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ELIZABETHAN ARCHITECTURE AND *THE FAERIE*

QUEENE: SOME STRUCTURAL ANALOGIES

IF ONE IS SEEKING TO LEARN something of the aesthetic of an age, it seems that making analogies between two of the arts is one of the most useful approaches to this abstraction called an aesthetic. Panofsky's *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* is a sufficient example of an approach to the history of ideas through parallels drawn between contemporaneous creations of the human mind. Analogies between arts of any period, if these analogies have validity, will almost certainly suggest general qualities of taste or habits of mind. For the Elizabethan Age, additional knowledge of artistic assumptions and aims can be gained from a comparison of one of the fine arts with the elaborate structure and imagery of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*.¹ Architecture was chosen because it happens to be more distinctively English than any of the other Elizabethan fine arts, with the exception of miniatures. Miniatures, however, scarcely lend themselves to comparison with a work of such magnitude as *The Faerie Queene*, whereas architecture is a particularly good field for investigation. Indeed, Spenser's poem is itself designed architecturally; the ambitious plan of illustrating the virtues in twelve books and linking them into a whole by the inclusive virtue of magnanimity recalls the great houses of the day, such as Burghley.

It was essentially a secular architecture that the Renaissance brought to England, since the patrons were not the Church—which accounts for much of the magnificent architecture of Renaissance Italy—but the landed gentry. It was also a court-centred architecture, with the greatest Elizabethan houses being built to honour and entertain the queen in her progresses through the country. Even lesser gentry were caught by the fever of emulation and built as grandly as they could. Thus one could say that either directly or indirectly Elizabeth inspired the great houses of her day, just as she inspired *The Faerie Queene*. In writing an epic dedicated to his sovereign, Spenser was adopting

the same courtly and humanistic mode that produced many of the stylistic features of the Elizabethan country house.

In both *The Faerie Queene* and sixteenth-century English houses one may see a similar attempt to transform a Gothic idea into a Renaissance idea. Spenser's imposing of an allegorical scheme on what is essentially fairy tale is only the chief effect of a desire to rationalize and impose order. On the formal side, he tried to prevent his poem from being a mere aggregation of units—twelve separate books each dealing with a representative of a particular virtue. His unifying idea seems to have been to embody the inclusive virtue of magnanimity, which he found in Aristotle, in the person of Prince Arthur, who would have the single goal of seeking glory but would come to the rescue of individual knights. But the consecutiveness of the entire plan hinders a real unity, and Arthur proves to be nothing more than a gesture in the direction of unity. It could almost be said that the only unity which the poem possesses is that supplied by the realm of fantasy. This, the Gothic foundation of the poem, does not meet the requirements either of academic art or of academic critics, who like to find some more rational principle of order in *The Faerie Queene* and who elaborate with considerable ingenuity on the way this principle, whatever it may be, is followed from book to book. Yet the mere fact that so many and such insistent attempts have been made to show the exact allegorical or rational function of every incident in the poem suggests that a consistently allegorical interpretation must be worked for, that something elusive and possibly irrational has crept past the poet's watchful intelligence, and that the critics are driven to rationalize what Spenser himself has failed to control sufficiently according to his plan. Passages that cannot easily be accounted for schematically are the Dance of the Graces and the tale of Florimell and Marinell. Hard as Spenser has tried to reduce a chivalric romance to order, the inexplicable denies the cool Renaissance logic.

A similar uncertainty of plan in Elizabethan houses has led many people to condemn them as being not architecture at all. A more sympathetic view would, however, find in both *The Faerie Queene* and these houses the same cravings for symmetry and lucidity, for classical ornament and splendour. Admittedly, both also reveal the awkwardness and the naïveté of an imperfectly grasped idiom. Their charm, if they have any, must lie in the combination of fancifulness and order, so that something always escapes the symmetry of the plan and expresses the pure fancy of the Elizabethan spirit. For example, the houses that were intended to be classical usually have skylines that suggest more the projection of a dream than the expression of artistic

purpose. From Longleat's heraldic beasts to Burghley's onion-capped towers it is the same story: fancy running away with a façade that started out to have some pretensions to classical symmetry. John Summerson warns against the use of the word "Renaissance" in connection with English architecture because, as he says, "the artistic products of the Renaissance *and its sequel*, profoundly affected the arts" in England, "but the use and enjoyment of those products is not necessarily analogous to their use and enjoyment in Italy".² Yet from about 1530 English architecture begins to show a new concern with symmetry. Instead of the irregular masses that characterize earlier Tudor architecture, with an inward-looking, courtyard style predominant, Barrington Court, Somerset, has features introduced gratuitously for the sake of symmetry. The mediaeval house was regularized into the familiar "E" shape, which with its development, the "H" shape, was to become the formula for matching wing with wing and marking the focal point by a more or less elaborate entrance porch. But the best example of the High Renaissance style in surviving Elizabethan houses is Longleat, built over a period from about 1568 to 1580. A four-sided palace, it is completely extraverted, in spite of two inner courts. It faces the world with all the serenity of its absolute symmetry and rhythmically placed bay windows. Only the skyline, with its variety of chimneys, heraldic beasts, and other decorative finials, reminds us of the fantastic element in Elizabethan architecture.

If one asks what was the prevailing style of architecture in this period, the answer seems to be that there was none. Longleat could not be repeated, simply because each house was the peculiar creation of its owner. The fantastic element appears everywhere, and is the mark of individuality in every Elizabethan house. Since the builders were not trying to imitate ancient Rome or modern Italy, they simply drew features from any source that appealed to them: French, Flemish, and Italian motifs might be used freely in such houses as Kirby and Burghley. Perhaps these creations reveal no attempt to be academically correct but only the desire to objectify a dream, the dream of the splendid and stately palace. In fact, the images of Spenser's allegorical houses read like actual descriptions of Elizabethan mansions; the House of Pride offers the fullest example:

A stately pallace built of squared bricke,
Which cunningly was without mortar laid,
Whose wals were high, but nothing strong nor thicke-
And golden foile all over them displaid,
That purest skye with brightnesse they dismaid:

High lifted up were many loftie towres,
And goodly galleries far over laid,
Full of faire windowes and delightful bowres;
And on the top a diall told the timely howres.

It was a goodly heape for to behould,
And spake the praises of the workmans witt. . . .

Such architectural images have led one critic, Frederick Hard, to say that "Spenser's structures impress us as being far more substantial and orderly than those found in the conventional examples of 'literary' architecture."³ I would add that, as examples of architecture, Elizabethan houses impress us as being far more literary than conventional, in spite of Bacon's injunction: "leave the goodly fabrics of houses, for beauty only, to the enchanted palaces of the poets, who build them with small cost."⁴

In actuality, the Elizabethan builders did not count the cost when it came to their goal of achieving splendour. So concerned were they with the ornamental aspect of their houses that some art historians believe that all the Renaissance really contributed to Elizabethan architecture was a mode of decorative design. Certainly classical ornament was something more readily seized upon than classical structure. The new classical style of adornment is first seen in the use of roundels with busts of Roman emperors at Hampton Court; but later, chimneys at various houses are transformed into classical columns and the classical orders are applied to the frontispiece, which was often all that remained of the old Gothic gatehouse. This last instance is specially telling, since the gatehouse was once used for military purposes but was reduced in Elizabethan times to a piece of decoration—frequently the chief decoration for a fairly austere façade. But again the imagination of the builders is seen to be running wild as they combine the classical orders haphazardly and pile ornamental feature upon feature until the result sometimes can only be described as grotesque. And yet the freedom and the innocence with which these entrance porches were adorned reflects the individuality and the personal involvement of every builder with his house.

Inside the house, too, the owner's personal taste dictated the kind and extent of applied classical ornament, as well as the familiar Flemish strapwork. Like the frontispiece, the chimney-piece, rising perhaps from floor to ceiling, was a fitting object for experimentation with the classical orders. It almost seems as if the Elizabethans abhorred an unadorned surface, for panels, whether on the walls or the ceiling, were more and more filled with emblems of all

kinds. Yet it would be a mistake to think of Elizabethan houses as "a mass of extraneous ornamentation". The ornament is generally contrasted with the plain surface and is used for heightened significance, such as emphasizing the entrance porch or the chimney-piece as the focal point of a room. It is not only the desire for splendour but conscious aesthetic considerations that distinguish the Elizabethan houses from the earlier Tudor ones.

That this same consciousness of art as art is present in Spenser can be seen from his prefatory letter and from his correspondence with Gabriel Harvey, if it can not just as easily be seen in his poetry itself. We learn that he believed that he was following all "the antique poets historicall" and that he hoped to rival Ariosto. We may compare Spenser's attitude, and indeed that of Elizabethan writers generally, with Harrison's statement in his *Description of England* (1577): "if ever curious building did flourish in England, it is in these our years wherein our workmen excel and are in manner comparable in skill with old Vitruvius, Leo Baptista, and Serlo."⁵ This is one aspect of the endeavour to achieve splendour that should be kept in mind: that the Elizabethans had set themselves the task of proving their civilization and enlightenment.

The new aestheticism of the Renaissance also accounts for the ornamental surface of *The Faerie Queene*. The attitude of the Elizabethans to ornament is revealed by their remarks on literature. Typical is the criticism of Gower's verses as "poore and plaine" in contrast to those of Chaucer.⁶ Ornamentation, on the other hand, was commended for its exciting effect on the mind of the reader; thus Puttenham refers to figure as "a certain liuely or good grace set upon wordes, speaches and sentences to some purpose and not in vaine, giving them ornament or efficacie."⁷ This efficacy or rhetorical effectiveness was the purpose of the embroidered surface of *The Faerie Queene*. The allegory itself is, from the Elizabethan point of view, an adornment of truth, "as precious stones are set in a ring, to commend the gold".⁸ But if the meaning of the word "ornament" is narrowed to such applied decoration as Spenser's epic similes or descriptions of tapestries, including his use of classical myth, there may be a closer analogy to the way the Elizabethan builders applied classical motifs to native Gothic structures. Certainly Spenser's classical borrowings seem at times strangely incongruous with his fairyland. What is the Garden of Adonis doing in this Arthurian landscape? Yet perhaps, after all, the symbolism can absorb mythology of any kind, regardless of national origin. It is stylistic discrepancies that more clearly reveal the uneasy wedding of classical and native elements. To give one example, the epic similes, as reminders of the classical epic tradition, seem self-conscious

interruptions to the free flow of fantasy that characterizes Spenser's dream world.

The epic similes, however, constitute a very small portion of the poem and in themselves are scarcely sufficient to give *The Faerie Queene* the effect of a tapestry. We must look rather to the ordinary imagery of the narrative, conceived as paintings or decorative objects, to support the contention that the style of the poem is ornamental. Consider, for example, the description of the dragon in Book I:

His huge long tayle, wownd up in hundred foldes,
Does overspred his long bras-scaly back,
Whose wreathed boughtes when ever he unfolds,
And thicke entangled knots adown does slacke,
Bespotted as with shieldes of red and blacke,
It sweepeth all the land behind him farre,
And of three furlongs does but little lacke;
And at the point two stinges in fixed arre,
Both deadly sharp, that sharpest steele exceeden farr. (I, 11, xi)

The tapestry effect is produced because objects are delineated so explicitly that they do not melt into the distance but hold the surface of the stanza as if it were a picce of paper. Thus any consideration of Spenser's ornamental style necessarily leads to a discussion of lucidity as a related value in the Elizabethan aesthetic.

Though Elizabethan attempts to achieve classical symmetry and to use classical ornament were often destined to miss the mark, they are responsible for introducing a new lucidity into both English architecture and English poetry. In contrast with those of the Middle Ages, Elizabethan houses, along with the clarification obtained by symmetrical design, have a multiplicity of windows—indeed, sometimes so many windows that Bacon remarks, "You shall have sometimes fair houses so full of glas that one cannot tell where to become to be out of the sun or cold."⁹ But both the symmetry and the new use of windows are aspects of the change from the inward-looking mediaeval house to the outward-looking Renaissance one; the terms "introversion" and "extraversion" are used architecturally to describe this change. The Elizabethan house ceases to hide in some hollow, but confidently faces the world, often from a rise in the ground. Inside, too, a notable difference is evident in the treatment of space. Instead of the old communal living in the great hall, rooms for a variety of purposes are created, such as the dining parlour and the winter and summer parlours. Another instance of the new desire for organized space is

the development of the square-built staircase with its broad landings, instead of the old spiral stairs which cramped and made dizzy the occupants of the house. "Humanized space" is in fact the special achievement of Renaissance architecture,¹⁰ and in so far as Elizabethan architecture shares certain qualities of the Renaissance, it too possesses a sense of space planned for human needs. One might think of the Long Gallery, which appears regularly in the great houses, as serving this new-found need of agreeable space; there the ladies of the house could stroll on rainy days, and in the privacy of the bay windows they could find, as Bacon says, "pretty retiring places for conference".¹¹

This sense of space, not as a void but as a positive value, seems to settle the question of whether Spenser is a Renaissance artist or, as Wylie Sypher says, a mediaeval artist born out of his time.¹² In *The Faerie Queene*, for the first time in English literature, images are given a spatial organization; details are selected and arranged for pictorial clarity. Remarkably, Spenser uses a three-part structure for his images that suggests the differentiated planes of background, middle ground, and foreground. Although these planes do not necessarily coincide with the three-part structure of the stanza, and indeed sometimes override the single stanza altogether, nevertheless the eye is carried from the far distance (represented often by a survey of the whole scene) through something like a middle distance (represented often by a closer view of what was shown in the preliminary survey) to rest finally upon some significant detail. That is the characteristic spatial pattern of his images. Without forcing the comparison, one could call it "stratification of the picture in parallel planes".¹³ An illustration will make the matter clearer:

Long she thus traueiled through deserts wyde,
 By which she thought her wandring knight shold pas,
 Yet never shew of living wight espyde;
 Till that at length she found the troden gras,
 In which the tract of peoples footing was,
 Under the steepe foot of a mountaine hore:
 The same she followes, till at last she has
 A damzell spyde slow footing her before,
 That on her shoulders sad a pot of water bore. (I.3.x)

The first three lines simply suggest "a waste wilderness"; the next three identify the mountain and the path at its foot; and the last three show us the damsel, with a final focussing upon her pot of water. This is the typical pattern of spatial organization in the individual image of the poem.

One vital factor in the space composition of Spenser's images still needs to be mentioned. Like other Renaissance artists, he has mastered the third dimension by means of establishing a fixed point of view outside his picture; most often he presents the scene through the eyes of one of his characters who is not actually participating in what is going on. In this way he accomplishes something akin to what mathematical perspective accomplishes for Renaissance painting: that is, the depiction of unified, deep space. Yet it is not really an immovable eye that sees in his images, but one which moves like a cinematic eye from the far distance to the detail close at hand; for narrative, after all, is a time art and must use its own means of depicting space. The miracle is that Spenser was able so nearly to approximate space-composition that we have the sensation of architecturally ordered space, even though we do not view the whole scene at once. Two factors are primarily responsible for this achievement: the fixed point of view and the arrangement in planes; and of course the two imply each other in Spenser, as in Renaissance art generally.

Finally, the stability of the whole pictorial design is proclaimed by the closed form of the stanza. Not only is the stanza treated as a frame for the image, but the concluding alexandrine effectually closes the picture and prepares for the appearance of a new one. But the tectonics of Spenser's stanza can not be separated from his whole aim at definition of forms: clarity is his watchword. At the same time, we must not think of him as a primitive, for his are conscious aims and not the unconscious expressions of a naïve mind. To understand him, one must align him with Renaissance painting and Renaissance architecture and recognize the primacy of architecture in that age, even in the design of paintings. Thus Spenser's stanza is architecturally a unit, not something to be skimmed over as one may skim over the stanzas of both earlier mediaeval and later romantic poets, but something to pause and contemplate in its fully articulated form.

The High Renaissance character of *The Faerie Queene* appears most in the structure of the images. As a totality, the poem shows a lack of control that makes it utterly unclassical—a lack of control, indeed, that prohibited completion in a lifetime. And if Spenser had lived long enough to complete his epic, what real unity could it have had, given his scheme of separate knightly adventures? It would take more than a shadowy figure such as Prince Arthur to tie the whole together. Spenser's style, too, shows uncertain artistic purpose, with its archaisms, genuine as well as invented,¹⁴ and his arbitrary canto lengths. Above all, he seems unable completely to control and at the same time vivify his allegorical imagery, veering as he does between

rich mythological symbolism and mechanical personification. But beside these deficiencies, one can put the Flemish gables of so many Elizabethan houses, the clumsy use of the classical orders on most frontispieces, and the fantastic skylines with their forest of chimneys and decorative finials, with the result that not one of these houses is truly classical in style.

In defence it may be urged that both Elizabethan builder and Elizabethan poet engaged in a primitive struggle to find a form of expression to suit the new age, an age that required one not merely to hold the fort but to find new values. Thus both are in a sense conscious artists and need symmetry, lucidity, ornament, and even splendour to match the expansiveness of the new age. The old Gothic meets the new Renaissance, and from this meeting comes an exuberance not matched again either in English literature or in English architecture. But inevitably, the devotees of Elizabethan architecture or of *The Faerie Queene* will be forced to justify their tastes in terms of vitality and charm, as against the pedantry which neoclassicism too often entails.

NOTES

1. John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain, 1530-1830*, Pelican History of Art (Baltimore and Middlesex, 1954), p. 11, F.N. 5.
2. Frederick Hard, "Princelie Pallaces", *The Sewanee Review*, 42 (1934), p. 300.
3. Francis Bacon, "Of Building", in *Essays, Advancement of Learning, New Atlantis, and Other Pieces*, ed. R. F. Jones (New York, Odyssey Press, 1937), p. 127.
4. William Harrison, *A Description of Elizabethan England*, ed. Furnivall (Harvard Classics, vol. 35), p. 312.
5. "The Compleat Gentleman", in J. E. Spingarn, *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, Vol. I (Oxford, 1908-9), p. 132.
6. *Arte of English Poesie* (1589), ed. G. D. Willcock and A. Walker (Cambridge University Press, 1936), p. 159.
7. Robert Cawdrey, *A Table Alphabeticall* (1604), 3rd ed., 1613, sig. A3r.
8. "Of Building", p. 130.
9. Geoffrey Scott, *The Architecture of Humanism*, 2nd ed. (Doubleday Anchor Books, 1924), p. 166 and *passim*.
10. "Of Building", p. 130.
11. *Four Stages of Renaissance Style* (Anchor Books, 1955), p. 87.
12. See Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, trans. M. D. Hottinger (New York, 1932).
13. Spenser's deliberately archaic style is doubtless a Mannerist symptom, but I agree with Nikolaus Pevsner that basically the Elizabethan style is not a Mannerist style. See Pevsner's articles in *The Listener*, February 27, 1964; March 5, 1964; and March 19, 1964, entitled "Mannerism and Elizabethan Architecture".