

Gy. E. Szönyi

A SYNTHESIS OF RENAISSANCE LOVE-THEORIES;
THE COMPOSITIONAL STRUCTURE OF
EDMUND SPENSER'S *F O W R E H Y M N E S*

Preface

Trying to interpret a literary work of art one cannot help facing a great number of difficulties. On the one hand the possible estimation is distracted and modified by the spirit of the interpreter's own age; on the other hand the work's age creates a barrier between the interpreter and the work to be interpreted, hiding its particular ideas, relations and aims. These, in the case of a work of art from an age in the remote past, are usually unknown or incomprehensible for those who want to approach a certain product of the intellect and imagination.

A work of high standard obviously can please and fascinate its reader or listener in any age, excepting some intentionally obscure extremities. However, it could hardly be denied that the knowledge of certain things which occur outside the structure of the work of art does reveal newer levels of understanding. One also must not forget that following medieval traditions it was just the Renaissance (the age of our work to be interpreted) which spawned the doctrine about the double (*vulgar* and *higher*) meanings of any artistic opus. Dante differentiated four levels of

interpretation as (1) the literal, (2) the allegorical-philosophical, (3) the moral and (4) the theological.

In English we can also find similar opinions such as that of Philip Sidney writing in his *Apology*: "believe with me, that there are many mysteries contained in poetry, which of purpose were written darkly, lest by profane wits it should be abused".¹

All these quotations urge us to take into consideration the artist's definite intention to express some deeper content: either in the compositional arrangement or using special systems of symbols and allegories. If we aim to understand the work of art in the context of its age we can hardly avoid examining the historical and intellectual current within which the work was begotten.

In the first part of this paper I am going to analyse the themes of Spenser's *Four Hymnes* including the compositional arrangement; in the second part some philological questions will be dealt with directed towards the work's antecedents in the history of ideas; the third part is intended to summarize and synthetize the interpretation.

Part One

FOURRE HYMNES: Composition and Structure
(a linear analysis)

A series of poems entitled *Fowre Hymnes*, the last poetic work by Edmund Spenser (1552-99)² genius of the English Renaissance, appeared in 1596 with the following dedication:

Haunting in the greener times of my youth, composed these former two Hymnes in the praise of Loue and beautye, 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 honey to their honest delight, I was moued by the one of you two most excellent Ladies, to call in the same. But being unable so to doe, by reason that many copies thereof were formerly scattered abroad, I resolued at least to amend, and by way of retractation to reforme them, making in stead of those two Hymnes of earthly or naturall love and beautie, two others of heauenly and celestiaall. The which I doe dedicate ioyntly vnto you two honorable sisters, as to the most excellent and rare ornaments of all true loue and beautie, both in the one and the other kinde, humbly beseeching you to vouchsafe the patronage of them and to accept this my humble seruice, in lieu of the great graces and honorable fauours which ye dayly shew into me, antill such time as I may by better meanes yeeld you some more notable testimonie of my thankfull mind and dutifull deuotion.

And euen so I pray for your happinesse.
Greenwich this first of September.
1596.

Your Honors most bounden euer in
all humble seruice.

Ed. Sp. (MACLEAN 1968, 449).

A careful reading of the four hymns proves that each part consists of the same units, again four in number. The hymns each begin with an invocation. The one to earthly love praises Cupid, the other to earthly beauty admires Venus while their heavenly pairs are written to Jesus and the Holy Ghost. The invocation is always followed by the mythology of the birth of the hymn's addressee. Then some explicatory parts come in each poem, an argument and rebuttal on the nature of the hymns' objects. The poems end with scenes of Paradise where pleasures are promised properly coinciding with the main themes.

The first piece of the series (*An Hymne in Honour of Love*), after invoking Cupid, describes the birth-myth of Love in three versions following three classical authors. The first of them is that of Plato, according to which Love was born by plenitude and need in the marriage of Poros and Penia, that is why Love is desperately longing for beauty and is abundant in desires.³ The second version is taken from Hesiod's *Theogony* (ll. 116-22) in which Love (i.e. Eros) is presented as the first-born god after Chaos and it is he who brought order into the unshaped, still turbulent world. Hesiod's story, however, occurs with Plato, as well.⁴

Spenser's third source is the *Methamorphoses* by Ovid. In its first book Ovid wrote that a god had reconciled at the beginning of time the confused and violent elements of the universe.⁵ Spenser developed this motif with a Neoplatonist thought: that god must have been Love, who with the energy of affection, forced the contradictory fire and water, air and earth to look for and accept each other: "Ayre hated earth, and water hated fyre, /Till Love relented their rebellious yre" (HL, 83-4)/.

The nature of Love is also treated in three parts by Spenser. First of all he speaks about the universal love that gives eternity to the human race by means of generation. Then the poet contrasts bodily lust with true love - only the latter is able to elevate: "For Love is Lord of truth and loialtie, /Lifting himselfe out of the lowly dust, / On golden plumes up to the purest skie" (HL, 176-8). Finally he comes to jealousy that turns love to bitterness and afflicts the lover with unexpressable torments: "With thousands more then any tongue can tell, /Do make lovers life a wretches hell" (HL, 264-5), and - as in the *Purgatorium* - purges him before the accomplishment: "through Paines of Purgatorie, / Dost beare unto thy blisse, and heavens glorie" (HL, 278-9).

The completion is obviously the attainment of the beloved in the Paradise of Love, represented in the poem by Cupid's ivory-bed where lovers are fed with nectar among roses and lilies and where the poet praises the god of love as "My

guide, my God, my victor and my king".

The second hymn completes the first as being dedicated to the object of earthly love: earthly beauty (*An Hymne in Honour of Beautie*). The poet turns to Venus, Love's mother, before describing beauty as an immanent creative power of the world. Ideal beauty was the original shape by which the existing world had been formed, he states: "The wondrous Paterne wheresoere it bee, /Is perfect Beautie which all men adore" (HB, 36-40).⁶

As love is the mobilizer of the world, beauty urges spirits to move; it is energy given by the Sun that inspires the soul to soar when it descends to a mortal body.⁷ The comparison between true and false beauty is parallel with that of the bodily lust and true love. The dynamism of notions is again pointed upwards: true love ascends to the ideal beauty. The closing paradise-scene lauds the beauties of Venus with her power to conquer death itself: "what wondrous powre your beautie hath, /That can restore a damned weight from death" (HB, 286-7).

An Hymne of Heavenly Love begins with the "restitution" mentioned already in the dedication of the cycle. The poet asks Jesus to give him the strength to leave earthly matters and to write this time about the love of the Lord. The birth-myth relates the creation of the world but it is restricted to sentient beings. First we learn about the formation of the orders of Anges including the story of the revolt of the "brightest Angell, even the Child

of Light". God cast off the unfaithful spirits and to replace them he made man of "clay, and breathd a living spright into his face most beautifull and fayre". But man, as well as the angels, also sinned, fell and was expelled from Paradise to the eternal damnation. At this point the stream of divine love reached its extreme as God sent his own son to redeem mankind. The third part of the birth-myth is Christ's transfiguration into man and his altruistic death: "In flesh at first the guilt committed was, /Therefore in flesh it must be satysfyde" (HHL, 141-2).

When analysing divine love Spenser emphasized the example of Christ's unselfishness. The stipulation of heavenly love is a disinterested love of God and ones fellow-beings: "Him first to love, And next, our brethren to his image wrought ... And love our brethren; thereby to approve, /How much himselfe that loved us, we love" (HHL, 188-9 ... 216-7).

This love is represented by the earthly life and teachings of Jesus which provided salvation for men on earth. When describing the heavenly Christian Paradise Spenser also was inclined to use the patterns of Neoplatonic expression:

Than shall thy ravisht soule inspiréd bee
With heavenly thoughts, farre above humane skill,
And thy bright radiant eyes shall plainly see
Th'Idée of his pure glorie, present still
Before thy face, that all thy spirits shall fill
With sweete enragement of celestiall love

(281-6).

An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie strictly follows the previous poem as with the earthly hymns. The poet invokes the Holy Ghost and announces at the same time that in the following stanzas he is going to outline his vision of celestial beauty. In this poem the myth of the world-creation coincides with the delineation of the created universe. Spenser describes the world in the sequence of beauty's gradually growing manifestation in things. It is essentially that of the spherical world picture founded by Pseudo-Dionysius around the second century A.D. and conventionally accepted up to the end of the Renaissance (see: Yates 1964, 117-30).⁸ The spherical connections are based upon the principle of "the great chain of being" as related by Plato in *Timaeus* and which can be defined as the essence of the Medieval world picture that remained practically untouched until the end of the 16th century. This chain was supposed to be unbroken and an element of it was always more important than the lower under it but smaller than the upper one above. In Spenser's interpretation, according to his platonizing attitude, successively higher spheres are possessed of a more perfect beauty (on the great chain of being see: Tillyard 1968, 37-50). The initial loop of the chain is the natural world with its numberless creatures and with earth, ocean, air and sky, the combinations of the four basic elements. Above these we see the planets, the Sun and the Moon then the upper skies where the highest is the *primum mobile*, the sphere of the first mover. The description of the spiritual

world comes now where Spenser only loosely follows the order given by Dionysius and Dante. Eight, altogether, of the nine angelic hierarchies are mentioned:

D A N T E		S P E N S E R
	God	
Seraphim		Archangels
Cherubim		Angels
Thrones		
		Seraphim
Dominations		Cherubim
Virtues		
Powers		Dominations
		Thrones
Principalities		
Archangels		Principalities
Angels		Powers
		Spirits, ideas

As it turns out Spenser also completes his celestial hierarchies with a ninth but he, beyond the conventional orders, feels it necessary to add the Platonic ideas:

More faire is that, where those Ideas on hie,
Enraungéd bee, which Plato so admyred,
And pure Intelligences from God inspyred

(HHB, 82-4).

The most perfect thing, the Final Point is trivially God whose beauty cannot be described by any human imagination: "How then can mortall tongue hope to express / The image of such endlesse perfectnesse?" (HHB, 104-5). Spenser, then

goes on to meditate on the nature of divine beauty. While he paints earthly beauty with metaphysically heated and elevated pictures he tries to represent God's beauty with earthly similes. As the Lord's true beauty is incomprehensible to the human mind this fairness can be perceived only in its products. The poet's effort in depicting this divine beauty borrows again from Plato's mythology and system of poetic images.⁹ The last unit of this hymn is on Wisdom which is but the embodiment of divine beauty.

Spenser describes with inspired pictures a queen sitting in the bosom of God, "clad like a Queene in royall robes ... And all with gemmes and jewels gorgeously / Adorn'd, that brighter then the starres appeare, ... And on her head a crowne of purest gold, ... And in her hand a scepter she doth hold, / With which she rules the house of God on hy" (HHB, 185 ... 93). She governs not only the house of God, continues Spenser, but also the celestial world and the earth with all its inhabitants. This majestic and magnificent figure is nothing less than a reincarnation of Venus' beauty on a higher plane, a figure which cannot be described by poets or painters, not even by that classical artist who so marvellously depicted Venus ascending from the sea:

Ne could that Painter (had he lived yet)
Which pictured Venus with so curious quill
That all posteritie admyred it,
Have purtrayd this, for all his mastering skill

(HHB, 211-4).

The only appropriate standpoint from which to view that heavenly beauty is one of a chaste, unselfish, divine love. The closing Paradise-scene speaks about the final fulfilment: while Venus was able to keep death away only temporarily - this heavenly beauty is eternity itself. The last lines: "And looke at last up to the soveraine light, / From whose pure beame al perfect beautie springs, / That kindleth love in every godly spright" (HHB, 295-8) again recall the Neoplatonist terminology. Ficino wrote about the eternal beauty of God: "So the light and beauty of God, which is pure, freed from all other things, is called ... infinite beauty".¹⁰

And this is the end of the soul's peregrination: the highest level of "the great chain of being"! After wandering through the stages of earthly wishes the beauty-longing spirit wings up to God's infinite perfectness.

Part Two

FOWRE HYMNES: Philology and History of Ideas

A survey of Spenser's dedication before the *Fowre Hymnes* proves that the poems were not written at the same time and the latter two seem to be intended as "restrictions" of the first two dealing with earthly desires; as if the poet wanted to avoid any accusation of unchastity or frivolity. According to the dedication some critics insist on stating that the first two hymns were made much earlier, sometime in the eight-

ies of the 16th century (e.g.: Knight 1967, 330). This dating can hardly be denied but modern scholars are increasingly coming to emphasize the unity and homogeneity in the cycle. It seems to be quite obvious that the poet necessarily revised the first two hymns before publishing the series in 1596, so "creating a single, carefully constructed poem, in four parts" (Bennet 1931, 48). The "restriction" of the earlier works must be considered a mere conventional device, especially considering that in the dedication Spenser speaks of his patrons as "the most excellent and rare ornaments of all true loue and beautie, both in the one and the other kinde". In this context the two earlier hymns function as a representation of the transitory stage in the soul's progress to the supernatural love and beauty (cf.: Ellrodt 1960, 211).

We may say that the *Fowre Hymnes* were intended to be a work of synthesis in which Spenser aimed to summarize his views on love in a philosophical poem. This work stands alone in the contemporary English literature, in that there cannot be found other poetic efforts dealing with love from a theoretical starting point. The usual cycles of *songs and sonnets*, following the Petrarchian scheme, generally handed over their messages parallel with some epic narration. In spite of them Spenser treated his subject impersonally from a purely philosophical approximation that can be connected to one of the Renaissance stream of ideas i.e. the Neoplatonist concep-

tion of love (on this topic generally see: Nelson 1958; Bán 1976, 122-30; Klaniczay 1976, 311-27; etc.).

Neoplatonism was based on a few works of Plato. It is well-known that the ancient Greek philosopher had worked his love-theory out in two of his dialogues, *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. In the *Symposium* the two natures of love are described as that of the earthly and heavenly ones.¹¹ It is often estimated that Plato's most poetic simile is the picture of the soul's carriage with the team of winged horses which explains the twofold operation of love in the human spirit.¹² One of the horses represents earthly desire while the other divine love. Plato clearly distinguishes between the two though also emphasizes their relationship. The inspiring force in Plato's love-theory is beauty, that is what enkindles amorous desires.

The Platonic scheme provided a suitable ideologic support for the new type of love appearing due to the changing sociological relations during the Renaissance. Beauty, as a central category represented the rising interest in antiquity but at the same time it could also be injected into the system of norms of Christianity. Beauty was a principle in aesthetics as well as in ontology (cf.: Klaniczay 1975, 13-22); the Neoplatonists adapted their master's fusing of the problems of love and beauty and used it as a certain system of allegory and symbol to express important philosophical and theological topics.

The rediscovery of the classical heritage and of Plato's teaching ensued naturally and not by chance. The man-centered Renaissance mentality badly needed a philosophy of Plato's kind that created such a dualism which accepted earthly matters while still favouring God and his realm.¹³

Plato, however, was not unfamiliar to the Middle Ages. He was appreciated by the fathers of the Church (especially by Augustine and Lactantius) and the cosmology of the *Timaeus* had a considerable impact on Christian ideology. Nevertheless, the greatest part of Plato's oeuvre was being rediscovered only during and after the 15th century including those works *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* in which he expounds his theory of ideas and conception of love.¹⁴

In the sixth decade of the 15th century Marsiglio Ficino published in Florence his translations of Plato with the support of Lorenzo de' Medici's Neoplatonist academy. These volumes significantly determined the further development of Renaissance philosophy. In addition to the translations they contained Ficino's comments on Plato's writings elaborating his own personal theory of beauty and love. The collected commentaries later appeared in 1482 in a single volume entitled *Theologia Platonica*. According to Ficino beauty is but a symbol of perfection, i.e. God's reflection in the empirical world. Beauty is begotten by a divine creative act and likewise, that man who is able to create beauty is himself God-like. It was due to Renaissance Neoplatonism that beauty became the main principle of the contemporary arts (cf.:

Klaniczay 1975, 14). Beauty and love, Ficino states, constitute a dialectical pair of energies: love is but a painful awareness of beauty-lacking, a longing for its perfecting presence. This mechanism can be extended to different notions: man's desire for woman is something similar to the artist's wish for aesthetical pleasure or the soul's desperate longing for God's grace. So, in this compound of ideas the principles of aesthetics, theology and even magic are often melted together.

Ficino's activity in this field for a century inspired men of letters to write poems and treatises on their master's, Plato's, theories of love and beauty. The first among these wellknown works was a poem by Girolamo Benivieni, Ficino's contemporary, *Canzona della amore celeste et divino*, completed with a treatise by the famous philosopher, Pico della Mirandola. The topic was further popularized by Baldassare Castiglione who discussed it in the fourth dialogue of his *Il corteggiano* (1528). This Platonic love conception was marvellously elaborated in the work of Leone Ebreo's, the Spanish born Jewish doctor. In 1535 he published his *Dialoghi d'amore* in Rome. In the fascinating dialogue the male character, Filone explains his views to his lover, Sofia, whom he wants to persuade that sexual love is a suitable and necessary stage in the ascent to the spheres of divine love. Though at first reading the work is nothing more than an exciting story of a seduction clad in philosophical garments it accurately mirrors the Renaissance's

quite liberal opinion on love when Ebreo emphasizes his seriousness by choosing the names of his characters: Filo-Sofia. By the end of the treatise the author has reached the image of a love-breathing anthropomorphic universe in which all the relationships of earth and heavens resemble sexual intercourse. In this world-picture - beyond the effects of the late-Hellenistic Neoplatonism - some features of the Hebrew-Egyptian gnostic philosophy can be noted which were transmitted to Europe by the Arabic world and first appeared in Pico's hermetic works.¹⁵

France also contributed a great deal of treatises on Plato, especially Louis Le Roy, contemporary of the *Pleïade* dealt with the Platonic love-theory (cf.: Nelson 1968, 650) the work of whom *La Sympose de Platon de l'Amour et de Beauté* directly effected Spenser's poetic evolution (see: Ellrodt 1960, 99-105). The topic was still popular in the last decades of the 16th century, for instance Giordano Bruno devoted a series of sonnets and analyses to it in his book entitled *Eroici furori* which was published in London, 1585 with a dedication to Sir Philip Sidney. In his preface Bruno explains that his Petrarchism is not of the ordinary kind, directed towards the love of a woman, but of a higher kind, belonging to the intellectual part of the soul. He is not against the "vulgar loves", but it is towards the "higher Cupid" that his loves are addressed (Yates 1964, 275).

Spenser's works logically stand at the end of this above sketched development of Renaissance aesthetics and

philosophy. Nevertheless, we also must face some philological questions: what was the extent of Spenser's awareness of cultural heritage, did he possess deeper philosophical aspiration? The English poet's Platonism was accurately analysed by Robert Ellrodt who, distinguishing between an aesthetical and esoterical Platonism, classified Spenser as belonging to the aesthetical branch. Ellrodt's conclusions are rather disappointing as he finds that up to Spenser's last creative period we can find traces of only the aesthetical Platonism the source of which can usually be indicated in Castiglione's *The courtier*. An English version of this by Sir Thomas Hoby had appeared in 1561 and soon became a spring of Platonic thoughts in England (cf.: Tillyard 1968, 60). Referring to some parts of the *Faerie Queene* and Colin Clouts Come Home Againe Ellrodt accepts Bembo's *Gli Asolani* and Le Roy's French commentaries on Plato's *Symposium* as possible readings of Spenser.

The *Fowre Hymnes* doubtlessly prove that Spenser incorporated new elements of Neoplatonism into his poetic imagination. The definition of ideal beauty, the description of the soul's descending from celestial planets to earthly bodies and also other parts give evidence of the poet's knowledge of Ficino and Benivieni (Ellrodt 1960, 118). As a plausible source of these Italians Ellrodt suggests the French translation of Ficino's own work (*Discours de l'honneste amour sur le Banquet de Platon par Marsile Ficin...*, Paris, 1588.) and Leone Ebreo's treatise which also might

have been familiar to Spenser in a French translation by Pontus de Tyard published in Lyon 1551 and five other times later in the century (op.cit., 183-95).

There is not much hope of exactly specifying Spenser's actual sources in writing his *Fowre Hymnes*.¹⁶ However, we can easily notice that the poet was able to renew his poetry in this composition and to summarize his poetic message on a higher level of contemporary philosophy. In accordance with his aims he chose as genre a cycle of hymns elevated, pathetic but impersonal in tone. The representatives of this poetic licence were the mystical-philosophical "pagan" hymns of the Renaissance that usually used symbols borrowed from classical mythology but referring to Christian ideology, too, such as that of Lorenzo de' Medici's Bacchus Hymn, Benivieni's *Canzona* or Ronsard's nature-hymns.

The Neoplatonic love-conception had already appeared in Spenser's previous works. His *Faerie Queene* (1590-6) can be considered as a tangled elaboration of earthly and heavenly love-affairs. One may think of the relation between King Arthur and the fairy queen and their possible equivalents in Leicester and Queen Elizabeth.¹⁷

While *The Faerie Queene* was intended to be a comprehensive synthesis of the values of English historical experience and the results of Renaissance culture Spenser expressed his Petrarchism in his cycle of sonnets entitled *Amoretti*. Two pieces of these poems already signal the poet's inclination to deal theoretically with the problems of love. One of

these sonnets (LXVIII) uses a Christian interpretation, while another (LXXII) gives a Neoplatonist approximation as if anticipating the possible topics of the latter hymns (cf.: Nelson 1968, 651). The first praises the power of Christ's love that was able to conquer sin and death: "So let us love, deare love, lyke as we ought, / Love is the lesson wich the Lord us taught". Sonnet LXXII illustrates the soul's endeavour to ascend to heavenly beauty as it had been written by Plato himself. In the final couplet Spenser seems almost to surpass his master, when stating that his sweetheart's beauty includes even the celestial fairness: "Heart need not wish none other happinesse, / But here on earth to have such heavens blisse".

These sonnets clearly reveal Spenser's aim of considering earthly love not as the antagonistic adversary of the heavenly one but, following the Italian Neoplatonists, as the first step which the true lover can climb on to redeeming, transcendental love: "grade by grade to the uncreated sphere / ... whence fashioned were / All beauties in the loved one manifest".¹⁸

Part Three

POWRE HYMNES: Composition and Meaning

(a parallel analysis)

Modern scholars agree that Spenser's most characteristic feature lies in his synthezizing nature (see: Ellrodt 1960;

Nelson 1968; Satterthwaite 1960; Selincourt 1970; etc.). He attempted a unification of the European Renaissance tradition and the particular pattern of English thought inherited from the Middle Ages; he tried to fuse the classical legacy and his own deeply felt Protestant Christianity. His success and that of other Elizabethan poets was due to a rare, transitory historical-social situation; the cosmopolitan and self-conscious attitude of Elizabeth's court. This court, a highly cultured, aristocratic but still democratic society was reigned over by the Virgin Queen, the highest ideal of all poets, the embodiment of righteousness and power, a symbol of earthly and heavenly love (cf.: Yates 1947).

The *Foure Hymnes* in its construction also reveals this synthesizing objective. It has a consequently worked out parallel structure characterized by a logical duality of Christian and Neoplatonist symbolism.

Another peculiarity in the work is the appearance of Plato's theory on the binary nature of love. According to Plato there are two poles of love, the lover and the beloved. The lover is the active, dynamic element characterized by a constant longing for beauty. The beloved is the passive embodiment of fairness receptive to the attentions of the lover.¹⁹ Plato - because of certain characteristics of the contemporary society and thinking - attributed to the male sex both the lover and the beloved, (see: Heller 1966).

By the time of the Renaissance the situation had changed (although some Neoplatonists also tried to revive the antique tradition in this respect and members of Lorenzo de'Medici's academy like Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Benivieni, Landino or Poliziano all highly estimated friendships of the Platonic type, the effect of which can be seen in Michelangelo's sonnets - cf.: Tolnay 1975, 54, 252) and the lover-beloved relation with the analogy of Cupid and Venus appeared as a connection between man and woman. Spenser's hymns consequently show this bipolarity. The first and the third ones in the cycle are dynamic and animated even in their poetic devices while the second and the fourth ones - according to the static nature of beauty - are rather of the tableau kind. The male-female opposition is represented by the main characters of the hymns, too. Not only Cupid and Venus but also in the heavenly hymns Jesus and the divine Wisdom, depicted as the Queen of the Heavens, realize this duality.

The whole cycle is marked by a sophisticated system of three or four elements in various combinations. The work consists of four hymns each of which can be divided into four parts. It is worth mentioning that each of the hymns' second and third units contain three series of arguments while the poems in pairs refer to one particular trinity:

Zeus		God	
<u>Cupid</u>	<u>Venus</u>	<u>Jesus Christ</u>	<u>The Holy Ghost</u>
Classical mythology		Christian body of beliefs	

We can hardly consider this number-system as accidental. Among Hungarian scholars O.Súpek has recently drawn attention to the significance of number-symbolism in Medieval and Renaissance poetry: the construction-principle of these works of art ordered the selection and arrangement of words and lines first of all because of the theological effort to create a harmony of rhythm and divine perfection as manifested in numbers and only secondly because of the required rhythm and metrics (Súpek 1971, 443). The numbers three and four had strict meanings in Renaissance numerology: four symbolized earthly matters as the body, elements and humours. The number three represented supernatural phenomena from the Trinity to the ternary units of celestial and angelic hierarchies ($3 \times 3 = 9$). The figures three and four expressed the dialectics of body and soul, earth and heaven as it had been written by Saint Augustine: "Numerus ternarius ad animam pertinet, quaternarius ad corpus" (quoted by Súpek 1964, 315). By the time of the Renaissance the figure three also became the symbol for earthly perfection manifested in works of art (it is enough to think of Dante's versification and construction in his *Divina Commedia*) and the number seven ($3+4$) proclaimed the unity of the world - Spenser wrote his hymns in seven lined stanzas! His choosing the Rhyme Royal may have come from philosophical assumptions.

An examination of the sources also strongly suggests that the poet's aim was one of synthesis. Among the classical authors Hesiod and Ovid have already been mentioned

but the list must include the name of Cicero whose works (especially *De oratore*) provided the main patterns of Platonism for those who did not read the original dialogues of the Greek philosopher. The influence of Dante and Petrarch has doubtless been felt in English literary tradition for their follower, Geoffrey Chaucer, can be counted as one of Spenser's greatest ideals. In addition to the above-analysed impact of Neoplatonism on Spenser the Medieval heritage calls for mentioning particularly that perception of love according to which life was governed by the dual powers of earthly and heavenly passion and love was considered a worldpopulating and world-moving force as in the lyrics of the troubadours and by various 12th century Platonist philosophers e.g. Bernard Silvestris or Alain de Lille (on the troubadours see: Györy 1970, 270-3; on the above mentioned philosophers: Nelson 1968, 657).

Naturally, the Christian sensibility and terminology ought not to be dismissed when we mention Spenser's description of the divine creation, the doctrine of charity and fraternal love or his depiction of God's Wisdom which closely follows one section of the Apochrypha (*The Wisdom of Solomon*) which was particularly popular during the Renaissance.

Spenser worked out a coherent system of poetic images: the Platonic allegories of flame, fire and the soaring spirit are melted with the Medieval mirror-symbolism and Christian emblem of lamb in the crucible of his poetic workshop.

The *Four Hymnes* is characterized by an extraordinary

balance, a refined unity of composition. The work evokes a Renaissance building resting on four pillars, crowned with a symmetrical tympanum, yet at the same time it follows the precepts of a *poeta doctus* whose purpose was to present the totality of the world - obviously not by means of philosophy but poetry. This cycle was the product of one of those rare moments when art experienced the delicate balance which has been vainly desired by society for centuries. One of the work's interpreters wrote: "Spenser's system of love reaches upward from this world but keeps foothold within it..."

The poet was attempting to justify by the authority of literature, the wisdom of the ancients, and revealed religion his deep feelings about the relationship of man and woman and God. He saw a likeness between the love that draws the sexes together, producing noble deeds and perpetuating the race, and the love that draws man to God and fills the world with beauty. To testify to this likeness he summoned his cloud of witnesses" (Nelson 1968, 658).

N O T E S

- 1 Edited by J.A. Van Dorsten, London, 1966. OUP, 75.
- 2 On Spenser see: SELINCOURT 1970, vii-lxvii; a bibliography is included in: MACLEAN 1968, 658-62.
- 3 Cf.: Plato's *Symposium*, section 203.
- 4 *Symposium*, section 177.
- 5 *Methamorphoses*, Book One, ll. 21-2.
- 6 This idea can also be traced back to Plato as it was expressed by him in his *Timaeus*, section 28.
- 7 Cf.: Marsiglio Ficino, *Commentarium in Convivium Platonis de amore*, VI,6; quoted by MACLEAN 1968, 461n.
- 8 Among the literary interpretations of this world picture the most famous is Dante's, cf. his description in *Paradiso*, XXVIII.
- 9 Cf. Ficino's *Commentary*, VI,17: "The beauty of God ... certainly excels the rest of beauties as much as the true light of the Sun in itself, pure, single and inviolate, surpasses the splendor of the Sun..." quoted by MACLEAN 1968, 480n.
- 10 *Commentary*, VI,18 quoted by MACLEAN 1968, 483n.
- 11 Sections 180-4.
- 12 *Phaedrus*, sections 246-57.

- 13 This dualism occurs with Dante and Petrarch, although without the basis of the elaborated Neoplatonist philosophy. Petrarch's *Canzoniere* anticipates the opposition of earthly and heavenly love the book being divided into poems written before and after Laura's death (cf.: HAUSER 1968, 1:210).
- 14 According to Robert Ellrodt's unpublished statistics on the 16th century popularity of Plato's works *Timaeus* appeared in a greater number of editions but the *Symposium* more frequently was published in vernacular translations (ELLRODT 1960, 224-7).
- 15 On Leone Ebreo see: PERRY 1973; BÀN 1976, 130; KLANICZAY 1976, 317-24. Some works that revealed the hermetic impact in European Renaissance culture: FESTUGIERE 1950-4; WALKER 1958; YATES 1964.
- 16 Francis Yates fascinatingly indicated the roots of Spenser's ideas in Giorgi's *De harmonia mundi* (Venice, 1525). See: Yates 1979, 95 ff.
- 17 On Spenser's Neoplatonism in his *Faerie Queene* see: FOWLER 1964; ROSE 1968.
- 18 Girolamo Benivieni: *Ode of Love*, tr. J.B. Fletcher in: *Literature of the Italian Renaissance*, New York, 1934, 340.
- 19 Cf.: Plato's *Symposium*, section 204.

R E F E R E N C E S

- Bán, I. 1976. "Balassi és a Platonizmus", in: B.I.: *Esszék és stílusok*, Budapest: Akadémiai
- Bennett, J.W. 1931. "The Theme of Spenser's *Four Hymnes*", *SP* XXXVII
- Ellrodt, R. 1960. *Neoplatonism in the Poetry of Spenser*, Geneva
- Festugiere, A.J. 1950-4, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, Paris (4 vols)
- Fowler, A. 1964. *Spenser and the Numbers of Time*, London
- Györy, J. 1970. "Az amour courtois", in: *Világirodalmi Lexikon*, Budapest: Akadémiai 1: 270-3.
- Hauser, A. 1968. *Az irodalom és a művészetek társadalomtörténete*, Budapest: Gondolat
- Heller, A. 1966. *Az arisztotelészi etika és az antik ethosz*, Budapest: Akadémiai
- Klaniczay, T. 1975. *A manierizmus*, vál., bev.: K.T., Budapest: Gondolat
- Klaniczay, T. 1976. "A szerelem és szépségkultusz a reneszánszban", in: K.T.: *Hagyományok ébresztése*, Budapest: Szépirodalmi
- Knight W.G. 1967. "The Spenserian Fluidity", in: *Elizabethan Poetry*, ed: Alpers, P.J., Oxford
- Maclean, H. 1968. *Edmund Spenser's Poetry - Authoritative Texts Criticism*, ed: M.H., New York: Norton
- Nelson, J.Ch. 1958, *Renaissance Theory of Love*, New York
- Nelson, W. 1968. "*Four Hymnes*", in: Maclean 1968, 650-8.
- Perry, A. 1973. "Dialogue and Doctrine in Leone Ebreo's *Dialoghi d'amore*", *PMLA* (October), 1173-80.
- Rose, M. 1968. *Heroic Love: Studies in Sidney and Spenser*, Cambridge Mass.: The Harvard UP

- Satterthwaite, A.W. 1960. *Spenser, Ronsard and Du Bellay: a Renaissance Comparison*, New York
- Selincourt, E. de 1970. *Spenser Poetical Works*, ed: Smith, J.C. & S.E. de, Oxford (1912): OUP
- Süpek, O. 1964. "A quadrivium nyomai Villon költészetében", *MTA I. OK*, 21, 311-27.
- Süpek, O. 1971. "Balassi Bálint Katonánakének szám-szimbolikus szerkezete", *MTA I. OK*, 27, 443-49.
- Tillyard, E.M.W. 1968. *The Elizabethan World Picture*, London, (1943)
- Tolnay, Ch. de 1975. *Michelangelo*, Budapest: Akadémiai
- Walker, D.P. 1958. *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella*, London: Studies of the Warburg Institute
- Yates, F.A. 1947. "Queen Elizabeth as Astraea", *JWCI*, X, 27-82.
- Yates, F.A. 1964. *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul
- Yates, F.A. 1979. *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, London: RKP