

AN HERMETIC INQUIRY INTO THE ELEMENT OF TIME
IN THE FAERIE QUEENE OF EDMUND SPENSER

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PREFACE

This study developed under the direction of Dr. Charles E. Walton, Head of the Department of English, at Kansas State Teachers College of Emporia. It was suggested by a recurrent theme appearing in classical and medieval literature, in fourteenth-century poetry, and in the prose and poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. That theme--the hermetic philosophy--lends itself to a study that, once begun, can have no end.

Multifaceted as is alchemy, there is no single text that can present more than a fraction of its subject matter. However, in his three writings available to me, John Read has made a valuable contribution to an increased understanding of the involved symbolism of alchemy and its application in literature. Similarly, Mircea Eliade has presented in his writings a second important aspect, that of the time element in the hermetic cosmology. From these sources upon which I have relied heavily, and from others less comprehensive but not less valuable, have come the cues that provide a brief glimpse into the panorama of alchemy as it appears in The Faerie Queene.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
PREFACE	1v
I. ALCHEMY AND THE IMAGES OF TIME	1
II. CIRCLES OF TIME	27
III. COLORS OF TIME	48
IV. THE DRAGON OF TIME	81
BIBLIOGRAPHY	108

CHAPTER I

ALCHEMY AND THE IMAGES OF TIME

Contained in The Faerie Queene of Edmund Spenser is a succession of images, diffuse, disparate, yet linked together in a system of thought as intriguing as it is illusory. The expression of that thought--the hermetic philosophy--invades every aspect of life, either known or speculative, and betrays an attitude toward life that is at once spontaneous, optimistic, and irrepressible. Alchemy, synonymous with hermetism, embodies a symbolism that is disarmingly simple yet dismayingly involved. Despite the fact that the symbols are relatively few in number, sometimes three or four, often seven as in the case of the planets, their tutelary gods and goddesses, their metals, and the colors of the spectrum of light, one still is confronted with the multiplicity with which these symbols operate. It soon becomes evident that clarity was not the primary intent of alchemical writers. In order to sustain the difficulty of understanding their treatises, alchemical writers might refer to one substance by six or seven different names, and one name might denote five or six different substances.¹

¹M. Caron and S. Hutin, The Alchemists, p. 133. The secrets of alchemical operations were guarded by the adepts, who "placed themselves beneath the banner of Harpocrates (god of silence)," once they had come into possession of the sacred mysteries. Raymond Lully believed that to reveal the secrets of the divine science was to invite damnation; Basil Valentine more explicitly added that it was "to be willing to sink into hell." For detailed description of the iconography of alchemy, see John Read, Prelude to Chemistry, pp. 85 ff. See also Caron and Hutin, op. cit., pp. 133 ff.

Thus, meaning is overlaid with meaning, ambiguity overlaid with ambiguity. Only the masters knew how to interpret the terms and they spoke only to each other. The oblique approach was their method and metaphor their delight. To the uninitiated, groping for secrets denied to all but an elect, Arthephius directed this somewhat haughty reprimand:

Poor idiot; could you be so simple-minded as to believe that we shall teach you clearly the greatest and most important of secrets, and take our words literally? . . .²

The nature of hermetic literature makes it frustrating, perhaps futile, to attempt the documentation of interpretative clues to its symbolism, for many of the clues necessarily lie in the associations made by the reader between works of numerous writers, often widely separated in both time and space. For example, one encounters repeated references in classical and medieval literature to leftward and rightward turnings. The significance of this left-right orientation, persisting as it does throughout centuries of literary and graphic art, denies its easy dismissal. In Book VI of Virgil's Aeneid, Aeneas turns to the right at Proserpine's gate and proceeds toward Elysium. A turn to the left would have taken him into Tartarus and darkness. In Dante's Inferno, the pilgrim poet and his guide descend in a leftward turning spiral into the pit:

Thou knowest that the place is circular and though thou art come far, always to the left in descending toward the

²Caron and Hutin, op. cit., p. 133.

bottom, thou has not yet turned through the whole circle;
 (XIV.124)

An exception that seems remarkable is the sudden turn to the right after they enter the gate to the ruddy city of Dis. (X.132) The reader who has become sensitized to color references and to the significance of the scarlet hue may pause at this seeming anomaly: not only does the city of Dis have vermilion mosques, but also one of the three faces of Dis is scarlet. In The Faerie Queene, the old nurse, Glauce, in attempting to undo the love spell holding Britomart in thrall, turns the love-sick maid three times to the left:

. . . her rownd about she from her turnd
 She turned her contrary to the sunne,
 Thrise she her turnd contrary, and returnd
 All contrary, for she the right did shunne. . . .
 (III.iii.1)

These few references, spanning as they do fifteen centuries in time and all of Europe from Italy to the British Isles, are enough to set up a singularly involved chain of conjectural reactions. It would appear that the left has something to do with Tartarus, with the underworld and darkness, with Satan or Dis, and with the powers of undoing, or dissolution, while the right is involved with Elysium, with the sun and light, with certain colors, and time-defying elements. A hierarchy appears of that which is above and that which is below. The reader who has attached solar significance to the metal gold, the final work in alchemy, will eventually attach solar significance to the color scarlet, the final hue in the Grand Magistry which

yields the Red Stone and full perfection.³ Having made this link and others that follow in the course of his study, he will have to approach the issue of the vermilion mosques of the city of Dis, as well as the scarlet face of Dis, and make his own judgments. These are the problems to be pondered and they are left unanswered by the poets.

In pursuing his course through the literature of alchemy, then, the reader must make his own associations, find his own clues, and attempt to unravel the mysteries shadowed forth. Lacking the oral tradition that surely must have accompanied the hermetic writings, he cannot hope to become an adept, yet given time and an accretion of symbolic references, he may acquire a sense of orientation in territory that seems increasingly familiar. On the other hand, he may ramble happily through the thickets of alchemical symbolism like the Red Cross Knight in Wandering Wood, confused and misled by tracks that lead nowhere. In the absence of a deliberate obscurity, it would be surprising if alchemy were not confusing, for it is at once philosophy, science, and theology, and it operates on various levels independently and simultaneously. A French writer has this to say about the complexities of hermetic thought:

Scholasticism with its infinitely subtle argumentation, theology with its ambiguous phraseology, astrology, so

³John Read, Prelude to Chemistry, pp. 130, 147.

vast and so complicated, are only child's play in comparison with alchemy.⁴

Even this comment must be viewed with a certain amount of distrust, for the term, child's play, is linked enigmatically with the identity of the Philosopher's Stone and with its preparation, both of which were closely-guarded secrets and never were referred to in clear terms.⁵ The Philosopher's Stone was often referred to as the Royal Child, and of its preparation one alchemist wrote, ". . . the preparation of the stone is only a labour fit for women, or child's play."⁶ In regard to the

⁴ John Read, Through Alchemy to Chemistry, p. 73.

⁵ Caron and Hutin, op. cit., p. 133.

⁶ John Read, Prelude to Chemistry, p. 134. In another text, Through Alchemy to Chemistry, Read elaborates on the ludus puerum, or child's play motif, as it appears in the paintings and drawings of alchemy in the early sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In 1514, Cranach explored the Saturnine mysticism of Melancholy in three paintings, all of which show infants at play, some with a hoop, others with a sphere. A century later, Tenier's paintings based on this theme show winged cupids at play in an alchemical laboratory. Above them floats a thin and shining sphere like a bubble. The Saturnine mysticism is usually--although not always--associated with wetness or humidity, and sometimes with the opus mulierum, or "the labour of the woman who washes clothes." That, Read says, may be the significance of the woman who appears with the infants in each of the Cranach paintings. This exploration certainly does not exhaust the potential of Saturnine symbolism, which may have been the primary interest of hermetic artists and poets, and which probably is the theme least well understood and most widely misinterpreted. It does, however, link together two motives frequently used in alchemical illustrations and, at the same time, ushers in a train of attendant symbolic references that demand attention. The student who wishes to pursue this motif further might do well to examine the remarkable works of the fifteenth-century artist, Hieronymus Bosch, who depicted a strange world in procession of human, animal,

multiple meanings inherent in medieval symbolism, Dunbar says that it is never a question of "either-or," but that all of

(continued) and vegetable forms, and forms which are various combinations of the three, often emerging forms. See [the reproduction of his painting] The Garden of Earthly Delights, pp. 56-65, in Hieronymus Bosch, edited by Anthony Bosman. The painting, The Vagabond, is considered by Bosman to be the synthesis of the genius of Bosch. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, this painting has been known as The Prodigal Son; however, recent astrological interpretations have identified the lame and leaden-hued figure as a Saturn subject (p. 84). Bosman suggests that the one interpretation does not preclude the other. Compare this association with the interpretation of the parable of The Prodigal Son by Alvin Boyd Kuhn, The Lost Light, pp. 130, 171, 260, 347. Compare these, in turn, with the September song in Spenser's Shepheard's Calendar, and the curiously juxtaposed Embleme of the myth of Narcissus, who, enamored of his reflected image, fell into the pool and was changed into a flower. Here the symbolic reference to the pool suggests the wetness associated with Saturn, and the fall, then, is the fall or the descent of the soul into an alien element, a "farre country," the realm of Saturn or Kronos, the realm of Time, of matter and form, the "garden of earthly delights." Further implications of the egg-like forms of Bosch's paintings lie in the common and nearly universal usage of the egg as a symbol of creation--the world egg--which has been likened to the gradual differentiation of the substance of the egg from the fructified germ cell. See William Kingsland, The Gnosis of Ancient Wisdom in the Christian Scriptures, p. 109. This usage is consistent with the alchemical theory of the unicity of all matter. The egg, primordial and undifferentiated substance, is androgynous, a Rebis, a Two-thing, the holy and inscrutable One. According to the Neo-Platonists, the World Egg was a prominent feature of the Orphic theogonies and through this association has come to be more familiarly known as the Orphic Egg. See W. K. C. Guthrie, Orpheus and Greek Religion, p. 93. In the Orphic tradition, it is said that Chronos produced the egg and that Night is the daughter of the god hatched from it. From Aristophanes' The Birds comes the variation that the egg was produced by Night and Eros was the god who emerged from it: "There was Chaos at first, and Darkness, and Night, and Tartarus vasty and dismal: / But the Earth was not there, nor the Sky, nor the Air, till at length in the bosom abysmal / Of Darkness an egg, from the whirlwind conceived, was laid by the sable-plumed Night. / And out of that egg, as the Seasons revolved, sprang Love, the

the meanings are true at once, and all are necessary in order to understand the universal implications of the symbol.⁷

Perhaps the best study method is to accept no comment for what it seems to be, to regard every word with a degree of suspicion for subterranean import, and to dismiss nothing as irrelevant. In this manner one may hope, at the least, to construct the hermetic circle.

These natural and familiar elements are part of the rudimentary material provided for putting together a myth of amazing complexity: the planets, the metals, the gems, light and the color spectrum, darkness, space and number, polarities of equal and opposite qualities, and perhaps the simplest, yet the most complex of all, the two prime elements of the four-- fire and water--from which all else is derived. For centuries the poets have used these simple ingredients of myth, setting them forth repeatedly and in innumerable variations, each in

(continued) entrancing, the bright, / Love brilliant and bold with his pinions of gold, like a whirlwind, refulgent and sparkling!" The text from which the lines above are taken is Aristophanes, translated by Benjamin B. Rogers, ll. 693-697, p. 198. Spenser discloses the cosmic genealogy of Mutabilitie as the daughter of Earth and granddaughter of Chaos and Titan. (VII.vi.26) In An Hymne in Honour of Love, Spenser addresses love as "the world's great parent." (l. 156) Although there are variations, there is no real contradiction in these symbols. Here is the doctrine of the two contraries, born from one matter, the alchemical white regimen born from the black regimen of Saturn, and the golden-winged Eros, linked with dark Saturn.

⁷Helen Flanders Dunbar, Symbolism in Medieval Thought and Its Consummation in the Divine Comedy, p. 21.

his distinctive style yet always with an underlying consistency. Chaucer's use of alchemical symbolism is a brilliant pageantry of metal and color and man in openly concealed designs.

Spenser, avowing Chaucer to be his master, may have felt compelled to overmaster the master in the art of concealment, for Spenser has employed the traditional symbolism of alchemy without the strong linkage that characterizes Chaucer. Spenser's figures are more abstract and his associations are based on intervals of longer duration, like a slower music. He may be the more difficult and the less delightful because of his elusive style, but the pattern is there, although glimpsed but fleetingly.

Two aspects of Spenser's art command attention. One is the strongly linear quality of the action, visually that of processional art. It is particularly significant because of the implications it conveys concerning time and space. Both background detail and depth of perspective in The Faerie Queene are remarkable for their near absence. Spenser's little figures, powerfully evocative despite their lack of detail, move from position to position as in a void, while an unseen hand artfully sets up emblems of tree and cave, castle and stream. There is more of interval than there is of object. It is in this respect that the poem is revealed as a cosmos of suspended objects with the mind producing the continuum. The second important aspect of The Faerie Queene is Spenser's use of symbol.

Having dispensed with all but a minimum of line, and leaving unspanned intervals to puzzle and perhaps to mislead, his use of symbol necessarily must carry the maximum meaning and provide some solution to continuity.

Spenser's symbolism, like that of Chaucer, is principally the symbolism of light and its attributes. Of these, color is of great significance, although it is far less prominently displayed in The Faerie Queene than it is in Chaucer's works. Where Chaucer's daemon goes abroad in familiar guise and in a complete spectrum of color, Spenser's is better described as chance sparks, stray flashes of color briefly revealed and easily overlooked.

Light symbolism is solar symbolism, and through the sun, it is related to the six planets familiar to the astronomy, or astrology, of antiquity, as well as to a pantheon of mythic gods and goddesses: Luna, the moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Each planet is assigned a dual position in the zodiac, and to each is assigned a metal important in the language of alchemy. The seven metals arranged in descending order from Sol, the sun to Saturn, are gold, silver, mercury, copper, iron, tin, and lead. The symbols identifying the planets and their metals thus appear:⁸

Sun (Sol)	☉	Gold
Moon (Luna)	☾	Silver

⁸ Stanley Redgrove, Alchemy, Ancient and Modern, p. 27.

Mercury	♄	Mercury
Venus	♀	Copper
Mars	♂	Iron
Jupiter	♃	Tin
Saturn	♄	Lead

There are discrepancies in old listings of the metals and their planetary associations. A tenth-century manuscript of St. Marks, Venice, assigns electrum (a mixture of silver and gold) to Jupiter, and tin to Mercury, no mention being made of metallic mercury, or quicksilver, which was known to Aristotle.⁹ Yet another listing reported by Celsus and quoted by Origen assigns "mixed metals" to Mars, tin to Venus, and iron to Mercury, this particular hierarchy being designated, although not necessarily in this order, as "the ladder of Mithraism."¹⁰ Later texts tend to support the organization of symbols as given by Redgrove. Even that miscreant among witnesses, the Canon's Yeoman, in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, affirms it:

The bodyes sevene eek, lo! hem heere
 anon: Sol gold is, and Luna silver we threpe
 Mars iren, Mercurie quycksilver we clepe
 Saturnus leed, and Juppiter is tyn, And
 Venus coper, by my fader kyn!¹¹

⁹J. R. Partington, A Short History of Chemistry, p. 23.

¹⁰Loc. cit.

¹¹Geoffrey Chaucer, The Canon Yeoman's Tale, 825-829, Robinson's edition.

A conspicuous feature of these listings lies in the unanimous consent accorded the position of primacy to the sun and its metal, gold, followed by the moon and silver, and the seventh and lowest position to Saturn, the dark planet, and lead, the dark and heavy metal.

Anyone searching the literature of alchemy for its message should feel fortunate to have progressed this far into its symbolism and to have encountered so little difficulty or disagreement. Beyond this point simplicity and clearly ordered categories are less easily found. Difficulties and disagreements multiply. Discrepancies in alchemical texts are not so much the product of disagreement among their authors as they seem to be the product of an impressive unanimity directed toward a deliberate concealment of the truth and the calculated misleading of the reader. Once again, the Canon's Yeoman testifies, this time to the almost certain frustration awaiting the seeker of easy remedies:

Philosopheres spoken so mistily
 In this craft that men kan not come therby,
 For any wit that men han now-a-dayes.
 They mowe well chiteren as doon thise jayes. . . .
 For this science and this konnyng . . .
 Is of the secree of secrees. . . .¹²

What the secret of secrets is remains tantalizingly open to question. Depending upon the personal bias of whatever author one happens to be reading, alchemy may range from the practical

¹²The Canon Yeoman's Tale, 1394-1397, 1447-1448.

to the absurd. It was the eminently practical search for a process of making gold from matter that is not gold. It was the chemistry and the medicine of antiquity. It was the first stumbling steps taken by intelligent (but naive) men toward the clinical truths of modern science. It was a hoax, perpetrated by the wilful and the wicked upon the gullible, ever hoping for a magic elixir. It was the Elixir. It was magic. It was Rumpelstiltskin spinning straw into gold. Above and beyond these alchemical theories, there rises still another alchemy--a mystical alchemy which is the religious apprehension of the universe and of the soul seeking its source in god. It is this final definition which must be taken into consideration along with the practical. Each is essential; both are necessary.

In the absence of any real authority, one turns to the commentators on this strange art. Alchemy has been defined as the secret art of transmuting base metals into gold by means of a mysterious agent, the Philosopher's Stone.¹³ This definition, however, is restrictive and too narrow if applied literally and solely to metallurgy, for it is generally agreed that alchemy was also a mystical philosophy of a deeply religious nature, which found its abstract theories demonstrated allegorically on the material plane. It has been called "a

¹³Redgrove, op. cit., p. 2.

philosophy applied to a technique."¹⁴ This is supported somewhat cautiously by Read, who says that alchemy includes metallurgical processes, the chemistry and medicine of the Middle Ages, and a system of philosophy which was said to plumb the mysteries of creation.¹⁵ It ranges, therefore, from the practical and material on the one hand to the mystical and abstract on the other; yet it is still united in a coherent system.

It is fairly evident that in addition to several kinds of alchemy, there are at least two kinds of alchemists: honest and upright men of sound scientific and philosophical reputation practicing a legitimate work, and still others who were charlatans preying on the gullibility of the willing and the unwary.¹⁶ Certainly the pages of its long history have been enlivened by the antic alchemy of puffers and practitioners busily engaged in something other than a "divine art." This scandalous element has not been overlooked by the detractors

¹⁴ John A. Hopkins, Alchemy, Child of Greek Philosophy, p. 2. The lowest aspect of alchemy, says Franz Hartmann, is the "preparation, purification and combination of physical substances," from which processes has grown the science of modern chemistry. Chemistry may "decompose and recombine substances," purifying them of foreign elements, yet leaving the primitive elements unchanged. Alchemy, on the other hand, changes the character of substances, raising them to higher levels of existence. See The Life and the Doctrines of Paracelsus, F. Hartmann, pp. 286-287.

¹⁵ John Read, Prelude to Chemistry, p. 2.

¹⁶ Caron and Hutin, op. cit., p. 53.

of alchemy, who, incidentally, seem to have existed throughout its career, for it has been regarded rather consistently as something suspect. Diocletian ordered all alchemical works banned.¹⁷ A latter-day writer deems it to be "an incomprehensible perversion of the human spirit."¹⁸ Yet a history of the hermetic philosophy, published in 1742, casts a subtle light with its first words: "I am about to give, in this little work, the history of the greatest folly, and of the greatest wisdom of which men are capable."¹⁹

Gold has not yet lost its lure nor has the wish for physical immortality and perpetual youth passed into decay. The Philosopher's Stone in solution was the Elixir, or The Elixir of Life, which promised a panacea for all human ills, the restoration of youth, and the prolongation of life.²⁰ Tales

¹⁷Redgrove, op. cit., p. 35.

¹⁸Caron and Hutin, op. cit., p. 178.

¹⁹John Read, Prelude to Chemistry, p. 3. Quoted from Histoire de la Philosophie hermetique, I, i.

²⁰Ibid., p. 121. Read emphasizes the popular belief in the extension of powers and the promise of immortality, or at least greatly extended years accompanied by youthful vigor. He quotes Arnold of Villanova: "Our Medicine has also power to heal all infirmity and diseases, both of inflammation and deviltry; it turns an old man into a youth. If the illness be of one month's standing, it may be cured in a day; if of one year's standing, it may be healed in twelve days; if of many year's standing, it may be healed in a month." The statement of Villanova is of interest not only for its reference to the Elixir, but also because of the numerology suggested in his choice of time periods. In his Opus Saturni, Isaac of Holland recommends the dose of a piece of Stone half the size of a

of fabulous wealth, mysteriously or miraculously acquired, persist and mingle with tales of adepts who were still living centuries after their birth.²¹ One can scarcely credit these reports with literal truth, yet it is equally incredible that gifted men for centuries should have dedicated mind and energy to the pursuit of a will-of-the-wisp. So much ado may be over something.

(continued) grain of wheat to be taken every nine days, the effect of which will make the patient "feel as if he were no longer man but spirit . . . nine days in Paradise. . . ." Somewhat cynically, Read suggests that the wondrous effect may have been in part due to the spirits of the wine in which the Stone commonly was dissolved. In Alchemy, Ancient and Modern, p. 35, Redgrove indicates that the supposed fact of physical immortality is not in strict accord with alchemical analogy, and cites the doctor, Paracelsus, who warns all such over-enthusiastic subjects, ". . . there is nothing which might deliver the mortal body from death; but there is One Thing which may postpone decay, renew youth, and prolong short human life. . . ."

²¹Rene Alleau, A History of Occult Sciences, pp. 80, 82. In this text, which contains an unusual collection of illustrations, Alleau says that greatly increased amounts of gold made available in the seventeenth century caused the idea of transmutation to lose appeal, and the foundation of the learned societies stimulated popular interest in research of a more practical and profitable nature in the advancement of science and commerce. Both served to sound the death knell of the traditional sciences and of alchemy as a respected system of thought. However, he cites an incident which occurred in 1666, when a stranger visited Helvetius at the Hague and showed him an ivory box containing what was purported to be the Philosopher's Stone in powder form. A minute amount of the powder, covered with wax, ". . . was dropped into 80 grammes of molten lead, which was then transmuted into gold of a high degree of purity and which was tested by Brechtel, the chief assayer of Holland." Spinoza gave an account of the incident in a letter the following year, after personally questioning all of the witnesses to the assay. Brechtel added the information that during the assay, a small amount of silver was added to the gold, increasing its weight, and "after seven successive refining processes, it had not lost a grain."

An extended listing of names and pseudonyms which appear with regularity in connection with alchemical writings would be beyond the purposes of this writing; however, a few deserve mention. Among the names is that of Nicholas Flamel, the French adept of the fourteenth century whose mysteriously acquired wealth seems to be historically affirmed, and whose remarkable biography bears all of the necessary characteristics of a legend.²² There was the marvelous Paracelsus, "always drunk and always lucid . . .," who believed that the chief end of alchemy was medicine rather than gold making.²³ Albertus Magnus, considered by some not to have been a true adept, still is said by others to have learned the secret of the Philosopher's Stone and to have passed it on to St. Thomas Aquinas.²⁴ One is assured--or perhaps to be reassured--that Aquinas himself did not practice the hermetic arts; however, it is interesting to learn that he accepted alchemy as a legitimate art so long as it did not invade the realm of magic.²⁵ His sensible

²²The student with an interest in the numerology of alchemy will find in Flamel's biography an interesting collection of numbers and time periods with which to deal. See Caron and Hutin, op. cit., pp. 6-23. See also Read, Prelude to Chemistry, pp. 59 ff.

²³Stanley Redgrove, Bygone Beliefs, p. 60. Also, Read, Prelude to Chemistry, p. 29.

²⁴Caron and Hutin, op. cit., p. 34.

²⁵Ibid., p. 35.

admonition predictably and immediately revives speculation about the true nature of this "elvyssh craft."²⁶

Two statements in defense of magic reveal something of the divided attitude toward science and suggest the origins of its secularization. Platonists and Aristotelians alike regarded "natural magic" to be that wisdom which arises from a true and complete knowledge of natural properties, of which Pico de Mirandola said:

If Magic is the same as Wisdom, then deservedly is this practice of natural science, which presupposes an exact and absolute knowledge of all natural things as the apex and summit of all philosophy, called by the peculiar and appropriate name of Magic.²⁷

Here would appear to be a forerunner of the Renaissance man who took all knowledge to be the proper domain of his study. The alchemists, understanding the tendency of nature to be toward perfection and the tendency of metals to be toward gold, were drawing forth the hidden potentialities of the lower metals. This operation would seem to be not only natural but justifiable. The vision attended by that philosophy is staggering in its implications for mankind. Man, a part of the

²⁶ The reader who wishes to affirm--or to deny--Thomas Aquinas' reputed interest in alchemy may find the work, Aurora Consurgens, to be of value. It is a document attributed to Aquinas, perhaps his last writing, discovered by C. G. Jung and edited by Marie-Louise von Franz as a companion piece for Jung's Mysterium Coniunctionis.

²⁷ John H. Randall, Career of Philosophy, p. 192. Italics supplied by the present writer.

universe, is subject to the same natural laws, and, presumably, is perfectible. Again, this theory would seem to be consistent with theological aims of the time, the spiritual regeneration of imperfect man and the realization of his ultimate good--a condition surely so desirable that whatever might be learned of magic might also be welcomed to this operation of attainment. One wonders if the flaw lay in the end, in the means, or in the pagan origins. Orthodoxy is a powerful idol. Henry Vaughan, the hermetic poet, fell under the displeasure of a modern critic for what seems to be an unwarranted departure from orthodoxy: "The poet is so enamoured of this theory of the original spotlessness of the soul, that . . . he calmly repudiates the orthodox, Christian doctrine of original sin."²⁸ One finds a demonstration of the same unorthodox theory in the figure of the innocent Red Cross Knight, faring forth from Eden, gathering spots as he descends into the realm of shadows and illusion and the final darkness of the pit from which he is redeemed by the radiant Arthur.

It requires only a slightly extended pursuit of this particular tangent to expose the strong strain of Saturnine mysticism in alchemy, and to explain the quaking fears aroused by its mysterious rites and processes. It has been remarked that in his work of transmutation, the alchemist was drawing

²⁸E. C. Pettet, Of Paradise and Light, fn., p. 20.

forth the superior and hidden qualities inherent in the lower metals--the ultimate silver and gold. This work is not creation. At least, it is not creation ex nihilo, but a bringing to light of something always existing although hidden. In this way is one more offense added to orthodoxy. The alchemist literally is doing the work of nature, only at a vastly accelerated rate, accomplishing in a brief time, relatively, what nature performs over an infinitely long time.²⁹ The "Sons of Fire," were projecting futurity into the present and thus were treading dangerously near forbidden ground, for they were taking upon themselves the role of Time and, perhaps, the prerogatives of God.

Time is etymologically and indelibly linked with Kronos, the ancient god who swallowed his young. Analogically, this myth finds a rehearsal in the alchemists' deliberate distortion of time in which tomorrow is swallowed by today, or the future by its sire, the present. In alchemical symbolism, the mythology of Kronos is taken over by Saturn who is often represented as an old man bearing a curved sickle and sometimes an hour glass.³⁰ On the astrological wheel of the zodiac, Saturn reigns

²⁹The purpose of alchemy was the acceleration of evolution brought about through the contraction of time, and the primary object of the Philosopher's Stone lay in its relation to the time span of operations and its operation upon the time span. See Alleau, op. cit., p. 77.

³⁰Fire was an important agent in the alchemical processes and is symbolized by numerous cutting instruments, such as swords, lances, arrows, scissors, scythes, even hammers. It

over the dark houses of the two months following the winter solstice. The association of these houses with evil is vividly illustrated in both medieval liturgical drama and in Christian church architecture.³¹ In churches, the north side is the devil's side, where Satan lurks to catch the unwary and where most people were unwilling to be buried.³² "All evils arise out of the north," it is said; "Hell can lie nowhere but 'sharpe northe' or 'declining west.'"³³ A ritual descent into the solstice of life, into fire and darkness, boded no good to the

(continued) is sometimes represented by Vulcan, or Hephaestos, the god of fire, born lame and often shown with a wooden leg. See Read, Prelude to Chemistry, p. 143. Hephaestos was the armorer of the gods and made the magic armor of Achilles, worn in his turn by Arthegall. For its description, see Homer's Iliad, XVIII. Cf. lame Vulcan with the Saturnine figure in Bosch's painting, The Vagabond. In Mythology, Edith Hamilton links the scythe-bearer, Saturn, with the Greek Cronus, father of Zeus or the Roman Jupiter, p. 45. An additional association may be made between Eros and Saturn by comparing the grotesque by Raphael, plate 293, Germain Bazin, Loom of Art, with the fifteenth-century zodiacal illustration shown by Alleau, p. 33. In the former, Eros, or a putto very much similar, is being drawn in a chariot by two serpents. In the latter, the aged Saturn is being drawn by two serpents, one of which is shown with its tail clasped in its mouth--the ancient symbol of eternity, the Ouroborous.

³¹The association of evil with the days of Saturn is a departure from early Roman belief. The Roman feast of the Saturnalia was held during the winter in order to restore to earth the Golden Age which had prevailed while Saturn had reigned in Italy. During the festival no wars could be declared, executions were postponed, and the equality of man was observed by slave and master sitting down together to dine. See Edith Hamilton, Mythology, p. 45.

³²Leslie Hotson, Shakespeare's Wooden O., p. 36.

³³Loc. cit.

literally good and implied a magic of Satanic origin, employable in alchemical and other scientific pursuits. Of this association, Pompanazzi said,

There is no doubt that natural magic is in itself a true and productive science, depending on natural philosophy and astrology, like medicine, and many other sciences; and in itself it is good and a perfection of the intellect . . . and as such it does not make the man who possesses it a bad man.³⁴

Sir Walter Raleigh, condemned for his "School of Night," and charged with atheism,³⁵ made a significant identification of magic with science and a further distinction regarding the properties of magic. He stressed the differences between theurgic magic and goëtic magic, and regarded the former not only as a legitimate branch of science, but perhaps as its most sacred branch:

It is true that many abhorred the very name and word Magus because of Simon Magus, who, being not Magus but Goes . . . familiar with evil spirits, usurped that title. For magicke, conjuring, and witcherie are farre differing artes, whereof Plinie being ignorant, scoffed thereat. . . . Magus is a Persian word, primitively,

³⁴Randall, op. cit., p. 192.

³⁵Will Durant, The Age of Reason Begins, p. 16. The doctrine of the School of Night remains largely a matter of conjecture. M. C. Bradbrook says that the esotericism of the School was due partly to necessity: the public attitude, then as ever, was not friendly to free intellectual inquiry; Harriot's astronomy undoubtedly was incomprehensibly to the generality; there apparently was a strong strain of the occult in the activities of the group; and finally, its members were "of a haughty and self-sufficient spirit and not averse from accepting the popular verdict that they were not as other men." (p. 53) For further discussion of the School, its doctrine, and of Raleigh's literary relationships, see The School of Night, M. C. Bradbrook.

whereby is exprest such a one as is altogether conversant in things divine. And (as Plato affirmeth) the Arte of Magicke is the Arte of Worshipping God.³⁶

So speaks a voice across three centuries, cautioning one to incline toward accuracy in definition and away from narrow judgment.

It is not difficult to understand the position of the Church concerning mysterious activities that distorted time and presumed to make man his own god. However, alchemists were numbered among churchmen and were not irreligious in their dedication to their science. The prevailing tone of their texts is one of a devout nature, if not one of exaltation. However ambiguous their treatises, their prayers seem beautifully lucid. Flamel's prayer is an example of one such masterfully conceived petition:

All-powerful God, Father of light, from whom come all good and perfect gifts, I beg thy infinite mercy; grant that I may know thy eternal wisdom, that wisdom that surrounds thy throne, which created and perfected, guides and keeps all things. I pray thou mayest send it unto me from heaven, thy sanctuary, and from the throne of thy glory, that it may be and work in me. For it is thy wisdom that governs all celestial and occult arts, that keeps the knowledge and intelligence of all things. Grant that it accompany me in all my works; that by its spirit I may have true knowledge; that I may proceed without error in the noble art in which I have dedicated myself, seeking the miraculous stone of the sages, that stone that thou hast hidden from the world, but are wont to reveal to thy elect, that I may begin, pursue, and complete this great work that is mine to do here below, that I may enjoy its rewards in peace, forever more. In the name of Christ Jesus, I ask of thee the miraculous

³⁶K. M. Briggs, Pale Hecate's Team, p. 43.

cornerstone of Heaven, set in place for all eternity, to govern and reign with thee. . . .³⁷

A second discourse on wisdom, of interest because of the moving and mystical mood of its dynamic author and the unusual circumstances surrounding its transmission, comes from Aurora Consurgens, a document attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas and considered by its translator to be the most revealing and deeply introspective writing of this complicated visionary:

If therefore now your delight be in thrones and the sceptres of kings, that you may reign forever, love the light of science all of you and enquire, ye who are signed with the learning of nature, for the wise man (will) seek out for you the wisdom of all the ancients. . . . What the science is and how she cometh into being I will lay bare, and will not hide from you. For she is a gift and a sacrament of God and a divine matter, which deeply and in divers manners was veiled in images by the wise . . . she is an infinite treasure to all men, which a man having found, hideth it. . . . Senior likewise saith: For there is a stone, which he that knoweth layeth it upon his eyes, but he that doth not, casteth it upon the dunghill, and it is a medicine which putteth poverty to flight and after God hath man no better thing.³⁸

The designation of alchemy as a sacrament is striking, says von Franz, and coming from the pen of a Christian writer, one cannot doubt that the word has deep significance and that the author of Aurora was thinking of the sacraments of the Church.³⁹

These were men of the West and of a relatively recent period in western alchemy. They have estimable forerunners who

³⁷Caron and Hutin, op. cit., pp. 12-13.

³⁸Marie-Louise von Franz (trans.), Aurora Consurgens, p. 430.

³⁹Ibid., p. 197.

command attention. A list of names in a Greek manuscript preserved in the French National Library is greatly similar to a list found in the Kitab al Fihrist, an Arabic encyclopedia, dated from 850 A. D.:

Know ye, my friends, the names of the masters of the Great Work: Plato, Aristotle, Hermes . . . Democritus, Zosimos the Great, Olympiodorus. . . . These are the universal masters, known the world over.⁴⁰

With these illustrious antecedents to consider, a new definition of alchemy is in order. Hermetism, according to Garner, is the name given to the occult philosophy which accumulated around certain Greek texts attributed to the Greek god Hermes as he became identified with the Egyptian god, Thoth, legendary author of the Emerald Table.⁴¹ These texts represent a fusion

⁴⁰Caron and Hutin, op. cit., p. 113.

⁴¹Ross Garner, Henry Vaughan, Experience and Tradition, p. 65. The Emerald Table, or the Smaragdine Table of Hermes, is as follows: "True, without error, certain and most true; that which is above is as that which is below, and that which is below is as that which is above, for performing the miracles of the One Thing; and as all things were from one, by the mediation of one, so all things arose from this one thing by adaptation; the father of it is the Sun, the mother of it is the Moon; the wind carries it in its belly; the nurse thereof is the Earth. This is the father of all perfection, or consummation of the whole world. The power of it is integral, if it be turned into earth. Thou shalt separate the earth from the fire, the subtle from the gross, gently with much sagacity; it ascends from earth to heaven, and again descends to earth: and receives the strength of the superiors and of the inferiors --so thou has the glory of the whole world; therefore let all obscurity flee before thee. This is the strong fortitude of all fortitudes, overcoming every subtle and penetrating every solid thing. So the world was created. Hence were all wonderful adaptations of which this is the manner. Therefore am I called Thrice-Great Hermes, having the Three Parts of the

of Egyptian priest-craft and Greek science, and concern astrology, alchemy, magic, and the occult science.⁴²

Significantly, it is remarked that the Greek alchemists exhibited a striking lack of interest in physico-chemical phenomena, and, in short, failed to display a properly scientific spirit.⁴³ Indeed, Eliade says that the alchemical texts of antiquity reveal that "these men were not interested in making gold--in fact, were not talking about gold at all."⁴⁴ Still another writer with evident misgivings about the subject of alchemy, after pondering at length the obscurantism of the treatises, asks almost in dismay what it was that these men were really writing about and why they felt constrained to write with so much secrecy in a language so oddly staccato; and he wonders that their incredible collection of terms should have been preserved and perpetuated, so that a thousand years later it was still vital and looked upon as divine esoterica.⁴⁵

(continued) philosophy of the whole world That which I have written is consummated concerning the operation of the Sun. Mary Ann Atwood, Hermetic Philosophy and Alchemy, pp. 7-8. See, also, Read, Prelude to Chemistry, p. 54.

⁴²Ibid., p. 67.

⁴³Mircea Eliade, The Forge and the Crucible, p. 147.

⁴⁴Eliade, op. cit., p. 148.

⁴⁵Hopkins, op. cit., p. vi. In The Life and Doctrines of Paracelsus, Franz Hartmann observes "the sign in which the true alchemist works is the cross. . . ." (p. 286)

This marvelous amalgam, then, is alchemy, an interlacement of science, philosophy, theology, art, astrology, magic, and mysticism. Its imbroglio of star and planet, metal and color, its gold-making, its projections and progresses, are linked with the Red Cross Knight and Una, with the mundus, with Time, by the single glyph most representative of them all, tying together surface disparities in subterranean agreement--the dazzling signature of the sun, symbol of time and eternity --the cross and the circle.

CHAPTER II

CIRCLES OF TIME

When the Red Cross Knight, strongly visual, yet strangely lacking in features, canters along the plain accompanied by Una and her lazy dwarf, one is drawn into a subtle net of hermetic intrigue. The faceless people of The Faerie Queene gleam in the dusk and wear countenances of light. They display certain colors and wear certain metals, but Spenser's references to such details are minimal. They traverse plain and forest, cross water, engage in combat with monstrous creatures and with each other. They rarely, if ever, rest. Even when they sleep, their dreams are a trouble. Somehow, they seem smaller than life, as if they are viewed through the wrong end of a perspective glass. They lack dimension, like paper cut-outs, drawn with superb artistry and with a minimum of line, superimposed upon a single pen stroke--the plain which divides heaven and earth.

No greater contrast could be asked than that to be found in Spenser's fairy subjects and the creatures that people Chaucer's teeming works. Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims have faces, sometimes fair, more often not. They wear scarlet hosiery, dip their bread into gravy, have ulcers on their shins. The pages of The Canterbury Tales are rank with the exhalations of humanity. However, in his other works, Chaucer, too,

produced figures that anticipate Spenser's abstract representations. The poet in The Book of the Duchess stands in an enchanted glade and carries on an oddly detached conversation with a pale knight dressed in black. Bereaved and grieving, the knight has lost his lady, his heart, his ruddiness. As a company of hart hunters rides through the forest, an evening bell begins to ring deep within the castle. The hart has escaped the hunter; a time has been completed; a circle has been drawn. Similarly, the contenders in The Knight's Tale, although real, are invested somehow with the reality of a dream. The red and gold kings of the East, sumptuous with oriental pearl, the cosmic struggle of Palamon and Arcite, the circular arean specially created for that struggle, and the enigmatic and mystical Emily, all produce the effect that one has wandered, like the poet of The Book of the Duchess, onto a scene that is at least once removed from reality, yet which is familiar and in that familiarity, supra-real.

A strong link between Chaucer's works and Spenser's lies in the hermetic element; however, it is difficult to define, not because of any lack of reference points, but because of an abundance. It contains an involved symbolism of colors and metals, of planets and astrological figures resident in the zodiac. It is spirit and form and matter, fire and water, sulphur and mercury, and something called the quintessence. It is the rainbow of the peacock's tail, the scarlet and white of the philosopher's stone. It is unity and duality, light

and darkness, white and black. It is birth and death, and more particularly, it is life, separate and distinct from these two. It defies efforts to codify its elements in fixed positions, for they are vital and dynamic. A succinct definition of this hermetic impulse and of the style most characteristic of its expression is provided by Bazin, who describes it as the concept of a world not fixed but always in a state of becoming, in which forms are not states but stages--a world always in a process of transformation, yet ceaselessly returning upon itself.⁴⁶ He finds its style to be Asianic, attractive in the sixth century to the Spanish, Celts, Bretons, and Irish, who produced a literature and art expressive of an elemental love of nature and whose single theme is interlacement--"a tracery of abstract and living forms . . . which [takes] metaphor as its principle."⁴⁷ Certainly, this description finds responsive chords in Spenser's work, for The Faerie Queene is an interlacement of forms, often one contained within another. Thus it is that the pageantry of Isis Church fits neatly into the strange glass in which Britomartis first regards herself, and that both of these images are inherent in the veiled idol of the temple of Venus. Hermetically, these are glyphs of arcane significance, each a distinctive

⁴⁶Bazin, Loom of Art, p. 126.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 127.

representation of the cross and a processional. Among these mysteries, the central one is that of time.

In the passages describing the progress of the Red Cross Knight into the forest and out again, the element of time as well as that of space presents something of a puzzle. Spenser has defined both space and time, for a plain has been crossed, a labyrinthine wood entered, a battle done, but how much space and how much time are concerned is unknown and probably unknowable. It is impossible to chart the reaches of this land in The Faerie Queene or to measure its sequences. Spenser's time has the same indefinable quality. One assumes that there is time and that time has passed (primarily because there has been motion), yet figures move in a curiously static manner. The Red Cross Knight's passage across the plain and into the wood may be a diversion for a rainy afternoon involving only a few hours, yet it might as easily be a year, a lifetime, an aeon.

Spenser's three symbols used to establish points in space have an equally dubious quality. The plain, the wood, and the den are names for prosaic elements in a landscape. Of the plain, little is said. It is as barren to the imagination as it is barren of description. However, the character of Spenser's wood cannot be so lightly dismissed. Wandering Wood seems to be enchanted. Sweet with bird song and a delight to the eye, it is a pleasant place but one that thwarts progress through its aisles. Paths mislead, arrive nowhere. There is no backward turning; retraced steps lead only into new and

strange ways--or into old ways subtly altered. (I.1.10) A new doubt--that they have lost their reason--arises to trouble the wanderers. (I.1.10) When they believe themselves to be closest to their point of departure from the wood, actually they are farthest from it. (I.1.10) At last, they choose a thoroughfare pressed before by many feet, because it seems most likely to "lead the labyrinth about." (I.1.10) It leads to the dragon's den, and only after the young knight has entered the darkness of the den and overcome the dragon is he capable of finding his way out of the wood. Tried in battle, he has become a more seasoned traveler, and, like many heroes before him who traversed the dark reaches of the nether world, his outward passage is easily accomplished and receives the briefest of comment. (I.1.28) So did Aeneas take his leave of Elysium with only a passing reference to the ivory gate. Dante, lost in a wood, found it necessary to descend the more specifically detailed fire escape of the inferno in order to return home.

A second interesting association with Spenser's company of heroic questers lies in the influence of the cardinal directions through which their respective journeys take them. Except for occasional instances, such as in the Biblical story of Jonah, there are few overt descriptions of an eastward passage, but the consistently high regard shown for the East cannot be overlooked. Jonah passed through the sinful city of Nineveh from west to east with no deviation, but not until he had made

an initiatory sea passage through the labyrinthine depths. Aeneas was not permitted to approach Latium from the east, even when his goal lay almost within reach, but was required to take a long and devious passage around in order to enter his new homeland from the west. Yet Spenser's uncharted reaches in the realm of The Faerie Queene lend themselves to little more than speculation. It might be consistent with a theme from antiquity that the Red Cross Knight and Una enter Wandering Wood from the west, and after roaming about in a sensual delight of eye and ear, apparently alien to their recent past experience, they discover, at last, that heavily trodden path that seems to promise to lead them forward, and follow it into the darkest, and therefore northermost, depths of the grove. But Spenser is more consistent unto himself and his own theme, and here as usual, makes his approach obliquely to the conventions of time and space. Una and the Red Cross Knight enter the grove at some unspecified point and wander about within. They are not concerned with direction, nor seemingly, is Spenser. Indications of time and direction throughout the poem are customarily made to the rising and the setting sun, to eastern and western horizons. It is in reference to the passage of the sun that Spenser mentions the pole star and, by association, the north:

By this the northerne wagoner had set
 His sevenfold teme behind the stedfast starre,
 That was in ocean waves yet never wet,
 But firme is fixt, and sendeth light from farre
 To al that in the wide deepe wandring arre:

And chearfull Chaunticlere with his note shrill
 Had warned once, that Phoebus fiery carre
 In hast was climbing up the easterne hill. . . .
 (I.ii.1)

The directional plane thus established seems to be that of the east-to-west path of the sun, and movement in the poem is otherwise confined to the advancing into and out of varying degrees and kinds of darkness. However obscured its form, Wandering Wood has connotations of the traditional symbol of the mundus.⁴⁸ Although the pattern, here, is not marked, in

⁴⁸ Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and Profane, p. 44. The Roman mundus--a circular trench divided into four quarters--was considered to be the image of the universe and the "paradigmatic model for human habitation." For a discussion of the mundus and its relation to the sacred Center of the universe, see Eliade, pp. 42 ff. The significance of the Center in the traditional society is the significance of the real and the true. Any departure from the Center, therefore, is a departure from reality. Much of the symbolism of antiquity may be applied to this simple design of the quartered circle. The original mundus was platted in the heavens and is described by the galactic houses of the zodiac encircling the earth--another Center--surrounded by its sun and stars and revolving planets. From the Center, the break in plane where deity irrupts and where space is sacred and infused with the uttermost reality, comes the birth of a new universe or of a new form, whether it be that of man, or city, or temple. From the Center the four horizons are projected, defining the four cardinal directions in space and the four seasons of the year in time. The first gesture of the Creator, then, may be said to have been the sign of the cross. This design, in turn, became the celestial archetype for the creative gestures of man. Therefore, one's territory is the Center of the world, and one's city within that territory is another Center. Frequently a city or village was developed from a central intersection, either natural or contrived, where a space was left for the construction of the temple, itself a sacred Center originating from its own central point of origin. Similarly, one's house, although not necessarily in the geographical center either of the territory or the city, still was another Center, an axis mundi, by virtue of its hearth or fire altar. Not the least of these domains

later passages of the poem it becomes suspect, for Spenser has suspended a number of variations of this sunny symbol throughout his work--in Britomartis' magic mirror, in the sylvan interlude of Chrysogonee and the sunbeam, by implication on the shield of the Red Cross Knight, and, finally and radiantly, in Isis Church.

Like Aeneas and Dante, the Red Cross Knight is accompanied on his journey into the darkness, but compared to Aeneas and the Sibyl of Cumae, the Red Cross Knight's guide seems peculiarly inept, because Una gives little, if any, indication that she is not lost in the wood along with her companion. She lends no assistance and offers no advice to the Red Cross Knight until he approaches the Den of Error and bravely--or foolishly--essays to enter the dark cavern. At this point, Una reveals that she knows the place and its dangers: "The perils of this . . . place I better wot than you . . . this is Wandering Wood, this Errour's Den, a monster vile whom God and man both hate." (I.1.13) Somewhat belatedly,

(continued) is man, himself an intersection of two means, carrying about with him always, although perhaps but dimly realized, his own temple, his own altar, his own reflection of godhead. For other variations on the theme of the holy center of the universe, see Plato's description of the beam of light with its golden chains tying together the upper and lower realms of the universe, The Republic, Book X. For a description of the rainbow bridge, Bifrost, linking the land of the Æsir to the sky-root of the ash tree, Yggdrasil, see Jean Young, The Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson, p. 30. Eliade's description of Babylonian temples and the ritual function of the ziggurat may be found on page 41, op. cit.

she indicates that it is now too late for the knight to turn back without incurring disgrace, yet adds, ". . . wisdome warnes whilst foot is in the gate to stay the steppe ere forced to retrate." (I.1.13) Her dwarf, however, chattering with fear, urges the knight to flee, disgrace or none.

Subtly, Una has identified herself. If one may take her at her word, she is Wisdom, yet a wisdom that remains silent until the foot is in the door and the only possible retreat is to advance. If she seems to be an uncertain guide, her dwarf is hardly commendable. To the occasion he adds only a shrill note of fear that may be a necessary adjunct of wisdom as long as his dwarfish proportion is maintained. Although he echoes the words of fearsome Charon concerning the entry of living men into the forbidden realm of the dead, the dwarf has little else in common with that venerable guardian of the deep. He has, however, obliquely established the association of this dark and dangerous den with other Stygian worlds and their lurking monsters.

Of this curious trio, one yet remains to be discussed. Anonymous at first in his borrowed gear, the Red Cross Knight reveals his nature considerably earlier than in his encounter with the dragon. When he enters the darkness of the cave, he gleams with light, and, although the ray is weak, it is enough to reveal the danger before him, arousing the dragon and exposing her to a fearful threat. Darkness is her natural lair,

light her natural enemy, concealment her intent. But she, too, is denied any retreat. The two opponents hurl themselves upon each other in what seems to be a fated and deathly embrace. Spenser's implications, here, are as obvious as they are numerous, and he may have tailored them to suit his readers' biases, for the Red Cross Knight is St. George slaying the dragon.⁴⁹ He is a solar hero engaged in a cosmic struggle between light and darkness. He is the light in the tomb, analogous to the soul in the body, making its perilous descent into time and space, and its progression through the stations of form. He is man on a physical and spiritual odyssey, surmounting his brutish aspects. Oen cannot say "his brutish

⁴⁹The Red Cross Knight is not actually St. George at any time in Book I, although his identification seems strongly implied by his company in its earliest passages. Donald Cheney says that there is no question of a mystery about his identity; the reader is expected to recognize the tableau of knight, lady, ass, and lamb. However, as an unproved knight, he is only potentially St. George. See Spenser's Image of Nature, pp. 21-22. After leading the young knight, purged and shriven, to the top of the highest hill at the House of Holiness, the aged guide, Contemplation, showed him the distant and iridescent Holy City, approached by a steep and narrow path. Here, he was advised to choose the path leading to the heavenly city where he would ultimately and after longer labors take his place among the elect and assume his identification as St. George, of merry England. His origins were revealed to him, that he was descended from Saxon kings, and that he had been a changeling, stolen away to Faerie Land and left in a furrow for a ploughman to discover. One might conclude that the young knight, an initiate, had been led to the top of a sacred mountain where he was permitted to gaze upon absolute reality, beyond time and space, into the Sabbath day. V. W. Whitaker sees in these passages the indication of Spenser's lack of sympathy with Puritanism. See The Religious Basis of Spenser's Thought, p. 29.

origins" and be consistent with the thought of the poem: there is nothing brutish about the origin of the Red Cross Knight. He is a stranger to the present time and place. Brutality, when it appears, is something taken on in progress through the lower realm and is something to be overcome when it is assumed. And in this the Red Cross Knight is triumphant, at least momentarily.

The dragon is not the first opponent the Red Cross Knight has ever encountered, but rather the third, so subtle are the devices of the serpent. His first opposition was the rainstorm that drove him and his little company into the grove for protection. He has recently come from the realm of Gloriana, and although he was a lesser figure at that court, he was not alien to it. His light is dim, perhaps even reflected; still, he is a child of fire, and water is alien to his natural element. His second test occurs in the dusk of the grove. This shadowy mean between the two extremities represents a danger requiring more sophistication than the young knight possesses. In the utter darkness of the dragon's den, he is distinguished by his light--an attribute of fire. His foe is external to him, easily recognized. However, in the semi-darkness of the grove, he is not remarkable for his light, for that little gleam is inadequate in the gleaming shadows, themselves half light, half darkness. He is, therefore, identified at that point by a measure of darkness contained within himself. His enemy is within and, predictably,

escapes immediate recognition. His silver shield provides a whispered clue to his nature. Silver--although one of the "royal" metals--is not gold. In the hermetic tradition, it is tending toward gold, but unlike gold, is corruptible in the presence of corruptive elements.⁵⁰ The Red Cross Knight is not a flawed knight, but an infant knight, unfinished, tending toward perfection, or holiness, his quest.

The elements of fire and water, air and earth, operate in the initial passages of this knight's adventure. From Gloriana's kingdom to the dragon's den, he makes an easily recognized passage into increasingly gross elements, from fire, or light (symbolic of the highest), to earth, or darkness (symbolic of the lowest). And because he went into the den, he literally enters into the earth and emerges again, if not a new knight, at least an altered knight. Spenser is rehearsing old themes, here--the light in darkness, the life in death.

In the manner of the poet historical, Spenser begins his knight's tale abruptly in the middle, but he explains in his letter to Raleigh that the story would have ended--had he completed it--at the exact point wherein the historiographer would have begun it. The place and time are Gloriana's court, where twelve annual days of festival are in progress. This place and this time Spenser offers as antecedent to his abrupt opening, making of last things true beginnings. On the first

⁵⁰ Stanley Redgrove, Alchemy, Ancient and Modern, p. 27.

day of the festival, a tall, clownish young man presents himself to Gloriana, asking of her a boon which, according to the custom of the time, she could not refuse during the festal period. Falling before his queen, he requests that he be granted any chance adventure that might befall him during the holiday. He remains at rest upon the floor, unfit through his rusticity for any higher position. Seemingly by chance, there enters, almost at once, a fair lady in mourning, followed by a dwarf carrying a spear in his hand and leading a war horse bearing knightly armor. The lady Una, makes her complaint that her father and mother, an ancient king and queen whose scepters had once extended from the eastern horizon to the western, have been imprisoned for many years in a brazen tower, prevented by a huge dragon from issuing forth. She begs a champion for her cause.

Eager to take upon himself the adventure offered by this situation, the Red Cross Knight is warned by Una that he will be unequal to the task unless he puts on the armor that she has brought. Here, Spenser indicates that the armor is that "whole armor of God" described in St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

So take God's armor . . . tighten the belt of truth about your loins, wear integrity as your coat of mail . . . have your foot shod with . . . peace . . . take faith as your shield . . . salvation as your helmet, and . . . the Spirit as your Sword (VI: 13-18)⁵¹

⁵¹Quoted from the James Moffatt translation of the Bible.

Thus it is that the beginning of the poem is really a "middle" when one finds the Red Cross Knight, newly clad in something akin to the magical armor of Achilles, and Una, radiant yet mantled in black, crossing the plain. Having come from one point and going toward another, they are occupying in time and space a midpoint that moves when they move along their plane of existence. In style and thought, The Faerie Queene bears a resemblance to a description of cosmos given by Nicholas of Cusa--a circle whose circumference is nowhere and whose center is everywhere.⁵² At no point is the kinship made more remarkable than in the element of time as it appears in this romance. Spenser's time is all "middest," and like the center of Cusanus' cosmos, not only is it central to the theme of The Faerie Queene, but it is also everywhere throughout the work. However, Spenser's treatment of the element of time, as well as that of space, is one of studied indifference, casual, even capricious, suggesting that time is of no great consequence either to himself or to his work. There is little enough of continuity between his books and a characteristic confusion of figures and actions within his cantos, frequently with no perceivable relation to time or to each other. The action is

⁵²C. S. Lewis quotes from Cusa's De docta ignorantia: "Every man, whether he be on earth, in the sun, or on another planet, always has the impression that all other things are in movement whilst he himself is in a sort of immovable centre In consequence there will be a *machina mundi* whose centre . . . is everywhere, whose circumference is nowhere." (ii, 12; tr. Heron, III) See Spenser's Images of Life, fn., p. 15.

disjunct, and disconcerting gaps in time and space are bridged primarily by his remote unconcern for both. Landscapes, strongly emblematic in nature, are set up momentarily and struck as peremptorily. Figures come and go, sometimes to reappear, sometimes to vanish without explanation or apology. There are no seasons to orient the reader-wanderer within the circle of the year. There is no year, clearly indicated. No leaf turns. No snow falls. Rather, a perpetual summer holds indefinite sway. There are alternate periods of darkness and light but in no accountable sequence, and, finally, these, too, assume a curious quality that belies their identification as night and day.

But time is there. Apprehended in the figure of Kronos, agreeably pictorial, conventionalized in the familiar figure of Father Time armed with hour glass and sickle plying his way between the two gates of the Garden of Adonis, admitting and releasing clamorous cherubs and intermittently scything down fair and fresh forms growing in the garden--here is Spenser's time made visible, at last. But having seen, or thinking he has seen, time, the reader is in as great a quandary as before and is no better oriented than before. Whatever Time has to do with the Garden of Adonis and whatever the Garden of Adonis has to do with the rest of the romance remain unclear. Certainly, great numbers of characters canter, lag, boat, and do battle in and about hastily erected land- and water-scapes without encountering the mythical Garden. Except for certain

recited genealogies and references to a time of great antiquity --a Golden Age--there is little sense of time past and still less of the future. All that happens seems to be happening at this moment and in this place, the center foreground, time and space having been brought into sharp focus at one point, the here and now. It is to this point that the reader must orient himself, even though he may eventually realize that he is searching in the wrong place for the answers that he seeks. Certainly, Spenser's treatment of time is irrational. It is the kind of time and space encountered in the dream, exploited in the drama, experienced in the ritual. Each of these is consistent not only with the others and with The Faerie Queene, but also with strains of hermetic thought that sang alike in the minds of poet, priest, philosopher, and scientist, at least until the early years of the seventeenth century.

In spite of real or imagined inconsistencies in his treatment of the conventions of time and space, Spenser makes it immediately clear in his prefatory letter to Sir Walter Raleigh that he is greatly concerned with time. While he speaks of "the present historical time," he speaks much more of the nature of time, for he has set forth briefly and explicitly two concepts of time, one linear, the other circular or cyclical.⁵³ The significance of one of these to The Faerie

⁵³Spenser has intermingled pagan and Christian orthodoxy throughout The Faerie Queene to the extent that the time concepts involved call for extended examination. Tom Driver says

Queene may not be overlooked, for it is in the latter of the two concepts that the relation of time and history to the circle and the cross is to be found; and in the poem the circle and cross appear in various guises or are implied too frequently to be easily dismissed.

(continued) that in the Greek world view, as it is represented in art, literature, and ritual, the concept of time is essentially cyclical, and in the Hebrew it is essentially linear. In a comparison of the historical consciousness of the two cultures, he indicates that Hebrew thought is historically grounded, and that the valorization of history was extended still further in Christianity. The Greek sense of history, on the other hand, is unhistorical, being derived from a "passion for what is permanent," a reality unaffected by the ebb and flow of coming into being and passing away. See The Sense of History in Greek and Shakespearean Drama, pp. 19 ff. As historical consciousness, this attitude seems to be self-negating, for history involves precisely those elements of change and imbalance that the Greeks sought to overcome in their search for the permanent. Although their time concept has been described as a rejection of history, it seems much less a rejection than an acceptance conditioned by the inadequacy of history to function as a major factor in their world view. Considered in its cosmic perspective, historical time and the historical event are but fragments of a larger reality and cannot, therefore, constitute a valid mode of being for a people oriented to something beyond change. The Greek approach to reality has been described as being strongly visual. They lived in a roundish world--the circular horizon, the round sea, the dome of the sky--surrounded by certain circular tracings and processes that repeated themselves endlessly. Conditioned by their sense of sight and by their profound sense of poetry, they found in the circle an eloquent structure of time and space--the single form which provides a symbol of the principle of Being and in which the changing and the changeless are reconciled. In contrast to the Hellenic circle of time, the symbol in Biblical Judaism and in early Christianity was an upward sloping line. See Oscar Cullmann, Christ and Time, p. 51. The idea of cyclic time was rejected. Time was considered as having a beginning and ultimately an ending. In Christianity as in Judaism, time was conceived as a straight line progressing from the Creation to the end of the world. See Eliade, The Myth of the Eternal Return, p. 143. See also Eliade, The Sacred and Profane.

In explaining to Raleigh his intention in writing The Faerie Queene and outlining the method which he chose to employ, Spenser makes a comparison between the method of the historiographer and that of the "poet historicall," suggesting that the means of the one may not be sufficient to the ends of the other. The historiographer, he explains, begins an account at the beginning and proceeds in an orderly manner to the end, recounting the times as well as the actions; but the poet "thrusts into the midst where it most concerns him" and proceeds both forward and backward, "recoursing to things forepast, divining of things to come." The projected twelfth book of The Faerie Queene, which Spenser planned as a conclusion, he concedes would, of necessity, have been the first book of an historiographer. If Book XII had the recognizable character of a beginning, then the poet has done a curious thing: beginning, by his own admission, in the middle, he has advanced not to the end but to the beginning. This arrangement effectively eliminates the existence of an ending, since beginning and ending are one. The kinship of this concept of time to the circle is self-evident, for there is no point in the circumference of the circle that may be identified either as beginning or end, and in the delineation of this form, there is no place that is not a flowing point retracing itself, meaningless except in its total context of circularity. From his vantage point in the middle of time--the flowing point of the present--the poet anticipates the future in retrospect;

the past becomes a mirror in which the future is imaged, and what has been not only will be, but is now. Here is a powerful image of time--a time that was, a time that is yet to be, both detached and suspended, yet both absorbed into the unique and vital instant of the present, always advancing, always returning upon itself--the dynamics of eternity brought to bear upon a single point. Spenser's deceptively simple definition of what might be called "poetic time" is fundamental to the highly involved patterns of image and action in The Faerie Queene in which distinctive figures and actions take on attributes of other dissimilar figures and actions, often producing within the reader a disturbing sense of déjà vu. Inherent in this cycle of time is the triad, a pattern of two opposing figures united by, or in, a third figure that shares elements of each. The significance of this pattern-of-three to Spenser's theme is suggested by the frequency with which it appears throughout The Faerie Queene in such varied representations as Medina and her jangling sisters; Cambina and the warring knights, Cambello and Triamond, himself a three-in-one figure; and the three rooms in the house of Busirane in which Britomartis peers into the masque of time. Mirror imagery (a cosmic triad of viewer, object viewed, and viewing medium) is a variation on this theme, reënföring it with profound implications. In a characteristically understated manner, Spenser employs mirror imagery in what one might describe as the creation of Britomartis when she gazes into the magic glass; and it is almost subliminally

that the cross and the circle are interjected into this account, for it is the ansate cross, or Venus' looking glass, into which she gazes.

If, to the historiographer, time is only linear, to the poet it is circular but, often enough, both circular and linear. To the former, first things and last things are strictly ordered, neither to be confused nor altered. To the poet, these distinctions vanish. Certainly, these two organizational methods reveal two distinct attitudes toward time and cosmos, and, while they are not inimical, they are often presented as contradictions. An awareness of both and of how they have operated in thought may help to justify the presence of what may otherwise seem to be irreconcilable contradictions, not only in Spenser's work, but in other writings of the past. Coupled with that awareness, a more sympathetic approach to the less familiar of the two time concepts may illumine many of Spenser's passages, to reveal in what previously seemed to be chaos, an image of unsuspected beauty.

Few concepts have equalled and probably none has surpassed the concept of time in its germinal impact on the imagination. Apart from the respect shown for the utility of an errant shadow scanning the stations of a dial, dividing the day, the year, and life into supportable segments, there has been consistently demonstrated a reverence for time as one of the ultimate mysteries. It has provided literature with a persistent theme and some of its most romantic inventions in

characterization. As many and as varied as those representations have been, their differences do not obscure an underlying simplicity of theme which recapitulates itself in complexity. Kronos, despite his austerity, has much in common with the plummy-winged Hermes, descending the towers of heaven to gaze in amazement and a little fear at the militant Mutability, and each owes something to that most oriental of figures, the serpent, or dragon. It is precisely within the context of winged figures and serpent forms and of the mythic realities which they prefigure, that Time and Hermes are to be considered. In his office as messenger to the other gods in the Greek pantheon, Hermes may be compared, not unreasonably, to a dynamic quality inherent in processional art, a vital spirit that exists fully and intensely in the intervals between the processional figures, and which passes through those figures, silently and invisibly, much as through a series of arches. Sensed when not seen, and seen but indistinctly, it is the same fleeing spirit that animates the passages of Spenser's romance, for whether evoked in the figure of Hermes, winged, youthful, and bearing his snaky wand, or in the figure of Kronos, aged and trudging afoot at his wintry craft in the Garden of Adonis, time is a protean figure in The Faerie Queene.

CHAPTER III

COLORS OF TIME

Spenser's interest in time and the symbols of time is shown in his early work, The Shepheardes' Calendar. In what seems to be an extraordinarily detailed account of various calendars of the past, he explains, as though challenged, why he chose to begin his calendar with the month of January. He says that it may seem to some that the poet, Theocritus, has faulted in beginning the calendar with that "moneth which be-
ginneeth not the yeare," pointing out that it is maintained with strong reasons of the learned, that the year really begins with March, when the sun renews its course and spring has returned to earth with pleasures that have lain buried in the sadness of dead winter. He declares this wisdom to have been that of the ancient astrologers and philosophers, and cites Macrobius and his "holy dayes of Saturn," affirming that the estimable Romans and Greeks observed this yearly progression of months. Suddenly, as if in graceful acquiescence to a reason far superior to pagan insight, he states a case for the incarnation of Christ, who has turned time back to its first commencement, the Nativity. Still, prompted by some old and secret urging, he returns once more to the theme of "elder times," and notes that God commanded the Jews to begin their new year in March, in remembrance of their having been brought out of exile. There follows, then, still more description of innovations in

the keeping of calendars before Spenser observes that ancient Egyptians began their year in September, because, according to the best rabbinical purposes and scriptural authority, God created the world in September. Finally, he declares himself immune either to the "subtility of the one or the antiquity of the other," considering it indecorous for a simple shepherd boy to indulge in matters of such deep insight, or to "canvass a case of so doubtful judgment." He announces, therefore, that he will arrange his chronology to fit the simplicity of "common understanding" and begin his own calendar with January and continue throughout. At last, after rounding out the year with a cycle of songs, delightful and sometimes dubious in their matter, he appends the following lines:

Loe! I have made a Calendar for every yeare,
 That steele in strength, and time in durance shall
 outweare:
 And if I marked well the starres revolution,
 It shall continewe till the worlds dissolution,
 To teach the ruder shepheard how to feede his sheepe,
 And from the falsers fraud his folded flocke to keepe.
 Goe, lyttle Calendar! thou hast a free passeporte:
 Goe but a lowly gate emongste the meaner sorte:
 Dare not to match thy pype with Tityrus hys style,
 Nor with the Pilgrim that the Ploughman playde a whyle:
 But follow them farre off, and their high steppes adore:
 The better please, the worse despise; I aske no more.
 (S.C. Env.)

One hardly doubts that The Faerie Queene was taking form in Spenser's mind at this time, a decade in advance of its initial publication. Many of the attributes of Spenser's Calendar appear in The Faerie Queene, although at times in masquerade. He planned it originally to be twelve books, of which only six were eventually completed. However, one wonders if he actually

intended for the projected six books to appear in print, but instead may have deliberately left them to float forever in the realm of the ideal, real but uncreate. This plan would have been consistent with the method of his chosen master, Chaucer, whose "unfinished" books also seem somewhat suspect when considered in the light of their prevaillingly cheerful attitude toward creation as an unfinished work. But whether real or ideal, Spenser's projected twelve books suggest the twelve months of the year, and each of his six completed books contains twelve cantos. Immediately, an analogy may be drawn between the six completed books and the six days of the Creation. That there is no seventh--and Sabbath--book is reasonable, when one considers what may be Spenser's only reference to the Sabbath occurring in Canto VIII, "Unperfite," of "Mutabilitie," wherein he writes:

Then gin I thinke on that which Nature sayd,
 Of that same time when no more change shall be,
 But stedfast rest of all things, firmly stayd
 Upon the pillours of eternity,
 That is contrayr to Mutabilitie:
 For all that moveth doth in change delight:
 But thence-forth all shall rest eternally
 With Him that is the God of Sabbaoth hight:
 O that great Sabbaoth God graunt me that Sabbaoths sight!
 (VII.viii.2)

In his discussion of calendar keeping, Spenser's emphasis upon the importance attending the proper beginning of the New Year is not easily dismissed. He shares in this attitude with a long line of predecessors, for the celebration of the New Year apparently has always held significance as a religious

event. It is the beginning both of a new time and of a new world, created simultaneously. Janus, deity of the first month of the new year, has two faces, one looking backward and one looking forward. In Roman mythology, this two-faced god is the guardian of portals and the patron of auspicious beginnings and endings.⁵⁴ Similarly, Saturn, the ruling planet in the months of January and February, and of the constellations Capricorn and Aquarius, is depicted both as Father Time, aged and bent, dark clad and armed with sickle and hour glass, and as a rosy cherub--companion pieces in the mystery of time and mutability. The traditional and ancient honors paid to time are, therefore, more than token celebrations of certain repetitious natural phenomena. Cumont says that, along with the concept of an Eternity greater than the sum of years and centuries, there arose the concept of Time as a divinity,⁵⁵ and he quotes Proclus in regard to this matter:

General opinion makes the Hours goddesses and the month a god, and their worship has been handed on to us: we say also that the Day and the Night are deities, and the gods themselves have taught us to call on them. Does it not necessarily follow that Time also should be a god, seeing that it includes at once months and hours, days and nights?⁵⁶

⁵⁴Hamilton, op. cit., p. 45.

⁵⁵Franz Cumont, Astrology and Religion Among the Greeks and Romans, p. 109.

⁵⁶Loc. cit.

One is reminded by these lines of the masque of Nature in the *Mutabilitie Canto VII* in which Spenser reviews a lavishly ornamented zodiac of the figures of time.

In his description of various calendars, Spenser has repeatedly called attention to March and, more subtly, to September--the two equinoctial points of the year. In doing so, he has established a plane of time that is a dominant theme in myth--that period extending from the first day of autumn until the first day of spring. Mythically, the equinoctial axis of the year establishes the plane of man's earthly cycle of life. His first birth occurs on the west side of the zodiac in the house of Virgo. He is regenerated on the east side of the zodiac in the house of Pisces. The western descent of spirit, or solar fire, into the waters of incarnation creates organic man; his restoration in the east makes him spiritual again.⁵⁷ The singular aspect of the equinoxes is their demonstration of cosmic balance. On these two days, when the sun passes over the equator, the hours of light and darkness are equal. Therefore, the year is divided into its own morning and evening by the equinoctial plane. Bisecting the axis of the equinoxes is that of the solstices, to which Spenser has paid its due in its relation to the Nativity and to its astrological position as the portal of the New Year. In this

⁵⁷Kuhn, op. cit., p. 9.

manner, he has established the four major points of the zodiac well in advance of the line, ". . . I marked well the starres revolution. . . ." It is consistent with a long tradition that the zodiac should occupy a position of importance in Spenser's iconography. The stars have commanded attention throughout the history of man's search for truth. Interestingly, it is said that the first of Bibles originally was written across the open sky, later to be pictorially represented in the planisphere, and eventually transferred, with embellishments and elaborations, to scrolls and parchments.⁵⁸ The zodiac, therefore, may be regarded as an archetypal image of reality upon which man has charted his origin, his course, and his return. It is literally his star-map of existence--the image of time and space, of the world, and of his motions through all three. Astrologically, it provides a diagram of the planets, ascending from Saturn to the sun. Alchemically, it shows the hierarchy of the metals from lead to gold. It establishes the course of the Red Cross Knight in his quest for holiness, indeed, the course of all such heroic questers. One imagines the Red Cross Knight as coming from the south, the realm of light, descending in the west into shadowy dangers, falling into darkness in the north only to be redeemed by Arthur, after which he follows the circuit of his adventures eastward to be

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 4.

reunited with Truth. The four directions of the course of the Red Cross Knight are assumptions which must be drawn from Spenser's method of indirection, through his clues of metal, color, and water, of his primary symbols of light and darkness, and their relation to each other and to the divided circle. The difficulty of interpreting Spenser's alchemy is the difficulty of interpreting any system of symbols that operate simultaneously and frequently interchangeably, particularly when that system of symbols relates to everything in the cosmos. Therefore, before drawing Spenser's element of color dynamics into the web of light and shadow, star and metal, fixed and flying elements, it seems desirable to recapitulate the basic alchemical doctrines in their relation to the zodiac.

An interesting genesis of symbols and alchemical precepts may be shown in the structure of the quartered circle. The circle, itself, represents the Oneness of the universe, the assumption upon which alchemical reasoning is based.⁵⁹ According to this theory, all organizations of matter are one in origin, sharing a common soul that is permanent, immutable, and yet transitory, appearing in and passing through successive forms in an evolutionary progress.⁶⁰ The second and third precepts of The Emerald Table of Hermes defines and supports the theory of the unity of matter:

⁵⁹John Read, Alchemy Through to Chemistry, p. 15.

⁶⁰Loc. cit.

What is below is like that which is above, and what is above is like that which is below, to accomplish the miracles of one thing. And as all things were produced by the one word of one Being, so all things were produced from this one thing by adaptation.⁶¹

This concept is the basic doctrine of alchemy, the unity of the cosmos and the correspondence and analogy existing among all things within the cosmos, whether spiritual or physical.⁶²

Spenser hints at the doctrine of the unity of the cosmos in his recitation of the lineage of Mutabilitie and Duessa. Each is descended from an ancestor who had existed prior to the Creation--Chaos, or Night, who had seen the secrets of the world yet unmade. On the metallic plane, metals were regarded as "one in essence," sprung from the same seed, or primordial matter, in the womb of Nature, although not equal in maturity and attainment to perfection.⁶³ Metaphorically, the metals

⁶¹John Read, Prelude to Chemistry, p. 54. In slightly altered form, this material appears in Redgrove, Alchemy, Ancient and Modern, pp. 40-41. Redgrove cites a work attributed to Albertus Magnus, probably spurious, in which the Emerald Table is said to have been discovered by Alexander the Great in a cave near Hebron, the tomb of the legendary Hermes. The thirteen precepts were inscribed on this so-called Smaragdine Table in Phoenician characters.

⁶²Stanley Redgrove, Alchemy, Ancient and Modern, p. 10.

⁶³Ibid., p. 11. In gold, the alchemists saw regenerate man overcoming all temptations, while in lead, the basest of the metals, they saw typified unregenerate man, stamped with sin and easily overcome by temptation. Gold alone resists the action of fire and of all corrosive liquids save aqua regia. Lead is the most easily acted upon. The Philosopher's Stone was considered a species of gold, but purer than the purest; its mystical analogy in Christian theology is the Christ.

may be considered as different types of men, also sprung from celestial seed--a combination of male and female principles, sulphur and mercury, in alchemical delineation--and also differing in their stage of progress toward that condition of regeneration represented by the incorruptible metal, gold.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Stanley Redgrove, Bygone Beliefs, p. 7. In another work, Redgrove cites the Book of Lamspring: "Be warned and understand truly that two fishes are swimming in our sea . . . the Sea is the Body, the two Fishes are Soul and Spirit." He explains the belief that the metals were constructed after the manner of man in whose threefold constitution are the factors of body, soul, and spirit. See Alchemy, Ancient and Modern, pp. 15-16. Paracelsus called the three principles, Sulphur, Mercury, and Salt, and linked man with his universe in this manner: "Heaven and Earth, air and water are scientifically considered a Man, and man is a world containing a heaven and earth, air and water, and all are the various principles which constitute the mineral, vegetable and animal kingdoms, and the higher acts upon the lower. . . . There are innumerable principles in the Macrocosm and in the Microcosm; they are not differing from each other in the number of things of which they are composed; for they all consist only of three things--Sulphur, Mercury, and Salt." See The Life and Doctrines of Paracelsus, Hartmann, pp. 237-238. Compare this trinal Unity with the creation story in Plato's Timaeus: The one world was created, in the beginning, from fire and earth. That which is created must be corporeal, visible, and tangible. Nothing may be visible without fire; nothing may be tangible without the solidity of earth. But two things cannot be joined together without some third thing to form the bond of union between them, and that bond which makes the fairest union is that which is most like the things it joins together and which makes the most complete fusion of itself with them. Had it been only surface, the world would have required only one mean, but having depth it required a dual mean. Therefore, the creator set between the contraries of fire and earth the mean of air and water, for as fire is to air, air is to water, and water is to earth. For these reasons and out of these four elements, the world was created; being harmonised by proportion, it has the spirit of friendship, and being reconciled to itself, it is indissoluble by any hand other than that of its creator. Cf. Spenser's threefold warrior, Triamond, who received the spirit of each of his two brothers as they fell in battle, and who was reconciled with his warring opponent, Campbell, through the mediation of Cambina and the caduceus. (Book IV, Canto III)

In the figures of the Red Cross Knight and Arthur, Spenser has presented two degrees of attainment to perfection. The Red Cross Knight is simply armored and bears a silver shield, while Arthur is richly ornamented in massive golden armor and bears the flashing shield of the sun. Perhaps of even greater interest than these two is the figure of Mammon in his dusky delfe, his iron coat, all golden underneath, now darkened with sooty dust, yet testifying to an imperial origin in its "worke of rich entayle and curious mould, / Woven with antickes and wyld ymagery. . . ." (II.vii.4) The doctrine of unity projects itself into the vegetative plane along with an interesting involvement of planetary and metallic symbols. Prominent among an abundance of celestial trees are the tree Yggdrasil and the Tree in the Garden of Eden. Alchemical tradition has its own Garden with a Tree of Life, variously represented as the tree of seven metals, the tree of universal matter, as sun-tree and moon-tree, and often with the metals and planets represented by flowers, roses and lilies respectively corresponding to the sun and the moon.⁶⁵ Often a spring, the Menstruum or Hermetic spring, flows from the roots of these magical trees, and represents the Elixir.⁶⁶ There is a remarkably similar tree in Spenser's Book I, Canto xi, wherein the Red Cross Knight, engaged in battle with the flaming dragon, incurs his second fall:

⁶⁵John Read, Prelude to Chemistry, p. 99.

⁶⁶Loc. cit.

There grew a goodly tree him faire beside
 Loaden with fruit and apples rosy redd,
 As they in pure vermillion had been dide,
 Whereof great vertues over all were redd

.

From that first tree forth flowd, as from a well,
 A trickling stream of balme, most souveraine . . .
 Life and long health that gracious ointment gave
 And deadly wounds could heale, and reare againe
 The senseless corse appointed for the grave.
 Into that same he fell: which did from death him save.
 (I.xi.46-48)

In Book II, Guyon finds a tree in the Garden of Proserpine, bearing the golden apples of the sun. Once again, the analogy of gold, the sun, and the color red appears with consistency. That Spenser was operating within a tradition that not only had long preceded him but also followed him is indicated in the vegetative and metallic symbolism of regeneration in the poetry of Henry Vaughan, who combined seed and light symbolism in lines that are constellations of cosmicism. In "Cock-Crowing," he wrote: "Father of Light! what sunny seed / What glance of day hast Thou confined / Into this bird?"⁶⁷ The title of Vaughan's work, as well, Silex Scintillans, is a reference to something that reaches far below the level of vegetative symbolism into the mineral depths, and provides a significant clue to the evolutionary content in alchemical thought and to the central meaning of references to the Golden

⁶⁷ Henry Vaughan, "Cock Crowing." See English Poetry of the XVII Century, ed. Brinkley, p. 537.

Age. It was more than chthonic primitivism that prompted Vaughan to write:

. . . Man in those early days
Was not all stone and earth;
He shined a little, and by those weak rays
Had some glimpse of his birth.
He saw heaven o'er his head, and knew from whence
He came. . . .⁶⁸

Of overtones to alchemical thoughts such as these, Redgrove makes an interesting comment:

The alchemist was certainly a fantastic evolutionist, but he was an evolutionist, and moreover, he did not make the curious and paradoxical mistake of regarding the fact of evolution as explaining away the existence of God.⁶⁹

The circle, ○ , sign of the Absolute, of or the universe, in one respect may be regarded as a symbol of potentiality, or of a cosmos at rest, undifferentiated and unmanifested. With the

⁶⁸Henry Vaughan, "Corruption," op. cit., p. 531.

⁶⁹Stanley Redgrove, Alchemy, Ancient and Modern, p. 29. A Persian poet of the thirteenth century neatly caught in the net of his song the essence and much of the symbolism of this thought: "Every form you see has its archetype in the placeless world; / If the form perishes, no matter, since its original is everlasting. / Every fair shape you have seen, every deep saying you have heard-- / Be not cast down that it perishes, for that is not so-- / While the fountains flow, the rivers run from it. / Put grief out of your head, and keep quaffing this river water; / Do not think of the water failing, for this water is without end. / From the moment you came into the world of being / A ladder was placed before you that you might escape. / First you were mineral; later you turned to plant; / Then you became animal; how should this be a secret to you? / Afterwards you were made man, with knowledge, reason, faith. . . . / When you have traveled on from now, you will doubtless become an angel. . . . / Pass again from angelhood; enter that ocean, / That your drop may become a sea. . . ." See Will Durant, The Age of Faith, p. 325.

introduction of the dot into the center of the circle, the dynamics of creation have been initiated and potentiality has been set into motion toward reality. The sign of the sun, Sol, ☉, and the chemical symbol for gold, illustrate the theory of creation which, according to Eliade, is a break in plane where deity irrupts and manifests itself.⁷⁰ Hebrew and Hindu creation myths explain, also, that the universe began at the center, the nucleus, and spread outward in all directions, thus establishing the four cardinal points of the horizon. Two planes of primary importance are, therefore, projected, a perpendicular and a transverse, representing, in differing contexts, spirit and matter, the ideal and the real, fire and water. By dividing the circle once, ⊙, one establishes a symbol of polarity, illustrating the second principle of alchemical thought--The Doctrine of the Two Contraries. This theory that supports the classical ideal of balance and symmetry is often ascribed to Aristotle, but actually may be traced in antiquity more than a thousand years earlier than the Stagirite, since its essentials are recognized in early Egyptian and Indian myth, as well as in the later Chinese Yin and Yang duad.⁷¹ It is from this doctrine that many attractive analogies may be drawn, appealing to that tendency of mind that delights in opposites--the masculine-feminine principle, the red-green

⁷⁰ Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, p. 45.

⁷¹ John Read, Through Alchemy to Chemistry, p. 2.

polarity in the color spectrum, all pairs of equal and opposite qualities productive of tension held in balance. Inherent in The Doctrine of the Two Contraries, and arising naturally from it, is the theory of the four elements, earth, water, air, and fire, from which all kinds of matter were considered to have been derived.⁷² The four elements are only further divisions of the original two contraries, fire and water, or fire and earth, from which arise two pairs of opposing qualities--heat and cold, dryness and wetness.⁷³ Finally, through the two contraries and the four elements, one arrives at the sign of the world, the mundus, the all-containing, multiple One, ⊕ . Spenser acknowledges the principles involved in this alchemical concept in Book VII, when Mutabilitie describes the creative interaction of the four elements of which the world is composed. Of the ensuing tensions and oppositions, she states what clearly seems to be The Doctrine of Contraries, and concludes with a comment on the unity of resolved opposition:

Thus all these fower (the which the ground-work bee
 Of all the world, and of all living wights)
 To thousand sorts of change we subject see:
 Yet are they chang'd (by other wondrous slights)
 Into themselves, and lose their native might:
 The fire to aire, and th' ayre to water sheere,
 And water into earth: yet water fights
 With fire, and aire with earth, approaching neere:
 Yet all are in one body, and as one appeare.
 (VII.vii.25)

⁷²Loc. cit.

⁷³John Arthur Hopkins, Alchemy, Child of Greek Philosophy, p. 24.

The warring of the elements is a familiar theme throughout The Faerie Queene. In the adventures of the Red Cross Knight, the rain shower that sends him into the grove for protection reveals his nature--at that point--to be alien to water.

Applying this episode to the diagram of the divided circle, one may tentatively assume that he is a child of the upper realm of fire and air, who has just descended into the lower realm of watery and earthy elements. His encounter with the dragon in Errour's Den supports the assumption by revealing him to be also an enemy of darkness and its creatures. He is identifiable, in part, by his enemies, the elements that he opposes in battle. Spenser's humor seems evident in the fact that by the time the Red Cross Knight encounters Duessa, granddaughter of Night, his resistance to the lower realm and the creatures of darkness has decreased remarkably.

As a symbol of time and of the year (synonymous in ritual with the symbol of the world), the circle, still further divided, embodies the twelve months and the twelve constellations of the zodiac. The horizontal axis represents the plane of the equinox; the vertical axis represents the solstice. Produced by the intersection of these two lines are the four seasons, providing convenient points for appending the four cardinal directions and the four gates of the horizon, fraught with their own specific symbolic content, according to the purpose of the myth. It is possible, therefore, for one to draw a single diagram representative of the world, symbolically

demonstrating time, space, and motion, and to affix to such a diagram various alchemical and astrological emblems that bear witness to an optimistic philosophy of progress and a return to the Golden Age, from seed to sun. Spenser has defined this star-path, properly enough, in the wanderings of the champion of Truth. From the time that the Red Cross Knight is first discovered cantering along the plain until he sets out once again from Eden, after his betrothal to Truth, his course may be traced into and out of light and shadow, into descent and ascent, describing from west to east the arc of his various experiences. As he descends from the west into error, he takes on increasingly the elements of humidity and earthliness--qualities to be found only in that shadowy realm lying below the equinoctial plain of the cosmos. He encounters the daughter of darkness, Duessa, battles the dragon of Time, and returns to his origins. In defining the cyclic progress of the Red Cross Knight, Spenser has used symbols taken from the four elements and their accompanying qualities, from the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms, from light and darkness, and from varying levels of consciousness represented by illusion in both the sleeping and waking states. Any lack of clarity in The Faerie Queene, would seem to be, therefore, due to a super-abundance of cues rather than to a dearth. His dominant symbols, however, are those of light and its attribute, color. Both are properties of the sun, the major image in the zodiac, which marks the sun's course through time and space.

Spenser's use of color is not the least complicated element in his interlacement of symbols. An examination of his color references, canto by canto, reveals the deliberate care that he exercised in his choice of terms. He has used definitive color terms, and where it suits his purpose, he has used terms that are surrogates for color. For example, in Canto I, he describes the cross on the breast and shield of the "gentle" knight as being bloodie, rather than red. The knight, himself, is not identified as the Red Cross Knight until Canto II. Similarly, Wandering Wood is described as a shadie grove rather than a green grove, although attention is called to an extended listing of trees "yclad with sommers pride." (I.i.7) Spenser's avoidance of direct references to red and gree, as well as to all other colors, must be regarded as a measure taken to avoid contaminating Canto I with untimely references in a color progression that he is observing.

Spenser's color dynamics are consistent with the color theory of alchemy. Canto I, the beginning of Spenser's work, is starkly achromatic; he refers only to black, white, and gray. The work of alchemy also begins with black and white and progresses to red. An excerpt taken from The Hermetic Arcanum of Espagnet describes the progression:

The Means of demonstrative signs are Colours, successively and orderly affecting the matter and its . . . demonstrative passions, whereof there are also three special ones . . . to be noted: to these some add a fourth. The first is black, which is called the Crow's head. . . . The white color succeedeth the black, wherein is given the perfection of the first degree. . . . This is called the

blessed Stone. . . . The third is Orange colour, which is produced in the passage of the white to the red, as the middle and being mixed of both as is the dawn with his saffron hair, a forerunner of the Sun. The fourth colour is ruddy and Sanguine, which is extracted from the white fire only. . . . The deep redness of the Sun perfecteth the work of Sulphur, which is called . . . the fire of the Stone . . . and the Son of Sol wherein the first labour of the workman resteth.⁷⁴

Read adds that the colors of the Great Work were supposed to appear in rapid succession during the process of multiplication, and were denoted by regimens: the regimen of Saturn predictably is black; the regimen of the Moon, white; that of

⁷⁴ Stanley Redgrove, Alchemy, Ancient and Modern, p. 36. Leicester comments on the ancient belief that changes in the macrocosm are reflected in the microcosm, and explains in some detail the involvement of the stages of the transmutation of metals with their changes in form and its properties, linking the metalline process with man and his universe. In Stoic philosophy, a spirit (pneuma) was an essential element of all things and acted upon the body to produce change. Only the body died, leaving a seed which, impelled by the pneuma, developed through the progression of changes into final perfection. The alchemist, then, found it necessary to "kill" the metals with which he worked in order to bring them into their primal condition. This process involved loss of form and change of color, after which new forms could be impressed upon them. Through prolonged treatment of warmth and moisture --fire and water, or sulphur and mercury--the seed of the metal could be expected to develop into the final perfection of gold. The three color stages according to the process of the work are blackening, or the "death" of the metal and its attendant loss of form, called melanosis, followed by leucosis, or whitening, or "silvermaking." This step was followed by a yellowing, or xanthosis, and eventually a violet iridescence, or "coral of gold" was the result. The color progression of black, white, yellow or red, became standard. See Henry M. Leicester, Historical Background of Chemistry, pp. 41-42. For further work on the concept of the life of the metals, see Mircea Eliade, The Forge and the Crucible. He describes the ritual aspects of the mining processes of antiquity, in which the metals were removed, living, from the womb of Nature and ripened in the alchemists' crucibles.

Venus, green and purple; of Mars, the "rainbow," and the regimen of the Sun, red or golden.⁷⁵ The principal colors, however, and in the order of their development, were black, white, citrine, and red.⁷⁶

That Spenser was working within a tradition of long standing is made evident by the consistency of the color pattern and the frequency with which it appears in literature--sometimes in startling contexts. For example, in Dante's Inferno, the head of Dis has three faces, one black, one crimson, one a shade between yellow and white:

I saw three faces on his head! One in front, and that was crimson; the other were two . . . the right seemed between white and yellow, the left such in appearance as those who come from whence the Nile descends. (Canto xxxiv)

Norton's explanatory footnote describes the three faces of Dis as the diabolical counterpart of the Godhead: Ignorance, indicated by the black face, Impotence (or jealousy and envy) by the pale yellow, and Rage by the red.⁷⁷ Blackness, or darkness as opposed to light and to Wisdom, might well represent ignorance; and scarlet, associated with the passion of both metals and man, might represent hate as opposed to love and to the Stone. One wishes for a more extended explanation of the third

⁷⁵John Read, Prelude to Chemistry, p. 147.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 146.

⁷⁷Charles Eliot Norton (trans.), The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, p. 51.

color, the yellow in transition, and of its heavenly counterpart which elsewhere has been described as the forerunner of the sun. The association of Lucifer with the Morning Star immediately intrudes into this pattern. Dante is entirely consistent with tradition in his arrangement of the three colors of the faces of Dis. The black face and darkness are to the left, the pale yellow to the right, and the crimson forward. Conceivably, that crimson face could be looking eastward. This association imposes an interesting ambiguity in the position of Duessa whose scarlet image is the first color encountered by the Red Cross Knight in his adventure, and also is the color necessary to complete the triad of black, white, and red.

The imagery of Saturnine blackness or duskiness is continued elsewhere in The Inferno, revealing what must have been an almost unanimous consent to the calendar of colors, and setting up an interesting parallel, once again, with the white member of the triad:

In that part of the young year when the sun tempers his locks beneath Aquarius, and now the nights are passing to the south, when the hoar frost copies on the ground the image of her white sister, but the temper of her pen lasts but little while. . . . (Canto xxiv.1)

In this reference, Dante has established what seems to be the achromatic plane of the year, the black winter solstice and its white sister, the summer solstice, cosmic extremes held in balance. On the zodiacal wheel, the black regimen of Saturn, ruling the two houses of Capricorn and Aquarius, and the months of January and February, are directly opposite the signs of

Sol and Luna. Significantly, in view of the force with which Saturn operates in mythology, the houses of Saturn have the only color that duplicates itself in this scheme; thus, black is set in opposition to both red and white, establishing the two poles between which this myth operates, and establishing, as well, the hermetic triad of black, white, and red. Black and red, therefore, represent polar stages in the transmuting process. The black color was held by some writers to represent dissolution, by others as solution or complete conjunction, while red represented complete fixation.⁷⁸ The seeming absence of agreement underscores the paradox of the union of opposites to which Mutabilitie refers as being elements eternally at war, yet all united in one body and appearing as one. The dragon that the Red Cross Knight battles for three days is an example of Spenser's imagery of unity. Not only does this dragon combine hermetic clues to both masculine and feminine principles, he also is identifiable by his colors, for he is ". . . be-spotted as with shieldes of red and blacke. . . ." (I.xi.11.5) In addition to black, white, and red, the other colors of the spectrum are recognized, but they receive a lesser emphasis. An interesting demonstration of alchemical sectarianism appears in The Twelve Gates of George Ripley, in which he describes the pageantry of color to be witnessed in the crucible under fire:

⁷⁸ John Read, Prelude to Chemistry, p. 147.

Pale and Black, wyth falce Citryne, unparfyt White and Red,
 Pekoks fethers in color gay, the Raynbow whych shall overgoe
 The Spotted Panther wyth the Lyon greene, the Crowys byll bloe as lede;
 These shall appere before the parfyt Whyte, & many other moe
 Colors, and after the parfyt Whyte, Grey, and falce Citrine also:
 And after all thys shall appere the blod Red invaryable,
 Then thou has a Medcyn of the thyrd order of hys own kynde Multyplycable.⁷⁹

Into his first book of The Faerie Queene Spenser has drawn a spectrum of color. He has referred to black, red, white, green, purple, vermillion, saffron, blue, brown, and gray. In addition, he has referred to the metals, gold, silver, brass, iron, steel, and lead. One might assume, therefore,

⁷⁹Loc. cit. For an interesting collection of antique alchemical writings, see Ashmole's Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum, described on its frontispiece as "Containing Severall Poeticall Pieces of our Famous English Philosophers, who have written the Hermetique Mysteries in their owne Ancient Language." For a collection of vividly beautiful alchemical illustrations, see the Splendor Solis of Salomon Trismosin. This book contains seven representations of the Vase of Hermes, showing various color stages in the alchemical process. The seven Vases, crowned and occupying central niches with their distinctive color plaques, contain the following: three birds, black, white, and red; a dragon with three heads, also black, white, and red; a peacock; a queen dressed in blue; a king dressed in gold and red; a child pouring a liquid down the throat of a dragon; and a white bird with three heads, each crowned with gold. Above the Vases appear various astrological devices, and surrounding the Vases are executed scenes of medieval life. For astonishment, and instruction on how to achieve the true medicine of the Philosopher's Stone, see The Hermetic Museum. This work contains the largest collection of alchemical treatises in English, among which are The Book of Lambspring, and Maier's Golden Tripod.

that Book I represents a little cosmos in which the operation of the sun is in progress. Other features of this book support this assumption. For example, at various points, the Red Cross Knight enacts stages of transmutation. Early in the book he is separated from Una; later, he descends into the fires of night and the darkness of Orgoglio's dungeon. Furthermore, his travail in the pit may symbolize his death and dissolution as well as his rebirth following the arrival of Arthur. After the restoration of his powers and his spiritual retreat at the House of Faith, he is reunited with Una and betrothed.

Not too surprisingly, in view of the importance accorded it in alchemy and in the zodiac, Spenser has referred more often to black than to any other color or regimen. This color appears sixteen times in Book I in the following references:

over all a blacke stole shee did throw (I.i.4.5)
 A floud of poison horrible and blacke (I.i.20.2)
 Deformed monsters, fowle, and blacke as inke (I.i.22.7)
 An aged sire, in long blacke weedes yclad (I.i.29.2)
 He bad awake blacke Plutoes griesly Dame (I.i.37.4)
 sad Night over him her mantle blacke doth spread (I.i.39.9)
 a black stole most like to seeme for Una fit (I.i.45.9)
 Under blacke stole hyding her bayted hooke; (I.i.49.6)
 mourning altars . . . the black infernall Furies
 doen aslake (I.iii.36.8)
 sluggish Idlenesse . . . Arayd in habit blacke (I.iv.18.8)
 Who rough, and blacke, and filthy did appeare (I.iv.24.5)
 Doest thou sit wayling by blacke Stygian lake (I.v.10.6)
 Night, . . . in a foule blacke pitchy mantle
 clad (I.v.20.3)
 two blacke as pitch And two were browne (I.v.28.4)

Bespotted as with shieldes of red and blacke (I.xi.11.5)

A gushing river of blacke gory blood (I.xi.22.4)

In addition to the color, black, Spenser has referred to coal-black four times:

cole-black blood forth gushed from her corse (I.i.24.9)

darksome night had all displayd Her coleblacke
curtein (I.iv.44.2)

cole blacke steedes yborne of hellish brood (I.v.20.8)

Enwrap in coleblacke cloudes and filthy smoke (I.xi.44.8)

One cannot discount this particular choice of adjective as chance on the part of the poet, nor overlook the association of carbon with diamond and of diamond with light. The diamond and the sun are synonymous in interpreting gems and light in symbolic content. Arthur's sunshiny shield and armor sparkle with diamonds:

Athward his brest a bauldrick brave he ware,
That shind, like twinkling stars, with stones most
pretious rare.
And in the midst thereof, one pretious stone
Of wondrous worth, and eke of wondrous mights, . . .
exceeding shone,
Like Hesperus emongst the lesser lights. . . .
(I.vii.29-30)

His warlike shield all closely cover'd was . . .
But all of diamond perfect pure and cleene
It fram'd was, one massy entire mould,
Hewen out of adamant rocke. . . .
(I.vii.33)

In her chapter, The Golden Treatise, Atwood writes,

. . . know that the chief principle of the art is the
Crow, which in the blackness of the night and clearness
of the day, flies without wings . . . Understand,
therefore, and accept this gift of God. In the caverns
of the metals there is hidden the Stone that is venerable,

splendid in colour, a mind sublime, and an open sea.
Behold, I have declared it unto thee. . . .⁸⁰

As the sun is hidden in winter, as life is hidden in death, and as the diamond is hidden in coal, so this light of Wisdom is hidden in darkness. From black, the first color of the operation, is born the second, white, and the final, red, is "extracted from the white fire." It is not difficult to see the outlines of Genesis in this progression.

In Book I, Spenser refers to red seventeen times. He also includes an assortment of terms denoting various qualities of redness: e.g., red, rosy, rosy red, blood red, fiery red, scarlet, scarlet red, and vermillion:

adowne his coursers side The red bloud
trickling (I.ii.14.9)

heathnish shield, wherein with letters red, Was
writt Sansjoy (I.iv.38.5)

That in his armour bare a croslet red (I.vi.36.6)

Bespotted as with shieldes of red and blacke (I.xi.11.5)

With rosy cheekes, for shame as blushing red (I.xi.51.4)

A rosy girlond was the victors meede (I.ii.37.5)

Loaden with fruit and apples rosy red (I.xi.46.2)

blood-red billowes, like a walléd front (I.x.53.3)

His eies did hurle forth sparckles fiery red (I.iv.33.5)

From flaming mouth bright sparckles fiery
redd (I.vii.31.7)

he gave in charge unto his Squyre, That scarlot
whore (I.viii.29.2)

spoile her of her scarlot robe, and let her
fly (I.viii.45.9)

⁸⁰ Mary Anne Atwood, Hermetic Philosophy and Alchemy,
p. 110.

Bespredd with costly scarlott of great name (I.xi.13.8)

A goodly Lady clad in scarlot red (I.ii.13.2)

armes . . . Into a pure vermillion now are
dyde (I.v.9.6)

As they in pure vermillion had been dide (I.xi.46.3)

The "red cross" is mentioned an additional twenty-three times, although not at all in Canto I, and Spenser uses the words, blood and bloody, with their connotations of redness eighty-five times. His preoccupation with blood, however, shows an interesting decline as his books advance and loses any horrid implication that it might have when one recalls the frequency and ambiguity with which the term also appears in alchemical writings, particularly "infant's blood." One is repeatedly assured by authors of alchemical texts that it is error to confuse references to sulphur and mercury, for example, with the common substances, or to suppose that the references made to the four elements, earth, water, air, and fire mean the matter that one commonly associates with these terms. Infant's blood was regarded by at least one writer as "the mineral spirit of metals."⁸¹ This discovery was something of a relief to the adept Flamel, who wrote of his experiences, ". . . during the space of one and twenty yeares, I tryed a thousand brouylleryes, yet never with blood for that was wicked and villainous."⁸²

⁸¹ John Read, Prelude to Chemistry, p. 158.

⁸² Ibid., p. 65.

Again, Atwood provides an interesting comment for consideration, and from a more mystical viewpoint:

Blood containeth the three things I have told,
 And in his tincture hath nature of gold;
 Without gold, no metal may shine bright:
 Without blood no body hath light:
 So doth the greater and less world still
 Hold the circle according to God's will.
 Blood hath true proportion of the elements foure
 And of the three parts spoke of before;
 For blood is the principle matter of each thing,
 Which hath any manner of increasing.
 The true blood to find without labour or cost,
 Thou knowest where to have it or thy wits be lost;
 Seek out the noblest, as I said before,
 And now of the Matter, I dare say no more.⁸³

Six times Spenser mentions the color white of different degree or kind; once yellow; and once saffron, suggestive of both yellow and orange:

a lowly Asse more white then snow (I.i.4.2)
 Her all in white be clad (I.i.45.8)
 An old old man, with beard as white as snow (I.viii.30.2)
 She was araied all in lilly white (I.x.13.1)
 a garment she did weare All lilly white (I.xii.22.7)
 a milkewhite lambe she had (I.i.4.9)
 all in yellow robes arayd still (I.x.30.9)
 Weary of aged Tithones saffron bed (I.ii.7.2)

Apparently, in his entire works, Spenser used orange only once.⁸⁴ Similarly, brown appears but three times, but

⁸³Mary Anne Atwood, Hermetic Philosophy and Alchemy, p. 153.

⁸⁴The reference to orange appears in Four visions of Revelation, from The Theater for Worldlings: "A woman . . . of Orange color hew. . . ." (Rev.II.11) This reference, as well as the citations above, are taken from A Concordance to the Poems of Edmund Spenser, compiled and edited by Charles Grosvenor Osgood.

only once in Book I of The Faerie Queene. Gray appears four times in Book I:

two blacke as pitche, And two were browne (I.v.28.5)
 His feet all bare, his beard all hoarie gray (I.i.29.3)
 Where grew two goodly trees . . . with gray
 mosse overcast (I.ii.28.4)
 he hath lefte his plumes all hory gray (I.xi.34.4)
 he was an aged syre, all hory gray (I.x.5.5)

Blue appears four times in Book I, and purple, with associations of royalty, dawns, blood, and gold, appears six times:

Her eyelids blew, . . . at last she up gan
 lift (I.ii.45.4)
 Full of diseases was his carcas blew (I.iv.23.6)
 Her younger sister, . . . was clad in blew (I.x.14.2)
 Enrold in duskish smoke and brimstone blew (I.xi.44.4)
 rosy fingred Morning faire, . . . Had spread
 her purple robe (I.ii.7.3)
 streams of purple bloud new die the verdant
 fields (I.ii.17.9)
 Aurora in her purple pall . . . the dawning
 day doth call (I.iv.16.4)
 He gave her gold and purple pall to weare (I.vii.16.3)
 Enforst her purple beast with all her might (I.viii.13.3)
 robd of roiall robes, and purple pall (I.viii.46.2)

Next in frequency to black and red is Spenser's use of green, occurring thirteen times in the following references, two of which are nouns:

their greene leaves, . . . Made a calme
 shadowe (I.ii.28.5)
 thinking of those braunches greene to frame
 a girland (I.ii.30.6)
 in greene vine leaves he was right fitly clad (I.iv.22.1)
 in a greene gowne he clothed was full faire (I.iv.25.1)

she is ybrought into a paled greene (I.v.5.3)

with greene braunches strowing all the
ground (I.vi.13.8)

with greene boughes decking a gloomy glade (I.vii.4.4)
an almond tree ymounted hye On top of green
Selinis (I.vii.32.6)

His dwelling is lowe in a valley greene (I.ix.4.5)

carcasses were scattred on the greene (I.ix.34.5)

like a leafe of Aspin greene (I.ix.51.4)

As fresh as flowres in meadow greene doe grow (I.xii.6.7)
on her head they sett a girlond greene (I.xii.8.6)

It is difficult to draw effective conclusions about the symbolic content of any particular color in The Faerie Queene because of the dynamic and ambiguous manner in which Spenser employs symbols. It is equally difficult to attempt a definition based upon the emotional context within which these symbols operate. To do so is to invite almost certain frustration, for Spenser's colors, like his characters, move about in a bilateral maze, readily changing sides. However, an examination of his color references in regard to their point of introduction into the theme and their relationship to each other and to the action reveals a pattern operating below a surface confusion. Some cantos in Book I are starkly achromatic; others blaze of color. It is not surprising to find Duessa occupying a pivotal position in the color progression. Scarlet clad, lavished with gems and pearl, tinseled, and jangling with golden bells, her appearance in The Faerie Queene is epochal in its assault upon the senses. Spenser introduces her as

. . . a goodly lady clad in scarlot red,
 Purfled with gold and pearle of rich assay;
 And like a Persian mitre on her hed
 She wore, with crowns and owches garnished,
 The which her lavish lovers to her gave:
 Her wanton palfrey all was overspred
 With tinsell trappings woven like a wave,
 Whose bridle rung with golden bells and bosses brave.
 (I.11.13)

This stanza contains Spenser's second overt reference to color, his first serving almost as a fanfare announcing Duessa's impending arrival: ". . . when rosy fingred Morning faire / Weary of aged Tithones saffron bed / Had spred her purple robe. . . ." (I.11.7) Canto I contains references only to black, white, and gray. Color is incipient but not defined. The Red Cross Knight goes by other names: Holiness, the gentle knight, the youthful knight. His croslet, described later as being red, is here described as a bloody cross. The proem to Canto II identifies the young knight, for the first time, as the Red Cross Knight, and Canto II is bright with sudden color: red, rosy, scarlet red, saffron, purple, green, blue, and gray. It is interesting to note that Duessa, who introduces scarlet into Canto II, also seems instrumental in introducing green, its opposite.

The Red Cross Knight and Duessa travel together until, wearied, they take shelter beneath "two goodly trees . . . their green leaves trembling. . . ." (I.11.28.3-5) As if to emphasize a point that might otherwise be missed, the knight, ". . . thinking of those braunches green to frame a garland

. . . pluckt a bough. . . ." (I.11.30) Other than a single reference to the gray moss on the tree, there is no suggestion of black in Canto II. Somewhat surprisingly, Canto III is devoid of all color references and contains only a single allusion to black. (I.xxx.36) This canto belongs to Una, wandering afield, searching for her lost love. There is no reference to the blackness of her stole, laid aside in secret shadow, nor to her whiteness, although her face is radiant and light. Even the grass where she lays her dainty limbs is merely grass, not green grass. A remedy for the simplicity of Canto III appears at once. In Canto IV, "to sinful House of Pryde Duessa Guydes the faithful knight," and once again there is a display of color: red, fiery red, green, blue, purple, black, and coal black. The battle between the Saracen and Red Cross, in Canto V, and Duessa's descent into hell with Dame Night are accomplished in vermilion, black, coal black, and brown, the latter two references being descriptive of the hell-born team of Night's chariot. Interestingly enough, Canto VI, which is concerned with Una's sojourn in the wildwood, contains references only to red and green, one each. Some kind of balance must be acknowledged in this polarity, since if red and green are the colors of two kinds of love, divine and earthly, Una's reign among the satyrs represents the cosmic marriage of heaven and earth.

Cantos VII through X contain the following combinations of colors:

fiery red, green, purple (VII)
 scarlet, purple, white (VIII)
 green (IX)
 blood red, yellow, blue, lily white, gray (X)

Canto XII, in which the knight battles for three days with the dragon, contains allusions to red, rosy, rosy red, vermillion, blue, black, coal black, and gray. This canto also contains Spenser's most numerous metalline references. Finally, Canto XII, in which the bridals of Una and her champion are celebrated, presents a new triad--green, white, and red--the familiar medieval trinity of color. Between Canto I and Canto XII, something resembling a genesis of color has occurred. In the beginning, Una and her knight are represented by black and white, the achromatic elements of an aboriginal condition, that of light and darkness. At the end of Book I, there is the phenomenon of color, balanced and reconciled. The red and green halves of the light spectrum, united, disappear into white light. Following the black, white, and red triad of alchemy in this projection, one finds light passing through the refracting glass of matter, dividing and appearing as manifested color. In order to become visible, light must encounter a tangible object. Similarly, spirit must have matter, and Truth must have a champion. Spenser's knight has increased in wisdom, often enough through error, but is saved, finally, by Truth. Una has put on the green coronal of the bridal garland, and the red and green of Canto XII, reconciled, become white, a trinity operating within a unity, a divine marriage. From

beginning to end of Book I, Spenser has progressed from unity to unity, from incipient but unmanifested color, represented in the cosmic order of black and white, to color actualized in the red, green, and white unity of Book XII. And if one may believe the instruction of Nature to Mutabilitie, the Red Cross Knight has progressed through the rainbow and returned, at last, to himself.

CHAPTER IV

THE DRAGON OF TIME

Spenser began his first canto of the first book of The Faerie Queene with a veiled statement concerning unity or holiness. The hermetic triad of color potentially is there, black, white, and red. No other color is necessary, for these three colors together signify that something present is whole and perfect, at least in essence. One metal, silver, is named, implying in contradistinction that something present is incomplete but desiring completion and moving toward a state of holiness that is unity, the ultimate gold. Even in its absence, gold is present by implication. Being the final symbol in the metallic kingdom, gold is analogous in the planetary kingdom to the sun and, in the light spectrum, to red, the final color in the work of the alchemist. Spiritually, it is symbolic of regenerate man, purified by both fire and water, while silver, although beautiful and a royal metal that resists the action of fire, still is attacked by certain corrosives.⁸⁵

Mythologically, gold was regarded by the alchemists as the symbol of the spiritual soul of the microcosm, the secret fire of the alchemist, that pervades the cosmos in currents which produce light when they intersect in the heavens, and gold

⁸⁵Stanley Redgrove, Alchemy, Ancient and Modern, p. 28.

when they intersect underground.⁸⁶ A charming legend relates that the celebrated Arabian alchemist, Averroes, buried a ray of sunlight beneath the first pillar to the left in the Great Mosque of Cordova, leaving it there to ripen into gold during the 8,000 years to follow.⁸⁷ So gold, the incorruptible metal, is the aim of nature, and all of the lower metals of the hierarchy, born of the same primordial seed, are gold in the making, or gold in proportion to their attainment to that end.⁸⁸

Projecting this striving toward an ideal upon the plane of humankind, one may now understand why Spenser's Red Cross Knight, seeking holiness and grace, could not, at his youthful stage of development, wear the shield of the sun, but must go forth on his adventure bearing arms cast of silver, the metal of the moon. Gloriana has sent him forth on a twofold quest, ". . . To winne him worshippe, and her grace to have, / Which of all earthly things he most did crave. . . ." (I.1.3.4-5)

Events of the sublunary sphere are traditionally and actively involved with, and influenced by, that planet which most vividly demonstrates mutability and temporality. As the sun in its symbology is stable, masculine, and abiding, so the moon, Luna, is fluid, feminine, and subject to continuous change.

⁸⁶Caron and Hutin, op. cit., pp. 163-164.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 164.

⁸⁸Stanley Redgrove, Alchemy, Ancient and Modern, p. 27.

An interesting parallel may be drawn, here, between the shields of the Red Cross Knight and of Britomartis.

Britomartis's shield ". . . bore a lion passant in a golden field." (III.1.4.9) Unlike the young knight, Britomart starts upon her quest with a distinctive advantage. She is not endowed with the power of Arthur's sunshiny shield, ". . . all of diamond perfect pure and cleene. . . ." (I.vii.33.5)

However, it may have been the golden shield and the mark of the sun upon her that created, for a time, the confusion concerning her sex wherever she appeared. In her encounter with Guyon, and from Guyon's point of view, she seems to be masculine.⁸⁹ (III.1.4.3) Spenser refers to her as "he." Again,

⁸⁹The hermetic cosmology is suggested in Britomartis's confusing identity, just as it is suggested in the representation of the veiled idol in the temple of Venus, its legs and feet "twyned together" with a snake: "The cause why she was covered with a vele / Was hard to know, for that her priests the same / From peoples knowledge labour'd to concele. / But sooth it was not sure for womanish shame, / Nor any blemish, which the worke mote blame; / But for, they say, she hath both kinds in one, / Both male and female, both under one name: / She syre and mother is her self alone, / Begets and also conceives nor needeth other none." (IV.x.41) The androgyne is a glyph for the Absolute in which all opposite qualities are reconciled. In a cosmos proceeding from one primordial substance, that substance will be all things, yet no thing. Kuhn cites numerous examples of androgynous deities in religious myth: "Deity was epicene, in token either of its original unity or of its later return to androgyne state. The first Horus was . . . pictured with the locks of girlhood. Even the mummy was dual in sex, another proof that it typified living man, since only in Amenta does the soul split into the two halves of sex. There is the Jesus with the female paps in Revelation . . . Christ as Charis, and Jesus as St. Sophia . . . Aphrodite is sometimes written Aphroditos. . . ." Kuhn further demonstrates the mythological thesis on the biological

she is mistaken for a man by the Lady of Delight in Castle Joyeous: ". . . when the lady saw so faire a wight / All ignorant of her contrary sex / (For shee her seemd a fresh and lovely knight) / She greatly enamored to wax. . . ." (III.i.47.1-4) Protected by the power and wisdom inherent in her golden shield, Britomart rides through the mineral kingdom, untempted by the glimmering jewels washed up on the strand, ". . . pearles and pretious stones of great assay / And all the gravel mixt with golden owre . . . them despised all / For all was in her powre. . . ." (III.iv.18.5-9) She rides through the vegetable kingdom, the greenwood, unswerved from her course by the sudden appearance of Beauty in the figure of Florimell, presiding spirit of that leafy realm: ". . . faire Britomart, whose constant mind / Would not so lightly follow beauties

(continued) plane: "Life was Father-Mother in one at first, and only in long slow development did it become Father and Mother. The human race, which represents a miniature eidolon of cosmic creation, reflects the same process. Humans were androgyne . . . for aeons before . . . they bifurcated into separate sexes. A single life portrays again the same stages. For the human child . . . is of epicene gender until puberty unfolds true differentiation of sex. That is why Horus, the mummy, and the child Jesus of the catacombs, were represented with legs bound together. The two legs are the sign of bifurcation, the one typing spirit, the other matter . . . free to move in counterbalance. . . ." See Kuhn, op. cit., pp. 466-467. The dual nature of deity is further suggested by Spenser in the description of the winged god of Love, Cupid, in the House of Busirane. The duplicity of Cupid is a recurrent theme throughout The Faerie Queene. He is both good and evil, according to report. In the temple of Busirane, he is shown with his left ankle encircled by the coils of the blinded dragon beneath his feet--the left foot, the "mortal" side, the element of matter clasped in the embrace of time. (III.xi.48)

chace. . . ." (III.1.19.1-3) Her superficial wound acquired in Castle Joyeous is the product of her foray into the third kingdom, the animal and human, with its attendant dangers. Her evolutionary progress may be tracked vividly enough as she proceeds upon her quest for differentiation. In contrast to the quest of the easily duped young knight of the silver shield, Britomart ramps through three kingdoms, untempted, undaunted, relentless. The Red Cross Knight, unhindered by wisdom, pursues a more erratic and, therefore, seemingly a more human course through the wilderness of night, but Britomartis lacks this curiously human quality. Her errors are those of strength rather than weakness. It is significant that in her quest for love and for human compassion, she displays the first elemental signs of humidity and of a lower order than that of her origin when she meets and battles with Arthegall:

. . . her angels face, unseene afore,
 Like to the ruddie morne appeard in sight,
 Deawed with silver drops, through sweating sore,
 But somehow redder then beseem'd aright
 Through toylesom heate and labour of her weary fight.
 (IV.vi.19.5-9)

Combined in Spenser's description of Britomart and her gear are terms involving both sun and moon, both silver and gold, both masculine and feminine phases. There are alchemical allusions of process--her face like the ruddy morn, its silver dew produced through "toylesome heate and labour"; her yellow hair, like wire framed by a goldsmith's art, yet still more subtle. (IV.vi.20) It is only after numerous such labors that the

redoubtable Britonesse reaches the level wherein she displays the stigma of silver--the level at which the Red Cross Knight had begun his quest.

However, the Red Cross Knight bears the signs of a royal house and of a royal marriage--the silver of the moon, the scarlet of the sun--emblazoned upon his shield and his breast. Once he has left the realm of faerie, he is a traveler in a strange land, and although his armor is old and has passed through many a previous battle, the young knight himself, unarmed, is unique, a splinter of sunlight planted in darkness to ripen or, alchemically, to multiply his gold. That this multiplication is effected by means of the mysterious "powders of projection," or the Philosopher's Stone, finds an interesting locus in the figure of Una, the snow-white maid.

Of the parentage of the young knight Spenser reveals nothing, but he points out that Una is a princess royal, the daughter of an ancient line of kings and queens whose scepters once ruled from the eastern to the western shores. One learns, also, that her parents are held captive within a brazen tower, prevented from issuing forth by a huge dragon. Here, again, is Spenser's reference strongly suggesting a hermetic glyph, since sulphur and mercury are represented in alchemical lore by a king and queen, denoting the fixed and the volatile, and when they are confined within a chamber, that chamber represents the philosopher's egg.⁹⁰ That the tower within which Una's

⁹⁰Caron and Hutin, op. cit., p. 141.

parents are held captive is brazen is indicative of conjunction, or the marriage of metals, for brass is not one of the seven metals, being rather a fusion of two metals into one. A further extension of the metaphor would identify the red and the white of the royal couple--Sol and Luna, king and queen, the red man and his white wife. The Red Cross Knight's shield supports the association and links together metal and color--silver (white) of the moon, emblazoned with the rosy cross of the sun (gold). As long as the ancient and elemental pair, Una's parents, are kept in thrall by the huge dragon, unity is maintained and held in balance. It is consistent, therefore, that Una's name should reflect her lineage and the unity it suggests. In his proem to Canto I, Spenser identifies Una as "true Holiness"--a tag consistent with his previous hermetic clues of color and metal. Before the dragon's lair, she obliquely identifies herself as "wisdom." In the proem to Canto II, she is called "Truth," from whom the Red Cross Knight is separated by the enchanter, Archimago. The nature of this gentle and illusory figure is further defined by her own colors, or more accurately, by what may seem to be their absence. The knight, her champion, bears the mighty arms and wears the colors of the house from which she comes, but she, herself, goes forth clad in a dazzling whiteness that can suggest only light. Over her radiance is cast a black stole, perhaps the dark mantle of Saturn, taken upon herself for her sojourn in the realm of time. Una's celestial attributes are made more

evident still later in the poem when, deserted by her patron, she wanders into the wood seeking the knight, and wearied, alights from her strange mount and lays aside the black stole. Then, says Spenser, "Her angel's face as the great eye of heaven shyned bright and made a sunshine in that shady place." (I.iii.4) At that point, the ramping lion that is to accompany her on her way for a time, bursts forth from the thicket, almost at once to be subdued by the sight of the dazzling lady. Both the Magnum Opus and the Philosopher's Stone are designated by a lion.⁹¹

With all her mystical attributes, it is not surprising to find that Una lacks an essentially human quality. Indeed, Duessa is much more believable in her golden bangles. Spenser's contrast is consistent with his theme of descent and return. Una is the principle of unity. Duessa is the living embodiment of duality. Somewhere between the desertion of Una by the Red Cross Knight and his subsequent liaison with Duessa, a boundary is crossed, dividing the greater world of reality from the lesser world of illusion, the one the realm of the true, the other the realm of the false. This boundary is not clearly defined, and the knight does not follow explicitly the well-worn path of the zodiac as it is revealed in more exoteric writings.

⁹¹Ibid., p. 142. Read adds a related fact concerning the mythic nature of the lion: the griffin is a combination of the lion and the eagle, one wingless, one winged, one fixed, one volatile. The Philosopher's Stone, being the essence of gold and beyond improvement, represents the unchangeable, the timeless seed of the universe. See Read, Prelude to Chemistry, p. 63.

However, the cycle is there and the descent is made from Gloriana's court down into Canto VIII and Orgoglio's pit, from which an ascent is made to the Eden-like condition of Canto XII. The stages of the young knight's passage are gradual and variously marked: into the shadows of Wandering Wood and the darkness of Errour's den; "down into the dale" where Archimago's hermitage lay in wait with sleep and false dreams. From that point onward, the pilgrim makes a skidding approach to a new kind of reality--the pageantry of night and its dangers. Guided by false Duessa, ambiguous in scarlet and in deed, he progresses through the House of Pryde where the masque of sins is previewed with its six unattractive sages seated on six unequal beasts. Duessa's venture into hell provides the reader with an added glimpse into depths yet unplumbed by the knight. There follows his interlude with Duessa in the shadowy grove beside the tainted fountain. He has become the prey of various converging elements that are the prelude to his nearly fatal encounter with Orgoglio--the green of the grove, its shadows, the chanting of the birds, the watery element of the crystal fountain for which he had thirsted and from which he had drunk--all sensual elements and all of a lower order than that of his early pristine condition. That he has progressed downward is made evident by his own humidity, for he bathes his sweating forehead in the breathing wind and, thirsting, desires still more of the element which has weakened him and to which he has succumbed. He has conspicuously become a creature of

water and air. His tryst with Duessa is not a wedding of contraries. He has become a familiar of the dark elements, of earth and water, and with the propitious appearance of the giant, Orgoglio, he finds the earth ready to receive him as one of its own.

Canto VIII is pivotal, not only to Book I, but to all other books in The Faerie Queene, save Book III. It is in Canto VIII that the Red Cross Knight reaches his nadir in the pit of Orgoglio. It is in Canto VIII that Arthur, summoned by Una, arrives like a shaft of sunlight, overcoming Orgoglio with the unbearable brilliance of his shield, unveiled, penetrating finally into the gloom of the dungeon where the knight lies submerged in darkness. In Book II, Canto VIII, it is Guyon ". . . layd in swoone . . . by Acrates sonnes despolyld; / Whom Arthure soone hath reskewed / And Paynim brethren foyld." (Proem, II.viii) No rescue is effected in Book III, for this is Britomart's book, and she rescues herself, consistently. In Book IV, "The gentle Squier recovers grace; / Schlaunder her guests doth stain, / Corflambo chaseth Placidus / And is by Arthur slain." (Proem, VIII) In Book V, Prince Arthur and Arthegall "free Samient from fear," and in Book VI, "Prince Arthur overcomes Disdaine; / Quites Mirabell from dread. . . ." That Canto VIII, in all books but one, has some Saturnine significance may be inferred from the arrangement of the houses of the zodiac. Saturn's realm occupies the two months immediately following the winter solstice, the dungeon of the sun in

its annual cycle. Directly opposite the two houses of Saturn are the houses of the sun and the moon, the two months following the summer solstice. January begins the final period of declining Saturn, and it is the eighth month following the summer solstice. Arthur's descent is made swiftly and surely, straight across the wheel of the zodiac. He arrives as if from nowhere in his precipitous flight from the sun. Canto VIII, therefore, may be considered the turning point of Book I for the Red Cross Knight. In the first eight cantos, Spenser's theme is death, its servant, sleep, and its mantle, darkness. From that point onward, his theme is one of ascension, restoration, and resurrection.

Following the account of Arthur's rescue of the Red Cross Knight in Canto VIII, there is the diversionary Canto IX, the recitation of Arthur's lineage. Canto X finds the young knight's being renewed spiritually in the House of Holiness. In Canto XI, he is confronted with his personal grand opus in the battle of the dragon. Here, Spenser's description of the battle assumes unmistakable overtones of an alchemical process. The dragon, half-flying and half-footing, demonstrates both the volatility of mercury and the fixity of sulphur. He is a winged dragon: "his flaggy wings . . . like two sayles. . . ." (I.xi.10) The symbol of the winged dragon was commonly associated with mercury and volatility, while a wingless dragon denoted sulphur and fixity.⁹² Out of his gorge steams a cloud

⁹²Caron and Hutin, op. cit., p. 141.

of smothering smoke and sulphur. (I.xi.13) In this way is the pattern neatly, if subtly, filled in. Together, mercury and sulphur form the two basic elements of the alchemical work. Hence, the dragon is a duad, two elements united in one.

Almost at once, the knight and his mount are borne aloft by the flying dragon and carried the distance of an arrow's flight before being let down. (I.xi.19) Then, the knight deals a wound to his foe close under the left wing, bringing forth a river of blood and rendering his enemy less mobile. (I.xi.20-22) At this point, and by this time, one would expect the wound to be made in the left rather than in the right wing, for the left has assumed the significance of temporality and mortality. It was the first pillar to the left in the Great Mosque where Averroes reputedly buried the sun-beam, for it is to the left that time has dominion and where the god, Saturn, walks with his handmaiden, Mutability. After the wounding, Spenser's dragon begins to take on marked characteristics of an alchemist's furnace, and the battle assumes the character of a process in which the knight seems to be the alchemist, tending the fires of his forge, yet strangely and simultaneously, also the substance undergoing transmutation within a greater crucible and a greater magistry. Fire, the most mysterious and significant force of the alchemist, acts upon the young knight, almost overcoming him, yet he is also a fire-bearer, since emblematically fire is denoted by his sword. Therefore, he is, himself, a Son of Hermes in that he

wounds the dragon with his own fires and eventually succeeds in overcoming the monster. The Doctrine of the Two Contraries is at work in Spenser's account of this strange and savage battle, portrayed in an involved pattern of opposed and united elements. The winged dragon characteristically is represented as mercurial and feminine in alchemical symbolism, yet Spenser refers to it repeatedly in the masculine gender--an additional instance of what appears to be a confusion of the sexes in his symbolism, yet which is entirely consistent with the alchemical doctrine of the unity of the elements. The active knight, passive Una, and the fierce dragon-duad who ". . . cryde . . . as he would eat his neighbor element . . ." combine in a swirl of flame and blood, in a passion of creation and destruction, and something like death and redemption. From the "wide devouring oven" there comes forth a flake of fire that amazes the knight, turning his steel into a burning garment of pain rather than a protection. (I.xi.26) Instead, scorched and faint, he is hurled backward into a silver stream springing forth from an ancient well--the silver stream from the Well of Life that has power to return the living from the dead. (I.xi.29-30) As the sun declines into the evening sea, he falls, senseless, into the silver flood and the dragon ". . . clapt his yron wings . . ." in victory. (I.xi.31) So ends the first day's battle, leaving pensive Una to pray over her fallen champion during the hours of darkness.

The resemblance of Spenser's dragon to a forge is remarkable. From the beginning of the conflict, Spenser has used the language of the metals to describe the monster: e.g., he is armed with brazen scales ". . . like plated cote of steel. . . ." (I.xi.9) His back is brass plated; his wreathed tail spotted red and black; his claws, sharper than sharpest steel; and his jaws, like the mouth of a furnace, are ranked with iron teeth. (I.xi.12-13) All about him are smothering clouds of smoke and sulphurous fumes. (I.xi.13) Appended to this metallic description is Spenser's curious comment, ". . . far within, as in a hollow glade, those glaring lamps were set that made a dreadful shade." (I.xi.14) Surely this is an extraordinary dragon, holding extraordinary significance for the embattled knight who has taken his first fall on the evening of the first day. But now, with the sun of the second day, the knight rises up, a renewed being. Even his steel, his ". . . bright, deaw-burning blade . . ." has been endowed with greater strength by his silver baptismal bath. He arises with the sun like an eagle from the sea, and if this seems to be a strangely inept metaphor, it combines, nevertheless, with certainty and skill, two elements of the four, water and air. An ascent has been accomplished from a lower element to a higher, and part of a transmutation accomplished, as well. The second day's battle continues, and a second wound is dealt the dragon. His skull reft by the blade of the knight, the dragon pierces with his stinging tail the shoulder of his

contender. More concerned with his honor than with his new injury and inflamed with rage, the knight strikes off five joints of the dragon's tail. (I.xi.39) Here, Spenser confronts the reader with the symbolic reference of the number five, not only to five familiar wounds, but also in its association with the pentagram, less familiar, but frequent in alchemical illustrations.

Without altering the deceptive pace of his passages, Spenser has introduced into the following five stanzas a series of clues of acceleration. The heat of the battle is increased, the action intensified, and the process subtly advanced. Gathering himself up out of the mire, the dragon falls upon the "sunne bright shield" of the knight--the silver shield which suddenly gives evidence of transmutation. (I.xi.40) Three times the knight attempts to unfold it from the dragon's talons and three times fails. Then, ". . . when he saw no power might prevail . . .," he attacks the dragon with his sword:

. . . he fiersly did his foe assaile,
 And double blows about him stoutly laid,
 That glauncing fire out of the yron plaid,
 As sparcles from the andvile use to fly,
 When heavy hammers on the wedg are swaid;
 Therewith at last he forst him to unty
 One of his graspong feete. . . .
 (I.xi.42)

Unable to loosen the other grasping foot, he strikes it off at the joint, leaving it still fixed upon his shield. (I.xi.43) Wounded in wing and skull and paw, the beast is rendered less

virulent and less mobile, and here, too, lies a riddle. From a work reputed to have been written by Flamel and entitled, "Nicholas Flamel, his Exposition of the Hieroglyphic Figures which he caused to be painted upon an arch in St. Innocent's Churchyard in Paris . . .," Read cites an illustration that contains a striking similarity to the elements operating in the battle between Spenser's knight and dragon:

The dragon is sophic mercury; the griffin a combination of lion and eagle, that is, of the fixed and the volatile. The old man with the scythe . . . Saturn or Kronos, cutting off the feet of Mercury, signifies the fixing of mercury. The adepts identified sophic mercury with the "essence" of silver. Now, when silver is cupelled with lead, its original impurities sink into the material of the cupel, and the residual silver becomes fixed or unalterable. Thus, the pure essence of silver, or of quicksilver . . . has been obtained: Saturn has cut off the feet of ordinary mercury, . . . and rendered it immobile.⁹³

One might more easily disregard Spenser's description of the cutting away of the dragon's paw if a similar reference had not appeared in a later book when Talus, the iron man with the cutting hook, slices off the golden hands and silver feet of Munera: "But he her suppliant hands, those hands of gold, / And eke her feet, those feet of silver trye . . . / Chopt off, and naid on high. . . ." (V.ii.26)

In Spenser's description of the knight's raining blows upon the iron plate of the dragon, like hammer blows striking fire from an anvil, one sees Hephaestos, the patron of the Sons

⁹³John Read, Prelude to Chemistry, p. 63.

of Fire. And in the act of severing the dragon's paw, the knight assumes the character of "the old man with the scythe, Kronos," and becomes the alchemist, taking upon himself the role of Time in the reduction of form. The heat of his labors is reflected in the increased heat of the forge-like dragon whose fires now are compared to a volcano, smothering the land in a horror of cloud and stench. Forced backward by the heat and pestilence, the wearied knight loses his footing in the mire and falls. (I.xi.45) Providentially, he falls beside a magic tree--the Tree of Life--burdened with "fruit and apples rosy redd, / As they in pure vermillion had beene dide. . . ." (I.xi.46) Here are the multiple connotations of the color red, its association with the Philosopher's Stone, with the hermetic ruby, with the sun, and with gold. At the foot of the Tree there flows a stream, ". . . as from a well, / A trickling streame of balme [that] Life and long health . . . gave, / And deadly wounds could heale, and reare againe / The sencelesse corse appointed for the grave. . . ." Into this stream, reminiscent of the Elixir, sought through the centuries, the young knight falls, and once more through the hours of darkness, Una watches and prays as he lies, now "as in a dreame of deepe delight." (I.xi.1)

With the advent of the third day, the fallen knight rises up, completely healed and so radiantly strengthened that the dragon is dismayed. Bringing the battle to a swift conclusion,

the knight thrusts his sword into the beast's open mouth and throat, releasing its blood very much as an alchemist might pierce the seal of a Vase of Hermes to discharge its contents into the open. Drummer-like in his accents, Spenser describes the fall of the monster:

So downe he fell, and forth his life did breath . . .
 So downe he fell, that th' earth him underneath did
 grone . . .
 So downe he fell, as an huge rocky clift . . .
 So downe he fell, and like an heaped mountaine lay. . . .
(I.xi.54)

Four times the poet uses the phrase. Four is the number of the elements from which the created universe is drawn into form, the number of temporal things, of descents and falls.

One might hope that now a transmutation has been made and the adventure resolved. Dragon blood has been spilled. The Red Cross Knight has overcome his foe and gained his reward, yet it is not a final reward. Unlike Una, who has returned home, her journey ended, he still has his six-year vow to fulfill. In his return to Gloriana's court he describes a full circle, divided by the equinoctial plane separating the upper and lower realms, quartered by Arthur's slash-mark from the sun. In his continuing adventure the young knight charts the course of other "wanderers on the deep," and reveals something of the cosmology that Spenser has shadowed forth elsewhere in stray flashes.

Chaucer unfolded the panorama of the universe in The Knight's Tale, as did Spenser in the first book of The Faerie

Queene. Each poet described the threefold nature of man--Chaucer in the unity of Emily, Palamon, and Arcite, Spenser in the unity of the Red Cross Knight, Una, and Duessa. Both Chaucer and Spenser defined the circular arena--the mundus--where the tournament of human experience is hammered out of the raw material of spirit and matter. It is a circle, half heaven, half earth, yet an earth interfused with heaven. With Chaucer, the circle may be the more obvious image, as shown in his tournament field in The Knight's Tale. With Spenser, the cross is the more obvious, yet his cross quarters a field that consistently approximates the circle, either overtly or by implication. The rosy cross is the conspicuous feature of the shield of the Red Cross Knight. The circumference of its quartered field is not disclosed except by association. In the sylvan interlude of Chrysogonee and the sunbeam, the cross again is the immediate image, portrayed in the sleeping, elfin figure transfixed by the sun. Emblematically, Spenser, has here represented the traditional concept of matter animated by spirit, the one passive, the other vital, the one feminine, the other masculine--the fusion of water and fire. The circle in this glyph is revealed gradually in the course of Chrysogonee's wandering in the wilderness, her body swollen with the seed of the sun, the twins Belphebe and Amoretta. (III.vi.9-10) In her accouchement, she recapitulates the four phases of the moon in its circular course. Her body, literally "upblone" with light, represents the moon at the full; her

hiding in the wilderness represents the dark phase of the moon. The twins were taken from her side by Phoebe and Venus: ". . . she bore Belpheobe, she bore in like case / Fayre Amoretta in the second place. . . ." (III.vi.4) In the double birth may be read the two crescent phases of the moon, one moon baby being taken from either side. The lunar vignette of Chrysogonee is a little creation story, a repetition of cosmogony, the marriage of the elementals, fire and water. Although complete in itself, it is not left isolated from the rest of Book III. It is a bright and crucial thread in Britomart's experience, for it is Amoret whom Britomart champions and rescues, the element of love which she lacks and which she requires in her own search for unity. In her early adventures as the martial maid, her resemblance to the cool and passionless Belpheobe is marked. Through Amoret, she becomes less the sun goddess, more the woman, and begins to reconcile the two. Belpheobe and Amoret form the upper and lower elements of Britomart's nature, just as Una and Duessa form the upper and lower elements of the nature of the fledgling Red Cross Knight. Plato's theme of the two Aphrodites seems evident in all of these manifold figures. However, Spenser is not faithful to Plato's theme, for there are curious reversals in the conjoined figures in The Faerie Queene. The upper rules the lower insofar as the true rules the false, but Spenser has not rejected earthly love as false. Instead, he has divided the earthly Aphrodite, once again. Duessa, one

embodiment of earthly love, is treated with a certain disfavor, but Amoret is preserved and protected.

An example of Spenser's reversal of images may be found in Britomart's dream vision in which she reads her love's destiny. In the temple pageantry of Isis Church, he has represented the cosmos in dazzling array. The four elements and the three kingdoms are there, mingled in dynamic tension and balance. Altar fire is swirled to earth by the tempest. The crocodile, combining in one form his native elements of earth and water, becomes a quintessential figure when he devours both fire and tempest. The gold of Isis' crown and the silver twine of her robe combine the power of the sun and the moon and their respective realms of fire and air, water and earth. On a more material plane, the mineral kingdom is shown in gold, silver, and gems of Britomart's dream array, the vegetable kingdom in the linen temple vestments, and the animal kingdom, most literally, in the crocodile.

Central to this whirlwind of elementals is the figure of Isis, the moon goddess, standing in seeming ascendance with one foot set on the crocodile, portending both Osiris and the sun. (V.vii.4) Conventionally, the moon is the lower element reflecting the sun, but here the sun is passive, asleep, recumbent. The reversal of role is neither accidental nor anomalous, but is consistent with the particular theology of alchemy. According to the Table of Hermes, "That which is above is as that which is below, and that which is below is as

that which is above. . . ." In Spenser's Isis, the moon, are shown precisely the same elements that are shown in Osiris, the sun. Although opposite, they are equal and alike, derived from One. Containing all of the elements in perfect harmony, they are quintessential and are returned to One. As the crocodile, having consumed both fire and tempest, threatens to consume Britomart as well, he is mollified by the goddess. Book V is the Book of Justice, in which the balance of Astraea is shown as cosmic law. Unity is both origin and end; duality is necessary to balance, and balance is necessary to unity. This theory of cosmology finds added support in Spenser's Temple of Venus. Androgynous, all opposition reconciled, the veiled idol is an image of the Absolute, unknown and unknowable except through its oppositions and its fragments of reality. As such, it is the image of time and eternity, motion and balance, change and the changeless.

In the brief and poignant Canto VIII, Unperfite, of the Mutability Cantos, Spenser comments upon both change and balance. He speaks of the seventh day ". . . when no more change shall be . . ." and hopes he may be granted that Sabbath's sight. Yet, even as he decries the love of vanity in the frail things cut down by the edge of Time, he confers prestige upon change in the figure of Mutabilitie storming the courts of heaven. Having seen the effects of her "cruel sports" in earth and all of its creatures, she aspires to lay claim to the

universe as her hereditary right. Saved by her beauty from the effects of her audacity, she is permitted by Jove to challenge his dominion in heaven, where the stars, the signs, and even the sky itself, are moved in the love of mutability. (VII.vii.55) She is instructed by Nature, ". . . still moving, yet unmoving from her sted . . ." (VII.vii.13) that despite the evidence of change, there is no change:

. . . all things stedfastness doe hate
 And changed be, yet . . .
 They are not changed from their first estate,
 But by their change their being doth dilate,
 And turning to themselves at length againe,
 Do worke their own perfection so by fate:
 Then over them Change doth not rule and raigne;
 But they raigne over Change. . . .
 (VII.vii.58)

These brief lines may be Spenser's single, concise statement of the philosophy underlying The Faerie Queene. It reaffirms his theory of time in which the poet anticipates the future in the mirror of the past. It restates the diffuse wanderings of the Red Cross Knight, going out from Faerie Land with Una, to be guided by Mutabilitie's dark counterpart, Duessa, through the downward arc of time.

A comparison of Mutabilitie and Duessa discloses similarities in lineage and aspiration alike. Descended from the god, Titan, elder brother of Saturn, Mutabilitie is the daughter of Earth, granddaughter of Chaos. Beautiful and dangerous in her duplicity, she shows her kinship with the god of love, Cupid. In her activities, she resembles also ". . . wicked Time . . . with his flaggy wings . . ." scything down

Venus's fair brood in the Garden of Adonis. In addressing herself to Night, ". . . most auncient grandmother of all . . ." who, like Chaos, had seen the secrets of the world yet uncreated, Duessa discloses her lineage in the ill-favored progeny of Night--Falsehood, Deceit, and Shame. (I.v.27) Similar to Mutability in her aspiration to rule the heavens, Duessa has laid claim to an unlawful love, that of the Red Cross Knight, and has found her limits abruptly determined by Una and Arthur. Shining in gold and jewels, Duessa seems a sunny sprite in the courts of Night, yet when robbed of her royal attire, she is revealed as a deformed and bestial creature. Her description, here, is consistent with the one given by Fradubio, who has been turned into a tree by the witch, Duessa. (I.iii.41) However, it is inconsistent with Spenser's initial introduction of Duessa, and it does not account for the curious persistence of her claim to the Red Cross Knight, carried into Eden by her advocate, Archimago, and offered as stay to his betrothal to Una. In Duessa, Spenser has created a troubling figure, conspicuously ambiguous in a work characterized by ambiguity. The duality which she portrays is the trying condition in Spenser's cosmos, a condition which he has exploited by presenting its contraries and permitting the reader to wander irresolutely between.

Between the extremes of Una and Duessa lies the wavering identity of the Red Cross Knight. In Archimago's hermitage, the knight has become, not only a dreamer, but the victim of

dreams. His light, noticeably dim in Error's Den, is overwhelmed by his illusions--his substitute for the Truth which he has left sleeping. The dazzling stanza in which Duessa is introduced into the knight's consciousness indicates the strength of his illusions. She is fair, "a goodly lady clad in scarlot red. (I.11.13) Her veils are decorated with gold and pearl. She wears a jeweled crown. Even her horse is decked in scarlet, with tinsel "woven like a wave," his bridle ringing with golden bells. Buried almost unnoticed in the midst of the glitter is the line indicating that Duessa's royal trappings are the gifts of lavish lovers.

Literally deafened by his sense of sight, the Red Cross Knight becomes her companion and champion. Suddenly critical, Spenser comments on the turn of events, describing the knight as ". . . More busying his quick eyes, her face to view, / Then his dull eares to heare what she did tell. . . ." (I.11.26) More significant than anything to follow is her remark that she had been born ". . . the sole daughter of an emperor / He that the wide west under his rule has. . . ." (I.11.22) The west is traditionally associated with mortality and the temporal world into which Duessa at once leads the unresisting knight. Thereafter, with nagging insistence, Spenser describes her as the "false Duessa," as if his readers' dull wit might be unequal to the task of judging her nature or her actions. Although the Red Cross Knight is a willing enough member to the misalliance with Duessa, he remains curiously immune to

criticism. The seeming ambiguity of his position is resolved in Canto VIII when he has become the fool of Time, fallen into the dungeon of Orgoglio, whose warder is ignorance. Literally crossing the circle of the Red Cross Knight's wandering course, Arthur's arrival redeems the fallen champion of Truth. Duessa, who has ". . . cast her colours . . . to seeme like truth . . ." cannot prevail in the presence of Truth. Unveiled by Una, Duessa is revealed to be a deformed love, her scarlet robes redemptive only insofar as they are gifts of love conferred upon her by illusioned and untried lovers of Truth. Thus, the Red Cross Knight is redeemed, working his perfection through change and returning to himself again, enhanced, but unchanged from his first estate. (VII.vii.58)

In a mixture of alchemy and theology, having been tried in the fires of experience, having symbolically died in the blackness of the pit--only then is he a candidate for the beatific vision in which he gazes into the seventh day. Postlude to the vision is his battle with the dragon in which he literally overcomes time, his sword and shield sparkling with magical intent. But he is not yet saint, this infant St. George. He is man. Spenser scatters clues to his humanity. One lies in the persistence of Duessa's claim to his love. A second lies in the coronal of green donned by Una during her bridals. A third is that he sets out after the betrothal, still impelled forward by the delight in change, to fulfill his vows. He appears again in Book II, where he is met almost

at once by the perennial Archimago and his handmaiden, Duessa. Grown wily from experience, he is immune to the snare. He mingles with Guyon in Guyon's beginning adventure, becomes confusingly identified with him for a time and finally disappears. But has he gone, or does he not persist in Guyon, and is he not present in the mature and serious Caledore? Of all the knights in The Faerie Queene, the Red Cross Knight alone goes unnamed, known only by his colors, his elfish origin, his destiny. He is no man, and yet he is all men, tracing the course of the ancient track. And when he has gone, and if he has gone, one remains to wonder--for a time.

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