

*DEAD MAN'S SPACE AND THE LANGUAGE OF DEMOCRACY ON THE AMERICAN  
FRONTIER*

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the  
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## Abstract

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Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995) borrows its artistic vision from the works of Francophone poet, writer, and painter Henri Michaux (1899-1984) and English Romantic poet, painter, and engraver William Blake (1757-1827). It does so through a series of verbal and visual incorporations. Both poets emphasize the ability of language to either stabilize or destabilize our perception of the world. Blake understands art as something that enhances human vision beyond linguistic conventions and social institutions. Michaux's work positions language as something that can resist and confront the reified familiarities of everyday existence, jar congealed conventions of society, or negotiate the abyssal absurdity of life.

Both poets consistently employ two sets of tropes; one composed of figures of fluidity, transgression, and expansion and the other composed of figures of containment and delimitation. These tropes, which are employed to illustrate a tension that arises from our inability to fully envision the world through language, resonate forcefully in the film and against the history of the

Western as a genre that is bound up with space and its ideological representations. They generate reflection on the space of the American West and explore how such a space is linguistically produced, contained, and expanded. Through a close reading of word and image, my dissertation renders the effect of Blake's and Michaux's figurative language on the cinematic space of *Dead Man*. This reading focuses on the tension between the compulsion to transgress boundaries and the desire to contain and delimit an immutable worldview.

The overriding argument of the dissertation is that the film's movement from the figurative language of fixity, containing, and sheltering, to the figurative language of openness, fluidity, transgression, and incommensurability, and finally, the cyclic movement back to the beginning of the film's narrative, reflects the formation of the social landscape of an American past and present that is bound up with the tension of these disparate figures. *Dead Man* illustrates the impulse to bound and preserve very singular and institutionalized readings of an idealized past and the almost insatiable desire for endless expansion. The film journeys through these defining characteristics of American experience, which form irresolvable tensions that lie at the heart of any national narrative, whether negotiated openly and consciously or as hidden traces that haunt the productions of its discursive socio-political fabric.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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To Danielle: there are no words to say what needs to be said. Simply and sincerely, thank you for being there and everything that this entails.

In my tribe we have no poets. Everyone talks in poetry.

—Anonymous qtd. in Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*

My heroes have never been cowboys; my heroes carry guns in their minds.

—Sherman Alexie, “My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys”

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## ABBREVIATIONS

Unless otherwise noted, all William Blake citations refer to *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, edited by David V. Erdman. When necessary, the individual works, listed by plate (when relevant) and line number, are abbreviated as follows:

<i>A</i>	<i>America a Prophecy</i>
<i>AI</i>	<i>Auguries of Innocence</i>
<i>BT</i>	<i>The Book of Thel</i>
<i>BU</i>	<i>The Book of Urizen</i>
<i>MHH</i>	<i>The Marriage of Heaven and Hell</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>Milton a Poem</i>

Line numbers for Henri Michaux's rather long narrative poems would not be appropriate. Therefore, unless otherwise noted, Michaux citations refer to page numbers in one of the following two translated sources abbreviated below:

<i>DkM</i>	<i>Darkness Moves</i> , trans. David Ball
<i>SW</i>	<i>Selected Writings: Henri Michaux</i> , trans. Richard Ellmann

## Introduction

### *Dead Man*, the Western, and History

Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995), like most Westerns, rehearses the myths that arise from the frontier experience of the encounter between the familiar and the foreign. Like all variations of the Western, it is concerned with questions of nationhood and history. The Western as a genre provides a space to negotiate the idea of a nation, not as a unity defined by territorial borders, or linguistic, ideological, or ethnic purity, but as a necessary illusion, dream, or fictional unity at the center of which numerous tensions lie.<sup>1</sup> Because it is concerned with the history, historiography, and foundational mythology<sup>2</sup> of the United States, the genre reiterates a set of questions about individual and national identity, the processes of structuring fictional identities or unities through images and narratives, and the necessary, overdetermined, or destructive attempts to maintain the contours of such unities.<sup>3</sup> These questions are particularly relevant for a nation like the United States that is large, young, diverse, and based on an inherently fragmented

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<sup>1</sup> There are numerous commentaries on the American dream and cinematic space, and more specifically on the dream as it is projected in the Western. See, for example, the commentary in Deleuze, 141-151.

<sup>2</sup> Many film theorists turn to Levi-Strauss's definition of myth as model "capable of overcoming contradiction" (*Structural* 229). For a brief introduction to Levi-Strauss's theory of myth, see *Myth and Meaning*. The chapter entitled "When Myth Becomes History" is particularly relevant in terms of the Western. For a breakdown of many of the contradictions embodied by myths of the West, see Baird and for an overview of the different elements of myths of the West, see Durgnat and Simmon.

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of the way early American cinema was used to project the ideal terms of a masculine American democracy through a realist lens, see Gerstner, especially chapter one. Particularly relevant to our analysis is his discussion of the American artists' grounding of American masculinity in nativist imagery, the balancing of 'civilization' and 'savagery' in the ideal image of American individualism, and the importance of frontier and land imagery in the process of projecting an ideal of masculine American democracy.

theory of both state and national sovereignty. These factors, by which contradictions are woven into the texture of U.S. history, are reconciled, or exposed in their various iterations in the filmed myths of the genre. Each film re-codifies the conflicting national desires to maintain an image of the U.S. as it 'was' in an idealized past and forge into an unknown and expansive capitalist future, ideals that are essentially irreconcilable, but seemingly necessary components of the idea of the U.S. Westerns embody and explore the complexities of American experience with varying levels of critical awareness, and through a range of attitudes, postures, and ideologies. They do so by reiterating the tension between the static image of America and the real need to respond to the changing conditions of ever-advancing frontiers. But what is particular to *Dead Man's* reiteration? How does it frame this tension?

*Dead Man* pursues a discursive path through the Western's varied formulations of U.S. mytho-historical experience via several strategies that call attention to the spatial logic brought into relief by all of the major issues of the Western, including identity, nationhood, manifest destiny, progress, and the frontier. The most important of these strategies is the film's intertextual conversation with the works of poets William Blake (1757-1827) and Henri Michaux (1899-1984). The provocative and substantial tension queried in this intertextual conversation is the tension between tropes of containment and tropes of transgression—those ideal utterances that delimit our thinking about what the U.S. is and those that continually exceed and redefine it. These tropes, which are so essential to narratives of America and the Western as a genre, are underscored in *Dead Man* through the explicit use of the tropologies of Blake and Michaux, whose works embody the tension and play between the energies of expansion and transgression on the one hand and containment, delimitation, and bounding on the other. The play between Blake's works, Michaux's works, and *Dead Man* accents this unavoidable tension and posits it as

a fundamental paradigm that underlies many of the central questions of the genre. This tension is an animated and animating *Urgrund* for the varied mytho-historical discourses of nation and identity that drive the fictional unity of America that is projected in the Western.

*Dead Man* is an expression of this tropology of containment and transgression that is essential to the historiography of the West. This tropological bind is expressed in the changing formulations of the regions myths as they are negotiated in the Western. For example, Michael Budd points to the recurrent image of the door and other framing images in John Ford's films as devices that control the space of the community and also frame "the constant presence of the unfamiliar beyond the fragile enclosed space" (136). The *mise en scène* reflects and controls the tension between the contained space and the expansive and lawless land beyond. In an essay on Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939), Nick Browne shows how Ford affects the viewers' psychological disposition and causes them to identify with the outsiders, particularly the prostitute Dallas (Claire Trevor), through the use of camera placement and spectator positioning. Ford dictates the "moral order of the text" (162). This technique deeply embeds an ideological critique that shatters the boundaries and moral assumptions of the community, makes us suspicious of the 'morally upright' citizens, and makes us empathize with the outsiders. The ideal community, as the last shot of the film suggests, is always in the future. In another of Ford's films, *The Man Who Liberty Valance* (1962), this tension is formulated in a different way. The containment and transgression of myth and law are one and the same. Ransom Stoddard (James Stewart), who is the presumed, though not actual killer of Liberty Valance (Lee Marvin), lives on to embody the myth and help build the community and the law—"This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." The foundational act, the act that founds and contains a community within the law, is a lie—it is a transgressive act.

We could look at examples outside of Ford's films to see this tension of containment and transgression expressed in the Western. George Stevens' *Shane* (1953), for example, embodies these contradictions. Shane (Alan Ladd), who rides out of nowhere, becomes part of the Starrett family, lives on their homestead, and takes on their conflict with Ryker (John Dierkes) and his cattlemen, embodies the legend fully when he kills Jack Wilson (Jack Palance), Ryker's menacing hired gun. Shane transgresses the law for the Starrett's so that they do not have to and then he rides off into the night wounded, though we are not sure how seriously as he maintains his legendary luster and poise, not to mention his affable smile. By facing Wilson, who is too fast a draw for anybody else, he protects and maintains the Starrett's homestead and presumably keeps Joe Starrett (Van Heflin), the husband and father, alive. Shane's legend lives on in the Starrett Homestead, and particularly in the mind of young Joey Starrett (Brandon De Wilde), though Marian Starrett (Jean Arthur) is also quite fond of him, as is Joe. This story allows both facets of the American dream to exist. Shane fulfills the transgressive and expansionist necessities of the dream—he kills Wilson, and thus breaks the law, and he continues on into the night—while the Starretts embody the contained and static space also necessary to the dream. Shane lives on in them and they live on in Shane. The myth embodies both the familiarity of the homestead and the unfamiliarity of the dark and solitary night, and the future beyond that, that is ahead of Shane. It engages the unfamiliar while being based in the familiar. It is transgressive, but as a means to preserve the contained space of the homestead. In a different way than *Liberty Valance*, *Shane* carries the contradiction.

Finally, Marcia Landy speaks of what has come to be understood as a more revisionist version of the Western when she shows how “the dependence on physical action, on the body, and on the face” in Sergio Leone's films “sets up a tension between historical stasis and dynamic

movement, between mechanization and spontaneity, and between the containing and release of energy” (220). Again, the tension here is between a contained state and the necessity for movement, release of energy, and transgression of boundaries.<sup>4</sup> All of these films provide examples of how this tension—whether it is latent or very manifest—is a major component of the myths of the West as they are generally negotiated in the Western.

*Dead Man* draws on the traditional myths of the Western and incorporates Blake and Michaux to supplement these myths and specifically to foreground this inescapable foundational tension of containment and transgression, delimitation and expansion, familiarity and unfamiliarity, or nostalgia and futurity. It very consciously stretches these contradictions and explores the meaning of their inherent spatial antimony by juxtaposing a surreal vision of the Western’s frontier imagery, Blake’s rendering of orthodoxy (institutional and intellectual stasis) versus imagination (unbound visionary energy), and Michaux’s scrutiny of the delimiting and expanding textures of language. *Dead Man* reads Blake and Michaux, but Blake and Michaux also read *Dead Man*, as well as each other.

Incorporating these poets is not just a way for the film to explore basic contradictions, but also a way for it to announce that it is concerned with how writing affects our vision of Western history. The film announces that it is about the writing of the West, about historiography. Alexandra Keller writes of the Western, “if it has always been a revisionist genre it has not, until relatively recently, wanted to announce itself as such” (31). *Dead Man* announces itself. It announces that it is about revising, reconstructing, and rewriting, all processes that can be

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<sup>4</sup> The sense of the tension between containing and releasing energy is particularly resonant with Blake’s works, which critique the institutionalized containment of human creative energy and highlight artistic vision as one of the many creative releases of energy. We see here in Leone’s works an anticipation of something that *Dead Man* more explicitly expresses.

described by the paradigm of containment and transgression. The annunciation of this process through the juxtaposition of poetic texts articulates these deep textures—these fundamental contraries—that are vital to the genre. The Western is always revising itself and it is always about the historiography of the West, whether implicitly or explicitly, consciously or unconsciously. It is about how the elusive space of the past is organized for the present.

*Dead Man* specifically delineates the structural necessities of this process of organization. It articulates the very necessary symbolic texture and abstract conceptual apparatus of containment and transgression that supports the myths through which the Western past is filtered, a texture that is also the underlying paradox of the Western's fundamental questions about identity. Through its obscure self-effacing style and integration of texts that are not typically associated with the Western, *Dead Man* looks closely at processes of inscription that articulate this paradox. The paradox is that identity, both individual and collective, as it is expressed by the American dream has to simultaneously embody two contrary notions of being, one based on stasis and the other on endless movement. The paradoxical dream is rehearsed again and again on the fictional frontiers of the West. This inevitably fictive process of organizing and unifying the contradictory dream-space of America's past, present, and future, is the substance of the Western. In *Dead Man*, the reiterated vision of the dream is deteriorating, both figuratively and more literally in the deteriorating body of William Blake (Johnny Depp). Through the dreams deterioration, we are better able to see how it operates as a text.

More specifically, the various ways *Dead Man* queries these operations that inform the space of the West include the slow pacing of the film whose images at times crawl along and seem to linger on the screen, to the repetition of images, dialogue and sound, to the often non-utilitarian use of language, which attains an almost poetic opacity, stunning and even violent, to

the perversion of Western imagery that creates a sense of disillusionment and discontinuity. These techniques, which allow the viewer to dwell on the play of meanings happening between the film and its borrowed sources, work against the full-speed-ahead ethos of contemporary rhetorical strategies dependent on U.S. frontier myths. *Dead Man* lays bare the contradictory mechanisms of this process of myth building—through its style and intertextual play—as a response to popular socio-political rhetorical strategies that use myths of the West without attention to the contradictions (either consciously illustrated or dormant in popular filmic narratives) on which such myths function. By replacing false clarity with a posture of intense and sometimes impassable reverie, the film dwells on issues of identity raised by U.S. frontier expansion, the mythography surrounding that expansion, and its continuing ideological legacy. Its style—its integration of poetry into the dialogue, its lingering atmosphere, and its repetitions—are vital for imparting the ambiguity and necessary tension of contraries inherent to the frontier myth. It does not aim to settle the issues. It looks at how they haunt our socio-political discourse as they are often invoked, either as support or as critique, to simplify morally complex issues of identity.

*Dead Man* explores the history of the Western as a genre, reconfigures the space of the West through the blending of poetry and cinema, and fleshes out the textural contradiction of the American dream that the Western rehearses. The film's obscure combination of stark realism and poetic reverie accents the deep textural paradox of the dream as it takes shape in individual and national identity.<sup>5</sup> The film recuperates the less evident deconstructive spaces of the

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<sup>5</sup> For Jarmusch's own comments on the tension between the seeming simplicity of the film and its thematic depth, see Rosenbaum's "A Gun Up Your Ass." For a discussion of the tension in the film between realism and utter surrealism and the attendant critical response to such perceived realism or surrealism, see Hall.

Western—spaces that have always been there in varying degrees in different texts—lays bare the textual operations of the dream, offers up a reexamination of how we construct and contain an always-changing past and the present, and presents the impossibility of a fully coherent American dream-space by looking at the textures of containment and transgression that are fundamental to the Western.

There are several crucial scenes around which this reexamination takes place. *Dead Man* tells the story of an accountant from Cleveland named William Blake. We join Blake on a journey west where he plans to start a new job at the metalworks in the town of Machine, the “end of the line.” The opening scene immediately sets the tone of the film. We find Blake in a train, wearing a rather loud plaid suit, and falling in and out of sleep. The passengers on his journey are marked as increasingly less civilized by the different outfits we see through a series of cuts. Close-ups of the train’s hissing wheels are crosscut with the enclosed space of the train. The mechanical sounds of the train are juxtaposed with the silence within. One obscure conversation between Blake and the train fireman (Crispin Glover) breaks the silence, which is followed by the loud pops of rifles as the passengers on the train massacre a herd of “buffalo.” All of this is preceded by the film’s epigraph, “it is preferable not to travel with a dead man,” a line borrowed from Henri Michaux. The absence of Blake’s past life and the ambiguity of his destination pervade this scene.

The second crucial scene is Blake’s encounter with John Dickinson (Robert Mitchum), the owner of the metalworks and the law in the town. After Blake is denied the job he was promised, an intimidating and heartless Dickinson threatens him with a shotgun and chases him out of the metalworks. The scene is dominated by the mechanical imagery of the factory and the predatory imagery of Dickinson’s office. After being chased away, Blake finds solace in Thel

(Mili Avital), who, unbeknownst to him, is the former girlfriend of Dickinson's son, Charlie (Gabriel Byrne). When Charlie finds Blake and Thel together, he shoots Thel and lodges a bullet above Blake's heart before Blake clumsily kills him. Blake flees the ruggedly sensual and strangely poetic space of Thel's room to become a man hunted by Dickinson's hired guns. He is also slowly dying from the bullet in his chest.

After he flees Machine, Blake ends up past the frontier of *civilization*, where he is acquainted with Nobody (Gary Farmer), a Native American who finds him, befriends him, and leads him on his journey to death. This marks the beginning of a change in his worldview. The third crucial scene is when Nobody realizes Blake's name and believes he is the renowned poet. This scene introduces William Blake's poetry into the dialogue and drastically changes the trajectory of the film. The landscape beyond the frontier of Machine becomes a poetic space used to question the rigidity of Machine. Nobody's comic demeanor and ironic commentary on American culture add to the critique. Additionally, two encounters in the woods, one with a makeshift family of fur trappers and the other with an obviously corrupt Christian missionary (Alfred Molina), further the critique. All of these encounters also address the role of violence in shaping the West and make an atypical connection between violence and poetry. The overwhelming feeling of these scenes is meditative and ironic. They are formed as weighty reveries.

For example, until the last scene, in which we see the open expanse of the sky and the ocean, the film's imagery is overwhelmed with a sense of enclosure and entrapment. A cage motif, whether wood planking on the sides of buildings, window frames, or shots of trees in the forest, dominates the *mise en scène*. The imagery also has an overwhelming weight and density to it. It is claustrophobic. We only briefly see the open and expansive landscapes typical of the

classical Western. More often space is enclosed. The density of the forest dominates images of the landscape and when we do see the sky, it is relegated to a very small sliver at the top of the screen. The final scene and a brief moment in the beginning of the film are exceptions, but various objects, including Blake's own hat, obstruct even the sky Blake sees out of the train's window in the beginning. Really, the final scene opens up the *mise en scène*. This, like the film's cyclic turn to the beginning, is conceptual. It speaks to the flux of enclosure and openness or containment and transgression that defines the film's articulation of human understanding. It reminds us of historic Blake's description of man's limited perception that sees 'thro narrow chinks of his cavern" (*MHH* pl. 14). *Dead Man* deems this facet of perception inescapable. The open sky at the end of the film is enclosed once more in its cycled reinscription back into the weighty space of the narrative. Also, the hero's journey is not postured toward an unknown future, but is re-consumed by the filmic text. It does not leave the possibility of a fulfilled future.

The last scene of the film ends with Blake's journey out to sea. The sky and the ocean dominate this scene with Blake's small canoe lost in the vastness of the two. The image is actually a repetition of the conversation Blake had with the train fireman at the beginning of the film. It shows us in images what the fireman had described at the beginning of the film in words. It brings us full circle and, in doing so, asks us to continue the enigmatic inquiry of the film, as well as reflect on the genre and the historical context of the film's production.

## *Dead Man*, Genre, and Socio-political Context

Generally speaking, the Western responds not just to the history and conventions of the genre and the past in general, but to the national atmosphere and socio-political context contemporary to a film's production. The Western gauges and reflects the contemporary and historical concerns, the socio-political atmosphere, the ideals, and the history of the U.S. This is true of films that seem to romanticize the conquest of the West and reinforce the notion that U.S. ideals are always the solid and immovable convictions of heroes acting in the name of freedom and equality and it is also true of the Revisionist Western, which tends to have a darker tone, take a more critical stance on U.S. history and heroic motives, and have a more relativist view of human morality. Films like John Ford's *Rio Grande* (1950) or Anthony Mann's *Devil's Doorway* (1950), for example, respond to the atmosphere of the early Cold War by representing "conflicts of power and value as social or collective in character," while a film such as Sam Peckinpah's *Wild Bunch* (1969) responds "to the failure of American values and beliefs and rising tide of 'insane' violence here and abroad" typical of the Vietnam era (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 377, 613).<sup>6</sup> Richard Slotkin also suggests that the demoralization of America in the 1970's led to an increasing disillusionment with the mythology of the Western, something that Reagan took advantage of by invoking those myths in an attempt to reinvigorate the ethos of the American frontier narrative. Though Reagan was successful, the genre did not quite experience the same renaissance and the end of the Cold War presented a new context and set of challenges. Among

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<sup>6</sup> See Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation: The Mythology of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* for a broad and in-depth analysis of the history of Western and how it reflects its ideological context.

other things, *Dead Man* reflects this context and echoes the waning interest in the genre in the late 1970s and 1980s as an indicator of the crumbling of the myths embodied by the Western.

The film premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 1995. It is safe to say that we could describe the period of its production and release as still being in the relatively immediate shadow of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the redistribution of power following that collapse engendered, as much as anything preceding it in the previous decades, what Jean-François Lyotard describes as a narrative crisis or “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv). While the U.S. did not experience the reconstitution of national boundaries that many countries did, it nonetheless faced a need to redefine itself in a suddenly more tenuous world in which it was the sole superpower. This immediate post-Cold War period is defined largely by disorientation, a perceived need to define new adversaries, and the continued fragmentation of a singular national narrative. We saw the consequences of all of this in first Iraq War in 1990-91, in Somalia in 1992, and in the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993.<sup>7</sup> This disorientation or lack of direction is mirrored in *Dead Man*.

In addition, the lack of a defined force against which the nation could bolster its frontiers did not just make for a series of small conflicts with various entities throughout the decade, but created a turn inward in terms of defining a national narrative. The Soviet Union was no longer there to provide that well-defined opposition in the American narrative. We saw this in an increasingly polarized political climate and the ratcheting up of culture wars. These were certainly not new, but they took a more central place in political discourse. Attempting to draw national identities along rigid ideological worldviews, some of which were very traditionalist and

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<sup>7</sup> We might read the present War on Terror and focus on Muslim extremism as a recalibration of our national narrative in terms that fit the traditional mythic model of the Western.

some of which were progressive, partially replaced the enemy outside. The other was more internalized. The vitriolic divide in some way highlighted two contradictory tendencies that are inherent in the U.S.'s amorphous national narrative; one, an originalist tendency to find in the U.S. constitution a supposedly singular and stable definition of the laws that define the U.S., and two, a reading that suggests that the word of the constitution is living and changing and that it is the duty of a healthy democracy to constantly engage that change.

This situation, based on a rhetorical divide and two fundamentally different understandings of language, resonates deeply in *Dead Man*. The major tension reflected in the film between containment and transgression, between the will to contain a vision of the dream and the need for that dream to constantly transgress itself, the divide between dream illusions and material actualities, and the overdetermined use of the rhetoric of the American dream to draw attention away from its fundamental contradictions, expresses the necessary and inescapable paradox of this dream, which is embodied in American socio-political and cultural rhetoric. At the heart of this tension is the question of how something can reconcile its identity with its difference from itself. How can something be simultaneously identical to itself and different from itself? We can either embrace this paradox or ignore it. This is a fundamental question of language and identity that compounds the divide of many of issues of the so-called culture wars.

This culture war was and still is compounded by the fact that the news media started to become a twenty-four hour business around the early 1990s. CNN, a twenty-four hour news source, started in 1980, but the Gulf War really catapulted it into the minds of Americans. This was a very televised war and some have theorized that the presence of the media even influenced

the decision-making of the American forces. This is in fact known as the CNN effect.<sup>8</sup>

Following the coverage of the war, we saw this media scrutiny turn inward. It was the dawning of a new hyper-reflexivity. We see this extreme and constant turn inward in *Dead Man* as well. The film plays out the tension between originalist yearnings for a fixed and perfectly descriptive document and the fluidity of language that shapes the world, both of which are so indicative of attempts to create a U.S. national narrative. One of the ironies brought out by *Dead Man*, which is partially a response to its historical moment after the Cold War, but also a more general response to overdetermined political rhetoric, is that the overinvestment in the dream and the attempt to pin it down more fully reveal its contradictions.

These contradictions dominate the film, as do the contentious narratives, ideological incoherence, tenuous frontiers, general lack of direction, and inner strife of the film's contemporary context. *Dead Man* renders the necessary and inherently impassable frontier between an ideal as a set of instructions from the past and an ideal as an impossible goal of the future. Roger Ebert inadvertently sums it up best in a not so flattering review of the film in *The Chicago Sun-Times* online. He pronounces, "*Dead Man* is a strange, slow, unrewarding movie that provides us with more time to think about its meaning than with meaning." He continues, "Jarmusch is trying to get at something here, and I don't have a clue what it is."<sup>9</sup> He is right. *Dead Man* is a "strange, slow, and unrewarding" film. It does not provide us with meaning and we cannot be sure exactly what it is trying to get at. In a fast-paced world of easily consumable "meanings," it does not mean to offer easy rewards. It rather dwells in the tenuous frontier regions in which meaning is constantly receding and is something one can never quite "get at."

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<sup>8</sup> For more information on this theory, known as the CNN effect, see Piers Robinson's *The CNN Effect: The Myth of News Media, Foreign Policy and Intervention* and "The CNN Effect Revisited."

Since the Western is a genre that explores the growing democracy of the U.S., perhaps the suggestion of the film is that the creaky engines of democracy disjointedly churn in these tenuous frontier regions and it is our task to struggle with this.

### Space: American Paradigms and Philosophical Reflections

*Dead Man* brings many critical voices into its discussions of space through the incorporation of Michaux and Blake and through its stylistic resonance with thinkers that are not generally associated with the Western or broader discourses on American space. These atypical voices, such as Heidegger, Derrida, and Freud, and poetic influences on *Dead Man* are undeniable, but first we need to keep in mind that the Western is largely a genre about space in order to appropriately think about the juxtaposition of the film with the works of Blake and Michaux. As much as the Western is about the past and the past's influence on the present, the national, metaphysical, moral, and social universe that it gauges are often expressed by the magnificent, expansive, and uncanny landscapes of the western U.S. Space is equally important in *Dead Man*. While the film's attention to the operations of language situate it within discussions of film theory and modern and postmodern thought more generally, the film's use of space situate it within the genre and a larger discourse of space in the U.S. Because of the U.S.'s rapid and relatively recent expansion across the vast space of the North American continent, discussions of space hold a special place in American literary and sociopolitical discourse. They are written and rewritten into the narrative of American expansion and national identity. The spaces are as much produced in these discourses as they are uncovered. The wilderness or the

emptiness of the desert become repositories for the moral character, conscious and unconscious desires, and socio-political being of an always-undetermined nation. The canonical works that deal with space in American Studies are built mainly around a frontier mythography of American space and its metaphysical, psychic, and socio-political import. *Dead Man* negotiates these imagined spaces and the productions of identity that happen through them.

Doug Williams writes, “The West is the ritual alter of American identity, and the form in which it is manifested is an affirmation of particular visions of American society” (111). William Cronon speaks of this alter of American identity in his discussions of the West.<sup>10</sup> His discussions frame the two very different notions (one of movement and the other of stasis) embodied in the American movement West and the remnants of that movement that show up as contradictory characteristics of American identity in our art, entertainment, and popular discourses and socio-political discussions. In *Changes in the Land* (1983), Cronon speaks of these contradictions in the context of earlier American frontiers and the settlers’ contact with Native Americans. In this work, Cronon addresses the transformation of wilderness into a pastoral countryside. The main contribution of this work of environmental history is to juxtapose the European settlers’ view of the land with that of the Native Americans, a juxtaposition that resonates particularly well in *Dead Man* with the juxtaposition of Blake and Nobody. Cronon’s contention is that the settlers’ view of the land, increasingly driven by the forces of industrial capitalism, was one defined largely by creating boundaries, fixing space, manipulating the environment, dividing land, and transforming that land to fit specific uses. The foundational premise of all these transformative actions is ownership and the idea of profiting

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<sup>10</sup> See Cronon, “Becoming West: Toward a New Meaning for Western History.”

from ownership. Cronon also points out the settlers' false assumption that the land and its resources were limitless.

Native Americans on the other hand did not have the same sense of ownership of land, want of profit or the accumulation of wealth, and were more mobile. Their relationship with the land was more fluid and did not have as much of an impact on the land itself. Cronon's *Changes in the Land* is a study of two different ways of envisioning the land. One is a calculated view of the land as something from which to coerce profit and the other is a more organic view that understands the land and the people of the land as inherently interdependent. In his discussions of the West, Cronon suggests that both of these views, one carried over from Europe and the other conditioned by contact with Native Americans and the expansion into the grand North American continent, play an important role for America's collective vision of itself. Embedded in these two views are the contrary characteristics of American identity as they are expressed in *Dead Man*. In Cronon's terms we might formulate them as fixity and fluidity.

Cronon's writing, like most new Western historians and those who write about Western space more generally, is in many ways a response to Frederick Jackson Turner's vision of the frontier as renewing and renewable engine of American democracy. Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis, which he outlines fully in *The Frontier in American History* (1920), is one of these productions of space over and against which many subsequent writers who theorize American space situate themselves.<sup>11</sup> The basic tenet of his thesis is that the constant westward movement of the frontier, the settling of those frontier spaces, and the confrontation of industrial civilization and wilderness are the driving forces of an ever-renewing American democracy. Turner suggests that westward expansion is the most important force in American history.

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<sup>11</sup> Turner first introduced his Frontier Thesis in a paper entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" given in Chicago in 1893.

Turner's thesis is very insightful and alluring, but his singular and unwavering focus on westward expansion makes the tone of his writing almost panegyric. The frontier is imbued with the sole power to promote freedom and establish an American people. "The frontier promoted the formation of a composite nationality" Turner writes (27). With language even loftier and more mythic in tenor he suggests, "In the crucible of the American frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics" (27). Turner is building a foundational myth around which to base his picture of a unified people. This statement seems as much nostalgic as it does descriptive. In fact it is telling that this hypothesis of a national character being wrought by the confrontation of forces on the frontier was first presented at the moment in U.S. history when westward expansion was halted by the Pacific Ocean. Turner acknowledges this, but does not fully account for what this means for his thesis or for American democracy.

Many scholars, like Cronon, respond with different levels of criticism and indebtedness to Turner's thesis. For example, Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950) responds to Turner's thesis as well as other ideas about westward expansion. His thesis is that the actual expansion of the U.S., as well as a lot of the writing about that expansion, such as Turner's, perpetuated many myths that were instrumental in driving expansion, but did not appropriately describe the material conditions of that expansion. The chief among these myths he calls the "myth of the garden," which describes the belief that the West was the ever-renewable garden of the world that would fuel American expansion and prosperity. This Eden-like description of the West, Smith argues, is an inaccurate description of the landscape and the "primitive" values promoted by such a vision do not fit an increasingly industrialized nation. Nonetheless, Smith's work points to an obsession with the image of a

pastoral America that exists to this day. Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) picks up on the idea of the pastoral landscape, a kind of 'middle-landscape' between the wild landscape of the virgin continent and the industrial landscape of the American nineteenth century. He suggests that this is the most basic metaphor, in both literary and social discourses, pervading American consciousness. He also insists that this metaphor is a kind of coping mechanism for a people who experienced the drastic explosion of industrialization in a previously wild or rural landscape. In establishing the prevalence of this pastoral metaphor, Marx is careful to distinguish between two types of pastoralism, one that he calls complex and the other he labels sentimental. Complex pastoralism recognizes the inability to return to the garden of the past and in fact recognizes that the Edenic garden was always a myth, while sentimental pastoralism echoes with the hope of a return to the garden.

In a different vein than Smith or Marx, Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973) and Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) look at the more hidden recesses of the American psyche as they deal with the psychology of expansion through America's works of art and entertainment. The main contention of Slotkin's work is that America is highly invested in a mythic cycle of the renewing powers of violence. From the colonial period through the period of westward expansion and to the present, America has "achieved a regeneration of the spirit" through different acts of violent initiation and confrontation with otherness (551). Such otherness ranges from the figure of the Native American to the wilderness itself, both of which suffer from the destructive tendencies of violent rituals of American regeneration. Slotkin outlines these violent rituals in detail from early Indian captivity narratives to myths of the hunter and other frontier myths. The most striking aspect of Slotkin's argument is the way he describes the psychic tension caused by America's expansion,

which he illustrates as a force that is simultaneously destructive and reinvigorating. That is to say that it destroys and draws renewing energy from that which it destroys. He aptly describes both the fear of and attraction to the unknown that drives American expansion and the inevitable violence that comes from this strange tension.

Fiedler formulates this psychic tension in a slightly different way. His study focuses almost solely on the American novel. He describes the same draw of the wilderness and fascination with the 'savage.' He suggests that the central theme of American literature is the bond between the white man and the dark-skinned man who forsake civilization and escape into the wilderness. He also suggests that this bond is a kind of projection that stands for the healing of the conflicts that haunt us, namely Native American genocide and slavery. Additionally, the wilderness becomes a subconscious projection of America's guilt and a projection of its hopes. The connection between the landscape and the socio-political and mytho-historical notions of national character remains strong in both Fiedler and Slotkin's work. Both draw out a similar obsession with death and violence, something that we see in Jarmusch's film.

*Dead Man* projects the scenario described by Fiedler in the relationship between Blake and Nobody, two figures representative of the two sides of the frontier, yet who complicate this division. Through Blake and Nobody and through the different episodes on either side of the frontier of so called civilization, the film deals with many of the themes broached by both Fiedler and Slotkin, and the other writers mentioned above, including the tension between stability and yearning for movement, the projection on the landscape of guilt, innocence, fear and hope, the juxtaposition of tainted mechanical civilization and reinvigorating Edenic wilderness, the loss of home, the notion of becoming the monster you project, the role of violence as a way to

deliverance, and, as Fielder writes, the acceptance of the “lapsed American dream of innocent success” (315).

*Dead Man* engages the conventions of the Western as well as the critical discourses mentioned above, to open up discussions of American space, but it also brings in questions of space not so typical of discourses of American space. Jarmusch’s films generally do this. They explore themes that are relevant to the U.S., but that are made unfamiliar through his style. They tend to look at significant, but forgotten spaces, people, and times. This is true of *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), *Down by Law* (1986), *Mystery Train* (1989), and *Dead Man*, among others. The defamiliarizing affect is heightened by *Dead Man*’s poetic influences and overt theoretical concerns. These strands of theoretical reflection make for an intriguing inquiry concerning the role of space in the Western.

The most resonant theoretical voices in *Dead Man* come from psychoanalysis—an important component of film theory since its inception<sup>12</sup>—and the deconstructive terrain of philosophy that reaches from Martin Heidegger to Jacques Derrida. *Dead Man*’s clear blending of mental and physical spaces lend it a clear affinity with psychoanalysis and its deep concern with questions of linguistic texture and the spaces between presence and absence echo with deconstructive queries.<sup>13</sup>

The way *Dead Man* confuses physical and mental space is a central issue. Is Blake’s journey real or is it a dream? Who is Blake and what does he stand for? The story appears to us

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<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of a psychoanalytical approach to film, see Baudry.

<sup>13</sup> The fact that the few works written about *Dead Man* all deal in one way or another with the discourses of psychoanalysis and what has come to be known as deconstruction speaks to the film’s resonance with these discourses. See, for example, Rickman, Szakloky, Rosenbaum’s *Dead Man*, and Nieland, which very succinctly renders the resonance between Derrida’s discussion of history and the archive in *Archive Fever* and *Dead Man*’s portrayal of Nobody and its more general negotiation of the history of the West.

almost as if it is the subconscious of the nation, the guilty remainder of the “lapsed American dream of innocent success” (Fiedler 315). It is a psychic space. It engages an idea of psychic space and language that can be best understood via Jacques Lacan’s reading of Freud. Lacan revisits many of Freud’s key inquiries: 1. the fragmentation of human subjectivity, signified by Freud as the *id*, *ego*, and *superego* (*An Outline of Psychoanalysis*) 2. *eros* and *thanatos* (death drive), the mechanism of repression, and the repetition compulsion as a gesture of mastery, something he describes among other places in his observations of a little boy’s game, *fort-da* [gone-there] (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 40-74, 14-17) 3. the notion of dreams, and psychoanalysis in general, as a field of interpretation (*On Dreams*), 4. and the description of “mental life” in spatial and architectural terms, something we see most clearly in his comparison of human mental processes with the city of Rome (*Civilization and Its Discontents* 16-19).<sup>14</sup> Lacan, however, extends Freud’s observations by focusing more on the mental life ordered as language. Lacan’s articulation of the orders of the *real*, *imaginary*, and *symbolic* is instructive. These orders are important in distinguishing between the real and what we call “reality.” The real is that pre-linguistic order to which we do not have access. Reality, on the other hand is an inner and imaginary reality created by the discursive space of the symbolic. Words create each person’s projection of the world, which each person understands as reality. Reality is illusory and we are alienated from the real by our inescapable place in the symbolic order.<sup>15</sup> This imaginary space created by the discursive order of the symbolic resonates particularly clearly in

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<sup>14</sup> See Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Lacan’s *Ecrits* 31-106 and his discussions on language, philosophy, emptiness, and man’s relation to the signifier in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, especially 101-138. For a detailed analysis of Lacanian concepts and a comparison of his approach to language with other approaches (including deconstruction), see Pavón Cuéllar.

*Dead Man*'s connection of space and poetry. Bruce Fink addresses such imaginary space and our consequent alienation:

Writers like Rousseau have beautifully expressed what Lacan calls man's *alienation in language*. According to Lacanian theory, every human being who learns to speak is thereby alienated from her or himself—for it is language that, while allowing desire to come into being, ties knots therein, and makes us such that we can both want and not want one and the same thing, never be satisfied when we get what we thought we wanted, and so on. (7)

*Dead Man*, in a different manner than Rousseau, expresses such alienation in language and looks at the consequences of such alienation on the larger discursive body of a nation. The film engages psychoanalysis and plays with the idea of film space as the projected psychological dreams, desires, and traumas of an audience, an idea that is important to an understanding of the Western and its relation to American historiography.<sup>16</sup>

The other theoretical strand that resonates in *Dead Man* is expressed most profoundly by Heidegger and Derrida. Space and language, or more explicitly, the space of language is also fundamental to their thought. The simultaneous familiarity and unfamiliarity of language—we might say the simultaneous operation of containment and transgression—is also fundamental. Both thinkers depend on spatial metaphors to describes time and man's condition and place in the world. The three ideas that are perhaps most helpful for us are the notion of man's being homeless, unsettled, uncanny [*unheimlich*] and a being that is always situated toward the future, man's state of being in the world as one primarily of dwelling [*wohnen*], and man's notion of truth in the modern industrialized world as one in which things are framed or enframed

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, a discussion of the landscape as “mental traumascapes” in Walker's “Captive Images in the Traumatic Western: *The Searchers*, *Pursued*, *Once upon a Time in the West*, and *Lone Star*.”

[*Gestell*].<sup>17</sup> Of central importance in all of these ideas of Heidegger's is his suggestion that man dwells in and is shaped by language. Derrida picks up on the language that Heidegger uses and teases out the threads of his thinking to comment on language and the history of metaphysics. The language Derrida uses to talk about *writing* is equally rife with spatial metaphors that help us think about *Dead Man*'s interesting blend of space with an inquiry about the nature of language.

The film's spatial expressions of containment and transgression speak to the notions of spacing, distance, deferral, and futurity that we see in Derrida's writings about writing. Signifiers such as *differance*, *trace*, *pharmakon*, and *supplement* inform the textural background for a closer reading of the film.<sup>18</sup> They are helpful in thinking through the sense of haunting, absence, loss, and distance that dominates the film. A central aspect of Derrida's thought—that the absence and distance of writing describes language more appropriately than the apparent presence and close proximity of speech and that there is a contextual, temporal, and spatial distance between any word and what it attempts to fix—is central to *Dead Man*'s inquiry into the juxtaposition of the mechanical language of industry and the poetry of William Blake. The film poses many questions about the functions and possibilities of language. Its use of cinematic space to explore these questions echoes with Derridean nuances. In the greater context of the Western, a genre that reflects the socio-political and ideological milieu of the U.S., *Dead Man* cleverly replaces notions of cultural representation with those more in the vein of deconstructive

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<sup>17</sup> For a selection of discussions of these ideas, see Heidegger's "Building Dwelling Thinking," *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister"* 48-73, *Introduction to Metaphysics* 156-181, and "The Question Concerning Technology"

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed rendering of these signifiers, see Derrida's *Speech and Phenomenology*, *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Dissemination*.

thought.<sup>19</sup> The represented spaces of the *sutured* society become open and constantly articulated social spaces of discontinuity. *Dead Man* is not the first Western to do this, but is typical of the 1990s Westerns that more explicitly explore the articulatory practices that inform the symbolic and imaginary spaces of our socio-political, historical, and ideological terrain.

*Dead Man* responds to its historical moment and to discussions of American space and identity that are reflected in the Western as a genre, mirrors the texture of containment and transgression that we see in Blake and Michaux, and echoes the mercurial contours of knowledge and identity characteristic of a modern and postmodern theoretical milieu. It shows a common thread in these very disparate registers, each of which similarly approach the philosophical problem of identity and reference. In other words, Blake's and Michaux's poetry, the theoretical impulse embodied most acutely in the thread of thinking from Heidegger and Derrida, and the fundamental questions that *Dead Man* underscores in the Western, all work through identity, reference, and difference. They render the discord between identity and change. *Dead Man* alludes to these problems that are evident in Heidegger's notion of homelessness and explicitly framed in Derrida's work. It more explicitly outlines these problems as something that Blake is getting at in his poetic studies of contraries, and something that the Western deals with in its bounding images of space. We can hear in the cross-chatter of all of these registers a similar and fundamental spatio-linguistic logic of home and homelessness, familiarity and unfamiliarity, and

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<sup>19</sup> For arguments about *Dead Man* as a deconstructive Western, see Nieland and Rickman.

containment and transgression, all of which bear heavily on how we understand, refer to, and signify identity, whether individual, collective, or historical.<sup>20</sup>

## Situating Henri Michaux and William Blake

*Dead Man's* epigraph introduces us to the poetry of twentieth-century writer and painter Henri Michaux and in so doing provides the film with its initial poetic and theoretical pulse. Besides making poetry and the idea of poiesis a central question and driving force of the film, this epigraph advances several compelling thematic concerns.<sup>21</sup> These concerns echo throughout the film and are picked up both in the film's *mise en scène* and narrative and in the poetic lines borrowed from William Blake. The way the works of the two poets reverberate in the film is significant to its vision. I will outline a few of Michaux's major themes so as to build on the theoretical foundation that illuminates this vision.

In *Poetics of Space*, Bachelard offers a commentary on the poem, "L'espace aux ombres," ["Space of the Shadows"] that is an apt description of much of Michaux's work, including *A Certain Plume* (1931, 1938), the poem from which *Dead Man* takes its epigraph:

Here I read Michaux's poem over and over, and I accept it as a phobia of inner space, as though hostile remoteness had already become oppressive in the tiny cell represented by inner space. With this poem, Henri Michaux has juxtaposed

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<sup>20</sup> For an insightful analysis of the structural necessity of spatial, architectural, and domestic metaphors to deconstructive discourse and philosophical discourse more generally, see Wigley.

<sup>21</sup> For a brief discussion of some parallels between Michaux's work and *Dead Man* and a more general overview of Jim Jarmusch's blending of genres, media, and voices in his later films, such as *Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog*, see the chapter on *Dead Man* in Suarez.

claustrophobia and agoraphobia; he has aggravated the line of demarcation between outside and inside. But in doing so, from the psychological standpoint, he has demolished the lazy certainties of the geometrical intuitions by means of which psychologists sought to govern the space of intimacy. (220)

Bachelard describes the general haunted, hostile, and remote atmosphere of Michaux's work as well as the ambiguity of spaces and the attendant unease of such spatial disorientation. This spatial disorientation, the ambiguity, the sense of remoteness and hostility, and the feeling of haunting are reflected in the atmosphere of *Dead Man*. Out of this general atmosphere come a few more specific problems typical of Michaux's work that are picked up by the film and resonate with William Blake's work as well.

There is no better way to describe the confusion of inner and outer space, or the ambiguity of the border between internal and external being, than Bachelard's observation that "he [Michaux] has aggravated the line of demarcation between outside and inside" (220). This is a primary problem *Dead Man* explores, space being one of the major currencies of the Western. The film problematizes the role of space as a social register in the Western and makes it impossible to distinguish between socio-political, psychological, physical, and linguistic registers. One cannot get comfortable in the "lazy certainties of the geometrical intuitions" in *Dead Man*, nor does the film allow one to get comfortable in the certainty of an easy reading of its space as a gauge of national climate. The space, rather, is a disorienting one.

Language in *Dead Man* is also disorienting. The film, which displays its clear concern for how language shapes the way we perceive the world by starting with Michaux's poetry, giving its protagonist the name William Blake, and so conspicuously, yet oddly integrating Blake's poetry into the film's dialogue, draws out some major components of Michaux's thoughts on language. At one point in *Plume*, the protagonist finds himself in a restaurant and he orders something that is not on the menu because he cannot read without his glasses. The

headwaiter comes by and severely remarks, “What you have there in your plate is *not* listed on the menu.” Though Plume explains, “I didn’t look at it, for I’m very shortsighted, and I didn’t have my glasses with me, and besides, reading is very painful for me,” he is severely punished by a policeman who is called to the scene (*SW* 85). This episode is typical of Michaux’s way of making astute observations by exaggerating the behavioral dynamics of very mundane situations. Here we have a passage that is essentially about language and how we engage the world with it. The exchange between Plume and the waiter conveys two very different views of language that offer up one of the central tensions of Michaux’s work.

The primary struggle here is between the waiter’s necessity to rigidly stick to the word of the menu and Plume’s deviation from that word. Now, admittedly Plume’s deviation from the menu is by no means a moment of inspiration, but the scene does draw the distinction between language as a medium of convention and languages as something that cannot be contained by convention. The pendulum will swing completely the other way when we look at what Blake calls vision, which is quite the opposite of convention. Vision creates, while convention contains. In one view, language is a stable document that merely describes the world. The world that Plume inhabits, however, is more typical of the unsettled world Michaux envisions. The world for Plume is unstable and language is fluid and even turbulent. It does not merely describe his world, but changes it as he moves along. It does not describe, it inscribes. It does not point to predetermined objects, but brings them temporarily into being.

Finally, for Plume, and for the waiter as well, engaging the world with language is a violent act. There is a tie in Michaux’s work between violence and language that we clearly see picked up in *Dead Man*. Michaux’s poetry suggests that language is a type of weapon with which humanity negotiates a hostile world, and a world with no true sense of place or origin. He

describes language as a weapon to exorcise this world. Humanity is lost and attempts to find itself through acts of linguistic creation. In these acts, however, humanity is always coming up against itself as we see with Plume and the waiter. Plume's language is violent in that it breaks the established mold of the menu. It unravels the document. The waiter's violence is the violence of the institution. It is a language that is scared of expansion. It looks to contain as limited a vision of the world as possible. This tension between containment and transgression is drawn out in even greater detail in William Blake's works. It is a tension that haunts *Dead Man*.

Blake's poetry is the most obvious artistic influence on *Dead Man* considering the protagonist is named after the poet whose words are also frequently borrowed to provide dialogue for the film. There is clearly something happening in the juxtaposition of his poetry and the space of the American West. The "contraries" that define Blake's works could be described in terms similar to the textual bind of containment and transgression that also finds expression in *Dead Man*. When he writes, "Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy" (*MHH* pl. 4), these two contraries of Reason and Energy express among other things the necessary and inescapable bind of existence that demands both the driving force of change and the molded stasis of definable categories. Imaginative energy is change and reason is stasis. The juxtaposition of Blake and *Dead Man* brings this bind into full relief. Blake employs and deconstructs a whole set of contraries—innocence and experience, heaven and hell, day and night, reason and imagination—that structure his work and are analogous to the expression of containment and transgression in *Dead Man*. These interdependent contrary terms provide the cyclic texture and atmosphere of disintegrating distinctions that is integral to Blake's works and the film. Therefore, we should establish a general feeling for Blake's work and render a few

relevant terms to ensure some understanding of his symbology and establish its importance to our reading of *Dead Man*.

The nature of language is central to Blake. The instability of his symbolism makes it impossible to fully grasp his work, but this gesture of instability is already a clue to help his readers. It is a criticism of the way we institutionalize language. Nelson Hilton points this out in his discussion of Blake's work as political satire: "The satire focuses on the limitations of intellect and perception occasioned by our forgetting the nature of language and accepting the imposition of supposed teachers" (201-202). Blake's works help us remember the volatile nature of language and surpass the limits of our conventional perceptions. To do so he employs a litany of unstable and changing symbols.

In his works, Blake uses many animal and nature symbols, and some minor characters, such as Thel, to explore the ideas of the will, innocence and experience, desire, and other human emotions. These are contained enough to deal with in the context of our analysis as they become relevant. The Four Zoas however are the building block of Blake's symbology and provide a larger picture of his thinking. Though his works often describe a particular time and place, the Four Zoas and their various emanations (as Blake calls them) are the beginning of an attempt to explain as fully as possible the essential qualities of human existence that are universally relevant, from classical times, to biblical times, to modern times. The Zoas are the fundamental aspects of man, as Blake understands them. They are Tharmas (body) in the west, Urizen (reason) in the south, Luvah (emotions) in the east, and Urthona (imagination) in the north. This mythological paradigm lends to *Dead Man* a lens through which to look at these aspects of man and their opposition in the context of the Western. By shifting these aspects between different figures of his symbology and by allowing these figures themselves to slip into different aspects

of man, Blake ensures that this paradigm also underscores the very temporary and tenuous nature of these aspects of man. A few of the more crucial emanations as far as we are concerned are Los (poetry), a manifestation of Urthona in time and space, and Orc, who is the son of Los and a form of Luvah on earth. He is a combination of imagination and emotion, and an oppositional force to Urizen. Orc and Urizen are probably the most significant emanations of the Zoas and are particularly foundational for our reading of *Dead Man*.

Blake criticism generally speaks of Orc as a symbol of passion, generation, revolution, and imagination, while Urizen is understood as the hardened, tyrannical, often cruel, and repressive law.<sup>22</sup> Many critics follow Northrop Frye's assessment of Orc and Urizen as two parts, generative and degenerative, of one universal cyclic pattern of revolution, reification into law, and then revolution again and so on.<sup>23</sup> That is to suggest that Orc and Urizen merely represent stages in the ongoing cycle of the generation and degeneration of life. Orc, the passionate revolutionary son, eventually becomes the steadfast and immovable Urizenic father. Though these critics all draw on the imagery of generation and degeneration, unbridled passion and steadfast law, the notions of either surpassing boundaries or creating them, and the cycle of growth, calcification, and death, they often approach such imagery in different contexts. Before looking at Blake's poetry and the Blakean imagery in *Dead Man*, we will look at few of these critical contexts in order to help us read the rich threads of Blake woven into the film.

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<sup>22</sup> Urizen has been read in a general sense as a figure of repression and more specifically as a symbol for Blake's understanding of repressive institutions such as the church. For an interesting discussion of Urizen and Blake's view of religion, see Ryan. For a more general discussion of Urizen and repression, see Sutherland.

<sup>23</sup> Some critics read in Orc and Urizen, not a cyclic pattern, but a continuous and always oppositional play of forces in line with Blake's idea of the "contraries of the human soul." For one such challenge to Frye's reading, see Hobson, who suggests that rather than being cyclic, the energies of Orc are always in opposition to and being repressed by those of Urizen.

Frye was the first modern critic to fully engage Blake's symbolism in a systematic way. In his *Fearful Symmetry* he offers a reading of Blake's works as a complicated, but decipherable, comprehensive and systematic universal mythology of human life. He reads Blake's mythology as the cyclic process of human life, historical and cosmic time. In this reading, Urizen originally creates the world as a prison of convention and Orc attempts to break that mold, but eventually becomes like Urizen. In Blake Frye reads a continuous failure of the narrative of progress. Human history moves forward, but then constantly regresses. Frye reads in Blake a cyclic clash of revolution and tyranny and a more general trend of historical degeneration and entrapment within this very process of degeneration, with the small possibility of imaginative release from this entrapping cyclic process. He explains that Blake:

postulates a historical process which may be described as the exact opposite of the Hegelian one. Every advance of truth forces error to consolidate itself in a more obviously erroneous form, and every advance of freedom has the same effect on tyranny. Thus history exhibits a series of crisis in which a sudden flash of imaginative vision (as in the French Revolution)<sup>24</sup> bursts out, is counteracted by a more ruthless defense of the *status quo*, and subsides again. The evolution comes in the fact that the opposition grows sharper each time, and will one day present a clear-cut alternative of eternal life or extermination. (260)

Frye's explication of Blake's mythology offers up a reading of *Dead Man* wherein Blake's journey is merely another part of an endless cycle of destruction and rebirth, with the small possibility of revelation offered by the imaginative processes of what we might term poetry in the case of *Dead Man*.

Such revelation, or freedom from constraint, seems a very distant possibility in that even the poetic imagination is still always bound to the physical world. Frye tells us, "as Orc stiffens into Urizen, it becomes manifest that the world is so constituted that no cause can triumph within

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<sup>24</sup> The American Revolution is also clearly implied here, as Frye himself points out elsewhere in his text. Blake addresses the sudden flash and the failings of the American Revolution in *America a Prophecy*.

it and still preserve its imaginative integrity. The imagination is mental, and it never has a preponderance of physical force on its side” (217). Frye calls this passing from revolution to repressive law to destruction the Orc cycle, a cycle that is embodied by several of Blake’s figures, but mainly Orc and Urizen. Frye repeatedly mentions that Orc is bound to the physical world such as when he proclaims, “Orc is completely bound to the cyclic wheel of life. He cannot represent an entry into a new world, but only the power of renewing an exhausted form in an old one.” Finally, Frye reminds us that “The word ‘revolution’ itself contains a tragic irony: it is itself a part of the revolving of life and death in a circle of pain” (218). This tension of revolution, of life and death, and of physical space versus imaginative mental space is played out in *Dead Man*.

David V. Erdman, like Frye, looks at the idea of revolution in Blake, but does so from a more historical, and less mythological, standpoint. Erdman’s reading of Blake’s works in *Prophet Against Empire* does not distinguish itself completely from Frye’s, but it does more specifically look at the relevance of Blake’s work in the context of the revolutionary history of his time. Much of his discussion of the American Revolution and of revolution in general clearly resonates with *Dead Man* considering that the story addresses the not so distant aftermath of that revolution, the rise of industry in the West, and the nation’s failure to fully embody some of the better ideals of that revolution. In his discussions of revolution and its failures, Erdman, like Frye, calls on the Orc cycle, but he situates it not as much in deeply mythological terms as in political and economic terms. Urizen maintains his role as tyrant and Orc is often pictured as a slave who attempts to transcend the economic, industrial, and political boundaries imposed by Urizen. Erdman poses the pair in completely economic terms when he describes “Orc as the spirit that transcends the spirit of trading” and calls him “the divine seed-fire that exceeds the

calculations of Urizen, god of commerce” (227). This reading situates Urizen as an imperialist and an economic and political oppressor obsessed with possession, measurability, and calculation. Urizen’s ultimate goal is to divide and conquer the immeasurability of a chaotic world through possession and calculation. Orc, having realized his fallen position in the shell of the physical world, hopes for a vision beyond this mundane, divided and tyrannical plane of conventional thought. The Orcian and Urizenic terms of Erdman’s discussion, though they are focused mostly on political and economic revolution, maintain the salient terms of Frye’s discussion and of most discussions of Orc and Urizen. Those terms include Orcian revolution, vision, imagination and desire and the “circumscribed order of Urizen,” repression, bounding, and law (Mitchell 79).

Kathleen Raine looks at Blake’s work from a slightly different perspective, but one that is equally important to our discussion. She traces the many influences on Blake’s work including classical and biblical influences and those more contemporary to Blake. Her readings reveal a rich and multilayered texture to Blake’s symbolism. She picks up on many of the themes already mentioned, such as the cyclical nature of history, renewal and death, the decadence of the new age, and the rise of a “landscape of industrialism,” but what is consistent throughout her critiques of Blake is her focus on Blake’s view of the brutal rationality and coldly scientific ethos of an utterly mechanistic modern world, which is summed up when she suggests “Hell is the universe seen as mechanism” (*Blake and Antiquity* 97).<sup>25</sup> This idea of mechanism, as opposed to vision, is prevalent in *Dead Man* in the division between Blake’s life before he meets Nobody and after.

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<sup>25</sup> For an extended discussion of the contemporary relevance of Blake’s ideas about rationality, science, and industrialism, see Raine, *Blake and the New Age*.

The town of Machine is caught between the apparent chaos of the frontier and the tyrannical mechanicity embodied by the factory that dominates the town.

Finally, a lot of the more contemporary Blake criticism resituates many of the themes dealt with by earlier critics in terms of logics of inscription, deconstruction, the supplement, *differance*, the trace, writing, textuality and so on. One such collection is *Unnam'd Forms: Blake and Textuality*. Of this collection, Paul Mann's "The Book of Urizen and the Horizon of the Book" is most relevant to our discussion of *Dead Man* and the film's particular focus on language.<sup>26</sup> Mann keys in on Urizen as a writer. He focuses on the book's power to delimit, create boundaries, and impose order.<sup>27</sup> He mentions Urizen's will to create enclosures out of the fallen space of the physical world, a world that he orders as supplement in order to translate the abyss of eternity into a delimited and understandable world. The Bible, of which *The Book of Urizen* is an inversion, Geoffrey Hartman reminds us, is "a limiting concept, which tells us not to think about what went before" (qtd. in Mann 51). More specifically Mann draws on the Derridean understanding of supplement. He points out:

Writing, specifically book writing, both traces and displaces eternal *logos*. Urizen's book obliterates eternity, defines it as what has been lost (from the Book).

Perhaps we encounter here something like what Derrida encounters in Rousseau's *Confessions*. *The Book of Urizen* describes a lost and equivocally lamented origin, but an origin that the book itself obscures and ultimately erases. "The universe (which others call the Library)" (Borges 51) is an exclusive and "dangerous supplement," a horizon . . ." (53)

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<sup>26</sup> For a further selection of views, see Simpson and Behrendt. For a more explicit discussion of logics of inscription and the political dimension of Blake's writing, see Swearingen.

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of the figure of Urizen as a representative of binding and order, see Dorothy Plowman.

Urizen's book, his supplement, his space, his enclosure in which he binds his world and creates an origin is always a stand in, a stopgap. That is all that it can be. His book cannot capture the spaces in between meaning. It can always only offer approximations, transferences, and translations. The frontier, and the town of Machine that stands on that frontier in *Dead Man*, is a similar space of delimitation. The frontier is a binding. It is a written space. It is a boundary and a space of origin through which ideologies are filtered and imposed. *Dead Man* imports its Urizenic concerns with textuality to negotiate themes of supplementarity as they relate to the American frontier and to reflect on the porousness and ideological tenuousness of any interpretive horizon.

These concerns are reflected in one way or another in the different approaches of all of these critics who, through many different contexts, bring out the tension between the possibilities of passion, desire, revolution, imagination, creativity and vision embodied by Orc and the oppositional forces of tyranny, fear, bounding, delimiting, oppression, repression, mechanization, and violence embodied by Urizen.<sup>28</sup> *Dead Man* looks at this tension in the context of the North American frontier, a frontier that harkens back to previous and always expanding frontiers and particularly to the promises of the revolutionary founding of the United States. The scene in Machine, for example, is dominated by Urizenic imagery, but there are specters of Orc as well. The scene, which is a reflection on a revolutionary past, an industrializing present, and a mechanical future, resonates with Blakean imagery. The film's appropriation of this poetic

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<sup>28</sup> We will follow Blake's broad use of the word tyranny, which describes both tyranny in the sense of the excessive exercise of power and the more subtle tyranny that inadvertently takes hold of the mind through the complacency with the conventions of socio-political institutions. Our discussion will generally, but not exclusively refer to the second notion of tyranny. I do not wish to suggest that unrestrained monarchical tyranny is identical to a pacified state of mind, nor am I exactly equating the tyranny of kings with the mechanism of modern industrial and capitalistic expansion dealt with in the Western.

imagery transforms the filmic space by bringing in issues about how space is envisioned and created that might otherwise be missing. The superimposition of Blake's poetry and the space of the film brings these issues to bear on the space of America and the West. The combination of poetry and cinematic space of *Dead Man* ask us to look at how we envision these spaces, a call that would not be as prominent without the echoes of Blake's thinking. Some of the specific issues to which this superimposition draws our attention are the play between law and desire or passion, the pull between mechanical convention and unbridled vision, and the confusion of physical and psychic space, all of which we could situate under the encompassing tension between the forces of delimitation and the energies of expansion, or containment and transgression. Additionally, using the mythological elements of Blake's work, focusing on his disintegration of the border between physical and psychic space, and making the play between forces of delimitation and expansion a central concern of the film, reflects on the space of the American West as an undecided space and one that is in the constant flux of a space both envisioned and bound by the convulsions of many psycho-linguistic registers, including those of socio-politics, mytho-historicism, and metaphysical inquiry.

### Textual Map and Argument

Jonathan Rosenbaum writes, "*Dead Man* proposes a cluster of metaphors: life as a journey (Blake's journey unwittingly becomes a spiritual quest), white man as dead man, Blake as death itself (such as when Nobody, on peyote, sees him turn into a skeleton), and poetry as something that white America is but doesn't know and can't understand" (*Dead* 74). These

metaphors are all born out by the trajectory of the film's narrative, the imminent fact of Blake's death, and the film's conspicuous appropriation of Michaux and Blake's poetry. The first metaphor—"life as a journey"—registers in several different ways through the film's attention to the intersection of mytho-historical, socio-political, metaphysical, and psychic spaces and the formation of these spaces through different types of language. The language of poetry, as Rosenbaum point out, is of central concern, particularly in the way it is used to analyze the myths of progress, violence, and conquest in the American West. Poetry, language in general, and the production of meaning through different types of language are overriding concerns of *Dead Man*. This is evident from the opening epigraph and then it becomes more apparent throughout the film with the strange appropriation of William Blake's works. *Dead Man* incorporates these texts and reflects on Western genre conventions to pose a series of deeply philosophical questions about how we produce meaning to envision a nation, a history, and the world in general.

The dominant tension brought out by these questions is one between tropes of containment, stasis, stability, familiarity, and convention on the one hand, and fluidity, flight, turbulence, instability, and unfamiliarity on the other. In our reading of *Dead Man* we will deal with a range of issues that come from the basic tension between these two sets of tropes. These issues include language and the confusion of inner and outer space, language and different notions of violence, language as *poiesis* and language as *techne*, or language as vision and language as convention, innocence and experience, perception and perspective, the notions of home and foreignness, the idea of origin and nostalgia, and a general concern with the idea of boundaries and enclosure within, or flight beyond those boundaries, all of which are in some way

fundamental problems of identity, individual or collective. Our analysis will elucidate these concerns and sketch out the contours of their correspondence.

Part one of the analysis, entitled “Destination,” establishes the trajectory of the argument through a reading of the juxtaposition of *Dead Man* with Henri Michaux’s *A Perfect Plume*. While the film and the poem dismantle the traditional notion of destination, as neither the film’s or the poem’s protagonist reaches his intended destination, the opening scene does establish a set of theoretical problems. The opening of *Dead Man* very astutely establishes a set of problems to which the film continually returns. The film’s narrative is a constant reassessment and renegotiation of the terms established in the beginning. The narrative trajectory is not linear, but rather follows a cyclical path of inquiry that asks the viewer to reconsider these terms over and over again. The final gesture of the film in fact brings us back to the opening scene, unsettling any conclusions we might have developed and asking us to reassess the problems once more. The reiterative movement simultaneously returns us to a destination while making that destination impossible. The theoretical destination—the arguments the film makes and problems it establishes—is shown to be equally fleeting. We at best establish a constellation of inquiries.

More particularly, the way we see some of these inquiries in the opening scene is in the interplay between *Dead Man* and *Plume*. *Plume*’s strange way with language, for example, resonates with the strange conversation in the opening scene of the film and immediately establishes language as a central concern. In the opening of both works, nonconventional language is situated in the proximity of more mechanical language. It is clear that a distinction between two notions of language is being negotiated. These works ask how the way we conceive of language shapes our perception of the world. The ideas of origin, home, boundaries and foreignness are also established at the beginning of both of these works. *Plume* wakes up in

a home destroyed by a train, while Blake wakes up on a train destined for the “end of the line,” the final boundary of civilization. Blake is asked where he is from. “Cleveland,” he answers. It is a past and absent place in the film. A haunting absence of origin and unknown destination haunts Blake and Plume. Equally, both are foreigners in their own land. Finally, there is a dream-like atmosphere in both works that makes inner and outer worlds indistinguishable. The constant fades in *Dead Man* and its cyclic narrative, for example, beg the question whether Blake is experiencing his journey in the physical world or in his own haunted American dream.

Part two of the analysis, entitled “Bounds,” picks up the line of inquiry from part one, but delves into the juxtaposition of the *mise en scène* in *Dead Man*'s second scene with the imagery of two of Blake's prophetic works, *America a Prophecy* and *The Book of Urizen*.<sup>29</sup> The comparison of images and of figures such as Orc and Urizen in Blake's works and Dickinson and Blake in *Dead Man* picks up on this inquiry, but more specifically considers the connection between a world of industrial production and the hyper-rational and mechanistic language that shapes that world. The analysis of Blakean tropes in the context of *Dead Man* helps us look at the way language is articulated as a medium of delimitation and containment that limits our view of the world. The first section of part two scrutinizes the notion that language is a restrictive force. This section however marks a turn in the film from a focus on closing off space to opening it up. The words ‘bounds’ and ‘bounding’ are relevant in all of their resonances. The scenes in *Machine* and then in Thel's room mark a space of bounding in the sense of confining,

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<sup>29</sup> Though it is somewhat misleading to suggest a single publication date for Blake's works, since many of them appear in various versions throughout his life, and his very process undermines the notion of a single text, it is helpful for historical contextualization. The first publication of *America a Prophecy* is 1793 and the *The Book of Urizen* was first published in 1794.

but also in the sense of leaping over or quickly fleeing. Here, the dominant tension in the film between enclosed spaces and open space is illuminated.

Part three of the analysis, entitled “Flight,” hearkens back to the discussion of mechanization in part two, but moves to a discussion of language as poesis, which keys in on language’s inevitable function as a creative force that undoes imposed limits, rather than as an inescapable necessity that closes off through designation and categorization. Blake’s transformation from accountant to poet and his transgression of the limits of Machine warrant this discussion and bring out this contentious and contrary linguistic tension. This section continues to look at Blakean imagery and the film’s *mise en scène*, but focuses more on the film’s dialogue, much of which is borrowed from the works of William Blake. In looking at Blake’s works in the film’s dialogue, we move from a discussion of the mechanization of conventional language to a discussion of Blake’s notion of visionary language. We move from a fixed and bound world to an undetermined one. Finally, we move from linguistic reification to linguistic fluidity. The last chapter, “Horizons,” brings us back to the beginning of the film much like the narrative does. This final analysis deals with the superimposition of the film’s final images with the dialogue in the opening scene and considers this superimposition in the context of Blake’s and Michaux’s works. It attempts to bring all of these threads together to tease out the primary tensions that haunt the film, all of which revolve around the simultaneous compulsions and necessities to maintain and transgress boundaries.

The discussion of the various problems opened by the contact of the works of these three artists—William Blake, Henri Michaux, and Jim Jarmusch—will inevitably illuminate some points of similarity and some discrepancies in their visions. Blake’s writings, illuminated and otherwise, charge that humanity lives in a shrunken field of vision, in which time and space are

limited by our own ideas of perception. Such limited perception can be enlarged by the visions of art and imagination. As such, the world we perceive is a mere image or hyperreality of a truer and larger reality to which we have momentary access only through the imaginative visions of art. Blake's poetics aims to enlarge humanity's field of vision and break the constraints of tyrannical institutions and orthodoxies.

Michaux's work also deals with the apparent limitations of human perception. It however negotiates a world of conflictual and indistinguishable realities and hyperrealities. His works do not seem to suggest any access to a more encompassing reality. We have only the screen of language and a world that is full of angst and near impossible to read or negotiate. Michaux's poetics hint at the small possibility of transcendental moments through language, but ultimately contend that language is more of a weapon to ward off and negotiate the violent tensions of a turbulent world, in which personal identity and external topography are nearly indistinguishable.

Jarmusch's *Dead Man* considers both of these contentions and transposes them to a deconstructed space of the American West. In his work the contours of reality and hyperreality are also tenuous and essentially unreadable. *Dead Man* borrows from Blake and Michaux a dissatisfaction with the conventional uses of language that are taken for granted as natural, but it resists offering a transcendent getaway from our binding linguistic machinations. Perhaps it offers change, but certainly not escape. The film, after all, ends where it began. Jarmusch's work follows Michaux in its understanding of violence—in its broadest and most metaphysical sense—as an essential component of how we create, survive, and interact in the world of our own making. His poetics stresses lingering, distance, even nonsense, and a removed posture and dream-like tension and the delay or even suspension of any type of signification of

transcendence. The moment of understanding or transfer between beings and other beings and between beings and the *world* is always delayed.

Despite their subtleties, all these works have in common an interest in how language shapes our experiences, perceptions, and perspectives. They look at how we negotiate a sense of something we call *world*, and *self*, and *nation*, and so on. They look at how these interactions and experiences inform identity. *Dead Man* looks at the intersection of these works in order to problematize these *things* and contends that only if they are problematized can they cease being merely problems. The problematization proposed by this thematics leaves us with a lot to consider. How do we weave all of these threads into a web that offers a coherent texture? How do we synthesize these many registers? In one way or another they all express the tropes of containment and transgression—this one possible arrangement of the terms of *Dead Man*. These are the two different textural necessities of making or creating an identity. The film accentuates the fact that this necessary tension is particularly well expressed in the Western. This tension is the driving force of America's vision of itself, the necessary contradiction of that vision, and the textual impossibility of that dream vision to fulfill itself.

*Dead Man* does not just call on the genre conventions of the Western, or the poetry of Blake and Michaux. By pointing to the textural necessities of containment and transgression so important to the Western, the film reflects more broadly on the idea and identity of America that is explored in many great works. In his 1883 memoir, *Life on the Mississippi*, Mark Twain reflects on the river he had come to love. He writes, "Now when I had mastered the language of this water and had come to know every trifling feature that bordered the great river as familiarly as I knew the letters of the alphabet, I had made a valuable acquisition. But I had lost something too" (284). He goes on to poetically describe how he had once innocently viewed the beauty and

power of the river, a time from which he recalls the vivid colors of a sunset that painted the river. For Twain though, “All the grace, the beauty, the poetry, had gone out of the majestic river!” (284). In mastering the river he lost this majesty. The point of his reflection is to show the reader how changing one’s perspective drastically changes one’s view of the world. Twain had learned and mastered the mighty Mississippi through his experiences navigating it, but in doing so he lost the wondrous Mississippi of his youth. He finishes this passage by asking, “doesn’t he sometimes wonder whether he has gained most or lost most by learning his trade?” (285).

Twain’s passage conveys his personal experience, works as an allegory of nation becoming more technified, and draws attention to the ineffability of truth in a perceptual and, hence, perspectival world. This story speaks to *Dead Man*, which essentially reverses the trajectory of experience on which Twain reflects. In *Dead Man*, Nobody attempts to help Blake unlearn his experiences as an accountant and representative of a mechanical world. Blake’s journey could be read as a nostalgic attempt to recapture the more innocent world described by Twain, a world of simple experience and poetic beauty, but bereft of hyper-technical knowledge. It also signifies the larger national problem of reconciling these two postures, one of mastery and the other of mytho-poieic creation, one that attempts to contain a fixed notion of being and one that calls to the great open future that grows through the transgression of this fixed notion of being. But, transgressing always means losing something and furthermore every transgression is a new act of containment. These contraries work together and against each other. The complicated superimposition of the film and Michaux’s and Blake’s works brings to bear different readings of space and language that offer several formulations of the protagonist’s journey in relation to these contraries and negotiates the tense contradiction of the American dream, which embodies these inseparable textural necessities.

We see this in another of Twain's works, which *Dead Man* recalls. Huck "lights out for the territory," after having come of age on his journey down the Mississippi with Jim. He does not know what lies ahead of him. *Dead Man* slightly alters the terms of this archetypal American story. We pick up with Blake in his lighting out for the territories. Though he is not a boy like Huck, he is semi-innocent. He is nonetheless a grown man. Perhaps *Dead Man* continues where *Huckleberry Finn* left off. The youthful, coming of age, and relatively innocent America represented by Huck is replaced by Blake, who is a wanderer without origin and without destination that meets his prolonged death. In the end, Blake's journey is even less certain than Huck's. The foreignness of the land ahead of Huck is more certain and more stable than the ocean into which Blake drifts. If Twain spoke to the openness and uncertainty of a young nation whose frontiers were being closed, *Dead Man* speaks to the equally tenuous situation of a developed nation renegotiating the frontiers of its past and situating the meaning of those past frontiers for an open and democratic present and future. Though the frontier is not as materially present, it exists in other ways. The journey still necessarily moves on and simultaneously fixes itself.

Blake's cyclic journey works against the ideas of fixity signified by Blake's material death. His journey is wrought with signifiers of fixity, bounding, enclosing, sheltering, mechanicity and a chain of signifiers made up of notions such as openness, fluidity, boundlessness, and undecidability. This is apparent in Blake's movement from Cleveland to Machine to the forest and, ultimately, to the ocean. These spaces form a figurative link to Blake's movement through the language of hyper-rationality to the language of poetry. Also, this movement over the American landscape and language-scape, as it is read alongside Blake's poetry, plays with the notions of innocence and experience in their relation to fixity and

openness. Finally, this movement reflects the ongoing reformation of the social landscape of an American past and present that is bound up with the tension of competing, but interdependent sets of tropes. *Dead Man's* incorporation of Blake's and Michaux's works reveals an elemental resonance between these works and the film's own textual operations. It discloses similar thematic concerns, lines of inquiry, and imagery, all of which are grounded on the operative juxtaposition of analogous pairs of tropes—containment and transgression, delimitation and expansion, fixity and movement, stability and instability, familiarity and unfamiliarity, identity and difference, and so on. Through this revealing juxtaposition of texts, these tropological pairs are shown to be textual and textural necessities. In other words, Blake's and Michaux's works and *Dead Man* are functionally dependent on these pairs to mobilize their central tensions, inquiries, and dominant imagery. In providing this comparative reading and acutely tracing these tropological pairs, *Dead Man* also reflects more broadly on the functional and textural necessity of these tensions for the Western genre and its most vital questions about the dream of American identity.

## PART 1: Destination

*Dead Man* begins with the epigraph, “It’s always preferable not to travel with a dead man,” a line taken from Henri Michaux’s long narrative poem entitled *A Certain Plume* (SW 101). The incorporation of this line at the beginning of the film, which refers both to the story of film and to the text from which it came, brings many ideas into play. Along with the Blakean resonances in the film, this line significantly transforms the space of *Dead Man* by making language a central thematic concern and opening up a rich and multilayered reading. This reading (or these readings) is informed largely by some very important themes that come out of Michaux’s work, many of which reverberate with his tragicomic character Plume. We also find these themes in slightly different articulations in William Blake’s work, work that is equally essential to the film.

These themes could be broadly characterized as the association of mental space with physical space, the notion of man as a fallen being who is in a continuous and primarily linguistic struggle to recuperate a lost origin, and the differentiation of a world of convention and a world of vision, something that is accentuated by an understanding of language as primarily figurative and always in flux. A larger thematic paradigm that we see in *A Certain Plume* and in Blake’s works underscores these themes and speaks to the limit situation of the frontier that we see in *Dead Man*; that is, the structural tension between tropes of containment and tropes of transgression.

These themes foreshadow much of what comes out of the film’s appropriation of the words of William Blake. They illuminate Blake’s journey and make some sense of his accidental undertakings in the role of a poet. Finally, the themes, all imbued with a sense of

distance, instability, and loss, challenge or de-familiarize the already challenging ideological space of the Western by demanding that the viewer confront the way language forms the unfamiliar physical and mental territory of the West. The physical strangeness and dreamlike atmosphere of the territory is drawn together in a very conspicuous way with the use of literary language in *Dead Man* in order to complicate the more familiar ways meaning is produced and to hint at the gaping abysses that are sheltered by such meaning.

The film's close attention to and use of poetry and its own poetic style emphasize the different possible functions of language as an important problematic, raise the overriding question of language as a simultaneously delimiting and transgressive force, and connect this question to the ideological space of the Western and the frontier in particular. This problematic and the issues that arise from it are even more pronounced when one looks at Michaux's and Blake's works after having viewed *Dead Man*, something the film itself calls the inquisitive viewer to do. One is confounded by the thematic and imagistic similarities between the works, which initially seem deeply buried, but are strikingly apparent after reading the works side by side and back and forth. Such a web of reading is implied by the play of the film and its protagonist's own journey of discovery, repetition, and loss.

There are numerous moments in *Dead Man* in which these similarities are most conspicuous. After the film's epigraph, for example, the strange train-ride sequence displays some remarkable likenesses to *A Certain Plume*, part of which also takes place on a train. Both episodes have an eerie feeling, are dream-like, and confound the limits between physical and mental space. Both protagonists go in and out of sleep and are confronted by various strangers. Both trains head to what are essentially foreign lands. The atmosphere of both scenes is imbued with an extreme attention to the obscurity of language, its ability to disturb or unsettle the

listener or speaker, its confrontational and violent uses, and its ability to be both very familiar and unfamiliar. These conditions of language are echoed in the gunplay that is central to both scenes. Finally, the last scenes of both narratives are unusually congruous in their use of the symbols of water, the sky, and a ceiling, all of which gives them an analogous imagistic and thematic structure based on questions of linguistic containment and transgression. In other words, the scenes have a notably comparable look, feel, and constellation of thematic concerns that echo throughout the film. These threads that juxtapose sky and water and invoke the structures of the land and world in terms of a domestic space run deeply through both works and show up repeatedly in conspicuous and inconspicuous incarnations.

## Chapter 1: Michaux and *Dead Man* Pluming Blake

### The Here and There of the Mind

Michaux's poetry is rife with metaphors of confrontation. *A Certain Plume* is about a man who is bombarded by a hostile world, but who is equally uncomfortable in his own mind. Further, neither he nor the reader can fully dissociate the two. There is no separating of ideal from real, of mental from material in this poem. There is only a constant and often contentious engagement between the two. Perhaps this notion of engagement between mental and physical space is what *Plume* lends most to a reading of *Dead Man*. The 1938 French publication of *A Certain Plume* includes the collection *The Far-Off Inside*.<sup>30</sup> This version affixes the absurd travels of *Plume* with reveries on the workings of the mind. The adjoining of these works makes interior and exterior space almost indistinguishable by lending a topographical element to the mind and a mental ethereality to physical spaces. The impression achieved by the coupling of the separate spheres specifically confuses mental travel with physical travel. This is most clear in the section of the book entitled "Movements of the Internal Being" (*SW* 77). One notices the jarringly violent and often incongruously juxtaposed imagery used to evoke the sense of extreme difficulty with which this traveler traverses the spaces described in the poem: "The powder magazine of the internal being is not always exploding. You might suppose it was sand. Then all of a sudden this sand is at the other end of the world and through some strange sluices falls

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<sup>30</sup> *A Certain Plume* was first published in 1931 and then republished in 1938 as *Plume Precede de Lointain Intérieur*. The 1938 publication includes the poems of *The Far-Off Inside*. This discussion takes into account the juxtaposition of these two collections in the 1938 edition and holds that the coupling of these works further strengthens the notion that mental and physical space are difficult to distinguish, a notion that is already evident in much of Michaux's work. In fact, publishing *Plume* in a different context already underscores questions of space, unity, wholeness, boundaries and so forth.

the cataract of bombs” (*SW* 77-79).<sup>31</sup> Further along we are told “velocity is at home in the internal being” (*SW* 79) and asked:

When concupiscence hauling its boats of fever into the immense country of the internal being . . . What! Then what is this rising fog?

The internal being continually combats gesticulating larva. It is all at once emptied of them as of a cry, as of detritus swept away by a sudden hurricane.

But the invasion soon starts again from the bottom and the calm of an instant is lifted and tunneled through like the lids of fields by the avidly growing wheat grains.

The internal being’s attack on concupiscence is worth seeing . . . (*SW* 79)

Desire and longing and all the other internal “gesticulations” born of the mind acquire a physical form. They battle with the mind. They haul “boats of fever” and invade and move at a certain velocity. The internal being is an “immense country” in which the inhabitant’s thoughts and desires take on the form of fog and hurricanes or sometimes even the incendiary power of bombs. Desires have a physical presence and a force. They are indistinguishable from acts in the real world. The “movements of the internal being” develop a certain mangled topography and the places traversed by the traveler suggest that his thoughts and desires either overwhelm him or are repressed.

How does Plume’s world, seemingly fraught with the overwhelming desire and repression described in “Movements of the Internal Being,” and a place in which the mind and

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<sup>31</sup> We might also read this envisioning of the “internal being” that suddenly appears as sand at “the other end of the world” as a faint reverberation with William Blake’s *Auguries of Innocence*, which starts with “To see a World in a Grain of Sand” (490). Much like Blake’s writing here suggests that an active mind can envision an enlarged world through the smallest of details, Michaux’s writing speaks to an active mind altering the world through its own inventive conscious or subconscious musings and desires. This connection, like many of those between Michaux and *Dead Man*, anticipates some of the more explicit uses of Blake’s work, and particularly of *Auguries of Innocence*, that appear later in the film.

the material world are inseparable, bear on a reading of *Dead Man* or more generally on the use of space in the Western as national narrative, social commentary, or ideological battleground? The story of Plume, and Blake's works later in the film, both of which grasp the importance of language in shaping the world, focus on the production of meaning, and pay heed to various human and societal impulses, echo in *Dead Man* as a criticism of the production of positivistic popular American narratives. *Dead Man* focuses specifically on language and how the articulations of conscious and unconscious thought and desire affect the world. The film insists that we should not ignore all the "gesticulations of desire" but those that privilege and even insist on the endurance of the unified self, the stability of language, the acceptance of institutional violence, and the absolute coherence of a national narrative. The desire to maintain and contain these views that privilege fixity are commonplace and have become almost unquestionable in the popular national discourse. These ideas are evoked simplified cultural conceptions of rugged individuality, American masculinity, American domesticity, and American exceptionalism, ideas that are often exclusionary, delimiting in terms of the possibilities of a more open democracy, and dependent on a deep pattern of forgetting events of the past.

Desires have almost a physical presence like in the world of Plume. *Dead Man* plays this out and suggests that gesticulations of desire have consequences in the material world. Internal desires violently transform the world. Mental and physical spaces are indistinguishable. We do not completely realize this until the end of the film, at which point we see images of Blake described by the train fireman in the opening scene. The physical space that we see manifests as if the stranger whom Blake had met brought it into being by speaking it. Is he describing Blake's thoughts, his dreams, his journey to an afterlife? The viewer cannot be sure, but through the juxtaposition of these scenes we do see a blurring of lines between mental and physical

*reality* and a congruence of figurative language and physical spaces. *Dead Man* is explicit in its insistence that the world comes into being and is framed by language. As the film moves on, Blake's thoughts and desires and his language are matched by action; language acquires a physical presence through actions. In the beginning he is silent and when he does speak he fumbles, but as the story moves along he gains confidence in the force of his words. Later in the film he asks two sheriffs who are following him, "do you know my poetry," and then he shoots them. Poetry here is action. Language has creative force. *Dead Man*, rather than accepting these things as natural phenomena or subtly attempting to subvert the institutionalized conventions of ideological production, follows *Plume* in explicitly challenging us to acknowledge the force of words, the production of meaning, the sources of desire and how these desires are articulated. It very specifically addresses the conflicts of desire, the different ways that desire is linguistically projected, exorcised, and produced, and the consequences (both remembered and forgotten) of such linguistic productions.

Considering the similar tone and thematic concerns of *Plume* and *Dead Man* we might take a closer look at the film's epigraph and its more immediate context. What might it suggest? The line, "it is always preferable not to travel with a dead man" is taken from a section entitled "Night of the Bulgarians" (*SW* 93). In this section of Plume's story, we find him on a train in a foreign country. Besides the play between the ideas of home and foreignness, there are many other details that resonate with Blake's train journey at the beginning of *Dead Man*. There is the same sense of going in and out of sleep, displayed in the film through numerous fades and in the poem through constant mentions of sleeping and waking and the disjointed description of events that suggests lapses in time. Another important parallel is the movement of the train in both works toward a frontier. Finally, we see a lot of gunplay in *Plume* and *Dead Man*. Plume's

journey foreshadows Blake's journey in that Plume runs into trouble on the train and shoots a bunch of strangers in his train compartment. They are all dead men that he travels with. Before throwing the dead men off of the train, Plume sits them next to him in an attempt to fool the conductor into thinking that they are alive. This part of Plume's journey seems relatively literal if a bit strange, but the reader knows differently. We know from earlier passages in the poem that this space that appears to be physical is also a description of mental turbulence. How does one read this scene and what does it mean in the context of *Dead Man*?

To help make sense of this scene and assess its significance for *Dead Man*, it might be worth looking back to "Movements of the Internal Being." If this scene on the train is merely a movement of the mind, part of Michaux's inner world like so much of his work, who are these dead men with whom Plume has to deal? Let's zoom out in order to survey the entire scene. "Night of The Bulgarians" plays with the notions of inside and outside, native and foreigner, and invasion, notions hinted at in "Movements of the Internal Being." The scene starts by telling us that Plume and his cohorts "were homeward bound" but took the "wrong train," in which they confront a "bunch of Bulgarians" who were muttering and generally making Plume uncomfortable (*SW* 93). They are not unlike the frontiersmen whom Blake sees on his train journey. Plume however immediately shoots the Bulgarians, whom he does not trust. The rest of this strange scene consists of Plume dealing with the dead men in the cramped compartment of the train. He has to "hold them steady" as speed "makes them nervous." This very uncomfortable and macabre situation is typified by the closed space of the compartment, frequent episodes of sleep, feelings of immobility, and of course the dead bodies. Plume has difficulty getting rid of the dead men, whom he actually calls "sleepers." At one point Michaux's words even help us envision the gruesome image of a dead man's head repeatedly

bouncing off of a window as Plume tries to throw him out of that window. The episode ends, the live passengers having arrived at the frontier, flee and pronounce, “Oh! to live now, oh! to live at last!” (*SW* 93-103).

Just before the train arrives, there is a quandary about the one remaining dead man and what might happen if a girl in the corridor next to the compartment notices this dead man and questions Plume. He is hoping:

the girl will go to sleep now! One dead man, to be sure, that’s already easier to explain away than five dead men. But it’s better to avoid all questions. For when you’re questioned you are easily tangled up. Contradictions and offenses show on all sides. It’s always preferable not to travel with a dead man. Especially when he has been the victim of a revolver bullet, for the blood which has run out gives him an unpleasant look. (*SW* 101)

Perhaps these dead men in the space of the internal being, the train in this instance, are the tired thoughts and desires of a stagnant mind. They are boxed in, compartmentalized, and slowly rotting as they bleed out. Plume does not keep them around. Though the bodies want stability and prefer not to move too quickly, Plume only watches over them temporarily and primarily because he does not want to be found out. He after all killed these foreign bodies in an attempt to shut them up, but now he must deal with the remnants of that killing. Plume does prefer movement to the stagnancy of the cramped compartments of the train. He flees when he reaches the frontier. He needs to travel, to move, and to be reinvigorated. According to *Plume*, the more alive mind speaks an unbound language of motion.

How does this translate to the space of *Dead Man*, to Blake’s train, to the American West, and to Blake as a dead man? Michaux’s language rejects immobile, rigid, or ‘dead’ language, demands lively interpretation, superimposes physical topography over the functions of the mind, and suggests the breakdown of boundaries between inside and outside. He continuously traverses and surveys such boundaries and suggests that neither the topography of

the mind nor the space of the world are easily traversed or ever settled, nor can we ever fully negotiate the proximity of the two. In his study on Michaux, Malcolm Bowie calls Michaux's personality "a meeting place of irreconcilables" (185). Irreconcilability is central to the Western. *Dead Man* persistently follows the line of inquiry offered by this struggle of irreconcilables. It preserves the space of the irreconcilable, and the process of irreconcilability, rather than attempting to veil them. The use of Michaux's work unsettles the textual coherence of the film's space as well as the spaces of the American West. It does so by focusing on our linguistic engagements in and with the world, by looking at unconscious impulses that inform our reading of the past and present, and by exploring how personal and national identity is formed or deformed. *Dead Man* starts with Michaux to problematize the distinction between a bound interior mind and an unbound landscape and to fully immerse the viewer in the struggles of language that mark this problematized boundary. It identifies how such struggles are implied by the imagery of the Western, which is saturated by the extreme beauty and highly symbolic significance of its landscapes.

### Re-poetizing Western Spaces

The opening scene of *Dead Man*, after the epigraph, picks up on the tradition of the Western as social commentary in which topography and ideology blend. It uses the language of the Western to challenge dominant modes of understanding and look at how ideas about space are formed. Particularly, the film opens by appropriating the iconography of movement associated with the Western and recasting that movement. The locomotive, one of the archetypal

symbols of that iconography, is the first image we see. In a discussion of Benjamin's writings about Paris and the notion of progress in *Dialectics of Seeing*, Susan Buck-Morss elucidates this symbol of the locomotive, which we could easily apply to the context of the American West: "Railroads were the referent, and progress the sign, as spatial movement became so wedded to the concept of historical movement that these could no longer be distinguished" (91). Here Buck-Morss points to the conflating of space with ideology. She suggests that the repeated invocation of the railroad as a marker of progress naturalizes the idea that spatial movement is inherently historical and progressive. This is one of the primary functions of the railroad as a symbol. *Dead Man* picks up on this symbol as it does with many other typical symbols of the West and allows its subterranean nuances to dominate the screen through repeated close-ups. The film not only attempts to dismantle these symbols, a task already undertaken by a long history of revisionist Westerns, but also specifically draws the viewers' attention to the linguistic acts that create ideology. This is reinforced in the film's preoccupation with language and in the particular way it brings in poetry as an act of poiesis, by which I mean making, creating, forming, or producing.

The opening shots of *Dead Man* suggest that the ideology of progress so tied to the American West carries with it the very terms it attempts to exclude. Spatial movement in *Dead Man* is as much cyclical as it is linear. It recalls forgotten or erased events of the past. This is apparent with the train, which we see in the film not as a vehicle of historical movement, but as one of stasis, repetition, and return. The opening sequence highlights this by focusing on the repetitive movement of the wheels. The turning wheels, rather than evoking the progress often associated with the train, evoke a sense of aimlessness and wasted movement because the camera stubbornly and incessantly returns to them. In these shots we see many close-ups of the moving

wheels of the train, accompanied by some steam and the mechanical sounds of the wheels on the tracks (See fig. 1-3, p. 95). The back-and-forth movement of the train wheels is shown repeatedly as the opening sequence fades to black between those wheels and Blake's stoic facial expression. As we move from forest to desert, we see, along with Blake, a landscape that becomes more desolate and overwhelming in scope, littered with the abandoned remnants of human habitation. Among these remnants are a tattered and broken carriage and a few tepees in disrepair, objects that remind the viewer of dilapidation and destruction rather than progress. Sparsely placed, haunting, and fragmented guitar chords accompany this sequence. Everything speaks repetition, remembrance, and forgetting, rather than progress. We barely even see the iconic shot of the full train moving through the landscape in its full glory.

The close-ups of the wheels juxtaposed with long shots of the changing landscape situate the turning commotion of idle repetition that fills the screen next to the derelict fruits of progress. This scene does not engender the great change and dynamic movement of expansion, but a pattern of repetition. It does not show historical movement, but merely movement through a destroyed and desolate space. The repeated close-ups of the wheels evoke the change and forward movement synonymous with the great iron locomotive, while emphasizing the repetition and even the stasis of this same movement. This sequence takes apart the symbol of the train as a symbol of full-speed-ahead progress in order to focus on its qualities that accent its repetitive machinations. These close-ups suggest that all of the mechanical gesticulations of this great machine embody a repetition, ritual, futile attempts at forgetting the past, and even stagnation as much as they hint at forward movement and unfettered expansion.

*Dead Man* uses the symbol of the train on its own terms as a symbol not only of progress, or of the fruits or famines of progress, but as the actual process of negotiating that progress, of

making sense of it, and of bringing it into narrative. The train is shown as a mechanism, its traditional symbolic dressings having been played down. The opening stanza of the film uses the machinations of the train as symbol of the reiterating and retelling of the stories associated with progress. It is a visual representation of the human inability to escape the draw of our own narratives, which both move forward and engender repetition, and even evoke failure or degeneration. The train functions as symbol, as frontier poetry, as a vehicle of narrative. It is shown not to clarify representations of the American West, but to complicate them by foregrounding the forgotten past of the West, highlighting the present as an accumulation of reiterations that have taken hold through repetition and habit, and looking at the future as the ever-unsettled topography of symbolic negotiation. Because the symbol and the story shroud as much as they reveal, they always open new interpretive pathways. All representations are complicated and effaced by a constellation of past, present, and future frontiers that call for constant rereading, rewriting, reinventing, and re-envisioning. The train sequence in *Dead Man* emphasizes these inevitably repetitive processes and follows up on the concern with the functions of language established by the film's poetic epigraph by multiplying the symbolic functions of a very common symbol and by pointing to a lack of any one natural meaning for that symbol.

These symbols often come to seem natural, as do the processes and languages through which humans negotiate the world. We see visual cues throughout this opening sequence that reinforce this suggestion, but the film attempts to undo this sense of naturalness. The train is the most notable in this scene. Another cue is the watch that Blake continually and conspicuously checks on his ride. Not only does it mark his slow passing through the landscape and the immensity of the journey, but it also signals a certain way to negotiate the space. This is most

notable when we see shots imitating the iconic Monument Valley juxtaposed with a shot of Blake checking his watch. These are two very incongruous signs. The vast western landscape is used to show an expansive and alienating natural world and man's insignificant place in that world. The other, Blake's watch, is used to show man's ability to turn such inhospitality into something calculable and manageable. This juxtaposition, much like the reading of the train, focuses on how man makes meaning of the world around him. It focuses on machinations and processes, rather than the accepted, reified, and exchanged value of commonly taken for granted symbols. This small detail is indicative of one of the larger concerns of the film—how the world, and that includes how we read the past, is pieced together by the mind. It anticipates Blake's encounters later in the story that more explicitly accentuate the film's preoccupation with the ways in which the world is made, the visions put forth by that making, and the consequences of that making.

We might start to address these preoccupations by taking another look back to Michaux, who also raises questions about how we envision the world. I already mentioned that Plume anticipates Blake. In some sense, Plume's travels are about using language to negotiate his mind and the world around him, both of which are constantly changing visions of his own making. In doing so, Plume attempts to create some type of sensible and tangible unity out of a vast network of loose connections, something that Blake attempts to do, something that the viewer of the film attempts to do, and something that Michaux suggests we all do everyday, though he also suggests poetic visionaries struggle more profoundly in that they most willingly recognize these attempts as a condition of being. In his afterword to *Plume*, Michaux speaks to this simultaneous longing for and allergy to unity and also of the fight for and against fragmentation of being. He says, "We want too much to be someone. There is not one self. *There are not ten selves. There*

*is no self. ME is only a position in equilibrium. (One among a thousand others, continually possible and always at the ready.) An average of "me's," a movement in the crowd. In the name of many, I sign this book" (DkM 77).* He speaks here and in the rest of the passage of the inability to create a unified "me" out of a collection of relations. His poetry, including *Plume*, occupies the inhospitable space between this intersection of confused relations and that me. *Plume* is very much a playing out of that negotiation between those relations and that "equilibrium."

In *Dead Man*, as Blake transforms into a poet, he does something similar. He starts to recognize that his linguistic acts have some role in creating his world, a world that we can never truly place as either dream or reality, a world that we cannot fully distinguish as either a mental one or physical one. He also realizes that his linguistic acts unsettle the world and starts to become slightly undone by his use of language as he adopts the tongue of a poet. His appearance starts to change as does the way he perceives the world. Blake's steady undoing, his slow death, and his failure to maintain equilibrium, parallels a national journey. His simultaneous attempt to create a self and the undoing of himself through acts of language correlates to a fluctuating national narrative and the reconfiguration of conventional myths of the frontier. The growth of the country, typically told through the hero's journey in the Western, is recuperated in the character of Blake to unravel the sense that a singular narrative is possible or necessary. Blake's slow death is the death of the myth of singularity, unity, and wholeness. This is apparent in his westward movement.

Each of Blake's encounters, which are all overwrought and stylized to emphasize their artificiality, embodies and deconstructs a different American myth, all of which either die off or fade away. For example, the encounter with Dickinson aligns entrepreneur with predatory

industrialist, while Blake's relationship with Nobody draws on Native American folklore and stereotypes, but also presents Nobody as a more complete character. Most conspicuously, Blake is not the typical hero of the Western. He is not self-assured nor is he clearly identifiable as any specific type. He is shown as a linguistic creation whose character is produced by his encounters with others. He is, as Jonathan Rosenbaum describes him, a "mystic writing pad bearing the traces of other signatures" (*Dead* 68). He is defined in fragmented and disparate ways by his encounters with Dickinson, Thel, and Nobody, among others. Just like Blake is momentarily defined by linguistic acts, the nation he traverses is an amalgam of narratives always being reframed and rewritten. It is put together, managed, exchanged, and activated by and through signs and symbols of various interests, many of which we see in *Dead Man*. Blake—since it is his journey we follow—bears most of the burden of channeling these signs and creating a semi-coherent narrative out of a land and place impossible to read. He begins to actively do so through his poetic acts, but the very fact that he is initially a kind of blank slate that is constantly redefined is a reminder of the tenuousness and impermanence of such narratives.

The specific reference to the creation of a coherent national narrative as a poetic act is heightened in *Dead Man* through its conversation with the poetry of Michaux and Blake. In intimating that the picturing of a place is essentially an act of poesis the film picks up on the tradition of the revisionist Western in its critique of the calcification of dominant ideology and the conventional language of the West. It is however unusually adamant in its stylistic approach and integration of supplementary sources to make the point that the problem of ideology and nation formation is located in fluctuating symbolic and linguistic acts. Calling on Michaux and Blake draws our attention to this and specifically focuses our attention on the simultaneous and contradictory use of tropes of delimitation and tropes of transgression as they are relevant to the

U.S. frontier. The train is one such symbol. It inscribes unbound movement and the transgression of bound spaces, but it also inscribes delimitation through repetition, as the formal qualities of *Dead Man* emphasize.

### Poetizing as Housing, and Un-housing Worlds

As with many Westerns there is a movement in *Dead Man* from the *civilized* East to the *wilderness* of the West. It is a movement that simultaneously transgresses limits and laws and establishes boundaries. Blake notices this move to a wilder space as is evident in his reaction to the train's passengers, whose appearances drastically change in the move West. The film picks up on this conventional American spatial metaphor, but it goes further. It binds space to writing and poetic creation. It connects spatial perception with linguistic production by cleverly adorning the film with the epigraph from *Plume*, a title that itself recalls the act of writing (from the French for pen), and by explicitly tying the movement West to the poet William Blake. Seeing and constructing space is not a neutral act, but is active. It is a form of production. It is a type of writing. It is poiesis. In terms of this paradigm of poiesis, the place from which Blake flees is largely an already written world or, to describe it in other Blakean terms, a world of experience. The laws of its being have already been produced and are steadfast in their place as far as Blake is concerned. It has a worked out structure. It is a picture already painted in Blake's eyes. The West is an unwritten space, though Blake realizes this is not entirely true through his encounter with Nobody. The landscape is nonetheless less developed by the standards of Blake's own civilization back East. It is understood as a space to be developed. When Blake

gets on the train he is cast out into this yet-to-be-written world, but what he finds is not a paradise before language, but a tarnished page on which he will write once again. This is emphasized when he meets Dickinson and finds out that the letter promising him his job is useless. The structured agreement implied by the letter holds no weight out West where the laws are being constantly rewritten and, since Blake is not the typical self-confident hero of the Western, Dickinson is the one who imposes his will and writes the law. Blake does not escape the hell of the civilized world to find something better, but finds something just as scary—an already tainted space littered with the memories of a near future that will be shaped anew.

Blake is partially responsible for shaping this space, a responsibility about which Nobody makes him aware by telling of his past life as great poet and painter. Though he is initially naïve, Nobody makes Blake aware that as a harbinger of civilization his writing projects the infrastructural laws of a coming civilization onto the western landscape. As he journeys on he begins to recognize language, not as mere instrument, but as inscriptive, creative, and poetic power. Blake recognizes language for the first time as a material to be coerced as it becomes more alien with his westward travels. Again, this is particularly true of his interactions with Nobody. His is no longer the conventional language of an accountant from Cleveland. It becomes poetic. He confronts languages both violent and creative. He is cast into the world of a moving language for the first time, away from the hardened concrete of the civilized streets and into undecided space of the *wilderness*. We can see his discomfort with this more fluid world in his encounter with the train fireman as he stumbles over their conversation. Blake does not understand the unconventional language of the stranger, who is not satisfied with mere stock answers. The stranger demands something more and speaks in a vaguely poetic language about

things that are unknown to Blake. This trend certainly continues with *Thel* and particularly with *Nobody*.

There are other clues that draw up the tension between the already built up, conventional, structured world from which Blake comes and the relatively open and un-manicured space that he enters. Even Blake's reading material on the train embodies this tension. We notice on the train that he is reading a farmer's almanac, something that would have been extremely common for this time. In that almanac one of the things he reads about is beehives. The beehive is an interesting symbol. It is a structure that is highly symmetrical and extremely ordered and it is often associated with industry. While it represents the possibilities of industriousness, it also recalls the humming and monotonous drone of the bees that create the hive. It is in fact the singular instinctual task and the unchanging and uniform actions of the bees that make possible the highly ordered world of the beehive. Monotony, industry, and structure are utterly connected in the world of the bee. Perhaps this is an indication of the world Blake is leaving. He is fleeing the already structured world of the East. He has just decided to leave the rigid and industrious structure of his present life. Perhaps he is leaving to escape the drone of conventional life, whether he knows it or not. This certainly ends up being the case, as he does not fulfill his mission to become an accountant at the Machine metalworks. He had wanted to continue in his task as accountant. Perhaps he had wanted to bring the accountant's view of an utterly structured world to the West, but he inadvertently ends up going from the calculated work of accounting to take on the task of a poet. The beehive, while it represents a certain unstoppable industriousness, is also a project that is never completed. It is always a work in progress, as its intricacies need to be reworked and maintained. Perhaps this open-endedness is more in line with the mission Blake takes up as a poet. He has to confront the open-ended work of constantly reiterating the

social space of a democracy that is enacted and expressed in the future of a landscape through which he is about to wander.

The film's first gesture of making the audience confront the written word of a poet is picked up in Blake's journey. The film asks us to deal with language. We are thrown into a haze of language with the epigraph, "It is always preferable not to travel with a dead man." This epigraph's resonance in the film, along with the curious use of Blake's work, opens up an interpretational matrix in which these numerous texts commune in a myriad of ways. Who or what is the dead man to whom the poem and the film refer? Is it merely Blake or does Blake stand for something else in this game of language? Is the dead man the dead letter, the dead word, the mummification of conventional meaning that is left behind at the beginning of the film? Is the dead man the entombed containment of language against its own will to transgress and be transgressed? Maybe this is why the words that explode of the screen in the opening credits are formed of letters resembling human bones. The word is material or even corporeal—it is the body of Blake. It is logos. Is it dead language that it is preferable to travel without, in favor of the living word? Is Blake's slow death throughout the film a leaving behind of this notion of ossified language? Perhaps his passing, with the help of Nobody, is into the everlasting and open-ended world of a living language.

Blake, the dead man, is carried over into the lively world of metaphor, the only place where his journey can be carried on. The end of the film is where corporeal death and the vessel of metaphor (the only possibility of continued existence) fuse and then are re-inscribed back into the beginning of the film through its circular narrative. This cycle confuses the boundary between corporeal and metaphysical, between literal and figurative, between physical and mental, and between dream and reality. Read once, the film might be seen as a strange, but

tangible *reality*, but by the time the viewer arrives at the end of the film it is clear that that reality was at best tenuous and then the act of reading must be reconsidered. Through its circularity the film simultaneously combines all of these possible realities, or better, worlds.

Blake is thrown into the matrix of meanings, a world in which he first becomes conscious of the consequences, surplus possibilities, and corruptions, substitutions, and contradictions of language, and a world in which he first questions the stability of his vision of self. These questions and the stable past that he has lost haunt him and destabilize his notions of the world. Blake leaves the stability of the domesticated scene with his parents, wife, his job, and his conventional family life to be an accountant out on the western frontier. He however discovers that he has to account for the instability of a much less settled space. He is thrown into the instability of what looks like a yet-to-be-written place and he bears the burden of accounting for, of writing over, or of bringing into being that space. Through this he partially realizes his larger burden of engaging the linguistic conditions of all space, whether the seemingly open landscapes of the West or the seemingly ironclad structures of the East.

The fact that Blake is thrown into a new, open, and partially uncharted space resonates with Plume's situation. The first passage of *Plume* entitled "A Tractable Man" begins with Plume waking up, feeling for the wall, not finding the wall there, and going back to sleep with little reaction to the wall's absence (*SW* 81-82). The poem continues as his wife wakes him and exclaims, "you slug! While you were busy sleeping somebody has stolen our house." An image is painted of an "unbroken sky stretched on all sides above them" (*SW* 83). The passage absurdly carries on, a train having plowed full speed through what was Plume's house and his wife having been split into eight pieces, with Plume being tried for doing nothing and scheduled to be executed, all the while indifferently going in and out of sleep. Blake's situation is not

exactly parallel and he is not quite as aloof as Plume, but there is some imagery in both the poem and the film, including that of the train and the house, whose comparison might render some interesting connections. We might make the obvious connections between the train in each of these works, both of which seem to be invoked as mechanical instruments of destruction or harbingers of an increasingly hostile external world, and we could also make something of the fact that both of these works start with the killing of each protagonist's partner<sup>32</sup> and the subsequent guilty verdict for the two protagonists, but the most interesting and obscure connection is the one between the two descriptions of houses in the openings of these works.

Plume's narrative starts with the unexplainable disappearance of his house. His shelter is taken away from him, he is exposed to the "unbroken sky" all around him, and he begins his journey. The sharp and immediate contrast between the closed-in, limited, and sheltered space of the house and the unending and open sky is striking. Perhaps the disappearance of the house is the disappearance of the confined and limiting space of the conventional linguistically conditioned structure of the world that is being abandoned. The poem begins as Plume enters a new linguistic space that is less rigid. He recognizes this malleability. Plume is thrown into a world of possibility with the open sky, but he also enters a world much more hostile in its very possibilities.

Blake's situation is different. We never see his home. It is left behind. His new home resides with him wherever he goes, whether it is the confined and moving space of the train, or the canoe in which his journey continues at the end of the film. However, if you listen very

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<sup>32</sup> In *Dead Man* this gesture is repeated, as Blake's fiancé is absent from the film, having been left in the past for unknown reasons, and then Thel, her temporary substitute, is immediately killed off.

carefully to the obscure exchange between the train fireman and Blake, you notice that he describes Blake's whole world as a house:

Look out the window. And doesn't this remind you of when you were in the boat? And then later that night, you were lying, looking up at the ceiling, and the water in your head . . . was not dissimilar from the landscape, and you think to yourself, "Why is it that the landscape . . . is moving, but . . . the boat is still ?" And also, where is it that you're from?

The endless sky in Michaux's poem, a sky similar to the one we see at the end of *Dead Man*, is described by the fireman as a ceiling, as something that encloses and shelters. The world itself is described in terms of a house. The openness and indefinable endlessness of the sky is fused with an image of shelter, containment, delimitation, and familiarity. In this sense the very openness itself is the thing that is sheltering. It provides the semi-contained demarcation of world and definition of Blake's identity. The structure, the form, is open, and conversely, unending openness is the form. This paradoxical arche-structure, and this inherent, ungraspable, and unfathomable *differance*<sup>33</sup> structures Blake's ability to perceive the world and himself. That is to say that Blake must take solace in the very fact that the architecture of his world is always yet to be built. He can take shelter in the freedom of the undecided. Blake might be in a small boat floating in a fathomless ocean, but he is nonetheless sheltered by the seemingly endless firmament. He is at home in the immense and unexplainable world, towards an unknown future, and attempting to inhabit his own being. In a Heideggerian sense, he is at home in this immensity because it is the very indeterminacy of his identity and his recognition of the indeterminate identity of the world and his role in continually defining that world that defines

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<sup>33</sup> The notion of *differance* has become very popular since Derrida first introduced it. For several arguments about similar notions used by Derrida, what has come to be known as deconstruction, and the lines of demarcation between philosophy and literary criticism, see Derrida's *Speech and Phenomena*, Spivak's introduction to *Of Grammatology*, Gasché, and Miller and Asensi, especially 132-183.

him.<sup>34</sup> He is defined by the fact that he is undefined and always postured toward the future. His recognition of this condition and his ability take hold of this fundamental unfamiliarity of existence are the things that are most familiar to him. He is characterized by the fact that he cannot explain this unexplainable immensity or draw out the slippery counters of his own identity, as we are reminded by his common dumbfounded and sometimes poetic reactions to the wild world of the West and those explanations that people try to level at him.

This immense world, this unending home without walls, is primarily linguistic because language brings it into being. Language gives it symbolic structure. That is how Blake comes to know it and set its contours, as Nobody shows him by insisting on his role as poet, which is to say as maker. As one who enacts poetry, Blake composes a world. This is brought home not only through Blake's interactions toward the end of the film, which are increasingly defined by his linguistic acts, but in Blake's very name and also in Plume's name. The fact that Blake has the same name as a poet is a gesture that suggests he is one who makes the world poetically with each word he utters. This is also the case with Michaux's work, which challenges the conventions of established idioms and seeks to create through its own concoctions a new way to see the world, and hence a new world. The poet, and particularly William Blake, understands the world as something that can actually be made and changed by language. In *Dead Man*, Blake starts to do this. He becomes a poet and maker of worlds. He is a likeness of Plume, whose name means pen and feather, and calls up writing, but also the lightness, showiness and pliant brilliance of that same writing. Identity and world have little weight. They are unbearably light and have no immediate or containable meaning. They are not destinations, but starting points.

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<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Heidegger's discussion of the first choral ode of Sophocles' *Antigone* in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 156-181.

Additionally, the name Plume resonates with the ineffable malleability of smoke or water, images that are echoed in the opening scene and final scene of the film. In the final scene, the brilliant and unreadable depth of the ocean that reflects the sun's rays, and in some way rejects the illumination that they offer, is the most poignant expression of this wavering ineffability. This likeness between Plume and Blake, on top of his name alone, facilitates the notion of him as writer and the landscape as something that he writes into being. He lends structure to a spacious world. His mind houses the world through language, but in doing so he becomes un-housed, and abandons his destination and destiny, which is not manifest, but always unsettled.

### Identity, Alterity, and the Space of the Unconscious

The past often seems lost in *Dead Man*, but it is a constant phantom presence. It is unsettling. Encountering it is formulated as both a delimiting act and as a transgressive or reconstructive act. These formulations are juxtaposed through several characters in the film, including Blake, Nobody, Thel, Charlie, Dickinson, and even the missionary Blake and Nobody stumble upon in the forest. The film focuses on the real loss of the past and the conscious and unconscious desires to recreate a past in order to recuperate some sense of origin and ameliorate loss. However, this recuperation in *Dead Man* often leads to dark places.

We are led to believe that Blake's continuous movement forward is an attempt to flee his past in Erie. His gestures when he talks briefly about it suggest that he is fleeing a somewhat dark and personal place. Blake's journey is an attempted break from the past. He is eventually led back to the start of his journey, in the perpetual present that is between past and future, but

intricately intertwined with both. The viewer realizes this when the final scene of the film plays out exactly as it was described by the train fireman in the opening scene. This return back and the fact that it was foretold at the film's outset significantly transform the spaces that Blake passes through. One reading is that these landscapes are the topography of Blake's mind, a topography of which he is largely unaware. If we follow the analogy between Blake and the nation, or of Blake as the poetic maker of national narrative, we might also understand this space as a kind of national subconscious that Blake is bringing to light. Read this way, *Dead Man* opens up the space of the West as a hidden space of the Blake's unconscious, as well as a national unconscious for which he is synecdochically substituted.

*Dead Man* is enlivened by its proximity to *Plume* in this as well. In "Song of Death," a short poem that accompanies "Movements of the Internal Being" and precedes Plume's narrative, the speaker, after having come upon a good bit of fortune, tells us that "I fell back on the hard soil of my past, a past now present forevermore" (*SW* 75). Plume, on the other hand, seems to be a man without past. He is constantly dealing with the overwhelming input of the present moment or he is moving forward to unknown places. These two pictures taken together, one of a man being forced to confront the hard past and one of a man blindly pushing forward, describe the tension embodied by Blake very well. He moves into unknown places and he flees the "hard soil" of his past, which, along his journey, becomes something painfully present.

In becoming a poet, he learns to bring the darker recesses of his mind, visions of the past and present, into language. He is cut off from his past, but is attempting to recuperate some sense of wholeness from a lost place. His journey through the landscape is a journey in which he is helped along to confront a missing past. The dream-like atmosphere, one in which Blake, like Plume, goes in and out of sleep (something that the viewer feels as he is led through the film by

constant fades in and out of blackness) highlights the impossibility of this confrontation. The past can only be viewed in pieces. Blake's unconscious can only come up in fragments. The implication here is that the darkness of Blake's past—much like the U.S.'s past—surfaces to haunt him though he diligently tries to cut himself off from it, but when he attempts to make sense of that haunted and secret past it recedes. We see this initially when he reticently withholds details about his past in his conversation on the train. Later, after *Machine*, the entirety of the film is structured as an accumulation of his past actions haunting him. He so eagerly flees *Machine* and crosses the frontier because he foresees the consequences of his night with *Thel*. The chase that ensues is the past following him. He is even haunted in the forest by illustrations of *Thel* and himself posted on trees. The bullet he carries in his chest is a material relic of past events. This past does not just haunt him, but it also slowly kills him. Finally, even his encounter with *Nobody* calls on a past life he seems to have forgotten, that of the poet William Blake.

Blake's past is lost to him. We never get the impression that it is fully identifiable to him. He is cut off from any past we might recognize. It is other to him and the viewer. His past is a distant landscape that is as strange to him as the landscape he enters; yet this alterity of the past defines him just as the otherness of the landscape slowly becomes something that defines him. Blake is a lost character whose identity is played out, not through any type of immediacy, but largely via this secret alterity of a far-off past. His identity is never present, but is always situated by things that have happened or have yet to happen in the unknown future of the eerie landscape he enters, which is equally a place in which he searches the obscured regions of his past.

*Dead Man* draws a connection between the landscape and the mind of its protagonist. These two things are indistinguishable in the film. The audience could be moving through the western U.S. along with Blake, or it could be experiencing some sort of Blakean dreamscape as is suggested by the dialogue at the beginning of the film combined with the final scene of the film. Put simply, it is both. *Dead Man* chronicles the nightmarish workings of the outer settlements of a new and expanding empire and it explores the psyche of a man coming to terms with the movements of his mind. Blake's psyche and his story are a story of the U.S. Considering this, what does Blake's story suggest about the psychic wellbeing and developing identity of a young nation? It does not provide the most palatable picture as *Dead Man* shows a death-obsessed civilization bent on the destruction of anything that gets in the way of a narrative of progress. The landscape, the national psyche if you will, is littered with the destroyed and dilapidated remnants of progress. Scavengers, hunters, killers, cutthroat industrialists, and other harbingers of death dot the landscape. Blake is slowly dying as he sees all of this passing him by. The visions of *Dead Man* call to mind Benjamin's description of Klee's "Angelus Novus," a painting of the angel of progress he describes as caught in a storm that "irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress" (257-258). We might picture Blake as this angel who is just being caught by the strength of a developing storm, a storm whose wreckage is the ruins of the landscape, but also the accumulated psychic traumas of his wanderings.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> The landscape in *Dead Man* lends itself to such a reading. For a more specific reading of the final gesture of the film in terms of Benjamin's rendering of history through Klee's painting and a general discussion of *Dead Man* and Derrida's notion of the archive, see Nieland. In Nieland's reading, Blake's backward glance at Nobody's death as his boat floats out to sea is the final confirmation of this backward look at the destruction left in the tailwinds of progress.

This psychic storm that Blake must endure unsettles his being. It clearly changes him. We see this in his change from an accountant, to a vagabond, to a lover, to a killer, to an outcast, to a poet, and to a dead man. The traumas of his wanderings agitate his identity. They put Blake's identity in flux. They reveal to him that he is not fixed. He changes as he traverses the landscape. He changes with the landscape and with the people he encounters. Blake's interior being is largely conditioned by the world around him and the traumas behind him. This manifests physically as his clothes change throughout film. Though he tries to maintain his accountant like look and posture, which seem ridiculous in his new landscape, he slowly transforms into a woodsmen. He loses his hat. Nobody steals his glasses and takes from him his clear vision of self and world. He gains a fur, gets a pattern painted on his face by Nobody, and even puts deer blood on his own face. He goes from the sophisticated world of an accountant to the wilderness and as he moves into wilder places his mind confronts its own wilderness.

It is not only the landscape that changes Blake, but also the people whom he encounters. From the first scene of the film, those around Blake define him. The train fireman seems to know more about Blake than Blake knows about himself, as we can tell from their strange encounter:

Fireman: Look out the window. And doesn't this remind you of when you were in the boat? And then later that night, you were lying, looking up at the ceiling, and the water in your head . . . was not dissimilar from the landscape, and you think to yourself, "Why is it that the landscape . . . is moving, but . . . the boat is still ?" And also, where is it that you're from?

Blake: Cleveland.

Fireman: Cleveland.

Blake: Lake Erie.

Fireman: Erie. Do you have any parents back in, uh, Erie?

Blake: They passed on recently.

Fireman: And, uh, do you have a wife . . . in Erie?

Blake: No.

Fireman: A fiancée?

Blake: Well, I—I had one of those, but, um, she changed her mind.

Fireman: She found herself somebody else.

Blake: No.

Fireman: Yes, she did. Well, that doesn't explain . . . why you've come all the way out here, all the way out here to hell.

Is this strange and ghostly character merely a thought from Blake's own mind telling him about his origin and his unknown destination? We find out this destination is receding, always falling away and, like his identity, unfixed. Machine is an attempt to contain it, but the laws established there are transgressed and rewritten. In any case, the fireman is insistent about Blake's past and his future. Blake, in an awkward silence, eventually accepts the stranger's diagnosis. This is not unlike many of the awkward situations in which Plume finds himself. Plume, even more than Blake and in a more absurd manner, is defined by the roles other people assign to him. The strangest case is when Plume orders a plate of food at a restaurant, only to find out that it is not on the menu, and then he ends up being arrested by the secret police after trying to explain at length the simple mistake (*SW* 83-89). The consequences of Blake's conversation are not as bizarre as those of Plume's encounter, but the sentiment is similar, and the juxtaposition of *Dead Man* and Michaux is once again telling. Plume and Blake are defined largely by inner and outer worlds that they cannot explain and that are often hostile to them.

This is frequently the case with Blake's encounters. They are either extremely hostile, as with the case of Dickinson, or they are bewildering to Blake, as with the case of Nobody. All of

the other people Blake meets play a part in designating his identity. Thel is quick to label him different from the other people in town and she immediately concludes that he is a nice person. Dickinson sees him as an idiot and coward in a clown suit. The fur trappers he meets in the woods merely see him as dinner. A missionary he encounters calls him, as well as Nobody, the devil incarnate. Also, the viewers can see that the mythic picture of Blake's identity grows as it is posted throughout the forest on the wanted posters that offer a reward for Blake, the cold-blooded killer. Blake has little to say about how he is defined by all of these outside voices. Finally, Blake is most fully defined by Nobody. The surfacing of the erased or caricatured figure of the Native American, of Nobody, reminds Blake and the viewer that a nation is not only defined by its best intentions and mythic rendering, but is also defined by the systematically forgotten or suppressed events on which it is built.

Does this dark reading however provide any solace? Blake's identity is in flux and some of the fluctuations of that identity are less than flattering, but does his exploration of his changing and dynamic identity not allow for some more positive manifestations? Don't those darker moments of the past, those things not dealt with, haunt those who attempt to cover them? If the identities that Blake assumes are distant echoes that haunt the emptiness of his being, doesn't listening to those echoes at least allow for an engagement with the dynamically changing landscape of the future of his identity? Is it not better than anchoring to a fixed, but false, identity? If *Dead Man* does tell of Blake's casting out into the chaotic abyss of his identity, perhaps this is an abyss that also allows for a continuing reassessment and restoration. Perhaps acknowledging such alterity, unconscious or not, is a more appropriate way to ground oneself. As Michel Butor says in reference to Michaux: "Weigh no more than a *plume* and everything will be alright" (qtd. in *DkM* 43), which is to say rewrite yourself and allow each incarnation of

identity no more than the weight of a feather. Do not settle on destinations, destinies, or identities, or on specific incarnations that are bound by the laws of necessity. Sure this is a difficult, sometimes painful, and alienating way to survive, but it is probably better than clinging to apparitions. The same could be said about a *people* and their past.

The narrative of Blake's journey provides some of this weightlessness. He offers a paradigm of searching, journeying, and wandering that is typical of the Western, but *Dead Man*, like many revisionist Westerns, is devoid of the comforting domestic scene that typically offsets the restlessness of the hero.<sup>36</sup> The two we do see—in Thel's room and in the forest with a renegade band of fur trappers—unravel the conventional domestic scene by reevaluating conventional roles. They become places from which Blake flees, much like he fled Cleveland, the home that is always absent from the narrative we see. Familiar places accumulate behind him on his journey and each new 'domestic' space is slightly less familiar than the last; he goes from his home in Cleveland, which had apparently become a place from which he had to flee, to the comfort of Thel's room, which he has to flee after she is shot, to a cannibalistic band of fur trappers whose characterization degradingly approximates that of the Christian family around the hearth. In addition to this lack of conventional domesticity, Blake's own demeanor is not bold enough or consistent enough for him to provide his own law or self-assured identity like many Western heroes. He struggles to assert his character. He is not entirely identifiable. He is nonidentity and his transgressive movement westward is neither counterbalanced by the controlled space of the homestead nor the steadfastness of his character.

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<sup>36</sup> Compare, for example, images of domesticity in Stevens' *Shane* (1953), Ford's *My Darling Clementine* (1946), Howard Hawks' *Red River* (1947), William Wellman's *Yellow Sky* (1948), and Anthony Mann's *The Man from Laramie* (1955) to, say, the comedic rendering in Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970), the domestic space as brothel in Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), and the relative absence of domestic space in Monte Hellman's *The Shooting* (1966) and *Dead Man*.

## The Haunted “Linguistic Fiction”<sup>37</sup> of the Self

The world that Blake enters is defined largely by its apparent indeterminacy. It is not conventional as far as Blake is concerned and there are no comfortingly familiar spaces or trappings of normality to ease the unfamiliarity. Thel’s room might be the one exception, but this very temporary space of comfort is revealed as a ruse when Charlie, Thel’s former lover and Dickinson’s son, abruptly intrudes. It is a double of the space Blake left behind in Cleveland and is equally fleeting. Additionally, the film’s attention to the extremely artificial character of the space—the paper flowers for example—critically comments on ideas of domesticity, familiarity, and comfort. The film undoes these spaces. The doubled space of the familiar that perhaps draws on moments of solace from Blake’s past in Cleveland is once again taken from Blake. This initiates his foray into the less familiar spaces beyond the frontier of Machine. Blake inhabits the overwhelming openness and the strangeness of these landscapes, which undoubtedly unsettle him. In attempting to negotiate the strange landscape, in trying to make sense of it, Blake starts to lose himself. His vision of himself is destabilized as he starts to dwell in the foreign topography of a strange place—this otherness is that strange and hard to find place between the topography of his mind and the indecipherable language of world around him. It is nowhere and everywhere. He lives in this otherness and has to come home to the instability of an unfound language and an unidentifiable self.

It is useful to call upon Plume’s name again with all its intimations of writing and ineffability to explore the changing and ungraspable identity we call William Blake. The recognition that the world changes with one’s perceptions of it, that it is essentially written into

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<sup>37</sup> Rigaud-Drayton, 6.

being via our perceptions, or envisioned, as the English poet William Blake would have it, has consequences for the notion of subjectivity as well. Self and world are inseparable as we see in the characters of Blake and Plume. Margaret Rigaud-Drayton comments that Michaux has relegated “the unified self to an alienating linguistic fiction” (6). What Michaux does with Plume is played out in *Dead Man* through Blake. Through his journey toward identity, Blake always “weighs no more than a plume” because his identity is fictitious. He carries the painful weight of accumulated linguistic fictions, but his identity is insubstantial. It is fleeting and light, like a feather, or ineffable and fluid like a plume of smoke or water. It is a spectacle, something that is showy and a mere put on for appearance like a peacock’s plume of feathers. This identity, like the world, is penned. It is not burdened by a false sense of reality. Blake, as a writer, not only pens the world around him, but brings himself into being through the word. He repeatedly writes the contours of his own identity in his acts of poetizing the world around him. His acts of writing bring into being worlds, both external and internal, and as such, both are only temporary and fleeting linguistic fictions.

Recall in his afterword to *Plume* that Michaux speaks of the “prejudice in favor of unity” and tells us, “We want to much to be someone.” “Nothing fixed. Nothing is property,” he says. He also reminds us that these tendencies are reactions to an ever-hostile world and to a subconscious “hostile to the conscious mind” (*DkM* 77). Michaux shows through Plume how inner and outer hostilities either force one to define that fictitious “someone” that they want to be or be defined by those hostilities.

Just like Plume is anonymous and fleeting, only “a certain” Plume, Blake is only a certain and momentary Blake. He really has no idea who that someone he wants to be is, but he is helped in this regard by others. He is defined largely by the world around him. His identity is

always in flux. It is not stable or unified. He is clearly a different person at the end of his journey than he was at the beginning. He sees intimations of self by being defined, and even named by others. Any identity he takes on is essentially a temporary linguistic fiction. It is formed in language. The abyss of his fictitious self is defined by this alterity.

His identity always comes from somewhere or someone else, like the train fireman, Dickinson, Thel, or Nobody, all of whom perceive him differently. It is an identity written by others, though he attempts to claim some of it as his own as the film moves on. He begins to try to outline the parameters of his own being when he adopts the poetry that Nobody insists is his creation. He temporarily claims William Blake as his own, but he never fully integrates him. He only keeps traces and fragments of his encounters. He remains the “mystic writing pad bearing the traces of other signatures” that Rosenbaum aptly describes (*Dead* 68). Or, like Plume, he is a tractable man. He is malleable and easily shaped by others. Blake’s vision of himself is essentially a story told by others, though the traces of these stories leave an impression on him. These stories are sometimes comforting to Blake, but are more often disquieting and even burdensome.

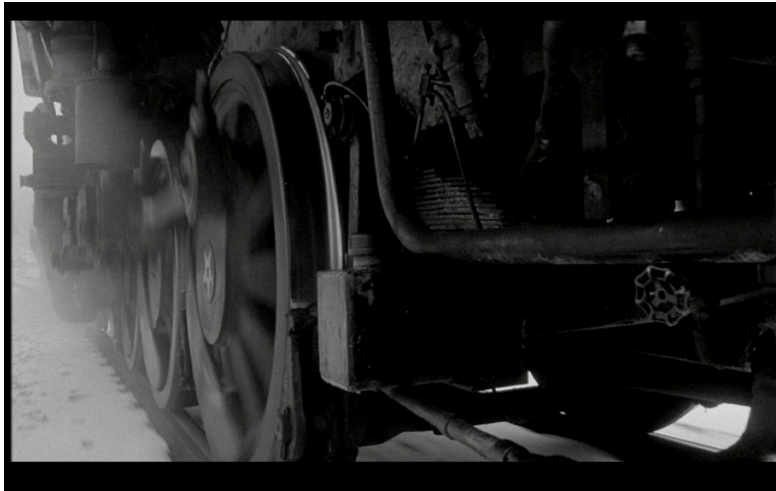
The different identities ascribed to Blake confound and even haunt him. He is unable to exorcise the ones he does not want and cannot completely negotiate those by which he feels more sheltered. Rigaud-Drayton describes Michaux as one of those French writers “haunted by an ‘elsewhere,’” (29). We can detect this “elsewhere” in *Plume*. It also provides an apt description for Blake. He is, after all, from Erie as he tells the train fireman and as far as we can tell, his past life in Erie, his elsewhere, is something that haunts him. This is very clear in his reticence to reveal much of that past.

This initial and minute revelation serves the function of showing Blake's past as something that haunts him and intimates the haunting of his future. What is to come, which is also what has already happened according to the fireman, is as haunted as Blake's past in Erie. The role Blake is to take on as a poet and maker of the future will take him out of the comfort of having a world that is already decided for him. If we bring back Michaux's "Movements of the Internal Being," the poem that paints the movements and topography of the mind and is placed right before the narrative of Plume's journey, we notice that it ends by invoking the fear of the mind that allows itself to truly engage the abyss of its being. The "life forever contaminated" by this fear is the one that faces the indistinguishable abyss between the fictions of the inner and outer world and the unreachable landscapes of past and future (*SW* 81). Blake's conversation on the train gives him a glimmer of this fear. He is haunted by the mutability of his identity for sure, but also by his own obligation in shaping an unstable future that will never arrive out of a past whose shape is lost to uncertainty. To return again to that strange conversation that opens the film and initiates Blake and the viewer, the fireman frames Blake's role as shaper of the world past and future when he tells him to "Look out the window." He reminds him of being in a boat and then says, "And then later that night, you were lying, looking up at the ceiling, and the water in your head . . . was not dissimilar from the landscape, and you think to yourself, 'Why is it that the landscape . . . is moving, but . . . the boat is still?'" What the fireman does here is describe the world as a picture provided by Blake's vision. First he frames it with the window and then he suggests that the landscape is similar to the water in Blake's head. That is to say that Blake's fluid and malleable thoughts and visions create the landscape of the world. What is in his head is what appears as the world around him. Blake appears to be still. He is anchored and the world moves. He is the center from which the world is measured and created. Though

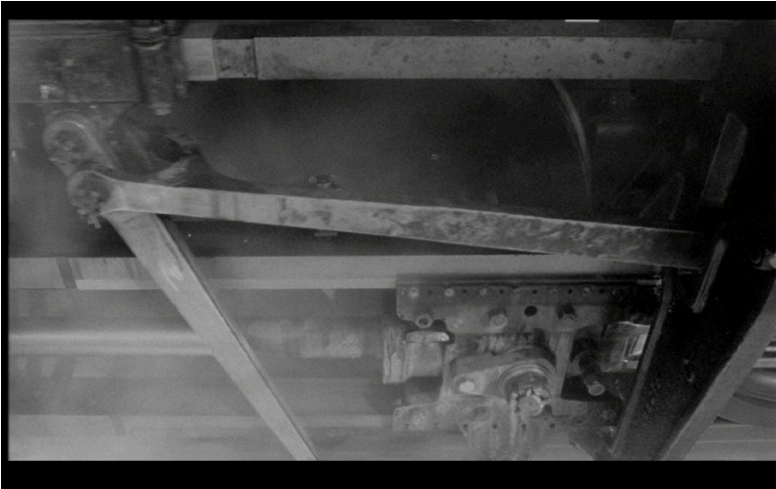
we see something different—we see the boat moving through the seascape—to Blake the world is his vision. He is responsible for creating the “ceiling” that covers the home of his being. He frames it and he shelters it. It is contained by the limits of his perceptions.

He is lost somewhere between this vision of the world and his vision of self, something that haunts him in its absence, a fact that is further brought home by the different renditions of self he is given by other people, but we might return to another telling clue that we see throughout the film. Blake is quite disturbed by the various wanted posters of himself that he sees as he flees his pursuers. They describe him in ways he feels are misleading or just false. He is haunted by these identities. He insists that they are wrong—he is not Thel’s murderer—but others are convinced that Blake is the killer pictured on the poster. Even Nobody mentions what a good portrait it is.

Blake is followed by these identities. The irony is that the posters speak truthfully in a certain way. Blake is wanted. He is wanted to himself. An identity is wanted—something that can be pictured and pinned down, just like a poster to a tree. Blake is unable to be at home in any one identity. He is haunted by all of them. He is inhabited by the other of the world. Rather than take comfort in any identity, he struggles with his new role as a writer, a poet, an accountant of the world who works with inexact words and stories rather than the calculated world of number, and breaks out of the conventional language of the East into the linguistic maelstrom of an *undiscovered* West. He leaves his home to become the awkward creator of a home that is always to come. In an attempt to write the manifestation of his destiny, he inadvertently transgresses his fictitious personal and national destination.



**Figure 1.** We see close-ups of train wheels in the opening of *Dead Man*.



**Figure 2.** The camera keeps returning to close-ups of the wheel mechanism.



**Figure 3.** We see the wheels one more time, shrouded in steam.

## Chapter 2: Movement, Mutability, Metaphor and Convention Unbound

### Language, Loss, and Nostalgia

By assigning its protagonist the task of a poet, borrowing generously from multiple poetic sources, heavily using irony, metaphor and other figurative devices, and through its own poetic style and structure in repeated rhyming images, *Dead Man* centralizes the question of language (particularly poetry), explores its functions, and offers up many ways to think about it.<sup>38</sup> The film's inquiries complicate the human relationship to language and suggest that it involves some sort of struggle. Language is never presented as easy or merely utilitarian. It is never taken for granted. Blake has some difficulty linguistically negotiating the world. We also see in Michaux's Plume somebody who is not completely comfortable with language because he cannot negotiate the signs of a hostile and imperfect world. Blake is similar. The viewer cannot easily discern Blake's inner dialogue, but does notice his awkwardness in the world around him and the possibility remains that the viewer is in fact experiencing Blake's inner dialogue, as the world of the film could easily be the workings of his mind. The internal and external are indistinguishable. His language and gestures are uncomfortable. He struggles through the world. He does not seem at home in it.

To anticipate some issues that are made more explicit later in the film after Blake flees Machine, this struggle could be described in Blakean terms by man's disconnection from the divine world of eternity and attachment to the illusory and imperfect world we know. In this imperfect world, conventional language cannot fulfill the promise of perfection. It can only approximate meanings and reach toward eternity. Martin Heidegger provides a vocabulary to

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<sup>38</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the structures of the film that are analogous to poetry, see, Rosenbaum, *Dead Man*, 63-81.

address this situation in less theological terms, terms which are more appropriate to the theoretical issues of humanity's relationship to language that are explored via the character of Blake and more generally in *Dead Man*. Blake's (the Romantic poet) description of the human condition in terms that allude to the biblical notion of humanity's fallen state might be compared to Heidegger's phenomenological description of thrownness.<sup>39</sup> The large difference between the biblical notion of the fall that Blake reiterates<sup>40</sup> and Heidegger's formulation is that the category of thrownness does not assume an eternity from which man has fallen, but merely recognizes each person's state of being thrown into a world that he did not chose and whose limits, rules, relations, and language he did not create. Each individual is thrown into a world in whose making he had no part.

To complicate matters, Heidegger also posits a notion of falling, from which we can draw some connections to Blake. Heidegger's notion of falling is that each human, or what Heidegger calls *Dasein*—Being-there—in its everyday life, has fallen away from *Dasein*—or, its own authentic Being-there.<sup>41</sup> *Dasein* has fallen from its own position as one who inquires about Being—or, 'what is.' This falling consists of being-with-others, engaging in idle talk and so on. Now, what Heidegger calls idle talk, Blake might simply call the language of convention. As I mentioned, Blake considers this conventional language the language of fallen humanity. It is the rigid institutionalized language that indicates humanity's fallen state as distinguished from a state

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<sup>39</sup> See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 219-224.

<sup>40</sup> It is important to point out that Blake alludes to the biblical fall without wholeheartedly endorsing an institutionalized reading of the story. He reiterates it and draws out its implications for his own wariness of institutionalized language and exploration of visionary language.

<sup>41</sup> *Dasein*, best translated as Being-there, is a term Heidegger uses to more appropriately characterize *humans* and their condition in the world. For a more in-depth explication of this term, see Heidegger, *Being and Time*, especially 24-28.

of illumination and connection to an eternal and perfectly divine language. Institutionalized language is conventional, while visionary language is eternal. Humanity has fallen into convention. I am not suggesting that Blake and Heidegger are talking about the same thing here—particularly considering the theological character of Blake’s language and the phenomenological character of Heidegger’s—but there are resonances. Heidegger’s thrownness does not posit a pre-thrown state, such as that posited by the biblical notion of fallen humanity, but it does suggest *Dasein* is thrown into a world always already conditioned. Blake’s notion of fallen humanity also suggests that individuals are thrown into a world whose conditions are already there, whether they are imposed by corrupted institutions or are merely a consequence of humanity’s material existence. The greater similarity, however, is between Heidegger’s notion of falling and Blake’s. Blake’s poetry, and Michaux’s in fact, suggests that humans are caught up in the world of conventional language. Heidegger explains that *Dasein* falls away from its authentic Being-there in its getting caught up in everyday-ness, something that includes the conventions of idle talk and the inflexible institutionalization of language.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, Heidegger’s later writings that describe poetry as the most *authentic* language and encounter with Being are somewhat similar to Blake’s, and even Michaux’s, notion of poetry as a visionary language.<sup>43</sup> But, how does all of this relate to *Dead Man*?

Blake’s journey in *Dead Man* is a coming to terms with his thrownness and a turning away from his falling in the world, inasmuch as that is possible. His changing view of the workings of language is his recognition of his thrownness and a turning away from falling. He begins to understand that the malleability of thought and vision has material consequences.

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<sup>42</sup> See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 203-219.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Heidegger’s *On the Way to Language* and *Poetry, Language, Thought*.

Thoughts, visions, language, perceptions are mutable and they do not only respond to the world, but they materially condition the world. Material reality responds to thought, vision, and language. Almost nothing should be taken for granted. When he sees this, particularly after his encounter with Nobody, he starts to reject the easy justifications and rigid conditions of the institutionalized frontier mantra. He sees that the reification of institutions lead to myth.

This recognition marks a change for Blake. It is a sort of fall from the easy world of simplified justifications, effortless dichotomies of good and bad, and unquestioned utilitarian language that maintains a pretense of exact meanings. By accepting a more intricately nuanced world, Blake loses the false innocence of his previous world. One of the consequences is a need to confront the strange nuances of a language that is necessarily inexact and that can never hope to fully grasp the meaning it seeks. In his flight, Blake's conversations, his words, and his language cease to be destinations. This less familiar situation starts with his conversation with the train fireman. It is most evident in his uncomfortable silences and struggles with words, silences and struggles that are mirrored in *Plume* by the frequent ellipses. In Blake's becoming conscious of the strangeness of language he loses the ease of its everyday-ness. Blake leaves the world of conventional language represented by his domestic life back in Cleveland, and confronts the creative and violent powers of language, though he does not always recognize this. He comes up against the hostility of the conventional world and takes hold of the power of his word, a word that itself can enact violence, exorcise the events of the past, and even protect him from those who would attempt to delimit the boundaries of his being. Finally, Blake's journey, defined primarily by his taking on the role of poet, is a search for a truer language, unbound by convention, primordial.

Blake's journey is one in which he sheds the conventions of the *civilized* world. By accepting the language of a poet, and particularly of William Blake, he unwittingly embraces the idea of a visionary language, of a language that attempts to find a place prior to or outside of convention. He remains somewhat unaware of this change, and does struggle with it, though Nobody evokes nostalgia for the lost language of the poet. Blake's language is behind him, new to him, and other to him. It is behind him and lost as the language of his namesake. It is new to him in his re-appropriation of that same language. It is other to him in both of these ways, but also because he thinks that the language he speaks is the proverbial language of Nobody, a Native American. Whether it is the lost language of a poet or the language of a people becoming lost to time, Blake's appropriation of this language is his grasping on to something prior to his accountant's language. He is grasping on to something visionary. He is replacing the calculating language of the modern world with vision, but he is always only turning towards it and not returning to it. It is always elsewhere. It is an absolute nostalgia for a place to which he can never return. This is reinforced for the viewer, who starts with Blake mid-journey, and never glimpses the home that he has left. One gets the feeling that Blake's life is "forever contaminated," like Plume, not just by fear, but also by the world of language, whether that world is the falsely simplified world of convention or the more openly complex realm of experience in which language is unveiled as a veil. Language itself is always already contaminated and contaminating, whether Blake recognizes this or not. It is not transparent. Blake cannot find a pre-linguistic home or a world of perfect expression. It is forever lost. He must come to be at-home in this lost-ness. He must embrace it as his own.

His movement westward repeats and reinforces this attempted turn to a more primordial language and evokes the common American vision of a return to an Edenic world. This sort of

return to the innocent and idyllic wilderness proves to be as hopeless as a return to a perfect language. The wilderness is as scary as civilization. *Dead Man* presents this return as one already haunted by the destruction of the future. In fact, Blake's attempted return to an Eden-like world is the path of his slow death. This suggests that a perfect world, with a perfect and completely transparent language, is perhaps something for which Blake should not be striving. A completely still, immovable, and reified language is dead. To live means to inhabit an imperfectly moving language, a language of elsewhere.

This is apparent when the train fireman tells Blake to look out the window and recalls that this vision is a past and future vision of Blake. The stranger asks Blake if he is reminded of this other place. The entire film is about Nobody shepherding him to this other place. It is about using the language at hand to speak of that other place, to speak of an elsewhere, and to bring it into being through language. Of course bringing it into language only points to it. Blake is still always journeying towards it while he and Nobody refer to it. During his conversation on the train, Blake is looking at the arid plain and is asked by the stranger if it reminds him of when he was in a boat on the water. Later we find out that this water is the expansive Pacific Ocean, the westward limit of the continent, Blake's eventual resting place, and the place that will bring him back to the beginning of his journey. In the meantime the viewer is left with Blake, unable to reach that elsewhere, on the limitless plain or in the fluid undulations of an absent ocean, that final and all-encompassing wilderness that speaks not of the perfect Eden, but of the fathomless depths of that which cannot be signified.

The film uses Blake's journey to pose a myriad of questions concerning language and concerning how language is used to inform our notions of world, identity, and nation. Some of these questions are: does Blake's inadvertent quest show him a lost visionary world or merely

take him to the void of his slow death, does he at least break from the mode of language as a mere tool of calculation, does he ever truly come to an understanding of the very active and violent power of his words to shape a vision of the world or does he somehow remain caught in convention, or is convention all there is? Is he contained by convention or does he transgress it? Can he really ever arrive at or return to his destination or is it always absent?

### Writing, Violence, Exorcism, and Shelter

*Dead Man* clearly marks writing as a violent act. It is a film about killing and death. It explicitly draws an analogy between the act of writing and the use of the gun. It marks writing as something that marks. It marks writing as forceful and “*inaugural*, in the fresh sense of the word, that it is dangerous and anguishing.” It also ties writing to loss and death, something about which Derrida reminds us when he writes, “*To Comprehend* the structure of a becoming, the form of a force, is to lose meaning by finding it” (*Writing* 11, 26). Creation, force, writing, is also loss. Meaning dies as it is created. Writing as an act of inscription that creates the rules of a world that it simultaneously brings into being and loses, not a description that points to an ineffable truth. This is overtly evident in Michaux’s works.

Rigaud-Drayton says of his works that they “seek to inscribe rather than describe” (6). *Dead Man* follows *Plume* in this task. Its picture of an American past is one that re-inscribes and attempts to reconstruct a traumatic place. Furthermore, it shows through Blake and Nobody that the making of a time and place is always an inscriptive act. It is not merely descriptive. It is not mimetic. Tom Cohen asks the question, “Does ideology not almost always operate by replacing a logic of inscription with one of representation, expression, ‘subjective’ or ‘objective

correspondence, *description?*” (12). Ideology attempts to pass off as mere explanation an act of language. It claims that it is merely describing that which it is bringing into being. It tries to uphold the pretense that its mark is mere description. It tries to pretend it is only describing, or un-writing, when it is in fact writing, inscribing, and marking. *Dead Man* probes these distinctions and in some sense reverses the more commonplace idea of writing as description with the notion of writing as inscription. It does so mainly through the actions and words of Blake and the change in his perceptions of language from transparent utility to creative force, but also through a general equating in the film of writing with violence. It replaces a politics of representation with one of inscription. It focuses on the mark of writing.

Critic Peter Broome highlights the forceful marking power of Michaux’s work when he makes the connection between the poet’s writing and violence, an observation that could have just as easily been made about the cinematic canvas of *Dead Man*. Here, Broome describes the paper as:

A place of blood and violence, an intimate battlefield where the relations between the writer and the objective world, between “bourreau” and “victime,” are constantly reworked and turned into an acceptable balance of power. Poetry becomes an operating table, far more urgent and carnal than that admired by the Surrealists on which a sewing machine and an umbrella are brought into provocative confrontation, and the poet himself is transformed into a living instrument, pulled by some unavoidable fate to perform surgery on the matter of reality. (18)

This is true of much of Michaux’s poetry, but we can see it very clearly in two passages of *Plume*. Recall “A Tractable Man,” the passage in which Plume’s wife is chopped in to pieces by a passing train, splattering blood all over the place. The other passage is the one from which the film’s epigraph is directly taken, “The Night of the Bulgarians.” This passage illustrates Plume’s killing of a group of strangers, after which he rides overnight with the dead bodies and eventually discards them.

Jarmusch's screen, like Michaux' paper, is a "place of blood and violence," quite literally at times, but also in its form, in its extreme and drawn out renderings. *Dead Man* confronts the viewer by showing many acts of violence and the consequences of those acts, but the non-conventionality of the cinematic form itself also strikes the viewer as somewhat intrusive. Many reviewers have commented on this.<sup>44</sup> There are a few particular moments in the opening scene that jolt the viewer, create an atmosphere of violence, and foreshadow what is to come. First, the obscure character of the fireman's conversation with Blake strikes Blake and the viewer. Language here is not transparent, but is rather opaque. It is highlighted as material, not as communicative reference. It is confrontational, particularly when the fireman says to Blake "Well, that doesn't explain . . . why you've come all the way out here, all the way out here to hell," and then tells him that Machine is "the end of the line" and "you're just as likely to find your own grave." Also, this conversation in a very real sense marks what is to come in the film. One might say it brings it into being. Tacked on to the end of this strange conversation is the abrupt and violent gunplay of the fur trappers and hunters who start to shoot buffalo from the moving train. Blake and the viewer are startled by the sudden loud bang of the gunshots after the relative quiet of the conversation and the silence just before that. The fireman yells, "Look. They're shooting buffalo. Government says . . . killed a million of'em last year alone."

The first conversation of the film is juxtaposed with a mass slaughter, setting the atmosphere of death in the film, but also establishing a link between writing and gunplay. This pairing of language and gunplay runs through the film, suggesting a connection between violence and writing. Writing is not merely a passive act. It is *the* way in which we encounter and construe the world. Blake shows and is shown repeatedly that its force should not be taken for

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<sup>44</sup> See Ebert.

granted. For instance, at a pivotal moment later in the film Blake kills two of his pursuers as he delivers a few lines of Blake's poetry he had heard Nobody uttering earlier. Writing explicitly marks the world in this instance as Blake almost simultaneously delivers the fatal bullets and asks his victims, "Do you know my poetry?"

Nobody tries to teach Blake how to use the force of writing, rather than merely have it used against him. What are the ways he teaches Blake? How does the force of writing serve Blake? How does Blake harness the violent energy of his poetic past to mark the world? The barren and confused interior of Blake's being is haunted by the specters of the world around him and behind him and we might look at his journey as one in which he attempts to exorcise the hostility of the outside world by trying to form, or fill in, an identity. He begins to exorcise such hostility with his poetry. He responds with poetry to a destructive world, something critic Malcolm Bowie explains as a catalyst for Michaux's poetry, which he describes as "a response to the destructiveness of experience" and as "an exceptionally subtle form of self-preservation and of environmental control; or, simply, as in Wallace Stevens's adage, 'a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right.'" He also says, "The central issues of poetry are those of being itself: the completeness of the human individual; his place in the created order; his effectiveness as an agent" (8). Dealing with these issues in a response to "the destructiveness of experience" is what Michaux terms exorcism. In his preface to *Ordeals, Exorcisms*, he tells us "Most of the following texts are in a sense exorcisms through subterfuge. Their reason for being: to ward off the surrounding powers of the hostile world" (*DkM* 84).

In "Destiny," a short poem that precedes *Plume*, the author proclaims, "execrable world, it isn't easy to draw good out of you" (*SW* 77). Perhaps *Plume*'s discarding of the dead bodies in "Night of the Bulgarians" is an exorcism of the "surrounding powers of the hostile world." Does

Blake use language in the same way, or are his actions any indication of his exorcising such hostile powers? What does he exorcise and why? Also, might we compare Michaux's notion of exorcism with that of sheltering, what we described earlier as housing and un-housing, and how does haunting come into play? The notion of exorcism implies in the first place that one's body houses a hostile force that needs to be expelled. In this case, Blake is haunted by his past, but he is also haunted by the future hostilities of his people in their push to new frontiers. All of these specters echo in the landscape as Blake is carried through it. His writing and reconstructing these legacies, bringing up and revisiting the past, rewriting the story, all serve as a way to exorcise, or un-house these ghosts. Writing is the work of exorcism—it expels and moves spirits of the past and prepares new shelters for specters of the future. This does not necessarily mean his passing through will be more pleasant—it is actually much more difficult (remember, he is slowly dying). The exorcism weakens him, but at least he attempts to do the work of un-housing the past, and exorcising the future.

Blake's demeanor consistently betrays such a haunted past in need of exorcism. Additionally, as the narrative proceeds the viewer can see that Blake's past does follow him. This is particularly true of the killing of Charlie Dickinson and the death of Thel, but there are also hints that Blake's past in Erie is something he is running away from. Blake is slightly upset when the fireman questions his past in Erie and even more upset when he sees wanted signs accusing him of the coldblooded murder of Thel and Charlie. This version of his past is not true, at least not according to him, nor in the eyes of the viewer. He did not kill Thel and he killed Charlie in self-defense, not in a coldblooded rage. Blake's past actions have physical consequences also as he is literally hunted by a few hired killers. It is as if his past actions take on a physical incarnation and follow him. Again, we cannot completely distinguish whether

these incarnations are part of a material world or part of the topography of Blake's mindscape. Either way, they haunt him and with Nobody's help he attempts to get rid of them. Is Blake's journey a quest to exorcise the "surrounding powers of a hostile world"? Are these hostile memories part of a larger American past? This journey could be characterized as an exorcizing of a dark American past, particularly when we consider Nobody, a Native American, is the one that guides Blake through that tainted past. Nobody gives Blake the language to make sense of and reconfigure a hostile world.

The train fireman, with his obscure intervention, is however the one to start Blake on his quest. He makes Blake confront the strangeness of language and the hostility of the world. Is there a connection between what he says about the ceiling of the world (a figurative use of language that provides an image of shelter from the indifference of the cosmos) that the viewer and Blake see at the end of his journey and Michaux's notion of poetry as exorcism? Both are types of protection, though one wrenches evil from within and one keeps danger out. One expels and reconstructs a hostile human past and one protects from a hostile society and the cold cosmological *exterior*. Michaux describes poetry as exorcism and as a way to "ward off the surrounding powers of the hostile world." So, in this case the idea of exorcising and sheltering are very similar or at least they serve a similar function. They both endeavor to create a pure space by protecting an indistinguishable boundary between an incalculable outside and unlocatable inside. They are imaginary boundaries built against ineffable hostilities that project from an *interior-being* composed of approximations of identity, desires, specters of the past, and so on, or bombard the *writer* through the conventions of institutional violence or the indeterminacy of cosmological indifference.

However, do such boundaries really serve the purpose of protection? Language uncovers at the same time as it shelters. It exorcises, but also creates demons. It un-houses as it houses. It recedes as it makes marks. There are many questions *Dead Man* poses concerning Blake and none of them are precisely answered. The ending is particularly ambiguous. It just opens more questions. Is Blake merely a dead man who succumbs to the violence of the world? Does he find some better, more poetic, and more visionary language to shelter himself from the hostility of the past and present or does he merely carry the dead language of convention with him and repeat the platitudes of a society that turns from its traumas instead of dealing with them? Does he instead face a better and more open future or does he fail to exorcise the exertions of a hostile world and merely live other people's versions of himself? Can he ever actually outrun his past, or must he repeatedly relive it? How is his life marked? The world is violent for the unsettled traveler. His destination is unknown.

### Turning Around Stability

Michaux's writing corresponds to the opening of *Dead Man* for many reasons, one of which is that the use of language evokes an overwhelming sense of loss and distance. Additionally, the language is remote and hostile, and even violent, in its resistance to the listener or reader. The uses of language in the texts of Michaux and in *Dead Man* play the double role of protector and intruder. It is at times sheltering, but it also has the ability to violate by stirring up or unsettling one's complacency with the established conditions of everyday life. It goes a long

way to destabilizing one's comprehension of notions such as identity, nation, place, boundary, inside, and outside, just to name a few.

One does not need to look beyond the few works already mentioned to see Michaux's concern with the destabilizing movements of language. His poetry speaks to disturbance. In "Movements of the Internal Being," a poem whose title already evokes an uncomfortably agitated interior space, the speaker reminds us "velocity is at home in the internal being" (*SW* 79). The reader moves from the agitated space of the internal being directly to Plume's travels, which evoke, not only the obvious movement of the travels themselves, but also the strange and violent interactions that further unsettle an already unsettled space. The macro-movements of the train are repeated in the micro-movements of Plume's encounters, whether it is the minute, but explosive movement of the bullets in his gun battle, or the grotesque movement of the dead man whose head bounces off of the window as Plume attempts to throw him from the train. These small, yet unsubtle clues illustrate the unwinding of a space. These movements are a challenge to the integrity of that space. Plume after all was "homeward bound," but "took the wrong train," and when he arrives at his unknown destination he 'flees' (*SW* 93, 103). The train does not take him to a comfortable and settled home, but to the uncertainty of a foreign land. The language here, like Plume's journey, moves toward foreign lands.

Blake's journey is not dissimilar. He also flees his home on a train bound for a place that is quite foreign to him. Equally, as his journey moves on into increasingly alien places, the language of the film, including Blake's, follows suit. The language becomes more obscure as Blake is carried into foreign lands. *Dead Man*, though, is in a way even more radical than *Plume* because the foreign lands that Blake travels are lands that are, or are soon to be, parts of his own country, while Plume seems to be in another country as the title "Night of the Bulgarians"

suggests. The important distinction here is that in *Dead Man* the place that is home and the place that is foreign are the same place. The close place is the faraway place. The contained place is the place of transgression. To attempt to contain language's will to movement, much like attempting to contain the traveler within the limits of the destination, is already a transgression of the law—and that law is transgression. It is the law of movement, passing through, and carrying over. So, containment is transgression and transgression is containment in so much as it provides the rules of the game.

This correspondence between the binding force and the unbinding force of the law of language, which corresponds to the traveler, resonates with the iterations of law, domesticity, and the frontier in the Western, and draws on tropes of familiarity and unfamiliarity. This correspondence comes full circle when the train fireman obscurely draws together the film's last scene with the film's first scene. In his conversation with Blake in which he makes this connection, the obscurities of language also relate to unfamiliar places. The fireman equates the space of the train with the canoe on which Blake will apparently spend his last moments. The space of the train is one that moves through known lands. It stops at the frontier of the familiar. The canoe however is already in a place that is foreign to Blake and moves into even more unfamiliar places. By bringing the two spaces together, the fireman suggests that the familiar is already something unknown and that the unfamiliar is something already known. Blake already carries it with him. In a Heideggerian sense, what is proper to *Dasein* is the fact that the way it is determined, delimited, or characterized is always something undecided because it is in or toward the future. *Dasein's* very definition, what is familiar to it, is the unfamiliarity, futurity, and indeterminacy of its own being. In other words, it is determined by its constant need to determine itself and its surroundings anew. *Dasein* will never reach the destination of itself or its

world. There is a sense in *Dead Man* that Blake is always already moving ahead of himself. He is always towards something, never settled, such as when he is already on the train to start the film, and according to the fireman, already on the boat that carries him further into unfamiliar territory. Michaux's poem "Destiny," which precedes Plume's travels, speaks to Blake's situation: "We were already on the boat, I was already leaving, I was out in the open . . ." Further on the speaker repeats, "Already on the boat, the ocean with its confused voices already spreads flexibly apart, the ocean in its great modesty already spreads kindly back, driving its long blue lips back upon itself, already the mirage of distant lands, already . . . but all of a sudden . . ." (*SW* 75-77). This scene resonates with Blake's travels and it also develops the very important image of the ocean, the place Blake ends up at the end of the film and a symbol that is as important in *Dead Man* as that of the train. Both speak to the back and forth and circular undulations of Blake's wandering, but the train speaks in a tone of mechanical foreboding while the ocean roars from an unknown and endless depth. Both the rotations of the wheels and the swelling of the waves speak of movement and change, but also of reiteration and return.

Both *Plume* and *Dead Man* use the traveler's journey as a way to talk about writing, which is presented as a medium whose inherent and primary qualities are mutability, movement, instability, transition and so on. They suggest that all language is merely a translation of the irreducible and untranslatable paradox at the center of all human endeavors, but a translation that we must undertake nonetheless. It is this very translation that makes up the gesticulations of the everyday. These works point to the malleable materiality of a language that has become shrouded by a very hardened language. Such a shell of a language dictates that the paradoxes of existence be permanently enveloped rather than consistently confronted. *Plume* and *Dead Man* offer up, in the place of more customary permutations of language, an unending and

impermanent landscape of translation. Michaux's work bears on the film when it comes to presenting the movement and instability of language. Its exploration of the ideas of transgression, transition, turbulence, waves, cycles and revolutions, all of which are movements that also resonate forcefully with the poetry of William Blake, is particularly resonant in *Dead Man*.

### Transition, Turbulence, and Revolution

All language is a type of translation of the paradoxes of existence. That is to say that language translates the strangeness of the uncharted territory of the unknown into material that is more recognizable. It charts, marks, makes boundaries, delimits, encloses and so forth. There is a certain spatial quality to this notion of translation. That is, something is moved from unfamiliar territory into seemingly more familiar territory. Translation can be understood simply as a type of transition, as a movement from one place to another. It is reasonable to approach Blake's experiences with this in mind. He is a poet, but also a traveler. His poetry is a way of making meaning out of a foreign world. It is away of translating, but it is interwoven deeply with the movements of his journey. Traveling, translating, and poetry become almost inseparable in Blake. His movement as he traverses the open country of the West is a translation of the unfamiliar. Simply put, he tries to make sense of a strange world. His doing so does not allow him to anchor to one place but rather demands constant transition. This transition is a constant dialogue between and fusing of an outer-world Blake has trouble situating and an inner-

world he cannot find, using a language for which he cannot account, but needs to in order to negotiate the unmappable boundaries of these spaces.

In reference to Michaux, Malcolm Bowie describes the constellation of these spaces, what he calls “the space of literary activity proper,” as:

the space in which the poet partakes of the inner and outer worlds and in which he seeks to balance their contradictory demands; it is a space of friction or of open conflict between rational and irrational, real and imaginary, physical and mental, controlled and chaotic. This private-public region offers the poet not the glory of transcendence, but the mingled pain and joy of endless transition. (17)

Linguistic transition here is akin to traveling and the poet’s writing is described in terms of space. The interweaving of Michaux’s poetry with *Dead Man* paints a picture of Blake’s voyage as one in which he attempts to come to terms with this “endless transition,” which is a slightly different reading than that offered by juxtaposing *Dead Man* with Blake’s namesake, whose poetry gives a slightly more enthusiastic nod to the idea of the transcendence that Michaux turns away from in his poetry.

It is not necessary to say much more than has already been said about the transitional character of both Plume’s and Blake’s circumstances. Their stories are both travel narratives. *Plume* is about the restless movement of a character that cannot be placed. He is always fleeing the boundaries of his own being. Blake is equally difficult to locate. He is always in transition, continually moving from one place to another, and never arrives at a destination. *Dead Man* recalls many of the conventions of both the Western and the road movie in evoking such notions of displacement, foreignness, and transitional spaces. Blake’s ongoing transition makes him a constant foreigner in his own land. He is a settler who never settles down, but rather settles on the very notion of being unsettled.

Though Blake fails to fully accept the paradoxes presented by the failure of language to perfectly translate the unknown, he begins to understand language as a mode of transition not unlike his journey. However, the fact that language is always failing at its task ensures that Plume and Blake do not merely experience a smooth and eventless transition from one place to another. Both journeys are painful, shocking, and destabilizing, and we could question whether or not they are ultimately transformative. Their paradoxical wanderings are accompanied by the uncontrollable and turbulent convolutions of an imperfect architecture of translation.

*Dead Man* follows *Plume* in using language to destabilize the world. Blake's encounters with language are turbulent. His way of being with language suggests a mode far different from the rational one that his job title would suggest. His change from accountant to poet follows a path from a supposedly stable and rational being-with language to a less stable one. This path is a turbulent one. Also, the coexistence of the rational and the 'turbulent' modes of being with language, a description that ultimately fits Blake, itself suggests a certain instability that already exists in language, something that Blake discovers along the way.

Michaux grasps this turbulent potential in his poetry, something that is clear from our readings of *Plume*, "Movements of the Internal Being," and "Destiny." Bowie in fact calls Michaux "a poet of turbulence" (V) and points out that "'destabilization' is not a means to an end of a more suitable stability but an independent manner of existing—and a manner which has become the very substance of the author's prose" (45). In "Irony in Michaux's *Plume*," Elisabeth A. Howe describes this tendency in *Plume* as unstable irony. That is to say that the way language is used in *Plume* does not just offer criticism of the world or posit a more perfect or stable existence behind the observations of a clever and critical irony, but it finally and permanently destabilizes the world without recourse to something more meaningfully ordered.

Irony in *Plume* just carves a path to a more ultimate and cosmic confusion. It does not reconstruct a more just, proper, concrete, or discernable existence. It is continuous regression and negation from which understanding feebly attempts to defend and shelter itself. As Paul de Man surmises in his history and reading of the non-concept, irony is “tied to impossibility of understanding” (167). De Man proposes, “The way to stop irony is by understanding, by the understanding of irony, by the understanding of the ironic process. Understanding would allow us to control irony.” He immediately shows what is at issue with this proposition when he cunningly questions, “But what if irony is always of understanding, if irony is always the irony of understanding, if what is at stake in irony is always the question of whether it is possible to understand or not to understand?” (166). This is an apt description of *Plume*’s situation. He is caught in a cyclone of understanding and disillusionment in which his world wavers between sense, loss, and nonsense.

This explains *Plume*’s discomfort with the world, his constant motion, and his inability to come to a standstill or satisfactorily make sense of anything. His predicament comes to a head in the last passage in which we find him walking on the ceiling and “paralyzed by the blood that had immediately collected, piled up in his head like the iron in a hammer.” It continues, “He was lost. With terror, he saw the far-off floor, the armchair once so inviting, the whole room an astonishing abyss.” His world has turned upside down because he cannot make sense of it or he cannot make it make sense in a way that is satisfactory and stable. His interactions with the world, all of which we could describe in terms of language and translation, betray him. Meanwhile, “so many people all over the world continued to walk calmly on the ground, people who surely were no better than he was” (*DkM* 75). In his afterword to *Plume*, Michaux describes *Plume*’s situation and his own when he proclaims “Signs, symbols, impulses, falls, departures,

relations, discords, everything is there to bounce up, to seek, for further on, for something else. Between them, without settling down, the author grew his life” (*DkM* 79). This also aptly describes Blake, who, only in his dying, begins to come to terms with the false and fleeting stability that was his life. Only in his dying does he start to gaze at the turbulence caused by the signs, symbols, impulses, falls, departures, relations, and discords that make up the passage of his life. Blake’s passage does not end with his world turned upside down. Rather, the images at the end of the film repeat the picture described at the beginning of the film and show him floating along with the ceiling of his understanding as distant as the firmament. The sky encloses him and simultaneously communicates great and impassable distance. He is at home in a much more vacuous world in which the boundaries of sense-making are not so easily discernable.

*Dead Man* breaks down these boundaries in Blake’s life and holds up a mirror to visions of an idyllic American past. By throwing Blake’s identity into question and complicating his ability to understand or even see the world as a whole, it undoes the easy permutations of understanding that are so necessary to express binding terms such as nation, freedom, and so on. It suggests that any ideal is a future to strive toward rather than merely a monumental past to which we should refer. Blake’s death is the death of blind conceptualization and overwrought idealism. It also suggests that all ideals are turbulent and unstable moments of inscription, turns of phrase, and those who invoke them have a responsibility to deal with them as such. That is to say that signifiers are not stable. They are repositories of turbulent change and endless reiteration. Perhaps Blake finally sees this as he rides the undulations of a fathomless ocean and stares up at the distant sky. His ideal, evokes the past, but is something always future and distant, beyond him. This partially explains the cyclical nature of the film, which ends where it

begins. This is the revisiting and reiteration of a constant, but changing past, passing into a far-off and unknown future.

*Plume* and *Dead Man* suggest that we come to the world through writing, through the far-off marks of a changing past and unknown future. We can only make sense of the world through an active and conscious engagement and that engagement always leaves its mark. The world is not given to us passively—though we might like to think it is—but is informed by the mind or written out as it were. Writing is an act of inscription, in that it marks the world. It is turbulent and destabilizing, and even violent.

*Plume* and *Dead Man*, and also the poetry of William Blake, call attention to the turbulence of writing and all associate such turbulence with cyclical, wave-like, and even revolutionary movement. Writing not only has the power to change how the world is envisioned, but in its very movement, in its twists and turns, it cannot help but affect how the world is envisioned and hidden. Michaux emphasizes this in the radical distance between his words and conventional notions of the world, but also in many of the repetitive and wave-like images he calls upon. Revolutions and cycles are brought to the fore in *Dead Man* through much of its imagery and also in the cyclical shape of the narrative.

Bowie seizes on Michaux's desire to call out the revolutions of language and use its force to affect change when he suggests that Michaux "had been aware that he could act effectively upon an unstable and unpredictable world by making his language as mobile and flexible as possible" (157). Broome goes even a little further in explaining Michaux's writing. His explanation itself even calls upon a language that is slightly more revolutionary in its tone when he says of Michaux's writing that "it is not a question of words fondling words and setting up a mutually flattering verbal world apart, but of words intervening dynamically in the heart of the

problem of existence and judged solely on their practical success.” Broome draws our attention to the very real and dynamic affect Michaux envisions his writing having on the world. He goes on to tell us that “Michaux speaks of his poetic means as weapons and tools,” and that the “poem is not an artistic product to be savoured according to the laws of some aesthetic harmony. It is, ideally, a sorcery or therapy, an act of personal salvation, however provisional, valuable for the transformation it can work either on reality or on the self.” Poetry according to Michaux is not something that describes the beauty of an unchanging and untainted world. It is something that drastically changes the world and violently intervenes in the hostilities of a seemingly implacable reality. Michaux desires “to make words do something more than words, to intervene, metamorphose, revolutionize, recompose, as if the energy of poetry should stir and redistribute the molecules of reality or implant vision as fact” (16). One gets this sense from *Plume*. His journey is one in which he tries to flee the constraints of an antagonistic world. He attempts his own re-compositions and revolutions and at times does so through violent means. Michaux’s writing works on drastic and even violently dynamic turns of language and attempts to draw the readers’ attention to how these turns are woven into the fabric of the world.

*Dead Man* also draws a link between the revolutions of rhetorical maneuvering and socio-political or even cosmic revolution. Without suggesting some hidden order, it seems to say that the space of the social revolves like the cosmos, which revolves like language. There is a kind of equivalence without harmony. It underscores the visionary possibilities of language, though it does not come to any particular conclusions. It just poses questions. Does the change in Blake’s language represent the possibility of any actual change in the world or are his new poetic words just turns that lead to nowhere? Do they just cycle back to the void of a lost past as we see with Blake’s journey? Can they ever really close the gap between a tentative present and

the distant future or do they always just cunningly stall? There are differences between how the possibilities of poetry are envisioned in *Dead Man*, in Michaux's work, and in Blake's work, but all of these works suggest that poetry breaks the complacency of institutionalized or mundane language.

Two images that continue to assert themselves prefigure the change in Blake's language and accent the turns of language and the revolutionary possibilities of the word. Those images are the wheels of the train that are juxtaposed with the strange conversation between Blake and the fireman and the ocean foreseen in that conversation and pictured at the end of the film. The wheels in the opening scene are like the conversation in that they drive the train forward, but they also evoke an unending circularity. The conversation also makes the narrative of the film into a cycle that starts where it begins. So the question that the film raises is, does the train drive Blake forward or bring him back to where he started? Does his language allow for actual change or is it a ruse? The film ends with a long shot of the ocean. The back-and-forth and finally indiscernible and impermanent form of the waves serve as another symbol of the slipperiness of language. Where do these waves take Blake? Do they offer a trip to something transcendent or must Blake just ceaselessly float on the unending undulations of a deep unknown? Does the turn of language or revolution offer something new or is it merely a return? Is "The Eternal hourglass of existence . . . turned upside down again and again," as Nietzsche suggests in *The Gay Science* (273). Does the turbulence of such turning offer up any real or readable translation or merely an endless translation over the topography of the unknown? Again, there seems to be no place of containment, no destination.

## Alienation in Language, Conventional and Visionary

*Dead Man* draws out the characteristics of writing accentuated by movement, marking, and instability. It works against a passive acceptance of the world. It suggests that nothing should be taken “as is,” but rather should be actively engaged. Furthermore it distinguishes between a conventional language of acquiescence and a language of vision. We see a violent and visionary language in *Plume*, in which Michaux uses some very conventional situations, but inserts rather bizarre happenings and peculiar and ironic language to make the reader feel alienated in the conventions of otherwise everyday situations, such as going to a restaurant or riding a train. In *Dead Man* we also see the juxtaposition of conventionality with peculiarity.

Both *Plume* and *Dead Man* comment on this juxtaposition by obscuring the line between a waking world and a world of sleep. Both Plume and Blake go in and out of sleep to the point where you cannot tell if their worlds are dreams or not. This is true of “Night of the Bulgarians,” the passage from which *Dead Man*’s epigraph is taken. This passage is one that marks the difference between the sleepers on the train and those who are awake and then those who are dead. It seems that these states could represent three levels of awareness. The dead seem to have no awareness, but the sleepers and those who are awake are interestingly ambiguous. The same is true in *Dead Man*. Is Blake’s waking life—if we can even distinguish it from a dream world or a world of the dead—representative of a visionary world, or an enlarged field of vision, in which the seer is aided by the full light of day or is it the established and seemingly unchangeable and contained world of conventionality? When Blake is asleep, is it that he is closed off to the world or that he experiences the visionary possibilities of dreams? Also, which world do we inhabit in *Dead Man*?

The ambiguity of these distinctions between waking life, the dream world, and death, and by extension between convention and vision, accents the tonality of the whole film. Blake goes in and out of sleep in the opening scene, a trend which continues throughout the film and is reinforced for the audience in the fades to black that make up many of the scene and shot transitions. These techniques do not allow a clear distinction between the waking and the sleeping world. They heighten ambiguity. Perhaps the blurring of distinctions is a suggestion that language is always alienating. It always carries the speaker further away from what he attempts to grasp through that language. It always separates the writer from what he wants to bring into being through writing. It never hits its mark. It is impossible to mark what is convention and what is vision and, even if we could, we would find that both are alienating. Understanding language as conventional encloses one within the frontier of easy explanations, rigid justifications, and false comprehension, but does the language of vision, though it might temporarily transgress such frontiers, really offer something more? If both incarnations of language are alienating does it matter if the sleeper is one who is lulled to sleep by the repeated conventions of mundane language and one who is asleep to a visionary world, or one who inhabits a dream and is therefore awake to the visionary and unconventional possibility of such a dream? Conversely, does it matter if the one who is awake has the clear and grand perspective promised by flights of vision, or is merely an inhabitant of the flat and unchanging topography of the everyday world of convention? These figures of waking, sleeping, and death are themselves alienating tropes that turn around and around on themselves and represent both vision and convention as a type of alienation in language, with some recourse to the significance of these different types of alienation.

Though vision itself can alienate the seer, there still seems to be a suggestion that it is a type of alienation different than that of wading in the stagnancy of the ordinary world. Michaux speaks about the pain and fear associated with vision. In “Movements of the Internal Being,” he speaks of “Fear, gushing forth like mercury” and the “life forever contaminated” (*SW* 81) and, in “Destiny,” he talks about the “one who has a pin in his eye,” who would rather “Sleep, if he could only sleep” (*SW* 77). Here, the one who sees is lost in the fear and pain presented by the aporia of vision. Vision does not offer transcendence. Is this where Blake is left at the end of *Dead Man*? *Dead Man* brings this distinction, between language as vision and language as convention, into play without attempting to settle the matter. It suspends Blake and the viewer between the possibility of visionary transcendence and inescapable alienation.

The distinction between the stagnancy of conventional language and the possibility of visionary poetic language is reinforced in *Dead Man* by the association of visual and verbal signifiers. It is not a coincidence that Michaux and William Blake were both artists who worked in and combined both visual and verbal media. One suggestion in combining these media is that words have the force to create visions of the world. They can picture how one sees things. The language of poetry has the power to break the bonds of convention and envision the world in a different way. *Dead Man*, however, also brings up the use of visual and verbal signifiers to highlight the ambiguity of language, its possible use for deception, and the impossibility of distinguishing between conventional and visionary modes.

We begin to see clues of the connection between verbal and visual signs at the beginning of the film when the title of the film is formed by a bunch of bones. It is an illumination in many

senses.<sup>45</sup> There are subtle reminders of this connection as we move in to the first scene. The almanac Blake reads, which is composed of both pictures and words, is one example. We see these clues throughout the film. Nobody takes peyote and has visions of Blake as a skeleton, reinforcing his verbal description of Blake. We also see wanted pictures of Blake posted. These pictures also verbally describe Blake. The most convincing connections however are those scenes that visually enact either William Blake's poetry or something that was already described in the film. The best example of a visual enactment of a verbal description is the scene to which we keep returning, that between the fireman's verbal illustration in the beginning of the film of Blake's final journey out to sea and its visual representation at the film's end. The words in this instance seem to have created the picture.

The possible power of the word to envision a world and affect material change is played out through Blake's journey, whose words start to become intimately linked with his actions. His poetry seems to transform the physical world, much as the fireman's illustration seems to have brought Blake's journey into being. The question remains whether the fireman's illustration is a mere description or an inscription, but the possibility of language to affect material change is certainly opened up. It is conceivable that Blake, as a poet, is a visionary who creates his world. He sees the world in a different way. Blake starts to do this, though he remains ironically unaware of the powers of his imagination. He possesses the power of the word, but he does not know it.

Though Blake never fully embraces his role as poet, he nonetheless becomes that role. Even if he does not completely realize it, his language goes from the dry and calculated language of an accountant to the richly metaphoric, ironic, and comedic language of the poet. This

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<sup>45</sup> Here, I am specifically referring to the practice of illuminating texts through the addition of supplemental visual ornamentation, a practice for which Blake is well known.

happens to him unwittingly in the beginning merely as the context of his journey begins to change, but later he starts to consciously, if only slightly, accept the change in his language. Blake certainly does not start off as a visionary and we can surely question whether he ever becomes one. He, like Plume, is often caught in situations whose conditions he has no part in making. His journey nonetheless is one in which he breaks the bonds of a more calcified language, even if he does not reach the possibilities of a visionary language. Perhaps Blake still holds on to some of the conventions of his past language while he begins to live in the world as a visionary. Perhaps as the world he knows breaks down, he accepts the “limits of categorical thinking” (Rigaud-Drayton 57).

But, does Blake accept the limits of categorical thinking in that he accepts rationality as a reasonable delimiting factor, something that satisfactorily contains our understanding of the world, or does he accept that rationality is limited in its possibilities to explain the world? Blake is the meeting space for the language of imagination and poetic vision and categorical thinking. He is the chasm between alienating convention and alienating vision with no recourse to an intelligible realm of understanding. *Dead Man* is a space in which the force of poetic vision is explored over and against unquestioned conventionality. It juxtaposes the discursive with the figural, the visionary with the visible, and poetry with rationality. It combines these uses and shows their inability to be separated. It asserts that they are modes of language, none of which can be tossed out in favor of another. The fireman’s conversation with Blake is a very poetic and metaphoric interlude that starts the film. It is a vision, but it also becomes description when we see the end of the film. It both creates our vision of the scene and it describes it.

Blake is a good example of the inseparability of the figural and the discursive. Poetic language eventually takes hold of him, but he remains tied to rational and categorical thinking.

He is a poet, a role of which he is unaware, and the purveyor of conventionality. He is something he himself cannot understand. He is, like Plume, a tractable man, meaning that he is easily coerced and managed, tied to the conventional world, but also that he is malleable and changeable, always fleeing the conventions of reality, and tied to a world of vision. He, like the language he uses, is always against convention in that he works to fight it, but also in that he is up against it, with it, and inseparable from it.

### Destination Disappearing

*Dead Man* starts with a line from Michaux's poetry in order to reinforce certain themes that run through the film—namely, the association of the topography of the mind with the topography of the world, the notion of man's being thrown into a world of writing and in search of an immediacy not provided by a world tied to the conditions of language, and the exploration of the conditions of language informed by convention and vision and based on an understanding of language's inconstancy. The film opens up lines of inquiry that follow these themes in relation to the space of the American West and all of its figural implications that inform notions of boundary, familiarity, nationhood, foreignness, horizons, distance, nearness, and on and on. We have not yet fully engaged with how these themes bear on the space of the West, but have only begun to delineate how they are developed in a comparison of *Dead Man* with *Plume*. William Blake's poetry also resonates with these themes. The rest of the film after the opening scene picks these themes up mainly through his writings. The following chapters explore these connections in more detail. Preliminarily, one might say that one of the major differences

between Michaux's writing and Blake's, though they deal with many of the same themes, seems to be one of tone. To simplify, one might say that where Michaux sees a void Blake sees a vision. This ultimately irresolvable tension and its consequences are played out in *Dead Man*. To call upon the fireman's obscure conversation with Blake once more, the perception of the world is merely a matter of perspective. It is a matter of coming into being through languages that contain slippages and turns in meaning. The mix of verbal and visual language in *Dead Man*, particularly in the juxtaposition of the opening and closing scene, draws further attention to the complications of the inherently creative act of attempted understanding. If we look at these scenes we see that where one sees the shelter of a far-off ceiling, another sees a limitless expanse of sky. Furthermore, to some people that limitless expanse speaks visionary possibilities while to others it is a picture of paradoxical voids. Is Blake, the dead man with whom it is preferable not to travel, the one ossified by the world of convention or the one struck by vision? This is ambiguous. We do however see the unraveling of a place destined to contain boundaries, delimit identity, and accurately capture the past. Blake never fulfills a destiny and he never arrives at any destination. He passes through or is carried over.

## PART 2: Bounds

Part one of our analysis addressed the implications of beginning *Dead Man* with a line of Henri Michaux's poetry. Reading the opening scene of the film juxtaposed with the poem from which the film's epigraph was taken allowed us to draw out more explicitly some of the themes already implied in the imagery of the film. Additionally, we suggested that the insertion of Michaux's poetry, which is unique in the way it uses the word to confront and recalibrate the world and discomfit the normal, is a gesture that opens up an idea of reading as an act that neither necessitates a linear motion nor establishes a singular understanding. It immediately injects into the film a field of vision in which the boundaries of convention and vision, and reality and hyperreality, are diffuse, indistinguishable, and often conflictual.

This part of the discussion picks up on this gesture and further fleshes out many of the themes already addressed through an analysis of a few scenes in the film prior to Blake's meeting with Nobody, his Native American friend and guide. Blake's meeting with Nobody marks the moment when William Blake's poetry is explicitly inserted into the film via the dialogue. This is done through Nobody and repeated later by Blake. Nobody actually believes Blake, the accountant from Cleveland, is a reincarnation of the English poet and artist. The world through which Blake journeys before he meets Nobody is drastically different than the one he traverses after he meets his guide. The scenes prior to Blake's passing the frontier provide a markedly different world than the one Nobody inhabits and speak to the mental despotism of imposed ways of thinking and unyielding ways of encountering and understanding the world, things that are criticized in Blake and Michaux's works. The rigid space in the town of Machine is clearly divided from the space outside of its boundaries.

William Blake's poetry is not specifically inserted into the scenes prior to Blake's frontier crossing. This part of the film, though its only verbal reference to Blake's works is the name of the film's protagonist and the name of a woman he meets, Thel, is composed of carefully wrought imagery that visually illuminates a lot of Blake's symbology and even illustrates some very specific images from his poems. By closely analyzing the images and placing them next to some of Blake's illuminated works, we will draw out the verbal and visual parallels, many of which have to do with Blake's conviction that the modernizing world is one in which humanity has fallen from an imaginative and visionary relationship to the world in favor of a less fluid, more mechanical, and even veiled relationship to its surroundings. *Dead Man* approaches this through the mechanized world of Dickinson's factory in Machine.

## Chapter 3: Cycling Back from the Horizons of *Dead Man* to Blake's Urizen

### Blake's Machinery in the American Frontier Town

In the previous chapters, in which we moved from *Dead Man's* epigraph and through the opening scene to consider the bearing Michaux's poetry has on the film, we addressed several themes that are accentuated by the nexus of Michaux's work, *Dead Man*, and the history of the West and the Western as a genre. Those themes include the binding of physical and mental space, humanity's, and particularly the United States', struggles to recuperate a sense of origin through the invention of a mythic language, and the distinction between a world of imaginative vision and one of convention. All of these themes are revisited through the film's dialogue with William Blake's work, a dialogue that is first picked up in the imagery of the town of Machine and then later in the appropriation of the poet's words.

When Blake arrives in the town of Machine, his intended destination, he is rudely awakened by the inhospitality, general desolation, and dreariness of the town. The *mise en scène* reflects neither the moral austerity nor the heroic grandeur of the classical frontier scene. It does not speak to regeneration nor does it look like the fertile field in which to sow the seeds of a young democracy. It maintains only a feeling of distance and violent desolation. It is a battleground in which different forces fight to establish their own order. Looming over the town is the mill with billowing smoke, an image that refers to the frontier, not as an idyllic space, but as a decaying space of mechanical reproduction (See fig. 4, p. 176). The clear focus on the mill, taken together with the name of the film's protagonist, recalls Blake's "dark Satanic Mills" and his criticism of a world of mechanical reproduction (*M* 1.8). The imagery, particularly when the film's protagonist enters the factory, begins to dialogue with some of the larger themes of

Blake's prophetic works, including the battle between artistic vision, or imagination, and brutal rationality. After he walks through town, we see Blake pass under and gaze up at an Urizen-like gate that guards the factory, a clear sign of transition, a motif that we see in *Dead Man* and Blake's works (See fig. 5, p. 176). This gate recalls the frontispiece of *The Book of Urizen*, in which Urizen displays his stony book of laws, while he guards a tree-formed gate that seems to be poised over a couple of gravestones (See fig. 6, p. 177). As Blake passes through the gate and enters the mill, the viewer sees very Blakean images, which echo with an aura of repetition, containment, and delimitation. Such images include the oversized gears, or cogs of the factory, the fires that emanate both revolution and the iron forged ideas of tyranny, and even the inescapable labyrinthine passages of the mill itself (See fig. 9-16, pp. 178-79). The similarity between these filmic images and the images of Blake's poetry is striking. The film's images seem as if they were pulled from one of Blake's prophecies.

Accompanying the images of the factory, and foretelling the consequences of its machinations, are abundant images of death, including several shots of animal skulls piled and displayed throughout *Machine*. The town produces death and, more importantly, its mechanical movements produce a clockwork worldview and the death of vision. This is the Blakean implication. The uniform movements of the mill are equivalent to the linguistic productions of corrupt and dogmatic social institutions and the general atmosphere of mechanization that Blake's poetic language undermines.

Beyond the factory, the town of *Machine*, its surroundings, and its people embody frontier severity. In it, the standard symbols of frontier hostility are intensified, but the only recourse from lawlessness is the severe authority of John Dickinson, the owner of the town metal works. Blake eventually works his way to the metal works to meet Dickinson, his would-be boss

and the most abrasive character in the film, who with shotgun in hand orders Blake to leave the mill, his job having been given to another accountant. Dickinson, characterized by his iron grip on the town law, and his obsession with the accumulation of material, could be a character taken from one of Blake's prophecies—an Urizen. When Blake sees the gun, he scampers away from the mill, his meager attempt at reasoning with Dickinson having proved futile and his notion of the law, embodied for him in a letter assuring his position, shattered. This futility of the letter of the law is one of the many clues that are lost on Blake. He naively thinks that in this barely civilized place the symbolic order is something immovable. His naïveté is shown in his refusal to recognize the pliability of that order, in this case imposed by a tyrant, but something that will later be at his own disposal thanks to his meeting with his Native American guide, Nobody. The irony of his name is made all the more clear through this blindness. He does not possess the vision of his namesake

This idea of vision so important to William Blake's thought is one that we see repeatedly in the film. Many themes that we gather from Blake's illuminated pages resonate more deeply in *Dead Man's* imagery than one might think. Blake's concern with our processes of envisioning the world and how such processes either expand or limit our experience is a central thematic structure that shapes *Dead Man*. This overarching thematic structure that we see in the film—between figures and processes of containment and delimitation and those of transgression and expansion—manifests in many ways; in the juxtaposition of the processes of industrial production with the creative and imaginative powers of poetic language, in the problem of democracy versus tyranny, in the empowering and delimiting potential of law, and in the space of the frontier as one of containment and transgression. This dichotomy is clear in *Machine*, a space where the great imaginative ideas of the America Revolution have become mechanized.

These ideas have become prey to Dickinson's limited vision of the world, which serves solely his interests and excludes the needs and rights of others. The town of Machine is a space used to negotiate the ideals of a young democracy that are continually evolving. It is a warning that the mechanization of such ideals is antithetical to any vision of democracy. Machine shows the remnants of the passionate fervor of a vision turned into the mechanical motions of an industry that fuels predatory commerce, and also produces a moral structure to suit its needs. It points out fundamental discrepancies between the goals of unchecked capital and those of democracy. One depends on commodification and repetitive production and the other, at least theoretically, depends on the possibility of change and the resistance to defining ideals singularly. The repetitive processes of industrial production and the entombing of ideals dominate in Machine. We see this in Dickinson's mill, the most imposing structure in the town, which looms like a church casting a shadow over the promise of the American Revolution. It hints at genocide, slavery, and destruction of resources. It represents, as Frye says of Blake's mills, "any unimaginative mechanism: the mechanical logical method of Aristotle, the industrial machine that requires slave-labor . . ." (290). The unimaginative mechanism of the mill is representative of the larger problem of a world of mechanical reproduction, not only of physical objects, but also of ideas.

The imagery in Machine speaks to the grossest failures to live up to the ideals of the American Revolution. It shows that moments of idealism inevitably degenerate if the institutions built by such idealism are not constantly scrutinized. Machine is a world in which people and nature are bound to the conventions and laws of greed. *Dead Man* addresses the failures of these laws in the genocide of Native Americans and the predations of industry, things that are conveniently overlooked in triumphalist accounts of the frontier. These events, based in the

creation of divisions and built on the exclusion of otherness, address the larger thematic structure of containment and transgression. Machine is containment. It is a place where the world is contained by one tyrant's vision. It is a place where one man's capital expands at the expense of the ideas and lives of everyone else. It is the failure of democracy, intended or not, and the triumph of unchecked capital. Its dreary and death-obsessed images echo the degeneration of ideals and serve as a rejoinder to an American narrative obsessed with an ideal image of unlimited progress, generation, and growth.

This picture of a decaying democracy brings out the barely hidden tension inherent to the American narrative of unlimited horizons and it addresses the real impossibility of maintaining America's continuous expansion of physical horizons. This picture frames such a narrative as a device of control. The narrative is itself an instrument of delimitation and bounding, which attempts to maintain a worldview that is rather limited in its scope, invents "moral law to make activity predictable," understands instrumentality as "an end in itself," shrouds irrationality behind a veil of reason, and tries to pin down a very specific sense of origin (Frye 307, 296). The imagery of this Machine scene reinterprets many of the themes suggested by the insertion of Michaux's poetry in the opening scene, but it also echoes the central schematic formulation of Blake's works, which is built on the idea of limits and the encounter between tropes of containment and tropes of transgression. This encounter is brought out in many ways, one of which is the distinction between the imposed conventions of instrumental language and the visions of poetic language, something which is addressed in the film in the person of Blake and his encounters with Dickinson and later Nobody. Blake is a figure of instrumentality as an accountant and a figure of vision as a poet.

The images in the mill and the general atmosphere of Machine immediately bring Blake's work into *Dead Man*, even before his poetic words are uttered later in the film. These images of containment explicitly refer to Blake's prophecies. His vision is woven fully into the film through this imagery of reason gone awry, repressive and mechanical thought, overdependence on strict systematicity, authoritarianism, and blind adherence to law, all of which the viewer sees in the enclosed spaces of Dickinson's mill and hears in the unsettling undulations of those same spaces of mechanical reproduction. These themes are developed in such illuminated poems as *America a Prophecy* and *The Book of Urizen*, poems that bear directly on the Machine scene. Issues that pop up in this intertextual discussion are those of revolution and tyranny, repetitive production, predatory industry, and what we previously pointed to as the reign of convention, all issues about which Blake is clearly concerned. These issues are approached in the works mentioned above primarily through the figures of Orc and Urizen, the symbol of the mill, images of fire and furnaces, large gears and wheels, and the imagery of bounding and binding that we see in depictions of chains, caves, labyrinths and so on, all of which we also see in various incarnations in the film. These types of images are picked up when Blake steps off of the train and enters the town of Machine. This scene swells with images of death, the lost promises of progress and revolution, and the feeling of the tyranny of blind, inconsiderate, and violent reasoning, of reason gone wrong, and of the wheels of progress turning for purposes that are anything but progressive. The scene clearly offers the dirty underside of the positivistic readings of reason and progress.

This scene of the film sets up in more detail than the opening scene the contentious dialogue between repressive thought and the expansive power of imagination that is so central to the rest of the film. This dialogue between repressive convention and imaginative vision is

explored in depth later in the film through the relationship of Blake and Nobody, but the subject is broached in the overwhelmingly mechanical images of Dickinson's mill and the overwrought assuredness of Dickinson's speech and demeanor. The images of the mill and Dickinson's use of language speak to the idea of the efficiency of supposedly untainted reason, but also to the much more violent yearnings that fuel an overblown sense of entitlement and destructive allegiance to his own laws and worldview. He is like Blake's Urizen. They share an insular and self-contained vision.

The imagery of the film is already bleak and poetic, but when the Blakean imagery and Blake's words come in to full relief through the dialogue, they offer a deeper reassessment of typically American ideals and symbolically loaded American spaces. The Blakean resonances also bring poetic and figurative language more clearly in to focus. Furthermore, the thematic concerns revolving around Orc and Urizen, and the constellation of ideas surrounding these figures, are brought to bear on the already complicated space of the American frontier. These shared themes also incorporate Blake into *Dead Man* by hinting at a certain method of reading. Much as there are thematic parallels between Blake and Michaux—particularly their concern with the ability of language to either shrink or enlarge our perception of the world—there is also some crossover in their methods of reading and literary production. Both poets use word and image, though Blake combines them more intricately. Both poets attempt to complicate the notion of a singular or stable text and undermine or problematize simplistic notions of the world. They do so through several methods, including creating multiple versions of their works. Many of Blake's works are illuminated, and done so in numerous editions, intertwining words and images in ways that further complicate any singular or simplistic readings. It is also difficult to

pin down meaning in Blake's works because of the elaborate mythological matrix of word and image whose references are biblical, classical, and historical.

Saree Makdisi speaks of Blake's problematized or "open" texts when he reminds us of the way in which "Blake's works are constituted by the dynamic relation of words and images," which demand a new mode of reading in which "text emerges from the process of reading itself" (111, 112). He describes how the experience of such reading "involves alternating between reading words and reading images, and turning back and forth through the plates, "tracing and retracing different interpretive paths through the gap between words and images" (112). *Dead Man* opens up even more "interpretive paths" by offering its audience the intertextual resonances with Blake and Michaux. It radicalizes Blake even more in its appropriation and employment of this notion of reading. It opens another interpretive path between the word, the image, and the moving image and it adds another mythological space and time to that of the genre patterns of the Western.

*Dead Man* appropriates these already "open" works to further scrutinize the complicated space of the American frontier and to reclaim many of the ideals associated with such a space. It suggests that these ideals should never be settled, but always contested by interpretation. This is one reason why the film does not focus on a settler, a farmer, a homesteader, or even a resolute cowboy protecting the homestead, but on a would-be settler turned accidental wanderer who experiences drastically different, conflicting, and changing views of the world as he travels westward to his death. His journey is the death of idyllic spaces and a slow unwinding of those ideals associated with such spaces.

By following Michaux with Blake, the film reasserts its focus on the intersection of film and poetry, the production of meaning, the use of language as a figurative apparatus, and the

open-ended movements of reading. This is reinforced in the Machine scene, which is rife with images of production, all of which call into question the conventional ways symbols of the frontier are used to produce meaning. It draws a connection between the mechanical movements of industrial production and the productions of language. It suggests that the way we speak informs the way we see the world and operate within that world. Conversely, the way we work in the world informs our language. *Dead Man* displays and then destabilizes the idea of industrial production and commodification of meaning. The mechanical images of the Machine scene, including the mill, the gears and wheels of that factory, and the fiery furnaces, as well as the cramped and labyrinthine spaces, in all their Blakean resonances, simultaneously criticize the tyrannical monotony of industrial production and the reification of language that is an offshoot of that production and use the dynamic images of those same processes to argue that the movements of linguistic production are open-ended, a notion that is reinforced by Blake's poetry and his manual processes of production.<sup>46</sup>

The fact that the protagonist is named William Blake strengthens the criticism of the mechanical processes of production and the attempt to undermine the understanding of language as mere mechanism. Furthermore, the poetic resonances undo the traditional space of the Western, which is so concerned with establishing origin and stabilizing meaning through the reproduction of specific tropes. Inserting Blake into the space of *Dead Man* makes discoverable origins and concrete meanings even less possible than in most revisionist Westerns. *Dead Man*, like Blake's work, points to "an ongoing, open-ended production of meanings rather than a representation of an original meaning" (Carr 190). We see this very much in the character of

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<sup>46</sup> For more detail on Blake's production processes and the theoretical implications of such a process, see Viscomi.

Blake, as he reads his journey from multiple perspectives while he passes through the story of his life and nation in the wilderness of the West.

Though Blake himself is not yet fully associated with the poet William Blake at this point in the film—the people he encounters in fact call him Bill Blake or even Mr. Black, drawing attention away from this association and showing their ignorance and lack of poetic vision—Blake's entrance into the town of Machine resonates with many Blakean themes through the *mise en scène*. Whereas Blake's later encounters with Nobody literally bring out the poet's words, the opening scenes illuminate the poet's words and imagery on the screen. This specific scene is most notable for its focus on the notion of production, images of the mill and all of the associations of this mill to Blake's character Urizen, namely a sense of limiting, enclosing, and controlling, all of which peripherally refer to the notion of humanity's having always already fallen into a world of convention. The opposition of Urizen and Orc is one of the central mythologies of Blake's poetry. This scene evokes Blake's central mythological pairing of Orc and Urizen, but focuses on the repressive thoughts associated with Urizen and juxtaposes them with the rise of industry on the American frontier. Makdisi, in explaining Blake's processes of production and how they confront industrial processes of production that simultaneously espouse freedom and undermine it by their very processes, captures a tension also evident in the Machine scene:

And he [Blake] may have had some sense that a society increasingly oriented towards the production of intermeasurable things—a logic of production repudiated by his own highly differentiated works—would ultimately turn all of its members into equally homogeneous and intermeasurable units, and perhaps even into *things* themselves. It is against this industrial logic of commodification, the reification of both objects and subjects, that I believe Blake based his own understanding of freedom. This remains, of course, an understanding of freedom that is incompatible with, and hence so often incomprehensible in, the social system that we presently inhabit, whose wealth takes the shape of an immense collection of commodities—and of images. (131)

The scene in *Machine* picks up this critique of industrial logic and suggests that such logic is detrimental to many ideals evoked in the images of the American West, such as freedom and opportunity. It also suggests that language becomes reified, unimaginative, and conventional, in an environment that pushes such logic. Everything becomes understood as coercible material and everything is enframed, as Martin Heidegger explains in his “The Question Concerning Technology.”

The choice of poets and their integration into the film makes an argument about such enframing and more generally about the acts and processes of containment and expansion. The suggestion is that the industrializing nation we see in the classic Western represents a very expanding realm of material wealth and physical space, but this expansion is at the expense of a social discourse that is overshadowed by the want for material expansion. Material wealth overwhelms and shrinks the space of social discourse. It is in the interest of a system of capital built on the idea of endless expansion to prevent discourse that constantly reformulates institutional rules and questions the balance of power and wealth. Such discourse could be detrimental to the very makeup of such institutions and laws that control this balance on which the notion of material expansion depends. The *Machine* scene uses Urizenic imagery to pull out the contradictions of this industrial logic, which we see weaved through William Blake’s prophecies and into the film. Conversely, *Dead Man* argues that the contained language typical of an industrializing society, which is necessary to maintain a worldview of endless expansion, is detrimental to the open language-space of a developing democracy. This is a language space that needs to be continually open to expansion or enlargement, as Blake argues in his prophecies. He envisions this expanding social, and even metaphysical space, through the power and vision of art and imagination.

## The Promises of Revolution to the Mechanization of Industry and World

Blake's Orc and Urizen cycle is a good example of his vision of the interconnectedness of the aesthetic and social registers. It addresses the tension between the possibilities of passion, desire, revolution, imagination, creativity and vision embodied by Orc and the disappointment of the opposing forces of tyranny, fear, bounding, delimiting, repression, mechanization, and violence embodied by Urizen. *Dead Man* translates these tensions to the context of the North American frontier. The scene in *Machine*, dominated by Urizenic imagery, is the center of this tension. The other problematics of the film branch out from the opposition of Orcian and Urizenic energies in this scene. The trajectory from *America a Prophecy* to *The Book of Urizen* embody this opposition and offer a deeper reading of the images in this scene.

In the rise of Orc one can already hear the tyranny of Urizen. *America a Prophecy* uses the figure of Orc to tell of the initial hope of the American Revolution and to hint at the descent of that hope back into a repressive mindset. It tells of the fiery revolt of Orc, the son of Los (poetry) against Albion (England) and gazes toward the not so far off distance at the stony law of Urizen, the fallen god of tyrannical reason and the material world. The war it recounts is the American Revolution, but also the ongoing mytho-historical battle between the passions of Orc and the repressive powers of Urizen. It recounts an intellectual struggle as well as a physical one. The poem abounds with violent images of creation and destruction. There is a clear tension, but also an intimacy between the forces of creating, destroying, bounding, and breaking. This poem is about the intimacy of these forces. It is about simultaneously creating and breaking forms of the aestheticized social realm. This realm and the expansion or retraction of its boundaries are expressed through several of Blake's figures: the "shadowy daughter of Urthona"

is the material world and the daughter of the creative imagination, Los, who is himself a blacksmith, a poet, the earth, and a creator of forms, that opposes reason; Orc is the passionate spirit of revolt and desire; Albion is the stony law, as is Urizen, who is also a figure of blind reason. Many of these images of forming and rupturing are images that are simultaneously put into service to stand for oppositional ideals, particularly when we read Blake's fully illuminated prophecies. For example, he might pit the structuring principles of reason against those of imagination, as we see in *America a Prophecy* and *The Book of Urizen*. Some of the repeated images in these works include iron, fire, and wheels, but also roofs, chains, caves, and the rending of such boundaries. There are also several mentions of abysses, something which is much more central to *The Book of Urizen*.<sup>47</sup> All of this imagery that we see in *America a Prophecy* is picked up and reinterpreted in *The Book of Urizen*, a poem about Orc's rival, and then further interpreted in *Dead Man*.

The two most dominant sets of images in *America a Prophecy* are images of form-making, uninhibited passion, desire, imagination, and revolutionary war—typically embodied in fire, iron, and wheels—and images of things that delimit or enclose, such as roofs, caves, and chains, which are typically being broken in this work, or “rent,” to use the language of the poem.

We merely need to look at the opening few lines to see some of these first set of images.

Notice the repeated use of the word iron in the “Preludium” of poem:

The shadowy daughter of Urthona stood before red Orc.  
 When fourteen suns had faintly journey'd o'er his dark abode;  
 His food she brought in iron baskets, his drink in cups of iron;  
 Crown'd with a helmet & dark hair the nameless female stood;  
 A quiver with its burning stores, a bow like that of night,  
 When pestilence is shot from heaven; no other arms she need:  
 Invulnerable tho' naked, save where clouds roll round her loins,

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<sup>47</sup> For a more in depth explanation and analysis of such tropes, see Erdman's *The Illuminated Blake* and Damon.

Their awful folds in the dark air; silent she stood as night;  
 For never from her iron tongue could voice or sound arise;  
 But dumb till that dread day when Orc assay'd his fierce embrace. (1.1-10)

The opening of the poem introduces the conquest, both sexual and revolutionary, on which Orc embarks and which is played out in detail throughout the rest of the poem. Orc's creative powers are violent—he takes up revolutionary arms, or eats from “iron baskets” and drinks from “cups of iron”—but they are uninhibited and temporarily defy entanglement in the machinations of the physical world with which Urizen is so embroiled. Orc's violence is one that breaks the conventions of the repressive world. His union with the earth or nature—“The shadowy daughter of Urthona”—seems to be the beginning of a drastic change, a paradigm shift and the empowerment of creative, sexual, and revolutionary forces, something the last two lines confirm: “For never from her tongue could voice or sound arise/But dumb till that dread day when Orc assay'd his fierce embrace.” The energies of Orc give voice, begin regeneration, and start to crumble away the façades of the calcified and repressive monarchic and religious systems that control humanity. The question remains whether Orc is capable of breaking the boundaries of the shadow of the physical world or will he become seduced by these images.<sup>48</sup> This issue of the possibilities of poiesis and the practical necessity of grounding oneself in convention, of being simultaneously wrought by the necessities of the material world and tugged by the want of

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<sup>48</sup> *Dead Man* projects back on to Blake's work much like Blake bears on *Dead Man*. One way it does so is to pull out of Blake's prophecies their very cinematic images. Many commentators have mentioned how Blake anticipates modern thinkers such as Freud. His writing also anticipates modern media such as cinema. Blake's notion of the physical world as a shadow, a projection of a more universal vision, is one of these instances. So, just as *Dead Man* appropriates Blake's work, making the film more poetic, it also looks back at Blake's prophetic works and draws out of them something that is innately very cinematic. There is an exchange. Blake's work does not only inform *Dead Man*, but is transformed by it.

vision, is at the heart of *Dead Man*. In the film, Blake waivers over this apparent boundary as he traverses different landscapes, industrial, desolate, and poetic.

The images of bounding pick up more explicitly in *The Book of Urizen* and continue in *America a Prophecy* with the imagery of iron and fire that we see in “the fourteen suns,” “the burning stores,” and “red Orc” of the Preludium. These images are picked up more explicitly in many places later in the poem. Fire is used to describe the war-like rage of Albion (England) and his angels—“The Guardian Prince of Albion burns in his nightly tent/Sullen fires across the Atlantic glow to America’s shore”—but also Orc’s “fiery joy, that Urizen perverted to ten commands” (3.1-2, 8.3). Urizen is very much a double of Albion and his fires of war, religion, and industry. The combined use of these images, of the destructive and creative possibilities of fire, of the invocation of unbreakable order and inevitable revolution seen in wheels and all sorts of orb-like figures, and of the destructive and creative possibilities of iron are displayed best in the following two passages, which describe the coming conflict between Albion and Orc, and then Orc’s ascendancy:

Solemn heave the Atlantic waves between the gloomy nations,  
Swelling, belching from its deeps red clouds & raging Fires!  
Albion is sick. America faints! enrag'd the Zenith grew.  
As human blood shooting its veins all round the orb'd heaven  
Red rose the clouds from the Atlantic in vast wheels of blood  
And in the red clouds rose a Wonder o'er the Atlantic sea;  
Intense! naked! a Human fire fierce glowing, as the wedge  
Of iron heated in the furnace; his terrible limbs were fire  
With myriads of cloudy terrors banners dark & towers  
Surrounded; heat but not light went thro' the murky atmosphere (4.2-12)

A few passages later Orc asserts his power:

The terror answerd: I am Orc, wreath'd round the accursed tree:  
The times are ended; shadows pass the morning gins to break;  
The fiery joy, that Urizen perverted to ten commands,  
What night he led the starry hosts thro' the wide wilderness:  
That stony law I stamp to dust: and scatter religion abroad

To the four winds as a torn book, & none shall gather the leaves;  
 But they shall rot on desert sands, & consume in bottomless deeps;  
 To make the deserts blossom, & the deeps shrink to their fountains,  
 And to renew the fiery joy, and burst the stony roof.  
 That pale religious lechery, seeking Virginitie,  
 May find it in a harlot, and in coarse-clad honesty  
 The undefil'd tho' ravish'd in her cradle night and morn:  
 For every thing that lives is holy, life delights in life;  
 Because the soul of sweet delight can never be defil'd.  
 Fires inwrap the earthly globe, yet man is not consumd;  
 Amidst the lustful fires he walks: his feet become like brass,  
 His knees and thighs like silver, & his breast and head like gold. (8.1-17)

The first passage sets the stage for battle. It uses figures of language that both evoke Orcian revolution and foreshadow the coming of Urizen. Those “deep red clouds & raging fires” that are so often repeated in this passage are both symbols of the incineration of an old order and the establishment of a new order that will inevitably shroud the world with its own clouds and by the same means as that order which it replaced. Clouds of insurrection still obscure vision. Equally, the “iron heated in the furnace” becomes pliable, and is reshaped, perhaps into a weapon of revolution, but it nonetheless hardens and ultimately becomes another weapon to be used for the machine of war. Finally, the circular figures of revolution—“human blood shooting its veins all round the orb'd heaven” or the red clouds rising from “the Atlantic in vast wheels of blood”—are the same as those of war. The red wheels and orb'd heaven covered in blood are simultaneously the violent wheels of war, the encasing and bloody orb of empire, and the possibility of change. The wheels speak to revolution and change as they speak to repetition and maintaining the status quo, much as the fire-heated iron gives off “heat but not light,” causing revolution, but not illumination.

The latter passage describes Orc, but one can see the similarities in character of Orc to those of Albion and hear an echo of the possible return of Orc's energies into the conventions of the relatively unimaginative society over which Urizen rules. Orc's imagery is as violent as

Urizen's, yet it is an imagery that is generally suggestive of breaking forms, rather than the Urizenic imagery of maintaining forms. Whereas Urizen attempts to build a world to ward off the "raging fathomless abyss," Orc attempts to un-build a world in order to gaze, if only momentarily, at "portions of the infinite" (1.15, 14.18).

We see in *America a Prophecy* the old forms that Orc threatens, but which are reconstituted in a constant push and shove in other works, such as *The Book of Urizen*. In the passage above, for example, Orc stamps "to dust" the "stony law" and bursts the "stony roof"<sup>49</sup> with "fiery joy." Finally, the world that Orc envisions is described as consumed in the "lustful fires" that "inwrap the earthly globe." Amidst this raging fiery vision "man is not consumed," "because the soul of sweet delight can never be defiled."<sup>50</sup> Orc's rending is visionary. It cannot be defiled. It breaks the repressive laws of convention and looks past the shadow of the material world. The Preludium in fact describes Orc breaking himself from the physical world, which is the fallen world of humanity. He proclaims, "For chained beneath, I rend these caverns," to which the shadowy earth later responds, "On my American plains I feel the struggling afflictions/Endur'd by roots that writhe their arms into the nether deep," and later he continues with, "O what limb rending pains I feel" (1.18, 2.10-11, 2.16). This type of imagery, which conveys a sense of sexually and imaginatively desirous energy, and describes both the rending of the earth via war-like revolution, but also the revolution of vision, or language, is prevalent throughout *America a Prophecy*, but even this imagery gazes back at the entangled world of Urizen.

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<sup>49</sup> The roof and ceiling are central tropes that show up in this poem and across Blake's oeuvre, in Michaux's work, and in *Dead Man*.

<sup>50</sup> Nobody directly invokes such "sweet delight" in *Dead Man*, though he borrows the line from Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

The roots “that writhe their arms into the nether deep,” though they might be images of generation are also images of entrapment and entanglement. They call up the contradictory notions of growth and stasis. This sense of the roots as being part of a physical world and representative of the entangled laws of humanity that trap the human body and mind is reinforced in the Blake’s illuminations. This is most clear in plates 1 and 2 in which Orc is trapped underground by the roots of a tree and then, in the second plate, breaks free from this entanglement (*Illuminated* 139-140). We also see this in plate 16, the final plate of the work (*Illuminated* 154).<sup>51</sup> The many images of the entwining of human forms and tree forms suggests generation, but also a sense of entrapment, and the possible disillusionment with the outcome of revolution (See fig. 7-8, p. 177).<sup>52</sup>

*America a Prophecy* offers a glimpse at the possibility that the fires of revolt can transcend the laws of convention. It pits poetic imagination against blind reason. How does this translate to *Dead Man*? As Blake enters the town of Machine he certainly does not show any Orcian characteristics. He by no means seems to display any revolutionary spirit and he enters a town that is a mix of unbridled wilderness with the reverberations of an Urizenic will to control. Machine is a boundary for Blake that splits the world of mechanization from one of poetry. Blake’s trip West merely represents the hope of a new life, which is quickly shattered by the

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<sup>51</sup> To see full color images of these plates in multiple versions, see *The William Blake Archive*, eds. Morris Eaves, Robert Essick, and Joseph Viscomi.

<sup>52</sup> Also, as we move from the 1793 to the 1821 edition of these illuminations there is a general trend in the plates of a darkened and more muddled, less crisp image, perhaps suggesting Blake’s increasing disillusionment with violent revolution, or more specifically, the American Revolution. Pinks, reds and yellows for example turn into dark blues and blacks. These changes, from crisp outlines to muddled forms, and from brighter to darker colors, also speak of the inevitable tendency of the bright and enthusiastic ideas of revolution to sink into the rule of institutional convention and bureaucracy.

Urizenic law. The law in Machine dominates him. It is only his escape into the lands beyond Machine that allow for a shift in vision. If *America a Prophecy* keys in on the possibilities of Orcian revolt, the town of Machine is the failure of these possibilities. The mise en scène in the town reflects the engulfing of these possibilities by the perversions of Urizenic law, which are pictured most explicitly in *The Book of Urizen*. The town of Machine is a strange boundary between repressive mechanization and poetic possibility. It shows that Orc's triumph is only temporary and that all revolt descends back into the conventions of the material world, but also that these conventions themselves are merely moveable constructs. The town of Machine is a seedling of the world described in *The Book of Urizen*.

*The Book of Urizen* is a story of degeneration rather than generation. It asserts the domination of convention and immovable reason over imagination. It pits Urizen (repressive law and ironclad reason) against Orc's father Los (imagination) and tells of the imagination's eventual subsumption by the inescapable repressive laws of the material world. Orc's revolutionary fires eventually burn out or are subsumed by the fires of industry and Los' powers of imagination eventually fall to the material world. All languages of the mind are eventually overtaken by the mechanical conventions of nature and industry. In telling of this fall of imagination and of the burning out of revolutionary fires, the poem recasts many symbols used in *America a Prophecy* so that they embody the repression of Urizen rather than the enthusiasm of Orc. The symbols slip, something that is very common in Blake's work. In doing so they illustrate the failures of revolution—that is to say its inevitable reification into repressive systematicity, the very thing it attempts to undermine.

The Machine scene in *Dead Man* is overwhelmingly Urizenic in feel. Hanging over it is a feeling of lost promises and it illustrates a tyrant's (John Dickinson) attempt to negotiate a

chaotic world and fabricate it in his own repressive image. As in *The Book of Urizen*, wheels come to mean entrapment rather than revolution. Revolution itself reasserts hierarchy. The fires of passion become those that assist the gears of a destructive industry. The iron will of Orc becomes the steadfast machinery of the law. Bounding and measuring overtakes the explosive, wrenching, and rending powers of imagination. Those powers are contained and concentrated in the regimented machinery of sense-making, in the gears of the factory, and in the repressive, violent, and unchecked laws of the frontier. The poem is overwhelmingly about bounding, containing, delimiting, and enclosing. It is about maintaining control over an obscure world and disallowing the possibility of change represented by imaginative vision.

The shadows of an obscure world that haunts Urizen in this poem are those forces against which he builds his stony kingdom and are very much like the world beyond Machine. The description of him as he builds up walls against the surrounding void recalls some of the language associated with Orc, but now in the context of form-making rather than form-breaking. The following passages describe Urizen's emergence through the eternal void and his initial attempts to form a world against that void:

3. Sund'ring, dark'ning, thund'ring!  
 Rent away with a terrible crash  
 Eternity roll'd wide apart  
 Wide asunder rolling  
 Mountainous all around  
 Departing; departing; departing:  
 Leaving ruinous fragments of life  
 Hanging frowning cliffs & all between  
 An ocean of voidness unfathomable.

4. The roaring fires ran o'er the heav'ns  
 In whirlwinds & cataracts of blood  
 And o'er the dark desarts of Urizen  
 Fires pour thro' the void on all sides  
 On Urizens self-begotten armies.

5. But no light from the fires. all was darkness  
In the flames of Eternal fury

6. In fierce anguish & quenchless flames  
To the desarts and rocks He ran raging  
To hide, but He could not: combining  
He dug mountains & hills in vast strength,  
He piled them in incessant labour,  
In howlings & pangs & fierce madness  
Long periods in burning fires labouring  
Till hoary, and age-broke, and aged,  
In despair and the shadows of death. (5.1-27)

Rage and fear dominate this scene, but not the rage of Orc against what he deems an unjust society. This rage is the rage of eternity that comes down on Urizen, the rage of “An ocean of voidness unfathomable,” a rage that he himself will eventually harness to build shelter against such an onslaught.<sup>53</sup> He translates the rage of the unknown into his own encased and safe world, a world of religion and law. Urizen’s rage is fueled by his fear of the void around him. He is incapable of gazing at this void and seeing it with the imaginative visions of Orc or Los. He can only build a mechanical world against this fluid and ungraspable abyss. All of the “flames of eternal fury” and “fires pouring “thro’ the void on all sides” are forces subsumed by Urizen, which become the fires of industry and mechanization. The forces of fury are transferred to him and used to create his world of law later in the poem. It is significant, that there is “no light from the fires,” as was the case with Albion’s fires, whose heat scorched across the Atlantic. The fires of eternity do not illuminate anything for Urizen, as they might for Orc, but only burn him and in turn his fires are not fires of illumination, or revolution, but rather the fires of industry that do not shine, illuminate, or enlighten. Toward the end of this passage we see Urizen beginning to give

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<sup>53</sup> The ocean is another central trope that plays an important role in fostering a dialogue between Blake’s work and *Dead Man*.

shape to the world in an attempt to hide from the fury of eternity: “He dug mountains & hills in vast strength/He piled them in incessant labour.”

In the next passage Urizen fights off the “Eternals” and harnesses the energy of the void to create a world in his own image, a world that eventually becomes an immovable and repressive construct captured under his shell of law and reason. This passage, which describes Urizen forming his world, shows the images of enclosure, delimiting, and sheltering that dominate his negotiation of and confrontation with the eternal void:

7. And a roof, vast petrific around,  
 On all sides He fram'd: like a womb;  
 Where thousands of rivers in veins  
 Of blood pour down the mountains to cool  
 The eternal fires beating without  
 From Eternals; & like a black globe  
 View'd by sons of Eternity, standing  
 On the shore of the infinite ocean  
 Like a human heart strugling & beating  
 The vast world of Urizen appear'd. (5.28-37)

Very corporeal imagery is used to describe Urizen’s world being born and formed. His world is the phenomenal world, a mere veil of the eternal. It is material, not visionary. One can see here, as we saw in *America a Prophecy*, the world being described as a woman, something that becomes even more explicit in *Dead Man* with Blake’s meeting of Thel. Both the womb and the roof are used here to relay a sense of enclosure and protection, but also to give a notion of the very corporeal, organic, and material world that Urizen has built. It is a fallen world separated and divided from the visions of eternity that are more common to Los and Orc. It is a world without imagination and it becomes evident that Urizen will use brutish means to ensure it stays that way. This is evident in the blood pouring down “the mountains to cool/The eternal fires beating without/Form Eternals.” This blood cooling the fires of vision foreshadows Urizen’s willingness to use tyrannical means to achieve what he perceives as peaceful ends.

These methods include his squelching of Los and Orc later in the poem. He attempts to destroy imagination by wrenching Los apart—by separating the world of imaginative vision into categories and divisions—and he crushes rebellion by chaining a newborn Orc to the phenomenal world. Though his initial intentions might not have been cruel, Urizen nonetheless does this to ensure the reign of repressive reason. Further along we see the outcome of Urizen’s idealistic attempt to create just law out of furious chaos. The protective shell he builds ends up entrapping those for whom he attempted to build a world separated from chaos. Chaos creeps back in through the implementation of his iron laws. The cruelty of eternity that Urizen perceived becomes subsumed in his mechanical visions and is enacted by different means, through the laws of society rather than merely the laws of nature. The rest of the poem tells of his entombing the world in his dead stony laws and “The Net of Religion” that traps and tangles the imagination of man in a facile morality that disguises itself as the word of God (25.22). Urizen’s struggles with the imaginative powers of Los, his bounding of Los to the laws of the phenomenal world, the subjection of his people to the violence of his fabricated laws, and his enchaining of any revolutionary energy use much of the same imagery associated with Orc. Urizen is often pictured with images of enclosing, bounding, chaining, separating, and solidity—images such as iron, metal, stone, roofs, caverns, and webs. Unlike Orc though, these images do not accompany Urizen as constructs to be broken or as materials to be used against the binding of tyrannical laws. They serve the opposite purpose. Bound in Urizen’s book, these images speak of a desire to freeze thought and to control or ward off forces that cannot be understood.

This is quite apparent in the following two passages, the first of which describes Urizen’s trapping of Los in the material world, and the second of which describes Urizen dividing,

measuring, and exploring his den, the physical world. First, the following describes Los' turmoil caused by the world of Urizen:

1. Ages on ages roll'd over him!  
 In stony sleep ages roll'd over him!  
 Like a dark waste stretching chang'able  
 By earthquakes riv'n, belching sullen fires  
 On ages roll'd ages in ghastly

Sick torment; around him in whirlwinds  
 Of darkness the eternal Prophet howl'd  
 Beating still on his rivets of iron  
 Pouring sodor of iron; dividing  
 The horrible night into watches.

2. And Urizen (so his eternal name)  
 His prolific delight obscurd more & more  
 In dark secrecy hiding in surgeing  
 Sulphureous fluid his phantasies.  
 The Eternal Prophet heavd the dark bellows,  
 And turn'd restless the tongs; and the hammer  
 Incessant beat; forging chains new & new  
 Numb'ring with links. hours, days & years

3. The eternal mind bounded began to roll  
 Eddies of wrath ceaseless round & round,  
 And the sulphureous foam surgeing thick  
 Settled, a lake, bright, & shining clear:  
 White as the snow on the mountains cold.

4. Forgetfulness, dumbness, necessity!  
 In chains of the mind locked up,  
 Like fetters of ice shrinking together  
 Disorganiz'd, rent from Eternity,  
 Los beat on his fetters of iron;  
 And heated his furnaces & pour'd  
 Iron sodor and sodor of brass

5. Restless turn'd the immortal inchain'd  
 Heaving dolorous! anguish'd! unbearable  
 Till a roof shaggy wild inclos'd  
 In an orb, his fountain of thought.

6. In a horrible dreamful slumber;  
 Like the linked infernal chain;

A vast Spine writh'd in torment  
 Upon the winds; shooting pain'd  
 Ribs, like a bending cavern  
 And bones of solidness, froze  
 Over all his nerves of joy.  
 And a first Age passed over,  
 And a state of dismal woe. (10.1-43)

Later in the poem, Urizen's is explicitly pictured exploring his domain:

6. And Urizen craving with hunger  
 Stung with the odours of Nature  
 Explor'd his dens around

7. He form'd a line & a plummet  
 To divide the Abyss beneath.  
 He form'd a dividing rule:

8. He formed scales to weigh;  
 He formed massy weights;  
 He formed a brazen quadrant;

He formed golden compasses  
 And began to explore the Abyss  
 And he planted a garden of fruits (20.30-41)

Measurement, division, delimitation, and the caging of imagination and desire define the domain of Urizen.<sup>54</sup>

In Blake's writings, Urizen's world is the world of phenomena. It is a fallen world that is removed from the eternal visions of the imagination. It is a shell that encloses the mechanical world of law. Urizen creates his own horizon and his own measurable language and polices the boundaries in order to extricate and keep out the unpredictability that is promised in the unfettered movements of the less controlled language of the abyssal void around him. The town

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<sup>54</sup> The plates that accompany the verse are equally dominated by the imposing figure of Urizen who carries with him his book of laws and evokes a sense of the imagination being caged. For example, we often see Los entombed by the weight of the fiery material world. The weightiness of corporeality comes through in the composition, density, and coloring of the images.

of Machine is like this world. It is the attempted reign of mechanicity, calculation, reason merely for the sake of reason, and iron law, but it is evident that the façade of law merely shrouds the unknown world just beyond its borders. The unknown, and violent urges and passions that guide and mark the horizons of progress creep through that thin façade everywhere in the town. Machine is a place that represents the fall of imagination into convention. It shows that the laws of convention can be as violent and unpredictable as those unknowns against which they protect. The protective cover of conventionality caused by the fear of losing control can be a suffocating veil. The factory, or mill, something the viewer sees prominently in Machine, is the Blakean representation of this incongruity. The mill, like many Blakean rhetorical devices, speaks duplicitously. It is intended for creation, but it squelches the intensely creative and visionary powers of imagination. It embodies the bind of mechanicity, which harbors the possibility of utter loss of control and the slow death caused by the smothering movements of outsized mechanical thinking.

### Orc and Urizen in *Dead Man*: Fire on the American Frontier

The imagery of Machine is wrought with themes we see in *America a Prophecy* and *The Book of Urizen*. Blake's prophecies reverberate in *Dead Man*'s frontier space and are particularly noticeable in the mise en scène in the second scene of the film in the town of Machine. These works lay out visions of the confrontation between Orc and Urizen—revolutionary spirit and tyrannical reason—and *America a Prophecy* specifically speaks of the American Revolution and its aftermath.

When Blake enters Machine, Dickinson's Metalworks dominates the town with its almost church-like façade, as he sees the black smoke soil the sky. The intensity of the mill's power is heightened when Blake enters the building and the oversized gears dominate the frame. Blake's approach to the factory is thick with the feeling of death and entrapment. Hundreds, if not thousands of skulls peer at him from every corner of the town, as do the sullen and sunken eyes of the weather-beaten and skull-like faces of the townspeople. Piles of bones, hanging furs, and guns accompany the skulls. Blake's walk of death takes him past the only businesses in town besides the factory—a fur trader, a saloon, and a coffin maker—all of which reek of death and decay. It is as if Blake's walk to the factory is his final descent into hell, as the train fireman had warned him, but the hell is simply the physical world of mechanical rules in which Blake is trapped. Machine is an Urizenic shell. The sense of entrapment is reinforced by the *mise en scène*, as the narrowness of the street guides Blake to the factory and the wood slats of the buildings establish a bar-like, or cage motif, which is repeated in a few homemade cages of sticks that litter the ground. This feeling is intensified when Blake enters the cramped spaces of the factory.

Even subtle linguistic cues speak to larger Blakean themes. In Blake's mythology, Urizen's use of language separates and divides humanity from higher visions of human possibility. The language itself, rather than peering at something beyond the most tyrannically mundane aspects of everyday life, maintains a barrier and it does so by categorizing, separating, and delimiting. It builds ontological boundaries or cages around separate and distinct objects. It is ultimately a language of separation. We see this subtly invoked in *Dead Man*. As Blake enters the town of Machine, or as he descends into the most mechanical of worlds, he sees a sign that announces Machine as the "Home of Dickinson Metalworks." By the time he completes his

short, but eerie walk and enters through the large metal gate of the factory, the name of the factory, as the sign on the gate indicates, is “Dickinson Metal Works.” The words themselves start to separate. “Metal” is divided from “Works.” The naming of the place, the language itself, speaks to its function. It is a medium of separation, not vision. The boundary between Machine and the wilderness, embodied largely by the hard shell of the factory’s exterior, is a boundary that maintains within itself a world of fabrication, separation, and categorization. The world beyond Machine on the other hand, while it may or may not promise any real visionary awareness, is nonetheless less calcified. It is more fluid.

This scene brings to mind the Urizenic will to subsume all passions under inflexible laws, but conversely hints at the breaking of these laws by the revolutionary passions of Orc, and the imagination from which he is born, Los. It shows the barely subterranean chaos inherent in limit situations, which the town of Machine clearly is, and marks the industrial institution that reigns over and reigns in such chaos. The image of the factory, with its huge plume of smoke, dominates the town from the moment Blake enters. It serves as a reminder that the less than orderly space of the town, which Blake notices in the strange encounters on his walk to the factory, is in fact controlled and even dominated by the movements of industry. It is a caldron of chaos contained and even channeled by the machinations of industrial production. This Blakean paradigm of chaos and control, of unleashing and bounding, that comes through in Machine illustrates the problematic of the frontier illustrated in *Dead Man*. That is to say that the very attempt to constitute any type of boundary needs as its means, as its force, the very chaos and violence that it attempts to expel.<sup>55</sup> Constituting a boundary is then in essence always also reconstituting those forces that the boundary wants to eliminate or subsuming them into the very

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier*.

machinery of law, morality, and industry that maintain the sense of physical, intellectual, and linguistic boundaries for a people.<sup>56</sup>

It is more than conceivable that the wilderness beyond Machine is akin to the chaos that frightens Urizen in *The Book of Urizen* and that Machine itself is akin to Urizen's attempt to harness nature and mute the echoes of the unknown that hearken from beyond the mechanistic façade of this industrial settlement. John Dickinson is the very Urizen-like character in this scenario. Machine is an imposed boundary that separates the known from the unknown—it attempts to keep the void and anything associated with that wilderness, including Native Americans, out there—and allows the harbingers of civilization, in this case industrial predators, to safely enclose their ideals in a hardened façade of faux civility and tamed nature. Their world is a shell that tries to divide the unsettling powers of imagination from the limit-imposing movements of mechanicity. However, we can see in Machine that this world subsumes in its structures the violence that it supposedly eliminates.

The force of this subsumed violence is most evident in the very Blakean image of the factory, or the mill, or the Metal Works, as it is called in *Dead Man*. The mills to which Blake refers in *America a Prophecy* and *The Book of Urizen* are not yet the “satanic mills” that he mentions in later poems, but they have the same intonations. The phrase “satanic mills,” which refers to the what Blake understands as the limiting of human relationships and thought brought on by the industrial revolution, does not specifically appear in his work until the preface to his

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<sup>56</sup> This is a reversal of Frederick Jackson Turner's well-known frontier thesis. As opposed to a democracy that is constantly renewed by the rugged life demanded by the confrontation of civilization and wilderness, we see in Machine a kind of decay of democracy that is fuelled by the violent forces it supposedly eliminates. It needs to continuously subsume these violent forces to keep going and thus must seek out confrontation through continual extension of boundaries. The very creation of physical boundaries and social and moral laws becomes much like the violent forces against which these things are supposedly built.

poem *Milton*, published in various editions between 1804 and 1811, but the language of industry, calculation, measurability, and mechanization is already clear in the two earlier works mentioned. Urizen in fact appears again in Blake's *Milton* as an oppositional force to Los (poetry) and as a fallen god who attempts to control and form the material world, much like Satan. Satan's mills are also Urizen's mills and Urizen is somewhat interchangeable with Satan. Urizen also appears as Milton's false god of reason before Blake corrects Milton's errors and points him to imagination and poetry.<sup>57</sup> In all of Urizen's incarnations, he works against imagination because he is obsessed with containing an immovable and predictable world. The mill is one of the prime symbols of this tendency. Ultimately, the language of fabrication, forming, entrapment, and enclosure in *The Book of Urizen* resonates with the "satanic mills" to which Blake refers in *Milton*. Furthermore, the connection is significant in that these satanic mills appear in a poem that speaks of a New Jerusalem—"And was Jerusalem builded here/Among these dark Satanic Mills?" (1.7-8)—which is often called on as a symbol of liberty and as often associated with the founding of America.<sup>58</sup> Also, Urizen blocks Milton's path to a more poetic understanding of the world, much like the stony façade of the mechanical world represented by Dickinson initially blocks Blake's path to a deeper understanding of his world, his nation, and his history. Ultimately, Machine, like Urizen's world, is a fallen world—the opposite of a New Jerusalem or an Eden—dominated by the mills of industry. Urizen's death-like creation, and Dickinson's, is a perversion that invokes an ethos of creation to blind its

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<sup>57</sup> *Dead Man* seems to be doing to Blake's work what Blake did to Milton's. That is to say that it is recuperating, reiterating, and reinterpreting his ideas, and essentially attempting to recalibrate them in a new context.

<sup>58</sup> In *Milton*, Blake is speaking specifically of rebuilding a freer England, but this clearly resonates with his earlier interest in the American Revolution.

adherents to its extremely limited vision. It serves only to maintain itself and its facile boundaries.

These boundaries are most evident in the conspicuously monumental gates that mark Urizen's book and Dickinson's factory. In *Dead Man*, the large and heavy riveted metal gate of the Metal Works conveys a sense of a closed and contained world and the smoke we see issuing from the chimney of the factory reminds us of the fires beneath its roof. The furnaces of the factory, like a lot of the imagery we see in this scene not only have Blakean undercurrents, but also speak with multiple voices. That is to say that they offer various readings, some of which are very obvious at first glance and some of which undermine the more obvious readings. These readings are roughly equivalent to Blake's poetic invocations of the forces generally associated with Urizen and those associated with Orc or Los. Fire, or the furnace, for example, is a central symbol of industrialization. As I mentioned earlier, it is an Urizenic symbol that calls up the potentially violent forces of destruction, reification, and degeneration implicit in overblown mechanization. It portends the destruction forged in the attempt to contain the world, to close it off, and to maintain a pretense that it is fully under control. Yet it also signifies unbridled creativity, the uncontrollable human spirit, desire for change, and renewal. Poetry, for example, is associated with Los, who is a blacksmith that forges his creations in a fiery furnace. Orc's revolutionary spirit, which enables change, is also associated with fire. The fires in *Machine* are the dampened, but still existent passions of Orc, but more so the destructive forces of Urizen, and finally, they shine a light on the possibility of Blake capturing a poetic spark when he goes beyond *Machine*. Read cyclically, they are the uninhibited passion and the desire for change sparked by revolution, but also the inevitable fabrication or forging of a new system, which itself has the potential to calcify and die. Forging can be tyrannical, limited, and bound to

convention—as is implied by the identical reproductions of the factory—or it can be poetic, as is implied by the fluid visions of the poet. Fire is both a creator and destroyer.

### Orc and Urizen in *Dead Man*: Gears, Wheels, and Cogs

Images of wheels and gears, much like those associated with fire, function in many ways in *Dead Man*. The Blakean imagery of wheels, gears, cycles, and revolution is called upon after Blake walks through the outer gates of the metal works and into the factory. Several oversized gears that fill the screen immediately meet him and the viewer, overwhelming both (See fig. 9, 11, p. 178). This recalls the opening of the film, in which close-ups of the train's wheels dominate the screen, evoking both the narrative of progress that is commonly paired with industrialization and the westward movement of the train, but also the repetition, stasis, and death that comes with it. Just as the opening scene offered a reminder of this duplicitous nature by pairing the train's movement with the killing of the bison as well as the lingering atmosphere of death, *Machine* pairs the movements of industry with the skulls, coffins, and other reminders of death that surround it. Additionally, the gears in the opening passageway of the factory, which we repeatedly see throughout the edifice, are even more dominant as their scale is so inhuman.

The clearest reading of the gears is offered by Blake's prophecies. Though his works do not directly address the American West, they speak to a vision of the world that is appropriate to this expansion. They offer an alternative reading to the popular narrative of transparent democracy, expansion, and manifest destiny. In his prophecies he illustrates an alternative view

of a mechanical and visionless clockwork universe and the repetition and tyranny of an industrial system that crushes the vision of the individual in terms of economy, religious morality, systematicity, and war. We see in the Machine of *Dead Man*, and expressed particularly through the machinations of the metal works, an industrial system destroying everything that does not correspond to its worldview. The opening scenes of *Dead Man* bring Blake's poetry into an American context and give movement to Blakean images "of the system he [Blake] had called Religion-hid-in-War," a system that stepped forth "unashamed as a religion of profit in pounds and shillings, a religion whose 'God Creates nothing but what can be Touched & Weighed & Taxed & Measured'" (Erdmann 491). These giant wheels in Machine are the "'cogs tyrannic' of industrial capitalism" (491), or the "rolling of wheels/As of swelling of seas" (*BU* 3.30-31) heard on Urizen's approach.

However, the death-like atmosphere surrounding the metal works tells of the instability of this giant machine of industry that does not account for any of the consequences of its assertions of power over nature and man. The overwhelming sense of death indicates not only that this industry is a harbinger of death, but also that it is dying. It is not sustainable. These edifices, regardless of their size and sense of permanence, are merely temporary. The revolution motif throughout the film—wheels, gears, cogs, the back and forth of the ocean tide, the circular narrative of the film itself—speaks of the impermanence of worldly things and of inevitable change and repetition of human thought. The imagery of these giant wheels of industry, symbols of the motions of progress and the permanence of humanity's hold on nature, and in this case, America's hold on the new frontier, also signal the constant and irrevocable change and loss that comes with any perceived gains. In Blakean terms, the turning of these giant cogs signifies a change that is not always for the better. This change is one in which man is reduced to a mere

part of a mechanical system. It is destructive and violent. Even the fires of revolution calcify into the corruptions of tyranny. We do not see in *Dead Man* the building of a “New Jerusalem” on a paradisaal frontier, or a “shining city upon a hill,” but merely the motions of a system whose gears grind to dust anything in its path. The question remains whether these wheels signify any type of revolutionary change beyond the edifice of the factory and the town of Machine. Does Blake’s flight to the wilderness offer any promise of something outside of the clockwork mechanism, anonymity, death, and destruction represented by Machine or does it just cycle him endlessly within this mechanism.

If Blake’s journey is cyclic, as the film suggests, are there any moments of solace, or escape from this mechanism in which he is trapped or is *Dead Man* an ironic comment on this notion of cycles? Is there ever an upside to the ebb and flow of a cyclic history if everything merely seems to be repetition with little change? What is there to hope for if Orc always becomes Urizen, even if Orc rises again, only to have his energies codified into the iron laws of Urizen, as Frye suggests? Kathleen Raine, speaking of Blake’s cyclic view of history in her *Blake and Antiquity*, comments, “Materialism becomes in its turn a spent force, whose task of nourishing its opposite principle is accomplished. The new Babe—Christ or Dionysus—enters history at the moment when, in the completeness of achievement, the materialist dominance is both at its height and its limit” (71). If this is the suggestion in *Dead Man*—that “materialist dominance is both at its height and its limit”—that a paradigm shift is necessary for a relatively young nation to come to terms with its past and to sustain its future, what possibilities does the film offer, if any? In *Dead Man*, America seems haunted by and oblivious to its past, but unable to honestly engage with it, and William Blake—while his namesake’s poetry might have been quite insightful—certainly does not have the vision, nor does he capture the imagination, of a

figure like Christ or Dionysus. He is something of an empty vessel and his journey into the wilderness does not seem to offer any escape from the mechanism of his life. Even his spiritual journey out to sea brings him back to the train.<sup>59</sup> His quest for vision brings him back to a mechanical world. His attempt at flight brings him back toward a bounded destination.

### Orc and Urizen in *Dead Man*: The Labyrinthine American Frontier

The impression of inescapability that hovers over the film from the beginning, which is ultimately reinforced when the viewer realizes at the end of the film that he has in fact gone in a large and roundabout circle, is very explicitly impressed upon the viewer in the factory. The tight shots of the train ride and the cage-like composition of Machine lead the viewer through the overwhelming gate of the factory and past the several oversized gears already mentioned. The cramped and labyrinthine passageways and the legion of chains that inconspicuously dress the factory match the size of the gears (See fig. 9-13, pp. 178-79). Blake has to negotiate a series of tight turns through these maze-like passageways and past various gears, which dominate the screen and leave Blake lost and overwhelmed in this labyrinth as he ascends to Dickinson's office. At one point he even asks for directions, unaware of the signs that dot the confused

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<sup>59</sup> This could also be a suggestion that the American ethos is one of mechanicity shrouded in a veil of religion or spirituality. In other words, religiosity is already systematic. Religious systems—under which I would include any spiritual worldview, and certainly the notion of manifest destiny—is a pretense upheld in order to maintain a strict adherence to a mechanical worldview by its very promise of transcending that view. In other words, unreasonable limits are acceptable in the here and now in the service of the boundlessness promised later.

industrial landscape. The disorienting sound of roiling machinery, steam, and smoke intensify the labyrinthine impressions of the imagery.

Blake is caught in the labyrinth with no escape. Cyclic and labyrinthine imagery used in *Dead Man*, while it might hint at renewal or even the immense possibilities of human vision, more so relates the inevitable failures caused by being bound to a material world and lost in the indecipherability of language.<sup>60</sup> Blake's poetry employs cyclic imagery, which itself evokes a sense of enclosure, and the imagery of bounding, like chains, labyrinths, and caves and a host of other images, to address humanity's blindness in being bound to the experience of the senses and the machinations of the material world. We see this in *America a Prophecy* and *The Book of Urizen*. We hear echoes of this imagery in the mise en scène of Dickinson's *Metal Works*.

When Blake's poetry conjures images of bounding and enclosure—labyrinths, chains, caves, robes, and veils—things that trap or cover the body or shroud the eyes, they in one way or another signify humanity's entanglement in the material world and blindness to the eternal and abyssal void beyond the contained locomotion of everyday human endeavors. The *Metal Works* is a paradigmatic symbol of this entanglement. There are clear indications in Dickinson's *Metal*

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<sup>60</sup> As I have already mentioned, the very insertion of Blake's poetry, and Michaux's, makes the question of language central to *Dead Man*. This line of inquiry is what makes the film unique, even among revisionist Westerns. It very explicitly addresses the American West in terms of how it is produced through language. Here we see an important connection between language and space that Blake's poetry brings out of the film. For Blake there is a sort of equivalence between being tied to the material world and living within the conventions of a societal language into which one is born. This is one reason why he essentially created his own symbology. This creation is an attempt to break convention and grasp language as vision and imagination. It is a use of language quite different from that of industry. This is somewhat true of Michaux's work as well, though his words are used more as weapons against convention and they lack the highly mythological character of Blake's writing. This nexus of Blake, Michaux, and the traditional narrative of the Western, offers up one of the central tensions of the film. That is, what exactly does language offer: mere delimitation and entrapment within a system, as we see with Blake's cycle back to the train, a contentious confrontation with the world of convention, the transgression of imposed limits, or all of these things?

Works that the space of the American frontier, which is so ideologically loaded and linguistically overdetermined,<sup>61</sup> cannot in fact fulfill the grandiose visions of its making, but rather is mired in its own entangled machinery. The constant symbols of death are reminders that this space cannot manifest the destiny of plenty for all that it promises. Those lofty visions of destiny are so divorced from the material circumstances that create them that they both reinforce and undermine the events that they describe. That is to say that the almost poetic vision of the frontier life allows for the collectively maintained ignorance of a people to the real events surrounding that life, including mass genocide and the destruction of resources, but also the fact of a brutal frontier life and the almost impossible task of maintaining the moral acuity pictured in the ideology of Western life, not to mention the false sense that the majority of those who undertook such a task were doing so in a ‘democratic’ manner. This mythopoetic vision, if appropriately recognized, also undermines the events it describes because the chasm between the vision and many of the real events around which this vision is built is often so gaping that a closer look at it reveals the machinery of ideology. This is in some sense what is poetic about it, or at least mythic. The ideology of expansion is the poetry of the American frontier. It is a foundational national narrative. In a Blakean sense, man is bound to the material conditions of a brutal frontier, but blinded by the machinery of an industrial language. Blake’s prophecies however seem to hold out hope at times that there is a poetic escape from the industrial world and mechanical language, whereas *Dead Man* suggests that the industry itself, and the mechanization, is the mythic poetry of America. Perhaps this is what Jonathan Rosenbaum means when he says poetry is “something that white America is but doesn’t know and can’t

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<sup>61</sup> It is primarily determined by the promises of democracy and driven by the language of industry, expansion, and manifest destiny.

understand” (*Dead Man* 74). Any poetic vision leads back to the ideology of mechanization and industry. *Dead Man* is truly an inescapable and vicious circle.<sup>62</sup>

The labyrinth of the factory is the material, industrial, physically experienced vision of the world in which Blake is trapped. This calculated view of the world, which holds everything as material, blinds Blake. This notion is reinforced by his role as an accountant. Most importantly, it is also the machinations of an ideology of expansion that bounds the visions of people. Erdmann suggests that Blake had to “conceal the naked theme of liberty in “beautiful labyrinths”” in order to hide such visions from the tyranny of a corrupt society (461). That beautiful labyrinth is of course the language the poet uses to undermine the corporeal and labyrinthine materiality of a mechanized industrial society that subsumes the poetic voice of the visionary. *Dead Man* reverses this. It is the language of liberty that is the labyrinth which conceals the very controlled locomotion of a world that is not free. The beautiful language serves the opposite purpose here, and that is to shroud, not “naked liberty,” but ugly industry. *Dead Man* in some sense reverses Blake by suggesting that even beautiful language is co-opted by the ideologies of mechanical reproduction. We can read those images of bounding, such as the labyrinth, in more than one way, much like we can read Blake’s imagery. The labyrinth is certainly something in which humanity is trapped, whether it is the physical world or the machinations of an inescapable ideology that has co-opted even poetic language. Perhaps, as Blake suggests, there is also a possibility that the labyrinthine maneuvers of language allow for a

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<sup>62</sup> Read as such, *Dead Man* offers a much more bleak picture than Blake’s works. It essentially reverses Blake’s idea that art offers an escape from the tyrannical conventions of society by showing that poetic visions do not in fact grasp some sense of the eternal, but are themselves the machinery of corrupt society. It is the machinery itself that is most poetic. The ideology of industry is most visionary, and holds the most sway, especially because it is relatively unrecognized as ideology. Language does not ever undermine corporeal labyrinthine materiality, but always reinforces it.

vision beyond the tyrannical mundanity of material existence and beyond the unreasonable laws of authority. *Dead Man*, though it glimpses at the possibilities of poetic vision, suggests the former. American frontier poetry is the efficiently mechanical contortions of a language of liberty that shrouds a more honest confrontation with the not-so-efficient, and certainly not utterly liberating, events of the American frontier. It is a relatively well-oiled ideology.

Blake's exit from the factory makes the point one final time before he encounters Thel, an encounter that provides a completely different set of circumstances and readings. This idea of the world as a labyrinth, encased by materiality and language, is emphasized in a birds-eye-view in which Blake is shown mistakenly going the wrong way twice before he figures out how to leave Dickinson's factory (See fig. 14-16, p. 179). The shot captures his confused movements as well as the numerous hammers and wrenches strewn across the floor. The world to him is labyrinthine to the end. This motif is picked up in the rest of the film, not just in the passages of the factory, but also in the tangled roots of the forests beyond Machine.

### Orc and Urizen in *Dead Man*: Dickinson as Urizen

The images we see in the bowels of the factory are also clearly present in the space of Dickinson's office, where Blake ends up after he negotiates his way through the labyrinth below. His office picks up many of the motifs established outside of the factory in the town of Machine. The walls made of lateral wooden boards recall the cage motif from the town street. This motif, which speaks to Dickinson's worldview, is reinforced by his actions. He traps the citizens of Machine within the enclosed world of his iron will and he traps himself. His office is typical of

the very bounded world he envisions. It is a space within which he protects himself and wards off others, as he does with Blake. This space locks him into his own world. He is trapped in his own laws. We only see him within the space of his office and he sends hired minions out into the world to do his bidding. The tight framing adds to the claustrophobic feel. Death permeates the room, particularly in the form of the dead animals that adorn the walls, the most dominant of which is a grizzly bear whose face, which peers at Blake from the corner of the room, is frozen in an imposing growl. The grizzly bear is the ultimate predatory symbol of the West, both in its own right as a hunter and feared beast, but also as the victim and prey of the throngs of humanity who all but wiped it out in their movement through its territories. It is a double symbol of predation—it is the ultimate symbol of the wilderness and the ultimate symbol of the destructiveness of civilization. It speaks of Dickinson's character. Its presence in his office signifies his assimilation of those predatory instincts, which he enacts against the wild and unknown spaces from which they came.

Along with the dead animals, there is of course the symbol of violence, force, and power so essential to the Western—the gun. In *Dead Man* the gun is aimed at death, not freedom. When Dickinson seems to appear in ghost-like fashion out of nowhere, shotgun in hand pointing at Blake, he has in his mouth, another phallic symbol—his cigar. This only reinforces the aura of power in the room and reminds the viewer that the atmosphere of death that pervades *Dead Man* is an atmosphere caused primarily by the machinations of power.

Finally, a close-up shows money piled haphazardly next to a safe on the floor. Apparently Dickinson had been counting it before Blake interrupted him to request the job he was promised. The accumulation of wealth and consolidation of power is certainly Dickinson's goal as we can tell by his demeanor. In a strange way though, money, the very thing that

Dickinson wants to accumulate, is also the symbol of the impossibility of his ultimate goal, which is the utter and unending domain over his own world defined by his laws. The very fact that money is so eminently symbolic in character, is so easily exchanged and transferred, and is permanently fluctuating in terms of its value, regardless of how much of it is accumulated, essentially makes Dickinson's goal one of the most tenuous and foolish.<sup>63</sup>

Dickinson is clearly a tyrant that rules over the town of Machine with little concern for anything that does not serve the purpose of increasing his profits. His office reflects his predatory instincts, Urizenic rationale, and his control over his own arbitrary and despotic law. He is unquestionably a symbol of predatory industrial capitalism and his office has all of the trappings to reinforce his position and to speak of his pillaging of the lands on which he has built his fortune. These trappings also show how Dickinson has consumed and assimilated many of those things that he would otherwise consider uncivilized or incomprehensible. He, much like Urizen, constructs a world of his own making. He uses his own structured laws to contain those forces that he does not understand. In this way, his shell of a world provides a sort of protection for him and he must maintain his sense of law to stay protected, but he also integrates into the structured laws of his world those very violent and unpredictable forces that he has supposedly eliminated. Thus, in perpetrating violent acts as acts of law and civilization, he feels protected

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<sup>63</sup> There is an ongoing discourse in *Dead Man* concerning the figuration of social spaces. That is to say that *Dead Man* asks the question, how is social space symbolically produced and how should it be produced? Money is one of the common symbols of exchange and transfer so important to social space, though its concrete buying power often shrouds its highly figurative nature. *Dead Man* attempts to unveil this figurative nature and draw a stronger connection between different linguistic and figurative registers, such as capital and, say, poetry. Considering this, does the second part of *Dead Man*, in which Blake flees Machine, propose a kind of material impact of poetry, or language in general, similar to that of money or does it suggest that money, along with violence, is the archetypal American symbolic discourse? Blake becomes a poet, but he is also an accountant and a killer.

from them as the unshapeable, foreign, ungovernable, and hardly understandable laws of the unknown world outside of the rigid structures of his factory.

Dickinson embodies the hypocrisy of unrestrained power. He only uses law as pretense to ensure his own worldview. One example is when he starts a manhunt for Blake based on a description of Blake as a cold-blooded killer, something he knows is not true from his previous encounter with the man he thought looked like a clown and who scurried away at the sight of a gun. Dickinson in fact fits the description he uses to paint Blake. He is a killer of man and nature, he displays an utter lack of compassion for Native Americans, and he does whatever is necessary to maintain his business without any respect for those around him. He also does not uphold his own laws when this would be disadvantageous to him. We see this when he disregards his own letter ensuring Blake's position. Dickinson's office displays the hypocrisy of his power and, like the rest of the factory space, speaks to his predatory and dismissive character. It speaks a double language. This language maintains a masquerade of monumental power while simultaneously undermining the possibility of that power's permanence. Equally, it speaks of the convoluted undulations of progress reified, of lost promises, and of the opportunities of optimism seized. It calls up what Frye described as Blake's Orc cycle. It is a mythology of the cycle of generation and degeneration of the ideals of a society.

One could envision Dickinson as a once idealistic Orc who has fallen, but he is undoubtedly an Urizen type when we encounter him? We could imagine the Orc-like energy it would take to envision a civilization and then inhabit an unknown frontier in order to enact such a vision, but what we see in *Dead Man* is a man driven by greed and power and a man who wants to create a frontier vision in his own likeness. Dickinson sets up rules and boundaries. He is the law in Machine. Whatever Dickinson was when he arrived on the frontier, he is clearly a

tyrannical figure when Blake first encounters him. He is cutthroat and without compassion. He sees everything as material to be used, manipulated, and manufactured. He represents the extremes of capitalism as an utterly predatory system. We see in his office that he has consumed and integrated the ways of the very wilderness he demeans and destroys as the ethos that regulates his business practices. In his *Regeneration Through Violence*, Richard Slotkin sums up this peculiarly American contradiction:<sup>64</sup>

The businessmen and politician are hunters in their daily lives, and all desire the clean, uncomplicated expression of the hunting passion in the actual chase of the beast. Every American shares with Boone the love of the chase, the conflict, the kill. His acts demonstrate his peculiar combination of love for the wild country and the urge to destroy, digest, and remake it in his own image. (426)

This perfectly describes Dickinson's proclivity for hunting, yet disdain of Native Americans, and disregard for the land. He is the industrialist as hunter. His office is a sanctuary in which the wilderness is sacrificed to the gods of industry and the spirit of the hunter is "digested" by industrial predators. This consumption however does not generate permanence or sustainability. It requires endless fodder, something that is not available. Rather, what we see in Dickinson's Machine is the process of degeneration begun by the attempt to generate a permanent and immovable system out of fluid and impermanent laws.

### Orc and Urizen in *Dead Man*: Conclusion

Inserting Blake's symbology into *Dead Man*, which is a symbology comprised of sliding and changing values, highlights language as a figurative medium. It draws attention to the

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<sup>64</sup> For another analysis of this contradiction, see Fiedler.

slippage of words, the impassable distance between symbols and what they inscribe, and the impermanent values of language systems. Explicitly connecting such symbols to the American frontier context of industrial expansion suggests that the exchange values of industrial capitalism have their own tenuous symbology that works against the institution of a monolithic frontier mythology. Additionally, the reification of any single mythological narrative works against a young nation that wants to call itself an open-ended, forward gazing, always-to-be decided, always-to-come republic of democratic ideals. *Dead Man* imports Blake to discourage reading the frontier singularly and to highlight the frontier as a space that is continually rewritten and read into history.

Machine is used as a space of negotiation between the imaginative potential of an expanding young American democracy and the cooptation of that potential for the purposes of merely expanding industrial wealth. Machine is imagined as a space that delimits the potential of the visionary thinking of an open democracy through the rigid mechanism of predatory industrial production. The figures of Orc and Urizen, read in the context of *Dead Man*, take on the aftermath of the American Revolution and show the degeneration of a moment of idealism into a world in which people are bound to the conventions and laws of greed, genocide, and other horrors of the frontier. *Dead Man* paints a picture of the genocide of Native Americans and the predations of industry, which is directly juxtaposed to more romantic notions of the frontier, such as Turner's hypothesis of the renewal of democracy in the confrontation of "civilization" and "wilderness." We might say that *Dead Man* focuses on Orc's failures and the consequences, intended or not, of Urizen's temporary triumphs. Whether Machine invokes the notion of cyclic history, or just shows the degeneration of ideals, it is a direct hit to an American narrative obsessed with unlimited progress, generation, and growth.

In the context of *Dead Man*, Urizen brings out the paradoxical contradictions of a narrative of unlimited horizons. Besides the fact that it imagines unreal expectations of unending expansion, such a narrative is a way to delimit how we think about America's past and its relation to the present. By reinterpreting many of the themes introduced by Michaux's poetry in the opening scene—such as the inability to distinguish between the mental and the physical, the attempted recuperation of origin that must happen through language, a medium that already separates the speaker from the moment of origination, and the distinction between the visionary language of poetry and the burdensome conventions of instrumental language—the Machine scene illuminates the contradictions of this self-assured narrative.

In doing so, it gestures at the inevitably multiplicitous character of the production of meaning through reading and points to the change in context as well as the responsibility of the reader as integral parts of any reading. *Dead Man* does this over and over as the viewer has to constantly renegotiate familiar material in new contexts. The Urizenic imagery in Machine, for example, hearkens back to the opening of the film and foreshadows the last scene in which the ceiling mentioned in the opening of the film is illuminated on the screen. The horizon that hovers over Blake at the close of the narrative looks endless, but we also hear the train fireman's words, which recall Urizen's "roof, vast petrific around/On all sides He fram'd," (*BU* 7.28-29). In this closing scene we also hear echoes of the power of the mill as we see illuminated "the shore of the infinite ocean" on which "Like a human heart struggling & beating/the vast world of Urizen appear'd," (*BU* 7.35-37). The mill's power is reincarnated in nature's power. The numerous associations jump in, out, and across the space of the film, creating a web of contexts and a matrix of readings. This creates a confused and fallen space without the possibility of transcendence. One point only leads to another. Connecting different scenes in the film builds a

tension between the seeming endlessness of the sky and the invocation of the roof, a symbol of shelter and boundaries. This tension is intensified with the addition of Blake's and Michaux's works. Both of their works on their own allow for the possibility of moments of visionary transcendence through language, yet are grounded in the constant failures of language to negotiate the boundaries of our made world, if by world we mean a singular and all encompassing vision. They both describe fallen places, as does *Dead Man*. They foreground a tension between expansion and delimitation that is imagined on the screen.

The question remains, what does this possible, if only momentary, visionary transcendence of the mechanized world look like? Does Blake achieve this when he meets Thel, or when he leaves Machine dying? Does Blake escape the laws of Urizen when he flees into the western forest and does his escape offer up an alternative to Urizen's mechanized reading of the world, a less stable and more Orcian mode of reading, or a "revolutionary model of reading" in which meaning "emerges from the process of reading itself" (Makdisi 110, 112)?

The frontier town of Machine is a place of delimitation. The rest of *Dead Man* is about Blake's attempts, failed or not, to transcend the limits imposed on him by the machinations of his society. Machine is the failed promises of revolution—at least in a Blakean sense—and the descent or degeneration of the generative powers of imagination into a world determined by material wealth and the imprisoning laws of nonsensical, inflexible, and psychologically destructive reasoning. However, it also speaks to other possibilities. Though the mill in Blake's terms generally speaks to the machinations of passionless reason, a clockwork universe, and a steadfast, immovable and often cruel moral law, one also sees in it possibilities that undermine these harsh and calcifying tendencies. Blake's imagery works in this way, as does *Dead Man*'s. Neither allows for easy or singular interpretations, and both attempt to undermine the "satanic

mills” they criticize. Additionally, the interpretive movement between the film and poetry suggest to the viewer a method of reading and a play with language not bound to the conventional laws of artistic influence, tropological sharing, allusion, or temporal understanding.



Figure 4. Blake enters the town of Machine, over which the billowing smoke of Dickinson's factory looms. The mise en scène siphons the viewer's gaze toward the imposing structure.



Figure 5. Blake passes under the rigid metal gate that guards Dickinson's factory. This marks another transition.



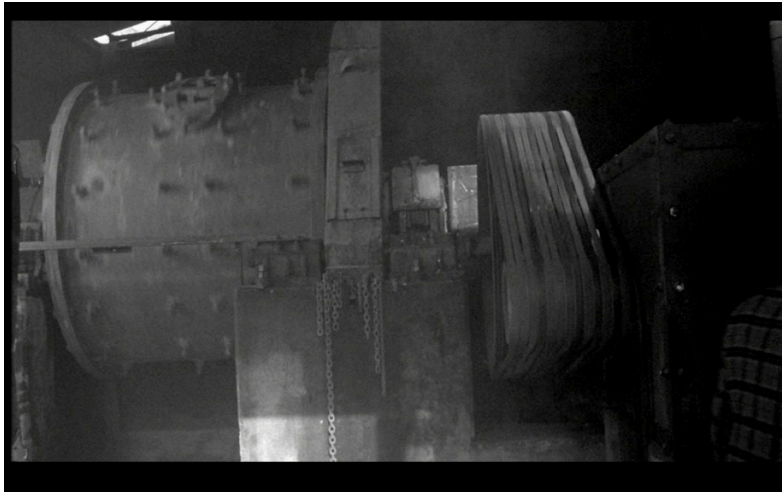
Figure 6. *The Book of Urizen*, copy G, object 1. Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress. Copyright © 2012 the William Blake Archive. Used with permission.



Figure 7. Enlargement from *America a Prophecy*, copy E, object 3. Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress. Copyright © 2012 the William Blake Archive. Used with permission.



Figure 8. Enlargement from *America a Prophecy*, copy E, object 4. Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress. Copyright © 2012 the William Blake Archive. Used with permission.



**Figure 9. Blake sees oversized gears as he enters Dickinson's factory.**



**Figure 10. Chains adorn the passageways of Dickinson's factory.**



**Figure 11. Blake passes another oversized gear as he ascends the stairway.**



**Figure 12.** Blake meanders through the maze-like corridors of Dickinson's factory.



**Figure 13.** Blake disappears around the corner of the cramped corridor.



**Figure 14.** Blake attempts to exit the factory to his left.



**Figure 15.** After realizing he is lost, Blake returns and goes the other way.



**Figure 16.** Blake finally finds his way out of Dickinson's factory.

## Interlude: Transition, Translation, Transgression, and Transcendence: From the Force of Reason to Seduction of Language

After Blake is chased out of Dickinson's factory, he goes to the town saloon to spend his last penny on a drink. While there he encounters Thel, a former "whore," as we are told by a burley and drunken patron who pushes her into a mud puddle. Blake looks on surprised, but wordless, until Thel finally looks up at him and sarcastically comments, "Why don't you just paint my portrait?" Hearing this, Blake's stupor is broken and he apologizes, helps Thel collect the paper roses she is carrying, helps her up, and walks her back to her room. Blake's encounter with Thel is a strange and seductive interlude between the hostile town of Machine and the unknown wilderness that Blake enters beyond the town. Her room is a transitional space out of which a new Blake is born. It marks a convergence of, but also a separating line between, the mechanical world of Machine and loosely constructed space of the landscape beyond Machine. It is a strange place of demarcation, but it draws out an important distinction.

This is reinforced if we look at Blake's *The Book of Thel*, which, like his *The Book of Urizen*, offers us a transition in the gate made of trees on its frontispiece, though this transition is less guarded and more inviting (See fig. 17, p. 191).<sup>65</sup> Thel's room offers a transition from Machine. If the space in Machine, and more specifically in Dickinson's factory, is one in which a vision of the world is forcefully, and often violently imposed, then the space in Thel's room is one in which a vision of the world is more tenuous, poetic, and even seductive. Attention is drawn to the artifice of representation. We can see this largely in the forced connection between

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<sup>65</sup> *The Book of Thel* was first published in 1789.

nature and artifice, such as the paper flowers that Thel tells Blake she would cover with French perfume had she the resources—the overly simplistic use of cultural tropes, more than apparent in the exchange when Blake, surprised, finds a pistol under Thel’s pillow and she dismissively comments “this is America”—and the overall aesthetic of the scene, which draws attention to its extremely fabricated and poetic aura. The world is envisioned in the space of Thel’s room, not through force or sheer will power, but through the playful, coercive, suggestive, and seductive qualities of language and vision. This marks a transition in the film from the mechanical space of Machine to the enigmatic space beyond the frontier.<sup>66</sup>

The attention to the artifice of the scene is heightened by the fact that it is the first explicit reference to one of William Blake’s poems. It is not merely a visual allusion one must infer from the *mise en scène*, but an actual verbal reference. The name Thel is an obvious reference to *The Book of Thel*. A less obvious reference, and one more akin to the visual allusions of the first few scenes in Machine, is Blake’s “The Sick Rose.”<sup>67</sup> This scene could be read as a retelling of that poem. Both of these poems bear on our reading of this scene and suggest that there is more of a connection between this scene and the ones that precede it than is initially apparent. In other words, this scene suggests that the control represented by the chains of Urizen works in many ways. This control does not just work mechanically, but also in terms of desire. *Dead Man*

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<sup>66</sup> We could also say that Blake is passing from innocence to experience, but this would be a slight oversimplification, something that I will discuss later in our reading. For a discussion of Blake’s *The Book of Thel* as a transitional place between the states of innocence and experience as explored in *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* (1789, 1794), see Max Plowman.

<sup>67</sup> “The Sick Rose” is in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

enacts the stirrings of desire inherent to language, one of the many manifestations of the creative energy that Blake works through in his poetry.<sup>68</sup>

Catherine L. McClenahan addresses this connection in Blake's work between the machinery of creative, social, and sexual energy:

Later in his career, Blake looked at the political, economic, social, and linguistic processes that had shaped 'Albion,' Blake's personification of England, into 'his' current nation state and body politic and named what he saw 'a Sexual Machine: and Aged Virgin Form' (*J* 39[44]:25). The sexual machine is a relative of the 'mind-forg'd manacles' that Blake found everywhere in London in the late 1780s and early 1790s. Both images suggest that to be 'born' as an individual or a nation into an existing culture is to be inserted into a pre-existing process of social construction that resists interrogation or change: to become part of a cultural machinery. The seeming contrast between machine and "Aged Virgin" fades quickly. Albion is a 'virgin' form, despite his 'masculine' identity, because 'he' mechanically and jealously guards 'his' preeminence as a nation and empire against all change and successfully fends off all attempts at revolution or even reform by the ruling class at home; he is 'aged' because he struggles to prevent change or growth by clinging to institutions and traditions formed far in the past. (301)

McClenahan's reading suggests that Blake equates England's refusal to embrace social change with a virgin's attempt to protect her sexual innocence. How then in this context and looking back to our reading of *America a Prophecy* do we situate Blake's reading of the American Revolution? How do we read the post-revolution aftermath that *Dead Man* envisions, which we connected to the *The Book of Urizen*? Further, how does *The Book of Thel* play into this?

First, what we see in *America a Prophecy* is a reversal of this schema suggested by McClenahan. If Blake's Albion is pictured as protecting its pristine social construction, then the beginnings of the American Revolution illustrated in his poem draw out the transgression of this construction. The revolutionary spirit embodied by Orc embraces the "shadowy daughter of

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<sup>68</sup> Cf. Roland Barthes' "from *The Pleasure of the Text*" in *A Barthes Reader*, 404-414, and *A Lover's Discourse*, particularly 13-17, 54-56, 97-100, and 188-194.

Urthona,” the “Dark Virgin,” and on the virgin shores of America engenders a new social construction based on loftier ideals (*A* 1.1, 1.11). The shores of America are represented as seductive. Revolutionary Orc embodies unfettered sexual energy. However, as we suggested in our reading of *The Book of Urizen*, those energies and lofty ideals reify into the machinery of industry and commerce and soon start to look like the Albion they had previously forsaken. This is the path suggested by the first few scenes of *Dead Man*. Thel however introduces a new set of circumstances and offers a different reading. Blake’s Thel, in *The Book of Thel*, anticipates “the shadowy daughter of Urthona” of *America a Prophecy*. It is commonly held that she is characterized by sexual inexperience. This is clearly not the case with Thel in *Dead Man*. She seduces Blake. As much as her demeanor tells us she might want to recuperate a state of innocence by rejecting her former life, we know she is sexually experienced. She offers a break from the rigid laws of Machine and her room embodies a different paradigm of post-revolution America. It is not a space of reified force like Dickinson’s factory, but a space of seduction. Her story is still about the American frontier—such as when she nonchalantly replies to Blake’s inquiry about why she has a gun under her pillow with “Cause this is America”—but it is told in a different way.

Jarmusch’s Thel looks back at the American Revolution and its aftermath and reinterprets it in different terms. She is not the mere physical power of an Orc or Urizen, but embodies willfulness and playfulness. The forceful and violent chains of Urizen embodied by Dickinson are juxtaposed to the atmosphere of coercion and seduction in Thel’s room. The scene with Thel draws the viewer’s attention to the coercive powers of fabrication and representation. It shows that the conventions of ideology are just as effectively transmitted via coercion as by force. Additionally, Thel brings with her a plethora of Blakean associations that have to do with nature

and the female figure, associations which suggest in Blakean terms that this language of coercion is ultimately as problematic as Urizen's laws. Whether by force or coercion, the language of revolution finally succumbs to the institutional forces and conventional language that it attempts to transgress.

Blake's coercive "shadowy female" is a figure of the material world and the veiled world of nature that prevents man from envisioning the freedom of imagination. This figure is often connected to the world of nature as a fallen place removed from the immediacy of poetic vision, and, as we see in *America a Prophecy*, is generally associated with earthly images, such as caves, water, and other features of the landscape. What we see in Blake's transition from Machine to Thel's room and eventually to the forest, is a movement from the artifice of the mechanical material world, in which all things are understood as coercible material for industry, to the artifice of the natural material world, in which the world is defined as a state of nature—a mode of understanding that Blake's work suggests equally veils the possibilities of poetic understanding—to the world of imagination and poetry represented by Los and Nobody. *Dead Man* uses the works of Blake to invert the way these visions of the world are read in the context of the American frontier. Industriousness turns into predation. The Edenic nature of the virgin frontier turns into the seductive veil of a place that is always already lost. The imaginative and poetic world of Los and Nobody is another ruse of an always already lost time and place. Los is loss and Nobody is equally representative of a lost world of pure imagination and pure poesis.

Blake's transition through these spaces is merely a movement from one inescapably veiled space to another, from the overdetermined world of Urizenic law, to the seductive world of nature, to the always-lost world of Los and Nobody. This always-lost state is explored in more depth when Blake encounters Nobody. In *Dead Man*, the world of poetic vision is not

more immediate than the mechanized world. This incarnation of the world is merely another vision, no more or less exact than the mechanized version through which Blake had previously passed. However, what distinguishes the third space, that space which Nobody inhabits, is the recognition of an always-lost state. The third space is a constant flight to the future rather than an attempt to recuperate the past. In Blakean parlance it is a passing from innocence to experience, a passing from understanding the world as a settled and immovable whole to understanding it as an always-yet-to-be-determined production.<sup>69</sup> Thel's room is an in-between space and an appropriate reference to explore these notions of innocence and experience. This scene does a couple of things. First, by invoking *The Book of Thel*, it speaks to the idea of man as a fallen being in a veiled world and explores the idea of the will, innocence, and experience. Second, this scene, coupled with the scene in Dickinson's factory, continues the dialogue between the voices of reason and the voices of imagination. Whereas the *mise en scène* in the Dickinson scene is dominated by images that invoke a Blakean sense of the tyranny of violent reason, the Thel scene is charged with a much more imaginatively poetic tone. This juxtaposition, however, suggests a similarity between the two as much as it suggests a separation.

The superimposition of *The Book of Thel* over this scene illustrates these similarities. *The Book of Thel* explores a young woman's attempt to pass from a world of innocence to a world of experience. In his commentary on the poem, Harold Bloom reminds us that Thel comes from the Greek, meaning "will" or "wish," which offers an ironic commentary about Thel's lack of will to

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<sup>69</sup> However, Blake's work shows us that his schema of innocence and experience that he explores in *The Book of Thel* and other works, including *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, is not fixed, nor can the two contraries be simply understood, something we will explore in more depth when we discuss Nobody.

pass from innocence to experience.<sup>70</sup> It is for this reason that at the end of the poem Thel retreats to the “Vales of Har,” described by S. Foster Damon as “a place of primal innocence” (174). In *Blake and Antiquity*, Kathleen Raine equates Thel’s story with a fall into the world of generation. She reads Thel’s attempted transition to the world of experience as the descent of the imaginative soul into the cage of matter. Raine even equates the world into which Thel falls with Plato’s cave,<sup>71</sup> the material world that is wrought with the false projections of a truer and more ideal reality (17-18).<sup>72</sup> The poem bears out both of these readings. The transition that Thel attempts is both a passing from innocence to experience and a transition from an eternal world of imagination to a mutable world of material. Innocence describes a world of eternal, ideal, and unchanging vision. To be innocent means to understand the world in these terms. Change is the realm of experience. To understand that the world is always only envisioned, and that that vision is always mutable, and impermanent is to enter into experience. With change and with the world of generation also comes death, as *Dead Man* reminds us.

*The Book of Thel* is important at this point in the film as a marker of Blake’s beginning to pass into the realm of experience and toward death. This transition includes recognizing that the world is not simply the Urizenic shell of Machine or the Edenic landscape past the frontier, but a mutable world of loss that always works its way through language and toward death. Nobody reveals this to Blake when he helps Blake become a poet and guides him to the unknown. While Thel finally “Fled back unhindered till she came into the vales of Har” (*BT* 6.22) in order to maintain an illusion of safety, Blake has no choice but to continue on into the unknown and

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<sup>70</sup> Blake, *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, 895.

<sup>71</sup> See Plato, *Republic*, 747-750.

<sup>72</sup> Raine’s reading inadvertently points to the cinematic nature of Blake’s prophecies.

experience the danger of the ever-changing veils of the world over the frontier. Blake is the one who is moving from innocence to experience, from understanding the world simply to confronting its unanswerable complexities. Jarmusch's Thel is already experienced, but she tries to recuperate a sense of innocence. This is what she likes about Blake and she tries to borrow it from him, but it works the other way around. Blake gains experience from the encounter and she loses even more of her innocence and eventually finds her death. He encounters the artifice of the world, an artifice that Thel uses in an attempt to recuperate innocence and to alleviate the pain of her harsh experiences. The most poignant example is the paper roses that Thel carries with her. They are a reminder that not even nature is "natural" or innocent. Everything is somehow created through man's visions. The world is always mediated. She, however, reveals her plan to make her creations even closer to nature when Blake questions her. Had she enough money, she would cover her paper roses with French perfume and try to make her art closer to *nature* through the processes of artificial production. Nonetheless, she does not have the resources in her harsh world, and even if she did the roses would still just be nice-smelling paper. Her world, the world between innocence and experience, from which Blake heads out into the territories, is a recognition of artifice, of the poiesis of distance and delay, and of the made-ness of our personal, cultural, ideological, and socio-political spaces. Blake picks up this recognition as Thel finds her death.

We might look at Thel's death as the fulfillment of the final line of Blake's "The Sick Rose" and read the scene in its entirety as a retelling of this poem. A brief look at the scene through this lens shows that this reading reinforces the exploration of many of the issues brought out by the web of allusions to *The Book of Thel*. The prime example is the dialogue between the ideas of innocence and experience. "The Sick Rose" is often read as an indictment of the social

mores of a society that prohibits the open expression of pleasure and condemns desire to secrecy. It is the “invisible worm” that finds the rose’s “bed of crimson joy” and “his dark secret love /Does thy life destroy.” Again, it is not the experience of desire or pleasure that is necessarily destructive here, but the necessity of maintaining the secrecy of such feelings. It is the necessity of maintaining a veil of innocence, rather than expressing its desire openly, that makes the rose sick. To take this one step further, we could compare the language of societal convention, which attempts to maintain a simplified and closed version of the world, with the language of desire, which is innately a language that is always toward the future and never settled. Desire is more in tune with the language of experience and so this poem and this scene are indictments of a world that attempts to maintain a façade of innocence rather than recognize the world of experience characterized by mediation, contaminated representation, and openness to the future.

Thel, in *Dead Man*, is not destroyed by her desire or by her experience, but rather by the machinations of a society—in this case represented by Dickinson’s son, Charlie—that will not recognize the meaning of what Blake calls experience and will use violence to enforce a vision of false innocence and simplicity. So, while Blake’s Thel retreats to a sheltered world of innocence because she is afraid of the world of experience, Jarmusch’s Thel is unable to take full cover in the protected world of the innocent. Her experience, which includes recognition of the artificial constitution of her world and the mutability of law and meaning, is detrimental in an Urizenic society like Machine that attempts to quell the chaos around it through a violent and immovable force whose consequences it will not recognize.

The scene with Thel offers up one more reading. What we just described, Thel’s dwelling in the space between innocence and experience and Blake’s beginning to transition from a state of innocence to a state of experience, is essentially a rereading of the first few scenes

of the film and also a retelling of Blake's *America a Prophecy*. This prophecy begins with Orc encountering the daughter of Urthona. This can be read not only as revolution engulfing the shores of America, but as Orc's descent into the material world—as Blake commonly uses the woman's body as a representation of the material world of nature—or as a revolutionary transition from innocence to experience, a transition that signifies a move in how language is used and understood.<sup>73</sup> Just as Orc encounters a nameless woman, “the shadowy daughter of Urthona,” Blake encounters Thel and encounters the world of experience. That is to say that his perspective of the world begins to turn around. He starts to abandon his past world of overdetermined accounting and categorizing. This transition to experience is, however, also a descent into the world of material, a world of generation that is wrought in the veils of signification. That is not to say that the world that preceded this fall was free of those veils, but that those veils were more convincing to a less experienced person. Blake's fall, then, his revolution, his emancipation, is one of recognition, not of his freedom from the fetters of a corrupt society, but of his utter, ongoing, and inescapable connection to the artifice of the world. This is the irony of his new freedom—it emancipates him into a maze-like world of endless signification. The emancipation of the revolution is as much a further fall into artifice. It is a condemnation. We see all of this in greater depth when Blake encounters Nobody and the landscape becomes more steeped in poetry and mytho-poieic language. The wilderness becomes, not the virgin land of American myth, but the chaotic and poetic space of representations, as Nobody is so apt to show Blake. Blake does not escape into a virgin wilderness, but falls further into the game of language. This is the game that Blake starts to recognize when he picks up Thel's paper roses.

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<sup>73</sup> Nobody addresses this use of language after Blake leaves Machine. This attention to language problematizes the schema of innocence and experience.

In Thel's room, Blake begins to recognize the existence of paradigms other than the rational. He moves from the mechanicity and blind rationality of the accountant into a world of desire, seduction, and signification, poesies, myth, and artifice, categories with which he struggles throughout his journey. To bring *America a Prophecy* and the idea of revolution back in, we might say that the most revolutionary of notions that this prophecy suggests is that revolution is always an unfinished possibility that is bound to the conditions of the impossibility of closure. That is to say that it is always revolving. Blake begins to accept this in Thel's room. This is what it means to be in an always already fallen world. He must embrace imperfection and face an always-delayed future.

Thel's room is one of the ever-extending borders of this future toward death. For Blake, it is a frontier in which force and seduction blend and rationality and poesy bleed together. It is a space between different ways of envisioning the world, ways that Blake plays with throughout the film. It is also a space that reiterates and revisits those themes that open the film. It complicates the frontier of the mental and physical world by suggesting that this construct is already built through signification. It suggests that the world is an inevitably fallen space of ever-receding origins that is attached to the linguistic openness to the future. The constant nostalgia for this loss of what never existed is particularly palpable in this scene. Thel is certainly sensitive to it. Finally, the movements, spacing, and distances inherent in linguistic mediations are characterized as essential to the world of experience and the borders between conventional language and visionary language are explored and blurred. The distinction starts to disintegrate a bit, and continues to be tested when Blake meets Nobody and is guided through the confused narrative of his life.

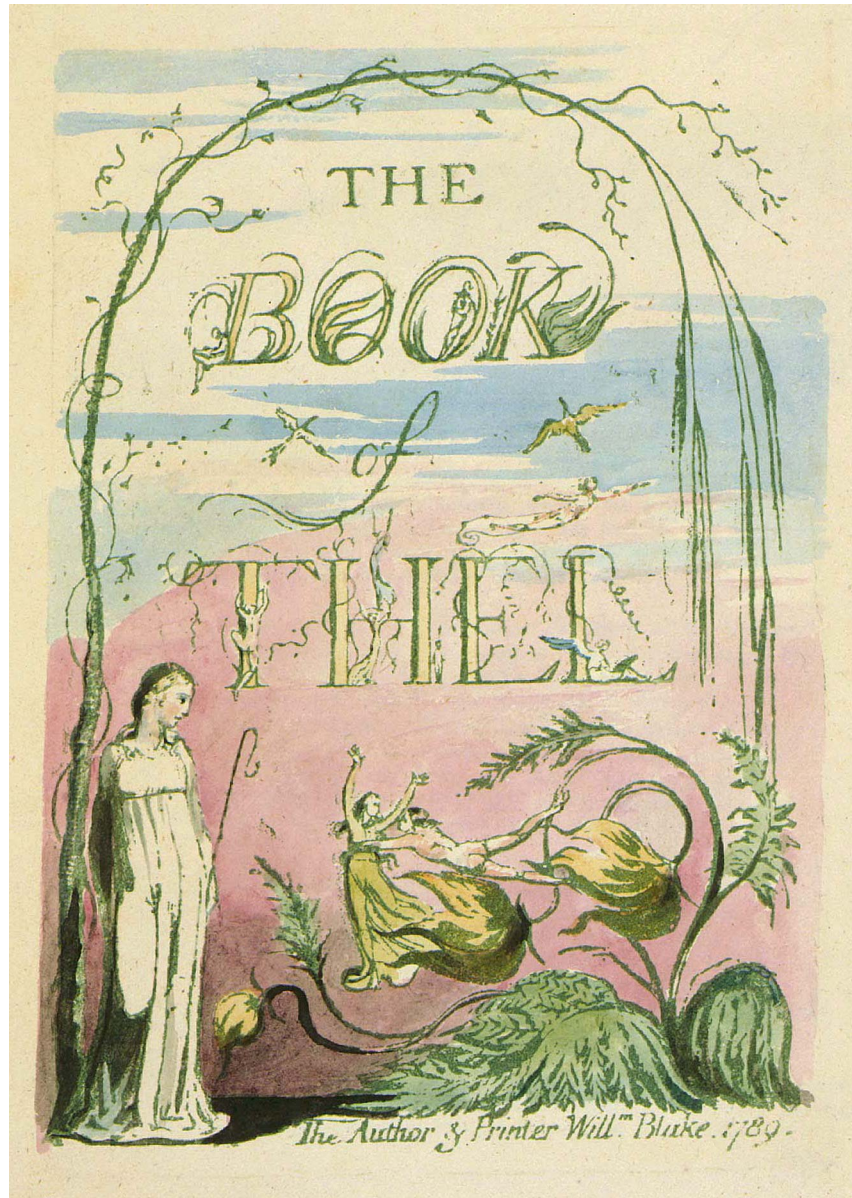


Figure 17. *The Book of Thel*, copy H, object 2. Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress. Copyright © the William Blake Archive. Used with permission.

### PART 3: Unbound Flight

When Blake flees Machine, the aura of the film takes a turn and with it new themes are addressed. What transpires when Blake crosses the frontier of Machine is the bizarre and often comical relationship between Blake and Nobody, a Native American whom Blake unwittingly and reluctantly adopts as his guide, both physically and spiritually. Juxtaposed with the development of this relationship are the even more bizarre interactions of the three hired killers who are following the supposedly murderous Blake. The film follows these two groups and their travails mainly through a series of cross-fades, which add a dream-like quality to the narrative. The purpose of this part of the film is to more fully explore the implications of Blake's presence in this American frontier landscape. It does this largely through three scenes, each of which offers a slightly different perspective. The first scene is when Nobody and Blake become better acquainted around a campfire. This is when Nobody discovers Blake's name and is taken with him as a poet, painter, and "killer of white men."<sup>74</sup> This scene is typical of their encounters, which are typified by misunderstanding and linguistic disconnection, yet a deep appreciation of each other. The central questions of this scene and those related to it are raised when Nobody

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<sup>74</sup> Nobody's reverence for Blake's poetry draws our attention to the importance of poetry and words in general for Native American life and renders a similarity between Nobody's vision of the world and that illuminated in Blake's works. It shows a similarity, not just between Blake's works and the figurative language of Native American life, but, in terms of our discussion, a similarity between the theoretical paradigms we have discussed and the Native American understanding of language, history, and space as innately figurative. One might suggest, as the film seems to do, that the Native American understanding of language represented by Nobody is more sophisticated than a more instrumentalist or positivist understanding. For a discussion of the reverence for the power of words in Native American cultures, see Trigger and Washburn, 454-462. For a reading of the artistry of Native American myth and the importance of "the power of imagining culture," irony, repetition, and figuration in Native American oral tradition and history, see Kroeber, 272-284.

recounts a few lines of Blake's *Auguries of Innocence*,<sup>75</sup> something that Blake thinks is a Native American proverb, or "Indian Malarkey," as he calls it.<sup>76</sup>

Nobody is surprised when Blake does not remember having written it. Their two differing perspectives drive the comedic strangeness and irony of these scenes. The second scene is when Blake is alone, having split with Nobody after a minor argument. He sees two sheriffs who are hunting him, and he kills them and delivers the lines that Nobody had recited earlier. At this point, he seems to at least partially accept his role as poet. There are several scenes connected to this one, scenes in which Blake is alone and seems to challenge the perspective of the world he had previously held. These scenes offer up Blake's perception of himself and his new world. The third scene is one in which Blake and Nobody encounter a Christian missionary at an outpost. The missionary brutally judges Nobody and tries to trick Blake. Blake ends up coolly killing him, having by this point fully adopted his status as an outcast. Again, Blake's poetry is quoted. This scene positions Blake's perspective, along with

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<sup>75</sup> *Auguries of Innocence* appears in what is known as *The Pickering Manuscript*, published in 1866, long after Blake's death. The estimated time of composition for the poems is between 1800 and 1804.

<sup>76</sup> By moving beyond the implied Blakean imagery of the opening scenes and more explicitly incorporating his poetry in to the dialogue, the film raises a set of questions about strategies of reading. In the film, we go from the implications of the epigraph borrowed from Michaux to the implied Blakean prophetic images in *Machine* to the actual use of words from Blake's works such as *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Auguries of Innocence*. The words Nobody borrows have a way of eluding or even undermining the reader through their seeming simplicity, though they actually have a very amorphous quality. On repeated readings, their meanings change, even to have a meaning contrary to what they first appear to be saying. They change through the depth and ambivalence of their figurative language, whose expanded meanings accumulate through different contextualization and interconnections in Blake's oeuvre. *Dead Man* further complicates the situation through a broader dissemination of already ambivalent tropes.

Nobody's, against the priest's dogmatism, which is in many ways an extension of the laws that Blake experienced in Dickinson's town of Machine.

The incorporated lines are affective in themselves, but also resonate audibly with the *mise-en-scène* and action of the film. These scenes go beyond the implied Blakean themes of the evocative *mise-en-scène* in the beginning of the film to more explicitly engage William Blake's vision. The most noticeable of these parallels is that both the poetry that is borrowed and the film deal with how the world is perceived from various perspectives. They both offer up seemingly simple themes and dialectical pairings only to show the slippage between such pairings and in doing so challenge orthodox perceptions of meaning based in simple contraries. In Blake's case, this might be the traditional ideas of heaven and hell, innocence and experience, reason and imagination, life and death, convention and vision, or the manmade world of rules and the unfathomable void beyond these rules. Much the same holds true for *Dead Man*. Vision, perception, perspective are all central to Blake and we see this translated in *Dead Man* in the altered visions of the protagonist as he enacts his poetic license. We also see this through Nobody, with his unique perspective and peyote-induced visions. Furthermore, the film offers multiple perceptions of the world through the eyes of a "savage," a "white man," a priest, a bunch of bounty hunters, a predatory industrialist, and so on. Finally, *Dead Man* incorporates the weighty and impenetrable symbolism of Blake's works to suggest that the world is ultimately an unsettled and open-ended collection of perspectives, a continuous passage to something unknown and not entirely predictable. Vision, this part of the film suggests, is the fluid play between chase and flight.

Many new questions are raised by this part of the film; questions about how we perceive and construct the world, questions about how the senses both open and delimit meaning, and

questions about how we symbolically encounter the unknown. The dominant imagery of enclosing and enchaining so evident in the first few scenes of the film is challenged by a different set of images that dominate when Blake encounters Nobody. If the images in the first part of the film reinforce the notion of delimiting perception, then the images in the latter part of the film suggest a loosening, if not breaking, of this perception. The images that dominate are those of traversing, crossing thresholds and frontiers, and blurring boundaries. There is a greater feeling of inconstancy and indeterminacy, which is reinforced by the fact that Blake is slowly dying and losing consciousness throughout the rest of the film. Blake's new journey—post-Machine, past the established boundaries of civilization, and to new horizons—marks a rupture from his previous state and initiates a new symbolic structure of discontinuity, openness, and the plurality of metaphysical and social space. The new space of ever-retreating horizons is markedly different than the previous spaces of final destinations and delimiting boundaries. The dialogue kindled in this space, between Jarmusch's American West and Blake's poetry, between Blake and Nobody, asks the audience to consider all of these themes that have to do with perspective and the limitations and possibilities of perception. Additionally, the very overwrought insertion of Blake's language and the way the film clearly connects Blake's poetry to actions in the film draws our attention to how one's perceptions illuminate a particular vision of the world. That is to say that perception is a type of writing that formulates a world or, more simply stated, our perceptions paint our world. We see this as Blake changes his language and his world changes with it. For example, Blake's perception of himself alters when he recites his namesake's poetry as he willingly kills his adversaries. Ultimately, this superimposition of filmic and poetic texts suggests that the act of perception is always an act of vision and inscription in an always-undetermined world. In other words, language determines perception.

## Chapter 4: Nobody Envisions Blake

### Disintegrating Distinctions

After their initial encounter, in which Blake wakes up to the surprise of Nobody trying to carve a bullet out of his chest, we meet the hired killers who chase Blake and then we revisit Blake and Nobody by the fireside. This begins the strange conversation between the two and officially introduces William Blake, as poet, painter, and “killer of white men,” to William Blake and to Nobody. It also indirectly, and then directly, leads us to Blake’s poetry. The first incantations Nobody utters compare the stones in the fire with the sun:

Nobody: The round stones beneath the earth . . . have spoken through the fire.

Blake: What?

Nobody: Things which are alike, in nature, grow to look alike, and the speaking stones have lain a long time lookin' at the sun.

Blake: The speaking stones?

Nobody: Some believe they descend with the lightning, but I believe they are on the ground and are projected downward by the bolt.

The second line here—“Things which are alike, in nature, grow to look alike, and the speaking stones have lain a long time lookin' at the sun”—echoes the alchemical philosophy of the Smaragdine Table of Hermes Trismegistus,<sup>77</sup> a text, which, as Kathleen Raine points out, Blake refers to in *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*.<sup>78</sup> She also cites one of the table’s more famous axioms, which Blake clearly refers to in this prophecy: “That which is above is like

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<sup>77</sup> For the table, as well as a brief overview of Hermes Trismegistus, see Linden, 27-28. For a broader history and explanation of Hermes Trismegistus and Hermeticism, see Ebeling, and for a broader collection of Hermetic texts, see Copenhaver.

<sup>78</sup> Blake composed *Jerusalem* between 1804 and 1820.

that which is beneath, and that which is beneath is like that which is above, to work the miracles of one thing” (76). Though the film indirectly references this rather than quoting it verbatim, there are some parallels—namely in that they both draw a connection between an earthly world and a world “above,” a natural world and a spiritual world that are connected through the symbolic medium of language.

If we look at Blake’s *Jerusalem* and delve a bit into the reference to Hermes Trismegistus, we see even more interesting connections with *Dead Man*. Blake’s prophetic work brings back some themes we have already discussed, such as the equation of psychic space and physical space, rationality as a shelter from the void of existence, something that we saw in *The Book of Urizen*, and the imaginative and poetic powers of Los working against the binding powers of the natural world. We also see in this prophecy, and at this moment in *Dead Man* when Blake crosses an important threshold on the American frontier, a renewed interest in the breaking of these bonds of rationality and material reality. Nobody’s monologues, for example, begin here and continue through the film to suggest an ineffable reality outside of rational thought and beyond the natural world to which he and Blake are attempting to transition. In the same vein, the frontispiece of *Jerusalem* speaks to transitions as it pictures a man going through an arched door. The first chapter of the prophecy is entitled, “Of the Sleep of Ulro! And of the passage through/Eternal Death! And of the awaking to Eternal Life” (4.1-2). This talk of passages and the sleep of Ulro (the material world), and entering into “a void outside of existence” (1.1) makes sense at the point in the film when Blake leaves the rules of the “civilized” world he knew, crosses the threshold of the frontier into the wilderness, and begins a death-like journey, as Nobody reminds him when he asks, “did you kill the white man that killed

you?” This episode of the film challenges the presumptions of earlier episodes. It begins to erode the laws that Machine represented.

This is most palpable in the part of *Jerusalem* in which the Smaragdine Table of Hermes is mentioned: “The Spectre builded stupendous Works, taking the Starry Heavens/Like to a curtain & folding to his will/Repeating the Smaragdine Table of Hermes to draw Los down/Into the Indefinite, refusing to believe without demonstration” (91.32-35). In this selection, Los, the figure of imagination and poetry, is resisting the Spectre of rationality, who is attempting to draw Los’ imaginative powers back into the realm below. Los is trying to escape the world of rational distinctions, generalized categories, and “demonstration.” He embraces a realm of vision. He refuses to exactly equate the two realms and rejects the Spectre’s folding over of the one onto the other. These are two visions represented by Los and the Spectre, or by Jerusalem and the emanation of Albion, and Albion himself. In the context of *Dead Man*, these visions are evident in Blake the accountant and Blake the poet, or in Nobody and Dickinson, or in a slew of other characters and associations, some of which we should briefly consider.

First, Jerusalem, the shining city upon a hill, resonates in the context of any discussion of American space and the comparison here to Albion, the industrial giant, is appropriate to this moment in *Dead Man* when the frontier is crossed. We see in Machine the rumblings of an industrial giant and the film’s version of the atmosphere of this industrialization, namely death and destruction. Past the frontier of Machine we also see the specter of death in an ironic version of an Eden-like wilderness.

Finally, this episode, which is set around Blake’s major transitions—from civilization to wilderness, from accountant to poet and killer, and from life to death—illuminates the contours of Blake’s journey, not only by bringing in this very American notion of a new

Jerusalem, but also by inserting this Blakean reference to the Smaragdine Table of Hermes Trismegistus, which draws out a symbolic association between a world “above” and a world “below.” Though the historical Blake ultimately rejected the magical and alchemical conclusions of the table, as he shows us through Los’ rejection of the Spectre, the figure of Hermes Trismegistus still resonates interestingly in *Dead Man*. It turns out that Hermes Trismegistus, the combination of the Greek god, Hermes, and the Egyptian god, Thoth, is the perfect nexus by which many of the themes we have been addressing in *Dead Man* come together. Most importantly, both are gods of magic and writing.<sup>79</sup> Hermes is also an orator and god of eloquence and communication, a guide to Hades, the underworld, a messenger, a trickster, a thief, and a god of borders who guides travelers, among other things. Thoth is god of wisdom, a messenger, and the inventor of language and writing. Nobody resembles both of these figures, particularly in his inventive use of language and his guidance of Blake.<sup>80</sup>

His appreciation of Blake’s poetry and his belief in the reincarnation of the poet are a turning point in the film, which goes from a strange and bleak revisionist Western to a meditation on the nature of language, death, transference, the human odyssey to symbolize the world, and America’s attempt to reconcile the contradictions of its past and the possibilities of its future. By evoking Thoth, the inventor of writing, and Hermes, and all of the associations connected to these communicators, such as magic, cunning, trickery, wisdom, the delivery of messages, the guidance of travelers, and the transgression of borders, the film turns a peculiar commentary on the consequences of expansion in the American West into a bizarre hybrid of

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<sup>79</sup> For an explanation of Hermes and Thoth, see Ebeling, 3-7

<sup>80</sup> Nobody certainly displays some characteristics of Hermes as a guide and some characteristics of the Native American trickster figure, particularly in his use of language. For a general discussion of the trickster figure and a comparison of the Native American trickster figure and Hermes, see Radin, 111-211.

criticism and poetry about the different uses of language used to construct social and metaphysical spaces and national narratives. Nobody is quick to point out the many-faceted implications of Blake's frontier poetry, of the consequences, fruitful and detrimental, of his writing of the world, and of the imposition of his understanding on the world he confronts. Nobody knows Blake's writing as a *pharmacia* of sorts, in all of its resonances, but most particularly in that it serves as guide and detour.<sup>81</sup>

Nobody's incantation by the fire, Blake's first real interaction with him, begins a series of queries into common dichotomies—such as good and evil, innocence and experience, life and death, idea and form, reality and hyperreality. It begins to blur or rearrange some of these distinctions, move towards language as vision and away from convention, and embrace the poetic as an appropriate mode of understanding. All of this questions the notion of destination implied in Blake's original train trip and moves away from the more static realm of Machine, away from the pursuit of the self-appointed and self-interested lawman of the border and his hired killers, toward the constant flight of an open and undecided future. The law and language of Blake's destination is not decided, but always-to-come.

## Innocence and Experience

Soon after Nobody's discussion about the likeness of the stones and the sun, he finds out that the white man's name is William Blake, after which he responds with surprise and then proffers the first lines in the film taken directly from Blake's poetry, lines which become a kind

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<sup>81</sup> See Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," and Plato, *Phaedrus*, especially 514-515.

of compass that guides much of the inquiry of the film moving forward and reflects on some of its previous moments:

Every Night & every Morn  
 Some to Misery are Born  
 Every Morn and every Night  
 Some are Born to sweet delight  
 Some are Born to sweet delight  
 Some are Born to Endless Night (*AI* 119-124)

The “sweet delight” and “Endless Night” of these lines refer to the key Blakean ideas of innocence and experience, which are at play throughout *Dead Man*, but also to questions about perception and states of mind. The light and darkness of morn and night describe these modes of perception, but not in the most typical manner. Neither darkness nor light or night nor day operate as simple dichotomies with set meanings. The notion of night as concealing and day as revealing, or the common use of darkness as a symbol of evil versus the good of light, is complicated, just as the meanings of all the pairings in the poem are put into question. Neither is more true nor false than the other, or more illusory or visionary, and neither is more indicative of innocence or experience. Innocence and experience are intricately intertwined. The slippage in meaning is so disorienting at times that the poem becomes almost unreadable. The reader recognizes that these auguries of innocence are actually quite intricate and complex. They can only be read, and innocence glimpsed, from the shrouded world of human experience. The poem opens by showing us this augmentation of experience through the power of the human imagination:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
 And Heaven in a Wild Flower  
 Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
 And Eternity in an hour (1-4)

Infinity and eternity are grasped in the human realm through the heightening of the senses. Blake's play with the capitalization here is telling, as it is through the rest of the poem. The words "palm of your hand" and "hour," the limited time and space of the human senses, remain lowercase, while the "Grain of Sand" and the "Wild Flower" are expanded by the imagination to show "Infinity" and "Eternity," the space and time beyond everyday human proportions. We notice this also in the stanza used in *Dead Man*. "Endless Night" is capitalized while "sweet delight" is not, telling us that perhaps that "Endless Night" is the more encompassing experience, mode of perception, or state of mind. Night looms larger, even at the end of the poem, when it is juxtaposed with day:

We are led to Believe a Lie  
 When we see not Thro the Eye  
 Which was Born in a Night to perish in a Night  
 When the Soul Slept in Beams of Light  
 God Appears & God is Light  
 To those poor Souls who dwell in Night  
 But does a Human Form Display  
 To those who Dwell in Realms of day (125-132)

Day seems to be the less primary realm, or less encompassing, while our Dwelling in it seems to be of a larger order. The capitalization of "Dwell" here suggests that our experience of the realm of day is *apparently* more encompassing, but perhaps less acute, than our experience of the realm of night. Night, the darker realm, but the realm from which our perception is born—"the Eye/which was Born in a Night to perish in a night"—seems to be a place of confined dwelling, but a place or a mode of perception, unlike day, that is attuned to the true breadth and wonder of Light. We notice that Night and Light are connected because they are both capitalized, unlike the word day, which remains cut off from the darker desires and visions of the nighttime realm. Hence, day is not Light and Night is not merely darkness. Additionally, the apparently larger realm of day is shrunken and the acuity of light in the darkness of the nighttime realm is shown

to be an acuity that actually expands vision. The readings can go on. For example, we have not even considered the lack of punctuation, a lack that makes it more difficult to negotiate the meanings of this poem. Is the last line, for example, a statement or a question? The poem is rich and indeterminate in its possibilities, which is why it is completely appropriate for this moment in *Dead Man*, a moment that takes a turn toward the realm of indeterminacy, or, we might say Night, but hints at the possibility of a broader engagement with the intricacies of space, time, and world.

Blake might term this engagement artistic or visionary and that seems to be the implication in *Dead Man* as we move from the stringent mechanistic of Machine to the more fluid space of the forest. Northrop Frye explains Blake's vision and describes the revelation of the artist, who he reminds us accepts "the mental nature of reality," when he writes, "when something is revealed to us we see it, and the response to this revelation is not faith in the unseen or hope in divine promises but vision, seeing face to face after we have been seeing through a glass darkly. Vision is the end of religion, and the destruction of the physical universe is the clearing of our own eyesight" (45). Vision enlarges, whereas dogma delimits and makes the world smaller. Vision is flight from the limits imposed by conventional thought. It is not predestined nor does it have any destination. Through the employment of the human senses, perception, and imagination, art is capable of momentarily capturing and enlarging the realm of human experience and opening up vision. "It is the function of art to illuminate the human form of nature," Frye proclaims (123).

This idea of "the human form of nature" and the notion of enlarging vision through art, which is apparent at this point in *Dead Man* when Nobody's introduces Blake's *Auguries of Innocence*, requires a closer and more nuanced look at what Blake calls innocence and

experience. We have been juxtaposing innocence and experience to darkness and light, though these pairs do not equate exactly. Frye, following Blake in describing the world as largely constructed by the human mind, calls light and dark and innocence and experience “aspects” of the human mind. He gives as an example a couplet from *Auguries of Innocence*—“The Bat that flits at close of Eve/Has left the Brain that won’t Believe” (25-26). He calls the bat “that aspect of the human imagination which prefers darkness to light” and he point out, “this bat is the exact opposite of the bat which is a symbol of doubt” (123). By showing us this reversal, Frye not only comments on the depth of Blake’s poetry, but makes the important observation that seemingly simple and dogmatic categories and symbolic uses of language are impermanent aspects that point to nuances in the world, not settled and permanent traits of immovable substances or beings.

Taking into consideration this observation and the preceding analysis, we might understand *Dead Man*’s borrowing of Blake’s *Auguries of Innocence* as opening up the question of how these two modes of being, or these “aspects” of the human mind, innocence and experience, relate to a narrative of America. What is the relationship of innocence and experience in an American context? Is there a tension between the two terms? How do these terms relate to the birth and development of the country? Why does *Dead Man* evoke them?

There are competing notions of innocence and experience at work throughout *Dead Man* and the use of *Auguries of Innocence* draws our attention to those often-contentious notions and points to the necessary tension on which the typical narrative of America depends.

Innocence and experience—to which we could juxtapose heaven and hell, “sweet delight” and “Endless Night,” or even Orc and Urizen—the poem suggests are neither good nor bad, but diverse in character and merely aspects of being that coexist within the human mind and that are

each harnessed at different moments. Innocence, for example, is both a pre-fallen and energetic state of purity and a blind naïveté. Experience is a state of being tried, tested, and knowledgeable, but also a fallen state that is forgetful of the joys of innocence, jaded, and blinded through learning. Both exist within the mind and as an extension in the world that the mind creates. Thus Blake's American story is one of the ongoing tension of innocence and experience. We see it in the imaginative and revolutionary spirit of Orc and the rigid law of Urizen. There is a tension between moving forward and looking back, between energy and rigidity and reification. *Dead Man* poses the question of how a young country like America, having matured and broken the bond with England, maintains the picture of innocence of its pioneer state without simply reverting to those aspects of the experienced state that it rejected. Nobody seems to suggest that it does both. That is to say that one may act out of experience, yet maintain a picture of innocence or one may even think oneself is innocent while undertaking acts that are clearly within the realm of experience.

This is the situation with most characters in the film, though at different levels and with different consequences. Thel, Dickinson, Nobody, and Blake all fit this situation. Dickinson is clearly the most within the realm of experience as blindness. He rules with an iron fist, but still maintains his pretense of innocence and even victimhood. Thel knows she is experienced, but attempts to recapture an air of innocence. Nobody seems the most truly innocent, and certainly in a Blakean sense in that he is the most attuned to the powers of imagination, yet he has been tainted by the white man's learning. He is also the most experienced in the sense that he has clearly witnessed the horrors of the fallen world, generally as a victim of those horrors. Blake, though, is the most interesting. He seems so innocent in his new and strange landscape and he never seems to grasp any of what Nobody says to him, yet he eventually becomes a steady and

cool killer. He becomes the most efficient killer when he embraces his role as poet. What does this mean? He gains the most experience as a killer, a role that we could safely put within the realm of “Endless Night,” when he embraces what his namesake would characterize as the realm of imagination and a conduit to the prelapsarian state of innocence. His access to a state of innocence seems to be only through the most heightened realm of experience. That experience is through poetry, through writing, through language. Innocence and experience are inextricably linked. This paradox—which is formulated in the film more broadly, but in an analogous sense, as the archi-textural linguistic operations of containment and transgression—is a major crux of *Dead Man* and perhaps the best commentary on how the film envisions America, the world, and what we call reality. Jonathan Rosenbaum sums this up well when he suggests poetry is “something that white America is but doesn’t know and can’t understand” (*Dead* 74). That is to say that “white America” has constructed, in the realm of experience and through the most intricate means, a picture of innocence, but it cannot see the less than innocent means by which it has constructed that picture. The film suggests that this *picture* offers the only innocence available and that art is not capable of truly envisioning something more pure.

## Writing and Violence

One of the major offshoots of this central paradox is the connection between the word and violence, something that is conspicuously emphasized in *Dead Man*. Guns, words, writing, killing, and poetry are all connected at various points in the film and Blake, in his roles as a poet, painter, and “killer of white men,” asks the viewer to consider the proximity of writing and

violence. Nobody is the primary voice that marks Blake's violence as poetic. Nobody recognizes a connection between the language of Blake's life as an accountant and life as a poet, but he also draws a distinction between the calculated language of Blake's past life and his poetic language as a killer. There are subtle cues throughout the story that point to this distinction, such as when Nobody initially sees Blake passed out on the ground and tries on his hat and glasses. In Chaplinesque style Nobody mimes Blake's speech by comically moving his mouth. This gesture is an indication that Nobody understands the calculated speech of the white man as empty and without vision. This is how he sees Blake the accountant. Nobody reiterates this in his story about all the white men he saw in each city he visited when he was kidnapped. He thinks all of the men in each city are the exact same people and wonders how so many people were able to so quickly move from city to city. This shows that in his mind all of these people are anonymous copies of each other, miming the same calculated language and functioning as part of the same mechanical system. One is like the other and they all embrace the world as an utterly rational, understandable, measurable, and calculable place. This is the world from which Blake the accountant hails.

This dialogue between language as a rigid medium and language as a visionary medium continues later on when Blake cannot find his glasses. He says, "I seem to have misplaced my eyeglasses. I can't see clearly." Nobody responds, "Perhaps you will see more clearly without them." Again, this is an indication to Blake that the clarity of sight, much like the clarity of rational language, does not guarantee a deep understanding of the world. Opposed to his need to see the contours of the world clearly and rationally, Nobody suggests, "Quest for vision is a great blessing, William Blake." This vision, that of a poet and killer, is of a higher order for Nobody, but the conundrum remains as to why he draws such a strong connection between acts of

violence and acts of poesy. At this point, we already understand why Nobody would make a connection between rationality and violence, but his association between violence and poetry is slightly more enigmatic. His characterization of Blake seems to be drawing a distinction between two modes of violence and writing, one a coldly rational one and the other a passionately creative one. While Blake and Nobody are around the fire, and shortly after he first incants the lines from *Auguries of Innocence*, Nobody draws the most distinct association between violence and poetry when he responds to Blake's fascination with the pistol he had taken from Thels' room:

Nobody: William Blake, do you know how to use this weapon?

Blake: Not really.

Nobody: That weapon will replace your tongue. You will learn to speak through it, and your poetry will now be written with blood.

On the surface, this exchange most obviously draws attention to the gun-ridden mythology of the American West, the glorification of violence as an heroic act of nation building, and the genocide of Nobody's people. It suggests that America's poetry is violence, that its highest achievement is conquest through violence, and that it has glorified violence to the level of the epically poetic without really consciously recognizing this fact.

Nobody's words do suggest all of this, but something more is happening in the strong association of Blake's poetry with violence. Why does poetic and visionary writing seem to be marked by violence in Nobody's mind? Why is killing poetic or why are Blake's violent acts considered poetry? Or, is it that Nobody is not just making a comment on violence in America? Is he also making a simple comment on poetry and on writing in a more general sense? Is he suggesting not only that violence has become a kind of poetry in the American West, but also that poetry itself has a type of force that we might compare to an act of violence? It marks, it

inscribes, it creates, it imposes its own vision, and it makes a vision of the world. The poet, as the Greek *poiêtes* suggests, is a maker. An act of *poiesis*, or *poesy*, is a forceful and creative act of imagination that imposes a new way of seeing and understanding the world. It makes a world. It has an inscriptive and even violent force in that it dictates its vision. The implication in *Dead Man* is that the realm of *poiesis*—which is somewhere in the forest between the fixed boundaries of the living that we see in *Machine* and the unknown space of the dead toward which Blake travels—is a realm of transition, change, and flight in which the power of imagination breaks the more static boundaries of the world represented by the mechanization of a place like *Machine*. The realm of *Machine*, on the other hand, poses as a static realm of mere reproduction, representation, or *mimesis*.

The static world of *Machine* poses the world as mere representation of something more real beyond its boundaries and suggests that the world is as it is and cannot be changed. It works to level out the world and make everything an imitation of a singular mechanical vision. It imposes itself as copy. The world beyond the boundaries of *Machine*, the world of flight, is a realm of creation and imagination that embraces the unpredictable and forceful act of inscribing one's vision in the world. It rejects the complacency and blindness of representational originalism. Force, violence, and poetry are all taken for what they are—acts that mark and change how we understand the world. They are linguistic acts that mark the world and make the world through the material consequences of imagination. The main difference is between a language that recognizes its own abilities to forcefully mark the world and one that attempts to hide this ability.

We might pose this dialogue, as we did earlier, as one between an ideology of representation and ideology of inscription. One of *Nobody's* tasks as guide to Blake is to bring

out this distinction and to show Blake that the world works via the latter though behind the veil of the former. Nobody helps Blake come to terms with his poetic acts, and in doing so also comments on the racist and genocidal acts of people like Dickinson who justify their actions by acting as if the world they create is merely the world they are given. He does this when he challenges Blake to encounter a ragged group of fur traders. He makes Blake accept his role as poet and “killer of white men” and while doing this also combats the very ideology of those who would merely present the world as a representation and mark their own actions as somehow predestined. In many ways the new Blake, the poet, replaces, or at least adjoins, Blake the accountant. Vision replaces representation. Poetry is a force that marks the world and violence is America’s most eloquent poetry, at least from Nobody’s perspective as he looks back East at the encroaching civilization.

## Heaven and Hell

Later on in the story, Nobody borrows a proverb from William Blake’s “Proverbs of Hell.”<sup>82</sup> He does so when discussing the killers who are following Blake and himself. When Blake asks what they should do about the killers following them, Nobody responds with “The eagle never lost so much time as when he submitted to learn from the crow.” The illumination from which this proverb is taken resonates with the film (*MHH* 8.39). What we see in the illumination, among other things, is a bunch of soaring eagles, some of which are flying above a

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<sup>82</sup> This is part of the longer work, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which articulates Blake’s theory of contraries.

scene slightly reminiscent of the final Scene of *Dead Man*. In this small picture, there are a few boats sailing on a large body of water next to some cliffs. One of those boats appears to be going over the horizon much like Blake's canoe does at the end of the film. We also see a person staring up at a tree, an image that is also repeated in Blake's actions in the film (See fig. 18, p. 217). This illumination and the words that Nobody borrows from it anticipate the final scene of *Dead Man* and forecast the implications of that scene. These words also reinforce many of Nobody's previous Blakean interventions and continue the dialogue between language as energy and vision and language as a delimiting force.

So how do the eagle—a very loaded symbol in a general context, in a Blakean context, and in an American context—and the crow work in this schema of vision versus delimitation? In other words, how does this proverb reinforce Nobody's claim to language as poetic vision versus language as a merely representative function that enforces boundaries? First, we should situate the various resonances of the eagle as a figure. Shortly after juxtaposing the crow and the eagle in "The Proverbs of Hell," Blake advises the reader, "When thou seest an Eagle, though seest a portion of Genius. lift up thy head!" (*MHH* 9.54). The eagle is the energy and imagination of genius. It soars so as to break the boundaries of conventional thought. This is consistent with its general association with creativity, understanding, renewal, and power. In this sense the eagle is clearly a symbol of the unbridled energies of imagination. Orc, in *America a Prophecy*, compares himself to "an eagle screaming in the sky" (1.13) when he is breaking his chains, harnessing his creative powers, and emerging as a revolutionary force. At the height of his imaginative powers he compares himself to an eagle. Certainly the powers of this symbolic bird resonate with America in a more general sense as well, but in more than one way. The Eagle is a symbol of soaring imagination and power and a breaker of boundaries, but it is also a predator.

S. Foster Damon mentions that especially in Blake's imagination the eagle is not a static symbol, much like genius is not a state of being, but a momentary symbolic engagement with the world. Damon suggests, "when the Eagle of Genius is starved, he becomes (as in the Bible) an eater of carrion, an unclean bird" (112).<sup>83</sup> In other words, momentary flashes of imaginative genius can easily be starved in an atmosphere in which the conventional wisdom of dead ideas takes hold. This iconic American symbol is destabilized by the proximity of Blake's work to *Dead Man*. Such instability underscores the precariousness of any national symbolic order. In the schema of delimitation versus vision, the invocation of such symbols as the eagle is shown to open up the possibilities of vision rather than delimit any particular symbolic order. What we get in the second part of *Dead Man* is a vision primarily provided by Nobody. His world is not one of the conventional boundaries to which Blake is accustomed, but one of transition, transference, and translation, something reinforced by his mixed-blood, multicultural education, and outcast status. It is a world in which the flight of language is not bound by conventional laws. In the symbolic order of Nobody's making, the eagle—the symbol of "starved" genius—is not merely held in opposition to the crow, but can also be quite easily compared to its fellow "eater of carrion."

The symbolism of the crow is quite pervasive. The crow is understood as a general harbinger of death. Its blackness, besides evoking death, is often seen more generally as a bad omen or as a sign of sin in Christian mythology. In some Native American traditions the crow is a messenger, thief, a trickster, or false teacher, a kind of Hermes. It is often a shape-shifter and as such represents transformation. It is also sometimes seen as a creator of the world, a keeper of

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<sup>83</sup> The eagle is also a tool of tyranny and torture in Hesiod's *Works and Days* and *Theogeny*, in which the Prometheus' liver is eaten and regenerates day after day. Orc, a fiery rebel, is very Promethean, something Blake's works clearly echo.

the sacred law, or a sign of wisdom.<sup>84</sup> Many of these symbolic functions seem contradictory when we initially look at them; the notion of wisdom, the sacred law, or the creator of the world, does not mesh very well with the idea of an eater of carrion or harbinger of death. However, in the context of Blake's writings this juxtaposition makes plenty of sense. Blake understands conventional wisdom and the prevailing laws enforced by sacred institutions as dead ideas and tricks of the material world. They are inventions, but not true creations that harness the powers of imaginative genius. Additionally, Blake tends to understand contraries, not as contradictory, but rather as equally important parts of human existence. That is the overarching message of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. "Proverbs of Hell" plays with this message of contraries through a series of dialectical pairings, which challenge the readers' perceptual and moral equilibrium.<sup>85</sup> The eagle and the crow, heaven and hell, devils and angels, good and bad, and so on, are not things or states or even moral qualities, but rather merely continuously changing and momentary aspects of the mind. One is not an angel or a devil, or an eagle or a crow, but is both at the same time and enacts a crow at times and an eagle at other times. These are both just aspects of the human mind. Damon explains this when he writes, "In analyzing the universe of man's mind, which contains heaven and hell and nature, Blake anticipated the theories of Freud. For Blake's 'Energy' is the libido, the Id, and his 'Reason' is the censor, the Superego" (262). He continues to describe the poetic mindscapes of Blake's writings in psychoanalytic terms: "The forces of the Id are the fountain of life; its 'devils' are the original thinkers, essentially revolutionists, who are always disturbing to orthodoxy" (262).

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<sup>84</sup> The raven, which is part of the crow family, also serves these symbolic functions. For a description of the raven in Native American culture, see Gill and Sullivan, 254.

<sup>85</sup> *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* was first published in 1790.

Nobody picks up the Blakean task of exploring and deconstructing these dichotomous pairings of the mind and superimposes Blake's pre-psychoanalytic explorations of the mind onto the mental landscape of *Dead Man*. All of the various shades of meaning are harnessed by Nobody when he mentions the eagle and the crow, as well as when he borrows other Blakean pairings. These shades can be disorienting, but make much more sense when understood in the context of Blake's thought. Furthermore, if we look at the proverb of the eagle and the crow, there are some clues that help us temporarily ground its linguistic flight. One question we might ask to get at some of these clues is, how does this particular pairing work in the context of the American West and more particularly in terms of the narrative of *Dead Man*? How do the characteristics and symbolic import of the eagle and the crow translate to the film?

Though the eagle is described and used in many different ways, all of its robust characteristics speak to energy, imagination, and genius. The eagle is a soaring and strong bird that evokes upward flight and intimates the breaking of boundaries. It evokes movement. This is why Blake uses it as a symbol of energetic genius. The crow on the other hand, though it has many different qualities, tends to evoke more of a corporeal and earthly sense. Even its evocation as a figure of wisdom, whether we understand wisdom as a positive or a negative attribute, is a more grounded vision. Wisdom, as opposed to the flight of vision, is accumulated knowledge. It is weightier, more contained, and more burdensome than vision. Whereas the crow seems more tied to the ground in its symbolic function as trickster, and association with wisdom and death, the eagle seems to function more as a figure of flight and energy. While the crow creates a world of convention, delimitation, and boundaries, the eagle's soaring flight figuratively attempts to transcend such boundaries through imaginative, or artistic, genius. The eagle is poetry. The crow is the more mechanical and conventional wisdom, grounded and

dying. The eagle's energy enlivens. The crow's wisdom, which in Blake's reading is essentially an accumulation of rules, encloses and limits such energies. Both of these forces though, as *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* proposes, are necessarily intertwined and indivisible.

In his "Dialectic in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*," Harold Bloom refers to this tension of opposites as a progression "in the ironic sense of cycle" and explains it as "dialectic without transcendence, in which heaven and hell are to be married but without becoming altogether one flesh or one family. By the 'marriage' of contraries Blake means only that we are to cease valuing one contrary above the other in any way" (78). This tension between heaven and hell, between the energy of poetic vision and the bounding forces of reason, is vital according to Bloom. This is definitive for Blake and very important for the narrative of *Dead Man*. The film attempts to display these tensions and explore their imbalance in the myth of the American West without offering a definitive resolution. It picks up from Nobody's first incantation of *Auguries of Innocence* after Blake has crossed the frontier of Machine, carries through Nobody's dialogue with "Proverbs of Hell," and continues toward the finale scene of the film. The last scene displays cinematically, and much in the same manner as a Blakean illumination, what Nobody repeats verbally throughout the film.

Bloom further addresses this tension that we also see in the last scene when he states that the "problem is where the stuff of life comes from; where does Reason, divinity of the 'Angels,' obtain the substance that it binds and orders, the energy that it restrains?" Blake's "diabolic answer," he claims, is that it steals it "from the *Urgrund* of the abyss" (80). *Dead Man* cautions that death spouts from this same *Urgrund* from which the "stuff of life" springs. The tension of energy and restraint destroys as much as it creates. This schema of movement, flight, and the transcendence of boundaries over and against the imposition of limits and the building of

linguistic enclosures becomes more and more explicit as the viewer approaches the final scene. Nobody's mention of the eagle and the crow anticipates this final scene where the overarching significance of the film comes together. What we see in the eagle and the crow, a conversation about the imposing institutionalized linguistic boundaries of the past and present and the constant attempt to transgress or redefine these boundaries, we see repeated at the end of *Dead Man* in a different manner. Instead of the eagle and the crow, we see the sky, the ocean, and the horizon, a vision that is anticipated by the Blakean illumination from which the eagle and the crow are appropriated.

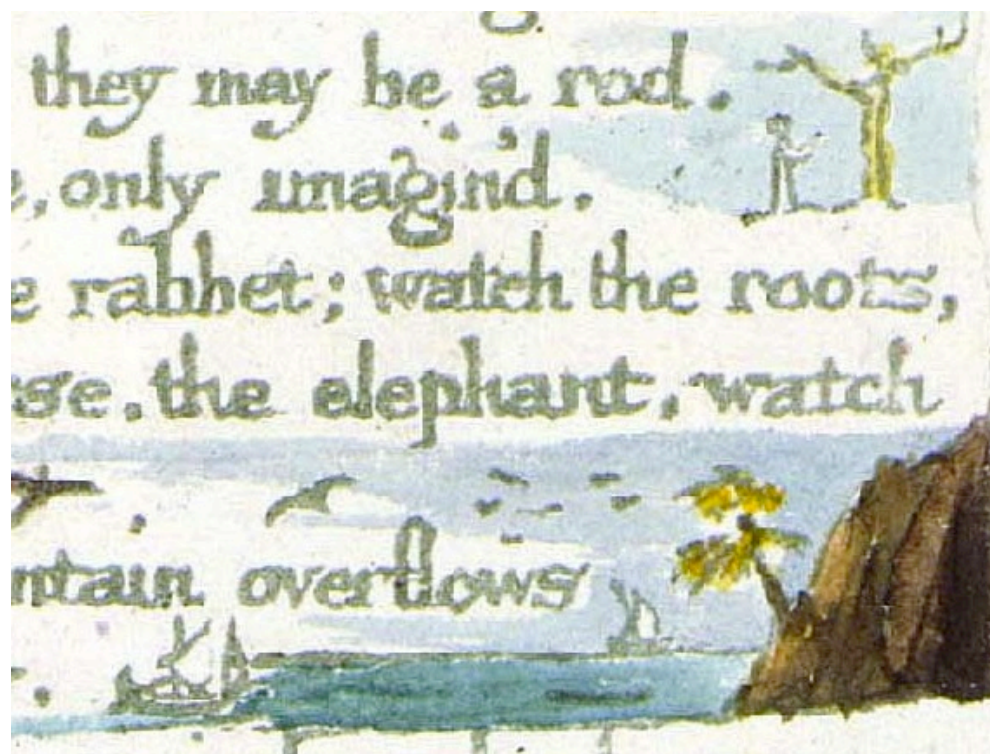


Figure 18. Enlargement from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, copy D, object 8. Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress. Copyright © 2012 the William Blake Archive. Used with permission.

## Chapter 5: Blake Envisions Blake

### Perspective

The few times when Blake and Nobody temporarily split up, it is clear that Blake has adopted the persona that Nobody has ascribed to him. There are some very clear verbal and filmic references to the poems and Blakean antimonies to which Nobody had referred in his initial encounter with Blake. “Proverbs of Hell” and *Auguries of Innocence* are both evoked again and continue to explore one of the central lines of inquiry of the film; that is, how do we conceive of innocence and experience in an American context? *Auguries of Innocence* is specifically referenced when Blake himself recites the lines Nobody had shared with him earlier—“some are born to endless night”—just after killing two sheriffs that are following him. “Proverbs of Hell” is more subtly introduced through the visual imagery of the film. It is another moment in which cinematic images speak the language of Blake’s poetry. There are two instances in which Blake seems to be very intent on observing the trees around him. These moments, when situated with the things to which Nobody had referred earlier, subtly gesture to other proverbs in Blake’s “Proverbs of Hell.” This happens most clearly when a few images in the forest call up the line, “A fool sees not the same tree as a wise man sees” (*MHH* 7.8). This is another line that draws on notions of innocence and experience, perspective, and convention and vision, all of which are themes that the film continues to explore through Blake’s solo encounters with the world around him. Also, the imagery of the forest and a few more Blakean references throughout these scenes repeatedly draw on these perspectival antimonies.

Blake initially splits with Nobody after a minor argument and then again when Nobody leaves him to rest after having a peyote vision of Blake as a dead man. There is a continual back

and forth between Nobody and Blake concerning Blake's glasses and the idea of vision. At one point Nobody suggests that Blake might see better without them. Here, he is contrasting Blake's accountant-like notion of vision as an instrument with his own vision of the world as formed, dismantled, and informed by the poetic visions of the imagination. Shortly after Nobody has a vision of Blake, he suggests that Blake might be better-off without his glasses, and tells Blake that "Quest for vision is a great blessing," Blake is left on his own to find his own visions. It is right after this that he begins to embrace his role as poet and killer of white men and even repeats some of the lines Nobody had recited to him. It is also after this that the filmic images begin to echo Blake's poetry and reinforce some of the main questions of *Dead Man*. At this point in the film these questions are anchored by the images that evoke the proverb, "A fool sees not the same tree as a wise man sees." This line is first echoed when Blake nonchalantly urinates on a solitary tree and then seems to have a revelation as his gaze lingers upward on the tree. A point of view shot focuses our gaze on the tree for a few lengthy moments. Shortly after this, Blake discovers a dead fawn, lies down next to it and again peers up at a tree. This time we see his intent gaze and then we see another shot lingering on the tree as the camera spins through a series of cross-fades between Blake's gaze and the twisted branches of the tree. Again, this poetic gesture is noticeable. Finally, this gesture is repeated when Blake is riding on horseback with Nobody through the forest and the two of them are shown constantly gazing up at the stupendous redwoods. The audience experiences the magnificence of the trees through a series of lingering point of view shots. These episodes draw greatly on Blakean imagery and all of its implications and raise the question once more of foolishness and wisdom, innocence and experience, or seeing and vision.

*Dead Man* uses the magnificent images of the redwood forest, not just to draw on Blake, but also to draw on a tradition of forest imagery in American literature. The film juxtaposes these two traditions to create another dialogue. In 1835 Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that within the forests of America “a profound obscurity reigned” (25). Hawthorne most famously exploits this obscurity of the forest to explore the thin socio-religious façade and dark moral landscape of the puritan settlers’ life.<sup>86</sup> In doing so he uses the forest, with its dark and twisted passageways, as a symbol of moral uncertainty in an uncanny and indifferent, if not downright hostile, world. Hawthorne’s forest, in its own way, is much like the tree Blake uses as a perspectival compass of innocence and experience. The dark and unknown space of the forest, and man’s ability or inability to tame it and make it into a pastoral space, is used often in American literature to explore the ever-changing social and moral spaces of America’s history. In these discussions there is also a strange tension between innocence and experience and a lack of equilibrium concerning the way such terms can be situated in the American narrative of conquest. Returning to Blake’s work, this inability to stabilize these two terms is exactly what is addressed, though, in his normal fashion, he does not attempt to stabilize this antimony, but rather shows that these terms exist side by side. He marries heaven and hell, innocence and experience, by placing them next to each other within the same person or same society, but not by putting the terms in complete opposition or eliminating either one. These faculties are merely momentary states of mind, not eternal states of being. The fool and the wise man are in fact the same person, particularly in the case of Blake, who stumbles back and forth through the forest between blind ignorance and nonchalant mastery.

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<sup>86</sup> See, for example *The Scarlet Letter*, and his short stories, such as “Young Goodman Brown.”

Blake seems to have mixed moments of confusion and epiphany when he peers up at these trees, his gaze leaving the tangled and rooted floor of the forest and weight of the canopy that blocks out the sky (See fig. 19-26, pp. 236-37). Damon reminds us that for Blake forests are “accumulations of error, where the light is gone and the way is lost” (410). He tells us in more detail, “Blake’s forests are composed of dead trees, symbolizing the complicated rooted errors either of the social order or of the dogmatic mind” (141). The forest in *Dead Man* is a reminder and a continuation of this order. Its barred structure entraps Blake and the viewer (See fig. 27-28, p. 238). It is a harbinger of things to come. The audience, with Blake, stumbles on a few characters, including a missionary and some fur trappers, to remind them of this. Blake however, with Nobody’s help, is attempting to momentarily transcend the conventional boundaries of such an order. He left Cleveland, he crossed the frontiers of Machine, and he keeps moving on. His upward gaze at trees in the forest is another sign of this attempt to break such boundaries (See fig. 23-26, pp. 236-37). Damon also reminds us, “the Tree, like the Sunflower, though it aspires upward, is rooted in this world” (410). The tree and the forest are both symbols of the entanglement of the material world, the social order, and human thought and language in general, but the tree also offers a small symbolic glimpse upward at something beyond the twisted and confused web of the forest floor. The redwood in particular rises above the forest floor to aspire upward. The arboreal landscape entraps Blake, but the trees of the forest also guide his vision upward and beyond to something else. They free the imaginative faculties from the grounded world. Perhaps Blake is the wiser for having wrenched such a plane of vision from dense forest ground or perhaps he is more foolish for seeing such vision as a way to escape his inevitable spot amidst the roots of the forest. Perhaps he is both.

## Poetry and Violence

Blake's new awareness of his surroundings and the increasing cinematic allusions to "Proverbs of Hell" coincide with his adoption of his namesake's poetry as well as his increasingly casual proclivity for violence. All of his killings up to this point of the film—after he and Nobody temporarily part ways—are haphazard, hesitant, clumsy, and unskilled. After Nobody takes Blake's glasses, tells him that he might "see better without them," and talks about Blake's "quest for vision," Blake develops a new confidence, a new sense of identity, and a more reflective aura. He is less lost and more certain of his quest, at least temporarily.

He immediately fulfills Nobody's premonition that his gun would replace his tongue. His first act marks violence as his poetry and signals the violent potential of his writing. Violence and writing are equated. Poetry enacts, brings in to being, marks, or inscribes a vision. It brings the force of its vision to bear on the world. It imposes on the world. It imposes a picture of the world. In fact, it imposes the world or even imposes or enacts the world. Blake's first solitary action strikingly draws this connection between writing and violence. He kills two sheriffs that are following him. He happens upon the sheriffs who had come into his camp and are reading the wanted notice that describes him. One of them points his rifle at Blake and asks if he is William Blake, to which Blake replies, "Yes I am. Do you know my poetry?" After asking this question, Blake immediately draws his pistol and coolly, calculatedly, and with little expression shoots the sheriff in the chest and then the sheriff's rifle fires and inadvertently shoots his partner. Blake walks up to the other sheriff, who is still alive and writhing on the ground. After observing him for a few extended seconds Blake says, "Some are born to endless night" and then he kills him. The scene then cuts to a very stylized shot of the two dead sheriffs, one of which

has fallen with his head in the fire. His pose looks very statuesque, almost like a religious icon, something that Cole Wilson (Lance Henriksen), the sole person left giving chase to Blake, notices when he arrives on the scene after Blake has already left.

This scene aligns the institutions of law and religion much like many other images already mentioned, the most memorable of which is the image of Dickinson's church-like factory, which also aligns law and industry. The suggestion is clear that the visions of the world represented by these institutions work against the visions of the artist. Blake comes up against these institutions throughout the film and is in a constant and violent struggle to escape them. He casts himself out from these institutions. It is only Nobody, a fellow outcast and a visionary who knows Blake's poetry, who allows Blake to envision an alternative to the rigid, systematic, and limiting visions of these violent institutions. Nobody's encouragement and recognition of Blake's poetry allow Blake to envision and even write into existence a world of imagination rather than a world tied to the conventions of the material world and ruling social hegemonies. He starts to transform his own social and psychological space. He is a poet in the sense that he is a creator. He no longer accepts that the world is already there created before him, but actively works to shape his own circumstances. To suggest that this act of violence and creation is somehow an act of innocence, as the film proposes by calling once more on Blake's *Auguries of Innocence*, seems a bit counterintuitive and strikes the viewer as deeply ironic, particularly at the moment in the film when Blake actually starts to look as if he has gained experience and lost his naïve ways, but this is a typically Blakean reversal. It is ironic in a sense, but Blake's role as a kind of warrior poet is also actually a sign of innocence in the sense that as he becomes the creator of his own world he discovers a new unfettered and untainted picture. Innocence here means to have access to a type of purity outside of the conventions of society. It is a glimpse of

innocence gained by intense vision. Ironically, it is only the experience of the artist, having gone through the tribulations of an entangled, fallen, and lost world that is capable of achieving a kind of innocence through the rebirth of his own vision, a vision that can only be described as violent and even earth shattering. Blake, in his visionary moments as a poet, temporarily glimpses the innocence of an eternal world free of the convolutions and mechanizations of organized human society. His art is religious in this sense, but different than the dogma of those harbingers of civilization that he encounters. It is revelatory without being religious. Additionally, he is temporarily in the strange situation of being experienced—at the height of his imaginative powers as a poet—and innocent—capable of envisioning a world not delimited by the rules of societal dogmas.

The trajectory of the film, from Blake as a naïve and innocent visitor amongst the hardened settlers of the frontier to his first killing of Charlie and finally to his role as a calculated and experienced killer himself, is thrown into a different light by this new perspective. This perspective draws out two different types of violence; one is a violence of creative and visionary expansion that aims to break limitations and enlarge the world, while the other is a violence of retraction and containment that aims to fix a singular vision of the world. The conversation between the delimiting and bounding forces of convention, authority, and law—those forces that seem to exert a violence of containment—and those expanding forces of the imagination that attempt to exert a violence that works against containment, continues through this section of the film and will continue later when Blake runs into the missionary post, but the terms are complicated and confused. The spaces of social convention, from which Blake flees, are spaces of experience in the sense that they are the maze-like world of human error. They require knowledge of the systematic apparatuses of convention for survival. They are certainly violent

in their positing a singular understanding of the world and their immoveable rigidity, and in a willingness to eliminate competing visions. It might be hard to make an argument that these spaces also speak to innocence, meaning that they are somehow pure, guiltless, or free from moral wrong, but they do speak to simplicity or a simplistic understanding of the world as a predetermined and singular phenomenon.

On the other hand, the spaces that we might call those of vision and imagination are spaces of experience in that they require the great visionary skill and tact of the artist to create. This is the trajectory that the film seems to be taking from the beginning. But, as I mentioned, this experience ultimately aims to provide a vision of the world that is freed from the fetters of dogma and is in this sense purer, and even innocent. It is a paradoxical innocence achieved through the artistic violence of the poet. It is a contained space refashioned by the visionary transgressions of the artist. The narrative of the film even puts us in this position in its circularity. Blake ends up where he began. All of the experience he gains brings him back to a state before his fall into the world of experience, or a world of dogma.

## Dogma and Poiesis

Positioned against Blake's newfound independence, which is defined largely by his flight into the world of poetry and his ease with the ways of violence, are a few characters that Blake stumbles upon in the forest, who are reminders of the dogmatic rules of places like Machine that Blake has left behind. These characters also represent the ever-approaching encroachment of the rigid dogmatism into the less settled spaces of the West. The most clear-cut example of this

dogmatism and its shortsightedness is the Christian missionary whom Blake and Nobody encounter at a trading post. A few fur trappers who read verses from the Bible as they sit around a fire provide an additional example of the possible depravities of rigid dogmatism. These two situations, in which the a theological justification is used to contain a limited view of the world, are juxtaposed to Blake's newly discovered freedom with the poetry of language, a poetry that provides him vision and flight from the reified conventions of his society. Notably, with Nobody's help, he eliminates these conventional obstacles and through the use of his poetic violence moves further beyond the established frontier.

Blake's first real antagonistic encounter in the woods is with a group of fur trappers who highlight the absence of the conventional home-space so essential to the traditional Western. This ragtag amalgam of cannibalistic fur trappers serves as a perverted representation of a family of frontier settlers, complete with a man in drag who plays the role of the mother providing moral lessons by reading the Bible around the hearth, in this case a campfire. This scene provides a harsh anti-Western critique of the role of the home, the family, and Christianity in shaping the ideals of the American West. The scene revolves around the cross-dressing Sally (Iggy Pop) who plays the mother that "teaches" moral lessons from the Bible and cooks for her children. When Blake approaches the family, the scene proceeds as the three obsess over him, all the while feeling his "soft" hair. One of the traders, Big George (Billy Bob Thornton), seems most determined to "have" Blake and as a result starts to quarrel with Benmont (Jared Harris), the last fur trader. The quarrel eventually leads to the killing of all but Blake and Nobody.

This scene serves the purpose of opening up the space of the home as a space of moral inquiry. Along with Blake's movement West, and away from his home, this tenuous and obviously corrupted space reflects a more ambiguous moral space, and with this symbolic

ambiguity so typical of the wilderness, a more violent insistence on maintaining the solid façade of order. The fur trappers, for example, enact this contradiction by being sure to read their Bible, though they are also clearly willing to indiscriminately kill Blake. The film shows the crumbling of these domestic structures to signal the growing gap between the world as we see it in all its gruesome violence and the world as it is told through the increasingly poetic visions of Blake. In other words, the falling away of the home is the falling away of any kind of ground. The absence of the home is representative of the absence of a solid structural ground or material referent to which Blake's visions correspond. It is also a revealing of the thinly veiled impositions of domestic dogma that attempts to maintain a vision of stability—even on a ground of gruesome violence. The offshoot of the domestic scene, as Nobody knows so well, is the mass slaughter of Native Americans who had previously inhabited the land and the grave and indiscriminate destruction of resources, including the animals whose furs these trappers carry with them.

This is also the point in the film at which Blake unwittingly accepts his role as a killer, something about which Nobody has been trying to convince him, and a role that he later adopts more intentionally. Blake has to shoot one of the trappers to save himself and Nobody. He, in some way, associates himself with these killers in that very act. Blake, although he might not realize it yet, is similar to these killers in at least one way—in his use of violence. However, we might distinguish his acts from their acts. He violently destroys a dogmatic vision of the world with his own poetic visions, much like his namesake deconstructs the angel's vision in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. We might describe this violence, following Blake's namesake, as revolutionary, revelatory, or visionary. It has a character different than the violence of dogmatic maintenance, but it is nonetheless forceful. The Bible and common frontier myths of the family

provide their symbolic structure, while Blake provides a different and less contained structure of poetic imagination. *Dead Man* replaces the image of the idyllic Christian home of the frontier with this band of fur traders who attempt to violently impose their own moral code as they haunt the countryside. In the beginning of his journey Blake's code is his unwitting poetry. It replaces the concrete images of the Western homestead with images like these, but more importantly it highlights the distance between the material world and Blake's poetry about that world. In this scene, he unwittingly begins to create the poetry of the West, which he himself does not recognize until later (in the scene I already mentioned in which he kills the sheriffs). He provides an alternative vision. He moves from a language of dogma veiled in a picture of rationality to an openly poetic language.

Blake's last encounter with a white man before he reaches the ocean is at a missionary outpost. This encounter is quite different than that with the fur trappers, mainly because Blake has embraced his role as poet and killer of white men by this point. He is much more confident in his own creative and destructive powers. The clearly corrupt missionary refuses to sell tobacco to Nobody, though the missionary offers up a tainted blanket, a common practice that Nobody is well aware of and had already explained to Blake. The film reminds us that vision is only a matter of perspective when Nobody enters and the missionary says in a shocked yet cuttingly cruel manner, "May our Lord Jesus Christ wash this earth with His holy light . . . and purge its darkest places from heathens and philistines," to which Nobody replies, "The vision of Christ that thou dost see . . . is my vision's greatest enemy." Nobody's response to the missionary's violent invocation is appropriated from Blake's *The Everlasting Gospel*, a poem that problematizes the traditional dichotomy of good and evil by offering up different and often

opposite perspectives or visions of Jesus Christ.<sup>87</sup> The poem ends, “Both read the Bible day and & night/But thou readst black where I read white” (e.1-2, e.13-14). The last line suggests that the vision of the world offered up by one party, in this case the missionary, paints a picture of man’s acts as the evil that darkens the world. The other party in this case, Nobody and Blake, see those same acts and visions as signs of revelation.

Blake, now outcast and hunted like Nobody, certainly shares Nobody’s perspective. He posits his visionary and poetic violence against the violence of dogmatic tradition. We see this when Nobody asks the missionary if he has any tobacco, to which the missionary rudely replies “I sure don’t.” After that, Blake asks the same question, surprising the priest who suddenly finds some tobacco from his “own stash,” and only for “friends.” As he goes to grab the tobacco, he seems to recognize Blake from the wanted poster and he asks Blake for his autograph. Blake, recognizing the ruse and the gun that the missionary is hiding behind the counter, stabs the pen through the missionary’s hand and into the wanted poster. The blood from this violent act stains the paper. Blake says, “There's my autograph,” then the missionary damns his “soul to the fires of hell,” and Blake responds by coolly shooting him dead and then commenting, “He already has.” Blake accepts his damnation. He in fact embraces it and rejects the contained view of the world offered by the missionary’s or the fur trappers’ dogmatic hypocrisy. He provides the “dark” foil to their supposedly enlightened vision and at this point in the narrative he fully accepts this role. He fully accepts the inscriptive violence of imaginative vision over and against the scriptural dogma of engrained and traditional regimes of the past. To his vision he adds his signature.

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<sup>87</sup> *The Everlasting Gospel* was composed in 1818.

## Passing Through

At one point in the film, Blake and Nobody temporarily part ways and Blake enacts Nobody's vision of him as a poet. After Blake experiences himself as a poet he reunites with Nobody, who wakes him up and incites him to "Drive your cart and plow over the bones of the dead." This, like much of Nobody's speech, sounds a bit obscure, but does not seem too out of place as it sounds like it could be a Native American proverb. Nobody often speaks in proverbs, many of which we know are borrowed from William Blake, and his language is not always immediately easy to understand. It is obscure, poetic, metaphoric and often ironic. Blake himself certainly misses the point most of the time until later in his journey. His killing of the sheriffs and his use of his namesake's poetry indicate a small change. This change continues when he reunites with Nobody. It seems that Nobody's words start to take over Blake's vision, though the irony is not always apparent to Blake or even the viewer. When Nobody tells Blake to "Drive your cart and plow over the bones of the dead," Blake enacts this line—like he did when he killed the sheriffs and the fur trappers—by killing a missionary who they find in an outpost in Native American territory. This is another line Nobody borrows from "Proverbs of Hell" which is indicative of his constant talk of death, doubling, and passing through. It refers to the dead dogmas of Blake's former world. Damon explains that this line means "that the dead past is not to be respected if it hinders your work" (329). Blake's work is the revisiting and recasting of this American past. As a worker of hell, which the missionary reminds Blake when he says "God damn your soul to the fires of hell," Blake's position does not fit into the conventions of religious society and therefore he is cast out as a devil, one of those creatures whom William Blake venerated. He is as an outsider, along with Nobody, who, because of his

place outside of convention, is able to lend a critical view. He destroys the conventions of the past in favor of the imagination of the present. He drives his “cart and plow over the bones of the dead.”

It is not that simple though. As usual, Nobody, who is a bit of a trickster, uses language creatively and often plays on its double meanings. This statement is quite ironic if we fully consider the consequences. Blake is an outcast and he takes on the role of the poet, killer of white men, and the Native American, but he is still a representative of his civilization and a harbinger of things to come. He lights out into the territories. Though he puts some paint on his face and dons a fur, his civilizing influence can still be felt in the forest, particularly in his goofy garb—his “clown suit” from Cleveland, his Chaplinesque hat, and his spectacles. As much as Nobody changes Blake, Blake also changes Nobody and Nobody’s land. In fact, the reason Nobody understands Blake so well is because he had been kidnapped and given a western education before he escaped and came back to the forest. Perhaps this is the other reason he tells Blake to “Drive your cart and plow over the bones of the dead” (*MHH* 7.2). Perhaps Nobody knows that Blake is a reminder of what happened and a harbinger of things to come. The irony in this context comes from the fact that Blake is both part of the America from which he hails and an outcast of that America. As an outcast and poet Blake is driving his plow over convention, but as an American he is representative of the plow of America blindly driving over the bones of those they have massacred, as well as domesticating the wilderness landscape. Additionally, there is a commentary about language here. Blake the accountant is aligned with the calculated machinations of industry, but also the faux-rational language of conquest and the justification offered by that conquest. Blake the poet recognizes the conspicuously figurative character of this language of conquest and decides to use it against itself. As an outcast who

flees into the forest he embraces the tangled web of possibilities offered by the dark recesses of metaphor. He sees a past just before conquest. He sees a language just before instrumentality and understands that this figurative base is still the subterranean fluidity that underlies and constantly threatens to deconstruct the conceptual edifice of the moment.

Blake, and even Nobody, is stuck between these two places or modes of being. One wonders if that is why Nobody is so intent on carrying Blake through, as he so often says he is going to do. Of course, in a very primary sense, Nobody is being very kind to Blake and taking care of him until he passes through to “next level of the world, where Blake is from,” a next level that is clearly part of Nobody’s symbolic belief system. But how does this passing through work in terms of the symbolic logic of the film? Nobody says to Blake, “I will take you to the bridge made of waters. The mirror. Then you will be taken up to the next level of the world. The place where William Blake is from. Where his spirit belongs. I must make sure that you pass back through the mirror at the place . . . where the sea meets the sky.” Again, these descriptions belong to Nobody’s belief system and his vision of the world. They describe the way he believes he will guide Blake to the next level of the world down the river and to the ocean, but how does this invocation of crossing mirrors, and bridging, and taking up to the next level of the world work in terms of the film’s symbolic logic and its dialogue with William Blake’s poetry?

This bridging of worlds makes sense in the dialogue with Blake if we think of it again in terms of Blake’s passing as one in which he moves beyond convention to vision or beyond reality to hyper reality, or beyond the language of rational restraint and constraint, to the language of emboldened imagination. Water, Damon tells us, is for Blake a symbol of matter. When Nobody carries Blake down the river in a canoe and toward the ocean, or “the mirror at the place where the sea meets the sky,” we might understand this not only in the traditionally

religious sense of passing from the material plane to the spiritual plane, but as an abandoning of a world of convention for a world of vision. It is the confined material place from which one glimpses through the symbolic conduit at the eternal moments offered by artistic vision. The world of vision, however, by the time we find him back at the beginning of the film, has fallen into convention and needs to be renewed through creative acts of imagination. So the inescapable cycle continues, with only momentary solace in temporary visionary glimpses of emancipation. The mirror is a constant reminder and reflection of this double nature that Blake carries with him. He is a person inevitably tied to the conventions of his society and a visionary, a wise man and a fool, a poet and an accountant. These terms are all a matter of perspective and timing.

As Blake finally takes the “bridge of water” to arrive at the “mirror” through which he will pass to the next world, one last remark is offered in the dialogue between the poetry of William Blake and Nobody’s mythology. As the canoe begins to carry down the river, we cut to Blake’s horse, which is visibly upset that Blake is leaving. The camera focuses on him as he gallops a short way down the riverbank and whinnies before coming to an impasse. He watches Blake and Nobody float away. The horse, after Europeans introduced it to North America, came to represent nobility, courage, freedom, and prosperity in Native American mythology. It was also often believed to accompany its owner to the spirit world.<sup>88</sup> All of these are relevant to Blake’s journey and his new position as a visionary poet of the frontier. However, there is another perspective being offered in this scene. In Blakean terms the horse is a symbol of reason. It is a representative of the delimiting forces of Urizen that squelch our deeper impulses.

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<sup>88</sup> For a more in depth explanation of the horse in Native American culture and myth, see Grant, 151-153. For an explanation, with a specific emphasis on the religious significance of the horse, see Ewers, 257-298 and 316-318.

It is a symbol of convention. In “Proverbs of Hell,” Blake writes, “The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction” (*MHH* 9.44). This also makes sense in this scene as Blake is leaving his horse behind as he ascends beyond the world of “instruction” to an unknown world that only the imagination can appropriately negotiate. This is his passing.

Is this ascension, the ‘passing through’ Nobody so often talks about, and the eventual cycling back to the beginning of the film’s narrative, *Dead Man*’s final comment? Blake is seemingly passing from the world of the living into death, the unknown, oblivion, or nothingness. His movement toward death however brings him into a past in which language and the world it describes are understood much differently. He goes into a world of myth, and into a world in which metaphor still has a hold on language. It is a world in which language is not merely understood as a tool that is separated from the world it describes and influences. Language is understood as poetic, it is literary, and it does not carry the burden of being merely instrumental or rational. Language is poiesis, it is in constant flux and it is a material of transfer and translation. It is a carrying over. In fact, one can only use symbolic terms to attach meaning to the void of death.

This is a gesture, clearly reinforced by Nobody’s talk of other worlds, that as Blake gets closer to death he begins to live more in language as metaphor. This is not to suggest that he finds some kind of eternal life, but that in the very act of symbolically marking the unknown of death he finally passes from the dead rationality and reified language of a religiously dogmatic social fabric to the fluid language of poetry. Another way to say this is that Blake’s constant renegotiating and redefining the world against his imminent death enriches the vision of his life. To accept a prescribed version of death, such as that provided by the church, is essentially to be defeated already, or is to subscribe to a still and dead language. It is only in this momentary

negotiation with language that Blake's world expands beyond the container of mechanized thought. Blake passes through the prescribed and steadfast notions of people like Dickinson and the missionary that he comes across just before the last scene of the film. His death is therefore both the metaphorical death of a very specific traditional image of America and the rebirth of a more fluid, if not more encompassing, vision. It highlights this tension inherent in the American national narrative, which attempts to achieve two discordant goals; it attempts to impose and solidify a grounded origin on a vacuous chasm and it also embraces the open-ended project of a new democracy, which is a project that by definition must constantly renegotiate and hence destabilize its moment of origin. These are competing, yet simultaneous tasks.



**Figure 19.** Blake sits atop his horse with the tangled branches of the trees behind him blocking out the sky.



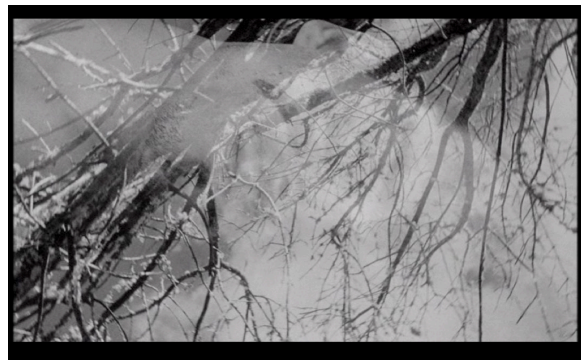
**Figure 20.** The tangled web of branches dominates the mise en scène in this scene in which Blake walks through the forest.



**Figure 21.** We see the tree from Blake's point of view as he lies on the ground and gazes skyward.



**Figure 22.** The tree that we see from Blake's point of view begins to spin.



**Figure 23.** A dissolve shows us Blake gazing upward and the tree caught by his gaze.



**Figure 24. The bark of a tree from Blake's point of view.**



**Figure 25. Blake stares up at a tree.**



**Figure 26. The tree branches from Blake's point of view as he stares upward.**



Figure 27. The sun fights through the weight of the redwoods, which block out the sky and dominate the screen.



Figure 28. The size of the redwoods dominates the screen and seems to entrap Nobody and Blake as they ride through the forest.

## Chapter 6: Horizons

The head is like the sky. Always turning around and around inside. But very slowly. When you think, you make it go too fast. Then it aches.

—Paul Bowles, *The Sheltering Sky*

Before her eyes was the violent blue sky—nothing else. For an endless moment she looked into it. Like a great overpowering sound it destroyed everything in her mind, paralyzed her. Someone once had said to her that the sky hides the night behind it, shelters the person beneath from the horror that lies above. Unblinking, she fixed the solid emptiness, and anguish began to move in her. At any moment the rip can occur, the edges fly back, and the giant maw will be revealed.

—Paul Bowles, *The Sheltering Sky*

Why this reference to language? In order to stress once again that we are moving within language, which means moving on shifting ground or, still better, on the billowing waters of an ocean.

—Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*

Was Blake's journey just a dream? This is one of the possibilities offered up at the end of *Dead Man*, which starts where it began. The viewers see in images what was described in words in the opening scene. We see the scene that had been described by the train fireman on Blake's initial push westward. Finally, this interlocutor's cryptic illustration comes to life and starts to make some sense. The ceiling he described is the firmament. Blake gazes upward at this ceiling of sky and is surrounded by the horizon that seems to move as he sits still in the boat. The horizon between the vast ocean and vast sky dominates the image (See fig. 31-35, p. 261-62). The viewers, if they recall the strange messenger's words from the beginning of the film, know the near future of Blake's journey: "Look out the window. And doesn't this remind you of when you were in the boat? And then later that night, you were lying, looking up at the ceiling, and the water in your head . . . was not dissimilar from the landscape, and you think to yourself,

‘Why is it that the landscape . . . is moving, but . . . the boat is still ?’” As Blake experiences his movement out to sea in the canoe as described above, we see the canoe floating along the coast and eventually out to sea as some stray rays of sun shine down through the clouds. Like much of the narrative the closing is poetic and enigmatic and it leaves us to linger on any threads of meaning that we might see in its imagery.

It creates further conundrums by cycling us back to the opening of the film through this peculiar connection of word and image. This turning back reminds the viewer of the film’s epigraph: “It’s always preferable not to travel with a dead man.” Why does the film recall Michaux and does this reminder bear on our reading of the film in any important way? What is the crossover here between Michaux’s works, and *Dead Man*, and Blake’s works, these three threads that are woven together? Are there any other clues in *Plume*? The film began with *Plume*. Perhaps it is appropriate that it ends there. We see some thematic similarities if we look at the end of Plume’s journey, a journey that is as strange as Blake’s and a journey, like Blake’s, that pits the idiosyncrasies of living in the world against mundane and conventional experience. The juxtaposition of Michaux and *Dead Man* further illuminates some of the questions that the film already poses.

There are several striking similarities between the works besides the obvious strange and dream-like tone, the paralogical narrative, and association of mental and physical space. First, though the end of *Plume* does not cycle back to the beginning quite as directly as in *Dead Man*, there is a compelling congruence between the two parts of the narrative as well as some of the episodes in the middle of the poem. The poem starts, much like *Dead Man*, as the docile protagonist goes in and out of sleep. The bizarre scene finds Plume feeling for the wall, his house having been “stolen” from him and his wife having been run over by a passing train, and

finding himself surrounded by “an unbroken sky stretched on all sides above them” (*SW* 83). The house, the train and the sky, which are all important tropes for both *Dead Man* and *Plume*, recur throughout the poem. There are two very notable occurrences. One that was already mentioned is the train that Plume finds himself on in the section entitled “The Night of the Bulgarians,” a section from which *Dead Man* borrows its epigraph and which greatly informs the viewer’s reading of Blake’s journey westward. Plume, who is trying to return to the home that was stolen from him, mentions that he took the wrong train. He missed the one that was “homeward bound,” yet he is trying to return to that stolen place. He, like Blake, is moving into an unknown future and a lost past. Also, both works aptly capture the simultaneously creative and destructive power of the train, the journey, and the travelers on that journey.

The second important recurrence happens at the end of the poem and loosely links the end back to the beginning of the poem. At the end of *Plume* we sense a tension similar to that felt in *Dead Man* and we also hear a similar hearkening back to the beginning of the work. This tension is clear in the last two sections of the poem. The last section finds Plume looking up at the same endless sky that he saw when his house was stolen at the beginning of his narrative. This time he also senses the weightlessness of the earth. There is a sense of flight and freedom, but also the anxiety inherent in the space between taking mental flight and being safely grounded in conventional experience. In the penultimate section, Plume grapples with this tension. He does not see an endless sky, but rather is bound by the ceiling of the world, which we might take to be the limitations imposed by conventional experiences and rules of society, experiences and rules that had been removed when his “house” was stolen in his initial push into his journey. This is just one of the constant reminders in this work of the burden of being brought into and living in a world that you can never completely understand, but must negotiate to create some

semblance of order. The underside of this burden is the attempt to avoid going too far in creating order. We see this with Plume who wants to avoid the complacency of blindly following rules given to him. He is all too aware that though those rules are portrayed as natural they are merely productions of the human mind. Michaux's work portrays this situation as an ongoing, yet erratic and contentious encounter. Both of these instances echo the poem's first few lines. This cyclic structure and the tension between firm and grounded boundaries and open and endless flight are two of the central characteristics of both works. Both stories finish with the protagonists gazing at the endless sky described as a ceiling, which is where they both started. The primary terms, between the breaking of boundaries and unleashing of exploratory vision and the containment of such vision by the conventions of everyday experience and societal rules, are the same. There is an uncontrollable movement "of the internal being" and a counter movement of containment.

We have already shown how Blake's works resonate with *Dead Man* in the way they deal with the contrary forces of visionary flight and containment. The echoes of his work are evident in the last scene as well. Like Michaux's *Plume*, many of Blake's works register the same tension between containment and flight, or the retraction and expansion of the mind's vision, and the uneasy, fragile, and nebulous juxtaposition of mind and world, all of which are so clearly present in the final scene of *Dead Man*. The sense of human endeavors as cyclic or boustrophedonic is also there in Blake's writing as it is in the film. This tension is clear in all of the poems that the film references, all of which we have addressed at one point or another. We see it in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which explores the notions of innocence and experience that are illuminated in the film. Innocence and experience, terms whose meanings fluctuate in Blake's writing, are connected to the ideas of expansion and retraction. This is clear

in many of Blake's symbols, which are rife with the agitation between expansion and retraction, or flight and containment. In "Proverbs of Hell," for example, the reader is told, "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom" (*MHH* 7.3). Later one reads, "The cistern contains: the fountain overflows/One thought. fills immensity" (*MHH* 8.35-36). Excess, overflowing, and the expansion of thought, expand the world and lead to "the palace of wisdom," but are met at every turn by the forces of containment, whether those are the rules of a society, the contours of the natural world, the failure of one's senses, or the shortcomings of one's own imagination. What is, perhaps, Blake's most well known statement on humanity's condition in its own retracted mental space comes a little later in the same poem in one of the sections entitled "A Memorable Fancy." This statement explains the two previous ones: "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is: infinite./For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern" (*MHH* Plate 14). He revisits this notion in *Auguries of Innocence*. Most importantly, we see the ideas of flight and containment in *The Book of Urizen*, which contains imagery that echoes the last scene of *Dead Man*. The sky that is a ceiling in *Dead Man* is the sky that is the "roof" of Urizen in *The Book of Urizen* (5.28). Urizen's roof is the delimiting law that contains the visions and desires of the people in his world and also blocks out the unfathomable void surrounding his neat and contained abode.

The similarities between these three sets of works raises many questions. How do innocence and experience, heaven and hell, containment and flight, the inner being and the world, convention and vision come into play? How does the final scene reinforce the Blakean tension between the energy of flight and the limitations of bounding, the mental and the physical, retraction and expansion, and so on? What is the significance of the narrative's cyclic nature? Why does it end where it began? Also, how do these very important tropes like the sky, the

ocean and the ceiling, translate from the epic world of Blake's thought and the obscure world of Michaux to the strange world of *Dead Man*? Furthermore, how does this strange world of *Dead Man* reflect in a broader sense how we think of the U.S. narrative of the West? Finally, what is the significance of writing and language in this context? Why is *Dead Man*, a film about U.S. expansion and the exploitation of people and resources, so concerned with poetry? To begin to answer these questions, we need to take a closer look at the way the last scene of the film reiterates some of the tensions in the works of Blake and Michaux. We will start with Blake.

In *Auguries of Innocence*, Blake revisits the notion from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that the artistic and visionary mind has the power to expand the contours of a world contained by shortsighted rules. It is *Auguries of Innocence* that provides the main terms of discussion in *Dead Man* through its repeated appearances in the film. The poem begins, "To see a World in a Grain of Sand/And Heaven in a Wild Flower/Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand/And Eternity in an hour" (1-4). Here we see the idea that the human mind has the power to envision an expanded plane of being through the minutest interactions with the world. The sand becomes a world in the visionary mind as it is seen as more than a mere grain of sand. It is understood in all its grand, expansive, and timeless associations. Even Blake's words themselves speak to this expansion. The "World in a Grain of Sand," "Heaven in a Wild Flower," "Infinity," and "Eternity" are capitalized. They are expansive and large, even contained in the small palm of the human hand that holds them. It is the mind that allows for this expansion of our limited purview of the physical world. As we get to the end of the poem, one suspects that the difference between those "Born to sweet delight," and those "Born to Endless Night," the major distinction and terms of discussion in *Dead Man*, is the ability to envision a world somehow prior to or beyond the confines of socio-political conventions. For William Blake art

provides the momentary possibility of this escape, but the circular narrative of *Dead Man* hints at the relative impossibility of such a task.

In terms of the narrative of the film, such conventions are indicated in many ways, whether it is the boundary of Machine, the bizarre Christian family or the priest in the forest, or something less tangible. In the final scene this vacuous social and metaphysical boundary is the last thing the viewer sees. It is a diffuse and inconceivable boundary, but it cradles the progeny of our visions nonetheless. The sky, described earlier in the film as the ceiling, is the final symbol of the bounding of the human mind. There is a parallel in Blake's *Book of Urizen*, which ends similarly to *Dead Man* in terms of symbolism and imagery. After Fuzon, Urizen's child, gathers all of the "remaining children of Urizen," they leave the imprisoned realm of the earth. The story ends as the "salt ocean roll englob'd" (28.20, 28.23). Like *Dead Man*, we are left to look at the fury of the ocean contained by the endless sky that also serves as boundary.

The final chapter of *The Book of Urizen* takes place after Urizen has established his reign, "englob'd" the earth, and cast the "Net of Religion." This chapter parallels the biblical exodus and is rife with images of social and perceptual bondage. Urizen binds the people of the earth and his rule shrinks their perceptions:

The senses inward rush'd shrinking,  
Beneath the dark net of infection.

2. Till the shrunken eyes clouded over  
Discerned not the woven hypocrisy  
But the streaky slime in their heavens  
Brought together by narrowing perceptions  
Appeard transparent air; for their eyes  
Grew small like the eyes of a man  
And in reptile forms shrinking together  
Of seven feet stature they remaind (25.29-38)

The rest of the narrative is about Urizen binding his people and limiting their perceptions through “laws of prudence” (28.4). Urizen’s will to contain a limited vision of the world and his desire to keep out the abyssal void beyond the rigid roof of his comfortable abode reverberates thunderingly against the image of the abyssal sky invoked as a ceiling in *Dead Man*. In the film, it is almost as if the train fireman, a harbinger of the U.S.’s push into the wilderness, projects the hard shell of civilization out to the abyss of the frontier. He projects the future that Blake will come up against. When Blake arrives there, the viewer can see the endless abyssal sky and at the same time remember the words describing it as a ceiling, a hard, delimiting, and sheltering boundary. This is the central tension of the film. Does Blake cross this boundary or merely stay within the cycle of this world? How far can his vision actually take him? In *The Book of Urizen*, the tension is similar. Urizen’s will is to keep everyone inside of his world, but his children rebel and attempt to cross the hardened boundary of Urizen’s roof, though they are not able to bring the people of this world with them. The last stanzas describe this departure of Urizen’s children and their inability to persuade others to follow them. It begins by describing the crushed will and limited perceptions of the inhabitants of Urizen’s world:

4. And their thirty cities divided  
 In form of a human heart  
 No more could they rise at will  
 In the infinite void, but bound down  
 To earth by their narrowing perceptions (25.43-47)

The story finishes in an inversion of Exodus. The people remain enslaved under the roof of Urizen. Ultimately, their own limited perceptions and sterile laws encase them. However, the gods, Urizen’s children, rebel and escape:

8. So Fuzon call’d all together  
 The remaining children of Urizen:  
 And they left the pendulous earth:  
 They called it Egypt, & left it.

9. And the salt ocean rolled englob'd (28.19-23)

The gods abandon the “englob'd” prison of earth. It is left to its laws, its religions, and its industries. It is a place bound and divided, and without vision. The reader is left to ponder the future of this place that is embroiled with expansive forces of life-giving vision being contained by the binding and limiting forces of the immovable horizons of Urizen. The last image of the rolling ocean churning beneath the globe of the sky perfectly encapsulates this tension. It is creativity and chaos contained. It is an image similar to the one we see at the end of *Dead Man*.

Do we also see this tension in Michaux's work? A more detailed look at the penultimate section of *Plume* bears out these issues. At the end of his narrative we find Plume, like Blake, staring up at the endless sky, but just before that we are confronted with the same tension that is brought out in *Dead Man's* cyclic narrative. The same connection is drawn between the two figures of the seemingly boundless heavens and the impassable shell of the ceiling. *Plume's* narrative also describes the endless sky as a ceiling. “In a silly moment of distraction” we find Plume walking “with his feet on the ceiling, instead of keeping them on the ground” (*DkM* 75). The ceiling for Plume seems to represent the same tempting, but always-impassable boundary as it does for Blake, but Plume gets closer to such a boundary and because of this proximity is more disoriented. The consequences of his tempting these limits are extreme and possibly dangerous: “Already paralyzed by the blood that had immediately collected, piled up in his head like the iron in a hammer, he no longer knew what he was doing. He was lost. With terror, he saw the far-off floor, the armchair once so inviting, the whole room an astonishing abyss” (*DkM* 75). Having tempted the limits, Plume experiences extreme disorientation. Mental impressions, the “movements of the internal being,” are explained in terms of physical space and, as is often the case with Michaux's work, these spaces are brutal on the body. Psychological and physical

ailments mix to describe the disorientation Plume experiences when he confronts the abyss of the world outside of him and beyond the conventions offered by society. The abyss that inhabits the cracked foundation of those conventions equally disturbs him. Finally, the void that churns within him agitates his being. The ceiling shelters one from the abyss beyond, but also contains the abyss within. Those things that previously provided comfort now represent danger. They seem arbitrary and limiting. They are as abyssal as that which is warded off by the ceiling. It is as unsafe within the limits of the house as it is outside. The chaos is disorienting, as is the arbitrariness of convention. There seems to be no escape for Plume. He is truly trapped in a lost space.

He wishes to have some recourse from the world he is experiencing, some acceptable, yet not too comfortable, sense of enclosure and containment, and a barrier from all abysses, but he does not want to plunge back into utter normalcy. The reader is told how Plume “would have liked to be in a vat full of water, in a wolf trap, in a safe, in a copper water-heater, rather than here, all alone, on this ridiculously deserted ceiling that offered no resources; and coming back down from it would have been tantamount to suicide” (*DkM* 75). Plume would rather experience the disagreeable and unordinary enclosure of a safe or a copper water-heater than return to the mundane world of the armchair below, but he will do anything to get off of the expansive heights and far-off boundaries of the ceiling. His only choice is to return to the abyss of normality below and to remain in the space sheltered by the ceiling because “ceilings are hard, and can only ‘return’ you—that’s the right word” (*DkM* 75). He must, as the words remind us, “return” from his strange exploration of the ceiling. The world below is the only space, the only structure, and the only set of rules, from which he can steadily work, though he is not as comfortable doing so whereas “so many other people all over the world continued to walk calmly on the ground”

(*DkM* 75). Plume cannot accept being grounded, or bound, but the alternatives are barely possible and can be dire.

His only option seems to be to deal with the fact that his haphazard journey is a constantly fluctuating confrontation with inner and outer worlds. This confrontation is a constant attempt to contain the erratic movements of his being without completely crippling him. The consequences of this task are often brutal, as we see in the violence that Plume both sustains and delves out. No matter how much he tries to transcend the imposed boundaries of a hostile world, there is no escape. His only option is to gaze at the ceiling from a distance, but this distance provides some solace. It offers room for his haphazard, comedic, playful, and sometimes violent visions. From a distance, this boundary is delicate and airy. It is merely the endless sky at which Plume gazes. It provides shelter, but also offers room for curiosity. What is beyond this? As Plume gets closer, however, the airiness becomes rigid and impassable. It is a ceiling and it offers no impasse. It must remain. There have to be limits and these limits are only passable from afar. They cannot be transgressed within the limitations and rules of the world as we experience it everyday. They cannot be transcended within the world of nature. It is only Plume's far-off gaze, his vision, that can see the endless sky and look into it. It is only the distance of vision that allows for this type of encounter with a moment of transcendence. Perhaps the distance given by the currency of symbolic encounters offers momentary visions. The closer proximity of logical thought precludes contact with the chaotic spaces of the unknown. Going closer to the limits to intellectually and sensibly figure out exactly what lies behind them blocks one from a fuller appreciation of what cannot be fully captured by the gesture of delimitation. Only artistic vision, through language and image, can momentarily capture such chaos, but with the consequences of the extreme disorientation and need to return to

a grounded state that Plume experiences. This is the tension, to be grounded, but not too much, and to experience visionary flight, but not too much. This is where we leave Plume, gazing up at a vision of the limitless sky and fatigued, but refusing to let go.

Michaux offers an “Afterword to Plume” that helps to explain the narrative. This afterword also serves well to explain some of the tensions in *Dead Man*. The main issues dealt with in the afterword are the tension between fixity and fluidity, the tenuousness of identity, the hostility of the subconscious, the failures of logical thought, and the distance inherent in signification. The first issue, the tension between fixity and fluidity, is the most encompassing and overarches the other issues in many ways. This issue, so central to Michaux, is also central to *Dead Man* and our discussion of this work. We have to this point been using the terms transgression and bounding or limiting or some version thereof, but regardless of the terms, the main tension is one between containing and fixing something versus accepting the inability to fix or bound something. It is a tension between the pretense to understanding and a willingness to live honestly within the abyssal limitations of a fluid and not completely comprehensible world, both within and surrounding us. Of the self he writes things like, “Self is made out of everything,” “We want too much to be someone,” and “Perhaps we are not made for just one self. We are wrong to cling to it. The prejudice in favor of unity” (*DkM* 76-77). Of the world and everything in it he writes, “Nothing fixed. Nothing is property” (*DkM* 77). The final lines of the afterword offer a statement describing Plume’s world and Michaux’s world, but they also serve as an apt bookend for *Dead Man*, and they even encompass some of William Blake’s thinking, though the style is quite different. Michaux concludes by asking the question of the author (a term we should take in its broadest sense here), “WHAT DOES HE KNOW ABOUT

HIS THOUGHT?” to which he later adds, “He does not know the components of his own thought,” and then he finally finishes with the following:

His “logical” thought? But it circulates in a casing of paralogical ideas, a straight road cutting through circular paths, seizing (you can only seize by cutting) bleeding sections of this richly vascularized world. (All gardens are hard for trees.) False simplicity of first truths (in metaphysics) followed by extreme multiplicity—that’s what he’s trying to get accepted.

In one point, too, will and thought converge, inseparable, and become false thought-will.

In one point, too, the examination of false thought—thought like, in microphysics, the observation of light (the path of the photon)—falsifies it.

Any progress, every new observation, every thought, every creation, seems to create (at the same time as light) a zone of darkness.

All knowledge creates new ignorance.

All consciousness, a new unconscious.

Every new contribution creates new nothingness.

So, reader, *you’re holding in your hands, as often happens, a book the author did not write*, although a world participated in it. And what does that matter?

Signs, symbols, impulses, falls, departures, relations, discords, everything, is there to bounce up, to seek, for further on, for something else.

Between them, without settling down, the author grew his life.

Perhaps you could try, too? (*DkM* 78-79)

Ultimately, the author’s thoughts do not form a sensible whole. Logical thought has its limits.

The story does not offer a completely coherent explanation. There are only moments of illumination, temporary and fleeting. Solid understanding is eventually agitated in the fluid mind. Communication creates distance. All of this, as Michaux explains, does not create a satisfactory picture, but a nexus in which the only world that one can understand is not one that is built or solidified, but one that momentarily and fluidly “participates” with the actors in it. Plume often experiences this as conflict, interrupted by moments of vision. His weapon is art, poetry. William Blake also sees art as a provider of vision in a confined world. How does this understanding ultimately bear on the final scene of *Dead Man*?

*Dead Man* also addresses the limits of logical thought. It suggests that the world is not understood as a whole, but only in flashes of illumination. The story does not make complete sense. However, the poetic imagination is offered up by the film as a valid way to negotiate a hostile world, but is also shown to have its limitations. Blake's perceptions in the canoe, in which his mind is the anchor around which the world turns, are described in the beginning of the film. We see this manifest on the screen in a sequence of cuts that show us Blake's point-of-view looking directly up at the sky in between close-ups of his face and long shots of the canoe floating out to sea. The last image is an extreme long shot of the boat, a speck sandwiched in between the immense sky and the turbulent ocean. The last filmic sequence of Blake's final voyage captures the tension described above. We see Blake's view of the sky as it spins around his mind. He is the creator of this vision. The sky is limitless. His imagination bears the energy to break the boundaries of his world. Yet the physical world still encloses Blake's mental energies. His voyage is captive to the undulations of the ocean. Furthermore, we recall the words describing the sky as a ceiling and no longer understand this vision as a limitless one. It is not necessarily representative of a passing in to an eternal and infinite realm, but is merely an impasse, a limit, and a boundary through which Blake cannot see. The sky, highlighted in its description as a ceiling, is the final limit of the world. It is an impassable boundary that encloses. It shelters and traps. It is an endless ceiling that both opens humanity's mind to the void above and delimits the mind of humanity. It is the roof of Urizen, the horizon of conventional thought that also attempts to hem in the wanderer. We know that Blake's voyage takes him full circle. He cycles back to the beginning. He finds himself on the train again and caught in this world. There is no transcendence in his death. He does not float endlessly out to

sea, nor does he transgress the horizon. The Horizon is always there, ahead of him, and the ceiling is always above, a structure never to be transgressed, no matter how creative the mind.

The sky encapsulates the ocean. The overwhelming energies of the human mind still come up against a boundary. The ocean and the sky here, like in *The Book of Urizen* and in *Plume*, are both unconquerable and indispensable components of the mind's meeting with the world. The ocean is the deep energies and unknown recesses of the human imagination. Its seemingly bottomless depths exude power. It is frightening and illuminating. It is the imaginative energy, described by William Blake and pictured in *Dead Man*, that constantly comes up against humanity's fearful necessity to quell the unpredictable. It is, again, the energy of flight contained by the necessity to bound. It comes up again and again in American fiction. In *Moby-Dick*, for example, Melville writes:

Glimpses do ye seem to see of that mortally intolerable truth; that all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore?

But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God—so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! For worm-like, then, oh! who would craven crawl to land! Terrors of the terrible! is all this agony so vain? Take heart, take heart, O Bulkington! Bear thee grimly, demigod! Up from the spray of thy ocean-perishing—straight up, leaps thy apotheosis! (97)

The ocean is the unbounded mind and the shore is the comfortable ground that quells the powers of that imagination. The description resonates with Blake's ideas. We also see it in *Dead Man* and particularly in the last scene. This primordial tension between the necessity of control and the impetus to emancipate the mind is inherent in the U.S. expansion westward. This tension is captured by the juxtaposition of the vast sky and endless ocean and the end of the film with the very domesticated description of this scene in the beginning of the film.

To recall something we mentioned earlier, Harold Bloom describes how *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* embodies this paradigm of the creative energy of life and the bounding of that energy by reason. He suggests this is what Blake means when he writes, “Energy is the only life, and is from the Body; and Reason is the Bound or outward circumference of Energy./Energy is Eternal Delight” (plate 4). Reason is the sky that “englobes” the rolling “salt ocean” and takes its energy from it. Bloom explains, “the problem is where the stuff of life comes from; where does Reason, divinity of the ‘Angels,’ obtain the substance that it binds and orders, the energy that it restrains? By stealing it from the *Urgrund* of the abyss, is Blake’s diabolic answer” (“Dialectic” 80). The meeting of ocean and ceiling is the cinematic illumination of this restraint and capturing of the abyssal energy of the imagination by the machinations of reason. It is a tension inherent in the limit situation of the expanding Western frontier. The frontier imposes and expands a border to divide the civilized space from the wilderness space and in so doing draws energy, both destructively violent and creative, from this wellspring of wilderness. It is a translation of sorts. The vigor of the wild and uncontrolled land is invested into the vigorous expansion of civilization.

It is important to remember though that in the film the future of this expansion is not only left open, but is also a movement back into the past. The film cycles back. What is this gesture? Forward movement is simultaneously cast with a renegotiation of the past. This strange movement does a few things. First, it suggests the future to which Blake will never arrive is largely informed by his encounter and renegotiation of a haunted past. Additionally, it suggests that the future, like the past, is a mythological place. His transformation into a poet plays into this as well. The future is not just being built by the machinations of civilization—though this is happening also—but by the mythopoeic narrative that Blake is constantly writing. In his

narrative return to the film's beginning, he crosses and re-crosses the American West in an effort to retell and rewrite its story as a foundational myth. The failures of material revolution—war is not able to fully engender the world it portends—are partially rectified through his constant linguistic revolution. The materials of history are recast in the mythopoeic stories of West. It is only from this constant look backward to the past as an undecided space, rather than a settled space, that one can honestly engage the open future. This is one of the defining characteristics of the social space of a democracy. The democratic ideal is not an originalist yearning that looks back at some kind of *true* origin, but is something that is always to come. It is always in the future. It is not just a beginning from which we come, but the non-place toward which we strive. The impossible movement is there in *Dead Man*. Our striving, like Blake's voyage, continues uncertainly amidst the chaos of a seemingly endless expanse of ocean, but under the fragile and vacuous shelter of a manmade ceiling that shelters from the even more endless expanse of sky.

It is the confrontation with such an endless expanse that drives such a project. It is the confrontation with a nation's haunted history that eventually enriches its understanding. Blake is defined by these confrontations and is enriched even if he does not fully understand them. It is significant, for example, that his final resting place is in a Native American canoe prepared by Nobody. Blake is only able to find some semblance of identity in his completely outcast position, that of the Native American, a figure that is excluded from the U.S. nation, yet who is so integral for the definition of that nation. The gesture might be that it is in what is excluded, in that outside of the boundaries of "civilization," in a nation's exclusions and often brutal exterminations, that a people is tentatively defined. A place is defined as much by what haunts it as by its visible and positivistic narrative. It is defined by the "inside" and the "outside" of its

boundaries. It is always defined against alterity. Blake takes this definition with him as he cycles back to try again.

This notion of reiteration, though it is so clearly written into the idea of democracy, is not the dominant strand in thinking about the U.S. social space. The dominant strands in American thinking about social space are mytho-theological. They suture the space of the social. That is to say that the space of the social is sewn up and becomes a “society.” It has a tendency to refer back to a supposedly defined and immovable origin. Its “origins” lend an authority. However, a democratic “origin” in fact calls for openness and looking forward and hence does not establish a society, but rather the space of the social. It is a foundation that establishes its own precarious grounding and openness to the future.<sup>89</sup> The origin itself is the gaping wound that cannot be fully sewn together. This logic is not one of suturing, but one of inscribing. It opens a space rather than attempting to artificially close it off. It does not suture, but breaks open a wound and hence it is violent. It is not merely a remedy, but is also a wound that initiates the need for a remedy.<sup>90</sup> It is an ongoing and self-perpetuating opening of a wound and demand for a remedy. We see these repeated wounds inflicted on the body of Blake.

As Blake carries his wounded body through a Native American village, his final walk before he will be cast out to sea, he looks around disoriented. One of the things he sees is a sewing machine sitting in the mud. Certainly this is a symbol of the eclipse of one type of lifestyle by another and the fact that it is haphazardly strewn on the ground serves to reinforce the other images of the dilapidated state of the village, but it also serves a symbolic function. It does seem quite out of place compared to the many other objects we see in the village. It is

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<sup>89</sup> For an analysis of different articulations of social space, including a discussion of the notion of the sutured versus the open social space, see Laclau and Mouffe.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy.”

another one of the film's strange juxtapositions. A significant detail of this juxtaposition is that Blake notices the sewing machine in his dying state while Nobody is bartering for a sea canoe that will carry Blake's wounded body on its voyage. Sewing, or weaving, so often used as a trope for writing itself, is used here at the point that Nobody is writing the last chapter in the poets' life. It resonates in many ways and leaves room for much interpretation. Does the mechanical nature of the sewing machine say anything about the creation of narratives in and industrializing world? Is the machine broken and would this be relevant? These are questions, like many, that the film leaves open. The threads fray at the end, though they are woven tightly enough to build some semblance of meaning.

*Dead Man* explores this web of meaning. It traverses the landscape of conventional and visionary experience by weaving together Blake, Michaux, and Jarmusch's versions of the ambiguous boundary of reality and hyperreality. It does so in order to question and negotiate the contours of the highly charged social space of the past of American West, and the present and the future of an unsettled place. William Blake's works pose this boundary as one imposed by the "mind-forged manacles" of a world bound to industry and insane rationality. The world of convention is one shrunken from the infinite world accessible only through the artistic visions of human imagination. The chronotopical configuration of his poetry is historical and mythological. It deals with his contemporary historical situation of a rapidly expanding world, but it also draws from biblical and classical texts to draw parallels and envision some sense of a universal experience of human imagination.

Michaux's works propose a diffuse and moving boundary between a painfully mundane world and a painfully alienating world. Poetry is an attempt to scrutinize this conflictual space of confusion. The place and time he approaches in his poetry is a completely industrialized and

alienated world that is even more removed from any sense of a universal imagination. It is an individualized mental world in constant conflict with the undulations of its own intangible internal being and the ethereal external world. *Dead Man* appropriates these ambiguous realities to problematize the simplified symbolic space of the West and draw the viewer's attention to the symbolic formation of this space. Its use of poetry as a primary discourse in the film unsettles the space. It is turned into a far-off dream-space of indistinguishable realities. The narrative does not offer a simplified view of the space of the West, but rather captures the rich and tenuous contours of a space whose vastness calls up the unfinished canvas of a young nation striving for the ideals of a democracy that is always-to-come. In offering this canvas it also points to the viewer's own complicity in this task.

Our visions mingle with the poetics of Blake, Michaux, and Jarmusch, to form an ongoing dialogue. Jarmusch's vision borrows the theme of tension between convention and vision from Blake and Michaux in order to negotiate the strange deconstructed socio-political space of the American West. *Dead Man* falls somewhere between Blake's attempt to enlarge reality past the constraints of convention and toward the infinite and Michaux's use of the word as a weapon to confront an uncomfortable and nonsensical world. This bizarre combination creates a slowly paced and disparate poetic dream-space of the western landscape. It also provides the viewer with an interesting set of tools to rethink how this space is produced.

All of these versions of reality have a slightly different vision, but they share some fundamental themes, which all come together in *Dead Man*. They understand the world as a place conditioned by the continuous and unavoidable flux of language. They understand that the boundaries of mental and physical space are not completely comprehensible. They understand human beings as *fallen* beings that always struggle to build a sense of origin, a struggle whose

undulations can either open up or curtail the possibilities of thought. Finally, they appreciate that the conventions and rules of a people are merely temporary boundaries in the face of greater visions. The American West is just one recent example of a screen on which these struggles and visions are projected and boundaries challenged. To return to the enigmatic conversation that opens the film; it suggests, through Blake, that we are “looking up at the ceiling.” That is to say that we continue to project onto an endless and unfathomable sky a seemingly finite, sheltering, and protective aesthetic-moral ceiling, that must always be challenged in order to strive towards the ideals of an open democracy. Transgression is the rule to contain the functions of openness and futurity necessary for this ever-receding movement.



**Figure 29.** We see images from Blake's point of view as he peers at the passing landscape. The train window frames these images. It is a frame within a frame, something of a *mise en abyme*.



**Figure 30.** In this instance, the window and a couple of trees frame the passing images.



Figure 31. Blake floats out to sea as he dies.



Figure 32. His canoe floats between sea and sky.



Figure 33. Blake's point of view from the canoe.



Figure 34. A dissolve shows us Blake's point of view and the sky that he sees on his final journey.



**Figure 35.** In the final shot of *Dead Man*, we barely see Blake's canoe, which is situated between the undulating ocean waves and sky. The image is cut in half by remote horizon.

## What Is the Method of a Journey?

The uncanniest (the human being) is what it is because from the ground up it deals with and conserves the familiar only in order to break out of it and to let what overwhelms it break in.<sup>91</sup>

—Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*

The place we inhabit, wherever we are, is always this in-between zone, place of host and parasite, neither inside nor outside. It is a region of the *Unheimlich*, beyond any formalism, which reforms itself wherever we are, if we know where we are. This ‘place’ is where we are, in whatever text, in the most inclusive sense of that word, we happen to be living.

—J. Hillis Miller, “The Critic as Host”

*Dead Man*, a conjunction of texts, looks at how the constructed reality of the present—the measured and bound convulsions and convolutions of individuation and nation-making—attempts to contain the ever-expanding movements of the indefinable, and it calls us to read its own texture in a ceaselessly reconstructive process. It playfully, yet darkly, calls us to read the twists and turns of its narrative and the back-and-forth movement with its artistic antecedents. It defies definition. It unsettles the reader. Though an unconcerned reader could easily gloss over the deeper implications implied by this matrix of texts, Blake’s and Michaux’s work is so deeply embedded in the film and they bring so much to our reading of it. These poetic works do not merely influence the film, nor are they mere allusions in the larger body of a text, but on close reading are fused with the film. They are deeply integrated into the fabric of its narrative. The

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<sup>91</sup> Heidegger’s discussion of familiarity and unfamiliarity, which resonates with *Dead Man*’s use of Blake to express the archi-texture of containment and transgression in the Western, is picked up in Derrida’s discussion of the arche-structures of language. We also see this paradigm in some ways in Nietzsche’s work. *The Birth of Tragedy*, for example, discusses tragedy as an aesthetic form through which humans define their existence via the *Urgrund* of Dionysiac energy that is contained or framed by the clarity of Apolline imagery.

poets' texts transform one's reading of the film and the film transforms one's reading of the poets' texts. The movement is nonlinear and the web of exchange implies a type of synchronicity.

Reading, it insists, happens now, but it always has affects beyond the moment of vision. It is transformative in the most radical sense. Reading re-envisions and frames anew the turbulent energies of the aestheticized world. Additionally, *Dead Man's* playful and poetic spirit, displayed particularly through Nobody and adopted by Blake, forecasts the repeated play of its own linguistic and imagistic texture with the viewer. The viewer is mirrored in the text and enacts its movements. The film anticipates the reader's process of discovery. At first, he is uninitiated, much like Blake, but then journeys between film and poetry to unfold the hidden recesses and strange processes implied by the conglomeration of texts—William Blake's illuminated prophecies, Michaux's turbulent and confrontational poems, the Western and all of its ideological resonances, and *Dead Man's* own off-beat, severe, and poetic style.

What, it asks, is the methodology of the reader? What is the texture of the poem? What is the way of the journey? How are these frameworks, structures, approaches, or practices put into play or called upon? The epigraph, and then the strange opening sequence, and finally the first conversation in the film immediately call the reader to an unusual method of analysis. "It's always preferable not to travel with a dead man," seems to be a warning. But we do not have to "travel with a dead man." We do not have to take the words for granted. Meaning is not merely surface, nor is it calcified. Rigor mortis has not set in. The very process of reading itself animates this dead man—the dead letter of the word—awakens the body of the document, and repeatedly revives the borrowed visions of poets in new ways. Michaux, like Blake, often criticizes the dead and rigid conventions of a language imposed by social institutions, so it is not

a stretch to see in this epigraph a connection between corporeal death, institutional death, and the death of language. We even see this connection between language and corporeality materialize as the letters of the opening credits are formed of human bones that fall away from the screen.

The epigraph warns us against this death and recalls Blake's and Michaux's process in calling the viewer to read and reanimate the text. The process itself is alive—even if the words continually die off—and the word is only animated through its being read and interpreted. This is a radical and rigorous notion of what it means to use language and, in this context of the American frontier, to define a democracy. *Dead Man*, like all Westerns, is about socio-historical spaces and it insists that a dead language is anathema to a living democratic space that should be defined by a changing collection of voices. The method is reanimating. The method is democratic. It refuses definition. It is against ultimate definitions. As much as *Dead Man* is about all kinds of death/s, including the death of outdated regimes of signification, it is radically against death in its refusal to be arrested or confined by determinate readings. Thierry Kuntzel writes, “in every society various techniques are developed intended to *fix* the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs . . . it is the fluttering of meaning that concerns me” (24).

*Dead Man* flutters within its *borders* and *beyond* its textual frontiers. For example, the questions raised by the epigraph are reiterated in that strange but integral conversation that opens the film, to which we must return one more time. It is thematically important and its intimate connection to the last scene strengthens the film's resonance with its artistic and visionary colleagues, William Blake and Henri Michaux. But does this initial linguistic barrage serve any other purpose? The questioning is also directed toward the audience and it suggests a certain method of interaction with the film and its artistic companions. The soot-faced stranger that we

meet with Blake asks us if we are “reminded” of another place when we look out the window of the train. We wonder what is brought into one’s mind again or what is it that we will have to mind again and again. It is about that re-, that again, the sense of revolution in all of its intonations—as we view the film. This conversation, which asks us to “look out the window,” has to do, not just with the thematic possibilities of the film, but also with our method of reading the matrix of intimations proposed by such an intersection of texts. It hints at a kind of methodology or organized procedure. Because, as much as the conjunction of texts is about the various revolutions, meanderings, operational binds, and the convulsive movements and linguistic turns in and between textual and contextual moments, it is about framing as well. It is about how one “looks out that window,” how the dissonant *Urgrund* of existence come into a harmonious shape or picture of the reality of the present. It is about the ever-negotiated in-between space that is neither utter dissonance nor complete order. It conveys existence—the natural, the social, the economic, the political, and the ethical registers—as an aesthetic phenomenon and addresses the framing of existence particular to the conditions of the American frontier.

The initial conversation echoes the intimations of the epigraph. Both bring out the tension between death and life, or containment and fluidity, between the rigid body of the frame and the fluid dissonance captured and given form by that frame: “Look out the window. And doesn't this remind you of when you were in the boat? And then later that night, you were lying, looking up at the ceiling, and the water in your head . . . was not dissimilar from the landscape, and you think to yourself, ‘Why is it that the landscape . . . is moving, but . . . the boat is still?’ And also—where is it that you’re from?” Blake tells the nameless stranger he is from Cleveland—Lake Erie. The stranger responds in drawn out recognition, “Erie,” before he

continues his questioning. This juncture is clarified in terms of the narrative logic of the film when the viewer realizes during the final scene that the words of this initial conversation had anticipated and described the last images of the film. This only becomes clear when we arrive at the end of the film. This connection of the opening dialogue and final scene reinforces the themes explored throughout the film—including the existential attempt at framing, or containing the fluidity of language and the twists and turns of signification. This short passage, which contains in it the thematics of the film, also presages, or even asks for, a certain kind of reciprocity between the work of art and its observer. It calls for a method that is appropriate to the thematics of the film, a method that respects the singularity of each critical moment, but also recognizes the necessity of that critical interchange's openness to the future. Such exchange maintains a democratic vision and works against totalitarian codes of taste-making that assume the character of an aestheticized moral order. Such dominant codes, which the film establishes as one of the less desired aspects of industrial production, delineate a particularly limited sense of the world that is opposed to the less bound texture of the film. The entirety of this initial passage pulses with the linguistic rhythm of these tensions between openness and cultural, social, ethical, political, ideological, epistemological, and aesthetic containment—between the inevitably fragmented plurality implied by democracy and the narrowly controlled vision implied by oligarchy, totalitarianism, and tyranny. It insists that a democracy or a tyranny may function in any register of human existence, whether in the individual mind or social collective, whether as aesthetic phenomenon or social institution, or both. The passage as a whole, but also the individual words themselves, displays these tensions.

As we have noticed with the exchange between this passage from the film and passages from *Plume* and *The Book of Urizen*, there is a deep play between the fluid movements of the

water and the rigid structure of the window, the head, the boat, and the ceiling, all of which serve in this example as structures of containment and repositories of meaning.<sup>92</sup> These structures seem to provide a solid barrier against the ineffability of what lies beyond them and also lend a shape to what is contained within them. The play between unpredictable movement and the will to contain is clear in this passage as a whole. This play anticipates our reading of it. It calls for a methodic and constant return to the space between the macro and micro-intonations of the text. The word contains the passage, which contains the large picture of the film, which contains the literary matrix of which it is a part, which contains the more universal resonance, and so on.

What about these smaller repositories of meaning within the passage, what of the words themselves? How do they call on our methodological exchange with the film? If we follow the etymological passage opened by these words, we see archi-textures of containment and transgression that are analogous to the larger picture provided by the film. First, the unnamed stranger asks Blake and the viewer to “Look out the window.” The first request—or is it an inevitable demand—calls us to an act of framing. From our moving perspective on the train, we are intended to make sense of the images going by us. We are intended to make a world of them. We are asked to contain within the limited space of this window frame something approximating a world. This refers to the filmic endeavor as well. As readers, we are intended to weave together the various and seemingly dissonant threads of the film into a sensible and stable, if

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<sup>92</sup> I have been arguing that *Dead Man* brings out the inherent philosophical resonances and Blakean poetic resonances of the Western’s imagery, all of which are wrought with tropes of stability and instability, or containing and transgressing, to rehearse and reiterate the contours of American identity. The film brings out these similarities. The major juxtaposition, I have argued, is between the figure of the ocean and the sky described as ceiling, tropes which have both philosophical and literary precedents. For example, see the discussion of Kant’s aesthetics in de Man’s “Kant and Schiller,” 124-127. In this analysis, de Man points out that Kant’s discussion of sublimity and nature, including the sky and the ocean, is based on domestic and architectural tropes, such as the house and ceiling.

only temporary, approximation of a whole. But how does one achieve this? How does one stabilize this vision through the window mentioned by the sooty stranger, this frame, when the framed space of sight is itself already moving like the train (See fig. 29-30, p. 260)?

Window, literally “wind eye” from the Old Norse for *vindauga*, already has the sense of movement in it, as in seeing in movement, like the air in motion, but also containing the winding movement within its frame.<sup>93</sup> We see in the noun ‘wind,’ the turning, twisting, weaving and wandering movements of the verb ‘to wind.’ We hear the sense of moving in cycles, of reiteration. We also hear references to the cinematic apparatus. The window, our contained frame of reference, is a place from which we see the constant and fluid transgressions of signification. It is a frame within which we see the troping of the world—the wind at play twisting through the observer’s eye. The frame itself already contorts the hardened foundations of the land or contains the contorted motions of topography. The word window can also be traced to the Old English *eagbyrl* or *eagduru*, meaning ‘eye-hole,’ or ‘eye-door.’<sup>94</sup> The absent house, which is the world as *Dead Man* formulates it, is personified by the window. It is organic, unstable, and moving. The foundation has eyes through which the dissonant and outward instability enters. The insinuation here is also that the eye looks out from some sheltered place, that our perceptions of the dissonant world must be sheltered. Sheltering is akin to framing. Making sense of the world through our imagining it in a certain way—framing it—provides a modicum of shelter and security in an otherwise inexplicable universe. Differentiation, form-giving, and categorization barricades against the dizzying heights of inexplicability. Having a window onto the world indicates that one perceives from a temporary

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<sup>93</sup> See *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, 1007.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 1008.

place and moment of shelter. Heidegger tells us that one dwells, meaning both to take solace in the sheltering semblance of meaning and to linger in the unreadable and often unbearable turns of language.<sup>95</sup>

This passage reminds us of this again and again. The nameless stranger, referring to the view out the window, asks, “And doesn't this remind you of when you were in the boat?” “Doesn't this remind you?” By reminding us, this passage invites the inquiring reader to bring to mind again, or to reframe, the different threads of signification and the endless textual confluences. The epigraph, followed by the palpably foreign atmosphere of the film and then the strange verbal encounter with an unknown speaker, begs for decoding. This call to interpretation is conjured repeatedly throughout the film as many instances recall this early scene as well as the artistic associations implied therein. Nobody's incorporation of Blake's poetry, for example, leaves us perplexed and curious. The poetic epigraph is put in our mind again and we look after it over and over. This boustrophedonic method of interpretation is matched by the film's concern with remembering, repetition and revolution, in all of their senses. Such a method is most radically revolutionary in that it refuses to accept the text. It is in favor of textuality. It refuses to allow the reader the false satisfaction that he will find the text or bring it to a standstill. He will only carry it or it will carry him. He is the host of its continued life via the interpretive act, an act which also serves the purpose of framing him. It is a symbiotic happening. There is little distance between the work that comes into being via the creative act and the moment of being touched by that work, a moment we call reading.

Is the reader, like Blake, adrift, as the stranger implies when he mentions the boat? A connection is drawn between the undulating dissonance of the water that Blake hears in his head

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<sup>95</sup> See Martin Heidegger's different formulations of 'dwelling' in "Building Dwelling Thinking," "Language," and "... Poetically Man Dwells," *Poetry Language Thought*.

and the substance on which his vessel floats. Inner and outer space are conflated. The boat, that semi-protected place floating on the ocean, and from which the world is framed, is not unlike the mind of Blake, and that of the reader. The physical journey is the mental journey. The word boat itself, which in this case is vessel of Blake's journey and cyclic crossing, brings with it associations of carrying, taking care of, protecting, and containing, but the word boat is also associated with the idea of fissuring, splitting, or cleaving. It has a link to the Proto-Indo-European base *bheid-*, 'to split,' which refers to the hollowing out or splitting of a tree trunk to make the vessel.<sup>96</sup> Through this we understand that only through force is the vessel formed. If the boat is the shelter of Blake's vision of the world, then it already speaks to an inherent and inescapable dissonance, splitting, and violent disconnect on which that shelter is built. Containing the world means to already have transgressed it. To carry and protect a specific reading of the dissonant world is already to open a fissure, as the word implies. The seeds of dissonance are not exorcised from a neatly framed and contained picture that is seemingly separated from the chaos of the world. Any framing device is apt to break apart at any moment. The "water in your head," is always already there and it mirrors the unknown and dissonant depths of the vast ocean through which the boats bow cleaves. The confluence of mental and physical space that we see in the Western and in Michaux's and Blake's works resonate again. The outer turbulence is subsumed by the inner-vision of the reader and remains an important, if subversive element of that reader's vision-making. The reader is called to contain these undulating and animated motions and creative energies within rigid boundaries, but with ordering and containing also comes dividing and separating and the ever-happening possibility of boundaries dissolving or being transgressed.

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<sup>96</sup> See *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots*, 8.

The word water also has many conflicting resonances. It is connected to the Sanskrit *apah*,<sup>97</sup> a term that is expressed in an animate gender, the Latin *unda*<sup>98</sup> for wave, the Arabic *ma*<sup>99</sup> for luster or shine, and the Greek *el*,<sup>100</sup> as in element, or one of the four simple substances. It brings with it a sense of uncontainable motion and the powerful movements of an unexplainable dissonance with *apah* and *unda*, the reflective shining forth of appearances with *ma*, and the indivisible and contained with *el*. It is the contained uncontainable by which and through which man brings forth his vision of the world.<sup>101</sup> It speaks to the inescapable bind of the containment and transgression that is confronted every time man attempts to define his surroundings, whether through science, industry, religion, poetry, or other types of artistic vision. In this case, in other words, the vessel from which Blake and the viewer see the world itself already inhabits the uncontrollable and unknown energy of the ocean, that itself is already contained within the head of the perceiver as the stranger tells us. These two things are inseparable. The small and tenuous space of the boat, Blake's isolated frame of reference, is barely protection from the undulations on which he floats (See fig. 31-35, pp. 261-62). His frame always only contains a limited vision within the uncanny power of the unknown, which is always receding into futurity.

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>98</sup> See *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, 994.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> See Shipley, 31.

<sup>101</sup> To more fully grasp the resonance of the word shine and appearance in this context, see the discussion entitled "Being and Seeming" in Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 103-122. In this discussion, Heidegger uses the German *Schein* and its many derivatives to discuss things such as seeming, semblance, appearing, manifesting, and showing.

As the water undulates in his head, the viewer, with Blake, is looking up at the ceiling, and much like Plume he sees that the ceiling both conceals the vision beneath it and refers to the great-unknown futurity beyond it. A ceiling, the term used by the sooty-faced stranger to describe the sky, serves a different architectural function than the window mentioned earlier, but there is a structural connection (See fig. 29-35, pp. 260-62). A ceiling shelters and does not allow one to see beyond it. We see this function in its etymological connections, but we also see other interesting echoes. Ceiling has connections to *celure*,<sup>102</sup> which means to cover or conceal, or *caelare*,<sup>103</sup> which means to engrave, or from *caelum* for heaven, sky or celestial realm, which itself has possible associations with carving, engraving, or shaping, such as with a sculptor's chisel, or a caelum.<sup>104</sup> It also has a connection to the root *kait*,<sup>105</sup> which means bright, as in the bright and sun-drenched sky. With ceiling we see something similar to what we saw with the words window and water. It contains meanings that speak to often seemingly divergent ideas, but that, in fact, are rather revelatory. With ceiling, we see a sense of covering something, but also of engraving, or inscribing something, and finally of something showing forth in its brightness, much like the reflective shine of water. The ceiling shelters, but in doing so it gives appearance to things, drawing up a picture of the world beyond the limited confines within its space, and finally, the appearance comes through the shaping or engraving forces of man's will to frame the world, or in this case shelter the world, which is to say bring the expanse of the unknown into the confines of the familiar, if only temporarily. The archi-textural image of a

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<sup>102</sup> See *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, 156.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> See "kae-id," *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots*, 36.

<sup>105</sup> See Shipley, 154.

ceiling, as used to describe the sky in *Dead Man*, contains the idea that what is concealed within the referential frame is merely the small and temporary piece bound to the blinding and dissonant space beyond. It is thus always beyond and within. Interior space cannot be differentiated from exterior space. This covering-inscribing-shining-forth is the simultaneous bind of containment and transgression.

After mentioning the ceiling, the stranger says to Blake and the viewer that the movement of “the water in your head . . . was not dissimilar from the landscape.” Initially, this makes no sense because we are looking out the window of a rapidly moving train, but the connection becomes clear at the end of the film when we view the sky from Blake’s perspective as he floats out to sea. We also think back to the initial conversation of the film. These two images—of the gently bobbing boat, whose movements are the reveries of the thinker and the quick moving train, whose windows provide the world viewed in fast-paced and cinematic glory—though they share some properties, are partially incongruous and they refer to different ways of arriving, or not arriving, at a destination. One set of images is clearly framed as they quickly move by. The other set calmly float along as we look up at the sky. One frames what appears to be an immovable landscape, but the other approximates the movements of the depthless ocean. The opening set of images goes by in fixed frames and we have no time to question this formulation as they roll by. Though the train is moving, the images seen through its windows appear immovable. The final set of images does not give as exact or fixed an impression because they float by, allow time for reflection, and are comprised of several disorienting moving shots and angles. As we know though, these final images lead back to the opening images and the cycle continues. They are actually connected. Immovability and reflection are bound together. They

exist as necessary contraries that fuel the ongoing collisions of man's creations with, within, and against an unfamiliar world (See fig. 29-35, pp. 260-62).

The stranger reminds Blake about this connection when he says—"the water in your head" and "the landscape"—are "not dissimilar." The word landscape, a Dutch word that refers to painting, comes from *land*, meaning region or land and *-scap*,<sup>106</sup> meaning condition. *-Scap* is akin to the suffix *-ship*, which comes from *-scip*<sup>107</sup> for the "state or condition of being," and *-skap*<sup>108</sup> for "to create, ordain, or appoint." All of these also resonate with the word 'shape.' Landscape in fact refers to a "particular enclosed area" while *lendh*<sup>109</sup> on its own refers to "open ground." What is a landscape besides the open land shaped and enclosed, the collision of dissonance and harmony, the border of the familiar and the unfamiliar, or the temporary framing of a stable picture of the expansive, open and, changing world? So, what is the landscape; framed picture, condition of being, ordained creation, created or conditioned region, or a region of creation and conditions? Additionally, *scip* refers to a ship or a boat. This framed region of conditioned being is "not dissimilar" from the boat, or the undulating waters. Its stability is a necessary ruse, a comfort-zone ordained by Blake, and the viewer, or the reader. In its being shaped, or framed, and appointed conditions and laws, it nonetheless shows the fissures in its creation, the split necessary to create order and the undulating inconsistencies that show through that illuminated order. It shows that framing a vision, or containing a world, is itself already a transgressive act.

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<sup>106</sup> See *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, 513.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> See Shipley, 217.

The stranger then reminds Blake, “you think to yourself, ‘Why is it that the landscape . . . is moving, but . . . the boat is still ?,’” but we, the viewers, have a different perspective. We see the moving landscape from Blake’s perspective with a point-of-view shot, but we also see an extreme long shot of Blake floating along. We do not see a still boat at a stand without change or in a moment of quietude. Either the boat or the landscape is moving depending on the perspective. Both are always subject to the changing conditions dictated by the future. The boat is the vessel—a type of frame within which the world, or the small region of the world, comes into being through the eyes of Blake. But the frame itself is actually moving, as we can see from our frame of reference. Additionally, the conditioned space framed by our perspective is impermanent and illusory though it might seem fixed, stable, or static. The film plays with this idea as it makes us take multiple and changing perspectives, both through the changing perspectives of the cinematic apparatus and in the multiple critical and poetic perspectives it offers.

Finally, the stranger asks Blake where he comes from, which is also a call to the film’s reader, who by the end of the film knows that where he has been in the filmic dreamscape is where he is going. He ends where he began, that is to say with nobody and going who-knows-where. Blake’s response, “Cleveland,” is a place we never see and a land already divided, split, rent, cut, and severed, but a place to which one adheres or clings. Blake is cleaved from it and it itself is already cleaved, yet it cleaves or adheres to Blake. It is unknown, yet intimate. It is the unsettled space that Blake carries.

“Erie” is Blake’s supplemental response. The Erie are the lost peoples that once inhabited the area around the southeastern part of the great body of water bearing the same name. Not only does it resonate with the stranger’s mention of water, but it also brings with it a sense of

the unknown, the lost, and the foreign. It calls on the figure of the Native American, who is so often formulated as the stranger within the Western. Nobody is used ironically to serve this purpose, but just like Nobody is touched by European ways, Blake encounters Native American visions through his contact with Nobody. This encounter is also already implied in his *origin*—Erie—which is always also his unfound destination, as the film implies with its narrative cycle. Blake's strange encounter was and is always within and beyond.

Even the sound of the word carries the double resonance of containing and transgressing that is so central to the thematics of the film and to the multilayered reading and methodology of the reader. Aerie is a term that resonates with the name Erie in terms of its sound. An aerie is an isolated place, usually a house or fortress on a hill, but also the nest of a bird of prey, and particularly an eagle, that well-known symbol of America. An aerie is a protected and enclosed space that is buttressed against the forces of the outside world. It is the known and familiar space of the home or the comfortably perched nest in an unfamiliar world. It is not only hard to access from the outside, but it is guarded. It is a contained, protected and familiar space. A similar sounding word however draws up quite different associations. The word eerie refers to that which is mysterious and uncanny. It refers to the unknown and the unsettling. That which is eerie is outside of the comfortable boundaries of the known. An eerie place is not familiar. So Blake comes from and goes to the familiar unknown place. Following Heidegger, what is nearest to him is his own uncanny being toward the future.<sup>110</sup> What is closest and most proper to his being-in-the-world is the fact that he must constantly define himself and his surroundings. Such drawing out of contours is an aesthetic task, among other things. Heidegger reminds us:

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<sup>110</sup> For a fuller discussion of the notion of familiarity and unfamiliarity as those terms are used here, see the discussions of *Antigone* in Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 156-181, and *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister,"* 48-73.

The Fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture. The word “picture” [*Bild*] now means the structured image [*Gebild*] that is the creature of man’s producing which represents and sets before. In such producing, man contends for the position in which he can be that particular being who gives the measure and draws up the guidelines for everything that is. (“The Age” 134)

Man’s need to constantly determine the contours of his world, whether he knows it or not, determines him. This is also true of the political entity drawn up by the millions of voices that Blake signifies, a space and political entity that approximates a nation. An open democracy recognizes the unsettled region of the past and its uncanny being toward the future. Furthermore, the critic who listens to the call of the text hears not only the hard-fought attempts to illuminate a particular set of themes and capture a sense of a finely formed picture, but the fragments and fissures of that illumination and the various woven threads that are always attempting to unwind in various directions and rend asunder the vision of the reader.

Perhaps listening to this call of each reading is itself always a radical methodology (if it can even be called that) that respects the particularity of each reading as well as its more universal reverberations. The words and images are repositories of meaning and through the various etymological corridors, allusive incorporations, and con-textural wanderings, connections are drawn up and a broader (though elusive) picture temporarily comes into being through this particular combination. There is an analogy between the word and more extensive textual systems comprised of words and images. Just as every word is its own system or structure, or even better, texture of meaning based on an collection of ideas that work in concert and contrarily, such is also the case for larger, or seemingly more complex textures of meaning—whether a specific text, an institution, a system of thought, or a genre. *Dead Man* draws out this analogy between systems, all of which depend on the contrary flux of containment and transgression.

The particular textural combination of any work of art dictates one's method as a critic or reader. So in this reading I have followed *Dead Man* and listened to the works of William Blake and learned how to read from Henri Michaux's *Plume*. I have followed the laws of containment and transgression set forth by Blake's readings of a socio-politically, linguistically, and creatively tyrannical society, the laws reiterated by Plume's ironic, and comical linguistic confrontations with a dangerously mundane world, and the laws reiterated once more through the different transformations of spatio-linguistic journeying of the frontier that *Dead Man's* protagonist undertakes. This is not influence or allusion; it is a synchronic web of resonance that poses the problem of our understanding the simultaneously contained and transgressed limits of our existence, individually and collectively. The best that we can do is to bring these visions side by side so as to momentarily recognize the formed chaos. When they are juxtaposed we can see the semblance of order that is both energized and threatened by the imposing and dissonant powers of this chaos:

2. Times on times he divided, & measur'd  
 Space by space in his ninefold darkness  
 Unseen, unknown! changes appear'd  
 In his desolate mountains rifted furious  
 By the black winds of perturbation

3. For he strove in battles dire  
 In unseen conflictions with shapes  
 Bred from his forsaken wilderness,  
 Of beast, bird, fish, serpent & element  
 Combustion, blast, vapour and cloud.

4. Dark revolving in silent activity:  
 Unseen in tormenting passions;  
 An activity unknown and horrible;  
 A self-contemplating shadow,  
 In enormous labours occupied (*Urizen* 3.8-22)

Urizen's laborious battle against the surrounding chaotic darkness creates the mundane shell, a figure similar to the ceiling that suspends Plume between that chaos and mundanity:

In a silly moment of distraction, Plume walked with his feet on the ceiling, instead of keeping them on the ground.

Alas, when he noticed it was too late.

Already paralyzed by the blood that had immediately collected, piled up in his head like the iron in a hammer, he no longer knew what he was doing. He was lost. With terror, he saw the far-off floor, the armchair once so inviting, the whole room an astonishing abyss. (*DkM* 75)

Plume is suspended in the crisis of the critical position as he reads the world. He reads the world like the critic who approaches the text or the traveler who finds himself in unknown regions.

This region, "The place we inhabit, wherever we are, is always this in-between zone, place of host and parasite, neither inside nor outside" (Miller 25). Blake also finds himself in this indefinable "in-between zone," never past, never future and never quite present:

Look out the window. And doesn't this remind you of when you were in the boat? And then later that night, you were lying, looking up at the ceiling, and the water in your head . . . was not dissimilar from the landscape, and you think to yourself, 'Why is it that the landscape . . . is moving, but . . . the boat is still?' And also—where is it that you're from?"

We ourselves have trodden this "in-between zone" in more ways than one on this textural journey. Recognizing the call of proximity and nearness of a dissonant and uncanny milieu; that has been the methodology—order against chaos, containment with transgression, refusal to accept the impositions and conditions of banality; call it reading or interpretation as travel.

All of this brings out the thematic archi-texture of transgression against containment that we see in Blake's work, in Michaux's work, and in *Dead Man*. It evokes the Blakean demons of vision against regimes of "epistemic closure" (Frank 32). It follows Blake's understanding of the "relation between writing and reading as a form of struggle" and his practice of writing "as the active imposition of 'imagination' or 'fantasy' as a form of discursive struggle against the

dominant values organizing the social experiences and practices in which he participated” (Brenkman 109, 111). It follows the traveler on a journey that attempts to move past the settled boundaries and stagnant fears of assuredly confident understanding. This confidence in being able to fully grasp the limits and categories of our understanding—one might even call it a posture—and the deep transgressive desires to constantly undo and exceed the boundaries of our dominion is a central paradox of American being and a defining tension of American democracy, in terms of both theory and practice. It is a code expressed in the Western that *Dead Man* brings into full relief. Containment and transgression must live side by side. This tension is somewhat inherent in any politico-aestheticization of the world, but is particularly true of the American national narrative, and even more particularly as it is expressed in the Western. It is also a tension central to any political act, aesthetic act, and the act of criticism. There is equivalence between these registers. The reader is the poet is the critic is the traveler. These threads are all woven through the thematic archi-texture of *Dead Man*, which is an expression of this central tension of America that is explored by the generic codes of the Western. The film explicitly renders the exploration of this tension central to the Western as a genre. It juggles these codes of containment and transgression.

*Dead Man* also more specifically forges a method of reflection and reading already hinted at by the Western as a genre. Such a method implies fluidity between contexts, times, and places that we do not always want to accept. It suggests that as one peers into the distance of the past and heads into the unknown of the future the only way to engage one’s picture of the world is to continually read and reread these nodes of meaning represented by time and place and context. We must continually form and reform that ever-receding picture of a future that is unknown and always-yet-to-happen.

That is the momentary picture to which this process approximating a methodology—we could call it intercommunication, exchange, reciprocation, communion, or synergy—will have called the reader and asked him to listen to the undulations offered up by these textured moments. And eventually the reader must seize the illusion that he is releasing the text—at least temporarily—and leaving it to decay, though it wishes to go on and on, as do the attempted visions of the poet, each falling away from definition in the afterlife of their reformulations. Such textual seizure and release in *Dead Man* overlays, among other things, narratives of America.

Robert Baird comments, “Tautologically, the defining American characteristic has been the attempt to define the American character” (278). This is true also of the text that attempts to grasp this character—and the text that attempts to grasp the text, and so on. *Dead Man* rehearses this, as does the reader in his act of reading, or translating, meaning. Reading, as Peter Wollen submits, “simply produces more meaning . . . different codes may run across the frontiers of texts at liberty, meet and conflict with them” (533). A work is valuable if it “challenges codes, overthrows established ways of reading or looking, not simply to establish new ones, but to compel an unending dialogue, not at random but productively” (535). What will this textual incarnation have said? How will it have been translated? As I have shown, even the faintest resonations of this intertextual exchange—of this composite texture—express the necessary conflation of contraries, containment and transgression (bounding, in one word). The inevitable signifying tension and archi-textural operations are exposed. The text echoes with the binding textural necessity and inescapability that defines any textual operation, and undermines familiar attempts to pin down categories of knowing, including those that enable us to refer to something—whether text, or reader, or nation—as having an identity, individual or collective.

Though the temporary appearance of self-sameness is essential to functioning in the world, this appearance is always an overdetermined one. *Dead Man* opens up a line of questioning concerning the contours of such overdetermined appearances of identity as they are imagined through the Western's frontier spaces, and particularly through the archi-textural flux of containment and transgression. These contraries inform the journey towards identity. Rehearsing that fact to mobilize awareness, as *Dead Man* does, is its own methodology that impossibly and necessarily reiterates in perpetuity the contours of a new methodology.

He who sought to escape the World becomes its translator, too. Who can escape?  
The container is closed.

—Henri Michaux, “Preface to Elsewhere”

But he says nothing, he does not complain. He thinks of the luckless ones  
who are unable to travel at all, while he, he travels, he travels continually.

—Henri Michaux, *A Certain Plume*

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