

SOME IDEAS ON SPENSER AND THE IRISH QUESTION

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When Caliban talks to Stephano in Act III, scene II, of *The Tempest* and prepares the murder of his master, Prospero, observing that the latter's books must be robbed before the deed is done, Shakespeare is transmitting a thought that many of his contemporaries, and even some authors before his time, shared. That thought was, and perhaps still is, tremendously important in English history. Caliban doesn't say it only once, he insists on it: "Remember first to possess his books, for without them he's but a sot, as I am, nor hath not one spirit to command." Caliban, then, is not only paying humble tribute to knowledge at this precise moment, but also, and this is very important, converting knowledge into power. That's the idea, the thought that had led England in the past to its domination of the civilized world and that for centuries served as an example for the most powerful nations, for those, therefore, 'destined' to subdue humbler folks.

It's my aim to comment on the relationship between writer, literary work and political power in the XVIth century. In order to do so, I have chosen a work that has passed unnoticed in the English literary world—in a way it still does nowadays—: *A View of the State of Ireland* by Edmund Spenser. At first, sight it may come as a surprise that the author of *The Faerie Queene* should be taken as an example to comment on such a subject, totally unconnected, apparently, with the philosophy underlying his main literary works. However, and to justify this contradiction, I must point out that Spenser was a privileged witness of one of the bloodiest and darkest episodes of Elizabethan politics: the colonization of Ireland. The poet did not only write the immortal verses of *The Faerie Queene*, he was also aware of a sad situation he tried to understand, for he was part of it.

Edmund Spenser, a Cambridge scholar, accompanied Lord Arthur Grey Wilton to his post as Lord Deputy of Ireland. Acting as the latter's secretary, Spenser acquired in return several things: experience, a profound knowledge of English colonization plans and 3.000 acres of land in Cork, where, by the way, he finished his greatest work: *The Faerie Queene*. As a result of these circumstances he also wrote *A View of the State of Ireland written dialogue-wise between Eudoxus and Irenaeus*. The author, however, died without having seen this work published. He died in 1599 in Westminster and was buried close

to the tomb of Chaucer, a literary figure he worshipped during his life. The work, which as a matter of fact didn't cause any sensation within the literary circles of the time, was written in order to show Ireland's great evils and their solution. It wasn't therefore done to please the taste of a humble public but, rather, that of the ruling classes. What's even more important, Spenser used the same arguments this audience was trying to impose upon society at the time. We are not, therefore, dealing with an author who tries to criticize the ends a political class is trying to achieve, but, rather, with a man who defends those same ends and who criticises anything that may interfere with the 'project'. This is the first basic and necessary step we must take if we want to understand a work like the present one.

We have mentioned knowledge or, rather, the power knowledge may bring to man. In other words, knowledge, according to Spenser, brings the man who possesses it the possibility of imposing his own law. Caliban knows this. Without knowledge Prospero, for example, wouldn't have been able to subdue him. Prospero would never have felt superior to others without it; he would never have felt the right to impose his own law upon the island. This law we are talking about, imposed by the wise man, the educated man, by the man that has knowledge, appears as soon as we start reading *A View of the State of Ireland*. Eudoxus opens the dialogue by praising the island and feeling rather surprised "That no course is taken for the turning thereof to good uses, and reducing that nation to better government and civility". Irenaeus answers that the plans are good but the evils on the island so great that it is not surprising if the former don't produce any good effect upon the latter. That is, Caliban, so far, hasn't been 'reduced', as Eudoxus says. The tone in which the words are said seems to betray a certain pessimism. The battle seems to be lost or nearly lost. Far from it, however. The mechanism Spenser uses is a very subtle one; the dialogue is written in such a way that only certain answers can appear. We must, therefore, refuse to draw conclusions before the work has been read in its entirety. And, of course, we must not expect answers of the kind: "every land has the right to rule itself according to its own principles". That type of answer would have nothing to do with the spirit of the age or with the beliefs Spenser, as one of the members of the ruling class, had.

Joel Hurtsfield's words in his article 'The Historical and Social Background', published in the book *A New Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, make it clear: "order and degree formed part of the new concept of the state pressed on the nation by the Crown and its servants". Eudoxus' answer to Irenaeus' words and especially to the defeatist tone employed, is clear and definite:

"Which manner of speeche is the manner rather of desperate men farre driven, to wish the utter ruin of that which they cannot redress, than of grave Councillors, which ought to thinke nothing so hard but that through wisdome it may mastered and subbdued, since the Poet saith

that the wiseman shall rule even over the starres, much more over the Earth, for were it not the part of a desperate Phisitian to wish his deseased patient dead, rather than to apply the best indeavour of his skill for his recovery."

We are, therefore, confronted with words that define in themselves an important moment of English History and perhaps of the history of all civilised countries at the time. The divine power the king wields is reflected in the orders his servants carry out. The latter act following the pattern their master has set out faithfully. If we come back to a Shakespearean image, Prospero needs Ariel to exercise his power. Once the order has been carried out, the amount of power increases, of course, which is the ultimate end the master wishes to achieve. Joel Hurstfield again illustrates clearly what we are trying to say: "To grasp this is fundamental to any understanding of Elizabethan or Jacobean society. It is not that the old order was dissolving. It was that a new more rigid order and degree were being imposed. It is not that the Tudor Monarchy was fighting to retain its inherited powers, but it had enlarged those powers in a measure never enjoyed by its predecessors."

By 1598, the year in which *A View of the State of Ireland* was completed, England had left behind dark moments that had meant a hard test of endurance for her. Problems, however, were far from solved. England, despite being the leader in a world that had become accustomed to war, still suffered great internal troubles. Among them the most dangerous one was, perhaps, overpopulation, and as a consequence of it, the lack of resources to maintain such a large number of people. Emigration was, therefore, necessary, fundamental even, in the policy of a government that couldn't maintain a large number of subjects. Ireland, together with other overseas territories was the perfect answer to the problem. The colonization of the territory must, consequently, be contemplated from another point of view; that is, as the solution to an internal economic problem. That is the reason why Eudoxus mentions, at the beginning of the work, the great number of resources the country to be colonised, or rather 'reduced', has. Obviously, this argument is not enough by itself. Colonization, understood as expansion, acquisition of wealth and power, must be seen to be justified by the settlers. Knowledge is only part of the justification. 'To teach' the uneducated was, and still is, a synonym of 'to dominate' them. That's why in this peculiar relationship it's imperative for the dominant part to show the great evils the education he possesses is going to eradicate. On the other hand, it is not 'convenient' to show the facts the educated may learn from the ignorant, which no doubt exist. The structure of Spenser's work follows, then, a very simple pattern: evils that must be 'extirpated' and the way to do it. Of course, the interesting things the colonized land may have are not so interesting as to be mentioned in so important a work. As if it were a practical joke, he states at the end of his book that such a

thing will be done on a future, better occasion; a promise that, as far as we know, was never put into practice:

“I thanke you Irenaeus for this your gentle paines, withall not forgetting now in the shutting up, to put you in minde of that whiche you have formerly halfe promised, that hereafter when wee shall meete againe, upon the like good occasion, you will declare unto us, those your observations which you have gathered of the antiquities of Ireland.”

This is not, on the other hand, the only excuse given for the colonization. Sir James Ware, in the preface to the first edition of 1633, praises Spenser's knowledge of all the subjects mentioned in the book. Undoubtedly, the author's erudition is present in the figures of the two characters that share the dialogue. The evils that are destroying the land are mentioned, as well as the right solutions, and also the history of the land; now, this fact is most interesting within the artificial conversation. It is not a mere question of chance that both Eudoxus and Irenaeus mention the mythical foundation of Ireland, for example, or that the work was published together with Campion's *Irish History*. Both works, *A View of the State of Ireland* and *Two Bokes of the Histories of Ireland*, retain bits of a legend that was first mentioned by Giraldus Cambrensis: the foundation of Ireland by Iberian settlers. Spenser, no doubt, knows the legend and it is Eudoxus who brings up the subject: “How commeth it then to passe that the Irish doe derive themselves from Gathelus the Spaniard?” The question is more dangerous than it may appear at first sight. To begin with, if the author admitted the possibility that underlies the question, he would also be forced to admit that, historically, there is another nation that has, even before England, a ‘right’ to the colonization of the land. It's rather amusing to see how the different authors that have treated the subject throughout history draw the same conclusions and bring forward the same answers. Thus, Giraldus Cambrensis, in his book *The History and Topography of Ireland*, says that the first settlers came, according to him, without any doubt from the French city of Bayonne. Also according to him: “The city of Bayonne is on the boundary of Gascony and belongs to it. It is also the capital of Basclonia, whence the Hibernienses came. And now Gascony and all the Aquitaine rejoices in the same rule as Britain.”

Edmund Campion reaches the same conclusion in his work. Or rather takes advantage of the argument exposed by Giraldus Cambrensis. A subject, then, that could blossom dangerously is converted to a tremendous advantage. The study of History, no doubt a serious business, clearly shows that the task to be performed, that is, the colonization, can be done on the grounds of a formidable historical argument: “First that the Irish (for the rest there is no question) were subjects to the Crown of Britayne before they set foote in Ireland, thus it appereth. They dwelt in that side of Spayne whereof Bayon was the cheife imperiall citie.”¹

Spenser does, basically, the same thing. He plays the same 'erudition game' of his predecessor Giraldus Cambrensis and of his contemporary E. Campion. He immediately eliminates any possibility of Spanish influence on the island, via a very peculiar mode of reasoning, and points out the presence of Gauls, Scythians and English. He does not mention the fact that the French territories had one day been English, he knows little about the subject, and we must remember that the public of his age knew a great deal, immediately realises that the second part of the argument is not necessary. England has the 'sacred right', the historical justification, to carry out her colonization plans: the territory, according to History's right of transmission, is hers on two counts, not one: her physical presence since Strongbow's time and the possession of Aquitaine, the land from which those first settlers came. There is some thing else however. Spenser does not only laugh at the Irish Chronicles' inaccuracy, he also uses the occasion to attack England's most powerful enemy at the time: "But all that is vaine, for from the Spaniards that now are or that people that now inhab Spaine they no wayes can prove themselves to descend; neither should it be pretty glorious unto them, for the Spaniard that now is, is come from as rude and savage nations as they. "There is no doubt about it: the first great justification given in the work, that is, culture or knowledge, increases in importance. The savage character of the first hypothetical settlers, and please notice that the word 'hypothetical', is full of meaning, also justifies the actions to be carried out. Their cultural formation is inferior to that of the English, and, therefore, it's the latter that must prevail.

With two reasons such as the ones mentioned, Spenser clears the way. Once the colonization plans have been fully justified only the technical elements in them a worth mentioning. This takes up, however, great space in Spenser's work. He divides the problems into three categories: laws, customs and religion. The order in which they appear has nothing to do with their respective priority. The author gives each group the same relevance. It is of capital importance to point out, however, that the wild Irish character is stressed in each part. In comparison, the peaceful English character, accustomed to law and order, earns dignity and pride. In the group of problems concerning the laws of the land, Spenser, for example, shows, through Irenaeus, that those applied to Ireland are the same ones William of Normandy "laid upon the neck of England". The effect, however, has been totally different. In England "the effect was good. It was a peaceable kingdome and but lately inured to the milde and goodly government of Edward surnamed the Confessor, besides now lately growne into a loathing and detestation of the unjust and tyrannous rule of Harold an usurper." In Ireland, on the other hand, the effect has been rather different: "But with Ireland it is farre otherwise, for it is a Nation ever acquainted with warres." The warlike Irish character is not the only answer given for the lack of law and order. Spenser's bitter criticism is also directed against those who have held the right to apply the law and have done so timidly or without the necessary severity. The simile he employs speaks for itself:

“But what bootes is to breake a Colte and to let him straight runne loose at randome. So were these people at first well handled and wisely brought to acknowledge allegiance to the kings of England, but being straight left unto themselves and their owne inordinate life and manners, they eftsoones forgot what before they were taught, and so soone as they were out of sight, by themselves shook off their bridles and began to coste anew, more licentiously than before.”

The choice of words is highly expressive. Sentences like ‘wisely brought to acknowledge allegiance’ or words such as ‘bridles’ allow us to see the author’s philosophy and ideas more accurately than the detailed accounts he sometimes presents us with. Caliban, or the horse running ‘loose at randome’, must be dominated by sheer force and, especially, by perseverance. Strict punishments are not enough, though they must exist until the adversary is totally subdued. Not in vain, laws, or the means employed, are, as Machiavelli sustained, good, provided they achieve the desired result. Spenser holds, similarly, that: “No lawes of man (according to the straight rule of right) are just, but as in regard to the evils which they prevent, and the safety of the Common-weale which they provide for.” Constancy, however, must also exist: We must start as we mean to go on. That’s why two basic principles come out clearly in this stage of the work. First it is totally necessary to achieve the total submission of the population: “So as it is in vaine to speak of planting laws, and plotting pollicie till they be altogether subdued.” And second, the means employed must stop the horse from running loose. It’s not surprising, then, that justice in such a case as this is a vital point for Irenaeus. Its rightful administration, for example, is something the English governors and political figures in Ireland haven’t carried out in the past, according to the two friends that share the dialogue. That mistake has been one of the causes of chaos in the land. But we are talking about this mistake in a general sense. Details are necessary as well. There is, according to Irenaeus, one specific element of failure: The administration of justice cannot and must not be left in the hands of the Irish, for they still think “that the English lye still in waite to wyepe them out of their lande and territories.” It would be interesting to recall, though very rapidly, Cromwell’s policy in the XVIIth century. We, of course, judge the occasion from a historical perspective of centuries, something Spenser couldn’t do, and we can well be accused of being rather unfair, but the critical reader asks himself constantly and unavoidably about the ultimate end England, through Irenaeus’ argument, wishes to achieve. We go back, naturally, to the arguments we explained at the beginning of this paper, transmission of culture and historical rights, but the reader in 1986 is not satisfied. What those arguments meant in 1633 can’t be appreciated in full detail, but their effect upon the mind of the ruling class was, so it appears, totally different from the effect produced now. Eudoxus doesn’t ask himself the question about England’s ultimate end, as we have done just now. On the contrary he listens carefully to Irenaeus’ opinions

and sums them up as follows: "I holde it not wisdome to have unto them too much command over their kindred, but rather to withdrawe their followers from them as much as may bee, and to gather them under the command of law." This 'command of law' must be in the hands of Englishmen or in those of Irishmen who favour the English cause. In the words of Eudoxus, in the hands of Irishmen" of the soundest judgment and disposition." Spenser knows, of course, that the solution he mentions has been put into practice before. The English colonization of Ireland had been going on for years when he wrote the book. Hundreds of Englishmen had been sent to the area where British influence was stronger: The Pale, with its capital, Dublin. He knew, therefore, that the English presence on the island was not enough by itself, for it hadn't achieved the goals the Government had planned. The occasion is a magnificent one to criticise, once more and through Irenaeus, the biggest mistakes made. One of them the reader may find at least surprising at first sight:

"You thinke otherwise Eudoxus than I doe, for the chiefest abuses which are now in that realme, are growne from the English, and some of them are now more lawlesse and licentious than the Wilde Irish: so that as much care, as was by them had to reforme the Irish, so and much more, must now bee used to reforme the Irish, so and much more, must now bee used to reforme them, so much time doth alter the manners of men."

It is not that the English have introduced chaos and anarchy, it's that they have become accustomed to the existing ones. Spenser cannot, of course, doubt the moral superiority order and laws have given England. After all, this is precisely what he is trying to defend. He criticises, rather, the element of high treason that exists, on the one hand, in the loss of the hereditary order handed down to them and, on the other, in the acquisition of wild habits that can only bring chaos.

Like a good critic, he analyses the causes that led the first settlers to becoming more Irish than the Irish. He draws several conclusions that are worth mentioning. First, his criticism is directed against the lack of social unity the first settlers showed in the past:

"This you may read plainly discovered by a letter written from the citizens of Corke out of Ireland, to the Earle of Shrewsbury then in England, and remaining yet upon record, both in the Tower of London, and also among the Cronicles of Ireland. Wherein it is by them complained, that the English lords and gentlemen, who then had great possessions in Ireland, began through pride and insolency, to make private warres one against another, and when either part was weak, they would wage and draw in the Irish to take their part."

Against an enemy who also suffers from internal strife but has the sense to join hands against a common enemy, mainly the English settler, unity is not only necessary but fundamental. Without it, victory can never be gained and, what's more, weakness may appear allowing one of the sides to fall into the hands of the enemy. Time has been on this particular occasion, according to Spenser, a great ally of the opposite side. Thanks to it and to the internal weakness of the English settlers, the most incredible situations have arisen. The author is not worried about military aspects or questions concerning numbers of people; that, after all, can be easily solved. A rather more subtle evil worries him, something really difficult to eradicate: The Irishness of the English: "Some of them have quite shaken off their English names, and put on Irish that they might be altogether Irish." That 'altogether Irish' has a tremendous significance. Being altogether Irish meant, at least then, being England's enemy. That's the origin of Eudoxus' surprise and probably of England's throughout history, especially whenever she has seen one of her sons defend the enemy's cause. For Irenaeus, this is something that really exists and that, therefore, must be faced with realism if it is to be successfully wiped out. There are, according to him, ways to prevent it from taking place again. One of these solutions will appear at the end of the work, as we shall see, and can be summed up as follows: a stronger English presence upon the island. Others will appear immediately and can be divided into three big groups, the first concerning language: "And first I have to finde fault with the abuse of language, that is, for the speaking of Irish among the English, which as it is inconvenient, and the cause of many other evils." Here we can see the seed of England's policy in the XIXth century that reduced the number of Gaelic speakers to less than 90.000. Be that as it may, one thing is clear: England's policy was not only destined to make the English in Ireland speak English but also the Irish. Eudoxus, with what we can call cruel realism, speaks about it thus:

"it seemeth strange to me that the English should take more delight to speake that language than their owne, whereas they should (mee thinkes) rather take scorne to acquaint their tongues thereto. For it hath ever bene the use of the Conquerour to despise the language of the conquered, and to force him by all meanes to learne his."

This is an opinion Irenaeus doesn't contradict so we may assume he agrees with it. At least it leads him to mention the other two sets of solutions, closely connected, by the way, with language:

"I suppose that the cheife cause of bringing in the Irish language amongst them, was specially their fostering and marrying with the Irish, the which are two most dangerous infections, for first the child that sucketh the milke of the nurse, must of necessity learne his first speach of her, the which being the first inured to his tongue, is ever

after most pleasing unto him, insomuch as though he afterwards be taught English yet the smacke of the first will always abide with him. So that the speach being Irish, the heart must needes be Irish: for out of the abundance of the heart, the tongue speaketh."

Therefore, language, mixed marriages and the fostering of English children by Irish women, are three of the points to bear in mind and to be wiped out if they constitute, as they seem to do, a danger for the settler. Irenaeus, then, favours cold relations with the Irish and is for keeping a distance between the two sides; it is not, however, the only sign of ruthlessness we find in him. The work still has surprises for us.

The faculty Spenser had of writing ahead of his time is worth mentioning here: he foresaw a vast number of measures England was going to take in future years in order to cope with 'The Irish question'. *A View of the State of Ireland* is not so much a piece of criticism on the Irish situation at a given time but, rather, what we could symbolically call 'the perfect guide to colonization'. That, at least, is what History has demonstrated so far. In nearly all the capital questions concerning Ireland, the English political actions followed, almost perfectly, the pattern Spenser set out back in the XVIth century. We do not know if the work we are commenting on served indeed as a real guide or if it was simply a compendium of political ideas in Elizabethan England. There is no doubt, however, that in linguistic, military and population matters, the work served as a prologue to the main line of action of the following centuries.

We have seen Spenser's ideas concerning the administration of justice and the bad customs of some of the English settlers. The first of these two points comes within the criticism Irenaeus makes of the laws of the country. The second within that of the customs. Also in this same group we find something of capital importance that completes the policy tending towards the destruction of the native language. We are referring to the destruction of the collective memory. Spenser thinks that the Irish memory can really be a weapon that will destroy all plans of colonization. His attack this time is, therefore, directed against those in charge of perpetuating this memory: the bards. Once more it is surprising to see how this same point also had great relevance in the XIXth century, the golden age of Irish balladry. The ballad singer then still had the same role his predecessor had had three centuries before: to increase the degree of resistance of the population. Spenser criticises this particular use given to poetry; according to him this is no longer poetry in the sense that it follows the classical rules but, rather, a pamphlet for the defence of rebels and traitors:

"It is most true, that such poets as in their writings doe labour to better the manners of men, and through the sweete baite of their members, to steale into the young spirits a desire of honour and virtue, are worthy to be had in great respect. But these Irish bards are for the most part of another minde, and so farre from instructing young men in morall discipline, that they themselves doe more deserve to bee sharply

disciplined, for they seldome use to choose unto themselves the doings of good men for the Arguments of their Poems, but whomsoever they finde to be most licentious of life most bolde and lawlesse in his doings, most dangerous and desperate in all parts of disobedience and rebellious disposition, him they set up and glorifie in their Rithmes, him they praise to the people and to young men make an example to follow."Irenaeus doesn't have any pleasant words for the bards, something that will have dreadful consequences, as we will see later on. His criticism is directed both against form and content, the latter being, according to him, a guarantee of the former. In other words, if the complimentary words were directed at what he calls virtue, the beauty of the poetry written would not only be greater but also poetry itself would follow the strictest rules of classicism: "Yea truly, I have caused divers of them to be translate unto me, that I might understand them and surely they are favoured of sweet wit and good invention, but skilled not of the goodly ornaments of poetry; yet were they sprinkled with some pretty flowers of their naturall device, which have good grace and comlinesse unto them, the which it is great pity to see so abused, to the gracing of wickedness and vice, which with good usage would serve to adrne and beautifie vertue."

Poetry, thus, in the hands of Irish bards, contributes to increase chaos and wildness, and acts as a barrier for the new ideal of culture. These are, once more, the excuses given for the eradication of the bards' work. The truth behind it all is more sinister: namely to destroy one of the enemy's most powerful weapons. 'Without language and without historical memory, there can be no roots' is basically the idea England made hers from the XVth century onwards. The message is a tragic one and is full of a pragmatism we could well classify as cruel. This cruelty probably forced Sir James Ware to state in the prologue to the first edition that he would have liked some of the passages to be "tempered with more moderation". He adds, however, that "the troubles and miseries of the time when he wrote it, doe partly excuse him". Spenser, or Irenaeus, for it is he who examines the situation, doesn't like moderation. Great evils require remedies or, better still, great enterprises require painful and unpopular steps to be taken. Machiavelli, anyway, comes out on top again. He allows Spenser to cry out for total freedom of movement for those in charge of making things reach a 'happy' end:

"And this I remember is worthily observed by Machiavel in his discourses upon Livie, where he commendeth the manner of the Romans Government, in giving absolute power to all their Councillors and Governours, which if they abused, they would afterwards clearly ansere; and the contrary thereof he reprehendeth in the States of Venice, of Florence and many other principalities of Italy: who use to limit their cheife officers so strictly, as that thereby they have oftentimes lost such happy occasions, as they could never come unto againe."

It is not surprising, then, that in full command of that freedom he defends, Irenaeus puts forward the most incredible suggestions. We must suppose, however, that the suggestions had in fact a good effect upon Elizabethan minds for the end they tried to achieve pleased everybody or nearly everybody. After all, 'order must prevail over chaos' was, basically, the idea everyone believed at the time to be behind any just society. The cruelty of the laws or of the means employed in order to achieve such a purpose, must have been a secondary consideration at the time. So, Irenaeus must be judged as a man belonging to a time when our idea of human rights would have seemed eccentric. We mustn't feel shaken, therefore, when we see him defend the use of sheer force as the only way to begin the reform of the land. Thus, when Eudoxus asks how this reform must be carried out, Irenaeus answers: "Even by the sword, for all these evils must first be cut away by a strong hand, before any good can be planted, like as the corrupt branches and unwholesome boughs are first to be pruned and the fowle mosse cleansed and scraped away, before the tree can bring forth any good fruits." He adds, trying to explain this, that the cruelty employed is not gratuitous but the result of an unbearable situation: "Where no other remedie may be devised, nor hope of recovery had, there must needs violent meanes be used." The use of the sword, as he says, must come hand in hand with a numerous presence of soldiers, strategically placed in the most important areas of the territory. The number of soldiers must be at least 8,000. The use of violent methods is not an end in itself. The idea behind it is to subdue the population and to reduce it to as intolerable a situation as possible. The master's order will then be undisputable, the power being, thus, firmly established. The well known quotation we are about to see is not, as some historians have argued, a plea Spenser makes to the Elizabethan authorities; he is not trying to wake up the Elizabethan conscience with horrible images. On the contrary, he is trying to forecast what the use of the sword will afford; he is simply trying to show an audience the hard but necessary steps to be taken if a peaceful future colonization of the land is to be carried out:

"The end will be hunger for the people. The proof whereof, I saw sufficiently exemplified in these late warres of Munster, for not withstanding that the same was a most rich and plentifull country full of corne and cattle, that you would have thought they should have been able to stand long, yet ere one yeare and a halfe they were brought to such wretchednesse, as that any stony heart would have rued the same. Out of every corner of the woods and glynnes they came creeping forth upon their hands for their legges could not beare them, they looked like anatomies of death, they spake like Ghosts crying out of their graves, they did eat the dead carrions, happy were they could finde them, yea, and one another soone after, insomuch as the very carcasses they spared not to scrape out of their graves, and if they found a plot of water-cresses or shamrocks; there they flocked as to a feast for the time, yet not able long to continue therewithall, that in

short space there were none almost left, and a most populous and plentiful country suddainely left voyde of man and beast, yet sure in all that warre, there perished not many by the sword, but all by the extremitie of famine, which they themselves had wrought.”

According to Irenaeus, it is not the settler who kills and subdues the native population but the victim's own stupidity, his stubbornness, which makes him stick to modes and manners long forgotten by History.

So far we have seen the steps previous to colonization itself, that is, the use of the sword and famine among the population. We have still to mention those that solve the evils we saw at the beginning. Thus, chaos and disorder, for example, must be tackled with an effective system of hostages: “Some of their principall men must remain in hostage one for another.” To this we must add the English ownership of all the land: “all the lands will I give unto Englishmen. Under every of those Englishmen will I place some of those Irish to be tenants for a certain rent.” The administration of justice, one of the country's great problems, can be solved in a similar way: “if there were English well placed among them”. That way: “They should not be able once to stirre or to murmure.” And just in case these measures were not enough, the population of the biggest towns must be reduced: “the country should de dispeopled (some areas at least) by moving people to different regions”. Finally, and once these steps have been taken, sweetness and charity can be spread, especially concerning religion, for only by sweet methods can the influence of Catholic priests be abolished: “Religion should be delivered and intimated with mildnesse and gentlenesse; so as it may not be hated before it be understood, and their professors despised and rejected.”

That's how Spenser finishes his work. Historical perspective allows u to see not only how those measures were put into practice but also their consequences. In all the process, however, there was only a single cry against it: the victim's. I wouldn't like to finsih without analysing this cry a little more deeply. The cry has sprung for generations from the collective throat of the Irish people. Poetry has been given, in fact, the responsibility for making that cry known. Poetry has been, for example, the most important defender of Irish customs and poetry has been, indeed, the messenger of war. Spenser was not totally wrong when he accused it of defending rebels; however, he didn't tell the whole truth. He didn't, say, at least, that its main role was a different one: to defend the Irish against an external agent. But this has not been its only role, though. There has also been another one: its function as a historical Chronicle. These two roles are, thus, combined in a magnificent way in a ballad which is virtually unknown nowadays but that has tremendous relevance within the subject we are talking about: “The Burning of Kilcolman.” The date of composition is unknown to me. R.D. Joyce, a compiler and composer of songs in whose book the ballad appears, says nothing concerning dates. He only adds an explanatory note to it in which he gives us some details about the castle that

appears in the title. The book in which it is compiled is entitled *Ballads of Irish Chivalry* and was also published undated. It was probably published, however, at the end of the XIXth century or the beginning of the XXth. This lack of information might lead somebody to think that Joyce's work has no relevance at all or, even, that the ballad mentioned here lacks importance. There is something, however, that draws our attention to it and that contradicts these possible first assumptions: its historical value. We have before us a text that may well be considered as the historical register of the Irish answer to Spenser's work.

We don't know all the details about Spenser's deeds in Ireland. We know even less about the influence he might have had upon the Irish population. We know, nevertheless, that his influence in Elizabethan England was profound, thanks especially to works like *The Faerie Queene*. We are also certain that *A View of the State of Ireland* did have its influence too upon ruling classes of a later age. It is not mere chance that the steps Spenser defends coincide with those taken by Lord Arthur Grey Wilton. It could well be, however, that the traditional point of view that holds that Spenser defended his master's ideas were wrong. There is, at least, another possibility: Spenser acting as a guide and source of ideas that his master would know how to exploit. Be that as it may, the real thing is that neither of the two points of view helps much when we come to investigate to what degree Spenser was loved, admired or, even, hated in Ireland. This ballad, precisely, may help us in this difficult situation.

During his stay in Ireland, Spenser lived in the castle of Kilcolman, County Cork. The castle had belonged, before Spenser came to live in it, to the Earl of Desmond and was burnt in 1598, while Spenser was actually living in it and had already completed *A View of the State of Ireland*. The burning of the castle forced Spenser to flee leaving behind a child that died in the flames. The title of the ballad sets the story. It begins with a sad image of silence and darkness that announces death:

"No sound of life was coming
 Form glen or tree or brake
 Save the bittern's hollow booming
 Up from the ready lake;
 The golden light of sunset
 was swallowed in the deep
 And the night came down with sullen frown
 On Kilcolman's massive keep."

The first stanza, then, stresses the importance of silence. Even the bittern's song is 'hollow'. Day has died and night reigns. Light has been swallowed by darkness. The second stanza, acting as a tremendous contrast, begins with an explosion of sound:

“But hark! that trumpet blast
it fills the forest boundless.”

It is the sound of war, the gallowglass’ call to battle. The people in the castle know it;

“In the castle hearts are beating,
while through the mountain pass,
by lake and river meeting,
came kern and gallowglass,
breathing vengeance deep and deadly
under the forest tree
to the wizard man who cast the ban
on the minstrels bold and free.”

Who but Spenser could be the wizard that has forbidden the singing of the ‘minstrels bold and free?’ It is him, undoubtedly, the savage is looking for. This is, then, the vengeance taken against the person that has insulted the most sacred memory; but the poet has fled:

“They gave no word of warning,
silent they came, and on
Gate, wall and rampart scoring:
But the wizard bard was gone.”

Fire, however, must destroy the sanctuary of the sinner and purify the air:

“Till from the mystic circle
on Corrins crest of stone,
a sheet of fire like an Indian pyre
up to the clouds was thrown.”

Fire destroys the hated and frightful symbol:

“The Castle of the Poet
The man of endless fame
Soon hid its head in a mantle red
of fierce and rushing flame.”

As if it were a strange ritual of satanic magic, the human sacrifice is necessary. The victim is not the wizard, but an innocent child:

“But hark that thrilling screaming
Over the crackling din
‘Tis the poet’s child in its terror wild,
the blazing tower within.”

The courage of a gallowglass that runs to prevent the disaster is not enough. The ruins of a castle and the death of an innocent creature are a symbol of the Ireland Spenser left behind. The Irish answer was, therefore, a violent one, as it continued to be for years. This violence, however, must make us think and draw conclusions; as we do, we'll see that there is something of capital importance within the ballad: the attack of the Irish bard. Why? Well, it doesn't matter much. The attack of the bard is a symbol, a metaphor even. There is a stronger reason behind it, though: the answer of a people that have felt their rights suffocated by a mistaken idea of culture or knowledge. We said before that Shakespeare or Spenser couldn't be criticised for sustaining an idea that was fairly popular in their time. Similarly we can't criticise the Irish for defending their own. Who has a greater right? The answer hasn't been found yet. For four centuries, however, the predominant answer has been only one: the law of the strongest. But being predominant doesn't mean that it is also the right one. The Irish bard, the composer of "The Burning of Kilcolman" wants his island, as Caliban wanted the legacy of Sycorax. The bard rewrites Shakespeare's work: that is, Caliban attacks Prospero, the wizard man of the ballad. The last act, however, hasn't yet been written.

Notes:

1. A Spanish captain in Ireland in the year 1560, Diego Ortiz de Urizar, informs Philip II that: "these people say that the country (Ireland) belongs to your Majesty from very remote times". Archivo General de Simancas. Estado. Legajo, 828.

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