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Interpretation: "Aire and Angels"

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I had returned from World War II and was eager to work again with seventeenth-century literature, though not to begin where I had left off. This is my memory of a conversation that had some influence on me and certainly encouraged inclinations I already felt.

> "I think I understand much of what you value in poetry and the systematic reasoning back of your criticism. I want to ask you how you would respond if you encountered a poem you found yourself liking very much though it seemed to violate your basic thinking about poetry?"
>
> "Oh, I'd give up my theory if it stood in the way of a good poem."

This was John Crowe Ransom, whose friendship I was enjoying in 1947. His mild manner and his kindness were genuine, but so was the hard edge of his critical judgment. Some of his best friends were not spared the bruises of sincerity—as when he reviewed Robert Penn Warren's *Brother to Dragons* (the 1953 version) and expressed his disappointment that this ambitious poem was not that rare accomplishment, the long poem, but rather a novel in verse. What I want to emphasize is that Ransom felt strongly committed to some of the intellectual disciplines and "speculations" now gathered together under the capacious name of "theory," but he certainly believed that the resources of criticism fulfilled their purpose best in serving poetry.

On another occasion, when we were talking about Warren's criticism, I expressed my admiration for his analysis of Ransom's "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter," a graceful poem with a kind of power I had not suspected. Ransom acknowledged in a modest, detached way that Warren liked the poem and had interesting things to say about it. As for himself, what he chiefly remembered intending was some necessary "prettying up" of the poem. That surprising expression sticks in my memory, and I regarded it as a mild form of self-deprecation. The critic deserved praise for his efforts. The poet was of course pleased, but he was also a man of self-discipline. He did not commit himself, as critic or poet, concerning the accuracy of the interpretation. For the author the subject was naturally sensitive and complex; a pleased silence was perhaps the most fitting answer. I assumed that we shared a general understanding that it was

the critic's right to analyze and judge. Other critics would in turn possess their right to respond, in perpetuity. As for the poem, it may or may not have a life of its own. As the passage of time leaves many things forgotten, other things are revealed when they are seen in a new light, and the sense of their newness may continue for some time.

Among the successive waves of recent change and development, the importance of poetry has justified itself in many quarters by providing useful materials for analysis and for transfer to enterprises enjoying high repute, "or nearer tending." The present sophistication makes my remarks to Ransom sound like a pastoral dialogue between the wise shepherd and his young companion. Suppose I had, after a while, returned and asked Ransom how, without his organization of critical perceptions and defenses in place, he would have recognized the revolutionary merit of the poem that could reveal the utter inadequacy of his critical theory? And would I have broached a possibly related phenomenon? How can we identify the causes that bring about the abandonment of intellectual systems that have flourished in spite of their faults and contradictions? The systems may begin to decline at the appearance of rivals, the success of which will be fully explained by several theories. Or a collapse may occur for no reasons that satisfy.

The individual interpretation of a major poem is likely to proceed at an irregular pace. If it is a poem that is going to upset positions we have been holding, we are likely to experience intimations of the great result well before we have pieced together all details and judged each separately and all together. On the other hand, a critical system does not appraise itself; parts are usually tested. But in our first deep response to an important poem, what is felt, I believe, does not hold back until each part has been tested. Parts give assurance of the whole in advance. Even the steadiest among us may on occasion feel the response of a deep esthetic experience not to be answered by a provisional welcome.

Though many good poets are not reliable critics, some of their observations, insights, feelings will possess recognizable authority. I remember reading long ago with amusement, in the course of a vigorous argument by F. R. Leavis, a strange complaint as he wondered how a good poet like Allen Tate could possibly admire Milton. If Ransom took any pleasure, as I think he did, in Warren's interpretation of "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter," it was surely because he thought the interpretation might represent something true. Truth in poetry may stroll among surprises. Warren told me that when he was young he tried to cultivate a dislike for Milton's poetry because many of the people he admired had rejected that poetry, and had done so with arguments he wanted to be convinced by. But he failed because any time he opened *Paradise Lost* and read as many as ten lines, "The rhythm got me."

When Donne was a young man, we are told, poetry was important because it was a way to demonstrate abilities that recommended one for employment and advancement. Poems had a limited, coterie circulation, and gentlemen authors preferred not to appear in print. If we subscribe to this account of conditions, and

too narrowly, we may commit ourselves to some unwarranted views. Donne's carelessness in not keeping all personal copies of his poems should be kept separate from the thought that he did not value his writing, or took no pains in creating its impromptu air of freshness, or in creating the exact character of what he wished to say.

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After a flourishing period of interpretation as a principal instrument of criticism, dissatisfactions began to set in. The faults of interpretation were fully explained while a stream of other topics and other methods of doing criticism expanded into a flood. The variety and volume were something new in the world, as literary criticism, a subject often changing in some respects but still a subject that had remained largely recognizable for centuries, now began to merge with a vast curriculum of studies. Though demoted from its place of prominence, interpretation, not always named or recognized, continues its necessary work. Some of it may rightly be judged as flimsy, strained, embarrassing; on the other hand, some of the work is indispensable, solid, inspired, convincing.

Both as poet and as preacher Donne would have been consciously aware of how he wished to be understood, how he intended his purposes and his words to be interpreted. Satires and elegies carried their own generic risks, and these were best controlled by limiting the circulation of copies to the right readers. But sermons were directly exposed to interpretation. When Donne was ordered to preach before King Charles for the first time, he chose as his text "If the Foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous doe?" The Church is safe for Christ is its foundation. The state is founded on law, and the central message is a safe, reassuring one, not to be misinterpreted, but also an appropriate and important one for the young king to hear: "Let the *Law* bee sacred to thee, and the Dispensers of the *Law*, reverend; Keepe the *Lawe*, and the *Lawe* shall keepe thee."[1]

That sermon was prepared under pressure, at short notice. Another sermon, one that Donne prepared well in advance and "put into that very order, in which I delivered it, more than two months since," angered the King and caused Donne considerable anxiety. He wrote his friend Sir Robert Ker that he wished he were "a little more guilty"; indeed, his own sense of "innocency makes me afraid." He had apparently expected the King's approval and perhaps even his thanks:

> the King who hath let fall his eye upon some of my Poems, never saw, of mine, a hand, or an eye, or an affection, set down with so much study, and diligence, and labour of syllables, as in this Sermon I expressed those two points, which I take so much to conduce to his service, the imprinting of

> persuasibility and obedience in the subject, And the breaking of the bed of whisperers, by casting in a bone, of making them suspect and distrust one another.[2]

Donne's editors are less baffled and observe two passages "which might have been interpreted as references somewhat lacking in respect to Henrietta Maria, Charles's Queen" (VII, 41-42). When the King read a copy of the sermon he apparently found that whatever had stirred his wrath as auditor no longer did so.

I want to stay with sermons a while longer to illustrate another side of interpretation. In her book *Donne's "Anniversaries" and the Poetry of Praise*, Barbara Lewalski, among other topics, developed a substantial account of Protestant meditation, the sermon, and the funeral sermon. Of the four examples she draws upon, one of Donne's funeral sermons she regards as inferior and one a notable success. In writing on the good death I used two of the same sermons and found much to admire in the memorial sermon for Magdalen Herbert (Lady Danvers) and much to deplore in the funeral sermon for Sir William Cokayne, Lewalski's example of a highly successful sermon. How could two serious, experienced students of Donne, both acting conscientiously, differ so much in their interpretive judgments? A familiar story: we must have been looking at and for different evidence in the same examples. Lewalski was working up a comprehensive view of which the Protestant death sermon was only one part. In reading her book, I thought her approval and disapproval were influenced to some degree by the conformity of the parts with her interpretation of the sermons and what, looking ahead, this was going to explain in Donne's *Anniversaries*. Stein was trying to understand from the sermons the ways they dealt with death, and his identification of successful and unsuccessful writing was chiefly supported by his personal judgment, and that was neither improved nor limited by evidence supporting a conscious program or thesis. This is not to deny the acquired lifetime tangle of literary and other values one may inspect and discipline but never neutralize. Nor is this a denial that one's acquired experience may exert an influence on one's judgment at times resembling the influence of a resident theory or program.

To return to the first person: I was moved by Magdalen's death scene and embarrassed (for Donne) by Cokayne's. Certainly, in interpretation many differences are affected by what one is looking for or prepared to see. In the case of King Charles: whatever potential irritability came to the service with him, its causes, its directions—what he heard with anger he read in a larger context that permitted more scope for judgment. As for myself, I cannot imagine how I could interpret Donne's portrait of Lady Danvers's death as not a model of the good death.

> How may we thinke, she was joy'd to see that face, that *Angels* delight to looke upon, the face of her *Saviour*, that did not abhor the face of his

> fearfullest *Messenger*, Death? Shee shew'd no feare of his face, in any change of her owne; but died without any change of *countenance*, or *posture*; without any *strugling*, any *disorder*; but her *Death-bed* was as quiet, as her *Grave*. (VIII, 91)

Memory and imagination invoke what was and was *not* seen by those who were at the bedside a month earlier, and for those, Donne among them, who were not. The witnesses are silent remembering presences, recreating through Donne's words what love and faith may be permitted to think they see.[3]

In Cokayne's deathbed scene the witnesses are made to testify by offering, through Donne, a preferred interpretation.

> And his last and dying words were the repetition of the name of Jesus; And when he had not strength to utter that name distinctly and perfectly, they might heare it from within him, as from a man a far off; even then, when his hollow and remote naming of Jesus, was rather a certifying of them, that he was with his Jesus, then a prayer that he might come to him. (VII, 276)

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Early in her Norton Lectures, *In Defence of theImagination*, Helen Gardner declared that proponents of the " old New Criticism" "concentrated on interpretation and explication of texts." The most distinctive things they had in common "were the primacy given to interpretation, to the comparative neglect of evaluation, the stress on a poem as an embodiment of feelings, emotions, moods, to the neglect of the cognitive element in poetry. . . . New Critics concentrated on underlying themes and structures at the expense of what makes a poem a work of deliberate art and gives delight."[4] I pass by her alternating sallies and distributions of brief general praise. She seemed to be allowing herself something of a holiday. I shall want to make some observations on her own interpretation of Donne's "Aire and Angels" in the chapter called "Interpretation" from her volume, *The Business of Criticism.*

Reluctantly I must repeat the word that appeared twice in my last sentence, for "interpretation" covers a range of meanings from the equivalent of plain, literal translation to the explication of more difficult, perhaps esoteric, materials. A further range may include subtle, intricate, or profound meanings requiring special and superior interpreters. A correct explanation may need some particular knowledge, perhaps rare, though simply applied; another explanation may begin with an insight into a relationship that will disclose further knowledge only through a process of observation and analysis. And so on.

As with other branches of knowledge in states of renewed vitality and expansion, old names and categories will need renaming. But I hope to stay short of these depths. Even the simplest interpretation is likely to be affected by some predisposition already in place. Explanation may slip into ways of judgment sooner than one intended. That is a personal drama, and everyone has devices to resist or accommodate the process. There are many ways to misinterpret, no less easily by booming confidence in the accuracy of one's knowledge and its application than by the assurance of the reliability of one's own intuition and its functioning. Also available for both interpretation and misinterpretation are sight, hearing, memory, discrimination, judgment, and other faculties.

Some remarks in Donne's prose have been taken up and chiefly applied to issues concerning his poetry but have also been used to interpret passages of prose or aspects of his thought and expression. It is natural to look for translatable insights in an author who left few direct comments on his work. This practice can mislead, however, as most of us who have quoted Donne on Donne are well aware. The quotation that seems to illuminate an issue or situation almost as if Donne had the connection in mind, in retrospect may appear to be forced and distorted.

In her interpretation of "Aire and Angels" Helen Gardner commits herself to an "aside" expressed by Donne in a sermon:

> And therefore it is easie to observe, that in all Metricall compositions, of which kinde the booke of Psalmes is, 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. (VI, 41)

The sentence is alluring but dangerous. Donne seems to be making a pronouncement, but he introduces qualifications that affect the "force" of his "whole" statement. The preceding sentence is partly transitional, moving from Donne's interpretation, which explains why David has held back his thanks (there are plenty of reasons, to be produced later) but the first one is that David has deferred his thanks "because being reserved to the end, and close of the Psalme, it leaves the best impression in the memory. And therefore it is easie to observe . . . ."

The sixth Psalm is a short one, of ten verses, and the text of the sermon is based upon the last three verses. Why did David postpone the expression of thankfulness until the eighth verse? Donne interprets this delay as a deliberate sign of great importance, and his own noble sentence then proceeds to elevate the lateness to a significance one might think was not the beginning of the end but the very end, the "shutting up," "the last clause." For though the Psalmist's timing of thankfulness receives a worthy exegesis, it does not occur in the third and last part of Donne's text, which might be the normal place for expressing "the force of the whole piece." But that is to mistake Donne's critical generalization as applicable to his own exposition of this psalm. Much of the direct discussion of thanks is

therefore transitional to such topics as the following: why David delayed until the eighth verse, the reminder of the centrality of praise and thanks in the whole book of Psalms, the reminder that good pagans had honored the virtue of gratitude though their knowledge of repentance was deficient, etc.

In fact, the exposition of thankfulness after the eighth verse chiefly turns to other subjects. The exegesis of the tenth and last verse, the third part of Donne's sermon, is characteristically long—here almost one half of the sermon. It was probably most challenging to make good biblical sense of that verse. Besides, the third part justified the preacher's expected exertions as he gracefully introduced some elegant digressions that were certainly memorable, though not in that forceful, final way he described earlier, that of leaving "the best impression in the memory."

After quoting Donne's "aside," Gardner comments:

> This warns us that in interpreting a poem by Donne we should pay special attention to its final clause, and if, as here, we find it to be a disappointment, then we must judge the poem to be imperfect.[5]

Here she has allowed herself to be bound to a detached comment by Donne that has chiefly local relevance within the sermon. She does not examine or weigh Donne's remarks as she does expressions in the poem but accepts the prose truth at once. That Donne's parenthetical remark in the sermon contributes almost nothing to the interpretation of the sermon itself goes unexplained.

Though she is taken in by that sentence which seemed to fit her case as if it bore "the impression of the stamp" and retrieved for use "a judgment by Donne's own standards," some of her other assertions are also troubling and do not derive from simple error but from theoretical positions here asserted, with Donne's "Aire and Angels" for illustration. By her principles the center of

> a great poem . . . should be self-evident. But there are poems, and I think this is one, where there is an uncertainty as to the central conception which no amount of argument can settle with finality. (74)

One might think the standard of greatness not the right one for approaching love poems. The speaker of "Aire and Angels" plays parts; his role is a subtly dramatic one, at moments a clumsy male striving to be a proper servant of love, but also a masked playfulness hovers. The writer of love poems may expect to be allowed more than usual poetic latitude, and the reader of love poems should not insist on satisfaction that requires "certainty" and accurate knowledge of the poet's intentions. Besides, love poems are not the only disturbers of critical peace. There are still a few uncertainties and disagreements current—as among admirers of Milton's "Lycidas."

All good poets pray to end well, again and again. From first to last, as Donne cared how he looked in a portrait, he cared how he looked in his prose, and was highly conscious of his modulations and pauses and endings. Some of his poems he closes as if he were signing his name or showing his delight in creating endings of individual charm. He also expresses a variety of attitudes—some put on, over-expressed, hiding hurt, pretending and partly pretending, etc. There are improvised endings that do not matter and ones that continue speaking in the reader's mind.

Besides, how many of Donne's poems actually answer to that severe standard of "the last clause"? In my judgment, not very many. Most poems draw themselves up and salute smartly, often with a witty turn, making a good exit, which is generally regarded as a useful effect but is far from bringing "the force of the whole piece" to that closure. "Twicknam garden" is a fair sample of the smart exit: "O perverse sexe, where none is true but shee, / Who's therefore true, because her truth kills mee."[6] It brings the poem to an ending that commands finality like an epigram but does not produce a lofty, memorable force. "The Canonization" ends by singing differently in its last stanza from the individual difference of each preceding stanza. Protest and argument drop still further away, and the invocation celebrates the lovers in a hymn of sustained beauty and spiritual power. One may also hear, or imagine one hears, laughter *singing, which will be remembered.* Here it is the whole last stanza that produces the splendor that crowns the succession of stanzaic triumphs with a noble "shutting up."

A number of poems end with a sort of joke, varying in the quality and the kind of wit—as the flippancy of "The Indifferent" or "Song: Goe, and catche a falling starre." At opposite extremes there is "Farewell to love" and its mockery and self-mockery ("worme-seed to the Taile"), and there is "The Autumnal" with its beautiful, elaborated, teasing eloquence ("Not panting after growing beauties, so, / I shall ebbe out with them, who homeward goe"). In a class of its own is the cataclysmic ending of "Loves Alchymie." There are also simple endings that surprise because they are Donne's: for instance, "The Baite" and "The Anniversarie" ("this is the second of our raigne"). An extraordinary ending to a brilliant poem, "A Valediction: of my name, in the window," falters, rejects the poem as the simple-minded murmuring of one sleeping or dying. A very strong poem concludes by producing an arbitrary intervention of affordable weakness.[7]

A rare kind of ending, in the third Satire, is an intense moral narrative. Elegy XVI, "On his Mistris," concludes with a nightmare and personal message. The satire ends with strength and conviction as a final statement. The elegy ends with a direct appeal to feminine fear and love and to masculine need. Both of these endings, in different ways, consolidate themes; they do not summarize but they heighten the last moments unforgettably. The ending of the satire provides a convincing example of impressing the memory by "the shutting up." Most of Donne's best endings are ones that concentrate important elements in their poems. They differ more than the few examples I have listed from various categories, and

they range from examples of inspired brilliance to endings that signal closing with relatively minor emphasis.

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A. J. Smith's "New Bearings in Donne: 'Air and Angels'"—in striking contrast to Helen Gardner's essay and its questioning procedures—bristles with confident answers. We are advised that we may hear Donne's voice

> when we are prepared to try to be the contemporary reader for whom Donne wrote—when, in other words, we equip ourselves to unravel the argument of the whole poem as it emerges from a highly intricate process of intellectual maneuvering in the alien manner of mock-rhetoric . . . . Ultimately, however it offends our pieties, we have to ask what "Aire and Angels" "means." . . . when we know what Donne thought he was doing, we can get down to him in some confidence that we are not grappling with shadows; and it is high time we set ourselves seriously to discover that.[8]

As Smith reads the poem, Donne's chief aim is to be witty and ingenious, using familiar materials, tricks, and turns to create and solve problems with a distinctive display of skill in the plotting and in the resolution. The first stanza employs a poet's equivalent of syllogism, the "example" that leads to the assumption of a body by Love. Then the problem needing to be solved develops. Smith summarizes expertly in marking

> how cleverly Donne is maintaining together the several levels, as it were, of his play—the simulacrum of consistent logical inquiry, with its impersonal probing of alternatives, and the slight complimentary love-plot on which the poem is threaded. The two intentions coincide, quite wonderfully, in such a phrase as "extreme and scatt'ring bright." (176)

Though the speaker of the poem seems to be blocked still by difficult opposites, the angel returns, this time with a saving analogy: "So thy love may be my loves spheare."[8] As Smith observes, "Donne is saying . . . that the only proper vehicle for his love is her love"(177). (This does not follow strictly from the traditional explanation that an angel when visible has clothed itself in the denser element of air, less pure than the angel itself. The analogy is transferred to woman's love, and the possible advantages of spherical intimations are left implicit.) The point turns from air and angels to women and men, their relative purity. "He loves unprompted, but she loves only in return for love." The active principle, in the masculine lover as in the angel, is superior to the passive. Though the "disparity" is declared to be a permanent one, both winner and loser seem to be well compensated by the established order of things.

It is indeed a witty poem, and the writing is breathtaking. I agree with much of Smith's interpretation but differ in matters of emphasis and because of silences in his discourse. The active argument and its arrangements of the "common love-situation" lend themselves to analysis more readily than other effects, as those of the woman on the lover which are subtle and implied and not for everyone to recognize. She has at least a preliminary identification with angels, through whom she may have affected the man "in a voice," or "shapelesse flame." Her identification is definitely non-masculine and precedes any claims yet set forth concerning the embodiment, or the putting on, of "perfection" yclept "purity." Was it she herself, in the flesh, though appearing as transfigured, "Some lovely glorious nothing," who was there in that place identified only by her presence "when, to where thou wert, I came"? Is this what he "did see" or what she caused him to see? If Donne has been as clever as I think, the "I" of the poem is not allowed to be master of all the action. The woman is no doubt modest, looking away, or down, in self-denying postures with a remarkable history of power through meekness. We cannot know whether she had also imagined him "Twice or thrice," but without saying so the language does tell us that he was dazzled by a sight too strong for ordinary seeing. The woman is silent throughout; she is addressed, however, and the poem is written to her, I imagine, whoever else will be allowed to enjoy it, and whether she is real or imagined. Implied mental activity is present if the woman is not a dummy. She is complimented by a splendid speech that not only expresses wit and playful reasoning but resembles drama (*pace* Gardner) by the implied action and recognition present in courtship. On the one hand, the lover is masterful in guiding her to her proper station, a little lower than the angels, but delicately, and with enhancements of proved desirability. Even if the original difference in purity will remain in effect, any intimation of marriage and the first putting on of "perfection and a womans name"[9] might suggest an interesting distraction. The whole performance arranges for silence in the woman's role. In interpreting such matters one may prefer not to be coarsely conclusive. I suggest that the masculine lover is also demonstrating, among the many agreeable tasks he balances, the silent, eloquent purity of the lady's half of a dialogue of love. If he understands that she understands what he is really saying as lover,

> Then you have done a braver thing
> Then all the Worthies did;
> And a braver thence will spring,
> Which is, to keepe that hid. [10]

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Notes

[1] *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. E. M. Simpson and G. R. Potter, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953-62), VI: 259. Where practicable, subsequent references will be included in the text.

[2] Excerpts from two letters are quoted from the "Introduction" to *Sermons*, VII: 39-40. The conclusion of the last sentence opens another view, of the political scene, not pretty.

[3] Donne composes a full death scene which might have served as directions for a painter. It is a verbal picture, expressing and evoking religious and other emotions. A figure of Death is present, and Christ, and the original mourners. All these are drawn to the peaceful figure in the center. Those listening to the sermon constitute a larger and renewed circle of mourners.

[4] *In Defence of the Imagination* (Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 6-8.

[5] *The Business of Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 70.

[6] *The Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965).

[7] I admire Barbara Hardy's reading of the poem: "Thinking and Feeling in the *Songs and Sonnets*," in A. J. Smith's *John Donne: Essays in Celebration* (London: Methuen, 1972), also in her *The Advantage of Lyric* (London: Athlone Press, 1977).

[8] I quote from the text edited by Helen Gardner, *John Donne: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), pp. 171-79.

[9] "Epithalamion made at Lincolnes Inne" employs as refrain "To day put on perfection, and a womans name." The last five stanzas vary between "put" and "puts"; the last four settle on "night." The honor of course derives from the man.

[10] We cannot know how much intimacy existed between the poet and the woman, or whether the poem was intended chiefly for her or for the circle of his masculine friends. If the latter, the restraint of broader references to physical relations would seem remarkable. Some lines, well restrained, do suggest a double sense. The nautical image Donne introduced was well qualified to carry a cargo signifying amorous values, several of them speaking together. See D. C. Allen, "Donne and the Ship Metaphor," *MLN* 76 (1961), 308-12. I followed up some of Allen's work in my *John Donne's Lyrics* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press,1962), pp. 232-33. My main discussion of "Aire and Angels" may be found, pp. 141-47. To return to the present: I regard Donne's playfulness as important and an inseparable part of the love theme and the achievement of the poem. My guess is that a measure of uncertainty is built into the poem.