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Spenser's New England Conscience

by HERBERT V. FACKLER

ONE OF THE TRUISMS OF SCHOLARSHIP regarding the hard-boiled hero is that his genealogical table is liberally peopled by traditional heroes of the frontier literary convention from Natty Bumppo to the dime-novel and pulp heroes of Ned Buntline and his followers. It is a genealogy that is clear, rational, and rather obvious. Like the frontier hero, the hard-boiled detective stands on a societal rift-line between the pure Darwinian survival of the fittest and the social responsibility of a civilized world. While he inevitably represents the interests of the latter in the face of an order grounded upon violence and its threat, he often reverts to that very violence in the performance of his objective. Ultimately an agent of the law, he must follow a higher imperative in order to provide a situation in which law is viable.

This is true to some degree of Robert B. Parker's Spenser, of course. Unwilling to submit to the rigors of authority as a police officer, he is a private eye. Independent and self-reliant, he pursues his cases to mend the social fabric that iniquity has torn. Humorously, he refers to himself as a "thug," and he often steps outside the strictly-legal to right a wrong, taking upon himself the responsibility for determining and meting out justice. Parker—who early discussed the western background of the hard-boiled hero in his doctoral dissertation—has even provided a frontier genesis for Spenser. He was born in Wyoming and raised by his father and two maternal uncles, who later moved to Boston, apparently to provide him with a growing-up environment that represented to them "the great tradition" of American ethics and behavior. How well he assimilated that sensibility is a matter for interested consideration.

The New England conscience can be approached, of course, through its Puritan roots and developed further by an appreciation of the great moralists Emerson and Thoreau, and extended into modernism as Robert Frost exhibits it. On the surface, Spenser is an unlikely Puritan, who often seems to be a moral relativist, with a code approaching Hemingway's. But underlying it are both a sense of the self that is firmly grounded in the concepts of early New England and a commitment to the pursuit of the good (or perhaps rela-

tive good) that is familiar to those who have read Cotton Mather's *Bonifacius: An Essay Upon the Good*.¹

Spenser's first mention of Cotton Mather, in *Promised Land* (1978), is in conversation with Susan Silverman and Pam Shepard over how Harv Shepard defines himself. When Spenser speaks of Harv "defining himself in Cotton Mather's terms," Pam and Susan are surprised, and he expands: ". . . you know, the old Puritan ethic" (p. 170).² This sounds facile and somewhat derogatory, but Spenser has a great deal more in common with Mather than with most of the characters who people his adventures. By *Ceremony* (1982), it has become a good thing to adhere to at least part of that Puritan ethic. Susan is concerned that Spenser is "bleak" over the world into which young April Kyle has vanished, and wonders why he persists on the case:

I shrugged. "It's what I do," I said.
 "Even when it bothers you like this?"
 "If you only do it when it's easy, is it worth doing?"
 She smiled. Her mouth was wide, and when she smiled her whole face
 smiled and her eyes gleamed.
 "You never disappoint," she said. "You and Cotton Mather." (p. 81)

Surely, Spenser fulfills many of Mather's criteria for a man of honor: he is a "stranger to the gain of oppression; the common refuge of the oppressed, and the distressed" and a man who "stoops to do good" (Mather, p. 4). He devises to do good, and is "full of fiery indignation against the adversaries of the design" (Mather, p. 18). In his profession he is gifted with "opportunities to do good" (Mather, p. 35) and does not let them slip by out of disinterest or idleness. His concern for children is typically shown by the number of Parker's books in which his quest is in behalf of a "lost child," and he is solicitous in his concern for the relative moral influence of their companions, past, present, and prospective.

Let us examine but one example, *God Save the Child* (1974). Its essential problem is that Kevin Bartlett, a pubescent boy from a confused and dysfunctional family, has run away. His mother is a self-concerned, middle-aged flirt with social, artistic, and sexual pretensions. His father, who mistakes providing materially for emotional support, is a less than adequate male authority figure. Kevin's solution is to run away with Vic Harroway, a drug-dealing, weight-lifting, homosexual pimp. Spenser is called to protect Kevin's mother (who has received death threats) and then to find the boy. The local police, represented by Chief Trask, are useless: in fact, Trask is involved with Harroway's prostitution ring and a dishonored doctor who abets it. Spenser's sole outside support is the local high-school counselor,

1. Cotton Mather, *Bonifacius: An Essay Upon the Good*, ed. David Levin (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1966).

2. All page references to the Spenser novels are to the currently available paperback editions, except for references to *Chance* and *Small Vices*, for which I used the hardback editions. *Chance* is now in print as a paperback; *Small Vices* should be available in that format by Summer 1998.

Susan Silverman, who becomes his lifelong love. But he is not without "devices." Lieutenant Healy of the State Police is useful in the early stages of the case; Henry Cimoli, owner of the Harbor Health Club where Spenser works out, gives him information on Harroway, whom he knows as a weight-lifter. A gay photographer friend, Race Willingham, tells him how dangerous Harroway might be, and that he has a penchant for young boys. Spenser moves in and out of various strata of Boston to locate Harroway, encountering a depressing assortment of types. And he always has Susan, with whom he can try out his ideas.

By the novel's end a number of interesting matters are revealed. Kevin's parents, in a confrontation with Harroway, shed some of their self-concern and are willing to engage in unequal physical trial of Harroway at their own risk; it is not that they are not loving parents, but that they are inactively good, out of the habit of acting to promote a positive end. Of course it is Spenser who takes on and thrashes Harroway. But Spenser's victory is not without thought. He has been repulsed initially by the weight-lifter's crudeness and degeneracy—even speculating upon fighting him over a slur Harroway cast at Susan—and he does remind Harroway of that as he methodically boxes him into submission. But he recognizes a shard of true concern for Kevin in his adversary's stubborn fight to retain the boy. The nature of the punishment he metes out to Harroway is extreme, but instructive to Kevin, for it is delivered with equable efficiency. As Mather writes, "Nor shall any chastisement ever be dispensed in a passion and fury . . ." (Mather, p. 48).

Dealing with Trask is a little more difficult. When the Chief has arrested his doctor-flunky and hanged him in a jail cell, Spenser disarms him, tells him his iniquity is now revealed, and tells him to "start running" from the authorities. He has an opportunity to end it on the spot, but refrains from passionate vengeance, which is a part of doing good. In sum, his actions measure up to that chapter of *Bonifacius* in which Mather considers "The Duty to Oneself" (Mather, pp. 35–40), without its religious context. Spenser is also given to self-examination, and it is this habit which allows him to develop his "code," so often—and simplistically—compared to that of the Hemingway hero.

Many of the concerns of *God Save the Child* continue throughout the Spenser canon, of course. *The Godwulf Manuscript* (1973), *Early Autumn* (1981), *Ceremony* (1982), *Taming a Sea Horse* (1986), in which Spenser refers to Increase Mather, Cotton's father (p. 253), *Playmates* (1989), *Double Deuce* (1992), even *Stardust* (1990) and *Crimson Joy* (1988), all have a "lost child" motif and Spenser's concern for its salvation as central theme, and it is a tangential interest in others such as *Mortal Stakes* (1975) and *Pastime* (1991). But consideration of the canon rather than the individual novels leads inevitably to the development of Spenser's sensibility rather than to the matters at hand in each plot.

Nor does Spenser's New England conscience stop with the various adumbrations of Cotton Mather's criteria for the do-gooder; a powerful intellectual and social impetus for his character might be found in the writings of the great moralist Ralph Waldo Emerson. Despite the physicality of Spenser's profession, he is an American Scholar. In an age even more aptly characterized by Emerson's indictment that "men are become of no account. Men in history, men of today, are bugs, are spawn, and are called 'the mass' and 'the herd'" (p. 75), Spenser represents the true man, true to himself and to his ideals (all references to the works of Emerson are by title and page number).³

He knows Emerson's ideas. When Loudon Tripp misquotes the famous maxim from *Self-Reliance* as "he who would be a man must be a non-conformist" and waits, Spenser identifies the source (*Paper Doll*, 1993, p. 10). In the context of the conversation it is explained why Spenser rejected the regimen of the police department to become a private eye and his own man. Later in the novel he clarifies to Susan his need to be independent of authority, using the example of a man he respects, Lt. Martin Quirk of the Homicide Division:

"You can't push Quirk, but he's a career cop. It's his nationality—cop. If the chain of command limits him, he'll stay inside those limits."

"And not say so?"

"And not even think there are limits," I said. (p. 164)

If he is anything, Spenser is a non-conformist. His solutions to situations are original, if not bizarre: in *Mortal Stakes* he uses the power of a good press to save a sports hero and his ex-prostitute wife; in *Early Autumn* he blackmails unfit parents to provide a more wholesome boarding-school life for their son; in *Ceremony* he locates an abused teenage hooker in the relatively safe haven of a high-class New York bordello run by a benevolent madam. In several cases, beginning with *The Godwulf Manuscript*, his initiative and non-conformity direct him beyond his initial job and re-invest his energies in either larger issues or in the interests of others, sometimes even the ones he has been hired to return to the conformist fold; *Mortal Stakes*, *Promised Land*, *The Widening Gyre* (1983), *Stardust*, *Double Deuce*, and *Paper Doll*, for instances, can be read this way.

If one considers the influences Emerson posits in *The American Scholar* to be the common ground of such men, Spenser is a *summa cum laude* American Scholar. The temporal and significant first influence is nature; though Spenser's usual landscape is urban, his descriptions of nature—and particularly of weather (which a Boston cab driver once assured me was the most important conversational subject of serious Bostonians)—are excellent. Describing a place he has agreed to meet a gangster named Doerr who will try to ambush him there, he says:

3. *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960).

A small hill sloped up from the road, and scooped out of the side of it was a hollow the size of a basketball court and the shape of a free-form pool. About in the middle was a flat-planed granite slab, higher than a man's head at one end that tapered into the ground in a shape vaguely like a shark fin. (*Mortal Stakes*, pp. 262–63)

Having set the transition from city/artificial (court, pool) to natural (granite, shark fin), Spenser has also made it a little ominous, and goes on to describe the rest of the setting before settling in for what he knows will be a messy—and unorthodox—scene: he will ambush the ambushers.

In *Early Autumn* he uses Susan's cabin in Maine as a back-to-nature retreat to begin the maturation of his young charge, Paul Giacomin. A good bit of the action in *A Catskill Eagle* (1985) takes place away from the city, and Spenser is remarkably able to convert to a forest-style stalker in it. He returns to Susan's cabin to heal the spiritually wounded actress Jill Joyce in *Stardust*. But perhaps the most notable of his woodsy adventures is his escape from Gerry Broz, though wounded, when Broz and his henchmen (including a tracker) pursue him through the forest near Concord in *Pastime*. He relies on survivalist techniques, eating wild artichokes, packing his wound with moss, and eventually takes Broz from his helpers, all the while with self-mocking humor. In nature he survives, or as Emerson put it, he is in sympathy with it, for "its laws are the laws of his own mind" (Emerson, p. 66).

Spenser is, of course, the avid reader among hard-boiled detectives (James Sallis' Lew Griffin is perhaps the only better-read one), and his reading is congruent with Emerson's second influence on the American Scholar. He is conversant enough with literature to allude to a range of writers from Shakespeare and Herrick to Eliot and Faulkner, but he does not stick to "The Canon" (whatever that might prove). He reads Samuel Eliot Morrison, Barbara Tuchman, and Richard Slotkin on periods distant from his own. It is significant that in those eras—the Nineteenth Century in America, the Fourteenth Century in France—whatever polity was actual, historical figures represented and believed themselves to be acting out of a system of belief and honor. How often the idea of a code, derisively put by others like Rachael Wallace or even Susan, or in utter seriousness, comes up in the Spenser novels! He may joke about it himself, and the redoubtable Hawk may even call him a Boy Scout, as he does most recently in both *Chance* (1996) and *Small Vices* (1997), but all recognize that it is his adherence to his code of behavior that makes Spenser what he is and accounts for their attraction to him. When he deviates from the code, as in *A Savage Place* (1981), *A Catskill Eagle*, or *Mortal Stakes*, he is courting disaster or failure, or becomes a monstrosity until he re-establishes himself firmly on its moral ground.

As early as 1985 Lonnie Willis, in a very perceptive essay, noted that "Thoreau is nearly ubiquitous in the protagonist's consciousness in the

Spenser novels" (p. 1).⁴ Spenser is teased about it in *Ceremony* and disclaims that he was seen building a cabin by a Concord pond; and he admits in *Promised Land* (p. 116) that he believes "most of the nonsense that Thoreau was preaching," and, of course, he retreats to the cabin in Maine in *Early Autumn*. He has built himself, made himself as he is, through the virtues and discipline he applies. He has become, in one of his favorite words, autonomous, and he will help others reach the same goal. It is easy to forget that Thoreau did not retreat to Walden Pond to build a sod house; he went to build his soul, and that is precisely what Spenser is doing, with the dedication of a Thoreau and an aim at the breadth of an Emerson. The inconsequentiality of his wilderness capability—how he is able to squat in the rain for hours and eat trail-mix in *A Catskill Eagle*, how he foils pursuers in *Pastime* while wounded and encumbered by a gun-shy hunting dog—are just that, inconsequential.

Spenser is in a complicated position. He rests firmly on the assumptions of a New England consciousness, but looks forward to the cultural attitudes articulated by Richard Slotkin (himself a Wesleyan professor) in *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973), *Fatal Environment* (1985), and *Gunfighter Nation* (1992). All three books examine the myth of the frontier and its effect on American consciousness. It is worth noting that New England's consciousness was a frontier one at the beginning, as Spenser notes in *Promised Land* (p. 101).

There are many less emphatic echoes in the novels as well. Some are contained in the physical descriptions of nature and are reminiscent of the nature poems of the Brahmins, and especially of Whittier. It can be argued that similarities will naturally occur in the observations of highly educated, articulate writers who live, even at different times, in the same environment. That is the point: it is Spenser's consciousness that Parker represents, and that consciousness is in synch with a whole attitudinal and responsive tradition.

Nor does the affinity stop with the Nineteenth-Century New Englanders. Parker is fond of allusion, and one of his most frequent sources is Robert Frost. He alludes to a variety of Frost poems, often merely in passing, as a device to incorporate a response we feel to the larger context of Frost's work without full replication of it: in *The Godwulf Manuscript*, "Birches" (p. 121); "Stopping by Woods" (p. 123); Frost's statement that his poems are "a lover's quarrel with the world" (p. 200), just to cite the first Spenser novel. But the clearest, most relevant, and longest-held allusion is to Frost's poem "Two Tramps in Mud Time," an allusion from which *Mortal Stakes* takes its title. It is a poem about competence, one's place in time and nature, and autonomy. Still, it is even more about the design for a life that a thoughtful man might make, and why:

4. Lonnie Willis, "Henry David Thoreau and the Hard Boiled Dick," *The Thoreau Society Bulletin* 170 (Winter 1985): 1-3.

... yield who will to their separation,
 My object in living is to unite
 My avocation and my vocation
 As my two eyes make one in sight.
 Only where love and need are one,
 And the work is play for mortal stakes,
 Is the deed ever really done
 For Heaven and the future's sakes.⁵

This is no fugitive outbreak of New England sentiment in either Frost or Parker, for it is repeated twenty-two years later in *Small Vices*, when Susan echoes the poem's lines. Commenting on the nexus of kindness and violence in Spenser's life, she says, "You are able to apply the impulse to violence in the service of compassion. Your profession allows you actually to exist at the point where vocation and avocation meet" (p. 155). This is homage, of course, but also recognition of kinship and community. That both Frost's speaker (presumably himself) and Spenser are New Englanders by choice rather than by birth is of little moment: they share a common understanding of a man's role in shaping his life.

Spenser is a constructed man—his own construct—in a deconstructed age. In his social attitudes he exhibits the behavior one expects from his tradition; he accepts races, genders, ages, nationalities, and sexual orientations with equanimity, judging by performance rather than grouping (as he says, "watch what I do and you'll pretty much know what I am"). But he recognizes that the world in which he must act—as an Emersonian hero, perhaps—is a world of illusion and purposeful delusion. His path often leads him to the Combat Zone, filled with prostitutes, junkies, pimps, and petty criminals, the pilot fish of organized crime. Here, nothing is what it seems. It is the Boston of, say, the poet John Wieners' "Nerves,"⁶ a sad place of lost dreams and negatives. Against it, Spenser opposes his insistence on making what is real apparent (the job of any good investigator).

For a long time I thought that there was some chord, some common note between Spenser's position and the terse, almost brittle clarity of the poetry of Massachusetts-born and -reared poet Robert Creeley. Parker says (in a note, October 1997) that he has not read Creeley, and I have not found a single allusion to Creeley's work in the novels, though that poetry would have been current in the years when Parker successfully pursued an academic career in Boston. Two things persuade me that they have much in common. In a public television interview in the mid-60s Creeley talks of the native New Englander's care for authenticity, to have things present as they really are. This is Spenser's concern as well, and it means that if understanding reveals a reality neither pleasant nor orthodox (e.g., *Ceremony* and *Taming a*

5. *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. E.C. Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 277.

6. Excerpted in *Selected Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), pp. 111 ff.

Sea Horse, Crimson Joy, Paper Doll), then that, too, must be dealt with. Another factor is Creeley's reason for beginning his college experience at Harvard: it represented for him, as New England does for Spenser's father, the "great tradition." From these two elements springs a commonality of attitude that encompasses the originality, the insistence on autonomy, the self-reliance bordering on assurance in the face of misfortune that mark both Creeley's persona and Spenser as inheritors of a long and rich heritage of the New England conscience.