

Gravity's Angels in America, or, Pynchon's Angelology Revisited

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1: No Angels in America

"There are no angels in America," says Louis Ironson, a character in Tony Kushner's epic play, *Angels in America* (92). This line is fraught with multiple ironies, some of them unintended. Though the character Louis doesn't know it, in fact there *are* angels in his America, the America of 1985, one of whom will shortly manifest itself to his former lover, Prior. Moreover, though the playwright Kushner might not have known it yet, as of 1990, when the first part of his two-part play premiered, there were already angels in *his* America as well; and by 1993, when his play opened on Broadway, there would be many more of them.

Since the end of the 1980s, the American marketplace has become saturated with angel imagery. "Angels Are Everywhere," read the headline of a *New York Times* editorial for Sunday, September 4, 1994. The *Times* meant everywhere in the secondary, simulacral sphere of the mass media and popular culture, not everywhere in the real world. (But where is the real world? These days, nowhere but on MTV . . .) Some six months later, on March 16, 1995, the "Calvin and Hobbes" comic strip offered this corroboration:

Calvin (to Hobbes): "I think angels are everywhere."

Hobbes: "You do?"

Calvin: "They're on calendars, books, greeting cards . . . almost every product imaginable."

Hobbes (ironically): "What a spiritual age we live in."

Calvin is right: from tabloids to coffee-table books, from greeting cards and calendars to mugs and t-shirts, from serious newsmagazines to television and Hollywood movies—not to mention comic strips—every niche of mass culture has filled to overflowing with angels.

By its very nature, the rise and diffusion of a popular fad is an elusive phenomenon, hard to capture on a timeline. Nevertheless, certain landmarks or thresholds in the mass marketing of angels can be identified. December 27, 1993: *Time* magazine featured a cover-story

on angels, a sure indication that they had arrived. February 7, 1995: Judge Lance Ito, presiding over the "Trial of the Century," the intensively televised murder-trial of O. J. Simpson, reprimanded prosecutor Marcia Clark for wearing the same angel pin as that worn by the relatives of victim Nicole Brown Simpson. (Clark took off her pin, but she might have argued, with some justice, that everybody was wearing such pins nowadays.) Summer 1997: Victoria's Secret, lingerie retailer, used voluptuous winged models in its catalogues and other advertising to introduce a new line of "Angel" undergarments. As Hobbes says, what a spiritual age we live in.

Time magazine, O. J., Victoria's Secret: where could angels possibly go from there? They could go to Hollywood, of course, and to weekly network television. Formerly a minor and sporadic subgenre of Hollywood movie, angelic visitation has become a staple of American television series and feature films in the 1990s. CBS introduced *Touched by an Angel* in the 1994-95 season, and it is still going strong as I write. *Michael*, a film starring John Travolta in the archangelic role, was a Christmastime offering in 1996. Hollywood's most recent angel movie is *City of Angels* (Brad Silberling, 1998), a remake of Wim Wenders's 1987 classic, *Wings of Desire*. Starring Nicholas Cage and Meg Ryan, *City of Angels* recapitulates the entire range of angelic roles, angelic behavior and angel imagery developed in popular culture over the preceding decade. Whatever its deficiencies as a film or as a remake, it is an invaluable document for the student of postmodern angel iconology.¹

Angels in America, though generally hospitable to all kinds of pop-cultural material, does not in fact derive its angels from the angel imagery that was beginning to circulate in the surrounding popular culture during the early 1990s, the very years when *Angels* was being developed and premiered. Rather, Kushner's angels derive in almost every respect from high culture: from scripture and scriptural commentary, but especially from Walter Benjamin's "angel of history."² So Kushner's high angels and pop-culture's low angels occupy the same moment, but only by a kind of historical accident (if you believe in accidents).

Now rewind from 1993 to 1973. There are no angels in America in 1973—that is, there aren't any until *Gravity's Rainbow* arrives, with its Angel over Lübeck, its "watchmen of world's edge," its Virgin of Hiroshima, its "star-blotting Moslem angels" of Central Asia, its various avatars of the Angel of Death, and all its other miscellaneous angel imagery. I exaggerate, of course; one could certainly find angels in the marketplace in 1973, as well as in certain subcultural niches, but they were not nearly as ubiquitous on the cultural scene as they would be

twenty years later. In 1973, angel imagery could have been found, for instance, in the gay subculture, where angels functioned both as figures with whom gay men identified and as idealized objects of gay desire. Twenty years later, Kushner would play on this gay meaning of the term when he titled his "gay fantasia on national themes" *Angels in America*. Partly overlapping with the gay use of angel imagery was its use by the Beats, already by 1973 a historical movement. (Ginsberg's "Howl" is representative: I count at least eight angel references in it.) On gay and Beat angels, check out Maria Damon. She knows more about it than you'll ever find here.

In popular and mass culture circa 1973, the presence of angels was limited. The Catholic Church, and Catholic popular devotion in particular, never abandoned angels, especially in their guardian function; but for American Protestants, angel imagery was generally limited to Christmastime. After Christmas, the angels were stored away again until next year. Hollywood, of course, showed sporadic interest in angels over the years, as in *Heaven Can Wait* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1943) or *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946) or *Angels in the Outfield* (Clarence Brown, 1951), but there was no sustained tradition of angel movies, and no long-running angel TV series until Michael Landon's *Highway to Heaven* (1984–1989). Moreover, such angel movies as were produced tended to be released during the Christmas season when, again, angel imagery formed part of the expected traditional decor; this was the case with *It's a Wonderful Life* just as it was, more recently, with *Michael*.

It is striking how little the angels of *Gravity's Rainbow* owe to either the subcultural or the pop-cultural angel imagery that would have been available to Pynchon in the late 1960s and early '70s. Pynchon displays little or no direct knowledge of gay subculture, including gay angelology, in *Gravity's Rainbow*; his homosexual characters and situations derive almost entirely from homophobic stereotypes. As for popular angel iconology, Pynchon shows no particular interest, or he deliberately ignores it. Consider the Christmas episodes in part 1: the Advent evensong episode, the episode of Pointsman's holiday visit to Gwenhidwy, the traditional Christmas pantomime (GR 127–36, 169–74, 174–77). All provide occasions for plentiful references to Christmas angels, but in fact angels are almost entirely excluded. One angel appears in a paraphrase of a hymn's lyric (134), the Jamaican singer is referred to as a "mock-angel" (135), a topical version of "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" is cited (177), and that's all. Christmas angels are conspicuous by their near-total absence. And what do we get in their place? Christmas water bugs (173–74). We can only conclude, I think,

that Pynchon is at best indifferent or blind to the angels of pop-culture iconology, at worst hostile to them.

Critics who have analyzed Pynchon's angelology, including Charles Hohmann, Kathryn Hume, Robert McLaughlin and Dwight Eddins, though they agree about little else, do concur in attributing the angels of *Gravity's Rainbow* exclusively to prestigious, high-culture sources: the Kabbalah, possibly the Gnostic scriptures and other esoteric writings, certainly Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. No one to my knowledge has ever tried to argue that Pynchon's angels derive from pop-culture angels. Pynchon's are sublime and awe-inspiring angels, like the ones Rilke claimed to have discovered in the Islamic tradition, and not at all like the domesticated, sentimental angels of Nativity scenes, let alone the consumer icons of the 1990s.³ Even if Pynchon's angels are actually parodic of Rilke, as McLaughlin argues, they are serious, tendentious parodies, not merely iconoclastic or trivializing.

This is not something that could be said about the angels of postmodernist literature before the arrival of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Before Pynchon, postmodernist literary angelology was largely ironic and derisive, corrosively parodic, reflecting a general spirit of iconoclasm and a suspicion of metaphysics. Typical of this earlier phase is the very old man with enormous wings of Gabriel García Márquez's story by that title (1972), an angel who, having fallen to earth, comes to be housed in a chicken coop. Another example is Donald Barthelme's mock-essay "On Angels" (1970), based on Gustav Davidson's more mutedly ironic *Dictionary of Angels* (1967). The legacy of this corrosive irony toward angels has been long and potent, persisting down to the 1980s and beyond. For instance, Barthelme's distraught angels, abandoned by God, contribute something to the plight of Kushner's angels in *Angels in America*, while the imagery of García Márquez's "Very Old Man" recurs in R.E.M.'s memorable video for their song "Losing My Religion" (1991).

Nevertheless, the ironic model of the angel has not been the only one, or even the most salient one, in postmodernist writing and other media since 1973. Rather, it is the serious and sublime angel, the angel of *Gravity's Rainbow*, that has come increasingly to engage the imaginations of postmodernist artists. Think of James Merrill's poetic trilogy, *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1976–1982), Harold Brodkey's ambitious short story "Angel" (1985), Joseph McElroy's mega-novel *Women and Men* (1987), Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (1988), Wenders and Handke's *Wings of Desire* (*Der Himmel über Berlin*) and its lesser sequel, *Faraway, So Close* (1993), and of course Kushner's *Angels in America*; the list could easily be extended. It would be foolhardy, no doubt, to credit Pynchon with having singlehandedly

made the world safe for unironic angels; nevertheless, it certainly seems that the appearance of *Gravity's Rainbow* signalled the onset of a new, more serious and exploratory phase in postmodernist angel-imagery.

That exploratory phase seems to have been brought to a premature end in our own decade by forces outside Pynchon's or any other individual artist's control—the forces of an ever-expanding culture industry and its voracious appetite for recycled imagery. Worse, these same forces that have preempted serious exploration of the angel motif also threaten to obscure the accomplishments of the past. Pynchon's text, as I have tried to demonstrate, preceded the mass-market appropriation of angel imagery by as much as fifteen to twenty years, but that has not prevented the angelic revival in popular culture from coloring our perspective on *Gravity's Rainbow*. History, as we know from Borges, is written in retrospect, and now Pynchon and the other sublime angelologists (Merrill, Brodkey, McElroy, Rushdie, Wenders, Kushner) have been retrospectively written into the popular angelic revival to which they are in no sense indebted, which they indeed mostly predate. By an irony of cultural history, Pynchon's serious-minded angelology has been engulfed by pop-culture fashion; his sublime Rilkean angels have been reduced post factum to fellowship with John Travolta and Victoria's Secret catalogue models. It is already becoming difficult (and in future it may become impossible) to remember a period before the pop-culture vogue of angels, when Pynchon's sublime angels—and those of Merrill, McElroy, Rushdie, Wenders and the others—could actually appear innovative and cutting-edge. Already it requires an act of historical imagination to recapture that earlier, innovative moment.

Postmodernism's general tendency, as we know, is toward the erosion of hierarchical distinctions between high and low culture, so contrasting innovative and popular art, to the detriment of the latter, is apt to sound merely retrograde. How different, really, is mass-market angelology from the more serious-minded angelology of allegedly cutting-edge postmodernists? We might gauge that difference by, for instance, juxtaposing *Wings of Desire* with its Hollywood remake.⁴ But an even more telling measure of the difference emerges from juxtaposing the most memorable image from *City of Angels* with the scene that is in some sense its equivalent in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Several times during *City of Angels* we are shown the angels of Los Angeles, all identically dressed in black overcoats, massed on the beach to celebrate the sun's setting into the Pacific or its rising over the mountains. An arresting and resonant image, no doubt; but compare its equivalent in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the scene in which Dodson-Truck,

drunk and contrite, confesses his treachery to Slothrop on the beach while “out at the horizon . . . robed figures,” “monumental beings” perhaps “hundreds of miles tall,” serenely look on from within the colors of a spectacular sunset (214–15). The two scenes are mirror images structurally: where Pynchon places his monumental angels, at the horizon, the Hollywood film places the sunset toward which its angels gaze; where Pynchon places his human characters, the objects of his angels’ surveillance, the film places its scaled-down, domesticated, humanoid angels—namely, on the beach. Monumental robed figures vs. humanoids in overcoats, angels at the horizon vs. angels on the beach: therein, precisely, lies the difference.

2: Gravity’s Angel

If the *New York Times* (5 Apr. 1998) is to be believed, Wenders has endorsed the Hollywood remake of *Wings of Desire*, but he resents the way commercials and music videos have casually appropriated his film’s imagery over the years. Wenders is quoted as saying that the music videos leave him feeling “violated,” while the remake does not (or not so much, anyway). If this is really Wenders’s attitude, then he evidently misunderstands the degree to which those commercials and music videos constitute the condition for the very existence of the Hollywood remake. Without the prior circulation of his imagery through the medium of commercials and music videos, Wenders’s angels would be literally unreadable by the mass audience; they would lack the recognizability of the already familiar upon which mass-market success depends. A case in point is the image I have just described, of overcoat-wearing angels celebrating sunset on the beach at Malibu; its immediate source is not *Wings of Desire* (no beaches in Berlin), but the music video for Leonard Cohen’s song “First We Take Manhattan, Then We Take Berlin” (1988), which was, I suspect, modelled on the look of *Wings*. Without the intermediate stage of pop-culture appropriation, domestication and familiarization represented by “First We Take Manhattan” (and other similar commercials and videos), the gap between Wenders’s art-film audience and the mass audience of *City of Angels* would have remained unbridged.

The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, for Pynchon. The mass-media excitement about Pynchon’s elusiveness, revived on the occasion of the publication of *Mason & Dixon* in 1997, suggests that he already has a semi-popular status, that he, or rather his image, is poised on the threshold of pop-culture recognition. But if his sublime, high-art angels are ever to be assimilated fully to the contemporary mass-market cult of the angel (and it remains to be seen whether they can be), it will

require the intervention of some intermediary, some functional equivalent of “First We Take Manhattan.” In Pynchon’s case, such an agent of pop-culture domestication has already appeared, in the person of Laurie Anderson.

Anderson’s position in contemporary American culture is almost unique. Better than anyone else, she bridges the gap between avant-garde and popular, high and low, performance art and rock stardom, Fluxus and Lou Reed. A blurb from the *Village Voice* on the jacket of *Empty Places*, the book of her 1989–90 concert tour, calls her “the avant-garde’s emissary to the real world.” I take this to mean the real world in the MTV sense; that is, for “real world” in this blurb, read “mass culture.” Anderson is the avant-garde’s emissary to mass culture. And it is through her mediation that mass culture has become aware (to the degree that it has) of Pynchon’s angels—specifically, through the song “Gravity’s Angel,” Anderson’s collaboration with rock star Peter Gabriel, included on her album *Mister Heartbreak* (1984) and performed in her film *Home of the Brave* (1986).

Here are the lyrics to that song, looking somewhat flat and attenuated on the page, stripped of their strange, evocative music and delivery:

You can dance. You can make me laugh. You’ve got x-ray
eyes.

You know how to sing. You’re a diplomat. You’ve got it all.
Everybody loves you.

You can charm the birds out of the sky. But I, I’ve got one
thing.

You always know just what to say. And when to go.
But I’ve got one thing. You can see in the dark.
But I’ve got one thing: I loved you better.

Last night I woke up. Saw this angel. He flew in my window.
And he said: Girl, pretty proud of yourself, huh?
And I looked around and said: Who me?
And he said: The higher you fly, the faster you fall. He said:
Send it up. Watch it rise. See it fall. Gravity’s rainbow.
Send it up. Watch it rise. See it fall. Gravity’s angel.
Why these mountains? Why this sky? This long road. This
ugly train.

Well he was an ugly guy. With an ugly face.
An also-ran in the human race.
And even God got sad just looking at him. And at his funeral

all his friends stood around looking sad. But they were really thinking of all the ham and cheese sandwiches in the next room.

And everybody used to hang around him. And I know why. They said: There but for the grace of the angels go I. Why these mountains? Why this sky? Send it up. Watch it rise. See it fall. Gravity's rainbow. Send it up. Watch it rise. See it fall. Gravity's angel.

Well, we were just laying there. And this ghost of your other lover walked in. And stood there. Made of thin air. Full of desire. Look. Look. Look. You forgot to take your shirt. And there's your book. And there's your pen, sitting on the table. Why these mountains? Why this sky? This long road? This empty room? Why these mountains? Why this sky? This long road. This empty room. (© Difficult Music, 1989)

The song, it will come as no surprise, is dedicated to Thomas Pynchon. It seemed to me on first hearing, and still seems to me, among the most penetrating readings of Pynchon's text we have. This is a paradoxical response, since it is not obvious in what sense "Gravity's Angel" is actually about *Gravity's Rainbow*. Apart from the title and refrain, allusions to Pynchon's text are few and oblique at best. Conspicuous by their absence are the familiar topoi of Pynchon criticism: no trace here of entropy, no paranoia or conspiracy, no military-industrial complex or self-actuating technologies, no Second World War, no counterculture. One might even argue plausibly that Anderson need never have read *Gravity's Rainbow* at all, but merely cobbled together some images and phrases derived at second hand from other sources.

In fact, it makes no difference whether Anderson actually read the book or only read about it, because one way or another she has grasped some of its key motifs and attitudes, though she has not made much use of Pynchon's own imagery or language to express them. Masochistic eroticism, in the first stanza; preterition, in the third; spectral hauntings,⁵ in the last: these are some of the motifs Anderson has captured here. Moreover, she gives the slightly uncanny impression of having seen right through *Gravity's Rainbow* to its deepest sources. In this case, as most angelologists agree (for example, Hohmann 350–58), the relevant source-text is Rilke's Tenth Duino Elegy (1912, 1922),

images from which Anderson seems somehow to have recovered from deep inside *Gravity's Rainbow*, as though she had detected them there with some kind of scanner or X-ray device ("x-ray eyes"?).

Hohmann observes that the landscape and topography of the Tenth Elegy seem to be implied throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*: the carnivalesque and illusory City of Pain, its desolate but "real" outskirts, then beyond that the vast, ruined landscape of the Land of Sorrows, and still further beyond, the sublime "mountains of primeval sorrow" (Hohmann 356–57). By contrast, the vignettes of "Gravity's Angel" seem confined to domestic interiors—apartments in the City of Pain?—until suddenly we are afforded a glimpse of the landscape beyond: "Why these mountains? Why this sky? This long road. This ugly train." The mountains, sky and long road all figure in the landscapes Pynchon shares with Rilke; but what about that ugly train? (In the last stanza, the "ugly train" becomes an "empty room," and we are back indoors again.)

The train of "Gravity's Angel" derives, it seems to me, from Pynchon alone, not from Pynchon's appropriation of Rilke; as far as I can see, it corresponds to no image from the *Duino Elegies*. Ugly trains crisscross the Zone, and Slothrop and others frequently ride them; more important, the trains give rise to a song, sung by the displaced persons of the Zone:

If you see a train this evening,
Far away against the sky,
Lie down in your wooden blanket,
Sleep, and let the train go by.

Trains have called us, every midnight,
From a thousand miles away,
Trains that pass through empty cities,
Trains that have no place to stay.

No one drives the locomotive,
No one tends the staring light,
Trains have never needed riders,
Trains belong to bitter night.

Railway stations stand deserted,
Rights-of-way lie clear and cold:
What we left them, trains inherit,
Trains go on, and we grow old.

Let them cry like cheated lovers,
 Let their cries find only wind.
 Trains are meant for night and ruin.
 We are meant for song, and sin. (GR 283-84)

Not many of Pynchon's songs are as sober as this one. Not many are based, as this one seems to be, on folk-song models (think of "Bound for Glory," "Mystery Train"); typically, Pynchon's songs are modelled not on folk songs but on pop or show tunes. Anderson presumably noticed not only that Pynchon's train song is uncharacteristically sober but that the train in the song runs through precisely the kind of sublimely desolate landscape Pynchon would have found in Rilke.

She might also have noticed the way these Zonal trains connect diverse regions of Pynchon's text. One branching of the track, for instance, links the displaced persons' song with Leni Pökler, who dreams of her daughter, Ilse, "riding lost through the Zone on a long freight train that never seems to come to rest" (610). Another branching leads "off the track," astray from the point, to a digression. Skippy gets off the track, and Mister Information sets him straight, with a metaphor that, typically for Pynchon, comes to encompass a whole miniature world, one in which a sinister pointsman controls the switch that shunts one either to Happyville or—where else—to Rilke's Pain City, the City of the Tenth Elegy:

Skippy, you little fool, you are off on another of your senseless and retrograde journeys. Come back, here, to the points. Here is where the paths divided. See the man back there. [. . .] He is the pointsman. He is called that because he throws the lever that changes the points. And we go to Happyville, instead of to Pain City. Or "Der Leid-Stadt," that's what the Germans call it. There is a mean poem about the Leid-Stadt, by a German man named Mr. Rilke. But we will not read it, because we are going to Happyville. The pointsman has made sure we'll go there. He hardly has to work at all. The lever is very smooth, and easy to push. Even you could push it, Skippy. If you knew where it was. But look what a lot of work he has done, with just one little push. He has sent us all the way to Happyville, instead of to Pain City. That is because he knows just where the points and the lever are. He is the only kind of man who puts in very little work and makes big things happen, all over the world. He could have sent you on the right trip back there, Skippy. You can have *your* fantasy if you want, you probably don't deserve anything better, but Mister Information tonight is in a kind mood. He will show you Happyville. (644-45)

So, while the ugly train might not belong to the repertoire of landscape imagery Pynchon shares with Rilke, nevertheless it does lead back to Rilke, literally and figuratively; and Anderson seems to have grasped this.

But what about the angel of "Gravity's Angel"? Despite the song's title and refrain, its angel imagery is actually rather sparse. Apart from the indisputable angel of stanza two (to which I will return in a moment), there is only the altered cliché of stanza three ("there but for the grace of the angels" instead of "there but for the grace of God"). Unless, that is, the first stanza ought to be read as addressed to an angel, a lover so superior to oneself that one's only claim to worthiness is the profoundly abject and masochistic one, "I loved you better." If that is the scenario of stanza one, then it reverses the scenario of *Wings of Desire* and *City of Angels*, and of Juan Goytisolo's *Makbara* (1980), in each of which an angel debases itself for love of a mortal.⁶ Compare also the various alien-abduction scenarios that abound in contemporary popular culture, often involving sexual relations with superior beings (for "aliens" read "angels").

The one image in Anderson's text that appears to have little or nothing to do with either Pynchon or Rilke is its single instance of explicit angel-imagery. This angel, which flies in the window and addresses the song's protagonist in familiar, everyday idiom, belongs not to the Rilkean sublime but to the domesticated, banal angelology of our own decade: "And he said: Girl, pretty proud of yourself, huh? / And I looked around and said: Who me?" This is the register of the angels in *Touched by an Angel* or *City of Angels*—except, that is, when they are uttering portentous, oracular aphorisms along the lines of "The higher you fly, the faster you fall." Seth, the angel played by Nicholas Cage in *City of Angels*, displays just this incongruous mix of homely banality and pop sententiousness when he courts the Meg Ryan character.

Thus, the window through which the angel enters Anderson's song opens upon the vast expanses, not of the Rilkean Land of Sorrows, but of pop culture, and this angel is itself a forerunner of that army of pop angels that would overwhelm American culture by the early nineties. Anderson seems somehow to have anticipated the onslaught of this pop-angel army, still (in 1984) five or six years in the future, just as she seems to have intuited the deep affinities between Pynchon and Rilke. Her song accommodates both these impulses, high and low, sublime and pop, and helps make each accessible to the other. It is through the mediation of "Gravity's Angel" that Pynchon's angels have been made ready for prime time—or as ready as they'll ever be.

Postscript

This was by no means the end of Anderson's involvement with angel imagery, though it seems to have been the end of her direct involvement with Pynchon's angels. She subsequently (1987) contributed atmospheric music, called "Angel Fragments," to the soundtrack of *Wings of Desire*. Angels abound on her CD *Strange Angels* (1989) and in the accompanying book, *Empty Places* (1991), though she seems to have exchanged one set of high-culture sources (Pynchon, Rilke) for a different source, namely Benjamin's angel of history (also Kushner's source, as I noted above). The lyrics of "The Dream Before," on *Strange Angels*, actually incorporate the verbatim text of Thesis IX (the "angel of history" thesis) of Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (see Cadden). Anderson splices the Benjamin text with Pynchonesque material, a modernized version of "Hansel and Gretel" that echoes the sadomasochistic Hansel-and-Gretel scenarios enacted by Blicero, Katje and Gottfried in *Gravity's Rainbow*; so perhaps there does remain some association in her imagination between angels and Pynchon after all.

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Notes

¹The angels of *City of Angels* function as guardians, observers and messengers—all the roles typically assigned to them in contemporary popular culture. They are also psychopomps, angels of death, conducting the dead to the world to come. What they explicitly are not—and the film is insistent on this point—are glorified spirits of dead human beings; rather, they belong to a wholly different order of being from us. By distinguishing angels from human beings ontologically in this way, the film confirms an essential difference between contemporary pop-culture angels and the standard angel of an earlier period, typically pictured as a human being who had died and gone to heaven. Harold Bloom cites a poll indicating that 55% of Americans now believe angels are "higher beings created by God as his agents," while only 15% continue to hold what until recently was the standard view, identifying them as "spirits of the dead" (42). According to the angelology of *City of Angels*, angels can become human, if they choose to, but they don't originate in the human condition; they may descend to us, but not ascend from us.

As a matter of fact, the standard angel, now displaced in popular consciousness, turns out to be a relatively recent invention, dating back no further than the writings of the heterodox Swedish visionary Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772); see McDannell and Lang 181–227.

²The inevitable Benjamin source is, of course, Thesis IX of the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations* 257–58. On Kushner’s indebtedness to Benjamin, see David Savran and Martin Harries.

³On the domestication of angels and the erosion of their capacity to inspire awe, see Bloom 43, 57 and passim.

⁴In *Wings of Desire*, the angel hungers for human experience, and risks everything in order to experience the world the way we do; only after he has renounced his angelhood does he meet and fall in love with a mortal woman. In *City of Angels*, the order of events is reversed, in deference to Hollywood norms: first the angel (Cage) meets and falls in love with the mortal woman (Ryan), and only then does he renounce his angelhood; in proper Hollywood fashion, he risks everything for romantic love. In *Wings*, the ontological gulf between angels and humans is so great that human beings never become aware of the angels all around them; in *City*, the angel appears to human beings, interacts with them, and even courts the Ryan character while still an angel. *City* also satisfies the Hollywood requirement of strong narrative closure, with its “tragic” ending and heavy-handed irony; nothing could be further from the inconclusive non-closure of *Wings*.

Other differences include the two films’ different treatments of the metaphorical equation between angels and stars (in the entertainment-industry sense). In *Wings*, the leads are mere actors (Bruno Ganz, Solveig Dommartin), while the ex-angel who has fallen into their midst is played by a TV star, Peter Falk, a.k.a. Columbo. (Interestingly, Columbo plays a parallel role of intruder from another ontological sphere in Christine Brooke-Rose’s metafictional novel *Textermination* [1991].) In *City*, the relations are reversed: the leads are, of course, Hollywood movie-stars (Ryan, Cage), while the fallen ex-angel is played by the TV star Dennis Frantz of *NYPD Blue*, who in this high-luminosity context dwindles to the status of a mere actor. A related difference is the systematic elimination from *City* of the angels’ affinity for spectacles (rock shows, the circus), which is such a conspicuous feature of *Wings*. The reasons seem obvious enough: Wenders and Handke seek to “bare the device” of cinematic spectacle itself, but that is precisely what a Hollywood star vehicle like *City* can least afford to do. Consequently, we get in *City* a version of Los Angeles from which all traces of the entertainment industry have been expunged.

⁵See Steven Weisenburger’s essay elsewhere in this volume. I thought at first that the “ghost of your other lover” who walks in on the couple in the last stanza of “Gravity’s Angel” might refer obliquely to Slothrop’s paranoid fantasies of Tchitcherine catching him in flagrante delicto with Geli (short for Angelika) Tripping (GR 292–95); but of course the tone here is all wrong for that ribald passage. Closer in tone is Slothrop’s later, wistful encounter with the printer’s daughter (571–72), whose absent father, present only in a snapshot, gently haunts their moments together.

⁶I have had students who read this first stanza as Anderson's confession of her abject love for Pynchon himself. While I see no reason to read the "I" of this stanza as autobiographical—all of Anderson's I's are fictional characters, it seems to me—this reading does set us on the road toward a more general insight concerning our masochistic relation as readers of *Gravity's Rainbow* to Pynchon's authorial sadism: "You've got it all. . . . But I've got one thing: I loved you better."

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