“Day’s Deep Midnight”: John Donne and the Aesthetics of Obscurity

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From classical antiquity, ἀσαφές, obscuritas, or indistinctus has galvanized rhetoricians, poets, and philosophers.

• Aristotle and Cicero warn against obscurity as an effect of poor style.
• Augustine compares obscurity to a fog engulfing the landscape.
• Italian Renaissance poets hurl “obscurity” as an insult.
• But Edmund Spenser labels *The Faerie Queene* a “darke conceit...clowdily enwrapped in allegorical devices,” and other early modern poets, such as George Chapman, pursue a similar aesthetic: “with that darkness will I still labour to be shadowed.”
• This project sees Donne as exemplifying and expanding the counter-tradition of obscurity as aesthetic virtue.

-The poetry of John Donne relies on an aesthetic framework of deliberate obscurity to motivate the central claim that there are things of and beyond the world we can only know by working through the obscure.

- Obscurity in Donne’s poetry takes two interrelated forms:

  • Formal obscurity: the complex poetic structure and vocabulary of darkness, death, sickness and shadow that fills poems such as “A Nocturnall Upon St. Lucy’s Day” and “The First Anniversary.”
  • Philosophical obscurity: the tangled set of philosophical and theological doctrines that underlie Donne’s verse that we can grasp only by working through formal obscurity, such as the mediation between material and spiritual love in “Air and Angels.”

“Philo with twelve years’ study hath been grieved / To be understood; when will he be believed?”

—John Donne, “An Obscure Writer”