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Edmund Spenser and Transhistorical Memory in Ireland

Edmund Spenser has been beleaguered by some critics who deem him to be a willing and active representative of the worst of English colonial aspirations, and defended by others who see him as a humanist poet caught in the closing jaws of an imperial mission. This vacillation of opinion is seen in the rewriting of Spenser by Irish authors over time, from Geoffrey Keating to Peter Walsh, from Sarah Butler to Maria Edgeworth, from W.B. Yeats to Frank McGuinness. At different points, Spenser has drawn the attention of Irish writers; he has also haunted Irish critical work, moving through the contemporary academy in a swift transmission beginning in the 1980s, when 'Spenser and Ireland' became a subject of some significance.¹ Yet now, only thirty years later, that attention has been largely diverted.² Certain moments of resurgent interest in Spenser are more easily explained than others. Attention to 'Spenser and Ireland' from the late 1980s onwards, for instance, occurs within the context of postcolonial studies and Irish studies, which were both then in the ascendant. But deferring to such explanations does not give us some of the crucial information we need: if we want to consider how and why it is that Spenser – or any figure – makes a more marked appearance in Irish criticism and creative work at certain points, we need to consider cultural memory. For Spenser to recur in Irish culture as the object of imaginative and critical speculation, a form of memory must be at work: Spenser has been remembered, in effect, on a cultural level. While recent work in the area of memory studies has usefully focused on transcultural memory (and Spenser is also productively considered in those terms) there has been little consideration of the ways in which cultural memory functions transhistorically, perhaps because 'memory' implies interaction over time, and this has allowed us to avoid considerations of how cultural memory moves through decades, through centuries. In this case, there is a sense that the cultural memory of Spenser is transferred through textual sources that revive and reinterpret his work, his life, and his image through rewriting.

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In one of few interventions on the subject of transhistorical memory, Plate and Rose have named the concept of 'rewriting' as vital:

As process and as product, rewriting is engaged in cultural transmission and inheritance. Like translation, commentary, exegesis ... it adapts culture to preserve it, re-producing it to keep it alive. In this sense, rewriting's teleology is conservative: although it is a transformative process, its re-productive capacity produces tradition, the semblance of things eternally present and unchanged, carried on across time and space. Yet rewriting may also be primarily vested in change. Its interest, then, is not so much in preserving culture as it is in transforming it, directing its look at what might be, rather than to what is or was.³

The 'rewriting' of Spenser might, in some contexts, amount to a cultural preservation; in an Irish context, however, this rewriting seems to have a more radical intent of reevaluating the relationship to the colonial occupation and not simply preserving difficult historical moments. Spenser, I suggest, comes to function as a 'coming to terms' with aspects of the Irish historical past. While in an English context Spenser was, early on, interpreted as an impoverished poet forced by rebels to flee inhospitable Ireland, in an Irish context Spenser becomes, in a wonderfully appropriate turn of events, allegorized in Irish culture over time. Seen in a certain light, the 'story' of Spenser in Ireland is one of an Englishman who comes to Ireland and is, after a long period in the country, driven out again by the Irish. This interpretation immediately suggests a reason for Spenser's recurrence in Irish literature and criticism over the centuries: he can so easily be shaped into a narrative that serves the Irish cultural imagination's sense of putting paid to the invader and usurper of power. Rather than the various unsuccessful rebellions that saw Irish hopes of independence quashed, the 'Spenser narrative'⁴ is one that relies upon the story of a coloniser who is, eventually, uprooted and driven from Ireland. Read this way, 'Spenser' is a potent icon for the Irish imagination, and one that might be called upon at particular historical moments in order to 'remember' Irish rebelliousness, if not independence. It would thus seem no accident that Spenser reappears in Irish cultural memory at heightened moments in Irish history, when the culture is either under colonial pressure or recovering from it. While it is impossible to present a thorough survey in so brief a space, this essay considers key moments or changes in the rewriting of Spenser's cultural memory in Ireland, attempting to consider the long duration of his figuring in Irish literature and culture as a case study of transhistorical memory processes.

EARLY REWRITINGS: KEATING, WALSH, BUTLER

The first to claim Spenser as an opponent in a forum that was consciously attempting to shape Irish identity, Geoffrey Keating – a learned and prolific Jesuit priest – refuted Spenser and other planters' descriptions of Ireland in *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* (c.1634). Because Keating's history circulated at around the same time as Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (belatedly published in 1633), Keating must have had access to a manuscript version of the *View*.⁵ Just as extant manuscript copies of Spenser's *View* suggested the text's impact, the many seventeenth-century manuscript copies of Keating's text testify to its own rapid success. 'Keating's history', Bernadette Cunningham writes, 'was immediately accepted as authoritative by Ireland's professional scribes'.⁶ If his English contemporaries were prepared to draw upon ancient history to justify their claims about the Irish, Keating would do the same by transforming Irish manuscript and oral traditions into an exhaustive written history of Ireland. But Keating also drew upon continental source material, which distinguished his history from earlier attempts to employ Irish manuscript material in an overarching history, and which spoke of his continental education. Bede, Nennius, Geoffrey of Monmouth, John Speed, Raphael Holinshead, William Camden, George Buchanan, John Mair, Edmund Campion, Meredith Hanmer and Richard Stanihurst are all discussed – in addition to Spenser. Even a cursory glance at this list makes clear that Spenser was situated in a line of authors, and, more particularly, was only one of many English authors who had written prose tracts on Ireland – several of whose works were in fact included in James Ware's 1633 edition with Spenser's *View*.

Keating's dismissal of Spenser and other planters' assessments of Ireland occurs in the preface, suggesting that Keating has been sparked to his task by those very assessments; Cunningham notes that Ware's volume 'may well have been the catalyst that led Keating to add an historiographical preface'.⁷ If a sense of outrage is taken as the starting point for Keating's monumental work, *Foras Feasa* becomes, ideologically at least, a postcolonial text in its reclamation of culture, identity, history, and doctrine. By refusing to write his history in English, Keating takes a crucial step towards what would later be recognized as a postcolonial mindset: he claims the Irish language as his medium, refuting the ascendancy of the English language in Ireland and instead focusing on native cultural traditions. This led to his being seen as the 'symbolic personification' of the language revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁸

Interestingly, for Keating it is not Spenser who is singled out for the greatest attack, but other planters. Keating's refutation of other

English writers is much more ferocious than that of Spenser; Richard Stanihurst, like Keating a Catholic who claimed Norman heritage, comes in for the sharpest critique. Keating certainly dismisses Spenser's *View* and the attitudes it expresses towards Ireland and the Irish, but he does not focus relentlessly on Spenser as the principal icon of Elizabethan colonial administration and abuse in Ireland. Keating's text thus establishes quite clearly that Spenser, in the 1630s, had not yet become the solitary representative of a widespread phenomenon. So when does Spenser become something other than one of several, or many – when does he move beyond the fold of James Ware's 1633 collection of tracts on Ireland, beyond Keating's assessment that considers Spenser as one, and certainly not the worst, of many Englishmen who misappropriated and condemned Irish culture? The 'Spenser narrative' that recurs in Irish culture in later centuries, in other words, had not yet been shaped three decades after his death. Indeed, there seems not enough material in *Foras Feasa* to justify the *Oxford Companion to Irish Literature's* claim that Keating viewed Spenser as 'a leading calumniator of Irish culture and society'.⁹ Keating does lay down a cornerstone, however, for the construction of what functions as a transhistorical Spenser script. Spenser's analysis of the Irish and Irish culture, Keating concludes, is the fancy of a poet too used to indulging his imagination:

I am surprised how Spenser ventured to meddle in these matters, of which he was ignorant, unless that, on the score of being a poet, he allowed himself license of invention, as it was usual with him, and others like him, to frame and arrange many poetic romances with sweet-sounding words to deceive the reader.¹⁰

In mentioning Spenser's status as a poet, Keating establishes a pattern that will be frequently followed; when Spenser reappears in Irish literature in the coming centuries, his *View* will not be read or interpreted as the work of a mere planter, but as the work of a poet, the author of *The Faerie Queene*, the laureate buried in Westminster.

Following Keating's interpretation of Spenser, there are a handful of Irish texts in the 17th and 18th centuries that mention Spenser and reveal the ways in which subtle changes occur to the cultural memory of Spenser in both English and Irish contexts. Peter Walsh – described as 'conciliatory' by Leerssen¹¹ and self-described as 'no Irish man by blood, but English, though born in Ireland'¹² – discusses Spenser in the preface to his *Prospect of the State of Ireland* (1682) and, like Keating, corrects Spenser's excesses to a degree: 'in writing his Faerie Queen he had the right of a Poet to fancy anything; nevertheless, in the Historical

part of his Dialogue ... [h]e should have follow'd other Rules'.¹³ This is fairly typical of 17th century appraisals of Spenser, in that Spenser's contribution to the body of written work on Ireland is acknowledged, but he is a diminishing figure. Spenser is eclipsed in Walsh by Keating, whose careful history of Ireland is far more credited; the reader is even reassured that Walsh will only mention Spenser one further time.¹⁴

Something changes, however, in the early 18th century, with the preface to Sarah Butler's *Irish Tales* (1714). The text drew heavily on Keating himself to present a version of Irish history 'cloath'd ... with the Dress and Title of a Novel'.¹⁵ In the preface, Spenser is mentioned alongside Camden, but rather than condemning Spenser's position on Ireland, Butler instead deploys Spenser as part of a defense of Irish writing and culture: '[B]oth Camden and Edmund Spenser in his *View of Ireland*, page 29. do acknowledge, That our Ancestors in Great Britain learned the very form and manner of framing their Character for Writing, from Ireland'.¹⁶ Butler's text, sympathetic to the Catholic platform of Jacobitism, was published at a moment of uprising and at a time when Spenser would still have been linked in a triumvirate with Shakespeare and Milton as the greatest of English writers; therefore to deploy Spenser's own claims in defense of Irish culture was both to acknowledge his position and to use it to raise the status of Irish history and literature. Taken as an attempt to revive interest in the Irish past from a sympathetic, even pseudo-nationalist point of view, Butler's text is important in signalling a changing usage of Spenser in an Irish context. It is important, though, that Spenser still figures as one of several chroniclers named as representative of an ideological position.

REWRITING SPENSER IN THE 19TH CENTURY: EDGEWORTH, SIGERSON, YEATS

Spenser moves out of the preface and into the text several decades later, and is named individually, without mention of other of his contemporaries. Maria Edgeworth will name Spenser on the opening page of *Castle Rackrent* (1800), her well-known novella about one Irish estate and its changing fortunes. In the second line of the book, narrator 'Honest Thady' describes his 'greatcoat' as fastening 'cloak fashion'; this leads to a long footnote that quite overwhelms the book's first page. The footnote begins by citing Spenser as an expert of some reliability in establishing the 'high antiquity' of the garment, and proceeds to quote from *A View* a passage in which Spenser describes the potential treacherous usage of the cloak by the Irish: 'for it is a fit house for an outlaw, a meet bed for a rebel, and an apt cloak for a thief'.¹⁷ The note's reverential tone is of course undercut by the central

text, in which Thady, whose narratorial reliability is questionable, repeatedly demonstrates his own wherewithal as opposed to the inanity and ignorance of the estate's owners. Spenser's expertise as a colonial occupier, then, is called upon by Edgeworth in ironic fashion to underline the distinctly inexperienced management of his fictional colonial successors, while also potentially implicating 'Honest Thady's' role in his masters' downfall. That this commentary appears just as the Act of Union comes into force suggests that, at a moment of political crisis, previous English commentators on the Irish situation remain important; in fact, in terms of the textual presentation and the space given to the note citing Spenser, it would seem that the past is overwhelming the present. However, if Spenser has been consigned mostly to the preface, his position here in a footnote does suggest that, in cultural memory in Ireland, 'Spenser' is something that has gone before that must be dealt with, and however marginal he and those with similar ideas might be perceived, their impact continues to be felt. The conclusion that we can begin to draw, then, is that 'Spenser' remains in memory, and remains because narratives concerning him travel through time. 'Spenser' offers an example of a specific process of memory, a transhistorical version of 'postmemory', in which what is experienced is not the direct, personal memory of the individual, but an inherited (and in this case cultural) version of memory. While 'Spenser' is not remembered firsthand, the transmission of his literary and cultural legacy suggests that transhistorical memory, like postmemory, travels and moves across generations.¹⁸

There are several curious traces in the next century that tell us something about the way in which Spenser's memory moved across time after the Act of Union. One of these comes in the first epigraph¹⁹ to George Sigerson's *Bards of the Gael and Gall* (1907). Like Butler's two centuries before, Sigerson's citation of Spenser comes as a support for his own claims and precedes his main text; he chooses to cite Irenius from *A View* on the merits of Irish poetry.

Eudoxus. But tell me (I pray you) have they any art in their composition? or bee they anything wittie or well savoured, as poemes should be?

Irenaeus. Yea truly, I have caused divers of them to be translated unto me, that I might understand them, and surely they savoured of sweet wit and good inventon . . . sprinkled with some pretty flowers of their naturall device, which gave good grace and comelinesse unto them. – Edmund Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, 1596²⁰

This is an extraordinary epigraph to have chosen for an important Revival text that made available translations of bardic poetry. Spenser's name is invoked as almost ultimate proof, as if to say – if *even Spenser* could praise Irish literature and culture, it must indeed be worthy of praise. There is thus an odd, colonial nod to Spenser – an acknowledgement that he retains a privileged position in British literary culture and history – with his 'Irish connection' no doubt encouraging the citation of his work as evidence of the merit of Irish cultural heritage.

Yeats, writing on the eve of Irish independence and picking up on the threads left by Sigerson, takes things further. Yeats's engagement with Spenser is prolonged and cannot be fully treated in so short a space, but it is important to note the shift that occurs through his rewriting of Spenser.²¹ Yeats acknowledges the prestige retained by Spenser because of his poetic capacity, but returns to Keating's tone of rebuke: despite his fondness for Spenser's poetry and its impact on his work, Yeats chastises Spenser for his overfondness of the state and queen. At this point, as the momentum for home rule and independence increases, it is clear that Spenser cannot be wholly approved of; nor can his political stance be ignored and simple positives focused on as in Butler's preface or Sigerson's epigraph. Instead, Spenser comes in for critique as an able poet who lost his way in the maze of colonialism. If Spenser, willing colonial servant and national poet, is deployed in defense of Irish culture in the earlier part of the Revival, he is symbolically disempowered by Yeats, with a lasting impact.

LATE 20TH-CENTURY REWRITINGS OF SPENSER: HEANEY AND MCGUINNESS

In addition to Yeats's rewriting of Spenser, the 20th century saw other high profile Irish literary engagements with Spenser.²² Two of these occur far later in the century, when Ireland was again under pressure due to mounting difficulties in the North. Seamus Heaney's is a cautious rewriting; Spenser occurs not as a persona for the poet to inhabit – as he does Sweeney, for instance, in the same period²³ – but as a distant figure of the past. Heaney's subdued engagement stands in contrast to several other poetic responses, such as the challenging rendition of Spenser in Brendan Kennelly's *Cromwell* sequence a decade later, in which Spenser is represented as an alcoholic auctioneer wishing to escape 'fucking Cork';²⁴ but Heaney, as Ireland's most prominent late 20th century Irish poet, is important to examine. Heaney's caution might be ascribed most straightforwardly to the political and social situation in which he wrote, on the heels of Bloody Sunday, and in the midst of an unfurling civil crisis.

In 'Bog Oak', one of his much-analysed series of bog poems, Heaney presents images that grow out of the raising from the bog of an ancient oak, a 'black,/ long-seasoned rib' (ll.3-4).²⁵ As the 'mizzling rain/ blurs the far end/ of the cart track', the poet knows that the track will lead 'back to no / "oak groves"' (ll.17-8). It is in this state of being able to only half see into the past that Heaney writes:

Perhaps I just make out
 Edmund Spenser
 dreaming sunlight,
 encroached upon by

geniuses who creep
 'out of every corner
 of the woodes and glennes'
 towards watercress and carrion.

Quoting from Spenser's *View*, Heaney confronts Spenser not as a poet, but as the author of an infamous tract that among other things recommended the felling of the oak trees, which both impeded travel and hid rebels, and centuries later turn up in bogs. If in earlier incarnations, in Keating, say, Spenser the poet is admonished for his colonial role, here Spenser's poetic function has all but disappeared; he is merely one who suggested starving the Irish out of the forests. Despite the planters' takeover of the land, it is not the Irish but Spenser who is 'encroached upon' – a choice of words that captures the Elizabethan belief in England's right to Ireland. However, while the presence of the colonizer is manifested through the citation of Spenser's own words and that sense of colonial entitlement, the 'creep' of 'geniuses' – whether defined in contemporary usage or in the medieval sense of the spirits or sources of inspiration – undercuts that presence and the force of the colonizing agenda. The colonizing presence in the poem is not given the last word; in the end, the will to survive – and Heaney is aware of the dire circumstances that drove survival in many periods of Irish history, the 'watercress and carrion' – closes the poem. Just as the oak has persisted in the bog despite its felling, so does genius – we might say Heaney's own – continue.

Heaney's concern with memory and metaphors of memory during this period is well known: the bog itself acts as a preservative, a medium through which to read the past, as so compellingly described by Stuart McLean.²⁶ When we talk about Heaney's concern with memory during the 1970s, we are immediately dealing with a form of memory that goes beyond the personal: the bog

remembers for the culture, for the tribe, to use a term to which Heaney has recourse to use in this same period – even at times when the culture is preoccupied with forgetting, as Guy Beiner has argued, there is a sense in which memory persists and is ‘regenerated’.²⁷ If the bog preserves physical objects like that oak beam, it also functions as a preservative of ideas that, Heaney’s poetry considers, we might be better off forgetting: this is because the physical preservation disallows social forgetting, with the object functioning as both a revenant and a placeholder of memory.²⁸ Heaney is thus aware of the possibility of being bogged down, as the phrase goes, in memories, in the past. This is a particularly important crux for postcolonial cultures²⁹ and suggests why Spenser inserts himself into this era of Heaney’s poetry: how does one ensure that rituals and traditions are preserved, heritage maintained, without preserving too what Heaney in ‘North’ deems ‘the hatreds and behind-backs’ of the past (1.25)?³⁰ For a poet writing in 1970s Ireland, this was a vital question – and for one from the North of Ireland, it was near unavoidable. Jane Grogan notes that a particular phase of ‘Spenser’s Irish legacy is dominated by the emerging northern poets of the day: John Montague, Seamus Heaney, and Derek Mahon’.³¹ If postcolonial cultures felt themselves in the earliest stages to be struggling against the absence or the loss of memory,³² Northern Ireland – neither clearly a colonial nor postcolonial space – seemed to suffer from a surfeit of memory, an excess so great that it was spilling over in two nations.

Frank McGuinness’s *Mutabilitie* (first performed in 1997) continues the rewriting of cultural memory by deploying and transforming Spenser at another critical moment in Irish history, when the Good Friday Agreement was being composed and the cultural memory of the Troubles was beginning to be acknowledged and sifted through. It is this dramatic rewriting that most extensively deploys Spenser as a way of getting to grips with the colonial relationship between England and Ireland, with the implication that this deployment mirrors a present moment when the relationship was yet again being redefined, and for what many hoped was the last time, as a form of reconciliation was broached. Where Spenser had been kept at a distance by Heaney, McGuinness enters Kilcolman Castle and imagines Spenser’s life within its walls as his time in Ireland draws to a close. In McGuinness’s play, Spenser and his wife Elizabeth have opened their doors to a family of Irish servants who are linked to the medieval story of *Buile Suibhne*, in which king Sweeney has been usurped and forced out into the natural world. The allusions make clear that McGuinness’s once royal family has also been displaced by the colonial occupation.

It is through this family that *Mutabilitie* settles on a symbol of importance to both Irish mythology and *The Faerie Queene* – the fostered babe. In taking up this topic, McGuinness draws on a famous aspect of Spenser’s biography: Ben Jonson’s reported claim that ‘The Irish . . . robd Spensers goods, and burnt his house and a little child new born’.³³ McGuinness transforms this child lost to the fire into a child who has lost his way, only to be found by the dispossessed Irish royal family and its powerful File who will become Spenser’s child’s foster-mother.³⁴ Confused and frightened by the flames, McGuinness’s child emerges as an apt summation of a play that has dwelt on the complex interactions necessitated by colonial expansion. The child functions as an allegorical symbol for what happens between a colonial occupier and occupied, a figure who bridges while also representing those gaps it is impossible to bridge. The colonial occupier – Spenser – might flee, might be run out by the rebellion of native landholders, but he will always leave something of himself behind: ways of thinking, ways of life, ways of being.

Beyond the child’s use as an allegorical symbol of the results and inheritances of colonialism, the fact of the child’s fosterage opens onto a theme of significance in Irish lore as well as in Spenser’s epic. Within Irish mythology, Cuchulain and Finn are both given over to foster parents to be raised;³⁵ fosterage remained an integral part of early and medieval Irish culture, in all likeliness reflecting a response to demands that multiple children placed on parents.³⁶ For exceptional figures like Cuchulain and Finn, fosterage also meant exposure to people or environments that teach the hero crucial things – Cuchulain learns to bear arms from his foster father, while Finn learns about the natural world through his fosterage in a forest. In terms of narrative, then, fosterage provides an explanation of various factors that may not be available simply out of a given character’s birth.

Spenser himself deployed fosterage for its narrative possibilities. Several times in *The Faerie Queene* knights are required to rescue infants from dead parents, as in Book 2, when Sir Guyon fosters a ‘lucklesse babe, borne under cruell starre’³⁷ to Lady Medina. A second fosterage occurs in Book 6, when Sir Calepine rescues a babe from a bear. Calepine chances afterwards on the weeping Matilda, whose husband lacks an heir and who is thus the perfect foster mother. Besides commenting on the anxieties at Queen Elizabeth’s own lack of an heir, the episode allows Spenser to gesture towards the baby’s future. Matilda passes the child off as their own to her husband, with the result that ‘it in goodly thewes so well upbrought, / That it became a famous knight well knowne / And did right noble deedes, the which elsewhere are showne’.³⁸ There is a certain poignancy in this, because the babe that Spenser evidently intended to grow up and host another

book of the projected back half of *The Faerie Queene* remains a babe and does not go on to adventures of his own; his 'noble deedes' are not 'elsewhere showne', since the writing of *The Faerie Queene* was halted. There is a sense in which Spenser's writing – like memory by rewriting or through the physical preservation of artefacts – itself is fostered, in the end – given over to control other than the author's own. Chance, as so often happens in this epic, intervenes, and Spenser's intention of a twelve-book poem was thwarted.

If Spenser's circumstances in a colony struggling with rebellion contributed to the fact of *The Faerie Queene* never being completed, there is a way in which the unfinished business that was his literary legacy and his political one has been taken up by Irish writers in the four centuries since his death. Just as Spenser's child in *Mutabilitie* is fostered, so too has Spenser been fostered: adopted by authors whom he never envisioned as his audience or the interpreters of his legacy, of which McGuinness is one of the most recent. Spenser, as is so frequently noted, set out in *The Faerie Queene* to show how to 'fashion a gentleman', and the figure of Spenser in McGuinness is, indeed, gentle; he is not blameless, but he is not savage in the way that earlier writers might have imagined him. Spenser is greatly to be pitied, in McGuinness's version of him, in a significant break from previous anticolonial versions of Spenser: a man defeated by his own inspiration, whose zeal has created the gaps in his thinking that will be his downfall. Pity and imaginative empathy with a clear 'other' would seem to represent a distinctive postcolonial remembering, at a point when imaginative engagement with the 'other' in Northern Ireland was actively encouraged society-wide: this is the kind of empathetic leap that makes possible the idea of 'healing through remembering'.³⁹ Spenser's desire to convert the Irish, to reform them in McGuinness's play, is itself fascinating: McGuinness's Spenser requires the Irish to change, to mutate, just as, ultimately, 'Spenser' himself has become a mutable narrative in Irish culture. And yet, ironically, in *Mutabilitie*, the very instability of Spenser's situation – its changing, mutating nature – is what he cannot bear.

And one of the worst things for Spenser to bear would surely have been the idea of a child of his being rescued by the Irish, by the kernes – foot-soldiers – that kept the woods. McGuinness's play employs this scenario as a resolution to the colonial context and the workings of empire, and as a contemporary plea for reconciliation, it would appear. But if we imagine that Spenser might have dreaded the notion of his child fallen to the hands of the savage Irish, he could have seen the irony that is apparent in the play in his child being rescued by a royal family. For the court-conscious Spenser, this is an appropriate and savagely warranted turn of

fictional events: in McGuinness's version of it, Spenser's middle-class English son will be raised by the Irish nobles who live in a wood.

McGuinness's knowledge of Spenser's writing is apparent throughout the play, and there are echoes of many aspects of *The Faerie Queene*. In Book 6, noble-born Tristram is sent away by his mother to keep him safe from his uncle, who has usurped Tristram's power (6.2.28-9). She sends him to 'some forrein land' (6.2.29), where, like Finn and like a Robin Hood figure, he learns to live as an exceptional hunter in the natural world, away from cultural corruption and devoted instead to nature. Sir Calidore is immediately impressed with the courtesy and vigour of the youth, and makes a squire of Tristram, with the implication that noble birth will eventually reveal itself in greatness. The narrative echo of greatest import between McGuinness's fostered child and Spenser's epic is that of Arthur, whose birth is of an origin unknown to him. Like Tristram, he was removed from his family, while only a babe – but unlike Tristram, is unaware of his ancestry. When Una asks him to outline his background, he replies:

Faire virgin (said the Prince) ye me require
 A thing without the compas of my wit:
 For both the lignage and the certain Sire,
 From which I sprong, from me are hidden yit.
 For all so soone as life did me admit
 Into this world, and shewed heavens light,
 From mothers pap I taken was unfit:
 And straight delivered to a Faery knight,
 To be unbrought in gentle thewes and martiall might. (1.9.3)

Reared by 'old Timon' (1.9.4), Arthur was also visited frequently by Merlin, of whom the child prince enquired his beginnings, only to be told 'That I was sonne and heire unto a king, / As time in her just terme the truth to light should bring' (1.9.5). Merlin's involvement with Arthur's upbringing, as well as Arthur's childhood home on the river Dee – which in Spenser's marriage of the rivers is described as a river 'which Britons long ygone / Did call divine' (4.2.3) – suggests an origin beyond the merely human. The fact of his fosterage thus confirms his mysterious, wondrous origins, as is the case with Finn as well: the semi-divine and mythological origins of the hero imply the greatness that is to come.

If Arthur is brought up by a man representing earthly wisdom and ability in arms and by a magician with all the power of good, the figure of Spenser's child in McGuinness's *Mutabilitie* will be reared by a poet-sorceress with extraordinary strength of will and by a gentle man

of wisdom. The parallel and allusion McGuinness no doubt intends us to note; and yet it is a parallel that problematizes our reading of *The Faerie Queene*, and provides a comment on the prophecies that Spenser lays out in the poem. Arthur's fated greatness is firmly pronounced at every opportunity in the six existing books of *The Faerie Queene*, even though we are not privy to any passage in which his eventual meeting with the Faerie Queene herself takes place. In this sense, the epic ends without the crucial union – on which the fate of the nation rests. McGuinness's employment of a parallel to Arthur complicates this, challenging the very notion of prophecy by denying its possibility from an *English* perspective – for in his play the child's arrival has been prophesied, of course, by the File. Knowing that no heir was produced to follow Elizabeth, and knowing that the British empire as Spenser imagined it has now come apart, McGuinness's version of Spenserian prophecy is definitively postcolonial; it is denied except within the context of the Irish family. McGuinness thus problematizes our view of *The Faerie Queene's* close, since – if we consider the possibility of an intentional abandonment of the poem by Spenser – *Mutabilitie's* ending suggests that Spenser himself had come to doubt his own prophecies and leaves Arthur unfulfilled, having failed to make a union with Gloriana and produce an heir.

Of all of the literary rewritings of Spenser in an Irish context, McGuinness's is, to my mind, the most successful: notably engaged with Spenser's poetry, prose, and, crucially, with Spenser criticism. It is this last element that, as Grogan has noted, distinguishes the play from other versions of Spenser in Irish literature, for McGuinness consciously writes in the context of the revived interest in 'Spenser in Ireland' that was apparent by the time of the play's composition.⁴⁰ *Mutabilitie* is conscious of its allegorizing not only of Spenser but also of the colonial encounter, and thus mirrors the milieu in which McGuinness wrote, conscious of ongoing negotiations of English, Irish, and Northern Irish identities. 'Spenser', in his four-hundred year presence in Irish literature and culture, has moved from functioning as one of many English chroniclers and essayists on Ireland and as a lauded poet to a representative figure who stands in and, true to allegory's roots, speaks otherwise – of the past, of the colonial relationship, and of the shifting perception of that colonial relationship in the present. In this recent versioning of Spenser, we find Spenser still speaking otherwise, still functioning allegorically, but simultaneously returned to himself, a lone poet, for whom Ireland is indeed a Den of Error.

Spenser, I have suggested, functions as a revealing case study of transhistorical memory since his presence in Irish literature is of such

duration. Of course, Spenser is also functioning in the realm of transcultural memory, with his literary legacy stretching across at least two national spaces. As the Republic of Ireland, England, and Northern Ireland enter into a new and unknown stage of relations following Britain's 'Brexit' vote in June 2016, we face further questions about how both transhistorical and transcultural memory will function on these islands. While McGuinness's play seemed in some sense to signal a reconciliation of memory and a literal performance of it, it is not clear, in the new political climate, how the intertwined histories of the three geographical spaces will be negotiated. Spenser might, even after four hundred years, find himself called upon yet again to allegorically represent the past and speak to the present.

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Ciaran Brady, 'Spenser's Irish Crisis: Humanism and Experience in the 1590s', *Past and Present* 111 (May 1986), 17–49; Anne Fogarty, 'The Colonization of Language: Narrative Strategies in *A View of the Present State of Ireland* and *The Faerie Queene*, Book VI', in *Spenser and Ireland: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. by Patricia Coughlan (Cork: Cork University Press, 1989), pp.75–108; Richard McCabe, 'The Fate of Irena: Spenser and Political Violence', in Patricia Coughlan, ed., *Spenser and Ireland*, pp.109–25; Clare Carroll, 'The Construction of Gender and the Cultural and Political Other in *The Faerie Queene* and *A View of the Present State of Ireland*: the critics, the context, and the case of Radigund', in *Criticism* Vol. XXXII, 2 (1990), 163–192; Richard Rambuss, *Spenser's Secret Career* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Andrew Hadfield, *Edmund Spenser's Irish Experience: Wilde Fruit and Salvage Soyl* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Willey Maley, *Salvaging Spenser: Colonialism, Culture and Identity* (London: Macmillan, 1997); David Gardiner, *Befitting Emblems of Adversity: A Modern Irish View of Edmund Spenser from W.B. Yeats to the Present* (Omaha, Nebraska: Creighton University Press, 2001); Richard McCabe, *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment: Elizabethan Ireland and the Poetics of Difference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
2. A notable exception is Andrew Hadfield's biography, *Edmund Spenser: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), and the Fifth International Spenser Society conference, 'The Place of Spenser/ Spenser's Places', which took place at Dublin Castle 18–20 June 2015.
3. Liedeke Plate and H.G. Els Rose, 'Rewriting, a Literary Concept for the Study of Cultural Memory: Towards a Transhistorical Approach to Cultural Remembrance', *Neophilologus* 97 (2013), p.613.
4. I have used this phrase in 'Spenser's Trace', *New Hibernia Review* 12.1 (2008), to describe the way in which a story of Spenser extends itself across time.
5. Bernadette Cunningham, *The World of Geoffrey Keating* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), p.59.
6. Cunningham, p.181.
7. Cunningham, p.86.
8. Cunningham, p.14.
9. Robert Welch, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.52.

10. Geoffrey Keating, *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* (Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 1902), Volume I, p.31.
11. J.T. Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), p.321.
12. Peter Walsh, *A Prospect of the State of Ireland From the Year of the World 1756 to the Year of Christ 1652* (London, 1682), p.8.
13. Walsh, p.405.
14. Walsh, p.405.
15. Sarah Butler, *Irish Tales, or, instructive histories for the happy conduct of life* (London: E. Curl and J. Hooke, 1714), Preface, n.p.
16. Butler, Preface, n.p.
17. Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. by Ryan Twomey (London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004), p.11.
18. On 'postmemory', see Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997).
19. There are two others: the second cites Wordsworth's 'The Solitary Reaper' in which the speaker listens to a 'Highland lass' singing; the last is a Fenian poem spoken by Oisín.
20. George Sigerson, *Bards of the Gael and Gall* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1907), n.p..
21. On Yeats and Spenser, see Oona Frawley, *Irish Pastoral* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2004); Oona Frawley, "'Who's He When He's at Home?' Spenser and Irishness', in *Affecting Irishness*, ed. by J. Byrne et. al. (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009); Jane Grogan, 'Spenser's Lost Children', *Spenser Studies* Vol. XXVIII (2013), 1–54.
22. On poets' treatment of Spenser, see David Gardiner, *Befitting Emblems of Adversity: A Modern View of Edmund Spenser from WB Yeats to the Present* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), and Grogan, 'Spenser's Lost Children'.
23. Tales of 'mad Sweeney' thought to have been composed between the 12–15th centuries and written down in the 17th and 18th century were published as *Buile Suibhne*, ed. by JG O'Keeffe (Dublin: Irish Texts Society Volume 12, 1913). Sweeney was cursed by a priest and, transformed into a bird and, suffering from madness, he subsequently flitted about Ireland uttering poems. As a figure of inspiration who was also placeless and on the edges of society, Sweeney intrigued Heaney enough to publish a translation of *Buile Suibhne, Sweeney Astray*, in 1983 (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 1983). He later published a series of poems inhabiting the character of Sweeney as part of *Station Island* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984).
24. Brendan Kennelly, *Cromwell: A Poem* (Eastburn: Bloodaxe Books, 1987 (1983)), p.28.
25. Seamus Heaney, 'Bog Oak', in *Wintering Out* (London: Faber, 1972).
26. McLean, *The Event and its Terrors: Ireland, Famine, Modernity* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2004).
27. Beiner, 'Making Sense of Memory: coming to terms with conceptualisations of historical remembrance', in *Remembering 1916: The Easter Rising, the Somme, and the Politics of Memory*, ed. by Richard Grayson and Fearghal McGarry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p.21.
28. Marianne Hirsch has described the effects of the preservations of, among other material artifacts, photographs, and their impact on the resulting cultural memory (see Hirsch, 1997).
29. In fact, postcolonial trauma is a new and exciting realm within memory studies, with Stef Craps arguing that western-derived conceptions of individual traumatic experience cannot be applied wholesale to postcolonial cultures, which not only experience trauma in different ways but also *culturally* rather than strictly individually. See *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
30. Heaney, 'North', in *Opened Ground* (London: Faber, 1998).

31. Grogan, p.5.
32. This notion was at the implied backbone of many classic postcolonial texts, from Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (London; Vintage, 1994) to, in the Irish context, Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland* (London: Vintage, 1996).
33. *Ben Jonson's Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden*, ed. by R.F. Patterson (London: Blackie and Son Limited, 1923), pp.16–17.
34. The File is a poet figure based on the important medieval Irish bards, whose compositions documented a family's history, and who wielded great power – bards were feared for their ability to satirise and undermine a family's position, and so treated with tremendous respect. See Osborn Bergin, *Irish Bardic Poetry* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1970).
35. Cuchulain spends time with foster parents who each teach him a different skill, while Finn is similarly fostered and raised by two women warriors, Liath Luachra and Bodhmall.
36. See, for instance, T. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
37. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (London: Penguin, 2003), 2.2.1.
38. Spenser, 6.4.38.
39. The Northern Irish charity, Healing Through Remembering, was established in 2001 following a report composed by the head of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The charity's goal is to promote reconciliation through shared acknowledgement and remembrance.
40. Grogan, p.37.