EDMUND SPENSER

From An Hymne in Honour of Beautie

Ah whither, Love, wilt thou now carrie mee?
What wontlesse fury dost thou now inspire
Into my feeble breast, too full of thee?
Whylest seeking to aslake thy raging fyre,
Thou in me kindlest much more great desyre,
And up aloft above my strength doest rayse
The wondrous matter of my fyre to prayse.

That as I earst in praise of thine owne name,
So now in honour of thy Mother deare,
An honourable Hymne I eke should frame;
And with the brightnesse of her beautie cleare,
The ravisht harts of gazefull men might reare,
To admiration of that heavenly light,
From whence proceeds such soule enchaunting might.
Therto do thou great Goddesse, queene of Beauty,
Mother of love, and of all worlds delight,
Without whose soverayne grace and kindly dewty,
Nothing on earth seemes fayre to fleshly sight,
Doe thou vouchsafe with thy love-kindling light,
T’ illuminate my dim and dulléd eyne,
And beautifie this sacred hymne of thyne.

That both to thee, to whom I meane it most,
And eke to her, whose faire immortall beame,
Hath darted fyre into my feeble ghost,
That now it wasted is with woes extreame,
It may so please that she at length will streame
Some deaw of grace, into my withered hart,
After long sorrow and consuming smart.

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.

1. Spenser’s Foure Hymnes, published in 1596, consist of a hymn to Love and a hymn to Beauty, followed by hymns to Heavenly Love and Heavenly Beauty. All four of the poems are Platonic, but the third and fourth are more so. The poems are addressed successively to Cupid, Venus, Christ, and God. In the second Hymne the poet stresses the points that the Idea of Perfection, the “goodly Paterne” which was before God’s eyes at the Creation, is reflected in beautiful things on earth, particularly the loved woman, and that eventually the beautiful and the good are identical.
That wondrous Paterne wheresoere it bee,
Whether in earth layd up in secret store,
Or else in heaven, that no man may it see
With sinfull eyes, for feare it to deflore,
Is perfect Beautie which all men adore,
Whose face and feature doth so much excell
All mortal sence, that none the same may tell.

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. That is thy soveraine might,
O Cyprian Queene,2 which flowing from the beame
Of thy bright starre, thou into them doest streame.

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,
Therewith thou pointest thy Sons3 poysned arrow,
That wounds the life, and wastes the inmost marrow.

How vainely then doe ydle wits invent,
That beautie is nought else, but mixture made
Of colours faire, and goodly temp'rament
Of pure complexions,3 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.

Hath white and red in it such wondrous powre,
That it can pierce through th' eyes unto the hart,
And therein stirre such rage and restlesse stowre,4
As nought but death can stint his dolours smart?
Or can proportion of the outward part,
Move such affection in the inward mynd,
That it can rob both sense and reason blynd?

Why doe not then the blossomes of the field,
Which are arayd with much more orient hew,

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2. I.e., Venus.
3. Perfect combination in the body of the four elements or "humors."
And to the sense most daintie odours yield,
Worke like impression in the lookers vew?  
Or why doe not faire pictures like powre shew,
In which oftimes, we Nature see of Art
Exceld, in perfect limming\(^6\) every part.

But ah, beleeeve me, there is more then so
That workes such wonders in the minds of men.
I that have often proved,\(^6\) too well it know;
And who so list the like assayes to ken,\(^4\)
Shall find by tryall, and confesse it then,
That Beautie is not, as fond men misdeeme,
An outward shew of things, that onely seeme.

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.

But that faire lampe, from whose celestiall ray
That light proceeedes, 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.\(^5\)

For when the soule, the which derive´d was
At first, out of that great immortall Spright,\(^0\)
By whom all live to love, whilome\(^0\) did pas
Downe from the top of purest heavens hight,
To be embodied here, it then tooke light
And lively\(^0\) spirits from that fayrest starre,
Which lights the world forth from his firie carre.

Which powre retayning still or more or lesse,
When she in fleshly seede is eft enraced,\(^6\)
Through every part she doth the same impresse,
According as the heavens have her graced,
And frames her house, in which she will be placed,
Fit for her selfe, adorning it with spoyle
Of th’ heavenly riches, which she robd erewhyle.

Thereof it comes, that these faire soules, which have
The most resemblance of that heavenly light,
Frame to themselves most beautifull and brave

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\(^4\) Whoever wants to make the same tests.
\(^5\) In Neo-Platonic thought, the soul when descending from heaven is infused with vital spirits by the sun (in Ptolemaic astronomy the sun is a planet). See the next stanza.
\(^6\) Again implanted.
Their fleshly bowre, most fit for their delight,
And the grosse matter by a soveraine might
Tempers so trim, that it may well be seene,
A pallace fit for such a virgin Queene.

So every spirit, as it is most pure,
And hath in it the more of heavenly light,
So it the fairer bodie doth procure
To habit in, and it more fairely dight
With chearefull grace and amiable sight.
For of the soule the bodie forme doth take:
For soule is forme, and doth the bodie make.

Therefore where ever that thou doest behold
A comely corpse, with beautie faire endewed,
Know this for certaine, that the same doth hold
A beauteous soule, with faire conditions thewed,
Fit to receive the seede of vertue strewed.
For all that faire is, is by nature good;
That is a signe to know the gentle blood.

Yet oft it falles, that many a gentle mynd
Dwels in deforme´d tabernacle drownd,
Either by chaunce, against the course of kynd,\(^{6}\)
Or through unaptnesse in the substance fownd,
Which it assuméd of some stubborne grownd,
That will not yield unto her forms direction,
But is performed with some foule imperfection.

And oft it falles (ay me the more to rew)
That goodly beautie, albe heavenly borne,
Is foule abusd, and that celestiall hew,
Which doth the world with her delight adorne
Made but the bait of sinne, and sinners scorne;
Whilest every one doth seeke and sew\(^{6}\) to have it
But every one doth seeke, but to deprave it.

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.

\(^{7}\) Living body.