The Poet’s Three Worlds

Throughout our lives, certain places – usually geographical, though if we are even normally introspective, they can also be imaginary – accumulate emotional resonance for us. They may be places associated with our childhood, or with spectacular successes or losses; they may have acquired a familiarity because we lived or worked for many years there. Some of the associations we accumulate seem ‘personal’ or subjective: here I used to come when I wanted to be alone; here I met my wife or husband or lover; at this point some terrible tragedy – the death of a friend or loved one – occurred. But even these personal associations, which together help to give shape and meaning to a life, have a collective dimension, even while we may not at the time notice what it is. We may think of certain, especially very intimate, experiences as ‘ours’; but the experiences of a particular history are inevitably forms and articulations of more general processes. Whether we speak of the shared dimension of such experiences as ‘essential’ parts of the permanent pattern of being human, or as archetypal, or as representing historically specific class or gender or ethnic constructions, there is no doubt that places – cities, countryside, names on a map, houses, vistas, imaginary worlds, activities in which we lose (or find) ourselves – are not merely neutral, but are heavily, complexly, metaphorical. In our metaphors for the places we inhabit and remember are our cultural values revealed.

In the opening chapter, I considered Spenser in relation to one such place that, by the sixteenth-century, had acquired – and in whatever changed ways retains – certain ideological resonances. That was England. Here I want to focus on three other ‘places’ within which or within the influence of which, Spenser spent his adult life. One is a specific geographical place; the second is an institution with specific material and enormous metaphorical resonance; the third is an activity by which he created, in a further, metaphorical sense, a ‘place’ or ‘world’ that was designed to reflect (to use his own recurring metaphor of the ‘glas’ or mirror) and
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reflect upon, the other two, but which increasingly, if never consistently, became its own world, at least in his mind. These three places are, respectively, Ireland, the court, and poetry. His life, literary and other, was dominated or – to use an appropriate metaphor for a writer – written by the often contradictory demands of these three worlds. In this chapter, I will look at each in turn.

THE COURT: A PLACE OF CONTROL

In speaking of the importance of ‘place’ in Spenser’s life, I am suggesting that we must look not merely to the ideas that can be abstracted from his poetry, but to the events that determined the relationships between the poetry and his life, and also to ideas and feelings that play about (that existed in the vicinity of) both his life and writings. In many cases, Spenser will have been unaware of how his literary (and other) life was shaped as he struggled within the complex interplay of discursive structures, symbolic formations, and ideological systems of representation. The poem to which he devoted much of his energy, The Faerie Queene, was, like the rest of his life, coerced and compelled by political and wider cultural forces outside it, by networks of discourse in which it was caught or – to use Pierre Macherey’s powerful metaphor – which haunt it, playing, encroaching, or teasing it from the edge of the text.

In his influential essay on ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’, Louis Althusser discusses the very concrete practices by which any society structures, even creates, the allegiances by which its members feel they ‘belong’ to it – the systems of education, characteristic lifestyles, patterns of religion, family organization, and so forth. It is by means of such institutions and structures, what Althusser called ‘apparatuses’, that ideology functions. The major institution or social apparatus that dominates Spenser’s, and indeed, sixteenth-century poetry generally, was the court. Looking back at his youth and attempting to make sense of those years which we now recognize as one of the cataclysmic eras of English history, Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, focused on the institution in which he had spent his youth. The court, he wrote, was where ‘as in a mirror, we may best see the face of that time, and the affections and temper of the people in general’, for, he continued, ‘the court measured the temper and affection of the country’. Throughout Spenser’s lifetime, ‘court’ was a powerful word as well as a powerful institution; it accumu-