

A Reader's Guide
to the Narrative
and Lyric Poetry
of Thomas Lovell
Beddoes

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By

Rodney Stenning Edgecombe

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface and Acknowledgements.....	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter One.....	10
The Juvenilia	
Chapter Two.....	45
“The Improvisatore”	
Chapter Three	106
Miscellaneous Poems	
Chapter Four.....	144
<i>Outidana</i> Part 1	
Chapter Five	178
<i>Outidana</i> Part 2	
Chapter Six.....	225
<i>Outidana</i> Part 3	
Chapter Seven.....	255
“Letters in Verse”	
Chapter Eight.....	287
Poems Chiefly from <i>Death's Jest-Book</i> (Composed 1825-1829)	
Chapter Nine.....	322
Poems from the Later Versions of <i>Death's Jest-Book</i> and Other Poems, 1829-44	
Chapter Ten	351
<i>The Ivory Gate</i>	

Chapter Eleven	393
Last Poems (Composed 1844-8)	
Notes.....	419
Bibliography.....	464
Index.....	490

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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"An Allusion to *Endymion* in Beddoes's 'Phantom-Wooer.'" *Notes and Queries* 55.4 (2008): 440-41.

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INTRODUCTION

Beddoes poses a peculiar problem for critics and scholars wishing to redress the marginal position that this gifted writer occupies in the Romantic canon—a problem seemingly unique to him, and created in part by his misconception of his own strengths as a writer. Others have erred in this way, but not with such catastrophic results. Patrick White, for example, while he misdirected energy into the production of second-rate plays, kept more than enough in reserve to realize his position as an important novelist of the twentieth century. Beddoes was less fortunate. An extremely good poet who, had things turned out differently, might have functioned as a missing link between Keats and Tennyson, he fatally divided his attention between verse and medicine, a discipline that by his own admission (made in the poem composed for Zoë King) served to wither his creative gift. In this he resembles Alexander Borodin, who could have achieved greater heights as a composer had not he been distracted by his duties as a professor of chemistry. The fission of energy was bad enough, but more damaging still was the misconception of metier, for whatever mental resources remained to Beddoes after gruelling days in the classroom he invested in writing an unstageable drama instead of in his primary gift for lyric verse. Properly developed, it could have ranked him *proxime accessit* in relation to the great Romantics of the second generation, but that was not to be. Arthur Symons's diagnosis of *Death's Jest-Book* explains why:

But there never was anything less dramatic in substance than this mass of admirable poetry in dialogue. Beddoes' genius was essentially lyrical: he had imagination, the gift of style, the mastery of rhythm, a strange choiceness and curiosity of phrase. But of really dramatic analysis he had nothing. He could neither conceive a coherent plot, nor develop a credible situation. He had no grasp on human nature, he had no conception of what character might be in men and women, he had no faculty of expressing emotion convincingly.¹

The Beddoes revival that has been gathering momentum in recent years has centred on *Death's Jest-Book*, a work analysed and appraised in such groundbreaking studies as those by Alan Halsey,² Michael Bradshaw,³ and Ute Berns.⁴ The first two of these scholars have also produced editions of

the text in question, even though this will remain as unstable and insusceptible of resolution as Offenbach's *Contes d'Hoffmann*, another work-in-progress that reached the public after the death of its author, and which has been re-edited ever since. Given the fact that *Death's Jest-Book* has been so well researched, and also because its deficiencies far outweigh the beauties of its blank verse, I have chosen to focus wholly on Beddoes's lyric and narrative verse, much of which has received short critical shrift. Daniel Karlin, for example, claims that the poet "was a second-rate writer. He thought so himself. He was that rare thing, an honest, unaffected self-dispraiser,"⁵ and bases this assessment on a perceived limitation of scope: "It is one thing to see the skull beneath the skin. But what if you see nothing else?" (p. 36). The answer to that question lies in the richness and comprehensiveness of the *sic transit* outlook that Eliot's tribute to Webster actually entails. An awareness of the skull doesn't desensitize one to the varying texture of the skin that clothes it. Indeed one's appreciation of that texture is enhanced and rendered more poignant by the fact of its transience. *Sic transit* is the still centre of Beddoes's turning mental world, and gives an unexpected thematic coherence to his restricted lyric output. Even the most fragmentary of his fragments have an arresting vividness, a vividness that points to the probable resolutions that the poet had in store for them. The same can't be said for *Death's Jest-Book*, where instead of providing a focal point, the poet's *idée fixe* becomes a shackle, and all the characters its commutable and ventriloquial vectors. His lyric strength commutes into dramatic weakness to the extent that the play shows no objective differentiation, existing inertly as the expatiations of a single consciousness. Not so the song lyrics embedded in it after the example of the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, and which can be detached like jewels from their overwrought setting—and not so those song lyrics composed without any thought of the stage at all. The last are vital and energetic, prompting Christopher Ricks to claim in his seminal essay that it is the "life, sometimes restless, sometimes restful, within Beddoes's very words, which most needs to be made manifest."⁶ Ricks's penetrating and attentive analyses draw attention to the subtlety and interest of those words, and I have tried to follow in his example by repeatedly putting them under the magnifying glass.

I shall be hugging the coast of the H. W. Donner edition⁷ from "The Improvisatore" to the "Last Poems," and since the texts themselves will be my priority, any generalities I formulate will emerge from the tissue of close analysis instead of being posited inductively. As a result, the reader will not confront a problem that often bedevils critical discourse on Beddoes, viz, his "readers' unfamiliarity with the texts" (Bradshaw, p.

6). The dramatic poetry—by and large the focus of most Beddovian criticism up till now—will enter my purview only through the lyrics that were intended to grace it, though it goes without saying that his blank verse, qua poetry (as opposed its dramatic appropriateness), is always assured and not infrequently excellent. John Forster made no attempt at digesting *Death's Jest-Book* when he introduced it to the Victorian public, and offered instead a florilegium of "purple passages" divorced from its incoherent plot and incredible situations. In a word, he suppressed the dramatic matrix and foregrounded the verse texture:

. . . But surely all we have quoted, fragmentary as it is, proclaims a writer of the highest order—magnificent in diction, terse and close in expression, various and beautiful in modulation, displaying imaginative thoughts of the highest reach, and sweeping the chords of passion with a strong and fearless hand. Plenty of defects may be noted—scenes hastily constructed, characters exalted into mere passionate abstraction, motives too sudden, loves and revenges too abundant and intense—but never a want of sincerity, never a borrowed trick, never a gaudy irrelevance, never a superfluous commonplace.⁸

Characterizing Beddoes as a poet both "magnificent in diction" and "terse and close in expression," Forster also touched on a crux that still awaits resolution, viz., whether the verse of *Death's Jest-Book* should be judged by modern or archaic standards. Should we regard it as a vital, unmediated nineteenth-century idiom or as neo-Romantic pastiche? Geoffrey Wagner, recalling Lytton Strachey's bon mot, affirms that while Beddoes "was 'the last Elizabethan' he was also the first of the moderns,"⁹ and Eleanor Wilner builds on his aperçu:

Thus the desire to rescue Beddoes from his undeserved obscurity and to explore his vision at length stems from this precocious modernity, his manifestly powerful poetic voice, and the way in which his despairing and demonic vision offers the negative image of a century whose contradictions he suffered and articulated at a time when they remained hidden to most men. Many of our own artists and thinkers share his sense that these contradictions are incurable, and that they are in the nature of things and men.¹⁰

The opposing school of thought is exemplified by Ezra Pound, who for his own part tessellated verse out of the fragmented past—pastiche in the Italian sense of "pasticcio," which is to say, "pezzo . . . scritto in collaborazione [in this case, cross-temporal] da diversi compositori", and something to be distinguished from "pastiche," a piece "il cui autore ha

imitato lo stile di altri." The first presents itself as a naked act of bricolage; the second disguises its borrowings as feat of empathetic reconstruction:

Can a man write poetry in a purely archaic dialect? Presumably he can, and Beddoes has done so; but would not this poetry, his poetry be more effective, would not its effectiveness be much more lasting if he had used a real speech instead of a language which may have been used on the early Victorian stage, but certainly had no existence in the life of his era?¹¹

Some might answer in the affirmative, as Royall Snow does when he points out that in

the orderly sequence of the history of literature [*Death's Jest-Book*] has no place; it belongs to no school and no period. Written in the nineteenth century its language has, by right divine and not artifice, the fine unexpectedness of the days of Elizabeth.¹²

As a claim with respect to the *language* of *Death's Jest-Book*, Snow's position is certainly defensible, especially since the "real speech" that Pound fetishizes as a *sine qua non* arrived in non-burlesque verse only with the advent of modernism. Besides, any doubt about the aesthetic viability of pastiche will be dispelled the moment we recall such works as "The Eve of St Agnes" and "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." And even if the idiom of *Death's Jest-Book* might cause such questions to arise, they scarcely obtain in respect of Beddoes's free-standing poems, which, notwithstanding a "mediaevalist" experiment or two, emerge freshly and engagingly *ex peto*, and which are situated well within the lexical compass of Regency and early Victorian verse. Indeed, his non-dramatic writing relies so little on pastiche that it seems much more progressive than retrograde, and looks ahead now and then to the work of the French *Symbolistes*. It also not infrequently suggests an acquaintance with the cutting-edge efforts of Victor Hugo up to and including *Les Rayons et les ombres* (1840), poems linguistically adventurous in a way unmatched by their English coevals.

In a letter to John Kelsall, Beddoes claimed that "Apollo has been barbarously separated by the moderns" and resolved "to unite him" (pp. 610-11). He clearly hoped at this stage of his career to effect a union between science and literature, subjects somewhat interinvolved in the Augustan era, but increasingly alienated in the eras that followed. By studying medicine, he hoped to establish an interface between mind and body in terms as frankly physiological as the Cartesian location of the soul in the pineal gland. Though undertaken with an eye to effecting a marriage of aesthetic and poetic experience with bodily functions, this amounted to

bad science: the "middle ground on which this reconciliation [between the *dissecta membra* of an Apollo drawn and quartered] was to take place appears to have been nearer the intuitive side of his personality than the intellectual, in what we should call the occult."¹³ In the event, bad science also issued in bad poetry, the experience of the dissecting table having prompted the coarse, defiant *Totentanz* of *Death's Jest-Book*, and deflected the poet's lyric gift into a metier to which it was little suited. The result of these repeated and self-destructive efforts at laughing death out of countenance was to exhaust Beddoes's creativity, for the wellspring of his imagination (essentially romantic and descriptive rather than satirical and dramatic) was neutered by the Gradgrindian facts he had accumulated at Göttingen—or so one infers from the confessional poem mentioned above:

Fain would have spellbound fiction's fairest shapes
And sent them captive to pay homage there.
But all in vain: the truth was restless in him,
And shook his visionary fabrics down,
As one who has been buried long ago
And was now called up by a necromancer
To answer dreadful questions; so compelled,
He left the way of fiction and wrote thus:
'Woe unto him whose fate hath thwarted him,
Whose life has been 'mongst such as were not born
To cherish in his bosom reverence,
And the calm awe that comforteth the heart
And lulls the yearnings of hope unfulfilled:'] (pp. 102-03)

In this testament to an existence that, from a creative point of view, had been largely misspent, he regrets the loss of the "calm awe" incompatible with the bravado of *Death's Jest-Book*. Wordsworth, after all, had argued that calm—passion quiescent if not passion spent—was a necessary precondition for poetry:

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of re-action, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.¹⁴

Not only does this specify a composure foreign to the febrile spirit of Beddoes's play but it also stresses the need for persisted effort through time. A long and shapeless enterprise, endlessly reworked in breaks between medical lectures, will necessarily suffer from the circumstances

of its composition. Beddoes didn't have time enough to arrive at greatness, differing in this respect from Keats's single-minded pursuit of his vocation:

He ended his letter to George with yet another rueful shrug at his laurel-crowning episode, and to this or another letter from Canterbury, he added the comment 'I have forgotten all surgery.' It was not that he regretted his medical training; but the step he felt he had taken in formulating and writing this credo now marked him off from his past for ever.¹⁵

Edmund Blunden also had Keats in mind when he praised the ease and trenchancy of Beddoes's informal prose—

The author of *Death's Jest Book* was a poet capable of fair and sublime revelations, a judge of life who could write a letter almost as vivid and rapid as those of Keats, a man of unusual scientific training and insight; and yet here he was burying his wit and his glory deeper and deeper "in the grave."¹⁶

—and regretted the Sisyphean futility of trying to perfect a work with foundations infinitely more "sandy" than those of *Endymion*. Keats had had the wisdom to write the last off as a learning experience, as a way of graduating to greater things. Beddoes, by contrast, persevered at his hopeless task. However, in spite of that expense of spirit in a shameful waste, he still eked out a body of lyric verse that matched the excellence of his prose, though certainly not "rapid," given its statuesque, mannered elaboration, and, while "vivid," not vivid in the sense of being immediately apprehensible. Its expression is often circuitous, and prone to follow unbeaten tracks of lexis and syntax, a tendency of which he was well aware, and which he traced to the texts—many of them obscure by the standards of Regency Britain—he read in childhood and adolescence. To absorb Cowley with one's mother's milk is perhaps to predestine oneself to an involuted kind of poetry:

For of the three classes of defects which you mention—obscurity, conceits, and mysticism,—I am afraid I am blind to the first and last, as I may be supposed to have associated a certain train of ideas to a certain mode of expressing them, and my four German years may have a little impaired my English style; and to the second I am, alas! a little partial, for Cowley was the first poetical writer whom I learned to understand. (p. 642)

But while the Metaphysical idiom of Donne can often be mathematically abstract, Beddoes is never jejune cerebral: he sensualizes the conceit, giving abstractions a concrete embodiment and then, in the last resort, failing to make that embodiment physically plausible. Solecisms and catachreses often arise in consequence, but the "obscurity, conceits, and mysticism" amount less to defects than to loci of imaginative strength. Graham Robb has written that Victor "Hugo's single greatest contribution to modern literature was a kind of transcendent modesty: the revelation that words were creatures with a life of their own, that to write a poem or a novel is not to go shopping for the best verbal approximation to reality, but to engage in a mysterious collaboration, to invent a new reality."¹⁷ The same might be said of the curious linguistic realm into which the verse of Beddoes takes us.

The thematic range of that realm might at first blush seem limited, though Northrop Frye tries to justify the poet's death-obsession as the paradoxical obverse of his vitality: "The complete identity with nature, which is the fulfilment of life, is achieved visibly only by death; hence death is the most accurate symbol of the ultimate meaning of life".¹⁸ That might contain an element of sophistry, however, for Beddoes never strove for a "complete identity with nature", rather viewing it *sub specie mortis* instead of *sub specie aeternitatis* (as in the contrastively affirmative *Weltanschauungs* of Shelley and Wordsworth). It therefore seems more politic for the poet's apologists to acknowledge the "thanatism" instead of recasting or disguising it. One must simply point out that his obsession, while it might restrict his range, by no means damns or even impairs his verse. Geoffrey Wagner remarks that with Beddoes "death becomes baroque,"¹⁹ claiming for the *idée fixe* the same insistent, writhing energy that typified the art of the early seventeenth century, an art more motile rather than balanced. At the same time, Snow stresses the frontality with which Beddoes addresses death, showing that frontality doesn't of itself preclude nuance and gradation: "The power of the abnormal is there, but not an abnormal which is lurking and sly, but one which is robust and powerful, which occupies the foreground rather than lurks in the shadows of his mind. But there is also the sting of an astringent and critical mind behind it."²⁰

The "sting of an astringent and critical mind" is what led to the foundering of *Death's Jest-Book*, which the poet could never bring to a desired state of functioning and polish, and one might be forgiven for extracting its lyric ore from otherwise barren rifts. Alan Halsey objects to this procedure, however, stressing the integrity of its lyrics to their matrix, and claiming that its "songs are 'lyric' in a sense in which the majority of

twentieth-century lyrics are not."²¹ He goes on to suggest that "if anthologists want justification for concentrating on this area of his work they can find it in his letters: 'song-writing is the only kind of poetry of w^h I have attained a decided and clear critical theory'" (p. 250). So far so good, but he then moves to an unwarrantable conclusion: "The problem is that the play to which these lyrics belong is thus automatically set aside—a misconceived work eccentric as its author, incoherent, foredoomed to failure. The orthodoxy implies that despite his statement about song-writing, Beddoes was blind to his only true strength as a poet" (p. 250). Far from it. What the orthodoxy implies is that Beddoes had mastered the principles of lyric but had failed to grasp the most basic principles (objectivity, multi-facetedness) of dramatic composition, presumably because he *failed* consciously to formulate them into theory. Besides, songs written for the drama (and even for novels) can easily break free of their moorings and function in self-sufficient ways, as witness the dirge from *Cymbeline* and Olivia's lament in *The Vicar of Wakefield*.

Beddoes was, in the last resort a highly professional poet, but a lamentably amateur dramatist. Goethe is worth quoting in this regard:

When a dilettante has done what lies within his capacity to complete a work, he usually makes the excuse that of course it's as yet unfinished. Clearly, it can never be finished because it was never properly started. The master of his art, by means of a few strokes, produces a finished work; fully worked out or not, it is already completed. The cleverest kind of dilettante gropes about in uncertainties and, as the work proceeds, the dubiousness of the initial structure becomes more and more apparent. Right at the end the faulty nature of the work, impossible to correct, shows up clearly, and so, the work can never be finished.²²

There lies the crux of the matter. Beddoes dilettantishly misapplied his significant talent to a work "impossible to correct." The anagnorisis regarding this misapplication arrived too late, a fact indicated by the heart-breaking epitaph—too humble by far—of his suicide note: "I ought to have been among other things, a good poet."²³ A good poet he certainly was, as I hope to prove in this monograph. Properly focussed, he could have been a great one. The sentence that follows—"Life was too great a bore on one peg, and that a bad one" (p. 262)—refers to the prosthesis forced upon him by a lost limb, but it also in a sense allegorizes his aesthetic tragedy. If we construe "peg" as the "wooden or metal pins to tighten or loosen (and so tune) the strings of a musical instrument" (*SOED*), it encapsulates the narrow emotional range and tonal monotony of *Death's Jest-Book* upon which Beddoes wasted so much valuable time.

But how remarkable that, that false turn notwithstanding, his lyric poetry should still prove so fresh and engaging. In a note to *Ivanhoe*, Scott remarked that Coleridge's "Muse so often tantalises with fragments which indicate her powers, while the manner in which she flings them from her betrays her caprice, yet whose unfinished sketches display more talent than the laboured masterpieces of others."²⁴ That supplies a more fitting epigraph for Beddoes's career. Many of his lyric poems are fragmentary, and yet, for all their imperfections, much to be preferred to the "laboured masterpieces" of a Southey, say, or a Procter.

CHAPTER ONE

THE JUVENILIA

Introducing his edition of Beddoes, H. W. Donner calls him "a poet of fragments."¹ These fragments constellate in a no less fragmentary sequence, for even the earliest poems pose problems of dating. To quote Donner yet again, "we cannot say for certain that any other than the Hymn from *Scaroni* was actually written before he left the Charterhouse. Be it sufficient that they belong to the first years of his authorship" (p. xxv). He does, however, concede that the "two fragments of *The New-born Star* . . . may be of a later date." But even though the chronology of the poems be riddled with lacunae, the child in Beddoes, more than in most poets, is father to the man. Almost everything he wrote, from adolescence to maturity, centres on the topics of death and time, and the differences between the various pieces relate more to issues of texture than of content. That there is critical unanimity in this regard can be gathered from Michael Bradshaw on the one hand—"Beddoes's subject as a writer was always death, from the earliest Lewisite horrors of the juvenile prose tale *Scaroni* (1818) . . . to the lyrical dissolution of his last poems from the 1840s"²—and G. R. Potter on the other, who remarks that his "sense of the strange, mysterious recesses of time, both past and future, the sense that the present is bound to the past and future by indissoluble ties, is one of the characteristic notes in his verse that help give it the unique quality which it possesses."³

"Hymn from *Scaroni*, or *The Mysterious Cave* [1818] (p. 3)

This invocation is extracted from the "Romantic Fiction" that Beddoes composed in 1818. It lacks individuality, but has some features to recommend it—the framing *inclusio* that imparts a certain ritual tidiness, and the hieratic anaphora. Beddoes seems to have found inspiration in the invocations of *Macbeth*—"All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis" (1.3.48)—and (a keen opera aficionado) he might also have remembered the advent of the Queen of the Night in *Die Zauberflöte*:

Erste Dame.

Es verkündet the Ankunft unserer Königin.

(*Donner.*)

Die drei Damen.

Sie kommt! (*Donner.*) Sie kommt! (*Donner.*)

Sie kommt!—⁴

[First Lady.

It proclaims the advent of our queen.

(Thunder)

The Three Ladies.

She comes! (Thunder.) She comes!

(Thunder.) She comes!—]

The idea of a godly catabasis can be found in Gray's "Descent of Odin. An Ode", a poem that might also have prompted Beddoes's tetrameter couplets (though Shakespeare also used this metre for the eldritch moments of *Macbeth* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*):

Uprose the King of Men with speed,
And saddled straight his coal-black steed;
Down the yawning steep he rode,
That leads to Hela's drear abode.⁵

Advent hymns in the Charterhouse chapel no doubt supplied further grist to the poet's mill, as witness the gesture of revelation in Wesley's ("Lo, he comes with clouds descending, / Once for favoured sinners slain"⁶) and the confident prophecy of Milton's ("The Lord will come and not be slow, / His footsteps cannot err"—p. 57). Even in this undistinctive (and undistinguished) early poem, we catch a glimpse of Beddoes's future virtuosity when an anapaest—"In the light"—flickers out against the iambic pulse: "In the lightning's flash, and thunder's roar."

"St Dunstan" [1821] (p. 3)

Dickens entertainingly captured the lore upon which Beddoes based this poem in *A Child's History of England*:

Dunstan, Abbot of Glastonbury Abbey, was one of the most sagacious of these monks. He was an ingenious smith, and worked a forge in a little cell. This cell was made too short to admit of his lying at full length when he went to sleep—as if *that* did any good to anybody!—and he used to tell

the most extraordinary lies about demons and spirits, who, he said, came there to persecute him. For instance, he related that one day when he was at work, the devil looked in at the little window, and tried to tempt him to lead a life of idle pleasure; whereupon, having his pincers in the fire, red hot, he seized the devil by the nose, and put him to such pain, that his bellowings were heard for miles and miles. Some people are inclined to think this nonsense a part of Dustan's madness (for his head never quite recovered the fever), but I think not. I observe that it induced the ignorant people to consider him a holy man, and that it made him very powerful. Which was exactly what he always wanted.⁷

The poet looks ahead to this roistering irreverence when he makes his subject the patron saint of noses rather than blacksmiths, doing homage to such misprisions as that, for example, which turned Agatha into the guardian of bell-ringers and bakers, the breasts of her martyrdom (a double mastectomy) having been misread as bells or loaves. Furthermore, remembering that Milton had turned the deities of Olympus into Semitic demons—"The rest were long to tell, though far renown'd, / Th' *Ionian* Gods, of *Javan's* Issue held / Gods, yet confest later than Heav'n and Earth / Thir boasted Parents"⁸—Beddoes reconceives the devil as the god of the underworld. He also turns the saint's sadistic triumphalism into a grotesque act of hygiene ("blew Pluto's nose with his tongs"). The squib all but foreshadows the clerihow, since, like that form, it presents a biographical vignette in off-centred terms, casual syntax here taking the place of the casual scansion of Bentley's invention. Nineteenth-century iconology, perhaps because of Delacroix's engravings for *Faust*, tended to favour the devil with an aquiline nose. We catch a glimpse of this convention when Dickens gives one of his villains "a hook nose, handsome after its kind, but too high between the eyes."⁹ Dunstan, on the other hand, uses his tongs to shorten that member—or so the hearty imperative implies (as though shouted by a spectator at a boxing match): "Gnaw short the long nose." "Gnaw," initially a command, almost immediately turns into an onomatopoeic snort, proving that mutilation hasn't prevented it from breathing: "Gnaw, quoth the short." By way of coda, we learn that "a nose is a nose is a nose," however much the iconography of Delacroix and Dickens might have tried to demonize one shape and valorize another.

"Within a Bower of Eglantine" (pp. 3-4)

Had this fragment been more closely worked, it could have passed muster as a proto-Imagist vignette, but its imperfections are too many. In the opening line—"When the night-air filled the holes between / The stalks of

light and tender green"—the word "holes" converts the random interstices of a creeper into symmetrical apertures like those on a Chinese Checkers board, and the air that fills them, since a filled hole is no longer a hole, develops an improbable opacity. Beddoes also drops a syntactic stitch when the "night-air" grasps the drop of dew instead of the "cup of its flower" (clearly the intended accusative). Nor can one applaud "cypress stalks," a noun too pliant for those sturdy columnar trunks, which can hardly be woven into bowers.

“Song from Eriphyle's Love A Dramatic Tale” (p. 4)

The name "Eriphyle" means "tribal strife," and it's possible that Beddoes was thinking here of the character in the *Thebaid*—possible only, for there aren't enough data in the poem to be sure of his purpose. The original Eriphyle, vain and treacherous, was bribed by a necklace to "settle the dispute between Amphiarus and Adrastus."¹⁰ No hint of that in this aubade, however, though there is more than a touch of *Cymbeline* 2.3.19-25:

Hark, hark, the lark at leaven's gate sings,
 And Phoebus gins arise,
 His steeds to water at those springs
 On chalic'd flowers that lies;
 And winking Mary-buds begin to ope their
 golden eyes;
 With every thing that pretty is, my lady
 sweet arise:

Arise, arise!

Common to both poems is the stress on dew, which Beddoes throws into focus by a rapt use of *tnesis* ("It is the dawn, my maiden, / It is the dewy dawn"), cradling the key adjective in a weave of repetition. The comprehensiveness of his inventory—"And every bird in every tree"; "every blossom"; "every leaf"—recalls (and inverts) the relentless listing in the "Nocturnal upon S. Lucy's Day, being the shortest day" ("All others, from all things, draw all that's good"¹¹). Just as Donne had sung that mock-serenade in winter, so Beddoes marries his aubade with the *reverdie* (spring song) in a dual celebration of life renewed. The narrow compass of the trimeters speeds up the tempo, and the *canzone*-like "chiavi" of the dimeters ("Yesterday" and "Through the air") create even more urgent *strette* at those junctures. The oxymoron "sunny rain" catches the fleeting point of transition between rain and the brightness that

follows, and the distributive "every" diffuses vitality throughout the landscape: "Every leaf is shaken / With the joy of Spring." Music (ordinarily an undifferentiated collective) turns plural ("All the musics sing") to convey the various layers of the dawn chorus—frogs, insects, birds and mammals.

The second stanza enters the dream of the mistress, who nestles passively within it ("Between the wings of sleep"), and occupies a world that fails to match the rich and vivid reality outside. Ordinarily dreams provide a heightened alternative to life—one thinks of how Caliban weeps at the discrepancy between them in *The Tempest* ("when I wak'd, / I cried to dream again"—3.2.140-41)—but here Beddoes presents conscious experience as something more complete: "Yet thou canst not be / Where showers can ever weep, / Within so green a forest." The lines recall Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn," except that in both of those, the alternative world of art trumps that of pain and mortality: "What thou among the leaves hast never known"¹²; "For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd, / For ever panting, and for ever young" (p. 210). They also overturn Sidney's claim that "the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow, in effect, into another nature, in making things . . . better than nature bringeth forth."¹³ Beddoes ends by despatching an envoi into the sleeper's consciousness and alerting her to the vivid world that awaits her *levée*:

Waken then, ere this
Does its clue unravel
Through the air,
By bee and bird its travel,
Ending with a kiss
On thy white ear, my fair. (pp. 4-5)

The speaker's kiss, while it might stop *on* the ear, will penetrate the dream as Porphyro penetrates Madeline's in *The Eve of St Agnes*, the contractive internal rhyme ("ear/fear") enacting that gentle ending.

“The New-Born Star. A Fragment” (p. 5)

This poem, a verse cosmogony like those in Book I of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Book VII of *Paradise Lost*, differs from both in dispensing with the idea of a creative agent. Ovid, like the Babylonian mythographers who in turn influenced the book of Genesis, had presented creation as an act of segregation and securement—

Hanc deus et melior litem natura diremit.
 nam caelo terras et terris abscedit undas
 et liquidum spisso secrevit ab aere caelum.
 quae postquam evolvit caecoque exemit acervo,
 dissociata locis concordia pace liagavit,¹⁴

[God—or kindlier Nature—composed this strife; for he rent asunder land from sky, and sea from land, and separated the ethereal heavens from the dense atmosphere. When thus he had released these elements and freed them from the blind heap of things, he set them each in its own place and bound them fast in harmony.] (pp. 3 and 5)

—and Milton followed suit, presenting the process as if it had the closure and fixity of a geometric theorem. The justness of God's "just Circumference" represents exactitude on the one hand and fittingness on the other:

For *Chaos* heard his voice: him all his Train
 Follow'd in bright procession to behold
 Creation, and the wonders of his might.
 Then stay'd the fervid Wheels, and in his hand
 He took the golden Compasses, prepar'd
 In God's Eternal store, to circumscribe
 This Universe, and all created things:
 One foot he centred, and the other turn'd
 Round through the vast profundity obscure,
 And said, Thus far extend, thus far thy bounds,
 This be thy just Circumference, O World. (p. 351)

Beddoes's world, by contrast, is self-generating, and whereas in *Paradise Lost*, angels watch and applaud the process ("him all his Train / Follow'd in bright procession to behold / Creation"), and whereas Blake's star-spirits likewise witness the enterprise ("When the stars threw down their spears / And watered Heaven with their tears"¹⁵), this angel seems almost to have stumbled on the event by chance. His primary function, like that of the angelic repoussoirs in Renaissance pictures, is to establish perspective and centre the viewer's attention.

The opening announcement ("An earth is born! an earth is born!") recalls Is. 9.6—"For unto us a child is born"—as if to remind us of the extrinsic purpose behind creation in the Judeo-Christian scheme of things, and to highlight the contrasting fact that this world is intrinsic to itself. We sense this in the rose metaphor that Beddoes has borrowed from Canto XXX of Dante's *Paradiso*—

Nel giallo della rosa sempiterna,
 che si dilata ed ingrada e redole
 odor di lode al sol che sempre verna,

[Into the yellow of the eternal rose, which expands and rises in ranks and exhales odours of praise to the Sun that makes perpetual spring.]¹⁶

—but modified to make it seem less static and composed. The bloom opens up before our eyes, and anticipates the acceleration of slow processes associated with stop-frame photography:

Leaf after leaf, and glory under glory,
 He marked the golden rose
 Like a deep human life
 From little birth unto its core, the grave,
 Opening, wide, and fallen in story
 Itself unclose. (p. 5)

As in Donne's "Blossom," a "higher" consciousness here overarches the life of the subject, encompassing its history in a mere brace of lines—"Whom I have watched six or seven days, / And seen thy birth, and seen what every hour / Gave to thy growth" (p. 44). The angel, standing outside time, compresses geological aeons into a moment and makes it an evermore.

Whereas in *Paradise Lost* God creates "ex nihilo"—for the "vast profundity" must have extension if it require limits to be set—Beddoes hangs his angel like a plumb-line above an intangible and immeasurable surge ("As o'er an unseen ocean"). His vertical stasis in the middle distance intensifies the restless energy beneath: "And in its bright expanding / Wondered at the infant star." Milton's creator had proceeded by fiat, but Beddoes, like Dryden, makes music the generative force: "From Harmony, from heav'nly Harmony / This universal Frame began."¹⁷ Dryden, however, still clung to the idea of an anthropic presence ("The tuneful Voice was heard from high") whereas Beddoes, swivelling between the transitive and the intransitive significations of "wakening," conceives *his* music as a force—one that spontaneously comes into existence and then causes other things to materialize:

And from the breaking air
 A wakening music did unbind
 Its curls of pale invisible hair
 And in veins and rivers wind
 Round the crest and bosom fair

Of the foundling world, fading away
 Into dumb spring as it fell through the day.

The *antanaclasis* of air=ether and air=melody creates an effect of clouds breaking to reveal the sun on the one hand, and of the world's breaking into song on the other. Beddoes evokes polyphonic strands of music through a metaphor of tresses, and, having emphasized its invisibility, leaves us to ponder whether gradations of tone—the figurative hair is "pale"—can indeed subsist in something unseen. Then he slips in yet another line of thought—the hair-like configuration of blood vessels no doubt derived from the root meaning of "capillary." So restless and wide-ranging is his analogical imagination that those veins shift almost at once into the waterways that course over the new world.

Even so, we can't be sure if the angel observes actual rivers in the landscape evolving before him, or if the extended metaphor has simply thrown up the new allotrope of the hair/vein sequence, and still works in terms of the music that brings the world into being. That music is the only external force in Beddoes's cosmogony. "Foundling" implies the absence of a divine parent, and, with that, the process of external approval and certification at the heart of the Judeo-Christian myth ("and God saw that it was good"—Gen. 1.10)—not to mention the sense of a hierarchical ascent: "There wanted yet the Master work, the end / Of all yet done" (*Paradise Lost*, p. 359). Not only does "foundling" suggest the world's abandonment to an indifferent cosmos but it also hints at "floundering" and "founding," a typical instance of the poet's habit of *agnominatio* or analogical punning. This is apparent in the way "dumb spring," even as it extends the water metaphor, also introduces the sense of "spring"=propulsion, since the music spurs the unfolding of life. Beddoes's new world is paradisaical, and carries no taint of death or corruption or sorrow, even though the fragment breaks off with a reference to its being "fallen in story." "Story" makes it clear that he views the fall something merely fabular, and that he was about to take issue with the Genesis myth.

“Alfarabi. The World-Maker. A rhapsodical fragment (p. 6)

According to Kelsall, who based his claim on vanished graphological evidence, "Alfarabi" is a juvenile poem, "written in so boyish a hand that there could be no mistake in ascribing it to his last Charterhouse days."¹⁸ All subsequent scholars, from Gosse to John Haydn Baker, have weighed in with their assent, the latter remarking as recently as 2002 that the poem is "tentatively dated to around 1819."¹⁹ I am unconvinced, however, for

not only does the verse texture differ from Beddoes's attested schoolboy productions (being austere and chastened, and altogether more sophisticated than "The Improvisatore"), but also because it seems unlikely that he would have even have heard of Al-Farabi in 1819. This philosopher, born in Turkestan in the ninth century CE, attempted to syncretize Islamic thought with that of Plato and Aristotle. His work, which one commentator commends for its "polyhistoric breadth,"²⁰ included a treatise that "envisages a perfect city state as well as a perfect nation (*umma*) and a perfect world state."²¹ In that treatise, I'm sure, lies the key to Beddoes's choice of name, a name he is much more likely to have heard in Göttingen than at Charterhouse, and heard from someone who played an important part in his life:

On October 6, 1826, there matriculated at Göttingen a young man who was soon to become Beddoes' friend. This was Benjamin Bernard Reich, the son of a Jewish banker at Bar in Podolia. We know nothing about him except what Beddoes tells us in his letters later, but it is significant that before the new year Beddoes had borrowed from the University Library a work on the Cabbalistic doctrines. It is difficult not avoid the conclusion that this young friend who had 'dug up a great deal of interesting matter relative to the Hebrew doctrine of immortality,' had inspired the choice of this book. (*The Making of a Poet*, p. 197)

I propose, therefore, that "Alfarabi" dates from this point of Beddoes's life, and that the philosopher's name probably came up in conversations with Reich, a student well versed in Semitic lore. Since these would have been conducted in German (and also, perhaps, in Latin), misprisions would have arisen, and it's possible that Beddoes, not realizing that Al-Farabi had written an Islamic version of *The Republic*, mistook it for a fantastical utopia. But it's more likely that, having indeed grasped the scope and purpose of the work, he saw nothing wrong with sending it up in a sprightly *coup d'esprit*. To this end, he seems to have incorporated data about Reich himself, data that, *ex hypothesi*, would place the poem several months into their friendship—say, January, 1827—when they had become sufficiently intimate for good-natured teasing. This also jibes with a datum in the prologue, viz., Beddoes's comment that he hasn't seen the sun "all this winter" (p. 6).

Furthermore, if indeed there be bits of Reich in the bricolage the Alfarabi portrait, it follows that the fragment was intended for the man himself, memorializing the start of a significant friendship. Beddoes's letters show that Reich greatly impressed him, and Donner even goes so far as tentatively to identify him with the "loved longlost boy" (p. 111) of "Dream-Pedlary." If we take him to be "Alfarabi's" hypothetic dedicatee,

we can explain the rounded penmanship that caused Kelsall to assign it to the poet's Charterhouse days, for this would have sprung from the need to write in a clear hand for someone better versed in the Hebrew and Cyrillic scripts—the lucid hand an outward and visible sign of a wish that the poem be grasped by a second-language speaker.

"Alfarabi" would additionally have shown Reich that Beddoes was a fluent and brilliant poet. He had performed in the same way for the adoring Kelsall during the summer of 1823 in Southhampton: "So facile, says Kelsall, was his composition at this period of his authorship, that it often happened that in the evening he would take home some unfinished act of a drama and the next morning show Kelsall an entirely new one where the same theme was given a different treatment" (*The Making of a Poet*, p. 132). "Alfarabi" does indeed have the air of having been written at a sitting (as Keats dashed off poems after visits to Leigh Hunt). Perhaps Beddoes returned home from an evening with Reich, wrote into the small hours (conscious, like Ted Hughes in "The Thought Fox," of the brilliant winter sky beyond his window) and decided to centre the poem on the creation of a planet.

Thrust into Reich's hands the next day, it would have served both as a friendship-offering and demonstration of creative power. For in 1827, Beddoes's verse was still flowing freely, and he was no doubt vain of his facility as productive people often tend to be (Donizetti boasted more than once of writing the final act of *La Favorite* in a night). Since, according to a note in Donner's edition, Kelsall supplied the title of the companion poem ("The world is born today"), can we infer that Beddoes himself provided the subtitle of "Alfarabi"? If so, it's significant that it should stress the improvisational nature of the exercise. When he wrote for Kelsall in Southhampton, the surviving bits and pieces were all intended eventually to develop into bigger things, and were never tagged as fragments. "A *rhapsodical fragment*" might therefore signify a *poème d'occasion* never meant to be carried further once its memorializing work was done. Beddoes could have used the word "rhapsodical" not only to explain its formal disjunctiveness, but also to hint at the enthusiasm and delight that Reich's friendship inspired ("rhapsody" conceived as "elation" as well as "free form"). In any event, my suggested interpretative framework allows some puzzling details to fall into place.

The first of these relates to the poem's national announcement—"I'm an Englishman" (my emphasis)—which seems both redundant and inappropriately mature for an English schoolboy, but which becomes more meaningful if we assume that the *adult* Beddoes is writing for a Russian friend. Nationalist taggings belong more naturally to such poems of exile

as Browning's "Home Thoughts from Abroad." "Alfarabi" goes on to mock that nationality through an irrational attachment to cloudiness, long conceived on the continent as a typical "note" of the English climate:

. . . and one cloud—
 Yes (I'm an Englishman), one snow-winged cloud
 To wander slowly down the trembling blue;

Just as Lord Warburton, trying to ascertain the reasons for his rejection, asks Isabel, "Are you afraid—afraid of the climate?"²² and just as in *A Rebours*, "abominably foggy and rainy weather" induces an impulse to visit England, and keeps "before [Esseintes'] eyes the picture of a land of mist and mud,"²³ so Beddoes, blotting the Arcadian sky of his prologue with a cloud, sends up his native climate for the amusement of a Russian friend.

But an additional irony might have been layered on to that phenomenon, for Reich must have informed Beddoes of an equivalent disadvantage to Odessa. A travelogue, *Russians of the South* (1854), remarks of the city that

dust lies like a universal shroud of some two or three inches thick. The slightest breeze flings it over the town in clouds, the lightest footstep sends it flying high in dense heaps. When, therefore, I tell you that hundreds of the carriages of the places, driven at high speed . . . are perpetually racing about, and that the sea breezes are as perpetually rushing through the streets, the statement that Odessa lives in a cloud is no figure of speech.²⁴

This motif of bad weather recurs when Alfarabi puffs "from his pipe a British climate round" (p. 10) his new world. Since pipes produce dry, acrid smoke rather than moist, and since "sidus" can mean "weather" as well as "star," the name of his creation ("Georgium Sidus") might also glance at the dust clouds of the Black Sea. Although Beddoes identifies the new world with Uranus—"It chanc'd a bearded sage espied it's sweep, / And named it GEORGIUM SIDUS"—Georgius could refer to the patron saint of Georgia (geographical neighbour of Reich's Ukraine) as well as to Herschel's patron. Since, like most eighteenth-century gentlemen, that astronomer had no facial hair, Beddoes seems to have superimposed upon him the image of Reich, almost certainly bearded, and most certainly a sage. When, decades later, Beddoes sat for the Tobler portrait in something approximating a kaftan, did he mean to memorialize his friend's gabardine? Be that as it may, the fluid and improvisatory nature of the poem—a "rhapsodical fragment," after all—facilitates the traffic in fragmentary, half-realized allusions. Baker finds irony in the "contrast

between Alfarabi's bright new world and the pitiful condition of the English monarchy—and monarch—in 1819.

Compared with the unimaginably distant Uranus 'like some great ruinous dream of broken worlds, / Tumbling through heaven', both the 'old, mad, blind, despised and dying King' and those who cynically hold him up for reverence are indeed doubly insignificant" (p. 47). For my part, though, I see no "bright new world" in the "ruinous dream," cobbled up as it is by "tongs, and trowels, needles, scissors, paste, / Solder and glue" (p. 9). Alfarabi's world seems all too continuous with the one we know, and its very atmosphere—hinting both at the cloud-cover of the British Isles and the haze over Odessa—points to that shared deficiency. There can be no doubt that Beddoes means that cloud to signify the presence of life on Uranus, a deduction made from an atmosphere closer to home: "Believing that Venus' proximity to the Sun would make it warmer than Earth, and encouraged by the discovery of a thick atmosphere by Mikhail Lomonosov in the 18th century, astronomers once imagined a lush carboniferous forest beneath the Venusian clouds."²⁵ Even if Herschel's telescope had been too weak to reveal the colour of his new world's atmosphere—Sparrow observes that "From Earth, astronomers can discern Uranus as little more than a tiny, indistinct blue-green circle" (p. 187)—he would certainly have entertained the possibility of its being swathed in cloud.

Any attempt to link Beddoes and Reich by the cloudiness of their countries remains suppositious, but one treads on firmer ground when guessing that, as the son of a banker, Reich had chosen a course of cultural assimilation. He must have begun his education at one of the many private schools in Odessa ("including special primary schools for Catholics, Armenians, Germans, and Jews"—Zipperstein, p. 29), and then progressed to the Richelieu Lyceum, which had "opened in 1817, and transformed into the New Russia University in 1865." But even in the comparatively liberal enclave of Odessa, he would not have escaped the scourge of Russian Judeophobia. Zipperstein informs us that, nine years after Reich's arrival in Göttingen, there were only 11 Jews in the 2,000-strong student population at Russian universities. Alexander I's Statute of 1804 had attempted to alleviate their plight, but its articles weren't always upheld, and, in addition to "*a numerus clausus* for secondary and university students" (p. 10), conversion to Orthodoxy was sometimes made a necessary condition for graduation, as witness the case of Simon Wolf. John Klier points out that no Jew,

emerging from the traditional Jewish school system, with its emphasis upon the study of the Talmud, would have been qualified to seek admission to a Russian institution of higher learning, nor, ordinarily, would

he have wanted to. On the other hand, the Russian state showed itself completely mystified when confronted with the anomaly of a Russian Jew with a university degree. After a Jewish native of Kurlandia province, Simon Wolf (Vul'f), completed the requirements for the advanced degree of Candidate in Law at Derpt University in 1816, the Faculty Council refused his request to pursue the doctoral degree in law, and this decision was upheld by the Russian Council of Ministers, in clear violation of article 5 of the statute.²⁶

If Reich found himself in a position similar to Wolf's on graduating, it would have made sense for him to opt for further medical studies in Göttingen, not least because the Jewish Enlightenment had originated in Germany.

This movement, also called the Haskalah, denounced "aspects of contemporary Jewish life at variance with the beliefs of the larger society (and presumably with the true character of Judaism as well), such as mystical speculation, disdain for secular study, and ignorance of the vernacular" (Zipperstein, p. 11). But even though he had escaped the ghetto, Reich still commanded an impressive knowledge of Semitic lore, no doubt honouring the Mendelssohnian dictum that one should "Be a Jew at home, but a man in the street" (qtd. Klier, p. 50). Beddoes, we should remember, calls Alfarabi "an antiquary sage" (p. 7). At the same time, however, Reich must have regarded that lore with scepticism, as witness his dispassionate notes on the Luz bone, and the detail of Alfarabi's having risen above finicky mediaeval chop logic as had his fellow Maskilim (enlightened Jews): "'Twas not by Logic, reader; / Her and her crabbed sister, Metaphysics, / Left he to wash Thought's shirt." Beddoes seems to acknowledge this independence, teasing and saluting his friend in the same breath:

A man renowned in the newspapers:
 He wrote in two reviews; raw pork at night
 He ate, and opium; kept a bear at college.
 A most extraordinary man was he.
 But he was not one satisfied with man,
 As man has made himself: he thought this life
 Was something deeper than a jest, and sought
 Into its roots: himself was his best science.

Here some opaque details let through light if we allow them to refer to Reich rather than to the real Al-Farabi, for it's unthinkable that a Syrian Muslim feasted on raw pork or kept a bear at college (not a Mohammedan institution, after all). Surely this must be an in-joke like the allusion to