Baroque Fire (A Note on Early-Modern Angelology)

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Abstract
Between Galileo’s discovery of the moons of Jupiter (1610) and the publication of
Newton’s Principia (1687), uncertainty regarding the structure of the heavens com-
bined with a lyrical fascination for extraterrestrial life inspired a distinctly Baroque
outpouring of speculation in which angels played a key part. English Catholic “reces-
sants,” haunted by a feeling of lost unity, vividly illustrate the imaginative character of
Baroque speculation.

Keywords
angels, Thomas White, planetary atmosphere, meteorology, Franciscus à Sancta Clara,
Kenelm Digby, Antoine Legrand, Robert Boyle

How did the scholastic doctrine of angelic appearances, laboriously
crafted by medieval masters to fit Aristotelian parameters, fare in a
post-Copernican universe? Did early-modern philosophers who ten-
tatively embraced some form of heliocentrism but who also remained
committed to the scholastic project of rational theology continue
to defend angelic appearances philosophically? This essay will
consider three closely-connected authors who flourished in an anglo-
phone environment prone to vandalizing angelic images and largely
antagonistic to scholasticism. My first author is the Roman Catholic

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1) See Tiziana Suarez-Nani, Les anges et la philosophie (Paris, 2002), especially Part II,
92-182.

priest Thomas “Blacklow” White, Kenelm Digby’s friend and philosophical associate, who in 1652 published a theology, *Institutiones Sacrae*, based on Digby’s natural philosophy. Thomas White dedicated his *Institutiones Sacrae* to my second author, the equally idiosyncratic English Franciscan convert Franciscus à Sancta Clara, who, also in 1652, while serving as Provincial of his Order for England, published a philosophical treatise, *Paralipomena philosophica de mundo peripatetico*, aimed at harmonizing Scotism with new astronomical and chemical discoveries. My third author is Sancta Clara’s younger Franciscan confrère, Antoine Legrand, whose devoutly Cartesian *Institutio Philosophiae* of 1675 includes a detailed section on angels—surprisingly, since Descartes explicitly shunned the topic. How were angelic appearances viewed by these three Catholic “recusant” authors, based for the most part in London, unmoored from the very catholicity for which they yearned?

Let me first briefly characterize the new conditions faced by angels after Galileo’s discovery of the Jovian moons (1610). With the demise of Aristotle’s geocentric cosmos, crystalline spheres slowly receded (Cambridge, UK, 2006) 134-168. See also William Godwin’s account in *History of the Commonwealth of England* (London, 1824) 81; and Albert Loomie, “The Destruction of Rubens’s Crucifixion,” *The Burlington Magazine*, 140/1147 (October 1998) 680-682. See also Increase Mather, *Angelographia* (Boston, 1696) “To the Reader,” A3: “As for Philosophical Questions about the Nature of Angels and the way of their Understanding Things, whether it be *Per Species Intelligibiles Insitas vel Acquisitas* and many the like, which Thomists and Scotists have such wrangling Contests about, I have wholly declined them.”

*Cf. Descartes’s Interview with Burman,* in René Descartes, *Oeuvres choisies*, ed. Bridoux (Paris, 1996) 1370: “La connaissance des anges nous échappe presque entièrement, parce que [...] nous ignorons aussi tout ce qu’on demande d’ordinaire à leur sujet, s’ils peuvent s’unir à un corps, quels ont été ces corps que dans l’Ancien testament ils revêtaient souvent, et choses semblables.”