

THE PORTRAYAL OF UNIVERSAL HARMONY AND ORDER  
IN EDMUND SPENSER'S *FOWRE HYMNES*

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
OF  
MIDDLE EAST TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY

BY  
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR  
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS  
IN THE DEPARTMENT OF  
ENGLISH LITERATURE

SEPTEMBER 2010

Approval of the Graduate School of Social Sciences

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**ABSTRACT**

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M.A., Program in English Literature

Supervisor: Assist. Prof. Dr. Margaret Sönmez

September 2010, 64 pages

This thesis analyses Edmund Spenser's *Fowre Hymnes* in light of the holistic Renaissance world view and poet's collection of various tradition of ideas. Spenser's treatment of love is explored as the cosmic principle of harmony. Universal order is examined with an emphasis on the position of man in the ontological hierarchy. Thus, this thesis investigates Spenser's own suggestions to imitate macrocosmic harmony and order in the microcosmic level.

Keywords: Spenser, Renaissance, Cosmology, Neoplatonism

## ÖZ

### EDMUND SPENSER'İN *DÖRT İLAHİ* SİNDE EVRENSEL UYUM VE DÜZENİN BETİMLENMESİ

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Tez Yöneticisi: Yrd. Doç. Dr. Margaret Sönmez

Eylül 2010, 64 sayfa

Bu çalışma Edmund Spenser'ın *Dört İlahi*'sini Rönesans dönemindeki bütünsel dünya görüşü ve şairin bir araya getirdiği çeşitli düşünce geleneklerinin ışığında analiz etmektedir. Spenser'ın aşk görüşü kozmik uyum prensibi olarak incelenmektedir. Evrensel düzen ontolojik hiyerarşide özellikle insanın pozisyonu dikkate alınarak incelenmektedir. Bu nedenle bu tez insani küçük evrende kainattaki uyum ve düzenin örnek alınması için Spenser'ın sunduğu önerileri araştırmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Spenser, Rönesans, Kozmoloji, Yeni-Platonculuk

To My Mother

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor Assist. Prof. Dr. Margaret Sönmez for her valuable suggestions, unwavering encouragement and support.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Assist. Prof. Dr. Dürrin Alpakın Martinez-Caro for her helpful suggestions and comments and I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Yasin Ceylan for his supportive attitude.

Finally, I am greatly indebted to my family and to Namık Özgür Aydın for their encouragement, support and patience.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

PLAGIARISM.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
ÖZ.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vii
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND.....	7
3. THE “EARTHLY” HYMNS.....	22
3.1. <i>An Hymne in Honour of Love</i> .....	22
3.2. <i>An Hymne in Honour of Beautie</i> .....	30
4. THE “HEAVENLY” HYMNS.....	39
4.1. <i>An Hymne of Heavenly Love</i> .....	39
4.2. <i>An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie</i> .....	47
5. CONCLUSION.....	58
REFERENCES.....	62

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This thesis aims to analyse Edmund Spenser's *Fowre Hymes* in terms of its portrayal of universal harmony and order within the framework of the Renaissance world view and Spenser's own syncretism of different tradition of ideas. Spenser's treatment of the universal harmony and order, in a general sense, derives from traditional cosmology, the medieval concept of a hierarchy of being, Platonic and Neoplatonic doctrines and biblical accounts. The collection of all these materials makes up Spenser's unique approach to love as a cosmic principle of harmony. Moreover, the *Fowre Hymnes* might be considered as the reflection of the general Renaissance conception of an ordered and unified system of cosmic hierarchy. In this system, man has a key role as a reflection of the cosmic distinction between matter and spirit. Spenser's work presents love as a transformative power of harmony which eliminates this duality.

Representations of universal harmony and order can be found as a general pattern in Spenser's poetry. His great epic, *The Faerie Queene*, is the expression of the celebration of political and divine order, and the struggle of man to overcome his base instincts in order to imitate divine harmony (Hebron 25-30). Even its complicated structure can be interpreted as the reflection of the harmony in disharmony and the unity through diversity (Rivers 74). The desire for order and the fear of chaos is reflected in the *Cantos of Mutabilitie* (Tillyard 25), and it is possible to read *The Shepheardes Calender* as an overall unified picture with each month

representing the cosmic harmony (Richardson 3). Spenser's *Epithalamion* is the celebration of individual love as a reflection of divine harmony (Cirillo 29).

The *Fowre Hymnes* was published in 1596, with a dedication to the Countesses of Cumberland and Warwicke. In this dedicatory epistle, Spenser asserts that the first two hymns were written in "the greener times" of his youth. However, the exact date of composition of these hymns is uncertain. Spenser states that they "sucke out poyson" to the "strong passion" of "those of like age and disposition." Thus, he wrote the second pair as a literary retractation. Spenser needed to "reforme" the hymns of "earthly or naturall love and beautie" by writing the hymns of "heavenly and celestiall" love and beauty.

Spenser's hymns have the same structure as the hymns of antiquity which begin with an invocation to a divine power, continue with a creation account and the exposition of the main theme, and end with a vision of Paradise and a prayer for salvation (Cheney 212). Bieman suggests that Spenser introduces himself as an Orphic hymnist; taking Orpheus, the Greek mythic poet and musician as his model. In the narratives of the cosmic creation and harmony, Spenser, as a Christian Neoplatonist, becomes an Orphic poet in hope of Orphic purification and salvation (147-148). Even if some similarities can be found between Platonic and Christian illustrations of the ascent of the soul and divine illumination, however, "the cosmic piety of the Platonic hymn is not finally a substitute for or identical to the monotheistic piety of the Christian hymnist" (137-138).

The criticism of the *Fowre Hymnes* is mostly focused on thematic connections between the two pairs. Several theories have been developed in order to explain the purpose of Spenser's retraction. As Cheney (197) remarks, these theories are either focused on the progression from earthly love and beauty to heavenly love and beauty or on the poems' dialectic and typology, emphasizing the contrasts and parallels between the hymns. Some critics have correlated earthly love with young age and spiritual love with mature age, while some have claimed that the latter two might have been a repudiation of the earlier ones (Bjorvand and Schell 684). However, as Maclean (525) says, it must be noted that Spenser's retraction might have been only the extension of a literary convention modelled on the retractions of Petrarch. According to Bieman, a dualistic approach towards the hymns and the strict distinction of earthly and heavenly love can lead to a neglect of some fundamental elements in Spenser's poetry:

Spenser could not possibly have wished his dedication to evolve from the perceptive reader a dichotomizing interpretation which would divorce the human from the divine in love's wholeness, although he has conflated in the macrotext very disparate alternative accounts. The retraction and certain portions of the microtexts are there to satisfy the analytical Puritan reader of the poet's reformed propriety, but the synchronic, or retrospective, comprehension will overarch the fracture lines and attend to recurrences. It will achieve for the imaginative reader a mimesis of love, rejoining the levels of experience that the Calvinists would separate schematically by the gulf of human sin (155).

Bieman adds that the unity of the hymns can be understood if they are perceived as a portrayal of lower and higher poles of love where Cupid and Venus dwells in the

created cosmos; Christ and Sapience belongs to the divine realm which is beyond the limits of time and space (156). Spenser's

paradigm of love...unites divine and human in circling dynamic: the paradigm preserves the notions of vertical hierarchy but ameliorates the emphasis upon the disaster of the fall which in Calvinistic thinking so distanced the human from godliness immanent or transcendent (153).

As Deneef points out, the *Fowre Hymnes* is "a meditation on the divine cosmic principles" (77). Spenser's hymns illustrate both the visible and the invisible order in the universe. Moreover, the *Fowre Hymnes* is a reflection of Spenser's optimism which exalts the position of man, as he portrays Christ as the "idea of illumination which both poet and reader must imitate in order to be illuminated and in order to illuminate in return" (88).

Berger (8-10) thinks that Spenser's conception of universal harmony in the *Fowre Hymnes* is dynamic and evolutionary, built on the principle of *discordia concors*: there is a constant movement from the simpler to more complex or from unity to diversity despite the interruptions of regression phases, like the fall of the angels from heaven or fall of man from the Garden of Eden. Spenser's perception of harmony is not only cosmological but it is also applicable to the ethical and psychological realms. As Miller (199, 217) asserts, Spenser's world in the *Fowre Hymes* is the reflection of the harmony of spiritual form and matter and the union of heaven and chaos. Love harmonizes the opposite forces, the dialectic of which is also inherent in the process of human life. Moreover, Spenser sees harmony through inconstancy and violence. The primordial discordance and the drive of violence of

the elements which ended up in reconciliation and harmony in the cosmos is also the cause of decay in the terrestrial world. In the bodily form, it cuts off the connection of body and soul through passions and emotions. But love as the impulse to form, struggles with passions, the impulse to matter, which draws man to the state of primordial chaos.

This thesis will not analyse the hymns in terms of a comparison between the earthly and heavenly forms of beauty and love, even though both pairs are linked to each other in terms of contrasts and parallels. The focus will be on the presentation of love as a cosmic principle of harmony and order. Besides that, Spenser's portrayal of the traditional world picture will be explored with an emphasis on the Renaissance views on order and hierarchy. Moreover, within the framework of a macrocosmos-microcosmos analogy, the distinction between matter and spirit, and Spenser's suggestions for bridging this cosmic gap will be presented.

Because of the complexity of the ideas making up Spenser's portrayal of universal order and harmony, Chapter 2 will give an overview of the different traditions collected and reflected by Spenser. Moreover, general concepts that make up the Renaissance conception of the hierarchically ordered universe and the great chain of being will be explained. Chapters 3 and 4 will be devoted to analyses of the hymnes. The first pair of hymns presents mostly Platonic and Neoplatonic ideas and the Christian tone of the second pair is more prominent. Renaissance views of the order of the universe and great chain of being are dispersed throughout the work. The hymns will be analysed separately in order not to break their narrative continuity. The analysis of the earthly hymns will be focused on the power of love as the

universal principle of harmony and order. That of the heavenly hymns will concentrate on the Renaissance view of the hierarchical order of the universe with an emphasis on love of Christ and the contemplation of heavenly beauty as a way to restore the cosmic harmony lost after the Fall.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

There is no single source or theory that explicates Spenser's position in relation to love and the cosmos. In what follows, information and insight from a variety of scholars have been brought together in an attempt to present a picture of the universe as Spenser would have recognised it.

The *Fowre Hymnes* is unique in Renaissance English literature being wholly written on the philosophy of love (Nelson 729). However, it draws on a collection of traditions including Platonic, Neoplatonic and Christian doctrines, French and Italian Renaissance love treatises and ancient conceptions of creation. Spenser is mostly in favour of the Platonic and Neoplatonic doctrines and the *Fowre Hymnes* is thought to be the clearest expression of his Neoplatonism (Yates 113). Moreover, the portrayal of the hierarchical order of the universe derives from a long tradition, including the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic geocentric universe, the angelic hierarchy of Pseudo-Dionysius and the Neoplatonic three world system. Thus, Spenser brought all these materials together and most of the times combined them with biblical language. As Nelson points out:

This fabric of love is a weaving of Spenser's own. The strands which compose it are diverse, indeed incompatible by philosophic standards...In full accord with the spirit of most Renaissance thinking Spenser's effort in the *Fowre Hymnes*, as in his other poems, is to discover common direction in the traditions which he inherited, even at the cost of blurring distinctions logically necessary. The very diversity of the traditions

which enter into it is therefore essential to the conception of the work (734-735).

Besides the complexity of the material he collected, the Renaissance view of the hierarchically ordered universe and the concept of great chain of being and man's place in it should be explained. Therefore, this chapter will provide a summary of the general points in these concepts and ideas that are syncreticised by Spenser.

The Renaissance view of the universe is based on an ordered and unified system of hierarchies. This model of the universe which underlies most Early Modern English literary works is described by E.M.W. Tillyard in his classic work, *The Elizabethan World Picture*. Although later scholars criticized Tillyard's model for being too general and not informative of marginalised voices (Hebron 24), in a general sense, the ideas he describes were reflected in most of the Elizabethan literary works. Even if "the [16th century] urge towards harmony is suggestive of an underlying concern with the possibilities of disorder" (Hebron 31), this ordered world of hierarchy provided many authors with a general pattern for imagery and metaphor to explore and express higher forms of reality (22-25). It was only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century that this conceptual world of order and unity came to an end through conflicts of values and new views of life as an outcome of new religious and political thinking and new socioeconomic orders. Moreover, new scientific developments accelerated the rise of individualism and finally the perfect divine order was doubted. These doubts are reflected in the works of 17<sup>th</sup> century authors such as Donne and Milton even though they did not totally abandon the old world view. If the Earth was not the centre of the universe, if the planets did not rotate in perfect circles; then, in

Donne's words, the "new Philosophy calls all in doubt" and the discovery of this chaotic state in the heavens would end up as chaos in society (Parkes 468).

Despite the religious and social tensions of Elizabethan England, the perception of a hierarchically ordered universe as a harmonious unity legitimized the political power of the monarch by making the social hierarchy natural and in harmony with divine grace (Hopkins and Steggle 42). Her absolute power and her position at the top of the political hierarchy were paralleled by the position of God in the cosmic hierarchy (Hebron 24). The rising values of individualism and rationalism in the Italian Renaissance were generally considered to be contradictory and threatening factors to the established order (Parkes 428). The Elizabethans feared mutability and chaos which meant the primeval cosmic anarchy before God's creation of the world, so they were obsessed with order (Tillyard 24). Most of the authors reflected these ideas with the exception of few authors such as Marlowe, who glorified the individualism and rejected the established divine order. The general Elizabethan literary tendency was to represent man in relation to the divine law, as a part of the cosmic unity (Parkes 448).

The ordered universe model reflected in the *Four Hymnes* derives from a long tradition of cosmological views. The term *cosmos* means order in ancient Greek and it was first used by Pythagoreans to define the universe as a harmoniously shaped and bounded entity, as an opposition to disorderly chaos (Rivers 68). Plato's *Timaeus*, Aristotle's *Physics* and *On the Heavens* and Ptolemaic astronomy were very influential upon the development of the medieval and Renaissance visions of an ordered universe. Moreover, the Church Fathers and the Renaissance Neoplatonists

used *Timaeus* to interpret Genesis. However, the Greek cosmos was created out of Chaos whereas the Christian cosmos was created by God *ex-nihilo* (out of nothing). Aristotle thought that the cosmos had always existed, so the Platonic creation of cosmos was more applicable to the Christian belief (Rivers 69). In *Timaeus*, the world is created by the great craftsman demiurge as a living organism. The whole universe imitates its creator for being beautiful and good:

if this universe of ours is beautiful and if its craftsman was good, it evidently follows that he was looking at an eternal model,...because nothing in creation is more beautiful than the world and no cause is better than its maker (29a-29b).

The Platonic creator made the universe as perfect as possible and by this act of creation he established a beautiful order upon the primordial chaos. Thus, creation of the cosmos is the triumph of order and harmony over the discordance of chaos:

For the god wanted everything to be good, marred by as little imperfection as possible. He found everything visible in a state of turmoil, moving in a discordant and chaotic manner, so he led it from chaos to order, which he regarded as in all ways better (30a).

In the creation accounts of the hymns, Spenser takes the traditional cosmology for granted, with few modifications. According to the Renaissance geocentric model of the universe, the earth is placed at the bottom of the universe and it is the centre of it. It is surrounded by other concentric spheres of the elements of water, air and fire. Fire is at the top of elemental hierarchy and it is the purest of the terrestrial elements, being invisible to the eye. The fifth element, aether, only exists in the planes higher than the Moon. Above them, the transparent spheres of the planets rise above each other. The most common form of the geocentric universe

model has nine spheres (Tillyard 49). The Moon occupies the lowest planetary sphere which is the borderline between the celestial and terrestrial realms. The essential characteristic of the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic model of cosmos is its distinction between the constant and ordered heavenly realms and the mutable and corrupted earthly realms. Everything below the Moon is subject to the natural laws; prone to change, decay and corruption. The translunary realm is the perfect reflection of purity, constancy and true cosmic harmony. In this realm, the planetary spheres of Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn are placed in an ascending order. Above Saturn's sphere, the sphere of the fixed stars and above them the First Mover (*primum mobile*) is located. As the spheres move around each other, they create a heavenly sound which is known as the music of the spheres. According to Plato, the sirens sang the harmonious music of the spheres (56). The Scholastic tradition identified them with the Intelligences (angels) who regulate the movement of each sphere and make the music of the spheres by singing their songs (50). Before the Fall man could hear this music (*musica mundana*) but after the Fall he can only feel the sense of that harmony through instrumental music (*musica humana*) and by living harmoniously "in concord with his God, his society and the natural dispositions of his soul" (Hebron 30). In Aristotelian thought the *primum mobile* is unmoved, it is the sole reason of the motion of the other spheres; however, in its Christianized version, the *primum mobile* also rotates and the cause of its motion comes from God. The Aristotelian Unmoved Mover moves the cosmos because he is the object of love whereas the Christian *primum mobile* is moved by the love of God and thus it transfers motion to the other parts of the universe (Lewis 113). The spheres rotate in

the way most likely to come close to divine perfection, hence their motion is circular, the circle being considered as the most perfect form. From the *primum mobile* to the Earth, the speed and the dignity of the spheres decrease (114-116).

The Aristotelian view suggested no time or place beyond the last sphere of the First Unmoved Mover. However, when this view was transferred into Christianity, the notion of *caelum ipsum*, the “very Heaven” which is full of God, was postulated. This realm of pure and immaterial intellectual light is the Empyrean Heaven (Lewis 96-97). But the sphere of the *primum mobile* is the last existence in spatiality; it determines the limits of the perfect spherical universe. Lewis suggests that this model of a vast but finite universe model would have provided “an object in which the mind can rest, overwhelming with its greatness but satisfying in its harmony” (99). He also adds that until Milton, who described the heavens as pathless thinking that the chaos of an “infinite Abyss” existed outside of them in *Paradise Lost*, the baffling feeling of insecurity aroused by the concept of an infinite universe did not exist fully in English literature (99-100).

The Renaissance picture of the hierarchically ordered universe inherited its general features from the Middle Ages. This traditional model was based on the synthesis of Plato, Aristotle and the Old Testament and it reconciled all the contradictory features of the Greek thought and Christian doctrines by postulating a complex system of unity (Tillyard 11-12). As Lewis points out, the medieval tendency was to formulize everything according to rigid patterns of perfect codes and systems (10). The model of the universe was a part of this highly regulated organisation of ideas. In this complex system, everything in the universe is connected

to everything else, forming a chain of being (Tillyard 12). In this chain, all the manifestations of creation are arranged in a perfect order, forming a hierarchical ladder at the top of which exists God as the supreme creator and mover of all things (33). So, whole universe exists in order and harmony by the will of God. The position of everything in the hierarchy depends on their degree of perfection; the levels of creation closer to God have more dignity. Moreover, the contradictory elements in the universe are thought to be the part of the greater whole as the expression of the *discordia concors* (concord in discord) and “an approximation toward the *concinnitas* (unity through variety) of the divinely ordered cosmos” (Hebron 31).

According to the Renaissance world picture, man’s position is central in the universal hierarchy. Every person is thought to be the reflection of the cosmic whole, hence there is an analogy between the macrocosmos of the universe and the microcosmos of man. Since the cosmos is composed of two distinct parts of constancy and immutability, man’s nature is also dual, being composed of both body and soul. Moreover, he is the reflection of the division between the corrupted and pure realms of the universe. The diversity of the bodily humours corresponds to the diversity of the terrestrial constituents of elements. It was believed that the proportion of the mixture of the bodily humours makes up the temper and the complexion of human beings. The human body is terrestrial whereas the human soul has a spark of divinity. Thus, in this sense, human beings’ search and desire for the sublime things, for instance their search for beauty, is the outcome of the tendency of the soul to return to its original state (Lewis 94). The position of man has a function in bringing

together all aspects of creation because his dual nature is a bridge spanning the “universal chasm of matter and spirit” (Tillyard 73).

Spenser is thought to be the most prominent representative of Neoplatonism in the Elizabethan literature (Yates 111), he derived most of his ideas reflected in the *Fowre Hymnes* from the works of Plato and the Florentine Neoplatonists, and from the Italian Neoplatonist love treatises. The teachings of Plato came to Spenser through various channels. Some of these are Plato’s own dialogues, Plotinus, Boethius, St. Augustine and the Florentine Neoplatonists (Nelson 736). Spenser probably read Plato and Plotinus’s *Enneads* (Bulger 127) and was familiar with Ficino’s translation and commentary on the *Symposium*, Bembo’s *Gli Asolani* and Castiglione’s *Il Libro del Cortegiano* (Gibbs 140). Within the text, there are direct references to Plato’s *Timaeus* and *Symposium*, to Ficino’s *Commentary on Symposium* and Castiglione’s *Il Cortegiano*. Spenser’s collection of these ideas constitutes the main aspects of his views on man’s place in the universe and the role of love as a means for harmony in the *Fowre Hymnes*.

The Platonic doctrine draws a distinction between the world of sensible things, the world of Becoming; and the world of intelligible things, the world of Being (Ideas). The world of Being is the immutable, eternal and perfect world of Ideas, or archetypal patterns of particular things. On the other hand, the particular things in the world of Becoming are just the copies and shadows of the true reality of the Ideas. The world of Becoming is subject to change and it corresponds to the mutable nature of the sublunary world. The human soul is thought to be descended from the world of Being. Man has to enable his soul’s ascent back to its original

place. According to the Platonic doctrine, this ascent is only possible by liberating the soul through philosophical contemplation, from its body where it is imprisoned. Plato thought that the life in the material world can be led harmoniously only by understanding its relation to the real world of Ideas (Rivers 34).

The 3<sup>rd</sup> century Neoplatonist Plotinus developed Platonic metaphysics and he postulated a holistic system of the universe in which the One is the ultimate principle and the source of everything. The individual soul is able to turn either towards the intelligible or to the material world, but the ultimate purpose has to be the union with the One (Rivers 34). Through St. Augustine, Boethius and Dionysius the Areopagite this new form of Platonist interpretation passed into the Middle Ages and the One was identified with the Christian God (35).

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola and the other Florentine Neoplatonists disseminated Platonic and Neoplatonic thought. Ficino translated all dialogues of Plato from Greek into Latin. He reconciled Platonism with Christianity in his *Teologia Platonica*; he found Platonic roots in the explanation of the creation of the world, in the immortality of the soul and in a version of the Trinity (Hutton 69). Christ was considered as the Logos, a guide and teacher through whom the knowledge of God and spiritual transformation is possible (Bulger 134). Christ was thought to be the mediator between the visible and invisible worlds through his incarnation and transfiguration (134-135). Pico della Mirandola syncreticised Platonism with Christianity, Hellenic mystery traditions such as Hermeticism, and Jewish tradition. His most famous work, *On the Dignity of Man*, exalts the position of the man. Both Ficino and Pico della Mirandola emphasized the central place of

man in the universe and his freedom of the will, as he stands between angelic realms and the material world. The intermediary position of the soul enables it to choose to go either downwards or upwards, either to stick to materiality or to go back to its origins (Rivers 36).

Ficino's cosmology is based on the unity of the world. Both man and love have a fundamental role since they link everything in the world (Kristeller 97). The human soul is the link between intelligible and material worlds because of its capacity of thinking, knowing and loving all things; thus it is the real centre and bond of the universe (ibid.). According to Ficino, through contemplation, the soul withdraws itself from all physicality (including its body) and finds its own divine origin, gradually ascending through the intelligible world and transcendent ideas, and finally it reaches God, the source of everything (94). As Bieman states, Renaissance Neoplatonism absorbed Christian, Pythagorean, Platonic, Aristotelian, Augustinian, Cabbalistic and other ancient and medieval traditions and Spenser used this intertextuality and syncreticism to the greatest extent in the *Fowre Hymnes* (141).

The Neoplatonist postulation of intellectual and spiritual contemplation as a way through which to reach God and unite with God was also compatible with the Protestant emphasis of purification of the soul and a direct and unmediated communion with God (Hattaway 210). On the other hand, Protestant theology is not quite optimistic about the position of man. Protestantism, particularly Calvinism, emphasized the notion of election and predestination. As a result of the Original Sin and the Fall, man is trapped in his sinful body and only the divinely elected ones are worthy of salvation. Protestants believed that the soul is corrupted and sinful because

of its fallen nature. The Calvinist belief in the salvation of the soul is deterministic and depends upon the concept of election. Hebron points out that Elizabethan culture looked both upwards and downwards, combining the Calvinistic awareness of the sinfulness of man with the Neoplatonic hope for salvation through philosophical contemplation and the faculty of reason (31). In this sense, the Renaissance views of the position of man are both optimistic and pessimistic.

In the *Fowre Hymnes*, Spenser adopts the Platonic idea of love. Particularly in the first two hymns, Spenser follows the Platonic doctrine in using love for the beloved as a guide to understand the Idea of Beauty and through this, the Idea of Love. In Plato's *Symposium*, Love (*eros*) is the medium through which two Platonic worlds are connected (Bieman 51). By loving the particular, the soul is able to apprehend the Idea of Love, and loving the particular beauty leads to the comprehension of the Idea of Beauty. True knowledge of the perfect Form of Beauty is achievable after transcending the particularity of individual beauties. In Platonic thought, beauty has a role in the process of liberation of the soul and spiritual transformation. (51-52). According to Ficino, knowledge and love have a special role because thinking and loving an object enable the soul to unify with it (Kristeller 97). In his *Commentary* on the *Symposium*, Ficino's perception of love acts as a unifying cosmological principle that connects everything to each other (ibid.). Platonic love, a term first used by Ficino, is the yearning and the search for the absolute Good through love, and it is a means to transcend the materiality of this world (Hebron 84). Ficino developed the conception of Platonic love as a means for the ontological ascent of the soul to God (Kraye 78-79). In the Platonic ladder of love, sensual love

is a lower form of love in soul's progress towards divine perfection. For Ficino, this form of love is the cause of intemperance and disharmony (Gibbs 142). This notion was used in Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* and passed into Italian, French and finally English literature, especially through sonnet sequences (Hebron 84). Castiglione's conception of Platonic love combines Plato's views on love with medieval courtly love (Rivers 36). This theory denies sexual union and considers the love for the lady only as a means to reach God because loving the individual leads to unification with God (46). Hattaway (206-207) reminds us that, in *Il Cortegiano*, Castiglione suggests that love of heavenly things is a means to understand heavenly harmony and to restore order upon the discord of passions. Through the ladder of love and withdrawal from the body, it is possible to grasp heavenly beauty as the manifestation of the good:

Thus the soul, kindled in the most holy fire of true heavenly love, fleeth to couple herself with the nature of angels,...she seeth the main [immense] sea of the pure heavenly beauty and receiveth it unto her, and enjoyeth the sovereign happiness that cannot be apprehended of the senses...(Castiglione in Hattaway 206).

Thus, the main theme of Platonic love poetry is the distinction between the earthly and sacred love. Although he was considered a Neoplatonist, Spenser's emphasis on marriage and procreation, particularly in his *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion*, seems to contradict these ideas. Moreover, in the earthly hymns, he is in favour of sexual unification with his beloved.

Yates (112-113) claims that, besides the other Neoplatonists, Spenser was also influenced by the Neoplatonic Christian Cabala, particularly that of Francesco

Giorgi whose *De Harmonia Mundi* is a picture of universal harmony between macrocosmos and microcosmos. Giorgi postulated the three world system in which divine grace descends through different levels. According to this system which was also explained in Pico della Mirandola's *Heptaplus*, apart from the main distinction of corruptible and incorruptible parts of the universe, the created universe is divided into three parts, composed of the supercelestial realm of the intelligences or angels, the celestial realm of the heavenly bodies, and the mutable and corruptible realm of earthly bodies. Man unites these three different parts in himself, as the microcosmos of the created universe. Pico della Mirandola tried to prove the existence of this hierarchy in Genesis and he even explained the intermediary position of man between the physical and spritual worlds in biblical terms. So, as mentioned before, man was considered to be a model of the Many in One and the unificatory factor of material and spritual worlds. Both Pico della Mirandola and Giorgi imagine a mystical ascent through the spheres of the universe by means of mystical meditation of religious contemplation (Yates 24).

Moreover, in the heavenly hymnes Spenser gives a picture of the angelic hierarchies. The generally accepted model of the order of the angels was first introduced by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in the 6th century (Lewis 71). In his book *The Celestial Hierarchies* he divided the angels into three groups of nine orders according to their perfection and closeness to God (71). Tillyard (48-50) shows that the model of an angelic hierarchy was widely known in the Middle Ages because it was accepted by St. Aquinas and Dante. The angels are ordered according to their capacity for receiving the divine essence. They can apprehend God directly and their

will never conflicts with the will of God. The division of the angels into three categories resembles the Trinity and it also corresponded to the nine planetary spheres. The angel hierarchy was also considered to be related to the Platonic doctrine of the music of the spheres. The closest angels to God constitute the first hierarchy, containing Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones, and they surround God, dancing and making music. The second group of the angelic hierarchy contains Dominations, Powers and Virtues, whose actions are directed towards God. The final group, the lowest in the whole hierarchy contains Princedoms as the guardians of nations, and Archangels and Angels who are in contact with human beings. Lewis points to the Platonic basis of Pseudo-Dionysius' model of the angel hierarchy, noting that in this model angels act as the intermediary and filter through which "divine splendour" is transferred to the humans, hence the whole hierarchy both in itself and between God and man has an intermediary role (72-73).

Throughout the Fowre *Hymnes*, Spenser adopts both Platonic, Neoplatonic and Christian views of the soul and its liberation, purification and salvation from the corruption of the material world. To a certain extent, there are common points between Platonic and Christian doctrines. As Nelson states, both "identify the highest with ultimate good and ultimate beauty, both find material existence in comparison shadowy and poor, [and] both urge man to break from the bounds of earth toward celestial" (737). Spenser's understanding of Platonism and Christianity are compatible with each other in their aspiration to unite with the transcendent One (Bulger 137).

Consequently, Spenser's collection of all these ideas constitutes "a new unity, a new vision of truth and harmony" (Bjorvand and Schell 683). In other words, the syncretism of the Neoplatonic, Platonic, Biblical, Aristotelian-Ptolemaic traditions and mythological elements in the *Fowre Hymnes* may be interpreted as Spenser's own way of creating a harmony of contradictory elements, a form of *discordia concors* and unity through diversity. In this sense, Spenser is the creator poet making up his own harmony since the Renaissance perception of an art work is that it is another microcosmos that imitates the greater universal whole in itself, and artistic creation has an earthly correspondence to divine creation (Hebron 24).

## CHAPTER 3

### THE “EARTHLY” HYMNS

The first pair of hymns of earthly love and beauty, in a general sense, deals with the notion of Platonic love, and present love as the principle of universal and individual harmony. The creation accounts, mostly derived from Plato’s *Timaeus* and *Symposium* illustrate the state of order and harmony in the universe. Love is the cosmic principle which imposes harmony and order on both the chaotic state of the universe and the bestial nature of man. Love, and beauty evoking love, are the means for the harmony of body and soul, lifting man up from the material realm into the divine. Maclean, and Bjorvand and Schell have made analyses of these poems in terms of their Neoplatonic ideas, and these scholars will therefore be frequently referred in the analysis of love that follows here.

#### ***3.1 An Hymne in Honour of Love***

In *An Hymne in Honour of Love*, the poet invokes to Cupid as the god of Love. He calls him both Cupid and Love, combining Greek mythology with the Greek and Neoplatonist concepts of Love. The emphasis is on the birth of Love as the principle of harmony and order in the universe, and the role of Love as the means to rise up the divine soul from earthly passions into the heavenly realm.

Throughout the hymn, Cupid sometimes becomes the tyrant Petrarchan god, subduing the poet’s “poore captived” and “bleeding hart with thousand wounds”, causing “sharpe sorrowes” and duplicating the pain of the lovers when he

“enmarble[s] the proud hart” of the mistress (2-16, 139-143). Despite the conventional Petrarchan descriptions of Cupid as the the cruel god of love, Spenser’s creation story presents him as the principle of harmony and order in the universe. This creation account illustrates the birth of Love as the primary nourishing and complementary principle in the created universe, as also discussed by Ficino in his *Commentary on the Symposium* (Maclean 509).

In the seventh stanza, Cupid is the “victor of gods, subduer of mankynd” (45) and tamer of the beasts. He penetrates everything created and “reignest in the mind and all the body” (43). According to Plato’s *Symposium* and Ficino’s commentary on it, even the ancient gods are subject to love’s rule. Spenser first narrates the genealogy of Cupid. In the eighth stanza, Love is “Begot of Plentie and Penurie” (53). This echoes the begetting of Love from Poros (Plenty) and Penia (Penury) in the *Symposium* (Bjorvand and Schell 693-694). Spenser also gives Venus, however, as his “great mother” (52), thus combining two views of the birth of Cupid, and taking the Italian humanist and mythographer Natalis Comes as his model (Maclean 509). In the *Symposium*, Love is the oldest and the loveliest of the gods (Plato 178c). Accordingly, Spenser describes Cupid as the “eldest of the heavenly Peares” (56). Cupid also came into being out of the primordial Chaos before the creation of the world:

For ere this worlds still moving mightie masse  
 Out of great Chaos ugly prison crept,  
 In which his goodly face long hidden was  
 From heavens view, and in deepe darknesse kept,  
 Love, that had now long time securely slept  
 In Venus lap, unarmed then and naked,

Gan reare his head, by Clotho being waked. (57-63)

In the stanza above, Spenser refers to Plato and the ancient Greek creation myth. The birth of Love out of Chaos is described in Hesiod's *Theogony* (Maclean 509) and later it was discussed in Plato's *Symposium*:

The poet Hesiod says that first of all Chaos came into being, "then there was broad-bosomed Earth, the eternally firm foundation of all things, and Love..." (178b).

As Cupid was sleeping in Venus' lap, Love was peacefully in union with Beauty. He is waked by Clotho, one of the three Fates who is responsible for the spinning of the thread of life and who is also connected with the moment of birth (B & S 694).

In the tenth stanza, Cupid grows his wings to create a universe in which Love reigned. He makes his flight "through all that great wide wast" (70) of Chaos. Before Love's birth and creation of the world, there was a state of disorder in the universe:

Then through the world his way he gan to take,  
The world, that was not till he did it make,  
Whose sundrie parts he from themselves did sever  
The which before had lyen confused ever.

The earth, the ayre, the water, and the fyre,  
Then gan to raunge them selves in huge array,  
And with contrary forces to conspyre  
Each against other by all meanes they may,  
Threatning their owne confusion and decay:  
Ayre hated earth, and water hated fyre,  
Till Love relented their rebellious yre. (74-84)

The lines above illustrate that before Love imposed harmony upon the elements, they had been antagonistic towards each other in a state of confusion and disorder. But Love seperated them from the disorder of Chaos. These lines bear a resemblance to the description of the primeval state of existence made from a discordant mixture and

conflict of four elements in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Maclean 510). Spenser's poem continues with a description of how the elements were placed in a hierarchical order of elemental spheres by Love:

He then them tooke, and, tempering goodly well  
 Their contrary dislikes with loved meanes,  
 Did place them all in order, and compell  
 To keepe them selves within their sundrie raines,  
 Together linkt with Adamantine chaines;  
 Yet so, as that in every living wight  
 They mixe themselves, and shew their kindly might.

So ever since they firmly have remained,  
 And duly well observed his behest;  
 Through which now all these things that are contained  
 Within this goodly cope, both most and least  
 Their being have, and dayly are increast,  
 Through secret sparks of his infused fyre,  
 Which in the barraine cold he doth inspyre. (85-98)

In these stanzas, Spenser explains how the elements were drawn into harmony and order and made to stay in their own domains in the cosmic hierarchy, and how the orderly mixture of contrary elements constitute living corporeal bodies. Love is shown to have created the universe in harmony through discordance, or *discordia concors* (Berger 10). Love is the primary principle of creation and the reconciler of discordant elements. It is responsible for the order of the created things in the universe. Thus Love becomes the bond and the harmonizing principle of everything created in the world. In stanza 11, Venus "did lend him light from her own goodly ray" (73) as Love started to impose order and harmony on the confusion and disorder of contrary forces in the universe. This is reminiscent of Ficino who asserts that Love infuses into the formless substance in the form of divine light, and nourishes them (Maclean 509).

Berger (8-11) thinks that Spenser's Love is the actualizer of the evolutionary progress of harmony in all levels of existence, guiding harmony creatively toward a more complex form of organization via several phases. The progress is from the elements to composite organism of creatures: elements are separated from Chaos first by their desire for strife, and Love brings the contrary elements together in order to form a unity and a state of harmony. As an element of cosmogony<sup>1</sup>, the Greek conception of *eros* is a desire for the fulfillment of perfection, so it is the source of motion through the dialectic of contrary forces of love and strife. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, *eros* is the cosmogonical power which reconciles discordant elements. According to the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Greek philosopher Empedocles, all things in the universe come together in harmony by force of Love and they are separated from each other by force of Strife. Empedocles' model is a perpetual cycle but in *An Hymne in Honour of Love*, Spenser only narrates the first state of Strife, disorder and diversity which ended as a result of Love's act of unification, harmony and order. In this way, harmony emerges from discordance and order emerges from Chaos.

In the *Symposium*, Plato explains "universal zeal and love" as the principle through which "everything mortal is preserved" (Plato, 208b). Maclean (512) also finds a parallel between these lines and Ficino who suggested that if Love is responsible for the creation of the world than it must also be responsible for its preservation. Accordingly, Spenser's Love is:

The worlds great Parent, the most kind preserver  
Of living wights, the souveraine Lord of all, (156-157)

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<sup>1</sup> Cosmogony is an account of the origin of the universe and coming into existence.

Procreation is the natural tendency of lower forms of creatures to fulfill their being which is different from man's more tentative attempt to multiply:

Thereby they all do live, and moved are  
 To multiply the likenesse of their kynd,  
 Whilest they seeke onely, without further care,  
 To quench the flame which they in burning fynd;  
 But man that breathes a more immortall mynd,  
 Not for lusts sake, but for eternitie,  
 Seekes to enlarge his lasting progenie: (99-105)

As discussed by Plato, the main purpose of the sexuality of man is not lust but to reach immortality by leaving behind his offspring. Thus, Spenser emphasizes the divine nature of man and his purpose to achieve immortality. Miller (199) thinks that the Love of *An Hymne in Honour of Love* is identified with Christian Logos, the divine creative power through which everything comes into being as the instinct of reproduction. This desire for reproduction, thus the sex drive of man which leads to procreation, is the desire for eternity since it produces stability and order in the universe.

In *An Hymne in Honour of Love*, Spenser adopts Platonic doctrine in his description of man's special position in the cosmic hierarchy. Since the human soul descended to the body from the world of Ideas, man has the potential to recollect his soul's divine nature. Accordingly, Spenser explains:

For, having yet in his deducted spright,  
 Some sparks remaining of that heavenly fyre,  
 He is enlumind with that goodly light,  
 Unto like goodly semblant to aspyre:  
 Therefore in choice of love he doth desyre  
 That seemes on earth most heavenly to embrace,  
 That same is Beautie, borne of heavenly race.

For sure of all that in this mortall frame

Contained is, nought more divine doth seeme,  
 Or that resembleth more th' immortall flame  
 Of heavenly light, then Beauties glorious beame. (106-116).

Therefore, as we have seen, love is not only the substantial principle of order in the universe, but it also reminds the soul of its heavenly origin through the contemplation of beauty.

However, man is always prone to be a victim of his bestial side. Because of his passions he might take the earthly beauty as an object of loose desire. But beautiful ladies as the representative of things divine, cannot be spoiled by the base instincts of lust:

So hard those heavenly beauties he enfyred  
 As things divine, least passions doe impresse,  
 The more of stedfast myndes to be admyred,  
 The more they stayed be on stedfastnesse;  
 But baseborne myndes such lamps regard the lesse,  
 Which at first blowing take not hastie fyre;  
 Such fancies feele no love, but loose desyre. (169-173).

Thus, if the objects of love remain unresponsive to the passions of baseborn minds, they are to be admired by steadfast minds. As Maclean points out, this is compatible with the Neoplatonic thought which suggests that focusing only on sexual union suspends the more desirable Platonic contemplation that finally leads to the beauty of God (512).

True love withdraws man from his body and through love man is able to ascend to the realm of true reality. But lust only binds man to the materiality and corruption of this world:

For love is Lord of truth and loialtie,  
 Lifting himselfe out of the lowly dust,  
 On golden plumes up to the purest skie,

Above the reach of loathly sinfull lust,  
 Whose base affect through cowardly distrust  
 Of his weake wings, dare not to heaven fly,  
 But like a moldwarpe in the earth doth ly.

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 celestiall fyre  
 Which kindleth love in generous desyre,  
 And makes him mount above the native might  
 Of heavie earth, up to the heavens hight.

Such is the powre of that sweet passion,  
 That it all sordid basenesse doth expell, (176-191)

As the hierarchy of being goes upwards towards perfection; lust, being the part of man's bestial side and imperfection of the body, is doomed to stay on the lowest level of the universal hierarchy. If man chooses to be the victim of his passions he stays on the lowest level, too. But true love, which Spenser calls a "sweet passion" refines the mind of the lover and expels all the baseness of physicality.

Consequently, in *An Hymne in Honour of Love*, Love is first presented as the cosmic principle of harmony and order which brings the contrary forces together. Secondly, through love which is evoked by beauty, man is able to remember his true divine essence and elevate himself to the heavenly realm from the baseness of this world. Love liberates man from his passions which bind him to the materiality of the world. Through love, man is able to get closer to the heavenly realm, overpower his bestial nature and find the harmony between body and soul.

### 3.2 *An Hymne in Honour of Beautie*

In the first stanzas of *An Hymne in Honour of Beautie* Spenser praises Venus as the goddess of beauty. Love is his inspiration to “wontlesse fury” to praise the “wondrous matter” of beauty (2-7). Here, Spenser refers to Platonic conception of poetic madness<sup>2</sup> which is explained by Ficino as the first step to the madness of love, raising the soul from the material level to the divine (B & S 706, Maclean 516).

The creation account of *An Hymne in Honour of Beautie* derives from Plato’s *Timaeus*. The fifth stanza is a reference to the creation of the world by the Platonic demiurge:

What time this worlds great workmaister did cast  
To make al things such as we now behold,  
It seemes that he before his eyes had plast  
A goodly Paterne, to whose perfect mould  
He fashiond them as comely as he could,  
That now so faire and seemely they appeare,  
As nought may be amended any wheare. (29-35)

As in *Timaeus*, here, the craftman created the world after a perfect pattern. This stanza describes creation as the perfect beauty of a finished product whereas in *An Hymne in Honour of Love*, creation is described as a process by the intervention of love (B & S 707).

In the sixth stanza, the perfect pattern and form of being is described as “perfect Beautie”, “whose face and feature doth so much excell/ all mortall sence” and can not be seen “with sinfull eyes” (39-42). Here, Spenser combines Platonic ideas with Christian morality (Maclean 571) and once more emphasizes man’s

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<sup>2</sup> In *Phaedrus*, poetic madness is one of the four types of divine madnesses, which is given to the poets by the Muses as a gift.

imperfect side. The sinful nature of man is the obstacle to understand the “wondrous Paterne” (36) of beauty and harmony.

In the following stanzas, the reference to the distinction between the sublunary and translunary worlds is quite obvious. Since the gross matter of the Earth corrupts and conceals the heavenly influences, the perfect form of beauty is first concealed on earth. For Maclean, Spenser expresses the Neoplatonic idea according to which the form of Beauty in the form of light, emanating from God, reflects its perfection less as it descends into matter (518). Then, Spenser’s heavenly influence of beauty refines the gross matter of earth:

Thereof as every earthly thing partakes,  
Or more or lesse by influence divine,  
So it more faire accordingly it makes,  
And the grosse matter of this earthly myne,  
Which clotheth it, thereafter doth refyne,  
Doing away the drosse which dims the light  
Of that faire beame, which therein is empight.

For through infusion of celestiall powre,  
The duller earth it quickneth with delight,  
And life-full spirits privily doth powre  
Through all the parts, that to the lookers sight  
They seeme to please. (43-54)

Divine influence and celestial power are also references to the astrological influences of the planets and stars (B & S 708). This reflects the Renaissance belief in the direct influence of the planets on earth and its inhabitants. The duller earth needs to be quickened by a heavenly influence because gross matter needs to be formed by a heavenly influence. Spenser may also refer to Castiglione who mentions the triumph of beauty over the gross and martial nature (Maclean 517). The beholders of beauty

love it because beauty is the form through which love creates the world and its eternal vital power shapes matter (Oram 271). Therefore:

That is the thing which giveth pleasant grace  
To all things faire, that kindleth lively fyre,  
Light of thy lampe, which, shyning in the face,  
Thence to the soule darts amorous desyre,  
And robs the harts of those which it admyre, (57-61)

So again, as Bjorvand and Schell note, Spenser draws his readers to the Neoplatonic interpretation of beauty as the heavenly beam “which manifests itself in visible proportion and balance, to which love is a visual response” (707).

As Maclean (518) notes, like Ficino, Spenser disagrees with the Renaissance idea that beauty lies in the symmetrical arrangement of the parts constituting the whole, with an agreeableness of colours:

How vainely them doe ydle wits invent,  
That beautie is nought else but mixture made  
Of colours faire, and goodly temp'rament  
Of pure complexions, that shall quickly fade  
And passe away, like to a sommers shade,  
Or that it is but comely composition  
Of parts well measurd, with meet disposition. (64-70)

This stanza also refers to the Renaissance notion of humours. For Spenser, the even proportion of the humours making up goodly temperament and beautiful complexion is also subject to decay, physical beauty will sooner or later fade away since it belongs to the mutable material realm. Spenser thinks that physical beauty cannot affect the inward mind, it can only be an imitation, for true beauty can not be reduced to something corporeal:

...can proportion of the outward part  
Move such affection in the inward mynd,  
That it can rob both sense, and reason blynd?

...  
 That Beautie is not, as fond men misdeeme,  
 An outward shew of things, that onely seme. (75-91)

All things physical are subject to decay and change, even the physical beauty of the lady. The materiality of earth is corruptible and mutable, so is the physical beauty of things:

For that same goodly hew of white and red,  
 With which the cheekes are sprinckled, shal decay,  
 And those sweete rosy leaves so fairely spred  
 Upon the lips, shall fade and fall away  
 To that they were, even to corrupted clay.  
 That golden wyre, those sparckling stars so bright  
 Shall turne to dust, and loose their goodly light. (92-98)

The Idea of Beauty, however, is incorporeal. In accordance with the Neoplatonic conception of beauty as a heavenly ray reaching every created thing, Spenser's true beauty is a celestial light reaching the hearts of the lovers. This beauty belongs to the perfect, uncorruptable and immutable heavenly realm, the origin of the immortal soul, hence it can not die. Spenser likens this incorporeal beauty to a beautiful lamp:

But that faire lampe, from whose celestiall ray  
 That light proceedes, which kindleth lovers fire,  
 Shall never be extinguisht nor decay,  
 But, when the vitall spirits doe expyre,  
 Unto her native planet shall retyre,  
 For it is heavenly borne and can not die,  
 Being a parcell of the purest skie.

For when the soule, the which derived was  
 At first, out of that great immortall Spright,  
 By whom all live to love, whilome did pas  
 Downe from the top of purest heavens hight  
 To be embodied here, it then tooke light  
 And lively spirits from that fayrest starre,  
 Which lights the world forth from his firie carre. (99-112)

The soul is derived from God which is described as the immortal Spirit. These stanzas also mention the Neoplatonic notion of the spirit coming from the sun and forming a bond between the body and soul. The imagery of “vitall spirits” and “lively spirits” reflect this belief and sun is described as the fairest star and identified with Phoebus Apollo travelling across the sky by his fiery chariot.

In stanza 17, Spenser describes that the soul and its beauty are implanted in “fleshly seede” and placed in its “house” (114-117), reflecting the Renaissance ideas about the relationship of body and soul. Thus the soul is descended into the corporeality and it is trapped in matter. Spenser defends the Neoplatonic idea suggesting that the physical beauty of the body is in correlation with the beauty and goodness of the soul:

Thereof it comes that these faire soules, which have  
 The most resemblance of that heavenly light,  
 Frame to themselves most beautifull and brave  
 Their fleshly bowre, most fit for their delight,  
 And the grosse matter by a souveraine might  
 Tempers so trim...

...

For of the soule the bodie forme doth take;  
 For soule is forme, and doth the bodie make. (120-133)

So, whenever the soul is more pure the humours of its body are more temperate, and the body is tempered elegantly. According to Maclean, this is reminiscent of the Ficinian idea which connects the intemperence of the humours in the body to the lack of soul’s work in incarnation (520). Since the soul is the form shaping the body, a beautiful soul shapes a beautiful body (Oram 271-272). Spenser supports this idea and in stanza 20 adds that more refined souls are embodied in more beautiful body because “all that faire is, is by nature good” (139). But, for Ficino, even if the soul

begins its work, sometimes the body can not be shaped by the goodly pattern of the soul because of the indiscipline and imperfection, or “inherent recalcitrance” of matter (Maclean 520, B & S 713). Maclean (520) notes that the following stanza reflects this idea:

Yet oft it falles that many a gentle mynd  
 Dwels in deformed tabernacle drownd,  
 Either by chaunce, against the course of kynd,  
 Or through unaptnesse in the substance fownd,  
 Which it assumed of some stubborne grownd,  
 That will not yield unto her formes direction,  
 But is deform'd with some foule imperfection. (141-147)

Sometimes the soul cannot overcome the imperfection of the body, because it is vulnerable to earthly corruptions. The “heavenly borne” (149) beauty of the lady may be the “bait of sinne” (152) and may be abused because of “disparagements” (164), dishonourable deeds of the ones who try to deprave the lady. Maclean draws a parallel between Spenser’s approach and that of Castiglione who explains the lack of chastity of some beautiful women in terms of many factors including the provocations of lovers and tokens (520). But for Spenser, this is not the fault of the beautiful lady, it is the shame of those who try to corrupt her:

Yet nathemore is that faire beauties blame,  
 But theirs that do abuse it unto ill:  
 Nothing so good, but that through guilty shame  
 May be corrupt, and wrested unto will:  
 Nathelesse the soule is faire and beauteous still,  
 How ever fleshes fault it filthy make;  
 For things immortall no corruption take. (148-161)

The goodness of the soul can not be corrupted by the base instincts of the others. Soul, being immortal, is always pure and good, and only the corporeality can be corrupted. The soul is by nature good; hence it remains to be good. Even so, in stanza

24, Spenser advises the “faire Dames” to remain unresponsive to deprivations and disgraceful actions, and not to be the bait of lust which is the greatest enemy to the heavenly essence of the soul:

Loath that foule blot, that hellish fier-brand,  
Disloiall lust faire beauties foulest blame,  
That base affections, which your eares would bland  
Commend to you by loves abused name,  
But is indeede the bondslave of defame;  
Which will the garland of your glorie marre,  
And quench the light of your bright shyning starre. (169-175)

Physical beauty arouses feelings of lust and it would be the biggest fault of the beautiful lady to be deprived by base affections. In a Platonic sense, Spenser tries to distinguish between the sensual delights which draw man to the materiality of this world, and the intellectual delights of contemplation and moral actions which will withdraw the soul from the prison of the body (B & S 714). Lust can only degrade the person and lead to dishonourable actions. In contrast with “disloiall” lust, beauty can only be appreciated by “loiall” true love because both beauty and love have the same heavenly essence:

But gentle Love, that loiall is and trew,  
Will more illumine your resplendent ray,  
And adde more brightnesse to your goodly hew,  
From light of his pure fire, which by like way  
Kindled of yours, your likenesse doth display,  
Like as two mirroures by opposd reflexion,  
Doe both expresse the faces first impression. (176-182)

This stanza reflects the Neoplatonic view of the relationship of beauty and love in which, according to Ficino, the lover reflects the image of the loved one like a mirror because the image of the beloved is imprinted on his soul. Because of this, Spenser advises lovers to choose beloveds whose image may be in harmony with the inner

ideal, reflecting the harmonious character of the true love first ordained in the heaven (Maclean 521-22). If this rule is not followed, the result would be an immoral affection leading to discordance:

But, in your choice of Loves, this well advize,  
That likest to your selves ye them select,  
The which your forms first sourse may sympathize,  
And with like beauties parts be inly deckt:  
For, if you loosely love without respect,  
It is no love, but a discordant warre,  
Whose unlike parts amongst themselves do jarre. (190-196).

In Neoplatonic terms this is possible for lovers who are born under the influence of the same celestial influence (Maclean 522). Accordingly, the stanza below describes love as a celestial harmony, a harmony of the stars bringing together similar hearts:

For Love is a celestiaall harmonie,  
Of likely harts composd of starres concent,  
Which joyne together in sweete sympathie,  
To worke ech others joy and true content,  
Which they have harbourd since their first descent  
Out of their heavenly bowres, where they did see  
And know ech other here belov'd to bee. (197-203).

Thus, love is a reflection of the heavenly harmony. If similar hearts are brought together by the harmony of the stars, they are able to recognize the true essence of their souls. The bond of gentle love links these souls to each other because they are “made out of one mould” (207) in the heavenly realm, hence when they meet, they can see each other in the form of their first heavenly perfection which is liberated from the imperfection of the body.

To sum up, in *An Hymne in Honour Beautie*, the distinction between the mutable earthly realm and pure heavenly realm is emphasized within the context of Platonic and Neoplatonic ideas of beauty and love. The Platonic Idea of Beauty is

explained as a perfect pattern and in Neoplatonic terms, as an incorporeal form emanating from God which shapes the matter. Beauty in the bodily form is the reminder of the heavenly beauty and it shows the beauty of the soul. This beauty is essential for evoking true love which leads the soul to the perception of its heavenly nature. This love elevates man from the corruption of earth and earthly passions to the heavenly realm where his soul belongs to. The celestial powers and incorporeal beauty as a heavenly light influence the earthly realm and evoke love, constituting harmony between the souls and reminding them of their first heavenly perfection.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE “HEAVENLY” HYMNS

In the heavenly hymns Spenser’s portrayal of universal order mostly derives from the general Renaissance view of the chain of being and hierarchy of three worlds, combined with the biblical accounts. Universal harmony is a reflection of divine love, and contemplation of the divinely ordered universe, divine love of Christ and divine beauty of Sapience are means for the salvation and liberation of the soul from the corruption of the body and the earthly realm.

#### *4.1 An Hymne of Heavenly Love*

In *An Hymne of Heavenly Love*, the poet’s guide is not *An Hymne in Honour of Love*’s Cupid anymore, and he wants to ascend “from this base world...farre above feeble reach of earthly sight” on the “golden wings” of true love, where he can praise his new guide, Christ, the true “god of Love, high heavens king” (1-7). Now the poet is ready to fly to the realm of divine love, whereas in the earthly hymns he can only fly with Cupid’s wings and the “golden plumes” (*Hymne of Love* 178) of earthly love serving only the ascent from the baser instincts of the body, and still remaining in the sphere of individual love towards the lady (B & S 721).

The creation story of *An Hymne of Heavenly Love* is biblical and it is focused on description of the Trinity, the creation of the angels and the angelic hierarchy, the fall of the angels, and the creation and fall of man. But it is still possible to find Greek elements in the description of the cosmos, and the whole model described by

Spenser is compatible with the Renaissance view of the created universe which is spherical, vast and bounded. In contrast with Greek creation story and birth of Love out of Chaos in *Hymne of Love*, the stanza below describes the universe being created by God *ex-nihilo*; before then there was no time or space:

Before this worlds great frame, in which al things  
 Are now containd, found any being-place,  
 Ere flitting Time could wag his eyas wings  
 About that mightie bound which doth embrace  
 The rolling Spheres, and parts their houres by space,  
 That High Eternall Powre, which now doth move  
 In all these things, mov'd in it selfe by love.

It lov'd it selfe, because it selfe was faire;  
 (For faire is lov'd;) (22-28)

The “mightie bound” enclosing the other spheres of the planets refers both to the sphere of the fixed stars and the sphere of the *primum mobile*. They complete their movement around the Earth in twenty-four hours, and the sphere of the fixed stars is divided into twelve signs of the Zodiac, each having thirty degrees and two planetary hours. Spenser explains that God is the actualizer of the movement of all spheres. Before God created the universe as the act of his love, it had been pure love and beauty. Here, Spenser, in Neoplatonic terms, adopts a Platonic conception of love as a power bringing forth what is beautiful and merges it with the Christian conception of God as love (Maclean 525).

In the fifth and sixth stanzas, Spenser describes that God begot out of itself “his eldest sone and heire”, who is “eternall, pure, and void of sinfull blot” (31-32), devoid of pride and equal with God. From them, “most wise, most holy, most almightie Spright” (39), the Holy Spirit of the Trinity was derived. The creation story

continues with a narrative of the creation of the angels as God's "second brood" (53) and a description of the angel hierarchy. From now on, Spenser begins his cosmic descent. The angels are "not in power so great, /Yet full of beauty," (53-54). Yet, they are still in the presence of God, "all glistring glorious in their Makers light" (56). The angels dwell in the Empyrean Heaven of pure light beyond the limits of the created universe:

To them the heavens illimitable hight  
 (Not this round heaven, which we from hence behold,  
 Adorn'd with thousand lamps of burning light,  
 And with ten thousand gemmes of shyning gold,)

...

There they in their trinall triplicities  
 About him wait, and on his will depend,  
 Either with nimble wings to cut the skies,  
 When he them on his messages doth send,  
 Or on his owne dread presence to attend,  
 Where they behold the glorie of his light,  
 And caroll Hymnes of love both day and night. (57-70).

In the Empyrean Heaven, the angels are arranged in "trinall triplicities", forming a threefold hierarchy. Spenser here refers to the angelic hierarchy of Pseudo-Dionysius. Accordingly, Spenser emphasizes the different characteristics of the angels. Some of them stay closer to God while others descend to earth to carry messages. The carols sung by the angels are their act of worship, praise and love of God. The angels live in the pure light of the Empyrean Heaven beyond time and space, so they don't need the illumination of sun. They live in perfect harmony, conforming to the divine order:

Both day, and night, is unto them all one,  
 For he his beames doth still to them extend,  
 That darknesse there appeareth never none,  
 Ne hath their day, ne hath their blisse an end,

But there their termelesse time in pleasure spend,  
 Ne ever should their happinesse decay,  
 Had not they dar'd their Lord to disobay. (71-77)

But this state of harmony and peace is spoiled by some of the angels' rebellion against God. Lucifer, the brightest angel in the angelic hierarchy tried to break the divinely ordered hierarchy and wanted to climb up to the level of God because of his pride:

But pride, impatient of long resting peace,  
 Did puffed them up with greedy bold ambition,  
 That they gan cast their state how to increase  
 Above the fortune of their first condition,  
 And sit in Gods owne seat without commission:  
 The brightest Angell, even the Child of Light,  
 Drew millions more against their God to fight. (78-84)

That some angels fell from heaven and grace because of their pride was accepted by Christian doctrine (Tillyard 58). Accordingly, Spenser's disobedient angels are sent to hell as a punishment for their pride and disobedience:

Th' Almighty, seeing their so bold assay,  
 Kindled the flame of His consuming yre,  
 And with His onely breath them blew away  
 From heavens hight, to which they did aspyre,  
 To deepest hell, and lake of damned fyre,  
 Where they in darknesse and dread horror dwell,  
 Hating the happie light from which they fell.

So that next off-spring of the Makers love,  
 Next to Himselfe in glorious degree,  
 Degendering to hate, fell from above  
 Through pride, (85-95)

The fallen angels live in the darkness and horror of disorder at the lowest point of the universe. Their love of God degenerated to hate even though they had been in the highest possible level of the cosmic hierarchy, in degree below only the Trinity.

The next stanza narrates that, after the fall of the angels God created “a new unknowen Colony” since God still wanted to pour “his goodnesse unto all” as the “eternall fount of love and grace” (99-104). So God created man who would dwell in “earths base groundworke” (105). Spenser’s narrative of man’s creation contains Platonic elements, influenced by the account of creation after an eternal, heavenly pattern in *Timaeus*, but the general account was taken from Genesis where man is created out of clay in God’s image and has his soul breathed into him:

Therefore of clay, base, vile, and next to nought,  
 Yet form'd by wondrous skill, and by his might:  
 According to an heavenly patterne wrought,  
 Which he had fashiond in his wise foresight,  
 He man did make, and breathd a living spright  
 Into his face most beautifull and fayre,  
 Endewd with wisedomes riches, heavenly, rare. (106-112)

This stanza begins with a description of the creation of man, compatible with the account of Genesis, and then turns to the Platonic account of creation of man after a heavenly pattern. The last three lines reflect both the biblical and Platonic doctrines. God breathed life into man (biblical) and gave him the heavenly beauty and wisdom (Platonic).

Man was created as the reflection of the love of God and he was made the leader of all created things on earth; he is at the top in the chain of being of terrestrial creatures. God granted his own immortality to man’s soul:

Such he him made, that he resemble might  
 Himselfe, as mortall thing immortall could;  
 Him to be Lord of every living wight  
 He made by love out of His owne like mould, (106-119)

Despite his godly essence, as a punishment for Original Sin, man “fell from the hope of promised heavenly place, / Into the mouth of death to sinners dew” (122-123), like the angels who committed sin despite their pure essence. Because of their sin, human beings are now subject to change and decay. Thus the harmony of the first state of perfection in the Garden of Eden is lost after the Fall.

From this point on, the rest of *An Hymne of Heavenly Love* is focused on Christ’s life and his sacrifice for the good of humankind. Almost all of the narrative directly refers to the Bible. According to Maclean, *An Hymne of Heavenly Love* is in some ways structured like religious meditation (528). Spenser now presents the love of Christ as the universal principle which would restore the lost harmony. Christ, as the “great Lord of Love” (127) descended to Earth “Out of the bosome of eternall bisse,/ In which he reigned with his glorious syre” (134-135) in order to:

...pay sinnes deadly hyre,  
And him restore unto that happie state  
In which he stood before his haplesse fate. (138-140)

Thus, the Logos is incarnated (Miller 199) and God sent his Son because he loved the world and wanted to confer harmony to the universe again. Although the angels have a higher degree in the great chain of being, Christ was incarnated “in fleshes fraile attyre” (137) because the sins of the flesh can only be atoned for in the bodily form:

In flesh at first the guilt committed was,  
Therefore in flesh it must be satisfyde;  
Nor spirit, nor Angell, though they man surpas,  
Could make amends to God for mans misguyde, (141-144)

Through his sacrifice, Christ gave back to man his freedom and reopened the gates of heaven for his soul. He asks nothing but love in return for his sacrifice. The love of Christ is compassionate and through loving him one can learn to love others:

... he our life hath left unto us free,  
 Free that was thrall, and blessed that was band;  
 Ne ought demaunds but that we loving bee,  
 As he himselfe hath lov'd us aforehand,  
 And bound therto with an eternall band,  
 Him first to love that us so dearely bought,  
 And next our brethren, to his image wrought. (183-189)

Only his love can lift man up from the mud of “dirty pleasures” (220) clouding the eyes, like the *Love of An Hymne in Honour of Love* which raised him from the “lowly dust” (*Hymne of Love* 177) of lust (B & S 731). Through Christ’s love and through meditation on Christ, man can lift himself up from the baseness of this world:

Through meditation of his endlesse merit,  
 Lift up thy mind to th' Author of thy weale,  
 And to his souveraine mercie doe appeale;  
 Learne him to love that loved thee so deare,  
 And in thy brest his blessed image beare.

...  
 With all thy hart, with all thy soule and mind,  
 Thou must him love, and his beheasts embrace;  
 All other loves, with which the world doth blind  
 Weake fancies, and stirre up affections base, (255-263)

Loving Christ with all the heart displaces all other kinds of love presented here as stirring up passions. Spenser claims that the love of Christ supersedes all other forms of love. Hence in *An Hymne of Heavenly Love*, *eros* of the earthly hymns directed towards the beloved is superseded by the contemplative *agape*. The harmony lost after the Fall is regained in this love which casts out all the traps of sensual and

wordly desires by controlling man's bestial nature and showing him the real heavenly beauties:

Thenceforth all worlds desire will in thee dye,  
 And all earthes glorie, on which men do gaze,  
 Seeme durt and drosse in thy pure-sighted eye,  
 Compar'd to that celestiall beauties blaze,  
 Whose glorious beames all fleshly sense doth daze

...

Then shall thy ravisht soule inspired bee  
 With heavenly thoughts farre above humane skil,  
 And thy bright radiant eyes shall plainly see  
 Th' Idee of his pure glorie present still  
 Before thy face, that all thy spirits shall fill  
 With sweete enagement of celestiall love,  
 Kindled through sight of those faire things above. (274-287)

Although heavenly perfection is beyond human understanding, the love of Christ inspires the soul and clears the sight which was blurred by earthy concerns before. Thus, in this state of mystical ecstasy man is able to see heavenly beauty. Bjorvand and Schell suggest that the term Idea might have been used to underline the parallel between the "sweet passion" of the Platonic love of *An Hymne in Honour of Love* which expels all base instincts and the love of Christ through which all earthly desires die (734).

According to Miller, compared to the portrayal of the creative power of Love as the Logos in the universe in *An Hymne in Honour of Love*, the transforming power of Love is identified with the real Christian Logos, which is the incarnation of Christ (199). The fall of man is the consequence of the imperfection of matter, but the descent of the perfect spirit into matter is a cosmic principle. The ascent is only possible through meditative vision which is a Paradise of spritual enligtenment, a mystic reward for the love of Christ (216). Thus, the divine love descends to man

through the incarnation of Christ as *agape* and this contemplative love of Christ raises the human soul into the heavenly realm.

As a consequence, we can find a very typical example of a Renaissance interpretation of the Biblical Genesis in *An Hymne of Heavenly Love*. It starts with an illustration of the hierarchical order and harmony in the universe in a descending order. It goes on to show how the fall of the angels and man destroyed the harmony. Christ as the lord of heavenly love is shown to have sacrificed himself in order to return to man the prelapsarian state of perfection and harmony. The love of Christ is seen as cleansing all the imperfections of matter, and through this love man is able to pass beyond all materiality and he can be purified. Thus, as Bieman remarks, being placed at the top of the cosmic hierarchy, Christ is the cosmic metaphor for universal harmony and unity (22).

#### ***4.2 An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie***

*An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie* illustrates an ascent through the levels of the hierarchically ordered universe and finally arrives at the wisdom and beauty of God. The upward motion from the material to the spiritual conveys the order in the universe very clearly. Each level is brighter and has more dignity than the lower and the supercelestial realm beyond the last sphere of the universe is the brightest.

In *An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie*, Spenser invokes to the Holy Spirit. Once more he seems to be inspired by the Platonic notion of the divine madness of the poet (B & S 735). He is full of religious “rage” and wants to show his vision of the “immortall beautie” and “glorious images in heaven” to the “mortall eyes below”

(1-12). As Bjorvand and Schell (736) remark, despite the Christian tone, Spenser still makes a distinction between the mortal “vaine delight” (17) of the Platonic world of Becoming and the “celestiall desyre/ Of those faire formes” (18-19) of the world of Being which transforms earthly delights.

In this hymn, the poet does not make a description of a creation process; he rather narrates the hierarchical order of the universe from the bottom to the top. In order to praise and love God, “Th’eternall fountaine of that heavenly beauty” (21), he begins his ascent through the hierarchical levels of the universe and lifts himself from the baseness of the terrestrial realm:

Beginning then below, with th' easie vew  
Of this base world, subject to fleshly eye,  
From thence to mount aloft, by order dew,  
To contemplation of th' immortall sky; (22-26)

Thus, the narrative moves from the creature to the creator dwelling in the immortality of the Empyrean Heaven, which is movement in the opposite direction to that of *An Hymne of Heavenly Love*. This is also reminiscent of a Platonic ascent, starting from the perception of individual beauty and moving to the Idea of Beauty. First, the poet recognizes the Platonic notion of abundance in nature, or in Biblical terms, the plenitude of God’s creation in perfect order:

Then looke, who list thy gazefull eyes to feed  
With sight of that is faire, looke on the frame  
Of this wyde universe, and therein reed  
The endlesse kinds of creatures which by name  
Thou canst not count, much lesse their natures aime;  
All which are made with wondrous wise respect,  
And all with admirable beautie deckt. (29-35)

In the created universe which is vast but finite, all created things reflect the beauty of their creator in degrees. Spenser then describes the spheres of the four elements, one above the other in their traditional order:

First th' Earth, on adamantine pillers founded,  
Amid the Sea engirt with brasen bands;  
Then th' Aire still flitting, but yet firmly bounded  
On everie side, with pyles of flaming brands,  
Never consum'd, nor quencht with mortall hands;  
And, last, that mightie shining christall wall,  
Wherewith he hath encompassed this All. (36-42)

Although Bjorvand and Schell (737) and Maclean (534) suggest that Spenser attributed the characteristics of purer and invisible aether to the sphere of fire, in my opinion, Spenser describes the sphere of elemental fire since it was also presumed to be pure, transparent and invisible. The elemental fire differs from impure fire and flames which can be consumed and seen by the human eye. The last sphere enclosing all the other transparent spheres is the *primum mobile*.

The next stanza illustrates the perfect order of the arrangement in the universe and it expresses how the hierarchy goes upwards in the great chain of being to get closer to the ultimate perfection. The higher sphere always reflects more beauty and purity than the one below:

By view whereof, it plainly may appeare,  
That still as every thing doth upward tend,  
And further is from earth, so still more cleare  
And faire it growes, till to his perfect end  
Of purest beautie, it at last ascend:  
Ayre more then water, fire much more then ayre,  
And heaven then fire appeares more pure and fayre. (43-49).

In the eighth stanza, the geocentric universe is once again described as a vast sphere, a “bright shynie round still moving Masse” (51), containing the spheres of

“glistring stars” and “blessed Gods” (52-53), a reference to the spheres of the stars and planets which had been identified with the ancient divinities. Moreover, the Wisdom of Solomon<sup>3</sup> mentions the consideration of the heavenly luminaries as gods because of the delight in their beauty (Maclean 534). A special emphasis is given to two luminaries, the Sun and the Moon, by Spenser, presuming that they supersede all stars in brightness, and they are the “King and Queene” of the heavens “ruling night and day”.

In the next stanza, the realm of the heavens is described as being much more beautiful and higher in degree than anything created on earth. Like everything else, their beauty increases in degree as they get closer to the sphere of *primum mobile*, the mover of the other spheres:

And as these heavens still be degrees arize,  
 Untill they come to their first Movers bound,  
 That in his mightie compasse doth comprize,  
 And carrie all the rest with him around,  
 So those likewise doe by degrees redound,  
 And rise more faire, till they at last arive  
 To the most faire, whereto they all do strive. (71-77)

The Neoplatonic supercelestial realm beyond the known universe is not bounded; it is static and it is full of pure light, illuminated by the light of God:

For farre above these heavens, which here we see,  
 Be others farre exceeding these in light,  
 Not bounded, nor corrupt, as these same bee,  
 But infinite in largenesse and in hight,  
 Unmoving, uncorrupt, and spotlesee bright,

---

<sup>3</sup> Also known as the Book of Wisdom or Wisdom, it is one of the non-canonical books which constitute the Biblical Apocrypha. The influence of the Apocrypha on the heavenly hymns has been discussed by various scholars including Bieman and Maclean, and by Carol V. Kaske in *Spenser and Biblical Poetics* in more detail.

That need no Sunne t' illuminate their spheres,  
But their owne native light farre passing theirs. (64-70)

Although corruption can not take place in the celestial realm as, Spenser emphasizes that this region still needs the illumination of sun and it still lacks the true state of perfection of the supercelestial world. It is still bounded, unlike the supercelestial realm of the Empyrean, and of course the spheres closer to the Earth reflect the divine beauty less. On the other hand, the Empyrean Heaven is pure light in which God dwells as the source of all creation with the blessed souls and the angels:

Faire is the heaven where happy soules have place,  
In full enjoyment of felicitie,  
Whence they doe still behold the glorious face  
Of the Divine Eternall Majestie;  
More faire is that, where those Ideas on hie  
Enraunged be, which Plato so admyred,  
And pure Intelligencies from God inspyred. (78-84)

The Empyrean Heaven is also described as containing different levels. The Platonic Ideas are placed within the hierarchical order that was applied to the universe. The souls of the blessed Christians dwell in a lower section than that of Platonic Ideas. The incorporation of Platonic Ideas into the Christian order of heaven is, for Tillyard, “a measure of the queerness of the Elizabethan age”. According to Bjorvand and Schell (739), Spenser touches on the distinction of the region of the immortal souls beyond the heavens and the region of true being of Ideas in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, and they note that in Spenser’s view, the region of Platonic Ideas is still nevertheless below the perfection of the Christian God, for God is described as the “Highest farre beyond all telling,/ Fairer then all the rest” (101-102) in stanza 15. Spenser identifies the realm of Ideas with the sphere of Intelligences, referring to a term used by St.

Aquinas to define angels. However, Spenser puts the traditional angel hierarchy above both of these levels:

Yet fairer is that heaven, in which doe raine  
 The soveraine Powres and mightie Potentates,  
 Which in their high protections doe containe  
 All mortall Princes and imperiall States;  
 And fayrer yet, whereas the royall Seates  
 And heavenly Dominations are set,  
 From whom all earthly governance is fet.

Yet farre more faire be those bright Cherubins,  
 Which all with golden wings are overdight,  
 And those eternall burning Seraphins,  
 Which from their faces dart out fierie light;  
 Yet fairer then they both, and much more bright,  
 Be th' Angels and Archangels, which attend  
 On Gods owne person, without rest or end. (85-98)

Spenser describes the “trinall triplicities”<sup>4</sup> of *An Hymne of Heavenly Love* in more detail here. However, he modifies the traditional hierarchy established by Pseudo-Dionysius and places the lowest order of Angels and Archangels at the top of the hierarchy as the angels closest to God. The traditional model of the angelic hierarchy was also modified by Milton, who placed the Archangels at the top of the angelic hierarchy (Tillyard 50). According to Feisal, Spenser might have found a parallel between ecclesiastical hierarchy (reflecting the divine law) and the orders of angels, a parallel which had been suggested by Pseudo-Dionysius (562). Feisal suggests that the model of the angel hierarchy also offers a model for human worship, the church being at the top of the devotional hierarchy as being closest to the angels and the true bride of Christ (562, 570).

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<sup>4</sup> The threefold angelic order.

After giving a clear picture of the hierarchical order of God's creation, Spenser turns to the position of man. The stanzas 15-18 reflect that heavenly perfection can not be grasped or expressed by the humans. Neither any mortal mind nor any "mortall tongue" can comprehend or verbalize "the image of such endless perfectnesse" (104-105). Human beings can only see this perfection as though through a glass<sup>5</sup>, an image that Milton was later to use:

Those unto all he daily doth display,  
And shew himselfe in th' image of his grace,  
As in a looking-glasse, through which he may  
Be seene, of all his creatures vile and base,  
That are unable else to see his face,

...

The meanes therefore which unto us is lent  
Him to behold, is on his workes to looke,  
Which he hath made in beauty excellent, (113-129)

Therefore, the grace of God can only be understood by means of the beauty and order of the creation of God. As Miller points out, Spenser aimed to show that "the created world..., is a veil over the face of God that turns luminous when we learn to see his divinity immanent in his works (223). Like the spirit connecting the body to the soul, once again, man needs a medium to connect to a higher form. Even though the perfection of divine order can not be grasped directly, through the contemplation of the beauty of the creation, man can understand the beauty of God. Spenser's account is in this respect similar to that of Calvin (B & S 741) who declared that:

this skillful ordering of the universe is for us a sort of  
mirror in which we contemplate God, who is otherwise  
invisible (qtd. in B & S 741).

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<sup>5</sup> This metaphor is used both in Plato's *Phaedrus* and in the Bible, 1 Corinthians 13:12.

Only through the beauty of the creation is man able to understand the goodness of God, because, in the Platonic fashion, all things beautiful are by nature good:

His goodnesse, which his beautie doth declare;  
For all thats good, is beautifull and faire. (132-133)

In stanza 20, Spenser advises to gather the wings of “perfect speculation” which lift man up “From this darke world, whose dampes the soule do blynd” (134, 137). Spenser likens the material world to fogs clouding the vision of the soul. If heavenly love can be achievable through meditation on Christ in *An Hymne of Heavenly Love*, here, heavenly beauty of God can be grasped by “heavenly contemplation” (136) of the works of God. Through this contemplation, man is able to look straight at the “bright Sunne of glorie” and clear himself from “grosse mists of fraile infirmities” (139-140). Thus, the poet also refers to the Platonic allegory of the cave (B & S 742), distinguishing between the shadows of imitation and the reality of the Sun’s light.

In the following stanzas Spenser describes God’s power, righteousness and eternal truth through the traditional symbols of the throne, scepter and light (B & S 743). According to Oram, because of the limitations of human perception and communication, Spenser describes God through the metaphors of biblical language, and the figure of Sapience is the most obvious example of this language (279). Possible meanings have been suggested for this rather mysterious figure. She has been identified as Platonic notion of Wisdom, Wisdom in the Scriptures, and as Christ as creative Logos (Bieman 161); but for Maclean, Spenser’s portrayal lies parallel to *An Hymne of Heavenly Love*’s Christ while contrasting with *An Hymne in*

*Honour of Beautie's Venus* (538). In the Book of Proverbs of the Old Testament Wisdom is personified as female as she is in Spenser (B & S 745). Spenser's Sapience is the "soveraine dearling of the Deity" (184), ruling the heavens and all the lower creatures:

Both heaven and earth obey unto her will,  
 And all the creatures which they both containe:  
 For of her fulnesse which the world doth fill,  
 They all partake, and do in state remaine,  
 As their great Maker did at first ordaine,  
 Through observation of her high behest,  
 By which they first were made, and still increast. (197-203)

Sapience is responsible for the establishment of the order in the universe. According to Bjorvand and Schell, Spenser refers to the biblical account of wisdom of Christ as the creating Spirit in the Genesis, laying the foundation of the earth and making the world (747). The following stanzas show that Sapience's beauty can neither be described by the painters unlike the beauty of Venus, nor praised by the poets, both of whom can only reflect the "shadow of her sight" while her beauty "filles the heavens with her light" (228-229). Thus, Spenser again distinguishes between the Platonic pure light of truth and the shadow of imitation. The beauty of Sapience which is "sparkled on her from Gods owne glorious face" (207), also supersedes that of the angels. Her beauty is the source of "all joy, all blisse, all happiness" (243). If man contemplate on this "beauty soverayne" (217), she will grant "heavenly riches" (248) which will transport him "from flesh into the spright" (259),

In which they see such admirable things,  
 As carries them into an extasy,  
 And heare such heavenly notes and carolings,  
 Of Gods high praise, that filles the brasen sky;  
 And feele such joy and pleasure inwardly,

That maketh them all worldly cares forget,  
And onely thinke on that before them set. (260-266)

In this state of ecstasy, man is even able to hear the songs of the angels. Therefore, man is freed from the prison of his body and forgets about all earthly things. In both Platonic and Christian senses, he now understands that all “fleshy sense,/ Or idle thought of earthly things” are nothing but “fayned shadows” (268-273). Spenser’s merging of the Platonic thought and the Christian faith finally displays his vision for the proper position of man in the great chain of being. In order to attain the harmony of “happie joy and full contentment” found in the “inward eye” and “fastened mynd” (285-287), man has to contemplate the creation of God and his beauty and wisdom personified as Sapience. All earthly concerns are the “deceitfull shadowes” (291) of the reality and they blind the soul. But the human soul has a divine, godly essence, and it can be saved from the infirmities of this base world through the contemplation of the heavenly beauty of Sapience. And the true harmony can only be achieved by resting with that eternal beauty which evokes contemplative love of God in every godly soul:

And looke at last up to that Soveraine Light,  
From whose pure beams al perfect beauty springs,  
That kindleth love in every godly spright  
Even the love of God; which loathing brings  
Of this vile world and these gay-seeming things;  
With whose sweete pleasures being so possest,  
Thy straying thoughts henceforth for ever rest. (295-301)

Consequently, in *An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie* God is described as the source of all beauty, order and harmony in the universe. Divine order is visible in the hierarchical order of the known universe and in the Empyrean Heaven. The reflection

of heavenly harmony and joy is achievable on earth through the contemplation of the beauty of God's creation and Sapience as the form of heavenly beauty. Through this contemplation true love of God arises, and it eliminates the confusion and disorder of earthly concerns.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

This thesis has tried to analyse the universal harmony and order in Spenser's *Fowre Hymnes* with an emphasis on the Renaissance world view and Spenser's own conception of harmony. The overall picture of the traditional cosmology, great chain of being, Platonic, Neoplatonic and Christian perceptions of man, his position in the universal hierarchical order and the means for the liberation and salvation of his soul in order to climb up in the ladder of hierarchy of being have been explored within the framework of Spenser's treatment of love and beauty.

The portrayal of the universal order in the *Fowre Hymnes* more or less reflects the conventional Renaissance view of divinely ordered universe. *An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie* illustrates the clearest picture of the universal hierarchical order in the universe. Every level in the ladder of creation is more bright and beautiful, and God is the source of all beauty both in the visible and invisible universe. Spenser illustrates the general aspects of Renaissance cosmology and the notion of hierarchy of being only with a few modifications. He places the lowest order of the established angelic hierarchy at the top of the angelic order. The replacement of Angels and Archangels might be the expression of Spenser's emphasis on the position of man in the universal order and his exaltation in the Neoplatonic sense, since only Angels and Archangels were thought to appear to human beings. The most interesting expression of Spenser's imagination is seen in the incorporation of Platonic Ideas into the hierarchy of the Empyrean Heaven between the realm of the blessed Christians souls

and the angelic hierarchy. This can be interpreted as the reflection of Spenser's fascination of Platonism and Neoplatonism, traces of which can be found throughout the *Fowre Hymnes*.

Universal harmony is mostly portrayed through Spenser's insights of love. In the *Fowre Hymnes*, love is both expressed in Platonic and Christian terms. In a general sense, Spenser adopted the Neoplatonist ideas which combine these two traditions. However, in the heavenly hymns, sometimes the narrative becomes purely Biblical. Even so, Spenser's understanding of the Fall does not convey a pessimism towards the position of man; he rather advocates the possibility of purification through the agent of contemplative love.

Spenser's Platonism and Neoplatonism are very prominent in the earthly hymns. In the first part of *An Hymne in Honour of Love*, love is treated as the universal creative power imposing harmony and order on the discordant elements and ending up the confusion of the Chaos. The second part of the hymn illustrates love as the means to overpower the earthly passions and achieve the state of harmony of body and soul. Love, personified as Cupid, is the Platonic notion of *eros* as the desire to unite with the beloved. Through this individual love, man is able to comprehend the Idea of Love and in Neoplatonistic terms, heavenly love and his heavenly nature. The Idea of Beauty can be grasped through loving the individual beauty of the beloved. This view is more emphasized in *An Hymne in Honour of Love*, and Beauty, personified as Venus, is reflected as the divine light emanating from God. Loving the particular beauty of the lady enables man to understand the incorporeal beauty which is heavenly. Through this comprehension man is able to

see his heavenly essence and escape from his baser instincts which pull him back to the lowest level of the universal hierarchy. In the earthly hymns, beauty always evokes love and this dynamic relationship of love and beauty always brings forth individual harmony as a reflection of the heavenly harmony. In both hymns, the true relationship between love and beauty frees the soul from the imprisonment of body.

On the other hand, we witness the presentation of a contemplative love in the heavenly hymns. The dynamic human love of the earthly hymns is transformed into a compassionate form of love and the divine love, *agape*, descends to the earthly realm as the incarnation of Christ in *An Hymne of Heavenly Love*. This transformative love is the means to restore the harmony lost after the Fall, to purify the soul and to unite the division of matter and spirit. This Christian emphasis continues in *An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie*, this time the comprehension of the divine order and harmony in the visible and the invisible universe is presented as a way to achieve individual harmony. Through the contemplation of the works of God, the universal order and all the manifestations of the beauty of God, human soul can impose order and harmony on the disorder of the earthly realm. Although man is unable to apprehend the perfect beauty and goodness of God directly, he can always see them through the glass of the perfect order of God's creation. Despite its ambiguity, Spenser's figure of Sapience as the personification of the highest form of the beauty of God, is presented as one of the means to contemplate on the beauty of God which will finally end up as the true form of love directed towards God.

On the whole, in the *Fowre Hymnes*, Spenser presents an ordered and harmonious universe bridging the chasm of matter and spirit, finally being unified

with God. Throughout the hymns, love is the cosmic principle through which all diversity is unified. It both descends from the top of cosmic hierarchy and ascends to its source transforming the human soul. The distinction of body and soul is reconciled through love which is towards the lady in the earthly hymns and towards Christ and God in the heavenly hymns. Universal order is portrayed within the framework of typical Renaissance ideas. However, throughout the hymns, Christianity, Platonism, Neoplatonism and other ancient and medieval doctrines are reconciled as the merging of Christian and pagan elements. The overall picture is the expression of a long tradition of ideas and Spenser's artistical syncretism of them.

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