
 THOMAS LOVELL BEDDOES

1803–1849

Thomas Lovell Beddoes was the most gifted poet of the late Romantic “Elizabethan revival.” By profession a physician and anatomist, he studied at Oxford and Göttingen, then spent most of his mature life as a solitary wanderer among the universities of Germany and Switzerland, involving himself in various radical movements. His letters contain shrewd and caustic criticism of his own and others’ writings but also reveal an eccentricity and a despondency that sometimes verge on madness. His only two published volumes, *The Improvisatore* (1821) and *The Bride’s Tragedy* (1822), he wrote while still an undergraduate at Oxford. His later writings consist mainly of massive fragments of drama and romance. The major work was *Death’s Jest-Book, or The Fool’s Tragedy*, begun in the later 1820s, incessantly patched and revised for the next quarter century, and left still unfinished at his death. A nightmarish drama of murder, disguise, revenge, and ghosts, it reveals that his chief models were Jacobean tragedy, English and German terror tales of the “Gothic” vogue, and the more fantastic among the writings of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Beddoes’s lyrics, many of which were incorporated in his dramas, specialize in the sinister and in the grotesquely comic effect and, at their best, achieve a thrilling felicity of unexpected phrasing. Beddoes, like his Jacobean masters, John Webster and Cyril Tourneur—and his contemporary master, Shelley—was much obsessed by death, as a thing at once terrible and dear. He ended his own life, after several unsuccessful attempts, by taking poison.

Song

How many times do I love thee, dear?
 Tell me how many thoughts there be
 In the atmosphere
 Of a new-fall’n year,
 Whose white and sable hours appear
 The latest flake of Eternity—
 So many times do I love thee, dear.

How many times do I love again?
 Tell me how many beads there are
 In a silver chain 10
 Of evening rain,
 Unraveled from the tumbling main,
 And threading the eye of a yellow star—
 So many times do I love again.

1824

1851

Song

Old Adam, the carrion crow,
 The old crow of Cairo;
 He sat in the shower, and let it flow
 Under his tail and over his crest;
 And through every feather 5
 Leaked the wet weather;
 And the bough swung under his nest;
 For his beak it was heavy with marrow.
 Is that the wind dying? O no;
 It's only two devils, that blow 10
 Through a murderer's bones, to and fro,
 In the ghosts' moonshine.

Ho! Eve, my gray carrion wife,
 When we have supped on kings' marrow,¹
 Where shall we drink and make merry our life? 15
 Our nest it is queen Cleopatra's skull,
 'Tis cloven and cracked,
 And battered and hacked,
 But with tears of blue eyes it is full:
 Let us drink then, my raven of Cairo. 20
 Is that the wind dying? O no;
 It's only two devils, that blow

1. I.e., the king's bone marrow.

THE PHANTOM WOOER

3

Through a murderer's bones, to and fro,
In the ghosts' moonshine.

1825-28

1849-50

The Phantom Wooer

A ghost, that loved a lady fair,
Ever in the starry air
 Of midnight at her pillow stood;
And, with a sweetness skies above
The luring words of human love, 5
 Her soul the phantom wooed.
Sweet and sweet is their poisoned note,
The little snakes of silver throat,
In mossy skulls that nest and lie,
Ever singing, "Die, oh! die." 10

Young soul put off your flesh, and come
With me into the quiet tomb,
 Our bed is lovely, dark, and sweet;
The earth will swing us, as she goes,
Beneath our coverlid of snows, 15
 And the warm leaden sheet.
Dear and dear is their poisoned note,
The little snakes of silver throat,
In mossy skulls that nest and lie,
Ever singing, "Die, oh! die." 20

1844-48

1849-50