The Flow of Time in Spenser’s “Epithalamion”

Fukushima Nahoko

(1) Epithalamion and Spenser

Spenser’s “Epithalamion” is written in the first person, celebrating his wedding day in June. It opens up its poetic world thus:

Ye learned sisters which haue oftentimes
Beene to me ayding, others to adorne:
Whom ye thought worthy of your gracefull rymes,
That euen the greatest did not gratly scorne
To heare theyr names sung in your simple layes,
But ioyed in theyr prayse.\(^{(1)}\)

The poet (for we will assume for convenience of discussion here that the voice of the poem is Spenser’s own) addresses the Muses, wishing that he and his bride can successfully finish their wedding rituals and procedures, and also that he can successfully create his own celebration poem to rhapsodize his love and to admire the beauty of his bride.
Before going into a detailed examination of the world of Spenser’s “Epithalamion,” I would like to take a look at its formal exterior structure. It is composed in twenty-three stanzas and an envoi, making twenty-four sections in all. The exterior structure of this poem has already highlighted the element of “time” as central to its poetic world, as A. Kent Hieatt demonstrates in his *Short Time’s Endless Monument*. In this paper, I would like to add a further layer to our understanding of the evocation of “time” seen in the poem through the examination of two different types of “time” and the tension between them, as well as the tensions within each kind.

(2) Spenser’s “Epithalamion” and Time

When we take a look at the exterior structure of the poem, we notice that the last stanza is shorter than the rest of the stanzas—less than half as long. While the other stanzas have eighteen to nineteen lines, the last stanza has only seven. In other words, the last stanza, which is the twenty-fourth one, seems to have failed to complete its task. We might also say that, when these stanzas are compared to the hours of a day, this poetic world remains incomplete, the text fails to complete this important day, the wedding day, because of this shortened last stanza.

The poetic world does not carry a full day, and thus the evoked wedding is still short of its goal, in other words, its sexual consummation, towards which the entire poem has been impatiently pressing. This indicates that the bride and bridegroom do not reach sexual consummation. Can this still be called a complete poem? We can already see the representation of tension in this form itself, and I would like to come back to this “problematic” last stanza later in this paper. For the moment, however, let us simply note that the exterior structure of this poem has already highlighted the element of “time” as central to this poetic world, which would seem to point our attention toward the temporal function also within the “depth” of the poetic world. Thus I would like to pay special attention to the aspect of “time” in this paper.

This poem is composed of twenty-four stanzas. It can be said that, from the beginning, the notion of twenty-four here is ambiguous when it is associated with “time.” We can take this as a numerical sequence from one to twenty-four arranged
in a linear progression, which is theoretically a small portion of a much longer time line extending to infinity in both directions. And in this case, twenty-four indicates "linear time." Or, also we can consider twenty-four as a circle, the twenty-four hours of a day that form a repeating cycle. In this case, twenty-four indicates "cyclical time." In other words, Spenser's "Epithalamion" includes two different kinds of time, linear and cyclical, which interact with each other and create several kinds of tensions.

Let us examine the poem from the point of time and the tension between these two kinds of time, as well as the tensions within each kind. This examination can be divided into three parts. First, I will discuss the tension between linear time and cyclical time that appears in the poetic world. Second, I will move on to the tensions within cyclical time. Thirdly, I will look at the tension within linear time, and then we go back to the question of the last stanza again.

(3) The Tension between Linear and Cyclical Time

Now let us examine the tension between linear time and cyclical time. As we have already seen earlier in this paper, the form of this poem itself implies this tension. We can observe the climax of this tension between linear time and cyclical time in the very last line of the last stanza: "And for short time an endlesse moniment." Here, "short time" indicates the remaining time of the day, which is coming to its end in linear time. But the phrase is followed by "endless moniment," which might be seen as a pun on "moment," and this points to the dimension of cyclical time, since "endless moment" would indicate that this moment is coming back again and again and will be extended infinitely in its eternal recurrence. In other words, the ending brings us to the beginning, and this movement continues.

Things can happen in both linear time and cyclical time. While in cyclical time, for example, morning comes again and again after twenty-four hours every day, and every event happens again. Even when we mention "the joy of the wedding night," in cyclical time, it also means that "the joy" will happen hereafter, every night, every month... or every year. In other words, the status of being married exists in cyclical time. On the other hand, in linear time, "the joy of the wedding night" (at least of this wedding night) occurs only once in a lifetime. Every event
in linear time is new and decisive. Let us take a look at a passage in stanza three for example:

And let them make great store of bridale poses,
And let them eeke bring store of other flowers
To deck the bridale bowers.
(stanza 3, lines 9-11)

As stanza three indicates, if a person is waiting for and looking forward to a special event, then that seems to show the flow of linear time. Spenser, in writing this poem, announces his eagerness to welcome his bride. This means that the event happens in linear time, at least in an arc of cyclical time that is presently being considered subjectively linear. The act of waiting itself places us within linear time.

We can also observe the poet’s impatience toward the event in stanza fourteen. He clarifies here that he is looking forward to this event and at the same time, that he wants to make the day special:

Neuer had man more joyfull day then this,
Whom heauen would heape with blis.
Make feast therefore now all this liue long day,
This day for euer to me holy is.
(stanza 14, lines 5-8)

Here, he rhapsodizes that this event is really special for him. Again, he is waiting for the special incident in linear time. But at the same time, he wants to commemorate the day, probably keep the anniversary every year. Here, the tension arises. Waiting for the special day and celebrating that specific moment itself occur in linear time, but waiting for “the memorial day” and celebrating it carry different implications for the notion of time. As to the anniversary, it is a date that comes back again and again every year. Needless to say, this recurrence is situated in cyclical time. Therefore, once the poet announces his desire to make the day holy, the tension between linear time and cyclical time arises simultaneously.

Another point must be noted in this connection. He wants to celebrate his spe-
cial day “forever.” The notion of “forever” can be taken in two ways. We can take the notion in what might be called an “eschatological” sense, which would spell an end to the recurrent perishing of cyclical time, and indeed of time itself to the extent that it involves the cycle of coming into existence and disappearing. This sense of “forever” means infinite duration, extending forward as it is without limit. But “forever” can also have a cyclical meaning. The event that is here being celebrated comes and goes every night in their sacred bedroom, this day comes every month, and the anniversary comes every year, again and again, as eternal recurrence. So there is a possibility here to interpret forever in these two contrasting ways.

In stanza fifteen, the tension between linear time and cyclical time on the wedding day becomes much clearer:

This day is holy; doe ye rite it downe,
That ye for euer it remember may.
This day the sunne is in his chiefest hight.
...
To choose the longest day in all the yeare,
And shortest night, when longest fitter weare:
(stanza 15, lines 3-5, 11-12)

From this passage it is clear that the summer solstice is chosen as their wedding day. Again the wedding day dwells in linear time, since they are waiting for and looking forward to it. But at the same time the specific day, the summer solstice, comes back every year. In that sense the day dwells in cyclical time.

There is one more example of the tension between linear and cyclical time. In stanza three, we can see a beautiful image of bridal flowers:

And let them make great store of bridale poses,
And let them eke bring store of other flowers
To deck the bridale bowers.
(stanza 3, lines 9-11)
The bridal flowers, which will adorn the beautiful bride as well as the poet's "Epithalamion," are here associated with an event which occurs once in a lifetime. The bride here is waiting to be adorned with her wedding costume and to attend a once in a lifetime ceremony, and the bridegroom is also waiting for and celebrating this special event by composing an epithalamion. Here, the bridal flowers display their joy and expectancy toward the event in linear time. But when we consider the essential biological attribute of flowers, we note that the same kind of flowers blooms around the same time almost every year. Flowers can thus also be a marker of the existence of recurrence. Thus the "bridal flowers" dwell in both times, cyclical and linear. By now it is clear that the poetic world is marked by a constant evocation of linear and cyclical time, weaving them into one another, compressing them often into a single token, thereby exacerbating their tension with their inseparability, which adds a deeper layer into this poetic world.

(4) The Tension within Cyclical Time

Next, I would like to consider tensions within each kind of time. First, let us examine the tensions within cyclical time, of which we can observe two kinds. The first kind of tension can be found relatively easily in the poem. Let us take a look at stanza fifteen.

This day the sunne is in his chiepest hight,  
With Barnaby the bright,  
From whence declining daily by degrees,  
He somewhat loseth of his heat and light,  
When once Crab behind his back he sees.  
(stanza 15, lines 5-9)

Their wedding day, the summer solstice, already indicates the cyclicity of time, as we have seen earlier in this paper. But the interesting point here is how the day is described. Since it is a point within a cycle, a line on the circumference of a circle, we could describe the movement starting from the point in both ways; ascending or descending. It could even include both. After the summer solstice, we can
see that the natural objects are dying and therefore descending. Or meteorologically, the length of the day and the quantity of sunlight are declining. On the other hand, we can also see the summer solstice as an anticipation of productivity, especially from the standpoint of the agricultural calendar. Since this is the starting day of the culmination of fecundity in the agricultural cycle, it serves as a token of this ascending motion from this point.

Here, in this stanza, Spenser invokes the summer solstice, the longest day of the year, which is described as the starting day of “declining.” The days will become shorter and shorter and more and more gloomy, and the temperature is going down. So how the wedding day is located in the flow of cyclical time in the passages above is as the starting point of descending.

However, in another stanza, the same day is described in terms of its other valence, as an ascending point:

And sith of wemens labours thou hast charge,
And generation goodly dost enlarge,
Encline thy will t’effect our wishful vow,
And the chast wombe informe with timely seed,
That may our comfort breed:
(stanza 21, lines 12-16)

Clearly here, the wedding day is the starting day of procreation, the result of the ultimate goal of the wedding day. Thus in cyclical time, we have observed that tension is intrinsic in movement. Tension arises in cyclical time whenever we try to decide which way the cyclical movement is directed. The way up is the way down, and every motion in the cycle is directed toward every other point, and proceeds from every other point.

There is another kind of tension generated within cyclical time. In order to exist, any phase within cyclical time needs its opposite. For example, in order to have summer, winter is absolutely necessary. If “summer” just kept increasing its tendency, in other words, if the days just kept getting longer and longer, then we would eventually have only constant daylight, and night would cease to exist. Thus summer, defined as “the tendency for the days to get longer,” would also cease to
exist, for the days could get no longer. And the same thing can be said of “winter,” “night,” and “day.” If they just kept increasing their tendency, they could no longer survive. To stop their tendency, they need to be pinched between contradictory tendencies, so that they can continue to exist. This characteristic in cyclical time could be called contradiction in its most extreme form, or an informing restriction, rather than tension here. Spenser does not explicitly evoke this “informing restriction” in cyclical time in his poem, but we can trace this characteristic in the following lines in stanza six:

But first come ye fayre houres which were begot
In Joues sweet paradice, of Day and Night,
Which doe the seasons of ther yeare allot,
And al that euer in this world is fayre
Do make and still repayre.
(stanza 6, lines7-11)

In order to be one of “the seasons,” it has to be divided into “Day and Night.” This suggests that cyclical time leaves things incomplete. Now the characteristic of cyclical time in Spenser’s poetic world becomes clear. Later in this paper, I would like to verify this trait of cyclical time in order to understand what the last stanza indicates.

(5) The Tensions within Linear Time

Lastly, I would like to consider the characteristics of the tensions that appear within linear time. First of all, we may be allowed to say that linear time contains a number of different attributes within itself. The first attribute we notice may be called “physical time.” This is the sort of time that is marked by the motions of a clock. Physical time is regular and does not change its pace. We can observe the same flow of this physical time in the poetic world. Each stanza, which can be considered as a unit of time, i.e., an hour, since there are twenty-four stanzas, finishes with a repeating refrain. These last lines are, for example, thus:
“The woods shall to me answer and my Echo ring.”
(the first stanza)
“The whiles the woods shall answer and your echo ring.”
(the sixth stanza)
“To which the woods did answer and your echo ring.”
(the tenth stanza)
“Ne let the woods them anser, nor their echo ring.”
(the einghteenth stanza)
“The woods no more vs anwer, nor our echo ring.”
(the twenty-third stanza)

The rest of other refrains are variations on this same theme. In this poem, no matter what is described in each stanza, no matter how the poet feels, after consuming a certain amount of lines, i.e., time, similar last lines follow without fail, and tell us that regular time flows. Moreover, each last line “rings” at the very end, as if it were a clock. As we can see above, the rhythm of the poem shows that time cannot be accelerated, even though the poet may want time to pass quickly or slowly. No matter who we are or how we feel, physical time keeps flowing regularly.

(6) Another Type of Flow: “Psychological Time”

By now, we notice that there is another type of flow that proceeds at different paces, due to the poet’s feelings. We sometimes feel the different paces of the flow of time depending on our consciousness. Sometimes we feel that time passes too slowly and sometimes too quickly. And this is totally dependent on our psychology; therefore, we may want to give this type of flow of linear time the name, “psychological time."

Let us take a look at stanzas sixteen, seventeen and the envoi. At the moment portrayed in stanza sixteen, the wedding ritual is still proceeding, and the poet is eager to finish up the ceremony so that they can share the wedding bed. Spenser describes how the bridegroom perceives the pace of time thus:

How slowly do the houres they numbers spend!
How slowly does sad Time his feathers moue?
Hast thee, O fairest planet, to thy home
Within the Western fome:
(stanza 16, lines 3-6)

The poet points out here that there are certain occasions when we feel that time
flows unbearably slowly, though physical time is flowing at its usual regulated pace,
he claims that no matter how accurate a pace physical time keeps, the time seems
to flow too slowly to him, and he expresses his impatience over this regular pace
of flowing time.

In stanza seventeen, now that the wedding procedure is almost over, and night-
fall is coming, the poet's perception of the pace of time starts changing:

Now cease ye damsels your delights forepast;
Enough is it, that all the day was youres:
Now day is doen, and night is nighting fast:
...
Now it is night, ye damsels my be gon,
And leaue my loue alone,
(stanza 17, lines 1-3, 16-7)

Now the moment he has been awaiting for a long time, especially in psychologi-
cal time, has come, and the poet wants time to pass slowly, so that they can have
a long night together all alone. He asks the Muses to leave them alone. We also
notice that the tone of the refrain changes here. The refrain until the sixteenth
stanza is written in the affirmative, but from the seventeenth stanza, it turns into a
negative sentence. So even though physical time keeps its pace regularly, the sign
of this pace, i.e., the repeating refrain of each stanza, sounds different to the poet,
due to the state of his consciousness. And in the last stanza, the poet even
describes retrospectively the wedding day and events as having lasted only "for
short time" (stanza 24, the last line). So in "psychological time," we perceive the
pace of linear time different than actual "physical time." Moreover, psychological
time seems to have an unlimited self-modifying power here, such that a single
stretch of time can be, psychologically, both long and short, depending on whether it is presently being experienced or recalled upon. There seems to be no theoretical limit to the retrospective revisions that are possible for the specific values of any given stretch of psychological time.

(7) How the Tensions of the Time-Flows Conclude

Now let us examine these two different attributes in linear time. In linear time, every object is involved in a process and therefore incomplete. Its incompleteness can indicate any number of different processes, each of which can be thought of as a tendency in a different direction. Some wish to move toward completion, some wish to remain as they are, and maybe some even direct themselves toward destruction. But even in the latter case, inasmuch as this is a process and a project, it entails incompleteness of that project and a tendency toward it. Also we can put it this way: any given objects wish to remain as they are, but at the same time, objects keep changing their status in the flow of time, which keeps moving forward. In other words, in order to exist in linear time, tension is inevitable and intrinsic in time. Time itself is the tension. For example, in the poetic world, Spenser wishes time to proceed as quickly as possible during the daytime, and on the other hand, he desires it to stop when night comes, to make it flow as slowly as possible, so that it might endure. However, these wishes contradict the basic character of linear physical time. Time has to keep moving regularly. Thus arises the tension. From the passage below from stanza seven, we also can sense the poet’s eagerness to stop the moment:

Fit for so joyfull day,
The joyfulst day that euer sunne did see. ...
But let this day, let this one day be mine:
Let all the rest be thine.
(stanza 7, lines 6-9)

The poet wants the day to hold its special status but, again, it contradicts the character of regulated time. In other words, as to the function of perceiving “time,”
human consciousness cannot help directing itself in a different dimension from that which physical linear time demands. As objects existing in time, our existences themselves are exactly what they are at each specific moment; in Spenser’s case, wearing a wedding costume and attending the ceremony. On the other hand, consciousness does not and by its nature cannot restrict itself to the solitary present moment of physical linear time; it starts wandering around in the time constituted by imagination. For example, while attending the wedding ceremony in the wedding costume, because of his strong desire, his consciousness cannot help imagining the night time, distending this physical moment against its current so that it lies stretched between these two contrasted moments. Therefore, his psychological time dwells in a certain period of the future, at least for a while, and comes back to the present moment. Thus our consciousness functions, as to the perception of time, like a looping, which sticks to the line of physical linear time; we project ourselves in a certain period of the future (or even in the past), and return to the present moment. Strictly speaking, we cannot dwell in the physical moment, even for a moment, as it were. In our consciousness, there are infinite numbers of these loops in our perception of time, and the loops are another kind of tension.

Which brings us, by way of a conclusion, to a closer look at this last stanza, the envoi. The reaching of the wedding goal comes after the poem ends, it is not included among the events described therein. What does this indicate? In the last stanza, the poet is saying good-bye to his own poem, and making excuses to the Muses that he has to stop reporting the wedding day in the middle without telling the most joyful part of it. And he promises to give a “recompense” for this omission:

Song mae in lieu of many ornaments,
With which my loue should duly haue bene dect,
Which cutting off through hasty accidents,
But promist both to recompens,
Be unto her a goodly ornament,
And for short time an endless moniment.
(stanza 24)
This implies that this poem is an ornament for his bride, but he has to stop at this point, even though in the poem, the conclusion or the aim, that is, the consummation, has not occurred. For the poet has these “hasty accidents” which I interpret to mean “his hasty attribute,” in other words, his impatience—he cannot wait to get to his wedding bed. Now it seems that this action of “cutting off” the poem would damage “both” the reputation of the beautiful bride, since the ornamental praise of her—the poem—is incomplete, and his own poem itself, and hence, perhaps, his reputation as a poet. But there is “recompense” for this damage—it is worthwhile doing it. Because, by cutting this last stanza off in the middle, the poet succeeds in expressing his eagerness and his strong desire for his bride, and that is the highest praise for his bride.

The real completion of the poem, i.e., its “due time,” then, seems to come after the end of the poem, in the white space at the end of the page, but by omitting the formal completion and the explicit narration of the events which the entire rest of the poem lead up to, these events are highlighted, given an extra reality, and their urgency and power are enhanced, for they actually make the poet drop his pen and attend to them. This is a strong ending.

Moreover, cyclical time implies a return to the beginning of the cycle, such that the “cutting off,” here in the twenty-fourth stanza leads our attention back to stanza one, emphasizing again the ambiguity of the uniqueness of the day. Since we have not only the view of linear time, for which this is one special unique event, but also the sense of the cyclical time, for which it is forever repeated. Cyclical phases require incompleteness in order to survive, that is, the opposition of their limiting other, since completion of their tendency leads to a destruction of the cycle. This incompleteness is thus the motor that keeps the system moving. As Timothy Bahti puts, the end of the poem is “where reading has to rebegin, never end.”

This day, while living it, has been uncommonly long. Now that it is ending, it is seen to have passed away very quickly, just as the stanza breaks off prematurely. But this short day will also come back, as its own commemorative anniversary each year, and now, since the broken off poem serves as such a powerful and striking witness to the intensity of this day’s passion, also due to the poem itself, the endless monument to this “endless” moment—that is, this moment which deliberately
lacks a proper "end" (and indeed is "less than end," not quite coming up to it). If we tie all these ends together, we come to the conclusion that it is just this "endlessness," its incompleteness, which gives the poem the power to return and play itself over and over, like the daily cycle that gives it its form.

**Notes:**


**Bibliography:**

*<Text>*


*<Scholarly works>*


