

**“Movement/ occurs at the split”: Turning to Late Modernity in Edward Dorn’s
*North Atlantic Turbine.***

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Edward Dorn’s 1966 poem “A Theory of Truth: The North Atlantic Turbine” marks a turning point in the intersection between language and space in Dorn’s poetics (Dorn, 2012). This article uses “A Theory of Truth” to illustrate the transition from the anxious early poetry that Reitha Pattison explores, to the blasted heath of de-signification that is the early books of *Gunslinger* (Pattison, 2010). Dorn’s hypothesis in this poem is that “[t]he earth has been destroyed. Only a/ few people know that” (ll.250-7). In “A Theory of Truth” he seeks a language act that will enable us to properly conceive of what kind of “place” we inhabit in late modernity. The importance of this poem is in the way that Dorn uses language as a site in itself, in a way that is analogous to the world as a whole. He thereby enables the individual to experience the movement of socio-political systems, which contain and limit the individual body every day without being discernible to them. Dorn sounds out the logic of late capitalism, and tests the extent to which emplaced, quotidian life as we knew it has been destroyed. By his insistence on language as site in the manner suggested by Lytle Shaw, Dorn enables the reader to come to terms with the new, replacing system of late modernity, and to test out a mechanism for survival post-apocalypse that he perfects in books one and two of *Gunslinger* (Shaw, 2012).

This article proceeds in two parts. The first is an interrogation of the specific spatial practice of “A Theory of Truth”, held in conversation with the thesis that Pattison sets out for Dorn’s early poetry. The specific interrogation of Dorn’s linguistic and spatial practice in “A Theory of Truth” presented here will be braced against certain aspects of

Gunslinger. As well as exploring how Dorn's language manifests a particular political position with regards to the enclosure acts of late capitalism, this article brings to light some tensions in the poetic relationship between Dorn and Charles Olson, and brings forward the strength of William Carlos Williams' influence on Dorn's spatializing tactics. The work of Christopher Beach, Michael Davidson and Sherman Paul is essential to this study. In the second, longer part of this argument, the way that Dorn uses language to manifest experience rather than simply to represent space will be set out, allowing a clear analysis of the relationship between spatial process in phenomenal reality, and spatial processes in the "experienced or imagined" loci of Dorn's poem (Davidson, 2007). This part of the work draws in particular on the ideas of Lytle Shaw, Ian Davidson and Justin Katko.

Dorn's tendency to use language as a substitute or analogue for human social experience has been discussed in the past. As Christopher Beach explains in his essay, "Migrating Voices in the Poetry of Edward Dorn":

Dorn's use of language in the poem... is one that seeks to incorporate all available forms of rhetoric "as semiotic systems embedded in the surface of modern American life". Dorn himself has characterized language as "an active audience, with its own ideas and its own content and its own need to make its expression" apart from any "psycho-philosophical pressure [that] has nothing to do with the poem." (Beach & Dorn, 1991)

Instead of binding his poetry to a single meaning in "A Theory of Truth" and *Gunslinger*, Dorn's language allows a potentially infinite number of associations to open up, enacting on the linguistic field one of the major

geographical points of the text. In Dorn's writing, Michel de Certeau's assertion that practice is the distinction between "place" and "space" doesn't precisely hold true, because there is a tension in his "spatial" terrain, which will be discussed later on. Practically, it seems that "place" can be considered as the inhabited, local situation of everyday life (Certeau, 1984). "Space" by contrast denotes distance: the distance that is synonymous with freedom in much American writing of the twentieth century, and the vast, enclosing distances of globalisation and multinational trade.

For language as much as for the landscape in Dorn's poetry, it is the agreed routes through it which establish its "meaning". Although Lytle Shaw doesn't call Dorn by name, he identifies an important part of the relationship between language and space when he identifies "...a turn, in avant-garde poetry of the 1970s and 1980s, away from empirical sites towards the idea of language itself as a site, so that the *real* world would now be the linguistic... preconditions for representation." (Shaw, 2012)

In early poems like "Relics from a Polar Cairn" (5-6) and "The Top List" (38), Dorn's adherence to Olson's methodology almost drowns his own voice, although Dorn's tendency to be distracted by occurrences in the present (jokes between the anthropologists in "Relics from a Polar Cairn", for example) and his inability to resist humour belie his later poetics in most instances. By the time he comes to write the first book of *Gunslinger* in 1968, he is almost writing a systematic reappraisal of the theoretical foundations of *The Maximus Poems*, based in his assertion of the primacy of time over space, and an out-and-out rejection of what Michael Davidson calls Olson's "archetype of self-reliance"

as a political methodology for resisting the homogenizing nature of global capitalism (Davidson, 1980).

In the relationship between “A Theory of Truth/ The North Atlantic Turbine”, written in 1966, and *Gunslinger*, begun two years later, Dorn has shifted his poetic project with regards to the relationship between the long poem, the geological world and the encroachment of capitalist ideology.ⁱ In this particular study, the focus will be on “A Theory of Truth” as a sort of inheritor of William Carlos Williams’ methodology. As Williams does in *Paterson*, Dorn offers an intense focus on the state of things in the present moment, incorporating the history of the (increasingly metaphorical) ground on which the landscape of contemporary capitalism is built: he has a particular interest in the history of trade routes, tracing a direct relationship between the circulation of the slave trade at the dawn of the capitalist period, and the circulation of consumer goods in the contemporary moment (Williams, 1958). Although he has moved above the local level of *Paterson*, and even above the national level, Dorn is just as systematic as Williams in appraising how the planet is practised on its global, mechanised level, and what that means for people living in the world.

“A Theory of Truth” is the poem in which Dorn bridges one reality and the next; the investigation here uses *Gunslinger* to show how the completely flat landscape of Slinger’s desert replaces the physical, spiritual and linguistic relief of the geological world. *Paterson* looks back over the colonial history of the U.S.A., and by hyper-attention in the present effects a schism between its European past and its democratic, republican future. For “A Theory of Truth”, the division – which Dorn is in some ways trying to resist – is between the

period of the emergence of capitalism, and the dissolution of regional identities under what Olson refers to as “Mu-sick”: the imaginative, economic, social and political closing-down of identity and cultural potential brought about by globalisation (Olson, 1983). The poem begins:

not *includes* west africa
goes to west africa
rum slaves and crude molasses
Wilberforce a standard trick
of conscience, what i.e.,
can be the *thought* of man
as he ventures
part of Bristol is still rich.

(ll. 1-8)

The orientation of the poem is clear from the get-go: as he “*goes* to west africa/ rum slaves and crude molasses”, Dorn enacts the trade routes of the Middle Passage, along which humans were traded for sugar, rum, and fish. Via “Wilberforce a standard trick/ of conscience”, i.e., the historical narrative whereby colonial guilt is alleviated, he brings what would look to be a historically-situated poem into the present: “part of Bristol is still rich”. Dorn’s movement via the word “ventures” is especially keen: he incorporates the idea of movement and of colonialism, of venturing out, and venture capitalism. He refers not only to the foundation of a British city through slavery, but to its enduring profit from that period: “Bristol is still rich”. Grammatically, the agent is not specified – we don’t know who or what it is that “*goes* to west africa”. By context, the feeling is of the past, of a buried history, but the

language is situated in the present, as it will be yet more vehemently when he comes to the first really angry pun of the poem:

...people

or some other material.

Molasses or molasses skinned persons.

(ll. 18-20)

In the intervening lines, Dorn has asserted that “There is no beginning/ unless the end/ has been reached”: that the history of capitalism, its roots in slavery, is all part of the same action, “symphony” as he will have it later (l. 49) of exploitation that exists in the present, and that the trade of “molasses or molasses skinned people” is the same in the present as it was at the time of the colonial settling of the USA, before slavery was disguised as sweated labour and an international culture of mass-production. There is another trick at play in the way that Dorn speaks of “people/ or some other material”: a fundamental making-object of humans, which will be discussed at length later on. For now, what matters is the slow pace with which Dorn comes to his characterisation of the system that makes no distinction between sugar and brown-skinned people. He starts at the historical level, moving slowly through a theoretical abstraction, “it starts of course/ with the *finished* product” (ll. 9-10) which is his means of time-travel, of collapsing the current and the historical, until he comes to the obviously biting characterisation of institutional racism in the present day, the reduction of brown-skinned people in particular, and people in general, to just another “product” of global capitalism. There is a sense of crumbling order: the reader is struggling to understand the associations that Dorn is making on more than an instinctual

level (we have the sense that he is articulating a relationship between money, slavery, and production, but it's difficult to say precisely where or when).

Dorn is enacting, here, a deconstruction of established orders, of the way we think of ourselves as engaging directly with the phenomenal world, and as sitting at a particular moment at the end of a roughly linear conception of history. It is not the poet, Dorn suggests, but the organising principle of capitalism, which has in fact brought about this deconstruction. He writes:

This is no rose
this is the turbine. Continents
break before it
they pull apart to allow the pass - ...

(ll. 24-8).

“This is no rose”. This is not beauty. It is not love. It is not organic fauna emerging naturally from the ground, nor is it Gertrude Stein’s “Rose is a rose is a rose”, a constant thing, defining itself by its very existence (Stein, 1968). Hart Crane’s “Atlantis rose” is also submerged here: the idea of a utopian state emerging organically from the sea is being specifically crushed (Crane, 1970).

“This is the turbine”: in place of an organic member of the planet which is familiar as an expression of human sentiment and hope, Dorn instates a machine whose purpose is production by movement, the conversion of energy into work. The original definition of a turbine was, “a machine which rotates at great speed”: it is not a machine that was designed with a specific job in mind, but rather, it is a machine which embodies the principle of motion and speed,

which can then be deployed in any number of directions (Burdain, 1822). It is the principle itself that matters to Dorn, who writes:

the turbine is only movement.

the current of the atlantic

Swirl,

(ll. 21-23)

The lines “the turbine is only movement./ the current of the atlantic” embody the whole concept of the turbine as it will figure throughout the poem:

“movement” is the principle of trade in this particular turbine, located on the site of the Middle Passage and of contemporary trade routes, interested in the endemicisation of production of material goods, the energy from which the movement of capitalism is derived. As Pattison writes:

...[T]he poet’s attention is upon the submerged action
of the turbine of economic power dialectically
conceived... It is a governing force that pumps an
economic imperative around the earth... the collection
articulates what Dorn sees as the spatial results of the
cycle of global capital... (Pattison, 2010)

The philosophical importance of “movement” with relation to time and the definition of a human “being” defined by time, Heidegger’s *Dasein*, is also hinted towards here in a way that will become explicit later in the poem. “[T]he current of the atlantic” is also a more loaded – charged – line than it might first seem. The “current” suggests the power, the moving electrical impulse, of the Atlantic Ocean – another geographical centring of the turbine as a

manifestation of the economic west. What is “current” in the Atlantic “[s]wirl”, which again underlines the principle of movement here, might also be thought of as its “currency”: by way of the kind of pun that is Dorn’s *métier*, there is an easy equation between types of power: economic, electronic, and physical power are all bound up in defining the nature of the turbine, what “the turbine is”, and it is movement. The turbine is the economic principle of currency circulation made physical: it has literally become the organising principle of the whole Western area and, by extension, of the globe.

Dorn begins the poem angry. He unites past and present exploitations in the figure of the turbine, which “is no rose”: it is antithetical to any conception of the organic or the hopeful. In the early days of the slave trade, because of the principle of the turbine, which uses up all of the earth’s potential, people are commodities – although this becoming-object is in fact a desired state in late capitalism. Later in the poem, Dorn writes:

Every man must
and will or he will kill
have *all* the money”

(ll. 114-6)

Money and currency are vocal figures in “A Theory of Truth” because Dorn’s thesis in this poem is that the way that we understand the circulation of capital is in fact identical with the way that the whole of society is ordered. His figuring of people as “material” (l. 19) at the beginning of the poem, and the conflation of “molasses or molasses skinned persons” (l. 20) highlights the extent to which people are, under capitalism, as much objects to be exchanged as the coins and dollar bills which represent them. In this particular quotation,

we see “every man” killing in order to possess “*all*” the money. There is an exchange happening here: the lives of others in return for cash. Essentially, people are being sold, and are engaging in selling one another.

Dorn’s sardonic voice shouldn’t be ignored, of course. “[E]very” man having “*all*” the money is an obvious impossibility: it is the competitive paradox on which capitalism is predicated. What is important here is not the straightforwardly anti-capitalist position that Dorn takes throughout his work, but the way that he equates the circulation of capital with the whole organisation of human society. Where other ecologically minded poets, like Gary Snyder, Alice Notley, Anne Waldman or Juliana Spahr, for example, champion carefully inter-subjective relationships in the phenomenal world, Dorn opts instead for a blunt inter-objectivity. This inter-objectivity begins to show itself in “A Theory of Truth”, but is perfected in *Gunslinger* in the lines:

Do I hear a dollar, and he heard a dollar
and since money speaks the company left him
at the direction of a lively scene.

(II. ll. 845-7)

In these lines, Claude Lévi-Strauss, the *Gunslinger*’s talking horse, is conducting an auction. During the proceedings, money literally talks, in precisely the same way as all of the other characters in the poem. These characters, too – as the horse’s name suggests – are automata, ideas circulated in the same way as money.ⁱⁱ It is fundamental to Dorn’s poetics that these mechanical propositions are perfectly well represented in or perhaps by language, as words are (more convincingly at some points than others) simply so many more objects.

At the beginning of “A Theory of Truth”, before Dorn reaches the impulse to kill for money, the poet is straight-forwardly angry, disgusted by the functioning of the turbine. He asserts that “[m]en rot. Trade revolves and revolves/ it remains the turbine” (ll. 41-43). The rotting, the disintegration, of organic flesh is visceral against the mechanical turbine, which subsumes and destroys the organic “rose”. There is clearly also a connotation of moral decay here: humans who have allowed this system to overtake organic reality are as spiritually rotten as the dead bodies that they have attempted to step out of the flesh is dead and rotting because of the turbine, which has destroyed the organic. In other words, humans have destroyed themselves by their identification with enclosing trade structures. This is an aspect of the difficult relationship between space and place in Dorn’s work. The local scale is identified with the small, and the organic: this is bounded and knowable, and it is “place”. “Space”, then is the indiscriminate, occupying terrain of the turbine. In Pattison’s words:

...[I]n the thirst for distant horizons people have travelled
‘everywhere’ upon the face of the earth and they have
everywhere emplaced space until there is no more space to
be annealed into place. The sheer distance as empty space –
clear because of its emptiness – has been exhausted.

(Pattison, 2010)

Part of Dorn’s experiment is the pursuit of imaginative space once physical space has been completely enclosed and used up. In his fantasy of the turbine’s speed, which is mirrored in the pace of association and movement in language, Pattison identifies a tension between the desire for freedom of distance and

space, and the desire for place, “with a vexed recognition that place affects space, consumes or obscures it”. (Pattison, 2010) It is an American tension as much as anything else: to feel unenclosed requires the spatial tactic of violent and enclosing machinery, but the technologically enabled desire and joy in great distances cannot be unthought.

In his symbols of roses, his invocation of the memory of the slave-trade (supposed to jolt us by its comparison to the present situation – slavery is something he trusts his readers at least to pretend to have feelings about) he manifests, without having to explain, a fondness for or attachment to the place-scale of the organic world.

Sherman Paul characterizes the kind of anger that Dorn expresses here when he writes:

What he learned inevitably by attention and by digging in one place is registered in his disgust, in the somber tone and deathward tendency of so much of the verse, in a hopelessness made extreme by disillusionment with the lies of American history. See how parodically he uses slogans such as “Wagon Wheels” and “Home on the Range.” Or his de-mythification of the cowboy. (Paul, 1981)

The process of “digging in one place” that Paul refers to is Dorn’s taking of “the West” as his subject throughout his oeuvre. In *Gunslinger*, that is, or would seem to be, the specific “west” of the south-western United States; in “A Theory of Truth” it is the economic West, manifests as a turbine built along the route of the slave trade. In his “de-mythification of the cowboy” in *Gunslinger*, Dorn turns up precisely the same manner of social organisation that

he casts as a “symphony” of oppression in “A Theory of Truth”. The crucial distinction between his response to this system in the two poems is that, by the time he writes *Gunslinger*, the “deathward tendency” has actually been eradicated, been theorised out of the verse, as his characters have stepped out of their bodies (“I”, the embodiment of the first person singular, having literally died, and been preserved in a batch of LSD). They have become permanent, automatic parts of what in *Gunslinger* is called “The Cycle”, and in “A Theory of Truth” is, of course, the North Atlantic Turbine. Dorn doesn’t try to make this old physical ordering of things any more rational than the turbine which supplants it, but he makes it clear that this at least was a world in which people had skin, and flesh, and therefore feeling – and as long as he’s addressing a human reader with a physical body, there is an appeal to that sensuality, a suggestion that this embodied way of being is one which should not be given up too lightly.

It is an exceptionally rare occasion on which there is only one voice in one of Dorn’s poems, and impossible that there should be only one theoretical point of entry. Even as the opening stanzas of “A Theory of Truth” gives us bodies, organic objects, pathetic histories and romanticized symbols which seem to anchor us in one way of feeling, Dorn introduces an explicitly theoretical line of reasoning which directly undercuts it. The poem opens with the distinction between “including” and “going to” West Africa. The turbine goes to places but is not made up of them: it is not the place itself, but the way that it is used. The movement of the turbine, which is trade (making and exchanging products which might as well be people) articulates a new place, a new map, which is not actually connected to the places standing underneath it.

Michael Davidson characterises the relationship to the physical landscape that Dorn practices in “A Theory of Truth” particularly clearly. He writes:

His poetry of the mid-fifties to late sixties deals with the ‘iron locomotives and shovels, hand tools/ and barbed wire motives’ (CP 44) behind the settlement of the frontier. Its geography is projected as a component of the mind, possessing and terrifying the local inhabitant, who in turn alters the landscape to his own uses; what is ‘seen’ becomes a matter of what frames the sight... (Davidson, 1981)

“Localism”, of course, means something different elsewhere in Dorn’s poetry and in *Gunslinger* in particular, to what it means in “A Theory of Truth”. In *Gunslinger*, there is a direct conversation with, and rejection of, localism as “polis” as it is conceived in *The Maximus Poems*. Olson attempts to assert, by strength of character alone, the sanctity and wholeness of a specific place; this is impossible for Dorn, owing to his totalising conception of late capitalism. There is much less explicit conversation around localism in and of itself in “A Theory of Truth”, but Davidson’s characterisation of geography as being “projected as a component of the mind” remains useful.

It is difficult to talk about the distinction between conceptual and actual places in a poem like “A Theory of Truth”. For one thing, “The North Atlantic Turbine” is not a physical entity. It is a metaphor, and a conceptualisation of the way that trade, and market ideology, limit our understanding of reality. Because it is a way of explaining how globalisation functions, the turbine can be “projected” onto phenomenal reality like an economic map. So far, “A Theory of Truth” would seem to be functioning, in its relationship to place, in

much the same way as *The Maximus Poems*: the text maps a certain way of conceiving of the geopolitical situation.

In fact, *A Theory of Truth* has much more in common with William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* than with Olson's Gloucester. As previously stated, Dorn's poem explores the actualities of the present moment in much the same way that Williams does in his "walking" of Paterson. Dorn's conclusion, though, might be roughly formulated as, "no things but in ideas", as Frank O'Hara punned in "To A Poet": owing to the total dominance of information culture, all of our understanding of phenomenal reality is moderated by that projected map (O'Hara, 1995). It might only be a "component of the mind", but the mind controls how we decide to use the resources of geological reality the landscape becomes, as we shall see, a reconstituted product of the "turbine".

"The turbine", which is as much a mind-set as anything else, is made real because it has traction in the phenomenal world. Of course, the conceptual turbine also incorporates trade routes, which exist physically because they are practised by actual ships on the surface of the globe: "the turbine is only movement" (l. 21).

Movement, then, is the defining principle of the turbine and thereby of contemporary modernity for Dorn. He goes on to nuance this statement with the assertion:

Movement
occurs at the split
displacement is a sign

we are told the signs are men

(ll. 24-7)

It is singularly difficult to excerpt quotations from Dorn's verse to assert a single point because his poetics relies on polyvalencing by addition: he will happily change direction on a single word, having it mean two completely separate things for the preceding and succeeding lines just because the word has that potential; it often seems that the chance use of the word itself is what has led Dorn to take a poem in a given direction, rather than proceeding according to a strictly projected scheme. Christopher Beach uses this tendency in Dorn's verse to orient his writing to Williams, Olson and Pound:

If Dorn is more interested in the space organized around "the collective voice" than he is in the isolated voice of any individual speaker, he is also intrigued by the way different voices and sources interact in the mind of a single person – the poet – as he moves through time and space. It is in this sense, perhaps, that he most closely resembles his chief predecessors – Pound, Williams, and Olson – all of whom achieve a similar synthesis of sources. But Dorn differs radically from them in his emphasis on the language randomly picked up as a material in itself, not accountable to a given source of authority. (Beach & Dorn, 1991)

This aspect of Dorn's poetics is in fact part of the philosophical argument at stake here: his words are signs which cut our experience of the world away from that world's actual state, its phenomenal being. That's what the word "signs" is doing here of course – reminding us of that fact, and then arguing that in late modernity, "signs", objects used to mark out space, "are men" (amen). There is another connection to be made with O'Hara, who writes: "I

don't believe in god, so I don't have to make elaborately sounded structures.” (O'Hara, 1995) The word “sound” is slightly distracting here, since there is an argument to be made for Dorn as a sound poet, or at least as gesturing in that direction. What is important is that commitment to language as an object in itself, separate from the world it describes, and “not accountable to a given source of authority”: there is no spiritual hierarchy lurking in Dorn's verse. He trusts to language “picked up as material in itself” to make sense to his readers because that is what the landscape of contemporary modernity, at least as we practise it intellectually, is made up of. Dorn's interest in language-as-object, rather than in linguistic objects alone, is one of the foundational principles of Language Poetry, which *Gunslinger* in particular can be seen as an active participant in. (Perloff, 1985)

Before he begins punning on signs, though, Dorn writes, “Movement/ occurs at the split/ displacement is a sign.” “Movement/ occurs” is a difficult enough construction in itself, calling to mind the way that the *Gunslinger's* .44 “recurred” in his hand in the first book of that poem. Movement is translated here into a permanent state of being. Movement, which “occurs”, and is permanent, exists “at the split” between the ground, the “actual earth” whether you hold it to be of value or no, and the trajectory of the turbine it moves over the ground but isn't made of it. (Savage, 2012) Inhabitants of the phenomenal world are displaced: they are moved out of their immediate relationship with the ground, and brought instead into the practised space of the turbine. Men are displaced and they become “signs”. Just as “movement/ occurs”, “trade... revolves/ it remains the turbine”. Human remains have in the intervening lines

rotted off, no longer necessary to the permanent, non-human reality of the trade-turbine.

The only hope for the old, phenomenal order which exists in place, rather than in the descriptions, the spatial stories, of the turbine, is that Dorn's anger and his occasional viscera have awoken a feeling for it, a sense-memory of sympathy, somewhere in the reader – but he is not hopeful. Although profoundly political, this is not an advocational poem; after all, Dorn has already told us that “ it starts of course/ with the finished product” (ll. 9-10): for the turbine to exist at all, as he is adamant that it does, it must be complete. Later in the poem, Dorn makes this concept rather easier to grasp when he writes:

The earth has been destroyed. Only a
few people know that. The rest usually
think of it as a subject of some threat;
atomic, nuclear, erosional
etc. What must be destroyed is
the present circus of the earth...

(ll. 256-61)

The connection between these two points is not immediately plain, but it runs more or less as follows: “[t]he earth has been destroyed” and supplanted by “the present circus of the earth”. “[C]ircus” is crucial, being at once carnivalesque, grotesque and spectacular, and round, containing rings: the grotesquely roseate turbine, which is made of pure trade, the circulation of currency, which is the “current of the atlantic” at line twenty-two. The whole principle of the North Atlantic Turbine began with “the *finished* product/

nothing starts with the 1st”: began with the projected idea of a self-sustaining capitalist system which had nothing to do with the world on which it stood. It was in service of this, finished, idea that products – people, goods, information – were created, being milled or, in Dorn’s pun, “middled” (l. 17). The whole idea of contemporary social organization and of trade came about “last-things-first”: the idea of the perfected turbine brought about everything that happened in service of it, however much those processes – mining, or being sold into slavery, for example – might have felt like they were in fundamental contact with the phenomenal world. They were only ever in contact, Dorn posits, with an idea of that world which served the revolution of the turbine. There is a science fictionality to the world that Dorn is conjuring, which will be intensified before it is dispelled; after all, the thesis here, the “theory of truth” is that, in contemporary modernity, we inhabit information culture, a world of systems and modes of behaviour that serves an idea of itself, rather than the imperatives of our bodies or the geological environment. As Michael Davidson puts it:

According to Dorn, the local has been lost; in its place is a variable fiction created by global capitalism and manipulable by those few who have the cunning and will to use it. The central recognition in these poems is that man has become a function of a series of signs, dispersed from distant data banks (economic, intellectual, scientific). One’s ability to stand upright, once thought to be a sign of individuality, has been undercut; man’s gravity is his “ordered and/ endlessly transferrable/ place”. (Davidson, 1981)

A version of this principle of separation from geological reality – one which has been simultaneously complicated and simplified by the doing-away-with of phenomenal space at any level – will reappear in *Gunslinger* in the shape of the “Literate Projector” which allows you to “Shoot a volcano, project it/ and See the Idea behind it” (465), thereby perfecting the translation of the phenomenal world into information, which Dorn conceives of as the end game of late capitalism.

For all that there have been numerous narrative and philosophical urges contesting one another throughout this analysis of the opening of “A Theory of Truth”, they have up until this point been bounded by a single narrative voice, which has made it possible to begin from a sense of how Dorn feels about what is happening here. As Donald Wesling identifies, “...except in *Slinger* where the evanescence of the *I* is all part of the fun, when he writes with *I* he means himself and not, as with some writers, every other mentioned thing and person in the poem”. (Wesling, 1985) Just as he asserts that humans are in some sense still bonded to the phenomenal world by their senses, for all the turbine’s best efforts to reduce them to signs, the competitive impulses of the poem have been bounded by a single, complicated, authorial voice. At line 76, the synthesizing voice disappears, and will struggle to re-emerge for momentary, half-successful moments throughout the rest of the poem. When Dorn abandons his authorial presence, he does it whole-heartedly, replacing himself with a talking sea-monster. This is the first of several cartoonish voices that will carry the poem to its close, in a kind of formal hollowing that mimics the hollowing-out of feeling that the turbine enacts on the whole phenomenal world. The leviathan speaks:

“I am the creature

From the north atlantic. I will speak
now of the circulation of my discontent
and of that dull unhappiness which,
on the occasions of their excitement,
all creatures describe...

(ll. 77-82)

It is tempting to read this monster like Dickens’ “steaming Megalosaurus” or like Marx’s “spectre that is haunting Europe”, as a monstrous manifestation of the evils that shape society, made either out of pure satirical anger or out of an earnest desire to manifest the oppression of thousands. Dorn’s monster, however, is neither of those things. Instead, he offers us the Creature from the Black Lagoon, a back-lot, B-movie monster who, outside the reality of the film, is more comical than terrifying. Yes, this sea creature contains the “dull unhappiness” which “all creatures describe” but these creatures, in their “excitement”, are the citizens of a world in which this two-dimensional monster calls the shots. With mock-Shakespearian grandeur, the monster articulates “the circulation of my discontent”: it is the cartoon monster’s bad-tempered whims that keep this whole world turning.

It is impossible at this point not to think of Charles Olson, who with such sincerity articulated the birth-pains of “Maximus, a metal hot from boiling water”, emerging from the sea to enumerate the shape of Gloucester’s history. Melville’s leviathan, of course, also haunts all of Olson’s work, a tendency that

he explains in *Call Me Ishmael*. (Olson, 1997) There is something more than parody to Dorn's invocation of his teacher here. As so often, Dorn takes his cue from Olson, admitting that, yes, space has been fundamental to the definition of contemporary modernity, the organisation of late capitalism. *Call Me Ishmael* denotes the ocean as the logical next frontier after the land has been settled or, in Dorn's term, "described"; what we have here is a nuancing of Olson's impulse, whereby the whole of the globe has been encountered, and so movement itself has become the next frontier, and been surmounted by global acts of enclosure. As Davidson explained in his 1980 essay "Archeologist of Morning", "[b]y refusing to ground history in dynastic succession (as in Pound) or in an archetype of self-reliance (as in Olson), Dorn charts the condition of history and time in the period of late-capitalism." (Davidson, 1980) The voice of the creature, in his case a man, rising from the sea which constitutes Olson's "archetype of self-reliance" in *The Maximus Poems* has become a cartoon sea-monster for Dorn because, in a world with no distinct, reliable places, no "local" whatsoever, there can be no distinct, reliable "I". The Maximus voice is completely untenable in a reality where Gloucester, along with West Africa, China and everywhere else, has been subsumed under the turbine.

Davidson identifies history here as one of the key distinctions between Dorn's writing and the modern epic tradition that precedes it. It is commonly agreed amongst Dorn scholars that time is, as previously stated, the fundamental frontier in his writing, taking philosophical precedence over space. (Davidson, 1980) (Davidson, 1981) (Wesling, 1985) (Von Hallberg, 1985) Dorn argues that in the 1960s, the battle for freedom to define one's own republic in space must

be given up. The turbine's trade routes have enclosed the ocean just as roads and railways have dictated the potential uses of land. What is at stake is instead the impulse to freedom in movement. The "creature of the north atlantic" is simultaneously the white whale and the turbine, and so the final symbol of the unknown has become a parody of itself: the world has been swallowed by the whale; its limits have become known, and specific. Nothing moves without being circulated by the whale (or "creature", as Dorn in fact has it). Dorn's Gunslinger, when he appears, will be no Ahab facing down the limits of the unknown: contemporary humans know the extent of the world and have travelled it; all the Slinger can do is illustrate, or describe, the fact that the whole of society has opted into a whale-hunt as something to do with their time (of which they have, now, an unlimited and pointless supply), in full knowledge that there is no whale to be had – or, in a grotesque tortioning of Jonah's story, because they're already inside it.

To borrow once again from Davidson's "Archaeologist of Morning":

Dorn realises that the 'space' which carried such atavistic force for Olson no longer exists as such. All space has become a function of entrepreneurial capitalism, and no self-sufficient, gestural language can stand up to this fact. So Dorn flattens narrative into a masque, creates two-dimensional characters and uses the language of popular culture in order to record the state of space in the new West. (171)

The formal presentation of Dorn's leviathan upholds this position. Its speech is announced by one of many sets of quotation marks which open but never close: the terrain of the last two-thirds of Dorn's poem is, as Davidson suggests, completely flat (after all, it is made of language, of information, and

not of land). None of the competing voices of the poem take precedence over one another, and so they all – the fat-cat (ll. 110-116), the cynical new-born (ll. 117-127), the digressional Western raconteur (ll.154-163), the British workman (ll. 199-202) and the Alabama hick (ll. 277-270) – form part of the voice of the turbine. Once more, the people are signs, place-holders: they appear to have identities and purposes but, as their obvious caricature makes evident, they are in fact nothing more than tokens exchanged in the revolution of North Atlantic Turbine. They are automata; as Dorn explains it:

The equipment of the commodity-motivated killer is the
thing under your nose. Whitman carried
into the administration tower of the U. of Takes-Us
underarm spray deodorant. I
date the urgency as before reversions i.e.,
automobiles reach China.

End-O-China

(ll. 312-8)

This is the very end of the poem, by which point all the different layers of what it is no longer safe to call “significance” have become so muddled up in one another that it takes a good deal of work to extract a single strand of sense – which is, of course, an essential part of the point of writing that lacks the “elaborately sounded structure” of mythological thought. Walt Whitman, for example, never entered the University of Texas, and its administrative building is not a tower. What’s going on here is the denaturing, sanitizing, and (literal)

deodorizing (Whitman might prefer perfuming) of history, turning all nuanced human impulses into a capitalist competition between “things”. The university has taken over from knowledge, the system has replaced the action, and the whole of society has become a series of “*automobiles*” - cartoonishly disguised automata – pretending to have great cultural significance as they complete another “reversion”, get back to China and start off, once again, on another trip around the turbine.

At the end of “A Theory of Truth”, there is still some remnant of an organising narrative voice, someone remains to announce, with great finality, “End-O-China”. Dorn the satirist is still present and still angry, but his anger has become as automatic as everything else in the poem.

Instead of the visceral “rot” that is available to human bodies at the start of the poem, the party-goers of its penultimate stanza retire to Italy, to an endless round of meaningless social niceties exchanged between archetypal, simulacraic characters. They don’t die; they just go on and on performing the empty actions of contemporary modernity with less and less relevance to one another or to the outside world. It is the generation of this damning comic-book that communicates Dorn’s anger, rather than anything he actually says, until it comes to that emphatic final line, “End-O-China”. Separating “Indochina”, whether the peninsula land-mass or, more likely, the biogeographical bioregion, Dorn becomes the turbine, destroying if not continents, then at least geographical entity at the tectonic level. (Davidson, 2008) Once again, there is violence to Dorn’s image: the “reversions” of the turbine bring about the end of the phenomenal world. Everything about the language supports this philosophical argument: Dorn has forced the words “End of China” into a

phrase whose primary meaning is, “the poem has come to an end”; after that, they manifest the turbine’s aggression against the continent, the “Indochina” level of meaning, and, somewhere down the line, the destruction of “China” as a distinct national unit. It is the inherent violence, the force of the statement, which is communicated before the sense of the words themselves: any words will do by this point, and that is an act of violence in itself.

Language, then, is the fundamental unit of Dorn’s poetry. His puns are bold and dictate the movement of the verse, making big political statements out of apparent accidents of expression. By treating language as a collection of material objects, Dorn uses it to pave the surface of his North Atlantic Turbine. He creates a hard shell of linguistic jokes, which pave the surface of his “turbine” reality. In a series of audacious associations which work only if language is considered as a collection of solid objects, he uses a cartoon entertainment to distract from the forceful enclosure of the phenomenal world and the enslaving of its people. The way that Dorn uses language is an enacting of the way the forces of global capitalism encloses reality. “A Theory of Truth” is an illustration of this – literally, the exposition of Dorn’s theory – and an angry response to it. By the time he comes to write *Gunslinger*, Dorn will have exorcised the tone of anger from the verse itself, and instead mounts an investigation of the way that organising global powers construct myths which compel us into going along with their totalitarian principles.

ⁱThe rest of the collection, *North Atlantic Turbine*, serves as a set of studies towards this position. The three-way dedication to J.H. Prynne, Donald Davie and Tom Raworth identifies the text as positioned between the personal, theoretical, and national. Much of the use of space in the collection serves either to situate the biographical poems (“The first note (from London”, (234-5); “A notation on the evening of November 27, 1966” (277-8)), or to highlight the different experience of a place and its history to emplaced labourers and to displaced travellers (“England, its latitude and some of its conditions, the seriousness of a ghost” (234-5); “Wait by the door awhile Death, there are others” (270-6); “Oxford” (249-69)). “On the nature of Communication, September 7, 1966” (260-70) is a study of the violence of nationalism via the suggested inevitability of the assassination of the South African president. “The Sundering U.P. Tracks (the end of the North Atlantic Turbine poem)” (283) doesn’t really end that poem, but shows how the study for that work gets caught up in the poet’s psychic processes, causing distraction when encountering news of a personal loss, and complicating the feeling of distance from the political context at “home” in the USA. “An Idle Visitation” (279-81) is Dorn’s first sketch for *Gunslinger*, illustrating how the door for that work was opened by the theoretical processes involved in composing “A Theory of Truth

ⁱⁱ Credit for defining Dorn’s characters as automata goes to Justin Katko, personal conversation, 30/11/2010

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