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After the Mutabilitie Cantos: Yeats and Heaney Reading Spenser

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When Yeats first turned to Spenser in a professional way, it was a chance opportunity to generate some income. 'It is good pay,' he wrote to his friend, Lady Augusta Gregory, and 'I may do it if I have not to do it at once. I have a good deal to say about Spenser but tremble at the thought of reading his six books.'¹ He was writing of the invitation he had just received from an Edinburgh publisher to select and introduce Spenser's poetry for their 'Golden Poets' series. That close encounter, when in due course it ensued, was to provide Yeats with several crucial things that he didn't yet know he was looking for. What he ultimately found in Spenser was a potent model of Irish poetry in English in Ireland, a Protestant poetic progenitor and with it, an originary tradition for his own poetry. What he found in *The Faerie Queene* was a poetry of a Miltonic 'grandeur' (as he deemed it), and a metaphysical perspective on time, history and nature congenial to his own Platonist beliefs.² And what he found *beyond* the six daunting books, in the fragment of the putative seventh book entitled the *Two Cantos of Mutabilitie*, was all of this

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¹ From a letter dated 20th January 1902, in *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, ed. by Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 365.

² See James Olney, 'The Esoteric Flower: Yeats and Jung', in *Yeats and the Occult*, ed. by George Mills Harper (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 27-54, especially pp. 45-48.

enabling poetry and metaphysics clearly and conspicuously set in Ireland, animated by a marvellous, mythical figure of female resistance: Mutabilitie.³ For a poet who returned again and again to the figure of the radical or intransigent Irish female, whether Maud Gonne or Kathleen Ni Houlihaun or the Shan Van Vocht, the combination must surely have exercised considerable appeal.⁴

Choosing from *The Faerie Queene* ‘only those passages [...] that I want to remember and carry about with me’, the Mutabilitie Cantos feature among the longest extracts and as the only succeeding cantos to be included in their entirety in Yeats’s selection.⁵ For Yeats, they mark both the apogee of Spenser’s poetic craft, and the inevitable, tragic terminus of his conflicted career as a poet and public servant of Queen Elizabeth’s in Ireland: ‘just as he was rising to something of Milton’s grandeur in the fragment that has been called ‘Mutabilitie’, “the wandering companies that keep the woods,” as he called the Irish armies, drove him to his death.’⁶ In that splicing of unrealized fellowship and alienation, in pinpointing Spenser’s superlative gift and unwitting tragic flaw, Yeats finds the matrix of the Irish Protestant poet. Marking the Mutabilitie Cantos as the height of Spenser’s poetic achievement, Yeats also celebrated the catalytic female figure of Mutabilitie herself. Spenser’s personification of Mutabilitie, handmaid to Nature and agent of Time, embodies the power of change, the impetus of

³ *The Poems of Spenser*, edited and with an introduction by W.B. Yeats (London: Caxton Publishing, 1906): Introduction, p. xx. First published by T.C. & E.C. Jack in Edinburgh in 1906, the series was taken over by Caxton Publishing. He was paid £35 sterling for the book. The essay, now titled ‘Edmund Spenser’, was reprinted in *Discoveries* (Dublin: Dun Emer Press, 1907) and in *The Cutting of an Agate* (New York: Macmillan, 1912; repr. London: Macmillan, 1919).

⁴ On the ‘allegorical identification of Ireland as a woman’ (p. 55), with its ‘ironically congruent’ (p. 61) imperial gender politics, although rooted in the *aisling* tradition of Gaelic bardic poetry, see Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, *Gender and History in Yeats’s Love Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), especially pp. 55-72.

⁵ Yeats, Introduction, p. xlv.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xx.

history. Her challenge to the powers-that-be at a particular moment in history, a legal and political challenge adjudicated by Dame Nature herself, enacts precisely the kind of initiative that Yeats was so keen to provide in his verse: revolt, but in a full consciousness of cosmic history. (That Dame Nature ultimately re-instates the status quo and undermines Mutabilitie's sense of her own agency may perhaps have been an unconscious salve for Yeats, who never really wished the Ascendancy class (a class for whom he fought hard to keep company, as R.F. Foster reminds us) to relinquish their standing to a new, Catholic, middle-class political élite.)⁷ As we will see, the Mutabilitie Cantos cast a long shadow on Yeats's early and middle years, with Spenser the poet on whom Yeats would variously model aspects of his own problematic social, political, racial and religious identity.

Yeats's taste for Spenser, and his favourable re-modelling of him, have not gone unnoticed by Irish poets and writers after him.⁸ Long a bogeyman of the Irish Catholic imagination, Spenser stalks the poetry of John Montague, Derek Mahon, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Paul Muldoon, among others.⁹ Frank McGuinness takes Yeats's Irish Spenser as his target in his difficult play of dissent, *Mutabilitie*. But it is Seamus Heaney who has most fully explored Yeats's Spenser, in both poetry and prose, in different forms and through different perspectives, throughout his career.¹⁰ A recognisably Yeatsian, conflicted, even hybridized, Spenser ('dreaming sunlight' but 'encroached upon' by the

⁷ See Foster's Chatterton lecture at the British Academy (1989), 'Protestant Magic: W.B. Yeats and the Spell of Irish History', reprinted in *Yeats's Political Identities: Selected Essays*, ed. by Jonathan Allison (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 83-105.

⁸ See, for example, Jon Stallworthy, 'The Poet as Archaeologist: W.B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney', *RES*, 33 (1982), 158-74.

⁹ See David Gardiner, *'Befitting Emblems of Adversity': A Modern Irish View of Edmund Spenser from W.B. Yeats to the Present* (Omaha, Nebraska: Creighton University Press, 2001), especially pp. 121-213.

¹⁰ Both Yeats and Heaney have signalled their affiliations to Spenser more loudly in prose than in verse, as Heaney has likewise done with Yeats.

Irish victims of the Munster famine he so infamously enumerated) appears among the shades of the dead whose ‘hopeless wisdom’ the young Heaney solicits in ‘Bog Oak’ (1972). Echoes of Spenser’s judgement of the Irish, so starved that they survive on watercress (as the same poem remembers), recur throughout Heaney’s poetry, notably in *Sweeney Astray* where the ‘[watercress] juices that have greened my chin / are Sweeney’s markings and birthstain’ (section V).¹¹ Spenser returns in Heaney’s later work, a kindlier, hapless, but still Yeatsian shade, to endow his 1999 translation of *Beowulf* with an Irish political heritage – but in the service, ultimately, of re-describing it as a form of global ‘world art’.¹² Alongside these overt engagements with Spenser, Heaney’s admiration for ‘Yeats as an example’, rooted at least in part in Yeats’s Spenserian self-fashioning, keeps the Elizabethan poet in the picture. No political manoeuvring this, Heaney wrestles with, but ultimately accepts Yeats’s Spenser not simply as an act of historical forgiveness and poetic *largesse*, but as a way of developing a more complex, ecumenical and post-colonial notion of the Irish poet in history and in the Irish landscape.

It was Yeats, years before the Variorum editors, who put Ireland back into Spenser; almost a century later, Heaney performs a similar restorative gesture when he ‘put[s] a bawn in *Beowulf*’. By describing Hrothgar’s hall in terms of an Elizabethan planter’s fortified Irish dwellings, Heaney extends Yeats’s symbolic gesture by re-asserting the

¹¹ Heaney’s ‘Introduction’ to his translation of *Sweeney Astray* suggests that Sweeney is readable as a ‘figure of the artist, displaced, guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance’ (*Sweeney Astray* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1983), n.p. [p. 2]). There is both continuity and a definite break enacted in Heaney’s setting himself the translation of *Buile Suibhne* as his first task after his move south to Wicklow. Later, in *Station Island* (1984), he further acknowledges his own connection with the figure of Sweeney through the suggestive Sweeney/Heaney rhyme.

¹² *Beowulf*, trans. by Seamus Heaney (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. xii.

place of the Irish poet in English literary history.¹³ Digging out those infamous lines from the then-obscure *View of the Present State of Ireland*, Yeats puts Spenser's description of the victims of the Munster famine alongside the poetry as defiantly and assuredly as Heaney puts a bawn in *Beowulf*, each making direct, paradigm-shifting interventions into the critical and popular reception of those works. Most startling when they are first made, such gestures quickly become accommodated, their boldness forgotten in the energy of their influence. And yet, Yeats's acceptance and promotion of Spenser as an Irish poet still raises hackles, not least among his literary inheritors. To understand why, we must look more closely at the dynamics of Yeats's engagement with Spenser.

The invitation from the Edinburgh publisher was not Yeats's first encounter with Spenser, nor even his first engagement with Spenserianism. David Gardiner dates Yeats's conscious engagement with Spenser to *The Island of the Statues* (1885), a work that he introduced to his first audience as “an Arcadian play in imitation of Edmund Spenser”.¹⁴ But lurking in the background even then was the prominent Spenser criticism of Edward Dowden – and (according to Foster) a quasi-oedipal urge on Yeats's part to overcome all that his father's old friend stood for.¹⁵ Certainly, the terms in which Yeats reads Spenser's poetry (‘that conflict between the aesthetic and moral interests that was to run through well-nigh all his works’) evoke Dowden's – but with their values

¹³ The Variorum editors, while notably interested in Spenser's Irish experience, published the *View* last in their sequence of volumes of Spenser's work, published between 1932 and 1949. In re-casting *Beowulf* as what Heaney would later call a ‘through-other venture’ in flagrant disregard of the historical context of that long Danish epic, James Shapiro notes that ‘in making this claim Heaney leaves himself open to the charge that he fails to acknowledge the “complex history of conquest and colony” of the very poem that he is translating’. See Shapiro, ‘A Better *Beowulf*’, *The New York Times*, 27/2/2000, and ‘Through-other places, through-other times: the Irish poet and Britain’ (2001), reprinted in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose, 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), pp. 364-82 (p. 381).

¹⁴ See Gardiner, ‘*Befitting Emblems of Adversity*’, pp. 48-85, especially p. 52.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 63-85 and 90-93, and Foster, ‘Protestant Magic’, p. 96. On Dowden's retirement, Yeats applied unsuccessfully for his Chair at Trinity College.

strategically reversed.¹⁶ In his selection and the prefatory essay, Yeats sought to liberate Spenser from Dowden's ponderous moralising, a Spenser in the 'sage and serious' mould whose Irish relevance was a hindrance both to himself and to his readers and critics.¹⁷ Instead, Yeats finds advantage in Spenser's situation in Ireland: the distance that it gave the poet from the increasing sway of English Puritanism with its confining dictates on poetry and the activities of the creative mind.¹⁸ As he acknowledged to Lady Gregory a year later, he 'founded' the selection and essay in his Spenser book on 'a single idea – the contrast between Anglo-French England and Anglo-Saxon England'.¹⁹ In this schema, Anglo-French England, the medieval 'merrie England' of his most wistful dreams, 'indolent, demonstrative' and joyous, is conveniently transplanted to sixteenth-century Ireland where, strengthened by Anglo-Norman aristocrats such as the Butlers (whose lineage Willie and his father insisted upon claiming), it managed to flower a little longer than in England where the Puritan descendents of the Anglo-Saxons held sway.²⁰ Colonial outpost becomes a cultural haven for values the imperial centre has let slide.

To Yeats's mind, Ireland, and especially Anglo-Norman Kilcolman castle, is a haven for Spenser, even if it is one whose freedoms he fails to explore fully. For Yeats recognises that Spenser is enough a man of England to struggle with these costly Irish freedoms: he sees his self-division not just in the conflict between aesthetic and moral in his poetry but in the conflict Spenser so evidently feels between England and Ireland,

¹⁶ Yeats, Introduction, p. xviii.

¹⁷ See Gardiner, *Befitting Emblems of Adversity*, pp. 83-84n.

¹⁸ In its way, this argument prefigures the argument made by late-twentieth-century critics that Spenser's exile in Ireland, on 'salvage soyl', was, like that of Ovid amongst the Goths in Tomis, a more enabling position than he would otherwise have occupied at the metropolitan centre.

¹⁹ From *Letters*, ed. Wade, p. 391.

²⁰ 'Introduction', p. xxiv. And, for all his insistence on Spenser's Irish dues, Yeats's attachment to the idea of a lost, Anglo-Norman aesthetic, at one point brings him to comment that *The Faerie Queene* 'was written in Merry England'.

between poetry and public service to the Queen.²¹ Such conflicting loyalties exact a great personal and poetic cost to Yeats's Spenser: 'Like an hysterical patient he drew a complicated web of inhuman logic out of the bowels of an insufficient premise – there was no right, no law, but that of Elizabeth, and all that opposed her opposed themselves to God, to civilisation, and to all inherited wisdom and courtesy, and should be put to death.'²² For Yeats, it is not simply that Spenser's 'inhuman logic' demeans the man: the losses of the poetic fellowship, imagination and resources of Ireland that Spenser suffers by his service to Elizabeth deprive him of his true place as an Irish poet. And it is this loss that Yeats can then heroically step in to repair, re-establishing the tradition of Irish poetry in English on the illustrious, but needy precedent of this tragic Spenser.

Nonetheless, Yeats sees Spenser's career spiralling ever-upwards to reach, in the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, a kind of apotheosis despite himself, one that transcends the limitations of mind and duty and that 'complicated web of inhuman logic', a beacon that confirms the promise of a tradition of Irish poetry in English for Spenser's poetic descendants.²³ How so? Because Yeats reads Spenser's self-division between England and Ireland as, concurrently, a division between the public poet and the lyric poet. Yeats makes a direct link between the achievement of the *Mutabilitie Cantos* and Spenser's 'new happiness' and security in poetic and personal life in the vision of Colin Clout piping at Mount Acidale and in '*Epithalamium*' [*sic*].²⁴ Strategically ignoring the conclusion of the Mount Acidale scene where Colin breaks his pipes, Yeats, like readers before and after him, identifies the wonderful vision of the Graces dancing as a befitting

²¹ Spenser's allegorising being, as Yeats sees it, the mark of the oncoming Puritan times, he yet merges it with a 'long descended, irresponsible, happy art'. See his Introduction, p. xxvii.

²² Yeats, Introduction, p. xix-xx.

²³ Ibid., p. xix.

²⁴ Ibid., p. xx.

image of poetic transcendence – the power of the lyric poet – in heady combination with the folkloric local topos of a poet celebrating his love for a ‘fair woman of his neighbourhood’.²⁵ More engaging still, Yeats finds that strand of celebration of poetic power and independence, the poetic daring of celebrating one’s beloved in equal company with the Graces, vividly re-asserted in the language, spirit and Irish topography of the *Mutabilitie Cantos*.

Ireland’s presence in the *Mutabilitie Cantos* cannot be ignored, as it might otherwise be if buried under the weight of the moralistic allegoresis scorned by Yeats, and which he has come to expect of Spenserians such as Dowden. ‘Who knowes not *Arlo-Hill*?’ (VII.vi.36), the narrator demands, pointedly echoing the form and very parenthetical address of the vaunting poet’s ‘(who knowes not *Colin Clout*?)’ (VI.x.16) of the previous Book. Infamous Arlo-Hill, the trumpeting capitals of ‘*IRELAND*’ (VII.vi.38), the transplanted aetiology of the Faunus and Diana myths, and those of the local rivers Awbeg and Behanna, build up a topography local to Kilcolman in which matters of universal import, past, present and future, are decided. The particular interest in ‘the rivers and hills about [Kilcolman] castle’ that Yeats admires in Spenser gets its most vociferous support in the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, not just in its topographical allegories but in the strikingly reconceived epic task: ‘To sing of hilles & woods, mongst warres & Knights’ (VI.vi.37) rather than the expected obverse (to sing of wars and knights, mongst hills and woods).²⁶ Yeats may have spotted Ireland in the details too: a curious use of the word ‘file’ (Gaelic for ‘poet’), the familiar sour pun on the ‘holy-Island’ (*sacra Insula*) (VII.vi.37). But the central drama of the *Mutabilitie Cantos* is *Mutabilitie*’s case against

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. xviii. Yeats later finds an appreciation for ‘the beauty of the hills and woods’ even in the *View* (p. xxxiv).

Jove, and the ceremonial evidence she marshals in support of her insurrection. Although Yeats may ultimately side with Dame Nature, it is through the powerful, rebellious, female presence of Mutabilitie that Spenser, despite himself, finally allows Ireland to speak in the kind of spirit that Yeats can approve. Here, admittedly, speculation repays more than worm-eaten historical record does: Mutabilitie's bold challenge ventriloquizes a protest to absolutist powers that Edmund Spenser, civil servant, could not make (if he had so desired). Yeats had already made (and would continue to make) ample use of Kathleen Ni Houlihaun and other Irish female intransigents to voice a challenge to his own class and ancestors that William Butler Yeats, Irish Protestant (wishful Norman ancestry notwithstanding), could not make.

Rebellious, articulate females are a conspicuous presence in Yeats's selection from Spenser, even including morally dubious female sovereigns of one kind or another.²⁷ And in the Yeatsian reading that the Cantos accommodate, this unruly female personification of an undeniable natural and rhetorical force undermines the earthly sovereignty of another female sovereign outside the poem: that of Queen Elizabeth. Thus Mutabilitie's charge, that of usurpation, constitutes a metaphysical challenge to the bases of contemporary political belief and colonial endeavour, rooted as they were (in Yeats's words) in that 'insufficient premise', the belief 'that there was no right, no law, but that of Elizabeth'.²⁸ The ceremonial pageantry that she instigates – one of Yeats's favourite Spenserian literary techniques – both invokes and, in its cosmic scale, trivialises

²⁷ Yeats's selection and the accompanying images by Jessie M. King foreground Phaedria, Acrasia and Mutabilitie. In fact, the captions of King's illustrations do not always remain faithful to the Spenserian text: a revealing flight of fancy in keeping with Yeats's selection of rebellious Faeryland females riffs on Spenserian lines about Phaedria (and in Spenserian spelling) to compare her to the notorious Pope Joan, a woman who is supposed to have cross-dressed and been pope for several years in the ninth century: King adds the following to the relevant lines excerpted from II.vi.3: 'Sometimes she song as lowd as larke in ayre / Sometimes she laughed as mery as Pope Jone'. *The Poems of Spenser*, illustration facing p. 184.

²⁸ Yeats, Introduction, p. xix.

Elizabeth's courtly pageantry.²⁹ Finally, this female antagonist to Elizabeth, a female personification of Mutability, making her case atop Irish Arlo-Hill, succeeds in shifting the centre of authority and power away from London and the royal court to rural Ireland and the judicial courts so active there, and posits an alternative universe, an alternative sovereign, an alternative political establishment that, in more ways than one, was not a million miles away from Spenser – or at least, from a Yeatsian Spenser.³⁰ In giving voice to her challenge, Spenser as a Yeatsian lyric poet has, through his Irish material, escaped the shackles of the public poet and somehow found his way to the other side.

Nearly a century after Yeats mustered up the courage to celebrate Spenser, Seamus Heaney prepared to do Yeats the same favour. As Michael Cavanagh notes, Heaney's attention to Yeats for his selection and introduction to Yeats's poetry for the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* proved the anchor for his 1991 collection, *Seeing Things*.³¹ But Heaney's attention to Yeats pre-dated this work, and his deep reflections on the figure of Yeats's Spenser in all his political and historical complexities, constitute a strong (and hitherto unnoticed) form of engagement with Yeats as much as with Spenser.³² This engagement begins pugnaciously with the collections of the early 1970s, especially *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975). It mellows through Heaney's poetry and prose as the Yeatsian influence prevails, but never loses sight of the hard edges of

²⁹ Ibid., p. xlv-xlvii.

³⁰ On Spenser's Irish legal wrangles with Lord Roche as a context for the Mutabilitie Cantos, see Patricia Coughlan, 'The Local Context of Mutabilitie's Plea', *Irish University Review*, 26 (1996), 320-41.

³¹ Cavanagh describes Yeats as 'the master spirit' of this collection, in 'Tower and Boat: Yeats and Seamus Heaney', *New Hibernia Review*, 4 (2000), 17-38 (p. 17).

³² In styling and signing himself 'Incertus' in his younger days, Heaney distantly remembers the early Spenser signature, 'Immerito'. For an opposing view, see Raphael Ingelbein's essay which argues that Yeats exerts little influence on Heaney because they are '[p]olitically [...] poles apart' (p. 72): 'Decolonizing Ireland/England? Yeats, Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes', in *W.B. Yeats and Postcolonialism*, ed. by Deborah Fleming (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 2001), pp. 71-100.

Spenser's political intractability and his harsh words in the *View*. Reading the mad king Sweeney as the figure of an artist, for example, the image Heaney seizes on is remarkably close to Yeats's account of Elizabethan Spenser: 'it is possible to read the work as an aspect of the quarrel between the free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political, and domestic obligation'.³³ The gradual transformation of Spenser into an Irish poet is complete when Spenser makes a surprise return in the mature Heaney, now conscripted to fight on a side for which the historical Spenser could never have envisaged himself, but which faithfully follows through on the Yeatsian vision of Spenser: promoting the cause of the Irish poet writing in English, and his or her claims for inclusion in the English literary canon. But the seeds of this *entente* were present even in Heaney's most antagonistic writings in the early 1970s, the core group of writings to be examined in this essay. I will suggest that Yeats, and his reading of the *Mutabilitie Cantos* in particular, lie behind this and every stage of Heaney's careful acceptance of Spenser: in his understanding of the poet's vocation, in his identification of the place of the Irish poet in the Irish landscape and in a cosmic history of conflict in which the artist has hard choices to make.³⁴ Occasionally Heaney clarifies aspects of Yeats's moulding of Spenser, bringing Yeats's tragic, colonial poetic avatar into a necessarily post-colonial political dialogue with the present – but carefully avoiding recuperating Spenser for a committed postcolonial politics. If Heaney's Spenser is necessarily coloured by the political issues raised by post-colonial criticism (as he admits), the counter-weight of

³³ *Sweeney Astray* (1983), n.p. [p. 2].

³⁴ The touchstones of the *Mutabilitie Cantos* recur in *Wintering Out* and *North*: the term 'mutable' appears in various forms in the poems of *North*, e.g. in 'Belderg' ('mutable as sound') and 'Kinship' ('mutation of weathers / and seasons'). Diana and Actaeon, subjects of Spenser's subplot in the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, also make a quirky appearance, enjoying an Irish courtship of 'decadent sweet art' in a poem entitled 'Aisling', in honour of the genre of the Irish bards. The poem appears immediately after 'Ocean's Love to Ireland' with its rape scene described through Raleigh's 'broad Devonshire' and his victim's broken Irish words of protest.

Yeats's Spenser (and Heaney's Yeats) sees off any easy, politicised condemnation of Spenser's poetry.³⁵ The remainder of this essay will be devoted to these Yeatsian-Spenserian moments in Heaney and their contribution to the idea of Spenser as an Irish poet.

Heaney's status as a Northern poet and the question of his response to the 'Troubles' have drawn much comment from critics and peers alike. Although far from being apolitical, Heaney's refusal to be drawn into the activist politics of one side has not always been remembered kindly to him.³⁶ In answering these charges, Heaney has remained staunch in his defence of the vocation of poet as a calling higher than political partisanship and propaganda, however justified those causes. It is a measure of Heaney's poetic conviction and latitude of vision that he finds support for this stance in Spenser. Heaney shares Yeats's appreciation for Spenser's modulation (thorny though it is) between the tasks of the public poet and the lyric poet, and he follows Yeats's lead in reading Spenser as a poet troubled by the conflicting demands of lyric poetry and public poetry, of the poet and the public servant. It is not so much that Yeats and Heaney seek to separate Spenser's politics from his art, but rather that they see in their mutuality and urgency the familiar challenges of the Irish poet, the burdensome immediacies of present times and the no less pressing poetic imperative of a larger, un-lived history. While Yeats brandishes Spenser's execrable politics as an exigency to which he is historically (tragically) bound, Heaney ultimately directs us to the 'entirely important' act of shifting

³⁵ See Heaney's recent interviews with Dennis O'Driscoll in *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), p. 455.

³⁶ This is familiar ground, and I will limit myself to two examples: Desmond Fennell's pamphlet attack on Heaney appropriating the title of one of Heaney's own poems: *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing: Why Seamus Heaney is No. 1* (ELO Publications, 1991), and Eileen Cahill's critique of Heaney 'restless circumvention of political activism' in 'A Silent Voice: Seamus Heaney and Ulster Politics', *Critical Quarterly*, 29 (1987), 55-70 (p. 56).

the ‘plane of regard’ with which we read Spenser and his fellow planters to one that transcends the politics of blame or the illusion of apolitical art and that seeks, instead, to acknowledge and interrogate how execrable politics can find a home in the most humane art.³⁷

But such are the gains of Heaney’s long-standing reflection on Spenser. In his earlier poetry, it is the excess energy – and conviction – of Spenser’s verse, most pronounced in the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, and read by Yeats as a psychic repudiation of the ‘serviceable thoughts’ he is compelled to think in allegiance to Elizabeth, which presents Spenser’s credentials as a lyric poet most appealingly to Heaney.³⁸ Moreover, Yeats’s Spenser provides the cues for Heaney to re-model Spenser as a poet of place, a poet whose vocation transcends particular moments and testifies instead to a primordial, cosmic history of conflict and the sufferings of its victims by keeping strict faith with the local, the timeless – and the land. Against the inevitable partisanship of public poetry, Heaney instead commits himself to a poetry of authentic attestation and articulation of the local: to give voice to the hidden histories of the land, the storehouse of memory.

Heaney’s forgiveness of Spenser’s overt antipathy to the Irish, like Yeats’s, owes much to Spenser’s equivocal treatment of Ireland and insurrection in the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, where the Irish settings and dark prophecies are forcefully animated by the intransigent *Mutabilitie*, making her a creature of this soil, a *genius loci*.³⁹ It is in the bold terms of *Mutabilitie*’s plea, in the strong, almost anti-imperial language of the *Cantos*, in the embedding and classicizing of narratives of native Irish resistance, that the

³⁷ Heaney’s retrospect in this vein in his interviews with Dennis O’Driscoll seems to mark the end of one stage of his engagement with Spenser. See *Stepping Stones*, p. 455.

³⁸ Yeats, Introduction, p. xxxi.

³⁹ Heaney’s ‘little adúlteress’ of the bog poems might be traced back to *Mutabilitie*, just as his figuring of the poet as Antaeus returns to Maleger. See also note 000.

Mutabilitie Cantos allow for a strong reading of Spenser against ‘Spenser’, the lyric poet against the public servant. If Yeats formalizes this reading, Heaney carries it forward to the next generation of Irish poets, in the process gathering up Spenser’s Protestant invective against the Catholic Irish and Old English into the larger primordial history of conflict on the island, that ‘archetypal pattern’ to which the Irish poet must give voice.⁴⁰ In such times of conflict, Heaney again follows Yeats in setting out the poet’s task as being to provide ‘the perspectives of a *humane* reason’ together with “‘befitting emblems of adversity’”. In this distant echo of Yeats’s indictment of Spenser-as-public-servant for drawing ‘a complicated web of *inhuman* logic out of the bowels of an insufficient premise’ (the tendentious prompts of Elizabeth’s absolutism), Heaney delicately reworks Yeats’s Spenser as a poetic model.⁴¹

Here, as elsewhere in his poetry and prose, Heaney makes explicit what was implicit – or elided – in Yeats’s selections from Spenser. A case in point is the difficult question of Spenser’s political and literary allegiances to England, one that Yeats only partially resolved by a series of evasions and elisions that allowed sixteenth-century Ireland to be read as a late flowering of medieval England.⁴² By contrast, Heaney takes his cue from Spenser and his contemporaries when he presents the problem of being an Irish poet writing in English in gendered terms.⁴³ We can find traces not just of Spenser’s

⁴⁰ Cited by Stallworthy, ‘The Poet as Archaeologist’, p. 165.

⁴¹ From ‘Feeling Into Words’, a 1974 lecture, reprinted in *Preoccupations*, pp. 41-60 (pp. 56-7); emphasis mine. Heaney does not simply recall Yeats’s judgement of Spenser here, though (see Yeats, Introduction, p. xix; emphasis mine); he also looks to and quotes from Yeats’s ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’ for the idea of ‘befitting emblems of adversity’.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. xxii-xxvii.

⁴³ ‘I suppose the feminine element for me involves the matter of Ireland, and the masculine strain is drawn from the involvement with English literature.’ These are Heaney’s words from a 1972 essay for the *Guardian* newspaper. ‘Belfast’, in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1980), pp. 28-37 (p. 34). Heaney goes on to state that this ‘realisation’ is enforce[d] upon him by Spenser and Sir John Davies, holding out the notorious lines from the *View* and re-casting them as he

Irena or Maleger but also of Spenser's stirring combination of an Irish setting and an unruly female figure in the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, so potent for Yeats, recapitulated in startling fashion when Heaney casts this problem as one of reconciling the female matter of Ireland ('our mother ground' and 'insatiable bride' ('Kinship')) with the authoritative male form of the English literary tradition. In his early poetry, this reconciliation is barely or roughly achieved, through the awkward linguistic throwbacks of 'our guttural muse' ('Traditions') or even in the figure of rape ('Ocean's Love to Ireland'). But soon Heaney finds what will become his signature solution to this challenge in the 'bog queens' of *North* (1975): intransigent goddesses of the Irish soil, preserving (and preserved in) a primordial Irish cultural memory of conflict that stretches far, far back beyond either 1970s sectarianism or sixteenth-century English colonialism.⁴⁴ From here on in, Heaney's female figures of intransigence or resistance – 'pirate queens', 'little adultresses' ('Come to the Bower'), unlikely Venuses ('Girls Bathing, Galway 1965'), spirited female renegades – are always shadowed and protected by their primitive female ancestors, geniuses of the land whose unknown transgressions brought such terrible fates upon them. Heaney's poetic act of giving voice to these silenced female bodies chimes with the terms of his earliest image of writing poetry: digging, unearthing, sounding the depths of the soil in an approximation of the masculine agricultural skills and traditions of his ancestors, an image that cleverly re-appropriates and re-grounds the masculine labours of

had in 'Bog Oak'. This highly-politicized gendering of Ireland and England is something Heaney specifically repudiates in the later interviews with O'Driscoll, citing the changed world and tenor of Anglo-Irish relations in the Blair era (*Stepping Stones*, p. 170).

⁴⁴ See, for example, 'Come to the Bower' and 'Strange Fruit'.

the English literary tradition in the workings of the feminized land of Heaney's ancestors.⁴⁵

Anchoring this diachronic reconciliation is Heaney's perceptive addition of the word 'genius' to the terms of the Yeatsian-Spenserian dynamic. Implicit in Yeats, Heaney uses the term in all its classical and Elizabethan valencies in order to assimilate Spenser to an Irish poetic tradition without fudging his difficult political bequest in any way.⁴⁶ Spenser's savage lines about the victims of the Munster famine, ostentatiously quoted by Yeats in his Introduction and irrevocably charging the Spenserian critical tradition, are carefully emended by Heaney when he, too, quotes them in 'Bog Oak': here the locus of agency and power have switched, and, rhetorically at least, they are not so much victims but 'geniuses who creep / "out of every corner / of the woodes and glennes" / towards watercress and carrion'. The Yeatsian view of Spenser as a tragic bard *manqué* clearly lies behind Heaney's pointed emendation of Spenser's infamous words, and it acquires an added potency by echoing the equally infamous opening of Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, in which Irenius suggests that it may be because of 'the *very Genius* of the soile, or influence of the starres, or [p. 44] that Almighty god hathe not yeat Appointed the tyme of her reformation or that he reserueth her in this

⁴⁵ Heaney also pursues other earth-bound figures such as Antaeus (who has a particularly strong Irish relevance in his Spenserian provenance). See 'Antaeus' and 'Hercules and Antaeus', the latter of which refers to souterrains and caves, both associated by Spenser with Irish rebels. The principal Irish Antaeus is Spenser's Maleger, but other earth-dwellers in *The Faerie Queene* have strong Irish overtones. See, for example, M.M. Gray, 'The Influence of Spenser's Irish Experiences on *The Faerie Queene*', *RES*, 6 (1930), 413-28 (pp. 415-16); Richard McCabe, *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment: Elizabethan Ireland and the Poetics of Difference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 128-30; and Thomas Herron, 'Irish Den of Thieves: Souterrains (and a Crannóg?) in Books V and VI of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*', *Spenser Studies*, 14 (2000), 303-17.

⁴⁶ Travelling back into pagan antiquity as well as literary history, Heaney writes his own attachment to the Irish landscape through the figure of the *genius loci*. It is worth noting that Spenser's figure of Genius in the Garden of Adonis (III.vi.31-2) stands over precisely the processes of cyclical history that Yeats had cherished, and that Heaney, too, foregrounds (see note 000), as well as the preservation of Adonis from his boar-gored fate, 'eterne in mutabilitie' (III.vi.47).

vnquiet state still, for some secrete skourge, which shall by her Come vnto Englande' that Ireland has not yet proved reformable.⁴⁷ And it is with these creeping geniuses that Heaney proclaims his sympathies: in the *Guardian* piece that also appeared in 1972, he declares that 'At that point I feel closer to the natives, the *geniuses of the place*'.⁴⁸ But Heaney's assertion of fellowship with Spenser's enemies can be misleading: his loyalties are more divided than that. (So, too, are Yeats's, as Heaney reveals by the same manoeuvre.) It is, for example, a recognisably Spenserian sense of 'genius' that Heaney draws upon in the *Guardian* article and poem: the *genius loci* or spirit of place, which shades into the figure of Genius and the processes he facilitates in the Garden of Adonis in Book III of *The Faerie Queene*.⁴⁹ This process by which nature renews itself in a great, cosmic cycle dovetails with Yeats's beliefs about cosmic history, and provides the backdrop and rationale for a Heanyesque poetry that, if local, speaks to the cosmos, the infinite.⁵⁰

Heaney thus shifts the Yeatsian Spenser from the tragic Irish Protestant poet despite himself to a more ecumenical role as a poet of place, and, consequently, an Irish poet. But on Heaney's model, this Irish poet as a poet of place is not limited by nationalism or any other such ideology. Here, again, the *Mutabilitie Cantos* proves exemplary: who knows not Arlo-Hill where the cosmic *is* the local and where the local is

⁴⁷ *A View*, in *The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition*, ed. by Edwin Greenlaw et al., 11 vols (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1932-49), vol. 10, 39-231 (pp. 43-44); emphasis Spenser's, interestingly. Frank McGuinness builds on the same cue in plotting his Spenserian play, *Mutabilitie*.

⁴⁸ 'Belfast', pp. 34-35; emphasis mine. 'Traditions' appears in the same collection, with its patchwork of harsh Elizabethan pronouncements on Ireland and the Irish, including Sir Philip Sidney's comment in the *Defence of Poesy* that in Ireland, 'learning goeth very bare', Spenser's 'anatomies of death' in the *View* (also quoted by Yeats in his Introduction), those same victims of the Munster famine and, of course, Shakespeare's Macmorris's famous expostulation, 'What ish my nation?'.

⁴⁹ See note 000.

⁵⁰ See Olney, pp. 45-48. Daniel Tobin perceptively notes that Heaney's understanding of history is more cyclical than chronological, with a concern that is 'cosmological as well as historical' (p. 55). See *Passage to the Center: Imagination and the Sacred in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), especially pp. 53-61.

the global? In Heaney's poetic genealogy, Spenser gains another Irish compatriot at this juncture of metaphysics and geopolitics, where the tiniest immediacies of rural townlands decode the most enduring human experiences of being-in-the-world: Patrick Kavanagh, whose quiet 'Epic' couples the local and the global in just this way, and makes the connection with the compromised form of *The Faerie Queene* itself. The ghost of Homer materialising to whisper in the poet's ear, 'I made the Iliad from such / A local row. Gods make their own importance', might be the ghost of Spenser in Heaney's ear.

Heaney's Irish poet is at one and the same time a global poet. In defining the Irish poet as first a poet of place, rather than of any particular ideological standpoint or political or religious persuasion, Heaney seems to part company with Yeats. And yet, his strongest example of the Irish poet as a poet of place is Yeats and Yeats's creative association with Thoor Ballylee, primarily as expressed in the poems of *The Tower* (1928). The image of Yeats in his tower chrystallises for Heaney the poet's independence, obstinacy and enduring integrity and the way that being true to place nurtures such qualities, and it is this image that Heaney designates as the signature motif of the Irish poet. But how much of that image is owed to Yeats's sense of Spenser in his own tower!

Heaney's charting of the literary history of Ireland in terms of a quincunx of towers is well known. Its five points comprise Spenser's Kilcolman, Yeats's Thoor Ballylee, Joyce's Sandycove Martello tower, Carrickfergus castle for MacNeice, and at the centre, 'the tower of prior Irelandness, the round tower of original insular dwelling'.⁵¹ Three of the five – those of Yeats, Spenser and MacNeice – are Norman towers. All

⁵¹ Heaney draws this wishful map, 'the shape of an integrated literary tradition', in his final lecture as Professor of Poetry in Oxford. It is reprinted as 'Frontiers of Writing' in *Preoccupations*, pp. 186-203 (see p. 199).

defensive structures to a greater or lesser degree, it is the Yeatsian tower that best expresses Heaney's sense of the Irish poet of place. Heaney rightly identifies the empowering effect that Thoor Ballylee had on Yeats's imagination, the protection and poetic privileges fostered by its stone walls, almost more potent symbolically than physically.⁵² And yet, as vital to Yeats's charmed image of the tower as ancient protection, as liberating as the passage it afforded from the demands of daily, historical life into the timeless and enduring interior world of poetry, is its shadow of ruin and destruction, an inevitability that Yeats accepts at the very same moment as he acknowledges the tower's gifts.⁵³ It is to Spenser, once again, that Yeats owes this dual conception of the poet in his tower: not the historical Spenser, but his own carefully-remoulded conception of an Irish Spenser.

Towers first built as defences by the Anglo-Normans (or Old English, as Spenser knew them) and subsequently renovated as homes and hearthplaces, were dotted around the Irish countryside both as intact towers and – after the next waves of conflict in the sixteenth-century plantations of Henry and Elizabeth – as war-torn ruins, rubble-strewn mounds. Nineteenth-century nostalgia read such ruins as testimony to faraway historical conflict or golden ages lost, and in some cases (as happened to Kilcolman), took measures to ruin such castles even more pleasingly. To Yeats, the towers promised the possibility of re-establishing those golden ages, even as they signified the inevitable

⁵² Heaney, too, seems to feel deeply the same kind of symbolic protection. In an extraordinary but unrelated reflection on his last meeting with Ted Hughes, he remembers a comment Hughes had made on an extension Heaney and his wife were building onto their Dublin house: 'it was an odd four-sided outshot to the main building, so he says, "Anything that tends towards the octagonal makes your house a tower." I still find that somehow fortifying. It has a kind of soothsaying quality that was often in his words.' *Stepping Stones*, p. 393.

⁵³ Yeats's ambivalent command in 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' is a case in point: 'May this laborious stair and this stark tower / Become a roofless ruin that the owl / May build in the cracked masonry and cry / Her desolation to the desolate sky.'

demise of such enterprises too.⁵⁴ What Thoor Ballylee offered Yeats, as Kilcolman (in a different way) offered Spenser was protection: not just the protection of ancient granite and stonemasonry, but the symbolic protection of history, of a prior, hospitable tradition, of a safe dwelling-place in Irish landscape and history.⁵⁵ To Heaney, reading Yeats, the quincunx of towers provides a visual matrix for a history of conflict in which poets, by their attachment to certain places, forged an Irish literary tradition against the odds, a poetry of the land as a sort of national treasure. That literary chorography in turn rehistoricises the landscape, making places like Ben Bulbin, Lissadell and Innisfree ‘instinct with the spirit of a poet and his poetry’.⁵⁶ In other words, poets like Yeats – and Spenser – *become* the geniuses of place; that is their act of public service to Ireland. Far from being a ‘monument to poetic guilt’, then, Heaney’s Spenser becomes a spur to poetic consciousness and poetic enterprise in a cosmos marked by conflict and struggle.⁵⁷

Towers, like great houses, crumble and fall, a fact that both Yeats and Spenser found particularly compelling. Yeats is particularly sensitive to the entropic and historical pull that draws the tower inexorably from its social and intellectual heights into the rubble and rampant verdure of a bump in the landscape where ‘nettles wave upon a shapeless mound’.⁵⁸ (Spenser has a single word for it: mutability.) T. McAlindon has judiciously noted something Spenserian in Yeats’s attraction to ‘princely ruins’ as a

⁵⁴ Foster suggests that some of Yeats’s contemporaries regarded his acquisition of a Norman castle as a straightforward act of social climbing, but the Spenserian antecedent gives it a stronger poetic character, I think.

⁵⁵ In its way, this derives from the totemic power of the castle’s Norman origins combined with Spenser’s illustrious inhabitation of the tower in a time when ‘the earth had still its sheltering sacredness’ (Introduction, p. xxv). I would suggest that ‘sheltering sacredness’ captures precisely the quality of Heaney’s earth; in his 1977 lecture, ‘The Sense of Place’, Heaney fondly describes a not-so-distant past when ‘[t]he landscape was sacramental’ (reprinted in *Preoccupations*, pp. 131–49 (p. 132)).

⁵⁶ ‘The Sense of Place’, p. 132.

⁵⁷ Henry Hart, ‘Poetymologies in Seamus Heaney’s *Wintering Out*’, *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 35 (1989), 204–31 (p. 208).

⁵⁸ This is the main theme of ‘Coole Park: 1929’, from which this line is taken.

setting for his verse, but poems such as ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’, ‘The Tower’ and ‘Coole Park: 1929’ concern themselves with more than just the poignant juxtaposition he suggests.⁵⁹ Twenty years after his selections from Spenser, these tower poems mark another stage in Yeats’s engagement with Spenser, a deepening of his concerns with the place of the poet in not just an Irish, but also a cosmic history. In these poems, Yeats places the poet squarely within the powerful dynamic of becoming and degenerating that holds tower and mound in thrall to each other, as master and servant of both, sheltered and exposed to the ravages of time and history. Here again, Yeats models the poet’s role between history and nature on the beleaguered Spenser as he, Yeats, saw him: eternally caught between two worlds, between the political exigencies of a time of strife and an eternal fellowship of bards and poets. Poetry between history and nature. Most unflinchingly expressed in ‘Coole Park: 1929’, this belief also animates the lines Yeats wrote to be carved on his own tower as an ever-present truth: ‘And may these characters remain / When all is ruin once again’.⁶⁰ If this faintly, classically, recalls Shakespeare’s sonnets (sonnet 55, for example) with their obsessive prognostication and resistance of ruin and obliteration, it also builds on Yeats’s reading of the *Mutabilitie Cantos* as articulating just such a moment between history and nature in which the contours of a specific moment in Irish history – and a prophecy of its future – can also be picked out, but which ultimately recede against the backdrop of cosmic history.

⁵⁹ ‘Yeats and the English Renaissance’, *PMLA*, 82 (1967), 157-69 (p. 163).

⁶⁰ ‘To be Carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee’, in *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats: A New Edition*, ed. by Richard J. Finneran (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1993).

Yeats might also have been thinking of William Henry Bartlett's well-known drawing of Kilcolman.⁶¹ That image of picturesque isolation, the ivy-clad tower on a mound that falls away by a sun-dappled lake to which only animals now pay homage brings together the chief strands of Yeats's Spenser: the embattled poet in his tower, protected by the remains of the Anglo-Normans and the 'old French joy' that they preserved in Ireland, tragically flawed by his dogged imperviousness to Ireland and Irish culture, this willed ignorance finally quited when he is driven from his castle to his death and the castle falls into decay, a ruin on a mound for ruminants of one kind or another to contemplate.⁶² Bartlett styles the mound on which the ruins stand more pronouncedly than in reality, perhaps suggesting that irresistible relationship between tower and mound already to be found in *The Faerie Queene* and which spoke so strongly to Yeats's poetic and historiographical beliefs.

Written from Thoor Ballylee in the latter half of 1922, and laden with an array of complex personal and philosophical significances, 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' also carries a reconceived Spenserian burden. It presents a series of key moments in the poet's struggle to know his place between tower and mound, between history and nature, in a turbulent narrative of civil war deliberately rendered flat by the eternal rhythms of poetry and nature. In one of its poems, Yeats finds a troop of Irregulars at his door, and

⁶¹ And perhaps, too, the rumours that proliferated about the circumstances of Spenser's abandonment of Kilcolman castle. J.B. Lethbridge gives a good account of these in his 'Spenser's Last Days: Ireland, Career, Mutability, Allegory', in *Edmund Spenser: New and Renewed Directions*, ed. by J.B. Lethbridge (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 2006), pp. 302-36. Bartlett's drawings were made for the prints of N.P. Willis and S. Coyne's *The Scenery and Antiquities of Ireland* (1842). The Kilcolman print has been circulated alone since, and stamps Kilcolman with the nineteenth-century fascination with ruins. See Christopher Burlinson, *Allegory, Space, and the Material World in the Writings of Edmund Spenser* (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2006), pp. 155-58, on the way in which the loss and fragmentation of Kilcolman came to stand for the loss and fragmentation of *The Faerie Queene*.

⁶² Yeats, Introduction, p. xxii. Yeats speculates that some of those who attacked Spenser's castle may have found partial cause in 'some rumours of "The State of Ireland" sticking in their stomachs' (p xxi).

can amiably complain about the weather to this volatile group of soldiers, secure in his 'more ancient tower' and its immutable protection of intellect and poetry. Later, he climbs to the tower-top and 'lean[s] upon broken stone' to enter the enveloping mist, sure of the tower's past and future as 'broken stone' and rubble even as he draws solace from its hewn strength and protection. The weather confirms nature's sway over history, 'sweeping over all, / Valley, river, and elms, under the light of a moon / That seems unlike itself, that seems unchangeable, / A glittering sword out of the east'.⁶³ And from these moments comes Yeats's defiant expression of the strength and conviction that Heaney so admired in him, and which was generated at least in part from Yeats's sense of fellowship with the Spenser he now construed as Irish poetic avatar in his mouldering Norman tower. The terse, potent monosyllables of the final stanza render this conviction: 'I turn away and shut the door', back into the timeless but temporary protection of the tower and the 'daemonic images' of his poetry, truly 'eterne in mutabilitie'

Spenser and *The Faerie Queene* lurk about this poem. Echoes and ripostes to Spenser's Elizabeth (Cynthia, her motto 'Semper Eadem'), strongly redolent of the spirit of Spenser's *Mutabilitie* and her claims, find the moon 'unlike itself, that seems unchangeable'. The spectral ruined tower of 'broken stone' has another Spenserian echo in the hills and mounds from which poets always have sung, and will continue to sing, the natural counterpart to (and metamorphosed form of) the tower from which he writes. This irresistible dynamic between tower and mound symbolizes and spatializes the passing of time even as it re-animates *Mutabilitie*'s claims and Dame Nature's ruling. Yeats poignantly acknowledges the degenerative power of mutability in 'Coole Park: 1929'

⁶³ The weather performs the same function in the 'mizzling rain' that 'blurs the far end / of the cart track' in Heaney's 'Bog Oak', and that allows Heaney to imagine the figure of Spenser through its mists.

where he imagines Lady Gregory's great home 'When all those rooms and passages are gone, / When nettles wave upon a shapeless mound / And saplings root among the broken stone'. In the sway of mutability, nothing but 'a moment's memory' can recover the transient glory of the place, immortalised though it is by the work of those connected with it. 'What power could now prevent the fertility, the insensibility of nature?', as Virginia Woolf writes of the decaying Ramsay house in the Hebrides as war exacts its toll on the family and their way of life, in *To the Lighthouse*.⁶⁴ But while Woolf laments the moment, Yeats finds succour in the larger historical trajectory to which the thistle in the Ramsay's larder, the swallows nesting in their drawing-room, the bees and stare nesting in the mouldering masonry of Thoor Ballylee all testify.

Heaney, of course, concurs. It is the principle of maternal nature that Heaney cherishes in Yeats's 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', the irrepressibility of the stare's nest-building in the old Norman keep at a moment of historical crisis.⁶⁵ More than entropy, what Spenser and Yeats's poeticised dynamic between tower and mound reveals is the potent bargain struck between Nature and Time, the enfolding of material change in form and matter as upheld by Dame Nature on Arlo-Hill, and the unfolding of human history against the massive backdrop of cosmic history. Heaney's designation of humans as mound-dwellers ('Antaeus') also speak to this nexus of towers and mounds in Yeatsian and Spenserian terms, although he revises the poet's place from a Colin Clout piping on hill-tops to a less autocratic voicing of what lies beneath those mounds. For example, the highly-charged 'bawn' that Heaney will later put in *Beowulf* appears in

⁶⁴ From Part II: Time Passes (London: Granada, 1984; first published 1927), p. 128.

⁶⁵ 'Yeats as an Example', a 1978 lecture, reprinted in *Preoccupations*, pp. 98-114 (p. 112). Heaney is drawn to poems where Yeats rehearses the boundary between castle and the outside world, between turning inward to the world of poetry, the imagination and the quarrel with oneself, and the outer world of civil war, conflict and turmoil, public duty and problematic identity.

North as '[a] planter's walled-in mound' ('Belderg'), while crannógs and bogs are among other mounds whose more ancient secrets Heaney articulates in the same collection. Like Queen Maeve's mound in County Sligo, the mound marks the burial place of myth and cultural memory as well as bodies, the source (for Heaney) of his poetic voice. As tower becomes mound and mound becomes tower, history re-joins nature and nature spawns further human history: cosmic history played out in microcosm. It is against this interplay that Yeats and Heaney – like Spenser in the *Mutabilitie Cantos* – situate the poet and his place.

This play of mutability offers a significant pay-off, as Heaney realizes. Differences of time, of religious and political loyalties, are telescoped into this magnetized pairing of tower and mound, and all shrink against the massive background of cyclical cosmic history. Thus spatialized, what had previously seemed irreconcilable about sectarian (or any other) conflict vanishes, obstacles become realigned as markers in the continuum between tower and mound, history and nature, past and present and future. It is in this spirit that, while accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature, Heaney took the opportunity to commend Yeats's invitation to 'come build in the empty nest of the stare', reading it as a celebration of the tower as a creature of the landscape rather than a creation of a specific political history.⁶⁶ For Heaney, Yeats's recognition of the dominance of the natural is a sign of artistic humility, of human humility, and it is this understanding that makes Heaney's quincunx of towers less a celebration of monuments to human endeavour than a chart of nature's dominion over human history.

But at times, Heaney's foregrounding of Yeats as his prime example of the Irish poet as a poet of place risks underestimating Yeats's cultural and historical indebtedness

⁶⁶ 'Crediting Poetry', given in Stockholm, 7/12/1995.

to Spenser. When Heaney looks to Yeats's later poems, he returns again and again to 'Cuchulain Comforted', and finds the tower continuing to dominate his imagination. As he writes, that 'Yeatsian keep', in which Yeats only dwelled between 1919 and 1928, 'entered so deeply into the prophetic strains of his voice that it could be invoked without being inhabited. He no longer needed to live in it since he had attained a state in which he lived *by* it.'⁶⁷ That state was more than the creative attachment to place that Heaney favours. It was also the state of sureness of being an Irish poet, of finding a Protestant poetic avatar in Spenser and, like him, appropriating the physical forms of the only group of Irish Catholics Yeats favoured as much as the idealised peasantry: the Anglo-Norman invaders who became, famously, more Irish than the Irish themselves, and whose towers Yeats was keen to regard as natural outcroppings of a landscape of 'sheltering sacredness' rather than the aggressive fortifications of an invading people. Yeats's legerdemain in also obfuscating the history of conflict between Spenser and the Anglo-Normans implicit in the very act of inhabiting the castle, is part of what Heaney confronts in his early wranglings with Spenser. But in his way and for all the remembrances of the suffering Irish alongside Spenser, Heaney, too, underplays Spenser's active role in one of the most violent periods in Irish history, situating Spenser in a longer metaphysical history of conflict that he could not transcend, but could only write from and attest to, in the terms of his time and people. Or, as Heaney puts the Spenserian problem years later, 'you can live with so many truths at once'.⁶⁸ A genius of the soil no less than the victims of the Munster famine that he played a part in bringing about, Heaney's Spenser remains

⁶⁷ 'The Place of Writing', extracts reprinted in *Finders Keepers*, pp. 232-45 (p. 234).

⁶⁸ *Stepping Stones*, p. 455.

grounded in Yeats's vision of the reluctant civil servant, unwitting victim of his times and Irish national poet *avant la lettre*.

Heaney's self-confessed temerity in 'putting a bawn in *Beowulf*' is a considered assertion of the place of the Irish poet in a shared English literary history, one in which Irish poets are not taken as British poets or subjects (his passport's green, after all) or as token peripheral contributors, but as Irish poets in a shared English-language literary tradition that confronts but is not cowed by political and historical boundaries.⁶⁹ The bawns and towers of his quincunx schema are, ultimately, permeable to both nature and history: the tower-bound Spenser on borrowed time before the Irish burnt him out of it; Yeats in his crumbling edifice, watched over by cheerful Irregulars, servants of history, who blow up the bridge accessing his tower; MacNeice shaking a fist at the Normans of Carrickfergus castle who made his portion unsure; Joyce anguished by the carping critics inside and outside his martello tower; the learned Irish monks hastily pulling their books after them into the round towers at the approach of the Vikings. Embattled, global Irish poets all.

⁶⁹ It is at the close of this same prefatory essay to his translation that Heaney registers that his Spenser is indeed Yeats's tower-bound Spenser. See *Beowulf*, trans. Heaney, p. xxx. See Heaney's famous response to being included in the *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982) in the poem 'An Open Letter' and his account of the incident in 'Through-other Places, Through-other Times: The Irish Poet and Britain', in *Finders Keepers*, pp. 364-82, especially pp. 369-71.