Subjugating the Beast and the Angel: Suggestions of Dante's Inferno in "Altarwise by owl-light"


**Abstract**

‘Altarwise by owl-light’ is one of Thomas’s most intransigent poems, an intricately woven text of images and symbols. It has generated, over the years, a great variety of interpretations ranging from the astrological, to the Freudian to the Surrealistic. The reading of this poem often involves a search for sources,
the unravelling of references and allusions. For instance, in some of the sonnets’ most seemingly surreal lines, at the end of Sonnet V, an unexpected source has been discovered by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud. In - Cross-stroked salt Adam to the frozen angel Pin-legged on pole-hills with a black medusa By waste seas where the white bear quoted Virgil And sirens singing from our lady’s sea-straw. - the image of the ‘waste seas where the white bear quoted Virgil’ originates in an allegorical text by Anatole France entitled L’île des pingouins. There now remains the problem of finding out who the ‘frozen angel’ and the ‘black medusa’ are, and of piecing together the elements. This paper will offer suggestions regarding these and other images, by concentrating on allusions, in the poem, to Dante’s Inferno. In the process, it will raise a previously unrecognised possibility in the core interpretation of the poem.

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