



Thinking Out of the Box in Literary and Cultural Studies



Proceedings of the XXIX AIA Conference

edited by
Rocco Coronato, Marilena Parlati and Alessandra Petrina

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UP

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*RECONFIGURING THE DEAD BODY.
SHAPES OF THE AFTER-LIFE
IN GUNTHER VON HAGENS AND SEAMUS HEANEY*

Anna Anselmo

This article focuses on the revisitation of the dead body as exemplified, theoretically, by Gunther von Hagens' *Body Worlds* and, experientially and textually, by the bodies that emerged out of North-Western European bogs celebrated in Seamus Heaney's *bog poems* sequence (1969, 1972, 1975). Von Hagens' work, demiurge-like in nature, defamiliarizes the dead body by turning it into a self-confessed art object that defies the life-death dichotomy and begs for a third option. Bog bodies, on the other hand, are the fruit of peculiar microbiological conditions whereby the dead body is mummified and made available for retrieval, observation, study and, ultimately, exhibition – a visual-verbal art object. The article first lays out its theoretical framework by providing working definitions of both Gilles Deleuze's *devenir* and remediation. It then questions the ontological status of the dead body as revisited by von Hagens, self-appointed demiurge, and the Bog, Northern-European laboratory. It further focuses on the layers of remediation that the defamiliarized dead body undergoes: from *Body Worlds*' self-proclaimed status as pedagogic art to Heaney's verses lingering on the givenness and materiality of bog bodies, the dead body is shown as defying the life-death dichotomy, constructing its unprecedented after-life.

Bog Poems; Bog Bodies; Body Worlds; Remediation; Devenir

1. Deconstructing the binary machine

The present essay deals with two cultural phenomena: Gunther von Hagens' exhibition, *Body Worlds*,¹ and four of Seamus Heaney's bog poems. The purpose is not to have these phenomena converse, but to present a sustained analysis of both while treating them as parallel, yet distinct manifestations of a similar intention to surpass disciplinary boundaries and to offer syncretic cultural experiences. The essay further aims to show von Hagens and Heaney as examples of the same cultural tendency to question the ultimate binaries of life/death and subject/object.

¹ More information on and images of von Hagens' project can be found here: <https://bodyworlds.com/>.

The fact that this is done in different fields (von Hagens' anatomy and Heaney's poetry), at different times (the late 1990s, and the late 1960s and early 1970s, respectively), through efforts conceptually and artistically unrelated (anatomy and sculpture versus poetry and archaeology) justifies my treating the phenomena as parallel rather than conversant. One further similarity bringing von Hagens' anatomical-artistic work and Heaney's archaeo-poetics together into the present critical diptych is their readability in terms of Gilles Deleuze's notion of *devenir* and of his theoretical suggestions as to what he terms 'the binary machine'.

Regarding the latter point, Deleuze opens the second part of *Dialogues* by listing a few seemingly incontestable oppositions. He states:

For example, in a literary interview, there is first of all the interviewer/interviewee dualism, and then, beyond, the man/writer, life/work dualisms in the interviewee himself, and again, the dualism between the work and the intention or the meaning of the work.²

The interview format, it seems, is not designed for obtaining answers insofar as all the questions have been framed in such a way as to already contain all their possible answers. And vice versa. Deleuze elaborates:

There is always a binary machine which governs the distribution of roles and which means that all the answers must go through preformed questions, since the questions are already worked out on the basis of the answers assumed to be probable according to the dominant meanings. Thus a grille is constituted such that everything which does not pass through the grille cannot be materially understood. For example, in a broadcast on prisons the following choices will be established: jurist/prison governor, judge/lawyer, social worker/interesting case, the opinion of the ordinary prisoners who fill the prisons being pushed back outside the grille or outside the subject.³

Deleuze's definition of how binary logic works and his emphasis on the trap of taxonomical reasoning are the conceptual provocations which pave the way for my argument.

I use both lexicographical inputs and the Deleuzian notion of *devenir* (henceforth 'becoming') to read both von Hagens and Heaney as producing porous cultural work that aims at debunking conventional hermeneutic and ontological categories. The life/death opposition is in-

² Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 19.

³ Deleuze and Parnet, p. 20.

terrogated, firstly, in the light of the disruptive quality of representation:⁴ the clean-cut distinction of dead/living body, the meaning of such dualism, and the very use of the (dead) body for creative purposes are read through more than the basic dead/alive opposition, and the notions of plastination and bog mummification are introduced. Secondly, the subject/object opposition is interrogated, using the two terms in the following acceptations: 'subject' is intended as he or she who can say 'I', in other words, 'A being [...] that thinks, knows, or perceives (more fully conscious subject, thinking subject); the conscious mind, esp. as opposed to any objects external to it. [...] the person or self, considered as a conscious agent' (*OED*); at the same time, it is intended as its paradoxical counterpart, 'a person who is under the control of another or who owes obedience to another'. 'Object' is intended as 'a thing which is perceived, thought of, known, etc.; [...] a thing which is external to or distinct from the apprehending mind, subject, or self' (*OED*). Deleuze's sophisticated theory of the subject is deemed unnecessary, and, therefore, not taken into consideration.

2. Defamiliarizing the dead: Gunther von Hagens and the anatomical aesthetics of Body Worlds

The line of demarcation between life and death is usually configured as an unquestionable ontological shift, duly reflected by language. Karin Sanders makes this point:⁵ a living, breathing body becomes corpse/cadaver; this process of transformation is at the same time one of dissolution. When a person dies, 'the visible part of him [or her], the body, which lies in the visible world and which we call a corpse [...] is naturally subject to dissolution and decomposition'.⁶ An example of how this seemingly unquestionable binary is, in fact, questioned, and fruitfully so, in the realm of representation, lies at the crossroads of science and aesthetics: Gunther von Hagens' *Body Worlds* exhibition.

⁴ This article uses the word *representation* as meaning 'The action or fact of portraying a person or thing, esp. in an artistic medium; depiction', as well as 'The action of putting forward an account of something discursively; a spoken or written statement, esp. one which conveys or intends to create a particular view or impression' (*OED*). The use of the Deleuzian notion of representation as laid out, among other works, in *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) is not taken into consideration.

⁵ Karin Sanders, *Bodies in the Bog and the Archaeological Imagination* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 8.

⁶ Sanders, p. 8.

Von Hagens' process is one of defamiliarization of both body and corpse. Indebted to forms of preservation of the dead such as mummification and embalming, his work is self-confessedly aimed at

[educating] the public about the inner workings of the human body and [showing] the effects of healthy and unhealthy lifestyles. Targeted mainly at a lay audience, the exhibitions are aimed to inspire visitors to become aware of the fragility of their bodies and to recognize the anatomical individual beauty inside each of us. The exhibition intends to: strengthen one's sense of health, show the potential and limits of the body, raise the question of the meaning of life.⁷

Such wilfully heterogenous aims manifest a desire to supersede mere scientific and anatomical data, not only in favour of educational and philosophical questions, but also with the aim to create aesthetic as well as scientific value. These aims further imply a symbolic reconfiguration of the corpse as *living* in the form of a memento, a learning opportunity, and a gateway to more spiritual considerations. Such symbolic slippage – in itself an implication that the cadaver is no longer an ontological fact antipodal to a living body, but an exhibit that has undergone several stages of remediation,⁸ therefore a category all unto itself – is complemented by the scientific process the cadavers undergo in order to be exhibited, a process von Hagens himself invented: plastination.

Plastination is a 'process that replaces bodily fluids with synthetic preservatives'⁹ and consists of five different steps: step one is 'fixation and anatomical dissection', and implies injecting preservation solutions into the specimen¹⁰ and then removing fatty and connective tissues; step two consists in the 'removal of body fat and water'; 'forced impregnation' (step three) lies at the core of the plastination process and requires placing the specimen in a bath of liquid polymer, which prepares it for 'positioning' (step four), in which 'every single anatomical structure is properly aligned and fixed',¹¹ and 'curing or hardening' (step five), which protects what has now become a plastinate from decomposition and decay.

⁷ See <https://bodyworlds.com/about/philosophy/>.

⁸ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

⁹ Christina Goulding, Michael Saren and Andrew Lindridge, 'Reading the Body at von Hagens' "Body Worlds", *Annals of Tourism Research* 40 (2013): p. 309.

¹⁰ *Specimen* is the term used on the official *Body Worlds* website: <https://bodyworlds.com/plastination/plastination-technique/>.

¹¹ <https://bodyworlds.com/plastination/plastination-technique/>.

Plastination configures itself as a revolutionary act of counter-natural chemistry, a barrage against death. Its revolutionary quality is compounded by the theoretical-ontological implications of one of its steps, 'positioning', that is, the arrangement of the specimen in a specific position which is consistent with the educational/aesthetic intent of the exhibition. 'Positioning' is key to von Hagens' project, in that it combines the anatomical artist's seemingly irreducible educational, anatomical, and artistic aims. On the *Body Worlds* website, the positioning phase is described as requiring not only knowledge of anatomy, but a strong sense of aesthetics.¹² Such a deceptively concise statement contains several elements worthy of analysis: firstly, the remediation of the cadaver with self-professed aesthetic aims points in the direction of the time-honoured tradition of anatomical art, further supported by specific references on the official *Body Worlds* website. In particular, the website mentions the intertwining of art and anatomy in Leonardo da Vinci's work, as well as the anatomical art of the eighteenth century. More than that, von Hagens' plastinates have been analysed as being connected with the work of the seventeenth-century anatomist Frederick Ruysch,¹³ who propounded a 'new aesthetic of anatomy that melded the acts of demonstration and display with the stylistic and emblematic meanings of Vanitas art'.¹⁴ The connection between the vagaries of art movements and the works of anatomists has long been recognized.¹⁵

A second element worth noting regards a survey carried out between May and August 2003 in Munich: *Body Worlds* visitors were presented with a questionnaire so as to map their emotional reaction to the exhibition. The results show how the aesthetic appeal of the plastinates contributes to their definitive defamiliarization¹⁶ and thus makes them palatable. Further research, this time based on visitors' opinions spontaneously shared online, proves that it is precisely the aesthetic-artistic component of von Hagens' work that allows for emotional detachment and the acceptance of the plastinates as other than human: 'it is distance

¹² <https://bodyworlds.com/plastination/plastination-technique/>.

¹³ José Van Dijck, 'Bodyworlds: The Art of Plastinated Cadavers,' *Configurations* 9, 1 (2001): pp. 103-4.

¹⁴ Julie V. Hansen, 'Resurrecting Death: Anatomical Art in the Cabinet of Dr. Frederick Ruysch,' *Art Bulletin* 78, 4 (1996): p. 671.

¹⁵ Van Dijck, p. 111.

¹⁶ Peter Leiberich et al., 'Body Worlds Exhibition – Visitor Attitudes and Emotions,' *Annals of Anatomy* 188 (2006): p. 572.

or the lack of identification that makes death palatable or even pleasurable'.¹⁷ More than that, von Hagens creates his exhibits out of donated bodies and the donors remain anonymous; this contributes to the effective erasure of self-identity or, as far as the visitors to the *Body Worlds* exhibition are concerned, even the sense that the exhibits were once, in fact, living. The dead body is thus metonymically reduced to its dissected anatomy and reborn as an exhibit; effectively preserved, on the one hand, and dissolved, on the other.

Von Hagens' work, disturbing and yet acceptable to visitors precisely because of its unfathomable excesses, subscribes to what Kayser defined as

art whose form and subject matter appear to be part of, while contradictory to, the natural, social or personal worlds of which we are part. Its images most often embody distortions, exaggerations, a fusion of incompatible parts in such a fashion that it confronts us as strange and disordered, as a world turned upside down.¹⁸

This is achieved through the distancing between audience and exhibit due to the utter defacement of the latter, and the seemingly counter-intuitive celebration and re-enactment of the quotidian embedded in the process of 'positioning', for cadavers are placed so as to silently reproduce images and situations of everyday life. Here does plastination effectively dissolve the ontological status of the cadaver, which has not only been turned into an exhibit – therefore virtually recreated as an art as well as a science object – but is also simultaneously infused with paradoxical life through its re-enactment of the every-day. A sort of anatomical still life.

Body Worlds is thus exemplary in its problematization and disruption of the life/death, body/corpse binary in many ways, as von Hagens' plastinates step 'outside the acceptable',¹⁹ and yet straddle that fine line that has always been the stylistic marker of the anatomical body, 'regarded as a hybrid object, one of art as well as science'.²⁰ The disruption of the life/death binary in terms of representation is here compounded by the eminent problematization of the subject/object binary: von Hagens' work reifies the dead through plastination and display, a process hinging on

¹⁷ Goulding, Saren, and Lindridge, pp. 314, 315.

¹⁸ Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. 2.

¹⁹ Goulding, Saren, and Lindridge, p. 313.

²⁰ Van Dijck, p. 110.

both the above-mentioned emphasis on the aesthetic value of the plastinates and on the work of spectacularization and dehumanization of the exhibits effected through the removal of skin.

By removing fat, soft tissue, water and skin, von Hagens effects the blurring of ontological categories: 'the stripping of the skin, the exposure of veins, sinew, muscle, organs, and the clinical manner in which they were exposed, open and posed, [dissolves] the distinction between mannequin and human'.²¹ The corpse is defaced, both literally (it is entirely skinless, therefore faceless) and metaphorically, it is stripped of any recognizable sign of its former living and breathing humanity. In his ground-breaking book, Anzieu Didier identified skin as 'a primary datum which has elements of both the organic and the imaginary, which is at once a system for protecting our individuality and a primary instrument and site of exchange with others'.²² Skin is the ultimate border between me and not-me: in death, skin finds dissolution along with everything else, while in von Hagens' work, skin alone is dissolved in order to lay anatomy bare. This is a revolutionary representational gesture: the skinned cadaver becomes one with the world surrounding it, through plastination it becomes an object among objects, for the skin that enclosed it and separated it from its surroundings no longer exists.²³

Von Hagens' work further complexifies the life/death binary by questioning the ontological shift in language that sees the transition from living and breathing body to lifeless cadaver. The original German name for von Hagens' project is *Körperwelten*; German and French philosophical theories have distinguished between *Körper* – which has remained the only signifier for 'body' in modern-day German – and *Leib*; the former is the body as an object in space, measurable in size and weight, the latter is the living body.²⁴ Von Hagens aptly qualifies his anatomical works as *Körper*, that is, bodies that are no longer infused with life, metonymically reduced to what they can be made to re-enact and showcase, elements of a scientific/aesthetic agenda which sees them reborn as a paradoxical form of non-life.

²¹ Goulding, Saren, and Lindridge, p. 310.

²² Anzieu Didier, *The Skin Ego*, trans. Naomi Seagal (London: Karnac, 2016), p. 3.

²³ Erasmo Silvio Storace, *Per un'estetica del cadavere: I Körperwelten di Gunther von Hagens* (Milano: Albo Versorio, 2013), pp. 41-50.

²⁴ Hans-Peter Krüger, 'Persons and Their Bodies: The Körper/Leib Distinction and Helmuth Plessner's Theories of Ex-centric Positionality and Homo Absconditus,' *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 24, 3 (2010): pp. 256-74.

The English translation of *Körperwelten* is *Body Worlds*, reading the language-specific effacement of the *Körper/Leib* distinction, but more than that, the effacement of the body/corpse opposition. *Body Worlds* shows the disruption of the life/death binary in its very name: ‘body’ means both the living body and the measurable body, the body that’s unquestionably alive and the body/object in space. It is a convenient hypernym, designating at once ‘the complete physical form of a person or animal; the assemblage of parts, organs, and tissues that constitutes the whole material organism’ (*OED*), a living ‘person’, and a cadaver. The word ‘body’ thus contains, yet hides, within itself the distinction between *Körper* and *Leib*, while concealing the ignominious status of cadavers of von Hagens’ plastinated exhibits, and it further consolidates their self-proclaimed identity as artworks. For a cadaver cannot be art, but a body can.

Von Hagens’ *Körper* are more than simple anatomical hybrid bodies and their disruptiveness can be further understood in the light of Gilles Deleuze’s notion of becoming: ‘rather than a product, final or interim, [...] the very dynamism of change, situated between heterogeneous terms and tending towards no particular goal or end-state’.²⁵ Von Hagens’ plastinates are suspended in-between: belonging to no fixed category – neither human nor mere objects, neither living nor dead, neither fully anatomical nor fully aesthetic productions – they are all these things at once, human and objects, anatomical and aesthetic, living in the symbolic slippage of their representation and remediation, dead in the bare facticity of their being originally donated for plastination. They are body-shaped and yet dehumanized and reified to the point of ontological fuzziness. Their status as exhibits is evidenced through von Hagens’ decision to foreground the ‘process of production [...] rather than hiding it from the audience’.²⁶ They straddle the subject/object dichotomy as their dehumanization and commodification is complemented by their reproduction of the quotidian, as they are ‘staged in extreme [and quotidian] imitations of their key defining activities’.²⁷ Their in-betweenness is thus ontological, constitutive, and, above all, without resolution or goal.

²⁵ Cliff Stagoll, ‘Becoming,’ in Adrian Parr (ed.), *The Deleuze Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 26.

²⁶ Van Dijck, p. 121.

²⁷ Goulding, Saren, and Lindridge, p. 313.

3. Literature and the aesthetics of bodies in the bog: remediation and the binary machine

There is one more instance of body/corpse disruption: the one enacted within Northern European bogs. Coupled with its artistic/literary counterpart, remediation, the bog effects the ultimate defamiliarization and paradoxical rebirth of the dead body. A definition of the bog body and an outline of the natural process it undergoes is as follows:

any of several hundred variously preserved human remains found in natural peat bogs, mostly in northern and western Europe [...] Such bogs are anaerobic (oxygen-free) environments, a condition that prevents decay. They are also heavy with tannins [...]. The tannins preserve organic materials such as human bodies, including the soft tissues and the contents of the digestive tract.²⁸

Bog bodies show several peculiarities: they are both overwhelmed by and resilient to the microbiological conditions in which they find themselves, while they are 'gradually invaded, distorted, and covered', they not only manage 'to survive under the surface of the landscape', but also 'testify to the fact that the past can be *corporeally* preserved and rediscoverable'.²⁹

Bog deaths disturb and disrupt by definition: on the one hand, they have been ascribed to various patterns of communal and ritual violence,³⁰ on the other, they likely fall outside the Christian framework, as bogs are 'perceived as appropriate liminal spaces [...] in which to inter the troubled or dangerous dead',³¹ such as suicides or unbaptized infants or murder victims. As a consequence, burial sites remain unmarked and bog bodies are not actually excavated. On the contrary, they have been known to literally resurface, entirely by accident, either at the metaphorical hand of a digger bucket or through the careful eyes of some worker busy at the processing line.³²

Disruptiveness is the foremost characteristic of bog bodies,³³ described

²⁸ *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (www.britannica.com) defines bogs as follows: 'type of wetland ecosystem characterized by wet, spongy, poorly drained peaty soil'.

²⁹ Sanders, p. 7.

³⁰ Peter Vilhelm Glob, *The Bog People: Iron-age Man Preserved*, trans. Rupert Bruce-Mitford (New York: New York Review of Books, 1969); Melanie Giles, 'Bog Bodies: Representing the Dead,' paper delivered at the Conference *Respect for Ancient British Human Remains: Philosophy and Practice*, Manchester Museum, 17 November 2006.

³¹ Giles, p. 2.

³² Giles, p. 1.

³³ See Sanders, pp. 7-14.

as ‘unique go-betweens [...] straddling not only the binaries of time and space, past and present, text and image, and ethics and aesthetics, but also the disciplinary boundaries between archaeology, history, literary studies and art history’.³⁴ Like von Hagens’ exhibits, they are stuck in the semantic ambiguity of denotation: they are corpses, but the literature (archaeological and otherwise) addresses them as *bodies*. The ontological shift that marks the transition from life to death, from body to corpse is here again eluded: the use of *bodies* as designation lays bare the ambiguities of this special brand of dead by conveniently representing wholeness and fragmentation (complete physical form and the assemblage of parts), life and subjectivity (a person), death and the necessary objectification that follows it (a cadaver).

Mummification can be read as an interruption of the either/or of life and death. Bogs do not merely produce an interruption, but a rupture: the bodies’ random emergence, from the peat and the past both, makes them remarkably present and tangible, while calling temporality into question as the stunning degree of preservation of bog bodies eludes dating without the support of forensic technology. In fact, bodies ‘are often found in circumstances which lead the public and police to believe they are dealing with a modern – or at least historically recent – murder’.³⁵ Scholars and professionals who have worked with bog bodies have been deeply affected by their vividness and the violence of death that resonates from them, as well as by their utter disruption of temporality.³⁶

The microbiological conditions in bogs preserve skin, hair and nails, the major organs, as well as food and parasitic remains in the stomach,³⁷ and ‘garments or objects made of wool, skin, leather and metal’.³⁸ Because of their pastness and presentness, their vivid life-like appearance contrasting with their unquestionable status as dead, bog bodies blur

³⁴ Sanders, p. xv.

³⁵ Giles, p. 1.

³⁶ Rolly Reed, Head of Conservation at the National Museum of Ireland, is reported as saying: ‘I was freaked [...] On a personal level I had trouble... I had a vision of those enormous arms coming round the back of my neck. I was getting flashbacks for a fortnight. I was having nightmares... What hit me hardest, I think, was the fingerprints – perfect fingerprints – the same as a guy’s from today. He could have been anybody off the streets of Dublin... it was like touching your own skin’. Elizabeth Grice, ‘A Chilling Tale of Ritual Murder,’ *The Daily Telegraph*, 7 January 2006, pp. 19, 21.

³⁷ Ian Mathieson Stead, J.B. Bourke, and Don R. Brothwell, *Lindow Man: The Body in the Bog* (London: British Museum, 1986).

³⁸ Giles, p. 2.

the boundaries between life and death, disrupt the either/or, the binary machine all at once; and while they offer invaluable insight into the past, they also urge artists and scientists alike to reconsider the present. In the constant slippage they embody – past/present, dead/alive – they offer a convenient semantic vacuum that opens up the possibilities of metaphor, allegory, and symbol.

Seamus Heaney's celebrated bog poem sequence has often been interpreted in terms of time and place (as an oblique reference to the Troubles in Ireland), the emphasis being on sectarian violence and the consequences of English colonialism.³⁹ The bulk of Heaney's 'Bog Poems' were published in his 1975 collection *North*, but poems using bog and bog bodies as imaginative symbols can also be found in *Door into the Dark* (1969) and *Wintering Out* (1972).⁴⁰ Heaney's fascination with the bog manifests itself in the very inception of his work,⁴¹ but it is in 'Bogland' (1969) that he sets up the bog as the soft, black centre of binary disruption, a trope that will be inflected in many ways in the bog poems to follow, and that will lead the way to the writing of the disruption of the either/or of life/death and subject/object. The poems I will take into consideration are: 'Bogland', 'The Grauballe Man', 'Bog Queen' and 'Strange Fruit'.

'Bogland' (1969) spells out the descriptive coordinates of the bog: caught in a series of binaries – surface and depth, crust and core, immersion and emersion – the bog itself seems to be subservient to the binary machine. Heaney describes it, firstly, in terms of horizontality and verticality, that is, its vastness ('unfenced country', l. 6) and its vertical vertigo ('inwards and downwards', l. 24, stripped layers that seem 'camped on before', l. 26, 'The wet centre is bottomless', l. 28); secondly, in terms of hard and soft, that is, its crusting 'Between the sights of the sun' (l. 8) and its 'melting and opening underfoot' (l. 17), the wet softness that implies the sinking of objects; thirdly, in terms of its being both killer/kidnapper and mother, that is, in its privative and restitutive qualities. Here is where the bog emerges as more than the sum and the cruel exclusivist logic of

³⁹ Patrick Wright, 'Empathising with Bog Bodies: Seamus Heaney and the Feminine Sublime,' *Brief Encounters* 1, 1 (2017): p. 2.

⁴⁰ Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998). All quotations are taken from here.

⁴¹ On the origins of Heaney's archaeological poetics and interest in bogland, see Anna Anselmo, 'Toward the Within: Archaeology and Remediation in Seamus Heaney's *Digging*,' *Remediating Imagination: Literatures and Cultures in English from the Renaissance to the Postcolonial*, ed. Gioia Angeletti, Giovanna Buonanno e Diego Saglia (Roma: Carocci, 2016), pp. 141-8.

its binaries: while it swallows up bodies, objects, and animals ('butter', l. 13, and 'the Great Irish Elk', l. 10) and is thus treacherous and deadly, it also preserves these accidental casualties of anthropological rites and fate; further, it not only cradles and conserves whatever is deposited in it, it also gives it back in random and unexpected acts of restitution and/or discovery. The bog bridges the gap between lost and found, in and out, dead and alive. Thus, Heaney writes of the 'Great Irish Elk' (l. 10) taken out of the peat and standing as 'an astounding crate full of air' (l. 12); he writes of 'butter sunk under / More than a hundred years' (ll. 13-14) which 'was recovered salty and white' (l. 15).

Reflecting on the meaning of bogland in his creative life, Heaney explains how 'memory was the faculty that supplied [him] with the first quickening of [his] own poetry' and how he felt 'a tentative unrealized need to make a congruence between memory and bogland'.⁴² Bogland is thus pregnant with meaning and history; in 'Kinship', Heaney calls it in turn 'Ruminant ground' (II, l. 9), 'Earth-pantry' and 'bone vault' (II, l. 13); containing death, creativity/motherhood, and the contradiction of chewing, swallowing, and bringing back up.

It is 'The Grauballe Man' (1975) that bridges the gap between life and death by acknowledging bogs and bog bodies as the ultimate act of defiance against 'the rupture wrought by death on the body'.⁴³ The body of the Grauballe Man presents the poet with more questions than answers: it is 'something entirely different from what [it] had been before, changed from subject to object by the weight of the past'.⁴⁴ In fact, Heaney first sees it in a picture, already remediated through the archaeological work of reconstruction carried out by P.V. Glob, a double object. At the same time, the Grauballe Man refuses objectification, caught in the life-giving paradox of the bog: neither alive nor quite dead, Grauballe may be an object of study, but is the subject of his own rebirth, given a new lease of life by the mother-bog/motherland, with Heaney acting as midwife and playing out the disruption of the life and death binary in verse: 'Who will say "corpse" / to his vivid cast? / Who will say "body" / to his opaque repose?' (ll. 25-8). Exploiting the linguistic slippage that captures

⁴² Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), p. 54.

⁴³ Thomas Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 35.

⁴⁴ Laqueur, p. 32.

the ontological rupture caused by bog bodies, Heaney questions the very nature of life and death: too vivid to be dead, too still to be alive, the Grauballe Man is neither alive *nor* dead, but some other way of being in the world that questions the very language we use as well as the hard-and-fast ontological categories we live by. Grauballe is a foetus (l. 31), his head and shoulder 'Bruised like a forceps baby' (l. 36): showcasing the awkward lines of a new-born ('his twisted face', l. 32), he is a product of the bog, and of himself, intertwined with the very ground that hid him in the gruesomeness of his death and penetrated him to his very core so he could be new again, completely transfigured by tannins, 'poured in / tar' (ll. 1-2) and weeping 'the black river of himself' (ll. 4-5).

Heaney is intensely aware of the disruptive quality of his topic: both subject and object, newly born and long-dead, Grauballe is caught in-between, pure becoming. Both in himself and through Heaney's eyes, Grauballe embodies Deleuze's very dynamism of change: he has been penetrated by what Heaney in 'The Tollund Man' (1972) calls the 'dark juices' (l. 15) of the bog, but the transformative qualities of the peat reach beyond the ground and into the materiality of the word. Grauballe is, in fact, beyond human, beyond the utter and deceptively clean-cut categories of dead and alive, he is imbued with the paradox of wet-land (another word for bog), existing in water and earth at the same time: his wrists are like 'bog oak' (l. 7), his heel like a 'basalt egg' (l. 9), his instep wobbling between the alliteration and rhyme of 'a swan's foot / or a wet swamp root' (ll. 11-12), floral and faunal; his hips mussel-like (l. 14), concave and convex at once, and his spine the shape of an eel in glistening mud (ll. 15-16). Part water, part earth, in-between life and death and partaking of both, Grauballe is individuated by Heaney's ekphrastic brushstrokes in his intense liminality, in his essentiality as a signifier of change and perpetual becoming.

'Bog Queen' (1975) takes the disruptive quality of the bog body even further by belabouring the Deleuzian concept of becoming, which 'explodes the ideas about what we are and what we can be beyond the categories that seem to contain us: beyond the boundaries separating human being from animal, man from woman, child from adult, micro from macro, and even perceptible and understandable from imperceptible and incomprehensible',⁴⁵ and life from death, I may add. The subject/object divide is

⁴⁵ Patty Sotirin, 'Becoming-woman,' in *Gilles Deleuze: Key Concepts*, ed. Charles Stivale (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), p. 99.

blurred in Iron Age bog bodies; people and things were treated analogously when placed in the bog, 'weapons, personal objects, tools, cauldrons and food such as tubs of bog butter, [were] often deliberately damaged, twisted or broken, before being pinned or weighed down, as with the bog bodies'.⁴⁶ This already tenuous divide between subjects and objects in bogs leads to the questioning of the very nature of bog bodies themselves, as people or things, human beings that once were or archaeological evidence and, eventually, exhibits. Such tenuous divide is addressed by Heaney, who comfortably inhabits the ambiguity in 'Bog Queen'.

The first person narration already identifies the queen as a speaking, thinking, feeling subject: on the one hand, she is, undeniably, a cadaver, a sacrificial victim, *subjected* to the vagaries and violence of time, the elements, and (living) human agency ('dawn suns groped over my head / and cooled at my feet', ll. 7-8; 'I was barbered / and stripped / by a turf-cutter's spade', ll. 42-4), an object of anthropological rites, archaeological research, and museum exhibitions; on the other hand, given her own voice by the poet, she is caught in-between subjectivity and objectification, life and death, taking part in both, waiting to be reborn. In a word, becoming. The queen is thus one more perfect embodiment of the paradox of bogs: she was a subject (alive), she was an object (of sacrifice, a cadaver), she is a subject again as she lies waiting (l. 1), a key verb Heaney employs, which implies an active subject in terms of consciousness of self and decision-making abilities. Heaney thus verbally constitutes the Bog Queen as something unique, fundamentally disruptive: an archaeological subject, as opposed to the conventional archaeological object.

More than that, Heaney's ekphrastic exploits solidify the deceptively ephemeral concept of becoming. While, in common parlance, becoming tends to be assimilated with a linear process *tout court* with a start, a metamorphic middle and an end result, in Deleuzian thought, becoming is not synonymous with metamorphosis or transformation, but rather a relational cross-contagion in which no origins or targets are relevant, and in which no element caught in becoming loses itself or transforms itself, but reaches out beyond itself and is thus caught in the very dynamism of change, existing in the absence of either/ors and in the very presence of addition (and...and...and...). To put it in Deleuze's own words, firstly:

⁴⁶ Giles, p. 11.

Becomings are not phenomena of imitation or assimilation, but of a double capture, of non-parallel evolution, of nuptials between two reigns. Nuptials are always against nature. Nuptials are the opposite of a couple. There are no longer binary machines: question-answer, masculine-feminine, man-animal, etc.⁴⁷

And secondly:

The wasp and the orchid provide the example. The orchid seems to form a wasp image, but in fact there is a wasp-becoming of the orchid, an orchid-becoming of the wasp, a double capture since 'what' each becomes changes no less than 'that which' becomes. The wasp becomes part of the orchid's reproductive apparatus at the same time as the orchid becomes the sexual organ of the wasp. One and the same becoming, a single bloc of becoming.⁴⁸

The Deleuzian example serves to understand how bog bodies, and Heaney's 'Bog Queen' in particular, are caught in becoming. Already in 'The Tollund Man' (ll. 13-18) and, as seen above, in 'Grauballe Man', images of cross-contagion, and an awareness of the intertwining of body and bog are key elements of Heaney's poetical agenda. In 'Bog Queen', images of this sort multiply to signify the double-capture, indissoluble and perpetually dynamic, between the queen and the peat. The queen describes the process of decay and preservation undergone in the bog in terms of becoming-bog and the bog becoming her: the master image being 'My body was braille / for the creeping influences' (ll. 5-6). Underground, in the dark, both bog and queen are bound to the sense of touch, her body becomes a language made up of bumps and crevices and full and empty, in which the surrounding terrain finds room for cross-contagion. The sun above ground warms her head up and cools at her feet, from east to west, and that's how she knows the way she's been laid down; she is penetrated by the 'seeps of winter' (l. 10) – underground streamlets of water and tannins – through skin and fabric, they digest her, capture her in a process of progressive drying up and conservation of tanned, leathery skin. Infiltrated by the juices of the bog, drained and leathered, she is porous, and, in turn, becomes home to roots that 'pondered and died / in the cavings / of stomach and sockets' (ll. 13-15). Not only is she penetrated by the juices of the bog, she offers herself up as home to 'illiterate roots' (l. 12): they are caught in becoming-queen, while she is caught in becoming-root, becoming-bog.

⁴⁷ Deleuze and Parnet, p. 2.

⁴⁸ Deleuze and Parnet, p. 2.

What Heaney crystallizes in the rich abundance and mercilessness of his images is Deleuzian becoming as epitomized in bog bodies: despite references to origins and results in Heaney's verses – the queen's royal status and crown, her silent wait for rebirth out of the bog – the focus is on the ground and the body cross-contaminating; the queen does not become the ground any more than the ground becomes her, but they are in constant conversation, the parts where they touch embodying the very dynamism of change. So 'The question "What are you becoming?" is particularly stupid. For as someone becomes, what he is becoming changes as much as he does himself'.⁴⁹ The 'Bog Queen' does not become anything: while she is bent on rebirth, lying in wait, she is also conversing with the natural environment in which she is embedded, part of a constant and absolute event, that of relationship and contagion. Her brain 'fermenting' (l. 20), becoming-tannin, reminiscent of vineyards and wine; her nails darkened by the minerals in the earth, fruit-like ('Bruised berries under my nails', l. 22). Even when she is finally reborn, torn out of her century-long double-capture with the bog ('The plait of my hair / a slimy birth-cord / of bog, had been cut / and I rose from the dark', ll. 50-3), Heaney and the reader know that her becoming will never cease: she will be caught in becoming-cadaver for the purpose of medical and archaeological study, becoming-photograph, becoming-exhibit, conversing with display cases and arrangements and lighting and positioning and location, constantly reconfiguring and reconfigured by finally becoming-spectator, seen and seeing.

The last poem here discussed, an emblem of becoming and of the linguistic slippage inherent in bog bodies, is 'Strange Fruit'. Firstly, the poem presents the full ambiguity and ontological rupture in the use of the word 'body': if, based on the arguments and the definition offered above, 'body' is a hypernym, comfortable in that it refers to both living and dead body, but also defamiliarizing because it is more commonly associated with life than death for which the hyponyms corpse and cadaver are more usual, 'body' is also the name for a unity that is made up of parts, that is, the assemblage of organs, tissue, systems that go into the function of the body as a whole. Already in 'Grauballe' and 'Tollund', Heaney zooms in on body parts, his ekphrastic verses focus on head ('Tollund'), and chin and slit throat ('Grauballe'). The poet's attention to

⁴⁹ Deleuze and Parnet, p. 2.

detail is both a stylistic feature that predates the bog poem sequence, as well as a necessity for two reasons: on the one hand, Danish bog bodies come to him via P.V. Glob's *The Bog People*, thus what Heaney sees is, firstly, pictures (remediated versions of the bodies), and secondly, pictures of parts, details, which constitute the material he draws on in order to write. In fact, as Gail McConnell points out:

many of Heaney's comments on poetry 'nudge it towards the visual arts ... the verbal icon'; 'a search for images and symbols'; 'The poetry I love is some kind of image or visionary thing'; 'a painter can lift anything and make an image of it'. Famously, in 'Feeling into Words', Heaney represents poetry as divination and frames his poetic endeavour as 'a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament' as though already pre-formed, found rather than made. While this may sound painterly, Heaney is speaking about an encounter with photography: 'the unforgettable photographs of these victims [in *The Bog People*] blended in my mind with photographs of atrocities, past and present'. Indeed, his memory of the elk skeleton found in the bog as a child is less a memory than a memory of a photograph.⁵⁰

Heaney compounds his fascination with the compactness and emotional impact of photography with his profound understanding of the ambiguity of 'body', of bog-made and bog-found subjects/objects that are impossible to pigeonhole into the clean-cut categories of alive and dead. Thus, using language as he would a lens, he thematizes the assemblage-like quality inherent in the word 'body', he looks at body parts. Specifically, a head. The significance of metonymy (a head for a victim, a head for a body) coupled with the importance that the head itself has in some parts of Deleuze's discourse on becoming is a starting point for discussing the blurring of the boundaries between dead and alive, object and subject.

In writing of Francis Bacon's portraits, Deleuze claims that by portraying heads instead of faces, Bacon sets out to 'dismantle the face: to rediscover the head and make it emerge from beneath the face'.⁵¹ In perhaps similar fashion, Heaney writes of what is presumably the head of a young woman found in Rourk Fen in 1942 and described by Glob.⁵² Her state of preservation is such that she is already beyond the catego-

⁵⁰ Gail McConnell, 'Heaney and the Photograph: "Strange Fruit" in Manuscript and Published Form,' *Irish University Review* 47 (2017): p. 434.

⁵¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 19.

⁵² Glob, pp. 98-100.

ries of alive and dead: empty eye-sockets 'blank as pools' (l. 8), 'prune-skinned' (l. 2), dark and wrinkled-thick, she is purely symbolic, almost faceless, her becoming-bog and becoming-nature still resonating. Nature has both preserved her head and corrupted her to the point of defamiliarization. The face has left room for the flesh: 'without the face, the body becomes-animal, that is, becomes flesh or meat – something that loses definition as it is removed from its bones'.⁵³

Beyond definition, the girl in 'Strange Fruit' is both completely transformed into a part of nature, the metaphor/title to the poem bearing the full weight of the perfect identity between severed head and fruit, and a completely defamiliarized subject/object, impossible to read as alive or dead for it is pure symbol – a talking head, body-less – and exhibit at the same time. Some of the bog bodies studied by Glob ended up dismembered for the purpose of study and exhibition, so Heaney takes up the Roum girl's head as symbolic of ritual violence, remediation and becoming. Ritual violence and time make an object out of her, her sagging, leathery flesh and open mouth reminiscent of Francis Bacon's melting, self-deconstructing faces; she is stripped of that mask, 'laid on from the outside that allows me to pass into human society but only within certain narrow corridors defined by the faciality of my face'.⁵⁴ Her emersion, exhumation, study and exhibition have reduced her to a metonymy, her head the only manifestation of her past and present existence, tight as an elastic band across time, and timeless in the (literal) emptiness of her eye(sockets): and yet, bodiless head, she *stares*, she meets the violence of her death and the voyeuristic twentieth-century museum-goer head on ('outstaring axe / And beatification, outstaring / What had begun to feel like reverence', ll. 12-14). It is in her eyeless stare and her open, all-swallowing Baconian mouth that she ceases to be object and claims subjectivity. Within the subject/object divide, with her being subject *and* object, Deleuzian becoming is once more enacted: Heaney writes of her as an 'exhumed gourd' (l. 1), 'pash' (l. 6) – an old regional word for head, the archaism delivering the depth of time she embodies – made 'of tallow' (l. 6), animal fat, soft and hard, malleable. Not only is she a strange fruit, becoming-bog in her prune-skin and prune-stone-like teeth (l. 2), not only is her hair described as 'wet fern' (l. 3), caught in-between animal and vegetable texture, but she

⁵³ Gerald L. Bruns, 'Becoming Animal (Some Simple Ways),' *New Literary History* 38, 4 (2007): p. 711.

⁵⁴ Bruns, p. 712.

is also becoming-animal as exemplified by the loneliness of her defaced, eyeless face, an absolute 'head', which is, in Deleuze's words, a 'spirit in bodily form, a corporeal and vital breath, an animal spirit. It is the animal spirit of man: a pig-spirit, a buffalo-spirit, a dog-spirit, a bat-spirit';⁵⁵ as evident in the tallow of her head, the soft animal-based substance that makes the Roum girl less of a biped and more of a quadruped.

4. Drawing flies: or, coming to an end

The binary machine has been consistently questioned by science and literature alike. Either/or scenarios have been increasingly problematized and their claim for absoluteness debunked. By looking at Gunther von Hagens' scientific-aesthetic agenda, as well as the peculiarities of bog bodies, both natural and representational, the very real possibility of disrupting binary oppositions such as life/death and subject/object has emerged. While Gunther von Hagens' work walks the fine line between anatomy and the visual arts and plays on the defamiliarization and defacement of the dead body and the effect provoked by its contradictory positioning within the quotidian, bog bodies prove disruptive on multiple levels. The very existence of these bodies and their location – the bog – provide a liminal backdrop against which representation – be it archaeological, museal, and literary – must be read.

Seamus Heaney's reading of bog bodies pivots on such a threshold, but reaches beyond it, and shows bog bodies as disrupting the life/death as well as the subject/object divide. Heaney captures the symbolic essence of these bodies, their being in-between: they are caught in becoming, a pure event, a simultaneity 'whose characteristic is to elude the present. Insofar as it eludes the present, becoming does not tolerate the separation or the distinction of before and after, or of past and future. It pertains to the essence of becoming to move and to pull in both directions at once'.⁵⁶ Heaney sees these bodies as pulling in both directions, past and future, caught in their relational dynamic with the bog. Both von Hagens' and Heaney's work thrive on the rupture of the either/or and re-imagine and re-present the body as going beyond accepted hermeneutic categories, signifying all the more because of it.

⁵⁵ Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, p. 19.

⁵⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 1.

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