

[MJTM 22 (2020–2021)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

D. S. Martin. *Angelicus: Poems*. Poiema Poetry Series. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021. xiii + 88 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-6667-0381-8. \$11.00.

Over the past twenty years, Don Martin has been an indefatigable editor of religious poetry as well as the author of several collections of his own. His latest volume, *Angelicus*, is an impressive achievement. It is dedicated to the subject of angels, those invisible, benign, spiritual presences that play significant parts in the sacred texts of all the Abrahamic religions. In these monologues, Martin effectively acts as a messenger of the messengers, and in presenting the diverse responses of angels to human life, he makes them very human-like. At the same time, by adopting the point of view of angels, he gives voice to their divine perspectives on human behavior, highlighting our strengths and weaknesses, our achievements and our vulnerabilities, and our struggle with faith and meaning. The structure of his book—seven sections, each containing nine poems—reflects the kind of numerological symbolism often linked with angels. One can trace a sequential path through the sections: beginning with incidents in daily life, through the representations of angels in art, to theological questions and the natural world, then a turn to angelic interventions in human history and to human love, and concluding, appropriately, with death, prayer, and last things.

The word angel means “messenger,” and, in the most general sense, angels are believed to serve God and guide and protect human beings. Martin often has his angels address or admonish readers with phrases emphasizing human mortality, for example, “child of clay” (1) or “descendant of dust” (23, 29). At other times, they use a more compassionate and tender address, for example, “little one” (42) or “fragile child” (45). The prefatory

poem, “Of Angels Speaking” (1), establishes the primary challenge of communicating between the divine and human realms:

What we say needs traction  
in your slippery language besides fluent sound  
making new use of shopworn words

in partnership to avoid a vacuous spin  
so your imagination can begin  
to comprehend

In “An Angel Marvels at Human Language” (6), human inventiveness in language-making astonishes one angel. At the same time, the act of naming (“to label & relabel,” 6) leads humans to a false sense of control over creation. In section 4, several poems touch on the more serious matter of the human relationship with nature. In “Frozen Lake” (44), an angel admires a child skating, and in “Rain” (42), our dependence on nature is said to be by “divine design.” However, “Polar Bear” (45) acknowledges the human role in the “diminishing arctic icescape” and ends with a prayer for the environment threatened by those who are elsewhere termed “ungrateful children” (this phrase occurs in the more chastising tone of “The Angels’ Vineyard Song,” 41).

The “limited view” (19) available to humans underlies our pride as well as our frailty and vulnerability, and sections 1 and 2 include several poems that affirm the role of angels as agents of reassurance and comfort who bestow blessings and mercy, as in “An Angel of Mercy Schemes to Undermine Grief” (9) and “Fear Not” (12). In the second of these, the issue of choice and providence is touched upon:

To reassure You have free choice  
though he who dwells  
in the yet to come knows what will be

True you will not merely be your own  
but then you never were

Ultimately, the faithful have nothing to fear (“Angel of Comfort Angel of Peace,” 23):

No angel or demon  
can separate you from the love of God

At the same time, in addition to their dominantly serious roles, angels are occasionally portrayed as unexpectedly playful, as in the game of hide and seek among the laundry hanging on the clothesline (“An Angel Laughs About Laundry,” 8):

Does such frivolity strike you  
as unbecoming to angels of light?  
Know then we continually dwell in joy  
& when love calls us we respond with what’s right

“Angelic Manifestations” (37) summarizes one angel’s boastful account of the different forms he could take. In all of these respects, the approach is balanced and inclusive.

Martin naturally draws on many incidents from scripture involving angels and their interventions in human affairs, including the remarkable “The Preannunciation” (82) in section 7. Here, the subject is the care and concern with which the (here unnamed) Gabriel approached Mary. It ends with these lines:

How will she receive my greeting as I  
tell she’s highly favoured how will  
I enable her to see?

Might she think she’s unsavoury too  
lowly too young or simply submit  
& say *Let it be?*

Martin also includes poems that treat the Ascension (“This Same Jesus,” 36), the temptation in the wilderness (“Ministering Angel,” 57), and the resurrection (“Sitting on a Stone,” 53). “Ministering Angel” (57) wittily uses contemporary lingo to better convey the temptations Jesus faced from Satan:

He’s offered a glorious Kidron  
Valley swandive into fame & a means-  
justifying short-cut to a name  
above every name

*It is written* he replies

& as Satan skulks away we bring better bread  
& rest from all those lies

As for incidents from the Hebrew Bible, one memorable example is “Intervening Angel” (54). It narrates the better-late-than-never arrival of the angel at the scene of Abraham’s near sacrifice of his son Isaac and just as “he raised the knife”:

That’s when I was able to tell  
my message seizing  
the old man’s wrist  
& that’s when the knife fell

Two poems address Jacob’s wrestling with an angel. The first (“Staircase,” 11) is a luminous vision of the angels ascending and descending the stairs to heaven, while the second (“Jacob Wrestles,” 30) records angelic astonishment at Jacob’s daring refusal “to let go.”

Angels are apparently aware of how they are pictured (and often misrepresented) in art, both high-brow and popular. Section 2 begins with “An Angel Critiques Caravaggio’s *Saint Matthew & the Angel*” (17). It is soon followed by “Putto Putto Putti” (21)—a witty declension—in which “baby angels” are dismissed as fantasy and “nonsense”; ironically, human artists are instead advised to “stick to what is true.” “Teen Angel” (80), a “hit record” from the 1950s, is dismissed by one angel as naïve, uninformed, and hopelessly sentimental. The poem concludes with this corrective:

I’m weary of the worn out *up above* rhyming  
with *love* & dead dolts in cartoons sprouting wings  
Death does not make you higher beings  
That’s not how it loses its sting

Other poems endorse the legitimacy of artistic visions (e.g., “An Angel from Signorelli’s *Resurrection of the Body*” [48] and “An Angel from Cimabue’s *The Crucifixion*” [49]). Angels are also said to be attracted to popular art such as film, as in “An Angel Watches *It’s a Wonderful Life*” (61), the murder mysteries of Dorothy Sayers (“Murder Mystery,” 79), and the country music of the self-destructive Hank Williams (“The Angel of Death

at the Grand Ole Opry,” 24).

In the course of the sixty-four poems, Martin orchestrates a wide variety of tones and postures, from questions of divine justice (“Avenging Angel,” 56) and “spiritual war” (“Birds of the Air,” 43) to a cat’s sensing the presence of angels (“Your Cat Watching,” 46). The historical references are equally wide, running from Eden to Babylon to Israel to nineteenth century England and contemporary society. The poems themselves are finely realized and deftly crafted. Like many other contemporary poets, Martin has abandoned conventional punctuation, relying instead on spacing and rhythm. However, he has not abandoned other poetic resources like rhyme, assonance, repetition, and alliteration, and he manages all of them with dexterity. The apt epigraphs (taken from Wesley, Luther, Spurgeon, Hesiod, Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Newton), as well as the literary and theological allusions scattered through the poems, enrich the depth and density of the collection.

There is so much more in the riches of *Angelicus* that I have not touched upon and which readers need to discover for themselves: poems that allude to Dante, Leonardo da Vinci, *Hamlet*, Milton, Emily Brontë, Emily Dickinson, Rilke, and others; poems that treat prayer and married love; a poem that revisits (in a visionary mode) an image Martin has used in earlier poems and made his trademark (“Swing Low Sweet Grocery Cart,” 84); poems that convey prophetic utterance (“The Tenth Plague,” 77–78) or puzzlement over interpretations of scripture (“An Angel Addresses a Churchgoer,” 70); poems that concern the guardianship of Eden, death, and the Second Coming. *Angelicus* is innovative as well as comprehensive in its range and variety. I recommend it highly.

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