Meditation on a Bone

A.D. Hope
A piece of bone, found at Trondhjem in 1901, with the following runic inscription (about AD 1050) cut on it:

I loved her as a maiden; I will not trouble Erlend’s detestable wife; better she should be a widow.
Words scored upon a bone,
Scratched in despair or rage –
Nine hundred years have gone;
Now, in another age,
They burn with passion on
A scholar’s tranquil page.
The scholar takes his pen
And turns the bone about,
And writes those words again.
Once more they seethe and shout,
And through a human brain
Undying hate rings out.
‘I loved her when a maid;
I loathe and love the wife
That warms another’s bed:
Let him beware his life!’
The scholar’s hand is stayed;
His pen becomes a knife
To grave in living bone
The fierce archaic cry.
He sits and reads his own
Dull sum of misery.
A thousand years have flown
Before that ink is dry.
And, in a foreign tongue,
A man, who is not he,
Reads and his heart is wrung
This ancient grief to see,
And thinks: When I am dung,
What bone shall speak for me?