

DREAMING IN CRISIS: ANGELS AND THE ALLEGORICAL
IMAGINATION IN POST-WAR AMERICA

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This dissertation bridges literary and cultural studies in order to offer a critical reading of the fascination with angels that appears in America at the beginning and end of the Cold War. Though the contemporary wave of interest spans genres of mass entertainment, pop psychology, and high modernist literature and film, I find angelic representations to be consistent. Invested in the idea of a separated intelligence, these representations expose larger concerns with personal sovereignty and historical determinism. From fantasy to true story, the encounter with the pure and providential spectator consecrates the subject within a special temporality, a temporality of imagination and reception. Angelic illumination thus answers a crisis of attention that renders the human paralyzed. In all of the texts considered the attendant spirit confers personal chosenness and historical beginning through the act of judgment, an idea I discuss in reference to the theories of agency of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Immanuel Kant.

One distinguishing feature of the angelic spectrum is that popular and highbrow treatments differ radically in their attitudes toward angelic revelation. *It's a Wonderful Life* and other movies of the sentimental fantasy genre, the true stories books, the self-help books, and the TV drama *Touched by an Angel* represent the angel-guardian as a figure of completion that assimilates an unsteady future to the rational structures of the past. Implicit already in Tony Kushner's Broadway hit *Angels in America* and fully expressed in the angelic poetry since the second world war, angels appear as expressions of partialness, ruin, and decay. I analyze the

differences between sentimental and tragic appropriations of angels by investigating them in relation to the logic of allegory. A paradoxically populist-hierarchical way of reading, allegorical thinking defines both the angels of annunciatory blessing and the angels of impotence and destruction. Through a final engagement with the work of Walter Benjamin, I argue that as a way of reading experience through its own alterity, allegory is itself an angelic hermeneutic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: AN APOLOGY FOR ANGELS

A topic so outrageous and taxing can only have required the encouragement, brilliance, and support of a great many. However “pitiful a defence” of this poor subject my dissertation may prove to be, it owes its existence to those who have nurtured me in the writing, and to those who have nurtured my very engagement with writing. For the latter gift I am most grateful to my parents, Mary and Tom, who have always believed in the curiosity and conviction that makes a dissertation both possible and meaningful, and who never failed to make these qualities real in their own life and work. From my mother I learned that passion is nothing without discipline, and from my father that the love of ideas carries with it its own grace. I could say of them, in echo of Sidney, that their “milk little by little enabled me to feed afterwards of tougher knowledges.” Such tougher knowledges presented themselves in the course of my education in literature and critical theory. Among those teachers who contributed enormously to my sense of intellectual possibility in this field I single out Olakunle George, my thesis advisor at Northwestern, and at the University of Pittsburgh, Paul Bové. Fiery and exacting in intellect, both teachers modeled a commitment to the life of the mind that continues to influence me. Whatever seriousness and energy I possess as a scholar I owe in part to their inspiration.

The writing of the dissertation itself benefited from the strengths and attention of a diverse and powerful committee. Though very different in orientation, they all share a penetrating ability to name the substance of things, even when that means calling a spade a spade. Nancy Condee, my outside reader, has been particularly helpful in this regard, pointing out both opportunities and pitfalls from a perspective that I could almost call the voice of Cultural Studies. It was her talk on “Baby Lenin” that first exposed me to a different kind of

work on popular culture, and opened up for me the topical possibilities that eventually defined my thesis. I have worked with Jonathan Arac since my very first semester at Pitt, and despite the increasingly intervening miles have always found myself blessed by his thoughtful encouragement and wisdom in the field. Thank you, Jonathan, for all your insight and enthusiasm, and for the knowledge that your passing this project means the affirmation of one of the most judicious and discriminating readers in English Studies. The project itself would have gotten nowhere without Ronald Judy. Professor Judy's erudition encompasses the theological knowledge that makes angels transparent, and the philosophical and literary thinking that could translate such knowledge to the social field. I would have been lost without either. In my work on this dissertation I have been in many ways Ronald's student; conversations with him both about the topic and the writing have in every case proven to be turning points, flashes on my horizon always productive and exciting and always a little out of reach. And to Colin MacCabe, my advisor and chair, I am indebted for reasons both predictable and surprising. Colin's warm faith in my abilities, his patience, and his spiritedness have kept me grounded throughout the long process. His talent for seeing – and demanding – the forest for the trees has functioned as a needful corrective to my immersion in the leaves and branches. But it is Colin's peculiar distaste for angels – ironically coupled with an interest in and genius for the ideas that angels represent – that perhaps has elicited the most from me. I could not have asked for a more providential devil's advocate, nor a more ennobling struggle than that posed by the restless challenges and alluring gauntlet repeatedly thrown down before me by my chair.

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Anja Ulanowicz, Lisa Phillips, Clare Connors, and Jessica Pannell. I am forever at the mercy of Scott Silsbe, whose extensive knowledge of angels and contemporary poetry provided the basis of the fourth chapter. I also owe the final paragraph of this chapter to the administration of George W. Bush, in whose honor it was written. Susan Noel provided unhopd for enthusiasm for the topic in the early stages of this project, and throughout the writing Martha Feldman, my stepmother of twenty years, provided devoted *camaraderie* in her own work on angels and castrati, as well as an inspiring example of a strong and brilliant female academic. Deepest thanks also go to Sean McNamara for his unfailing support and for watching endless episodes of *Touched by an Angel* with me, to Anne Drymalski and Diane Coleman for their unfailing interest in discussing *Touched by an Angel* with me, and to Steve Arledge for his love and slightly amazed patience across vocational borders. Finally, I thank my friend and colleague, Brenda Whitney, for her help in the technically maddening preparation of the final draft, for her insightfulness and careful reading of some of the chapters, and for her friendship. To all of these people and many more, not the least my siblings Rebecca, Mason, and Meredith, this work owes its very being.

During the revising stages of this dissertation my stepfather, Philip Heller, died from cancer. I wish I could say how much his love and generosity, intelligence and spark, his commitment as a father and radiance as a person have made my life richer and helped me to grow. In his absence, the world has less wonder and simplicity. Einstein's eyes seem blurry, and I keep waiting for the last run to get knocked in. Without ability to say more, I dedicate this dissertation to his memory, to his sweetness and courage, to a prince of a human being. And flights of angels, Philip.

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1. Introduction

“What is all this shit about angels?”

- George Carlin

In his 1999 album “You Are All Diseased” America’s most obnoxious stand-up comic finally gave blatant form to a question that had been stirring for some time among critics and consumers of American popular culture. Though the nation had in the 1980’s witnessed the advent of “God bless America” in political rhetoric and become used to the advance of New Ageism into both private and public spheres, it was still unprepared for the sweeping parade of religious extra-terrestrials that rose with the dust of the Berlin Wall. In the 1970’s Nina Auerbach could write, “We no longer adore angels; we do not even like them” (64). By the 1990’s, however, angels seemed to possess - as one bookseller put it - a “universal appeal” that “[crossed] age and denominational lines” (Bachleda, 31).¹ Those who noticed but took exception to the appeal experienced a universal perplexity. What indeed was going on with this so-called “angel craze”? Why this interest – serious interest – in figures that to skeptics seemed purposeless and unconvincing, fluffy expressions of sanctimony and cultural regression?

If anything, Carlin’s question was tardy. The poll he referred to in his 1999 monologue, indicating that three out of four Americans actually believed in angels, had been anticipated over five years earlier. In 1999 the Barna Research Group announced that 75% of Americans “believe angels exist and have an effect on people’s lives” (Lazar). But the big news had come

¹ That the 1990’s - present angel fascination is in fact generalized is suggested by the fact that it spans geographical, age, race, faith, and class demographics. Teenagers in New York took to wearing angel wings at the same time that the over-sixty crowd in Pittsburgh was attending talks on angel encounters and baby boomers in California were buying angel candles. As this dissertation will discuss, angels haven’t penetrated every demographic equally nor in the same way, but their presence is exclusive to none.

earlier. Shortly after Christmas in 1993, *Time* magazine had unveiled the first unexpected statistics about angels in America: 69% of Americans believed in angels, and 46% believed they had their own guardian angel. Books testifying to true encounters with angels – where the angel saves the witness from some peril, or more often simply fixes his or her tire – had hit bookstores across malls and airports. A few were beginning to emerge counselling readers on how to turn this encounter into a meaningful relationship through the intimacy of daily conversation. Little gold angel pins had begun to circulate. Even Hillary Clinton claimed to wear one, for the wings, and had made angels the theme of the White House Christmas tree that year. The fixation was apparent, even before the angel events that would follow through the rest of the decade: the release of the unflagging hit CBS drama, *Touched by an Angel*; endless remakes of angel films from the forties and fifties; the Vatican tour of angel art, “The Invisible Made Visible,” and the proliferation of Renaissance angels among greeting cards and calendars; the assimilation of the angel moniker by self-help activist groups, business investors, technology firms, and Oprah; and the emergence across the country of stores solely devoted to peddling angelic merchandise. Angels were almost a national theme.

They were a theme whose source of authority, however, was not self-evident. While efforts were made on the part of both angel-critics and angel-sympathizers to contextualize this phenomenon within broader social and cultural trends, none of them took pains to analyze the texts themselves with any degree of care or sensitivity. Beneath the reactions to angels one could perceive a vague panic that established modes of thought were somehow under threat, and with this a sharp re-affirmation of those modes as means of containing it. What appeared was a divide between neo-enlightenment discourses denigrating the taste in angels as populist escapism and socially conscious movements who saw in them a call to action. Carlin’s own response –

that since the sixties Americans have taken so many drugs that they are now experiencing a collective flashback manifesting itself as a belief in angels – represents a flippant version of the critical stance dismissing angels as so much irrationalist blather. Wendy Kaminer's *Sleeping with Extraterrestrials: The Rise of Irrationalism and the Perils of Piety* is at the forefront of those promoting this argument. Kaminer associates angels with the rise of a therapeutic culture based on the "celebration of subjectivism." For her, the angel fascination and other pop spirituality movements undermine critical thinking and intellectual inquiry in order to promote a facile spiritual relativism and its narcissistic raptures. The goal is security, as grounded by a "divine benevolent despotism," and the price is freedom. Others are equally critical, if less hand-wringing. On the academic front lines, Harold Bloom - in perhaps the best known relevant academic text, the 1996 *Omens of Millennium* - reads angels as part of the New Age's "endlessly entertaining saturnalia of ill-defined yearnings," a "debasement" of a Gnostic tradition that is more effectively studied on its own. For Mark Edmundson in *Nightmare on Main Street*, published a year later, angels are simply a "mental vacation" from an American Gothic also more effectively studied on its own. In such circles and in general, very little intellectual play has been given to the phenomenon as text as opposed to indication or symptom.²

The alternative explanatory stance tends to situate angelic interest in relation to global threats instead of cultural decadence. As Peter Kreeft, a philosophy professor at Boston College, put it: "these are desperate times" (Gibbs, 58). Encounter books speak vaguely of "all the personal and world problems we are facing" (Webber, 13) as the reason for an increased interest in celestial creatures. "Now," Webber adds, "it's safe to come out of the angelic closet." This

² I should add that discrete angelic texts have received a great deal of critical attention, especially Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (which counts as "literature"), but also popular works such as *Touched by an Angel* have enjoyed a certain degree of research and analysis. When the "angel-craze" is addressed as a whole in academia, however, it is dealt with briefly and dismissively.

double edge of world crisis and spiritual readiness defines the lay religious response. Those working in religious studies often give more specific answers: “This is a religious experience, which society manifests in times of transition,” says Bruce Chilton, professor of religion at Bard and an Episcopal priest (Carvajal 8), in this case the transition to a “postindustrial economy – the likelihood that a person will change jobs and careers, the likelihood of changing spouses several times.” Eileen Elias Freeman, a pop angel author who also holds a degree in theology, offers a broader vision of the current destruction, attributing the renewal of angelic voices to rampant “depersonalization” from media over-saturation and to a global political and ecological crisis in which “we are killing our future.” Retired rabbi Morris Margolies, author of a book on angels in Judaism, *A Gathering of Angels*, draws a historical parallel: “We’re living in an era very similar to the Maccabean era for the Jews, where disaster confronts us on all sides” (in Gibbs 62).³ In essence a more specific version of the broad arguments of the pop laity, Margolies’s historical parallel articulates the angel craze as a religious expression of material forces. Whether taken as real “oases of peace” in Freeman’s terms or as signals of distress,⁴ the angels of this perspective demand our rightful attention – almost exclusively, however, as messengers of more serious issues afoot.

As the title of this dissertation suggests, I will be reading the recent output of angels with both of these perspectives in mind. I take seriously the irrational, naïve component of angelic expression as well as its tragic, socially critical inflection. Where I diverge from both of these

³ The Maccabean era was a disastrous period involving colonial repression and with that a loss of tradition, a disaster of Hellenist conformism and Judaic decadence ultimately resulting in uprising and civil war. It was also a time when angels were becoming more interesting in a way that would explode in the years following

⁴ Though grounded in the religion, aspects of the sympathetic response echo the view of piety advanced by Marx in his introduction to *Toward a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, that “religious suffering is the expression of real suffering and at the same time the protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions” (24).

positions, however, is in my insistence that the specificity of angelic representation warrants careful and imaginative attention, and on its own terms.

It is the end of 2003 as I write this. The latest poll, published in Fall 2002, shows if anything a rise in angelic fascination. According to Scripps Howard News Service and Ohio University, 77% of Americans now say they believe in angels, 73% not simply “in general” but as actual entities that “come into the world even in these modern days” (see “Angels beliefs on the rise”). What is most surprising, however, is the demographic consistency. A fad often assumed as belonging to the province of white elderly women, the belief in angels is reported in more than fifty percent of every polled demographic (broken down by age, race, gender, faith, family status, location, education and income) except Jews (32%) and those with no religious preference (47%). Where women account for 81% of those saying they believe, men are behind only at 72%; those with a lower income were more likely to believe, but the spread between those with incomes below \$25,000 and those with incomes above \$80,000 was only 15%; in education those most likely to believe reported having “some college” (82%), but of the lowest educational demographic, those with post-graduate study, a full 63% said “Yes” when asked, “Do you believe that angels, that is, some kind of heavenly beings who visit Earth, in fact exist?”⁵

The popular significance of angels, then, is established and widespread. Yet, of those doing post-graduate study, no one among the 63% or otherwise has to this date has attempted a substantial work that would “read” this phenomenon. It is true that angels have enjoyed some attention recently as a figurative and theoretical tool for analyzing topics as diverse as the

⁵ The poll, by Scripps Howard News Service and the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University sponsored the survey, which was conducted by telephone from randomly selected households in all states and the District of Columbia, and included 1,127 adults and a 4% margin of error. Though the sample is small, the results do suggest that the angel craze cannot be “contained” by an one major demographic.

semiotics of human sexuality, the sublimity of the diva, the rise of “bot” culture in information sciences, and the pedagogical ideal of perfect communication. Michel Serres’s sumptuous 1995 art book on angels is especially valuable in its attempt to connect the interest in angels with the rise of “globalism,” particularly in its morphology of the Information Age. But his book is primarily meditative, rather than analytical, and – like the above texts – it does not deal with the contemporary texts in which these ideas take shape. The attention these works give the angel has a stated source other than its current cultural uproar. Making use of the current fascination for their own purposes, these critics respond to the special status the angel possesses historically as a literary and philosophical figure. Throughout centuries understood as “immaterial substances,” angels have been invoked in relation to some of the most famous and insoluble questions in philosophic history, notably the mind/body problem and the question of the relation between the universal and the particular. They have arisen in conjunction with two of the most important concepts in Western theology, the beliefs in a unified but dualist universe and in the immortality of the individual soul. Those doing work in literary and cultural theory have begun, it seems, to rediscover the rich, various and - especially for those educated since the Second World War – taxing body of thinking on angels in theological, philosophical, and poetic discourses.

In other words, a profound disjunction emerges within the analytic consideration of the angelic figure. As they appear in theoretical works, angels pose a formidable challenge. When it comes to popular texts, however, angels are easy. Above all, the two traditions - so the critical as literature might convince us - have little to say to each other.

This dissertation is an attempt to put the popular and the literary-philosophical treatment of angels in conversation. As I see it, the idea of the angel – whether in high-, low-, or middle-brow venues – is configured in remarkably coherent ways. Across the range of genres, angels

portray the fantasy of minds separated from bodies, minds whose knowledge comes from pure forms rather than sensual experience. Angels from Averroës to Sophy Burnham know through intuition, and they know disinterestedly. This “global” intelligence of angels manifests itself in different ways, but above all as a particular form of aesthetic judgment. As the 1946 movie *Stairway to Heaven* puts it, angels see things “all at once and in a poet’s eye.” As simple divine beings, angels see the whole within the fragmentary – the entirety of a personal or collective history flashing up within the moment. One can see the appeal of this at once totalizing and defamiliarizing form of vision for literary and filmic analysis, but also for popular discourses like self-help counseling, near-death narrative, and “born again” conversion stories. All define their angels through the particular way of reading that they embody: a consecrating and spectatorial relation to time and space, and through its significance as a means of connecting historical intelligence with individual experience.

I do not deal with all of the above discourses in this dissertation. Rather, I take the angel as a representation of the imagination and of a particular kind of work that it performs and read it through a select cross-section of American cultural texts, both high and low. My method, however, remains constant: to treat the figure of the angel in each text simultaneously as object of analysis and idea. I see this as the purpose of literary and filmic criticism, to move in a given interpretation toward the principles of that interpretation – to read a text from within, under the assumption that it is its own philosophy. This applies equally to the cross-section as to the individual works; thus, I try to bring together canonical and “evanescent” texts in each of the chapters in order to demonstrate their mutual illumination. The one exception is the final chapter, which describes a particular formation of the angel that is, for the most part, unique to more hermetic cultural forms.

In exploring the interstices of the popular and the “literary” I have not been disappointed. I have not found the angel in any of its versions to be reducible to either religious or spiritualist consolationism. Nor have I found it transparent either as fantasy or as cry for help; in fact, as I will elaborate below, the figure of the angel says as much about the nature of crisis and fantasy as either say about it. The foremost difficulty this endlessly fertile topic has posed, however, has been how to narrow it. Neither a reception or audience study, historical analysis, or series of case studies organized around a central theme, my dissertation is a narrative meant to be read in sequence. It moves from an elaboration of angels as appearances within conditions of crisis to angels as expressions of that crisis. At the beginning the angel consistently features as a pure intelligence that delivers distinctions to a world and a subject in a state of confusion. By the end, the angel indicates its own impossibility as attending and illuminating messenger. In opening up the fantasy within crisis, the angel names the otherness and the division at the core of the process of judgment that it is its job to deliver.

The issue of crisis is where I begin, because so often in angelic narrative, that is exactly where beginning happens. In current narratives, the angel usually appears to a subject in a quandary or condition of loss of faith, which is experienced as an existential problem. Suicide, confession, accident, these are some of the situations that in the past century have tended to exemplify this quandary. For each of these descriptions implies a collapse of lived intelligibility, a felt contradiction between the individual and external restriction, whether in the form of the body and physical world (terminal illness, a no-exit trap or intrigue) or conceptual forces (the conventions of the past, or the forward machinery of “progress”). In each case decision appears simultaneously necessary and inaccessible.

This expression of existential quandary through the imagery of containment is especially

telling, given the timing of angelic eruption in recent American history. We see angelic interest cropping up not only in the decade/s following the Cold War, but also in the decades inaugurating it. Angels were popular in film, poetry, and popular song from the early 1940's through the 50's, with their greatest period of interest being the immediate post-war into the early years of the midcentury. They are only occasionally used as a device during the 60's, 70's, and early 80's. I focus on texts from both sides of the "war," partly because the recent angel craze references works from the earlier period, but also for another, more important reason. I read both angelic fascinations as responses to changes in the social organization of power that began during World War II. As bookends of the Cold War, angels appear to frame a transitional chaos whose implications would be governed and suppressed by that period's binarist logic. Focus on the arms race and détente provided narratives of power and containment vis-à-vis science and the state, while domestically the battles over Civil Rights concentrated the country's self-reflective energies. These energies emerge at the ends of each of these wars in angelic images and stories expressive of a particular anxiety of containment, resulting in profound personal dissociation. The supernatural visitation both highlights this dissociation and relieves it. Simultaneously, the subject is freed from and assimilated to containing structures by the pure intelligence. The imagination, judgment's daemon and interlocutor, has done its work; crisis has become memory.

The word "crisis" in its root stems from the Greek *krisis*: to decide, to judge. At the heart of the angelic story is a problem of judgment, a difficulty assimilating the universalist codes of reason to intuited information and particulars. In some ways, the very identification of a situation as crisis suggests a gap between received orders of thought and new realities. The

angel appears in reference to a specific kind of crisis, however - or perhaps I should say to a crisis as it is perceived in a specific kind of way. Cast in relation to the idea of a separated, sacred intelligence, the problem of decision-making invokes the question of attention, of the mystery of willing rather than the difficulty of thinking. Angels do not solve problems. They do not because – consistently in their cultural representations, both current and historical – they cannot create. Instead, they direct the attention of their charges and their communities to something that is, always, already there. Symbols since the early Muslim Aristotelians and the later Scholastics of the active intelligence,⁶ angels are theorized as actualizing something that is already potential, whether a truth or an identity. Their task is merely to bring it to existence through the power of their attention, which exalts each thing it holds in its arms or in its gaze. Angels are the midwives of judgment, never its parents.

For the most part, these spirits have been taken up in the past half-century as figures of attention in two distinct ways. The first is as attention-directors. Like the stars that they have since classical times been seen to inspire, angels function in their recognizable capacity as guides, selecting among a field of choices the one we are to take, pointing the way. So we find, for instance, “Digital Angel” tracking devices, miniature GPS satellite receivers that could prove useful to the military, pilots, farmers, motorists, and parents willing to implant them in their children against the eventuality of a kidnapping. Echoing the horn-blowing capacity of the heavenly choirs, the angel moniker has been used for “intelligent” traffic light systems designed to redirect the flow of cars during sensitive times of day, such as rush-hour. The realm of

⁶ In Aristotle’s ladder of the causal powers, the angels would be the secondary unmoved movers: powers subordinate to God (the Unmoved Mover) who initiate a chain of movement which results in the excitation of life and the judging action of the individual soul. Aquinas would later reformulate the definition of the angel as secondary unmoved mover as being “infinite from above, finite from below.” Aristotle’s is essentially a creation narrative, an attempt to ground the dynamic expression of difference – birth and change – within a teleological determinism upholding eternal law.

science even has lately baptised the “guardian angel gene,” anti-carcinogenic P53, a “quality-control officer”⁷ responsible for triggering the repair of mutated cells and for commanding the self-destruction of cells beyond repair. In business, “angel investors” were in a position to bless particular would-be corporations, contributing significantly to their success and to the technology start-up boom of the 1990’s.⁸ The idea of angels in this regard helped to coat the risk that such parties took, as questions of risk and prediction are among the primary reasons we cry for judgment in the first place. And in politics Americans saw the manipulation of the guardian angel pin by the Nicole Braun Simpson Campaign against domestic violence – both during the trial (her sister took the stand wearing it “for Nicole”) and after (OJ’s trophies were on tour for the campaign, following which they were to be melted down into little guardian angel pins and sold, profits going to raise awareness about domestic violence) - and of angelic figures in the Elian Gonzalez “Save the Whales”-esque murals, where Miami and its spectators could gaze at Elian surrounded by angels frolicking with dolphins. Ironically, the secular sphere uses the idea of angels to organize its operations, from the smallest cell to the cosmos. And its use of them is apt: as mediators between global intelligence and local action, the general and the particular,

⁷ Specifically the *Washington Post* dubbed it the “molecular equivalent of a quality-control officer,” a “safeguard against random changes,” and a “master-control molecule” that essentially protects against cell anarchy (Rensberger). This concept of the “master-control” is also implicit in the naming of the GPS devices and the traffic lighting system co-ordinators that bear “angel” in their title. The connection with judgment, which requires co-ordination and central processing of multiple particulars within a holistic view, is here evident. Interestingly, the interplay between angels and the scientific world has historically been inspired by theoretical issues of organization. At the beginning of the twentieth century Darwin’s partner, A.R. Wallace used the idea of angels to launch his early theory of intelligent design. In his post-Darwinian work Wallace refers to angels as “organising spirits” who mediated the random mutations of evolutionary narrative with the plans of a master intelligence. In “an infinite series of grades of being” the angels manifest the power of the Deity through their agency in the material universe. In elaborating this claim Wallace draws as much from New Thought spiritualism as from evolutionary science, especially in his focus on “thought-transference” as the angelic means of influencing human action and the idea of the Almighty as the “all-soul.” His ideas diverge from Darwin’s most importantly, however, in their emphasis on evolution as a form of *progress*, which requires the idea of divine intention if one is to read biological history in this way.

⁸ The general title “angel investors” also worked its way into the specific titles of various groups. In California, for instance, a budding entrepreneur could contact the Sacramento Angels, Sierra Angels, Acorn Angels, Angel’s Forum, Band of Angels, Breakfast Angels, or BayAngels.com (see Chan).

angels stand particularly well for the judgments that each of these areas are describing or calling us to make.

The second function of angels as heralds of the gaze is a mirror image of the first. In this case, rather than directing the attention of their charges, they bestow attention upon them. This capacity refers itself to the human as object instead of subject. As attending audience, angels elevate the status of each individual whom they grace. The emotion of loneliness so often invoked to explain the recent burgeoning interest in angels is relevant here. Writers of true-encounters-with-angels books and how-to-contact-your-guardian-angel self-help books frequently appeal to the isolation of the reader as a universal problem that the companionship of angels can palliate. One can see this in recent angelic publishing history, apparent in the 1995 retitling of Billy Graham's 1975 book of Biblical and modern angel stories, *Angels: God's Secret Agents*, as *Angels: Ringing Assurance that We Are Not Alone*. Even outside the angel industry, however, this idea has taken wing. Memoirist and social critic Richard Rodriguez has, in a PBS newshour interview, likened the recent fascination with angels to the contemporary interest in animals for the same reason: "Was there ever another era of history where humans seemed so desperate to make contact with angels and to talk to animals - a sign of our modern curiosity, yes, but evidence too of our utter loneliness" (10/1/97). The angel's status as consecrating spectator perhaps also fuels the obsessive lust for collecting angels that – while collecting has always had something of the neurotic *idée fixe* about it – seems more than just fetishistic.⁹ For angels are above all figures of grace. Beyond idiosyncratic self-expression or eccentric hobby,

⁹ We can see this emphasis on the innumerability of the angelic host reflected in the tendency of collectors to suffuse their lived space with a hyperabundance of angel figurines. This is not just the isolated bust of David on the coffee table, whose single form is set up as an object of contemplation of the human. Oprah's donation to a Wisconsin museum of five hundred angel figures (see Hart 1) is actually a quite modest amount. Stories abound of people knocking out walls and windows in their homes to accommodate enough space for collectibles in their angel rooms. And signs in angel stores from San Diego to Virginia Beach proclaim what might be a pop anthem of lonely reassurance, "Angels Are Everywhere."

the pious collection of angels confers on each of us a sovereign, even adulatory, distinction.

The dual role of the angelic, allowing us to distinguish judge the world and to find ourselves judged and distinguished in a world beyond it, recalls an idea inseparable from angels as they have come to us in Western culture: that of the immortal soul. Since its origin in Zoroastrian religion - the religion that was one of the original sources for the angelic idea proper - the belief in a separable, personal, and everlasting soul has been directly referable to the belief in a last judgment. Guardian spirits as well as psychopomps of the dead, Zoroaster's angels also embody the personal ideal which each soul strives toward and with which it ultimately becomes one; thus angels minister to this reckoning both during and after our lifetimes. In them our acts – which in Hellenistic discourse belonged to the province of the soul and its judgments – are unified into a singular identity (and accountability).

The self-aggrandizing urges of the belief in personal attendant angels also express themselves in the belief in personal immortality – a belief that has experienced something of a renaissance in the recent taste for ghosts, cloning, and various forms of life writing, as well as angels. Easily attributable to a fear of death, the fascination with personal permanence says much about what the fear of death might mean. As the great leveller, death empties all distinctions, undoes hierarchy, flattens space and time. From this perspective, it is not so much relinquishing the experience of living that we fear, as relinquishing the feeling that our experiences are ours. The idea of the immortal soul takes care of all that. In this idea our thoughts and responses belong to us forever whether we want them to or not, and in the moralized afterlife they name our position in the cosmic order of things.

The Zoroastrian version of the final judgment (and its version is also the first version) stands out with a single image: the vision of the individual soul at the bridge to the afterworld

waiting to meet the sum of its acts. They will appear in human form, either as a beautiful woman or as a wretched hag. Virtue, or Vice. Such a figure is allegory, the storyteller of eternal order and individual action and, like the angel, an interpreter between conditions of dividedness and ideals of unity, visible and invisible. Allegory arises originally in somewhat crude form in Zoroastrian thinking specifically in references to its angels and their counterparts, the demonic daevas. The latter, together with the archangelic amesha spentas and the lowest order of angels, the yazatas, are personifications of abstract ideas who rule the world of appearance.¹⁰ They answer the prayers of the pious, descending to them on paths of gold. Conceived within Zoroaster's radically dualist cosmology, these personifications experience the most heightened form of literal existence by engaging in battle, the legendary war in heaven that begins the story of *Paradise Lost*. The cosmic battle allegorizes the personal one and its dramatization of subjective recompense, in which the soul becomes liberated from the body at death and judged by the figure of its own deeds as destined for heaven or hell.

Heaven and hell have less of a hold on contemporary angelic thinking, which emphasizes personal distinction over eternal judgment. What is important in the latter half of the twentieth century is the allegorical presumption that the unity of the will is under the aegis of a distant and abstract agency rather than the individual's rational mind. Immortal souls achieve complete expression of their power only in contact with the infinite.¹¹ This is an idea that would be developed further in later Judaic and Christian thought. In Judaism, the allegorical impulse

¹⁰ Such allegorical treatment of angels was particularly important in art of the Renaissance and Pre-Raphaelites, two other moments of angelic fascination, and reappears today in tarot decks, greeting cards, self-help books, and incense lines, to name a few. For example *Magnificents'* "Angelic Series" includes "Joy," "Peace," "Love," "Inspiration," and "Hope." These are fairly typical modern representatives of angelic allegories, abstractions that are so universalized as to be removed from any real concrete application and which pander to the larger abstraction of good feeling. The Zoroastrian virtues, by contrast, include Good Thought/Good Mind, Holy Truth, Power/Material Sovereignty, Toil-Mind/Holy Work, Completeness/Wholeness/Health/Salvation, and Life/Immortality.

occurs similarly in a field of resonance between double worlds and within a divided consciousness seeking its perfection in the revelation of hidden meaning. Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis* contrasts Jewish and Greek thinking in this matter. Referring specifically to Homer, Auerbach writes, “Later allegorizing trends have tried their arts of interpretation upon him, but to no avail. He resists any such treatment; the interpretations are forced and foreign, they do not crystallize into a unified doctrine” (13-14). That is, opaque narrative lends itself to “a calm acceptance of the basic facts of human existence” rather than to a “passionate impulse to rebel against them or to embrace them in an ecstasy of submission.” Both passionate rebellion and an ecstasy of submission are enabled by a significant contribution to an idea of angels that is distinctly Jewish: the idea of angel as divine messenger, holy utterance.¹² More than Zoroastrianism, which shares with it its categorization as a religion of the book, Judaism demonstrates the deep relation between angels and revealed text, the consecrating communication. As a system of signs that creates meaning through negation, written language provokes both submission (the letter of the law) and rebellion (argument, interpretation). The Jewish scribal tradition of scriptural exegesis incorporated both these urges in its development of allegory as a way of reading. Through allegory and the allegorists, then, the subject could

¹¹ In his writings on allegory and the daemonic, Angus Fletcher puts it this way: allegory demonstrates that “control over our acts is an illusion, an eternally unsatisfied search for perfection” (64).

¹² Angels in the Judaic tradition present some difficulty, in that the Jewish scriptures themselves cannot be exclusively determined separate from the Zoroastrian thinking as it influenced the Jews through Babylonian appropriations during the Exile, at the end of the Exile under the Persian King Cyrus, and under Hellenistic cosmopolitanism, which promoted further Persian-Jewish syncretism. It is clear that the post-exilic books of the Jewish Bible are replete with angelic appearances, and that the appearances themselves (in Ezekiel, Daniel, Isaiah and Zechariah especially) are more fantastical and hyperbolic. But even the pre-exilic texts may show the influence of Persian metaphysics. Since the seventeenth century scholars – among them Spinoza - have speculated that the Pentateuch was actually a composite text; in the nineteenth century, Edouard Reese, Karl Heinrich Graf, and Julius Wellhausen suggested that it included material written both before and after the years in captivity, in the sixth-fifth centuries B.C.E., a view that is generally accepted. Important aspects of this theory have been challenged since then, but more in the way of modification. For the most part the idea that the Pentateuch is purely a pre-exilic documented is less commonly advanced. (See the Introduction to Joseph Blenkinsopp’s *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* for a helpful history of Biblical scholarship on this problem.) What

confront and wrestle with his condition of chosenness.¹³ In that chosenness he would discover the secret of his own will, evident above all in its own self-negation: sacrifice and submission.

Writing much earlier than Auerbach, the nineteenth century German Idealist philosopher Friedrich Schelling also compares Greek monochromatic representation with the allegorical tradition of a religion springing from the Middle East, in this case Christianity. His discussion makes more apparent than does Auerbach's, however, the connection between allegory, angels and the question of action in a divided and indeterminate landscape. To do this Schelling distinguishes the world of myth, the cosmogony of the Greek gods, from the world of history, the revelation of the angels.

The mythology of the Greeks was a self-enclosed world of symbols of ideas, which can be intuited in reality only as gods. Pure limitation on the one hand and undivided absoluteness on the other is the determining law for each individual god, just as for the world of the gods as a whole. . . . Things stand quite differently in a religion that directs itself to the infinite directly in and for itself, and in which the finite is conceived not as a symbol of the infinite, and simultaneously for its own sake, but rather only as an allegory of the former and in complete subordination to it. The whole in which the ideas of such a religion become objective is necessarily infinite, and not a world completed and limited on all sides. Its

seems distinctly Jewish is the formulation of angels as agents of divine communication without image and personality.

¹³ Both Judaism and Zoroastrianism referred exceptionality – as personal immortal or ethnic chosen - directly to the apprehension of divine intelligence; they did so differently, but found common ground in the allegorical representation of the name-blessing. In Judaism the angels (unnamed before the exile) eventually took poetic titles that described the attributes of God. Zoroastrianism angels took on the names of “the first internal elements of the mental universe” (Mills 23), the bases of its immortal order and the logic by which it conferred immortality.

figures do not endure, but rather appear; they are not eternal beings of nature, but rather historical figures in whom the divine reveals itself only temporarily and whose fleeting appearance can be held fast only through faith, but never transformed into an absolute presence. (62)

These apparition-like figures, as Schelling later clarifies, are the angels, facilitators of the “supersensual dreams” belonging to the Christian sensibility he is describing. “Christianity, which is possible only within absolute disunion, is at its inception already founded on miracles” (69), i.e. founded on the cohering of two worlds into one through a moment of illumination and blessing. The angels, presiding over this unifying event, enable the apprehension of the divine that in an allegorical world cannot be determined but only revealed.

To make this point, Schelling – unlike Auerbach – keeps to the romantic aesthetic opposing the allegorical and the symbolic, a distinction important at the time for the categorization of all artistic modes within a universal system. But the legendary opposition serves another function here, which is to distinguish the static symbol from the symbol charged as *act*. As Schelling makes clear, allegory implies a dynamic system, limited but not completed. Allegorical emblems form a narrative of striving and achievement in a world characterized by incompleteness; set existentially in time, doubleness becomes discontinuity. As a fundamentally non-temporal mode, on the other hand, the symbol does not traffic with either narrative or its agents. Beautifully non-ethical, it poses questions of meaning, but not of judgment. Or, to use Auerbach’s distinction between Homer and the Bible, it can be analyzed, but not interpreted. And because of this, while the mythic fixities of the symbol may be apropos, they are never historical. History finds itself instead in the allegorical system, a discontinuity of temporal and

mental worlds unified only through a transcendent absence – the miraculous, the infinite, the divine. This “unfathomable” vision is, as Schelling insists, definitively esoteric, but for this reason, also disorienting.¹⁴ Allegory, a poetic system deriving from the presumption of a revealed and an invisible world, moves its pilgrim toward the possibility of emerging into that other world, a world ineffably correspondent to the given one in which he travels. But this divide also presupposes a foundational difference that gives the lie to those resemblances and correspondences, and so its pilgrim travels through a maze of deception, balking at appearances, searching for self-evidence. He finds it in the angel – not delivering the promise of allegory, but emerging out of its own undoing.

The “fleeting appearance” of angels makes its presence felt in a number of different ways in contemporary literature and culture. This dissertation will look at the breadth of them. I focus on the two periods since the second world war that have seen flurries of interest in angels. The first begins during the war and follows immediately from it, disappearing by the mid to late fifties. The second period begins around the time of the collapse of the Berlin Wall; it continues, with bated force, until the current moment early in the twenty-first century. Angels usher in the Cold War and usher it out again, presenting before us the threshold of an unknown order.

For angels to arise in the popular imagination during transitional times like these is not

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, in *The Order of Things*, describes the disorder resulting from the duality inherent in allegorical form. He credits the semiotic rupture between “similitude and sign” in the seventeenth century with the appearance of two new subjects, one of them essentially an allegorist: the madman who confronts the disorder of signs, and the poet who manages this disorder. “At the fringes of a knowledge that separates beings, signs, and similitudes, and as though to limit its power, the madman fulfils the function of *homosemanticism*: he groups all signs together and leads them with a resemblance that never ceases to proliferate. The poet fulfills the opposite function: his is the *allegorical* role; beneath the language of signs and beneath the interplay of their precisely delineated distinctions, he strains his ears to catch that ‘other language,’ the language, without words or discourse, of resemblance” (49-50, Foucault’s italics). Allegoria, in Greek “other-speaking,” speaking through the other, is the signifying system of the hidden, moving forward always through its semiotic gestures towards a sacred not-there. The poet, whose skills are divinatory as well as discursive, is the only one who can speak in this tongue, and imagine that he understands it.

unusual, especially during transition in the nature and source of institutional power. The first great period of widespread angelic fervor¹⁵ occurred in Palestine after the Exile ended in 538 B.C.E. and before the emergence of rabbinic Judaism in the first and second centuries of the common era. This was the time when the “intertestamentary” biblical books were written – notably the Book of Tobit and the Book of Enoch, and when separatist cults like the Essene-based group that produced the angel-ridden and apocalyptic Dead Sea Scrolls flourished. Multiple pieties competed within an uneven terrain of power, each seeking a return to authentic tradition while coexisting with and often incorporating foreign influences. It was in this climate that the vision of angels at this time was produced by the early followers of Jesus Christ.¹⁶ Another awakening of interest in angels occurred in the sixteenth and especially the seventeenth centuries. In Holland pamphlets circulated telling people how to initiate angelic visions and encounters, in Italy angels experienced a sea change with the creation of the cherubic *putti*, and in England Spenser, Bunyan, and Milton assured the status of angels at the level of the literati. All of the Renaissance upheavals giving birth to new formations in the economic, religious, political, and global orders resulted in increasing centralization and rationalization of power structures across an also broadening and increasingly diversified base. And the last distinctive angel upwelling before the recent crazes occurred in the Victorian era. These angels have much in common with those of the New Age; abstract and sentimental, they return to allegories of

¹⁵ That is, where there is a definable rise in angelic images and ideas across multiple sectors of society and distinct from standard representations of them in religious and cultural expression.

¹⁶ A significant exception would be the letters authored by Paul, who (especially in the letter to the Colossians) opposes angel worship as a threat to Christ as intermediary. This is a position that was replicated in the Reformation and even today as evangelists decry the angel craze as a religious decadence. In some ways it is strange that Christology and angelology should coexist – but not because one threatens to take the place of the other, but because their philosophies are so opposed. Christ’s redemption presupposes a universally fallen humanity; angels (with the exception of those that guard sacred places from the human) discriminate amongst individuals – exalting some, condemning others. Technically, then, the only appropriate angels in Christianity are those who herald the divine, i.e. Christ himself. In this sense the Reformation’s stance suggested a doctrinal purity. More likely, however, is the

transcendence, offering a romance of pure ideas. Unlike the fiercely otherworldly angels of the Middle Ages, these “forget-me-nots of the sky” (to borrow Longfellow’s phrase) generalize their subjects through idealized and intentional cultural anachronism, harnessing for the status quo the otherworldly power of an imagined bygone age. The worldly power of the moment, let alone the future, seems itself too heavy.

Though they announce the birth of something beyond, angels focus their attention on the past. This is putting it crudely. More accurately, they look upon any temporality *as though it were* the past. From Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life*, which brilliantly converts a crisis of the moment (what am I going to do?) to an affirming thought-experiment about personal history, to the born-yesterday, backward-looking angels in Kushner’s *Angels in America* who try to halt progress, to the little cherubs, the young contemplating the world with the eyes of the old, angels frame the moment and its futurity as though it were already judged, already proven historically. Their gaze may be sentimental or apocalyptic or prophetic; whatever the nature of its objectification, angels attend to the moment with retroactive gravity. The allegorical journey is at any moment available to them in its completion, while the subject struggles on toward infinity.

That there are limits as well as possibilities in such a way of thinking – which is as much a way of looking – goes without saying. In granting a moment of the present or imagined future the quality of the *fait accompli*, one approaches it with acquiescence and passivity. We can never act in the past, just as we cannot act and think at the same moment. Instead, we receive it as we would information. Reality, in this context, becomes a matter of intelligence. As the poet Rilke wrote in his angelic *Duino Elegies*, “where once an enduring house stood now a cerebral structure crosses our path.” This cerebral structure is the memory, in which the house appears to

coincidence in all these occasions of a belief in salvation by faith alone, in which the concept of free will – a concept which angels exist in reference to - becomes irrelevant at best and at worst deeply threatening.

us in its pure image and idea rather than its existence. Endowing the present moment with the quality of memory invests it with the power and status of this ideational separation from the present, turning participation into spectatorship, action into awe. To elaborate more fully, angelic benediction splits the present, dividing it between its phenomenal occurrence and its judgment in the eyes of the angel; appearing as though already enacted, it appeals to the power of the imagination. Whether we understand this imaginative receptivity to enable a different kind of action, in turn, depends on how we read the nature of this divide.

While the representation of the idea of angelic vision is largely consistent, there is a spectrum of attitudes toward it. For some texts, the angelic touch of history keeps the past alive – such are the faux-angels of departed spirits, for instance in *Field of Dreams* or *A Guy Named Joe*, which position the past not as a ghost come to beg the present for its due, but as a spirit invisibly operating at the heart of things. Other celebratory versions look to the angel's gaze of pastness as making the present destiny and the future knowable – hence the figure of the prophet. But there are texts that see the angel tragically as well, notably Walter Benjamin's allegory of the Angel of History. In his essay the angel is itself rendered impotent by what its backwards-looking flight into the future means it is *not* seeing: which is “progress.” “Don't mingle, don't migrate,” Tony Kushner's angel tells us. The vision of the separate intelligence calls our attention to inaction, stasis, and inertia in the midst of crisis. Yet even in Benjamin's reading there is possibility. Like certain other texts, it is precisely this angelic not-seeing that, in representing a world stripped of its normalizing roles and conventions, prepares a different path for the will to follow. Where a given “angel text” falls in this spectrum depends, interestingly, on the form of its dissemination. Popular culture tends to use them optimistically. The angels of true-encounter narrative, television, and popular film spell providence and good fortune in their

graces; the angels of what could be called high modernist texts, however – both literary and visual – discover only decadence. In popular culture limitation serves as an enchanted vessel that discloses in its depths an interior infinite. In the modernist literature, limits are seen as such; finitude signals a no-exit of repetition and disaster. For this reason the angels themselves appear differently. As I describe them in the first three chapters, the angels of family, self, and society appear in all their naïve splendor. The angels of history, however, as the fourth chapter shows, are incomplete, halted, or deformed. Each type of angel allegorizes the sight that it beholds and the subject whom it serves as ideal spirit, whether that subject receives it or remain separated from its intelligence.

My dissertation proceeds, roughly, from positive to negative treatments, though most of the truly powerful and influential angel texts contain elements of both. Each chapter is dominated by a different angelic figure: the guardian-messenger angel, the fallen angel, the wrestling angel, and the impotent angel. Each of these figures, in its turn, unlocks a different aspect of allegory that modernity attempts to solve, the problem of the relation between reason and action.

The first chapter focuses on the idea of allegorical journey, establishing in its discussion of this movement the nature of the double worlds and their relation time. Specifically, I focus on the conceit of the crashed car, which so dominates recent literature of true encounters with angels, but also as it opens up the angelic revelations in films of the sentimental fantasy genre, especially *The Preacher's Wife* and above all *It's a Wonderful Life*. This chapter also unpacks the essential features of the angel in general – reading its attention as a form of chosenness, naming, and beginning, which I discuss in reference to the thinking of Immanuel Kant and Thomas Aquinas. The second chapter elaborates the conceptual basis of allegorical thinking as a

form of agency. In some ways this is the most complicated of the chapters. Largely devoted to analyzing the angel self-help books of the 1990's, it isolates in them an attempt to imagine the human in angelic terms as a separated intelligence. As an attempt to solve a specifically inward crisis and division through an angelized rationalism, the self-help books find themselves dogged by the problem of illusion, a problem that St. Augustine and René Descartes similarly make clear belongs in the domain of the fallen angel Satan. I argue that in demonizing the idea of self-projection implicit in their human angelism, these post-recovery books are trying to find a way out of the fierce dualism of the recovery movement, and failing. The third chapter takes up the notion of the allegorical subject as fool, and the specific kind of thinking this allows – though with the important change that it is the human, and not the angel, who functions as fool. I pair the TV show *Touched by an Angel* and Kushner's *Angels in America* in order to talk about texts that appropriate angels for explicitly socially conscious purposes, and to do so position their subjects in struggle with the angel as naïve voice of truth. The play marks a departure from the earlier texts in rejecting its angel and her historical simplicity, recognizing that the angelic emphasis on receptivity and the imagination may be productive for theater, but is antithetical to an activist ideology. In the fourth chapter I build on Kushner's idea, but in texts that maintain their engagement with the angel, now presented as impotent and unreachable. This chapter examines the fundamental incompleteness of allegory through a different kind of receptiveness than the other chapters describe, that of entering into the disorder, the chaos, the ruin and the crisis to which the angel responds. The writers most invested in this vision in America are poets, inspired by a Latin American marvelous realism that has its own relationship with angels. In their work and in other writings of Benjamin the thwarted angel reveals a surprising ancestry in the bird of prey; in his claws impotence is unveiled as patience, waiting for the opening to seize

history in all its decay and transport it into the future.

Each chapter is devoted to a different formation of the angel as it is currently represented and to the different genres in which it appears. The sequence of the chapters, however, follows the dissertation's unifying problematic. In working through the idea of judgment, the chapters mimic the process of judgment itself. The first chapter, in dealing with angelic encounter, echoes the initial moment of sensory contact in response to which the subject's reaction takes place. The second follows the course of sense-impressions to cognition, thought, conceptualization. The third translates thought to will, exploring angels in terms of their ethical valuation. And the fourth apprehends judgment in its collapse, probing it from the perspective articulated in Benjamin's work on allegory that any idea or practice reveals its essence more in its destruction than in its successful operation. For this reason the fourth chapter is in many ways the key to all the others. In the ruins of its expression and performance what judgment reveals is its dependence on its own antithesis: a non-rational simplicity outside of the imagination but without which the imagination cannot function. This simple other appears in the first three chapters respectively as the perception of formlessness, the revelation of intuition, and the truthfulness of the naïve; all of these illuminations define the nature of the contact between human and angel, arousing the imaginative activity that such encounter represents. They are disruptive, as all fantasy is essentially disruptive, but like all fantasy they also perform a divine function, acting as the "Otherness – that is, with the big 'O' – that sense of something divine in other people that can make you even more whole."¹⁷ This is the angelic message, that the

¹⁷ Rabbi Norman J. Cohen in interview with Tony Kushner (229).

reduction of judgment to the unknowable provides the unity and the immediacy that makes judgment possible,¹⁸ and with it, distinctive action¹⁹ – the act worth remembering.

The fourth chapter is different from the others in its emphasis on partialness, on ruin and exposure. Where the first three present an angelic reality external to the system the subject inhabits, in the fourth the system appears outside of itself. Allegory's "other-speaking" unearths this interior division, spreading it before us on the surfaces of things, making it an image for our beholding and - separated from our experience - for our choosing as well. This is a kind of death, the angel frozen in a prism of air, blocked from his life-giving annunciation. Far away from the crisis, the attendant angel hovers without power to move our own attentions. It is only by our own wills that we may turn to look at him, in his decrepitude now the object rather than the agent of our intelligence. What we see in this tattered illumination, and what we choose to do with it, is a subject of our most infinite and invisible determinations.

¹⁸ In *De Anima* Aristotle emphasizes the importance of indivisibility of subject and time for the process of judgment: "the judging sense must be undivided, and must also judge without an interval" (III.ii).

¹⁹ Writing in regards to the longstanding ontological argument between realism and idealism, Henri Bergson explains the connection between imagination and action. In *Matter and Memory* he describes theories of science and theories of consciousness as both positing very different ideas of the image. Scientific realism sees the image as sense impression, idealism sees it as representation of things. The first identifies the image as a response to the outside world, the second as an interpretation of it. The gulf is wide between these two, and between their failures as systems. Bergson uncovers in realism the inability to account for reception as a form of intelligence, concluding that realism is "bound to make perception an accident, and, consequently, a mystery" (27). In counterpoint, idealist thinking cannot account for objective law and its practicability, thus rendering science itself an accident "and its success a mystery." The only way he discovers out of this Scylla and Charybdis of mutual mystifications is to cease considering perception as a means of knowledge, and instead understand it as a mode of action. Image perception demonstrates its nature in practice, in decisions and their performance. In other words, image is something that *effects*, that has power.

2. Roadside Annunciations

On the day that George Bailey contemplates suicide a number of daily life pitfalls beset him. Viewers of *It's a Wonderful Life*'s may remember George tangling with the bannister knob; Janie endlessly playing the same holiday piece on the piano; Mary shouting at him to leave the house and the crying children alone; and the schoolteacher's husband punching him in the jaw. All of this follows the dramatic event of the eight-thousand-dollar deposit missing from the Building and Loan, an event that George reads to mean "bankruptcy, scandal, prison." Each of these lesser, essentially domestic events represents some form of George's life crisis, precipitated by the threat of public shame and exile. In doing so, each event also crystallizes the state of emergency already implicit in his life's narrative and essential personhood. Frank Capra presents to us a Faust story in reverse, in which a young man with much promise and ambition but also much responsibility falls lower with each effort to resist self-inflation and defer the call of personal freedom. Such internal resistance and deferral, the movie suggests, inevitably produce an adult night terror, a state of environmental siege on the boundaries of the self, its perception and its will.

To understand *It's a Wonderful Life* as a prototype of contemporary angelic narrative means looking to those aspects of the film that establish the angel's necessity. From the perspective of an audience familiar with the movie's cultic status, the angel must seem to embody some essence in the film as a whole. The audience must feel that the entire purpose as well as structure of the movie would collapse without its presence. In other words, we read the film as angel-text only when we read it as asking specifically for the idea of an angel, not just for a miracle or other divine intervention. The essence of the angelic annunciation, in fact, is its cognitive basis, changing the subject's perception of his life, rather than his life itself. If the

latter – if the angel served strictly as a novelty of the plot - it would be merely mechanical. Such a representation would be deeply contradictory. For the angel has, in its many traditions and guises, been represented as an anti-mechanical figure. Whether as a herald of the unexpected and unknown, bridging old and new orders at the moment of their discontinuity, as the interruptor of profane passage or life-denying trains of thought, or as the expression of a divinely occasioned chosenness, the angel appears in opposition to mechanical determinism. In films of the sentimental fantasy genre, to which *It's a Wonderful Life* belongs, the last, expressive role typifies the function of the angel. Angelic intervention enables the plot to unfold as an expression of the character and identity of the human protagonist, not at all as a function of some saving grace to which the protagonist is beholden. The angel is handmaid to the human, not the other way around, his calling-benediction an expression of the generative power of the annunciated subject. For the driving preoccupation of angel-films as a whole is the question of the relation between the subject as a *particular* being and the realization of this particularity in the life he lives. Not just agents of cosmic decision, angels help call this realization into being. Put in other terms, fate produces the *deus ex machina*; angels answer to the personal soul.

In keeping with this trajectory, Capra's angel arrives in the event of mechanical failure, at the moment where the very concept of mechanism fails to move the story forward, fails to account for the continuity and coherence of human being in the world. So in angel films as well as angel stories, the angel appears unexpendable. It arrives on the scene presumptuously, familiarly, as if already present in the sequence of events that precipitate its arrival, just as Clarence – watching *It's a Wonderful Life* with its uninitiated audience – has already been present in them for us. The angel becomes visible only in the wake of the dissolution and exposure these events produce.

The events of December 24th lead George to such dissolution and exposure – to a pre-angelic breakdown. This is the day that his brother Harry Bailey receives the Congressional Medal of Honor while George falls steadily into a mire that threatens to exile him from the very community for which he had sacrificed his dreams of freedom. Even before he gets knocked down by the schoolteacher's husband, he sits weeping at the bar, praying for help and admitting "I'm at the end of my rope." The reminder of his brother's success just before his own threatens to become destroyed, the chaos and eccentricity of his home and family, Potter's comment that he's worth more dead than alive, all produce the feeling that he has lost control over every role that has ever defined him. Yet for the audience, for the movie and the narrative itself, these mounting catastrophes are not enough to define George's crisis as a proto-angelic one. We require another form of collapse in order for the angel to articulate his presence convincingly, believably, *necessarily*. The crucial moment that – for us - prepares George Bailey to receive his angel diverges from these other crises of place and identity. This moment occurs outside the known community, on the road. It is anonymous and brief. George has just drunkenly left Martini's Bar, Martini having solicitously tried to get him to stay and rest after he'd been punched by Mr. Welch. George staggers out, into his car and the snowstorm. In the next shot we see the black car careening into a tree. He totters around, repeatedly trying to shut the driver's side door that formerly had refused to open, when a man with an umbrella walks out of his house, comes up and begins to berate him. "Now look what you did. My great-grandfather planted this tree! Hey you! Hey you! Come back here you drunken fool! Get this car outta here!"

This moment diverges from the previous ones. Before the incident with the car, George has been recognized as George in all his various roles, with each of his acts named and read

within those roles. Even in his infractions he belongs to community, family, and friends. The man with the tree, however, hails him as an unknown. “Hey you!” This is the first time that George Bailey ceases to be George Bailey, becoming instead an anonymous outcast who violates the community’s history (“my great-grandfather planted that tree”) rather than heroically defining it. For a second George appears as the ghost he will later become in the film’s nightmare sequence, rushing around seeking in people’s lives and voices an echo of his own name. It is as this stranded, nameless individual that George stumbles onto the bridge, narrowly missing being run over. In the middle of an escalating white-out he finds himself on the edge of self-annihilation, and about to meet his angel.

George Bailey’s collapse is a general one, but it is not collapse in general that petitions or aesthetically justifies angelic arrival. The narrative we have here isolates a moment of dissociation of the individual and collective history as a prelude to exceptional visitation. The disturbing anonymity is significant, not just as a form of “unlearning”²⁰ prefatory to learning that our hero is about to discover, but more importantly as a way to set up a universal context that will then be undone as George realizes his special role in the town. The figure is anonymous; he could be anybody – not just to the enraged tree-owner, but to us. What we find, however, and what drives the action from that point onwards, is that in fact he isn’t just anybody. The appearance of Clarence at just that moment proves it. What we first understood as a crisis of constriction – no options, no freedom, walls closing in – becomes reframed as a crisis of possibility. There is nothing that limits George Bailey as George Bailey at this moment, until Clarence takes him under his not-yet-existent wing.

²⁰ I take this term from Carlos Castaneda’s *Journey to Ixtlan*. According to his teacher Don Juan, “unlearning” describes the necessary erasure of the ideas and systems with which we organize and interpret experience, in order to “see” it at a level of gnostic illumination.

Towards the beginning of Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* we hear a child's voice asking questions. "Why am I me and not you? Why am I here and not there?" These are not adult questions, these questions questioning the "illusion of a world before the world." As the camera worms its way through the rooms of a house, pausing before a child smiling and watching TV, we see this illusion and hear this voice. And as the camera moves on we find these questions – which come right before a montage of soliloquys in cars - humming beneath the worldly surfaces of adult thoughts and meditations that the rest of the film will trace. Like *Wings of Desire*, *It's a Wonderful Life* presents a pageant of the mystery the child questions, the mystery of personal singularity, of self-possession speaking from a particular place, of knowing the ground beneath our feet. This pageant subjectivizes a larger problem, that of understanding why, among a range of unknown and infinite possibility, things happen the way they do: how it is that history happens. In these movies the advent of the angel specifically makes the question of historical eventfulness a question about the self, for in angelic annunciation history answers always to its perception and apprehension. If the only one capable of answer this question is the founding prophet, we must grasp how it is the prophet comes into his vision, and what must happen for that vision to become his own. This is where George Bailey's snow-covered confusion finally breaks down, tottering on the threshold of the angel's familiar and unerring greeting.

I. Conceiving Motions

In the early 1990's a chorus of angel stories appeared, nonfiction stories describing people's encounters with angels. Such stories of course were not unknown. Many of the anthologies in fact reprinted stories from previous times and decades, ranging from the Biblical into the modern era. Billy Graham's *Angels: God's Secret Agents* had made a mark in 1975,

only to be reissued with greater fanfare in 1994. Beginning primarily with the 1990 publication by Ballantine of Sophy Burnham's *A Book of Angels: Reflections on Angels Past and Present and True Stories of How They Touch Our Lives*, the true encounter craze gave voice to a host of stories testifying to angelic rescues and visitations, whether miraculous and full-blown or subtle and uncanny.²¹ Among the panoply of short-circuits, lost ways, and near-misses, one narrative type stands out: the scenario of the stranded motorist.

The theme of the stranded motorist evolved from stories of serious crisis. Tales of angels rescuing sailors lost at sea, of wayfarers lost on the road, and of hikers lost in the woods eventually produced stories of travellers lost without a car. In *Angel Letters* Burnham herself comments on the number of tales of "encounters of near accidents and flat tires" she received for the book. As a rule, these stories tended to situate angels outside of the borders of civilization. We find them, to quote the movie *Michael*, "by the side of the road in the middle of nowhere."²²

²¹ The history of the word "encounter" is illuminating. Through its origins in "countenance" it refers to a kind of face-to-face meeting, especially one that involves conflict or battle. This circulates especially during early modern British writing, apparent in Milton in 1667: "hov'ring a space, till winds the signal blow / To join their dark encounter in mid-air" (*Paradise Lost*, ii 718, cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary*), and in travel accounts from the late sixteenth to the close of the seventeenth centuries, equipped with strapping titles like "Great and bloody news from Turnham-Green, or, a relation of sharp encounter between the Earl of Pembroke and his company, with the constable and watch belonging to the parish of Chiswick on the 18 instant, in which conflict one Mr. Halfpenny, a constable of the said parish, were mortally wounded. . . : with several other remarkable circumstances" (1680). This is the historical moment in which with the newspaper "news" is created, born in cataclysmic rupture between the new world and the old. It accrued the sense of news also in the seventeenth century as "an idea that suddenly presents itself, as it were by accident; a happy thought" (*OED*), extended also at that time in its reference to a casual and accidental meeting (accidental in a lighter way than for Mr. Halfpenny) - encounter as undesigned and unforeseen (a sense now enshrined in the Los Angeles Airport's *Barbarella*-inspired Encounter Restaurant). The association with transit and movement is apparent in the Shakespearean uses of the word also, and in ways even closer on the surface to angelic annunciations, as an accosting or address, the style or manner of this address, and especially as an amorous interview. Though these senses became obsolete, they resurfaced in the way that "encounter" was later appropriated (starting in 1967) in the phrases "encounter therapy" and "encounter groups." Here the ethos of being "moved" through a form of emotive communion - with others as well as with the self - takes shape. The idea of being "touched" central to this kind of encounter seems to carry with it all the other layers of meaning, of confrontation, spontaneity, and change. It is out of this history that the series of books testifying to personal encounters with angels, pervasive during the first half of the 1990's, emerges.

²² These same words appear in one story reprinted in Sophy Burnham's *Angel Letters*. "In November 1985 I was traveling with my ten-year old daughter to my parents' home, which is a one and a half hours' drive. Dusk was descending as we started up the four-lane mountain highway. Suddenly we heard a loud *pop* and the steering wheel shook as I guided the car off the road onto the shoulder. Getting out of the car, I saw I had a flat tire and was in the middle of nowhere" (17). This image is more detailed in the grocery store "minimag" account of Adele and Jay

Many of the tales read as though they could take place anywhere; they obliterate all identifying traces, and position such obliteration as a precondition for angelic encounter. The erasure of a shared, consensual knowledge – the knowledge of geography and place – becomes necessary for the reception of the exceptional, singularizing knowledge that the angel provides. So, in conjunction with the collapse of the driving machine, the driving snow appears as a favorite scenic component – as in *It's a Wonderful Life*, whiting out all perceptual definition and direction.²³ One of the first major collections of angels stories to inaugurate the recent trend begins with such a story, a tale of a car breakdown in the middle of a blizzard. In *Where Angels Walk: True Stories of Heavenly Visitors*, Joan Wester Anderson opens her bestseller with a narrative of a road trip gone bad. “The Beginning,” a story she tells in her travelling lectures and which is included in the *Reader's Digest* video of angel stories, describes the predicament of two young men – Tim and Jim - driving home from college for Christmas break. Just west of Fort Wayne, Indiana, in the face of a mounting snowstorm, their car sputters to a stop. Highlighting the defamiliarization as well as the danger, Anderson writes, “It was as if they had landed on an alien, snow-covered planet.” The two boys huddle together panicking in the subzero temperatures, when suddenly a tow truck appears and its driver – calm, uncurious, and almost completely hidden by mounds of snow clothing - offers to haul them back to their friend's house. They rush inside to get money to pay him, but upon returning outside discover that the tow truck

Rodriguez's fateful trip through the Florida everglades. Jay – who had just undergone bypass surgery and thus was not fit for physical exertion, informed his wife they had a problem: “About one hour into desolate Alligator Alley in Everglades country with not a service station visible for at least another hour, Jay announced we had a flat tire” (McCall 24). Adele Rodriguez magnifies the stakes of this isolation later, pointing out that though “The picture we presented to passing traffic was certainly not one of a major crisis,” “What if something had happened to him in the middle of the Everglades with absolutely nothing around for miles and miles?” (25, 27). The formless, undifferentiated, and empty location, then, acts as one of the primary sources and markers of crisis in these stories, even when the “picture” seems otherwise.

²³ Additionally, as George stumbles onto the bridge he nearly gets run over by a car. The driver angrily shouts out, “Hey what's the matter with ya, look where you're going!” Reading this structurally, the combination of anonymity and spatial confusion seems almost to push George over the edge.

had gone – “no taillights disappearing into the distance, no engine noise echoing through the silent streets, nothing at all to mark the tow truck’s presence.” There was only one pair of tire marks in the snow, “and they belonged to Tim’s car...”

Two details set the story apart. The first is that one of the boys is Anderson’s son. The story of the anxious mother waiting at home parallels the story of the lost boys. Just after midnight she prays for help for her son, right at the moment that (accounting for the one hour time difference between Eastern and Central Standard Time) the tow truck appears. The story thus establishes Anderson’s personal connection to angels and explains the inspiration for her belief in them – or more accurately, for her attention to that belief. Anderson is, after all, about to become she-who-gathers-angel-stories, a messenger of the messengers, and requires her own creation narrative. The other detail returns us to George Bailey: Anderson’s story takes place on Christmas Eve. “It was just past midnight on December 24, 1983.” This is not just a sacred but a liminal day, in its self-understanding as the moment of transformation before the birth of the king and the next generation in the divine lineage. Though both Clarence and the tow truck driver act specifically as guardian angels, they also perform an annunciating function as well. Clarence presents to George the negative of his own existence, an experience of anonymity that in counterpoint hails his birth as true father of Bedford Falls. Anderson’s angel rescues her status as mother from the intrepidities of male youth (driving from Connecticut to Illinois in blizzard conditions), thus enacting a miraculous rebirth of both mother and child. As tales of angelic annunciation, then, both *It’s a Wonderful Life* and Anderson’s “Beginning” detail and confirm their function as stories about parents and sons.

In angelic narratives, themes of annunciation and parenthood are inextricable. Both picture the theme of supreme beginning in the material world, of a temporal eruption that confers

a kind of eternal return. It is as if the advent of divine news cannot be rendered apart from the ideas of chosenness and personal immortality. Revelation in these narratives presumes the concept of the creative “soul” so important in the history of divine and imaginative encounter. As I will elaborate in this chapter, this conception of the divine messenger as agent of personal self-determination and continuity fundamentally proposes a theory of identity and agency (and, as I will slowly elaborate through the course of this dissertation, of history). At the moment, however, what appears most startlingly is the impregnating performance of the message and its designations. We see this most prominently in the Judeo-Christian tradition and sacred texts. Gabriel appears before Mary with the both terrifying and marvelous news of her mothering God; an angel comes to Hagar to save her in the desert, motivating her with the promise that her son Ishmael will father a new race; an angel stays the hand of Abraham poised to sacrifice his only son; an angel wrestles with Jacob, after which he renames him “Israel,” prince, at once naming both the group and the man. These are all theological events that share the following: 1) a definition of a people - whether through ethnic, religious or universal human categories, 2) an assertion of “parenthood” as simultaneously a receptive and a (re)generative act, and 3) the bestowing of the seed as a kind of news or intelligence. The overall story that these elements relate involves the coming of a singularity in the form of a word or name (Abraham, now the “father of nations”; “and you shall call your son Ishmael”; Mary, “mother of God”; “Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel”) promising individuating power. The annunciation, as both the message and its bearing, mediates between God and individual, life and destiny, people and representative. Within the variations of this super-narrative, angels deliver to their subjects the sign of a choice proliferation (their call is itself a sign) as if their words were seeds already reflecting, not just anticipating, their fecund significance. For the prophets who receive the

divine calling, discriminatory revelation is its own blessing, gracing each with an identity that has the power to name itself.

In the periods that I am focusing on - the years following the end of the Cold War and the last world war - much of the angelic cinema that has emerged has taken male figures as the protagonists of its angelic annunciations. Given the already sentimental nature of the majority of these films, and of the popular invocation of angels in general, one can imagine that having a female receive an angel visitor would render the emotion so cloying as to be almost grotesque.²⁴ On the screen, where the presentation of gender seems at times to swallow the camera whole, feminized sentiment must make a pact with masculinized distance if it is to retain any dignity. This is not just a question of balance; the medium of film demands to be experienced at both the levels of spectatorship and participation, a doubleness which the immediacy of the image constantly challenges. Women, since at least the Victorian era always the express representatives of the angelic human, render the angel either superfluous²⁵ or too close an identification – except in those cases which I will discuss later in this chapter where the angel is counterpoised to the female subject through an erotic separation. Written texts, on the other hand, having the detaching mechanisms of narration, irony, and the word itself at their disposal, can take greater liberties with their angels and other sentimental visitations. In fact female protagonists seem to be a favorite in recent fiction about angels (see for instance *The Vintner's Luck* or Ann Enright's *The Wig My Father Wore*). None of this fiction, however, has attained the iconic force of the angel films, and it is possible that the films get more quickly to the heart

²⁴ The major exceptions are the 1947 *The Bishop's Wife* and its 1996 remake, *The Preacher's Wife*. The relationship between the angels and the wives is romantic rather than sentimental, however; in each the true sentimental relationship, where the angel acts as guarantor of memory and destiny, is with the minister.

²⁵ The need to maintain distinctions among primary cast members is perhaps best articulated by a moment of theater-interchange. Mary Martin, when informed that she was to sing opposite Mario Pinza in Roger's and Hammerstein's Broadway version of *South Pacific*, joked, "What do you want – two basses?"

of the affair: angels are figures of foundational power; such power rightfully belongs to men. In either case, the kind of male protagonist that typifies the genre belongs to a specific breed, one best expressed in the style of acting that Jimmy Stewart did so well, and could hardly do differently. This style could be defined as a certain *awkwardness*, a sense of barely contained eccentric spirit pushing at the boundaries that circumscribe it - much as George Bailey crows about “shaking the dust” of Bedford Falls. David Niven, who originally had been considered to play the angel in *The Bishop’s Wife* and lost the role to an insistent Cary Grant,²⁶ portrays the discouraged bishop with a similar lack of grace. Grant was right to insist on the casting: his debonair polish better suited the angel as an achieved form of being. The bishop, ridden with inconsistency and hesitancy, lacks the necessary smoothness to contain the power that is potential within him. Such barely inhibited inner excess is not the same passionate restraint that we see in the figures Steve Cohan identified as the new “boys,” postwar cinematic youths whose inner majesty struggles against the anachronistic structures of an adult world, a rebellion emblemized by the T-shirt and jeans of James Dean or Marlon Brando.²⁷ George, Henry, and others prophet-protagonists like them are adult spirits (“You were born older George”) whose ill-adjustment to convention ultimately serves to reinvigorate convention with charm and personal power. Awkward keeps cozier company with the past than cool.

Though this affect - perfected in Jimmy Stewart’s simultaneously expansive yet jerky movements, unpredictable lope, and trademark quivery drawl (as though he were always slightly drunk) - does not necessarily feminize its male leads, it does align them with a distinctly feminine role. Potter even calls attention to this role when he refers to George as having been “trapped into frittering his life away playing nursemaid to a lot of garlic-eaters.” From the

²⁶ Grant apparently threatened to leave the project if the original roles were to be switched, as director Henry Koster at one point proposed, and had to be paid an addition hundred grand to remain.

beginning George paternally watches out for others' mistakes – his brother, Mr. Gower, Uncle Billy, gives them homes, confers life. In the comforting real-day world of Bedford Falls the traditional Italian Martini looks up to George, an eager boyish grin on his face, in contrast to the Nighttown world of George's absence, where the bruiser Nick replaces Martini's filial piety with a challenging, powerful irreverence. Nick is now George's rival, the father of law, discipline, and fast physical consumption inverting the paternal logic of George Bailey's reflective, nurturing production. He is George's negation as parent, his masculine cool the opposite of the latter's feminine awkwardness. It is Clarence, the eternal (and immortal) child, who reclaims the latter power for George. At the end of these sentimental angel films the annunciated figures give birth – to the community they lead and in which they function as prophet, and in reaffirming their own status as fathers. (The less typical 1995 Australian film *Angel Baby* in fact describes the story of a manic depressive whose schizophrenic girlfriend dies at the end of the film giving birth to an angelic spirit with whom she'd been in communication. Harry, however, remains the central focus of the narrative, and it is his coming into fatherhood and subsequent suicide that define this story of spirit becoming actualized in the material world.) Children in general occupy critical roles in this genre. Zuzu and her petals, the orphaned girl in *Angels in the Outfield* (1951) and the orphaned boy in its 1994 remake, the little girl angel waiting to be born in *For Heaven's Sake* (1950), the daughter in *The Bishop's Wife* and the son and soon-to-be-adopted son in *The Preacher's Wife* are some examples. The surge in emphasis on family values in general and fatherhood in particular proper to both periods that saw a rise in angel films accounts in part for this prevalence. But the coincidence between these and the foundational angelic annunciations where “thy seed will multiply as the sands of the sea and in thee will all the families of the earth be blessed” suggests a deeper connection between social generation and

²⁷ See Cohan's discussion of cinematic male types in *Masked Men*.

personal crisis inherent in the idea of the angel as messenger and conceived in relation to the human. In doing so, this connection also ultimately leads us toward an explanation of what so many contemporary annunciation stories have to do with cars.

We see in the annunciation the collapse of pregnancy as condition and expectation to its conception, the moment of beginning. In the angel's message, where in Augustine's famous terms Gabriel impregnates Mary "through the ear," the utterance folds into itself both the fact it declares and the occasion to which it responds. In other words, it defines a unique event: creation that exists outside of the laws of causality. The angelic message celebrates a genuine beginning where causal agency lies within the event itself – or, more accurately, in the hailing that follows it.²⁸ Conception comes into being via its after-the-fact judgment and demonstration. Seen in this context the immaculate conception appears to merit the fierce defense of Catholic theologians not just as a justification of the purity and godliness of the blessed mother, but as a figure of religious self-evidence. Mary's annunciation is not just a particular species of miracle,

²⁸ Althusser's concept of ideological hailing, as outlined in his essay "Ideological State Apparatus," comes close to this idea in his insistence that the hailing of the self as subject simultaneously creates that self as subject. For Althusser the "call" calls into existence. In this the affinities between the figure of the angel and the logic of the state become evident. Bureaucrats of the heavenly kingdom, angels can be seen as "representing" the ultimate Subject, God – who is Subjectivity itself, premier autonomy. I would contrast this, however, with the Thomist idea of God as Being or *Esse*, which I will discuss later in this chapter. For now, let me point out the difference between subjective hailing within an ideological system and existential hailing as it appears in the more angelic annunciation. Althusser's discussion identifies the interpellation as a linguistically contractual act: when the policeman hails the passerby, "Nine times out of ten he will turn around." The subject *recognizes* the call, and hence recognizes the relationship between himself and the state that that call assumes and articulates, and without which it could not exist as such. Annunciation narratives tend to emphasize a logic of reception rather than subjectification. They start from the idea of that tenth person. Sarah laughed, Mary (in so many Renaissance paintings) looks vaguely taken aback, George and Henry refuse to believe in the angel, encounter heroes wonder deliciously if in fact it really was an angel that they saw. There is a sublime *apprehension*, initially taking the form of anxiety and wonder but eventually transforming into an amazed perception and beholding. The initial disbelief is necessary, however, in order to establish the benediction as a state of grace outside of belief, a condition of being for which belief is irrelevant. Althusser's interpellation requires the act of belief as part of its logic. A hailing based on recognition proposes a model of socialization that is logocentric, mediated entirely by the projection and recognition of symbols; while just barely escaping determinism, his schema nevertheless contains all social creation and response within the same signifying system. Angelic annunciation is more properly allegorical, operating simultaneously on symbolic and material orders (divine utterance and human reality) that are fundamentally heterogeneous, if analogically related. For this reason the imagination becomes significant, finding a place in an annunciation premised on conceiving rather than (re)cognizing.

but the very definition of miraculous happening. Gabriel's message then becomes the beacon of such self-evidence – a promise, yes, but more than a promise; it is a promise that fulfills itself in its very communication. In this temporal conflation *a posteriori* response attains the status and power of *a priori* law. We call such conflation revelation, a communication that - in manifesting the extraordinary power to generate what it proclaims - can be understood as *truth*. From this perspective, truth requires the address of the human by the divine, effecting the simultaneous relation and participation of the two orders of existence, which in these narratives might be understood as appearance and reality. Thus the self-evidently miraculous nature of divine self-presentation in the angelic word finds its inseparable analogue in the virgin conception, in the *ex-nihilo* creation of paternity as consecrating power.

Paternal influence, in *It's A Wonderful Life*, initially arises as a source of anxiety. Like Ray Kinsella in Phil Robinson's *Field of Dreams*, George Bailey lives in fear of replicating his father's life, which he sees as provincial, limiting, and anachronistic. Together he and Harry Bailey tell a story that is the reverse of the Jacob and Esau: neither son wants the father's blessing. Their desire for flight is motivated by the belief that origins inhibit rather than open up possibility, that the past does not provide access to the world. Rather, the weary Mr. Bailey testifies to the extent to which, as an emblem of small-time capitalism, he is about to be superseded by capitalism's newer formation, apparent in the centralizing grasp of Potter. In many ways the entire project of the film is to revive the blessing of the father, make it contemporary, to convince George to reject the paternal claims of Potter on him in favor of the legacy of the Building and Loan, and through George to affirm that legacy against the intrusions of the hour. This means, in a sense, that the movie must somehow convey a temporal collapse

and confusion if it is to read and awaken the present through a point of presumed origin. It must, in effect, refigure time through the experience of crisis.

“The time is out of joint.” Hamlet, still reeling from the visitations of his ghostly father, describes his own quandary in words that might almost be a definition of crisis. The past, a previous event and the subjectivity belonging to that event, haunts the present. It lingers because it is defined by a crime, an event that stands in a relation of excess to the time of its occurrence. This is the way with ghost narratives. Built on issues of memory and trauma (“Remember me” old Hamlet’s ghost continually intones), the ghostly is motivated by a need for repetition, imitation, mimesis – the need to make visible what has been left invisible, what has been forgotten, repressed, or unknown. The ghost, essentially, is imprisoned by time and its mortal relegations – “But that I am forbid / To tell the secrets of my prison-house, / I could a tale unfold”. . . Trapped in an immaterial existence whose intelligence is yet tied to the world of physical experience, the ghost requires the action of humans in order to be freed. In particular, it requires the action of progeny, those who inherit the sins of the fathers and who have access to the crimes they have witnessed.

I will say much more about the ghostly in relation to the angelic later in this chapter. I bring it up here, however, in order to begin to note the relation between spirits, temporal discontiguity, and the condition of inaction that this discontiguity brings on. Such narratives are premised on the idea of spiritual being as necessary for any kind of temporal or historical relation, whether that being take the form of memory or imagination. Each, of course, is necessary for the other, and ghosts and angels frequently populate the same texts. (The number of references to angels in *Hamlet*, for instance, outdoes that of any other Shakespeare play.) Often, the ghost will act as a prelude to the angel, figuring a crisis of memory and identity that in

a sense calls the angelic imaginary. This is certainly what happens in *It's a Wonderful Life*. The entire local problem, the missing \$8000, involves an error of memory. Uncle Billy, with so many strings tied around his fingers, forgets what each is supposed to represent. This failure of continuity and particularization sets plot-wise in motion what will later appear graphically – the nullification of individual identity following the collapse of consensual markers. In the scene at the bridge, George, already becoming anonymous and at the brink of self-erasure, appears to us stumbling down the walkway, moving away from the camera in the middle of thick round chunks of falling snow. We see his back, as if he has at this point become enigmatic, some man sloshing through the wind and wetness. This tableau (the camera remains stationary) also evokes the idea of suicide: we remain, as George heads into the encroaching blankness, almost seeming to disappear. The camera cuts briefly to face him as he looks down into the water, but then immediately the water itself is beneath us, the mimetic expression of his formless despair and feeling of no escape. It is at this point that Clarence appears, leaning against the bridge, and – following a series of striking intercuts between his placid face and George's increasingly wild one - we see a splash in the water.

The world Clarence subsequently presents to George is a shattered one, an effort of the imagination to conceive memory without any collective basis or affirmation. The life in which you had never been born reveals itself as the purest experience of singularity, and also the purest experience of anachronism. George, like Clarence in his nineteenth-century garb or the angel Dudley with his dated dance moves, finds himself in a world in which he cannot translate, where in fact no one can remember him. Significantly, though this world pictures his mother and his would-be wife, the gravestone of his brother and the slummy quarters of his friends, this also has to be a world without his children. It is a world sired by the wrong father: Pottersville, city of

raucous lights, the madding crowd, a hapless and frenetic modernity. Here we can see how the movie maps its competing social realities in terms of temporality. Nostalgia abounds for the Bailey version of benevolent capitalism, paranoia for the unchecked individualism we see in the Nighttown sequence. But, as Robin Wood cautions us, each ideological-temporality shadows the other. “The film recognizes explicitly that behind every Bedford Falls lurks a Pottersville” (65). What Wood calls the “generic familiarity” of both the pastoral and noir conventions makes each equally compelling as a projection of the fate of Capra’s upstate New York town, hence simultaneous in the viewer’s imagination.²⁹ This shadowplay is important. George’s mounting experience of chaos and mania results from the disappearance of the personal history that orders his existence, but the film shows “explicitly” that such history and such order depend on the ideas of space and, more importantly, time, with which we confront experience. Awareness of location and historical moment orient us to our place in the collectivity. Thus what on one level the audience sees as the unmoored psychic confusion of *It’s a Wonderful Life’s* protagonist, becomes even more powerful when read in conjunction with the temporal confusion that the movie’s ghostly palimpsest of “past” and “future” presents.

It is customary to divide Capra’s film according to two basic kinds of existence. Much like *The Wizard of Oz*, the movie begins in real time, shifts to fantasy, and then moves back – with the duration of the intervening fantasy (at least in *It’s a Wonderful Life*) almost completely telescoped. Yet we know from the beginning that we’re watching the first part of the movie with Clarence. As we discover later, our viewing of George’s life story takes place during the time

²⁹ It is worth pointing out that the mutual acceptability (and hence interpenetration) of country and city in the film’s vision supports the argument Raymond Williams makes in his famous work, *The Country and the City*. Williams writes that while seemingly opposed, rural and urban narratives ultimately tell the same story – that of the loss of self-determination under the onward historical march of capitalist production. This story can be read separately in each, however – which Williams does. Wood’s point is that Bailey Park and Pottersville must be interpreted and experienced together in order to grasp the critique of bourgeois family values that the movie (whether or not Capra intended it) launches.

between his prayer and Clarence's appearance. This interval, which is the interval of George's breakdown – being hit in the jaw, running into the tree, almost jumping over the bridge – becomes charmed in a special kind of way. It is the one period in the film that operates in two orders of time at once, the time of diegetic action and the time of angelic perception.³⁰ Spectatorial intelligence guards the subject acting under a sense of doomed determinism and bad faith, a guardianship that becomes apparent when we finally see Clarence watching at the end of the sequence. It is also the time of crisis, prefatory to the noir fantasy where crisis becomes magnified into revelation and, ultimately, re-orientation (which is also a re-conception, as George learns to “see” his life through different principles). Taking place under angelic auspices, George's breakdown can be read specifically as a mechanical breakdown, a collapse of the deterministic ethic under which physical laws are seen to operate. And in a sense the governance of causality must be usurped if a true beginning – a beginning that does not in turn refer back to something before itself as its cause and progenitor – is to take narrative form.

³⁰ One of the better examples of what this perception looks like comes from Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In the famous scene where Michael shows Adam the spectacle of human history laid out before him, we see the emphasis on simultaneity, rather than chronology, of events. Thus the narrative portrays an image of surveying and beholding *in totality*. “So both ascend in the visions of God: it was a hill / Of Paradise the highest, from whose top / The hemisphere of earth in clearest ken / Stretched out to amplest reach of prospect lay . . . His eye might there command wherever stood / City of old or modern fame . . .” (XI, 376-80, 385). This vision prepares Adam for the coming of the “Promised Seed.” Unfolding from the top of “this specular Mount,” it is a mirror of history, for history begins from this moment; and the angel - not separable from the sight he in essence announces - is this mirror too. Adam is appropriately grateful for the enlightening, thanking Michael, after the tour of biblical history to the coming of Christ, for the self-understanding of his fallen dependence and possibility of redemption through right meekness. His preface to this piece of thanksgiving is interesting: “How soon hath thy prediction, seer blest, / Measured this transient world, the race of time, / Till time stand fixed: beyond is all abyss, / Eternity, whose end no eye can reach. / Greatly instructed I shall hence depart, / Greatly in peace of thought, and have my fill / Of knowledge, what this vessel can contain; / Beyond which was my folly to aspire” (XII, 553-60). Transience, like the passing of images through a mirror, leads to eternity. The mirror is after all the boundary of image and reality, visible and invisible, through which each passes and relates to the other. As messenger, the angel mediates these orders of existence. Yet the angel's very mediation calls attention to a distance (for the messenger is, since Hermes, always a distance runner) between perception and understanding that is potentially provocative of existential crisis. So it is that, in the vision of the angel the “race of time” - Adam's children – see themselves reaching eternal life, but in Adam fail to comprehend it. He sees human history mapped out before him, but finds it “all abyss,” dark and fathomless. Angelic revelation exceeds Adam's ken, producing an experience of amazement that, like the vision

II. Fahrvergnügen Interruptus

The various encounter stories involving miraculous car rescues follow this same logic of breakdown as necessary for the reception of grace, and the idea of grace. During the time of crisis or impending crisis – the wheels spinning out of control, an unknown accident just up ahead – the angel makes its presence felt simultaneous with the threshold state. It appears as a “hunch,” a soft but clear inner voice directing the driver, as a commanding outer voice like the one in *Angels in the Outfield*,³¹ as a superhuman figure that only the car’s occupant can see who physically stops her car in its tracks,³² hands on the wheel navigating the driver through the accident itself, the mysterious figure – police officer with unregistered badge, tow truck driver, “unassuming Hispanic man” – who appears to wake, warn, or guide her. The angel is a mysteriously locked steering wheel that prevents the driver from hitting a car in his blind spot, the missing car that diverted the driver’s path, the yellow snow-removal vehicle that prevents him from entering the scene of accident.³³ Each time following the near-death experience the driver realizes that the sensation or apparition *must* have been an angel, that the special condition of emergency revealed a direct communion with angelic order. There were blue and green colors, like those C.S. Lewis associated with angels we’re told, a special sweet smell, or most often simply an absence of conventional explanation for these extraordinary perceptions (“From

Clarence presents to George, requires limitation and containment.

³¹ “I wonder what shape I would have been in, had I not obeyed my angel’s orders!” one woman comments in Anderson 47.

³² Or in the case of Linda and Wynter Rowe, “six gigantic angels, with their hands interlocked, blocking the guardrail” (Webber & Webber 53).

³³ The yellow snowplow makes an appearance in Father O’Neill’s story, mentioned below, and in Elsie’s story, printed in Hope Price’s *Angels: True Stories of How They Touch Our Lives*. Elsie’s is fairly classic, including blizzard conditions, an articulation of the problem (“Decision time!”), and then the appearance, out of nowhere, of a big yellow snowplow (19). For O’Neill, the novelty is that the second time he sees the yellow snowplow it is May and there isn’t any snow. Good encounter stories seem to favor one of these two options, the magnification of threat through the trope of the blizzard or barren, desolate landscape, or the magnification of grace through the use of the uncanny and inexplicable. Anderson’s story does both, of course, balancing horror and the marvelous through the voice of the mother, for whom the experience was rendered more intense because it took place – both at the time she

all that we know about this accident,” the investigators said later, “we will never know how Kailey Smith survived,” quoted in Tyler, 22.³⁴ “All of a sudden I realized that we were on Highway 308, on the left side of the Bayou Lafouche. . . . The highway on the right side of the bayou is Highway 1. The woman couldn’t possibly have turned right onto a shell road, because she would have been in the bayou. There *are no* shell roads on the right side, only bayouside homes. Yet we both saw her. She definitely turned right!” quoted in Burnham’s *Angel Letters* 30).

The best stories include this negative proof, most often the inexplicable disappearance of the angel and his vehicle (and, Smith’s story notwithstanding, in angel car stories the angel is usually male). Yet they also include as positive proof the presence of a certain “feeling” following the encounter. Generally this is described as a sense of “peace” or “reassurance,” a “sudden understanding” (without a direct object), and more rarely as the feeling of no longer being alone. The descriptions are vague and stunningly vacuous, one-word abstract nouns that highlight the presence of (positive) *feeling in general* more than anything else. The writers seem almost wary of being too specific; the very presence of the feeling, like the very presence of the angel, is what they want to emphasize. The effect of this is significant. The power of the danger becomes converted to a sense of personal power, as if the feeling of emergency itself could be appropriated to the person, harnessed as spirit rather than threat.

Here the conversion of feeling to the idea of feeling becomes important. The particularity of the situation – which by contrast is alertly detailed in the stories – is responsible

was pacing around in her kitchen, and later, in having it recounted to her – entirely in her imagination. Hence the unknown enters in double force, as both otherworldly defamiliarization and pregnant suggestiveness.

³⁴ In case the reader misses it, Kelsey Tyler’s *There’s an Angel on Your Shoulder* tries to phrase the point that there is no possible natural explanation in just so many words repeatedly in her book: “‘There’s really no other explanation, is there?’ ‘Not really.’” (43); “There was no earthly explanation for what had happened that night in Boston” (49); “‘Is there any other explanation?’” Ann shook her head slowly. ‘Amazing isn’t it?’” (125); etc.

for the potency of the subject's experience from the beginning. In order for it to be translated to the individual, however, it has to be generalized. Angels, as bodiless minds who give names, though they so often have none,³⁵ perform this service as effortlessly as they do the actual rescues themselves. In fact, the angel itself is usually the least detailed character in the story – almost purposefully anonymous. He is described in generic terms as a “nice-looking,” nondescript young man; if white (as is usual in this demographic) he is often blond. Writers go out of their way to point up his ordinary appearance, such as a plain button-down blue shirt, and his quietness. The angel's youth is consistently noted, however, as is his sportiness. “It was then that Judith saw the angel – at the front of her car. He looked like a clean-cut, boy-next-door football player” (Webber & Webber 48). And in the beginning of one story the “rather pleasant-looking man about age twenty-five” that we first meet is further defined as “perfectly ordinary in his sports clothes and average blond hair and blue eyes” (Burnham *Angel Letters* 19, 20). The angel is appealing, sexual in a purely abstract, non-threatening way, his physicality diverted into the contained and agreeable realms of sports (evoking especially the reassuring etiquette of the “good” sport). In keeping with this trend, the baseball cap features as a single item of description. (See Father Dennis O'Neill's story, reprinted in both Burnham's *Angel Letters* and in Tyler's *There's an Angel on Your Shoulder*, or the heartrending “Encounter 22: The Boy and the Bus” in Tyler.) The angel's sporty bearing is simultaneously concrete and unspecific, suggesting masculinity without sexual interest and a collective rather than personal engagement with physical affairs. In the end there can be only one personal. Given the formidable lack of

³⁵ For the purposes of these narratives, at least, angels function as nameless beings. Though unsustainable in longer narratives such as the film or the novel, this tendency remains constant throughout angelic annunciation stories – the nameless men who appear to Abraham, for instance, the angel who wrestles with Jacob, the angel who appears to Hagar. Even the famous angel of the Virgin mother's annunciation was identified with Gabriel only later. Mohammed names Gabriel as the source and spirit of his own revelations, but then the transmission of the Koran is far more than an annunciation. As I'll discuss in chapter two, however, angels in the self-help books do take on

imagination with which the recent literature of encounter describes him, the angel clearly is of interest not as character, but as concept. Whereas the human narrators make themselves of general interest to the (general) reader by strongly asserting details of location and purpose, or at least specific feelings prior to the encounter (annoyance, apprehension, sanguinity), the angel remains portable, self-erasing, not too filled-in. He remains, in other words, spirit.

Of course, though the humans identify themselves through emotional and directional specifics, they are not exactly characters either. The emotional and situational specificity if anything substitutes for those markers of personality which narrative forms (however brief) usually strive to represent. And this brings us to a second result of the emphasis on feeling *per se* that we find in the angelic literature of encounter. These are essentially internal stories - psychological, if at times reductively so. C.S. Lewis points out that in essence this is the psychology afforded by allegory. Arising from the “divided will,” allegorical introspection devotes its attention to the “raw material, the passions and emotions which contend for mastery,” for “the gaze turned inward with a moral purpose does not discover *character*” (61). What is interesting about these narratives, however, is how little “moral purpose” actually defines their project, how little they struggle with good and evil. Even in *It’s a Wonderful Life*, though we are told that suicide violates both earthly and divine law, and even more so the bitter apostasy of wishing that one had never been born, the conflict we see (and here it takes the form of real passion) is reduced to a question of negation or affirmation.³⁶ Feeling in Capra’s film, albeit differently than in the encounter narratives, articulates the transformation from one to the other.

names (learning the angel’s name in fact is a sought-after stage of the communication), very unlike the rescuing angels of the true encounter tales.

³⁶ In the second chapter I’ll also discuss how the binary between affirmation and negation that gives life to these stories becomes the premise for a worked out system of moral thinking and judgment. In the encounter books and movies like *It’s a Wonderful Life*, moral associations are implied visually (Pottersville as alliance with negation, for instance), but are used to launch the main point, which is the revelation of singularity, rather than the other way around.

Both the film and the stories, however, use the image and scene of car breakdown to allegorize the “raw material” of (ghostly) negation, the feeling of lawlessness into which the angel lands concretely. Lewis’s sequence of events is also reversed. The breakdown is the occasion rather than the enactment of the introspective urge. After all, these are not plot-progressive mystery plays but image-driven accounts of a moment as “turning-point.” Once the driver resumes her road trip the introspection begins, expressed in “feelings” (peace, reassurance, understanding) that are wholly interior, that name the experience of interiority itself. Thus physical encounter ushers in an experience that is celebrated as a distinctly immaterial one, but without thereby losing any of its particularity; essentially, encounter heroes affirm their own sense of self as something abstract.

I will speak later in this chapter of what constitutes the allegory of affirmation in these stories. First, however, I want to say more about the question of morality, not the least because of the religious history of and association with angels and because of the overt Christian allegiances of so many of these books.³⁷ Angel encounter narratives do not primarily concern themselves with good Christian morality. Though they certainly lionize the virtues of prayer and generosity to strangers, they are not as interested in portraying good will as the foundation of the earthly shining city. In fact, it is the presence of the angel that ruins this. One could imagine a morality tale of the helpful roadside Samaritan accosting the lonely pilgrim on his journey, after which the saved pilgrim dedicates himself to the transmission and perpetuation of this experience of disinterested goodness.³⁸ But the encounter tales are not wholly diegetic allegories (where the literal meaning is grounded in the “sublunar” world, and the symbolic meaning alights from the

³⁷ Over half profess a distinct Christian duty, although the implication of Christian ethic in even the more New Age books can be felt as an invisible but protective mantle.

supernatural). *Both* natural and supernatural orders are real; there is no shadowplay of correspondences between symbol and act. As a consequence, humanistic meta-narratives have no place in this interpenetrated world: the angel, like an exuberant film score, interrupts any morality play of that kind. Angels cannot tell the story of altruism overcoming self-interest, because they are in their Western definition already conceived as disinterested servants of God, whose loves inherently accord with His Will, and for whom Love and Law pose no “division of the will.” (How silly and at the same time how tempting to consider the image of an angel with an angel and a devil warring on *his* shoulder.) To speak of angelic rescue is to valorize something other than the efforts of good will: it is to dramatize a certain consecration of the self.

Thus the “conversion” these stories describe is not revolutionary, where we witness a change of heart or a rebirth, a baptism by fire altering the very structure of the self, such as the Pauline (from skeptic to believer) or the Dickensian (money-hoarding capitalist to benevolent patron). Angels represent a conversion to right judgment rather than good intentions. Clarence, it is worth noting, appears to George, not Potter. His job is not to *make* George’s life wonderful, but simply to demonstrate to him how wonderful it is already. The angelic miracle effects an organic change in perception and evaluation, not simply a wondrous but contrived transcendence out of a tight jam. Many of those touched by angels speak of a reaffirmed faith in their religion or a newly discovered belief in angels; these transformations emblemize something profane, however, as well as sacred. When the chosen resume their road trips what has mainly changed is their judgment of their relation to the world, allegorized in their orientation to the road itself. They are no longer concerned with destination and the particular feelings occasioned by the necessity of getting there; rather, these externally imposed denominations, these experiences of

³⁸ A few stories do discuss the hero’s consequent decision to devote himself or herself to some greater good, but these are by far the exception. In general the focus remains squarely on the magic of the blessing and the beauty of

role and necessity, become converted to feelings of grace and freedom guarded by the angel as the figure of intuition and interior determination. Both the road and time have become general, appearing as metaphysical presentations of an internal road (destiny) and personal rightness of time (the angelic arrival). The driver, previously concerned with efficient causes and instrumental means, is now the pilgrim, beginning a journey into the world that appears before her as a whole, and which – in the knowledge that her guardian angel is watching over her - she can wholly claim.

It is the assertion of chosenness, more than anything else, that distances angelic encounters apart from questions of morality. A quick glance at some of the narratives themselves shows why. Many describe the way in which the subject is set apart from catastrophe that befalls others. For instance, in the bayou story above, Stephanie Boudreaux and her mother avoid the wreck occasioned by a collision between an eighteen wheeler and a small car, both of them “in the ditch.” No account of what happened to the drivers in *those* vehicles, though the size differential makes optimism difficult. Here is another account that omits details regarding the death or injury of others, though scenic details are vividly described: “Jim was not quite all the way into the passing lane when he heard the crash. The flatbed behind him had apparently had brake failure, and he watched, horrified, as it smashed into the truck ahead. If Jim had not been helped by that strong hand on the wheel, his light van would have been squeezed like an accordion between those two heavy trucks” (Malz 57). The next paragraph immediately follows with, “Since that experience, Jim tells me that he and his wife have both met Jesus as their Lord.”³⁹ This emphasis on being set apart is not unique to angel stories about

angelic existence as guardians of the human (especially that human in particular).

³⁹ We see this same narrative logic in Quentin Tarantino’s 1994 *Pulp Fiction*, where Samuel L. Jackson, inexplicably un-hit by a rain of bullets four feet away, decides - after blowing away the hapless culprits - to give up crime and “walk the earth.”

motorists; consider this story about Chantal, a mountain climber who descends a precipitous cliff-face through the aid of a miraculous “wall of angels”: “I later learned that the cliff face was considered particularly dangerous in that area, and that a number of well-prepared climbers had been killed like [my fiancé] Dale while trying to descend” (Freeman 140). Tony Kushner gives voice to this problem of justice in a different way. As he told *Time* magazine, “The question is, why are you saved with your guardian angel and not the woman who was shot to death shielding her children in Brooklyn three weeks ago?” (Gibbs 65).

I dwell on this question of morality and justice not in order to indict these texts, but to point out how even ethical considerations pertinent to the belief system that so many of them advocate are compromised in order to assert what is most important: the principle of selection as dependent on an experiential disorder, rather than a rational system. The chosen subjects are then – perhaps ironically – accommodated to a collective, ethical enterprise via the interiority such revelation produces, and which acts as its sign. Thus the narrative movement in the quotation from Betty Malz (whose oft-cited book *Angels Watching Over Me* is categorized under “Contemporary Applied Christianity”) may be read then not at her own expense, but as a logical sequence pointing up a creative contradiction at work in the very idea of judgment itself.

Immanuel Kant, in his writings on judgment, suggests how this difficulty appears in the movement between sense-impression to conceptualization through the action of fantasy. For him the idea of sublime experience provokes a theory of judgment, of the human psychology of imagination and its service as the base of a universal, consensual determination. In the following excerpt, Kant outlines a prototypical pattern of sublime experience remarkably similar to that of the encounter narratives. This is taken from his initial presentation of the sublime attitude in distinction to that of the beautiful:

But in what we are wont to call sublime in nature there is such an absence of anything leading to particular objective principles and corresponding forms of nature, that it is rather in its chaos, or in its wildest and most irregular disorder and desolation, provided it gives signs of magnitude and power, that nature chiefly excites the ideas of the sublime. Hence we see that the concept of the sublime in nature is far less important and rich in consequences than that of its beauty. It gives on the whole no indication of anything final in nature itself, but only in the possible *employment* of our intuitions of it in inducing a feeling in our own selves of a finality quite independent of nature. For the beautiful in nature we must seek a ground external to ourselves, but for the sublime one merely in ourselves and the attitude of mind that introduces sublimity into the representation of nature. . . [It] involves no more than the development of a final employment by the imagination of its own representation. (*Critique of Judgement* 92-3)

Kant describes a necessary transition between external crisis – a chaos possessing magnitude and power – and the internal reflection by the self on its own powers of reflection. Beauty is in the formal presentation of the thing, sublimity in the eye of the beholder as it responds to the presentation of things in their formlessness. And it is - especially - in her ability to turn that eye inward on herself.

Kant speaks of this “employment” almost cursorily, at the very least coyly: the representation of sublime experience “involves no more” than its exercise, as if the act of

reflective judgment were already destined or inevitable in the encounter between a powerful breakdown of nature and the subject endowed with all her faculties. And in a way he is right, provided that the subject *has the means* of representing her own imagination to herself. In choosing to focus his critique on nature rather than culture, however, Kant risks assimilating such representation to the faculty of concepts, which is supremely capable of objectifying phenomena (as nature for instance, or experience, as the beautiful, or the sublime), but is not actually capable of “representing” it. In doing so he risks failing to recognize or admit the imagination on its own terms, which necessarily evade rationalization, prediction, and convention, at the same time that they draw on and may even ultimately reinvigorate them. For Kant understands the imagination primarily in its existence as a faculty, rather than as something demonstrated in that faculty’s created work. Thus his imagination remains a concept – abstract and remote, an idea of agency rather than an agent itself. It is hardly ever understood as an actual presence. Kant’s whole point, of course, is to make the distinction between imagining and conceiving (for it is this distinction that gives impulse to the sublime as the drive to overcome it), yet his rationalization of the imaginary – evident too in his confidence in the subject’s eventual “fall into reason” - betrays this distinction. Kant has a purpose in making this move; images and forms do not as readily lend themselves to generalization as concepts or ideas, and the understated intent of the third critique is to provide a theory of democracy through an investigation of taste as the irreducible principle of human decision-making. Nevertheless, if we are to understand what is at work in the process of collective self-determination (and heed Kant’s later injunction to resist the “influence” of nature by exalting our own powers above it), it becomes imperative for us to approach the topic of the imagination with an eye for what in it

escapes our powers of determination to begin with, in order then to understand how it may guide our conceptions, and through what transporting machinery.

Any narrative of sublime encounter will offer some way of dealing with the relation between imagination and intelligence, but the angel narratives provide an especially compelling genre because in the figure of the angel we see Kant's representation of the imagination to itself. In the angelic messenger the imagination sees the dramatization of its own operation - a miraculous mediation of mind and matter, thought and impression - as a revelatory event. This self-presentation, then, is also an annunciation. The angel appeals as a necessarily fantastic intelligence - fantastic in that it is at the least foreign to objective reality, if not always absolutely fabulous, and thus claims the idea of a thing irreducible to its image, though immanent in it. Angelic possibility asserts itself as a sublime power already potential within our experience of the world, rather than as a magical, external machination. We can see how compelling the angel then appears in relation to situations of acknowledged crisis, in the face of imminent danger, death, and potential dismemberment occasioned by a precipitous accident or machines gone out of control. In the angel we see our own capacity for making sense of things, and the greater the force of the outside chaos, the more elevated the personal powers by which we rationalize and order it.

The most faddish prototype of the recent encounter stories poses a problem, however. How do you account for the potency of this final representation, and hence of the narrative itself, when the latter describes a natural disorder which give *no* "signs of magnitude or power"? Where does the imagination harness its power from? And what does one make of the angel, not just when it gives its blessing apparently arbitrarily, but when it does so *frivolously*? What does one make of the relentlessly trivial use of this sublime figure in stories about busted tires?

A year after her own angel film came out, director Nora Ephron described the importance of angels in daily affairs. She differentiated the belief in angels from the belief in God: “The horrible truth is that he probably doesn’t notice. He’s got more important things to do. But angels do notice. You know, they make the tow truck come when you have a flat tire” (quoted in Sterngold H41). So ubiquitous is this image of the angelic emissary from AAA that in her 1996 comedy *Michael* Ephron has her angel – a slovenly chain-smoking John Travolta – make the tow truck come for just this purpose. Like Ephron, angel writer Eileen Elias Freeman (and founder of the AngelWatch™ Network and Journal) also views the emblematic tire-change encounter as the most self-evident example of angels’ real guardianship over our lives:

One thing is clear: Angels are far more than projections of the divine mind or literary devices. They are real, personal beings, even if their corporeality is totally different from ours. Literary devices and mythical beings cannot touch people’s lives and utterly transform them. Ancient stories and legends are not capable of changing tires for stranded motorists before disappearing. Angels are beings, creatures, as we are, but different. (28)

One thing *is* clear: Flat Tires are far more than an annoying exercise in waiting or a test of one’s lug-nut skills. From these quotations one must conclude that either the flat tire has been widely experienced as the sublime negation of providential order and that it is generally understood to act as the incontrovertible ground of individual actuality and existential being, or that it somehow lends itself to the idea of angels proper, dramatizing and confirming their relation to us as figures of the imagination, messenger spirits, and counterpoints to the mechanistic thinking so

important for the automotive enterprise. If the quintessential stories of angels over the past century have involved crises of movement, there must be something about the roadside angelic tire-fix that captures the essence of those stories, even without the crises and their terrors.

I want to suggest what this something is through a detour. The detour involves an angel film that has nothing to do with cars, but everything to do with the relation between imagination and reality, with the message from the angel about itself as fantasy. One of the least successful angel films ever made arrived at the end of the trend in the mid-fifties. By the beginning of that decade angel films no longer dealt with social reality; they had become less serious, more individualized. *Angels in the Outfield* (1951), which describes a baseball manager's outrageous breaches of etiquette, is a good example. But it is *Forever Darling* (1956), starring Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, that marks the nadir of the genre (and is perhaps the last genuine angel film made until the 1970's). It achieves lows of triviality that make the tire change stories seem deeply consequential. Produced by Arnaz himself and directed by Alexander Hall (who had fifteen years earlier directed *Here Comes Mr. Jordan*, one of the great all-time angel fantasies, and one that arguably began the trend in the 1940's), the film awkwardly follows follows a storyline in which a good-looking guardian angel (James Mason, who would later play Mr. Jordan in the 1978 remake of Hall's classic, *Heaven Can Wait*)⁴⁰ descends to earth to try to help a bored couple rejuvenate their marriage. The rejuvenation involves Lucy (Susan Bewell Vega, an attention-starved housewife) following Desi (Lorenzo Xavier Vega, a research scientist) on a loony expedition to test a new insecticide. The trip is a shambles, but not her newly developed intention to fulfill the role of the dutiful wife who believes in her husband without benefit of actual judgment, and all ends well, for no good reason.

⁴⁰ Apparently Mason dubbed this film "the worst I ever appeared in" (Parrish 102). The critics did not disagree.

Two moments in the film stand out, however, if more for the purpose of angel-watching than movie-watching. One is when Lucy first meets the angel. Like George Bailey she is dubious, but her skepticism expresses itself a bit differently: “If you are what you say you are, why do you look like James Mason?” she asks. To which the angel responds, “I look the way you want me to look.” Later in the film Ball will imagine herself opposite Mason who is starring in a hot-blooded jungle movie that she and Desi go to watch. This is also a crux moment in terms of musical fantasy, for it is at this point that we first hear the title song, “Forever Darling” (which was the only commercially successful element of this production, enjoying its own play for some years after). These two moments are tantalizing for their comic self-referentiality, for the delight in watching a movie star fantasize herself a movie star and a celebrity be celebrated as himself in the diegetic action of the film. But what is most interesting is the essential message that these devices relay: Even your fantasies can set you on the right track; even your fantasies can illuminate reality, and your role to play in it. In fact, precisely your fantasies serve as your guide, because only your fantasies are able to mediate external and internal worlds. In this case such an insight reconciles personality to convention, individual expression (Ball’s wackiness) to social role. This is the same conservative and accommodationist move Capra makes at the end of his film, yet both narratives have succeeded in presenting an important aspect of the announcing angel as the self-representation of fantasy – the significance of the imaginary in determining “rightness,” and its necessity for allegorical thinking as a form of ineradicably *representational* naming and judgment. As Claude Rains says as the heavenly agent in *Here Comes Mr. Jordan*, “This is your road, Joe.”

Roadside angel narratives, whether of crisis or the merest, most mechanical breakdown, represent a collapse of unity between personal power and social role, through allegories of the

car stranded at the side of the road. We see this nowhere more clearly than in the physical depiction of George Bailey, as he increasingly struggles to adapt his spirit to the limitations imposed upon him by his family obligations and the conventions of provincial life – a “divided will” that collapses the purpose of that spirit during the events of the 24th, evident in his slow and jerky movements and restless, haunted eyes.⁴¹ In the encounter stories the conflict of the will does not appear as a question of character, but rather is mapped onto the divisions of the scene itself and onto the temporal divisions of subjective states within the narrative. While the stories of accidents or near-accidents heighten this tension, both for the narrative itself and for the angel, in a way the excessively quotidian nature of the tire-change stories presents this question of power and chaos in a more distilled form. What they present is the question of agency within determinism, the question of how one engages consent (the figure of the road) as a particular person. The power of this engagement appears as movement which, after its ghostly interruptions, resumes in a different order of time - which is to say, a different idea of being.

I am drawing here from Aquinas. His writings on time – like those of many other Christian theologians before him – distinguish between the time of God: eternity, of the angels: beginning without end, and the human: motion, or time proper, complete with beginning and end. But unlike these other thinkers, Aquinas ties these ideas of the three temporalities to an already formulated theory of being and identity. Aquinas bases his theory on a distinction between *esse*, existential being, and essence, the being that defines a thing. Essentially his is a theory of life, of source and existence. He explicitly borrows this distinction from Aristotle’s theory of active and potential being, in which the knowledge potential within the self becomes

⁴¹ In his brief discussion of *It’s a Wonderful Life* as a cult film, Danny Peary comments James Stewart’s peculiar appeal in it. This is, he argues, Stewart’s greatest performance (in addition to being his favorite role), because in it we find a blend of his prewar and postwar personas. The optimistic, provincial “boy next door” of the thirties coexists with the dark, brooding neurotic of the fifties – Hitchcock’s Jimmy Stewart (165-66).

actualized by the mind's encounter with experience.⁴² For Aristotle, the act of knowing is the essential act of being; Aquinas, less interested in knowledge than in identity, understands agency in terms of existence itself. That is, he comes much closer to Kant's emphasis on feeling as the principle of judgment, as it is existentially called into being. Aquinas's interest in time, however, allows him to grasp the experiential quality of judgment in a way that Kantian idealism does not. Aquinas writes of the three orders of time in these terms, terms of active being, three modes of reality. Divine reality is eternally self-sustaining, in that its existence is also its essence, human reality is wholly potential with regards to its existence, dependent on succession and movement for its being, and angelic reality, the time of *aevum*, receives existence in a single moment which then (immediately) becomes self-sustaining, independent of time, change, and beginning.⁴³ This shift articulates that of the encounter narratives – the movement from the feeling of change and disruption, the feeling of *things happening*, to the feeling of eternity, peaceful interiority and contemplation, the feeling of having been touched by an angel. Within the cosmology of these Thomist temporalities, it becomes clear that the annunciation is a special kind of beginning – a beginning like that of the angels, beginning without end. This is what the books' reader seeks in such narratives: the idea of creativity as dissemination, the act of being chosen as a condition without end. She looks for the generation of the receiver as eternal parent and agent, a generation that posits reception as agency, essence as existence. And above all this the reader seeks the feeling of beginning as experience and as grace.

⁴² Aristotle's theory of active and passive being appears in the famous discussion in *De Anima*, Book III. Here he argues that thinking is a form of receiving (sense impressions) by and in which the act of thinking is brought into being. This annunciation of the mind is curious, in that act, the condition of being an agent, depends on and is co-existent with reception. In much the same way the encounter heroes receive the angel's news and in that instant, in the moment of being acted upon by their angel, they think, conceive, and most importantly, exist. Mind, "that part of the soul. . . by which the soul thinks and forms judgments," can paradoxically only create actively in the condition of experiencing passively: "Mind in the passive sense is such because it becomes all things, but mind has another aspect in that it makes all things. . . Mind in this sense is separable, impassive and unmixed, since it is essentially an activity" (III.V).

This experience is also what we want from our movies. As viewer-receptors we look for an experience of fantasy that only the angel can name. *It's a Wonderful Life* specifically invokes this idea by placing us as self-conscious viewers at the start of the film – along with Clarence, who through in watching will also move from passive reception to active agency, and thus earn his wings. In this initial move the film tells us to expect the representation of our own imaginations to ourselves, and it gives us this representation in the conventional figure of the angel. But Capra's treatment of the angel is creative; like the tire-change allegory of the road, convention - an a priori emotional agreement between reader and text – ultimately provides the “force and magnitude” necessary for imaginative experience. In his article on *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Toles tells how this works in regards to convention in Capra's directing method. Capra's treatment of the angel is analogical.

Toles's analysis begins with a restating of the dominant discourse on Capra's style, which claims that he projects a “false attitude” by using conventions merely as means to an emotional effect. Instead of viewing them as “devices,” however, Toles suggests that they might be understood (like angels and their messages) as “forms that come unbidden, discovered as they unfold.” In this Capra would not be rhetorically plotting the narrative of the audience's responses, drawing on the teleological power that convention so easily provides, so much as making an artistic leap into each scene and thus announcing its special fecundity. This maneuver requires that each “device” act less as *deus ex machina* than as illumination.

Capra, to be sure, makes extensive use of the conventions of established Hollywood genres, and unlike, say, Preston Sturges, does so mostly in an uncynical manner. But it has generally escaped notice that once his scenes have gotten underway (at least

⁴³ See *Commentary on Sentences* I, d., 19, q.2, a.1.

in *It's a Wonderful Life*) the supports that these conventions might be expected to supply - for example, the motivating information for our emotional "reading" of a situation - rapidly drop away. Capra seizes upon conventions as the quickest route into a scene, just as Astaire sidles his way into a dance by a series of simple, orthodox steps, which are minimally communicative about the flights of invention that his motions will inscribe later on. Conventions bring the *ground* for scenes into preliminary focus, but the scene-structures that feel their way into being on that ground are meant to be self-sustaining. Capra is not at all interested in the habitual, somewhat protected mode of response that conventions necessarily bring with them. What he consistently strives to distill out of them is an unmediated primary recognition of tremendous force, which throws the convention out of focus and makes sudden contact with the vital truth. (47-48)

Speaking in the discourse of sublime encounter, Toles identifies convention as a kind of messenger whose elemental power enables an imaginative response, and which in turn erases itself in the process of enabling this response. That Toles insists Capra uses these tools at the opening of each scene is important, for what we are looking at in his description of Capra's style as an aesthetic event is an encounter with *aevum*, the temporal beginning that undoes itself almost immediately to yield "self-sustaining" being. Toles is less specific about what this "unmediated primary recognition" consists of, about what defines the camerawork itself. But his description provides a useful and compelling point of entry for the movie's annunciation proper,

the final scene in which intervention finally gives way to blessing and at last the guardian angel earns the status of a true messenger.

III. Christmas

The first time I ever saw *It's a Wonderful Life* was, like most Americans, on TV. It was a typically busy Christmas Eve. I had missed the first 115 minutes and glimpsed only the final scene, completely cut off from the larger narrative of ambition, sacrifice, and contemplated suicide. All I saw was a stream of people piling money on a table like it was a collection plate – a boisterous round of holy devotions. And this materialist homage was being celebrated. A couple was looking tearfully at the money piling up, their tears instructing me to worship it. Even though I was a child, it seemed to me crass. So I ranted internally about the commercialism of the Christmas season, and went back to my presents.

Frank Capra's classic was not a success when it was released at the close of 1946. Despite mostly positive reviews it failed to break even at the box office, and in the face of stiff competition (*The Best Years of Our Lives*) won no academy awards (though it was nominated for several, including Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Actor). Twenty seven years later, after a lapse in copyright renewal left it at the mercy of the public domain, the movie was picked up by PBS on a lark and quickly became a Christmas season TV cult phenomenon.⁴⁴ Displaced from the grammar of cinema to that of television, *It's A Wonderful Life* was now positioned to appeal to a domestically situated audience, an audience geared to respond to that feeling of group participation petitioned by the communal outreach onscreen. But the film lent itself to TV viewing in other ways. In particular, it adapted well to the surgery of editing, commercials, and

most of all the random attentiveness of the viewer's gaze. Even without viewer familiarity, isolated scenes and even stills press on the viewer's imagination (if not initially her favor), like the one I witnessed years ago.

Though confusing to the virgin viewer, the final scene is if anything heightened by isolated perception, by being seen as television rather than cinema. Seen in flashes and cuts, the movie's appeal to the revelatory power of the momentary and the mundane states its case even more intensely. And it borrows from that special trait of television, that it brings this revelation into the viewer's own home, to her personal space. She watches TV as part of a larger collective audience, but still with the feeling of isolation that her responses will be hers alone, uninduced by those of the crowd around her. Such a situation invokes almost a fear of crowds, of intrusion into the territory of the self. *It's a Wonderful Life's* final great scene in particular plays up to that. The camera simultaneously sacralizes the physical spontaneity of the converging townsfolk and pointedly contains the threat of its acting as a large, unpredictable force. The sequence begins with an unstable array of shots at various angle and perspectives before stabilizing in a high angle long shot of the crowd, now emptied of cash and domesticated into song. During the oncoming confusion, George and Mary are positioned at a safe remove above the happy fray - George in the position of honored guest,⁴⁴ Mary as conductor/guardian. The screenplay itself calls attention to the threat of the incoming masses: "*George picks up Zuzu to protect her from the mob.*" "*The place becomes a bedlam.*" "*Ernie is trying to get some system into the chaos*"

⁴⁴ In New York in the 1970's people would actually hold *It's a Wonderful Life* Christmas parties. Since 1994 a copyright of NBC, the movie has lost its funky cult edge.

⁴⁵ Film critic David Sterritt's description of the significance of the final scene calls attention to the way in which, at the height of his recognition by the community, George is even more clearly a loner. Significantly, he is a loner because of his visions and imaginative difference: "On the one hand, a happy ending arrives when George sees that his proper place is with ordinary, uncreative people who take comfort in their own conformity. But on the other, George has had an experience - the dream provided by Clarence the angel - that none of his neighbors could share. Even at the film's joyful climax, George is a loner with insights that place him outside the little community taken for granted by the less imaginative folks who crowd around him" (13).

(Basinger 318). This danger has already been established in another climactic scene earlier in the film: during the mass hysteria of the stock market crash, when the frenzy of a desperate and unreflecting crowd (itself a massive expression of consent) threatens to gut the Building and Loan. In contrast to the disciplining action in which the earlier scene ended, with George and Uncle Billy waving the two remaining dollars as a trophy, in this one the exuberantly flowing cash signals a power that is about to be named and represented through a specifically angelic affirmation.

The naming is the big event in Capra's movie; it is one of those rare films that moves ineluctably toward a crucial emotive revelation, and without too much transparency or heavy-handedness.⁴⁶ The tension is agile, sustaining itself through a relentless progression from the refined to the elemental. The final chaos builds on this tension to give the concluding annunciation its power, brought to high pitch in the stream of Bedford Falls citizens pouring into the Bailey household, and emphasized by the alternating close-ups and noisy, overlapping chatter. But this surge of populist excess is only part of what makes the final scene memorable and essential. George may be hailed by the crowd as "the richest man in town," but he isn't truly named as such until we get our last sign from the angel, a gesture that picks up the elemental force of the human hailing and contracts it into a genuine communication as well as delivery. This final impression and sublime naming is Clarence's beaten copy of *Tom Sawyer*. Suddenly, on top of the pile of money, the book appears – the same copy we'd seen earlier in the film, now a heavenly confirmation instead of an anachronistic emblem.

Twain's novel is an appropriate choice to capture and contain the motion of the film. It is appropriate, to begin with, as a signature of George's angel, the eccentric and bumbling but

⁴⁶ Other examples might include *Cinema Paradiso*, *Groundhog Day*, *The Sixth Sense* – notably, all engaging fantasy in some way, whether in the domain of the real or the supernatural.

good-hearted Clarence Oddbody. Its place in the canon of beloved and whimsical children's books immediately attunes the audience to view Clarence in the same way - as a figure whose very oddness paradoxically ensures him a place *within* the collective identity and national self-idealization, and as a junior, not yet fully initiated member of it. But those familiar with the book will also understand its appropriateness for George himself. As any annunciation is ultimately a form of titling and entitling, George's naïvely literal angel honors him with a name which is exactly that - a title. The choice, as with all of Clarence's decisions, uncannily strikes home. Because *Tom Sawyer* is a tale reconciling the spirit of adventure with small-town values it addresses the main conflict that motivates the plot in this film - the conflict between George's need to see himself as a creative world-spirit and his sense of duty to the world that created him. The local and its modalities is not unproblematic in Twain's novel, however, any more than Bedford Falls is graspable without its Pottersville alter ego. Those who remember the book more sharply will recall its darkness - the darkness of provincial enclavism and the monsters it creates. For instance, the book carefully contextualizes Injun Joe's sociopathic revenge and greed as a product of exclusion and injustice. It represents the arrest of Muff Potter (no relation) as an act of frontier vigilantism. The existence of slaves and slavery are repeatedly ironized through the children's various crossings of the Mississippi. In his identification of the parallels between Tom Sawyer and George Bailey, Robert Ray also points to the double-edged relation between romanticized convention and an inner animation. "*It's a Wonderful Life* shared Twain's acute recognition of an outworn romantic myth's capacity to disparage normal life. If the sound of a train whistle made George unhappy with what he had, the steamboat had done the same for Twain" (194). That Clarence's hailing of George - both at their first encounter and in the token

of his farewell - is through Twain's *Tom Sawyer*, highlights the significance of the presentation of the book in general as a mode of annunciative grace.

If cars in current angelic discourse seem to represent the call to angelic arrival through a mechanistic breakdown, books represent the angel gathering the pieces. The naming action of reading substitutes an interior, reflective movement for an external, eventful one: the time of the sacred (*contemplari* - from the *templum*, or temple) for the time of the historical. Where the roadside rescue signals angelic guardianship and descent, the sign of our immortal reconstitution in the book⁴⁷ provides the true hailing. This is appropriate; books and annunciations have had a long history together. In his essay on the annunciation, Thomas Moore points out how frequently in art Mary is depicted reading a book. "Paintings show her in a contemplative mood, in her room, reading" (23). Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* (1435-45), one of the most frequently reprinted renderings of this scene, is a suggestive example. Mary's book lies open on her knee, facing Gabriel, an open text between them. The open book prior to annunciation (and in some ways the text of its reading) invokes the idea of contemplation as a receptive state preparatory to receiving grace. Moore comments, "It would seem to take a degree of expectancy and intellectual preparedness to glimpse the angel when he appears." Mary's awakened, "mindful" interiority prior to being hailed as the mother of God in fact suggests her fitness for the role; where in the encounter stories this state follows angelic awakening, from Moore's reading it makes it possible. The godly self is the reading self, readied to participate in angelic communication. But there is also a sense in which the book *is* the annunciation, the bestowal of the seed that contains its own future even before it is read. Because it is for this reason the

⁴⁷ In the encounter stories the final meditative or transcendent consciousness while divine performs the same function, but weakly. The shift from particular, intended experience to receptive, universal grace is palpable, but lacks any emblem to make it concrete. One could argue, however, that the circulation of the encounter books themselves provides this token, especially since the ultimate annunciation they offer is of the readers themselves.

emblem *par excellence* of prophecy and any religious tradition founded on the prophetic, the sacred book presents itself as the proper gift of the visionary spirit. This spirit is the angelic messenger. Thus by the time of Islam we see that messenger, named and established, perform the role of transmission of *the* sacred book – a much more exalted role for the angel. In not just bestowing but *uttering* the word of not just any divine text but the *foundational* divine text, we see the angel become more than the occasional voice of the Lord – it becomes its necessary embodiment.

In the story of Muhammad and Gabriel the idea of revelation as the ground beneath the feet of religious conception and practice reaches its apex. As it arises in these Western traditions, the angel articulates their status as specifically revealed religions, where both the holy leaders and their followers understand their faith's power in terms of a consecrated and consecrating book (a masterplot that Tony Kushner uses with great fanfare when his histrionic angel delivers an enormous book to his humble prophet in *Angels in America*). Significantly, the religions of the book also have invoked allegory as a major mode of their interpretation, from Zoroastrianism's allegorical pantheon to Judaism's and Christianity's traditions of allegorical exegesis to the allegorical passages of the Qur'an.⁴⁸ The connection is an organic one. As Walter Benjamin points out, the idea of allegory calls up the sacred script, the illuminated word, the very process of divine inscription (not, perhaps, unlike the virgin conception) to mobilize its rendering of the particularized generality. Thus the "emblem" becomes the special language of allegory, the imaginative representation of abstract meaning attached to its object as through a divine logic. This is the logic of the angel, who bestows both sacred emblems and the means of reading them, just as Gabriel conferred literacy on the illiterate Muhammed in tandem with the

⁴⁸ These sections of *mutashaabihaat* concern human dealings with realms beyond its comprehension – the nature of God and of the afterlife – which require allegorical description in order to be conveyed to the human.

sacred law. The book is, after all, at once an object of imaginative experience and the expression of its action. In the book we go beyond our imagination, seeking to grasp that which can only be known negatively, as words purvey their objects. But in allegory word also functions as image, and so the negative referentiality of language gives way to illumination. Thus allegorical language strives to convey the unknowable positively, presenting words before us as signs of negativity, absence, and invisibility that at the same time communicate infinite and eternal, absolute presence through their dual status as images. In the religions of the book one sees the book as the self-revelatory origin and essence of that religion's imagistic power.

The allegorical movement from negation to affirmation is paralleled by the movement in angel true encounter narratives from ghostly breakdown to angelic annunciation. We can see in this movement how the true annunciation has to wait for the angel – who begins as ghost, the spirit of a departed soul – to become a proper angel, fully separate from human knowing. *It's a Wonderful Life* demonstrates this necessary movement beautifully. In the scene of allegorical ghostly negation, so strikingly epitomized by the depersonalization and self-unmaking of Capra's Nighttown sequence, the angel is most accurately not-yet, or about-to-be. Like the angels watching but not yet appearing in the encounter stories, Clarence is only halfway realized – “angel second-class” - guarding, witnessing, and recording, rather than acting. Only in acting are angels fully angelic, just as Aristotle defined them (active intelligences: pure form, which is pure act) and only then do they truly deliver a message. Of all the angels in the history of the supernatural canon, the messenger angel is the one that best demonstrates this idea of pure act as it relates to the central problem of self-determination that the film's nightmare and fantasy life engages. Surrogate of a presence that can only be apprehended through words and images, the messenger angel epitomizes the necessary absence at the heart of judgment and free will – of

which suicide, the exercise of the will towards its own destruction and against its own interest, may be the most dramatic case. Significantly, Clarence only becomes a true messenger at the end, after George's threatened self-annihilation and after the vision of that annihilation in the Pottersville sequence. Like all personal or guardian angels, his actualization depends on that of his charge; appropriately, the emblem of the one doubles for the other. Clarence's great act as an angel with wings is the gift of the book on top of George's pile of tribute, simultaneously a testimony of his reality, his personal and actual existence, and a hailing of George's. *Tom Sawyer*, and Clarence's inscription in it to George, is the essential affirmation of both his achieved status as angel and that of his prophet. The presentation of such a gift and its message, however, requires the messenger's invisibility.

Angelic invisibility differs from ghostly invisibility in significant ways. Like the difference between textual negation and affirmation, the ghostly describes invisibility as a suppression of agency, the angelic, the sign of its happening. Where free will is the desired but occluded possibility of the ghostly, it is the very precondition of the angelic and its obsession with judgment. This relation between ghostly and angelic invisibilities is worth a detour, because both can be read as articulating themselves through the figure of the book, the text that speaks things that aren't there. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. defines the ghostly in this manner, through the subaltern experience of illiteracy and the "trope of the talking book." According to Gates, the experience of slaves like Oloudah Equiano confronting the object of knowledge is like two mirrors facing each other. For him this is a "sign of absence," a silence born of the static reflection of two non-subjects - the slave who can't read (that is, who by law is defined as an object, hence non-reading), and the book that won't speak. Gates speaks in the tradition of the American sublime as outlined separately by Mary Arensberg and Rob

Wilson,⁴⁹ as the experience of utter blankness and whiteness – Melville’s whale, or Stevens’s snow. Gates calls this “the null and void,” “an endless pattern of voided repetition,” and it is also what we see in the first parts of *It’s a Wonderful Life* and the true encounter books – the chaotic dissolution of identity and, more importantly, means of identification. For Gates, the invisibility attendant on these double mirrors expresses the subaltern experience in which the “language of the master” is incapable of recognizing the other. “When the master’s book looks to see whose face is behind the voice that Equiano speaks, it can only see an absence, an invisibility that dwells in an unattended looking-glass” (156). The book is ghostly as an expression of closed repetition, unable to yield the other (literally allegoria means “to speak the other”), resistant, mirroring without communicating.

Where these textual mirrors evoke a problem of the will, of intention haunting physical reality, the angelic text finds its voice in unreflected light, in almost an excess of illumination. Thus the ghostly lends itself more to critique, to the exposure of invisible structures and processes in order to ascribe cause and responsibility; the angelic, on the other hand, in treating invisible structures as manifestations of an other reality whose causality escapes us, tends to acknowledge the worldly limitations of those structures while mystifying their otherworldly potential. Because of this, angels and ghosts deal with the problem of immaterial presence differently. The sign of the ghostly and the otherized is an absent presence, the shadow of something there but not recognized or seen - not essentially readable, except as an uncanny feeling that there might, in fact, be something where there appears to be nothing. The sign of the angel, on the other hand, is a present absence, what Hannah Arendt in her writings on imagination and judgment calls “the nonappearance in the appearances” (80). As with the stories of angels appearing to humans in disguise as humans (“for some have thereby entertained angels

⁴⁹ See both of their books by the same title: *The American Sublime*.

unawares” - and this includes Satan in disguise as the snake), the sensible contains within it something that goes beyond sensibility; the invisible is perceptible through the opacity of the visible. (The 1998 travelling exhibit of angel art from the Vatican, touring under the catchy title “The Invisible Made Visible,” gets this wrong, I think. It is ghosts who are hungry to be made visible. Angels, according to the encounter books, are “shy,” not the least perhaps because they represent something antithetical to visibility. In their capacity as messengers and willing servants they rather make *something else* visible, something immaterial about the human and human life, instead of simply their own being.) If as spirits both angels and ghosts rely on a sensibility of “something more,” this something represents in each case a different kind of reality. In the case of ghosts that reality, now whited out of appearance, is a sensory-defined one - something definite beneath an unstable surface that already feels unreal. In the case of angels we find a surface stability - the everyday - yielding an extraordinary intelligence whose reality - the reality of a sublime nonappearance - illumines appearance from within.

The difference between angels and ghosts, as we see it through their different manipulations of the figure of the book, describes why angelic narrative in particular begs allegorical reading. The ghostly, as indicated in Gates’s use of the term “trope” to describe the talking book, is essentially a metaphorical representation of the sublime. The figure of speech and the figure of the unknown go together; as the substitution of one type of representation for another, metaphor in its definition suggests a ghostly presence.⁵⁰ This is particularly evident if

⁵⁰ The substitution of presence for absence also suggests a teleology of redemption. As Paul de Man argues, the very action of troping follows a redemptive logic, involving the restoration of life from death, of innocence out of experience. He identifies what he calls “tropological chains” as a gesture toward infinitude, traveling from particulars - “individual sensations” - to “infinite generalities” (of which death is perhaps the most infinite as well as the most general) in his analysis of Baudelaire and Kleist’s *Marionettentheater*. This is not too far afield from Erich Auerbach’s conception of the figura as a prophetic system of interpretation invoking a narrative of fulfillment in which the figura “shadows forth” events and meanings to come. Significantly, a great number of quotations he uses to illustrate this (mostly from classical Christian writers like Tertullian) use the word “shadow” to express this figural movement. The figura’s prophetic genealogy and the trope’s travel narrative serve to produce, accentuate,

we return to the literature on that great zone of the imagination, the sublime. In her analysis of the sublime, Arensberg sees metaphor as inheriting the problem of the absence of meaning as it was articulated by Longinus. She argues that since it is predicated on the collapse of direct referentiality later articulated in poststructuralism, metaphor is capable of grasping the affective ghosting of the subject that pervades American poetry.⁵¹ Metaphor (and Lewis says similar things about symbolism) reaches from the image toward infinity, posing the image as a shade of this universal reality, redeeming it through that reality. Angelic allegory, on the other hand, reduces infinity to the image, and in so illuminating it allows it to speak *with* the infinite, presents it as the revelation that is the talking book. As we shall see, this is a different attitude toward the status and problem of civilization. As revelation, rather than suppression, the book turns its face from the ghostly past towards the direction of the angelic message – the future.

In contemporary culture, both high and low brow, the story of angels and their books is intimately tied to the stories of humans and their cars. The idea of the the book as a certain kind of intelligence, contemplative, historical, and global, directly clarifies what it is the angel brings to the human experience of driving and the idea of the car as a certain kind of decision-making,

and glorify “the idea of innocence recovered at the far side and by way of experience, of paradise consciously regained after the fall” (De Man, 267). The concept, essentially, recovers individual losses through its infinity. This is a theory of meaning-production in which meaning seems almost to crawl through literal gaps and pitfalls to resurface in the more buoyant air of figuration, finally hailed as a spiritual and universal if not densely concrete and particular presence.

⁵¹ This dynamic appears earlier in British romantic poetry, perhaps the primary progenitor of American Transcendentalist writing. Thomas Weiskel, in describing the romantic sublime as an encounter with a self-conscious modernity, also begins his book *The Romantic Sublime* with recourse to metaphor, this time as the essential principle of a *sublimation*. (This is perhaps an echo of Harold Bloom’s “antithetical” reading of a Freudian sublime which is itself highly dependent on metaphorical substitutions). As Weiskel explains it, the “stunning metaphor” of sublime action arrived in the wake of the historical withdrawal of God to offer a way of reading, a “compromise between old and new,” that at once compensated for this loss and legitimized its experience. “The affective aggrandizement of the sublime moment supports an illusion, a metaphorical union with the creator which suppresses the inferiority of our status as listeners. [. . .] By some such illusion of joining with the creator, we read and learn to think. *Sublime* is one of those terms like *inspiration*, *vision*, *apocalypse*, *imagination*, the *daemonic* - and, of course, *transcendence* - whose continual sublimation into metaphor makes thought possible by enabling us to grasp experience in terms sanctioned by the past - the essential critical gesture, already sophisticated in antiquity” (2).

vigilant, quotidian, and personal. In pairing the two visually you see an allegory of the angelic message: the communication of the timeless beyond to the temporal here and now, the immortalization of the individual, and the process of judgment whereby particularities are grasped as a whole. This pairing appears arrestingly on screen. In a number of angel films, for instance, the only time the angels ever appear *in* cars they are also accompanied by a book. In *Michael*, the angel in the back of the station wagon reads from a tourist book featuring all the local Midwestern pilgrimage sites for various world records (the world's largest ball of twine, the world's largest frying pan). The humans up front ignore him, and when they refuse to take a detour for one of these world-historical sites, Michael makes the car break down. These breakdowns, of course, lead them closer to their destiny, which is closer to each other. Wim Wenders's 1988 *Wings of Desire* (original German title *Der Himmel Uber Berlin*, the sky or heavens over Berlin) also uses the concatenation of cars and books to introduce the idea of unrecognized notability, as *Michael* does in invoking the genre of Ripley's Believe It Or Not and the Guinness Book of World Records – two texts premised on the idea that nowhere'sville mundanity can produce exceptionality, like George Bailey in Bedford Falls. (Appropriately, another angelic narrative of the naïve extraordinary occurs in Mark Twain's *Report from Paradise*, in which we're told that one of the greatest celebrations in heaven occurred upon the arrival of an unknown, uneducated, poverty-stricken poet from Kentucky, who was hailed with greater fanfare than most saints.)

Wenders's treatment of angels, cars, and books is extraordinarily dense and rich, and demands a slow analysis. In *Wings of Desire* there are two scenes with angels in cars.⁵² The first takes place in a car showroom, somewhere in Berlin. The two angels, Damiel and Cassiel,

are sitting in a convertible going over the day's events. The scene begins with a long circling pan of the angels (including a brilliant reflection of the BMW insignia on a hubcap in the window) Cassiel, the angel who in this film remains in the cerebral, angelic world order of colorless perception, reads from his book the data of the day. He begins with the times of sunrise and sunset, moonrise and moonset, and the water levels, and then moves on to events that had occurred throughout history on that day: "20 years ago today a Soviet jet fighter crashed into the lake at Spandau. Fifty years ago there were" - and Daniel answers for him, "the Olympic Games." "200 years ago, Blanchard flew over the city in a balloon." Daniel, the angel of the contemporary with a sensibility for human feeling, adds, "Like the fugitives the other day." In the middle of Cassiel's registry of collective memory, Daniel points out a couple kissing passionately through the showroom window. Instantly overlapping this, the list changes. Cassiel names a different kind of event: "And today on the Lilienthaler Chausee, a man, walking, slowed down, and looked over his shoulder into space." Daniel then reads from his own list - a man who before he kills himself sends off letters with rare postage stamps, a woman who closes her umbrella in the middle of the rain. The angels are now speaking in scenes, in living snapshot moments of individual contemplation ("staring over his shoulder into space") and intention. As Daniel and Cassiel compare notes they become enchanted by this process of naming the formlessness, of selecting experience aesthetically. Sitting in the BMW showroom, in the middle of German civilization's glistening self-advertisement, they end up discussing their own desire for human experience - "to be alone, to remain serious, to be a savage." Here the film takes Benjamin's famous observation, that "every document of civilization is at the same time a document of barbarism" to a wistful and even hopeful place. Civilization, allegorized by the

⁵² Immediately prior to the first scene we see the angel Daniel in an ambulance with his hand on a pregnant woman's belly as she struggles in the middle of labor. The crisis-mobile is not quite the same thing as a car,

angelic records and recordings, ultimately produces within itself the desire for savagery, for physical sensation untouched by ideas and motion determined by the isolated individual. The task of the angel of history is not just to record and name history, but to show how historical perception inevitably valorizes and returns to pre-historical experience.

The second scene takes the angel into the moving vehicle. Cassiel sits observing and recording the thoughts of an anonymous driver, who is meditating on “statelessness” as a feature of modern life. Sitting in an antique car about to be used in a film about wartime Berlin starring Columbo, the angel finds himself in the heart of the city, in its archives and testimonies, memories and perceptions. Cassiel is no longer reading from an already made record, but actually recording what the man is saying into his book. His hands glow as he writes.

Every home owner, or even every tenant, nails his name plate on the door, like a coat of arms, and studies the morning paper as if he were a world leader. Germany has crumbled into as many small states as there are individuals. And these small states are mobile. Everyone carries his own state with him, and demands a toll when another wants to enter: [at this point we cut to the angel writing, his hands illuminated and illuminating] a fly caught in amber, or a leather bottle. So much for the border. But one can only enter each state with a password. The German soul of today can only be conquered and governed by one who arrives at each small state with the password. Fortunately, no one is currently in a position to do this. So everyone migrates, and waves his one-man-state flag in all earthly directions.

This scene shows some of *Wings of Desire*'s most celebrated techniques – in particular the use of actual pre-war film footage, which then cuts to the modern-day cuts of cars passing on the gritty streets. What is interesting here is the fact that the revelation comes from the driver, not the angel, who simply sits passively by (though he has chosen to enter this car based on hearing the previous part of the man's monologue, already selecting the car he is going to occupy and the voice he is going to listen to and record). The global perspective, evident in the speaker's musings on the current state of radical singularity as a potential terrain of totalitarianism, is highlighted, rather than articulated, by the writing presence of the angel. Angelic illumination chooses its human prophets to deliver the divine message. In this image of prophecy and its confirmation the film emphasizes the revelatory relation between human reflection and angelic memory. The man's thoughts as he drives through his city are fleeting, like his motion, dependent on angelic textualization for their historic resonance. In this way the book is presented to us, the human, as witness – naming (as Clarence does the wonder of George's life) what we already know.

The work the angelic book performs of inscribing the invisible into visibility pertains especially to those films whose angels are themselves already visible within the diegetic world – visible to the characters, not just the audience (as is the case with *Wings of Desire* and its unhappy remake, *City of Angels*). The matter of angels' visibility becomes a question of their belief - as it does for George Bailey and the encounter story heroes. To believe in angels is to believe in our own sanctification and inscription in the future, to believe, essentially, in our own immortality. What is significant in this belief, then, is not the existence of the angel *per se*, but what that existence affirms. The annunciation after all testifies to an earthly glory, to the presence of divinity in this world, and to the seeds of the future in the present. These

affirmations are dramatized in the great pair of angel films where the issue of belief in the angel marks the point of the annunciation - *The Bishop's Wife*, made a year after Capra's film, and its remake *The Preacher's Wife*, made the same year as *Michael*. Both deal with some of the same issues as *Wings of Desire* – a culture and a civilization uncertain of its direction and the means of evaluating it, which is to say, of being able to exert power within it. Though the first is arguably the better movie, the one I want to focus on (and what I want to close this chapter with) is the second, not the least because it also offers an interesting treatment of angels, books, and cars.

Directed by Penny Marshall, *The Preacher's Wife* tells the story of a good-looking angel who comes to earth to help a cash-strapped minister and ends up falling in love with his wife. Whitney Houston and Denzel Washington decided to work on *The Preacher's Wife* in order to promote solidarity among black Americans and to raise consciousness among the non-black community. At the time the most expensive “black film” ever made, the movie's producers hoped to break the crossover divide by releasing this feel-good remake of a white film during the Christmas season. The project didn't work on those terms, though there have been efforts in recent years to revive it for the mass American audience during the holiday TV season. One reason may be the film's possible lack of interest in universalist claims, or the difficulty even now of depicting broad social reality through a minority community, with a few token white actors. In either case, the movie generalizes through emotional rather than cosmopolitan conventions. The original followed the story of a bishop desperate for a new cathedral, but who learns instead that in tough times money is better spent on the social good; by contrast the remake focuses on the good of the *locality*. Gregory Hines is a greedy developer who wants to move his old neighborhood church to a planned community in the suburbs. Courtney B. Vance, the church's preacher, frustrated by his own ineffectuality and the recent combustion of the

church boiler, prays for help. Help arrives in the form of a debonair angel played by Washington, but Vance has lost so much faith that he refuses to believe in him. As Clarence does with George Bailey, the angel Dudley's major struggle with preacher Henry Biggs is to effect this belief, to persuade him of his reality as an angel. The tension between the jaundiced Vance and the bubbly Washington – enthused finally to be back on earth – beautifully understates this struggle. This tension comes to its initial head when Dudley accosts Henry at a despondent moment: after a tiring day marked by lack of agency, the station wagon won't start, so Henry asks the Lord for a little help. Dudley arrives and – though Henry of course refuses to credit him – the car starts.

The car scene incorporates contemporary angelic lore by beginning with a broken down car resuscitated by angelic presence. (And broken-down machines run throughout this film, including a coffee pot as well as the boiler and the station wagon. The only machine that works, significantly, is the television). But the angel does more than start the broken-down vehicle. As the pair sputter past the chintzy storefronts and one-night cheap hotels they engage in a contest over rules, from the preacher's "don't draw on the window" and "seatbelt please" to Dudley's angel handbook. These rules embody different approaches to the question of how to move forward, or rather, their difference poses the question, what does it mean to move forward? The angel's role is to demonstrate for Henry a way of reading progress for the community other than through urban planning and the destruction of the old. Dudley does this quite literally *by* reading as they move forward in the car. As in Wenders's film, when the car is still, the angelic book reveals; when the car is moving, it records, Cassiel's hands glowing with illuminating power. In Marshall's fantasy, the book claims the power to guide. Its illumination in turn is confirmed by Dudley's enchanting handshake at the scene's end. "Feel it? Kind of like springtime and Mom's

home cooking rolled into one?”⁵³ In the event when physical mobility fails, so this scene tells us, angels serve to articulate the possibility of mobility at the level of theory and ideas.

Dudley’s day comes, and he earns his wings in Henry’s belief, but also Henry’s forgetting. The day of the Christmas sermon arrives, a sermon which will announce that the church is going to be destroyed, taken over by the real estate developer, and moved to the suburbs. The speech is prewritten, and going to be televised. Appropriately it is the assimilation of the church to TV that will signal its consent to the isolating social structures of commercialism, modernization, and “progress” (and this is its purpose, since Hines has arranged the event). But on the opening day the preacher, reading from the teleprompter, falters: “Christmas is supposed to be the most joyous day of the year, but for St. Matthews, today. . . St. Matts. . . today is supposed to be. . .” We cut to the angel watching him from the back of the church, almost as if to remind us that television is about performance as much as script and that it is, from the point of view of the spectator, not just a rational but an imaginative occasion. Henry looks to the side, and begins again. “Beloved, God never promised us a perfect life. He’s saving that for the hereafter. While we’re here on this earth, sometimes we just have to work for it.” The manager for WRKL runs out, in a crisis, high-heeled boots flopping, to the TV van waiting outside. “I don’t know what to do - he’s not following the script!” Meanwhile, Henry invokes the power of allegory to describe this “work.” “But the good news is that he gave us two secret weapons to help us to succeed: Hope,” “Hope,” the congregation echoes, “and Love.” “Love.” . . . And in Love, also “Forgiveness.” At this moment Henry looks at Dudley, who has fallen in love with his wife (Houston) and Dudley looks back in acceptance and as witness of his

⁵³ Interestingly *Michael* uses similar imagery, though it makes much more of it. To every woman who passes Michael smells like something warm and sweet and familiar, something “from childhood,” until finally Andie MacDowell exclaims, “It’s cookies! He smells like cookies!” Released the same year, it’s unclear whether one film

forgiving. He exits the church as Henry delivers an apology/paeon to his wife and acknowledges finally the lesson that has been Dudley's "work," the recognition that we take those we love for granted. "Look in wonder at those you love, for they are the face of God." As we see Dudley now alone and outside, walking down the steps, the preacher's old fire returns, as if the angel was a castrating presence from which he was now freed. And now he unveils the real secret weapon we have when "the path is dark and the road bends," and offers to his flock almost an exact repetition of what Dudley had told him in the car. "You see, He's - " Henry looks up and almost whistles, "He's got these angels, waiting in this loooooong line, for the chance to come down and help each and every one of us." We cut to Dudley raising his hands in victory and saying "Yes!" over the preacher's voice, "And they do!" The sermon continues on the momentum it has built, declaring blessedness, agency, the power to save the church and begin again, and the power to go forward "into the new days ahead."

The Clintonian tinge of the last line is merely a flourish; the crux of the speech happens when the preacher sings the existence of angels as the source of power for the principles of hope and love that guide us into possibility, and with which we struggle. He segues into the idea of angels by testifying to the power of angels in his life, as the personal blessing of God, at the moment that Dudley is exiting the church. Yet it is a fiction. For this is also the moment that rule number three (the final rule) in the angel handbook comes into play: "When I'm gone, you'll have no memory of me."⁵⁴ At the same instant that Henry declares the existence of angels and their influence in his life, he has lost all recollection that Dudley was ever there. (The same pertains to the bishop in *The Bishop's Wife*, who in the midst of his Christmas sermon – also breaking from the book at Dudley's inspiration – acknowledges angels at the moment when he

was borrowing from the other (and they were made by different production companies) or whether they both came to the same purpose of conveying angelic grace through like conventions of appetite and nostalgia.

forgets *his* angel). In forgetting his rules, he paradoxically follows them. The pouring out of the spirit performed also by the crowd in *It's a Wonderful Life* displays itself in this forgetting, just as the preacher “forgets” the script set up in supertitles before him. Benediction only comes in the angel’s absence - whether literally, as when Clarence appears solely through his metonym *Tom Sawyer*, or psychologically, as at the end of *The Preacher's Wife* when the congregation pours out of the church and Dudley waves to the family, now a stranger to all except the children (similarly, in *Wings of Desire*, only the children can see the angels). In a poetic inversion, by the end of Capra’s film Clarence has become “an” angel (“Look Daddy! Teacher says every time a bell rings. . .”), himself anonymous (the “dear friend” who gives George his book) at the end as George had become in the middle. Just as Clarence’s distinctly odd body has disappeared into generalized annunciatory status, so does the charismatic Dudley retreat into an almost bodiless apprehension. We watch Denzel Washington watching, set apart in his grey polished overcoat – an exalted and consecrating isolation that echoes his role as the Prince in Branagh’s *Much Ado About Nothing*. So the guardians of memory show that forgetting is necessary in order to move forward, and that memory is always also a departure.

This is where the story of cars, books, and angels has brought us. An allegory of transience and immortality, the story of movement interrupted in crisis, resumed in judgment, and guarded in text tells us something about the kind of audience angel and human make for each other. As recorder, the angel textualizes human experience, fixing its images within a conceptual order that erases the means of its own translation in order to remember itself. The human, unable to intelligize its own power, receives the angel as a locomotive force and agent of its progress. To give audience to the angel is to step briefly across the threshold of *aevum*, into the sphere of existential being as blessing and time as luminous continuity. This is the instant of

⁵⁴ When Dudley tells him this in the car, Henry responds, “That’s my favorite part!”

prophetic calling and impregnation, of a radical beginning to which the future must always return, and whose future is its own revelation. To receive the angel as audience, on the other hand, is to assume a priestly authority that calls the image of the angel before it as witness of its truth and power to determine truth, to name and to decide. The future appears as a chosen eternity which time crosses into via the angelic invocation. Thus the allegory goes both ways – into the dual imaginaries of memory and possibility, which the angelic image renders scenic and immediate. Only when he attains the force of *idea*, general and invisible, shining through and illuminating the human particularities, does the angel finally get his wings.

3. Everyman's an Angel

"Could it be. . . Satan?"

- Dana Carvey as "Saturday Night Live"'s Church Lady

"O father, . . .

*Hast thou forgot me then, and do I seem
Now in thine eye so foul, once deemed so fair
In heav'n, when at th'assembly, and in sight
Of all the Seraphim with thee combined
In bold conspiracy against heav'n's King,
All on a sudden miserable pain
Surprised thee, dim thine eyes, and dizzy swum
In darkness, while thy head flames thick and fast
Threw forth, till on the left side op'ning wide,
Likest to thee in shape and count'nance bright,
Then shining heav'nly fair, a goddess armed
Out of thy head I sprung: amazement seized
All th' host of heav'n; back they recoiled afraid
At first, and called me Sin, and for a sign
Portentous held me; but familiar grown,
I pleased, and with attractive graces won
The most averse, thee chiefly, who full oft
Thyself in me thy perfect image viewing
Becam'st enamored. . ."*

- John Milton *Paradise Lost* (II, 727; 747-765)

In 1992 Ballantine's publication of Alma Daniel's, Timothy Wylie's, and Andrew Ramer's *Ask Your Angels: A practical guide to working with the messengers of heaven to empower and enrich your life* officially inaugurated the recent publishing trend of angel self-help books. These books evolved naturally out of the tales of angel encounter; with so many reporting angelic communications, it was almost a matter of etiquette to expand their availability beyond the contingencies of time and place. In fact it seemed that contingency - and its sublime voices - could be more effectively universalized if only one moved them inward. Since the

encounter narratives had already valorized the capacity of the “recipient” to be moved by contact with one’s supernatural familiar, perhaps this capacity itself could become the basis of a more ecumenical angelism.

The generic parthenogenesis was easy: automotive contact blended seamlessly with auto-conversation, that meditative brand of “talking with” your guardian angel so enticing to the new genre’s readership. Little hybrid books of angel encounters now added sections about how to initiate and sustain your own contact with angels. Major angel authors like Terry Lynn Taylor and Eileen Elias Freeman shifted their angelic typologies from instantiated companionship to cultivated friendship (Freeman’s *Angel Healing: Working with Angels to Heal Your Life* took up the baton from her inaugural book *Touched by Angels: True Cases of Close Encounters of the Celestial Kind*, published two years earlier). And best of all, this new, intentional form of angel experience could be done in the comfort of your own home, without exposing oneself to the dangers and obstacles of highway driving.

Above all, both genres picked up on the angelic figure as a means of representing the experience of crisis in late twentieth century America. The first dramatized the story of judgment (from which crisis originally gets its name); in the scenario of automotive breakdown we follow the transformation of annihilating anxiety and paralysis to elevating states of contemplation and reflection via the call of the angel as pure beginning. In the second genre, the crisis becomes a psychological, rather than a narrative, one: a drama of decision-making – of integrating both passive and active modes of relating to our environments – precipitated by a conflict *within* the self, instead of between the self and the external world. Two opposing processes of imagination hold battle: reception versus projection. In this dilemma of creation

and origination the angelic call appears subjectively, a beginning (or capacity for beginning) built into the structure of the psyche itself.

The difference is important. The vision of the encounter stories was cosmological: two worlds distinguished by their modalities of time – the time of appearances and the time of ideas – mediated by the angel. The self-help books, in imagining this binary within the domain of the individual psyche, produced a very different story. Their story frames the angelic call as something that can be petitioned by the human. Grace and chosenness no longer drop from heaven as an expression of an individual's prophetic status in the world. Instead, the self-help books take this chosenness and offer to make it widespread. They take a moment of mystery and devise a way to make it everyday life, take an outside encounter and make it the highest expression of internality. They do this by defining angelic grace as an aspect of human psychology, an already-endowed gift of human existence, waiting only to be actualized by the mind's eye as it looks deep within.

No longer an annunciation of the self by an external power, angelic communication appears as the inward turning of the mind and its decisive faculties in order to – paradoxically – induce grace. The change is palpable at the level of ideas as well as images. In psychologizing the relationship between the angelic and the human the self-help books rely on and demand a different theory of reality. The duality of worlds and temporalities in the true stories about angels emerges as a duality of substance in the self-help books: an idealist distinction between matter and spirit oriented toward the problem of unity rather than the problem of action.⁵⁵ In a situation of internal rivenness, of conflict within the self, of *inner crisis*, resolution must summon an agent of wholeness. Angelic conversation is this unity's rainbow. Starting where the true

encounter stories left off – with the experience of an intense interiority and self-awareness, these guides to talking to angels broach our own self-consciousness as the principle of the unified self. In this practice we perceive what we are and what we think as one. It is a perfect, divine intuition, this auto-conversation. And it settles the dispute between rival forms of imagination. Establishing angelic communication as the road to self-help, the how-to-talk-to-your-guardian-angel books glorify our capacity to receive information from within as the true means of achieving wholeness and realizing the self. Reception beats out projection as the basis of the individual's coming-into-power.

The angels in these two types of books are for this reason not the same. Though they have messages to deliver, the new inward angels are not messenger angels in the sense of the true encounter stories. They are closer to us than that. In them our imaginative experience has moved from sense-impression to pure form, from physical apprehension to mental perception. This makes them subject to our power, accessible to our concentration, answerable to our call. And as the agency for contact shifts from the angel to the human, so does the message shift from revelation to intuition. Now *we* are the message-bearers, the messengers themselves merely respondents. Partners in a dialogue of the mind, angels may become our “best friends.” They can be domesticated in this way because they are seen to express the divinity that inherently permeates every human soul – a divinity that is familiar, personal, and essential. As Ginsberg writes in the “Footnote to Howl,” personal divinity is populist: “Everyman’s an angel.” In cultivating this expression, the angelic manifestation of the divine self, we overcome our awe of angels as the occasional irruption of the inhuman, unassimilable to human reason and understanding. In a sense, we have taken on their role. We have become angels; the angels

⁵⁵ In many ways the problem of unity is where the problem of action leads – if one understands action as depending on a coherent self whose judgments are traceable to a central, defining and essential power. As this chapter will

themselves, merely our reflections. In them we see our perfection and our power. In them we “visualize” our minds as autonomous beings, without history or physical knowledge, only pure, intuitive knowing to which reality appears as clear and distinct: immediate, coherent, and self-evident.

Fundamentally an angel of the concept, then, the self-help angel is minister and emblem of the mind and its mastery, fulfilling the idea of judgment’s completion in Kant’s *Critique* of the representation of the imagination *to itself*. Where in the first chapter such a representation took the form of address - the annunciating utterance, the book, and the divinely inspired oration - here it is an abstract reflection wholly within the realm of thought. The angel comes back to us as the personification of an idea, what A.D. Nuttall in his book *Two Concepts of Allegory* refers to as “nonspecific imagery,” the “instantially viewed universal.”⁵⁶ Where the roadside angels of the encounter books were anonymous and relentlessly typical, the self-help angels have universal names they acquire through our meditatively induced conversations with them, abstract qualities we attend to as a means of effecting change.

Something happens, at this point, where the angels we think begin to define the process of thinking them. As allegorical specimens extraordinaire, angels – global and general yet targeted and precise – themselves emblemize a way of thinking typical of the spiritual self-help genre. The personal divine, ecumenical and conceptual, seeks the angel as the reflection of its own species of reflection. This is especially true of reading practices within the genre. When

explain later, this power in contemporary pop psychology as well as other discourses is understood to be the soul.

⁵⁶ Nuttall defines the latter as the objectification of a universal idea, when thought of as an instance of itself, an argument central to his definition of allegory. It is not a tautology so much as a way to acknowledge how the representation of an abstract noun becomes concrete through its own adjectival forms, so that Beauty is beautiful, Avarice avaricious, etc. In other words, allegory is that special means of representing metaphysical reality, a difficult and potentially contradictory idea that I engage later in this chapter in a discussion of angels as spiritual substances. The phrase “unspecified images,” or “non-specific imagery,” builds on this idea in terms of the artwork. This refers to a pictorial image that is of necessity definite (and I think the same could be said for words), yet aspires

they are positioned in reference to visual imagining (as they do in allegorical thought), words exert a particular self-reflexive quality. In allegorical language ideas appear as instances of themselves, to borrow Nuttall's terminology. In it they view their perfect image, to borrow Milton's. This trait of allegorical representation is necessary for the angel self-help books, because the experience of these books *is* the experience of ideas. Where the self conceives itself spiritually as a separated mind, self-teaching, self-sustaining, and transcendent, thinking and experiencing become conflated - each functioning as the highest definition of the other. With this move the essential object of experience becomes the idea, the abstraction, the personified concept. So it is that angels, who as messengers or annunciators initiate events but do not themselves receive them, typify just this idea of static experience, the experience of being and existence rather than of happenings, ruptures or changes, that the self-help books promise. In making contact with their angels the readers make contact with angelic rationalism: the experience of a universe where the unchanging and the typical are operative forces, where the unchanging and typical are in fact the only operative forces, because only they have the power to name reality. In such a universe the search for self-help requires an aid beyond that which the individual, weakly specific and concrete, can give herself.

If we would help ourselves, we must become our own angels.⁵⁷ This is the premise of the genre, and the guiding principle of its pages. Asked to "cultivate the qualities of the divine," the reader approaches the path of self-regeneration by mimicking the qualities of those beings whose conversation he seeks to activate. The conversation itself serves as a vehicle for such mimicry;

to be "typical rather than individual" (73). It aims to be, rather than to mean, to be identifiable without corresponding to any one actual thing. As Nuttall makes clear, this is essentially a Platonic project.

⁵⁷ Doreen Virtue, Ph.D.'s *Angel Therapy* tells us, "You are indeed an earthly angel sent here by God to perform miraculous deeds of love and sharing" (xiv). And the title of Dana Reynolds' and Karen Blessen's book of spiritual wisdom clarifies the connection between using your angels and becoming one: *Be An Angel: Heavenly Hints for Angelic Acts from Your Guardian Spirits*.

in receiving the angels we receive our angelic selves. These selves are knowable perhaps less for what they are than for what they do. They exert a particular kind of power - the power of thought as the power of creation - premised on a rationalist idealism. The image popular in many of these books of guardian angels making deals on our behalf with the guardian angels of others might serve as an allegory of this idealism. It is the mind communicating with its own image that makes things happen, not people communicating with each other. Platonic dualism is at home in this thinking. Separated sharply from one another, mental and physical worlds are no longer mutually accountable. The first appears as a self-determining, self-justifying arena in which idea and object are in perfect conformity with each other; the second merely appears. The physical world is the shadow, the projection of ideas as appearance, and hence as illusion and deception. This is indeed the main thrust of the books, to understand as illusion any phenomenon that cannot be immediately intuited. Since the only phenomena that *can* be intuited are internal to the self - our thoughts, the ideas by which we think them, and above all our own existence as thinking subjects - this means that anything that does not belong to the “percipient” *as percipient* is potentially regardable as “false.”⁵⁸ In other words, if a thing is not angelic, then it must be the dual opposite.

In self-help angelism the revelation of the demon is inevitable. Where the mind conceives itself as separated from experience the possibility of projection arises, and with it, the agent of deception. Doubt strikes at the angelized soul. What if these messages are not, in fact, angelic, these intuitions not given but made? Manufactured? Fabricated? What if the machinery of the mind produced its own memories and visions, at will? For indeed, what power

⁵⁸ “Percipient” is the books’ term of choice to designate the reading angel-talker. The word suggests a smooth transition from receiving (“recipient,” the more common word, is evoked here) and acting. The passive reception of intelligence is reconceived as active perception, just as chatting with angels, a process these books celebrate as inherently “intuitive” and ultimately “automatic,” is adapted within the active discourse of self-help.

distinguishes the reception of truth from the projection of belief? These questions arise necessarily at the cusp of the angelic conversation. At the same time that the platonic subject claims her own autonomy by regarding her mind as an independent force and her world as subject to it, at the instant that awareness of perception transcends the organs of perception, one glimpses a spirit of a different sort. For, in the margins and slinking between the lines, we find the true angelic spirit of spiritualist self-help is a fallen one. He appears wherever the human becomes angel – as the evil genius threatening the sanctity of Descartes’s *cogito*, as the howl of the Beats’ beatification, as the precarious depths lying in wait underneath our own pure reflection. Like Milton’s Eve we discover in the self-contemplating self-image the threat of narcissism, false projection, and *pride*. The angel Satan is the special guardian of this cognitivist dilemma. Shadowing our own self-attention, the demon of rationalism asserts his presence as a symbol of our inner crisis – whispering in our ear the presence of a profound split at the base of the angelic psyche, suggesting that in fact active and passive are not one in us, prodding us to keep searching for the actualized self.

A lost battalion of platonic conversationalists

The Prologue to *Ask Your Angels* begins with two stories of near-death on the highway. Though each story eventually names the person this happened to, they begin in the second-person. “You are driving on the interstate across the great southwestern desert.” “You’re traveling in your station wagon with a friend beside you.” As a book of instruction rather than nonfiction narrative, *Ask Your Angels* speaks to collective personhood. The authors change the original first-person voice of the encounter stories to the second-person, making the reader participant rather than voyeur. They rehearse the encounter master narrative in order to establish

for the reader the reality of the stories, the fact of the marvelous in the lives of individuals. This move acts as both authorization and definition: angels exist as personal visitants. But the use of direct address alters the realism of this claim – it is not the historical occurrence of angelic annunciation that matters, but its universal possibility, not the physical event, but its presence in the imagination. Built into the structure of the individual, angels arrive when we claim our divine inheritance.

And in fact, it quickly becomes clear that once recalled and reframed, the true encounter stories have no further use in the self-help books. The opening of *Ask Your Angels* is a case in point; within a page the objective shifts:

Angels don't only show up in life-threatening situations. They're with us all the time. Polly saw an angel in her kitchen, on a sunny afternoon when she was baking cookies for her kids. And Ben's been talking to angels since his grandmother first told him about them in 1957. Perhaps when you were young, you were in touch with your invisible friends but weren't believed and learned to keep silent after that – and forgot. Almost everyone has had a mysterious, unexplained occurrence in his life. Your story may not be as dramatic as the first three examples we've given. Or you may not even think you have a story. But the angels come into our lives in different ways. If you've picked up this book, the angels have already touched you. And this is the beginning of your story.

(2)

The angelic authors address the reader as the child she once was, and invite her to begin where she left off. They invoke the charmed past of the reader's childhood as a way to include her in the community of the chosen, of those who have angel stories, like the imaginary events children construct. This idea of origin appears once, the echo of memory, uncontrolled and forgotten, that will prove the inspiration for something beyond memory: the intentional cultivation of a language and perception that transcends sense-impressions.⁵⁹ For this reason the status of the memory as fantasy or actual event is irrelevant; what matters is that we recollect it as something lost to mind, an absent presence at the core of our personal history. For at the base of the angelic conversation one finds a forgottenness – a recovered memory (though not traumatic, and not positively existing) that acts as a portal to a different order of experience. The angelic remembrance is necessarily incomplete, suggesting a powerful invisibility – a felt but unapparent motion, the moment of silence in the middle of conversation that inspires the saying “an angel passes overhead” (in French “un ange passe”). In breaking the silence to say “an angel passes” we offer the unspoken its image and its own voice, give a nod to the fleeting presence of supernal interiority.⁶⁰ It is this fleetingness that the self-help books attempt to rationalize and

⁵⁹ Later in the book childhood will resurface as a divinatory grounding for the angelic journey in the story of Connie, who was persuaded to participate in the Angel Invocation chant because it echoed her experience “when she was small” of belonging to a church where people spoke in tongues. “The sounds of this chant brought her back to some of those happy moments in her childhood, when she knew that angels were real” (157). Childhood memory also opens Kim O'Neill's *How to Talk With Your Angels*: The very first paragraph begins, “From my earliest childhood recollections I can vividly remember the presence of special, unseen companions who talked with me, played with me, guided me, comforted me, and protected me. As a child, I fully accepted and believed in the reality of their existence” (3). Here the memory is fully in view – but only as testimony establishing O'Neill's narrative authority. In order to universalize the experience, Daniels et al rely on the possibility of forgetting as a form of inclusion, one which is also more powerful imaginatively, more magical, in grounding metaphysical reality in an experience perceptible to intuition but evanescent to recollection.

⁶⁰ In his book *An Angel Passes* Stuart Schneiderman takes, as I do, the angel on principle as tied to a theory of language. He is particularly interested in the means by which language makes an ‘effect,’ writing of the angel in relation to this, “Perhaps the agent is simply the invisible insensible meaning – to the extent that it is visualized” (179). As I argued in the first chapter, the angel is this visualization, the power of the imagination to render our apprehension of power, which is always itself an invisibility, however it may manifest itself.

make contractual, this forgetting that they seek to sublimate. Our mission, should we choose to accept it, is the recovery of the angel at the core of the self.

The year the angel self-help books began to surface was marked in the publishing industry by two other events. In 1992 Thomas Moore's *Care of the Soul* made its debut, and the recovery genre, which had previously dominated the self-help market, began to lose ground to a new trend of books more directly oriented toward "spirituality." A 1994 *Publisher's Weekly* article quotes Stuart Matlin, the president of Jewish Lights press, to date this change. "Two years ago, bookstores cut back on recovery titles, partly because of the expectation that the recovery trend was about to end" (McCullough 43). The publication in 1992 of books like Charlotte Davis Kasl's *Many Roads, One Journey: Moving Beyond the Twelve Steps* and Lynn Grabhorn's *Beyond the Twelve Steps: Roadmap to a New Life* (reissued in 2001) may have contributed to this expectation. Wendy Kaminer's hard-hitting critique of the self-help genre in general and the recovery movement in particular also appeared in 1992. Her basic argument, that the recovery movement infantilizes its practitioners, is almost cagily anticipated and defended by Charles Allen in *Powerless but Not Helpless: Working the 12 Steps with Our Everyday Problems*, published in the same year. His book is now out of print. At the time, many publishers suggested that the spirituality trend was simply a dialectical continuation of the Twelve-Step genre, starting at the Eleventh Step, "conscious contact with God or a higher power" (Cheryl Woodruff, senior editor at Ballantine Books - perhaps the most successful publisher of both the angel encounter and angel self-help books, in McCullough 42).⁶¹

⁶¹ Though the connections between the recovery and the spirituality movements are compelling as explanations of the 1980's - 1990's shift in marketing and demand, their psychology of self-improvement is radically different. To begin with, recovery is a decidedly Manichaeian formation. Based on a pathology-cure model, its main focus is how to deal with the presence of past trauma. In general, these books imagine this trauma as a warring or hungry self within, and the subject's various problems and dysfunctions as symptoms of this primitive inner force constantly sabotaging the adult's potential for happiness. The recovery of self from this agent of malicious power requires a difficult and conflict-laden exorcism. Such accounts of a "two substances" psychology are specifically countered,

Consequently, natural progress on the journey manifested itself as “an increased emphasis on soul issues as the major trend in the post-recovery market” (41). The increase was meteoric. *Care of the Soul* was soon followed by *Soul Mates* (1994) and a soul-industry all to itself, the grass-roots bestseller, Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen’s *Chicken Soup for the Soul* (1993). Since then Canfield and Hansen’s classic has hatched over thirty specialized offspring, qualifying the various souls in the world from the teenage soul to the preteen soul, the mother’s soul to the expectant mother’s soul, the cat and dog lover’s soul, the country soul, the single’s soul, etc. (Among self-help books, sex and the single girl has clearly moved on to purer pastures.) And as late as the year 2000 a Barnes and Noble bestseller list for its summer books listed five of its twenty top self-help books as having soul-based titles.

The shift from recovery to soul as a staple of self-help marketing is especially clear in the angel self-help genre. Early books overtly claim allegiance to the recovery planet. *Ask Your Angels* includes a whole section on recovery and healing, focusing on addiction and featuring the twelve steps. Terry Lynn Taylor’s *Gurdians of Hope*, like *Ask Your Angels* also published in 1992, is even more expansive, giving a specific angel to each of the twelve steps, rather than positioning angels in relation to the twelve steps as a whole. But the angel genre also clarifies how much a positive spirituality actually began to usurp negative recovery and declare its own kingdom. Later Taylor books, for instance (she has a running total of eight), omit 12-step references entirely. Her tone shifts from passivity in regard to a “higher” external power to passivity in regard to the power of one’s inner divine experiences. The power of dreams and

however, by many of the spirituality books, which bear titles like *No Enemies Within: A Creative Process for Discovering What’s Right about What’s Wrong* (Dawna Markova, 1994). In general, the spirituality books perceive substance as a single entity based on the mind, capable of turning toward or away from reality. Weakness remains a form of being “stuck,” but this experience is what attracts readers to books like *Beyond the Twelve Steps* in the first place; both Kasl and Grabhorn appeal to readers who feel that even after counting an even dozen there’s still “something missing,” that life is “un-jazzed,” and that their experiences are static and repetitive. This is not the effect of antagonism, but, as I explain below, of a misperception.

prophetic receptivity replaces the traumatic admittance of dependency. In *Angel Healing*, Doreen Virtue – another author of multiple angel titles – tellingly approaches her section on “Addiction” from a more clearly 1997 perspective. She begins with the question, “What is substance, really?” Virtue’s answer redefines substance from an external object holding sway over our desires to an internal “spark,” a “thought-form” that makes us whole. “Feeling your wholeness” resolves the dilemma of “powerlessness,” thus updating the orientation of self-help from the problem of autonomy and mastery to that of unity and completion.

These problems are distinct. The recovery genre remains fixed on a complex of denial and repression, seeking liberation in the act of confession and submission of the self in order to master the self. It is Manichean, polarized, and agonistic. Recovery, like the ghostly, speaks to a relentless repetition, a crisis of progress and adaptation initiated by personal trauma. The spirituality movement, on the other hand, is existential rather than experiential. Seemingly about nothing at all, its crisis is, in fact, the crisis of nothing at all. The issue of illusion rather than denial filmily hovers over every gentle pronouncement, every chore of the soul. In the spirituality books’ psychology, a soft duality of true and false replaces the aggressive conflict between good and evil. The true, these books suggest, is a function of internal coherence and inner substantiality. Wholeness and unity define positive existence; falsity reveals itself as fragmentation, the inability of the subject to provide his own internal principle by which parts of the self may be organized, ordered, and brought into consensus. The object is harmony, not exorcism.

In many ways, the goals of recovery and the goals of the New Age work together in the self-help nation. The practical, self-sufficient activity of judging and acting for and by oneself presumes a sense of what all this busy concentration is *for*. That is, the individual exerts his

autonomy in reference to a larger sense of the whole and in the service of developing his role in it. Both of these requirements emerge in investigations of the reading response to contemporary self-help literature. Not content to take everything on faith, readers act as “bricoleurs,” exploring a variety of books and culling particular gems from each while rejecting others. As *Newsweek*’s Daniel McGinn put it, “None of what they read becomes gospel; rather they mix and match mantras the way duffers use golf tips” (47). In her study on readers of self-help books, Communications theorist Deborah Grodin identifies the value of this practice as a feeling of “autonomy and self-reliance” produced by the exercise of choice in this kind of reading experience. Elaborating on the same idea that McGinn proposes, she writes, “my research indicates that readers often view self-help books as limited in their capacity to cure and that they feel empowered as they piece together ideas from a number of sources” (406).⁶²

The practice of detached evaluation is counterposed, however, by a search for community and a sense of the larger whole. This is the second important strand of a reader’s engagement with self-help textuality, Grodin argues. Daily life has failed to give readers a “sufficient sense of what constitutes the common” (414). This idea of “the common,” she continues, is not simply a personal or imagined community; it is something profoundly *abstract*. Readers seek an understanding of social life in general, within which they may analyze their own personal and interpersonal experiences. Notably, Grodin finds that this is something not articulated in the texts themselves, but - like the practice of selection - belongs solely to the reading process. The angel books - which took wing a year after Grodin published her article - could then be understood as offering in their angels a meta-discourse for the culture of self-help reading as it is provoked by gaps in self-help books. As I discussed in the first chapter, holistic intelligence is

⁶² Paul Lichterman also found the self-help books to provide an “ad-hoc forum for personal life,” stressing their use for the reader in providing names and discourses with which they could articulate, validate, and assess their feelings

proper to the angelic vision as the figuration of an intuitive objectivity. In reference to human intelligence, the angel-vision acts as an intuitive support for our judgments that is impervious to logical analysis and deduction, and hence remains mysterious. The sophisticate views this mystery as a difficulty, the naïf, as a badge of honor. The recognition of an unknown presence liberates the subject from crude materialism, from appearance as inexorability, and thus opens the door to change. In other words, angels speak in these texts for a specifically unarticulated, “invisible” interpretation that, in its very invisibility and unarticulatedness, provides a basis for self-improvement. Understood in terms of the self-help reading process, power results not from the books’ specific insight and instructions, but from their appeal to the universal and universalizing capacity of the mind that reads them. This urge to abstraction is significant; the books’ valorization of conceptuality and the “common” is simultaneously a theory of cognition and, as Grodin points out, a theory of the relation between individual and collective. Like Milton’s Satan, the ambitions of the self are made in the name of (and in search of) “public reason just.”

Grodin interprets these two aspects of self-help reception - the exercise of free choice and the search for “the common” - structurally as simultaneous and balanced poles that define the particular act of self-help reading. The structural perspective allows her to position self-help readers as agents responding to the limitations of the society in which they live, and thus position self-help practice as the expression of a genuine utopian impulse. What Grodin’s approach doesn’t recognize, however, is that the second pole is necessary for the first - and not merely as the other term of a defining dichotomy. The very process of selection *depends on* a view of the whole, just as the recovery movement’s obsession with resolving an inner apocalypse raises the problem of judgment and the judging mind – of the psychology of resolution itself. Thus the

and experiences.

issue of utopianism becomes less relevant than that of cosmology; for the relation between readerly autonomy and readerly intelligence is worth remarking not so much for what it does than for what it says. And what it says is directly tied to the hand-off from recovery to spirituality. That the spirituality movement then took on a life of its own is less due to a “dialectical” evolution of self-help psychology, I think, than of the very thing that Grodin describes as the goal of self-help: the issue of social integration, which in turn reflects changes in the social order and its integrating institutions.

Angelheaded hipsters

In 1992 Terry Lynn Taylor described the purpose of angels in the lives of the human in terms their global intelligence. Angels help accommodate us to the organizational imperatives of worldly success on the eve of the information age. In Taylor’s early rhetoric, angels are “happiness trainers” and “prosperity brokers,” secretaries who will “reorganize” the details in your life for you, and mediators who will contact the guardian angels of others in order to work out conflicts and facilitate communication.⁶³ One may either ask one’s angel directly, or visualize meetings between the angels to gain insight into the world of human relations. This is the early version of Taylor’s thinking, however, especially apparent in her first two books. By 1998, however, her perspective on the relation between the psyche and prosperity (which is to

⁶³ In the age of technology, where human communication with the machine is distinguished from human communication with other humans, the angelic surfaces in the fallen terrain of worldly society. Having dropped to earth, the angel invests his powers in those aspects of language that are not-language. In essence, he de-materializes the word or *geste*. In their chapter “Angels and Agents” in *The Social Life of Information*, John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid describe this reverse incarnation as it operates in human judgment within the social processes of negotiation and conversation. While Peters, focusing on the intimate and interpersonal, saw perfect communication as a dreamed-of ideal, these authors rely on it to explain the accidental immediacy of the impersonal language arts. In fact, this is what allows the person to engage in social and collective communication in the first place. Thus Brown and Duguid understand negotiation to depend on communications that escape identification, that are too “subtle” to be perceived by the rational mind, but yet influence it.

say between individual and angel) has changed. We see a more ambivalent treatment of the contributions an angelic universal intelligence makes to the self-help subject and the achievement of her goals, one that recognizes divisions within the individual psyche as inseparable from divisions within the social body. This recognition is a direct result of engaging the problem of choice and the question of personal freedom; as the passage below demonstrates, the spiritual crisis of free will immediately calls up the issue of intelligence.

Taylor's chapter "Accepting Varied Realities" in *The Angel Experience* begins with an account of the challenges we face in "being human" every time we open the newspaper and read about world social inequality ("varied realities"). This "human mystery" – rendered mysterious by the idea apparent in her previous works and the genre at large that we freely "choose" the reality we inhabit – petitions angelic consolations, which arrive in the form of presenting the "big picture." Global consciousness produces an anxiety that is quieted by the global mind. This paradox is a comfort, in that the very expansion that troubles knowledge is itself relieved by an expansive knowingness. Yet the rift between consciousness and thinking, as it is posited by the global, is not so easily undone, however contentedly we may welcome the angelic conversation of large-scale perspectivizing. . .

When I get to this level, thanks to the angels, I truly feel like a free spirit able to navigate wisely in the world.

The end of the millenium, as I mentioned earlier, is making some people very fearful. Many people think that the reason the angels are making themselves more visibly present is that the world is nearing an end. Part of this fear may be based on the atrocities that are happening in the world. Even if we haven't been

directly responsible for some atrocity, we know it's wrong to allow them to continue. The atrocities are splitting our psyche. We may have recently found real ways to be happy and peaceful within ourselves, but we listen to a discussion on the radio and find out that shoes we are wearing are assembled by workers in Indonesia who are treated like slaves. They are only earning one dollar a day in abusive conditions, yet the shoe company is able to pay a sports celebrity \$20 million to represent them in a few commercials. I don't know about you, but this kind of thing saddens my heart. I could rant on about widespread corporate disregard of human rights, but that is not my goal in this book. My goal is that we wake up and understand ourselves more, and to do this we have to see the whole picture, and realize that there are a myriad of realities going on. It is not fun to live with a split psyche. (101-2)

Angels are a direct result of the tension between inner freedom and external repression or containment. While the First World subject glides happily in the ether of her disembodied consciousness, the shadow side of modernity makes its presence felt materially, as a physical contradiction obstructing all attempts at rationalization. As in Plato's allegory of the soul, Taylor finds herself at the helm of a chariot destabilized by two wayward horses, a split self unsteadied in her efforts to move freely across the sky. Principled, angelic knowledge cannot be reconciled with the fracturing knowledge of the senses, and so Taylor proceeds to invoke the idea of wholeness – the “big picture” – as a way to refrain from judgment, to take refuge in abstraction. From here she throws the whole argument in the hands of a different kind of globalism. The

passage above is immediately followed by a quote from the Dalai Lama advocating ecumenical, non-sectarian religion and love and compassion as the means to inner peace - a personal change that Taylor suggests would get us into “alignment with Spiritual Law.” Access to the transcendent general saves the day. For the same angels that mediate crises between people now rhetorically universalize the internal crisis of living “with a split psyche,” rendering the conflict between perception and judgment eclipsable by a special kind of cognition. This is pure intuition, which is available in its purity only when the attention is directed inward, and which provides that unique experience in which thinking and feeling are one. Thus, in conversing with the angels the subject approaches feelings (love and compassion) as though they were decisions. “I don’t think we are asked to be saints in the old-fashioned way. We are asked to do something even more difficult: to enjoy life and continue loving in the face of turmoil and confusion, while watching old structures we depended on fall to the ground” (103). Channeling subjective freedom in place of objective intervention, Taylor emphasizes the sense of being a “free spirit able to navigate wisely in the world.” She effectively substitutes the feeling of freedom for its exercise, a feeling in which the conversant experiences herself as a cognizant being whose movement is separated from that of the external world. The political and economic rhetoric has changed since Taylor’s earlier books: corporate contentment no longer constitutes a domestic mirage available to any American traveler, as increasingly capital throws up photographs of difference, uneven development, and worldwide “abuse.” But the Law of the spirit – constant, general, and absolute – prevails, granting its subjects the unity spiritually that they lack in reference to the physical world.⁶⁴ The angels both allegorize this law and give voice to it in their response to our distressed advances.

⁶⁴ The angels’ obedience is directly reflective of the way they think and act according to such law, apparent in their attraction to the principle that makes the rule, the universal idea. The fallen angels, on the other hand, are

Like the concept of spiritual substance in another discourse, spiritual law answers to a problem of interpreting reality: the recognition that appearances are not adequate to their own explanation, that the idea of a thing, its behavior and properties and power, presupposes an invisibility cohering it. This “law,” essence, nature of the thing is only available to thought, not perception. Immediately, then, the problem of certainty and doubt arises as a schism between thought and perception, a schism which invites the name of spiritual crisis. The seeking subject finds herself conflicted between the “varied” contents of positive reportage and conceptual immutabilities. So she moves to ground her certainty in the idea rather than the image and thus transcend this schism, avoiding all the questions about right action that the crisis - if looked at on the terms that produced it - would exact from her. In this angelic transcendence she finds the beauty of passivity,⁶⁵ but at a cost. The problem of illusion has not been resolved, but on the contrary given autonomous form as the shadow of a perverse intentionality, bad will, the pure mind gone sour. This fall of the pure mind and its separated ideas is dramatized by the fall of the angel, the pure intelligence. A new creature emerges. Around the corner, Satan – and his bastard child Sin - appear as the emblems of the angelized subject’s schismatic anxiety, and the agents of its fall.

disobedient because they attempt to rationalize these legislative ideas, making the power that apprehends them (reason, which operates in temporal, sequential, *human* time) the god, rather than the eternal laws themselves. While it is often argued that their ambition is to claim their own self-sufficiency and self-determination (see Rogers, for instance), inherent in the fallen’s disobedience is a claim for the power of thought itself. In Shelley’s “Prometheus Unbound,” human thoughts and imaginings produce their own spiritual realities within the cosmos, and it is with the aid of these that the fallen Titan Prometheus opposes Jove and his “thought-executing ministers.” Again the allegorical idea of thoughts as agents (and the implicit status of the individual mind as creator) gives life to the fallen angel - only this time his bid for such terrain is seen as just and fiercely heroic. In the binaristic turmoil of the fall of feudalism, Satan has always appeared to his Romantic fans as the revolutionary angel of independent reason, freedom, and democratic autonomy – an idea already anticipated in Milton.

⁶⁵ The grocery store version of self-help books are useful in that they often more clearly state the underlying values of the genre than longer, more detailed, and (comparatively) more subtle books put out by serious publishing houses. The angel pamphlet, simply titled *Angels* (New & Revised Edition containing both true encounter stories and tips on how to contact your own guardian angel), is blunt about this: “you should maintain a passive attitude” (Matthews 52), and “Maintain a passive attitude and permit contact to happen at its own pace” (53). This book

Moloch in whom I am a consciousness without a body

Satan entered modernity proper as a smooth-talking sophist, brandishing the power of the Logos (if not the Word). He is the cool orator extraordinaire in *Paradise Lost*, the cosmopolitan man of the world who convinces Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown to walk with him in the forest wilds, "reasoning as we go," and the soul-coveting white-clad con artist in Hollywood's various Daniel Webster films. In Dashiell Hammett's *Maltese Falcon*, Sam Spade is introduced as having a face full of v's, looking "rather pleasantly like a blond satan" (3). The epitome of calculating restraint who uses passion so as not to fall prey to it, believes the femme fatale's money, not her story, and above all escapes being "played for a sucker," the private investigator embodies independent reason in a way that inherits the Satanic tradition.⁶⁶ Both are the quintessential figures of doubt and suspicion, plying their trade on the fear of illusion that so defines the search for autonomy. Spade's victory is also Mephistopheles' victory - the final revelation that, like the characters that surround the lone detective, the falcon itself is just a fake.

The private detective, icon of modern American identity, is characterized by his isolation. Like an angel he exists as a separated intelligence, wandering the streets of rationalism gone astray. Like Satan's his job is the seduction of character into self-exposure. And in this they share something more fundamental in common. Whether in the interests of criminal investigation or malicious *ressentiment*, the seduction of intelligence operates through the logic of contract. The old idea of the compact with the devil gives form to the philosophy of doubt, of calculating paranoia, that plays such a role in these contemporary figures of the urban and the

freely acknowledges the influence of Terry Lynn Taylor, giving an essentialized but not for that reason less valuable version of her thinking on angelic contact.

urbane. The satanic traffic in souls, however, is of an extremely ancient mythology, going back much further than the Faust legend to the Zoroastrian Zend-Avesta, in which the demon Ahriman tries (unsuccessfully) to tempt Zoroaster. From there the legend migrates to post-exilic Jewish literature (probably resulting in the interpolation of the story of Eve and the wily snake in Genesis), the New Testament, and the Koran. Though the idea of a devil-compact traces its roots to Persian belief systems, Maximilian Rudwin suggests that it might have held particular force for religions based on the idea of a covenant with God. “The Adversary, wishing in every respect to counterfeit the acts of the Almighty, naturally also attempts to form a compact with men” (170). In these religious systems the bargain for the individual soul appears as the supreme act of falsehood, threatening by cheap verisimilitude an entire society’s religious and moral contract. Though one form of chosenness challenges the other, the moral outcome leaves no doubt as to which has the greater power.⁶⁷

The threat of such compact hovers wherever rationalist, dualistic thinking attempts to institutionalize itself, or claim its power as first principle. The first and most influential modern dualistic philosopher, René Descartes, had his own Satanic apparition. This is the “evil genius” that, in Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy*, leads him to the famous argument that we can only know that we know. In his quest to discover something utterly impregnable to the assault of the doubting mind (which he ultimately finds in that selfsame doubting mind), Descartes runs across a character who, acting as a “devil’s advocate,” tests his belief in the reality of the world he thinks he experiences. “I will regard the heavens, the air, the earth, colors, shapes, sounds, and all external things as nothing but the bedeviling hoaxes of my

⁶⁶ Interestingly, one of the three films based on Hammett’s novel was entitled *Satan Met a Lady* (1936, starring Bette Davis), before the famous version with Humphrey Bogart, titled the same as the book.

dreams, with which he lays snares for my credulity” (107). On the character of this “malicious deceiver,” Descartes questions the possibility of our having any absolute knowledge of anything outside of our own knowing. This doubt is irretrievably a thought-experiment; unlike Berkeley, Descartes is completely uninterested in arguing the nonexistence of the world for its own sake. What is important here is that, in line with tradition, the devil serves as a test and foil for the disembodied subject’s affirming his faith and belief in something else.

Accordingly, I will suppose not a supremely good God, the source of truth, but rather an evil genius, supremely powerful and clever, who has directed his entire effort at deceiving me. I will regard the heavens, the air, the earth, colors, shapes, sounds, and all external things as nothing but the bedeviling hoaxes of my dreams, with which he lays snares for my credulity. I will regard myself as not having hands, or eyes, or flesh, or blood, or any senses, but as nevertheless falsely believing that I possess all these things. I will remain resolute and steadfast in this meditation, and even if it is not within my power to know anything true, it certainly is within my power to take care resolutely to withhold my assent to what is false, lest this deceiver, however powerful, however clever he may be, have any effect on me. (ibid.)

In a devious, indirect, and subtle way, then, the supposition of the diabolical leads Descartes to doubt all that is sensory and material, eventually concluding that since the world is always mediated by our minds, our minds themselves are the only things about which we can have any

⁶⁷ This obtains both for the earlier Theophilus legends of the Middle Ages, where the repentant bishop is saved by

certainty. The deceptive chain stops with the fact of deception itself; one must exist as a thinking being in order to be deceived in the first place. Within this schema only the *cogito*, the mind or intellect, can be true. “So modern thought starts with the disembodied, solitary thinker, lacking body, external world, and relationships – or at least not certain of their reality. . . . Descartes’s self could be a character in a Beckett play” (Levin 7-8).

The *cogito*’s independence is metaphysical; it belongs to another world, a heaven of the inner self. Though Descartes does not describe the thinking mind in completely celestial terms as infallible and purely divine, he does resurrect a specific kind of divinity in his affirmation of cognition as a form of revelation. For this sin Jacques Maritain convicts him of “angelism,” the formulation of the human mind in the purely rational, mathematical terms of the angelic (Maritain’s discussion occurs in a chapter titled “Descartes, or the Incarnation of the Angel”). Writing with uncompromising disgust, Maritain says of Descartes that “he turned cognition and Thought into a hopeless perplexity, an abyss of unrest, because he conceived human Thought after the type of angelic Thought” (54). As I’ve been arguing in this chapter, the idea of a fallible but pure mind necessitates the idea of an evil demon lurking somewhere in the corners of thought. For Descartes, this demon appears not only as the isolated figure of doubt, but also as a problem posed by the *cogito* itself. Maritain points out that Descartes lands himself in a dilemma by elevating the rational mind where yet no exercise of reason could be found.⁶⁸ The

the intercession of Mary and the Church, and the Faust stories of the Protestant reformation, where the anguished doctor is most surely damned.

⁶⁸ Essentially Descartes’s reason is guilty of hubris. In his discussion of the differences between what he terms the “symbolic imagination” and the “angelic imagination,” Alan Tate describes how, previous to the Renaissance inheritance and elaboration of Cartesian philosophy, angels had been taken up as a way to absorb this hubris without contradiction or ethical consequence. “The symbolic imagination takes rise from a definite limitation of human rationality which was recognized in the West until the 17th Century; in this view the intellect cannot have direct knowledge of essences. The only created mind that has this knowledge is the angelic mind. If we do not believe in angels we shall have to invent them in order to explain by parable the remarkable appearance, in Europe, at about the end of the 16th Century, of a mentality which denied man’s commitment to the physical world, and set itself up in quasi-divine independence” (“The Symbolic Imagination” 37). For Tate, the effects of this are clear. “I call that

cogito intuitis, but does not reason. This is the problem of judgment, that it reduces to a feeling wholly other than itself, and provides no means of explaining how it reaches the rational faculties from this feeling - just as Descartes' dualism cannot account for how the self-knowing mind can then reason about the external world and make sense of its experiences. This dilemma is not of itself demonic. But it leads to something more severe – to an actual conflict. The question of wilfulness arises in this gap between judgment and intuition. If our intuitions are not necessarily answerable to logic or rational law, who legislates them? Just as we doubt the origin of our sensory information, so we might ask where our faith in innate ideas comes from – and by what intention. Is it willed by us, by a higher power, or by a demon deceiver? And if we believe by a higher power, how can we know this with the same certainty that we know that we know?

Thus the question of *authorship* in regards to both our ideas and our belief in them rears its ugly head. It is a question never far from the spirit of self-help textuality.

Moloch in whom I dream angels

The idea of the mind as a power adequate to itself, clear and luminous in the exercise of ideas given it innately by a higher power, has always been foundational for the self-help genre. It fuels the belief that action can be reduced to information, and that text is adequate to practice. This belief hails most directly from the literature produced by the New Thought movement in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. New Thought (in England Higher Thought) was a spiritualist amalgam of charismatic-led religions, most notably Christian Science and Mind-Cure, whose supporters and critics were bound on the one side by William James and on the other by

human imagination angelic which tries to disintegrate or to circumvent the image in the illusory pursuit of essence” (ibid.). Like Descartes, the self-help books dedicate themselves to this pursuit, and hence are vulnerable to its “illusion.”

Mark Twain. All shared an interest in the question of healing and a belief that the source of disease lay within.⁶⁹ Founded in opposition to Christian denominational orthodoxy, these groups all conceived themselves as anti-dogmatic and open-minded. (It might be worth recalling that Madame Blavatsky, who founded the Eastern-inspired and New Thought-compatible Theosophical Society in 1875, titled her magazine *Lucifer*.) Like other nineteenth century folk healers, New Thought's spiritual leaders - Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, Mary Baker Eddy, and Ralph Waldo Trine are the most famous - claimed healing authority from personal experience, rather than institutional credentials. In this respect the current self-help anti-orthodoxy was already important, embedded in a folk-based critique of established religious power reminiscent of the Protestant Reformation. Unlike their direct antecedents, however - Mesmerism, with its invasive manipulation of magnetic forces and hypnotic spell-binding, or Spiritualism, with its ghostly communion with the dead - New Thought movements avoided a rhetoric of possession, whether of source or cure. Instead, they sought to make mediums of the patients themselves, the leaders offering cure through their *ideas* rather than their physical presence or activity. This focus on self-healing through education translated especially well to dissemination through books. Like the self-help books today, the method of self-healing could involve practices that appealed to the subject's own available experience and so were readily teachable through verbal direction. These included affirmative thinking, relaxation techniques, breathing exercises, meditation, general visualization, and attuning oneself to higher "vibrations" - the powers

⁶⁹ One of the diseases to which Mind Cure in particular was most frequently applied was the mysterious neurasthenia. It is interesting to compare the outburst of this syndrome with the neuro-muscular condition that has flooded the 1990's, fibromyalgia. Controversy about whether the source of fibromyalgia is mental or physiological has been particularly intense for this disease since there is no real treatment, psychiatric or otherwise. As one doctor critical of the diagnostic put it, "We have a huge problem with Descartes here" (quoted in Groopman 88). Perhaps for this reason, the most promising response has utilized a modified cognitive behavioral therapy that casts treatment in the form of self-help. In the words of its founder, Daniel Rooks, the program teaches patients "how to problem-solve," giving them the gratification of "doing something for themselves that made them better" (ibid. 92).

claimed for autosuggestion deriving from the sweep of the movement's mentalism.⁷⁰ Paradoxically, all of these are practices that appeal to what I would call the existential rather than the developmental aspects of the self; educative healing and spiritual self-improvement stress "actualization" over change.⁷¹ For the New Thought thinker, transformation came of properly aligning the self with its own already given identity, its personal innate idea – in other words, the guardian angel.

Though a common element in New Age literature, the New Thought enthusiasm for good vibrations has a special role in defining angelic response to human initiation. These vibrations promise much to the eager initiate, in particular a way of defining the purpose as well as the satisfaction of angelic conversation itself. In *The Angel Experience* (one of her eight books on angels), Terry Lynn Taylor explains what the idea of "vibration" accomplishes for her readers. She discusses the "qualities" we seek to develop in beginning a dialogue with our angels: "The qualities that most people list include love, compassion, tolerance, flexibility, honesty, beauty, peace, humor, joy, and most important, gratitude. If you think about it, these words represent more than concepts: they represent a true vibration that allows us to experience our divinity" (26). Like the allegorical army of angelic traits that permeates not just the angel books but angel incense, angel tarot cards, angel greeting cards, angel candles, etc., these qualities need to be

⁷⁰ An example from 1909, Stanton Davis Kirkham's *The Philosophy of Self-Help: An Application of Practical Psychology to Daily Life* describes the emphasis on vibrations as resulting from a collapse in the belief in objective sense-data. "The colour of the rose and the sound of the bell are purely *sensations* in the percipient mind; in the external world, until they reach the brain and are interpreted by the mind, they are *vibrations* merely. Colour and sound are in the eye and ear and not in the object, or to speak precisely, sensation is an act of consciousness. Pain is in the mind; pleasure is in the mind" (15). Power then comes from communing with that aspect of the self that converts perception to interpretation. "The highest form of self-reliance is reliance upon the soul, which is God in us" (197).

⁷¹ The only strikingly different aspect of the New Age from the New Thought self-help methodology is the former's emphasis on list-making, journal-keeping, and free-writing. Doubtless a result of changes in paper cost and availability, the move to what I would call "script-therapy" has been a staple of self-help books in general for some time. But it seems to be hyper-present in the most recent books, coinciding with a resurgence of print culture in the 1990's through the rise of the internet. Writing, in fact, becomes in these books the main marker of the quotidian, and the means of bringing it to bear on the angel books' theory of the self and its relation to the infinite.

embodied in order to participate in and direct human action. “More than concepts,” concepts-as-powers represent the human divine. Jane M. Howard, in *Commune with the Angels: A Heavenly Handbook*, puts this a different way. “After praying, I allow myself to focus upon an aspect of the angels. For example, I may think of the word ‘peace.’ In my years of meditating with the angels, I have come to know that their peace is a very calming influence in my life. So when I think of their peace, I find myself becoming that peace” (53). The ontological circle is a captivating one, moving the reader from thought to being through the metaphysical reality of the concept. Howard comes one step closer to identifying how this idea of the embodied concept, the quality-vibration, assures the angelic status of the human. In her chapter on meditating with the angels she explains that the purpose of angelic communion is simply, “to be who you are in the body you live in and also to experience yourself as you really exist in a higher transcendent realm, the angelic realm” (60). The angel experience, then, is not an event in the way that human experience is - the eruption of newness in the temporal world; it is a state or condition of being, in which the self becomes the object as well as the subject of the experience. The subject experiences itself experiencing. Such divinity is total and reflexive, like the songs of the seraphim, endlessly chanting “Holy holy holy,” or like angelic sex in *Paradise Lost*, where the angels find no obstacle “Of membrane, joint, or limb, exclusive bars: Easier than air with air, if Spirits embrace” (VIII, 625-6). In these angelic frequencies we go beyond the empiricist idea that experience consists of things happening to a subject. The self-evident nature of the vibrational angel experience persuades us that we are the things we know and feel – “when I think of their peace, I find myself becoming that peace.” Like Milton’s angels we experience the idea of an experience (an airy easiness that makes his angelic sexuality at best unconvincing and at worst unseductive). Conceptual descriptions have reality *in* us, it is true, but as themselves

self-subsisting subjectivities through which we participate in the divine. Each quality a persona, each persona an inner angel.

In spiritual vibrations this sense of radical interiority, of inner perception as a mode of being, provides quasi-physical confirmation of the verbal message exchange as an angelic reality. For behind every call to intuition, the question lurks, “How do you know if it’s really intuition? How do you know if you really are receiving the angels?” Doreen Virtue addresses this problem as a matter that can be distinguished ostensibly in terms of the positive or negative nature of the messages.

If you ever find yourself channeling a spirit that belittles you, or pushes you to do anything that would cause pain to you or another, stop. You are not channeling angels at that point. . . Call in the Archangel Michael and ask him to clear away the earthbound spirit which you are channeling. Do not fight the spirit with fear or anger, but do say prayers and visualize yourself surrounded by white light before having another channeling session. Your greatest ally in the channeling arena is your determination to channel only love. Nothing that is from love can ever hurt you.

(180)

Avoiding the solipsism that intuition can itself only be confirmed by more intuition, these books posit as their Unmoved Mover the eros of angelic vibration, both the object of our intention and its substantiation. The angelic communication, after all, is not enough: the experience is not complete unless one *knows* that it is angelic communication. In fact “knowingness,” in addition to “intuition,” is one of the genre’s key words defining angelic communication. It is the first of

three modes in O'Neill's guide (including "hearing their voices" and "visual imagery") and the most "common" form – "the process of intuitive information suddenly 'popping' into your head" (40). Virtue, in her book *Angel Therapy* (itself channeled by "The Angelic Realm") identifies knowingness as "claircognizance" (clear knowing), a type of angelic contact accompanied by clairvoyance (clear seeing), clairaudience (clear hearing), and clairsentience (clear feeling). She suggests each form is appropriate for different types of people, ending on the claircognizant. "If you are intellectually inclined, or a person who constantly searches for hidden meanings in situations, then you'll want to monitor your thoughts for those heavenly moments of 'knowingness' that bring you certainty in guiding your actions" (174-5). At the end of her book *Creating with the Angels: An Angel-Guided Journey into Creativity*, Taylor includes an interview with Carlos Santana. In answer to a question about whether he thinks everyone is creative, Santana appeals to the idea of knowingness, expressed in pointedly angelic imagery: "I also think that creativity comes from having made some kind of effort to listen to your inner voice. If you listen to your inner voice, I think that you awaken enthusiasm and imagination, which is vision. And I think that these are the two wings that we need to fly" (178). Unlike the angel authors, Santana describes intuitive certainty in more conventional terms and in pictorial rather than conceptual allegory. The message, however, is the same: by attending to our "inner voice" we (all of us) awaken our angelic powers.

Among John Randolph Price's twenty-two angels of various qualities that "govern our lives," Isis, the Angel of Creative Wisdom, identifies his problem. She tells him he can never open the Gates of Wisdom as long as his life consists of discordant frequencies. "You are applying what you know to the phenomenal world of effects rather than to the inner world of cause. You are highly mental, and such individuals are outer directed, basing decisions on

reasoning and rational thinking. Thus the goal is always to attack the illusion – but the opposite of illusion is intuition” (*The Angels Within Us* 5). The problem of reality, in other words, is the crisis that any initiate into the angelic realm must confront. This was an issue we saw indicated in the books’ move to establish angelic being in the world of childhood realism, a realism in which the imagination did not distinguish between the agency of external and internal images. Such a move begs the question of illusion, however. Because the “turn inward” makes determinations among the objective images themselves inaccessible, the locus of truth and falsity shifts to the inner world itself, and the spirit of the self doing the imagining and determining.

The emphasis on “knowingness” in the angel self-help genre is, to some extent, counterintuitive to the “practical guide” nature of the books. At the same time that we are being advised to listen to our inner voices and act on intuition, we are given highly rationalized ways of decision-making, much more appropriate to logical analysis than gut feeling. *How to Talk with Your Angels*, for instance, gives elaborate lists of questions to the reader to help him determine (among other things) whether a given significant other is marriage potential, whether or not to get pregnant, to evaluate a channeling experienced with a deceased family member, or whether he should start his own business (an obsession in this book). Most of the question lists – fifteen in all - range from 20-30 angles or aspects of the issue to consider in making a judgment. Numbered, guided practices permeate these books, often with bullets advising the reader what to stop and start doing. There are helpful tips, such as how to interpret the angels’ puns, and fill-in-the-blank sentences to guide the reader’s thinking. Most books make recourse to other organized hermeneutic systems, such as chakras, astrology, or the Twelve Steps. In fact the entire nature of the self-help genre itself is opposed to intuitive ascendancy. While the books attempt to stabilize this contradiction through recourse to the discourse of vibrations, they still betray an anxiety

about the reader's powers to intuit in the first place. When it is dealt with directly, this anxiety appears as a demonic negation threatening the angelism of the text.

Moloch whose name is the Mind

Though he is not always seen as such, the dark prince is a Janus-faced figure. He appears in his complex form at the intersection of two very different religious traditions, taking as their orientations the idea of dualistic war on the one hand, and on the other the spirit of covenant. The prince of evil and the prince of lies were not always one; in fact the latter emerged only when, through conquest and displacement, the first was assimilated to the latter. In this chapter I read self-help spirituality through an understanding of Satan as a composite icon, whose roles as usurping agent and master deceiver are to some degree always in conversation with one another.⁷² This dialogue between the theories of power and theories of illusion is apparent in the concurrent explosions of New Age spiritualism and self-help pragmatism, where the idea of the “good” is determined by the idea of the “true.” As we shall see, the conceptual system of true and false articulates Satan in relation to the psychological problem of illusion and deception in place of the moral problem of good and evil. Yet, as in some ways the attempted resolution of problems intrinsic to the latter system, true and false also remain bound to its territory, just as resentment always lurks one step behind its more sophisticated cousin, confusion.

The displacement of good and evil onto the realm of true and false has a long story, and at least two origins. The Judaic tradition is illuminating; it is from this history that we get the idea of the devil as an internal traitor, instigator of internal difference. Once a feature of

⁷² This is true literally, for instance, in the movie *Dogma*: the endless debates between Matt Damon as the angel of destruction and Ben Affleck as the angel of reason structure their picaresque journey almost in the style of the Odd Couple or the Honeymooners.

communal identity, this association between Satan and inner betrayal eventually finds its way to a theory of personal identity. In her book *The Origin of Satan* Elain Pagels outlines the historical development of the first connection. She begins her story in early Jewish history, where the word “satan” originally referred to any of God’s angels who served - literally - as an “obstacle” or “adversary” to humans, acting as vehicles of God’s teaching (see in particular Numbers, Zechariah, and the Book of Job). During periods of schism and dissent following the Babylonian exile, however, the word became a negative epithet to describe one’s sectarian opponents – used both by the mainstream and the sects to describe each other. From the third century B.C.E. onwards, a time clouded by Hellenistic, Seleucid, and then Roman imperial rule, revulsion for *these* satans on the part of radical groups like the Essenes told stories of wicked angels - the Book of Enoch’s Watchers, for instance, including Beelzebub, Azazel, etc. - and the figure of the malicious contrarian was born. And no wonder: from his exalted position as God’s agent to his role as ultimate betrayer the satan had indeed become a “fallen angel.” By the time of the advent of Christianity such a practice of identifying the satan with “the enemy within” - or what Pagels has described as the “intimate enemy” - was sufficiently in place that the New Testament could define him as *the* opponent of God and man. The tradition of linking Satan with apostasy prospered, fueled by multiple opportunities to apply it to Jews and eventually other Gentiles, and in the third century Origen gave it poetry, identifying this Satan with Isaiah’s Lucifer, a reference to the enslaving King of Babylon as the morning star: “How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!” (14:12, cited in Russell 130-1). This was a significant move, both as a poetic framing of adversariality as a fall from grace, and as a historical reference to the fact that, above all, the devil comes from a Persian rather than a Judaic tradition.

The origin of the devil has been granted almost as many sources as the origin of human beings. The overwhelming trend, however, is to begin east of Palestine. One very good example of this analysis that extends it to a dizzying range of time periods and cultures is Gerald Messadié's *History of the Devil*. Writing around the same time as Pagels,⁷³ Messadié identifies a trajectory beginning with Zoroastrianism (also the oldest source of what are recognizably “good” angels) as it sharpened metaphysical potentialities in Iranian Vedism. In Zoroastrianism he sees for the first time the convergence of monotheism, the identification of good and evil as “transcendent principles,” and the belief in the immortality of the soul. Together these create a dualistic cosmology emblemized by the forces of “light” and “darkness” and oriented toward individual, devotional morality. This is fueled by the expectation of an afterlife - salvation and damnation hanging in the balance. In combination with the idea of penitence generated in ancient Babylon, according to Messadié, these beliefs would flower in the religions that would later dominate the “West,” appearing in complete and sophisticated form by the time of Augustine and his *Confessions*. From Zoroaster's Ahriman, the spirit of Evil and the “lie” who “leads his followers astray by untruth or *druj*,” he sees the devil's historical emergence in postexilic Judaism, through Christianity, Gnosticism, and finally Shiite Islam. Significantly, these are also the religions most fascinated with angels in general.

Between these two analyses we can see the convergence of Satan as *schism* and Satan as *illusion*, producing a narrative of the devil as seducer and betrayer of our perceptions, and eventually, a narrative of our faculties of perception betraying us. Zoroastrian dualism plays a part here, introducing a distinction between base matter and divine spirit driven by the need for perceptive certainty. Persia's emphasis on personal spirituality, through the ideas of personal

⁷³ His *History of the Devil* was originally published in French in 1993, but was not translated into English until 1996. Pagels's book is copyrighted 1995. Neither one refers to the other.

immortality, an afterlife split between a morally determined heaven and hell, and the resulting emphasis on individual penitence invite the possibility, realized later and most fully in the writings of St. Augustine of Hippo, of mapping this dualism in terms of the psyche. In the contemporary self-help books this dualism takes the form of battle between a wholly receptive self-intuition and a self-aggrandizing projection, which I discuss below. James Hillman, in demonstrating that “we cannot confront the personalism of California without first passing through the confessionalism of Carthage” (27), marks the contemporary fear of projection as Augustinian in its origin.⁷⁴ Augustine’s “confessional ontology” of truth is grounded in the elusive unity of the subject, a sought-for singularity that I would argue must come to grips with the separation of personal power and personal identity that is gently dramatized by the angelic conversation; ironically, the subject comes to grip with this schism through the idea of Satan, who promises subjective power and individuality as one. Confession, then, converts this “false” unity offered by the spirit of negation into a “true” one. In light of this important antecedence, I want to look at a particularly relevant section of Augustine’s *Confessions*. The chapter where he confronts his demon is also the chapter where he deals with a psychology of true and false, one that serves as a perfect exemplar of the satanic interplay between a psychic dualism and a theory of truth that I want to develop.

In Book Seven of his *Confessions*, St. Augustine very carefully describes the stages of a spiritual crisis occasioned by contradictions he must face in the idea of spiritual being and the concept of evil. The book is a rhetorical tour de force, constructing a saga of intellectual torment and then awakening through the experience of an inwardness that Augustine at once defines and

⁷⁴ Hillman premises this conclusion on Augustine’s expulsion of the imaginal to the external, either as sense-impressions or metaphysical abstraction. Hence, “a gulf opens between subjective feelings without imaginative forms and the literalism of images as sensations, ideas, data without subjectivity. They do not confess; only I can confess. So anything they might say must be my projections” (29).

makes perceptibly real. Confusing and obstructing him in his path toward this inwardness is the perverse figure of the devil. His role is twofold. As himself a simple spiritual substance - but a fallen one - he presents a contradiction to the principle of good; through this he preys upon and seeks to influence the various schisms within the self presented by its own modes of spiritual and material thinking.

Augustine begins Book Seven with a *lachrymosa*, mourning not his “dead” adolescent self but the not-yet-born adult capable of understanding God with clarity and distinction. Like the spiritual self-help books, his model of personal development is oriented toward the unfolding of this spiritual vision. “By now my adolescence, with all its shameful sins, was dead. I was approaching mature manhood, but the older I grew, the more disgraceful was my self-delusion. I could imagine no kind of substance except such as is normally seen by the eye” (VII, 1). These first words establish the project of the chapter: to define the ground of a supersensible reality, and its perceptibility to the human through a particular way of seeing, the eye of the mind. Telescopically, this becomes a question of grasping the idea of immaterial substance. For Augustine, such a substance must free itself not so much from brute physicality as from the conceptions that define the nature of the physical for the human psyche.⁷⁵ He explains this personally. “Although I did not imagine you in the shape of a human body, I could not free myself from the thought that you were some kind of bodily substance extended in space, either

⁷⁵ “I was trying to find the origin of evil, but I was quite blind to the evil in my own method of research. In my mind’s eye I pictured the whole of creation, both the things which are visible to us, such as the earth and the sea, the air and the stars, the trees and the animals which live their lives and die, and the things which we cannot see, such as the firmament of heaven above, with all its angels and everything in it that is spiritual - for I thought of spiritual things, too, as material bodies, each in its allotted place. I imagined the whole of your creation as a vast mass made up of different kinds of bodies, some of them real, some of them only the bodies which in my imagination took the place of spirits. I thought of this mass as something huge. . . I pictured you, O Lord, as encompassing this mass on all sides and penetrating it in every part, yet yourself infinite in every dimension. . . I said to myself, “Here is God, and here is what he has created. God is good, utterly and entirely better than the things which he has made. But, since he is good, the things that he has made are also good. This is how he contains them all in himself and fills them all with his presence” (VII, 5).

permeating the world or diffused in infinity beyond it” (ibid.). He offers to God and the reader the burning shame of his naïveté, of imagining the spiritual through material categories of extension and space. These are Augustine’s intimate enemies. Since he is arguing from the insight that differences among things seen require different ways of seeing, the interplay between the eye of the body and the “eye of the mind” will be the driving theme of the rest of this book.

The move to contextualize one dialogue within another is artful, shifting the boundaries of inner and outer conversation so that the inner self becomes identified with God, the outer with the aspect of the self that takes its own pictures literally. In this way confession becomes the supreme act of a proto-divine subjectivity that grasps its separation from the things that it thinks. “For my mind ranged in imagination over shapes and forms such as are familiar to the eye, and I did not realize that the power of thought, by which I formed these images, was itself something quite different from them” (VII, 1). This “something,” the spiritual substance as a thinking substance, transcends the appearances that impress it and the means by which it apprehends them. Augustine discovers that the materialist reliance on categories of spatial understanding reveals itself as a fallen methodology. Not only does it fail to answer the question of the source of evil, death and corruption, but it fails to account for the very differences that are evident in and define the physical world.⁷⁶ Ideas belonging to the world of appearances, in other words, are incapable of explaining it, and thus both seduce and delude us.

The materialist illusion can only be exorcised by an encounter with reading - not reading that is fully transparent, but one that bears witness almost in spite of itself. For Augustine’s

⁷⁶ Augustine underscores this point by detouring into the story of a friend concerning the perils of astrology (a belief system incorporated by his former religious companions, the Manichaeans). According to his friend Firminus, two babies were born at the same instant; that is, they were born on the exact same place of the stellar map. And yet, behold! their fates, as respective sons of a nobleman and a slave, were the opposite. This story arouses Augustine’s disgust for the idea of judgment based on the position of bodies (however heavenly) in space, and cures his “stubborn resistance” to the counsel of those friends who encourage his return to scripture as the firmament of his meditations.

autobiography is as much a reading of scripture through a life as it is a reading of a life through scripture. In the ninth section of the book the text explodes with scriptural references; over half the text consists of quotes from the New Testament narrating the story of the Word. Yet the reading experience is not of the scriptures, but of the Platonists. Indirectly, they illuminate the word of Christ without any literal reference to it, just as Augustine, in turn, has no direct quotes from them. He owes this possibility of indirect illumination to St. Ambrose's Biblical exegesis, which he based on Paul's distinction between the letter and the spirit of the word. But it is also significant for Augustine that the Platonic texts, in their idealist view of "truth as something incorporeal," themselves inspired such a reading. Referring their works to the unity and eternity of spirit, he sees in the Platonists an illumination of the word of God, despite their also apparent indifference to it. The very spirituality of the word permits this incorporation of heathen texts to Christian morality, acting as the ground of a "true" unity over and above apparent difference. With this new, inward vision Augustine can now read these writings as pointing to "one meaning only."

This capability of setting the mind on the "inward" meaning of a composite (and hence potentially self-contradictory) thing Augustine elsewhere calls *intentio* or *attentio animi*. Though in *The Trinity* the intention or attention of the soul originally refers to the fixing of the gaze on memory, I apply it here to suggest a way of discriminating what is read, which in this case is reading through the light of scriptural revelation, through and for the simplicity and self-evidence of the Word. When he introduces the next section with the words "these books served to remind me to return to my own self," and to "enter into the depths of my soul," he identifies the soul's attention to itself with such logocentric luminosity. Hence this inward attention

becomes “confession,” the corollary and the antidote to “presumption,” the act of pride.⁷⁷ As a spiritual substance, the soul sees through and beyond itself. Fixed on the light of God, it too understands through a glass darkly, or, following Augustine’s translation of Paul, “in an enigma.” The contradictions generated by the worldly and the obscure become productive mysteries when viewed enigmatically - when the worldly is experienced “as though” it were spiritual.⁷⁸ Only through this enigmatic way of seeing can Augustine light on a perceptual basis assimilating belief and truth.

For I wondered how it was that I could appreciate beauty in material things on earth or in the heavens, and what it was that enabled me to make correct decisions about things that are subject to change and to rule that one thing ought to be like this, another like that. I wondered how it was that I was able to judge them in this way, and I realized that above my own mind, which was liable to change, there was the never changing, true eternity of truth.

(VII, 17)

⁷⁷ Brian Stock understands the necessity of an inward encounter with the word specifically for a Christian monism: “In the *Confessions*, the emphasis is on the inner forces that prepare us for the possibility of grace and the role of narrative in bringing that possibility into our conscious thoughts. One of the premises of Augustine’s thinking is that we can be made one with God through the assimilation of his unified Word. This cannot take place if God is dual” (51). In this light pride can be read as the perverse expression of a psychologized dualism.

⁷⁸ There is a striking series of uses of “as though” in this part of the chapter. In section 10 “I realized that I was far away from you. It was as though I were in a land where all is different from your own and I heard your voice calling from on high” (147); section 15 “I saw that all finite things are in you, not as though you were a place that contained them, but in a different manner. They are in you because you hold all things in your truth as though they were in your hand, and all things are true in so far as they have being” (150); and section 17, after describing the sight of God through his creations he writes, “In my weakness I recoiled and fell back into my old ways, carrying with me nothing but the memory of something that I loved and longed for, as though I had sensed the fragrance of the fare but was not able to eat it” (152).” Each time in using this phrase Augustine expresses his relation to God as a right or wrong exertion of the imagination. The imagination is capable of using both material and spiritual ways of seeing; hence, its acts have moral implications. Significantly in these quotes, the imagination as it represents experience “in truth” rather than “in space” is more pictorial and evocative - more “imaginative.” In this way Augustine proposes a germinal distinction between quantitative and qualitative forms of thinking.

Finally, Augustine can answer the question of the origin of evil. Having grasped through the Platonists the idea that spiritual substance exists more fully than material substance because its being is in truth rather than space, he can meditate productively on the existence of evil and properly introduce the figure of Satan-Lucifer, who has lurked steadily behind this chapter's confessions. His famous conclusion is that, as the "perversion of the will when it turns away" from God, evil doesn't exist; it has no substance. It is an attribute of the mind, not a self-subsistent being. "The prince of sin, author of death" then becomes the image of this perversion - not so much in representing as in inducing it. He "coaxes" us into the ultimate falsehood of believing in the "existence of something that has no being."⁷⁹

This connection between the figure of the devil and the idea of nonbeing is crucial to my discussion of the angel self-help books. It raises many points of intersection for the father of autobiography and the progeny of the self-help movement. The most fundamental of these is their treatment of falsehood. Augustine defines it as a way of seeing that is "perverse" because it uses contradiction within the psyche to misjudge the basis of reality. As the act of hypostatizing the unreal, falsehood attributes actual being to sense-induced ways of thinking, or ways of thinking that interpret the world through its own images. This concept of satanic falsehood emerges necessarily in the attempt to convert a dualist universe to a quasi-monist belief system, one where the free turnings of the separated mind - the spiritual substance - define all conflict as internal opposition, bad will. Such conflict is unnecessary, however, as the bad will turns to a

⁷⁹ Augustine's famous theory of evil as privation was not new to early Christian thought (St. Jerome and Gregory of Nyssa, for instance, had already discussed evil as a form of nonbeing), but Augustine's contribution was to place the idea within a theory of knowledge and agency. The absence of God is a result of a free act of individual minds, "authors to themselves in all / both what they judge and what they choose" (Milton III, 122-3). Augustine's move had serious consequences, however. His insistence on the freedom of the will exonerated God from any guilt by association, but it also suggested that evil itself was unintelligible. Satan may have induced the will of Adam, whose sin leads the rest of mankind astray, but what made Satan's own will turn away to begin with?⁷⁹ The explanation is the privation of explanation. As Jeffrey Burton Russell interprets it, such a question begs the issue;

fantasy, something that is not there. Augustine uses this idea of Satan to reduce the problem of morality to a theory of truth. Against the false existence of evil he positions a hierarchy of reality, different kinds of substance whose highest is, of course, the spiritual. What is at stake in this hierarchy is a theory of the conceptual unity of the universe and, in its ability to comprehend and judge it, the rational unity of the self.

The hospital illuminates itself imaginary walls collapse

St. Augustine's privationist re-reading of "good and evil" as "true and false" has been historically replayed in the self-help movement's gradual replacement of recovery theory by "spirituality." Recovery is decidedly dualist, imagining the subject as caught in a dilemma of recognition. Within a dialectic of denial and remembering, the problem is that there is not enough belief, rather than too much. Good and evil are both real, almost palpable forces and principles each unto themselves. Recovery requires acknowledging the power of the latter, usually manifest in the form of past trauma of addiction or abuse. In the spirituality movement, illusion does the work of denial. Coincidentally echoing the critique of the recovery movement for equating memory with history (as in, for instance, the assertion in *The Courage to Heal* that "if you think you were abused, you probably were"), the spiritual self-help books warn of the dangers of projection. Much of what we think to be real, they insist, is only fantasy, the work of mental error. We are too gullible, they say, in mistaking our beliefs for reality. Evil, too, is a mistaken belief. As Augustine says in *De Trinitate* (*The Trinity*), we mustn't project or "imagine by mere empty thought" (279). How then do you distinguish? Rather than attempt to adjudicate among varying sense-impressions, the books attempt to differentiate between two different

the acts of the free will cannot be determined by any source, or they would no longer be free. Hence for Augustine

aspects of the self as the source of the trouble. As in Augustine, bad will is a function of a certain kind of thinking, one that mimetically responds to the external world, as opposed to perusing the world of images within. In the New Age discourse of the late twentieth century, this difference is formulated as a competition between the “soul” and the “ego.”⁸⁰ Terms derived from two very different discourses, it is possible to read them as claiming the value of religion over psychology. But something more is at work, for these books rely on ideas obtainable primarily through psychology and, originally, psychoanalysis. In demonizing the ego, the books reject something particular: the faculty of projection, which they associate with the ego. In this they condemn not so much a part of the self (the very idea of villainizing the ego is absurd) as a form of mental act that it takes. This idea of turning out and “putting into,” as it is known in post-Abraham psychology, becomes the locus of falseness. By contrast the “soul” is identified with the act of intuiting, the taking in of an image, idea, or feeling, without need for distrust. Thanks to the field’s blissful Cartesianism, intuitions of the self are seen as undoubtable, as the basis of positive knowledge so desperately sought in a climate where both processes of judgment and the power of external influences are experienced as overwhelming. In other words, a climate

“the movement of a free will cannot be analyzed causally” (201). The *non sequitur* is ultimately also a tautology.

⁸⁰ This is a distinction that Thomas Moore, in his own writing on angels, casts in terms of the distinction between the individual as isolated and singular historical agent and the individual as it participates in communal, daily life. Referring to the “modern” tendency to dismiss angels as hallucinations, he cautions, “but this is an ego-centered point of view” (“Annunciation” 25). He proposes instead a theological viewpoint - “the perspective of the soul” - with which he wants to invest everyday life. After all the soul is, in philosophical discourse, the principle of life and the faculty of divine communion, receiving the intelligible forms that give life (or, in Descartes’ case, existence). Moore suggests that from this “soul” perspective - which watches the daily news - the rise of angelic visions marks a social rift between “secularism and fundamentalism gone mad.” “How are we to find our way through rituals, images, beliefs, ethics, mysteries, marriage, possessions of the soul, and so on, if we have no accessible theology?” (25) This call to accessibility through the angelization of daily life indicates a lapse in the putative function of the soul, to provide a basis for social communion. The demonization of the ego brands it as the cause of this fall. But if we read the ego through Freud, who defined it as the organizing principle of the psyche (which he saw as always a social act), it would perhaps be more appropriate to read it as the sign and victim of this fall. Ego and soul thus announce different ways of reading the relation between self and world, the former through the agonistic polarization of social relations, the latter through the communal, ritualistic folds of the “deeply quotidian.”

of recovery ideology, which is appropriately the climate of totalitarianism,⁸¹ produces self-angelism as a specific response.

One of the major proponents of the vice of “ego-projection” is John Vincent Price, a Ballantine original that has influenced other angel-books writers and has some status within the spiritual self-help genre in general. His twenty-two angels attribute false beliefs to “ego-projections.” In doing so they borrow from the thinking of the king of spiritualist self-help, Deepak Chopra. In a masked criticism of watered-down object-relations theory, Chopra writes, “In object-referral, your internal reference point is your ego. The ego, however, is not who you really are. The ego is your self-image; it is your social mask; it is the role you are playing” (11). The key concept here is that of the social self. Like George Bailey in his fear of having to conform to a proscribed external role, Chopra advocates an individuality sufficient to itself – a true spiritual substance - in the form of the “spirit” or “soul.” It is Price’s contribution to make the social self the self’s own creation. Rather than an introjection of social mores and

⁸¹ Messadié argues that the idea of Satan as it is produced within a good/evil dualism – one in which the recovery movement takes part – is responsible for theocratic formations during times of imperialism. He describes the Reaganite 1980’s, when the recovery movement took off, as a moment of such formation. Having demonstrated Zoroaster’s reform as an assertion of populist religion during a time of great state power, he argues that the devil must always be seen as helping to augment religious influence so as to make it equal to an expanding, and hence multicultural, state. (During Zoroaster’s life, 628-551 B.C.E., the Iranian Empire was at its height, encompassing what is now the Middle East and extending into Africa, southern present-day Russia, and the Indian subcontinent.) In other words, a devil-conscious religion becomes a vehicle for the establishment of an actual or quasi-theocracy. Fear of a “Great Satan” or an “Evil Empire,” he argues, elevates the status and service of the priestly caste, thus allowing the nation-state to consolidate its power through the incorporation of an equally strong “ecclesiastical authority.” “In the end the fallen angel is no more than the logical stratagem of a totalitarian power” (145). While Messadié may be overstating the necessary connection between fascist formations and the belief in Satan, it is useful here to remember Nietzsche’s analysis of the origin of a value system based on the polarity good and evil. This binary is always a product of a “slave morality” responding to social relations based on absolute power. Nietzsche links this morality to the history of the Jews and the Christians for reasons that in turn are suggestive of Messadié’s account of the Zoroastrian reform and revolution. A priest of means modest enough to declare himself “powerless” for having “little livestock and few men” (80), Zoroaster effected a demagogic rebellion in the name of popular religion and the right of the clergy to arbitrate earthly law. This is perhaps the crux of slave morality: the claim that material power should be answerable to a spiritual elect, “elected” by their allegiance to that disenfranchised mass, “the people.” Here, in the proposed convergence between divine judgment and social legislation, we see a dualistic symbology lending itself to and unveiling another major principle of moral authority - that mainstay of state centralization, *raison d’état*. Conceived of as the principle of the divine within the human, reason governs absolutely and with committed purity. It becomes itself a separate, spiritual substance - that is, the higher pole in a

expectations, the ego is the creation of a part of the self that misperceives. It is a satanic “obstacle,” as well as a deceiver, which sees things “through the eye of the human personality.” The “human personality” is a tag for individualism, which Price rejects as an impediment to his belief in universal wealth. Against the human, he posits the divine self, a consciousness that replaces the “ego’s projected effects” with “divine impressions of a substantial nature,” thus achieving an “abundance of wholeness” (59). Price’s “I am Mercer,” divinity-within-the-human ontology sees the angelic self as the “separation” of the self from these projections and the false beliefs they create. But the angel-self may become “blocked.” Then the angelic archetype falls; “it becomes the master manipulator and works closely with the ego to deceive, mislead, and defraud, becoming a cunning adversary to spiritual consciousness” (*Angels Within Us* 38).

Doreen Virtue similarly places the ego squarely within the rhetorical world of the devil. She argues that “lower-self egos” have sway over us through the demonic host of fears they create, all the while deceiving us that they themselves are real. She (or rather, the angels whom she is channeling) exposes this “thing/not-thing” called ego as “the greatest illusion of all time. Yet, its power stands ready to block you with the paradox that, though not a thing, it also serves as the gatekeeper of the illusion of many of the experiences that you believe you have” (60). Virtue’s discourse here accelerates the discourse of the satanic as she goes on to describe the ego’s “whisperings” of our capacity to become a “demi-god of our own making,” luring the self into its “dens of lies.” Sin - specifically the demonic sin of pride, or “ego” in the discourse of pop psychology - enters the world as an avowed auto-generation of self-projection. For the angel-lovers, the demonized ego provides a self-policing psych ward where the threat of projections from the sovereign self that shadow angelic conversation may be contained and

dualistic theory of being, hitched to the power of the soul. Along with the divine, of course, reason also bears the potential of the diabolical.

quarantined. The difference is localized subjectively. False experiences translates to false divinity, with the usurping ego makes the self a slave to its own self-declared kingdom. As in the line quoted in chapter one from *Wings of Desire*, “every man waves his one-man state flag in all directions.”⁸²

The association of ego and projection is strange, given that Jungian psychology – which most directly influences this genre – maintains firmly that it is the unconscious that does the projecting, and the ego that brings it to conscious awareness, that provides insight. While Freudian psychology theorizes projection as a function of the ego – and at the very least in the service of it – again, the unconscious is the principal agent. It is interesting that the concept of the unconscious is downplayed in the angel books, whereas it is fundamental in recovery theory. It appears that the ego acts as the necessary target because it represents the shadow of the guiding philosophy of these books in general, which they need to debunk. This is the philosophy of the self-made man, which they inherit from a long tradition of self-help in America.

In mid-twentieth century, the mind cure books merged with another strand of self-help literature, the success manuals of the nineteenth century. These were Horatio Alger-type stories that preached the self-disciplined and virtuous pursuit of a “calling,” hailing the ideal of the self-made man and the principle of self-determination. The twentieth century hybrid texts - Napoleon Hill’s classic *Think and Grow Rich* (1937) and Norman Vincent Peale’s perennial *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952) - replaced the emphasis on virtuous restraint with mental expansiveness, whether through alignment with harmonic vibrations (Hill) or through “prayer power” practiced repetitively throughout daily activities (Peale). The most influential

⁸² Wendy Kaminer outlines the fascist potential inherent in such a view in her scathing critique of mind cure and positive thinking strands of self-help. Likening these subjects to the Christian Science selves seen as “complete, self-enclosed ‘individualizations’ of God,” kaminer writes of a parallel with the state: “In the political realm envisioning every man and woman as individualizations of the state is the essence of totalitarianism” (55-6).

contemporary example of this convergence is endocrinologist Deepak Chopra, whose theories of quantum healing - harmonic balancing with natural law - actually owe more to the less durable Hill than to Peale. Like the New Thought trajectory, Chopra's original focus on health has been redirected toward "success" self-help, and eventually spirituality pure and simple. But, as New Age pioneer, he has also introduced something new to the genre. His debut publication, *Creating Health: Beyond Prevention, Toward Perfection* (1987), opens with a quote from his mentor, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Later books suggest the Maharishi's influence (particularly his emphasis on creating "Heaven on Earth")⁸³ in inspiring the essential tenet of Chopra's thinking and his main contribution to the field of self-help (one to which the angel books are sublimely indebted): "In reality, we are divinity in disguise, and the gods and goddesses in embryo that are contained within us seek to be fully materialized. True success is therefore the experience of the miraculous. It is the unfolding of the divinity within us" (*Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* 3). This, ultimately, is where self-help psychology leads us: any system that claims infinite power for the exercise of the individual mind must invoke a supernatural basis for this exercise. The ideology of material success as subject to intention, as so many contemporary self-help seminars attest,⁸⁴ must return to the spiritual as an enchantment of intention.

The enchanted intention that positive thinking propounds is that of the *sui generis*, the self-made individual. In America this value has always been curiously paradoxical; on the one hand, it represents a deep suspicion and mistrust of social values and influence, of social conditioning. On the other, it requires the characteristics of the naïve to launch itself: optimism,

⁸³ The Maharishi's website includes a description of this project: "Maharishi's Program to Create Heaven on Earth contains practical, simple, scientifically-proven, time-tested knowledge that can bring Heaven on Earth to any society." As with the self-help books, the practicalization of the metaphysical produces an absurdity clothed in the language of platitude.

⁸⁴ Paul Hellas, in *New Age Religion*, points out just how much the development of New Ageism intertwined with that of corporate culture.

risk-taking, credulity. The devil who preys on credulity is the ideal expression of the risks such a value runs, and acts as the “intimate enemy” of its subjectivity. The internal, distrustful self – the one who projects its fears and suspicions onto others – threatens the naïve, intuitive self, by calling attention to its naivete, illuminating it as such through its own sophistication. Any Cartesian system immediately falls prey to this problem.

Descartes believed he had dispensed with the problem of gullibility that we witness in the self-help books by positing the idea of an infinitely benevolent God who could have no intention to deceive. This intention was secured by the fact that the human could conceive of its own imperfection – and not discover itself subject to the self-aggrandizements that would surely belong to a demonic figure. The argument that the worship of the infinite as a higher form of being could only have been placed there by just such a higher infinite being is of course tautological and resolutely fatuous, but it importantly defines the ground of human divinity for Cartesian rationalism. “When I turn the mind’s eye toward myself,” the Cartesian ego says, “I perceive this likeness, in which the idea of God is contained, by means of the same faculty by which I perceive myself” (121). This is not unusual language for Descartes – he speaks often of the turning of the will, directing his thoughts, being *attentive*. These are all motions of intent, and it is in this faculty that Descartes bases his likeness to God, the supreme agent. The terminology echoes, however. As we saw, this is Augustinian rhetoric, and the concept of attention one that attempts to supersede internal division, the activation of the divine self that provides internal unity: “This whole within, this whole is the mind” (*The Trinity* Book X). The angels are especially relevant to this idea; attendants of God, they serve also to pay attention to men. They are, if anything, the expressions of attention, its image as act. The cry of the subject for attention warrants the angels – both as the conversational “companions” that minister to our

lonely neglect, and as the faculty of judgment, the power of attending, that we ourselves lack. If, according to the recovery movement, the emblematic pathology of the 80's was addiction, in the 90's it appears as ADD. The essential act of the soul then appears as a self-attending, via the conversation with the angel.

The parallels between Augustine's and Descartes' thinking on the topic of spiritual substance are well-known and in some ways quite striking. Descartes himself commented on some points of resemblance, once they were brought to his attention.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, for purposes of demonstrating what is at stake in questions concerning the relationship between Satan and spiritual substance - which is to say, what the consequences are of reading the devil specifically as a fallen angel - I will outline the major points of commonality. The most overarching is their choosing to base their metaphysical world orders on an axis of truth and falsity. In both cases the false is identified with spatial perception (or what Descartes calls "extension") and the true with the self-evident existence of the "power of thought." This framework looks back to Aristotle's original definition of substance (the Greek "ousia") as "being-in-itself," but understands such "self-evidence" literally. Ultimate self-existence is the self's evidence *to* itself - what could be variously described as self-awareness, self-consciousness, self-reflection. This is clear in their use of language. Descartes, like Augustine, seeks to "turn the mind's eye toward myself" (121) and "converse with myself alone and look more deeply into myself" as a way to gain knowledge of the "true." As the self-attending mind's

⁸⁵ See his letter *To Colvius*, November 14, 1640 (90). Referring to a passage in *City of God* where Augustine also refers to the our knowledge of our own existence as the basis for our knowledge of God, Descartes expresses his gratitude for having "come together with Saint Augustine, if only to shut the mouths of the little minds who have tried to quibble with that principle" (91). He remarks, however, that he differs from Augustine in that he uses this principle "to make it known that this *I* who is thinking is an *immaterial substance*, and has nothing in it that is corporeal" (ibid.). As I have discussed, Augustine is elsewhere concerned to show the primacy of the soul, and would thus agree with the first half of Descartes' objective, but he departs from Descartes in his complexity of vision. Augustine's much less placid *I* includes the corporeal as part of its defining agonistics.

eye, human spiritual substance can only express itself in the first-person - as autobiography, as confession.⁸⁶

The self-reflective soliloquy – the angelic conversation - is the necessary act of the soul, in which it separates and saves itself from material gravity. But why? For St. Augustine God's grace is given freely with or without our petition, and for Descartes the *cogito*'s unique existence is already guaranteed by virtue of its being clear and distinct. Isn't individual reflection merely superfluous? Such a question forgets, however, the importance that soul-saving (the counterpart to Satan's notorious soul-hustling) places on human understanding. In order to fully participate in the divine, the self must grasp how its soul differs from other, material substances. What, finally, is the principle that distinguishes spiritual substance? What is this invisible something that makes us more than our physical parts?⁸⁷ For both thinkers, the immaterial principle relies on a conception of being as responsible to "truth." According to this way of thinking, which originated in the "West" with the Platonic tradition, things are more or less real according to their fidelity to the universal - whether that universal is the God of revelation (Augustine) or of reason (Descartes).⁸⁸ Though different and, as the religious debates in the Christian sixteenth century showed, potentially contradictory values, reason and revelation still share a function as

⁸⁶ As *Touched By an Angel*'s Monica says, "You can tell a lie, you can live a lie, but you can't *pray* a lie. . ."

⁸⁷ Locke's famous description of substance as "something I-know-not-what" presents the idea sanguinely as an invisible friend, rather than an evil genius or seductive crisis. Locke argues that if anything, immaterial substance is more certain a proposition than material substance. In this sense he elevates determination by (ideational) quality above determination by (physical) extension. "Lastly, if this notion of immaterial Spirit may have, perhaps, some difficulties in it, not easie to be explained, we have therefore no more reason to deny, or doubt the existence of such Spirits, than we have to deny, or doubt the existence of Body; because the notion of Body is cumbred with some difficulties very hard, and, perhaps, impossible to be explained, or understood by us. For I would fain have instanced any thing in our notion of Spirit more perplexed, or nearer a Contradiction, than the very notion of Body includes in it; the divisibility *in infinitum* of any finite Extension, involving us, whether we grant or deny it, in consequences impossible to be explicated, or made in our apprehensions consistent; Consequences that carry greater difficulty, and more apparent absurdity, than any thing can follow from the Notion of an immaterial knowing substance" (313). Descartes' disquisitions on extension do not come off well in this quote, though Locke retains the primacy of thought as less vulnerable to the sabotage of contradictory "difficulties" and the gravity of their consequences.

transcendent principles of the material world. In both systems of thought, only what conforms to the explanatory universal is truly held to exist, without illusion or deception.

Though familiar, this qualification of existence is hardly an anthropological constant. The idea of deceptive being - which is the idea of Satan - springs from an essentially linguistic sense of the world. The distinction between true and false is solely a product of how we talk about and represent things. For the non-symbolic mind, things happen; their being is never in question. Symbols, on the other hand, are judged according to their faithfulness to the things they represent. Only in language can we actually “lie.” Only the communicated thing may be betrayed. At this point we can understand the significance of the impulse to penitential utterance. Confession enters this debauched and sinister scene to name the lie and the system that conceives it. As the language of the soul, it petitions the radiance of the “Word,” which seems to mean by and in itself - language as spiritual substance. The confessional soul petitions the Word - not so that it may become, like it, free from contradiction - but so that it may see within its own compositeness the simplicity of pure being.

This is pertinent to the style of communication which has been associated with the idea of angels. Angels have generally been represented as simple, not composite, creatures - bodies without organs. As Milton puts it, they have an “uncompounded” ontology. As a consequence, they are imagined as communicating without language - directly, intuitively. Their lack of spatial multiplicity reflects their freedom from the complexities of time; they do not think in sequence or in grammatical form, but immediately grasp the whole of a picture, the essence of an idea. There is no gap between an angel’s thought and his expression, nor between the thoughts of one angel and their reception by another. In this spirit John Durham Peters describes angels as

⁸⁸ I should note that Augustine did not, like his flag-waving acolytes centuries later, oppose reason and revelation. Rather, in its right direction of the mind, reason prepares the way for revelation.

embodying the dream of perfect, soul-to-soul communication, which he reads as the “inner speech” of telepathy. Lacking material bodies, “angels understand each other in an instantaneous unfurling of interiorities. . . . They, of all beings, know no communication breakdown” (77).⁸⁹

Encouraging the reader to imitate both the communicative quality of the angels and their revelatory effect on the human, the “exercises” try to balance the relaxation of perception with its attentiveness. Such pop self-help staples as automatic writing, visualization, journaling, free association, and of course meditation abound. Faithful record-keeping organizes the experience, while list-taking provides a springboard for continuing dialogue. The universal approach is to reduce and separate usually integrated aspects of the creative process into a sequence of divination and reflection. The reader first a) brainstorms an itemized list of emotional hangups, desires, responses, etc. (*Ask Your Angels* calls this a “spiritual laundry list”), or b) writes in stream-of-consciousness form - often as a letter to her angel - to meditate on a particular concept, and then uses either of these as a prompt for visualizing her life in the presence of angels. The practical “can-do” aspects of writing are thus neatly segregated in time from the intellectual,

⁸⁹ In his *Essay on Human Understanding*, John Locke magnifies these differences between human and angelic communication by elaborating the impossibility of the first comprehending the nature of the second. “For that in our *Ideas*, as well of *Spirits*, as of other things, we are *restrained to those we receive from Sensation and Reflection*, is evident from hence, that in our *Ideas* of *Spirits*, how much soever advanced in Perfection, beyond those of *Bodies*, even to that of *Infinite*, we cannot yet have any *Idea* of the manner, wherein they discover their Thoughts to one another: Though we must necessarily conclude, that separate *Spirits*, which are *Beings* that have perfecter Knowledge, and greater happiness than we, must needs have also a perfecter way of communicating their Thoughts, than we have, who are fain to make use of corporeal Signs, and particularly Sounds, which are therefore of most general use, as being the best, and quickest we are capable of” (316). Angels may speak in the tongues of men, and when they do so endow it with an intimate, visionary glow whose only human correlate is prophecy. The tongues of angels, however, are inaccessible to men, for whom communication is an object of analysis and a problem for rational study. The physicality of sign and sound join us, but also stand in our way; as a consequence we are both aided by and vulnerable to the angels and their transparencies.

immaterial processes, whose place in the creative order becomes both mystified and mechanical.⁹⁰

The angel self-help books, then, serve as the reflexive expressions of the self-help genre as a whole. They allegorize the very idea of the reading process as an actualization of the will in all its freedom. The difference is that the intelligence of the angel is presented as performing the reading function with the readers as they read. The process of judgment is now in the hands of the universe; what instead the reader needs to learn is how to make the proper advances, how properly to become the subject-to-whom-angels-speak.

The best minds of my generation destroyed

*“ . . . who saw
When this creation was? Remember’st thou
Thy making, while the Maker gave thee being?
We know no time when we were not as now;
Know none before us, self-begot, self-raised
By our own quick’ning power.”*
(Milton’s Satan V, 856-860)

In this last section I want to return to the image and ideas posed by the opening epigram – the problem of sin in a world of individual determinations, and her creation in the absence of God. What happens to sin in a system that dispenses with the reality of evil? If evil is only the privation of good, a mirage, what becomes of the shadow’s bastard daughter? How does she exist in a world where the assertion of the self as a separate principle unto itself is not only wicked, but impossible?

⁹⁰ Different images may be chosen to represent these processes. There appears to be some dissension on the topic of “channeling”: whether when one hears the angels they are speaking to or through the subject. The less religiously inclined a book is the more likely that it will choose “channeling” as an expression of angelic communion. Much more ubiquitous is the language of spiritualized telecommunications: the telephone metaphor repeats throughout the genre, as well as the post-New Thought rhetoric of contact as “attuning” to angelic “frequencies” or “vibrations.”

The self-help books, strangely, are not silent on the issue of sin; they continue to make recourse to dogmatic morality even in the midst of their “whole boatload of sensitive bullshit,” to borrow Ginsberg. As equally as sin appears an illusion, illusion becomes a sin. In this the idea of auto-production, of the self’s tautological self-reckoning, self-love, and ultimately self-enclosure, threatens the sanctity of the infinite innerness they claim for absolute reality. The nature of the illusion is to make us believe in limited physical possibility – in fact to think in terms of the physical and its inherent friction and limitations. John Randolph Price, a former holder of “executive positions in business and industry,” writes in *Angel Energy* that the belief in scarcity (i.e. “whenever we experience a shortage of money”) is a “sin” because it violates our essential nature. “Sin means ‘falling short of the divine law’ – and we certainly do place ourselves outside the law of abundance when we fail to acknowledge that we are that principle in action” (140). As the reader *becomes* Peace in Howard’s book, so she *is* the principle of Abundance with whose angel she communes. The idea of sin depends on this universal inner divine as the essential nature which it particularly violates; Price says as much at the opening of the section (“The Angels and Prosperity”).⁹¹ Kierkegaard, in writing of original sin, also requires the universal presence of the natural human in each individual. In each of us sin begins anew – we are “participants” rather than “spectators” of Adam’s fall. In this participation infinite freedom is seen as a principle inside the human, rather than the idea outside it towards which it moves, and which gives it being.

This, at least, is the place where the angel books begin. Anxiety is overcome by our free powers of concentration. These books are aimed primarily at the would-be success, preaching that the law of cooperation overrides that of competition, that abundance and prosperity are

⁹¹ “In order to understand that unlimited abundance is a natural part of life on the third-dimensional plane, we must accept the fact that God is fully manifest as each individual being” (139).

matters for angelic attunement to “program,” that reality is merely a state of mind. The shift from dependence to grace, recovered memory to turning of the attention, looks to the present rather than the past, a move we might read as occurring from ghosts as haunting traumas to angels as attending crises. For it is the present that especially looks to the idea of soul as the arena of its particular self-questioning. Why do I judge the world as I do? On what basis do I act? How is it possible that I act? The crisis of the present is the crisis of the soul and its powers. Above all the present beseeches that power of the soul to enter the moment, without which there is no perceiving nor deciding. Thus questions about the attention’s own nature and potency beg the figure of the satan, as the present conjures the angel of the soul in order to know its own instantiation. How is the head turned? By whom, and towards what ends?

These problems of the mind and invocation of the soul are necessary to the devil and his negotiations. These unseen but identifiable presences are his domain and his source of strength. To quote Rudwin again on Satan in the literary imagination, “His kingdom is the human mind, through which he directs the affairs of this earth” (245). This is the master story, but it also provides a key to the theory. Satanic judgment remains angelic in its ability to access directly the invisible force behind material operations.⁹² For Satan as for Descartes, the mind yields the world. At stake, then, in answering the questions about the attention of the soul above, is a theory of reading. The figure of the great deceiver and of the fallen *attentio* requires a particular hermeneutic in order for the subject to discover an alternative activator of the mind’s powers. This hermeneutic is premised on a demonic anxiety that substitutes the problem of true and false

⁹² What distinguishes the intelligence of the fallen from the beatified angel, however, is that the devil cloaks this unseen presence in language. Whereas the angelic message seems to transcend language, Satan makes language seem transcendent. This is why the Faustus of the world seek power through access to codes - whether of alchemy or oratory (as in *The Devil and Daniel Webster*), in order to render their hidden forces transparent. Magic and art must become rationalized. The lesson of the devil-compact and its initiation into taboo mysteries, of course, is that such knowledge is beyond reason, and so for the human mind it means death. The only profit this language has for those

for that of the (recovery-appropriated) good and evil. Thus the problem of the source of evil is unveiled as a matter of existence, of *mis*-intepretation, and of the status of the very images with which we read ourselves.

The spiritualist obsession is, like angelic consciousness, global in nature. In line with the ecumenical project of the modernity/religion alliance, contemporary spiritualist treatments of Satan and of recovery exceed both Christianity and the United States. A good example is Australian Hassidic Rabbi Laibl Wolf (whose credentials also include an LL.B and an M.Ed in Psychology). Like other angel self-help experts, he also takes up the association of Satan with nonbeing. He does so, however, in order to elevate the demon's role in what could be called "spiritual recovery." In his "Meditation and Personal Growth" tapes *Angels, Souls & Dreams*, Wolf returns Satan to his original role as sanctioned tester, hired gun for God. Drawing particularly from Kabbala, he explains that Satan is an "angelic form that's much misunderstood. . . an angelic force totally subservient to God." He derives the the term *sata-n* from the Hebrew word *listo-n*, which means to test.

Sata-n is what creates for us the test of life. Bringing adversities or *seeming* adversities into our progressive pathways. But these adversities, of course, are only really opportunities to draw from our inner strength. So we find many stories, both in the *chomash* and [sic] of course you and I will experience these in our ordinary everyday lives. Of Sata-n playing tricks on us, making things look much harder than they really are. Sata-n also is the agency for punishment. Punishment of course is reminder, for - sins? But

who bargain away their souls (the premier figure of whom is the witch) is that, in Caliban's words, they know how to curse with it.

what is a sin? We're not using the antiquated notion. Sin is spelled S-I-N, and you know what that stands for: Self-Inflicted-Nonsense. So that's all it's all about. In fact, Sata-n is a mirage. But a very, very well-devised mirage that makes us seem to perceive obstacles when they are not.

Wolf identifies this mirage as “attitudinal response,” and goes on to advocate instead reinterpreting reality through the use of the “right eye” – a specific form of the “mind’s eye.” The right eye, as Wolf interprets Lubavitch theology, belongs to the right side of the cosmos which is giving, empathic, and nonjudgmental. In terminology deeply resonant of John Price’s angel books, “Looking through the right eye is what most neutralizes Sata-n. But we have to remember that Sata-n is really what you and I conjure up in our misinterpretation of a beneficent world.”

Unlike his treatment of the other fallen angels, Wolf’s reference to Satan is more than just an excursion; it helps him set up the method of “personal growth” for the Angel tape (part one of the trio) and his appropriation of angels from their conventional use in orthodox tradition. The self must be emptied of its own impositions, its categories of interpreting the world, in order to access the angelic forces (which he names as the four archangels, Michae-l, Gavrie-l, Orie-l, and Rafae-l). Paradoxically, this self-emptying is the recognition of an emptiness that is already there.⁹³ Contrasted with the fullness of ordinary life, the grand poseur-provocateur Sata-n names

⁹³ Kierkegaard writes of anxiety that it is begotten by a nothingness, the “actuality” of the spirit. It is an insight appropriate to the idea of immaterial substance: spirit relates to itself as anxiety, because it can neither do away with nor lay hold of itself. It is an “ambiguous power,” and hence one to which – as part spirit – we ambiguously relate. “Dreamily the spirit projects its own actuality, but this actuality is nothing, and innocence always sees this nothing outside itself” (41). External nothingness, a transcendence of nothingness, returns to us individually as sin. The return is a crisis, a “discrimen rerum” Kierkegaard calls it, for in it we grasp our own innocence, which no longer exists, since “innocence only comes into existence when annulled” (36). Like Satan, in this sin we see ourselves, and also know ourselves. The self-knowing subject thus inhabits two realities, which are also unrealities: the reality of the self-image, which as soon as it is externalized and apprehended becomes vacant to our actual experience, and

this seeming being and the purpose of its provisional existence. As in so many of the angel self-help books, the very idea of obstacle is revealed to be the obstacle. The will is really free, subject only to the limitations placed on it by thought. As Satan himself famously tells us, “The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a heav’n of hell, a hell of heav’n” (Milton I 254-5). All difficulty is merely illusion, brought about by the self’s judgments and (as in the case of the definition of sin) adherence to literal rather than spiritual law. Where the “sin” of good and evil consists in an act of bad will belonging to the whole self, the “sin” of true and false, being and non-being, results from the self-engendering quality of bad perception as an individual act – the supreme act of the individual, sufficient unto himself.

Thus self-making, the projection of the self as Sin whom we covet and abuse, emerges as the ultimate transgression. Writing against their own historical function as vehicles toward personal wealth and entrepreneurialism, the spiritualist self-help books - manifest in the specific sub-genre of books on how to contact your own guardian angel – strive to re-imagine their own self-begetting, at the same time that they prove themselves deeply suspicious of the very idea of self-begetting. Cloistered against the realm of the ego, these books’ soulful self-sanctification preaches angelically against the values that give them life. If the whole idea of self-improvement stems from the ability of imaginative experience to develop our intellect, these books prove themselves highly ambivalent about that experience. As an abstraction, an illusion, elusive and imagined and preying on our imaginations, their Satan sabotages the road to eternity. He questions the status of the free mind in a world of universal individuals who seek to know themselves by converting experience to ideas and who approach such knowledge as a communion with the infinite. He reflects back to these books their own self-authorizing status;

the reality of the knowing self, which anxiously contemplates the sin that is not-yet, that abyss where “freedom looks down into its own possibility” (61).

he is the projective displacement of the idea of projective displacement, the illusion of illusion, the mirage of mirage. He is the recovery of a nonexistent experience, and the selfhood of this nonexistence. In him the person is not concealed within memory, only to be retrieved by its exercise, but turned into a fantasy by doubt.

This is the great deception of the self-help books, that, grounded in a radical interiority and separation of mind and world apparent in the psychic schisms within, their personalism can never actually be personal, because they are so desperate for the kind of absolute subjective unity that appears only in abstraction. In reaching out for their angels, for spiritual dialogue, they reach for this principle. They seek the voice that organizes the chaos of individual existence in a multiple world and addresses that existence as a singularity. They seek truth, which is one, and discover it within a psychology that sees the cosmos in the personal soul. Yet the specificity of that soul eludes them; the power to say that these thoughts are *my* thoughts, that the “I” is anything more than thinking itself – of thinking happening - is guaranteed only by the angelic conversation and its distant intimacy. The interior angel is the sign of this power failure, the expression of what in such a system remains dependent on external grace and cannot be provided within. As celestial allegory the angel speaks our absent personhood, speaks it in the very act of attending. As fallen creature, as fraud, the angel claims this personhood for his own, baldly and without servitude. As much as we petition a spiritual endowment of our selfhood, we fear its claim.

4. The Necessary Fool

“I don’t understand a word!”

“Nor do I.”

Angelic intelligence reaches its defining limit in Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s 1946 *A Matter of Life and Death* (released in the U.S. as *Stairway to Heaven*). Confronted with earthly forms of expression too banal to be rationally apprehended, these two departed souls confess their failure. It appears the American pop song “Shoe Shoe Baby” has left them baffled.

The scene is heaven. A trial – trying at once British-American relations, true love, and the capacity of the universe to deliver justice to the individual. The premise of the romantic fantasy borrows from *Here Comes Mr. Jordan*, released a few years earlier. Like the American film the British one spins its plot from a heavenly mistake, committed by one of heaven’s more foolish messengers. But where in the first film the messenger has come too soon, impulsively seizing a soul before its time, in the second he comes too late. Lost in the British fog, the French angel excuses his error by blaming “your infernal English climate.” Damage has been done, of course. In the meantime the young man, a pilot for the RAF, has fallen in love – with an American WAC – and refuses to accompany Conductor #71 up to the pearly gates. Instead he convinces him to arrange a hearing. The pilot’s English physician, recently and precipitously departed, pleads his case in front of the heavenly court, defending his client against prosecuting counsel Abraham Ferlon – the first American revolutionary to be killed by a British bullet.

Powell and Pressburger originally made *A Matter of Life and Death* in response to a request by the head of MoI Films Divisions to ease tensions between Americans and British

during the war and lay positive groundwork for their relations in the impending post-war world order. The result was a narrative whose controversial climax adjudicated the matter of life and death in part by staging a confrontation between American and British civilizations.⁹⁴ The cosmic question of the possibility of true love devolves to a question of character and reliability, which in turn begs the question of circumstance, culture, and identity, which finally warrants the question of a young Brit's right to a stay of execution in order to marry a beautiful Boston-born girl. The process is murky; in fact early on the judge asks, "Why do you stress their nationalities?" But the enthusiasm of both attorneys and a vast audience of historical characters and contemporary servicemen and women overrides him. In one of the pivotal moments each lawyer procures a radio in order to play, respectively, the Voices of England and America 1945. The Voice of England mumbles incoherently about cricket and the weather. Everyone titters indulgently. The Voice of America sings out: "Shoe shoe shoe baby / ow! / Shoe shoe shoe baby

⁹⁴ In sync with the majority British and American opinion, the *New York Times* hailed the scene as a tour de force: "We haven't space to credit the literary wit of the heavenly 'trial' in which the right of an English flier to marry an American girl is discussed, with all of the subtle ruminations of a cultivated English mind that it connotes" (see Crowther). But the reaction in countries other than these two was not so enthusiastic. Carlos Diaz Maroto of Spain condemned it as naïve propaganda that prevents a merely good film from becoming a masterwork: "El duelo dialéctico que se establece hacia el final de la película entre acusador y defensor es de una trivialidad e ingenuidad portentosas, e invalida el valor de una película que si no hubiese optado tanto por decir *grandes cosas* y se hubiese quedado en una simple y sencilla historia de amor sobrenatural, hubiera devenido en una obra maestra de este maravilloso subgénero. De este modo, lo conseguido es una mera *buena película*, lastrada por su primitiva inocencia ideológica" (see *Powell and Pressburger Pages*). The USSR reaction more directly rejected the politics rather than the fact of the movie's propagandistic mission. In Sue Harper's and Vincent Porter's excellent article on the Muscovite view of the film, they explain this as a response to the pointedly aestheticist bent of the film's "mensaje": "What needs to be stressed is the complexity and the coherence of the ideological case made by Powell and Pressburger. *A Matter of Life and Death* is important because it represents a bid for intellectual power on behalf of a small elite intelligentsia. Powell and Pressburger are attempting to formulate, for old-style Tories, a response to possible post-war reforms. In *A Matter of Life and Death* they summon to their aid a range of cultural and literary resources, the most prominent of which is that of the English Romantic movement. In their attitude to individuality, history, and art, Powell and Pressburger replicate the ideas of Burke, Blake, Wordsworth and Keats. These writers were well assimilated into British cultural life; but here they were given an additional conservative 'gloss'. In *A Matter of Life and Death* Peter Carter's subjectivity is structured so as to embrace the whole of culture and human history. With the closing of his physical eye before the operation, we are granted access to his "mind's eye", which contains both monochrome and Technicolor worlds, as well as the collected wisdom of Plato, Sophocles, and Bunyan. The film displays Peter's subconscious as the fertile location of that individual psychic power which provides social cohesion. Its propaganda aim is to suggest that what binds Britons and Americans together is their common history and their shared definition of individualism and culture." Furthermore it is unlikely that, in addition to their rejection of the Archers' individualism, the Soviets had any taste for the angels.

/ Bye bye baby / Your papa's off to seven seas." The response is dumbfoundedness; no established national joke accounts for this. It is a moment of triumph for the defense – which is to say, for “life” over death – the moment when the sweepingly nationalistic prosecutor admits he cannot fathom his own country's self-declarations, some centuries advanced. The equivalent of even angels weeping, the dumbstruckness of the celestial legal system scores a point for true love against prejudice.

In the process of making direct social and political judgments the heavenly bureaucracy must become naïve. A stranger to culture (entering GI's ask, “Do you have USO shows here?” “No.” “Okay we'll stay.”) the supernatural world can encounter it only as an innocent. Consequently, angel texts seeking to comment on timely issues discover in their angels this communication of speechlessness. The separation of speech from knowledge arises specifically from the contact between angelic and human worlds under conditions of pressure for both. On its own the celestial world's thinking and power are one – producing a logical omnipotence in which plans effortlessly work themselves, and laws and acts conform perfectly. But when it must wrestle with the earthly world and its luscious senselessness,⁹⁵ the heavenly adopts a necessary stance of unknowingness. It is from this position of equating worldly ignorance with cosmic truth that heaven is finally able to speak its revelations. In this way the mediating figures of angels and departed souls act as the Voices of Justice, essentially positioned to question a culture's self-definitions and the very language of its self-understanding. They tell us that in regards to the “common” currency of earthly civilization, the power of not understanding underlies the power of judging. For it is precisely the common that the angelic naïf cannot know. As unconditioned intelligences, separated from culture and experience, angels identify

those things which they cannot intuit as conventions purely - conventions that exert a coercive and normalizing force. It is their particular task as angels to help their charges overcome these conventions, to wrestle with those things that cannot translate to universals yet are positioned to usurp their role.

Caught between the world of absolute laws and that of arbitrary nonsense, angels struggle with the human to empower the middle terrain between thought and the senses. This terrain is a realm of fantasy unique to the human, but one which – metaphysically – calls out to the inhuman for its realization. How the inhuman reaches it makes a difference. As we saw in the first chapter, announcing angels simply disclose their intelligence, hailing the prophet-subject by creating a momentary but profound chaos that ultimately assimilates new ideas to established structures. Such collapse of intelligibility appears differently in stories of angelic wrestling. In these stories chaos is presented as part of the fundamental order of life itself. In its encounter with the angel the subject wrestles with the nature of mortal existence - with life and death as a matter of justice and desire. As a consequence the subject must be relieved of his will rather than his despair, a discharge that pits angel and human in opposition to each other – in form, though not in interest. For this is an educative wrestling match, occurring between teacher and student instead of rival and competitor. Beholding in this struggle the fire of pure self-interest attempting to secure itself in an intelligible order, we find in these narratives of senselessness and suffering a supremely individualist but also communitarian gratification.

A Matter of Life and Death contains many of the semantic elements of classic angel narrative. 1) There is the angelic presentation of the book – where Conductor #71 (Marius Goring) makes the pilot Peter Carter (David Niven) a present of a book on chess at the close of

⁹⁵ This irrationality is actually fully sensual, testifying to the inability of separated intelligences to comprehend that which exists only in relation to the senses, at the same time that they are drawn to it in their encounter with the

the film. 2) At the very beginning his neurologist Dr. Reeves references angelic vision: “I see it all clearly and at once as in a poet’s eye.” Subsequently we discover that Peter Carter is *the* Peter Carter, an up-and-coming poet. 3) In their first meeting Reeves asks Carter if he believes in the survival of the human personality after death, a belief that – as we saw in Zoroastrian cosmology – accompanies the belief in angels. 4) One of the more magical and commented-on moments in the film occurs when the angel stops time in order to have his conversation with Carter (“We are talking in space, not time”), a sensation that would be echoed later during John Travolta’s dance scene in *Michael*. 5) The issue of crisis so familiar from the first two chapters also appears in *A Matter*. The brain surgeon tells Dr. Reeves of planning Carter’s brain operation (which occurs simultaneously with the trial in heaven), “There’s no crisis for such a thing. Any day will do.” To which Reeves responds, “No it won’t. I’ll tell you why I think it won’t and why there is a crisis.”⁹⁶ Heaven may stop time, but it also insists on it, in keeping with its characterization as the site of planning and destiny. “Your time was up,” Carter’s angel explains. 6) But above all, and significant for the angelic predisposition to chosenness and its engagement with the problem of personal existence, the film assures the power of the “uncommon man” (the poet, the one saved from certain death, even if by something so capricious as a soggy climate) to decide his fate. Singled out by accident, Carter seeks to claim this exceptionality in the form of an indulgence for his special circumstances. The distinctions between a judgment based on eternal rules and one that acknowledges exceptions come to a head in the trial scene, where Ferlon admonishes Reeves to respect the “eternal law of the universe,” and Reeves responds, “This is a court of justice, not a court of law.”

human. As the conductor angel says, “We are starved for Technicolor up there.”

⁹⁶ The movie bills itself as presenting a fantasy “which exists only in the mind of a young airman whose life has been shaped by war.” The tension between scientific, psycho-neurological explanations (Pressburger’s brother was

This pivotal conflict between universal law and the concept of individual justice is set up from the beginning. Carter and the angel debate whether he must accompany his psychopomp to heaven – which he must, according to the law of both heaven and earth. “Yes, but what is law?” Carter asks. “Law is law,” the angel shrugs. “Yes, but law is based on reason,” the poet replies. The distinction he makes is not a trifling one, and the main aesthetic thrust of the movie borrows its fire from it. Because it is answerable to reason, justice privileges thinking over knowledge. Thus narratives of justice – unlike narratives of law - adopt a confrontational rather than a deductive approach to experience. The angelic trial is the grand performance of this confrontation.

In his essay on “all-in wrestling” Roland Barthes identifies the attention to the “individual” as part of the wrestling world’s theory of justice, and its quasi-divine impulse. The infraction of isolated laws to accommodate the individual moment bends us toward the sublime threshold. This is the origin of the spectacular nature of the sport – the Jacob’s ladder implicit in the angelic wrestling match. Justice, we perceive, pertains to what we see, rather than to how we play the game:

But what wrestling above all is meant to portray is a purely moral concept: that of justice . . . The idea of “paying” is essential to wrestling, . . . and the crowd is jubilant at seeing the rules broken for the sake of a deserved punishment. Wrestlers know very well how to play up to the capacity for indignation of the public by presenting the very limit of the concept of Justice, this outermost zone of confrontation where it is enough to infringe the rules a

a neurologist) and metaphysical, fantastic ones is brilliantly handled, and heightens the affective play within the audience, who by it are made to yearn for the fantastic, rather than taking it for granted.

little more to open the gates of a world without restraints. . . Justice is therefore the embodiment of a possible transgression; it is from the fact that there is a Law that the spectacle of the passions which infringe it derives its value. (21-2)

This chapter is devoted to describing the homologies between the angelic trial as it is presented in Powell and Pressburger's classic, and the idea of wrestling as Barthes understands it and as it leads to the deployment of wrestling angels in contemporary culture. In suggesting "a world without restraints," the transgressive, even criminal confrontation between angelic and human orders provides a forum for direct cultural critique within a metaphysical dramatization of abstract ideas. Justice, Love, Hate, Fear, Forgiveness, these are as much players in the game of wrestling as they are principles that judge concrete issues and events. If some of the critical reception of *A Matter of Life and Death* sought to adjudicate between the story of True Love and that of post-World War II international rivalry, it failed then to read the film's essential project, and the thing that makes it so interesting. The story of rules and roles in contest is inseparable from the fantasy and the romance; indeed, as Barthes points out, such a contest provokes the entry of the otherworldly. The conflict between the "uncommon" and the "common," so often allegorized within stories of individual exceptionality overcoming the social order, invokes the incursion of the sacred and the supernatural. In order to create and establish new norms or codes of conduct the text must affirm the will and freedom of the individual who creates them, an affirmation that calls upon a purer power outside of and capable of challenging the worldly. This power is both agent and witness, and blesses its audience as participant spectators and actors within the world to come.

In this chapter I am going to look at the representation of angelic trials – or, in more

traditional terms, of wrestling with angels – in two very different contemporary texts. CBS’s hit drama *Touched by an Angel* and Tony Kushner’s award-winning Broadway play, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, would appear to set the poles in a spectrum of angel-appeal. Where Martha Williamson’s TV show launches a broad-based, “non-denominational” Christian emphasis on self-surrender to God’s love, Kushner’s duo of plays, *Millenium Approaches* and *Perestroika*, provides a secular-friendly appropriation of Kabbalistic spiritualism, historical critique, and homoerotic melodrama in the service of a return to 1930’s Leftist politics. In the first text the angel is the divine luminary, in the second, a titillating flop. In their respective uses of the angel as voice of truth and foil for truth, then, earnestness balances camp to define the extension of the past decade’s angelic consumption in relation to social issues. This cultural hyperbola widens its reach around two poles: the naïve appropriation of the angelic as the means of guaranteeing free will through the manifestation of a foundational and unconstructed truth, and the fabulous supplanting of such truth through the manifestation of a derivative and constructed image, with which the will must, nevertheless, grapple. In the stretch between *Touched by an Angel* and *Angels in America* the wrestling angel alights on strikingly different domains of power.

This is not to say however that the two texts are at war. Like *A Matter of Life and Death*, both *Touched by an Angel* and *Angels in America* narrate a story of crime and forgiveness, specifically crime that involves the problem of national identity. Where Peter violates earthly law by falling in love with an American and heavenly law by surviving an impossible air crash, Kushner’s and CBS’s texts also involve themselves with the individual violation of larger codes of law. In the case of the latter texts, however, the individual must conform to that law. Both are much more concerned with self-interest as a threat to community and the relationships that

sustain it, particularly insofar as it affects a community based on difference. In this regard the two texts reach some sort of political accord. For instance, one of the more interesting of *Touched by an Angel*'s episodes deals with a retired military officer who must learn to accept his gay son, and Kushner is as invested in a communality based on love and tolerance as Williamson's devoutly sentimental series. In fact it is precisely this investment in an ethics of difference and multiplicity that constitutes each text's drama of justice and sense of personal trial. Where they differ is in their treatment of their angels, and with that their attitudes towards consensus and desire. Where *Touched by an Angel* ultimately seeks to affirm the mechanisms of consent through the individualizing touch of the unconditioned angel, *Angels in America* is far more ambivalent. In fact, it is ambivalence that is its final guide, not the naïve. In rejecting its own angel, the play puts aside the possibility of grounding the relationship between the individual interest and the law of the group in any principle or structure. Not understanding begins and ends with not understanding; the wrestling match between desire and consent produces a blessing, but one that remains unnamed.

What places Kushner's and Williamson's shows together is their casting these issues of identity, trial, and belonging within a hermeneutic of death, specifically terminal illness. The issue of inexorable determinism, apparent in the counter-mechanicism of the first chapter and anxiety about free will in the second, rears its head here in its most agonistic form. In a context of group, rather than individual, sovereignty, encounter and conversation become all-out wrestling. For this reason, all of *TBA*'s weekly protagonists and *Angels*' central characters must learn to grasp their own identity through the other. It is a struggle that is both mortal - demanding that we submit our individual autonomy to the encounter, and erotic - promising redemption of that autonomy through love. In other words, in order to exert power socially the

individual identity must become active by engaging his own immortality, the judgment of one's self through the unprejudiced eyes of death. This is why the threat of dying is so central to each of these texts, apparent in *Angels* in the dominating presence of AIDS and in *TBA* through the persistent thematics of terminal illness in general (notably cancer). Metaphorical treatments of terminal illness also about, however. In Kushner's play, Reaganism and its associated doctrines and in *TBA*, addiction, loss of faith, and prejudice, all take on the role of a death sentence.

The pluralistic world of conscious difference, which is a world of conscious struggle, provokes this fascination with individual doom: in a system that sets up generalities as a mode of social understanding the effort to claim exception (to claim the blessing) requires a personal trial. Just as the idea of the individual pre-determined death sparks the battle for justice in Powell and Pressburger's British classic, so does it provide the terrain for the ethical and political wrestlings that drive American stories of angelic trials today. And, just as topically the struggles of the doomed individual makes possible a meditation on the fate of the balance of nationalisms and power in an emerging global order in *A Matter of Life and Death*,⁹⁷ so do these struggles seem necessary for *Angels in America*'s and *Touched by an Angel*'s commentary on identity politics and national life during the global-conscious post-Cold War era. The personal confrontation with one's own singularity - in leading to the realization that any universal connection must pass through death - is suggestive in times seeking to comprehend and judge new structures of

⁹⁷ The most striking moment of this occurs during the selection of the jury. With a presumption of balance and fairness, the jury of six is chosen based on national diversity of peoples who are neither British nor American. The result – citizens of France, Germany, Russia, China, Punjab state, and of course Ireland – convinces Dr. Reeves that perhaps it is in his client's interest to choose a jury of Americans rather than of former rivals and colonized countries. The joke mounts when the new jury, all of American citizens, reveals itself as members of each of these same ethnicities (with the sole substitution of a Mr. Jackson, descendent of Africa, for the Indian). Unlike Carlos Maroto, footnoted above, I would argue that the political allusions do not weaken what would otherwise be a charming fantasy-romance; on the contrary, the fantasy-romance via a story of angelic visitation facilitates an exploration and critique of a changing postwar international order. This objective may have proved less compelling for a Spanish movie critic, however, since much "topical" storytelling holds direct interest primarily for those to whom it is overtly relevant.

relations among competing groups. Necessarily a question of mediating general and particular identities within a competitive context, the preoccupation with justice manifests itself expressly within fantasies of immortality and otherness. The individual and the law must reckon with love and death.

Such reckoning takes its most potent and alluring form in regards to the topic of race, and it is this particular aspect that I focus my analysis on in this chapter. Both Tony Kushner's drama and Martha Williamson's hit series present fantasies of difference and community involving the differences in religion, gender, nation, political affiliation, and sexual orientation, but it is in their treatment of what is still in this country probably the most complex of internal differences, that each reveals its topical project. While Kushner offers up a "gay fantasia," gay life and culture functions more as an affective influence than a subject of struggle. In *Touched by an Angel*, the religious urge is the hunger that drives the show and only rarely itself an object of analysis. In other words, the two forms of identity that most obviously define each text do so as modes of expression, rather than as primary issues of engagement.⁹⁸ Each is the presumed language and system of values within which the audience judges the stories of individual trials. These stories range across a wide ground, but it is arguably in relation to the issue of race – especially African-American - that they express the greatest tension and the most forceful treatment of justice. Race in both texts becomes a privileged site to work out problems of self-determination posed by other issues and in other ways. In the *TBA* episodes on lynching and *Angel*'s depiction of its designated black characters, we see race acting as a kind of "terminal

⁹⁸ The character of Joe, a Mormon who learns to accept his repressed homosexuality only during the course of the play, is an obvious exception. But his difficulty functions more as a foil for the problems of the openly gay characters who must wrestle with subtler and in some ways more challenging angels. And in *Touched by an Angel*, the angel Monica rejects pietistic structures for the central mode and reigning idea that gives them (and the show) life: "I'm not talking about religion, I'm talking about God." Talking about religion suggests talking about something concrete; talking about God could more accurately be described as talking through God, talking through the gesture towards God, as God is supremely that which is unknowable.

identity” that at the same time uniquely enables personal agency through an angelic substitution. The black characters, we find, speak more as divine messengers than the angels themselves, being endowed with a profoundly judicial grasp of historical tragedy and melodrama. In Williamson’s and Kushner’s distinct treatments of race and death, their respective angels of order and excess appear in the most distress and find their worthiest combatant. By participating in trials involving race in America, the wrestling angel isolates racial truths as essential crucibles of American current, public, and historical identity. These are truths that like the divine are knowable only negatively: in the moment of foolishness, in the absence of consent, and through understandings that cannot – in fact must not – be understood.

Part I: Apollo

In his essay “On Dreams, That They Are God-Sent,” the first century Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria describes three kinds of wisdom. He does so through allegorizing a sacred genealogy, identifying the first three fathers of the people of Israel with each kind. Abraham is the learning that comes of guidance, Isaac, “self-instruction,” and Jacob, the attainment of virtue born of “industry and practice, in accordance with which were his labors of wrestling and contention.” Philo uses this moment to distinguish Jacob when he is called son of his grandfather Abraham, the student, from Jacob after he has earned the new name Israel and is called son of his father Isaac, the natural.

Philo’s exegesis is intended to make a point about “the nature of things,” that is, to suggest how the practice of learning becomes the inheritance of being, and the difference this makes in a narrative of naturalization, rights, and mobility. He points out that Abraham is a migrant, a stranger in a strange land, whereas Isaac inherits the land he was born in. Primarily

stories of contract and property rights, the chapters of Genesis dealing with Jacob's early manhood describe the condition of his own wandering, including God's promise that his offspring shall cover all the corners of the earth and his labors toward this end, and his consequent return home to become the leader of a people. For Philo's diasporic cosmopolitanism, these struggles and eventual transformation make Jacob the leader of *the* people (or rather make *his* people the people): he is the nominal founder of the "race of wisdom," the "inheritor of all the parts of the world," and "a common good to all men." Jacob's status as "common good" is directly tied to his transformation from student to natural through his revelations of the stairway to heaven during his flight into exile and his wrestling with the unknown man who appears to him during his return.

As it appears in the stories surrounding Jacob, angelic activity is twofold. The first takes place in his dream-vision of the ladder of God, with angels ascending and descending. The context is one of a classic annunciation – a divine address honoring the recipient as sacred patriarch- or matriarch-to-be in the form of covenant and promise. The psychological imagery supports this, the ladder of imagination reaching up between the individual and the universal. What sets this instance apart, however, is that the Lord directly gives his message. Our attention thus is drawn to the angels as images, not messengers; we apprehend these supernatural backup dancers purely physically, in the spirit of a distinction once made by Virginia Woolf's in her essay on the cinema: "For some reason, the shape of a thought is more appealing than the thought itself." What is not as clear is the relationship this experience has to the second of Jacob's angels, the one who appears as a man and wrestles with him through the night, on the eve of his reconciliation with his brother Esau.⁹⁹ This is a trial for Jacob, rather than a

⁹⁹ Technically Jacob's second angel encounter is the morning before the night wrestling. He approaches Menahim after covenanting with Laban, his uncle, and there meets two angels. He declares the spot holy, and begins

beholding. In this scene he becomes for us a figure of suffering which – unlike Job – he has brought upon himself in his willingness to play the game of covenants and blessings. For Jacob is as much hero as prophet. His angelic experience is one of risk and daring as well as imaginative perception, and his own passion and ambition fuel the dramas of his history.¹⁰⁰ He is a creature of his own self-interest and willful self-assertion who at the same time fathers the larger good. This ambivalence in his historical role makes itself felt in his struggle with the unifying agent of the angel.

I have chosen to begin with the drama of Jacob because it establishes the spectatorial nature of the power play between the common and the uncommon apparent in so many stories of human and angelic wrestling. Jacob is emotional and melodramatic, the sympathetic criminal who usurps his brother's power and then is forced to earn it. The character of Roy Cohn in *Perestroika* refers to him (in what is also an appreciative self-description) as “a ruthless motherfucker, some bald runt” who “laid hold of his birthright with his claws and his teeth” (81). Jacob is a creature of nature and nature's elemental struggle for survival, yet he is also diligent and patient – a visionary and seer, as well as a hot-blooded actor. Redacted before the modern conception of justice, the story of Jacob appeals to us in our efforts to represent it. In his struggle with the angelic other – with his own inheritance and potential being – Jacob demonstrates the necessarily imaginative component of the attainment of covenant and blessing, and the divine underpinnings of the social order.

Touched by an Angel reveals its investment in pure nature almost immediately through the earnest transparency of its style. The show's flat characterization, forced plotline, and plain-

negotiations toward the encounter he most anticipates, the meeting between him and his brother. It is the night before this, amid great fear and distress (Gen. 32.7), that he wrestles with the anonymous man.

dealing camerawork have provoked the censure of critics, but then it has never been interested in artistic criticism. Ignored by the Emmy's for a decade, CBS's religious mainstay nevertheless garners popular awards, cult-like fan devotion, and, in 1998-1999, status behind only *ER* as the top ranked TV drama. I would argue that the show's resilient popularity exists not despite but in part because of its lack of artistic virtuosity. The show is not unsophisticated – in fact its cinematography, editing, sets and costume design are almost sensuously smooth – but its affect is devotedly ingenuous. Like much dramatic children's television, it is characterized by a pure exhibitionism of character and feeling, expressive in its technical obsession with the dissolve. The bitter dismissals of God and self, breakdown confessions, and inspired beholdings all aim for a self-evidence and totality of presentation common to the didactic arts. That which is fully exhibited cannot leave us titillated or provoked by the thought that there is something more than what is put before us, or that any character is less than utterly honest about their nature - even that aspect of their nature marked by deception or denial. The drama thus becomes an object of intuition, not analysis, predicated on the disarming power of the naïve.

In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant argues that “an art of being *naïf*” is a contradiction. No art can sustain this quality except for a moment, following which “the veil of dissembling art” is drawn over it again. *Touched by an Angel* seems to choose, in its embrace of the naïve as a mode of its entirety, nature over art. Produced by the same network that pioneered the latest round of “reality TV,” the show derives its adulating reception from this feeling of pure presentation, of a uniform wholeness, that induces the idea of the real.

Naïveté is the breaking forth of the ingenuousness originally

natural to humanity, in opposition to the art of disguising oneself

¹⁰⁰ He is, for instance, born clutching the heel of the brother whose title he will later usurp, and upon meeting Rachel, the woman for whom he will labor fourteen years under contract, he kisses her immediately, lifts his eyes to

that has become a second nature. We laugh at the simplicity that is as yet a stranger to dissimulation, but we rejoice the while over the simplicity of nature that thwarts that art. We await the commonplace manner of artificial utterance, thoughtfully addressed to a fair show, and lo! nature stands before us in unsullied innocence – nature that we were quite unprepared to meet . . . But that something infinitely better than any accepted code of manners, namely purity of mind, (or at least a vestige of such purity,) has not become wholly extinct in human nature, infuses seriousness and reverence into this play of judgement. (202)

In the reverse traffic of emotions occasioned by the naïve within art we move from laughter to tears, from what Kant earlier names animal “gratification” to spiritual “self-esteem” for the “humanity within us.” Here we find a Jacob’s ladder illustrating the motion of our relation, as spectators, to the idea of the human as transcending the conventions and codes of social judgment.¹⁰¹ The opacity of “manners” bows before the self-evidence of “nature.” This motion is certainly mimicked in *Touched by an Angel*’s frequent transformation of its protagonist from sneering skeptic, ensconced in the attitude and paraphernalia of their job or position in society, to humble believer, “nakedly exposed” under the light of angelic illumination. But the show’s emotional exhibitionism also plays this up for its audience as each episode shifts its “style-less” appropriation of the naïve from within the poetics of the sentimental.¹⁰²

heaven, and weeps.

¹⁰¹ It is significant in this regard that here Kant chooses theater as his example, both because it is overtly a collective production, and also because German theater at the end of the eighteenth century self-consciously defined itself as a *national* art form.

¹⁰² Friedrich Schiller makes a fast distinction between the naïve and the sentimental as opposite aesthetics, pivoting on the well-worn distinction between nature and art, respectively. Nature simply expresses itself, where art seeks to

In effecting this move from the perspective of experience to that of innocence, the educative project of the script becomes crucial. For it is through its commitment to showcasing the innocence within social codes that the show makes its particularly angelic plea for social justice. In this the show recalls Nietzsche's description of Apollinian tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy* as the glorification of the human will, which represents itself through the ordered and restrained expression of human suffering. Apollo's sense of order does not take away his feeling for art, however. Nietzsche categorizes such expression as naïve, the dream-induced voice of the Olympian magic mountain. "Where we encounter the 'naïve' in art, we should recognize the highest effect of Apollinian culture – which always must first overcome an empire of Titans and slay monsters, and which must have triumphed over an abysmal and terrifying view of the world and the keenest susceptibility to suffering through recourse to the most forceful and pleasurable illusions" (43). Williamson's melodrama discovers its polemic in just this force and pleasure, in the slaying of the monsters within the self which feed the social Titans. The illusion is the angel, whose status as a fantasy that yet "correlatively"¹⁰³ promises truth functions as the supreme naïve conviction of providence, in which justice is guaranteed by love.

represent or discover nature. Schiller uses this to contrast the art of modernity from that of antiquity, and to name the exceptionality of the moment in which he is writing. My thoughts on this have more in common with Friedrich Schelling than with Schiller. He situates Schiller's discussion of the naïve and the sentimental within a theory of modernity as a form of consciousness, rather than a period. As a consequence Schelling argues that in fact the former can only be named from within the purview of the latter, just as the object exists only through the apprehension of the subject. He writes, "Perhaps no modern, Shakespeare included, has attained the perfect indifference of the naïve and the sentimental (for, as I have already remarked, the naïve actually appears naïve only from the perspective of the sentimental). The basis or point of departure here is always the juxtaposition of the subject and the object, that is, the element of the sentimental, except that in the object itself it is reduced to naivete" (93). Schiller, and Schelling in agreement with him, sees the naïve as devoted to an aesthetics of the object, where the sentimental belongs to the realm of the subject. As we can see, Schelling uses this distinction to undo the argument that the two modes must be (in fact can be) exclusive of each other.

¹⁰³ The word is Nietzsche's. About the relation between truth and fantasy in Apollinian tragedy he writes, "The Homeric 'naivete' can be understood only as the complete victory of Apollinian illusion: this is one of those illusions which nature so frequently employs to achieve her own ends. The true goal is veiled by a phantasm: and while we stretch out our hands for the latter, nature attains the former by means of our illusion" (44). I liken the harmony between nature and individual human to the concept of providence – which did not, in the culture which Nietzsche was describing – properly exist.

Touched by an Angel tells the story of naïve education on two levels. The overall plot follows the adventures of Monica (Roma Downey), a young intern caseworker angel, as she is guided in her tentative but sincere efforts by Tess (Della Reese), a crabby but tender wise-woman angel, and aided by Andrew (John Dye), the mild-mannered angel of death. Over the course of the series Monica matures from a neophyte who is always asking questions of Tess about what to do - much as a child does, to an angel of stature who asks questions of the humans from a position of knowing what not to do. In much later seasons, as Monica's finesse develops with her changing eyebrows and hairstyles, she is even given an intern for herself to train, the young Gloria (played by Valerie Bertinelli), also newly birthed into her role of messenger of God. (Williamson's program is consistent in depicting angels as beings unto themselves, not former humans.) Monica's evolution towards greater confidence in her own stature parallels that of the show. When it debuted with uncertain promise in 1994, *TBA* was much more lighthearted about its purpose, funnier, self-reflexive, quick to play with its then oddball premise. In one early episode, for instance, Andrew – having just been hung up on by a telephone operator after he mentioned that he didn't have a last name – comments, "this three-dimensional living is very, very limiting." Andrew himself gains in prominence as the series matures; in the first season he doesn't even appear in the opening widescreen credits showing the angels in action. Later each episode will open with the famous prairie-rich image of the three angels sauntering towards us, hair blowing in the wind, to the tune of Reese singing "Walk with You."

A walk with the angels requires a similar openness to the elements. And this openness comprises the second educative storyline that *Touched by an Angel* follows – the repeated need of humans to confront "nature" as only the angelic stranger can articulate it, in order to exchange skepticism for faith. The angelic mind that knows innately, rather than by experience, is the best

and perhaps only occasion for the particular kind of education the human protagonists require – so the show tells us. The time collapse of this “education” is significant: where Monica’s episode-by-episode tutorship follows a simple development model, that of the humans is epiphanic. Here we are looking at a different image and idea of experience – one that is revelatory and absolute, and one where, as we saw in chapter two, image and idea are one. In a sense the human subjects are being asked by the naïve angel to bypass their fidelity to learned knowledge and enter into a contract with truth – as it is given by the angel. Such experience opens up a the possibility of what can only be called moral feeling. Monica matures; her cases convert. Because of this the angelic trial requires their participation physically, melodramatically, and with profound emotional display.

“Here in this rose, is my case.” So Dr. Reeves puts forward to the jury a tear shed by the young WAC for her poet, captured by the conductor angel on the petals of a vibrant red rose. It is brought before the high heavenly court as evidence of Peter Carter’s prowess and ability to produce true love. In it we see the man’s struggle with the angel, even in his absence. And we also see his passions. As Roland Barthes says of such grandiloquent spectacle, “In wrestling, as on the stage in antiquity, one is not ashamed of one’s suffering, one knows how to cry, one has a liking for tears” (16). By insisting on the tear as self-evident truth and the armature of just defense, angelic melodrama recasts suffering as the supreme expression of faith and conviction. Physicalized emotion becomes an engagement with the divine and a demonstration of our covenant with it. In the absence of a clerical or ministerial authority capable of articulating this engagement as logos (and such an absence is quite marked in Williamson’s series), it is rendered through angelic self-presentation. As Philo says in “On Flight and Finding,” the angel is the “convicter of the soul.” Thus the trials of faith become sacralized as a struggle between the

individual will and its indeterminate nature (the angel in the Jacob story never reveals his name), and through the subsequent socialization of that power through the angelic blessing (though the fight is not won and the opponent remains unknown, Jacob has obtained his new name and history is begun anew).

In this context the angels must appear *within* the experience of trial. So, in *Touched by an Angel*, they participate in the human drama as human characters, the new teacher or journalist or prison guard complete with letters of recommendation, career-specific knowledge, uniforms, and a car. (Tess's beat-up red convertible – which in one episode she gives to a transportation-lorn character – is for a few seasons her emblem.) The final revelation requires this veil of humanization. As Monica instructs her new intern caseworker angel Gloria in the opening of the 2001 season, “Oh, and never let anyone know you are an angel. For it says here [she awkwardly opens the Bible and reads from it] ‘for so have some entertained angels unawares.’” At each episode's end, the announcing angel glows, revealing her status and the words of truth which her light enables the protagonist to see, clearly and distinctly.¹⁰⁴ In earlier episodes the angel even changes her clothes, appearing in luminous white evening dress. The hero reflects back and all of a sudden he perceives his condition angelically, as part of a temporal totality, and thus perceives that even in his misery the angels have been there “all along.” The outbreak of revelation almost always occurs in tears – sometimes a single tear – which testifies to the transforming acceptance of divine love and truth. Both climax and conclusion present an unabashed display of human emotional suggestibility, reeducating the subject from skepticism - reminiscent of Jacob's challenges to paternal authority - to a childlike wisdom (apparent in Monica's episodal refrain, “God loves you”) and the practice of faith. In this wrestling, which appears as a tense engagement with love from within the subject's emotional exile, a new

compact of connection and participation is defined and accepted, and – like the tear in Jacob’s thigh – his tears are its seal.¹⁰⁵

The liking for tears seems the essential drive behind *Touched by an Angel* – as basic, fundamental, and natural as the death drive or the sex drive. Within fifteen minutes even a suspicious viewer may find that tears begin to pour – superficially, but inevitably, and completely separate from whatever judgments she, in her shrewdness, might make. Skepticism, indeed, holds no power against faith. Whether in those episodes involving children – lost to terminal illness, lost to the integrated family structure, or just plain lost – or in those dedicated to the drama of the child in adult’s clothing, the feeling of pity (and by extension of self-pity) seizes hold. Perhaps the drive to tears is so mesmerizing because it appeals to our sense of the natural rather than the primitive; that is, it is a drive that exists only as an effect of civilization. Or, to put it better, where the fire to sex and death grows and takes shape in competition with civilizing impulses, the charged expression of “nature” serves as the ideal towards which civilization itself is driven. In this way the sentimental passions define the experience of the innocent outside culture as the moral ground on which that culture depends. They return us always to ourselves, feeling ourselves at the very center of the struggles to define the social world that we inhabit and, in our divine revelations, transcend.

This idea that questions of the social in essence compute to a theory of individual psychic experience and display is far from new. Conrad, in *Heart of Darkness*, holds an entire civilizing

¹⁰⁴ It is worth recalling that Philo translates Israel, normally taken to mean “prince of God,” as “he who sees.”

¹⁰⁵ After this maudlin exercise the angelic tableau reassembles, always, around the image of a white dove. It is as tasteless a device as it was in Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (but then *Touched by an Angel* is not interested in taste), yet in part because of this it serves the function of collapsing the presentation of infinity back to a particular thing, a unifying sign. If the tear functions as this sign in relation to the human, the dove brings us back to the angelic vision. We look up with the angels, and then the camera moves back and we view the angels together vanishing, now fully transparent. Thus the angels of Jacob’s ladder moving up and down between earthly and holy anticipate the convergence of physical act and inner law, as it appears in his wrestling with the angel. It is this convergence that in each episode releases the dove, and unites the human with the heavenly worlds.

project hostage through the portrayal of an individual psyche in dissolution. Ellison's approach in *Invisible Man* is not far afield, though his psychic prototype is anonymous rather than impenetrable. In either case nature commands its own language, which both narrators find themselves unable to speak, except through the discourse of the ironic. These are high modernist texts, responding to histories of racism and imperialism with psychological self-consciousness, and an almost mournful sense of double-bind. *Heart of Darkness* and *Invisible Man* represent perhaps the most prominent of those literary traditions where the single consciousness (indeed the very experience of isolated singularity) is seen to refract a larger social reality. It could be argued that all of modernist literature takes this project and the double-bind – with its accompanying themes of paralysis and internal division – as the essential purpose of literature in the modern era. And it is true that the idea of self as social mirror (in Joyce, the cracked mirror of history) is a modern one. Within modernity, however, another tradition takes aim at this same goal, but within a completely different cosmology. This tradition maintains an external gaze. Individual experience is accessible spectatorially, in the objectified act or what Bertolt Brecht calls the *gestus*. The experience itself falls to the audience; it is the objectified emotion that triggers in us almost instinctively a set of feelings, not the process of identification on which the literature of interiority relies. This is a different way of dramatizing the “split psyche” (referred to by Terry Lynn Taylor in chapter two) than the primarily psychological modernist portrayal. Our attention must turn to the object, innocent in its capacity to be wholly intuited, rather than the subject, in whose mind we discriminate the differences within ourselves.

Each episode begins with the angels in a tableau, as in the opening of many angel films

watching the scene they are about to enter.¹⁰⁶ We watch them watching, their responsive gazes witnessing for us the particular form of ignorance and injustice that tonight's characters must confront, and its metaphysical solution. In beginning always with the invitations of audience, *Touched by an Angel* invokes the sentimental mode; for as Ann Douglas points out, sentiment requires audience. What is ultimately idealized and clutched to the heart is our own capacity for identification and pity,¹⁰⁷ just as in Kant esteem for the naïve object is translated through the reception of the universal human to "self-esteem." The white dove that opens and closes each show evokes this translation of esteem, of the possibility of humanity's ascent into the ether of love and fellowship.¹⁰⁸ In this fluttery white object *TBA* becomes a show about us - watchers like the angels, and like them psychological actors in an otherworldly scene.

The framing of each episode works well in relation to personal stories of unremitting self-interestedness and graceless action: the short-haired hard-boiled astronaut who ditches a little girl's letter to God she wanted posted in space because she can't deal with her own relation to death; the con artist father who drags his daughter from place to place, depriving her of friendship and an ice skating career; the religion professor who obsesses about finding the ark of the covenant (and in the course of the episode actually does find it) in order to advance his career. But this naïve commentary is inadequate when the show's subject turns to something more than the individual crisis. In these cases the angel appears naïve not only in relation to the

¹⁰⁶ Sometimes during an episode we will also enjoy surprise cuts to the angels perched in overarching places, like the top of a doorway, at the end of scenes where a character has exposed his weakness in a moment of judgment "alone," and to the audience.

¹⁰⁷ See the introduction to *The Feminization of American Culture*.

¹⁰⁸ Objects figure constantly in the show as sentimental triggers, especially to evoke the past and its memorialization. Objects also function in other ways, however. One interesting use of objective symbolism occurs in "The Spirit of Liberty Moon" when a Chinese dissident attempts to get through customs on her way back into her native country. She hands her passport tremulously to the customs agent, and as a diversion Monica – posing as a consultant for a toy manufacturing company – drops her briefcase. It opens, and all sorts of wind-up toys spill out. She turns to the person in line ahead of her who has picked up one buzzing item and asks, "Excuse me, could you please hand me my chattering teeth?" An allegory of fear, the teeth get her friend through the line and defuse our

art of delivering the message, but to the language in which it must be delivered. As Monica discovers, her sheltered apprenticeship – complete with training wheels in the form of Tess and Andrew - becomes inadequate in the face of certain lessons. Where the social order itself must decide, or where guardians of that order must wrestle with judgment and right action, her developmental orientation falls away. Learning must come from risk, from entering into the danger. Monica must lose her Apollinian contemplation and calm, and fall into the human world of excess and frenzy.

The episode “Black Like Monica” opens with the typical shot of the dove, fluttering in a tree. From there we look down, however, through the branches onto Monica looking up at us, small and far below. The camera dissolves – slowly – onto the image of her walking. Her face is serious, almost stricken, and she walks purposefully. As she moves forward the camera, tracking backward, pulls Tess into view. She is seated on the left, holding a noose and crying. “Tess what is it?” Monica asks. “How many times is he going to ask me to do this?” Tess cries. Monica turns, and we see Andrew kneeling beside a dead black man in a field. Monica turns back to see Tess declaring that she can’t do this one more time, she’s going home. Monica looks bewilderedly at Andrew. “She left, and I don’t know what my assignment is.” He grips her shoulder, emotional. “Yeah you do.”

This opening is unusual in several ways. To begin with, our angels are not looking down on a human mess or tragedy, demonstrating in the exalted pose of their gaze the judgment that it is their tasks is to illumine in a different way through participation in the human world. Instead, we see Monica diminutive and overwhelmed, the dove above and beyond her. And her isolation is emphasized. Usually the angels appear in tableau together. Here the tableau is broken up –

tension at the same time that they hold it before us. The tension will reappear later in more dramatic form as the dissident is about to meet her end at the hand of the authorities.

appearing almost as an allegory of broken community and isolation. The opening is meant to be read statically, as a whole piece. Monica's initial expression conveys the emotion of the situation even before she has heard of the news. Tess sits, posed, as the shot reveals her – almost like a curtain parting to indicate something already there and waiting, rather than giving that profound sense of entrance that typifies more dynamic filming. The pace is slow and restrained, a measured shot-by-shot experience that calls attention to the assembly of parts and to the voice of their arrangement. Benjamin insists on the “disjunctive, atomizing principle of the allegorical approach” (*Origin* 208), the fragmenting operation which allows us to see a concept within a pictorial “configuration.” What “Black Like Monica” accomplishes in its opening sequence – the experience of isolation as a necessary way of exposing the principles operating within a totality – sets up the project that the episode itself will follow. Presenting a story of dual coverups and symbolic falsifications, the episode heads relentlessly towards exposing the rifts and fragments that, once exposed themselves, interpret the whole.

My name is Monica. I am an angel sent by God as a messenger of hope and peace and truth. I am not magic. I cannot predict the future; I cannot alter the past. Whenever I am on this earth I always come in human form to appear more like you. But I was never less of an angel, except once. For one day in spring I discovered just how human I could be. I don't have wings you know. But that day, God forgive me, that day I wished I did.

Roma Downey's Northern Irish lilt gives charm to her character's position in this episode, the position of an angel weak before a situation that exceeds her comprehension. To wrestle with it she must become human – not just appear as one. This means living with the

threat of mortality, in that mortality, committing a crime, and in that crime, wrestling with the problem of identity. “My name is Monica.” Where in the usual moment of glowing self-revelation the intern angel appears to her human case not as Monica but as “an angel sent by God,” this episode emphasizes her individuality, her status as a named individual. After all, only an individual being can die. In a story of lynching and public coverup, Monica must also take on the threat of mortality in more than her humanity. Not only does she become a human in this episode, she also becomes black.

“Black Like Monica” instantly references the nonfiction classic from the heart of the Civil Rights era, John Howard Griffin’s *Black Like Me*. The entire project of his investigative journalism is itself a naïve one, pursuing the question of what it would be like “if a white man became a Negro in the Deep South” (7). Griffin’s is a story of defamiliarization, loneliness and transformation, and also a story of danger. A profound feeling of “dread” mounts throughout his travels as he walks in and out of threats to his life, finding himself longing to return to being white and to the belief in the warmth and goodness of his race that the experience of being black has rendered corrupt and illusory for him. Hate and death lurk constantly, and the fact of his own limits as a white man are now revealed to him as the world reflects back his blackness.

Monica’s journey has a different source. Her mission becomes clear to her when some of the leading figures in the small southern Illinois town discover the body in her presence and determine what to do with it. Half white and half black, the “committee” – members of the city council – decide against the will of the sheriff (played by John Ritter) and his deputy to keep the matter quiet.¹⁰⁹ Lavanda, a leading member of the city council, is planning a special dramatic

¹⁰⁹ *TBA*’s orientation to the law is generally extremely positive. In this instance the interests of local community (wanting to keep the matter quiet so as to avoid detrimental headlines at a time when it is petitioning the governor for a new bridge) is pitted against the disinterestedness of the federal state, which the sheriff’s office represents. He and his partner claim the right to investigate – “hate crimes are a federal crime” – but is voted down by the

presentation for Civil Rights day two days later - a drama of a local townsman who hid slaves as part of the underground railroad - to be performed before Rosa Parks, who is coming in as special honorary guest; this is the town's opportunity to write itself into history. Fairly certain of the men responsible for the killing, they resolve to delay making the matter public. The victim was a stranger in town, ironically helping to build the sets for the performance, and he will not be soon missed. Monica tries to intervene, asking the naïve question, "What was Mr. Moody's full name please?" (a question that later, when answered, provides a clue as to the true identity of the slave-hider – as it turns out not a white man, but a free black woman). Monica's speech, based on what Tess later describes as "politically correct" rhetoric, has no effect, and they decide to lock her up into "protective custody." She spends a day in jail, silenced, dreams prophetically of another lynching, and wakes up in the night to discover her jail cell open, and her skin and hair completely altered. She spends the next day in the town, her clothes the same but her accent changed, completely unrecognized, no white person ever even asking her name. The naïve question for the human government now becomes one for the divine, "Why had God changed me at all?"

As Monica learns, she becomes black/human (and the politics of aligning one with the other are in conformity with the politics of the decade, which tend to define the human through the experience of identity-based suffering, located above all in the black slave) not to effect a change in the town as a black woman, but to effect a change in herself in order to accomplish her

committee. Charlie, who is both a member of the city council and a volunteer deputy, is asked whether he's going to vote in his capacity as the one or the other, i.e. for or against keeping the truth under wraps. Federal power, the message goes, is capable of the objectivity needed to analyze local battles. As the sheriff later remarks of the plan to put Monica (temporarily) behind bars, "I think it's pretty interesting to deprive someone of their civil rights to make sure that Civil Rights Day goes well." Irony here acts as the naïve, in its capacity to point out what would, were it not for consensus and its received conventions, appear startlingly obvious. The sheriff (played by the biggest celebrity) also reveals himself to be intuitive; after the Foley boys go after Monica he gets a hunch that they're going to do it again, and keeps them under watch at the local bar. When Monica finds him later she tells him that another

mission as a white angel. The “Foley boys,” perpetrators of the lynching, realize their attempt at publicity is being silenced in favor of that of the “nigger-loving” consensus, and decide to perform another lynching to secure the attention. They light on Monica, and as she runs away, trips, and draws blood (the marker of mortality), she prays to God to make her white. He does, they bypass her, and she breaks down, “Oh my God, I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry.” She is so sorry because, as she later admits to Tess, she would never – if white – have prayed to God to make her black. Surprisingly, mortality exists for her not as a division between angel and human, but between white and black – and the choice one between race-betrayal and personal survival. She learns to appreciate with Tess, that “even an angel must be tougher and stronger and prouder if she’s to make a difference in black skin,” because black skin (presumably in a white-dominated world) makes it more difficult for her to perform her role as an angel: to be heard, to deliver a message.¹¹⁰ This is the trouble Monica begins with, not being listened to, not gaining attention. And it is curiously the function angels perform vis-à-vis the human: to pay attention, to bestow honor, and to name. This is what the town wants for its history, the lynchers for their beliefs, and the angels for their God. Monica performs this role in relation to Jackson Moody, in calling attention to the fact that he had a full name, in reminding the “committee” in her first speech of his death and suffering, his humanity. But calling attention requires power, and without appearing as an angel, her power is minimal. Only after she confronts her own weakness can she do as Tess enjoins, and say something “real,” a speech to the sheriff and deputy in which she

lynching is imminent, and he assures her that all is under control. The state is thus quasi-angelic, except that as we later discover – like the angel – it needs to reckon with history and the prejudices it implants.

¹¹⁰ Monica asks Lavanda if she were black would they have thrown her into jail, and Lavanda replies, “Honey, if you were black they wouldn’t have listened to you in the first place.” Griffin reports a similar conversation between himself, three FBI men, and the owner and editor of the black *Sepia* magazine, which was sponsoring his project. “‘Do you suppose they’ll treat me as John Howard Griffin, regardless of my color – or will they treat me as some nameless Negro, even though I am still the same man?’ I asked. ‘You’re not serious,’ one of them said. ‘They’re not going to ask you any questions. As soon as they see you, you’ll be a Negro and that’s all they’ll ever want to

confesses her own fears, which she says form the core of all racism, and asks them to confess theirs.¹¹¹ They do, in a tense conversation, following which they are able to announce to the town just as the performance begins the truth about the lynching.

Touched by an Angel is all about truth, about confession and announcement. This is its theory of justice, that telling the truth – particularly about the past, whether personal or historical – secures that contract between love and law, individual and group, that must be wrestled from a moment of crisis. In his discussion of the coming together of the naïve and the modern,¹¹² Schiller describes the union of law and love - on whose back justice falls - as essentially angelic. “But only if both are joined one with the other – if the will freely obeys the law of necessity, and reason asserts its rule through all the flux of the imagination, does the ideal or the divine come to the fore” (85). The angels, who in obeying eternal law also obey their own natures, act as the divine agents of this joining. In their revelations the problem of just action finds its internal principle, the righteous human his own certainty and willingness to act. In part this is the text of the angels’ message. “God loves you” – the utterance to which every episode finally turns, and the motivator for the right action and truth-telling toward which every episode impels us -

know about you.”” This pair of quotes articulate the extent to which naming and listening perform similar functions – that of attending to the particular self and recognizing individual rights and claims.

¹¹¹ After glowing to them and confessing her own fears she tells them, “You too must look deep into your own hearts and seek out that same dark corner. And as hard as it may be, you must confess it to each other and to God. So please don’t worry about saying the *right* words, so long as you say the *true* words.” And later, “For the color of Hatred is Fear.” This is in sharp contrast to her earlier exhortation, which appealed to the listeners’ humanity and ability to find compassion for the sufferings of Jackson Moody. She concludes her plea, “That he died today is not an inconvenient coincidence. It’s a message that no one is listening to.” How Tess could find this an example of “PC” is a little puzzling, except that politically correct discourse tends to invoke the ethics of humanism – to which *TBA* with its emphasis on human rights and liberalist tolerance generally makes appeal – where the second sermon does not. Monica’s speech here differs in that now she asks each person not to identify with the other outside himself, but inside. She is asking for self-exposure rather than reaching out, confession, not identification. And she is asking each person to relate to the situation as a particular person, not a member of the species. Just as the announcing angel anoints the self as self, as specificity here in this and time and not another, with this name and identity and not another, now the messenger holds her subjects accountable for being specific beings who exists in this place and time, with this identity and not that, and in causing each of them to struggle with their own particular existence, makes them earn the blessing.

¹¹² Which, however, can never really be separated, as the naïve exists only from the perspective of the modern. See footnote above.

indicates more than just redemption and happy ending. It also speaks the resolution of necessity and will through the union of “God” and “love,” a resolution which the subject mirrors in her own confession and tearful self-exhibition. In this way it is significant that each angel represents herself as “an angel sent by God.” Edmund Burke comments, “To represent an angel in a picture, you can only draw a beautiful young man winged; but what painting can furnish out any thing so grand as the addition of one word, the ‘angel of the *Lord?*’” (197)

For all its emphasis on image, *Touch by an Angel* remains committed to the word. Its source of power, drawing imagistically from Tess’s imposing presence, Monica’s tempered sexuality, Andrew’s nonthreatening ethereality, and the tears of each subject at the close of the episode, nevertheless delivers its coup de grace through the verbal utterance. Angelic address, human confession, and above all telling the truth can only be verbal acts. Truth and falsity can neither be thrown into question nor determined by the image. Hence the dissident picking up the megaphone to speak the truth about her jailed husband, the astronaut delivering a terminally ill little girl’s letter to God, the science teacher father consenting to read his daughter’s paper on intelligent design theory, the black singer courageously singing a song directly concerned with lynching, all of these moments speak to the power of words as purveyors of the truth, within which crises of difference and mortality find their arbiter. This commitment to truth as it is revealed through the word marks the show’s particular engagement with the naïve as the basis of justice. This is evident even at the beginning of “Black Like Monica,” which opens with a brief debate about words. As a child reads aloud from a summary history of the underground railroad, the white mayor and black director of the drama discuss the use of the term “Negro spirituals;” the director informs him that she’s “comfortable” with using the term over his proposed “African-American spirituals.” He smiles and replies, “Well, I learned something today.

Historically accurate beats politically correct.”

In adopting this stance *Touched by an Angel* positions positive knowledge against convention, privileging language in its historical rather than symbolic role. Such literalism is certainly naïve, and in moving from questioning bewilderment to confessional self-evidence, from critique of the committee to admitting her own fears and weaknesses, the intern angel shifts the attitude of her ignorance from the other to herself. The ignorance presented is more total, hence more capable of gaining the attention she requires as “caseworker,” and which this drama of identity, surfaces, and disguise renders unusually difficult. More than this, however, the attention of the individual angel must compete with the attention of public history, and it is on these terms that she must prove herself worthy, the human in her struggling with the angel, in order more effectively to deliver her message. In the initial speech - where she is silenced and ignored - Monica hasn’t “glowed” of course, revealing her power as the power of God. But it is also clear that in order to reveal herself as angel and most of all to *speak as angel* she needs to reckon with the powers of history which test her. She does this prior to her self-revelation to the sheriff and deputy, in an encounter with Rosa Parks.

Celebrity culture figures prominently in *Touched by an Angel*. Guest appearances are common, most especially (drawing on the lure of Della Reese) by famous musicians. Charlotte Church, ‘N Sync, Celine Dion, Al Jarraud, and B.B. King appear in their own superstar identities; Wynonna takes on an actual character (and of course sings). The fan culture is equally star-struck. Fans are so swept away by the angels in their preacherly roles that they refuse to recognize its main actors – whose own backgrounds form a trinity of personal, social, and religious responses to the experience of death¹¹³ – *as actors*.¹¹⁴ Tales are legion of viewers who,

¹¹³ Della Reese has her own ministry in Los Angeles, John Dye was once an aspiring ACLU lawyer, and Roma Downey was orphaned very young as a lass in Donegal, Northern Ireland. Of the three modes, the personal is the

sharing the experiences of cancer, suicide, addiction, and death that the show most commonly addresses, write letters thanking the producers and actors for inspiring them to apply the lessons involving these traumas to their own reality. Not only does life imitate art; it seems to need it. As a melodrama designed to cross the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction in this way, *TBA* swims in iconicity. This makes sense – angels themselves already put out an iconic radiance. Like many icons they soak up contradiction through the promise of transcendence and through the almost convulsive power of the sacred object. Angels are not stars, however, but the powers that move the stars. Their celebrity function is causal, not just affective. Because of this they are never quite contemporary; like Clarence, in his outdated clothes, or Dudley with his outdated dance moves, or as we shall see, the Soviet bureaucrat angel in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, angels tend to appear slightly anachronistic. Successful representations of them emphasize their historicity, their power as motive forces – whether through the metaphors of the automobile or through direct intervention in history itself. An example comes from the one other time that Monica becomes black. It happens in the episode “Without Tears: Living Sanctuary in America,” which intercuts between the story of a young black teenage girl refusing to kick drugs¹¹⁵ and confront the history of lynching in America by going to the exhibit of

most prominent, emblemized in the power of the biographic deathbed scene. Downey’s father’s parting words to her were to remember that if she could endure the pain of seeing him die, she could do anything; Dye agreed to do the show after seeing through the death of a friend with AIDS; and producer Martha Williamson has used her own experience of her father’s death from pneumonia in 1991 to ground an episode in which a man’s children sing songs of God and hope to him as he dies, just as she and her sister had done (for further details of all these examples see Lipton et al).

¹¹⁴ Downey apparently was rebuked by fans for appearing in extracurricular movies in which she kissed a man, and Dye has complained about not being able to appear in movies where he could be cast as other than soft and compassionate. Describing the added annoyance of fans chastising him every time he takes a drink at a bar in Salt Lake City, where he lives during the show’s on-location shooting, he told *People* magazine, “If you expect me to be an angel, you really need to go to a shrink” (ibid. 92).

¹¹⁵ As a strange coincidence we watch this episode about the high school drug scene as it is intercut with ads for the anti-depressant Zoloft and the pain reliever Imitrex. The irony of this is deeply gratifying.

lynching postcards with her grandmother, “Without Sanctuary,”¹¹⁶ and the story of Billie Holliday daring to sing “Strange Fruit.” Monica, in a black cameo performance appearing as she does in “Black Like Monica,” it turns out is the nameless individual in the back of the audience who starts clapping at the end of the song, encouraging the rest of the crowd to clap and “Lady Day” herself to make it her “anthem.” She tells the story of Lady Day to young Chanelle, who resists listening to “a story this wacked,” but ultimately yields her hard-bitten skepticism, fear and hatred to Monica’s illumination.¹¹⁷ The angel of history prepares the promise of tomorrow.

The sequence between Monica and Rosa Parks does not follow this pattern. It is Rosa who changes things for Monica, and not the other way around. After “Miss Wings” (Tess’s affectionate name for her) has had her breakdown before God, she runs through the streets looking for “Mrs. Parks” until she finds the sheriff and deputy standing before the Greyhound. She tries to explain, but can’t, and Rosa – spectatorial with enormous glasses and a subdued, watchful manner - appears at the door and beckons her onto the bus. Monica glows to her, and recounts the exact same speech with which she began the episode: “My name is Monica. I am an angel sent by God as a messenger of hope and peace and truth. I am not magic . . .” In her uncertain voice we hear how much her glowing is not revelation, but self-revelation. Then the filming changes to a montage of silent shots during which she recounts her experience and her shame before the historic figure. She concludes, kneeling before her, Rosa’s hand on her head, “I’ve betrayed both heaven and earth. If I was white I never would have begged God to become black.” “God is good, Monica,” Rosa tells her. “He forgives and heals. He heals angels too.”

The image of a white angel receiving benediction from a black woman is something of a

¹¹⁶ Her grandmother, we find out in the final scene, is the little girl in the white sailor dress featured in one of the postcards. History is living, we learn, and still has a voice to guide us.

¹¹⁷ Her response to this is refreshingly teenage. “God sent me a *white* angel?!” “God sent you a messenger in human form . . .”

televisual event. Rosa Parks, immortal in a way that Monica cannot be, absolves her of her humanity – of her mortality. Rosa after all is immortal for her actions, for her historical existence as a specific individual (with a full name, please). Monica is an angel, no full name, as the show points out. Her immortality is given, not made - part of her very being as a creature who interrupts or redirects history, but does not live in it. Except for one day, one spring. For this reason the episode echoes the idea familiar from other angelic texts that heaven is inferior to earth. To live in mortality, in time, in chance, and in death, is to possess a power that the angel cannot have, because it is a power born of experience - which is to say, of suffering, of the conflict between desire and law that is foreign to angels. We see this theme resoundingly in *Wings of Desire* and its remake *City of Angels*, in the angel's longing for mortal life and his later gratification – even when it means experiencing the pain of death, as it does for Nicholas Cage in the American film. This longing is apparent also in the character of Dudley, in *The Bishop's Wife* and *The Preacher's Wife*, where the angel witnesses to the force and pleasure of those who learn through sensual, rather than intellectual, experience. Likewise the wilful martyrdom of Rosa Parks testifies to the value of life even in its price. It affirms with Nietzsche, in his description of the Apollinian will as mirroring the worth of human existence in its longing for it, that in the wilful struggle with mortal existence, “lamentation itself becomes a song of praise.”

What we witness on the screen at this moment is an idea that challenges *TBA*'s self-proclaimed pietism. For in it we see the divine – fully illuminated as such – bowing before the historical. Both are color-coded. The mother of the Civil Rights movement wields the power to invoke the blessing for a daughter of God. Justice, we behold, is stronger than grace. Not only must the blessing be earned, but the power to give it as well. In the encounter between the human angel and the angelic human, mortal and immortal judgment wrestle with each other, put

each other on trial. Monica's human racism subjects itself to human truth, positioning herself as the fool – as all confession is the admission of foolishness, the self-realization of ignorance. In seeing herself part of the mortality she is sent to earth to deliver, the angel judges herself through naïve systems of thinking. That is, she judges herself through the other, outside the identity that defines her. Because of this she can only receive mercy from the other, in its immortalized form. The moment leads her – and *Touched by an Angel* – from a poetics of the naïve to something else. A different aspect of melodrama seeps in at the moment where divinity and history confront each other. This is something that in a different context might be called “the fabulous.”

The fabulous is not only a different aesthetic style, though still in the mode and yearnings of melodrama, but more importantly a different philosophy. Unlike the naïve, the fabulous takes the perceptual nature of all knowledge for granted, arguing for truth without a truthful subject. Where the naïve seeks truth through the unknowability of the other as object, the fabulous recognizes that object only through its status as image. Rosa Parks' glasses call attention to this, as does her fame and our sense that this is not *really* Rosa Parks, though we believe it for the moment. In this final moment the angel finds herself humbled before the image it is her job to empower. She must find this power at the hands of something created, both mortal and immortal, real and imaginary.

Part II: Dionysus

Theater is as much a part of trash culture as it is high art. It always is that. And it's incredibly important for people who are working in theater to always remember that it's show biz and it's sort of sleazy, and a lot of the traditions that you've inherited and a lot of the ways that you have at your disposal for telling a story are ways that were developed by, incredibly, sort of lowbrow, popular entertainment. The theater always has to function as popular

entertainment. . . it has to have the jokes and it has to have the feathers and the mirrors and the smoke.” - Tony Kushner¹¹⁸

The most important thing to know about *Angels in America* is that the angel is a fraud. Fabulously a fraud, in a way that the fabulous must be. At the beginning of the play’s second part, *Perestroika* (the part where the angel is actually seen), Kushner informs would-be producers that “The moments of magic – all of them – are to be fully realized, as bits of wonderful *theatrical* illusion – which means it’s OK if the wires show, and maybe it’s good that they do, but the magic should at the same time be thoroughly amazing” (7). The Angel of America marks the height of this magic, of the feathers and smoke. She must be breathtakingly unreal, the enchantment of pure show. In marveling at the angel we marvel also at the human (they do it with wires, but *how* do they do that?), yet her constructedness does not render her any the less marvelous. Within Kushner’s self-proclaimed “Theater of the Fabulous” the angel is *awesome* and *divine* as pure spectacle, the ultimate of self-revelation and of our capacity for astonishment.

She is also a mixed-up reactionary whom the play ends up exposing as narrow and absurd. She appears at the end of the first part, *Millenium Approaches*, as an explosion of camp, a *coup de grace* of all the real hallucinations that structure the play’s movement. During the course of Part II, however, we find her uttering grandiose banalities, neo-conservative, rigid, and hysterical. By the time we get a glimpse of heaven we find the entire angelic community has become a farce: a crew of literally God-forsaken angels crowding pathetically around an archaic

¹¹⁸ In interview with Michael Cunningham (62). He says something similar in a roundtable interview at Northwestern. “The best thing about the theater is that when the angel comes through at the end of *Millenium* you see the wires, and that’s the magic of the theater . . . For five seconds you are actually watching this thing swing down and saying, ‘It’s an angel! I’m seeing an angel!’ Then you’re saying, ‘It’s a woman in a silly wig and fly wires,’ and that doubleness is the kind of consciousness that citizens of capitalism need to survive, and are constantly being winnowed away from. Making stage magic is an important thing, and I think a lot of people of my generation have sort of reembraced that, and are doing that. As part of that movement, I’m happy about that” (Kinzer et al 214-5).

radio that doesn't work anymore, waiting for Him to return. Their intelligence is boundless – the angels can describe the various cathodes and anodes that make the radio work – but they are incapable of fixing it. “I I I agree. In diodes we see manifest the self-same divided human consciousness which has engendered the multifarious catastrophes to which We are impotent witness . . .” (128). The undivided consciousness, pure mind, simple spiritual substance, is without God utterly deprived of agency. Consigned to a spectatorial nostalgia, the angels – “Continental Principalities” - wallow in their resistance to progress. The Angel of America is a qualified exception; she wrestles with her gay prophet in a sexually charged battle, before he ultimately gives back the Book (the “Tome of Immobility”) and rejects her. The lame status of the angel's message does not undercut her magnificence, however. If anything, it is part of it. Her revelations exposed as foolish nonsense, they yield the blessing nevertheless. For unlike its earnest appearance in *Touched by an Angel*, Kushner's fabulous does not necessarily tell the truth, but it provides the struggle which does.

“Listen to the world, to how fast it goes. . . That's New York traffic, baby, the sound of energy, the sound of time. Even if you're hurting, it can't go back. There's no angel. You hear me?” (*Perestroika* 48) Belize, a registered nurse and former lover of the presumably deranged AIDS victim Prior Walter, is telling him why he has not in fact been visited by an angel who is mysteriously dispensing reactionary propoganda. In Prior's visions the angel shrilly lobbies against progress, for stasis, against migration, for inertia. She stands for the fixity of ideas and abstractions over the movement of time, for unchanging laws over existential particularities.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Kushner renders the angel as a diva of a reactionary fundamentalism, almost grotesquely refiguring Walter Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*. Taken from a drawing by Paul Klee, the New Angel in Benjamin's hands is presented as a helpless spectator of the wasteland of human history. In the Gershom Scholem poem that acts as an epigram to Benjamin's ninth thesis on the philosophy of history, the angel says, “If I could stay timeless time I would have little luck.” The poignant and futile yearning to accommodate human action to its ideal (and with the image of the angel being blown backward into the future its counterpart suggestion that ideals move forward faster than realities) becomes in the angel and her dated cohorts an image of obsolescence. Progress, Belize and New York City tell

In doing so the angel – traditionally an emblem of memory and immortality - articulates the dying man’s desire to hold back the progress of his disease. Belize reminds him that death and life are inseparable, that immortality is just an illusion, like the angel. Belize is wrong, however. There is an angel; the audience knows it – it’s why the audience is there. But it is important that the play gives us this dual perspective: at the same time that *Angels* visually exults in the presence of the angel, verbally it tells us angels don’t exist. Realism and fantasy run neck and neck – not in an uncanny relation, as they do in *A Matter of Life and Death* where it is up to us to decide what is hallucination and what magic - but playfully. This is central to the play’s fascination with history and to its attempt to grapple with a contemporary moment that it understands as historical, but which is not yet available to understanding. Viral injustice – striking without cause or reason, is paired with highly rationalized threats within the social order. The virus quickly unfolds a story of the incommensurability of life and law, in which caprice, figured by the fantastic, meets state power, rendered by realism. Within this tension Kushner offers us an ultimately humanist vision in which the characters of the play emerge as the real angels, articulating through an ethics of the personal a power that the laws of heaven and earth fail to grasp or control.

When he first applied for grant money to write *Angels*, Kushner described it as a play about “AIDS, gay men, Reagan, Roy Cohn, and Mormons” (Cohen 219). And to some extent, this is still true. The 2003 HBO broadcast of the play was anticipated in terms that emphasized subject matter over aesthetics: The *New York Times* represented it as potentially scandal-creating

Prior, is not reducible to intention; it exacts its judgment temporally rather than rationally, in human not angelic experience. If *Angels in America* finally commits itself to a relationship with progress, it does so through an embrace of its thunderous opposite, an embrace that is both attraction and struggle. In fact, the play suggests that this wrestling is decreed by the very nature of progress, the movement toward the ideal. For all its difficulties and betrayals, the idea of progress confronts the essential problems of race and time that baffle the angelic order, and the paradoxes of constancy and change that for Kushner comprise the motion of love.

for its criticism of the Reagan administration, and *USA Today* devoted its preview article almost exclusively to the play's resonance for addressing the AIDS crisis (much of the article, in fact, does not discuss the play but the current status of the AIDS epidemic, domestically and worldwide).¹²⁰ The assemblage presents indigenous historical events that seemingly resist inter-relation, and yet *Angels* relates them.¹²¹ Set in New York, the play integrates the stories of a Reaganite Mormon homosexual law clerk in denial, a man who betrays personal and political allegiances by leaving his lover with AIDS, and a power-mongering gay lawyer who sent the Rosenbergs to the chair, now himself facing death by euphemistic "liver cancer." The problem of neo-fascism contemporary with the late 1980's surfaces within its playful juxtaposing of fantastic camp and wry realism. It may be in this sense that theater critic John Lahr credits Kushner with having created an "original, impressionistic theatrical vocabulary to show us the heart of a new age" (133). Or he may be responding to something else, a certain vocabulary of character development and interaction (the playwright's notes to *Perestroika* remark that this "must be" an "actor-driven event") that indeed strikes at the heart of the "New Age." For, as Kushner has more than once commented, this is above all a "fantasia" on relationships. Even the political drama appears as a problem of interpersonal connection and communication. These become the play's primary objects of thought, with connectedness hypothesized as the site of

¹²⁰ See Rich and Gardner respectively. Rich comments specifically that "If 'Angels' reaches an audience typical for HBO hits, it could detonate a debate bloody enough to make the fight over 'The Reagans' [also an HBO production] look like an exhibition bout."

¹²¹ The first blatant example of this is also the first fantastic incursion in the play. Prior, who is dying of AIDS, and Harper, the Valium-addicted wife of a closeted chief clerk, meet when his dream encounters her hallucination. It is unclear to either (and the audience) whether he is in her hallucination, or she in his dream. In other words, it is unclear which fantasy is more capable of encompassing the other's reality – or not.

HARPER: . . . I'm a Mormon.

PRIOR: I'm a homosexual.

HARPER: Oh! In my church we don't believe in homosexuals.

PRIOR: In my church we don't believe in Mormons. (*Millenium* 37)

At this point only fantasy born of extreme suffering (and its solidarity) can bring members of these communities to mutual recognition. Later in the play, this will be effected by a Brechtian realism which fantasy both catalyzes and serves.

encounter and struggle,¹²² and communication as the agonistic display of inner life. In another discourse, to say that *Angels in America* is about relationships is to say that it is about communion. Not a mystic communion, breathless, still, and tautological, but a confused communion, an urban communion. Jokes and sex are our best hope within a society based on pluralism and progress, which is to say, conflict and instability. Like jokes and sex - and perhaps indicated by them - the question of the relationship between fraudulence and love looms centrally within the play's exposition of the problems and possibilities of difference.

As in *Touched by an Angel*, explorations of social and communal justice through questions of difference and perception converge on the issue of ethnicity. The play opens with this. The first part, *Millenium Approaches*, begins with a recognition of the extent to which a type of fraudulence is inseparable from American history, of necessity the history of migration, assimilation, miscegenation. Louis Ironson, a word processor for the Second Circuit Court of Appeals and the play's prodigal son, is at the funeral of his grandmother in the Bronx. He is there with his partner, Prior, whom he is about to leave when the AIDS gets too much, betraying four years of love and trust. He is also there incognito, pretending to be straight – and ironically so, as he is so busy playing butch to his cousin Doris he fails to notice, as Prior does, that “cousin Doris is a dyke.” This net of irony appears only after the opening scene, however. At the beginning, we are sitting with Louis and Prior, watching the rabbi unveil the hard truth:

Hello and good morning. I am Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz of the
Bronx Home for Aged Hebrews. We are here this morning to pay
respects at the passing of Sarah Ironson, devoted wife of Benjamin
Ironson, also deceased, loving and caring mother of her sons

¹²² This is a consistent fascination for Kushner. His latest play, *Homebody/Kabul*, explores the relations between local and global through the theme of “interconnectedness.” This is an expansion of the theory, only implicit in

Morris, Abraham, and Samuel, and her daughters Esther and Rachel; beloved grandmother of Max, Mark, Louis, Lisa, Maria . . . uh . . . Lesley, Angela, Doris, Luke and Eric. (*Looks more closely at paper*) Eric? This is a Jewish name? (*Shrugs*) Eric. A large and loving family. We assemble that we may mourn collectively this good and righteous woman. (9-10)

It is significant, of course, that it is *Sarah*, the first Jewish matriarch, whose legacy has been assimilated by other tongues and traditions. The rabbi situates this nominal breach of authenticity within a story of the crossing of the Ashkenazi to America, and insists that despite the “Goyisch names” of Sarah’s descendents “in you that journey is.” History competes with contemporaneity in ways that anticipate Prior’s own desire to hold back the clock, as it is taken to task by Belize. “Descendants of this immigrant woman, you do not grow up in America. . . . You do not live in America. No such place exists. Your clay is the clay of some Litvak shtetl, your air the air of the steppes. . .” (10). Not only are there no angels in America, there is no America for them to inhabit. The Rabbi is saying something more powerful here, however. Let us first consider the ambivalence of this beginning. In this sense it is more of an induction in the Shakespearean style than a beginning (we almost expect Sarah Ironson to wake from her deep sleep halfway through the play and request an ale).¹²³ Through this convention the audience is informed that the play it is about to see is a mirage, a fabula where the drama itself invents the place, where reality belongs to the imagination. And this is precisely the Rabbi’s point. History depends on the imagination, on the representations of fantasy, just as nation does. Kushner’s stage directions about the angel accentuate this privileging of the image. In a similar vein, the

Angels in America, that globalism itself follows and extends the logic of the interpersonal.

original British production chose to display an American flag in the otherwise “pared-down” background. The Rabbi is not so much telling us that there is no America, as that because it retrieves its history from other sources, it has none of its own. As a consequence, the play’s opening threatens, the relation between identity and society is always undetermined, unless grounded by the laws of the past.

Louis will say something very similar later in *Millenium*, in conversation with Belize – who, as an African-American, represents a different kind of immigratory judgment. (His response to the angel’s diatribe against migration is to point out, “Some of us didn’t exactly *choose* to migrate, know what I’m saying,” (*Perestroika* 47). We enter the scene with Louis monologuing about democracy in America. His very scattered speculations on the topic of race – drawing from anecdotal hidden staircases and trapdoor generalities – are worth quoting in part to get a sense of the play’s ironic but tender presentation of Louis the Betrayer. Kushner has himself commented that he saw himself in Louis more than any other character, evident in the gentleness with which he treats his character’s struggle with having committed the crime of abandoning a dying lover. Louis’s failure to follow “the hard law of love,” as Belize later puts it, is directly tied to his latent race prejudice. For instance, in this speech note how it is not even so much Louis’s ideas that get him into trouble, but his commitment to generalization – in all its forms - that gets in his way. Just a few scenes earlier, in his final showdown with Prior before leaving him, he tried to justify himself: “You can love someone and fail them. You can love someone and not be able to . . .” To which Prior responds, “You *can*, theoretically, yes. A person can, maybe an editorial ‘you’ can love, Louis, but not *you*, specifically you, I don’t know, I think you are excluded from that general category” (78-9). As in *A Matter of Life and Death*

¹²³ Appropriately, *The Taming of the Shrew* (whose Induction I am recalling here) is also a play concerned with deception and its various “crossings.”

and *Touched by an Angel* the question of justice on earth as in heaven again leads us directly to the preoccupations of angelic existentialism. The problem of actuality, action, decision-making is comprehensible only in terms of the specific “you.” History and democracy, themselves stories of the individual act, follow suit.

I begin partway through Louis’s marathon monologue, where he is responding to a point of Belize’s about the monolithic power of “White Straight Male America” being “not unimpressive.”

LOUIS: Well, no, but when the race thing gets taken care of, and I don’t mean to minimize how major it is, I mean I know it is, this is a really, really incredibly racist country but it’s like, well, the British. I mean, all these blue-eyed pink people. And it’s just weird, you know, I mean I’m not all that Jewish-looking, or . . . well, maybe I am but, you know, in New York, everyone is . . . well, not everyone, but so many are but so but in England, in London I walk into bars and I feel like Sid the Yid, you know I mean like Woody Allen in *Annie Hall*, with the payess and the gabardine coat, like never, never anywhere so much – I mean, not actively despised, not like they’re Germans, who I think are still terribly anti-Semitic, and racist too, I mean black-racist, they pretend otherwise but, anyway, in London, there’s just . . . and at one point I met this black gay guy from Jamaica who talked with a lilt but he said his family’d been living in London since before the Civil War – the American one – and how the English never let him forget for a minute that he wasn’t blue-eyed and pink and I said yeah, me too, these people are anti-Semites and he said yeah but the British Jews have the clothing business all sewed up and blacks there can’t get a foothold. And it was an incredibly awkward moment of just. . . . I mean here we were, in this bar that was gay but it was a *pub*, you know, the beams and the plaster and those horrible little, like, two-day old fish and egg sandwiches – and just so British, so *old*, and I felt, well, there’s no way out of this because both of us are, right now, too much immersed in this history, hope is dissolved in the sheer age of this place, where race is what counts and there’s no real hope of change – it’s the racial destiny of the Brits that matters to them, not their political destiny, whereas in America . . .

BELIZE: Here in America race doesn’t count.

LOUIS: No, no, that’s not. . . . I mean you *can’t* be hearing that. . .

BELIZE: I . . .

LOUIS: It's – look, race, yes, but ultimately race here is a political question, right? Racists just try to use race here as a tool in a political struggle. It's not really about race. Like the spiritualists try to use that stuff, are you enlightened, are you centered, channeled, whatever, this reaching out for a spiritual past in a country where no indigenous spirits exist – only the Indians, I mean Native American spirits and we killed them off so now, there are no gods here, no ghosts and spirits in America, there are no angels in America, no spiritual past, no racial past, there's only the political, and the decoys and the ploys to maneuver around the inescapable battle of politics, the shifting downwards and outwards of political power to the people. . .

BELIZE: POWER to the People! AMEN! (*Looking at this watch*) OH MY GOODNESS! Will you look at the time, I gotta . . .

LOUIS: Do you. . . . You think this is, what, racist or naïve or something?

BELIZE: Well it's certainly *something*. . . (90-2)

Like the Rabbi Louis denies America a historical past, except insofar as it appears politically. From the perspective of his cynicism, in America spirit and race are only instrumental fictions, not ends in themselves, having their own internal laws and powers. History is not living (as we see for instance in the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg who visits Roy Cohn), but represented, part of a mechanical ploy. For Louis, history in America is absence and fabrication, a substanceless creation on behalf of the few and not the whole. And so, in the midst of his racist naivete, he utters the phrase that gives the play its title.

It is interesting that the title's seemingly enchanting affirmation – “Angels in America” - appears only in negative form. At first it seems simply like an invitation to scoff at Louis's self-indulgent blindness. These are, after all, the most neurotic set of speeches in the play. Here Louis offers a mental hysteria that rivals that of only Woody Allen himself. He tells stories but stops short of spelling out their meanings. It is as if he's afraid to articulate them, or can't, relying on details like fish and egg sandwiches to speak for themselves when in fact they betray

the limits of his theorizing. His language is a mess, halting and tripping over itself on its way to yet another dash or ellipse. Louis's whole diatribe is motivated by the urge to erect and take refuge in universal claims and sweeping pronouncements, to generate a theory of America.¹²⁴ Behind this is a need to come to terms with his (ex-) lover's AIDS, a disease whose history and power escape the influence of reason and its universals. Theory for Louis is the nervous return of an outdated machinery that he insists on using the more he experiences it as threatened.¹²⁵ Yet he uses it in the name of progress, of a progressive "shifting downwards and outwards of political power," which is to say, of an idealized conception of historical movement and change. This flow of ideas submerges the presence of race and of spirit, at the same time implying that America's racial and spiritual pasts are homologous or intertwined. Within Louis' neo-liberal rhetoric, both are smoke and mirrors screens for political opportunism, against which an authentic political sensibility positions itself. "When the race thing gets taken care of," suggestively, the nation's political destiny will manifest itself. And it can do this because - unlike England with its preserved beams and haunting past - "there are no angels in America." For Louis, even America's civil war casts a shadow over race relations on European rather than American soil.

This is the conclusion we might arrive at after the first night, having seen only *Millenium*.

¹²⁴ Louis's idealist approach is more directly indicated in the more direct *Perestroika*. In Act Four, Scene One Prior rebuffs his attempts to "make up." "You cry, but you endanger nothing in yourself. It's like the idea of crying when you do it. Or the idea of love." Later he will refer to Louis as not being able to "handle bodies." Love in Kushner is physical, particular, and dangerous – like AIDS. Hence Louis's inability to deal with his partner's disease appears as a discomfort with love's necessities, with love as necessity. A patriot in the tradition of the founding fathers, Louis prefers love as freedom and as concept. Ironically, however, his understanding of the political as theoretical misses the boat. Roy Cohn describes politics earlier in very different terms: "This is gastric juices churning, this is enzymes and acids, this is intestinal is what this is, bowel movement and blood-red meat - this stinks, this is *politics*, Joe, the game of being alive" (*Millenium* 68). A Kushnerian materialism suggests, even in theory, you can run but you cannot hide.

¹²⁵ In this he presages the attempts by the angels in *Perestroika* to monitor activities on earth through a decrepit 1940's radio whose vacuum tubes keep bursting. Ironically, the event they are trying to comprehend is the Chernobyl disaster. As in *Planet of the Apes*, civilization seems to be possible within a binary of either a backwards

Only in a Louis-like state of confused ignorance about the relation of the present moment to the past could we say that America has no spirit beyond material interests and the self-serving jockeying for power. But, as we find later in *Perestroika*, Belize agrees: there is no angel. There is no past,¹²⁶ just “the sound of time.” What do we do with this concatenation, in which the play’s fool and its hierophant come to the same conclusion, and one which is at cross-purposes with the play’s theatrical mission? How do we understand both of these voices, the voice of ignorance and the voice of experience, negating the presence of angels?

To answer this question requires analyzing the role that Belize plays in *Angels*, and the play’s treatment of race through this characterization. The character of Belize is, with Harper – Joe’s valium-addicted wife, the most interesting in the play, and, with Prior’s angel, the most fabulous. In this vein he is also among the most feminized, in a cast dominated by men. His style of speaking is the most flamboyant and the least macho, and even his name suggests woman and fabulation in a single breath. “Belize,” we are told in the cast of characters, is a “drag name that stuck.” In Belize as well as the angel we see the feminine as the essential affect of fantasy – its demonstration and its condition of possibility.¹²⁷ Like Monica, with her long hair and tailored outfits, the play’s feminized characters are sexualized without really being sexual. But in Belize we also see fantasy and fabulousness through the contours of race. Significantly, the character who plays Belize also plays the character of Mr. Lies, Harper’s jazz-affected

fascism or a progressive but destructive anarchy. In rejecting the angels, Prior – and Kushner’s play – clearly choose a trajectory of hope within the latter.

¹²⁶ Right before the coming of the angel Prior has been visited by the ghosts of three prior Prior Walters, three of a long line of similarly-named ancestors across the ages (our Prior is the 34th). In rejecting Prior’s angel Belize also implicitly rejects her harbingers, Prior’s priors, and the idea of individual ancestry itself. In particular, as “prophet” Prior is given to understand himself as somehow fulfilling an anticipatory family destiny in grappling with the various plagues in Euro-American history; Belize, who would not know his ancestry prior to the crossing, rejects this as well.

¹²⁷ By and large this is true of all the female characters in the play, including in addition a mad prophet homeless woman, the spirit of Ethel Rosenberg, and the androgynous angel. The one exception is Hannah Pitt, Joe’s mother, who is clinically sensible, hard, and pragmatic. “An angel is just a belief, with wings and arms that can carry you.

imaginary travel agent friend who spirits her to the location of her choice during her valium trips. The one black body on stage visibly calls attention to itself as occupying the realm of perception. When he is attending Roy Cohn, dying of AIDS in the hospital, Roy – who flaunts his racism as if it too were drag – mistakes him one night for Satan. He calls him the “bogeyman,” a “schvartze toytenmann,” and his “negation.” The monstrous and ghostly echoes are deliberate. When Roy finally waves him off, the play references Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*: “Yeah. I know you. Nothing. A stomach grumble that wakes you in the night” (*Perestroika* 77). Like Marley, whom Scrooge initially dismisses as psychosomatic illusion – the hallucinatory symptom of a “piece of undigested beef,” Belize is a spirit come to haunt. Unlike with Ethel Rosenberg, however, Roy cannot get the better of him (in the final scene between Roy and her ghost he tricks her into playing *mutter* and singing to him). Like Marley, Belize appears as a fantastic reality challenging self-interested narratives of personal power through the shapes of their own shadows. Within a seemingly private fantasy world, he suggests something larger.

Roy’s fearful projections are telling, given that it is Belize who – overcoming his contempt for Roy and his red-baiting past – tells him the truth about AZT and the afterlife (heaven is a creole urban gender-flaming San Francisco). And in his eulogy for Roy he is given perhaps the most crucial line in the play, and one which illuminates the kind of wrestling most at stake in Kushner’s humanistic politics and one which ties it to *Touched by an Angel*’s sentimental moralism: “He was a terrible person. He died a hard death. So maybe . . . a queen can forgive her vanquished foe. It isn’t easy, it doesn’t count if it’s easy, it’s the hardest thing. Forgiveness. Which is maybe where love and justice finally meet” (*Perestroika* 122).¹²⁸ Of all

It’s naught to be afraid of” (*Perestroika* 103). Her realism, however, is also accentuated by her brusque, almost masculine manner and tone. In style, Hannah is something of a dyke.

¹²⁸ At the end of his earlier interchange with Louis in *Millenium* he says something similar. Predicting the coming of snow he asks Louis if he can smell it. “LOUIS: Smell what? BELIZE: Softness, compliance, forgiveness,

the characters Belize has an almost angelic power to name things, like Rosa Parks to grant mercy, to point out the right way. Belize's association with an external marvelous or uncanny gives him a revelatory power, particularly for those characters with an enclosed, nepotistic ethics.¹²⁹ But Belize's role in general, vis-à-vis all the characters, seems to be that of soothsayer, unflappable sage. Critics have commented on Belize's privileged relation to moral truth, not only within the play, but for the audience. David Savran, citing other both mainstream and academic drama critics, remarks of Belize that "his is the one point of view that is never submitted to a critique," and that as such he is the play's "purveyor of truth" (30). Framji Minwalla puts it more elegantly: "he is the rational, articulate fulcrum around whom other characters revolve. . . the most moral and stable character in the play" (104-5). Like many American texts from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to *Driving Miss Daisy* to most recently *Bruce Almighty*, the sensitive black soul illuminates white ignorance and passes on the benediction bought of his own (and his race's) suffering and struggle.

Minwalla is interested in making a more metaphysical claim, however, that as the play's only African-American character included within the inner circle, Belize occupies a position akin to that of master signifier. He is "a cipher, an enigma, a blankness," less a character than an "iconic representation." I do not entirely agree. Minwalla too easily assimilates this character's blackness to the field of its reception, without acknowledging the dual nature of that blackness - and of *Angels in America*'s politico-aesthetic project. Belize is both character and icon, privileged within the visionary world of the play without at once losing his particular voice.

grace" (100). This is something Louis can't quite learn, as later he tells Prior that "Maybe what I did isn't forgivable," but asserts that it is yet "reasonable," still seeking justice and justification through reason rather than in appeal to love.

¹²⁹ One of the differences between Roy's and Prior's visitations - visitations that accompany the manifestation of AIDS - is that, ultimately, Prior doesn't need his. His "urge to run" following the angel's appearances precipitates a relapse, but these journeys out also give him "more life," the blessing of a cosmopolitan, communitarian America.

Huffy, penetrating, and performative, that voice is distinguished among the various players by its consciousness of the other. He is perhaps the only character more aware of his environment and his audience than himself, appropriate for a nurse and former drag queen (and later a former former drag queen). This is perhaps the essence of Kushner's theory of the fabulous – the ability to comprehend and dramatize both causality (the wires showing) and revelation (still thoroughly amazing).

BELIZE: Oh cheer up, Louis. Look at that heavy sky out there.

LOUIS: Purple.

BELIZE: *Purple?* Boy, what kind of a homosexual are you, anyway?
That's not purple, Mary, that color up there is (*Very grand*) *mauve*.
(*Millenium* 100)

In the context of African-American self-understanding, Belize becomes almost a necessary choice to play the prophet of the play's fabulous realism, for this other-consciousness is *his* historical inheritance. W.E.B. DuBois writes famously, "the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (5). Note that Du Bois does not describe the Negro as *being* the other world's revelation; rather, the other world becomes a necessary and inescapable means of his own self-knowing (and, philosophically, the means of self-knowledge in general). The Negro is not so much "America's" double as he is its doubleness, its wrestling against its own mortalities through the immortal other, its wrestling with reality through the imagination. Born of fiction, double-consciousness expresses itself as a subjective agonism¹³⁰ which Du Bois – and Kushner –

¹³⁰ Describing the progress of the Negro pilgrim, Du Bois continues a few pages later: "In those sombre forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself, - darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission" (9). Self-revelation approaches truth increasingly as it shifts its reference from the other world to the action of the self, from self-perception as idea to self-perception in act. This is the truth that Belize tries to convey to Louis, and one that is unnecessary for him to convey to Prior, who like Jacob

identify with prophetic knowledge. Implicitly, then, for the Negro and for Belize, race becomes the imperative connection between appearance and truth.

The spirit of America past, present, and yet to come, Belize speaks to the ideas that comprise its self-definition, the way of reading that is America. Significantly, his revelation is also an essential statement of the play's moral and ideological project, as well as one of its most frequently quoted lines. At the end of his conversation with Louis, Belize tries to help him define love, in the process explaining why political theory is not the answer to his ethical struggles. "I've thought about it for a very long time, and I still don't understand what love is. Justice is simple. Democracy is simple. Those things are unambivalent. But love is very hard. And it goes bad for you if you violate the hard law of love" (*Millenium* 100). Moments later, Mr. Lies (played by the actor playing Belize) will tell Harper something similar about fantasy, that it too has its laws that must not be violated, as impenetrable as they may be.¹³¹ "Even hallucinations have laws," he says. Fantasy does not mean limitless possibility, just miraculous transportation. As fantasy's agent, Mr. Lies – like an angel – moves us to a different order of existence. It remains an order, however, with its own hierarchy and principle of hierarchy; our powers remain limited by the differences within it. Such fantasy echoes what Coleridge said of the action of fancy, that it is really a "mode of memory emancipated from time and space," as distinguished from imagination, a "living power" and "prime agent" of creation that can "build a world" and "make an order." Harper, hallucinogenically transported to Antarctica, seeks

en route to his own self-revelation as Israel, learns this through his otherworldly encounters and struggles, face to face.

¹³¹ Harper wants to "make a new world" in Antarctica, where he has taken her, to erect a city, "an enormous city made up of frontier forts, dark wood and green roofs and high gates made of pointed logs and bonfires burning on every street corner," etc. Mr. Lies cautions her, "No timber here. Too cold. Ice, no trees." And She says she wants to stay forever, but he reminds her, "Ice has a way of melting . . ." He spurns her advances because it would violate the rules of the International Order of Travel Agents. And he insists that in Antarctica, never, ever, will she find an Eskimo. "Respect the delicate ecology of your delusions." She doesn't, however. In *Perestroika* she violates their

imaginative sovereignty, the ability to build her own world, just as Louis seeks in America the freedom of association that would transcend fancy's "law of association." As Louis describes his "political" nationality, America refers to a theory of historical change in which change is freed from history. It is Belize's job to remind him of that history, of the limits of sovereignty, the price of building a new world. The laws of America, designed to rationalize and unify, are general, abstract, pure and overarching. Against their universal, theoretical transparency Belize gives us the "law of love," mysterious, ineluctable, the law of the prophets and the priests.

"I've thought about it for a very long time, and I still don't understand what love is." At the end of the road we find still a question, an ignorance and an incomprehension. Belize too has his naivete. The power of origination and originative certainty must be inaccessible, he suggests, as inaccessible as the presence of God. *Angels'* theater of the fabulous seems to follow this insight; the fabulous, like drag, consists always in imitation, in combining and separating, playing with the given in recognition that it is only within the given that we have the power to grasp something immortal. For the fabulous as for the diva, immortality is derivative. Like the presence of Rosa Parks in *Touched by an Angel* or Ethel Rosenberg in *Angels in America*, the fabulous dramatizes the divine power of the other, as icon and as historical agent. Thus drag artists tend to perform celebrities of an other era, who have already been canonized as founders of a particular cultural movement or aesthetic style. This is a particularly human iconicity. In its inclination toward transcendence the human is capable of something the angel isn't: ambivalence. As the Angel Australia says, "We cannot solve Conundrums." Living on the edge of the gender line and the color line, Belize more than most of *Angels'* characters witnesses to such ambivalence, and to the necessity of choosing, committing, and enduring within it. In this

supposed laws by gnawing down a pine tree where there should be none. It turns out to be a real tree in Prospect Park, and she gets arrested. "Mr. Lies (*Vanishing*): The Law for real."

investment we can see why Belize, for different reasons than Louis, rejects the angel. Where Louis finds angels irrelevant to an ideal of America justice based on naïve principles of disinterestedness,¹³² Belize sees them as dangerously not interested enough. In their rigidity and adherence to simple ideas, the Soviet-style angelic bureaucracy fails to translate. Unlike the iconic person they do not cross time and space, but remain paralyzed in the apparatus of the moment. Devoted to the process of imagination yet deprived of God, the separated intelligences cannot act at all.¹³³ By definition without experience, they prove themselves incapable even of fancy, which in Belize's – and possibly Kushner's – cosmologies is all that is left us.

Yet Kushner too is ambivalent. Despite its cautions against angelic excesses, the play at the same time is genuinely fascinated by them (as well as beautifully researched on the nature of the angel as figure). And, by a winning irony, the very characters that refuse angels show themselves to have the most in common with them. Louis would like to traffic in angelic intelligence. Belize describes him to himself later in *Perestroika*: “Up in the air, just like that angel, too far off the earth to pick out the details. Louis and his Big Ideas. Big Ideas are all you love. ‘America’ is what Louis loves” (94). Louis's are the angels of paradise, inhabiting a system of pure laws which, in a wholly intellectual world, are always adequate to events. Truth and justice are the same. It is appropriate that, in identifying with Louis, Kushner also identifies one of the weaknesses of his play – its conceptual narrative, in which people wrestle with ideas and only occasionally each other (and, in the case of Louis and Joe, wrestle with each other over

¹³² Louis's idea of justice cannot comprehend viral caprice. His thinking remains in a system of reward and retribution. “It's not fair. I fucked around more than he did.” In this sense Louis has the most in common with the projected audience of *Touched by an Angel*, in demonstration an inability to comprehend how it is the good die young.

¹³³ This loss of imagination, and its connection to a theater of the fabulous, can be seen via the angel's costuming. In the 1993 Broadway production *Ellen McLaughlin*, the actress playing the angel, appears in a Romanesque, sweeping gown with drooping sleeves and with a wingspan greater than her height. Her appearance is, as Prior defines angels, devoid of imagination, “both fabulous and dull all at once.” The same might be said for her

ideas). His stimulation for the project was itself an idea: what happens when the lover of an AIDS victim wrestles with the idea of leaving him, and on what basis?¹³⁴ As the Rabbi says in response to Louis's question about "someone who abandons someone he loves at a time of great need," "Why would a person do such a thing?" This is exactly the question that *Angels* literally seeks to answer. Like Louis, the play itself wrestles with ideas and with the angelic other as idea. "The fabulous" in this context is at bottom a speculation, a logical enterprise, rather than a fantastic conceit. Kushner himself finds this not only appropriate, but necessary: "We have to recognize that human beings are as much creatures of ideas as they are of materiality, and that we need ideas. Wallace Stevens is very important. We live in – we are made of – words. God is the imagination" (Kinzer 214).

Given a conception of God as the Logos, the Word, Kushner argues for a reading of the imaginary through the verbal. This is a radically intellectual project, perhaps more than an artistic one – Brechtian in origin, and profoundly oriented toward consciousness and social change. As a result, it ultimately explains the play's major dramatic weakness, which is to avoid providing that kind of single-minded affective satisfaction that *Touched by an Angel*, for all its faults, strives to deliver. But it also lands us at the heart of Kushner's political and philosophical mission in this context, to write a play about AIDS, gay men, Reagan, Roy Cohn, and Mormons, and at the idea that unites them. This is the idea of the relation between suffering and freedom, and it is most apparent in the doubling between the Angel of America and Belize. For, while ostensibly the double of Prior's externally imposed physical trauma and also of Louis's self-

message, the new law that is visited upon Prior. Its apocalyptic splendor and fierce, absolute totalizing make us gasp; yet, like drag, their magic is in their familiarity, of the known brought to extremes.

¹³⁴ Specifically, Kushner in interview comments on the rarity of gay men walking out on lovers with AIDS. "I don't actually know anyone who has. I wanted to write what I wrote in *Angels* because I felt it was something that a lot of people were afraid of, and that a lot of people weren't talking about" (Cunningham 72). He accentuates the danger of such a choice later, referring to Louis as someone who "dares to do the unspeakable to see what happens when

imposed mental one, the angel at her most expressive speaks to an experience she (literally, with coughs and stutters) cannot articulate, but which is for Belize a necessary reckoning within his life in America. In America, as Harper later realizes in relation to the Mormon migration, movement comes from “devastation.” We assume this devastation in Belize (“I am trapped in a world of white people,” he proclaims as he exits swishily) while we perceive its conversion to a distinct sense of time and motion: cutting short conversations, ushering other characters in and out of scenes, saying things like, “We have to move fast.” The sound of New York traffic. This sound, somehow neither material nor conceptual and somehow also both, suggests the isolation that defines suffering in the world of the play. In its dynamism the moment dies to us immediately, is immortalized and made divine because it cannot be wholly known or contained. It is what the angel, who naively would like time to slow down, nevertheless inspires despite herself in her conveyance of material urgency: “The great work begins.” Will exists only phenomenally and in relation to death. Free and alone – whether bed-ridden in an apartment, crying in the men’s room, or simply, angelically, appearing in the door¹³⁵ – it exists on its own. And in a play that more than anything is about immaturity and power, being on one’s own appears as the final, and very American, truth.

And at the end we find that Belize too, for all his protestations, has an angelic counterpart. She arrives in a different way than the first angel: predictably. Instead of fanfare, screeches, eight vaginas, a “bouquet of phalli” and divine self-importance, we see a simple statue at a fountain – the Angel of Bethesda. “I like them best when they’re statuary. They commemorate death but they suggest a world without dying. They are made of the heaviest

you do it” (ibid. 73). In many ways, the play too does exactly this, in the experimental spirit of seeing what happens, a spirit of boldness and adventure and moral transgression.

¹³⁵ The HBO version very dramatically portrays Belize’s (authoritatively played by Jeffrey Wright) first entrance at the door of Prior’s hospital room, stunning in bright leather jacket and feather boa.

things on earth, stone and iron, they weigh tons but they're winged, they are engines and instruments of flight" (Prior in *Perestroika* 145). Belize's echo is an angel of the earth, and the laws she brings – of gravity and aerodynamics – are operational, rather than conceptual. She is a force and expression of life, but one which acknowledges death in the representation of that force. This is appropriate for Belize who as drag queen – immortal as icon, rather than person – addresses the necessary material limits of the person. For Belize the ability to act in time presupposes a social imperative, the ability to accept the physical, personal reality of death as an essential principle of human connectedness and solidarity. (At a funeral for one of the "Great Glitter Queens," a victim of AIDS, Prior becomes upset, calling it a "ludicrous spectacle." Belize, on the other hand, finds it "divine." For this Prior calls him a "death junkie.") Belize's counterpart, the Angel of Bethesda, testifies to the failure of the heavenly angels, the failure of an intelligence divorced from historical and mortal ruptures and, hence, from genuine participation in human affairs.

The statuary angel is a living contradiction then. But she is also a unification of contradiction. Appearing in the final minutes of the second part of *Angels*, the Angel of Bethesda returns us to the beginning of the first part, in a way that brings Jewishness and America together. There to commemorate the naval dead of the Civil War and suggesting in her very name America's capital, she is also a Jewish mythic figure. As Louis and Belize (orchestrated by Prior) both tell us, she appeared during the days of the Second Temple, and where she landed a fountain shot up, endowed with great healing powers. When the Romans conquered the city the fountain ran dry, but it is said that it will flow again, when the Millennium comes. In this figure history and ideas meet; America exists, and so do angels in America. And it is in her meditation that Prior turns to the audience members and blesses them. "Bye now.

You are fabulous creatures, each and every one. And I bless you: *More Life*.¹³⁶ The Great Work Begins” (146).

In wrestling, nothing exists except in the absolute, there is no symbol, no allusion, everything is presented exhaustively. Leaving nothing in the shade, each action discards all parasitic meanings and ceremonially offers to the public a pure and full signification, rounded like Nature. This grandiloquence is nothing but the popular and age-old image of the perfect intelligibility of reality.

What is portrayed by wrestling is therefore an ideal understanding of things; it is the euphoria of men raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of a univocal nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction. (Barthes 25)

Prior has earned the right to bestow on his audience this divine unity and intelligibility of experience. In his wrestlings with the angel, which is to say in wrestling with the temptation of accepting her message, he appropriates her grandiloquent power for his own humanist message. His rejection of her is declamatory, delivering the endowed book back to heaven while demanding the blessing. In essence, he wins. In Kushner’s version, it is the angel not Jacob who

¹³⁶ In interpreting the blessing the angel confers upon Jacob, Kushner in *Perestroika* acknowledges himself indebted to Harold Bloom’s analysis in *The Book of J*. Writing in his capacity as a literary critic (the book’s dust-jacket tells us he is “America’s foremost literary critic”), Bloom argues that Jacob’s exile represents the falling away from the blessing of Yahweh (conferred or enacted by the angel); more precisely it represents the failure to stomach the limitlessness – he calls it boundary-lessness – of such blessing. He interprets “more life,” the original meaning of the blessing, to indicate something close to the eternal or immortal, in his suggestion that the sublimity of God cannot be born, in every sense of the word. “And yet, in J, the Blessing is always partly ironic, and frequently attended by fraud. Usurpation after all is Jacob’s mode, as in some sense it will be the way of Jesus. Jacob too is one of the spiritually exuberant who bear away the Blessing by a kind of violence” (Rosenberg and Bloom 211).

tears her thigh, and the delivery of the blessing – more life – means denying the angelic message, rather than taking the name it bestows.¹³⁷ The angelic message itself is a kind of messagelessness, an emptiness or absence underneath the fabulous trappings. This is the point of her fabulousness – an organizing lie at the heart of appearance. As the conclusion of Kushner’s two-part epic tells us, the real angel of America is an angel of stone, who represents the very act she cannot perform.

The failure of the angel and the allure of the angel (she stimulates an erection in Prior, who has long been dormant) preach the doctrine of fancy, and a theory of the social based on it. Done with imagination, with revolution and re-creation, art and empire, she points to something more modest but, for Tony Kushner, equally passionate. This is the power of memory separated from time and space, a specific historical iconicity within which the social body might take shape. At the end Prior declaims, “This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away” (146). Wrestling with the immortality that can only come from dying, the country faces its own judgments in this terrifying joining together of love and death. Angels hang heavy over these judgments. No longer potent figures of historical origination, the only thing they are good for, *Angels* proposes, is to give the past continuity, bless it with more life. In a “time of Crisis and Confusion,” as the Angel herself puts it, the question of change and continuity looms largest, our powers of selection most taxed. This is a question the angels cannot answer. Rather, in wrestling with them we make it for ourselves. We create our own power to bless, our own truth, and our own love.

¹³⁷ Bloom makes an interesting interpretation of the angels’ bestowing the name “Israel” on Jacob, that perhaps Israel was the angel’s name. He refuses, after all, to give it. The identification between the two would then be even stronger. Whether this is what the text itself implies, the angel is always to some degree one’s other, thus it always bears the name of our own potential, which we have to then earn by wrestling it from him.

5. Love Among the Ruins

The death of God left the angels in a strange position. They were overtaken suddenly by a fundamental question. One can attempt to imagine the moment. How did they look at the instant the question invaded them, flooding the angelic consciousness, taking hold with terrifying force? The question was, "What are angels?"

New to questioning, unaccustomed to terror, unskilled in aloneness, the angels (we assume) fell into despair.

- Donald Barthelme, "On Angels"

In many ways, neither *Touched by an Angel* nor *Angels in America* is "art." Each subordinates the avenues disclosed by its presentation of an imaginative world to an already determined didactic purpose. This is the secret behind the TV melodrama's resolutely style-less yet mannered pursuit of epiphany, and behind the Broadway hit's attempt to find the dramatic idiom of "theory." Witty, creative, and completely entertaining, Tony Kushner's play nevertheless attempts to translate the genre of the novel of ideas to performance, with the result that the performance itself is deprived of any inner engines. Both texts devote themselves to a conceptual, moral goal, evoking emotion by this means where aesthetically it should derive from the action itself.

Each work has its artistic moments, however. *Touched by an Angel* recalls scenes of a little girl staring at the rain shelter door as her brother is locking her in to protect her from her abusive father, Andrew the angel of death in the corner quietly catching her eye; an astronaut floating in outer space, cut off from her shuttle, trying not to use up all her oxygen; a Chinese dissident cowering in the corner of her prison cell as fellow inmates bribed by the powers-that-be try to brutalize her, the white-clad figure of Monica kneeling over her, in agony, protecting her

from the blows. *Angels in America* yields up tableaux that are not so much fleeting as typical: a bed-ridden Prior enclosed in his apartment, whose roof the angel bursts climactically; the angels themselves myopically clustered in their corner of bureaucratic heaven, trying to receive communications from the world via an outdated radio set; and finally the circle of friends gesturing towards the statuary Angel of Bethesda, an object rather than an agent of thought, mute and staring in her encasement of stone. All of these imagistic legacies play into a recurrent feeling – the hit of claustrophobia that fascinates so much of contemporary angelic literature. From the famous scene in which George Bailey declares, “I’m shaking the dust off this little town” to the scene where he accuses Potter of trying to enclose the town like a “scurvy little spider,” from Daniel in *Wings of Desire*, trapped in a sphere of influence but devoid of touch, to the angel encounter books’ trope of the car broken-down or smashed like a chrysalis, and from the angel self-help books’ urge to transcend the body to its fear of entrapment in demonic deception, angelic texts tend in their different ways to lurch around a poetics of confinement. Such confinement can be intimate and erotic – we might think of *Angels in America*’s Joe and Louis hiding out in bed – as well as terrifying. This is the fundamental narcissism of the angelic benediction, which attracts us with the delights of Satanic pride as much as it traps us in an isolated and subjective universe.

The contribution of *Touched by an Angel* and *Angels in America* to a tradition of angelic enclosure is specific. In Williamson’s show we see the angel standing surrogate for the abuses of imprisonment and in Kushner, even more powerfully, the angels discover their own confinement, one which appears by the end as more constricting even than being bedridden by AIDS. The backward-looking pure intelligence that is safe from death and corruption nevertheless cheapens its own power because it cannot tell truth from illusion. The death of God

and universal principles, the play suggests, strips the angelic mind – and its assumed coherence of rational law and free will – of any divinatory certainty. Where in *Touched by an Angel* we can see the beginnings of angelic self-enclosure in its assumption of the human form (Monica's experience of being black is at once a claustrophobia and an agoraphobia), in *Angels in America* this imprisonment is completed by the absence of any ultimate authority or final cause – of any *source*. The problem of causelessness, epitomized by the randomness of the virus, provokes the emergent representation of angelic impotence and provinciality.

As far as angels are concerned, impotence and provinciality are actually the same thing. In general and consistently, the angel emblemizes potential being unfolding itself – suddenly and completely spread out before us. For such a figure to be represented as limited in her view of what is possible, which happens in both Kushner's text and (temporarily but suggestively) in *Touched by an Angel*'s "Black Like Monica" episode, necessarily means negating her agency. The angel's view is powerful and unique in at once encompassing past, present, and future. To be stuck looking backward – whether at American racism or Soviet-style Communism – demeans her before the human which has overcome its own past, and which alone can make its own history. Historical agents and martyrs like Rosa Parks and Ethel Rosenberg thus appear in positions more capable of giving the blessing than a fallen Monica or the clueless Angel of America, while contemporary ones like Prior choose to reject the messenger and her entourage in favor of non-transcendent struggle and the gaze of an angel that does not pretend to be anything other than stone.

Thus Tony Kushner's intense duology leaves us where it began: with the image of Walter Benjamin's angel of history,¹³⁸ looking back at the skyward-growing repetitions of historical

¹³⁸ The famous description in the Ninth Thesis in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (in *Illuminations*) is taken after a picture by Paul Klee entitled *Angelus Novus*, which Benjamin owned and which fascinated him

destruction as he moves horizontally into the future. In this image idea lurches heavily away from reality, possibility from actuality. Torn from its angel, human history cracks, revealing the essential contradiction between its revolutionary ideal and its unproductive, even decadent reality. At the scene of such a contradiction, we perceive in the distance a bodiless spectator – like the subject of the angel self-help books – imprisoned in his own gaze. The messenger who ushers in the new within the terms of the old finds himself impotently blown backward by the winds of change. For the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” as for *Angels in America*, “progress” is stronger than “destiny.”

Benjamin’s angel of history is one of the most potent allegories in a century that has seemed at once fascinated by allegory and disdainful of it.¹³⁹ This may be part of its appeal. For it is an allegory without God and even of the absence of God. In the spirit of Benjamin’s own writing on allegory, the famous scene of angel, time, and wreckage portrays the critical distance between idea and thing. The angel-ideal moves ever further away from the history whose spirit he would speak for and to which he belongs. In the face of such inhibited communication,

throughout his life. He even titled an early ‘20’s journal after it. The picture itself shows only the angel – wide-eyed and staring; the description of the entire scene including the wreckage of the past is Benjamin’s own invention. For those readers unfamiliar with Thesis IX I include it here. It follows a poem by Gershom Scholem which translates as, “*My wing is ready for flight, / I would like to turn back. / If I stayed timeless time, / I would have little luck.*” The thesis follows: “A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”

¹³⁹ John Milfull offers a timely contextualization of the popularity of this, the most utopic of Benjamin’s work. Discussing Benjamin’s “Messianic dreams” he writes, “Malamud’s perception that in the twentieth century we have all become Jews is in need of an update; since 1989, those of us, at least, who cling to such utopias have all become Benjamins” (129). The inclusion of 1989 is apt and important, and relevant to the current fascination with angels that opens with the close of the Cold War, but Milfull’s reading – I think mistakenly – focuses on the corporate decadence of the eighties rather than on the change in world order and its mode of articulation that the collapse of the Cold War created. A Benjaminian utopianism looks forward to emergence out of destruction, within a historical-cultural dialectic; it is not a rationalist critique of current modes of production and analytic imagining of something else.

history produces the angel's opposite: detritus, waste, garbage. An allegory that refuses to make agents of concepts, the "Theses" tableau is without pedagogy or redemption. Would-be transcendence, we see clearly before us, paralyzes history.

In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* Benjamin elaborates his hermeneutic of the ruin through the distinction between an allegory of correspondence and an allegory of configuration. For Benjamin the idea of a thing – of a work, or a culture – cannot be represented in a fixed relation to material reality, because it would be impossible to construct a unity from the collection of correspondences that trace a path throughout it. He is not interested in that representational form of allegory where characters embody concepts; that only allows us to read qualities, not situations. Instead, he develops a "theological" mode of allegorical reading in which the players and parts form a conceptual whole: hence we see the idea in the "arrangement" or "configuration" of formal elements in the concept. Such a configuration, made up of fragments, is fully exposed to us, but only in its status as ruin. The floor plan is not visible in the structure – where it is only immanent - but in the decay of the structure. "Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is fleetingly revealed with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified primordial landscape" (166). And again, "Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things" (178). In ruin, decay, and above all, catastrophe, allegory reveals not only the concept immanent in things and deeds but the observer who contemplates them, calling history by its name.¹⁴⁰ Where a doctrine of correspondences ultimately reaches

¹⁴⁰ Irving Wohlfarth has a wonderful write-up of Benjamin's famous image in terms of decadent modernist cosmology. (Referring to the historicist concept of "homogeneous, empty time" proper to modern idealism): "Benjamin calls such a conception of history vertiginous, because it seesaws between two antithetical phantasmagorias – that of infinite progress and that of infinite repetition – which coalesce in the bourgeois dictum 'Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose'" (200). Wohlfarth distinguishes the latter, which he aligns with Nietzschean eternal return, from the pile of wreckage perceived by the angel of history: "To put it schematically, the doctrine of progress is an escapist daydream; the hallucinatory vision of eternal return is a nightmare that recognizes

toward liberation from the finite world, configuration presumes the impossibility of such liberation, promising only the gift of seeing into the world in all its finitude.

This seeing is precisely what Benjamin's allegory of history offers. But while his image presents before us the deadly spectacle of confinement even in flight and even for angels,¹⁴¹ it does have some positive content. In the spectatorial eyes of the angel we see a way of reading the decay. For as a poetics of the fall,¹⁴² allegory never ceases to take its eyes off of the scene of waste and destruction, and in fact looks to this destruction as its own scribe. It recalls an imagined and original ordering impulse, poignant but also formidable in its naïve conviction that merely by *arranging* things, they will come to life. Few aesthetic forms are so claustrophobia-inducing as one of these allegorical arrangements, whether in writing or art, yet they also have the power to strike us to the quick and hold fast, tearing open for us new worlds, thoughts, and feelings. That allegories can do this is in part due to the fact that, in trying to capture the ideal in the real, they portray reality fantastically. The supernatural and the marvelous are, in an allegory of configuration, not quite graspable, but never too far away.

This amalgam of order, supernatural presence, and life force follows angels in any particular form, whether it be revelation, of pure reason, or of struggle. But peculiarly these elements appear most strongly when the angel is least an angel, that is, when it is itself a ruin.

itself as such, but only from within, while the angel has fully awakened to the nightmare, without, however, being able to escape it" (201).

¹⁴¹ And paradoxically as a result of *too much* openness. The detail in the ninth thesis is significant here, that the angel cannot fly because he cannot close his wings. It is as if the angel has been frozen before us as angel (in the full reach of his span, seemingly representing the height of his power), and is fixed before our gaze as such. The closing of the wings is also a disappearance – in Wallace Stevens' words, the angel is "half seen, or seen for a moment." This is the angel of reality, however (see "Angels Surrounded by Paysans"). The angel of history is not of the moment that opens and closes, but belongs to the past, to the moment prior after it has already petrified. The resulting ruins also open their idea, their angel, to full view as a result of their petrified bondage. Thus the angel tells us more about itself by the very fact of its not being able to fly.

¹⁴² See for instance Edwin Honig's description of allegory in *Dark Conceit* as searching always for paradise regained (108). Honig understands this postlapsarian urge to express itself as the forging of a new order, ideal, and imaginary world: "For the allegorist the re-creation of authority necessitates a critical view of reality, a re-

As Benjamin insists about allegory - that not only does the ruin not befoul the revelation, but the ruin *is* the revelation - so does the ruined angel more clearly manifest those elements that define angels in the full display and exercise of their power. It is the ruined angel that will be the fourth and final type that this dissertation will describe. Such ruination is indissolubly tied to boundedness, limitation, the situations that produce claustrophobia, for the enforced passivity that results is exactly the ruin of the angel, a figure of agency and free will.

As a self-negating representation, the passive, constrained angel is not common. This figure appears in the second half of the twentieth century at the same times as the others – immediately after the Second World War, and after the collapse of the order that that war ultimately inaugurated. But it does not populate multiple genres as do some of the other figures – most especially the annunciating angels. Almost always it is adopted by texts with a self-consciously aesthetic sensibility, refined, and above all, modernist. The cheesy *City of Angels* would be an exception to this, but this movie about an earth-longing angel exists only as a remake of arthouse-chic *Wings of Desire*, and in Nicholas Cage it turns surprised melancholy into a sodden mournfulness. By and large, ruined angels take wing (or fall clumsily) in texts that adopt as their primary existential attitude an assumption of belatedness between the event and its contemplation, a fundamental schism that expresses itself in other ways – as a split between sign and meaning, origin and tradition, subject and object. This is the modernist project generally, postlapsarian, a too old consciousness attached to a too young experience, seeking to express itself in a culture it perceives as defined by the reverse. Within the literature of this period a specific means of addressing these issues arose, however, that took as its goal the potential within these splits to forge new associations; these associations – both free and freeing – were

examination of the objective norms of experience in the light of human ideality. It includes the making of a new version of reality by means of an ideal which the reality of fiction proves” (109).

characterized by a creative discontinuity which was seen as essentially capable of grasping and making perceptible the discontinuities at the basis of human (and modern) experience. The initiating poets called this movement surrealism, a movement that later, in relation to the political insanities of Latin America, spawned the highly influential contemporary form called magical or marvelous realism.

Most of the ruined angel texts of the current era in the United States are poems, and most of these poems are surrealist-influenced.¹⁴³ The fascination with angels roughly coincides with the surrealist revival in this country, and angels in general – let alone angels of the kind that this chapter is focused on – tend to appear more frequently in poems with a surreal affect or orientation. Few of these are properly surrealist; the movement adopts that title as forebear, but participates more in the thinking of marvelous realism, which – though it shares with surrealism a fascination with the irrational, unpredictable, and inhuman forces of experience – probes the cosmos rather than the mind.¹⁴⁴ In Latin America and Spain (whose literary traditions are still in close conversation with one another) these representations are not limited to poetry, but extend also to fiction, particularly short fiction.

¹⁴³ Surrealism influenced American poets – including Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery – just following World War II – precisely when it was losing its hold in Europe. Following the publication of Robert Bly's translations of Spanish and Latin American poems in 1972 and his own experiments in this form of writing, subsequent poets began to adopt some of the conventions and ideas proper to that tradition (see *Leaping Poetry*). These poets included W.S. Merwin, James Wright, and – a poet whose work I engage later in this chapter – Mark Strand. Willard Bohn explains the project of what has informally been dubbed the “New Surrealism.” “Surrealism, as adopted by well-known poets in the United States, shed much of its overt political positions, particularly its reliance on Marxism, and instead focused on the rhetorical processes of defamiliarization, disjunctive constructions, and collage. Partly adopted as a method of responding to the corruption of language during the Vietnam War and as a response to a growing dissatisfaction with academic poetry, as well as a response to and a result of the burgeoning market for works in translation, the most evident processes of surrealism were seized upon. Nonetheless, recent poets in the United States share the goals of continental surrealism of transforming the process of seeing and of sensory liberation.”

¹⁴⁴ It may be inaccurate, albeit compact, to define the divergence between surrealism and magical realism in terms of their theories of mind and cosmos. Surrealism is invested in a structuralist view that seeks to bring the irrational mind of the unconscious to rational, conscious experience. Marvelous realism, on the other hand, lends itself better to a “poststructuralist” sensibility, though one that is politically tutored. Such writers understand the irrational as part and parcel of rational thought and system. Such surrealist techniques as “free association” need not be

The current poetic investment in a neo-surrealist enterprise¹⁴⁵ is especially important when positioned against the other major trends in contemporary poetry. The poets who write most about angels are not part of any of the most prominent contemporary movements: the New Formalism/New Narrative, or the Confessional revival – especially the latter. In fact, two of the better known poets who write about angels, Billy Collins and Stephen Dunn, are anthologized in a collection of essays about autobiographical poetry as gadflies of the genre. While most of the essays in *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography* (Sontag and Graham, 2001) are exploratory or celebratory in approach, Collins’ “My Grandfather’s Tackle Box” and Dunn’s “Degrees of Fidelity” stand out in their criticism of poetry as a form of life-writing. Collins situates such a project within the “history of ego,” which he traces from Rousseau to Wordsworth to the present, and in the rejection of the “immediacy” of a language of the present for the “aesthetic intimacy” purchased by the language of memory. Engaging the distinction between memory as history and memory as invention, Collins advocates that, following Robert Frost, the poet retain in her self-exhibiting the “delicacy” to “stop short.” For Collins the sense of limit is a poetic imperative and a matter of aesthetic principle. Dunn too recognizes the value of the limit in the poetry of personal disclosure: “most poems about family should be put in a locked closet” (176). But where Collins blithely suggests that an “imaginative liberty” that may “fly over history” rewards this nostalgic check, Dunn regards writerly finitude as the essence of poetic life. “The dead free us as much as the living constrain us,” he writes, but adds that constraint is *useful*. Dunn is

cultivated and released, because these associations are already given and understood as part of what we understand to be “order.”

¹⁴⁵ Charles Borkhuis terms this tendency “parasurrealist.” He attributes the return of surrealist approaches in poetry of the 1990’s in part to the legacy of poststructuralist sensibilities that challenged the other major experimentalist arena in modern poetry – language poetry. “If surrealism’s return in later textual poetry has been prepared in part by structuralist and postructuralist theory, it is also true that the germ of the structuralist revolution was already in surrealist writings. The emergence of a parasurrealist tendency in today’s textual poetry may be a sign that language writing is still too narrowly rooted in cognitive processes and that what postlanguage poetries are seeing is a more

uninterested in the liberation from trauma or the past that memory-driven poetry often promises. Instead, a worthy poem asserts itself as the “cry of its own occasion.” This is the core of his poetic philosophy, but could function more globally as the motto of any poem that deals with the past through the lens of angelic constraint and ruin. For the cry – the yelp of being when it reaches its own limit – is not necessarily opposed to the representation of memory or history. It simply cannot escape the destruction that any such contemplation requires. Where confession sees in the present the repetition of an originary moment made whole in memory, what might be called the occasional does the opposite; its memory breaks apart, siezes a moment from the past as it strikes the limit of the present, and searches for beginning in singularity rather than echo. This disjunctive view of experience is essential to both the surrealist and marvelous realist projects, apparent even in poets like Collins and Dunn who are not technically surrealist, and guides the treatment of history and reality in the texts I shall discuss dominated by images of angelic lapse.

In this chapter I will be looking at literature from both North and South America and from the two major postwar time periods relevant to angels – American poetry from the Forties and Fifties and again from the late 80’s and 90’s, and one short work from Latin America. In doing this I intend to describe one of the major – if not the major – attitudes that define the poetic angel tradition in America, using the “magical realist” short story as a road map and analytic tool. Gabriel García Márquez’s story “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings,” first published in 1955, has little of the chilling melancholia of Benjamin’s angel or of the majority of postwar American angel poetry. Its tone is wry and uninvested. But in the chaos of its “primordial landscape” and the destruction of its battered angelic “observer,” García Marquez’s fable

contemporary, scientific model of intelligence, one that is more widely dispersed throughout the entire sensorium” (252-53).

exposes and makes perceptible the idea of the angel that grips both Benjamin and the contemporary poetic scene. Marvelous realism –inheriting surrealist thinking - is especially adapted to this allegorical goal; as Charles Borkhuis comments, surrealism “postulates an ideal or absolute reality – a super-reality toward which all of its actions are directed. . . . This philosophy of essence keeps orthodox surrealism on a vertical axis, working to transform base metals into the alchemical gold of a truer reality” (244). Allegory’s destructive idealism finds expression in the spontaneous revelations and beholdings that constitute surrealism’s courtship of the absolute. When read allegorically, the configuration of these elements in García Márquez’s story reveals the spectator that makes the angel a spectacle, the reader that makes it readable - in “A Very Old Man”’s objective, intuitive arrangement of angelic ruination, we find the angel’s angel.

Paradoxically, then, we behold in the aged and comical farce of the story’s angel the defining angelic function of making history, to put things in time, turn time into event, and usher in a world of distinctions and degrees through the ordering power of its gaze. It as if we can only completely perceive the angel’s idea in the absence of this power. Thus in the allegorical ruin a negative theology lurks: in attempting to portray an infinitely unknowable order through another, allegory suggests that the best we can know of something is in its negation. The angel - like ruins, damaged and blown apart by time - is no exception. In perceiving it foiled of its divinity we see more clearly the nature of that divinity, and its power.

This chapter approaches the figure of the ruined angel with the spirit of negation in mind. However, its method will take up the other side of allegory that works in consort with negation: the parabolic. Allegory is distinct from the parable in that its elaboration of two worlds is more complex; its goal is conceptualization rather than generalization. Yet it shares with the parable

an insistence on producing meaning between two levels, one of which escapes the other and is in effect always pursued by it. Both begin from the position that ignorance is not impervious to truth; it simply does not have within itself the means of accessing it. Thus allegory and parable function as possible affirmative forms within a doctrine of negative theology. This is how the *via negativa* expresses itself given the necessity of presence, of the physical, and of story, for human cognition.¹⁴⁶ Mystical affirmation, the great angelic theologian pseudo-Dionysius insists, functions as an intermediary by which the reader proceeds deductively towards “that darkness which is beyond intellect.”¹⁴⁷ Where negation emphasizes the differences between things, the parabolic, anagogic mode is guided by their similarities (both “parable” and “parabolic” derive from the Greek *parabolē*, to compare). It is for this reason that my exegesis of the poems will be through story, and through the isolation of guiding parts of it that bring together the various incarnations of the angel of distress. I start within a presumption that an incompletely knowable reality can only be known in its incompleteness through the presentation of fantasy. García Márquez’s marvelous realism and the surrealist revival that sponsors the poems guide me in this. In them the physicality of deformation, bondage and decay find convincing expression while at the same time raising questions about the convincing – about truth and believability and the infinities of an imprisoned spectatorship. These are the affirmations that these works embrace as the very mark of limitation, and which I follow in the structure of this chapter. Their shared vision of an “angel in distress” speaks at once to the possibilities with which the marvelous

¹⁴⁶ The great Medieval Jewish theologian Moses of Maimonides argues in *The Guide of the Perplexed* that only the philosophical thinker can think truly negatively – for the masses, parables must suffice. These cannot be interpreted literally, however, lest they lead to falsity. So Maimonides demonstrates through his own analysis of parables how they could lead, through careful exegesis, to the brink of knowledge which negative theology posits between the human and the divine.

¹⁴⁷ See “The Mystical Theology,” 139. The soul, Dionysius says, aims to get to the point where it finds itself “speechless and unknowing,” much like the angelic naïve described in chapter three. Similarly, this state requires an experience of the self through the other. “Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united by a completely unknowing inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing” (137).

invests reality, and the pathos by which reality fails to regard it for what it is, and pushes it away. The angel whirled further and further away from the self-destructing focal point of his gaze becomes himself the shrinking point on the horizon, disappearing from our eyes and petrifying in the imagination of the past.

Modifying Claws

Benjamin's angel of history has exerted such force in contemporary theory, cultural studies, and literary production, that it can seem at times unnecessary and perhaps impossible to perceive him as part of a larger legacy or tradition. He must, like the revelation that angels bring, be his own beginning. Indeed, it is difficult to find a similar evocation of angels prior to twentieth century modernism.¹⁴⁸ Within Benjamin's own thinking, however, the figure reveals a genealogy. For the melancholy angel is not Benjamin's only angel. He has an antecedent, a more sanguine one, who tells a different story of intelligence and confinement. This angel embodies the destruction that the later angel sees, and his relation to the human is active and personal. Yet he derives from the same image and source. Benjamin's enigmatic, angelic alter

¹⁴⁸ The origin of the genuinely stricken angel (not the angel merely posing as a person in distress) is long and winding. At the end of the eighteenth century angelology had fizzled in a Swedenborgian burst, and when taken up a few decades later, angels took partly human shape. Doppelgangers of the romantic man of action, they assumed a role for the most part unoccupied since the days of intertestamentary Biblical literature, in which the "sons of God" make love to the daughters of men. (Gayle Shadduck describes this tendency in English romantic poetry, in particular Lord Byron's *Heaven and Earth*, Thomas Moore's bestselling *The Loves of the Angels*, and George Croly's *The Angel of the World*, establishing a tradition that would later cross the channel – influencing Vigny, Lamartine, and Hugo – and be "kept alive" in French poetry well into the next century.) These erotic angels acted more as gods than angels, and in ceasing to occupy a messengerial, hermeneutic role prepared the way for the rarefied, purely conceptual allegorizations of feminine purity belonging to the Victorian Age. Angels of the nineteenth century thus destroyed the possibility of uniting action and intelligence in angelic form. In this they presaged some of the major theoretical revelations of the new century. The amorous power to pierce, to fix and grab hold of, could not be conjoined to human rationality in the face of Saussure's critique of representationalism and Freud's splintering of the self-interpreting psyche. If Nietzsche had only shortly before declared the death of God (the unity of reason and will), these events established it. Consequently the angelic, as a means of human allegorization and integration, calcified, and any treatment of angels had to take stock of this calcification and patiently unearth what it had to say.

ego in the small piece “Agesilaus Santander”¹⁴⁹ is an earlier interpretation of the Klee painting *Angelus Novus*, which inspired the “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Agesilaus Santander is an angel of exalted destructive power. A demonic figure (Gershom Scholem has persuasively interpreted “Der Angelus Satanas” as an anagram for The Satanic Angel or Satan’s Angel), he looks back to Benjamin’s treatment of Klee’s *Angelus Novus* in the 1931 essay “Karl Kraus.” The passionate voice of the ephemeral and of material humanism, that essay’s New Angel nevertheless “preferred to free men by taking from them, rather than make them happy by giving to them.” His is a tough but necessary love. For in the vision of this angel we learn to “understand a humanity that proves itself by destruction” (*Reflections* 273).

The gesture of “taking from” is both destruction and origin; it calls attention to the essence it seeks to plunder. As in Benjamin’s ruins, the seizure of a thing by time opens up its source and governing idea. In a different way than the annunciating or wrestling angel, then, this creature still serves his charge as the image of his own perfection and possibility. The difference is that the violence of this attention – already evident in this dissertation thematically in the images of wrecked cars and struggles over life and death – is expressed as a menacing hostility built into the representation of the angel itself. We discover that this angel is emblemized by a feature that the later New Angel distinctly lacks: where the signature of the later angel would undoubtedly be his transfixed eyes, the earlier angel surprises us with his claws. These claws are part of the original picture – as are the pointed ends of the angel’s wings, wings like bats – yet they leave almost no trace in the later writing. We find only the ruins they leave behind, the claws that pierce becoming wings that cannot flap. Something else does their work, or in failing to, reveals its nature. In order to understand what this is, however, we need to know them in

¹⁴⁹ It was written in exile in Ibiza, Spain, 1933. In his biographical interpretation of the piece, “Walter Benjamin and his Angel,” Gershom Scholem finds in its anxiety about past and future, poverty, and personal identity an

their original setting.

“Agesilaus Santander” is a notoriously puzzling piece of writing. Part mystical treatise, part love letter, and part psychoanalytic fable, the two page essay (significant enough, however, to boast two drafts) defies ready penetration. It begins with a (pseudo-) autobiographic description of the origin of the name. Agesilaus Santander, we are told, is the narrator’s Kaballistic secret name whose image the angel is. It was given him by his parents as protection, in prophetic anticipation of what it might later mean for a Jewish writer to be so easily located and identified. “This is why they gave me two names in addition to my first name – eccentric names which showed neither that a Jew bore them, nore even that they were his first names” (712). These “prophylactic names” are also meant to appear eventfully, as a momentary utterance or invocation in which the angel appears to sing his worship of God and then is allowed to “return to the void.” But like the later angel who cannot close his wings, the divine visitation has been stayed. The narrator has fixed him to the wall, preventing him from the occult disappearance that is his due. Engaged in battle with the man whose nature he expresses, the angel releases his “feminine aspect” to in turn hold his captor in thrall – as he is held fast by him. But this gains the angel no release. For (and I quote here from the first version of the text):

He may have been unaware that in doing this he brought out the strength of the man against whom he was proceeding. For nothing can overcome my patience. Its pinions resemble those of the angel: they need but a few movements to hold it stationary in the face of the woman whom it is determined to await. But my patience has claws like the angel and razor-sharp pinions, and makes no attempt to pounce on her whom it has sighted. It learns

from the angel and sees how he embraces his partner with a glance, but then retreats in a series of spasms, inexorably. He draws the angel after him on that flight into the future from which he has emerged. He hopes for nothing new from that future, other than the gaze of the person to whom he keeps his face turned.

And so, scarcely had I seen you the first time than I returned with you to where I had come from. (713)

In this early treatment the images of the “Theses” are already apparent. The angel is paradoxically moving into the future while staying still, gazing not at this future but at the object of his other self, towards which his being intends. As in the tableau from Thesis Nine, the scene is parabolic - geometrically parabolic. In this figure the eye moves ever distantly from the fixed point of its beloved and the axis of its desire. The reach toward infinity remains focused on the point of origin, on the finite and physical. The focus is like the recipient of angelic benediction familiar from the first chapter, a seed that in Benjamin’s dialectical hands configures both the future and the past. Angel and demon similarly move towards the origin and away from it at the same time.

Unlike the angel’s, however, the demon’s point of origin is individual, not collective. “Agesilaus Santander” is after all a love poem as well as a meditation; reflections on time as messianic (as opposed to eternal) serve a personal narrative of the self’s self-declaration to the other. Such reflections are not quite generalizable into allegory, comprising rather the story of a person’s relation to his time (it begins with the issue of secrecy and Jewishness) than the relation of a time to itself. In this sense the piece is life-writing, not philosophy, and maintains its hold on a particular experience of historical reality. We see this in the presence of the claws, still

ready to seize experience and capable of doing so. Almost the opposite of the Ninth Thesis's spectatorial lament, the claws seem to have more in common with the "Theses'" monadology – the delivery of a "shock" to the "configuration" of history, whereby an image of the past "flashes up" in brief but total illumination.¹⁵⁰ The monadology of claws is a monadology of the future, however, of lying in wait, and though their power is a divine one, it still reflects the individual will. Endowed with such power and such reflection, the destructive power of the claws exhibits a tenacity that is also an immobility. Benjamin's angel and man *hold* still – stationary as purposive seduction, or the seductive exercise of purpose. Fierce and erotic, the patience of man and angel tears a moment out of its continuum, waiting for that other moment of its liberation, when image becomes act.

Giorgio Agamben has invited a reading of the claws in "Agesilaus Santander" as the mark of Eros. Unlike Scholem, who reads the figure a wholly diabolical, de-angelized Satan, as Scholem had suggested, the demon for Agamben is a demon-angel hybrid. Drawing from Plutarch and Giotto primarily, Agamben concludes, "Benjamin's figure of the angel with claws and wings can therefore lead us only into the domain of Eros, that is, not a demon in the Judeo-Christian sense, but a *daimōn* in the Greek sense" (141). "The Greek sense" defines the daemon as a personal spirit or familiar, on the one hand, and on the other, as the middle agency between gods and men who mediates communication between human and divine and is responsible for sudden or undetermined changes of events (love's arrows symbolize the arousal of movement or action when reason and concept fail to provide immanent cause).¹⁵¹ Destruction, in other words,

¹⁵⁰ Benjamin's use of the term "configuration" in the Seventeenth Thesis is a telling echo of the *Origin*. A moment with all its "tension" yields to those who would pierce it the mysteries of its existence, source, and possibility.

¹⁵¹ In Plato's *Symposium* Eros is described even more clearly in the role of the angel: "This is the power. . . which interprets and conveys to the gods the prayers and sacrifices of men, and to men the commands and rewards of the gods; and this power spans the chasm which divides them, and in this all is bound together, and through this the arts of the prophet and the priest, their sacrifices and mysteries and charms, and all prophecy and incantation, find their way" (135-6). The reference to "binding together" is most striking, suggesting that the claws of the daemon perform

is not the work of malevolent spirit or bad will, but arises from the claiming of the self through ones daemon-genius – whether angel, demon, or lover. The secret name - which in Benjamin's words "gathers all the forces of life unto itself, and by which these forces can be conjured up and protected against outsiders" - can only be brought into being by the destruction of a certain humanity proper to the public self, especially the public self of the writer. This is demanded by the personal angel whose claws scratch out a writing of inhuman patience, of retreat and holding back, cabalistically naming the possibility of transformation and return.

The inscriptive action of the claws recalls Benjamin's discussion of allegory in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. In setting up his distinction between the symbol and the allegory he quotes Schopenhauer's description of the hieroglyphic nature of allegorical pictorial representation, which treats it as equivalent to the representation of a word "in large clear letters on the wall" (*The World As Will and Representation* 1, 237, quoted in *Origin* 162). Schopenhauer uses this to dismiss allegory as an abstract, rather than artistic, medium, as a handmaid of the concept, by which it limits our understanding of the material world, and collapses the particular to the universal. Benjamin, on the other hand, finds in the allegorical hieroglyphic an expression of that petrifying action he considers so necessary to our understanding and use of history, a process that isolates history from time and its mortalities, converting the phenomenal to text. The reader of this petrification is the distant angel. As George Steiner comments in his introduction to the *Origin*, "through allegory, the Angel, who in Paul Klee's depiction, *Angelus Novus* plays so obsessive a part in Benjamin's inner existence, can look into the deeps" (20).

For Eros, however, such hermeneutic spectatorship is only half the story. The

the same role as the idea of substance, unifying particulars and generalities into a whole so that the soul may judge and, in judging, act.

petrification is already present in his claws; where the angel is the reader, he is the writer, the writer who gazes at his work while “drawing it after him.” The works he produces are distinct. An erotic rather than a philosophic expression of a crystallized and crystallizing history, the demon-angel calls attention to the role of the fantastic and the fictional in history - to magnify the act of creation through the unshirking representation of its danger. Destruction hovers above origin, like Agesilaus Santander waiting to pounce on a moment that is not yet. This “melancholy and fantastic relationship to existence” (“Kraus” 266) belongs to the daemon’s angel, but also to something else. Angelic claws also evoke another creature of flight and finding - not just the demon nor the god of love - but the bird of prey.

The poetic association of angels with birds of prey has a special place in the Modernist poetic project. From Rilke’s “almost deadly birds of the soul”¹⁵² to Wallace Stevens’s “Bird with the Coppery Keen Claws,” the guardian and the predator merge imagistically during the period roughly contemporary to Benjamin’s writings. Stevens’s parakeet/paraclete in particular invokes the Benjaminian idea of the terrible patience of the angel-demon, “His tip a drop of water full of storms. / But though the turbulent tinges undulate / As his pure intellect applies its laws, / He moves not on his coppery, keen claws” (12-15). Providence is a long way off, where – as chapter three began to describe it – laws and blessings cannot contain each other, and the idea of the angel as pure intelligence who is also an attendant spirit poses a serious and perhaps inviolable contradiction. “Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels’ hierarchies?” Rilke asks in the opening line of the *Duino Elegies*. The pure intellect is indifferent, truly disinterested, yet if we would have it pierce the void we discover that it answers with its own

will, one that crushes ours. “And even if one of them pressed me / suddenly against his heart: I would be consumed / in that overwhelming existence” (First Elegy 2-4). It is as though, after years of representing angels in terms of providential judgment – whether by chosenness or struggle – the poets had decided that judgment could not, after all, be separated from passion. In order for the universal and the particular to meet they had to do so through feeling, feeling that was less than love and prior to intuition, but that was also more than desire and after sensation.

The claws inherited from the daemonic return to articulate this something that the modernist angel, a stormy drop and unruly pinhead, brings to the small point with such violent infinity. It is truly the threshold between the angels in their heavenly hierarchies and the human on their confused earth, a threshold that something inhuman but also physical (and physically powerful) would uniquely inhabit. In their initial form these are the angel predators, who stay time as mortal challenge and disruption; in metamorphosis, however, the angel can no longer stay timeless time. Conceived on the other end of the event, where the gaze of history replaces the grip of prophecy, its patience appears as the patience of endurance and surprise rather than anticipation and cunning. The later angel relinquishes will for love – for only in this way can it herald the messianic and a new order of time that, because it explodes the sequence of things, has no need for the will that would hold them together. With will the angel circles around and then enters the human world, its action and its temporality. With love it leaves it, and leaves it exposed.

Almost thirty years after Benjamin finished the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Gabriel García Márquez wrote what has become in English his most frequently anthologized short story, “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings.” This “tale for children” is a classic of

¹⁵² The *Duino Elegies* is a series of poems about angels as elusive figures of the terror and wonder of existence, in which the mysteries of the threshold take violent and intense form – belonging to us personally and yet wholly alien

marvelous realism. A decrepit angel falls into the courtyard of a humble seaside family, a happening with no explanation except that offered by a neighbor woman, who tells them that he must have been coming for the sick child but was knocked down by the storm. Angels appear, she implies, not because of their power but in moments of weakness; they are visible insofar as their wings are impotent. The angel is unceremoniously kept with the chickens, quickly becomes a local spectacle, the family charges admission, and eventually the angel is upstaged by a human-turned-tarantula, the locals having become disillusioned with his absurd miracles. He is forgotten, and then one day becomes well and departs, disappearing into “an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea.” The surrealist relation among people and things, the inclusion of the supernatural, the diversion from and perversion of natural reason, and above all the interpolation of daily with historical time - all the elements of the genre are radiantly present in this story. The story’s simultaneously de-familiarizing and naturalizing project, evident in its depiction of the angel/very old man, suggests a way to relate Benjamin’s two angels. A parable without a point, the story depicts its hapless angel as the ruins of the bird of prey, and lets those ruins speak for themselves.

At first, García Márquez’s angel would seem an unalloyed echo of the melancholy *Angelus Novus*. The first paragraph suggests this, positioning its angel as falling, Icarus-like, in view of a scene of disaster and decay:

On the third day of rain they had killed so many crabs inside the house that Pelayo had to cross his drenched courtyard and throw them into the sea, because the newborn child had a temperature all night and they thought it was due to the stench. The world had been sad since Tuesday. Sea and sky were a single ash-gray thing

and ruthless.”Every angel is terrifying,” the most famous line announces.

and the sands of the beach, which on March nights glimmered like powdered light, had become a stew of mud and rotten shellfish. The light was so weak at noon that when Pelayo was coming back to the house after throwing away the crabs, it was hard for him to see what it was that was moving and groaning in the rear of the courtyard. He had to go very close to see that it was an old man, a very old man, lying face down in the mud, who, in spite of his tremendous efforts, couldn't get up, impeded by his enormous wings. (*Collected Stories* 217)

At the level of detail, this passage immediately suggests figures of the modernist aesthetic project, a project also evident in the famous passage from Benjamin's "Theses." The sense of waste is prominent, apparent in the impotent waste of the angel's enormous wings, in the swarm of dead crabs, and in the "single ash-gray" merging of sea and sky. The angel happens as a consequence of this formlessness, descending amid an infinity of dead crabs and an indiscernable horizon that indicate his genealogy as a creature of the sublime. We witness in him, however, not a sublime power – his ineffective enormous wings indicate capacity without power – but a sublime paralysis. The angel is impeded, immobile – a feature that later in the story will be characterized as patience, "the patience of a dog who had no illusions." This is in fact his "only supernatural virtue," and it calls us to look differently at the images of decay that not only surround the fallen angel but make his story, bringing us back toward the destructive daemon of "Agesilaus Santander." For instance, after having roused him with their stones, feather-pulling, and hen-pecking, the community realizes "that his passivity was not that of a hero taking his ease but that of a cataclysm in repose" (221). The potentially destructive power

of the angel awaits, allegorized twice in the story by the presence of an isolated condensed sharpness. In one instance, at the story's end, the angel has become just a dot on the horizon, a point into which the vastness of the sky is packed. The other is at the beginning, where he is ushered in by the wash of crabs, dead, only their hard skeletons left. Here T.S. Eliot's image scurries underfoot: "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" ("Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," 73-74).

Like Eliot, García Márquez does not force the moment to its crisis. Claws are never directly mentioned, but the angel is consistently referred to in terms of a bird of prey. These references progress evenly throughout the story. In the second paragraph we are told of his "buzzard wings," later they are compared to those of a hawk, an airplane, and a "sidereal bat," and in the final paragraph, his self-exorcism from the household, the angel rises to the sky "with the risky flapping of a senile vulture."¹⁵³ These heatedly increasing images define his relationship to the family he adopts, and the message his changing presence clumsily delivers. Though the angel begins in quarantine in the chicken coop (erotically titillating the "fascinated" chickens and eventually the obsessed locals), by the end he has become an unwanted household intimate, patiently devouring its peace. We see this change visually. After the ravages of nature eventually destroy the chicken coop he begins to wander about what has now, from the funds he himself produced as five-cent attraction, become a mansion. At this point, the angel becomes demon.

¹⁵³ Robert Hayden's poem based on this story, "For a Young Artist," also mentions the angel in the context of bird of prey. I quote from the last five stanzas, to give a sense of the context and movement from the angel as patient, monstrous predator to a moment in the pure geometry of flight. Hayden begins in the chicken coop: "In the dark his heavy wings / open and shut, stiffly spread / like a wooden butterfly's. / He leaps, board wings clum- / sily flapping, big sex / flopping, falls. / The hawk-haunted fowl / flutter and squawk; / panic squeals in the sty. / He strains, an awk- / ward patsy, sweating strains / leaping falling. Then - / silken rustling in the air, / the angle of ascent / achieved" (33-47). Here the angel is "hawk-haunted," haunted, potentially, by memories of its former bird-like freedom, and by the chicken wire that, claw-like, pens it in.

The angel went dragging himself about here and there like a stray dying man. They would drive him out of the bedroom with a broom and a moment later find him in the kitchen. He seemed to be in so many places at the same time that they grew to think that he'd been duplicated, that he was reproducing himself all through the house, and the exasperated and unhinged Elisenda shouted that it was awful living in that hell full of angels. (224)

Aquinas's idea of the instantaneous, discontinuous movement of angels here metamorphoses into a parodic torment. Importantly, it does so through the conceit of the old man still capable of and insistent on reproducing, and hence a scourge on the family-impulses of the young. Relentless and repetitive, prey becomes predator. In this way the figure upsets the self-definitions of modernity and its relationship to what it calls progress. Within the story of such a "very old man" the modernist self-consciousness of age becomes contaminated by the references to a (shaky) predatoriness; such predatoriness is usually associated with youth, with personal power rather than social status. The man of unknown experience reflects the showy mansion back to itself, outdoing it in its newness and as a sign of limitless and excessive reproduction. As the unwished-for alter ego of the family, the angel also reminds it of the waste and decay that progress leaves behind, yet to which it is nevertheless ever and parabolically tied. He affronts the household as almost a zombie - a living death. For the daemon's essence is in living; his claws firmly pierce the present with a patience that, like vultures endlessly circling, constitutes his totalizing relationship to time, and his eventful assault on history.

Deformation and Decay

“And also the watch heard them talk of one Deformed. They say he wears a key in his ear and a lock hanging by it and borrows money in God’s name, the which he hath used so long and never paid that now men grow hardhearted and will not lend nothing for God’s sake.”

-Much Ado About Nothing

For the most part, contemporary poetry does not represent its melancholic angels in their demonic original. These angels have already collapsed, revealing themselves as flightless or misshapen in some way. There are a few exceptional references to the bird of prey in poems from the 1980’s: James Galvin, in writing of a provincialism in which angels have “learned their own angelic disbelief,” concludes with the image of “So many owls made of pollen / Wintering in a stand of imaginary timber,” giving the title to his collection *Imaginary Timber* (“Everyone Knows Whom the Saved Envy” 29-30), and Robert Hass’s “Privilege of Being” describes angels above, themselves the return glances and activity of “human longing,” staring at the human scene below where “two beings with evolved eyes, rapacious, / startled, connected at the belly in an unbelievably sweet / lubricious glue, stare at each other, / and the angels are desolate” (13-16).¹⁵⁴ Already in these poems, however, we see the claws metamorphosing into the gaze. It is the couple’s eyes that are rapacious, not their hands. Birds of prey may clasp “lubriciously,” but they are notable most of all for their piercing gaze, and the limitlessness of their spectatorial attention. These angels are “desolate,” mired by their own “disbelief” in imaginary worlds that, like the helplessly spread-eagled Angel of History, lack the ability to puncture reality.

¹⁵⁴ Compare also Brandon Mendoza Som’s “Still Life: My Grandmother Smoking in Bed” (2002), which begins, “Talking to angels is not unlike falconry.” As in Hass’s poem and Benjamin’s short piece, Som associates the angel-predator with desire, “The whole of our want always circling, like falcons” (9). A line further on suggests how this desire is still present in the image of the angel of history, for “If light desires nothing then it walks away /

More to the point is an earlier poem by Donald Justice. Part of the angel uspurge in poetry of the immediate post-World War II era, his simply titled “Sonnet” from 1950 shows in its pure form the stakes of representing powerful and piercing angels, and the legacy it creates for the more typical forms of the later angel poetry. Writing about the human urge to transcendence from within an inevitable enclosure, Justice gives us a view of the angel when it is still predatory - that is, when it is still capable of delivering and making good the historical occasion potential in the human act. The cry of such occasion in its very beginnings, which are the beginnings of history itself, “Sonnet” opens by announcing the feature of Eden that most defines its nature – the walls. Here the legendary cherubim with their flaming swords anticipate the later fixation with claws, also semantically noted in the poem. Their power, we see, comes from the power (true of both grasping and of flight) of opening and closing, just as the power of divine revelation requires at the same time the power of sealing-off, withdrawal, and limitation, in order to maintain its status as mystery. Justice’s poem gives us both this divine presence and absence, emblemized in the final image of the threshold:

The walls surrounding them they never saw:
The angels, often. Angels were as common
As birds or butterflies, but looked more human.
As long as the wings were furled, they felt no awe.
Beasts, too, were friendly. They could find no flaw
In all of Eden: this was the first omen.
The second was the dream which woke the woman:
She dreamed she saw the lion sharpen his claw.

without looking back” (12-13). The angel insists on looking back, even as the storms of progress de-claw his capacity to sieze the world below him.

As for the fruit, it had no taste at all.
They had been warned of what was bound to happen;
They had been told of something called the world;
They had been told and told about the wall.
They saw it now; the gate was standing open.
As they advanced, the giant wings unfurled. (1-14)

The final rhyme marks what Justice has in his classes referred to as an electric jolt, that line at the end that sends shock waves through the rest of the poem.¹⁵⁵ Here the wings of the cherubim are their own messianism, executing judgment – always the judgment of the boundaries of what is knowable to human discovery. They enforce the invisible law that exists in the face of visible freedom. What Adam and Eve discover is not the unknowable, however, but the limits of the human. These limits are also the threshold of the divine – the walls that only begin to be articulated as such with the appearance of perfection and the vision of the claws. The angels reveal themselves in place of the walls; they express the presence of limits when they are not seen. They are, in a sense, the messengers of Adam and Eve's claustrophobia. When the fall from imagination to reality has at last occurred, when the gate has opened, then Adam and Eve finally see them. Then the angels open their wings, signalling the beginnings of temporality and the history that is, already, out there.

The opening of the wall, accompanied by the angels unfurling their destructive power, suggests the ruin of Eden. No longer a whole within which earthly paradise “corresponds” to heavenly, Eden becomes itself the spoiled and impenetrable border between human action and divine grace. Now in the tattered configurations of history, Adam and Eve look back on the ruins of what once kept them in check, the architecture in whose destruction the human is

revealed in the essential naivete of its passion. The burial of Eden is the birth of the world. Mark Strand, in the long poem *Dark Harbor* which I discuss more fully later, has a line evocative of this scene: “A shadowed glass held within its frozen calm an image / Of abundance, a bloom of humanness, a hymn in which / The shapes and sounds of Paradise are buried” (XXVIII. 22-24). We find the fullest expression of the human in its song of paradise lost. This latent lament is foreshadowed by the opening claws and the unfurled wings, both evocative of the unfurling of scrolls and the message-bearing power the angels would henceforth assume. Here Justice’s poem is proto-allegorical, likening the power of inscription to the exposure of a thing in its state of collapse. The writing is on the wall – in the revelation of the wall itself at the moment of the fall.

Where the poets of the mid-century are more interested in representing the event of divine encounter and of human fall, the 1990’s American poets are post-lapsarian, primarily looking at angels as creatures of post-wanting, post-potency, almost post-mortem. Theirs is not the moment of judgment or anticipation, but the moment of frustration, captivity, and confusion. Their angels either do not fly, or fly amiss, or fly away. Above all, they are deformed, corrupted by a humanness that un-wings them. Once perfect creatures, each a species unto itself, the angels now are malformed members of a species, partially realized examples of an idea where before they expressed the perfect unity of idea and act. The relations between human and angel darkly and magnificently depicted in the angel-eros – relations that used the potency of the daemon to empower the human – resulted in the weakening of the angel. In waiting for history, the angel is surprised by the gathering forces of history’s ideology, and loosens his hold. Thus the former Scholastic emphasis on angelic perfection and individuation, apparent in the idea of the angel as active intelligence, decays into the image of an enforced passivity. In this image we

¹⁵⁵ I would like to thank Scott Silsbe for this reference, as well as for calling this poem to my attention.

view – perhaps for the first time – the idea of corruptible immortality, in the spirit of “A Very Old Man.”

Three poems stand out in representing this angelic corruption. The first, like Justice’s “Sonnet,” comes from the midcentury angel rush. A.R. Ammons’s “A Crippled Angel”¹⁵⁶ anticipates the poetic representation of the melancholy angel that would dominate the 1990’s. Like García Márquez’s story the poem is told from the perspective of human encounter and human destruction, neatly moving from the problem of lameness to the glory (and almost simultaneous effacement) of ascent. As in Donald Justice’s “Sonnet,” the final spread of wings – the emblem of completion - signals death, but in this case it is the death of the angel, not the human. Significantly such death is allegorically enabled by the references to industrial production, in which the figure of Time is embedded:

A crippled angel bent in a scythe of grief
mourned in an empty lot
Passing by I stopped
amused that immortality should grieve
and said
It must be exquisite (1-6)

The poem continues its marvelous configuration of an allegorical idea. “Immortality” grieving takes shape as a weary dragon, a retired daemon, and the breakdown of the machine.

Smoke came out of the angel’s ears
the axles
of slow handwheels of grief
and under the white lids of its eyes

¹⁵⁶ “A Crippled Angel” is listed in the 1951-1955 section of Ammons’s *Collected Poems*.

bulged tears of purplelight

Watching the agony diffuse in

shapeless loss

I interposed a harp (7-14)

As the speaker takes up the harp he becomes the emblem of the lyric poet that the lyric poet himself must kill. As in *Justice and Strand*, for the poet to sing, paradise must die. “Bent in a scythe of grief,” the angel is also his own grim reaper, brought to his knees by the “shapeless loss” of poetic form (and which the harp “interposed” resuscitates). The Benjaminian obsession with a formless piling-up of historical events returns in this image of a dragon-hoard of grief - dragons themselves Satanic types. But in music the fire of the dragon and perhaps of hell (where indeed immortality does grieve) opens upward. A Renaissance quotation follows this slow beginning of flight, in the suggestion of Botticelli’s *Venus rising from the sea*. “Grief sounded like an ocean rose / in bright clothes” (20-21). The poet answers Venus as Cupid, becoming his own erotic messenger and daimon of the violence that writing must claim if it is to burn its script into the wall of immortality. The speaker does this by shooting the angel as it rises in the sky – the predator become the prey.¹⁵⁷ Crippled in agony and loss, immortality is made vulnerable to mortality. “Taking a bow I shot transfixing / the angel midair / all miracle hanging fire / on rafters of the sky” (26-29). The dragon-angel of despair shares the same fate as Agesilaus

¹⁵⁷ Writing half a century later, David Berman in “Snow” also describes an angel-poaching. The speaker here is wandering with his little brother across a field, making up stories. “I pointed to a place where kids had made angels in the snow. / For some reason, I told him that a troop of angels / had been shot and dissolved when they hit the ground” (2-4). From there a causal fiction evolves: Who shot them? A farmer. Why? They were on his property. “Snow” then concludes via a series of asides that renders the poem simultaneously intimate and social. “When it’s snowing, the outdoors seem like a room. / Today I traded hellos with my neighbor. / Our voices hung close in the new acoustics. / A room with the walls blasted to shreds and falling. / We returned to our shoveling, working side by side in silence. / But why were they on his property, he asked” (11-16). From the freedom of a walk in the field to the imputation of the bounds of property, the angels of imagination and childhood are transfigured as trespassers of reality and worldly relations. Snow – at first the passive substance in which forms inhere also encloses, limits, and destroys those limits. In the relations between working neighbors the sounds of “blasting” evoke either war or the

Santander nailed to the wall or the angel of history locked in fixed flight. In attempting to make immortality subject to mortal will, to appropriate it for our power (in this case the power of poetic creation), we forget that it can no longer be immortality.

The melancholy poetry of the contemporary scene generates its own life from the ruin of the angel. In Ammons's case the poet revives the crippled angel to a burning, destructive power of flight and song only to "transfix" him in his poetry. The ascension of the Angel-Eros provides for the poet the arrows by which his daemonic force may be taken and assimilated, as in the beliefs of the cannibals that by eating their noble opponent they thereby accumulate his strength. The poetry presumes here an identity between angel and poet, like "Agesilaus," consisting of a scriptural alterity. The poet's angel is his other as it appears in writing, which is to say, at the bleeding point of the agonistic between life and art (Charles Rosen understands in Benjamin's theory of biographical interpretation the necessity that the two are never in a state of correspondence, rather "the artist shapes his life and his experience to make his art possible," 138). In this way the angel provides the occasion for the poet to name himself, heroically. By the time of Stephen Dunn's "Retarded Angel,"¹⁵⁸ however, the battle cry has become an elegy, for the hero-poet is himself in ruins. Landed fully in the 1990's, poetic angels show no sign of their former power.¹⁵⁹ The ruins of writing itself confront the writer at the moment of his

wrecking ball, and the walls surround them (not between them as Frost would have it) in ruins. The walls of snow are post-lapsarian walls.

¹⁵⁸ Dunn's collection that this poem arises from, *between Angels*, also includes a poem entitled "Hawk," describing a bird of prey circling and crashing through the window, testimony to the limitations of human exegetical language and the primal power of poetry, removed from and above the earth "where the air is such a lie," and which is alone capable of possessing it. "Guardian Angel," the poem that begins his collection, also picks up the theme of angelic ineffectuality in relation to the human world: "Afloat between lives and stale truths, / he realizes / he's never truly protected one soul, / they all die anyway, and what good / is solace, / solace is cheap" (1-6). And later, "When the poor are evicted, he stands / between them / and the bank, but the bank sees nothing / in its way. When the meek are overpowered / he's there, the thin air / through which they fall." (19-24). Like Kushner's, Dunn's angel can only function as falsity, invisibly complicit with oppression and injustice. "Trying to live beyond despair," the guardian angel nevertheless absorbs the debasement he seeks to save.

¹⁵⁹ The historical age that subordinates art to truth demands of the poet a revelation of this truth – of the essentially human, in the service of which language as expression must submit to violence, in particular the violence of the

composition, in the language of fallenness and decay with which he articulates his social role.¹⁶⁰

So the poet regards his angel as the flightless silence of his own reckoning.

Wordless with a message,

you sit on our shoulders

off-balance, one wing

apparently useless (1-4)

The result of some “accidentally brilliant” agency, Dunn’s “damaged” angel gazes patiently at the speaker. He denies argument and judgment and urges no real change, his restraint matched by the duration of his travel - “years perhaps / of landing elsewhere” (20-21). In his half-winged stationary gaze the deformed angel presents the human to itself as its own threshold, and his muteness is the cry of this crossing, sustained for so long it has become inaudible.

Voiceless, flightless, and lost, these qualities describe modern literary angels as they are epitomized in García Márquez’s story and as they continue to land elsewhere across the years. Mark Strand’s section XXXV from the long poem *Dark Harbor* presents these characteristics all at once and in beautifully condensed form. He does so by invoking a physical condition which ought to be foreign to pure intelligences: being sick.

passing of time. Rosen explains in reference to Benjamin’s work on the *Trauerspiel*: “Every critical reading should move toward that moment when the work appears to exist for the sake of the philosophical truth within it: it no longer exists for itself, and it therefore loses its charms. It reaches the condition of the *inexpressive*” (151). It is in this inexpressivity, apparent in the Baroque treatment of allegory that so fascinates Benjamin, that a work’s essential nature – its “idea” – reveals itself.

¹⁶⁰ Michael Blumenthal’s volume *Dusty Angel* brings together both these ideas, the subordination of the poet to the witness-journalist, and the difficulty for poetry to revolutionize language. In “The Happiest Man in the World” he explains, in reference to the Balkan War, how history “no longer seems to have much need for poetry / among angels or demons, or what once passed for friends” (17-18), and in “Stones,” he continues the politics/poetics binary: “But I have always hated stones / and loved words, / and held to the deep illusion / that words could wound and heal / as no stones can, that one day / there will be a revolution of words / in which the angels will come / to sing with the vipers, / and even the dark flames of greed / will be doused by the right syllables / spoken in the right places” (5-15). But in this poem the viper-angel, the transcendent predator of words, is waylaid by thieves, and allows the speaker only a poetic and empty hope that one day someone will turn the words into stones.

The sickness of angels is nothing new.
I have seen them crawling like bees,
Flightless, chewing their tongues, not singing,

Down by the bus terminal, hanging out,
Showing their legs, hiding their wings,
Carrying on for their brief term on earth,

No longer smiling. (1-7)

In the half-light of the half-world – the liminal port of transit where everything feels like it's a step behind its own happening - physical corruptibility displays itself. Like Dunn's one-winged angel, Strand's angels hide half themselves, showing their legs only, and casting the aura of Edenic illumination only in passive sleep and shade, only as the potential message that arrives without being read. Dallying too long in the human, these angel-insect-dharma bums can only turn their corruption and their silence into Eros. They "drift into the arms of strangers who step / Into their light, which is the mascara of Eden, / Offering more than invisible love" (8-10). They are almost human, existing in and for the dark harbor of another's arms – almost human, except that for them humanity is a sickness, and the body "the pure erotic glory of death without echoes." In the belatedness of the crippled, the retarded, the sick angel, time also decays, piling on top of itself as if searching for the echo of immortality, and at the same time ravishing its absence.

Dark Harbor is, as the book tells us, a single poem, a series of meditations elaborating the ideas of memory and possibility, past and future. Section XXXV, "The sickness of angels," arrives at the crest of a sequence of images of evanescence uniting moon, stars, dreams and

prophecies. These staples of surreal-chic contemporary poetry prepare us for the occasional everyday-fantastical moment: “Someone is playing a tape of birds singing. / Someone has fallen asleep on a boxcar of turnips” (XVII. 8-9). But the poem (and even in its forty-five segments Dark Harbor is still its own poem) is too coherent and conceptual to be truly surrealist. Place and situation vary only between constituent poems, and return always to the intimations of luminosity promised by the speaker’s unchanging age and attitude. They are poems about voice and thus – while like surrealist poetry they move receptively – ultimately their receptivity presumes a unitary and stable subject. The tone also has none of that revolutionary jubilation so often found in surrealism. Reflective, rather than immediate, Strand’s poem focuses on “grief,” “melancholy,” “mourning.” The surrealist sense of freedom above all is missing. We find at best only a qualified freedom, angels in the bus stop giving love instead of revelation. Within a context of inexorable limitedness (“It is true, as someone has said, that in / A world without heaven all is farewell” XVI. 1-2 and “The Beyond is merely beyond, / A melancholy place of failed and fallen stars” XLII. 17-18), the angel turns half-human. Immortality grieves, wingless, watching its light bounce off the walls.

In her book on surrealism, Anna Balakian describes the ultimate aim of the movement as a scientific one: in science’s ability to grant “metaphysical destiny” to human physical creation it affirms “faith in the human potential to master the universe” (45). The faith (and the hubris) here is dazzling. More provocative is her reading of the actual project and consequences of surrealism, which though they may stem from this grand philosophy, take on their own life. This life will continue in and invest the often tragic but highly creative vision of marvelous realism. For, in its embracing of the possibilities of objective chance, the “infinite expansion of reality” into the realms of the imagination, and cultivation of absurdity as a means to truth, surrealism

opens the door of the relation between subject and object. Nothing limits human invention, so long as the human creates the artistic tools to bring phenomena to reveal their mystical essences. Surrealism, then, is a sensory-epistemological project that, Balakian notes, initiates a revolution of language. The kind of marvelous realism that influences contemporary poetry, however, is less concerned with language as a force whose capriciousness may be appropriated as a source of illumination, than in the ways that language reveals in its very conventions a force that goes beyond itself. (Octavio Paz makes a similar point about García Márquez, that he “doesn’t change the language” in the way that the initiators of the tradition did. “[Neruda and Vallejo and Borges] started a new tradition, he comes at the end of an old one . . . the rural, epic, and magic tradition of Guiraldes, Quiroga, José Eustacio Rivera.”)¹⁶¹ There is much to be said about why in the English-speaking world *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is regarded as both the premier and prototypical “magical realist” novel, but this relationship to language of which Paz speaks is perhaps the most telling reason. For marvelous realism is also importantly concerned with the subject-matter that is generally identified as “decadence.”¹⁶² What Balakian terms the “creative principle” of surrealist metaphysics the later movement recasts as the exploration of decadent fecundities. For angels, this means a creaturely physicalization in the domain of selfhood - that is, in the body of the human.

Right from the beginning of “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” the creature is introduced to us as part human. “On the following day everyone knew that a flesh-and-blood angel was held captive in Pelayo’s house” (218). His humanness is determined by both ecclesiastical and scientific authorities. The local priest decides on examination that he is “much too human,” being afflicted with foul smells and parasites, and the local doctor finds he has

¹⁶¹ See his interview with Selden Rodman in the latter’s *Tongues of Fallen Angels*, 143.

examinable, if impossibly diseased, organs. “What surprised him most, however, was the logic of his wings. They seemed so natural on that completely human organism that he couldn’t understand why other men didn’t have them too” (223-224). The naïve literalness of marvelous realism asserts itself here: where the surreal image would unearth the fantastic within the human, “A Very Old Man” treats the fantastic as unassumingly as it would a new disease. Marvelous realism is what the supernatural looks like within the apparatus of the known. The banal limits of everyday life enclose the angel; in fact we do not find his initial deteriorated presence so surprising, as much as we do his geometric sublimity at the end. The language itself leads us to expect such supernatural deterioration, to find it as “natural” as the monstrosity of enormous wings. Immediately, the first paragraph naturalizes all unknown experience through a kind of syntactic obliviousness. “The light was so weak at noon that when Pelayo was coming back to the house after throwing away the crabs, it was hard for him to see what it was that was moving and groaning in the rear of the courtyard” (217). There are no introductions. The fact of there being something in the courtyard is referred to unassumingly as something already known and registered, “que cuando Pelayo regresaba a la casa después de haber tirado los cangrejos, le costó trabajo ver qué era lo que se movía y se quejaba en el fondo del patio” (*La Increíble y Triste Historia* 11). Narrative perception skips a step: we do not learn that the thing is before we learn more about it. Another writer might tell us first, “Pelayo heard something moving and groaning in the rear of the courtyard. The light was too weak, however, for him to tell what it was,” but that would signal a different kind of story, one where the unknown could actually exist as such, where causes and consequence would appear in order,¹⁶³ and where angels would retain their

¹⁶² The work of Juan Rulfo is probably the best example of this inner necessity of the form, the short story “Luvina” and his major work *Pedro Páramo* especially.

¹⁶³ The first line of the story is an only slightly less strong example of this: “On the third day of rain they had killed so many crabs inside the house that Pelayo had to cross his drenched courtyard and throw them into the sea, because

accustomed grandeur. Instead, pest and smells, diseased organs, mental and physical idiocy, these are the wreckages we expect of our angel. In the failure of the human logic and judgment, apparent in an inability to order experience and to recognize divine eventfulness when it happens, the angel must conform to the human, and, in the process, contract its own disorder.

The failure of human reason and evaluation appears first in the carnivalesque misrule of the story's language, but more dramatically in the plot as well. The angel, deformed but still supernatural, is relegated to a sideshow attraction next to something that is only bizarre: the spider-woman. She is in fact a kind of spokesman for the human, an institutionalized carnival attraction who, unlike the "bird-man" (who speaks in an unknown "hermetic" tongue), divulges self to public through that great mediator, the confession. "She was a frightful tarantula the size of a ram and with the head of a sad maiden. What was most heartrending, however, was not her outlandish shape but the sincere affliction with which she recounted the details of her misfortune" (222). Hers is a misfortune with a moral meaning, for it was a heavenly lightning bolt changed her to a spider after she attended a dance without permission. The allusions to Kafka's "Metamorphosis" and "The Hunger Artist" are ironic, as the spider-woman's triumph is a triumph of only mundane translatability; she is not genuinely monstrous or grotesque, but touching, a fallen woman rather than a fallen angel. In adulating her the crowd acts precisely as a crowd, privileging received generic and didactic conventions as they appear in this cheap allegory of human frailty. "A spectacle like that, full of so much human truth and with such a

the newborn child had a temperature all night and they thought it was due to the stench" (217). While they would be more receptive to such an illogical presentation, even most children would know that the most important thing to learn is that the child had a temperature, that the killing of the crabs is incidental, and that any normal storyteller should begin with the stench - not "Al tercer día de lluvia. . ."

fearful lesson, was bound to defeat without even trying that of a haughty angel who scarcely deigned to look at mortals” (ibid).¹⁶⁴

The rich humor of the narrative voice here calls attention to the spectacle as a very different kind of allegory – an allegory of foolishness, of human susceptibility, official discourse, and consumption. The distant angel, mute and unfathomable on the other hand, suggests something else. He presents the ultimate deformation of the angel - an allegory of passivity. Cloistered in a chicken coop, losing feathers, decrepit and incoherent, the carnivalized angel is neither messenger nor agent. What in the daemon’s clawlike immobility appears as a matter of choice, becomes in the caged angel’s passivity an expression of circumstance. And it is there that we need look for an idea of participation that the angel in distress can offer – in a theory of history which the angel’s own gaze has to show us.

Looking Backward

García Márquez’s work has often been read within the genre of the carnivalesque. In fact, its relation to the world-in-reverse is assumed as part of the dynamic of magical realism as well as exemplary of his own thematic preoccupations. And yet carnival, as the formalization of disorder and heterogeneity, is opposed to angels and their narratives. Where angelism solemnly proffer distinction, carnival chases it away with gleeful uncrowning; where the one orders hierarchy, the other invites leveling. Angels and carnival are on either side of the Dionysian/Apollonian divide. Carnival is public, the language of the marketplace, whereas

¹⁶⁴ The narrator continues, contrasting her reinscription of the social order with the angel’s disordering presence in that world. “Besides, the few miracles attributed to the angel showed a certain mental disorder, like the blind man who didn’t recover his sight but grew three new teeth, or the paralytic who didn’t get to walk but almost won the lottery, and the leper whose sores sprouted sunflowers. Those consolation miracles, which were more like mocking fun, had already ruined the angel’s reputation when the woman who had been changed into a spider finally crushed him completely” (222-223).

angels appear in solitude, in the cloister, the home, the car, or – in the case of “A Very Old Man” – the *rear* of the private courtyard. Both essentially fantastic genres, they articulate otherness through vastly different means. For angels, the other appears in and through history, for carnival, through nature and the body. Thus angelic incorporeality levies the principle of substantial being, of immaterial unity and totality, against the other’s “material bodily principle”¹⁶⁵ in which life appears in its incompleteness and incoherence, in the holes and cavities of perceptive experience. Angelic ascent invertedly mirrors carnivalesque debasement, and so, tellingly, carnival embraces for its figural representative the devil and his masque. Freedom for the angels means loving conformity to universal law; for devil mas’, freedom is its own law and self-determining principle. The world of carnival *is* the whole world, at once alien and familiar. As a consequence, and most fundamentally perhaps, the aesthetic modes of the two appear in dialectical opposition. Bakhtin, engaging Hugo’s writings on the grotesque, reminds us that the grotesque “aesthetics of the monstrous” is essentially “a means of contrasting the sublime,” at the same time that “the two complete each other” (43). For Hugo, this completion is Beauty, whose lover Cupid is.

“A Very Old Man” asks us to view the antinomies of history and nature, birth and death, angelic and grotesque together. This was certainly the project of the age that made carnival an art form, and that also produced a very specific kind of angel which, one could argue, could only be born within a consciousness of deformity and decay. The Renaissance emphasis on renewal, rebirth, and the natural man found expression both in the universal experience of the carnival world and in the innocent figure of the cherub. The pierced body with its sensitive orifices submitted to a monstrous, predatory knowledge at the same time that a sublime news

¹⁶⁵ This comes from Mikhail Bakhtin’s famous writings on carnival in *Rabelais and His World*. He defines the carnivalesque aesthetically as the “bodily awareness of another world.”

was being heralded by messengers who knew no touch, though they might provoke it. This dialectic would appear in terms of proximity to the human. The world as universal was predicated on an ideal of intimacy - Bakhtin points out that carnival makes no distinction between reveller and spectator, for all participate in the event - whereas the universal intelligence assumed a distance between them, whose role it was to mediate. Born within a world that conceived itself as a totality of human experience, the little cupids found themselves doomed to spectatorship. At the edge of the action, these figures absorb the distance that might interpose itself between viewer and subject, expressing it in their ornamental positioning and in their transparent gazes – passive and dreamy and very far away. As “A Very Old Man”’s narrator says of Pelayo’s bird-man, “The angel was the only one who took no part in his own act.”

The English “act” translates “acontecimiento,” event. The evolution is telling. Cherubs are the occasion for a participation that they do not share, appearing in paintings as little potentialities inevitably separated from the action that they herald. Children are after all the emblems of possibility and of the inexperienced thought which it embodies. We see this idea especially in nativity paintings, where the baby angels allegorize a birth that is “written” as idea in the infant Messiah. But their function is generalizable too. So often in paintings of this period, cherubs entice our gaze toward the central tableau or object, always divine; these playful and peripheral adornments seem to hold up such sublime subjects with their eyes, binding them as Socrates’ daemon binds earth and heaven. Their primary act is to see, and to see *inwardly* - despite the titillating quality of their bodies so uninhibitedly displayed. Belying their impish legs and serene bottoms, their expressions are, more often than not, melancholy. The best representatives of this are also the two *putti*-images most widely circulated today - in calendars, refrigerator magnets, figurines, etc. The detail from the bottom of Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna*

(1513) shows two cherubs leaning on a shelf contemplating a nativity above – one watchful, his chin on his crossed arms, the other in the attitude of *pensée*, his chin in one hand, looking upward. Rosso Fiorentino's *Musical Angel* (1522) is more dramatic. His face is buried against his lute, which he is softly plucking, two dark half-closed eyes staring at the frets, hair tousled, red and white wings aloft. In the depiction of these cherubs the playful body is paired with an expression of contemplation. Little bodies with big eyes (and often just their heads are represented), they establish reflection as an almost voluptuous condition, full unto itself of all states of the soul and passages of time.

The cherub's reflective inwardness calls attention to the intimate interiority of experience, but its gaze need not also be a mournful one.¹⁶⁶ What is the source of cherubic melancholy? Why are these frolicky creatures so sad? And how is it that, in post-Romantic eras, they become so very old?

These questions return us to Benjamin. In his essay on Kraus he distinguishes the poesy of rhyme from that of a more properly angelic tongue, which finds its focus in the name:

Language has never been more perfectly distinguished from mind, never more intimately bound to Eros, than by Kraus in the observation "The more closely you look at a word the more distantly it looks back." This is a Platonic love of language. The only closeness from which the word cannot escape, however, is rhyme. So the primal erotic relationship between closeness and distance is given voice in his language: as rhyme and name. As

¹⁶⁶ It is interesting to note that while often playful, cherubs almost never smile. And frequently, they are not playful.

rhyme, language rises up from the creaturely world; as name it
draws all creation up to it. (267-268)

Rhyme, having its basis in physical sound, provides a productive scaffolding for thought and communication, a movement from things to ideas; the name, whose action is to totalize from above rather than to generate from below, invites the “creaturely world” while yet remaining distant from it. In his distinction between rhyme and name Benjamin begins to anticipate the angel of melancholy that would later become for him the New Angel of the drawing. Under the sign of Eros we see the cherubic intimacy with which language is bound, an intimacy between the uttered sound and the “creaturely world.” The cherub is in and of this world, yet he sees beyond it. The more closely these creatures resemble the human in its native state, the more universally they embody this human, the “more distantly” they gaze at their inhuman source. From this gaze – the only remnant of the daemon’s claws - the erotic dialectic emerges, which draws our attention to the other angel. From far away (and in the later incarnation, in the process of being blown farther) the angel seeks to redeem or “draw up” the natural world, to give it its nobility as name. The cherub’s pensive response to its close contact with the natural world is given form in this sublime angel who looks toward the things of this world, rather than away from them. It is when the latter fails to absorb them to itself, fails to redeem these phenomena as symbols, that this distance becomes age. Once born the angels could grow old.

Benjamin’s definition of the sacred name as a binding force that must be protected belongs to the second of the two version of “Agesilaus.” The first, written a day earlier, says that the name is that “by which these forces can be conjured up and protected against outsiders.” In the first version the name protects the self’s life-forces against a hostile exterior; in the second, this “prophylactic” quality (a term omitted in the second draft) has disappeared. Now it is the

name itself that needs protection, rather than the forces that it coheres. In shifting from name as guardian to name as emblem, Benjamin implies that it is not the possibility of life that is so much under threat by the fascists as the possibility of naming, and with that, transformative action. Under this allegorical argument, the angel itself also becomes less important as guard than as condition. But as condition it is vulnerable. In the evolution from bird of prey to melancholy spectator, the angel sees more deeply and names more truly, but what he sees strips him of his potency.¹⁶⁷ Benjamin's earlier work gives some indication why. In his discussion of the evolution of melancholy in the *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin attributes it to the institutionalization of the belief in grace devoid of works, which he identifies in the seventeenth century Lutheranism of the *Trauerspiel* dramatists as well as in earlier Calvinist theology. For Benjamin, Lutheranism's secularization of daily life makes of human choice and action a nullity by rendering "the soul dependent on grace through faith." This, at least, is the insight forthcoming for those who, like the angel of history, see events as a whole. "For those who looked deeper saw the scene of their existence as a rubbish heap of partial, inauthentic actions" (*Origin* 139). We can see this partial-ness of action, which the ruined angel expresses, in the chicken coop and the storm of "progress." From the position of transcendence into which the reflective subject was thrown, his relation to the world appeared decadent and its history, destructive. He could fall only with the creation of such a position, and with it the depths for him to fall into.

¹⁶⁷ This is also Nietzsche's analysis of Hamlet's much-debated hesitation to act. Writing against the Coleridgean view of Hamlet's hesitation, Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* argues that it is not merely the prince's contemplative spirit that creates the hesitation, but the nature of the truth that that contemplation uncovers. I quote from the whole of the famous passage. "In this sense the Dionysian man resembles Hamlet: both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have *gained knowledge*, and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things; they feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that they should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint. Knowledge kills action; action requires the veils of illusion: that is the doctrine of Hamlet, not that cheap wisdom of Jack the Dreamer who reflects too much and, as it were, from an excess of possibilities does not get around to action. Not reflection, no – true knowledge, an insight into the horrible truth, outweighs any motive for action" (60).

Historically the angel has been viewed as the active intelligence which brings a being into existence as such, and then guards that existence. He hails the subject as agent, bringing out of him the exertions that earn the name of blessing; we saw this in the third chapter, and see it again in “Agesilaus Santander.” The latter figure, however, in framing this exertion as waiting, holding on to time rather than entering into it, opens the way for the enforced passivity that the later angel of history epitomizes. Looking backward – as the philosophy of history always must – this angel still names the activity of his subject, but names it as “partial.” We see this in the angel’s own distance and inability to participate, but also in the human’s attempt to hold on to and possess time – to “stay timeless time.” If memorializing angels (such as Kushner’s Angel of Bethesda) bless the past with existence, the angel of history appears at the moment of a failure of memory. For judgment, whose failure is portrayed so whimsically in “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” – depends on memory. The absence of distinctions apparent in the leveling mass of waste and decay, the “rubbish heap,” the pile of “wreckage upon wreckage,” calls us to notice a problem of memory and time, articulated through images of grace in all its palpable capriciousness. This is the problem that Jacqueline Osherow describes in her brooding “A Poem about Angels.”

The poem speaks to an intimate yet universal subject, implicitly her own interior self. The addressee, the poem tells us, has traveled far yet, of all her experiences, wants only to write a poem about angels.

Not because they are winged and white and haloed
And in many paintings very beautiful
But because you have seen many things and remembered
Only angels.” (2-5)

Neither the parapets nor, later, the mountains, are fixed in memory (despite the subject's writing them down). "Only the angels are intact, marble / Or otherwise, recorded" (13-14), as the narrator sets it, "by some lucky visionary / With a paintbrush" (15-16). Only the angels are "petrified," to use Benjamin's term. But they are not yet ruins, not yet exposed – and it is partly for this reason that the subject wishes to write about them. Poetry follows the photograph in order to expose, to grasp the origin in a way that the image cannot. Writing, Osherow suggests, belongs to ruins – particularly the ruins of walls, both ancient and medieval – whereas the immortal and intact exist in visual representation, the apotheosis of script. But visual memory has failed her. "You have seen many things and remembered / Only angels" (4-5). And this is the other reason she wishes to write a poem about them – as a petition to sort the unclear and disordered remembrances, to bring back the lost images. But, she discovers, the angels too are primarily absent, only random presences in the technological record of one's personal history.

All you know is how impossible it is
Without them. The stones conspire against you
With the heavy clouds, and everything through glass
Or, worse, that cracking memory, flashing tents
And camels in between the high pink towns
Of, was it Tuscany, as if the slides you never took
Got all mixed up. Only occasional the empty screen
For you to fill with all your angels. (21-28)

The reader can hear, reverberating within, the mournful echo of this "only occasional" empty screen. Like the "rare, random descent" of the angels long-awaited in Sylvia Plath's 1960 "Black Rook in Rainy Weather," the human subject can act only in answer to the angelic call, the occasion for creativity within a mind haunted by a confusion that is itself imaginary and

immaterial. This is the other side of the angel self-help books, asking their readers to clear their minds and create within themselves a perfect emptiness – as if (from the perspective of the melancholic) emptiness could be created. Instead, Osherow mourns the absence of emptiness amidst the clutter and confusion of images piling up that are, she thinks, an indication of “Tuscany” – Tuscany, itself the ruins of the Renaissance, the cultural and artistic center of the time period filled with so many paintings of angels. Again, the need for a screen to fill with angels echoes the absence of an ordering principle that would effect remembrance, gather it up, call its name across the cracks of memory of the world traveller¹⁶⁸ and the glass encasings of museums.

Osherow’s poem ends with the disappointed failure of the angels to answer her call, or indeed to do anything at all. We see them now on their own turf, heavy with such mundanities as gardening and the feeling of boredom. God is “old” and “disappointed.” The angels play their harps mechanically, and greet the full moon with the feeling of dread that “another month” has passed and they have “done nothing.” This busy-ness, passive mechanicism, and other-directed anxiety about productivity, the narrator suggests, are what keep the angels from exerting real agency in the world. The problem is that they do not sing like poets. Apart from the random moments when they drop their harps (their instruments, their machines) and hum a “long-dreamed psalm,”¹⁶⁹ the angels inhabit the time of the everyday, the quotidian reproduction and

¹⁶⁸ This idea is emphasized at the beginning of the poem that gives Osherow’s collection its title, “Looking for Angels in New York”: “All this traveling around and I’ve learned / Nothing less obvious than this: that each / Piece of the world has something missing” (1-3). Globality as she sees it is riven, “The space between the / Continents seems eerie now,” and riven in particular by the plurality of visual experience without anything to hold it together, only the occasional empty screen. It is interesting to speculate what the Renaissance as “quotation” might mean here, perhaps as an idealized vision of world-consciousness in which global artistic centers cohere a historical movement that in hindsight is named as totality: the Rebirth.

¹⁶⁹ Billy Collins describes in a similar way the anachronism of the poetic angel from a contemporary perspective of labor. At the end of his “Questions about Angels,” devoted to the legendary medieval question about the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin, he resolves the matter: the answer is one. “One female angel dancing alone in her stocking feet, / a small jazz combo working in the background. / She sways like a branch in the wind,

repetition that is antithetical to the creative eventfulness of history. In this fall into workaday temporality moments comprise a formless mass; they do not exist individually, and hence are unavailable to memory and judgment. As the pile of the unsorted past grows skyward, the angels sink into an almost eternal torpor, except that for them the immortal songs (their poetry, the forms of poetic expression) are still, potentially, available to their intuition.

“A Poem about Angels” details the failure of angels, expressing and taking place within a problem of globality and experience which in turn appears as a crisis of memory. The lapse of angelic participation spells trouble, but the very thing the speaker laments – the “cracking memory” – contains within itself the possibility of a different idea of participation regarding angels and history. Nancy Eimers’s “Black Angel” shows us how we might begin to imagine this idea. Like Osherow, Eimers presents the past as a problem of angelic intelligence. And like Osherow’s, Eimers’s poem also speaks to a sense of the world as it opens from the unreachable (just barely unreachable) position of angelic eyes. But she adds a deformity that we have not yet seen – angelic blindness.¹⁷⁰ Those eyes that see the world are blocked. The angel is now not even a spectator; we assume that role. The first line of the poem establishes this for us: “You can see her across the graveyard. . .” With the individuating power of the angelic gaze gone, the

her beautiful / eyes closed, and the tall thin bassist leans over / to glance at his watch because she has been dancing / forever, and now it is very late, even for musicians” (30-35).

¹⁷⁰ Another notable example of angelic blindness from the contemporary scene is Charles Wright’s “Mondo Angelico.” In this poem he describes fish as “aquatic angels,” possessed of an almost bodiless angelic vision that is at the same time supremely – almost haughtily – worldly. The fishy eyes take in the wreckage heap of human existence thus: “Like lost thoughts, / they wouldn’t remember us if they could / Hovering just out of touch, / Their bodies liminal, their sights sealed. / Always they disregard us / with a dull disregard” (12-17). An instance from contemporary creative non-fiction, Chuck Kinder’s “meta-memoir & mythopoetic travelogue to Almost Heaven” entitled *The Last Mountain Dancer* also depicts blind angels. In the chapter “Hotel Angel” two rednecks bent on revenge are waylaid by their enemy’s mother, who describes how after her twin sister was brutally raped and murdered she started making these little angel dolls (12-15 hours a day) to remember her and to make ends meet. All the dolls have one thing in common: “Where faces should have been the angel dolls were featureless, blank and smooth as eggs” (368). The reason echoes Osherow’s “occasional blank screen” for her own angels. “The fat lady always left the face blank so it could be filled by the memory of them who looked upon it” (368). In this case the gaze of the human possesses individuating power, where the angel proves itself incapable of communication.

angel reflects the rawness of the world around her. No longer able to look into the depths or the interiors of things, she forces us to confront them in their primitivity – their barbarism, their blunt surfaces. Her revelation is her own limitedness, the cage that surrounds her. If you would discover the secret of the world you live in, she tells us, look to the nature of that cage.

Eimers chooses as her voiceless, eyeless figure the inevitable memorial angel on a headstone, but it is a memorial that we do not see in relation to an individual grave. Rather, it is described from a perspective of distance, as if this one angel was the angel for all the dead – and the living. In such a capacity the angel appears in a state of fall, as if to reconnect herself to some concrete thing beyond her dominion of generalities. She appears in echo of Benjamin's angel of history - "Almost spread, her wings are caught / mid-flare, one breath behind / a lift into corrosive air" (4-6).

But she is as pure a shock
as the sky's primary, unfinished blue
that pulls away from her in all directions.
She turned black years ago –
one night for grief or faithfulness
with the patient instinct of chemicals,
copper and oxygen, toward something
more gradual than white.
Her eyes are simple.
un-irised, as if her sight had failed
at specifics: how formal and serious
we are, the wrinkles in my shorts,
your ruffling tiers of hair.

The afternoon stalls,
wanting to see as barely
over headstones, driveways, hills
of houses groping down to ours
any one thing we close our eyes
not to forget. (11-29)

In the ruins of the angel we begin to judge ourselves. Right when the speaker notes that the angel's sight has failed, she turns to herself with clarity and precision: "how formal and serious / we are" (21-22). The angel's failure to judge specifics produces in the human a self-reckoning urge not to forget, and a potentially transformative urge to discover something worth remembering.

The blind angel prompts these urges in us specifically as her spectators. In beholding the ruined – turned black, sightless – angel, we receive a pure "shock." The "any one" impression we look for, this shock appears as a singularity that enters and illuminates the world of decadent distinctions – distinctions that "we," with our "wrinkles" and "ruffles," our close-up distinguishing of "headstones, driveways, hills," tiredly think through and die in. We perceive the details of the branches and, overwhelmed by such details and such seeing, "close our eyes not to forget." In such a world and such a subjectivity the only possibility of not forgetting is through the Benjaminian jolt, jolting us out of an impoverished continuum, a petrified set of codes and conventions within which we no longer really judge the world. The patience of the earth-bound angel ("not rising but sinking to earth"), enables this shock, almost as sacrifice, for it is her patience, her duration over time, that gives her her color. Startling black against the blue sky, the angel (while impervious to the senses and their chaos) is still bound to the world and its

corrosions. In the fields of no escape, the “un-irised” vision of the angel has this to tell us: that the most powerful agent of perception is not impression, nor even the ability to rationalize impression, but that invisible moment in between, where the intuitive faculty flashes before us the idea of a thing separated from its appearance and from our recollection of it. There is possibility, the angel suggests, for revelation without freedom, if we are willing to attend to this separation of idea and thing. Such separation is, poetically, the moment of blind prophecy and intuition. But it is also, historically, the scene in which past and present are discontinuous, history and progress at odds. Or where, in the words of Gabriel García Márquez’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech explaining the origin of marvelous realism, we “lack a conventional means to render our lives believable.”¹⁷¹

I will explain what I mean through a final engagement with “A Very Old Man.” Though fiction, the story leads us to a perspective that like poetry isolates things from their causal connections. Beginning with causal disorder, the story ends with causal irrelevance, a radical discontinuity that like Eimers’s “shock” depends on the transfer of the spectatorial gaze from angel to human. With the departure of angelic attention we get our irises back again.

By the end of the whole absurd saga the Pelayo family has come to experience the angel’s omnipresence as a kind of violence, an extension of that patience that is the hallmark of the bird-man’s standoffish remove. Their initial fame begins to break apart with the angel’s exposure as an unreliable miracle-worker. The prospect of his imminent death alarms them, for nothing so grotesque as a dead angel had made demands of their practical universe. “And yet,”

¹⁷¹ García Márquez credits this “outsized reality” as being specific to Latin American history and experience. It is “a reality not of paper, but one that lives within us and determines each instant of our countless daily deaths, and that nourishes a source of insatiable creativity, full of sorrow and beauty, of which this roving and nostalgic Columbian is but one cipher more, singled out by fortune. Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all creatures of that unbridled reality, we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable. This, my friends, is the crux of our solitude” (135). This

the final paragraph begins, the angel survives, grows wings, and disappears awkwardly into the sky. Elisenda watches him, her vigilance registering the event as fact. “She kept watching him even when she was through cutting the onions and she kept on watching until it was no longer possible for her to see him, because then he was no longer an annoyance in her life but an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea” (225). The original Spanish emphasizes the geometry of this distance. From being “un estorbo en su vida,” he becomes “sino un punto imaginario en el horizonte del mar.” This is perhaps the only instance in the story where the bird-man appears *as angel*, and not as some vagrantly human entity (an old Norwegian sailor is the favored presumption in the story). Paradoxically he must disappear in order to be seen, and, more importantly, he must cease to be a spectator. Now he has become an image in the human mind, erasable and yet infinite. In turn Elisenda has become the spectator, providing the first (and last) interior moment in the story, watching the angel disappear from time and its spectacular narratives.

In keeping with the angelic sighting the final moment is also the only moment given to the reader completely disjointedly, without eventual transition or explanation. This disjointedness is the sign of angelic freedom, purchased at the price of his participation in the world. It is given to the reader pointed and quick. We find in the penultimate paragraph that the angel is half dead, and then shift to the final paragraph, beginning *in medias res*: “And yet [sin embargo] he not only survived his worst winter, but seemed improved with the first sunny days” (224), rejuvenating as suddenly as spring.

Though disordered, the rest of the story follows the conventions of narrative, using transitional, hypotactic language to order, qualify, hierarchize: “On the following day,” “The

quote is perhaps the crux of a speech that, throughout, astonishes with its imagination, its commitment, and its power.

angel was the only one. . .,” “When the child began school. . .” And yet the final outcome – the outcome which the rest of the tale has spent anticipating, suspending the question of whether, after such decadence, what flight? – is arbitrarily dodged and reduced to an imaginary geometrical point. This final abrupt move – a linguistic *deus ex machina*¹⁷² - could be read in many ways. In the context of the parabolic nature of the tale, however, it recalls Paul de Man’s definition of allegory as pretending to “order sequentially, in a narrative, what is actually the destruction of all sequence” (“Pascal’s Allegory of Persuasion” 69). Foreshadowed by the story’s first syntactic convolutions, the final abrupt move acts as the destruction of all pretense. It is, ironically, revelation. For this reason the issue of causelessness is irrelevant – it appears only momentarily as a way of calling our attention to the angel’s self-revelation as disappearance into the imaginary. We have after all, psychologically already been given the cause for the angel’s miraculous flight: the angel was crushed by the tarantula woman, his reputation “ruined” by his own failure as celebrity. Summarily, the town strips him of the power to command attention that is his estate as angel. “And that was how Father Gonzaga was cured forever of his insomnia and Pelayo’s courtyard went back to being as empty as during the time it had rained for three days and crabs walked through the bedrooms” (223), we are told three paragraphs before the end. In his own ruins, the angel finds the motive-force for flight. It is not his reasons that are

¹⁷² Benjamin’s discussion of Karl Borinski’s *ponderación misteriosa*, the “intervention of God in the work of art,” relates in a different way the consequences for angels of divine interference. As in García Márquez’s story, such intervention enables the flight of the angel, which in allegory is also the flight of the human. “Subjectivity, like an angel falling into the depths, is brought back by allegories, and held fast in heaven, in God, by *ponderación misteriosa*” (*Origin* 235). Through a simple, mechanical “and yet,” time is petrified in the firmament, affixed like mottoes before a thesis (roughly half of the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” are prefaced by mottoes), or like the watercolor of the New Angel, waylaid on the wall. Benjamin is too dialectical a thinker, however, to leave us in such fulfilled stasis; his angel is falling back into the sky, propelled by time’s ephemerality away towards a permanence he cannot master. His inability to “make whole” what has been torn apart echoes the inability of the German mourning-drama, the *trauerspiel*, to achieve that totality by which mourning itself would be conceived and resolved – returned and assimilated to its essence and origin. Instead, the excesses and vulgarity of the genre resolve suffering in destruction, presenting only the ruins of the allegorical idea, the melancholy of the subject suspended in what, in his poem on angels prefaced to the ninth thesis, Scholem calls “timeless time.” Grace yields to gravity; neither allegorical inscription nor its angelic inscriber can bear its own weight.

important, the story implies, but the shock with which we behold the angel rising from the stagnation of all reason. Here time is arrested, it “stands still and has come to a stop” (Benjamin “Theses” XVI), held before us in order to attract our gaze to a sublime point of appearance that is also disappearance, of origin that is also a point of destruction.¹⁷³ The reader of this arrest, singularly unconcerned with causality, “seizes the past “as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (Thesis V). To her things appear whole and self-subsisting, alternately a welcome of abundance and the signature of a certain ruthlessness.

The temporal “stop” belongs to human, not angelic, perception. It is important that at the end we watch *Elisenda* watching, the disappearance of the angel finally provoking her imagination in a way that, as a living presence in her world, he could not. Finally she attends to the angel as such. In decadent times, the story seems to say - times of disjunction between convention and reality, times both fantastical and banal – the angel exists only as a departure. For only then does he seem to possess the power that, at other moments and in other contexts, would be taken for granted – the power to command (and hence redirect) the attention of the beholder. In times such as these we look to the angel’s limits, its loss, its emptiness, its mourning, for these describe our decadence and also our utopianism. In the angel’s cage we see the partialness of our own actions, the wash of discriminations that prevents the fullness of the moment, but also the possibility of seizing the beginning that has always been there. For this reason the angel must reduce to a point on the horizon, the singular instant where the past meets the future. When the time is out of joint, the fullness of the angel’s participation in human affairs occurs at the point of his absence.

¹⁷³Benjamin famously explains his investment in the interrelation of origin and destruction the *Trauerspiel* book, “Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the

I want to close with a brief reading of a poet that, unlike those above, is both a neo-surrealist and an historical poet. In the spirit of this combination, he is also a writer about angels. But unlike many angel poems, his are deadly serious; Larry Levis has no patience for the strictly personal or the mysticism of the everyday, and every patience in the world for the slow, contorted strangeness of social recollection. His method is fierce, but sustained. He wrenches historical moments out of their continuum, using the angels of incompleteness to examine them whole. This is especially true for his two most compelling angel poems. “Anastasia & Sandman” is a poem about Stalin and fascism and about the rhetorical apparatus of fascism, written as simultaneous nightmare and plaint. The later “Elegy with an Angel” is an assembly of four vignettes that analyze the history of the New World and its inner-city reverberations. In these poems Levis dives into the heart of the delay between angel and event, into the allegory of frustrated redemption, in order to discover a parable of our time.

“Anastasia & Sandman” describes a world of allegorical absurdity. A bureaucrat is recounting the days of Stalin before (as we discover later) an empty audience. Interspersed with references to the “Committee on the Ineffable,” the “University of Flies,” and the “Committee on Solitude” is the story of a horse. These mock titles pair institution and inhuman as an indicator of the surreal isolation that accosts the subject under terroristic rule. The discourses of state and person come together historically: the peasants’ horses were confiscated by Stalin after he took over Romania, sent as meat to starving Poles, and then served as the ground of reality for the once-farmer-now-factory-worker (whose horse was confiscated) under Stalin’s rule.

“That horse I had,

He was more real than any angel,

processgenesis” (45).

The housefly, when I had a house, was real too,”
Is what the man thought.
Yet it wasn’t more than a few months
Before the man began to wonder, talking
To himself out loud before the others,
“Was the horse real? Was the house real?”
An angel flew in and out of the high window
In the factory where the man worked, his hands
Numb with cold. He hated the window & the light
Entering the window & he hated the angel.
Because the angel could not be carved into meat
Or dumped into the ossuary & become part
Of the landfill at the edge of town,
It therefore could not acquire a soul,
And resembled in significance nothing more
Than a light summer dress when the body has gone.

The man survived because, after a while,
He shut up about it. (41-60)

The poem’s inflated allegories of institutionalized rhetoric and grand ideas contrast with the simplicity of the images of the horse and the angel, the light, and the landfill. The latter expose the former. They expose totalitarianism as life destroyed and regenerated, the waste at the edge of civilization, and above all as the angel’s bodiless emptiness and absence of power. In this poem animal and angelic realities also contrast allegorically. The reality of the horse is the

steady survival of habit and habitat; that of the angel, the threshold of origin and destruction, poetry and slaughter. For the “light summer dress” without a body is also the killing of the *kulaks*, and they speak the same non-rhetorical truth. Though an emblem of substantial disappearance and insubstantial arrival, the angel is not, however, therefore irrelevant. As in “A Very Old Man,” its own disappearance provokes an imaginative entry into the past. There is in the sum of images a connection between the angel and the horse; in the speaker’s mind the angel crawls like a fly into the ear of the horse and from there into the brain of the horse and from there becomes for the horse a mist in the field. After detailing this portrait of angelic immanence the speaker concludes that he has decided not to attend committee meetings anymore, because no one else is ever there. In surreal isolation he discovers that “lack of conventional means to render our lives believable,” and so turns from the imagination to the absences of the imagination, to memory and its ruins.

And besides, behind the angel hissing in its mist
Is a gate that leads only into another field,
Another outcropping of stones & withered grass, where
A horse named Sandman & a horse named Anastasia
Used to stand at the fence & watch the traffic pass.
Where there were outdoor concerts once, in summer,
Under the missing & innumerable stars. (104-110)

The mist, itself a ruined angel, leads directly through the gate of memory to a scene of passive spectatorship. Here the horses of history gaze at the progress of traffic, configuring an allegory of absence and infinity that only the angelic imaginary points overhead can explain, or fail to explain.

“Elegy with an Angel at its Gate” begins where “Anastasia & Sandman” leaves off, with the images of angels infinite and empty in the heavens, and their descent into the threshold of memory. The poem uses this image to open a narrative of the angels’ fall from paradise into American life and history as they might be told by the very old and philosophical. In this first section, “Muir in the Wilderness,” the angels speak directly to us.

We were the uncountable stars, at first.

We were nothing at first, and the light

of what was already over still in it. (1-3)

“We were never the color-blind grasses,” the poem continues, never the clarity of the patterns of the snake or in the water falling and filling spaces where it wasn’t. The poem proceeds through negation in order to arrive at that occasionalist beginning before beginning, a space of simultaneous infinity and emptiness before immediate existence, and through which we understand existence. We get only as far as the fall, however (the mind cannot reach before the beginning of time, though it can presuppose it). “One by one” the angels vanish from heaven, penetrating the things of this world, becoming part of this world:

Part of every law,

Part of each Apache heirloom for sale

In a window, part of the wedding cake

Part of the smallpox epidemic, part of God (l. 22-25)

In these partakings, the angels span historical event and memorabilia so that historical event and memorabilia become part of each other. Part of love, and the parting of flesh, part of the slaughterhouse, part of summer, the angels finally become part of poetic references:

Part of the fork in the road where we took

Both directions at once to disappear in them,

Into the noise that cuts us in half, part

Of the noise, part of what doesn't come back. (1. 44-47)

Angelic participation requires the angels' own division and breaking apart. Infinitely present in all possibilities, they cohere the fragments of time and the world through an emptiness. As *The Wizard of Oz*'s scarecrow puts it they go both ways, but "in order to disappear in them." Recognizing chance rather than destiny, they are unlike those angels that appear in order to hail the prophet; these angels participate both in what happens and what doesn't. They are midwife and executioner, origin and destruction, the "nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." The second half of the "Muir" section collapses this idea for us into a story: a story of a Cuban would-be revolutionary and his love that we are told could become a movie that the movie-watching gape-mouthed audience the angels in the first half are part of will watch and be a part of. Part of the movie and part of its audience, angels are part of the configuration of history and fantasy, and, particularly in relation to the gaze, the part that holds the parts together.

Unlike his earlier angel poem, Levis's "Elegy" finds possibility in the partial-ness of existence, and in the idea of angelic participation in it. This is where his sequence of negations leads, to a theory of angels not only without God but – in contrast to Benjamin - without the messiah. For Levis, the ruins of the past and the wreckage of the now are not distinguishable, and history's angel may yet lead us through the present. We see this in the following sections. They pursue the tale of an Irish immigrant to the New World and his experience of British colonialism - the famine and the religious oppression and the Atlantic crossing they provoke - through the image of an angel-figurehead that is still preserved after centuries. These sections are intercut by "Stevens," a poem imagining a rainy-day in Hartford where Wallace Stevens is getting a manicure. As Stevens is "turning angels into air," the poem is turning him into one of his own historical images (water reflected through the glass, "reflecting everything and the

nothing in everything”) and into images from a progress he doesn’t yet know (“the background chorus / Of semis on the interstate,” 3. 14-15).

The last section takes off from both these points, from “Stevens”’s afternoon and “Bunny Mayo”’s trip. In “Like the Scattered Beads of a Dimestore Rosary” the speaker is walking through the kind of neighborhood slums spoken of proleptically in the third section, talking to an angel in the gate – an echo of the second section’s hanged soul on the gatepost of British justice, and here also an echo of the gate to a pre-genocidal past in “Anastasia & Sandman.” The angel he speaks to is the double of that “wrong, other angel trapped in stone” which, like Wright’s fishes and Eimers’s corroded angel, “must stare out, stupidly.” The speaker’s conversation addresses the issues represented by both these gates with a return to the poem’s opening image:

The point is to live beyond all jurisdiction,
To be the uncountable stars again, the shape
Of the animal running through tall grasses.

It is too late for either of us now.

Angel in the gate, walk with me sometimes (4. 13-17)

The speaker releases the “trapped” angel despite its belatedness and distance from its own bloody origin. Immortality may grieve, but it nevertheless moves forward in its grief.

If in choosing to free the gate’s dumbstruck and staring angel Levis here angles away from revolution and towards reform, it is at the same time an apocalyptic reform. Angelic participation, however partial, illuminates possibilities of thought and reality beyond what we already know, through the emptiness of its beginning. There is universality in this emptiness, for the melancholy angel’s issues are issues of civilization, both historical and contemporary. In inviting his companionship the speaker seeks to converse with the melancholy of totalitarian

order and disorder, bombast and absurdity, secrets and slaughter, to open its wings but also to close them. It may be too late for either man or angel to be the shape of an animal and not a ship, but it is not too late for the angel to be brought back by allegories. Be my guide, the speaker seems to ask, and show me in the ruins of this neighborhood, this reality, its essential truth. Walk, angel, “the heavens behind you on fire,” and show me the house “Where eternity was no more than my hand / Scurrying across a sheet of paper, / Kindling blent to the music of its hush” (4. 78-80). To the place where words are concrete and emblematic; where the fires of time and eternity destroy, but also inscribe; and where the angel of history redeems from history some form of intelligence.

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