

From Antaeus to the Bog Queen: Mythological Allusions in Seamus Heaney's *North*

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Abstract: Addressing the Irish Troubles in his "North", 1995 Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney makes mythological allusions and tells of the chaos by using symbolic language. His relevant poems, Antaeus and Hercules myths from Greek mythology are the stories of source power for the Irish and those of their dispossessions. His poems dealing with the cult of Nerthus, the goddess of earth in Scandinavian mythology, are the narratives underlying the cultural kinships between the two geographies, reflecting contemporary practices of cycle of violence. In this sense, the bog queens in 'Come to the Bower' and 'Bog Queen' appear to be as Nerthus, for whom people were sacrificed to ensure the fertility of the territory in spring, and as Mother Ireland, who needs the blood of her children to survive. While the first group traces back the reasons of hibernation of Ireland, defined as the 'sleeping giant', the second one picks the route of violence followed by her loyalties to awaken this giant. Heaney's preference to hold a mirror to his locale through Greek and Scandinavian mythologies is a result of his desire to show the political and social chaos comprehensively.

Keywords: Seamus Heaney, poetry, Ireland, Irish Troubles, mythology, bog

Antaeus'tan Bataklık Kraliçesi'ne: Seamus Heaney'nin *North* Adlı Yapıtında Mitolojik Göndermeler

Öz: 1995 Nobel Edebiyat Ödülü sahibi Seamus Heaney 'North' adlı kitabında İrlanda Sorunu'nu ele alırken mitolojik araştırmalarda bulunmuş, yaşanan karmaşayı simgesel bir dille anlatmıştır. Yunan mitolojisindeki Antaeus ve Hercules söylenceleri, onun ilgili şiirlerinde, İrlandalıların köklerinin ve köklerinden kopartılış sürecinin öyküleridir. İskandinav mitolojisindeki Toprak Tanrıçası Nerthus kültürüyle ilgili şiirleri ise, iki coğrafya arasındaki ekinsel benzerlikleri vurgulayan, şiddet döngüsünün çağdaş pratiklerini yansıtan anlatılardır. Bu anlamda, 'Come to the Bower' ve 'Bog Queen' şiirlerinde sözü edilen bataklık kraliçeleri, ilkbaharda toprağa bereket getirmesi için kendisine kurbanlar sunulan Nerthus, kurtuluşu için evlatlarının kanına gereksinim duyan İrlanda Ana olarak görünür. Birinci grup, 'uyanık dev' olarak tanımlanan İrlanda'nın uykuya yatışının izlerini sürerken, ikinci grup bu devin uyanması için izlenen şiddet yolunu yanlış bularak eleştirir. Heaney'nin Yunan ve İskandinav mitolojileri aracılığı ile kendi yereline uzaktan ayna tutmayı yeğlemesi, yaşanan siyasal ve toplumsal karmaşayı bütün boyutlarıyla gösterebilme isteğinin bir sonucudur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Seamus Heaney, şiir, İrlanda, İrlanda sorunu, mitoloji, bataklık

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The literary pioneers of the Celtic Revival defined myths as the primary movers of history and regarded them as pure sources, through the use of which the fragmented national identity was believed to be restored. The main goal was to reproduce the past and to create an Irish generation from Celtic values by proving they were descended from a nation that left indelible marks on the history of Europe (Hutchinson, 2001: p. 505). For Yeats and other dominant writers of the Revival, through mythology they would gain unity in culture and then in politics, which would lead to national solidarity. Their ideal was to “mythologize Ireland’s past with a view towards shaping its future” (Bhroin, 2011: p. 7). However, as Richard Kearney writes, “Yeatsian mythologizing was so imposing that it soon became part of a new cultural orthodoxy. The next generation of Irish writers felt it necessary to escape from his shadow. They had to bury their revivalist fathers in order to create anew” (1996: p. 124). This new literary treatment, especially led by James Joyce, approached myths as a means to illuminate the critique of current problems rather than as a source of national conscience.

The 1995 Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney (1939-), one of the most popular Irish poets currently writing in English, handles the Irish Troubles, a three decade-long civil war during which the Catholic-Nationalist and the Protestant-Unionist terror was inextricably intertwined with that of the state, within a mythological context so as to lay bare the question behind the conflicts. His purpose is to create poetic solutions to the social turmoil of his country, to rummage out “emblems of cultural predisposition to tribal sacrifice” (Vendler: 1998, p. 39), or with his own words, to offer “befitting emblems of adversity” (1980: p. 57). Most of these emblems can be read convincingly in his world-shaking volume *North*, which was, for Blake Morrison, “an ambitious historical myth with a quite definite political mission” (1982: p. 57).

However, the poet sometimes comes under the fire due to his mythologizing tendency, and hence is criticized by Ciaran Carson as “the laureate of violence –a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing, an apologist for “the situation”, in the last resort, a mythifier” (1975: p. 183). While Johnston Dillon articulates that “Heaney’s psychological intentions are obscured by the accidental conjunction of history” (2003: p. 115), J. W. Foster states that despite his “need to negotiate between the rival claims upon him, his notion of history, taking his cue from the popular rather than educated mind in Ireland, centres almost brutally on struggle rather than diplomacy” (1995: p. 28). On the other hand, Conor Cruise O’Brien tackles the poems in the volume from a sectarian aspect claiming the book tells just the Catholics of Northern Ireland, “Yes, the Catholics: there is no equivalent Protestant voice. Poetry is as unfair as history, though in a different way” (1997: p. 25). Positive or not, all criticisms about *North* contribute to its popularity and make it one of the most riveting volumes of contemporary British poetry, and serve its messages to reach a large audience.

Heaney’s method in using myths in *North* is to hold a mirror to the local from a distance. Therefore, his poems in this regard are largely based on non-native myths,

which can be handled in two main categories: Greek and Nordic. In either case, the poet is at work for the purpose of uncovering the core reasons of the Troubles. Poems cited to Greek mythology implicitly address the colonization of Ireland, dispossession of the indigenous people of their lands and destruction of native culture. Yet, those associated with Nordic mythology suggest the cultural roots of the predicaments, which are largely based on neither colonial nor sectarian, neither economic nor class-caused reasons, but rather deeply on Nerthus cult of the Iron Age (Vendler, 1998: p. 50-51). In this strong view, the poet likens the primitive tribal societies where people were sacrificed for Nerthus, the goddess of earth, to ensure the fertility of the territory in spring, to contemporary Irish society, cherishing the republican sense which summons its faithful followers to give up their lives for their country.

The first part of *North* is wrapped up by two significant poems: 'Antaeus' in the beginning and 'Hercules and Antaeus' in the end. As the former refers to the origins of Irish solidity and source of native resistance, the latter implies the great loss and the extinction of indigenes under the mental faculties and growing capacity of the British colonizer. Both poems create a harmonious integrity with each other and with the other poems in the part as well. This integrity should be read as a cycle in which mythical and symbolic origins of the political tragedy of contemporary Ulster are explored (Tobin, 1999: 109). At the beginning of this cycle stands 'Antaeus':

When I lie on the ground
I rise flushed as a rose in the morning.
In fights I arrange a fall on the ring
To rub myself with sand

That is operative
As an elixir.
I cannot be weaned
Off the earth's long contour, her river-veins. (p. 12)

Antaeus¹, who takes advantage of earth as an elixir, is not concerned about being defeated, for whether he falls or not, in both cases, the winner is none other than himself.

1) Antaeus, in Greek mythology, is an invincible giant who challenges pass-bys to wrestle with him, and killing his rivals, collects their skulls to build a temple for his father Poseidon, the god of the Sea. He is unrivalled as long as he remains in contact with his mother Gaia, the Earth. This is the reason why he always gains strength when he is thrown off or tossed to the ground. However, he has chink in his armour that he loses all his strength when lifted in the air, or his ties cut with the earth.

Thanks to magical sand, he is able to get back his strength and reconstruct himself. The earth vitalising him is represented as female in the poem, a woman that nurtures his child, which evokes 'Mother Ireland'. He finds his Adam's ale in her nourishing milk, 'long contours' and 'river-veins'. The poem is enriched with expressions supporting the bond between mother-earth and her child:

Down here in my cave
Girded with root and rock
I am cradled in the dark that wombed me
And nurtured in every artery
Like a small hillock. (p. 12)

The words such as 'cradle', 'womb', 'nurture' and 'hillock' all serve to strengthen the giant's maternal roots and emphasise on the vital importance of his home, Mother Ireland. The allusions to the Greek myth are rather creative and befittingly chosen: while Gaia, the mother Earth, becomes an image of Ireland whose people is traditionally agrarian, Poseidon, the god of the sea, consolidates this image hinting at the island in terms of its geographically being surrounded by the sea. In line with the myth, the poem implies that Antaeus is not celestial but terrestrial. From the final lines, the reader can learn what if he loses his links with the earth:

Let each new hero come
Seeking the golden apples and Atlas:
He must wrestle with me before he pass
Into that realm of fame

Among sky-born and royal
He may well throw me and renew my birth
But let him not plan, lifting me off the earth,
My elevation, my fall. (p. 12)

Heaney poetically resuscitates two mythological heroes, Antaeus and Hercules² -the latter 'seek[s] the golden apples and Atlas' to ascend to the realm of gods- by using

2) Hercules is the Roman name for the great hero of Greek mythology, Heracles, who is the son of Zeus and a mortal woman. To the myth, Hera, the supreme goddess, who is jealous of Hercules -because he is the son of another woman- makes him to lose his mind. Under her magic, Hercules kills his wife and children. When he regains his sanity and notices what he did, he prays to Apollo for guidance and finally he is advised to serve Eurystheus, the king of Tiryns and Mycenae, for twelve years, in return of punishment for his crime. He would also perform twelve tasks which are considered impossible to be carried out. Should he achieve the impossible, he would join the realm of gods. Having surmounted ten of them, Hercules has to steal the apples of the Hesperides as his 11th labour. On his way to search for apples, he encounters with Antaeus who challenges him to

them as symbols of two different worlds. Antaeus is the true owner of the country while Hercules is the colonizer contemplating to dispossess him of his home. Antaeus can stand his ground as long as he is loyal to the values moulding him, hence opposing any enemies. What nurtures and makes him resist against virulent attacks is hidden in the solidity of his relationships with his roots. Waiting especially for Hercules, he is overconfident in winning every combat, but the fact remains that he is conscious of his weakness, his achilles heel, and, for this very reason, he is always on guard. However, he has nothing going for him, because the second poem 'Hercules and Antaeus' reports that the invincible giant is already defeated by his rival:

a fall was a renewal
but now he is raised up the
challenger's intelligence
is a spur of light,
a blue prong graiping him
out of his element
into a dream of loss
and origins- (p. 52)

On his way to join 'among sky-born and royal', Hercules's most powerful weapon is his intelligence which is 'a spur of light'. He is celestial by birth because of his father, Zeus. If Antaeus is the colonized and dispossessed Irish, then Hercules is the British colonizer equipped with mind and strength. He is well aware of the fact that he can easily exploit anything concerning Ireland provided that he erases the language, culture and historical consciousness of indigenous people. Thus, 'Hercules and Antaeus' becomes a story narrating the defeat of the Irish, a people embedded in agrarian traditions and browbeaten by the British colonizers, representatives of a nation adapting itself to the necessities of the time and prioritising technological innovations. This story is mostly based on a historical fact that through plantations especially Ulster, one of the four historical provinces of Ireland, was colonized by Protestant settlers from Scotland and England in the 16th century, and Penal Laws which entered into force in the 17th century restricted living space for the Catholics to the utmost. For the people dispossessed of their homes, there was nothing much to do, so the Irish remained alone within a world of refuge, which was once the reason for their existence but turns suddenly into an absence. This is a world of dreams. David Lloyd points out the word 'graiping' in the poem and asserts that as "an old Norse word for 'gripping' or 'grasping', 'graiping' recalls the Viking invasions of Ireland and their linguistic legacy" (1996: p. 84). This interpretation supplies

fight. Being a wise and tricky hero, he notices he cannot resist to the giant with usual methods, and learns his rival's secret. In the fight, Hercules breaks Antaeus's earth-contacts and keeps him in the air till he dies.

the reader with a convenient potential to connect ‘Antaeus’ and ‘Hercules and Antaeus’ with bog poems to be handled in the following pages.

Antaeus loses his sacred place, his country, “the cradling dark, the river-veins, the secret gullies of his strength, the hatching grounds of cave and souterrain” (p.52) after the combat. The defeated giant leaves his memoirs, souvenirs, all his belongings confirming his existence to the elegists, and he himself becomes a subject of lament. Towards the end of the poem, writing “Balor will die and Byrthnoth and Sitting Bull” (p. 53), Heaney compares the giant with three important leaders chosen from different historical periods and cultures: the king of Fomarians in Celtic mythology, the British commander who was slaughtered by Vikings during the Battle of Maldon towards the end of the 10th century, and the chieftain of Dakota Sioux Indians, who defeated George Armstrong Custer in the Battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876 but killed when he was in exile in Canada, respectively. Mythological or real, these characters are national heroes who fought against their enemies to defend their countries and protect their cultures, but in the end, were inflicted defeat (Lloyd, 1996: p. 85). Similar to Antaeus they have some powers that keep them alive. Antaeus takes his power from earth, Balor his magical eye, Byrthnoth his sharp intelligence, and Sitting Bull his commitment to freedom. They exist as long as they can protect the treasures they have.

At the end of the poem, Antaeus is declared to be a definite loser and described as ‘a sleeping giant’, a failed representative of the repressed Irish:

Hercules lifts his arms
in a remorseless V,
his triumph unassailed
by the powers he has shaken,
and lifts and banks Antaeus
high as a profiled ridge,
a sleeping giant,
pap for the dispossessed. (p. 53)

Whether the ‘sleeping giant’ will wake up one day is a controversial point. If so, of course, the adjective ‘sleeping’ implies positively, opening a door to the future for hope. However, it is not Antaeus but Hercules who is described as the owner of the future: “his mind big with golden apples, his future hung with trophies” (p.52). Until coming back to the real world, the ‘sleeping giant’ is doomed to remain just as an instrument occupying the dispossessed with old pompous days and the term will continue to depict a dream by means of which pro-united Ireland supporters console themselves. That which Hercules confiscates is no other than, as it happens, Northern Ireland, which has been a part of the United Kingdom since 1921. This approach is in accord with the title of the volume

'North', which indicates directly the north of the Ireland on the one hand and implies it by alluding to the ancient tribal cult of Northern Europe on the other.

If 'Antaeus' tells of the Irish roots, 'Hercules and Antaeus' tells of the rise of British ascendancy, then 'Come to the Bower' and 'Bog Queen' denote the misinterpretations of fidelity to those roots in 20th century Ireland. They highlight contemporary violence which lives on deviated beliefs and practices of the republicans to regain the lost origins. Inspired by Nordic mythology, the poet tells in these poems that the method followed by paramilitary groups to rouse up the 'sleeping giant' is unacceptable.

Heaney holds a mirror to his locale from a distance once again and "succeeds in rediscovering home away from home, in rereading myths of sovereignty from an outer place" (Kearney, 1996: p.123). The outer place that supplies a model for him is Iron Age Jutland, today forming the main land of Denmark. Along with the traditional and historical kinship, the resemblance between Ireland and Denmark in terms of geographical features –both countries have a wide area of bogs- helps the poet to set his poetry on a proper and sound ground. In this sense, boglands, especially those in Jutland, are of paramount importance for him on account of having been the homes of the men and women who were ritually strangled, cast into the bogs, or buried with their throats cut thousands of years ago and excavated from their 'sacred places' mostly in the second half of the 20th century.

To the Danish archaeologist Peter Vilhelm Glob, who is famous for his book *The Bog People*, a study of bog bodies and a reference guide for the poet himself, the bog burials were offerings to the goddess Nerthus, who desired new victims every winter to guarantee the fertility of the territory in the spring, or with Heaney's own words, "who needed new bridegrooms each winter to bed with her in her sacred place, in the bog" (1980: p. 57). Jutland is not only a physical territory for the poet but an inspiring home as well, since inhabitants in both geographies acknowledge the violence in different times but in a similar way. The parishes Heaney alludes to cover Jutland, Iceland, Norway, Northern England and Ireland, all of which are "religious districts distinguished chiefly by man-killing: murder and concomitant revenge, the inexorable circle of reciprocal violence" (O'Neill, 1996: p. 93).

Reading Glob's book, Heaney came to believe that in relation to the tradition of Irish political martyrdom, which considers the armed struggle as a sacred debt and sparks off its followers to die for a free Ireland, the goddess cult is "more than an archaic barbarous rite: it is an archetypal pattern" (1980: p. 57). The bog bodies suggest to him "the sort of intratribal violence he sees around him. Perhaps more importantly, though, they unlock the doors to the past" (Foster, Thomas C., 1989: p. 49-50). Through the comparison he makes between ancient and modern ages, Heaney matches Nerthus with Ireland. The mother goddess who was the dominant figure in Germanic tribes tends to clog up the modern mentality, thereby creating a simulacrum for herself, which is none other than Mother Ireland. As Henry Hart writes "Mother Ireland is a *femme fatale*, seducing her devotees to

violent death, rather than a holy land populated by sacred ghosts” (1989: p. 388). Pointing out this point, the poet addresses the high mental resemblance the republicans bear to the actors of the pagan cult in his article ‘Mother Ireland’:

You have a society in the Iron Age where there was ritual blood-letting. You have a society where girls’ heads were shaved for adultery, you have a religion centering on the territory, on a goddess of the ground and of the land, and associated with sacrifice. Now in many ways the fury of Irish Republicanism is associated with a religion like this, with a female goddess who has appeared in various guises. She appears as Cathleen ni Houlihan in Yeats’s plays; she appears as Mother Ireland. I think that the Republican ethos is a feminine religion, in a way. It seems to me that there are satisfactory imaginative parallels between this religion and time and our time (1972: p. 790).

‘Come to the Bower’ considers the matter in a parallel vein. The title of the poem is derived from a popular republican song, ‘Will you come to the Bower?’ which appeals to Irish emigrants, who were scattered to the four winds after the Great Irish Famine, to return home. The song conjures up memories of motherland by mentioning names of landscapes and cherishing the hope that the separated children of Ireland will give ear to the request and come back home. The urgency of homecoming is revealed in the chorus at the end of each stanza: “Will you come, will you, will you./ Will you come to the bower?”. However, the kind request in the song turns to be a sort of obligation in Heaney’s poem. The bower is Ireland itself, yet it also symbolises the bed of the goddess (Moloney, 2007: p.110).

On the other hand, the bower is obviously a source of life for republicans, a kind of Edenic garden, a place where the ‘sleeping giant’ is supposed to be reborn, but from the poet’s point of view, it is nothing short of a sacred space where Nerthus waits for her victims or her lovers. What she hopes to do after awakening from her slumber, in John Haffenden’s terms, is a “sexual congress” (1987: p. 91). Here, it is the poet himself who accepts the invitation:

My hands come, touched
By sweetbriar and tangled vetch,
Foraging past the burst gizzards
Of coin-hoards

To where the dark-bowered queen,
Whom I unpin,
Is waiting. Out of the black maw
Of the peat, sharpened willow

Withdraws gently.
I unwrap skins and see
The pot of the skull,
The damp tuck of each curl

Reddish as a fox's brush,
A mark of a gorget in the flesh
Of her throat. And spring water
Starts to rise around her.

I reach past
The riverbed's washed
Dream of gold to the bullion
Of her Venus bone. (p. 31)

The whole poem attests to "the poet's imaginative intercourse with his country" (Longley, 1997: p.48). The bedchamber, which the goddess summons to, is no doubt a grave for the volunteers, but the narrator of the poem seems to be glad to sacrifice himself, nevertheless. No matter he dies, because every death is a renewal. In the republican sense, the hunger strikers in the Maze, acting within the circle of politics but inspired by myth, were close to this mentality, for they found an escape from the desperate plight they were obliged to through "a mythico-religious tradition of *renewal-through-sacrifice*" (Kearney, 1996: p. 110). Generally speaking, this poem "suggest[s] in symbolic terms that such myths of blood sacrifice [...] continue to lie just below the surface of Irish political life, and continue also to exert an appeal in which the politics has an almost sexual allure and mystique" (Corcoran, 1998: p. 70). Henry Hart gives a satisfactory analysis from a similar angle, emphasizing erotically and mythically formed relationship between the son-victim-lover and the deity:

Ireland here is "the bower," as in the popular republican song which Heaney alludes to in his title, but womb as well as tomb, Nerthus's sexualized grove as well as a girl's comely body (and it is hard to ignore the orgasmic connotations of "My hands come" at the beginning of the poem). Heaney's persona feels his way, as if blinded by the feminine mystery, unpinning and unwrapping her until she is finally naked. If he wants to examine the naked reality of Ireland, he is hardly dispassionate in his quest. [...] The dead girl's *mons veneris* is a mountain of gold bullion, flecks of which can be panned in her fertile streams. Heaney's "dark-bowered queen" may be Yeats's Houlihan, who, disguised as an old woman, stole the young Michael Gillane from his wife-to-be and

states fore-bodingly, “Many a man has died for love of me (1989: p. 404-405).

The sharpened willow out of the black maw of the peat can be regarded as a phallic symbol. In this very point, the reality of ritual murders is metamorphosed and explicitly eroticised (Coughlan: 1997:194). The narrator tries to temper this with the dark-bowered queen to copulation, then “the bog becomes a love-bower, its female corpses ‘insatiable’ brides who lie in waiting for an awakening kiss” (Morrison, 1982: p. 62). As Moloney puts it, ‘Come to the Bower’ “could be dismissed as an unwelcome, distasteful portrait of a necrophiliac in action- a pathological narrator making love to a strangely preserved corpse” (2007: p. 116). As seen, there is a disgusting and hideous twosome act that shocks the readers and makes them draw an analogy between bog bodies and martyrdom-minded people, and keep aloof from such a context of incestuousness and necrophilia.

The final point the narrator reaches is the Venus bone of the bog body which becomes gold. There is also an archaeological side here. Thomas C. Foster summarises it quite well:

Buried, rare, the woman is literally an equivalent to gold in archaeological value, but beyond that, she represents an alchemical miracle: an ordinary body transformed into a preserved, tanned body unlike its living form, an ordinary woman changed magically to not just the subject of a poem but an organising metaphor for a volume of poems. The gold is for the poet as well as the researcher (1989: p. 57).

This archaeological tendency is also seen in ‘Bog Queen’. Heaney once again carries out poetical excavations to address the links between the cast of mind prevailing to the Troubles and the Nordic mythology. Historically, the body of ‘Bog Queen’ was found in 1781 in County Down, Northern Ireland, in a peat bog in Lord Moira’s estate –this time not in Jutland. She becomes a good token in point of her having evidential value to show how deep the roots of Nerthus cult extend to Heaney’s home. As is understood from the garments on and around the body and the ornaments pertaining to a diadem, she is presumed to be a lady of high rank, a Viking. She is a sort of time traveller, of course, with some physical changes but despite the harsh climate conditions, she stays at her ground so long that she becomes the earth and earth becomes her. It seems to Michael Parker that she “accepts the indignities of Time with fortitude and confidence in her ultimate salvation. Like dispossessed people of her adopted home, she survived centuries of ‘waiting’ by becoming at one with the land and its sufferings” (1993: p.135). In the poem it is the bog queen herself speaking and informing the reader about her waiting process:

I lay waiting
between turf-face and demesne wall,

between heathery levels
and glass-toothed stone.

My body was braille
for the creeping influences:
dawn suns groped over my head
and cooled at my feet,

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

pondered and died
in the cavings
of stomach and socket.
I lay waiting

on the gravel bottom,
my brain darkening.
a jar of spawn
fermenting underground
dreams of Baltic amber. (pp. 32-33)

Giving exact coordinates of her nest/tomb, she speaks of herself as if she was the centre of all weather and climate events. It is mostly cold, an allusion to her motherland, Scandinavia. Even in her 'brain darkening', her imagination is hale and hearty, thus she can remember 'Baltic amber' which underlies her Viking origins once more. The poet uses 'I lay waiting' twice in the poem, particularly evoking the woman of 'Come to the Bower'. In this sense, she is disguised as a goddess like her equivalents, waiting for her subjects. Even though the 'bog queen' is depicted substantially as live and aware of what goes around her, she is not alive in real terms, that is, she looks forward to her visitors taking steps to the centre of life. As Thomas C. Foster points out, "her period of burial resembles a winter's hibernation, just as her removal betokens the arrival of spring (the poet connects her with the fertility goddess to whom the bog men are sacrificed) or rebirth" (1989: p. 58). In the final stanzas she tells how she was found or resurrected:

I was barbered
and stripped
by a turfcutter's spade

who veiled me again
and packed coomb softly
between the stone jambs
at my head and my feet.

Till a peer's wife bribed him.
The plait of my hair
a slimy birth-cord
of bog, had been cut

and I rose from the dark,
hacked bone, skull-ware,
frayed stitches, tufts,
small gleams on the bank (pp. 33-34).

She 'rose from the dark' just as the dark-bowered queen of 'Come to the Bower' did. They are both incarnations of Nerthus, conveying the Nordic cult into the streets of Northern Ireland and appealing to the opposing groups to feed them with their blood. Drawing analogies between ancient cults and contemporary cultures, Heaney tries to explain the persistence in Northern Ireland of fiercely defensive, and, at times, pitilessly destructive republican ideology, and that of its twin-Loyalism (Parker, 1993: p. 135), for these groups were responsible of most of the casualties during the Troubles. To Malcolm Button, from 1969 to 2001, out of 3530 killings, 1841 of whom were civilians, 2057 were murdered by republican paramilitaries, 1026 by loyalist paramilitaries, 363 by British security forces, 5 by Irish security forces and 82 persons unknown (CAIN).

All murdered people of the Troubles poetically emerge as the victims of paramilitary methods for awakening the 'sleeping giant'. These people, especially civilians, then, are said to be brothers and sisters of ancient victims. So, Heaney's purpose in using Nordic myths at this point is "to give a cultural and historical context to sectarian violence" (Tomlinson, 1999: 184) and to open alternative paths to the poetic interpretations for the Troubles. In this sense, he seems to be concurred with Richard Kearney regarding the meanings and reflections of myths for the modern man. Kearney evaluates myths in two categories in connection with their influence on contemporary world:

At best, myth invites us to reimagine our past in a way which challenges the present status quo and opens up alternative possibilities of thinking. At worst, it provides a community with a straight-jacket of fixed identity, drawing a *cordon sanitaire* around this identity which excludes dialogue with all that is other than itself. (Kearney, 1996: p. 121).

It only stands to reason that Heaney positions himself in the first group. Since he explores the interface between the ancient and the modern, the myths of the past in his poetry can be considered as instruments illuminating the history of the present and providing 'befitting emblems of adversity'. To challenge the current status quo, as he traces back the reasons of hibernation of the 'sleeping giant', or rather Ireland, in 'Antaeus' and 'Hercules and Antaeus', in 'Come to the Bower' and 'Bog Queen' he picks the route of violence followed by her loyalties to awaken that giant. In doing this, his mythical characters more or less are enshrined, which allows the poet to discuss the matter on a divine platform. They are either deific, semi-deific or godlike. Antaeus is not divine but his parents, mother Earth and father Poseidon; Hercules's mother is a mortal but father is the supreme god Zeus; Nerthus is the goddess of earth; bog bodies are victims sacrificed for the goddess, coalescing into one and thus becoming her incarnations. All these divine perspectives presented in aforementioned poems can also be read as warning texts for Catholic and Protestant fanatics, who, from the issue strive for the creation of a holy war.

To conclude, in Heaney's poetry mythical characters come together to signify the chaos in Northern Ireland. Antaeus becomes the Irish, his power supply is the earth, his country Ireland; Hercules represents the British colonizer who has been continuing to dominate Ulster since 16th century; Nerthus is in the centre of a pagan tribal belief system, and its contemporary follow-up. As bog bodies were the victims of ancient goddess yesterday, the people shot to death, bombed and murdered in the streets of Northern Ireland are of Mother Ireland. They are all symbols chosen from distant lands, through the use of which the poet discovers an aesthetic ground to juxtapose the real with mythological. Heaney's holding a mirror to his locale through Greek and Scandinavian mythologies is a result of his desire to show the political and social chaos comprehensively, for looking at the immediate from a distance supplies a better view and reminds the readers that everybody is in danger of falling a prey to the accidental violence.

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