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"This Dialogue of One": Rational Argument and Affective Discourse in Donne's "Aire and Angels"

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". . . the vision of your love's loveliness . . . ."
Earth Angel by the Penguins[1]

Much of the critical commentary on Donne has evolved from two propositions concerning the *Songs and Sonnets*: that the arguments of the poems reflect the influence of medieval Scholasticism and that the poems commingle the sacred and profane. While the foregoing propositions have provided perspectives on most of the *Songs and Sonnets*, a few of the poems, most notably "Aire and Angels," have resisted such analysis. My aim is to overcome this deficiency by examining "Aire and Angels" in relation to the very propositions that have guided commentary on the other *Songs and Sonnets*.

Scholastic philosophers often speculated on the nature of angels, so-called separated substances—i.e., beings existing in separation from normal material conditions, beings outside the limits of space and time, beings for whom descriptive statements are inapplicable. After all, position, motion, corporeality, individuality, countability, and dimensional features, all of which relate to sensible bodies, do not relate to incorporeal beings. Both the substance and properties of angels, which transcend the phenomenal world, are not accessible to direct apprehension.

In order that unknown beings would not remain unknowable, philosophers employed at least three means of understanding: negation, causality, analogy. Angels, for example, may be understood as immaterial or incorporeal, not subject to material conditions and not having bodies. Angels may be understood from their causal activity—from their influence on the material world and its beings. Angels may be understood by analogy or by comparison with sensible bodies. This last means of understanding, called analogy of proportionality in Thomas Aquinas's discussion of angels, is also termed analogy of predication. To make angels more knowable, philosophers adduced analogical relationships between angelic and earthly entities, between the subject and predicate, respectively. Speculation became so refined that the following question was posed: How many angels may cling to the head of a pin?[2]

While analogical predication was employed by some medieval philosophers to promote human understanding of angels and, in effect, to prove their existence, this methodology is wittily adapted by John Donne in "Aire and Angels."[3] In this poem, the lady who is the angelic subject becomes by the analogy of predication more accessible and knowable. By likening her to earthly entities, the speaker or lover creates a sensible presence from angelic nothingness. For this process to work, the speaker's predication must include rational argument, which generates analogies from the intellect, and affective discourse, which informs the analogies with emotional coloration. By combining the cognitive and the affective, the poem becomes "this dialogue of one."

In "Aire and Angels," the speaker strives to fashion a lovable beloved. At first, he is awestruck and abjectly submissive, for his beloved, the angelic subject, is transcendent and inaccessible during their earliest encounters: "Twice or thrice had I loved thee, / Before I knew thy face or name."[4] Accordingly, the speaker predicates analogies that liken his beloved to a disembodied "voice," a "shapelesse flame," a "lovely glorious nothing," all of which were manifested presences of angels in biblical history. After further encounters, he strives to make her more accessible and lovable. The face that he did not know becomes knowable, including its chief features, her "lip, eye, and brow." The speaker creates a sensible presence, a composite being with bodily parts, so that the beloved, conjoined by his analogies to material reality, is no longer perceived as a separated substance. The intent "to ballast love" or to embody his beloved stably but admirably seems almost to have been achieved. But when he likens the composite being of his beloved to "loves pinnace overfraught," the allusion is to a light sailing boat, a pinnace, whose "wares"—the bodily parts that she "wears"—are heavier than ballast, thus causing the vessel to sink.

Though the weight with which the light vessel is fraught seems attributable to the material being of the beloved, it is more wittily attributed to the speaker's outlook on his material creation. The sensible presence of the beloved, like her angelic presence, is still awesome. A single hair of hers—"Ev'ry thy haire"—is sufficient to "sink" his admiration or, to put it another way, to elicit the weight of his full admiration, with which she is fraught. When her facial features—"lip, eye, and brow"—are added to her sensible presence, then the speaker's admiration is even weightier; and she, a light sailing craft, is overfraught and sunk more deeply thereby.

The speaker is challenged to fashion his beloved so that she is at once more corporeal than angelic nothingness and yet more rarefied than a sensible presence, without the slightest materiality, without a single hair. He meets the challenge by predicating an analogy that likens her to the manifestation of an angel in condensed air, whereby the form and some details of the figure become evident but full material presence does not. In the philosophical context to which Donne alludes, an angel was deemed purer than air, the pure element that it would "wear." The

problematic endeavor of the speaker reflects his implied dissatisfaction with the minted and overly materialistic presence of an "angel" in the so-called gold coin.

The motivation of the speaker to embody his angelic beloved in some quasi-corporeal form is also argued by analogy, for his own spiritual self or "soule, whose child love is, / Takes limmes of flesh." The reference is to the soul's presence inside the speaker's body; but the soul, *having taken* flesh, *takes to* limbs of flesh as the means of interacting with the soul in another body. Thus, analogies of parenthood and procreation suggest that the natural inclination of the soul is toward loving union with another soul. When manifested through recourse to the bodies, the interaction of souls may result in a sensible sign and bodily consequence, impregnation and the birth of the "child love." After all, "more subtile then the parent is, / Love must not be, but take a body too."

The argument that spiritual love may manifest itself corporeally is developed, by implication, against a frame of reference involving the love of the godhead for humankind. Through anthropomorphism, a form of analogy, the First Person of the Trinity is likened to a father. Anthropomorphism and analogy thereafter give way to sensible signs and bodily consequences when the Second Person, the Son, takes limbs of flesh, a reference to his presence in Mary's womb and to the wearing of flesh therein. In line with this outlook, the impregnation of Mary under the auspices of the Father and its consequence, the Incarnation of the Second Person, manifest divine love. Not to be overlooked is the angelic involvement in the impregnation of Mary. The visit by the angel, his salutation, and Mary's receptivity are traditionally interpreted and visualized as acts with sexual consequences. In particular, the angel is "limned" in art with "limmes of flesh," the agent through whom divine insemination is announced. Usually he points to Mary and in some works of art presses his outstretched finger against her open palm. Accompanying the angel at times is Christ, visualized as a babe who descends headlong in order to inhabit Mary's womb. The utterance of the angel, conveyed by the medium of "air" to Mary's "ear," was often perceived as the means of access to the Virgin. In scenes of the Annunciation, the empty vessel, usually a pitcher or vase, signifies the womb or hold that will be occupied by the babe, the word made flesh.

Emerging from this frame of reference and related to it are the wordplay and the *double-entendre* in the poem, which result in predicated analogies of coarse and obscene wit that parody the sexual enactment of the mystery of divine love. If, in other words, divine love is manifested in the impregnation of Mary and procreation, then the love of one soul for another will be analogously expressed. From start to finish, "Aire and Angels" is outrageously blasphemous when interpreted against the context of divine love. The use of "loves pinnace overfraught" glances at the pretty "pinnage" of a mistress or prostitute, whose approach was comparable to a vessel with rigging that had been "pinned" or made fast. If the beloved by "wearing" limbs of flesh became more accessible to the

speaker, by "wearing" the garish attire of a promiscuous woman she signals her availability to virtually all men. At the same time, her immodesty, impurity, and vainglory are contrasted with the modesty, purity, and humility of Mary, especially at the Annunciation. In the blasphemous wit of the poem, promiscuity becomes sanctity. Thus Mary's one experience with insemination, not only a sign of her sanctity but also the means by which divine love is shown to humankind, is multiplied by the more accessible woman, who enhances her holiness, promotes the interaction of her soul with the souls of her lovers, and often bears the "child love" as a sensible manifestation of her numerous spiritual unions.

Other connotations of "pin" and "ace," especially in games of skill and chance, intensify the bawdiness of the poem. The ace playing card was often valued or weighted with the most points, even above the king and queen; ace point was the first of the points scored in a game. To "pin" an "ace" was to fix it to one's score. In quoits, the hoop was aimed at a peg or hob called a "pin." To "ace" the "pin" was to score a hit. With the upright pin in the circle of the quoit, coital union was implied. The pin in the cleft or hole was commonplace sexual innuendo; it was also a typical means of score-keeping as the pin was advanced from one hole (or hold) to another.[5] The sexual connotations of "pin" are highlighted in *Love's Labor's Lost* by Boyet, who is reprimanded by Maria for talking "greasily" or lewdly when he says that a woman "will . . . get the upshoot by cleaving the pin" (IV i, 138).[6]

"Loves pinnace overfraught" also refers to the erect penis. The cupidinous offshoot of the tumescent male member (the pin is eased thereby) is activity comparable to the discharge of an arrow by Cupid, the "child love." Having been boarded by her lover in the action of coitus, the woman is ballasted. But to "turne ayeyn with writhyng of a pyn" (l. 127)—a coarse allusion in *The Squire's Tale* to the alternating positions (including upside down) of lover and beloved in coitus—implies capsizing and sinking.[7] In its "angle" during love-making the male member may be directed upward or downward as it intersects with the sphere of the womb. Another change in position is suggested by the nautical meaning of "wear": to put a vessel about, bringing her stern to windward or turning her head away from wind. Furthermore, "ballast" and "ballocks," a term for the testicles, are nearly homophones. Accordingly, "child love," which glances at the propagation that eventuates from sexual union, refers to a woman whose sphere or womb, having accepted the offshoot of her lover, may be burdened by impregnation. From a nautical perspective, the beloved, a light sailing vessel, is steady because of sufficient weight in her hold. She has been sunk by ballast to such a depth as to prevent capsizing while under sail. One may also say that she has been sunk down to the center of motion, coincident with the centric zone of her anatomy. As the weight "in her" increases with advancing pregnancy, she may sink. While "ware" may signify the burden of her womb, the same word was applied jocularly

to equate certain women, seemingly virtuous but sexually experienced, with defective merchandise. The *OED*, citing J. Phillips (1687), indicates that "ware" meant "A young fresh-colour'd smerking Country Wench that went for a Maid, but in truth, was a crackt piece of Ware" (4b).

"Aire and Angels," in effect, posits the question: "Where can love inhere?" The combinations and permutations in the incessant wordplay, involving "where," "here," and their homonyms, generate numerous variations of the question and countless answers. For instance, love may not "inhere" in "air" or in a single "hair" of the beloved, but surely "in her" or "herein" or in her pubic "hair." One may "wear" the "hair" of his beloved, a reference to phallic access; and by "waring" her, the lover may be burdening her with his weight and that of the "child love." Further ambiguity derives from the inevitable wordplay on "hare," "hoar," and "whore," all of which generate ribald overtones comparable to what emerge in Mercutio's encounter with the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* (II.iv). Also encompassed in the wordplay is allusion to "heir," the offspring with the right to "inherit."

While the intellectual pyrotechnics of predicated analogies, which extend to wordplay and *double-entendre*, are remarkably diverse, the speaker's affective state is likewise kaleidoscopic. From one perspective he is the triumphant male ego, whose abject submissiveness to an angelic beloved is transformed into male dominance, particularly virile self-assertion, after the woman, by his use of analogies, takes on material being and fleshly features. As she becomes more accessible, she descends from the air; when she is too accessible, she descends into the water. Since the speaker believes that the woman is transformed by his outlook, his seeming exercise of power over her is a source of pride, vainglory, and male bravura. But the woman herself is never changed, only the speaker's perception of her. If he could not interact with the woman whom he perceived as an angelic beloved, he does not sensually encounter the transformed, fleshly woman except in his imagination. First as a Platonist, then as an Ovidian he fails; for his changed outlook on the woman does not empower him to act sexually, merely to fantasize.

The poem becomes the speaker's endeavor to achieve equilibrium in his apprehension of the beloved, so that she is afloat precisely at the plane where air meets water. She would neither rise nor sink, a moment that never occurs. When beholding the beloved as an angel, the speaker causes her to be elevated beyond his ken; when he perceives her sensible presence, the full weight of his admiration for each and every bodily part, even a single hair, weighs heavily on her. Sexual possession, which would ballast her, leads inevitably to intense orgasmic activity, capsizing the light vessel and, after impregnation, sinking it. The fantasies of the speaker, which become outlets for his affections, are self-deluding when they pander to his male dominance but self-indulgent as they provide phantasmic or orgasmic release for his sensuality. His most notable talent, the predication of

analogies, qualifies the speaker as a ludic entertainer first of himself, then of the various coterie audiences—male, female, or mixed company—that overheard "this dialogue of one." Despite his shifting "angle" of vision and various analogical speech acts, the speaker cannot approach his beloved. The coarse analogies, which are brash, irreverent, and even blasphemous, disguise a personality intimidated by the angelic beloved and timid in the presence of the sensible beloved.

The witty *tour de force* that ends the poem occurs as the speaker by analogy imparts to himself both the angelic and sensible natures that he attributed to his beloved. To argue that her "love" may be his "loves spheare," the speaker is likening himself to an angel riding inside a celestial orb, action that implies coitus. To predicate that the difference between "womens love, and mens" is comparable to that "twixt Aire and Angells puritie" continues the same analogy. The usual commentary pertains—the angel is purer than the condensed air that it "wears." This argument, however, is part of a larger one, which avers, quite simply, that what resides inside is purer than what exists outside: the angel inside condensed air or in a celestial sphere, the soul inhabiting the body, the speaker's sexual presence (both phallic intrusion and its procreative consequence), and, in relation to divine love, the "child love" in the womb of Mary. As a witty innovation on the allusion to divine love, the speaker also likens himself to the angel of the Annunciation, whose discourse and interaction with Mary are the sensible signs of otherwise mysterious activity. The beloved, by implication, is likened to Mary, the purest of women, but still a woman, not an angel. The angel's homage to Mary is recognition that she is the chosen receptacle or hold for the "child love." What she will bear as a consequence of his visitation is the object of greater reverence.

"Aire and Angels," by wittily commingling the sacred and profane, complicates the Scholastic dispute concerning the number of angels that may cling to the head of a pin. Unlike the medieval disputants, Donne's speaker perceives multiple significance, even phallicism, in the word "pin." He also recognizes that the predicated analogies used to attribute presence to an angel are the constructs of both cognitive understanding and affective outlook. Awe, on the one hand, and cupidinous desire, on the other, are different affections that lead to contrasting apprehensions of one's beloved. When rendered as an airy nothingness—with no materiality, without a single hair—the beloved may never cling to the head of a pin. When likened to a sensible presence, she may cleave to a pin on one or another occasion. She may be one of countless sensible presences to have clung to the same pin, not simultaneously but successively, or to have been "pinned" by innumerable men. If the poem begins by likening the beloved to an angel in the air, it ends with the lover self-fashioned as an "earth angel," who descends from above. Like the angel of the Annunciation, he takes "limmes of flesh" in order to visit and interact with a woman and to present her with "the vision of . . . love's loveliness"—and its incarnation.

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Notes

[1] Written in 1954 by Curtis Williams, *Earth Angel* was one of the greatest rhythm and blues hits of the 1950s, the only million seller for the Penguins. I am grateful to Professors Kate Frost, Renée Hannaford, Thomas Hester, and Ernest Sullivan II for their suggestions concerning the present essay.

[2] For a discussion of medieval concepts of analogy, especially in John Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas, see David Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1973); for a discussion of Aquinas' views on angels, see James Collins, *The Thomistic Philosophy of the Angels* (Washington, DC: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1947).

[3] My approach to the poem, which studies predicated analogies embedded in wordplay and *double-entendre*, has not been previously attempted. Among the essays most useful in establishing the frame of reference for my outlook are the following: Ronald J. Corthell, "Donne's 'Disparitie': Inversion, Gender, and the Subject of Love in Some Songs and Sonnets," *Exemplaria* 1 (1989), 29, 33; E. F. Pritchard, "Donne's *Aire and Angels*," *Expl* 41 (1982), 16-20; Peter De Sa Wiggins, "'Aire and Angels': Incarnations of Love," *ELR* 12 (1982), 87-101; Patrick Swinden, "John Donne: 'Air and Angels,'" *CritQ* 21 (1979), 51-54; Katherine Mauch, "Angel Imagery and Neoplatonic Love in Donne's 'Air and Angels'," *SCN* 35 (1977), 106-11; John M. Couper, "Aire and Angels," *AN&Q* 15 (1977), 104-06; Srilekha Bell, "John Donne: A Symbol of the Middle Ages," *EAS* 6 (1977), 68-77; Raman Selden, "John Donne's 'Incarnational Conviction,'" *CritQ* 17 (1975), 56-73; John Dean, "The Two Arguments of Donne's 'Air and Angels,'" *MSE* 3 (1972), 84-90; Wesley Milgate, "'Aire and Angels' and the Discrimination of Experience," in *"Just So Much Honor": Essays Commemorating the Four-Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of John Donne*, ed. Peter Amadeus Fiore (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1972), pp. 149-76; H. M. Richmond, "Ronsard and the English Renaissance," *CLS* 7 (1970), esp. 147; Murray Prosky, "Donne's *Aire and Angels*," *Expl* 27 (1968), item 27; Hugh Sykes Davies, "Text or Context?" *REL* 6 (1965), 93-107; A. J. Smith, "Theory and Practice in Renaissance Poetry: Two Kinds of Imitation," *BJRL* 47 (1964), 212-43; William Empson, "Donne the Space Man," *KR* 19 (1957), 337-99; A. J. Smith, "Two Notes on Donne," *MLR* 51 (1956), 405-06; D. C. Allen, "Donne and the Ship Metaphor," *MLN* 76 (1961), 308-12; A. J. Smith, "New Bearings in Donne: *Aire and Angels*," *English* 13 (1960), 49-53. Most book-length studies of Donne tend to give only passing reference to "Aire and Angels"; more sustained analysis, however, appears in the following: Arthur F. Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1986), pp. 219-22; Wilbur Sanders, *John Donne's Poetry* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971), esp. pp. 89-97; N. J. C. Andreasen, *John Donne: Conservative Revolutionary* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 210-15; Helen Gardner, *The Business of Criticism* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959), esp. pp. 62-75.

[4] "Aire and Angels" is quoted from *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967). Because of the brevity of the poem, line numbers are not cited.

[5] These meanings of "pin" and "ace" are reflected in the *OED* and in various descriptions of Elizabethan games. See, for example, A. Forbes Sieveking, "Games," in *Shakespeare's England: An Account of the Life & Manners of His Age*, vol. II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1916), 451-82 and the bibliography on 482-83.

[6] Shakespeare is quoted from *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare*, gen. ed. Sylvan Barnet (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972).

[7] Chaucer is quoted from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed., ed. F. N. Robinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957).