

PLATONISM AND THE IDEA OF LOVE IN SPENSER'S MINOR POEMS

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I would like to warn the possible audience of these considerations about the fact that I shall be mainly dealing with some very specific shorter poems by Edmund Spenser (*London, circa 1552 - †Westminster, 1599), instead of quoting lavishly from his two longer works as it seems that contemporary readers of English Renaissance poetry appear to delight themselves in the sonnet collections and other shorter poems which thus would enable their readers to appreciate the spark of genius of their authors in very little time, though I would assume as well that they may also consider several of the great poetic achievements of the late Tudor period as rather cumbersome. Cumbersome because in most cases their frequent overwhelming extension hinders the possibility of reading them in just one quiet afternoon or in a dark and stormy night. *Caveat emptor & co.*

Contemporary passion for saving time in any activity in order to devote it to some idle occupations, a passion that Elizabethans shared as well, is not the only reason responsible for the removing of these literary works to rather remote shelves of the present-day everyman's library of poetic diction, reasonable poetry and sensible taste. I would like to remark that there is a good number of 16th and 17th century poems that constitute quite an ordeal even for the most biased amateur of verse, as these are representative of a world that has been fully discarded by modern fashion and by poetic usage. And I would even add that this phenomenon has happened especially after the singular devotion that a certain group of the English Romantic Poets felt for them, and after the essays of a swarm of critics influenced by T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis's ideas and opinions. Not to

mention that some of those Renaissance poems were already exceedingly boring in the opinion of the contemporaries of their authors.²⁶

I must confess that one may be inclined to corroborate such a supposition if we were just to take into account the number of scholarly and popular editions both of the longer and shorter poems of Elizabethan times that have appeared in the four last decades of the current century.²⁷ Spenser's *Faery Queene*, and *Amoretti*, (1594-95), for instance have been issued in Britain just once²⁸ (Roche, 1978; and Evans, 1977 respectively)²⁹, though *The Shepherds Calender*, (1579) is still waiting for a sound edition; Sidney's magnificent *Astrophil & Stella*, (1591), as a whole has reappeared but twice (Ringler, 1962; Evans, 1977); Samuel Daniel's fifty five sonnets *To Delia*, (1594) have been edited twice (Sprague, 1972; Evans 1977); and Michael Drayton's *Ideas Mirrour. Amours in quatorzains*, (1594), have appeared only in Evans' edition (Evans, 1977). And most people would grant, Shakespeare is altogether quite a different case in terms of both audience and editions.

The consequence hence is that there seems to be a real need for new and authorised editions of most of the poetry that I would like to discuss, and

²⁶ For instance, the *Passionate Centurie of Love*, by Thomas Wilson (London, 1582), is possibly one of the dullest sonnet collections in Elizabethan poetry.

²⁷ I.e. 1950-1990, being the years surveyed.

²⁸ The *Epithalamion*, however, though it was printed in the same volume as the sonnet collection, probably following after the intention of its author, is not included in Evans, 1977. If modesty would not forbid such an arrogance, I would probably include in this list my own Spanish edition of Spenser's *Amoretti & Epithalamion*, as it includes the original 1595 texts.

²⁹ Evans' *Elizabethan Sonnets*, is an excellent and still easily available collection of the shorter type of Elizabethan poetry we have been discussing so far. However it is not a critical edition (neither it has that intention), of any of the texts included. Professor Evans actually says (1977, xxxi): "The reader who hopes to taste the full flavour of the minor Elizabethan sonnets should read the exquisite miniature editions of the 1590s in the British Museum. (...) I have tried to retain something of that flavour by avoiding a standardized and uniform presentation of the varying texts; but the reader who takes one of the original octavos in his hand will feel something of the excitement which a new book of poems must have produced in the relative infancy of printing, and be unusually conscious that he is handling an artefact."

that is specially true in the case of Edmund Spenser's poetry. The only accessible text of Spenser's works is still A.C. Smith & E. de Selincourt's comprehensive Oxford edition. Though very good, it dates from 1912 and the criteria with which it was prepared have varied very much indeed in the course of time.³⁰ The excellent American *Variorum* edition is nevertheless printed in a very inconvenient size and in several volumes.³¹ Therefore it may only be easily handled within the bounds of University and Research Libraries.

But my concern should be more specific from this moment onwards in order to try to illustrate which were the sort of ideas about love that predominated in the literary world during the second half of the 16th century in England, ideas which ultimately seem to derive from a wider conception of love as seen from the scope of the ideas about man and the world. The part played by the ideas on love during the period of our concern, and how this so very sensible an emotion takes on a new dignified status during the English Renaissance can be very well followed in a series of shorter poems by Spenser and in several of those sonnet sequences I have already mentioned.

If we consider Spenser an archetypical Elizabethan poet, we will be able to illustrate as well how these ideas appear in those poems of our author that deal specifically with this uchronic and attractive topic in the moment in which the narrative quality of English love poetry was turning from the discursive into the lyrical mode that it adopted after the waning of the Middle Ages. Poems included in the *Fowre Hymnes*, (1596), and in *Amoretti & Epithalamion*, (1595), together with the *Prothalamion*, (1596), I expect, will help us to the better understanding of the development of the idea of love in Spenser and other Elizabethans.³² Moreover, we shall probably

³⁰ It is therefore the text employed for quotation in this paper (Smith & Selincourt, 1977).

³¹ This American edition of Spenser's works occupies 11 volumes: vols. I-VI include *The Faerie Queene*; vols. VII & VIII the *Minor Poems*; vol. IX the *Prose Works*; vol. X is a *Life of Spenser*; and vol. XI a general *Index* to the previous volumes. Vid. Greenlaw et al., 1932-1966.

³² Though the sonnet sequence *Amoretti* was published together with the *Epithalamion* these are poems significantly separate in theme and purpose. The *Epithalamion* assumedly relates Spenser's own (poetic?) marriage with Elizabeth

manage as well to scan what I consider to be the progressive and irresistible transition from his early Platonic mannerisms to the kind of pre-baroque concept of love that he was probably having in the latter part of his life. I think we should take into consideration as well that Spenser was a mature man in his forties and had just married³³ when he wrote most of the poems

Boyle, and it does so in a most classical way: it is a pageant describing the bride's and bridegroom's progress first towards the temple, then to the bridal bed, and finally the purposed consummation of love within the bounds of marriage when the longed-for night arrives at last. Therefore *Epithalamion* can be more easily related to *Prothalamion*, as this shorter poem which deals with the double marriage of Elizabeth and Katherine Somerset, is also written in the same classical mode: the brides are carried over the river Thames to the Temple Embankment where their bridegrooms are waiting for them. Both *Epithalamion* and *Prothalamion* refer to married love, whereas the sonnets of *Amoretti* seem to represent the courtship of Spenser's in 1594, and the kind of love presented in them is not necessarily of a bridal character. See below for further discussion.

³³ There has been some discussion about Spenser's married life. It is absolutely certain that he married Elizabeth Boyle on the 11th of June, 1594, but there is an increasingly strong critical opinion which favours (founded, unfortunately, mainly on internal evidence of the poems) that this was Spenser's second marriage, as he could have married "Machabyas Childe" (being either the name of his bride or the name of his bride's father), several years before, maybe some time in between 1576 and 1580. The character "Rosalind" in *The Shepherds Calender*, could hence be identified with Machabyas Childe, though a second "Rosalind" appears in *Colin Clovts Come Home Againe*, (1595), and the characters can be very easily identified with the former "Rosalind" of 1579, (*The Shepherds Calender*: "January" Ll. 59-66; Smith & Selincourt, 1977: 422): "Ah foolish *Hobbinol*, thy gifts bene vayne: / *Colin* them giues to *Rosalind* againe. / I loue thilke lasse, (alas why doe I loue?) / And am forlorne, (alas why am I lorne?) / Shee deignes not my good will, but doth reprove, / And of my rurall musick holdeth scorne. / Shepherds deuise she hateth as the snake, / And laughes the songes, that *Colin Clout* doth make." In 1595, we find the same proof of nobility in "Faire *Rosalind*," (*Colin Clovts Come Home Againe*, 939-9446; Smith & Selincourt, 1977: 545): "Yet so much grace let her vouchsafe to grant / To simple sawine, sith her I may not loue: / Yet that I may her honour paravant, / And praise her worth, though far my wit aboue, / Such grace shall be some guerdon for the grieffe, / And long affliction which I haue endured: / Such grace sometimes shall giue me some reliefe, / And ease of paine which cannot be recured." So far we still lack some sound historical evidence which may provide us with proof about who might have been the lady or ladies impersonated by "Rosalind" and about Spenser's first wife. Anyway, a full reinterpretation of Spenser's early poems might be possible by taking into account the possibility of

under discussion, whereas he was a younger man in his late twenties when he published *The Shepherds Calender*.

For the English Renaissance men love was a dual entity, just as man was conformed by body, soul and spirit,³⁴ though the physical support provided by man's mortal flesh was no longer to have sinful Christian connotations but rather instead to imply that man's senses were to and could be controlled. And man had also been created after the image of God, which implied a constant need to match the traditions of Christian thought with the renewed philosophy of the ancient Greeks. Love and beauty became highly prized qualities, and both love and beauty hence could have bodily and spiritual senses. That is what we have to assume when approaching Spenser's *Fowre Hymnes*, as two of them present to the reader love and beauty from the point of view of those physical ideas, whereas the other two deal with "heavenly love" and "heavenly beauty."

At this moment I think it will be most convenient to analyze the hymns on love included in *Fowre Hymnes*, in order to assess my hypothesis. In the introductory letter to the Countesses of Cumberland and Warwick, Spenser states:

Hauing in the greener times of my youth, composed these former two Hymnes in the praise of Loue and beautie, and finding that the same too much pleased those of like age and disposition, which being too vehemently caried with that kind of affection, do rather sucke out poyson to their strong passion, then hony to their honest delight, I was moued by the one of you two most excellent Ladies, to call in the same. But being vnable so to doe, by reason that many copies thereof were formerly scattered abroad, I resolued at last to amend, and by way of retractation to reforme them, making in stead of those two Hymnes of earthly or naturall loue and beautie, two others of heauenly and celestiall. The which I doe dedicate ioyntly vnto you two honorable sisters, as to the most

seeing him as a married man when he wrote them. For further discussion see H. Shire, 1978: 2-34; Hudson, 1949; and below in this essay.

³⁴ These three concepts follow after the ideas of "corpus," "anima et animus," so dear to the Academic School, and they are most probably founded in Aristotle's *De natura animalium*.

excellent and rare ornaments of all true loue and beautie, both
in the one and the other kinde, ...³⁵

Spenser points out to one and the other kind of love: earthly love and heavenly love. In the first composition, *An Hymne in Honovr of Love*, (*HL*), what he presents is a classical allegorical vision including Cupid and his mother, Venus (*HL*. 23-26):

Out of thy siluer bowres and secret blisse,
Where thou doest sit in *Venus* lap aboue,
Bathing thy wings in her ambrosiall kisse,
That sweeter farre then any Nectar is;

alongside with the god of love's own daughter (*HL*. 287-288):

There with thy daughter *Pleasure* they doe play
Their hurtlesse sports, without rebuke or blame,

and the usual appeal to literary authority by means of introducing the examples of the loves and fates of Greco-Roman characters such as Tantalus, Leander, Æneas, Achilles, Orpheus, etc.

The concept of love that Spenser has been using here seems to follow rather closely the Neoplatonic conception of love expressed by the most outstanding Italian Renaissance philosophers.³⁶ The values of classical

³⁵ Smith & Selincourt, 1977: 586.

³⁶ I think there can be no doubt whatsoever about Spenser having been acquainted with Marsilio Ficino's *De Amore: Commentarium in Convivium Platonis*, (*DA*); and the *Dialoghi d'Amore* by Leo Abarbanel (also known as Leone Hebreo, Leo Hebraevs, León Hebreo, or Leon the Hebrew). Ficino for instance says "che la bellezza è cosa spirituale," and that it must be something shared by virtue, shapes and voices; (*DA*, Discourse V, chapter III), these being the underlying ideas that one may find in both the *Hymne in Honour of Love*, and the *Hymne on Heavenly Love*, and in several of the sonnets from *Amoretti*, f.i. n° XXXIX, LXI, or LXXXIII. Vid. Villa, 1986: 91; Soria & Romano, 1986. To illustrate the influences of different Italian poets who also follow after the ideas of Neoplatonism on love, see Lewis, 1967: 1-63; and Lotspeich, 1977; Blanchard, 1977; Neil Dodge, 1977; Alpers, 1977; Tuve, 1977 (all in Bayley, P. ed. 1977: 49-100); Smith & Selincourt, 1977: xxxv-xxxviii. About the influence of the Florentine Neoplatonic thought on Spenser, vid Shire, 1978: 82-83.

antiquity: ethical behaviour and the wonderful delight of being alive, which might have led into the topic expressed in the line “gather ye rosebuds while ye may,” are now confronted with a new “human” character whose ideal is the search for virtue.³⁷ This humanism derives from Aristotelian ethics once they have been filtered through Christianity and confronted with Plato’s newly reborn writings. Renaissance Italy and France³⁸ had already seen by the 1550s the discussion of humanism and its adaptation to Christian values. In England that discussion seems to take place once the religious confrontations have been officially settled by the last of the Tudor monarchs.

My next main consideration about the idea of love in Spenser’s poetry is concerned with the problem of reality as surveyed by Renaissance Neoplatonism: that the physical world is just a puzzling gathering of imperfect versions of the ideas that do only exist -that are hence real- in the spiritual world. In the same way that God created the world and then created Adam in his image, man can also create things in his own image, but then, although God’s creatures are real and hence perfect, man’s creations, unless they be inspired by divine power, are mere illusions, imperfect shapes. God created out of His love, and as God’s main feature is His spiritual nature, His creatures derive their perfection from the real world of ideas. Man, as a bodily creature, “Then shall return to earth as it was;” but Man as a being participating of God’s own nature, has a soul, “and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it,” thus completing the cycle of creation.³⁹ And therefore Man’s creations should not be loved but merely appreciated, admired, or coveted. Man ought to love God, and thus that kind of love will be perfect and duly rewarded, this love having both a Christian and a Platonic justification.

But Man can also love other human creatures both as reflections of the spiritual idea of beauty -which is the kind of explanation provided in

³⁷ The concept indeed is better expressed in the Italian word: *Virtù*. Virtue or Vertue are hence the qualities of substantial to man -*vir*-, and closely deriving from truth -*veritas*.

³⁸ It is convenient to remember that Spenser’s early models are fundamentally French (Marot, Du Bellay), and that the poetry of Ariosto, Tasso, and other Italians influenced him later, or previously filtered through French poets. Vid. Renwick, 1933; Kermode, 1973.

³⁹ Vid *Ecclesiastes*, 12: 7.

Plato's *Symposium*, and in Ficino's *de Amore*- and as further examples (albeit the own self) of God's perfect creatures -which is the Renaissance interpretation of Christian blood and flesh love.

The concept of love then has a dual nature as well -carnal and spiritual-, and it can be considered as the main principle of conduct in human behaviour. This is the sort of discussion that Spenser presents in the allegorical *Colin Clovts Come Home Againe* (1595),⁴⁰ as the shepherds who talk about Cynthia, review in detail and ponder about her virtues comparing her to other shepherdesses -Neæra, Stella, Galathea, Amaryllis, etc.- in terms of perfection in beauty and love. The course of true love seems to be a progression, the climbing of a scale towards perception first, and then the delight in ideal beauty. We could now re-examine why Drayton's *Ideas Mirroure* does embed in its very title the concept to be developed in his sonnets, or why is it that Sidney's Astrophil -the star-lover-, pursues a star -Stella; or why Spenser also writes about "the Idea playne" in his sonnets We would probably guess that love's dual nature also implies that its effects can be both admirable and destructive.

Those effects of love do also present an antithesis in terms of the origin and development of ideal love, as the image imprinted in the deepest part of the lover's wit is obtained by means of the contemplation of the person or object beloved -the old idea that love enters the mind of the lover through the lover's sight-, followed by the compulsory thoughts that the lover has to dedicate himself to obtaining the attention of the person beloved. We can possibly see it in *An Hymne in Honovr of Love*, (*HL*, 215-217):

His harts enshrined saint, his heauens queene,
Fairer then fairest, in his fayning eye,
Whose sole aspects he counts felicitye.

but then still insisting upon some of the medieval ideas about the service of love that one is accustomed to find in Courtly Love situations (*HL*. 176-182):

For loue is a Lord of truth and loialtie,

⁴⁰ Smith & Selincourt, 1977: 536-545. In lines 463-588 of the poem one can find the discussion we are concerned with.

Gustav Ungerer

Lifting himselfe out of the lowly dust,
 Of golden plumes vp to the purest skie,
 About the reach of loathly sinfull lust,
 Whose base affect through cowardly distrust
 Of his weake wings, dare not to heauen fly,
 But like a moldwarpe in the earth doth ly.

We could hence deduce that if indeed this poem is a result of those “*greener times of my youth*,” it does fit very well indeed with the sort of ideas that we are to expect from an Elizabethan whose education has been founded on that Neoplatonic model. I think that the lines (HL. 183-189), that follow the previous stanza as we find them in *An Hymne in Honovr of Love*:⁴¹

His dunghill thoughts, which do themselves enure
 To dirtie drosse, no higher dare aspyre,
 Ne can his feeble earthly eyes endure
 The flaming light of that celestial fyre,
 Which kindleth loue in generous desyre,
 And makes him mount about the natiue might
 Of heaue earth, vp to the heauens hight.

do present a remarkable similitude with some lines included in Sidney’s *An Apology for Poetry*: (Shepherd, 1984: 116):

... sometimes, under the pretty tales of wolves and sheep,
 can include the whole considerations of wrong-doing and
 patience; sometimes show that contention for trifles can get
 but a trifling victory; where perchance a man may see that
 even Alexander and Darius, when they strave who should be
 cock of this world’s dunghill, the benefit they got was that the
 afterlivers may say,
Haec memini et victum frustra contendere Thirsin:
Ex illo Corydon, Corydon es tempore nobis.

and it is precisely Sidney who indicates very clearly why would English poets follow the path of Platonism (Shepherd, 1984: 128):

⁴¹ Vid. Smith & Selincourt, 1977: 588.

But now indeed my burden is great; now Plato's name is laid upon me, whom, I must confess, of all philosophers I have ever esteemed most worthy of reverence, and with great reason: since of all philosophers he is the most poetical.

If we were to assume that the ideas about love and beauty that Spenser stated in his hymn on Love were to last, we would probably be shocked about what we can read in his later *An Hymne of Heavenly Love* (HHL, 258-273):

Learne him to loue, that loued thee so deare,
 And in thy brest his blessed image beare.
 With all thy hart, with all thy soule and mind,
 Thou must him loue, and his behests embrace;
 All other loues, with which the world doth blind
 Weake fancies, and stirre vp affections base,
 Thou must renounce, and utterly displace,
 And giue thy selfe vnto him full and free,
 That full and freely gaue himself to thee.

Then shalt thou feele thy spirit so possesst,
 And rausht with deuouring great desire
 Of his deare selfe, that shall thy feeble brest
 In flame with loue, and set thee all on fire
 With burning zeale, through euery part entire,
 That in no earthly thing thou shalt delight,
 But in his sweet and amiable sight.

Here we do not find any longer the pure Neoplatonic concepts of love and beauty as ideal elements. We are to consider instead that though in his youthful verses Spenser declared that it is most agreeable to find truth and kindness in the object of love, that it is more pleasant to look at a beautiful body than to observe despicable limbs, and that the sweet accord of voices is delightful because it is not corporeal, some twenty years later his ideas about love and beauty have changed. Indeed we should be just stating that Spenser is at first an English Neoplatonic poet who is merely applying the ideas on love of his own times. And then we are thus to assume that the spiritual world in which poetry is to find its fundamental justification -the true universe of man's mind-, really prefers these qualities because they are well known to it as they seem to be deprived of a bodily appearance and hence they may be closer in their nature and attributes to the immortal soul of man,

to that world where shapes do not count any longer because the observer is only able to see a stage inhabited by shadows that reincarnate and descend to this unhappy world. In the Elizabethan quest for the establishing of an acceptable set of social and philosophical values, the search for happiness includes automatically those three concepts we have alluded to, three virtues⁴² that will be highly admired and appreciated even many years after the Renaissance fashions and customs had been substituted by those currently deriving from the Baroque modes, although that substitution was probably effected by the very same group of poets who introduced them.

I think there can be no superciliousness about considering that this change took place in the late years of the 16th century and the early decades of the 17th, as one can easily point at the differences, for instance, in between the attitude towards life in general that can be detected in the early love-poetry of John Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*, and his later *Divine Sonnets*, or the remarkable treatment of love-scenes and performance techniques that we are able to discuss when contrasting Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *The Tempest*. The transitions that modified the attitudes and modes of Renaissance Platonism in literature all over Western Europe might very well be linked to the general need for a spiritual synthesis of the opposing religious attitudes of Roman Catholicism or Protestantism, both Christian forms at any rate, and the principles derived from an intellectual longing for classical paganism. This is the sort of discussion that one may find recorded in many Spenserian critics, and it is the sort of discussion which led to a rather sound proposal by C.S. Lewis, (1967: 59):

Every lover looks for qualities in the beloved that remind him of the god he followed in a former life. They 'keep their eyes fixed upon the god, and as they reach and grasp him by memory they are inspired and receive from him character and habits, so far as it is possible for a man to have a part in God.' (...) Such doctrines, then, were to be found in the works of the Platonists. But granted that, how could Spenser call himself a Christian and believe in them? Two very different answers to this question occur; and each may in part be true. The first is that the whole school of thought to which Spenser belonged felt that in the long run *everything* must be reconcilable. There

⁴² It might be convenient to pay attention to the fact that by "virtue" I am really alluding to an "inherent character," henceforth using it in a rather Platonic sense.

was no belief, however pagan or bizarre it might seem, that could not be accommodated somehow, if only it were right understood. The other answer is that Spenser may not have intended the doctrines as articles of belief at all.

Though one is also able to detect in Lewis's attitude the same dichotomy (*Two very different answers to this question occur, and each may in part be true*); that Spenser and his contemporaries had to, or at least tried to solve.

However one could also say that Platonism as understood in the late 16th century, informs the relation of image to idea, and hence in Spenser's poems it usually implies a system of ideas and images of ideas. And then, also following after the Platonic principle of the opposing complementary selves, which can be expounded into a system which includes complementary worlds, we will find the most elaborate universe of ideas and counter-ideas: a system in which ideas and images of ideas, that can very easily be attributed a good moral finality, will be confronted by a false system of ideas and a false system of images of ideas. Thus the dichotomy in between Platonism and Christianity may be seen from the scope of a new meaning based on the decision that both the poet and his audience have to take when they have to match the real world and the reality of the worlds created by Spenser. It may follow as well that Elizabethans were actually trying to implement the equation in which Christianity is a world of good moral ideas which have to be confronted by a Platonic world which is at the same time good inasmuch as it can be levelled with the Christian one, and evil, because it is to that ideal world where falsehood belongs. If we are to accept this basic principle, then we may be able to understand much better how those two answers are different and how each one is true.

Even in those cases in which Spenser does not introduce, or just does not wish to introduce, this dual universe, his whole conception of reality and fantasy prove illusory, because the opposition no longer affects imitations and realities, and instead he offers us emblems, symbols, images, and so on, twice over, in true and false forms which are very difficult to separate one from the other. The principle of complementation is always adamant in Renaissance authors, though it is much more a manneristic effect in the case of Spenser because it seems to be his own version of Plato's dialectic principle. If we can accept that Spenser is actually "a mind in progress" during the 1590s, then we shall be able to determine that the concepts of

mannerism and baroque are to be found in his minor poems. It is possible to illustrate this dialectics for instance in sonnet 7 from *Amoretti*:⁴³

Fayre eyes, the myrrour of my mazed hart,
 what wondrous vertue is contaynd in you
 the which both lyfe and death forth from you dart
 into the obiect of your mighty view?

For when ye mildly looke with louely hew,
 then is my soule with life and loue inspired,
 but when ye lowre, or looke on me askew,
 then doe I die, as one with lightning fyred.

But since that lyfe is more then death desyred,
 looke euer louely, as becomes you best,
 that your bright beams of my weak eies admyred,
 may kindle liuing fire within my brest.

Such life should be the honor of your light,
 such death the sad ensample of your might.

because as it was the case of *An Hymne in Honovr of Love*, the topic of the eyes⁴⁴ which introduces the discussion about the poet's "lyfe and death," indeed helps Spenser to present the dichotomy about the dual nature of love, though the underlying discussion of the sonnet may rest upon the confrontation of opposed principles which are resolved in the final couplet. But I would like to point out especially to the first lines in the second stanza:

For when ye mildly looke with louely hew,
 then is my soule with life and loue inspired,

as in these we find the clue for the explanation of the antithesis presented, because it appears that the poet's life seems to be sustained by the mere spiritual contemplation of the "wondrous vertue contayned in you," needing little else. And that is a purely Neoplatonic attitude. Yet it can be quite

⁴³ Vid. Smith & Selincourt, 1977: 563; González Corugedo, 1983: 84-85.

⁴⁴ This is a very dear topic to English literature. One may for instance remember that in the late 12th century, the clerk who is responsible for the *Ancrene Riwe* also uses the eyes, or the eyesight rather, as "Beginnunge ant rote of al þis ilke reowle was a liht sihlfe." Vid. Tolkien, 1962.

interesting to compare sonnet 7 -which we can assume to have been written several months before the latter poems of *Amoretti*-, with sonnet 88,⁴⁵ in terms of the idea of love that Spenser has been constructing and depicting in the series, because in sonnet 88 we meet the *Idea*, which is introduced by means of the customary routine about the sight and the contemplation derived from it:

Since I have lackt the comfort of that light,
The which was wont to lead my thoughts astray:
I wander as in darknesse of the night,
affrayd of every dangers least dismay.

Ne ought I see, though in the clearest day,
when others gaze upon theyr shadowes vayne:
but th'onely image of that heavenly ray,
whereof some glance doth mine eye remayne.

Of which beholding the Idea playne,
through contemplation of my purest part:
with light thereof I doe my selfe sustayne,
and thereon feed my love-affamisht hart.

But with such brightnesse whylest I fill my mind,
I starve my body and myne eyes doe blynd.

If I am not very much mistaken, I think we could detect that there has been a significant change in the way in which Spenser feeds his “love-affamisht hart” as he seems to be quite unhappy with the mere spiritual contemplation of his beloved one. At the same time that he is able to fill his mind to probable full satisfaction, he starves his body and blinds his eyes, thus expressing utter unhappiness. All that is no longer a purely Neoplatonic concept. We could deduce then that this new (physical?) requirement might have imperative connections with the kinds of love that will be expressed and confronted in the two couples of ideas appearing in *Fowre Hymnes: An Hymne of Heavenly Love* and *An Hymne of Heavenly Beavtie*, and the earlier *An Hymne in Honovr of Love*, and *An Hymne in Honovr of Beavtie*.

⁴⁵ Smith & Selincourt, 1977: 577.

Spenser substitutes, maybe just partially, but in a way which I think to be significant enough, the Neoplatonic ideas of his earlier compositions for a new concept of love and beauty which permeates a change in the world of the mind: The double love that is to be found in the soul has been somewhat transformed in Spenser's late poems: it is more elaborate, less purely Platonic and more Christianized, though none the less rational and polemic. It might have been just a consequence implied by a mere fact of worldly character: that the poet advances in age. But it may also have been a consequence of a deeper change in the world of ideas

The double love of earthly character has also changed: it is no longer incontinent and distempered, but quite chaste and sober. All these features concerning the origin, nature, and effects of love in their gradual transformation may be proof enough to determine that whereas in the late 1580s Spenser and other remarkable Elizabethans were still wondering about the problem of adapting Neoplatonism, by the 1590s they had completed the sort of transition that one may find in a very noticeable way in John Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*, and very especially in the intertwining of the three characters that appear in Shakespeare's sonnet sequence. It is a transition that we could identify very well with the end of English Renaissance and the dawn of a brave new Baroque.

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