

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Angelus Silesius

Introduction to Silesius. "I am like God and God like me. I am as large as God. He is as small as I." Angelus Silesius (1624-1677) plays off of the identity of God and man. (Silesius was off and on accused by the Church of panentheism, of believing that the world exists as God, but that God is more (the animating force) than the world.) Who was this 'Silesian Angel,' and why was he such a source of distress for many theologians in his time?

The life and perspective of Angelus Silesius. Angelus Silesius, the 'Silesian Angel' as he christened himself later in life, having changed his name from plain German to suggestive Latin, was born in Breslau in 1624, only three years after the death of Grimmelshausen. His father was a military man of some distinction, a member of the lower nobility, and the future Angelus was sent to the prominent Elisabethsgymnasium, a promising preparatory school in Breslau; his education was excellent. For higher studies Angelus was sent to the University of Strasbourg and to the Netherlands, where he became aware of the mystic thinking of Jacob Bohme. Meanwhile, following an inclination strong in him since childhood, he had converted to Catholicism, and been ordained; in 1663, he also pursued medical studies on an advanced level. This well credentialed and brilliant young man was then appointed Court Physician to the Duke of Wuerteemberg, a position which promised him a good career, but the chemistry of the appointment was not effective. Silesius began to speak out critically against Lutheranism, in this court which had strong Lutheran leanings, and, above all, began to enter more frequently into the visionary condition. In the end Silesius was fired from his court position, and the rumors of heresy, which were quick to follow in such cases—think of Eckhart and Jacob Boehme, both of whom were victims of smear campaigns—and retired to a Jesuit retreat house where he spent the rest of his life.

The visions of Silesius. Visionary thinking, among members of the clergy, inevitably leads to official nervousness. (We see, in our own day, the time consuming protocols that proceed any ratification of miracles or the saintly condition.) in the case of Silesius, the records of visions fitted exquisitely into the prosody made available to him in time by the elegant works of Martin Opitz (1597-1639), who had dominated the scene of German poetry in the seventeenth century, and had particularly reshaped the technical direction of the craft, by introducing the French alexandrine line as the standard line for German poetry. Silesius moved directly into this verse form—the translations to be found below, in our excerpts, don't attempt the difficult challenge of putting Silesius into alexandrines in English. In any case, in the 1650's when Silesius decided to ask permission to have his poems published—as a priest he required an imprimatur—he was granted it, and in his 1676 his collection of 1500 short poems, aphorisms, and epigrams, *Der cherubinische Wandersman*, was published. Most of the work there was in rhyming alexandrine couplets, often arranged—through syntactical inversion, wordplay, learned allusions—to conceal a hidden and mystical meaning. The reason for the secrecy can perhaps be sensed from the brief excerpts offered below. 'I am as large as god/ he is as small as I': this leitmotif, with which we opened the entry, pervades Silesius' poems, and contributes even to the simplest of his pieces a paradoxical richness.

Borges and Silesius. The brilliant Argentinian writer and poet, Jose Luis Borges, viewed Silesius as a chief inspiration. Put in English, the Silesian verses—'The rose is without a why; it blossoms because it blossoms'—were for Borges the summary of Silesius' (and his own) view of life.

Reading

Primary source reading

Angelus Silesius: the Cherubic Wanderer, trans. Shradly and Schmidt, 1986.

Secondary source reading

Wehr, Gerhard, Angelus Silesius. The Mystic, 2011.

Further reading

Sammons, Jeffrey, Angelus Silesius, 1967.

Original language reading

Walz, Herbert, Deutsche Literatur der Reformationszeit: eine Einfuehrung, 1988.

Suggested paper topics

What, from your own experience, could be threatening to any church about the kind of 'pantheism' or 'panentheism' (check the term) attributed to Angelus Silesius? Meister Eckhart and Jacob Boehme, who preceded Silesius, both reviewed, deepened, modified the notion that man and God are intricately interwoven. Does this position, which Silesius reaffirms, leave room for Trinity, Crucifixion, Redemption?

You will have noticed that the high literature of the early period of German literature intersects at many points with religious thinking. Does the Reformation period seem to you especially replete with the religious imagination? Is the impression correct, that the purely literary imagination, the creative force behind art for its own sake, is irrelevant in such a period as the seventeenth century in Germany?

Excerpts

en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Angelus_Silesius

GODHEAD

BEING IS NOT MEASURED

Turn wheresoe'er I will, I find no evidence
of End, Beginning, Centre or Circumference.

GOD NEVER EXPLORETH HIMSELF

The Thought and Deed of Deity
Are of such richness and extent
That It remaineth to Itself
An Undiscovered Continent.

IN THE SEA MANY ARE ONE

A Loaf holds many grains of corn
And many myriad drops the Sea:
So is God's Oneness Multitude
And that great Multitude are we.

ALL INTO ONE AGAIN

The All proceedeth from the One,
And into One must All regress:
If otherwise, the All remains
Asunder-riven manyness.