

- 31 Despite King James's well-known objection to the Geneva's "bitter notes," and William Barlow's report that at Hampton Court James insisted that "no marginal note should be added" to the KJB (cited in Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 434), the KJB margins are in fact full of notes, just of a different kind than in the Geneva.
- 32 Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), 7.
- 33 One exception is an anonymous seventeenth-century Ranter who wrote a scandalous biblical poem discovered in manuscript only in the late twentieth century (Anne Laurence, "Two Ranters Poems," *Review of English Studies*, New Series, 31.121 [1980]: 56–9). The poet writes of "walking on a day" and spying a "gallant City ... Jerusalem new it was," in which there are pastures greene" and a "waterie fountaine." The new Jerusalem is from Rev. 21:2, and the pastures and waters are from Ps. 23, probably in the BCP ("green pastures") or the Scottish Psalter ("pastures green"). The poet wants to get inside the city gates, "to refresh myself or sleepe those Hills between," but he finds them closed. As Noam Flinker points out, the geography in which the poet would fain sleep is a topographical allegory of Song of Sol. 1:13, in which the beloved longs for the lover to "lie all night betwixt my breasts" (*The Song of Songs in English Renaissance Literature: Kisses of their Mouths* [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000], 136). The locked gate, the specific language of which derives from Isaiah and Revelation, should also be read in terms of the Song of Solomon, in which the beloved is described as a "garden enclosed" (4:12), and she describes how her lover "put in his hand by the hole of the door" (5:4). In typically blasphemous Ranter fashion, the poet wants sex with Jerusalem. Flinker describes the tendency of Ranters and other seventeenth-century radicals to interpret the Song of Solomon literally, as a celebration and endorsement of sexual license. But though Bunyan would have been appalled at the substance of this poem, he would have recognized its biblical mode. It is notable too that even this Ranter turns primarily to the KJB rather than Geneva. Of course, few if any probably read the Ranter poem in the seventeenth century, and no one read it for several hundred years thereafter.
- 34 Thomas H. Luxon, *Literal Figures: Puritan Allegory and the Reformation Crisis in Representation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), ch. 2.

10 Romantic transformations of the King James Bible

Wordsworth, Shelley, Blake

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When you hear the Bible echoed in a Romantic poet, expect to find it transformed. I start with a biblical echo in William Wordsworth's early poem, *Descriptive Sketches* (1793). In the following passage the speaker rejoices in the "Soft music from th'aëreal summit" (421), and in the absence of man:

– And sure there is a secret Power that reigns
 Here, where no trace of man the spot profanes ...
 An idle voice the sabbath region fills
 Of *Deep* that calls to *Deep* across the hills,
 Broke only by the melancholy sound
 Of drowsy bells for ever tinkling round;
 Faint wail of eagle melting into blue
 Beneath the cliffs, and pine-woods steady sigh;
 The solitary heifer's deepn'd low;
 Or rumbling heard remote of falling snow.

(424–39, emphasis mine)¹

In the "Deep that calls to Deep across the hills," a *basso continuo* over which plays an array of "melancholy" (but not saddening) sounds, Wordsworth recalls the first line of Psalm 42:7 – "Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts" – while signally omitting its parallel line, in which the sound of waters becomes a vehicle for the speaker's despondency: "All thy waves and thy billows are gone over me." Wordsworth's lines reverse the Biblical dynamic; here inner landscape seems to give way to outer. The deeps that concern him are those of nature, not of human spirit, and they call, but not primarily to us, the speaker's witness notwithstanding. Whereas Psalm 42 as a whole uses natural imagery to describe, analogically, the individual's inner striving towards God – "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God" (v. 1) – Wordsworth,

antithetically, describes the elements of nature in relation to one another, “where no trace of man the spot profanes.” In short, Wordsworth turns the Bible on its head.

Why, then, quote it at all? First of all, Wordsworth alludes to the King James Bible (KJB) to set his own project in relation to its tenets (here, anthropocentrism), and at least partially against it (for Wordsworth, nature is set over man, or man subsumed into nature). By incorporating well-known lines of the KJB he gives a scriptural sonority to his own poetry; by transforming the meaning of the lines he quotes, he lays claim to a metaphysical heft of his own. Wordsworth reads the Bible *antithetically*, or in a manner that reveals its own tensions or fissures: and in this creative dialogue with the KJB, we shall see, he is at one with most of the other major Romantic poets.

A second attraction of the line from Psalms that Wordsworth employs is its *ambiguity*, a semantic vagueness that contributes to its richness. In Hebrew as in the KJB’s corresponding English, it’s hard to say precisely what “deep calleth unto deep” means, and so commentaries vary. Most offer a naturalistic interpretation: in Wordsworth’s day, a popular gloss of the verse suggested that “when, at the ‘sound’ of descending ‘water spouts,’ or torrents of rain, the depths are stirred up, and put into horrible commotion,” it is as though “the clouds above [were] calling ... to the waters below, and one wave encouraging and exciting another, to join their forces, and overwhelm the despairing sufferer.”² Nearer our own day, Abraham Cohen offers another naturalistic interpretation of what it means for a deep to call to a deep: “The melting snows from the peaks of Hermon form thunderous waterfalls; and to these are added the rapids of the Jordan.”³ But Robert Alter gets closer to what attracted Wordsworth to the KJB style when he concedes the ambiguity of the forty-second psalm’s “deeps”: “this could be an associative leap from the heights [of v. 7] to the antithetical depths, from the mountains to the seas”; these “deeps” or “abysses” are “geological or cosmic.”⁴ Indefiniteness shades into an intimation of infiniteness. Alter’s gloss is attuned to the indeterminacy, the sublime affront to clear representation, which attracted Wordsworth to the Hebrew Bible and its King James translation. Wordsworth spells out his anti-iconic aesthetic in his 1815 *Preface* to his *Poetical Works*:

The grand storehouses of the enthusiastic and meditative Imagination, of poetical ... Imagination, are the prophetic and lyrical parts of the Holy

Scriptures, and the works of Milton ... I select these writers in preference to those of ancient Greece and Rome, because the anthropomorphism [sic] of the Pagan religion subjected the minds of the greatest poets in those countries too much to the bondage of definite form; from which the Hebrews were preserved by their abhorrence of idolatry. This abhorrence was almost as strong in our great epic Poet ... However imbued the surface might be with classical literature, he was a Hebrew in soul; and all things tended in him towards the sublime.⁵

Wordsworth’s lines on the anti-iconic sublimity of Milton and “the prophetic and lyrical parts of the Holy Scriptures” are in keeping with Edmund Burke’s influential assessment that both these sources evince the sublime of the indefinite or obscure.⁶

They may also be read as a manifesto for the Biblical aesthetic shared by all the major Romantics, with the partial exception of the artist-poet Blake – though it is perhaps significant that Blake scarcely illustrates “Proverbs of Hell,” his first major engagement with the Bible. As David Norton notes, the central figures of English Romantic poetry “share a biblical upbringing in a time when a favorable literary opinion of the KJB had become established,” being “the first major literary group to have this in common”; I would add that for the most part the literary quality they valued in the KJB was the rhetorical sublimity praised by Longinus and admired by eighteenth-century critics from John Dennis through Robert Lowth and Burke.⁷ In this essay, I continue with my examination of Wordsworth’s sublime and antithetical use of the KJB, focusing on his poem “Tintern Abbey,” and then suggest ways in which his method of allusive sublimity and semantic inversion influences the work of Shelley, and runs parallel to Blake’s antithetical or dialectic engagement with the Bible in his “Proverbs of Hell.” This antithetical relation to the Bible does not, I should note, necessarily make the Romantics involved in a process of secularization; they can also be viewed, and in the early nineteenth century often were viewed, within the framework of Protestant Dissent to a Church–State establishment that was ratcheting up its authority during the Napoleonic wars.⁸

Yet of the three antithetical biblical echoes I find in Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” the poem to which I now turn, the echo that seems most radical in its implications concerns *conscience*, a faculty still dearer to Dissent than to the religious establishment. It is conscience, I would argue,

that Wordsworth means to conjure in his richly mysterious phrase “the still, sad music of humanity,” for behind it lies the “still small voice” of 1 Kings 19:11–12. This voice that subdues the fire-eating prophet Elijah, rendering him serviceable to God’s designs, afterwards became identified as conscience, the voice of God within. Particularly among early evangelicals, the “still small voice” served as a source of enlightenment to which the Christian should listen in composure and silence, outside the din of the public world. Thus William Cowper satirizes the ethics of the third earl of Shaftesbury, which equate the moral sense and the sense of beauty, as (alluding to 1 Cor. 13:1) “tinkling cymbal and high sounding brass / Smitten in vain!”; for “such music cannot charm” the soul where “The STILL, SMALL VOICE is wanted.”⁹

Wordsworth asserts such music precisely in lieu of the “still small voice.” His music is sometimes the blended sounds of outer nature: e.g., “Soft music from th’aëreal summit” in *Descriptive Sketches*, or the “soothing melody” that begins and ends *The Ruined Cottage*, Ms. D. (15, 531–3).¹⁰ In the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, directly after “The Convict” – a poem that laments the “torture” of conscience (130) – we find “Tintern Abbey,” in which the still small voice is transformed into

The still, sad music of humanity,
Not harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. (92–4)

To read this music as a purely formal version of conscience is to understand why it is not harsh nor punitive (as conscience was popularly held to be¹¹), but nonetheless chastens by putting one into an ethically receptive mood, an orientation of responsiveness towards the Other, outside of a Christian (or monarchist) ethics of obedience or, as Wordsworth called it in an Alfoxden fragment, “negative morality.”¹² The “still small voice” to which Wordsworth alludes can say “thou shalt not,” but music never forbids, though it may prompt to tenderness and fellow feeling. Wordsworth thus uses a KJB echo to suggest, in an indefinite manner, opposition to “harsh and grating” commandments, injunctions, and laws, or the civic arm of religion itself.

A second KJB allusion in “Tintern Abbey” is to a pastoral psalm, the well-known Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd,” specifically to verse 4: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear

no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” After the speaker of “Tintern Abbey” has heard “the still, sad music of humanity,” and been moved by “a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused” in all things, he turns to a presence that walks beside him, one that would seem at first to be God (or some person of the triune God):

Nor, perchance,
If I were not thus taught, should I the more
Suffer my genial spirits to decay:
For thou art with me, here, upon the banks
Of this fair river; thou, my dearest Friend,
My dear, dear Friend, and in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! Yet a little while
May I behold in thee what I was once,
My dear, dear Sister! (112–22, emphasis mine)

Why does Wordsworth wait seven lines between the KJB phrase “thou art with me” – referring here to an unidentified “thou” whose presence has not been anticipated in the first 115 lines of the poem – and the identification of that “thou” as his sister? Clearly, I think, he intends by the force of his allusion to make his readers infer that this “thou” is the Lord, and then Jesus-as-Friend, and only gradually disabuse us of this inference: “thy wild eyes” is the first sign that this reading is probably awry. By the time we discover that those eyes belong to his sister (Dorothy, if we read the poem biographically), his sister has been invested with the office and splendor of the Lord of Psalms – and of Paul’s Epistle to the Hebrews as well (“For *yet a little while*, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry,” 10:37, emphasis added). She emerges as a new shepherd or comforter, at once naturalized and rendered numinous. That the poem’s speaker turns in the following lines to comfort his comforter, indemnifying her against the prospect of future ills, registers a final irony with respect to the Psalm we’ve had in mind, a final deconstruction of the hierarchical relation between shepherd and sheep, lord and servant.

The poem’s third and final KJB allusion comes in the speaker’s prayer to Nature on his and his sister’s behalf. Nature can (in this valley of the shadow of death) quell the fear of evil, or – as he puts it –

so impress
 With quietness and beauty, and so feed
 With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
 Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
 Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
 The dreary intercourse of daily life,
 Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb
 Our cheerful faith that all which we behold
 Is full of blessings. (127–35)

Here Wordsworth conjures both Milton and St. Paul. His “evil tongues” that shall not prevail come, textually, from Milton’s proem to book 7 of *Paradise Lost*: “More safe I sing with mortal voice, unchang’d / To hoarse or mute, though fall’n on evil days, / On evil days though fall’n, and evil tongues; / ... yet not alone, while thou / Visit’st my slumbers Nightly” (24–9) – this “thou” referring to Urania as muse of epic poetry.¹³ Wordsworth imagines into being similarly evil tongues and times, as proof of what he and Dorothy can withstand as long as they stand firm in their religion of nature. And to underscore that theirs is truly a religion and a calling, Wordsworth’s catalog of negations (“neither ... nor ... nor ... nor”) – of all that will not render them apostate – is modeled, as Michael Vander Weele has argued, on a Pauline passage concerning the perseverance of the saints: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?... For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:35, 38–9).¹⁴

Far more remains to be said of the imprint of the KJB on Wordsworth’s poetry, but suffice it to say here that he persistently deploys scriptural allusion in crafting his oppositional (or complementary) religion of nature. We may say of Wordsworth what Wordsworth, in book 1 of *The Excursion*, says of his character, “the Wanderer”: “He had early learned / To reverence the Volume which displays / The mystery, the life which cannot die: / But in the mountains did he feel his faith” (244–7).¹⁵

That Percy Shelley revered the major works of Wordsworth is well known, but his own ongoing dialogue with the KJB has drawn less attention.¹⁶ His debt to both sources is readily apparent in “The Retrospect”

(1812), a poem about revisiting a spot in Wales that is modeled on “Tintern Abbey” and that draws on Psalm 139. This Psalm concerns God’s protection of the elect wherever they may be: “If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me” (vv. 9–11). “The wings of the morning” appear to be a piece of pagan imagery, a synecdoche for the goddess of dawn as she rises from the eastern ocean. With these wings in mind, Shelley recalls his visionary flights in the solitude of the night, in flight from false friends who would yoke him to earthly things:

And early I had learned to scorn
 The chains of clay that bound a soul
 Panting to seize the wings of morn,
 And where its vital fires were born
 To soar, and spurn the cold control
 Which the vile slaves of earthly night
 Would twine around its struggling flight. (71–7)¹⁷

Shelley’s lines here could be paraphrased: even if darkness covers me, night shall be light about me; the aerial spirit can take flight. Yet Shelley recasts Psalm 139 in terms of individual transcendence, without the evident embrace of divine protection – his allusion to the KJB is thus, as Wordsworth’s allusions were, oppositional. Similarly, Shelley alludes as well to Psalm 42, verse 1 – “so panteth my soul after thee, O God” – but here the “panting” (destined to become a favorite Shelley word) is to rise above, to the spirit’s primordial fire, but to do so without an external master of that spirit.

Shelley lights in “The Retrospect” on another biblicalism that will become a standard part of his poetic repertoire: Christ’s “crown of thorns” (Matt. 27:29). In the present of “The Retrospect,” the speaker’s days are as happy as his visionary nights, because of the love of a new companion (biographically, Shelley’s first wife, Harriet Westbrook). She has effected “so bright a change” (143) that

The gloomiest retrospects that bind
 With crowns of thorn the bleeding mind,
 The prospects of most doubtful hue

That rise on Fancy's shuddering view,
 Are gilt by the reviving ray
 Which thou hast flung upon my day. (163-8)

The speaker has in this poem been addressing his own past, but the chiasmic transformation of Christ's singular "crown of thorns" into the plural "crowns of thorn" suggests, as does "the" rather than "a" "bleeding mind," a reference to a retrospect by or of mankind as a whole. This suggestion flowers in the first Act of Shelley's masterpiece *Prometheus Unbound* (1818-20), in which the Chorus of Furies torments Prometheus with a painful vision of human history, torn by fire and dread religious war:

Joy, Joy, Joy!
 Past ages crowd on thee, but each one remembers,
 And the future is dark, and the present is spread
 Like a pillow of thorns for thy slumberless head. (560-3)

The "thee" of the Furies' last three lines refers equally well to Prometheus, to personified Joy, or to the Christ addressed earlier as "One ... of gentle worth" (546), and the equation of the three seems intentional - any of these figures would be tortured by the vision of history the Furies unfold.

The redemption of history comes through Prometheus's Christ-like endurance and forgiveness.¹⁸ Cosmic rejuvenation stems from Prometheus's act of forgiveness, one that recalls Christ's words upon the cross: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). This verse is evoked by the Furies who tempt Prometheus to despair. According to the last Fury, "Many are strong and rich, - and would be just, - / But live among their suffering fellow men / As if none felt - they know not what they do" (629-31). Christ's act of forgiveness, evoked here under erasure - the line "Father, forgive them" is precisely what the Fury omits - is for Shelley the essence of his teaching and the key to the possible perfection of man and his environment. Only pity for those who act unreflectively within the chain of causal necessity ("they know not what they do") can inaugurate change within that chain; only forgiveness can open up a horizon of possible virtue beyond the calculation of probable evil. Prometheus responds to the final Fury: "Thy words are like a cloud of winged snakes / And yet, I pity those they torture not." These are the words that make the Fury vanish: "Thou pitiest them? I speak no more!" (634).

For Shelley (as earlier for Blake), everything beyond the example of forgiveness advanced under the name of Christianity is a lie and force of destruction. Although an atheist, Shelley adhered to theological ethics, for forgiveness is not an unqualified good in any secular ethics (in which it might be censured for condoning evil-doing or for flouting the moral law). And he remained steeped in the KJB, which, along with his friend Byron (in his closet drama, *Cain: A Mystery*, and elsewhere), Shelley read against the grain. Spirits may take wing with or without God; humans may usefully forgive with or without a God to forgive them.

Another masterpiece of antithetical Bible reading is one that none of the other major Romantics knew: William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-3), a strange and complex work that is part prose and part poetry, part satire and part prophecy. While called a "marriage," and while its title page depicts a couple in embrace, in this work the devil's party wins all the debates - presumably to offset the one-sidedness of the Bible and Judeo-Christian literature more generally. Here the voice of the devil proclaims:

- 1 Man has no Body distinct from his Soul, for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.
- 2 Energy is the only life and is from the Body, and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.
- 3 Energy is Eternal Delight.¹⁹

Shortly after this creed of bodily energy we find a section called "Proverbs of Hell." To some degree, these are the contraries of the biblical book of Proverbs: whereas the biblical Proverbs teach prudential wisdom, Blake's Proverbs of Hell celebrate energy, action, and exuberance. The biblical Proverbs claim to show the way to success through conduct that is upright, just, industrious, prudent, and god-fearing. One must avoid excess, overindulgence, and especially (as the book is addressed foremost to men) "strange women," a phrase that would seem to refer to all women who aren't wives or family members. Blake's "Proverbs of Hell," by contrast, commend excess in a variety of forms because - as Blake earlier states the case, *in propria persona* - "without Contraries is no Progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, are necessary to Human existence" (plate 3). Yet Blake's diabolic proverbs do not simply oppose or invert biblical proverbs: the devil doesn't advise, "be lazy, be unjust,

and be drunk." Indeed, the devil doesn't in any clear way advise anything, and in this opposes less the ethics than the didacticism of the biblical Proverbs. Blake's proverbs invite the reader to struggle with their semantic excess, and to glean from that struggle an ethic that is internal rather than imposed.

The "Proverbs of Hell" (plates 7–10) are set out in a list, one that begins benignly: "In seed time learn, in harvest teach, in winter enjoy." But the second proverb, on first sight, may startle: "Drive your cart and your plow over the bones of the dead." Upon reflection, however, the injunction is softened by its very ambiguity: does it mean "desecrate your predecessors," or simply "cultivate the earth and all that your ancestors have brought to it"? Does it urge us to reject the past utterly, or rather to cultivate a present moment that incorporates within it accretions of the past? A similar question can be asked of the gospel injunction that Blake echoes here, one that on first glance seems no less shocking than Blake's: "Follow me," Christ says to a disciple who asks if he can wait till he buries his father, "and let the dead bury the dead" (Matt. 8:22). Thus Blake's proverb prompts us to think not only about it, but also about the Gospel line it obliquely invokes.

And when we think about either injunction, we can't help but notice its quality of excess, of being in excess of a literal command (i.e., it involves hyperbole and/or symbolism) and also in excess of any one reading (ambiguity). But excess, hermeneutic or otherwise, is critical, as we are told in Blake's next proverb: "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." And the prudence that would reign in excess, the prudence that the biblical Proverbs presents as a divine quality – "I wisdom dwell with prudence," speaks Wisdom personified as a woman (8:12) – is thus countered by the following Proverb of Hell: "Prudence is a rich ugly old maid courted by Incapacity."

A subsequent set of diabolic proverbs sound as though they accord well enough with the biblical Proverbs' emphasis on work and industry: "Eternity is in love with the productions of time"; "The busy bee has no time for sorrow"; "The hours of folly are measur'd by the clock, but of wisdom: no clock can measure." (There follows a vegetarian proverb: "All wholsom [*sic*] food is caught without a net or a trap.") But next comes a proverb that runs athwart the numerous biblical Proverbs on what we would now call "business ethics," in a day before standard coinage, when gold and silver often had to be weighed out during commercial transactions. Proverbs

urge time and again to measure justly, using a good scale or "balance" and proper weights: for example, in the antithetical parallelism of Proverbs 11:1, "A false balance is abomination to the Lord; but a just weight is his delight." Blake counters: "Bring out number, weight, & measure in a year of dearth."²⁰ This compacted expression could be paraphrased: "bring out weights and scales when there's scarcity, presumably of wheat, of grain, of goods." But should care in business dealing be taken only when there's scarcity? What about in years of plenty? Blake's implication here may be that if there's enough to go around, let it go around freely – perhaps according to the ancient Christian principle of "to each according to his need" (Acts 2:45, 4:35). Unless there's real scarcity, don't worry about the minutiae of apportionment. Less Christian-communistic, however, is an alternative interpretation: in years of plenty, it's fine to take advantage of one's customers (they've got the dough). Again, Blake's proverb is in excess of any single or simple meaning – and what matters, finally, is how it "reads its reader," revealing and perhaps transforming her unexamined assumptions, and prompting her to the fruit of suitable action.

Blake's next three proverbs emphasize the reader's self-reliance in both interpretation and action. "No bird soars too high if he soars with his own wings": like Shelley on the "wings of morning" he would seize without a divine protector, Blake endorses soaring in one's own way, subtly echoing and inverting Isaiah 40:31: "they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles." Blake's bird needs no succor, though the next proverb suggests that he needs to think well on his relation to others: "A dead body revenges not injuries." Conversely, if you're alive you will avenge yourself? Or is it fine to injure someone as long as you don't give that person an opportunity to strike back – that is, by making sure he's dead? Finally, however, an ethical rule seems to inhabit Blake's provocative saying: don't injure anyone *unless* you're ready to kill him – which, upon inspection, you may well find yourself not ready to do. Only in this last interpretation does Blake's "dead body" proverb accord with the altruistic proverb that follows: "The most sublime act is to set another before you." But the ethical turn is one that Blake invites rather than dictates, requiring his reader, on her own wings, to meet him at least halfway. The less careful or differently inclined reader could become a murderer, a Raskolnikov. Yet it would not be the devil's fault.

"He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence" is Blake's fifth proverb, but he arrives at a more shocking variation in his fourth-to-last: "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires." Read by someone urgently desiring to murder an infant, this proverb could prove a goad to infanticide. But Blake did presumably not imagine a readership of repressed murderers. For the ideal reader, the key word here may be "nurse": if you have a desire you shouldn't or wouldn't act on, then don't nurse it. Cultivate only desires you would see flourish: in this light, Blake's diabolic proverb is not so far from Proverbs 13:12, "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh [when the thing desired comes], it is a tree of life." Still, this ethical reading of "sooner murder an infant" is dependent on a hermeneutic decision to focus on "[don't] nurse unacted desires"; the proverb as a whole, as Blake frames it, is in excess of a simple meaning or moral injunction. But it is only in ambiguity, in opposition, that the ethical choice arises.

True limits arise only from excess: this lesson in reading finds a final summation in Blake's final two proverbs. The first looks self-reflexively at Blake's fostering of self-understanding: "Truth can never be told so as to be understood, and not be believ'd." And the truth, at last, lies in Blake's final proverb: "Enough! Or Too much." "Enough" is the first choice we're offered, and its emphatic punctuation makes it appear the preferable one. "Too much," the road of excess, is a second choice that seems finally to be instrumental to the first, as indeed it is in the earlier proverb, "The road of excess *leads* to the palace of wisdom." Excess isn't urged for its own sake. Blake's motto is not that of the Lone Star Saloon in the Manhattan of my youth: "Too much ain't enough." The wise man knows when enough is enough, or the ethical and/or natural limits of desire. What Blake warns against, in the Proverbs of Hell and throughout his work, is "nursing unacted desires," that is, poisoning oneself with repressed rage and frustration, pining away with frustration; in this sense, *not* acting. But Blake knew that not all desires should be acted upon.

Of Blake's final proverbs I have saved for last his antepenultimate: "Where man is not nature is barren." Does this too have a relation to the KJB? It may seem to extend the anthropocentrism we find in Psalm 8 ("thou hast made ... [man] a little lower than the angels") and in the Bible more generally, and in doing so to run counter to Wordsworth's anti-anthropocentric echo of Psalm 42 in his description of a scene

"where no trace of man the spot profanes." But Blake's proverb may also be read as splitting the difference between these two extremes, and indeed as revealing the paradox inherent in Wordsworth's passage: the poem's speaker, imaginatively describing the rural scene, is the trace of man. The critic David B. Morris writes of this proverb: "What turns nature barren is not an absence of people, but, specifically, the absence of imaginative vision. Humans who view nature solely through the chinks of the un-liberated five senses will see only a reflection of their own imprisonment Where vision is absent, then, man and nature are equally barren; where vision is present, nature and man both reveal their kinship in the infinite, the eternal, and the divine."²¹ Supporting this reading is Blake's proverb "A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees," as well as his comment elsewhere: "the tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the Eyes of others; only a Green thing that stands in the way."²²

As Mike Goode has recently argued in a provocative article on Blake, proverbs in general tend towards diffusion, subject to excerption and recollection as well as different interpretations among different readers; although directed to shaping lives, they are offered in an ad hoc, accretive, unsystematic, and otherwise shapeless way, and are thus structurally opposite to the systematic regulation of theological orthodoxy.²³ Yet Blake's diabolic proverbs more than other proverbs critically depend on the power of ambiguity or semantic excess to craft a fit reader. Thus what Goode writes of proverbs as a genre is especially true of Blake's Proverbs of Hell: "through their circulation, they carry the potential not just to undermine their own already unsystematic regulatory authority but also, as they do so, to produce cultural hegemonies that compete with and perhaps begin to erode a culture's systematic regulatory authorities."²⁴

One such authority in the Romantic era, as I remarked at the outset of this essay, was the Church of England, still closely tied to the state, its doctrine enforced by the increasingly long arm of the law. And it was against the authoritative use of Scripture, rather than Scripture itself, that Wordsworth, Shelley, and Blake, each in his own way, aimed their anti-theoretical engagements. These poets displayed their gratitude for the Bible's rich ambiguities by crafting richly ambiguous lines of their own, lines that never enshrine the "authorized" version but that often echo its sublimities. We may thank them for helping to keep the Bible alive.

NOTES

- 1 *Descriptive Sketches*, ed. Eric Birdsall with Paul M. Zall (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); I quote from the 1793 version of the poem. Wordsworth defines "sugh" (437) in a footnote: "a Scotch word expressive of the sound of the wind through the trees."
- 2 George Horne, *A Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 3rd edn., 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1784), vol. 1, 254.
- 3 *The Psalms: Hebrew Text & English Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (London: The Socino Press, 1945), 132.
- 4 Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2007), 150.
- 5 Wordsworth, *Prose Works*, vol. 3, ed. W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 34–5.
- 6 Part II of Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) enumerates the various attributes of the sublime, starting with terror, obscurity, and power, and illustrating these with quotations from sources including Milton, Job, and Psalms.
- 7 David Norton traces the rise of the Bible's, and particularly the KJB's, literary reputation from 1700 to the Romantic poets and Charlotte Brontë in *A History of the Bible as Literature*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), vol. 2, 1–175, although he only touches upon Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry*. My quotation from Norton comes from vol. 2, 136.
- 8 For challenges to seeing Romantic poetics as a process of secularization, see Robert Ryan, *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789–1824* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), and Colin Jager, *The Book of God: Secularization and Design in the Romantic Era* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).
- 9 William Cowper, *The Task*, book 5, "The Winter Morning Walk," 681–5 (emphasis original), quoted from *The Task and Selected Other Poems*, ed. James Sambrook (London: Longman, 1994), 188. Similarly, William Wilberforce urges: "Rise on the wings of contemplation, until the praises and the censures of men die away upon the ear, and the still small voice of conscience is no longer drowned by the din of this nether world" (*A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes of this Country, contrasted with Real Christianity*, 2nd edn. [London, 1797], 235).
- 10 *The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar*, ed. James Butler (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979).
- 11 On the hell of conscience, see for example Fanny Holcroft's ballad "Conscience the Worst of Tortures" (*Monthly Magazine*, April 1798), reprinted in

- Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads and Related Writings*, ed. William Richey and Daniel Robinson (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin/Riverside, 2002), 270–1.
- 12 Fragment, "There is an active principle alive in all things," l. 73, in *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797–1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 310. I elaborate on Wordsworth's substitution of music for conscience in "Music vs. Conscience in Wordsworth's Poetry," in *Theory and Practice in the Eighteenth Century: Writing between Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Alexander Dick and Christina Lupton (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008), 225–38, 279–83.
 - 13 Quoted from Milton, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes, rev. David Kastan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005). Wordsworth – and Milton – may have also had in mind Psalm 34:13: "Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile."
 - 14 Michael Vander Weele, "The Contest of Memory in 'Tintern Abbey,'" *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 50.1 (1995): 6–26; Vander Weele's Pauline citation appears on 24.
 - 15 Quoted from the 1814 edition in *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).
 - 16 See, however, Bryan Shelley's useful *Shelley and Scripture: The Interpreting Angel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).
 - 17 Quotations of Shelley are from *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002).
 - 18 For a fuller reading of *Prometheus Unbound* in relation to forgiveness and joy, see Adam Potkay, *The Story of Joy from the Bible to Late Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); 180–6.
 - 19 *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 4, quoted from *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, ed. Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant (New York: Norton, 1979).
 - 20 Cf. Wisdom of Solomon 11:20–2, where "measure and number and weight" are attributed to God, as one who both manages natural order, and is as superior to his created world as to "a little grain of the balance."
 - 21 David B. Morris, "Dark Matter(s): Sacramental Humanscape in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*," a paper delivered at the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, Richmond, Virginia, March 2009.
 - 22 Blake's letter to John Trusler, August 23, 1799; quoted from *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, 448.
 - 23 Mike Goode, "Blakespotting," *PMLA* 121.3 (2006): 769–86.
 - 24 *Ibid.*, 780.

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Literary, Linguistic, and Cultural Influences

EDITED BY

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and

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