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"Aire and Angels" and Questionable Shapes

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Readings of Donne's "Aire and Angels" often quarrel over the nature of the final conjunction of matter and spirit, seeing in it, variously, the dominance of either male or female principle, the acceptance or rejection of the physical, and other polarities that certainly exist in the poem. Regardless of the critic's focus, however, each analysis acknowledges a number of disturbing image clusters throughout the poem: a sequential discarding of wrong or at least problematic ways of looking at the lady before the "correct" conclusion is reached. I should like to suggest that some of these images are more than merely disturbing, that they are in fact highly sinister in the context of Renaissance spirit-lore, and that they call into question Petrarchan notions of love in the same manner as do poems such as "The Extasie" and "The Canonization."

Line 4 of the poem, "*Angells* affect us oft, and worship'd bee," undoubtedly alludes to the Petrarchan religion of love. More important, however, is the verb "worship" itself. As a throwaway compound verb to the periodic sentence that lists the *a*ffective quality of the angelic presence, it seems to follow logically as an *e*ffect of that presence. But in theological reality, it may refer to a long-condemned heresy—not angel*ology* but angel*olatry*. Angels are not to be accorded *latria*. To be sure, the word "worship" might indicate the lesser "veneration," or simply the exaggerated form of "love" used in Petrarchan poetry; but considering the revival of doctrinal controversy on the subject, in which Roman Catholics were accused indeed of worshiping angels and saints with *latria*, and in which Donne himself became engaged on the Protestant side, we may view the word with suspicion. That suspicion may deepen as we look more closely at the "glorious nothing" that the lover encounters in the lady two lines later. If this is an angel, it is a negative, a spurious, perhaps even a dangerous angel; nor must we forget that there are fallen angels as well as Petrarchan angels—one of whom indeed demanded to be "worship'd" in the third temptation of Christ.

If this allusion seems stretched, we must also remember that not only Aquinas maintained the theory that angels are non-corporeal beings who appear by clothing themselves in air. Such contemporary Protestants as Ludwig Lavater, Reginald Scot, and James VI of Scotland (James I of England to be) discuss angels—fallen and otherwise—in their explorations of apparitions, and in all cases maintain that

such apparitions show themselves by bending currents of air into the desired shape. Notably, all of these experts on apparitions warn repeatedly that although some manifestations may indeed be good spirits (it is otherwise impossible to account for the angelic appearances in Scripture), more often they are evil spirits; in any case, they must be tested in various ways to determine their nature.

As for the appearance of the angel-lady in "Aire and Angels," James had suggested that the apparitions may occasionally clothe themselves in matter as well as air,[1] although Lavater and Scot were doubtful about such a theory, because in such cases an apparition would leave a pile of debris—or puddles—on the floor when it vanished. According to Scot:

> Now saie they that imagine diuels and spirits to be made of aier, that it must needs be, that they consist of that element; because otherwise when they vanish suddenlie awaie, they should leaue some earthie substance behind them. If they were of water, then should they moisten the place where they stand, and must needs be shed on the floore. If they consisted of fier, then would they burne anie thing that touched them.[2]

However, Scot also corrects the conclusion that the only remaining element of which apparitions may be made is air; they may not be *made* of air, he says, because "aier is *Corpus homogenium*; so euerie part of aier is aier, whereof there can be no distinct members made. For an organicall bodie must haue bones, sinewes, veines, flesh, &c: which canot be made of aier."[3] Rather, then, spirits most likely create impressions on men's minds, shaping their "appearances" in the form of hallucination only.

James and Lavater agree with Scot to a point, but grant apparitions more management over the physical. Aside from James's speculation about spirits' abilities to animate dead bodies, the conclusion of James and Lavater is that most often spirits appear by thickening currents of air or bending the air into desired shapes. This method of appearance, James adds, explains why a spirit may appear to only one person in a group: "For if [a spirit] may forme what kinde of impressiones he pleases in the aire . . . why may he not far easilier thicken & obscure so the air, that is next about them by contracting it strait together, that the beames of any other mans eyes cannot pearce thorow the same to see them?"[4] In any case, the spirit does not become *of* the matter, even the air, but rather *uses* the air-matter to create an image. Air, of course, leaves no pile of debris when the spirit abandons it, but reshapes itself naturally into the invisible element.

In Donne's poem, thus, the investiture of the ideal form of stanza one in "thy lip, eye, and brow" becomes a sort of golem, the questionable shape alluded to by Hamlet when he speculates on what he will do if the spectre "assume my noble father's person."[5] Note the similarity of phrasing to that of Donne's line 13, "That it assume thy body." Note, too, the disturbing manner of the investiture: an

inverted blazon, moving upward from lip to brow, and only bits and pieces of the lady, rather than a consolidated entity. Stanza two, then, acknowledges the golem-like construct of stanza one, and discards it along with the "nothing" of disembodied love: it becomes "things / Extreme, and scatt'ring bright," the pile of debris, however lovely, of Scot's and Lavater's objections.

Skepticism about apparitions is also part of the spirit-lore of the day. All writers on the subject—Catholic, Protestant, and rationalist—prescribe tests to determine the nature of the spirit, Lavater in particular going on for some ten pages about key words, questions, and tests of discourse to use in such situations;[6] and all caution the observer to assume the spirit evil until it proves itself otherwise. James, indeed, insists that angels do not come to earth at all; that this is an error derived from the ancient idea of Good and Evil Geniuses; and that an apparition is most likely a devil who wants to deprive men of "the tinsell of their life" and of their souls.[7] Further,

> And that the Diuel is permitted at som times to put himself in the liknes of the Saintes, it is plaine in the Scriptures, where it is said, that *Sathan can trans-form himselfe into an Angell of light.* Neither could that bring any inconvenient with the visiones of the Prophets, since it is most certaine, that God will not permit him so to deceiue his own: but only such, as first wilfully deceiues them-selues by running vnto him, whome God then suffers to fall in their owne snares, and justlie permittes them to be illuded with great efficacy of deceit, because they would not beleeue the trueth (as *Paul* sayth).[8]

Lavater gives a more homely description of the young man who is temporarily dazzled by the beauty of an apparition: "Sathan doth imitate craftie gamesters, who suffer a plaine and simple young man to winne a while of them, that afterwards being greedie to play, they may lurche him of all his golde and siluer."[9] If the "scatt'ring bright[ness]" of the apparition in stanza one is indeed so questionably bright and so suspiciously scattered, stanza two must abandon it and search for the true embodiment of love. It should prove no surprise to readers of "The Extasie" to discover that such love inheres in—or rather proceeds from—an already existing body-soul combination which may further be combined with a complementary body-soul to produce some "new concoction."

As in "The Extasie," in which change of pronouns makes the "we" become, alternately, the bodies, souls, and body-souls of the lovers, the subsequent concoction of "Aire and Angels" inverts and alternates the thing inhering and the thing in which it inheres; Petrarchan speculation having been tested and discarded, its language may now be inverted and reused for more valid conclusions. In this new definition of terms, love inheres in a combination of the lover and lady, but the male love physically inheres in the female. In other words, the "angel" of the

first stanza (the lady) has in true Donnean fashion been transformed into the man rather than the woman—but he is no more to be "worship'd" than was she, and if he demands dominance, he becomes as questionable as the disjointed body parts of stanza one. Rather, we have a new mutuality. The "spheare" of the lady's love is both the less-pure element of air (but still pure, remember) that enables the man's love to be made palpable, and the cosmological sphere that emphasizes man's place at the center; however, the mutuality that R. V. Young suggests is included in the interlocking images. Without the heavenly sphere, the center is itself a referentless pile of debris, and without air to make spirit visible, the spirit cannot act effectively in the human world.

In this last sense, and bearing in mind Donne's frequent use of cosmological imagery to mask a physical coupling in bed, I should like to dare a fashionably genital gloss on male-female mutuality in the final lines of the poem. Neither the female sphere unoccupied nor the male love with nothing to occupy produces culminative love, any more than the unclothed spirit or untenanted air/matter produces an apparition. And, in fact, should the so-called dominant male attempt to produce love without the enabling envelopment of the female, the result is onanism—impure and simple.

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Notes

[1] James I, *Daemonology, In Forme of a Dialogue* (London, 1597), pp. 58-59.

[2] Reginald Scot, *A Discourse vpon Diuels and Spirits* (London, 1584), p. 517.

[3] Scot, p. 516

[4] *Daemonology*, p. 39.

[5] William Shakespeare, "Hamlet," *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*, ed. Alfred Harbage (New York: Viking, 1977), 1.2.243.

[6] Ludwig Lavater, *Of Ghostes and Spirites, Walking by Night*, trans. "R. H." (London, 1596), pp. 105-13.

[7] *Daemonology*, pp. 63-65.

[8] *Daemonology*, p. 4.

[9] Lavater, p. 172.