The impacts of images on meaning of epic simile.

Spenser’s Faerie Queene fights against reduction; there is no one-to-one correspondence of thing to meaning. Spenser recasts figures and images throughout the poem, allowing meanings to be changed and complicated through the course of reading. Language and form work to divide these moments of action and implication; the space within or between stanzas (or cantos, or books) allows shifts in narrative tone and complications of meaning. As Spenser revises the act of wandering in Book I, Canto I, giving it a moral meaning alongside its spatial one, so he takes an epic simile, and, using a sequence of comparisons, forces it to undergo changes in meaning and intent. In Canto I, this technique is seen in stanzas 20 through 23, in Spenser’s epic similes of the Nile River and the shepherd.

Stanzas 20 through 22 sustain a single image, with variations. It is the image of glut uncontained and spilling. Stanza 20 describes Error’s vomit, “ a Floud of pyson horrible and blacke,” containing lumps of flesh, books and papers, and eyeless frogs and toads, who “ reeping sought way in the weedy gras”? (20. 2-8). Spenser takes care to introduce some idea of life along with the dead and material fragments of the vomit; the frogs and toads, released from Error’s mouth, creep away in the grass in a startling and unexpected image. This allows Spenser to move into his epic simile in stanza 21, in which the sense of life is perverted in the course of the simile. The simile, taken from the natural world, begins by referencing fertility, the healthy abundance and cycle of seasons bringing rain and flood:

As when old father Nilus gins to swell

With timely pride aboue the Aegyptian vale

His fattie wauves do fertile slime outwell

And ouerflow each plaine and lowly dale. (21. 1-4)

But in the second quatrain of the stanza, the idea of regeneration is complicated. Like the creatures that creep out and away from Error's vomit, the swelling of the Nile River leaves " Huge heapes of mudd . . . wherein there breed / Ten thousand kindes of creatures, partly male / And partly female of his fruitfull seed" (21. 6-8). This second quatrain continues with the ideas of the first; the " fertile slime," as it should, produces " fruitfull seed." But this seed is perverted. The sexual paternity and maternity of the seed are obscured, incestuous or otherwise depraved, and breed " ten thousand kindes of creatures" of mixed male and female orientation. Spenser writes, " Such vgly monstrous shapes elsewhere may no man reed," recalling the image of Error as half-serpent and half-woman, " Most lothsom, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdaine"(21. 9, 14. 6-9). The natural and abundant order of the world, like the natural and rich human acts of wandering and procreation, so quickly becomes tainted. Spenser implies that error is constantly breeding, lying dormant in fertile mud, so that romantic wandering " non-linear, spatial play within a romantic landscape" too easily becomes epic wandering, which is not innocent but morally suggestive.

The epic simile in stanza 21 runs on to stanza 22, so that it is unclear whether the simile should be read as an exposition of stanza 20 (Error's vomit) or as an exposition of stanza 21 (Error's vomit-children). At any rate, it probably does not matter. Spenser links both excretions to the perverse propagation of the river in stanza 21, so that all three stanzas are tied

visually and allegorically. Error, like the river's seed, is " fruitfull." Spenser writes, " She poured forth out of her hellish sinke, / Her fruitfull cursed spawne of serpents small, / Deformed monsters, fowle, and blacke as inke" (22. 5-7). Both the spawne of Error and of the river are " deformed" and unnatural offspring. While these monsters are characterized by their foulness, nearly overcoming the Knight with their vivid stink, the narrator notes that they are harmless, " swarming all about his legs did crall, / And him encombred sore, but could not hurt at all" (22. 8-9).

The closing couplet of stanza 22 is the narrator's interjection, a distancing effect that allows the reader a small release from the epic and narrative tension sustained and built through the three stanzas. We are told that the Knight cannot be harmed, and therefore we are able to enjoy the quality of the poetic image, especially as it takes a comic turn in stanza 23. Here, Spenser uses another epic simile to combat that put forth in the preceding stanzas. Error's offspring are transformed from the thick and lowly (creeping and swarming) to the light and airy. He writes,

As gentle Shepheard in sweete euen-tide,

When ruddy Phoebus gins to welke in west . . .

A cloud of cumbrous gnattes do him molest,

All striuing to infixe their feeble stings. (23. 1-5)

It is still a mob scene, but a gentle one, more of a disturbance than a danger: " From their noyance he no where can rest, / But with his clownish hands

their tender wings / He brusheth off, and oft doth mar their murmurings” (23. 7-9).

The description of Error’s offspring is enclosed between two epic similes, both taken from the natural world, but with different degrees of threat and therefore different degrees of narrative distance from the Knight. Spenser uses a series of comparisons that introduces different modes of vision throughout the canto, allowing multiple perspectives. Thus, when Una approaches the Knight in stanza 27 to greet his victory, telling him “ Well worthy be you of that Armorie,” when in stanza 26 we have just been told that “ His foes haue slaine themselves,” we understand that the two statements are not incompatible (27. 5, 26. 9). From the Knight’s perspective, or perhaps from Una’s, he is worthy, having stood in “ certaine perill” (24. 2). He has not seen himself as the shepherd brushing flies from his flesh, as we have. Spenser reduces the Knight’s adversary in the space of a stanza, and suggests that bigger and more dangerous battles are yet to come.

The strength of the poetic image, and its malleability in Spenser’s design, is seen in the way it returns later in Canto I. In stanzas 36 through 38, he revisits the simile of the shepherd and the flies. Following the defeat of Error, the Knight and Una take a rest in Archimago’s inn. While the two are sleeping, “[Archimago] to his study goes, and there amides / His Magick bookes and artes of sundry kindes, / He seeks out mighty charmes, to trouble sleepy mindes”(36. 7-9). This recalls Error’s vomit in stanza 20, which is filled with the stuff that magic is made of: “ great lumpes of flesh and gobbets raw . . . bookes and papers . . . loathly frogs and toades, which

eyes did lacke” (20. 3-7). This symmetry of base materials throws Archimago on the side of evil in the canto, aligning him with Error.

From these books, Archimago chooses a few verses,

And forth he cald out of deepe darknesse dred

Legions of Sprights, the which like little flyes

Fluttring about his euer damned hed,

A-waite whereto their seruice he applyes. (38. 1-4)

The shepherd in stanza 23, Redcrosse, has become Archimago in stanza 38, the flies have become sprites, and the epic simile has been freed from the merely metaphorical world to become a real and corporal part of the narrative, anticipating the granting of physical form to allegorical characters as Book I continues. Accompanying this shift from the figurative to the literal is an intensification of degree. The harmless flies, fluttering around an entirely different and less moral shepherd, suddenly become dangerous. Archimago chooses “ the falsest twoo” from this swarm, and sends them to the Knight. The swarm is reduced in number, but gains in specificity and threat.

Finally, in stanza 41, Spenser condenses the image to a sound, “ the sowne / Of swarming Bees” that surrounds the house of Morpheus (41. 4-5). This sound, blended with the sounds of a “ trickling streame from high rocke tumbling downe / And euer-drizling raine vpon the loft, / Mixt with a murmuring winde,” lulle “ the occupants of the town to slumber soft” (41. 1-

4). The beautiful aural imagery of the stanza is indulgent and deceptive, lovely but dangerous in the way it diverts Morpheus from his labors. The sound of swarming bees thus prefigures the “ fit false dreame, that can delude the sleepers sent,” which Morpheus delivers to Archimago (42. 9). Although the image is condensed into a single element, that of sound, it retains its rhetorical power through allusion to its earlier appearances in the canto.

Spenser delights in the limber quality of language and form, the way images and meanings can be altered and complicated in the course of a few stanzas, the way metaphor can come to life. The romantic impulse might mourn the restriction of wandering to a morally problematic act, but the epic impulse “ arriving somewhere” forces this to be the case. Both impulses perform in the Faerie Queene, however, as Spenser wanders through language, recasting images with different intents, resting only when his design is exact.