The Invisible Made Visible: Angels from the Vatican

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How do we make the invisible visible? How do we see, or touch, what others have made visible? Such questions can, of course, mean different things. They might be questions about how technology such as telescopes and microscopes have made visible the previously invisible things, and what (if anything) such technology leaves invisible. They might also be political questions about how previously invisible groups are made visible, and how invisible we can make ourselves to each other without ceasing to be. And there are equally important philosophical questions about whether the invisible *is*, if so what it means to *make* it visible, and whether in so doing we perfect or destroy it. Such questions are on the back burners of this essay.

But my focus is more specific. An exhibition *Angels from the Vatican. The Invisible Made Visible* has been touring the United States. These are artifacts of angels from the Vatican museum. Embattled church politicians might regard the title as oxymoronic; they would also not be surprised that it is sponsored by the Chrysler Corporation. But I think it is the sub-title rather than the title of the exhibition that raises (perhaps from the dead) many old and new questions about angels, precisely by considering angels under the rubric of "The Invisible Made Visible".[1] The exhibition, in its version at the Walters Art Gallery (Baltimore, Maryland), consists of four galleries and a lengthy balcony-corridor of about one hundred paintings, sculptures, and other artifacts ranging from a sixth century before Christ Assyrian "winged genius" to a twentieth century painting by Salvador Dali. This essay is an experiment—a verbal tour through largely non-verbal art. For the industrious, the art is available in the exhibition catalogue. Others will have to be more imaginative. But, before taking the reader through the exhibition, I need to begin by stepping back.

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I Aestheticizing Angels: A Truth in Christian Iconoclasm

Our age, perhaps more than other ages, combines deep scepticism and indifference about angels with massive production and consumption of all sorts of things under the umbrella of angels. On the one hand, while enlightened philosophers and theologians have long ceased to believe in angels, more revisionist theologians have less dismissed them than argued that a conception of angels can "continue to have its place in Christian language [because it contains 'in itself nothing impossible'] without laying on us the duty of arriving at any conclusion with regard to its truth".[2] On the other hand, while many modern theologians have been either sceptical or indifferent toward angels, many modern folk continued to believe—at least in the United States. All one has to do is go to any food store not to mention book store or television and discover all sorts of interest in the spirit-world, the world of angels of all sorts, etc. Some of this may be profound, some of it is clearly gullibility. But how do we tell the difference?

Indifference and gullibility can feed off each other, and threaten to isolate angel-art from its context. I am reminded of a cartoon I saw in the *New Yorker* a number of years ago. The scene is a stylish avenue in New York. In the foreground are a nicely dressed couple, looking at someone coming up the sidewalk toward them—a priest dressed in the garb of the Orthodox Church, from hat through cassock to modest but visible pectoral cross. As they stare at this unusual sight, one of the couple says: "Fantastic crucifix!" The joke, if it can come across in mere words, is that we can see, and not see at the same time. We can see the cross—presume it was a fantastic crucifix—and miss the significance. We might call this the "aestheticizing" of the cross. It is seeing the visible but not seeing the invisible made in it.

The cartoon is a reminder of a truth in Christian iconoclasm. Karl Barth, who has written as delightful an account of angels as any in the twentieth century, chides "playful, trifling, ornamental, or in a word childish conceptions" of angels that "have obtruded into the matter by way of Christian art, which here as elsewhere is responsible for so much that is inappropriate". Barth equally rejected less trifling depictions implying (as Rilke put it) that "[e]very angel is terrifying".[3] Why the iconoclasm?

The earliest piece of Christian art in this exhibition is the Mandylion of Edessa, a handkerchief of Christ's face from somewhere between the third and sixth century now housed in a seventeenth century reliquary (#38). This piece is uncanny not least because archaeologists tell us that we have no Christian artifacts before the late

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second or early third century. There were surely a variety of reasons and causes for the lack of early Christian art, from early Jewish Christian resistance to making the invisible God visible to (as Corby Finney suggests is more likely) the simple fact that early Christians had little property from which to make such art, or too little money to spend on it.[4] But we do have words and texts from early on, canonical and noncanonical writings. And one motive behind one kind of iconoclasm is surely a conviction that icons (images, in a broad sense, embracing paintings and sculptures, and other artifacts) distort the invisible, making the invisible into something it is really not. This much, I think, can count in favour of iconoclasm: how we *see* depends in part on how we *speak*, words make the invisible visible just as paintings and sculptures and tapestries do, the words we read on the walls next to the paintings and words heard on tape recordings provide an essential context for the artifacts we have seen.

Of course, language too is an artifact, a making visible of an invisible. A theology of the word that breaks up the paintings and statues and other artifacts we see in this Vatican exhibition always risks throwing stones from a glass house. Barth's theology of the word is, as usual, more subtle. After the iconoclastic quotes above, he goes on to approve of the angels in Grünwald's annunciation and Pauli's fresco. He is not "iconoclast", *simpliciter*. He was making theological discriminations. A consistent iconoclasm would dissent from all images, all making, in a quest for something more pure. It might delight in the visible for its own sake—a world where the emotivist "Fantastic angel!" was not a joke. But rather than take off into the thin air of the battles between Platonic Form and iconoclastic un-form, I will turn to the exhibition, having suggested a truth in iconoclasm: how we see these angels depends crucially on the language we speak, or learn to speak, about them. How so?

II The Invisible Made Visible in Words

The exhibition greets us with words before artifacts. Before we see a single artifact of angels, what first greets observers as we enter the first gallery are the words of Cardinal Charles Borromeo informing us that angels are invisible but "are endowed with human appearance because there is no other more perfect". There is also a description of the Vatican museum whence the artifacts of the exhibition came, and a summary of some members of the medieval hierarchy of angels. There are, then, words that render the invisible visible—words that make us see. How so?

As we move from these words to the artifacts of the first gallery,

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angels are almost always at centre stage. There is first an intricate painting of young John the Baptist and the extra-biblical angel Uriel (c. 1340, #70), the billowing concert of angels sketched for the Gesu in Rome (c. 1672, #2), a wood carving of a choir of angels that could rival in kitsch any late twentieth century angelic decoration (17th century, #4), an icon and some statues of Michael (#7, #93, #94). Only in Caliari's life-size painting of "The Vision of St. Helena" (c. 1580, #62), a small winged putto with back to the viewer, holding the cross Helena is being commissioned to recover, do we get a sense that angels are not at the centre of things. We may not be prepared to say of all these angels "Fantastic!" But it is hard not to say that there are fantastic images here — but images of what? What invisible has been made visible?

The second gallery does not answer this question, at least directly. Instead, it takes us into "The Origins of Angels in the Ancient World". Where do angels originate? Traditionalist Christians may well have expected a gallery of paintings of the creation of angels and angels at creation, of the fall of some angels and the posting of cherubim at the garden. Such paintings exist, and I presume they exist in abundance at the Vatican museum. And yet the words we read at the entrance to this gallery places "the origins of angels in the ancient world". What do these words move us to see, if not just more "Fantastic angels!"

Here we find the diverse and competing angel-like figures of the ancient world: the terrifying Assyrian winged being carved in stone who guards the world (883 - 859 b.c.e., #10), the delicate figures sketched on Etruscan mirrors (evocative, says the museum's accompanying words, of female sexuality)(4th century b.c.e., #11, 16, 19, 20), Greek Eros naked and winged and stringing a now-absent bow (4th century b.c.e., #12), angels on pottery from southern Italy and the funeral arts of Rome (#27 – #32). Here, as in the first gallery, angel-like creatures are at centre stage. Unlike the first gallery, the creatures on display are from other cultures, other religions (we might say). They too render the invisible visible—in diverse and conflicting ways.

I have said that these angels compete and *conflict*: the Assyrian who fiercely guards life is quite different from the statue of naked Eros, drawing bow—and each are different from the almost invisible (merely decorative?) angels on the Etruscan mirrors. I emphasize the competition and conflict for this reason. There is a temptation, having tasted of Christian angels in the first gallery and non-Christian angels in the second, to level out the world of angels, perhaps even to think that while empires and religions are only too often in conflict, angels are not. On this view there is an angelic world that spans the

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particularities of cultures and religions, a "natural" world (Catholics would say) of angels common to us all that transcends our conflicts. For example, in the exhibition catalogue, Chrysler's CEO explains his corporation's philanthropic patronage of this exhibition by claiming that "[c]ommon men, women and children everywhere have looked to [angels] for guidance and protection and to serve as their intermediary to their Supreme Being". He hopes that "this exhibition, like the angels themselves, will help lead all of us who experience it more humanely and more peacefully into the next millennium".[5] This would be, as they say, nice. And no doubt, if this was true, it would help Chrysler sell more vehicles to such pacified common men and women.

But the problem with Chrysler's theology of angels (for that is what it is) is that it thins out the angelic world to a supposed lowest common denominator. It ignores the differences and oppositions among the angels in these first two galleries. For example, do angels always offer "guidance and protection"? Not that I can see from these two galleries. There are terrifying angels, and devils. More importantly, do angels always serve as "intermediary to their Supreme Being"? Not according to the calm prose of our exhibition. The angel-like beings from Assyria, Greece, Rome, and elsewhere in the second gallery are called (in the words of the Vatican: remember we are concerned with words) divine messengers or guardians—but are said to be generally "minor deities". The implication, of course, is that they belong to a polytheistic world—not simply a diverse world (one sense of "poly-") but a world of conflicts as well.

"Fantastic angels" in this first two galleries? Perhaps. But how do they make the invisible visible? How does one proceed when there are conflicts in the angelic world?

III Plundering Egyptians, Assyrians, Greeks, Romans — and Americans

This is a complicated question. The only short answer I can think of is to raise up some *facta* about angels that remain inexplicably in the background of this exhibition. The people who has had the most influence on the New Testament angels we eventually meet in the next gallery has been the Jewish people—although there are few Old Testament scenes in this exhibition. As we prepare to enter the third gallery on angels in the birth and death and resurrection of Jesus, it is important to recall that these New Testament angels *are* the angels of Israel, come to announce Isaiah's gospel (Isaiah 40:9; 52:7; 61:1): the fulfilment of the covenant with Israel. We will see the angels at Jesus' birth and death and resurrection differently if we see them against the

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background of Israel's drama. What is "fantastic" is that the incarnation of God in the Jew Jesus fulfils the covenant with Israel. Thus, before moving into the next gallery, a reminder about Israel's angels.

Most readers will not need to be reminded of the many key scenes of strange characters is Israel's drama: the heavenly council, the serpent of Genesis, the cherubim of the garden, the angel who tells Abraham not to slay Isaac, the visions of Ezekiel and Zechariah, the seraph of Isaiah 6 and the angels of Daniel.[6] Surely at least some of these angels were taken from Israel's surrounding cultures—the cherubim perhaps from Assyria, Isaiah's seraphs from Egyptian winged cobras, and so forth. How did Israel make room for such strange creatures without coming to be dominated by them? One traditional Christian answer is that Israel "plundered" them.[7] Recall that, as Israel leaves Egypt in its exodus through the desert to the promised land, they are told to "plunder" the silver and gold and clothing of the Egyptians—gold and silver and clothing Israelites do not have, gold and silver and clothing they need (Exodus 13:35 - 36). Such "plundering" can be for good or ill. Israel uses the gold for its idolatrous calf but also to decorate its temple. At least some (perhaps all) of Israel's angelic beings are plundered from their surrounding culture and incorporated into Israel's drama. It is Israel's story that gives significance to the angels, not the reverse.

Let me explain this in another way. I have reminded you that angels appear frequently in the drama of Israel and Jesus and the early Church. But it is equally important to recall that the angels that suddenly appear are frequently not described.[8] Indeed, the diverse strange creatures in Old and New Testament are rarely if ever linked by a common story. The story of angels on which many traditional Christians were and are raised is not central to either the Bible or this exhibition. Again, the story of the creation of angels, with some falling and some not, the latter to tempt and terrify us and the former to guard and protect, is not central to the biblical drama. I am not saying that this story of angels is not true—or that the Vatican would not have had the resources to put this drama on exhibition. My point is simply that it is not central to the biblical drama, or the Vatican's exhibition. Why?

The exhibition does not tell us. My guess is this. Like Chrysler's C.E.O., Jews and Christians (as well as Muslims) have been constantly tempted to make the story of angels into a world of its own, an invisible world too often thought preferable to our visible world, as if God made us to be invisible, immaterial, unembodied, incorporeal. Much Jewish literature on angels is "pseudepigraphal", intertestamental—and much Christian literature is in what is called "apocryphal" literature. It is in

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such "noncanonical literature" that we find more sustained discussion of angels and angelic hierarchies—more sustained than we find in the biblical canon of either Jews or Christians. It is out of such literature that many of the legends about angels that delight and terrify have been constructed.[9]

I am not suggesting that there is not much of value in noncanonical literature to be plundered. The first painting in this exhibition, I would remind you, is not from the Jewish or Christian Scriptures but from the Proto-Gospel of Saint James (#70) —the picture of young John the Baptist and the angel Uriel. And there are other such portraits in this exhibition. But I would suggest that the Vatican exhibition (like the biblical drama) aims less to offer us a drama of the angelic world than to plunder that angelic world for a larger story. This needs emphasis. Far from being a decorative display of "Fantastic angels! ", the Vatican exhibition aims to plunder our culture's scepticism of as well as fascination with angels. It aims to take them captive into a larger narrative that makes sense of them rather than the opposite. That story is the rest of our galleries, at least until we arrive at angels in the modern world. How so?

IV Angels as Figures of the Incarnation

If Christian and non-Christian angels are at centre stage in the first two galleries, then it seems to me that they are made visible only in relation to a larger story in subsequent galleries, beginning with angels in the story of Jesus. Thomas Aquinas, the medieval theologian sometimes called "the angelic doctor" for his intricate treatment of angels, says that angels take on bodies in Israel's story "to signify [*figurale indicium*] the future assumption of a human body by the Word of God".[10] The Jesus who makes the invisible visible (the Word become flesh, the authentic image of God among us) brings in his wake the entire visible and invisible world. The angels of the biblical drama are the invisible made visible, as are the artifacts exhibited here. But they are figures of the invisible God making the invisible life he has promised visible to us in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. Angels are plundered for this purpose.

I restrict myself to one comment on the two rooms devoted to this plundering. These rooms deal with angels in the birth and death and resurrection and return of Jesus. It is probably important that so many of the paintings here centre on the passion and death of Jesus. The exhibition forces us to follow angels not simply in good times but in bad, not simply in health and life but in sickness and death. These angels console in the face of suffering and death—and they sometimes

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cry, and lament. One of my favourite angels covers her face in tears above the cross of Jesus in Bonaiuto's "Crucifixion with Mary, Saint John the Evangelist, and a Dominican Friar" (c. 1370 – 77, #41). I am reminded of the Islamic *hadith* in which God Most High shows the Angel of Death to the other angels, and "they fell down in a faint for a thousand years", no one except God Most High being Lord of death.[11] But these angels in these paintings, unlike so many angels in our culture, cannot make such things right. They cannot remove the deepest forms of passion and death that we all will know. They do sometimes plead for us in these paintings. The most striking portrait on this score is Scarsella's "The Virgin and Angels imploring Christ not to punish lust, avarice, and pride" (c. 1550 – 1620, # 97), as if Christ would need to be implored. But even when they plead for us, they cannot die for us. It is the story of Jesus told in these paintings that makes sense of the story of angels, not the reverse.

V Angels in the lives of Mary and the Church

The angels in the life of Mary and the Christian community are another way that angels are plundered. It is the drama of people, human beings, that give significance to angels as the angel announces the birth of Mary to Joachim and Anne, as another angel hails Mary with news that she will bear "the Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:32), or still other angels gather at her "dormition", or join her in the kingdom of heaven.[12] Just as some stories of angels are not in the bible, so some stories of Mary are apocryphal, particularly stories of her birth and dormition and assumption. Much could be said about this Maria drama (as Balthasar calls it), but my point here is that this gallery is about angels in the life of Mary, not Mary in the life of angels. Angels are plundered, made into characters in a story other than their own. It is, for the purposes of this exhibition, more important to see the story of Mary's life, from beginning to end (birth to resurrection), than to learn the comparable story of angels. It is, we might say, higher in the hierarchy of narratives.

Something similar can be said about the Angels in the life of the community that line the balcony hallway. There are here renditions of the appearance of angels in the lives of individual Christians like Fra Angelico's Francis receiving the Stigmata (c. 1440, #66), or St. Catherine of Sienna (#63), or St. Bridget (#64), or Reni's "Saint Matthew and the Angel" (1635 – 40, #58)—the last, judging from the museum store's collection of angelica, among the most popular of the items on exhibition. But the words "angels in the life of the community" re-shape these individual encounters into encounters

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within a community. The culture's angel-cult too frequently treats angels as consolers of individuals—as if the mission of angels is "to fulfil our individual wants and needs as we perceive them".[13] The exhibition appropriates these individual encounters --including our individual guardian angels—into the story of a community. The invisible becomes visible in and for a community.

This communal setting is perhaps the point to be reminded of the modesty of Christian teachings about angels, precisely insofar as they are teachings of the Church and not simply the speculations of theologians or the general populace. In the Nicene creed we pray that "We believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth, of all things invisible and visible . . . ", a remarkably humble confession compared to the rich world displayed in this art.[14] The creed is also modest in comparison to Dionysius' or Gregory's or Aquinas' theology of angelic hierarchies, or the "animisms" of some popular religions. What is crucial for the creeds is that God is maker of the invisible and visible—that God is maker of both, that both are distinct yet related. But there are no detailed teachings about *how* visible and invisible are related, about *how* the visible is (to return to our central issue) made from the invisible. It is precisely the relative thinness of Christian teaching about angels that leaves room for the abundance of artistic visible renderings of the invisible—and that calls them into check, reminding Christians how little we really know of such strangers.

My favourite of the communal encounters is the first one in the hall: Fra Angelico's "Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata" (c. 1440). The now-invisible wounds of Christ are made visible for a time in Francis, as he kneels in his beloved nature amidst rocks and plants and sky. But the singular curiosity here is that the stigmata are given as rays from a Jesus Christ who, a small figure in the right corner of the painting, is wrapped in a seeming robe, bright seraphic red with wings. The catalogue accurately describes this as "Christ in the form of an angel", like the fiery angel of Isaiah 5:6 (#66, p. 221). Here it is Christ who makes invisible seraphs visible—as, perhaps, it is Christ the Lord who makes visible the falcon in Hopkins' "The Windhover".[15] Jesus identifies this angel in the life of one member of the community rather than the reverse.

VI Liturgical Utensils, in God's Service

"Angels and the Liturgy" may seem the least impressive, until the liturgy of the word shows the way. That is, here gold and silver seem to dominate function, and the intricacy of angelic statuary threatens to

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create its own drama. The beautiful reliquary of St. Francis Xavier presided over by angels (20th century, #68); the angels supporting a monstrance with the liver of Saint Gregory Barbarigo (1762 a.d., #69), the dazzling silver monstrance supported by gilded shocks of grain and angels (1750 a.d., #81), chalices and croziers and crucifixes and candelabras decorated with angels (#82 – #90), and some particularly homely nineteenth century vestments woven with angels (#91)—all these might make one think that here the visible has frozen the invisible. A beautiful tempera on wood by Raphael with angels on both sides of a figure of Faith—a woman delicately elevating, in one hand, chalice with host—is a striking piece of joy (and perhaps even humour) in the midst of all this liturgical seriousness. But, in general, these luxurious liturgical instruments might even make one sympathetic to Lessing's contrast of statuary and drama as virtually incompatible art forms.[16]

But at this point, perhaps above all, we need words lest we remain satisfied with the mere exclamation, "Fantastic reliquary (or monstrance or chalice or vestments or woman eucharistic minister!)". What the exhibition calls "the liturgy" is the full range of the Christian community's worship, especially the Catholic sacraments. At the centre of this liturgy is the Eucharist. It is crucial (I think) to have noticed how much of the art we see in this and previous galleries was made for churches and their altars. It is even more important to remember the role of the angels in the Eucharistic prayer. This role is clearest in the Greek Orthodox Liturgy of John Chrysostom. Here God is blessed, called upon in the second person as "ineffable, beyond comprehension, *invisible*, beyond understanding"—the God who is other than us and our world, the one than whom a greater cannot be conceived. This God who is other (transcendent, theologians sometimes say) brings us into being and raises us when we fall (says Chrysostom's prayer)—raises us to communion with himself. But the God who is transcendent other is also the God who is with us as immanent gift for whom we give thanks, for that is what "eucharist" means: thanks. The God who is other than us and our world is and works in us and our world, the invisible made visible.

But we are thankful (again, says this eucharistic prayer) to a God who is "surrounded by thousands of Archangels and tens of thousands of Angels, by the Cherubim and Seraphim, six-winged, many-eyed, soaring with their songs, singing the victory hymn, proclaiming, crying out, and saying: Holy, holy, holy Lord Sabaoth, heaven and earth are filled with your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna to God in the highest." It is "together

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with these blessed powers" that the congregation prays the Sanctus of Isaiah 6. Note how, in Chrysostom's prayer, the soaring of angels is identified with their singing their songs—music as the rendering visible of our invisible voices. Singing is also what angels do. Recall how often angels are singing in these artifacts, from the angel choir I mentioned in the first gallery to those angelic armies (they form a strange military) who sing of peace in Luke 2:14: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours". Singing also makes visible the invisible.

But pursuing the visibility of song that needs to be *heard* as we *see* these angels in the liturgy would take me too far from this particular exhibition. I have gone on this excursus through the Eucharistic prayer to remind us that these liturgical vessels, whether beautifully fantastic or all too sumptuous or homely, have a context of liturgical prayer said and sung—a reminder that invisible angels are at the service not of us and our world (not even of Mary and the Christian community) but of the invisible God, compared to whom (as Aquinas says) angels *are* visible, material, and bodily.[17] Here we finally learn that the invisibility of angels is an image of God's invisibility, their visibility an image of God's dwelling among us in the flesh of Israel and Jesus, of eucharistic bread and the relics of martyrs, along with Mary and the church, and all the nations.

VII Angels in a World Modern, or Postmodern?

Where does this leave us by exhibition's end? The exhibition ends with Angels in the Modern World, a handful of paintings and a sculpture that—well, that does what? I began with a claim that our battle between scepticism or indifference and unremitting production and consumption of angels places us in the position of the couple who saw a "Fantastic crucifix!" I suggested that this can help us understand iconoclasms that would say that all these visible artifacts mis-make, distort the invisible. I have been proposing that the remedy is to learn to see angels in the context of a story larger than themselves—the story of the Israelites Jesus and Mary and the Christian community, especially at divine service (*Gottesdienst*). As Israel plundered the strange creatures of her surrounding culture (e.g., the cherubim and seraphim), so Christians plundered ancient iconography of angels, incorporating angels into this larger story of Jesus and Mary and the community. This drama makes visible the invisibility of these artifacts, gives us a perspective from which to "see" these angels without either adoring them or breaking them.

But the last segment of the exhibition brings us from the liturgical

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heights down to earth, to "Angels in the Modern World". Here, as near as I can see, the drama that began with the perfection rather than destruction of the conflicting angels of the ancient world and ended with angelic liturgy seems to fall apart: Casorati's hauntingly hopeful Angel in the Night (c. 1961, #75); Modeersohn-Beck's Annunciation of one faceless figure to another (c. 1905, #79); Ciminaghi's bronze statue that sets the characters of the Annunciation in virtual motion (1967, #46); Rouault's angel over the mourning Christ calling to us "Miserere" (1939, #39); Dali's perplexing "Angelic Landscape" (1977, #80); and finally Marini's cubist "The Fall of the Angel" (1963, #6). One is (or, at least, I am) hard pressed to say where this world is headed in this exhibition. What invisible is made visible in these angels of the modern world?

The exhibition catalogue, I should say, ends differently. The modern paintings and sculpture I just mentioned are scattered throughout the catalogue rather than gathered at the end as they are in the exhibition. At the end of the catalogue itself are paintings of "Christ the Judge" (with angels variously depicted at the last judgment). The final painting of the catalogue is Carraci's "The Trinity with the Dead Christ" (c. 1590, #98), a virtually life-size dead Christ lying dead in the lap of the Father, surrounded on all sides by angels that almost burst the frame, except for a dove at the top hovering over the whole. These paintings have now been moved to the gallery on Jesus' passion and death. One can only wonder what the reasons were for the move. Surely American audiences would not have liked concluding an exhibition of fantastic angels with those creatures present but unable to raise the dead Christ.

But I wonder if the more modern conclusion of the exhibition does not make the same point as the catalogue. The words of the exhibition (inseparable, I have been suggesting, from the other artifacts that make the invisible visible) tell the observer that "in the twentieth century, artists have generally abandoned traditional representations of angelic beings." Yet angels are still portrayed for "an age when humans increasingly feel the isolation brought about by changes in modern life". We might think of Pascal's dread before an infinite cosmos, where invisibility might be metaphor for a meaningless cosmos unable to be rendered visible—meaningless no matter how far we go in inner or outer space. Or we might think of the isolation of Dostoevsky's "Underground Man," isolated and invisible, who resists being raised from the dead—refuses to be made visible after death.

What are we to make of these final artifacts? We are brought back, I suggest, to where I began. This modern world, too, is a world whose

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scepticism and gullibility over angels needs to be plundered, not to be used to create other idols but to adorn another temple. Certainly some of these final paintings do this. Casorati's Angel in the Night offers hope to this world, if we can heed the call of Rouault's angel to have mercy on the sorrowful and suffering. Marini's "The Fall of the Angel" is a cubist angel free-falling in space, seemingly changing colours as it goes—but not (yet?) damned forever.

But plundering can work both ways. If Israel can plunder Egypt, then why cannot Egypt plunder Israel? Islamic angels (whom I have largely ignored) plundered Jewish and Christian ones. We have seen the generous, corporate patron of this exhibition plunder these angels for its ends. In some ways, that is also what seems to happen in Salvador Dali's Angelic Landscape, a surrealistic scene in which almost magical spirits dance in a seemingly evening sky, a blob of unintelligible matter, wounded but not bleeding, simply lying in a corner. Here angels seem to form another world, oblivious to our own, and more visible. Dali's angels seem to me to be most akin to the thin angels on the Etruscan mirrors we saw earlier. Are they trivial decorations on a world of death and war, or are they signs of an invisible world that gives life and meaning to our own? I do not know.

The invisible made visible: I have tried to suggest why I find this a fascinating puzzle. On one level it is about how the invisible God is made visible in our world—in the people and things that lie near at hand—without ceasing to be invisible. In another way it is about how we and these artists make that world visible in word and painting and sculpture. I have tried to suggest some words—words from the biblical drama and Christian creed and eucharistic worship—that make visible some of the invisibility of this exhibit. The invisible made visible in the ancient and modern worlds is here plundered and made part of the larger story of the Word become flesh through Mary, now visible in the community and its liturgy for those with eyes to see.

1 Allen Duston, OP. and Arnold Nesselrath, *Angels from the Vatican. The Invisible Made Visible* (Alexandria, Virginia: Arts Services International, 1998). I will refer to the exhibits by their number in this catalogue. This essay was originally written for those who had seen the exhibition, although I have revised it for an audience who has not. To that first audience I emphasized the important of *words* for *seeing* the picture. To readers who have not seen, I emphasize the importance of the *seeing* the pictures in the catalogue for these *words*.

2 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. and trans. H. R. MacIntosh and J. S. Stewart (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1963 [English original T & T Clark, 1928]), paragraph 42, pp. 156–60. For the intriguing story of how Thomas Spencer Baynes's Schleiermacher-like essay on angels in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* played a role in his indictment for heresy, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame: University of

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Notre Dame Press, 1990), chapter I.

3 *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley and R. J. Ehrlich (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), volume III, part 3, p. 492.

4 Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God. The Earliest Christians on Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

5 *Angels from the Vatican*, p. 13. The letter from John Paul II (p. 7) has a quite different theology of angels.

6 For a survey and bibliography, see Duane Watson, "Angels" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, David Noel Freedman, editor-in-chief (Doubleday, 1992), volume I, pp. 248–255. See also the articles on "Cherubim" and "Element, Elemental Spirit".

7 Paul Griffiths, "Despoiling the Egyptians," manuscript. Henri de Lubac highlights the instructions for treating a captive woman in Deuteronomy 21:10–13 as filling a similar role as the story of plundering in *Medieval Exegesis*, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, and Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998 [French original 1959]), volume I, pp. 211–224

8 Bruce Marshall, "Do Angels Exist?" in *Why are We Here? Everyday Questions and the Christian Life*, eds. Ronald F. Thiemann and William C. Placher (Harrisburg, PA.: Trinity Press International, 1998), pp. 69–83

9 Are the largely invisible world of "confraternities and other associations for the purpose of honouring the angels" brought to visibility in Aidan Nichols' treatment of angels entirely immune from becoming their own world? See Aidan Nichols, OP., *Epiphany. A Theological Introduction to Catholicism* (Collegeville, MN.: Liturgical Press, 1996), pp. 382–90.

10 *Summa Theologiae* Ia. 51,2, ad 1 (Kenelm Foster, OP., ed. and trans. [London: Blackfriars, with Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1968], volume 9, p. 36). There are, of course, no questions here about angels on the heads of pins. But the sheer detail will strike the sceptical or indifferent as the equivalent of triviality. On the other hand, the detail can only be non-trivial against the background of an invisible world that needs an ontological scalpel to be rendered truly visible.

11 John MacDonald, "The Creation of Man and Angels in the Eschatological Literature" in *Islamic Studies* 3 (1964), pp. 285–308 (here, p. 303).

12 See "Angels in the Life of the Virgin" in *Angels from the Vatican*, pp. 173–199.

13 Bruce Marshall, "Do Angels Exist?", p. 77.

14 The identification of "the invisible and visible" with "the angelic and the earthly" is later than the creed, climaxing in Lateran IV in 1215 a.d. See Aquinas' discussion of traditional arguments over the incorporeality and immateriality of angels in *Summa Theologiae* Ia. 50, 1.

15 See "The Windhover. To Christ our Lord" in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner and H.H. MacKenzie, fourth ed. (Oxford University Press, 1970 [First ed. 1918]), p. 69. If the quote I mentioned from Borromeo with which the exhibition began is correct, it is hardly natural for angels to have wings, any more than it is for humans. Wings on birds or angels have many functions (not all are for flying), but the ornithography of angel wings is a topic for another time.

16 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön. An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University press, 1984 [Bobbs-Merrill English original, 1962; German original 1766]). Lessing goes so far as to say that the distinction between visible and invisible can be made in drama but not painting, "where everything is visible and visible in but one way" (p. 66).

17 *Summa theologiae* ST Ia, 50, 1, ad 1. Aquinas' main point, of course, is that "the angels might be called material and bodily as compared with God, without implying that they are so intrinsically [*in eis*]".

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