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The Method of Spenser's Stanza

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"The Method of Spenser's Stanza" proposes the analogy of method—in its late sixteenth-century sense, particularly as associated with Ramus—as a way of understanding how Spenser's stanza works. That stanza's two most distinctive moments, the medial couplet and its final alexandrine, have the normative (if by no means inevitable) effects of a second thought in the middest and a summary of sententious closure. It is a shape imposed on experience in order to yield, time after time, a particular form of thought, a particular kind of lesson. In this it is like the dream of a universal method which can be applied in order to give the same intelligibility to diverse materials (e.g., the tendency of Ramist analysis to reduce texts to a single "dialectical ratiocination"). Arthur's advice to Una after the defeat of Orgoglio ("Dear lady, then said that victorious knight [I.viii.44]) makes the principal example.

LET ME BEGIN BY quoting from the story of a clownish young man who sets out on a great quest for which he is not very well prepared. You may find that the details come back to you with a certain alienated majesty:

> A Worthy Knight was riding on the Plain,
> In Armour Clad, which richly did Contain
> The Gallant Marks of many Battels fought,
> Tho' he before no Martial Habit sought;
> How Warlike ere his Person seem'd to Sit
> On a Bold Steed, that scarce obey'd the Bit:
> Upon his Breast a Bloody Cross display'd,
> The Precious Drops for him his Saviour paid;
> And on his Mighty Shield the same did bear,
> To shew his Faith was his Valours Care.[1]

I could go on—as Edward Howard did, at length, casting the whole of Book I into heroic couplets and publishing the results in 1687 as *Spenser Redivivus: Containing the First Book of the Faery Queen, His Essential Design preserv'd, but his obsolete Language and manner of Verse totally laid aside.* In his preface Howard declares himself to be especially concerned with saving his readers from what he called Spenser's "tedious stanza" (A3v). The couplet he prefers may be a tacit slape at rhymeless John Milton, whose *Paradise Lost* goes conspicuously unmentioned in the preface's brief history of English poetic ambition.[2] But that couplet is also a means by which Spenser's great matter might be more "genuinely and succinctly convey'd" (A3v), "abreviated and, as I conceive, improv'd" (A4r).

Howard's claims for his chosen form might remind us of those made by another turner of couplets, Alexander Pope, almost fifty years later. Pope prefaced his *Essay on Man* by arguing that couplets allowed him to treat his subject "more *shortly* [. . .] than in prose itself; and nothing is more certain, than that much of the *force* as well as *grace* of arguments or instructions, depends on their *conciseness* . . . " Couplets served him as a compositional method, a way of thinking and presenting his "principles, maxims, or precepts": their "chain of reasoning" is among the chief means by which (to quote now the *Essay on Criticism*) "*Nature*" may be "*Methodiz'd*."[3] Compared with Pope, Howard's amateur and uncompressed rhymes cannot be said to show a particularly strong methodizing hand. What I want to ask here is whether method might be exactly the word for what is missing in his rewriting of Spenser; whether it might be the best word for one particular kind of work that the stanza he banishes actually does in its nearly four thousand instances over the length of *The Faerie Queene*.

This is a question I will shortly put to one stanza in particular, Arthur's advice to Una after Red Cross has been haled up from Orgoglio's dungeon. But first I want to consider what that word "method" might have meant to Spenser. The idea of a rational program by which unfounded knowledge might be discarded and new learning built from the foundations—something close to what we might now call scientific method—had to wait for the Royal Academy. The authorities behind the word circa 1590 were as various as Aristotle, the Stoics, Galen, and above all the Protestant educational reformer Petrus Ramus; it was most often understood as a means for bringing systematic order and concision to existing fields of study. A method was a *modus operandi*—*via* and *ordo* were common synonyms—by which diffuse materials could be approached, organized,

and conveyed to others. It offered a model of thinking and a procedure for teaching.[4] Spenser himself never used the word in his poetry, but he lived in the midst of a great fashion for it, and his friend Gabriel Harvey was among its early English enthusiasts. When both men were still at Cambridge Harvey wrote an elegy for Ramus called Ode Natalia in which a heavenly virgin named Method presides over the goddesses of the arts of grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, and geometry, all reformed by Ramus, and offers consolation to their unmethodized sisters, music, astronomy, theology, jurisprudence, and medicine. The work is a peculiar and—for a mind like Spenser's—suggestive compound of method and allegory.[5]

The counsel Arthur gives to Una may bias the case that there is something methodical or methodizing about the Spenserian stanza itself. It is one of the most concerted instances of instruction between characters in the poem, and it puts the peculiar pressure on the representation of thinking that teaching always does. Still I hope it will set some general features in high relief. It comes in the forty-fourth stanza of canto viii, Book I:

Faire Lady, then said that victorious knight,
The things, that grieuous were to doe, or beare,
Them to renew, I wote, breeds no delight;
Best musicke breeds delight in loathing eare:
But th'only good, that growes of passed feare,
Is to be wise, and ware of like agein.
This daies ensample hath this lesson deare
Deepe written in my heart with yron pen,
That blisse may not abide in state of mortal men.

(I.viii.44)[6]

The opening lines are highly controlled. The victorious Arthur begins with the rhetorician's distinction between doing and suffering, a topos of analysis implying that what follows will be carefully structured argument. "I wote" reinforces this deliberateness. It concedes to Una her desire to forget, but also asserts that the wisdom Arthur imparts is already known, already thought or thought out. That wisdom might be paraphrased roughly as follows: the past is painful; it is hard (as always in Spenser) to recognize the difference between agent and victim, particularly in oneself; renewing the past renews its pain and confusion. The compound of remembering and repeating in that word "renew" comes from Aeneas' famous *renovare*, and for a moment it is as though Arthur were giving advice to Virgil's hero

too—the hero who fears, at the beginning of *Aeneid* II, that in retelling the Fall of Troy he will suffer it again.[7] The problem is old and intractable, but at least Spenser's victorious knight speaks with the authority of one who knows his mind.

The fourth line, then, sounds a kind of preliminary closure: it is syntactically autonomous, and finishes the opening ABAB quatrain with a sententious ring. The next two lines would seem to open up a new unit of thought. The "but" of "but th'only good" is not the unsettling double-take of "Yet armes till that time did he neuer wield" (I.i.1); instead it inaugurates a new quatrain, one that will be a room as fit for its own stage of argument as was the last. But this impression depends upon a hasty reading of that decisive-sounding fourth line, "Best musicke breeds delight in loathing eare," one that (as Hamilton's edition testifies) has provoked more than its share of commentary and emendation.[8] I would suggest the paraphrase, "It is music that best restores delight to an ear poisoned by loathing," and argue that part of the line's difficulty is that it does *not* in fact complete the thought of lines 1 to 3. Instead it is part of lasting good that can come of what you have been through is to remember it well enough to recognize its like in the future. Now the stanza seems to have fallen into three groups of three lines each: not an arrangement abetted by the rhyme scheme, though there are plenty of other examples of it in the poem. What is important for my purposes is that the effect of readjustment I have just described is typical of the unstable relations generated by the couplet at the center of the stanza. Because, as Empson observed, this couplet can be troped both as a moment of disruption and of closure, it introduces a regular-as-clockwork schedule for microcosmic reflection on the cosmic problems of the poem's order and ideas of order.[9]

"Ware of like agein" marks the first full stop in the stanza, and the next line takes a still more decisive didactic turn. "This daies ensample hath this lesson deare/Deepe written in my heart with yron pen,/That blisse may not abide in state of mortal men." It is important to remember the visceral horror of the previous stanzas, Orgoglio's castle awash with the blood of innocent babes, and the spectacle of the emaciated and obdurately silent Red Cross, his fresh dried up like withered flowers. Like the description of the disrobed Duessa that will follow, the vividness of the details seems to exceed the requirements of the emblem: this is the grim *experience* that Arthur must transmute to useful knowledge. He works by stages. The first is "ensample," etymologically poised between "sample," a piece of the original experience, and *exemplum*, an epitome of it. The next stage is a "lesson," still more abstract, another insulating remove.

But we have already seen Arthur's concern for the discplacement of memory by music: music which is the perfect threat, in its resistance to representation, to being ware of like again. The next line seems to be driven by the same anxiety. The lesson must be written on the heart with an iron pen, and the pain lost in translation—the grievousness of what was done and borne—is renewed in the violence of the act of inscription itself. Arthur is wrestling with the impossible balance between the lesson as comfort and punishment. And for all this scrupling, still the last word is the maxim of the hexameter, self-balanced on its medial caesura, ripe for the commonplace book. "That blisse may not abide in state of mortal men."

How does Howard manage the same stanza?

> Then to Lady gallant Arthur said,
> All grief repeated is more grievous made:
> Nor can the softest sounds delight the Ear
> Of him that loathing does the Musick hear.
> From actions past no Counsel can arise,
> Other than future Care of being more wise.
> And in my heart this Maxim fix'd I find,
> That constant Bliss abides not with Mankind.
>
> (L4r)

Howard's complaint against Spenser's form is that "the Writing in Stanza's must render Verse sententious and contrain'd, the most weighty part of their meaning still being to be expected at the Period of the Stanza; so, in that consideration, their Composure must needs be less difficult than where the force of each single Line is to be weigh'd apart" (A3v). He seems to mean that Spenser's verse is "sententious and contrain'd" because it leaves the last line to do all the moral work, rather than distributing the burden evenly; there is a note of self-congratulation in his claim that his couplets—which are less sententious, one assumes, only because no one sententia particularly stands out from the throng of its neighbors—are more difficult to write. His own interest in their autonomy (and in their "composure," in a double sense) means that Howard cannot hear the excruciated second-thoughts of Arthur's instruction. He does, however, recognize the peculiar force and authority of the hexameter. Once again Empson is the canonical guide to "possible variety" (34) of effects that this final line achieves, but so often there is something reflective, summary, or even epigrammatic about it. In a poem so wary of rest it repeatedly proposes itself as a moment of provisional

rest (even if that rest is only the formulation of a prayer: "God helpe the man so wrapt in *Errours* endlesse traine" [I.i.18]). Arthur's didactic urgency puts a still finer point on this effect than usual, as though the poem has handed its own procedures momentarily over to its duodecimal hero in order to reflect on them with greater detachment.

So: a double-take in the middest; a final, elongated, balanced (or notably unbalanced) sententia; a system of rhymes that proposes a variety of relations between them. Is this enough to speak of the stanza as a method? In order to answer this question I want to step a little further back and consider the poem and the stanza in particular as a mimesis of thinking. This is a topic that has long occupied Spenser's critics in one form or another: Isabel MacCaffrey's wonderful book on Spenser's Allegory describes *The Faerie Queene* as "a model of the mind's life in the world"; more recently, both Kenneth Gross and Gordon Teskey have been thinking about Spenserian thinking.[10] Angus Fletcher's wrestle in *Colors of the Mind* with what he calls "noetics"—a poetics of thinking—also has Spenser much on its mind.[11] What makes this topic so elusive and compelling is that thinking itself seemed to be, for want of a better word, too *big* to think about: if a given mind were to compass thought in its entirety, what space would be left over for thinking *about* it? Wouldn't that just be more thinking, still to be reflected upon? Reflection is a supplement always being subsumed. One recourse is to admit that when we think about thinking what we imagine are reductions or schemes or, in McCaffrey's phrase, "models" (6), or, in Fletcher's "iconographies of thought" (15–34). And this is precisely what method is. We may take method primarily to be a tool, a cognitive procedure by which some desired order may be brought to new materials. But it is also a picture of the mind at work on those materials: in the ordering of the object we see the order of the mind. This order may be understood as a subset of mental activity, or (by a mistake either consoling or terrifying) as just what the mind does, ideally or actually. Logic and rhetoric are among the Renaissance disciplines that work this way: the five stages of composing an oration, for example, were often taught by schoolmasters as though they might come to be coextensive with the ideal student's mental life. The stanza too has an analogous power to filter and render all experience, imposing on it a particular shape, deriving from it a particular kind of lesson. Certainly *The Faerie Queene* never thinks without it.

At bottom this is only an analogy: I cannot say more than that it might help us understand how the stanza works, and, more tenuously, that the intellectual fashion for the one method might have contributed to Spenser's turn away from the variety of *The Shepherdes Calender* to the unflagging regularity of *The Faerie Queene*. Still I can make

the analogy a little more specific. The basic procedure of Ramus's method was to resolve a field of knowledge into its constituent elements by a technique of dichotomizing analysis: this is the operation that yields the ramifying trees of his diagrams, each branch splitting into two and then splitting again. In matters of literary analysis, however, the point was to isolate the "dialectical ratiocination" or maxim at the heart of the discourse; method becomes a matter of stripping away ornament to arrive at essence. So Cicero's *Pro Milo*, for example, can be reduced to the formula "It is permissible to kill a criminal."[12] The application of the method is complete when it yields this fecund minimum; the process has two separate moments, the first unfolding in time, the other finished, timeless. The Spenserian stanza might likewise be understood as an engine for deriving some kind of concrete result in the form of that sententious hexameter: for making, out of thinking, a thought. Gordon Teskey has distinguished broadly between *The Faerie Queene* as a poem in which thinking actually happens and *Paradise Lost* as poem that teaches what has already been thought. I would suggest that a play between thinking and thought is constantly dramatized within *The Faerie Queene* itself, particularly as a problem of teaching; a play, as Arthur defines it, among experience, memory, and maxim. The stanza is built to raise the problem of their relation continually.

This is not to say that the hexameter is inevitably to be identified with fossilized thought. Nor does every stanza work the way I am describing: there are plenty that defy these structural generalizations. But the incidence of conformity is high enough to generate an expectation, and when that expectation is violated—or transcended—the difference is meaningful. On analogy with Teskey's thinking about allegory one might speak of a kind of "stanzaic capture," the fiction that the stanza is imposed upon some antecedent matter that once had a shape of its own. Stanzas that do not fit, particularly those that do not crystallize in their final line, cast doubt on the capacity of the method to process the full range of experience. Such mis-fit is among the stanza's resources, and a measure of how much more capricious it turns out to be than is the methodical promise it encodes. (But then those stanzas that fit too well, as Arthur reminds us, generate their own kind of doubt too.)

I would like to think that Gabriel Harvey could have been persuaded to recognize in Spenser's device the promise of method, though the two men seem to have talked more about lines than about stanzas. It is at all events a more flexible instrument than Ramus ever had, building in as it does a moment of disruption and perhaps of doubt; in this it may even anticipate the programmatic doubt that

became essential to the seventeenth century's version of the concept. Spenser applied his method more than thirty-eight hundred times over the course of *The Faerie Queene*, pouring the welter of ideas and events in his massive poem into its idiosyncratic shape again and again; day, we must imagine, after day; year after year. The contest staged there between thinking and thought is parallel to—though it cannot simply be mapped onto—the contest between narrative (or romance) and allegory, forces in the poem that often collaborate but tend fundamentally in different directions. Allegory too might fruitfully be considered under the rubric of method, particularly in those templar moments when it seems most like a mode of analysis. The notorious trick of saving the revelation of a character's name for the end of an episode is a little like the consolidating closure of the hexameter writ large. But none of this is to say that *The Faerie Queene* is a methodical poem: rather, that there is method in it, on a variety of levels: the ambivalent search for a structure of thinking that could be widely and recurrently applied to help us understand and fashion other understanders. In this at least Spenser was a characteristic if ever skeptical citizen of an intellectual moment avid after such reliable, programmatic access to the truth. He may have sleepwalked through the rooms of his accumulating memory palace, and he may have dithered over every threshold, turning forward, then back, but we have to allow that he had the peculiar presence of mind to shut the door behind him, every time.

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Notes

1. Subsequent citations by page number in parenthesis in the text. For a much more thoughtful and thorough examination of Howard than I attempt here, see Clare R. Kinney, " 'What s/he ought to have been': Romancing Truth in *Spenser Redivivus*," *Spenser Studies* XVI (2002): 125–38.

2. The book was licensed by Roger L'Estrange, the Surveyor of the Press, on September 21, 1686; author of a broadside against Milton entitled "No Blinde Guides" (1660, L'Estrange presumably would have had no objection to Howard's tactical omission.

3. Alexander Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (New York: Routledge, 1989), 502, 146. On compression, wit, and method in Pope's *Essays*, see Patricia Meyer Spacks, "Imagery and Method in *An Essay on Criticism*," PMLA 85 (1970): 97–106.

4. On the range of Renaissance definitions of method and their sources, see Neil W. Gilbert, *Renaissance Concepts of Method* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960).

5. For an account of the Ode Natalia and Harvey's interest in method generally, see Kendrick W. Prewitt, "Gabriel Harvey and the Practice of Method," *SEL* 31:1 (1990): 19–39.

6. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. Thomas P. Roche (Penguin, 1980), I.viii.44. Subsequent citations in parentheses in the text.

7. Virgil, *Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I-VI*, tr. H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), II.3.

8. Hamilton notes eighteenth-century emendations of "delight" to "dislike" or "no delight"; he goes on, "If the text is kept, possible paraphrases are: 'music best breeds delight, not a recital of grievous matters'; or 'only the best music, not a recital etc., may breed delight." Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 111n.

9. William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 33–34.

10. Isabel McCaffrey, *Spenser's Allegory: The Anatomy of Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 6; Gross and Teskey's work has been presented at recent conferences (e.g., Teskey's " 'And therefore as a stranger give it welcome': Courtesy and Thinking," presented at the conference "The Place of Spenser," Cambridge, England [July 2001]; and Gross's MLA paper reprinted here).

11. Angus Fletcher, *Colors of the Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 169–70.

12. See Walter Ong, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958) 191. On this double movement in Ramist method—dichotomous exfoliation and analytic reduction—see Martin Elsky, "Reorganizing the Encyclopedia: Vives and Ramus on Aristotle and the Scholastics," *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Volume 3, The Renaissance*, ed. Glyn P. Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 406.