INTRODUCTION

For the American poet, Wallace Stevens, angels were "necessary." Through their eyes, one "saw the world anew."[1] Angels offer special knowledge, he indicated, by means of their close-to-human incarnation – but it is also their difference from humankind that signifies their meaning. Angels have long had their place in world religions, from the Assyrian, Hindu, and Roman traditions to those of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Their relation to the human person invariably brings revelation, and poses metaphysical questions about the character of faith, the afterlife, and the body.

In 1139, Bernard of Clairvaux eloquently inquired as to "the ways of the holy angels," voicing a universal curiosity in the West that has animated thinkers from Late Antiquity into modern times. From the Jewish Apocrypha through the Bible, angels are instruments of salvation and retribution, mystical unveilers, and harbingers of hope. They are embodiments of the idea of knowledge, often enacting the soul's active and contemplative capacities. They invite, equally, symbolic and taxonomical identification. Whatever an angel may be – and its potentiality, suspension, and quickness are at the core of its meaning – it is at a defining intersection of diverse belief structures and philosophical systems. To define an angel for any period and culture is at the same time to make a contrast with what is incontrovertibly "human."

Although there have been scholarly studies of angels, there has been no comprehensive study of their representation in the West in the Early Modern era, nor a full analysis of their iconography from an

interdisciplinary perspective. No such single study is possible. By focusing on Italy in the years bracketed by the birth of Dante (1265–1321) and the unfolding of the Counter-Reformation in the sixteenth century, I aim to show how angels engage in shifting visions of the afterlife, and illuminate fundamental definitions of the difference between the material and immaterial worlds. By interrogating written and visual sources, including philosophical and theological treatises, and in evaluating the religious pluralism of the Renaissance, I aim to give new readings to pictorial works and new meaning to angels themselves.

In this study, I have three aims: first, to consider the character of Renaissance angelology as distinct from the medieval theological traditions that informed it and from which it grew. I have found it essential to begin with medieval angelology since persons of Christian faith in the Middle Ages, much like those in later centuries, understood themselves to be subjects of the Virgin in the company of her angels, and for them, moreover, the angels comprised forms of explanation and guides to theological discovery. These themes prove indelibly important to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries where continuities are as significant as rupture. Second, I aim to trace the iconography of angels in text and in visual form with a view to making available a precise key to their representation, whether through wing color, attribute, or action. Third, above all, I intend to uncover the philosophical underpinnings of medieval and Renaissance definitions of the angelic and angelic nature as a way to understanding the fabric of Renaissance philosophy itself. From Dante through Giovanni Pico della Mirandola to the vibrant angelic interventions of the Vatican Stanze, angels in the Italian Renaissance are touchstones and markers of the period's intellectual self-understanding, whether this is in terms of Greco-Roman revival, theological doctrine, or artistic imagination.

To think about angels in any of the world's religions is to think about the question of embodiment, for angels pose the most inviting kind of challenge for theologians, artists, and art historians. It is reasonable, for one thing, to at least ask whether theologians modeled angels after pictorial representations. As messenger figures, they elect human form – a medieval theory posited that they could morph into any shape, such as saints in visions – yet they are strictly incorporeal and without gender in their theological essence, urging the most abstract categories of

identification. For the Renaissance, many of these themes seem to have come into focus in ways that get to the heart of that era's self-understanding: in philosophy and theology, as well as in art.

The study of angels, or angelology, was a formal component of the medieval theological curriculum of the University of Paris, for which Bonaventure (c. 1217–1274), the "Seraphic Doctor," and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), the "Angelic Doctor," wrote foundational scholastic works. Medievalists across disciplines, as well as those specializing in the religion and cultures of the East, have also long studied angels, leaving us with a rich and illuminating body of scholarship.[2] Angels continued to be ubiquitous in Early Modern times, although, as such, they are a relatively neglected subject in contemporary scholarship.[3] In looking to the interrelationship of textual and visual traditions, I am also aware of the distinct languages of each. As with the word, the work of art is its own event with its own history, the subject of art history. In examining the illustrations to Dante's *Comedy*, for example, I am mindful, as well, of the slippage between word and image, and of the ways in which Giovanni di Paolo's decisions led to absences, elisions, and inventions when his paintings are compared to Dante's text. So, too, outside the demands of the written narrative, there is what I am tempted to call a metaphysics of the artistic imagination, and a truth-value in the object itself. Giovanni was an inventor in his own right. And for Dante, to complicate matters further, his angelic metaphysics encompasses the very stuff of visual experience, sight itself and the ways it is courted in reflections, in mirrors, and in light. Flight is another motif, as well. And I mean not only poetic metaphors of seeing, reflecting, and flying, but also their philosophical underpinnings.[4]

The iconography of angels alone is a broad topic, beginning with the question of their origins as winged figures. It may be a truism expressed by a majority of scholars that angels' wings derive from those of their antique or "pagan" precursors, yet, like all truisms, while containing a kernel of truth, it also flattens out complexities.[5] The early Christian apologist, Tertullian (c. 160–220 C.E.), posited the association of angels and demons with the attribute of wings, and, in linking wings to their aerial and fast-moving qualities, he set in motion their ancient and multifaceted affiliation with the winds.[6] The winds, too, in early representations, like angels, carried souls aloft.[7] Wings and, with them, the

multiple eyes on the wings of the Cherubim, derived from the vision of Ezekiel (1: 18; 10: 12), and illustrated both the omnipresence and omniscience of God.[8] Together, the winds and the angels were invisible yet potent cosmic agents of transition and transformation, whether in the afterlife or in the here and now. By the time of Donatello's *Cavalcanti Altar* (c. 1435) in Santa Croce, Florence, the emotive *putti* of the frame, projecting the inner turmoil of the Virgin's response to Gabriel's arrival, appear perhaps as types of *spiritelli*, or as small signs of the power of the Holy Spirit. Their name, occasionally employed in the Quattrocento, derives from the motion of air, whether in breath or wind.[9]

The fifth-century example of the Cotton Genesis contains angels, psyches, and winged personifications such that gender and costume provide keys to distinguishing among them: the winged personifications are garlanded female figures while the angels are purple and gold-clad male figures, yet even these have been misunderstood as human persons.[10] At the same time, the likeness of angels to eunuchs and imperial *cubicularii* has much to reveal not only about concepts of the angelic but also about the socio-historical resonances of imperial culture in Byzantium.[11] As it turns out, winged figures from different religious contexts – antique and Christian – can cohabit and even share some of the same symbolic labor while being iconographically distinct. In the Cotton Genesis, for example, winged beings in the Creation pages who are not angels evoke time as a Christian concern while drawing on pre-Christian imagery.[12] Interpretations of winged forms as angels have, however, also been linked with provocative exegetical and iconographical theories, among the most persuasive of which are those that make connections between Augustine's views on Creation and his conception of angels as illumination and light. Creation as portrayed in the Cotton Genesis and the thirteenth-century mosaics of San Marco, Venice, share an Augustinian identity.[13]

The image of the winged man in Christianity had independent origins. Ezekiel (1: 5–6) and Revelation (4: 7–8), as instances, or Exodus (25: 20), Daniel (9: 21), and Revelation (14: 6), refer to the wings of Cherubim and Seraphim as instruments of motion and emblems of divine mystery.[14] Daniel was explicit in observing that the visionary beasts of his dream had wings like birds (7: 4–6), while the Seraphim of Isaiah (6: 1–3) employ two wings for flight and two sets of two to cover their face and feet. By the

third and fourth centuries, Christians thought of wings as "symbols of the angels' transcendental nature":[15]

> Every spirit is winged, both angels and demons. In this way, in a moment they are everywhere: all the world is for them one place; what is taking place everywhere is as easy for them to know as to tell. It is thought that their velocity is divine, because their substance is not known.[16]

The anonymous twelfth-century author of *On the Six Wings of the Cherubim* delineated the flight of the human soul into the light of love using the very forms of the feathers (five) and wings (six) of the Seraphim (not Cherubim) as metaphors for the spiritual quest of this earthly life and of the soul's journey to God: "Such flight is supported on the strong wings and delicate feathers of the angelic Seraphim, whereby the soul hovers in both the active and contemplative life."[17] The treatise begins as a description of an annotated drawing of the "Cherubim Mystici" and, as such, suggests the inseparable relation between image and explanation, diagram and theological content.[18] At the conclusion of his ruminations on the Sixth Wing, which is "the love of God," he says:

> These are the wings of which the psalmist said, *Hide me under the shadow of your wings, from the face of the wicked who assail me*. And who said, *I will take hope in the shadow of your wings until the injustice has passed*. These are the feathers of which the psalmist also said, *Who will give me feathers like the dove, that I might fly away and be at rest?* "That I might fly away," the psalmist said, abandoning the earth, striving passionately after heaven, and delighting in the eternal blessing, the true freedom of peace. Amen.[19]

As late as the early fifteenth century, Italian illuminators continued to paint mnemonic "Cherub" images that had by now, to look at one example, become increasingly complex, requiring rotation of the page in order to read the angel's wings, which surrounded a red face afire with divine love; wings that might spell out autonomous topics for sermons.[20] Rearranging the penitential themes of earlier Cherub images, the "flight wings" of this later image, labeled "Confession" and "Satisfaction," and their subheadings, are as follows: for *Confessio*, effusion of tears; holy meditation; straightforward speech; truthful thought; and prompt obedience; for *Satisfactio*, decorous looking; chaste hearing; modest scent;

temperate eating; and holy touching.[21] Thus, as autonomous rubrics to guide the homilist as he composed his sermon, the wings of this Cherub distinguished possible topics from one another while making clear, in this instance, the right actions and sensory controls that should be exercised by the reader.

For Richard of Saint-Victor (d. 1173), in his *Mystical Ark*, the action of "hovering" evoked the very paradoxes at the heart of angelic spirituality: how, for example, the visibility of the angel leads to contemplation of the invisible. Richard seems to have been a bird watcher, in fact, and his sensitive observation of them informed his spiritual outlook. Like birds, angels and humans can "hover" while in motion, taking in the forms of God's wisdom. With the help of grace, the Cherubim are able to "fly" to contemplation "'beyond' reason;" this he distinguished from contemplation with the aid of reason.[22] "And of Richard," Dante wrote, "who in contemplation was more than human."[23] In fact, the metaphors of wings and flight are universal relative to contemplation:

> To look at the birds of the sky is to see them flying. One is reminded of those verses of Acarya Atisa, the great Buddhist sage of the Mahayana tradition, saying that a bird with folded wings cannot fly up into the sky just as a man who has not unfolded primordial wisdom cannot contribute to the well-being of the world. To look at the birds is to fly with them. To contemplate is this undivided holistic activity.[24]

Both writers and artists faced the same kind of challenge in decoding the appearance of angels mentioned in Scripture, including the Hebrew Testament. When three "men" came to Abraham (Gen. 18), this episode was variously represented as the arrival of three young men before a seated Abraham, as in its first manifestation in the fourth-century catacomb on Via Latina, or as encompassing a burst of light between two angels, a Christological reference, as in the fifth-century mosaics of Rome's basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. Genesis does not identify these figures as angels; later Jewish and Christian commentaries determined that that was who they were, and in the Christian context, they became a type for the Trinity. Alternatively, when "men" appeared to Abraham and Sarah at Mamre, this event was interpreted as a typological figuration of the Annunciation.[25] The artist's choice of wings in the literal rendering of the Annunciation itself announces this scene as privileged and heavenly; by contrast, the

wingless angels in front of Sarah and Abraham might convey the earth-bound quality of the epiphany or the initial reaction of Abraham, which was not to recognize the "men" as angels.[26] Angels are equipped with wings according to their context and, too, because of the impreciseness of scriptural descriptions of the appearance of angels. In addition to angels and archangels, Scripture contains references to other angelic beings who, in turn, inspired Pseudo-Dionysius in the sixth century to set out and rationalize his Nine Orders.[27]

As early as the late third or early fourth century, Methodius of Olympus alluded to an image with "likenesses fashioned from gold of his angels, who are the Principalities and the Powers, [which] we make in honour and faith in him."[28] Images of winged youths from as early as the seventh century connote angels as a general type, even where the different orders may be intended, and this tradition becomes a very long one in Byzantine art as well as in Christian art more widely.[29] In early Byzantine art, sometimes wingless youths stand in for their colleagues whose scriptural likenesses, such as the Cherubim as six-winged tetramorphs, are quite specific. When the Seraphim and Cherubim do appear in closer conformity to Isaiah, for example, or Ezekiel, it is – at least in Byzantine art – in a heightened liturgical setting, particularly in connection with the "Holy, holy, holy" (the Trisagion).[30] By the same token, alterations in artistic style in Byzantine art registered changes in the nature and meaning of angels.[31] That artists did not always squarely face the challenge of the enigma of the angels, relying as they had to on the incomplete accounts in Scripture and conventions of generic repetition of wingless or winged young men, is perhaps more true of Eastern or Byzantine Christian culture; nonetheless, wings are a point of departure for any consideration of angels' meaning, in whatever medieval and Renaissance context.[32] Color and clouds also served as vehicles for their scriptural bodies, and more frequently in the Latin West to the extent that these forms become part and parcel of angels' iconography.[33] That angels could legitimately be portrayed in art had to be set out in 787 by the Second Council of Nicaea, a fact that demonstrates the very contentiousness of the issue.[34] Artists had, however, portrayed angels long before. The fact that an angel is a kind of dissimulation makes the project of representation both exciting and fraught; at once drawing us, and artists of the past, to the edge of an interpretive abyss, and yet leading us, too, to

the highest levels of metaphysical contemplation.[35] We might ask, in fact, whether the controversies of the past – for example, the relation of pagan models to Christian motifs, the risks of idolatry and of debasing spiritual creatures – are really over.

Angels often incline to unexpected, even dramatic gestures, and these seem to have been permissible within tacit codes of theological decorum. An angel's identity as spirit, his sharing simultaneously in divine foreknowledge and human affairs, gives him a unique freedom as a register of the human passions and as an instrument, quite literally, for the music, harmonious or otherwise, of the heavens. In medieval and Renaissance art, angels often embody untrammeled affect. Related to this, they also afford artists myriad opportunities for technical erudition and experimentation, as with foreshortening and *cangianti*. These, too, cannot be separated from their otherworldly origins and were usually the mark of them. In Duccio di Buoninsegna's *Crucifixion* panel from his *Maestà*, as one example, mourning angels wipe tears on their robes, while others, still more poignantly, kiss Christ's bleeding hands. In Giotto's version, in the Scrovegni Chapel, ten symmetrically placed angels – a number reflecting divine perfection, according to the tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius – lament Christ's passing, and one, closest to Christ, tears at his chest with astonishing feeling. All of these angels' bodies trail into clouds as befitting their scriptural nature but also, as one ingenious interpretation has it, reflecting Giotto's observation of the tail of Halley's Comet in 1310.[36]

The otherworldliness of angels, the absence of bodily travail and physical impediment that characterizes them, could be transferred, by analogy, to the work, or *aria*, of the artist himself. The notion of *aria*, as suggested by Giorgio Vasari, meant rendering the invisible visible; here, then, one quality of angels and the goals of Renaissance painting and sculpture intersect.[37] When he comments on Fra Angelico's *Coronation of the Virgin* (Plate I), an angelic theme governs his response, for there is:

> a choir of angels and a numberless multitude of saints male and female, so many in number, so well done and with such varied attitudes and different airs of heads that incredible pleasure and sweetness is felt in seeing it [. . .] because all the saints that are there are not only alive with delicate and sweet airs, but the coloring of the painting seems as if it has been done by an angel.[38]

Vasari uses this same simile when describing Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, this time to refer to the artist's own painted features and, by association, his divine and inimitable capabilities:

> And since Francesco had an air of great beauty, with a face and aspect full of grace, in the likeness rather of an angel than of a man, his image on that ball had the appearance of a thing divine. So happily, indeed, did he succeed in the whole of this work, that the painting was no less real than the reality, and in it were seen the lustre of the glass, the reflection of every detail, and the lights and shadows, all so true and natural, that nothing more could have been looked for from the brain of man.[39]

Leonardo's precocious addition of an angel to his master, Verrocchio's, *Baptism of Christ*, evokes just these qualities of *aria* for, unlike his companion, Leonardo's figure is subject to – and creates – its own physical laws. The blue ribbons behind him move on their own, free from nature's confines, while his halo, skin, and eyes are clear, imbued with light and veiled in atmosphere, "condensations" in their own way, as Aquinas himself might have said.[40] Leonardo's apprenticeship with Verrocchio was bracketed, in fact, by angels: his *Tobias and the Angel* and his angel in the *Baptism*.[41] The description in these paintings of natural phenomena marks them to be from a hand other than Verrocchio's. The touch of the brush that gives us a sense of the film just beginning to cloud the eye of Tobias's fish seems to be the mark of a painter who was mindful of the visual witticism he was making – that is, that this very fish would provide the means to dispel the white films over the eyes of Tobit, Tobias's father.[42] It is as if angels represented for Leonardo both an entrée into the métier of painting and his departure from it as a virtuoso master.

Another field of knowledge for which discussion of the character of angels is revealing is that of the philosophy of mind, including theories of communication. In his letter to the Corinthians (I Cor. 13: 1), Paul famously said: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal." Just how angels communicated, and what constituted angelic language, occupied a host of medieval theologians, including Thomas Aquinas and his adversary on this subject, William of Ockham.[43] For Aquinas, will guided an angel's impulse to communicate, and if he willed

communication with only one other angel – say, Raphael to Gabriel – then only his destined listener would hear him.[44] For Ockham, on the other hand, the listener's will determined whether he might hear the voice of another angel. That voice could also be heard by other angels, depending on their proximity. For Ockham, angels' thoughts are not private. Behind these differences lie theories of mental language, for Aquinas thought that mental images, in both humans and angels, exist in the intellect in three different ways: *in habitu*, *in actu* (or the *verbum cordis*), and *in ordine ad alterum* (or *ut ad aliud relatum*). These correspond respectively to states of idle cogitation, active consideration (or Augustine's "mental word"), or as a directed, that is, addressed and coordinated communication.[45] This last occurs before speech or before writing; in the case of angels, neither of these activities is necessary. Thought and language, for Aquinas, are separate; they are one and the same for Ockham. For Aquinas, the angel grasped his object at once and in all its fullness; this was a perfected and essentially visual operation; a failing in the processes of the human mind leads us to construct words and sentences and the like. For Ockham, angels and mortals think alike, and with language.

The reverberations of Aquinas's and Ockham's distinctions led subsequent commentators to new interpretations. Richard of Middleton posited that the angelic *locutio*, the putting of thought into words, was equivalent to producing a spiritual ray that would be aimed at the addressee.[46] This variation – and there were others that took opposing views – seems sympathetic to pictorial instances of the Annunciation, such as Fra Angelico's Cortona *Annunciation* (Plate II) in which Gabriel's greeting appears in both golden rays and text. More generally, the questions raised by Aquinas and others led to experimental debates about the nature of the mind itself, the prerequisites for sharing knowledge, the relation between causality and intentionality, and the role of the Aristotelian idea of *similitudo*.[47] Ockham even allowed for a kind of matching of visual representations as a mode of angelic dialogue, and this, too, at least potentially, has great consequences for medieval and Renaissance visual culture. That the subject of how angels spoke to one another was examined so carefully led to real advances in the philosophy of the mind – that is, particularly as angels potentially separated thought from verbal articulation – and it led to the "idealization" and "dramatization" of philosophical problems that remain of urgent interest today.[48]