Blakespotting

MIKE GOODE

Blake's durability seems to depend partly on his ready reproducibility in simple forms as a cultural marker—memorable images to decorate dust jackets, startling proverbs to launch book chapters, catchy phrases to name rock bands.
—Morris Eaves, "On Blakes We Want and Blakes We Don't" (414)

It is a truism to all of us that undergraduates no longer read on library walls that the tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction.
—David Simpson, "Reading Blake and Derrida" (25)

WILLIAM BLAKE SCHOLARS ARE USED TO SPOTTING BLAKE'S proverbs in varied and at times amusing contexts. Still, more than a few academic eyebrows must have been raised in November 2003 when the *New Yorker* reported that the penthouse atop Donald Trump's 1 Central Park West complex boasts a "Library Dining Room" that features framed proverbs from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*,[1] including "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom" and "You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough" (McGrath 38). The citation in particular of "The road of excess" resonated with some of that proverb's other noteworthy appearances in 2002–03. Among the more famous in Blake's "Proverbs of Hell" section, it was quoted in at least three wide-release films: as the epigraph for *The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys*, a film about rebellious Catholic schoolboys in Savannah; as the hedonist credo of the title character in *Party Monster*, a biopic about New York club and drug culture; and as the self-proclaimed philosophy of the protagonist of *24 Hour Party People*, a film about the Manchester music producer who ushered in punk's New Wave. Invoking Blake's "The road of excess," it seems, has become a convention for licensing behaviors that overstep conventions—a permit for taking things too

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https://doi.org/10.1632/003081206X142878 Published online by Cambridge University Press

far, for doing things too much—reiterated to legitimate everything from the excesses of urban counterculture and drug consumption to those of condo culture and conspicuous consumption. A quick Web search of "The road of excess" in November 2005 located the proverb on dozens of sites devoted to substance use and abuse: it surfaced, among other places, as the motto of a Web site on growing cannabis ("Cannabis"), as an inspirational quotation on a news group for hard-drug users (Anapiel), and among the "365 excuses to get soused" greeting visitors to *Modern Drunkard Magazine* ("365 Excuses").

Among the many mainstream citations of "The road of excess" in recent years, only the invocation of the saying in 2003 by Lewis Lapham, editor of *Harper's*, presented it as something other than a hedonist manifesto. Neither regulated routes nor palaces, be they of excess, wisdom, or anything else, tend to be desirable things in Blake's poetry. Recall, for example, *Songs of Experience*'s "London," in which the city's "charter'd streets" are metonymically linked to Londoners' "mind-forg'd manacles" and in which "Palace walls" represent an oppressive architecture surreally stained "in blood" by "the hapless Soldier's sigh" (27). Blake's proverb easily can be interpreted as opposing those well-traveled and even conventional routes of excess by which individuals assume high offices that enable them to impose their authority as wisdom. Writing in early 2003 in the face of a struggling American economy and an imminent war in Iraq, Lapham appears to have had this reading in mind. He used the proverb as the epigraph for an editorial paralleling the world-unraveling excesses of George W. Bush's America with those of late imperial Rome. The thrust of the editorial was not (in line with another possible construal of Blake's proverb) that Bush needed to carry his agenda too far as a means of learning what would have been far enough but, rather, that the all-too-conventional culture of corporate excess that underwrote that agenda needed to be exposed for what it was, that Bush's policies were projects in palace building dressed up as efforts to disseminate the "wisdom" of democracy and freedom.

Given such varied invocations of Blake's proverb, one critical impulse is to try to show how they do violence to the proverb, how they uproot it from its historical and textual contexts to endorse ideologies inconsistent with *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, with Blake, or with 1790s British radicalism. Some version of this historicist impulse prompts our raised eyebrows or provokes our laughs when the radical anticapitalist Blake is apprenticed to endorse the Trump lifestyle. Yet it is difficult to defend the position that the proverb, once dislocated from Blake's copperplate and relocated onto the gilded walls of a luxury penthouse, cannot mean what Trump seems to want it to mean there. Deconstruction teaches us that it is beside the point to speak about taking combinations of words in or out of context because language is always already reiterated (Derrida 7–8). More to the point, historicist reception study demonstrates convincingly that texts' meanings depend entirely on how, when, where, to what end, and by whom they are read. As Tony Bennett suggests, literary critics should stop trying to study the "text," an idealist abstraction, in favor of studying "reading formations," by which he means the "set of discursive and intertextual determinations that organize and animate the practice of reading, connecting texts and readers in specific relations to one another by constituting readers as reading subjects of particular types and texts as objects-to-be read in particular ways" (66). When historicist scholars stop laughing, in other words, they need to ask what it means that some consider Blake's proverb an appropriate adornment for a luxury condo wall and that others will encounter the proverb for the first time on this wall. Such scholars might even regard the wide circulation of Blake's proverbs today less as a cause for chagrin than as an intellectual opportu-

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nity, a case for historical analysis in its own right, a penthouse view onto a portion of the infinitely complex history of the present.

Nonetheless, trying to discuss Blake's proverbs as reading formations poses problems because the proverbs resist being structured in those terms. While the circulation of "The road of excess" in drug culture is likely the joint legacy of Aldous Huxley's and Jim Morrison's association of Blake with mind alteration, the provenance of other citations of Blake's proverbs, including Trump's and Lapham's invocations of "The road of excess," is more opaque. Paul de Man once noted that Blake's texts deconstruct themselves, and the ambiguous diction, punctuation, and phrasing of Blake's proverbs certainly make them readily available to multiple and contradictory interpretations. Their circulation highlights that multiplicity as they appear in more and more, at times bizarre, contexts, such as when the Borealis Press published a greeting card in 1993 that read "Dip him in the river who loves water" ("Dip") or when the *Guardian* used the phrase "damn braces, bless relaxes," without attributing it to Blake, in its November 2001 review of Valerie Steele's *The Corset: A Cultural History* (Rule). While reading formations already vary radically from proverb to proverb because proverbs circulate independently from one another, they often vary within an individual proverb too as its circulation increases. For every line like "No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings," which routinely surfaces on inspirational Web sites, there are lines like "Exuberance is beauty," which circulate in a more diffuse set of contexts. The latter, for example, was quoted in the British press in 1999 when the New Year's festivities at London's Millennium Dome featured Blake's poetry (Odone), was cited in the 2001 "manifesto" of the punk band the Virgin Suicides, and was featured in 2005 on a motivational Web site called *Daily Celebrations* (flanked by quotations from Aristotle and Roseanne Barr ["Favorite Quotations"]); it also has been misattributed to everyone from H. G. Wells ("H. G. Wells") to Ralph Waldo Emerson (Wagner). If Roger Abrahams and Barbara Babcock are right that proverbs "provide a kind of cognitive mapping of common interactive situations" in a culture (418), then surely the circulation of Blake's "Proverbs of Hell" points to all manner of unmapped and possibly unmappable spaces of interactivity in contemporary Anglo-American culture.

My interest here is neither to seek out nor to map these spaces but rather to make the point that the facility with which Blake's proverbs circulate today is critically and politically instructive. Wai Chee Dimock once challenged *PMLA* readers to imagine a new kind of historicist criticism grounded in the idea that texts are "activated and to some extent constituted by the passage of time" (1061). More than simply reiterating reception study's basic tenet that a text becomes meaningful only through its consumption, she was making the point that a text endures through its lack of integral meaning and thus its openness to reappropriation, "its tendency to fall apart, to pick up noise, to break out in a riot of tongues" (1064). Certainly this is one way to explain the endurance of Blake's illuminated poems, which often circulate literally in pieces. But Dimock's theory of texts' latent meaningfulness also offers scholars a way to open historicist literary criticism and reception study out to each other: implicitly, her theory predicts that a text's historically specific meanings in one context sometimes reveal its potential energies in other times and places. I engage this aspect of Dimock's challenge here: while Blake undoubtedly would disapprove of many facets of contemporary Anglo-American culture, I suggest that the largely unmappable circulation of his proverbs today nonetheless reveals much about the politics, or at least the latent political potential, of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*—indeed, of Blake's poetry more generally—in the sociopolitical contexts of its original production.

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I take the proverb, that smallest of generic forms, as my license for making this historical leap. The idea is that the disparate contexts in which Blake's proverbs surface reveal potential energies in the proverb form—namely, proverbs' ready availability to deconstruction through their use—that bring into focus the politics of Blake's reliance on the genre in the 1790s. This does not presuppose a historically unspecific "law of genre" for proverbs, whereby what is true about proverbs in one context can be assumed to be true in another. Rather, I regard what we know about proverbs in different historical contexts, along with what we know about Blake's proverbs' resistance to reception study, as heuristics that help us find latent political possibilities in Blake's use of the form. Specifically, attention to the proverb form offers significant insight into how Blake's poetry came to be as widely cited and seemingly misappropriated as it is today. But, more important, proverbs' resistance to reception study enables us to see how, as forms, Blake's laboriously printed, hand-tinted, and little-circulated poetic manuscripts defy much more than just the orthodoxy and homogeneity of the form of the mass-produced book and the figure of the Romantic author, as so much Blake scholarship already demonstrates. His poetry in fact works to resist the idealist abstractions of the categories of reader, text, and corpus altogether, in the service of producing reading formations that cannot be identified or mapped according to existing strategies and technologies.

Producing such unmappable formations may well have been a pragmatic decision given that Blake worked at a time when political dissidents faced intense persecution. But it can also be understood, I will argue, as a challenge to the "wisdom" of the law that is consistent with Blake's political and spiritual commitment to stripping away reified structures of perception and judgment so that, as he famously put it in *The Marriage*, "every thing [will] appear to man as it is: infinite" (39). Although he was an artist who worked in a medium that necessarily limited the number of copies of his works and who spoke an elitist language of genius, Blake, in his transformation of the proverb genre, created a medium that is its own heterogeneous message, and that message, like the "rhizomatic" forms that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari celebrate (7–15), becomes senderless and receiverless over time, directed toward everybody by everyone.

Scholars have long debated whether or not Blake's art elaborates a system, whether or not a coherent mythology or allegory underlies his poems and gives them a consistent philosophical, theological, artistic, or prophetic vision. Over the last two decades, critical consensus gradually has shifted to favor the idea of Blake's a- or even antisystematicity, effectively dismantling the unified systems that earlier studies by Northrop Frye, S. Foster Damon, A. L. Morton, David Erdman, Harold Bloom, Kathleen Raine, Christine Gallant, and W. J. T. Mitchell proposed were organizing the illuminated books.[2] But Blake criticism has never fully embraced "a logic of absolute difference," as Tilottama Rajan charged it was doing by the mid-1990s, a logic under which no part of Blake's mythology need be consistent with any other part, no univocal poetic voice ever can be found, and no two Blake texts—indeed, no two copies of the same text—ever signify the same things ("(Dis)Figuring" 383). On the contrary, while the best Blake scholarship of the 1990s rejected reading his individual poems and collected works as efforts to elaborate a system, it also threw into relief similarities of stance and style across them. It did so, moreover, with an intent to reveal further unities between the artist and his age, points where Blake's corpus formally, philosophically, or ideologically overlaps with the rhetoric, principles, and practices of late-eighteenth-century radical movements. Thus, for example, in *Witness against the Beast* (1993), E. P. Thompson explicitly cautioned against knitting Blake's

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symbolic and rhetorical heterogeneity "into a system" but went on to contend that "a common nexus" of insights organizes Blake's corpus, a nexus not "of systematic philosophy nor of a particular intellectual or metaphysical 'tradition'" but, instead, "of attitude, stance, attack—the stance of the radical antihegemony of the antinomian tradition" (224).

For the reception scholar, however, the problem with Blake criticism to date is that, in one significant respect, it never has carried the idea of a logic of difference near enough to absolutism. This is not to suggest that there ever existed a reading formation for which Blake's texts somehow truly embodied "a logic of absolute difference." Rather, it is to acknowledge the difficulty of identifying any reading formation at all for Blake's poetry throughout most of the past two centuries. "A logic of absolute difference" goes much further to characterize the heterogeneity of the forms of Blake's readership historically than it ever could to characterize the formal and intellectual structures of the texts themselves. Specifically, for the reception scholar, the problem with critics' systematic and antisystematic readings alike is that they produce Blake corpuses that are little more than mythical historical entities, because those readings usually depend on being able to read widely across an oeuvre that has only recently become available *as* an oeuvre to readers.

Blake scholars hardly need reminding that his poems were reproduced in small quantities and thus scarcely circulated.[3] That reminder may even seem beside the point to those who read Blake in an effort to access his artistic, intellectual, or sociopolitical complexity or to those who seek to elaborate some aspect of the discursive construction of his age. But it is not beside the point if we consider that Blake favored production methods that, before the recent formation of the online Blake Archive, made it impossible for any individual reader to encounter more than a portion of his poetic output over the course of a lifetime. If we bear this in mind, his poetry's traditionally piecemeal circulation becomes not just relevant but crucial to assessing its artistic, intellectual, and sociopolitical complexity, not to mention the complexity of the eras from which it emerged and in which it has since circulated.

For years now, scholars have stressed the individuality of Blake's illuminated texts—each copy is hand-painted, and some are uniquely collated. But even when scholars assert the need (as they now often do) to specify the copies on which they base their readings of Blake, they generally fail to take stock of the logical correlate of their assertions: namely, that a corpus that changed with each new copy of certain poems not only ensured that no reader ever could consume more than a fractional part of it but also actively facilitated the proliferation of unique reading formations for its contents. For the reception scholar and perhaps for historicist scholars of Blake more generally, the question of the systematicity or asystematicity of Blake's corpus must give way to fundamental questions about a basic organizational rubric of literary history. Can the notion of a poetic corpus be anything other than a historical abstraction when each new copy of a text already "in" that corpus makes the corpus less available to an individual reader? Does it make sense to think about Blake's poems as a corpus given that, paradoxically, they became more unavailable *as* a corpus through their reproduction and dissemination?

Saree Makdisi's groundbreaking *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* has helped reconceive Blake's poetic output according to a more flexible, fragmented model of reading. Building on Jon Mee's model of Blake as an improvisational *bricoleur* who resists the idea of unified, self-contained, univocal texts (*Dangerous Enthusiasm* 3–11), Makdisi contends that the biggest impediments to Blake scholarship are the reified organizational categories of modern literary criticism. "The book, the author,

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the work, the subject," he writes, "might actually prevent us from seeing what is most significant about Blake's work" (13). Focusing on lines and images repeated across Blake's poems, he proposes instead that we conceive of the poems as "open texts" that generate unpredictable Deleuzean "lines of flight" to other texts: their repetitions, in other words, produce logics, collisions, and unions that generate across poems meanings unavailable in individual poems, meanings moreover that are unsystematic insofar as they are contradictory and arbitrarily sequenced (162, 157).[4]

But even this model of Blake's corpus does not carry the process of fragmentation far enough, because it continues to structure that corpus through another of modern literary scholarship's idealist organizational categories: the reader. *Impossible History* implicitly posits a reader who not only possesses Makdisi's considerable talents for recognizing and interpreting recycled images, lines, and their variations but also has unfettered access to all corners of the Blakean oeuvre, including multiple copies of the poems. Such a reader never existed until recently and certainly never existed in Blake's day. Moreover, promoting this model of reading as the way to see "what is most significant about Blake's work" again ignores the fact—a politically significant fact—that, for years, lines and images repeated across Blake's poems were never recognizable or available to readers as repetitions, were never put into circulation in contexts that could be, or even could have been meant to be, witnessed or connected by any single reader or reading.[5]

This point becomes clearer when we recognize that the repeated lines within Blake's corpus are perhaps less central formally than those seemingly designed to be repeated outside of it. The most recognizable linguistic form that such lines take in his poetry is the proverb. Gavin Edwards has suggested that "much of [Blake's] poetry is written in proverb-like sentences" (40), and even a casual perusal of his collected works will bear this out: the propositions that make up *There Is No Natural Religion*; the aphoristic statements of "The Divine Image" and "The Human Abstract"; *The Marriage*'s "Proverbs of Hell"; the dispute between Bromion, Oothoon, and Theotormon in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*; scattered lines throughout the continental prophecies; the free-floating phrases in *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (fig. 1); and so forth.

FIG. 1
William Blake, *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (London, 1825), pl. 11. Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University.

It is this prevalence of proverbial language, furthermore, that most clearly marks Blake's poetry's resistance to organization through the idealist abstractions of the "text," "corpus," and "reader." From a linguistic standpoint, a proverb is "quotational," always repeated verbatim as direct speech and thus functioning as a single lexical unit (Cram 84). It also, as Abrahams and Babcock put it, possesses a greater "degree of detachability" than other types of signs and sign systems because it has a virtually unmatched "capacity to maintain itself both within an interactional context and outside of it" (418). What marks a lexical unit as a proverb, in other words, is its capacity to circulate apart from its original context without altering its lexical form: identifying language as proverbial or proverblike means sensing its ability to slip its context and circulate in this way. Acknowledging the proverb as one of the dominant forms specifically of Blake's poetry is tantamount to identifying a kind of centrifugal force at work when it is read, a pressure his poetry exerts on readers to break off chunks of poems, to circulate its texts out of their contexts, to stop reading its lines and start repeating them instead. Blake's poetry may be an "open text" that operates through "lines of flight," but those lines tend to pass not through doorways to other sectors of his corpus so much as through escape hatches out of it. To the extent that these exits work (and contemporary culture has shown they can), the idea of a "reader" of Blake's poetry begins to look like

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a system to contain it. His poetry's lines of flight actively defy the production of anything like a systematic reading experience, producing readers but never a generalizable reader. Indeed, given that Blake's proverblike poetry actively encourages readers to appropriate and resituate its lines, it tends to dissolve and defy critics' organizational distinctions between the text, its author, and its reader.

This built-in pressure of Blake's illuminated poems to fragment and disorganize themselves underneath their readers' gazes, to enable multiple paths through and out of their texts, is further evident in the clutter of tiny images that often populate their margins. While it has become a critical commonplace that Blake's larger images bear puzzling relations to the texts they intersperse and surround, rendering it unclear whether they are depicting, elaborating, or merely in dialogue with the figures and concepts in the poetry (Mitchell; James 228; De Luca 89–90; Wright), critics often do not mention the tongues of fire, swathes of color, minute people, and leaf-fringed legends that also adorn his words.[6] That reticence can give the impression that these images are little more than gratuitous ornaments, neither elucidating nor interacting with the poetry. Yet, in practice, these diminutive images significantly affect the thrilling but also physically demanding task of reading Blake's intricate plates, causing readers to reread lines, flip back pages, turn plates upside down, see words as visual objects, and, in general, interrupt their otherwise linear movements through the text.[7] Who can read plate 8 of "Proverbs of Hell," for example, without occasionally pausing to look at the birds, leaves, ships, and people who seem almost to punctuate the proverbs, breaking up the flow of the words on the page (fig. 2)? That so many of these images depict straying objects—birds flying, leaves blowing, ships sailing—makes them less images or symbols relating to anything taking place in the proverbs than markers simultaneously of the formal texture of Blake's proverbial texts and of the reading practices those texts induce.[8]

The point that I have been making is that contemporary cultural references to Blake can teach us much about Blakean poetic form and the reading practices it encourages. Mainstream citations of Blake throw into relief at once the heterogeneity of the Blakean reader and the tendency of Blake's lines to fragment and to fulfill their proverbial ambitions. Skeptics may object that Blake's poetry was unsuccessful at realizing those ambitions in his own age and that this raises the question of whether its fragmentation and circulation today might be less attributable to its form than to changes in reading practices and technologies. After all, Blake's resistance to mass-production and marketing techniques renders suspect the idea that he wrote his poems to circulate widely, even in fragments. Nonetheless, it remains a fact that Blake frequently wrote poems with proverbs and proverblike sentences. Perhaps more significant, his poetry's verbal and visual self-citations—its tendency, as William Kumbier memorably put it, to repeat itself as "its own best source" (169)—have anticipated and even modeled what since has become a central mode of its dissemination.

I shall try to lend further credence to this reevaluation of Blake's poetic form by showing how in his day that form would have represented an unprecedented, but not historically improbable, challenge to regulatory systems, including to Britain's system of common law. Blake's proverblike poetry reads, among other things, as a canny attempt to evade the lethal power the law wielded against the era's radicals, while simultaneously eroding the forms of sociopolitical individuation the law underwrote. Proverbs offered Blake a way to create enduring forms of political collectivity that would never need to become conscious of themselves as such in order for them to undermine systems tactically.

This argument requires taking seriously Blake's seemingly playful presentation of his

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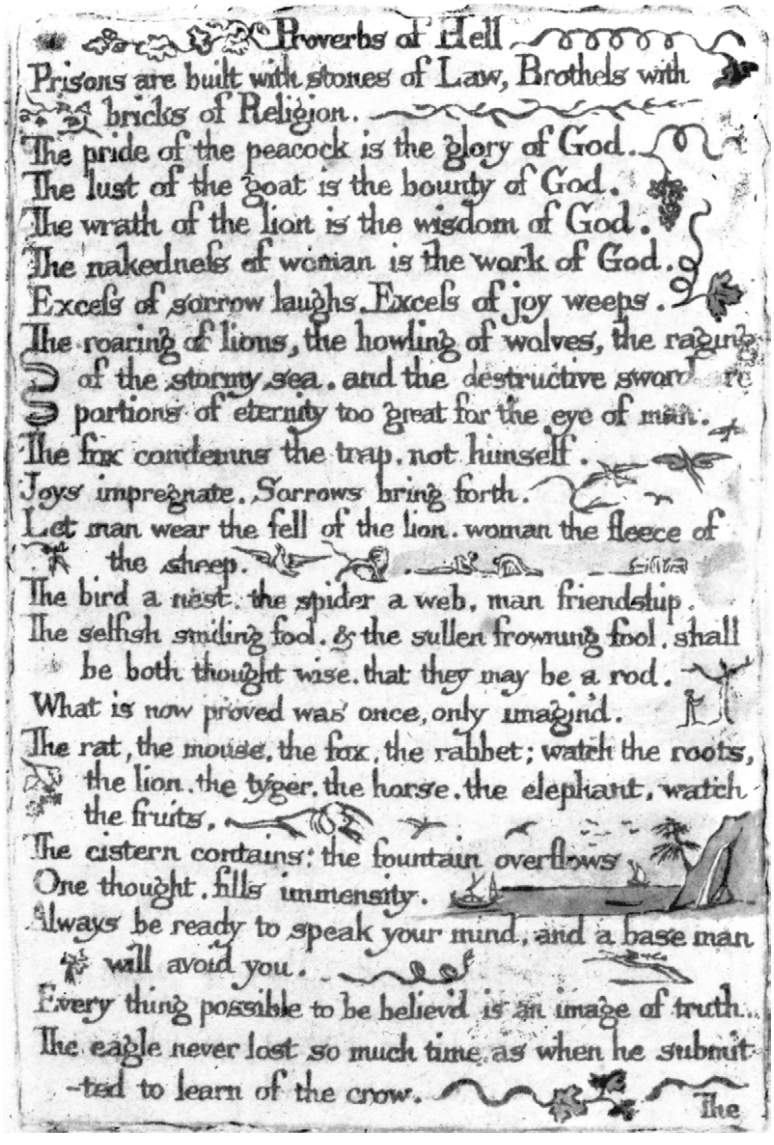

Proverbs of Hell
Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion.
The pride of the peacock is the glory of God.
The lust of the goat is the bounty of God.
The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God.
The nakedness of woman is the work of God.
Excess of sorrow laughs. Excess of joy weeps.
The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword are portions of eternity too great for the eye of man.
The fox condemns the trap, not himself.
Joys impregnate. Sorrows bring forth.
Let man wear the fell of the lion, woman the fleece of the sheep.
The bird a nest, the spider a web, man friendship.
The selfish smiling fool, & the sullen frowning fool, shall be both thought wise, that they may be a rod.
What is now proved was once, only imagind.
The rat, the mouse, the fox, the rabbet; watch the roots, the lion, the tyger, the horse, the elephant, watch the fruits.
The cistern contains: the fountain overflows
One thought, fills immensity.
Always be ready to speak your mind, and a base man will avoid you.
Every thing possible to be believd is an image of truth.
The eagle never lost so much time, as when he submitted to learn of the crow.
The

FIG. 2
William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, copy A (London, c. 1790), pl. 8. Leaf size: 15 × 10½ in. (38 × 26.8 cm). Typ 6500.36 PF, Department of Printing and Graphic Arts, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library.

"Proverbs of Hell" as compiled from anonymous sources rather than written by one, identifiable author. Not only does he refrain from acknowledging his authorship on the title page of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (an anomalous move at this point in his career) but he also introduces the lyric narrator of the poem's "Proverbs of Hell" section as an ethnographer: "As I was walking among the fires of hell, delighted with the enjoyments of Genius; which to the angels look like torment and insanity, I collected some of their Proverbs: thinking that as the sayings used in a nation mark its character, so the Proverbs of Hell, shew the nature of Infernal wisdom better than any description of buildings or garments" (35). Critics sometimes note that "Proverbs of Hell" bears a stylistic resemblance to Henry Fuseli's 1788 translation of Johann Kaspar Lavater's *Aphorisms on Man*, a text that Blake admiringly annotated (Butler 50; Holstein 29–31). But the two texts share little generically, for, adhering to the period's working distinction between aphorisms (by

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an author) and proverbs (collected from popular speech), Lavater introduces his *Aphorisms* as the "new and individual" work of a single mind (3) while in this passage Blake presents "Proverbs of Hell" explicitly in the guise of the collective "wisdom" of others. "Infernal wisdom" is not created by an author so much as simply there for the taking—in the air or, in this case, in "among the fires" of Hell.[9] Moreover, by adopting the pose of the ethnographer, Blake's narrator mediates this wisdom through the same quasi-historical lens that occasionally surfaces in eighteenth-century British scholarship on the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible. Much of the era's scholarship on biblical proverbs is antihistoricist in the sense that it lifts the proverbs out of their historical context, instead representing them as sublime texts that invite meditation and that thus intimate divinity's obscurity. But some eighteenth-century biblical scholars point the same kind of ethnohistoriographical gaze toward the Hebrew proverbs that Blake's narrator directs at the proverbs of Hell. Matthew Henry, whose exegeses and prayer guides remained popular into Blake's day, writes, "Much of the wisdom of the ancients has been handed down to posterity by proverbs; and some think we may judge of the temper and character of a nation by the complexion of its vulgar proverbs" (qtd. in Villalobos 248).

This historical perspective implicitly debunks proverbs' ethical and metaphysical truth claims. When the narrator of Blake's *Marriage* suggests, like Henry, that "the sayings used in a nation mark its character," he insinuates that the insights and counsels proverbs convey are time- and place-specific, merely situational, conventional, or traditional rather than universally right and true. Indeed, proverbs' ability to "mark" national character—their ability to reflect and, as the semantic ambiguity of "mark" suggests, to imprint the structures that organize a people into something recognizable (in this case, "a nation")—characterizes proverbial "wisdom" as tantamount to ideology or, more precisely, to regulation. On this point Blake's narrator would find ample theoretical support from modern folklorists. For roughly a century, paremiologists (folklorists who study proverbs) have understood proverbs to be essentially regulatory forms. In line with Kenneth Burke's characterization of proverbs as "strategic" language (1–4), paremiologists discuss individual proverbs as counseling appropriate plans for making sense of and dealing with situations that the proverbs name (Finnegan; Goodwin and Wenzel; Yankah). These counsels derive their clout from their impersonality. According to Archer Taylor's classic formulation, "A proverb is wise; it belongs to many people" (3). In other words, proverbs cannot be pinned down to a single author, and therefore they displace authority from the citer onto abstract entities such as collective tradition or common sense (Arora 5; Edwards 40; Obelkevich 214). A proverb's power thus tends to be hegemonic, in Gramscian terms: if people accede to its counsel, they do so because they experience that counsel as issuing from within themselves. Indeed, it is this hegemonic power that seems to attract the narrator of *The Marriage* to proverbs as cultural evidence. The ambiguity in his term "mark" implies that the sayings used in a nation mark how that nation marks itself.

To understand Blake's use of such an ostensibly regulatory literary form, however, it is important to add that, because proverbs deconstruct themselves as they do their regulatory work, their hegemonic power will always be unstable and internally contradictory. Proverbs can only become recognizable as such by circulating in many different contexts, and they can remain proverbial only by continuing to be applied in new ones. As the linguist David Cram puts it, "Proverb usage involves seeking out new contexts in which to apply a stock expression; consequently proverbs do not get invalidated as the world changes, but tend rather to shift their range of

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application by a process of metaphorical extension" (91). On their face, proverbs would seem to simplify and organize disparate situations by drawing analogies between them and citing something akin to a precedent for dealing with them. Cram notes that invoking a proverb is linguistically comparable to "cit[ing] a precedent" (87), and the anthropologist Ruth Finnegan has documented that some cultures actually use proverbs as precedents (27–32). But as each new citation draws more situations into comparative relation with one another, a proverb tends to grow more meaningless because, paradoxically, it becomes too meaning-full.

This tendency toward excess signification has to do with the fact that proverbs usually operate by way of analogy, and insofar as analogies often work readily on different levels, the same proverb sometimes yokes together truly disparate situations because its yoking operation can follow multiple associational logics (Lieber). Take "A rolling stone gathers no moss." In a student survey at the University of Texas in the early 1970s, the anthropologist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett found that some respondents familiar with this folk proverb understood it to mean that people who remain active never get old or run down; others, that people who keep moving never enjoy the gains and comforts of stability; and others, that people who keep moving remain blissfully unburdened. The latter two readings interpret the proverb as cautioning against and endorsing the same behavior, which suggests that people who are told, "A rolling stone gathers no moss" regularly internalize the opposite of the counsel intended by the addressor and neither party realizes the misunderstanding. Though proverbs may function individually as extralegal precedents, they are unlike true legal precedents in that their meaning and validity can never be adjudicated by reference back to a system of charters, rights, or principles from which they were derived. Just as no cultural system exists to arbitrate between conflicting proverbs (e.g, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder" versus "Out of sight, out of mind"), no system exists to arbitrate what counts as a proper interpretation or application of a proverb. Given that a culture's proverbs generally originate out of situations rather than systems, they tend collectively to be as unsystematic as the textures of the culture and its history.

When we understand proverbs' hegemony in these terms, Blake's attraction to the genre makes better political sense. Although Blake tended to oppose regulatory power in its myriad forms, the hegemonic power of proverbs is unsystematic and always undermining its own authority; moreover, the people who cite proverbs can contribute unwittingly to that destabilization. Blake's "Proverbs of Hell" and, more generally, the proverblike lines scattered throughout his poetry exaggerate and exploit the full range of potential regulatory instabilities just described. Most of the proverbs of Hell readily yield multiple and incompatible meanings. For example, the range of meaning of "Where man is not, nature is barren" (38) includes celebration of humanity's ecological stewardship (i.e., man turns nature's barrenness into fertility), criticism of humanity's ecological anthropocentrism (i.e., nature unavailable to man seems barren to him), and antifoundational skepticism (i.e., man invented nature as a category to organize and regulate the nothingness of the world as it is). Almost all Blake's proverbs contain such incompatibilities and incongruities. As Edwards has pointed out, the meanings of individual proverbs also can shift depending on which other proverbs they are associated with, a propensity that Blake exploits in copy H of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* by painting proverbs different colors, thus generating among the maxims visual relations that are unique to that copy (43). For example, "The bird a nest, the spider a web, man friendship" (36) initially reads as a series of analogies indicating that communal bonds protect,

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support, and comfort humanity, just as nests and webs do birds and spiders. In copy H, plate 8, of "Proverbs of Hell," however, this proverb shares its purplish color with "Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion," a line that recasts the webs and nests of communal bonds as instruments that exclude, trap, and exploit. The associations readers make with nests and support networks grow still more complex if they flip back a page and read the only purplish proverb on plate 7: "No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings" (36).[10]

If proverbs do function like extralegal precedents, then such instabilities of signification give Blake's proverbs the feel of precedents seeking out cases to which they might apply. They challenge their hearers, not unlike the "Dip him in the river who loves water" greeting card, to imagine occasions on which they could ever be of use. But the same individual semantic instability and collective regulatory heterogeneity that make Blake's proverbs seem so eligible to step in and regulate multiple and heterogeneous situations also give them the power to entrench and exacerbate the contradictions in their readers' self-regulatory impulses. In other words, his proverbs map their semantic and regulatory instability both through and onto the instability of the hegemonic contexts in which they circulate. 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.

For Blake, insight into a regulatory system's vulnerability to proverbs likely would have come from reading the Old Testament. Recent scholarship on the book of Proverbs indicates that its sayings date to various phases, over several centuries, of ancient Israelite and extra-Israelite traditions of "practical wisdom." Those traditions generally aimed to generate ethical consensus and promote social order by offering instruction on how to cope with regular contingencies and situations in everyday life (Day; Murphy 1–32; Weeks). Many of the sayings that compose Proverbs were once among the educational materials for young men looking to enter public life after the establishment of David's monarchy in 1005 BCE (Clements, *Wisdom* 13–39). This early civil education had "nothing particularly religious about it," Joseph Blenkinsopp contends in *Wisdom and Law in the Old Testament*, and its emphasis on a wisdom that relies exclusively on human faculties inevitably was in tension with a pre-Deuteronomic (late-seventh-century-BCE) religious orthodoxy that stressed obedience to the extrinsic, divine wisdom of the law (16). Blenkinsopp argues that wisdom traditions' different genres operated alongside, mingled with, and often competed with the law's regulatory power until the two "flow[ed] together and eventually [found] their outlet in the rabbinic writings and early Christian theology" (17).

The composition of Proverbs reflects this competition and this flowing together. The book bears traces of an editorial process designed at once to consolidate and codify its ancient, scattershot wisdom into a more unified whole and to bring its sayings in line with the law and theology of early Judaism (Blenkinsopp 27, 46–57, 157–62). At the same time, as the theologian R. E. Clements has suggested, the heightened importance of the practical-wisdom tradition under early Judaism represented part of a broader modification in the law, making the law less purely extrinsic and more an object of human searching ("Wisdom" 280–84). Blake harbored deep suspicions of all scriptures and of biblical law in particular (Mee, "Radical Enthusiasm"). Those suspicions are apparent, for example, in *The Marriage*'s charged remarks about the "Errors" of which "[a]ll Bibles or sacred codes have been the causes" and in *The Book of Urizen*'s disdainful portrayal of the authoritar-

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ian divine Urizen writing a stone "Book" that dictates "One command, one joy, one desire, / . . . One king, one God, one Law" (34, 72). When we imagine Blake sitting down to "read the Bible . . . in its infernal or diabolical sense" (44), as *The Marriage*'s narrator claims to do, it is thus easy to imagine him reading the proverbs in the book of Proverbs both backward and forward, as it were: reading them as sayings that not only further extended the Jewish law's reach into everyday life but also further introduced the wisdom of everyday life into the study and cognizance of the law—reading them as extralegal regulatory forms that frayed and unraveled the edges of efforts to impose "one Law."

Lest this seem too anachronistic an insight to attribute to a Bible reader in the 1790s, it is worth noting that the long eighteenth century marked a turning point in biblical scholarship in Britain, when Christian exegetes began to stress the presence of human motives, mediations, and methods in the composition of the Bible's books (Mandelbrote 36). The general view of Proverbs was that it was an edited collection compiled by diverse hands, that it "doubtless" contained, as Matthew Poole observed in a headnote in his popular 1696 annotated Bible, only those ancient sayings its compilers understood to be "the most eminent and useful" for leading a pious life. An educated eighteenth-century reader like Blake thus would have been conscious that some proverbs circulating at the time when Proverbs was compiled must have been excluded from the book, presumably because its compilers interpreted them as countering the spirit of true piety and the theology of the law under early Judaism. As a collection, Proverbs could not mark the character of the ancient Jews, then, so much as mark the character that the book's compilers wished to find—or construct—in the ancient Jews. To read Proverbs in its "diabolical sense," that is, may well have meant understanding it historically, recognizing it as a culturally specific effort to harness a potentially rogue extralegal regulatory power to divine law. At the very least, the era's most influential exegetes acknowledged that Proverbs' sayings exhibited instability and heterogeneity as instructive and regulatory forms. Simon Patrick, whose *The Proverbs of Solomon* (1683) remained in print throughout the eighteenth century, characterized the biblical proverbs as opposing "methodical discourse," subject to principles of neither grammar nor logic (qtd. in Villalobos 250), and Poole's headnote likewise cautioned readers "not to expect that order and coherence which is in many other Books of Scripture." As John Villalobos has pointed out, Christians routinely abridged Proverbs in the 1790s on the same grounds: "[Biblical] proverbs were considered as unrelated to one another except in basic subject matter. And since they were considered discontinuous, they could be reorganized with many of the lesser proverbs omitted" (250–51).

Regardless of whether or not Blake discerned the proverb form's potential power to subvert divine law in the ancient world, however, the semantic content of his proverbs suggests that he found the form appropriate for targeting the laws of religion and of the courts in the modern world. A few of *The Marriage*'s proverbs openly question the power wielded by systems of law. Such is true, for example, of the aforementioned "Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion" and of the poem's anti-Urizenic final line, "One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression" (44). Readers familiar with the operative metaphors for the law in early-1790s political discourse would also have recognized some of the poem's other proverbs as subtle attacks on Britain's systems of common and statute law. Take "A dead body revenges not injuries" (36). The line invites the Machiavellian reading that destroying one's opponents prevents their retaliation. But the line was also published at a time when Britain's most outspoken thinkers were

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fiercely debating whether Britain's "body" of laws was alive or dead. In 1790, the year that Blake produced the first copies of *The Marriage*, Edmund Burke famously characterized the British constitution as a "wounded father" and further equated failing to respect the "body of our statute law" with pulling "the bodies of our ancient sovereigns out of the quiet of their tombs" (27). Thomas Paine, whose social circle overlapped with Blake's at the time, in turn characterized Britain's laws as dead bodies and, thus, its legal system as a mausoleum, a "sepulchre of precedents," that privileges "the dead over the rights and freedom of the living" (196, 13). The declaration that a "dead body revenges not injuries" in early-1790s Britain would have been a veiled hint to some that the law—and the dead men who established it—had become ineffective at redressing present injuries. Some might even have understood the proverb as a subtle reminder that the law cannot revenge injuries to itself, that it possesses regulatory power only through social consent to its authority.

A form of radical speech as subtle as Blake's proverbs would have had obvious practical advantages in the 1790s.[11] Readers familiar with this era of British history will recall that the climate for most forms of political protest and dissent was unusually repressive, regularly resulting in executions and imprisonments. E. P. Thompson (*Making* and *Witness*), Iain McCalman, David Worrall, John Barrell, and others have demonstrated how fear of the state's coercive and punitive power affected the forms of political discourse and action throughout the 1790s. The decade's so-called gagging acts placed severe restrictions on public assemblies, suspended habeas corpus, and rendered mere criticism of the law's statutes a treasonable offense. Undoubtedly Blake's decision to embed the most politically radical connotations of his proverbs in ambiguous metaphors thus was dictated in part by the threat of the law's sword. But in the operation of the proverb form itself, Blake also had found a challenge to the logic of the law's operation. Had any of his lines realized its proverbial ambitions—had it circulated to the point that its wisdom became "conventional"—then responsibility for its wisdom could not have been located in any single writer or speaker. As a proverb becomes more and more effective as regulatory competition with the law, it makes itself increasingly unavailable to the individuation of responsibility on which the common law's penal power depends. In other words, as a form, Blake's proverbs did more to challenge British common law than just offer a competing regulatory form and substantively attack the justice of the legal system; they threatened to operate beneath the gaze of the law's individualist logic of volition.

At least potentially, the operation of Blake's proverbs falls into the category of praxis that Michel de Certeau terms "tactics," or acts and practices that "insinuate [themselves] into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance" (xix). Blake's proverbs can execute acts of subversive speech and counsel directly in the field of vision of hostile regulatory authorities, yet without necessarily being visible to those authorities. In fact, as subversive forms, his proverbs may be even more radical than "tactics" because their semantic instabilities can make the people repeating them unaware of their subversive counsel. Akin to his contemporary Thomas Spence, who imprinted radical messages onto legal tender in the early 1790s (Worrall, *Radical Culture* 26–27), Blake perhaps sought in the proverb a way to circulate messages along unpredictable and untraceable routes, as well as through the agency of even people who might be unsympathetic to his messages. This tactical quality likely can be blamed for the tendency of so many Blake critics to portray his poetry's meanings as available only to initiates, just as so many popular references to Blake associate his readers with conspira-

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tors.[12] *From Hell* (1989–99), for example, a fascinating graphic novel about Jack the Ripper, portrays the famous killer as a freemason who views Blake as an occult brother (Moore and Campbell, pt. 4, pp. 10–12). More recently, *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001), a forgettable action film about a secret society's plot to control time, metonymically links Blake readers to the society. To learn the society's nefarious aim, Croft has not only to identify a Blake line and decode a clue from it but also to locate an edition of Blake's poems that bears the society's emblem on its inside cover.

Nevertheless, by arguing that Blake's proverbs can be tactical, I have been arguing against the idea of an initiated Blake reader. Blake may well have designed portions of his poems so that only some readers would get them, but the radical semantic content of at least the proverbs and proverblike lines laced throughout his corpus cannot be understood as their "right" or "best" meanings. Their radical political work depends on their semantic availability to multiple and incompatible interpretations and on their formal availability to a reading that is itself tactical (what Certeau calls "reading as poaching" [165–76]). This joint availability enables them to circulate in the heterogeneous and unpredictable ways that make them threatening to systematic and unsystematic regulatory authorities alike. In other words, Blake's proverbs erode regulatory authorities not by replacing them with an authorized form of radicalism, a radical coterie or society of initiates, but by proliferating heterogeneous, self-undermining regulations to the point that no common identities, grounds, or situations exist anymore to be regulated—by regulating to the point where human culture marks its own infinitude onto itself. In Blake's hands, the proverb form works to produce not stable reading formations—societies within society—so much as an enormous rhizomatic formation of readers, hearers, reciters, writers, and co-opters who all know and use the proverbs inconsistently and who do so, ideally, without ever attributing them to Blake.

Blake's proverbs failed to realize this political potential in his age. Moreover, despite their increased visibility in contemporary Anglo-American culture, America's ongoing erosion of civil liberties and increase in moral absolutism inspires despair about the proverbs' utility and efficacy. I take another contemporary filmic invocation of Blake, Jim Jarmusch's haunting *Dead Man* (1995), to be something like a regretful admission of this despair. A revisionist western set in the late nineteenth century, *Dead Man* tells the story of an accountant named William Blake who travels west to take a job in a company town called Machine, kills a man in self-defense on arriving, receives a mortal gunshot wound, and ends up in the care of an older, enigmatic Pacific Coast Indian named Nobody. Nobody fancies the accountant to be William Blake the poet and approvingly cites several of Blake's proverbs as the two flee Machine and negotiate various perils together. As the accountant Blake hears more and more of these sayings, he begins repeating them and even at one point refers to himself as "the poet" William Blake. The film thus dramatizes the propensity of Blake's proverbs to circulate across cultures and generations and of their audiences to become their authors.

But, at the same time, *Dead Man*'s audience knows throughout the film that the accountant will die and that the Indian circulating Blake's words belongs to a culture that will not survive the nineteenth century intact. Moreover, all other nonindigenous characters in the film are repulsive—buffalo-slaughtering railroad passengers, prostitute-beating drunks, vicious and exploitative industrialists, a racist trading-post owner, a cannibalistic bounty hunter—and all play roles in settling, developing, and marking the character of the American frontier. When the film ends with an entire community of coastal

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Indians pushing the dying William Blake out to sea in a canoe, it seems to insert itself into the long tradition of national jeremiads that Sacvan Bercovitch suggests Americans tend to write in times of trouble. In this jeremiad, however, it is those who know and recite a quarter-millennium-old British poet's proverbs, those for whom Blake's lines have fulfilled their proverbial ambitions, who stand in for the many roads that America regrettably did not and continues not to take.

Notes

1. Blake 33–45. Throughout this essay, page numbers of Blake quotations refer to *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*.

2. Mitchell sowed the seeds for this dismantling by concluding that Blake did not produce a "closed" system (214–16). The earliest full-blown antisystematic readings of Blake are Damrosch's *Symbol and Truth in Blake's Myth* and Hilton and Vogler's *Unnam'd Forms* collection.

3. Of Blake's illuminated books, *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* had the largest print runs, and each amounted to fewer than thirty copies (Bentley l).

4. Edward Larrissy also uses Blake's repetitions to argue for an atomized, self-deconstructing Blake corpus, though, contrary to my argument and to Makdisi's, he suggests that this atomization reinforces the categories of author and work. For Larrissy, Blake's repetitions and recycled images represent "an attempt to recover aura in relation to a method [printing] which could literally decline into 'mechanical repetition'" (75).

5. The same criticism applies to Rajan's Blake reader, who must be able to read the mature "systematic" poems through the earlier "nonsystematic" ones (thereby recognizing that the "intertextuality" of Blake's corpus replaces and critiques the notion of its "canonicity"; *Supplement* 197–274, esp. 198–99).

6. That Blake integrated his words into such a labor-intensive visual medium might seem to undermine the claim that, formally, his poetry promotes its own fragmentation, reappropriation, and dissemination. Indeed, Joseph Viscomi has demonstrated that Blake's composition and production processes were integral to one another (*Blake*), concluding that Blake sought to "fix" his meanings and, moreover, objected to the "misreading and appropriation" of poets ("In the Caves" 40). Nonetheless, Blake's laborious accenting of his images' uniqueness across copies ensured that, even at the level of the individual page, the same lines of his poetry would enter the world differently. What seems like labor directed at integrating words and images can just as easily be viewed as labor that deconstructs and disperses them across copies (see also Carr 177–78).

7. The point that Blake's texts discourage linear reading has been expertly made by Mitchell, Eaves (*Counter-Arts*), Makdisi, Julia Wright, and David James, among others.

8. Stephen Behrendt makes the related point that Blake's microscopic images "force upon the reader a continual reconceptualization of space and perspective" (*Reading* 16); see also Mitchell 13 and Hilton 3.

9. For a proverb to take hold as a proverb, it must lack a clear origin. Given that Blake is the author of his maxims, Edwards is technically right that he "wrote aphorisms and not proverbs" (47). Moreover, his proverbs have never actually circulated *as* proverbs: when not masquerading as the wisdom of Wells or Emerson, they tend to be cited as lines by Blake. But it is Blake's presentation of his aphorisms as—even, his ambition for them to become—proverbs that interests me. The paradoxical enterprise of writing proverbs, even anonymously, presents substantial practical difficulties. It requires imagining a mode of circulating new "words of wisdom" without having that wisdom widely identified with a particular book or person. Might this not add to our understanding of why, having chosen to present *The Marriage*'s proverbs as "collected" sayings, Blake also chose to make the poem anonymous? Might it not also offer some insight into why Blake favored a production method that prevented him from ever mass-producing his poetic texts?

10. The proverbs' signifying possibilities would also increase simply through their transformation from inscription into speech, something that Blake's self-citations model. Kumbier shows that when Blake recycled his own lines, he sometimes altered their rhythms, thereby "shifting" their sonic "registers" (192).

11. David Worrall has documented the extent to which radical printmakers relied on encoded political speech in the 1790s, noting that it is a metaphoric speech for which we have no dictionary ("Blake" 202–03).

12. Systematic readers of Blake are most guilty of this, though many antisystematic commentaries still suggest that his poetry addresses an audience exclusive or conspiratorial or both (e.g., Eaves, "Romantic Expressive Theory" 792–94; Behrendt, "Something" 85; Newlyn 276–77; and Makdisi).

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https://doi.org/10.1632/003081206X142878 Published online by Cambridge University Press