

SPENSER'S POETIC PHENOMENOLOGY:
HUMANISM AND THE RECOVERY OF PLACE

The present paper defends the thesis that Spenser's recovery of place, as enacted in *The Faerie Queene*, Book VI, can be linked in a direct way to his use of a poetic phenomenology which informs and clarifies his work as an epic writer. Traditional humanism is sometimes defined as an attempt to appropriate the meaning of classical art and literature in terms of "timeless" philosophical truths. Spenser's originality as a Renaissance poet, however, has much to do with his use of literary procedures that express but also complicate his relationship to traditional humanism. While the heart of Spenser's "Book of Courtesy" enacts a Neo-Platonic movement from the lower levels of temporal existence to an exalted vision of spiritual perfection, this same section can be read along phenomenological lines as a mysterious adventure that embraces self and other, personality and community, aesthetics and ethics, in a sequence of images that opens up a new interpretation of imaginative fulfillment.¹ The burden of this paper, therefore, is largely concerned with demonstrating how this poetic sequence instates the "truth" of place in a way that is inseparable from the meaning of Spenser's humanism.²

Spenser's celebration of Courtesy as a virtue involves an appreciation of social values as well as a commitment to transcendent notions of Good. This peculiar combination cannot be understood apart from a dialectical appraisal of Spenser's view of nature. This view embraces two extremes. On the one hand, Spenser identifies nature with the principle of fecundity and abundance. According to this view, which mainly derives from Aristotle, nature is a visible source of human values. In the Garden of Adonis, for instance, nature emerges as a productive force and a spectacular point of origin (III.vi.42). On the other hand, Spenser also maintains that nature can function as the invisible source of moral virtue. This more Platonic conception informs his representation of major characters, and also influences his critical attitude toward pagan mythology.³

The difference between these two conceptions of nature can be understood in terms of the tension that governs *The Faerie Queene* as a whole. The Aristotelian conception is more closely related to traditional conceptions of political authority. At the beginning of Book VI, for

instance, courtesy as a virtue is associated with the reign of Queen Elizabeth (VI.proem 6, line 4). Thus Spenser seems to associate courtesy as a virtue with the legitimate rule of a contemporary monarch. At the end of Book VI, however, the idea of pastoral as a place of magic and innocence reinforces the Platonic conception of nature, and suggests that Spenser does not wish to derive virtue from either a limited experience of nature or from basically political arrangements.

The idea that virtue can be institutional as well as basic to human communities underlines Spenser's epic narrative as a recovery of place which happens *in* language and ultimately concerns the movement of the soul toward imaginative fulfillment.⁴ In the introductory stanzas of his epic, Spenser wishes to establish the connection between courtesy and everyday concerns. While courtesy as a virtue belongs in the hall of princes, it is also said to be "the ground, /And root of ciuill conuersation" (VI.i.1, lines 1–6). Spenser indicates in this way that courtesy goes beyond specific political interests and penetrates the very language of civilized life.

An early allusion to the meaning of courtesy invokes the figure of Calidore, whose "gracious speach, did steale men's hearts away" (VI.i.2, line 6). However, Spenser also refers to "the triall of true curtesie" where an ecclesiastical court must pass sentence on a loveless Mirabella (VI.proem.5, lines 1–2). The illusions of the world are often mistaken for ideal beauty: "But vertues seat is deepe within the mynd, /And not in outward shows, but inward thoughts defynd" (VI.poem.5, lines 8–9). Hence Spenser rejects a narrowly political conception of virtue in order to affirm the importance of subjectivity to moral understanding. Primarily for this reason, I wish to contend that the figure of Calidore takes part in a phenomenological movement toward spiritual insight.⁵

While functioning as a counter to pure nature and its attendant virtue, Calidore must discover the relationship between the wisdom of humanity and the demands of political life. Near the beginning of his adventures, we learn about the "innate gifts" of Calidore: his honesty and love of truth are commended (VI.i.3, line 9). The philosophical basis for this combination of talents can be found in Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*. Here Gasparo explains to Ottaviano that certain important virtues cannot be learned: "but I think that to those who have them they have been given by nature and by God."⁶ Calidore's moral education within the epic context takes the form of a "recollection" of virtue that allows him to partially overcome the difference between nature and politics.

Unlike other heroes in Spenser's epic, Calidore is absent from the center of his own text: Calidore disappears at the end of canto ii and does not re-appear prior to canto ix. It would seem that Calepine in some way substitutes for him during the interim. As a much less skillful Calidore, Calepine tries to perform the function of the traditional hero. However, his presence never ceases to remind us of Calidore's absence. Because he lacks the manifest qualities of the traditional hero, Calidore's virtue is credible and unobtrusive.

Calidore helps us see that "courtesy" is probably the Spenserian form of Aristotle's "near-friendliness": it, too, properly belongs to the man who is neither subservient nor disagreeable.⁷ Occupying the mean between two extremes, courtesy thus defined is a kind of goodwill that enables us to relate to everyone in a like manner: "Eunoia or goodwill bears some resemblance to friendship, but is not in fact friendship, for we may feel goodwill towards strangers and persons who are not aware of our feeling – a thing impossible between friends."⁸ However, while it draws strangers into its warm embrace, courtesy also might be a pre-condition for the emergence of more exalted forms of experience. Aristotle clearly understood the possible connection between the experience of beauty and the attainment of spiritual truth: "Nobody falls in love who has not been first delighted by the sight of beauty, although it does not follow that a man who is delighted by the beauty of a person is in love."⁹

At the beginning of Book VI, we retreat from the plains, mountains and rocky coast and enter the wood of Faerie land. The scene of courtesy is a pastoral countryside. Violence and sadness pervade this world of archaic values: "There is an older tradition of 'gentillesse' derived from Provence and France, running through medieval romance literature, which had its rules and casuistry too, but expressed itself chiefly in actual example and a pervading chivalrous tone."¹⁰ The tradition of courtesy, however, can involve the sudden appearance of various truths. Harry Berger contends that the repetition of specific motifs structures Book VI as a whole: "The most frequently repeated motif is, significantly enough, that of a character surprised in a moment of diversion."¹¹ All such moments must be understood within a moral context. For instance, the motif of the interrupted couple occurs twice (VI.ii.16–17; VI.iii.20–23). Each time, the discovery of love moves us closer to the vision of Mount Acidale. Many scenes of recognition must precede the great unveiling near the end of the Book of Courtesy (VI.x.27–28).

The trial of Mirabella establishes the low point in the history of courtesy. It precedes the slow ascent from a discourteous world. This entire movement takes place in three episodes that are represented by three different women: "Mirabella projects the germinal form of frustration, Serena and her Cannibals the germinal form of desire, Pastorella and her swains the germinal form of poetic recreation, all of which are infolded and transfigured by Colin's vision."¹² The extreme discourtesy of Mirabella results in an ecclesiastical court summons. The glorification of Serena among cannibals is the parody of a religious ceremony. Finally, the capture of Pastorella by Calidore is the prelude to the final vision of love on Mount Acidale. These three episodes have been said to imitate a Plotinian philosophy of love. However, they also might be interpreted as constituting a poetic phenomenology whereby courtesy is defined on the basis of three discontinuous moments.

The first episode dramatizes the pitfalls of immediate experience. Rejecting the moderate claims of courtesy, Mirabella uses her beauty in order to obtain power over men. Mirabella is literally the "look of beauty" that enamors men and attempts to ruin them. The jury that presides over her trial condemns her to do penance: tomorrow she must walk the earth and love as many men as she formerly ruined (VI.vii.37). Mirabella's suitors are feudal retainers of Cupid and her plea of mercy is a religious petition. Both of these facts seem to indicate that Mirabella takes part in an ecclesiastical, rather than a civil, trial.¹³ This interpretation supports the view that love (in the religious sense) is a central issue in Book VI. It also suggests that lovelessness is the supreme discourtesy in Spenser's phenomenology.

In contrast, the abduction of Serena by cannibals leads to a basic conflict in interpretations. On the one hand, we condemn the behavior of the cannibals as completely abhorrent. The abduction of Serena is particularly shocking insofar as it places a brutal practice in an aesthetic perspective. The cannibals who adore Serena eventually raise her "divine" body upon an altar of sacrifice (VI.viii.42-45). We instinctively reject any figurative analogy between a savage practice and civilized modes of worship.

This response, however, could prevent us from coming to terms with the full meaning of the episode as an adventure in Renaissance anthropology. Before the festivities begin, the cannibals must be restrained by a spiritual superior: it seems that "religion held even theiues in measure" (VI.viii.43, line 9). Spenser's humanistic perspective allows

him to imagine genuine order in a primitive context. By directing his people to the altar, this figure seems to organize these forms into a social whole. Compared to this event, the love of Mirabella is regressive: her beauty does not "rise" but actually "descends" into a physical world: "Spenser's transition to the cannibal ring logically reduces the sophisticated evil to its confused origin and, in effect, allows him to begin all over again."¹⁴

It is probable that Spenser knew of Montaigne's famous essay on cannibals: his anthropological imagination seems to owe a great deal to it. After discussing the habits of cannibals at some length, Montaigne integrates relativism into an argument against his would-be detractors: "I am not so anxious that we should note the horrible savagery of these acts as concerned that, whilst judging their faults correctly, we should be so blind to our own."¹⁵ Like Montaigne, Spenser attempts to link anthropological awareness to the potential enhancement of moral sensitivity.

Hence the "raising up" of Calidore's Pastorella both glorifies nature and prefigures its transformation (VI.ix.8). There is an irony in this act that becomes evident in retrospect: "In naming her, the swains reduce her from an aristocrat to a shepherdess; in worshipping her, they exalt her from an aristocrat to a goddess, identifying the symbol with the reality to which it refers."¹⁶ Later on, we will discover that this child of nature is really a high-born daughter (VI.xii.20). If the cannibal ring represents the lowest starting-point of human culture, then the pastoral ring represents the beginning of an aesthetic departure. The poetic qualities of the ring prepare us for the reduced geometry of intellectual beauty and a less ambiguous symbolism.

A further contrast is implied in the encounter between Calidore and Pastorella's protector, old Meliboe. After chasing the Blatant Beast from court to country, Calidore returns at the beginning of canto ix. His absence from the center of the poem has not gone unobserved. It created a moral vacuum that his return promises to fill. In his encounter with Meliboe, however, Calidore merge as the typical heroic protagonist. While visiting Meliboe's peasant lodging, Calidore expresses envy for the life of rural simplicity (VI.ix.19). An "entraunced" Calidore momentarily rejects his political vocation as he speaks to the wise recluse (VI.ix.27-28). But Meliboe will have none of this, and refuses to view political life as an external achievement: "It is the mynd, that maketh good or ill," he tells Calidore (VI.ix.30, line 1). Spenser presents Meliboe

as a relative contrast to the more worldly Calidore: "Boethian stoicism was not Spenser's whole card; but neither was there any reason to doubt that he meant Meliboe's 'sensible words' (VI.ix.26) as the expression of one facet of an acceptable attitude."¹⁷

Prior to the vision on Mount Acidale, Calidore fails to understand the unity of real and ideal worlds.¹⁸ Traditionally, the figure of Calidore is associated with the name of Sir Philip Sidney. This identification lies at the basis of our optimism with respect to Calidore's future. Calidore is a man of the world whose natural gifts lift him above common ambitions. As the exemplar of courtesy, he must mingle with others and advance the cause of virtue. But his idealism derives from an ideal court, rather than from a purely political one: "In Book VI diplomacy is less a technique than a symbol, and Spenser does not show Calidore's exquisite tact simply in order to make him more convincing as a Renaissance courtier."¹⁹ Hence the "fulfillment" of political service requires a poetic vision of the supernatural. Nature is less resourceful than the most truthful poets: "Her world is brazen, the poets deliver a golden."²⁰

In Spenser's epic, therefore, the return to pastoral culminates in the overcoming of nature as an external obstacle. Our first glimpse of Venus is significant in this respect: her place appears to exclude nature in its grosser aspects (VI.x.7, lines 1-5). It is here that Calidore has his vision of the hundred dancing maidens (VI.x.11, lines 6-9). Three Graces appear in the center of a ring and circle a solitary figure, who wears a rose garland. Because her beauty surpasses that of all the others, she is "that faire one/ That in the midst was placed parauant" (VI.x.15, lines 6-7). We learn from the narrator that this mysterious figure is Colin Clout's lost love: "Thy loue is there aduunst to be another Grace" (VI.x.16, lines 8-9). In a moment, this whole apparition suddenly vanishes.

The rough shepherd who has played his pipe in a fit of anger then proceeds to offer his intruder an interpretation of the vision as a whole. It is what we learn about the central figure that primarily interests us. At first glance, she is "but a countrey lasse, /Yet she all other countrey lasses farre did pass" (VI.x.25, lines 8-9). Her pre-eminent beauty distinguishes her from all other women. From another standpoint, however, she seems to condense or contain the qualities of her companions (VI.x.27, lines 1-3). No longer a country maiden, she finally becomes "Great *Gloriana*, greatest maiesry" (VI.x.28, line 3). Reconciled in spirit to the virtue of his Queen, Calidore can now return to his beloved

Pastorella. The thrust of what he sees points toward a vast firmament: "For a moment the beloved is poised alone in a visionary splendor; in the next moment she recedes to make room for Gloriana though, with the words, 'Sunne of the world,' the two Ideas make brief contact."²¹

The vision on Mount Acidale reveals Spenser's indebtedness to traditional iconography. Although he may not have actually known of Botticelli's "Primavera," Spenser works with the same principles that govern this composition. For instance, the painting shows Venus standing between two groups of maidens: one group produces an earthly Flora; but the other group contains a lovely Castitas, who turns toward a heavenly Mercury. Taken as a whole, this entire sequence (or action) reproduces the basic structure of Plotinian spirituality.²² The separate moments of this sequence only become "simultaneous" within the sphere of the canvas.

As a poet, Spenser reproduces the same movement by means of language. In the uncertain identity of the central figure on Mount Acidale, we discern the flickering visage of an earthly maiden or a celestial Queen. The rhythm of the poem intensifies from one stanza to the next: beauty that can only exist in time haunts us as it turns into silence. Calidore patiently listens, but he cannot separate himself from what he hears: his chivalrous mission may have led him to discover an actual Gloriana, but it also suggests that ideal beauty must transcend the limitations of space and time. Unlike the piping shepherd, Colin Clout, with whom the identity of the poet at last ceases to be confused, Calidore must live in the tension between ideals and their fulfillment. This tension commits him, in advance, to a future life of concrete acts and the company of historical persons. As he leaves his pastoral setting, Calidore prepares to perform his remaining duties.

I would like to conclude this discussion by restating my position concerning the relevance of phenomenology to Spenser's work as an epic poet. On the one hand, what I have chosen to call Spenser's "poetic phenomenology" at least suggests that the traditional interpretation of this philosophical sources might be considered from a phenomenological standpoint. At the beginning of this paper, I alluded to the role that both Aristotle and Plato might have had in developing Spenser's concept of virtue. Within the course of the paper, however, I presented the goal of the Book of Courtesy in terms of a poetic phenomenology that helps situate the recovery of place within a narrative context. This goal is inseparable from the mission of Calidore himself as a typical

representative of Renaissance conceptions of virtue and political education. At the same time, it cannot be identified too closely with Calidore's personal function in the epic narrative.

The recovery of place involves a slow spiritual awakening that embraces the lowest levels of erotic awareness as well as the highest reaches of "ideal" experience. While this phenomenological progression requires social interaction, it also assumes the form of a subjective adventure that does not completely coincide with the actions of any single character. At the end of Spenser's epic, therefore, the recovery of place becomes a sublime metaphor whose deeper meaning is corroborated by tradition and phenomenology alike: "But what do I bid you love in the soul? – the beauty of the soul. The beauty of bodies is a visible light, the beauty of the soul is an invisible light; the light of the soul is truth."²³

NOTES

¹ In this paper, I do not limit the meaning of phenomenology to the work of its founder, or to any single phase of its long development. Nevertheless, I derive the concept of "imaginative fulfillment" from Husserl's attempt to describe the experience of truth on a phenomenological basis. I believe that this concept can be related to a broad range of human activities.

² While the sense of place that relates to poetry may not coincide with truth, it opens up a world in which truth can occur. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger explores the concept of world as a phenomenological alternative to Cartesian dualism. His late writings on art and language demonstrate how this concept can be linked to place as a poetic concern.

³ For instance, while *FQ* II.xii abounds in classical references, Spenser inverts a facile naturalism in his use of ancient sources. Guyon resembles Odysseus in his voyage into the Bower of Bliss, but he also shows how the rejection of artifice can parallel the affirmation of natural abundance as an ethically mediated value.

⁴ By emphasizing the role of language in the recovery of place, I leave open the issue of whether or not interpretation must be ontologically grounded. On the other hand, I contend that imaginative fulfillment is already a "linguistic" phenomenon on the most primordial level. Hence my use of phenomenology is especially suited for the examination of literature.

⁵ The claim that Calidore takes part in a phenomenological movement toward truth should not be confused with the identification of Calidore with an imputed narrative subject. While subjectivity plays a crucial role in Spenser's epic as a whole, Calidore himself is by no means the narrative "center" of *Courtesy*.

⁶ Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, Book IV, sec. 11, p. 295.

⁷ See Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle*, II. vi, pp. 70–71:

In the other sphere of the agreeable – the general business of life – the person who is agreeable, supposing him to have no ulterior object, is 'obsequious'; if he has no such object, he is a 'flatterer'. The man who is deficient in this quality and takes every opportunity of making himself disagreeable may be called 'peevish' or 'sulky' or 'surly'.

- ⁸ Aristotle, *The Ethics*, IX, p. 269.
⁹ Aristotle, *The Ethics*, IX, p. 269.
¹⁰ Graham Hough, *A Preface to the Faerie Queene*, p. 202.
¹¹ Harry Berger, "A Secret Discipline: *The Faerie Queene*, Book VI," in *Form and Convention in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser*, p. 40.
¹² Berger, "A Secret Discipline" in *Form and Convention*, p. 51.
¹³ Cf. Arnold Williams, *Flower On A Lowly Stalk: The Sixth Book Of The Faerie Queene*, p. 108.
¹⁴ Berger, "A Secret Discipline" in *Form and Convention*, p. 58.
¹⁵ Michel de Montaigne, "On Cannibals", *Essays* (I.31), p. 113.
¹⁶ Berger, "A Secret Discipline" in *Form and Convention*, p. 61.
¹⁷ Alastair Fowler, *Spenser and the Numbers of Time*, p. 224.
¹⁸ I contend that Calidore's reconciliation of ideal and real must be understood in terms of the phenomenological difference between *noesis* and *noema* as paired terms. In the political sphere, this means that Calidore's actions as a Renaissance courtier never leave the world of experience entirely behind. In the sphere of art, it means that the difference between the natural Pastorella and the supernatural Gloriana expresses an essential ambiguity that lies at the heart of the noematic correlate.
¹⁹ Donald Cheney, *Spenser's Image of Nature: Wild Man and Shepherd in the Faerie Queene*, p. 185.
²⁰ Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesy* in *Sir Philip Sidney: Selected Prose and Poetry*, p. 108.
²¹ Harry Berger, "A Secret Discipline" in *Form and Convention*, p. 72.
²² Cf. Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, p. 105. Its basic form is: emanatio – conversio – remeatio. The Zephyr's "descent" into Flora leads to the "conversion" in the Dance of the Graces. "Re-ascent" occurs in the turning of Castitas toward Mercury.
²³ Ficino, *Ficino's Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, XVIII: "How The Soul Is To The Beauty Of God", p. 213. Compare to Husserl's citation of Augustine in *Cartesian Meditations*, section 64, p. 157.

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