

Butter sunk under  
 More than a hundred years  
 Was recovered salty and white.  
 The ground itself is kind, black butter  
 Melting and opening underfoot.

[DD, 55]

## 2 Archaeologies: North

the procession drags its tail  
 out of the Gap of the North  
 as its head already enters  
 the megalithic doorway.

'Funeral Rites' [N, 8]

To enter the megalithic doorway is to go underground, working back into what seems a bottomless pre-history, to a 'matter of Ireland' more archaeo-cultural than agricultural, and Heaney was brought to his archaeologies in *North* (1975), as we shall see, by the violence unleashed in Ireland from 1972 on. Earlier, in 1969, Heaney had closed his second book, *Door into the Dark*, with a prophetic poem called 'Bogland', in which the unearthing of buried things from peat bogs was represented as instructive and benevolent:

They've taken the skeleton  
 Of the Great Irish Elk  
 Out of the peat, set it up  
 An astounding crate full of air.

And though 'The wet centre is bottomless', 'Bogland' does not envisage horrors to be found within it. Resisting the usual image of bog-discovery – medieval gold objects – Heaney clearly seeks either domestic ordinariness (butter) or evolutionary astonishment (the giant elk). A comparable childhood poem in *Door into the Dark* (37) praises the 'oatmeal coloured' piece of petrified wood (a 'Relic of Memory') retrieved from 'the lough waters' and stored on a shelf at school. Other forms of stone – lava, meteorite, coal, and even diamond – are unfavourably compared with it: they cannot 'incarcerate ghosts / of sap and season' as the wood does. Loughs and bogs contain Irish natural and domestic history, and in 'Bogland' the poet enters history willingly, as a 'pioneer . . . striking / Inwards and downwards' (DD, 56).

All this changes when archaeology ceases to be interesting and beneficent, and instead is interrogated for an explanation of violence. Now, what Heaney's poetry (inspired by P. V. Glob's *The Bog People*) retrieves from the bog is a series of murdered bodies, serving as emblems of cultural predisposition to tribal sacrifice. In 1972, when Heaney published *Wintering Out*, Northern Irish violence had already escalated: in 1969 British troops had been sent in to Belfast and Derry; in 1971 internment without jury trial had begun in Ulster, with over 1,500 people interned in the first year; on 30 January 1972, 'Bloody Sunday', British

paratroopers fired upon Derry civil rights marchers, killing thirteen; and 'sectarian' violence (one of the many adjectives essayed to describe the events) reached new heights. But it was in the years between 1972 and 1975, when *North* was published, that Heaney's poetry was able to reflect more deeply on these events. 'The Troubles', like all complex historical events, have produced rival explanations: they have been seen as the aftermath of colonization; as the clash of religions; as class warfare; as ethnic disputes; or, in their degenerate forms, as the tuggery of rival gangs. No one living in Northern Ireland went unscathed by them; eventually everyone on both sides knew a friend or family member whose life had been changed (or ended) by them. In August of 1972 Heaney and his family left Belfast and moved to the Republic of Ireland, where they lived for four years in Glanmore, County Wicklow, in a gate-keeper's cottage attached to the Synge estate and rented to them by its owner, their friend Ann Saddlemyer, editor of Synge's letters. Heaney resigned his lectureship at Queen's University and committed himself fully to writing poetry (free-lancing as a journalist and radio commentator to support his family).

Heaney had known as soon as he wrote *Wintering Out* (published just after the move to Glanmore) that a journalistic approach to the Troubles was bound to lead to cliché. His first attempt at dealing with current events – twelve lines that later, with one slight change, were used to close 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing' in *North* – begins in realism: 'This morning from a dewy motorway / I saw the new camp for the internees.' However, the poem quickly subverts itself ('and it was déjà-vu, some film made / of Stalag 17'), and as quickly derides its own wish to insert the Troubles into some repetitive frame: 'We hug our little destiny again' (WO, 5). The usual journalistic and *bien-pensant* remarks about the Troubles are later mercilessly exposed in 'Whatever You Say', and the poet does not spare

himself. The 'media-men and stringers' revel in their new vocabulary; they have

proved upon their pulses 'escalate',  
'Backlash' and 'crack down', 'the provisional wing',  
'Polarization' and 'long-standing hate'.

'Yet I live here, I live here too, I sing,' begins the poet, but goes on to condemn himself,

Expertly civil tongued with civil neighbours  
On the high wires of first wireless reports,  
Sucking the fake taste, the stony flavours  
Of those sanctioned, old, elaborate retorts:

'Oh, it's disgraceful, surely, I agree,  
'Where's it going to end?' 'It's getting worse.'  
'They're murderers.' 'Internment, understandably...'  
The 'voice of sanity' is getting hoarse.

[N, 51-2]

There is simply no room left in style for either reportage or conventional ideology: 'The liberal papist note sounds hollow.' Yet Heaney continues to believe that with a true art, 'any of us / Could draw the line through bigotry and sham / Given the right line, *aere perennius*' (N, 53). And so Glob's book on the bog people strikes with electric effect the poet seeking 'befitting emblems of adversity' (Yeats) or 'symbols adequate to our predicament' (Heaney, 'Feeling into Words', P, 56). As Heaney said in a radio interview,

My emotions, my feelings, whatever those instinctive energies are that have to be engaged for a poem, those energies quickened more when contemplating a victim, strangely, from 2,000 years ago

type

than they did from contemplating a man at the end of a road being swept up into a plastic bag – I mean the barman at the end of our road tried to carry out a bomb and it blew up. Now there is of course something terrible about that, but somehow language, words didn't live in the way I think they have to live in a poem when they were hovering over that kind of horror and pity.<sup>4</sup>

The poet recognizes adequate symbols by a 'first stirring of the mind round a word or an image or a memory',<sup>5</sup> and must then follow the symbol where it leads. The archaeology of bodies is, for Heaney, such a symbol.

Having found the bog bodies, how is the poet to make poems out of them? In 'The Tollund Man' Heaney attempted a binocular view of the past and the present: on the left, so to speak, the exhumed Iron Age body; on the right the four murdered brothers and other 'stockinged corpses / Laid out in the farmyards' after being ambushed. The archaeological part is more imaginatively stirring than the twentieth-century part, perhaps because the poet is put on his mettle by having to delineate the improbable bog-tanned body:

... his peat-brown head,  
The mild pods of his eye-lids . . .

His last gruel of winter seeds  
Caked in his stomach.

[WO, 47]

But the power of the bog bodies has yet another component. The archaeologists' conclusion that these are victims of ritual sacrifice to an earth-goddess not only eroticizes the naked corpse of the Tollund Man for the poet, but also

lends it the reliquary air of the preserved and exhibited bodies of Catholic saints:

Bridegroom to the goddess,  
She tightened her torc on him  
And opened her fen,  
Those dark juices working  
Him to a saint's kept body . . .  
Now his stained face  
Reposes at Aarhus.

[WO, 47]

Expertly done though this is, and courageous as Heaney was in allowing so much psychic material to be detonated by Glob's book, the binocular poem is uneasy in proposing that these sexual and religious interpretations have something to do with the 'scattered . . . flesh', the 'tell-tale skin and teeth' of the 1920s' corpses. The poem recovers itself in its conclusion, where the speaker comes home to himself, imagining the Tollund Man's last moments before execution:

Something of his sad freedom  
As he rode the tumbrel  
Should come to me, driving,  
Saying the names  
Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard . . .

[WO, 48]

The 'sad freedom' of the certain knowledge of death – Hamlet's sad freedom in the last act – is bestowed on the young poet (Heaney is still only thirty-three) by the apparent repetitiveness of history. It happened at Tollund, it happened

at Grauballe, it is happening in Derry, it will happen elsewhere . . .

Because of the multiple and as yet intractable materials offered by the bog-bodies, Heaney 'rewrites' 'The Tollund Man' several times in *North*. The Tollund Man is twinned by the Grauballe Man (in Heaney's most beautiful 'bog poem', meditating on the relation between art and suffering); and there are twinned poems of female bodies – 'Bog Queen' and 'Punishment'. Understandably, the poems about the bog-bodies have been examined by literary historians chiefly as comments on the Troubles; and it is unlikely that Glob's book would have had the same effect on Heaney if Northern Ireland had been at peace. But if we recall that poems are the poet's attempt to replicate in words some version of himself, we can – without forgetting their function as symbols of a cultural predicament – come closer to their whole being as artworks.

Let me summarize briefly. 'The Grauballe Man' does not attempt the binocular vision of 'The Tollund Man', but withholds its contemporary application until the poet has completed his meditation on the bog-body. We are first given forty-five deeply imaginative lines for the preserved body of the Grauballe Man, almost vegetative, almost bronze:

The grain of his wrists  
is like bog oak,  
the ball of his heel  
like a basalt egg. . . .

Who will say 'corpse'  
to his vivid cast?  
Who will say 'body'  
to his opaque repose?

[N, 28-9]

Then come the three shocking closing lines, throwing on the scale 'the actual weight / of each hooded victim, / slashed and dumped' (N, 29). It is affronting – after being lost in detached and even aesthetic contemplation of the archaeological specimen – to be subjected to the 'actual weight' of the 'slashed and dumped' contemporary. The poet overturns the objectivity of history by the insult of the actual, putting his contemplative power to aestheticize squarely in conflict with his political power to sympathize.

I have put this too crudely (because 'The Grauballe Man' has infinite nuance, revealing Heaney's gift for stunningly exact description better than any other poem in *North*), but the poem becomes a better artwork for having faced its own metaphysical stance so clearly. Is it wrong to aestheticize? Is it possible to do other than look objectively when what is before one's eyes is a long-dead corpse, and not a recently living person? What would the corpse himself say post-humously about his own state? Heaney answers this question in the regal poem 'Bog Queen', in which the corpse (this time an Irish one, and not a sacrificial victim) speaks out for herself, narrating, with delay and ceremony, her long stay in the bog. (She was discovered in 1781 by a turfcutter on the Moira estate south of Belfast and sold to Lady Moira.) For ten of her fourteen stanzas the bog queen rests undisturbed by human enquiry, and she is not resurrected until the last stanza: 'and I rose from the dark, / hacked bone'. In that final rising 'The Bog Queen' owes something to Plath's 'Lady Lazarus'; but before that, when she speaks, it is with the objectivity of one who can see her own disintegration. Gradually, she is 'digested' by natural process, and her adornments and garments decay. The narrative is eloquent and rich, as step by step the buried woman is undone until she becomes a geologic rather than a human phenomenon:

through my fabrics and skins  
the seeps of winter  
digested me,  
the illiterate roots

pondered and died  
in the cavings  
of stomach and socket . . .

My diadem grew carious,  
gemstones dropped  
in the peat floe  
like the bearings of history.

My sash was a black glacier  
wrinkling, dyed weaves  
and phoenician stitchwork  
retted on my breasts'

soft moraines.

[N, 25-6]

What can be deduced about Heaney as a poet from such a sample? As the bog queen describes her slow changes, she has the equanimity of the dead, and she reaches almost the unintelligibility of a script in a lost language: as the two-thousand-year-long disintegration is narrated, her equal and far more surprising underground resistance to disintegration is not mentioned. After all – despite the 'creeping influences', the 'darkening' and 'fermenting' and 'reducing' and 'wrinkling' and 'soak[ing]' and 'fray[ing]' – the bog queen, once exhumed, is still unitary, recognizable, present. Heaney's even-handed attentions to brain and nails, pelvis and breasts, thighs and skull, hair and feet, 'realize' the body entire, with a blazon fuller than the convention

normally allows. The bog queen is much changed, but (to use her own metaphor), she was only hibernating, and has now reappeared to testify to – to what?

First of all – if we recall Heaney's title and notice her regalia – to her nobility. Her (lost) diadem is the witness to that civilization of torcs and gemstones that Heaney had once rejected in favour of elk and butter as bog-treasure. She reveals not violence, like the other bog-bodies, but patience. Twice she says, 'I lay waiting.' When she rises, she rises not as a queen but as a woman 'robbed . . . / barbered and stripped', her hair cut off, her skull hacked by the turfcutter's spade. She therefore gives off not her full radiance but 'frayed stitches, tufts, / small gleams on the bank'. Of course analogies can be drawn to the reduced state of the vision in this renovation of the aising poem (a poem envisaging the nation as a maiden appearing to the poet); but the poem is also an assertion of the deep poetic interest Heaney now finds in the processes of unmaking, of the resonance he gives to the frayed, the hacked, the incomplete. For a poet like Heaney – who so loved the 'sloped honeycomb' of the ordered and butted and stapled thatch, who praised the 'heavy and rich, coagulated sunlight' that appeared on churning day, both when the butter was 'heaped up like gilded gravel in the bowl' and when it was civilized into 'soft printed slabs' in the pantry (DN, 9-10), who praised the retention of sap and seasons in the petrified stone – for such a poet to become the curator of undoing, of dilution, of loss, is to reverse direction with surprising force. Death having entered the poet's domain with such suddenness, he resolves to understand it, to live it out through the deliberate phases of the bog queen's undoing. Yet the process (thanks to the embalming power of the bog) stops short of entire disintegration; the poem asserts that something of the past is always preserved, and is always ready to be rediscovered. In spite of the bog queen's distress at her violation

by the spade, she does not object to being exhumed: 'I lay waiting,' she has said twice, waiting for this very day. The bog body, then, in the person of this example who died naturally, can speak of the permanence of human nobility, not only of assassination and sacrifice. Heaney's respect for the complexity of the past, as one sort of bog-body balances another – the bog queen against the Tollund Man or Grauballe Man – is one factor in the greatness of *North*.

Heaney pursues his archaeology less successfully in the poem on the museum-display of the exhumed head of a girl ('*Strange Fruit*'), which relies too heavily on lavish but conventional adjectives: 'Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible / Beheaded girl' (N, 32). I have said that the bog poems are, for the poet, as much a replication of self as a symbolic representation of history, and this truth can be seen through '*Strange Fruit*'. Here Heaney recognizes his own tendency to beatify and to venerate, and he finds this response inadequate to the girl's murder. Like an uninterpretable residue – or some other form of art beyond mimetic representation – the girl is seen 'outstaring axe / And beatification'. To the extent that the Tollund Man was 'a saint's kept body' reposing at Aarhus; to the extent that the bog queen is a resurrected goddess, so far has death been misrepresented, as Heaney's second thoughts advise him, and as his poem reproaches him. The bodies do not want to be beatified (religious language is inadequate to them), nor did they exist to be murdered (the language of violence is inadequate to them). What they claim now, and claimed in life, is what all human beings want: existence on the same terms as their fellows.

As Heaney wrote the bog poems, the archaeological and the contemporary converged more and more. It is the humanity, and the contemporaneity, of the bog corpse in '*Punishment*' that has made this the most controversial of Heaney's archaeologies. Heaney makes the archaic mur-

dered young woman ('the Windeby girl' disinterred in Northern Germany) one of his own ethnic group, a 'sister' to the Catholic women whose heads were shaved, and who themselves were tarred, for fraternizing in the seventies with British soldiers. Because he wants to correct his tendency to 'venerate' the bodies, to distance their suffering by aestheticizing them into museum objects, he confronts the 'little adulteress' directly. He first speaks about her in the third person and then, at the exact centre of the poem, speaks to her in a second-person address which he maintains to the end. 'I can feel,' the poet begins; 'I can see,' he continues: 'I almost love you,' he protests – but then he indicts himself: he was among those 'who stood dumb' while her 'betraying sisters . . . / cauled in tar, / wept by the railings'.

With '*Punishment*', Heaney's archaeology of persons becomes an anthropology of the present: dig however deep, the person who rises to the surface is one you recognize from your own life. The situations of the past are replicated at the railings of Belfast. This cast of the imagination – in which the present (the tribal abuse of 'betraying' women) makes the past (the Windeby girl) suddenly relevant, and in which the past (the bog-body) makes the present (Heaney's own self-admitted complicity in the abuse) unignorable – is one for which Heaney has been condemned. But no poem is a poem unless, as Yeats said, it is about a quarrel within oneself: if Heaney had no ambivalence about the fraternizing women and their abusers, he would not have been moved to write the poem, saying,

[ ] would connive  
in civilized outrage  
yet understand the exact  
and tribal, intimate revenge.

[N, 31]

There are three criminal acts inventoried in the poem: the first is standing silent while 'punishment' is carried out; the second is 'conniving' in hypocritical condemnation of the act; and the third is the punishment itself, as the tribe takes its vengeance. The poet is not guilty of the third; but how many of his readers could honestly exempt themselves from the first and second crimes, those of which he accuses himself?

The best writing in 'Punishment' comes at the end. Though the language of archaeological discovery is, as it always is in Heaney, expert, as he describes the corpse - 'her shaved head / like a stubble of black corn, / her blindfold a soiled bandage' - the motive force within the poet is not the beauty of the blackened body (as in 'The Grauballe Man'), nor the back-and-forth comparison between historical past and journalistic present (as in 'The Tollund Man'), nor interest in the slow disintegration of the physical over time (as in 'Bog Queen'), but rather an examination of conscience with respect to personal behaviour. The line between past and present has reached its vanishing point: and whereas the poet did not stand personally guilty before the 'slashed and dumped' victims at the close of 'The Grauballe Man', he does stand self-indicted before the victims 'cauled in tar' at the close of 'Punishment'. The uses of the archaeology of bodies ends here, as past and present coincide. In the self-indictment of the end the poet has passed beyond 'veneration' and beyond 'atrocities': he has replicated himself in the very posture of the silent onlooker.

In an attempt to go below or beyond journalistic explanations of the Troubles, Heaney turned in *North* to an archaeological myth averring that a wide practice of prehistoric violence, encompassing both the Scandinavian countries and Ireland, accounted for the survival of savage tribal conflict, which fundamentally was neither colonial nor sectarian, neither economic nor class-caused, but rather deeply

cultural. This was a way of saying that other countries have religious differences without religious wars; that other countries endure deep rifts between classes without resorting to murder; that other countries are postcolonial without continuing to avenge grievances dating from the sixteenth century. Can it be, Heaney proposes, that what we are seeing is not Catholics against Protestants, or rich against poor, or loyalist against nationalist, but rather a generalized cultural approval of violence, dating back many centuries?

In the summer of 1969, when the police and residents of Derry were involved in what came to be known as the 'Battle of Bogside', Heaney was in Madrid, as he tells us in 'Singing School'. He goes to the Prado and sees the Goyas, which he recalls, for the purpose of the poem, in a climactic order. First, the instant political reprisal captured in 'Shootings of the Third of May' -

the thrown-up arms  
And spasm of the rebel, the helmeted  
And knapsacked military, the efficient  
Rake of the fusillade.

This is murder under the cover of military order, as the Napoleonic troops execute 'traitors'. Northern Ireland knows about this, but so do many other countries. Second, Goya's lavish allegorical 'nightmares':

Saturn  
Jewelled in the blood of his own children,  
Gigantic Chaos turning his brute hips  
Over the world.

Northern Ireland knows about this, too; but again, it is not alone in that experience. Finally, a Goya that comes closest

to the origins of Irish violence, as Heaney now understands it:

Also, that holmgang  
Where two berserks club each other to death  
For honour's sake, greaved in a bog, and sinking.

[N, 63-4]

This mindless clubbing, without justification by war or other cause, is simply violence for the sake of violence, though the armed berserkers (from Old Norse 'bear' plus 'shirt', the dress of the frenzied warriors) invoke a primitive ideal of 'honour' to defend their suicidal slaughter. It is this form of mutual slaughter that Heaney wishes to anatomize in the culture of Ireland.

To go back to a prehistoric time before the current journalistic clichés apply, Heaney returns, in 'Funeral Rites', to the Boyne valley and its megalithic tombs, built in a time when, it is presumed from archaeological evidence, human sacrifice was still practised in Ireland, and tribal war was endemic:

Now as news comes in  
of each neighbourly murder  
we pine for ceremony,  
customary rhythms:

the temperate footsteps  
of a cortège, winding past  
each blinded home.  
I would restore

the great chambers of Boyne,  
prepare a sepulchre  
under the cupmarked stones. . . .

Quiet as a serpent  
in its grassy boulevard  
the procession drags its tail  
out of the Gap of the North  
as its head already enters  
the megalithic doorway.

[N, 7-8]

This eerily liturgical piece of writing reveals a wholly male procession from North to South, one so long that when its head reaches the tombs north-west of Dublin, its serpentine tail is still at 'the Gap of the North' at Carlingford Lough. The 'sommambulant women' of the tribe have been left behind to imagine the 'slow triumph' of the men - 'our slow triumph,' says the poet, speaking as one of the participants in this 'neighbourly' ritual following on 'each neighbourly murder'. Instead of intensifying anger or grief, the funeral acts as a narcotic, on the men as well as the women: once the tomb mouth has been closed again by its great stone, the procession winds back north, 'the cud of memory / allayed for once, arbitration / of the feud placated.' The step-by-step advance of the lines; the religious ceremony of the cortège; the unstated conflict between a Christ-like 'sepulchre' and an immense 'serpent' approaching it; the attempt to dignify violent death by fiat ('I would restore / the great chambers of Boyne / prepare a sepulchre / under the cupmarked stones'); the savage understatement of 'each neighbourly murder' - all these are part of the new civil motions in which the poet, however unwillingly, finds himself a participant. Though he imagines a possible cessation to conflict in the image of Gunnar Hamundarson, from *Njal's Saga*, who, though dead by violence, was deliberately left unavenged, Heaney's perennial hope remains unfulfilled in the moment of the writing of the poem.



Other archaeological remains – the Viking ships, one of them unearthed by archaeologists in Dublin – offer Heaney an occasion to counsel himself against the voyeuristic attraction to ‘violence and epiphany’ always endangering what has come to be known (and increasingly exploited by contemporary poets) as ‘the poetry of witness’. Like the bog queen, the Viking raiders now lie as ‘hacked and glinting’ corpses, their ships petrifying in the earth, ‘their long swords rusting’. It is the ‘swimming tongue’ of the longship itself – that superbly made and functional archaic object – that adjures the poet to

Lie down  
in the word-hoard. . . .  
Compose in darkness. . . .  
Keep your eye clear  
as the bleb of the icicle.

[N, 11]

Another sort of instruction is sought from excavated bones used as ‘trial-pieces’ by Viking artists; but though they show how an incised line following its own buoyant migrations can unfold itself into life-giving ‘foliage, / bestiaries, / interlacings’, this heavenly glimpse cannot be sufficient to times so grim as the present. In a parodic self-image of his archaeological excavations, Heaney becomes ‘Hamlet the Dane’,

pinioned by ghosts  
and affections,  
  
murders and pieties,  
coming to consciousness

by jumping in graves,  
dithering, blathering.

[N, 14]

The exhuming of symbols, both human and monumental, can no more affect reality, Heaney mordantly argues, than Hamlet’s theatrical bravado as he leaps into Ophelia’s grave. With this turning on his own processes, Heaney leaves behind the recourse to archaeology that, while it lasted, gave him ways to distil his anguish, guilt and feelings of complicity before the ‘weary twisted emotions that are rolled like a ball of hooks and sinkers in the heart’ (P, 30). No one could be more conscious than their author that these poems alone could not tell everything about political events and the feelings they evoked in the years between 1968 and 1975. Yet there is no other body of work about those years that so wholly evokes the desperation and devastation felt in that period. *North* reconstitutes, in powerful symbolic form and tense imaginative language, the impact of those years on one person. That so many readers, both in Ireland and abroad, have found *North* an unforgettable book means that Heaney’s archaeologies have consolidated the personal into the communicable.

### Second Thoughts

Tombs, caves, tribal pasts – all the appurtenances of archaeology – are blood-tinged and corpse-haunted in *North*: the archaeology of the northlands alone has come to usurp the very meaning of the word ‘archaeology’. In the last poem of *Station Island*, however, an alternative archaeology comes into view – not entirely consoling, but at least not blood-besmirched; primitive and tribal, but solacing rather

than murderous. It is the archaeology of Lascaux, the cave in the Dordogne where Neanderthal paintings – among them, one of a deer drinking at a pool – were first discovered in 1940. The unknown artists – older than the builders of the Boyne megalithic chambers or the honour-berserk Scandinavian warriors – took advantage of relief-variations in the stone of the cave walls in inventing and disposing their stylized images of animals. At the close of 'On the Road' the poet (in the person of the bird-king Sweeney, and using the 'archaic' thin stanza of *North*) contemplates coming to rest at last in Lascaux, the birthplace of Western art:

I would migrate  
through a high cave mouth  
into an oaten, sun-warmed cliff,

on down the soft-nubbed,  
clay-floored passage,  
face-brush, wing-flap,  
to the deepest chamber.

There a drinking deer  
is cut into rock,  
its haunch and neck  
rise with the contours,

the incised outline  
curves to a strained  
expectant muzzle  
and a nostril flared

at a dried-up source.  
For my book of changes  
I would meditate  
that stone-faced vigil

until the long dumbfounded  
spirit broke cover  
to raise a dust  
in the font of exhaustion.

[SL, 120-21]

Archaeological investigation can reveal not only dead bodies (whether victims or, like the bog queen, merely disintegrating organic forms) but also a solacing art. There is no pool yet for the poet to drink from: as the bird-Sweeney, he can only 'raise a dust / in the font of exhaustion'. Yet he hopes that the spirit can eventually refresh itself, like the deer at the source: to that end, he will keep vigil.