

**“The Phantom Wooer” and
the Haunting Resonance:
An Anticipation of Frost
— or of Beddoes’ Own Name?**

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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,
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.”

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,
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.”

May I add a footnote to a long-established debate on a line from “The Phantom Wooer” (published 1851) by Thomas Lovell Beddoes (1803-49), which has been said to have influenced a key line in Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”? The Beddoes line is “Our bed is lovely, dark, and sweet” (line 13), and the Frost line, of course, is “The woods are lovely, dark and deep,” which also happens to be the thirteenth line (a coincidence that has not been pointed out before to my knowledge, but need not, for that reason, indicate good luck!). Some time ago I entered into a controversy on this matter in *English*

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Language Notes over a note by Anya Taylor. My demurrers¹ were largely based on the commonplace that Frost was resolutely on record denying that his most famous poem was at all about death, whereas the Beddoes lyric (and Beddoes' work in general) conveyed strongly decadent associations. In my title I tried to suggest that the very idea of hinting at the transformation of Beddoes' "wooded" into a Frostian *wood* seemed far-fetched, a hidden pun on the level of sound but not meaning. (This proposed switch, however, was one I set up, not one specifically used by Professor Taylor.) Because it is generally known that Frost, toward the end of his career, tended to play up his kindly grandfather image, and so would read this popular poem during poetry recitals for reasons of sentiment, if for no other, and it is possible that he did not fully understand his own creativity, we might look at the controversy again. Indirectly it involves name play.

First, I might mention that several readers, both poet and scholar, have apparently corroborated my criticism of this suggested influence. The poet, Celeste Turner Wright, observed to me that Frost's puritan New England "get-up-and-go" Yankee spirit, which dominates the end of the poem, is such as to preclude any intervention of morbid Beddoes' jesting with death. The scholar, Earl Wilcox, asked me if the Beddoes lyric was to be found in Frost's favorite stand-bys, Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* and the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, and when I said no, the implication was that he was probably unfamiliar with "The Phantom Wooer."

On the other hand, one of the main arguments in my published response to Taylor prompted her rejoinder. I contended that the association of such romantic adjectives as "lovely," "dark," and "deep" or "sweet" and their variants in the writings of poets whom Frost greatly admired, especially Shakespeare, Keats, and Blake, indicated that he was indebted to the whole tradition behind him. She then claimed that the closer proximity of the key adjectives in both Beddoes and Frost was more important. We both admitted certain unconscious, archetypal associations as well.

Let me now point out that when, in my response, I referred to her "discovery" of the correlation, I was mistaken. It had been noticed at least once before, over ten years previously, in England (Danzig).² Since then, for what it is worth, the parallel has come to light several times without reference to either prior article on the subject. Alfred Corn's review³ of William H. Pritchard's fine reassessment of Lawrance Thompson's work on Frost's biography in *The New Republic* took this major Frost specialist to task for not citing the Beddoes

source, observing that another poet, Richard Wilbur, had also shown its relevance in an essay some time ago. Further, the Beddoes-Frost correlation was then referred to with approval by Donald Greiner in his paper for the Frost Society during the annual meeting of the MLA in 1983. Still, even more recently, Carlos Baker, a one-time friend of Frost, contended in his new collection of essays that the key line in "Stopping by Woods" was indebted to Keats (194-95).

With all this brouhaha, is it going too far to suggest finally that the Beddoes line is indeed resonant – but perhaps in a different manner from what has been suggested? To my knowledge, it has not been pointed out before that "Our bed is lovely, dark, and sweet" actually hints at the creator's name in codified form, as it were. In other words, it sounds so very much like true Beddoes, as reflective of his morbidity, because it *is* Beddoes – not merely by him but about him and about his full name. True, at first blush, the association of "bed is lovely" with the concatenation "Beddoes Lovell" may appear to be no more than an ingenious coincidence, one not so far removed from the accident by which both the Beddoes and Frost lines appeared as the thirteenth in their respective poems. After all, it takes a little doing to transfer "bed is" in *Beddoes*, albeit the sound effect is fairly similar. When I first noticed the possibility of such overlapping, I realized that some other fact would have to enter in to make such an onomastic effect convincing.

Then this other fact emerged: The word immediately preceding "Our bed is lovely" happens to be closely enough associated with the poet's first name to allow for at least orthographic resemblance ("tomb" – Tom). Emerging from "tomb/ Our bed is lovely," then, is our Tom Lovell Beddoes.⁴ To claim that Frost was taken by this very unconscious association and so modeled his own poem after it, making the wintry setting suggestive of his own last name, is perhaps a charming conclusion but one a bit hard to believe if Frost never referred to Beddoes elsewhere. Professor Taylor urged that both poems are thematically akin in dealing with aspects of temptation, but to escort Frost too much into the onomatological arena may itself be rather too much of a temptation. In any case, given a choice between the Beddoes line as resonant because of its anticipation of one in Frost or resonant because of its reflection (or "echoes") of Beddoes' full name (by which he was so often known), the latter wins out. It is, after all, based on a much closer historical linkage.

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Notes

1. Fleissner, "From 'Wooded' to Wood," followed by Taylor's brief rejoinder.
2. In fairness to Professor Taylor, it should be noted that she cited one parallel ignored in the earlier article; the fact that both poems have short refrains, one possibly having inspired the other.
3. This is the only negative review of Pritchard's book I have encountered..
4. The alias used by Evans in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "The 'Gloria Scott'" is also Beddoes, and I have argued that the resonance involved is again that of Thomas Lovell Beddoes. See Fleissner, "The Original Beddoes." The name of Beddoes can indeed be a resonant one.

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