

Introduction: tightrope walking in an afflicted style

The 'afflicted stile' of *The Faerie Queene* is part of the poem's opening gambit, the Proem to Book I. In a text which imitates the spurious opening of the *Aeneid* (still seen as genuine during the Renaissance),¹ invokes an ambiguous Muse² and the amorous, dysfunctional family of Venus, Mars, and Cupid, Spenser finally turns to the 'Goddesse' who is his subject: Elizabeth is 'The argument of mine afflicted stile' (Pr. I.iv).³ Inevitably, it also offers a tempting opening for a study of the forms of the epic: what are the implications of an 'afflicted stile'? What did Spenser have in mind in adopting this formulation? Lesley Brill offers cautious guidance about reading the Proems as self-conscious texts which never quite say as much as readers and critics might like them to:

The proems announce the speaker's attitude towards the poem, but his attitude becomes as much a point of departure as a fixed point of reference ... [They] offer fertile and compact areas for considering such issues as the character and status of the narrator of the epic, the multiple framings of the poem, its relation to the historical and fictional materials it incorporates, and, broadly, what we mean and what Spenser may have understood by the elusive entity that we call the text of *The Faerie Queene*.⁴

1 On the spurious opening, see David Scott Wilson-Okamura, *Virgil in the Renaissance*, 83–85.

2 Probably either Clio, Muse of History, or Calliope, Muse of Epic; see Hamilton's note in *FQ*, 30.

3 Though as Lesley Brill notes, 'the Elizabeth of the proems is more than an historical monarch'; *The Faerie Queene*, proems, 294. See also Susanne L. Wofford, *The Faerie Queene*, Books I–III, 106.

4 Brill, *The Faerie Queene*, proems, 294. As Hamilton notes, 'Proem' (like 'Argument') is an editorial convention rather than a Spenserian usage (*FQ*, 29).

A point of departure is a good way of explaining a line which is at one level no more than a studied modesty topos.⁵ At the beginning of his epic, Spenser disclaims literary skill in a passage which is paradoxically one of the most rhetorically ornamented in the 1590 *Faerie Queene*; ‘afflicted’ has the sense of ‘cast down’ or ‘humble’, implying that the poem and the poet need to be uplifted by the Goddess, who will ‘raise my thoughtes too humble and too vile’ (Pr. I.iv).⁶ Like all modesty topoi, the line is conventional and asks to be read as a formal gesture of obeisance the poet doesn’t altogether mean. As Brill implies, we should be cautious before generalising from this about Spenser’s understanding of the necessarily ‘elusive’ *Faerie Queene*. It might be better to say Spenser’s style is ‘afflicted’ only inasmuch as it pleases himself to label it as such at this moment; in the Mutabilitie Cantos at a similarly self-conscious moment, the narrator suggests that he will temporarily ‘abate the sternenesse’ of his ‘stile’, a description more in keeping with conventional ideas of epic (VII.vi.37).⁷

As this discussion implies, ‘afflicted stile’ is usually read in terms of the poet-narrator’s attitude towards his poem.⁸ Yet as Brill points out, the Proems are also concerned with the reader’s understanding of the poem.⁹ So it might be reasonable to consider ‘afflicted stile’ as a way of characterising how we read *The Faerie Queene* – that this is a troubled style which in some ways deliberately seeks to impede its readers,¹⁰ or at the very least, to slow them down, to force them to work harder at the business of interpretation. Such a suggestion would add an edge to the modesty topos: though Spenser may be humble in respect of Elizabeth, he may at the same time be aggressive or indifferent to the comforts of his readers.

Spenser’s use of ‘afflicted’ is unusual. Though widely used, particularly in pietistic contexts – afflicted ghosts and spirits are commonplace in late sixteenth-century texts – it is not typically a word associated with

5 On modesty topoi, see Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 83–85.

6 See Hamilton’s note in *FQ*, 30, and “afflicted, adj. and n.” *OED Online*.

7 See Richard Danson Brown, “‘I would abate the sternenesse of my stile’”, 275–94, particularly 279–80.

8 See A. Leigh DeNeef, *Spenser and the Motives of Metaphor*, 92, 94.

9 See Brill, ‘*The Faerie Queene*, proems’: ‘the proems condition the reader’s understanding of the following narratives’, 294.

10 See the earlier reference to the *OED* definition of ‘afflicted’, a term which comprises meanings such as downtrodden, troubled, tormented, and humiliated – *OED* cites this passage in relation to the latter meaning.

poetic style.¹¹ Anne Dowriche's account of the 'beastlie butchers' who kill French Protestants demonstrates the way in which the word tends to adhere to religious content: 'Not like to men, but rather as some furies had been sent/From hell, to stop the course of Gods afflicted word.'¹² Dowriche's 'afflicted word[s]' are unambiguously biblical – as the full title of her poem declares, she records the 'most famous bloodie broiles that haue happened in France for the Gospell of Iesus Christ.'¹³ In contrast, Spenser's 'afflicted stile' is polysemous, a usage which at once comprises notions of humility and humiliation, but whose fundamental purpose is to provoke the reader's alert curiosity about the poem it precedes and elliptically describes. Indeed, in arriving at this striking collocation Spenser conceivably was remembering aspects of Petrarch's *Rime Sparse*. Though Petrarch never uses precisely this phrase, Poem 332, the double sestina, 'Mia beninga fortuna e'l viver lieto', is in effect an evocation of stylistic affliction in response to Laura's death; he laments his 'agro stile' and 'debile stile' (bitter and weak style), and the poem as a whole is a concerted abjection of an afflicted poet-speaker. In other poems, Petrarch uses the adjective 'afflitto' in ways which are again suggestive of poetic self-consciousness.¹⁴ As a piece of lexis, then, 'afflicted' is tonally challenging and uncertain, evoking simultaneously notions of both religious and erotic persecution, and positioning the speaker of this epic poem in a kind of stylistic no man's land.

In making the suggestion that Spenser's style is deliberately troubled and elliptical, part of me is profoundly uncomfortable: since first reading *The Faerie Queene* and Paul Alpers's brilliant discussion of the way it works syntactically, I have inclined to the view that the aesthetic singularity of the poem lies in 'a rule that Spenser's verse almost never makes us violate: follow the path of least resistance.'¹⁵ As Alpers demonstrates, Spenser's syntax, his organisation of meaning in lines of verse, is significantly

11 See for example Jean Calvin, *Sermons of John Calvin*, sig. A6v ('his tender and afflicted spirit') and Samuel Daniel, *Delia and Rosamund*, sig. E6r ('My poore afflicted ghost').

12 A[nne] D[owriche], *The French Historie*, 33 [v], sig. 14v. On Dowriche, see Bronwen Price, 'Women's Poetry 1550–1700', 288, and Kate Aughterson, 'Dowriche, Anne (*d.* in or after 1613)', *ODNB Online*.

13 D[owriche], *The French Historie*, sig. A1r.

14 See Francesco Petrarca, *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, 524–29. For 'afflitto' elsewhere in Petrarch, see 64–65 (Poem 23, l.97: 'vertute afflitte'), 204–05 (Poem 102, l.5: 'l'imperio afflitto'), and 234–35 (Poem 120, l.13: 'l cor vostro afflitto'). My thanks to David Lee Miller for alerting me to these echoes.

15 Paul J. Alpers, *The Poetry of The Faerie Queene*, 84.

easier to follow than the syntactic styles of his contemporaries: by following this semantic path, you accommodate yourself to the sometimes ‘extreme permissiveness’ of *The Faerie Queene* as a poetic narration.¹⁶ Yet it takes time and patience to get to the easy familiarity with Spenser’s syntactic structures which Alpers’s study exemplifies. The point is not so much whether the style of *The Faerie Queene* is easy or difficult as that at a key moment in the poem, Spenser chooses a word with troubling connotations, implying that the reader’s progress through the poem may be similarly impeded. And at a time when Spenser’s position in the English studies curriculum is ‘curious’ – a major canonical writer who is almost habitually seen by students as an obstacle to be avoided – an ‘afflicted stile’ might be seen as the worst form of self-promotion.¹⁷

My concern in this study is not Spenserian difficulty per se, a topic which would demand encyclopaedic coverage. Rather, I’m interested in the way in which Spenser’s style might be experienced as a blockage to comprehension and enjoyment. Since Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defence of Poetry* onwards, commentators have seen Spenser’s archaism as his fundamental stylistic difficulty, and it is the unfamiliarity of his idiom which alienates many fledgling readers.¹⁸ *The Faerie Queene* shows a patina of archaism throughout, such as the inflected past participle ‘Ycladd’ in the first stanza of Book I, but its unfamiliarity is not only a matter of *whilomes* and *sithences*. What arrests a new reader in the following stanzas is a mixture of syntactic difficulty alongside variety of allusion:

Firebrand of hell first tynd in Phlegeton,
 By thousand furies, and from thence out throwen
 Into this world, to worke confusion,
 And set it all on fire by force vnknown,
 Is wicked discord, whose small sparkes once blowen
 None but a God or godlike man can slake;
 Such as was *Orpheus*, that when strife was growen
 Amongst those famous ympes of Greece, did take
 His siluer Harpe in hand, and shortly friends them make.

16 Alpers, *The Poetry of The Faerie Queene*, 83. See pp. 77–82 for comparisons of Spenser with Milton, Marlowe, and Drayton. For a contrasting position, see Carol V. Kaske, *Spenser and Biblical Poetics*, 2, who suggests that ‘Spenser’s style is often ornate and seldom plain, as conventional wisdom considers that of the Bible to be’.

17 John D. Staines, ‘The Historicist Tradition in Spenser Studies’, 733.

18 Sir Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry in Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, 112. Archaism is widely discussed by linguists and Spenserians, with most authorities suggesting that the quantity of archaic diction has been exaggerated; see Manfred Görlach, *Introduction to Early Modern English*, 144, 202, and Chapter 1 below for further discussion.

Or such as that celestiaall Psalmist was,
 That when the wicked feend his Lord tormented,
 With heauenly notes, that did all other pas,
 The outrage of his furious fit relented.
 Such Musicke is wise words with time concenterd,
 To moderate stiffe minds, disposd to striue:
 Such as that prudent Romane well inuented,
 What time his people into partes did riue,
 Them reconcyld againe, and to their homes did driue. (IV.ii.1–2)

This is in some ways an uncharacteristic passage, which is what makes it stylistically provocative. In the first place, these stanzas are canto openers, a subset which have their own particular styles and registers, and in which the narrator typically makes space outside of the narrative to address moral questions or the reader directly.¹⁹ But even in this specialised discursive space, these are extraordinary stanzas. In the first, syntax flows beyond line lengths in lines 2, 5, 7, 8, and even 4 (despite its ostensibly conclusive comma); the subject of the first sentence is delayed until the beginning of the fifth line, by which stage the reader is feeling some of the confusion ascribed to discord as s/he tries to work out what the ‘Firebrand of hell’ is and who the ‘force unknowen’ might be which is causing this chaos. The meaning of ‘tynd’ is a smaller problem, perhaps, but the verb is strongly marked metrically in the first line, and adds to the confusion of both the Firebrand and the ensuing Phlegton. ‘Tynd’ is easy enough to gloss, and was probably unproblematic to readers in the 1590s; it means ‘kindled’.²⁰ As so often in the Spenserian stanza, the fifth line is the hinge between two halves of the stanza, as noted by William Empson.²¹ In this case, the fifth line renews the stanza’s syntactical challenges: ‘Is wicked discord’ retroactively explains some of the riddles of the first four lines, but ‘whose small sparkes once blowen’ runs into the oracular sixth line and the story of Orpheus’s reconciliation of the warring Argonauts. Overall, the stanza operates in a way which is in sharp contrast with Alpers’s rule that ‘individual lines of verse work independently, even

19 See Jerome S. Dees, ‘Narrator of *The Faerie Queene*’ (1990), 498–500, on the uncertainty and “provisional” authority’ of canto openings (499). I give dates to distinguish this essay from Dees’s earlier essay with an almost identical title, ‘The Narrator of *The Faerie Queene*’ (1971). See further discussion in Chapters 5 and 6 below.

20 See “tind, v.” *OED Online*. *OED*’s citations indicate that ‘tynd’ was still being used in the Elizabethan period, particularly in poetic contexts.

21 William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 33–34.

when they are based on the same narrative event.²² It is difficult to read lines like ‘Is wicked discord, whose small sparkes once blowen’ and ‘Amongst those famous ympes of Greece, did take’ as independent lines. Rather, the reader has to work against the structure of the line and with the syntax of the sentence to recode the second half of the stanza as ‘Only a God or godlike man can slake the fires of discord, as is shown by Orpheus, who, when strife grew amongst those famous youths of Greece, took his silver harp and made them friends again.’ This is not poetry, but something like this transposition is what Spenser’s verse demands of its readers here.

The second stanza presents related and different challenges. Syntactically, the sovereignty of the individual line is re-established as the poet-narrator warms to his theme: as the ordering function of poetry overwhelms the principle of discord, so its ‘outrage’ is more properly controlled – or ‘relented’ – in the more linear syntax of this stanza. The fifth line, ‘Such Musicke is wise words with time concented’, exemplifies the theme and restores the syntax to the organising authority of the line. But even here, Spenser’s syntax may strike the reader as unusual with its repeated use of the (to modern ears) outdated, supremely ‘poetic,’ device of inversion. In the first two lines, the main verb is relentlessly transferred to the rhyming position: in place of the normative subject-verb-object syntax of ‘such as *was* that celestiaall Psalmist’ and ‘when the wicked feend *tormented* his Lord’, Spenser prefers patterns which delay the verb, thus maximising his rhyming options and adding a distinctive, verbal quality to his syntax. The same trick repeats throughout the stanza, as in the final line, which would read more easily as ‘reconciled them again and drove them to their homes.’ As well as missing the rhyme, such reordering loses the semantic emphasis Spenser throws on the key verbs of the C-rhyme, *striue: riue: driue*, all of which stress the theme of confusion reconciled by harmonious speech or music.²³ But it is Spenser’s mythological thinking which poses the major difficulty in this stanza. After the Greek exempla of the previous stanza, this stanza draws on the Hebrew Bible and on Livy for the examples of David (‘that celestiaall Psalmist’) and Menenius Agrippa (‘that prudent Romane’). In

22 Alpers, *The Poetry of The Faerie Queene*, 37. See also Catherine Addison, ‘Rhyming Against the Grain’ for the related idea that ‘the reader has been educated by thousands of stanzas of nine self-contained lines each to pause even when the grammar does point onwards beyond the line ending’ (346).

23 On the unusually high incidence of verbal rhymes in Spenser, see Addison, ‘Rhyming Against the Grain.’ On the semantic and affective qualities of rhyme, see Richard Danson Brown, ‘“Charmed with Inchaunted Rimes”: An Introduction to *The Faerie Queene* Rhymes Concordance’.

both cases, the characters are named by epithet rather than directly, a device of omission which underlines the narrator's learning while implying the familiarity of the allusions. An educated sixteenth-century reader would need little help with either of these exempla – for Sir Philip Sidney, Menenius's fable of the belly was 'notorious, and as notorious that it was a tale'.²⁴ At the same time, the allusive texture of *The Faerie Queene* is dynamic, fusing tales from different traditions, and demanding similar dynamism from its readers, or at the very least readers equipped with good critical editions. The verse continues to impede the reader through specific choices of diction, such as 'tynd' in the first stanza, and the rare coinage 'concented' in the second.²⁵ Alpers notwithstanding – and as this study will demonstrate, I write in a tradition stemming from his work – Spenser's poetic idiom is challenging, strewn with stylistic, rhetorical, and above all interpretive impedimenta. I aim to clear some of this rubble, or at least to enable the reader to negotiate it in new ways.

So far I have used metaphors of obstruction and blockage to evoke the effect of Spenser's 'afflicted stile'. In doing so, I am drawing on Viktor Shklovsky's suggestive model of literary style in *Theory of Prose* (1929). His remarks about poetic language are congruent with most readers' first experience of *The Faerie Queene*. He sees it as a device of 'enstrangement', or defamiliarisation.²⁶ In Shklovsky's terms, poetic language is artificially distanced from ordinary language in order to slow the reader down to enhance the text's semantic and artistic charge. Such 'impeding language', he suggests, is 'the very hallmark of the artistic':

an artifact has been removed from the domain of automatized perception. It is 'artificially' created by an artist in such a way that the perceiver, pausing in his reading, dwells on the text.²⁷

Shklovsky interrogates why writers adopt particular forms: 'A crooked, laborious poetic speech, which makes the poet tongue-tied, or a strange

24 Sidney, *Miscellaneous Prose*, 93. See *FQ*, 419 for Hamilton's notes. For the centrality of the Psalms to the sixteenth-century English experience of the Bible and to Spenser in particular, see Kaske, *Spenser and Biblical Poetics*, 12–13.

25 For concented, see "† concent, v." *OED Online*.

26 Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, 12–14. See Shur's remarks about the difficulty of rendering Shklovsky's term *ostaniene* – Shur rejects the more usual translation 'defamiliarization' in favour of 'enstrangement' on the grounds that the latter has cognate roots to Shklovsky's Russian neologism (xviii–xix).

27 Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, 13, 12. In the same passage, Shklovsky notes (following Aristotle) the 'outlandish' quality of poetic language, and includes the use of archaism in a brief inventory of obstructing techniques (13).

unusual vocabulary, an unusual arrangement of words – what’s behind all this?²⁸ The tongue-tied poet is a good evocation of the tongue-twisting involutions performed by Spenser in the ‘Fireband of hell’ stanza. According to Shklovsky, the main reason for such styles is to make the reader dwell on the text, to reduce ‘automatized perception’ in favour of a more questing response to the artistic structures of the text in question. My approach is rooted in Shklovsky’s thinking: Spenser’s manipulation of poetic form constitutes a series of enstranging devices, which aim to provoke and engage the reader. These devices are the means through which Spenser positions and repositions the reader in relation to the poem. Modulations of rhyme, metre, stanza, episode, and interpretative framework are dynamic aspects of the poem in progress which cumulatively resist evaluative stasis. Put another way – and to adapt a related remark of Shklovsky’s – my aim is to show why and how Spenser walks the poetic tightrope in an afflicted style.²⁹

‘Enstrangement’ has a bearing on two further aspects of my work. Firstly, I am interested in *The Faerie Queene’s* relationship to its medieval precursors. The question of how early modern writing negotiates the influence of the medieval is a developing topic, covered by several important collections,³⁰ and the formal consequences of Spenser’s reading of ‘the Renaissance Chaucer’ need reconsideration, especially in the light of the growing consciousness of both the continuity and the oddness of Middle English idioms in the later sixteenth century.³¹ Though Sidney’s adverse comments on *The Shepheardes Calender’s* archaism are the most well known contemporaneous response, Everard Guilpin provides a glimpse of the enstranging qualities of Spenser’s diction at the end of the 1590s:

Some blame deep *Spencer* for his grandam words,
Others protest that, in them he records
His maister-peece of cunning giuing praise,
And grauity to his profound-prickt layes.

Spenser’s ‘grandam words’ follow Guilpin’s amused report of related carping at ‘reuerend *Chawcer*’ and a Gower past his literary sell-by date: poetic diction was a subject of debate and tastes were changing whilst Spenser

28 Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, 15.

29 Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, 15.

30 Theresa M. Krier (ed.), *Refiguring Chaucer in the Renaissance*; Gordon McMullan and David Matthews (eds), *Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England*.

31 Alice S. Miskimin, *The Renaissance Chaucer*; Andrew King, *The Faerie Queene and Middle English Romance*.

was publishing *The Faerie Queene*.³² As Guilpin suggests, opinions had not coalesced about Spenser's language, nor indeed about the medieval past. This vignette shows a culture attempting to value a literature which was becoming estranged from its own readers; as Edmund Waller would ask much later, 'who can hope his lines should long/Last in a daily changing Tongue?'³³ 'Enstrangement' also provides a way of re-reading the 'bad' or phatic parts of *The Faerie Queene*. The sense that *The Faerie Queene* is an uneven poem has been articulated by generations of readers and has been used as evidence of Spenser's compositional processes; Josephine Waters Bennett used the varying stylistic qualities of different parts of the poem to suggest the sequence in which it might have been written.³⁴ Interventions since the turn of the millennium respond to similar perceptions: the work of J. B. Lethbridge and others pays renewed attention to the formulaic aspects of *The Faerie Queene* to suggest that its poetic texture is more conventional and ready made than previous scholars have recognised.³⁵ As Bennett's work inadvertently suggests, badness is often in the eye of the beholder;³⁶ conversely, I am interested in whether the weak parts of *The Faerie Queene* are bad by design or writerly inattention.³⁷ Lethbridge's work suggests that Spenser's epic was written under different aesthetic criteria from the largely unhistoricised notions of stylistic consistency invoked by Bennett. These are debates to which I will return.

Formalism vs historicism?

That my thinking about the forms of *The Faerie Queene* draws on the work of Shklovsky and Alpers poses a broader question: what is the place of formalist approaches when historicism has become the dominant critical paradigm in Renaissance literature and Spenser studies? There are two

32 Everard Guilpin, Satire VI, ll.73–76, 67–72, in *Skialetheia*, 90.

33 Edmond Waller, *Poems*, 234. Waller goes on to lament that 'Chaucer his Sense can only boast,/The glory of his numbers lost', underlining the widespread difficulty early modern readers had with Chaucer's metres (235).

34 Josephine Waters Bennett, *The Evolution of The Faerie Queene*. The longevity of Bennett's modelling of the composition is shown by Andrew Hadfield's reliance on her work in his account of the writing of the poem in *Edmund Spenser: A Life*, 254–55, 444 fn. 221.

35 See J. B. Lethbridge's study, 'The Bondage of Rhyme in *The Faerie Queene*: Moderate "this Ornament of Rhyme"', in Brown and Lethbridge, *A Concordance*, 76–180.

36 See Bennett, *The Evolution of The Faerie Queene*, 21, on Spenser's 'struggle for rhymes', and my discussion in "'Charmed with Inchaunted Rimes'" in *A Concordance*, 12, 22.

37 See David Lee Miller, 'Laughing at Spenser's *Daphnaida*', 241–50, for a recent example of an argument based on the 'bad by design' model.

main ways of answering this question. The first is to argue that the dominance of historicist approaches has been counterproductive in terms of the understanding of the literary qualities of Spenser's work. As Mark David Rasmussen suggests (in an essay which incidentally makes searching criticism of my earlier study of the *Complaints* volume), though formalist approaches are 'less influential' than historicist ones, both approaches suffer from overlapping weaknesses: where formalism can overlook context, historicism can fail 'to fully engage the poems'.³⁸ Inevitably, I want to suggest that despite the enormous value and range of historicist approaches to *The Faerie Queene*, something of the aesthetic richness of the poem – and particularly the demands which it lays on its readers – has been mislaid or, rather, side-stepped since the 1980s.³⁹ Richard A. McCabe's remarks about his decision to place a group of essays on 'Poetic Craft' at the heart of his *Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser* strike an interesting balance between historicism and formalism:

Without his literary skills, Spenser would be indistinguishable from the scores of secretaries, civil servants, and colonists who sought personal advancement on the fringes of empire ... Without his literary skills, he could never have produced the works ... upon which his reputation rests.⁴⁰

McCabe's careful, anaphoristic sentences insist on both the claims of the historical and those of the literary. In this regard, the New Critical position which privileges literary texts as self-sustaining entities, or icons which exist outside of time and space, has little purchase. McCabe's Spenser is emphatically both literary and historical; similarly, it is my contention that there is no intrinsic incompatibility between these approaches.⁴¹ Yet, in the course of this study I will have little to say about Spenser's engagement with Ireland or the complex web of patronage relationships in which he was involved throughout his career.⁴² In a related fashion, there are formal

38 Mark David Rasmussen, 'Complaints and *Daphnaïda*', 222. Though Rasmussen's comments relate primarily to *Complaints*, they have broader application, and mirror some of the trends mapped by David Scott Wilson-Okamura ('The Formalist Tradition') and Staines ('The Historicist Tradition in Spenser Studies') in the same volume.

39 Staines, 'The Historicist Tradition in Spenser Studies', 733, is again germane in observing that Spenser is rightly seen as both 'the poet's poet' and 'a historian's poet', 'a fruitful paradox that opens up the richness of his literary achievement'.

40 Richard A. McCabe, 'Introduction', *The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser*, 4.

41 See Brown, "'Charmed with inchaunted rimes'", in Brown and Lethbridge, *A Concordance*, 27–31.

42 See for example Judith Owens, *Enabling Engagements*, Thomas Herron, *Spenser's Irish Work*, and more recently, Richard McCabe, *Ungainefull Arte*, and Rachel E. Hile, *Spenserian Satire*.

approaches which are not developed here: I do not engage in detail with numerological or topomorphical approaches, because my primary concern is with the text as the reader experiences it moment by moment as well as with the still controversial bases of such interpretations.⁴³ Such omissions do not betoken a lack of interest or engagement, but are, rather, a concomitant of attempting to re-read the poem formally, and for what its formal engagements and experiments tell us about interpretation and allegory.

The second approach to the question of the place of formalism is the corrective advanced by David Scott Wilson-Okamura. Taking the longer view of Spenserian reception, formalism is the dominant tradition:

Critics have been writing about Spenser for more than four centuries, and for the first three of those centuries, most critics wrote about subjects which today would be classified as formalist ... the recurring issues in Spenser criticism – the ones that critics have come back to, not just decade after decade, but century after century – have historically been questions about form.⁴⁴

This is not simply a fact about the reception of Spenser: it is also a truth about the literary culture which shaped Spenser. Early modern education was rooted in the acquisition of rhetorical fluency and the laborious analysis of sentences in Latin and other ancient languages. As has widely been recognised, such a rigorous, painstaking (in all senses of the word) grounding in the mechanics of syntax, translation from and back into Latin, and the mastery of rhetorical tropes equipped educated Elizabethans with a formidable battery of linguistic and cultural resources.⁴⁵ Unsurprisingly then, Renaissance criticism remains perplexed by and fixated on questions

43 See Maren-Sofie Røstvig, 'Canto Structure in Tasso and Spenser', 179, for the use of 'topomorphical'; for an overview, see Alexander Dunlop, 'Modern Studies in Number Symbolism'. Though numerological approaches are widely referenced (Hadfield makes repeated use of them in *Edmund Spenser: A Life*), a comprehensive review of numerology in the light of historical and textual evidence remains a pressing need in the critical literature. At any event, numerology demands readers willing to juxtapose the textual reading of the poem with various forms of counting and tallying of fictive incident to symbolic number.

44 Wilson-Okamura, 'The Formalist Tradition', 718.

45 See Hadfield, *Edmund Spenser: A Life*, 29–30, for the curriculum at Merchant Taylors, and 57–59, for Cambridge. Herbert D. Rix, *Rhetoric in Spenser's Poetry*, 11–18, is still useful on the question of curriculum. See also Brian Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric*, 264; Peter Mack, 'Spenser and Rhetoric', 425–28; Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, 19–23, for an empathetic evocation of the 'limited but intense' education grammar school boys received (19), and Jeff Dolven, *Scenes of Instruction in Renaissance Romance*, 15–64. For the physical pains of early modern education, see Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns, *John Milton*, 152–54.

of genre and form, in particular the legitimacy of those formal choices. Formal legitimacy underlines both Sidney's assessment of *The Shepheardes Calender* and Spenser's own defensive remarks about *The Faerie Queene* in the 'Letter to Raleigh': Sidney 'dare[d] not allow' the archaic diction of the *Calender*,⁴⁶ while Spenser's letter attempts to forestall 'jealous opinions and misconstructions' by clarifying his 'general intention and meaning' (FQ, 714). As Wilson-Okamura argues, the thinking which underlies these and many similar interventions is implicitly formalist: what is the proper diction for a pastoral collection in English? What is the basis of Spenser's epic – what does an intelligent reader need to know in order to make sense of that poem in terms of genre ('being a continued Allegory, or darke conceit' [FQ, 714])? These are naturally not the only questions we might ask about Spenser's poetry now, nor are they superior to the questions which have been asked of the poems by historicist critics. As others have suggested, historicist approaches do not preclude close reading, while the renewed attention to the textuality of context arguably sharpens the practice of close reading while certainly making its practitioners more ideologically self-conscious. In seeking to re-read the formal bases of *The Faerie Queene*, I am not attempting to rescue Spenser from his contexts, nor to suggest that aesthetic questions can or should be insulated from the cultures which produced them. Indeed, the consequence of many of my readings is to underline the unfixed, unsettled quality of *The Faerie Queene's* narrations and descriptions; Spenser, I think, was wholly serious in his recognition that 'the most part of men delight to read' what he calls 'historical fiction ... rather for variety of matter, then for profite of the ensample' (FQ, 715).⁴⁷ In other words, variety of matter, with all the mediation and complexity such variation necessarily entails, frequently occludes the profit of the example; the darkness of the dark conceit may be constitutive of a reader's experience. Wilson-Okamura makes the broader claim that formal questions have historical and methodological priority: 'To insist on the importance of style, in a period obsessed with style, is not mere formalism; it is also good historicism.'⁴⁸ While this remains debatable – for a materialist,

46 Sidney, *Miscellaneous Prose*, 112.

47 Jane Grogan, *Exemplary Spenser*, 27–34, argues that both the 'Letter to Raleigh' and the poem as a whole are serious about their claims to ethical teaching. Though my emphasis is different, Grogan's sense of the playfulness of the Letter is helpful: 'The Letter's aim, it seems, is not to furnish an accurate *précis* of Spenser's poetics but to entice, poke and point readers towards a deeper understanding of the poetics of the poem by making them work through the challenges of a genial but tricky familiar letter, one that simultaneously *embodies* the principles it states' (33).

48 Wilson-Okamura, *Spenser's International Style*, 3.

politics will always take precedence over competing discourses⁴⁹ – it points to the fact that historicists can underestimate the changeable history of literary forms and their impact on what and how we read.

Formal reading is a challenging and potentially delusive discipline: the things which I see in the text may not be there; I will overlook many of the things which are there. This is particularly the case with a text which deploys conventions which are unfamiliar or have been rusting for centuries. T. S. Eliot's bemused contempt for the pleasures of Spenser – 'who except for scholars, and except the eccentric few who are born with a sympathy for such work ... can now read through the whole of *The Faerie Queene* with delight?' – captures this dilemma.⁵⁰ Since *The Faerie Queene* is an antiquarian enthusiasm, it takes antiquarian sympathies (or eccentricities) to enjoy it. A more nuanced way of putting this would be that Spenser demands historical sympathy, broadly conceived, from his readers – that is, an interest in the history of the language and style as well as an interest in English and European history. Formal reading of *The Faerie Queene* entails the deployment of a range of reading styles in the service of a broader attentiveness to a text which is always dynamic, always on the point of further qualifications or amendments. To misapply a Neil Young song: rust never sleeps; the processes of historical change and decay on the language and forms of the poem mean that the reading of it is never steadied or fixed. The formal reader needs to have an informed understanding of a wide range of discourses and practices such as: sixteenth-century rhetoric; Spenser's knowledge of other poetries and literatures, including the Bible; versification and contemporaneous debates about metre; the impact of book history on the understanding of the physical forms in which Spenser's poems circulated; the relationship between Spenser's language and Early Modern English, itself a distinct linguistic phenomenon.⁵¹ In its perhaps relaxed complexity, Spenser's approach to poetic meaning is analogous to the unaligned *modus vivendi* Louis MacNeice outlined in his 'Ode' in the mid 1930s:

I cannot draw up any code
 There are too many qualifications
 Too many asterisk asides
 Too many crosses in the margin⁵²

49 See for example Jameson's claim that 'the political perspective' is 'the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation'. In Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks (eds), *The Jameson Reader*, 33.

50 T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 451.

51 See individual chapters for full references on these topics.

52 Louis MacNeice, 'Ode' in *Collected Poems*, 37. On MacNeice and Spenser, see my 'MacNeice in Fairy Land', 352–69.

'Ode' is a poem of paternal advice to MacNeice's new-born son; as such, it is both pseudo-oracular and skittish in the service of a serious scepticism. How do you give advice which doesn't want to be seen as advice? Those 'qualifications' and 'asterisk asides' are a useful way of approaching *The Faerie Queene*, and the work of its critics, whether formalists or historicists. How do you 'fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline' with an 'afflicted stile' (FQ, 714)? To develop this idea further, I add some 'crosses in the margin' about the risks and ambiguity of formal reading. These are not only those diagnosed by Rasmussen of neglecting context for form. Gordon Teskey has suggested that close reading techniques of microscopic analysis may be counterproductive to understanding Spenserian allegory:

There is no poet for whom the techniques of close reading are more unsuitable if relied on exclusively, or more likely to mislead if mechanically applied. When we read *The Faerie Queene* we need a long memory and a distanced, somewhat relaxed view of its entanglements even more than we need the capacity for paying minute attention. Matters are complicated and deepened in Spenser's verse by continually widening contexts ... Meaning in *The Faerie Queene* is like meaning in life: it is always entangled with the real.⁵³

The notion of the relaxed entanglements of *The Faerie Queene* serves as a warning against mechanistic close reading: again, Spenser's epic is not a verbal icon, and does not always respond well to the kinds of microscopic close reading practised by writers like Empson.⁵⁴ Teskey's maxim that *The Faerie Queene's* meaning 'is like life' strikes a MacNeicean note, or certainly the MacNeice of 'Ode', who goes on to claim that he would as 'mystic and maudlin/Dream of both real and ideal/Breakers of ocean.'⁵⁵ Any formal reading of *The Faerie Queene* has to strike a balance between 'minute attention' and a more 'relaxed' overview, which must recognise that no individual case is conclusive. The disrupted syntax of IV.ii.1 does not disprove Alpers's model of a linear syntax, rather the reverse; again, this is a point of departure, rather than a fixed point of reference. The breakers of ocean are both real and ideal, both specific forms and dynamic phenomena.

53 Gordon Teskey, 'Thinking Moments in *The Faerie Queene*', 103–24 (111).

54 As Empson himself recognised: see *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 33. See also Theresa Krier, 'Time Lords', 1–19, for the notion that *The Faerie Queene* actively encourages readers to experience semantic drift in the white spaces between individual stanzas.

55 Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 37.

In a book published in the same year as Teskey's article, Andrew Zurcher offers a lengthy footnote which attempts to specify the kind of reading demanded by *The Faerie Queene*. Working from a close reading of I.ii.4–6, Zurcher notes that an annotated edition like Hamilton's Longman necessarily cannot reproduce the attention he has just paid to the semantics of individual words like 'suddenly' and 'yblent', and which 'we can suppose Spenser would have expected from his first readers.'⁵⁶ The footnote richly elaborates on this expectation:

It might at first seem obvious that the interpretation of a rhetorically or conceptually complicated work should require studious application over time; and yet at the same time the apprehension of beauty or meaning in a text seems to occur in a vanishing moment, in the course of any single reading experience. The experience of coming-to-know a text like *The Faerie Queene* ... must thus be one of successive layering of momentous apprehensions. This successive layering can take place if the reader invests time and effort, between readings, in the analysis of the constituent elements of the text; these sundry inquiries will themselves provoke proleptically the pleasures of a further reading, as the synthesizing intuition, stored with new information, interacts with the memory, but the real effect of synthesis will occur most pleasurably at the next reading.

The work of the reader envisaged here is certainly not relaxed: Zurcher's focus is on a 'studious' reading and re-reading with the aim of producing aesthetic pleasure; as he goes on to note, this method of reading for 'temporal synthesis (where the experience of times past and that of the present are gripped as in a handful) is physically delighting.'⁵⁷ Zurcher's reader follows Sir Walter Raleigh, who by following Spenser's advice '*may as in a handful gripe al the discourse*' of *The Faerie Queene*, but where Spenser offers an aide-memoire to his diffuse text, Zurcher repurposes this resonant phrase to evoke the delight of re-reading (*FQ*, 718). Whether Raleigh was a delighted re-reader of *The Faerie Queene* is a different order of speculation.⁵⁸ The hesitations in Zurcher's formulation are exemplary of the difficulties still facing formalists: should we talk of 'beauty or meaning'? (The second term reads as a neutral-seeming afterthought to qualify what might

⁵⁶ Andrew Zurcher, *Spenser's Legal Language*, 5.

⁵⁷ Zurcher, *Spenser's Legal Language*, 5 n.2. See also Zurcher's discussion of the 'Letter to Raleigh' in the context of the *sensus germanus* of Renaissance lawyers, 17–49, in particular his remarks about the 'desperation' the reader may feel in attempting to analyse the poem (49).

⁵⁸ Hadfield suggests that Spenser's attitude towards Raleigh was to become progressively more hostile and critical; in *Edmund Spenser: A Life*, 172–73, 307, 340.

otherwise seem an unguarded admission). Does finding aspects of *The Faerie Queene* beautiful problematise our objectivity as critics? I would put the question the other way around: how can we study, much less teach, *The Faerie Queene* without some measure of recognition that it can be beautiful?⁵⁹ As before, beauty is not a get-out clause from the realities which flow from ‘*the wel-head*’ of history (FQ, 718); that *The Faerie Queene* is a great poem does not make the Smerwick massacre any less repellent, nor obviate the treatment of the native Irish by Spenser and fellow settlers. Indeed, as Zurcher has suggested elsewhere, the poetry of *The Faerie Queene* draws vividly for both serious and comic effects on the bloodthirsty transactions in which Spenser was complicit as both witness and participant.⁶⁰

What makes this footnote so valuable is its painstaking articulation of the cognitive processes which go into the re-reading of *The Faerie Queene*. Such a model is in tension with Teskey’s scepticism about close reading – Zurcher’s reader remains preoccupied with ‘the analysis of the constituent elements of the text.’⁶¹ Nevertheless, these models do not cancel one another out. If Teskey’s relaxed entanglements point to the way the poem enacts the processes of thinking through its extraordinary variety of episode and thus to its overall construction, Zurcher’s successive layerings speak to the reader’s apprehension of the same poem line by line and page by page in the processes of reading and re-reading. The challenge for formal reading is to reconcile these different yet related imperatives. *The Faerie Queene* is at once a record of complex historical processes, a text (to adopt a quasi-New Historical rhetoric) in which the tensions within certain ideologies are played out and negotiated, and a complex, layered work of art

59 See Wilson-Okamura, *Spenser’s International Style*, for the related argument that students legitimately expect from their teachers some grounding in the basics of literary composition. This is related to the other subversive classroom question: ‘Yes, but is it any good?’. Like Wilson-Okamura, my view is that we fail to respond to our students’ enthusiasm for literature when we brush this off as a jejune or inappropriate question.

60 Edmund Spenser, *Selected Letters Other Papers*, ed. Christopher Burlinson and Andrew Zurcher, Introduction, lix–lxiv, citing Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence*. See Hadfield, *Edmund Spenser: A Life*, 100–01, for the argument that Spenser witnessed the execution of Murrough O’Brien at Limerick in 1577, later described in *A View of The Present State of Ireland*.

61 Although perhaps not wholly: Teskey goes on to clarify the ‘Thinking Moments’ of *The Faerie Queene* through analogies to the way in which philosophers arrest and slow down discursive flow, connecting Hegel and Plato with the ‘continual oscillation between narrative movement and symbolic tableau’ in *The Faerie Queene* (114–15), a model which mirrors Zurcher’s emphasis on ‘momentous apprehensions’.

which demands plural readings and approaches. My ambition is to contribute to this debate by exploring how the poem works from the level of the individual word upwards to the poem as a totality, always conscious of what Teskey refers to as 'its sheer bigness' and 'the noetic entanglement' of its episodes.⁶²

There have been several important moves to revitalise formal reading, which have reminded readers of Spenser's unique literary skills. My debts to these scholars will be evident throughout, but in particular I want to demarcate my approach in this book from David Scott Wilson-Okamura's *Spenser's International Style* and my earlier collaboration with J. B. Lethbridge on the *Concordance to the Rhymes of The Faerie Queene*. Wilson-Okamura's brilliant study focuses on the literary contexts for Spenser's style, particularly the commentarial tradition on Virgil and others which helped to constitute the humanist and Renaissance poetics in which Spenser and others were educated; as he concedes at the outset, 'In what follows there is almost no close reading'.⁶³ Like Teskey, he suggests that such approaches may not be the best suited to the reading of *The Faerie Queene*: 'for a long poem, there are better ways to prove something about its style: by adducing statistics; or, when those are unavailable, by appealing to the *consensus sapientum*, the convergence of scholarly or critical opinion over a long period'.⁶⁴ Lethbridge and I have made a contribution to the tools available for the formal analysis of the poem through the *Concordance to the Rhymes of The Faerie Queene*, and further work remains to be done in this field. However, this is mostly an analytical study rather than a statistical one – my emphasis here is on reading for meaning.

Such perspectives notwithstanding, in this study I concentrate on readings of *The Faerie Queene*, albeit readings which are consciously provisional, and which are informed by relevant contexts (historical, literary, political, and, in places, contexts by analogy). Wilson-Okamura partly adopts the term 'historical formalism',⁶⁵ a related formulation would be provisional rather than definitive close readings – readings which aim for the dynamism which is characteristic of the poem. Spenser's comments in the metaphysical laboratory of the Gardins of Adonis are germane to

62 Teskey, 'Thinking Moments', 111.

63 Wilson-Okamura, *Spenser's International Style*, 4. See also Wilson-Okamura, *Virgil in the Renaissance* for his earlier work on the commentarial tradition.

64 Wilson-Okamura, *Spenser's International Style*, 5.

65 Wilson-Okamura, *Spenser's International Style*, 5–6.

such an enterprise: ‘formes are variable and decay,/By course of kinde, and by occasion’ (III.vi.38). Though the main referent is the distinction between the ‘substance’ which is ‘eternel’ and the transitory ‘outward fashion’ of appearances (III.vi.37–38), Spenser’s biologics mimic and reflect upon his literary choices. Indeed, the textual changes to this canto – in particular the introduction of a half line to stanza 45 in the 1609 folio, which appears as an incomplete eight-line stanza in both the 1590 and 1596 editions – suggests a witty consciousness of the vagaries through which ‘sweet Poets verse’ might give ‘endless date’ to its subjects (III.vi.45).⁶⁶ Traditional close reading is inappropriate to such a text because it so continuously evokes within itself notions of the mutability and plasticity of all forms. Yet the business of making sense remains paramount, and my readings try to do limited justice to the challenges the poem poses to its readers. My hope is that this study and Wilson-Okamura’s will be complementary, providing readers with different approaches to related problems. This does not mean that we are wholly in agreement at all points. I remain sceptical about Wilson-Okamura’s contention that Renaissance thinking valued ornament and ornamentation for its own sake, and that such ornaments are separable from questions of poetic meaning, as will become clear.⁶⁷ In contrast, I tend to read Spenser’s style semantically. That is, I am ready to look for meaning as and when the forms of *The Faerie Queene* diverge and mutate under pressure of the events he narrates or the objects he describes; my reading of the ‘Firebrand of hell’ stanza above is exemplary of this tendency.⁶⁸ The more important commonality between this study and Wilson-Okamura’s is in the broad contours of our interests and in our conviction that style matters centrally to Spenser and the interpretation of *The Faerie Queene*.

This study is structured in two complementary parts. The first half concentrates on detailed accounts of the key compositional units of *The Faerie Queene*: words and lexis (Chapter 1), line and metre (Chapter 2), rhyme (Chapter 3), and stanza (Chapter 4); this part is aimed at giving an overview of the microscopic aspects of Spenser’s art. In contrast, the second half offers panoramic views of *The Faerie Queene*’s macrocosmic

66 See *FQ*, 745 for textual commentary. I discuss this stanza in greater detail in “‘And dearest loue’”: Virgilian half-lines in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*’.

67 See Wilson-Okamura, *Spenser’s International Style*, Chapter 5, ‘Ornamentalism’.

68 The counter position – that Spenser is aesthetic rather than a mimetic metrist, whose formal effects aim for pleasingness of sound but which do not affect ‘the lexical meaning of the poem’s statement’ – is advanced by Susanne Woods, *Natural Emphasis*, 15, 137–61, and more recently by Jeff Dolven, ‘Spenser’s Metrics’, 390.

structures, focusing on canto (Chapter 5) and, finally, narrative structure (Chapter 6). These demarcations are necessarily not absolute: rhyme as a device is discussed in and across several chapters; choices of lexis are particularly relevant to Chapter 1, but are discussed throughout. As will become clear, I have been conscious throughout of the risks of what I later call 'synecdochical formalism'; that is, the selection of one or two examples which serve as illustrations of larger tendencies. The selection of examples is perforce one of the hazards of close reading: even as I warn against it, I embrace it.