The Ashgate Research Companion to Thomas Lovell Beddoes

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'Death and his sweetheart': Revolution and Return in Death's Jest-Book

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‘Death and his sweetheart’: Revolution and Return in *Death’s Jest-Book*

David M. Baulch

I: ‘That was SHELLEY’: Premature Resurrections

When it was published in 1820, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* found an adoring disciple in the nineteen-year-old Thomas Lovell Beddoes. Only months before Shelley’s death in 1822, Beddoes inscribed his poetic allegiance to Shelley’s vision in the blank leaf of his copy of Shelley’s poetic drama.¹ For Beddoes, *Prometheus Unbound* was a cosmic event:

> The bright creations of a human heart  
> Wrought magic in the bosoms of mankind:  
> A flooding summer burst on Poetry,  
> Of which the crowning sun, the night of beauty,  
> The dancing showers, the birds, whose anthems wild,  
> Note after note, unbind the enchanted leaves  
> Of breaking buds, eve, and flow of dawn,  
> Were centered and condensed in his one name  
> As in a providence—and that was SHELLEY. (ll. 8–16)

‘Lines: Written by the Author of *The Bride’s Tragedy*’ credits Shelley’s poetry with producing the same kind of universal change that his *Prometheus Unbound* describes. At the same time, it suggests an astute critique of the relationship of the past to the present, specifically as they conspire in the revolutionary moment. In *Prometheus Unbound*, the failed hopes attached to past revolutions, from those of classical mythology to the French Revolution, are suddenly realized and crystallized in a utopian future that emerges in a return to the past.

In Shelley’s drama the future depends upon Prometheus’ ability to recall his own curse: his challenge to Jupiter’s absolute authority and power. What he must

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¹ The date assigned to ‘Lines written in the *Prometheus Unbound*’ rests, according to Donner ‘on Kelsall’s authority’ that the poem was ‘written early in 1822’, *Works*, pp. xxvii–viii. Kelsall states in his introduction to the piece as it appeared in *The Athenaeum* on 18 May 1833: ‘When Mr. Beddoes penned this fine extravaganza, the subject of its graceful idolatry was still living’, p. 796.
recover, in short, is the repressed history of his own failed revolutionary attempt. Recovery requires that Prometheus recall his curse upon Jupiter in two ways. He must recall, as in recover, the memory of what he said, and he must recall, as in take back, the sentiment of those words. Prometheus’ actions are a demonstration of the paradoxical way in which revolution is a return to a dead or repressed past whose meaning, as a door to the future, is retroactively assigned by its repetition in the present. It is the paradox of the uncanny revolution, a revolution dependent upon a structure of repetition, which pervades Beddoes’s own most striking work, *Death’s Jest-Book*, just as in the ‘Lines’ Beddoes writes to Shelley in 1822. Although written before Shelley’s death, Beddoes’s poem only found its way into print as a much-belated tribute to the departed Shelley in 1833, but this is a task that the *past-ness* of the poem accommodates remarkably well. Beddoes’s celebration takes the form of a premature revival, wherein both Shelley and the ‘flooding summer’ of poetry are already consigned to the past, to a moment ‘that was Shelley’. Put another way, the lyric buries Shelley alive, for when Beddoes writes his tribute, it is as if his idol were already dead. Eleven years later, when the poem to Shelley is finally published, it is presented as if it were the headstone over the corpse of Beddoes’s own long-moldering literary career.

The death of Shelley signals the death of English poetry for Beddoes, and both of these deaths coincide roughly with his own figurative death from the British literary scene. On 25 August 1824, Beddoes wrote to his friend Thomas Forbes Kelsall:

> The disappearance of Shelley from the world seems, like the tropical setting of that luminary (aside, I hate that word) to which his poetical genius alone can be compared with reference to the companions of his day, to have been followed by instant darkness and owl-season, . . . if I were the literary weather-guesser for 1825 I would safely prognosticate fog, rain, blight in due succession for it’s dullard months (p. 589).

When Kelsall publishes Beddoes’s tribute to Shelley in *The Athenaeum*, he laments that the then twenty-nine-year-old Beddoes is already as good as dead for British readers. In terms of Beddoes’s publications, Kelsall is right. Between the short time in which *Prometheus Unbound* was published and Shelley drowned, Beddoes completed his only two major published works in Great Britain: a collection of lyric poems, *The Improvisatore*, in 1821; and a poetic drama, *The Brides’ Tragedy*, in 1822. Thus, by 1833 Kelsall is able to claim in his headnote/headstone to Beddoes’s ‘Lines’:

> For aught, indeed, that our literature would have lost, [Beddoes] might have perished in the same fatal storm in the Gulf of Spezia. How much longer is he contented to be un-known as the author of the Bride’s [sic] Tragedy—(that blossom of exquisite beauty—still but a
blossom,)—and is expectation, in the few who know his really great and rare powers, to doze away at last into oblivion? (p. 796).

Kelsall’s question is one that still haunts Beddoes’s contemporary reputation. Yet, when Kelsall asks the question, Beddoes is still very much alive, and it is only by burying Beddoes prematurely that Kelsall is able to desire his resurrection. Kelsall’s untimely eulogy echoes Beddoes’s own strangely enabling and inexhaustible obsession with death in his texts in general, but most particularly in his sprawling, never-finished *Death’s Jest-Book*. Although something of a macabre gesture, it is perfectly appropriate to imagine that Kelsall’s headnote to Beddoes’s poem is meant to goad Beddoes into seriously making a return to the public display of his literary efforts by finishing his revisions to *Death’s Jest-Book*. However, it appears to be the case that Beddoes only sporadically looks away from his studies in anatomy to revisit a play that only became progressively longer, internally conflicted, and ever more bizarre as it accommodates the shifting views of death that preoccupy him from 1825 until 1844. During this time, the subterranean growth of Beddoes’s *Death’s Jest-Book* seems to have abjured the luminous, revolutionary optimism of Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*. Both dramas present revolution as an uncanny return, but if the revolutionary force in *Prometheus Unbound* is Eros, in *Death’s Jest-Book* it is Thanatos, the name Freud would later give to the death drive. *Death’s Jest-Book* becomes a presentation of death as the central compulsive force common to individual desire and political revolution.

Beddoes’s *Death’s Jest-Book* and Freud’s ‘The Uncanny’ come out of the same struggle to come to terms with the death drive. Ultimately, however, *Death’s Jest-Book* arrives not at *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* or *Civilization and its Discontents* but, more correctly, at Lacan’s rereading of the death drive in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Here, Lacan eventually identifies Freud’s death drive as the un-symbolizable void of the Real. For Lacan, the Real is paradoxically that ineffable, impossible thing beyond the experiential reality of the symbolic order and the impenetrable kernel around which it is constructed. In the same way, death in *Death’s Jest-Book* is both beyond individual life and material history and, at the same time, functions as the centre around which the individual psyche is formed. Precisely in its paradoxical role as ineffable, non-material, outside of time, and the essential truth of the psyche, death is the basis of social-political reality as it is constructed in *Death’s Jest-Book*. Rather than the life-affirming leap beyond history conveyed in *Prometheus Unbound*, revolution in *Death’s Jest-Book* reveals history’s essence as the compulsive return to death, understood as the ahistorical void of the Real.

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II: ‘A living semiotical display’: Anatomy and Tragedy

As an undergraduate at Pembroke College, Oxford, it seemed a foregone conclusion that Beddoes would be a creative writer. With the modest critical success of *The Brides’ Tragedy*, Beddoes appeared poised to enter the English literary scene, and yet, one month after graduation in 1825, he leaves England to study anatomy at Göttingen University. At approximately the same time that Beddoes has resolved upon his new course of study, he starts to write *Death’s Jest-Book*. The interrelationship between his study of the human body and the composition of *Death’s Jest-Book* is captured in the letters Beddoes sent to his friends in England. These letters help to chart a particular shift in the place Beddoes’s drama assigns death in relation to both human life and literary meaning. Seeking the principle of human life in his academic studies, Beddoes concurrently writes his *Jest-Book* as a satire on death. For Beddoes, death as a limitation that can be challenged by both science and art soon gives way to an obsession with death as a central psychic principle and an absolute condition beyond both the scope of science and language.

In the last recorded letter before he leaves for Germany, Beddoes writes to Kelsall that he has abandoned the play upon which he had been working and intends to devote himself to a new project: ‘I do not intend to finish that 2nd Brother you say but am thinking of a very Gothic-styled tragedy, for w[h] I have a jewel of a name—DEATH’S JESTBOOK—of course no one will ever read it’ (p. 604). While it is difficult to say how much of Beddoes’s fatalism about the tragedy’s eventual readership stems from insecurity and bravado, and how much comes from a substantial insight into the strange text that *Death’s Jest-Book* was to become, he nevertheless seems to have been well aware that *Death’s Jest-Book* would represent a significant departure from English drama.

Despite Beddoes’s apparent ambivalence about *Death’s Jest-Book* in his letters to Kelsall, this literary effort is a part of a larger vision that Beddoes has for redefining drama in tandem with his anatomical studies. In December 1825, he writes Kelsall that *Death’s Jest-Book* ‘is a horrible waste of time’ and that he has ‘lost much, if not all of my ambition to become poetically distinguished’ (p. 609). His denial of literary ambitions is not simply a rejection of his interest in literature, but rather it indicates a rejection of the Wordsworthian construction of the author as one who is solely devoted to the production of literature. Instead Beddoes appears to nurture a grand interdisciplinary vision for the merging of science and literature in the quest for an approach to both physical and mental health:

The studies then of the dramatist & physician are closely, almost inseparably, allied; the application alone is different; but is it impossible for the same man to combine these two professions, in some degree at least? The science of psychology, & mental varieties, has long been used by physicians, in conjunction with the corresponding corporeal knowledge, for the investigation and removal of immaterial causes of disease; it still remains for some one to exhibit the sum
of his experience in mental pathology & therapeutics, not in a cold technical dead description, but a living semiotical display, a series of anthropological experiments, developed for the purpose of ascertaining some important psychical principle—i.e., a tragedy. (p. 609)

The alliance the letter sees between ‘the dramatist & physician’ is grounded in a common focus on the maintenance of human life. While the physician’s science can address the biological causes of death, Beddoes’s letter suggests that death is equally a pathological condition. For Beddoes, drama holds the potential to perform a mental cure. As a ‘psychical principle’, ‘tragedy’ would reveal death as a ‘mental pathology’ that the literary text can address therapeutically. Death becomes primarily a psychical concern central to the maintenance of physical life. In his therapeutic drama, the stage becomes the site for a mimetic mental cure of the pathologies that death inspires.

A verse letter to Bryan Waller Procter, postmarked 13 March 1826, reveals Beddoes’s high hopes that Death’s Jest-Book will inspire a psychic revolution against the tyranny of death. Beddoes claims that by exposing death to observation he can render ‘him’ powerless: ‘I’ve dug him up and decked him trim / And made a mock, a fool, a slave of him / Who was the planet’s tyrant: dotard death’ (p. 614). By casting death as a political figure, a ruling ‘tyrant’ who will be revealed as both ‘fool’ and ‘slave’, Death’s Jest-Book envisions a revolutionary freedom from a universal tyrant. Yet, Beddoes’s Death’s Jest-Book recognizes that for political power to maintain itself, it must produce the conditions of its reproduction, and to do this it must generate subjects who always/already function within the ideological field that legitimates its power. Death’s power over people comes from its ideological mystification as an absolute power over life. Death’s Jest-Book’s answer to death as the point at which individuals are interpellated as subjects amounts to disrupting the ideological field that underwrites death’s power with a mixture of empirical science and comedy. Beddoes writes to Procter that Death’s Jest-Book means to ‘rob [death], to un-cypress him i’ the light / To unmask all his secrets’ (p. 615). Death’s Jest-Book functions as a ‘living semiotical display’, able to ‘unmask all [Death’s] secrets’ leaving only a pathological remainder, ‘dotard death’, as the object of satire.

Beddoes’s playful ambition to ‘un-cypress’ death in Death’s Jest-Book and place death within ‘a living semiotical display’ depends in part on the success of his search for an indestructible principle of life. In the same way that Death’s Jest-Book is intended to pioneer a new role for dramatic texts, his academic work at Göttingen attempts to effect a revolution in the understanding of human life. John Agar observes of Beddoes’s medical investigations that, ‘in rejecting a hypothetical ‘vital principle’, Beddoes presented himself with the problem of finding the real principle of life, and of finding it tangibly, on the dissection table’. Beddoes, at one point, sought the principle of human life in the legend of the indestructible bone from which the living body is regenerated: the almond-shaped seed of human life,
called luz. Christopher Moylan claims that ‘in the spring of 1827, Beddoes gave his late evenings to dissecting corpses in the hope of finding the bone of luz, associated in various Talmudic sources with the resurrection of the dead’. Beddoes’ interest in the luz is preserved in Death’s Jest-Book.

Despite his early optimism, a letter written to Kelsall in April of 1827 suggests that Beddoes’s literary and scientific attempts to establish a principle of life have failed to materialize and thus dispel the power of death. Beddoes tells Kelsall that ‘I am now already so thoroughly penetrated with the conviction of the absurdity & unsatisfactory nature of human life that I search with avidity for every shadow of a proof or probability of an after-existence, both in the material and immaterial nature of man’ (pp. 629–30). His search for a principle of human life has become the search for ‘an after-existence’. The search for what gives life meaning, that which will somehow dispel or justify its ‘absurdity & unsatisfactory nature’, depends upon positing an ‘after-existence’ that both exceeds life itself and yet can be empirically verified and discursively articulated as life’s most essential, internal component. The truly impossible dimension of Beddoes’s project becomes clear, insofar as the ‘after-existence’ that must ground life is simultaneously the a priori condition of its possibility and paradoxically beyond its scope.

Despairing of achieving his goal of finding an enduring principle of life within the structure of the body, Beddoes recognizes the fantasmatic nature of the desire for a ‘doctrine of immortality’ as a common structural principal in religion, philosophy, and empirical science, in their attempt to repress death (p. 629). This realization allows Beddoes to reconstruct his therapeutic purpose for his play into a recognizably psychoanalytic reading of death as the central force that drives both the human subject and history. Beddoes wrote to Kelsall:

Man appears to have found out this secret [that of the ‘doctrine of immortality’] for himself, & it is certainly the best part of religion and philosophy, the only truth worth demonstrating: an anxious question full of hope & fear & promise, for w^h Nature appears to have appointed one solution — Death (pp. 629–30).

By suggesting that the ‘secret’ of ‘immortality’ is ‘Death’, Beddoes renders life itself an uncanny fantasm.

The disappointment Beddoes experienced in his anatomical research is also reflected in a change in what death means in Death’s Jest-Book. Michael Bradshaw identifies the coincidence of Beddoes’s inability to empirically identify a principle of life in his anatomical researches and the negative reactions to the first version of Death’s Jest-Book by Procter and J.G.H. Bourne in early 1829 as the point at which Beddoes seeks ‘to redefine the terms of his quest’. Similarly, James Thompson

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5 Bradshaw, Resurrection Songs, p. 105.
identifies the impact these personal events had on *Death’s Jest-Book* by observing, ‘the play is truly Death’s jest book; starting as a satire destructive of death, the play has turned into death’s own satire on the jest of life itself . . . Beddoes had clearly failed to achieve his original intention in the play—to make death a dotard’. The text of *Death’s Jest-Book* preserves a strange composite state of both of Beddoes’s intentions. At the center of *Death’s Jest-Book*’s dramatic structure is the promise of the immortality of the body. Ziba, an African conjurer, tells Duke Melveric that it is possible to bring the dead back to life. Ziba relates the story of ‘A magic scholar’ who raised a flower from the tears of a woman weeping for her departed lover, and he claims that it is similarly possible to raise a deceased man. He explains that:

even as there is a round dry grain  
In a plant’s skeleton, which being buried  
Can raise the herb’s green body up again;  
So is there such in man, a seed-shaped bone,  
Aldabaron, called by the Hebrews Luz,  
Which being laid into the ground will bear  
After three thousand years the grass of flesh,  
The bloody, soul-possessed weed called man. (γ: III, iii, 447–54)

Even though Ziba’s necromantic lore duplicates Beddoes’s own anatomical research, the drama clearly does not celebrate the *luz* as a principle of life. Playing on the seed metaphor, the Duke asks Ziba, ‘What tree is man the seed of?’ to which the conjurer responds, ‘Of a ghost’ (γ: III, iii, 444–45). Life in *Death’s Jest-Book* is only the preparatory stage for death, and death is privileged as the structural centre of existence and the destination of an ‘after-existence’. Although the play treats the *luz* as the stuff of legend (when Ziba actually reanimates the corpse of Wolfram he uses the power of words to do so), Beddoes appends a scholarly note soberly tracing the history of the *luz* through ancient rabbinical texts. Far from dismissing the *luz*, Beddoes has clearly made it the focus of some serious research. In this way, the text of *Death’s Jest-Book* indicates that Beddoes’s medical research had a direct impact on both the content and the hopes for the play that he originally expressed to Kelsall and Procter. That Beddoes’s empirical search for the principle of life as a feature of human anatomy was unsuccessful goes without saying, but the mixed intentions of Beddoes’s persistent, if intermittent, desire to treat death as a psychic principle in the form of a semiotical display opens Freudian and post-Freudian possibilities for a reading of *Death’s Jest-Book.*

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7 He translates various Hebrew references to determine that the ‘Luz is therefore the os coccyges’ (p. 488).
III: ‘The fictitious condition’: *Death’s Jest-Book* and the Uncanny

Like Sigmund Freud, Beddoes sought for connections between scientific and psychic phenomena. Beyond this general similarity, what is particularly striking is the common ground that Freud and Beddoes share with regard to the problem that death presents to the human psyche. For, as Beddoes was forced to abandon his search for a principle of life distinct from death, Freud is finally forced to concede that the life drive, Eros, is inextricably bound to Thanatos, the death drive. ‘The Uncanny’ presents itself as entering into a belated dispute on what creates the effect of the uncanny in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman’. According to Freud, Jentsch contends the uncanny involves the ‘impression of automatic, mechanical processes at work behind the ordinary appearance of mental activity’ and that this ‘impression’ gives rise to a feeling of ‘intellectual uncertainty’. By contrast, Freud’s thesis claims that the effect of the uncanny refers ‘to the castration complex of childhood’ that arises from a child’s initial erotic attachment to his mother, ‘and that . . . intellectual uncertainty has nothing to do with the effect’. Looking back on the development of Freud’s thought, what is interesting about ‘The Uncanny’ is not the way Freud argues for his stated thesis of childhood erotic attachment but, rather, the way much of Freud’s speculation about the effect of the uncanny keeps returning to the subject of death. David Ellison accurately observes that:

> Freud’s writing style follows the impulse, the drive, to say again, and repeatedly, what the uncanny has already said through a multitude of texts, including, most strikingly, ‘Der Sandmann’. And what the uncanny says or testifies to, ceaselessly, is death. Beyond the Pleasure Principle becomes the retroactively deferred theoretical justification for the praxis of ‘Das Unheimliche’.

Thus, the significance ‘The Uncanny’ has for thinking about *Death’s Jest-Book* is two-fold, in that both texts recognize but cannot adequately theorize the place that death holds in the human psyche.

‘The Uncanny’ is particularly relevant to *Death’s Jest-Book*, given its observation that ‘many people experience the feeling [of the uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts’. To be sure, *Death’s Jest-Book* can boast all of these, and its use of doubling, reanimation of the dead, and spirit dances invite a Freudian reading of the play. Yet *Death’s Jest-Book* is hardly Freud avant la lettre, and the play will not sit still long enough for an application of Freud’s strikingly un-theorized claims in the ‘The Uncanny’. The ground for a more provocative relation between the two texts

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lies in Freud’s rationale for identifying death as the preeminent ground of the uncanny. Freud speculates that death is particularly uncanny because it continues to resist scientific inquiry: ‘Biology has not yet been able to decide whether death is the inevitable fate of every living being or whether it is only a regular but yet perhaps avoidable event in life.’ Here, Freud’s notion of the uncanniness of death is specifically the short-circuiting of an internalized scientific rationalism that also underwrites Beddoes’ anatomical search for a principle of life.

The proto-Freudian uncanny of Death’s Jest-Book lies in its generic oscillation between satire and tragedy and its epistemological oscillation between magic and science. While Death’s Jest-Book places the story of the luz into the mouth of the black conjurer Ziba, both slave to the Duke and the self-proclaimed master of death, Beddoes’s footnote also seeks to establish the historical existence of the luz and its potential importance for nineteenth-century anatomical research. If this suggests that the drama sees an empirical tradition of scientific knowledge as owing something to the necromancer, the text also undermines Ziba’s claims. When Ziba endeavours to resurrect the Duke’s dead wife, the effect of his effort is doubly uncertain and doubly uncanny. Ziba’s incantations fail to resurrect the Duke’s wife, but the results of the spell are alternately comic and then gothic.

Beddoes’s satire also resists a Freudian model by providing what I will call the mock uncanny. The first figure to appear from the tomb at Ziba’s call is the low comic character Mandrake. Mandrake’s resurrection is only possible because he has spilled a potion of invisibility upon himself, and he has been misrecognized as the voice of his own ghost. Indeed, Mandrake comes to think of himself as a ghost and addresses the audience with his conclusion:

> that death’s all a take-in: as soon as gentlemen have gained some 70 years of experience they begin to be weary of the common drudgery of the world, lay themselves down, hold their breath, close their eyes and are announced as having entered the fictitious condition by means of epitaphs and effigies (γ: III, iii, 4–8).

Mandrake asserts that physical death is a discursive construction, ‘the fictitious condition’, as if it were solely a function of language’s ability to imitate reality. Mandrake’s appearance and commentary satirizes both death and the uncanny. His parodic death-in-life is literally Heimlich: death becomes the state Mandrake mistakenly understands as his home. When Mandrake initially enters the sepulchre of the Duke’s departed wife, he quips, ‘here are good quarters for the like of me, there I’ll sleep tonight’ (γ: III, iii, 24–25). When Mandrake responds to Ziba’s
incantation, his appearance deflates the expectations of both Ziba and the Duke,
primed as they are for the reanimation of the Duke’s wife. Beyond his role in the
plot, Mandrake offers a satire of the hopes Beddoes expresses to Kelsall and Procter
for exposing death as a pathological condition. Rather than revealing ‘dotard
death’ and affirming a life principle, Death’s Jest-Book finds death at the centre of
human activity. Before exiting the scene in humiliation, Ziba claims that ‘Death is a
hypocrite, a white dissembler, / Like all that doth seem good’ (γ: III, iii, 610–11). For
Ziba, death’s power is like that of the white imperialist Duke; death produces the
effect of power, because, like the Duke, death does not adhere to verbal contractual
agreements that establish the rules of fair play or, by extension, scientific discourse.
Ziba’s incantation fails to produce a proto-empirical cause and effect relationship
that allows a corpse to move between death and life. Still, the case in Death’s Jest-
Book is more complicated. Expressing a thematic repetition compulsion, a second
figure emerges from the tomb: the knight Wolfram, whom the Duke has killed
treacherously in the first act of the play. But the reason he appears is far from
clear. Neither the Duke nor Wolfram attributes this resurrection to Ziba. The Duke
initially insists that Wolfram’s reappearance is the result of their pact, wherein the
first who dies shall return to tell the other what death is like, but the more intriguing
possibility is that Wolfram is making good on his dying claim, ‘I will avenge me,
Duke, as never man’ (γ: I, iv, 203). Even in the moment of his death, Wolfram seems
to appeal to death as a realm superior to the actions of life. The first ‘Song from the
Waters’ that immediately follows Wolfram’s riddling threat of revenge specifically
distinguishes Death as the superior force to living joy. The song claims that it is the
uncanny presence of Death that ‘Rives asunder / Men’s delight’ (γ: I, iv, 208–09) and
becomes the very essence of living form, when ‘Our ghost, our corpse and we / Rise
to be’ (γ: I, iv, 210–11). Rather than extolling the erotic joys of ‘Men’s delights’ as the
driving force of life, the song lyricizes being-in-death as the paradoxical core of the
cycle of human existence.

It is important to note that the first ‘Song from the Waters’ reflects the view of
death in the 1844 γ text of Act I, rather than that of the 1829 β text of the first act.
Clearly, the view of γ does not represent that of the Duke’s consciousness later
in the play. The Duke tries to explain the presence of the uncanny, living-dead
Wolfram at the end of Act III as part of a political revolution against the feudal
order that includes Death among its sovereigns:

... There is rebellion
Against all kings, even Death. Murder’s worn out
And full of holes; I’ll never make it the prison,
Of what I hate again ... (γ: III, iv, 688–91)

Wolfram is in the tomb of the Duke’s wife as a result of the machinations of his brother
Isbrand. Part of Isbrand’s plot to overthrow the Duke involves burying the murdered
Wolfram in the tomb that will eventually hold the Duke so that the Duke will have
to face his victim in the hereafter. Isbrand says of Wolfram’s corpse that ‘he is an
earthquake-seed, and will / whisper revenge to the earth’ (γ: II, ii, 140–41).
The Duke’s analysis is only half right. Like Ziba, the Duke has misrecognized death’s failure to co-operate with his desires as death’s impotence. The rebellion in the play is against his reign, as he has suspected, but the action of the play does not indicate that Death’s reign has ended. Rather, death has just begun to manifest its centrality to life itself. Indeed, Wolfram, speaking for death, gets the last word in Death’s Jest-Book, claiming that it is the Duke himself who must bear the responsibility for bringing the dead back to life. Death, rather than Wolfram himself, will be revenged ‘in like manner’ by taking the Duke ‘still alive, into the world o’ the dead’ (β: V, iv, 356–57). What is at stake in the uncanny reanimation of the dead is the attempt to bring Thanatos into the symbolic order, to be able to articulate its secrets, as Wolfram says, in ‘the unholy world’s forbidden sunlight’ (β: V, iv, 354). For Death’s Jest-Book, life is ultimately a perverse epiphenomenon of death.

As it develops in the wake of Beddoes’s frustrated anatomical investigations, the text’s treatment of death anticipates what contemporary criticism has noted in the development of Freud’s own work, namely that the uncanniness of death reveals itself as the effect of a central structural principle—Thanatos, or the death drive. Thus Freud’s ‘The Uncanny’ has come to be read as a proleptic demonstration of a theory that is only articulated later in Beyond the Pleasure Principle and in Civilization and Its Discontents. The ‘point’ of what Gilles Deleuze calls ‘the turning point in Freudianism’ is not so much that the feeling of the uncanny arises from a childhood experience or a disruption of rationalist assumptions, as Freud initially concluded in the 1919 essay. Rather, it is the particular uncanniness of death insofar as it indicates a structural principle of repetition, the death drive, a principle that exists beyond the repressed erotic energy of the biological individual. As Neil Hertz puts it, ‘the feeling of the uncanny would seem to be generated by being reminded of the repetition compulsion, not by being reminded of whatever it is that is repeated’. Read through Freud’s later work, the uncanny testifies to the presence of a non-biological compulsion, instinct, or drive towards death, a drive wherein an individual death is merely the visible epiphenomenon of an invisible process of destruction at the centre of the structure of human reality. The development of Beddoes’s thoughts about death as he studies anatomy and intermittently works on Death’s Jest-Book can be seen as an uncanny precursor to Freud’s development

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16 Deleuze, p. 16. Freud concludes that the experience of the uncanny is produced when ‘infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed’, ‘Uncanny’, p. 226.

17 Hertz, p. 101.
of the death drive as the structural principle of existence. The April 1827 letter to Kelsall expresses a similar turn in Beddoes’s thoughts about death. In writing that ‘nature appears to have appointed one solution—Death’, Beddoes sounds much like the Freud of Civilization and Its Discontents (p. 630).

The problem, then, for Freud’s theoretical project and Beddoes’ poetic drama, is that both concede that human experiential reality is effectuated by a principle of Thanatos. For Freud, Thanatos takes centre stage uneasily as a principle that has no material content in the reality it constitutes. While Freud recognizes the death drive as a central force that drives humans to create civilization as a kind of sublimation of this instinct, he does not recognize in the death drive a structural principle that is specifically political or ideological. For Beddoes, Thanatos emerged as the title inclusive of Death’s Jest-Book in the 1844 MS III title page: the ivory gate / didaskalia — eleutheria — anthesteria / thanatos or the private theatre / A Story Including / death’s jest-book’ (γ, p. 323). Tellingly, ‘Eleutheria’, or the celebration of liberty, is bound together with ‘Thanatos’ in the impossibly ambitious text of which Death’s Jest-Book was only a part. In the expanded frame constituted by this confusing title, the very possibility of the political reality of liberty is underwritten by death. Teresa de Lauretis identifies the broader theoretical implications of Freud’s problem in terms that apply equally to Beddoes’ drama: ‘Freud’s figuration of an unconscious death drive . . . conveys the sense and the force of something in human reality that resists discursive articulation as well as political diplomacy, an otherness that haunts the dream of a common world’. It is precisely in the sense of the death drive as ‘something . . . that resists discursive articulation’ that Death’s Jest-Book takes a step beyond Freud, to find itself in accord with Jacques Lacan’s rereading of the death drive and its ideological implications. Death’s Jest-Book exceeds the false biologism of classical psychoanalysis and the naïve materialism of Beddoes’s own anatomical research to posit, as does Lacan, the death drive as simultaneously the radical other and the traumatic core of reality as constituted by the symbolic order of language, a reality that is purely ideological in its nature. Beddoes’s play offers a living semiotical display of Lacan’s rereading of the death drive, thus conveying the play’s critique of ideology as a structural principle that underwrites both the feudal order and the possibility of a post-revolutionary republic in Death’s Jest-Book. If revolution hides its uncanniness—the structure of repetition that is the death drive—Death’s Jest-Book compulsively adumbrates its void.

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18 For Freud the death drive cannot be identified in and of itself ‘unless’, as he admits in Civilization and Its Discontents, ‘it is tinged with eroticism’. Freud is interested in both the necessity of the death drive or ‘instinct’ to his theory of civilization and at the same time its elusiveness. He comments that, ‘it was not easy, however, to demonstrate the activities of this supposed death instinct. The manifestations of Eros were conspicuously noisy enough. It might be assumed that the death instinct operated silently within the organism towards its dissolution, but that of course, was no proof’. Sigmund Freud, Civilization, p. 79; p. 78.

19 See Michael Bradshaw’s reading of the 1844 MS III title page (Bradshaw, pp. 109–10).

20 Bradshaw, p. 109.

21 De Lauretis, p. 570.
IV: ‘The DANCE OF DEATH’: Death, the Real, and Revolution

In terms of a Lacanian paradigm, the beginning of the final scene of Death’s Jest-Book emerges as a parable of the identity of the death drive and the Real.22 The scene takes place in a ‘ruined Cathedral . . . the cloisters painted with the dance of death’ (γ, p. 476). The stage directions describe the following: ‘The Deaths, and the figures paired with them come out of the walls, and dance fantastically to a rattling music’ (γ, p. 477). This scene is, of course, uncanny in Freud’s sense of bringing to ‘life’ figures described as ‘Deaths’, but the song these Death figures sing perfectly articulates the structural paradox of the Real:

The emperor and empress, the king and the queen,
The knight and the abbot, friar fat, friar thin,
The gipsy and beggar, are met on the green;
Where’s Death and his sweetheart? We want to begin. (γ: V, iv, 19–22)

Here the re-animation of the dead that so fascinated Freud is inseparable from the whole social hierarchy represented in the dance. The absence of Death-in-itself from the centre of the dance of death highlights both the dead and the social hierarchy of which they are a part as material effects of Thanatos. In this scene, Death-in-itself has the same character as the Lacanian Real, refusing to take a place in the symbolic order, and, at the same time, it is the void around which the symbolic order is structured. This scene makes a distinction between physical death and Death-in-itself. Even in its physical death, the entire feudal social hierarchy still holds a place in the symbolic order. Even though absent in the scene, Death-in-itself is the structural principle that is both radically beyond the symbolic order and simultaneously the basis of its possibility.23 What is at stake in death is not only the physical death of the individual but also, more importantly, the death drive as the threat of the ‘obliteration of the signifying network itself’.24 Death’s Jest-Book thus can be seen to set out the ideological implications of the problem of physical death and the death drive as the threat of the ‘obliteration of the signifying network itself’.24

22 Slavoj Žižek’s synopsis of Lacan’s seminar The Ethic of Psychoanalysis thus speaks with precision to Death’s Jest-Book: here it is ‘the symbolic order itself which is identified with the pleasure principle: the unconscious “structured like a language” . . . is governed by the pleasure principle; what lies beyond is . . . a real kernel, a traumatic core’, Slavoj Žižek, The Sublime Object of Ideology (London: Verso, 1989), p. 132.
23 Žižek explicates Lacan’s reading of the death-drive-as-Real as a kind of second death, which situates the death drive as ‘exactly the opposite of the symbolic order’ in presenting ‘the possibility of the “second death”’, ibid., p. 132. In this way, the second death represented by the death-drive-as-Real marks the possibility, as Žižek observes, of ‘the radical annihilation of the symbolic order through which the so-called reality is constituted. The very existence of the symbolic order implies a possibility of its radical effacement, of “symbolic death” —not the death of the so-called “real-object” in its symbol, but the obliteration of the signifying network itself’, ibid., p. 132.
24 Ibid., p. 132.
revolution as the anxious theoretical space between two deaths, which is to say that revolution in *Death’s Jest-Book* enacts the paradox of the Real. In its threat to destroy the symbolic order, to somehow step beyond the very process of symbolization and historicization, the revolutionary moment returns to the self-destructive limit of the process of symbolization and historicization itself.

Because the symbolic order is the ontological basis of experiential or ideological reality, *Death’s Jest-Book*’s treatment of the dance of death as an enactment of the structural role of the death drive is crucial to a critical understanding of the way the text treats the question of political order and revolution. Michael Bradshaw identifies in the text’s treatment of the dance of death both ‘a submerged recollection of the muted social protest understood to be present in the motif, and [a] metaphorical dimension [that] exploits its recent decline into apolitical blandness’. Insofar as the dance of death in *Death’s Jest-Book* identifies a diachronic unfolding of British literature’s loss of the political idealism in its representation of Death as a social leveller, an inheritance that stems from the political charge attached to Hans Holbein’s sixteenth-century woodcuts, it also suggests a synchronic analysis of reality as ideological, an analysis wherein the semiotical display of the psychic principle of revolution is a return to the death drive. Here, the problem of the chronological setting of *Death’s Jest-Book* is instructive. If, as Northrop Frye has observed, ‘the action of the play is said to take place in the thirteenth century, . . . the use of the *danse macabre* brings it closer to the fifteenth’, does this mean that Beddoes was simply mistaken in the historical setting he gives the play? For Frye this seems unlikely in view of the text’s other ‘deliberate anachronisms’ that remove Beddoes’s work from ‘any definite historical community . . . creat[ing] the sense of something alive and dead at the same time’. In view of these uncanny anachronisms, Frye concludes that the text presents ‘a historical essence suspended in time’. While Frye’s notion of ‘historical essence’ correctly identifies one way the play produces the uncanny as a historical as well as a biological effect, it misses the way that the historical essence presented by *Death’s Jest-Book* is a compulsive return to the ahistorical void of the Real as the absolute negative limit of history’s essence.

Nowhere is revolution’s return to the ahistorical void of the Real clearer than it is in the third scene of Act III, where Isbrand convenes a final meeting of his revolutionary conspirators who are attempting to supplant the reign of the feudal order of Duke Melveric with a republic. The apparent purpose of this meeting is to distribute copies of its founding principles. Isbrand calls this document ‘a quick

25 Bradshaw, p. 223.
26 Perhaps this very observation is what made Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* such an exceptional text in TLB’s mind. Shelley’s triumph is that his play is able to maintain the idea that the return to the past is the key to the discovery of desire or Eros rather than a compulsive return to a principle of Thanatos.
28 Ibid., p. 66.
29 Ibid., p. 66.
receipt to make a new creation / In our old dukedom’, and he further likens his vision of the revolt to ‘the first drops of Noah’s world-washing shower’ (β: III, iii, 70–71; 67). The biblical inflection of Isbrand’s description of revolution identifies the ideological return to the ahistorical void of the Real as both history’s essence and its antithesis in its invocation of the Christian myth of the world’s creation ex nihilo and then its destruction and re-founding after the great flood. By first likening revolution to creation, Isbrand’s phrase posits it as both a pre-ontological and a pre-ideological space. For *Death’s Jest-Book*, revolution is a death to the old order accomplished through a return to a moment of creation: the essence of the historical-social reality promised by the revolution depends upon presenting itself, and presumably the ideological reality of bourgeois society that would be its result, in the ghostly lineaments of the biblical time before time, a moment marking the ground zero of eschatological history. Isbrand thus figures the emergence of bourgeois ideology as prior to the originary moment of existence.

While this moment is figured as a return to a place outside of history, as a moment without ideological content, it also reveals the Real’s paradoxical position as the pre-ontological and pre-ideological kernel of the history of existence and its ideological structure. Isbrand figures the annihilation of the ideological substance of society before the flood as the destructive return to a kind of social-historical symbolization that depends upon the threat of its own erasure, thus likening the process of his revolution to that of the great flood. The claims Isbrand makes for his revolution as a moment of both creation and destruction suggest the kind of uncanny sense of revolution identified by Karl Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, where revolution is always an ‘awakening of the dead’.30 Marx’s materialist conception of history finds in revolution not so much a place outside of history but, rather, the uncanny reanimation of a prior revolutionary moment. And while Marx certainly would not have accepted the Lacanian notion of the Real as a space that is somehow pre-ontological or pre-ideological, his view of revolution as uncanny is useful for a reading of *Death’s Jest-Book* in allowing for a view of the process of social-historical symbolization as a return to a dead past in the name of historical progress.31

In a way that is strikingly similar to *Death’s Jest-Book’s* thematic enshrinement of the repetition compulsion as a force that shapes both material history and the psyche, Marx also sees the uncanny reanimation of the past in revolution in terms


of dramatic genre. The French Revolutions of 1789 and 1848 allowed Marx to modify Hegel’s observation ‘that all great, world-historical facts and personages occur, as it were twice’, with the addendum: ‘the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce’. While the Duke’s attempt to reanimate his dead wife reverses the uncanny-generic-temporal sequence Marx posits for revolution, by bringing forth Mandrake and then Wolfram, the play’s treatment of Isbrand’s revolution could be read in terms of Marx’s account of the failure of the two French Revolutions. Marx claims that ‘the parties and the masses of the old French Revolution . . . performed the task of their time in Roman costume and with Roman phrases, the task of releasing and setting up modern bourgeois society’. In its understanding of the uncanny possibilities of revolution as both tragedy and farce, Death’s Jest-Book also presents its revolution—like Marx’s view of the French Revolution—as a return to the crucial moment of death-in-birth of the Roman Republic.

In Death’s Jest-Book, not only does revolution rely on a past moment of greatness but also it testifies to the failure of that prior moment. The play underscores this return in the conspirators’ discovery of the blind Mario, a self-described ‘Roman in unroman times’ (β: III, iii, 115). Mario, a witness to the crucial moment in the failure of the Roman republic, marks the uncanny return of that moment in Isbrand’s revolution. Reliving the death of Caesar, Mario narrates the prior historical moment:

Down with him to the grave! Down with the god!
Stab, Cassius; Brutus, through him; through him all!
Dead.—As he fell there was a tearing sigh:
Earth stood on him; her roots were in his heart;
They fell together. Caesar and his world

The toge is cut for cowls; and falsehood dozes
In the chair of freedom, triple-crowned beast,
King Cerberus. Thence I have come in time
To see one grave for foul oppression dug,
Though I may share it. (β: III, iii, 130–34; 139–43)

Mario’s example of the death of Caesar suggests that a key feature of revolution’s reanimation of a prior historical moment is the way in which that prior moment obscures the content of the present moment. For Mario, the unseating of Caesar to prevent tyranny was in itself an act that opened the way for yet greater tyranny. Marx could have been writing a gloss on Mario’s speech when he comments on the February Revolution that, ‘instead of society having conquered a new content for itself, the state only appears to have returned to its oldest form, to the domination of

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32 Marx, p. 594.
33 Ibid., p. 595.
the saber and the cowl’. In its depiction of revolution, Death’s Jest-Book recognizes the same distinction Marx makes between form and content in its analysis of the merger of revolution and repetition, but the analysis of revolution and repetition that Death’s Jest-Book allows for takes a step beyond Marx’s materialism. The obfuscation of content effected by the reference to a prior historical moment in Death’s Jest-Book reveals that behind the historical movement forward promised by Isbrand’s revolution lies the death drive, as made clear by Mario’s description of the overthrow of Caesar. The difference is that Death’s Jest-Book finds that the return to the crucial moment of the Roman republic is not an obfuscation of the content of Isbrand’s own revolution but, rather, an admission that—as a return to the ahistorical void of the Real—revolution has no positive content at all.

The scene Mario describes of Romans calling for the death of Caesar can be read as a manifestation of the death-drive-as-Real. The implication of Mario’s address is that the activities of Isbrand’s conspirators are only a political mask covering a return to the death drive. As in the example of the dance of death having both a symbolic and Real component, Mario’s description of Caesar’s death and its ideological implications is a perfect instance of the contrast between two deaths. While the physical death of Caesar is a pivotal moment of historical possibility, a moment where society can avoid a ruler whose ideological power depends upon a claim to divine sanction, the death of Caesar also underwrites the possibility of the death of the symbolic order as the destruction of ideological reality of Roman society. Once again, however, the paradox of the Real is apparent insofar as the persistent essence of ideological reality is inextricably linked with its radical negation: the desire for destruction. In Mario’s description, the revolutionary acts of Brutus and Cassius are exposed as pure expressions of Thanatos as figured as uncanny repetitions of Hercules’ feat of bringing Cerberus from the world of the dead. Mario’s message is not so much that Brutus and Cassius failed at a given historical moment but, rather, that their historical moment is structured by the same return to the ahistorical void of the Real that structures the present. For Death’s Jest-Book, ideological reality does not take on a new content in revolution; rather, revolution reveals the consistency with which ideological reality depends upon terror, the secrecy of the cowl, and the hand of the assassin. Thus Mario claims that the moment of revolution places in the ‘chair of freedom’ the three-headed beast whose essence is the timelessness of death itself.

The irony of Mario’s prophecy in Act III, ‘Thence I have come in time / To see one grave for foul oppression dug’ becomes clear at the end of Death’s Jest-Book. The true inhabitant of the ‘grave for foul oppression’ is the revolutionary leader Isbrand, to whom Mario finally delivers a mortal blow. As soon as his republican revolution succeeds, Isbrand wants to appoint himself king. He tells his chief co-conspirator Siegfried, ‘I will be no man / Unless I am a king . . . / I have a bit of / in my soul’ (β: V, i, 35–36; 38). The deposed Melveric identifies in Isbrand’s aspirations to absolute power not the abandonment of his revolutionary plan but, rather, the reflection of his movement’s adherents. As he informs them, ‘Your hopes

34 Ibid., p. 597.
and wishes found an echo in him / As out of a sepulchral cave’ (β: V, ii, 24–25). In short, revolutionary aspirations in *Death’s Jest-Book* are a return to the sepulchre. Isbrand’s democratic revolution reveals itself as a compulsive return to the death-drive-as-Real, and, after his hiatus from the symbolic order of feudal power, Duke Melveric is momentarily recognized as a ruler only to be taken alive to the realm of the dead by Wolfram. In an ending with as much death as the Jacobean tragedies it reanimates, *Death’s Jest-Book* give a proleptic Lacanian twist to Marx’s observation, ‘that in order to arrive at its content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead’.35 Through the agency of the anachronistic Roman Mario and the reanimated corpse Wolfram, death’s absence becomes the positive ‘content’ at which revolution arrives.

It is tempting to see the connection between the death drive and revolution in *Death’s Jest-Book* as a darkly Freudian parable about the innate nature of human aggression. Of the death drive, Freud claimed that ‘it constitutes the greatest impediment to civilization’.36 For Freud, the only response to the death drive that serves the purposes of civilization is more effective repression. To simply apply this Freudian insight to *Death’s Jest-Book*’s presentation of revolution would be to say that revolution does not serve the purposes of civilization. However, such a conclusion retards the possibility of practical political reform and leads only to the conclusion that Beddoes’s text is unavoidably nihilistic.

By contrast, it is precisely through a Lacanian reading of revolution as an expression of the death-drive-as-Real that *Death’s Jest-Book* gains its force as a sustained and pervasive engagement with a paradoxical principle of structure. What emerges from this engagement is the potential for a critique of ideology itself rather than an opposition to any particular ideological-political content. The ‘living semiotical display’ Beddoes sought to give to the ‘psychical principle’ he called ‘tragedy’ returns compulsively to the void of the Real as a negative limit of experiential reality. In understanding revolution in terms of the death-drive-as-Real, *Death’s Jest-Book* suggests an un-locatable, unspeakable, ahistorical absence at the centre of ideological reality. Unless revolution first takes into account the essence of psychic and political reality as a negative limit rather than as an object of desire, revolution, as it is set out in *Death’s Jest-Book*, is doomed to compulsively and tragically return to the void of the Real in the search for an essential substance of human desire and political power. If in a Lacanian reading of *Death’s Jest-Book* revolution is a symptom of the death-drive-as-Real, then the therapeutic approach suggested by Beddoes’s drama is the identification of psychic and political content with the void at its centre.

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35 Ibid., p. 597.
36 Freud, *Civilization*, p. 81.