A Little Love? Remembering the *Amoretti*, Forgetting *The Faerie Queene*

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Did Spenser forget about *The Faerie Queene* for the *Amoretti*?[1] In sonnet 33, Spenser defends himself against this implicit charge (as much to readers as to friend and fellow poet, Lodowick Bryskett), even as he admits that he *should* be writing *The Faerie Queene* but is *not*:

> Great wrong I do, I can it not deny,
> to that most sacred Empresse my dear dred,
> not finishing her Queene of faery,
> that mote enlarge her living prayses dead:
> But lodwick, this of grace to me aread:
> doe ye not thinck th'accomplishment of it
> sufficient worke for one mans simple head,
> all were it as the rest but rudely writ.
> How then should I without another wit:
> thinck ever to endure so taedious toyle,
> sins that this one is tost with troublous fit
> of a proud love, that doth my spirite spoyle.
> Ceasse then, till she vouchsafe to grawnt me rest,
> or lend you me another living brest.[2]

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[1] For Anna, *in memoriam.*

[2] Edmund Spenser, *Amoretti*, in *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, ed. William A. Oram, Einar Bjorvand, Ronald

The memorializing capacity of poetry is at stake in this sonnet, if indirectly. Spenser's speaker (an authorial persona both like and unlike the author, at once ironic and ironized) is reminded of "not finishing" *The Faerie Queene*, as though he had willfully forgotten his duty to the queen. But, of course, not finishing is not the same as forgetting, and to "forget" intentionally is also a way to remember. Here, I want to suggest, such forgetfulness is an ironic reminder of the importance of memory to Spenser's poetry.

The problem of the "unfinished" *Faerie Queene* is at the heart of Spenser scholarship, as C.S. Lewis suggests in *The Allegory of Love*, where he worries about the continued life of Spenser's incomplete poem in the minds and memories of readers—an anxiety about audience as well as authorial incompletion, which Catherine Nicholson reminds us in *Reading and Not Reading The Faerie Queene* is one that criticism has tended to ignore or suppress.[3] Yet "finishing" may have never been the plan or point of Spenser's poetry, a possibility grounded in his poetics of the partial and mutable. In sonnet 33, the speaker's apology for delaying his epic endeavor by writing sonnets is both generic—whether genuine or gestural, truly sorry or sorry, not sorry!—and related to genre. After all, Petrarch assumed a similar posture by lamenting his unfinished epic, even as he toiled at his songs and sonnets. Spenser's defense of his poetry thus speaks to the question of how the fragmentary "minor" form stands in relation to the monumental "major" one, how these seemingly "little love" sonnets measure up against the "higher love" of an epic-romance for a "sacred Empress." One answer is memorialization, which connects the two poems and forms in related allegories of love and poetry. In the background to sonnet 33 lies Horace's *Ode* 3.30, where the Roman poet promises to build a monument in poetry more lasting than those of marble, destined to fall to ruin, and thus to immortalize imperial power. As Spenser implies here, his task as epic poet is to immortalize Queen Elizabeth, though he also seeks to immortalize Elizabeth Boyle, albeit in seemingly less significant sonnets.

However, the *Amoretti* is far more than a diminutive "handmayd of the Faery Queene," as Spenser wryly calls it when he returns to the issue of an unfinished *Faerie*

Bond, Thomas H. Cain, Alexander Dunlop, and Richard Schell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 30. All quotes from this edition will hereafter be cited parenthetically by sonnet and line number.

[3] C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 446. Catherine Nicholson, *Reading and Not Reading The Faerie Queene: Spenser and the Making of Literary Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 151.

Queene in sonnet 80. Rather, as I will argue, Spenser offers an apology for his poetry akin to Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*: that is, a defense of the art of poetry as an art of memory.[4] In his sonnets, Spenser constructs a hierarchy of loves and love poems only to deconstruct it, showing how the little rooms of the *Amoretti* connect with the grand architecture of *The Faerie Queene*, and how the poems for Elizabeth Boyle and for Queen Elizabeth share in a poetics of ruin and recollection, one that shaped Spenser's career.

The art of memory has been understood primarily as a classical art of rhetoric, the construction of an architectural mnemonic as an aid-to-memory for the orator's delivery. Yet the art of memory's relationship to poetics was paramount, as Sidney suggests when he asserts that, "Even they that have taught the art of memory have showed nothing so apt for it as a certain room divided into many places," an art which fits "verse in effect perfectly, every word having his natural seat, which seat must needs make the words remembered."[5] Beyond the mnemonic architecture and richly decorated rooms of verse, Sidney alludes to a more complex understanding of the art of memory when he defines poetry as an "art of imitation … a speaking picture, with this end, to teach and delight" (18), quoting the legendary inventor of the art of memory, the ancient Greek poet, Simonides. As the story goes, Simonides discovered how to construct a mnemonic architecture by memorially reconstructing an edifice that had just fallen to ruin—significantly, the performance space where he had just delivered a poem for an ungrateful patron—killing all, save himself. The art of the poet becomes the art of memory, the method by which Simonides was able to remember the dead buried amidst the ruins, and to memorialize them in the same way that poetry immortalizes patrons: by creating "speaking pictures" and places for them. The story of Simonides illustrates how poetry is an art of recollecting the ruins of the past for new edifices. This story is at the heart of the complex history of the art of memory as a poetics of ruin and recollection, spanning from antiquity to early modernity, from Plato to Petrarch, but finding a central locus in Cicero's dialogue on the ideal orator (and a mirror in Castiglione's ideal courtier). The art of memory is reformed across a range of fields as an art of storytelling, dramatized in the tale of Simonides and its afterlife in new tales of ruin and recollection. Such teaching tales—edifying lessons in a process of memorial edification—function as metafiction about how fiction is fashioned: they are allegories about how to remember the ruins of the self and the soul, the past within the present, an art of memory enacted by an author's own allegorical persona.

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[4] This argument builds upon my study *Spenser's Ruins and the Art of Recollection* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012). On the art of memory, see Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (University of Chicago Press, 1967); and Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[5] Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Forrest Robinson (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 54.

In denying that Spenser's "Queene" has been forgotten, sonnet 33 serves as a witty reminder of the centrality of the art of memory to *The Faerie Queene*. Friend and fellow poet Gabriel Harvey coyly suggests its significance in his letter to Spenser: "But, see, how I have the *Arte Memorative* at commaundment . . . I had once againe nigh forgotten your *Faerie Queene*."[6] Spenser himself gestures to the art of memory's significance in his letter to another friend and fellow poet, Walter Raleigh, defending his "method [as] a Poet historical" in *The Faerie Queene*.[7] Spenser undercuts generic expectations by calling the poem neither an epic nor a romance but a "continued Allegory, or dark conceit" on which he seeks to shed "light" to avoid "misconstructions" of it ("Letter to Raleigh" 737). Yet he paradoxically unveils allegory with allegory. "To direct your understanding to the wel-hed of the History," he points Raleigh and reader alike to the Castle of Alma: the allegory of the soul that is also an allegory of the art of memory, representing Spenser's "method" as an allegorical poet (738). In the Castle of Alma, history is written in the "ruinous" back chamber of the mind by Eumnestes, an old man of "infinite remembrance," and, with the help of the young boy, Anamnestes, who serves as his aid to memory, by gathering the "worme-eaten" remains of the past into an "immortal scrine" (II.ix.55–58). Immortality is thus a constant effort of recollection from ruin, an endless project of re-edification that represents Spenserian allegory, which Gordon Teskey describes as "assembled or 'composed'... from the material remains of the past."[8] The past is remembered in the mind and on the page, within the castle of the body as in the body of this work, as a story about history: a mingling of truth and fiction by which Spenser portrays his "method" as a "Poet historical." The Castle of Alma stands as Spenser's defense of poetry, as an edifice which is edifying. "I have fashioned" the work, he explains, in order "to fashion a gentleman or noble person" ("Letter to Raleigh" 737). The purpose of poetry, he suggests, can be found in the castle of the soul, where reader and regent alike are fashioned by the art of memory.

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[6] Gabriel Harvey, *The Works of Edmund Spenser*, v.9, ed. E. Greenlaw (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1949), 441–42, 471.

[7] Edmund Spenser, "Letter to Raleigh," in *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A.C. Hamilton et al. (London and New York: Longman, 1992), 737.

[8] Gordon Teskey, *Spenserian Moments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 175.

Alma's Castle further suggests how the soul and sonnet are connected through the art of memory, in ways related to the love poet's perennial promise to "build in sonnets pretty rooms" that will become an immortal monument to sanctified love.[9] The sonnet tradition intertwines with the art of memory in Dante's confessional sonnet sequence-cum-defense of poetry, the *Vita Nuova,* which responds to Augustine's rejection of Virgil and "weeping for Dido" in his spiritual memoir, *Confessions*.[10] Here, Augustine reforms the Ciceronian and Platonic art of memory as an allegory of sin and salvation, how he recollects his ruined soul as a house of God's love and defines and defends his allegorical poetics. In turn, Dante creates his own Augustinian art of memory: he links the sonnet to the soul through an allegorical poetics of memory but makes the sonnet simply a starting place en route to the greater structure of epic. By contrast, Petrarch divides the sonnet from salvation, refusing to justify poetry on the grounds of spiritual allegory. Petrarch portrays his songs and sonnets as "ruinae"—at once material and memorial, physical and poetic—which he recollects. Petrarch's remembrance of poetry and the past, allegorized as Laura and reflected in the palindrome *AMOR SUMMUS ROMA*, is a love that divides him not only from himself and God, but also from his unfinished epic.[11] Petrarch bemoans such forgetting but turns this self-directed complaint into an ironic reminder of his poetics of ruin and recollection. And though identified with an impossible fantasy of cultural rebirth, Petrarch makes the sonnet into a space of perpetual recollection for the ruined soul and ruined poetry, for immortality over time but not for all time.

Ironically, Petrarch is not remembered this way, as Sidney suggests in his quasi-satirical complaint about (and defense of) English poetry in the *Apology*. "Have we none, but that lyrical kind of songs and sonnets," Sidney laments, and bad ones at that: "But truly many of such writings as come under the banner of unresistable love, if I were a mistress, would never persuade me they were in love; so coldly they apply fiery speeches, as men that had rather read lovers' writings . . . than that in truth they feel these passions" (81). Exhuming "poor Petrarch's long-deceased woes," as Sidney writes in his own sonnet, these poor Petrarchan imitators write artificial allegories of love dedicated to other poets, rather than poems about "real" love.[12] The joke at the heart of the *Amoretti* is that Spenser's speaker seeks to immortalize Elizabeth Boyle in exactly the way that Sidney mocks: by imitating Petrarch badly. Describing himself as "one [who] is tost with troublous fit / of a proud love, that doth my spirite spoyle" *(Amoretti* 33.11–12), the speaker sounds unmistakably like the famously tempest-tossed Petrarch, who seeks to remember the ruins of the past and of himself in poetry. While Sidney's speaker in *Astrophil and Stella* affects to reject Petrarch and instead to look in his heart to write, Spenser's speaker compulsively resurrects dead Petrarchan tropes—"My love is lyke to yse, and I to fyre" (*Amoretti* 30.1)— in an unintentionally comic performance ridiculed by the hard-boiled Elizabeth Boyle: "she doth laugh at me and makes my pain her sport" (*Amoretti* 10.14). As a "lady … of wit and literary taste, she knows that Petrarchan mood swings are often theatre," as Anne Lake Prescott wittily observes, but though amused by the spectacle of lover's ruin and sad tragedy, she (dear she) refuses to be cast in the clichéd role of stony Petrarchan mistress.[13] Of course, "even to reject Petrarchism was to be Petrarchan," as Prescott puts it—or is, in Spenser's case, to embrace Petrarchism to the point of parody (152). The speaker's comic Petrarchism draws attention to Spenser's poetic originality and to questions about the complexity of Petrarchan imitation in England that are central to *Amoretti* scholarship. I would add that this parody exposes the speaker's mistaken ideas about memory and poetic immortality. In his attempt to memorialize his love, the speaker forgets, in effect, that Petrarch ruined the ideal of poetic permanence associated with classical rebirth and made the ruin itself into a space for immortality-as-recollection despite the irony, dramatized by Spenser's speaker, that Petrarch was remembered for naïve fantasies of a Renaissance.

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[9] John Donne, "The Canonization," in *John Donne: A Critical Edition*, ed. John Carey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 96.

[10] See Augustine, *Confessions*, *Volume 1: Books 1–8*, ed. and trans. Carolyn J.-B. Hammond (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 1.13.20–21.

[11] See Thomas Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

In the *Amoretti*, Spenser remembers the art of memory anew, innovating upon the Petrarchan sonnet tradition through role reversal: no mere allegory of poetry, his beloved instructs the speaker in the right relationship between art and memory, indeed in how to remember her, teaching him about love and love-poetry as part of what David Lee Miller terms "the metapoetic plot" of the *Amoretti*.[14] In an inversion of the expected relationship between sonnet and epic, Elizabeth Boyle edifies Spenser in the same way that Spenser seeks to edify Queen Elizabeth in *The Faerie Queene*. "You frame my thoughts and fashion me within" (*Amoretti* 8.9), the speaker tells his beloved, a reformation achieved by ruining his fantasies of poetic immortality and refusing to be memorialized—idealized, allegorized, or praised to death—in bad Petrarchan poetry. The speaker arrogantly warns his "faire proud" beloved in sonnet 27 that "all worlds glorie" is destined for ruin, and even she will fall under the "shade of death" and "be forgot as it had never beene" without his verse, which he claims "shal you make immortall," and which she should thus "cherish" (27). In sonnet 69, the speaker promises nothing less than an ode to poetic immortality. Following the model of the "anticke world," he vows to "record the memory" of his "glorious spoile": "Even this verse vowd to eternity, / shall be thereof immortall moniment: / and tell her prayse to all posterity, / that may admires such worlds rare wonderment" (69.9–12). He imagines building an "immortall moniment" that presumably will never fall to ruin, but is paradoxically built upon the ruins of love-as-war.

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[12] Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella*, in *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 15.7. Subsequent citations of this poem will be cited parenthetically by sonnet and line number.

[13] Anne Lake Prescott, "Spenser's Shorter Poems" in *The Cambridge Companion to Spenser*, ed. Andrew Hadfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 152.

[14] David Lee Miller, "Spenser's Hovercraft," *Spenser Studies* 36.1 (2022): 69.

As the poet constantly reminds readers, "Boyle" rhymes with "spoile," a complex word that can refer to a prize or a punishment, to riches or to ruins, built into the double meaning of "moniment": both a monument and an admonishment to the vanity of monumental ambition. But if the beloved is a "spoile," so is the speaker himself, as he calls himself in sonnet 33 and elsewhere: "One day I wrote her name upon the strand, / but came the waves and washed it a way," he admits in sonnet 75, his beloved pointing up the comic futility and vanity in what William Oram calls a crucial "teaching moment"[15]:

> Vayne man, sayd she, that doest in vaine assay,
> a mortall thing so to immortalize.
> for I my selve shall lyke to this decay,
> and eek my name bee wyped out lykewize.
>
> (*Amoretti* 75.5–8)

The speaker rejects this stark reality, refusing to let her be forgotten, not in his sonnets, anyway: "Not so, (quod I) . . . / my verse your vertues rare shall eternize"—her "fame" defying "death" and all such "baser things"—and "our love shall live, and later life renew" (75). In one sense, the speaker achieves his ambition, for the poem represents the very memorial that he promises her, proof of the “life” of her memory after “death.” Yet at the same time, the poem performs the very impermanence that she portends: the “decay” of all things in matter as in memory, and the inevitable ruin of even monuments of poetry. As the Castle of Alma must be perpetually reedified by recollecting the past, so the *Amoretti* can "eternize" Elizabeth Boyle not through an eternal and unchanging monument to her memory, but through an endless project of rebuilding from ruin. Such perpetual ruin and recollection represents the life of all poetry, which depends upon the continuous remembrance of readers, past, present, and future.

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[15] William A. Oram, "What Happens in the *Amoretti*," *Spenser Review* 50.2.3 (2020), https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/spenseronline/review/item/50.2.3/.

When Spenser returns to the issue of the unfinished *Faerie Queene* in sonnet 80, he does so in ways that reflect upon sonnet 8 and what it means when the speaker praises his beloved, “You frame my thoughts and fashion me within”:

> After so long a race as I have run
> Through Faery land, which those six books compile,
> give leave to rest me being halfe foredonne,
> and gather to my selfe new breath awhile.
> Then as a steed refreshed after toyle,
> Out of my prison, I will breake anew:
> and stoutly will that second worke assoyle,
> with strong endevour and attention dew.
> Till then give leave to me in pleasant mew,
> to sport my muse and sing my loves sweet praise:
> the contemplation of whose heavenly hew,
> my spirit to an higher pitch will rayse.
> But let her prayses yet be low and meane,
> fit for the handmayd of the Faery Queene.
>
> (*Amoretti* 80)

Spenser uses spatial metaphors that evoke spatial memory: those of poetry and of the mind’s own place, the “mental space” that connects the minds of readers to that of the writer and his creations (including himself). Citing exhaustion from “so long a race as I have run” through this “Faery land,” the speaker vows that, after a short time, “Out of my prison I will breake anew”: the small “room” of the sonnet framed as a “prison” is compared with vast landscape of *The Faerie Queene* and its memorable landmarks. But not yet, the speaker says, as though begging Lodowick yet again for time and space for such blissful confinement in the space of the sonnet to “sing my loves sweet praise.” He insists that the "contemplation” of his love’s “heavenly hew, / my spirit to an higher pitch will rayse," but then he radically qualifies this: "But let her prayses yet be low and meane, / fit for the handmayd of the Faery Queene." Significantly, the language that Spenser uses to describe memorializing Elizabeth Boyle here recalls the same language that he uses to memorialize Queen Elizabeth in *The Faerie Queene*, which begins with an apology for his poetry: "Lowly verse may loftily arise, / And lift it selfe unto the highest skies / . . . whiles the famous auncestries / Of my most dreaded Soveraigne I recount," their "mightie empire raysd" from "ruines," "[a]s in that old mans booke" (II.x.1–5). The speaker's need for space and time to "gather to my selfe" reminds readers of the Castle of Alma, where history—at once personal and political—is written within the self and on the soul by endlessly recollecting the ruins of the past for new poetic structures. In sonnet 80, Spenser defends his remembrance of Tudor history in *The Faerie Queene*, both his "method" as a "Poet historical" and the matter of his memory. Returning readers to the space of that "chamber… ruinous and old," and the "man of infinite remembrance" (II.ix.55–56) therein, Spenser reminds readers of his art of memory.

Clearly the *Amoretti* is not simply the "handmayd" of *The Faerie Queene*, for Elizabeth Boyle fashions and frames Spenser's speaker within the *Amoretti* much as Spenser's speaker fashions Queen Elizabeth. Rather, Spenser undercuts the hierarchy of genres and love poems, the so-called "major" and "minor," by showing how these allegories of love share in a poetics of memory.[16] As we know, sonnet 80 makes a promise that will be broken and, just as *The Faerie Queene* ends as it begins—"in the middest" ("Letter to Raleigh" 738) and only half complete, an ironic imitation of Virgilian epic—so the *Amoretti* ends with the speaker in a state of sadness and "playnt[]" (89.8), his love unfulfilled. Yet such partialness is the point, as I have argued, and the defining point of Spenser's poetry from his earliest *Complaints* and the ruins poetry therein, to the unfinished or "unperfite" *Cantos of Mutabilitie*: a Spenserian poetics that finds "eterne in mutabilitie" (III.vi.47), at least until the time when all things will be "firmely stayd / Upon the pillours of Eternity."[17] This is the lesson by which Spenser seeks to "frame" and "fashion . . . within" his poetic persona, a model student at once comic and tragic, and the indirect means or “method” by which he teaches or edifies readers how to frame and fashion themselves within the architecture of the soul and the sonnet. The speaker learns what it means to memorialize in poetry, and that immortality paradoxically lies in ruins as a space for perpetual recollection, reformation, and renovation.

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[16] In sonnet 74, Spenser unites his three Elizabeths in one allegory of love: "Ye three Elizabeths for ever live"—mother, queen, and future wife— "that three such graces did unto me give" (*Amoretti* 74.13–14). The mythological *Anacreontics* poetry which follow the *Amoretti* further reinforce its allegory of love.

[17] VII.viii.2. The *Mutabilitie Cantos* may well be a fitting memorial to Spenser by one or more friend and fellow poet who offers him, as Spenser asks for at *Amoretti* 33.5, "grace to me aread."

But this is a lesson in love and poetry that Spenser’s speaker does not fully grasp until a later time and place, in another poem and another genre which challenges any clear hierarchical relationship between his allegories of love: Spenser’s marriage song *Epithalamion*, whose happy ending is tempered only by an awareness of time itself. At the end of this wedding song, the poet delivers to his bride only a fragment of a promised poem: a mere seven lines which recall the ruins theme in his fourteen-line sonnets, and which he defends to Elizabeth Boyle in a way that echoes sonnet 33 of the *Amoretti*, where the poet defends giving only half a promised poem to Queen Elizabeth. The poet again apologizes for the partial poem—the “cutting off through hasty accidents” that the poetic fragment represents—which he nevertheless offers as an “ornament” as “promist to recompens.”[18] Though a broken promise, the recollection of the broken parts and pieces of this song, the ruins and the remains of the past, is precisely the art of Spenser’s poetry. And why apologize for half a poem such as this? After all, it’s a gift.

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[18] Spenser, *Epithalamion*, in *The Shorter Poems*, lines 429–32.