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The Footing of His Feet: On a Line of Milton's

John Hollander

In his remarkable and comprehensive *Harmonie Universelle*, the seventeenth-century Franciscan Marin Mersenne projected a science of Echometry, which might some day allow one to build, among other things, places in which what is cried out in one language would be choed by a response in another one. Whatever the use of such an invention, it is the matter of echo which I wish to address in these remarks — the matter of echo or, at any rate, that of poetic allusion which I have called elsewhere “the figure of echo,” the trope of pointed intertextual resonance.

By poetic allusion I mean not so much to indicate allusions, quotations and so forth *in* poems, but rather the poetic or figurative operations of certain unavowed, or barely acknowledged, fragments of earlier poetry which are worked into a later text. (In the taxonomy of *imitatio* in Thomas M. Greene's *The Light in Troy*, this should constitute that renaissance type which he calls “dialectical.”) We commonly use the acoustical term “echo” metaphorically to invoke such sorts of allusion, and it may be observed that renaissance poetic practice is full of moments at which literal or mythological invocations of echo, or the use of echo schemes of formal or informal kinds, will be accompanied by such allusions, and will frequently produce them in later texts. To adduce one example not previously discussed: Ben Jonson, in the fourth poem of his extravagant *Eupheme* (a cycle in praise of Lady Venetia Digby), addresses his mythologized heroine as follows:

The voice so sweet, the words so fair,
As some soft chime had stroked the air;
And though the sound were parted thence,
Still left an echo in the sense. (11. 37-40)

This is not the nymph Echo of post-Ovidian mythography, but neither is it the literal acoustical phenomenon. We may admire the delicate syntactic ambiguity of “Still left an echo *in the sense*” – in the hearer’s own sense of hearing (in sensation, *im Gefühl*) and in the sense, the meaning (*Sinn, signification*) of the text. Alexander Pope had certainly “heard” these echoes of this echoing. In his famous formula (in *An Essay on Criticism*, 364–5), directed against the cultivation by “tuneful fools” of what he treats as poetic musicality in spite of meaning, he himself echoes Jonson’s line:

’Tis not enough no harshness gives offense,
The sound must seem an echo to the sense.

This is a sharp, expositarily tactful (note the “must seem”) but reductive revision of Jonson’s far more resonant trope of memory, or abstraction, even to troping itself. Where Jonson is plangent, Pope is merely striking. It is one of many instances in which poetry *about* echo elicits intertextual echoes later on.

Yet we cannot help but observe that a relatively minute particular of poetic language – the sequence “sound” – “echo” – “sense” – engages the poetic attention of a later writer, and that such minutiae are easy for the reader to overlook. The philological scholar, in the earlier history of the academic study of literature, would frequently note echoic phrases or uses as linguistic evidence of, or exceptions to, some convention he was trying to identify. Intrinsic theories of reading, including extreme “new-critical” responses to a text, would – perhaps even unwittingly – tend to write as if in each poem, language were born anew, *ex nihilo* (even though the trope of birth out of nothing seems sterile in its self-contradiction). The philological scholar wields his *confer* footnote in such a way as to make the poet ask, “So what?” The new critic abandons the device as an instrument of inauthenticity. But the poetic reader – a strange blend of Lessing’s critic, philosopher and (in the oldest sense of the word) *Liebhaber* – will always be hearing bells that sing out, “compare, compare,” sometimes at the tiniest, but often peculiarly sharp, points of language. I believe that the poetic process is deeply associated with awareness of this kind, whether actively displaying the interconnections of allusive use or, as in the instance mentioned in my title, interestingly and significantly suppressed.

But I should proceed without further delay to that instance. The line of Milton’s is from *Il Penseroso*, from the passage celebrating the Imagin-

nation's nighttime at the heart of the poem. This section, running roughly from lines 75 through 122, has obsessed English and American poetry from Collins to Yeats and Stevens; from

I hear the far off *Curfew* sound
Over some wide-water'd shore,
Swinging low with sullen roar

— whose echoes are heard in the “sullen horn” of the may-fly in Collins’ “Ode to Evening” and in the repeated “wide water, without sound” of Stevens’ “Sunday Morning” — through the place

Where glowing Embers through the room
Teach light to counterfeit a gloom

and to generate the interior illumination of the figurative, the passage then continues into the realms of tragedy and romance.

But at this point, the power of Melancholy is invoked as being unable to call up the power and the persons of poets in the way in which the figure of “Gorgeous Tragedy” had been able to represent tragic poets by presenting their plays

But, O sad Virgin, that thy power
Might raise *Musaens* from his bower,
Or bid the soul of *Orpheus* sing
Such notes as, warbled to the string,
Drew Iron tears down *Pluto*'s cheek,
And made Hell grant what Love did seek.

It is interesting to observe that the parallel evocation of Orpheus, in the closing lines of *L'Allegro*, calls up music and lyric poetry to make one

hear
Such strains as would have won the ear
Of *Pluto*, to have quite set free
His half-regained *Eurydice*.

We are reminded that the formulation in *Il Penseroso* suppresses the fact that Hell granted to poetic power only half of what Love did seek, and it is all the more touching that, as Milton's meditative consciousness moves on, the matter of suppression, of telling half a tale — or perhaps half a truth — of poetic incompleteness, in short, emerges as a central question. The lines continue:

And made Hell grant what Love did seek.
 Or call up him who left half told
 The story of *Cambuscan* bold,
 Of *Camball*, and of *Algarsife*,
 And who had *Canace* to wife,
 That own'd the virtuous Ring and Glass,
 And of the wondrous Horse of Brass,
 On which the *Tartar* King did ride ...

The poet invoked here is of course Chaucer, but as author of the half-told *Squire's Tale* – a very strange choice indeed to juxtapose with the exemplary works of the tragic dramatists, those central matters of Thebes (for Sophocles), the line of Pelops (for Aeschylus) and of Troy (for Euripides). We may well ask why this is so, and a glance at the following lines will lead to an answer, as well as to the problematic line of my title:

And if aught else great Bards beside
 In sage and solemn tunes have sung,
 Of Tournays and of Trophies hung,
 Of Forests, and enchantments drear,
 Where more is meant than meets the ear.
 Thus night oft see me in thy pale career ...

The “great Bards” are only one, Spenser, the suppression of whose name is a very different matter from reducing Chaucer's to “him that left half told ...” It has been frequently remarked that the epithet “sage and solemn” was one which Milton himself recalled, probably a decade or more later, in a passage in *Areopagitica* to which we must return, when he invoked “our sage and serious poet Spenser.” Indeed, possible allusions to Ariosto and Tasso fade before the strength of Spenser's presence here. “And who had *Canace* to wife” is itself answered by the text it echoes, from Book IV, canto iii of *The Faerie Queene*: “For Triamond had *Canacee* to wife” (st. 52), and the importance of the allusion to *The Squire's Tale* is now apparent. It is that half-told story which Spenser completes in Book IV of *The Faerie Queene*, and which he uses as an occasion for acknowledgment of his major precursor, Chaucer, “Well of English vndefyled.” Milton chooses the half-told tale of Chaucer because of its influential power on Spenser, as well as for its incompleteness; at the same time, Spenser is himself unnamed and un-designated here. Given that, as Dryden observed in a famous moment in the preface to the *Fables*, Chaucer's relation to Spenser was that of

Spenser to Milton (his "original"), it would seem that this whole passage would constitute an important constellation of acknowledgments.

That Spenser goes unacknowledged, then, save perhaps through the screen of Chaucer's presence, is strange. Spenser confessed that he could not dare to strive for poetic eminence "but through infusion sweete / Of thine owne spirit, which doth in me surviue" as he says to Chaucer, adding that

I follow here the footing of thy feete,
That with thy meaning so I may the rather meete. (IV. iii. 34)

But at the analogous point of acknowledgment, Milton loses his own footing, in all the senses of the word which Spenser had employed. When he moves away from to half-avowed Spenserian scene "Where more is meant than meets the ear," he does so with a curious metrical limp, a lapse of an almost unique sort in all of Milton's verse. The hypermetrical line, "Thus night oft see me in thy pale career" is egregious not only for its extra syllables — it is a strict iambic pentameter thrusting out from the well-trained herd of octosyllabics in both *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* — but also because it continues on with the rhymes of the previous couplet, an infelicity elsewhere scrupulously avoided. I find it interesting that no editor since the eighteenth century has remarked on the line, and then only to observe that its role was to introduce a new section. But no new section in either of the companion poems is introduced in this fashion, and we are clearly dealing with a matter of meeting meaning in a deeper way.

For Milton's is no ordinary error, no mere lapse in prosodic control non violation of his own carefully drawn ground-rules. Rather it is itself an interpretive reminiscence of Spenser, and a strong defense against the very defensive suppression of acknowledgment which has just occurred. Like the one other, far better known slip of Milton's, which also occurs with respect to Spenser, some slight souring of the "infusion sweete" is going on, though ultimately with an even more quickening effect. In the most famous passage, perhaps, in *Areopagitica* which I mentioned earlier, Milton's celebrated lapse of memory causes him to include Guyon's palmer on the excursion into the Cave of Mammon (as Spenser does not) as well as into the Bower of Bliss. The whole passage, which starts out with celebrated dispraise of the "fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercis'd and unbreath'd," deals with necessities of moral and spiritual risk, of imaginative enterprise; "that which purifies us is triall, and triall is by what is contrary." I continue with the famous sentences:

That virtue therefore which is but a youngling in the contemplation of evil, and knows not the utmost that vice promises to her followers, and rejects it, is but a blank virtue, not a pure; her whiteness is but an excremental whiteness; which was the reason why our sage and serious Poet Spenser, whom I dare to be known to think a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas, describing true temperance under the person of Guyon, brings him in with his palmer through the cave of Mammon, and the bower of earthly bliss, that he might see and know, and yet abstain.

It is not surprising that, at such a crucial imaginative moment, Milton, whose earthly father was a musician and a money-lender, and whose spiritual or poetical father was Spenser,¹ might reach out for a succedaneum and prop by remembering one – the assistance of the reasonable palmer – that had not been there. The cave of Mammon, in particular, is charged for Milton with implicit significance: it probably plays a greater formative role in the generation of the Hell of *Paradise Lost* than has been acknowledged, and is in any case a highly-charged *topos* for an ambitious poet.

The significance of Milton's mistake has been variously discussed by historical scholars like Ernest Sirluck, and poetic interpreters – Harold Bloom and, more recently, John Guillory.² I shall not dwell on it any further, but return to the long line in *Il Penseroso*. In its Spenserian environment, it presents as many features of a fiction as of an error (like the cave of Mammon slip and, indeed, like any dream). Looked at more closely, it can be seen to seal a kind of closure as much as to commence what Warton in the eighteenth century called the “second part or division of the poem . . . ushered in with a long verse.”

Of Forests, and enchantments drear,
Where more is meant than meets the ear.
Thus night oft see me in thy pale career . . .

The “thus” can look backward, syntactically, as well as forward, and the repeated rhyme of the previous couplet, carried through in the following long line, suggests a compelling and familiar way of closing down a stanza. Suppose that we pad out the lines as follows:

Of forests and of dire enchantments drear,
Where more is meant than merely meets the ear –
Thus night thou oft dost see me in thy pale career.

¹ See also “the sage / And serious doctrine of Virginity” (*Comus*, 785–6), where the Spenserian epithet is applied to a relevant concept. Milton is quoted from the edition of Menitt Y. Hughes (New York, 1957).

² John Guillory, *Poetic Authority* (New York, 1983), pp. 90–93; 132–39.

The Spenserian closure, which had operated so strongly on Milton in "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" as Kenneth Gross has so admirably shown,³ returns here in synecdoche: a triad of lines of 8, 8 and 10 syllables, linked in rhyme to what proceeds, is here made to represent what had been 10, 10 and 12. The line in which the speaker rejoins the text of *Il Pensero* after leaving it at night in his high, lonely tower "Where I may oft outwatch the *Bear*" (line 87) is not merely hypermetrical, but Spenserianly so. Stylistically speaking, the absence of Spenser's name even in pronominal allusion (as with Chaucer's) is a question of suppression; poetically it is another matter, and the Spenserian close enters the poem in a return of the repressed.

Milton's line, then, is in itself a metaphoric version of Spenser's alexandrine, and is, in its role in *Il Pensero*, playing an important part in the drama of authorial priority in that poem, and in Milton's early career generally. Humphrey Moseley, the publisher of Milton's 1645 *Poems* in which it appears, boasts of having been able to bring "into the Light as true a Birth, as the Muses have brought forth since our famous Spenser wrote; whose poems in these English ones are as rarely imitated, as sweetly excell'd." And while neither of these is strictly or significantly true, it is clearly the Spenserian presence which shadows so much of the light of these poems. It may seem strange to suggest that Spenser – or his returning shade – can enter them by the waving of so slender a wand as a single alexandrine. For a historian of form, identifying Spenser with the English hexameter line might seem irresponsible or capricious. Yet for English poetry from the mid-1580's on, this identification was clearly at work: poets grasped and wielded the minutiae which later learning might overlook.

In early Tudor poetry, the hexameter line introduced the rhyming couplet form called by George Gascoigne the "poulter's measure," the twelve-syllable six stressed line rhyming with the following fourteener. (We may remind ourselves of the rhythmic effect of this by distinguishing between the full couplet of fourteen-syllable lines: "Fourteeners, cut from ballad stanzas, don't seem right for song: / Their measure rumbles on like this for just a bit too long" and "A poulter's measure (like a "baker's dozen") cut / One foot off a fourteener couplet, ended in a

³ Kenneth Gross, "Spenser and the Early Poetry of Milton," *PMLA* 98:1 (1983), 22–27.

rut.”)⁴ But the independence of the six-foot line would not emerge until well after the Earl of Surrey had given the English pentameter a canonical form. The first English poem in alexandrines I know of is Surrey’s translation of Psalm 55; the first original one is George Turberville’s “Of Ladie Venus” (a version, perhaps via Poliziano, of Moschus’ “Idyllion of wandring Love” – as E. K. calls it in a note on the “March” eclogue of *The Shepheardes Calender*), published in 1567.⁵ Ten years after that, we find Sidney and Spenser first employing the line at about the same time: Sidney in several places in the original *Arcadia*, and Spenser, for the first avowed time, as the closing line of the opening “January” eclogue of *SC*.⁶ This last instance is most significant: Spenser associates the alexandrine with closure of a pentameter rhymed stanza, albeit only once, at the very end of the whole poem, which is itself by way of being the entire *Shepheardes Calender* in prefatory microcosm. The anticipation of the ultimate shaping of the alexandrine and its role in the stanza-form of *The Faerie Queene* is clear.

Sidney used alexandrines not infrequently in the sonnets of *Astrophel and Stella* (sonnets 1, 6, 8, 76, 77, 102, as well as the first and third songs), but more and more, particularly after the publication of *The Faerie Queene* and of *Epithalamion*, the English alexandrine seems to ring with Spenser’s name. The intricately rhymed alexandrines of the lament for Sir Philip Sidney, *The Mourning Muse of Thestylis*, by Spenser’s friend Lodowick Bryskett (written in 1587 or after); the choice by the devotedly Spenserian poet Michael Drayton of alexandrines for his devotedly Spenserian topographico-mythographic *Poly-Olbion*; the use, by even so anti-Spenserian poets as Donne and Jonson, of alexan-

⁴ These didactic examples from this author’s *Rhyme’s Reason: A Guide to English Verse* (New Haven, 1981), p. 11. It should be observed that couplets of poulters measure were often printed as ballad stanzas, with lines of 6, 6, 8 and 6 syllables.

⁵ *A Paradyse of Daynty Devises* (1578) has two poems in alexandrines; *The Gallery of Gallant Inventions* has four (one alternating with pentameters); *England’s Parnassus* (1600) has a poem beginning “Of Neptune war was made by Æolus and his traine,” in blank alexandrines and credited, interestingly enough, to “Edm. Spencer.” Surrey inserted alexandrines at M. 30, 714, and 832 of his translation of *Aeneid* IV; the last one closes Dido’s lament.

⁶ There is an alexandrine at the first line of the lament stanza in “November.” The closing of “January,” by the way, was crucial for Milton, who echoed it in a most complex fashion at the end of *Lycidas*. See John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1981), p. 128n.

drines to terminate strophes of epithalamia and odes – in all of these instances there is some echo, however muffled or suppressed, of the older poet.⁷ Milton's self-consciously Spenserian alexandrines have recently been discussed in detail. Abraham Cowley used the alexandrine frequently among the heroic couplets of his youthful *Davideis*, not with an eye to their power of closure, but, interestingly enough, to trope augmentation. In a note to one of these lines in Book I, Cowley apologizes for the intrusion of the long line, protesting that "it is not by negligence that this verse is so loose, long, and as it were, vast; it is to paint in the number the nature of the thing which it describes." Cowley cites at this point a number of such lines, including one from the fourth book, "Like some fair pine o'erlooking all th'ignobler wood," which caused Dr. Johnson, in his "Life of Cowley," to observe that he could not discover "why the *pine* is *taller* in an Alexandrine than in ten syllables." But Johnson went on to praise, as an example of "representative versification," the conclusion of these couplets:

He who defers this work from day to day,
Does on a river's bank expecting stay
Till the whole stream which stopp'd him should be gone
Which runs, and, as it runs, for ever will run on.

Here, the last line so clearly applies to itself, to verse in general, and to running water as an ancient figure of eloquence, that Johnson's conviction that verse "can imitate only sound and motion" gives way. Cowley used the alexandrine, later on, conspicuously to terminate strophes of his "Pindarick" odes, and from a remark by the poetaster Dogrel in his play *The Guardian* (1650), in re one of his own lines of verse ("The last

⁷ The *genius loci* invoked by Drayton in the first song of *Poly-Olbion*, 8–25 might almost be Spenser as precursor. For Donne's guarded Spenserian formal echo, see the stanza form of "The Progresse of the Soule," that strange poem which declares itself to be, at the end of its first stanza, "A worke t'outweare *Seths* pillars, bricke and stone, / And (holy writt excepted) made to yeeld to none"; also, "The Valediction: Of the Book," "The Anniversarie," "An Epithalamion Made at Lincolnes Inn." For Jonson, see *The Under-wood* 23, 25; the "Epithalamion, or a Song" (number 75) is most interesting in its evasive allusion to Spenser: the twenty-four (hourly?) stanzas, all ending in alexandrines, start out with what seems to be a conscious look at their own belatedness with respect to the mid-summer date of Spenser's great precursor poem ("Though thou hast past thy summer standing, stay / Awhile with us, bright sun, and help our light").

is a little too long: but I imitate *Spenser*"), the association remains strong for him.

When John Dryden comes to discuss the alexandrine's use as the third line of the occasional, pace-modulating triplet in Augustan verse, he makes clear this same association: "Spenser has also given me boldness to make use sometimes of his *Alexandrin* line, which we call, tho' improperly, the Pindaric, because Mr. Cowley has often employ'd it in his *Odes*," he observes in his dedicatory essay prefixed to his translation of the *Aeneid*. He goes on to add that it gives "a certain majesty to the verse, when 't is us'd with judgment, and stops the sense from overflowing into another line." Dryden's triplets that conclude with hexameters, then, are like the closes of Spenserian stanzas: the effect of an alexandrine for him is clearly cadential. It is perhaps more than merely amusing to note what may be the earliest instance of an alexandrine at the end of one of Dryden's triplets; in 1670, in the fourth act of his heroic drama *The Conquest of Granada*, his hero Alamanzor counsels the Queen of Granada not to look before she leaps:

True, 'tis a narrow path that leads to bliss,
But right before there is no precipice:
Fear makes men look aside, and then their footing miss.⁸

Dryden knew well the passage in *The Faerie Queene* Book IV cited earlier, and seems here to be following the "footing" of Spenser's "feete" in a way that strangely surfaces, some twenty-seven years before he wrote the introduction to his translation of Virgil. In his non-dramatic verse, Dryden seems not to have used the longer line to complete a triplet much before 1682 (lines 90 and 166 of "The Medal"). In the following year, he concludes the final couplet of the great elegy on John Oldham that begins "Farewell, too little, and too lately known" with a line imitated from Virgil (having used one for a triplet earlier in the poem): "Thy brows with ivy, and with laurels bound, / But fate and gloomy night encompass thee around." Here, the echo of Virgil's specific account of the shade of Marcellus in Book VI of the *Aeneid* ("sed nox atra caput tristi circumvolat umbra")⁹ points back to the

⁸ John Dryden, *The Conquest of Granada*, IV. ii. 460-2. See Conrad A. Balliet, "The History and Rhetoric of the Triplet," *PMLA* 80 (1965), 528-34.

⁹ This line is translated by Dryden later on as "and night, with sable shades, involves his head" (*Aeneid* VI. 1199).

mention of Marcellus by Dryden earlier, and itself *circumvolat*, wraps up, the whole poem in the Spenserian closure.

During the next twenty-five years, the cadential power of the alexandrine at the end of the occasional triplet in Augustan heroic couplets had become weakened by convention. Pope, in the famous passage from *An Essay on Criticism* quoted earlier, heaps his scorn on such concluding devices: "A needless Alexandrine ends the Song, / That like a wounded Snake, drags its slow length along," brilliantly slowing up his own line with the "slow length." It is interesting to observe that, less than twenty lines later (370-73), when Pope is using the same sorts of self-descriptive lines to represent beneficial, rather than harmful phonetic devices, he introduces a "quick" rather than a "slow" alexandrine. Like all the lines in this passage, it directs its energies toward a particular bit of narrative:

When Ajax strives, some Rock's vast weight to throw,
The Line too labours, and the Words move slow;
Not so, when swift Camilla scours the Plain,
Flies oe'r th'unbending Corn, and skims along the Main.

Swift Camilla's fast six feet are uncontaminated by any belatedly Spenserian closure here, and one can't help wondering whether the serpentine presence in the bad, slow "closing" alexandrine has not wandered into the example from Spenser, via Milton: the stanza in *F.Q.* I. vii. 31, describing Arthur's helmet, ends with the dragon on it, "And scaly tayle was stretcht adowne his backe full low." The "old Dragon under ground," in stanza 18 of Milton's *Nativity Hymn*, at stanza's end "Swinges the scaly Horror of his folded tail" in echo of Spenser. Pope's needless alexandrine is related to these lines; his effectively swift one has been purified by Virgil, and by Dryden.¹⁰

In any event, the alexandrine continued to resonate, however faintly, with Spenserian allusiveness, throughout the seventeenth century. We

¹⁰ It should also be observed that Pope himself, in the *Epistle to Augustus*, could not resist a bit of "representative versification" in this triplet: "Waller was smooth; but Dryden taught to join / The varying verse, the full resounding line, / The long majestic march, and energy divine." Dryden's word has been "majestic" to characterize the alexandrine. See also Pope's letter to Cromwell dated 11/25/1710. Pope's couplet with the fast alexandrine in the *Essay* on "swift Camilla" translates, very swiftly indeed, Virgil's four lines (V. 808-811); the word "skims" seems to come from Dryden's earlier translation of the same lines. An even longer Spenserian serpentine alexandrine occurs in *FQ* III. xi. 28.

may well want to ask if Spenser himself even gives evidence of being aware of his own possession, as it were, and, if so, where and when. Without knowing anything of the formal structure of Spenser's "lost works" like the *Dying Pellicano* or the *Dreames*, we may turn to the verse epilogue to *The Shepheardes Calender*, in six alexandrine couplets, beginning "Loe! I have made a Calender for every yeaire, / That steele in strength, and time in durance, shall outweare." (The poem is divided in two by the opening of the fourth couplet, "Goe, lytle Calender! thou hast a free passeperte," which echoes the already formulaic "Goe, little booke: thy self present ..." of the opening invocation "To His Booke."¹¹ It is interesting to observe that the six tetrameter triplets of the opening invocation contain the same number of syllables as the six hexameter couplets of the closing one.) The form to which that epilogue is attuned is by no means a trivial matter; but in any case, I should like to consider one unique earlier instance of an alexandrine line in Spenser's earliest published writing. Both for the remarkable question of the occasion of its occurrence, and for the uncanny relation it bears to the egregious pentameter line of Milton's, it deserves the attention it never seems to have received.

In 1569, Spenser at the age of seventeen had graduated from school and was on his way to university, and it is at this early moment in his far from pale career that he translated some poems of Marot and Du Bellay for an English edition of Jan van der Noot's *Theatre for Voluptuous Worldlings* – a kind of emblem book with woodcuts accompanying the poems and an extended, polemically protestant, commentary. Spenser's version of the Marot lines (themselves a translation of Petrarch's "Standomi un giorno solo a la finestra") is in rhymed iambic pentameter. But in the fourth of the so-called "epigrams" into which it is divided, a "spring of water" is described,

Whereto approached not in any wise .
The homely shepherde, nor the ruder clowne,
But many Muses, and the Nymphes withall,
That sweetely in accorde did tune their voice
Unto the gentle sounding of the waters fall ...

Here once more (for us), but first (for Spenser) is an egregious alexandrine, the only one in all of the 294 lines which Spenser contributed to

¹¹ The "Goe, little booke" is itself a Chaucerian echo.

the *Theatre*. It represents a strange sort of mistake, for the French is decasyllabic:

N'osoient pasteurs ne bouviers approcher,
 Mais mainte Muse et Nymphe seulement,
 Qui de leurs voix accordoient doucement
 Au son de l'eau ...

Spenser radically expands Marot's half-line in what is his first, apparently unwitting, alexandrine. This would be of little interest were it not for its origination, for the rest of the poet's *oeuvre*, of a thematic *topos* as well as a formal one. A singer "tuning" his or her voice to the fall of water – where "tune" means both to sing or sound (*OED* sense 3) as well as to attune or adapt to (*OED* 1a or b, *accorder*) – is a recurring presence. Ten years later, in the "Aprill" eclogue of *The Shepheardes Calender*, the shepherd called Hobbinol says of his friend Colin Clout,

then will I sing his laye
 Of fayre Eliza, queene of shepherdes all,
 Which once he made, as by a spring he laye,
 And tuned it unto the waters fall.

This was an important trope for the young poet. In an ambitious and radically experimental book, Colin, the figure "under whose person the Author selfe is shadowed," both intones his song to the moving water, and accords his singing with it. Tityrus, in Virgil's first eclogue, "at ease in the shade teaches [with his piping and signing] the Woods to reecho the name of lovely Amaryllis" ("lentus in umbra / formosam resonare doces Amaryllida silvas"). In the *Calender*, "Tityrus" stands for Virgil, and the Virgilian trope of imprinting human significance on the mute nature of the pastoral world – the institution of the pathetic fallacy, as it were – is powerfully revised in Spenser's transumption of it. Colin addresses – and thereby extends authorial power over – the moving water of poetic tradition, even as he accommodates to it. (One of these senses of "tune" makes this an emblem of Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," the other, of Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*: Spenser's figure subsumes the dialectic between these views.) Hobbinol tells us that the "laye" so attuned was not about Colin's love Rosalind, but of "fayre Eliza" herself, which suggests a major consecration to a Muse outside the "greene cabinet" of the *Calender*. In addition, the quatrain's *rime riche*, unusual in that book, of "laye" (poem) and "laye"

(reclined) underscores the trope of according, and the association of pastoral *otium* and pastoral poetry.

The figure returns in the “June” eclogue of *SC* (11. 7–8): “The bramble bush where byrdes of every kynde / To the water fall their tunes attemper right.” It reappears in *Virgils Gnat* (Spenser’s translation of the pseudo-Virgilian *Culex*) where, at the opening, the falling water is clearly revealed as poetic tradition: “We now have playde (Augustus) wantonly, / Tuning our song unto a tender Muse.” And at a high and important moment in Book VI of *The Faerie Queene*, Sir Calidore encounters a stream at the foot of Mt. Acidale, where he is about to be vouchsafed one of the poem’s major and central visions:

Ne mote wylde beastes, ne mote the ruder clowne
Thereto approach, ne filth mote therein drowne:
But nymphes and faeries by the bancks did sit,
In the woods shade, which did the waters crowne,
Keeping all noysome things away from it,
And to the waters fall tuning their accents fit. (VI. x. 7)

Here there is a direct reminiscence of the Marot translation, of the privileged scene of a vision of eloquence not to be transgressed upon by “the ruder clowne,” the bad poets. Spenser had, probably in the early 1580’s, reworked his contributions to the *Theatre* volume, and these revised poems were published much later in his volume entitled *Complaints*. In this later version, the lines about the nymphs read “That sweetly in accord did tune their voyce / To the soft sounding of the waters fall,” the alexandrine being corrected. In addition, his later *Visions of Bellay* recast into sonnet form the blank verse he had originally used for them in the van der Noot book.¹² In the early, unrhymed Englishing of one of the *Songe* sonnets, the same figure turns up:

Hard by a rivers side, a waling nymph
Folding her armes with thousand sighs to heaven
Did tune her plaint to falling rivers sound.

¹² Spenser was undoubtedly working from the French, not from van der Noot’s Dutch versions; in any case, that rendering of the Du Bellay line, “Mengdé haer clachte oock met des waters getire” is a Dutch alexandrine, but the Marot line in question, “Maer Nimphen gent songhen daer met genuchte” is a pentameter, and could not, had Spenser seen it, have suggested an alexandrine. The Petrarch passage (*Rime* 323) is simply “ma ninfe et muse a quel tenor cantando.”

In the later text, this becomes

Hard by a rivers side a virgin faire
 Folding her armes to heaven with thousand throbs
 And outraging her cheeke and golden haire
 To falling rivers sound thus tun'd her sobs.

Du Bellay's French seems to provide a possible paradigm for the alexandrine expansion of the Marot tuning-to-the-water line: his "Nymphe esployree ... / Accordeit ceste plainte au murmure des flotz," and Spenser may have had the cadence of the French *alexandrin* in his ear as he worked with the uncannily similar text from Petrarch via Marot, where one "waling nymph" gave way to many.

Be that as may be, their song was in his line; and just as the terminal alexandrine would always seem a Spenserian echo, the trope of tuning poetry to the flow of poetic waters became, for many of Spenser's followers, a kind of colophon or signature to be acknowledged. Thus, three years after the publication of the first edition of *The Shephearde's Calender*, Thomas Blenerhassot (in *A Revelation of the True Minerva*, 1582): "Take lute in hand, tune to the waters fall." Lodowick Bryskett's elegy for Sir Philip Sidney in alexandrines, mentioned earlier, makes the water that of his local, Irish poetic river; the nymphs he invokes at his poem's opening seem figures for the poetic of his friend Spenser: "Help me to tune my dolefull notes to gurgling sound / Of Liffies tumbling streams ..." George Peele's *A Farewell* (1589): "So couth he sing his layes among them all / And tune his pype unto the waters fall." William Vallans (*A Tale of Two Swans*, 1590): "Where Venus ... / Sate lovely by the running river side, / Tuning her Lute unto the waters fall." *The Returne from Parnassus* (Part II, 1606) invokes Spenser directly: "While to the waters fall he tun'd her fame" (Act I, ii), and, later on (Act IV, iv): "Weele tune our sorrows to the waters fall." Spenserians like Drayton, William Browne and George Wither repeat the figure several times.¹³

¹³ See for example Drayton's *Quest of Cynthia* (1627): "Tuning to the waters fall / The small birds sang to her"; also, *Pastorals* (1619), Eclogue 3: "And let them set to gather all / Time keeping with the waters fall"; also, George Wither, *A Satyre*, "There to my fellow Shepheards will I sing, / Tuning my Reed unto some dancing Spring"; "The Shepheards Sunne" (probably by Anthony Munday) in *England's Helicon*: "Take hands then Nymphes and Shepheards all, / And to these Rivers musiques fall / Sing true love, and chast love begins our Festivall" (and note the alexandrine closure). I count 3 more instances in Drayton, and 6 in William Browne. We may even consider, I think,

What we have seen in the resonance of Spenser's early, mistakenly long alexandrine exhibits a somewhat ghostly quality: the anticipation, at an early point in an artist's work, of what might come to seem synecdochic of it by others. There are other such instances of over-privileged – and perhaps over-determined – minutiae in Spenser which, by self-echoing, he seemed to avow. One of these is the rhetorical formula, used in a quasi-mythographic context, "Who knows not X?" Spenser uses it to institute a central fiction – to introduce it and to make an ironically guarded claim for its prior establishment by the two-edged means of a rhetorical question. Its first use in the "August" eclogue of *The Shepheardes Calender* involves "a doleful verse / Of Rosalend (whe knowes not Rosalend?) / That Colin made." (Colin-Spenser has a "love and mistresse" with the "feigned name" of Rosalind.) This initial instance of the little scheme is protected by the fictional extension of the question "Who knows not?" That question is uttered by Cuddie, one of the shepherds in the eclogue, about another, Colin, and his mistress: in Cuddie's world, her name is echoed by every stream. When Spenser comes later on to echo his own formula, the two other occasions, while evoking versions of a Colin-Rosalind situation, are nonetheless far more audacious.

In the first of the *Cantos of Mutabilitie* (VII. vi. 36), Spenser as narrator first names the sacred spot, the hilltop whereon a legal proceeding with cosmic consequences is to take place. The hilltop "shadowed," as Spenser would have said, by the hill in the poem was a place near and dear to him – Gullymore, near his own home at Kilcolman – but renamed in the poem from the valley beneath it, and thereby refigured. The spot "That was, to weet, upon the highest hights / Of Arlo-hill (who knows not Arlo-hill?)" stands to the poet as Rosalind to his own persona, Colin; it bears a feigned name which also, "being wel ordered, will bewray the very name" of a personal place. The rhetoric of questioning here is much more complex than in the first instance. Firstly, the height has been re-named from a stream of water at its base: readers could be said to know and not know it at once, depending upon whether what Spenser elsewhere calls the "feigned colours" or the "true case" is meant. Secondly, the narrator here, unlike the naif Cuddie in the *Calender*, knows well that the scoffing answer ("Nobody"), the Marlowe's lines from "The Passionate Sheepheard to his Love" (also from *England's Helicon*), "Seeing the Sheepheards feed theyr flocks, / By shallow Rivers, to whose falls, / Melodious byrds sing Madrigalls," as another instance.

plain answer ("I don't"), are both subsumed by the wise answer ("We all do, now that you mention it").

The second re-echoing of the formula occurs in Book VI of *The Faerie Queene*, a few stanzas after the reoccurrence of the tuning-song-to-the-waters'-fall figure we just considered. The scene is the top of Mt. Acidale itself, where Sir Calidore has come upon his fragile vision of the hundred naked girls dancing in a ring around the Graces, who concentrically surround an unnamed lady in the process of being "advaunst to be another Grace":

She was, to weete, that jolly shepheards lasse,
Which piped there unto the merry rout;
That jolly shepheard which there piped was
Poore Colin Clout (who knows not Colin Clout?) (VI. x. 16)

And who remembers not Rosalind, who need not be named? At this astonishing moment of encounter between a pure fiction (Sir Calidore) and his own persona, the narrator names that persona by means of the formula applied to his "love and mistress" by a surrogate shepherd-poet earlier in Spenser's career.

It is no wonder, then, that this poignantly returning figure should have been picked up – as the tuning-to-the-water had not been – by Milton, at a moment of flagrantly Spenserian mythopoeia. In discoursing of the genealogy of his version of Comus in *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle*, the Attendant Spirit tells of how Bacchus

On Circe's island fell: (Who knows not Circe,
The daughter of the Sun? Whose charmed Cup
Whoever tasted, lost his upright shape
And downward fell into a groveling Swine.)

The long parenthesis, incorporating the mythographic footnote into the text itself, anticipates what would be a major strategy in *Paradise Lost*. The allusive use of the Spenserian device is rhetorically complex as well: by interpretively echoing Spenser's rhetorical question, Milton can displace his own mythographic uneasiness. Instead of asking "Who knows not Comus?" about his masque's character (the one he had so radically transformed from the belly-god of Ben Jonson and the delicate youth of Philostratus), he can re-direct the question to one about Circe. He is thus able to ask it with the singular candor of Spenser's Cuddie.¹⁴

¹⁴ Milton's echo may be reinforced by others: the pseudo-Spenserian *Brit-*

The Spenserian *topos* of tuning-to-the-water is, like the “who knows not?” scheme, more than merely one of what Thomas Warton called “Spenser’s imitations of himself”: it was recognized as such, as we have seen, by subsequent poets of the kind whose ear is tuned to the frequency at which poetic echo is transmitted. What seems so strange about the original alexandrine in the 1596 *Theatre* is that the young poet’s schoolboy pentameters should stumble over just that place. When Colin Clout, ten years later in the *Calender*, can tune in on his central precursors through the tutelage of a “Tityrus” who is both Virgil and Chaucer, Spenser is troping the pastoral convention of the accord between natural voice and shepherd’s piping. The “water’s fall” had not yet become the major stream of full, assured poetic eloquence, the Thames, which would provide for the poet at the end of his life so resonant an undersong. But this poignant moment of being metrically out of tune would in fact generate just such a figuration of poetic accord. Both the long line and the trope of tuning poetry to moving water would always stay with him.

Even if the alexandrine seems to remain Spenser’s property in subsequent verse, I do not mean to suggest that all egregious long lines, or versions of them like the one of Milton’s that has led us to this pass, are willful and manifest Spenserian allusions. But for a certain kind of English poetic ear, the very line is like a spell. Even after the flood of eighteenth-century Spenserian verse had turned the stanza-form into a trivial container, Wordsworth, Blake, Byron, Shelley and Keats could reanimate it in powerfully different ways. Keats, in particular, returned to the Augustan practice of pacing heroic couplets with the occasional alexandrine (in *Lamia* Part II). But one particular instance of an egregious alexandrine is, in light of the previous discussion, a most touching one.

Keats’s line – or rather lines, for it is a pair of them, a Drayton-like *Poly-Olbion* alexandrine couplet, in fact – reaches out from the metre of his 1816 verse lettre to Charles Cowden Clarke, who, Keats says,

first taught me all the sweets of song.
The grand, the sweet, the terse, the free, the fine;
What swelled with pathos, and what right divine;

tain’s *Ida* (1628) by Phineas Fletcher starts out “In *Ida’s vale*, (who knows not *Ida’s vale*?).” Also see Joseph Hall, *Virgidemiarum* (1597), III. 6. In any case, the scene on Acidale was a sensitive one for Milton, for he echoes one of its lines in a crucial situation (see *The Figure of Echo*, p. 67).

Spenserian vowels that elope with ease,
 And float along like birds o'er summer seas;
Miltonian storms, and more, Miltonian tenderness;
Michael in arms, and more, meek Eve's fair slenderness. (11. 53-59)

The alexandrine couplet is interestingly displaced here from the lines which invoke, with a sort of Popean "representative versification," Spenserian vocalic prominence, onto those lines characterizing Milton's style. Secondly, they are far from Miltonic in themselves: the architec-tonic quality of the couplet resounds with Sidney and Spenser. The pattern in which the stylistic modes (concrete "storms," abstract "tenderness") are exemplified in the following line by the near-rhyming instances (concrete "arms," slightly more general "slenderness") can be rendered thus:

Miltonian storms (and more)	Miltonian tenderness
Michael in arms (and more)	meek Eve's fair slenderness

The more precise (masculine?) rhythmic echo of the first four syllables of line two is modulated by the slower, rhythmically more ambiguous (feminine?) half-line about Eve. And yet they are both aspects of the Miltonic voice, even as they are revealed in a Spenserian schematic pattern, arrayed in the alexandrine line that for poets would always be Spenser's own. As we have seen, Milton himself, at a moment of authorial anxiety, of suppression of the proper acknowledgment of his poetic father, himself falls into the "footing" of his precursor's "feete" and causes his verse to cast a shortened but unmistakable shadow of the Spenserian line. The line from *Il Penseroso* is a momentary revisionary version – I should call it a metalepsis – of a line of Spenser's whose own origination lies in a mysterious moment of over-determined error.

In following the thread of Milton's line, we may seem to have wandered into, rather than out of, a labyrinth; I hope it has not been too confusing to discover that one was holding on to a line of Spenser's for most of the journey. One of the dangers has been the risk of concern with the sort of historical detail that caricatures philological research – the risk of becoming what Pope called one "who reads not, but who scans and spells," a "word-catcher that lives on syllables."¹⁵ Formal matters of prosody and versification concern verse, not poetry, which is to say that poetics is involved with trope, rather than with theme or

¹⁵ "Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot," 165-6.

scheme. But the mysterious way in which poetry animates the otherwise lifeless image of verse-form has always been something that poets have perceived in each other's work, and have been reticent about addressing openly. Occasionally, as at moments of metrical pathology like the two we have pursued so relentlessly, these perceptions may surface, and we may conclude that the loss of footing has been a slip not of ordinary nor of unusual skill or craft, but a stumbling over a block set up by the Imagination itself.