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Spenser's Trace

Raising his voice against the din, the postman says the weather is to worsen, that the winds will mount into a category that we in Ireland call “storm force.” Streams flow down the graveled driveway; spied even from the distance of the windows, the road is awash with small rivers floated with the detritus that is autumn, flukes and brown-orange leaves, yew needles blackened by rain. When, for a moment, the wind breathes in, I glimpse smoke against the gorsed and heathered hill that says our neighbors, here in the Wicklow mountains, are in and at the fire. And then the wind resumes. I almost wait for the power to cut out, lines clipped by branches broken or snagged: I have filled kettle, water jug, a pot, knowing that if it cuts out our pump will cut out too, and the well, not dry, will seem so. And so these slight preparations.

I am thinking about how wild wind and rain might sound in a building composed of meter-thick, handcut granite and clay and none of the modern insulations, how they might have sounded to the four-centuries-dead writer Edmund Spenser when he lived in County Cork: more distant, perhaps, more persistent, a dull ache that ran through Kilcolman Castle like a murmur of language not understood—rivulets slipping down the tower's face, over slow, relentless time tracing their channels into speckled gray stone made black with wet. I imagine that in most of the castle, the rain would have been something one merely sensed—a disturbance of air. Surely the granite would have muted the sound unless one was standing in a top room of the tower, where the lash of water could be heard against beams and turf and straw packed dense against slabs of slate. Rain and wind would have been available as sound only in rooms directly beneath a roof, or discerned through small, heavy glass windows that would have distorted the view of any storm like a fun-house mirror, perhaps exaggerating the bend of trees or the size of the raindrops until the outside world was threatening, deformed—perhaps making the world of weather seem far, far away, like a view through a telescope.

I close my eyes to contain the sound of this current rain and try to imagine Spenser hearing rain four centuries ago on the other side of Ireland, his eyes fallen closed in a rare moment of indulgent daydream—Spenser sheltering amid those gray stone walls, Spenser beyond a name and reputation: Spenser alive, existing, listening to an Irish rain something like this one.

Many who know of Edmund Spenser will know the name only and very little of his work. Even for those who study or have studied English literature, Spenser is rarely required reading in the way that Shakespeare is. One can move through a four-year undergraduate degree in English literature, as I did in the United States, without reading his poetry. Spenser, once known as “the poet’s poet,” a writer once linked in a trinity with Shakespeare and Milton as the greatest of English authors, has lost a good deal of his former status. Many know Spenser’s name only as that of the author of *The Faerie Queene*, but will not have read the epic allegory itself, and likely know very little about Spenser in a more general sense; he appears to have developed a reputation as difficult, inaccessible, and dated. It would appear that little has changed since David Hume, in his 1759 *History of England*, wrote that “Spencer [*sic*] maintains his place in the shelves among our English classics: But he is seldom seen on the table.” Despite this, Spenser has persistently attracted a certain attention and readership, and much of this attention has, in recent years, come from Ireland or from a perspective that considers Spenser’s time in Ireland. Spenser left a trace in Irish cultural memory, albeit one that remains largely concealed.

From approximately 1580 onward, when he traveled to Dublin in the service of Lord Grey de Wilton, Spenser spent most of his time in Ireland. He allowed himself only one extended period of return to England at around the time of publication of the first three books of *The Faerie Queene* in 1590; the second confirmed return occurred only shortly before he died. Even though Lord Grey was recalled in disgrace in 1582 after an infamous massacre of surrendered Spanish forces at Smerwick, or Ventry Bay, in County Kerry, Spenser remained in Ireland. He was initially appointed as a commissioner for musters in Kildare for two years. Tellingly, for some critics, he also retained a strong loyalty to Grey, who makes an only slightly disguised appearance in Book Five of *The Faerie Queene*: despite Grey’s fall into disfavor for pursuing policies considered harsh by Elizabeth, Spenser seems to have approved of his friend’s governing strategies for Ireland, and defended Grey in his epic accordingly.

Spenser continued to serve in various administrative offices in Ireland, and had, by 1589, taken possession of a parcel of three thousand acres of land in County Cork, which included Kilcolman Castle, near Buttevant, to which he added a nearby Abbey and additional lands in 1597, for one of his children. Eliz-

abeth formally granted Spenser this estate in 1590 and, in 1591—presumably for his services as poet and servant to the queen—Spenser was awarded a pension of fifty pounds a year, an immense sum at the time.

In the years that followed, Spenser seems to have been settled largely at Kilcolman. There, he married for the second time; it is not known what became of his first wife, Maccabaeus Chylde, whom he is believed to have married in London in 1579, but she is presumed to have died, leaving him with two children, Sylvanus and Catherine. His marriage to Elizabeth Boyle in 1594 appears to have produced one son, Peregrine. During these years at Kilcolman, he completed Books Four through Six of *The Faerie Queene*, and he is believed to have composed most of *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (which was registered with the Stationer in April of 1598 but remained unpublished until 1633) in the summer of 1596. In 1598, the same year in which he was nominated for the post of sheriff of Cork, Kilcolman Castle was sacked and burned, and the Spensers fled first to Cork City, from where Spenser sent ahead documents outlining the rebellion, and then to London, where Spenser died on the thirteenth of January, 1899, and was buried some days later in Westminster Abbey.

The data on Spenser's life—supported by entries in the Stationers' Register, in administrative and legal record books of various kinds in both England and Ireland, through his own publications and the letters we have in his hand, as well as through the odd reference to him in other contemporaneous writings—is thin enough, providing only a sketch of what his existence must have been like. We have a few facts and a handful of dates that attach him to a particular place or person at a particular time; we have the writing itself, dated by entry in the Stationers' Register or by his occasional reference to composition in a letter, as in his very deliberately composed letter to Walter Raleigh that preceded the first three books of *The Faerie Queene*.

What we lack is anything else that might indicate the state of Spenser's actual life. Anything that might tell us about him, or the life of his mind.

The lack of information about Spenser's interior life makes it hard, for me at least, to imagine some external, physical existence of his in a tower set on a hillock overlooking a bog, set against what would then have been forest. As I write, the house is encased by sound, the wet echo of hurtling drops against glass, crackle of branch against slate as trees lose pieces of themselves. Yet, despite the drift of imagination that the rain inspires, I have no image of him, none: I can force myself to one, but even as I do so I know it is a forced imagining—and I see a man who might have been corpulent in other circumstances (under a different god more tolerant of excesses, or in a place whose land was more yielding, a colony over further seas)—a man who is thin merely by chance.

Otherwise I can gather no physical image in my mind, other than a beard, which Spenser must have worn: not only because of the images we have in portraits and miniatures that inform us of the Elizabethan fashion for beards—in oils, they appear almost chiseled into their sharply perfect points—but also because of the shame he attaches to a bare face in *The Faerie Queene* as the sign of a knight gone wrong. A false knight revealed must lose face, and so, the allegory goes, is forced to reveal his own, shorn of ornament and position.

There is something ridiculous in the way I imagine him, as a beard attached to a reluctantly thin body. This is because—despite my inability to picture Spenser—like many who read and become heavily involved in the work of a particular author, I feel I have somehow garnered a sense of him as a man, as a character quite different from my absurd imagining. I have gathered an idea of Spenser as supremely earnest, absolutely committed to the word and to God, nation, and queen: possessing the kind of fervent love of nation that has begun to wane and even become suspect today while also becoming contemporary, in a world that has so recently seen waves of ideological wars against “terror” and “infidels” and an absolute zealousness on all sides. Spenser is thus at once utterly dated and utterly modern for me.

But if I sense some uncertainty about where Spenser would be most at home in an historical era, there is no doubt in my mind about his seriousness and his sobriety. Unlike, say, Walter Raleigh, who has taken on almost mythological proportions as an adventurer of Elizabeth's court and a colonial explorer (in the United States, Raleigh was the one sketched in school history books as the gentleman who threw a cloak over a puddle so that the queen might pass easily, and who brought her tobacco, cocoa, rumors of the flow of the Orinoco, the Amazon). Spenser does not have, for me, an aura of anything but seriousness. Whereas Raleigh is frequently thought of as dashing, edging in on danger, Spenser seems careful, restrained, only matching Raleigh's reputational exuberance within the writing of *The Faerie Queene*.

But where has this idea that I have of Spenser come from? It may be based on the kinds of facts rehearsed above, that are demonstrably true about Spenser's life. Or on certain of these facts of Spenser's life, but not others, that I have not retained or have somehow not absorbed as important in the way that I did others. My idea of Spenser might derive from his writings alone, composed of the silences that stretch between the poetry and the prose, on the few letters that are his own, including his well known preface of *The Faerie Queene* that describes the book's schoolmasterly aim as being to “fashion a gentleman.” My idea of Spenser might find its origin in Yeats's early twentieth-century poetic analysis in his essay “On Edmund Spenser” or Frank McGuinness's dramatization in his 1997 play *Mutabilitie*. Or perhaps it is a patchwork idea of Edmund

Spenser the man, stitched from pieces of academic criticism: the scant but enormously influential comments of Ben Jonson, the first centuries of criticism that defined Spenser as “the poet’s poet,” a moral instructor or painter of scenes or a man broken by circumstance; or the mid-twentieth century work of C.S. Lewis, William Empson, Northrop Frye, Harry Berger, Jr., Frank Kermode, Angus Fletcher, and recent critics like Andrew Hadfield, Willy Maley, Clare Carroll, Anne Fogarty, Patricia Coughlan.

In the end, does my concept of Spenser derive from something beyond such specifics, and instead from some atmosphere, from an historical reality that we grasp intuitively, from something circulating in our culture and in our time, from something we might call cultural memory?

It rains, harder: I think that Spenser, a poet dead so long before the advent of skylight windows, would have admired the pitch of water against clear flat glass, would have enjoyed the subtle, unpredictable, even chaotic music of it. I think, *He would like this*; I feel I “know” what he would have liked, despite the impossibility of knowing Spenser the man.

My musings on Spenser and how rain might have sounded to his ears are abstracted and removed from him, whoever he was, a man not so much factual as figurative. They are also, perhaps inevitably, the result of a natural human desire to make Spenser into something more than a figure, to convert him. He’d have appreciated the attempt, I think to myself ironically, given his own insistence on the need for conversion amongst the Irish back into something more human. For Spenser is, ultimately, a figure; four hundred years after the fact of his life, he is a something rather than a someone, unknowable except in the abstract and through a paltry handful of fact. Out of what we remember of that fact and out of our experience of reading the author’s work, we seem to construct new fictions, and new narratives, of Spenser: what we remember shapes him, once a man, into a something, an idea.

But our individual remembrances are themselves influenced, I believe, by something beyond our own minds and their chance encounters with criticism or ideas, by something within our cultures and our times that encourages us to read a text, or an author, in a particular way: what we remember culturally also appears to shape our reading and our subsequent narration of that text or author. So it interests me to know not only how it is that I have come to see Spenser in the way that I do, but what this can tell us about the sense of Spenser that rebounds from the late sixteenth century through the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: how has the cultural memory of Spenser changed over time, particularly in Ireland? And what, in turn, can such things tell us about the way that cultural memory functions?

Spenser's struggling relationship with Ireland was, for me, an immediate point of entry into his poetry and prose. Beginning, as a young graduate student in New York, to read the work of a poet I had always vaguely thought of as a quintessentially English writer, I was surprised to learn of Spenser's time in Ireland. I was surprised to learn that he had in all likelihood written most of his definitive work not in England, but in Ireland, reminiscing about an England from which he was largely removed in space, by virtue of his position as a colonial servant abroad, and in time, by virtue of his medieval literary tendencies, as well as by the changes he must have observed in his returns to England from Ireland. For me, Spenser's removal from England reverberated with my own sense of removal from Ireland, as at the time I lived five thousand miles away in New York while longing for the place I had felt was home. For the daughter of Irish parents who had spent a part of each year out of the United States—and who had grown up being referred to as Irish when I was in New York and American when I was in Ireland—the confusion in Spenser's writings about homelands, about identity, had an immediate emotional appeal: I could look upon the sublime landscape of Manhattan and somehow experience a pastoral nostalgia for Ireland that seemed to align me with Spenserian poetics and experience.

It was not only this, though, that determined how I read Spenser, not only this that appealed so strongly to me: something else seemed to emerge from the pages as I murmured them aloud to myself night after night on that first reading of *The Faerie Queene*. Within the vast number of cantos, hidden somewhere like the Faerie Queene herself, there seemed to me a fanatical devotion, a frenzied compulsion: the act of composing an epic such as *The Faerie Queene*—even if it did remain incomplete or unfinished—proved Spenser's nearly irrational impulse. I saw a compulsion to the layering of stanzas, something architectural, some sense of a craftsman unable to cease with the brickwork, of continuing on beyond an original plan or drawing so that the structure became organic, bizarre. This appealed to me, as did the sense of his being thus submersed in a fantasy world of his own construction: the sense that Faeryland had become so all-consuming as to become crazily real, as if, again, that same obsessive craftsman had begun, accidentally, to block the exits and to build only upward, able to see his work only by leaning out of haphazard (a word that is one of Spenser's own coinages) windows that provided only one kind of perspective.

Then, too, there was the mysterious, fragmentary nature of his life revealed in those broken cantos of *Mutabilitie*: why were these all that we had of the planned second half of the poem? Had Spenser simply run out of cantos, become overwhelmed by the figure of the Blatant Beast that, at the end of *The Faerie Queene*'s sixth book, escapes and runs riot again? Or had the poem been composed but lost in his return to England? When I was in my early twenties,

these questions had a tremendous force for me, with their ideas of fracture and submersion, of complete fixation, of creative overdrive and creative loss: Spenser quickly became, for me as for many other readers over many generations, my own allegory.

One more factor—which happened also to be a fact—made its way into my memory and stayed there. This was Spenser's final official position as sheriff of Cork. More than any other "fact" this last lodged in my mind with other irresistible literary trivia; I cannot hear the name of E. M. Forster without thinking of how the poor-sighted novelist reputedly bowed to an enormous wedding cake, mistaking it for Queen Victoria. For me, Spenser-as-sheriff-of-Cork created postmodern images of a kind of Elizabethan western set in the dramatic landscape of the Southwest of Ireland. I conjured another absurd picture of Spenser, in spurs, cowboy boots, a yellow lone star badge of the plastic kind worn by children for Halloween costumes on his dark frock coat, pacing his way through fens and bogs and thick muck in the name of justice, even without the fierce Talus of *The Faerie Queene's* fifth book at his side. (Talus was somehow far easier to picture than Spenser himself; Talus, in fact, was so vividly present that it made one wonder if he was more real to Spenser than the absent center of the epic, the Faerie Queene herself.) To be sheriff of Cork in the 1580s seemed an impossible idea: I indulged in imagining a three-day gallop by messenger-cum-deputy from Cork City to Kilcolman to inform Spenser of some event, say, the robbing of the post office or some other modern crime. I amused myself imagining Spenser then accompanying the messenger on the three-day gallop back to Cork to try to catch the bad guys, lawman Spenser sizing up the neighborhood from a suitably dusty Cork doorway.

The reality of the job was, of course, quite different. The position that Spenser was awarded only shortly before leaving Ireland was a good one for the writer to have obtained, and provided a regular income to supplement his annual pension of fifty pounds. The sheriff's job was far more secretarial, indeed, ceremonial, than anything undertaken by John Wayne. There was an early colonial formality to the post that was utterly missing from my conjured images; it was the post of a colonial civil servant, rather than anything out of an American Western tradition. Spenser was not spinning his guns, in other words, or pacing away from some enemy before a shootout. What he was doing while sheriff was instead making further use of his talent as a shaper of language.

Oddly, none of my early imaginings of Spenser managed to engage with a central aspect of his life: in no way could I picture the bearded thin man actually writing. Nothing that I fabricated about Spenser allowed him to write, to etch stanza after endless stanza of his poem onto stiff yellowing paper, or to pore over an imagined dialogue between Irenius and Eudoxus for the treatise *A View of the*

Present State of Ireland, or even to attend to the written work that provided him with most of his living for most of his life—the letters and reports that he wrote, by hand, for superiors like Lord Grey de Wilton, and whose employment of him appears to have been the impetus behind Spenser's essentially permanent move to Ireland. Pen, ink, and paper were no minor chord in his life, and yet I could not find a way to insert this occupation into my imagining of Spenser.

This problem of the imagination was reinforced by the last fact that stayed in my memory from my earliest forays into Spenser: the burning-out and sack of Kilcolman Castle in 1598. A burned-out building could not contain the image of a writer at his work, and this was made vivid by my first sight of the structure's ruins when I visited it while still a New York graduate student yearning for a permanent place in Ireland. The stones stood solid gray against the green of grass, and everything wet, slick with winter rain, dark cloud pressing downward like an iron. Weather reigned in Kilcolman Castle now, four centuries after Spenser was forced out, and almost four centuries after his son Sylvanus, having returned after his father's death to rebuild the home in which he seems to have grown up. Standing among the rubble of the tower, bawn walls, and other outbuildings reduced to collapsing pyramids of rock, it is a strain to imagine Spenser at home, writing. There is no need to imagine what rain sounded like: it is a sound no longer kept from the former castle, which is open, like an unhealed wound, to the elements. If Spenser wrote here, as he must have, it was very difficult to imagine and actually picture the activity, the hand moving across the page, the arm reaching toward ink, the pauses to consider a phrase or a rhythm.

For Spenser, we have no image of “the artist at his work,” nothing comparable to, say, those images of Samuel Beckett's intense concentration while directing one of his plays, or the photograph of Seamus Heaney at his desk. While in the centuries prior to the invention of photography there were numerous testaments in painting to the idea of the artist at his work—one thinks immediately of Parmagianino's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, or of the numerous occasions on which a portrait painter inserted himself through a similar reflection—we lack comparable images of writers in the milieu in which they wrote.

But, while we lack photographs of Spenser, or paintings of him that might depict him at the work for which he has been remembered, we do not lack portraits. It shocked me to discover that there were indeed images of Spenser, formal portraits, most of which are owned by the National Portrait Gallery in London, and most of which are not displayed. My shock derived, perhaps, from a comparison with Shakespeare, whose image from portraits is so well known, so established: one might show a portrait of Shakespeare to secondary school stu-

dents and expect that a high percentage would recognize him, or guess his identity correctly. The same could never be said about Spenser.

The first portrait that I saw of Spenser was the one executed by the engraver Emery Walker. I had bought a 1912 edition of Spenser's works in a secondhand shop, delighted to have found a volume that contained minor works with which I was unfamiliar. I owned the volume for a full year, however, before I discovered the portrait at the front. The pages just before the table of contents had gummed together until one afternoon I discovered the stuck pages, released them one from the other, and found myself looking—lo! and behold—at Spenser. I was riveted by the portrait, staring at it intently in an attempt to align it with my non-image of the writer with the quirks of beard and spurs that I had so long imagined.

In Walker's painting, Spenser is, indeed, rather thin as I had imagined him to be; he has a long face, shaped by a beard that is light in color, and by eyes that are sunken, somehow hollowed out. Spenser died a young man; the man in the portrait could be anywhere from his mid-twenties to his mid-forties, which would bring us to the end of Spenser's life. The man in the portrait does not smile; there is something serious in the image, some restraint about the mouth, as if the sitter were pulling in his bottom lip ever so slightly, trying not to move. Spenser wears what looks to be a linen shirt, the collar of which appears from beneath a simple, straight buttoned jacket of what looks like a brocade or velvet—a fabric rich with texture, herring-boned. The collar is trimmed with fine lace that lies against the jacket, while the upper part of the collar, white, rises up around the sitter's neck, edging toward his beard. We are unable to see the sitter's arms or hands; Spenser is surrounded by dark, by a black oval of nothingness: Spenser, in the portrait, sits on nothing, appears as if in nothing, is simply a head and a torso without context. For me, it was extraordinary to gaze at this painting and feel that somehow the image, so profoundly removed from the world because of this encroaching dark, the dark oils of the paint edging in on the sitter's shoulders, head, was appropriate to my own non-image of Spenser. Spenser existed beyond context, beyond situation, beyond a narrative.

Having stumbled across my first image of Spenser, I sought others. These images are, for me, fascinating not only because they present a pictorial sense of what Spenser might have looked like, but more so because they do not present a definite image, one that is universal even among the small group of paintings. Spenser with variously colored hair and beard; Spenser with a larger or a smaller nose; Spenser looking darkly romantic or elementally serious: the paintings and engravings are, one from the other, different. We cannot explain this inconsistency simply by saying that each painter provided an interpretation; it is more complicated than that, because in many cases, we do not know who the

original artist was, or when he might have first painted Spenser. Many of the extant portraits of Spenser are painted or engraved, often at quite a distance in time from Spenser's own lifetime, "after" some unknown artist. The representations, then, lack provenance and context in the same way that the initial images themselves frequently do.

Interestingly, the earliest images of Spenser date from a century after his death, and it is possible—though we do not know whether these images are copies of earlier ones—they might actually reflect a "realistic" Spenser. That the images appear in the mid-eighteenth century tells us that Spenser was revered enough to warrant the production of varied engravings and paintings, some of which grouped him with other well-known writers under headings like "Worthies of Britain." Francis Kyte's mezzotint of this name includes Spenser alongside Chaucer and John Fletcher and Francis Beaumont, minor poets even in their own time. John Simon's mid-eighteenth-century mezzotint also situates Spenser amongst English authors; his "Poets and Philosophers of England Plate 1" includes, once again, Chaucer, and also Shakespeare and "Benjamin [not Ben] Johnson."

It rains: wind surges through trees that take on new shapes, boughs clutch wildly at each other. I look out my window, and think of how, in the end, the representation of Spenser in so many forms means that none of them is quite reliable. We can infer something of Spenser's importance to the period in which these portraits appeared from those with whom he is grouped. Other individual images of Spenser, which range to the early nineteenth century, continue to interpret his position of importance and offer a commentary on his literary standing relative to other writers and on his own; but they continue to differ in the representation of his image, and provide us with no enduring sense of what Spenser looked like.

This problem of settling upon an image is the same one that we engage in each time we come to a text of Spenser's, each time we try to conclude what, or who, Spenser was. Mutabilitie, that figure of reverence and contempt in what are presumed to be Spenser's final known poetic writings, has taken her charge of "all beneath the moon" seriously. And out in the yard, against the sheds that store wood for the winter, the jasmine—white stars still fragrant for autumn—is engaged in a shocking dance; I watch it heave away from itself and return, heave again, knowing it will eventually give way. Snapdragons, calendula, and a fuschia that have persisted until now through a month's rains lose their summer color to the wind.