

# **A Time To Every Purpose Under Heaven**

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**A**ntinous had been born in 1551 at Ardo, a small mountain town in the far north of Italy, where in all likelihood he remained until he began to study in 1565. Apart from one particular event, to which he was to return time after time for the rest of his life, little is known about his early years. The names of his parents and native town do not figure anywhere in Antinous' writings, and, as they are otherwise characterised by a large amount of biographical detail, this early obscurity has aroused the curiosity of many readers. But if one is to attempt to understand Antinous it isn't to the inner man one must turn. For even if one succeeded in charting his inner landscape as it actually *was*, right down to the smallest fissure and groove in the massif of his character, imperceptibly shaped by the slow erosion of events, and trace the course of the flood of feelings back to their source, one would end up no wiser and the *meaning* of what was being charted would remain obscure. Even if the events and relationships of his life were to correspond exactly with a life in our own time, one that we understand and recognise, we would still come no closer to him. Antinous was, first and foremost, of his time, and to understand who he was, *that* is what must be mapped. The minimal emphasis we place on this difference is due perhaps in particular to the lasting influence of Freud, that speculative genius of the twentieth century, whose fatal confusing of culture with nature, combined with his equally fatal insistence on the external event's inner consequences, has influenced our self-understanding more than anything else, and lured us so far away from our ancestors that we believe they were like us. But our world is only one of many possible worlds, something of which the writings of Antinous and his contemporaries serve to remind us in no small measure.

The decisive event in Antinous's life occurred when he was eleven years old. Where he'd come from, we're not told, nor where he went afterwards, and the fact that the incident is surrounded by obscurity, makes each detail in his narrative stand out with unprecedented clarity. The red tinge of the earth he walks on, the green leaves of the riverside trees he's approaching, the yellow sun, the blue sky, the shimmering dragonfly that hovers for an instant in the air in front of him, before it breaks free and next moment is flying away to the trees. The fishing rod he's carrying over his shoulder, his dusty feet, his brow glistening with sweat. The way the shadows from the trees are splintered by sunbeams into small, quivering lattices of light as the wind takes hold of the boughs and gently rocks them up and down. The moss on the stones by the river's edge, the distortions of the current on the black surface, trouser legs that darken with water when he puts his feet into the water, eyes that close in rapture.

All that long Sunday he's been looking forward to this. Coming here, to this shady pool in the river, his regular spot, to fish.

After a while he gets up, pulls out a worm he's been carrying in his pocket and threads it on the hook. Even with half its body impaled, it tries to wriggle free. Its pale pink colour and the small grooves on its skin make it look a bit like a finger, he thinks, as he studies it for a moment before clasping the writhing end and impaling that on the hook as well. Then he casts it out on to the water.

When, half an hour later, he hasn't had a single bite, he walks a few hundred yards up-river to the next fishing place. But there are no bites here, either. Feeling restless he decides to hide his rod and go exploring up the valley instead. He stands a while above the rapids and stares down into the sparkling water, fascinated by how all its various movements always occur in one place, from the swelling current at the top, where the water looks as if it's flowing inside a membrane, to the roaring fall below the ledges, which almost seems to be *ploughed* into the waiting mass of water below, there to create innumerable small eddies on the surface.

The eddies are made up of water, he thinks. So why don't they flow away when the water flows away?

He chucks a stick into the river above the rapids and follows it, running down faster and faster, until it goes over the edge and disappears into the foam. When, a little while later, it comes gliding into the backwater he's there ready to pick it up. He repeats this game a couple of times, before he tires of it and continues his journey. He follows a path up the rough mountainside and halts, damp with sweat, at the summit to look out across the plain. The town he comes from, lying in shadow under the mountains on the other side, is hard to see with the bright light in his eyes. The thought that a stranger probably wouldn't have spotted it, fills him with pride, for *he* knows, *he* sees. For a while he amuses himself pointing out various houses and places to the stranger, who's just as amazed each time, is that a *house*, you say? Who would have thought it? It looks just like part of the mountain! Then he turns and gazes down at the forest in the valley on the other side. Dark green and dense it lies, ringed by mountains, as if in a crater. There are tales told about this forest, but now, highlighted here and there by clearings, meadows and small, glittering lakes, it doesn't seem the least threatening, and without giving it a second thought he carries on down the path.

When he gets into the valley he's struck by how silent it is. The air is quite stagnant between the trees, as if exhausted by the heat. The shade beneath the treetops is scaled by shafts of light, filled in places by small pockets of swarming insects. There is the scent of resin, dry pine needles, warm earth. The water in the stream he's following is greenish-black in the gloom beneath the great conifers, blue and sparkling where the sky opens up above it, shiny white and frothing in the terrace-like falls leading to the little lake in the middle of the valley. Full of adventure he runs this way and that and, completely impervious to the approach of evening, moves ever deeper into the valley. He sees a wasps' nest under a branch, he sees a meadow filled with butterflies, he sees a dead cow in a ditch, and the disgusting stink that emerges when he finally manages to push a stick into its rotting belly, almost makes him sick. He sees a dried snakeskin in some scree, he sees a cherry tree in full bloom, he sees a hare bound past him in the grass only a few yards away, and as the sun goes down, he's lying on his stomach in front of a huge anthill studying the strange life going on there. He doesn't notice that the sun's rays are moving higher and higher up the mountainsides, and that the valley around him is gradually filling with darkness. Nor does he register that the birds have stopped singing, or that the constant hum of insects gradually decreases. He is watching the workers marching in long lines with their small loads of organic material on their backs, pine needles, pieces of leaf, blades of grass or bits of dead insect they have come across on their journey, and the posted sentries which constantly go up to the lines of ants and sniff them, like dogs, and occasionally raise themselves up and gesticulate with their forelegs, at which the alien ant, having perhaps believed that its identity was a well-kept secret in the throng, rushes off and disappears into the undergrowth.

After a while he takes a twig and pokes it gingerly into the anthill, curious to see the chaos this causes, the furious concentration of thin legs and chubby bodies as the ants come streaming up from all directions. At the same time he finds it repulsive, he doesn't really want to destroy their work, but there is something almost magical about being able to

influence a chain of events in this way, and he's not really *ruining* their anthill, is he? They're so hard working, they'll soon have it mended again.

He pokes the stick into the other side of the anthill, keen to see how they will rise to the challenge. A new wave of ants pours out, while the first ones, certain that the danger is now past, have already set about repairing the damage he's just caused. For a time he switches between them, enjoying seeing how quickly they switch from attack to defence, until without giving it a thought he thrusts the stick into the anthill as hard as he can and starts wiggling it around. The way the porous mixture of earth, pine needles and twigs yields to his movements, gives him a strangely satisfying feeling. And as parts of the anthill have already fallen in, he may as well continue, he thinks. At the same time he begins to despise what he's doing. But in a strange way, it's precisely this disgust that causes him to carry on. He knows just how strong his remorse will be when it's over, and he wants to put that moment off for as long as possible, while his despair at what he's doing creates a kind of fury within him. He begins to kick at the anthill, more and more wildly, not stopping until it has collapsed completely and the ground around him is dark with crawling ants. Then he throws down his stick and hurries away.

Even though dusk is dimming everything he sees, and great sails of darkness have lapped up some places entirely, he still doesn't think about how late it is. He only wants to put as many yards and as much time between him and his crime as possible. *What have I done*, he thinks, *what have I done, what have I done*.

Only when the path he is following enters a meadow he can't remember seeing before does the seriousness of the situation dawn on him. Soon it will be completely dark. And not only is he several miles from home, he is also well off the track that leads there.

For a long time he stands motionless on the forest brow looking across the meadow. The summit of the dark mountain behind it shows clearly against the inky blue sky, where the moon, which all day long has floated pale and ghostly above the horizon, has now appeared. He can see the shadows thrown on the mountains, the luminous plateaux.

It's as if it's moving towards him, he thinks. As if it's gliding in from space like a ship from the sea.

Suddenly he shivers: there's a rustling noise in the undergrowth near by. The sound moves quickly away over the forest floor, but when it stops it isn't replaced by silence, as he's unconsciously been anticipating; quite the contrary, it opens the way to a host of other small sounds. A twig cracks here, a bush rustles there, somewhere in the distance an owl hoots. Then, with a sigh, the wind rises in the valley and the branches of the trees behind him begin to sway. He thinks that they're like blind people grasping at something. Or the dead waking to life. He imagines how their shadows float unseen through the darkness about him. But if he stays quite still, he thinks, perhaps nothing will notice he's there. No wild beasts, no evil spirits, no dead souls... At the same time he's itching to get away from the place. It won't be long before the darkness is total, and if he's not out of the forest by then, he'll never find the way home.

He steels himself several times, thinking *now I'll run*, but each time fear prevents him from putting the thought into action. Only when the owl hoots again and he hears that it has come closer, are his thoughts matched by movement. He begins to run, and he runs as fast as he can, because owls are creatures of the devil, they have human eyes and birds' bodies, and hearing one so soon after what he's done, must be an omen. Perhaps more than an omen, too. Perhaps they're flying through the black treetops at this very moment searching for him. Perhaps they've just caught sight of him. Perhaps they're stooping through the darkness above him right now...

At that moment he realises that he's approaching the scene of his crime. He never wants to set eyes on that ruined anthill again, the mere thought of it fills him with desperation

and, as he doesn't dare stop either, he runs into the forest in what he thinks is a gently curving detour which will bring him back on to the path again after a few hundred yards.

Like a frightened animal he crashes through the thick undergrowth. He aims for a tree about fifty yards in front of him; when he gets to it he turns to the left and goes on another fifty yards before he begins to look out for the path. It should be about there, he thinks. Behind the tree trunk *there*. When he gets to it, he realises that it's behind the other tree trunk *there*. Provided he hasn't crossed it without noticing?

No, not a chance!

But when it's not there either, a little shadow of doubt enters his mind. He halts and leans against a tree to catch his breath while he stares into the darkness in front of him. Could he have run too far? Could it be in the forest higher up?

Then he understands. Of course, the path has turned! That's why he hasn't found it yet. It's just a matter of keeping on, he thinks, glancing up for a moment at the sky where darkness is just about to extinguish the last remnants of blue. Then he starts running again. This time he runs several hundred yards before doubt again gets the upper hand. There is no path here. He must have run the wrong way. The path is in the other direction, he thinks, and begins to run back in the direction he's come from. Now he can barely see his hand in front of his face. He stumbles, gets to his feet, stumbles again. The thought that he's got himself lost is so awful that he pushes it away by giving himself small encouragements each time it surfaces. He thinks constantly that he can recognise formations in the landscape about him. That toppled tree, this moss-grown rock face, that bit of bog. Even when these signs turn out not to fit, he refuses to make any concession to doubt, provided he keeps straight on, he thinks, he must eventually come to the path or the mountainside. He strays into a thicket of thorns, one cheek and the backs of both hands get scratched, but he doesn't notice, he's going to find the path, it's somewhere close by, he knows it is. Behind that rise there, perhaps, he thinks, but it isn't there, nor behind the next rise either...

Finally, he can't run any further, and the fear, which during the past half hour has drifted about within him on its own, shut in behind the hammering heart and furious panting, can once again connect with its source. Even the smallest sound strikes him like a stone and spreads its unchecked ripples of anxiety when it touches bottom. *If only I hadn't destroyed that anthill*, he thinks.

In the pale moonlight the shadows around him have formed themselves into figures. He can see them clearly, they stand in huddles under the trees and watch him, and when they whisper to each other, it's his name they're whispering. *Antinous*, they whisper. *Antinous*.

Without taking his eyes off them he stops, clasps his hands and begins to pray.

*Our Father, who art in heaven.*

A sigh passes through the figures in the forest around him.

*This evening I destroyed an anthill. But I didn't mean to. I don't know why I did it. It was a sin and I repent. Please forgive me.*

Are they retreating?

*Help me get out of here. Please, help me get out of here.*

Yes, they are moving away. At first he hardly dares believe it, and peers suspiciously into the gloom. But when they remain motionless, even when he takes a few steps into them, he realises they've gone.

It's just a matter of finding the path, he thinks. He can't remember which way he came from any more, and he starts walking in the direction where the trees seem to be least thick. He imagines God is directing his footsteps. Around him the forest becomes sparser and sparser until, after a few hundred yards, it opens into a clearing. And there is the ridge.

There is the ridge!

The fact that he can't see the path he descended earlier in the day, doesn't concern him in the least, because the ridge's side isn't steep and is easy to force, even in the dark. And on the other side will be the plain. Once he gets there, he'll be able to find his way to the town as easily as anything.

But when, a quarter of an hour later, he halts at the summit, it's only to discover that instead of sloping down into the plain as he'd imagined, it plunges straight into a ravine, from which another mountainside rises.

This can only mean that he's on the *other* side of the valley. That the entire forest is between him and the plain.

This time he can't hold back the tears. A sob racks him, and the stream of feelings that follow no longer meets any resistance but wells up unchecked inside him, until it fills him entirely and he throws himself weeping to the ground. His thoughts, too, dissolve and merge into the spasms. He lies there without noticing anything apart from his own despair, locked within his own darkness, and where no time exists, for when his tears subside and his breathing at last returns to its normal rhythm, he has no idea how long he's been gone.

It's as if he's slept, he thinks, and then woken up in a different place.

Totally relaxed in body he sits up and dries his eyes on his sleeve. At least he's got out of the forest! The treeless darkness up here seems purer somehow, he thinks, and decides to endure whatever lies in store for him.

The first thing he must do, is to find a safe place to sleep.

He gets to his feet and begins to walk along the ridge while inspecting the terrain in front of him. After a few minutes he catches sight of a ledge protruding a little way down the mountainside. When he clammers down to it, he finds to his joy that it forms the roof of a deep, narrow cave, which actually widens out at the back, where it almost becomes like a small room. Here he can sleep securely. But not comfortably: the ground is hard and uneven, and after trying various positions, he crawls out again to collect some conifer branches from the trees he saw growing on the mountainside below the cave opening.

It is then he makes the discovery. Some five hundred yards further down, at the end of the ravine, a small prick of light floats in the darkness. His first impulse is to hurry towards it, and he actually begins to clamber downwards, but stops after only a few yards, for who could be out at this time of night? It might be shepherds, but it could also be bandits...

Or perhaps it's people from the town searching for him?

There is only one thing children find harder to hold back than tears, and that is joy. Antinous is no exception. The odds against anyone searching for him just *here*, isn't something that crosses his mind. Nor yet the unreasonableness of doing so in such utter darkness as this. One does not argue with joy, one surrenders to it, and after his first instant of doubt he begins the steep descent into the ravine. If he were certain they were well disposed, he might have called down to them, but this he doesn't do; on the contrary he's careful to make as little noise as possible. Whenever he dislodges a stone and it begins to roll down, he stays still for a while before continuing.

The upper reaches of the slope are steep, in several places he has to search for hand- or footholds on the mountain, but on the last bit the gradient relents, and soon he's standing down by the river bank, surrounded by the noise of the waterfall, whose white curtains he can just glimpse in the darkness to his right. To the left the river cuts in behind a shoulder of rock. It is perhaps fifty feet high and hides the light completely. As he doesn't know what awaits him there, he decides to go up the slope a bit again, so as to close in on them as unnoticed as possible, whoever they are.

Although the light is hidden behind the projection, the darkness up towards the top of it is less intense, like the sky in the moment before the sun peeps over the horizon, and he can see the outline of each tree in the stunted forest around him. He thinks that perhaps his father

is sitting on the far side along with other men from the town. A pulse of joy courses through him as he imagines how happy they will be when he walks down to them from out of nowhere. But if it is them, he thinks, he ought to hear them soon. They've no reason to be quiet. Or could they have lain down to sleep?

He stops and listens. But the only thing he hears is his own heart. Worried by the silence he places each foot carefully before transferring his weight over to it as he moves on, and when he comes to the highest point of the shoulder, which is bare, he gets down on his stomach and wriggles forward. Just before he reaches the lip he stops and listens.

Nothing.

Gingerly he raises his head and looks over the edge. The sight that meets his eyes petrifies him. Two cloaked men are standing motionless on the river bank staring up at him. Quick as lightning he ducks and presses his face to the ground. Did they see him? Or was it just a noise that made them look up? He shuts his eyes and tries to make out if they're on their way up towards him. If he hears so much as a twig snap, he'll take to his heels and run away from them as fast as he can. But the silence is unbroken, and a few seconds later, when he's convinced himself that they couldn't have seen anything, blinded by their own light as they must have been, he again lifts his head above the lip.

The two figures stand as immobile as before. But now they're looking at the water in front of them. One holds a torch in his hand, the other a spear. Both wear chain mail under their cloaks and each has a sword hanging at his side. The glare from the torch encircles them and makes it look as if they're standing in a cave of light.

Slowly they begin to wade out into the river. They stop roughly in the middle, and one lowers his torch towards the water's surface as the other raises his spear to throw. The quivering light of the flame leaves their faces and the uppermost parts of their bodies in shadow. Even so, it's impossible to take one's eyes off them. In some strange way Antinous' gaze seems to meet no resistance, it's as if it vanishes into them. He looks at the deep red colour of their cloaks, enhanced by the light from the torch, he looks at the black metal of the mail and the shining silver scabbards, he looks at the lowered arm and the reflection of the fire in the water. He looks at their mysterious faces, half hidden by the dark, he looks at the small eddies round their boots, the long, narrow fingers curled around the spear, the turned wrist, and all he wants is to be in their presence. Without giving a thought to what he's doing, he gets up and begins to walk slowly down, all the time concealed by the trees and with his eyes fixed on the two figures, who display no sign of having heard him, but stand there still as ever. Half way down he notices their wings and thinks what has until then been just a vague inkling: there are two angels standing in the river. The rush of fear and happiness which this sends coursing through him is almost unendurable. Despite it, he ventures right down to a small hummock on the mountain only ten yards away from them, behind which he can hide. But he isn't able to look at them, even though he wants to, his closeness to them overwhelms him and for a long time he lies quite still with his eyes closed and his face pressed to the ground.

When the residual image of the angels has cleared from his retina, the blackness in his head is filled with the rush of the waterfall, the almost imperceptible ripple of water along the bank, his own thudding pulse. But although he tries as hard as he can, he hears not a sound from them, and little by little the desire to see them overcomes his fear.

He opens his eyes and is just about to lift his head, when there is a kind of hissing from their direction. Appalled he lies still.

Have they noticed him?

One of them takes a few steps through the water, he hears how it splashes against his feet, but then it goes quiet again, and slowly he raises his head above his cover. This time it is only with the greatest caution that he allows his gaze to close in on them. Slowly he lets it

sweep across the water's black surface, into the glare of the torch, at first only visible as a glossier texture of blackness, then lighter and lighter, until it reaches the very reflection where the water flames up yellow and orange.

Then he sits up and takes in everything in one single glance.

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

Just then the other one tilts its head back, opens its 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 Antinous presses his face into the earth once more. He wants to help them, but he can't do, he wants to be something to them, but he can't be, he wants to run away from that place, but he can't run.

Again he hears the hissing. This time it's followed by a splash, and when he looks in their direction again, one of them is just lifting the spear from the water. The fish it has impaled thrashes its tail a few times, twinkling in the light from the torch, before the angel pulls it off the point and breaks its neck.

The other one comes a few steps closer. Antinous now sees that its jaw, too, is shaking. But its expression is firm, its eyes cold and clear. The first one bites into the fish and pulls off a piece with a jerk. Then it takes the torch for the other, which grips the fish in both hands and bends its head slowly forward. It is as if the effort increases the shaking, and the first one places a supporting hand on its arm. And so, standing close together, the light flickering across their faces and the bottom of their cloaks trailing in the water, they stand eating the fish. 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 like statues standing there, for without the life of the eyes the deadness of their faces is emphasised. 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 before was loathsome in them, is now beautiful again.

The angel with the shaking hands stretches his head forward once more. Its wings, the upper part of which Antinous can just make out over its shoulders, glimmer green and black. Its neck is long and slender, its skin white as snow, and its eyes so blue that they almost seem artificial, as if made from glass or porcelain. Or perhaps it's their stillness that creates that impression. They look ahead the whole time, seemingly independent of the body's movements as it slowly and laboriously lowers its head to the trembling hands. But then, just as the mouth opens and the teeth are bared, just as it's about to bite into the soft fish, the eyes swivel to the side.

*They've seen him.*

As if dazzled by a sudden light Antinous shuts his eyes. At the same moment there's a leap in his breast. It feels as if a cord is being tightened around his heart. He tries to fill his lungs with air, but it's impossible, his heart feels even more constricted. Unable to move, he lies and breathes in small, short spasms as the angels begin to move towards him. He can't see them as the light continues to burn on his retina, but he can hear them, the water splashing over their feet with every step they take, the almost imperceptible swish of their clothes, the chinking of the rings of chain mail. And he can sense them: the coldness in the air increases as they approach.

When they stop before him, he's lying with his face to the ground. He hears their breathing, and feels the darkness that emanates from them, the icy coldness. He's never been so frightened in his life. Even so, he wants them to stay, it is as if something inside him discerns the vacuum their absence will leave, that he will long to return here, to this moment. Perhaps that's why he stretches out his hand and reaches out for them.

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**F**or some reason the cherubim, those chubby, rosy-cheeked little boys that throng the paintings of the late Renaissance and Baroque period, have stuck in our consciousness as the true image of angels. And it may not be a complete misconception, for in many ways it was during this period that the angels enjoyed their heyday. At the same time it represents a turning point in their history. Few knew it then, but their demise had already begun, and for those of us who can look at paintings of them with the benefit of hindsight, the signs are clear: there is something greedy and cosseted about them, which not even the most ingratiating pose can conceal, and here, perhaps, the hardest thing to understand is how innocence and purity, attributes they always steadfastly displayed, could so easily be turned into their diametrical opposites. But that was precisely what happened. Many will say that the angels got what they deserved, because they didn't have the sense to stop, but allowed themselves to be tempted further and further into that world they had been sent to serve, until finally they got caught up in it. It strikes me that the terrible fate they suffered isn't wholly commensurate with their sins. But that's my own view. As for the angels, it doesn't concern them now anyway. They no longer remember where they came from or who they were, concepts like dignity and solemnity have no meaning for them, all they think about is eating and reproducing.

The origin of angels is uncertain. Around AD 400 Jerome claimed that angels were around a time long before the world was created, and based this assertion on their notable absence from the story of the creation, in which angels are not mentioned at all, whereas the opposite view was taken by St Augustine who, for his part, argued that the angels *were* mentioned in the creation story, albeit indirectly, by being included in God's first command, *Let there be light!*, and so were created on the first day. This argument, expanded and refined by St Thomas Aquinas, presupposes that the relationship between angels and light isn't merely metaphorical, as we normally assume, but a complex one that sees them as approaching the identical. Light is not angels, but angels are light. Beautiful though this thought is, and much as it tells us about the angelic condition, unfortunately it doesn't hold water. Light is only one of the angels' many manifestations according to the Bible, and why should *that* be the one used to indicate when these perfect, God-favoured creatures came into existence? Are they, in their other-worldliness, impossible to describe or comprehend? If so, it seems very strange that immediately after this, in the Garden of Eden story, their name is spoken without the least reticence and that there, on the *first* occasion angels are directly alluded to in the Scriptures, their existence is so tangible and solid that they even appear equipped with swords.

So I think Jerome was right in his deduction: angels aren't mentioned in the creation story because they had long since existed by then. Whether they have *always* existed, as claimed by Antinous Bellori and others, it is clearly impossible to say. Everything about the angels is shrouded in a mist of obscurity: we don't know when they were created, we don't know where they came from, we don't know what characteristics they have, how they think or what they see when they look at us. But at the same time, all through the Bible they are endowed with a kind of familiarity, as if their existence is so ineluctable that it permits no explanation. Such ambivalence is natural, because angels' most important characteristic is that they really belong to two worlds, and always carry the one into the other. Nowhere is this clearer than in the story about the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah. There is something alien about them – as soon as Lot catches sight of them outside the city gate at dusk, he runs to

meet them and bows down in the dust at their feet – but also something homely, because immediately afterwards he invites them into his house, bakes bread and prepares a feast, which they eat. Presumably it is this familiarity that makes the author feel it's not worth the trouble to describe the situation in more detail. Here are two angels sitting eating at a kitchen table in Sodom, having been sent by God to decide the city's fate, perhaps to annihilate it, and we are told *nothing* about the atmosphere, what they look like, what they say to each other. Only the laconic statement *...and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate*. That's all. But the angels must have been sitting there a good while, at least as long as it takes to bake bread, and their presence must have made Lot nervous as he was the only person who knew their mission. I picture him standing there in front of his oven waiting for the loaves to rise, darting frequent glances at the two angels seated silently at his table, his desperation growing with each new noise outside in the street, for he knows what they are capable of, these citizens who have learnt of the presence of strangers, and who have now begun to gather in the darkness outside. The angels display a certain reluctance – at first they turn down his invitation, as they had planned to spend the night in the streets, but Lot is so insistent that they finally give in – while Lot for his part seems over-eager and chatty, his concern being to prevent them from realising what is happening outside.

At last the bread is ready. He takes the loaves out of the oven and leaves them to cool, places food and drink on the table, notes how their physical presence makes his heart pound in his breast, senses the coolness about them, but fights down these feelings, rubs his hands and exclaims merrily:

'There's nothing like a good meal!'

There is no reply. Although the biblical text simply states that they eat, I'm pretty sure they must have been very hungry and dispatched the food without any attempt to hide their greed. The precise words are *...and they ate*. The unexpected full stop brings the sentence up short. But the language is merely a vehicle, and the meaning of the language is thrown further by the momentum of its accumulated speed, across the full stop, out of the sentence and down through the lines, where, of course, it can no longer be read, only conjectured.

They eat. While one hand grasps the joint of meat their teeth are busy stripping, the other feels blindly across the table for a piece of bread or cheese, to be ready the instant the mouthful is swallowed, if it isn't already cupping the beaker of wine that Lot is careful to replenish, apparently unnoticed by them, occupied as they are in stuffing themselves with what is before them. They slurp and smack their lips, their jaws shine with fat, now and again their eyeballs roll upwards making their eyes seem white and empty. Even though the sight fills Lot with fear, he wants the meal to last, because while they are eating they don't notice their surroundings, and in the street outside people have begun to shout his name. And so he rises unobtrusively as soon as anything on the table runs short, slips into his larder and fetches more food which he places before them as discreetly as possible, trying not to draw attention to himself and shatter their trance-like state.

Perhaps things will be all right after all, he thinks. After a meal like this they'll certainly feel sleepy, and if he announces that he is going to retire for the night, they may very well be tempted to follow his example. The evening is well advanced, he realises. And he has already made up a bed for them.

These thoughts lift Lot's spirits. Then he becomes aware that the two angels are sitting looking at him. Red with embarrassment, he asks them if they've had enough to eat. They nod and thank him for the meal. It's quiet outside. Once he's cleared the table he stretches his arms above his head and yawns.

'It's late,' he says. 'Maybe it's time to think about turning in?'

The angels push back their chairs and rise. The fervour of their eating has vanished without trace and the Lord's two servants once again exude dignity and calm, and for an instant Lot imagines he's dreamt the whole thing.

'I've put you in here,' he says pointing to the room next door. 'If you'd care to follow me...'

It's going to be all right! he thinks. It's going to be all right!

Just then someone knocks loudly at the front door. Lot feigns unconcern, and continues across the room, but behind him the angels have stopped.

'What was that?' one of them asks.

'Oh, probably just a few kids,' says Lot. 'Nothing to worry about.'

Then a shout from the street penetrates the room.

*Lot!* goes the cry. *'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them.'*

There's no avoiding it. Candle in hand, he walks past the two angels and opens the door to the multitude that has gathered outside. But still he hasn't lost hope. For as it says in the Bible: *Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, 'I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly.'*

The key thing here is not the appeal he makes to his fellow citizens, but the information that he first ensures the door is closed behind him. So Lot is still trying to prevent the angels from finding out what is going on. There is something touching about this, I feel; what a desperation he must have felt to try to keep angels in ignorance with the aid of a closed door.

'Look, I've got two daughters neither of whom have lain with a man,' he says. 'Let me bring them out to you, and you can do with them as you think fit! Just leave these men alone, as they have sought shelter under the shadow of my roof!'

But they won't listen to him.

'Get out of the way!' they shout. 'Here is this man living amongst us as a stranger, and he always wants to set himself up as a judge! Things will go worse with you than with them!'

Furiously, they press in upon him and rush forward to break down the door.

Just then the angels step in. They grab Lot, haul him into the house and shut the door behind them, while at the same time striking the crowd blind so that it can't pursue them any further. It almost looks as if they're filled with wrath on Lot's behalf. Presumably their sympathy for him must have grown during course of the evening, they must have sat there smiling to themselves at his futile attempts to conceal his motives from them.

'If you have anyone here, either son-in-law or sons or daughters or any others who are connected with you in the city, you must get them away from this place!' they tell him. 'For now we shall destroy this place, because a great outcry about them has reached the Lord, and the Lord has sent us to destroy it.'

Lot does what he's told, he goes out and speaks to his sons-in-law, but he lacks credibility, they think he's joking. Then, of all things, he goes to bed, for the next thing that is written is: *When morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, 'Arise, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you be consumed in the punishment of the city.'*

When Lot hesitates, the angels take all four by the hand and lead them out of the city. Later that day the city is razed to the ground, and every living thing exterminated. Next morning, we are told, smoke is rising from the ground like the smoke from a furnace.

This is an extraordinary tale, and the angels' role in it is not easy to grasp. Traditionally, angels are the link between the divine and the human, at once messengers and the message itself. The message carried by the angel that appeared to Mary about her being with child, is

also the thing that makes her conceive. The angels are action and meaning in one. Everything they do has to be interpreted. That is why their actions are normally so large and obvious, like the gestures of actors on a stage, which again are made with the distance of the audience in mind, and for this reason their behaviour towards Lot seems so strange. Isn't he too small for them? Aren't they too close to him? Yes, one might say, but couldn't that be the whole point? That, in doing it, they want to elevate this small, upright and considerate man, as well as justifying the terrible things that follow: the only pure person is spared, everyone else is impure and deserves to be punished. And that's certainly true, seen from our perspective. But it must seem different to the angels. What we may think of them means nothing. They don't belong here, just as they don't belong in heaven; transition between the two is their element. Compassion is alien to them, they are indifferent to us and all our affairs, thus the semblance of cruelty that angels often exude.

But they showed consideration and feeling as far as Lot was concerned.

What could have been its cause?

I believe the explanation is simple. Angels can, as is well known, assume any shape. But what is less well known is that the shape they assume contains an element of danger for them, as well. If they inhabit it for too long, it will begin to affect them and finally, if they haven't heeded the warning signs, it will take them over entirely. In Sodom they appeared as human beings. Clearly the idea was to go round the city, separate sinners from non-sinners and then raze it. But Lot's intervention disturbed this chain of events. Initially they said no to his invitation, but then they must have thought: why not? A morsel to eat and a short rest can't do any harm. Once they'd entered his house, they had to sit there and wait for the bread to bake, angelic still in their silence, dignity and coolness, but slowly taking stock of their surroundings and noting everything that never usually impinges on an angel's consciousness, so that, by the time the meal was over, they had been fatally caught up in Lot's trivial existence. This frail man suddenly meant something to them, and the impulses that governed their actions became more attuned to him than to the task they had been sent to accomplish. This may explain the fury with which Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. As soon as Lot was out of sight, they came to themselves again, understood how weak they'd been, and took it out on the two cities. For they didn't just destroy all the houses and inhabitants, but also the entire plain and everything that grew in the fields; and they turned Lot's wife, who was unable to relinquish the past, not even the evil parts of it, into a pillar of salt.

A modern reader of the Bible is struck by how strong the connection between this world and the next once was. It can almost seem as if God was genuinely concerned about mankind. It took very little to get him to show himself and talk to men, or send one of his angels down to Earth to do his bidding. But these constant interventions never led to any permanent improvement. On the contrary, everything always reverted to its old ways. It seems as if all goodness and justness is the result of gargantuan efforts, which must constantly be repeated, in a continual maintenance that no human being is strong enough to manage. Even Lot, the angels' unlikely favourite, succumbed in the end. After fleeing from Sodom, he settled in the mountains above Zoar with his two daughters. Still too fearful to chance living in the city, they dwelt in a cave, and there he got both of them pregnant. True, they were living alone in the mountains after a Doomsday-like event, and may have been bewildered enough to believe that they were the last people on earth, and certainly the insemination took place at the instigation of the daughters who plied him with wine before going to bed with him, but Lot must still have been well aware of the mark he was overstepping. He wanted his daughters, and he had them. For lustful thoughts may form such a tangled web above the sky of consciousness that not a single ray of light can penetrate to the soul, whose damp and dingy seat excludes all life-forms except the very lowest; moss and fungus, beetles and maggots,

and a slimy snail or two blindly creeping about the mire. And who can be expected to do right under such conditions? For a time, perhaps, you'll manage to keep it open a chink; righteous and enlightened as you still are, but sooner or later you'll sleep, and when you awake, you'll be surrounded by darkness once again. If you have the strength, you'll fight on, if you haven't, you'll give up. The human soul is a clearing in a forest, and for the divinely pure and untarnished it must be impossible to understand why it's forever getting choked with growth. This is the struggle the Bible speaks of; the darkness that descends again and again on person after person, generation after generation, century after century, until the despair is unendurable, and the story ends in the description of the insane, apocalyptic fury that was revealed to John on Patmos: *So the four angels were released, who had been held ready for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, to kill a third of mankind.* They decapitate, burn, become a living torture, and from the bottomless pit they release swarms of poisonous locust-scorpions, which harm no grass or bush or tree, but only the people who haven't the seal of God in their foreheads. Stars fall down to earth, the sun is darkened, forests burn in great firestorms, the seas turn to blood. A huge army is sent out numbering twice ten thousand times ten thousand, and they must have been an impressive sight for John, riding on horses with lions' heads and clad in breastplates the colour of fire and sapphire and sulphur. His descriptions are so detailed that there is no reason to doubt that he has seen what he's describing, and yet there is something that grates, because since his vision in that cave on Patmos, things have happened to make the scenario he described impossible. The world will be destroyed, but not in that way. The angels have lost all the power they once had, and if they went to war with us now, we wouldn't find it hard to crush them. At that time they probably did have plans to destroy everything, and it might have happened, too, if something hadn't gone terribly wrong for them, so there is no need to lambaste John, he acted in good faith, and the fury he witnessed was at least authentic.

What the angels didn't foresee was what a success Christianity would turn out to be. At the time they revealed the apocalypse to John, Christianity was still just a small, insignificant minority religion, something like our UFO sects, and as Christians were greeted with universal suspicion, and then persecuted, tortured and killed, no-one expected them to survive. When Christianity suddenly began to spread across the world in the first centuries after the death of Christ, the angels were completely unprepared. Soul after soul in country after country was saved. And all of them extolled the angels. Poetry was written about them, pictures were painted, theses written, stories told. By the time we get to the Middle Ages, angels were part of the common consciousness. They caused conditions resembling hysteria when they revealed themselves, because their proximity proclaimed those who'd been selected to carry out God's will, perhaps to give away their wealth and dedicate their life to the poor, as in the case of Francis of Assisi, or lead the French army into battle against the English like Joan of Arc, or just flog themselves until the blood ran as the many flagellants did. Bodies were wracked with convulsions, fell into deep trances, spoke in strange tongues, exhibited sudden wounds. The angels themselves stood aloof from this monstrous physicalisation of God's word, but must have been fascinated by the way their mere presence could induce a phenomenon that was so utterly foreign to them. Fair, beautiful and pure as they were, they must have felt a growing intoxication about the adoration they received. In any case they appeared more and more often and gradually became the objects of another, and no less intense, kind of worship, in the welter of learned tracts and theses about angels that were written in the medieval period, tabulating, systematising and classifying all their various manifestational forms in a kind of angelic taxonomy, complete with kinships, species and sub-species. The Swedish theologian Lönnroth from Uppsala distinguished, for example, between material and immaterial, visible and invisible, immutable and mutable, with and without free

will; in his *On the Heavenly and Ecclesiastical Hierarchies*, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite argued that there were nine classes of angel, while Gregorius Tholosanus believed that the number was seven in keeping with the seven planets, and that the virtuous could be found above the moon and the evil beneath it. Johannes Durandus discussed whether angels had memory, or if their consciousness occupied an eternal present. Were they pure form (*creatura rationalis et spiritualis*)? Or were they, like human beings, both form and substance (*creatura corporalis et rationalis*)? Bodine and David Crusius maintained in *Theatrum naturae* and *Hermetica philosophia* respectively that they were fully and entirely corporeal. Bodine put forward the odd notion that they must be as round as balls, because this is the most perfect of all shapes, while Bochart went as far as to claim that they were actually mortal, took sustenance and had bowel movements.

In truth, the Middle Ages was the time of the angels. Can we blame them for allowing themselves to be flattered by this concerted attention? For being more and more often in the proximity of human beings, even when they had no specific business to perform there? They still radiated dignity, with their stern looks, simple robes and angular movements; their beauty still had something hard and cruel about it, not of savagery, but the opposite, of an inhuman restraint, which however deserted them when they sang – the song of angels, oh, how lovely it was! – then their features would soften, their cheeks flush, their eyes fill with tears. But it couldn't last. Throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries their sojourns with mankind got ever longer and more frequent, and at the beginning of the fifteenth century the first changes in the angels' physiognomy occurred. A painting by Francesco Botticini of that period clearly shows what has happened. Michael, Raphael and Gabriel, three of the archangels, are walking in a landscape, presumably Italian, in the company of a young boy. True to tradition, Michael is clad in armour, in his hand he holds a raised sword, and yet there is nothing mighty or awesome about him, rather the contrary: his face is soft and boyish, his cheeks a trifle fat, his hair long and well-groomed and he has chosen red shoes to go with his black armour, a matching gold-embroidered red cape and a red scabbard with a gilded point, giving the impression of a vain young nobleman rather than a victorious warrior with all the angels of heaven under his command. Certainly his gaze has retained something of its former ruthlessness, but with the rest of the figure appearing so mannered and self-obsessed, he has more of the arrogant aspect of the spoilt youth about him. Raphael's costume is violet, across his shoulders he has a gold-embroidered cape of red, fastened at his throat with a simple pearl, draped in such a way as to show the subdued green of the lining visible over his arms. Around his waist he has tied a red and black kerchief, also embroidered in gold, while his wings are decorated with green and black circles, not unlike the pattern of a peacock feather. His hips are broad, his posture feminine, his hair long and golden, his face beautiful as a lovely woman's. His small mouth is pursed, the expression filling his half-closed eyes is one of boredom and distaste. Gabriel's figure is also dressed in a dark green silk cloak, with a black, gold-embroidered collar, his wings are red in colour, and his face is turned to the viewer in an attitude that might have been challenging, had it not been for the almost demonstrative lack of interest in its expression. He knows he is being observed, he knows that he looks good, but is indifferent to it all. At the same time there is also sorrow in his eyes. It makes his expression enigmatic. Why is he looking at us like that? He must want something of us.

But what?

In the early Renaissance angels began to be portrayed with expressions similar to this, all expressing compassion for man, as if they were only then close enough to comprehend what they saw. But Gabriel's expression is different, it's introverted: it isn't us he's suffering with, but the angels. He alone has a notion where the path they're following will lead. *The angels are to be pitied*, he seems to be saying as they pass us. But the clearest sign that

something is wrong can be seen in their haloes. Whereas in Cimabue and Giotto's time they shone so brightly that now and then they seemed like discs of gold, here they are so pale that they can only be glimpsed against a dark background, like Gabriel's red wings. Against the sky they are transparent. These angels are fallen, but they are falling so slowly that they notice nothing themselves.

The fact that it would be another hundred years before these changes began to affect the angels' lives, bearing and behaviour, must either mean that they remained blind in relation to their fate, something that's hardly plausible considering the length of time involved, or that they simply hadn't faced up to the consequences of it before, but lived in the hope that this new condition would pass, rather like the way some people shut their eyes to the most serious symptoms imaginable and don't visit the doctor until the disease has got such a grip that it's no longer possible to keep the truth hidden, not even from themselves. When, after becoming an ever-commoner sight in the purlieu of certain Italian city-states during the fifteenth century, the angels slowly began to draw back during the first half of the sixteenth century, it was presumably in an attempt to resurrect the old order in which an angel's appearance was as unique and rare an event as it was awe-inspiring and important, but this was unsuccessful as man's intimacy with them had become too great. Whether through arrogance or simply a lack of vigilance, they had gone too far. In certain places angels had become such a common sight that even the aura of revelation, the icy fear and ecstatic joy the sight of them had always generated, was gradually diminished. Fathers pointed them out to their children, farmers took them for good auguries, country priests were flattered when they manifested themselves in their churches. It was as if they'd always been there. Even the glow of their fires on the mountainsides outside the towns at night, which at first had caused people such anxiety and disquiet, particularly as they'd been told that large flocks of angels sat on the ground all night long completely immobile, just staring into the flames, as if they were hypnotised or the living dead, had gradually come to mean the opposite; over the generations a belief had grown up that the angels were just watching over their town. The fact that this intimacy is reflected in only a few sources isn't at all strange because human nature takes note of the unusual rather than the commonplace, the exception rather than the rule. They had as little cause to remark on the angels' roamings across the countryside when they wrote to each other as they had to mention the flight of the birds across the sky. Apart from art, of course, where angels continued to be painted and feted. But even here their supernatural aura waned, they began, more and more, to be seen as beautiful in themselves, in just the same way as an animal or a flower or a landscape is beautiful.

When they did begin to retire, it occurred over several generations so that people didn't find the change remarkable. For the collective memory only slowly relinquishes its notions, and there the sight of angels would long remain a common phenomenon.

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In 1584, a work called *On the Nature of Angels* was printed in Venice. The author was anonymous, but there is no longer any doubt that it was Antinous Bellori, who some twenty-two years previously had had that hilltop encounter with two angels. We know that from 1565 to 1572 he did his basic studies at the university in Naples, and that subsequently he began medical studies which were to take him to Montpellier, where he studied anatomy, Padua, where he studied surgery, and Bologna, where as well as studying pharmacology and natural history he also took his doctorate, but the great familiarity with scripture and the whole of the theological canon which characterises his work bears witness to the fact that in

all these years he must have immersed himself in questions concerning the existence of angels. There are no descriptions of Antinous from this time, we know little of the sort of life he led, who he met or how he earned his living, but if one adds to the great scope of the work the portrait he paints of himself in his later notes, we can assume, with relative certainty, that he was so engrossed in himself and his own ambitions that he seldom gave other people a thought, but spent large portions of the day in his own company, bent over his books in some miserable room somewhere, completely possessed by the thought of committing his unique insight to paper and gaining recognition for it. In other words, he was convinced that truth lay outside the realm of collective knowledge, and that he, through his talent and steadfast will, would be the first to arrive at it. In this, perhaps, he more closely resembled the obsessed young men who, in the first decades of the modern age ensconced themselves in rooms in great cities all round Europe to think, nervous and tormented and constantly on the edge of breakdown, as portrayed by Dostoyevsky and Hamsun, rather than the image we have of those full-blooded, expansive, life-affirming Baroque characters, but the fact remains that it was here, in the transition between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that this particular type emerged for the first time. Giordano Bruno was one example, René Descartes, Blaise Pascal, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz and Isaac Newton others. For all of them knowledge was indissolubly linked to their individual lives, severed from the general context it had originally been won from, with all the resultant loneliness, religious crisis and megalomania. No-one has captured their state better than Shakespeare in *Hamlet* (1604). Hamlet's tragedy is knowledge, it's this that has torn him away from his surroundings, and it is his hopeless attempts to re-connect with them that the play deals with. The isolated subject that began to appear in the philosophy of the time, wasn't merely an image, but also a physical reality, from Descartes' idealised version, as he describes how he spent the entire winter of 1620 indoors, *completely alone, in a heated room, where I could come to terms with my own thoughts in peace and quiet*, to the cold and lonely life of Newton, who remained friendless throughout his entire student days at Oxford, and later spent his best years almost totally isolated in his study in the same town. Newton, Descartes, Pascal and Leibniz were mathematicians and all of them broke the barriers of classical mathematics at an early age. Only Pascal reflected that it was not solely the universe that expanded as a result of their work, but also loneliness. In the posthumously published *Thoughts* (1670) he describes the horror of a world that has been opened up to infinity, where no boundaries exist, neither outer nor inner, for even the minutest thing always reveals something smaller – all of nature's infinity, with all its stars, planets, valleys and mountains, rivers and seas, animals and insects, is found within the tiniest atom, he writes, which in turn contains a minutest atom in which all of nature's infinity is found, which in turn contains a minutest atom... Every attempt to understand this universe, whether by charting its motions, systematising its products or searching for its origins, is naturally vain and risible, and Pascal was making real fun of the science of his age. What he never grasped was that the real aim of science isn't to understand the world, but to close it up. Choosing to turn to God was another mistake, because when reason has once taken the step into infinity, there is no way back, and the God to whom Pascal turned was every bit as abstract and limitless and cold as the mathematics he had some years earlier helped to develop.

It isn't difficult to picture him sitting there in his apartment in Paris writing, bent over his manuscript, his thin, earnest face barely illuminated by the light of a burning oil lamp, just as it isn't hard to imagine Newton in Oxford, Leibniz in Nuremburg or Descartes in Utrecht. The emergence of the type of person that each of them in their own way represented, just at the dawning of the Age of Enlightenment, is, of course, no coincidence. In antiquity they would never have been understood, either for what they were or in terms of what they wrote. The people of antiquity always studiously avoided the notion of the limitless, they weren't interested in the boundlessness of either space or time, and they clothed everything beyond

the immediate in anecdote. It's clear that their want of interest in astronomy and history is closely linked to their lack of interest in psychology; they had as little desire to forfeit themselves to infinity outwards or backwards, as they had to forfeit themselves to infinity inwards. Hence the purity of their art.

How different to those vast, medieval Gothic cathedrals! Not only did they open the way to the notion of infinite space, they made a cult of it, almost an obsession. Just how close a culture's concrete productions are to its view of the world and itself is well demonstrated by the fact that the first alchemists began to figure prominently in Europe at the same time as the cathedrals. The results the alchemists achieved or the methods they used are irrelevant in this context, the essential point is the underlying concept they brought with them, that insight into the secrets of life is not unattainable, but can be gleaned by those in possession of the right abilities and knowledge. It was said of Albertus Magnus, for example, that he'd constructed an automaton which could talk and move like a human being, of Théophraste Bartholomeus that he could control the weather, of Robert Foxcroft that he had brought his dead child back to life. It's not unreasonable to assume that myths like these formed the kernel of the legend of Faust, in which no doubt is left about that limitless art's demonic character. And what was the legend of Faust warning against, if not the activities of Copernicus, Bruno, Descartes, Galileo, Leibniz and Newton? We don't normally see it this way, because of the impressively effective operation that was mounted during the Enlightenment when demonic was the label attached to the obscure and the vague, the speculative and the occult, and truthful to the precise and rational, obvious and provable, with all the fateful consequences that would entail.

Because darkness isn't the danger, light is. That is where all the pitfalls are to be found.

Antonius Bellori's name is on the whole remarkable for its absence in such contexts, something which at first glance isn't in the least bit strange, considering the subjects that preoccupied him. It seems a long way from Newton's books on optics and gravity to Bellori's work on angels. But if we put what they wrote about to one side, and concentrate instead on the underlying mentality and philosophy, we will discover that the similarities outnumber the differences. Bellori employed the same methods as the others, he'd read the same literature and possessed the same knowledge. The only thing that distinguished him from them was that he looked in a different direction. That the secret into which he'd thereby gained insight would never be recognised was something of which he was ignorant, just as the other movers of the age hadn't the slightest inkling of the consequences of their own discoveries. They lived in a period suspended between two contrasting views of the world, and, like hermit crabs changing shells, were quite naked and vulnerable, always alert, always on the brink of scampering back to the old shell, until they'd crossed the invisible line and the new shell lay closer, after which they simply had to keep pushing on. The openness, fluidity and uncertainty of things then is there in Baroque art and its fascination with infinity and fixation on death. But the choice was made, the world's new boundaries were laid, and everything that was outside them sank slowly into oblivion. And rightly so, we might cry today, for Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo and Newton were right! After all, the ideas of Paracelsus, Landmark and Bellori are monstrous, unscientific, superstitious. But if we remember that these writings date from the very start of the Enlightenment, before the new world philosophy was determined, it may be easier to see that such channels of thought represented an alternative to the road that was chosen, the one that has brought us to where we are today, and that it's precisely this choice that makes the ideas in, for example, *On the Nature of Angels*, seem so outlandish and unfashionable. They weren't then. And therein lies the enticing point: what if Bellori's ideas had won through, and Newton's had sunk into oblivion?

We'd now be living in a different world.

In order to understand the unprecedentedly radical thing that Bellori set himself to do in *On the Nature of Angels*, it is necessary to have a clear idea of the contemporary view of angels. During the course of the church's then fifteen-hundred-year history a definite orthodox notion of the nature of the angels had crystallised, laid down for instance in the Roman Catholic Church's catechism no. 328, which states:

The existence of the spiritual, non-corporeal beings that Sacred Scripture usually calls "angels" is a truth of faith. The witness of Scripture is as clear as the unanimity of Tradition.

The term *truth of faith* makes the first part unproblematic. One may choose to believe that angels are spiritual, non-corporeal beings, or not. The second part of the statement, on the other hand, is more dubious. What exactly are tradition and scripture unanimous about? The existence of angels as such? Or the existence of angels as *spiritual, non-corporeal* beings? Or that such existence is a religious truth? The first and third are true, the second untrue. This lack of clarity was clearly intentional, as in this way one could get the claim about the nature of angels, and not merely their existence, to appear uncontroversial and straightforward without dissimulation. For if there is one thing tradition is not in agreement about it is the subject of angels. Right up until the thirteenth century innumerable opinions on the subject could be found, not only outside the walls of the Church, amongst openly heretical sects like the Cathars, Bogomils or Arians, but also within them, where constant delicate discussions went on about everything from the angels' provenance and number to the question of whether they had followed Christ's life without knowing what was in store, or if they had always foreseen his fate. These problems multiplied exponentially, each answer raising a whole host of new questions, and it is against this background that medieval institutions such as the Synod and the Inquisition must be understood; they arose to establish a solid foundation for the faith, which was well on the road to slipping and dissolving of its own accord. Then as now they knew that weakness is as closely associated with openness as strength is with restriction, and established a number of absolute truths, defended by all possible means, including capital punishment. The ultimate solution to the question about the origin of angels is a good example. As previously mentioned, some of the Greek church fathers believed that angels came into existence before the creation of the world, and they were supported by people like St John of Damascus and Jeremiah. However, in 1215 the Lateran Council drew up a decree against the Albigensian heresy, in which they determined that at the dawn of time, God in his omnipotence first made the spiritual and carnal orders, in other words the orders of angels and animals, and after that man, because he, composed of both body and spirit, was in between the angelic and the earthly. In this way, by means of a motion, all ambivalence and uncertainty surrounding the question was swept away in the course of a day. And this was also how it went with the other questions relating to the existence of the angels. Through various definitions and limitations, all impeccably founded in theology and philosophy, a specific image of them was gradually authorised in a process the end of which was marked by the publication of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*.

We know that Antinous Bellori owned a copy of Bernard of Clairvaux's *De Consideratione*, which told him, amongst other things, that angels are '...powerful, radiant, blessed, individual personalities of various ranks, which occupy that place they were accorded at the beginning of time, perfect in their kind, immortal, without feelings, of pure spirit, inseparably one in heart and mind, blessed with everlasting peace...', while in *Summa Theologica*, which he also possessed of course, he could study Thomas' hair-splitting definitions of the angels' form, characteristics and knowledge. Thomas describes them as spirit without body, and then in some incredibly complex reasoning explains that they

nevertheless take up room in time as well as space. Angels can remove themselves from one place to another without any expenditure of time, he writes, but this doesn't mean that they defy or suspend time, only that their movements aren't circumscribed by the laws of the universe. Furthermore he maintains that understanding is one with their existence, in other words that they are understanding in *pure form*, a kind of perfect intellect, bereft of emotions, imagination or senses. So angels know the world only as a concept, in its essence, as it exists (and always has existed) in God's word. They don't know material reality, each other, God or themselves. The latter he justifies as follows: 'The intellect is moved by the comprehensible, because to comprehend is a kind of reception, as stated in *The Soul* 3.4. But nothing is moved by, or received from itself, as can be seen from corporeal things. Therefore the angel cannot understand itself.'

In principle, Thomas of Aquinas's notions about angels might be correct. Nothing of what he attributes to them was unthinkable. The problem was simply that the opposite wasn't unthinkable either. How could anyone really know that *that* was just the way things were? None of the claims concerning angels in *Summa Theologica* are supported by examples, not one of the angels' many and well-documented manifestations is mentioned, either from biblical or post-biblical times, so what is Thomas's real basis when with such brilliance and detail he enumerates their various attributes?

Antonino Bellori had seen angels with his own eyes. Their characteristics on that occasion had so obviously been different to those the church ascribed to them, that only three conclusions were possible. The first was that he was mistaken, and had not seen what he'd seen, or had not understood it correctly. The second was that the Church was mistaken. And the third was that the angels had altered since the time the dogma about them had been conceived. To maintain that the Church was wrong in so decisive a question would be heresy. To claim that the angels must have altered would also be heresy, but of a more serious kind, as it went against the fundamental concept of the divine order.

Even if he disregarded the claims of heresy that in all likelihood would be thrown at him, the task seemed insuperable. Who was he to dare refute *Summa Theologica*, the theological bedrock of the Catholic Church, on the basis of an experience he'd had as an eleven-year-old?

He couldn't do it. If the interpretations about angels in *Summa* were to be refuted, it had to be on *Summa's* own premises. What he personally knew could not be submitted as a matter of experience, he had to take the route through scripture and tradition. It was from there that Thomas and his like had to be combated.

*On the Nature of Angels* consists of three parts. The first contains a catalogue of all 189 angelic manifestations in the Bible, and the second discusses what conclusions can be drawn about the angels from these. The third, which initially looks at angels' non-Biblical appearances, ends in a discussion about the question which is the work's main theme: can the nature of the divine undergo change?

Bellori's ambition was to chart the angels' appearance and characteristics with the same care and precision with which anatomists mapped the blood system, astronomers the constellations and cartographers the coastlines of continents. The catalogue formed his basic material and it was thanks to this that he did not lose himself in the desert of speculation in which most others who had written about angels before and after him, had ended up. Bellori's angels aren't the figments of a fevered mind, they are concrete creatures with a history closely linked to that of humans over several thousand years. At the same time the catalogue also reveals a problem. Rather than pinning down the angels and thus establishing a firm foundation for the discussions that follow, as Bellori must have intended, it makes apparent right from the outset the complexity, changeability and consistent nebulosity of

their presence in the world. Almost nowhere in scripture are we able to see angels as they really are, in their own right. Almost every one of their appearances is linked to an action and is always, therefore, woven into a specific context. And how can one sort out what is part of the angel from what is part of the context in which it operates? This is a recurring problem in *On the Nature of Angels* in which attention is always being focused on the dynamic between that which changes and that which is immutable, often hones in on the peripheral parts of the text in a belief that the small irregularities and aberrations found there throw a different light on the angels' substance than the bland illumination of the celestial. Together with the insight he gained when he saw the angels with his own eyes as an eleven-year-old, this led Bellori step by step closer to the conclusion he's now famous for and which went against all current concepts of the nature of the divine. *It is not the divine which is immutable and the human which is changeable, he wrote, the opposite is true and is the real theme of the Bible: the alteration in the divine from the creation to the death of Christ.*

\*[insert decorative text break]

The first time the angels appear in human history is in the story of the fall of man. When human beings ate from the tree of knowledge the Lord drove them out of the Garden of Eden, and to prevent them from returning and helping themselves to the fruit of the equally desirable tree of life, he set the cherubim to guard the way to it: *He cast him out, run the Bible's exact words, and to the east of the garden of Eden he stationed the cherubim and a sword whirling and flashing to guard the way to the tree of life.*

This is all it says. Not a word about who they were, where they came from, or what they looked like. Just a name *cherubim*; a weapon, the flashing sword whirling round; and a task, the guarding of the tree of life. But even though we can't say anything about their origins or appearance from this passage, it is nevertheless invaluable as a source for understanding their nature, Bellori writes, as the context it places them in is so unambiguous. Because they guard the tree of life, they are following God's will to which they are therefore subject. At the same time because of their role as guards, they are set above man's will which they are there to curb. In other words, the cherubim stand somewhere between God and man. And if one looks more closely at the Lord's words when he drove man out of the Garden of Eden, it is clear that they're considerably closer to the former than the latter. *The man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil* were God's words. He could have said "like me" if that was what he meant, but he didn't, he said "one of us" – and who else but the cherubim could that have referred to? No matter which way one looks at the text, one can only see three active parties there: the fallen human beings, God and the cherubim. As man stands in direct opposition to "us" in this context, it can hardly be anyone other than the cherubim he was referring to. This means, firstly, that the cherubim were similar enough to God for him to include them in the same expression as himself, secondly that they knew the difference between good and evil and thus were in possession of free will. As Bellori saw it, this more than indicated that the cherubim also had eternal life. It's hard to imagine God including a mortal creature in a description of himself, and even if he had done so, it is certainly unthinkable that he would have allowed this mortal creature, also in possession of free will, to guard the way to the tree of life after the fall of man.

In this, Bellori's views do not deviate much from those of the Church. Established dogma held that the angels ranked between God and man and that they had free will and eternal life, so when Bellori spent time arguing this in the opening of *On the Nature of Angels*, it might seem as if he was knocking at open doors. But there was also a dogma that the angels were spiritual, non-physical beings and because Bellori knew this wasn't the case, he couldn't be certain that the other dogmas were true either. As a consequence of this, the question of

the nature of the angels in Bellori's work runs parallel the whole time with that of how the Church's distorted picture of the divine could have arisen. What is noteworthy is that the origin of almost every single element in this picture can be traced back to the third, fourth or fifth century AD. It was here, during Christianity's early years, that the basis for the image of God, which later was to become the over-arching, sole and true one, was laid. And it was only here in the writings of the great theologians of the time, Origen, Hieronymus, Basil the Great, his brother, Gregory of Nyssa, Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite that the argument was actually made for it. So when Bellori engages with the question of God's use of "us" in scripture, it is just as much the origin of the false image of the angels he's searching for as for the angels themselves.

Of all the innumerable speculations that have been made in the course of time about who or what might be lurking behind God's enigmatic formulation, Basil the Great's is perhaps the most authoritative and influential and it's his exegesis as it appears in *Hexaemeron* – the nine famous homilies about the creation written in 378 – on which Bellori relies heavily in *On the Nature of the Angels*.

God twice uses this "us" in the Book of Genesis. These instances are linked to the two most decisive moments in man's history. The first occurs just before the creation itself when God says *Let us make man in our image and likeness*, the other takes place, as we have seen, just prior to man's ejection from paradise when God says *The man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil*.

If by "us", God was referring to the angels, they must in some way have been connected with the creation of man. "Our image" indicates a similarity between God and his angels, a similarity which man then shares by being created in its likeness. And this was how it was understood for centuries until churchmen in the fourth century began to challenge the notion and then entirely defeat it.

Just how important it was for them can be seen clearly from Basil's interpretation of the creation story. Until God's words prior to the creation of man, the tone in *Hexaemeron* is mild and pleasant, the style clear and beautiful. Then, suddenly, a great anger wells up in it. It's as if the eyes of the text are narrowing:

"Let us make man in our image." You hear that, enemy of Christ! God is talking to the one who is a participant in the work of creation through whom he has also created the ages. He who sustains everything with his almighty word. But he (the Jew) does not accept that sound teaching. Just as the most bloodthirsty wild animals, when trapped in a cage, rage against the bars and show off their bitter and wild nature without being able to satisfy their fury, so the Jews, this truth-hating brotherhood, maintain when they are pressed, that God's words are directed to many people. To the angels in fact, who are standing by his side, he says: "Let us make man in our own image."

This is a Jewish device, fabrication of their shamelessness. By reviling the Son they accord to the servants the dignity that belongs to counsellors. From our fellow slaves they make lords over our creation. A perfected man rises to an angel's dignity. But which created being can be like the creator?

Note also the following: "in our own image". What do you say to this? Does this mean God and his angels' image is one and the same? The father and the son must necessarily share the same features, but features here are taken to mean something that is suitable to the divine, not a physical outline, for it concerns God.

Hark also you of the new circumcision, you who make a show of being Christian while you promote Judaism. To whom did he say: "in our own image"? Who else than to the one who is the "effulgence of his splendour" and a "likeness of his being" and who is in the image of the invisible God? He was speaking to his own living image, to the one who said "my Father and I are one" and "anyone who has seen me has seen the Father".

Basil is of course saying that it is not the angels to whom God was referring with his "us", but his own living image, Jesus Christ. This theory depends on a number of unsubstantiated premises. In order to make it unlikely that the angels could have been part of the creation of man, directly or indirectly, Basil relegates them to "our fellow slaves" and in that way hints that they are both not free and very close to the human condition; in other words, just as far away from the divine as we are. The foundation for this is another claim, that a perfected man rises to an angel's dignity. However, there is no foundation for this anywhere in scripture. Basil's final, neartriumphant question concerning the angels *But which created being can be like the creator?* – then assumes that the creation of the angels is an established fact. But there is no substantiation for this either. On the contrary, the fact that there isn't a single word about the angels in the creation story, together with the fact that they demonstrably existed when God threw mankind out of the Garden of Eden, more than indicates that their history pre-dates the creation. And what happened then, whether they were created by God or not, no human being can know.

Despite this, Basil writes about it as if it was the most clear-cut thing imaginable.

How was this possible?

Basil was no fool, on the contrary he was one of the foremost thinkers of his age. He had attended Plato's academy in Athens, edited an influential anthology of Origen's texts together with Gregory of Nyssa, and because of his life-long battle against Arianism, he was very much responsible for ultimately making the concept of the Trinity absolute within Christianity. Nor was he corrupt or particularly pragmatically inclined, when the doctrine of the Arians was in the ascendant and Emperor Valentinian tried to force all bishops to sign a document supporting it, Basil refused and openly took up the cudgels for the opposition. So when Basil writes that the angels are God's creations and our fellow slaves there is no reason to doubt his sincerity. Basil was *certain* that that's how things were.

But what made him so certain?

To find the answer to this, we must turn our attention away from the age's theories about itself – those billowing cornfields of ideas and notions that are so easy to get lost in – and look down at the ground from which they sprang.

In the fourth century Christianity was a new religion in an ancient world. Its authority was not automatic but had to be argued, and this can quite clearly be seen in *Hexaemeron* where the Bible's explanations are constantly measured against the concepts of classical philosophy about the world's composition. But the old never dies, it always lives on inside the new, which blindly ingests and distorts it, just as medieval painting portrayed Christ in the poses of antiquity, with antiquity's mannerisms and antiquity's costumes and in that way filled the old forms with new meaning, just as the capitals of classical columns merged with one another and can just be glimpsed here and there as remnants of something antique in the Gothic's unruly and sombre decoration. These lines of development occur deep within a culture, far out of reach of the will or consciousness of those involved. If Basil represented the new, it was only in a superficial sense, for he belonged to antiquity, and even though he distanced himself from its philosophy, he couldn't distance himself from its soul.

The people of antiquity seemed obsessed with harmony. They viewed with deep suspicion all that was haphazard and imperfect. Of the human virtues, self-control was the one they most revered, and their models of the world always seek balance. Change and movement didn't suit them. Everything must always work out and, if possible, return to itself. It's obvious that a culture like that was bound to have problems dealing with what a figure like Jesus brought with him in the way of humiliation, doubt, poverty, longing and shameful death. The chaos of Jesus' life was just too foreign to be assimilated as it was. But there is no

reason to believe that the church fathers' transformation of his life was a conscious act. The nature of seeing is initially to look for what is known, and then to see the unknown in the light of that, and because the first Christian theologians deemed harmony and immutability to be expressions of the noblest kind, they could only see the elements that supported this within the divine. Even though they were staring right at the disharmonious sides of Jesus' life, and the violent, almost grotesque alteration in the nature of the divine that this life caused was quite obvious, they didn't "see" it, it was something unthinkable and was therefore either ignored, or re-shaped. As both the disharmony and the alteration of the divine were linked to the concrete and corporeal in Jesus' life, it was here the efforts were made. First his humiliation and suffering were transmuted into a triumphant ritual, then his blood became "blood", his body became "body", his death became "death". Next it was decreed that it wasn't God himself who had been incarnated in Jesus, but a part of him – "of one Being" as it says in the Nicene Creed. This meant that the acute and unavoidable fact of God's physical proximity on earth was toned down, and the brutality of the thought that men had actually mistreated and killed him was moderated, he was both here and not here. And finally, an infinite number of correspondences between the Old and the New Testaments were established, neutralising what was unique and wonderfully *new* in Jesus' life and even the *change* in the divine. That God, by his "us" had meant himself and Christ, thus became a guarantee for the absolute immutability of the divine, and more than hinted at the same time, that man's history had been preordained right from the creation. And so the great turbulence Jesus' life had created in the world order was subdued, and its stability re-established, but without losing what was regarded as the most important thing, namely that through his death he had saved mankind.

This was what was at stake in *Hexaemeron*. The earlier the incorporation of Christ in the Lord occurred, the more universal and timeless the link would seem. Because "Christ" is not mentioned anywhere in the creation story, Basil and his associates searched for other introductions. In this context God's "us" was perfect. But before such an insertion could take place, the space round the Lord had to be cleared. "Us" had to be emptied of other possible connotations. This is what he does in the first part of his reasoning.

For Basil it was crucial that only the knowledge of the truth appeared to be new, not the truth itself. This forced him to argue on two fronts. On the one hand against the philosophy and view of the world held by antiquity (which deep down, however, he sustained), on the other against Judaism. As the Jews read scripture without acknowledging Jesus, and this reading, which co-existed with his own, was clearly much older, it made visible both the historical newness of the concept of Christ's immutability, and the process of transformation from body to spirit. This explains Basil's fury. Had he reflected, he might have seen that the best thing might have been to ignore both the Jews and the angels, and simply *decree* that by "us" God was referring to himself and Christ – as the Church would later do. The text's opening to the world would then be closed and the seams between God and Christ remain concealed. The fact that Basil didn't do this, but instead went straight for the throats of the Jews, indicates that he saw them as a threat, not to Christianity per se, the foundation of which was faith and therefore irrefutable, but to his own interpretative work. Perhaps he glimpsed in the depths of his soul that the Christ-God was a construction, an insight so threatening that he couldn't simply ignore it but had to push it away completely, and in so doing place it outside himself. And that it was why he chose the precise words "fabrication" and "device" when belabouring the Jews and their concept of the divine.

Having emptied "us" of its old meaning by degrading the angels and the Jews, Basil inserts the new meaning in his argument's second half. But this is isn't convincing either. Bellori notes how striking it is that throughout the entire *Hexaemeron* Basil keeps strictly to God's

words as Moses wrote them down in the creation story and never either adds or subtracts anything in his interpretation of them until here, in the final passage, when Christ is suddenly drawn in. In the creation story itself Christ isn't mentioned. There is *nothing* that supports the idea that Christ might be covered by God's "us". Basil's sole justification for this is two of Jesus' own pronouncements *my Father and I are one* and *anyone who has seen me has seen the Father*. If, as Basil claims, it's true that God and Christ share the same form, they must also have done when Christ spoke these words. He spoke them when he was a man. And in the Bible it is *only* in this human, physical form that Christ is portrayed. In the Bible "Christ" equals God incarnated as man. If "Christ" had been present in God at the creation it must mean that incarnation was anticipated even then.

As there is no support for such a view anywhere in scripture the question is how could Basil know this?

The answer is, of course, that God is omnipotent. Nothing happens outside his will, his power stretches from eternity to eternity, for him past, present and future are one and the same.

Is he omnipotent?

When the serpent tricked the first people into eating from the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden, scripture is clear that it came as a surprise to God. He was out walking in the garden in the mild evening breeze when he felt something had changed. Normally the two human beings came to meet him, happy and trusting as dogs, but now the garden lay silent about him.

'Adam,' he called, 'Where are you?'

Hidden, each behind their own tree, they followed the Lord's movements with their eyes as he walked up and down in the clearing searching for them.

'Adam,' he called again, 'Where are you?'

Just a few hours earlier what the human beings were and what they did had been almost identical. However, the fruit from the tree of knowledge had disturbed the balance. A crack had occurred in humanity, suddenly they had become something over and above their actions. And this sudden surfeit meant that their actions could no longer moderate what they were. They looked at themselves, discovered that they were naked, and the shame that welled up in them then found no release. But the problem was so new that at first they attempted to solve it in the old way, through action. They ran into the grove and hid. But the shame over being naked did not disappear as perhaps they'd expected, on the contrary it increased because they also began to feel ashamed about hiding.

The Lord's shouts make it obvious that he neither knew where they were, nor what had happened. The world hadn't changed, just man's view of it, and provided they kept out of God's sight the change would remain unknown to him. Of course they could go on hiding, stealing around the forest and darting behind a tree or a rock each time they heard him coming, but in the long term this concealment would itself become a sign of what they trying to hide, and the shame in them would simply grow and grow. Even now it had broken away from its concrete beginnings and begun to live its own, abstract life within them.

No, action in itself wasn't enough. But what if they attempted to explain the action as well? Maybe that would expunge the shame? Perhaps that would re-establish the balance between the inner and the outer world?

Hesitantly, Adam took a step forward. A twig cracked beneath his foot and the Lord turned to the shadowy figure which slowly emerged from the gloom of the trees.

'I heard you in the garden,' he said, 'I was afraid because I was naked and so I hid.'

'Who told you you're naked?' asked the Lord. 'Have you eaten from the tree I forbade you to eat from?'

Behind him the woman also came into view. In a clearing in the middle of the garden the human beings stood, the Lord and the people he'd created. It was evening. In the grove around them the shadows lengthened, and now and then the air was filled with the sighing of the leaves that rustled in the wind.

'The woman you made me for company, gave me fruit from the tree,' Adam said, 'and I ate it.'

The Lord turned to the woman.

'What's this you've done!' he said.

'The serpent tempted me and I ate,' she said.

One after the other, the Lord cursed the serpent, the woman and the man. When he'd done this he made clothes for the two human beings and then banished them from the garden.

His shouts indicate that the Lord didn't know where they were, his questioning that he didn't know what they'd done, and the little detail of the clothes made out of skins which he handed over between the cursing and the banishment, gives a little hint of the inconsistency and impulsive nature of his presence. Everything, in other words, that is written about the fall in scripture tends towards the Lord being ignorant about it in advance. And if he hadn't foreseen the fall how could "Christ", even *before* human beings were created, be a part of him?

And if he knew that "Christ" would one day appear on earth in flesh and blood to save humanity, why did he as good as exterminate all living things in the great flood? And if he'd always known that he would at some point send a great flood over the earth, how can it be that he regretted it afterwards? Because as it says: *And the Lord said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth: neither will I again smite any more every living thing, as I have done. While the earth remaineth, seed-time and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night, shall not cease.*

This element of improvisation is apparent in a great many of the Lord's actions in the Old Testament. It can often seem as if he is borne along by his own emotions, and whether they have their basis in great rage or sudden kindness, it's difficult to draw any conclusion other than that he doesn't always see the consequences of his own actions. And because scripture tells us that he neither foresaw the fall or the great flood there is, at the time of the creation of human beings who originally were good and free from sin, no justification for the notion of sending them "Christ", which means that the enigma about who he is referring to with this "us" and "our", which until then had been *hidden in the depths of theology* as Basil so elegantly puts it, is hardly solved by referring to the son's existence in the father.

*Let us make man in our image and likeness.* Who other than the angels could the Lord have been thinking about when he said this? He has created heaven and earth, sun and the moon, day and the night, plants and the animals, birds and the fishes. And he has done it alone. Now that he is about to create mankind he turns, for the first time, to others. They are not named by name, nor are they described, but their proximity is undeniable. *Let us!* says the Lord and creates man in his own image and that of this enigmatic third party.

The next time he invokes them man has fallen. *The man is become as one of us, to know good and evil* says the Lord and immediately afterwards the names of the mysterious ones are made known: *he placed at the east of the Garden of Eden Cherubims.*

So, right from the beginning there was a link between the angels and the Lord on the one hand, and human beings on the other. God's statements and man's creation and fall respectively, both say something about the nature of this connection according to Bellori. Both are concerned with change (in the first, man is created from nothing, in the second he moves from innocence to knowledge) and about similarity (in the first man is created like "us"

in "our" image, in the second he changes to become even more like "us"). The fact that similarity wasn't a stable quantity in the relations between the human and the divine but was, right from the start, subject to the laws of change, is of prime importance in Bellori's theory of the angels as developed in *On the Nature of Angels*. Man was created in the image of the divine, the two resembled one another, at the same time each stood on their own side of a divide, that of creator and created. When man ate from the tree of knowledge the similarity increased, whereupon banishment made it clear that there was a limit to this.

Until that time the divine had functioned as one and the same, only manifested in the Lord's use of the word "us", but with the transgression the divine became differentiated: out of the Lord's all-powerful shadow stepped the cherubim. It's no accident that they were first mentioned then. Prior to the fall the difference between the human and the divine was absolute, after the fall it became fluid, a wide area opened between the two and in order to demarcate the boundary zone, the Lord was obliged to peel off the cherubim from the divine entity. And thus, as simultaneous guardians and representatives of the divine outer limits, the cherubim made their entrance on to the world's stage for the first time.

But who were they? Where did they come from? What did they look like? And how long were they there?

Apart from necessarily being trusted and in possession of a certain bodily strength or power it's impossible to make any final comment on the nature of the cherubim from what is written in the story of the fall. It isn't even possible to say anything really definite about the duration of their task. But certain assumptions are more likely than others. We know that the great flood covered the whole world with water, and as the Garden of Eden isn't listed as an exception, it's probable that it was flooded too. It's inconceivable that the cherubim would have continued their watch then. It is also unthinkable that their duty could have ended earlier without scripture mentioning or giving reasons for it. One may, therefore, conclude that the cherubim guarded the tree of life in the time between the fall and the flood. The lack of any description of their outward appearance may be because their guardianship of the tree of life first began *after* the banishment from paradise and that as a result they hadn't been seen by the first human beings. But this need not mean they were *never* seen. A fragment of the apocryphal writings found outside the Mesopotamian town of Mari in 1954 concerns the existence of the first human beings after the fall and it tells the story of how Abel made camp one evening on the edge of the forest surrounding the Garden of Eden where, despite his father's absolute injunction, he decided to search for the tree of life. No more than fifteen lines of the narrative remain, it stops dead as if on a precipice with the sentence *And Abel saw the light of the angels*.

Naturally, Antinous Bellori knew nothing of the existence of this narrative, which once must have constituted a deeper understanding of the circumstances that led to the fratricide, but even if he had, it is unlikely that it would have occasioned any substantial changes in *On the Nature of Angels*. The fact is that the fragment only strengthens Bellori's representation both of the actual geographically traceable existence of paradise, and of the cherubim's physical presence in the world in the time after the creation. The Lord's ordering them to keep watch over the way that led to the tree of life, indicates that mankind hadn't moved far away but had presumably settled down in the vicinity. So they were able to have a foot in two worlds, the lost one which they saw all the time but could never re-enter, and the one they had in which they lived and worked every day. For the first generation paradise must have represented the real life, something they always harked back to, whereas life in the valley where they tilled the soil must have had something second rate about it. For the next generation, on the other hand, the opposite would have been true. For them, life in the valley

was the real one. If they looked with longing at the forests bordering the Garden of Eden, it was the longing for the unknown that filled them.