polishing phases. If I were looking at the work from completely outside it, I'd also say this guy has a definite preoccupation with eros and nihilism – that he's interested in what happens when generative energies transmogrify into destructive ones. My thesis in the WTC book, for example, was that the building of the WTC constituted an abuse of power and a nihilistic act in and of itself.

Last but not least, the books all investigate the kinds of blindness – personal, intrapersonal and social – that are occasioned by fear. My fiction protagonists as well as my nonfiction narrators confront terrifying situations and struggle, with greater or lesser degrees of success to see things clearly. They're not classical heroes, but one can't say they fail for want of trying.

AFTER THE 9/11 TRAGEDY YOUR WORLD TRADE CENTER BOOK "DIVIDED WE STAND" GENERATED A LOT OF BUZZ, AND YOU WERE FREQUENTLY IN THE MEDIA. HOW DID ALL THAT AFFECT YOU, AND DOES THIS BOOK HAVE A "BEFORE AND AFTER" LIFE?

Yes, post-9/11 many personal chickens came home to roost. I'd always told my students that once their writing went out into the world, the world would make something out of it way beyond their scope of intent

or control. I found myself practicing what I'd preached in spades.

And imagine the weirdness – a writer suddenly being solicited by the media as though he possessed the philosopher's stone. And why? Because he'd paid attention to something unexamined – tried to find meaning in a cultural icon that no one gave a rap about until it was obilterated. What made the situation incredibly difficult was that I knew right away that the destruction of the WTC would be used as a pretext for war, so I had the rare opportunity to, metaphorically, stand in front of the tank for fifteen minutes before the collective hysteria shifted to anthrax-phobia and bloodlust. In what universe does a pacifist anarchist get to talk live on Voice of America? Or get a chance to plead the case on Good Morning America for waiting a year before acting – either to rebuild or to bomb – so that we could absorb the magnitude of what had happened.

Such was the moment, before the actuality of the horror was shrink-wrapped and the media began the dunning repitition of the towers falling in slo-mo – the true commencement of Shock and Awe.

Consequently, fighting this losing battle against the dogs of war, I got sick as a dog too – with pneumonia. I may have breathed in some funky stuff too. Lots of folks did. Being that depleted, not sure my lungs were going to recover was my first real intimation of mortality. In the wake of all this, and particularly when we started bombing Afghanistan, I got very depressed. Somewhere, at bottom, most writers imagine they can change the world with words, and in my own mind I had failed. First, I'd failed to warn people with sufficient urgency that there was something desperately wrong with the WTC to start with, and second that our aggressive response would further deepen the trauma, not help heal it. It got to the point where I actually tortured myself with the idea that if I had written a better book, none of this would have happened. The towers would have been abandoned after the first bombing in '93 and turned into a gigantic curiosity that no one would dream of inhabiting, but which made a nice viewing platform and maybe a base for turbines.

But that was, I think, really a regression to a kind of weird omnipotent stage based on a real sense of helplessness. In a way I was lucky to find out in such an unsparing way that books both do and don't matter, because in some senses, this nightmarish experience freed me to write precisely what I want rather than idealizing the process or writing out of a sense of obligation to knit the ruptures of world and family back together.

As to the before/after part of the question, the book was respectfully

reviewed when it came out in late 1999 and sank like a stone. It did make it into the Columbia University classics library, but very few people apart from some urbanists noticed it at all. It was a radical book, both formally and politically, and the left ignored it altogether. The best review came out of the Wall Street Journal. But fundamentally, until the morning of 9/11, the WTC was yawn city. Then, suddenly information about these buildings became interesting, vital even, to a wider readership. In October *Divided…* made the *Times* bestseller list.

It's indicative of something in our body politic too that the *Divided's* phoenix-like rise from remainder table to Airport Book lasted perhaps six weeks. Then the *Divided…* submerged again, but it has never entirely gone away. In retrospect, I'm glad someone took on the subject and lavished so much time and care on weaving the various threads of the tale into as robust and fundamentally useful a history as time has proven it. The buildings and the souls inside them are gone, so book is really what's left as far as an architecture and archive of ideas goes. All the primary source texts I used were blown away. Bits of those documents drifted down on Brooklyn and got plastered to the windscreens of fire trucks.

DO YOU FOLLOW ANY SORT OF WRITING ROUTINE?

I've tried, so far as possible, to live outside the tyranny of the clock. My muse prefers it when I heed her urgings, but the work suffers when I'm crazy or exhausted, so lately she's been pretty tolerant of my attempts to conserve energy when I need to. After all, I'm 57, an age verging on old a generation or two ago. 57 still is old in many places and under cerrtain conditions.

What I do routinely is visit my local café as many mornings a week as I can. It's a regularity I can tolerate without feeling oppressed because there's so much variation built in. Been going there these past twelve years – the Man at Table 4. The idea of being publicly findable and available appeals to me. For a number of years I wrote at the café back when I was pretty much anonymous there, but then a group of regulars developed and I would miss out on the conversations. So I trained myself to ignore the dust bunnies and work at home. The café is a kind of penny university, where diverse folks gather to sing a kind of collective aubade. Sometimes discordant. Indispensable.

One of the blessings and curses to being a writer is that one works all the time, even when not actively writing. The challenge is learning how to suspend narrating. In my case that's made difficult by the tendency of anxiety to rush into any gap in the work. The midlife practice is to try to

engage what's happening and not turn it immediately into thought or story.

For some people though, a writing routine is essential, so the trick is to make it less like school and more like a tryst with a lover.

HAS YOUR EXTENSIVE TRAVEL ABROAD SHAPED ANY PARTICULAR WORK(S)?

Most definitely. I'd pretty much silenced myself by spring '01 – my relationship with my writing was drained of energy – and our trip to France that summer, the incredible sensuality of the environments we traveled through kicked the doors of resistence in. Suddenly I had the strength to go into the yucky stuff that meant becoming a deeper writer.

The second novel, *Orogene*, owes its existence to a trip to the Dordogne region of France the following year. My compañera suggested that I use the two weeks to give the book a much needed revision that I'd been simply too fragmented to do at home. Well, it wasn't a revision the book needed, but a rewrite – not a sentence was left standing when I was done. It took a year. But I got a start anyway and found I could keep going stateside. And the geology and flora of the region, not to mention the neolithic caves, poured into the text as though the book had been waiting for them all the time in order to have permission to blossom. Which makes sense given that the book is about the discovery of a perfected world.

Notes of a New York Son, the New York journal, invariably leapt ahead on trips abroad. I'd never have had the distance to make big strategic decisions on the text had I been jammed up in the city with my everyday preoccupations and assumptions about what could and couldn't be done.

Recently we went to Costa Rica and on a solitary walk one evening, up and down a mountain, along a path improvised by cows, it came to me that I'd be cool with melting back into the earth whenever it was time. And, curiously, another result of the trip was that myths, Greek and otherwise, which I'd always loved, became much more physical to me. I "got" the relationship between natural forces and gods in a much more direct way. It's not abstract any more.

YOU BEGAN AS A POET, DO YOU SEE A RETURN TO THAT FORM?

I sure hope so. Whenever I love a piece of prose, fiction or non, almost invariably there's a strong sense of poetics, often unconscious, that underpins the characters, plot, situations. Poetry and drums grew up

together. They’re the heartbeat.