THE IDEA OF LOVE IN SPENSER'S MINOR POEMS

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Annotation: 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 ucronic 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 theMiddle 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.
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INTRODUCTION

For the English Renaissance men love was a dual entity, just as man was conformed by body, soul and spirit, 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."

MAIN PART

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. The values of classical 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. This humanism derives from Aristotelian ethics once they have been filtered through Christianism and confronted with Plato's newly reborn writings. Renaissance Italy and France 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. 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 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), 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.

CONSLUSION

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

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