The Faerie Kings: Yeats's Spenser

"The task of a poet is to make his imaginative world clear to himself" – Edwin Muir

When W.B. Yeats marks the end of a "glorious" age of Irish history in his 1937 poem "The Municipal Gallery Re-Visited," he quotes Edmund Spenser's "The Ruines of Time:" "And now that the end has come I have not wept;/ No fox can foul the lair the badger swept./(An image out of Spenser and the common tongue.)" (ll. 38-40).[1] George Bornstein comments that Yeats is "bidding farewell as much to the progenitor of his favorite literary images" as to his friends from that moment of Ireland's history.[2] Spenser indeed supplies Yeats with many of his favorite images: of enchanted trees and rivers, of questing heroes and Muses and goddesses and faeries; along with Shelley, Spenser is one of the earliest and strongest literary influences on the poet. At a crucial phase of his own poetic development, Yeats selected and edited *Poems of Spenser*[3] and composed notes and an introductory essay for the volume.[4] His work on the essay and his immersion in Spenser's poems helped the poet articulate his ideas about the role of a poet in his society, about the use of enchanted landscapes in Yeats's own work, about the possibilities of and differences between allegory and symbolism, about the long political history of Ireland's relationship to England, and about the development of English literary history and Yeats's own place in that development. As a critic of Spenser, Yeats not only writes about his own theretofore written poetry as he analyzes Spenser's poems,

[1] All poems, unless otherwise noted, from *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats,* ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996)
[2] George Bornstein, *Poetic Remaking: The Art of Browning, Yeats and Pound* (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 103.
[3] *Poems of Spenser: Selected with an Introduction by W.B. Yeats* (Edinburgh: T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1906)
[4] The essay was reprinted in *Essays and Introductions* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961) as "Edmund Spenser." All citations from the essay refer to this volume.

but also he points towards various concepts as yet undeveloped in his work, which in the coming years would show subtler, profounder Spenserian influence as these ideas seeped into his poems, plays, and essays. As a touchstone for understanding Yeats, *Poems of Spenser* gives us a way to interpret the development of a poet who throughout his career sought to reconcile private and personal concerns, politics and enchantment, reality and dreams, landscape and person.

Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory in January of 1902 to tell her of his offer to edit a "book of selections from Spenser for £35," and comments that he has "a good deal to say about Spenser, but tremble[s] at the thought of reading his six books [of the *Faerie Queene*]."[5] In January of 1903 he wrote Lady Gregory to say that he had sent the essay off to the publisher, though the volume itself was not published until 1906. Yeats had co-edited, with Edwin Ellis, a volume of Blake's poetry in 1889, but that edition and *Poems of Spenser* remained the only two single-poet volumes of poetry Yeats ever edited. A.G. Stock writes of 1887-1902 as formative years for the "leading ideas" which became important throughout Yeats's life. Stock writes that Yeats's "thinking about poetry" was as much a part of his "formative experience as his encounters with men, women, and events of the world around him."[6] Yeats understands the importance of thinking about the poems of others to any poet's development in terms of its formal benefits. He says of Spenser himself that he "learned from Sidney that impulse and method of creation that can only be learned with surety from the technical criticism of poets."[7]

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[5] *The Letters of W. B. Yeats,* ed. Allan Wade (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), 365.
[6] A.G. Stock 93
[7] A.G. Stock,"Yeats on Spenser," in *In Excited Reverie: A Centenary Tribute to William Butler Yeats 1965-1939,* ed. A. Norman Jeffares and K.G.W. Cross, 93-101. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), 359.

Yeats had long acknowledged a Spenserian influence on his work: his first published play, the 1885 *Island of the Statues* was a self-conscious imitation of Spenser and Shelley. But when set to the task of editing a volume of the great Elizabethan poet, Yeats needed to consider carefully his interpretations of the poet's work and age, and to figure out how they related to his modern world. Bornstein's research reveals that the marginalia in Yeats's working copy of Spenser shows his preoccupations with the texts: "its connection to Ireland, its exaltation of Venus or Intellectual Beauty, and its relation to romantic poetry."[8] These issues, and others important to Yeats such as courtliness, the development of allegory, and the tensions within Renaissance England, find their way into the introductory essay. Thomas Whitaker writes that Yeats was "not, in the academic sense, a disciplined thinker […] he was skilled at finding what he wished to find; and he often oversimplified and distorted the thought of others, molding it to resemble his own."[9] It has long been the process of poets to use their own thoughts about poetry, even their own poems, to talk about another poet. That great poet/critic of Romanticism, Samuel Coleridge, writes of Spenser's use of dream space that "it reminds me of some lines of my own," before quoting eight lines of his *Remorse*.[10] And, Richard Ellmann points out that when Yeats writes that "Balzac's will is always at crisis, or approaching crisis," he is writing in terms that apply to his own passionate work.[11] So when Yeats writes about Spenser, he is surely writing, at least in part, about himself. Yeats selected for the volume "only those passages from Spenser that I want to remember and carry

[8] Bornstein, *Poetic Remaking,* 100
[9] Thomas Whitaker, *Swan and Shadow: Yeats's Dialogue with History* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1964), 15.
[10] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Spenser's Art," in *Edmund Spender's Poetry*, ed. Hugh Maclean. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1968), 580.
[11] Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks (*New York: E.P. Dutton, 1948), 293.

around with me,"[12] and thus one can see, in *The Poems of Spenser*, those texts which had been most important to Yeats's poetry and plays before 1902, and can glimpse the way in which these texts themselves became a poetic landscape to which Yeats returned throughout his life.

Early Influences: Dreaming of Faeryland

"I've built a dreaming palace" –Yeats, prefatory poem to *Vivien and Time,* 1884[13]

In his *Autobiographies*, Yeats recalls the beginning of his writing career: "I had begun to write poetry in imitation of Shelley and of Edmund Spenser, play after play – for my father exalted the dramatic poetry above all other kinds – and I invented fantastic and incoherent plots."[14] The "fantastic plots" of Spenser, and the adaptations of Spenserian plots elements by Shelley and other romantics, were clearly a source of early fascination for the young poet. The young Yeats is interested in Spenser insofar as Spenser is an harbinger of the Romantic poets; the afterlife of Spenser's use of plot, landscape, and archaic language in Romanticism is key to Yeats's interest, as Yeats sees himself as a Romantic poet. In his essay on Spenser, Yeats compares a "Spenserian stanza out of Shelley," from *Laon and Cythna* to Spenser's *Adonais*, demonstrating a trajectory of influence.[15]

One of the most notable features of Spenser's poetry is its deliberately archaic, that is positively medieval, use of language. One need not look far to see that Yeats's

[12] "Edmund Spenser," 381.
[13] Qtd. in Ellmann, *The Man and the Masks,* 33.
[14] *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats, (*New York: Macmillan Company, 1953), 40.
[15] "Edmund Spenser," 379-380.

early poetry often adapted diction and syntax outdated in the late nineteenth century.[16] Many volumes of Yeats's collected poems begin with "The Song of the Happy Shepherd," written in 1885 and originally entitled "An Epilogue to 'The Island of Statues,'" and also "The Seeker." The short lyric came from the long dramatic poem *The Island of the Statues*, which Yeats describes as "an arcadian play in imitation of Edmund Spenser."[17] The poem begins: "The woods of Arcady are dead,/And over is their antique joy." But though the poem laments the loss of the Spenserian Arcadia, it reasserts the power of old poetry and poetic ideals. Much of the diction is old-fashioned: "Rood" and "Chronos" were words no more common for "cross" and "time" in the 1880s than they are today. There are whole phrases that echo with the syntax and rhythm and alliteration of earlier poetry: "Then nowise worship dusty deeds,/Nor seek, for this is also sooth,/ To hunger fiercely after truth,/Lest all thy toiling only breeds/New dreams, new dreams[….]" (ll. 22-26). Spenser has taught Yeats how to use archaic language for poetic effect, be it nostalgic or Otherworldly. As Yeats mourns the passing of "old earth's dreamy youth," he welcomes the power of poetry ("for words alone are certain good," l.43), of the "truth[…]in thine own heart" (ll. 26-27), and of a "dream, for this is also sooth" (l.57). In celebrating the power of these "ancient joys" yet to overcome the "Grey Truth" of the modern world, Yeats is inviting those ideals of gorgeous language, of searches for truth and beauty, of dreams and visions, of the "wandering earth herself," which will never leave his consciousness.

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[16] It is amusing to note the way in which Yeats playfully adapted archaic language in his notes to Spenser's poems. For example, his note on p. 278 to a line from the *Mutablitie* Cantos reads, "where Peter wist not what he said."

[17] *Autobiography,* 56.

Yeats's first poetic success, the long narrative poem *The Wandering of Oisin,* (1887, revised 1895), also owes much to Spenser, and to the idea, as expressed implicitly in Spenser's archaism and explicitly in his *Mutabilitie* Cantos, of mourning for a lost order. Blending the Spenserian with the Celtic, Yeats's Niamh, daughter of the Celtic god of love, sings of "faery and man/Before God was or my old line began" (Bk. II, ll. 8-9). Spenser appropriated both the gods of classical antiquity and the fairies of Celtic lore to create the allegorical land of his *Faerie Queen*. Yeats, re-telling the Celtic myth of Oisin but seeped in Spenser (as well as, as Daniel Albright points out, Tennyson),[18] learns from the Elizabethan poet how Celtic ideas might be Anglicized into new poetry. For example, the *topos* of wandering through a darkly unknowable Celtic Otherworld pervades Spenser:

> This is the wandering wood, this *Erours den,*
> A monster vile, whom God and man does hat:
> Therefore I read beware. Fly fly (quoth then
> The fearefull Dwarfe:) this is no place for liuing men.[19]

Yeats begins his poem "with a heavy heart and a wandering mind," and in a later moment, resonating with Spenser's enchanted trees and forest streams:

> And, now our wandering hours were done,
> We cantered to the shore, and knew
> The reason of the trembling trees:
> Round every branch the song-birds flew (ll.177-180).

In writing about the poem "The Stolen Child," Yeats comments that the poem's place names, Sleuth Wood, Rosses, and Glen-Car, beyond which "lies a leafy island" of fairies to which a human child is carried away, are actual place names around his own

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[18] Daniel Albright, *W.B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London; J.M. Dent & Sons, 1990), 399.
[19] *The Faerie Queen*, ed. Thomas P. Roche jr. (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), I.I.13.

Sligo, and that the story itself came from local legend. When Yeats reads Spenser, he is keenly aware that the backdrop of the poet's composition of such poems as the *Faerie Queene* was his own Ireland, a geography which creeps into Spenser's poetry in the forms of place names and images. Yeats explains at length, for example, that the Arlo Hill of Spenser's *Mutabilitie* Cantos is a hill near Spenser's home,[20] or that "our Irish Aubeg is 'Mulla mine, whose waves I taught to weep.'"[21] Both poets, then, are writing of a Celtic tradition while they themselves are dwelling amongst the verdant, mountainous, one might say enchanted Irish landscape that is as responsible for the fairies and Otherworlds of legend as the country's story-tellers. It could be said that while Yeats infuses his idea of Ireland with the Otherworldly in his poems and essays on the fairies which he thought to be very real, Spenser infuses his fictional Faeryland with Ireland, inserting the mountains and streams of his new habitat into his poems. When the "Man who Dreamed of Faeryland" wakes up from his symbol-induced fantasies, he can afterwards "know no place."[22] Paralyzed by his memory of the beautiful fairy world, the man cannot enjoy human life and longs for the possibility of returning to the Otherworld of his dream in death, which turns out to be just "unhaunted sleep." There is a sense to which Yeats and Spenser both, enchanted by the Irish landscape and their own dreamy imaginations, become dreamers of faeryland who must use the metaphors of far-off places and visionary dreams to understand and explain their own realities.

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[20] *Poems of Spenser,* 278.
[21] "Edmund Spenser," 360.
[22] David Daiches, "The Earlier Poems: Some Themes and Patterns," in *In Excited Reverie: A Centenary Tribute to William Butler Yeats 1965-1939,* ed. A. Norman Jeffares and K.G.W. Cross (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), 57.

Of Patrons, Courts, and Coole Park

"*Thocht I in courte be maid refuse*
And have few vertewis for to ruse,
Yit am I cum of Adame and Eve
And fane wald leif as utheris dois.
Exces of thocht dois me mischeif." –William Dunbar, "Schir, Yit Remember"

Yeats's *Poems of Spenser* is subdivided into categorical chapters, the second of which, entitled "Courtiers and Great Men," reveals one of Yeats's crucial attractions to Spenser. Yeats writes of Spenser's courtly affiliations, with the Earl of Leicester and his nephew Sir Philip Sidney, that they "gave his imagination its moral and practical turn." Yeats praises the "pastoral beauty and allegorical images of current events" in *The Shepheards Calender*, a long poem written under Sidney's influence and dedicated to him, and by no coincidence, Spenser's first great success.[23] Yeats, who at the time of writing his essay had been in the close company of Lady Gregory for around four years, recognizes both the financial and artistic benefits of having something like an aristocratic patron. T. McAlindon writes of the way in which Spenser, along with Shakespeare and Jonson, made for Yeats the model of an aristocratic poet particularly appealing, as the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, positioned in a time of cultural change, resembled Yeats's own place in early modernity:

> Among all the contributory influences behind Yeats's transformation into an aristocratic poet, English Renaissance literature should be granted special position. For it offered him, at the most hesitant stage of his development as a poet, the encouraging precedent of great poets, who, faced with the first signs of modernism, self-consciously adhered to a courtly ideal, despised the mob, and hated change.[24]

Maintaining that "the fate of the courtly poet in the presence of Modernism" is the subject of Yeats's essay on Spenser, McAlindon proposes that Yeats's aristocratic myth

[23] "Edmund Spenser," 359, 360.
[24] T. McAlindon, "Yeats and the English Renaissance," *PMLA* 82.3 (May, 1967):157.

was developed through his reading of Spenser, Shakespeare, and Jonson, instead of through Castiglione, as is often proposed. Yeats writes of Spenser's England as in transition from an Anglo-French nation, "the old feudal nation that had been established when the Norman and the Angevin made French the language of the court," and the Anglo-Saxon nation, "that was arising amid Puritan sermons and Marprelate pamphlets." He shows great nostalgia for the "Merry England," of the Anglo-French nation, for a time when courtly poets no less than Chaucer, or even Dunbar in Scotland,[25] wrote "full of abandon and willfulness," and "the earth had still its sheltering sacredness."[26] Spenser himself mourns the passing of such a time, for example in a few stanzas of his "The Teares of the Muses," re-titled "The Muse Laments that there are no more great poets" by Yeats:

> But now nor Prince nor Priest doth her maintayne
> But suffer her prophaned for to bee
> Of the base vulgar, that with hands uncleane
> Dares to pollute her hidden mysterie;
> And treadeth under foote hir holie things,
> Which was the care of Kesars and of Kings.[27]

Yeats inherits the idea of a poetic mourning for a time past, but also the notion of a poet unappreciated in his own time.

While Yeats clung to the aristocratic model of patronage and disdain for the middle and lower classes, as did Spenser, he recognized the changing status of the poet in his society. His ideas about the future of the aristocratic poet do not find their full force until later in Yeats's career, when, as he ages and his own "court" at Lady Gregory's Coole Park disintegrates from the deaths of her son and then of Lady Gregory herself, he

[25] Yeats makes references to Spenser's "unacknowledged" use of Dunbar's poetry in his notes, pp. 274 and 275.
[26] "Edmund Spenser," 365.
[27] *Poems of Spenser*, 74.

expresses the courtly ideal most fully, by lamenting its loss in his own life. In his essay on Spenser, Yeats analyzes what he re-titles "The Death of the Earl of Leicester" from the *Ruines of Times*:

> He now is dead, and all is with him dead,
> Save what in heavens storehouse he uplaid:
> His hope is faild, and come to passe his dread
> […]He now is gone, the whiles the Foxe is crept
> Into the hole, the which the Badger swept.[28]

Yeats explains his reading of the lyric: "at the end of a long beautiful passage [Spenser] laments that unworthy men should be in the dead Earl's place, and compares them to the fox–an unclean feeder–hiding in the lair 'the badger swept.'" But while Yeats is, in 1902, able to read and determine the meaning of Spenser's metaphor, it is not until much later that he himself feels he has *lived* the sentiment of the poem. In "Coole Park, 1929," Yeats glimpses the inevitable end that will come to his court of "an aged woman and her house" (l. 2). As he praises "a woman's powerful character" for establishing "a scene well set and excellent company," (l. 18, 16) he recalls the tone of Spenser's lamentations for a time, "Not long, since these two eyes beheld/A mightie Prince, of most renowned race[…]of greates ones did sue to gaine his grace." Imagining the future time "when all those rooms and passages are gone" at Coole Park he dedicates "a moment's memory to that laurelled head" (l. 26, 32). He is predicting, in essence, the time when his patron will have died and there will be, as Spenser cries for his Earl, "no man left to mone,/His dolefull fate, that late him loved deare." In "Coole and Ballylee, 1931," Yeats echoes Spenser's worry that after the Earl's death there will be "ne ani Poet seekes him to revive,/Yet manie Poets honourd him alive," and his 1931 poem laments more fully the

[28] Ibid., 72.

unavoidable passing of Lady Gregory herself, not just the impending end of Coole Park. Without the "last inheritor," Lady Gregory's only son Robert, the fate of the patron and her poet is even more unstable. Yeats fears not only that there will be "ne ani Poet" to sing her praise, but also that the very nature of poetry has changed so that it will soon be impossible for poets to understand and describe anything like Lady Gregory and her estate:

> We were the last romantics – chose for theme
> Traditional sanctity and loveliness
> Whatever's written in what poets name
> The book of the people; whatever most can bless
> The mind of man or elevate a rhyme;
> But all is changed, that high horse riderless,
> Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode
> Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood (ll. 41-48).

Indeed the end of life at Coole Park was near: in the following year, 1932, Lady Gregory died, and so it was that after her death, Yeats finally could fully comprehend, and quote in his own verse, the sentiments of Spenser's poem.

Gazing at a portrait of Lady Gregory in the Municipal Gallery in 1937, he writes in "The Municipal Gallery Re-Visited" that he is "in despair that time may bring/Approved patterns of women or men/But not that selfsame excellence again" (ll. 30-32). He remembers his great patron as "that woman, in that household where/Honour had lived so long, all lacking found" (ll. 34-35). Remembering his earliest days at the estate as opposed to those expressed in the Coole Park poems, he recalls that he then "never foresaw its end" (l. 37). But now that the estate and its Lady are gone, he is comforted, slightly, by "an image out of Spenser," for the destruction of Coole Park after Lady Gregory's death means that unlike the palace of the Earl of Leciester, Coole Park remains as pure as the swans which once inhabited it, not sullied by the "badger."

Otherworlds from Faerylands to Byzantium

"What is literature but the expression of moods by the vehicle of symbol and incident? And are there not moods which need heaven, hell, purgatory, and faeryland for their expression, no less than this dilapidated earth?" –Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight*

Yeats learned about more than the enchantment of a courtly world from Spenser. As I discussed above, the otherworldly Faeryland of Spenser's poetry crept much into Yeats's early work. But whereas in his early years Yeats simply re-wrote Spenser's landscapes and adapted many of his images wholesale, his later poetry reveals a more complex understanding of the way Otherworlds can function in poetry, as landscapes of the past, of the mind, of dreams. Re-reading his early poems, Yeats writes in his *Autobiography* that "it is so many years before one can believe enough in what one feels even to know what the feeling is." He calls this process of catching up a "withering into truth," and one can see that as Yeats aged, the boyhood delight he found in the enchanted worlds of Spenser developed into a reading of the poet complicated by his constantly evolving aesthetic, political, and spiritual ideas. In the essay "Discoveries," Yeats writes of Launcelot (he must mean Malory), that the book "ever a shadow, is more visible in my memory than all its substance," and the same could be said of Spenser.[29]

In his early poetry, the enchanted realms of Yeats's poetry retain what Coleridge called in Spenser, "the marvelous independence and true imaginative absence of all particular space or time in the *Faerie Queen*[…]truly the land of the Faery, that is, of mental space[…]a dream, a charmed space."[30] The floaty, Spenserian dream space of Yeats's early poetry gave way, in later poems, to a more specific grounding in time and place. Albright remarks that, "through the first part of his career, Yeats's landscapes grow

[29] "Discoveries," in *Essays and Introductions,* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), 273.
[30] Coleridge, "Spenser's Art," 580.

increasingly weightless; they are evacuated into significance," saying that for example in "He mourns for the Change" (1897), "we are not in Ireland, or Arcadia, or India, but in a wash of moods."[31] Like Coleridge, Yeats appreciated the way in which landscape created mood in *The Faerie Queene* and became itself a subject of poetry, and like Coleridge, he tried to replicate it. Yeats writes that Spenser, "loved the landscape more than the man,"[32] and in his early years as a poet, so did Yeats. No longer, as Ellmann has written of "The Island of Statues," can "words and dreams be equated."[33] The once-dreamy poet has realized that he could not make Maud Gonne love him, nor fight for Ireland's independence, in faeryland. In his 1916 poem "Men Improve with Years," about young Iseult Gonne's rejection of him, he sounds like Tennyson's Lady of Shallott. Instead of being "half-sick of shadows," Yeats begins, "I am worn out with dreams." He is now "weather-worn," with, in the words of Spenser, "all his vitall powres/Decayd, and all his flesh shronk vp like withered flowers."[34] As he "grow[s] old among dreams," the dream-poems of Spenser and Shelley and Coleridge, as well as his own fantasies of love and heroism, Yeats wonders as to the veracity of his literary and biographical reveries, never able to accept that they could be entirely fantastic: "and yet, and yet/Is this my dream, or the truth?" (ll. 12-13).

Yeats's long history with the Occult, beginning in 1887 with his first associations with the Spiritualist Madame Blavatsky in London, meant that the spirit world reached by dreams or séances, was a real, not necessarily merely imagined space. Helen Sword writes that Yeats "sought in the séance room not easy enlightenment but a confirmation

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[31] Albright, *W.B. Yeats: The Poems,* xxx.
[32] "Edmund Spenser," 356.
[33] Ellmann, *The Man and the Masks,* 38.
[34] *Faerie Queene*, I.Iii.41.

of his belief in the slipperiness of human consciousness, the precariousness of language, and the overwhelming complexity of modern life."[35] In *A Vision*, Yeats writes that Spritualism and mediumship are "metaphors for poetry."[36] There is thus another crucial difference between the dream worlds of Yeats and Spenser. For Spenser, the fantastic landscapes of dreams and fantasies are a metaphor, an allegory, for the ideas of his poetry. But for Yeats, the Otherworld is a real place: the line between "dream" and "truth" has been irrevocably blended, the spirit world may actually be reached, and this *process* of reaching another world is poetry's best metaphor. In his essay "Magic," Yeats proposes that "the borders of our mind are ever shifting" and a part of a "single mind, a single energy," and our memories are part of "one great memory."[37] The Otherworld, then, is not something dreamed up by the poet, but, "our most elaborate thoughts, elaborate purposes, precise emotions, are often, not really ours, but have on a sudden come up, as it were, out of Hell or down out of Heaven."[38]

Although he insisted on the reality of an Otherworld accessible in the present, Yeats's "most lavishly imagined anti-world,"[39] is a world of the past made supernatural by the distance of time and space. When Yeats writes of Byzantium, he speaks of a world already enchanted by centuries of medieval romance (see for example Chrétien de Troyes's *Cligés*), in which poets imagined the intimidatingly rich Constantinople as a fairyland. Diane Purkiss suggests that Spenser was echoing medieval descriptions of Byzantium when he describes Cleopolis, the land of the Faerie Queene herself, as "the

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[35] Helen Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 104.
[36] *A Vision, (*New York: Macmillan Company, 1956), 8.
[37] "Magic," in *Essays and Introductions,* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), 28.
[38] Ibid., 40.
[39] Albright, 629.

fairest Citie that might be seene[…]that does far surpass,/And this bright Angels towre quite dims that towre of glas."[40] When Yeats writes of his "fairest Citie" in "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium," the city (or country, as it becomes) is an idealized manifestation of a perfect political society, a full realization of man's relation to art and the expression of the spirit in the physical, seeable "gold mosaic of a wall" ("Sailing," l. 18). Whitaker writes that "Sailing to Byzantium" is "a voyage to a specific point in history[…]beyond all history, and in which monuments of the soul's magnificence reveal sages standing in God's holy fire."[41] Yeats has left the "religion of the wilderness" he describes as Spenser's and Shelley's, but continues to, as he said of Spenser, "feel through the eyes."[42] Longing in old age to enter the "artifice of eternity," he creates in the world of the poem a realm in which immortality comes via a poet or craftsman's undying art, "monuments of ungageing intellect" (l. 8). In "Byzantium," the image floats before him, sending him into a reverie on immortality: "I hail the superhuman; I call it death-in-life and life-in-death." As for Spenser in his *Mutabilitie* Cantos, death becomes an increasing obsession. Instead of describing a heavenly Otherworld of the afterlife, "Byzantium" is the possibility of living on in "those images that yet/Fresh images beget," those images which "break bitter furies of complexity" and pierce through to a future time and place (ll. 38-39, 37).

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[40] Diane Purkiss, *At the Bottom of the Garden: A Dark History of Fairies, Hobgoblins, and Other Troublesome Things (*New York: New York University Press), 203. *Faerie Queene,* I.W.58.
[41] Whitaker, *Swan and Shadow,* 116.
[42] "Edmund Spenser," 377, 383.

Symbols and Allegories

"I cannot now think symbols less than the greatest of all powers whether they are used consciously by the masters of magic, or half unconsciously by their successors, the poet, the musician, and the artist." – Yeats, "Magic"

Byzantine operates as a symbol, as opposed to an allegory, in Yeats's poems. The distinction is one that is important to Yeats, and one that he fleshes out in his essay on Spenser. He understands both allegory and symbolism as a medium for communication between this world and the next, between body and soul:

> Allegory and, to a much greater degree, symbolism are a natural language by which the soul when entranced, or even in ordinary sleep, communes with God and with angels. They can speak of things which cannot be spoken of in any other language, but one will always, I think, feel some sense of unreality when they are used to describe things which can be described as well in ordinary words.[43]

Spenser's failure, Yeats believes, was that he "never gets that visionary air which can alone make allegory real," that air which gives Dante and Bunyan's allegories "visionary strangeness and intensity." In his essay "Symbolism in Painting," of 1898, Yeats had begun to establish the difference between allegory and symbolism. He worries that the *Faerie Queene*'s popularity had caused, in England at any rate, "allegory to overtop Symbolism." For Yeats it is William Blake who defines the difference upon which a poet must insist. Suggesting that Blake means symbolism by "vision or imagination," Yeats quotes him: "Vision or imagination is a representation of what actually exists, really or unchangeably. Fable or Allegory is formed by the daughters of Memory."[44] For Yeats, adopting Blake's definition, the symbol is of a higher order because it speaks to the truth through magical symbols, instead of being, as for Spenser, mere imagination, decorating an allegory with fanciful metaphors. It could be said that Yeats liked the side-effect of

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[43] Ibid., 368.
[44] "Symbolism in Painting," in *Essays and Introductions* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), 146.

allegory, but not allegory itself: he wanted to create a Spenserian dream world, but he did not want it merely to represent creatively a set of exterior truths that could be spoken of just as well in their own terms. Rather, the worlds and symbols Yeats created were ends to themselves, they are the actual matter of the poem. Symbols, he explains in the essay "Magic," evoke the "great mind and great memory" that are shared by all. This process is "magic, an evocation of the spirits[…]in the visions of truth in the depths of the mind."[45]

In one of Yeats's last poems, "The Circus Animals' Desertion," the poet looks back on the various symbols and images he has used throughout his career. He recalls "First that sea-rider Oisin led by the nose/Through three enchanted islands, allegorical dreams,/Vain gaiety, vain battle, vain repose" (ll. 10-12). He realizes that the allegory of his early poem is actually a symbol of his real-life quest for love: "But what cared I that set him on to ride,/I, starved for the bosom of his fairy bride" (ll. 15-16). He had not understood, in his first attempts to write allegorically, that in fact he was writing symbols of his own future. The "counter-truth" of the allegory was the play he wrote, "Countess Cathleen," in which Maud Gonne starred in the leading role. When she literally entered into the world of his poetic creation, that of the play, "this brought forth a dream and soon enough/This dream itself had all my thought and love" (ll. 23-24). In his long quest for Maud's heart, Yeats reveals the truth of Shakespeare's words: "the lunatic, the lover, and the poet are of an imagination compact." There is no difference, for Yeats, between dream and person, between poem and life, between the heart as symbol and the true heart:

> Heart mysteries there, and yet when all is said
> It was the dream itself enchanted me:

[45] "Magic," 28.

> Character isolated by a deed
> To engross the present and dominate memory
> Players and painted stage took all my love
> And not those things that they were emblems of (ll. 26-32)

His last stanza seems a fitting critique of Spenser, of all who created "masterful images" which did not ground themselves in the gritty realities of existence, of allegories which do not acknowledge the inseparability of symbol and truth:

> Those masterful images because complete
> Grew in pure mind but out of what began?
> A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
> Old kettles, old bottles, a broken can,
> Old iron, old bones, old rages, that raving slut
> Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone
> I must lie down where all the ladders start
> In the foul rage and bone shop of the heart (ll. 33-40).

At the last, the "dilapidated earth," so neglected in allegorical forests and Heavenly visions alike, is the best source for the images which symbolize a real man's existence.

Views of the Present State of Ireland

"All around, shards of a lost tradition
The whole landscape a manuscript
We had lost the skill to read,
A part of our past disinherited
But fumbled, like a blind man,
Along the finger-tips of instinct." –John Montague

Although it was the lack of real-world grounding in Spenser's allegory which Yeats criticized, Spenser's most direct address of real-world issues, his treatise, *View of the Present State of Ireland*, drew Yeats's wrath. Indeed one of the most difficult aspects of Spenser-the-poet for Yeats was his anti-Irish sentiment, and in the figure of the English poet in 16th century Ireland, Yeats found a locus in which to think about his own Anglo-Irish traumas, of the nightmare of the hyphen. Yeats does not exaggerate the importance of Spenser's ferocious book to the understanding of Irish-English relations.

Declan Kiberd begins his massive chronicle *Inventing Ireland* with the Elizabethan poet: "from the later sixteenth century, when Edmund Spenser walked the plantations of Munster, the English have presented themselves to the world as controlled, refined and rooted; and so it suited them to find the Irish hot-headed, rude, and nomadic, the perfect foil to set off their own virtues."[46] Yeats's essay on Spenser discusses the way in which the poet never understood "the people he lived among or the historical events that were changing all things about him," while in Ireland. Yeats is protesting almost too much, in order that he may remind himself of his own need to understand his people and his changing world. He calls Spenser "an hysterical patient" who "drew a complicated web of inhuman logic out of the bowels of an insufficient premise" in his *View*,[47] although Yeats does not lack pathos when he explains that the Irish eventually drove Spenser out of his home and into poverty and death. Spenser is thus for Yeats both a villain and victim of Irish-English relations, a warning of that rancor which the Irish Nationalist Yeats wanted never to forget. As Yeats writes his essay on Spenser, he realizes that literature and nationality are inseparable.

In his "General Introduction to my Work," Yeats summarizes his difficulties with being partially English by genealogy, and almost wholly English by literary inheritance: "all my family names are English, and I owe my soul to Shakespeare, to Spenser and to Blake, perhaps to William Morris, and to the English language in which I think, speak, and write, that everything I love has come to me through English; my hatred tortures me with love, my love with hate."[48] As he writes in his essay on Spenser of the contrast,

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[46] Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), 9.
[47] "Edmund Spenser," 361.
[48] "A General Introduction to my work," *Essays and Introductions* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), 519.

within England, between the Anglo-French and the Anglo-Saxon worlds, one can see that Yeats is also deliberating over the Anglo-Irish tradition of which he is a part, and the fast-dying Gaelic-Irish tradition which he and Lady Gregory have sought to preserve through their collections of Irish fairy and folk tales. In his diary in 1930, Yeats writes of the task that has been his obsession: "preserve what is living and help the two Irelands, Gaelic Ireland and Anglo Ireland, so to unite that neither shall shed its pride."[49] When writing on Spenser, Yeats suggests that he, too, was in an age of sea-change, not just between the Anglo-Norman and Anglo-Saxon eras of his native England, but in his adopted Ireland, which was "in the last struggle of the Old Celtic order."[50] Seeking in Spenser's work glimpses how to preserve a Celtic past in an Anglicized Ireland, Yeats is expressing also his sadness for a lost culture which has been buried by the shared language and customs and Yeats and Spenser alike. Writing to George Russell (AE) in 1898, Yeats proposes the task which he himself takes up in his work: "absorb Ireland and her tragedy and you will be the poet of a people, perhaps the poet of a new insurrection."[51] Writing in 1995, Kiberd suggests that Yeats, not Russell, succeeded in being the poet of the Irish people, for his "grand destiny was to make Ireland once again interesting to the Irish."[52]

"We are the last romantics"

"Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow;
Nought may endure by Mutability" –Shelley

Yeats and Spenser both lived in times of great political and literary transition, and one can see the way in which Yeats likens himself, as poet, to Spenser in terms of his unique positioning in time. Spenser, according to Yeats, was the first romantic, and Yeats

[49] *Pages from a Diary Written in Nineteen Hundred and Thirty*. (Dublin, 1944), 54.
[50] "Edmund Spenser," 362.
[51] *Letters*, 295.
[52] Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 3.

is the last. Yeats suggests that Spenser was the "last poet of the old order" who mixes his refined "art with his own long-descended, irresponsible, happy art,"[53] of knights and ladies and fantastic beasts, the very images resurrected by the Romantics and kept alive in Yeats's early verse. Yeats also praises the adapted "classical metre" of the poet, which is both formal and also "liberated from the minute felicities of phrase and sound." Yeats suggests that there is sincere personal emotion when rhyme and rhythm break down in Spenser's early poetry. Spenser wrote at a "crossroad," in poetic development, from which "Milton was in the end to dislike rhyme as much," and not use it all. In retrospect, one sees that Spenser wrote during the end of the dominance of classical poetic forms, just before the Miltonian invention of blank verse. Yeats, who like Spenser invented his own forms but nonetheless always maintained some sort of pattern in rhyme and meter, lived to see the rise of free verse but did not himself practice it, forever dooming himself to be classified in a limbo between Victorianism and Modernism.

In Spenser's *Mutablities* Cantos, which were Yeats's favorite of all of his verses, Spenser writes of, as one critic says, "the eruption of a deeply experienced history on what had been Spenser's ideal landscape."[54] Yeats invents an ideal Ireland, an ideal faeryland, an ideal Byzantium for his poems, but these landscapes have been disturbed, unmistakably, by historical events, by the Irish uprising no less than the Great War. Yeats is the last poet, perhaps, to take faeryland seriously as a symbol in quite that alchemic way which Spenser first perfected. He is the last of the aristocratic poets, as Spenser was one of the last poets to write for a royal court in the order of Chaucer. If Spenser taught Yeats to seek divinity in the landscape, he also taught him, in his final poetic gesture of

[53] "Edmund Spenser," 367.
[54] Ricardo Quinones, "The Mutabilities Cantos," in *Edmund Spender's Poetry*, ed. Hugh Maclean (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1968), 690.

Mutalibitie, that "Times do change and moue continually./So nothing here long standeth in one stay:/Wherefore, this lower world who can deny/But to be suiect still to *Mutabilitie*?"[55] Albright explains that "as Yeats grew older, he wanted to realize divinity less in haunted and moody landscapes than in himself."[56] Yeats realizes, as does Spenser, that the faeries and fancy and Otherworlds, are, like himself, "such stuff as dreams are made on." When he, like Shelley and Coleridge,[57] composes his "Lines written in Dejection," he acknowledges the failure of images to explain the changing world:

> When I have last looked on
> The round green eyes and the long wavering bodies
> Of the dark leopards of the moon?
> All the wild witches, those most noble ladies,
> For all their broom-sticks and their tears,
> Their angry tears, are gone.
> The holy centaurs of the hills are vanished;
> I have nothing but the embittered sun;
> Banished heroic mother moon and vanished,
> And now that I have come to fifty years
> I must endure the timid sun.

The Celtic and Spenserian images of his poetry, Yeats fears, will eventually reveal themselves to be empty hopes of a better world. Again quoting Spenser,[58] Yeats realizes, in "The Tower," that "It seems that I must bid the Muse go pack" (l. 11). Pacing outside his tower home under the timid sun, in this case "day's declining beam," Yeats "call[s]/Images and memories/From ruin or from ancient trees,/For I would ask a question of them all" (ll.21-24). The images and memories, of *Ruines of Time* and "Enchanted Trees," of everything Yeats found in Spenser, gave him more questions than answers, which is for Yeats, perhaps, the greatest gift a poet could give or receive.

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[55] *Faerie Queen*, Mutabilities, VII.47.
[56] Albright, *W.B. Yeats: The Poems*. xxxi.
[57] Recalling Shelley's "Stanzas written in Dejection," and Coleridge's "Dejection: an Ode."
[58] "Teares of the Muses," l. 11.