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### **Spenser's Lost Children**

We do not get to choose our ancestors. Like it or not (and most don't), Irish writers inherit Edmund Spenser as a literary forebear. Worse still, Spenser's difficult and disconcerting presence in Irish history foregrounds the issue of the Irish literary tradition itself, posing it as a question the Irish writer needs to contend with, for better or worse. The problem is clear. On the one hand, Spenser crystallizes the attractions of the English literary tradition and even elaborates an Irish history for it. On the other hand, Spenser's Irish writings, especially certain well-known passages from *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, mould that opportunity as a poisoned chalice. In the simplest terms, Spenser emblemizes the nightmare of Irish colonial history in all its ambivalence: centuries of oppression, violence and dispossession, certainly, but also the legacy of a language and literature in and by which Irish writers have found peculiarly powerful expression – and, it must be said, an international recognition partly propelled by the dominance of English as a world language. For an Irish writer, to engage with Spenser is to engage with the origins and consequences of the fractured tradition of Irish literature as well as the post-colonial present. For the modern Irish writer, then, Spenser is a nettle worth the grasping.

This essay gathers together the work of a self-selecting group of Irish poets, novelists and dramatists of the last century who directly confront Spenser and his writing in their own work. It tentatively identifies this engagement with Spenser as a crucial step in their self-conscious construction of – and attempt to enter into – a modern Irish literary tradition. Although always a very individual kind of entanglement, the sum of these negotiations of Spenser and his poetic legacy in Ireland testifies to the very depth and intricacy of Spenser's roots in any version of the Irish literary tradition. But it is the writers themselves who put it best. Describing the complexities of writing in the shadow of what he calls the 'dark sixteenth century', the novelist Colm Tóibín sounds a sanguine note as rare as it is helpful on the subject: 'Spenser comes to us, whether we like it or not, in many guises'.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Spenser, 'reception' proves a poor term for capturing the diversity, vigour and peculiar psycho-political dynamics of Irish writers' negotiations of Spenser and his history in Ireland. These individual literary transactions with Spenser are enacted intertextually, imagistically, rhetorically, chorographically and fictively at different moments, in different moods and by different writers; most of all, they are enacted agonistically. And yet, the most recent Irish literary engagements with Spenser sound a surprisingly optimistic note even when they confront the harshest facts of his writings, career and complications.

Spenser has a powerful Irish champion, one whose re-description of Spenser colours almost all subsequent engagements with him. Many of the various 'guises' Tóibín notes bear the distinct traces of one William Butler Yeats, still a formidable name for Irish writers (especially poets) to conjure with. 'Yeats managed to create a heroic role for the poet in the modern world', Seamus Heaney explains, and '[n]owadays, whether he is thought of as a national bard or a world poet, Yeats figures in the mind as a translated force and a destiny fulfilled' – as well as 'the creator of a cultural idea in and for Ireland'.<sup>2</sup> What Irish writers – and less often, scholars of Irish writing – have seen is

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<sup>1</sup> Tóibín, 'The Dark Sixteenth Century'. *The Dublin Review* 43 (2011): 31-54 (p. 35).

<sup>2</sup> From *W.B. Yeats: Poems selected by Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber & Faber, 2000), pp. xii, xxiv

that Yeats placed Spenser squarely within that Irish cultural idea.<sup>3</sup> Yeats's engagement with Spenser began with his early plays and critical work, flourishing when he undertook the work of introducing his own selections of verse from Spenser for publication in a series on the 'Golden Poets'. The prefatory essay in which he made his notorious argument for separating Spenser's poetry from his politics was later reprinted alongside other key essays in *The Cutting of an Agate* (1912), the preface to which also foregrounded his work on Spenser, and the return of Spenser in Yeats's late poetry kept this idea alive in the Irish literary imagination long after Yeats's death in 1939. Yeats's Spenser is an Irish poet *manqué*, a man divided between his 'civil service' work and his lush, apolitical poetry: 'Could he have gone [to Ireland] as a poet merely, he might have found among its poets more wonderful imaginations than even those islands of Phaedria and Acrasia.'<sup>4</sup> Spenser thus becomes a tragic but energizing poetic avatar for Yeats's Protestant Anglo-Irish poet, and a stalwart ancestor in the Irish literary tradition.

No wonder, then, that Irish poets in particular struggle with the figure of Spenser, often as they first come of age as poets and sometimes in their maturity too. In his breakthrough collection, *Wintering Out* (1972), for example, Seamus Heaney reaches out in search of his Ulster ancestors in his poem, 'Bog Oak'. Instead he finds himself conjuring an alien figure alongside them: 'Perhaps I just make out / Edmund Spenser'<sup>5</sup> Early in his career Derek Mahon, too, confronts Yeats's Spenser in precarious repose at Kilcolman among a company of other literary ancestors in the important long poem, *Beyond Howth Head* (1970). In his play, *Mutabilitie* (1997), Frank McGuinness calls Spenser to account by putting him on stage alongside Shakespeare and a posse of brilliant Irish poets, intellectuals and rebels. More recently still, the experimental poet Trevor Joyce cocks a snook at Spenser by scrupulously re-translating *The Ruines of Rome* (1591) into rude, raw monosyllables.<sup>6</sup> For Irish writers, the need to confront Spenser as adversary or interlocutor, avatar or scapegoat derives from his place in Irish history. But the imperative to do so comes Yeats's brandishing of Spenser as avatar of the Irish literary tradition, and especially the poetic tradition.

Two scholars of modern Irish poetry have attempted to make sense of Spenser's legacy in Irish literature. David Gardiner's 2001 monograph on Spenser's influence on Irish poetry centres upon Yeats's pivotal role in proffering Spenser to Irish poets, and their differing responses to that offering.<sup>7</sup> Oona Frawley, by contrast, analyses what she calls Spenser's 'trace' in Irish cultural memory as a phenomenon which makes of him 'a something rather than a someone', 'a symbol or

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<sup>3</sup> Yeats's own most recent biographer, R.F. Foster, pays little attention to Yeats's engagement with Spenser ('an old love'), for example, in *W.B. Yeats: A Life*, vol. I. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 361. Seamus Deane has only eighteenth-century figures – and not Protestant Spenser – in mind in his insight that '[p]erhaps the most seductive of all Yeats's historical fictions is his gift of dignity and coherence to the Irish Protestant Ascendancy tradition'. Deane, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature, 1880-1980* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985), p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> Yeats, 'Edmund Spenser' (1902), in *The Cutting of an Agate* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), pp. 213-55 (p. 238).

<sup>5</sup> Heaney's sharp negotiation with Spenser here and elsewhere in *Wintering Out* (1972) continues in his next book, the breakthrough collection *North* (1975) in which Yeats, too, is challenged, though more gingerly.

<sup>6</sup> The work, *Rome's Wreck*, remains unpublished, although excerpts can be found online in various blogs and poetry journals.

<sup>7</sup> Gardiner, *"Befitting Emblems of Adversity": A Modern Irish View of Edmund Spenser from W.B. Yeats to the Present* (Omaha: Creighton University Press, 2001). See also my 'After the Mutabilitie Cantos: Yeats and Heaney Reading Spenser', in *Celebrating Mutabilitie: Essays on Edmund Spenser's Mutabilitie Cantos*, ed. Jane Grogan (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), pp. 295-314.

an icon meant to represent early modern colonialism' who is 'offered to the reader within a very limited set of terms'.<sup>8</sup> Particularly useful is Frawley's delineation of a 'Spenser narrative' to which Irish writers are drawn, a self-serving narrative of his karmic demise ('a coloniser, eventually thwarted') replete with apocrypha and ripe for further embellishment.<sup>9</sup> The roots of this narrative once again can be found in Yeats's conception of Spenser (as a man misguidedly committed to the Elizabethan colonial enterprise, with tragic consequences) although it steers a different course in Irish writing of the last forty years. Within this 'Spenser narrative', then, the alleged loss of a child when Kilcolman burned is made to figure a local, cosmic or poetic justice.<sup>10</sup> The 'Spenser narrative', then, and not Spenser's poetry, provides the idea of the lost child from which I derive my title, and which takes particularly rich new forms in the hands of Ireland's most capable novelists and dramatists, especially in recent years. But Spenser's poetry, too, asserts itself, not simply in the diffuse form of cultural memory but as an active force in the making of both Irish literature and history.

Three broad phases of engagement with Spenser by Irish writers can be discerned across the last century or so. The first and most influential is that generated by Yeats himself. Yeats's early appropriation of Spenser as a man more sinned against than sinning places Spenser at the heart of the Irish literary tradition. At the same time, it tries to sequester the poetry from the morally and politically compromised conditions of its production by a willing servant of the English crown from his escheated Irish fastness in and of the Munster plantation. From Yeats's earliest engagements with Spenser in the late 1890s right through to the poems of his seminal collection, *The Tower* (1928) and after, Yeats's poetry betrays his interests in Spenser. Yeats's conception of Spenser as a tragic but enabling poetic model for Irish poetry takes root in Ireland, more likely as a result of Yeats's prominence than Spenser's. But a strong literary challenge to the unspotted Yeatsian Spenser bursts into life in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the worsening political situation in Northern Ireland. This second phase of Spenser's Irish legacy is dominated by the emerging northern poets of the day: John Montague, Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon. In very different ways, these poets turn their angry attentions to Spenser and set in train a new era of increasingly politicized challenges to Spenser, especially in poetry. At the latter end of this phase, Ciaran Carson as well as the southern Irish poets Brendan Kennelly and Eavan Boland take this broadly anti-Yeatsian and anti-Spenserian phase in new and sometimes less antagonistic directions. Spenser's personal failures and struggles begin to come to the fore, and with them the 'Spenser narrative' takes shape. The ground is thus laid for a third phase of Spenser's reception in Ireland from the 1990s onward when Spenser is taken up by novelists and playwrights as well as poets. Some softening in attitudes to Spenser is evident, and with this softening, a paradoxical return of sorts to the Yeatsian Spenser: not a colonial monster but a true poet undone by his professional duties and blinkered colonial judgement. Sean Lysaght's fictive biographical sequence of poems, *Spenser* (2011), is the most recent example of this turn. The

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<sup>8</sup> Frawley makes these assertions in a reflective and personal essay, 'Spenser's Trace' (p. 13) and "'Who's he when he's at home?' Spenser and Irishness' (pp. 50, 53), the latter a review of Spenser's place in two major works of Irish literary history: the *Field Day* anthology and Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland*. Her approach to Spenser through cultural memory rather than through intertextuality, literary history and the specific and particular responses of Irish writers marks her work out from mine.

<sup>9</sup> Frawley, "'Who's he when he's at home?'" , p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> See Frawley, 'Spenser's Trace'.

lessons of history have been learnt, however, and this time around, Yeats's Spenser is made to face his detractors as well as the historical legacy of his actions.

Within this rough chronological trajectory, another interesting formation of Irish literary history can be seen: the additional burden that Irish *poets* have felt in their negotiation of Spenser.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, and despite very varied backgrounds and interests, Irish playwrights and novelists, seem less limited by the historical Spenser, leaving them free to explore instead lacunae in the 'Spenser narrative' and dissonances in Spenser's poetry and politics, and to propose alternative futures for Spenser in Ireland. This proves true even in the work of those writers socially and geographically most proximate to Spenser and the interests of his class: notably a cluster of writers whose north Cork connections intensify the Yeatsian imperative to engage with Spenser as a literary ancestor.

This essay argues that the place of Spenser in Irish literary culture and history is a deep-seated and abiding one. It suggests that negotiating the Spenserian heritage has become something of a rite of passage for Irish poets in particular, a particular burden handed down in the fractured history of the form in Ireland, but one not without its rewards. By highlighting and comparing key moments in Irish poets' engagements with Spenser, we see not just the range and vitality of these engagements, but the wider intertextual contexts into which Spenser is often put. If Yeats introduced Spenser to modern Irish poets, those poets look to Yeats to find their way out of Spenser's world. In the second part of this essay, I show how Spenser has also influenced Irish novelists and dramatists, and helped some of them to negotiate the vagaries of Irish Protestant identity in strikingly hopeful ways. Both through the very range of this survey of Spenser in modern Irish writing and particularly through analysis of the work of Frank McGuinness, this essay concludes that scholars of Irish literature need to confront the still 'live' place of Spenser in Irish writing beyond poetry alone. Moreover, that project now needs to attend to the political and historical significance of the 'Spenser and Ireland' critical industry as well.

The essay's three parts roughly follow the chronology of the three phases outlined above, but in order to do justice to the formal, historical and political complexity of Spenser's place in the Irish literary tradition, I take three different approaches to the material. Together, however, they comprise a comprehensive survey of Irish writers' direct responses to Spenser since the early twentieth century. The first section isolates the responses of Irish poets to Spenser, beginning with Yeats, the figure who has done most to determine Spenser's place in the Irish literary tradition. I want to plot some possibilities for considering not just Yeats's Spenser, but also Spenser's Yeats: the Spenserian antecedents of some of Yeats's most important poems. Thus, instead of simply rehearsing Yeats's comments on Spenser in his important essay once again, I examine instead the Spenserian heritage of that most Yeatsian emblem, the metamorphic swan, before tracking the various ways and moments in which Yeats's conception of Spenser was challenged by Irish poets after him.<sup>12</sup> Leaving behind genre, the second section approaches Spenser's Irish legacy from the point of view of historical geography, identifying a group of Cork poets and novelists whose first introduction to Spenser is not Yeats but the north Cork landscape: '*Faerie Queene* country', as Elizabeth Bowen called it. (Relevant here, too, is the recent lecture and essay given by the novelist

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<sup>11</sup> I owe this point to Fionnuala Dillane, from her astute reading of this essay.

<sup>12</sup> See 'After the Mutabilitie Cantos' for a more comprehensive analysis of Spenser in the work of Yeats and Heaney. Yeats's writings on Spenser are also well served by David Gardiner in '*Befitting Emblems of Adversity*'.

Colm Tóibín on Spenser's 'dark sixteenth century', for which his own point of access to Spenser is his native town of Enniscorthy, County Wexford, the castle of which Spenser briefly owned.)<sup>13</sup> Finally, a single-author focus on the dramatist Frank McGuinness allows for a closer view of the kinds of manoeuvres and manipulations Irish writers use in confronting Spenser, as well as the courage needed to accept him as a literary ancestor. Since Yeats the Irish writer who has engaged most provocatively, most substantively, and most sensitively with Spenser's life and work in Ireland, McGuinness draws freely and intelligently on both Spenser's poetry and the 'Spenser narrative' in his drama and prose. In *Mutabilitie*, he constructs a new Spenser – alongside a new Shakespeare – as writers of a dual English-language literary tradition, asserting his 'right to create images of them, which are every bit as valid as anything an English writer can create'.<sup>14</sup> It is McGuinness who sets out an important new direction to Irish writers facing Spenser in Ireland: the Spenser-in-Ireland critical industry itself.

### **Yeats, Spenser and Irish Poetry**

Spenser seems to have exerted a shadowy influence on Yeats even before he undertook his selections from Spenser for the 'Golden Poets' volume. His prefatory essay to that volume constitutes his most overt and influential engagement with Spenser and his work, and draws attention for the first time to the influence of Spenser on Yeats's own poetry. The essay's primary achievement was its insistent location of Spenser and his poetry in Ireland, pointing out, for example, the specifically Irish references of Spenser's poetic fictions, and how the Irish landscape around Kilcolman 'came much into his poetry: 'Our Irish Aubeg is "Mulla mine, whose waues I taught to weep", he writes'.<sup>15</sup> Yeats's own efforts to insert himself into Irish history and landscape followed Spenser's lead. As Heaney has recognized, it was the image of Spenser, the Protestant Irish poet ensconced in his Norman Irish tower that animated Yeats's extraordinarily enriching occupancy of Thoor Ballylee, the authority it conferred on him as an Irish poet (as Yeats saw it).<sup>16</sup> This project, of course, receives its most powerful expression in his seminal collection, *The Tower* (1928). But both before and after that period, Spenser remained an important figure in Yeats's poetry, authorizing his poetic self-representation even in late poems such as "The Municipal Gallery Revisited".

All the same, Yeats's pronounced interest in the *Mutabilitie Cantos* in particular, even in the tower poems, is what enables later poets such as Heaney to read 'Spenser against Spenser', as I have put it elsewhere. In this way, Spenser is recuperated as a poet of the Irish landscape, ultimately serving the goddess *Mutabilitie* more faithfully than he does Queen Elizabeth.<sup>17</sup> The theme of mutability is particularly strongly felt in Yeats's swan poems, where they blend with the legend of

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<sup>13</sup> Tóibín, 'The Dark Sixteenth Century'. Tóibín moves from this recognition to revealing a Spenserian allusion behind a poem by the Enniscorthy poet Thomas Kinsella. (In his reading of Kinsella's poem, "Another September", Tóibín argues that Spenser's was the first September to which Kinsella distantly alludes (pp. 52-4).)

<sup>14</sup> In 'Coming Home', an interview published in the *Irish Times*, 30 November 1997.

<sup>15</sup> 'Introduction', p. xviii. The essay was reprinted in *Discoveries* (1908) and in *The Cutting of an Agate* (1912). Even Tóibín in his recent essay comes under its sway: though he tries to dissolve Yeats's separation of Spenser's poetry and politics, he slips back into the honeyed trap when he remarks that Spenser 'lived in Ireland in two minds' (p. 41).

<sup>16</sup> See 'After the *Mutabilitie Cantos*'.

<sup>17</sup> A longer version of this argument can be found in my 2010 essay, 'After the *Mutabilitie Cantos*'.

the Children of Lir as part of Yeats's complex vision of the interplay of change and timelessness in Irish and cosmic history.<sup>18</sup> Three of Yeats's best-known poems centre on the swan, thus shaded by mutability: "The Wild Swans at Coole" (1917), "Leda and the Swan" (1923) and "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931". In these poems, Yeats's swans are the vehicles of his theories of cyclical history, immortality and necessary inconstancy, ideas at the heart of his poetic and political imaginary. Enough critical ink has been spilled on the multiple significances of Yeats's swans for additional intertextual reference to seem foolhardy. And yet the contribution of Spenser has scarcely been recognized. Despite Giorgio Melchiori's persuasive arguments long ago for the Spenserian antecedents of Yeats's swans as 'symbolical emblems' garnered from *Prothalamion* and *The Ruines of Time*, it has become the norm to seek no further than the Romantics for the literary antecedents of Yeats's swans.<sup>19</sup> But for a Spenserian, the signs are clear. Although they are immensely complex figures, symbolically and allusively, the swans of Yeats's poetry are often mythically endowed, often metamorphic. In later poems such as "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" they begin to represent the immortal soul of the poet, but in the 1916 poems, they stand for a recognisably Spenserian struggle between mortal constancy and what is 'eterne in mutabilitie' (*TFQ*, III.vi.47). Emblems of constancy and immemoriality as well as love and mortality more broadly, Yeats's swans have direct Spenserian echoes in the chastely desiring, metamorphic swans of *Prothalamion*, as well as in the elegiac Sidneyan swan prophesying his own death in *The Ruines of Time*. In the Coole Park swan poems, Yeats's felt estrangement from the swans and their figuring of his poetic powers – 'Another emblem there!' ('Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931') – is imbued with a nostalgia for the Spenserian ability to make the swan stand for the poet. Instead, the Coole Park swans act as remembrancers of loss through mutability in the poet's own life. But there are further stylistic explorations by Yeats arising from his interest in Spenser. For example, 'Leda and the Swan' draws on Ovid, of course, but enacts the Ovidian rape within and upon the sonnet form itself. Yeats thus yokes the two dominant early modern literary forms and discourses of desire (the Petrarchan and the Ovidian) into arresting formal coalition in some of the ways that Spenser himself had explored in Book III of *The Faerie Queene*.<sup>20</sup>

Facilitating these Spenserian moments in Yeat's poetry is Yeats's recognition that the rivers along which Spenser's swans paddled were often Irish, or if English, still coloured (or colourable) with Irish experience. Thus in *Prothalamion*, in the stanzas immediately following the poet's vision of a 'snowie Swan' and its 'dolefull Elegie', the invocation of the Lee (a tributary of the Thames upon which the poet sees 'th'Harpe of Philisides now dead' travelling), awakens a remembrance of the Irish river of the same name coursing through Cork city and county. The memory is awakened not just by its name but by recalling in its Orphic taming of 'Wylde beasts and forrests' the Irish projects

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<sup>18</sup> This legend tells of a king's children transformed into swans by their wicked stepmother and condemned to nine hundred years of lonely wandering before their transformation into humans again by Christian forces, a translation into a brave new world that, in Yeats's hands, became a powerful emblem of Irish colonial history.

<sup>19</sup> *The Whole Mystery of Art: Pattern into Poetry in the Work of WB Yeats* (London: Routledge, 1960), pp. 107-13. See also the predominantly Romantic conception of Yeats's swans in Rachel V. Billigheimer's essay on the subject, although she accepts several of Melchiori's arguments too. Billigheimer, "'Passion and Conquest": Yeats's Swans', *College Literature* 13: 1 (1986): 55-70.

<sup>20</sup> Melchiori has also noted echoes of Spenser's description of the rape of Leda in III. xi. 32, and suggests, too, the swan elegy of *The Ruines of Time*, ll. 589-603 as an influence on 'Coole Park and Ballylee', a poem originally named 'Swan and Water', as Billigheimer notes.

of Philisides' father, Henry Sidney – something Philip Sidney himself recalled in one of the most Petrarchan of his *Astrophel and Stella* sonnets, which itself remembers an Irish 'half tam[ing]'.<sup>21</sup> It may even remember how Spenser casts himself as Orpheus to his Irish bride, as he invokes the river nymphs of the Awbeg ('Ye Nymphes of Mulla') in the opening of *Epithalamion*.<sup>22</sup> (And something of the heroic role of the poet Heaney identified is strongly intimated in Yeats's swan poems, if only in reflection or aspiration.) In looking to Spenser's swans, therefore, Yeats also remembers Spenser's Irish rivers and their place in the allegory of the river-marriage of Thames and Medway in Book IV of *The Faerie Queene*. Yeats's swans thus exemplify several strands of his thinking on Spenser: the Elizabeth poet's usefulness as ancestor and avatar for a new Irish literary tradition, the attractions of his metamorphic imagination and Yeats's sense of the availability of Spenser's poetry for drastically reconfigured political purposes – something that relies on the separability of Spenser's poetry from the politics.

The influence and centrality of the swan poems to Yeats's corpus endured, and can be seen in poetry anthologies as well as more widely in Irish culture. Derek Mahon's 1972 *Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry*, for example, opens with Yeats 'with whom any discussion of modern Irish poetry necessarily begins' and selects all three swan poems to represent him.<sup>23</sup> Nearly thirty years later, Heaney follows suit in his own selection from Yeats.<sup>24</sup> Reflecting on her development as a poet, Eavan Boland admits to beginning in Yeatsian vein, but pinpoints her need to escape what she called 'the painted swans and ... shabby furnishings of the Literary Revival'.<sup>25</sup> The swan poems have also become central to critical accounts of Yeats's politics and philosophy: an analysis of 'Leda and the Swan' grounds Edward Said's flawed but highly influential essay reading Yeatsian nation-building through poetry as a necessary decolonizing step, for example.<sup>26</sup> Yeats's swans had a long afterlife in Irish culture, especially in its most nationalist moments. In 1966, fifty years after the Easter Rising, the original plan to represent soldiers in a commemorative sculpture commissioned for the Garden of Remembrance (which remembers those who died in the struggle for Irish freedom) in Dublin was replaced by Oisín Kelly's allegorical and highly Yeatsian monument of the Children of Lir, representing a quartet of humans in the throes of being changed to swans. The work remembers Yeats's swan

<sup>21</sup> See sonnet 30, in which Sidney most closely identifies himself with the suffering Astrophel: the court talk of 'How Ulster likes of that same golden bit, / Wherewith my father once made it half tame'.

<sup>22</sup> Melchiori, p. 109. Melchiori also finds 'a probable unconscious reminiscence' of Busirane's tapestry featuring Leda and the swan in some of the language of "Leda and the Swan" (p. 113). An even more revealing example of how Spenser's English rivers can look Irish within modern Irish culture is provided by the folk-song, 'Sweet Thames Flow Softly'. This curious re-appropriation of the 'siluer streaming Themmes' of Spenser's *Prothalamion*, in which – as in *Prothalamion* – each verse ends with the invocation 'Sweet Thames flow softly', was written by the British folk-singer Ewan McColl in 1968. But it quickly became a staple of the Irish folk music canon, sung by stalwarts such as the Dubliners, Planxty, the Clancy Brothers and Christy Moore. It is still taught in primary schools across Ireland, its Spenserian roots subordinated and re-appropriated to a London-Irish emigrant love-story. *Sweet Thames Run Softly* is also the title of a 1940 book of nature-writing by the Cork-born Robert Gibbings, whose family's strong antiquarian interests ensured that he knew his Spenser.

<sup>23</sup> *The Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry* (Aylesbury: Sphere Books, 1972).

<sup>24</sup> From his introduction, p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> 'Compact and Compromise: Derek Mahon as a Young Poet', *Irish University Review* 24:1 (1994): 61-66 (p. 64).

<sup>26</sup> Modifying this view, see Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland*, pp. 312-25 and Elizabeth Butler Cullingford's critique of the gender politics of such a model in 'Pornography and Canonicity: The Case of Yeats' "Leda and the Swan"', in *Representing Women: Law, Literature, and Feminism*, ed. Susan Sage Heinzelman and Zipporah Batshaw Wiseman (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 165-87.



poems (especially “The Wild Swans at Coole”) and fuses them with the famous concluding lines of his poem “Easter 1916”, ‘All’s changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born’.<sup>27</sup> Appropriately (if not intentionally), then, the shapeshifting swans of Lir in the Garden of Remembrance also host Spenser’s swans, and bespeak a far more complex relationship between Britain and Ireland than their fetishistic nationalism might suppose.

Beyond (but still connected to) the figure of the swan, Yeats’s essay’s explicit location of Spenser in an Irish landscape of hills and rivers as well as castles opened a new field of enquiry for Irish writers. ‘Our Irish Aubeg is “Mulla mine, whose waues I taught to weep”’. Yeats reconstituted Spenser as a poet of the Irish landscape despite himself. It was a bold move, and drew challengers as well as admirers in the generation after Yeats. Although an imperializing political mythology in *The Faerie Queene*, the presence of Irish rivers within the river-marriage allegory attracted particular attention.<sup>28</sup> Oliver St Gogarty borrowed Spenser’s description of the Liffey ‘rolling down the lea’ for the title of his quixotic 1950 memoir.<sup>29</sup> To this day, Kilkenny city boasts a motto that seems to derive from Spenser’s stanzas on the Irish rivers.<sup>30</sup> A 1956 chap-book entitled ‘The Loves of Bregog and Mulla’ published by the Dolmen Press reproduced the Irish river-marriage story of *Colin Clouts Come Home Again* (1591) and alluded to in the *Mutabilitie Cantos*.<sup>31</sup> This in turn probably inspired Dolmen Press poet John Montague’s desire to include Spenser’s rivers in his 1974 *Faber Anthology of Irish Poetry*, expressly in order ‘to challenge any narrow definitions of Irish poetry’.<sup>32</sup> But for Irish poets after Yeats, Spenser’s cardinal poetic virtue lies in his metamorphic imagination, or, more precisely, his poetics of mutability. The swans who turn into brides, the nymphs who turn into trees, the goddess who commands all seasons, the savages who turn into peaceful worshippers, the lovers who turn into rivers, the rivers that converge into the stream of history and the great ocean: this is the stuff of Irish literary fantasy and sometimes even political entreaty, if not in ways Spenser would have foreseen. And under the aegis of *Mutabilitie* another set of Irish Spenserian images joins them, this time mostly developed from the *View of the Present State of Ireland*: not just the mantle that turns into a rebel’s secret weapon, but the poet who turns into a slave of imperial power, the famine victims who turn into accusers, the usurped castle that turns inexorably into a ruin.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See Yvonne Whelan, ‘Symbolizing the State – the iconography of O’Connell Street and environs after Independence (1922)’, *Irish Geography* 34:2 (2001): 135-56, especially pp. 145-50.

<sup>28</sup> Is there another shot across our bows from history in the fact that Shakespeare’s only known rendering of the Irish language concerns a song with an Irish river’s name in it, ‘Cailín ó cois tSiúire mé’ (Girl from beside the [river] Suir)? Pistol’s fairly accurate phonetic rendering of it in *Henry V* is ‘Colin o custure me’ (4. 4. 4).

<sup>29</sup> Billigheimer makes a further connection between Gogarty and Yeats, pointing out that Yeats provided a preface to Gogarty’s 1923 poetry collection, *An Offering of Swans*, named for his tribute to the river Liffey by which he had escaped imprisonment in 1922.

<sup>30</sup> The point is made by John Bradley in an interview with Thomas Herron here: <http://www.celtic-cultural-studies.com/papers/02/herron-bradley-interview.html>

<sup>31</sup> As Derek Mahon points out, the Dolmen Press had been publishing some of the most important emerging Irish poets of the 1950s and 1960s, notably John Montague, Thomas Kinsella, Pearse Hutchinson and Richard Murphy, and sometimes in chap-book form, giving this Spenserian chap-book considerable profile as well as good company. Mahon, *The Sphere Book*, p. 14.

<sup>32</sup> Montague, *Faber Book of Irish Verse* (London: Faber & Faber, 1974), p. 27. In the event, he omitted Spenser, but did include Richard Stanihurst.

<sup>33</sup> For example, in a 1992 notebook primarily concerned with McGuinness’s Blood Sunday play, *Carthaginians*, he writes out the *View*’s account of the Irish rebel’s mantle, from its alleged derivation from the Scythians to its use as the Irish rebel’s ‘tabernacle’. John Montague, too, interests himself in this passage.

With the outbreak of the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s, Yeats’s Spenser began to be called to account by poets north and south of the border. Unsurprisingly, the *View* only galvanized their anger. Among those who turned to (and on) Spenser in this period are the Northern poets Seamus Heaney, John Montague, Derek Mahon, Louis MacNeice and their southern counterparts, Eavan Boland, Thomas Kinsella and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. Spenser is a thorny presence in Heaney’s early collections, *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975), an outright enemy in John Montague’s *The Rough Field* (1972), a troubling fellow-poet to be defied in the title poem of Derek Mahon’s *Beyond Howth Head* (1970) – but none of those things, for MacNeice.<sup>34</sup> All of these poets, poems and collections are centrally concerned with the poet’s task in a world of violence, injustice and political struggle. All of these works develop each poet’s political and poetic manifesto, their own vision of their role as poets negotiated against the very real and proximate Troubles in Northern Ireland, read as the direct result of the colonial policies of Spenser’s era. Anger and a sense of injustice fuels these repudiations of the unsullied Yeatsian Spenser. And yet, in wrestling with that Spenser, all of these northern poets found new and innovative poetic voice and even form. In less overtly political ways, the same can be said of the poets of the south.<sup>35</sup>

Three poets stand out for the formative (and combative) nature of their engagement with Spenser: John Montague, Derek Mahon and Eavan Boland. At first glance, Montague takes the toughest line. For him, Spenser straightforwardly represents the egregious English colonial regime. As an apologist for plantation and a poet-colonist, Spenser is summonsed and indicted for his role in the germination of the ‘Troubles’ in the North by a poet who has explicitly taken upon himself the mantle or ‘great cloak’ of the last of the bards to the O’Neills.<sup>36</sup> (Montague reads his *View* more tendentiously than most, drawing heavily on the notorious sections on the Munster famine and on the iniquities of the Irish bard, mantle and ‘glib’.) Montague’s great work is the extraordinary *bricolage*-like long poem, *The Rough Field* (1972), which drew visually and poetically on John Derricke’s *Image of Ireland* (1581) as well as on Spenser. He combines these Elizabethan forms and figures with contemporary news reports, letters, sermons and historical sources from earliest times. But on closer inspection, the Spenserian content of *The Rough Field* is thin; despite the Elizabethan styling of the poem and volume (with Derricke’s bard on the title-page), only two direct allusions to

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<sup>34</sup> On MacNeice’s Spenser as the traditional ‘poet’s poet’ during the 1960s, see Richard Danson Brown, ‘MacNeice in Fairyland’, in *Edmund Spenser: New and Renewed Directions*, ed. J.B. Lethbridge (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2006), pp. 352-69.

<sup>35</sup> In a 1995 interview, Ní Chuilleanáin describes the anger with which she reads history, given her bilingual background. A key instance she isolates (and which recurs in her poetry) is her cultural re-translation of Spenser’s description of an apparently barbarous Irish act: the foster-mother of an executed Irish man drinking his blood in her grief. Ní Chuilleanáin reads it as instead the fluent expression of ‘a culture of intimate bonds, of bodily and verbal affections that we know closely with our tongues because we know the language and the poetic shapes, the keening formulae and the bardic idiom of praise, which gave them expression’. In ‘Acts and Monuments of an Unelected Nation: the Cailleach Writes about the Renaissance’, *The Southern Review* 31:3 (1995): 570-80. She also admits in the same article to having ‘stolen the odd word, line, or phrase where I thought I might not be spotted – especially from Crashaw or Spenser’, explaining her taste for English Renaissance literature as a way to keep sight of the strangeness of language, as opposed to the easier idiom of ‘Anglo-Irish’ literature. Seamus Deane identifies this interest in language as a more politicized manoeuvre than Ní Chuilleanáin acknowledges in his 1985 collection of essays, *Celtic Revivals*: ‘Irish literature tends to dwell on the medium in which it is written because it is difficult not to be self-conscious about a language which has become simultaneously native and foreign’ (p. 13).

<sup>36</sup> *The Great Cloak* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1978).

Spenser are found. The epigraph borrows from the opening of the *View* to recall Ireland's 'fatal destiny'. And in the prize-winning poem 'Like Dolmens Round My Childhood, the Old People' (which became a central section of *The Rough Field*), Montague takes his argument with Spenser into *The Faerie Queene* itself. Describing one of the garlanded 'old people' Montague recalls as a 'well of gossip defiled', the poet rewrites Spenser's compliment to Chaucer to memorialize instead an uncelebrated old woman of his village. On the basis of these two moments, Gardiner argues for Spenser's centrality to Montague's poetry, and further attributes the Spenserian interests of contemporary Cork poets such as Nuala Ní Dhómhnaill and Seán Dunne to the presence, teaching and example of Montague at University College Cork.<sup>37</sup> But this version of Spenser's compliment to Chaucer is wrought too antagonistically to 'grant dignity' to the subject, Maggie Owens, in the way that David Gardiner suggests, I think.<sup>38</sup> Rather, the caustic inversion of Spenser's compliment carries the full force of insult, unmitigated by the distant benevolent shade of Spenser's Chaucer. Montague's allusions and poetic responses to Spenser are ultimately too sketchy to support the argument that he thereby aspires to be the better Spenser, to trump him bardically. What may be discerned instead in Montague's engagement with Spenser is a sublimated engagement with Yeats's Spenser and the question of the Irish literary tradition: a more personal struggle between the Ulster Catholic Montague and the Anglo-Irish Protestant Yeats whose vision of Ireland and the Irish literary tradition seemed to have won out.

The more substantial and sustained negotiation with Spenser found in Derek Mahon's poetry also seeks to put some distance between Spenser and Yeats's modelling of Spenser – but ultimately returns to Yeats's own poetry in order to find a way out of the problems and consequences of Spenser's Ireland. Mahon's poetry shows a deep familiarity not just with the *View* but with *The Faerie Queene*, *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, *Epithalamion* and the *Amoretti*. A revealing anecdote from Eavan Boland notes her recognition of Mahon's precocity and self-assurance as a poet one rainy day in Dublin when he declared to her that the *Epithalamion* was the "one uncriticizable poem" in the language'.<sup>39</sup> As she tells it Mahon's confidence about Spenser marks the distance between them as poet and aspiring poet; it is no accident that Spenser is the figure separating the aspiring from the newly-established poet. The critic Declan Kiberd, too, diagnoses in Mahon's sure writing signs of the Ulster-born poet's ease of access to the English

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<sup>37</sup> Certainly, the Irish-language poet Nuala Ní Dhómhnaill, one of the most celebrated of the Cork poets to emerge from UCC at that time, gives little credit to Montague, remembering his 'pontificating' about the impossibility of a woman muse poet, though she does commend his dissemination of contemporary American poetry among his students. "Cé leis tú?", in *Nuala Ní Dhómhnaill, Selected Essays*, ed. Oona Frawley (Dublin: New Island, 2005), pp. 97-155 (p. 141). In any case, Ní Dhómhnaill's attention to Spenser is oblique, and Dunne's is more obviously rooted in the landscape of north Cork.

<sup>38</sup> Gardiner argues that Montague's characterization of the elderly gossip, Maggie Owens as a 'well of gossip defiled' offers a counter-history and a counter-historian, a guardian of oral history (not dissimilar in function to Boland's 'Achill Woman', as we will see) valorised by Montague, who now himself 'stands briefly as his society's Spenser, completing and circulating the national folk traditions of his country'. *Befitting Emblems of Adversity*, p. 129.

<sup>39</sup> 'Compact and Compromise: Derek Mahon as a Young Poet', *Irish University Review* 24: 1 (1994), pp. 61-6 (p. 62). Boland observes in the young Mahon's comment 'a freedom and intensity that suggested entitlement' that she did not yet herself feel. It unfolds the tricky place of Spenser in the Irish literary tradition as a whole. '[Mahon's] remark about Spenser goes to the heart of it. No part of the poetic past was static or unavailable to him.'

literary tradition.<sup>40</sup> In fact, Spenser and his Elizabethan cohorts remain a sore in Mahon's poetry, one he returns to again and again. The earliest and most significant of Mahon's wranglings with Spenser occurs in his important long poem, "Beyond Howth Head" (1970). At issue once again is the Irish literary tradition, and specifically the Irish poet's role in this time of political turmoil, something the poem works through in a progression reminiscent of the cadences of a short story. Spenser's appearance is, therefore, hardly surprising. Here and in his other engagements with Spenser, Mahon tries to look not just at but *around* Yeats's Spenser, to make Yeats serve *his* turn instead. Mahon's bout with Spenser in "Beyond Howth Head" is no single combat; the intertexts accumulate thick and fast. Howth itself is the legendary home of Finn MacCool (hero of the folk cycle "an Fhiannaíocht"), and among the writers with whom Mahon keeps spiritual company in the poem are Joyce, Yeats, Spenser, Milton, Donne, Marvell, Auden, Thoreau and Beckett. Hugh Haughton points out that that Mahon's allusions 'signal ...[that]this is an unashamedly literary poem by a writer orienting himself within an Irish and international frame, poised symbolically and literally on the coast'.<sup>41</sup> Written for (and to) an English friend from his Trinity College days, Mahon spells out the necessity for the Irish poet to face up to Spenser. But the Spenser that Mahon remembers here is one among a company of 'embattled writers' and 'exilic intellectuals' with whom Mahon, standing by the sea at Monkstown, feels a strange and invigorating fellowship.<sup>42</sup> Mahon's irreverent invocation of Spenser has clear Yeatsian contours: Spenser in his castle of poetry among a people he regards as barbarous, richly endowed but sorely afflicted by the plank in his eye – an image to which Mahon returns in other poems too, most obviously "Ovid in Tomis" or even the more explicitly self-referential "Axel's Castle". But Mahon shows that Yeatsian Spenser under attack, in language that reminds readers of the Troubles. The uneasy suggestion of rabble-rousing in the poem's call for *more* bardic 'lewde libertie' such as 'fired Kilcolman's windows' has unsettled critics, and perhaps belies Boland's assumptions about Mahon's comfort within the English literary tradition. Instead, it seems to mark Mahon's attempt to disengage Irish writing as violently as possible from the Yeatsian Spenser and its careful division of poetry from politics.<sup>43</sup> Seamus Deane's suggestion that in this poem Mahon is 'deflecting history' in favour of a plea for new and unbounded kinds of freedom is hard to accept, factoring in Mahon's uncompromising engagement with Spenser's Irish history.<sup>44</sup>

But the poem doesn't end here. Mahon next turns his caustic eye to Yeats himself whose 'hill-men still break stone', the idealized peasants and fishermen of Yeats's poetic imagination of Ireland. But thoughts of Spenser and Yeats are momentarily interrupted by the sound of bells, ushering in yet another Yeatsian image. It is the Children of Lir, we are told, right at the moment of their being made 'human again' by the sounding of the Christian's bell. The pairing of the poet's troubles and Yeats's swans are kept in view almost through to the end of the poem: the 'bell-buoys' tossing in the bay beyond Howth Head sounding an intertextual echo with Yeats's unusual image of the 'bell-beat' of the swans' wings above his head in "The Wild Swans at Coole". Mahon has not yet

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<sup>40</sup> Kiberd's work in the *Field Day Anthology* positioning Mahon (alongside Michael Longley) in this way has not been universally accepted. See David Wheatley, 'Irish Poetry Into the Twenty-First Century', in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 255.

<sup>41</sup> *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 69.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 69, 73.

<sup>43</sup> *New Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2011), p. 53.

<sup>44</sup> Deane, *Celtic Revivals*, p. 158.

finished with Spenser, however, and as the poem draws to a night-time close he considers a withdrawal from the fray of a precariously changeful life and the horrors of 'plastic / bombs' in Belfast, perhaps like Thoreau at Walden, or Spenser "'farre from enimyees'". These 'might serve as models' – but only 'for a while', he concludes. The penultimate image of the river Liffey flowing into the sea, one reluctantly dismissed as night closes in, thus becomes a sort of diachronic détente between all parties, another complex infusion of English, Irish and Anglo-Irish intertexts:

'Anna Livia, breathing free,  
weeps silently into the sea,  
her tiny sorrows mingling with  
the wandering waters of the earth.'

In "Beyond Howth Head" Mahon tries out an array of techniques and strategies for getting to grips with Spenser in the Irish literary tradition: challenging Yeats's separation of the poet and civil servant but acceding to Yeats's presentation of Spenser as a poet in and of his Irish castle; quoting Spenser against 'Spenser' (asleep "'farre from enimyees'" but in a torched Kilcolman) and appropriating Spenserian poetic images himself. With impressive ease, he manoeuvres Spenser into an assorted company of literary friends and enemies Irish and otherwise (including Milton, whose *Lycidas* is read as a poem of Ireland and the Irish Sea). Mahon inserts himself into that varied fellowship, as he searches for a theme, a voice, a tradition that can withstand the wind that blows his words back across the snotgreen Irish sea. Thus, while Mahon flings Spenser's indictment of the 'lewde libertie' of the bards back upon him to justify the burning of his castle, he also fervently appeals to Spenser alongside the bards to 'come and inspire us once again!' (Hints of the nascent 'Spenser narrative' here, too.) Although a poem of several moods, in which Spenser seems to bear much of the brunt of Mahon's mischief-making, it fosters further poetic engagements with Spenser. Two important examples are 'Penshurst Place' and 'Rathlin Island': spikily elegant poems of place that juxtapose English literary history and Irish colonial suffering more sharply still. Thus, on a trip to Rathlin rich with experiences of nature, Mahon finds that he cannot but remember the bloody massacre on the island by Francis Drake and John Norris acting on orders from Henry Sidney and the first Earl of Essex in 1557. More powerfully still, in writing to Penshurst not from Jonson's London but from Ireland, Mahon skewers the repose of Sidney's home and the strategic political occlusions of the country house aesthetic with a verve and precision born of close acquaintance with the work of Spenser and his contemporaries: 'the iron hand and the velvet glove – / come live with me and be my love' is its damning refrain ('Penshurst Place', in *New and Collected Poems*, p. 75).

Mahon's more acute sense of the enduring legacy of the plantation years, of the plantation poets, probably owes something to the many years he has spent living in Kinsale, county Cork, site of the final defeat of Hugh O'Neill's forces in 1601 which in turn catalysed the Ulster Plantation. But as "Beyond Howth Head" shows, far from restraining his poetry, the Spenserian legacy has the opposite effect. Even very recently, Mahon mockingly called the '*nymphes of Bandon*' (cousins, one presumes,

to Spenser's 'nymphs of Mulla') to answer for the disastrous floods of 2009 in county Cork, especially around the Bandon area:

*Ye nymphes of Bandon,*

where were you when the great south-facing windows  
of heaven were opened and it bucketed down  
on quiet Munster?

("After the Storm", in *New Collected Poems*, 2011, pp. 344-45)

Spenser's protective river-spirits still hold some imaginative dominion over the Munster landscape, it seems, although even here Mahon does not let Spenser off the hook: 'quiet' Munster re-awakens memories of the form and methods of the political 'quiet' in Munster Spenser had sought. Alternatively, the evocation of Spenser's poetry may perhaps suggests that the goddess Mutabilitie has put on a show of force in Munster rather than merely an allegorical pageant, just as she does, distantly, even in Rathlin where the island manages to return to nature even after the massacre of its inhabitants: 'Then an unnatural silence; and then / A natural silence'. A subtle appreciation of Spenserian mutability here helps Mahon re-cast in a stroke both Spenser and Yeats. Leaving the island, his avowed uncertainty '[w]hether the future lies before us or behind', Mahon ascribes serious material responsibilities to Yeats's 'gyres' of history – and a blood-guilt to Yeats's Spenser by association. Yet tiny vestiges of hope glisten even here.

Several of Mahon's Kinsale poems exhibit this same re-purposing of Yeats to point a way out of Spenser's history in Ireland, or even re-mediating in the opposite direction between Elizabethan Ireland and modern Ireland. The Christmas morning meditation in 'Christmas in Kinsale', for example, begins with the seaside charms of fairy lights, gulls and 'polished' stars but quickly descends into dark remembrances of 'history, exhausted' in Kinsale by 'Elizabeth and the Tudor conquest'. But Mahon escapes these unseasonal dumps by a distinctly Yeatsian image: 'since when, four hundred years of solitude, / rain on crushed bluebells in an autumn wood'. The Yeatsian tone develops as the next stanza moves into a mock-epic catalogue of Christmas rubbish. Again, Mahon plays his way *out* of the nightmare of history with a series of Yeatsian images of how poetic craft can and will endure beyond it: in this fallen, post-colonial world, the rubbish recalls the bedrock of poetic invention that is Yeats's 'foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart' ("The Circus Animals' Desertion"), and another image of exalted poetic craft, the golden bird singing to an emperor in Byzantium ("Sailing to Byzantium") appears, metamorphosed, as 'A cock [that] crows good-morning from an oil drum / like a peacock on a rain-barrel in Byzantium'.<sup>45</sup> If Mahon's tussle with Spenser began by repudiating (even doing violence to) Yeats's unsullied Spenser in his castle, his recurring habit of turning to Yeats when grappling with Spenser's Elizabethan Ireland implicitly accepts Spenser's place in the Irish

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<sup>45</sup> "Christmas in Kinsale", in *New and Collected Poems*, pp. 228-29. Yeats's reflection on his poetic career in "The Circus Animals' Desertion" concludes that 'Now that my ladder's gone, I must lie down where all the ladders start / In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart'. "Sailing to Byzantium" fantasises about a form 'out of nature' for the poet in which he 'sing[s]' to a 'drowsy Emperor' in Byzantium, a golden bird on a golden bough. Both poems are especially familiar in Ireland from their presence on the secondary school curriculum.

literary tradition. A particularly able reader of Yeats, Mahon's work shows glimpses of Spenser's Yeats rather than simply Yeats's Spenser.

As "After the Storm" intimated, Spenser remains a key figure in Mahon's poetic imaginary. A trio of poems in his latest collection, *An Autumn Wind* (2010) shows Mahon retreading the ground of his earlier engagements with Spenser, now drawing in Montague's struggle with Spenser too. Still Yeats remains close, and the sequence concludes with a bittersweet sense of hope. The opening poem of "Autumn Skies" explicitly returns to the setting and concerns of Montague's *The Rough Field*. That 'Garvaghey (Gaelic for a "rough field"', as Mahon helpfully reminds us) remembers the 'Tudor armies' and what came before provides the poet with an odd sense of consolation in the face of unstoried Celtic Tiger corporatization and its monomaniacal building projects. Those memories are 'still relevant enough' in the new century, Mahon drily notes. At this moment, however, the role available to the poet is not the emboldening O' Neill bard nor even Derricke's bardic *reacaire* of Montague's title-page, but 'a bard [...] aloof / under a leaking roof' in west Cork. But Yeats once again lights the way, and the poem concludes with Mahon's uplifting realization that the poet can still create art through the 'great singing school' of the heather and dog-roses. The second poem of "Autumn Skies" returns explicitly to the terrain of Mahon's own "Beyond Howth Head": the poet once more gazes out to sea with 'Howth Head beyond' and considers the poet's lot. A new and at once old beginning in Heraclitean flux – or Spenserian mutability? – is the gift of the 'clean-swept morning' Mahon celebrates in writing back to his younger self and his more troubled long poem. The third and final poem of the sequence returns Mahon to his Belfast roots, to the changes seen there during his lifetime, and concludes by echoing the antanaclastic ending of "Beyond Howth Head" and its 'encroaching night'.<sup>46</sup> Mahon celebrates the apparent end of the Troubles in Northern Ireland – 'the historical nightmare' and its 'recent graves' now festooned with flowers and butterflies – with characteristically punctilious wit: 'Now we can die in peace'.

Mahon's engagement with Spenser is clearly crucial to his sense of the Irish literary tradition and his own place within it. And it is significant that those engagements are almost always partnered with a negotiation of Yeats. Although he replaces Yeats's Spenser with the historical Spenser with blood on his hands, Mahon finds the route from Spenser to Yeats – even to Spenser's Yeats – assuaging. Casual though the anecdote seemed, Boland's perceptive appreciation of the significance of Mahon's attitude to Spenser in student days still stands. But it is doubly revealing, as it was intended to be: Boland tells her anecdote as much to outline her own distinctive take on the literary tradition as to describe Mahon's place in the Irish literary tradition. Although contemporaries, Mahon and Boland come of age (as very different poets) at least partially through their respective attitudes to Spenser. In fact, the Spenserian/Yeatsian patterning of the Irish literary tradition has been strongly challenged by Irish women poets, especially by Boland herself. In repudiating a tradition of masculinist nationalist authority and the abiding 'shadow of bardic privilege' which disavows, demeans or otherwise subordinates Irish women's poetry and history (as Boland does), that tradition's own internal debates fall by the wayside.<sup>47</sup> We should therefore expect no Spenser in Boland's poetry – particularly given that she narrates as a key moment in her own poetic

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<sup>46</sup> The doubling of Shakespeare's Othello's 'put out the light and then put out the light' lies behind the concluding couplet of "Beyond Howth Head": '... and I put out the light / on shadows of the encroaching night'.

<sup>47</sup> Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in our Time* (New York: Norton, 1995), p. 191.

development her lack of the access to Spenser.<sup>48</sup> And yet the turning point of Boland's career as a poet, and the crystallizing of her politics and poetics (as she tells it) comes in a poem ripe with Spenserian possibility and shadowed by Spenser's poetic contemporaries. "The Achill Woman" narrates a formative encounter between the student Boland on a study-holiday with her trusty copy of the *Silver Poets of the Sixteenth Century* and a slaving, windburnt Achill woman who brings Boland water she has drawn from the well. From this account, there would seem to be plenty of room for Yeatsian rhapsodies on peasant lore and Celtic mythologies of wells and water, Montague-like benedictions of oral counter-histories to the Spenserian Silver Poets, or delicately re-spun borrowings from the Elizabethan poet-colonists turned against them as Mahon had done. But no; Boland's response is dramatically different.

"The Achill Woman" became the opening poem of her celebrated sequence, 'Outside History' (1990), and Boland has told the story of the 1960s origins of the poem that emerged from this moment on numerous occasions. Those re-tellings always privilege the narrative of the emerging woman-poet scored against the ironies of the moment (and the 'emblem' that she makes of the woman for whom the poem is named).<sup>49</sup> This fated woman-poet (Boland) will eventually dispense of the narrative of victimhood among her fellow-poets and sisters so as to re-shape and re-awaken the voices of victims such as this Achill woman and the forgotten Famine-victims with whom she keeps faith.<sup>50</sup> 'The wrath and grief of Irish history seemed to me, as it did to many, one of our true possessions. Women were part of that wrath, had endured that grief. It seemed to me a species of human insult that at the end of all, in certain Irish poems, they should become elements of style rather than aspects of truth.'<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, though, Boland underplays the sharp ironies immanent in the actual encounter between the labour-worn older woman and Boland's privileged student self, never fully appreciating the social disparities between them that are also consequences of that same complex political history to which her epiphany testifies. Nor does she acknowledge the distasteful social and intellectual dynamics of this encounter between newly-empowered poet and subordinate peasant-woman. Instead, Boland's poem remembers most pungently her own subsequent act, her response to this encounter: that she returned diligently to read her book of 'the Court poets of the Silver Age', blithely unaware of 'the songs crying out their ironies'. Boland's appreciation of the irony only stretches so far. Her transformation into an Irish woman poet defiantly outside the established literary tradition in this retrospective epiphany, in this unbidden encounter between her aspiring poet self, the poets of Spenser's time and the Irish landscape and its hidden oral histories recounted by the Achill woman is, in fact, a fairly typical rite-of-passage of the Irish poet of the very same national tradition she so vehemently critiques. Boland's epiphany differs from Kinsella's or Mahon's only in its failure to notice specific historical traces in the *Irish* landscape, history and cultural

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<sup>48</sup> See note 39.

<sup>49</sup> In Boland's essay, 'Outside History', *American Poetry Review* 19:" (1990): 32-38 (p. 32). Although published only in her 1990 collection, *Outside History*, this essay clarifies that "The Achill Woman" relates to an encounter she had in Achill in the 1960s.

<sup>50</sup> Boland's exploration of that encounter in her poem and essays is intended 'to probe the virulence and necessity of the idea of a nation. Not on its own and not in a vacuum, but as it intersects with a specific poetic inheritance and as that inheritance, in turn, cut across me as a woman and poet' (*Outside History: Selected Poems, 1980-1990* (New York: Norton, 1990), p. 125).

<sup>51</sup> From *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), p. 134.



memory of the particular poets she is reading, notably Raleigh and Sir John Davies, ‘whose lines appear so elegant, so offhand, yet whose poems smell of the gallows’.<sup>52</sup>

Despite this disappointing early response, a later Boland poem shows a more mature vision of the Irish poetic tradition’s uncomfortable ancestors, and is instead steeped in an Elizabethan, even Spenserian, worldview. ‘Irish Poetry’, written for Michael Hartnett, the gifted Irish poet who wrote in both Irish and English. ‘We always knew there was no Orpheus in Ireland’, Boland’s poem begins, before remembering an evening when Hartnett ‘began to speak of our own gods’. The catalogue of losses, of deprivations that Boland narrates is interrupted in a moment of transhistorical magic, the rupture temporarily healed by Hartnett’s recitation of a lost Irish word, becalming in that instant (as Boland has it) the ‘silvery lithe rivers’ and the ‘savage acres’ of southwest Ireland.<sup>53</sup> Surely there is some Spenser here in the imagery, the conjunction, the diction? We also find a more subtle appreciation of Spenser and the Elizabethans in their Irish context in recent poems such as “Irish Poetry” (2001) and “Becoming the Hand of John Speed” (2006).<sup>54</sup> Mahon and Boland’s encounters with Spenser thus continue to shape their very different poetic vocations, politics and ideas of the Irish literary tradition long after the first fiery moments of encounter in the late 1960s and 1970s.

A slightly later development of this same politicized cluster of poets challenging Yeats’s Spenser shifts the focus outward to other villains and victims of early modern Ireland. Perhaps taking direction from John Montague, two collections of poetry published in Dublin in the early 1980s forcibly put the politics back into Spenser, his poetry as well as his biography. Brendan Kennelly’s *Cromwell* (1983) is a sonnet sequence giving voice to perhaps the most hated man in Irish history. Kennelly seasons his vicious prosopopoeia of Cromwell with anachronistic interjections from a weaselly Spenser, a man on the make writing extravagant dedicatory poems – ‘Anything to escape from fucking Cork’ (‘Dedication’, p. 34). This thoroughly unYeatsian Spenser earns praise from Cromwell as a poet ‘who has truly learned his trade / Of delight, delight, delight’ (“Delight”, p. 96). Although Spenser is a minor character in the sequence, Kennelly’s provision of an Irish interlocutor for Cromwell, Buffún (pronounced ‘Buffoon’) distantly parodies Irenius and Eudoxus, and the way that Spenser’s ‘civil’ literary form gives cover for shocking measures. Thomas Kinsella, by contrast, confronts Spenser by publishing a parallel translation of Irish (Gaelic) poetry from the bardic tradition: *An Dúanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* (1981), edited by Seán O’ Tuama, heralds and disseminates through Kinsella’s English translations the literary achievements of Spenser’s Irish contemporaries. Kinsella’s translations stride into the unnervingly Elizabethan-sounding political sphere of his celebrated Bloody Sunday poem, “Butcher’s Dozen”, and seeks to redress the situation he had described in his seminal 1966 essay, ‘The Irish Writer’: that, for the Irish writer, ‘the past is mutilated’ by the fracturing of its two language traditions.<sup>55</sup> ‘A recuperative

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<sup>52</sup> ‘Outside History’, p. 32.

<sup>53</sup> In *Against Love Poetry* (New York: Norton, 2001); the collection appeared in the UK as *Code* (2001), and the poem also appeared in the *New Hibernia Review* 5: 5 (2001).

<sup>54</sup> “Becoming the Hand of John Speed” was published in *The Threepenny Review* 106 (summer 2006), p. 19, and in *Domestic Violence* (2007).

<sup>55</sup> ‘The Irish Writer’ was first given as the Modern Languages Association lecture in 1966, but first published in 1967. As Tóibín (who quotes it) shows, Spenser is given spectral presence in Kinsella’s poem, “Another

event', as Seamus Heaney termed the collection, Kinsella's work in foregrounding these Gaelic poems in both languages seems at least in part an attempt to replace Spenser in the Irish literary tradition with more desirable literary ancestors.<sup>56</sup>

The putsch against Spenser – or at least against Yeats's Spenser – seems to have achieved its aims: after the early 1980s, Irish poets tend to leave Spenser to his own devices, at least in their poetry. There are occasional exceptions, of course, although they tend to appear in short, one-off poems: in 'Spenser's Ireland' (its title borrowed from Marianne Moore), Ciaran Carson puts together a punchy bricolage of Spenserian descriptions of the Irish in his sonnet collection *The Twelfth of Never* (1999). His '[r]akehelly horseboys, kernes, gallowglasses' who hide beneath their mantles and 'talk too much' patently have more to them than Spenser allows. 'Not all of it is gibberish', the poem drily concludes, historical irony collapsing the distance between Carson's Northern Ireland and Spenser's and scoring a point against the Elizabethan poet. Cork poets Bernard O'Donoghue and Seán Dunne confront Spenser's presence in the north Cork landscape, somewhat more sceptically than Yeats's sense of Spenser in the Irish landscape. In O'Donoghue's latest collection, *Farmers Cross* (2011), "Racho" recounts tales of a young Polish man who found temporary shelter in Kilcolman. The very idea seems unimaginable, even mythic, to the Irish poet, for whom Spenser's castle is a forbidding and inhospitable place.<sup>57</sup> Personal troubles and a walk through north Cork prompt Dunne's addressing of Spenser in "Doneraile Court" (1992). Reflecting on the break-up of his marriage as he walks through the north Cork estate, Dunne turns to Spenser's connection with the neighbourhood, bitterly re-casting the echo-refrain of Spenser's marriage-poem, *Epithalamion*: for him, 'No woods can answer and no echoes ring'.<sup>58</sup> Dunne finds a stark synchronicity between his emotional state and the hostile environment exacerbated; Spenser's place in its history seems to have stripped it of its natural ability to soothe or inspire. The frozen Awbeg (not 'Mulla') and lonely trees 'Shelter no nymphs or attentive muse'. Rewriting *Epithalamion* as a bruised *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, Dunne also enlists the shade of another north Cork writer, Elizabeth Bowen, to his complaint, imagining 'the worn carpets of her Irish home' more sympathetically. But the poem ends on an unexpectedly upbeat note, and it is thanks to the goddess Mutability. There may even be a grudging rapprochement with Spenser's tainted poetic legacy in the glimmer of hope Dunne prizes from the day, imagined '[a]s a new love forms like a sentence / Carved in a tree, mutability's bole'.<sup>59</sup> As with O'Donoghue, Dunne's *nostos* with Spenser eventually produces an occasion of surprising warmth, hospitality, and, of course, poetry, if only in the distance of a simile, or another person's experience.

If the historical consciousness animating these poems by Carson, O'Donoghue and Dunne denies Yeats's separation of Spenser's poetry and politics, it also signals the rise of the 'Spenser

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September", by way of his and Lodowick Bryskett's onetime house, St John's in Enniscorthy ('The Dark Sixteenth Century').

<sup>56</sup> Heaney's comment is from a review originally published in the *Sunday Tribune*, reprinted in 'The Poems of the Dispossessed Repossessed', in *The Government of the Tongue* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1988, pp. 30-5 (p. 35).

<sup>57</sup> 'Racho', in *Farmers Cross* (2011). The same collection has a poem on a family day out at the beach beside Smerwick, named for its Irish name, "Dún an Óir".

<sup>58</sup> From *The Sheltering Nest* (1992), pp. 48-50.

<sup>59</sup> Is there also an evocation of the penultimate image of Yeats's "Amongst School Children" here too, the chestnut tree which, the poet wonders, may be leaf, blossom or bole?

narrative': the abstraction of Spenser as emblem of a violent, wrongful colonial regime where both man and regime receive their long-overdue comeuppance. Seeds of that 'Spenser narrative' were already visible in the bardic revenge on Kilcolman imagined by Mahon in "Beyond Howth Head" and in the desperate, homesick sycophancy of Kennelly's Spenser, as well as in Yeats's tragic Spenser. But it bursts into full flower in Seán Lysaght's *Spenser* (2011), an imagined biography in verse partly modelled on Kennelly's *Cromwell*, but which returns whole-heartedly to the terrain of Yeats's Spenser.<sup>60</sup> This wasn't the first Irish attempt at an extended fictional biography of Spenser. In his novel, *The Kilcolman Notebook* (1994), Cork-born critic and novelist Robert Welch has Spenser negotiate his Irish life through a grossly violent and crudely-sexualised imagination. The scatological excesses with which Welch attempts to negotiate the dark moral and political realities of Spenser's colonial career and poetry prove blunt tools, however, though not unusual ones.<sup>61</sup> (Such caricatures of Spenser and other Elizabethans in Ireland are still to be found in a certain strand of Irish writing, most recently on the stage of the Abbey Theatre in Tom McIntyre's *Only an Apple* (2009). In McIntyre's play, Grace O'Malley (the so-called pirate queen, Granuaile) and Queen Elizabeth I are frogmarched together into modern Irish politics as bawdy succubi to a randy Charles Haughey-like Taoiseach, a crude act of penitence for all parties.<sup>62</sup>) Spenser is less roughly handled in Lysaght's collection than in either Kennelly's sequence or Welch's novel. Instead, Lysaght describes his work as being motivated by a concern about a familiar 'gap between readings of Spenser the poet and Spenser the official, between the courtly lover and the apologist for massacre'.<sup>63</sup> Lysaght's Spenser is made to face again and again the violence and moral costs of his colonial enterprises. But the result is curiously like Yeats's tragic Spenser: a well meaning poet tragically limited by the conditions in which he came to Ireland. With Lysaght's sequence, then, the trajectory of Irish poetic responses to Spenser after Yeats has come full circle.

The collection, a biographical sequence in brisk tercets, gives thoroughly modern-sounding voice to Spenser at various points throughout his life, tracking Spenser's life from the accession of Queen Elizabeth to his own death in London. Divided into two parts, both before and after Spenser's posting to Ireland with Lord Grey, Lysaght follows longstanding tradition in its Yeatsian cast: Part One concludes with a poem named after one of Yeats's own collections, *Responsibilities*, and the opening poem of Part 2, 'Dublin, 1580' in which Spenser buys a horse at Smithfield market, generates through its vivid sights and smells the curiously evocative feel of a Jack B. Yeats crowd-painting. Lysaght is also firmly wedded to the Yeatsian image of Spenser writing in his tower. "Cottage and Castle" explicitly divides the domestic from the poetic space, while "Mutability" places Spenser 'in his tower all day / In a dry web of artifice like a spider!' while his wife, Elizabeth, labours in another room to deliver his son, Peregrine. The decidedly casual poetic idiom ("Spenser thought / That Ireland was an absolutely awful place" ("Limerick")) jars with its more experimental moments.

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<sup>60</sup> Westport: Stonechat Editions, 2011. Lysaght's previous collections, mostly nature-poetry, are published by the leading publisher of contemporary Irish poetry: the Gallery Press.

<sup>61</sup> Welch, *The Kilcolman Notebook* (Dingle: Brandon Book Publishers, 1994).

<sup>62</sup> Haughey was prime minister of Ireland three times (1979-81; 1982; 1987-92), and had a colourful and controversial career before that. More often remembered for his lifestyle and cash donations that financed it, he was an intelligent and well-read man who, notoriously, upon his retirement from the leadership of Fianna Fáil quoted Othello's deeply ambiguous final words, 'I have done the state some service, and they know't; no more of that'.

<sup>63</sup> *Spenser*, p. 120.

In “The Herder”, for example, Lysaght attempts a self-consciously Spenserian language and orthography to narrate a shocking atrocity that Talus would have been proud to administer. Rather than quote Spenser against himself, as Mahon had done, Lysaght produces a copy of Spenserian writing out of atrocity. Many of the same evocative poetic images that Yeats, Mahon and even Boland found so appealing and so useful for considering Spenser in Ireland and Irish literary tradition recur in *Spenser*. Alongside the enabling castle, the formidable bards, the deserved conflagration, Lysaght has the troubled Spenser seeks out a riverside to think by, deciding that ‘He would just have to divert this Thames / To Munster, and see if the river of his song / Could find a grandeur in the windswept Shannon’ (“Spring, 1583”). Another familiar figure is that of Ovid among the barbarians. Here Lysaght narrates an episode where ‘The man from Castlepook’ interrupts Spenser in his study. A Faunus-like figure clad in animal-skins to match his tales of lycanthropy and metamorphic ‘mere Irish’, too late Lysaght’s Spenser recognizes him as not the ‘weird spook’ he seems but none other than ‘the figure of Ovid’. In such tendentious imaginings of Spenser missing clear opportunities to recognize the fellowship of talented Irish bards, Lysaght relaunches Yeats’s vision of a tragic Irish Spenser despite himself.

Engaging with Spenser’s life and work has thus become something of a rite of passage for Irish poets. Far from being left behind in the process, Spenser remains a sort of touchstone – or, perhaps better, whetstone – to whom they tend to return. A weird spook himself, Spenser is angrily scapegoated or fictively punished during Northern Ireland’s most difficult days. But Yeats’s Spenser (and occasionally Spenser’s Yeats) proves a rich and enduring theme for poets consciously invested in an Irish literary tradition, one best addressed inside that tradition. And if Spenser comes to emblemize the *uncertainty* of that tradition, its fissures and fractures, its heroes and its outliers, Irish poets, more than their confrères in prose and drama, struggle most fiercely to answer it.

### **‘Faerie Queene country’**

It has largely escaped notice, but Spenser’s influence can also be traced in the Irish novel, specifically in that peculiarly Irish sub-genre, the ‘Big House’ novel. Here, the conduit is not so much Yeats as it is Spenser’s visibility in the historical geography of north Cork. As Michelle O’Callaghan recently observed, ‘For contemporary Irish writers and critics, Spenser and the late sixteenth century are still very much alive in the political topography of Ireland’.<sup>64</sup> Cork writers, especially those who feel a social or historical kinship with the Protestant planter-poet of Kilcolman castle, feel Spenser’s shadow particularly intensely. And the gods were not locked in a law-case atop Arlo-hill but indulging their mischievous ways when they decreed that two of Ireland’s greatest novelists, Elizabeth Bowen and William Trevor, be born and raised in the hinterlands of Spenser’s castle in north Cork. Despite their very different social and historical backgrounds – Bowen as a member of the elite Anglo-Irish Protestant settlers established in north Cork since Cromwellian times, Trevor from the more peripatetic Protestant classes that served them – both produce brilliant examples of the ‘Big House’ novel. Spenser haunts the historical and geographical imaginary of Bowen’s most celebrated ‘Big House’ novel *The Last September* (1929) and the central Irish section of her wartime spy novel, *The Heat of the Day* (1949), both of which draw extensively on her memories and eponymous history of Bowen’s Court. Trevor’s engagement with Spenser has tentative beginnings in

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<sup>64</sup> In ‘Spenser’s Literary Influence’, in Richard McCabe (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 664-83 (p. 681).

some of his early short stories, but is most fully manifested in his modern 'Big House' novel, *The Story of Lucy Gault* (2002). Spenser is not the only old ghost rattling around the wainscot: the form's debts to nineteenth-century Gothicism are long established.<sup>65</sup> Less often considered, however, is the debt of a certain kind of Big House novel to the concatenation of political and historical concerns clustered around the image of Spenser in his Anglo-Norman castle, an image so strongly fostered by Yeats. (Yeats, after all, was making not just a Spenserian keep but a Big House after his own fashion in his Thoor Ballylee. Re-idealizing the decaying reality of the Big House, Yeats saw it not as a symbol of oppression but as a poeticized structure of the Irish landscape.)<sup>66</sup> That debt is particularly strongly felt by Bowen and, a generation later, by Trevor, writers whose personal knowledge of the north Cork landscape help to fuse the lines of descent between the Big Houses and Spenser's Norman keep.

Predictably, the response to Spenser by a scion of an Anglo-Irish great house is the more self-conscious of the two. A few short pages into her history of her family, *Bowen's Court* (1942), Bowen situates her family home squarely in Spenser country. It doesn't augur well. An apparently bucolic couple of paragraphs on 'Faerie Queene country' have a pronounced edge of sinister fatalism, as Bowen repeats Jonson's story of Spenser's end and the supposed loss of his child in the burning of Kilcolman:

Kilcolman keep, a torn-open ruin, still stands; winds race round it at every time of the year. The view is of Ireland at its most intimidating – the marsh, the heartless mountains with their occasional black frown. That landscape fulfilled, for Spenser, its conveyed threat: the castle was burnt by the Irish in his absence, and one of his sons, an infant, died in the fire.

This nightmarish figure of the 'torn-open ruin' stalks the Anglo-Irish imagination; small wonder it animates its privileged literary mode, the Big House novel.<sup>67</sup> If Bowen's Spenser in his 'keep' resembles Yeats's Spenser, hers is significantly more troubled by a fatalistic sense of his end prescribed in his beginnings on 'granted land'.<sup>68</sup> For Bowen, the flames of Kilcolman are inevitable and imminent, as are the flames that destroy the Big Houses following the War of Independence in her own era, those that consumed the great houses nearest Bowen's Court (Rockmills, Ballywalter, Convamore) as well as Danielstown, her fictional version of Bowen's Court in *The Last September*.<sup>69</sup> Its proximity for Bowen is clear, although Bowen's Court itself escaped burning. The 'torn-open ruin' of Spenser's castle irresistibly testifies to a history still defined by struggle.

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<sup>65</sup> On the Irish 'Big House' novel see, for example, the essays collected in *Ancestral Voices: The Big House in Anglo-Irish Literature*, ed. Otto Rauchbauer (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1992).

<sup>66</sup> See Grogan, 'After the Mutabilitie Cantos'.

<sup>67</sup> Writing of Elizabeth Bowen and Lady Gregory, Hermione Lee notes the abiding interest of Anglo-Irish literature for ruins, describing it as a sort of romantic hangover, as well as a more immediate political fatalism. *Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation* (London: Vintage, 1981; repr. 1999), pp. 42-3.

<sup>68</sup> Her sense of the 'castles that had fallen before his' is less a Yeatsian symbol of cosmic history than a pragmatic recognition of just the kind of colonial bad faith that Yeats had ignored in romanticizing Spenser in his castle. *Bowen's Court*, p. 7.

<sup>69</sup> The burning of Danielstown is one part of Bowen's extraordinary response to the sparing of Bowen's Court during that night of burnings; the writing of *Bowen's Court* itself is another. More complex still is her 1942 essay 'The Big House', commissioned by Seán Ó Faoláin (her friend and lover) for the important Irish literary periodical *The Bell*.

Nonetheless, it's worth noting that Bowen sees some of 'gentle Spenser' in the countryside too, again in the rivers. The Awbeg, 'gentle Mulla', 'glitters with Spenser's gentler memories'.<sup>70</sup> But although she takes pains to suggest that 'the flames of Kilcolman were never reflected there', the same flames are never far from her imagination. The passage on Spenser's estate concludes by describing the site of Bridgetown Abbey where the Awbeg meets the Blackwater, an abbey itself 'burned and desolated by Cromwell's men'.<sup>71</sup> The burnings of the War of Independence mirror the burnings of an earlier era, with only the agents reversed. Her description here encapsulates the Spenser of most interest to modern Irish writers: the Yeatsian tragic poet in his castle, living on borrowed time and facing the violent ends that were his due as a 'civil servant' of a lamentable regime. But it also places those elements – river, castle and child – into the emerging form of the Spenser narrative. Bowen is no stranger to the kernel of hope buried deep in the Spenser narrative, one partially formed by the tiny glimpses of (could it be?) hibernophilia recuperable from the *Mutabilitie Cantos*: 'Spenser never came back to that unholy countryside full of holy wells and of castles that had fallen before his. He had, however, in his years at Kilcolman, added two cantos to the *Faerie Queene*'.

Bowen's careful exception of the Awbeg – 'You could not but love the Awbeg itself, even though it might flow through a hated land' – once again testifies to the attraction of Spenser's Irish rivers for Irish writers after him, and the kind of meta-historical *entente* that they can suggest.<sup>72</sup> Answering to the historical and political challenges of writing in Spenser's shadow, Cork rivers and the swans that paddle them – Spenser's swans, Yeats's swans – recur in Bowen and Trevor's novels. Without exception, they are emblems of solace and hope, figures of immemoriality suggesting the forgiveness of time.<sup>73</sup> In these novels, rivers facilitate encounter and rapprochement between opposing parties (they feature stepping stones in *The Last September*, *Lucy Gault*), and even sometimes hold miraculous or utopian possibilities: in her tense, wartime novel, *The Heat of the Day*, a boat that has been sunk for strategic purposes becomes a symbol of the hopeful future still salvageable in Ireland. *The Heat of the Day* concludes with the soothing sight of swans, and Trevor signals the peace finally attained by his eponymous heroine in *Lucy Gault* by her concern for the eponymous swans of Enniseala, the neighbouring town.

With Cromwellian forebears to thank for her ancestral home, Bowen has more trouble than Yeats in envisaging a future for the Big House and its histories in the Irish landscape. Tellingly, her fictional Big Houses are usually seen in autumnal aspect, as the title of *The Last September* suggests; in *The Heat of the Day*, Stella's honeymoon and sole return visit to Mount Morris are undertaken in September and October. Their ends in conflagration are always already intimated. Thus, the ending of *The Last September* mimics its opening, as Maud Ellmann observes: the door flung open in hospitality to visitors at the beginning is matched, finally, by the door flung open 'hospitably' to the arsonists' flames.<sup>74</sup> But Bowen's novels diverge from the previous 'Big House novel' tradition in their more forgiving attitude to their inhabitants. Does this owe something to Bowen's sense of Spenser in

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<sup>70</sup> *Bowen's Court*, p. 7.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>73</sup> Something similar can be seen in Mahon's image of the 'Anna Livia' flowing disconsolately into the sea in "Beyond Howth Head".

<sup>74</sup> Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 55.

the landscape before her? As Ellmann points out, Bowen ‘endows the Naylor[s] [of Danielstown] with a keen sense of propriety. Neither debauched nor profligate, the Naylor[s] are anachronisms, destroyed by the grandiose ambitions embodied in their house, rather than by any personal defects of character.’<sup>75</sup> It is in much this spirit that Bowen writes in *Bowen’s Court* of Spenser, his poetic wings unfortunately clipped in this ‘lyrical place’. As a ‘civil servant, living on granted land’, she notes, his ‘position was sinister and desolating’.<sup>76</sup> Not once does she charge Spenser personally: only his posting is sinister and the landscape full of ‘conveyed threat’. There are undoubtedly reasons closer to home, too, for this kinder attitude to the castle or Big House residents. Bowen herself wrote from a sense of tragic or unwanted complicity. Derek Mahon’s poem “At the Shelbourne”, nicely captures Bowen’s conflicted sympathies in the line, ‘I feel like a traitor spying on my own past’.<sup>77</sup> Mahon is writing of Bowen’s involvement in the British war effort, which brought her to Ireland to report on attitudes in her native country and earned her some enemies, even today. But he captures a sense of the deeper rifts informing Bowen’s own writing and identity, and her related, quasi-autobiographical concerns with feelings of dislocation, displacement and dispossession in her work.<sup>78</sup>

The Big House itself acquires a displaced shadow in *The Last September*, and Bowen generates the pivotal scene in the novel from the dynamic between them. This relatively late scene maps out both the past and future of Danielstown. The child of the house, the orphan Lois, goes for a walk by the river with two more recent visitors, Marda and Hugo. They happen upon and decide to explore an overgrown ruined mill nearby. As Hugo waits outside, the women find a man on the run. Marda suffers a surface wound in the panic that ensues, and the Danielstown party retreat hastily and furtively to the house, barely reporting a terrifying event that the novel itself only sketchily narrates. The end of Danielstown is nigh. The ominous ruined mill stands as the Big House’s dark double, as Neil Corcoran points out, betraying the exploitation of the landscape upon which the graceful Big House has thrived.<sup>79</sup> Formally, the mill is even closer to a Norman keep. Juxtaposing ruined mill and soon-to-be ruined Big House, Bowen thus distantly but appropriately evokes a ‘*Faerie Queene* country’ dynamic of safe castles which, for all their comforts, implicitly acknowledge the threat of less fixed kinds of domicile, earthy safe-houses and threatening ruins beyond – and potentially within – its walls. The Castle of Alma is the most obvious example of this, where the evocatively Irish Antaeus, Maleger, and his ongoing assaults are only revealed in the morning after a lengthy tour of the castle’s material riches.

The distant evocation of the Castle of Alma’s allegory of the body is compounded when Lois compares the mill, and other ruins like it, to ‘corpses at their most horrible’. The ‘dead mill [...] took

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<sup>75</sup> ‘[T]he forces of disintegration were historical, not personal’, Ellmann thus argues. *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 53.

<sup>76</sup> *Bowen’s Court*, p. 7.

<sup>77</sup> Mahon, *New Collected Poems*, p. 200.

<sup>78</sup> This is frequently noted by her readers, but see, for example, Neil Corcoran, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 184-87.

<sup>79</sup> Corcoran roots the scene in the Irish Protestant gothic tradition, arguing that the mill is a sort of demonic double for the Big House, its rapacious character made visible only in the mill’s ruined state. ‘This ruined mill is, as it were, the terrible secret of Anglo-Irish history still architecturally articulate on the land, even in its desolation’. Moreover, ‘the ruined scene of this conflicted history then becomes the scene for the return of the historically repressed’. Corcoran, *Elizabeth Bowen*, pp. 51-53 (52, 53).

on all of the past to which it had given nothing', and, worse still, 'her nightmare: brittle, staring ruins'.<sup>80</sup> This is the only moment in the novel where the Big House protagonists face up to the realities of the War of Independence raging around them, to their own historical role in it and its threat to their future. Otherwise, Danielstown, carries on its obsolete Big House life, treating the soldiers and their middle-class wives as the kind of social nuisance and diversion that they are in a Jane Austen novel. ('We came to take care of all of you – and, of course, we are ever so glad to be able to do it', declares the insufferable army wife Mrs Vermont, for example).<sup>81</sup> The echo of the 'torn-open ruin' of Kilcolman in Lois's words exposes the violent history of conquest and exploitation through which Big Houses were built and to which the defensive frame of the Norman keep before them still attested. In the scenes at the mill – in which Lois finally, brutally, comes of age – Bowen uses Spenser as emblem and scapegoat for the whole colonial process in which she, too, is implicated.

With the full view of hindsight, however, something more than the scars of English colonial history in Ireland may be registered in the Spenserian sites of ruin and rebellion and the hazardous landscape of war in *The Last September*: perhaps, too, they articulate a wish to re-connect Ireland's traumas to the sufferings of Europe during the two wars, as *The Heat of the Day* does more overtly. In that later novel, the Big House is itself shifted, experimentally, into a peripheral space, away from wartime London and its more urgent conflict. In it, Cousin Francis's bequest of Mount Morris offers Stella's enlisted son Roderick an alternative future to that shaped by the second world war, one in which Ireland's history of struggle and its relics of empire might service a more pressing global history. '[B]etter, it seemed to [Stella], than freedom in nothing', Roderick has been 'fitted into a destiny' by 'Cousin Francis's egotistic creative boldness with regard to the future, [...] his requisitioning for that purpose of Roderick'.<sup>82</sup> Bowen here generates plot from this more poignant personal attempt to force the Irish great house *out* of history, or to subordinate its history to a more pressing global history. Corcoran has remarked upon the Shakespearean intertextuality of *The Heat of the Day*, but it has its Spenserian moments too. Here, Mount Morris offers itself as a mysterious but salvific place, not unlike Bowen's account of Doneraile, the 'lyrical place' in which Roderick might temporarily escape History, like 'Raleigh, Spenser and Sydney [who] all conversed here, strolling along the lime walk or reclining "among the coolly shade of the green alders"'.<sup>83</sup> And indeed,

'[p]ossessorship of Mount Morris affected Roderick strongly. It established for him, and was adding to day by day, what might be called an historic future. The house came out to meet his growing capacity for attachment; all the more, perhaps, in that by geographically standing outside war it appeared also to be standing outside the present. The house, non-human, became the hub of his imaginary life, of fancies, fantasies only so to be called because circumstance outlawed them from reality.'<sup>84</sup>

But it is a project that is doomed to fail, as the insistently oneiric qualities of Roderick's 'historic future' hint. Roderick will fall short of his initial dreams for the house in which he was even

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<sup>80</sup> *The Last September*, p. 123.

<sup>81</sup> *The Last September* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 47.

<sup>82</sup> *The Heat of the Day*, p. 151.

<sup>83</sup> *Bowen's Court*, p. 7. These comments introduce the passage on Kilcolman.

<sup>84</sup> *The Heat of the Day* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), p. 44.



conceived, it turns out, by taking on the terms of its compromised history rather than its utopian possibilities *outside* history, as Stella (rather ambitiously) hopes. His failure reflects Bowen's own unsuccessful negotiation of the history and values of the Big House in her own literature and life, a negotiation coloured, even tormented by ideas of Spenser's tragic complicity.<sup>85</sup> The 'historic future' of Bowen's own class and their Big House or castle proves unimaginable other than in ruins. That the violence of their ends be self-evident, be 'torn-open', is a poor but necessary form of compensation.

Even more than Danielstown, Mount Morris shows the signs of its imminent ruin, even if its inheritor remains oblivious of it. To be fair, Roderick's failure of imagination owes something to his mother's willed repression of the same faculty; the strain of Bowen's project is felt at every level in the novel. The role of Mount Morris as a redemptive space outside history (and therefore wartime) is one that can be sustained only by looking the other way, by not asking the questions it so forcibly poses. Those questions, veiled threats, arise but are quickly dismissed by Stella when she visits the house in which she had spent her honeymoon: why did Cousin Francis follow the precautionary advice of shady intelligence officer, Harrison, who told him to sink his boat, for example? (The possibility of raising it again will be one of Roderick's first fancies.) Why did Cousin Francis leave such detailed and explicit instructions for the event of flooding when that had never happened before? (The Awbeg and its nymphs may not always be gentle, as Mahon will later point out.) Even the household staff bring an anxiety and uncertainty that Stella deliberately pushes down: how could the house's steward Donovan have two 'surprisingly young daughters' (new potential claimants on the house) and Stella not remember him at all?<sup>86</sup> (Stella's forgetting to ask whether the candles are rationed leads to months of winter darkness for the Donovans, the narrator quietly observes.)<sup>87</sup> Kiberd's observation of an English cultural desire to construct Ireland as a fallen but quasi-utopian space somehow outside history comes into play here, and it is a measure of Bowen's sense of moral and historical compromise and constraint that she resorts to such strategies.

With Roderick's acquiescence in Mount Morris's prior history, the locus of utopian hope (and Bowen does manage to maintain such hope) shifts to the sub-plot. The ending is always a particularly fraught location in a Bowen novel, and here, Spenser gives the scene additional significance. The novel ends not with Stella and Roderick but with the newly-single Louie, her strongest symbolic moment. Walking with her new baby, she catches sight of 'three swans ... disappearing in the direction of the west'. Louie feels strangely compelled to raise her baby to witness 'and perhaps remember' it. With this sight, Bowen brings the novel to a close. The swans not only wing their way west towards Ireland but may also evoke more specifically the three swans seen by Stella on the river at Mount Morris. The twice-fatherless baby, Tom Victor (not the child of Louie's late husband but of a wartime affair) provides a ray of hope for a British future after war. The lost child of a terrible, violent history, he just might escape that – Bowen implies – by remembering and following the swans west to an Irish space outside that history, as Roderick once had the opportunity to do before he allowed himself to be fitted to his historically-compromised destiny.

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<sup>85</sup> *The Heat of the Day*, p. 267.

<sup>86</sup> *The Heat of the Day* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), pp. 142-43.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

That redolent figure of the lost or fatherless child is a key element of Bowen's Spenserian landscape – as it is of the 'Spenser narrative'.<sup>88</sup> Jonson's dubious story of Spenser lost child, fondly repeated in *Bowen's Court*, has gained traction not just in Bowen but in Irish writing more widely not as history but as a sort of compensatory myth for Spenser's place in Irish history and literature. Not only that, the figure of Spenser's lost child hints at an alternative history, one of reconciliation, one perhaps even already begun. Often transplanted to another era, the fictionalised lost child of Spenser's recurs as a means by which Irish writers negotiate the Spenser legacy, a preferable surrogate for Spenser in (and of) Irish history. Trevor uses this narrative of the lost child as the master-plot of *The Story of Lucy Gault*, for example, and we will see how Frank McGuinness's *Mutabilitie* vests its redemptive potential on the same figure of Spenser's lost child. Even in Dunne's "Doneraile Court" there is a 'waiting child' in the wings for whom the poet gathers conkers in the Spenserian landscape.

The attractions of the figure are obvious: the possibility of a gentler alternative history already hidden within the folds of Ireland's colonial history establishes new ways out of old quarrels. It also usefully breaks down the hard and fast ethnic and historical divisions of sectarian politics. Lois, heroine of *The Last September*, is an orphan, as is Laurence, another temporary young resident of Danielstown. It is only through their orphan status that Lois and Laurence are in sympathy – and that they are offered a brighter future. Both live uncomfortably and unwillingly in Danielstown, 'resentful at giving so much of themselves to what was to be forgotten', and determined not to be *of* that world in the same way as Lord and Lady Naylor.<sup>89</sup> In seeking to be free of their discomfort, Bowen's lost children in *The Last September* are given the opportunity to live new kinds of histories. Something similar is held out for the naïve Roderick in *The Heat of the Day*, even if he does not finally take it. In an epiphany that he only experiences when he finally visits Mount Morris, Roderick realizes that he has lost no fewer than three fathers, a liberating as well as distressing recognition. Roderick's reflections on this fact, and on the related challenge of keeping on the Big House are worth quoting at length, for the way in which they also, semi-consciously, speak to the legacy of Spenser in the Irish landscape and literary tradition: 'Had there not been a prematurity about each of their three deaths, not least the obstinate old man's? Or, had they each, when it had come to a point, laid down what had become impossible to finish? Accept, as against that, that nothing might *be* possible to finish – who would, indeed, aspire to be the final man? It was a matter of continuing – but what, what? As to that, there ought to be access to the mindless knowledge locked up in rocks, in the stayers-on.'<sup>90</sup> Bowen's Spenser, too, is a father-figure, and this passage seems to be working

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<sup>88</sup> To evoke a lost child through whom a happier future might, eventually, be achieved is to evoke a favourite device of romance, and it was through the values of romance that Yeats had recuperated Spenser. Returning to the story of Spenser's lost child also allows writers to remember the lost children of Shakespearean romance – Perdita, Marina, Miranda, Innogen – and to furnish their re-tellings with the joyous lessons of early modern romance: the magic of forgiveness, the possibility of new, unimagined futures. All the same, this is not a politically innocent act (as Jonathan Gil Harris has recently shown of *The Tempest*), nor is it free from a kind of willed naivety and even hasty foreclosure. See *Marvellous Repossessions: 'The Tempest', Globalization, and the Waking Dream of Paradise*. The 2011 Garnett Sedgewick memorial Lecture. (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2012).

<sup>89</sup> *The Last September*, p. 118. Raised by her aunt and uncle, Lois is eventually freed from her historical destiny of marrying the English soldier, Gerald Lesworth and exported from doomed Danielstown to the continent by Lady Naylor.

<sup>90</sup> *The Heat of the Day*, p. 269.

out the costs of that relationship through the simple-minded Roderick. Unlike Lois and Laurence, Roderick ultimately chooses what he sees as that kind of mindless staying on, not seeing it for the treacherous historical complicity it is. A mindful staying on is the destiny Bowen ultimately chose for herself in Bowen's Court, awaiting the day of its imminent, inevitable ruin – as Spenser, too, must have awaited the arrival of the Nine Years War at his own doorstep.

There are more hopeful answers to be found in the writing of William Trevor. More fleeting than Bowen's centuries of Big House dominion they may be, but Trevor's north Cork connections are an abiding influence on his Irish fictions. Although Protestant, Trevor's family were a long distance from Bowen's Anglo-Irish class.<sup>91</sup> Originally Catholic Roscommon land-owners dispossessed by a Welsh family in the seventeenth-century settlements, they became tenant-farmers and converted at some point under the notoriously oppressive Penal Laws of the eighteenth century. Trevor's father worked in a bank, which meant that Trevor had a peripatetic childhood far from his family's Roscommon roots. Born in Mitchelstown in north Cork (not far from Kilcolman), his earliest years were spent in the Cork coastal villages of Youghal (where, Trevor reminds his readers, Raleigh had his house, Myrtle Grove) and Skibbereen.<sup>92</sup> A longtime English resident, very many of Trevor's novels and short stories are nonetheless set in Ireland.<sup>93</sup> Few are set earlier than the twentieth century, but the moral dilemmas and tough allegories characteristic of his work often reverberate in the echo chamber of Irish history. Standing squarely within his artistic vision of Ireland are the 'adventurers of the Virgin Queen', as Fogarty, the 'poor Protestant' servant, puts it in Trevor's classic short story, 'The News from Ireland': not just Raleigh but Spenser and all the undertakers, colonial administrators and their descendents from the Pale to dilapidated Big Houses in rural Cork. Those interests are most fully developed in his 2002 'Big House' novel, *The Story of Lucy Gault*.

Like Bowen's *The Last September*, Trevor's novel is set in a Big House and begins during the troubled years of the war of independence. It narrates the fortunes of the Gaults, an Anglo-Irish family in a fictionalised east Cork great house over almost eighty years, beginning with the moment in which they realize that they must abandon the house for fear of arson. In the fearful haste of their abandonment, their child is mistakenly left behind: another lost Spenserian child. The novel follows that child's Irish life, taking in her parents' exile as well as Captain Gault's eventual return to county Cork. Trevor's novel ends with the eventual demise of the house and family in the tragic penitent Lucy's old age. We have here, however allegorically distant, yet another figuration of the 'Spenser narrative', set in an evocatively Spenserian landscape and presented as the long-delayed end to the colonial history Spenser helped to set in train. Or, to put it another way, Trevor's novel presents an alternative history of Spenser's lost child in the Irish landscape, told through the prism of the Big

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<sup>91</sup> Mary Hoyt-Fitzgerald cites Trevor's description of himself as a "small-town Irish Protestant" as opposed to the Anglo-Irish Protestant gentry (or 'Ascendancy') of the Big House, although his work is set both in those small towns and in the great houses. *William Trevor: Re-Imagining Ireland* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2003), p. 79.

<sup>92</sup> Dolores MacKenna presents the early history of William Trevor's family in *William Trevor: The Writer and His Work* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1999), pp. 9-23. She quotes Trevor's remembrance of Raleigh in his *Excursions in the Real World* on pp. 27-8.

<sup>93</sup> Perhaps his most direct engagement with Irish history is the short story, 'The News from Ireland' (1986), the title of which dimly evokes the alarmist news pamphlets and polemics by Elizabethan soldiers, administrators and planters in Ireland, but which is set during the Famine in the nineteenth century. More typical is another short story with distant or allegorical allusions to the early modern, 'Beyond the Pale', which co-opts the much-elided secret of the origins and continuance of the northern Irish 'Troubles' as both plot and form.

House novel but coloured throughout by more gently-written Spenserian settings and images of Ireland. Yeats, too, gets a look in here, but only in the long, slow, restorative time after Captain Gault's tragically belated return. Like Mahon, then, Trevor looks to Yeats for guidance out of the nightmare of Elizabethan history. But Trevor ultimately manages to break away from the Yeatsian segregation of the poet and civil servant, offering this neo-Spenserian narrative not as an act of unwitting contrition but as a narrative of hope, an alternative counter-history readable all the way back to the Elizabethans.<sup>94</sup> As Mary Hoyt-Fitzgerald suggests, in the novel 'the past no longer has an inexorable stranglehold; old conceptions of Irish identity are shattered and reconstructed'.<sup>95</sup> Trevor's great achievement is to light the way through what Tóibín called Spenser's 'dark sixteenth century', and to show how it may yet provide the materials for unmaking the past and remaking the future.

The novel opens abruptly with the fatal, all-determining event, the complex historical context and ramifications of which will shade every subsequent moment of the novel: 'Captain Everard Gault wounded the boy in the right shoulder on the night of June the twenty-first, nineteen twenty-one.' Trevor waits only a short paragraph before directing the reader to that complex historical context to which his protagonists have been irrevocably enlisted: 'They had come to fire the house [Lahardane], their visit expected because they had been before.' Just as *The Last September* ends with a momentary vision of Danielstown soon to be consumed by arsonists' flames, the Gaults will accept the conflagration as a long-overdue payment for the colonial sins of their ancestors as well as their own complicit comforts in Lahardane. But the local debt-collectors in Trevor's novel, for reasons unknown (or perhaps half-compassionate, or thinking the penalty already sufficient), desist. As happened with Bowen's Court, the flames never come. Instead, a family tragedy intervenes. Everard and Heloise Gault, lovers as fast and as star-crossed as Abelard and Heloise, abandon Lahardane – and, unwittingly, their daughter, whom they believe dead. (Trevor later presents the Gaults as fallen Miltonic Adam and Eve figures.)<sup>96</sup> The novel tells how this lost child (who has simply gotten lost and injured in the woods in a childish attempt to delay the family's departure) is effectively fostered by Lahardane's kindly Irish Catholic housekeeper and caretaker-farmer. With this new and unimagined eventuality, all three of them find themselves living together as a new kind of 'trinity' in the abandoned Big House rather than the gate-lodge in which Bridget and Henry had previously been allowed to live.<sup>97</sup> 'Nurtured like our own, and natured like [her] own, as decreed by our laws, our customs, our religion', Lucy Gault keeps a 'vigil' in the 'gaunt old house' all her life until her father eventually returns home, many years later. Her fate and that of the house are irresistibly intertwined; even when a new love comes on the scene, she remains there alone,

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<sup>94</sup> Hoyt-Fitzgerald picks out Trevor's inclusion of Yeats through images such as Lucy's Innisfree-like honey-bees and in the consolation offered by the swans of the nearby town of Enniseala, where the name is an anglicization of 'Island of Swans' (p. 200).

<sup>95</sup> Hoyt-Fitzgerald, *William Trevor*, p. 191.

<sup>96</sup> In the shortest chapter of Part One, they finally realize that they imagine different futures: Heloise craves exile and Everard reluctantly chooses to accompany her out of love. The chapter ends with them making their way 'slowly on' to Italy, where they will settle – or more accurately, temporize – until Heloise's death, and Everard's sad return without his Eurydice, his Eve. *Lucy Gault*, p. 46.

<sup>97</sup> A 'trinity sustained by affection' is the term Trevor imputes to Heloise thinking about the Gault family a few pages into the novel (p. 7).

flight inconceivable.<sup>98</sup> Shades of Philomel, or perhaps Penelope (both early modern favourites) stir in Lucy in her years of ‘vigil’ through her passion for needlework. Frozen in that first, terrible moment, Lucy painstakingly re-articulates her own story through embroideries of the very landscape in which she suffered: the stepping stones in the stream she crossed on her fateful adventure; the pinks on the sea-cliffs by which she was supposed lost; the cottage in which she found shelter.<sup>99</sup> Like the children of Lir, by the time she comes back to life again after her father’s return she is an aged woman. But only in the autumn of her life does she find the true means to forgive herself for getting lost that crucial evening and causing her family’s sundering – and to restore the history of the Big House into the new independent Ireland. She does so, finally, through the act of forgiving the boy with the petrol can whom her father had shot in warning many years before. Horahan – like Bowen – bears his complicity heavily, and is subject to recurring nightmare visions in which the Big House does burn and the child, Lucy, is killed.<sup>100</sup> In her costly but humane act of forgiving the boy whose acts that fatal night have caused a lifetime of anguish, Lucy, generates from the figure of the Spenserian lost child a new and powerful narrative of atonement, reconciliation and hope, one already secreted within Irish history.

The disrupting of normative social structures and values compelled by the extraordinary situations emplotted by Bowen and Trevor (and McGuinness, we will see) – fostering, exile, surrogate parents, reversals – places this history firmly outside the established norms and paradigms. Of itself, this produces new angles of approach to the received narratives of Irish colonial history, as well as to the social and historical paradigms perpetuating colonial oppressions. The prominence of fostering in these narratives, for example, seems an especially dense way of writing back to the Spenser who condemned native Irish fostering practices for their disruptive effects on English familial structures and English common law norms of primogeniture in the *View*. The childless Bridget and Henry gain both a family and a future by becoming foster-parents to Lucy; she in turn gains two additional surrogate fathers in the local solicitor and Canon who, moved with pity, appoint themselves her guardians. In fact, this re-configuration of the family means that the Gaults, too, painfully but very movingly find in their European exile a way to build a new love free of the oppressive past they both carried. This burden of the past encompasses not just the loss of Lucy,

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<sup>98</sup> The quotation comes from outside the novel, but shows that Trevor is not alone in his redemptive envisioning of a post-Spenserian, post-colonial Ireland. It comes from the very end of Frank McGuinness’s play, *Mutabilitie* (p. 101), from which I derive my title. See below for closer discussion of the play, though for now it will be salient to note Trevor’s use of the very same device as McGuinness for imagining a reconciliation between Ireland’s English and colonial past and present: a child unwittingly abandoned in the colonial home amid the threat of it being burnt out by Irish rebels. For Everard’s observations on Lucy’s ‘vigil’ at Lahardane, a term that carries connotations of Lucy’s domestication into Catholic ways, see p. 165.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139. Aloysius Sullivan, Lucy’s guardian through the long years of Captain Gault’s absence, makes the significance of this embroidery habit explicit, as ‘something petrified, arrested in the drama there had been. Lucy was stilled too, a detail as in one of her own embroidered compositions’ (p. 139).

<sup>100</sup> In her 1952 preface to second American edition of *The Last September*, Bowen herself admits to being subject to such vivid visions of Bowen’s Court in flames that the final scene of *The Last September* ‘is more real than anything I have lived through’ (p.100; cited by Hermione Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen* (London: Vintage, 1981, rev. 1999), p.47).

Trevor makes clear, but also the bloody past of their army and planter families and that of Lahardane itself.<sup>101</sup>

If the story of Spenser's lost child helps to generate and historicize Trevor's plot, the landscape of *The Story of Lucy Gault* is pure 'Faerie Queene' country – dazzling, for all its woody shadows, and in its openness mysterious'.<sup>102</sup> Although Trevor's ostensible setting is east Cork, which gives him a coastline on which Lucy can be presumed to have drowned, many of the topographical details are more reminiscent of the north Cork landscape around Kilcolman and of the topography of Spenser's Faeryland. The Spenserian landscape of North Cork (and beyond) is suggested by the significance of the local village, Enniseala ('Island of the swans') with its swans in Lucy's life. Trevor probably had Mallow in mind, the name of which is often popularly (if incorrectly) deemed an anglicization of the Gaelic 'Maigh Eala' (Plain of the Swans). Thomas Norris built a great castle there in the 1580s while Lord President of Munster, which Spenser undoubtedly visited; it was the nearest town of importance to Kilcolman.<sup>103</sup> Trevor's geography, too, is markedly Spenserian. The ruined cottage in the woods that saves Lucy when she finds it 'by chance' (though never when she had previously sought it out) is recognisably modelled on the wooded dens and cottages of Faeryland, specifically on the Salvage Man's dwellings. (Unlike the threatening Irish woods of Spenser's *View*, Trevor's woodlands tendentiously nurture kinder Irish futures.) Ruins, again, are omnipresent, particularly in the imagination of the Anglo-Irish characters. 'Ireland of the ruins I have heard it called, more ruins and always more', Captain Gault writes to his brother, already dead, in a letter that will not be posted in any case.<sup>104</sup> The letter is a feeble attempt at reparation, but an important step towards his return to Lahardane and finding there 'his living daughter' – a woman who now sees herself through others' eyes as 'a relic, left over'.<sup>105</sup> As she awaits her death at the end of this novel, her last 'companions' are the rooks, reliable denizens of ruined castles like Kilcolman and burnt-down or doomed houses like Danielstown and Bowen's Court.<sup>106</sup> Trevor's ruined castles and mysterious abandoned buildings in the woods thus retain overtones of the dark allegories and ciphers they were in *The Last September* and *The Heat of the Day*. And if his treatment of them is gentler, it is far from romanticized. In fact, the violence of Irish history can be even closer to the surface of those allegories than it was in Bowen's novels. A 'frolicsome' mongrel dog beloved of

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<sup>101</sup> Like Bowen's juxtaposition of wartime London with the Irish Big House in *The Heat of the Day*, Trevor's juxtaposition of wartime and post-war Europe with the life of Lahardane also wonders whether Irish history might nestle into the more recent European trauma into a new and larger future. 'War had sucked the heart out of Europe [...] He thought of Ireland, drained of its energy by centuries of disaffection, and the feeling he had experienced at the beginning of his exile came back – of punishment inflicted for those sins of the past to which his family might have contributed. Had it been greed that the Gaults had held their ground too long? While penal laws were passed there had been parties at Lahardane, prayers said in church for King and Empire, the aspirations of the dispossessed ignored. Had such aspirations at least been realized? Had Ireland in his absence remade itself, as Europe was doing now?' (*Lucy Gault*, p. 146)

<sup>102</sup> *Bowen's Court*, p. 7.

<sup>103</sup> In fact the name comes from the Gaelic 'Mala', but an essay by the influential historian T.F. O'Rahilly in the 1930s supporting the 'plain of swans' derivation continues to propagate the idea in tourist information as well as locally, where some road-signs still carry 'Maigh Eala' as the Gaelic translation. Perhaps significant, too, is the fact that the only other Irish setting in the novel is Enniscorthy, to which Lucy's would-be lover retreats. As Tóibín reminds us, Spenser briefly held property in Enniscorthy.

<sup>104</sup> *Lucy Gault*, p. 145.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 155, 209.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

Lucy who wanders from a 'deserted house' and whose playfulness inadvertently leads the Gaults to believe their daughter to have drowned, for example, is no mere 'nameless' creature, we come to realize, but another victim exiled from a great house burned down.<sup>107</sup> But in Trevor, the Spenserian loci also provide sustenance, hope and the possibility of new, unimagined futures, as Lucy's own name implies.

Trevor's careful delineation of Enniseala, the other principal setting of the novel, demonstrates this nicely. Unlike Lahardane, the small town of Enniseala, where the river meets the sea (that figure again) is a place where restorative talk and stories flow, including the story of Lucy Gault and of Horahan. In Enniseala, the different currents of Irish history can blend and join and move towards the future. (It always had this capacity to release, it seems: Captain Gault tells the young Lucy that the reason for his own first visit to Enniseala was to correct his tongue-tied condition.) Until her father's return, however, Lucy never visits Enniseala and 'hardly remembered the swans on the water of the estuary' for which it is named. After his return, however, its full Yeatsian/Spenserian sustenance, the enduring poetic consolations of its swans, comes dropping slow.<sup>108</sup> Like Mahon in "Christmas in Kinsale", Trevor looks to Yeats to help negotiate the co-existence of pockets of hope within even the most terrible colonial histories. This is the Yeats of the 'hazel wand' as well as the 'brightening glance' more than the Yeats who, in Heaney's fine words, 'promulgate[d] and practise[d] such faith in art's absolute absolved necessity that they overbear whatever assaults the historical and contingent might mount upon their certitude'.<sup>109</sup> The sweet labours of seclusion in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree", the idealized new home the poet builds of pre-colonial materials, thus lie behind Captain Gault's last words to his daughter 'about the honey bees in the orchard'.<sup>110</sup> In turn, her own final enquiries of the nuns who visit her are about the swans of Enniseala.

More hopeful, too, are Trevor's Spenserian characters. 'Paddy Lindon used to come out of the woods like a wild man, his eyes bloodshot, hair that had never known a comb. It was Paddy Lindon who'd found her the stick shaped like a dagger, who'd shown her how to get a spark out of a flint pebble. Some of the roof of the cottage had fallen in, he'd told her, but some of it was all right.'<sup>111</sup> And it is in Paddy Lindon's ruined cottage that Lucy finds shelter and sustenance in her hour of need. The Salvage Man of Book VI of *The Faerie Queene* is the avatar for several persons in the Lahardane landscape, not just Paddy Lindon. Another significant figure moulded in the shape of the wordless Salvage Man is a nameless fisherman of Kilaoran who 'can't speak at all' but who makes himself understood by speaking 'on his fingers'.<sup>112</sup> It is by telling stories, even where they seem unspeakable, that Trevor negotiates the Spenserian heritage in the Irish landscape and literary

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<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15, 165.

<sup>109</sup> Heaney, "The Government of the Tongue", p. 100. See footnote 94 for Hoyt-Fitzgerald's account of the Yeatsian moments in *Lucy Gault*.

<sup>110</sup> *Lucy Gault*, p. 222. Yeats inevitably, helps to narrate Ireland's troubles there as well: 'The new Irish Free State was bloodily torn apart by [civil war], as towns and villages and families were. The terrible beauty of a destiny fulfilled trailed a terrible bitterness, which haunted memories long after the conflict ended in May 1923. *Ibid.*, pp. 68-9. Trevor echoes Yeats's famous diagnosis of the bloody birth of the new Irish state after the Easter Rising in his poem 'Easter 1916': 'a terrible beauty is born'.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47, 15.

tradition. How the lost child, Lucy, ‘came to find a place among the stories of the Troubles that were told in the neighbourhood’, the ‘famous story’ of her having walked in the funeral behind Horahan countering ancient wrongs; how her parents’ exile came to be ‘coloured and enriched, and altogether made better’ on the streets of Enniseala, transformed into ‘a pilgrimage, absolution sought for sins that varied in the telling’: these are the stories by which a new historic future can be created, Trevor suggests. Their fidelity to history becomes less relevant than their potential to change their audiences (as Philip Sidney would have agreed). Trevor’s wonderful novel charts how these changing stories effect multiple reconciliations with the past, healing the wounds of centuries and making a kind of peace with the hard history of plantation and oppression in this Spenserian landscape.<sup>113</sup> There is absolution, too, for Spenser himself in the closing image of Trevor’s novel, as Lucy, now an infirm, childless old woman awaiting ‘the fading of the day’ in company with the prescient rooks, walks about the same drawing-room which had been described in the opening pages of the novel. ‘[T]ouching the surfaces with her fingertips’ as the Kilaunan fisherman long ago might have done, Lucy gives her benediction to these doomed heirlooms, soon to be forgotten: ‘the glass of a cabinet door, the edge of a table-top, the writing-desk beneath the portrait of the unknown Gault’ and, most revealingly of all, ‘a shepherd’s head’.<sup>114</sup>

### **Staging a mutable tradition: the work of Frank McGuinness**

The ‘gentle shepherd’ Spenser has not troubled Irish theatre much, somewhat curiously given Yeats’s contributions to the Irish dramatic tradition.<sup>115</sup> *Making History*, Brian Friel’s 1989 play about Hugh O’Neill and the earls’ ‘flight’ to Rome, does mention Spenser’s *View of the Present State of Ireland* and draws briefly on its notorious description of the victims of the Munster famine. But in Friel’s play, the story of Spenser – noting the circulation of the *View* and Spenser’s having been ‘burned out in the troubles after the battle of the Yellow Ford’ – is told only for the sake of distraction as Harry Hoveden tries to put off telling Hugh O’Neill that his wife has died in childbirth together with their baby son.<sup>116</sup> Nonetheless, the yoking together of the burning of Kilcolman and the loss of a child (this time O’Neill’s, definitively lost to history) is revealing; for Friel, the redemptive possibilities of O’Neill’s loving marriage with the sister of the New English colonist, Sir Henry Bagenal are foreclosed with the loss of this child. What is produced instead (and what the play dramatizes) is Peter Lombard’s dry partisan ‘history’ of the earls. In it, Hugh O’Neill is offered as simply ‘a national hero’, papering over the more complex reality of Hugh and Mabel’s marriage, their divided loyalties and their doomed attempt to parlay such intricate realities into ‘the slow, sure tide of history’ (p. 27), as Friel has it.

Frank McGuinness’s 1997 play, *Mutabilitie*, on the other hand, wholeheartedly takes on the related questions of Spenser’s history in Ireland and the history of Spenser in Ireland. He does so through a series of shifts, speculations and reversals, all the more startling for being repeatedly expressed in words and images lifted directly from Spenser’s own writing. The play imagines a

<sup>113</sup> *Lucy Gault*, p. 70.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>115</sup> In Frank McGuinness’s *Mutabilitie* (Act 3, scene 1 (p. 50), this becomes William Shakespeare’s insistent term for Spenser – ‘No gentler shepherd may be found’ (Act 3, scene 1 (p. 49)). It is ironised, however, by the play’s constant interrogation of what ‘gentle’ occludes. For example, Edmund repudiates his servant’s remark that he is gentle: ‘Not in the service of my queen’ (Act 1, scene 3 (p. 11)).

<sup>116</sup> *Making History* (London: Faber & Faber 1989), pp. 52-53.



disillusioned Spenser in his castle, surrounded by his Irish servants. These servants are, in fact, spies plotting to overthrow him. But not just that: they also comprise a sparkling alternative court of brilliant, highly-educated Irish nobles who strategically cultivate Spenser's sense of their ignorance and incivility for their own purposes. Into this meta-performative scene, William Shakespeare and two actors wash up, literally, in the Awbeg. Following abortive attempts to cash in on the lack of theatre in Ireland – and grab some land while they're at it – Shakespeare now apparently plans to get a job in the civil service with Spenser's help. Things get even more complicated. The actors are taken hostage by Spenser's Irish servants, while William (gay and Catholic) is taken in by Spenser. This is not the prince of poets whom Shakespeare had expected to meet, however: for McGuinness's Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* is unfinishable, his loyalties and duties too impossible, too exacting. The play ends with Spenser *himself* burning Kilcolman and his child going astray in the mayhem, only to be found and fostered by the Irish counter-court.

With *Mutabilitie*, McGuinness sets his sights squarely on the uneasy relations between English and Irish literary traditions. 'It is a five-act play in Elizabethan mode, and it's not going to be easy for English audiences from a historical point of view, but also [from the literary point of view] that these writers are part of Irish tradition too. I'm asserting my right to create images of them, which are every bit as valid as anything an English writer can create.'<sup>117</sup> Like Friel, McGuinness, takes liberties with history in order to show our enslavement to a particularly divisive model of English/Irish history. But in McGuinness that theme becomes form, and that form, in turn, promises new kinds of English and Irish futures. In this, McGuinness expresses more conviction in the possibility of political as well as literary *entente* than Friel, whose slow, sure tide of history sweeps all before it, leading only to the troubled (pre-peace process) present. By contrast, for McGuinness history needs to be actively re-imagined, the tide resisted, existing norms uprooted and re-interrogated in the service of a new and less damaging future.

There have been several excellent recent essays on *Mutabilitie*, so I will confine myself here to considering its treatment of Spenser within the Irish literary tradition.<sup>118</sup> *Mutabilitie* centres on the familiar figure of a conflicted Spenser and that same poignant narrative of a child lost when Kilcolman burned that made such an impression on Bowen and Trevor. But if he accepts Yeats's

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<sup>117</sup> McGuinness in the *Irish Times* review, 'Coming Home', 30/11/1997. Before the opening night of *Mutabilitie* at London's National Theatre, he also spells out his ambition to write an Irish play of and *into* English literary history. "The Irish and the English have a shared history, which is why I'm taking two English literary icons and putting them in an Irish play. While Spenser was in Cork he wrote a dissertation on Ireland, and there were some horrific assertions about the Irish in it, but you can feel behind it, it's a troubled volume; there's still the poet in him. So from the wars of 1598, I'm reaching forward to today with the Irish File's cry to end the war. We're living in a dangerous time, the play expresses that desire we want an end to this violence." Cited by Mic Moroney in 'London's Irish Stage', *The Irish Times*, 20/11/1997.

<sup>118</sup> A special issue of the *Irish University Review* 40: 1 (2010) on McGuinness's drama devotes three of its eleven critical essays (Fitzpatrick Dean, Fogarty and Grene) almost entirely to *Mutabilitie*. This issue also contains Evelyn Flanagan's guide to the McGuinness papers on loan to Special Collections, UCD. Another 2010 edited volume, *Shakespeare and the Irish Writer*, ed. Janet Clare and Stephen O'Neill (Dublin: UCD Press, 2010) contains an excellent essay on McGuinness and Shakespeare by Helen Heusner Lojek, one of McGuinness's most astute critics. Despite its uncertain reception when it was first performed, both in London (1997) and later in Dublin (Michael Caven's 2001 TheatreWorks production at the Samuel Beckett Theatre, Trinity College Dublin), *Mutabilitie* is increasingly recognized as one of the most important plays in McGuinness's corpus – although not (yet) as one of the most important plays in and of the Irish literary tradition.

conception of a Spenser tragically divided against himself and his better poetic interests, McGuinness digs deeper into Spenser's murky conscience. His Spenser is riven by guilt at his complicity in the Munster famine and the human price of his 'castle built into the air'.<sup>119</sup> Thus it is Spenser, and not the Irish rebels, who sets fire to Kilcolman castle in *Mutabilitie*, and the act comprises both an elemental cleansing as well as expiation. The loss of a child is not accidental (as in Trevor) or its causes out of view (Bowen); the blame lies squarely at Spenser's door. (Revealingly, notes towards an early draft of the play in McGuinness's papers show that he first considered using the biblical narrative of the sacrifice of Isaac as the subject of the play-within-the-play, before replacing it with the larger classical narrative of the fall of Troy.) To lose a child in these conditions through a fire which he himself had wrought (as McGuinness, surprisingly, doesn't put it) is not just poetic justice or heavy-handed historical redress. Rather, it is a cruel demonstration not of the *limits* of Spenser's imaginative sympathy, but of its liveliness, and the terrifying mental place to which that repressed sympathy with the suffering Irish has sent him. And yet, all is not lost. In an astonishing closing scene, Spenser's lost child wandering the Irish woods encounters his father's Irish enemies, only to be accepted and fostered by them. Some critics have found this overly-sentimental, but Joan Fitzpatrick Dean usefully sees it connecting the three poet-figures in the play (Shakespeare, Spenser, the File) through the tragic loss of a child. Like Lucy Gault, the boy was 'only hiding' that fateful night, but is believed dead by his parents; as in Trevor's novel, the child is sacrificed not because of Irish savagery but because of the unbearable moral toll of English imperial ideology.<sup>120</sup> The play ends with the Child drinking what 'little' milk his new Irish family have, helping to effect a crucial reconciliation between the young Irish heirs, the File and Hugh, estranged after their own tragic loss of a child (as Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway are sometimes thought to have been).<sup>121</sup> McGuinness harnesses the full redemptive power of the figure of the lost child restored to its rightful history familiar from Shakespeare's late romances, allegorizing through this figure of Spenser's lost child an alternative route for the English and Irish literary tradition, one of sustenance, reconciliation and hope.<sup>122</sup> In McGuinness, we can trace more clearly the ultimate Spenserian heritage of the figure of the lost child: not simply a convenient piece of Jonsonian apocrypha ripe for re-imagining, the device ultimately recalls the envoy to *The Shepheardes Calendar*, Spenser/Immerito' sending the child of his verse, the song of the 'shepheardes swaine [...] base begot with blame' into the world and into history.<sup>123</sup>

McGuinness's play borrows from words, images and ideas from Spenser's *View*, *The Faerie Queene*, *Amoretti*, *Epithalamion*, *Shepheardes Calendar* and *Prothalamion*. Other Irish and English are also drawn into the task of rewriting and recomposing this fictive secret history of the two islands. Yeats is there, of course (and in its bare symbolic style, there is something of the air of a Yeats play about *Mutabilitie*), although some of the more conspicuously Yeatsian moments were

<sup>119</sup> *Mutabilitie*, Act 5, scene 6; p. 98.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, Act 5, scene 7 (p. 100)

<sup>121</sup> Helen Heusner Lojek, points out that here, as in other McGuinness plays, eating, as well as 'the presence of a child' are 'a sign of hope'. In 'Playing Together: William Shakespeare and Frank McGuinness', in *Shakespeare and the Irish Writer*, pp. 179-94 (p. 189).

<sup>122</sup> Heloise Gault thinks the house has attracted arsonists because she is English, and both she and her husband implicitly accept their exile as the moral price of inheriting Lahardane (*Lucy Gault*, p. 7).

<sup>123</sup> *Mutabilitie* is infused with the figures and language of Shakespeare's romances, primarily *The Tempest* but also *The Winter's Tale*.

excised from earlier drafts.<sup>124</sup> Another conspicuous borrowing is from Frank O'Connor's well-known short story, "Guests of the Nation", which narrates the execution of two English soldiers held by IRA members during the war of independence. From this, McGuinness generates the plot and moral horror of the play's sub-plot: two English actors, (named for Richard Burbage and Ben Jonson) who are taken hostage by members of the Irish counter-court and eventually stabbed to death in mocked-up performances of friendship.<sup>125</sup> Countless allusions to Shakespeare's life, plays and poetry permeate the play, often playfully undermined: the File completes sonnet 18, ('Shall I compare thee') for William; Hugh has 'much Latin and more Greek'; and it is a disillusioned Spenser who, in a Eudoxus/Irenius-like conversation with Shakespeare finds himself asking, 'What is my nation?'.<sup>126</sup> In other words, both the English and Irish literary traditions are pointedly invoked and together they shape the world of the play.

More commingled still is the language of the play. Patricia Palmer has highlighted the strategic erasure of the Irish language in early modern English texts about Ireland, an erasure she is sorry to see repeated in McGuinness's play.<sup>127</sup> But *Mutabilitie's* language is more complex than this critique allows. The book around which the play circles is not just *The Faerie Queene* (which Edmund reads to his Irish servants), but the (English) Book of Common Prayer, the 'first Irish book' as the first book to be printed in Ireland, McGuinness notes in a lecture on *Mutabilitie*.<sup>128</sup> Moreover, McGuinness's Spenser speaks a marked Hiberno-English in the play, an idiolect in which traces of the Irish language are never far below the surface. The best example is probably Spenser's early salutation of his Irish servants chopping wood (with cheeky echoes of Ferdinand in *The Tempest*) using not just a signature Irish blessing translated into Hiberno-English – 'God bless the work' ["Bail ó Dhia ar an obair"] – but using it in precisely the correct situation.<sup>129</sup> The fact that this work has been happening on the other side of the stage as Spenser sits in his study, unable to proceed with *The Faerie Queene* (as we soon hear), and glad of the excuse of conversation to interrupt it, nicely encapsulates McGuinness's impressive dramaturgy throughout the play: form, language, intertexts and stagecraft interact in rich and complex ways.

Not everyone was impressed by *Mutabilitie* when it was first produced, however. Although many years in the making, the play was poorly received when it opened in London in 1997 (a year before the Good Friday Agreement) where a mismatch between its hyper-realist set and its far more abstract and symbolist mode created friction. All the same, these design issues turned out to be less irritating to London critics than the idea that the cherished Bard should be 'dragged in' to all of this

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<sup>124</sup> Yeats's poem "I am of Ireland", itself based on an anonymous fourteenth-century poem, from which Maeve and Sweeney borrow lines in an earlier draft, is a casualty. A Yeats allusion that stays in is the evocation of the 'Playboy' riots at the Abbey Theatre, which famously drew Yeats's ire and despair. As Ben observes, 'Taking an axe to the stage was a bit much. Really, I was prepared for the passionate Irish, and I can handle a rowdy audience, but I am not prepared to sacrifice my life – ' (Act 1, scene 1; p. 1).

<sup>125</sup> This is made clear in an early schema in one of McGuinness's notebooks (in folder 35).

<sup>126</sup> *Mutabilitie*, Act 4, scene 2 (p. 68), and Act 3, scene 1 (p. 51)).

<sup>127</sup> *Language and Conquest in Early Modern Ireland: English Renaissance Literature and Elizabethan Imperial Expansion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 3. In fact, a very early manuscript draft of the play (in folder 35) has a short scene of mutual greetings in the Irish language between Sweeney and File.

<sup>128</sup> Again, this draft lecture can be found in his papers, held in Special Collections, UCD, in folder 87.

<sup>129</sup> Act 1, scene 3 (p. 4). The phrase is properly used when encountering someone hard at work while not working oneself.

'old blarney', as the *Daily Telegraph* review (rather predictably) put it.<sup>130</sup> The old prejudices, scouts of deeper colonial divisions, refuse to die that easily, and any Irish approach to Shakespeare is considered beyond the pale. There is a point of dramaturgical protocol at stake too. Fitzpatrick Dean links the hostility of London critics to their unwillingness to accept McGuinness's basic strategy: his 'non-representational dramaturgy' and 'meta-theatricality' deployed to help the past speak to the present in new and richer ways.<sup>131</sup> Thus, McGuinness forges new and unexpected alliances, parallels and sympathies between his English and Irish characters characters, a set of doubling structures that test and re-imagine the old and damaging historical relationship between England and Ireland through 'creative anachronism'.<sup>132</sup> But the refusal of London critics to climb down from their cultural chauvinism and from its patronizing sense of the alienness and/or merely picturesque independence of the Irish literary tradition is precisely the attitude McGuinness seeks to challenge by presenting their literary traditions as more organically and intimately intertwined.<sup>133</sup>

The critics are not alone in not recognizing the radical plea for reconciliation that McGuinness's play promulgates, unfortunately. Just recently, for example, Nicholas Grene has read *Mutabilitie* as McGuinness's 'revenge' on Shakespeare 'in so far as it allow him as an Irish playwright to create a dramatic world incorporating an alternative Irish culture of poetry and mythology which Shakespeare ignored'.<sup>134</sup> But that divisive, competitive dynamic serves as a corrective, a means rather than an end in *Mutabilitie*, I think. Instead, McGuinness works towards a more complex, troubled and organic sense of *both* the English and Irish literary traditions than this dissociative or belligerent model implies. And critics and scholars need to shift their focus: it is Spenser, not Shakespeare, who allows him to suggest that. Ultimately, McGuinness's Shakespeare turns out not to be the messianic figure the exiled Irish court (and others, McGuinness obliquely suggests) take him for, but just another confused figure living in painful but artistically enabling ambivalence. Spenser, however, *can* be a salvific figure, a force for reconciliation in the English and Irish literary

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<sup>130</sup> Charles Spencer, 'Bard dragged in to a load of old blarney'. *Daily Telegraph*, 29<sup>th</sup> November 1997, takes additional offence at the newly-appointed director of the Royal National Theatre, Trevor Nunn, having produced the play. As a result, it did not transfer to Dublin as originally intended, and it took another four years for it to receive an Irish premiere, this time under the direction of Michael Caven in a 2001 TheatreWorks production at the Samuel Beckett Theatre.

<sup>131</sup> 'Advice to the Players (and the Historians): The Metatheatricality of McGuinness's *Mutabilitie*', *IUR* 40: 1 (2010): 81-91 (p. 81-3).

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84. For Anne Fogarty writing in the same special issue of the *IUR*, this reliance on 'dyadic pairs' (p. 109) supplemented by the frequently split stage, work to re-instate female or queered Other 'authority figures as alternative locuses of influence'. 'Brushing History Against the Grain: The Renaissance Plays of Frank McGuinness', *IUR* 40: 1 (2010): 101-13, especially pp. 108-12. McGuinness himself confesses to the way the play seeks to intervene in the state of Anglo-Irish relations at the time: "for me, theatre can register your conscious commitment to the historical reality of your country and the responsibility you bear to that future. And I can say that I got involved, not in the narrowly reduced sense of that phrase, but I don't think you can let what's happening to your country pass by without saying 'I notice it, I see it'." In Mic Moroney, 'Coming Home'. *Irish Times*, 30<sup>th</sup> November 1997.

<sup>133</sup> A long piece in the *Irish Times* which appeared the day *Mutabilitie* opened in London highlights the roaring success of Irish drama in London in the preceding months and years, works mostly dealing with Ireland's past in the more comfortable idiom of the rural, Syngean mode (for example, the 1990s work of Martin McDonagh, Conor McPherson, Marina Carr and Vincent Woods), as well as the success of the Irish dancing shows, 'Riverdance' and 'Lord of the Dance', noted by the director of the Tricycle Theatre in the same piece. Mic Moroney, 'London's Irish Stage', *The Irish Times*. 20 November 1997.

<sup>134</sup> '*Mutabilitie*: In Search of Shakespeare', *IUR* 40: 1 (2010): 92-100 (p. 100).

tradition, he shows – but only if we face up fully to all of the egregious values he embodies. This bold act of recuperating Spenser in all his troubling complexity finds a partner in the mature poetry of Seamus Heaney who has abandoned the quasi-demonic ‘shade’ of Spenser of his earlier work for a more open wish to understand Spenser and to acknowledge that ‘you can live with so many truths at once’, but at a cost.<sup>135</sup> Both McGuinness and Heaney plot a new means for Irish writers to engage with Spenser, their literary ancestor, beyond Yeats’s self-serving domestication of him. Their work shows how Yeats’s well-meaning act of dividing the poet and the civil servant ultimately limits the possibility for growth, cross-fertilisation and respect within the English and Irish literary tradition. Only if you ‘[put] a bawn into *Beowulf*’ – or put Shakespeare in an Irish river – can the Irish writer confront the trauma of Irish history, as well as the richness, cogency and dual valency of the Irish literary tradition: not just cognate or contiguous to the English literary tradition but coeval with it – and vice versa.<sup>136</sup>

McGuinness has long been an astute and sensitive reader of Spenser’s place in Irish literary history. Unusually, he has also attended to the ways in which Spenser has functioned not just in literature but in the international world of critical scholarship too, a world which has traditionally been less attentive to its own history and geopolitics than it demands that readers of Spenser be. A satirical short story, ‘Wrestling in Oxford’ in a (regrettably) unpublished collection with a Spenserian title, *My Sweet Warriors* (from *Amoretti* 57) brilliantly interrogates the occasionally myopic orthodoxies of Spenser scholarship by insisting upon the still ‘live’ and contested political significance of Spenser in Irish and English culture and geography.<sup>137</sup> The plot describes the visit of an Irish scholar to an Oxford college to give a paper on J.M. Synge’s unacknowledged borrowings from Ibsen, followed by a tense dinner that escalates into near-combat and symbolic hunger-strike. The trouble begins with the patronising reception of the scholar’s paper, but is fanned into flames by a seemingly-guileless prandial query from the scholar’s Oxford host on what Spenser might think of the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland. The story skewers academic assumptions of the unsullied hands of literary criticism and the prevailing scholarly habit of treating one’s academic interests as valueless choices unburdened by social, historical or geopolitical factors – a trap into which, alas, I’ve already fallen in this essay. For Shanahan, the unfortunate Irish academic whose sensitivity to the complacent prejudices of the English scholarly establishment causes him to disappear helplessly down a rabbit-hole of his own making, Spenser is both what unites and divides the English and the Irish. What Spenser is *not*, for Shanahan, is simply another topic *du jour* be bandied about at High Table, some historical oddity to be discussed bloodlessly over dinner at an Oxford college dining hall. Nor is Spenser to be a sop to a half-hearted inclusion of Ireland within the English literary tradition under such carefully delimited categories as ‘Spenser and Ireland’ or ‘Philip Larkin’s Synge’. The half-

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<sup>135</sup> Seamus Heaney and Dennis O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), p. 455.

<sup>136</sup> Writing of his use of Hiberno-English in translating *Beowulf*, Heaney writes that ‘[p]utting a bawn into *Beowulf* seems one way for an Irish poet to come to terms with that complex history of conquest and colony, absorption and resistance, integrity and antagonism, a history that has to be clearly acknowledged by all concerned in order to render it ever more ‘willable forward / again and again and again’. *Beowulf* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. xxx.

<sup>137</sup> The stories, as well as the drafts of McGuinness’s play, are held with McGuinness’s papers in Special Collections, the James Joyce Library, University College Dublin. I am very grateful to Frank McGuinness as well as to the Librarian and staff of Special Collections for permission to consult and quote from his papers in this essay.

delirious Shanahan's final, devastating recitation of sonnet 57 in its entirety, in answer to his angered host and in still-hostile defence of his own quarter, elicits a tide of emptying seats, moistened handkerchiefs and a proffered glass of water. These small gestures of sympathy are still readable to him as the Oxford establishment whitewashing his own credentials as an Irish scholar of English literature (and of Irish literature in English), and even as attempts to destroy him entirely with their cut-throat manners.<sup>138</sup> But then, Shanahan is the creature of his own Irish prejudices about Oxford and English hostility too, and even the hefty dose of self-conscious mischief-making he indulges (professing to represent 'the Celtic nations' annually in the under-rated sport of 'mud-wrestling in gay bars') is not enough to save him from the punishment he has taken the shortcut of imposing upon himself.

For McGuinness the literary tradition is as much a battleground as any other area of Anglo-Irish relations, and the cultural arrogance Shanahan encounters is a product of a complacency in which the contribution of Ireland and Irish literature to England and 'English literature' is denied. But the feeling is mutual. In this small theatre of war, McGuinness expertly tracks the implications of the long history of mutual misunderstanding between Ireland and England, in which centuries-old preconceptions coerce both the Irish and the English scholars into polarizing misconceptions and suspicion of one another right from the moment of encounter. It is no accident that 'Wrestling in Oxford' is the title-story of this collection. And yet, Spenser's Petrarchan sonnet, finally recited for Shanahan's very survival in the manner of the 'reacaire' in the famous Derricke image of an Irish feast, offers a way out of it, even if neither reciter nor audience are yet ready to heed it. 'High time it is this war now ended were / Which I no longer can endure to sue'.<sup>139</sup> If *Mutabilitie* offended English sensibilities by its non-conformity, McGuinness's Shanahan doggedly pursues the same sore point, painful or not. But if the story registers McGuinness's hurt at the utopian possibilities of his play obstructed by prejudice on both sides, it throws the spotlight back again where it belongs: on *Mutabilitie*. More than any other engagement with Spenser by an Irish writer, McGuinness's is a bold attempt to confront the complex and entangled literary legacy of Spenser in both English and Irish writing, and to work towards a more honest, humane and historically-sensitive basis for understanding Ireland, Britain and the relationship between them.

Spenser's influence on Irish writing seems to be diminishing in the younger generation, a generation for whom Yeats, too, is a waning figurehead. In their quarrels and interrogations of Ireland's 'dark' history, they have found little need to move farther back than cruelties of the theocratic Irish Catholic state of the all too recent past. Besides Lysaght's sequence, itself something of a curio, few contemporary Irish poets – and markedly few female poets – interest themselves in Spenser. But even for the crudest of political reasons – remembrance, reconciliation, renewal – Trevor's novel and McGuinness's play make a powerful case for continuing to confront Spenser and with him, Ireland's colonial history in all its horror and all its complexity. It is for Irish poets, now, to leave Yeats's false dichotomies behind and to take on that new challenge.

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<sup>138</sup> McGuinness himself was working on a version of *Peer Gynt* at the same time as *Mutabilitie* and Heusner Lojek finds similarities in McGuinness's perspective on the work and style of each play. 'Playing Together', p. 187.

<sup>139</sup> From folder 380, p. 11.