Introduction

Spenser is rarely called ‘radical’. His works have long been portrayed as elitist, and felt to be edifices of otherworldly neo-platonism, or paeans to Elizabeth and the English monarchy. Pastoral, the mode which I shall argue most thoroughly informs his whole body of work, tends to be considered an aesthetic mystification either of traditional aristocracy or of aggressive colonial appropriation. Many passages in his work, especially in the later books of The Faerie Queene and the prose dialogue A View of the State of Ireland, condemn any form of popular emancipation, whilst recommending increased severity in the colonial conquest of Ireland. Spenser’s apparent political programme, in its systematic demolition of existing English policy in Ireland, and of any basis for restraint, is certainly ‘radical’, but not progressive. If anything, he is a ‘radical conservative’ who pushes for an extreme hard line on law and order, along with root-and-branch destruction of Irish culture, in the name of ‘reform’.

Some critics (among them David Norbrook and Robert Lane) have described a more socially critical Spenser, who emerges from popular and democratic traditions. Others, notably Lauren Silberman, have found his writing subversive in relation to sexual politics and gender boundaries. Annabel Patterson reads The Shepheardes Calender as ‘ideologically complex’. On the whole, however, it is accounts of his work as radically anti-democratic and patriarchal that have ensured his recent survival in the academy. ‘Radical Spenser’, therefore – the object of ‘radical’ (left or socially progressive) academic attention – is not usually revolutionary, subversive, reformist or even mildly non-conformist. Instead, as the bad guy in new historicist accounts of ‘early modern culture’, he stands as a prominent instance of culture’s complicity with barbarism. Rather than enlivening and enlightening, his poetry is seen as at one with the disciplinary web of early modern culture, and – new historicists imply – there is no getting away from that.

The assumptions and methods underpinning the construction of this
'radical' Spenser form a central topic of this book. It is motivated by a feeling that they are, at root, very unradi cal, even reactionary, and that despite the evidence of extreme positions in Spenser's work, such readings miss elements in it which are at odds with the authoritarianism of both Elizabethan England and modern Western societies. Indeed, I am not the first to make such an argument. A decade ago, in *Resistant Structures: Particularity, Radicalism and Renaissance Texts* (1995), Richard Strier criticised new historicism for dispensing with the unique qualities of Renaissance literary artworks in order to 'place' them within its own explanatory framework. Borrowing terms used, in *Blindness and Insight*, by Paul de Man, he describes his project thus:

The 'resistant structures' in the title of this book are, in the first instance, the structures of and in particular texts that produce 'bafflement,' that surprise or puzzle the reader on a large or small scale, and that in some sense resist assimilation to totalizing interpretative strategies or methods.¹

This 'bafflement' is clearly connected, for Strier, with the pleasures of reading and thinking about literature, but literary works' intriguing resistance to facile interpretation takes on an ethical and political dimension when they clash with critics of a dom inative, or authoritarian, cast. Such resistance to totalisation is subversive in the political realm and in culture as a whole. Increasingly, though still sporadically, writers like Isobel Armstrong, in *The Radical Aesthetic* (2000), have felt that the premises of liberating cultural criticism are dismissing the very components—irreducible singularity, sensuous pleasure, a self-realising reciprocity with the other—that would make up a liberated human life should it ever be achievable.² What value is there, such recent thinking asks, in a radical criticism that cannot bring itself to believe in a radically different humanity for which to struggle?

Strier, like William Empson, whom he takes to be a critic fully open to the surprise and bafflement of literature, specifically attacks the taming of Renaissance works by the imposition of a priori judgements based on prescriptive historicist scholarship, 'to which both old and new historicism have contributed', and which makes things worse by offering, in Empson's words, 'only “subservient or boot-licking morals” from the past.'³ Through readings of Donne and Shakespeare, he develops the notion of an 'impossible radicalism'—'impossible' because new historicists and their conservative predecessors have seen 'conceptions like freedom of conscience, justified individual disobedience, and justified popular rebellion as “unthinkable” in the Renaissance or “early modern” period. This notion of “unthinkability” seems to me a very dangerous one.'⁴ Whilst this enlightened radicalism is very attractive, my emphasis in this book differs
from Strier’s in its darker understanding of Spenser’s ineradicable implication in human suffering. It is too much of a stretch to portray him as a free-thinking radical. The moments of resistance I do identify in his writings manifest implicit principles, subversive logics and elusive slips that it is hard to imagine Spenser contemplating consciously at Kilcolman with the rebels at his door. Though the ‘unthinkable’ may not be thought in Spenser, therefore, I have assumed that it can happen.

Even if Spenser is not at home on the left, there are other senses in which his writing is ‘radical’. For one thing, he was an innovator in artistic form whose Shepheardes Calender initiated a new phase in English poetry. His experimental forms included early exercises in quantitative metre, the brilliant and influential Faerie Queene stanza, and the bizarre multi-layered structure of the Calender itself. According to William Empson, this originality in expanding the capacities of poetry explains the title ‘poet’s poet’ subsequently attached to him. The autonomy from prescribed rules and expectations which Spenser’s poems assert through their form – and also, as I hope to show, through their distinctively ‘pastoral’ ways of engendering meaning – presents an image of the individual emancipated from the sway of irrational laws imposed by heteronomous power. However remote this utopian glimmer is from Spenser’s conscious intentions or political vocabulary, these aspects of his work objectively challenge the powerful subjective reduction of artworks to context which characterises the dominant trends in theoretically informed, ‘radically’ orientated, historically grounded criticism.

My first chapter follows Strier in criticising new historicism’s absorption of literary works into a ‘complex’, but ultimately seamless, whole called ‘early modern culture’. The radicalism of literature – what made it worth reading in the first place – lies in its surprising, anarchic rejection of respectably conceptual structures. New historicist readings are too keen to tidy away this erratic dimension of the aesthetic and the glimpses it offers of an emancipated humanity. Cultural materialists do not feature heavily here because they have written about Spenser much less than their new historicist cousins. However, it should be noted that they have registered this self-delighting aesthetic unruliness, in reading Renaissance literature and in their own style, much more effectively. Whereas new historicists typically present their scepticism towards subversion with footnote-laden academicism, cultural materialists are often comically disruptive in mocking the ideological ruses of their opponents, and engaged in real political struggles through their critical writings.

These are strengths of Jonathan Dollimore’s Radical Tragedy (first published in 1984 and now in a third edition), a book written on the disturbing assumption that art, and critical inspection of it, is not necess-
arily good for you: 'It is the aesthetic where dangerous knowledge crosses with dissident desire, and may well exacerbate conflict rather than transcend it'; ‘To take art seriously is to know it comes without the humanitarian guarantees which currently smother it.’ This subversive capability, Dollimore argues, always lay ‘misrecognised’ in the humanist canon, and further, ‘has always been latent within western aesthetic concepts’. Writing of Spenser, he finds an ‘aesthetic identification with the daemonic’ having affinities with ‘the theological and ethical impulse to exact a full look at the worst’.

Are such imaginative identifications with the daemonic and the inhumane ultimately contained, placed or neutralized by some over-arching ethical vision or structural closure within the literary work? If a minority of critics have argued this to be so, a majority of readers have thought otherwise.

The answer is, of course, that they are not. The virtue of Dollimore’s criticism in Radical Tragedy is that he does not attempt to ‘contain’, ‘place’ or ‘neutralise’ them by reference to the repressive totality of ‘culture’ in a specific period.

Correspondingly, this book attempts to respond to the surprising, irreducible, resistant and unaccountable in some of Spenser’s major works because their presence gestures, even if weakly, towards a radical transformation of society. Unfortunately, however, the radical force of Spenser’s writing remains all too utopian. The passages in which I address politics only very obliquely, therefore, do not imply opposition to committed cultural criticism, but, rather, reflect the subject matter. In resisting immediate recourse to the political in each case I may at least avoid Dollimore’s censure that cultural materialists often find themselves ‘competing for the same ethical high ground’ as traditional humanism. My argument is not that Spenser pre-empts or expresses radical values, but that an anti-totalising impulse in his work contradicts that towards radical conservatism. Whilst this counter-principle prevents any traditional ‘over-arching ethical vision or structural closure within the literary work’, it is equally resistant to being placed in the new historicist straitjacket of ‘early modern culture’.

I have closely identified that disruptive principle with the pastoral mode, as it is transformed and extended by Spenser, and later theorised by Empson. This emphasis on the troublingly elusive character of pastoral is not one I share with most traditional humanist Spenserians, nor with those new historicists who have focused on his work. Indeed, twentieth-century Spenser criticism often enshrined the idea that pastoral constitutes a quietist retreat or escape from the political pressures of the social world, and the assumption that the best works of literature ultimately reject or repudiate
it. Nancy Jo Hoffman, for example, writes of ‘The Failure of Pastoral Convention in “Colin Clout’s Come Home Againe”’, while Andrew Ettin seeks to explain the upsurge in studies of pastoral during the politically troubled 1960s and 1970s by reference to ‘an impulse that is indeed pastoral – namely ... a desire for a literary form which seems safe and predictable, and which constructs a pattern of life which seems safe and predictable’. Again, A. C. Hamilton’s influential argument, that The Shepheardes Calender asserts the need for a true poet to move from the immature, escapist pastoral world into the adult, socially responsible world of epic, combines both of these notions and demonstrates the extent to which they inform critical responses.\(^{15}\) An approach which is antagonistic to pastoral, or sentimentalises and depoliticises it, is not helpful for reading Spenser’s poetry. On the contrary, pastoral is central to Spenser’s poetry, and far from a ‘safe and predictable’ alternative to ‘the indeterminacy of contemporary society and contemporary art’.\(^{15}\)

As Paul Alpers has noted in his subtle and wide-ranging account of the pastoral mode,

Pastoral is a familiar topic in the academic study of literature. It seems an accessible concept, and most critics and readers have a fairly clear idea of what they mean by it. Yet there is no principled account of it on which most people agree, and it sometimes seems as if there are as many versions of pastoral as there are critics and scholars who write about it.\(^{16}\)

The tendency of definitions of pastoral to contradict themselves and each other suggests that the mode both resists definition and is founded on forms of relationship which cannot be reduced to a single idea. As a mode, pastoral deconstructs the one-sided or identitarian thinking of literary criticism and demands a more dialectical pattern of thought:

The pastoral imitates rural life, usually the life of an imaginary Golden Age, in which the loves of shepherds and shepherdesses play a prominent part. To insist on a realistic (or even a recognizably ‘natural’) presentation of actual shepherd life would exclude the greater part of the compositions that are called pastoral. Only when pastoral ceases to imitate ordinary rural life does it become distinctly pastoral. It must be admitted, however, that the term has been and still is used to designate any treatment of rural life, as for instance Louis Untermeyer’s speaking of Robert Frost as a ‘pastoral’ poet or John F. Lynen writing on his ‘Pastoral art.’\(^{17}\)

Pastoral is assumed to be an idealising depiction of the countryside, a mode determined by its otherness from, and strict exclusion of, the reality of rural life. At the same time, however, this definition ‘must admit’ that pastoral also means the very opposite, that is, the ordinary and unremarkable state of things which can be contrasted with the sophisticated imaginings of urban civilisation. Similarly, Andrew Ettin notes, ‘to Puttenham, pastoral
diction is characterized by “rude speeches,” but to Pope, by “delicacy”. This apparent contradiction is not merely the result of historical changes in pastoral theory, but something essential to the logic of pastoral itself. When Puttenham says that pastoral conventions are ‘rude’, he silently acknowledges that their rudeness is of a particular, sophisticated and conventional, kind. When Pope thinks of pastoral as ‘delicacy’, this delicacy is of a sort distilled through the pretence of rusticity. Whilst Puttenham and Pope are both attuned to the way in which pastoral expresses the mutual implication of these opposites, the mode cannot be reduced to a simple synthesis of the two. The relations between rudeness and delicacy in these cases are not reversible images of each other; instead, pastoral’s ironies mutate with each new context. Pastoral is at once like and unlike ordinary rural life, and this contrariness enables pastoral to play upon ironies of identity and difference. Alpers’ work has, of course, been the most thorough and subtle exploration of these ironies since Empson. I engage with his view of pastoral briefly towards the end of Chapter 1, though he appears in this book chiefly as a silent informing presence, having mapped out for the student of pastoral its ironical turns and multiple implications in Spenser, Empson and a broad spectrum of Western literature.

The critical difficulties about pastoral, registered but perhaps contained in Alpers’ work, are, however, persistent enough to shade over into problems about criticism itself, leading insistently from local questions of genre and interpretation to matters of theory. Bryan Loughrey writes of ‘the remarkable body of criticism which has attempted to make sense of this most protean of literary modes’, and comes close to acknowledging that the resistance to critical appropriation in pastoral’s apparent mutability has effects upon the commentary it receives. Pastoral is immanently critical of conceptual reduction, demanding a decentred or ‘constellatory’ approach, and anti-totalising deconstructive and Adornoian critical models, along with Empson’s work, circulate (in no very systematic manner) in the background of this book. Spenser’s writing, I wish to argue, in so far as it is informed by the pastoral mode, both embodies theoretical questions about criticism precipitated by its historical moment and initiates a transformative dialogue with modern theory.

This is not, then, a book about the detail or history of pastoral conventions. Rather, I have been interested in the general or analogical senses in which Spenser’s works exhibit unconventional ‘versions’ of the mode. This other, more elusive, pastoral has been much talked about since Empson’s Some Versions of Pastoral (1935). His emphasis on pastoral as a kind of relationship, essential to the nature of the literary work, but dispersed among many different kinds and periods of literature, clearly
supports the view that pastoral is a ‘mode’ rather than a ‘genre’. Whereas ‘genre’ suggests a stable category of literary classification, in which certain conventional scenes, characters and types of language mark a work out as pastoral, ‘mode’ suggests the mobility and elasticity of pastoral relationships within literature. I generally use the term ‘mode’ because I am discussing this non-dominative form of relationship rather than the bucolic scenes and ‘generic’ details of sixteenth-century pastoralism. For Empson, this kind of relationship also exists between art and criticism, and pastoral is an Empsonian byword for the processes which mediate between the two. *Some Versions* is thus a recognition of the affinity between pastoral and criticism from within the field of literary theory. One aim of this book is to make more explicit what Empson only implies about this subject – an aim, however, that will inevitably result in a distortion of his point, which is bound up with the necessity of hint and implication.

Empson’s reluctance to spell out the theoretical or methodological implications of his readings – or to present them as the result of applying a certain method, as he had done in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) – suggests that a crucial element of his new ‘method’ is the avoidance of over-precise definition and totalising explanation. The obliqueness of the critical theory in *Some Versions* makes it a suggestive, if unconventional, starting place for a study of the elusiveness of *The Shepheardes Calender* and *The Faerie Queene*. Empson gestures towards, but does not overtly formulate, a ‘pastoral criticism’ which aims both to understand the mode and to register its theoretical implications. Pastoral, for him, enacts the way in which the critic pursues the literary object, which remains tantalisingly in excess of his or her terms and theories, and asserts a certain primacy over any critical discourse which tries to represent it. At the same time, pastoral illustrates the literary object’s dependence upon the critic, whose observation and representation, in however inadequate a way, render it knowable. Empsonian pastoral is thus concerned with chains of implication and substitution, revealing uncanny connections between disparate subjects, persons and styles, yet deconstructing the assertion of false identity between them.

Hopefully, the book’s organisation reflects the elusiveness of pastoral and the way it only comes into being, differently inflected or modulated, in particular local contexts. Although I have characterised it as a structure of relations, there is no determinate pattern to this structure. To see pastoral through *The Shepheardes Calender* and *The Faerie Queene* is to recognise, like Empson in *Some Versions*, that the mode is never exactly repeatable, nor simply identical with its own concept. The inherent non-identity of pastoral means that the following chapters, although they form an integrated argument addressing the central problems outlined here, are at the
same time articulated stagings – connected but discrete – of the encounter between pastoral and criticism. Each chapter is intended to revisit and reformulate the argument as a whole. Each, therefore, is a shift of perspective achieved by viewing a work’s relationships to pastoral and criticism through a different prismatic word or idea. The book proceeds through a series of these prisms, whose relation to the poems is both motivated – connected to something distinctive and interesting in the particular passages I examine – and, in an important way, arbitrary: a collection of illuminating but perhaps contradictory ‘ways into’ or ways of ‘making sense’ of The Faerie Queene (for instance) which do not posit it as a repressive totality.

These ideas, partly drawn from the aesthetic theory of Adorno, make this book a contribution to those developments in contemporary criticism which have been called the ‘new aestheticism’. As the first chapter makes clear, criticism of Spenser, and Renaissance studies more widely, is likely to be shaped by this (at present rather diffuse) movement, as it was in the 1980s by new historicism. Despite enthusiasm for this renewed academic interest in the aesthetic qualities of literary works of art, however, I remain sceptical about its liberating potential, to a certain degree, on behalf of both radicalism and Spenser. As an academic ‘-ism’ it will have been institutionally approved, packaged and sold to undergraduates as another ready-made critical approach well before it has touched the bulk of Renaissance writing. Hopefully, there may be something about this subject matter that enables it to escape the dragnet of the criticism industry and the resistant pastoral of Spenser’s writing can highlight pathways beyond the free market in reified concepts which a new aesthetically orientated criticism might follow.

The dangers facing the new aestheticism have perhaps already over-whelmed eco-criticism, a style of reading which informs the final chapters of this book. As the global ecological crisis concentrates our minds in the coming years, it may even gain the same apparently universal authority once possessed by New Criticism. Again, I hope that the immanent forces of Spenser’s work can undo the constraints of orthodoxy and remain true to the spirit of the eco-critical enterprise. In this regard, attention falls on the ‘Mutabilitie Cantos’, as a troubled summation of the poem’s literary-critical investigations. In dealing with Mutabilitie and her conflict with the Olympian gods, the ‘Cantos’ form an afterword to the poem which reflects upon changefulness and surprise, and relations of domination or respect between self and other. The vertiginous regresses they describe set out a disruptively eccentric cosmology of unstable hierarchies, and thus allegorise, perhaps, the kind of criticism necessary to read The Faerie Queene. Their account of the dynamics of scale and proportion between colonised
individuals and the superhuman power of the English state speaks of a ‘pastoral’ ethics of reading which would both protest against domination of the defenceless artwork by the powerful critic and decry the environmental destruction in Ireland which such power has wrought.

In my final chapter, I test the integrity of my analogy between the ‘pastoral’ ethics of relating to literature and the politics of relating to everything by turning to A View of the State of Ireland. That text forces us to ask whether it is really possible or desirable to celebrate Spenser’s work as ‘radical’, and what, if anything, radical critics can make of it without, in turn, causing harm.

Notes


5. Strier, Resistant Structures, p. 119.

6. Ibid., pp. 5–6.


9. Ibid., p. xxxiv.

10. Ibid., both p. xxxiv.

11. Ibid., p. xxx.

12. Ibid., p. xxx.

13. Ibid., p. xxv.


24. For a discussion of this pastoral restlessness in relation to deconstruction, see Eagleton’s reading of Paul de Man on Empson, in ‘Critic as Clown’, p. 157.