

EDWARD DAHLBERG: A PORTRAIT FROM LIFE

Michael Perkins

[Editor's Note: The memoir/diary that follows captures Edward Dahlberg (1900-1977) with an 8mm camera's accuracy, an instrument of its time, producing an old roll of film with splotches and burned-out frames, full of flickering images. I continue to be disappointed that to my knowledge no one captured Dahlberg on film, even though, during the 1970s, the technology was beginning to be commonplace and available. Too bad he was never interviewed on television, by, say, David Susskind. In documentaries about the Black Mountain school you may hear his name, but will not see Dahlberg in action. Edward Dahlberg straddled a number of generations, finally becoming a member of the truly lost one, lost to our modern era and its ubiquitous visual store of collective memories. But, I can attest to the accuracy of the portrait drawn by Michael Perkins (though not to every claim E.D. makes). In many ways, the image conjured is an unflattering one, and I am publishing it, not, certainly, to settle any scores with the great man, since I owe him many things, and he owed me nothing, but to honor his existence. Yet, one takes the good with the bad and the argument that one is necessary to produce the other can continue to be forever fought. As one will see, Dahlberg could be racist, homophobic, misogynistic; he displayed a host of faults, which, in the late 1960s and early 70s, were more widely shared—or flaunted—than they are, one hopes, today. Dahlberg's sexual boasting in this account may stem from Perkins' own work, since he became a book reviewer for one of the original New York City alternative newspapers of the upstart 1970s, Screw, which devoted a whole tabloid page to discussions of literary fiction, and other works, which managed to accommodate the paper's central concerns. Nevertheless, Dahlberg himself was a misanthrope, but one with a sense of humor; he could often laugh, even, occasionally, at himself. I have written a number of essays about the man over the years, since Dahlberg was, is, one of America's most distinguished 20th century writers. But, few readers would recognize his name today, since almost everyone neglects him. Or, worse yet, ignores him. Dahlberg lacked a talent for friendship, though he did better at acquiring admirers, though, alas, only a handful still remain. Perkins is one of the few. —W.O.]

I dreamt of Edward Dahlberg the other night. My friend and mentor was chastising me, as he had done frequently, for my misuse of the English language. His own diction was graciously formal, seasoned with archaisms

drawn from the Baroque prose he favored, from North's *Plutarch* to John Stow's *Survey of London*. (When we saw each other in London in 1970, both books were important markers in our friendship.)

Edward fulminated against slipshod modern speech with the fervor of an Old Testament prophet. After the publication of the Depression-era naturalistic novels that made him famous, he had reinvented himself as a kind of literary throwback, and became a contemporary master of the eighteenth century sentence.

I had not really thought of Edward in years, but although the last time I saw him was 1970, and he died in 1977, his strictures stayed with me, as did the memory of some of his books, especially *Because I Was Flesh*, *Can These Bones Live* and *Alms for Oblivion*. But we met because I wanted to republish his first novel (Introduction by D.H. Lawrence) *Bottom Dogs*, at Croton Press, Ltd., where I was editor.

Edward insisted that the man and his book are one, and in his case this was exhaustingly, and sometimes regrettably, true. The virtues and vices of his books, early and late, were reflected in him.

We met at a reading he gave at the YMHA 92nd Street in 1967, when he was 67 and I was 24, and soon after became close.

In the time I knew him I loved him better than I loved my father, but he was a deeply flawed man, and a deeply flawed writer. As a man he was mercurial in his moods, touchy, ungrateful, homophobic and racist; as a writer his rhetoric often reached the page without passing through his intelligence. He could be a windbag.

But he was also gracious, generous, and open with the young man I was. He was an authentic grand old man of American letters, the kind they stopped making when Creative Writing Programs became ascendant in the literary world. He had written a book with his friend Herbert Read, had known Sherwood Anderson, Dreiser, and Ford Madox Ford, and told stories about them that made me want to be part of that grand tradition. Like a sannyasin attaching himself to a Zen master, I apprenticed myself to Edward.

December, 1967

We met when I attended his reading with Isabelle Gardner at the YMHA. As we listened to Gardner read, I watched Edward, who sat a row away. His wife R'Lene was with him, stroking his head and whispering in his ear. They were like newlyweds. She was loud and animated, like a blowsy old actress, drinking whiskey from a water glass. Dahlberg wore an old

tweed jacket, sweater, and chinos, and he shambled when he walked. Despite hooded eyes, he seemed quite kindly. At the intermission I asked him to sign my copy of *Because I Was Flesh*. (Thanking me for asking, he asked if we'd met before. I said no, but that I'd admired his work, starting with *Bottom Dogs*.)

September, 1969

Edward returned from Europe, and we spent three hours in the library of his apartment at 57 W. 75th Street. I think we became friends. I regard him as the greatest living American writer, and I think he has a lot to teach me about books and life, although he says his life has been composed of mistakes. He's about six feet tall, good voice, small pot belly, thinning white hair. I brought a bottle of Amontillado, and his new wife, Julia, an Irish-woman in her fifties, served us cookies, crackers and butter. Around us his books in rows, many of them bound in Barcelona. We spoke of Europe, where he'd gone for escape. He seems a warm man, gracious and courteous, and for his age, 69, chipper and clear. Ego and bitterness were not on display this visit. He charmed me. He gave me a precious copy of *The Flea of Sodom*, praising me for my candor in the inscription.

He spoke of writers he'd known: Ford Madox Ford was a gentle, generous man. Dreiser wanted to be his friend, told him "not to miss a trick with the ladies." Sherwood Anderson gave him an introductory letter to New Orleans people, where he had to defend Anderson from his friends. He once stayed up talking with the original of Barnes's Mathew-Mighty-Grain-of-Salt O'Connor and Hart Crane. He was Olson's mentor. He thinks Ginsberg is depraved, and that LeRoi Jones baits whites for money. (He only saw whites at Jones's apt.) He said Black Mountain was full of homosexuals, and that anyone who wants to write will "eat famine." He dislikes homosexuals, academics and rioters. He has lost his two sons because a former wife kept them and wouldn't let him influence them. He doesn't hear from them. "Without the warmth of a woman in the room I couldn't live," he said plaintively. He asked me to consider myself his friend, and I was honored. Said I couldn't publish *From Flushing to Cavalry* at Croton, but could have *Flea*.

June 1970

London. Met Edward at the Gloucester Tube Station. I saw him coming, looking quite jaunty in dark glasses he wore because of trouble with his

eyes. He stepped into the path of a car which stopped just in time. Instead of going to his flat, we took the tube to Bayswater. On the train I gave him Taylor's *Of Holy Dying*, which he said he'd seen for \$200. He twitted me again about my "inhuman" letters. We went to a restaurant on Leinster Terrace in Bayswater, and had retsina. and a feast of Greek food. Dropped inhibitions and spoke about our weight, clothing and women—Creeley's lovely wife Bobbie. He said Alex Trocchi had read him pages from *Cain's Book*, and he'd said, "That won't do, Trocchi." He apologized for lecturing me, and it was obvious he was in good form, feeling friendly and playful.

Distinctive features: his bad left eye, his slouch, his habit of ending sentences graciously with "uhh!" At 70 (July 24) he walks as fast as me, talks madly about women, gossips, with the demeanor of a kindly Biblical prophet. Coyly vain ("I've written some good books"), but engagingly so. Apologizes for himself. Picks on grammatical mistakes, bad language, with fond severity. Interested in "human" things—money & food & sex. Hates small towns. Hates his early books. Quit the Communist party after 14 months. Hates Dickens, Fitzgerald. Loved Anderson and Dreiser, but can't read them. Proud, touchy about his hard-earned knowledge; a good friend.

June 1970

London. Spent eight hours with Edward. Found him prophetic, critical of me, but encouraging—I was so in awe of him I couldn't talk well. Seymour Krim told me that he "gilds the lily" in his prose,—paints the obvious, but I disagree. He'd bought a fan and we took it back to Julia, who wasn't happy to see me. The dust jacket of *The Confessions* was lying on galleys of an ethnographic book he was introducing. We wandered out to a pub near Berkeley Square, talking companionably in the heat, each trying to save the other from traffic. The fancy pub was expensive and full of creeps. We had roast beef sandwiches and he bought me two large gins with ice. He took pills for a stomach ailment he's had since 1929. We chatted and he said of Edith Sitwell, "A dreadful, painted old hag," who admired his "barbaric American-ness." He was fired from Columbia for having an affair with a student, but he took Julia back rather than marry the girl. He said he complained to his landlady that his toilet seat was wobbly, and she said, "sit still," and he replied, "but I'm a nervous man." After lunch he called a waiter to task—as he did throughout the day to others, courteously, but thoroughly, if he thought they'd slighted him—for not thanking him for his tip. We went to Savile Row, then to book shops. Rota's was closed, but in Better Books he bought me a copy of Stow's *Survey of London*, as the result

of a bet I won. When I put the money in his pocket, he returned it. He said he'd wanted to write a play in the Restoration manner, full of wit—"which is difficult to acquire," and he winked. We caught a train to Sloane Square because I was taking him to see David Storey's "Home" at the Royal Court, seats in the Upper Circle. I fantasized he might like it. We were hot, so we stopped for ice cream and water. Meanwhile curtain time approached and he insisted on service from a slow Pakistani waiter. We arrived at the theater 15 minutes late and had to stand watching. Gielgud and Richardson starred. I saw that he didn't like it; the language was "banal" and the actors overpainted birds. "Dreadfully queer." Outside, he chastised me, saying that I began to seem disturbed in the restaurant, despite our pleasant afternoon, during which he'd been constantly attentive—"and all for a couple of fags." That started an argument that went on 15 minutes, with me trying to defend myself, that nearly ended our friendship. He became quite angry. We walked up Kings Road while he raged. We got lost, and I had to ask directions back to Gloucester Road. I apologized—I should have put him before the play. We stopped our argument, but he stopped being companionable and became the stern teacher. He pounced on every word I said. My language was "so bad" he made me speechless. We bought cider and went back to his sublet. He was tired, rubbing his face and blind eye. We spoke of Shakespeare, Indians, and of how much we could give up to live freely. He said he couldn't do without books, that he was a very bookish man, books were more important than life itself. He likes *Timon of Athens* and *Lear* best. I was overwhelmed because he talked about my writing seriously, saying I must be strong and without compromise if I wanted to write. I left him awed, but miserable. He called the next day, woke me at 9 (he's an insomniac), because he was worried about me. I said I had been tongue-tied with awe. He said he felt the same when he was writing to D.H. Lawrence. He cared about me, but a purely social day would have left a bad taste in both our mouths. That it was better than had a ton of bricks fallen on me. More: I'm the same height as his son, who he says is worthless as a writer. He's having trouble with Julia. She's not passionate. He likes romantic women.

(He wrote to apologize again on August 3, 1970: "Was really startled, my dear, fine fellow, that you should have been peevish with me because I did not relish seeing a pair of dilapidated clowns on the stage gabbling with one another. Please forgive me. I like you enormously, and was taken, and very much with your own prose, and enchanting sensibilities....")

Summer, 1970

New York. Over lunch I asked him for a reading list, and said I was his student. I asked him about being in a jail cell with Nathanael West. He was noncommittal; doesn't like West. He seemed nervous, but we bantered. He praised *In the American Grain*, Emmanuel Carnevali's autobiography, and Ford Madox Ford's *Portraits From Life*. Mentioned his love of Dreiser. Said he liked Irving Rosenthal, but his life was "degenerate."

He liked Barbra Streisand in "Hello Dolly," being partial to Music Hall delights. He had gotten tired of London. I was glad to see that he and Julia are getting along better.

October, 1970

New York. Spoke on the phone with Edward for 15 minutes. He doesn't like blacks because they're "trying to kill us." Mistrusts women.

A visit. I was late. He smiled and said I had "a quaint notion of time." He talked about the blacks, calling them "niggers". Justified his racism by saying he raised his hand against those who raised their hands to him. "They're ruining the city."

Although Croton failed to publish *Flea*, he still called me an honorable man. On every test he comes through. We walked south from his apartment to West 57th Street against the wind, talking of Sappho, Johnson, Walton on Bunyan.

He invited me to dinner. Julia wasn't home. Chicken, wild rice, asparagus and wine on a card table in his study. I told him about my family. He said my father was obviously worthless, but that I should try to save my sister by guiding her.

I told him he should be proud of his life. He said on the contrary, he wasn't proud of it, nor was he a proud man.

When my speech became loose he corrected it, saying if I couldn't speak it, how could I write well? He didn't like words like "fragmentation" or phrases like "cards on the table."

I said something about his having a lot of friends, and he demurred. He actually went through the list of *festschrift* contributors pointing out whom he knew. Called his student Bill O'Rourke "a drunken lazy Irishman." Edward is very conscious of imagined or real criticism, and one of his favorite tricks is to deliberately misunderstand me. But he's fond of me; we joke too much for him not to be. He read to me two pages from *Alms for Oblivion* on Allen Tate when I waxed enthusiastic for his letters at the expense of his

criticism.

He is stern, reactionary, human, wise, experienced, irritable, and I see the truth of his dictum that the writer and his books are one, virtues and vices together.

October, 1970

Edward called. I told him I'd bought paperback copies of writers he'd recommended—Trahem & Renard—and he urged me again to buy hard-covers. Told me he didn't want to go to a show of Pre-Columbian artifacts; he'd rather read about the period. He apologized for twitting me at our last meeting, saying to the tired man others are tiresome, when it was he who was tiresome.

November, 1970

Edward was with his old friend Herbert Miller, and very jovial. I gave him two poems he liked. Listened to tapes of Edward singing Cohan-Jolson songs. He sings well, if primitively. He read to us from *The Confessions* about Charles Olson. We all had a jolly time. Miller's wife showed up, an actress doing a production of *Because I Was Flesh*. She'll use some of the songs. I kept Edward on the defensive by pointing out the journalism in his "Kansas City Revisited" essay. Large television by his bed.

November, 1970

Spoke with Edward, who called me one of his dearest friends, and chided me for not being able to speak of emotions.

I told him I loved him, and realized I hadn't done so before because of my timidity before his stature. He asked me to send some manuscript pages; if they were good, he would get them published, and they would be good if in the same simple style as my book on Renie. He's close to signing a good contract with HBJ. Bill Jovanovich of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich comes in a limousine courting him.

December, 1970

Sat in his bedroom and watched the Ali-Bonavena fight on TV. He'd just signed a \$10,000 contract with HBJ. He admired the switchblade I carried, and said he carries a monkey wrench on the streets. I said I'd get him a

pistol. Gave him a first edition of Phillip Massinger for Christmas. Then he told me why he's been sleepless; Julia has been seeing other men. He told me he can last an hour inside her, and had asked her how big a prick she needed to satisfy her.

We argued about words, and talked about women. Julia once put a pistol in the belly of a 23-year-old girl he was sleeping with (four times in one day). We embraced as I left.

He signed my copy of *The Confessions* "Love Edward."

December, 1970

Edward called. He'd read the chapter of *The Double Dealer* I'd given him and wanted to see me, to go over it line by line. Some criticisms, but "many good lines—and you couldn't write one if you weren't good." He said I have the gift—"you've got it"—and he wants to teach me, in his words, the way Flaubert did Maupassant. He said that with work, *The Double Dealer* could be a much better book than *Bottom Dogs*, and that was an insult, considering his low opinion of *Bottom Dogs*.

He called a few days later to reassure me of his belief in my talent. Spoke of how Anthony Burgess snubbed him in a Columbia writing class.

February, 1971

A party for Edward and the publication of *The Confessions* at Coburn Britton's house at 6 St. Luke's Place. Beautiful house, black maid and a basement full of gays. Ted and Joan Wilentz were there. They liked my book, *Renie Perkins*, and Renie's paintings. I embraced Edward, who was talking with two publishers. Gerard Malanga was there. He's to do the Paris Review interview with Edward. I took Edward aside to warn him about Malanga, and he prodded me about my Voice review of *The Confessions*. I rebuked him, and he apologized. I was about to leave when Tom McGonigle told me to wait. A party was going to dinner. Went with Malanga, Britton and McGonigle to Max's Kansas City and talked to Edwin Seaver, publisher—half my size and feisty. I told McGonigle he made me sick because he sucked up to Malanga.

Edward called to ask about my Voice review of *The Confessions*. He was disappointed and distant, not as intimate as he had been, especially after I criticized Britton and McGonigle.

March, 1971

Saw Edward for the first time since before Christmas. He'd been busy finishing an essay, and dealing with Julia, who'd run away for a while. He was in a good mood, teasing and twitting me. He said I wrote a better prose in *Renie Perkins* than he did in *Bottom Dogs*. He spoke highly of Coburn Britton, said "Cobie" thought of him as a father, and he thought of "Cobie" as his only son. He doesn't like McGonigle, and Britton doesn't either. He told me how *The Confessions* had been cut and edited by Edwin Seaver, and he didn't mind. Said he didn't like old women, and told me more of his sexual experiences, describing himself as having been unable to satisfy a certain older woman after an hour and a half, and lying there dripping with sweat.

He fought with Jovanovich of HBJ because Jovanovich doesn't want to publish all of Edward's books. I finished a bottle of wine, and we went for a walk to Scribner's bookstore. We walked sixty blocks in an hour. The day was a beautiful, windy March, sun shining. I went to pee in Saks' while he waited outside. On the way back he bumped into a tough looking man and berated him until the man politely convinced him he'd been the bumper. Back at the apartment he gave me a copy of Quevedo and Chapman's *Homer*. He cajoled, he demanded, he was generous and impeccably, ornately, polite; he was witty, he was kind.

April, 1971

I called Edward. He was strained. Then he said that after I'd left him last time, two books were missing: a Horace and a Charles Olson. He assumed I had taken them because I'd confessed to sitting at Max's Kansas City with Cobie and not offering to pay. But McGonigle had been there two days before. I was hurt, shocked, and heated for half an hour; then he hung up, saying if he stayed he'd apologize forever. I was to call him. His injustice shook me. Next afternoon he called and invited me to visit. We went for a long walk down 5th Avenue. I swore on Renie's ashes I hadn't stolen from him. He talked again of all the people who'd betrayed him as justification for his rush to judgment. Talked about women. Can't stand a woman who just "lies there." She has to move. He said the FBI interviewed him in many cities, and had a tap on his Rivington Street apartment. They leave for Sarasota, Florida, Friday. They bought a Ford Pinto, and Julia will drive them and 200 books to Florida. Back at this apartment we had a bottle of wine; he made me take one home.

30 April, 1971

I should have stood in bed; went early to Edward's to help him move books, but Julia wasn't ready, so Edward and I bored each other for two hours. He gave up first and called a woman at Knopf he spoke with for an hour. It pleased me to hear him use on her the same tricks he used with me. He finds a word wrong and the other person becomes defensive.

Finally, at noon, Edward and I and the Super carried out two dozen packages of books, four suitcases, a typewriter, a juicer and a tape recorder. "I didn't need you after all, Michael." And so, farewell, old father.

I wrote to Edward in Florida, but there was no response. When I read Charles DeFanti's biography, *The Wages of Expectation*, (New York University Press, 1978), I learned that what had happened to me was not unusual. As time passed, my favorite book of Edward's became *Reasons of the Heart*, his aphorisms. Edward was a maker of profound sentences. I turn to them now when I remember my old friend.

"We canonize the bones of a man because while he lived we mistook him for a devil and questioned all his motives." And: "No man can be more than himself, but he is utterly worthless if he does not try."