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THE FAERIE QUEENE AND THE SEARCH FOR THE PERFECT LANGUAGE

The search for the perfect language is in some sense the oldest story of them all: Genesis tells us that the world was created when God spoke. Hence speech preceded the material universe. Adam named the creatures in the Garden of Eden, discovering signifiers that in some way embodied the signified. And, in a linguistic version of the fall (the misappropriation of speech as opposed to the misappropriation of fruit), God struck down the builders of the Tower of Babel through the confusion of tongues, in the process perhaps introducing the element of arbitrariness that we regard as essential to linguistic signifiers but which the perfect language, giving expression to the essence of the signified, does not have: Adam's naming of the creatures was not arbitrary but conveyed their essence, much as God's language contained *in posse* the created universe *in esse*. And that universe, created for the glory of God, reflected God's essence in endless reciprocity.

When Umberto Eco published his book *The Search for the Perfect Language* in 1993, he performed an important service for scholarship not only in what he said but in the fact that so central an interpreter of our culture said it.¹ The pursuit of linguistic perfection is an idea utterly central to our cultural tradition, as indeed it is to other cultures; and the utopianism that drives it posits both an idea of the future of language and a way of understanding its past. In the interstices of semantic complexity all of remembered history resides.

The idea of linguistic perfectability is important in Spenser in three ways: as a defining metaphor, in which poetic and linguistic order reflect and generate moral and civic order; as a political and poetic statement about English among the languages of Europe, and as a means of defining the nature of English among many Englishes.

Language as defining metaphor

As many have pointed out, *The Faerie Queene* begins with a kind of riddle. The Red Cross Knight wears armor that is full of "old dints of deepe wounds" – "Yet armes till

¹ Umberto Eco, *La ricerca della lingua perfetta* (Rome & Bari: Laterza, 1993); *The Search for the Perfect Language*, trans. James Fentress (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994). See McCabe 2002:182 for a related linkage of the search for the perfect language with the work of Spenser.

that time did he never wield.” The beginning of the poem is a beginning but not a beginning, a story of a new knight who is yet an old knight, a story of an imagined present that is yet suffused with its own past. It is not just an allusion to St. Paul or to the armor of a Christian man but a statement about the meaning of the here and now and the continuity both of human history and of Christ’s covenant with humanity. As the poem progresses, it is clear that we are being taken on a journey through an imagined landscape that is at the same time a journey through a poetic landscape, indeed a journey through language itself, in which our efforts to *read aright* (and hence understand aright) are matched by our hero’s efforts to *quest aright*. The elaborate catalogue of trees that accompanies the entry of Una and Redcross into the wandering wood brings arboreal delight and literary precedent into precise alignment. Indeed, one of the most notable occurrences of this *topos* of the trees occurs in Ovid’s narrative of the poet Orpheus, who plays his lyre on a grassy hilltop and crowds the trees into a shade through the beauty of his playing (*Met.* 10.86-105). Now, however, it is a distraction. Reading aright and questing aright coalesce in the monster Error, who is at one and the same time the inevitable consequence of wandering, *errare*, the outcome of misreading the landscape, and the result that follows from textual misprision.

This punning significance of Error (both scaly dragon and book-spewing misreading) has been remarked upon frequently,² most notably by Maureen Quilligan (1979), in a brilliant analysis of the episode. Quilligan points out that “a sensitivity to the polysemy in words is the basic component of the genre of allegory. This sensitivity is structural, for out of a focus on the word as word, allegory generates narrative action.” Thus allegory is driven by wordplay – often wordplay that finds occult connections between things seemingly disparate. Allegorical narrative issues from, and is redefined by, the act of naming – an act which, in an allegorical context, suggests a connection between signifier and signified that is something other than arbitrary: allegory points toward a perfect language as Eco defines the concept by rendering sound image and mental representation apparently connected.³ The allegorical and the utopian impulse are near-allied.

The clear implication of the encounter with Error is that the interpretive efforts of Redcross and Una have ended in failure: the first episode in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* is an exercise in how *not* to read the poem, at least for the protagonists, as the poem turns back on itself in a kind of endless recursion, like the “huge long tail” of Error herself (“God helpe the man so wrapt in *Errours* endlesse traine”). It is significant that Redcross slays the monster by a combination of force and faith: in Spenserian allegory the battle of knight with knight, or of knight with monster, is the primary way of releasing meaning, or of resolving competing meanings. A secondary way of releasing meaning is by progression through a structure or ordered landscape – like the House of Holiness, the Temple of Venus, or the Bower of Bliss. This latter way (structure or landscape) may be said to suggest rationality, the former the shifting battle for meaning contained in the reduction of multivalency to sequentiality in decoding an utterance, of extracting meaning from constantly shifting semantic waters. And not only the single utterance: the

² On literary punning in general see Culler 1988.

³ On allegory, see the seminal work of Angus Fletcher (Fletcher 1964) and, among more recent contributions, Whitman 1987, and Teskey 1996.

entire poem, its allegorical valency ever changing, constitutes a flux and reflux of meaning, hard to define and still harder to grasp. Indeed, the text offers no definitive meaning, any more than Ovid does in his *Metamorphoses* – only the iterative *illusion* of definitive meaning. In a world in flux, allegory is necessarily ironic because bound to linguistic imperfection.

It is in Books Five and Six that the question of language is explored most directly, particularly Book Six. Artegall's encounter with the Blatant Beast at the end of Book Five shifts the argument from the justification of Elizabethan policy in Ireland to the countering of arguments against it – from the facts to the public perception of those facts. Artegall, Spenser's Lord Grey figure, is called away from Ireland under "envies cloud" (5.12.27) and is met along the way by the ugly hags Envy and Detraction (whom the Poet describes with an almost loving enthusiasm for their loathsomeness) and their monster the Blatant Beast. Spenser reserves a full description of this Cerberus-like beast for the opening of Book Six. Here in Book Five he describes the hags themselves as like shepherds' dogs confronting a wolf – an interesting reversal of order and disorder in which the hags seem part of the established political fabric and Artegall the predator. As for the Blatant Beast, he barks and bays incessantly with his hundred tongues, such that "all the woods and rockes nigh to that way / Began to quake and tremble with dismay" (5.12.41) in what would seem to be a kind of parody of the Orphic impulse: words that move trees and stones not to order but to disorder.⁴

Calidore, whom we meet at the opening of Book Six, is "beloved over all" for "gentleness of spright / And manners mylde" (6.1.2) ... "To which he adding comely guize withall, / And gracious speach, did steale mens hearts away." Calidore, we are told in the following stanza, "loathd leasing, and base flattery." As the Knight of Courtesy, he embodies that virtue "Which of all goodly manners is the ground, / And roote of civill conversation." The term "civil conversation" echoes the title of Stefano Guazzo's book (1574) on the harmonious operations of civil society: conversation is the entire fabric of civil order, but it is also the art of dialogue. Civility, likewise, is both citizenship and polite speech. Thus language and order, related in different terms at the opening of Spenser's poem, come together again at the end.

The proem to Book Six again makes it clear that the journey through Fairyland is a journey through the poem, and hence that the journey is also a journey through language. As Goldberg remarks (1981:169), "Action in book VI is verbal action and words are followed to their roots." The book is permeated with linguistic references, for example the rude and imperfect speech of the Salvage Man and the highly artificial language that surrounds, indeed creates, Mirabella. The search for courtesy in Book Six culminates in the vision of the Graces, presided over by the alter ego of the poet, Colin Clout – a vision which I have described elsewhere (Tonkin 1972) as a vision of a poetic grace analogous to theological grace, or, to put it another way, of poetic language analogous to divine language. The place itself, a hill clad in woods on the top of which is an open plain, is an

⁴ Ovid, *Met.* 11.1-2: "Carminum dum tali silvas animosque ferarum / Threicius vates et saxa sequentia ducit..." (While with such songs the bard of Thrace drew the trees, held beasts enthralled and constrained stones to follow him...).

obvious echo of Orpheus's hill and hence of the poem's opening. Here meaning escapes us again, because the vision of the Graces is elusive and cannot be captured in our mortal and mutable world. It is ultimately undermined both by the clumsiness of the hero and by the depredations of the Blatant Beast, who escapes captivity much as the Graces and their handmaidens disappear into thin air. The misidentification of Artegal as marauding wolf makes more sense when that simile is expanded into the action of the sixth book: even Calidore himself plays the role of intruder. And the Colin Clout whose magic is unfortunately (I use the term advisedly) dispersed by the literalist Calidore, re-emerges at the end of the book as the poet himself, hounded by a philistine Burghley. Thus the impersonality of the epic becomes deeply personal at the end as the fiction slips away.

It is not enough to use language to describe, as we discover from Artegal's story in Book Five: we must also find a language that will control. The confrontation of Calidore's "gracious speech" with the slanders of the Blatant Beast signals a renewed search for a language capable not only of describing but also of controlling – or rather a renewed search for an Orphic language of poetry that has hung about Spenser's poetic career all along.

English among the languages of Europe

"Spenser, in affecting the Ancients, writ no language," declared Ben Jonson famously in *Timber, or Discoveries*. Spenser's project in writing *The Shepheardes Calender* was, as we know, an attempt to establish himself as a poet through the creation of a mysterious artifact that was at once a collection of eclogues and a highly premeditated assemblage of text, illustration, commentary, and literary echo (McCanles 1982; Hadfield 1994:174-175; Miller 2000). The language of the *Calender* (to this extent Jonson was right) has defied the efforts of linguists to identify it with any particular dialectal source (despite the northern language of Mulcaster's masters at Merchant Taylors that came in for the criticism of visitors, and despite occasional other suggestions of a northern connection for Spenser) and seems intended above all as an expression of continuity – and as an attempt to capture and import into the metropolis the generalized ethos of the countryside.⁵ This imported language resembled the in-migration from outlying areas that characterized the rapidly growing London of the day. Shakespeare, aided and abetted by the methodology whereby the Oxford English Dictionary was assembled in the nineteenth century, is credited with the invention of hundreds of words, but most or all of these words were likely part of the lexical currency of the cosmopolitan population of the new London. Spenser went beyond Shakespeare in retaining or refashioning the grammar and syntax that accompanied them. "Words borrow'd of Antiquity," Jonson adds a few pages after his famous comment on Spenser, "doe lend a kind of Majesty to style, and are not

⁵ It was, of course, also an attempt to identify in these pre-urban speech patterns the remains of the old England – a deliberate stylistic bent that we can also identify in the architecture of the 1570s, 1580s and 1590s, for example at Wollaton and Burghley. In a particularly perceptive brief essay on Spenser's language, David Lee Miller (2000:245) remarks, "Jonson's phrase – Spenser 'writ no language' – has stuck because it catches something important about Spenser's style, which resists memorization and may resist in a fundamental way the linguistic production of Enlightenment culture and cultural politics."

without their delight sometimes. For they have the Authority of yeares, and out of their intermission doe win to themselves a kind of grace-like newnesse. But the eldest of the present and newnesse of the past Language is the best. For what was the ancient Language, which some men so doate upon, but the ancient Custome?"

If Jonson's approach to language is mildly conservative and eschews "the ancient Custome" in favor of the usage of the day, Spenser's goal is different. It is precisely that "ancient custom" that Spenser seeks to reproduce in *The Shepheardes Calender* and, in an idiom less radically retrospective yet clearly archaized, in *The Faerie Queene*.⁶ If he can recover the syntax of the past, he can perhaps recover the virtue too: language is a tool in the archeology of meaning. Spenser aims to identify himself and his poetry with an English tradition that is above all Chaucerian (though Chaucer writ large: Spenser is not above employing doggerel of the Sir Thopas kind, and his poetic alter ego, Colin Clout, derives his name from Skelton: see Rambuss 1993:15-16). Writing in 1597, Francis Beaumont observes:

... so pure were Chaucers words in his daies ... and so good they are in our daies, as Maister Spenser (following the Counsaile of Tullie, in his third booke, *De Oratore*, for reviving of auncient wordes) hath adorned his Stile with that beautie and gravitie that Tullie there speaks of; and his much frequenting of Chaucers auncient wordes, with his excellent imitation of diverse places in him, is not the leaste helpe that hath made him reach so hie, as many learned men doe thinke, that no Poet either French or Italian, deserves a second place under him.⁷

Beaumont's observations focus on two assumptions – that Spenser has chosen a particular kind of English in order to emphasize its continuity (thus fitting his idiom to the ancient tale that he is telling and to the historical primacy of the English church), and that he has chosen to make a statement about the literary power of English that causes it to stand as the equal of French or Italian. That the latter was part of his agenda has long been established: it is explicit in the *Calender*, with its twin poetic antecedents Virgil and Chaucer, the one the begetter of a multilingual but monocultural poetic tradition, the other the monolingual originator of modern English literature as Spenser conceived it.⁸ E.K. comments in his preface to the *Calender* on Spenser's "framing of his words":

the which of many things which in him be straunge, I know will seeme the straungest, the words them selues being so auncient, the knitting of them so short and intricate, and the whole Periode and compasse of speache so delightsome for the roundnesse, and so graue for the straungenesse. And firste of the wordes to speake, I graunt they be something hard, and of most men vnused, yet both English, and also used of most Authors and most famous Poetes.

⁶ Verstegan 1628:189 explains that in its earliest form "our antient English tongue" "consisted most ... of words of monosyllable." It is not only the exigencies of rhyme that incline Spenser to abundant use of monosyllabic words.

⁷ Quoted in Wrenn 1967:103-104 (Wells, *Spenser Allusions*, 54).

⁸ McCabe (2002:180-181) points out that there were differing opinions on Chaucer's linguistic purity, some seeing him as too heavily influenced by French.

And, E.K. adds, "... in my opinion it is one special prayse, of many which are dew to this Poete, that he hath laboured to restore, as to theyr rightfull heritage such good and naturall English words, as have ben long time out of vse and almost cleane disinherited." Thus the rather bold linguistic departure of Spenser in the *Calender* is a statement about English among the languages of the world and the right English among many Englishes.

English and Englishes

As Paula Blank has explained (1996), England was faced with a *questione della lingua* not radically different from that confronted by Dante in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, a work which Joseph Lo Bianco (2005) has identified as the beginning of modern language planning, and which Eco defines as Dante's pursuit of a perfect language of poetry. Sixteenth-century England was both multilingual (witness Shakespeare's non-native-speaker Fluellen, constantly cantilevered beyond his linguistic ability and himself only one of a number of contemporary stage Welshmen) and multidialectal (varieties of English competed for authority – and not only in England itself but in Scotland and Ireland too).

The gradual, and in the sixteenth century still incomplete, emergence of a standard language can be traced to the growing dominance of London in the late fourteenth century and the increased emphasis on written communication. This was, for example, the period in which the form of handwriting known as secretary hand was established and generalized. It was also the period in which paper became generally available in England,⁹ it was the time of Chaucer, and Ricardian England was the beginning-point of Shakespeare's eight-play reconstruction of the history of his era. The process of standardization was aided by literacy and printing, yet the dialogue surrounding it displayed competing views of linguistic history, some authorities (among them E.K.) complaining about the mass importation of apparently foreign words, others suggesting that these words were not neologisms but revivals of true English speech. Spenser, firm in the Whorfian belief that language defines world view, is particularly indignant, in the *View*, about the intrusion of the Irish language upon English, since it implies moral as well as linguistic degeneration – a position shared by Stanihurst, who perhaps influenced Spenser (Hadfield 1997):

... words are the image of the minde, so as they proceeding from the minde, the minde must needs be affected with the words. So that the speach being Irish, the hearte must needs bee Irish; for out of the abundance of the heart, the tongue speaketh.¹⁰

⁹ Paper appeared in Europe first in Spain, and was commercially established in Italy only about a century and a half before printing, i.e. in the late thirteenth century. Braudel reminds us (1981:397) that up to then a 150-page manuscript required the slaughter of a dozen sheep: and see Febvre & Martin 1990/1958:17-18.

¹⁰ *A View of the State of Ireland* (Spenser 1997), p. 71.

In this regard Spenser is an early example of what Phillipson (1992) calls linguistic imperialism and Michael Hechter (1975) has named internal colonialism: English is associated with English rule and with English order, and thus standardization of dialects into a single English extended beyond English linguistic unity to the suppression of other languages within the Tudor realm, out of a belief that language and nationhood went together (an idea commonly associated with the German romantics, especially Herder and Fichte, but in fact much older¹¹). Indeed, insistence on the use of English in Ireland has a long history, including the largely unsuccessful Statutes of Kilkenny of Edward III (1367) which sought to bring the Old English, the descendants of Norman settlers, back to the English linguistic fold.¹² Legislation in the 1530s regarding both Welsh and Irish established a formal Tudor language policy of promotion of the English language: the Act of Union with Wales in 1536 specifically forbade Welsh speakers from using Welsh in the law courts or from holding municipal office: "... from henceforth no personne or personnes that use the Welshe speche or langage shall have or enjoy any manner office or fees within the Realme of Englonde Wales or other the Kinges dominions ... onless he or they use and exercise the speche or langage of English" (quoted by Blank 1996:131); and the Act for the English Order, Habit and Language of 1537 asserts of Ireland that there is "nothing which doth more contain and keep many of his [Henry VIII's] subjects of this his said land in a certain savage and wild kind and manner of living than the diversity that is betwixt them in tongue, language, order and habit" (Crowley 2005). In short, what we see under Henry VIII is the consolidation of English rule by the selective rupture of links with the Continent, that is, by the Reformation, and a reassertion of longstanding policies of anglicization aimed at reasserting the central control first advanced by Edward I and consolidated by Edward III. The Tudors engaged in pretty clearly defined status planning¹³ aimed at the anglicization of Britain (see also Canny 2001 *passim*).

This English-only policy was merely partially breached in Elizabeth's day by efforts to win the hearts and minds of the Welsh and the Irish through translation of religious texts, such as the publication in 1571 of the *Irish Alphabet and Catechism* containing

¹¹ Verstegan, in the *Restitution* (1605; 1628), sees language as the very source of nationality

¹² "Whereas at the conquest of the land of Ireland, and for a long time after, the English of the said land used the English language, mode of riding and apparel, and were governed and ruled, both they and their subjects called Betaghues, according to the English law, in which time God and holy Church, and their franchises according to their condition were maintained and themselves lived in due subjection. But now many English of the said land, forsaking the English language, manners, mode of riding, laws and usages, live and govern themselves according to the manners, fashion, and language of the Irish enemies; and also have made divers marriages and alliances between themselves and the Irish enemies aforesaid; whereby the said land, and the liege people thereof, the English language, the allegiance due to our lord the king, and the English laws there, are put in subjection and decayed, and the Irish enemies exalted and raised up, contrary to reason." Among other things, the statutes prohibited intermarriage, the use of Irish surnames, the settlement of disputes by Irish law, and the use of the Irish language by the English. They had relatively little effect, and so in 1534 Henry VIII issued an act against Irish poets and in 1537 the Act for the English Order, Habit and Language. In short, what we see under Henry VIII is the consolidation of English rule by the selective rupture of links with the Continent, that is, by the Reformation, and a reassertion of longstanding policies of Anglicization aimed at reasserting the central control first advanced by Edward I and consolidated by Edward III. The Tudors engaged in pretty clearly defined status planning aimed at the anglicization of Britain.

¹³ As opposed to corpus planning, the planning of the linguistic characteristics of a language. See Cooper 1989. On language legislation in Ireland, see the discussion in Hadfield 1997.

translations from the Book of Common Prayer (McCabe 2002: 178). The Welsh had Bishop Morgan's Bible of 1588, printed in London and intended for use in churches, out of concern about the reluctance of rural communities to give up the old Papist practices, and out of unease about contamination from Ireland: religious unity trumped linguistic unity.¹⁴

Situating language

Yet the English that Spenser finds underlying Irish in Ireland is, he seems to suggest, the remains of a purer language¹⁵ – a suggestion that leads Willy Maley (1997:34) to assert that the English of *The Faerie Queene*, archaic and supposedly Chaucerian, is also influenced by the English that Spenser encountered in Ireland. Roland Smith long ago pointed out that Spenser's orthography and lexical choices seem increasingly influenced by his residence in Ireland (McCabe 2002:177). Maley's observation is important, not least because Spenser's poetic and political career is characterized by contradictory impulses, both temporal and spatial. Temporally, his poetic and narrative strategy involves what Richard Verstegan was to call, somewhat quaintly, the restitution of decayed intelligence, yet its search among the relics of the past is directed at elevating the present and proclaiming an apocalyptic future (see Andrew Escobedo's fine study of this phenomenon). Spatially, Spenser displays a centralism manifest in the affirmation of the political values of the Tudors, most particularly the political themes of Books One and Five; and a provincialism (if that is the right term) that holds the court and London at a critical distance. *Colin Clouts Come Home Again*, for example, which for Hadfield (1994:189) "signals an alternative Englishness in Ireland"; and the choice of a linguistic idiom for *The Faerie Queene* that draws on archaic and dialectal elements as if to stress an English unity whose strength is derived not from the metropolis but from the hinterland – to say nothing of an Arthurianism that is emphatically not metropolitan. Particularly in its stress on national unity in provincial diversity, Spenser's work has something in common with the political dynamics of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, which stresses unity in the diversity of the four "nations" of Britain, or *King John*, which suggests in Faulconbridge the persistence of a national spirit independent of the particular politics of dynastic struggle.

The paradox comes to a crisis in Book Six, where the virtue most closely associated with the *court* is manifest in a dance of the Graces set on a *rural* hilltop and presided over by a version of the poet himself – and fundamentally inaccessible to the titular hero, Calidore, whose job it is to find it. In fact, that vision cannot last, any more than the sudden coincidence of naming and political destiny that comes at the end of canto 10 of Book One – a moment when the Red Cross Knight is named aright and recognizes that it is so:

¹⁴ On Welsh texts published in London, see Taylor 2002. When William Salesbury published his *Dictionary in Englyshe and Welshe* in 1547 he specifically equated a knowledge of English with loyalty to the crown.

¹⁵ See, for example, his comments on Irish letters: "For where you say the Irish have alwayes bin without letters, you are therein much deceived; for it is certaine, that Ireland hath had the use of letters very anciently, and long before England" (*View*, p.47).

O holy Sire (quoth he) how shall I quight
 The many favours I with thee have found,
 That hast my name and nation red aright,
 And taught the way that does to heaven bound? (1.10.67)

After struggling through the semantic fog of ten cantos, at the climax of a visit to the House of Holiness itself, a sudden flash of clarity both contextualizes and localizes the action. Contemplation's clear establishment of the Red Cross Knight as "Georgos," champion of England, makes clear to the hero of Book One something that has been apparent to the reader, in general terms, from the beginning. The explicit act of naming, at this high point of the action, comes as something of a surprise in a book in which reading and naming things aright is a problem both for reader and participant and it offers momentary promise of a kind of linguistic redemption as the Red Cross Knight accepts his name and nation and hence his destiny. The journey that we all embark on as the Book of Holiness begins is a metaphorical journey to knowledge in which the physical quest is a metaphor for intellectual understanding. The poem inquires into ways of knowing in a world that is constantly in flux, but it uses allegory to do so – a mode that appears to require, paradoxically, a certain fixity of meaning. The demand for inquiry is thus thrust upon the reader from the start, and the poem is enacted in a realm between flux and fixity that is really resolved and clarified only in the final stanzas of the incomplete or incompletely edited Mutability Cantos, where stasis succeeds change.

Spenser's choice of language for his poem had its precedent in *The Shepherd's Calendar*, but there it was justifiable as the rude speech of pastoral. Here, it is part of a strategy of archaism that parallels the arguments of Foxe and Jewell about the ancient claims of the English Church, and hints at the existence of a mysterious Faeryland beneath the tumuli and earthworks that dotted the English and Irish landscape in Spenser's day (Helgerson 1992 calls it a speaking landscape). In this British *Götterdämmerung*, Spenser is engaged in an archeological project to revive the ancient speech and hence the ancient ways, when virtue and humanity, signifier and signified, were near-allied. But he is engaged in this search for a perfect language, at least in part, for the most modern of reasons: to create a distinctive British history designed to bolster a unified Elizabethan state reinforced by a national language.

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