Who is Speaking in Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland?* A Response to John Breen[*]

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In his article on Spenser's *View*, John Breen not only presented a perceptive overview of recent critical debate on a notoriously problematic text, but also intervened to make a number of salient comments about reading—for want of a better word—Renaissance texts. Breen's principal target was the inability of numerous modern readers—many of them historians—to bother about the business of close reading and desire to use documents to further an argument without attending to the complexities of texts and contexts. Breen argued that too many readings of the *View* wanted to take the figure of Irenius as identical to that of Spenser himself, when, in fact, the Renaissance dialogue was a slippery genre which refused to allow such correspondence between fictionalised character and author: "Spenser is the authority removed from the text as Erasmus was in *The Praise of Folly* and More in *Utopia*" (126). Using Sidney's distinction between the "historiographer" and the "Poet historical," Breen concludes with the claim that "Spenser belonged to a historiographical school governed by poetry, not empiricism" (128), a skillful rhetorician rather than a fact grubber, whose text foregrounds history as a series of lessons based on the ancient principle of mimesis, a revelation which means that one has to attend to the whole narrative of the text and interpret that and not loot it for snippets of information to bolster an argument.

There is little in Breen's analysis that I would wish to challenge and, if I read my own work aright, I have independently been making a

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similar case (albeit not always as directly or eloquently) in some of the work which Breen cites. For far too long certain historians especially, have been allowed to conduct an argument amongst themselves without attending to the doubts and questions about the nature of the text and problems of reading arising in other quarters.[1] After Breen's intervention this *should*—which is not to say *will*—no longer be possible.

Needless to say, I have some reservations about facets of Breen's article, despite my general agreement with his overall argument and sense of gratitude to him for having put numerous important matters in such a persuasive manner.

First, whilst I have no qualms about agreeing with statements that the *View* "is a staging of the self by Spenser" (123-24), and "The author's voice is always refracted through that of a fictive polyvalent speaker" (124), it does not seem to me to *necessarily* follow—although, of course, it might—that one should never try to read the *View* as a "policy paper" and that "Spenser's 'I' elides (is never fully present)" (130). It seems to me that, like the readers he so accurately criticises, Breen is in danger of attempting to set up a generic category and then pigeonhole the *View* within a tradition and style of writing he has marked out without allowing for the fact that it might well have belonged to other traditions as well. To recognise that the *View* is a text which joins together different categories of writing—the aesthetic and the political, poetry and history— should not force the reader into accepting that there was therefore a fixed category in the English Renaissance which combined the two in a stable manner, as Breen seems to me to assume. It is not obvious to me that "Spenser *belonged* to a historiographical *school* governed by poetry, not empiricism" (128) [my emphases], but, rather, that he was able to employ a range of ideas, styles and genres which explored the relationship between poetry and history. Spenser was undoubtedly influenced by the ideas of Sir Philip Sidney and George Puttenham, as Breen claims (128-29); exactly how that influence manifested itself is another matter entirely. Puttenham and Sidney can hardly be described as a "school," although they do ask similar questions and are clearly relevant to the intellectual milieu of the composition of the *View*, nor is it clear that anyone had any fixed ideas on how a "Poet historical"

was supposed to write in the late sixteenth-century, as Breen appears to be claiming.[2]

After a discussion of the cultural genealogy of the Irish which concludes with a comparison of the forms of cannibalistic blood-drinking practised by ancient, savage peoples, Irenius comments:

> So allsoe they write that the owlde Irishe weare wonte And so haue I sene some of the Irishe doe but not theire enemyes but friendes blodd as namelye at the execution of A notable Traitour at Limericke Called murrogh Obrien I sawe an olde woman which was his foster mother take vp his heade whilste he was quartered and sucked vp all the blodd rvnninge theareout Sayinge that the earthe was not worthie to drinke it and thearewith allso steped her face, and breste and torne heare Cryinge and shrikinge out moste terrible/[3]

This description, with its obvious rhetoric of the eye-witness, has been used by some commentators to argue for the presence of Spenser in Ireland as early as 1577 rather than the usually accepted date of 1580 when Spenser travelled over as secretary to the Lord Deputy, Arthur Lord Grey de Wilton.[4] Obviously, it is dangerous to take such "eveidence" at face value as Breen, I suspect, would argue; but, what exact signal does such a passage send to the reader? Is it beyond dispute that we must discount Spenser's voice and note that it is mediated by the aesthetics of the textual form and, therefore, meant to be fictive? Or are there even more complex games at work whereby the fictively constructed "I" lends weight and authority to a political/anthropological analysis in an attempt to persuade the reader? To put it another way, given the mixed and unstable form which the *View* would appear to have—who knows exactly what was intended by the narrating of this incident—is it not just as dangerous to discount the obviously political reading and privilege the elided literary voice?

Breen cites James Ware, the editor of the first published edition of the work in 1633, as a naive reader of the work—"an early representative of an interpretative community which disregards the generic complexity of the *View* and insists upon reading Spenser as Irenius"—and constructs instead an ideal reader, "attentive to the author's poetic strategies and the text's generic complexity" (119). One should perhaps bear in mind that early readers of *The Faerie Queene* whose notes survive also appear

to have been rather naive readers, *which is not to dismiss them as wrong.*[5] Not all of Ware's comments are straightforwardly ridiculous or easy to decode: Ware doctored the *View* (see *Variorum* 10: 519-23 for details) and commented in his preface, had Spenser lived in the 1630s when, as Ware saw it, Ireland had been pacified, "he would have amitted those passages which may seeme to lay either any particular aspersion upon some families, or generall upon the Nation" (532). He also represented the *View* to the reader as a tract about ancient Irish customs and published it with the work of three other writers, Meredith Hanmer, Edmund Campion and Henry Marleburrough, as *The Historie of Ireland*, when it clearly deals more thoroughly with the political situation of the 1590s (in the *View* Irenius says that he will deal with the question of Irish antiquity elsewhere and at greater length [230]), all of which would imply that Ware's preface is not quite as it seems and his reasons for publishing the *View* by no means straightforward. The problem of sorting out even how readers read is a thorny one.

It should also be borne in mind that a large part of the second half of the *View*, after both interlocutors have accepted that Ireland needs to be reinvaded, is concerned with empirical detail, describing the means of munitioning and victualling an increased army in Ireland, where forts need to be positioned, which sections of the population need to be transplanted, where regional governors should be stationed, how to establish colonies and plantations, and what has been wrong with previous government tactics. It seems unsurprising to me that many readers read at least parts of the *View* as a "policy paper" (perhaps this is what caused Ware's nervous disclaimers?) and, pace Breen's sophisticated ideal reader, were tempted to read Irenius's proposals as Spenser's own. Vast sections of the text are complex and generically indeterminate; but, equally, other passages are not, which would appear to complicate matters further rather than simplifying things.

Breen makes use of Virginia Cox's recent book, *The Renaissance Dialogue*, in order to point out how negligent of form most readers of the *View* have been.[6] Breen comments: "Cox refuses to simplify the role of the speakers: the authentic voice of the author oscillates between absence and presence for the voice of the dramatic character is never wholly coterminous with the voice of the author" (121, Cox 7). What Breen does

not point out is Cox's conclusion of the development of the history of the *literary* dialogue, that the dialogic form eventually became engulfed in a typographical culture which produced the *Essais* of Montaigne in his "lonely tower" (113) and all too often the dialogue degenerated into a genre "whose conversational form is no more than an awkward and cumbersome decorative veneer" (112).

Cox's ideas are questionable and certainly owe a great deal to the psychological speculations of Walter Ong regarding the onset of the Gutenberg galaxy; but it is quite clear that Cox views the history of the literary dialogue as a battle between those who used the form to espouse a genuine dialogue—Breen's ideal reading community—and those who used the dialogue as a more obviously didactic form.[7] Perhaps it is relevant that the View was prepared for print, but one suspects that it was never really intended by its author to be reproduced in that medium.[8] What needs to be stated is that the *View* is by no means obviously a literary dialogue, which is what Cox is discussing, and even if we assume it is, it is not clear that Breen has cited Cox's conclusions accurately. There are a number of other dialogues dealing with Ireland which date from approximately the same period as Spenser's: Richard Beacon's *Solon his Follie* (1594), which clearly does lead the reader in certain directions, being heavily indebted to Machiavelli's political thought (Machiavelli wrote a dialogue, *Arte della guerra* [1521]); Barnaby Rich's "Anatomy of Ireland" (1615), perhaps modelled on the *View*; and the "Book on the state of Ireland, addressed to Robert, Earl of Essex, by H. C.," in the form of a dialogue between Peregryne and Sylvyn, the names of Spenser's two sons, to name but three.[9]

When Breen demands that the *View* be read in terms of Erasmus, More, and the tradition of the humanist dialogue, he is clearly right that such a context is relevant and needs to be considered in a way that Ciaran Brady's dismissal of the "dialogue form . . . as a decoy" fails to recognise.[10] But, I would suggest, the tradition of the dialogue is more complex and contradictory than this, containing from its early Socratic forms onwards, a mixture of the didactic, the playful and the open-ended.[11] Breen points to Spenser's "playful delight" in addressing readers beyond the text when Irenius tells Eudoxus that he is really only addressing him (124-25), a point that might be considered alongside

Patricia Coughlan's suggestion that there is an element of comedy in
Eudoxus's "slightly patronizing air" and attitude towards Irenius, as
well as Irenius's over-enthusiasm, inability to stick to the subject and
need to be kept in line by his interlocutor.[12] Whilst this may be true
of parts of the *View*, it is arguable that it provides a satisfactory overview
of the whole. Not only does it appear that we are supposed to endorse
Irenius's plans for the reinvasion of Ireland in the second half of the
text, and his speculations on the predominantly Scythian origins of the
savage Irish, but he is represented as the man of Ireland who is
informing the well-meaning and rational but ignorant (English) outsider
exactly what conditions are like in Ireland so that Eudoxus constantly
has to modify his ideas and accept Irenius's judgements.

In the crucial discussion regarding the means to be used to reform
Ireland, Irenius insists that drastic measures are necessary. Eudoxus
suggests that the establishment of good, English laws in Ireland will
solve the problem, but Irenius has to explain to him that the sword will
have to be used to establish the possibility of government, so lacking
in civilisation is Ireland (2910 ff.). At first Eudoxus asks quite challenging
questions and appears shocked at Irenius's suggestions, "Howe then
doe ye thinke is the reformacion thereof to be begonne yf not by Lawes
and Ordinaunces/" (2954-55); "did ye blame me even nowe for wishinge
kerne Horsboyes and Carrowes to be cleane cutt of as too violente a
meanes, and doe youe your selfe now prescribe the same medicyne?
Is not the sworde the moste violent redresse that maye be vsed for anie
evill//" (2961-64); and when Irenius suggests that a "stronge power
of men" will have to "bring in all that Rebellious route of loose people"
(2986-87), Eudoxus exclaims "Yea speake now *Irenius* of an infinite
Chardge to her maiestie" (2990). However, this section of the argument
culminates in Irenius explaining the need for "obstinate Rebells suche
as will neuer be made dutifull and obediente nor brought to labour or
civill Conuersacion" (3238-39; presumably, the dialogue form), "to be
cutt off" (3242). By now, Eudoxus is agreeing with Irenius: "Surelye of
suche desperate persons as will willfullie followe the Course of theire
owne follie theare is no Compassion to be had" (3243-44). Irenius's next
speech contains the most notorious passage in the *View*, the description
of the effects of such policies in Munster:

Out of euerie Corner of the woods and glinnes they Came Creeping forthe vppon theire handes for theire Leggs Coulde not beare them, they loked like Anotomies of deathe, they spake like ghostes Cryinge out of theire graues, they did eate the dead Carrions, happie wheare they Coulde finde them, Yea and one another sone after, in so muche as the verye carkasses they spared not to scrape out of theire graves. . . . that in shorte space theare weare non allmoste lefte and a moste populous and plentifull Countrye sodenlye lefte voide of man or beaste, yeat sure in all that warr theare perished not manie by the sworde but all by the extreamitye of famine which they themselves had wroughte/ (3259-70).

Irenius argues that all these deaths are not actually caused by the sword of state but by the rebels' own violence: in effect, they consume themselves. Eudoxus now agrees and leads the discussion off onto the question of false pity and how it can mislead the English court into pursuing misconceived policies in Ireland as happened with the slanders against the hard-line tactics of Spenser's erstwhile patron, Arthur Lord Grey de Wilton (3289-317).[13]

This whole passage, I would argue, is a *tour de force* of manipulative rhetoric: the English reader, ignorant of conditions in Ireland, is put in the position of Eudoxus, who makes reasonable but erroneous judgements, until he is given all the necessary facts by Irenius. I do not see how this passage can be read as a piece of balanced, playful dialogue between two equals, as the opinions of the one speaker seem to be privileged so clearly over the objections of the other. Breen is right to urge caution to those who wish to see a clear link between Irenius and Spenser throughout the *View*; however, some passages would appear to have the author's endorsement.

To conclude: despite my rather lengthy riposte to John Breen, I find little to disagree with in his excellent article. My only real caveat is that he has moved too swiftly to reject a position by stating its opposite and thus fixed the text within another genre whereas, like so much writing produced during the sixteenth-century, *A View of the Present State of Ireland* is a text which contains a whole series of mixed generic marks demanding different readings. It might be helpful to see the work as a combination of a sophisticated humanist dialogue—in itself a "mixed" genre caught between manipulating the reader and allowing the reader the means to educate him or herself—and a political treatise arguing

a specific position. Sorting out such differences is obviously easier said than done, but if the *View* did not have a particular message, identifiable as its author's, it is hard to imagine that it would have found its way into the state papers as a treatise purportedly offering advice. On the other hand, the complex history of its reception would seem to indicate that different readers interpreted the text in markedly different ways.[14]

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NOTES

[1]See Breen's comments on Nicholas Canny's attempts to distinguish between the methodologies of historians and literary scholars (123). Breen rightly points out that such distinctions are no longer tenable. I would also add that Canny's rhetorical strategy is to suggest that historians are superior to literary critics because they, as he believes, do more work.

[2]See my *Literature, Politics and National Identity: Reformation to Renaissance* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994) 122-43 for further comment.

[3]Edmund Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland, The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition,* ed. Edwin Greenlaw et al. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1932-49), vol. 10, *The Prose Works,* ed. Rudolf Gottfried, ll. 1935-42, at p. 112. Future references to this text in parentheses.

[4]See, for example, Willy Maley, *A Spenser Chronology* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994) 6-7; *Variorum,* 10: 344. On the status of the eye-witness see Elaine Y. L. Ho, "The Rhetoric of the 'I'-Witness in Fulke Greville's *The Life of Sir Philip Sidney," Literature and History,* second series, 2.1 (Spring 1991): 17-26.

[5]See Graham Hough, ed., *The First Commentary on* The Faerie Queene (London: Privately Printed, 1964); John Manning, "Notes and Marginalia in Bishop Percy's Copy of Spenser's *Works," N&Q* 229 (1984): 225-27; R. M. Cummings, ed., *Edmund Spenser: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1971), *passim.*

[6]Virginia Cox, *The Renaissance Dialogue: Literary Dialogue in Its Social and Political Contexts, Castiglione to Galileo* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993).

[7]For Ong's ideas see *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (New York: Columbia UP, 1958); *Orality and Literacy* (London: Methuen, 1982).

[8]See Jean R. Brink, "Constructing the *View of the Present State of Ireland," Spenser Studies* 11 (1994): 203-228, pp. 209-216; Andrew Hadfield, "Was Spenser's *View of the Present State of Ireland* Censored? A Review of the Evidence," *N&Q* 239 (1994): 459-63.

[9]See Sydney Anglo, "A Machiavellian Solution to the Irish Problem: Richard Beacon's *Solon His Follie* (1594)," Edward Cheney and Peter Mack, eds., *England and the Continental Renaissance: Essays in Honour of J. B. Trapp* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1990) 153-64; Edward M. Hinton, ed., "Rich's *Anatomy of Ireland,* with an Account of the Author," *PMLA* 55 (1940): 73-101; *Calendar of State Papers, Ireland, Elizabeth, 1598, January - 1599, March* 505-07.

[10]Ciaran Brady, "Spenser's Irish Crisis: Humanism and Experience in the 1590s," *Past and Present* 111 (May, 1986): 17-49, p. 41.

[11]For recent analysis of this see Arne Melberg, "Plato's Mimesis," *Theories of Mimesis* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995) 10-50; Tom Cohen, "*P.s.*: Plato's Scene of Reading in the *Protagoras," Anti-Mimesis from Plato to Hitchcock* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995) 45-86.

[12]Patricia Coughlan, "'Some secret scourge which shall by her come unto England': Ireland and Incivility in Spenser," Patricia Coughlan, ed., *Spenser and Ireland: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Cork: Cork UP, 1989) 46-74, at p. 67. See also Andrew Hadfield, "Briton and Scythian: Tudor Representations of Irish Origins," *Irish Historical Studies* 112 (1993): 390-408, pp. 402-03.

[13]On Grey, see the entry in *The Spenser Encyclopedia,* ed. A. C. Hamilton et al. (London: Routledge, 1990) 341-42.

[14]See Nicholas Canny, "Edmund Spenser and the Development of an Anglo-Irish Identity," *YES* 13 (1983): 1-19; Willy Maley, "How Milton and Some Contemporaries Read Spenser's *View," Brendan Bradshaw, Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley, eds., *Representing Ireland: Literature and the Origins of Conflict, 1534-1660* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993) 191-208; Sir James Ware's comments cited above.