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*When to Stop Reading
The Faerie Queene*

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How do you know when to stop reading *The Faerie Queene*? The title of Jonathan Goldberg's 1981 book *Endlesse Worke* seems like it could aptly name any number of studies of the last forty-five years or so (perhaps particularly the *magnum opus* of his predecessor James Nohrnberg, *The Analogy of The Faerie Queene*). Spenser may not be the only inexhaustible Renaissance poet, but there is something distinctively exhausting about reading his romance, a sense peculiar to him of wandering in a vast, interinanimated landscape within the bounds of which nothing can be understood without understanding everything. This almost paranoid response is the heightening—by means of sheer length, complexity, and an interlaced romance narrative—of an effect that Angus Fletcher describes as general to allegory, its construction of a *kosmos* or “total figure”¹ within which every part is implicated in the whole. Unlike a realist novel, which characteristically takes as a premise the selection of details out of an implicitly indifferent larger world, an allegory (on this account) wholly orders and constitutes its world. This is its contract with the reader, its promise of system or, failing that, at least of conspiracy: there is nothing left outside it that could be inside, nothing inside that is irrelevant, and nothing that is merely ordinary. Having articulated the contract this way, however, I want to take the two terms I have just excluded—irrelevance and ordinariness—and make an essay at describing the limits, or at least some limits, of reading *The Faerie Queene*. Always in some sense reading itself, the poem also develops ways of figuring doubts about that interminable project, doubts particularly about the relation between reading and virtuous action. At these moments it entertains the idea that what may save us—characters and readers—is a kind of metaphorical putting down the book.

¹ Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964), p. 85.

It will already be apparent that the concept of allegory I am adopting here is more Fletcher's than, say, Paul De Man's: I will talk in terms of daemons and the spaces they transgress, rather than about the rhetoric of temporality.² This means assuming the general integrity of the project of transcendental reference that Spenserian allegory advertises. I do so not because I take allegorical bivalence to be an adequate theory of meaning for general purposes: it disintegrates quickly for us in the solvents of deconstruction or ordinary language philosophy. It is rather because I am interested here in the poem's projected understanding of its own intelligibility, and how it may stage failures of that intelligibility not as a universal and inevitable condition but as particular events that we may learn to recognize and perhaps categorize. Understanding what Walter Benjamin describes as the "ruins"³ of allegory means investing something in the dream of their former wholeness. Such an investment allows us to see that *The Faerie Queene* can be every bit as fearful—or weary—of that wholeness as it is of the mode's disintegration.

Taking the allegory at its word, then, exposes impasses that are staged within the poem's own myths of reading. These are moments when the interpreter's sword halts above the text: not only interpretive difficulties, but crises in the possibility of reading. "Irrelevance" I will use to describe occasions when aspects of the allegory that typically interact in significant ways—in particular, characters and houses—fail to mean anything to one another, when the unified *kosmos* seems to split into what we might think of as distinct and mutually

2 Ibid., p. 207, "The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the *repetition* (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term) of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority. . . . renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference." De Man, "Rhetoric of Temporality," *Blindness and Insight*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), values allegory for its acknowledgment of this difference, which he understands the Romantic "symbol"—with its ideal of the identify of signifier and signified—to mystify and deny.

3 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), p. 178.

unenlightening allegories. "Ordinariness" identifies an opposite phenomenon, the inarticulate detail and its consequences, the apparent lapse out of allegory altogether into the everyday. The latter I will pursue with special reference to the ubiquitousness of punishment as an anchor of the moral allegory; but irrelevance first.

Irrelevance

The word "irrelevance" will remind Spenserians of an argument from Harry Berger's pioneering study *The Allegorical Temper*, where he introduced the phrase "conspicuous irrelevance." His aim was to show how passages of *The Faerie Queene* that appear to be mere ornament—where the narrative is conspicuously pushed aside by what he called the larger "poetic action," be it descriptive or allusive or mythographic—in fact function as "nodal points of meaning, moments in which the larger significance of the narrative is compressed, illuminated, altered."⁴ Nothing about the poem, in short, is really irrelevant: where it seems most distracted, it is often thinking hardest. The close readings sponsored by this claim made the vastnesses of Spenser's romance safe for the New Criticism. In revisiting his term I want to explore another kind of irrelevance, without performing the reversal—irrelevant to super-relevant—that Berger carries off.

Let us imagine for a moment what Spenser never gives us, an ideal book of *The Faerie Queene*. Such a book unfolds its titular virtue for the reader while preparing its hero, who labors under the sign of that virtue, to exemplify it in the action of the final cantos. The business of the intervening quest is to explore some of the characteristic errors and obstacles that might impede the realization of that virtue, and suggest strategies for overcoming them. The ultimate end is knowledge, indeed self-knowledge: an ever-higher integration of the *matéria poetica* that will redeem the confusions of a fallen world and allow for a new clarity of moral judgment. (This is more or less the evolutionary dynamic Berger proposes for the whole poem in his later essays, though he stops short—and takes Spenser's strength to lie not least in stopping short—of forecasting a

4 Harry Berger, Jr., *The Allegorical Temper* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 133.

final reconciliation of its perpetual *discordia concors*.⁵) In this ideal book the reader's understanding and that of the hero converge in the completion of the quest. It might be objected that it is a category mistake to speak of an allegorical agent's self-knowledge, but one might argue in response that there is a Platonic version of ideal knowledge-as-action that such an agent is ideally suited to embody, or enact. If to know the good is to do it, we might be forgiven for inferring that an agent who does good univocally must be perfect in his self-knowledge; in our own doubts and inward blindnesses we are only striving toward that pure, unreflexive purposiveness. Such assumptions ascribe to the poem a teleology that we moderns might as well call Hegelian, developing toward an ideal of self-consciousness somehow shared by hero, text, and reader. Such a *telos* is consonant with a persistent strain in Spenser criticism that describes *The Faerie Queene* as a mimesis of thinking, or even as a mind itself. For Isabel MacCaffrey the poem is "a model of the mind's life in the world"⁶; Gordon Teskey calls it "a heuristic instrument for exciting the mind to activity."⁷ Perhaps we do not read the poem so much as think it; realizing the poem's spectacular interrelatedness in our own mind is an exemplary integration of consciousness.

This account represents Spenser as a kind of Neoplatonic idealist, dedicated to the perfection of what James Nohrnberg calls the "duodecimal Arthur," the hero whose summary of the

5 Berger describes this dynamic concord as a progressive force for Spenser, applied not only to psychic but to cultural and historical development; a movement (quasi-Hegelian) from consciousness to self-consciousness. As examples he cites the "amorphous or polymorphous chaos" (Harry Berger, Jr., "The Spenserian Dynamics," *Revisionary Play* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988], pp. 19–35, 31) in which Book Three begins, and its gradual stabilization of elemental, sexual, and psychic contraries. It is a poem of *evolution*: "In spite of Spenser's frequent interest in depicting interruptions, failures, countermovements, and counterstatements (such as the myth of decline from golden antiquity), this evolutionary model remains fundamental in his thought, at least as a theoretical ideal that eros at all levels of existence tries to actualize" (p. 27).

6 Isabel MacCaffrey, *Spenser's Allegory: The Anatomy of Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 6.

7 Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 99.

private and the public virtues "in his person, after that hee came to be king" (737) is projected by the "Letter to Raleigh."⁸ The poem as we have it may balk such a scheme in uncountable ways, but the dream haunts its extant six-and-some books like Arthur's fleeting vision of the Faerie Queene herself. Even in its nightmare form, as a broken promise, it has a remarkable syncretic power. When the *telos* is obscured by the wandering wood there remains a pervasive sense of conspiracy, spurred by the doublings and parodies that wire episodes of the poem together across or in spite of narrative or obvious causal sequence. Relevance in the poem may be pursued in a spirit of syncretic confidence or of paranoia, but the practical effect is similar: keep reading, keep connecting, keep interpreting. Be bold, be bold, be bold. Then again, as every reader of the poem knows, this triple exhortation in the House of Busirane is qualified by a caution: "Be not too bold" (*The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton [London: Longman, 1977], 3.11.54). It is this episode that I want to read as a case study in how the poem constructs irrelevance in the midst of its own intense and programmatic (if often dark) interrelation.

What is Britomart to the House of Busirane, or the House of Busirane to her? The Knight of Chastity ends up in its precincts because she pledges to help the hapless Scudamour recover his beloved Amoret from the wizard who has imprisoned her. It has three parts: a room lined with Ovidian tapestries, depicting mostly mortals raped by gods, at the far end of which stands an idol of Cupid; a room of "monstrous formes" (3.11.51) in metal frieze, festooned with the arms of warriors felled by Cupid; and finally the chamber where Busirane tortures Amoret, from which once a day Cupid's procession issues forth. Thomas Roche's reading of the episode—itsself departing from C. S. Lewis—has been generative for many subsequent critics. He takes the varieties of antierotic propaganda Britomart encounters to be "an objectification of Amoret's fear of sexual love in marriage," though at the same time he insists that the description is mediated "through the eyes of Britomart."⁹ Taken all together the compound space represents the

8 James Nohrnberg, *The Analogy of the Faerie Queene* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 39–42.

9 Thomas Roche, Jr., *The Kindly Flame* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 77, 75.

sorts of anxieties that could derail the Knight of Chastity from a quest that can only be fulfilled in marriage (a marriage that has the highest dynastic stakes for the poem as a whole). Harry Berger more or less follows this line while ascribing greater agency to Busirane himself as the spectacle's architect: "in showing Britomart what and how Amoret suffers, Busirane tries to dissuade both from their promised futures."¹⁰ This sense of the house as a particularly apt test for the knight—or apt manifestation of her virtue—is an assumption that has become widespread, and indeed it is the assumption most native to the poem.¹¹ The two, house and guest, must be made for one another.

The first challenge that this line of interpretation encounters is that Britomart herself conspicuously does not recognize it. If we see the tapestries through Britomart's eyes, over nineteen stanzas her reaction is never once described: the mix of moralizing and delectation in the narrator's tone seems to be independent of the character whose physical progress from one tapestry to the next ostensibly strings the images together. This tacit disengagement becomes explicit when she comes to the idol of Cupid at the chamber's far end. She pays attention, but to no obvious effect:

That wondrous sight faire *Britomart* amazed,
Ne seeing could her wonder satisfie,
But euer more and more vpon it gazed,
The whiles the passing brightnes her fraile senses dazed.
(3.11.49)

10 Harry Berger, Jr., "Busirane and the War Between the Sexes: An Interpretation of *The Faerie Queene* III.xi–xii," *Revisionary Play* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 172–94.

11 See, for example, MacCaffrey, *Spenser's Allegory*, p. 112, John Watkins, *The Specter of Dido: Spenser and Virgilian Epic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 171–74. For a nearly opposite reading see Lauren Silberman's *Transforming Desire: Erotic Knowledge in Books III and IV of The Faerie Queene* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 66, where she treats the house as an interpretive contest between the authority of poet (Busirane) and reader (Britomart): "By imprisoning Amoret in the Masque of Cupid, Busirane attempts to assert the power of the poet to be supreme arbiter of meaning. By thwarting his attempt, Britomart reaffirms the view of allegory as a shared enterprise figured by the hermaphroditic embrace."

This combination of avid spectatorship and incomprehension is repeated several times, with the "be bold" legends ("she oft and oft it ouer-red, / Yet could not find what sence it figured" [3.11.50]; "That much she muz'd, yet could not construe it"; "whereto though she did bend / Her earnest mind, yet wist not what it might intend" [3.11.54]) and again with the spectacle of the next room ("beholding earnestly" she "Did greatly wonder ne could satisfie / Her greedy eyes with gazing a long space" [3.11.53]). John Watkins shrewdly notes the Virgil lurking privily under all of this Ovid: Britomart's reverie recalls Aeneas before the murals of Troy in Carthage.¹² Spenser's metaphors of feeding and his language of wonder perhaps both originate there: Aeneas "feasts his soul on the unsubstantial picture [*animum pictura pascit inani*]" and sees "wonderful things [*miranda*]" (*Virgil*, trans. H. R. Fairclough, 2 vols. [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994], 1.464, 1.494). *The Faerie Queene* recombines the two to define the kind of reading taking place, or not taking place, in Busirane's house. Wonder, Aristotle claims influentially in his *Rhetoric*, is the beginning of understanding.¹³ It is the open-mouthed, exhilarating blankness of confronting something for which we have no categories; it becomes understanding (and ceases being marvelous) as we assimilate its novelty to our existing, and ideally adapting, structures of knowledge. Hence it is one affective sign of what I am calling irrelevance—though its very intensity may suggest that an unexpected relevance awaits when it is overcome. The problem for Britomart is that she seems to idle at that threshold, feeding herself continuously without digesting anything. She is a hedonist of what ought to be a merely propaedeutic thrill. It may be that Spenser is pointing to a mode of misreading his poem, for wonder is also an affect commonly associated with romance as a pleasure that threatens to be sufficient unto itself.¹⁴

12 Watkins, *Specter*, pp. 170–74.

13 Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), *Rhetoric*, 1371a31–b10; on Renaissance ideas of wonder and the Aristotelian tradition see James Biester, *Lyric Wonder* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 1–66.

14 Biester, *Lyric Wonder*; on the debate over wonder in Italian criticism of the *romanzo* (much better developed than in England), see Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), ii.1050–55.

Of course, Britomart's ignorance of the meaning of her surround could count decisively against its "relevance" to her only in that perfect poem where the hero's and the reader's understandings must converge. *The Faerie Queene* is not such a poem; unresolved dissonance between these perspectives is one of its characteristic devices.¹⁵ There are, however, also other grounds for challenging the seasoned reader's reflexive quest for Britomart's implication in Busirane's designs. We might begin with the tapestries. They depict the monstrous, painful, and debasing shapes the gods take in their pursuit of mortal women. At first, there is some attention to the subjectivity of these women, especially an enigmatic Leda who seems to share a smile with the onrushing swan.¹⁶ But the emphasis in everything that follows is on Cupid's triumphs over the gods, all of them male (save Venus—"ne did he spare . . . His owne deare mother" [3.11.44]—with whom no particular story is associated). The boy god again and again asserts himself over his older brothers. The second chamber's bearing on Britomart is even more tenuous, filled as it is with the spoils of Cupid's victories over "mighty Conquerours and Captaines strong" (3.11.52). One might argue that because Britomart has adopted masculine armor for her quest—a metamorphosis of sorts—she is the proper audience for an ekphrastic lecture on the violence and humiliations of male desire. But still the rhetorical focus seems misplaced, for the room's ironies are pointed at leaders of men and conquerors of land rather than at solitary questers like the Knight of Chastity.

15 MacCaffrey, *Spenser's Allegory*, p. 102, "The fact that a character's experience occurs in a particular setting and a particular pattern that is allusive *need not* (and ordinarily *does not*) signify its dramatic meaning in the character's consciousness." Susanne Wofford offers a sterner version in *The Choice of Achilles: The Ideology of Figure in the Epic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 259, "The Faerie Queene affirms that the quest endows the lives of its principal protagonists with meaning, yet consistently shows, as we have begun to see with Arthur, that this quest does not change the defining conditions of action or lift the mortal limitations that prevent the fuller understanding essential for the moral life as the poem defines it."

16 "She slept, yet twixt her eyelids closely spyde, / How towards her he rusht, and smiled at his pryde" (3.11.32). Does Jove smile? Does Leda? Do both, in a conspiracy of unrefused ravishment?

This project of disentanglement would seem to reach its limit at the masque that processes through the second room while Britomart watches from the shadows. If the tapestries and reliefs ridicule men who have become slaves to love, surely Cupid's parade—traditionally read as the course of a rash love affair from Fancy and Desire to Reproach, Repentance, and Shame—is meant for a woman's eyes. But perhaps we should take literally Kenneth Gross's clever suggestion that the pageant is "all antimasque."¹⁷ The backstage horror of the third room is not the intended end: the masque proper may be yet to come, waiting on Amoret's surrender. Busirane is after all not another one of *The Faerie Queene's* rapist knights, a single-minded paynim: the spells and tortures he inflicts on Amoret are "all perforce to make her him to loue" (3.12.31). This is neither simple sexual desire, nor any recognizable kind of mutual love. Perhaps what Busirane is seeking, almost like King Lear, is some kind of more or less public profession. This would make sense of the House of Busirane as a grand gesture in the game of love as male rivalry. Errant visitors to its completed form would ultimately pass through its lessons in erotic tyranny and humiliation, view an antimasque exposing the suffering their attentions usually visit on women, and finally confront a masque proper—yet to be constructed—showing Busirane triumphant in his marriage to Amoret. This would make the sorcerer a sinister master of the turn from courtly to romantic love that C. S. Lewis described as the subject of these cantos: he wants Amoret's *consent*, and he wants it because this ideal of marriage represents the most thorough victory over rival lovers, and over Cupid himself.¹⁸ It is a strategic perversion of the dream of mutuality. Britomart just happens to stumble into the whole enterprise before it is open for business.

This last turn is obviously the most tendentious. It solves, I would argue, some durable puzzles in an episode that has attracted more than its share of commentary; it also implies an

17 Kenneth Gross, *Spenserian Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 164.

18 In telling the story of a shift from courtly love to romantic love and marriage that is the subject of *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), p. 298, C. S. Lewis takes Spenser to be "not so much part of my subject as one of my masters or collaborators."

investment in narrative contingency—what would happen if—that the poem does not always warrant.¹⁹ Even if Busirane's dream house remains a matter for speculation, however, the combination of Britomart's ostentatious imperviousness and the oddly misdirected rhetoric of the house itself, the obscurity of its address, raises the question of whether she really belongs there. And if she does not—if this is truly a case of mutual irrelevance, or rather the staging of irrelevance—what would *that* mean? For however inarticulate and unarticulated Britomart may be in these cantos, her success is straightforward. She accomplishes the obvious goal of liberating Amoret with uncommon dispatch and efficiency, and with none of the repeated self-overcomings that mark the last cantos of the previous two books (Red Cross falling and rising again, Guyon resisting temptation after temptation). Perhaps this is the point: she succeeds precisely because she understands nothing, recognizes nothing, learns nothing. Instruction as it is represented in *The Faerie Queene* is always some kind of self-diagnosis or critique; readers in the poem are always reading about themselves. Understanding itself seems to be a disabling recognition of unfitness and impediment. The key to success, perhaps, is not reading at all.

This is not to say that Britomart's untutored instincts are altogether irreproachable. Her wrath kindles immediately at the sight of Busirane torturing Amoret, and she strikes him so mightily "that to ground / He fell halfe dead" (3.12.34). Another stroke would finish the job, but Amoret hastily explains that her torments will end only if the enchanter lives to undo them. The knight stays her hand while Busirane begins "backe

19 The strongest reproach to imagining as I do here that *The Faerie Queene* gives us a fictional world within which cause and effect, narrative consistency, even counterfactuals are meaningful—whether they are upheld or violated—remains Paul Alpers's *The Poetry of The Faerie Queene* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967) with its fundamentally rhetorical conception of Spenser's art. In some ways his conception operates harmoniously with those scenes where I diagnose irrelevance; but of course I am dependent on the tenacity of narrative for the interest of my claims. I am not prepared to accept Alpers's account of the poem as a whole, but I do believe that in a poem that is constantly playing with the *kinds* of reading it solicits, Alpers's cautions and antidotes have recently been underexploited.

to reuerse" his charms: "Full dreadfull things out of that balefull booke / He red, and measur'd many a sad verse . . . And her faire lockes vp stared stiffe on end, / Hearing him those same bloody lines rehearse" (3.12.36). It is clear that he is reading poetry ("verses," "lines"), indeed doing what readers of *The Faerie Queene* are forever asked to do, reading the poem backward in order to make a "perfect hole" (3.12.38)—as the recovered Amoret is described—out of its scattered materials. Britomart's sword hangs above this scene of reading as an emblem of inaction and bafflement, and when she leaves the house Spenser tells us, in a perverse aside, that she is "much dismayd" to see the "glory" of the first two chambers "quite decayd" (3.12.42).²⁰ She is protected from understanding by an irrelevance constructed on both sides: the obliquity of the house's rhetorical address to her, and her own unconquerable wonder. Rather than making her unsuccessful there, this fracture in the poem's *kosmos* is the condition of her curious triumph. She is undistracted, uncompromised, unenlightened. I do not want to argue—it would be ridiculous to do so—that the relation between the two, place and character, is therefore somehow uninterpretable. But the poem seems to propose the breakdown of expected interplay as a particular limit of reading. Commentary on the episode that treats Britomart's victory as a further unfolding of her cardinal virtue—even accounts that emphasize the possibility, or danger, that chastity is purely negative—risks missing how she is enabled by being somehow beside the point, by the fact that nothing happens to her. What does this have to teach but the prudence of not reading?

Ordinariness

What I have been trying to describe by the term "irrelevance" is a rift in allegory: two aspects or elements of the fiction, each bearing allegory's outward limbs and flourishes, whose failure to interact when the plot brings them together questions the

20 This is the moment that transfixes Hamlet in the story of Pyrrhus' rampage (2.2.480–82), and that Aeneas must overcome when he unleashes the tempest of his wrathfulness on Turnus (12.939). In both cases it is preparatory (ultimately, in Hamlet's case) to violent and decisive action. Here Britomart's only role is to stand by and threaten.

integrity of the system and *figures* the dead end of reading itself. The second kind of limit or caution to reading has to do with the faltering of allegory, with lapse rather than with internal conflict or contradiction. For this I want to venture the term "ordinariness." It is a familiar move in the game of allegory to disrupt its mediation by an irruption of the noumenal, for example Red Cross's vision of the New Jerusalem or Arthur's night with the Faerie Queene, or by a collapse into mere matter, as in such jokes as the deflation of Orgoglio or Disdaine's severed limb becoming a "lumpe of durt" (6.8.16). I am after something different, something struggling to escape dependence on the way allegory carves up the world: a straying into the everyday, even something like realism. Once again this is not a matter that can be defined with categorical rigor, for how could we ever find a moment in *The Faerie Queene* that definitively exempts itself from allegorical reading, or definitively represents the everyday?²¹ But Spenser nonetheless has distinctive ways of raising these as problems to think or worry about. The approach I will follow here is by way of punishment, or rather what might be called "unpunishment." There is a deep connection in the poem between punishment and allegory itself. What happens when the prosecutorial rigor of the mode abates—when a character seems to sin against its virtues and gets away with it—will help us see other ways in which *The Faerie Queene* seeks to shrug off the burden of its own didactic authority.

I have written elsewhere about the matter of punishment and allegory: the element of emblem-making in public justice's display of the criminal; how the decorum or "poetic justice" of a particular penalty (for instance, cutting out a slanderer's tongue) might be confused after the fact with evidence of guilt; how allegory's radical contraction of identity—think of the inmates of Dante's hell, condemned to testify endlessly to the sin that has become their cardinal attribute—makes the mode itself into a punishment.²² I might have added there the simple problem for

21 Teskey, *Allegory and Violence*, p. 3, reminds us of the distinction between a text interpreted allegorically and one written as allegory (the latter of which "contains instructions for its own interpretation").

22 See my article "Spenser's Sense of Poetic Justice," *Raritan* 21.1 (2001): 127–40; on allegory, punishment, and Dante see also Teskey's *Allegory and Violence*, pp. 25–31.

a moral allegory of creating a crime-emblem that does not interpolate any element of criticism or rebuke: such an allegory will be dependent on events in the narrative to identify it as taboo, meanwhile flourishing as a kind of unregulated advertisement for its own depravity. The most ostentatiously allegorical episodes in the poem embody the association with punishment most clearly, as for example the self-revenging sins that parade out of Lucifera's castle. In other cases the plot maneuvers an evil character into a condition of suffering and unfreedom that is recognizable as the fullest (or most decisive) realization of his nature: we never see Pyrochles more clearly or understand him better than when his name is explained by the flames of Furor's provocation. This is all to say that it is easy to associate the function of allegory with an emblematic justice, whether that justice is imposed as we watch or is always already a condition of representation. It is accordingly disorienting when the mechanism of punishment fails to operate: we may be led to ask if something fundamental in the text's representative mode has changed.

A brief example from the neighborhood of Busirane's House will serve to illustrate unpunishment's unsettling effect. After Britomart's encounter with the miser Malbecco the narrative digresses to follow the misadventures of his wife Hellenore, a Helen seduced away by her parody Paris, the knight Paridel. Paridel loves her and leaves her, and for a few lines she seems destined to follow the tragic path toward shame and death that is laid out by the masque in Canto Twelve. In short order, however, she falls among a tribe of satyrs:

Her vp they tooke, and with them home her led,
With them as housewife euer to abide,
To milke their gotes, and make them cheese and bred,
And euery one as commune good her handeled. (3.10.36)

Malbecco disguises himself as a goat to try to win her back, only to discover her in the arms of an energetic satyr: "Nine time he heard him come aloft ere day . . . But yet that nights ensample did bewray / That not for nought his wife them loued so well" (3.10.48). His pleas to return are "refused at one word" (3.10.51) and at daybreak the satyrs run him off. Hellenore's place in the larger allegorical scheme of the book is clear enough: if Malbecco's hoarding represents the perils of love-as-

possession, then this is its opposite, a kind of erotic communion in which she is a freely shared good. But Malbecco is subject to one of the poem's most detailed episodes of allegory-as-punishment, ultimately so consumed and reduced by "self-murdering thought" (3.10.57) that he is rechristened *Gealosie*. Hellenore, on the other hand, seems to settle blithely into her new life: it is not without allegorical articulations (the "nine times" as a prophecy, or parody, of fertility) but it seems exempted from judgment. Going beyond the witty and provisional triumphs of the *fabliau*, this episode ends—if it really ends—in a new society with its own rhythms of work and pleasure, apparently perpetual, free and undaemonic.²³ When Malbecco laments "th'vknindnesse of his *Hellenore*" (3.10.45) his word acknowledges that it is almost as though she has become a different species, no longer kin to the poem's humans, faeries, or, more to the point, its allegories.

Why call this "ordinariness"—why not simply say that Hellenore has become an allegory of natural love?²⁴ I borrow my sense of the term very loosely from Stanley Cavell, who has carried it from Austin and Wittgenstein backward to Shakespeare (as well as to many other literary and philosophical places). Ordinariness on his account is to be understood over and against skepticism, as the acknowledgement of what skepticism denies: the accessibility of the world to knowing and feeling. Epistemology itself, arising from doubts about our ability to know, is accordingly regarded as a strategy for evading what otherwise we would have no excuse but to allow. As Cavell writes, "The power of this recognition of the ordinary for philosophy is bound up with the recognition that refusing or forcing the order of the ordinary"—turning either to skep-

23 On Hellenore's escape as Chaucerian *fabliau* see Watkins, *Specter*, pp. 163–67.

24 Nohrnberg, *Analogy*, p. 602, reads the episode this way: "An intimation of this kind of fulfillment is present in the story of Hellenore and the satyrs. A relation of 'natural' love is not ordinarily accessible to waking experience, where sexuality does not remain morally neutral, like stimulus and response, but either degrades or elevates"; see also p. 642. I do not disagree, but I want to explore the consequences of this "fulfillment" for the allegory: in a poem underwritten by the quest of Arthur for the Faerie Queene it may be that any fulfillment may threaten (especially threaten to obviate) the mode.

ticism or to metaphysics—"is a cause of philosophical emptiness (say avoidance) and violence."²⁵ I want to position his term not against skepticism but against allegory itself, which is to say, I want to consider allegory as a species of skepticism, refusing the order of the ordinary, a mediating language intended not so much to access the truth as to keep the world at bay. At moments such as Hellenore's idyll with the satyrs the repressed sufficiency of the world threatens the conceptual architecture of the poem and everything it knows about virtue with just this kind of adequacy of experience. The episode is not an *allegory of ordinariness*. (Whatever that would be: for us, a man in a gray flannel suit, face and fingertips white and smooth? Which would be anything but ordinary.) It is the representation of pleasures that do not mean but simply are. The immediacy of eros contributes to this dismantling; the everydayness of domestic routine—milking the goats and baking the bread—helps too.²⁶ Of course, as soon as we identify such a moment, the estrangement of representation itself intrudes, and both eros and the domestic return to us as tropes, *topoi*. (If it seems peculiar to speak of tropes of ordinariness, these are the wages of speaking of ordinariness at all.) But even if there is something ultimately paradoxical about representing the ordinary, the fantasy is established. Hellenore is somehow beyond or beneath the reach of allegory: going about her chores and her sports, she seems to realize Hazlitt's notorious remark that if readers "do not meddle with the allegory, the allegory will not meddle with them."²⁷

To understand the implications of this alternative mode, or lapse, for *The Faerie Queene*, I want to turn to Book Six, the chief analogue in the 1596 triptych to Book Three in 1590.²⁸ Prince Arthur has a particularly large role there—Arthur who

25 Stanley Cavell, "Declining Decline," *The Cavell Reader*, ed. Stephen Mulhall (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 321–52, 322.

26 On the domestic, and particularly marriage, as a figuration of the ordinary see Cavell's book on the Hollywood comedy of remarriage, *Pursuits of Happiness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

27 William Hazlitt, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed., P. P. Howe, 21 vols (London: J. M. Dent, 1930–34), v.38.

28 On such structural correspondences generally see, of course, Nohrnberg, *Analogy*, especially Chapter 5 (pp. 653–733) on the relation between Books One and Six.

is seemingly the least ordinary of the poem's characters, the most central to that grand, duodecimal order forecast in the "Letter to Raleigh." His particular antagonist in the middle cantos is the base knight Turpine, who feigns reformation when Arthur shames him for his cowardly conduct, then recruits two credulous young knights to pursue the prince into the forest. Arthur kills one and learns of Turpine's plan from the other; he sends the survivor back to lure the traitor to him. Then, unaccountably, he takes off his armor and falls asleep, "Loosely displayd vpon the grassie ground, / Possessed of sweete sleepe, that luld him soft in swound":

Wearie of trauell in his former fight,
He there in shade himselfe had layd to rest,
Hauing his armes and warlike things vndight,
Fearelesse of foes that mote his peace molest;
The whyles his saluage page, that wont be prest,
Was wandred in the wood another way,
To doe some thing, that seemed to him best,
The whyles his Lord in siluer slomber lay,
Like to an Euening starre adorn'd with dewy ray. (6.7.19)

The warning signals for the by-now-experienced reader are deafening: the echo of Red Cross at the fountain, "Poured out in loosnesse on the grassy grownd" (1.7.7), the perils of sleep more generally, and what is well established in Book Six as the disastrous mistake of taking off your armor. Is this then an attitude of total mastery, the prince secure enough in strength and virtue to break the poem's rules with impunity? Or is it an unexpected vulnerability? As he sleeps the imagery that gathers around him seems almost protective. The dewy rays last fell on Chrysogone as she conceived Amoret and Belpheobe, her "wombe of Morning dew" (3.6.3) impregnated "Through influence of th'heauens fruitful ray" (3.6.6). The dews of the Garden of Adonis may be in play as well. It is a subtle prophecy of rebirth, and washed in these pure waters—like Red Cross drowned in the "dreame of deepe delight" (1.1.50) from which he will wake to slay the dragon—Arthur becomes for a moment the king of the Tudor mythology who slumbered centuries under the hills of Wales. *Rex quondam rexque futurus*. The evening star is also the morning star: allegory wheels above him like a guarantee of his millennial destiny.

There is, however, a countercurrent to this prophetic strain. As Arthur sleeps the salvage man is wandering, if not aimlessly, then to no purpose the narrator bothers to discern. There may be no more offhanded line in the poem than "To doe some thing, that seemed to him best." This kind of wandering is what Arthur more than anything cannot do. He cannot just sleep, cannot just saunter off to do whatever seems best to him. The poem cannot be indifferent to his aims because he *is* the poem. This predicament makes some sense of the darker side of his repose. He has *laid* himself to rest, a funereal phrase, in the *shade*; this in spite of having summoned his enemy to the scene of his silver slumber. It is almost as though he wills—or prefigures?—his own death. This impulse to self-negation is a recurrent strain in Spenserian allegory, perhaps the extension of its relation to punishment (so often figured as some kind of self-punishment). Malbecco again is a paradigmatic instance: as he approaches the condition of pure Gealosie, he approaches, asymptotically, his own demise ("Yet can he neuer dye, but dying liues" [3.10.60]). The extent to which he suffers the idea he represents is the extent to which one might say he is still recalcitrantly human; the mercy of pure abstraction is denied him. Arthur too suffers: melancholy from the outset, his career of courtesy in Book Six is marked by diminishing returns, and his brush with catastrophe in this episode is the final failure of the project of reforming Turpine. The cosmic imagery of rebirth gathered in the alexandrine cannot redeem his abdication from a sense of weary contempt for all the poem's counsels of prudence. It is as though he were trying to sleep off the allegory. The salvage man functions in this scene not only to wake him up, happening back just as Turpine arrives; he is also a kind of unsupervised or unregarded antithesis, a lapse into the ordinary that points up the prince's imprisonment. He is ordinary not because he is natural, or even because of the apparent everydayness, or at least unremarkableness, of what he gets up to in the forest (though this helps link him to other fleeting idylls of domesticity), but because the poem almost loses track of him, just as it lets Hellenore slip out of its didactic and punitive designs.

The pressure exerted here on the eschatological Arthur might be said to be figured on a larger scale in Book Six by its

generic modulation into pastoral. *Otium* threatens the quest (where we can understand the quest as the narrative impulse to close the rift that defines allegory²⁹). But *otium* is not ordinariness. It is too dialectical: its sports are over against labor, its idle songs against the prose of *negotium* or the hexameters of epic. The salvage man's amble is indifferent to either, and Arthur's sleep seems to be a longing for surcease from both—just sleep. What follows next is a strong indication of how deeply this negligent interlude undermines the poem's discipline. Arthur humiliates Turpine and strings him up by his heels "that all which passed by, / The picture of his punishment might see, / And by the like ensample warned bee" (6.7.27). Inverting him is the sort of schematic gesture—a fundamental, graphic trope—at the heart of emblematic allegory, a lesson against his treason and his usurpation of courteous knighthood. It is the minimal move in the game of allegorical punishment: we know because he is upside down that he has opposed himself to virtue, or at least to whatever order instituted the penalty. And Arthur as punisher is restored to that order, his blunt reprisal—after so many failed attempts at reform—a kind of rebuilding of allegory and his role in it from the ground up. In the meantime, we have glimpsed what happens when the poem relaxes its vigilance. When Red Cross falls asleep by the fountain, the consequences follow him for the rest of the book; Arthur goes unpunished, which is to say, his sleep doesn't seem to *mean anything* to what follows. Character and text figure one another's exhaustion. The temptation in midst of the race is not the erotic but the ordinary, and beyond that, even death.

Conclusion

After Arthur has finished with Turpine, he does not wander far before he encounters the penitent Petrarchan Mirabella. She is the center of a creaky allegorical procession constituted to punish her fatal disregard for her lovers; she rides an ass, attended by

29 See, e.g., David Lee Miller, *The Poem's Two Bodies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 4, with his account of how *The Faerie Queene* is "organized with reference to the anticipated-but-deferred wholeness of an ideal body, which serves to structure the text in a manner comparable to the use of a vanishing point to organize spatial perspective in drawing."

the giant Disdaine and the dwarf Scorne, and Timias, her would-be rescuer, is led alongside "like a dog" (6.8.5). Arthur deplors this shameful spectacle and makes short work of her guardians, but when he stands above Disdaine to deliver the second, terminal blow, Mirabella begs him to stay his hand. The reminiscence of Amoret's desperate plea to Britomart is unmistakable (one way, of course, in which that episode is relevant to the rest of the poem, its internal strategies of schism notwithstanding). At the end of Book Three, however, the enchanter reads from his books while Britomart suspends her sword mutely and uncomprehendingly above him. In Book Six, by contrast, it is Mirabella—the victim herself—who speaks, and she not only tells her story but unfolds the emblematic punishment to which Cupid's justice has consigned her:

Here in this bottle (sayd the sory Mayd)
I put the teares of my contrition,
Till to the brim I haue it full defrayd:
And in this bag which I behinde me don,
I put repentaunce for things past and gon.
Yet is the bottle leake, and bag so torne,
That all which I put in, fals out anon. (6.8.24)

Walter Benjamin writes that the allegorical figure carries "a scroll in its mouth, which the observer was supposed to read like a letter"³⁰: Mirabella is a full participant in this regime, reading her own motto and glossing her parts. Most remarkably, she refuses Arthur's offered rescue, choosing rather to serve her term "Least vnto me betide a greater ill" (6.8.30). She seems to be the final perfection of allegorical punishment. Or then again, perhaps not quite: Malbecco-as-Gealosis suffers the pains of his nature without abating his sin; Mirabella no longer plays the part of the callous cruel-fair (her compassion for Timias gives every impression that she has reformed—an unusual, perhaps unique event in the books of 1596), but she still pays the price for it. Moreover her punishment has the quality of parody. Disdaine—wont to stand "on his tiptoes, to seeme tall" (6.8.26)—loses his leg in the fight and has to be propped up by Scorne in order for the whole apparatus to

30 Benjamin, *Origin*, p. 197.

hobble off at the episode's end. With its bags and bottles and dwarfs and giants it must be Allegory. And if Allegory (or its travesty) has exited, where are we then? I take this episode to be a kind of last, comic stand of the promises of the "Letter to Raleigh." *The Faerie Queene* often figures, critiques, even ridicules its own mode within itself, and having done that begs the question of what to call—and how to read—the rest of it. The two strategies that I have elaborated are only two ways of thinking about what it means to stand outside, or somehow between, what had promised to be the essence and the medium of the fiction.

I began by anticipating that these strategies would disappear under the scrutiny of a methodology that presumed allegory's structural incoherence. I have accepted a more stable account of the mode in order to distinguish such strategies from more general effects of, for example, deconstructive reading. But my intent is not therefore to dismiss the usefulness of those approaches. Among the glories of *The Faerie Queene* is that it is relentlessly attentive to the kinds of reading that may be brought to bear upon it. It solicits, rewards, confutes, and ridicules our methods by turn, playing them off one another with a sophistication that criticism will always be catching up to. None of our schools but has its part in the endless work. What I have tried to do here is to describe the consequences of allegiance to what I take to be a particularly prominent and tenacious set of assumptions about the *kosmos* of the poem. These consequences are impasses of two kinds: the failure of expected relation, a rift in allegory; and the lapse out of allegory into the everyday. The value of "irrelevance" and "ordinariness" as terms in practical criticism can only be measured by the number of further episodes, some of which I have suggested, where they have explanatory power. But together they also imply something about the nature of the poem as a whole. It is a work of such extraordinary internal complexity that it always threatens to come to nothing, or nothing beyond itself. Its wildness of parody and qualification may be how Spenser chose to teach virtue, or perhaps more accurately, how he confronted the cultural imperative that he use poetry to teach virtue. But reading itself cannot be the extent of virtue's practice. *The Faerie Queene* is never finally ready to tell us how to live; it does, however, have ways of telling us to stop reading.