

THE READER READING THE READER READING

Poetic Truth in the Northern Renaissance

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The English literary idiom of the late sixteenth century is deeply allusive, self-reflexive and ironic, heuristically engaged with the interpreter, who becomes an active agent in unlocking its meaning. Such interactivity is apparent in Elizabethan theatre, for example, where the expository strategies of the dramatist confer special status on the audience: dramatic action is to some degree presented through set speeches derived from the rhetorical tradition taught in the schools, a tradition that revolves around the persuasion of an audience, each time anew – and that accordingly provides the audience with unusual licence *not* to be persuaded. Interactivity of a similar kind is evident also in unmediated literary texts, which often allude to the process of interpretation or explicitly challenge the reader to interpret. Such strategies are familiar from our reading of the Metaphysical poets and such poets as Spenser. This active hermeneutic engagement by the reader is inherited most particularly from two interrelated sources: an allegorical tradition stretching back into the Middle Ages and applied also to classical works like the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses*, and a mode of biblical exegesis that the biblical text itself seems to demand and that can be freely applied to other texts as well.

The examples are legion. A couple from the Bible itself will make the point. Jehovah's instruction to Moses that, when asked his authority, he cite a god called "I am" is only the most notable example of a punning and self-referential almighty (one modern biblical commentator calls him "the self-existent one").¹ In the passage in question (Exodus 3.14-15), Jehovah actually provides Moses with a choice (or enjoins him to use two names, two approaches: we cannot tell which): "Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me to you," and (in the next verse, without preliminary explanation) "Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you." The two

¹ Exodus 3.14. I am indebted to Professor Michael Holquist for the example.

statements are very different. The first demands the cooperation of the audience in the solution of a puzzle and refers, poetically, as it were, beyond the rational; the second (the second thought of a God who is unimpressed by the reasonable, perhaps?) appeals to precedent and tradition and asks little of the listener except acceptance of history. It is utterances of the first kind that occur with frequency in the literary idiom of the period with which I am concerned: as Edgar Wind and others have abundantly demonstrated in connection with the art of the High Renaissance in Italy (and Frances Yates and others in literature), this is an age in which interest in ancient mysteries surfaces in both the visual and the literary arts.

Nor are such biblical utterances confined to the Old Testament. When the angels appear to the shepherds in the New Testament to announce the birth of Christ, they make the announcement and then add a kind of puzzle: “And this shall be a sign unto you,” they say: “Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger” (Luke 2.12). The shepherds, in other words, are enjoined to engage in a treasure-hunt: they are asked to question, to puzzle over the news they have received. A baby in a feeding-trough? What does this mean? No point in checking the hotel registers. Luckily, the treasure-hunt is aided by a star.

Such conundra, such puzzles, are a call to rational engagement that is at the same time allogical: they appeal to reason in order to explain events that transcend reason – liminal events at the point where the human and divine touch – bushes that burn without being consumed, picnic baskets that miraculously feed five thousand, gods that speak out of the silence that follows wind and earthquake and fire.² To contemplate such paradoxes is to contemplate divine power – though indirectly, through a glass darkly. This power, ever ready to break forth into the realm of the human, is present in the interstices of human language, since most of that language marches forward obeying the rules of grammar, signification and logic that we have collectively, over the years, laid down for it. In these

² Jonathan Culler, writes of the distinction between essence and accident, puns conflating the latter with the former: Jonathan Culler, ed., *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988). One can look at puns from the inside out or the outside in – as contradictory meanings derived from a single source, or as a single source containing within it the potential for contradictory meanings.

interstices lurks the last remnant, perhaps, of that perfect language spoken in the Garden, where signifier and signified are one and the same. Orpheus' lute is strung with poet's sinews, says Proteus, memorably, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Power lies in those very parts of language in which logic breaks down. The call for interpretation that we so often encounter in the literature of the age only underlines the unpredictability of meaning, which exfoliates in the most unlikely places and vanishes when under attack. To the extent that myth is a form of language, the same is true of myth. To take a simple example out of a well-known work, Ovid's story of Philomela emerges from the mythic underbrush and retreats in plain sight into a brown bird. What is the connection between the mutilated Philomela and the nightingale? The bird has no reference except (and it is a big exception, embracing much of western literature) the one we have imposed on it in our intertextual consciousness. Indeed the lack of apparent reference is an important part of Ovid's meaning – something akin to the notion that the world is (to misappropriate Gerard Manley Hopkins) charged with the glory of God, if we can only see it.

Ovid, with his shifting and kinetic universe, was the preferred poet of the Elizabethans, and clearly the preferred poet of Edmund Spenser, with the Lucretian vision of the personified *Venus Naturans* not far behind. The poetic idiom that I am describing tests the limits – of language, of experience – and, by contrast, seems almost suspicious of the purely reasonable, since the latter implies a certain simplification of, or putting limits upon, the deity. Spenser chose allegorical narrative, which, under the guise of reason, releases meaning that is often anything but reasonable.

My New Testament example is nicely mirrored in the opening stanza of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* – indeed prominently displayed as a challenge to interpretation that cannot not engage the reader:

A Gentle Knight was pricking on the plaine,
 Y cladd in mightie armes and siluer shielde,
 Wherein old dints of deepe wounds did remaine,
 The cruell markes of many' a bloody field;
 Yet armes till that time did he neuer wield:
 His angry steede did chide his foming bitt,

As much disdayning to the curbe to yield:
 Full iolly knight he seemd, and faire did sitt,
 As one for knightly giusts and fierce encounters fitt. (1.1.1)

Yet armes till that time did he neuer wield. What are we to make of this? A knight in battered armor who never fought a battle before? Whose armor is it? Is he entitled to wear this armor? What happened to his own armor, if he ever had any? The allusion, as many scholars have pointed out, and indeed as the Letter to Sir Walter Raleigh affixed to the poem makes clear, is to *Ephesians* 6.11, with its reference to putting on “the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the assaults of the devil.” Paul goes on to instruct us as follows: “Stand therefore, and your loins gird about with verity, and having on the breastplate of righteousness, / And your feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace.” Not only is this a puzzle to be solved, as with the angels and the shepherds, but it is a *transtextual* puzzle: we find the answer by reference to another text.

Furthermore (we might note in passing), this other text is more than a simple allusion: it sets forth a very direct and literal allegory, in which the Christian’s dress is directly linked to a set of theological values (the armor of God, the breastplate of righteousness, feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace...). Thus we are encouraged to read our text allegorically not only by its parallel *connection* with another text (parallelism being the basic ingredient of allegory), but also by the *content* of that text, which is itself directly and overtly allegorical.

But this simple opening example (coming, I might add, on the heels of a Proem that also invites the reader, in various less direct ways, to allegorical reading) leads to a more complicated sequel. In this paper I want to examine what happens *after* this opening stanza and the accompanying description of the knight and his companions. I will examine it as an example of reflexivity in which an extratextual reader is mirrored in an intratextual reader – in other words a situation in which an active external reader interrogates an internal reader. I earlier alluded to theatre: the Elizabethan interest in plays-within-plays is a similar phenomenon to the phenomenon of the reader reading the reader reading: in such theatrical instances, an actor acts an actor acting – and an

audience views an audience viewing. In the case that I will be discussing, the narrative purpose is to examine the processes of interpretation and to provide the reader with a lesson and example in interpretation that the *reader* can apply to the text as the *character* applies such interpretation to the setting and action. But the entire enterprise is colored or called into question by questions about language itself, and about the ability of the poet to represent, or help others to discover, truth.

Spenser's *Faerie Queene* inquires into ways of knowing in a world that is constantly in flux, but it uses allegory to do so – a mode that appears to require a certain fixity of meaning. The demand for inquiry is thrust upon the reader from the outset. The poem opens with an episode in which the knight whom we have just met, bearing a red cross on his shield and breastplate, and accompanied by a “lovely lady” clad in black and mounted on an ass, take refuge in a wood from a shower of rain. At first, none of these characters is named. Within the wood, branches form a canopy overhead, “and all within were paths and alleys wide.” Admiring the trees on either hand, the couple ride deeper and deeper into the forest, until they lose their way. Seeking an exit, they come upon a “hollow cave ... amid the thickest woods.” The cave is the cave of Error, a foul dragon, which the Red Cross Knight destroys only after a fierce fight and with the explicit encouragement of his lady, who calls on him to “add faith unto your force.” The dragon once dead, they have no difficulty in finding their way out of the wood, where they come upon an old hermit, who invites them to spend the night in his humble home. The hermit turns out to be a wizard in disguise: Archimago, specialist in the creation of false and misleading images and visions (and hence a representation of the false poet, Spenser's alter ego who constantly threatens to take over the poem and turn it to his own destructive and self-indulgent ends). Archimago's wiles succeed in separating the Red Cross Knight from Una and leading them both into confusion.

It was Bernard of Clairvaux, in a memorable saying that Shakespeare later reappropriated with delicate irony in *As You Like It*, who declared, “You will find more in forests than in

books; trees and rocks will teach you things no master can make known to you.”³ But the wood that Redcross and Una enter is no Cistercian retreat, no ordinary forest: each tree is also linked quite specifically with human activity, as though the journey is a journey not just through trees, or even trees with explanations, but through multifarious human occupations as well (an “emblem of man’s life within society” as A.C.Hamilton puts it⁴). Thus pines make masts for sailing, elms prop up vines, the oak is used for building, the yew for bows, willows are associated with weeping lovers, cypress trees with mourning and death:

Much can they prayse the trees so straight and hy,
The sayling Pine, the Cedar proud and tall,
The vine-prop Elme, the Poplar never dry,
The builder Oake, sole king of forrests all,
The Aspine good for staves, the Cypress funerall.

The Laurell, meed of mightie Conquerours
And Poets sage, the Firre that weepeth still,
The Willow worne of forlorne Paramours,
The Eugh obedient to the benders will,
The Birch for shaftes, the Sallow for the mill... (1.1.8-9)

and so on.

What the two companions *see* is altogether more limited than what they appear to apprehend. As we read, we find ourselves asking whether the Red Cross Knight and Una *find* meaning in the trees (they see pines and elms) or *construct* meaning (they see pines for sailing and elms for propping up vines) whether in fact we are dealing here simply with narrative rhetoric or with Spenser’s metarepresentational attribution of embedded interpretive acts to his protagonists – interpretive acts that reinforce their preconceptions and cause them, “led with delight,” to continue on their way.⁵ Are we as readers being

³ Cited by Anita Albus, *The Art of Arts* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2000), p.138. In Shakespeare’s play, rather disconcertingly, the trees turn into literal books when Orlando starts hanging bad poetry on them.

⁴ See his note on these stanzas in his edition of *The Faerie Queene* (London and New York: Longman, 1977), p. 32.

⁵ The passage raises numerous questions about the nature of narrative utterance and about the attribution of cogitation to fictional characters, especially when such cogitation is filtered through pre-existing literary

told that the forest is *in potentia* more than simply a forest, or is this also the realized apprehension of the two visitors? If the latter, are we to assume that they see a potential connection between trees and human activity, or that they are rehearsing the apprehensions of earlier authors who saw such connections and wrote tree-lists of their own? Is it a wood, or a palimpsest of human activity, or a literary topos that the two wanderers admire, or all three? If a literary topos, the two companions are wrapped in the toils of literary allusion, in a too-clever-by-half vision of their own surroundings, literary critics turned Little Jack Horner. The trees that the two wanderers admire are poetic trees, and their journey is a vain and self-indulgent game of literary identification: Spenser's sequence of trees is preceded in its literary genealogy by a quite astounding collection of literary tree-lists, stretching back to Ennius, and including Virgil's *Culex*, *Georgics* and *Aeneid*, Ovid, Seneca, Lucan, Statius, Claudian, and, among later writers and works, the *Roman de la Rose*, Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and *Parliament of Fowls*, Sannazaro, Tasso, and Sidney (and the line continues beyond Spenser into the seventeenth century).⁶ Spenser's list is closest to Ovid and Chaucer, two writers whom he particularly wished to emulate, the latter because of his role in the English poetic tradition and the former because of his interest in shape-changing.

So the Red Cross Knight and Una, it would seem, are not only visiting a wood but also visiting a premonition of Spenser's examination of human society and a gallery of literary works: they have stumbled into a topos that positively bristles with intertextual resonance and they move forward with the joy of recognition: "Or se' tu quel Virgilio, e quella fonte / che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?" (*Inf.* 1.79-80). Their journey resembles a journey through literature, in which they are *reading* a moral and literary *landscape* and interrogating it for meaning. Given its position at the beginning of the

precedents. On metarepresentation see François Recanati, *Oratio Obliqua, Oratio Recta: An Essay on Metarepresentation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

⁶ Douglas Bush, *Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry* (New York: Norton) offers a list (p.162), to which we might add Sannazaro's *Arcadia* (prose 1), Spenser's own *Virgil's Gnat* (201-224), and even Thomas Moffett's *The Silkworms and Their Flies* (1599). We still see the ghosts of the tree-list in the Christmastide opening of Thomas Hardy's *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872): "...to his eyes, casually glancing upward, the silver and black-stemmed birches with their characteristic tufts, the pale grey boughs of beech, the dark-creviced elm, all appeared now as black and flat outlines upon the sky, wherein the white stars twinkled so vehemently that their flickering seemed like the flapping of wings."

work, the episode is a preliminary guide to reading the poem – a process of initiation both for a new knight (for so Redcross is described) and for a new reader. Thus, Spenser’s text advances through an interlinked and self-reinforcing sequence of acts of interpretation – not just by the reader (who, from the riddle in very first stanza of the poem, is insistently asked to interpret), but by the characters embedded in the narrative, who are likewise puzzled by their surroundings. Their efforts to understand set up ironic resonances with the reader’s own efforts. The forward movement of the verse and the reader’s reading of the text are mimicked by fictional riders riding along a path of interpretation – a path *framed* (to use Wolfgang Iser’s term⁷) by prior experience and reinforced at every step of the way. Between Spenser’s reader, perhaps more canny than Spenser’s characters, and his protagonists the paths diverge in ironic distance, the framing only pushing them further apart: “Yet knowing how way leads on to way” (as another poet puts it) we anticipate the danger that lies ahead for the dreaming pair (though they seem oblivious to it).

Most importantly, Spenser’s poem begins by pointing out the dangers of poetry – its seductive and misleading quality, and the danger of reading it for its own beauties and sweetness rather than its moral force and utility – or we *think* that that is what Spenser is suggesting. From the start, the poem moves dangerously close to canceling itself out.

The woody setting does double duty for a different kind of forest, as I have already hinted with my quotation from Dante, the *selva selvaggia* or *selva oscura* of medieval dream-vision (and even of Robert Frost?); and the setting also perhaps hints at the Latin word *silva* in its meaning of “raw material,” including the raw materials or first drafts of poetry (Statius called his collection of occasional poems *Silvae*, and Ben Jonson named his lyric poems *The Forrest* and *The Under-wood*; his commonplace book he called *Timber*). The term also means “abundance,” particularly of written and spoken texts – *silva dicendi*, *silva rerum*. It is as though, in this first episode, the poem is not quite ready for its protagonists: the Red Cross Knight and Una pass through a kind of lumber-yard, the raw

⁷ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

material out of which the poem will be constructed. They are embarked, if the parallel with Dante holds true, on a journey into the self, the “wreathéd trellis of a working brain” as Keats will describe an analogous experience in the Ode to Psyche, or “the old oak forest” of his vision of King Lear.⁸

The tree-list is only an explicit example of an implicit tendency throughout Spenser’s poem – the creation of a densely intertextual and interlingual environment in which literary works salute one another diachronically and macaronically across narrative and landscape.⁹ Characters are repeatedly obliged to engage in interpretation strikingly similar to that of the reader reading: Sir Guyon and Prince Arthur read books whose contents are laid out for us in Book Two in elaborate detail; Britomart, alone in the House of the enchanter Busyrane in Book Three, puzzles over the elaborate tapestries depicting the amours of the gods that surround her on the walls (and as she does so, she moves on a progress through the house that is not unlike that experienced by visitors in Spenser’s day to the houses of the wealthy); in Book Five, Britomart seeks to understand a particularly complex erotic dream, and in Book Six Calidore tries to find the meaning of the dance of the Graces. The poem is replete with interpreters, puzzling over texts and images, and often providing flawed or incomplete answers.

But the first journey, this journey through the raw materials of poetry and the echoes of earlier poems, leads only to Error. Error is a punning dragon whose name, like the title of Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors*, is related both to wandering (*errare*) and to mistakes.¹⁰

⁸ See his sonnet “On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again.”

⁹ My discussion of such matters in the opening cantos of *The Faerie Queene* is manifestly incomplete in not examining the very next canto, Canto 2, in which Redcross comes upon a tree that is not merely suggestive of earlier literary trees, but actually speaks. The Fradubio episode provides Redcross with an explanatory reminiscence by the talking tree Fradubio himself, which Redcross chooses not to act upon (another example of a failure to *read* or *interpret* his surroundings adequately), even as the episode takes the reader back to earlier talking trees in the third book of the *Aeneid*, in the *Inferno*, and in Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* (and numbers of other places). But an analysis of this episode is beyond the scope of the present paper.

¹⁰ On errancy as a motif in Renaissance epic romance, see Deanna Shemek, *Ladies Errant: Wayward Women and Social Order in Early Modern Italy* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1998), and Patricia A. Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). Both stress the importance of Ariosto to an understanding of the sinuous ways of Renaissance romance – a factor of great significance also to an understanding of Spenser’s poetics, first

As I have suggested (and in contradistinction to Spenser's protagonists), we have had intimations of such an eventuality from the beginning: "Wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction," Jesus declares, and "strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matt. 7.13-14). Nor is the distraction of a "hideous shower of rain" an epic first: consider Dido and Aeneas, who encountered "commixta grandine nimbus," rain clouds mixed with hail, and for whom "ille deus primus leti primusque malorum / causa fuit," that day was the first day of death and the cause of harm. We have learned to worry about woods.... No wonder that the jilted King Iarbus calls Dido "femina *errans*."

The punning significance of Error has been remarked upon frequently,¹¹ most notably by Maureen Quilligan, in a brilliant analysis of this episode. She points out that "a sensitivity to the polysemy in words is the basic component of the genre of allegory. This sensitivity is structural, for out of a focus on the word as word, allegory generates narrative action."¹² Thus allegory is driven by wordplay – often wordplay that finds occult connections between things seemingly disparate. Allegorical narrative issues from, and is redefined by, the act of naming – an act which, in an allegorical context, suggests a connection between signifier and signified that is something other than arbitrary: allegory points toward a perfect language (as Umberto Eco defines the concept¹³) by rendering sound image and mental representation apparently connected.¹⁴

The clear implication is that the efforts of Redcross and Una to read aright have ended in failure – the first episode in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is, then, an exercise in how *not* to

comprehensively addressed by Paul J. Alpers in his *The Poetry of The Faerie Queene* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

¹¹ On literary punning in general see Jonathan Culler, ed., *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).

¹² Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 33, to whose analysis I am much indebted. (Some of the argument in the present paper, filtered through Quilligan's work, is derived from a lecture I delivered in 1981 to the Department of English at Columbia University, entitled "Spenser: The Status of the Text")

¹³ Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

¹⁴ On allegory, see Angus Fletcher's seminal work *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1964), and, among more recent contributions, Jon Whitman, *Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), and Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1996).

read the poem, at least for the protagonists – the poem turns back on itself in a kind of endless recession, like the “huge long tail” of Error herself (“God helpe the man so wrapt in *Errours* endlesse traine”). It is significant that Redcross slays the monster (a female monster, we note, who is capable of seemingly endless reproduction, like the ambiguous mud of the River Nile¹⁵) by a combination of force and faith: in Spenserian allegory the battle of knight with knight, or of knight with monster, is the primary way of releasing meaning, or of resolving competing meanings (Samuel Johnson missed the point when, in the *Life of Cowley*, he criticized the Metaphysicals because their “most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together”: it is the violent *breaking apart* of their ideas that releases their meaning, like fire from flint, as Henry Vaughan was to suggest in his *Silex Scintillans*). A secondary way of releasing meaning is by progression through a structure or ordered landscape – like the House of Holiness, the Temple of Venus, or the Bower of Bliss. The latter (structure or landscape) may be said to suggest rationality, the former the shifting battle for meaning contained in the reduction of multivalency to sequentiality in decoding an utterance, of extracting meaning from constantly shifting semantic waters. And not only the single utterance: the entire poem, its allegorical valency ever changing, constitutes a flux and reflux of meaning, hard to define and still harder to grasp. Indeed, the text offers no definitive meaning, any more than Ovid does – only the iterative illusion of definitive meaning. In a world in flux, allegory is necessarily ironic.

“Add faith unto your force,” says Una. So much for force, but what about faith? At this juncture allegorical force is not enough: faith is needed too, if meaning is to be revealed. It is here that Spenser’s Protestant poetic¹⁶ reveals itself most strongly, along with the problems associated with the creation of a Protestant allegory. The narrative premise of Spenser’s work, at least as it is implied in the letter to Raleigh that accompanies the poem, is that a series of knights, each representing a particular virtue, pass through a series of exemplary adventures and conclude by overcoming a representative of that virtue’s opposite. Thus, in the first two books, Redcross, the Knight of Holiness, defeats a dragon

¹⁵ See *Metamorphoses* 1.416-437, where the connotations are largely positive. Spenser refers to the Nile’s fertility on several occasions in the poem.

¹⁶ I use the term differently from Barbara K. Lewalski’s definition in *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), to refer to the questioning of poetic language that, for example, Sidney seeks to answer in his *Apology*.

that resembles the dragon of sin; and Guyon, the Knight of Temperance, overthrows the Bower of Bliss that displays intemperance. But, as the eleventh of Elizabeth's Thirty-Nine Articles, adopted into law in 1562, makes clear, "we are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by faith, and not for our own works or deservings." This doctrine of justification by faith alone makes meritorious action suspect, and certainly insufficient: too great a sense of satisfaction in good works, say the Protestant reformers, may only cause one to fall into pride.¹⁷ The "lofty trees" that Una and Redcross observe are, says the narrator, "yclad with sommers pride," and it is surely with a certain pride in their own powers of literary recall that the pair go deeper and deeper into the wood.

Thus the literary resonance is only partially assimilated into the poem: the openness of the literary panorama, the shock and pleasure of literary recognition, is what ensnares. If Spenser is in some sense engaged in *translating* his found originals into a new poetic setting, then Derrida's suggestion that the translator writes over, consumes, dismembers the original to create a new original, implies that here the translation is held open, incomplete. Walter Benjamin suggests that "A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language ... to shine upon the original all the more fully."¹⁸ Herein lies the distraction: our reading protagonists are lost in a labyrinth of language that takes them out of the poem, out of its interpretive path, and into its alluring sources.¹⁹ Thus the sources become a distraction instead of an enrichment.

In fact, Redcross's education is not a progress in achievement, but an extended sequence of reversals: in a theological environment in which self-sufficiency is itself suspect, only the very opposite of chivalric achievement can show the way. Success in overcoming Error is in some sense failure: it simply leads to the twin obstacle of Archimago. It is no

¹⁷ See Darryl J. Gless, *Interpretation and Theology in Spenser* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 28-33. On the questioning of the poetic image and the emergence of the early modern, see Russell Fraser, *The War Against Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

¹⁸ See his essay "The Task of the Translator" in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968). I quote from page 79.

¹⁹ "Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge," remarks Benjamin (p.76).

wonder that, with the monster Error slain, Redcross keeps easily to the path “which beaten was most plain, / Ne ever would to any by-way bend, / But still did follow on unto the end.” We are back in St. Matthew’s gospel, ready for the next misstep. The hermit Archimago, next in line, turns out to be a master at conjuring images, able to manipulate dreams and to turn truths to falsehoods: “for that old man had pleasing words in store,” we are told (1.1.35) Though Redcross resists temptation in Archimago’s house, by that very act he is separated from his companion Una. He only falls still further by moving on (despite Fradubio) to the House of Pride, and to imprisonment by Orgoglio, and is finally almost driven to Despair. The combined efforts of Una and Arthur rescue him and prepare him for the final fight. Thus it is only through the pursuit of a sinuous and wandering path that our errant knight is able to progress at all, and failure and success are near-allied.

Lurking behind these Polonian efforts that “With windlasses and with assays of bias / By indirections seek directions out” is an abiding suspicion not only of allegorical perfectionism²⁰ but of the poetic image itself, indeed of images in general. This suspicion, among the primary attributes of Protestant theology and doctrine, is given frequent play in Spenser’s poem, notably in the numerous references to false images that dot the text (beginning, in fact, with Archimago himself). Poetry, with its abundant beauties – beauties that often live for themselves – may be simply a means for pulling us back and away from Christian virtue. As Feste remarks, in *Twelfth Night*, perhaps half in earnest, “words are grown so false I am loath to prove reason with them.”

²⁰ Kenneth Gross, *Spenserian Poetics: Idolatry, Iconoclasm, and Magic* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985) suggests (p.117) that “Spenser’s willfully protean writing contains a violence against the powerful machinery of allegory which calls into question even such final measures of reading such as might be embodied in the grand but ambiguous figure of the Faerie Queen, Gloriana.” Indeed (and again this is outside the scope of the present paper), some scholars argue that the entire structure of allegory in *The Faerie Queene* ultimately implodes under the combined attacks of Spenser’s Irish experience, his increasing disillusionment with Elizabethan policy, his pre-modernist sense of the disintegration of the old order, and his refashioning of his own sense of self through the medium of pastoral. See Richard A. McCabe, *Spenser’s Monstrous Regiment: Elizabethan Ireland and the Poetics of Difference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), and my own *Spenser’s Courteous Pastoral: Book Six of The Faerie Queene* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), among numerous others.

As if to stress the point, Spenser, then, at the very beginning of his poem, leads us on a journey that affirms the seductive dangers of literary reminiscence and aesthetic pleasure and effectively undermines the very mode of discourse out of which the poem is apparently constructed:²¹ we admire his Orphic ordering of trees, but admiration is not the point – quite the reverse. In one of his greatest and most complex poems, “The Fore-runners,” George Herbert laments the advance of age and the decay of poetic wit, but he ends by pointing out, with reference to the “sweet phrases, lovely metaphors” of his youth that “‘Thou art still my god,’ is all that ye / Perhaps with more embellishment can say,” and he stresses that such phrases and metaphors can lead the Christian astray. It is a sentiment that, as many have pointed out, undermines and negates poetry from the beginning. And thus Spenser’s poem moves forward by going backwards, denying itself as it progresses, and affirming only the impossibility of the achievement of its goals. A poet who believes in moral accidentals, in truths stumbled upon rather than earned, and the humbling of the self before the power of the deity, must sooner or later conclude that the great I AM will choose his own moment to reveal himself and cannot be coaxed. The alternative, indeed, is just history. This conflict – between serving as a vessel for accidental truths and beating a path to a logical destination – is evident at every turn in Spenser’s unfinished and unfinishable poem, in which the apparent logic of allegory runs full tilt into the manifestly unpredictable nature of poetic truth – a collision superbly expressed at the very threshold of the work.

²¹ In an earlier essay I quote C.S.Lewis in *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 322: “It would appear that all allegories whatever are likely to seem Catholic to the general reader, and this phenomenon is worth investigation.” Allegory posits the discoverability of meaning, a premise that Spenser’s Protestant poem seems to question. See Humphrey Tonkin, “Some Notes on Myth and Allegory in *The Faerie Queene*,” *Modern Philology*, 70 (1973) 291-301.