



BLACK GOO: Forceful Encounters with Matter in Europe's Muddy Margins

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IMAGINE . . .

Picture a peat bog, somewhere in the west of Ireland, perhaps (see Figure 1). What meets the eye first is an expanse of vegetation with scattered pools and hummocks, mostly sphagnum moss—mottled purple, yellow, and green—but interspersed with other plants like bog cotton, flowering white in the springtime. Imagine yourself stepping onto this soft, spongiform surface. Feel it yielding to your tread. Listen to the squelching, sucking sound as you raise your foot. See the imprint that you leave behind slowly filling with water and fading. Now stop and bend close to the ground. Let the dank smell that comes off the peat invade your nostrils. Plunge your hands below the layer of plant growth and down into brown-black, liquid-solid indeterminacy that lies beneath—a mixture of water and plant and animal remains, built up over hundreds or thousands of years. Feel its texture surrounding your fingers as you move them. Register on your skin the simultaneous contrast and permeability between the overgrown surface and the sticky, amphibious goo beneath. Do you find yourself wondering: what's down there?

WHAT NOT TO EXPECT

The story I tell here is not a history. Perhaps it's not even a story—more a meandering thread weaving its way between disparate times and places. Or perhaps, as Tim Ingold has recently suggested, all stories are like that (2011:156–164). Nor is what follows an account of human–environment interactions or of the



FIGURE 1. Cross-section through peat bog, Belderg, County Mayo, Ireland. Photograph by author.

cultural significances of landscapes. It is, rather, a story about matter—not material entities (albeit that a range of artifacts, objects, places, etc., are referenced in the following pages)—but, rather, matter understood as a force capable of manifesting itself through a range of modalities, of which liquid, solid, and vapor are only the most obvious. Matter as described here is not reducible to the dynamics of human history making or the assignment of cultural meaning. Instead, it is to be approached or intuited as much through acts of *poesis* (making) as through the marshaling of newly discovered academic facts. When reference is made to specific contexts and histories, this should not be understood as a gesture of explanatory enframing, but rather, as an attempt to show how the cultural and historical specificities that are the stock in trade of so much academic analysis afford intimations too of their own conditions of possibility in material becomings that cannot themselves be thought in exclusively cultural-historical terms.

Certainly there are many pressing reasons why anyone concerned with understanding the contemporary world should pay attention to materiality. The editors of a recent volume on the subject of *New Materialisms* make reference, for example, to recent debates in philosophy, to the new understandings of matter suggested by developments in such fields as particle physics, chaos and complexity theory, to the ethical and political dilemmas posed by advances in biomedicine and biotechnology and to the increasing “saturation” of people’s intimate and physical lives by a variety

of digital, wireless, and virtual technologies (Coole and Frost 2010:5–25). There is, however, a danger in new approaches to materiality taking their cue too exclusively from transformations perceived to be affecting their own immediate social environment. To do so risks subordinating consideration of matter as an active principle to the description of its humanly experienced and comprehended effects and thus implying that the current (re-)emergence of materiality as a focus of academic concern is, finally, explicable in terms of what remains in the end a human-centered history of social processes, political transformations, and technological innovations. For all that can be said about the present historical entanglements of matter, there remains, arguably, another story to be told, one in which matter features as an abiding yet changeful presence, traversing distinctions between the human and the nonhuman, the organic and the inorganic—a presence occupying a time frame altogether more expansive than that of human history-making and as such never fully reducible to the varieties of contextual explanation that the latter makes available. Certainly matter, as I describe it here, is not timeless and static—quite the reverse—yet it's temporality is one that encompasses, rather than being encompassed by that of history. The challenges facing contemporary materialisms might then be seen to include not only the elaboration of the changing ethical and political stakes of taking account of materiality but also the exploration of practices of writing—or other modes of presentation—that open themselves to and allow themselves to be powerfully affected by matter as a force capable of exerting a deforming pressure on its cultural and linguistic codifications. Such explorations might stand to learn not only from philosophy, science, and their current intersections, but also from music, poetry and the visual arts as media for manifesting as much as theorizing the other-than-human force and efficacy of matter.

Anthropology's own recent efforts to engage materiality have shown an overwhelming predilection for solids. There are, of course, some notable exceptions to this trend: One thinks, for example, of Tim Ingold's call to attend to the transformations of substances, rather than the meanings and uses of things; of Christopher Pinney's emphasis on the inhuman temporalities of materials; and of Stefan Helmreich's explorations of "aqueous anthropologies" of oceanic life (Helmreich 2009; Ingold 2011; Pinney 2005). Nonetheless, such initiatives are far outnumbered by the object- and artifact-centered approaches that have characterized so much of the field of material culture studies (e.g., Buchli 2002; Miller 1998). At the same time, many of our analytic vocabularies continue to adhere to culturally specified boundaries of persons, bodies and objects, even if we recognize in theory that such boundaries are contingent, porous and shifting. Nonetheless, as

the sciences and art and literature continue, in their different ways, to remind us, not only does much of the matter that makes up our environment (and ourselves) exist in liquid or vapor form but also matter itself is disconcertingly capable of shifting between these modalities—solid to liquid, liquid to vapor (and vice versa). Indeed, it might be said that much of the matter that surrounds and constitutes us is perennially on the way to becoming something else. What would happen then to our received ways of describing and understanding the world if we were to take matter in transition as our focus of attention? Might such a reorientation be uniquely revealing, not only of the limits of our received terminology (incl. distinctions between nature and culture, form and substance) but also of a dynamism and creative potentiality inherent in matter itself?

My focus here is on interstitial landscapes existing between clearly differentiated states of matter, specifically liquid and solid—bogs, marshes, fens or “wetlands” as they are now commonly referred to—and their relationship to that impossible to define yet world historically consequential entity known as “Europe.” My wager is that such spaces and their associated cultural imaginaries are distinctively, perhaps uniquely revealing of a materiality in which human cultural expressions necessarily participate but which, at the same time forever exceeds their determinations.¹ As such they remind us of our own relationship as human beings to the impersonal life of matter, a life that simultaneously constitutes us as organisms and subjects and that precedes and outlasts our individual existence. My aim is not to provide a comprehensive overview of the domestication and settlement of Europe’s wetlands, nor to frame such an account in terms of a broader comparative global context. My project is both a narrower and a more ambitious one—namely mobilize a selectively juxtaposed and eclectically chosen range of sources (ethnographic, historical, literary, philosophical) in the service of a speculative poetic ontology and to sketch some of the possible implications of that ontology for thinking and acting in the present.

SWAMP WORLD

The life of the swamps presented the whole drama of tellurian creation to the amazed eyes of earliest mankind. No seed fecundates the womb of the earth, no plow opens the furrow. Spontaneously matter sends forth into the light of day what it has fashioned in its dark depths. The stalks grow, mature, age, die away, and are replaced by new sprouts that embark on the same cycle of development. Here was the prototype of all earthly life. The swamp growth

and its eternal cycle disclosed the law which also governs the world of animals and men. They too arise from the womb of matter, they too return to its darkness.

—J. J. Bachofen, *An Essay on Ancient Mortuary Symbolism*, 1859

Not, perhaps, the guide you were expecting: Johann Jakob Bachofen, 19th-century Swiss jurist and prolific antiquarian. Although Bachofen's writings at one time exerted an influence across the political spectrum, from Friedrich Engels, Paul Lafargue, and, later, Walter Benjamin on the left to Ludwig Kalges and Alfred Bäumler on the right, in the Anglophone academy today he is most often remembered (and frequently dismissed) for his study *Das Mutterrecht* [Mother Right], first published in 1861 (Davies 2010). Bachofen's account of mother-right looks back to a world prior to that of the classical Greco-Roman antiquity in which 19th-century scholarship had sought to discern the origins of European civilization: "I hope to restore the picture of a cultural stage which was overlaid or totally destroyed by the later development of the ancient world" (Bachofen 1992:70). If the Greek world described by mainstream classical scholarship was one of patriarchy and patrilineal descent, in which women were relegated to a marginal and subordinate role, behind it, Bachofen claimed, was an earlier, very different world that was in many respects its inverse.² The primeval world of mother right was one where women were ascendant over men, where descent was reckoned in the female, not the male line and where, in a reversal of later conceptions, the left hand predominated over the right and night over day. The predominance of the left was attested in details of clothing and in the observances of civil and religious life, as well as in the importance attached to the left hand of goddess figures such as the Egyptian Isis. The obscurity of night, meanwhile, rather than the solar clarity of day, provided the basis for the oldest systems of time reckoning and was the preferred time also for fighting battles, taking counsel, meting out justice and practicing religious rites. All this attested that, "we are not dealing with abstract philosophical ideas of later origin, but with the reality of an original mode of life" (Bachofen 1992:77). What characterized mother right above all, for Bachofen, however, was its allegiance to the principle of tellurianism, emphasizing the fecundity of matter, both in the guise of the mother-child relation and of the material substance of the earth as the primary source of all creation. In prioritizing the maternal over the paternal relation, mother right emphasized the material-bodily connection between mother and child. If the maternal relation, for Bachofen, stood as "the origin of all culture," it nonetheless maintained a link also to the fecundity of the natural world and of

the earth in particular as the source of all life. In its natural or tellurian aspect then, mother right partook of the universality of nature, fostering an ethos of universal brotherhood, based on an awareness of the common origin of all beings.

Bachofen distinguished two consecutive phases in the history of mother right. The later, Demetrian phase (so-called after the goddess Demeter) was one of institutionalized, monogamous marriage (accompanied by the matrilineal transmission of property) and settled agriculture, where religious rites and observances were closely linked to the cultivation of the soil. It was preceded however, by a more primitive stage of “hetaerism,” of unrestricted (and public) promiscuity and “formless, orderless freedom,” corresponding to a stateless, nomadic way of life (1992:191). This lower stage was one of “pure” tellurianism, where human reproduction resembled the unconstrained growth of wild plant life. Bachofen saw such a condition as “manifested most abundantly and luxuriantly in the life of the swamps” (1992:97). The swamp provides an image of unformed matter—neither liquid nor solid—and disordered proliferation whereby death and life are inseparably conjoined. Everything born of material creation is destined to die and return to the earth from which it sprang. It is a world of “endless becoming,” where birth and death succeed one another indefinitely and only the process of their succession endures (Bachofen 1992:125).³

Demetrian matriarchy and the concomitant shift to an agricultural way of life, represent, for Bachofen, an initial victory over primitive hetaerism through the ordering of sexual relations and the exaltation of motherhood:

With agriculture, motherhood takes on a new significance, a higher form. The wild swamp generation, which eternally rejuvenates matter in everlasting self-embrace, which brings forth only reeds and rushes or the “swampy offspring of the sources,” and which springs up uselessly without regard to man, is replaced by the act of the tiller of the soil, who opens the womb of the earth under his plow, who lays the seed in the furrow, and harvests nutritious fruit, Demeter’s food. . . . The earth becomes wife and mother, the man who guides the plow and scatters the seeds becomes husband and father. The man is joined in wedlock with feminine matter, and this provides the model for an intimate, enduring, and exclusive relation between the sexes. [1992:191]

The transition to agriculture and monogamous marriage could not, however, dispense entirely with the power of matter. Bachofen interprets the institution of the dowry, along with nuptial sacrifices and ritual promiscuity on the occasion of a marriage, as gestures of recompense toward the older, telluric divinities of

the superseded hetaeric stage: “The law of matter rejects all restrictions, abhors all fetters and regards exclusivity as an offence against its divinity” (1992:94–95). Monogamy was thus required to pay a price for the restrictions that it introduced.

The overcoming of the material-tellurian realm was to be accomplished definitively only with the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy. In contrast to the “universality” of mother right, father right is understood as inherently restrictive and differentiating. To the extent that the paternal relation lacks the tangible immediacy of the maternal one, it is obliged to define itself in abstract legalistic terms, according to criteria of legitimacy and illegitimacy, whereby particular offspring (and not others) are formally acknowledged as the progeny of particular fathers. For Bachofen, the triumph of father right represents humanity’s transcendence of matter, its liberation from the eternal tellurian cycle of birth and death and its ascension to an eternal realm of heavenly light and spirituality. The chthonic and nocturnal goddesses of the matriarchal era give way to male solar deities, like the Greek Apollo (Bachofen 1992:110). This is seen to involve also a shift to a new principle of creation. The self-begetting fecundity of (feminine) matter gives way to an immaterial male creative principle, henceforward to be accorded the status of divinity (Bachofen 1992:110–111). No longer is creation indissolubly linked to death and decay. Although these remain the inescapable fate of earthly matter, humanity is now endowed with a spiritual component that outlasts the dissolution of the body:

The transience of material life goes hand in hand with mother right. Father right is bound up with the immortality of a supermaterial life belonging to the regions of light. As long as religion recognizes the seat of the generative principle in tellurian matter, the law of matter prevails: man is equated with unlamented lower creation and mother right governs the reproduction of man and beast. But once the creative principle is dissociated from earthly matter and joined with the sun, a higher state sets in. Mother right is left to the animals and the human family goes over to father right. At the same time mortality is restricted to matter, which returns to the womb whence it came, while the spirit, purified by fire from the slag of matter, rises up to the luminous heights of immortality and immateriality. [Bachofen 1992:129]

Bachofen sees the changeover from mother right to father right as exemplified by the story of Orestes, the subject of a trilogy of plays (the *Oresteia*) by the Greek dramatist Aeschylus (?525/4–456/5 B.C.E.). In the final play of the trilogy, Orestes has killed his mother, Clytemnestra, after she and her lover, Aegisthus,

have killed his father, Agamemnon, and is pursued by the Erinyes (or Furies), haglike, black-clad female avengers, who demand retribution for the crime of matricide. He flees from his native Argos, first to Delphi, to the sanctuary of the god Apollo (who has previously urged him to avenge his father's death) and then to Athens, where, still pursued by the Erinyes, he seeks refuge in the temple of Athena. At Athena's suggestion, there follows a trial before a jury of Athenian citizens. The Erinyes demand that Orestes pay with his life for the killing of his mother. He, in turn, argues that his action was justified by her prior slaying of his father, her husband. The Erinyes, invoking the primacy of the maternal bond, counter that Clytemnestra's was the lesser crime because "The man she killed was not her flesh and blood" (Aeschylus 2003:172). Apollo, defending Orestes, responds by asserting the claims of fatherhood over those of motherhood:

. . . the so-called mother of the child
 Isn't the child's begetter, but only a sort
 Of nursing soil for the new sown seed.
 The man, the one on top, is the true parent,
 While she, a stranger, fosters a stranger's sprout,
 If no god blights it" [Aeschylus 2003:174]⁴

By way of demonstration, he cites the example of Athena ("such a child as no goddess could bring forth"), born directly from the head of Zeus, her father, and it is Athena herself who proceeds to cast the deciding vote, in favor of acquittal, when the jury is evenly split. Orestes is free to return to Argos to claim his father's throne and the Erinyes, angered at first by the verdict, are persuaded to remain in Athens and be honored as tutelary deities (henceforward to be known as the Eumenides, or kindly ones).

In Bachofen's reading of the story, the Erinyes and Apollo represent the old and new dispensations respectively: "Apollo champions the right of the begetter, while the Erinyes defend the rights of the blood, of the maternal matter" (1992:159). Apollo, as the advocate of father right, embodies too the new, celestial Olympian order, presided over by another male divinity, Zeus, the hurler of thunderbolts. The Erinyes belong, rather, to the sunless depths of the earth ("the dark ground of matter"), where they bring forth new life, which returns to them in death. Angered, they can cause famine, disease, or barrenness. Reconciled with Athens, at the end of the play, they receive sacrifices and prayers and in return undertake to ensure the fertility of the land and the prosperity and well-being of the city.

If the story Bachofen tells appears to represent a straightforward, linear progression, it is, in fact, an account fraught with setbacks and reversals. Bachofen himself, for all his endorsement of patriarchy, is given to frequent expressions of nostalgia for the vanished world of mother right and the poetic and patriotic sentiments it was capable of inspiring. At the same time, his account of the rise of father right and of the Olympian, solar religion is frequently punctuated by the resurgence of tellurianism and the disavowed powers of matter, as though the chronology of historical progress to which Bachofen remains committed were repeatedly suspended to allow the reemergence of a different temporality, characterized by cyclicity and generative repetition. Banished to the margins of “official” religion but never definitively left behind, the swamp world continues to subsist and to manifest itself in a variety of guises: in stories of Amazon communities of female warriors, in the vision of universal flux expounded in the teachings of Pythagoras and, within the Olympian religion itself, in the figure of Dionysus, the outsider god, with his retinue of ecstatic women and animal–human satyrs, in whose cult Bachofen sees a reemergence of the promiscuity and disordered sensuality associated with the most primitive stage of hetaerism, “the religion of the lowest tellurianism, of swamp generation with all its products” (1992:102).⁵

MUDDY MARGINS OF “EUROPE”

It should be noted that my focus here is deliberately and self-consciously Eurocentric. This is not because I do not acknowledge that the story of human engagements with bogs, swamps and other waterlogged spaces that forms the connecting thread of my account is not equally pertinent to an understanding of events elsewhere, including Europe’s onetime colonies. My effort to rethink the question of materiality through the histories and imaginaries of Europe’s waterlogged margins is not intended to exclude the possibility of giving similar consideration to other locales—quite the reverse. My choice of emphasis is, rather, a strategic one, aimed at highlighting a productive tension between the history of Europe’s successive self-definitions and their varied philosophical entailments and the recalcitrant materialities of the geography they have sought to delineate.

I regard Europe as both a geographical entity and a concept—the concept being no less real and no less fully in the world than the mountains, rivers, plains etc. comprising the geographical entity. The concept, the “Idea” of Europe has been articulated in multiple ways, from the Greek geographer Strabo in the first century C.E. to the present-day European Union and has been associated, at various times, with notions of historical exceptionalism, of the supposed distinctiveness

and superiority of its political institutions, most recently in the form of the modern liberal democratic nation-state, and of scientific reason and progress, often asserting the right of Europeans to remake the world in their own image, by force if necessary. The latter conviction has found support not only in science and political theory but also in a philosophical tradition that has often sought (with some notable exceptions) to suppress or deny matter as an active principle—namely the ethos of “hylomorphism”—the view, finding one of its most influential expressions in Aristotle’s *Physics*, that acts of creation, of making, involve the imposition of form *-morphe* on matter *hyle-*. Combined with a belief in the superiority of European values, institutions and technologies, such a view provided a powerful rationale both for intervention in the lives of non-European populations and for the purposive refashioning of the physical environment in Europe and beyond. As Anthony Pagden writes:

the history of the European and subsequent “Western” domination of the planet is not merely the consequence of superior technology. It is also the triumph of a conception of the world, one which assumed that the European scientific tradition from Aristotle to Newton had correctly interpreted the globe as a place for the forceful expropriation of human potential. Philosophy thus became associated with science in ways that were unique or so, at least, it seemed. That it was the European who had seen this most clearly meant that it was the Europeans who had, in a quite specific sense, inherited the earth. Others might know how to live on it, but only Europeans possessed the “Faustian power” to reconstruct it in their own image. [Pagden 2002a: 10–11]

One of the most ambitious attempts to formulate Europe’s world historical uniqueness is to be found, of course, in the philosophy of Hegel. In his lectures, “The Philosophy of History” (1953), originally delivered at the University of Berlin in 1822 and first published posthumously in 1837, Hegel characterized the Europe of his own day both as the culmination of a history and as the exemplification of what it meant to be a historical entity. For Hegel, “World History” described the process of Spirit’s coming-to-consciousness of its own freedom, a movement following a trajectory from east to west from the Persian empire, via Greece and Rome, through the Middle Ages, Reformation, and French Revolution and reaching its fulfillment in the Prussian state of Hegel’s own day. Notoriously, large tracts of the world remained entirely absent from this trajectory, including much of Africa, India and the whole of northern Asia (Hegel 1953:44). Spirit’s

affirmation of its own freedom entailed, for Hegel, nothing less than the overcoming of long-standing philosophical dualisms of mind and matter through Spirit's recognition that it is itself the absolute reality, that it is not determined by or subservient to anything external to itself and that it is therefore endowed with the power to shape reality, rather than being shaped by it. It was precisely the failure to attain such a realization of freedom that characterized the expressions of earlier, "pre-historical" epochs, such as the art of ancient Egypt, with its preponderance of Sphinxes and other hybrid animal–human figures, testifying, according to Hegel, to Spirit's continuing entrapment in the medium of its sensory representations: "The human spirit struggles to work itself out of the dumb power of the beast, through which it cannot display its inner freedom and mobility" (Hegel 2001:15). To think and act historically required in other words the disavowal of matter as a power independent of the life of Spirit.⁶ If much of Hegel's terminology has since fallen from favor, his account is by no means unrepresentative of subsequent developments. Indeed, it may be, as Talal Asad has suggested, that the very notion of historical agency, of "making history" in both its academic and popular usages, is necessarily predicated on the assumption of a universalist teleology, one moreover that presupposes the prior disenfranchisement of other-than-human presences and agencies (Asad 1993:1–14). In this sense, Hegel's philosophical history of European ascendancy remains very much relevant to contemporary formations of historical knowledge.

I want to pursue here a question that definitions of Europe have often sought to foreclose—namely how the material substance of the entity referred to as Europe is related to the concept of Europe as it has been variously formulated. After all, Europe is not, strictly speaking, a continent at all in the sense that geographers have been accustomed to define one but, rather, the northwestern peninsula of the larger landmass of Eurasia. Accordingly, attempts to define Europe have often been beset by the difficulty of fixing its boundaries. If the Atlantic seaboard has seemed to afford a self-evident western boundary (despite the fact that Iceland, routinely classed as a European nation, is in fact situated on the fracture line between the Eurasian and North American tectonic plates), Europe's eastern and southeastern boundaries have often proved more difficult to determine, the Ural Mountains, the Emba River, the Caucasus, the Bosphorus, the Black Sea and the Dardanelles having all been, at various times, appealed to in that capacity. The historian Larry Wolff has suggested that it was the same uncertainty that led, from the 18th century onward, to the practice, among Western Europeans, of distinguishing Eastern Europe as a transitional zone between Europe proper and Asia (Wolff 1994). More recently

of course, doubts as to precisely where Europe begins and ends have resurfaced in debates surrounding the possibility of Turkey's admission to the European Union. The physical geography of Europe has thus proven persistently recalcitrant to codification in terms of a discursively formulated idea of Europe. What then if, contra Hegel and others, one were to attempt to acknowledge this wayward materiality as a presence in its own right, irreducible to the successive definitions of it that have been proffered by geographers, philosophers and politicians across the centuries? How might one begin to take account of the "stuff" of which Europe is made, not simply as a setting for humanly enacted histories or a repository of cultural meanings but as a shifting and unstable aggregate of other than human materialities and agentive powers? Perhaps intimations of such an "other" or "inhuman" Europe might be most likely to reveal themselves in the designated peripheries of the self-styled European project?

As Bachofen's account of the defeat and resurgence of tellurianism reminds us, the story of Europe has unfolded, in no small degree, as an ongoing struggle against the recalcitrant materiality of its own muddy margins. Think, for example, of the fens of eastern England, an area of marsh and scrub, prone to inundation by the North Sea, where large-scale drainage operations began only in the late 16th century or of the Mediterranean plains with their malarial swamps, blocking the inland expansion of human settlement, the reclamation of which for agricultural use was achieved only at the cost of numerous lives and not completed, in some instances, until the 20th century (Braudel 1972; Darby 1940, 1956; Dobson 1997; Pollard 1997). By way of illustration, it is instructive to set Hegel's philosophy of World History alongside the description of the drainage of the Mediterranean plains contained in Fernand Braudel's magisterial history of that region. The Mediterranean is, of course, a crucial way station in the world historical itinerary outlined by Hegel, framing as it does the rise and fall of the civilizations of both Greece and Rome. Yet the story of the plains, as recounted by Braudel, is far from being one of unidirectional progress. Braudel warns that the Mediterranean plains were not always centers of wealth, abundance, and good living. Rather, their latter-day prosperity was the result of sometimes centuries of protracted struggle against waterlogging and disease. Many of the larger plains were not fully reclaimed for agricultural use until the 20th century. The Mitidja, behind Algiers, was not fully cultivated until around 1900. The marshes in the plain of Salonica were not drained and domesticated by Greek settlers in the region until the 1920s. The draining of the Ebro delta and the Pontine Marshes was not completed until the eve of World War II (Braudel 1972:60–62). Once drained, the plains became

richly productive agricultural areas, but the process of reclamation was often a long, slow one, punctuated by frequent setbacks. In the 16th century, which is the focus of Braudel's study, the plains presented, as he puts it, "a spectacle of misery and degradation." The Roman Campagna, the Pontine marshes, the lower Rhone valley, the plain of Durazzo and the Nile valley, along with the inland plains of Corsica, Sardinia and Cyprus were scarcely populated, their few struggling human inhabitants outnumbered by their abundant wildlife, while the mouth of the Danube was "an incredible marshland, a tangled amphibious world, with floating islands of vegetation, muddy forests, fever infested swamps" where a handful of fishermen eked out a wretched and precarious existence (Braudel 1972:62).

The difficulties that the plains presented to human settlers included flooding and malaria. When water from the mountains reached the plains, the flatness of the land caused it to collect in stagnant expenses. These were soon overgrown by reeds and rushes, producing a fertile breeding ground for the *anopheles* mosquitoes responsible for the transmission of malaria parasites. The settlement and cultivation of the plains required the digging of drainage channels and the building of dams, both of which involved intensive and long-term labor. Under such circumstances, the story of the reclamation of the plains could not be one of straightforward, uninterrupted progress. Prior to the use of quinine from the 17th century onward, malaria was often a fatal disease and when not fatal it had the effect of weakening its victims and thus reducing their capacity for labor. The workforce engaged in drainage and reclamation projects needed constant replenishment as successive waves of laborers were either killed or worn out by the ravages of the disease. Those who did not succumb to the disease often fell victim instead to the oppressive social order that often grew up around drainage and reclamation projects, one characterized by harsh living and working conditions and by the unchecked despotism of local landowners remote from and therefore unrestrained by any higher authority. Given the risks and the financial outlay involved, such modernizing projects tended to be undertaken either by governments, large landowners or wealthy capitalist entrepreneurs hoping to profit from newly reclaimed agricultural land. Nonetheless, their implementation, including the mobilization of the necessary labor power, often relied on and in some cases perpetuated the existence of feudal institutions and power relationships in the regions concerned. The attempted forging of capitalist futures in the plains from the 16th century onward was, thus, as Braudel points out, often curiously intertwined with the persistence of the feudal past. Moreover, whenever human efforts were relaxed, as they were, for example, after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, the landscape reverted to its former

waterlogged and disease-ridden state. Like Bachofen and for all his sometime investment in notions of historical progress and European exceptionalism (he refers at one point to the Mediterranean region as the “radiant center” of the globe), Braudel’s account allows us at the same time to envision a temporality radically different from that of any version of universal history, one in which material transformative powers are not relegated to a past of prehistory but remain available as a potential source of intervention in the present (Pagden 2002b:37). As Braudel himself puts it, “Mediterranean man has always had to fight against the swamps” (1972:67).

IL DUCE AND THE “BATTLE OF THE SWAMPS”

One of the most assertive protagonists in that struggle was the Italian Fascist leader Benito Mussolini, who, in 1928, initiated a program to drain and settle the Pontine Marshes, a low-lying region, approximately 300 square miles in extent, stretching along coast southeast of Rome. The marshes extended on both sides of the Roman road known as the Appian Way between Cisterna and Terracina, bounded to the west by the Tyrrhenian Sea and to the east by the Lepini Mountains (Frost 1934:584; Snowden 2006:146). The region had long been associated with malaria, discouraging more intensive settlement.⁷ In spring, rainwater running down from the mountains caused the rivers to overflow their banks and led to widespread flooding. The sand and clay topsoil impeded drainage and the stagnant pools that resulted provided an ideal breeding ground for the *anopheles* mosquito. The health risks posed by such an environment were luridly attested in a variety of local place names such as Land of Death, Pool of the Sepulcher, Marshes of Hell, and Land of Bad Advice. Since Antiquity, successive attempts at drainage and reclamation had met with only limited success and as late as 1928 the stable population of the plain totaled less than 2,000 people, who made a living from woodcutting, charcoal burning, fishing, shepherding, buffalo herding, or the small-scale cultivation of wheat. At the same time, particularly outside the summer season when the danger of malaria was at its height, the region’s “unspoiled” character had long attracted artists and writers from Italy and beyond, including Byron, Goethe, D’Annunzio, and Piranesi (Snowden 2006:146–148). Artistic and literary celebrations of the Marshes as an area of untouched natural beauty, combined with the relative failure of earlier reclamation efforts, made them an inviting setting in which to stage a demonstration of Fascism’s capabilities, especially after the consolidation of power in the years that followed the Blackshirts’ March on Rome in October 1922. Accordingly, the so-called Mussolini Law of

December 1928 (the only such legislation to receive the leader's personal endorsement) initiated a nationwide campaign to abolish malaria, focusing on the Pontine Marshes. Described by Mussolini's propagandists as the "Battle of the Swamps" the campaign involved drainage works and the building of farmsteads and new towns, including the regional capital, Littoria (now known as Latina), named after the bundled axe or *fascio littorio* that was the emblem of the Fascist party (Clark 2008:323–325; Frost 1934:590–595; Russell 1952:93; Schmidt 1937:344–346; Snowden 2006:142–155).⁸ It also involved the resettlement of more than 60 thousand people on reclaimed land and the concomitant displacement of most of the region's existing population, who were dismissed as "derelicts of the outdated life on the land" (Snowden 2006:155). Mussolini himself, in speech delivered in 1935, described the project as the creation, by force of will, of a Fascist Utopia in what had once been regarded as a largely uninhabitable region through the literal transformation of gelid swamp into solid ground: "It is by what we have done in the Pontine marshes that one must assess the strength of our will, as well as the organizational and creative capacity of the Blackshirt Revolution" (Snowden 2006:163).⁹ Nonetheless, Mussolini's confidence in the definitiveness of Fascism's victory over the swamps was to prove misplaced. In the latter stages of World War II, following Italy's dramatic change of sides, it was Mussolini's onetime allies, the Germans, who in January 1944 attempted to block the British and U.S. landings at Anzio and Nettuno by systematically sabotaging reclamation works.¹⁰ Pumps were smashed or set into reverse action and drainage channels blocked or mined, flooding much of the area with brackish water and returning the landscape to something akin to its early-20th-century state. Within a short space of time the region thus became once again a propitious breeding ground for the *anopheles* mosquito. At the same time stocks of quinine were confiscated and hidden to prevent the Italian medical authorities from making use of them. The result was a new epidemic of malaria that attacked not only the invading forces, who were provided with their own medical supplies, but also, more devastatingly, the local population, the number of officially recorded cases between 1944 and 1946 being more than ten times what it had been in 1939 and 1940 (Snowden 2006:196). Although the actions of the German forces would later be characterized (not without justification) by many Italian commentators as a deliberate and premeditated act of biological warfare, the abrupt reversal of *Il Duce's* much vaunted victory over the swamps could be seen as attributable, equally, to the forceful resurgence of the waterlogged expanses and their insect denizens that the Fascist campaign had sought to subdue and eradicate.¹¹

BIG TOE

Although within the body blood flows in equal quantities from high to low and from low to high, there is a bias in favor of that which elevates itself, and human life is erroneously seen as an elevation. The division of the universe into subterranean hell and perfectly pure heaven is an indelible conception, mud and darkness being the *principles* of evil as light and celestial space are the *principles* of good: with their feet in mud but their heads more or less in light, men obstinately imagine a tide that will permanently elevate them, never to return, into pure space. Human life entails, in fact, the rage of seeing oneself as a back and forth movement from refuse to the ideal, and from the ideal to refuse—a rage that is easily directed against an organ as *base* as the foot.

—Georges Bataille, “The Big Toe,” 1929

If World War II and its aftermath marked the spectacular demise of one version of historical progress, Europe’s perennial failure to escape from the swamp had already been pointed out by one of most eccentric and provocative of Hegel’s 20th-century readers. For Georges Bataille, who learned his Hegel in the first instance in the Parisian seminar of the Russian émigré Alexandre Kojève, what the dialectic and its associated historical vision revealed was not the Spirit’s cumulative advance toward consciousness of its own freedom, but, rather, the unsurpassability of the negative, which Bataille identified specifically as a power of matter, sticky, formless, viscous, clinging matter that reasserted itself continuously in the face of humanity’s aspirations to leave it behind (Surya 2002:187–90). In his essay “The Big Toe” (1985a [first published in the dissident Surrealist journal *Documents* in January 1929]), Bataille argued that the aspiration toward the spiritual and away from the material was at once exemplified and thwarted by humanity’s evolved anatomy. On the one hand, the upright gait that distinguishes human beings from their closest primate relatives suggested a body striving continuously heavenward, as though seeking to transcend its own corporeality. On the other hand, such vertical aspirations were possible only to the extent that humanity’s feet remained planted firmly on the ground, in contact with the disavowed realm of base matter. Hence, the profound ambivalence, a mixture of disgust and erotic fascination, attaching to the foot, and in particular the big toe, according to Bataille “the most *human* part of the human body,” so clearly differentiated from its tree-grasping counterpart among the anthropoid apes. At once enabling of humanity’s upward striving, the big toe served also as the token of an ineradicable kinship with matter,

a reminder that humanity's foot remained planted (as Bataille put it) "in the mud," and that its aspirations to heavenward flight might be fated to end by plunging, Icarus-like, into the mire from which its biological ancestors had once emerged (Bataille 1985a).

In an essay on Gnosticism, published the following year, Bataille would argue for an irreconcilable dualism of Spirit and Matter, such that the latter was accorded the status of an autonomous power whose antagonism toward Spirit could not be resolved in a higher unity. It was such a conception that Bataille found expressed in Gnostic images of animal-headed divinities or *archontes* depicted on a series of stones from the collection of the Cabinet des Médailles of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, "the stones on which they engraved the figures of a provocative and especially indecent Pantheon" (Bataille 1985b:47). These included a trio of archontes with duck heads and human bodies; a group of animals surrounded by seven planets; an acephalic god beneath two animal heads with, at his feet, a serpent biting its own tail and, in the circle formed by it, the jackal-headed Egyptian deity Anubis, together with a woman and a dog; and, finally, a god with the legs of a man, the body of a serpent and the head of a cock. What these images revealed, for Bataille, was Gnosticism's obsession with a radical principle of evil—"an eternal bestiality"—identified with matter as a power not subservient to any higher authority: "the opposed existence of an excellent divinity, worthy of the absolute confidence of the human spirit, matters little if the baneful and odious divinity of this dualism is under no circumstances reducible to it, without any possibility of hope" (Bataille 1985:47). What Gnosticism represented for Bataille was therefore the possibility of a "virulent" materialism involving the affirmation of base matter as an active and creative principle offering a permanent affront both to religious conceptions of a benign and all-powerful divinity and to philosophical idealism in all its forms (Bataille 1985:46).

Bataille's entire oeuvre can be understood as an attempt to think and to articulate this power of matter through a variety of genres and media—through actions performed with self-convened secret societies like the Acéphales, through his (at first) pseudonymously published pornographic fictions, through experimental essays, reflections on Aztec human sacrifice and European prehistoric art and through his uncompleted trilogy *The Accursed Share*, which set out to delineate an entirely new science of political economy (a "General Economy") predicated not on scarcity but on excess, expenditure, and the prodigality of matter energy, understood as presenting itself in the guise of superabundance if considered on a planetary or cosmic scale, rather than a "restricted" human one (Bataille 1988).



FIGURE 2. Tollund Man, Silkeborg Museum, Jutland, Denmark. Photograph by author.

I have long felt myself drawn to Bataille's attempts to think a materiality that cannot be reduced to the history of concepts or humanly assigned meanings. Yet I also find myself wondering, increasingly, whether his materialism remains too indebted to the teleological narratives of human progress and reason from which it seeks to free itself, to the extent that it continues to locate its own conditions of possibility in those same narratives. Base matter takes on its peculiar charge, its capacity to disconcert, precisely to the degree that it affords an affront and challenge to humanity's instituted self-images. Unlike Bachofen's originary and stubbornly recalcitrant swamp vegetation, its power is not one of generative self-proliferation but a power of transgression, requiring, as such, that a certain history of humanity's disavowal of and estrangement from "nature" and "matter" be assumed to have already taken place. Could we then begin to conceive of a materiality that is not dependent on such a history but that would nonetheless be acknowledged to exceed the human capacity to assign meaning and intelligibility? Perhaps we need to ask again, what's down there?

BOG MAN

The photograph shows a man's face, the skin dark and leatherlike, the eyes closed, as though in sleep (see Figure 2). Closer inspection reveals the strands of

hair protruding from beneath the pointed leather cap, the stubble on the chin, the pursed lips and, finally, the leather noose knotted around the neck. This sleeper's awakening to history took place courtesy of the spade, one spring afternoon in 1950, when two farmers cutting peat for fuel uncovered him by chance at Tollund Fen in Jutland, Denmark. Having been removed from the ground, he was conveyed to the museum at nearby Silkeborg, where his head and the skeletal remains of his body are preserved for the perusal of visitors. His story is retold by the eminent (and serendipitously named) Danish archaeologist Peter Vilhelm Glob, in his book *The Bog People*, which speculates that he met his end, like other similarly preserved peat bog corpses, as a sacrificial offering to the earth goddess (Glob 1968:18–36).¹² Glob's conjectures would later inspire the Northern Ireland-born poet Seamus Heaney to reflect on the transformations wrought by the Tollund Man's centuries long sojourn below ground:

“Bridegroom to the goddess
 She tightened her torc on him
 And opened her fen
 Those dark juices working
 Him to a saint's kept body”
 [Heaney 1998:62]

The poem, one of a series published between 1969 and 1975, recounts a scene of simultaneous recognition and nonrecognition, charting the Tollund Man's ingestion by the bog, the changes wrought on him (the preservation of the body being the result of a tanning process initiated by a chemical contained in sphagnum moss growing on the bog's surface) and his subsequent reemergence into historical legibility.¹³ The movement described is, not least, one from concealment to renewed visibility, a movement that proceeds by way of the bog's unseen depths, which themselves play an active role in shaping and conserving what later becomes an object of archaeological investigation and popular curiosity. If Heaney's description follows Glob in anthropomorphizing the work of the bog as the action of a sanguinary goddess, such a personification is notable also for granting a certain agentive autonomy both to the unseen chemical processes metaphorized as “dark juices” and to the material substance of the bog itself, an autonomy that appears both necessary to and potentially subversive of the Tollund Man's subsequent reconstitution as a museum artifact.¹⁴ In no sense is the feminized bog's embrace of her sacrificial bridegroom intended to ensure his transmission to posterity as a latter-day focus of scholarly speculation and poetic imagining. Indeed, from a

human perspective there is something strikingly gratuitous about the whole process, a fact underscored by the accidental character of the Tollund Man's rediscovery: had the two farmers who uncovered him chosen to cut fuel from a different section of bog, he might have slumbered on indefinitely. Yet the seemingly contingent circumstances both of his preservation and of his reemergence into the mid-20th century, in the aftermath of a conflict that had devastated most of Europe, surely account, in large measure, for the academic and artistic fascination he continues to inspire.

What the Tollund Man and other similarly discovered peat bog corpses make manifest in a manner at once striking and disconcerting is the interplay between metamorphosis and preservation that marks the alien-familiar material substrate of cultural memory and historical knowledge (McLean 2008). Unlike Bataille's dialectically challenged *Homo erectus*, the Tollund Man has had not only his big toe but also his entire body immersed in the mire and his appearance and chemical composition have been decisively altered as a result. The fetal crouch that characterizes his repose in the display at Silkeborg Museum suggests that one might think of him less as the consort than as the progeny of a generative power that inheres in the bog's fecund depths—a power anterior to and indifferent to human intentionality but to which human acts of culture making necessarily respond, and from which they draw their impetus and energy. Such acts include not only Glob's book and Heaney's poem but also, arguably, the ritual practices of those responsible for the Tollund man's death. Indeed, given the widely voiced archaeological interpretation of bog bodies (and of other artifacts retrieved from bogs) as sacrificial offerings, it is worth speculating as to whether the apparent onetime significance of bogs as votive sites might not have been informed by a more fundamental impulse to sacralize persons and things precisely by plunging them into the dark impenetrability of amorphous matter. The act of sacrifice itself then, as Bataille argued, might be understood not in terms of symbolic significance, always implying a Hegelian abstraction of intelligibility from material substance, but of as a violent sundering of the self-enclosed integrity of bodies and objects, restoring them to seamless participation in the anonymous and, finally, purposeless becoming of matter (Bataille 1988:19–41).

SWAMP WORLD OR WETLAND? BEFORE AND AFTER “EUROPE”

Today, bogs, fens, marshes, and swamps are commonly referred to as “wetlands”—a term that also includes estuaries, floodplains, shallow lakes, and shorelines. It's a curious term, *wetland*, for all its official currency and the familiarity that comes with it. Certainly it purports to be an in-between term, denoting a

zone of mixture or transition where land and water, solidity and liquidity transform and intermingle. Yet the pairing of adjective and noun conveys too an unmistakable partiality for terra firma and a concomitant desire to reduce liquidity and wetness to predicates of the solid substance of dry land. What the term *wetlands* simultaneously references and seeks to contain is precisely the volatility of substance that characterizes such land–water admixtures, their existence betwixt and between clearly differentiated states of matter. Nor is it only a matter of liquid and solid. One of the most remarked on features of bogs and marshes has been the phenomenon sometimes known as *ignis fatuus* or will-o’-the-wisp, a light, visible above the ground on summer and autumn nights and caused, according to modern science, by the spontaneous combustion of gases released by the decomposition of organic matter below the surface.¹⁵ Appearances of such lights were widely recorded in England prior to the large-scale drainage of marshy districts such as the East Anglian fens. The fact that such lights often appear to recede when approached or to vanish and reappear in another place (as one pocket of gas burned itself out and another ignited elsewhere) has supported their identification in literature and folklore with a variety of often-malevolent supernatural presences. These have included in-dwelling nature spirits given a variety of names—Jack-of-the Lantern, Jenny with the lantern, Will-o’-the-wisp, Kit- (or Kitty-) Candlestick, Gillion-a-burnt-tail, along with the ghosts of the drowned and souls of the dead deemed unfit for heaven or hell and stranded in perpetuity in the liminal zone of the marsh (Newell 1904; Walhouse 1894). Yet if such imputed presences represent an anthropomorphizing personification of material processes they are nonetheless made manifest independently of human imaginings precisely by phase transitions occurring between states of matter, specifically the release and combustion of vapors resulting from the decomposition of solid matter immersed in the liquid–solid environment of the bog or marsh.

If the material substance of so-called wetlands seems characterized then by an inherent volatility, a volatility that seems to have inspired many of the human imaginings to which they have given rise, much recent discourse about them has had a rather different focus. Much scientific research on wetlands, for example as carried out under the auspices of bodies such as Wetlands International, has often defined its aim, explicitly, as one of making visible by explaining to a wider public the significance and value of wetlands as ecosystems and natural habitats.¹⁶ Faced with a growing awareness of the threats posed to wetlands by global climate change and more localized human initiatives such as drainage and land reclamation schemes and the harvesting of peat for use as fertilizer or fuel, such an emphasis is

certainly not to be dismissed. Yet there remains arguably the need for a different kind of register, as much evocative as descriptive, one capable of making manifest a quality largely unarticulated in scientific accounts but that appears, nonetheless, quintessential both to the material being and to the cultural and historical efficacy of the spaces commonly grouped together as wetlands—namely, a certain palpably active obscurity and ontological elusiveness that finds expression more readily perhaps in Heaney’s bog poems with their dense, onomatopoeic lexicon and their visceral sense of life and matter or in the work of the numerous visual artists who have found both inspiration and raw material in the physical substance of bog landscapes (McLean 2007).¹⁷

One of the aims of this article is the pursuit of an idiom capable of giving expression to this elusive quality. More is at stake, however, than mere definitional slipperiness. Today, as the 21st century teeters into its second decade, we (meaning everyone on the planet) exist amid the aftermath—the monuments and the wreckage—of the onetime imperial “Idea” of Europe and its attendant conceptions of reason, progress and universal history, including the latter-day appropriation of these values by the United States. What confronts us, however, is not simply the unassimilated residue and thus still, in a sense, the product of such a history. Rather, we encounter proliferating reminders of matter as an active principle, one that, much as it participates in a variety of ways in human history making, nonetheless subsists independently of its implication in any possible version of the story of modernity. In recent years, one such (well-publicized) reminder has come from northern Asia, a region explicitly relegated by Hegel to a status outside of history. In sub-Arctic western Siberia, the world’s largest frozen peat bog, an area the size of France and Germany combined, is beginning to thaw for the first time since its formation 11,000 years ago, transforming expanses of permafrost into mud and lakes. As it does so, it threatens to release into the atmosphere billions of tones of trapped methane, a phase transition with unforeseeable and potentially catastrophic implications for global climate change.¹⁸ If Europe’s future as an agent of historical progress has often been staked on the conquest of its own waterlogged expanses, it now appears that the future of humanity as a whole may, rather, be at the mercy of the mire.

VIBRANT OR VIRULENT?

The vision of materiality set forth here has some obvious affinities with the “vibrant matter” recently evoked by Jane Bennett (2010). Like Bennett, I aim to portray matter as an active power capable of asserting itself independently of

human intentions and purposes. Like her I am concerned less with clearly delineated material things than with substances, flows, transformations, matter energy. Where I differ from Bennett perhaps is in the specific tenor of my characterization of matter. The matter I describe is more uncouth than vibrant, more belligerent than companionable, more a source of disquiet than of enchantment. If it reminds us of human beings' inextricable embeddedness within an active and dynamic material universe, such a reminder carries with it too the threat of self-dispossession, evisceration, loss, of the dissolution of human agency and subjectivity into the amorphous and protean black goo of matter's inhuman self-transformations. It is precisely this threatened loss, I suggest, that any artistic, intellectual, or political practice seeking to engage the other-than-human life of matter is bound to acknowledge. Bachofen's swamp world waits before and after the capitalized "History" of Europe's (and Euro-America's) transitory heyday. Yet the tellurian swamp world, along with Bataille's big toe, the Pontine marshes and the defrosting Siberian peat bog is itself no more than a placeholder, a provisional manifestation of a force to be glimpsed at the disjunctures and interstices of cultural and historical worlds but that can not, finally, be "explained" through recourse to any such register. To respond to the abiding presence of such a force requires a willingness to engage both with the transformative potentiality of matter and with the inescapable material underpinnings of our own concepts, imaginings and subjectivities. The latter are to be understood not as the raw materials of dialectical sublation but as an ineradicable alien-familiar presence that at once dispossesses us of our assumed ascendancy over the world and, in doing so, embeds us within a universe of volatile matter that forever exceeds our determinations and reckonings. Is it preposterous, then, to speculate that suggestions toward new knowledges, new modes of engagement, and new practices of habitation might be sought not only in the pages of philosophers and political theorists, not only in the lived reality of cotemporary struggles for social and environmental justice, but also in the viscous materiality of Europe's own muddy margins? Awakening from dreams of disembodied reason and progress we find our big toe where it has always been, immersed in the mire, the black goo of matter's protean self-transformations. Time to get wet and dirty (again)?

ABSTRACT

This article undertakes an evocative conjuration of alternative visions of materialism through consideration of intermediary states of matter. Specifically, it focuses on gelid, semiliquid, semisolid environments such as bogs, swamps, and marshes lying on the fringes of human settlement and against which the claims of reason and historical progress have often been staked. The article juxtaposes ethnographic and historical examples from

Ireland, Italy, Scandinavia, and Siberia with reflections on (among others) Bachofen, Bataille, and Hegel. In doing so it seeks both to explore the limits of certain canonical formulations of historicity and historical knowledge and to ask what new cultural and political imaginaries and what possible futures might become thinkable through a more sustained engagement with the recalcitrant materiality of Europe's muddy margins. [Materiality; Naturecultures; Philosophy; Environmental History; Europe]

NOTES

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1. Gaston Bachelard, in his study *Water and Dreams* (1983), likewise attaches particular importance to earth–water mixtures, which he identifies as “one of the fundamental schemes of materialism.” Crucially, what such mixtures reveal, for Bachelard, is an “elemental” experience of matter as substance, prior to any imposition of form: “this admixture seems to me the basis of a truly intimate materialism in which shape is supplanted, effaced, dissolved” (Bachelard 1983:104).
2. Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815–87) was born in Basel, studied law in Berlin under Friedrich Karl von Savigny and later returned to Basel, where he served as Professor of Roman law at the University of Basel and Judge of the Basel criminal court (1842–66). After publishing two works on Roman law (1847, 1848), he traveled to Greece and Italy to study the symbolism of ancient tombs. Material collected during the trip served as the basis for his *An Essay on Ancient Mortuary Symbolism* (1859). His best-known work, *Mother Right (Das Mutterrecht)*, was published in 1861. His last major publication, *The Myth of Tanaquil* appeared in 1870 (Campbell 1992:xxxiv–xli; Davies 2010).
3. According to Bachofen, it was women themselves who rebelled against the condition of hetaerism, under which they were compelled to submit indiscriminately to the desires of men. They rose up, slaughtering or driving away the men and reconstituting themselves as Amazons, independent and self-sufficient warriors. Such a phase, though, Bachofen argues, could only be a transitory one, representing as it did a distraction from women’s “natural” vocation as wives and mothers (Bachofen 1992:104–106). Demetrian matriarchy and the concomitant shift to an agricultural way of life, represented, in turn, a victory over primitive hetaerism through the ordering of sexual relations and the exaltation of motherhood: “The man is joined in wedlock with feminine matter, and this provides the model for an intimate, enduring, and exclusive relation between the sexes” (Bachofen 1992:191).
4. The argument put forward by Apollo would not necessarily have commanded universal assent among Aeschylus’ contemporaries. Equally widely attested at the time is the view that both men and women produced semen and that the sex of a child was determined by the relative contribution of each seed (Lloyd 1983:86–94).
5. The contemporary resurgence of the primeval swamp world was to be invoked by one of Bachofen’s most enthusiastic 20th-century readers, Walter Benjamin, in his 1934 essay on Franz Kafka: “Kafka did not consider the age in which he lived as an advance over the beginnings of time. His novels are set in a swamp world” (Benjamin 1999:808). Benjamin’s essay on Bachofen (1934–35) was written in the wake of a resurgence of interest in the latter’s writings. As Benjamin noted, such interest spanned the political spectrum from communism to fascism. Marxists like Friedrich Engels and Paul Lafargue praised Bachofen’s view of the patriarchal family as a historically recent institution, while expressing reservations about the primacy accorded to religious ideas in explaining the shift from mother right to father right. The conservative *Lebensphilosoph* Ludwig Klages and Nazi ideologues like Alfred Bäumler

were attracted to Bachofen's portrait of the matriarchal age by its emphasis on the power of irrational forces and by the attachment to native soil expressed in matriarchal religion (Benjamin 2002:12, 18–19). Benjamin's own interest in Bachofen appears to have centered on the originary stage of primitive hetaerism. He was fascinated above all by what Bachofen called *die unbewehrte Schöpfung* [unmourned creation], associated with the hetaeric age: "It arises from matter itself—but the word *Stoff* [matter, stuff] suggests tufted, dense, gathered material. It is the agent of the general promiscuity which characterizes the most ancient human community, with its hetaerical constitution. And from this promiscuity not even life and death were exempt; they commingled in ephemeral constellations according to the rhythm which governed the entire creation" (Benjamin 2002:14). In Bachofen's account of the matriarchal era, according to Benjamin, death did not take the form of violent destruction, but, rather, of a dialectical counterpart to life. Hence Bachofen could be considered a "prudent mediator" between nature and history: "what has become historical through death reverts ultimately to the domain of nature; and what has been made natural by death reverts ultimately to history" (Bachofen 1992:14). On the reception of Bachofen's writings in late-19th- and early-20th-century Germany, see Davies (2010). For a discussion of the figure of the "swamp world" in Benjamin's writings, see Weigel (1996).

6. Jean-Joseph Goux situates Hegel's account of the art of ancient Egypt within a longer history of what he calls "anthropocentering." The latter, exemplified by Oedipus's answer to the Sphinx's riddle—"Man"—involves the repudiation of the other-than-human presences and agencies once thought to inhabit the material world by relegating them to the status of projections of the human subject. In the process, the human subject discovers itself as subject and agent and constitutes the world external to it as something to be acted on, mastered, and possessed: "Oedipus is emblematic of the movement by which the human subject, recognizing itself as source and agent, withdraws what it had projected upon the external world, with the result that in a single two-sided operation of deprojection, the subject discovers the world as an object (rather than a sign) and situates himself as a subject" (Goux 1993:121). According to Goux, the hubristic and, ultimately, self-destructive aspect of this project consists in its assumption that such a realignment of subjectivity and world can be accomplished without residue, that it does not involve the denial of the subject's own kinship and entanglement with the material universe: the attempt of human reason to take possession of "Nature/Matter/Earth" is thus likened to what, in the Oedipus myth, is portrayed as the protagonist's unwitting sexual possession of his own mother (1993:175).
7. The name malaria is itself, of course, of Italian origin and derives from the combination of *mala*—bad and *aria*—air. Prior to medical science's linking of malaria to the parasite born by the *anopheles* mosquito, the disease was widely attributed to the influence of miasmas or noxious vapors emanating from waterlogged places and sometimes thought to derive from gases released by the decay of organic matter that had fallen into swamp water and then decomposed. The earliest recorded use of the term *malaria* in English has been credited to Horace Walpole, who, writing home from Italy in 1740, referred to "A horrid thing called the *mal'aria* that comes to Rome every summer and kills one" (Russell 1952:93; Snowden 2006:11). In addition, Italy has also made notable contributions to the field of malariology. In the late 19th century, the displacement of miasma theory and the recognition of role of mosquitoes in the transmission of the disease was because of, in part, the efforts of the so-called "Rome School" centered on the University of Rome and surrounded by two of the world's best known malarial areas, the Pontine Marshes and the Roman Campagna (Snowden 2006:38–39).
8. Littoria was one of a series of "New Towns" built by the regime, not only in the Pontine Marshes but also in Sardinia, Apulia, Sicily, and elsewhere. These typically featured a central piazza flanked by a church, a Fascist party headquarters (with a tower) and a range of services and offices. They were also widely invoked as a model for the architecture of Italy's colonial settlements in North Africa, East Africa, and the eastern Mediterranean (Fuller 2007:147).
9. It has been suggested that conditions in the Pontine Marshes may have been exacerbated by the construction in 312 B.C.E. of the Appian Way, linking Rome to Athens and the Near East. Raised above the general level of the land, the road acted as a dyke and thus a hindrance to

drainage, and it is possible too that malarial fever first traveled to the region along it. Previous efforts to drain the marshes had been undertaken by the Roman emperors Marcus Cornelius Cethegus, Trajan and Nerva, by Theodoric, the Gothic King at Ravenna and by successive Popes, including Leo X, who, in 1615, initiated the digging of the Canale Portatore, emptying into the sea near Terracina, Sixtus V, who, 70 years later, delegated his engineer, Adcanio Fenizzi, to dig the Sisto canal, connecting with the river Antico and, in the latter half of the 18th century, Pius VI, at whose behest the Canale Linea Pio was built parallel to the Appian Way, emptying into the Canale Portatore and thus making the latter more efficient (Frost 1934:586–590). Mussolini would later claim that he and his supporters had succeeded in subduing the marshes and the threat of malaria where Caesars and Popes (and Liberals) had previously failed (Snowden 2006:143).

10. King Victor Emmanuel III ordered Mussolini's arrest in July 1943 and appointed a successor government under General Pietro Badoglio. On September 8 of the same year Italy repudiated its onetime alliance with Hitler and reentered the conflict as an ally of Britain and the United States. Mussolini was subsequently rescued from imprisonment by the German army and installed as titular leader of the puppet republic of Salò in northern Italy (Clark 2008:363–373; Lamb 1993:11–23; Snowden 2006:184–185).
11. The German engineers responsible for flooding the Pontine marshes were advised by two German malariologists, Erich Martini of the University of Hamburg and Ernst Rodenwaldt of the University of Heidelberg. Martini, one of the most eminent malariologists in Europe and a pioneer researcher of the speciation of *anopheles* mosquitos, was also a member of the Nazi party, a protégé of Heinrich Himmler and an authority on germ warfare. He and Rodenwaldt devised a plan that took advantage of the fact that the mosquito species *anopheles labranchiae*, the principal vector of malaria in the region, was capable, unlike many other mosquito species, of breeding in water with a high saline content. This involved putting water pumps into reverse action so that they drew sea water onto the plains and opening the tidal gates at the mouths of the chief waterways to create an immense swamp of brackish water that would serve as an ideal breeding ground for *anopheles labranchiae* (Snowden 2006:188–189). Retrospective allegations of biological warfare have been made by, among others, the Italian malariologist Mario Coluzzi, recipient of the 1998 Ross prize for malariology, who claimed in a newspaper interview in 2003 that “this was certainly a war crime and a representative of the German government should apologize to the Italian people” (Snowden 2006:192).
12. Glob was involved in the excavation and subsequent investigation of a number of peat bog corpses. *The Bog People*, first published in 1965 (and in English translation in 1968), became one of the principal channels through which information about bog bodies and other finds reached a wider, nonacademic audience. Glob's book provides an overview of archaeological discoveries in bogs across northern Europe, along with more extended descriptions of some of the better-known bog bodies from the vicinity of Jutland, including the Grauballe Man, the subject of another poem by Heaney (see McLean 2008). Glob and later researchers have noted that many of the bog people appear to have met with violent deaths: pinned down in the peat by wooden hurdles, their skulls smashed, their throats cut or leather nooses tightened around their necks (Beuker 2002; Glob 1968:144–192; Van der Sanden 1996:154–165). This has prompted many (although not all) archaeologists to conclude that they met their deaths as human sacrifices, intended to ensure the fertility of the land for the coming year. Such a view has found support from the wide variety of other ancient artifacts, including gold and other jewelry, weaponry, battle armor, drinking vessels and musical instruments, retrieved from peat bogs and widely interpreted as votive offerings to the spirits and divinities associated with the bog (Davidson 1988:62–63, 131–133). Further corroboration has been provided by written sources, notably the Roman historian Tacitus, who wrote, in a work first published in 98 C.E., that votive deposits in rivers, lakes and other bodies of water were common among the Germanic tribes on western frontiers of the Roman Empire (Kehne 2002; Tacitus 1970:134–135). For a critique of the “sacrificial” hypothesis, see Briggs (1995).
13. For a more extended discussion of Heaney's bog poems, see Stallworthy (1982), Finn (2004), and (for a highly critical account) Lloyd (1993). For a discussion of other literary works inspired by Glob's book, see Purdey (2002) and Sanders (2009). In a speech delivered at Silkeborg

- Museum in August 1996, Heaney would describe his own initial response to the bog people in the following terms: "It has always seemed to me that this phenomenal potency derives from the fact that the bodies erase the boundary line between culture and nature, between art and life, between vision and eyesight, as it were." On first reading Glob's book he was, he recalled, "a man obsessed." The text and accompanying photographs called forth a spectrum of memories and associations, ranging from the appearance, smells and textures of bogs ("that fragrant secret outback of heather and scrub, of squelchy rushes and springy peatfields"), to their preservative properties, to his own rural childhood in the 1940s and the political and sectarian conflicts being played out at the time in Northern Ireland (Heaney 1999:3–4).
14. The preservation of bodies in bogs is because of the presence of a substance called sphagnum, a polysaccharide (or sugar chemical) contained in the cell walls of the sphagnum moss growing on a bog's surface and released slowly below the surface when the moss dies. Here it is gradually converted to brown humic acid via a series of intermediate compounds. Sphagnum, humic acid, and their intermediate compounds bind selectively with calcium and nitrogen contained in the bog environment. Calcium is thus extracted from a body immersed in the bog, inhibiting the growth of bacteria that would otherwise promote decay. Decalcification results too in the softening of the bones, which can then be subject to distortion by the overlying weight of peat, or, under highly acidic conditions, the skeleton may dissolve altogether, leaving only an outer envelope of skin. The presence of sphagnum and its associated compounds also initiates a series of chemical reactions through which the body's skin becomes tanned. As a result, the body's skin (and all or parts of the skeleton) along with hair, nails, brain, organs such as the kidneys and liver and items of clothing made from wool, skin or leather can survive in the bog, although garments made from plant fibers will dissolve (Van der Sanden 1996:18).
 15. The gases released by peat consist largely of nitrogen (c. 54 percent), along with methane (c. 43 percent) and carbon dioxide (3 percent). One difficulty with attempts to explain marsh lights in these terms is that there is no reason for methane to ignite spontaneously. It has sometimes been suggested, therefore, that combustion is because of the presence of diphosphane (P_2O_4), produced by anaerobic microorganisms, which does burn spontaneously on contact with air (Feehan and O'Donovan 1996:166–167).
 16. Wetlands International is an independent, nonprofit organization that has as its stated aim "to sustain and restore wetlands, their resources and biodiversity for future generations." It was founded in 1954 under the name of the International Wildfowl Inquiry, focusing on the protection of water birds. It later changed its name to the International Waterfowl and Wetlands Research Bureau (IWRB). In 1995, it merged with two other regionally based organizations the Asian Wetlands Bureau (AWB) and Wetlands for the Americas (WA) to form the global organization Wetlands International (Wetlands International n.d.).
 17. One example of the latter is the symposium *Boglands*, organized in August 1990 by the Sculptors' Society of Ireland. Sculptors from Ireland and elsewhere were invited to spend three weeks in the blanket bogs of the Wicklow mountains, taking with them minimal tools and no materials. The aim was to explore participants' reactions to the shapes, textures, and colors of the bog environment. At the end of three weeks, the works produced were left in situ to be effaced gradually by wind and weather, until they were finally reabsorbed into the landscape from which they had been fashioned. The project was recorded in Aisling Stuart's documentary film of the same title and in series of photographs by Christine Bond, which later served as the basis of exhibitions in Belfast and Dublin. For a more extended account of this project, see Mclean (2007).
 18. See BBC News 2005.

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