

ONE DAY I WROTE HER NAME: A REVIEW

Sibaprasad Dutta

=====

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,
But came the waves and washed it away:
Again I wrote it with a second hand,
But came the tide, and made my pains his prey.

"Vain man," said she, "that dost in vain assay,
A mortal thing so to immortalize;
For I myself shall like to this decay,
And eke my name be wiped out likewise."

"Not so," said I, "let baser things devise
To die in dust, but you shall live by fame:
My verse your virtues rare shall eternize,
And in the heavens write your glorious name:
Where when death shall all the world subdue,
Our love shall live, and later life renew."

Spenser's life had been as eventful and hassle-some as Sidney's and Chaucer's. He lived for a period of 47 years, but within this short span of time he made glorious contribution to English literature. Chaucer was his hero, but never did Spenser intend to rival him. He was inspired by the English chivalry, and he toed the line of Italian Ariosto, the writer of **Orlando Furioso**. Spenser's early life was spent in utter poverty, and he saw brighter days only when he secured, through the influence of his patron, the Earl of Leicester, the position of Secretary to the queen's Lord Deputy in Ireland. Here, after some years, he fell in love with Elizabeth Boyle, a beautiful Irish girl, and wrote **Amoretti**, a sonnet sequence in her honour. In 1594 he married Elizabeth and wrote **Epithalamion** to celebrate his wedding. His later life was painful, and he died in 1599 at an inn near Westminster. He was buried in Westminster beside Chaucer, and his funeral was attended by all the poets of the time who placed on his tomb the pens with which they wrote elegies on his death.

One day I wrote her name is the 75th sonnet among the eighty eight that make up **Amoretti**. Sidney's works did not appear until after his death; so it was Spenser who

revealed poetic beauty to his generation. He was 'the master of the language' 'whose numbers flowe as fast as spring doth ryse.' He turned 'the rebellious language' into the 'natural tone of his voice', and for him the language ceased to be refractory. In **Amoretti** he voices feelings without recourse to allegory, and the sonnet as the sole medium of direct effusion and personal expression is a Spenserian innovation. His sonnets come between Sidney's and Shakespeare's but they are distinct in form and in sentiment. His three quatrains linked by artistic arrangement of lines and summed up with a couplet (abab, bcbc, cdcd, ee) make his sonnets 'a harmonious whole'.

Spenser's sonnets depart from Petrarch and are those of a betrothed lover. We do not see in them the tumultuous soul of Sidney in love with Lord Rich's wife nor the disquietude of Shakespeare whose mistress betrayed him with his friend, Mr. W.H. Unlike them, they tell a story of love without sin or remorse although they are full of the sighs of a lover that the poet heaved till the day of his marriage, and also express his final joy. They 'are bathed with a white light' and demonstrate 'maidenliness', the term Coleridge uses about them. Although traces of the tradition are here and there bright in his sonnets as in the lover's sighs that fill Petrarch, the poet's distinct voice is heard in sonnets like the 6th in which he rejoices at Elizabeth's virginal purity and chastity. The same tone is reflected in sonnet no: 67 which, though imitative of Tasso, speaks about the poet's joy at the girl's ultimate submission to him. Though often the girl's chastity is extolled, there are colourful touches of sensuality in his description of the girl's beauty and in the description of his desires which he restrains with great patience. This is notable particularly in sonnet no: 88. **One day I wrote her name** in more ways than one anticipates Shakespeare who, aware of the mutability of love and beauty, makes an effort to perpetuate them in verse. This sonnet of Spenser is in the form of a dialogue between the poet and his fiancée who are sitting together on the strand of a sea. The poet writes the girl's name on the strand twice, but twice are they washed away by the breakers. The girl points out to her fiancé the mutability of life and of love, but the poet cannot accept as final the victory of Time and he determines 'to eternize' her fame and virtues in his verse. And the poet also proclaims that in heaven where they will meet again he will write her name in glorious letters. The poet-lover expresses his bold confidence that even when the world will be subdued by death, their 'love shall live' and will be renewed in heaven. Shakespeare avoids the concept of reunion in heaven, and only seeks to perpetuate in his verse the glory of love that will last till the day of doom. But Spenser goes beyond that and believes in reunification in life after death.

The whole poem is marked by a strong sincerity of the poet's feeling of sadness as well as of hope that overshadows the mood of depression. The stanza pattern is abab, bcbc, cdcd, ee, and the sonnet has a melody that is uniquely Spenserian. Spenser uses, puns, colloquialism and archaic words like *vayene, eek, quod, heuens, wryte, whenas, agayne, paynes, vaine* etc. to enhance the musical effect and establish a link with the tradition. The dialogue lends a dramatic hue to the sonnet and speaks of the poet's

originality not only in respect of his emotion but also in respect of form. Macaulay complains that the poems of Spenser, popularly acclaimed as 'the poets' poet', is difficult to read because of the abundance of archaic words, but with due deference to Macaulay's criticism, we must say that his complaint of difficulty in reading Spenser is not absolutely true. Spenser enthralls us by the beauty of his expression, by his exquisite stanza pattern and the rich mellifluousness of his verse alongside his original and strongly felt emotion.

=====