

On Angels and Other Anomalies of the Imaginal Life

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The Witness and the Critic

Reverie has always been for me something of a temperamental style, which is why, I guess, I was from very early on called a daydreamer. Then I was too young to appreciate the apt loveliness of the word, but in time I came to value the vision of someone who dreams the day, which is a wonderful privilege really, an honor and a gift. Dreaming the world while awake, an appropriate if brief description of reverie, seeing the world through a veil of dreams--its dreams--, allowing things to blossom with their secrets and mysteries, the daydreamer in reverie regards the world with soft eyes. Still later, when I was studying phenomenology, I began to sense how the daydreamer and phenomenologist are kin. For what is phenomenology if it is not the capacity to dream with the world?

Young daydreamers are drawn to become phenomenologists, just as phenomenologists can be described as old daydreamers. In either guise the curious fate is that each is always slightly out of step with the explanations given for the things of the world. For a daydreamer, and for a phenomenologist, an explanation always has the effect of taking him or her away from how things are in themselves, simply in their presence as they appear and in their difference from other things. When, for example, someone knows that ice and steam are, in spite of their appearances, the

same thing--molecules of H²O-- , then one is at serious risk of not seeing the ice or the steam as they are on their own terms. Knowing the facts in this case can close one's eyes to their difference: the steam which rises from a hot cup of coffee is not the same as those ice cubes which float in some cold tea. Ice and steam even belong to different landscapes of the world. Steam is more at home on cold wintry mornings; ice on hot summer afternoons.

A daydreaming phenomenologist is loyal to differences. This loyalty requires a kind of patience, the best virtue which a daydreamer has and, not surprisingly, the one which a fact-minded person often finds so irritating. This patience characterizes the style of what I call the witness, the one who stands up for the things of the world, especially for those small things which often go unnoticed, like the play of light and shadow in a grove of trees, or the early-morning song of a bird.

For a witness these small epiphanies of the world always have something of an attic quality to them, that place of reverie so beautifully explored by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Reverie*. Writing out of this space of attic reverie in *The Soul in Grief: Love, Death, and Transformation*, I wondered what strange alchemy must transpire in that place which, farthest from the ground of our daily concerns, is the first to receive the warmth of the morning sun and then later the light of the stars and the glow of the moon. In the alchemy of reverie the hard edges of the world are dissolved as things reveal their secrets and announce their dreams. In this place, the witness knows the world in a different way than does the critic, and, taking leave of him, frees the world into its awe-ful

mysteries. On one such occasion, I saw how a rose so fully desired to be itself that it opened beyond its own boundaries, drinking in the light, becoming pure light itself before its pedals would begin to fall away. In that moment, I realized a wonderful secret of the world: that a rose is a flowering of the sun, the light's way of becoming blossom and seed, odor and color, texture and visibility.

Witness and critic are two different styles and temperaments each of which reveals and conceals the world in its own particular fashion. In the face of the world's multiplicity, for example, the witness eschews judgments for as long as possible, the better to let things declare themselves before we silence them with how we know them. The witness is one who loves the world, the one for whom knowing flows from being, from being in love. For the critic it is the other way around: being follows from knowing; how things are depends upon how we know them. The scientific- technological way of knowing the world is a good illustration of the style of the critic. This way of knowing the world gives us great power over it, but it also shapes our way of being in the world: consumers of it ensconced in a practical, matter of fact mind.

It is not, however, a question of being either a witness or a critic. We are always something of each, just as love always has something of power in it, and power, if one is careful, might cradle love. Nevertheless, I do lean in my life and work toward the side of the witness because the critic has been so much in the ascendant that the witness's way of knowing the world and being in it, the way of love, the path of the daydreamer and phenomenologist has become endangered.

Looking at Medieval Paintings

Looking at paintings can be an occasion for reverie and for change. An occasion if the painting is more than what we look at; if it is also a moment that reflects how we are looking.

Medieval paintings are such an occasion. Mirroring back how we are looking, they can challenge some very basic, unexamined assumptions about how we regard ourselves and how we construct our notions of what is real. A stroll through a gallery of medieval paintings can be a kind of therapeutic reverie. The self who enters the gallery is undone, as the paintings become an instrument for an archeology of one's vision. Standing before these paintings one can discover forgotten possibilities, other ways of seeing and knowing which, over time, have fallen into disuse. A medieval painting can be a checkpoint at a border crossing between two worlds. Looking at these paintings can be a journey into a different landscape of experience where the usual habits and customs of one's style of being in and knowing the world are transformed.

There are many things in the territory of a medieval painting to challenge one's vision. Angels, for example, abound within its borders. They are everywhere, dominating the spaces that they share with our medieval ancestors, before we lost sight of them. Magnificent beings, these angels announce by their presence the continuity between the divine and the human realms. They are, as their name indicates, messengers, beings who connect us and keep us in touch with the glory and the wisdom of

another order of reality. They tell us things, as so many of the annunciation paintings demonstrate. In particular, I have always loved those paintings where the Angel, announcing to Mary that she is to be the mother of God, speaks to her through a trumpet-like tube which connects the Angel's mouth to the Virgin's ear. It is a strikingly beautiful image and a powerfully persuasive way to suggest that the angel impregnates us with the word.

In the presence of these images, I realize that in the medieval cosmos we are summoned to listen, called to obey, and for a moment I am wistful for how much of ourselves we have lost in becoming deaf to all those appeals from the side of the world which no longer reach us. In the presence of these trumpeting angels who voice their appearance, I fall into a kind of reverie where I feel the difference between living through the ear of attunement that is called to listen and to obey, and the eye of mastery through which we have come to dominate the world from afar. And when the reverie ends and the gallery in which I am standing returns, I am left with a strange sense of loss and longing.

In Technology as Symptom and Dream, I showed how the fifteenth century invention of linear perspective in art became a cultural convention of mind through which we learned to become a distant spectator of the world. Since that time we have increasingly forged a vision, which has allowed us to dominate nature, and presumably ourselves as well, through the observer's eye. In the presence of these angels, however, something of the servant who lives through the ear haunts me, like a phantom hovering just beyond my reach. I begin to recognize the limits of a despotic eye which knows and treats the world as a spectacle, and I feel again the

price I pay for a way of knowing and being which forgets that life is a vocation, that one is chosen to be who and what one is at least as much as one might think one chooses it. In a moment like this I hear that lost part of myself which yearns to be that servant again, which yearns to be addressed by something other than myself, which yearns to surrender in service to a vocation. Then the absence of the Angel is a cold space in an empty world.

They are gone, these Angels of an annunciation. They have disappeared from the landscapes of our world, fled from our vision. And it is painting that charts their departure. By the early eighteenth century those powerful Angels of annunciation that one sees for example in the works of daVinci, or Giotto, or Simone Martini, or Fra Angelico, have deteriorated into chubby, baby-faced, pink-bodied cupids. In a painting by Joseph-Marie Vien entitled, "The Merchant of Love," these remnants of the angels of annunciation are being plucked from a basket, like a commodity for purchase. The angel has now become an object of possession, something to amuse us, a bauble in service to our vanities. No wonder, then, that in our time the poet Rilke will ask who, if he cried out, would hear him among the angelic orders. His *Duino Elegies* are a song of lamentation over this loss, a register of our sorrow over their absence. Now we stand bereft of their presence, in a place of loneliness between their magnificent splendor and awesome beauty and the shy, sleepy dumbness of the animal, whose advantage over us is that it is content within its world, a cosmos of containment, while we, as Rilke notes, are not at all at home in our infinite universe and our overly interpreted world.

What then are we to do should we meet an angel, Rilke asks? By the end of his Elegies the song of lamentation has become one of praise for our condition of being neither angel nor animal. "Tell him things," he advises. Speak and proclaim the world. Say to the angel such simple things as "house, bridge, fountain, gate, jug, olive tree, window, possibly: pillar or tower."

Standing before a painting, a reverie like I am describing can happen. In their power to change us, paintings can create fields of reverie where conversations with the dead who always accompany us in the landscape of the imaginal world can take place. And so, on occasion, I do see these Angels of Annunciation through Rilke's eyes, and when he whispers to me, "tell them things," I know that for now in this moment he is right. But I also feel the elegiac quality of his knowledge, because I cannot forget that our speaking to the angel comes out of a sense of loss. Once, long ago, the Angel told us things. Now we are to tell them. On a cloudy, rainy Saturday afternoon in an art gallery, so radical a change like this asks to be witnessed. It is almost as if these Angels of Annunciation are speaking again, appealing to us now to feel the sharp poignancy of this difference. Then: "The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary and she conceived of the Holy Ghost." Now: "Tell them things!"

The Golden Firmament and the Blue Sky

As a daydreaming phenomenologist, I am for better or worse a witness for what has been lost, forgotten, left behind, or otherwise marginalized and neglected, a witness for those lost things which still

remain and haunt the outer margins of the experienced world. For their sake, and in service to them, I write in a mood of reverie and with a sense of love. Forgotten Angels require this kind of witnessing, loving presence, and it seems to me that we have an ethical obligation toward them. Standing before these paintings which record their presence, I am obliged to suspend my habitual, critical ways of knowing in favor of becoming that witness who welcomes the Angel. Otherwise the Angel becomes only a curious oddity of a time long past, a quaint and naive expression of a benighted age, a fiction no more real than it is today. To see the Angel then and now I have to look with eyes which can glimpse what lingers in the shadows and half-light of our bright reason.

The sky in medieval paintings is another occasion for reverie, reflection, and transformation, another occasion to check our vision to see how we see the world and ourselves. But I hesitate here even to use the word sky, preferring something like firmament, because the former already carries the assumptions of our way of knowing the world and being in it.

What is at issue here is the difference in color between the golden firmament of the heavens and the blue sky of the world. Here, maybe even more than with the Angel, a medieval painting, like Duccio's "Christ Entering Jerusalem," can pose a question to our usual and familiar ways of constructing reality. With the Angel, we are confronted with an absence in our current experience, but the blue sky--the blueness itself of the blue sky--is evident to our senses. Surely the medieval painter was expressing only some artistic convention, and just as surely they, like us, saw the blue sky above them.

This is the view of no less an authority than Kenneth Clark. In his master work, Civilization, he notes that medieval men and women saw the world clearly enough, but they preferred to believe in what they saw as symbolic of an ideal order. But can one truly separate seeing from believing? Was the medieval mind so divided against itself that it lived in one world and knew another? Clark's remark has the effect of making the different medieval mind and its world too much like our own split modern mind and the fragmented world in which we live--a world where the perceived differences between ice and steam are subsumed under the symbolic idea of H₂O. If we agree with Clark, we run the risk of colonizing the medieval world by the modern mind, of erasing the differences between them. Then it becomes only a matter of knowing the facts which surround the use of gold, of knowing, for example, the influence of Byzantine art on the thirteenth century Italian painter Duccio's use of gold. While such facts are the legitimate concern of cultural and art historians, knowledge of them can separate me (as well as the historian) from the experience of the golden firmament of heaven. Armed with these facts, I can put everything back in its rightful place: the sky is really blue and always blue: now, then, and forever.

Reverie, however, opens another way of knowing and being. The golden firmament is first simply what it is, and it asks of us only a simple and direct question: what is it like to be and to live in a world where the heavens are gold? Before a medieval painting like Simone Martini's "The Road To Calvary" we are asked to imagine this difference: above our heads not an open infinite blue sky, but a golden heaven which domes the world.

The golden dome of heaven is not a reality circumscribed by our empirical categories of time and space. It is an imaginal reality, and as such a possibility of human experience that is present and available at all times. One finds it, therefore, not only in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but also earlier and throughout the medieval period. In addition, even in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, when Giotto's masterpiece, the "Arena Chapel in Padua," depicts the blue sky, Cimabue's paintings are depicting the golden firmament. Giotto and Cimabue are contemporaries, but they live in different worlds.

I am defending in this essay that domain of reality which Henry Corbin calls the *mundus imaginalis*. It is a place that is neither that of sense perception nor that of the conceptual categories of the mind, but no less real on that account. It is a region of subtle bodies where the spirit matters and matter is in-spired, a landscape whose organ of reception is that of the active imagination. In the introduction to Corbin's book on the Sufi imagination of Ibn 'Arabi, *Alone with the Alone*, the Shakespeare scholar Harold Bloom reminds us that this imaginal world is as much an aesthetic domain as it is a spiritual one. And so, the imaginal world is also that far country watched over by the poets from Shakespeare and Milton to Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Blake and a host of others. Indeed, Corbin notes that this imaginal world has at times had no name other than poetry itself.

Imagining a cosmos where the heavens are gold, standing as a witness for this other reality, frees our world into its true depths where

beauty precedes meaning. Is this not what Keats meant when he said, "Truth is Beauty, Beauty is Truth?" It is a terrible kind of beauty and an awe-ful truth to be sure, which is what Rilke meant when he said that beauty is, after all, only the first moment of terror we are just able to bear. To read Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" is to experience with the poet this awe-ful truth of the beautiful.

Freeing the golden firmament of heaven from its encasement within a consciousness which has lost touch with beauty and with terror, the universe of the wide blue sky is cracked open, and the blueness of the blue sky, now more than a self-evident fact, itself becomes a marvelous beauty and an occasion for reverie. In such a moment one has come home to the world.

More often than not, however, we live without passport to that other country where beauty and its terrors, love and its shadows, death and its griefs awaken the soul and lift the veil from our eyes to reveal the imaginal realm. Without passport the blue sky remains a wide-open space of measurement and calculation, a world of infinite expanse waiting for our exploration. In that space we trace the arc which stretches from Galileo's 1609 observations of the moon to the 1969 Apollo moon landing. When we live in this way, we are in a different world, and we are different from who and how we are when we dwell beneath the golden dome of heaven. In this domain we are in the realm of the divine which secures our world and gives it its place.

Angels belong to this kind of cosmos. Indeed they have no place in the open and empty expanses of an infinite universe. This is why one of the first Russian cosmonauts, Yuri Gagarin, was correct when in 1959 he said of his journey into space that he saw no angels there. We should not have been shocked by his remark. But we were because we did not recognize the shift between worlds. We heard only what he said and not who was saying it, a modern man who lives beneath the fact of a blue sky, a sky which no longer harbors the heavens, that abode where the choir of Angels sing.

Looking at medieval paintings, I know that Angels had to disappear when the golden firmament of heaven began to fade into a blue sky. Beneath the golden dome of heaven I am gathered and tucked within a sacred, symbolic cosmos; under the blue sky I am living in a secular, factual world. The Angels who dwell in the golden firmament of heaven do not respond to our rational and empirical ways of knowing and being. The imaginal world is visible only to a vision that sees through the facts and penetrates the veil of ideas with which the mind clothes the world. Immersed in reverie before these paintings, I know that such a vision was not only once real, but also is real today.

Imaginal Vision and the Customs of Hospitality

We live in dark times because we have largely lost our capacity for an imaginal way of knowing and being and have largely forgotten how to appreciate the imaginal depths of the world. Beneath the golden cosmos, the critic in us wants to ask, "Was not the Medieval sky blue?" And to this

question the critic expects the witness in us to answer, "Yes"--for what else can be said in the face of the evidence of the blue sky? Alongside this self-evident fact, the golden firmament of heaven does not matter. It is only an artistic convention, a mere conceit, a piece of fiction with no real substance beside the heavy density of the fact. And even if the witness in us would dare to say "No!" to the critic's question, nothing would really change. The critic would merely shrug, convinced of the naiveté of the witness, convinced that the daydreaming phenomenologist is hopelessly out of touch with the way things really are, a wooly headed romantic whose sense of things is useless and unproductive.

But, of course, the golden firmament of the heavens does matter, and the witness who welcomes its presence is not naive. The witness simply begins in a different place than does the critic. Without judgment about the truth or falsity of an experience, the witness begins with a welcoming sense of wonder and even generosity, which allows things to be what they are as they are. Is a dream true or false, correct or incorrect? A poem? A work of art? Indeed, what happens to the dream, or the poem, or the work of art if we begin in this way? In this either/or form these questions force the dream or the poem or the work of art to speak on our terms, before they have had their chance to declare themselves and speak on their terms. For the witness these questions are premature. They are even impolite and inhospitable. Pressured by these kinds of inquiries, the golden firmament fades away and Angels disappear. Do we not need to weep for this disappearance? And do we not have to mourn for our part in this loss? Angels and their kind have not taken leave of us; we have abandoned them.

We mourn because we have dared to love, and we love again because we have dared to grieve. Mourning can revitalize our capacity to know the world by loving it, not unlike, I think, the painter and the poet must do. Each, I believe, faces the world in a spirit of loving wonderment, and in reply the world whispers something of its secrets. Something of this exchange is present, I believe, in these few lines of E.E. Cummings. He writes:

"While you and i have lips and voices which
are for kissing and to sing with
who cares if some one-eyed son of a bitch
invents an instrument to measure Spring with?"

The thing, he says, a few lines later is "to eat flowers and not be afraid."

Imagine knowing Spring in this way, by eating flowers, that is by taking Spring within ourselves in an act of intimacy and of love which no instrument can equal!

This spirit of loving wonderment, which opens the imaginal sense of the world, describes the attitude of hospitality. It is the custom that rules in the domain of the imaginal. To enter into that domain requires that one learn the ways of hospitality. The Roman poet, Ovid, tells a wonderful story of hospitality in *Metamorphoses*.

In Ovid's tale two gods, Jupiter and Mercury, disguised as strangers, are wandering the earth but do not find any place of rest or welcome until they arrive at the very humble dwelling of two old people, Philemon and Baucis. Philemon and Baucis are living in an un-godly age, in a world not too unlike our own where there is no recognition of the divine. But these two old people are the hosts who offer hospitality, withholding nothing of their meager stock of goods. Baucis even proposes that she and her husband offer the strangers their one and only valuable possession, a goose which they have been saving for a special occasion as a sacrifice to the gods. In this moment of generosity, the gods reveal themselves. Then the humble abode of Philemon and Baucis is transformed into a temple, and these two old people are made the priest and priestess of this sanctuary forever. At the same time a flood destroys the un-godly human race.

Wolfgang Giegerich has written a splendid article about this tale in which he argues that these transformations are not "magical miracles." On the contrary, these transformations are a radical shift in perspective or attitude, a transformation of consciousness in which we are "moved from one view of things to another, from a preliminary, superficial view of the world as positive fact to one capable of perceiving the divine essence even in the most simple event."

A chief value of Ovid's tale, and Giegerich's reading of it, is that it helps us appreciate not only that the imaginal is real, but also that the real is radically imaginal. The imaginal is the grounding of the world; it has, therefore, ontological priority over the empirical and the rational. As such,

however, it is not some other world apart from this one. No! To riff on a line from the poet Coleridge, it is an-other world that now is. There is only this world, the world in which we live and have our being. But this one and only world is numinous and holy. The old practices of hospitality disclose the world in this way, as sacred and strange. Practicing hospitality the world truly does becomes the "vale of soul making."

In their gestures of hospitality, Philemon and Baucis practice soul making. They do so by lingering in the moment, by staying with the strangers who are made guests without judgment, evaluation, or criticism. Hospitality is this kind of devotion to things as they are. It is presence to the present moment, which frees the image in the event, de-literalizes the factual character of the event, and dissolves preconceived ideas about what this moment is or should be.

Hospitality does not postpone the moment. Offering the strangers made guests their one and only possession, the fatted goose, Philemon and Baucis cast aside any worry, care, or concern about tomorrow. Their hospitality does not hold anything back. Their hospitable presence is a way of knowing the world and being in it, which does not live on credit, does not live on borrowed time, on time stolen from the past or the future. Staying in the moment, hospitality eschews any nostalgic longing for yesterday, as much as it avoids any kind of yearning for some utopia of tomorrow. Lingering in the moment, hospitality refuses to put any kind of narrative structure on the moment, refuses the temptations to question the moment in terms of its origins or development, as much as it refuses to question it in terms of its purpose or utility. In hospitality, time follows the rhythms of the

soul and not those of the mind. Moments are not strung out on a line where sequence means consequence, where the past is the cause of the present and the future is a present that is being caused now. In hospitality, moments have a timeless, archetypal quality to them.

Hospitality is an attitude of patient waiting, an attitude, which, as the poet Elliot says, knows how to wait without hope, because it knows that hope would be hope for the wrong thing, because it knows that this hope would empty the moment of its hidden presence. But while hospitality waits without hope, without care, or concern, or anxious worry, it does wait with love. Ovid's tale makes this clear, for the goose which Philemon and Baucis offer is the bird of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Also, Philemon's very name means the loving or hospitable one, and Baucis's name means the tender or affectionate one. Philemon and Baucis, then, are the hospitable ones because they nourish the moment with love, because they feed the strangers who are made guests with love. Indeed, is not love the prerequisite for lingering in the moment? Giegerich believes so, which is why he insists in this tale "Love makes the difference."

In response to this kind of loving hospitality, the moment freely gives of its own fullness: the gods show their faces. Gestures of hospitality liberate the imaginal sense of the world, and endow the individual moment with a numinous quality. Giegerich says, therefore, that "what this story is actually about is how, within common reality and precisely out of it, the divine emerges, how everyday reality blossoms into divine beauty." Hospitality allows the sacred to show itself through the profane, the extraordinary through the ordinary, the divine through the mundane. When

through gestures of hospitality we release the imaginal depths of the world,
we do come to realize that the world truly is ordinarily sacred, that the world
really is the vale of soul making. In such moments Angels might appear,
and the dome of heaven might be gold.

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