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The Root of Civil Conversation: Spenser with (and by) Himself

What is it that companions do? How do they pass the time? It may be quite enough just to travel together, or sit side by side under a tree and keep each other company. But often companions will converse, and when they converse, they are obliged to take turns. The word “conversation” first comes into the language as a description of a general sense of being in community, of participating in the texture of social life.¹ Around Spenser’s time the sense begins to narrow toward specifically verbal exchange and familiar discourse, a usage that activates the word’s etymology, *con-versare*, differently: from turning together in a common direction, it becomes the collaborative back-and-forth of taking turns. There may be, to this arrangement, an air of easy exchange, the permissive, digressive sense of “conversational” often applied to Montaigne. But the word may also invoke the idealization of dialogue that John Durham Peters describes in his history of the idea of communication, *Speaking into the Air*: reciprocity in talk as “the summit of human encounter, the essence of liberal education, and the medium of participatory democracy.”² These are the hopes that tend to inform present-day critical uses of the word, when we put ourselves in conversation with other texts, or put texts in conversation with one another. The conversation we mean is an ideally unhierarchical exchange of ideas, which borrows from the quotidian responsiveness of talk in person to overcome the constitutive estrangements and asymmetries of criticism—the

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critic talking to a reader who cannot talk back, at least not for now, about a text that cannot talk back, ever.

Many of the contributors to the present volume avail themselves of this conceit. Kat Addis, who brings Spenser together with Sylvia Wynter, describes Wynter's work as "'a network' of writing in conversation with itself that can be entered at any point."³ Courtney Druzak, pairing Spenser and Val Plumwood, sees poet and critic joining "an ongoing early modern conversation on the limits of the human."⁴ Melissa Sanchez makes particularly deliberate and thoughtful use of the word in staging a "transhistorical conversation" between Spenser and Julia Serano, "a sixteenth-century Protestant colonial administrator and a twenty-first-century trans writer and activist."⁵ That conversation has "affordances" for teasing out a complex knot of circumstances (racialization, colonialism, transphobia) with changing historical expressions and changing names. One of those affordances is conversation's economy, drawing two voices from what Sanchez calls the "cacophony" of the historical record and the critical tradition. If they help to focus attention, however, the two sides of conversation also rescue us from the monologic of a single voice, or from the temptation to render any single voice monologic.

The critic who stages such conversations is an interpreter, a go-between, arranging ideas (or quotations or images) from both sources so that they interrogate and answer each other. The reader's understanding is a surrogate for the mutual understanding that the two might have reached had they talked together in real time. My essay will not introduce a new companion for Spenser—we have such a fine company already! Instead, I will reflect on the structures of conversation in Spenser's poem, as a way of framing the various companionships in the pages that precede mine. I want to ask how Spenser imagines conversation, and whether his idea of what it is like to talk together (or with, or to, or by yourself) can teach us anything about what it is like to talk with him.

Spenser uses the word "conversation" only once, at the beginning of Book VI of *The Faerie Queene*, the Book of Courtesy. Courtesy, the narrator declares, is "the ground, / And roote of civill conversation." He continues, "Right so in Faery court it did redound, / Where courteous Knights and Ladies most did won" (VI.i.1.5–8), and we are meant to hear the gentle and respectful back-and-forth of people to the manner born, more of a phatic texture than a dialogue. A good deal of the talk early in Book VI is reported this way, as when Calidore and Calepine "discoursed both together" (VI.iii.23.1) after Calidore has interrupted Calepine's idyll with Serena.

The less these exchanges are quoted, or the less detailed the paraphrase, the more successful they seem to be in sustaining the chivalric compact that governs the book's network of encounter. Such courteous conversations bid to realize the ambitions articulated in Lodowick Bryskett's *A Discourse of Civill Life*, a book in which Spenser's fellow expatriate casts the poet himself as participant in a conversation "Containing the Ethike part of Morall Philosophie." Again and again Bryskett's dialogic treatise expresses his hopes for "the societie and civill conversation of men," a conversation that conduces to "all equity" among participants. This imagined conversation is set (and was written) in the 1580s, and Bryskett's Spenser adverts to the poem he is writing at the same time. The two men share hopes for their books: Bryskett "frameth men fittest for civill conversation, teaching them orderly what morall vertues are,"⁶ just as Spenser seeks to "fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline."⁷

In *The Faerie Queene*, the trouble arises when we can hear what the conversants actually say. There is a famous bit of close, stichomythic dialogue in Book I, when Arthur tries to temper Una's despair: "No faith so fast (quoth she) but flesh doth paire. / Flesh may empaire (quoth he) but reason can repaire" (I.vii.41.8–9). But the preponderance of the talk in the poem happens in larger blocks, often units of a stanza or more, and much of it takes the form of storytelling, when a new character arrives to provide the background necessary to frame a new adventure. Requests for aid are a subset of this kind of talk, as are scenes of interrogation, which the Book of Courtesy inherits particularly from the Book of Justice before it. Such exchanges, barely exchanges, are not especially companionate; they tend to be required between strangers, or between acquaintances who have been estranged. Book VI does transcribe some closer conversations between Calidore and the shepherds he meets in the middle of the book, Meliboe and Corydon, and the pastoral setting is a locus classicus for familiar talk. But readers have found these exchanges to be compromised by manipulation and inattention.⁸ It may be that the closest Book VI comes to interpolating conversational turn-taking is when it takes up its share of the poem-long, back-and-forth chronicle of combat, where the succession of blows is framed as a kind of careful question and answer, as when Arthur and Disdaine do battle in canto vii.⁹ There may be something shared here with the song contests of *The Shepheardes Calender*, and in the scrupulous balance of initiative such combats are almost civil in structure. If so, it is a hard sort of civility, the structure without the solace.

So let us say that conversation is a troubled art in *The Faerie Queene*. There is a promise of equity, of deliberation, even of conversion, but it is a promise variously compromised. The trouble arises not only among the poem's speaking characters but also throughout the poem's complex, intermittently personified narration. The structures of interpersonal conversation are present in any single voice, even any single mind—we all learn to talk to ourselves by talking to others, and we preserve, in our self-talk, features of interpersonal exchange that include the taking of turns. (Bakhtin is one of many to have noticed this: “Each person's inner world and thought has its stabilized social audience that comprises the environment in which reasons, motives, values, and so on are fashioned.”¹⁰) Here, by way of example, is Spenser's narrator introducing the Book of Courtesy:

The waies, through which my weary steps I guyde,
 In this delightfull land of Faery,
 Are so exceeding spacious and wyde,
 And sprinkled with such sweet variety,
 Of all that pleasant is to eare or eye,
 That I nigh rauisht with rare thoughts delight,
 My tedious trauell doe forget thereby;
 And when I gin to feele decay of might,
 It strength to me supplies, & chears my dulled spright.
 (VI.proem.1)

This stanza is a beautiful account of the poem as a space of recreation for its maker, Spenser guiding his own steps back through the broad and various ways of his poem so far, or perhaps even forward into what is waiting to be written, lying easy and ready before him. This *Faerie Queene* is not a companion. It would be better called, as it often is, a world, someplace that writer and reader can go, where they can follow what happens but also speculate counterfactually, as we do about any world we live in. And though I want to pursue the traces of conversational exchange in the narrator's voice, it should be said that these nine lines seem to be just one turn: the utterance is continuous, fluent, “so . . . and . . . that,” addressed to the reader with a collected, benign, free indifference.

The next stanza maintains that poise, even though the self-guiding narrator now turns to address the muses for help: “Guyde ye my footing, and conduct me well / In these strange waies, where neuer foote did vse” (VI.proem.2.7–8). Perhaps now he is making a distinction between the

written and the yet to write? The third stanza continues the prayer and begins to draw a contrast between the “sacred nursery / Of vertue” (VI.proem.3.1–2) that he seeks and a world around him that has descended into wickedness. It is in the next two stanzas, however, that the voice begins to come apart:

Amongst them all growes not a fayrer flowre,
 Then is the bloosme of comely courtesie,
 Which though it on a lowly stalke doe bowre,
 Yet brancheth forth in braue nobilitie,
 And spreads it selfe through all ciuilitie:
 Of which though present age doe plenteous seeme,
 Yet being matcht with plaine Antiquitie,
 Ye will them all but fayned showes esteeme,
 Which carry colours faire, that feeble eies misdeeme.

But in the triall of true courtesie,
 Its now so farre from that, which then it was,
 That it indeed is nought but forgerie,
 Fashion'd to please the eies of them, that pas,
 Which see not perfet things but in a glasse:
 Yet is that glasse so gay, that it can blynd
 The wisest sight, to thinke gold that is bras.
 But vertues seat is deepe within the mynd,
 And not in outward shows, but inward thoughts defynd.
 (VI.proem.4–5)

Here the narrator introduces the book's animating paradox, the bright flower of courtesy on its lowly stalk. Along with that contradiction comes a complex of buts and yet: the present seems courteous, *yet* not in comparison with antiquity; *but* today's courtesy pleases only as in a mirror, *yet* the mirror blinds even the wisest; *but* virtue is within the mind; not in shows, *but* in inward thoughts. It is possible to read these lines as a masterful, intricately manipulative rhetorical performance, leading readers down these switchbacks in order to expose our contradictory commitments. (Paul Alpers might see it that way.¹¹) But as the mood darkens, it is also possible to hear the narrator talking to himself, ruminating, engaged in a contentious self-conversation where optimism and skepticism take turns. And then, it should be said, reconciling—for the end of the proem turns to Elizabeth,

as an ocean that is the source and destiny of all rivers: “from your selfe I doe this vertue bring, / And to your selfe doe it returne againe” (VI.proem.7.2–3). The jagged alternation becomes, for a moment, a perfect circle.

But along the way, something important has been revealed about the way the poem moves when it steps away from its basic tasks of (diachronic) storytelling and (synchronic) emblem-and-temple elaboration and the narrator’s voice comes forward—something about the back-and-forth in its voice, its style of rumination. Narratorial self-talk in the proem is not a matter of what the linguists call “adjacency pairs,” question and answer, stichomythia or catechism.¹² In the way he keeps doubting and discrediting himself, it is a little more like the vagaries of real conversation, where the next turn is so often oblique to the turn before it, or partial, displaced from the diametric by some degrees—which is to say that it is less like the ideal of civil conversation that Bryskett represents. Bryskett quotes Epicurus, laughing at the idea that the fall of atoms fixes our fates, and goes on: “Yea he was further of opinion, that not onely humane prudence, and our free election, was able to resist the influences of the starres, but that also our complexion, our conversation and change of place might do the like: meaning that the good admonitions, and faithfull advice and counsell of friends, is sufficient to overcome destinie, and to free our mindes from the necessitie of fatall disposition.”¹³ There are a few ways to slip the determining influence of the stars, to enable or exercise your freedom: rebalance your humors (your “complexion”), go someplace different or new, or engage in conversation. These humane practicalities good-humoredly intercept a threatening metaphysics. If the middle of the proem is an apt specimen of Spenserian self-talk, this freedom is what his inner conversation fails to reach—not reasoning, tempering, adjusting, responding, but caught up in an accelerating self-rebuke that is solved only by deference to his muse. And whatever else Elizabeth is in the poem, and she is many things, she is not a companion.

The idea that conversation might be an antidote to fatal disposition suggests another way in which the practice may be hard for Spenser’s poem to digest. Companionate conversation brings people into nearer agreement; it consolidates bonds, and can even create them. When John Durham Peters reads the Socratic dialogues, he makes the chastening claim that their demand for responsiveness pointed toward consensus can be coercive, even “tyrannical.”¹⁴ Is this our model for political discussion, for seminar pedagogy? Does Spenser share Peters’s suspicion? Bryskett has a more sanguine view of conversation’s power to overcome the differences that “estranged” men “from all ciuill conuersation, like brute and sauage beasts.”¹⁵ It is, in

his book, a fundamentally civilizing activity. Whatever the inflection, pessimistic or optimistic, both thinkers see it as a solvent for difference. As such, conversation challenges an allegorical landscape where difference of character is required for meaning making. What if Despair and Speranza sat down and talked it out somewhere in canto x, midway between his cave and her high house? No: the drama of allegory is more about what characters are than what they say; their utterances are usually best understood as symptoms, like the clothing that they wear.

What is more, allegory, in its totalizing ambitions, and across its character repertory—as a closed system that includes everything that matters—is the conspiratorial ramification of a solitary need to understand, rather than the product of dialogic negotiation (as a document like a constitution might be). Readers of *The Faerie Queene* have recently seen its allegory as in constant contest with the poem's narrative, system and story fighting to a tense and perpetual draw. Allegory is in a kind of contest with conversation too, but a contest that allegory mostly wins. Another way of putting it, as Gordon Teskey and others have: *The Faerie Queene* is a thinking poem. Thinking can be like talking. When it is, it is because we question, test, and affirm ourselves, turning to account the voices in our heads. But it need not be, and when it is not, it is going to be more like the elaboration of an allegory—which is to say that when we call *The Faerie Queene* a thinking poem, we are saying that it is not so much a talking poem, and that the resources of talk—the resources of an inner sociability—are mostly suppressed there.

None of this keeps Spenser's poem from being intellectually companionable. Critics have been reconstructing his conversation with Aristotle for generations, what he learns and what he answers back. As for the form of companionship that the present volume undertakes, transhistorical in the other direction, he is nothing if not amenable. There may indeed be something distinctively affordant about *The Faerie Queene*: Joe Moshenska and Ayesha Ramachandran give an account of its responsiveness to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's radical perspectivism, the "competing ontological styles" that can be discovered in encounters with Malengin or the satyrs or the Blatant Beast.¹⁶ Supriya Chaudhuri finds that Donna Haraway's thinking about "companionable species" is enriched by Spenser's interest in the fecundating soil from which all kinds are born.¹⁷ Stephen Guy-Bray recommends Spenser to Roland Barthes as another Proust, another book that can serve as a "circular memory" for a lifetime.¹⁸ I could go on. Spenser's poem is so riven with contradictions that it somehow already complies with

any structure of thought and counterthought to which we might invite it. It meets the dialogic, not to say the dialectic, somewhat more than halfway, already sharing your incipient objections. Spenser encourages warm conversation among contemporary critics too. The web of mutual citation in this volume reflects countless encounters in the wide and spacious hallways of so many English departments and Hiltons and Marriotts.

But it is not clear that Spenser himself enjoyed this freedom, or at least that he chose to represent himself as its beneficiary. He does talk to himself. But compare him to that great auto-conversationalist, Montaigne, who has the full use of his own sociability, alert and sympathetic to his own questions, doubts, and asides. We readers could wish to join in!—if only we were not afraid of being less interesting than our interlocutor. By contrast, who wants to talk with Spenser's narrator? Who hears an invitation? Bryskett tells us that we all have “need of the conversation of other men, lest the occasion of doing vertuously shold faile him. . . . For as concerning civill felicitie, man cannot, nor ought not to be alone: in which respect conversation and friendship are necessary for the accomplishment of the same.”¹⁹ There is something about Spenser's presence in his poem that is obdurately solitary. If he is fragmented—when he is fragmented—his voices talk anxiously past one another. They spiral rather than balance. Comparison with Shakespeare is inevitable, for whom, like Montaigne, conversation is the basic texture of understanding, ever more so as his career advances. (Sometimes it is the characters' understanding, always the playwright's.) Spenser seems relatively unaccompanied, even or especially by himself. Perhaps more thinking, more reading, could work out deeper structural relationships between (say) narrative *entrelacement* and the structures of talk. How does question and answer function analogically at such higher levels of the poem's design? How far can we abstract from talk and still be talking about it? But when the poem is closest to conversation's interweaving texture, it sees so many shreds and patches. I wonder if it is not easier for a critic to construct a conversation when our partner needs the help.

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NOTES

1. The first sense given in the *OED* is “The action of living or having one's being in a place or among persons,” attested first in 1340; the first citation for

sense 7a, “Interchange of thoughts and words; familiar discourse or talk,” is from Sidney’s *Arcadia*.

2. John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 33.

3. Kat Addis, “Spenser with Wynter,” in this issue. Addis borrows the word “network” from the critic Walter Mignolo. Citation is also sometimes described as a feature of scholarly conversation, and it does have the companionable effect of suggesting that writer and reader might share some points of reference, or even acquaintances. Footnotes and endnotes, however, have no conversational counterparts (some of their abiding awkwardness to the experience of reading derives from this fact: Are you stepping away, to take a call? Putting a question to an aide? Etc.).

4. Courtney Druzak, “Spenser with Plumwood,” in this issue.

5. Melissa Sanchez, “Spenser with Serano,” in this issue.

6. Lodowick Bryskett, *A Discourse of Civill Life Containing the Ethike Part of Morall Philosophie* (London, 1606), 64, 71. 18. Bryskett interpolates into the dialogue his own translation of Giraldo Cinthio’s *Tre Dialoghi della vita Civile* (1565), at the request of his character Spenser.

7. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, rev. 2nd ed., ed. A. C. Hamilton, Hiroshi Yamashita, and Toshiyuki Suzuki (London: Routledge, 2013), 714. This edition is cited hereafter parenthetically by book, canto, stanza, and, where appropriate, line number.

8. See, e.g., Harry Berger Jr.’s essay on Book VI, “A Secret Discipline,” in *Revisionary Play: Studies in the Spenserian Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 215–42. Berger is an acute student of the uses and abuses of turn-taking in his work on Shakespeare and Socrates as well.

9. The substitution is explicit there, as elsewhere: “The villaine stayd not aunswer to invent, / But with his yron club preparing way, / His mindes sad message backe unto him sent” (VI.viii.8.1–3).

10. Mikhail Bakhtin, “Marxism and the Philosophy of Language,” in *The Bakhtin Reader*, ed. Pam Morris (London: Arnold, 1994), 58. See also John Dewey: “When the introspectionist thinks he has withdrawn into a wholly private realm of events disparate in kind from other events, made out of mental stuff, he is only turning his attention to his own soliloquy. And soliloquy is the product and reflex of converse with others; social communication not an effect of soliloquy.” John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1929), 170. N. J. Enfield offers a fascinating linguist’s account of turn-taking in *How We Talk* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), and Oliver Morgan has turned the general project of conversational analysis to excellent account in *Turn-Taking in Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). See also and always Erving Goffman’s *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981).

11. It is Alpers who is still the strongest and most cogent voice for reading the poem as a continuous exercise of rhetorical authority upon the reader: “Spenser’s

attention is focused on the reader's mind and feelings and not on what is happening within his fiction. His poetic motive in any given stanza is to elicit a response—to evoke, modify or complicate feelings and attitudes." Paul Alpers, *The Poetry of "The Faerie Queene"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 5. This poet is talking to us, not to himself.

12. Donald Hedrick gives a wonderful account of what he calls the "conversational turn" in Shakespeare, how he moves in later plays from the rhetorically patterned "adjacency pairs" of early work to the urgencies and obliquities of real talk. "Shakespeare's Entertainment Journey: From Dialogue to the Invention of Conversation," in *Conversational Exchanges in Early Modern England (1549–1640)*, ed. Kristen Abbott Bennett (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2015), 205.

13. Bryskett, *Discourse of Civill Life*, 170.

14. Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 34.

15. Bryskett, *Discourse of Civill Life*, 242.

16. Joe Moshenska and Ayesha Ramachandran, "Spenser with Viveiros de Castro," in this issue.

17. Supriya Chaudhuri, "Spenser with Haraway," in this issue.

18. Stephen Guy-Bray, "Spenser with Barthes," in this issue.

19. Bryskett, *Discourse of Civill Life*, 224.