

Non-Angelic Angels: Reinterpretations of Angels in Dante Gabriel Rossetti *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* and George Frederick Watts' *Death Crowning Innocence*

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Despite their peculiar character, angels have always played an important part in religious beliefs. In Christian tradition, the Scripture provides several instances of angelic encounters, starting from the Old Testament's meeting of Abraham and Angels, Jacob's wrestling with the Angel along with the New Testament famous scene of the Annunciation. However, the problem arises when it comes to the reimagining of angels from religious texts. Precisely because of vague descriptions of angelic appearance, artists were allowed to imagine angels as grand, ethereal and powerful creatures, with impressive wings and flowing robes (Martin 11). In fact, the biblical accounts of angels mostly focused on their functions, namely protecting people, bringing judgement upon God's adversaries and being messengers of God ("Angels (Christianity)").¹ Yet, some of the nineteenth-century British artists decided to reinterpret the classic depictions of angels and present them not as people's companions, enveloped by heavenly light and godly grace. Some of the Victorian representations of angels showed how artists played with the angelic conventions, showing them as either frightening and eroticised messengers of God as in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (1849–50) or the seemingly terrifying caregiver that provides comfort and consolation as in George Frederick Watts's painting *Death Crowning Innocence* (1886–7).

The depiction of angels in art has been changing throughout the centuries. The most striking element in the early Christian images was the lack of angelic wings. One of the earliest representations can be found in the Catacomb of Priscilla where the angel is portrayed as a man without wings, wearing a long-sleeved tunic, similar to liturgical vestments. The angel is making the oratorical gesture, raising the right arm to speak, in the same manner as the old emperors and rhetors (Buranelli et al. 16). The emergence of angelic wings and halos in the Christian tradition could be

¹ In fact, the very name "Angel" comes from Greek word "aggelos", which is a translation from Hebrew, and it means "a messenger". More about the history of angels in: Melvyn Bragg "Angels". Audio blog post. *In Our Time*.

traced back to the early fifth century. These attributes can be found for instance in the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome where angels, protecting the birth of Jesus, are depicted as young men with wings and gleaming halos around their heads who wear white Roman togas (Jones 20). As David Albert Jones notices, from that moment the image of an angel as a man with wings, halos and sometimes harps has become a standard vision of the heavenly messengers (21). Nonetheless, he points out that the representations of angels mirrored the fluctuating progression of the history of Christianity. At first, ancient Christianity did not pay much attention to the presence of angels in the set of beliefs, therefore their depictions were relatively rare. However, this trend changed when in 313 AD emperor Constantine declared Christianity a dominant religion. Thus, it became possible to build grand, high churches with angelic themes in decorations and mosaics, making allusions to the heavenly character of angels. Moreover, the Western medieval art decided to implement more symbols, with less attention to the accurate representations of angels. As a result, the depictions of holy messengers relied mainly on the use of characteristic objects and artefacts that could be associated with a specific angel, such as a sword, key or palm.

In contrast, the Renaissance period rejected the symbolic aspect of God's messengers. With the sixteenth-century humanistic spirit, contemporary artists decided to focus on their realistic representations as young men or children. Nonetheless, the sixteenth century also saw the emergence of the Protestant culture which treated the cult of angels with great suspicion and, for that reason, the angelic art became greatly secularised and devoid of any religious or spiritual aspects. With the emergence of Counter-reformation in the seventeenth century, the Roman Catholic Church insisted that the objective of religious art was to evoke a sense of overwhelming awe and the wave of emotions in the believers, hence the re-emergence of deeply spiritual and almost ecstatic images of angels. Obviously, the eighteenth century Enlightenment greatly influenced the religious beliefs thus the appearance of so-called secular angels, known as putti. They were mostly treated as a domestic decoration in the Rococo style, lacking any particular religious content.

However, the nineteenth-century art rediscovered the images of angels with their heavenly properties as a reaction to cruel consequences of the Industrial Revolution where people had to solely rely on their own work and perseverance. The artistic reaction to changes within British culture and society, connecting it with the use of deeply religious imagery could be traced, for instance, in William Blake's works and, later on, in the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (Jones 23-29). The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB), as the name suggests, aimed to revive the ideals of art from before the time of Rafael (1483-1520) in order to change the

painting style in British art (Barringer 7). As the opposition to the mainstream Royal Academy of Art, the PRB tried to apply rich, bright colours, flat surfaces and the sincerity of fifteenth-century Italian art. To the shock of the Victorian public, they also tried to introduce a complex set of symbols to the paintings. Yet, what is the most striking element in the Pre-Raphaelite style is a peculiar blend of realism and religion, sacred and profane.

One of the images that reinterpret the religious ideas from the Scripture was Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* ('Behold the servant of the Lord'). The picture depicts the scene of the Annunciation from the Gospel of Luke in which Virgin Mary is visited by Archangel Gabriel with the message that she would give birth to Jesus (Barringer 42). Rossetti, inspired by the early Renaissance artists such as Botticelli (1445-1510) and Fra Angelico (1387-1455), decided to use the traditional motif, but reinterpret the scene in a radical way. Traditionally, the Virgin Mary is presented in a contemplative state, immediately accepting her fate and future burden. However, in Rossetti's painting, Mary is shown as a young, frightened, distressed, and awkward girl in front of a masculine and menacing Archangel Gabriel. This contrast is highlighted by a highly unusual perspective, applied "in order to add a hypnotic charge to the encounter between (...) Angel Gabriel and (...) adolescent figure of the Virgin, modelled from Christina Rossetti" (Barringer 42). Mary is presented in an extremely private situation, rising from the bed and curling in the corner of her room; as a matter of fact, she looks as if roused from sleep. Simultaneously, Archangel Gabriel is standing tall above her and gives her a white lily, which is often associated with either innocence or death. What is interesting, the angel holds the lily in a peculiar way, namely pointing at her bosom, which may imply the very moment of the Annunciation. Both characters are dressed in white, signifying the purity of Mary and the purity of Angel's intentions. Indeed, the angel's role as God's messenger is highlighted by a white dove that marks the presence of the Holy Spirit (Fowle, "Ecce Ancilla Domini! (The Annunciation)").

Despite the application of religious symbolism, Rossetti's angel seems to be the unconventional one. Instead of using a long-haired boyish angel with mighty wings, Rossetti decided to paint a muscular Gabriel without wings or gracefully delicate halo. His face is only visible from a highly shadowed profile. Therefore, the viewer cannot fully decipher the expression on the angel's face (Newman "Dramatic Innovations on a Traditional Theme: Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*"). Moreover, because the angel delivers the news standing in front of Mary, the observer can glimpse the outline of the naked body beneath the tunic the angel is wearing (Hołdys 36-42). In other words, there is a conflict between the sacred subject matter and the profane way of presenting the angel. This clash of erotic and religious elements

becomes a dominating trend in Rossetti's general artistic endeavour. In this painting, Rossetti subverts the idea of angelic presence as a calming one, and portrays Archangel Gabriel as the messenger of God that invades the privacy of a young adolescent girl. As a consequence, the Virgin Mary looks as if she was a victim of circumstance so she must accept a huge burden brought upon her by a seemingly soothing angel who appears to be a rather threatening figure.

Another artist that created a both fascinating and conflicting image of the Victorian angel was George Frederick Watts. Throughout his life, he was mostly known for the allegorical paintings such as *Time, Death and Judgement* or *Love and Death*. In spite of being a mainstream painter, Watts tended to play with the typical representations of the grand ideas and place them in the tangled web of everyday dilemmas in the new industrial world. Apart from dealing with the universal notions, in one of his paintings Watts decided to interpret the religious idea in an interesting way. In *Death Crowning Innocence* (1896), Watts depicted the pseudo-angelic figure, who is seemingly dangerous and unpleasant to encounter but fulfils its duty with utmost devotion. The painting shows an angel-like figure, also referred as the Angel of Death, holding a little dead infant and encircles the baby with the majestic dark wings as if protecting the child from any outside dangers. As the nineteenth century commentator and writer Hugh MacMillan noted, the image can "bring the comfort to many a sorely bereaved mother" (MacMillan 246) as the face of the angel is "full of pity and has an expression of intense yearning" (MacMillan 246), thus trying to mirror the feelings of parents who mourn their dead children and provide comfort for them ("Death Crowning Innocence"). Interestingly, the depiction of Death as a soothing angel and even woman-angel breaks with the traditional depiction of death as a threatening and scary. Watts, by mixing the image of death and angel, created the art that would console the nineteenth-century viewers who lost their children. In case of *Death Crowning Innocence*, the winged female angel holds a baby on her lap, suggesting that Death can be treated as a gentle nurse who takes care of the infants and not as a malicious and devouring Lamia.

All in all, the Victorian painters drew inspiration from the religious symbols and traditional Christian depictions of the heavenly messengers. Yet, what made these paintings so interesting and troubling for the audience was the attempts to retell the biblical stories and playing with the long-established conventions of portraying angels in art. In case of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*, Archangel Gabriel is presented as a masculine figure who invades the privacy of the young, terrified girl. By creating this kind of narrative in the picture, Rossetti allowed himself to reinterpret the story of the Annunciation and implement the emotional aspect of the Virgin Mary's duty. Similarly, the revision of an angel in George

Frederick Watts's *Death Crowning Innocence* shows that the seemingly threatening idea of death, presented in angelic disguise, becomes a consolatory force. As a matter of fact, it communicates a positive message, namely giving hope and the necessity of coming to terms with the grief connected with the loss of a child. However, one of the questions that could be posed is why specifically angels? It can be argued that because of the prevailing Protestant trend in the Anglican Church that rejected the influence of saints, the Victorians shifted their focus on the other heavenly creatures. That is why the variety of denominations, for instance the Baptists took interest in so-called angelic studies (Spurgeon 100-111). As the Victorian times were associated with the age of transition in almost every aspect of life, angels became a perfect bridge between people and God that would give a sense companionship in the ever-changing world. Yet, despite fulfilling their traditional duties as the God's servants, the Victorian artists decided to express their complicated attitude towards religion through unconventional depictions in the Victorian paintings.

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