

NOT WITHOUT ANGELS

On Henry Corbin's angelology, and on a novel by Karl Ove Knausgård

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God is here, Abel said. [...] That must have been what he meant, thought Cain. That time was almost contracting around them, endowing the present moment with an unknown richness and making it holy.¹

An angel's despair is unbearable.²

Not without angels.

It could be the motto of Henry Corbin (1903-1978). This French philosopher and orientalist was not only a specialist in Sufi-Islam and Iranian philosophical and theosophical tradition, he also believed that in those traditions solutions were to be found to counter the nihilistic tendencies in modern western culture. We moderns, too, should not be without angels, so one can summarize the thesis underlying his entire oeuvre.

Not without angels.

It could be as well the motto of *En tid for alt, A Time for Everything*, a novel by the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgård (2004). Only, his thesis is not that we need angels to counter modernity's nihilism. Knausgård fully embraces nihilistic modernity and tries to comprehend it. To understand the death of God, so he seems to claim, one must understand the death of angels as well. Or, to be more precise, one must understand their very dying, because this is what, in his fiction, he lets happen: after God's death, the angels fell, slowly, very slowly, until they definitely lost their immortality and died.

In this essay I present a reading of both Corbin's and Knausgård's angelology. What is at stake in both angelologies is a profound reflection on modernity. In Corbin that reflection is negative concerning modernity and, in his eyes, angels can be helpful to restore a lost sense of

¹ Knausgård, Karl Ole (2009), *A Time for Everything*, translated by James Anderson, New York: Archipelago Books, p. 119-120.

² Knausgård 2009: 17.

truth and authentic way of human existence. In Knausgård the reference to modernity is positive, but even then a reflection on angels – at least at their dying – is helpful to acknowledge what is at stake in being modern.

1. Corbin's Heidegger

In his time, which is the second half of the twentieth century, Henry Corbin was a world-wide known expert in Islamic mystical philosophy, famous for his studies on, among others, Ibn Arabi, Shurawardi, Shi'ite mysticism and, even, Zoroastrian religion. But one of his earliest intellectual outputs, in 1938, is the very first translation of Heidegger in France, and this is far from being insignificant with respect to the rest of his oeuvre.³ Studying Arabic and Sanskrit and attending the courses of the Parisian orientalist, Louis Massignon, in the thirties, Henry Corbin frequented also Germany to study philosophy, more precisely the then new kind of philosophizing as taught by Jaspers and Heidegger.⁴ In a way, his entrance in the philosophical tradition is Heidegger's question about being: about the difference between *being* as such (*Sein*) and particular *beings* (*Seienden*), and about the specificity of *Dasein*, Heidegger's term for human existence.

According to Heidegger, knowledge is first of all a matter of being-in-the-world (*in-der-Welt-sein*), of existence (*Existenz*), *Dasein*. With this notion of *Dasein*, Heidegger puts forward an alternative for the Cartesian *cogito*, which is the ruling paradigm underlying the modern subject. According to Heidegger, man's relation to the world is not based in a subject, i.e. in a position that, by means of radical doubt, has disconnected itself from the world in order to find in itself a certainty beyond any doubt. This Cartesian idea denies man as being *essentially* part of the world, as living *of* it. Of course, it is true that he makes and constructs his world, but he is at least as dependent on that world. As *Dasein*, man is an *Entwurf* (a 'projet', a 'design'), but not an *Entwurf* out of nothing, but in dependency on the world, in

³ It is the translation of *Was ist Metaphysik?* (1929): Martin Heidegger (1938), *Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique ?*, traduit de l'allemand par H. Corbin, Paris : Gallimard (that edition is no longer available). He also translated *Von Wesen des Grundes* (*Ce qui fait l'être-essentiel d'un fondement ou 'raison'*). Both translations are available in : Martin Heidegger (1968), *Questions 1*, Paris: Gallimard.

⁴ Bisson, David (2013), *René Guinon. Une politique de l'esprit*, Paris: PGDR, p. 391-394. See also: Manuel de Diéguez (1972), 'Henry Corbin et Heidegger', in: *La nouvelle revue française*, février 1972, n°280, p. 27-39 ; Green, Nile (2008), 'Between Heidegger and the Hidden Imam: Reflections on Henry Corbin's Approaches to Mystical Islam', in: M.-R. Djalili, A. Monsutti & A. Neubauer, *Le monde turco-iranien en question*, coll. Développements, Paris: Karthala; Genève: Institut de hautes études internationales et du développement, p. 247-259.

which he at the same time lives as its ‘designer’. In other words, man is *geworfener Entwurf*, ‘designed design’.⁵

Heidegger does not so much say that man designs his world already designed, as that he *is* that ‘designed design’. His existence is to be defined as the very place where being designs itself. He is the locus where being *is*, in the active sense of the word: where it happens and makes history. Human being is the ‘*da*’ of ‘*Sein*’, hence *Dasein*. In that sense, man is not a ‘*Seiendes*’, a being among beings, i.e. a kind of ‘closed and full being’ as things like hammers, stones, and cars are. Instead, man is by excellence an open and finite being, a being open to the happening of being ‘as such’ – a ‘*da*’ open to the historicity of *Sein*.

This is why human knowledge, too, has to be defined as open and finite. It does not have its base in the kind of certainty Descartes puts forward, but has to be defined as an awareness of the impossibility of such a certainty. Its base is an awareness of its own finitude, i.e. of the fact that even in human knowledge being happens in a way that it does not exhaust itself. On its most profound level, human knowledge knows that, in it, being happens, and that it cannot fully appropriate that being. True knowledge recognizes that the being it knows about, is never *fully* known, that it is never know *as such*. This is to say that to know being is at the same time always already to have forgotten being. This is what Heidegger calls *Seinsvergessenheit* as the basic condition of human knowledge.⁶ The highest and most basic knowledge is aware of *this*: it realizes the radical *impossibility* to overcome – to ‘sublate’ – that ‘*Vergessenheit*’.

Nihilism: this is Heidegger’s reproach with regard to modernity. What, then, is the nihilistic fault of modernity? That is has forgotten being, that it has lost its ontological ground, i.e. its foundation in being as such? Although often interpreted like this, it is not exactly what Heidegger says. To him, modernity is nihilistic, not because it forgot being. Human knowledge *cannot but* forget being: it is its very condition. But modernity has forgotten this forgetting, it denies that oblivion. In this, modernity is in line with the entire philosophical tradition, for this oblivion has been installed at the very beginning of western thought. This is why nihilism is as old as this tradition and why that tradition should accept its death in order

⁵ The English edition translates *Entwurf* as *projection*, which is not the most elegant translation; see: Martin Heidegger (1972 [1927]), *Sein und Zeit*, Zwölfte, unveränderte Ausgabe, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, p. 145; (2001 [1962]), *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, Oxford, UK / Cambridge US: Blackwell, p. 185. ‘Projection’ beholds the notion of the latin ‘*icere*’ (to throw), which in German is ‘*werfen*’, but it loses its accurateness in the combination ‘*geworfener Entwurf*’, translated as “thrown projection” (Heidegger 1972: 285; 2001: 331). A better translation might be ‘design’, and ‘designed design’.

⁶ For the idea of *Seinsvergessenheit*, see Heidegger’s *Überwindung der Metaphysik*, in: Martin Heidegger (2000), *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 7, *Vorträge und Aussätze*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, p. 70ff.

to make a new thought possible, a thought that acknowledges its openness towards being without appropriating it.

This is why it is incorrect to claim that Heidegger is simply *against* modernity. And his thinking is certainly not an attempt to promote and re-install pre-modern philosophy. On the contrary, he precisely tries to ‘think’ modernity, including its ontological oblivion – its *Seinsvergessenheit*. But, as said, the problem he detects is that modernity denies that *Vergessenheit*. And, thus Heidegger, only an acknowledgment of that oblivion is the proper way in which modernity can get rid of its nihilism. His criticism of modernity is radically *affirmative*: rather than to overcome or to get away from it, he tries to save modernity, to bring it to its being, to what it *is*: an openness towards being, an openness that can be found in an acknowledgment of its unavoidable ontological oblivion.

This, however, is not exactly the way Henry Corbin read Heidegger in the early thirties. He fully agreed with his critical view on the Cartesian subject, responsible for the fact that we have reduced *Sein* to *Seiendes*, to an entirely objectified reality from which we are radically disconnected and which we have no ‘essential’ relation with. This loss of any connection with being as such is modernity’s nihilism. But unlike Heidegger, he did not see the way out of that nihilism in an *affirmative* criticism of modernity. He saw that way out in the philosophical traditions that modernity has left behind or even never had touched.

Not in these traditions *as such*, i.e. as a set of ideas, but as a testimony of the *Dasein* they designed. Or, in the terms of Corbin: not as *exoteric* doctrines but as beholders of an *esoteric*, spiritual core. In these traditions, the exoteric doctrine concealed a way of *Dasein*, and if modernity has to be interested in them, it is to get in touch with *their Dasein* in order to discover *our* own modern way of *Dasein* and, by this, discover a renewed connection with being as such.

This is why Corbin’s historical research keeps itself far from what he calls ‘historicism’, from a historiography that sticks to facts. Historical research must penetrate into the ‘soul’, in the *Dasein* of a time and its ideas. Concerning the study of Shi’itism, he writes that “the condition sine qua non to penetrate it and to live its spirit, is to be its spiritual host”.⁷ And, as Corbin explains, being the spiritual host of the other is the perfect remedy to rediscover the own spiritual kernel, the proper *Dasein*. Behind Corbin’s historical research, there is the assumption that the modern cosmopolitan world is only possible on the level of the spirit, i.e.

⁷ Corbin, Henry (1971), *En Islam iranien, Aspects spirituels et philosophiques, Tome 1, Le Shi’isme duodécimain*, Paris: Gallimard, p. 7 (cited in Diéguez 1972: 30).

on the level of a shared interest in one another's *Dasein*: only this way, a *Dasein* of today's global *Sein* is possible.

2. An 'Imaginal' Universe

Still a student in Iranian and Sanskrit language, the young Corbin received a present from his professor Louis Massignon: a book by the 12th-century Iranian author, Suhrawardi. It was the start of Corbin's long-life attempt to understand what this and similar books from the old Iranian tradition are about (including the old pre-Islamic tradition of Zoroastrism). The same years, Heidegger's philosophy explained to him why, in such non-European, antique and medieval thinking, European modernity could find the answer to its problems.

In that age-old Iranian thinking, Corbin finds an ontological openness the modern Cartesian universe lacks, an openness to being not reduced to mere empirical objectivity. It is this universe which is full of angels. The Avesta texts of the Zoroastrian religion are populated with "Yazata's" and "Fravarti", which, according to Corbin, can be considered as what we know as archangels and angels.⁸ Yet, those angels are not so much the ones we encounter in the Biblical texts, as the 'gods' the Neo-Platonist Proclus talks about. "Neo-Platonism" is "infinitely closer to Iranian angelology" than the biblical angelic reference, Corbin claims.⁹ If Suhrawardi is a central author in Corbin's appreciation of Iran's Islamic philosophy, it is because that medieval Sufi-intellectual "restored in Iran the philosophy of Light and the angelology of ancient Persia", which, as Corbin shows, is established in a fully neo-platonic way.¹⁰

Neo-Platonism: thus the universe Corbin himself puts forward as the alternative for the all too closed world of modernity.¹¹ It is the grammar of all the important Shi'ite

⁸ 'Yazata' is the common Zoroastrian word for 'god'; see Malandra, Willam M (1983), *An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion. Reading from the Avesta and the Achaemenid Inscriptions*, Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, p. 14; 188. 'Fravarti' or 'Fravashis' might originally have been "spirits of ancestors". They were imagined as "winged warriors, female like the Valkyries"; see Cohn, Norman (1993), *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come. The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith*, New Haven / London: Yale University Press, p. 90.

⁹ Corbin, Henry (1977), *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth. From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran*, translated by Nancy Pearson, with a new Prelude to the second edition by the Author, Princeton (New Jersey): Princeton University Press, p. 6. For Corbin's explanation of the *Yazatas* ('adorable ones') and the *Fravarti* ('those who have chosen [to assist the Ohrmazd, a god near to – or another name for – Ahura Mazda, the uppergod of the Zoroastrian universe]), see p. 9.

¹⁰ Corbin 1977: 12.

¹¹ For Corbin, the "metaphysical catastrophe" dates even from a few centuries earlier, and took place on Islamic ground, influencing directly European thought: "This [catastrophe] was signaled by the final triumph of the Aristotelianism of Averroes over Platonic and neo-Platonic cosmology championed by Avicenna. To the defeat of that cosmology is coupled the disappearance of the *anima mundi*, the Soul of the World. The catastrophic

philosophers Corbin has edited and commented¹², and it is, *avant la lettre*, the grammar as well of the Mazdian philosophy and theosophy of Iran's pre-Islamic era.¹³

In those kinds of universe, man is not considered as an autonomous subject, disconnected from – and consequently in relation with – being. There, the human fully 'is' being. Rather than having a position vis-à-vis being, man takes entirely part in being's very process. He, more exactly, is an *emanation* of being's Oneness. In that sense, his individuality is to be understood as openness to higher forms of being, i.e. to beings which are more close to being's 'oneness', the source from which all that is emanates. This is why the basic question is not whether man exists, as Descartes asked, but *to whom* he exist; not whether he is present as such, but *to whom* he is present.¹⁴

The one to whom he is first of all present is his angel, his immaterial Self, of which his material Self is a further emanation. So to discover his proper being, i.e. to be present with his real Self, the material Self has to realize an openness towards its spiritual Self, his Angel. This is the 'spiritual' way in which Neo-Platonism conceives the individuation of a human person – contrary to Aristotelianism or Averroism considering individuation as the singular 'materialization' of a common immaterial soul. According to the latter, the individual's presence is present to itself precisely in its concrete material shape. According to the former, to Neo-Platonism, the individual's presence is in touch with what exceeds materiality: it is present to its angel. And he is at the same time present to what and who his angel and the other angels are present to.

That world beyond the material is not *simply* the transcendent one, and neither does the One emanate *directly* in the realm of materiality. Between the material and the One, there is a kind of 'reality in between'.¹⁵ It is a "precise order of reality, corresponding to a precise mode of perception", so Corbin states. "By 'precise order of reality'", so Ali Shariat, one of today's Corbin scholars, writes,

event that gave rise to modernity is the loss of the soul of the world." In: Cheetham, Tom (2005), *Green Man, Earth Angel. The Prophetic Tradition and the Battle for the Soul of the World*, Albany: SUNY Press, p. 5.

¹² Corbin, Henry (1986 [1964]), *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, Paris: Gallimard (Folio Essays).

¹³ Corbin 1977: 3-50. Studying Zoroastrian and Shi'ite text, Corbin uses 'philosophy' and 'theosophy' as synonyms, which is also facilitated by his neo-platonic reading.

¹⁴ Cheetham, Tom (2003), *The World Turned Inside Out. Henry Corbin and Islamic Mysticism*, Woodstock (Connecticut): Spring Journal Books, p. 85.

¹⁵ In the system of Proclus, this is the realm of the "individuals ones", the "henades", that are at the beginning of a series of causation. It is Proclus' way to philosophically situate the antique gods. So, in his theory, Appolo is the 'henade', standing at the beginning of a causal system of 'sunny' effects.

he meant the imaginal order, that is a world created by and through the creative imagination, and of which it is itself the organ of perception. As spiritual topography, this imaginative world *really* exists ‘outside the exterior location’ and independent from our fictions.¹⁶

The world beyond the material – the universe of angels and archangels for instance – is certainly the product of human imagination but nonetheless “*really* exists”. In a Neo-Platonic philosophy, this is not contradictory, since imagination – and thinking in general – has a specific function in the entire ontological process. Imprisoned as it is in the material world, imagination (i.e. the creative faculty of reason) is there to turn being’s emanating move, that leads it away from the One, back in the direction of the One. On the individual level, creative imagination enables man’s material Self to ‘see’ his angelic Self and even beyond, and to discover its true being.

This makes sense in a Neo-Platonically conceived universe, but does it in a non-Neo-Platonic universe as well? And to what extent this could offer a way out of the closeness of modern materialism? In a way, Corbin defused this question by coining the concept of the ‘imaginal’, for which to a larger part he relied on the theory of Gustave Jung. Contrary to the imaginary, which is mere illusion, the ‘imaginal’, although only ‘seen by imagination’, really exists.¹⁷

Time and space are lacking here to discuss the notion of the imaginal, but the least one can say that it is a somewhat dubious concept, if only because it supposes a kind of supersensible, ‘imaginary perception’, escaping any of the criteria that are generally accepted in the realm of modern sciences. Yet, in relation to the topic of angels we discuss here, it is nonetheless interesting to follow Corbin’s argumentation why monotheism cannot do without a neo-platonic way of thinking – in other words, why it cannot do without angels.

3. No Monotheism without Angels

There is an inherent paradox in monotheism, and to solve the impasses to which it leads, an angelology is needed. This is why, so Corbin states, there is no monotheism without angels.

¹⁶ Shariat, Ali (1991), “Henry Corbin and the Imaginal: A look at the Concept and Function of the Creative Imagination in Iranian Philosophy”, in: *Diogenes*, No 156, Winter 1991, p. 83, Shariat’s italics; the author quotes Corbin 1972: 335 ff.

¹⁷ See for instance “Towards a Chart of the Imaginal” in: Corbin 1977: vii-xix.

What then is the paradox of monotheism? As he explains in an essay with that title, the paradox has three moments.¹⁸

Its first moment is due to the monotheistic claim that there is only one God or, what amounts to the same thing, that only God is God. Yet, since that claim is part of the “exoteric” dimension of that religion, the risk is real that this God, “*volens nolens*”, is seen as a separate being, as a kind of metaphysical idol. The more monotheism succeeds in promoting its One and Only God, the more it risks to “perish in its own triumph”.¹⁹ The promoted God will end up to be nothing but an idol.

Notice that Corbin’s analysis here is fully Heideggerian. In the “metaphysical idolatry” of God, being (*Sein*) is reduced to a particular being (*ein Seiendes*). Precisely by trying to save the transcendence of the One by whom everything is what it is, monotheism separates that One from all that is. It denies the being – *Sein* – of reality, and reduces it to an “*Ens supremum*”, Supreme Being and, thus, installs the nihilistic tendency that persists up into modernity.²⁰

The second moment of the paradox tries to resort out of that impasse. That resort is basically “esoteric”. Instead of promoting God to the outside world, one has to look for Him in the inner of one’s own soul, in the being that is hidden there, which connects the individual to the being of all that is, to the One unifying the entire universe without even possessing its own attribute of ‘oneness’. Returning to its own soul, monotheism discovers that, “in being there is solely God”.²¹

But that esoteric solution does not really lead out of the impasses of the paradox of monotheism, for than it seems as if God is simply (in) everything. The risk is that, claiming that “in being there is solely God”, one does not understand correctly the meaning of the word being.²²

Only the third moment brings the solution, which is “the installation of an integrated ontology”, i.e. a realm of being in between the ineffable perceptible One beyond perception and the empirical world. This intermediary realm is necessary to let the One God at the same

¹⁸ See the first chapter (“Le paradoxe du monothéisme”) in: Corbin, Henry (2003 [1981]), *Le paradoxe du Monothéisme*, Paris: Éditions de l’Herne, p. 11-96, more specifically p. 14 ff. ; see also the second chapter (“Nécessité de l’angéologie”), p. 102 ff.

¹⁹ Corbin 1981: 14; my translation, MDK.

²⁰ Corbin 1981: 102.

²¹ “Monotheism only finds its salvation and its truth by reaching its esoteric form, the one of which naïve thought thinks it destroys it and of which the creed sounds *Laysa fi’l-wojûd siwâ Allâh*; ‘in being there is solely God’.” Corbin 1981: 14; my translation, MDK.

²² “As the exoteric level is constantly threatened by a metaphysical idolatry, so the esoteric level is threatened by the danger emerging from the misunderstanding of the meaning of the word being.” Corbin 1981: 14; my translation, MDK.

time be the One, incomparable with all that is, and the one who enables everything to be what it is. How can God be the One and at the same time be the ontological basis of everything that exists? Put this way, it is no wonder Corbin puts forward Neo-Platonism as the only possible ‘grammar’ for monotheism. It is, according to him, the only way to conceive being as openness in which all separate beings find their true ‘self’, an openness which unites all that is.

To explain the integrated ontology as the solution for the monotheistic paradox, already on the same page just quoted, he refers to “the great Neo-Platonic philosopher Proclus”.²³ A few pages further, referring to him – but you can read Heidegger in it as well – Corbin writes:

The One *is* not One, it does not possess the attribute One. It is essentially *uni-ficent*, *unifying* [*uni-fique*, *unifiant*], constitutive for all the Ones, for all beings that are only able to be *being* by being each time *a* being, this is to say unified, constituted as unities precisely by the One unificent [par l’Un unifique].²⁴

To save at the same time the radical transcendence of God’s oneness and the idea that this eternal, unreachable oneness is the base of everything mortal and perishable on earth (unable as it is to hold its oneness), an intermediary level is needed in which the One is fully and immortally incarnated. Proclus coined a name for the ‘beings’ in that intermediary world, *henades*: ‘ones’, ‘one-beings’, beings unified in an immortal, spiritual way. Only the spiritual eyes of man’s creative imagination are able to see them, and this is at the same time man’s only way to see himself, his true being, i.e. the *one/henade* that makes him the unified individual he is.

Henades was Proclus’ name for the antique gods. The Christians named them ‘angels’, and Corbin took this word to translate all the equivalents of that term in the many Iranian texts, both Zoroastrian and Islamic. To conceive the oneness of the monotheistic God in an accurate way, man has to trust on Angels, on the ‘ones’ he ‘sees’ with the eyes of his creative imagination. Similarly, to restore an authentic way of *Dasein*, modernity has to affirm the *imaginal*, the world opened by our imagination without being unreal. This is what we, moderns, can learn from the angelologies of ancient times. Modernity, too, cannot do without ‘angels’.

²³ Corbin 1981: 14; my translation, MDK.

²⁴ Corbin 1981: 18; Cobin’s italics, my translation, MDK.

4. Antinous Bellori

The angels Antinous Bellori observed in 1562 were seen not with spiritual eyes or creative imagination. The eleven years old kid saw them in real. No doubt about it, but unfortunately, he saw them only once, and alone, without any witness to confirm his observation. All his life, he traversed the fields and woods of Europe hoping to see them again and, who knows, to examine their bodies. For this is what he had seen: winged bodies, fully corporeal. During his travels, he took notes and made a book out of them. In 1584, twenty two years after his ‘corporeal angelophany’, he published *On the Nature of Angels*.

This is what we read in *A Time for Everyting*, a novel by the Norwegian writer Karl Ole Knausgård.²⁵ Unlike in Corbin’s theory, in Knausgård’s fiction, angels are not a matter of the *imaginal*, of reality based creative imagination. Angels are simply real: they have been the empirical object of Bellori’s observation. Lost in a nocturnal wood, the young Antinous came upon two figures, in “chain mail”, one with a “torch”, the other with a “spear”.²⁶ Until he suddenly, he noticed the wings and realized that, at a distance of only ten meters, two living angels were standing in the water, trying to catch some fish.

Their faces are white and skull-like, their eyes sockets deep, cheekbones high, lips bloodless. They have long, fair hair, thin necks, slender wrists, clawlike fingers. And they’re shaking. One of them have hands that shake.

Just then, the other one tilts his head back, opens his mouth, and lets out a scream.

Wild and lamenting it reverberates up the walls of the ravine. No human being is meant to hear that cry. An angel’s despair is unbearable, and almost crushed by terror and compassion.²⁷

And, indeed, the two specimens of the immortal race catch their fish and hungrily consume it.

Antinous stares at them, spellbound. The teeth that sink into the fish’s flesh, the scales that cling to their chins, the eyeballs that now and then turn up and make them look white and blind. Then they look two statues standing there, for without the life of the

²⁵ Knausgård 2009. Original edition: (2004), *En tid for alt*, Oslo: Forlaget Oktober.

²⁶ Knausgård 2009: 15-16.

²⁷ Knausgård 2009: 17.

eyes, the deadness of their faces is emphasized. Each time he sees it, Antinous recoils in fear. *They're dead*, he thinks. *They're dead*. But then the eyeballs correct themselves, the faces again fill with life, and what a moment ago was loathsome in them is now beautiful again.²⁸

Antinous recoils because the angels he stares at “are dead”. And if apparently they are not, they certainly do no longer seem immortal. Later, the scholar Bellori realized that, as a young boy, he had witnessed a moment of the age-long degeneration process the angels have gone through.

What happened to the angels? Since God’s incarnation in Jesus, since he has exchanged his immortality for man’s mortal condition, heaven has remained empty and its angels all have fallen, Bellori explains. Yet, they did it not exactly like their bad brothers in Creation’s earliest times. Since they have not been punished, their fall has been slow, extremely slow: the empty heaven made them wander on earth, and the more they stayed in that mortal atmosphere, the more they took over the features of the mortals, their hunger, their fear, their shaking, and finally even their mortality. The young Bellori had witnessed *degenerated* angels.

To support his thesis, Knausgård’s novel mentions the history of the angels’ iconography. How they once were portrayed as knights with burning swords smashing their fallen fellows down to hell. But already in the age of the baroque in which Bellori lived, and certainly in later ages, they were nothing more than little putti’s, flabby, fat, and lazy.

At the end of the sixteenth century, the young Bellori observed them in a very late state, as they were obviously old and many of them invalid. Hence their cry of despair. It is despair out of hunger, rage and fury which, as they at that moment experienced, are really infinite; these endless needs were ironically the only things resting from their once infinite nature. At the end of the novel, we learn that it was this despair that made them opt for a metamorphosis into childish putti’s.

Why they chose the exact form that they did, and transformed themselves into human babylike beings, isn’t difficult to understand. Their fear was that their barbarity and appetite and terrible rage would show themselves, and so it was innocence they

²⁸ Knausgård 2009: 17.

sought, and as man was created in their image, they selected man at his most innocent as their new model.²⁹

Years after the publication of his book, so the novel tells, the old Bellori by accident witnesses again angels, in circumstances similar to the one when he saw them in his youth. Now, he even has the opportunity to see one of them dying and to take his body with him at home to study it. The results of that examination are unknown, since the notes we have of Bellori's diary then stop. Bellori disappeared and might have died on a new journey in search for angels, so the novel suggests. And the author adds that is not a coincidence that, precisely after Bellori's death, the angels appeared again, but this time as innocent putti's.

5. Angels after Incarnation

Actually, the story of Bellori's research on angelic bodies is but the framework of the novel. The other chapters tell in detail some Biblical stories in which angels play a minor role at the background. In the long second chapter, we follow Cain, the somewhat neurotic, shy brother of the sympathetic Abel, who is more courageous and dares to go back the Garden of Eden from which he and his family have been banished. So, Abel is the one who overcomes his fear for the cherubs with their burning swords keeping guard over the Tree of Life, and by times enters the forbidden ground. It is after such a journey that he is killed by Cain.

The cherubs are also at the background of the story of Noah and his Arch (chapter 3 and 4). Amazing how Knausgård immerses himself into that old story and changes it into a fully stirring modern novel. During the Flood, Anna, Noah's sister, tries to manage the survival of her family and when at the crucial moment, she unexpectedly faces her brother in his arch, she is refused to enter and doomed to die with the rest of mankind. At that moment, a peculiar angelic event has already happened: the flying away of the glow that till then had come from where the Garden of Eden was located. It was the glow of the cherubs, and their flying away was a sign that the Garden of Eden no longer needed protection. Only Noah understood it: it was a sign of the coming Flood.

In the fifth chapter Knausgård goes into Ezekiel, the only book in the Bible that gives an extensive description of the cherubs: they are like human beings, but with "four faces and four wings", "the face of a man in front, the face of a lion on the right, the face of an ox on the

²⁹ Knausgård 2009: 449.

left, and that of an eagle at the back”, with “their feet straight, [and] their soles like calves’ hooves”.³⁰ Thus the description of the cherubs in the story reporting Ezekiel’s vocation and in which he is offered a “scroll” to eat, a scroll “covered in writing both on the inside and the outside”, and full of “God’s dirges, God’s laments, God’s words of woe”.³¹ But, the novel asks, “what was it about the event that was so important that it could make the cherubim return on earth after an absence of several hundred years?”

The extraordinary thing about Ezekiel’s revelation, apart from the presence of the cherubim, was the consumption of the scroll. Nothing of that kind had ever happened before, and never would again. Traditionally this was interpreted as Ezekiel becoming one with God’s word, which of course is correct, but just as significant is the reverse perspective, emphasized by Bellori, that God’s word became one with him. The fact that Ezekiel became one with God’s word turns him into a prophet. But what happened to God’s word when it became one with Ezekiel? How should we understand God’s word being incarnate in a body, becoming flesh and blood, heart and lungs, sinew and tissue, and for a time moving about on the earth. Not figuratively, most definitely not that, for if there is one thing that characterizes the transaction between God and Ezekiel, it is its concrete and physical nature: he actually *eats* God’s words.³²

Ezekiel’s revelation is new because it is in fact nothing less than God’s incarnation into the human, thus abolishing the distance that separates man from God. And this is precisely why the cherubs intervened: if not to prevent it, at least to save something of God’s eternity.

Just as when they appeared in the Garden of Eden, the cherubim here are also, at one and the same time, the guardians and the representatives of the outer limit of the divine. But this time their presence is perhaps even more necessary, because the Lord himself is outside the boundary they mark. *The cherubim’s presence represents the divine’s original relationship to mankind, indifferent to us and our works as they are,* writes Bellori. *The Lord’s frenzy represents an aberration, unthinkable a few centuries*

³⁰ Knausgård 2009: 350-351.

³¹ Knausgård 2009: 353.

³² Knausgård 2009: 355.

*earlier but extended and taken to its absolute limit a few centuries later, when God let not only his words be incarnated in a man, but his entire being.*³³

The incarnation emptied heaven and changed radically man's relation towards God and his rage against man. It was no longer a matter of *what* had caused it: it was now God's rage itself that has been offered to eat. So, God was no longer outside, getting angry of the sins that men committed. Now, God, including his rage, was *in* men, and the domain of the monotheistic divine was left by its sole inhabitant. No wonder the cherubs are so massively present when God commanded Ezekiel to eat that scroll: they were the last ones to protect the domain of the eternal divine, which now was left by God himself.

But is the divine eternal? Are the angels eternal? Is God eternal? These are the basic questions Bellori's book deals with, and the answer is no. Both his research and his book on angels were an attempt to collect proves for t unorthodox thesis.

With his own eyes, he had seen the mortality of those who were supposed to be immortal. And even if the angels he once saw might not have been mortal, they certainly were affected by a condition very near to the one of the humans. What else could he say after having seen them hungrily eating the fish they had caught, after having heard out of their mouth that unforgettable cry of unbearable despair?

All his life, Bellori has also speculatively reflected about them. But the confrontation with the images of the dying Christ painted by Giotto in the *Capella degli Scrovegni* in Padua marked a turning point. It might have been the reaction of the angels' that was ultimately decisive for Bellori:



He would have seen the angels.

One of them closes his eyes, his mouth twisted in tears, as he clutches his face with both his hands, fingertips to his cheeks as if about to claw himself. Another is pictured in a strangely distorted posture, the upper half of his body lifted as if in ecstasy. A

³³ Knausgård 2009: 371.

third opens his arms as if in embrace or surrender. The angels' grief is frenzied. And Bellori couldn't even have thought about it, it must just have flashed on his mind as a certainty the moment he saw them.

God was dead.³⁴

Anyway, when he left the chapel, he kept complete silence during two long years. Confronted with those frescos, he must have fully realized what it means that Jesus died on the Cross. It was God himself who died there. Consequently, God is neither eternal nor unchangeable. God did change, from the very beginning of Creation onwards and surely with his incarnation. If you takes the core of Christian doctrine – incarnation – seriously, this is the only conclusion possible.



In his book, Bellori claimed that, seen from the perspective of God's inherent changeability, a lot of contradictions in both the Christian doctrine and narrative disappear. It takes away the confusion they inevitably bring about.

No one took this confusion for what it was: confusion. The reason for this was obvious: as long as the divine is regarded as perfect, always complete and in absolute balance, one must either brush aside all contradictions one finds within its sphere, or neutralize them. There are no other possibilities. But Bellori regarded the divine as mutable and therefore didn't repudiate the discrepancies. Rather, he took them as confirmation that he was right: the divine was incomplete en not in balance.³⁵

Only the discovery of God's changeability allowed Bellori a correct understanding of the angels he had observed as a young child. Since God had changed, more precisely, since he died on the cross,

³⁴ Knausgård 2009: 421. The cover of the American edition (out of which the quotes here come) shows the detail of the Giotto fresco of the *Lamentation*, with three of the angels as described here.

³⁵ Knausgård 2009: 419.

the angels alone remained, and that was why they were insane with grief, and why their lives had altered so dramatically in the centuries that followed. God was dead on the cross, and the angels were imprisoned here.³⁶

6. The Time of the Angels

But if the ‘time’ of the angels is not characterized by eternity and unchangeability, is it then to be considered as the kind of temporality we humans are under? Here Knausgård’s ‘theoretical fiction’ reaches its highest point of delicateness and precision. Angels are indifferent, so he lets Bellori explain at several occasions. They are

guardians, soldiers, slaughterers. But they also have another side. The brutal impression given by their merciless activities is constantly moderated by actions that help and protect people in need. [...] As Bellori writes: *Just as the angels’ merciless actions aren’t an expression of cruelty, so their good deeds aren’t an expression of goodness.* When they appear in the Bible, it is always on errands for the Lord, it is this bidding they follow, and the consequences for us are totally immaterial to them. In *themselves* angels aren’t beyond good and bad, but only in relation to human beings, whose lives do not concern them.³⁷

That indifference has its equivalent in the kind of time angels live in. And being the exact opposite of eternity, it is nonetheless not the kind of temporality we live in. The opposite of eternity as absence of time is time in which, so to say, there is but time, a time in which all past events happen at the same time: a time of absolute and omnipresent ‘presence’, in which past and present occur simultaneously.

Bellori says that as eternal beings, time can have no meaning for angels. And as their presence on earth is generally brief, nothing of what happens here can leave a mark on them but must glide shadowlike past, we might think of it as something like the images of our dreams, frightened up by what is to them an unknown will. In the angels’ time – which is our time before we were born and after we die, and therefore

³⁶ Knausgård 2009: 421.

³⁷ Knausgård 2009:378-379.

impossible, although material, as it means that that precious and inalienable I, to which we cling as fast as the shipwrecked mariner to a piece of flotsam, wouldn't exist all the time that death and the divine exist – everything ephemeral is in constant flux. The dead get mixed up with the living, what happened a century ago with what is happening now. A city mushrooms up, for a few centuries it quivers with activity, waves of bodies rise and fall in the streets, its inhabitants die, are born, die, are born again. Then, just as suddenly as it began, it vanishes. Only a shell remains. Then that, too, is expunged, buried in the sand.³⁸

The time of the angels – the time of the divine not considered as eternal and unchangeable – is a time without caesuras, a time in which “nothing is ever round off [and] everything just keeps on going”, in which “there are no boundaries, not even between the living and the dead”.³⁹

... as if in reality there is only one time, for everything, one time for every purpose under heaven. One single second, one single landscape, in which what happens activates and deactivates what has already happened in endless chain reactions, like the processes that take place in the brain, perhaps, where cells suddenly bloom and die away, all according to the way the winds of consciousness are blowing.⁴⁰

“One time, for everything, one time for every purpose under heaven”: the novel's title is extracted from that sentence: *A Time for Everything*, as it sounds in the edition for the US; *A Time for Every Purpose Under Heaven*”, in the edition for England.⁴¹ Unlike one might think at first sight, the title does not refer to the verse from Ecclesiastes 3:1, evoking the relativity of life: “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.” In fact, the title refers to the real topic of the novel: the non-linear and non-cyclic “constant flux”, in which all things happen in the same ‘indifferent’ temporal space. A time to be

³⁸ Knausgård 2009: 379.

³⁹ I translate these lines from the Dutch edition: K.O. Knausgård (2010), *Engelen vallen langzaam*, vertaald door Marianne Molenaar, Breda: De Geus, p. 536. The English edition has omitted the entire paragraph out of which the quotes are taken (Knausgård 2009: 466).

⁴⁰ Knausgård 2009: 466.

⁴¹ K.O. Knausgård (2008), *A time for every purpose under heaven*, translation James Anderson, London: Portobello Books.

compared with the one Henry Bergson calls '*la durée*' and Gilles Deleuze '*aeon*', in be distinguished from '*chronos*', the measurable time.⁴²

This Aeon time is the time of absolute immanence, allowing us to understand why the divine ones – including the angels – were far from being unchangeable. Their changings did not alter the temporality which they represent. Even changing, they represent the deep unity of being, the unity of life and death, of creation and destruction in one and the same temporal space of absolute presence. Unlike the Neo-Platonic idea of time, trying to turn everything into a transcendent unchangeable eternity, Bellori's concept of the divine time is radically immanent: it is time as such, time as mere changeability, as all-embracing simultaneity.

Yet, when God died on the cross, he lost himself in the human *chronos* time, and left for once and for all his *Aeon* temporality behind. Then, the angels remained the only ones representing that kind of divinely indifferent time. In the changings they underwent after God's incarnation, the temporality they represent altered as well. At the end of the day, it was that kind of time that degenerated. This was the angels' ultimate despair. In them, time had to die, time as radically immanent presence, as the simultaneousness of presence and absence, of good and evil, of generation and degeneration: the time which is the condition of possibility of that other 'normal' time, the one of *chronos*.

It is that despair that, in the "Coda" at the end of the book, the "I" might hear in the cry of the seagulls. For, according to the novel's suggestion, gulls are the last metamorphosis of the angels. In their cry, the immanent time of the divine has its ultimate utterance, and maybe disappears forever with the suicide of the one – the "I" – who was the last to be susceptible for that ultimate angelic cry of despair.

7. A transcendent experience of immanence

Not without angels. For Corbin, modernity needs angels, for these 'imaginal' beings break the closeness of modern human existence and restore our connection with being as such, i.e. with being as the place – the *Da* – where being – *Sein* – occurs. Human existence is unthinkable without transcendence, so Corbin explains referring to both a variety of Neo-Platonic traditions and the 'existential' philosophy of Heidegger. Yet, where Heidegger's thinks transcendence in a purely formal – transcendental – way, Corbin considers it ontologically: as

⁴² Henry Bergson (1997 [1889]), *Les données immédiates de la conscience*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France – Quadrige; Gilles Deleuze (1969), *Logique du sens*, Paris: Galilée, p. 190-197.

transcendent and real beings, as angels. What modernity needs is a renewed orientation towards a transcendent onto-angelology.

From a certain perspective, Knausgård's theoretical fiction elaborates a similar kind of criticism, be it that his criticism does not concern modernity, but precisely the kind of transcendence defended by Corbin. In his novel, the view on mortal, imperfect life as oriented towards an immortal, perfect divine being is criticized for being short-sighted. It locks us up in an all too closed universe, condemned as we are to the fixed aim of unchangeable eternity. This view on human life remains blind for the true nature of the divine, which is not an eternal and unchangeable transcendence, but a temporal and changeable immanence: the "impossible, although material [...] time before we were born and after we die", as we read in a passage quoted above.⁴³

This view is not the result of speculative thinking but of observed revelation, thus Knausgård's fiction. It is from an angel that Bellori learned a truth with respect to which everything he held as true before paled, a truth impossible to accept, but not because it is too transcendent, but too immanent. He learned it, more precisely, from looking at the gaze of a *dying* angel.

In his final angelophanic experience in which he comes across a group of angels, Bellori follows two of them and, at a certain moment, sees the couple coming in his direction, one sustaining the other who is obviously on the verge of dying. It is the acme of Antinous Bellori's angelophany:

Slowly [that angel] raised his head. He looked straight at Antinous. At first his eyes were quite vacant. Then they seemed to return to the world. For a brief moment, they stared at Antinous, they filled a fear so pervasive that Antinous couldn't bear it, but pressed his head into the snow, while a new cry, the last one, peeled through the forest.⁴⁴

The angel's eyes, although staring right in the eyes of Antinous, did not really look at him. His eyes looked "vacant". Until Antinous noticed that "they returned to the world". So, the eyes were not really vacant, they were returned *away from* the world in order to look *into himself*. Eyes looking into oneself: it is a motif coming back in almost each description of

⁴³ Knausgård 2009: 379.

⁴⁴ Knausgård 2009: 443.

angels all over the novel.⁴⁵ But, here, Antinous must have seen what the angel saw inside himself. He saw at least the fear that filled the angel's eyes, and finally, he must have understood the unbearable cry of despair that came out of his mouth.

A few moments later the angel dies. He is left behind by his fellow, and for the first time in his life, Bellori has the opportunity to touch the body of an angel.

He stroked the snow off its brow and felt it. Cold as ice. He raised its hands from its lap and pressed his thumb to the artery on the wrist. No pulse. He was quite calm. He knew the truth about himself. There was no place there for any of the conceptions he'd had about himself. He'd never taken the final step that could have enabled him to see it. It wasn't because he didn't know there was a step to take, but because he persuaded himself it didn't exist. He had known really. But now the angel who'd shown him that was dead. And he was alive. He was the one who was alive. He'd thought of that these past hours. Could he still live knowing what he knew? Yes, he could. And not only that. It would also set him free. He could do as he liked. He needn't take account of anything anymore.

Not even the dead angel.⁴⁶

Only now he realizes what he saw in the eyes of the dying angel. He saw a "truth about *himself*", a truth that had nothing in common with whatever he had thought about himself. And he also realizes that he always knew he was only one step at distance from that truth, but he did not take that step, because he didn't believe that this truth exists. An angel was needed to take that step. Why? Because that truth is unbearable, impossible, unacceptable. Because it is a truth one cannot live with when knowing it. One needs at least the support of an angel for that, Antinous must have thought. But now the angel is dead, and he, alive, has to bear the unbearable nonetheless. Realizing this, it is at that precise moment he takes the decision that, yes, he can and he will live with that angelic truth.

⁴⁵ A few examples. 1. The typical angelic gaze is announced in Bellori's first observation as a young boy, when he saw the catching and eating a fish. See the passage from p. 17 quoted above. 2. In the description of the kind of angels named "Nephelim", we read: "It was as if they were looking into themselves, one of them [i.e. men of Noach's generation who saw them] said later. Someone else said it was as if they could see something the others couldn't." (Knausgård 2009: 205). 3. In the chapter on Ezekiel, God's revelation is described in which the prophet faces cherubs whose wings are full of eyes: "He could conjure up the eyes on the wings they covered their bodies with and how they had stared at him. It had been a wall of eyes. And each one of them had seemed to lead an independent existence. They had stared at him as animals in the dark stare at a sudden light. Quite different to the eyes of their faces These, too, had fixed him, but the look in them had been averted in some curious way, as if they'd really been looking into themselves." (Knausgård 2009: 362)

⁴⁶ Knausgård 2009: 444.

What is that angelic truth? Precisely not the eternal one in the light of which earthly reality is vain, transient and perishable. It is the truth to be found directly *in* the vainness, the transient, the perishable *as such* – or more precisely, in the fact that there is no such thing as an ‘as such’ or any kind of fixed eternal identity. For being is not what it is, it does not coincide with a fixed and eternal sameness. It is life *and* death, good *and* evil, right *and* wrong, past *and* present, identity *and* non-identity *at the same time* – a time which is not *chronos* but *aeon*.

This truth is unbearable, if only it affects the subject that has to bear it. At the base of being there is a ‘constant flux’ that does not allow any fixed subject, any identity appropriating the flux into an closed identity. All that is, all that claims identity, has to find its being in the openness towards that ‘flux’, acknowledging the immanent co-presence of past and present and of all what claims to be contradictory to one another.

Yet, that truth is not simply the result of an insight, not even of a revelation. That kind of truth needs the decision of the one claiming it. For the truth Bellori has seen in the eyes of the dying angel, is the truth about himself, about his *own* being, and this implies a decision of fully acknowledgment of his part.

That moment of decision is what Heidegger would have called the one of ‘resoluteness’, ‘*Entschlossenheit*’, in which a human being fully takes upon him the radical finitude – his being-towards-death, his *Sein-zum-Tode* – of his *Dasein* as well as the inherent condition of *Seinsvergessenheit* (ontological oblivion) that goes hand in hand with it.⁴⁷

Entschlossenheit could be used as a concept to phenomenologically explain what is at stake in a neo-platonic encounter with angels. It is the moment one acknowledges the radical finitude of the human being together with the affirmation of being as what transcends the closeness of the empirical world. It is the Heideggerian way in which Corbin reads the Neo-platonic traditions of both the West and the East.

Knausgård’s theoretic fiction revolves around such a moment of *Entschlossenheit* as well – a moment of opening up (which is the literary meaning of the German word) the human closeness towards being as mere openness. But the angelic experience that transcends the world’s closeness, opens it up to the radical immanence of the *aeon*, to a materiality so radical that it cannot be appropriated in substantives and identities.

Even to take seriously the radical materiality of a word left by God, one cannot without angels.

⁴⁷ For the notion of *Entschlossenheit* / resoluteness, see Heidegger 1972: 297-301; 2001: 344-348.