Edmund Spenser, Lucretian Neoplatonist: Cosmology in the *Foure Hymnes*

This essay reconsiders the relationship between Spenser’s earthly and divine hymns in terms of the dialogic possibilities of the palinode, suggesting that the apparent “recantation” of the first two hymns is a poetic device used for philosophic effect. I argue that Spenser uses the poetic movement of action and retraction, turn and counterturn, to embody a philosophical oscillation and synthesis between a newly rediscovered Lucretian materialism and the Christian Neoplatonism, traditionally ascribed to the sequence. The stimulus for this seemingly unusual juxtaposition of two fundamentally different philosophies is the subject of the *Foure Hymnes*: the poems are not only an expression of personal emotion and faith, but seek to make a significant intervention in the late sixteenth-century revival of cosmology and natural philosophy. Therefore, the essay takes seriously the hymns’ generic claim towards the grand style of philosophic abstraction, showing how Spenser explores the dialectic between matter and form, chaos and creation, mutability and eternity, through his repeated emphasis on the creation. Each hymn contains a distinct creation account; together they contrast a vision of a dynamic, de-centered, material cosmos (identified textually with the cosmos of Lucretius’s *De rerum natura*) with the formal symmetry and stable order of the Christian-Platonic universe. In this syncretic relationship between Lucretius and Plato, Spenser may have seen a powerful model for harmonizing the traditionally opposed motivations of poetry and philosophy, and for reconciling, albeit very uneasily, a concern with the flux of worldly experience and a desire to comprehend cosmic stability and formal order.
IN THE DEDICATION to the *Foure Hymnes*, Spenser offers one of the few explicit autobiographical narratives to be found among his printed poems:

Having in the greener times of my youth composed these former two Hymnes in the praise of Love and Beautie, and finding that the same too much pleased those of like age and disposition, which being too vehemently caried with that kind of affection, do rather sucke out poyson to their strong passion, then hony to their honest delight, I was moved by the one of you two most excellent Ladies, to call in the same.¹

This story, with its tale of attempted retraction, has presented Spenser scholars with a puzzle: are the *Hymnes* a hybrid work comprised of two youthful Petrarchan poems and two later religious corrections to the poet’s *giovenile errore*? Why did Spenser feel moved to publish a hymnic palinode in 1596, the same year he published the six-book *Faerie Queene*? Perhaps more importantly, does the mystery of chronology and autobiography help illuminate the subject of the *Hymnes* themselves? The propositions of Robert Ellrodt, in his 1960 study, have done little to settle these questions of motive and content. Despite claiming that the poems could not have been composed before 1595 through a discussion of the “Neoplatonism” of Spenser’s poetry, Ellrodt only threw into sharper relief Spenser’s story of retraction and the possibility that it may be a fiction.² Why did the poet insist on this fiction? And what exactly was Spenser recanting in his own work?³

Long considered the apotheosis of sixteenth-century English Neoplatonism, particularly in the form of Petrarchan poetry, the *Hymnes* are perhaps the least studied poems of the Spenserian corpus. While there is critical consensus about their importance, we have yet to grasp firmly their relationship to the poet’s other works or to the sociopolitical matrix into which Spenser has so successfully been reinserted in the last twenty years of scholarship. In fact, the determined absence of topical detail in the *Hymnes*, as well as their sheen of formal symmetry, have made them somewhat impenetrable to critical approaches based on historicist methods and political interests; the handful of essays on the poems treat either their philosophical sources or their formal structure.⁴ Thus, we might note that the *Hymnes* have seemed paradoxically both too easy and too difficult to approach. Their juxtaposition of
earthly love and beauty with heavenly love and beauty seems to argue for the dynamic of conversion, a turn away from erotic error towards penitential faith characteristic of Petrarchan poetry and even of many figures in the Faerie Queene. However, their earnest tone and obvious claim to a philosophic grand style seem to demand mastery of the highly syncretic and often abstruse philosophies of the Renaissance for successful understanding.

Yet Spenser’s palinodic frame for the Fowre Hymnes in the dedication’s story of origin provides us with a powerful key to understanding the poems. Indeed, it is worth noting that not only the dedication, but also An Hymne of Heavenly Love, contain palinodic gestures, as though Spenser meant to thematize the movement of action and retraction, turn and countturn within the work as a whole. The palinode or recantation was of course a much-used lyric trope in the Renaissance. Its classical source is Stesichorus’s ode recantation of the Helen, famously imitated and discussed by Socrates in the Phaedrus (243a), while its best known Renaissance imitator might be Petrarch, whose Rime sparse is framed as a palinode, an Augustinian recantation of juvenile erotic experience. This turn away from either erotic nugae or errori to grand devotional themes, whether in Socrates’ repudiation of erotic fior or in Petrarch’s turn towards the “Vergine bella,” was simultaneously a sign of humility and ambition, a double-edged gesture that suggested genuine conversion as well as ironic self-consciousness. Moreover, Plato’s anecdote about the trope’s origin reveals how it became implicated in the vexed relations between poetry and philosophy: he tells of how Stesichorus, blinded because of his disparagement of Helen, was miraculously restored to sight when he penned the Palinode—a tale that Spenser significantly repeats in one of E. K.’s notes to the “Aprill” eclogue of The Shepheardes Calender. The palinode thus signals philosophic enlightenment, and by the late sixteenth century, it contained the promise of deliverance from the blindness of erotic seductions both literal and poetic.

Not surprisingly, as the Platonic example suggests, the palinodic gesture was not limited to poets alone. One philosophic case from the Quattrocento in particular stands out. Later in life, Marsilio Ficino, often considered the most significant source of Spenser’s Neoplatonic interests, discussed Socrates’ palinodic performance in the Phaedrus and repented some of the opinions he had held in his early “Lucretian” phase as a youthful error. In a well-known letter to Martin Preninger, he claimed to have burned works composed when he was younger, most notably what may have been a commentary
on Lucretius’s Epicurean epic, *De rerum natura*. While Ficino’s repudiation was not entirely fictional, the vehemence of his assertion belies the continuing impact of the Roman poet on his work: the early *De quattuor sectis philosophorum* (1457), which considers the central tenets of the Old Academy of Plato, the Peripatetics, the Stoics, and the Epicureans, cites Lucretius with approval, while the influence is evident in such texts as his widely read commentary on Plato’s *Symposium (Commentarium in Convivium Platonis De Amore)*, *De voluptate*, his comprehensive discourse on erotic pleasure, and even the vast *Theologia platonica*.

The history of turning away from youthful error to philosophic maturity is, however, not quite the straightforward intellectual and spiritual ascent that it appears to be in these Spenserian and Ficinian instances. Ironically, the very doubleness of the palinode alerts us to the continuing significance of what has been recanted. As Patricia Phillipy notes suggestively, the palinode contains dialogic possibilities, indicating a constant motion between multiple positions, so that the position of the initial ode is never quite abandoned for the palinode. Thus, Ficino’s strategy of philosophic distancing through the trope of retraction, provides a suggestive parallel to Spenser’s dedicatory gesture, not least because Spenser uses a poetic topos derived from Lucretius—the counterpoint of “poyson” and “hony” in the dedication echoes the famous simile of honey and wormwood in *De rerum natura*. More importantly, however, to notice the palinodic nature of Ficino’s repudiation of his youthful Lucretianism is to become aware of Epicurean traces in his work and thus to destabilize the seemingly monolithic edifice of Renaissance “Neoplatonism” for which his name is often a placeholder. Such awareness opens up the traditional critical framework of Neoplatonism to embrace not only theories of love and transcendence, but also the dilemmas of matter and form, the relations between the natural world and the divine. And consequently, it suggests that Spenser’s own dedicatory recantation to his overtly Neoplatonic *Hymnes* may also be haunted by a prior, Lucretian strain.

Turning towards this shadowy, palinodic aspect of Ficinian Neoplatonism and Spenser’s own possible engagement with it enables us to take a fresh look at the *Foure Hymnes*. My goal here is not so much to assert new sources for the *Hymnes*, that most dense of Spenserian texts, but to show how the synthesis of radically different philosophic traditions in the work may signal Spenser’s participation in the late sixteenth-century revival of cosmology and natural philosophy. Despite the prevailing Platonic consensus in interpretations of the
Hymnes, scholars have also pointed uneasily to their infamous philosophic inconsistencies, excusing Spenser on the grounds of syncretism or poetic license. But the task of rescuing the poet from such charges of philosophic inadequacy, particularly in the complex realm of Neoplatonic thought, has made it difficult to focus on other, non-Neoplatonic, aspects of the Hymnes. The dedication, however, provides a way out: Spenser significantly counterpoints “earthy or naturall” love and beauty to “heavenly and celestiall” ones, designations that indicate a concern not only with theology and the erotic psychologies of Neoplatonism, but also with the discourses of early modern natural philosophy. In fact, the Fowre Hymnes can be seen as Spenser’s exploitation of the dialectic between matter and form, chaos and creation, mutability and eternity—all important themes for the late poems. In the syncretic relationship between Lucretius and Plato advanced by so many Renaissance writers, Spenser may have seen a powerful philosophic model for reconciling, albeit very uneasily, a concern with the flux of worldly experience and a desire to comprehend cosmic stability and formal order.

Such a description alerts us to the wider philosophical scope of the Hymnes, which includes the creation and ordering of the universe (described in each of the hymns) as well as the problem of matter and its appropriate relationship to the soul or divine spirit. For Renaissance Neoplatonism itself was not only concerned with love, though it has often been limited to commentaries on the Symposium and the Phaedrus. The renovation of a medieval Platonism founded on the Timaeus gave early modern natural philosophers a powerful alternative to the Christian-Aristotelian science prevalent throughout the period. Moreover, the inflections of Lucretian Epicureanism—already present within the currents of Ficinian Neoplatonism, as I will demonstrate—only became stronger as the sixteenth century progressed, ultimately culminating in the matter theories of Gassendi, Descartes, and Newton. Recent work on the involvement of sixteenth-century writers such as Pontus de Tyard, Louis le Roy, and Giordano Bruno in the diffusion of new natural philosophies suggests that we need to rethink Spenser’s place within the currents of contemporary philosophical discourse.

To focus on the cosmology of the Hymnes in this manner is therefore to move away from a psychological approach to the poems as an expression of personal emotion and faith and to take seriously their generic claim towards the grand style of philosophic abstraction. Spenser himself designates the first two hymns and their preoccupations as the products of “greener times”—a metaphor that recalls the many seminal gardens of material origin in his poetry—and thereby
urges us to consider the relationship between the *Hymnes* and works such as the *Faerie Queene* and *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* with their corresponding cosmogonic accounts. I therefore extend philosophic questions to ask what generic and literary historical relationship the *Hymnes* may have to the project of epic in the sixteenth century and how they may help us to understand the arc of Spenser’s poetic career.

I

The problem with Neoplatonism, notes Robert Ellrodt, is that we seldom know what exactly it refers to.\(^\text{16}\) A similar sentiment could describe the protean genre of the Renaissance hymn. Despite the identification of classical precedents in the Homeric, Callimachan, and Orphic hymns, despite a fairly clear sense of the poem’s structural features, the term remains notoriously slippery and, in the sixteenth century alone, describes such varied works as Marullus’s *Hymni naturales*, Ronsard’s *Hymne de France*, and Spenser’s *An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie*.\(^\text{17}\) In formal terms, Renaissance writers found it difficult to distinguish between the ode and the hymn—Ronsard rearranged poems between his books of *Odes* and *Les Hymnes*, while Milton in 1645 published a hymnic poem as the *Ode on the Morning of Christ’s Nativity*. Moreover, in terms of function, the appreciation of the hymn as an invocation to classical deities for religious worship overlapped with Christian liturgical practices and hymnic forms in the Bible (such as the Song of Songs and the Psalms).\(^\text{18}\)

It was clear that the hymn was to be considered a poem of power, one that invoked divine or natural pantheistic energies, whose incantatory powers were enchanting and transformative.\(^\text{19}\) This quasi-magical aspect of the hymn made it the form of choice for philosophers and theologians, practitioners of the *prisca theologia* as well as reformers on both sides of the religious divide. Marullus’s *Hymni* were, for instance, probably influenced by both Ficino and Pico, while Marot’s *Psaumes* were among the works that Ronsard may have sought to surpass with his *Les Hymnes* of 1555. To write a hymn in the sixteenth century was thus to stake a philosophic claim, to assert the status of poet as *vates*. It was a poetic gesture in the grand style, comparable to the epic, perhaps even one that transcended the worldly, imperial epic by its vaster, cosmic and spiritual ambitions. Thus, Francis Cairns observes that the classical hymn was not a fixed genre like the *komos* of Greek tragedy:
Nor is it a genre in the other sense of the word, in which it is used to refer to kinds of literature like epic, elegy or lyric; for these kinds of literature are each characterized by metre and length, and more important, they are mutually exclusive. “Hymn” is not characterized by metre or by length, and hymns can be found in epic, elegy, lyric etc.

The flexibility of the form and its ability to combine secular and religious, personal and public themes made the hymn a potent, respectable mode for an ambitious Renaissance poet. If extended theoretical treatment is a mark of cultural importance, it is significant that Scaliger’s mammoth *Poetices libri septem* devotes an extensive section to describing and classifying the hymn, followed by commentary on the contemporary hymns of Marullus and Vida.

In generic terms, then, the hymn may have offered an alternative to the *rota Virgilii* with its culmination in the national epic. Homer, after all, had written not only the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but also the “Homeric” hymns, a work that Renaissance philologists such as Jean Dorat considered a late composition. To write successful hymns, the poet had to transcend worldly success and become a scholar-initiate, a philosopher always seeking the truth of the nature of things. When Ronsard published his hymns, for instance, Dorat wrote with pleasure, “Naturae rerum cantica docta sonas” [“You sing learned songs about the things of nature”]. In this model, the writing of hymns could perhaps come to seem more significant than the completion of an epic.

Spenser’s decision to write a set of hymns in the complex rhyme royal stanza reminiscent of the Italian *canzone* must be seen in this context of generic interplay. And here the example of Ronsard may in fact, as Anne Prescott has pointed out, shed light on the shape of Spenser’s literary career. By the mid-1590s, Spenser, like Ronsard before him, was a would-be epic poet with an incomplete *magnum opus* and waning support at court. The other poems of this period—the *Complaints*, the *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion*, and *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*—all register strong dissatisfaction with court politics and seem to withdraw into the private sphere. The 1596 *Faerie Queene* itself reflects a breakdown of the triumphal martial epic promised by the 1590 installment: the erotic meanderings of Book IV, the violent justice and frustrated political ambitions of Book V, and the destructive intrigues of Book VI are modulated by an increasing turn away from the dirty business of governance towards cosmic allegories and philosophical speculation. In fact, the second half of the epic
seems to pick up where the Gardens of Adonis left off, as the elemental river marriage of Book IV, the astrological proem of Book V, the vision on Mount Acidale all seem to lead towards the Cantos of Mutabilitie.

Also in 1596, in contrast to the ragged edges of his unfinished epic, Spenser presented the perfectly polished symmetries of the Foure Hymnes. Where the epic is plagued by doubt, a nagging lack of closure and the subversion of a so-called “Vergilian” national project, the Hymnes are accomplished poems whose entwining rhymes and cyclical stanzaic structure imitate the philosophic stability which they seek to find and express. Here, Spenser comes close to representing in formal terms the paradoxes of eternity and mutability that fill the later poetry, from the Epithalamion’s stance as being for “short time an endless moniment” to Nature’s verdict about steadfastness and change in the Cantos (“all things stedfastnes doe hate/And changed be: yet being rightly wayd/They are not changed from their first estate”). In this, the Hymnes may be seen as the culmination of a “cosmological turn” in Spenser’s poetry, already apparent in Book III of the Faerie Queene.

When read alongside The Faerie Queene, the hymns reveal preoccupations that are not evident at first glance: their meditations on love and beauty, the beloved theme of Neoplatonizing Petrarchan poets, now become a frame for investigations of cosmic order. An Hymne in Honour of Beautie (HB), for instance, begins with an apparently commonplace invocation to Venus, but it contains an unexpected allusion that would perhaps only be intelligible to readers of the Faerie Queene:

Therto do thou great Goddesse, queene of Beauty,
Mother of Love, and of all worlds delight,
Without whose soverayne grace and kindly dewty,
Nothing on earth seemes fayre to fleshly sight,
Doe thou vouchsafe with thy love-kindling light,
T’illuminate my dim and dulled eyne,
And beautifie this sacred hymne of thyne.

(An Hymne in Honour of Beautie, lines 15–21)

The invocation of this hymn echoes Spenser’s striking translation, in the epic’s fourth book, of Lucretius’s invocation to Venus (itself often described as a hymn) that opens De rerum natura:
Great Venus, Queene of beautie and of grace,
The ioy of Gods and men, that vnnder skie
Doest fayrest shine, and most adorne thy place,
That with thy smyling looke doest pacifie
The raging seas, and makst the stormes to flie;
Thee goddesse, thee the winds, the clouds doe feare,
And when thou spredst thy mantle forth on hie,
The waters play and pleasant lands appeare,
And heauens laugh, & al the world shews ioyous cheare.

(IV.x.44)26

Aeneadum genetrix, hominum divomque voluptas,
alma Venus
.....
quae quoniam rerum naturam sola gubernas
nec sine te quicquam dias in luminis oras
exoritur neque fit laetum neque amabile quicquam,
te sociam studeo scribendis versibus esse,
quos ego de rerum natura pangere conor
.....
quo magis aeternum da dictis, diva, leporem.

[Mother of Aeneas and his race, darling of men and gods, nur-
turing Venus . . . since without you nothing comes forth into
the shining borders of light, nothing joyous and lovely is made,
you I crave as partner in writing these verses . . . grant to my
speech, goddess, an ever-living charm.]

(De rerum natura I, lines 1–2, 21–28)27

Venus here is “hominum divomque voluptas,” which Spenser ren-
ders closely as “all worlds delight” (HB) and “joy of Gods and men”
(Faerie Queene) while the key Lucretian dictum that Venus “rerum
naturam sola gubernas” provides a textual precedent for Spenser’s
insistence on the goddess’s complete control of the world.26 Signifi-
cantly, the language of light, so often attributed to Ficinian Neopla-
tonism, is here associated with the coming-to-life of generation
(“dias in luminis oras”) rather than the transcendental purity of the
divine—a feature that Spenser retains in his evocation of the “love-
kindling light” that physically brightens the obscurity of his vision.
In the space of seven lines, the dense rime-royal stanza of the *Hymne* condenses the main tropes of Lucretius’s verse.

Spenser’s fluid assimilation of this Venerean energy into the images of astral influence (lines 43–44), generative power (lines 50–55), and seductive aesthetic deceptions (lines 64–91) in *An Hymne in Honour of Beautie* completes a shift of emphasis already begun in the epic: over the course of the middle books of the *Faerie Queene*, the figure of Venus becomes disentangled from Petrarchan or Ovidian love (as in the tapestries of Malecasta’s castle) and associated with cosmological generation (as in the Gardens of Adonis, the Temple, Isis Church). In the *Faerie Queene*, Spenser’s translation of Lucretius acts as the lament of a lover at the Temple of Venus; significantly, however, instead of being a mere erotic complaint, the lament/hymn of Book IV celebrates the cosmic and cosmogonic power of Venus, looking back to the Gardens of Adonis in Book III even as it points ahead to the elemental river marriage that concludes the fourth book. This figure is not merely the mythic goddess of love meddling in erotic disputes, the Ovidian mischief-maker who came to symbolize the unruly erotic instinct for the Renaissance. The Lucretian Venus is a natural philosophical principle, a muse-goddess who can inspire a poem on the nature of things because, as the life-force itself, she is the nature of things.

Venus Genetrix, the origin of all things and the erotic energy that fuels the generative process, emblematizes Lucretius’s epic treatment of the origin of the universe and its workings. She also signals Spenser’s attempt to fuse Neoplatonic thought and Lucretian cosmology. As a figurative node in both philosophical traditions, Venus symbolized the transformative power of erotic love and the dynamism of matter itself. She could evoke mystical rapture as well as sexual fervor, transcendence as well as a Grylle-like entrapment in the flesh. To recognize the double face of Spenser’s Venus is thus to revisit the philosophic underpinnings of the *Hymnes*.

My argument for the influence of Lucretius on Spenser’s poetry is not new. Spenserians may well remember how, in the 1920s, a furious battle broke out in the pages of *Studies in Philology* when Edwin Greenlaw suggested that in addition to the obvious Platonic impact on Spenser’s poetry, there was another discernable influence—that of Lucretius and the Epicurean philosophy which he celebrates in *De rerum natura*. Greenlaw was attacked by several noted critics for suggesting that Spenser might be guilty of precisely what we have seen Ficino, one of his key sources, wrestling with: a peculiar reconciliation of Platonism and Lucretian Epicureanism. How could
Spenser, a staunchly militant Protestant, possibly espouse the materialist philosophy of an atheist? How could this be consistent with the dualist ontology of Christian Neoplatonism? But if the tricky question of just how an ardent Neoplatonic poet could draw on Lucretius remains to be addressed fully for Spenser’s obvious borrowings in the *Faerie Queene*, it has yet to be posed for the *Foure Hymnes*, where it is less overt but perhaps even more significant.32

Since Ellrodt’s seminal work, scholars have attributed Spenser’s philosophical hybridity in the *Hymnes* to such Christian Neoplatonists as Louis le Roy, Leone Ebreo and Guy le Fèvre de la Boderie.33 However, recent explorations of these figures (particularly Le Roy) have revealed a complex contemporary engagement with Epicureanism and other alternate cosmologies.34 Le Roy’s insistence on mutability in *De la vicissitude ou variete des choses en l’univers* (1575), for instance, speaks to a persistent concern with the relation between matter and form, particularly with the troubling persistence of matter through an ever-changing array of forms (a theme that will be the basis of Mutability’s argument in Spenser’s *Cantos*). As Michel Jeanneret concedes, such an emphasis on matter and flux is “too variegated to classify or even encompass in a coherent survey”; nevertheless, the threads he carefully extracts from the “tangled network of sources” are tellingly not Platonic: the pre-Socratics, Lucretius, Pythagoras.35

II

Plato and Lucretius are strange bedfellows, even in the syncretic, not always consistent world of Renaissance philosophy. And yet, there is an identifiable tradition of linked commentaries on the Greek philosopher and Roman poet dating from at least the mid-Quattrocento.36 Poggio Bracciolini’s discovery of the manuscript of *De rerum natura* in 1417 was an important event in Florentine humanist circles. Leonardo Bruni translated the invocation to Venus into Italian in the form of the *Canzone a Venere* (“O Venere formosa”); Leon Battista Alberti translated a part of the third book into hendecasyllabic lines and inserted them into his *Theogenius*; Lucretius’s influence is marked on Angelo Poliziano’s *Rusticus* and *Stanze per la giostra*, a text that is closely imitated by Tasso in his depiction of Armida’s island, and which Spenser, in turn, echoes carefully in the Bower of Bliss.37 But most importantly, from the perspective of the history of ideas, *De
rerum natura exercised a powerful fascination on Marsilio Ficino, prompting the palinodic gesture that we have already seen. Hiro Hirai, perhaps the latest scholar to note the influence of Lucretius on Ficino, observes that the Florentine philosopher cites the poet in his commentary on the Philebus, clearly incorporating the Lucretian concept of the semina rerum into his version of Platonic philosophy.\textsuperscript{38} James Hankins and Michael Allen both point to the extensive sections on Lucretius in the Theologia Platonica, but there is as yet no substantive study on the relationship between the two figures, despite suggestive clues within both the Ficinian corpus and that of his circle. In fact, Alison Brown argues provocatively for a “Lucretian counter-culture” in Florence of the early sixteenth century, under the Soderini regime, identifying Niccolò Machiavelli as a prominent Epicurean.\textsuperscript{39}

One product of the Florentine school, for instance, was the Hymni naturales of Michael Marullus, a set of natural philosophical hymns that exhibit a peculiar synthesis of Lucretian and Platonic thought.\textsuperscript{40} Marullus had probably already encountered Lucretius through his association with Giovanni Pontano, whose circle in Naples would produce some of the most interesting and influential commentaries on De rerum natura, and whose own astronomical poem, Urania, would be enthusiastically championed by Gabriel Harvey, among others, in England.\textsuperscript{41}

If Ficino, the single most important translator and commentator on Plato in the Renaissance, wrestles so explicitly with the Lucretian legacy, it was perhaps inevitable that the critical fortunes of Plato and Lucretius would be linked within the Florentine circle and by their descendents and imitators. Among the Cinquecento writers who invoke Lucretius repeatedly alongside other Platonizing gestures, the most prominent are Torquato Tasso and Giordano Bruno, both important influences on Spenser’s poetry. Palingenius, an important Neo-Latin poet and author of the Zodiacus vitae, an often-proposed source for the Foure Hymnes, writes his “Neoplatonic” astrological poem in Lucretian verse and offers his own version of materialism.\textsuperscript{42} Similar entwining is also evident among French humanists of the sixteenth century and it is most likely through this French channel that Spenser may have been exposed to De rerum natura. Lambin’s important edition of Lucretius (1564), prepared with the assistance of Jean Dorat, attracted a new audience and led to a new spate of commentaries. Louis le Roy refers to the poem in his Platonic commentaries; its influence marks the poetry of the Pléiade, particularly Pontus de Tyard and Jean-Antoine de Baïf. Most intriguingly, a synthesis of Neoplatonism and Lucretian Epicureanism may also be discerned in the hymns of Ronsard, one of Spenser’s evident models.\textsuperscript{43}
Situated amid this roster of famous names, Spenser’s combination of Neoplatonic and Lucretian elements appears to participate in a well-established tradition. Moreover, as Greenlaw observed trenchantly almost a century ago, Spenser’s interest in cosmology and the philosophy of Nature would suggest an affinity with the Roman poet who attempted to explain, quite literally, “the nature of things” in hexameter. But there is more. The existence of a tradition linking Plato and Lucretius, by both poets and philosophers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, suggests that Spenser is engaging with a specific set of cultural and generic markers that align his poetic oeuvre not only with the imperial and nationalistic ambitions of Vergilian epic, but also with a parallel tradition of the philosophic, cosmological epic epitomized by Lucretius and Ovid.

While the Faerie Queene repeatedly announces its desire to be considered a rich foundational poem of fictionalized national history, the poem often veers away from these professed goals into the famous set-pieces of cosmological mythmaking, a trope that continues in the so-called minor poems, particularly Colin Clouts Come Home Againe, with its river marriage and cosmogony, and the Fowre Hymnes, each of which contains a creation account. There is, however, a crucial irony that informs these overtly philosophical musings in Spenser’s poetry, for, as Socrates says in the Republic, there is an ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy. Plato’s famous condemnation of the poets, and the long Middle and Neoplatonic traditions advocating the separation of poetry and philosophy, culminates in Ficino’s own denunciation of poetry as a mode of philosophizing and suggests that poets like Spenser should not contaminate or dilute the pure intellection of philosophy with the ornate aesthetic pleasures of poetry. While Ficinian Neoplatonism offered a bridge between metaphysical transcendence (that is, the attainment of the Good) and aesthetic temptation (the pleasures of the Beautiful), it too systematically separated poetry, with its fictional excesses, from the serious business of a rationally grounded philosophy—especially if that philosophy were to include cosmological speculation. Towards whom then could poets with philosophizing ambitions, like Spenser, look for a model?

“The poems of sublime Lucretius,” as Ovid describes the De rerum natura, exemplified the powerful potential of synthesizing poetry and philosophy: indeed, Lucretius’s famous image of honey and wormwood used to describe the dulce utile of poetry when conjoined to philosophy has a long and distinguished inheritance ranging from Virgil, Ovid, and Horace to their post-classical and Renaissance imitators. Ironically enough, for poets with philosophical longings and
Neoplatonic sympathies—such as Scève, Peletier du Mans, Tasso, Bruno, and Spenser—Lucretius suggested a way out of the Platonic bind, since he, opposing Epicurus’s dislike of the poets, composed a poem that celebrated and disseminated his teachings. In the invocation to Book IV of De rerum natura, Lucretius foregrounds this unprecedented fusion:

\[ \text{iuvat integros accedere fontis } \\
\text{atque haurire, iuvatque novos decerpere flores } \\
\text{insignemque meo capiti petere inde coronam, } \\
\text{unde prius nulli velarint tempora musae; } \\
\text{primum quod magnis doceo de rebus et artis } \\
\text{religionum animum nodis exsolvere pergo, } \\
\text{deinde quod obscura de re tam lucida pango } \\
\text{carmina musaeo contingens cuncta lepore. } \\
\text{id quoque enim non ab nulla ratione videtur; }\]

[I love to approach undefiled fountains, and there to drink deeply; I love to pluck fresh flowers, and to seek a distinguished garland for my head from a source where, before this time, the Muses have adorned no brow; first, because I teach of great things and proceed to free the soul from the knots of superstition; next because I compose an illuminating poem on a dark subject, touching every part with the Muses’ charm. This use of poetry does not seem to be without reason.]

(IV, lines 2–10)

By invoking the topoi of poetic facility (the Muses’ spring, the flowers of eloquence), Lucretius calls upon the power of poetic utterance to ease the expression of complex philosophic subjects though the clear light of his verse (“lucida carmina”). This expressive movement of dispelling philosophic obscurity through poetic light mimics the poem’s stated purpose of liberating the mind from the bonds of superstition. No less important is his assertion of originality: not only will he rejuvenate philosophy with the potent infusion of poetry, he will also be the first poet to bring philosophy into the domain of poetry. Both disciplines will be enriched by their union.

Spenser must have found Lucretius’s aspirations both visionary and seductive. The illuminating power of Lucretian poetry offered a striking alternative to the dark conceit of allegory that sought to
hide philosophical truth from the uninitiated. Such a conception of poetry as an epistemological tool is of course central to Spenserian poetics, and serves to explain a peculiar image in the final stanza of the Proem to Book II of the *Faerie Queene*:

The which O pardon me thus to enfold  
In couert vele and wrap in shadows light,  
That feeble eyes your glory may behold  
Which ells could not endure those beames bright  
But would bee dazled with exceeding light.

(II.Proem.5)

The emphasis on enlightenment and revelation *through* poetic veiling seems logically unintelligible, and in fact, in his notes to the Longman edition, A. C. Hamilton flags this as an inversion of a traditional topos, that of poetic fictions covering up truth. However, when placed alongside the Lucretian invocation, Spenser’s emphasis on light and brightness seems to evoke the idea of the *lucida carmina*, the illuminating poem that reveals rather than hides. More interestingly, this passage provides yet another instance of Spenser’s attempt to juxtapose Plato and Lucretius. The “couert vele”—a phrase which translates the Macrobian *integumentum* well known from medieval Neoplatonic commentaries—is at first glance a Platonic image for poetic fictions; however, Spenser yokes on to the same concept a Lucretian understanding of poetry as revelatory rather than obscuring in function.

Against this background, which I have sketched all too briefly, the “Neoplatonism” of the *Foure Hymnes* begins to look somewhat different. The Lucretian influence identified by Greenlaw almost a century ago no longer seems a heretical incompatibility, but rather a powerful inflection within an acknowledged Neoplatonic tradition. While it is impossible to pin down with precision, I emphasize this natural philosophical, Lucretian strain in Spenser’s verse to highlight a particular aspect in his poetic practice, one which reveals rather different preoccupations than the traditional focus on the poet of romance-epic or love lyric. Unlike Castiglione or the *petrarchisti* whose lyric emphasis was primarily on the psychology of love as a civilizing force, Spenserian poetry—like the metamorphic figure of Venus to which Spenser was so attached—stretched beyond the confines of specific genres to embrace a vaster philosophical subject. In this, he may, like so many of his contemporaries, have been inspired by the cosmological speculations of *De rerum natura*.

In fact, Lucretius’s emphasis on Venus as the source of the natural, material world helps us to revisit one of the most important structural
features of Spenser’s *Hymnes*: each hymn contains a distinct creation account based on an identifiable philosophic system. Near the beginning of each poem, the narrator’s perspective widens dramatically from his own plight as languishing lover or penitential devotee to take in the sweep of the entire universe, from its moment of nascence to its perfect aesthetic fulfillment as a *kosmos*, a beautiful, ordered system. But the contrasts between each of the creation accounts and cosmic systems—loosely Empedoclean in *An Hymne in Honour of Love*, Platonic (from the *Timaeus*) in *An Hymne in Honour of Beautie*, based on Genesis in *An Hymne of Heavenly Love*, and loosely Aristotelian (with its *scala naturae*) in *An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie*—each variously persuasive in its own right, foreground a crucial epistemological problem that may be seen as the subject of the *Hymnes* as a whole: what is the first cause of all things? What does the foundation of the universe rest upon? What animates this world?

While such questions of origin and etiology were not uniquely Lucretian by any means, it is nonetheless striking how often, during the course of the sixteenth century, they were associated with an interest in the Roman poet. By the 1580s, a number of poetic works, many exhibiting Lucretian influence, were articulating similar dilemmas—Pontus de Tyard’s *L’Univers* (1557; 1587), Du Bartas’s *La semaine* (1578), and Bruno’s *Degli eroici furori* (1585) are among the best known examples. A debate on cosmic order even appears as a set-piece in Sidney’s *New Arcadia* as Pamela and Cecropia argue whether the universe is ruled by chance or providence. For Spenser, as for Sidney and others, speculations about cosmic order may have been a corollary to speculations about the right foundation of political order, a connection he makes explicit in the prelude to Book V:

```
For that which all men then did vertue call,
   Is now cald vice; and that which vice was hight,
Is now hight vertue, and so vs’d of all:
   Right now is wrong, and wrong that was is right,
As all things else in time are chaunged quight.
Ne wonder; for the heauens reuolution
Is wandred farre from, where it first was pight,
And so doe make contrarie constitution
Of all this lower world, toward his dissolution.
```

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For who so list into the heauens looke,
   And search the courses of the rowling sphare,
Shall find that from the point, where they first tooke
```
Their setting forth, in these few thousand yeares
They all are wandred much.

(The Faerie Queene, V.Proem.4–5.5)

Here, Spenser posits a causal relationship between moral, political degeneration and cosmic decay. The destabilization of an original cosmic order symbolized by the straying zodiac, a trope used both by Palingenius and Bruno, echoes a sense of widespread philosophic turmoil and implicitly suggests that rectifying the political order necessitates a rethinking of the cosmic whole. Significantly, Lucretius’s invocation to Venus in De rerum natura is also framed as a response to corruption and violence, caused, in that case, by the Roman civil wars; for writers in Italy, France and later England, the Latin epic’s confrontation of political upheaval through a meditation on cosmic order may have seemed very compelling.49

Spenser’s turn to cosmogonies in the Fowre Hymnes thus begins to look like the responses to questions of origin and order that surface repeatedly in late sixteenth-century texts. Each hymn posits a source for the beginning of the world and the resulting narratives contain crucial differences: Amor as the ordering energy of the world (HL) contrasts sharply with the Platonic demiurge (HB), who in turn seems quite different from the “trinall triplicities” (HHL, line 64) or the figure of Wisdom, who is invoked as the source of creation in An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie and derives from Proverbs 8 and the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon. While Neoplatonic texts typically did tend to conflate such varied accounts (as we have seen with the uneasy but frequent synthesis of Lucretius and Plato), they could not entirely eliminate the dissonances. Spenser’s separation of these creation narratives into discrete units invites an investigation of their differences, and opens several avenues for study: what is the relationship between “love” (the force of desire) and “beautie” (the material of attraction) as foundational cosmic elements, and how do they reflect the traditional dualism of matter and form? Spenser had already explored an answer to this question in the Gardens of Adonis, but do the Hymnes diverge from or reinforce that mythic system? How is “heavenly love” (the “pittie” of an incarnate, material God) related to “heavenly beautie” (formal, abstract sapience, the Wisdom of the Old Testament)?

At the heart of these questions is the fundamental problem of understanding how the torment of the material world, filled with pangs of desire, mutability, duplicity, and violence, relates to the Ideal, transcendent order of an (imagined) world of theistic or philosophical perfection. This dilemma is already evident in the proem to
the fifth book of *The Faerie Queene*, where Spenser mourns the gap between the ideal and the actual, highlighting relentlessly the distance between his ideal of Justice and its pragmatic manifestation in figures such as Talus. Thus the lovers’ agony in *An Hymne in Honour of Love* parallels the anguish of Christ in *An Hymne of Heavenly Love* not only because the love of Christ for humanity supersedes by its magnanimity the solipsistic passions of the poet-lover, but because both confront the pain that comes with having a material body, both seek transcendence and fulfillment in a greater whole. Similarly, the idealizations in *An Hymne in Honour of Beautie* and *An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie* focus on the epistemological problem of separating false appearances from true knowledge, of discerning correctly the “Paterne” of the universe. In an important sense, then, the *Foure Hymnes*, like the *Cantos of Mutabilitie*, confronts the perception of worldly contingency and yearns for the stability of philosophic, divine order. Its characteristic flights of imagination and poetry, its contemplative ascents and material descents into the desiring body, are assays that seek to bring these two opposed poles into clearer relation. And it is in this oscillation between matter and form, mutability and eternity that we might discern the legacies of Lucretius and Plato within Spenser’s thought.

### III

Questions of cosmic origin permeate Spenser’s work as early as the 1590 *Faerie Queene* with its mythic gardens. Spenserian gardens offer moments of pause within the narrative from which matters of creation—both aesthetic and cosmogonic (and indeed, these are often linked)—may be posed and examined: the Faery garden where Elf and Fay meet and procreate in the *Antiquitee of Faerie Lond* of Book II; the Bower of Bliss with its excesses of sterile aesthetic creativity; the Gardens of Adonis which suggest the birth of the world. While the Faery Garden with its Ovidian cosmogony lightly masks an account of creation very similar to Genesis, the Bower and the Gardens have been linked to Epicurean pleasure and Lucretian materialism respectively. These allegorical gardens of the 1590 *Faerie Queene* reappear in other poems: in the pastoral *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, where Colin teaches Cuddie about the nature of love in a garden-like setting, evoking the cosmic Venus–Cupid (also in a garden); and in the pastoral Mount Acidale episode of the sixth book of the *Faerie Queene*; in the “silver bowers” (HL, line 23) “blossomes
of the field” (HB, line 78) and “Paradizes” that conclude each of the *Foure Hymnes*. In each of these cases, the pleasure gardens of epic become the spaces in which, appropriately enough, Spenser investigates the nature of eros. What is puzzling, however, is that in almost every instance (and with increasing frequency in the later poems), Spenser associates the investigation of desire in gardens with cosmological speculation—we might count five different cosmogonic narratives in the works I have outlined above—an association that reaches its culmination in the *Foure Hymnes*.

The prevalence of this pattern across Spenser’s poems suggests that questions of love and cosmology are closely interlinked in Spenser’s later poetry, and that we ought not to separate them. The significance of the garden setting itself gives us a clue. Not only was Spenser drawing on the *locus amoenus* tradition of classical epic and Italian romance, and not only did the garden recall the original Edenic paradise, but to those with more than a passing interest in philosophy, the garden evoked the private, pastoral school of Epicurus, known as “the Garden,” a famous spatial counterpoint to the public nature of Plato’s Academy, the Lyceum where Isocrates and Aristotle taught, and even the Stoa Poikile where Zeno is said to have met his students. Tales of the Epicurean Garden, an enclosed space conducive to both ataraxia (detachment, tranquility) and hedonism, were readily available in accounts by Cicero and Diogenes, and it seems likely that Spenser’s allegorical gardens with their distinctly materialist elements, their investigation of pleasure and cosmology, recall the philosophical significance of this model. Of course, gardens as locations for philosophic myth appear in key Platonic texts as well: in the *Republic*’s myth of Er (613e–621), in the *Phaedrus* (which takes place in a grove), and in the *Symposium* (203b–c)—another point of contact between Platonic and Epicurean systems.

The continuity between these philosophical gardens and the *Foure Hymnes* is evident in Spenser’s repetition of the cosmogony in *Colin Clouts* as the creation account in *An Hymne in Honour of Love*. Both poems refer to the paradox of Cupid’s birth and both offer a vision of the earth formed by the conjoining of antagonistic elements, characteristic of Epicurean physics:

> For by his [Love’s] powre the world was made of yore,  
> And all that therein wondrous doth appeare.  
> For how should else things so far from attone  
> And so great enemies as of them bee,  
> Be ever drawne together into one,
And taught in such accordance to agree?
Through him the cold began to covet heat,
And water fire; the light to mount on hie,
And th’heavie down to pieze; the hungry t’eat
And voydness to seek full satietie.
So being former foes, they wexed friends,
And gan by little learne to love each other:
So being knit, they brought forth other kynds
Out of the fruitfull wombe of their great mother.
Then first gan heaven out of darknesse dread
For to appeare, and brought forth chearfull day:
Next gan the earth to shew her naked head,
Out of deep waters which her drownd alway.
And shortly after everie living wight,
Crept forth like worms out of her slimie nature,
Soone as on them the Suns life giving light,
Had powred kindly heat and formall feature . . .

*(Colin Clouts Come Home Againe, lines 841–62)*

For ere this worlds still moving mightie masse,
Out of great Chaos ugly prison crept,
In which his [Love’s] goodly face long hidden was
From heavens view, and in deepe darknesse kept,
Love that had now long time securely slept
In *Venus* lap, unarmed then and naked,
Gan reare his head, by Clotho being waked.

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

The earth, the ayre, the water and the fyre,
Then gan to raunge them selves in huge array,
And with contrary forces to conspyre
Each against other, by all meanes they may,
Threatening their owne confusion and decay:
Ayre hated earth, and water hated fyre,
Till Love relented their rebellious yre.
He then them tooke, and tempering goodly well
Their contrary dislikes and loved meanes,
Did place them all in order, and compell
To keepe them selves within their sundrie raines,
Together linked with Adamantine chaines;
Yet so, as that in every living wight
They mixe themselves, and shew their kindly might.

\[(HL, \text{lines 57–91})\]

These two passages have typically been discussed in relation to each other since both identify Love as the creative source of the universe. Neither, however, is uniquely Platonic. Instead, both substitute a theory of spontaneous generation through the ordering principles of attraction and repulsion (personified in classical philosophy as Empedocles’ Love and Strife or Lucretius’s Venus and Mars) for the more orthodox architectural metaphors of the Platonic demiurge who is always an *artifex*, a maker.\(^5\) In *Colin Clouts*, Love separates an apparently preexisting chaos of confused elements, while *An Hymne in Honour of Love* makes this chronology somewhat clearer by suggesting that Love is born at the very moment when “this worlds still moving mightie masse,/Out of great Chaos ugly prison crept.”

It is crucial to observe here that Spenser implicitly denies the theory of creation *ex nihilo* in favor of the materialists’ view of preexisting cosmic matter—a topic that Du Bartas and Tasso both vigorously argue against in their hexamera, and which is still a vexed issue for readers of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.\(^5\) In fact, the loosely Empedoclean account of creation outlined in these poems seems to be another Spenserian variation on a set of famous passages in *De rerum natura*:

\[
\text{Denique tantopere inter se cum maxima mundi pugnent membra, pio nequaquam concita bello, nonne vides aliquam longi certaminis ollis posse dari finem?} \\
\text{. . . . .}
\text{Sed nova tempestas quaedam molesque coorta omnigenis e principiis, discordia quorum intervalla vias conexus pondera plagas concursus motus turbabat proelia miscens . . .}
\text{. . . . .}
\text{diffugere inde loci partes coepe, paresque}
\]

\[\text{}\]
cum paribus iungi res, et discludere mundum
membraque dividere et magnas disponere partes . . .

. . . .
Sic igitur terrae concreto corpore pondus
constitit, atque omnis mundi quasi limus in imum
confluxit.

[Since the greatest members of the world fight so hard together, stirred by most unrighteous war, do you not see that some end may be given to their long strife? . . . But a sort of strange storm, all kinds of beginnings gathered together into a mass, while their discord, exciting war amongst them, made a confusion. . . . In the next place parts began to separate, like things to join with like, and to divide the world and put its members in place and to arrange its great parts. . . . In this way, therefore, the heavy earth became solid with compact body, and all the mud of creation, flowed together.]

(De rerum Natura 5, lines 380–83, 436–45, 449–54, 495–97)

Lucretian language ("pugnet membria, pio nequaquam concita bello . . .", "Discordia . . . turbabat proelia") quite specifically underlies Spenser's vision of elemental conflict ("For how should else things so far from attone/And so great enemies as of them bee," "The earth, the ayre, the water and the fyre,/Then gan to raunge themselves in huge array./And with contrary forces to conspire. . . ."). And this is hardly surprising since the Roman poet's description of the world emerging from chaos was one of the most influential set-pieces of classical poetry for Renaissance writers. Both Du Bartas and Milton draw on it for their accounts of Genesis, Bruno returns to it in several treatises, and Spenser had already alluded to it in his Gardens of Adonis (Faerie Queene III.vi.36).

The similarities between the Spenserian and Lucretian passages cited here are nevertheless striking, not least because Spenser appears to have followed quite carefully the progression of events in the Roman epic's cosmogony. The narrator imagines a dynamic, fertile chaos of unformed material elements, described with metaphors of war, which gives way to the separation and recombination of the elements into a cosmic whole. Indeed, in Colin Clouts, Spenser offers a number of specific textual clues that point us towards De rerum natura. The invocation of the void as a spatial concept ("And voydness to seek full satietie") was a well-known Lucretian tag, and perhaps
the earliest use of the word in this cosmological sense in English.\footnote{56}

The emergence of Spenser’s earth from the waters of the ocean as an enormous womb bringing forth life spontaneously depends on another Lucretian echo (“slimie wormes” imitates “omnis mundi . . . limus in imum/confluxit”) and clearly identifies the “fruitfull wombe of their great mother” in Colin’s narrative as the earth itself rather than chaos. And perhaps most tellingly, the emphasis on an animate, generative matter that makes no mention of a metaphysically distinct form, spirit, or soul is distinctly Lucretian.

However, Spenser’s Lucretianism in Colin Clouts is contained within an Empedoclean frame, which mitigates somewhat the atheistic anti-teleological thrust of the Epicurean cosmogony.\footnote{57} Ellrodt has shown how Empedoclean thought could be neatly assimilated into Neoplatonic philosophies because of its rhetoric of love and strife.\footnote{58} And yet, the important nexus between Empedocles and Epicurus is one that Spenser would have been well aware of: Empedocles is the only philosopher (apart from Epicurus) whom Lucretius discusses with approval, and the Lucretian dichotomy of Venus/Mars is itself derived from the Empedoclean cycles of Love and Strife.\footnote{59} Moreover, Estienne’s Fragments of the pre-Socratic philosophers, published in 1573, and Diogenes Laertius’s well-known Vitae, would have enabled Spenser to distinguish the so-called naturalistic philosophers (Heraclitus, Democritus, Empedocles, and Epicurus) from the Neoplatonists, while recognizing the ways in which they had been assimilated by the Platonic tradition. Given these crosscurrents of Renaissance philosophy, Empedocles may have helped Spenser mediate between the atheistic materialism of Lucretian Epicureanism and the mystical devotions of the Neoplatonic writers.

It is no accident then that the stridently materialist cosmogony of Colin Clouts is softened in An Hymne in Honour of Love, even though the basic elements remain the same: Spenser removes the more extensive Lucretian allusions (the emergence of the earth-mother, the generation of animals), and focuses instead on Love’s active subjection of antagonistic elements and enforcement of order. But even as Spenser shifts from a Lucretian vision of animate matter in motion to a more Empedoclean account of Love as a creative agent (who seems here to resemble an allegorized demiurge), he retains key phrases from De rerum natura: “confused” and “confusion” along with the “great Chaos” allude not only to the condition of elemental disorder (discordia . . . turbabat . . . miscens) but to the intermingling of the elements so necessary for kosmos. Moreover, Spenser’s image of “the worlds still moving mightie masse” may translate Lucretius’s vision of the “moles et machina mundi” (DRN 5.97), following
Marullus’s hymn to Amor, which seems to have served as the model for *An Hymne in Honour of Love*. In this poem, Marullus presents a cosmogony with Love as the creative agent in terms that are almost identical to Spenser’s account:

Quid, quod et novas Chaos in figuras  
Digeris primus docilemque rerum  
Mutuis nectis seriem catenis  
Pace rebelli?

Quid, quod, antique superata Anance  
Suscipis mundum placidum regendum?

[And again, you organize Chaos into new forms, you are the first, and you enchain the docile line of things with mutual bonds in a rebellious peace. And again, triumphing over Ananke, you undertake to govern the calmed world.]

Marullus’s vision of Amor’s triumph over Ananke finds a counterpart in a peculiar detail of Spenser’s hymn—in the English version, Love awakens to create because of Clotho, the youngest of the Moirai, identified in Plato’s *Symposium* as the daughters of Ananke (necessity). The chains used to bind the elements in the *Hymne* echo the “mutuis catenis” of Marullus, while Spenser’s entire stanza is, in effect, an elaboration of the elemental “pace rebelli.” The structural and thematic similarities between the *Hymni naturales* and Spenser’s *Hymnes* are yet to be studied in detail, but they merit attention particularly because Marullus’s poems epitomize the unlikely synthesis between Lucretian and Neoplatonic philosophies that I have been tracing in Spenser’s poetry. It has long been observed, for instance, that Marullus’s hymn to Amor in Book I of the *Hymni* modifies Lucretius’s invocation to Venus in *De rerum natura*, transferring the creative energy from the goddess to Cupid/Love. Spenser makes a similar substitution in *An Hymne in Honour of Love*, only to quote his Lucretian source, appropriately enough, in the invocation to Venus that begins the *Hymne in Honoure of Beautie* (lines 15–21).

This peculiar juxtaposition of a Lucretian philosophy of matter and erotic energy (*voluptas*) against the visionary transcendence promised by Christian Neoplatonism occurs in a precise pattern in the first two hymns. In *An Hymne in Honour of Love*, a Lucretian–Empedoclean creation account is framed by Petrarchan–Neoplatonic love discourse,
while the pattern is reversed in the companion *Hymne in Honour of Beautie*, where the invocation to a Lucretian Venus frames a Platonic account of creation and a Neoplatonic meditation on the problem of beauty-as-form. If the torments of desire in the first hymn are experienced as physical and material, in the second, we are presented with the epistemological dilemma of distinguishing between “goodly beautie” and the “outward shew of things.” As the cosmic creation-ism of Love glides into a reflection on beauty, so the celebration of the beautiful “Paterne” leads to an exhortation to love (“Therefore to make your beautie more appeare, / It you behoves to love . . . ,” *HB*, lines 183–84). Significantly, as several critics have argued, there is no steady ascent along a Neoplatonic ladder of love because the two hymns are perfect thematic and rhetorical mirrors for each other; they emphatically do not follow a (perhaps expected) logic by which the second thematically erases and substitutes the first in a hierarchy of philosophic ascent.

IV

This extended discussion of Lucretian imagery in the first hymn raises at least two substantive questions for the interpretation of the work as a whole. First, why might cosmology, and specifically cosmogony, be central to Spenser’s poetry? In a now classic article, Harry Berger discusses the cosmogonies in *Colin Clouts* and *An Hymne in Honoure of Love* only to argue that Spenser is not particularly interested in cosmology but in ethics, psychology and politics, so that the cosmic awakening of Love corresponds to a “coming to consciousness” of the self. A similar emphasis on poetic subjectivity at the expense of the cosmic thought-experiment is at the center of Ellrodt’s influential analysis. While these theoretical approaches have yielded rich treatments of Spenser’s narrative technique, sociopolitical context and biographical motivations, what might be gained from investigating the cosmological turn in the later poems, particularly in the light of recent studies on the scientific contexts of the late sixteenth century?

The second question I want to raise harkens back to Greenlaw’s pioneering analysis of Spenser’s Lucretianism: why indeed would a devout Protestant engage so closely with the atheistic materialism of Lucretius? Specifically, how does an appreciation of the Lucretianism in the first two hymns affect an understanding of the work as a whole, particularly given the theological emphasis of the second pair?
issue is central to Spenser’s presentation of the *Four Hymns*’ structure as palinodic and forces us to consider whether the hymns of *Heavenly Love* and *Heavenly Beautie* simply supersede those to *Love* and *Beautie*, recanting the youthful error of “greener times” in favor of religious conversion.

As critics of Greenlaw’s thesis argued almost a century ago, Spenser was clearly no thoroughgoing materialist (as for instance, the monist Milton would be).67 His poems, especially the *Hymnes*, are suffused with the language of light, fire, air, and desire, rejecting the grossness of earthly matter as might be expected of a good Protestant. And indeed, when Spenser’s materialism does find expression, it is a peculiar mixture of Platonic and Lucretian elements, as for instance, in this passage from *An Hymne in Honour of Beautie*:

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

For through infusion of celestiall powre,  
The duller earth it quickneth with delight,  
And life-full spirits privily doth powre  
Through all the parts, that to the lookers sight  
They seeme to please. That is thy soveraine might,  
O Cyprian Queene, which flowing from the beame  
Of thy bright starre, thou into them doest streame.

(*HB*, lines 43–56)

These stanzas oscillate between the dualism of Platonic ontology (the Idea of beauty is infused into inert matter) and an evidently vitalist materialism (this “influence” and “infusion” suggest the physical fluidity of the “life-full spirits”). Spenser’s verses linguistically enact the steady movement from “grosse matter” to animate spirit, as the rhymes shift subtly from *refine/myne* to the ethereality of *light/empight/delight* before turning back to the physical realm through the same rhyme (*sight/might*). Never quite committing to an unambiguous Platonic hierarchy of form over matter, the words themselves dance around the impregnation (“quickneth with delight”) of matter
by animate spirits. While such a vision of matter taking on life could potentially be assimilated into a Plotinian vision of emanations, Spenser’s insistent identification of the life-force with Venus suggests otherwise.68 We might, moreover, also recall the central stanzas of the Gardens of Adonis episode in the Faerie Queene where the intermingling of Venus and Adonis, matter and form is inextricable, as are the elements of Platonism and materialism; here, Spenser’s use of the archaic verb “empight” evokes the same botanical metaphor of planting.69

More importantly, perhaps, both these stanzas provide an account of the origin of life, but also struggle with the epistemological consequences of dualism: positing a dichotomy of body and soul, matter and spirit creates the dilemma of distinguishing appearance from essence—a question that the hymn relates back to the Phaedria’s song and the Bower of Bliss.70

Why doe not then the blossomes of the field,
Which are arayd with much more orient hew,
And to the sense most daintie odours yield,
Worke like impression in the lookers vew?
Or why doe not faire pictures like powre shew,
In which oftimes, we Nature see of Art
Exceld, in perfect limming every part.

(HB, lines 78–84)

As the submerged allusion to Matthew 6:28–29 suggests, this passage of the Hymne confronts the dilemma of materiality itself—faced with the inevitable corruption of the flesh how do we transcend corporeality?71 Competing philosophies provided different answers, and the jarring incompatibility between Spenser’s address to Venus and his allusion to Matthew suggests an ongoing struggle between the imperatives of the sensual world and the desire for eternal perfection. In Book II of The Faerie Queene, the didactic impetus of the epic establishes a clear moral distinction between the overwrought world of the senses (epitomized by the hedonistic Bower of Bliss) and the need for restraint as a form of order; but in the Hymnes, the moral inflections of this dichotomy are less clear as Spenser struggles to separate matter (superficial physical attractiveness) from form (internal, soulful beauty).

The problem is only more acute in the second pair of overtly religious hymns, where the experience of matter leads to a rapturous contemplation of pure form. Indeed, the fine balance in the first pair
of hymns between the physical focus of Lucretian materialism and the meditative magic of Neoplatonism’s dualist ontology may be responsible for what David Miller insightfully describes as the “meta-leptic relation between the heavenly hymns and the earthly model they purport to imitate, correct, and supplant in a single gesture.”

Thus, *An Hymne of Heavenly Love* is almost obsessed with images of the suffering body of Christ: “that most blessed bodie . . . /He freely gave to be both rent and torne” (lines 148–50); “loves deepe wounde, that pierst the piteous hart. . . ./And sharply launching every inner part,/Dolours of death into his soule did dart” lines 156–59); “What hart can feele. . . ./Or thought can think the depth of so deare wound? Whose bleeding sourse their stremes yet never staunch” (lines 62–65). Meditation on the materiality of the Incarnation leads to an exhortation to love selflessly like the Son, but ends with an apostrophe to the earth, which is, significantly, also a synecdoche for the poet himself, man in all his material substance: “Then rouze thy selfe, O earth, out of thy soyle . . .” (line 218). The model for transcendence here is not enraptured contemplation of cosmic order itself (as it will be in *An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie*) but the mortification of the individual’s flesh—literal in the case of Christ, but metaphorically imitated by his followers who will finally approach the purity of heavenly love only through the sentient body:

> Then let thy flinty heart that feeles no paine,  
> Empierced be with pitiful remorse,  
> And let thy bowels bleede in every vaine,  
> . . . .  
> And let thy soule whose sins his sorrows wrought,  
> Melt into tears, and grone in grieved thought.  

(*HHL*, lines 246–52)

The corporeality of Spenser’s language in these passages contrasts strikingly with the ethereality of his images elsewhere in the hymns, and it is arguably the physical concreteness of the poem, its emphasis on the visceral, that has led to its frequent praise as the most powerful of the four.

In contrast, *An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie* turns away from the individual material body to a vision of the entire created cosmos strongly reminiscent of Du Bartas’s *La septime* (1578). Significantly, the poet now turns away from the sacrifice of the Son celebrated in the hymn of *Heavenly Love* and introduces the apocryphal Old Testament figure of Wisdom as the culminating figure of the *Foure*
Spenser seems to distinguish Sapience from the Trinity and draws on Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon, where Wisdom is closely associated with the creation; in fact, most of the final hymn delights in the creation before even introducing Sapience as the source of heavenly beauty. This turn away from the Trinity (even though Spenser does praise “God” before the enthroned “sovereign dearling of the Deity”) demands more attention for its unexpected shift of theological focus. It is a move similar to the final stanzas of the Cantos of Mutabilitie where “Dame Nature” seems to replace the traditional Christian deity that we might expect.

The figure of Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible is a mysterious figure. A personification who may be based on Near Eastern goddess cults and who is depicted as the child of God (Proverbs 8:22–30), she stands for the order embedded in the universe, the “Paterno” or trace of divine agency in the world. As John Collins argues persuasively, Wisdom embodies a kind of natural theology, forming “a bridge between creation and created,” providing a rather different model for understanding the relations of God and the universe. Human beings might understand the presence of the divine through Wisdom, that is, the understanding of order in the visible world. From this perspective, Wisdom, the abstraction of form and order in the cosmos, becomes the counterpart to the incarnate Christ who ennobles matter itself.

In an important sense then, the second pair of hymns replicates the interlocking pattern of matter and form found in the first two hymns. An emphasis on bodily experience in both the hymns on love balances the contemplative mode of the hymns on beauty, which present the concept of “Beautie” as the order in the cosmos. This structure is also evident in the cosmogonic accounts of the hymns: creation in the hymns on love is presented as a process, an elemental coming together, while in the hymns on beauty, it is an accomplished, constructed product. It is in this context that the Lucretian–Platonic dialectic that I have been describing becomes most interesting. For Spenser appears to have treated the problem of cosmic order, of matter and form, through two carefully separated perspectives, one in the light of classical philosophy without the benefit of Christian revelation, and one in the light of Revelation. This distinction between classical and Christian would seem typical, even too typical, for a sixteenth-century poet—until we note that there is no clear subordination of classical to Christian, no syncretic “Christianizing” of classical materials. Significantly, the conceptual patterns that emerge between the first and second pair are strikingly similar and even complement each other, suggesting that the Hymnes do not
advance a narrative of ascent and religious conversion or transcendence. The elaborate palinode of the dedication seems to have been pointing to this juxtaposition all along—an apparent recantation that is not quite a recantation at all.

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Notes


6. Of course, Stesichorus’s recantation to the *Helen* is not actually concerned with repudiating juvenile erotic experience in favor of later, more mature, spiritual experience. The ode recantation to the *Helen* is an apology for depicting a flawed Helen in the epic, and an attempt to reinstate a pristine version of the heroine. However, Stesichorus’s poem remains the first instance of this poetic mode, one which was adapted by later writers for the opportunities that it offered for portraying a flexible, changing poetic self.

7. Phillippy, 261.


9. For instance, in Speech VII of his commentary on the *Symposium*, chapters v, vi and xi, Ficino cites Book IV of *De rerum natura* at length for examples of the pains of erotic desire.


11. The question of defining “Neoplatonism” is, of course, a vexed one, since the term encompasses a wide range of philosophical positions including syncretic compilations of works not only by Plato, Plotinus, and the Alexandrian Platonists, but also such figures as Zoroaster, Pythagoras, Hermes Trismagistus, the Kabbala, and even Aristotle.

12. Literary scholars of the sixteenth century have typically focused on Neoplatonism as it relates to the erotic discourse of the period, a connection made explicit not only in Ficino’s commentaries on the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, but on Neoplatonizing interpretations of Petrarchan poetry (for instance, in Pico’s famous commentary on Benivieni’s *Canzone*). Perhaps the most influential instance of this relationship is the fourth book of Castiglione’s *Il libro del cortegiano*; this background, as it is relevant for Spenser, is surveyed concisely in Welsford, 3–36. However, as an entire system of thought, Neoplatonism was concerned not only with the problem of
desire, but also with metaphysics, epistemology and natural philosophy; in this, the ongoing importance of the *Timaeus* cannot be ignored. Other important philosophic *loqui* within the Platonic corpus for early modern philosophers include the *Laws* and the *Parmenides*; a useful approach to this aspect of Neoplatonic philosophy is provided by Michael F. Wagner ed., *Neoplatonism and Nature: Studies in Plotinus’ Enneads* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002). For a discussion of Platonic natural philosophy with specific regard to Spenser, see Jon Quitslund, *Spenser’s Supreme Fiction: Platonic Natural Philosophy and the Faerie Queene* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

13. The strangeness (and thus, importance) of Spenser’s use of the word “naturall” is noted in passing by Rollinson, “A Generic View,” 294. It is through this emphasis on “natural” hymns that Rollinson connects the *Foure Hymnes* to the *Hymni naturales* of Marullus. A case for Spenser’s interest in natural philosophy is made in two classic articles by Edwin Greenlaw; see “Spenser and Lucretius,” *Studies in Philology* 17 (1920): 455–84; and “Spenser’s Mutabilitie,” *PMLA* 45, no. 3 (September 1930): 684–703.

14. One of Ellrodt’s most important contributions for studies of Spenser and Neoplatonism was his focus on the importance of the *Timaeus* and Middle Platonism more generally; see especially 96–97. However, Ellrodt’s focus on medieval interpretations and assimilations of the *Timaeus* ignores the role that it played in the development of new directions in sixteenth-century natural philosophy—see for instance Gretchen Reydams-Schils, *Plato’s Timaeus as Cultural Icon* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003); Thomas Leinkauf, ed., *Plato’s Timaeus and the Foundations of Cosmology in Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005); Thomas Johansen, *Plato’s Natural Philosophy: A Study of the Timaeus-Critias* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and M. R. Wright, ed., *Reason and Necessity: Essays on Plato’s Timaeus* (London: Duckworth, 2000).


22. Patrick Cheney has argued for a reconsideration of Spenser’s poetic career, claiming that he “reinvents the Virgilian Wheel” (62) by creating a four-stage model from pastoral to epic to love-lyric to hymn, where the turn from love-lyric to hymn involves an Augustinian moment of conversion, a “salvific telos.” My argument seeks to extend Cheney’s insightful exploration in its emphasis on Spenser’s self-conscious turn from epic to hymn, but I am less persuaded by the Petrarchan-Augustinian recantation for which he argues. I see Spenser’s turn away from the immediate subject of history and politics, not as a movement towards heaven and salvation, but towards cosmology (an important focus of both the *Hymnes* and the *Mutabilitie Cantos*), which seems to be an extension of similar philosophic concerns with just order into a wider sphere.
23. For a useful discussion of Dorat’s lectures on Homer, see Ford, *Ronsard’s Hymnes*, 111–13.
24. Dorat’s comment is cited in Pierre de Ronsard, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Paul Laumonier (Paris: Hachette, 1914), 8:4–5. We might hear perhaps in Dorat’s phrase, “Naturae rerum” an echo of Lucretius’s *De rerum natura*, which Dorat was helping Lambinus to edit.
25. Anne Prescott suggests that the classical Vergilian model of a poetic career may not have been the only one available to Spenser. She points usefully to the case of Ronsard, who never managed to complete an epic, and who chose increasingly to be identified as a love poet, arguing that studies of poetic careers may be served by deploying an “inter-careerist model.” See Anne Lake Prescott, “The Laurel and the Myrtle: Spenser and Ronsard,” in *Worldmaking Spenser: Explorations in the Early Modern Age*, eds. Patrick Cheney and Lauren Silberman (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2000), 63–78. Such an analysis may well help us understand the importance of the hymns within Spenser’s oeuvre as a whole. On the relationship between Spenser’s poetry and Ronsard’s, see Alfred W. Satterthwaite, *Spenser, Ronsard, and Du Bellay: A Renaissance Comparison* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960). The importance of French writers more generally for Spenser (particularly, Du Bellay, Ronsard, and Du Bartas) cannot be underestimated; the classic work remains Anne Lake Prescott, *French Poets and the English Renaissance: Studies in Fame and Transformation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).


28. Anthony Esolen notes that the doctrine of nature being the only controlling power in the world was theologically problematic from a Christian point of view. He points to Lucretius’s identifications of “natura creatrix” and “fortuna gubernans” as the ruling forces of the universe; see Anthony Esolen, “Spenserian Chaos: Lucretius in *The Faerie Queene*,” *Spenser Studies* 11 (1994): 32. The problem of whether the world was governed by chance or nature—or the providential wisdom of a deity—was at the center of natural philosophic debates in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with implications that extended beyond physics into ethics and politics. A related problem was the proper relationship of a creative nature to the supreme creative deity. Spenser avoids an overt confrontation of these questions in the *Hymnes*; however, by balancing the first two hymns, with their invocations of Love/Venus as unpredictable rulers of the universe, against the second pair, with their insistence on a Christian teleology, he implicitly raises the issue.


30. It is worth noting that this Lucretian figure differs in significant ways from the iconography of the Platonic Venus (though the Neoplatonic tradition often distinguished between two versions of Venus—Venus Urania and Venus Pandemos). A useful parallel example of the difficulty of mediating between Neoplatonic and Lucretian versions of Venus can be observed in the debate over the right interpretation of Botticelli’s *Primavera*: Charles Dempsey, for instance, challenges the influential Neoplatonic analyses of the painting by Panofsky and Gombrich, pointing to the Lucretian intertext (among other classical poems) on which it is based; see Charles Dempsey, *The Portrayal of Love: Botticelli’s Primavera and Humanist Culture at the Time of Lorenzo the Magnificent* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). For the Neoplatonic studies see Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); Ernst Gombrich, “Botticelli’s Mythologies: A Study in the Neoplatonic Symbolism of His Circle,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 8 (1945): 7–60.


33. See for instance, Ellrodt, 100–105, 114–20, 183–93; Bieman; and Quitslund, *Spenser’s Supreme Fiction*. For a concise discussion of specific points of Neoplatonism

34. Jeanneret, 29–49; Luzius Keller, *Palingène, Ronsard, Du Bartas: trois études sur la poésie cosmologique de la Renaissance* (Berne: Francke, 1974); Werner L. Gundersheimer, *The Life and Works of Louis Le Roy* (Geneva: Droz, 1966), 104; Albert-Marie Schmidt, *La poésie scientifique en France au seizième siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1938). Ellrodt notes that Le Roy cites Lucretius several times (101). Guy le Fèvre de la Boderie is a particularly interesting and understudied figure in this regard (though he is soundly dismissed by Schmidt as a hazy Neoplatonist and second-rate successor to Scève and Pontus de Tyard): *La Galliade*, a seemingly mystical, “Neoplatonic” work, seems to bear the mark of an Epicurean physics on closer reading, which is hardly surprising given that de la Boderie was the first translator of Cicero’s *De natura deorum* into French. Even though Cicero’s work is an anti-Epicurean polemic, it became one of the important sources for Epicurean philosophy in the Renaissance because of its thorough description of the main tenets.

35. Jeanneret, 29.


45. See Allen.

46. Ovid, *Amores* I.XV.23–24: “carmina sublimis tunc sunt peritura Lucreti,/ exitio terras cum dabit una dies . . .” [“The poems of sublime Lucretius will perish/ only when, one day, the earth itself is ruined.”]

47. See Prosperi.

48. It is worth noting that all of these accounts can be (and have been) subsumed under the umbrella of “Neoplatonism,” in part because of the ways in which the Neoplatonic tradition absorbed other philosophic positions. A useful account of this process, particularly with regard to Aristotle, is George Karamanolis, *Plato and Aristotle in Agreement? Platonists on Aristotle from Antiochus to Porphyry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006).

49. For an interesting discussion of Italian writers’ imitation of Lucretius’s connection between political and cosmic turmoil, see Campbell, “Giorgione’s ‘Tempest,’ ” 322–23. The link is particularly evident in the partial English translations of Lucretius by John Evelyn and Lucy Hutchinson, both written during the English Civil Wars.

We might recall that “paradise,” a word Spenser uses repeatedly, derives from the Greek for a (Persian) enclosed park, orchard, or pleasure ground, and was used to describe the Garden of Eden in the Septuagint (OED).

An inscription on the gate to the Garden is recorded by Seneca in his Epistle XXI.10: “Cum adieris eius hortulos et inscriptum hortulis ‘Hospes hic bene maneabis, hic summum bonum voluptas est.’” [Go to his Garden and read the motto carved there: “Stranger, here you will do well to tarry; here our highest good is pleasure.” On the Garden, see R. E. Wycherley, “The Garden of Epicurus,” Phoenix 13, no. 2 (1959): 73–77; Alastair Small and Carola Small, “John Evelyn and the Garden of Epicurus,” Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 60 (1997): 194–214. Moreover, as Hiro Hirai has recently shown, the language of “semence” (seeds, sowing, botanical growth), used to describe problems of origin, is a powerful metaphor that pervades early modern thought, and derives from a heady mixture of Stoic 

51. The Yale edition of Spenser’s shorter poems glosses these passages as Neoplatonic, given the identification of Love as the first cause of the universe. However, the actual nature of cosmic coalescence described in these passages is quite different from the Platonist and Neoplatonist emphasis on creation as making, fashioning, shaping where architectural metaphors predominate. While such vitalistic theories were certainly made to fit under the umbrella of “Neoplatonism” in the fifteenth century, they are ontologically distinct and were increasingly seen to be such by the late sixteenth century. The contrast as well as the uneasy fusion of spontaneous generation and demiurhic creation is evident, for instance, in Du Bartas’s La septime, which Spenser may well have drawn on, particularly for the vision of the cosmos in An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie. For a thorough and useful discussion of vitalism/spontaneous generation versus Platonic metaphysics, see Matthew R. Goodrum, “Atomism, Atheism and the Spontaneous Generation of Human Beings: The Debate over a Natural Origin of the First Humans in Seventeenth-Century Britain,” Journal of the History of Ideas 63, no. 2 (2002): 207–24; Henry Harris, Things Come to Life: Spontaneous Generation Revisited (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Hirai.


53. I use “cosmic” here in its etymological senses of order and beautiful form as well as the entire universe (from the Greek kosmos)—a semantic node that clarifies why the creation narrative in An Hymne in Honour of Love ends with a seemingly abrupt shift to the subject of beauty: “Therefore in choice of love, he doth desire/ That seems on earth most heavenly, to embrace/ The same in Beauty, born of heavenly race.” If Love brings about the cosmos, it both effects and is drawn towards beauty (that is, kosmos); the Neoplatonic paradigm for the interactions of love and the Beautiful is here given a cosmological twist.

54. On the semantic history of the “void” see Leonard, “Milton, Lucretius, and ‘the Void Profound of Unessential Night,’ ” 203, who points out that the OED lists
Milton’s use of “void” as the first instance of the word in English to mean the vastness of empty space. Spenser’s “voydness” may however trump Milton’s primacy in this regard.

57. Empedoclean cosmology is slippery on the issue of teleology, which is one of the key points of contention between Lucretian Epicureanism (firmly antiteleological) and Neoplatonism (firmly teleological); this slipperiness (which is more strongly evident to modern scholars because only fragments of Empedocles’ work remain) was probably clearer in classical antiquity. On the trickiness of this question, see Gordon Campbell, “David Sedley, Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom,” *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (October 29, 1999), http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/1999/1999–10–29.html; the notes to Campbell’s edition of Book 5 of *De rerum natura* are also helpful; see Gordon Campbell, *Lucretius on Creation and Evolution: A Commentary on De Rerum Natura 5.772–1104* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).


60. Marullus describes the universe as “Machina”—a clear reference to Lucretius in a context that is very similar to Spenser’s use of the phrase: “Hic ubi missa superos sagitta/ Flectis et ipsum/ Arbitrum rerum dominunque patrem, / Cuius auditum procul omnis horret/ Coelitum pubes, procul omnis horret/ Machina nomen./ Quid, quod et novas Chaos in figuras . . . ” (*Hymni naturales* I. Amor, lines 15–21).

61. The parallels were first noted by Rollinson; see “A Generic View.”


63. See Goffis; and Hirai, 59–61.


66. See works cited at note 13 above.


68. For a useful study of the natural philosophical aspects of Neoplatonism see the essays in Wagner ed., Neoplatonism and Nature.

69. Compare The Faerie Queene, III.vi.46–47.

70. Compare The Faerie Queene II.vi.15.

71. Matthew 6:28–29: “See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.”


73. For the female figure of Wisdom in the Bible, see Proverbs 1:22ff, 8; Sirach 24; Wisdom of Solomon 1:5, 7:22–8:1. The identification of Sapience as the Biblical figure of Wisdom is disputed. In contrast to a generation of Neoplatonist interpretations of Sapience as the Uranian Venus, or theological interpretations of Sapience as either the Holy Spirit or the Virgin Enthroned, Charles Osgood first pointed out the detailed parallels between HHB and the Wisdom of Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon—see C. G. Osgood, “Spenser’s Sapience,” Studies in Philology 14 (1917): 167–77. I find Osgood’s argument persuasive and the connections he makes deserve further study, particularly in light on recent work on the Jewish Wisdom literature.


75. The relationship between Nature and the Christian God in the Cantos is a matter of considerable critical debate, particularly given the last two problematic stanzas of the work. It is worth considering Spenser’s movement away from a clearly identified Trinity in HHL to the “Deity” of HHB as a similar move, particularly given his focus on Wisdom, another female figure (like Dame Nature), associated with the order of the material world.


77. The point is made by the editors of the Yale edition of the poem.

78. Such a distinction might sound like a return to the conventional opposition of classical and Christian culture in the Renaissance, but what is striking is Spenser’s deliberate lack of a hierarchical relationship between the two. Rather than simply “correcting” the first two hymns, the second pair return to similar philosophical and cosmological ruminations that suggest continuity rather than conversion.