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The Angelic Messenger in "Aire and Angels"

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"Aire and Angels" is a poem of ascent and descent. The poet's soul ascends to the vision of the angelical lady only to descend with her, as his love takes on the necessary heft of earthly desire, into the more hospitable region of air. Many critics, R. V. Young among them, link the angel in the first stanza of the poem with the lady and the angel at the end with the male lover, showing how the sexes switch roles, as the man moves from idealized Petrarchan "spiritual" love to a realistic sexual love. But are these the only angels of the poem? I would like to consider how the usual concept of angel—the angel as divine messenger—also informs the poem. For the angel as the messenger to the poet—almost the poet's muse—is also a necessary medium for the descent from the spiritual plane of the first to the earthly plane of the second part of the poem. The angel brings the poet's unearthly vision down to earth, gives it form and voice. "Aire and Angels" is not just a poem about women and men in love, but also about the relationship between spiritual and corporeal states--and the inevitable and necessary movement from the one to the other.

An angel is, of course, a messenger—that is what the word means—and, as such, an intermediary between heaven and earth. He comes usually with tidings of joy or woe, often in response to some sort of human petition. As a messenger, he has something specific to tell, and his message, though conveyed from the realms above, has particular significance for the realms below. A human being asks or seeks something, and the angel is there to respond and enlighten. In Donne's poem, the poet-lover wants to know how to attain love, and the angelic messenger puts him in mind to learn.

The question is posed in the first of two inverted sonnets that make up "Aire and Angels." The poet is seeking not only a physical identity for the angelical lady that he has glimpsed once or twice in a "voice" or as "some lovely glorious nothing," but also a physical definition for love itself. He calls love the child of the soul; as such it, like the soul or the beloved angelical lady, is a spiritual essence. But, if love is only that, it cannot be fully apprehended or experienced by the physical lover. Love must take on flesh, must descend from the spiritual realms, and paradoxically, like its parent, the soul, lodge in a body. For the lover to know and understand what love is, it must as a heavenly concept or idea travel downward. The means for its descent, as the medium for dissemination of all information

originating in heaven, but descending to earth, must be the angel. Love in his quest for the lady is, in fact, just that—an angel in the familiar form of the cherub Amor—whom the poet in line 12 bids to "aske" what the lady was and whom he tells to assume her own body. It is a commonplace enough Petrarchan notion that Amor or love resides in the lady's eyes or heart, hence her very body.

Stanza one gives us two angelic annunciations, first of the conception, then the birth of love. The angel speaks the word and the word becomes flesh. The poet's intellect conceives first the lady as a spirit entity and then realizes her in flesh in a human "lip, eye, and brow." As Young has pointed out, Aquinas makes an analogy between the angel assuming a corporeal body in order to appear to human beings and the figural indication that Christ too was ordained to descend and take flesh. Hence there is an analogy between the intellectual descent of the word—the poet's concept of love—and the descent of the angel-messenger into the world as the medium revealing that word to human beings.

The problem the poet posed in stanza one is how the spiritual idea may take proper earthly form; the problem in stanza two is just the opposite: how the spiritual may retain its integrity in a physical context. In short, in stanza two the angel has descended and must tell his tidings to earth, without compromising the other-worldly nature of his message. From the beginning of stanza two the physical threatens to "sink" the tangible vessel or pinnace, in which love, the child of the soul, has embodied itself. In the heavens, the proper vessel for the angel or the muse of the intelligence that moves love is the sphere. In Renaissance mythographies, in fact, angels and muses are interchangeable as the spirits who govern the spheres. In the Ptolemaic system nine spheres circle the earth, each controlled by one of the nine Muses or one of the nine orders of angels. When a poet wishes to bring a heavenly concept down to earth, he appeals for guidance to one of the muses or angels that guide the spheres. Is it too much to dub the angelic intelligence of this poem Erato, the muse of love poetry, or to suggest that in describing how the man as "angel" seeks to guide as his proper sphere woman's love, Donne is making an earthly sexual analogy to a heavenly asexual mystery? In order to bring this mystery down to earth, moreover, the poet-lover needs the agency of the angel or muse. The vision of love first came to him through an angelical lady—"a lovely glorious nothing"; now he must bring it to earth. In order not only to appear, but also to be heard, the angel needs air. Through the medium of air the face and wings of the angel become visible; also through air as a resonating medium, the angel's message becomes audible. We learn from the poet how spiritual love may manifest itself on earth. The very words of the poem that the poet, inspired by the angel, delivers to us are the aural message.

Donne's "Aire and Angels" concludes with a comparison of man's to woman's love. We need not take it as a remark that demeans or slights woman's love. At the onset of the poem, Donne had compared the effect of woman on man to the effect of angels on humankind; at the end, he makes an analogy between man's love

and the angel, who, undescended, has not yet manifested himself, and between woman's love and the air by which the angel manifests himself. What he says applies as much to the difference between man's and woman's love. The angel—pure spirit—cannot make his message known in the world without the medium of air, the purest of all earthly elements. Neither can the poet-lover bring his vision of love to earth without bridging, like the angel, the spiritual and physical worlds. The sphere or earthly vehicle, by which man's love is expressed, that is, woman's love, will never be as pure as the lover's original intimations of glorious nothings. Donne is not speaking of the difference between men and women, but of the difference between intellectual love, conceived first by the man, and embodied love, realized through the man's love of woman—hence, "woman's love." A similar distinction exists also between the angelic inspiration and the angelic word expressed. Any spiritual message realized—be it intellectual concept or the idea of love or even the idea of a poem—will never in its earthly embodiment be the same as the wordless word the angel knew before he brought his message to earth. It is just this disparity that Donne also implicitly deals with.

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