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Resisting Mutuality

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The structure of this event bears a curious resemblance both to the way a Donne poem works and to the critical activity brought to bear on it—a pre-text (Young's paper) becomes three texts (Revard's, Spinrad's, Schoenfeldt's), and finally the metatext of this fourth intervention. Of course, "Aire and Angels" itself, in its structural and semantic doublings and inversions, in its vaunted idealism and its punned and intimated materialism, in its learned angelology in the service of a textual erotics possibly less subtle and refined, is simultaneously pretext and metatext riding on a barely visible, hardly audible subtext that voyeur-like we are attempting to discern.

"Aesthetic emotion," observed Rémy de Gourmont, "puts man in a state favorable to the reception of erotic emotion."[1] In Donne's case one could substitute "religious" for "aesthetic" or we could try "theological," for that is certainly an emotion for Donne for whom blasphemy seems to have had an aphrodisiac effect. Yet not all embodiments are necessarily incarnational; the elegy "To his Mistres Going to Bed" may not be the theme on which all Donne's later poems are merely variations. Is punning always the signifier of the occluded text? Is it always a pun because thinking makes it so? Just where is our over-fraught pinnace sailing? And what is its cargo? Hair? Air? Cards? Quoits? Quaint fancies and country matters? Angels, spurious or divine?

For there is hardly a word in this poem that cannot be read upside down or inside out. Indeed, there is nothing constant in this text, least of all "nothing." In line 6 it signifies angelic invisibility; by line 8 it is the earnest of carnality, "else [it] could nothing doe." By the second stanza meanings multiply and cancel each other out, since now "nor in nothing, nor in things / Extreme, and scattring bright, can love inhere" (in hair? in air?). Certainly the argument that "Aire and Angels" is blasphemous parody is helped by unpunning blasphemy in every syllable and sound, as Labriola wittily does in his essay. But even if not all the instances of blasphemy thus uncovered equally convince, his account of the poem as the parodic playing off of conflicting apprehensions of divine and phantasmic love strikes me as a useful way of negotiating the poem's competing textual spaces—now wondrously, now bitterly ideal, now bitterly, now wondrously material. But these spaces remain distinct, unresolvable, whatever glossary or archive we employ for the text's (necessary) elucidation.

And this poem, no matter what we want to make it do, no matter what mineshaft of intellectual history we want to make it dig, or inscription of cultural process we want to make it disclose, is difficult. Now an essential assumption of Young's paper is that "what is puzzling about the poem ... is largely accessible to historical and philological investigation" and that difficulties only arise when we try to make Donne's words conform to our own "assumptions and sensibilities." To which I would reply that the history we get is the history we ask for; it is not out there so much as constructed by our questions and thus, far from transparent, is informed by those unavoidable assumptions and sensibilities. Furthermore, it is largely philological investigation that has allowed for such widely and wildly divergent readings as fill the critical literature. I certainly agree that we should not sanitize Donne, giving him high marks where he is least apparently sexist (or imperialist or anti-intellectual); nor should we turn him upside down to make such defining traits disappear, to make the worse appear the better reason. But how we read, indeed what it is that we read, remains unsettled and unsettling.

"The first stanza is noble," wrote Coleridge in his copy's margins, "and reminds me of Wordsworth's apparition poem" ("She was a Phantom of Delight," suggests the editor); "The 2nd I do not understand."[2] And that has in one degree or another been a constant refrain. When James Mirollo looked for a text that would stand for the poetry of puzzlement in his study, *Mannerism and Renaissance Poetry*, his example was "Aire and Angels."[3] Look out, cautioned Patrides in a footnote to the poem, this is a text "intolerant of doctrinaire interpretations."[4] Young's paper is certainly not doctrinaire, but it does engage doctrinal issues and aligns them in a provocative way with more purely literary questions, to wit, how does reviewing the Thomist contexts for Donne's knowledge of and views on angels help explicate Donne's relation to Petrarchan and Neo-Platonic discourse? In this reading, Donne is seen as subverting and dismantling Petrarchan tropes as he rejects the dualistic notion of an irreconcilable antagonism between soul and body. That Donne rejects such dualism is true enough as a general proposition; its relation to this poem, however, is less obvious, especially if one does not accept the "disparity = mutuality" equation that grounds the argument. Furthermore, Petrarchanism can be seen as self-dismantling from Petrarch on. Donne might mock the Petrarchan mode on the level of style (those sigh tempests and such heavy weathers), but in the construction of his subjectivity he is remarkably close to Petrarch. Thomas Greene's comment that "Petrarch's search for self-discovery was complicated by the division, narcissism and volatility of that self"[5] bears a striking resemblance to Donne's description in a sermon of his "riddling, perplexed, labyrinthicall soul."[6]

Young leads us via Aquinas through an argument that woman as angel is an inadequate object for human love. The goal is thus mutuality but not equality, for man and woman remain disparate, the speaker requiring the love of the lady as the sphere for his love. This is described as an exercise in free will, but hers seems only called into play as a function of the exercise of his. Aquinas here yields place to

Paul ("wives submit") and an invoked seventeenth-century attitude towards hierarchy (he for . . ., she for . . ., etc.). It is this argument that Schoenfeldt particularly engages, as he counters Young's citations with his own, demonstrating the difficulty inherent in the concept of hierarchy as a stabilizer of meaning. Indeed, he argues that the poem actively (not accidentally) interrogates those categories that Young's argument requires as givens; that the poem's resistance to interpretation is built into the text.

Both Revard and Spinrad do not so much respond to as take off from Young's paper, coming to similar conclusions about mutuality, but with quite different although surprisingly symmetric arguments. The difference lies mainly with the supporting players—Revard's angels as good messengers vs. Spinrad's sinister spirits. What I found most suggestive in Revard's remarks, aside from the cameo appearances of Amor and Erato, is her play upon the air conceit so that the poem itself becomes the aural messenger. This allows her to shift the terms of the concluding lines to a statement of the difference between all intimations, poems included, and their embodiment. It is thus not disparity of sex, but the difference between intellectual and embodied love that is at stake (although since the former is identified as male and the latter as female we are still back at the old divide). It is a nice side step and I certainly like readings that suggest that poems are about writing poems; indeed Young's argument that the poem interrogates Petrarchan discourse makes a similar claim. They may well be right, but only by situating themselves at too great a remove from the experience of those last "blandly insolent"[7] lines.

I find Spinrad's response, while full of fascinating lore, difficult to align with the poem. Possibly Donne's angel belongs to the same semantic, cultural field as Hamlet's ghost, and there is something teasingly apposite about "things / Extreme and scatt'ring bright" as the pile of debris left by the departed apparition, but the connections are a little slippery, since that same pile of demonic debris is made to stand in for man at the center of the cosmological sphere if he lacks the enabling heavenly sphere. Mutuality returns here as culminative love, but again this seems more a consequence of the internal logic of the materials adduced in the text's explication than of the text itself.

One chooses how one will read. Leavis's "blandly insolent," after all, describes the same lines as Revard's "realistic sexual love." A passage from the Sermons may help focus the problem: "in all metricall compositions . . . the force of the whole piece, is for the most part left to the shutting up; the whole frame of the Poem is a beating out of a piece of gold, but the last clause is as the impression of the stamp, and that is it that makes it currant."[8] So endings matter. And the ending of "Aire and Angels" is startling, even shocking (at least, that is how I read it; I make no truth claims for the statement), closing off all speculation with epigrammatic suddenness and rudeness. Ricks, elaborating the critical position that Leavis's phrase exemplifies, argues that "the better the best things in Donne's

poem the more he is driven to rend it with his ending," and sees this as part of a pattern where Donne is "corrosively unfaithful to his poems."[9] But rather than simply undo the poem, these last lines make audible the contradictions, cross currents and slippages that have constituted it all along. Historical investigation may help identify these; it certainly doesn't make them disappear.

Finally I would like to question some of the assumptions carried in the expository language of Young's paper. For example, he sees Donne working in the poem towards a truce in the war between the sexes, whilst doubting its efficacy in our present war zone. But this is to speak the poem entirely through the operation of militant male desire. The female remains object even if worthy object—which of course in this reading she has to be as validation of the speaker's idealizings. On the other hand, the poem can be read along the axis of *nothing, thing, doe, pinnace*, with *angel* possibly punning the coin, as in "You which are angels, yet still bring with you thousands of angels on your marriage days" ("Epithalamium made at Lincoln's Inn"), so that the beloved, if such she is, becomes strangely interchangeable with the murderer of fleas or Mummy possest (which some benighted he "angelic finds"). Or it can be read with the gender markings blurred, as Schoenfeldt does in his emphasizing the confusion between male desire and female object, the lability among gender characteristics (pinnace/penis, for example). I would also add the major gender switch of the poem from she angel to he as example of this lability. Indeed this angelic sex change should possibly provoke more unease than it seems to have. If there is no clearly differentiated he and she, then just what is this disparity all about? Indeed, how gendered are Donne's speakers? And if one can't tell, then hierarchy, disparity, mutuality become fairly problematic categories. It is a problematic that cuts two ways, for if mutuality is, as I am suggesting, at the very least ironized in "Aire and Angels," then what privileges it in other texts, in "Sappho to Philaenis," for example?

From this vantage, the object of desire becomes ever more obscure, more like Marvell's abstracted "she" than the Donnean lady of literary history. (Indeed, "A Definition of Love" is not a bad place to begin rereading "Aire and Angels," its solipsism a useful antidote to the tendency to read Donne's lyrics dramatically.) "Aire and Angels" may be inscribed ideologically in the putative disparity between man's active and woman's responsive love. That it valorises this as a celebration of mutuality is precisely the point that I have been resisting throughout these remarks.

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Notes

[1] Rémy de Gourmont, "Success and the Idea of Love" (1901), in *Decadence and Other Essays on the Culture of Ideas*, trans. W. A. Bradley (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1921), p. 86.

[2] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works*, vol. 12, pt. 2, *Marginalia*, ed. G. Whalley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 315-16.

[3] James Mirollo, *Mannerism and Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 164.

[4] C. A. Patrides, ed., *The Complete English Poems of John Donne* (London: J. M. Dent, 1985), p. 66.

[5] Thomas Greene, *The Light in Troy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 100.

[6] John Donne, *Sermons*, ed. G. Potter and E. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953-62), VIII:332.

[7] I borrow this phrase from F. R. Leavis, *Revaluations* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1936), p. 12.

[8] Donne, *Sermons*, VI:41.

[9] Christopher Ricks, "Donne After Love," *Literature and the Body*, ed. E. Scarry, Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1986 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 39, 64.