

ESSAY

The Contingency of Form in Renaissance Poetics

COLLEEN RUTH ROSENFELD

Most people like the sonnets and think they are good. If they are good, they must be good because they are as they are. (Booth 28)

Metaphrasis is the act of turning prose into verse or verse into prose; the act of translating one prosodic form into another, like a line of iambic pentameter into a line of iambic hexameter; and the act of translating between different metrical systems, as in the move from the quantitative measure of classical verse to the looser, accentual-syllabic line of vernacular languages. William Drummond reports that metaphrasis was a part of Ben Jonson's poetic process: "that he wrote all his first in prose, for so his master Camden had learned him" (Jonson, "Conversations" 603). We know from published correspondence with Edmund Spenser that, while on break from university, Gabriel Harvey set his brother to "a peece of hollydayes exercise," which included rendering a "theame out of Ovid" into English hexameters and then, "to make proove of his facultie," transforming those hexameters into pentameter lines (Spenser and Harvey 37). In *De conscribendis epistolis* (1534; *On the Writing of Letters*), Desiderius Erasmus records a prank he played on the Oxford scholar Thomas Linacre in which he transcribed a letter composed in trochaic tetrameters into prose, "their arrangement so contrived that a casual reader might not suspect that it was verse" (16). The humanist schoolmaster Roger Ascham says of metaphrasis that Cicero did it, Horace did it, and Socrates liked to do it in prison (98).

Metaphrasis is a writing exercise of the English humanist schoolroom that harbors both a theory of form and a method of reading. From the perspective of metaphrasis, the central question one asks of a form is not what it "is." The question of what a form "is" proceeds

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from identification and encourages a taxonomic approach to genre and to literary history; it is indebted to a Renaissance theory of kind derived from Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *Ars poetica* in which, as Rosalie Colie describes, "a genre-system offers a set of interpretations, of 'frames' or 'fixes' on the world." "What is this form?" uses the answer to its question as a principle of generalization, such that an argument might be made about the form of the couplet, the form of blank verse, or the form of the Spenserian stanza (8).¹ An answer to the question of what a form is treats form as the kind of which any given poem is an instance and presupposes that the poem is "perfect" in the strictest sense of the word (in Latin *per* "to the end" and *facere* "to make"), combining the temporality of "finished" with the simultaneous implication of insulation by glossy veneer. An exercise in metaphrasis, by contrast, proceeds from the Renaissance impulse to find in mixed genre the mixed "mode of *thought*" so celebrated by Colie (19). Metaphrasis encourages us to ask, What is the range of this poem's formal possibilities? What variety of forms might this poem take? What variety of forms could this poem take? What variety of forms should this poem take? Or what variety of forms would this poem take under a specific set of alternative conditions, whether we conceive of those conditions along historical, aesthetic, or ethical axes?

Take, for example, Richard Tottel's *Miscellany* (1557), the anthology widely regarded as popularizing court poetry that previously circulated in coterie manuscript circles. The many editorial alterations that Tottel made to the poems of Thomas Wyatt included translation across verse forms.² A Wyatt poem that begins "What vailleth truth or by it to take pain" appears in manuscript as a rondeau (Wyatt 72). Through a series of strategic extensions and cuts, Tottel transforms Wyatt's rondeau into a sonnet: the rondeau's refrain, "What vailleth truth?," becomes the sonnet's volta, "What vailleth troth, or parfit stedfastnesse" (Tottel 75 [line 9]). A line of iambic dimeter becomes a line of iambic pentameter, a refrain becomes a volta, and a rondeau becomes a sonnet. Tottel's metaphrastic alterations couple the sonnet form's signature turn with

a gloss on truth that is also an alternative to truth: "parfit stedfastnesse." In Tottel's *Miscellany*, the sonnet's volta and the rondeau's refrain combine to create a form that turns by repeating, not unlike the volta we find in Wyatt's "Whoso list to hunt," where the poet's address returns with a difference at line 9 to an audience of "Who list her hunt" (Wyatt 77). Metaphrasis activates the refrain's capacity to turn and specifies the volta's capacity to turn by doubling back. In Tottel's "What vailleth troth," metaphrasis also generates a definition of truth from which Tottel's own compositional values depart: that which is thoroughly finished ("parfit") in a fixed form of being ("stedfastnesse").

In what follows, I take up a single stanza from Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1596) in order to turn metaphrasis into a method of reading.³ According to this method, what is important about the form of Spenser's stanza is not that it is what it is. Metaphrasis does not derive the value of a poem from the artifactual necessity of its form—as with Stephen Booth's casual but powerful justification for his foundational 1969 study of Shakespeare's sonnets: "If they are good, they must be good because they are as they are" (28); or as with Susan Sontag's suggestion that criticism should show what an art object "is" or "even that it is what it is, rather than . . . what it means" (14), a suggestion that has turned into a critical imperative in more recent "surface" and "postcritical" practices.⁴ According to metaphrasis, what is important about Spenser's stanza is that it might have been something other than what it is: the range of forms it could have been, might have been, should have been, or would have been under an alternative set of conditions. Metaphrasis derives the value of the aesthetic artifact from the contingency of its form and encourages a theoretical revival of form by, as Timothy Morton writes, "unplugging it from teleology" (219).⁵ "A poem," Morton writes, "is a certain form: just this lineation, just that rhyme scheme, just this stanza form" (219), which means that "its shape," as with blown glass, "is the trace of what happened to it" (220). But if "poems are records of causal-aesthetic decisions" (219), then the history that form records reveals "what

happened to it” as merely one possibility among many. Metaphrasis approaches form as that which, as Susan Stewart writes, “is dense with its relation to what otherwise could have been” (30). Metaphrasis is valuable as an instrument of historical epistemology because it is one technique by which humanists cultivated the poem as a contingent artifact capable of transformation. Metaphrasis is valuable as a critical hermeneutic because it permits us to access the potentiality of form, where the capacity for transformation is a dynamic property of the poem itself. When walked to its logical extreme, my argument extends this potential into the future: I argue that Spenser’s stanza might yet become something other than what it is.

I am interested in how an exercise in metaphrasis amounts to the technical cultivation of formal contingency and a literary-critical practice adequately attuned not only to history—what Philip Sidney described in “The Defence of Poesy” (ca. 1580) as the “bare ‘was’” (224)—but also to the penumbra of Renaissance poesis, “what may be and should be” (218). This essay therefore contributes to work that considers how Spenser’s experiments with historiographical perspective revise the temporal models that shape history, including the chronicle and antiquarianism.⁶ Most recently, J. K. Barret has argued that prosody, syntax, and figure enabled Spenser to disrupt a linear conception of historical time and make “a space in which the past can be thought of as not yet settled” (80).⁷ This essay also, however, contributes to a broader disciplinary conversation regarding the kinds of knowledge ascribed to both literature and its criticism. If, as Sidney writes, poesis turns away from the indicative of history, the philosophical or logical mode of affirmation, and the evaluative judgments of “true” and “false” in favor of a language that “nothing affirms,” what are the criteria for evaluating criticism that seeks to adequately represent such thinking (235)?

Wai Chee Dimock offers one answer to this question when she writes, “if works of fiction are always subjunctive to some extent, dwellers in some counterfactual universe, literary *scholarship* can also afford to go some length in that direction” (244). Criticism, she means, might try on the

modality of knowledge that characterizes the art objects it studies. A growing body of work on humanist grammatical theory and “the potential mood” is expanding our sense of the work of the subjunctive and the counterfactual in Renaissance theories of fiction.⁸ But what are the implications of “what may be and should be” for the knowledge of criticism—for conventions of evidence and explanation, techniques of reference, and styles of argumentation?⁹ I argue that poetic forms establish the temporal coordinates by which fictional worlds negotiate between the “bare ‘was’” of history and the more capacious realm of “what may be and should be.” Where we understand form to establish a set of coordinates for the world of a poem, something like the parameters of possibility for that poem, the critical activity of metaphrasis permits us to imagine the world of the poem otherwise. By inhabiting the fictional modality of its objects of study, criticism opens itself up to a wider expanse of knowledge than what, strictly speaking, is; it thereby clears out space for the possibility that the world might be otherwise than it is.

Book 5 of *The Faerie Queene* is a dangerous place to test this claim. Any argument about the value of art in a book that chronicles England’s imperialist violence against Ireland and its people runs the risk of sounding like aesthetic apology for historical genocide.¹⁰ By raising the specter of the counterfactual, however, I neither deny history nor replace it with aesthetic form.¹¹ The political gamble of this essay proceeds instead from a single sentence in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s influential critique of a hermeneutics of suspicion, in which Sedgwick briefly aligns the counterfactual with reparative reading:

Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did. (146)

In my emphasis on the “event” of reading and my understanding of literature as a “kinetic art” that

unfolds in time, the following exercise in metaphrasis shares with reader response criticism a desire to preserve those forms of the poem that, as Stanley Fish describes it, “failed to materialize” (144). But by insisting that those forms nonetheless exist, if only in the peculiar modal realm of “what may be,” it becomes the final wager of this essay that we can reverse the causal order of Sedgwick’s account and make room for a different future by engaging in a criticism that imagines the form of the poem happening differently.

Pentameter ↔ Hexameter

In a chapter in the middle of Sheila Heti’s *How Should a Person Be?* (2012), the narrator spins drunkenly on a bar stool and considers her “path toward beauty.” Maybe, she says, “if I am rigorous enough in following this path, it will lead me somewhere great.” If she hops the path, she “will be like the earth spinning off its axis into infinity.” The narrator then steps back from her simile to imagine the world it requires: “But I can only imagine what would happen to all the stuff of the earth if the earth was to spin off its axis. I think trees would crash into cars, but I don’t know enough science to say” (144). This is about where book 5 of *The Faerie Queene* picks up. Having missed “the first point of his appointed sourse,” the “world is runne quite out of square” (5.Pr.1.7–8). Constellations have shifted places. Stars have miscarried and collided and crushed one another. A cosmological scramble up there has made a mess of things down here in the “lower world” (5.Pr.4.9),

For that which all men then did vertue call,
Is now cald vice; and that which vice was hight,
Is now hight vertue, and so vs’d of all:
Right now is wrong, and wrong that was is right.
(5.Pr.4.1–4)

These are the chiasmic conditions under which trees might be said to crash into cars.

Readers of *The Faerie Queene* have been primarily interested in the opening stanza of book 5 for what David Lee Miller calls its “historical pessimism” (21) and what Bart Van Es describes as a

pessimism of “now” (*Spenser’s Forms* 151).¹² The dizzy world “growes daily wourse and wourse” and perpetuates a history of interminable degeneration in which the future is imaginable only as what is still “wourse” (5.Pr.1.9). Situating book 5 in the context of Elizabethan England’s violent imperialist practices, as well as Spenser’s own contribution to this project with *A View of the State of Ireland* (1633), Spenser’s modern readers describe this opening stanza as a vision of history “reflective of the political actualities of the state’s foreign and domestic policies” and designed to justify the brutal tactics of the Knight of Justice and Talus, his right-hand Iron Man (Van Es, *Spenser’s Forms* 151–52).¹³ According to this thinking, “what is,” or at least “what is nigh,” is the end: the proem to book 5 drives toward an apocalypse that *The Faerie Queene* just manages to keep at bay through the hard labor of its “endlesse worke” (4.12.1.1).¹⁴

The form of the Spenserian stanza is probably best known for its final hexameter: the line that makes the listener wait just one extra iamb for the close of rhyme’s reward. This stanza’s metrical extension, also a finely calibrated suspension, could point to an eschatological interpretation of the form. By deferring the end that it also guarantees, Spenser’s hexameter might be understood to recast the time of apocalypse at the local, prosodic level. This is what William Empson described as the stanza’s feat of “perpetually pausing at its close” (33). Here is the opening stanza to the proem of book 5:

So oft as I with state of present time,
The image of the antique world compare,
When as mans age was in his freshest prime,
And the first blossome of faire vertue bare,
Such oddes I finde twixt those, and these which are,
As that, through long continuance of his course,
Me seemes the world is runne quite out of square,
From the first point of his appointed sourse,
And being once amisse growes daily wourse and wourse.
(5.Pr.1)

In this stanza, Spenser’s hexameter does not make us wait. “Wourse” gratifies the expectation of “sourse” a full foot before it should. The poet’s pronouncement that the world, spun off its axis, “growes

daily wourse” answers the call of the previous line’s rhyme. This stanza could have concluded with a line of iambic pentameter instead of a line of iambic hexameter. “And wourse” is, as Harry Berger, Jr., might have said, “conspicuously irrelevant” because formally superfluous to a stanza that could have ended without it (122). At the opening of book 5, Spenser’s stanza pulls into focus the trace of a history in which it could have been something other than what it is: an interlaced stanza concluding in a heroic couplet.

One way to think about “and wourse” is error. In imitation of the world that this stanza represents, the form wanders off course and creates, at the level of prosody, the kind of dilation or endlessness that we usually talk about at the level of Spenser’s narrative (in terms of digression) or genre (especially romance).¹⁵ A later stanza in book 5 is an example of how Spenser’s hexameter more often operates in this vein:

Wherefore the Lady, which *Eirena* hight,
 Did to the Faery Queene her way addresse,
 To whom complayning her afflicted plight,
 She her besought of gracious redresse.
 That soueraine Queene, that mightie Emperesse,
 Whose glorie is to aide all suppliants pore,
 And of weake Princes to be Patronesse,
 Chose *Artegall* to right her to restore;
 For that to her he seem’d best skild in righteous lore.
 (5.1.4)

This final hexameter rhymes “lore” with “restore” and offers something like a sonic tmesis as it stretches “restore” across an additional syllable. “Restore” becomes “righteous lore.” It is as if Spenser’s hexameter closes this stanza down by slowing time down. It is like what it was to listen to a cassette tape as the batteries of your Sony Walkman died out. This hexameter is long because it makes one iamb take up the time of two. Against the imperialist imaginary of epic, its attendant narrative structure of the quest, and even the iambic pentameter line that was understood to be the English version of the classical epic line as early as the Earl of Surrey’s *Aeneid* translations, Spenser’s hexameter could be said to make room for rest or

indulgence or forgetting, the kind of leisure that couples physical and moral wandering in the manner of the poem’s favorite pun on “erring.”¹⁶

But the closing couplet in the opening stanza of book 5, “From the first point of his appointed sourse, / And being once amisse growes daily wourse and wourse,” does not delay or defer the end. It does not dilate the space and time before the end by postponing the end. Spenser’s rhyme marks an end, and then the line proceeds past that end: not “wourse” but “and wourse.” From the perspective of its rhyme, the form of this stanza is not apocalyptic, because it is postapocalyptic. In “A Defence of Rhyme” (1603), Samuel Daniel describes rhyme as a world-making activity because the closure it affords establishes a set of temporal coordinates. Speaking of the sonnet in particular, Daniel defends poetic form from the charge that it twists thought by claiming that form renders the infinite finite. Taking up a “conceit” and reducing it “*in gyrum*” (which the edition’s editor glosses as “into a circle or a circuit”), the sonnet is a “just form”:

For the body of our imagination being as an unformed chaos without fashion, without day, if by the divine power of the spirit it be wrought into an orb of order and form, is it not more pleasing to nature, that desires a certainty and comports not with that which is infinite, to have these closes, rather than not to know where to end or how far to go . . . ?
 (216)

Daniel suggests that we are most pleased with the artifacts of our imagination when the poetic act reproduces the divine act and manufactures a temporal experience of the world as a closed system of dependable divisions. The poetic act takes “unformed chaos without fashion, without day” and transforms it—Daniel’s word is “wrought”—“into an orb of order and form.” But the stanza at the start of book 5 does not “know where to end or how far to go.” It is as if God said, “Let there be light” and then had to follow up with, “Yes, in that corner too.” “Wourse” marks the close of an iambic pentameter line by rhyming with “sourse.” “And wourse” undoes the “certainty” of this closure, the

temporal coordinates it established, and the “orb of order and form” such coordinates would have sustained. Against the “certainty” of rhyme’s closure and the experience of time “certainty” entails, that extra foot proceeds past the line’s end. “And wourse” is the prosodic articulation of another world.

Metaphrasis reveals a dynamic principle of design whereby Spenser’s stanza offers two simultaneous but distinct final lines: a line of iambic pentameter and a line of iambic hexameter. At the most basic level of evidence, my reading turns on the pressure we permit “sourse” to exert on the value of that first “wourse”: the ring of rhyme wraps around the couplet, making “a band” in the stanza, as George Puttenham describes it in *The Art of English Poesy* (1589; 178). What is important about “and wourse” is the time the hexameter line clears out, the iamb it opens up, just after the stanza has ended. Kenneth Gross writes about how “a closing hexameter in Spenser can nudge us gently towards a new dimension, open up a broader frame of consciousness . . . the dream of a space beyond that marked by the more normative measure of the pentameter” (30). With the end behind it, Spenser’s hexameter works its way out from under eschatology and permits for the alternative frames of thinking that Gross begins to enumerate. In *Summa Lyrica*, Allen Grossman describes this prosodic dynamic as the distinct “modal values” (29.5) of lines of differing lengths within a single stanza: the long line of “more than ten indicates the troubling of form by inner possibility” (29.4). My argument is that Spenser’s stanza enables a literary-historical vision of time that is not reducible to narratives of apocalypse or providential design or the imperialist projects these narratives authorized.¹⁷ Instead of dilating the space and time before an end to which it inevitably defers, the metaphrastic oscillation between pentameter and hexameter lines lends a form to, and therefore opens up to, a future to which the poet can lay no conceptual claim.

Prose ↔ Verse

In 1687, Edward Howard published a metaphrastic translation of book 1 of *The Faerie Queene* in

which he rewrote Spenser’s poem in heroic couplets. Howard claims to have “discharg’d” Spenser’s “tedious Stanza” because couplets are “more sutable to an Epick Poem,” but his critique of the Spenserian stanza also includes an account of how verse and prose forms interact:

For as the Writing in Stanza’s must render the Verse sententious and constrain’d, the most weighty part of their meaning still being to be expected at the Period of the Stanza; so, in that consideration, their Composure must needs be less difficult than where the force of each single Line is to be weigh’d apart. (A3v)

Howard’s defense of his own exercise in metaphrasis contains the idea that stanzaic forms end not with a rhyme but with a “Period” (A3v).¹⁸ In the stanza at the start of book 5, the rhyme with “wourse” shuttles between pentameter and hexameter lines, but that first “wourse” is also a possible syntactical close to the single sentence that runs across the nine lines of Spenser’s stanza. The “first point” that marks the “sourse” and origin of the world before the moment at which it spins off its axis is also a full point or a period. “And wourse” misses the point with which, at which, this sentence could have ended.

The Greek word *period* means “a going around,” and its Latin synonyms maintain this sense of walking around, or being lead around, in a circle or a circuit or a revolution (Quintilian 9.4.22).¹⁹ Cicero describes the period as a “circle of words” (“orbem verborum”; my trans.; *De oratore* 3.51.198); “the language runs on,” he writes, “as if enclosed in a circle” (“illa circumscriptione ambitu-que, ut tanquam in orbe inclusa currat oratio”; *Orator* 61.207). Juan Luis Vives describes the period as a “circular course”; for Vives, Cicero’s *orbem verborum* is an orbiting sphere maintained in its proper course by the judgment of the ear. He describes the period as “full of motion and, as it were, suitable for tossing” (65). In his treatise *On Style*, Demetrius compares the period to a two-lap race in which the runner finishes at his starting place; a sentence ends where it began when its point is a definite

goal toward which runners speed: “at the very beginning of their race the end of the course is already before their eyes” (10). As an aesthetic ideal, the period ought to revolve around an axis that is also its climactic close: “the first point” of its “appointed source.” As Morris Croll argued, the period as aesthetic ideal harbors several closely related epistemological assumptions: that thinking has already happened, that thinking is located in the past, and thus that the period offers a finished thought (207–36).

The classical period was an ideal for writers in the English vernacular because it was impossible to reproduce in a language that depends on word order instead of inflection for integrity and coherence (Nicholson 77–78). But as Sylvia Adamson writes, it is possible to identify a “*principle of periodicity*” in early modern English sentences that exhibit both “*unified composition*” and a “*foregrounded ending*” (585). Adamson sounds like Daniel in his “Defence”: “the Period is a teleological construct whose author works in the same spirit as the divine creator, foreseeing the end and directing the unwitting reader/hearer towards its final disclosure” (Adamson 590). When Howard complains of Spenser’s stanzas that “the most weighty part of their meaning [is] still being to be expected at the Period of the Stanza,” he suggests that Spenser’s hexameter transcribes the grammatical suspension characteristic of the classical period into the epistemological program of the stanzaic form.²⁰ The problem with Spenser’s stanza is that it withholds its goods until the end.

In the opening stanza of book 5, that “Period” is surprisingly mobile. The stanza’s sentence begins with a correlative—“So oft as I with state of present time, / The image of the antique world compare”—but it delays the poet’s discovery with a short chronographic digression that teeters on the edge of a simile: “When as mans age was in his freshest prime, / And the first blossome of faire vertue bare.” If we were expecting the next line to begin with “so” and complete the simile, we instead get “Such oddes I finde twixt those, and these which are.” “Such oddes I finde” echoes the stanza’s opening “So oft as I” and closes its correlative, while

“twixt those, and these which are” rhymes with “bare” and produces the stanza’s medial couplet:

So oft as I with state of present time,
The image of the antique world compare,
When as mans age was in his freshest prime,
And the first blossome of faire vertue bare,
Such oddes I finde twixt those, and these which are[.]

The poet’s comparison is predicated on a temporal distinction between “antique” and “present,” but the close of the medial couplet quietly suspends then and now in simultaneity by way of a figure of speech known as zeugma. “Are” is expressed to the one, “these which are,” and implied to the other, “those [which are].” You can read against the logic of the figure and restore a linear conception of time to the line—“those [which were]”—but at the center of this stanza in which the world spins off its axis, it is as if Spenser picks up Sidney’s emblem for historical time in his “Defence”—the “bare ‘was’” (224)—and doubles back on the poetic line, and on a linear conception of time, to offer the “bare / . . . are.” For just a moment, “those, and these which are” coexist in the present by way of an elision, yoked together by the verb that closes the medial couplet. The figure of zeugma performs the period’s characteristic suspense by delivering the verb it previously elided. Figure and rhyme combine to produce what Demetrius described as the classical period’s capacity to “bend . . . back at the end,” where a closing sequence, whether with the inverted word order of chiasmus or the completion of an antithesis, creates a retrospective rhythm (359).²¹ According to this rhythm, movement forward is also paradoxically movement in reverse.

An epigram from John Davies’s *Wit’s Bedlam* (1617) provides an illustrative parallel to Spenser’s stanza and its mobile “first point.” Davies’s epigram animates the interplay of verse and prose forms by figuring the period’s orientation around its “full point” as an allegory of lust:

Marc in the compasse of his Lusts designes,
Is like a Circle in *Geometry*:
Hee; goes from point, to point, vntill he ioynes;
Then puts a *Period* to his Letchery:

A *Period* call it, or a full point, or (.)
 All's one to him, so he therein doth stick. (G5v)

The rhyme of the closing couplet translates punctuation into the anatomy that lands the punch line of the conceit: “A *Period* call it, or a full point, or (.)” *Or prick*. The signature force of the epigram’s salty close combines with the structure of suspense characteristic of the classical period to produce a form that incorporates the closure of the period into its “designes” by way of its rhyme. It is not simply that stanzaic and sentence forms run along parallel lines, the one acting as an allegory of the other. Instead, the rhyming of the typographical “(.)” with “stick” transforms the period into a formal resource for the stanza. Following the arc of Demetrius’s backward bend, the rhyme is completed by reading back from “stick” to what can only be read in retrospect.

In Davies’s poem, the typographical representation of the “full point” is bracketed by parentheses that distinguish it from a mere mark of punctuation. The force of those parentheses is double. The parentheses take the “full point” and the epigrammatic closure it enforces and transform it into a digression, inserting the formal and epistemological “end” into the midst of things.²² The pair of parentheses also complicate the apparent misogyny of Davies’s poem by transforming Marc’s “prick” into an anus.²³ We might think of the poem’s typographical rhyme as an object of what Jeffrey Masten calls queer philology and as an example of “early modern *skaiography*”: writing that occurs “leftward, backward, against the grain” (21). This poem’s apparent investment in what Adamson describes as the period’s “teleological construct” and its “final disclosure” turns into a more complex temporal model as its pair of parentheses pick up the end and place it, both temporally and anatomically, behind us (590).

Jonson’s critique that Davies’s epigrams “expressed in the end what should have been understood by what was said” is precisely what makes them useful to think with here (“Conversations” 603). Davies’s poem throws into relief the peculiar mobility of what Howard described as “the

Period” of Spenser’s stanza (A3v). Spenser’s laborious sentence refuses the resting place it has earned at the medial couplet. It continues with “As that,” as if rewriting the withheld comparison of the first quatrain:

So oft as I with state of present time,
 The image of the antique world compare,
 When as mans age was in his freshest prime,
 And the first blossome of faire vertue bare,
 Such oddes I finde twixt those, and these which are,
 As that [twixt X and Y].

Fill in the blanks *twixt X and Y* and measure out the temporal stretch between “the antique world” and the “state of present time.” Under the force of the comparative structure, “Such oddes” is a syntactical pivot: not an extremity or a high degree of odds but a particular set of “oddes.” The same kind of “oddes” that the poet also finds *twixt X and Y*. Poised on the precipice of “As that,” Spenser’s sentence creates yet another possible version of itself: not the classical period with its deferred verb and backward bend, but what Janel Mueller calls the “squared period” that “acquire[s] strength from being cut [‘incisa’] into fours and joined internally” as with two pairs of “antithetical members” (65). Jonson describes this sentence in his *Discoveries* when he praises the “congruent, and harmonious fitting of parts” like “stones well squar’d” (101). The “square and firme” period is one “which is to have equall and strong parts, everywhere answerable, and weighed” (105). As it undoes the apparent closure of the medial couplet and its backward bend, “As that” discards the circular course of the classical period in favor of the possibility of a squared period where “twixt those, and these which are” might be “answerable” to and “weighed” against *twixt X and Y*.

“As that,” however, does not make good on this promise. “As that” turns back on the comparative structure so briefly invoked and drives Spenser’s sentence, with the world it describes, “out of square”:

Such oddes I finde twixt those, and these which are,
 As that, through long continuance of his course,
 Me seemes the world is runne quite out of square,

From the first point of his appointed source,
And being once amisse growes daily wourse.

The stanza at the start of the proem to book 5 is a sentence that spins off its axis and spirals through time by refusing to complete a set of correlatives that the poet's habitual act of comparison would seem to promise.²⁴ By refusing to instantiate the sentences that might have been and the stanzas they would have formed, the Spenserian stanza defies both the proportional ideal of the classical period's *orbem verborum* and the "squared period"—as well as the temporal paradigms that underwrite these ideals, their emblematic shapes of circle and square, and the structures they lend to history through return and analogy. Among the analogies that Cicero offers to illustrate the period's distinctive combination of "beauty" and "utility" is the universe: "the sky," he writes, is "a round vault" with "the earth at its centre, held stationary by its own force and stress" while "the sun travels round it" (*De oratore* 3.45.178). This "system," Cicero insists, "is so powerful that a slight modification of it would make it impossible for it to hold together" (3.45.179).²⁵ Cicero's claim that the period is a model of the universe gives us some sense of what Spenser's stanza and the world it describes might have looked like if it had stopped at the medial couplet with its quiet denial of history in the backward bend of the "bare / . . . are."

The single line of hexameter with which Spenser closes his stanza trades in the idealism of the golden world and its attendant historical narrative of decay in favor of a future that is open to a wider range of alternatives than those perceived by the poet in the present. Metaphrasis opens up these alternatives: not the closed loop of return but the promise that this sentence, precisely because it has missed "the first point of his appointed source," might turn another way. This is the future to which Spenser's stanza inclines by proceeding past the end and discarding the apocalyptic framework that gave meaning to that end. In Spenser's stanza at the opening of book 5, "the first point of his appointed source" is the full point of a sentence that could have ended with a line of iambic pentameter:

"And being once amisse growes daily wourse." As the "first point" of origin and end shifts, Spenser's sentence produces another poetic line: "And being once amisse growes daily wourse and wourse." The mobile "point" makes a hexameter where there could have been a pentameter.²⁶

Spenser studies is accustomed to reading the crooked square of this stanza as an allegorical emblem for bad justice and as either an apology for or a criticism of the violent vision of justice that Artegall pursues. This is how Eudoxus deploys the image of "the square" in Spenser's *A View of the State of Ireland* when he describes "the whole ordinance and institution of that realmes government" as "both at first, when it was placed, evil plotted, and also sithence, thorough other over-sights, came more out of square to that disorder which it is now come unto" (91). Puttenham relies on a similar reading when he reports that the Areopagites banned "all manner of figurative speeches" from their courtroom as "mere illusions to the mind and wresters of upright judgment." Such figures, he declares, "were all one as if the carpenter, before he began to square his timber, would make his square crooked" (239). But a "crooked" square was not only an emblem of bad justice in early modern England; it was also a tool of the mechanical arts. It is, in fact, only with a crooked square that a stone mason might make something other than a pillar—might make, for example, an archway (Shelby 247).

My aim in this essay has been to put into critical practice the philosophical implications and provocations of the humanist exercise in metaphrasis. I am trying to rethink the relation of form to history at a moment in which critics regularly describe that relation as either radically discontinuous, as with an apolitical aesthetic, or unproblematically continuous, as with the flat ontology that underwrites Caroline Levine's account of "strategic formalism" ("Strategic Formalism" 627).²⁷ One could argue, for example, that Spenser's stanza stages the impossibility of the backward bend, the form of philosophical idealism and historical return, in order to justify the violence with which Artegall and Talus execute justice in faerie land. As Andrew King

writes, the wayward course of the stars in the proem insists on “the inaccessibility of ‘the golden age’” and provides both permission for the coercive tactics pursued by the Knight of Justice and an oblique apology for Spenser’s own complicity in his capacity as a colonialist functionary in Ireland (190; see 190–91).²⁸ This is how the “square” figures in the passage from *A View* quoted above, where the government must be destroyed because it is “out of square.” When read as the formal expression of England’s ideological justification for its imperialist practices, the hexameter’s extra foot becomes an effect and a measure of degeneration. Spenser’s stanza gives formal expression to the historical conditions under which the poet trades in the pentameter line that could have been and the golden world it would have sustained.

But from the perspective of metaphrasis, the contingency rather than the necessity of form invites a different approach to the question of the relation of form to history. We might, for example, turn to the elegiac distich with which Ovid composed his exile elegies, an important resource for Spenser throughout his career but especially in poems like *Colin Clout Comes Home Again*, where the poet measures out the distance between Ireland and Elizabeth’s court. In the *Tristia*, Ovid describes the elegiac couplet’s combination of hexameter and pentameter lines as an effect of his perceived degeneration in exile: “If the lame couplets halt in alternate verses / ’tis due to the metre’s nature or to the length of the journey” (“clauda quod alterno subsidunt carmina versu, / vel pedis hoc ratio, vel via longa facit”; 3.1.11–12). Or, as Thomas Churchyard renders it in the plodding line of poulter’s measure, his metaphrasis of Ovid’s elegiac couplet: “Eche other lyne a limping verse, that here in sight is seene, / Thy weary foote or length of way, the cause thereof haue beene” (Ovid, *Thre First Bookes* C2r). We usually talk about Spenser’s dalliance with forms of quantitative measure as the misguided experiment of a wayward youth, but it is also true that the hexameter with which Spenser concludes his stanza is half of an asymmetrical couplet. Could Spenser’s asymmetrical concluding couplet be a metaphrasis of Ovid’s elegiac distich, one that signifies poetic

degeneration in exile and prepares the form of *The Faerie Queene* itself for metamorphosis?

Michael Dixon has described our opening stanza and its model of the world spun off its axis as Spenser’s torquing of an Ovidian line of historical descent. The temporal line that in Ovid runs from the golden age to the stony becomes in book 5 “the vector of centrifugal dispersion.” Descent is an “entropic spiral,” and as “the spiral unwinds through time, from past to present, its vector of degeneration and dissolution is moral”: the spiral moves, Dixon writes, from “what ought to be to what is” (95). Book 5 of *The Faerie Queene* is therefore said to pull apart what previous books succeed in holding together—the philosophical ideal of the “antique world” and the historical realm of “present time”; book 5 transcribes “what ought to be” and “what is” across a radically simplified and simplistic conception of time.²⁹ This linear conception of time rewrites the difference between the idealism of “what should be” and the indicative of “what is” as a problem of historical distance: the world spun off its axis tracks a historical degeneration for which the shifting constellations act as cosmological chart and cause. The formal contingency cultivated by metaphrasis, however, leads us away from both the idealism of “what should be” and the “historical pessimism” of “what is” in favor of the more capacious but no less rigorously conceived category of “what may be.”³⁰ Form, in this reading, cannot be conflated with ideology, because it is not complicit in the idealism of “what should be”; neither, however, is form primarily significant for the ruptures within which we might access history as lived experience.³¹ “What may be” and the future it opens is not an object of knowledge: this is why Spenser’s verse is neither philosophical nor prophetic. “What may be” is, instead, a realm of thinking coterminous with Renaissance practices of poesis.

Renaissance poesis encourages us to treat metaphrasis as a formal resource for committing thought to motion. In *The Schoolmaster*, Ascham values metaphrasis for precisely its capacity to push thinking perpetually along. He writes that metaphrasis “may bring much profit to ripe heads and staid judgments, because in travailing in it the mind must

needs be very attentive and busily occupied in turning and tossing itself many ways” (106). Ascham’s description of metaphrasis is also an assessment of its value to literary criticism: “the mind . . . turning and tossing itself many ways.” I would therefore like to close this essay by putting pressure on our epistemic commitment to an “end,” by means of Andrew H. Miller’s description of “implicative criticism.” Against the end-oriented claims of its “conclusive” counterpart, “implicative criticism” displays its thinking so as to “enfold” its readers (347). For Miller, “implicative criticism” is primarily a description of practice rather than a theory of reading, what he calls a “modality” of criticism that can extend across traditional methodological divides (357). Implicative criticism is authorized, however, by a theory of the art object to which it responds, and this theory would seem to imply, if not entail, protocols of reading. Implicative criticism understands the art object as an “unfinished event” (353). Because art is itself “unfinished,” criticism becomes a form of continuation: the critical act models itself on the very principles that permit it to speak and resists, as Fish wrote, “coming to the point” (148). Criticism is therefore neither an act of explanation nor an act of transmission. With respect to the “unfinished event” that it describes, criticism is an act of participation.

Metaphrasis opens Spenser’s stanza up to the possibility of what Spenser himself did not and indeed could not know. By trading in the conclusive knowledge claims characteristic of the classical period, this stanza surrenders thought for acts of thinking, comparison for the acts of continuation that are perhaps more recognizable to us when they play out at the level of narrative, as in Ralph Knevet’s *A Supplement of the Faery Queene* (1635) or John Keats’s single stanza revision of the egalitarian giant episode in book 5.³² Angela Leighton describes the exchange of thought for thinking as poetry’s distinctive contribution to the history of knowledge: “for philosophy, the burden ultimately falls on ‘what’ might be known . . . in poetry, the burden falls on the ongoing ‘how’ of it—on the sounds and syntax which draw us in, again and again, to an act of discovery” (180). Metaphrasis does not align

exactly with the epistemological maneuvers of a single philosophical school, as, for example, with humanist exercises in argument *in utramque partem* (“on both sides”), which, as Victoria Kahn has shown, cultivated skepticism. The thinking encouraged by metaphrasis, however, is of a piece with humanist exercises that valued kaleidoscopic shifts in perspective, like Erasmus’s rewriting of a single sentence over and over again, “transforming the basic expression into a Protean variety of shapes” (*Copia* 348), or like more recent celebrations of form by *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* (Workshop of Potential Literature)—Harry Mathews’s “Thirty-Five Variations on a Theme from Shakespeare” (1999) or Paul Hoover’s fifty-six variations on Shakespeare in *Sonnet 56* (2009). This kind of thinking also finds expression in the work of contemporary poets tentatively described by Maureen M. McLane as the “new poetic philology,” “a kind of making-through-reading,” as, for example, with Paisley Rekdal’s rewriting of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in *Nightingale* (2019), or Monica Youn’s rewriting of John Milton’s Sonnet 19 in *Blackacre* (2016), or Aaron Kunin’s *Love Three* (2020), the making of which began with a paraphrase of George Herbert’s “Love (3)” and proceeded as an iterative evaluation of the adequacy of that and subsequent paraphrases.³³

My argument in this essay has been that “the mind . . . turning and tossing itself many ways” is a kind of thinking that the metaphrastic translation across forms makes possible and that this thinking allows for a future that is open to a wider range of possibilities than those we perceive in the present. But there is surely a perspective from which Ascham’s description speaks to the limitations of metaphrasis as a critical activity. When the mind is “busily occupied in turning and tossing itself many ways,” what is it not thinking about? This is the perspective from which, instead of making space for a future in which the apparent degeneration of the world might take another turn, the possibilities opened up by Spenser’s mobile “point” are merely a form of equivocation.³⁴ I have but one more way of advocating for the kind of thinking that looks like “the mind . . . tossing and turning

itself many ways.” But one way more of defending, in the radically elegant words of Emily Ogden, “a capacity to hold the position of not knowing yet” (6). In her essay *Poetry Is Not a Project*, Dorothea Laskey rejects the intentional imperative of a poet’s project and the linear conception of time on which it relies because, she writes, “poetry has everything to do with existing in a realm of uncertainty” (19). Poetry is not a project, she writes, because “the road through a poem” is not “a single line” but “a series of lines, like a constellation, all interconnected” (20); she writes that “if the kind of kaleidoscopic (versus linear) thinking . . . was promoted more in all people we would have a new and better world.” “We might even,” she continues, “create a century full of aesthetic renaissance.” I close with a question that is also Laskey’s question, “Don’t you want that?” (23).

NOTES

This essay is dedicated to Jacqueline T. Miller on the occasion of her retirement from Rutgers University, New Brunswick, where she taught me and so many others to read *The Faerie Queene*. Thank you, Jackie.

1. This question derives from an Aristotelian definition of “forme” as “a cause by the which a thing is that which it is” (Fraunce G2v). For Aristotle on form, see *Physics* 1.7; *Generation and Corruption* 321b22–322a4, 322a28; *De Anima* 412a10; *Metaphysics* 1029a5–7, 1038b6, 1042a29, 1049a35, 1042b10. For discussions of the Aristotelian conception of form in relation to literary criticism, see Ingarden; LaDrière; Crane. For Renaissance categories of kind or genre, see Colie 1–31. Colie writes “that some Renaissance genre-critics tried to fix those fixes hard” (8), though she emphasizes “mixed genre as a mode of *thought* as well as of poetry” (19).

2. The following reading of Wyatt is indebted to Dolven, “Reading Wyatt” and *Senses*.

3. On the Spenserian stanza, see Dolven, “Method”; Gross; Krier; Empson.

4. For examples of surface reading, see Best and Marcus. For “postcritical,” see Felski. See also Brooks’s admission that though “the formalist critic knows as well as anyone that literary works are merely potential until they are read,” that critic is nonetheless “concerned primarily with the work itself” as well as his sustaining methodological distinction between “the process of composition” and “the structure of the thing composed” (20).

5. If, as Bataille suggests, “the world . . . requir[es] that each thing have its form” such that philosophy is “a matter of giving

a frock coat to what is,” then metaphrasis suggests that the adequate critique of “form” lies not with the “formless” but with a plurality of “forms” (31). See also Bois and Krauss.

6. See Van Es, *Spenser’s Forms* and “Stream.”

7. See also Elsky.

8. On “the potential mood” and fiction, see De Grazia; Magnusson, “Play” and “What”; Rosenfeld, “Poetry” and “In the Mood”; Leeds; Sarkar.

9. On the relation of the style of criticism to its knowledge claims, see Saint-Amour; Kramnick; A. Miller.

10. Scholarship on Spenser and Ireland is largely guided by the critical desire both to acknowledge Spenser’s complicity in a violent program of reform and to demonstrate how faerie land shadows forth the very reality excluded from its idealized vision of a “golden world” (see Myers). Following Nicholson’s *Uncommon Tongues* (2014), Spenser criticism understands this conflict as the very structure of English subjectivity and nation formation at the close of the sixteenth century. When the poet of *The Faerie Queene* looks at Ireland in the present, what he sees is England’s history as the colonized barbarians under Roman rule and the extent to which that history continues to shape the social and political present. Drawing on Spenser’s classical sources for *A View of the State of Ireland*, Shuger argues that “the barbarians to whom Spenser . . . compare[s] the Irish are not the *ad hoc* constructs of a burgeoning imperialist discourse” but are, instead, “the native peoples of England” (495, 496; see also Avery). This historical structure becomes the ontological ground for poetry as such when Ward writes that “the fundamental threat ultimately presented by the acoustic world of colonial Ireland was the possibility that at the heart of what the English had enshrined as articulate speech was the clamorous voice of the other” (760).

11. See Dolezel’s discussion of “distorted history” (esp. 796–99). Though my essay’s thinking is indebted to Gallagher’s work on the counterfactual, it takes a broader approach to the topic than “the counterfactual-historical mode” that is the object of her book *Telling It Like It Wasn’t* (2).

12. On the “pessimism” of this stanza, see also Waller 152; James.

13. Critics disagree on whether the poem is complicit in or critical of this violence. See Lethbridge for essays representative of this spectrum. Greenblatt’s chapter on Spenser in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* set the terms for this conversation (ch. 4).

14. On apocalypse in book 5, see Mallette; Borris; Sandler; Norbrook 97–139. On Spenser’s deferral of the apocalyptic end, see Mallette 152–53; Borris 80; Wittreich 48; Barret 87. On apocalypse and form, see Kermode.

15. See Parker; Goldberg.

16. On blank verse and the epic line, see Foley.

17. Fletcher influentially describes book 5 as “a sequence of episodes unified by their prophetic, typological coherence in a providential scheme” (150). For Fletcher, this is the project of epic, to “create worlds which they [epic poets] dispose imperially” (214). By contrast, King argues that “[l]ike the erring planets ‘from their course astray’, the nation’s history does not fit the ideal,

providential narrative which would give authority, even sanctity, to the nation's experience and ongoing endeavors" (192).

18. On coterminal sentence and stanzaic forms, see Gascoigne 54; Puttenham 155.

19. On the humanist revival of the classical period, see Mueller; Croll; Williamson; Baxandall 20–31; Adamson 583–95.

20. Adamson writes that "the Period is considered as much a unit of prosody as of sense" and aligns the "long Period" with the sonnet form and the "abbreviated Period" with the couplet (593).

21. See also Demetrius 355nC.

22. On parenthesis, see Mann 87–117.

23. I am grateful to Adam Zucker for this observation.

24. James describes the determination with which book 5 of *The Faerie Queene* "undoes the magic of comparison" and performs a Guyon-like destruction of the "imaginative space" previously opened up by the poet's "sustained exploration of relationship between one thing and another."

25. The passage reads in full: "But in oratory as in most matters nature has contrived with incredible skill that the things possessing most utility also have the greatest amount of dignity, and indeed frequently of beauty also. We observe that for the safety and security of the universe this whole ordered world of nature is so constituted that the sky is a round vault, with the earth at its centre, held stationary by its own force and stress; and the sun travels around it, approaching towards the constellation in mid-winter and then gradually rising towards the opposite direction; while the moon receives the sun's light as it advances and retires; and five stars accomplish the same courses with different motion and on different route. This system is so powerful that a slight modification of it would make it impossible for it to hold together, and it is so beautiful that no lovelier vision is even imaginable" ("Sed ut in plerisque rebus incredibiliter hoc natura est ipsa fabricata, sic in oratione, ut ea quae maximam utilitatem in se continerent eadem haberent plurimum vel dignitatis vel saepe etiam venustatis. Incolumitatis ac salutis omnium causa videmus hunc statum esse huius totius mundi atque naturae, rotundum ut caelum terraque ut media sit eaque sua vi nutuque teneatur; sol ut eam circum feratur, ut accedat ad brumale signum et inde sensim ascendat in diversam partem; ut luna accessu et recessu suo solis lumen accipiat; ut eadem spatia quinque stellae dispari motu cursuque conficiant. Haec tantam habent vim ut paulum immutata cohaerere non possint, tantam pulchritudinem ut nulla species ne excogitari quidem possit orationem"; Cicero, *De oratore* 3.45.178–79).

26. Classical and early modern geometers understood mobility to be a property of the point itself, which they describe as both the basic unit of construction and ontologically unstable. At the moment of its material representation, a point is always already a line, which is why some theorists believed that the point was only ever a symbol (see Turner 60). On the necessary but unasserted existence of points in Euclidean geometry, see Berlinski 49–50. According to Euclid, "a lyne is the mouyng of a poynte": any direction in which a point might move is therefore a potential line (B1v). The relation of point to line is not the relation of part to whole; the point is instead best described in terms of the line, or infinite lines, that it could potentially become. In his

reading of Leibniz, Palfrey describes the point as "more a polymorphic crystal than an indivisible atom": "this point is implicated in a multitude of lines or vectors, straight and curved, which extend at once into and away from it . . . the criss-crossing, looping vectors produce potentially infinite planes, glimmering in glimpsed parcels of space and time" (116).

27. See also Levine's elaboration of this idea in *Forms*. Levinson divides contemporary formalist criticism into "normative formalism" and "activist formalism" (559). In a more recent survey, Kramnick and Nersessian include "revisionists" who seek to replace critique with description, citing a genealogy from Sedgwick through Marcus and Best, followed by Felski and theoretically authorized by Latour (652–54). The variations on "historical formalism" that have dominated early modern studies have largely defined themselves in relation to the field's dominant concern with matter, as represented by the essays collected in Brown and Wolfson; Cohen; Burton and Scott-Baumann.

28. On Spenser's poetics in Ireland, see Nicholson; Elsky; Ward.

29. See Anderson 163.

30. For "historical pessimism," see D. Miller 21.

31. See Eagleton 114 and Wolfson's broader history of this approach to form (1–30).

32. For Keats's stanza, see D. Miller. On Spenser's poetics of "thinking," see Teskey 285–309.

33. See Kunin's preface to *Love Three*.

34. On amphibologia and equivocation, see Tutino 121–24.

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Abstract: Metaphrasis is an exercise of the English humanist schoolroom that harbors both a theory of form and a method of reading. From the perspective of metaphrasis, the central question one asks of a form is not what it is. Metaphrasis encourages us to ask, instead: What is the range of this poem's formal possibilities? What variety of forms might this poem take? What variety of forms should this poem take? Or what variety of forms would this poem take under a specific set of alternative conditions, whether we conceive of those conditions along historical, aesthetic, or ethical axes? In this essay, I take up a single stanza from Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1596), and I argue that where form establishes the parameters of possibility for a poem, the critical activity of metaphrasis permits us to imagine the world of the poem otherwise.