

## Panic's Castle

“FORGETFULL OF HIS OWNE, THAT mindes others cares” (1.5.18).<sup>1</sup> Spenser’s narrator makes this declaration toward the middle of the first book of *The Faerie Queene*, and its maxim folds handsomely, authoritatively across the caesura of his alexandrine. Impressed by its gravitas, you could almost miss the moral catastrophe of the counsel. The scene is the House of Pride, where the book’s hero, Redcrosse, lies wounded under the care of some questionable physicians while his consort, Fidessa—the witch Duessa in disguise—weeps crocodile tears at his bedside. Redcrosse sees none of this, but the narrator sees it all and warns that any man who pities the crocodile will be “swallowd vp vnwares” (1.5.18). To care for others is to forget yourself, and fatally. There is no easy way to reconcile such a lesson with what book I has taught us so far. The hero’s career depends throughout upon the expressions of care, especially Una’s care, that ultimately save him from himself. The maxim must be something more like the cry of its occasion: *How could he have known? How could anyone know?* Confronting the book’s epistemological agonies, the narrator, our sole guide and storyteller, makes a sudden, drastic overcorrection, declaring that the only remedy for the hero’s vulnerability to deception is indifference. A problem of knowledge is solved by ethical withdrawal. It is a moment of moral panic expressed as a moral lesson.

“Panic” is not a Spenserian word, and it is not widespread in anything like its modern sense until the middle of the seventeenth century.<sup>2</sup> The goat god Pan, anciently associated with sudden and causeless terror, makes only an innocuous cameo in *The Faerie Queene*.<sup>3</sup> But the poem recurs to a number of words that cluster in panic’s vicinity: “amaze” (the feeling of being lost in the labyrinth), “astonish” (the feeling of being struck to stone), “stound” (an indeterminate interval of stupefaction). Let “panic” serve as the notional center of gravity in this troubled system, the dark star that these words orbit. Its radical case is not an idea, nor even an affect, but an experience of peril that overwhelms reason and instinct alike. Panic is both halt and spasm, an organismal failure, a sudden devolution that strips us not only of our civility

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ABSTRACT “Panic’s Castle” considers panic—self-loss under the threat of self-contradiction—as a perpetual interruption of the action of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* and simultaneously as the cause of its organization from the level of the line up to the architecture of the six books. The essay proposes a reading of overcommitment and overcorrection as the fundamental Spenserian dynamic. REPRESENTATIONS 120. Fall 2012 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 1–16. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/rep.2012.120.1.1.

but also of our sentience. Modern diagnostics will point to a racing heart rate, chest pains, dizziness, shortness of breath. But it is possible to begin before the symptoms, in a condition that is almost metaphysical in its self-loss—almost metaphysical, and yet experienced with an overwhelming and world-excluding intensity.

This essay will pursue the hypothesis that panic, and the fear of panic, are the generative principles of *The Faerie Queene*, and that the narrator's impetuous disavowal of an ethic of care is part of a pattern of overreaction that determines the poem at every level. This hypothesis sorts uneasily with accounts of the poem's architectural achievement, its capacities for dialectical progress, its analytic and its didactic ambitions. Panic unmakes everything, and so must challenge the idea of the poem as a made thing, and of the poet as a maker. And yet, as we will see, panic can be a kind of structure too, or it can make or at least provoke one. This last idea will need to be approached by stages, stages that will take us from the local trials of the characters up to the invention of the poet himself. Panic first as flight, then as action, then as interpretation, and, finally, panic as a structuring principle and the poem as panic's castle.

### Flight

What is the first moment of panic in *The Faerie Queene*? There may be a shiver of its overburdened emptiness even in the poem's first "Yet," that fifth line: "Yet armes till that time did he neuer wield" (1.1.1). But we are not yet prepared to detect it in that small reversal—barely a reversal, more of a second thought or an advised qualification. Another candidate is Redcrosse's combat with Error, especially when he is wrapped in the monster's coils. If panic suspends purpose, perhaps his "great perplexitie" would count. But the clearest case comes at the beginning of the next canto, when he is wakened from sleep by the wizard Archimago to witness the illusion of the lady Una, to whom in time he will be betrothed, "knit . . . in *Venus* shameful chain" (1.2.4) with a young squire.

All in amaze he suddenly vp start  
With sword in hand, and with the old man went;  
Who soone him brought into a secret part,  
Where that false couple were full closely ment  
In wanton lust and lewd embracement:  
Which when he saw, he burnt with gealous fire,  
The eye of reason was with rage yblent,  
And would haue slaine them in his furious ire,  
But hardly was restrained of that aged sire. (1.2.5)

Here is amazement, and the blinding of reason, and the suspension of action. Also loss of faith, a cosmic disorientation that only begins with crediting Una's betrayal. The knight's first impulse is violence—more of that to come—but when he is held back by Archimago, he returns to his bed, where “He could not rest, but did his stout heart eat, / And wast his inward gall with deepe despight.” This pointless, night-long paroxysm prolongs the moment when his sword hangs over the play-acting sprites, and release comes only when daylight allows him his escape. “Then vp he rose, and clad him hastily; / The Dwarfe him brought his steed: so both away do fly” (1.2.6).

Such intervals of excruciated stasis are the degree zero of panic. For Redcrosse that panic is not merely creaturely, as, say, drowning would be. It is the product of bonds and obligations that structure his identity, and it is no less imperiling for that. (He is, after all, an allegorical personification of those bonds and obligations as they define English chivalry. His ontology is at stake.) What the knight's susceptibility to Archimago's illusion exposes is the frailty of his faith and the strength of his desire. The contradiction—between the two, and between them both and his holiness, in the Book of Holiness—is like a crack in the earth that opens suddenly between his feet and widens as he stands transfixed. His response is not to stay to question, nor to abide, even temporarily, in uncertainty. The emergency is life threatening, and so he takes flight—to undo the situation, to exempt himself. The dissonance between allegorical identity (his fidelity, Una's unity) and event (the apparent betrayal) creates an overwhelming juxtaposition of meanings that threatens to annihilate the character who must bear them, a paradox of surplus and emptiness that is the metaphysics of panic. The knight's eating of his own heart—the very word “eat” cannibalizes “heart”—expresses the destructive force of this paralysis. Flight is the imperative, if not the answer. Stop *this*. Stop *this now*. He flees in no particular direction, just away.

Then again, the flight does have some directionality: away *from* Una. This awayness is important, for panic is often—though not always—expressed in motion that has at least the minimum intelligence of opposition. If it sometimes propels us heedlessly into the danger we seek to escape, it can also, like the pain reflex, pull the hand away from something hot or sharp. Florimel's flight at the beginning of book 3 has this reactive character, beginning as it does in a search for her beloved Marinel but quickly becoming a headlong flight from desire itself, which renders her incapable of distinguishing threat from rescue. (There is some wisdom to this confusion in *The Faerie Queene*, though it is not Florimel's wisdom.) Malbecco's flight to his cliffside grotto at the book's end is likewise driven by an intolerable contradiction, in his case between desire and possession: he “ran away, ran with himselfe away” (3.10.54). The miser-cuckold's panic becomes perpetual in his allegorical incarnation as jealousy transfixed in fear of imminent ruin. Like Redcrosse,

his doubt “doth with cureless care consume the heart” (3.10.59); and, like Redcrosse, he longs to die. Redcrosse’s later brush with self-slaughter under the tuition of Despaire may look like radical panic, too, but it is not, and the distinction is a useful one. He is led to his near conclusion by the worldly logic of his host’s arguments, and by suicide he wants to end everything, squaring his accounts with the Almighty. Panic, by contrast, is purely present tense: not ending everything, just ending *this*. Suicide—at least suicide as a deliberate solution—is already a kind of civilizing of panic’s anarchic immediacy, remembering as it does that there is a self to end.

The panic in this scene, the poem’s inaugural panic, is the knight’s. Its immediate aftermath hints at the threat his recoil might pose to the whole enterprise of *The Faerie Queene*—or at least how the narrator registers that threat.

Now when the rosy-fingred Morning faire,  
 Weary of aged Tithones saffron bed,  
 Had spred her purple robe through deawy aire,  
 And the high hills Titan discovered,  
 The royall virgin shooke off drowsy-hed (1.2.7)

Where is that panic now? The contrast in tone would be startling, if it were not so welcome. The lines intimate Una’s own reciprocal desire by casting her as an Aurora weary of the stale bed of Tithonus. Which is to say that they are knowing in a way that Redcrosse is not, worldly enough to acknowledge this complexity in Una, a character whose purity, whose unity is her allegorical essence. Even too worldly, for the Book of Holiness? And they are so conspicuously leisurely and pictorial, full of color, rose and saffron and purple and a suffusing dew. It is as though the narrator were at pains to declare his story’s independence from the violent haste and maybe the prudery of its hero, from his flight and his contagious overreaction. Panic is what we might call (following Philip Fisher) “thorough”—like rage and fear, only more so—for it drives all thought and feeling before it. Crossing out of panic again is marked by the threshold affect of shame, the reconstitution of a self appalled by its retrospective identification with the state that interrupted it.<sup>4</sup> The narrator’s lightness of tone is an elegant, perhaps defensive assertion of self-control, reassuring us, and perhaps himself, that he is not to be confused with his characters. Perhaps we had not thought to worry about such a confusion. Perhaps we should begin.

### Action

So: panic is *now*, cut free from the governing structure of the quest, which Redcrosse abandons when he abandons Una, and indeed from any reckoning of continuous time, historical or prophetic or just minimally

narrative. It is the present moment under the aspect of crisis. Angus Fletcher understands *The Faerie Queene* to be punctuated by crises, which occur when the wandering path of the poem's labyrinth intersects the centering ambitions of its temples. (His temples are like C. S. Lewis's allegorical cores, places such as the House of Holiness where systematic unfolding replaces wandering as the poem's basic procedure.)<sup>5</sup> These crises are moments of prophetic power, like the revelation of the future of Britain that Merlin gives when Britomart wanders into his fastness at Cayr-Merdin.<sup>6</sup> "The prophet thinks in terms of continual emergencies, if not crises, since for him the past and the future are gathered into an overloaded present."<sup>7</sup> Panic is the opposite of the prophetic moment, or better, its specific failure. The same pressures accumulate, an overplus of significances and imperatives, but the result is a present that does not infold, drawing all time into itself, but rather evacuates, emptying itself of all time—a present without the solace of presence. Flight is one symptom of this panic moment, and also, of course, an attempted escape from it (perhaps as any act of prophecy is both the articulation of a vision and an effort to shake off the god). Another symptom is spasmodic action.

If action is the right word: for "action," in its fullest deliberate sense, implies ends that panic cannot compass.<sup>8</sup> Still, it will serve, if only because action is what we sometimes call a spasm when it is past. Such action is to Guyon as flight is to Redcrosse. The Knight of Temperance is most temperate when he refrains, safely removed from the temptations around him, but his career still attains to a few pivotal moments of crisis. The first, as consequential for the course of book 2 as Redcrosse's flight is for book 1, comes during his encounter with the dying Amavia in the first canto. She lies on the grass with a knife in her breast, while her dead lover Mortdant lies beside her, and her babe innocently bloodies his hands in her wound. The spectacle overwhelms the knight:

Whom when the good Sir Guyon did behold,  
 His hart gan wexe as starke, as marble stone,  
 And his fresh bloud did frieze with fearefull cold,  
 That all his senses seemd bereft attone:  
 At last his mightie ghost gan deepe to grone,  
 As Lyon grudging in his great disdain,  
 Mournes inwardly, and makes to himselfe mone:  
 Till ruth and fraile affection did constraine,  
 His stout courage to stoupe, and shew his inward paine. (2.1.42)

There are marks of time-structure in this stanza—"when," "gan," "At last," "Till"—and of causal progression. With a little interpretive effort, you could argue that Guyon's initial astonishment (that sense again of being made stone)

is followed by disdain (for the lurid implications of the scene? for his own helplessness?), which is conquered in turn by frail affection. But that structure seems itself too frail and psychologically arbitrary to coordinate such forceful, contending elements, amounting to more of a rationalization than an explanation. The stronger impression is simply of paralysis, broken only when Guyon snatches the knife from Amavia's breast—"lightly snatcht" (2.1.43), perhaps the only way it could be done, without clear purpose and (as it turns out) without any consequence, for she dies soon after. To say as much is to read the gesture as a panic action, whose only meaning is to dispel the meaning of the scene.<sup>9</sup>

Action like this might as well be flight. It happens again in the next canto, when Guyon discovers that he cannot wash the babe's hands clean of his mother's blood: "The which him into great amaz'ment droue, / And into diuerse doubt his wauering wonder cloue" (2.2.3). As when Redcrosse eats his own heart, this amazement is not just stasis, but self-destruction. He is rescued not by action, in this case, but by the Palmer's hasty rationalization of the scene (it is not an indelible, original sin that taints the babe's hands, the Palmer tells him; rather that the purity of the fountain will take no blood). Nonetheless, that "wavering wonder" is worth pausing over, if only to establish another contrast. For wonder is a frequent register of response in *The Faerie Queene*, and, like panic, it is a kind of vacancy, an experience that occupies the place of affect without itself being affect.<sup>10</sup> Francis Bacon calls it "broken knowledge," and Aristotle regards it as the beginning of understanding, wiping the slate clean, as it were, for a new lesson.<sup>11</sup> The satyrs experience wonder when they encounter Una (1.6.12), the narrator wonders at the wisdom of Fidelia in the House of Holiness (1.10.29), and Britomart stares in wonder at the idol in the House of Busyrane (3.11.49). None of these moments, however, could be confused with panic: where panic bereaves us of our senses, wonder sharpens them (think of the intensity of Britomart's wondering gaze); where panic is foreclosed, wonder is an opening, in which new knowledge can take place. Wonder is full of possibility, a prophetic mood, perhaps, but without excruciation. It was all too short when it has passed.

Such wonder is quite different from Guyon's wavering wonder: he tips quickly into the reverie of "sore bloudguiltinesse" (2.2.4) from which the Palmer must save him, the ur-contradiction of hoped-for freedom and original sin. After his recovery, he arguably does not act again (with the exception of his more-or-less textbook intervention in the House of Medina) until his notorious final rampage in the Bower of Bliss:

But all those pleasant bowres and Pallace braue,  
*Guyon* broke downe, with rigour pittillesse;  
 Ne ought their goodly workmanship might saue  
 Them from the tempest of his wrathfulnesse (2.12.83)

That tempest of wrathfulness is pure, diametrical reaction: he defaces, spoiles, suppresses, burns, and razes, “And of the fairest late, now made the fowlest place” (2.12.83). Its violence is often remarked; its most immediate provocation, less so. The narrator surveys the scene, beginning with Amavia’s titillating immodesties, but concluding with her lover Verdant, on whose “tender lips the downy heare / Did now but freshly spring, and silken blossomes beare” (2.1.79). That trajectory recalls the scene of Amavia’s death, where again the narrator’s attention—tracking, as we often assume, the hero’s—moves from the lady to the babe to Mortdant, who, with his ruddy lips and cheerful cheeks, “Seemd to haue beene a goodly personage, / Now in his freshest flowre of lustie hed” (2.1.41). There is an incipient lesson available in this alignment of Mortdant and Verdant, death-giving and green-giving, something like a *précis* of the Garden of Adonis’s “continuall spring, and haruest there / Continuall” (3.6.42). But understanding is not the fruit of this encounter for Guyon. Jealousy of the comely young knight seems to precipitate him into a spasmodic parody of action. Why jealousy, again?—for that was Redcrosse’s affliction at the beginning of the poem, the birth of its panics. Perhaps the jealous man’s sudden exclusion from the world he thought he lived in is like panic’s violent abstraction from ordinary experience. (We might think of Shakespeare’s Leontes.) There is the simple discovery, too, of an unacceptable desire, its brute contradiction with temperance. And what if that desire attaches as much to these sensuous knights as to their ladies? Certainly the rhetoric of desire does. In an era we have come to think of as preceding any sure category of homosexuality, there may nonetheless be some shadow, *mutatis mutandis*, of the crisis of identity we now call homosexual panic.<sup>12</sup>

Flight and action of this reactive and spasmodic character are therefore not so very different. They at once signify, and seek to escape, the state of panic. In destroying the Bower, Guyon never freezes, he just lashes out, having learned to preempt the stound with the spasm. (There will be more to say shortly about the anticipatory fear of panic.) Each of his panic moments—indeed, all of the moments of panic in the poem—has dialectical potential, the discovery of a contradiction that might lead to understanding, or even, as Fletcher puts it, to prophecy. We glimpse there the promise of the poem’s slow, halting draught of *concors* from *discors*, on Harry Berger’s evolutionary account of the Spenserian dynamics; or what Fletcher calls the “assimilation of the poetic narrative to a steadily emerging vision of a final, guiding Logos.”<sup>13</sup> But those promises are squandered, at least locally, when dialectic is rejected for mere reaction—violent substitution, rather than integration or sublation. So far, I have considered panic as an affliction of the poem’s characters, but it is shared by the narrator, too, and ultimately it shapes the poem’s architecture as profoundly as any prophecy of wholeness.

## Interpretation

The narrator's degree of authority over *The Faerie Queene* is difficult to pin down: sometimes he declares himself to be following the script of an antique text, sometimes to be reporting a story he has heard; sometimes he writes as though he were realizing a vision, implicitly with a freer authorial hand. He may assert his dismay at the direction of the story he is obliged to tell, and then seem not to know what is going to happen next, or even to guess wrong.<sup>14</sup> We do, however, tend to assume that he is writing his own script in moments of explicit reflection on the meaning of events, the moralizing commentary that is a constant presence in the poem. (Even as that commentary shades, by imperceptible degrees, into the moral inflections of all of the poem's language.) It is hence as the utterance of a judgmental intelligence that we receive a line like "Forgetfull of his owne, that mindes anothers cares" (1.5.18). There is no stound for the line to break, but it is characterized by the panic signature of overreaction: at a moment when the problems of knowing others and caring for others meet (as a felt contradiction: I must care and I cannot know), the result is a violent disavowal of care (rather than a higher, synthetic truth: I must care and I cannot know). Such moments are frequent in the poem, sometimes subtle, often quite plain, and they touch on many of its most troubled themes: an access of determinism ("For who can shun the chaunce, that dest'ny doth ordaine" [3.1.37]); outbursts of antifeminism ("A womans will, which is disposd to go astray" [3.9.6]); cheerleading for carnage ("Smart daunts not mighty hearts, but makes them more to swell" [4.3.8]); even a desperate, naive, or perhaps just misapplied optimism ("True loue despiseth shame, when life is cald in dread" [5.1.27]).

In each case, we have interpretation as, again, the symptom of panic and the flight from panic: a sudden judgment, escaping a painful contradiction by lurching to one side. It is as though the narrator feared nothing more than being caught out extending himself too far, in sympathy or censure. This reflex is perhaps a courtier's reflex, and beyond that a fear of false conviction—he is so keen to anticipate the weakness or the danger of his own position, and he compensates with an equally vulnerable exaggeration. (At its limit, perhaps a horror of conviction itself, which generates not neutrality but an endless round of self-rebuke.) This is to characterize the dynamic at its most extreme. It is also expressed in subtler evasions and retrenchments, and the narrator's voice has resources of wry detachment, too, moments when we credit Spenser with an irony he learned in part from Chaucer.<sup>15</sup> Irony is a strong antidote, for it can treat panic's contradictions as occasion not for impetuous reaction, but for bemused equipoise. The ironist shirks complicity, a neat trick in a poem whose allegorical mode assumes that everything is

implicated. The avatar of this attitude is the half-human, half-satyr knight Satyrane, whose easy laugh sounds such a distinctive note in the middle books. Perhaps a little of his insouciance (a very different goatishness than Pan's) could rescue the lines that I diagnosed earlier as panic, just by slipping quotation marks around them. There is sometimes the slightest difference between the tight-throated strain of suppressed hysteria and the stylized excess that tips us off to ironic disidentification. *The Faerie Queene* is constructed, defensively, to pose that dilemma for us again and again, and, for the reader inclined to take these reversals just a little less seriously, the possibility is open to enjoy a poem much more worldly and much less agonized.<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, irony and panic are not co-equal alternatives. Irony is a response to panic, just as flight and impetuous action are; irony is achieved, whereas panic is primal. To conceive of irony this way is to move away from the stound itself—the degree zero of panic—into something like fear of panic, or even respect for it, a penumbra of cautionary affect around that intolerable, affectless center. For one can observe the conditions of panic and learn to evade them in advance—in the case of irony, by cultivating an easy shrug, or a tone guarded enough to protect the freedom of movement that is lost absolutely in panic's grip. (If irony is mobility, its special usefulness in avoiding frozen panic is clear.) Possibly something like this precautionary dynamic is expressed on a narrative level, as well, in the interlacement of Spenser's narrative. For Ariosto, Spenser's great original in matters of plotting, interlacement of episodes is a juggling act that is both gamesome and masterful. Spenser's own shifts from story to story are more hectic, and his safe return to the place he left off less certain. The transitions often have the character of hasty evasion. The poem's most concerted reflection on this problem is the career of Scudamour, the only character who makes a real go of usurping the position of the narrator for (nearly) a full canto. His experiment in storytelling is spurred by a fit of panic: his mistaken jealousy of Britomart is whetted by the hag Ate, and "his heart / Was thrild with inward griefe, as when in chace / The Parthian strikes a stag with shiuering dart, / The beast astonisht stands in midst of his smart" (4.1.49). He is poised three times—that hovering sword again—to slay Britomart's nurse Glauce in an act of displaced vengeance. But his ultimate solution is to tell the elaborately self-aggrandizing narrative of the House of Venus, where, on his own account, he won the title to his beloved and upheld his chivalric credentials against all comers. Many readers have taken the canto to be a defensive fiction. Perhaps this generation of a story to heal the contradictions that Ate exposes is meant to make us consider, in microcosm, tendencies of the narrator who has charge of the other seventy-three cantos. How much of his storytelling, in its order and its matter, tacks away from an unselving stound?

But this is to anticipate the question of structure. The narrator, it seems, can react by perturbing or shuffling or perhaps even reimagining the narrative (Scudamour's example hints at such strategies), and to that extent he seems to have some authority over the poem's construction, an authority that identifies him with the poet. He can also react by intrusive commentary, which usually—given his moralizing bent—takes the form not just of moral judgments but also of strong motions of identification or disidentification. Here, he seems less the poet, more a character caught up in the story. None of which is to say that the poem lacks moments of syncretic understanding, especially in its visionary aspect. But any reader will recognize the narrator's reversals, strong counter-reactions that are also new enthusiasms, new allegiances. This pattern is one of the reasons why, for all of his critical power, it is not right to call Spenser a skeptic in anything like a modern sense of the word (or even in the sense that Stanley Cavell adapts so successfully to Shakespeare).<sup>17</sup> Skepticism, and its shadow of a desperately singular certainty, would be a repose that *The Faerie Queene* cannot enjoy. The characteristic career of its narrator's faith veers from one dogma to its opposite, and wherever it lands, it does not stay. He can disbelieve in anything, and does, but he cannot disbelieve in everything at once.

### Structure

Once more: panic is an annihilating surplus, a coincidence of meanings experienced as an intolerable contradiction. That coincidence carries with it the promise of synthesis, of new understanding. But the reaction of panic is an overwhelming emptiness instead, and it makes the ordinary question (if it is a question) of what to do next into a crisis. It strands us in the present. The panic reaction is a way of thrusting ourselves back into the stream of time, but the price of that sudden return is that nothing has changed. We have merely moved to one side or the other of an unsolved dilemma. One way to control panic, as Fletcher suggests, is prophecy. Another, irony. Another, precautionary digression. Still another is implicit in the structure of the poem as a whole. The six completed books are often said to be governed by a nested set of correspondences: in the middle, books 3 and 4 (concerned with questions of love), and, radiating outwards, books 2 and 5 (questions of balance) and books 1 and 6 (questions of grace).<sup>18</sup> There is an intelligence to that order that is independent of the serial experience of the poem, one that requires a supranarrative vantage for its execution and recognition. It offers a way of holding the poem together without crisis. (By criticism, one might say.)<sup>19</sup> There is a similar command available in the design forecast by the Letter to Raleigh, with its projected twelve books that will together assemble the summary virtue of magnificence, what James Nohrnberg calls the “duodecimal” Arthur—the

completed hero, married at last to his fairy queen.<sup>20</sup> A broad and confident time-consciousness is required both to make and to read such a poem.

But the pattern of the books looks different when they are considered in sequence. Paradigmatic is the transition from book 5 to book 6. Progress from Justice to Courtesy can be viewed as part of a systematic canvass of the virtues, and also as a proper developmental order, insofar as justice makes the peace where the civilized virtue of courtesy can flourish. But it is also possible to think of book 6 as a reaction against book 5. Both books, as has been often observed, act out a pattern of diminishing success, and by the conclusion of book 5 the rigor of justice has become difficult to distinguish from police action and political self-assertion. The turn to courtesy is a recoil, abandoning the prospect of just punishment, lapsing instead into hope for gentle manners, forgiveness, and reformation—not as the fruit of justice, but as an escape from it.<sup>21</sup> Something similar might be said to be happening between books 1 and 2, when the incomplete success of Holiness (as a vertical, transcendent virtue that can be figured on earth, but not yet realized) propels the poem into experiment with Temperance (a horizontal, practical virtue that we might exercise here and now). It is as though the purpose of each next book were to forget the errors of the last. That is to say: what looks, from an elevation, like balance is, on the ground and in time, a career of violent alternations. The poem's antithetical structures, or structures of counterpoised opposites, may be better read as fossil panic. It is in this sense that the poem is panic's castle, a mighty structure built from constant crisis.

Perhaps any structure of balance and antithesis will raise these suspicions, if you consider it with the proper squint. The parallelisms of Samuel Johnson's sentences, for example, descendants of sixteenth-century Ciceronianism's ponderous equipoise. Are they propelled from clause to clause by the shame of false conviction, turning and turning again, away from the panic of being caught out—being frozen—in an untenable position? And what position that we could take is truly tenable, after all, if the pressure of the moment forbids us any qualification? How is it possible not to be, at any given moment, at that moment alone, wrong? We find the goat god at home, with his cloven feet resting on the ottoman, in the most civilized places. His goat-name, derived from *pa-on* (grazer), has long been confused with *pa-on*, meaning everything.<sup>22</sup>

But there may be no poem, perhaps no fiction, that manages to be quite so much about what afflicts it. The paradoxical construction of Spenser's monument of panic is abetted in particular by its systematic division into parts at ramifying scales, the typically end-stopped lines, the stanzas with their terminal alexandrines, the cantos, the books. *The Faerie Queene* is unlike Homer or Virgil in this partitioning, and most unlike *Paradise Lost*, with its sense variously drawn out from one line to another. On the page it looks

more like *Orlando Furioso*, a poem of stanzas and cantos, though for Ariosto, as for Byron, the gaps are primarily occasions for the virtuoso orchestration of continuities. For Spenser, the gaps are perpetually challenging thresholds. The poem is helped across them by its conceits of navigation or ploughing, or by the torch-passing exchanges between old and new characters that often take place in the first canto of a book. But as Theresa Krier observes, there remain white spaces, blank spaces, which must be traversed—joints that are also voids.<sup>23</sup> So the segmentation that permits the poem's elaborate coordinating structures also makes recurrent occasions for this loss of continuity, the halt of panic. There is no mortar between the castle's stones.

### Author

The grandest version of this argument identifies panic as the cause of *The Faerie Queene*, its prime mover: every line, every word is generated *ex nihilo*, or *ex timore nihilis*, or, what amounts to the same thing, *ex timore pleni*. But such a total explanation is what the poem will most never let us have. It is preeminently restless about the kinds of reading brought to bear upon it, and therefore about the kinds of explanation as well. As soon as you think you have the key, it changes the locks. But then again—perhaps panic is the origin of that restlessness itself, the engine of those very reversals. The poem is haunted by a kind of ideological shame, the shame of ideology, pathologically self-conscious about what disappears from its view whenever it believes in anything at all. (Whether that blind spot is a mortal need or a skeptical vantage hardly matters.) And so it rounds on itself: its characters flee or lash out; its narrator changes his mind; it raises ramparts of contradiction and forgetting. The superhuman, all-too-human acuteness of this reflex—and is there any poem like it?—is partly driven by the nature of the allegory. We assume, as we read, that a character who wanders into a new space or encounters a new character is complicit with, even guilty of, that new space or character. Spenser's narrator, half reporter and half maker, seems to feel that way about everything that flows from his pen. There is a Shakespearian range of sympathy and imagination in what he sets down, but where Shakespeare effaces himself (his negative capability is as much exemption as it is investment; there is no narrator in the plays), Spenser identifies, helplessly, again and again. Hence, he is perpetually subject to shame. In saying so we have taken a final step up the ladder from character to narrator to structure, to arrive at the poet's creative temperament. He must have worked almost daily on the great poem, adding stanza upon stanza. We cannot imagine him sitting down at his desk in a condition of panic again—can we?

Surely not. The poem knows how to steer itself away from panic, by evasion and digression and by irony. It knows how to wonder, and presumably

Spenser did too. He was capable of creating more integral, if not altogether untroubled, poetic structures, like the *Amoretti* or “Epithalamion.” Nor can the structures of panic in *The Faerie Queene* cancel those (like the nesting correspondence of books) that could only be produced by an intelligence at a safe and capable remove. Still, the man must have been subject to something like this reactive dynamic for him to want to make so much of it. In the modest record of his life outside his poems I often think about one of the letters to Gabriel Harvey, where he declares his commitment to the new movement for quantitative verse, and celebrates “a generall surceasing and silence of balde Rymers.”<sup>24</sup> This was a year after he finished his virtuoso summa of English accents, *The Shepheardes Calender*, and perhaps the very year he began his imposingly regular, intricately rhymed accentual epic. Perhaps, again, this is a courtier’s, or a bureaucrat’s, gift for position shifting; perhaps it is the mark of a man given to strong enthusiasms and sudden retrenchments, conversions and new conversions.<sup>25</sup> Who can say where else this trait expressed itself? But it is tempting to think that his poem’s relation to panic—some balance of experiencing it, managing it, meditating upon it—arises from a painful habit of going too far, and of forever fearing that he had and would.

If so, *The Faerie Queene* is a record of a certain kind of bravery, an odd thing to say if panic is the fundamental diagnosis. But we know that Spenser’s career as a servant of the English crown in Ireland made him witness, at least, to some terrible events, the massacre of the papal garrison at Smerwick and countless other acts of colonial violence, small and large. His greatest poem is sometimes described as trying to occlude or apologize for that violence, and sometimes described as an unsparing act of moral and political self-anatomy. We can be sure that he had the moral intelligence to recognize his failings, whether or not he had the constant will to train that intelligence on himself in real life. My own suspicion is that he saw his sins clearly enough, but that he was never convinced—never allowed himself to believe—that in the same circumstances, given a second chance, he would behave any differently. Such stark knowledge would be a rare kind of moral strength, and might count as a great bravery indeed, even if it reminds us that bravery and virtue do not guarantee each other.

## Notes

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In addition to the debts recorded in the notes that follow, I am grateful to the weekly Spenser reading group at Princeton, and particularly to Giulio Pertile for his preoccupation with Spenserian stounds; also to Andrew Escobedo, David Lee Miller, and Christopher Warley for their generous readings.

1. All citations of *The Faerie Queene* are given parenthetically by book, canto, and stanza from A. C. Hamilton, ed., *The Faerie Queene*, 2nd ed. (London, 2007).
2. The word comes to English from French, where *terreur panique* is idiomatic and at least as old as Rabelais; English usage is rare in the sixteenth century (the one instance presently attested in the searchable texts on Early English Books Online is in Antony Colyet's *The True History of the Ciuill Warres of France* [London, 1591], 302). "Panic" first comes into English dictionaries in the middle of the seventeenth century: Thomas Blount's *Glossographia or a Dictionary* (London, 1656) defines "Panick fear" as "a sudden fear, wherewith one is dis-straught, and put besides his wit, coming without known cause. So taken from the God Pan, who had power to strike men with terrors"; Edward Philips in *A New World of English Words* (London, 1658) offers "a sudden fear, or distraction from god Pan, who was the first that coming on a sudden upon his enemies with much noise and tumult, cast a mighty terrour and amazement into them." Patricia Merivale surveys Pan's literary history in the first chapter of *Pan the Goat-God* (Cambridge, 1969), 1–47. As she points out, Pan the terrorizer of shepherds and soldiers is a figure of mass panic. Spenser takes only occasional interest in the panic of crowds (e.g., the routs around Cambina's chariot [4.3.41] or the egalitarian giant [5.2.54]; and perhaps the slaughter in the brigants' cave [6.11.48]).
3. Prays-desire, in Alma's Castle, is ashamed "how rude Pan did her dight" (2.9.40). Pan is a frequent presence in *The Shepheardes Calender* as the god of shepherds, with a nod to his identification, via the famous story from Plutarch's *Moralia*, with Christ (see Merivale, *Pan the Goat-God*, 12–13). None of these associations bears on my use of the word.
4. Philip Fisher develops the idea of a "thorough passion," a passion that displaces the rest of the affective life, in *The Vehement Passions* (Princeton, 2002), 43. Panic is thorough in this sense, though it is not a passion. He also describes how shame affects us as we cross back from rage or fear into ordinary social self-consciousness (65).
5. Angus Fletcher draws the distinction in *The Prophetic Moment* (Ithaca, 1971), 11–34; C. S. Lewis discusses allegorical cores in his *English Literature of the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford, 1973), 334.
6. Merlin dwells in a cave at Cayr-Merdin, then called Maridunum, and its structure at the moment of Britomart's visit is difficult to discern; its templar character is consolidated when he sets his fiends to building a circular wall of brass around it (3.3.10).
7. Fletcher, *Prophetic Moment*, 5.
8. Andrew Escobedo has pointed out to me the roots of such an understanding of action in Aristotle's distinction between movement (*kinesis*) and action (*praxis*): the chance movement of limbs "is not an action or at least not a complete one (for it is not an end); but that in which the end is present is an action. E.g. at the same time we are seeing and have seen." Mere movement itself "is incomplete." See *Metaphysics* 9.6.1048b22–30, in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (Oxford, 1984), 2:1656.
9. I have discussed this episode in similar terms in *Scenes of Instruction* (Chicago, 2007), 154–56, there with an emphasis on how Guyon intervenes to break the lesson that the tableau presents.
10. Here I am relying on an understanding of affect articulated by pragmatist philosophers like William James and, in his *Art and Experience* (New York, 2005),

John Dewey: emotion as “the moving and cementing force of our lives” (44), the texture of our connection to the world. So, happiness expresses attunement with our environment, while sorrow or rage urges us toward adjustments that will reestablish that attunement. Renaissance humoral theory has its own language for expressing something like this idea, recommending a balance of humors and explaining suffering or strong feeling as an imbalance that cries for remedy. Panic as I understand it here is, again, an organismal failure, a radical loss of connection to the world—hence, not an affect, but a suspension of affect, in which the ordinary prompts, in one direction or another, of our emotional life are temporarily lost to us. (Wonder is such a suspension, too, though again as openness rather than desperation.) Perhaps the representation of panic as frozenness hints that it is a state likewise beyond humoral theory—not just a congestion of the humors, but the stoppage of a flow whose motions account both for feeling and for health.

11. Brian Vickers, ed., *Francis Bacon* (Oxford, 1996), 125; Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1.11.1371a31–b10, in *Complete Works*, 2:2183. On the Renaissance debt to Aristotle in these matters see James Biester, *Lyric Wonder* (Ithaca, 1997), 1–66, and Peter Platt, *Reason Diminished* (Lincoln, 1997), 1–18. See also Genevieve Guenther, “Spenser’s Magic, or Instrumental Aesthetics in the 1590 *Faerie Queene*,” *English Literary Renaissance* 36, no. 2 (2006): 194–226.
12. Certainly Guyon’s relation to love is difficult to specify: he is the only hero without a lady, and his protest to Mammon of a “love avowd to other Lady late” (2.7.50) has the ring of hasty, even defensive improvisation. Homosexual panic has the features of the panic described here: a moment of self-reckoning that is short-circuited either by flight or homophobic violence. The phrase dates to the 1920s and owes its critical currency partly to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “The Beast in the Closet,” in *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, 1990), 182–212.
13. Harry Berger champions an idea of the poem’s fundamentally progressive character, however fitful that progress may be: “In spite of Spenser’s frequent interest in depicting interruptions, failures, counter-movements, and counter-statements (such as the myth of decline from golden antiquity), this evolutionary model remains fundamental in his thought, at least as a theoretical ideal which erodes at all levels of existence tries to actualize”; “The Spenserian Dynamics,” in *Revisionary Play* (Berkeley, 1988), 27; and see Fletcher, *Prophetic Moment*, 43–44.
14. See, for example, the complex invocation of the muse in the proem to book 1, and the story of Campbell and Triamond, which the narrator introduces with an echo of Chaucer, “Whylome as antique stories tellen vs” (3.2.32). The Amoret story is a particular site for narratorial hand-wringing and protests of blindness, as at 4.7.1–2. Kathleen Williams surveys these questions in “Vision and Rhetoric: The Poet’s Voice in *The Faerie Queene*,” *ELH* 36, no. 1 (1969): 131–44; see also Stan Hinton on the sliding scale of narrative intrusions, “The Poet and His Narrator: Spenser’s Epic Voice,” *ELH* 41, no. 2 (1974): 165–81.
15. Jonathan Goldberg discusses Spenser’s transformations of Chaucerian irony in his *Endlesse Worke* (Baltimore, 1981), 35–41.
16. Paul Alpers shows the way to such a reading in “Narration in *The Faerie Queene*,” *ELH* 44, no.1 (1977): 19–39, where he queries the notion of a “dramatically consistent” (21) narrator: “Whereas in ordinary storytelling, the various meanings would be set into dramatic relations with each other, in Spenserian narration one reality does not directly qualify or conflict with another” (28). Relaxing that

- expectation of consistency takes the pressure off of the contradictions that I read as producing panic. Another alternative, based in poetics rather than narrative, is sketched in William Empson's great account of the Spenserian stanza in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* as a structure that allows the poem to hold its competing "systems of value floating as if at a distance, so as not to interfere with one another, in the prolonged and diffused energies of his mind" (London, 1930), 34. David Lee Miller makes this passage a touchstone in his survey of the poem and its criticism, "The Faerie Queene (1590)," in Bart Van Es, ed., *A Critical Companion to Spenser Studies* (New York, 2006), 139–65.
17. See especially the essays on *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale* in *Disowning Knowledge* (Cambridge, 1987), where the radical doubt that Stanley Cavell links to jealousy is transmuted into Othello's and Laertes's perverse certainty that they have been betrayed.
  18. The love, balance, grace scheme is Fletcher's (*Prophetic Moment*, 57–58); James Nohrberg points to a similar system of correspondence among the master analogies of *The Analogy of The Faerie Queene* (Princeton, 1980), 285: "The legend of friendship is conceived as both a sequel to, and a partner book for, the legend of chastity. . . . Next there is an analogy of private and public order, in the legends of temperance and justice. . . . Last is an analogy of grace, especially gracious speech, in the legends of holiness and courtesy."
  19. If the project of criticism is to give us new ways (and here, perhaps, safe ways) of holding a text in our heads: a simple and bottomless idea that I owe to my colleague Andrew Ford. See his "The Function of Criticism ca. 432 BC: Texts and Interpretations in Plato's 'Protagoras,'" *Princeton/Stanford Working Papers in Classics*, <http://www.princeton.edu/~pswpc/papers/authorAL/ford/ford.html>.
  20. Nohrberg, *Analogy*, 39.
  21. One might think of each book, as its central virtue frays, exploring alternate modalities of panic: book 5 relies increasingly on spasmodic violence, or action; book 6 cultivates a repertoire of nimble evasions, sublimated flight.
  22. Merivale, *Pan the Goat-God*, 9.
  23. Theresa Krier, "Time Lords: Rhythm and Interval in Spenser's Stanzaic Narrative," *Spenser Studies* 21 (2006): 13–16. She makes an analogy between those gaps and death but also regards the next line, the next stanza, as a potential anabasis or rebirth. The poem does, after all, continue.
  24. G. Gregory Smith, *Elizabethan Critical Essays* (London, 1959), 1:67.
  25. If we were to look further into the cultural background of Spenser's reactive temperament, the job of the secretary would offer resources; likewise, the unresolved tensions in the Elizabethan Settlement. Molly Murray studies the phenomena of religious conversion and reconversion in her book *The Poetics of Conversion in Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge, 2009). Such categorical back-and-forth lies on the other side of some spectrum from the weirdly blithe syncretism one sometimes finds in the poem, for example the rosary beads that busy Caelia in the House of Holiness (1.10.3).