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Colin Clout's Homecoming: The Imaginative Travels of Edmund Spenser

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Let me begin by expressing my sense of gratitude and pleasure at being able to address you today. You will of course recognize the conventionality of this remark: it may seem little more than the sort of polite noise we expect from a visitor, especially perhaps from the first speaker on the programme. So I must persuade you that I am sincere, that there is something special about today. I remind you that we are gathered in a quiet place to listen to one another, like shepherds whose sheep are otherwise cared-for; and that this is no typical academic convention where we have the distractions of a big city and the excuse of a crowded programme, where we can pretend to be listening to someone else's paper when we are not listening to anyone's. And to this invocation of pastoral *otium* I now add the romance motif of return, by appealing to those of you who were at an earlier *Connotations* symposium, asking you to bear witness to my genuine pleasure at returning to an hospitable and nourishing setting.

By now, you will recognize that our symposium is well and truly under way, and that the subject of "a place revisited" has been opened. It is important to note how profoundly, and how unquestioningly, we respond to rhetorical appeals to a return or recurrence. Knowledge and memory are so intimately intertwined that it seems as though we cannot know anything that we haven't previously known; that cognition depends on recognition. A sense of *déjà vu* awakens unpredictably deep and reassuring senses of *déjà su*, so that the revisiting of a place almost inevitably suggests patterns completed and an orderly repose that is a bulwark against the randomness of everyday experience.

A canonical text for this is the *Odyssey*, for behind all other invocations of places revisited is the overarching motif of home-coming. In the tragic vision of the *Iliad*, Achilles is forced to confront the isolation of the human condition in all its bleak meaninglessness; by contrast, the *Odyssey* offers the consolation of romance, tracing the process by which a man *can* return to his home, reclaim his past, and assert his personal identity, albeit at the price of denying a claim to immortality. Although both Homeric poems end with an acceptance of death, the *Odyssey* softens or counteracts the tragic vision. The death of Odysseus' faithful dog when he senses that his master has finally returned sets the sentimental tone for the poem's final episodes: for every place revisited is in some measure a figure of the place from which we come and to which we must return. Douglas Frame has suggestively reconstructed the etymology of the Greek word *nóos*, "mind," associating it with the Greek verb *néomai*, "return home," and its associated noun *nostos*, "homecoming": he posits an early form of *nóos* as **nos-os*, deriving from a verbal root **nes-* which he also sees in the name of the wise and aged Nestor.[1] The *Odyssey*'s subject is the *nostos* or homecoming of an Odysseus whom Zeus characterizes as "surpassing all other mortals in his *nóos*" (i.66). Odysseus is *polútropos*, a "man of many turns" as the earlier English translations had it, in the sense of his mental agility as well as his roundabout passage home. Our subject will be the various turns, or tropes, by which literature in English revisits its moments of *gnosis*.

The intimations of mortality that I have attributed to Odysseus' homecoming are explored and criticized by Dante in the familiar passage of *Inferno* XXVI when he imagines the aged hero assembling his comrades for a final, hubristic voyage. Tennyson's sympathetic imitation is true to a strong current in the original: for like Francesca and some of the other denizens of Dante's hell, Ulysses expresses a powerful humanity. In continuing to realize his polytropic nature, he finds death; like Dante himself in the opening lines of the poem, he comes up against the mount of Purgatory, the mass of his all-too-human, not-quite-damnable errors.

The post-classical or early mediaeval urge to revisit canonical texts and to complete them is seen here, and in Vegius' "completion" of the *Aeneid*,

and in the legend whereby the three Magi are separately called to one final journey where they will again encounter one another and be baptized by Prester John, and so die and achieve salvation. Here their earlier adventure is rewritten as a prefiguring of their sacramental encounter with Christ and their enjoyment of His salvific power. But it remains for the early modern period, in its aspect of experiencing a rebirth or rediscovery of the classics, to be peculiarly sensitive to the labours and rewards of this textual archaeology, and to cultivate its nostalgia for lost glories. In fact, the very word itself was coined by Roman doctors in the Renaissance, to name a malaise of homesickness affecting members of the papal Swiss Guard. The present essay will provide an overview of how one poet of the English literary Renaissance, Edmund Spenser, explored a sense of departures and returns that constituted a dominant theme of his time and place. The "poet's poet" was certainly *polútropos* in terms of his mastery of artistic turns; I will suggest that he was committed from early in his career to a sense of *nostos* that informs the returns of his pastoral persona, Colin Clout, both in the sixth book of the *Faerie Queene* and in *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*.

If English pastoral seems to have an undeniable tone of dignity and importance, this quality was defined late in the tradition by Milton and his Romantic heirs. Milton's story of a primal garden lost and regained makes fully explicit the pastoral metaphors in the Biblical stories, by expressing them in terms of the Homeric dyad I have just mentioned, legends of alienation and return. Milton collapses or denies the traditional distance between warrior and shepherd, high and low styles; after Milton it becomes difficult to take seriously the condescending language with which earlier critics had spoken of the pastoral. We now read the earlier shepherd poems looking for hints and prefigurations of the "true" pastoral strain, echoes of a true classic line that was probably first clearly drawn in the later seventeenth century.

The poetry of Spenser is of particular interest in anticipating (and perhaps enabling) these transformations of pastoral value in the seventeenth century. By comparing the pastoral of the *Shepheardes Calender*, focusing on Colin's loss of paradise, with the pastoral romance of Colin's (and

Spenser's) return at the end of the poet's career, we can see more clearly Spenser's version of poetic survival, his story of homes lost and regained.

As it stands, *The Shepheardes Calender* begins and ends with wintry thoughts. The poem's four "plaintive" eclogues, to use E.K.'s terminology, are the first, sixth, eleventh and twelfth. Their wintry thoughts are expressed by the poem's protagonist, Colin Clout, whom E.K. is careful to identify, in his first gloss to "Januarye," as the name "vnder which . . . this Poete secretly shadoweth himself." It is this autobiographical persona who "compareth his carefull case to the sadde season of the yeare," as the argument to "Januarye" puts it.

In "June," Colin also compares his case to that of Adam unparadised. He responds as follows to Hobbinoll's praise of the harmony and pleasures of the pastoral setting:

> O happy *Hobbinoll*, I blesse thy state,
> That Paradise hast found, whych *Adam* lost.
> Here wander may thy flock early or late,
> Withouten dreade of Wolues to bene ytost:
> Thy louely layes here mayst thou freely boste.
> But I vnhappy man, whom cruell fate,
> And angry Gods pursue from coste to coste,
> Can nowhere fynd, to shroude my lucklesse pate. (9-16)[2]

The sorry condition of Colin, totally undone by his unrequited love for Rosalind, has been something of an embarrassment to almost all readers of the poem. Although we can see that the *Calender* is a calendar for every year, Colin cannot see himself as getting past December. We may be aware of the *rota Vergiliana*, whereby an eclogue book becomes an advertisement of a new poet's readiness to emulate Vergil and compose an epic as soon as he gains patronage; and encouraged by E.K.'s assiduous advertisements for poem and poet, we can agree with A. C. Hamilton[3] that the argument of the *Shepheardes Calender* is "the rejection of the pastoral life for the truly dedicated life in the world"—at least this is one of the poem's arguments, or conversational gambits. But Colin shows no readiness to leap over the garden wall, only to leap into the grave. Again, we may agree with Paul Alpers' emphasis on the ability of pastoral song to give pleasure and

reconcile man to his mortal limits.[4] Colin himself does manage, in the present-time sequence of the poem's action, to provide a pastoral elegy for Dido that, in its motion from careful to happy verse, seems to fit Alpers' description almost as well as does *Lycidas*, its best exemplum. Yet this is sung in "November," and by December Colin is back to bemoaning his own lot with no sense of any spring beyond his present winter.

In short, the plot of *The Shepheardes Calender*, if not its argument, traces the triumph of death and isolation over the forces for life and love in the pastoral milieu. Spenser's eclogue book gives great prominence to an element present in earlier examples of the genre: a sense of a paradise which if not lost is at least threatened by the various penalties of Adam: seasons' difference, death, an obsessive and sterile eroticism. Even in Arcadia, the ego finds its discontents. A reluctant shepherdess, or even more a girl who scorns pastoral guises, provides a telling critique of the pastoral premise. We like to imagine a world in which our songs are effectively tuned to the water's fall—our *carmen* becomes thereby a charm capable of making us at one with the easy and shameless flow of energies found in nature, the guiltless fall of water on its way to the sea. We dream of being able to tell—measure out, confess, express—our loves without shame or envy. But we need a willing shepherdess to share our dreams if the magic is to work.

The Colin Clout of *The Shepheardes Calender* is not presented as willing to change his dreams to fit his circumstances. He refuses either to stop loving Rosalind or to begin loving her as a chaste and inaccessible figure. The flowery metamorphoses of defunct lovers such as those that Spenser places at the fringes of the *mons Veneris* in *Faerie Queene* III.vi are not for Colin: he doesn't want to love a rose as Petrarch came to love the laurel, or as Apollo similarly chose to end his race, hunting Daphne that she might laurel grow. Rather, he is consistently, tiresomely true to his desire, frustration, and pain.

It must be admitted that however petulant the wrath of Achilles may come to seem at times, the alienation of a pastoral lover is far harder for the spectator to take seriously. It is a given of the *Iliad* that Achilles must die young; he has something to complain about even if Agamemnon and

the other Greeks are not wholly appropriate objects of his wrath. But we survive our unrequited loves, and most of us choose to forget our sufferings; our spouses do not encourage us to rehearse them. Furthermore, most of us, like the Theocritan shepherds, like Colin Clout, like Romeo during a bad time with his own Rosalind, are surrounded by sympathetic friends. Spenser is careful to point out how decorous and well behaved are all the other shepherds. In "Febrvarie," Thenot and Cuddie respond to the season in ways that are suited to their respective age and youth; when Colin talks like an old man in "December" we feel like telling him this is rather bad form. Everyone wants to help Colin, in a spirit of altruistic friendship, especially poor old Hobbinoll who loves Colin as hopelessly as Colin loves Rosalind and yet listens meekly when Colin laments his isolation from the paradise that Hobbinoll has found in nature. In fact, Colin is quite right when he says that the mind can make its own heaven or hell, and Colin is alone in refusing to muster the self-control or good humor to enjoy the balm of a June day among friends.

Perhaps we have to wait for James Joyce before we find a portrait of the young artist so disagreeable, so humorless, so commendably honest in refusing to deny or redirect the agonies of adolescence. Both authors seem to have sensed that their creativity, what Spenser would call their daedale art, depended on the recognition and maintenance of this youthful and alienated self. Silence, exile, and cunning are in fact characteristic of the later history of Colin Clout.

Perhaps this is an overstatement of the role of Colin as a partially comic but finally grand figure of alienation in *The Shepheardes Calender*. But awareness of this role makes us end the early poem expecting him to return later in the poet's work: Colin's energies remain unresolved. When he does return, it is at a time when his creator was courting and marrying Elizabeth Boyle. Spenser gives his readers more than enough encouragement to see the second Mrs Spenser in the lady conjured up by Colin in the midst of the Graces in *Faerie Queene* VI.x, as well as in the lady celebrated by Colin at the centerpoint of *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*. The later works of Spenser weave the fact of his remarriage into a highly intricate fiction of public and private loves, responsibilities, conflicts, and divine or royal

jealousies. A concern over Envy—what today would be called misreading or deconstruction—blossoms into a phantasmagoria of allusions to the various Elizabeths worshiped and served by Spenser and by his friend, virtually his alter ego, Ralegh: Spenser's mother, his bride, his queen; Ralegh's bride and jealous queen; behind them all, perhaps, Eli-sabbat, the Sabbath God whom Spenser longs to see at the ending of the *Cantos of Mutabilitie*, and who suggests the figure that Freud was to speak of as the third woman in a man's life, after his mother and his wife: the grave.

The homecoming enacted in Spenser's *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* suggests a syncretic view of this worship of multiple Elizabeths which Spenser treats in more tense and problematic fashion elsewhere in his later works. The first problem is its title. We may hypothesize three principal kinds of homecoming for this figure who "secretly shadoweth" the poet. First, Colin has returned to the pastoral genre and to the friends he had left behind in the *Shepheardes Calender*. Seeing him seated among them once again, in what they had called his characteristic role prior to his falling in love with Rosalind, we may feel he has returned to his youth, to his youthful community or dream of community. Secondly, in more strictly geographical terms, Spenser's own visit to his native England is described in the poem: a temporary homecoming may well be what an English reader of a book published in London would make of the title. But it is not the point of view explicitly taken by the poem: Colin (in the poem itself) and Spenser (in his dedication of it to Ralegh) both speak of themselves as dwelling in Ireland, to which they have now returned after a visit across the sea. Thestylis in fact mentions the first and third of these referents in asking Colin why he has returned to "this barrein soyle" (656) of Ireland and of pastoral, leaving England and an occupation as court poet which had been available to him.

Spenser so obviously mingles actual autobiographical fact (such as his visit to England in the company of Ralegh) with literal falsehood (such as Hobbinol's or Harvey's presence in Ireland) that we must despair of finding any single consistent frame of reference. Rather, a blurring equivocation of reference seems present almost everywhere. One effect of the delayed publication of the poem in 1595, albeit describing a visit

of 1589-91 and with a dedication dated 1591, is that apparent allusions to Ralegh's and Spenser's marriages and other incidents in the interim have an uncertain status as foreshadowings or afterthoughts. Furthermore, we may hover between taking each of the three ladies praised in the poem as specific individuals or as distinct feminine qualities. The poet's own lady at the center, in lines 464-79, may simply be Elizabeth Boyle, or she may be a more generalized figure of reciprocated love; the repeated formula, *euer onely, euer one: / One euer . . . one euer*, is close enough to the Queen's motto, *semper eadem*, to suggest a perilous ambiguity. Colin's praise of Cynthia clearly refers to the Queen, but to a Queen who also is and is not the cause of quasi-erotic anxieties in her courtiers, especially Ralegh. And the Rosalind praised equally absolutely at the end of the poem may be both the specific Rosalind of the *Shepheardes Calender* and the part of every beloved that eludes possession by the lover. We may be reminded of Donne's roughly contemporary statement in "The good-morrow":

> If ever any beauty I did see,
> Which I desir'd, and got, t'was but a dreame of thee.

—with the crucial difference that Rosalind is the beauty that the lover never gets.

Doubtless there are other possibilities as well, and other ways of naming them; what seems certain is that the poem hymns love and the feminine both generally and under a broad range of apparently exclusive aspects. Elsewhere Spenser dramatizes the conflicts and contradictions; here Colin undertakes a harmonious union which denies all distinctions. At the beginning of the poem Hobbinoll describes Colin's return as something akin to Proserpina's a return of energy and vitality to the earth; Colin's songs of love implicitly enact this life-giving magic, by saying yes, yes to love in all its forms. Colin has finally gotten past December into a new year; and he has done so at a time when Edmund Spenser is celebrating his own rebirth through love.

At the opening of the poem, Colin's exchange of songs with the Shepherd of the Ocean provides natural myths of the poet's survival. The story of the marriage of Bregog and Mulla, like that of Fanchin and Molanna in

the *Mutability Cantos*, is facilitated and punished by essentially the same device, an underground disappearance which permits survival at the cost of losing one's name. On the one hand, the stories recall that of Alpheus and Arethusa in Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 5.577-641), and serve as Spenser's myth of the translation of pastoral from England across the sea to Ireland. At the same time, Bregog's name means "deceitful" and this plus his loss of name recall the wiles of *outis*-Odysseus. The wily marriage of rivers is presented not only as an example of the free and guiltless sexuality of the pastoral dream mentioned earlier, but as guiltless incest: it is the most natural thing in the world that brother and sister streams, born of the same father Mole, should couple as they fall toward the plain, intensifying name and force thereby. In general, Spenser's songs of his Irish countryside celebrate a rediscovery, or a recovery, of a sexual landscape that seems safely distant from the envious misdeemings of Elizabeth's court.

At the same time, Colin's identification with the watery fluidity of "my river Bregog" is set against the experience of the Shepherd of the Ocean, Walter or "Water" Ralegh, whose relationship with Cynthia is deeply troubled. The chaste but ever-changing moon exerts her power on the unstable waters. As shepherd of the ocean Ralegh is a master mariner; but he is also identified with the water itself in the manner of water-gods and nymphs. The extensive description of the "world of waters" in lines 196 ff. is at once a comic portrayal of a rude shepherd's crossing over to England, and a metaphor for the emotional strains of service to Cynthia, of combining his English and Irish selves. The storm-tossed Colin navigates his round trip to and from court successfully, achieving at the end the homecoming celebrated in *Colin Clout* and the courtship and marriage celebrated in *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion*.

Seen in the context of his other poems of this period, *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* combines the various modes and voices of an eclogue book—plaintive, moral, and recreative—into a single tour-de-force celebrating what amounts to an act of universal love. The poet survives and returns to all that he has ever been, superimposing his entire record of loves. He suggests that every woman he has loved or worshiped he has loved utterly and solely, precisely because all these loves are one and the

same, differing only in such negligible details as social estate or a willingness to become châtelaine of Kilcolman. Each Elizabeth is thus every other.

In Fairyland we know that this is not the case, and especially not in the troubled Fairyland of the later books of *The Faerie Queene*. Belphoebe feels no such identity with an Amoret who is in fact her twin sister. But Colin's songs admit of no such particular jealousies or envies. Spenser's treatment of pastoral characterization permits him to ventilate some of these incongruities here: there is an endearing virtuosity to a Colin Clout who is ready to frame his song to every topic, being driven finally to the absurdity of declaring he is still dying single-mindedly for love of Rosalind. He may rightly speak of "the languours of my too long dying" (948) if he has been holding this particular note since 1579, at the end of "December." Yet for all that may be amusing in this return to the adolescent enthusiasms of Colin, Spenser's announcement of his return heralds a serious refocusing of his energies. The poet is returning, however briefly or permanently he cannot really say, from his long service to the Faerie Queene, in middest of his race; his gaze is now turned homeward and inward; the pastoral and domestic muses have somehow made the crossing to what had earlier seemed a land of exile but now, briefly, will be a home and a garden he had once left, long ago. And the reader feels, in defiance of logic, the strong pull of a familiar topic or *locus communis*: it is good to be back.

The pastoral revisiting in *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* is sufficiently close to what appears in Book VI of *The Faerie Queene* that the two works may be usefully compared. Near the end of the 1596 instalment of Spenser's grand project, Colin is directly introduced into the poem as a familiar if unexpected figure—"who knowes not *Colin Clout*?" (VI.x.16)—summoning up the object of his affections, "that iolly Shepheards lasse." If we know Colin Clout as the protagonist of the 1579 *Calender*, we can know the lass as Rosalind; if we know him from E.K.'s note to that poem as secretly shadowing the poet Spenser, we are encouraged to take the lass as Elizabeth Boyle; if we know the 1595 *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* we may know that we don't know if she is both or neither.

In returning to the commonplaces of his earlier pastoral, Spenser seems to be suggesting that the middle-aged poet approaching remarriage is experiencing a renaissance of his own, recovering earlier feelings and earlier forms of self-expression. When Calidore intrudes on the scene of Colin's performance and accidentally breaks up the scene (as he has broken up earlier scenes of lovemaking), Colin "for fell despight / Of that displeasure, broke his bag-pipe quight" (VI.x.18), revisiting thereby an earlier *topos* of sexual frustration ("Januarye" 72).

Spenser invites us, I think, to collate our evidence for "knowing" Colin Clout, so that we can see the similarities and differences between the young and old lover and poet. Like the returned Colin of 1595, the Colin who sits down to talk with Calidore is more mellow, more ready to accept the joys and frustrations of love. "She made me often pipe and now to pipe apace" (VI.x.27). This has some of the overtones of the *donna angelicata* of the Petrarchan tradition, desire transformed into poetic abstraction. But this unnamed "she" is not the distanced Laura or Beatrice, but an amalgam of those sublimated objects of poetic desire with the earthiness of Boccaccio's Fiammetta, figuring a poet who serves one Elizabeth and marries another. When Colin concludes his speech by asking Gloriana to

> Pardon thy shepheard, mongst so many layes,
> As he hath sung of thee in all his dayes,
> To make one minime of thy poore handmayd (VI.x.28)

he brings the public and private worlds of Edmund Spenser, and of Elizabethan poetic genres, into a moment of uneasy encounter. We know how unwilling the Queen had been to pardon Ralegh for diverting or sharing his affections with another Elizabeth. Rather as he had done in the preface to *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, Spenser once again seems to invite a comparison with Ralegh's heretical behavior.

And in fact Book VI ends with a scene of homecoming that deliberately imitates that of Odysseus. After Calidore rescues Pastorella from the Brigants, who have destroyed her pastoral world, he brings her to the Castle of Belgard which turns out to be her parents' home. There, in the

best tradition of romance, it is the old nurse Melissa who bathes Pastorella and recognizes her as the lost child of her mistress:

> For on her brest I with these eyes did vew
> The litle purple rose, which thereon grew,
> Whereof her name ye then to her did giue. (VI.xii.18)

Critics of *The Faerie Queene* seem not to have noticed the aptness of the parallel here to Book 19 of the *Odyssey*, where the nurse Eurykleia recognizes Odysseus while bathing him, from the scar on his thigh which was associated with his naming by his maternal grandfather Autolykos. Here too it is the birthmark which gives the true, "original" name of the maiden we have known as Pastorella until now. Spenser gives us only the briefest of descriptions of her restoration to her true parents, Claribell and Bellamour (who like such other Spenserian couples as Britomart and Artegall or Scudamour and Amoret seem to have been destined to be joined from the day of their naming). Leaving them "in ioy" (VI.xii.22) the poet turns quickly to the story of Calidore's pursuit of the Blatant Beast which concludes the Book. But although he does not tell us the "real" name of Pastorella, it seems likely that the rosy mark on the breast of this child whose parents had stealthily gathered roses without benefit of clergy or parental approval, points once more to the figure of Rosalind, the inaccessible but still worshiped object of desire. This time around, Rosalind as Pastorella no longer disdains pastoral devices, but is successfully courted by Calidore after he puts on the disguise of a shepherd. Mysteriously, but with a curiously satisfactory sense of a place revisited and a pattern completed, Spenser has returned to his pastoral self and achieved a union of public and private, court and courtship, that was to elude the greater subject of *The Faerie Queene*, Arthur's pursuit of Gloriana. The 1596 installment of the poem ends with a strikingly Odyssean kind of homecoming, but one that does not dare to speak its name openly, since the Blatant Beast continues to rage,

> Ne spareth he the gentle Poets rime,
> But rends without regard of person or of time. (VI.xii.40)

It is strongly implied here that the poet has to rely on his readers' ability to recognize the motifs of romance. If we can respond fully to the emotions invoked by Pastorella's return to Belgard, and trace its literary genealogy, we will know where we are, and will understand better why we have a strong sense that the poem has in fact come to an end, here. As I suggested at the outset, there is a peculiar satisfaction to recognizing where we are, to being able to name a place revisited.

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NOTES

[1]Douglas Frame, *The Myth of Return in Early Greek Epic* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1978).

[2]Edmund Spenser, *Poetical Works*, eds. J. C. Smith and E. de Selincourt (Oxford: OUP 1912).

[3]A. C. Hamilton: "The Argument of Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender*," *ELH* 23 (1956): 171-82.

[4]Paul Alpers, "Pastoral and the Domain of Lyric in Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender*," *Representations* 12 (1985): 83-100; and the fuller discussion of pastoral in Paul Alpers, *What is Pastoral?* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1976).