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Fairie Queen - its Pictorial images - Spenser as a Painter

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Edmund Spenser is one of the greatest English Poets. He contributed a lot to the development of English Poetry as well as English Language. He has been described as an innovator. His influence on his contemporary and later poets has been so great that he is called the 'Poet's Poet'. He is really an important landmark in the history of English Poetry. In fact, he gave a new direction to its intrinsic qualities and decorated it with the structural elements of classical beauty. His poetic works, specially the 'Fairie Queen', have been an enriched source of genuine inspiration to the generations of Poets.

The great mass of the Fairie Queen contains within itself the most varied purpose. The poem obviously sets out to be an English equivalent to the heroic Arthurian epic as cultivated in Italy. Besides being a patriotic version of the Arthurian theme and the exaltation of the Gloriana, it contains the elements of moral and political allegory which complicate the whole conception. But, to top it all, the Fairie Queen abounds in pictorial imagery and picturesque description, which claim Spenser immortality among the supreme pictorial artists of English Poetry. Even without being a painter, Spenser could paint colourful and decorative pictures quite in the style of European painters. As it was, fortune made him a painter in verse. See the following lines;—

M.A. HAQUE

" Now when the rosy fingered Morning faire,
Wary of aged Tithones saffron bed
Had spread her purple through dewy aire
And the high hills Titan discovered."

Spenser looked out the world as a great pageantry of fleeing images and pictures. As one critic has said, he had but to close his eyes and images arose, crowding and overflowing his brain. As a pictorial

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painter, using words and rhythm, instead of external forms and colours, Spenser is unrivalled: For an example:-

"A goodly lady, clad in scarlat red
Purpled with gold and pearle of rich array
And like a Persian mitre on her head

She wore, with crowns and cuntes garnished."

Spenser presents a series of picturesque description through various kinds of imagery - perceptual, conceptual and emotional, drawn both from native and foreign sources. In fact, his pictorial art displays a heterogeneous combination of Biblical images, observation of Nature, study of conventional art and classical authors. As we read the Faerie Queen, specially Book-I, we come across a series of pictures each excelling the other in luxurious richness and colourful descriptiveness. We pass through successive pageants and dissolving views of forests, lakes, caves and palaces. While describing the cottage of a hermit, he paints landscape with all its naturalness beauty crystal streams and fountains:

"Therby a christall streame did gently play
Which from a sacred fountaine welled forth alway."

Spenser paints the realistic pictures in the very manner of a painter. The image of Satan, driving the seven deadly sins, shows the great strength and sublimity of his imagination.

"... upon the wagon beame

Rode Satan with a snarling whip in hand
With which he forward baskt the laasy team:
So oft as slowth still in the mire did stand."

The full picture of these vices come before us and we are, at once, reminded of Marlowe's seven deadly sins of Dr. Faustus. This shows how adept Spenser is in the art of presenting abstract qualities in concrete form. The pictures of horror, terror and

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pathos are also drawn in the concrete form. What can be more pathetic picture ^{than} that of Una when she is forcibly carried by the Pagan.

"And all the way, with great lamenting paine
And piteous plaints, she filleth his dull eares
And all the way she wetts with flowing teares
But, he enrag'd with rancor, nothing heares."

Really, the description of Una's distress evokes in the readers the same kind of pathetic emotion with which she might be suffering. Similarly, the

M.A. HAQUE descriptions of fights and encounters make us visualise them. There are several pictures of vigorous and bloody fights in Faerie Queen with all details of encounters and blood let loose at the fall of the warriors. The picture of blood gushing out of the body of a dragon is gruesome and nauseating:-

"Large streames of blood out of the brunched stock
Forth gushed, like fresh water streame from riven rocke."

In such pictures we feel that Spenser is rather too sensitive for sensitive eyes. He is no less adept in painting beautiful pictures as well. The stanza in which he paints the beauty of Prince Arthur's majestic face like Homer is very colourful:-

"Upon the top of all his lofty crest

A bounch of heares discoloured diversely

With sprinkled pearle and gold full richly drest."

Here we feel compelled to recall Keats's own art of pictorial excellences. Spenser's perception of beauty of all kinds was singularly quick. Anything that can be called beautiful would set his imagination at work and he would paint it with all strength at his command. The finest descriptive piece is the character of Una, the truth blessed with the token of humility and innocence:-

Thus, we see that Spenser's pictures, paintings and descriptions are distinct, vivid and clear. They

are rich in details. They are graphic and definite..
They are complete in every way having in their
texture colourful richness, solemn appeal, conc-
rete reality and decorative grandeur. Really,
he is the 'Poet's Poet'.

M.A. HAQUE