

MAN AND THE HIERARCHY OF THE CHRISTIAN PLATONISM AS
PRESENTED IN SELECTED POEMS OF EDMUND SPENSER

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Every lapse of time, with everything it introduces, repeats, and discards as antiquated, switches the keynote of interpreting a poem into a different mode. A work of art is not contiguous. Consequently, its controversial interpretations cannot be conclusively judged or criticised. Its function, which prevails in the criticism of a particular historical period, floats away with time, giving way to another interpretation. Apart from simultaneous existence of various conceptions of a literary work, the sense of the conception of a poem changes within the sequence of historical development.

Through the analysis of literature one can trace the unfamiliar of the present epoch to the familiar of the past. One can also trace the growth of the familiar of contemporary life from the unfamiliar to the consciousness of the people whose lives have been genetically linked with ours. The most interesting experience of consciousness, however, is the discovery of what seems to be familiar in the time unit which is contemporary to the mental activity of a 20th century man — in a different shape, to which the past weaved in its mental and emotional restlessness and penetrations.

The Renaissance, shaping itself deliberately into an epoch different from the preceding one, selected a set of elements out of the problems formulated in ancient and mediaeval cultures and blended them in the crucible of its own world of thought and art. The fusion of the conceptions of truth, nature, and philosophy — chosen out of the intellectual heritage of the Hellenic and Christian systems — resulted in the formation of the conception of the Universe and Man specific to English Renaissance.

The foundation of Spenser's artistically elaborated philosophy is the Christian religion. As M. P. Parker formulates it, "... in Spenser's days... the belief in a world order which was governed by the God of the Christians,

still held good, and was assumed as a common basis of thought and judgement" (Parker 1962: 3). Within the framework of the Christian religion, the elements of Platonian and Aristotelian systems of evaluation criteria are subordinated to the idea of the hierarchy of the universe, which penetrated into every sphere of Man's awareness and activity, due to the revision of the Bible interpretation.

The organization of the heavenly and earthly worlds presented in Spenser's poems accounts for the blend of the biblical history of creation and Platonian system of ethics. The criteria of evaluation which are employed by the poet in the interpretation of the principles of Christianity derive from a fusion of Platonian and Aristotelian philosophical principles.

The hierarchy of ideal values proposed by Spenser parallels Plato's system of ideas, the supremacy of which holds the highest Good — the supreme reason, culminating both rational and ethical principles. The poet's philosophical system is also analogous to Aristotle's teaching, according to which all form in nature is the product of a formative reason.

In Spenser's system, the idea of Good finds its spiritual incarnation in the creator of the Christian universe. According to the poet's interpretation of religion, God's creative power is Reason, "the souveraine dearing of the Deity"¹ ("The shepherdes calender": 443).

The Christian conception of God as harmonizer of the universe is reflected in Spenser's interpretation of the creation and organization of the spiritual, mental, and animal elements of the world. God, the beginning and end of everything, in His loving "to get things like himselfe", created the perfect universe "like to it selfe" ("An hymne of heavenly love": 599).

God, "the Idee of his pure glorie" ("An hymne of heavenly love": 602), is omnipresent in the universe. Enumerating the constituents of the world — which he describes in terms of mediaeval views on the universe organization — Spenser gives expression to the Renaissance endeavour to explain rationally the phenomena of nature, and to the Elizabethan delight in geometry. The Earth is founded "on adamantine pillars", "amid the Sea", and is "cngirt with brasen bands". The characterization of the air — "still flitting" — is in logical consequence followed by the remark "but yet firmly bounded on everie side" ("An hymne of heavenly beautie": 602). However unscientific Spenser's explanation of the air's nature is, it anticipates any possible inquiries concerning the unchanging form and position occupied by the air around the Earth. The air's constancy of quantity is noted in the additional observation which reflects the blend of the experimental knowledge with the Christian axiom: "never consum'd, nor quencht with mortall hands". Anal-

¹ All references are to *The Globe Edition of the works of Edmund Spenser* (Morris 1904). The numbers in parentheses indicate pages.

ogous observational accuracy intermingled with the mediaeval tradition — which placed the heaven inside the clouds — is testified in the image of the sky: "that bright shynie round still moving Masse", which is "the house of blessed God" ("An hymne of heavenly beautie": 602).

As seems to be implied in Spenser's poetry, the sources of Man's faith in God and admiration of nature as the reflection of God's own beauty and perfection, lie — however paradoxical it may be, particularly with reference to the epoch of the Renaissance — in the consciousness that Man's mental equipment is not sufficient enough to find a verifiable explanation of the first cause. Therefore, the human mind could not be considered to be the power capable of satisfying the Renaissance desire of experimental knowledge of existence.

One finds glimpses in Spenser's poetry which indicate that the homage paid to God's goodness and power is accompanied by the realization of the limitation of the human mind to understand the beginning of the earthly existence, as well as the intricate mechanism of the powers of nature that organize the universe. An illustration of such a dualism in the philosophical system, mirrored in the poems, are the lines from "An hymne of heavenly love": "Whose kingdomes throne no thought of earthly wight can comprehend" (599), and from "An hymne of heavenly beautie": "But we, fraile wights! whose sight cannot sustaine the Suns bright beams when he on us doth shyne" (603).

Entering Paradise, after a well-lived life, indicates — for the Renaissance man — the liberation of the mind from the limitations imposed upon it by the body. Man will "no longer need to struggle toward an idea of the intelligible world by the means of its visual images on earth..." (Davis 1965: 64). Traditional representation of paradise as a vast, brilliant area is modified by introducing liberty to the interpretation of the disposition of the material and spiritual elements of the world. Heaven need not be necessarily placed in the proximity of the Sun which would "illuminate their Spheres" ("An hymne of heavenly beautie": 603). The source of its illumination is "Their owne native light", which — due to God's intervention — is "farre passing" the light emitted by the Sun ("An hymne of heavenly beautie": 603).

Thus, the attempt to achieve absolute understanding of the earthly existence being futile, the poet accepts the world order as it shows itself in the Christian religion. He simultaneously advocates strong belief in the Christian God, which conditions acceptance of the proposed philosophical system.

The above interpretation may be equally well criticised as a convenient fitting of the 16th century attitude of purest Christian humility to the 20th century tendency towards affirmation of failure. Psychic repercussions of failures in modern Man's awareness augment the hints of the Renaissance — modest and absolute — subordination into the vacuous gaps left by success-

ful intellectual nihilism and emotional eruption, both marking modern works of art.

According to Spenser, communication with God may be achieved by contemplation of divinity through the study of the Bible:

Beginne from first, where he enradled was
In simple cratch, wrapt in a wad of hay.

("An hymne of heavenly beautie": 601)

Spenser demands jumping into the strong and absolute belief, trusting God, just as He trusted Man.

And give thy selfe unto him full and free,
That full and freely gave himselfe to thee.

("An hymne of heavenly love": 602)

The belief in God as the creator of the universe and the powerful rescuer is implied in the characters' attitude towards the world. In "The shepherdes calender" Thenot exclaims: "Ah, my souveraigne! Lord of creatures all" (449).

Thenot's exclamation implying his peaceful trust and sense of security, based on the belief in God, is not as foreign to the 20th century as it might appear to be. It would be unjust to accuse modern science of crippling Man by tearing God away from him. Science just emerged on the way in the search for Divinity, ridiculing the traditional personification of God — His gentleman's clothes, bearded face and predilection to altar flowers. Modern science set more refined requirements before human imagination, making the scientist pay tribute to the constellations of cyphers powerful to move robots, the politician to the labour and glory of reigning, the mother to the warmth of love, van Goghs to the obsession for discovering life in mutations of colours, poets to the omnipotent universe of associations. Emily Dickinson's (1961) poem summarizes the essence of modern sensibility and the essence of modern belief:

The soul selects her own society,
Then shuts the door;
On her divine majority
Obtrude no more.

...

I've known her from an ample nation
Choose one;
Then close the valves of her attention
Like stone.

Observing and acting according to the order of nature, set by God, conditions Man's goodness and freedom. One can be free, according to Spenser, only without being a slave to misdeeds, which trespass beyond the harmony of nature.

In "The shepherdes calender" Spenser presents in terms of pastoral life the ideal state which prevailed on the Earth before the fall of Man. The shepherds trusted God, "for Pan himselfe was their inheritaunce" (459), and let themselves be guided by goodness. They did not possess any property but sheep, "nought having, nought feared to forgoe" (459). By looking after their sheep, they served God, "the best shepheard", often referred to by the name of Great Pan — signifying omnipotence. They constantly had in mind their responsibility before God for what they did, and threatened with the vision of the hell — acted well. Criticising careless tending of sheep by some shepherds, Piers wonders:

... what account both these will make;
The one for the hire which he doth take,
And th'other for leaving his Lords taske,
And great Pan account of shepherdes shall aske.

("The shepherdes calender": 459)

Refusing to recognize the inevitability of being subordinated to the laws of nature leads to a conflict, and — in the final judgement — failure. Man's subordination to the laws of nature is accentuated by Thenot's story of the destruction of the balance of nature by an oak. By having the old tree cut down, the young oak deprived itself of protection from wind and snow, which it lacked particularly when it grew old. Its aging is described in terms of winter — the aged spring. The introduction of such a poetical parallel suggests the transformation of the story of the phenomenon of nature to the world of human beings.

The Renaissance code of the law of nature seems to be timeless. In modern literature the characters get involved in conflicts by breaking the balance required by nature. Miriam (cf. *Sons and lovers* by D. H. Lawrence) fell like "The shepherdes calender" Man (though hers was a modern fall, more refined by four-centuries wisdom) for committing the greatest Renaissance sin — the sin of falling out of the pace of nature. By augmenting one of the constituents of her personality — consciousness — she puffed around herself the glass bubble of art, and alienated herself into a poetic isolation.

In "The shepherdes calender", the characters' lives correspond to the metamorphosis of nature within a year. When remembering and commenting upon his life — on his age, occupation, and mistakes — Colin speaks metaphorically. He transforms the story of his life into an allegorical account of events which took place in animal and plant world.

The cooperation of nature with Man's life is accentuated also by the poetic media used by Spenser. The very structure of "The shepherdes calender" falls into the line of the rhythm of nature. Each part ends with the sunset. Apart from this, the characters accentuate ending of the day with remarks on the hiding sun.

The mental attitude associated with humanism assumed the importance of the factual plane of a thing. Combined with the mediaeval tradition, which insisted on perceiving allegorical correspondences between the levels of the universe structure, and applied in poetry, it yielded the Elizabethan poetic mode of describing people, objects, and phenomena by means of nature's features. Superficially, it could have enlarged the number of literary devices: Man and nature are in the same circle of semantic references of literary means. In fact, however, by fixing a set of correspondences between the states of nature, variations of human mood, and evaluation — the way of perceiving the world became impoverished. Instead of attempting to assume an objective look at nature to analyze its phenomena within the framework of the dynamics of its laws and stillness of its states, the poet transformed his knowledge of Man to his interpretation of Nature. The mediaeval allegory fused with the ancient literary tradition, the latter offering from the store of the classical poetics a number of gods and semi-gods representing and commanding a quality of human psyche and its reaction. Operating with such a poetic apparatus forced poetry into the allegorical form, sanctified by ancient mythology, as well as the mediaeval poetry of the good and evil. This form of poetry classified rather than characterized, presented type qualities, and did not depict the intricate features. Presenting Man in allegorical poetry appears to be like trying to communicate the ephemeral of feeling through a wooden mask of an ancient actor, whose cothurni allow him only controlled and measured movements, or killing the truth of uncertainty by assuming the infallibility of a doctrine.

In Spenser's poems nature responds to the states of human psyche. Night sympathizes with Man's despair, hiding the shining sun, the sight of which might be painful to the distressed characters. Within the structural framework of "The shepheardes calender" the seasons of the year correspond to the stages of man's life, spring indicating youth, winter — old age. The names of the seasons, as well as those of the months, are interchangeable with the age-terms. The phenomena of nature parallel, in the poems, the development of the human temperament.

In the model of the Renaissance philosophy Man reposes trust in the decisions of his reason. On the basis of the knowledge attainable for a man, reason constructs a code of morality to be followed. The painful consciousness of the limitation of the human mind is transferred into the willing acceptance of "the inevitable". "The inexplicable" for Man is attributed to spiritual perfection venerated in the Christian religion. Thus, the Renaissance acceptance is based on the admittance of intellectual failure, and the highest values presented in Spenser's philosophy are the Platonian-like, unattainable ideas, uniting the supreme qualities of both mind and

feeling. These are: wisdom, whose traces Man happens to encounter occasionally in earthly life, love — the balance between communion and detachment, which Man unsuccessfully struggles to achieve, and beauty — which Man is incapable of fully understanding or creating — giving the highest aesthetic satisfaction.

Like a skier on a ski-lift which crosses the slope, who at first is absorbed in grasping the quick of the running rope, but gradually grows aware of the snow images around him — filmed by his memory, until he is carried to the top and overwhelmed with the indifference of success — which, he knows, he did not conquer but was floated to — the Renaissance Man, presented by Spenser, lives two lives simultaneously. These are the life of the immediate now, and the life of waiting. One is a life of fascination with sensory impressions, the other consists in expectation of eventual achievement of the perfect in the other life. Both currents are united by the mental struggle to direct life according to the model of ideal values. An allegorical illustration of the perfect invisible and the every-day visible is the painting by Raphael: *The Marriage of the Virgin*. In the background it presents a temple with a mystical, transparent light glowing through its door, and in the front the bridal couple standing at the foot of the temple absorbed in watching their fingers being enclosed by rings.

The "double awareness of human desire and limit" (Cheney 1966 : 4) is made more conspicuous by the use of allegory which stresses the abstraction from the plot context. Having in mind D. Cheney's (1966 : 6) definition of allegory as "collocation of awarenesses which demands an equally high degree of attentive response from the reader", a reader interprets allegorical characters as "human figures struggling to realize their own identities" (1966 : 6) in terms of the virtues whose embodiment they are.

Man's personality seems to be understood by Spenser in terms of Aristotelian psychological doctrines. According to Aristotle, human mental faculties may be grouped into two classes — the cognitive powers (connected with knowledge and reason) and the motive powers (to which feeling, desire, and action are subordinated). Impulses are stimulated by emotion which is a mixture of pleasure and pain. "Common sense" coordinates various sensations and organizes consciousness. To explain ordering of spontaneous action Aristotle introduces Socrates's theory of the relation of conduct to knowledge. All organic nature is united by the principle of will. Freedom is the quality of rational will entirely, the latter in turn depending on empirical knowledge. The ideal state of the human psyche is the state of equilibrium, which is conditioned by the harmony between external stimuli and the sense-function.

In the hierarchy of intellectual states, rational choice — which depends on rational insight — occupies the highest position. Any disturbance of the

balance between the rational controlling of life and indulgence in its pleasures is a conflict which results in a character's failure. The criticism of the pastoral mode of life, implied in "The shepheardes calender", points it out.

Colin considers his life to be wasted. The reason for it is attributed to his letting his life be guided by pride that affirmed in him the sense of value of his singing and playing the pipe, directing him to choose the pastoral mode of life and devote his music to the praise of his beloved Rosalind. The description of his youth is the picture of rustic life, led for the sake of pleasure. As an aged man looking back at his life, Colin pessimistically concludes that the choice he made was a failure. His love — for which he sacrificed the satisfaction of a Christian with well performed duty, his art, and the effort of his whole life — appeared to be futile.

Spenser's proposing of principles to follow in action is not the equivalent of expression of certainty that the set of principles defines a measured proportion between pleasure and duty. The discussion between the Protestant and the Catholic ministers does not answer the question how people should live. One of them claims service to God through the praise of the delight in living to be the essence of life. The other one contradicts this view by saying that the shepherds "must walke another way, sike worldly sovenance he must forsay" ("The shepheardes calender": 459); their life should consist in performing their duty.

As Palinode points out, the balance between rational will and impulses is not easy to achieve. The cause of it is Man's vacillating will that wavers under the influence of love. And love — however conscientious is the effort to direct life with intellect, and not feeling — is unavoidable.

Three things to beare here very burdeneous,
But the forth to forbear is outrageous:
Wemen, that of Loves longing lust,
Hardly forbear, but have it they must.

("The shepheardes calender": 459)

Man's degeneration resulted from people's conduct. God's power only once directly trespassed the actions of humanity — in sending Christ. Oddly enough, the offence against Divine Love may happen in the heavenly world as well. The example of such an inconsistency in interpreting the divine is the Angels' fall. Similarly as in the account of Man's degeneration, Spenser's way of interweaving the account of this fact between the parts glorifying God's omnipotence smoothes out the inconsequence of his system.

The point of interpretation of God's infinite power seems to be, in actual fact, the cross-roads of two contradictory attitudes. One of them assumes God's will to be the absolute power directing the universe. The other implies the conception of an individual's free will, characteristic of the Renaissance. The fall of the Angels — who are depicted in the impressive, brilliant image,

as "Angels bright, all glistring glorious in their Makers light" ("An hymne of heavenly love": 599) — was punishment for their pride, the greatest sin against the truest virtue — love. God had little or no influence upon the Angels' conduct. Expelling them from the Heavenly Kingdom was His only intervention.

Similarly as the poetry of the Renaissance, modern poetry mirrors the disquiet of Man's consciousness on attempting to answer the questions concerning the divine and the human, the visible and the invisible. An example of the timelessness of those questions may be Ogden Nash's short poem which approaches the problem with humour and irony.

God in His wisdom made the fly,
And then forgot to tell us why.

(Ogden Nash 1945 : 134)

The 16th century prayer for inner equilibrium launched in the 20th century through the Renaissance house of God, which nowadays is not the illuminated, brilliant Paradise of souls, but a variety of clouds — mass of visible water vapour floating above the earth — orderly classified by scientific labels. Enlarging, for the 20th century Man's consciousness, God's world — by modern science and philosophy — with the metaphysical spacious space finds its repercussions in the contemporary trends of poetry. The Renaissance trust in the power of goodness became but an element in modern Man's quest for inner equilibrium.

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