

BOOK REVIEW

Spenser's International Style. *David Scott Wilson-Okamura*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. vii+235.

David Scott Wilson-Okamura has written a study of Renaissance literature at an unfamiliar scale. The major movements in twentieth-century criticism—the new criticism, deconstruction, and the exemplary anecdote of new historicism—all privilege the local and the particular. (Structuralism is the exception, also the least current.) The subject of style asks for a different approach. It is, as George Puttenham has it, “a constant & continuall phrase or tenour of speaking and writing, extending to the whole tale or processe of the poeme or history, and not properly to any peece or member of a tale” (6). Style extends not only through a work, holding its parts together, but through careers, schools, periods. Accounting for it requires acquaintance with a broad range of writing. One approach, the still-new gift of the digital humanities, is stylometric analysis of a large corpus. Another is to appeal to the “*consensus sapientum*, the convergence of scholarly or critical opinion over a long period” (5). Each has its advantages (and there is no reason why they cannot collaborate), but it is the latter that will put us in direct contact with the intellectual history of the subject, the ideas of style that shape its practice and its subsequent recognitions and misrecognitions.

A great share of the argument of *Spenser's International Style* lies in its advocacy and pursuit of this latter method. Wilson-Okamura wants his readers to invest their attention in the way that the poetry of the sixteenth century sounded to its audience and in what they said that sound meant. He begins the work of persuading us with a straightforward observation: “What the old commentaries tell us about most urgently . . . is not Virgil's meaning but his *elocutio*, his style” (1). That observation does not make it wrong for us to ask after meaning; our studies of the influence of his story, his images, and his ideology are not less important for their dependence on historical

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distance. Still, Wilson-Okamura is right that we attend less than Renaissance readers did to the translation of Virgil's voice into English. We are particularly baffled when it comes to the case of Edmund Spenser, who sounds so different from his principal career model. Surrey's pentameters are an intelligible vernacularization of the Latin line. But what about Spenser's stanzas? Are they not a polemical, nativist break with Virgil's hexameter?

This question drives the first half of the book: as the first chapter title puts it, "Why Stanzas for Epic?" Wilson-Okamura entertains Richard Helgerson's influential argument (in *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* [University of Chicago Press, 1992]) that the gothicism of the *Faerie Queene* is a brief for the revival of ancient liberties, but he puts his own emphasis not on Englishness but on internationalism. The stanza, as we know, is a compound of Chaucer's rhyme royale and Ariosto's ottava rima; its caesura is mobile, in the Italian manner, although there is no enjambment across stanzas, a more typically English constraint. The complexity of the rhyme scheme points Wilson-Okamura toward arguments among Italian and English critics about the value of artificiality. The late sixteenth-century fashion for quantitative verse depended on such arguments: quantities promised an English line that was more artificial, more intricate and expressive, than vernacular accents could afford. Wilson-Okamura's next and crucial move is identify this artificiality with the prestige of Virgil and to find in the complexity of the Spenserian stanza an equivalent artifice, a complexity by other means that might position his epic as a Virgilian inheritor built from the different, but analogous, resources in English.

The unexpected shape of that epic ambition and the dynamics of substitution behind it are only half the story that the book has to tell. *Spenser's International Style* also identifies in the Spenserian stanza an affinity with lyric and with love poetry, an identification that opens the question of the middle style. The *genus mediocre* is described by Cicero as a mean between grand and plain, and its identification with Virgilian georgic has contributed to a sense that it is generically intermediate and transitional. But as Wilson-Okamura observes, another strain of definition gives the middle more positive content, calling it "flowery" and assigning it the function of pleasing (while the plain style teaches, and the high style moves to action). This flowery middle, characterized particularly by "Gorgian" schemes of parallelism, makes for the highly patterned style of Petrarch, smooth and polished and charming. One of the book's most provocative moves is to say that this middle is also the style—at least, the level of style—of *The Faerie Queene*. The poem, after all, is characteristically described as remarkable for its delightful consistency and riverine process. "Spenser has other qualities, but not the specifically epic ones of vehemence and majesty" (109).

The dedicated Spenserian may swallow hard at having the high style taken away from England's first great epic poet. What of the dragon fight,

the House of Holiness, or even the violent lines of Guyon's crisis with Amavia? But the imperturbability of the rhythms and the steadiness of the diction count in Wilson-Okamura's favor. He is proposing a Spenser whose code (as he puts it) is fundamentally ornamental, rather than dramatic. It helps that Wilson-Okamura makes the case with unfaltering clarity and with a command of the scholarship from Spenser's moment to our own, in several languages, that is itself truly international. The vigor of expression helps, too: he does not often indulge in the mimetic temptations of his subject, but it is impossible to resist quoting his account of the flowery character of much of the sixteenth-century's Ciceronian prose. "Why was this style so popular?" he asks, and answers: "Because those [Gorgian schemes] are things that can be learned. . . . But the grand style—that calls for quickness and strength, power and dexterity; and these, not in succession, but in combination. . . . That last sentence—parison, topped with antithesis, spiked with chiasmus, and seasoned with homoeoteleuton—is an example. The author wanted to indicate a climax, but the genuine grand style—the *arma virumque* of academic prose—was not forthcoming. Instead he contented himself with a middle-style flourish, a fanfare of symmetry" (134).

Here is a good ear, and wit, and lucidity. Some share of the last may have to do with the avowed influence of undergraduate teaching on the book. He periodically addresses his students, at no compromise to the sophistication of his arguments, which might serve as a lesson to us all.

The book ends by taking a step forward into the reign of James, to consider (approvingly) the critical consensus that the prominence of the code of ornament, and of the middle style, is much diminished after Elizabeth. A coda wonders how Spenser would have adapted, had he lived longer. Might we be speaking of a second phase of his career, Spenser's Jacobean style? The counterfactual is a fit ending to a brave book. The reader will weigh for him- or herself the question of whether the artifice of the stanza counts as a species of Virgilianism. No one in the period quite says as much; the evidence is inference; the author will not twist your arm. The book does insist however that we consider its subject from a vantage less familiar to us than it was to previous generations of scholars. We must test its claims not against our close readings but against our accumulated impressions, our feel for the texts and the time, our ear. This too is literary knowledge, Wilson-Okamura tells us, knowledge subject, but not identical, to interpretation, and he wants us to learn how to hear it.

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