

PAUL J. ALPERS

The Poetry of “The Faerie Queene”



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THE POETRY OF
THE FAERIE QUEENE

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THE FAERIE QUEENE

BY PAUL J. ALPERS

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In Memory of Rosemond Tuve

Preface

The purpose of this book is to bring *The Faerie Queene* into focus—to enable the ordinary reader and student to trust Spenser's verse, and scholars and critics to agree on what the realities of the poem are and on the ways in which it is profitable to discuss and investigate them. I hope that my aims and arguments will be clear from the text itself, and I want only to say a word here about the organization of the book. Part I is addressed to describing and understanding the surface of *The Faerie Queene*; it concerns both the practical problem of the right relation between the reader and the poem, and more theoretical problems about the nature of the reality constituted by Spenser's verse. Part II concerns the interpretation of *The Faerie Queene*; it uses a variety of historical materials to ask what kinds of meanings are to be found in a number of episodes and, finally, a major canto of the poem. Part III draws on the arguments and conclusions of the first two parts to discuss, in the most general way, the nature of Spenser's poetry. The last two chapters are more illustrative than argumentative. They are intended to show first the kinds of continuities that exist in whole books of *The Faerie Queene*, and second the unique power of Spenser's verse to put us in possession of man's traditional wisdom about himself and of the truths contained in the traditions of European poetry.

Parts of Chapter 1 appeared as an article, "Narrative and Rhetoric in *The Faerie Queene*," in *Studies in English Literature*, II (1962), pages 27–46.

Quotations from *The Faerie Queene* are from *The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition*, edited by Edwin Greenlaw, et al., Baltimore, 1932–1957, cited in the notes as *Variorum*. For *Orlando Furioso* I have used the text of Santorre Debenedetti and Cesare Segre, Bologna, 1960, and the prose translation of Allan Gilbert, New York, 1954, with the permission of S. F. Vanni, Publishers. For Latin authors I have used the texts and translations of the Loeb Classical Library. All unidentified translations are mine. Biblical passages are from the Great Bible (1540); New Testament passages are quoted from *The New Testament Octapla*, edited by Luther A. Weigle. Quotations from Shakespeare are from *Works*, edited by George Lyman Kittredge, Boston, 1936. Except for expanding contractions, I have not altered any of the texts cited.

I owe a great deal to many people: to Douglas Bush and Harry Levin, who patiently supervised the doctoral dissertation in which I

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first tried to work out some of my ideas; to Reuben A. Brower, who taught me to frame critical questions and pursue intelligible answers; to my wife Svetlana, and to Stephen Orgel, David Kalstone, Roger Sale, and Jonas A. Barish for their friendship and intellectual companionship as well as for their services to this book; to Josephine Miles and Norman Grabo for giving the manuscript the kind of reading that encourages by its very stringency and intelligence; to my graduate students at Berkeley, who made teaching Spenser a joy and with whom many of the ideas in this book were worked out; finally, for favors great and small, to Herschel Baker, Elizabeth Closs, Martha Craig, Robert M. Durling, Donald Friedman, Christopher Ricks, Thomas P. Roche, Jr., and Ann Stanford. I should also like to thank the American Council of Learned Societies for a grant-in-aid that enabled me to do much of the research for this book, and the Warburg Institute, and particularly E. H. Gombrich, its director, and J. B. Trapp, for their hospitality during my months in London.

My greatest obligation is one that I can now discharge only by an act of commemoration. Rosemond Tuve gave me the support of intelligent understanding at a time when I was most discouraged about my work on Spenser. For most of the years I worked on this book, she was both its most discerning critic and its most appreciative audience. Indeed it was only when her magnificent *Allegorical Imagery* appeared, after I had completed my manuscript, that I realized how similar were the conclusions about Spenser towards which, starting from quite different materials and problems, we had both been working. Miss Tuve's powers and disinterestedness are apparent on even the densest pages of her writings, but one had to know her to realize fully how penetrating and flexible her mind was, and how profoundly she was motivated by love of the literature she studied. By her friendship, as well as by her example, she made you want your writing to be worthy of its subject. I hope this book is, and that in being so it is worthy of her.

P. J. A.
Berkeley, California
March 7, 1966

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P A R T I

Chapter One

The Rhetorical Mode of Spenser's Narrative

I

The main problem that faces a reader of *The Faerie Queene* was stated by Joseph Addison, in his "Account of the Greatest English Poets":

Old *Spenser* next, warm'd with poetick rage,
In ancient tales amus'd a barb'rous age;
An age that yet uncultivate and rude,
Where-e'er the poet's fancy led, pursu'd
Thro' pathless fields, and unfrequented floods,
To dens of dragons, and enchanted woods.
But now the mystick tale, that pleas'd of yore,
Can charm an understanding age no more;
The long-spun allegories fulsom grow,
While the dull moral lyes too plain below.
We view well-pleas'd at distance all the sights
Of arms and palfries, battels, fields and fights,
And damsels in distress, and courteous knights.
But when we look too near, the shades decay,
And all the pleasing landschape fades away.¹

The problem Addison indicates is the relation between the rich and elaborate surface of *The Faerie Queene* and its poetic meaning. For Addison, as for many readers today, "the dull moral" is both too insistent and too simple to allow narrative realities to take on a complex and substantial life of their own. Romantic criticism defended Spenser from such complaints by skimming off the surface and leaving the moral alone. This is the burden of Hazlitt's famous remark that Spenser's allegory is a painted dragon, and Hazlitt esteemed Spenser precisely because he was persuaded to follow "where-e'er the poet's fancy led." Modern commentators have in turn rescued Spenser from the romantics by arguing that the moral of *The Faerie Queene* is as com-

¹ Lines 17-31, in *The Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Addison*, ed. A. C. Guthkelch, London, 1914, 2 vols.

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plex and interesting as the surface of chivalric events and exotic landscapes. But the tendency of modern studies has been to expound Spenser's ideas, and there has recently been a reaction against the abstractness and aridity of much interpretation of *The Faerie Queene*. Book after book now urges us to return to the surface of the poem and to find its meanings there. Yet we still have no account of *The Faerie Queene* that new readers find persuasive or that scholars and critics find trustworthy. The movement back to the surface of the poem is entirely right in its motives and aims. But we still wander in a dark wood, because we have not made clear to ourselves just what constitutes the surface of *The Faerie Queene*, or in what way it holds our attention and expresses meanings of the complexity and human importance that we expect to find in great poetry.

The main initial impediment to our understanding of *The Faerie Queene* is a false assumption about the relation in it between narrative events and poetic meaning. Consider Ruskin's analysis of Book I—one of the first reactions against the romantic tendency to dismiss or minimize Spenser's allegory:

[Holiness], in the opening of the book, has Truth (or Una) at its side, but presently enters the Wandering Wood, and encounters the serpent Error; that is to say, Error in her universal form, the first enemy of Reverence and Holiness. . . . Having vanquished this first open and palpable form of Error, as Reverence and Religion must always vanquish it, the Knight encounters Hypocrisy, or Archimagus: Holiness cannot detect Hypocrisy, but believes him, and goes home with him; whereupon, Hypocrisy succeeds in separating Holiness from Truth; and the Knight (Holiness) and Lady (Truth) go forth separately from the house of Archimagus. Now observe; the moment Godly Fear, or Holiness, is separated from Truth, he meets Infidelity, or the Knight Sans Foy. . . .²

Ruskin simply translates the narrative materials of Book I into abstract terms. Characters and settings are given consistent symbolic identifications, and the narrative action indicates their conceptual relations. Ruskin makes what is still the fundamental assumption of Spenserian criticism—that the sequence of stanzas in *The Faerie Queene* is equivalent to the narrative materials, or (to use a handier term) the fiction, of the poem. As exemplary or dramatic narrative, Spenser's fiction is taken to be real, according to the conventional sus-

² *The Stones of Venice*, Appendix 2: "Theology of Spenser," in John Ruskin, *Works*, ed. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, London, 1903-1912, 11, 251-252.

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pension of disbelief we grant to any romance or novel. As allegory, the fiction is understood to be less real than its conceptual translation, but it nevertheless provides both the terms and the syntax of the translation. "What happens" poetically is taken to be identical with, or at least determined by, "what happens" fictionally. Whatever the specific content or meaning, it is expressed by the characters and settings that constitute and the events that take place in the putative reality of the poem.

However, when we read the poem on this assumption, we find numerous inconsistencies, some of which produce major interpretive difficulties. We find inconsistencies, I think, because our criterion of consistency is not valid. In turning narrative materials into stanzas of poetry, Spenser's attention is focused on the reader's mind and feelings and not on what is happening within his fiction. His poetic motive in any given stanza is to elicit a response—to evoke, modify, or complicate feelings and attitudes. His stanzas, then, are modes of address by the poet to the reader. For this reason, I call his use of narrative materials *rhetorical*.

The most striking instance in which this approach resolves a fictional inconsistency is the problem of why the figure of Time is in the Garden of Adonis. According to Spenser's myth, the flowers in the garden are souls or forms that are sent out into the world; having lived and died on earth, they return to the Garden of Adonis to be replanted and reborn. The garden itself is a spontaneously flowering paradise and projects the idea that nature is permanent because its change is orderly. Literally, then, it is simply a mistake to place wicked Time with his scythe in the Garden of Adonis: the realm he rules is the earth below, and he represents a principle of sudden and final death that is presumably resolved by the orderly cycles of the garden.³

³ The problem is not that Spenser places a figure named Time in the garden, but that he depicts Time as a destroyer, an agent of death, not of change. As Brents Stirling long ago pointed out, Spenser never represents the Garden of Adonis as changeless: "The Philosophy of Spenser's 'Garden of Adonis,'" *PMLA*, 49 (1934), 501–538. But the words that describe Time's actions—"mow," "flings," "wither," "fowly mard," and "beates downe"—all suggest final destruction; there is a sharp contrast with the terms of preceding stanzas, all of which suggest a process—"chaungefull" (stanza 33, which ends, "so like a wheele around they runne from old to new") and "decayes" and "fade," which appear jointly in both stanzas 37 and 38. Stirling maintains that "there is nothing inconsistent in Time mowing down the 'flowering herbes and goodly things'" (p. 526), but his argument depends on identifying change and death. The depiction of Time will not support, as the rest of the canto will, the formula used of Adonis, "eterne in mutabilitie" (3.6.47).

Robert Ellrodt (*Neoplatonism in the Poetry of Spenser*, Geneva, 1960, pp.

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Yet poetically Time's presence is perfectly valid. The potency of the image of a natural paradise depends on our understanding the idea of change that it corrects and resolves. In order to make us aware of earthly mutability, Spenser is willing to neglect both his fable and its philosophic coherence. He sets these aside in order to introduce concepts, and their attendant feelings, that are relevant to our understanding of the Garden of Adonis. In the stanza preceding the description of Time, Spenser explains the continuity of matter. "The substance is not chaunged," he says, but forms are:

For formes are variable and decay,
By course of kind, and by occasion;
And that faire flowre of beautie fades away,
As doth the lilly fresh before the sunny ray.

(3.6.38)

Spenser returns to the flowers of the garden by means of an image developed in the course of direct address to the reader. In the next four stanzas, he lays out the double suggestion of the image of the lily—on the one hand the inevitability of decay, and on the other the sense of benignity and naturalness given by "sunny ray."

The first of these stanzas is the presentation of earthly time:

Great enemy to it, and to all the rest,
That in the *Gardin of Adonis* springs,
Is wicked *Time*, who with his scyth address,
Does mow the flowring herbes and goodly things,
And all their glory to the ground downe flings,
Where they doe wither, and are fowly mard:

77–84) and William Nelson (*The Poetry of Edmund Spenser*, New York, 1963, pp. 210–215) have shown that the Garden of Adonis is not a realm of Platonic forms, but a storehouse of what Plotinus and, following him, Augustine called *rationes seminales* (cf. *FQ* 3.6.30). "According to Augustine," Ellrodt says, "God created all things, present and future, simultaneously. All living beings not fully developed in the first act of creation—whether plants, beasts or the bodies of men—were preformed in the *rationes seminales*, or invisible germs, not to be mistaken for the eternal 'ideas,' which were not created, but pre-existed in the divine mind or Word from all eternity" (p. 77). Such "seeds" have a temporal aspect inherent in them—they are created in time and they grow in time—but again this explains no more than the presence of change in the garden. Nelson, p. 213, simply identifies the description of Time's mowing with change. Ellrodt recognizes the distinction between change and death, and he rightly says that the flowers of stanza 39 "cannot be the pre-existent seeds but the actual beings they produced." But he then goes on to argue that these distinctions "could not but be blurred in the poetic myth" (p. 81).

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He flies about, and with his flaggy wings
Beates downe both leaues and buds without regard,
Ne euer pittie may relent his malice hard.

(3.6.39)

Time is more the activated abstraction of a sonnet than a fictional personage. The striking details of the stanza impress us primarily as emphatic diction, and not as the attributes of an emblematic character. "Wicked," "mow," "to the ground downe flings," "wither," "fowly mard," "beates downe," "malice hard"—this series runs through the stanza and is juxtaposed with the language of delicate pastoral—"flowring herbes," "glory," "leaues and buds." Spenser is multiplying statements about the action of earthly time. Even where there is a sense of fictional action, it is in the service of direct address to the reader. Time's wings, which ordinarily represent swiftness of flight, are here instruments of destruction, and the effect of this change in narrative materials is to give continuity and emphasis to the poet's statements.

The stanza that follows is also conceived as an address to the reader:

Yet pittie often did the gods relent,
To see so faire things mard, and spoyled quight:
And their great mother *Venus* did lament
The losse of her deare brood, her deare delight;
Her hart was pierst with pittie at the sight,
When walking through the Gardin, them she saw,
Yet no'te she find redresse for such despight.
For all that liues, is subiect to that law:
All things decay in time, and to their end do draw.

(3.6.40)

The first line directly echoes the last line of the stanza on Time and produces an important shift of tone. "Ne euer pittie may relent his malice hard" has a note of finality and rigor. "Yet pittie often did the gods relent" conveys tender solicitude for Time's victims. Venus' mourning is produced, so to speak, by our responding to Spenser's statements and to the verbal linking of the two stanzas. By the same token, Spenser can elicit from Venus' fictional tenderness a tone of direct address that is both delicate and grave. His concluding explanation of the goddess's helplessness is really a summary statement of Time's dominion over nature. It is from this rhetorical point that he

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presents the garden as a paradise (3.6.41–42). And even here he begins by saying, "But were it not, that *Time* their troubler is." In a strict philosophical sense, this concession is absurd, but poetically it places the vision of "continuall spring, and haruest . . . both meeting at one time" in a wider context of human feeling about time.

The poetic coherence of *The Faerie Queene* is usually described in terms of fictional consistency; but it is rather to be found in the coherence of the reader's feelings and attitudes. One of the puzzles of the poem is the ending of Book I, when the Red Cross Knight leaves Una. Spenser does not explicitly address the reader, but we can solve the interpretive dilemma only by recognizing that the mode of his narration is rhetorical:

Yet swimming in that sea of blisfull ioy,
He nought forgot, how he whilome had sworne,
In case he could that monstrous beast destroy,
Vnto his Farie Queene backe to returne:
The which he shortly did, and *Vna* left to mourne.

(1.12.41)

If the knight's separation from Una does not mean separation from Truth, as it did earlier in the book, then what does it mean? The question is perplexing if we assume that a continuous fiction is the main vehicle of Spenser's meaning. But surely Spenser's intention is clear enough. The holy knight still bears his burden of flesh, and therefore must resume a life of heroic action. Marriage to Una symbolically tells us about the knight's election and his moral condition, but it is not the literal truth about his human experience. As literal experience, the marriage is a "sea of blisfull ioy" and suggests permanent earthly happiness—precisely what is not possible for man since the Fall. Una's mourning, then, suggests the pathos of the fact that the servant of God does not enjoy the eternal bliss of the saints in heaven.

There is a further fictional inconsistency in the departure of the Red Cross Knight. He has already promised the hermit Contemplation that he will forsake arms and take up a "Pilgrims poore estate" (1.10.64), and this vow is directly contradicted by the vow to return to the Fairy Queen. Yet both vows serve the same poetic purpose: each in its context enlarges the reader's understanding of the conflicting imperatives that involve the elected man. The vow to the Fairy Queen, which is not mentioned until the last canto, is introduced simply to be used as a poetic device in the conclusion of Book I. In fictional terms, this conclusion must seem clumsy if not meaningless. But it is entirely true to

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the reader's sense of Spenser's central concern—human experience seen under the aspect of man's relation to God.

Each stanza in *The Faerie Queene* is conceived as an address to the reader, but we do not feel, as we do in *Paradise Lost*, that a decisive voice speaks to us. Spenser's manner of address is much more self-effacing than Milton's—so much so that C. S. Lewis finds it possible to claim that "outside the proems to the books and cantos he scarcely writes a line that is not for the story's sake."⁴ Nevertheless, Spenser's style is not, as Lewis proposes, "to be judged as the style of a storyteller"; it makes sense only as a rhetorical instrument, a means of appealing to the reader's feelings and awarenesses. Without attempting a comprehensive discussion of Spenser's style, I would like to examine a crucial phenomenon in his poetry—the pictorial effects in which his well-known verbal sensuousness seems to be in the service of fictional narration.

It has always been assumed that in his pictorial stanzas, Spenser's purpose is primarily imitative or descriptive: his language is chosen to render a "real" object, which of course can be symbolic or emblematic.⁵ But we often find that a striking pictorial effect is not identical with visual description:

For round about, the wals yclothed were
With goodly arras of great maiesty,
Wouen with gold and silke so close and nere,

⁴ *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, Oxford, 1954, p. 389.

⁵ The most extreme statement of this view is Joseph B. Dallett, "Ideas of Sight in *The Faerie Queene*," *ELH*, 27 (1960), 87–121. Dallett treats Spenser's reader as an "ideal spectator" who exists *within the fiction*, and he argues that "many of the descriptions (including those with optical 'absurdities') are analogous to methods of representation found abundantly in the fine arts" (p. 98). See also W. B. C. Watkins, *Shakespeare and Spenser*, Princeton, 1950, pp. 223–258 ("Spenser's Palace of Art"); Rudolf Gottfried, "The Pictorial Element in Spenser's Poetry," in *That Soueraine Light*, ed. W. R. Mueller and D. C. Allen, Baltimore, 1952, pp. 123–133; Carl Robinson Sonn, "Spenser's Imagery," *ELH*, 26 (1959), 156–170. Watkins' chapter is an engaging and sensitive essay in the tradition of comparing Spenser to various painters. Gottfried complains that Spenser's "pictures" are very bad paintings, and therefore concludes that the pictorial element in his poetry is insignificant. Sonn argues that Spenser does not attempt to paint pictures, but uses concrete details in formal images that convey abstracts or universals. But he assumes that when Spenser's language is pictorial it renders the sensory experience of objects in the external world. He recognizes that some of Spenser's sensuous imagery offers "no chance of sensuous identification with the object" (p. 166), but he so completely explains these images in terms of abstractions that he is unable to account for their sensuousness, which he describes as "transient," "superficial," or "sublimated" (pp. 167–168).

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That the rich metall lurked priuily,
As faining to be hid from enuious eye;
Yet here, and there, and every where vnwares
It shewd it selfe, and shone vnwillingly;
Like a discolourd Snake, whose hidden snares
Through the greene gras his long bright burnisht
backe declares. (3.11.28)

Several words and phrases that support a pictorial effect are not at all descriptive—for example, “vnwares,” “vnwillingly,” and most notably “faining to be hid from enuious eye,” where Spenser directly suggests the kind of feeling that Busyrane’s tapestries induce. Other phrases that do have a visual reference are persuasive because they are suggestive moral formulas—“close and nere,” “lurked priuily,” “hidden snares.” A great deal of quasi-visual effect is achieved through verse rhythms, particularly in the sixth and ninth lines. Spenser is using all the verbal resources of his poetry; our sense of physical immediacy comes specifically from our experience of words and their poetic disposition, and not from any optical illusion. The last line is the most distinctly pictorial, yet we are hardly meant to see the color green. The effect of the line comes from the rhythmic crowding of words, and we are to hear the alliterated formula, “greene gras.” Literally, the “long bright burnisht backe” of the snake is like a fitfully gleaming golden thread. But through alliteration, rhythm, and the concluding “declares” with its strong rhyme, Spenser makes us feel we are dazzled, our field of vision filled—nor do we remember that the snake is “discolourd.” The stanza has a pictorial effect because Spenser wants to achieve a certain psychological impact, not because he wants to render real visual experience.⁶ He impresses upon us, as if it were a di-

⁶ The following lines from the *Divine Comedy* genuinely attempt to render real visual experience. Tasso cites them as an example of *evidenza* or *energia*, “that power which makes us seem to see the things that are narrated”: Torquato Tasso, *Prose diverse*, ed. Cesare Guasti, Florence, 1875, 1, 257:

Come le pecorelle escon del chiuso
Ad una, a due, a tre, e l'altre stanno
Timidette atterrando l'occhio e 'l muso,
E ciò che fa la prima, e l'altre fanno,
Addossandosi a lei s' ella s' arresta,
Semplici e quete, e lo 'mperchè non sanno.
(*Purg.* 3.79–84)

As the sheep come forth from the fold by ones, and twos, and threes, and the others stand timid, holding eye and muzzle to the ground; and what the first does the others also do, huddling themselves to it if it stop, willy and quiet, and wherefore know not.

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rect sensation, the sinister moral atmosphere of Busyrane's palace.

The nondescriptive character of Spenser's "pictures" was recognized by Coleridge, in a comment on a line about Dissemblance, in the masque of Cupid: "And her bright browes were deckt with borrowed haire" (3.12.14). "Here, as too often in this great poem, that which is and may be known, but cannot *appear* from the given point of view, is confounded with the visible. It is no longer a mask-figure, but the character, of a Dissembler."⁷ The solution to this difficulty is to recognize that Spenser's pictorial stanzas are not mimetic descriptions, but "speaking pictures" in Sidney's sense:

Whatsoever the Philosopher sayth shoulde be doone, hee [the poet] giueth a perfect picture of it in some one, by whom hee presupposeth it was doone. . . . A perfect picture I say, for hee yeeldeth to the powers of the minde an image of that whereof the Philosopher bestoweth but a woordish description: which dooth neyther strike, pierce, nor possesse the sight of the soule so much as that other dooth. . . . No doubt the Philosopher with his learned definition, bee it of vertue, vices, matters of publick policie or priuat gouernment, replenisheth the memory with many infallible grounds of wisdom, which, notwithstanding, lye darke before the imaginative and iudging powre, if they bee not illuminated or figured foorth by the speaking picture of Poesie.⁸

We ordinarily understand "speaking picture" to mean "a picture that speaks." But Sidney does not attribute to poetry any formal analogies with painting, nor does he think poetry is vivid because it renders the visual experience of external objects. He is speaking of the psychological effect of poetry. The poem enables the reader's imagination to function properly: he can, as Sidney says elsewhere in this passage, "satisfie his inward conceits with being witnes to it selfe of a true lively knowledge." Poetry immediately implants in the mind images that the completely sound and regenerate man would produce by his ordinary psychological activity.⁹ Observe that Sidney does not limit the re-

The text is that of C. H. Grandgent, rev. edn., New York, 1933. The translation is by Charles Eliot Norton.

⁷ Coleridge's *Miscellaneous Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor, Cambridge, Mass., 1936, p. 39.

⁸ Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apologie for Poetrie*, in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. Gregory Smith, Oxford, 1904, 1, 164-165.

⁹ For an account of Renaissance psychological ideas that are relevant to this passage, see Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, Cambridge, Mass., 1939, chapters 9 and 10.

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sources of poetry in order to make it pictorial. All that he says assumes the full exploitation of the verbal resources that specifically belong to poetry and have nothing to do with painting. "Speaking picture," then, means speaking that is so vivid, has so much of its own life, that it gives immediacy and clarity to its subject matter.¹⁰ The presentation of Time in the Garden of Adonis is a speaking picture in this sense. In using the traditional phrase as a metaphor for the psychological effect of poetry, Sidney deals with a crucial problem in any didactic theory—to show that the knowledge conveyed by poetry is necessarily dependent on the emotional force and quasi-sensory immediacy of verse.

The relation between Spenser's pictorial language and his rhetorical use of narrative materials becomes very clear in Calidore's vision of the Graces, where pictorial experience is part of the fictional action. Spenser attempts neither a real description nor a dramatization of the hero's visual experience, but rather directly conveys the vision and its significance to the reader. Hence at the climax of the passage, the observing hero and what he sees vanish into a heroic simile. The vision begins when Calidore comes to an open green on the top of Mount Acidale:

There he did see, that pleased much his sight,
That euen he him selfe his eyes enuyde,
An hundred naked maidens lilly white,
All raunged in a ring, and dauncing in delight.

(6.10.11)

Spenser does not paint a picture or portray Calidore as first seeing, then responding. Descriptive elements are absorbed into a rendering of Calidore's response, which is completely identified with our experience in reading the passage. Thus two clauses that render quality of response intervene between the verb "see" and its object "naked maidens"; feeling and rhythm are dammed up so that the release will imitate Calidore's surprise and delight. This rhythmic effect and the shift of tone it produces in the next to last line account for the extraordi-

¹⁰ Compare Daniel, *Musophilus*, lines 177–182:

When as perhaps the words thou scornest now
May liue, the speaking picture of the mind,
The extract of the soule that laboured how
To leaue the image of her selfe behind,
Wherein posteritie that loue to know
The iust proportion of our spirits may find.

Poems and A Defence of Ryme, ed. A. C. Sprague, Cambridge, Mass., 1930.

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nary impression the word "naked" makes on most readers. From the remarks of critics, we would gather that the vision of the Graces is the healthy analogue of the long erotic description of Acrasia's damsels (2.12.63-68).¹¹ Not at all—this single line is almost all we see of the dancing maidens. There are, after all, a hundred of them, and we are not meant to see a naked human body any more than Wordsworth meant to describe, or meant us to see, the leaves and petals of the ten thousand daffodils that danced in the breeze. Pictorial description renders real visual experience, while Spenser's diction uses visual suggestions to make us experience the words themselves.

The next stanza decisively shows the difference between pictorial description and the rhetorical use of pictorial diction:

All they without were raunged in a ring,
And daunced round; but in the midst of them
Three other Ladies did both daunce and sing,
The whilest the rest them round about did hemme,
And like a gylond did in compasse stemme:
And in the midst of those same three, was placed
Another Damzell, as a precious gemme,
Amidst a ring most richly well enchaced,
That with her goodly presence all the rest much graced.

(6.10.12)

Clearly there is no pictorial equivalence between the two images in this stanza: if the lady is in the center of a ring of dancing maidens, she cannot be described as the jewel set into a ring for the finger. But it would be absurd to complain that Spenser is visually confusing, for he has no desire to be visually convincing. He uses sensory impressions to give a quasi-physical presence to images and words that express value.

The rationale of Spenser's verbal sensuousness is exceptionally clear in the profound and breathtaking stanza that concludes the vision. Although it is a heroic simile, it is not announced by the usual "like" or "as": the modification of the poet's voice does not suggest that he is turning from the narration of action (which scarcely exists at this point) in order to state an analogy. Spenser begins with "Looke," and his simile continues and intensifies our experience of the preceding stanza:

¹¹ See, for example, C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, Oxford, 1936, p. 331, and Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity*, New York, 1963, p. 86.

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Looke how the Crowne, which *Ariadne* wore
Vpon her yuory forehead that same day,
That *Theseus* her vnto his bridale bore,
When the bold *Centaures* made that bloody fray
With the fierce *Lapithes*, which did them dismay;
Being now placed in the firmament,
Through the bright heauen doth her beams display,
And is vnto the starres an ornament,
Which round about her moue in order excellent.

(6.10.13)

What Spenser makes us "see" is not a fixed image, an emblem in the usual sense, but a transformation of turbulence and fury into order and beauty. Our experience is specifically an experience of words and is modulated and developed in the very act of reading. The process is quite explicit in this stanza, for the crux of the simile has no iconographic or fictional reason for being there. The Centaurs and the Lapiths are not at all necessary to Ariadne's crown—they belong to another myth—nor does their bloody fray correspond to any part of the Graces' dance. Yet once there, the bloody fray is both relevant and necessary—as the syntax of the sentence makes us recognize.¹²

There is a temporal dimension in our reading of any poem, and in a narrative poem it is conventionally identified with a sequence of fictional events. But in *The Faerie Queene*, as our last example shows, time is the dimension of verbal events—the lines and stanzas that evoke and modify the reader's responses. An episode in *The Faerie Queene*, then, is best described as a developing psychological experience within the reader, rather than as an action to be observed by him. By heeding this distinction, we can solve one of the most perplexing interpretive problems in the poem: why is Amoret tortured by Busyrane? As W. B. C. Watkins remarks, her "captivity and torture by Busyrane seem sadism unrelated to her character or desert, since as Belpheobe's twin, she is clearly designed to represent a second kind of chastity closer to Spenser's heart—married faithfulness."¹³ The puzzle arises because the meaning of the episode is taken to be a simple translation of the story into abstract terms. Thus, "Britomart rescues Amoret from Busyrane" means "Chastity rescues Amoret from Lust." We are then led to search for what Watkins calls an "indefinable . . .

¹² See below, pp. 102–106, for a discussion of the relation of Spenser's pictorialism to sixteenth-century critical ideas.

¹³ *Shakespeare and Spenser*, p. 206.

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fault”¹⁴ in Amoret that is symbolized by her torture. If we take Amoret not as a dramatic individual but as an embodied concept, we are in the same dilemma, because we must find a concept that is in need of rescue from Lust.

There seems to me no way of juggling fictional terms to produce a plausible interpretation of the episode, much less one that adequately suggests its vastness and intensity. In this episode a series of speaking pictures that creates our psychological experience as it unfolds has a clear priority over the narration of an action. Britomart disappears the moment she enters Busyrane's castle, and Spenser presents directly to the reader the series of mythological tapestries (3.11.28–46). More important, we feel no break between this long set piece and the end of canto 11, in which Britomart reappears and fictional action nominally begins. There is complete continuity from one part to the other, because the end of the canto develops and expands the poetic experience begun in the presentation of the tapestries. The image of Cupid's darts is carried over to the description of his statue (3.11.48), and it is in the context established by the tapestries that we feel the menacing brilliance of that description. Taken by itself, Spenser's parenthetical "Ah man beware, how thou those darts behold" is merely a pious exclamation; in the context of his continual admiration of the persuasive liveliness of the tapestries, it records the intensification of our involvement as we move further into Busyrane's palace. When we proceed into the next room, the living walls of gold and the spoils of mighty conquerors (3.11.51–52) again intensify images of the tapestries.

The role of fictional action in this canto is to support the reader's psychological experience of images and their transformations. Spenser makes this explicit by reintroducing Britomart in the middle of the reader's exploration of the first room:

And vnderneath his feet was written thus,
Vnto the Victor of the Gods this bee:
 And all the people in that ample hous
 Did to that image bow their humble knee,
 And oft committed fowle Idolatree.
 That wondrous sight faire *Britomart* amazed,
 Ne seeing could her wonder satisfie,
 But euer more and more vpon it gazed,
 The whiles the passing brightnes her fraile
 sences dazed. (3.11.49)

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 66

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Britomart's daze is not something to be observed; it intensifies the reader's reaction to the dazzling effect of the palace. Britomart's actions in this episode never have the fictional independence that would place the reader in the role of an observer of an action. Rather they are poetic devices that develop the reader's responses and that frequently merge with a direct rendering of them. Britomart's vigil in canto 12 is absorbed into Cupid's masque, an emblematic procession of the psychological impulses that are engendered by and that characterize erotic feeling. Action in these cantos consistently turns into images that speak directly to the reader.

The nominal action at the beginning of canto 12 is Britomart's lying in wait to observe her enemy and Amoret, the object of her quest. But in fact Britomart is no more present as the masque marches by than she was when the tapestries were presented. It is the reader who first sees Amoret, and Amoret is primarily identified with her torture, the image Spenser wishes to impress upon us:

Her brest all naked, as net iuory,
Without adorne of gold or siluer bright,
Wherewith the Craftesman wonts it beautify,
Of her dew honour was despoyled quight,
And a wide wound therein (O ruefull sight)
Entrenched deepe with knife accursed keene,
Yet freshly bleeding forth her fainting spright,
(The worke of cruell hand) was to be seene,
That dyde in sanguine red her skin all snowy cleene.

(3.12.20)

Spenser begins by developing the suggestion of artificiality in the commonplace comparison of skin to ivory. He praises Amoret's beauty in terms that recall the sinister glamor of the palace, and thus suggests the puzzling presence of a beautiful woman in Busyrane's masque. When he presents Amoret's torture, Spenser directly identifies our psychological experience with the process of reading. Subordinate clauses and exclamations intervene between the major grammatical elements, "a wide wound" and "was to be seene"; each is a separate unit that presents a single aspect of a multiple response to Amoret's wound. The strikingly simple last line emerges from a context of deliberate confusions with which Spenser draws us in more closely.

Once what we may call the emblematic presence of the wound is achieved, Spenser continues to involve the reader:

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At that wide orifice her trembling hart
Was drawne forth, and in siluer basin layd,
Quite through transfixed with a deadly dart,
And in her bloud yet steeming fresh embayd:
And those two villeins, which her steps vpstayd,
When her weake feete could scarcely her sustaine,
And fading vitall powers gan to fade,
Her forward still with torture did constraine,
And euermore encreased her consuming paine.

(3.12.21)

After fully presenting the emblem, Spenser does the reverse of allowing us to observe it as complete and amenable to decisive understanding. In the final lines, he makes us participate in Amoret's pain; we have a sense not only of the fact that she is tortured, but also of her endurance of torment. This stanza is the last we see of her for the moment, and we are left at a peak of tension. By thus heightening the sense of mystery that characterizes the verse throughout this episode, Spenser makes it explicit that Britomart's quest is not an action we observe, but is identified with our experience of reading. When Britomart finally enters Busyrane's inner chamber, all the figures of the masque disappear, and we see only Amoret, bound and still tortured (3.12.30–31). The object of our quest is the image of the pure heart transfixd by the cruel dart of desire, and Britomart's "rescue" of Amoret is a resolution of this image:

The cruell steele, which thirld her dying hart,
Fell softly forth, as of his owne accord,
And the wyde wound, which lately did dispart
Her bleeding brest, and riuen bowels gor'd,
Was closed vp, as it had not bene bor'd,
And euery part to safety full sound,
As she were neuer hurt, was soone restor'd.

(3.12.38)

The meaning of these lines lies in the profoundly erotic sense of relaxation, wonder, and wholeness after the terrors of the palace have reached their height in the preceding stanzas (3.12.36–37). By bringing the reader into intimate contact with his verse, Spenser creates feelings and awarenesses that cannot be stated by a conceptual translation of fictional action.

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Amoret's torture is a conventional image that has occurred throughout Book III. It now emerges as the culminating expression of the major issue of the book—the compatibility of sexual desire and spiritual value in human love. The meanings the image carries are most succinctly indicated by Spenser's exclamation at the sight of Busyrane tormenting Amoret: "Ah who can loue the worker of her smart?" (3.12.31). "Worker of smart" is an epithet for the object of desire,¹⁵ and Spenser's sententious outcry asks, "Who can be a human lover?" Human love must involve the flesh and hence must involve desire and pain. Spenser's conception of chastity as marriage rather than virginity demands that he keep this point firmly in view, and Amoret's torture is the most drastic and comprehensive statement of it. Her torment presents something characteristic of all human love and not the unique suffering of an individual. The healing of her heart, then, expresses the resolution of problems with which the whole book is concerned, and in which Britomart—rocked by the storms of love and wounded by Malecasta and Busyrane (3.1.65, 12.33; cf. 4.6)—is fully implicated. Amoret's torture and release are a direct rendering of awarenesses that have developed in the reader throughout the book, and particularly in those passages of the final episode that have very little to do with fictional action—Busyrane's tapestries and the masque of Cupid.

In all the climactic episodes of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser brings us into extraordinarily close, almost physical contact with his verse, in order that our psychological experience be identified as closely as possible with the direct experience of language in the activity of reading. The immediacy of the reader's psychological experience is the sign of all these episodes—the human wretchedness of the Cave of Despair, the menacing glitter of Busyrane's palace, the oppressiveness of Mammon's cave, the seductive *otium* of the Bower of Bliss. Amoret's torture is a crucial problem because it is confusing on a very simple level where Spenser's meaning is usually clear. In this episode, Spenser was able to find and express vast significance in a story that has no clear allegorical translation. In most episodes, of course, allegorical significance is plain enough in its general outlines, because symbolic encounters, emblematic figures, and the like were simply raw narrative material to Spenser. But confusion sets in the moment we try to elabo-

¹⁵ Calidore's beloved, Pastorella, is called "his wounds worker" (6.10.31), and cf. *Hymne in Honour of Love*, lines 31–32:

And ye faire Nimphs, which oftentimes haue loued
The cruell worker of your kindly smarts.

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rate the significance of the allegory by treating details of language as if they were fictional details.¹⁶

II

The idea that *The Faerie Queene* is a coherent fiction implies and is based on the broader idea that the narrative poem is a "world." In its simplest forms, this analogy is obvious, and we appeal to it quite casually. But when the various senses in which we call a narrative poem a world are brought together, they make a comprehensive and powerful nexus of ideas. The narrative poem is and has been thought to be a world because its constituent elements (characters, actions, and settings) imitate or are analogous to those of the real world; because it is a self-contained, coherent, and intelligible structure; and because the poet is like God.¹⁷ Without insisting that these three ideas must necessarily occur together, we can observe that they frequently and naturally do. They do, for example, in the following passage from Tasso's *Discorsi del Poema Eroico*, which can serve as our basic statement of the analogy:

As in this wonderful realm of God, which is called the world, one sees the sky scattered or highlighted with such a variety of stars, and the air and the sea full of birds and fish, and so many animals, both fierce and gentle, inhabiting the earth, in which we are accustomed to wonder at brooks and fountains and lakes and fields and meadows and woods and mountains; . . . for all that, the world is single which holds in its lap so many and so diverse things, its form and essence are single, the knot is single with which its parts are

¹⁶ The phrase "continued allegory, or dark conceit" in the Letter to Raleigh refers to the symbolic nature of Spenser's materials, but it does not guarantee or even imply that a fiction with a continuous double significance is the main vehicle of poetic meaning in *The Faerie Queene*. Spenser would have found exactly this notion of allegory in Tasso's preface to *Gerusalemme Liberata*, which he certainly knew but from which he borrows nothing in his own prefatory letter. Spenser's formula "dark conceit" is based on the rhetoricians' definition of allegory as the local device of continued metaphor ("dark" is the stock epithet for the figure in rhetorical handbooks). Furthermore, in his remarks on *Gerusalemme Liberata*, Spenser does not follow the allegorical interpretation of the heroes that Tasso develops by rationalizing the fiction of his poem. The only possible conclusion is that Tasso's division of a heroic poem into the imitation of actions and the allegory hidden beneath this surface (*Prose*, 1, 301) meant very little to Spenser.

¹⁷ For a penetrating history of the idea of "the poem as heterocosm," see M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, New York, 1953, pp. 272-285.

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brought together and bound in discordant concord; and, with nothing lacking in it, yet there is nothing there which does not serve for either necessity or ornament: so by the same token I judge that an excellent poet (who is called divine for no other reason than that making himself like the supreme maker in his workings [*al supremo artefice nelle sue operazioni assomigliandosi*], he comes to participate in his divinity) can make a poem in which, as in a little world, here we read of armies drawn up, here of battles on land and sea, here of sieges of cities, . . . there deeds of cruelty, of boldness, of courtesy, of magnanimity, there the events of love, now happy now unhappy, now joyous now pitiful: but that nonetheless the poem is single that contains so much variety of material, its form and its soul are single; and that all these things are composed in such a way that one thing looks to another, one thing corresponds to another, one thing depends on another either necessarily or plausibly, so that if one single part is taken away or has its place changed, the whole is destroyed.¹⁸

When Tasso says that a poem is a world because it is single, the single soul or form he refers to is what he calls the fable—the comprehensive and controlling action that is assumed to exist (or felt to be missing) in each book of *The Faerie Queene*.¹⁹ But there is no reason to think that Spenser shared Tasso's concept of the heroic fable. Tasso says that the *Aeneid* has an ideal action for an epic: "The most noble action, beyond all the others, is the coming of Aeneas into Italy, because the argument is grand and illustrious in itself; but most grand and most illustrious since it looks to the Roman Empire, to which it gave rise."²⁰ English critics of the sixteenth century do not speak of Aeneas's travels and their destiny; the "argument" of the *Aeneid* is always stated in terms of the moral qualities of its hero. Thus Sidney calls Aeneas "a vertuous man in all fortunes" and describes the *Aeneid* as a series of moral exempla:

Only let *Aeneas* be worne in the tablet of your memory; how he gouerneth himselfe in the ruine of his Country; in the preseruing his old Father, and carrying away his religious ceremonies; . . . how in storms, howe in sports, howe in warre, howe in peace, how a fugitiue, how victorious, how besieged, how besieging, howe to

¹⁸ *Prose*, 1, 154–155.

¹⁹ See *Prose*, 1, 126, 135–136, 142.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1, 121.

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strangers, howe to allies, how to enemies, howe to his owne; lastly, how in his inward selfe, and how in his outward gouernment.²¹

Similarly Spenser, in the Letter to Raleigh, classifies epic poems by the type of virtue, ethical or political, that their heroes exemplify.

The *Apologie for Poetrie* provides considerable support for our view of *The Faerie Queene* as a continual address to the reader rather than as a fictional world. Sidney justifies the poet's use of fiction, but he does not describe or analyze poetic fictions. For example, he does not raise what is, for Tasso, a central question—whether the narrative of a heroic poem should be historically true. Sidney's criterion of truth is not the nature of the fiction in itself, but its didactic efficacy. He consistently describes poetry as a moral influence operating on the reader's mind. Hence his golden world is entirely different from the world of the poem that Tasso describes: "Nature neuer set forth the earth in so rich tapistry as diuers Poets haue done, neither with plesant riuers, fruitful trees, sweet smelling flowers, nor whatsoever els may make the too much loued earth more louely. Her world is brasen, the Poets only deliuer a golden."²² What interests Sidney is not the structure or the constituent elements of this world (compare the abundance of detail in Tasso's passage), but its effect on a human "inhabitant." His metaphor renders the attractiveness of poetry; hence he clinches his statement with the fine wistfulness of "nor whatsoever els may make the too much loued earth more louely." Sidney then goes on to say that Nature never produced such excellent men as the heroes of epic poetry:

Neither let this be iestingly conceiued, because the works of the one be essentiall, the other, in imitation or fiction; for any vnderstanding knoweth the skil of the Artificer standeth in that *Idea* or fore-conceite of the work, and not in the work it selfe. And that the Poet hath that *Idea* is manifest, by deliuering them forth in such excellencie as hee hath imagined them. Which deliuering forth also is not wholie imaginatiue, as we are wont to say by them that build Castles in the ayre: but so farre substantially it worketh, not onely to make a *Cyrus*, which had been but a particuler excellencie, as Nature might haue done, but to bestow a *Cyrus* vpon the worlde, to make many *Cyrus's*, if they wil learne aright why and how that Maker made him.²³

²¹ *An Apologie for Poetrie*, in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, 1, 166, 179–180.

²² *Ibid.*, 1, 156. ²³ *Ibid.*, 1, 157.

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For Tasso, the poet resembles "il supremo artefice nelle sue operazioni" because he creates his own little world, the poem. For Sidney, the poet "substantially worketh" by creating virtuous men.

In the two passages in *The Faerie Queene* in which Spenser refers to his poem as a world, his use of the analogy resembles Sidney's rather than Tasso's. The simpler passage is the beginning of Book VI:

The waies, through which my weary steps I guyde,
In this delightfull land of Faery,
Are so exceeding spacious and wyde,
And sprinckled with such sweet variety,
Of all that pleasant is to eare or eye,
That I nigh rauisht with rare thoughts delight,
My tedious trauell doe forget thereby;
And when I gin to feeble decay of might,
It strength to me supplies, and chears my dulled
spright. (6.Proem.1)

For Spenser, as for Sidney, the interest of the metaphorical landscape lies in what it suggests of human response to poetry. Spenser hardly pretends to describe "this delightfull land of Faery"; the crucial words in the first five lines almost all refer to feelings induced by this land. Not only vocabulary but also syntax indicates the orientation of Spenser's metaphor: the "that" clause that completes the first sentence takes us completely inside the poet's mind. Hence in the following stanzas, poetic landscape becomes Parnassus and "the sacred nursery / Of vertue" which Spenser asks the Muse to reveal to him (6.Proem. 3). The opening lines of this proem are so often quoted as if they were meant to be a direct characterization of the poem, that it is worth emphasizing how different they are from, say, Dante's at the beginning of *Purgatorio*:

Per correr migliori acque alza le vele
Omai la navicella del mio ingegno,
Che lascia dietro a sè mar sì crudele.

To run over better waters the little vessel of my genius now hoists her sails, as she leaves behind her a sea so cruel. (*Purgatory* 1.1-3)

The metaphor of the "better waters" and the "cruel sea" exactly corresponds to the fact that hell is a place with certain characteristics and purgatory is another place with certain other characteristics. But Spenser, who has just completed the harshest book in the poem, is not

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pointing to parts of the poem that can be thought of as external to him. He is characterizing his own mental experience as a poet—quite wonderfully, I think, with its mixture of delight and tedium—and he is about to ask the Muses for inspiration. The important affinities of the passage are with the internal landscape of Milton's

Yet not the more
Cease I to wander where the Muses haunt
Clear Spring, or shady Grove, or Sunny Hill,
Smit with the love of sacred Song; but chief
Thee *Sion* and the flow'ry Brooks beneath
That wash thy hallow'd feet, and warbling flow,
Nightly I visit.²⁴

In his most important comparison of his poem to a world, Spenser answers the charge that his poem "Of some th' abundance of an idle braine / Will iudged be, and painted forgery," because "none, that breatheth liuing aire, does know, / Where is that happy land of Faery" (2.Proem.1):

But let that man with better sence aduize,
That of the world least part to vs is red:
And dayly how through hardy enterprize,
Many great Regions are discouered,
Which to late age were neuer mentioned.
Who euer heard of th'Indian *Peru*?
Or who in venturous vessell measured
The *Amazons* huge riuer now found trew?
Or fruitfulest *Virginia* who did euer vew?

Yet all these were, when no man did them know;
Yet haue from wisest ages hidden beene:
And later times things more vnknowne shall show.
Why then should witlesse man so much misweene
That nothing is, but that which he hath seene?
What if within the Moones faire shining spheare?
What if in euery other starre vnseene
Of other worldes he happily should heare?
He wonder would much more: yet such to some appeare.

(2.Proem.2-3)

²⁴ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 3.26-32, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes, New York, 1962.

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Compare the opening stanzas of canto 7 of *Orlando Furioso*, a passage which Spenser surely had in mind:

Chi va lontan da la sua patria, vede
cose, da quel che già credea, lontane;
che narrandole poi, non se gli crede,
e stimato bugiardo ne rimane:
che 'l sciocco vulgo non gli vuol dar fede,
se non le vede e tocca chiare e piane.
Per questo io so che l'inesperienza
farà al mio canto dar poca credenza.

Poca o molta ch'io ci abbia, non bisogna
ch'io ponga mente al vulgo sciocco e ignaro.
A voi so ben che non parrà menzogna,
che 'l lume del discorso avete chiaro;
et a voi soli ogni mio intento agogna
che 'l frutto sia di mie fatiche caro.
Io vi lasciai che 'l ponte e la riviera
vider, che 'n guardia avea Erifilla altiera.

He who goes far from his native land sees things far different from what until then he believed, and afterward when he tells of them, he is not believed and is thought a liar, for the foolish multitude will not put faith in him if it does not openly and plainly see and touch them. From this I know that inexperience will make my song gain little belief.

Whether I get little or much of it, I do not need to care about the foolish and ignorant throng. I am certain it will not appear false to you who have the clear light of reason; and every purpose of mine struggles to make dear to you alone the fruit of my labors. I left you when they saw the bridge and the stream the proud Erifilla had in charge. (*OF* 7.1–2)

Ariosto's comparison of his poem to a strange land and himself to a returned traveler is completely adequate to justifying the fanciful, allegorical episodes on Alcina's island. He can treat *l'inesperienza* as the essential fault of the foolish crowd, and his lively confidence in the clear-witted reader is expressed by his setting us right back in the place where he left us: the final lines, by their very utterance, affirm that Alcina's island exists.²⁵ Spenser, on the other hand, is concerned

²⁵ In Harington's translation of this passage, the fit reader is represented as one who is "discreete and wise," and his credence is a matter of moral under-

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less with the existence of a strange place than with the presence and quality of a belief. His metaphor is that of an explorer, who thinks what he might see, rather than a returned traveler, who knows what he has seen. Hence instead of Ariosto's down-to-earth assertions, his stanzas consist of questions. These are not merely "rhetorical"—questions in form but assertions in fact. The questions do suggest affirmations, but at the same time they express a sense of wonder, which becomes explicit at the end:

What if within the Moones faire shining speare?
What if in euery other starre vnseene
Of other worldes he happily should heare?
He wonder would much more: yet such to some appeare.

There is a beautiful poise here between a very firm sense that something can be so, and a capacity for limitless marveling at what might turn out to be so. We note that the role Spenser adopts is not that of an explorer, but of an observer of explorers. The final "yet such to some appeare" is so firm and decisive precisely because Spenser does not claim to be one of those "some." He has made the affirmation hold true even when the fact exceeds what we can conceive. The kind of affirmation Spenser makes is very different from, say, Tasso's insistence that his fable be historically true, which is the high and serious version of Ariosto's claims to veracity. Spenser is not involved in such claims about events or places external to him. He is encouraging the reader to trust in his feelings of being moved, excited, interested, morally enlightened as he reads the poem. What is so wonderful about Spenser's stanzas is that they enact the affirmation implicit in Sidney's, "The poet . . . nothing affirmes and therefore neuer lyeth."

Almost any problem or topic we consider in *The Faerie Queene* in-

standing. Hence in a marginal note he identifies the *sciocco vulgo* of stanza 1 as "those that cannot understand the allegorie," and for Ariosto's lines about *l'inesperienza*, he substitutes:

Therefore to them, my tale may seeme a fable,
Whose wits to vnderstand it are not able.

The second stanza concludes not by returning us to the scene of the narrative action, but by appealing to the reader's self-understanding:

For some there are, may fortune in this booke,
As in a glasse their acts and haps to looke.

John Harington, *Orlando Furioso in English Heroical Verse*, London, 1591, 7.1-2. These changes have been noticed by Hallett Smith, *Elizabethan Poetry*, Cambridge, Mass., 1952, pp. 317-318.

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volves asking whether the poem is a world.²⁶ For example, Time's presence in the Garden of Adonis, which is usually considered a problem in the coherence of Spenser's thought, can equally well be stated as a problem of the identity of a place. Time's ravages in a garden are entirely relevant to that canto; the apparent inconsistency lies in Time's laying waste that particular garden. Hence we find one critic trying to solve the dilemma by saying, "The poet does not simply continue his description of the garden: here he creates a new and different space, substituting a second garden for the first. Momentarily, however, there is confusion: it is as if Time had not left the stage when the scene was changed."²⁷ The most direct and explicit way to test whether Spenser thought of his poem as a world is to examine his use of divine intervention in the ordinary course of events. Clearly a Christian poet who thinks of his poem as a world must decide whether it is one in which providential intervention occurs. We need not expect or require that *The Faerie Queene* be a poem like *Gerusalemme Liberata*, in which God directs all the major action. The question is whether the instances of providential intervention in *The Faerie Queene* reveal any pattern within a putative world or justify our thinking of Providence as an agent in the poem.

There are four clear instances of providential intervention in *The Faerie Queene*, one of which—the angel's succouring of Guyon—is a special case, since it involves a celestial being. The other three are the satyrs' rescue of Una from Sansloy (1.6.5–8), Belpheobe's discovery of the wounded Timias (3.5.27), and Proteus' rescue of Florimell from the lecherous old fisherman (3.8.27–30). In each of these cases the person rescued gets into more trouble. Proteus turns out to be as lustful as the fisherman and imprisons Florimell at the bottom of the sea. Belpheobe cures Timias' physical wounds, but inflicts a deadlier wound of love. Though the satyrs provide a pastoral retreat for Una, it is only a temporary respite; as soon as she returns to the world of men to seek her knight, she is deceived again by Archimago. If we really trusted these events to establish a pattern, the first thing we would notice is a taste for irony on the part of Spenser's Providence. Or we might say that the contradiction between a claim like "Providence heauenly passeth liuing thought, / And doth for wretched mens reliefe make way" (3.5.27) and the ensuing events is not to be at-

²⁶ See below, pp. 203 and 249, for its relevance to problems of iconography and interpretation of character.

²⁷ Harry Berger, Jr., "Spenser's Gardens of Adonis: Force and Form in the Renaissance Imagination," *UTQ*, 30 (1960–1961), 140.

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tributed to God Himself, but is a confusion in the mind of Spenser, the little god of the poem. But these problems arise only if we treat Spenser's assertions of providential intervention as literal claims about a world. What we find, in fact, is that these passages have a clear rhetorical purpose: at particular points in the poem, Spenser uses them to direct and extend the reader's emotional responses and awareness of issues.

The most imposing of these passages is the satyrs' rescue of Una from Sansloy's assault:

So when he saw his flatt'ring arts to fayle,
And subtile engines bet from batteree,
With greedy force he gan the fort assayle,
Whereof he weend possessed soone to bee,
And win rich spoile of ransackt chastetee.
Ah heauens, that do this hideous act behold,
And heauenly virgin thus outraged see,
How can ye vengeance iust so long withhold,
And hurle not flashing flames vpon that Paynim bold?

(1.6.5)

The idea of providential intervention enters the passage as an intensified reaction to a stock situation, the maiden in distress. The poet's role here is not that of the god who can call on supernatural forces to intervene, but that of the human being who shares Una's distress. Of course this role could be adopted ironically: to pretend to feel amazement at the heavens' indifference could be a way of indicating an assurance that heaven will act in the desired way. If this were indeed the case, the extravagance of Spenser's question would be melodramatic and vulgar. In fact that extravagance is turned to wonderful account in the next stanza:

The pitteous maiden carefull comfortlesse,
Does throw out thrilling shriekes, and shrieking cryes,
The last vaine helpe of womens great distresse,
And with loud plaints importuneth the skyes,
That molten starres do drop like weeping eyes;
And *Phoebus* flying so most shamefull sight,
His blushing face in foggy cloud implyes,
And hides for shame. What wit of mortall wight
Can now deuise to quit a thrall from such a plight?

(1.6.6)

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We see that Spenser is far from claiming that the heavens will behave in the way he has desired. The result of Una's cries is a very pointed bit of poetic artifice. Where we expected that the translation of our feelings into action would take the form of a rescue, it in fact takes the form of an emphatic pathetic fallacy. The poetic realization of our feelings is thus, in an entertaining way, completely problematic. The concluding question leaves us with only the resources of our mortal wits, and with a sense of puzzlement very different from the simple outrage expressed at the end of the preceding stanza.

As usual, Spenser is not imitating an action, but evoking and manipulating our responses. It is in the context of understanding created by these two stanzas that we read about the providential rescue of Una:

Eternall providence exceeding thought,
Where none appeares can make her selfe a way:
A wondrous way it for this Lady wrought,
From Lyons clawes to pluck the griped pray.
Her shrill outcryes and shriekes so loud did bray,
That all the woodes and forestes did resownd;
A troupe of *Faunes* and *Satyres* far away
Within the wood were dauncing in a rownd,
Whiles old *Syluanus* slept in shady arber sownd.

(1.6.7)

Taken by itself, this stanza might seem to treat Providence as a dramatic agent in the poem. But as an answer to the question with which the preceding stanza ends, the resonant opening lines of this stanza become part of Spenser's exploitation of our expectations and desires. This playing with the reader has its classic form in the passage he is imitating here:

Chi narrerà l'angoscie, i pianti, i gridi,
l'alta querela che nel ciel penètra?
Maraviglia ho che non s'apriro i lidi,
quando fu posta in su la fredda pietra,
dove in catena, priva di sussidi,
morte aspettava abominosa e tetra.
Io nol dirò; che sì il dolor mi muove,
che mi sforza voltar le rime altrove.

Who will relate the anxieties, the tears, the shrieks, the high lamentation that pierces into the sky? I wonder that the shores did

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not open when she was put on the cold rock, where in chains,
without aid, she awaited horrible black death. I shall not tell it,
for sorrow so moves me that it compels me to turn my rimes else-
where.²⁸

The reader has to wait two cantos to find out how Angelica is rescued. Spenser plays with the reader's expectations not by so direct a joke, but by turning the awe suggested by the opening lines of the stanza into the charm of the pastoral scene at the end. The rescue itself, in the next stanza, is a rather comic event. The satyrs rush to see what the disturbance is, and Sansloy, never having seen such a "rude, misshapen, monstrous rablement," takes to his horse and flees (1.6.8). What is wonderful about the rescue is its disarming simplicity. The satyrs, true pastoral figures in William Empson's sense,²⁹ are both better than and inferior to man. Their frank response to Una's beauty is genuinely innocent in its tenderness and awe; Spenser can even call them "incontinent" in their haste, whereas in human terms the word would suggest Sansloy's lust.³⁰ At the same time, their innocence turns out to be simply ignorance in respect to Una and what she represents (1.6.19).

Providential intervention in this episode is a product of our involvement, both emotional and mental, in Una's helplessness, and is not an assertion about the causation of events within a putative world. By the same token, the meaning of the episode is not the mere assertion, "Providence protects Truth." The feeling that Una is special, that Providence does care for her, gives us reassurance, just as the satyrs' affectionate awe does. On the other hand, we are aware that just as the satyrs' worship is not adequate, neither is a rescue that has been called providential precisely because it is not made by a human knight. The pastoralism of the satyrs brings out the pathos of the Red Cross Knight's defection from Una, for to adore so lovely a being seems the easiest and most natural act for a creature. At the same time, the pastoral mode reinforces the irony of Una's rescue—that she will not be truly secure until she is reunited with her human knight, she will be helpless so long as he is. Una is able to leave the satyrs only with the help of the "noble warlike knight" Satyrane (1.6.20). He immedi-

²⁸ *Orlando Furioso*, 8.66. This outburst occurs when Angelica is exposed to the Orc. The narrative action of Spenser's episode is derived from another episode in *Orlando Furioso*, Odorico's assault on the chaste Isabella (*OF* 13.26–29).

²⁹ See *Some Versions of Pastoral*, London, 1935, p. 15 *et passim*.

³⁰ For this play on words, see 2.9.1 and *As You Like It*, 5.2.43.

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ately leads her into another of Archimago's deceptions (1.6.34–48), but it is in the context of man's fallen world that Una must find her peace—a point emphasized by the fact that the reader is as much fooled by Archimago here as are Una and Satyrane. One objects to saying that "Providence protects Truth" is the meaning of this episode, because so simply confident a claim does not adequately represent all that Spenser makes us understand. It could do so only if our role as observers were decisively that of beings (angels, perhaps) who could view the action from the standpoint of Providence. This is precisely the effect Spenser would produce if, in the role of little god, he made us feel that Providence were an agent that could be counted on to act in a certain way within the world of the poem.

We have already observed that if Spenser literally holds Providence responsible for the protection of Florimell, he has a good deal to account for when Proteus puts her in prison. But no such claims or problems arise. As in the rescue of Una, Spenser uses the heavens' intercession for Florimell to develop the reader's response to a stock situation:

The silly virgin stroue him to withstand,
All that she might, and him in vaine reuild:
She struggled strongly both with foot and hand,
To saue her honor from that villaine vild,
And cride to heauen, from humane helpe exild.
O ye braue knights, that boast this Ladies loue,
Where be ye now, when she is nigh defild
Of filthy wretch? well may shee you reprove
Of falshood or of slouth, when most it may behoue.

(3.8.27)

From the end of this stanza, one would think that Spenser was about to introduce providential care as a rebuke to human indifference. But instead we are given two versions of an appropriate reaction to Florimell's distress—one human, one divine:

But if that thou, Sir *Satyran*, didst weete,
Or thou, Sir *Peridure*, her sorie state,
How soone would yee assemble many a fleete,
To fetch from sea, that ye at land lost late;
Towres, Cities, Kingdomes ye would ruinate,
In your auengement and dispiteous rage,
Ne ought your burning fury mote abate;

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But if Sir *Calidore* could it presage,
No liuing creature could his cruelty asswage.

But sith that none of all her knights is nye,
See how the heauens of voluntary grace,
And soueraine fauour towards chastity,
Doe succour send to her distressed cace:
So much high God doth innocence embrace.

(3.8.28–29)

Spenser provides two ways of seeing a rescue that are appropriate to Book III. First he suggests the tyrannical force of love, which good knights as well as bad feel in Book III. With the shift from phrases like “burning fury” to “voluntary grace” and “innocence,” he then suggests the natural harmony of the universe—most notably seen in the Garden of Adonis—which gives a sanction to human love and shows its painfulness to be ultimately benign. Both these views of love support the presentation of the rescue and its consequences. Florimell’s shrieks are heard by Proteus, the “Shepherd of the seas” while he wanders “along the fomy waues driuing his finny droue” (3.8.29–30). The rescue comes from the sea in its friendliest aspect—a pastoral realm populated by mythological figures. This image of the sea, far from being a proof of providential protection, is one of several ways in which Spenser examines the pastoral vision of love in its relation to actual human feeling. It has already been prominent in canto 4, where the inherent irony of treating the sea under the aspect of humanized nature is brought out by the contrast between Britomart’s storms of love and Cymoent’s delicate seclusion.³¹ At the beginning of this episode, nature sympathizes with Florimell’s plight:

For th’aire was milde, and cleared was the skie,
And all his windes *Dan Aeolus* did keepe,
From stirring vp their stormy enmitie,
As pittingyng to see her waile and weepe.

(3.8.21)

But the condition of this calm is made clear in the next line: “But all the while the fisher did securely sleepe.” The pastoral image of the sea

³¹ See 3.4.7–10, 13, 22–23, 31–34, 42–43. The description of Proteus’ chariot being drawn by fish resembles the description of Cymoent’s chariot (3.4.33). And Proteus, like Cymoent, has an underground bower (3.8.37). The way in which Spenser tests the pastoral vision of love as a rendering of actual human experience is discussed in chapter 11.

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is not a fixed reality in Spenser's little world, but a poetic image that is constantly subject to modifications. Its "reality" lies in the reader's grasp of what it suggests: it is thus amenable to the irony of Proteus' lustful wooing, while the literal claim of a providential rescue is not.³²

Belpheobe's rescue of Timias is a slighter example than the two we have examined, but here too we find the idea of providential intervention entering as an extension of our responses and desires. When Timias has been wounded and lies "wallowd all in his own gore," Spenser exclaims, "Now God thee keepe, thou gentlest Squire aliue" (3.5.26), and then says, in the next stanza:

Providence heauenly passeth liuing thought,
And doth for wretched mens reliefe make way;
For loe great grace or fortune thither brought
Comfort to him, that comfortlesse now lay.
(3.5.27)

These lines make our feelings anticipate Timias' exclamation when he awakens and sees Belpheobe:

Mercy deare Lord (said he) what grace is this,
That thou hast shewed to me sinfull wight,
To send thine Angell from her bowre of blis,
To comfort me in my distressed plight?
(3.5.35)

The irony of the episode—that in curing Timias' physical wounds, Belpheobe inflicts a deadlier wound of love (see 3.5.41–43)—is also

³² This is not to say that Spenser does not want us to see Florimell's chastity as a divinely sanctioned virtue. A dozen stanzas later, he praises her in terms that strongly recall the way he speaks of the heavens' voluntary grace:

Eternall thraldome was to her more lief,
Then losse of chastitie, or chaunge of loue:
Die had she rather in tormenting grieffe,
Then any should of falsenesse her reprove,
Or loosenesse, that she lightly did remoue.
Most vertuous virgin, glory be thy meed,
And crowne of heauenly praise with Saints aboue,
Where most sweet hymmes of this thy famous deed
Are still amongst them song, that far my rymes exceed.
(3.8.42)

These lines do not justify the heavens' earlier intervention, but rather prove that Spenser is concerned with our responses to Florimell and our attitude towards love, and not with claims about a putative world. The two passages are equivalent praises of chastity, whereas they conflict as statements about providential direction of human events. One says that Providence does succor innocence; the other says that suffering on earth will be rewarded in Heaven.