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The Bog Body as Mnemotope: Nationalist Archaeologies in Heaney and Tournier

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In following the entrails of ancient Nordicisms may we not be in danger of overlooking, for instance, the polylingual coincidence whereby *bog*, in modern Danish, is the word for book? (Brown 153)

“High modernism,” writes Brian McHale, “conspicuously privileged the spatial dimension of verticality or *depth*; indeed, the figure of depth was arguably one of modernism’s master-tropes” (239). Which is not to claim that the widely held view of a modernism characterized by its temporal dominant is in urgent need of revision. “For ‘depth’ in modernism is spatialized time, the past (whether personal and psychological or collective and historical) deposited in strata” (240). Given the requirements of an argument framed by an overarching distinction between modernist and postmodernist poetic practices, McHale’s sustained emphasis on the tensions between space and time comes as no surprise. His highly entertaining analysis of the archaeological tropes of modernism and their postmodernist *détournement* consistently foregrounds the devices used by modernist poets to privilege time over space, depth over surface, and the ingenious efforts of postmodernist poets to reverse those hierarchies. For my part, less concerned with making distinctions between modern and postmodern I will be slower to *oppose* time and space in my reflections on archaeological narratives, preferring to dwell, at least initially, upon their articulation in the work of archaeology and on the different ideological constructions placed upon that work, particularly with regard to issues of nation and nationalism. My approach will be informed by Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope.

As with any chronotope, the artifact in an archaeological excavation is “the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied,” where “[t]ime becomes, in effect, palpable and visible”; it functions as “the primary means for materializing time in space,” “makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins” (Bakhtin 250). Bakhtin’s “Concluding Remarks,” a late postscript (1973) to “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” are of particular interest here in that, turning away from the major chronotopes of the essay proper providing the basis for distinguishing between genres, they focus attention on minor chronotopes or chronotopic motifs. As motifs, these

chronotopes are coextensive with the texts in which they appear, as are the artifacts I wish to discuss. Since the primary function of the archaeological artifact as chronotope is to materialize a past in the present, to serve as a vehicle for personal and cultural memory, I will refer to it as a *mnemotope*, a term that should be fairly transparent but that I will define provisionally as a chronotopic motif manifesting the presence of the past, the conscious or unconscious memory traces of a more or less distant period in the life of a culture or, metaphorically, an individual. Of course, the *mnemotope* might come in many guises and be inflected by attitudinal values ranging from nostalgia and melancholy through desire, obsession and remembrance to horror and denial. Its preferred genre might be pastoral or testimony, but it might function equally well in western or *film noir*, historical romance, epic or ghost story. In intertextual terms its potential range is vast, running the gamut from homage and remake to parody and pastiche.

Among the archaeological motifs explored by McHale are the bog bodies that figure in Seamus Heaney's late modernist sequence of eight "bog poems" to be found in *Wintering Out* ("The Tollund Man" [47-48] and "Nerthus" [49-50]) and *North* ("Come to the Bower" [31], "Bog Queen" [32-34], "The Grauballe Man" [35-36], "Punishment" [37-38], "Kinship" [39] and "Strange Fruit" [40-45]). Heaney had read about the bodies in a work of archaeology, P.V. Glob's *The Bog People*, published in Danish in 1965 and translated into English in 1969. He had been moved by Glob's lyrical descriptions of the sometimes beautifully preserved Iron-Age bodies that turned up from time to time in the peat-bogs of Northwestern Europe, and was intrigued by the archaeologist's recourse to theories of ritual human sacrifice in order to explain their presence in the bogs. But while it is true that the theme of human sacrifice figures prominently in archaeological and literary accounts alike (Brothwell, Ross and Robins, Turner and Scaife, Van der Sanden; Atwood, Drabble), I would argue that it is not the defining feature of the genre.¹ For though speculation about how the body came to be in the bog is an integral part of any bog body narrative, it does not in itself define the body's chronotopic value. Far more important than either the Iron-Age world of the bog people or the modern world of their archaeological reappearance is the very particular way the bodies mediate the relationship between the two. Bog bodies have an extraordinary power to abolish temporal distance, to make the past present. They are not skeletal remains; they have flesh on their bones and that flesh bears the marks of their living and their dying. They have hair and beard stubble and faces with expressions we think we recognize. They have stomachs that still contain the grains and seeds and plants they ate as their last meal. In a word, with their peculiar capacity to compress time, bog bodies are exemplary mnemotopes and speak of a life anchored in an everyday that was then but is also now. To an extraordinary degree, bog bodies allow us to *see* time.

Without doubt the best-known literary treatment of bog bodies is in Heaney's poems. But before looking at some of the ambiguities and complexities of the

poet's most politically controversial work, it might help to recall briefly the place occupied by the Irish peat-bog in Heaney's own conception of his art. In an essay in *Preoccupations*, he outlines the archaeological view of poetry that informs what he sees as his best writing: "poetry as divination, poetry as revelation of the self to the self, as restoration of the culture to itself; poems as elements of continuity, with the aura and authenticity of archaeological finds, where the buried shard has an importance that is not diminished by the importance of the buried city; poetry as a dig, a dig for finds that end up being plants" (41). The hesitation between the poet as archaeologist and the poet as gardener was present as early as 1964 in the poem "Digging"—the first time Heaney had felt that he "had done more than make an arrangement of words," that he "had let down a shaft into real life." Real life, in this instance, involves a continuity from father to son—Heaney's grandfather and father—assured by their shared prowess with the spade. The poet, in turn, will take up a metaphorical spade, conjuring continuity from apparent discontinuity (physical labour versus cultural labour) while at the same time turning his back on the hint of violence in the opening lines—"Between my finger and my thumb/ The squat pen rests; snug as a gun"—to embrace a more bucolic view of poetry as both cultivation and discovery:

But I've no spade to follow men like them.
Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

(*Death* 13-14)

According to Heaney, the poem was not so much written down as dug up, "because I have come to realize that it was laid down in me years before that even" (*Preoccupations* 42). By this he means that the poem's unconscious verbal triggers (or seeds?) are to be found in the folk wisdom enshrined in sayings and proverbs and internalized by him as a child. In this respect, language itself is seen as an archaeological deposit, a mnemotope in the broader sense, in much the same way as, for Bakhtin, "[l]anguage, as a treasure-house of images, is fundamentally chronotopic" (251). The verbal artifact is assimilated to the archaeological find, the body taken from the bog: "I have always listened for poems, they come sometimes like bodies come out of a bog, almost complete, seeming to have been laid down a long time ago, surfacing with a touch of mystery" (*Preoccupations* 34). But it is not just bodies and poems that are born of the bog. Recalling childhood stories of butter kept fresh for years under the peat and the taking of the skeleton of a Great Irish Elk from the bog during his school years, Heaney recounts how the poem "Bogland" had been an attempt to present the bog as the mythical space or memory of the Irish landscape, "a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it. In fact, if you go round the National Museum in Dublin, you will realize that a great proportion of the most cherished material heritage of Ireland was 'found in a bog'" (54).

The breakthrough in Heaney's efforts "to make a congruence between memory and bogland and, for the want of a better word, our national consciousness" did not come until 1969, when the resumption of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland brought poetry face to face with new and urgent problems (54-55). Embarked upon "a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament," the poet felt challenged to find a "field of force" in which "it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity" (56-57). Some possible answers were suggested by Heaney's reading that same year of *Glob*, in whose evocations of Iron-Age human sacrifice he glimpsed "an archetypal pattern" connecting events far removed in time: "And the unforgettable photographs of these victims blended in my mind with photographs of atrocities, past and present, in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggles" (57-58). The result was the loose grouping of poems that would become known collectively as the bog-poems.

From the very first of these poems, "The Tollund Man," the debt to *Glob* is clear:

Some day I will go to Aarhus
To see his peat-brown head,
The mild pods of his eye-lids,
His pointed skin cap.

Aarhus, with its punning echo of "our house" (Stallworthy 179), becomes a site of pilgrimage, the shrine where the "saint's kept body" now reposes and the spiritual home to which the poet will return. But, from the familiar territory of physical detail, the motif of the last meal and the eroticized relationship between the sacrificial victim and the goddess, all of which can be found in *Glob*, the poem moves in the second section to a hypothetical prayer of intercession: the saint might be asked "to make germinate/ The scattered, ambushed/ Flesh of labourers,/ Stockinged corpses/ Laid out in the farmyards," and the mutilated remains "Of four young brothers, trailed/ For miles along the lines" in the 1920s. The juxtaposition of distant past and present or recent past, a distinctive feature I would argue of the bog-body mnemotope, is disturbing here in the context of the Ulster Troubles and has inevitably led to charges that Heaney uses *Glob* to mythologize history and aestheticize political violence. Such misgivings are not likely to be dispelled by the further erosion of the distance between tribal ritual killing and modern sectarian violence as the poem's third and last part projects a wandering poet in a state of inner exile, driving the country roads around Silkeborg, seeking directions from folk whose language he does not know:

Out there in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home.

The dilemma lived by Heaney in the early seventies is well captured by Eileen Cahill: “The poetry of Seamus Heaney articulates an inner world, a private landscape, an intimate voice. Yet his particular situation as a Catholic Nationalist living in Belfast during the worst of the Troubles challenges his lyricism as precious and superfluous. Heaney clearly suffers the tension between his personal dedication to a reflective art and his public responsibility towards political action” (55). If the poet’s first three books had been largely well received, the publication of *North* in 1975 elicited heated debate and a fair measure of vituperative criticism. Since I cannot hope to do justice here to either side of a complex argument, I will confine my comments to Heaney’s use of the bog-body mnemotope in two particularly contentious poems. In “The Grauballe Man,” a highly imaginative and controlled figural language matches the aesthetic preservation of the body to its chemical preservation by the peat. Embalmed in language, even the horror of the cut throat is transcended by a medico-aesthetic attraction that draws us into the wound and the body itself:

The head lifts,
the chin is a visor
raised above the vent
of his slashed throat
that has tanned and toughened.

In such a context of aesthetically distanced anatomical display, the questions that follow appear at first to be purely rhetorical:

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

Perfected in the poet’s memory down to the smallest details of his physical appearance, the man may be “hung in the scales/ with beauty and atrocity” but the two seem anything but antithetical until the shock of the poem’s last lines where the spell is broken and we are jerked “out of antiquity into contemporary Belfast. The spade has passed from the archaeologist to the grave-digger” (Stallworthy 179) and the scales tipped from beauty to atrocity under “the actual weight/ of each hooded victim,/ slashed and dumped.” And the questions, against all expectation, have been answered.

Like “The Tollund Man” and “The Grauballe Man,” “Punishment” takes its starting point in Glob’s account of a bog body, this time the girl from Windeby, in whose condition the archaeologist reads signs of punishment for adultery: “She lay naked in her grave in the peat, her hair shaved off, with nothing but a collar of ox-hide round her neck, and with bandaged eyes” (Glob 153).² The “little adulteress” in Heaney’s poem retains the same features—“her shaved head/ like a stubble of corn,/ her blindfold a soiled bandage,”—but the poet’s identification with the body is even closer than in the two earlier poems:

I can feel the tug
of the halter at the nape
of her neck, the wind
on her naked front.

And in the second half of the poem, he addresses her directly in lines that would provoke the bitterest criticism:

My poor scapegoat,
I almost love you
but would have cast, I know,
the stones of silence.
[.]
I who have stood dumb
when your betraying sisters,
cauled in tar,
wept by the railings,
who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge.

Once again, the analogy with contemporary events—made through allusion to the “betraying sisters,” shaved, stripped, tarred and handcuffed by the IRA to the railings of Belfast for keeping company with British soldiers—would be attacked for its mythologizing mystification of historical realities and its failure to condemn outright the odious violence perpetrated on these young women. The poet’s self-indictment as an “artful voyeur” conniving “in civilized outrage” and yet understanding the “tribal” need for revenge would be widely seen as a response inadequate to “our predicament” and as too neat a resolution of a false dilemma.³

Similar charges of mythologizing history and aestheticizing political violence were made against Michel Tournier’s 1970 *Le roi des aulnes* (*The Erl-King*), even as it was being hailed as one of the most important French novels of the twentieth century (Fischer).⁴ In the passage that interests us most immediately here, the novel’s protagonist, Abel Tiffauges, a French prisoner-of-war held in East Prussia in the 1940s, learns of the recent discovery of a corpse in the peat-bogs of Walkenau, just two kilometers from camp. Intrigued by the fact that the corpse is said to resemble him, Tiffauges, whose driving duties allow him a certain freedom of movement, drops in at the site at the first opportunity. He arrives in the middle of what seems like an anatomy lesson. A number of local worthies are gathered around a corpse stretched out on a table in the schoolroom, while Professor Keil of the Königsberg Institute of Anthropology and Archaeology explains the significance of the find: “You will note the delicacy of the hands and feet, the fineness of the face, with its aquiline profile in spite of the broad brow, the aristocratic air [. . .]” (*The Erl-King* 163). But while the description suggests another fictionalized incarnation of Tollund Man, a further detail points us in another direction, reminding us of Windeby Girl but with a new twist: “The

emaciated, spiritualized face had a thin band over the eyes, drawn so tight it seemed to have sunk into the bridge of the nose and the nape of the neck. A six-pointed star of gilded metal was fixed to the band, between the eyes.”

The device of the professor’s lecture allows Tournier to present a potted version of Glob on the bog bodies of Northwestern Europe, replete with all the salient features of the genre. When we come to the last meal, however, the Wagnerian overtones of Nazi archaeology grow all too audible as Keil speculates on the symbolism of this Last Supper: “Thus at the very moment when the Judeo-Mediterranean religion was springing into life in the Middle-East, a similar rite may have been founding a parallel religion here that was strictly Nordic and even Germanic” (164). The nationalist note is prolonged by the professor’s proposal to name the body the Erl-King (*Le roi des aulnes*—the King of the Alders) not only because it was found in a bog surrounded by alders but also in order to mark it as German through its affinity with Goethe’s ballad, “Der Erlkönig”: “It sings to our German ears, it lulls our German hearts, it is the real quintessence of the German soul” (165). Keil is just starting to recite the poem when he is interrupted by news of a further discovery in the same peat-bog. The group hastens to the site to witness the emergence of “this latest messenger from the mists of time”: “Only the head, or more exactly the right profile, was visible, as if encrusted in the mud and with no more thickness than the face on a medal. Its color was so like that of the peat itself it seemed merely modelled in low relief in the sod. It was a small face, emaciated, childish and sad. It wore a cap made of three pieces of material roughly cobbled together, which made it look like a prisoner or even a convict” (165). As the peat-cutters continue the process of uncovering, it becomes apparent that the body has been entirely resorbed, leaving only the head and an empty sheepskin cape or cloak.⁵ Despite Keil’s sentimental inclination to see it as the head of a woman—ideally that of the Erl-King’s wife—Tiffauges has little doubt that it is in fact the head of a child.

As the novel unfolds and the “innocent” Tiffauges becomes more and more implicated in the Nazi project, the Erl-King takes on a central structuring role in the “forest of symbols” that constitutes the protagonist’s personal mythology. Through his “sinister writings”—a diary written with his left hand—Tiffauges shares the novel’s narration with an impersonal, omniscient narrator and weaves an intricate web of analogies and correspondences in which the Erl-King, as a darkly Germanic abductor of children, gradually emerges as the “malign inversion” of St Christopher, the bearer of the Christ-child. Ambiguously identified with both figures, Tiffauges finds himself invested with ever-increasing power in the Napola (*nationalpolitische Erziehungsanstalt*) housed in the old castle at Kaltenborn to which he is assigned. (The Napola, an establishment for the political indoctrination and military training of the next generation of the Nazi elite, is itself the malign inversion of St Christopher’s, the boys’ boarding school attended by the young Tiffauges and remembered in great detail in the novel’s first part.) The

contrapuntal tension between the two figures is played out through an elaborate fugal structure culminating in a final apocalyptic scene in which Tiffauges leaves the ruins of Kaltenborn, overrun by the advancing Red Army, with a child on his shoulders. The child is Ephraim, a survivor of Auschwitz and an unmistakable reincarnation of the little “convict” found buried in the peat with the Erl-King.⁶ Ostensibly escaping from the Russian tanks, Tiffauges is guided by Ephraim out into the marshes through a wood of black alders where he starts to sink under the crushing weight of the child’s frail body: “When he turned to look up for the last time at Ephraim, all he saw was a six-pointed star turning slowly against the black sky” (317).

The ambiguities of this ending—Erl-King or St Christopher, damnation or salvation, or, at a higher level of abstraction, Hegelian *Aufhebung* or unresolvable dualism—are symptomatic of a novel that maintains a Flaubertian aesthetic distance from its central character and offers no moral vantage point within the text from which to condemn Tiffauges’s frequently disturbing behavior. Moreover, although Tiffauges himself in no way sympathizes with the Nazi cause, he nevertheless serves that cause while singlemindedly pursuing his own (very different) ends. The full extent of his complicity is brought home only late in the novel when Ephraim’s account of the horrors of Auschwitz reveals the existence of a universe that systematically and malignantly inverts Tiffauges’s highly idiosyncratic rituals and obsessions (302). Here, of course, we are on dangerous ground, for any novel that appears to derive the all-too-familiar referential details of the death camps from a textual logic already intricately aestheticized through its fugal transformations of recurrent themes and motifs and perversely personalized through its roots in the central character’s beliefs and behaviors inevitably invites accusations of both aestheticization and trivialization. Those accusations have been duly made and, as in the case of Heaney, deserve to be taken seriously.⁷ But, faced once more with an issue of considerable political, ethical and aesthetic complexity—the responsible representation in fiction of the Shoah and, more generally, of Nazi Germany—my response must again be limited to an assessment of the role played by the bog-body motif in such a representation.

The comparison with Heaney involves certain inevitable dissymmetries that should be pointed out for clarity’s sake. Whereas the bog bodies in Heaney are absolutely central, not only to the few, mostly short lyrics that constitute the corpus of bog-poems, but also to their critical reception, in Tournier they are confined to a short and diegetically self-contained episode in a long and immensely rich novel and, to my knowledge, have elicited no critical interest whatsoever as *bog bodies*. Significantly, Tournier’s reading of Glob has passed unnoticed and plays no part at all in the accusations of aestheticization, mythologization, and trivialization that have been made against the novel.⁸ The comparison is worth making, however, for two reasons. First because, as I shall argue, the structural role played by the bog bodies in *The Erl-King* is out of all proportion to their diegetic presence; in the

aesthetic, thematic, and intertextual networks they support, the bodies are in fact central to the issues that concern us here. Second, because the comparison promotes a better understanding of the *levels* at which the aesthetic functions in the two authors, for while the aesthetic qualities of Heaney's lyrics are inseparable from the poet's own voice and inform the entire analogy between past and present, the mnemotopic values in Tournier's novel are not directly attributable to the implied author but are thematized in different ways by characters whose constructions are ultimately contested by the text's own aesthetic structures.

The bog bodies in *The Erl-King* are described by the narrator as messengers from the mists of time—"messenger[s] de la nuit des temps" (*Le roi des aulnes* 295). The phrase becomes a leitmotiv that underscores the affinity felt by Tiffauges—who describes himself on the novel's very first page as having "issued from the mists of time" 'issu de la nuit des temps' (*The Erl-King* 11; *Le roi des aulnes* 13)—not only with the Iron Age man in the peat but also with the blind giant elk he befriends and that itself is seen in retrospect as preparing the way for the discovery of the bog bodies (*Erl-King* 167). But if the two bodies are messengers, the precise nature of the message they bear remains unclear. For Professor Keil it would seem to consist in a simple confirmation of those elements of Nazi ideology derived from Germanic myth. Similarly, for Tiffauges they serve to strengthen his conviction that he has "immemorial origins," "roots that went back into the deepest mists of time" (*Erl-King* 155) and that he has been singled out for an extraordinary destiny. (In this, the bog bodies resemble the messenger in apocalyptic literature who mediates between a mythic space-time and a "real" space-time. Vladimir Tumanov assigns this role in *The Erl-King* to Nestor, Tiffauges's childhood mentor at St Christopher's, but clearly the bog bodies fulfill the same function in a different register in this intrinsically polyphonic novel.) Unlike Heaney's bog bodies, which come freighted with thematic structures from a distant past that serve to frame and illuminate, however problematically, the historical events of the present, Tournier's bodies seem to travel light, relatively unburdened by the time and place from which they spring. Rather than full symbols, they are empty vehicles waiting to be filled, signposts rather than signs. As such they are useful guides to the way this disturbing text is ordered and a pointer to how it might best be read. The following observations address three distinct but overlapping issues.

First, as empty "signs" open to almost any manner of interpretation and appropriation by the receiver, the bog bodies participate in the paranoiac proliferation of signifying systems that characterizes not only Tiffauges's attempts to decipher the world but also the workings of Nazi science and ideology. In this universe, as Tiffauges is not slow to remind us, everything is sign. Thus, when Professor Keil appropriates the bodies as Nazi kitsch, he is simply installing them as part of a vast shimmering machine of flags, parades, uniforms, and symbols whose function is to intoxicate and seduce, to induce a state of emotional exaltation grounded in the twin principles of belonging and exclusion. (One historical Nazi

interpretation of bog bodies takes a very different tack to achieve a similar result. In an address to officers of the *Waffen-SS* on February 18, 1937, Himmler explains the fate of bog bodies in language that none too subtly evokes the “final solution”: “The worthy professors who find these bodies in peat do not realise that in ninety out of a hundred cases they are looking at the remains of a homosexual who was drowned in a swamp along with his clothes and everything else. That was not a punishment, but simply the termination of such an abnormal life” (Van der Sanden 167).⁹ Whether they are invoked as quasi-mythological Germanic ancestors or as “degenerates” to be disposed of, the bog bodies find themselves slotted willy-nilly into the manichaeian binaries of sameness and difference, purity and dirt that structure and mobilize the discourses of both Nazi science and Nazi ideology.) More particularly, the discovery of the bog bodies in *The Erl-King* foreshadows the apocalyptic proliferation of empty signs and symbols in the novel’s final chapter. As one of the characters warns Tiffauges, symbols become dangerous when severed from their referents and their power is allowed to go unchecked: “Have you read the Apocalypse of St John? It shows terrible, grandiose scenes that light up the sky—fantastic animals, stars, swords, crowns, constellations, a great chaos of archangels, sceptres, thrones and suns. And all that, undeniably, is symbol and cipher. But don’t try to understand it—don’t try to find the thing to which each sign refers. For these symbols are *diabols*, and no longer symbolize anything. And saturation with them brings the end of the world” (*Erl-King* 260).

The reference to John of Patmos—and, as Tumanov suggests, beyond the Johannine text to a whole tradition of apocalyptic literature rooted in Revelation—serves as a reminder that Tournier’s novel is saturated in intertextual allusion that frequently takes on a life of its own, quite independent of its textual anchors. In fact, the bog bodies *qua* bog bodies disappear from the text after their initial discovery and do not reappear until their symbolic reincarnation at the end of the novel. In the meantime, and this is my second observation, they undergo a *literary* transformation into the Erl-King and the child he entices away from his father, and it is in this guise that they are incorporated into Tiffauges’s reading of the world in terms of his own destiny. In this respect, they might be called “paper” bodies—a term used in bog-body archaeology to denote those bodies that have been reported but not preserved. The flight into language (from referent to signified) effected by the act of naming is entirely consonant with an apocalyptic tradition that divorces sense from reference and renders signifiers available for misappropriation (Tumanov 428-30). It is just such a process that leads to the elaboration of Tiffauges’s personal mythology—a system that, through its very coherence, challenges the reality of the real world. In the end, it is only Ephraim’s counter-revelations of the historical reality of Auschwitz that expose the hollowness of Tiffauges’s construction and bring the whole textual edifice tumbling down about his ears. (It is significant that an allegory of misreading is already buried deep in the genotext of the novel’s title, which itself rests on a translation error. As Tournier

remarks in *Le vent Paraclet* (118-19), Goethe took his title, “Der Erlkönig,” from Herder who in turn took it from Danish folklore.¹⁰ But in the course of his borrowings, Herder translated the Danish *eller* (elves) as *Erlen* (alders) because in his East Prussian dialect the word for alders was *Eller*. Both elves (metaphorically) and alders (metonymically) send the reader back to the peat-bogs of Denmark and the folklore surrounding the bodies that haunt them.)

My third observation concerns Tournier’s bog bodies as signposts, a metaphor that foregrounds the “spatial turn” taken by a novel in which all roads lead to Auschwitz. Despite their intrinsic temporality, these bodies lose much of the depth associated with archaeological tropes as they are disseminated across the surface of a text resembling a landscape or a map. Here most motifs are overdetermined and function as textual crossroads, points of intersection of two or more of the thematic itineraries that criss-cross the fictional landscape, covering it with an intricate hermeneutic grid that leaves no referential residue. I will limit my discussion to two brief examples, both drawn from the novel’s abundant fauna. The giant elk befriended by Tiffauges in East Prussia embodies tropes of blindness and marginality, both central to the novel, and functions, as we have seen, as a “messenger from the mists of time.” But it is also, as we know from Heaney, the kind of animal that turns up in skeletal form in bogs and finds its way from there into many a museum. Similarly, the herd of auroch (*bos primigenius redivivus*), bred by Nazi geneticists and allowed to run wild in the nature reserve at Rominten, articulates themes of racial purity, primordial nature, authenticity, and the return to barbarism. But auroch also occasionally turn up in bogs and one is tempted to ask whether Tournier, a voracious reader of German, might not have come across a passage in Goethe’s *Vergleichende Anatomie, Zoologie* that recounts the discovery of an *Urstier* skeleton in a peat-bog near Haßleben in 1821 (360-68). In addition to their rich thematic function, then, both elk and auroch establish, by means of intratextual patterns of repetition and variation and the novel’s unusual capacity for semiotic integration of extratextual elements, multiple links with other motifs, including the two bog bodies, as they are woven into a tight textual and intertextual mesh.¹¹

Just as many of the novel’s individual motifs and topoi are reprised and inverted in Ephraim’s revelations about Auschwitz, so the tightly woven web of themes and motifs that maps out the surface of the text is taken up (sublated, *aufgehoben*) in the infernal map of the death camps and the railway network that links them with the rest of Europe:

Over all Wehrmacht-occupied Europe, but chiefly in Germany, Austria and Poland, nearly a thousand villages and hamlets made up an infernal map of its own which subtended the ordinary country and had its own centres and capitals, and also its own sub-prefectures, junctions and sorting-offices. Schirmeck, Natzviller, Dachau, Neuengamme, Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, Oranienburg, Theresienstadt, Mauthausen, Stutthof, Lodz, Ravensbrück . . . Ephraim spoke of these as familiar landmarks in the world of shadows which was the only one he knew. But none shone with such black brilliance as Oswiecim,

thirty kilometres southeast of Katowice in Poland, which the Germans called Auschwitz. It was the Anus Mundi, the great metropolis of degradation, suffering and death on which convoys of victims converged from every corner of Europe. (*Erl-King* 302)

It is this map of infamy that finally opens Tiffauges's eyes to the full extent of the Nazi horror, as History, brutally reasserting its claims, turns his allegories and mythologies to derision, exposes the hollowness of his systems, and reconfigures his (mis-)readings of the world in the realization that everything in his own experience must be reconstrued in light of Auschwitz, the terminus of History and the vanishing point of the novel's vertiginous textual structures. After Auschwitz, after the ruin of representation and the failure of language,¹² it is difficult to follow those critics who see the return to vertical—or, in Tiffauges's terminology, *phoric*—imagery in the novel's final scene as a gauge of transcendence, of salvation. When Tiffauges looks up as he sinks into the bog and sees "a six-pointed star turning slowly against the black sky" (317), we are inevitably reminded of another failure of language, another verbal confusion, neither historical nor mythological but literary. I am thinking, of course, of Félicité in Flaubert's "Un cœur simple," of her "mistranslation" of *Paraclete* as *parrot* (*Paraclet* as *perroquet*) and of her deathbed epiphany when she sees the heavens open and her stuffed parrot Loulou transformed into the Holy Spirit, "a gigantic parrot soaring above her head" (61).¹³ Seen as the self-consciously literary construction it undoubtedly is, *The Erl-King* traces a textual itinerary, from its title to a closing sentence, that might be encompassed within an infinitely expansive but flattening and deflating four-term homology that proposes that *Erlen* is to *eller* as *perroquet* is to *Paraclet*.

The "superficiality" of Tournier's text, its relentlessly ironic suspicion of tropes of depth and origin, is achieved in large part through a textual and intertextual play of *différance*, of displacement across complex networks of signifiers and signifieds. Peter Bürger's "postmodern" reading of the novel notes some of the formal properties of the text but then asks the wrong question—"The decisive question for the interpretation of the novel is as follows: can this connection [the parallels between Abel Tiffauges and National Socialism] be regarded as a serious attempt at a mythical interpretation of German history during the Nazi period?"—which it answers in the negative because the novel "places before us a closed chain of signifiers, referring to nothing else" (Bürger 103). The question—which might, with appropriate substitutions, be legitimately asked of Heaney's bog poems—is wrongheaded here precisely because the novel offers, among other things, a very powerful critique of mythical interpretations of history. But in order to produce that critique it is obliged to reproduce the structures of mythic thought, just as it reproduces the structures of apocalyptic thinking in its critique of apocalyptic interpretations of history, a tactic that Saul Friedländer misreads and chastises as uncritical complicity with the apocalyptic kitsch of Nazi aesthetics (22-23, 42). Similarly, in order to counter the strategies of seduction

implicit in the Nazi aestheticization of politics, the novel has to run the political risk of being aesthetically seductive. A more interesting (and more appropriate, though not necessarily “decisive”) question might then be: in what sense can *The Erl-King* be regarded as an “archaeological” novel and can fictional archaeology tell us anything of interest about German history during the Nazi period?

Clearly, Tournier’s novel does not share the archaeological ambitions of a narrowly constructed Freudian psychoanalysis.¹⁴ Unlike Liz Headland, the psychoanalyst in Margaret Drabble’s *A Natural Curiosity*, it does not aspire to discover “what really happened. [. . .] At the beginning of human time” (75).¹⁵ Nor does it propose, like Heaney’s bog poems, that the myths of the past can illuminate the history of the present. Instead, its archaeology is much closer to what Foucault understood by the term: “[Archaeology] does not treat discourse as *document*, as a sign of something else, as an element that ought to be transparent, but whose unfortunate opacity must often be pierced if one is to reach at last the depth of the essential in the place in which it is held in reserve; it is concerned with discourse in its own volume, as a *monument*. It is not an interpretative discipline: it does not seek another, better-hidden discourse. It refuses to be ‘allegorical’” (138-39). *The Erl-King* achieves its own refusal to be “allegorical,” not by eschewing allegory but by foregrounding it as a “discourse in its own volume, as a monument,” by multiplying its instances, and its failures, through a proliferation of mistranslations and misreadings. The point of the exercise lies not in the search for a beginning, the excavation of a more authentic self, or the restoration of a lost or tainted purity, but in the critical re-presentation of a discourse that attempts all those things. The novel is “archaeological” in its determination to present the discourse of an allegorical archaeology *as discourse*, and its “archaeology” of Nazi Germany lays bare not the distant origins and hidden meanings of Nazi discourse but the Nazi *discourse* of distant origins and hidden meanings. For all these reasons, the novel’s attitude toward the mnemotope, as a vehicle of cultural, national, and racial memory, must be one of profound mistrust. That is why Tournier’s bog bodies are also, and above all else, book bodies, their “archaeological” meaning spun out of a web of (inter-)textual threads, a network of correspondence and allusion that, in its monumental facticity, renders untenable the ideological fiction of truths revealed by “messengers from the mists of time,” whoever they may be.

Notes

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¹ The archaeological accounts range from dry science through Glob’s lyricism to the sensationalism of Ross and Robins. Turner and Scaife and Van der Sanden offer the most reliable and up-to-date information. The nationalist stakes in bog

body archaeology came to the fore after the discovery of Lindow Man, when British archaeology entered the lists in barely concealed competition with more established German and Danish schools already in disagreement on fundamental questions of interpretation. Van der Sanden later added a Dutch voice to the chorus.

² Tollund Man, who was found in 1950 near Silkeborg in Central Jutland, is now displayed in the museum there. Grauballe Man, now in the museum at Moesgard near Aarhus, was discovered in 1952 eleven miles east of Tollund. Glob devotes chapters 1 and 2 of *The Bog People* to them respectively. Windeby Girl was found in 1952 in Domland Fen, south of Eckernförde in Schleswig and is now in the Landesmuseum in Schloß Gottorp. She is one of the bodies discussed by Glob in the chapter he devotes to countries other than Denmark (110-16).

³ The debates are too extensive to document here. Daniel Tobin (103-41) gives a useful overview, while David Lloyd offers perhaps the most severe and sustained critique.

⁴ All references will be to the English translation by Barbara Bray, published by Collins in 1972 under the title *The Erl-King*. An American edition of the same translation was published by Doubleday under the title *The Ogre*, which was also the title of Volker Schlöndorff's film featuring John Malkovich as Abel Tiffauges. For my purposes, I will refer to *The Erl-King*, for this title maintains the essential intertextual allusion to Goethe's ballad "Der Erlkönig."

⁵ Finds of detached heads are not unusual and have been the source of much speculation among archaeologists. Just such a head was found wrapped in a sheepskin cape at Roum in Denmark in 1942 (Glob 98-100). Rubenstein points out that the Celtic motif of the severed head figures prominently in Margaret Drabble's *A Natural Curiosity*.

⁶ Tiffauges finds Ephraim by the roadside, shortly after discovering a corpse hidden in the ditch under a shepherd's cloak: "This time it was a child. It was wearing a cap made of three pieces of felt sewn together. [. . .] When Tiffauges lifted it up in his arms it pierced his heart to feel how incredibly light it was, as if there was nothing inside the coarse wrappings from which the head emerged" (*Erl-King* 300-01). Shortly before his discovery of Ephraim, Tiffauges is shocked by the spectacle of a human corpse flattened into the frozen road by the passage of thousands of tanks, trucks, and boots until it is as thin as a carpet "roughly cut out in the shape of a human body, in which one could just make out a profile, an eye, and locks of hair" (290). The passage is remarkable in that the spectacle is completely devoid of "symbolic aura" for Tiffauges, who can find no way of integrating the corpse into his system of signs. In its unredeemed horror, it is a distant cousin of the "slashed and dumped" corpse of Heaney's Grauballe Man.

⁷ Perhaps the harshest criticisms are those made by Améry and Friedländer. For a balanced and stylistically nuanced study of the novel, see Korthals Altes.

⁸ Like Heaney, Tournier clearly bases his descriptions on Glob, whom he could have read in French or German as early as 1966. Unlike Heaney, he does not

acknowledge his borrowing, a fact that is all the more interesting as Tournier is a prolific commentator of his own work and scrupulously documents *some* of his sources.

⁹ The peat-bogs have other resonances in the death camps of the Third Reich. The song “Moorsoldaten” (“Peat-Bog Soldiers”), also known as “Börgermoorlied,” was the first song written in a Nazi concentration camp. It was written and first performed in the summer of 1933 by prisoners in Börgermoor, a concentration camp near Hanover, where political prisoners were used to drain peat-bog swamps (Kalisch 92-96). According to Robert Merle’s biographical novel, *La mort est mon métier*, Rudolf Höss, the future Kommandant of Auschwitz, was given the task of draining a swamp in Pomerania in 1929. It was Höss who would later refer to Auschwitz as *Anus mundi* (*Arschloch der Welt*), an appellation that takes on a particular significance in Tournier’s novel.

¹⁰ See the interesting exchange in the pages of *Poétique* between Jean Bellemin-Noël and Élisabeth J. Bik and Ria Lemaire.

¹¹ The two animals discussed here, *cervus megaceros* and *bos primigenius*, are described on the same page of Louis Figuier’s *La terre avant le déluge* as wonders of the antediluvian world. Figuier makes specific mention of Irish bog finds (364-65).

¹² The allusion is, of course, to Adorno: “Kein vom Hohen getöntes Wort, auch kein theologisches, hat unverwandelt nach Auschwitz ein Recht” ‘After Auschwitz, no word uttered from on high, not even a theological one, has any legitimacy unless it has undergone a transformation’ (358; my translation).

¹³ Colin Davis makes the same connection (61-63). We know that Tournier is well aware of Flaubert’s story since he wrote a preface to the Folio edition of *Trois contes*. It is also perhaps no coincidence that the two books in which Tournier discusses his influences and writing practices most openly are titled *Le vent Paraclet* and *Le vol du vampire*, both of which recall the description of Félicité’s parrot. David W. Price hears in *The Erl-King*’s final sentence a rather different echo, that of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra: “one must still have the chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star” (157). While I find Price’s reading of the novel interesting and rewarding, I cannot hear the Nietzsche without thinking of another passage in Flaubert, one I will quote in Geoffrey Braithwaite’s version: “Language is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, while all the time we long to move the stars to pity” (qtd. in Barnes 51).

¹⁴ Brian McHale recalls “Freud’s use of archaeological tropes for the ‘stratified’ structure of the psyche and the ‘excavatory’ work of psychoanalysis” with its project of ‘digging’ for buried truth. Aligning Freud’s appropriation of the archaeological model with his positivist side and with the discourse of epistemological mastery that it underwrites, McHale recognizes that there are other, more constructivist models in Freud’s psychoanalytic writings “whereby truth is not recovered by excavating the deep strata of the patient’s psyche, but

rather constructed in the therapeutic encounter—not so much an archaeological dig, then, as a kind of collaborative novel” (240). While I would largely agree with such an assessment of Freud’s methods and the rhetoric deployed to characterize them, I would argue that the distinction between retrieval and construction does not necessarily invalidate the archaeological master-trope, since archaeology, like psychoanalysis, can encompass both retrieval and construction. Even Heaney’s archaeologies lay bare a self that is negotiated through narrative rather than revealed once and for all as a timeless essence.

¹⁵ Drabble’s novel uses Lindow Man—“[a]geless, timeless, rescued from the bog” (22), “a link and a messenger from the underworld” (59)—in its excavation of original sin and the pathology of human nature: “Ancient crimes arise to declare themselves, to invite detection. Graves weep blood, sinners return to the fatal scene, the primal crime” (8).

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