Writing for an Age of Migration, Diaspora, Exile

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Panel: An Age of Migration, Diaspora, Exile

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I would like to talk about angels.

Angels are the lowest of the celestial order and are assigned to govern the earthly realm of the physical world.

According to our most reliable source, Dionys Areopagite’s treatise “On celestial hierarchies,”

The Word of God has assigned our Hierarchy (i.e. our earthly realm) to Angels, by naming Michael as Ruler of the Jewish people, and others over other nations. For the Most High established borders of nations according to number of Angels of God.

This text was so richly quoted by both the Christian East and West that it became part of the unconscious of those living in a Christian culture, whether willingly or unwillingly, as all great texts do. And as this culture itself became migratory, moving and reshaping the face of the earth, this text, part of its blood, became part of the unconscious elsewhere. And I am not sure that what it reports is not true. At least for us.

Recently in the narrow but still-surviving circles of deconstructors, this topic gave rise to a whole discussion on the nature of the angelic-centered European understanding of government and bureaucracy. Kafka certainly had issues with angels and, of course, had more than just a mundane and satirical understanding of the nature of power, bureaucracy and administration. We can follow Kafka’s thread to understand our general, purely theoretical system of borders, passport control, customers and visas that truly precedes our entrance into the sky in the white-winged chariot of an airplane. It was Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, arriving from the airport on a summer afternoon, who most recently gave a speech about angels in Moscow. Yet, deconstruct it how you will – Professor Agamben still needed a translator to take him over the border of his own tongue, for he still was an Italian thinker among Russians.

I like to imagine it – an angel standing over each nation, over each border, over perhaps each of the tongues governing and protecting them. Yet then another question occurs – is it possible to cross the border, what is it out there behind the angel’s wings, and what does the angel do?

In Wupertal, Germany, while staying at a student hotel, I met a beautiful girl named Almut. The name was given to her by her father, a visionary from southern Germany who had his own parish and children who could each play a musical instrument. According to Almut, her father could tell the future and talk to angels, alongside with the small, mundane tasks he performed as a minister. Almut was on the run. She got so frightened of celestial music that she took to graphic design. An immigrant from the medieval scene herself, she told me a story of another immigrant, and that has stayed in my mind. One day, her father suddenly announced that there was no more time for domestic affairs, for the world is in danger. At the same time, he invited into their home a refugee from Tanzania or Uganda. A simple old man from a village, he could barely speak, and unlike Almut, he was on the run from another kind of music, the sounds of war. “It was sad, so sad,” Almut told me. “He would sit in the corner of the room without speaking, and sigh…” Surrounded by a reality he could not read, with nothing naturally meaningful to refer to, he felt that the world was dead. Or that it was he who was dead, walking among the living.
This one didn’t cross the border.

If I were, on a purely non-theological basis, to use the word angel to mean, perhaps, light, the light in which we see things, the light which is shed and makes everything familiar, near, telling, then what could all the cathedrals and civilization of Germany mean to an old man from Tanzania, except to be a strange and deceitful dream that he would only want to pass.

I do not give this example in order to jump back to political issues. I will not extrapolate on why a German family might decide to host a refuge or on why local churches here in Iowa City are collecting clothing for the poor. The point I’m trying to make is a different one.

Do we actually arrive when we leave? Do we actually see a light of another country? Or do we try to keep an old fire, as if it had been borrowed, from home? If so, do angels travel? They seem to, for the border always travels with us—the border is always inside as well as outside. A well-known fact in linguistics is that the ways tribes refer to themselves often mean “man,” to set themselves apart from animals, demons and gods. When you cross another tribe’s border, the given name becomes your brand, your type of difference, sometimes your yellow star.

Does light meet the light? Is there an intermediate zone? A grand translation of experience into experience? To answer this question is to see that it is a question of a world that exists not so much in the new situation of traveling, migration and diaspora, but in the new situation of constant awareness of those concepts. What’s new is the world’s gradual acceptance of this transitory state, this constant chiara oscura, this game of light and shadow, of many lights and shadows, being permanent, always existing in and outside of oneself, always existing away and yet on the verge of leaving. It is a never-ending translation back and forth.

And this constant transitory state leads to a “Split.” Split, as in the initial state of modern personality, seen, felt, understood. Split is nothing new.

If we look at twentieth century writing it was always, at its best, dedicated to that split perception. The Split ego is so pervasive that the most characteristic of novels—“Ulysses”—is concerned entirely with the meeting of the two halves of a split personae within the tides of language and modernity. Ulysses is the great travelogue, written by a writer in exile, with a guide book of Dublin by his side, recreating the Dublin he remembered with love and hatred, creating a Dublin that now carries Joyce’s imagined voyage into all of its tourist guides.

Yet for all its magnanimity, Joyce’s voyage was still a voyage of “I,” the writer. It is the writer’s “I” that becomes split, a linguistic center of social transgressions. The Odyssey is within.

Nowadays, the situation is at once simpler and more complex. As if fulfilling Joyce’s prophecy, whole populations are on the move, and with them their tongues and customs, everyday metaphors and rituals packed in boxes like small museums. There is no more land they inhabit – only what they can take across the border, packed in a small detail. There is no more surrounding landscape, no sky and earth where ritual and habit, tensions and developments can proceed. What the moving populations have is no epic drama, it is a story. The story they take along, in order to memorize who they are and to introduce themselves once they’ve crossed the border, or even to amuse the locals with sharp observation always available to eyes newly-opened. A story is a vehicle; a story is a means of transportation. A story is also a path that marks a distance, the distance at which an object from home, a piece of
cloth, perhaps, has become so strange in its new environment at that it demands an explanation, a story. As this distance increases, the “I” of the narrator diminishes in scale and occupies exactly the same place as it does in collective identities. It does not encompass them, it feeds on them.

And the twinkle of the story, the hidden amazement and grief which lies within, its loop of travel, is, in effect, a meeting of light with light, a border meeting. Not a grand genre, no. Small, short, exact, practically impersonal. A glimpse of an angel the tribe sees when passing the border.

Mind you that that it was not Odysseus who wrote the Odyssey. Odysseus told stories of the impossible encounters. Homer wrote the Odyssey, the Ulysses. And then there is James Joyce. The two found a key principle that united their stories, a way to show the effect of the story on its characters, its darkness and light, its gyres of energy that reflect on each of us.

I have always liked the image of an aged Joyce standing on the bank of the sea throwing stones at the dogs, tremendously angry: Why are they fighting, he shouts, when they all should be reading Finnegan’s Wake. It not only goes to show how seriously those whom we call “the greats” take their writing and what their writing presupposes, but also that they may have been right. Finnegan’s Wake, the story of a worldwide burial service, celebrates some enormous loss, the loss of ideals, linguistic norms, unities, histories. A loss humanity chose instead to “celebrate” with an unprecedented massacre. Perhaps the reading of Finnegan’s Wake would have sent the world’s mind across all borders into a kind of multinational meditation, causing us to learn one another’s languages, to make an effort to overcome habitual patterns of thinking, discovering through it the common fate of humanity.

Perhaps Joyce’s prophecy is fulfilled. Perhaps, willingly or unwillingly, we are now in that book of his. We are, perhaps, reading the Wake. This enormous, strange, untranslatable Babel of a book, this bubble of memory, has long before us been remembered by one Ego, deeply installed in an aged Irishman throwing stones at dogs by the brink of the sea.

So here we are again, at the turn of the century, not knowing what to do, where to go, as if the whole pattern of things set, arranged, cherished as practically natural, is no more now than part of illusionary scene within an ever-shifting virtual reality. One click and you are in France, another click and you are in Alaska. You can look from inside and outside of your own situation, home, country, easily enriching the sense of the unreal, thus turning yourself into an observer of a perpetual world cinema. Yet the Angel of History, Angelus Novus, drawn by Klee and said to depict Walter Benjamin’s face, still looks back in horror. For even knowing what we were capable of in the past we still do not know what we are capable of in the future. The wind blows from Paradise, said Walter Benjamin, the world on the verge of fascistic upheaval, the wind called progress. Progress moves like wind along the face of the earth, building roads, taking natural resources, forcing nations into obedience for the sake of a service “higher” than any they could have ever imagined for themselves. As if the world was a classroom where progress causes some to fall behind and some to be advanced. Progress pushes lagging nations to their own borders, looking for a better future somewhere else. Progress pushes leading nations to their borders because, even with more than everybody else, they still need more and more. Poor nations break into families, families flee, find their way into the future, subside into Diasporas, build up along the lines of what they have left, to arrive at the second generation of half-admitted, not-really-admitted citizens of new states. And then the minute-man comes, the man with the gun, to guard the borders of his own country, not knowing that by doing so he turns his own country into a country on the run.

September 21, 2007: Tom Dreyer (South Africa), Ksenia Golubovich (Russia), Aziz Nazmi Shakir-Tash (Bulgaria), Verena Tay (Singapore)
Can we tell a real story of the Tanzanian old man? His light and darkness, his closeness and remoteness like that found in Rembrandt’s best paintings? The real big story of my friend Almut and her visionary father? For that, we must truly, verily see Angels, for Angels belong to that grand scheme of imagination William Blake talked about.

Who is mad enough to be like Melville, to throw away an established literary career for just one Moby Dick? Who is mad like Joyce, or Salinger? Who will be mad enough to be like Proust, to bury himself alive and write waiting for the times to return, while his asthma ate his lungs alive? Who will be mad enough to try again to ascend the steep slope of something Big, where the furies and the voices of heaven can be heard? Who would be mad enough to hear the voice of humanity suffering and lamenting again under the light shed by a story, a story now opened up as a common Fate? Does art matter that much? Unable to answer these questions I shall instead tell you a story.

I like this story. It has a sense of the renascent novellas I loved, following my love for fairy tales and preceding my love for novels.

Yet it is all true. And it has eye-witnesses to prove it.

It happened in the Vatican a couple of years ago. A group of writers, scholars and poets of the Eastern Church were welcomed warm-heartedly to the Vatican by the late Pope. Ages-old theological battles and the preceding history of wars were put aside, and the group was greeted as the representatives of the Eastern Light, a light long lost from the West. Before an audience with the Pope, the guests were asked to appear before a cardinal, the Pope’s assistant, who asked in French about each guest and their profession. Each presented himself boldly yet with dignity, for each was a true representative from his field. Only one of them, when asked, didn’t know what to say. She stood shyly and couldn’t raise her eyes. She didn’t know what to answer. Then, in an effort to escape the awkwardness of the situation, someone said: “She is a poet”. “A poet?” asked the cardinal. “Yes, yes!” everybody said, “A poet.” The cardinal grew silent and solemn. Then he turned to a secretary: “She is a poet,” he said. “This is very important.” Everyone looked on in amazement. “Are you a real poet?” he asked. The woman stood silently and then raised her eyes. He looked at her again and said “We shall have to study further. For you see true inspiration is fleeing from among us. Spirit so rarely comes to visit the world. For so long, we have not witnessed a true genius, and it is said that before the Last Days, the Spirit will leave the world. If you are a true poet, it is very, very important.” Who knows what the two thousand year-old Catholic Church had in store for verifying the truly-inspired word. Finding truth in another language, in another confession, was once proclaimed heretical. The cardinal and others the Church deems “next to Angels” were at that time considering the state of humanity itself, of our one race, so distinct from animals, gods and demons. The fate of this race suddenly depending so much on whether that quiet woman was or was not a true poet.

And because I’m telling you this story you already know the answer.