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Angels: Elements for a Theory of Proximity*

A. The diversion of distance

I. Every human life is confronted at a certain moment with the theme of the *optimal but inaccessible* landmark. Everything organizes itself around a supreme goal, around something distant, compared to which current, palpable realities appear diminished. It is a sort of *diversion* of the "distant" which determines us to live with eyes fixed on the horizon line. *There*, at the horizon, is the world of aspirations, of ideals, of goals. All our hopes are oriented towards it, our sternest exigencies are embodied there. At the horizon or — if we look upwards — at the zenith is the *privileged space of the Absolute*: the space of God. Without this landmark, situated at the ultimate limit of distance, the real loses its sense, and our existential effort loses its motivations. We could say that one of the consequences of original sin is the incapacity of the human race to imagine the scale of values elsewhere than in the Boreal world of an unreachable *there*. Fallen man lives his fall inevitably as a *distancing*; he feels catapulted into the antipode of his desires and administrates his life under the pressure of an indefatigable, recuperating zeal. Even the most humble of men aim at a "there" in proportion to the best of their ability, at a project, a horizon of fulfillment that becomes the object of a continuous siege. We have a "there" of belief: heavenly Jerusalem; a "there" of knowledge: absolute truth; a "there" of everyday life: happiness. Without these faces of the distant, without the halucinatory attraction they exert upon us, we would lose our "spiritedness", we would slide into an inferior realm. "The distance" is the prime matter of all utopias but, at the same time, the handiest intuition of transcendence. *There*, imperceptively, becomes beyond. On the one hand, one cannot deny the stimulating role, the benefit challenge that "there" implies. But, on the other hand, if we still talk of a *diversion* of the distant, it is because the distant can sometimes devastate the *interval* that separates us from it. Absorbed by our aim, under the tutelage of the prestige and the seduction of the distant, we end up by no longer understanding things that are near to us. It is nearness that becomes inaccessible.

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The *obnubilation of the sense of proximity is the morbid correlative of any zenithal metaphysics*. You contemplate "the distance" of a moral law and you cannot adapt yourself to the "nearness" of a given circumstance. You move in the abstract heaven of the concept (that is, "the distant", the logical zenith of thinking) and you lose the substance of the real. You cultivate the extreme heights and the extreme depths and you fail when meeting the immediate. You produce metaphors and can no longer utter simple statements. In other words, you can unhesitatingly adopt the trajectory of the jump, but you lose the naturalness of a leisurely walk.

II. A characteristic symptom of this *crisis of proximity*— which is, at the same time, a *crisis of the interval*— is the *blocking of the spirit in dichotomies*. One who does not think "step by step" ends up by establishing *polarities* that destroy the texture of intermediary spaces. Between the two terms of polarity there no longer is a significant "field", a transit universe. Ethics is blocked in "good and evil", logic in "true and false", belief in "sinning man and hidden God" etc. The risk of a rhythmic monotony hovers, therefore, over European thinking as a whole: object-subject, matter-mind, immanent-transcendent, real-ideal, an exasperating tick-tack, a soporific alllevelling cadence. The habit of functioning strictly in two times, in other words, the latent dualism of our mental schemes encourages a type of reductionism that compromises not only our world-image (impoverishing, among others, the part *imagination* has to play in the composition of this "image") but also our pragmatic mobility. We think more and more abstractly and we act more and more mechanically. A spontaneous *polarising instinct* constantly (and subversively!) shapes our cognitive, social and political performance: we talk about exploited and exploiters, communism and capitalism, left and right, "Ossies" and "Wessies" etc. No field is free from these stiffening, epidemic dualities.

The crisis of proximity has a paralysing effect upon the spirit. Dichotomies freeze into *antinomies*. The living movement of thinking succumbs to idolatry. The monumentalized "distant" pins you to your place, petrifies you in your exaltation. You face it, separated from it by a void space which excludes any possibility of being covered. Proximity is the *beginning* of covering it, the conversion of the void into a *dynamic interval*, into a *road*. Proximity is not the opposite of distance: it is the first step, the decisive step towards it. The absolute ceases to be utopie if we turn the distance that separates us from it into a *sequence of proximities*. What is near to us is also nearer to the absolute than we are; because our *neighbour* is the extension of our identity, our enlarged self. The enlarged self, the self in expansion, the self that *overflows its proximity* is the only true partner of the absolute. The absolute, in its turn, must come out from the shadow of its

distance in order to manifest itself as a possible *neighbourhood* of man, as proximity.

Several solutions can be imagined and have been imagined in order to escape the schematism of dichotomies, to fill up *the interval* between them, and to overcome the crisis of proximities resulting from the idolatric fascination of the distant: one of them constitutes the substance of angelology.

B. The solutions of angelology

III. The angels possess the unusual quality of being *simultaneously near God and near man*. First, near God: angels constitute the divine entourage par excellence, the heavenly "court", as it appears in the spectacular vision of the first chapter of Ezekiel. The angels are the supporters of the heavenly "throne", "the dragomans" of the supreme institution. They are the ones who keep up the cult of the Creator: they serve and praise, organized in priestly "choirs". They are also God's "hosts" (Jehova is the Lord of the Hosts, their leader) and messengers. The multitude of angels is alone capable of populating God's loneliness, dissolving the opacity of *Deus absconditus* into a multiple theophany. It is what Henry Corbin calls the *paradox of monotheism*. Without angelology, monotheism "expires in an illusory triumph"; it either falls into agnosticism (as *Ens supremum* God is inaccessible), or in anthropomorphism and allegory (God is loaded with names and attributes that attenuate the mystery of his transcendence). It is only the world of angels that allows God *to express himself*, while remaining ineffable. The angels are God's *language*, "die Stimmen seiner ewiggebärenden Harmony" as Böhme says in *Mysterium magnum*. As symbols of divine proximity, angels are the privileged "medium" of revelation, the "instruments" of divine manifestation. "Ihre Arbeit ist ein eitel Bildung göttlicher Kräfte and Formen" — Böhme goes on writing in *De tribus principiis*. The angels stay near God also because they are the only created beings that can *stand* his nearness. "Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live" (Exodus 33, 20). But the angels *see* the face of God. They *are*, in a certain sense, God's "face", the protective screen through which God shows himself to his creatures. In *Isaiah* 63, 9, "the angel of the Lord's presence" is mentioned. Schelling dedicates — in *Die Weltalter* and then in *Über die Gottheiten von Samothrake* — some memorable pages to this "angel of God's presence", herald and interpreter (*angelus interpres*) of *Jehova*: It is the angel to whom the gnostics, the rabbinic commentaries and also the Christology of the first Christian centuries give different names (Metatron, Anaphiel, Michael) identifying him, at times,

with Jesus Christ himself (Christos Angelos). Avicennian angelology also speaks of an "angel of the face of the holiest of the holy", who is no other than the archangel Michael. But beyond the name, the theme of a "presence" *immediately neighbouring* the supreme Presence always appears in angelologic speculation. This "immediate neighbourhood" is the destiny of any angelic presence. The angel floats in God's "atmosphere" (or, as Jacques Lacan says somewhere, "il nage dans le signifiant suprême").

IV. But the angel is also man's "immediate neighbourhood". He is his "heavenly friend", his inexhaustible pedagogue, his guide and protector. "The guardian angel" endeavours to counterbalance by his discreet "induction", the brutal "seduction" of the demon (the terms, in this acceptance, belong to Claudel). The angel is near us in our tribulations after death and is our advocate at the Last Judgement. He is our spiritual "model", our better conscience. Before becoming an *imitatio Christi*, the life of the virtuous man begins to be a "vita angelica", an "imitatio angeli". Compared to the distant heaven of God, the heaven of the angel appears as a heaven near at hand, at an encouragingly accessible height. The angelic world is the "ceiling" of humanity, its "genus proximus". Man has the intuition of the angel whenever he feels assisted, supported, "inspired" in his enterprises. The angels relativise man's loneliness as they relativise God's loneliness. They are, by definition companions, beings that are near to us. If this is how things stand, the spirit of the biblical text — if not its letter — allows us to believe that the famous "Thou shalt love thy neighbour" can mean more than "love the man who is near you". The angel, too, is our neighbour; not our next-door neighbour but the neighbour above. "Love thy neighbour" can be from the point of view of angelology, an exhortation to love your angel, to deepen the mystery of his proximity until it fuses into the proximity of God.

V. Angelology represents a solution not only to the crisis of proximity, but also to the *crisis of the interval*. The angels convert the `abyss' between God and man into a space of *communication*. They give consistency and life to this space, conveying to man the signs of God and to God the prayers of men. The Greek word *angelos*, like the Hebrew one (*malakh*) or the Arab (*malak*) or the Persian (*fereshteh*), means "messenger". Before defining itself through its essence, the angel defines itself through *its function* ("angelus enim officii nomen est, non natura" — says Augustine). And the angel's function is precisely to constantly cover, through a double motion, *the interval* between heaven and earth. It is the Old-Testament vision of Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28,12): "And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold

the angels of God ascending and descending on it." This intense "traffic" that the angels — as intermediary beings — keep up between the demiurgic center of the world and the concentric spheres of the created universe abolishes the static confrontation of extremes, ensuring, on the one hand, the possibility of man's unitive ascension towards God and, on the other hand, the possibility of God's descent — through revelation — towards man. The solution of Incarnation, of God become man, is only the heroic, exceptional variant of the same "procedure". Taking a human face — in Jesus Christ — God annuls the distance between Him and his creature through a massive, unrepeatable decision, befitting the gravity of human sin. But the "everyday life" of the angels, their ascent and descent on Jacob's ladder, is a way of anticipating the *event* of the Incarnation, a way to prepare and maintain it constantly *in actu*.

The ontological legitimacy and necessity of intermediary beings is far from being a strictly Christian intuition. Essential fragments from Plato — to give only one famous example — unequivocally illustrates it. In *Symposium* (202e) "a register of the spirit" (*to (5az,u6viov)*) is evoked, situated between (*icezav*) the divine and the mortal. The role of this intermediary register is that of "interpreting and transporting human things to the gods and divine things to men; entreaties and sacrifices from below, and ordinances and requitals from above".

VI. Characteristic for the type of space in which "the activity" of angels goes on are *differentiation* and *hierarchy*. The interval between God and man is neither void nor homogenous or schematic. Angelology can be, to a certain extent, a *sociology of heaven*. The angelic hosts are divided according to rank and capacity. There is a real "division of labour", according to which some are allotted the control over the human individual, others over peoples, great communities, or whole ages. There are, among angels, spirits of the place and spirits of the time, spirits of the elements — air, earth, fire, water — of heavenly bodies (sometimes there is a tendency towards the identification of angelic hierarchies with planetary spheres). or of meteorological phenomena (rain, wind, clouds, etc.). There are angels of the sea, of life, of death, of mercy, of forgiveness, of punishment, of peace. In late Judaism the fact that "everything that exists and happens in nature has its angel" is a self-understood truth. It will be taken up again by the Fathers of the Church and by scholastic theology, as an echo of the "all is full of gods" of the Milesians. A shi'ite thinker of the 19th century (the Shaikh Haff Mohammad Karim-Khan Kermani) considers that the angel is "the essential reality of anything existent at the height of its existence". Consequently, we can speak of the angel of a landscape, of a work of art, of a symphony, etc. So, a *maximal differentiation*, a differentiation equiv-

aient — at the level of subtle worlds — with the differentiation of the sensible world. But, as we were saying, there is not only differentiation, but also hierarchy. The angels are organised according to a principle of strict subordination, according to their proximity to, or distance from, God. Dionysius Areopagita's hierarchy of nine steps is universally accepted, starting with the highest hosts of the Seraphims, the Cherubims and the Thrones, continuing with the middle hosts of the Dominions, Virtues and Powers, and finishing with the hosts nearest to man: Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. Heavenly hierarchies, which sometimes borrow the style of imperial courts, are, anyway, the pattern for the ecclesiastic hierarchies. The angelic world does not lack a certain "parliamentary" nuance. Great authors of Patristics (Clemens of Alexandria, for instance, or Origenes) — continuing Judaic and Greek traditions — speak of "left" and "right" angels, adequately administrating the souls of the deceased. The "right" angels concern themselves with the souls of those who managed to repent, the "left" angels with irredeemable sinners.

VII. The hierarchic structure of angelic hosts implies the hierarchic structure of the interval they populate. There is, in other words, an *ontology of the interval*, a "gradation" immediately suggested by the image of the *ladder* in Jacob's vision. Between God and man there are different ontological *steps*, "heavens", "densities", just as between man and anorganic matter there are intermediary realms. The higher realms of man are the symmetric correspondents of the realms which are inferior to him: there are as many heavens as there are earths. We are confronted with a geometry similar to that of the Mesopotamian *ziggurat*, probably the first visual representation of supraterrrestrial worlds, a kind of anticipatory, tri-dimensional replica of Jacob's ladder.

Once the ontology of the interval constituted — it is inevitable to witness the birth of a technique of covering it — the technique *to fragmentise* the distance by turning it, as we said at the beginning, into a "sequence of proximities". The angels *divide* the distance that separates us from the absolute, they reduce it to a series of plausible segments. Angels are the filters of mystical knowledge. They lead, step by step, towards the intuition of the "divine distant", they are a road to God's throne, the *method* of any theognosis. Angelology, as the discipline of the steps existing between the intelligence of created man and the truth of his Creator, is a *methodology*, maybe even the archetypal form of methodology. It establishes the stages of a road and recommends, as guides, intermediary beings who control the thresholds between the stages. Descartes only had to secularize the "method" that angelology presupposes, laying Jacob's ladder horizontally; but the theme of the steps, of successive proximities, remains funda-

mental: the third (out of the four principles) that Descartes proposes is: "conduire par ordre mes pensées, en commençant par les objets les plus simples et les plus aisés à connaître, pour monter *peu à peu, comme par degrés* jusqu'à la connaissance des plus composés."

As we can see, Descartes still talks of "ascent" (*monter peu à peu*). In fact, his research and that of the sciences which are indebted to him become more and more attached to the typically Cartesian category of "étendue". Angelology ascends towards the object of its knowledge. Descartes *advances* towards it. And in this obstinate mental *progress* he no longer needs angels. As simple hybrids, arbitrary entities consisting of elements borrowed both from God and from man, angels move, for Descartes and the modern world, into the category of the *imaginary*. The offensive of dichotomies starts. A thing is real or unreal. The imaginary is unreal. Therefore, angels do not exist and God is once more exiled into the nebulous, unapproachable territory of the maximal distance.

VIII. And in fact, if things are *either real or unreal*, if a statement is *either true or false*, if we only move between dichotomies (concrete-abstract, sensorial knowledge-intellectual knowledge, "God-heaven-eternity" on the one hand, "man-earth-mutability" on the other), then angels do not exist. Angels are, by nature, *a third term*, the *middle term*. And when one of them refused to assume this specific destiny, when Lucifer wanted to leave the condition of the interval and establish himself at its highest limits, in God's own place, the entire angelic universe collapsed. When it stops perceiving itself as an interval, as a bridge, the angel becomes demon. In other words, the luciferic deviation *par excellence* is the *polarising instinct*, the "demony" of dichotomies. The angels start to come back to life when this demony is blurred, when the "degrees" of truth comprised between true and false, the "degrees" of reality included between the real and the unreal, the different "degrees" of consistency between corporality and spirituality are taken into consideration. We come close to the angels' territory every time we speak of the *modulations of the existent*: of the possible, of the virtual, of "intensive" existences, "supraexistences", indirect, implicit, oneiric existences, etc. We come close to the angels' territory when we speak of polyvalent logics, of cognitive faculties different both from the senses and from the intellect, of events which belong neither to "myth" nor to "history" but are still events (visionary experiences, for instance).

IX. Angelology can only adapt itself to an ontological anthropological pattern of the triadic type. As a discipline of the interval, it addresses itself to the "interval" in man, to his *animic* level, situated between body and mind. The human soul is a latent angel (see the image of the *soul as bird* in

the ancient world). It can be activated as a full angelic entity in so far as it defuses its other latency: the demonic latency. The crossing from potential to real angelicity is the very substance of the ascetic effort, at whose end the monk integrates himself into the metabolism of angelic life (*bios angelikôs*) and becomes, in this way, *isangelos*, like the angels. But the soul is not alone in its effort to face its own determinations. It is assisted by its "heavenly double", the perfect expression of its nature, a kind of sublime *alter ego*, that serves as a landmark and collaborator. Consequently, our inner life is a *cohabitation*, our inner existence a *co-existence*, a ceaseless dialogue between our earthly soul and its angelic "twin". Taken seriously, angelology could add to the "depth psychology" that valorizes the underground, nocturnal and, sometimes, impersonal strata of our psychic organism, a *phenomenology of heights*, taking into account the auroral, pronouncedly personalized zone of light of our soul. The study of the roots of our conscience would then be completed with an evaluation of its "nimbus". A real "psychology of heights" would be interested not only in *what motivates us* but also in *what inspires us*. Scepticism toward this perspective is not necessarily a proof of rationality, or, at least, not as long as the researcher (sceptical or not) does not go through a few treatises of angelology.

To illustrate the subtle relationship between the soul and its "guardian", its "Perfect Nature", we shall resort to three quotations from a hermetic, gnostic-Iranian text, *Ghayat-al-Hakim (The Aim of the Wise Man)*, probably written in the eighth century and known in its Latin translation as *Picatrix* (a deformation of the name Hippocrates). The text takes up several pages from a pseudo-aristotelian work claiming to contain the teachings of Aristotle to Alexander the Great. We draw attention to the fact that, in the selected quotations, "Perfect Nature" is closely related to Hermes — the winged god assimilated in some gnostic writings to the Archangel Michael.

First quotation: "The wise Socrates seems to have said: Perfect Nature is called the Philosopher's Sun, his root, his bough. I asked Hermes: How can one reach Wisdom? Hermes answered: Through Perfect Nature. I asked: What is the root of Wisdom? He answered: Perfect Nature. I asked: What is the key of Wisdom? He answered: Perfect Nature. Then I asked him: but what is Perfect Nature? He answered: It is the Angel, the heavenly Entity of the Philosopher, that accompanies his star, governs him, opens the locks of Wisdom, teaches him things that are difficult to learn, shows him — in sleep and awake — that which is right and the keys to all doors ..."

The relationship of the soul to "Perfect Nature" becomes a liturgical relationship, the substance of a cult. The second quotation is one of the prayers of this cult, addressed to the angelic hypostasis of Perfect Nature:

"I call upon all of you, oh powerful, sublime, incorporeal Angels, you who are the Wisdom of the Wise, the keenness of the clear-sighted, the knowledge of those who know. Fulfill me, show yourselves to me, bring me closer to your ranks, guide me through your wisdom, protect me through your power. Teach me to understand what I don't understand, to know what I don't know, to see what I don't see. Remove from me the burden of ignorance, forgetfulness and hardening of my heart, so that I should become like the Wise Men of old, in whose hearts dwelled wisdom, perspicacity, vigilance, discernment and understanding. You, too, dwell in my heart and do not ever part from me".

In a third fragment, the invocation to Perfect Nature is transferred upon Hermes himself, who takes over its attributes and prestige: "You are so concealed that nobody truly knows your nature and you are so subtle that you can't be defined by any particular quality; because you are masculine to masculinity and feminine to femininity; in daylight you borrow the nature of the day and in the darkness of the night the nature of the night; you surpass everything in its very nature and you take its likeness in its way of being .. .

The capacity of Perfect Nature to intimately comply with the specific structure of its partner is the very mystery of angelic nature. The "adaptation" of the angel to the earthly soul that it accompanies, goes as far as identification; the destiny of the two becomes one. It is, therefore, inevitable that, as soon as the problematic of the soul pales or degenerates, the problematic of angelology pales as well. But the soul with all the train of intermediary faculties that it presupposes (affectivity, intuition, imagination, etc.) appears, in the *Weltanschauung* of modern Europe like a discredited instance; it is either forgotten (to such an extent that C. G. Jung declared modern psychology to be a *psychology without psyche*), or assimilated to a vague sentimentalism, situated somewhere between romantic emotivity and hallucinatory deviation. The "polarising instinct", the obsession with binary simplifications have finished by putting between brackets the existence of the soul. This "resystematisation" of the traditional anthropological pattern occurred even within the territory of *official* Christian theology, achieving councillor dignity. As we know, in the apostolic period, one spoke of the *threefold* nature of man. It seemed a matter of course — and each one could experience this implication by a minimal introspection — that we are built from three neatly differentiated elements: body, soul, spirit (or will, affect, intelligence). The Pauline Epistles still maintain as valid this trichotomic image, which is, furthermore, perfectly consistent with the trinitary thinking of Christian Dogmatics. Created in the image and after the likeness of a trinitarian God, man can *only* be, in his turn, trinitary. And yet duality has won. It was

simpler to say that the human "recipe" is binary: a visible part (the body) and an invisible one (in which soul and spirit are fused into an indistinct unity), rather than linger in its trichotomic variant. Such a "simplification" was proclaimed obligatory by the second Council of Constantinople (869 A.D.). From this date on, man has been considered — in the Christian area at least — as an aggregate of diametrically opposed components, between which there is no longer a balancing function. And, in the same way in which the soul is absorbed into the spirit, leaving the interval in which it usually moved empty, the angels seem to be absorbed into the homogeneity of the divine, leaving Jacob's ladder unused. The dynamics of Jacob's ladder is occulted when the cognitive energy of the the soul goes out, because the faculty that normally mediates our access to the heavenly hierarchies is a faculty of the soul: *the imagination*. The term is, however, — like the soul — exposed to old and persistent semantic misunderstandings, which we cannot hope to clarify now. We shall only briefly enumerate some strictly necessary particularities.

C. The topography of the angelic world

X. From Plato to Sartre, we are offered a very rich *analytics of imagination* which, instead of consolidating the outlines of the term, relativised them. Imagination appeared either as simple "fantasy", opposed to reason and common sense (Descartes), or as a combinatory capacity, with no creative force (Diderot), or, on the contrary, as a true "queen of the faculties" (Baudelaire). But one thing was understood from the very beginning, namely, that there is a degraded form of imagination, the imagination that invents arbitrary forms, "phantasmagorias", "whims", and a noble form of imagination, the imagination that produces consistent quasi-autonomous worlds, the imagination that captures and describes the "image" aspect of the real, its zone of virtuality. Voltaire differentiated between *l'imagination passive*, understood as pure invention and the creative *imagination active*. It is Coleridge's famous distinction between illusive *fancy* and legitimate *imagination*. In the Byzantine world we owe to Gregory Palama (j' 1359) a series of reflections of the highest importance for this matter.

To an imagination of the "human" type, dependent on the conformity of soul and body (and thus physiologically determined), he opposed a type of imagination that he calls "divine", freed from the imprint of corporality, oriented towards *establishing* new "levels" of the real and not towards its artificial eludation. Jung rediscovers "divine imagination" in some alchemical treatises (see his *Psychologie and Alchemie*) that define it as a

"subtle body of the soul", *astrum in homine*; what is meant is, consequently, a "heavenly" gift similar in nature to the creative gift of God and, therefore, infinitely more "productive" than the strictly human fantasy. This is probably what Borges had in mind when, in the preface to his "text-book" of phantastic zoology, he admits that, however spectacular "artistic imagination" might be, it cannot compete with the imagination that expresses itself in the very forms of the real: real animals are more numerous and more strange than those of fiction. Neoplatonism, either in its Renaissance variant (with echos that can be perceived far into the XIXth century, in the Romantics) or in its Islamic variants (in Avicenna and Ibn Arabi) offers us the subtlest commentaries on the theme of "divine" imagination understood — as Alexandre Koyré puts it — as "a magic intermediary between thought and being", as an "embodiment of thought into image and the implantation of the image into the being". It is obvious that we are far from the common acceptance of "fantasy". Fantasy (*Die Phantasey*) — in the terms of Paracelsus — "ist nicht *Imaginatio*, sondern ein Eckstein der Narren". Imagination, *imaginatio vera*, is the royal way of access to a part of the real that is neither that of the concrete particular (the sensitive world) nor that of the logical universal (ideatic world) but of a metaphysical universal, consisting of "images", that is, of forms which, without being "abstract", are nevertheless incorporeal. *Imaginatio vera* is "thinking in images", the capacity to visualize trans-visual realities, to incorporate the spirit. When Giordano Bruno declares that "to understand is to speculate' with images" (*intelligere est phantasmata speculari*) — he must have in mind a faculty of this type, indispensable in order to apprehend the reality of the spirit, to understand, for instance, the world of symbols, of mystical epic poems, of hermetic literature in general (The Cycle of the Grail, of the *Nibelungen*, *Chymische Hochzeit* of Johann Valentin Andreae, *Le Roman de la Rose*, Raymundus Lullus' texts, etc.). Grasping the *specific* of this form of imagination, the difference that separates it from common fantasy is to grasp the difference between the texts invoked above and the common novel or, on another plane, the difference between allegory and symbol. Not to distinguish between "human" and "divine" imagination means to see only a difference of degree between Balzac's *Comédie humaine* and the *Bible*. It is what Henry Corbin somewhere calls "hermeneutic deafness", a way of not having an "ear" for a rigorously delimited category of texts. And since we mention Corbin we have to say that we owe him the essential in our effort to define *imaginatio vera*. In an attempt to clarify things, he put into circulation a concept — the concept of the "imaginal" (distinct from the "imaginary") — decisive, from our point of view, for the understanding of any mystical discourse. It is not a purely terminological invention, but a Latin transfer from an Arab expression

that constitutes the key to Persian Platonism, represented between the XIth and the XVIth century by some great thinkers like Sohrawardî or Moll Sadrâ. The Arabic expression is *âlam al-mithâl* (or *âlam al-khayâl*) and Corbin's Latin one is *mundus imaginalis*.

XI. *Mundus imaginalis* is the intermediary world between the world of bodies (of material existences) and the world of pure intellect, of spiritual existences. It is the *world of the soul*, a world in which the spirit and the body mingle, a world of images, imaginal, but, like the worlds that flank it, not imaginary. It is in this world that "visions", revelations, theophanies of all sorts and the posthumous resurrection of the soul occur. Into this world, where there is no space and where time is reversible, the Absolute descends as far down as it is necessary to show itself to his creatures. It is the world where spirits acquire density and densities become *diaphanous* (the Cambridge Platonist Henry More spoke — in the XVIIth century — about *spissitudo spiritualis* [spiritual density], Oetinger, the XIXth century disciple of Böhme and Swedenborg, invoked the same intermediary universe with the term *Geistleiblichkeit* [*caro spiritualis*], and Swedenborg himself claimed to have gathered "his informations" from a world of "real appearances" — *apparentiae reales*). This is the *world of the angels*. Is it an "objective" world?

1) No, if objective means "localized". "One can't say *where* this imaginal world is — mentions Corbin. The one who *has seen* it cannot *show* it to others. That is why it is also called the territory of *no-where* (Pers. *Nd-koja abad*), since you cannot find your bearings towards it by referring to the coordinates of the geographical or astronomical world."

2) *Mundus imaginalis* is not an "objective" world if objectivity presupposes "autonomous exteriority". *Mundus imaginalis* is at the borderline that separates exteriority from interiority. In order to manifest itself, it needs the contribution of the *imaginatio vera*, the "activation" of an inner faculty, specially constituted for its perception. Without the intervention of this faculty, the imaginal world is a simple virtual existence like the outside world for a blind man.

Is, then, the world of the angels, the imaginal world, a subjective world?

1) No, if "subjective" means "invented", "imaginary", valid only within the limits of a solitary delirium. *Imaginatio vera* is not an *Einbildungskraft*, a species of inner inventivity; it is rather a *Vorstellungskraft*, a capacity to transform the invisible into visible, to *pro pose* revealing images to the spirit. *Imaginatio vera* is not a *faculty without object*, a simple overstimulation of individual fantasy. In the contrary, in the same way in which physical senses have an object (the sensible world) and the intellect has an object (the world of ideas), *imaginatio vera* finds its object in the *mundus*

imaginalis. *Mundus imaginalis*, as the place of appearance of the imaginal forms, has an unquestionable ontological consistency and offers itself as such to a specific modality of knowledge: imaginative knowledge, with its characteristic instrument: *imaginal perception*.

2) The world of angels is not subjective, if "subjective" means strictly "psychological". *Mundus imaginalis* is not an "accident" of inner life, a psychic phenomenon. "The vision" a prophet has, is, of course, *his* vision. But *all* prophets meet in *a common space of vision* and, if they talk among themselves, they know they talk about the same thing. The common space of vision is, thus, *not* subjective but *inter-subjective* and, in fact, trans-subjective.

The closest visual analogy for *mundus imaginalis* is the universe of the *mirror*. Like the forms in the mirror, the imaginal forms are an unusual mixture of evidence and ineffable. The mirror receives and reflects without incorporating. What we see in it is not part of its substance, but could not be seen without the translucency of its substance. The image in the mirror is in a different space from ours, but moves only by an extension of our movement: it comes near us when we come near it, and it ceases to exist when we cease to look at it. Everything is suspended in the *unattainable nearness* of pure visuality. He who sees himself in the mirror — says Ibn Arabi — knows that what he sees is not really his image but can't deny that, nevertheless, it is his image. He also knows that his image is neither *in* the mirror nor between the mirror and himself. What does he see then? What is this positive-negative, existent-inexistent, known-unknown in the mirror? It's "a symbolic paradox", Ibn Arabi concludes, by whose means the direction in which we have to look for the sense of any theophany is suggested to us. The relation between optics, katoptrics and angelology is identifiable in the European space, as well as in the Oriental one, whenever the mystique of the light, the problem of divine manifestations and the hierarchy of incorporeal worlds are concerned. The world of angels — *mundus imaginalis* — is like a mirror between the world of God and the world of men, reflecting both, bringing both into an unexpected contiguity. The world of angels brings together *on the same plane* "the visible and the invisible", irreconcilable distances, dichotomies.

Instead of conclusion

XII. As "a theory of proximity", angelology can open up a fertile field of investigation for today's world, a world that has not yet found its optimal place in the interval between the extremes. Obviously a certain use of reason and common sense can decide that speaking about angels, today, is

an extravagance, an attempt to revive legends. And it is a fact that, to modern man, the angel is often no more than an occasion to smile. "Der Engel im modernen Leben" — says a contemporary theologian, Johannes Wagner — "erscheint aber auch dort, wo er nicht geleugnet wird, wie einer, der sich auf dem Rückzug befindet, um einen Vergleich zu brauchen, wie einer der Ureinwohner eines Landes, etwa der Indianer Nordamerikas, die, aus ihrem Eigentum vertrieben, keine wahre Macht mehr besitzen und in Reservaten leben. Gewiß, sie leben noch, man kann mit ihnen dort verkehren, ja, man kann sehr viel von dem erzählen, was sie einstmals bedeutet haben, aber im Grunde sind sie für das Bewußtsein der Heutigen fast nur noch wie eine Fabel." How did it happen? What do we lack to recover — beyond prejudices — the interest for *mundus imaginalis*? But maybe it is not something we lack but rather something we have in excess. We have lost the simplicity of Venerable Bede who, when late for Vespers, imagined that the angels in Church were looking at each other, shaking their head discontentedly and asking: *ubi est Beda*? We are more reasonable and more mature. Balaam, who — in an Old Testament passage (Numbers, 22) accepts to pass over to the enemies of the people of Israel at the request of the Moabites and against God's word, is reasonable and mature, too. He saddles his ass and starts on his way. In order to stop him, God sends the angel three times to stand in his way. Three times Balaam's ass sees the angel and stops, while Balaam does not see him and smites his stubborn ass in vexation. Descartes, too, is reasonable and mature when he no longer accepts angelology except as forgivable religious conformism. This did not stop Leibniz from writing his monadology taking as starting point the book on angels from the *Summa* of Aquinas. One can, of course, be on Descartes' side. But my paper finds its justification in the fact that, from my point of view, it seems preferable to be on the side of Leibniz, Venerable Bede and Balaam's ass.