

THE GHOST OF A SKELETON KEY:
SOME NOTES TOWARDS A COMMENTARY
ON THOMAS LOVELL BEDDOES' *DEATH'S JEST-BOOK*

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These notes are a revision of the second half of *An Anatomy of 'Death's Jest-Book'*, written between 1996 and 1998. A revised version of the first half, which dealt mainly with biographical and background material, was published in my collection *Marginalien* (Five Seasons Press 2005). Sections of the original text were also published in *The Thomas Lovell Beddoes Society Newsletter* nos. 3 & 4, 1997 & 1998. The original section concerning TLB and Antonin Artaud was expanded in the essay 'Beddoes and the Theatre of Cruelty' and published in *The Ashgate Companion to Thomas Lovell Beddoes*, ed. Ute Berns & Michael Bradshaw (Ashgate 2007); it has been further revised for inclusion here. The notes also incorporate revised material from *A Skeleton Key to 'Death's Jest-Book'* and *Homage to Homunculus Mandrake*, published by the TLB Society 1995 & '96.

Among other developments in TLB studies since 1998 there has been the republication of the two versions of *DJB*: the 1829 or β text edited by Michael Bradshaw (Carcanet/Routledge 2003) and my own edition of the later γ text (West House 2003). Since my comments generally concern the γ text I have cited line references to the West House edition unless otherwise stated.

TLB's letters, referenced by date, will be found in *The Works of Thomas Lovell Beddoes*, ed. H.W. Donner (OUP 1935). Other letters are cited from *The Browning Box*, ed. Donner (OUP 1935). Donner's *Thomas Lovell Beddoes: The Making of a Poet* (Blackwell 1935) is the source of other biographical and critical material.

Some other sources and bibliographical details are included within the text. The lapse of time between the original writing and its revision unfortunately means that I can't now identify all the sources but the following checklist may be helpful:

For Paracelsus:

The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings of Paracelsus the Great, ed. Arthur Edward Waite (The Alchemical Press facs. edn. 1992)

Henry M. Pachter *Paracelsus: Magic into Science* (Henry Schuman 1951)

Works by Artaud:

[abbrev. *Theatre*] *The Theatre and its Double* tr. Victor Corti (Calder reprint 1995)

Art and Death & The Nerve Meter in Selected Writings, tr. Helen Weaver, ed. Susan Sontag (California UP reprint 1988)

Other:

Chris Baldick *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing* (OUP 1990)

Erasmus Darwin *The Botanic Garden; A Poem in Two Parts: I. The Economy of Vegetation; II. The Loves of the Plants* (J. Johnson 1789 & 1791)

Robert Duncan *Copy Book Entries* (Meow Press 1996)

[abbrev. *A Study*] Northrop Frye *A Study of English Romanticism* (Random House 1968)

C.A. Hoyt 'Theme and Imagery in the Poetry of Thomas Lovell Beddoes', *Studia Neophilologia* 35, 1963
 Susan Lavender & Anna Franklin *Herb Craft* (Capall Bann 1996)
 Tim Marshall *Murdering to Dissect: Grave-Robbing, Frankenstein and the Anatomy Literature* (Manchester UP 1995)
 Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley *The Last Man*, ed. with intro by Morton D. Paley (OUP 1994)
 Dorothy A. Stansfield *Thomas Beddoes, MD, 1760-1808: Chemist, Physician, Democrat* (Reidel 1984)
 Dennis Tedlock tr. *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings* (Rev. edn., Touchstone 1996)
 Geoffrey Wagner 'Centennial of a Suicide: Thomas Lovell Beddoes', *Horizon* 19, 1949

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Dr Beddoes, in the manner of Dr Darwin:

First o'er his breast dark fumes of vengeance rise,
 Foul as the Typhon's terrors blot the skies:
 As dread Contagion, from her bone-strewed cell,
 Aims the keen arrow, dipt in poison fell,
 So, deep immured, amid his dark divan,
 Devising evil, sits the Foe of Man;
 The mandate issues, and unchained by Hate,
 Commissioned Murder moves in guilty State,
 And strews, with impious arm, the human wreck
 O'er heaven-loved realms, which Peace and Plenty deck.

[*Alexander's Expedition down the Hydaspes & the Indus to the Indian Ocean* ll.365-74]

Verse-ventriloquists, enemies of tyranny, plague-watchers, students of vengeance, Beddoes the father and Beddoes the son. In the year of TLB's birth his father subscribes to Southey and Cottle's three-volume edition of Thomas Chatterton's *Works*. Other subscribers include S.T. Coleridge, William Wordsworth and a 'Mr. Author Quartley'. Who was he? Such a pseudonym might have appealed to TLB, whose literary ambitions were apparently not encouraged by his mother. "I am sorry that Tom publishes," she wrote in 1823 of her son's play *The Bride's Tragedy*, "the fooleries of a youth in black and white are sometimes maliciously remembered against him." The remark is quoted by Dorothy A. Stansfield, who comments 'She could well have been thinking of earlier anxieties connected with her husband's work.' Was TLB's surprisingly ready agreement with Procter and Bourne's advice not to publish *DJB* in 1829 somehow reinforced by memory of his mother's disapproval? His letters reveal little of his feelings about either of his parents although his scientific interests suggest paternal influence. Isbrand's quarrel with Wolfram is expressed in an advanced medical trope: 'Say hast thou undergone transfusion, and whose hostile blood now turns thy life's wheels? Who has poured Lethe into thy veins, and washed thy father out of heart and brains?' [l.i.251-3]

*

Mandrake: 'man-dragon'. Paracelsus accepts *mandragorae* and *naturals* as colloquial names for homunculi. In calling his character 'Homunculus Mandrake' TLB is using two equivalent names for the same phenomenon. Insofar as the mandrake is a 'man-dragon' he is a *man-snake* and an ingredient in some of Paracelsus' receipts. He is also Satan's Apple, Brain Thief, Circegium,

Circoea, Galenmannchen, Ladykins, Mannikin, Semihomo, Wild Lemon, Sorcerer's Root, Dollwort and Woman Drake.

In the old woodcuts the leaves and flowers which sprout from the mandrakes' heads bear a conscious resemblance to the cap and bells of the traditional fool. Although Homunculus Mandrake is the first fool we meet in a play originally subtitled *The Fool's Tragedy* he is not the fool whose tragedy we are to watch. He is, however, the one character who is openly although comically engaged in alchemical pursuits of a distinctly Paracelsian kind – the search for the elixir, the power over life and death. His name is thus arguably related to 'fire-drake', a term for an alchemist's assistant: 'His lungs, his Zephyrus, he that puffes his coals' (Ben Jonson). The other main characters also seek the power of life over death: Isbrand who sees it as the crown of his political ambitions; Melveric, driven by emotional loss; Wolfram perhaps only through circumstance. Ziba has it, or believes he has it, or we are led to believe he has it, in the first place. Their anatomist creator apparently sought for it too.

The essential purpose of Mandrake's appearance at the beginning of the play is to introduce a comic mirror of the central plot. This structural device can itself be seen in alchemical terms: the story of Mandrake's search for the elixir in Egypt will form the 'so below' term of the play's 'as above so below' schema. The climax of the subplot will be the farcical 'raising' of Mandrake from the 'dead'. This will be immediately followed by the play's central event, the resurrection of Wolfram.

'... on the 3^d at Cephalonia I received a copy of D.J.B. ... I was glad to find the Mandrake so much suppressed. It was a character in which my brother delighted long ago when a boy, and the idea I can imagine ever haunted his imagination.' Captain C.H. Beddoes to T.F. Kelsall, HMS 'Racer' Zante 8/7/50.

*

TLB to Kelsall, August 1824: 'The disappearance of Shelley from the world, seems ... to have been followed by instant darkness and owl-season ... if I were the literary weather-guesser for 1825 I would prognosticate fog, rain, blight in due succession ...'

Weather such as Dr Darwin described,

Thrice round the grave CIRCÆA prints her tread,
And chaunts the numbers, which disturb the dead;
Shakes o'er the holy earth her sable plume,
Waves her dread wand, and strikes the echoing tomb!
– Pale shoot the stars across the troubled night,
The timorous moon withholds her conscious light;
Shrill scream the famish'd bats, and shivering owls,
And loud and long the dog of midnight howls! –

[*The Loves of the Plants* III, 7-14]

Darwin's footnote identifying *Circoea* as 'Enchanter's Nightshade. Two males, one female' [Wolfram, Melveric :: Sibylla | Wolfram, Isbrand :: Sibylla | Adalmar, Athulf :: Amala ?] and continuing 'the Bryony or Mandrake, was said to utter a scream, when its root was drawn from the ground; and that the animal which drew it up, became diseased and soon died: on which account, when it was wanted for the purposes of medicine, it was usual to loosen and remove

the earth about the root, and then to tie it by means of a cord to a dog's tail; who was whiped to pull it up, and was supposed to suffer for the impiety of the action.'

[Geoffrey Grigson, comparing Bryony or Mandrake to the German *Alraunwurzel*, lists its use in thirteen counties: 'As the home-grown Mandrake, Bryony acquired a chief virtue of the true *Mandragora officinalis*, which was one of the most anciently famous herbs of magical power, the *mandragoras* of the Greeks, the *nam-tar-gir* or "male Plague-god plant" of the Assyrians. The true Mandrake was supposed to help women to conceive. "Great and strange effects are supposed to be in Mandrakes, to cause women to be fruitfull and beare children if they shall but carie the same neer unto their bodies." Gerard went on to ridicule the claim, but people knew the Bible story (Genesis XXX.14-17) of Rachel and Leah and the Mandrakes, so the large roots of the native Bryony did service for the exotic, expensive roots of *Mandragora*. "The roote is very great, long, and thicke, growing deepe in the earth, of a white yellowish colour, extreme bitter, and altogither of an unpleasant taste. The Queenes chief Chirurgion, Master *William Goodorous*, a very curious and learned gentleman, showed me a roote hereof, that waied halfe an hundred waight, and of the bignesse of a child, of a yeere old" (Gerard). The root was child-shaped, or could be trimmed to look like a child; and Bryony mandrakes in human form, sometimes sown with grass to give them hair, used to be suspended in the English herb-shops, even as late as the last century.' "The Welsh called this magical plant *evrin Gwion*, the plums of Gwion, the wizard who was reborn as Taliesin. His plums have the filthiest smell when they are overripe.' *The Englishman's Flora* pp.224-5.]

Returning to Dr Darwin

– Then yawns the bursting ground! –

or as TLB sets the scene

The ruins of a spacious Gothic Cathedral and churchyard. On the cloister wall the Dance of Death is painted. The sepulchre of the Dukes with many folding doors &c., by moonlight. [III.iii]

Duke Melveric asks

Dost thou hear a door
Drop its great bolt and grate upon its hinges?
Ziba. (aside) Serpentine Hell! That is thy staircase echo,
And thy jaws groaning. What betides it? [III.iii.553-6]

Dr Darwin:

The ponderous portals of the church unbar, –
Hoarse on their hinge the ponderous portals jar;
As through the colour'd glass the moon beam falls,
Huge shapeless spectres quiver on the walls;
Low murmurs creep along the hollow ground,
And to each step the pealing ailes resound;
By glimmering lamps, protecting saints among,
The shrines all trembling as they pass along,
O'er the still choir with hideous laugh they move,
(Fiends yell below, and angels weep above!)

And Homunculus Mandrake shrieks ‘This cursed boot!’ In the meantime Isbrand listens to ‘seductive VITIS’ who according to the Doctor

‘Drink deep,’ she carols, as she waves in air
The mantling goblet, ‘and forget your care.’ –

Isbrand:

Fill the cups up, and pass them round again,
I’m not my nightly self yet. There’s creation
In these thick yellow drops. [III.iii.374-6]

The Doctor:

O’er the dread feast malignant Chemia scowls,
And mingles poison in the nectar’d bowls;

Isbrand:

A man of meat and water’s a thin beast,
But he who sails upon such waves as these
Begins to be a fellow. The old gods
Were only men and wine. [III.iii.376-80]

The Doctor:

So when PROMETHEUS

his footnote commenting ‘The ancient story of Prometheus, who concealed in his bosom the fire he had stolen, and afterwards had a vulture perpetually gnawing his liver, affords so apt an allegory for the effects of drinking spirituous liquors, that one should be induced to think the art of distillation, as well as some other chemical processes, (such as calcining gold,) had been known in times of great antiquity, and lost again. The swallowing drams cannot be better represented in hieroglyphic language than by taking fire into ones bosom; and certain it is, that the general effect of drinking fermented or spirituous liquors is an inflamed, or paralytic liver ...’

P.B. Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound* I.31ff:

The crawling glaciers pierce me with the spears
Of their moon-freezing crystals: the bright chains
Eat with their burning cold into my bones.
Heaven’s winged hound, polluting from thy lips
His beak in poison not his own, tears up
My heart; and shapeless sights come wandering by,
The ghastly people of the realm of dream,
Mocking me:

TLB to Kelsall, July 1830: ‘If dreams were dramatic calls as in the days (or nights) of Æschylus, I might plead something too. – He, according to Athenæus, sleeping in a vineyard, probably after acting a part in some Thespian satyric dialogue, had a vision of Bacchus descending to him, and bidding him arise and write tragedies.’

*

We might consider the initial appearance of Mandrake as an anaesthetic administered before surgery (mandrake's surgical use was mentioned by Pliny). Anaesthetics form a parenthesis around TLB's life. Although the laughing gas tested in his father's laboratory did not come into medical use until later in the century he acknowledges 'the powers of beneficial Chloroform' when telling his sister about his amputated leg in 1848. 'As a wine of the condemned mandrake was given on a sponge to those about to be crucified or hanged,' remark Lavender and Franklin, who go on to note the plant's use as an aphrodisiac.

DJB begins with a death – Mandrake dying to his fool-self, at least in his own mind – and ends with a speech by a dead man. But by the end of the play it is the dead who appear to be really alive and the living who appear to be dead. This reversal is accompanied by a startling mutation of values: to be living is ipso facto to be wicked. The dead Wolfram is the only definably 'good' survivor in the usual sense, with the exception of the rather shadowy women. Wolfram tells Sibylla

The dead are ever good and innocent,
And love the living. They are cheerful creatures,
And quiet as the sunbeams, and most like,
In grace and patient love and spotless beauty,
The new-born of mankind. [IV.ii.112-6]

*

Mandrake's speech beginning 'Whither should a journeyman magician' [I.i.20ff] is both an amusing picture of a novice traveller's expectations and a little storeroom of alchemical lore. The reference to Paracelsus is a conscious anachronism. Mandrake's self-assumed title 'son of the great Paracelsus' might simply be a periphrasis for 'alchemist' at the same time as a literal meaning is offered. Is Mandrake saying he *is* the son of Paracelsus – the grown-up homunculus which Paracelsus claimed he created? Is Paracelsus the 'Doctor' who must 'seek another Zany'? Is the gullible wisecracking Mandrake the product of man's interference with nature? While it would seem perverse for Beddoes to invest a comic subplot with such a major theme we must remember the 'as above so below' parallelism linking Mandrake with Isbrand: the lesser and greater fools following Paracelsus in the search for godhead. And the parallels between *Frankenstein* and *DJB* seem obvious enough: both involve the creation of life out of death, both log man's impotence in the face of powers he has unleashed.

In *Murdering to Dissect* Tim Marshall argues that *Frankenstein* 'rapidly acquires new meanings through historical events taking place after first publication, the Burke and Hare case in particular. In the 1820s the science of anatomy – the science which Victor Frankenstein practises – aroused controversy and there were mounting pressures for legislation concerning it. These developments [...] grow in the years which span the second and third editions in 1823 and 1831 and add a specific dimension – an anatomy storyline – which could not have been fully present in the first edition.' Marshall makes no reference to TLB but he is considering the main period of composition of *DJB*.

A dead man resurrected takes his murderer back alive to the tomb. This is Wolfram's revenge. The possibility that a dead body *might* resurrect, or might remain in some way sentient, must be the anatomist's particular dread. The anti-anatomists' view is voiced by Thorwald: 'this breaking

through the walls, that sever / 'The quick and cold, led never yet to good.' [III.iii. 199-200].
Wolfram's revenge is enacted above all on his creator who will spend much of his life dissecting
corpses, including the corpse of *DJB*.

*

Ancona-Egypt-Jerusalem was the route of the Fourth Crusade although its date 1202-4 does not tally with either of TLB's specifications. The significance of Egypt is in the first place as the Land of the Dead which Wolfram must visit to undergo a blood-rite, as if he were an epic hero. He is thus shown to be the hero of the play rather than Isbrand who remains in Ancona. And for Wolfram Egypt will not be a merely figurative Land of the Dead since he will be murdered there. Egypt being also the Land of the Mysteries – as Mandrake says, the alchemists' 'classic land' – is another pointer to the hermetic undertow. TLB may not have known that Mandrake is in effect returning to his first recorded home, for according to Lavender and Franklin the mandrake 'was mentioned in the Ebers papyrus, written around 1700 BC [and rediscovered in 1873 AD], and sections of mandrake roots have been found in the pyramids. The Egyptians honoured Ra as the first to administer mandrake as a soporific and they called it "phallus of the field".'

TLB would certainly have known the passage on 'Egypt's shower-less lands' in Canto III of Darwin's *The Economy of Vegetation*, illustrated by the Fuseli/Blake engraving of Anubis. Probably Mandrake owes his reference to 'the snows of Hekla' to the same source, for in the immediately following lines Darwin writes

High in the frozen North where HECCLA glows,
And melts in torrents his coeval snows
[...]

Mandrake possibly believes he is following 'the great Paracelsus' to Egypt. Paracelsus claims in one account (and denies in another) that he travelled the Venetian trade-route up the Nile and saw 'monsters so fearful you would jump right back into your mother's womb.'

*

Isbr. Good morrow, brother Vanity. How? Soul of a Pickle-herring, body of an hermetical Toss-pot, doublet of motley and mantle of Pilgrim, how art thou transmuted! Wilt thou desert our brotherhood, fool sublimate? Shall the Motley chapter no longer boast thee? Wilt forswear the order of the bell and break thy vows to Momus? Have mercy on Wisdom and relent, my mineral chameleon, my white nothing and philosophical wool-gatherer. [I.i.39-46]

Isbrand peppers familiar Renaissance fool-banter with occult jargon, mixing obvious alchemical puns with more opaque references. 'Nothing', for example, is the Fool's number in the Tarot and is usually regarded as the card signifying the quester whose number both includes him in and excludes him from the major arcana, a position similar to Mandrake's in the play. [The Fool is the 'spirit in search of experience', according to Waite, who 'notes that the subsidiary name of this card has been, The Alchemist. (Used in the sense of ultimate folly rather than ultimate wisdom.)'] To call him 'chameleon' emphasises his changeable nature while 'Soul of a Pickle-herring, body of an hermetical Toss-pot' seems a precise enough description of one created in a womb of hermetically sealed glass, or whose bodily parts and perhaps soul have been gathered

from sources as motley as Frankenstein's creature's. For 'Motley' itself cf. Paracelsus: 'God has made everything out of nothing but Man he made out of everything.' [Pachter p.205]

*

Mandrake's speech beginning 'Respect the grave and sober' [L.i.47ff] is a superb demonstration of language's ability to signify in spite of inbuilt contradictions. His plea for gravity is simultaneously a lament that gravity, having banished the gods and fairies, is about to murder Folly. On the other hand every man has become a fool and therefore there is more Folly in the world than ever. There is so much Folly that its murderer Gravity is no longer respected. The device is to identify the abstract quality Folly with the Fool himself and then to muddle the distinction between 'Fool' in the professional sense and 'fool' as Everyman. Since he regards himself as the last member of Master Merryman's Kingdom he is enabled by a wonderfully specious syllogism to arrive at the final term of his argument: Every man's become a fool / I am the last Fool / Therefore I am the Last Man. TLB thus encodes a reference to Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's novel *The Last Man*, the most developed treatment of a popular theme in Romantic writing.

It is in fact a return of references, for lines from TLB's *The Bride's Tragedy* are quoted in *The Last Man*, embedded in one of the many passages of transposed autobiography:

Her fear had been too deep, too absorbing, too entire, to be changed to security. She felt as if during the past calm she had dreamed, but was now awake; she was

As one
In some lone watchtower on the deep, awakened
From soothing visions of the home he loves,
Trembling to hear the wrathful billows roar;

as one who has been cradled in a storm, and awakes to find the vessel sinking. Before, she had been visited by pangs of fear – now, she never enjoyed an interval of hope. No smile of the heart ever irradiated her fair countenance; sometimes she forced one, and then gushing tears would flow, and the sea of grief close above these wrecks of past happiness.

Morton D. Paley remarks in his Oxford World's Classics edition that the original is misquoted: TLB wrote that 'the wrathful billows whoop'. Paley continues 'MWS wrote these lines out in her journal on 15 Dec. 1823 – correctly except for the intentional addition of "I'm" before the first word.' The suggestion that she was thus appropriating the text for herself is misleading in that TLB's sentence also begins 'I'm as one'. References snag in the 'instant darkness and owl-season'. No doubt MWS read more into the lines than TLB intended but before they resurface in *The Last Man* he will have acted as a financial guarantor of the *Posthumous Poems*: 'a ghost indeed, and one who will answer our demand for hidden treasure.'

TLB had worked on his play *The Last Man* as early as February 1824, when he mentions that 'Procter has the brass to tell me he likes that fool The last man.' He nevertheless refers to it as a future project in March 1825: 'I understand that M^r Tho^s Campbell has in some newspaper, in a paltry refutation of some paltry charge of plagiarism regarding his paltry poem in the paltry Edinburgh, touched the egg of my last man. The gentleman is completely addled, & the steam of my teapot will never be powerful enough to supply the place of incubation; nevertheless some time or other I will treat it, not in the style of Hopkins & Campbell.' A week or so later he writes

'I will do the Last Man before I die, but it is a subject I save up for a time when I have more knowledge, a freer pencil, a little menschen-lehre, a command of harmony, & an accumulation of picturesque ideas & dramatic characters fit for the theme.'

February 1824 was also the month in which MWS began writing her own *The Last Man*. In August TLB told Kelsall 'She is writing something.' He may not have known *what* she was writing at this stage, for his acquaintance with MWS was probably not close. But when he wrote to Procter in March 1826 'Now you must tell me about the last Last Man' he is almost certainly referring to the novel (rather than Thomas Hood's poem, published the same year) since he mentions MWS and the New Monthly in the same paragraph. The following month he wrote to Kelsall 'you must tell me all about the Last Man; I am very glad that M^{rs} S. has taken it from the New Monthly fellow.' It seems unlikely that TLB didn't read the novel but he doesn't mention it again in the surviving correspondence.

In the summer of 1825 TLB began thinking 'of a very Gothic-styled tragedy, for w^h I have a jewel of a name – DEATH'S JESTBOOK' and in October 1827 he told Kelsall that the fragments of 'the last Man ... will all go into the Jest book – or the Fool's Tragedy.' Again, in February 1829: 'I have used some of the Last man for the end of Fool's Trag.' Nevertheless, if Donner correctly dates a later note [*Works*, pp.525-6] he was thinking of *The Last Man* again in 1837, although nothing in the note suggests it relates to *DJB*. An ecological collapse seems to be anticipated in 'a dialogue between the sun, moon and seven stars about the state of the Earth's health. One of the dramatis personæ an incarnation of the world's destruction.'

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Mandrake's 'O world' is attributed to its author by Ezra Pound: "'O World!" / said Mr Beddoes.' Pound might as well have attributed the words to John Marston, several of whose characters use this general address. In *The Malcontent*:

O world most vile, when thy loose vanities,
Taught by this fool, do make the fool seem wise!

Thus Malevole, who is certainly an ancestor of Isbrand. Marston's Antonio, who disguises himself as a fool to exact his revenge, is another. Dying for love of him Mellida cries 'O world, thou art too subtle / For honest natures to converse withal.' But it is Malevole who answers, when Pietro exclaims 'O World!': 'World! 'Tis only the region of death, the greatest shop of the devil, the cruel'st prison of men, out of the which none pass without paying their dearest breath for a fee. There's nothing in it but extreme, extreme calamity.' And Webster, by way of introduction: 'I have most of the jests here in my table-book.'

That the specific gravity of, say, Marston's language anticipates TLB's, or that TLB finds his specific gravity in Marston's or Webster's or another's may be of small consequence. But that Marston's or Webster's language-gravity could be consummated in fully delineated and performable plays is only partly a matter of individual genius. They wrote for an active – hyperactive – theatre. TLB, by 1830, for the void.

O world, no world, but mass of public wrongs,
Confused and filled with murder and misdeeds!

is Hieronimo's variant, or Thomas Kyd's. *The Spanish Tragedy* is Fool-less, however, and it is left to Lorenzo's pageboy to ask 'Is't not a scurvy jest that a man should jest himself to death?' In

King Lear the jests are done and the Fool has spoken his last when Edgar seeing his father led eyeless across the heath cries

World, world, O world!
But that thy strange mutations make us hate thee,
Life would not yield to age.

Procter: 'We would not be supposed to assert that the writer was without his faults. On the contrary, he had several: he had too gloomy a brain, a distempered taste; he was sometimes harsh, and sometimes dull; but he had great sentiment and, not unfrequently, great vigor of expression.' He was referring to Webster, not TLB.

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'For by Art is created that great LEVIATHAN, called a COMMON-WEALTH, or STATE – (in latine, CIVITAS) which is but an Artificiall Man.' Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* p.1. The self-fashioner Isbrand may be seen as the middle term in a hierarchy of artificial men, of which Homunculus Mandrake is the lower term and the revolutionary state of Münsterberg the higher. Isbrand's seizure of power will follow the resurrection of his brother Wolfram, and perhaps Edmund Burke is our commentator here (or else TLB commentates on Burke): 'out of the tomb of the murdered monarchy in France has arisen a vast, tremendous unformed spectre, in a far more terrific guise than any which ever yet have overpowered the imagination, and subdued the fortitude of man.' Burke, ever distrustful of the alliance between philosophical experiment and political radicalism, is referring to a greater revolution than Isbrand's seizure of a small German state, but that state is nevertheless called 'Monster-berg'. As Baldick remarks (*In Frankenstein's Shadow*, p.18) revolutionary France is to Burke a 'monster of a state', 'the mother of monsters', a 'monstrous compound'.

TLB's observance of the Paracelsian notion that the homunculus is smaller than the average human being is uncommon in the nineteenth century. Frankenstein's creature is considerably larger than his creator but this might not be the decisive influence. The enormity (and enormity) of the 'artificial man' owes much to Hobbes, whose man-who-is-many may remind us of the Druids' wicker man, who also appears as the Giant Fool or Carnival King in some Tarot designs. Melville's Ahab, probably a reader of Hobbes in his youth, imagines a characteristically large creation: 'while Prometheus is about it, I'll order a complete man after a desirable pattern. Imprimis, fifty feet high in his socks; then, chest modelled after the Thames Tunnel; then, legs with roots to 'em, to stay in one place; then, arms three feet through to the waist; no heart at all, brass forehead, and about a quarter of fine brains; and let me see – shall I order eyes to see outwards? No, but put a sky-light on top of his head to illuminate inwards.' (*Moby Dick*, ch. 108.)

Ahab and Isbrand. Ahab is certainly the greater creation (i.e. 'artificial man' of his creator) but we can imagine Isbrand rising to some of his words. 'O Nature, and O soul of man! how far beyond all utterance are your linked analogies! not the smallest atom stirs or lives on matter, but has its cunning duplicate in mind.' (*Moby Dick* ch.70: *The Sphinx*.) *Moby Dick* is a 'Death's jest-book' projected as epic. It is a distant cousin of TLB's play since they share several Jacobean ancestors. There is no evidence that either knew the other's work; *DJB* was published posthumously in 1850, *Moby Dick* in '51. The contemporary work both certainly knew was Mary Shelley's.

It's the one's genius and the other's limitation, that Melville saw what TLB did not: the development out of the Jacobean drama of a muscular world-embracing almost Biblical *prose*.

Ishmael is the last last man.

*

Mandrake's artificial nature appears to be emphasised by Isbrand when he answers Wolfram's 'Who is this saucy fellow that prates between?': 'A living somebody or nothing, a false coin of flesh that may pass at Court as a tolerable counterfeit of humanity, so indeed that all who see but skin-deep might take it for a scurvy human creature. Believe it not. Some one of those malicious Gods who envy Prometheus his puppet show have taught all confounded sorts of malcontent beasts, saucy birds and ambitious shell-fish, and hopping creatures of land and water, the knack of looking human to the life. How? is the mystery of the cookery-book. Briskets of veal, liver and lights, tripe and capon, have been so cunningly smuggled into the featherless two-legged ones that the real history of the World is Æsop's fable-book in masquerade. A whole people is stout and surly, being mostly certain steaks and Barons of beef gone human: and another, after centuries of amphibious diet, owes to the frog's legs in its wooden shoes the agility with which it jumps over gentle King Log, and devotes itself patriotically to the appetite of Emperor Stork, his follower: aye, it would even blow itself up to be bull itself. Even you, Sir Knight, are still tolerably like a man, but Sirloin labours hard to shoulder away thy fine old heart, and a whole herd of sheep bleats in that merciful resolve of thine to pardon thy foe: but more of that anon.' [I.i.118-138]

TLB may have inherited his notion of the mutability of species (not always so playfully expressed as here) from Erasmus Darwin or Professor Blumenbach in Göttingen. Later it is Charles Darwin's theory which underlies the reversionary evolution of the not dissimilar ideas expressed in H.G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, where for example Pendrick remarks 'I could not persuade myself that the men and women I met were not also another, still passably human, Beast People, animals half-wrought into the outward image of human souls, and that they would presently begin to revert, to show first this bestial mark and then that.' 'Are there not,' asks Isbrand, 'Those that fall down out of humanity, / Into the story where the four-legged dwell?'

There is, again, a Melville-Beddoes resonance, as well as a fore-shadowing of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, in Chapter 98 of *Mardi*. Samoa describes an operation in which he trepanned a broken skull and replaced part of the human brain with that of a young pig. The patient recovered – 'But from being a warrior of great sense and spirit, he became a perverse-minded and piggish fellow, showing many of the characteristics of his swinish grafting. He survived the operation more than a year; at the end of the period, however, going mad, and dying in his delirium.' The story is doubted by Babalanja. "'... if this story be true,'" said he, "and since it is well settled, that our brains are somehow the organs of sense; then, I see not why human reason should not be put into a pig, by letting into its cranium the contents of a man's. I have long thought, that men, pigs, and plants, are but curious physiological experiments, and that science would at last enable philosophers to produce new species of beings, by somehow mixing, and concocting the essential ingredients of various creatures; and so forming new combinations.'

The essential point with Isbrand is that he negotiates his argument in Paracelsian terms, 'the mystery of the cookery-book'. If Mandrake *is* a genuine homunculus, his parts cooked together from all levels of animal creation, then he is only an example of what all men are, in soul as in body. Isbrand does not pose the key question until Act V: 'What shall we add to man, / To bring him higher? I begin to think / That's a discovery I soon shall make.' [V.i.62-4] He then makes a boast worthy of Paracelsus himself:

I [have] raised myself,

By this comparative philosophy,
Above your shoulders, my sage gentlemen.
Have patience but a little, and keep still,
I'll find means, bye and bye, of flying higher. [V.i.67-71]

The Paracelsian name for this higher being was Adech, the 'Man of the New Olympus'. The idea occurs in other alchemical texts; Jung notes the identification of the lapis/homunculus with 'the second Adam who is the philosophic man' in *Aurora Consurgens*. Isbrand is in his own mind nothing but 'the philosophic man'.

His purpose in I.i, however, apart from warning his brother that he will not himself forgive their father's murderer, is to persuade Wolfram to let Mandrake board the ship. 'We fools,' he says, 'send him as our ambassador to Africa; take him with you or be yourself our consul.' There is a suggestion that a fool-ambassador is essential for the voyage. By 'ambassador' we should perhaps understand 'surrogate', and specifically a surrogate for Isbrand. Paracelsus recommends the use of homunculi as surrogates, particularly when there is danger of harmful planetary influence. 'For example, if Mars should be disposed to destroy me, and there be a mental inclination from him to my mind, which might induce mental disease, I construct my homunculus, that the operation of Mars may be directed to this image, and I may get off safely.' Mandrake will in fact return from Egypt with a 'mental disease' while Isbrand props up the bar in Ancona.

Mandrake thanks Wolfram for yielding to Isbrand's persuasion with the words: 'Twice shalt thou live for this: for I will give thee a pint-bottle of my patent liquid – Eternity.' [I.i.158-9] The fool is sometimes a prophet: Wolfram will rise from the grave and so live twice.

*

'All the characters in *Death's Jest-Book* are, except for Isbrand, automatons in love with death,' writes Geoffrey Wagner in support of the common view that Beddoes was no good at all at making plays; as a 'practical playwright,' remarked Arthur Symonds, TLB is 'beneath contempt'. Northrop Frye seems to have been the first critic to see TLB the dramatist in a different light; Frye suggests that TLB's acute sense of alienation makes him the forerunner of the later drama which reaches from Chekhov and Strindberg to Sartre and Beckett. 'He anticipates later preoccupations with the relation of being and nothingness more directly than most Romantics.' [*A Study* p.85.]

We might see a closer resemblance between TLB and Antonin Artaud – 'some one to exhibit the sum of his experience in mental pathology & therapeutics [...] in [...] a living semiotical display' [TLB to Kelsall 4 Dec 1825] might have been said of, if not by, Artaud. Not the least of the resemblance is that although they were both passionate about the theatre their estrangement from their contemporary theatres means that they have left little in the way ofactable texts. Artaud did attempt to create his new theatre and wrote a body of work which has considerably influenced theatre since his death; TLB did not but this doesn't detract from the similarity of their situations. We hear something of the 'living semiotical display' in Artaud's remark 'If fundamental theatre is like the plague, this is [...] because [...] it is a revelation, urging forward the exteriorisation of a latent undercurrent of cruelty through which all the perversity of which the mind is capable, whether in a person or nation, becomes localised.' [*Theatre*, p.21.] Artaud stresses that his 'theatre of cruelty' has 'nothing to do with the cruelty we practise on each other [...] but the far more terrible, essential cruelty objects can practise on us. We are not free and the sky can still fall on our heads. And above all else, theatre is made to teach us this.' [p.60] We find this 'far more terrible, essential cruelty' embedded in the heart of *DJB*, in the attempted

necromancy whose consequences, in spite of the 'satiric pathos', are a most awful demonstration that in the face of death we are indeed not free and the sky will certainly 'fall on our heads' – a lesson the more potent in that TLB had initially sought to prove the opposite. We may be amused or appalled by the 'grotesque' and 'macabre' aspect of TLB's work but neither reaction should obscure the fact that he was convinced that death can be confronted and even 'conquered' and that this could be achieved by poetry in a manner analogous to the methods of scientific anatomy. He would feel an immediate affinity with Artaud's statement that 'I cling to the idea that death is not outside the realm of the mind, that it is within certain limits knowable and approachable by a certain sensibility.' [*Art and Death*.] *DJB* does not appear among the plays Artaud proposed for his theatre and he probably knew nothing of it, but he might have enjoyed directing *Mandrake*: '... to have a fabricated being appear, made of wood and cloth, resembling nothing, yet disturbing in nature, able to reproduce on stage the slightest intimation of the great metaphysical fear underlying all ancient theatre.' [*Theatre* p.32.] The easy notion of *Mandrake* as a mere clown would have undergone some such transformation in the Theatre of Cruelty.

We can listen in to the dialogue:

AA. This whole active, poetic way of visualising stage expression leads us to turn away from present-day theatre's human, psychological meaning and to rediscover a religious, mystical meaning our theatre has forgotten.

TLB. Many things are quite absurd, and destructive of all poetry, in arrangements which appear not of the slightest consequence. I am convinced that playbills for instance are very pernicious; one should never know the actors names and private circumstances.

AA. There is something about a spectacle like the Balinese Theatre which does away with entertainment, that aspect of useless artificiality, an evening's amusement so typical of our theatre. Its productions are hewn out of matter itself before our eyes, in real life itself. There is something of a religious ritual ceremony about them, in the sense that they eradicate any idea of pretence, a ridiculous imitation of real life, from the spectator's mind. This involved gesticulation we see has a goal towards which it aims by effective means, and we are able to experience its direct effectiveness. The thought it aims at, the states of mind it attempts to create, the mystical discoveries it offers are motivated and reached without delay or periphrasis. It all seems like an exorcism to make our devils FLOW.

TLB. The Greeks (from whom we can learn much if we understand their motives –) were in possession of this secret, and this is the real meaning of their masks, which have so much bothered the critics; and these were doubly useful, they deceived to a certain degree, not only the spectator, but also the actor, with the semblance of an heroic and unknown person, and prevented the annoying familiarity of the people on the stage. Of course I do not wish to see their sort of masks on our stage ... it is only to be lamented that we have no other means of completely disguising our actors and making Richard, Hamlet, Macbeth, as absolutely distinct and independent individuals, as *Œdipus & Orestes* must have been.

[*Theatre* pp.35 & 42; TLB to Kelsall 10 Jan. 1831.]

Looking for some deeper resonance between the two poets needs caution, for Artaud was a remorseless chronicler of his own instabilities, constantly probing his sense of being unable to write but leaving so graphic an account of his madness. We find nothing comparable in TLB, although the defensive ironies of his letters, the long silences and the hearsay tales of his sometimes riotous behaviour suggest considerable turmoil and this may be connected with feeling that he *could* not write as he would. There is certainly a fundamental shared sense between TLB and Artaud of the discontinuities of thought and the self, and the voids between, with the resultant failures of language. The sense of discontinuity is arguably the source of the notion of the 'double' which was obsessional with Artaud; in TLB it appears in his ubiquitous pairing of characters and mirroring of plot, particularly conspicuous in his use of the 'two brothers' theme

which Frye sees as a life-death identity/antithesis, the one brother representing ‘ordinary life driving toward, the other death seeping back into life.’ [*A Study*, p.53] ‘The real pain is to feel one’s thought shift within oneself,’ writes Artaud in *The Nerve Meter*, and that same ‘thought shift’ appears throughout *DJB*, being most memorably expressed by the Duke (who is surely no automaton) in his answer to Isbrand’s claim that ‘All of each heart I know’:

O perilous boast!
Fathom the wavy caverns of all stars,
Know every side of every sand in earth,
And hold in little all the lore of man,
As a dew’s drop doth miniature the sun:
But never hope to learn the alphabet,
In which the hieroglyphic human soul
More changeably is painted than the rainbow
Upon the cloudy pages of a shower,
Whose thunderous hinges a wild wind doth turn.
Know all of each! when each doth shift his thought
More often in a minute, than the air
Dust on a summer path. [III.iii.87-99]

*

‘I think it probable that he had a love disappointment.’ [Revell Phillips to Kelsall 8 Nov. 1858]

Without Donner’s biography all the groundwork on TLB would remain undone. But there’s no denying Donner can be pedantic, pompous and even condescending. Imagine Donner and TLB together with a bottle between them. Donner sees the philosopher’s stone in the most general ‘spiritual’ terms. Nevertheless his evasiveness over TLB’s sexuality is probably not his personal failure. His outline is clear enough, with the relationship with Bernard Reich during the first years in Germany as the emotional pivot and TLB’s affection for Konrad Degen the enduring attachment of his last years. Prudence rather than prudery is Donner’s watchword here. He was writing at a time when readers were supposed to suppose that the sleeping head on Auden’s arm was female.

While TLB’s life in Germany and Switzerland became increasingly nomadic it seems that Zoë King was pining away in England with a couple of album verses under her pillow. Her letters of 1858 recording her visit to Basel and discovery of the circumstances of TLB’s death make painful reading, in part because she seems to have been unaware of what the German authorities had long before identified as a ‘tendency to spleen and suicide’.

The image of ribcage as window-bars – the bars of a quite literal cage – is a favourite with TLB. Donner dates an early example 1820-21 [*Works*, p.163]:

Methinks I see into thy bridal chamber. –
So do I: – through the ribs of my father’s death.

The lines survive as an isolated fragment and in context were probably not as autobiographical as they might seem: some character says them in one abandoned play or another. It is nevertheless notable that whenever TLB uses the image its viewpoint is undefined. Is the speaker looking in or out through the ribcage? Is he imprisoned inside his father’s empty cell of a body or is he outside gazing in – to *whose* bridal chamber?

*

Wee, wee tailor,
Nobody was paler
Than wee, wee tailor [I.iv.74ff]

Cf. Carlyle: 'the Tailor is not only a Man, but something of a Creator or Divinity [...] – is not the fair fabric of Society itself, with all its royal mantles and pontifical stoles, whereby, from nakedness and dismemberment, we are organised into Politics, into nations, and a whole coöperating Mankind, the creation [...] of the Tailor alone?' In another passage Carlyle formulates a question Homunculus Mandrake might have asked: 'Am I not a botched mass of tailors' and cobblers' shreds, then; or a tightly-articulated, homogeneous little Figure, automatic, nay alive?'

*

Robert Duncan
[March 1971]
Notebook 42

A Gallery at the End of Time

There is no thing in which to delite that is not charged with the terrible, no thing in which the artist is to see beauty that is not the property of the Lords of Xibalba. The Sons of Art set up their games, all the time singing and dancing, playing cards (pictures) and dice (numbers) and their play-wars on the Road to Death. The lyre the poet strums is the bow of the invader. The painter illustrates the walls of Thanatos with the murals of Eros.

An email exchange with Robert Kelly, 1997:

AH. Robert Duncan in his Notebook 42 refers to the Lords of Xibalba. Presumably lords of Death in some myth- or the-ology, but which, where?

RK. The Lords of Xibalba are the lords of the underworld in the Mayan myth cycle preserved in the Popol Vuh. They are the ones the two brothers have to outwit – an intricate reference to the ceremonial ball game ...

AH. I'm a bit startled by your reference to the two brothers. I'd been struck by the fact that RD's remark reads almost as a footnote to Beddoes' Death's Jest-Book. I didn't expect that the ref to the Lords of Xibalba might bring me to two brothers attempting to outwit Death: but that is, after all, a good part of the story of D's Jest-Book ...

[C.A. Hoyt prefers to see the story in terms of the father-son relationship which is prominent in *The Bride's Tragedy* and in much of TLB's imagery. He notes the shift to the brother theme in *The Second Brother* yet reverts to father-son in his brief discussion of *DJB* by seeing the brother-brother relationship in terms of the question which he believes governs all TLB's work: 'after separation from the father, what then?' While there is certainly a biographical interest here – and granting too that father-son themes and imagery occur throughout *DJB* – there seems a violence done to the centrality of the Wolfram-Isbrand story. The contrapuntal effect of the Adalmar-Athulf subplot is similarly blunted if the brothers' enmity is seen less in its fratricidal than its parricidal aspect; TLB's remark that they are his 'Cain & Abel' is sufficient commentary. Northrop Frye seems nearer the mark: 'For [TLB] the world of experience is the world of life,

which has its focus and climax in love, and the world outside it becomes, quite simply, the world of death. The demon-lover theme is thus, in his work, the symbol of a life-death identity which he calls eternity. This identity can manifest itself only in the form of an antithesis, the antithesis we know as life *and* death. Its main symbol in Beddoes, as so often elsewhere in Romanticism, is that of the struggle of brothers, of which one represents ordinary life driving toward death, the other death seeping back into life.' (*A Study*, p.53.) That Romanticism in this sense is recovering an archetypal story as old as – perhaps older than – the *Popol Vuh* should not surprise.]

RK. Beddoes is one of my favourites too ... it's too rich to leave to the cabinet of curiosa.

AH. Later today I'll airmail you a little pamphlet called *Homage to Homunculus Mandrake* which represents an early & to me quite distant stage of my Beddoes researches – I mean I feel quite critical about it by now ...

RK. ... your reading of *Homunculus Mandrake*, whose presence in *DJB* seems to me absolutely radical, close to us. A friend tells me that the word *perineum*, which we think of so intimately anatomically, is also the space between the stage and the audience in the theater – be it so, then *Homunculus* is our perineal character, whose language comes closest to us of all, not the tortured metrics of the songs, not the magnificent sonority of the blank verse, but a poetic discourse that comes at us – so he, some way, stands in for the reader.

*

Mandrake's balsam can only be an ersatz variety of 'mummy powder' which Paracelsus would have disowned. 'He insisted that the mummy should be human. Two kinds of mummy were particularly effective: that of a Saint and that of a healthy young person who had recently drowned or been killed by a fall. He also recommended thieves cut down from the gallows or beheaded rebels. Having died in full vigor, their flesh, still radiating life power, might regenerate the failing spirits of the sick.'

And so Wolfram would be a suitable ingredient for the balsam, rather than the roots, toadstools, herbs etc which Mandrake gathers. The healing dance with *Dance* cannot be performed at the lower level of the play but at a higher level not merely of character but of dramatic integration: the play itself must be the balsam which will 'un-cypress' Death and 'unmask all his secrets.' The *mumia* of which Wolfram's body is the essential ingredient is *DJB* itself.

Isbrand sees his coming revolution as a concoction which seems by comparison as inadequate as Mandrake's:

Now you see how this dragon-egg of ours
Swells with its ripening plot? Methinks I hear
Snaky rebellion turning restless in it,
And with its horny jaws scraping away
The shell that hides it. All is ready now:
I hold the latch-string of a new world's wicket;
One pull – and it rolls in. [II.iv.1-7]

Perhaps they both put overmuch faith in basilisk's eggs and crocodile fat. Although Isbrand does internalise the homunculus/lapis it is in the perverted or polluted form which reverses values:

But the heart I have
Is a strange little snake. He drinks not wine
When he'd be drunk, but poison: he doth fatten

On bitter hate, not love.

[II.iv.26-9]

*

Ziba is the character who voices *DJB*'s peculiar sense of transparency – the transparency of worlds, of life and death, of perception, of the levels of insubstantiality: the creation of a substantial something out of nothing *or* vice versa. Wolfram is its enactment and it is not only his death which lends him insubstantiality. Approaching Egypt he is first sighted as a passenger in a something made from nothing, his galley as a creation of Ziba's soul in communion with the world-soul:

Duke. ... saw'st thou from the heights
No christian galley steering for this coast?
Ziba. I looked abroad upon the wide old world,
And in the sky and sea, through the same clouds,
The same stars saw I glistening, and nought else.
And as my soul sighed unto the world's soul,
Far in the north a wind blackened the waters,
And, after that creating breath was still,
A dark speck sat on the sky's edge: as watching
Upon the heaven-girt border of my mind
The first faint thought of a great deed arise,
With force and fascination I drew on
The wished sight, and my hope seemed to stamp
Its shape upon it. Not yet is it clear
What, or from whom, the vessel. [I.ii.57-71]

Ziba is the expression of Egypt, the land of passage between being and nothingness. Events there change the lives of all the characters with the exception of Ziba who already dwells in such a world. Only Isbrand by remaining in Ancona stays rooted in an apparently substantial world which he believes he can transform by his 'fiat'.

*

Mandrake is made to test his ointment unwillingly. The returning ship sails into a storm and, in the words of his boy, 'fell the pot of balsam on the man's scull who made it, broke it to pieces, and bathed him from head to foot, and so ran he about dripping with the oil of invisibility and tears for his lost body – but here he comes: see him not.' [II.i.73-5]

Donner's misreading, that Mandrake has been killed and from now on appears as a ghost, illustrates the degree to which TLB has already undermined substance. In his own mind Mandrake has become invisible and since he is apt to confuse 'being' with 'being seen' he is suffering serious doubts about his continued existence. Again he is the comic voice of the play's deeper themes, even if he can only tease out the implications of his condition in childish puns. The text leaves no doubt that the other characters can see him perfectly well. Isbrand instigates 'a game at blind man's buff' to further convince him of his invisibility. He panics – 'Good folks,' he pleads, 'don't pretend any more that you can't see me. O Lord, I am half frightened already into the belief that I am vanished. Reasonable folks! I stand here in the corner, by the rack of plates.' [II.i.95-8] And when the company starts cudgelling him: 'O gentle people! I confess. I will be invisible if you will leave off seeing where to put your blows in; – immaterial to keep my bones whole, and inaudible if you will hear my petition. I am no Mandrake, I am nothing ... Enough! I

am a poor invisible man, and will leave off haunting – But tremble, if I ever come to sight again.
[Runs out, the rest after him.] [II.i.136-144]

‘I am no Mandrake, I am nothing’: since there probably has never been a walking talking mandrake the words make a curious logical quibble, an assertion of double negativity which fails to equate with positive existence. In Mandrake’s own mind he has reverted to the first stage in the creation of Paracelsus’ homunculus: after forty days ‘it bears the form and resemblance of a human being, but it will be transparent and without a corpus.’ But he is ‘immaterial’ only in a non-Paracelsian sense, for Paracelsus regarded the soul as a form of matter; he sometimes called it the ‘chaos’, the word which in later scientific terminology became ‘gas’. We may wonder whether Mandrake is the spirit of the laughing gas which had so entertained Dr Beddoes and his circle. In his next speech, however, Mandrake uses another Paracelsian word to describe his state: ‘essence’. TLB is again revealing the alchemical structure of his play – as above so below, but with an ingenious mirror-like inversion: Mandrake is alive but ‘invisible’ whereas when we meet Wolfram again he will be dead but active and, as far as most of the other characters and presumably the audience are concerned, visible.

*

As the play progresses Mandrake is upstaged by Ziba, whose blackness is insisted upon whenever he appears: he is the play’s *nigredo*. His name is a variant backward spelling of ‘abyss’ as well as a transposition of the sound-values of IZBrAnd. The S/Z exchange takes us to the edge of the world as word, to that ultimate letter which was once regarded as scarcely belonging to the alphabet at all. ‘Z is a letter often heard amongst us,’ wrote Jonson, ‘but seldome seene.’ For Shakespeare it carried all the black force of insult: ‘Thou whoreson zed! thou unnecessary letter!’ So that Ziba has powers which make Isbrand’s seem the skills of a small-town fixer. Adalmar, Amala and Athulf, on the other hand, belong to the beginning of the alphabet, their experience unassimilated, driven by desire but ‘innocents’ nevertheless. An Athulf is not worth a Ziba’s poison. Only when faced with death does his understanding deepen – but even so ‘The spell of my creation is read backwards’ certainly seems a thought beyond his conception. It is the line in which we see that TLB is obsessed as much with origin as with death.

In the alchemical schema Ziba is a higher form of Mandrake. He too has been dragged from the earth, he is another creature of the death/origin threshold:

Many have been born dead: death was my birth.
My mother died while I was yet unborn,
And both were buried hastily; a pest
Then raging in the city. In the night
The sexton heard the crying of a babe
In the uncovered sepulchre: approaching
He found me drawing my first breath; and thus
My birth was an arising from the dead,
The grave my nurse. [III.iii.490-8]

In an earlier version ‘The sexton’ is ‘A serpent’. A longer and more far-reaching account appeared in the β text, in which Ziba tells how his whole race is ‘death-begotten’, descended from ‘a beauteous Arab, / Unmated yet and boyish’ and ‘A pale flower-breathed nymph with dewy hair’ who visits him at night. When her visits cease he searches for her and finally

[...] passing through a grassy burial-ground,

Wherein a new-dug grave gaped wide for food,
‘Who was she?’ cried he, and the earthy mouth
Did move its nettle-bearded lips together,
And said, ‘Twas I – I, Death: behold our child!’
The wanderer looked, and on the lap of the pit
A young child slept at its mother’s breast.
He raised it and he reared it.

[III.iii.510-7, Carcanet edn.]

The Duke introduces Ziba to Thorwald as a magus of the Parcelsian persuasion:

I bought this man of Afric from an Arab,
Under the shadow of a pyramid,
For many jewels. He hath skill in language;
And knowledge is in him root, flower, and fruit,
A palm with winged imagination in it,
Whose roots stretch even underneath the grave,
And on them hangs a lamp of magic science
In his soul’s deepest mine, where folded thoughts
Lie sleeping on the tombs of magi dead:
So said his master when he parted with him.
I know him skilful, faithful; take him with you;
He’s fit for many services.

[III.i.40-51]

A variant passage offers a synthesis of alchemical symbolism with the ‘deep time’ theories and observations of James Hutton, Erasmus Darwin and others:

[I found him in a buried city I went by torchlight through]
I followed once a fleet and mighty serpent
Into a cavern in a mountain’s side;
And, wading many lakes, descending gulphs,
At last I reached the ruins of a city,
Built not like ours but of another world,
As if the aged earth had loved in youth
The mightiest city of a perished planet, [another planet]
And kept the image of it in her heart.
So dream-like, shadowy, and spectral was it.
Nought seemed alive there, and the very dead
Were of another world the skeletons.
The mammoth, ribbed like to an arched cathedral,
Lay there, and ruins of great creatures else
More like a shipwrecked fleet, too great they seemed
For all the life that is to animate:
And vegetable rocks, tall sculptured palms,
Pines grown, not hewn, in stone; and giant ferns,
Whose earthquake-shaken leaves bore graves for nests.

[var., III.i.40ff; West House p.157]

TLB presumably decided this was all too much – a pyramid is a less elaborate shorthand for telling us that Ziba is heir to great antiquity. It is this which grants him knowledge of the bone of immortality, Luz, identified in a rare anatomical footnote as the *os coccyx*. When the Duke asks ‘What tree is man the seed of?’ Ziba answers

Of a ghost;
 Of his night-coming, tempest-waved phantom:
 And 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,
 Aldebaron, 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. [III.iii.446-455]

The weed called 'mandrake' is, perhaps, a popular corruption of the 'seed-shaped bone', just as Mandrake is the clownish misinterpreter of the arcanum buried in the black hole which is the heart of *DJB*, the seed which would have enabled the triumph over death TLB originally envisaged.

Apart from the re-appearance of Mandrake an odd comedy is written into Ziba's necromancy. He and the Duke seem to have a constant misunderstanding: Ziba always refers to the body to be raised as 'he' whereas the Duke clearly hopes to be reunited with his wife. There is uncertainty too whether Ziba expects his spell to succeed. He acts with confidence and yet his words 'Serpentine Hell! That is thy staircase echo, / And thy jaws' groaning. What betides it?' express surprise and he accepts that he has been put to shame by Death (or Mandrake). In fact it is the burning of the blood-bond rather than Ziba's scroll which raises Wolfram. But possibly he would have resurrected in any case, for Siegfried has also heard

That they did swear and write in their best blood,
 And her's they loved the most, that who died first
 Should, on death's holidays, revisit him
 Who still dwelt in the flesh. [II.iv.47-50]

We are not told whether the necromancy did take place on one of 'death's holidays'.

*

The backward spelling is retained in 'Sibylla' but with the 's' restored: she assumes middle place in the sequence of names

ISBrAnd SIByllA ZIBA

For Sibylla too birth was death, at least metaphorically: until rescued by the Duke she has 'shut from nature / Within my dungeon birthplace lived in darkness.' In I.ii.94-100 she describes her regeneration in a speech which we might condense into an incantatory praise-song, or perhaps the captions to an alchemical diagram –

this earth
 this heaven
 the sun
 the stars
 the flowers

