Angels In-Between:
The Poetics of Excess and the Crisis of Representation

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This dissertation examines the reconfiguration of the limits of representation in reference to the intermediary function of angels. The Modernist engagement with the figure of the angel entailed, primarily, a reconsideration of the problem of representation as well as an attempt to trace the contours of a poetics that plays itself outside the mimetic understanding of representation. My contention is that this transformation of literary referentiality was not simply a disengagement of art from reality but, rather, from the truth-falsity, reality-fiction, subject-object dichotomies. The angel, defined as the figure of passage par excellence, but also as the agency that induces the transformation of the visible in the invisible and vice versa, appears both as a model/archetype and as a guide towards the illumination of this intermediary aesthetic.

Working with the joined perspectives from angelology, contemporary phenomenology, and poetics, this dissertation is an extended overview of the notion of intermediary spaces, as well as an attempt to probe the relevance of this concept for the field of literary studies. In the first case, this dissertation offers a theoretical background to the concept of intermediality, seen in its theological, phenomenological, aesthetic and ethical significances. In the second case, it presents the reader with a heuristic apparatus for approaching this problematic in the field of literary interpretation and provides examples of ways in which such an analysis can become relevant. The primary texts discussed here are all examples of attempts to redefine the notion of representation away from the truth-falsity or subject-object oppositions, as well as to create an aesthetic space with its own particularities, at the limit between visibility and invisibility, excessive presence and absence. Nicholas of
Cusa’s “Preface” to *The Vision of God* proposes an ethics of reading defined by *admiratio* (the consubstantiation of immediacy and distance) under the aegis of the all-seeing icon of God. Louis Marin’s reading of the episode of the Resurrection reveals that history and narrative arise from the conjunction of the excessive absence of the empty tomb of Jesus and the excessive presence announcing the resurrection of Christ. Sohravardî’s “Recital of the Crimson Angel” is a presentation of the space-between of revelation, between *cognitio matutina* and *cognitio vespertina*. Walter Benjamin’s “Agesilaus Santander” restores the connections between the exoteric and the esoteric under the patient gaze of “Angelus Novus”. Paul Valéry’s *Eupalinos, ou l’Architecte* explores the aesthetic of “real appearance” in the space-between the image and the perceiving eye. Poe and Malamud’s short stories reveal the affinities between poetic language and angelophany. Elie Wiesel’s *Les portes de la forêt* expands the apophatic itinerary from the self to the radically other in a hermeneutical gesture which has the angel as its initial and final guide. Finally, Rafael Alberti’s *Sobre los ángeles* shows that the *aphaeretic* function of poetic language is very similar to the apophatic treatment of the world as representation; in this last sense too, the angels are indispensible guides.
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I will never be able to thank enough my parents for their quite extraordinary support. Their guidance and love set me on a good path from the early years of my life. They are therefore the natural addressees and places of return of all my works.
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my cousin, Alina: a present which, even if it can never make up for her exceeding absence, constructs a space-between of re-encounter and adds the proximity of lived co-participation to the distance of the departure.
Introduction

If only we could discover such a singular human pace—pure, determined, self-contained, our own fruitful soil between the river and the stone! But our hearts outrun us. We cannot capture their essence by lingering before consoling statuary, nor by contemplation of those godlike forms containing all for which we yearn in monumental measure.

(R.M. Rilke, “Second Duino Elegy”)

In recent years, angels and their intermediary status have become objects of inquiry for many disciplines in the humanities (other than the study of religion): philosophy (Massimo Cacciari’s *L’angelo necessario*, Michel Serres’ *La légende des anges*), aesthetics and poetics (Alida Cresti’s *Il colore dei angeli*, Paul Colilli’s *The Angel’s Corpse*), cultural studies (Régis Debray’s *Transmettre*, McLuhan and Powers’ *The Global Village*, H. Bloom’s *Omens of the Millenium*). Although the connection between angels and intermediary spaces has long been familiar to angelology, until lately, this particular aspect has been somewhat neglected by the arts, mainly due to the assimilation of angels to the realm of the immaterial\(^1\). The latest discussions of a “third space” seem to retrieve a certain materiality of angels which can cast a new light on 1. The particular configuration of angels and the ensuing poetics in the works of twentieth century artists; 2. The problem of representation; 3. Aesthetic categories which have been so far largely treated in terms of binary oppositions (fiction versus reference, icon versus idol, history versus narrative, etc.); 4. the relations between poetic language and the
notion of revelation. Through my discussion of the figure of the angel in the works of modernist writers, I seek to identify and describe the functions of angels in literary language from these four main perspectives. My assumption is that some of the literary actualizations of angels are deeply related to an attempt to explore the limits and “blind spots” of poetic language. Therefore, my fundamental purpose will be to open the space of the confines of poetic language - that space where language both attempts to exceed itself and is still infinitely exceeded - in relation with the phenomenological and hermeneutic repertoire that the angel brings to the fore.

Although the third space of representation has become a more prominent topic at the end of the twentieth century, this concept does have a history throughout this century both in art and in philosophy. Even if, in the twentieth century, the occurrences of the retrieval of a “third space” were but sporadic, taken together, they articulate a very specific aesthetic which, on the one hand, has become very relevant for our “hybrid culture” of today and, on the other hand, might offer an alternative to the crisis of dichotomous thinking poststructuralist theory and postmodernist poetics have pointed to. Although the various notions (religious or philosophical) of angelic in-betweenness will play a major part in my reading of the intervals articulated by the artistic texts, the most relevant definition of in-betweenness for my research, which applies to all the primary texts, is the actualization of a space which resists both a literal, or mimetic reading, and a metaphorical, fictitious categorization; one of my aims will be to show that in all the texts that I discuss, the encounter with the angel is both a visionary experience, a profession of faith of sorts, and a way to reflect upon language and on its means of representation.
In this thesis I will also investigate the connection between the intermediary aesthetics of angelic representation and the crisis of reference (or transcendence) from the beginnings of modernity. We can find one of the best articulated definitions of the crisis of reference in Derrida:

The alterity of the transcendent thing, although already irreducible, is such only by means of the indefinite incompleteness of my original perceptions. This is incomparable with the alterity of Others, which is also irreducible, and adds to the dimension of incompleteness of my original perceptions. [...] This transcendence of the nonproper no longer is that of the entirety, always inaccessible on the basis of only partial attempts: transcendence of Infinity not of Totality (Derrida, 2005: 124).

The angel (a messenger and not a substitute for God) always attests to that surplus of meaning, pure transcendence, which will never become fully available to the immanent. “Any angel is terrible”, says Rilke, pointing precisely to the absence which the angel’s tremendous presence paradoxically signifies.

Of the more recent studies on angels in twentieth-century literature and art, the following will be fundamental for my approach: Massimo Cacciari’s L’angelo necessario (1986), Paul Colilli’s The Angel’s Corpse (1999), Alida Cresti’s Mitografie di luce e il colore degli angeli. Simboli e figure della sacralità luminosa (2002), Michel de Certeau’s “Le parler angélique. Figures pour une poétique de la langue” (1994), Monic Robillard’s Sous la plume de l’ange. De Balzac à Valéry (1997), and Michel Serres’ La légende des anges (1993). Cacciari’s text is mostly angelological and philosophical, using the examples of Rilke, Benjamin and Klee in order to construct an epistemological and ontological outline of the reception of angels in twentieth-century modernity. Paul Colilli’s book traces the parallels between angelology and literature in a more direct way, his focus being on the similarities between angelic and poetic language. Alida Cresti’s
text introduces a series of novel concepts which help outline the connections between the figurative realm and the world of the angels. Michel de Certeau’s article is a very useful analysis of angelic discourse as it appears in Biblical accounts or in other mystical writings. Monic Robillard’s book is a very rich study of the figure of the angel in French modernist poetry and prose starting from the motif of the Annunciation; her purpose is the articulation of a poetics of the embodied spirit in relation to modernist poetry. Michel Serres, a philosopher of science writing mostly in the field of cultural studies and the history of ideas, has also written about angels and the third space: in his 1991 *Le Tiers instruit*, he sets out to restore a forgotten dimension of human understanding, the “included middle”. Serres turns Aristotle’s *tertium non datur* (excluded middle) into a (rather) Platonic *tertium datur* (included middle). Moreover, his re-interpretation of angels in *La légende des anges* as connecting, fluidic energies binding the world together is very much in tune with a Ptolemaic and Neo-Platonic worldview. Although most of these texts also refer directly or indirectly to the *topos* of in-betweenness, none of them provides a concerted analysis of this concept in relation to the figure of the angel in twentieth-century art. Furthermore, except for Colilli and de Certeau, none of these studies focuses on the relationship between poetics and angelology. Therefore, with the retrieval and theorization of an “included middle” for literary reception via the figure of the angel, this study proposes to provide a correspondent reflection in literary studies to similar current concerns from the fields of philosophy, cultural studies or the history of ideas.

Since the object on my dissertation will be to investigate the co-presence of two types of discourse (mystic and artistic) within the same text(s) and the ensuing aesthetics
of in-betweenness, I will ground my analysis on angelological, philosophical and poetological interpretations of in-betweenness. In the following, after a brief summary of some of the theological and phenomenological discussions of angels and intermediary spaces, I will look at this phenomenon in its literary development in the first half of the twentieth-century. Given the limits of my study, not all the authors mentioned in the introduction will represent an object of further interpretation in this thesis. I have therefore opted for referring to them in the introduction in order to provide a more consistent background in which all the writers that I will address in this thesis have attempted to re-configure the limits of literary representation in dialogue with the figure of the angel. I will end this introductory part with a presentation of the methodology and general outline of this dissertation.

The Space-Between in Angelology.

In his L’angelo necessario, Massimo Cacciari clearly distinguished between the fantastic (and even the imaginary) and the realm of the angels:

the proliferation of angelic instances in the Gnostic and Christian traditions, as well as in the neo-platonic developments and in Islam is certainly not meant to satisfy a sort of barbaric *horror vacui*³, nor does it entail the necessity to fill in the abysmal distance between human and divine. To interpret angelology according to such criteria would mean to reduce it to demonology […]. The Angel […] manifests the inconceivable richness of the Invisible, the infinity of the names of the No-where and generates, at the same time, the extraordinary imaginative path in man (Cacciari, 1992: 17).

Cacciari’s observation is an extremely important one as it highlights one of the main perspectives in angelology (in Islamic philosophy and Christianity in particular); this “richness of the Invisible” contrasts some of the more popular (or lay) views on angels,
which, only to hastily, assign them to the realm of the immaterial, the ethereal, or, simply, the fantastic. The angelological traditions on which Cacciari grounds his statement present an altogether different perspective on the matter, which becomes essential in the comprehension of the particular configuration of the angel in the texts I will discuss. As Andrei Pleșu\textsuperscript{4} points out in his book, *On Angels*:

> It is a fact that the sacred texts of all the great traditions of the world, from Persia to Greece, in the Arab, Judaic and Christian worlds, in Mesopotamia, Egypt and India, China and Siberia, admit the idea that the interval between the supreme Being and the terrestrial world is a very busy space. The skies are inhabited by an infinity of complicated creatures, differentiated and very active. In no way is there an immense blue desert, an abstract Sahara, annulled, in the end, by the oasis of the celestial Jerusalem (Pleșu 23).

Indeed, the theme of an interval populated with angels is pre-Christian. An important landmark for this understanding of the world is in the Platonic philosophy. In *Timaeus*, the necessity of an intermediary term (*to meson*) in the universal order is cosmologically proven. The Demiurge cannot create the world out of fire and earth without using a connecting principle: it is impossible to bring together two different things in harmony without a third one because it is necessary that there is something in the middle that connects the two (Plato, *Timaeus* 31 b-c). Plato’s cosmology, as elaborated in this dialogue, is a combination of these three elements: sameness, difference and existence (this last has the function to bind the first two) (34c-36c). Furthermore, Plato also wrote about the *daimones* who occupy the interval between the Creator and the creaturely being and whose main function is to transmit prayers, sacrifices, etc. from the humans to the divine and portends, dreams, visions from the divine to the humans. The daimonic theme pertains to a tradition anterior to Plato, whose main “axis” is Pythagoras’s philosophy (cf. Pleșu 25). From the neo-Platonic tradition, a vital point of
reference is Plotinus’ philosophy. Plotinus’ ontology is a scalar one: reality unfolds on a vertical axis, starting from the supreme point of the divine One and ending with earthly matter. Every being has a defining upper level, a coordinating principle situated above its superior limit. This upper level of being is, according to Plotinus, its daimon. In Plotinian terms, our daimon, the angelic being is, thus, the surface immediately enveloping our identity. It is an extension of the self (Plotinus 4-6). Plato and Neoplatonism had a long-lasting influence not only on the Western world but also on the mystical philosophy of the East, in the Iranian space most notably, perhaps mainly because the Platonic intermediary ontology had points in common with its tradition of Mazdean angelology. Be it as it may, we owe it to Henry Corbin’s life-long effort that these extremely rich angelological traditions were brought to the attention of the Western World in the second half of the twentieth century. Such philosophers and mystics as Ibn Arabî, Mushin Fayz Kashani, Sohrawardi or Avicenna were profusely analyzed by the French philosopher and from their writings he extracted such influential concepts as mundus imaginalis, creative imagination, or spiritual body. Creative or active imagination is not to be taken for fantasy or unreality; according to Islamic Sufism, creative imagination is the very matter from which the world and man were created; it is the proper medium and generator of images which get reflected on several planes of existence. According to Corbin, the encounter between angel and man takes place through the activation of this suprasensible “organ”:

Even the Imagination conjoined to, and inseparable from, the subject is in no sense a faculty functioning arbitrarily in the void, secreting ‘fantasies’. When the form of the Angel, for example, ‘projects itself’ into a human form (in the same sense, as we have seen, as a form ‘projects’ itself upon a mirror), this act takes place on the plane of autonomous Imagination,
which then raises the Image to the plane of conjoint Imagination (Corbin, 1969: 127).

The Imaginal world is an interval: the word “imaginal” refers to this world's capacity to manifest itself only through images, without ever becoming embodied however; in this respect too, the angels reunite two seemingly irreconcilable attributes: the visible and the invisible, the corporeal and the disembodied. The mundus imaginalis represents, in theological writings, the space of the angels, the interval between heaven and earth; it is a full-fledged world inhabited by angels, the messengers between God and men. As an intermediary space, the world of the angels is a non-spatial space, a bodiless body (Kashani). This is one of the most important characteristics of the mundus imaginalis, because it reveals its paradoxical nature, its capacity to be, at the same time, both visible and invisible, both actual and fictional.

Turning to the Christian tradition, we can find a retrieval of the intermediary angelic order in the early Middle Ages:

As angelic spirituality developed through the early Patristic period and into the medieval period and beyond, the angels were grouped in hierarchical orders. Scripture itself is not without hints that some angels were higher or closer to God than others. But it was certainly the influence of Neo-Platonist metaphysical notions of emanation from and return to ‘the One’ and of the mediating quality of intelligences between humanity and the gods that influenced Christian thinking and practice concerning the angels. [...] However, the fact is that writers from Ambrose to Jerome, from Dionysius the Areopagite to Gregory the Great and from Hugh of St. Victor to Umita of Faenza all used the biblical narrative, the available philosophy of the time, the doctrine of the tradition, and current spirituality to group the angels to orders and classes” (Chase 19).

The most frequently quoted and popular of these hierarchies is that of Dionysius the Areopagite who, in his Celestial Hierarchy, grouped the angelic orders as follows (from the highest to the lowest): Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones; Dominions, Powers,
Authorities; Principalities, Archangels, Angels. As we can see, the “vacant interval”
between transcendence and immanence becomes very populated and even functionally
organized. Although there are certainly affinities and correspondences between this
angelic hierarchy and the ecclesiastic order, it is not my purpose to question the validity
or bias of these early takes on angelology. What is important to retain is the formulation
of a very important function of the angelic office which is to both maintain the distance
between humanity and divinity (to maintain the transcendence of the transcendent One)
and to reveal God to man: “hierarchy in this sense is thus a vehicle for divine
manifestation or theophany” (Chase 21). In this respect, the celestial hierarchies are very
much similar to what Corbin called the Angel of the Face who has the function to
simultaneously reveal and hide God (cf. *Le Paradoxe du monothéisme*). Moreover, we
can find herein the absolute argument for the necessity of angelology – in Corbin’s view,
the three monotheistic traditions perish in their “moment of glory” because:

> Without angelology, monotheism risks to fall back in the worst of
metaphysical idolatries. […] It is what Ismaili theosophy expresses best in
its cosmogonic dramaturgy. Narrative theosophy, it shows us that the third
Angel of the pleroma, the spiritual Adam, the celestial man, *Anthropos
ouranios*, Adam qadmon, behaved, before the beginnings of time and of the
world as a perfect monotheist in the exoteric sense of the word. He claimed
reaching directly to the inaccessible divinity, accomplishing the perfect
tahwîd, refusing, at the same time, to realize that what he was reaching was,
in fact, the Image that the Angel immediately preceding him was offering
him. This refusal led to the catastrophe, no less than this “eternal delay”
which precipitated humanity into the historical becoming of the sublunar
world (Corbin, 1981: 182).

This is a very important insight and it reveals the danger inherent in the complete
spiritualization of angels at the same time as it formulates the most significant definition
of angels in terms of in-betweenness: a medium of encounter between humanity and
divinity which safeguards the absolute transcendence of the One. This definition will be
very relevant for my discussion of representation in relation to angels: the angels’ revelation is also a disclosing of the (absolute) absence of the supreme referent.

Through this very short presentation of the angelological traditions of the space-between I wanted to ground my own understanding of angels in specific notions from a very consistent tradition. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we cannot speak of the intermediary function of angels without reviving these notions which have somewhat fallen into obsolescence in the past two centuries. These traditions also show the relevance of this concept for fields other than the study of religion in the connections it establishes with human perception, reality, representation, or imagination. All these notions are also part and parcel of the life of the literary work. Moreover, in twentieth-century literature, the archetypes of angelic actualizations can be found (intentionally or not) in these angelological traditions. For instance, the hierarchy motif surfaces in Pynchon’s *Gravity Rainbow*; the notions of the *imaginal* and of creative imagination are very relevant for Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, Hrabal’s *Too Loud a Solitude*, Wallace Stevens’ *Angel Surrounded by Paysans* or W. B. Yeats’ *The Second Coming*. We can find the archetype for Baudelaire’s “chair spirituelle” (in *Sonnet XLII*) in Kashani’s “bodies are spiritualized”, but also in Oetinger’s *caro spiritualis* (spiritual flesh) or in Swedenborg’s *apparentiae reales* (real appearances) (conf. Pleșu 66). However, more than simply giving a useful reference to the source, these angelological groundings will help articulate the specificity of the space-between in the texts I will discuss.

**The Space-Between in Phenomenology and Aesthetics.**
In terms of twentieth-century philosophical conceptualizations of in-betweenness, although this appears to be a constant theme, there was never a concerted effort to discuss this notion in all its phenomenological or aesthetic significances. However, it appears in different guises in the works of some of the most important twentieth-century philosophers and poeticians: Walter Benjamin’s *Angelus Novus*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Jan Patočka’s *Heretical Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Paul Virilio’s *L’horizon négatif*, Laurent Jenny’s “L’événement figural”, Louis Marin’s *La représentation*, in many of Derrida’s texts and in Michel Serres’ *Le tiers instruit*, to give just a few examples. Some of these authors bring to the fore the issue of the third space in explicit reference to the Platonic and Neo-Platonic traditions. All of them offer the alternative of an included middle as a response to a crisis of reference, representation, or simply being in the world which, in their opinion, was induced by previous, more unilateral philosophical systems.

In his *Angelus Novus*, Benjamin advances a definition of imagination which draws a clear distinction between imagination and fantasy:

That is to say, the imagination does not itself dissolve, for where it attempts this it becomes fantastic. Fantastic objects arise where the process of de-formation does not proceed from within the heart of the form itself. [...] The imaginative de-formation of objects is distinguishable from the destructive collapse of the empirical by two features. First, it is without compulsion; it comes from within, is free and therefore painless, and indeed gently induces feelings of delight. Second, it never leads to death, but immortalizes the doom it brings about in an unending series of transitions (Benjamin, 1996: 280-281).

In this succinct, but very dense definition of imagination, we find the idea that imagination is that faculty which pertains neither to the “real”, nor, most importantly, to the “fantastic”; imagination, rather, is a creative process, a filter of reality we could say,
but which contains and immobilizes it in a series of “transitions”. This definition is extremely valuable for my reading of angelic in-betweenness as it allows to refine my scope of research to those texts which enact processes of imaginative and not fantastic (de)-formation. Imaginative de-formation, as evoked by Benjamin, is a figure of in-betweenness and of transition. Benjamin’s definition of imagination coincides with Corbin’s definition of creative imagination and his constant distinction between fantasy and imagination. This non-deforming imagination is the common ground on which angels and poetic language meet.

There are other notions from twentieth-century aesthetics which bring together the space of imagination and angels in their intermediary status. Although Merleu-Ponty did not refer to angelology, his concept of the embodied mind, as well as his general phenomenology of perception are evocative both of the Platonic existential included middle and of the Iranian and Christian notions of embodied spirits. A further specification of the figurative realm pertaining to the imagination that Benjamin was writing about comes from Laurent Jenny. His notion of in-betweenness (“l’entre-deux”) gives semiotic specificity to the figural event which:

1. Produces a new meaning at the same time it has an aesthetic value […].
2. Is in-between two representations of language insofar it replays the acquired possibilities of a language at the same time as it envisions and sketches a possible future for it.
3. Opens a new possible track in the referential world” (Batt 43).

This permanent tension between old and new language or meaning, between perceiver and the object perceived and which engenders a third space of significance seems to be the proper generator and vessel for artistic creativity and reception.
Jan Patočka’s phenomenology of perception touches on the same issues as Benjamin’s definition of imagination. Like Benjamin, Patočka is also wary of an act of sublimation or complete subjectivization of meaning that would, “of necessity” accompany the imaginative process of perception. He states that “the constitution of the thing is this achievement, continuous, spreading out endlessly. To say it is achievement does not imply subjectification because meaning is not captured simply by opening our eyes but rather with “all our soul” (Patočka 138). When Patočka uses such a phrase as “all our soul” with quotation marks he, as a scholar of Plato, is unmistakably referring to the conjunction of the “sensible” and the “intelligible” which allows one to see, as Swedenborg would say, the “real appearances” of things. Seeing the world “with all your soul” has deep and long-running affinities with that special poetic vision that the angel’s presence makes possible: “Yet, I am the necessary Angel of the Earth/ Since, in my sight you see the world anew” (Wallace Stevens, “Angel Surrounded by Paysans”). In this in-between space of imagination, prophetic and artistic vision, mystic and artistic discourse merge, they become complementary and enhance one another. But this coalescence of the artistic and the prophetic is rather a space-between the two, it is neither, as Benjamin sees so well, “pure art” (in the sense of departure from reality) nor “pure prophecy”: “Pure prophetic vision cannot form the basis of a work, yet such visions enter into every great work of art. Prophetic vision is the ability to perceive the forms of the future; imagination is the awareness of the de-formations of the future” (Benjamin, 1996: 282). Coming closer to our times, we find the notion that the third space is not so much (or not only) a metaphysical notion, but a space generated by a perceptive faculty which has become obstructed by “analytical consciousness”:
While we perceive circles, spheres, cubes, or corners perfectly, our perception of intervals, of the interstices between things, between people, is far less acute. These configurations, cut out by bodies, stamped out by forms, escape us...in every case, these passing figures barely leave any traces in our vision of the world, their fleeting character, tied to the instantaneity of a relation, never seems particularly important. These figures have a far too immediate obsolescence for our analytical consciousness, for our scrutinizing minds, we have more or less despised this movement that displaces the lines (Virilio 29-30).

Virilio’s “transparent forms” echo the Platonic worldly reflections of the archetypal Forms. Here we also find the idea that the analytical tradition has led us to observe more the definite objects and figures, taking our attention away from the spaces of transition between them or from their enveloping surfaces, their “skins” which, among other things, provide a very palpable connection between objects and the world. The subject-object dichotomy is resolved in the realization of this space of transition and inter-connectedness: the subject is no longer “impossibly” distanced from the object, it shares with it a common space of encounter – “the interstices between things”. This idea of fluidic inter-connectedness is a recurrent theme in Michel Serres’ philosophy – he uses a geographical metaphor to signify it: he prefers the unifying mental cartography of rivers, seas and oceans, to the dividing cartography of continents. It is in this topos of inter-connectedness that Serres will develop his angelology in La Légende des anges as well as his general philosophy of the “messenger”. His “instructed middle” is a figure emerging from this space of the conjunction of the multiple, he is “Harlequin”, a composite subject of every place who, while incorporating the multiple discourses of history, remains incandescent (a further development in L’incandescent), that is, purely subjective, ignorant of the “unity in multiplicity”; in other words, to refer back to the Platonic angelology, he is an existential
“third” who provides the link between *sameness* and *difference* without obliterating either of them\(^\text{10}\).

As we can see, the philosophical approaches to the third space in the twentieth century are varied and offer a multitude of different significations which can provide the grounds for re-thinking a third space in literary studies too. Perhaps the most important conclusion we can draw from these various accounts is that the space-between is in no way an “esoteric” category, nor is it trans-subjective: it is rather intra- and inter-subjective.

**Angels and the Space-Between in Modernist Poetics.**

To early modernist writers, such as Baudelaire, Rilke, Valéry, Yeats, Poe or Alberti, the figure of the angel, alongside with the disenchantment of reality and the break with the mimetic pact, came to announce the beginnings of an aesthetic whose purpose became the “transformation of the visible into invisible” (as in the case of Rilke).

Thus, in his first *Duino Elegy*, after the preliminary, “terrible” encounter with the angel, the poet is inexorably drawn back to the indecipherability of the sign: “But what could you do/ distracted, as you were/ by all of that significance?/ as though each signpost pointed on beyond itself/ towards something higher yet:/ a mere prelude to the Beloved” (Rilke 20-21). To Rilke, the angel appears as a prelude to a far greater vision, the angel’s presence is the sign for that *presence in absence*. The intangibility of the pure transcendence of God is not a burden for the poet; what he deplores is rather his own finitude, his “distraction” which prevents him from capturing the full “significance” of the vision. This incapacity to fully translate the significance of the angelic vision also appears in Paul Valéry’s *Le visionnaire*: 
The angel gave me a book and said: “This book contains all that you can possibly wish to know”. And he disappeared. And I opened this book which was modestly large. It was written in an unknown language. Scholars translated it but they each gave different versions. And they have differing opinions as concerns the very sense of the reading. Agreeing neither on the up nor on the down, neither on the beginning, nor on the end. Towards the end of this vision, it seemed to me that this book disappeared and became one with the reality which surrounds us (Robillard 61).

If for Rilke partial meaning was still possible through the token of presence granted by the angel’s vision, for Valéry, the schism between sign and referent is insurmountable and meaning is forever lost. However, the end of the vision offers an interesting turn: reality itself appears as the Book, it becomes *scripturale*; in the absence of a firm grasp of the “parole singulière”, we are left with multiple possible interpretations which weave together the texture of a reality written, however, in an “unknown language”. At this point, not only are we not able to grasp the exact meaning of the signifiers presented by the angel, but we are forgetting the angelic vocation as a sign which points beyond itself.

As Paul Colilli says in his book:

knowing the angel is closely linked to an unknowing; cognition exists alongside its opposite of cognitive impossibility (the brilliance that kills). The closest we can come, then, to knowledge of the angel is in its imprinting itself in human thought. That is, an idea of the Angel, has a corresponding ‘realness’ for which we are cognitively empty. […] It is a realm of void that is housed in the poetic sign […] (Colilli, 1999: 37).

The angels’ “corpse” is a recurrent theme in in Rafael Alberti’s *Sobre los angeles*; for instance, in “Los angeles de las ruinas” the angels appear as empty signs themselves:

“They have forgotten./ As I have, as have we all./ And now no one expects the express to arrive,/ the official visit of light to needy seas,/ the resurrection of voices in scorching echoes” (Alberti 138). A plethora of angels emerge from Alberti’s *Sobre los ángeles* – the unknown angel, the bellicose angel, the ashen angel, the angel of the numbers, the
musty angels, the good angel, etc. In these instances, the encounter with the angel is followed by a movement of sublimation of the mystic vision into a reflection back on language and its inability to fully preserve this meaning. As Monic Robillard points out, this movement of sublimation went both ways:

As we can see it in an exemplary manner in the work of Mallarmé, no matter how fascinating the object chosen by instinct or constructed by thinking, what dominates even more imperatively is the desire to arrive at its ‘almost vibrating disappearance’. What is invested then is the intermediary space, in its different guises (between two poles: subject-object, presence-absence, masculine-feminine, real-fictitious), between two statuses when indeterminacy reaches a point of incandescent precision (Robillard 104).

Robillard’s observation is an important one as it captures the stages of the hermeneutic process of the encounter with the angel; however, we should note that the intermediary space is not so much “less important” but rather almost always surpassed by an inevitable movement of sublimation which either directs the artist in the realm of the visio or returns her or him to the preliminary act of enunciation, to a self-reflexive reconsideration of the gap between (poetic) language and mystic vision.

Between the genesis of an aesthetic object hard to define and the final sublimation of this act a space of conjunction arises, a space whose figures appear as traces in the poetic text. Therefore, the proper expression of angelic in-betweenness is most often the evocation of a visionary experience and it is in the actualization of this intermediary visio that we will be able to find the figures of the space-between. Besides the vision of the present absence of the supreme “Beloved”, the angels of *The Duino Elegies* (1922) also offer the poet the vocation of an intermediary space similar to that of the encounter: “If only we could discover/ such a singular human place/- pure, determined, self-contained/ our own fruitful soil/ between the river and the stone!” (Rilke 26-27). This interval that
the poet so accurately describes in these lines is a realm between fixed, eternal essences ("the stone") and fleeting human temporality and contingency ("the river"); it is, moreover, "determined" and "self-contained" – that is, while connected to the two spaces it conjoins, it has its own ontological status and properties; it is also fertile and creative ("fruitful soil") and "human" – that is, derived from within man. Emerging in the encounter with the angel, this intermediary space has deep affinities with Corbin’s definitions of “creative imagination”. This idea also appears in Wallace Stevens’ “Angel Surrounded by Paysans” (1949): the angel is configured as a medium between man and reality and it is only by looking at the world through this ‘filter’ that the poet can, this time, re-capture meaning: “Yet I am the necessary angel of the earth/ Since, in my sight, you see the world anew”. This intelligible perception which interposes itself between sensible perception and the world is the only one capable of resurrecting the dead metaphors of language and of the world. The same space of creative imagination prompts Yeats’ vision in “The Second Coming” (1920): “The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out/ When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi/ Troubles my sight: Somewhere in sands of the desert/ A shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun/ is moving its slow thighs…” (Yeats 158). This passage is evocative of the tension that Benjamin was pointing to in relation to prophecy and imagination. In this case we are witnessing a process of imaginative de-formation of the future which takes the shape of a prophetic discourse without becoming one, however. Traditionally, the apocalyptic figure of the “shape with lion body and head of a man” has been interpreted as the Sphinx; nonetheless, the figure of the Sphinx itself is not without affinities with the
images of the Sumerian Cherubim – winged creatures with bodies of lions and heads of men, which, in their turn, are the archetypes for the Christian Cherubim.

The connection of the angel in his intermediary function with the problem of representation resonating, in various forms, throughout the 20th century, bespeaks an artistic nostalgia for the henceforth impossible re-union between words and things, at the same time as it translates the capacity of artistic vision and language to move beyond the ordinary realms of discourse and actualize images that pertain to a very nuanced worldview. To the generation of authors writing during, and in the aftermath of WWII, the crisis of reference is deepened by a crisis of transcendence, for the most radical of them in tune with Nietzsche’s dictum on the death of God, for the others, due to the painfully-felt absence of God from the world. Almost forty years later Donald Barthelme would say, in his essay “On Angels” (1981): “The death of God left the angels in a strange position”. However, in spite of the grim prospects that the philosophy and the events of the first half of the century had created, a new wave of mysticism infuses the writings of the two decades between 1940 and 1965: the encounter with the angel is, this time, a more engaged one, even if less spiritualized or ethereal. In the few texts in which angels appear, the proper archetype seems to be Jacob’s struggle with the angel and in all these instances the angel appears as the double, the guide, man’s, or artist’s, alter-ego. However, full identification never occurs, there are correspondences and transfers but it is important to state that the dichotomies (body versus spirit, man versus angel, etc.) never collapse, the conflict, even if a painful one, is fully preserved. Responding to the crisis of transcendence, of the absence of the supreme referent (from a world which has succumbed to the dispersion of languages, names and people), Gavriel, the angelic figure
in Elie Wiesel’s *Les Portes de la forêt* (1964), is allowed to question the existence of God himself. Moreover, his office as Gregor’s double or guide enacts the dramatism of the struggle to find meaning in those moments between presence and absence, reality and simulacra. An answer is given at the end but not a re-solution: the hermeneutic exercise under the auspices of the angel is a difficult one this time. The archetypal struggle of Jacob with the angel contains the germs of the preservation of two opposites under the same designation, through the transfer of the angelic name: by changing the name of Jacob into Israel, the angel institutes a reality which is both the locus of plurality and of singular election: “Intermediary, fleeting, the angel re-connects the open of the multiple with the closed space of solitude, he links the generality of the idea with the specificity of the incarnated form” (Robillard 69). The motif of the angelic investment of name appears in several other instances in modernist texts too. In his “Agesilaus Santander”13, written in Ibiza in 1933, Walter Benjamin wrote the following: “When I was born, it occurred to my parents that I might perhaps become a writer. […] This is why they gave me two names in addition to my first name – eccentric names which showed …] neither that a Jew bore them, nor even that they were his first names. […] In the room I occupied in Berlin, even before that person had emerged fully armored and accoutered from my name, he had fixed his image on the wall: *Angelus Novus* (Benjamin, 2003: 714). In Cocteau’s “Plain chant”, the angel reveals the poet’s true nature, saying, at the same time: “je suis ton nom divin” (“I am your divine name”) (quoted in Robillard 55).

In her 1945 “Tribute to the Angels” (from *Trilogy*), Hilda Doolittle evokes the motif of the struggle with the angel too; the struggle, in her case, occurs as a conflict between the visible and the invisible: “music sets up ladders/ it makes us invisible/ it sets
us apart/ it lets us escape/ but from the visible/ there is no escape/ there is no escape from
the spear/ that pierces the heart” (Doolittle 85-86). Caught between the spiritual vocation
of the angelic call and the materiality of her body, the poet’s solution is no longer the
sublimation of the visible into the invisible, but, rather, a realization of the spiritual in the
flesh. Mystic visions abound in the pages of Doolittle’s profound text, in which she pays
homage to the seven Archangels, to the Virgin Mary or to Hermes. The vision she
actualizes in the encounter with the angel is a space-between too: “did I weep? My eyes
saw/ it was not a dream/ yet it was a vision,/ it was a sign/ it was the Angel which
redeemed me/ it was the Holy Ghost/ a half burnt-out apple tree blossoming/ this is the
flowering of the rood/ this is the flowering of the wood/ (87). The trope of the “half
burnt-out apple tree blossoming” is a truly imaginal figure in its reconciliation of
contraries. Such images abound in the mystic poetry and prose of Sufi mysticism: there
we can encounter such figures as “the ship of stone”, oceans of precious metals which
touch one another without mixing their waters, etc. In Doolittle’s text, the angel has a
fully hermeneutic function and figures of transubstantiation are interspersed throughout
the Tribute: it is no coincidence that the cycle of poems begins with Hermes, the Greek
god of in-betweenness and ends with Hermes Trismegistus: “Hermes took his attribute/
of Leader-of-the-dead from Thoth/ and the T-cross becomes caduceous/ the Old Church
makes its invocation/ to Saint Michael and our Lady/ at the deathbed; Hermes
Trismegistus/ spears, with Saint Michael,/ the darkness of ignorance/ casts the Old
Dragon/ into the Abyss” (98). Doolittle covers the gap between the signifier and the
signified and resolves the crisis of transcendence by re-establishing long-lost connections
between various cultural signifieds through a careful reading of history, philosophy and history of religion.

These fragmentary examples serve to offer a glimpse in the rich texture of a poetics which was clearly involved with the redefinition of its limits in the engagement with an angelic repertoire. Some of the main motifs and themes emerging here will reappear in my discussion of the literary texts in this thesis.

Methodology.

This thesis seeks to make possible the recollection of the relations between angels and hermeneutics, in an attempt to show that the space-between of literary representation is replete with poetological figures which demand a phenomenological and aesthetic re-conceptualization of this space. Given this focus, my approach will be a thematic one, rather than historiographic. Nevertheless, even if the purpose will not be to account for the changes and innovations seen in their historical and cultural dynamic, this background will serve as a fundamental orientation in my readings of literary texts. In and of themselves, the main topics – “angels” and “the limits of representation” – cover extremely large areas of investigation which will be impossible to account for within the perimeters of this thesis. When taken together, however, one subject inevitably specializes and narrows down the other: thinking of the angels in terms of representation signifies focusing on their revealing function (and leaving aside their ministerial, psychopomp, and in general all those functions which relate to the exclusive relation between angels and God, with one notable exception); from the other side of the coin, angels and revelation narrow down the problem of representation to the domain of its limits, to the moments of “birth” and “death”, of genesis and sublimation.
In considering all these aspects, I will ground my discussion on theological, phenomenological and poetological writings in order to offer an interpretation which is as inclusive and aware as possible of the potentiality of significance of this subject. Therefore, for each chapter, I have opted for a structure which can permit the reader to understand the concepts discussed from all these perspectives: each chapter will start with a “theoretical background” part in which I will present the main theoretical definitions which are relevant for my interpretations; this preliminary discussion will be followed by readings of literary texts which problematize the theological and phenomenological notions from an aesthetic/poetological point of view. My aim will be to extract the relevant aesthetic functions from this new understanding of literary representation and see the ways in which they can compose a more consistent texture of the literary poetics of in-betweenness. Most of the literary texts I will focus on belong to the poetics of Modernism; however, my purpose is not to make a statement about modernist poetics: it is very likely that the same figures and notions will apply to some postmodernist or Renaissance texts equally. All the texts that I will analyze should be seen as outstanding examples of the advent of poetic language in the obscure regions of its doing and undoing itself, in the space-between of a double movement of excess: beyond the strictures of a limiting way of understanding representation and towards its infinitely deferred referential limit.

Seen within the purview of angelic exegesis, the space-between of representation becomes one with that of the limit, with those spaces where the invisible turns into visible and presence into absence. As we will see in the following chapters, these themes are essential ones in the reception of the revealing function of angels. Moreover, the
metaphysical categories of “presence” and “absence” (especially in their saturated phenomenalization) are at the core of the contemporary re-evaluation of the limits of representation. Therefore, I will begin my discussion with a theoretical chapter, titled “The Problem of Representation” and continue the analysis of the angels’ revelation of the space-between with a chapter on “exceeding presence” and a last one on “exceeding absence”. Through this configuration, I do not wish to polarize the question of the problem of representation; rather, I seek to render the relations between presence and absence more fluid and to show that they are both necessary stages in one and the same process of the artistic interpretation of reality.

The first chapter concentrates on “the problem of representation” and functions as a theoretical benchmark for the following two chapters. In the first part, I will discuss relevant examples from contemporary phenomenology and angelological poetics in order to explain why the space-between of angelic exegesis can be identified with the space of the limit as well as with a phenomenology and aesthetic of excess. This theoretical discussion situates the topic at the heart of contemporary debates on the traditional mode of understanding representation and shows the relevance of the figure of the angel for this matter. The second half of the first chapter is dedicated to the close analysis of three paradigmatic texts whose phenomenology of revelation is fundamental for my subsequent analyses. The first text, the “Preface” of Nicholas of Cusa’s *The Vision of God*, explores the space of excessive presence of the all-seeing icon. The second one represents one of the archetypes of the notion of excessive absence: the episode of the coming of the women to the empty tomb of Jesus and the angel’s announcing the overwhelming absence of this place. The last text I will discuss in the first chapter is Sohravardi’s *The
Recital of the Crimson Angel, which is one of the most detailed and hermeneutically rich examples of the space-between of revelation brought to light under the angel’s influence. While the first text applies mainly to the second chapter and the second one to the third chapter, Sohravardi’s recital is significant for the problematics of both (this is another way of suggesting the concomitance of presence and absence in the phenomenology and poetics of angelophany). In my readings of these three texts, I will provide my own interpretation, but will also consider the analyses of three twentieth-century authors who have engaged with these texts themselves: Michel de Certeau for Nicholas of Cusa’s “Preface”, Louis Marin for the episode of Resurrection, and Henry Corbin for Sohravardi’s recital. With these perspectives, I seek to show the relevance of these texts for contemporary theory as well as give an insight into the ways in which the religious, in particular the angelophanic, are relevant for the understanding of the essential mechanisms in the production of history and narrative.

The second chapter, titled “Exceeding Presence. Angels and the Space-Between of Appearing and Revelation” discusses the aspect of the surplus of presence which is always given in the phenomenalization of angelophanies. The first part articulates the background of the discussion, reviewing theological and philosophical takes on this matter as well as providing the details of the relation between angels and the phenomenology of presence. This theoretical preamble ends with a presentation of three main perspectives on the subject as seen from the field of aesthetics: Jean-Luc Marion’s notion of “saturated phenomena”, Paul Ricoeur’s concept of “the revealing function” of poetic language and Adorno’s discussion of the aesthetic of appearing. These concepts represent the fundamental background upon which I will develop my interpretation of the
intermediary space of excessive presence in the works of Benjamin’s “Agesilaus Santander”, Paul Valéry’s *Eupalinos, ou, l’Architecte*, E. A. Poe’s “The Angel of the Odd” and Bernard Malamud’s “Angel Levine”. My purpose will be to probe the possibilities and limits of a poetics/hermeneutics of appearing and revelation in relation with literary texts, as well as to identify the particular figures of discourse and interpretation which are given in these configurations of the encounter with the angel.

The third chapter takes us to the other end of the limits of representation: excessive absence. Of all the significances of absence – which is such a pervasive theme throughout twentieth-century – the one that is most related to my analysis in this chapter is apophasis. This is so for a number of reasons. First of all, apophasis entertains a very deep connection with the limits of representation and discourse. Secondly, given its religious/mystical origin, apophasis shares a very solid common ground with the angels’ revealing functions. Thirdly, apophasis is also the main theme around which contemporary phenomenology has conceptualized its investigation of the limits of representation in terms of excessive absence. In parallel with the structure from the previous two chapters, the last chapter starts with a review and discussion of the main definitions of apophasis, of the relations between angels and apophasis, and a few considerations on why apophasis can be considered a “third way” of literary representation. My interpretation of the literary texts – Elie Wiesel’s *The Gates of the Forest* and Rafael Alberti’s *Concerning the Angels* – re-engages with several concepts of apophatic discourse (de-nomination, de-negation, the neuter, deferral of meaning) with the purpose of, again, seeing the ways in which poetic language can incorporate traces of,
or even function as excessive absence, as well as of understanding the aesthetic categories which this process produces.

The angel, untraceable and impossible to map on any recognizable scheme of representation, has been, however, a constant figure of reflection for poetological thought for a very long time. In engaging with the “problem of representation” from the vantage point of angelophany, I seek to trace the gestures of poetic language towards its limits, and to give more substance to the space-between which arises from this movement of excess. My intention is to find the particulars of the space-between of angelic revelation and not to confine it to the strictures of finite aesthetic/poetological categories. Therefore, my interpretations of the literary texts will represent possible vistas which are opened in the consideration of the relations between angels and literary representation. Their fundamental purpose is to point to the richness of this interpretive mode once these possibilities are taken into account. As figure of the “open” \textit{par excellence}, the angel is the image of the multiple possibilities of interpretation and the moments of contact between his irrepresentable domain and the world of interpretation are always an occasion of artistic regeneration and return:

But we are always in the world […]. We are always entrapped, as Rilke phrases it, in a ‘forest of signs’. It is only the angel, pure essence of light, or the animal free from the past, ‘free from death’, who […] saves ‘the open’. […] Angels and animals are beyond the ‘world of interpretation’, beyond the world of quantity and arithmetic, they are in the open of a pure existence (Rella, 1984: 28).
Chapter 1

Angels and the Problem of Representation.

*But the irrepresentable, pure presence or pure absence, is also an effect of representation.*

(Jean-Luc Nancy)

Introduction

“The problem of representation” is the title of the third chapter of Massimo Cacciari’s seminal book, *L’angelo necessario (The Necessary Angel)*. In appropriating it, I am signaling the syntagmatic nature of the present topic, as well as the intention to directly engage with some of the main points that Cacciari made in this part of his book. Taken as a syntagm, “the problem of representation” situates us, from the beginning, at the core of the contemporary debates which have critiqued or revised the traditional ways of understanding representation. Therefore, my focus will be on those contemporary texts which have tackled specifically “the problem of representation”, as well as on the ways in which the angel appears as a herald towards reassessing the possibilities and limits of representation. In my parallel reading of recent approaches to
representation from philosophy, literary studies and angelology, I have found that the prevalent common theme is that of the limit, or, rather, that of exceeding the limit. After reviewing some of the more important contributions to this problematic, I will address the following questions: where can we situate the space-between of angelic representation; What are the figures emerging in this tertium datur of representation?; and what are the main axes of an “angelic” type of hermeneutics which places itself outside the traditional modes of envisaging representation. I will illustrate my theoretical discussion with three readings of archetypal texts situated at the limits of representation: Nicholas of Cusa’s “Preface” to The Vision of God, the New Testament episode of the empty tomb of Jesus and excerpts from Sohravardi’s L’archange empourpré. These three texts will represent the background models on the third way of representation against which I will develop my readings of angelic in-betweenness in the following chapters.

Massimo Cacciari begins his chapter with the following statement: “It is only the Angel who, freed from the demonic destiny, can pose the problem of representation” (Cacciari, 1992: 71). Cacciari’s formulation, elliptical and somewhat mysterious, affirms a double bind between angels and representation: on the one hand, the angel ‘poses the problem of representation’, he brings it to light; on the other hand, the angel himself is conditioned by the presence of the ‘problem of representation’: his angelic nature is thusly de-limited from demonic destiny. The pun here is that Cacciari is actually referring to two different types of representation – roughly speaking, demonic and angelic - which structure his chapter in two clearly delimited parts. In the
first case, we are dealing with the ‘problem of representation’ as it appeared in tragedy, with the uncanny connection between character and destiny:

Benjamin intends to break the link that connects the concept of the character with the concept of destiny. Knowledge has always worked at creating a very think web in which the two concepts should become indistinguishable threads – and thanks to which, therefore, every character can be judged in light of an immutable Law [...]. The character thus becomes daimon subjected to destiny. In this context there doesn’t seem to subsist a problem of representation, since the character is the daimon, and the daimon is the power of that destiny. Neither questions nor voids open up in the tissues that connect these terms (Cacciari, 1992: 72).

Cacciari’s talk here concerns Benjamin’s discussion of the *trauerspiel* as well as his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. In this context, the actual ‘problem of representation’ is obfuscated and overtaken by a false one – that of the “doxa” which “represents only the deceiving order of this same doxa, in its perennial changing of place and color” (Cacciari, 1992: 75):

Then the problem of representation explodes, starting already with tragedy. What is the report between autonomous logic (no longer repercussion, resonance, mediacy) and the thing? [...] How can the *logoi* stand for the thing itself if no common origin is expressible: thus, if the *logos*, having broken the network of the demonic destiny, has defined itself absolutely and autonomously?” (Cacciari, 1992: 74).

This is what the ‘first’ problem of representation is, the one that the angel challenges and puts into question: the scission between words and things. This passage summarizes, in a nutshell, the main issues at stake in the contemporary debates on the problems and limits of representation which I will address more in detail in the following pages. But the second or, rather, ‘hidden’ problem of representation is the one which is inextricably linked with the angelic destiny: representation, as Benjamin and Cacciari remind us, of ‘ideas’ and not ‘things’:
But of what idea is the Angel the proper exegete? The idea that is represented in the name of the Angel will have to express the eschatological value proper to any representation. He is exegete, in fact, precisely in this sense: that he brings out the phenomena of their appearances, outside the slavery of the letter, takes them away from their immediate presence in order to represent them, re-present them in their truth, finally rendering them justice” (Cacciari, 1992: 84).

The angel brings forth the “name-symbol”, a figure in which, due to the intransitivity of the name, the thing “is saved”; the “name-symbol does not possess the thing, but represents its given. Those words that Rilke pronounces have the consistency of things; they are not the thing, but like the thing itself. The Angel does not orient man to the conquest of the unrevealable, but to the recognition of his transfiguration in the Eros whose only manifestation is this like” (Cacciari, 1992: 83). Therefore, the Angel’s exegesis draws attention to the correspondences between names and ideas, it turns doxa away from the self-reflexive posture and discourse of rupture, to a point outside itself which, para-doXically, re-turns language to its initial “problem of representation”. This initial problem of representation is, for Cacciari and Benjamin, very much akin to the process of (artistic) creation, to that first impulse by which things were named. Their solution to the problem of representation is clearly Platonic. Cacciari’s innovation consists in distinguishing between two different problems of representation, thus precluding a possible criticism concerning the shortcomings of the Platonic theory of mimesis.

The writers I will discuss in this thesis have invoked the figure of the angel with very explicit references to the problem of representation. They experienced the artistic transposition of this complex imaginative process as difficult; a struggle with the angel of sorts which found its plenary expression in the actualization of alternate figures of
discourse pertaining to modes of representation which simply do not lend themselves any longer to models based on the true/false dichotomy (upon which the traditional models of representation rest). It is my assumption that for all these authors the evocation of the figure of the angel involves, among other things, the redefinition of these known or accepted models of representation into novel forms of expression, capable of resonating with the realms of vision and imagination they were experiencing.

But why, of all archetypes, motifs or figures, the angel? One of the answers to this question is that the problem of representation is fundamentally – or, even if no longer fundamentally, at least originally – a theological problem. Let’s take an example that would, apparently, have nothing to do with theology. The postmodern definitions of reality/history/world, be they Foucault’s take on historical reception, Baudrillard’s *simulacra* or Guy Debord’s *society of the spectacle*, seem to be all in agreement on one important matter: reality itself is re-presentation. Although their focus is more on the modes of mediation and reception rather than on the point of reference, they all posit ultimately that reality, as such, *an sich*, is inaccessible, either because it is mediated by subjective perception or by cultural constructs. Emerging from Marxist materialist philosophy which explicitly disavows any engagement with theology, these takes on reality as representation are, however, very much indebted to the essentially Christian notion that this world is a mere shadow (*vanitas vanitatum*) of the celestial world. Wasn’t this idea also the cornerstone of Plato’s definition of mimesis in his statement that the world of phenomena is a mere copy of the world of ideas (or archetypes)? So this negative, derivative notion of reality as representation is very clearly related to the idea that there is another complete, perfect reality from which, precisely, worldly reality is
derived. Hence this concept of representation is essentially a theological one since the re-
presentationaal nature of reality entails a *transcendent other* by which the represented world comes into being in the first place.

However, there is another, positive or plenary aspect of representation and it is connected to the equally theological notions of creation and, very importantly for the present study, revelation. Stating that the world is representation also implies a positive act of realization, of *mise en image*, an accomplished germination, much like the spirit becoming flesh: *logos*. And this is where angels achieve a crucial function: they are the first expression of this representation of the world. The angels are the primordial bearers of the theophanic vision. They are at once its first accomplishment and perennial expression and passage.

**The Problem of Representation.**

In dealing with representation today, we must contend with the serious challenge that post-structuralist scholars posed to Aristotelian poetics as well as to Platonic metaphysics. The critique developed by Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze or Michel Foucault on the traditional categories of poetics and/or representation (in particular those modes of envisaging representation which are based on these essential dichotomies: repetition and difference, immanence and transcendence, presence and absence, fiction and reality, mimesis and poiesis) largely parallels the concern of current studies on the relation between the angelologic and the poetic. Both these paths of inquiry develop in close connection with what can be defined, in very general terms, as the crisis of representation underscoring the works of twentieth-century writers who
have also equally approached the issues of representation and the domain of angelology.

I will address those issues of representation where the main theorists of deconstruction and contemporary philosophical/aesthetic studies of angelology meet on a common ground: the critique of a fundamentally binary theory of representation and the attempt to think beyond its margins. In the works of such philosophers and poeticians as Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze or Michel Foucault, one of the common denominators is the reconsideration of these two main axes of the traditional theory of representation: repetition and difference, which runs parallel to their deconstruction of metaphysical dichotomies: presence and absence, interiority and exteriority. Thus, in *The Order of Things*, Foucault touched at the core of the mimetic problem:

language was never to be more than a particular case of representation (for the Classics) or of signification (for us). The profound kinship of language with the world was thus dissolved. The primacy of the written word went into abeyance. And that uniform layer, in which the seen and the read, the visible and the expressible, were endlessly interwoven, vanished too. Things and words were to be separated from one another. The eye was thenceforth destined to see and only to see, the ear to hear and only to hear (Foucault, 2001: 47).

The schism between words and the world, language and reality is the undercurrent motif guiding the most important takes on representation from Antiquity to the present day. Foucault’s immense effort in the re-interpretation of the history of knowledge signaled the pervasiveness of a system of representation in which all the variations, digressions or transgressions proved to be no more than variations on the theme of similarity and/or identity. The key issue here is not the deconstruction of the
system itself, *per se*, but, rather, of being able to tell that which is truly *different* or, as Derrida would have it, utterly *exterior*:

it is also a question of inaugurating in a way that is to be new, quite new, a metaphysics of radical separation and exteriority. One anticipates that this metaphysics will have some difficulty finding its language in the medium of a traditional logos entirely governed by the structure ‘inside-outside’, ‘interior-exterior’ (Derrida, 2005: 98).

Formulating a philosophy of transcendence without naming the transcendent, the different, the utterly exterior (and yet contending with it) was one of Derrida’s major tasks, which he pursued, resumed, and took up in different guises throughout his writings. Like Foucault, Derrida’s attempt at formulating a new language starts with the deconstruction of dichotomies which have governed traditional metaphysics. A new language was needed, since, for instance, thinking the different with the word *different*, necessarily entailed the relapse to the dynamic and polarity between the same and the different in which case, as Deleuze showed in *La différence et la répétition*, the different would be no more than a case of the same:

The greatest effort of philosophy was perhaps directed at rendering representation infinite (orgiastic). It is a question of extending representation as far as the too large and too small of difference; of adding a hitherto unsuspected dimension to representation – in other words, inventing theological, scientific and aesthetic techniques which allow it to integrate the depth of difference in itself; of allowing representation to conquer the obscure; of allowing it to include the vanishing of difference which is too small and the dismemberment of difference which is too large; of allowing it to capture the power of giddiness, intoxication and cruelty, and even death; in short, it is a question of causing a little of Dionysius’ blood to flow in the organic veins of Apollo. This effort has always permeated the world of representation (Deleuze, 1968: 262).
A great effort indeed, one that could be defined as the metadiscourse of excess: in all cases, it is a question of exceeding and breaking beyond what is resented and understood as a narrow system of representation. This metadiscourse of excess is doubled by an ethos of sublimity: it places itself sub limen, either to reinforce it, to inhabit its space, as Derrida does in *Margins* or in his discussion of the *parergon* as well as Foucault in his heterotopias, or to annul it, if only to make way to the limit-less space of difference as Deleuze suggests. It is, after all, a question of transcending representation and language themselves. It is, as Jean-Luc Marion sees it so well, a matter of finding a “third way”. The “third way” will not be a “space” in-between the two terms of the binary opposition (which would be but an artifice in the old scheme of representation); it will be indeed sub limen, at the very margins of repetition and difference, presence and absence, etc. Its means of exceeding will be excess itself (either of presence or of absence):

we are trying to do away here with the binary terms of the metaphysical doctrine (in fact Aristotelian) of judgment and truth: the third way plays itself beyond the oppositions between affirmation and negation, synthesis and separation, in short, true and false. Strictly speaking in fact, if the thesis and the antithesis have telling the truth (and dispelling the false) in common, the path that transcends them must also transcend the true and the false; the third way would transgress, no more no less, the two values of truth in which the whole doctrine of metaphysics exerts itself (Marion, 2001: 166).

It is no coincidence that Marion’s definition of the third way (of representation) appears in a book entitled *De surcroît*: a theological and philosophical study of excess. I will elaborate later on Marion’s splendid analyses. His audacious, yet necessary conclusion which follows logically the author’s take on traditional metaphysics as well as on contemporary philosophy (in particular, Derrida’s) puts into perspective the
whole question of literary interpretation as well as the question of representation in art and literature.

The same questions – but different solutions – emerge in the texts of contemporary writers who have tackled the connections between angels and language. For these authors, the angel appears as one of the most consummate expressions of the limits of language and representation. Common to all these texts is the attempt to define that space or breach in the texture of the real that the angel produces. The angel belongs, according to Cacciari, to “the realm of nowhere” (Cacciari, 1992: 13), to that domain for which “we are cognitively empty” (Colilli, 1999: 37). Any poetological or philosophical attempt to map precisely the world that the angels inhabit would, by necessity, become theological or mystical. Nonetheless, the angel has generated a great number of extremely original reflections on the nature of language and representation. As Cacciari was noting in “The Problem of Representation”, the angel appears as a herald and inducer of a renewed awareness of an “outside” of the established doxa, beyond the roundabout trajectories that the postulate of the rupture between the words and the things had generated. Against the background of a discourse of loss, fracture and finitude, the angel appears as the figure of inter-connectedness par excellence: “Intermediary and fleeting, the angel reconnects the open to the multitude of the closed space of solitude, he draws a link between the generality of the idea and the specificity of the incarnated form” (Robillard 169). We could attribute the evanescent nature of the angelic apparition to the fact that he belongs to that space of passage between these two extreme modes of representation – the idea and the thing, the one and the multiple, fiction and reality. The question in this case is whether this definition of the angelic
nature really refers to the space “of passage” opened up by the angel’s presence or, rather, to the fact that this space is not localizable empirically, with the tools of analytical consciousness: “The Angel’s knowledge is spontaneous but utterly disembodied, and it has its source not in the domain of the sensorial but in the unrepeatable instant of intuition” (Colilli, 1999: 62). This tension between sensorial perception and intuitive knowledge is one of the key-elements that inform the ‘crisis of representation’ in artistic discourse; it is also the premise for inaugurating a poetics of defiance and transgression in relation to traditional modes of perception. The angel’s figuration is always a surplus, an excess – either of absence or of presence – “an irruption of what one does not know about oneself (good or bad). This angelic ‘anxiety’ is, for the human being, what the etymology is for the word: a shadow which comes from afar, the advent of an unnamable origin in a fleeting sign […]” (de Certeau, 1984: 117).

Angelic poetics has many affinities with the post-structuralist “différant” or “utterly exterior”; the angel’s vocation is that of always casting a new light on our perception of the world. In his article on angels and discourse, Michel de Certeau insisted on this aspect:

in general the angel figures more of a transversality of communication. He breaks and traverses; he short-circuits the hierarchies of beings and mediations. […] It would be a transgression by shortcut. But the essential is the fact that these passages take the shape of a parole which contests the order of things. Thus, in the book of Judges, to the defeated and conquered people, the Angel, this ‘divine man’ announces a victory; to the sterile woman, a birth. A poetics which defies the ontological hierarchy and the historic fatality (De Certeau, 1984: 116).
Para-doxical, the angel’s *parole* does not so much as go against history and reality but rather announces the *supra-determination* of a Logos whose reality envelops and guides chronological history and empirical reality. In strict theological terms, this is not a “transgression” proper: the angel and his message cannot be transgressors; the word that de Certeau uses here should be taken to refer to the “order of things” and to the reconsideration of the primacy of empirical reality and perception; in this sense, the angel, figure of passage *par excellence* orients man towards the illumination of a cognitive realm – intuition, creative imagination – in which apparently irreconcilable categories are able to coexist harmoniously: “A poetics which defies the ontological hierarchy and the historic fatality. The Angelic word reinstates events and possibles. In this sense, it is ‘metaphorical’: passage to another genre, invention of another space, creation of a possible within what facts posit as impossible” (de Certeau, 1984: 116).

As with the approaches to representation of contemporary phenomenology, angelological philosophy and poetics are at odds with the binary system of representation as well as with the phenomenology of separation. In his book on Henry Corbin, Tom Cheetham draws a clear parallel between the loss of the ancient beliefs in the angelic realm and the advent of dichotomous thinking:

The loss of the realm of the *imaginal* inhabited by the Angel of Humanity and the Angel of the Earth occasioned all the schisms that split the West: religion and philosophy, thought and being, intellect and ethics, body and spirit, God and the individual. In this history the place of language and the revealed Word is central, and the quest for the lost language of the angels is the fundamental task. It is *the* drama that underlies the unity of the three branches of the Abrahamic tradition (Cheetham 22).
The loss of what would later become known as the mythological or mythopoetic worldview is what the angel’s figure becomes a constant reminder of – he is one of the few remnants of an ancient perception of the world which favored imagination over analytical reason. The tradition that Cheetham references here is specifically the Platonic and Neo-Platonic tradition in which Henry Corbin clearly inscribed himself. This trend of thought never really died out – it paralleled, even if marginally, the dominant Aristotelian poetics throughout history. The split between the body and the spirit that became the norm with the advent of Aristotelian philosophy was the first moment that made possible the effacement of the “problem of representation” that Cacciari elaborated on in his book. The disappearance of the connecting element – in our case, the angel or the “good daimon” – led to the birth of the “demonic” type of representation: that representation which has itself as ultimate referent. Another moment that recent angelological exegesis blames for the loss of the third space is the emergence of Cartesian metaphysics: “After Descartes, Western thought has lost – with a few exceptions – the angelic dimension of the world, without recovering, at least, its archetypal epura. Its privileged instrument has become the concept, an abstraction which reduces life to logical predictability” (Pleșu 203). Pleșu’s book on angels is an occasion for the author to distance himself from, and criticize dichotomies and binary models which, to him, are responsible for the disappearance of the beauty of the world. In his view, life, art, philosophy etc., thrive in an open space of complex and particular relations which the too narrow categories of true and false, good and bad, spirit and matter, transcendent and immanent obscure and render unavailable. In this context, Platonic metaphysics (and not only) becomes re-evaluated away from the stereotyped
objections of idealism, transcendentalism or even naïveté. To all these authors who are writing in the aftermath of structuralism and post-structuralism, critical vision actually represents the capacity for discerning the thread of meaning that extends beyond dichotomous thinking and still is in dialogue with texts in which the angel is the emblem of an alternative way of envisaging reality: “Thus, imagining the angel, or, more precisely, thinking about what rests beyond the Angel’s mortal remains requires a heightened critical vision, one that is not distracted by the objections and roadblocks made by the ratio-logical and empirical mind sets” (Colilli, 1999: 23).

From these examples, we can see that the same preoccupations – breaking away from too rigid or narrow systems of representation and finding a (meta)discourse capable of explicating reality, art, etc., outside the traditional categories of true and false – animate both the philosophers of deconstruction and contemporary philosophers and poeticians who have investigated the story of the angel. This was possible, in the case of the latter, because angels have always entertained an essential connection with language: “custodian of the divine Verb, archetype of the ad-verbum, necessary intermediary to all the prophets up to Muhammad, the Angel can undertake long voyages from that invisible No-place […] to the interior time of man…” (Cacciari, 1992: 13-14). Both for Colilli and Pleșu, for example, the world of artistic creation is very similar to, if not the same as, the realm inhabited by angels:

The domain in which the Angels were purported to have lived, the mundus imaginalis (which had remained vacant for centuries), is the same as the supra-empirical world of poetic invention (Colilli, 1999: 38)

It is a world that occupies, in the macrocosmic sphere, the same place that the novel occupies in the microcosmic sphere: a space between body and
spirit. [...] There is, on the one hand, the 'perceivable world', 'the world herein', which we can access through sensorial perception and, on the other hand, 'the world beyond', the supreme 'skies' of pure Intellect, and, between them, in the vacant interval, there is an intermediary world [...] (Pleșu 30).

Both authors are referring here to the Platonic world of image-archetypes from which the whole world of being was created. The notions of correspondences and symbolism inform these uptakes on the world of artistic representation. It is in this affinity between artistic creativity and the demiurgic act of Creation that we can find again the angel: he appears both as the primordial epiphany of the divine One and as a guide and inspiration for artistic invention. In his description of the world of the angels as transfigured in the work of Henry Corbin, Tom Cheetham comes to the same conclusion: “The language of poetry is as close as we can get to this divine imaginal speech, in which lies the interior meaning of the Word” (Cheetham 22). The language of the angels is the language of creative imagination. In *The Angel’s Corpse*, Paul Colilli speaks of “angelological semiosis”, which he defines as follows: “where signification is pushed to its most daring limit, one where the distinction between a sign and a non-sign undergoes an unprecedented transformation” (82).

With the “interior meaning of the Word” we are back to the hidden or concealed “problem of representation” that Cacciari was describing in his chapter. The angel mediates the re-encounter between words and ideas because, as Cacciari was pointing out:

Benjamin states it explicitly: ‘if representation is to become an authentic method of philosophical investigations, it will have to be representation of ideas’. But the idea is not, as long as it belongs to conscience, a pro-duct
of the spontaneity of the intellect; it is names that ‘belong’ and are products. The idea should be considered a ‘Vorgegebenes’, a given of consciousness (Cacciari, 1992: 78).

Philosophy seems to have already found and defined a space which, beside reason, can consciously and apriorically shelter ideas and their representation. The difference between reason and what Henry Corbin called “creative imagination” is that the former is intentional while the latter is not. It is to this space of our inner psyche that belong artistic invention and the angelic realm. But how about language, in general, and artistic language, in particular? Can it become the site of passage/passing of the trace of an ideatic realm which this same language seems to have forgotten? This is what Michel de Certeau has to say about this: “As deceiving as language might be, [the angel] postulates ‘somewhere’ an enunciation which does not deceive and that the angel manifests, either in the will which moves the celestial spheres or in the shadow which doubles daily activities, but makes disappear from all the places where we would want to render him the warrant (of truth)” (de Certeau, 1984: 120-122). The “non-deceiving” character of that “somewhere” of enunciation should not necessarily be taken to have any alethic value: that “somewhere” plays itself outside valuation (since it is non-intentional); hence the values of true and false no longer obtain here. The trace that the angel leaves in language is hardly perceptible – in all cases, angelic discourses are laconic, they never give themselves to overflow or unnecessary ornamentation of speech – but his influence on the event in which he intervenes is great: “Because we hear him, we no longer listen to him and since he blows in all directions, he says almost nothing, also silent: white, transparent and invisible like an Angel” […] “like prepositions, Angels say almost nothing, but they decline the destinies of those they
visit” (Serres, 1999: 122). Like all Serresian metaphors, the one that substitutes angels for prepositions carries with it more meaning than simple ingenious analogy. The prefix “pre-” also hints to the temporal inscription of angels – they were the first, “premiers”, “darlings of creation” (Rilke), the first epiphanies of the One. This analogy also draws attention to the strong connection between angels and names: they are, once more, bearers of the “divine names”, those necessary “prompts” that transform ideas into things and things into words. Representation begins only in the moment in which we perceive the concomitance of difference and identity among these elements. Thus, Cacciari advises that “we have always to maintain the difference between this sign, its re-velation and the signified of which it is only the ad-verbum” (Cacciari, 1992: 147).

The “ad-”, the pre-positional posture of angels evokes their necessity in front of a space that can be defined only as excess. This is the third space of representation, “that third dimension, that of the distance between love and beauty, of the space-between which is called nostalgia or sadness: nostalgia for the lost country, sadness for the unattainable home-land” (Rella, 1989: 118).

Thinking a third way for literary representation would have to, therefore, transcend the true/false polarity and invent “theological, scientific and aesthetic techniques which allow it to integrate the depth of difference in itself” as Deleuze phrased it. Perhaps the most formidable challenge of such a poetics would be to resist the temptation of (re-)fitting difference in the corset of representation, of trying to determine, not the indeterminate, but the indeterminable. A discourse on the third way of representation will, in all likelihood, have to be a metadiscourse of failure: much like the metadiscourse of excess which, while indicating its move beyond the limit,
avows its sub-limity. It will find its “space” at the borders of representation, in the
punctum caecum of representation (quite literally: the reinvention of language will take
place in moments which immediately follow the over-abundance of light or darkness):

the painter renders visible as phenomenon what nobody had never seen,
because he succeeds, every time the first, to resist enough to the given in
order to obtain that it shows itself – and then in a phenomenon accessible
to all. A great painter never invents anything, as if the given were lacking
in something; he suffers, on the contrary, from resisting to this excess, to
the point of rendering it its visibility (Marion, 2001: 61).

According to Marion, the reason for blindness or invisibility is not because reality itself
(or even our perception) are at fault: it is because reality is given in excess; the artistic
act of creation is not so much transforming the invisible into visible (as Paul Klee
famously said it) but rather making visible what was already visible, casting away the
“material” in excess. The inception of discourse (language, art, literature, etc.) is
conditioned and triggered by this almost imperceptible moment which separates and
unites excessive blindness with excessive visibility, which reveals the inherently absent
character of presence, as well as the ever-present nature of absence. We are
approaching the crux of the problem of representation which, ab initio, was concerned
with this moment of transference, the moment which precedes and directs creation.
This moment, in its intersection of so many polarized states of mind, apperceptions of
the world and cognitive processes, is far more complex than the formula of the
transformation of reality into representation/fiction would suggest. It has a necessary
temporality and succession, of resistance to excess of presence and absence. This
resistance to excess can only be achieved through an interpretive attitude that does not
Desire is that “distance between love and beauty”; it is not unhappy because it can inhabit a space that is infinitely open and therefore infinitely rich; the other, the different, giving itself only in excess of presence or absence keeps this communion alive precisely through this inadequacy. At the confines of representation, when we discover that which gives itself in excess – and the angels’ “presence” is always informed by this polarity of excessive presence and absence – we also find that this movement of desire is the only one able to un-veil and re-veil the creative, generative force of language: “this non-congruity essential, fundamental: it is the only possibility of human language to say what exceeds it, whether we call it transcendence, eternity or mystery” (Marin 135).

As we have seen, the angel also appears at these junctures and margins. His presence is always overwhelming – either through blinding excess of light or in opening up an abyss of absence and emptiness. In the following sections of this chapter I will look at these two extreme instantiations of the limits of representation that the angelic attempt to appease desire but, on the contrary, lingers in the space of desire which also defines the relation between signifier and signified:

the movement of desire can be what it is only paradoxically, as the renunciation of desire. Neither theoretical intentionality nor the affectivity of need exhaust the movement of desire: they have as their meaning and end their own accomplishment, their own fulfillment and satisfaction within the totality and identity of the same. Desire, on the contrary, permits itself to be appealed to by the absolutely irreducible exteriority of the other to which it must remain infinitely inadequate. Desire is equal only to excess. No totality will ever encompass it. Thus, the metaphysics of desire is a metaphysics of infinite separation. […] For desire is not unhappy. It is opening and freedom. Further, a desired infinite may govern desire itself, but it can never appease desire by its presence (Derrida, 2005: 102).
presence opens up. Nicholas of Cusa’s concept of *admiratio* defines one way of deploying language and interpretation in that third space of representation which is that of desire for an unattainable all-encompassing presence. With the episode of the empty tomb of Jesus, the focus is moved to the other end of the spectrum: the inadequacy between the void of representation opened up in the face of the empty tomb and the fullness of the significance of the resurrection. These two movements roughly correspond to the two main metaphysical stances that angelological exegesis has undertaken so far: the metaphysics of presence and apophatic discourse. These two movements are complementary and parallel one another in the hermeneutical exercise. The last text that I will analyse in this chapter – Henry Corbin’s interpretation of the *tawîl* in light of Sohravardi’s encounters with the Crimson Angel – will bring these two movements together in a hermeneutic gesture which has the concept of revelation as its central idea. In all three cases, the « problem of representation » arises because the focus is displaced towards the margins of presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, respectively. The exegetical method and interpretive attitude that characterizes these authors in their reading of angelic iconography and textual realization will also serve as a model for my reading of the literary texts in the following chapters. The method was very clearly defined by Louis Marin:

> It is a question of taking the paths of the imaginary in the Book in order to see appear at its limits, at its borders, at its margins (filled with black, red, green and blue – your, my, his writing), but also at its intersections, imbrications and forking paths, in all its joints, adventures whose mark and trace appear there […]. Imaginary-symbolic, ‘but the imaginary is not illusory: it signs’ and if it signs, it is because it works the symbolism of the one who attempts to read the traces, to re-collect the figures and graphes: hiero-glyphes (Marin 152).
The All-Seeing Icon.

Admiratio est principium philosophandi 17 (Thomas Aquinas)

In the article “Le parler angélique”, De Certeau referred to the Cusan theology of coincidentia oppositorum in order to explain the revelatory nature of angelic discourse: “Angelizzare is […] an operation of the spirit which dispels the dark, subordinated to the principle of contradiction and which aims at the great solar light of the coincidence of opposites. This act of transfer, angelic act, is, he states, “auroral” (de Certeau, 1984: 116). But while this article represented a very condensed treatment of the angelic functions in relation to discourse, the question of praxis, of a detailed modus operandi is resumed on the occasion of examining Cusa’s “Preface” to The Vision of God. The “Preface” is emblematic of Cusa’s speculative philosophy, connecting the spaces of “spiritual exercise” and “empirical practice” in such a way that they will mirror each other. It is given as an exercise upon whose performance will depend the realized interpretation of the subsequent chapters in the book. In this light, the text is to be read as a hermeneutical exercise that the reader will have to undertake in order to be prepared for deciphering the author’s message. Its paratextual configuration offers a formal correspondence to its intentions: displacing the reader’s perception in an a priori of representation, in a spatial and temporal inscription which will, gradually, transport the reader towards felicitous interpretation.

The “Preface” begins with a statement of method:

If I truly wish to lead you by human paths to divine things, I must use a comparison (similitudo). Among the human productions, I have found
nothing more appropriate to my intention than the image of an all-seer (imago omnia videntis), whose face (facies) is painted with an art so subtle that it seems to look at everything in the vicinity. There are many of these, very well painted: that of Sagittarius, on the Nuremberg Square; the one that the great Roger [Van der Weyden] produced in a most precious painting that is found in the Tribunal in Brussels; that of Veronica, in my chapel at Koblenz; that of the Angel who is holding the arms of the Church, in the castle of Brixen, and many others elsewhere (quoted in De Certeau, 1987: 11).

The method will therefore be that of comparison or analogy. From the first lines of his “Preface”, Cusa sets himself in a specific theology of correspondences – *sicut in caelo et in terra* - by which he proposes to enlighten his audience on the interpretation of divine mysteries. We should note the direction: – movement and vectors being fundamental motifs in this text – the understanding will begin from downwards to upwards, that is, from “human paths” to “divine things”. The model, however, is not one to be easily found – although the author mentions four examples of such representations, Michel de Certeau notes that three of these have disappeared while the one left for examination – Van der Weyden’s self-portrait – is but a copy located on a tapestry in the Berne museum (de Certeau, 1987: 11). At this stage in the exposition, Cusa formulates a sentence that brings together sets of apparently irreconcilable opposites in the definition of representation: “image of an all-seer”, “face painted with subtle art” and “seems to look at everything in the vicinity”. The first of these condenses the “impossibility” or, as Michel de Certeau said, a “fantastic of the gaze” which boils down to talking about an unrepresentable representation. Despite the double bind of verisimilar narration – the autobiographical references and the topographic deictics – we are at the heart of representation as fabrication: all is subordinated to “an image”. The “face painted with subtle art” renders the
representational bias transparent: we are in the domain of “art”. However, by coupling the explicit idea of representation with the image of the face, Nicholas of Cusa hints to another paradox yet, because, as Jean-Luc Marion showed in his book *De surcroît*, the face is one of the invisibles *par excellence*:

what are we looking at when we behold the face of another? Not his mouth, nonetheless more expressive of his intentions than other parts of his body, but his eyes – or, more precisely, the empty pupil of his eyes, their black hole opening onto the somber ocular void. That is to say we are beholding in the face the only place where, precisely, nothing can be seen. Therefore, in the face of the other we are looking exactly at the point where all visible spectacle proves itself impossible, where there is nothing to see, where intuition can offer nothing that is visible (Marion, 2001: 138).

Therefore, on a subtler note, the second pair resumes and further specifies the paradox of representing that which is impossible to represent. The last pair launches the whole exercise under the mode of appearance: “seems to look at everything”. Between the first and last of these pairs, the figure of the “image” appears as a threshold between the “all-seer” and “everything”. The image of the face, organizing the space between the all-seer and everything will engage vision to perceive that which is given in excess, in the absolute, in an infinite dialogic act which encompasses *all seers* and *the all-seer*. We are dealing here with presence in excess which, because given in excess, has become invisible. The exercise will be aimed at carving out the outstanding visibility. But this process can take place only according to a very strict formula:

So that you should lack for nothing in an exercise (praxis) that requires the perceptible figure that was at my disposal, I am sending you a painting that shows that figure of the all-seer, which I call the icon of God (icona Dei)." Set it up somewhere, for example on the north wall. You, brothers, place yourselves at equal distance from it and look at it (intueri): from whatever side you may examine it (inspicere) each of you will have the experience (experiri) of being as it were the only one to be
seen by it. To the brother who is to the east, it will appear (videbitur) to be looking (respicere) towards the east; to the one who is located to the south, it will seem to be looking towards the south; and for the one who is at the west, towards the west (Cusa, in de Certeau, 1987: 11).

The image of the all-seer is, at this stage, identified with the icon of God. This paragraph contains the first part of the praxis, of the hermeneutical exercise devised to envisage\textsuperscript{18} the icon of the all-seer. The first moment of the exercise is constituted by the act of looking at the icon (\emph{intueri}). According to Marion, the proper territory of \textit{regarding} is that of “objective perception” the mode by which we partially and finitely perceive the objects around us: “\textit{Regarding} [i.e. looking at] comes from the Latin \textit{intueri}, which is, in its turn, constructed on \textit{tueri}, ‘to guard’, ‘to survey’. And, in fact, surveying the visible characterizes the mode of vision that belongs to the object…” (Marion, 2001: 138). In the mode of perception of re-garding, of in-tueri, the only possible observation is a superficial one (\textit{inspicere}) and the only experience which is available to us is the empirical one: \textit{experiri}. This type experience is destined to remain outside (“ex-“) – both spatially and temporally – the object of its contemplation.

Therefore, the experience of “being the only one to be seen by it” is, by necessity, incomplete and, ultimately, false. This type of seeing is reinforced by the passive future indicative \textit{videbitur} which places perception entirely on the part of the beholder, emphasizing its essentially subjective character. At this stage of the hermeneutical exercise, the face still belongs to the domain of the invisible. The prefixes employed here by Nicholas of Cusa show that the eye cannot, for now, actually see the object of its contemplation: either it is “too close”, it is looking in that blind spot of the face that Jean-Luc Marion was defining (\textit{in-} tueri; \textit{in-scipere}) or it remains
outside its perimeter, it is unable to comprehend it (ex-periri; re-spicere). They also attest to the author’s attempt to cross the borders of representation: it is, ultimately, a discourse on the limit. In this phase of the experiment, the actors are still unaware of the ubiquity of the gaze: they are under the *experience* that each is being watched by the face in the icon. However, the idea that the icon is watching each of them in all cardinal points and at all times has already been transmitted to the reader. Thus, an explanation is necessary together with the passing to the next phase:

You will be astonished (admirari), asking yourselves at first how it can be that this figure is looking at the same time at each and every one. For the one who is at the east, it is impossible to imagine that the icon is turning its sight (visus) in another direction, for example towards the west or towards the south. Then he will go place himself at the opposite side, and he will have the experience of having it fix (figere) its gaze on him, as it was doing at the east. Knowing that the image remains fixed and immobile, he will be astonished at the movement of this immobile gaze. If he fixes his eyes on it (figere obutum) and walks from west to east, he will discover that the image continually keeps its gaze fixed on him and that it does not leave him either if he walks in the opposite direction (Cusa in de Certeau, 1987: 11).

The “you” upon which opens this paragraph is the reader. The reader is the first one to be astonished, to undergo the experience of *admiratio*, even *before* the ones who are immersed in this experiment. But the reader’s astonishment can only be explicated by recourse to the actor’s similar realization. Admiration is thus the necessary passage from one stage to the next, from the phase of empirical observation to the domain of surprise:

There is no longer a seen object for whoever is being seen. The abnormality of this persistent gaze brings about the disappearance of the possibility of grasping it as one object among others, before or after others. The observer thought he was seeing. Changed into the observed, he enters into an "aston-ishment" which is not accompanied by any
representation. The experience of the gaze is a surprise without an object (De Certeau, 1987:16-17).

We are now in the moment of excessive presence, that moment in which the ubiquity of the gaze annuls any possibility of representation: “the gaze of the other remains impossible to gaze at” (Marion, 2001:138). The actor taking part in this exercise will have to first go through this experience of stupefaction that the fixity of the gaze induces in him. The motifs of this episode are impossibility and absence: “There is no longer a seen object for whoever is being seen. The abnormality of this persistent gaze brings about the disappearance of the possibility of grasping it as one object among others, before or after others” (De Certeau, 1987: 16-17).

Whereas in the first part of the experiment we were dealing with fixed points of observation and therefore limited fields of experience, in this stage vectors and movement begin to enact a dramatic change of perspective. The encroachment of fixed perspective and movement defamiliarize the observer and astonish him: a first act of transfer occurs, by which the icon bestows its fixity on the beholder: this act also entails the transformation of the observer into object of perception. But what is more important even is that this displacement of perspective would not have been possible unless the actor had entered dialogue with the icon, by beginning to move. The icon begins to signify, it is drawn out of its semiotic opacity only when proper discourse begins: “The domain of surprise will be the birthplace of discourse. The absence of a visible or imaginable object serves as a prelude, still without content, empty, to the necessity of believing the speech of the other” (De Certeau, 1987:18). Moreover, the face becomes visible only with the inception of discourse: “it is only when it speaks that the face shows itself” (Marion, 2001: 139). The icon’s “speech” is, of course, not made of
words and sounds – it is a silent language. It is through this language that the icon phenomenalises itself. Excessively present but impossible to behold, the icon of the face of God creates a fracture in the domain of the visible and renders the previous modes of perception – in particular, the intueri – irrelevant. It thus stirs curiosity in the beholder and transmits the desire to know. But the beginning of signification is conditioned by a necessary preliminary ethical pact: “the face of the gaze of the other appears only when I admit – submitting myself to him – that I must not kill him” (Marion, 2001: 140). It is only after this silent acquiescence that the actor is prepared for the third and last part of the exercise:

He will be astonished that it moves immobiley (immobiliter) and it is equally impossible to his imagination to grasp that the same type of movement is produced with a brother who is walking in the opposite direction. If he wants to make the experiment, he will arrange for a brother to be going from east to west without taking his eyes off the image, while he himself goes from west to east: he will question his partner to find out whether the image continues to turn its sight on him too, and he will learn from his ears that the gaze moves in the same manner in the opposite direction; then he will believe it. If he did not believe it, he could not grasp that it is possible.

Owing to the revelation made by the witness (revelatio relatoris), he succeeds in realizing that the face abandons none of the walkers, even when their movements are contrary. He thus experiences the fact that this immobile face (immobilis facies) moves at the same time towards the east and towards the west, towards the north and towards the south; that it is directed simultaneously toward one place and towards all; and that its gaze follows an individual movement as well as all the movements at once. If he observes (attendere) that the gaze leaves none of the persons present, he will see (videre) that this gaze is concerned with each one with as much care as if it were the only one to have the experience of being followed, to the extent that the one who is being looked at cannot conceive that another might be the object of the same attention. He will see that this gaze watches with extreme care over the smallest creature (minima) as over the largest (maxima) and over the totality of the universe. Starting from this perceptible phenomenon (sensibilis apparentia), I propose, most loving brothers, to raise you up
by an exercise of devotion (praxis devotionis) to mystic theology (Cusa in de Certeau, 1987: 11-12).

The “you” from the previous paragraph has now become “he”: the participants in the hermeneutical exercise are now the ones to experience the admiratio themselves. In the previous paragraph the experience of astonishment was giving birth to the germs of discourse by launching a (still) mute question between the two participants in the dialogue. This made possible a qualitative change in space which, in its turn, opened up the possibility for further spaces of enunciation. Thus, in this last part, the exercise is resumed in dialogue with other seers: the space is the concomitant presence of the all-seer and of all seers. The argument for the possibility of the “unrepresentable representation” can be found only with the acceptance of a common interpretation to a previously mysterious sign:

The style of this cooperation already sketches in the form that speech receives when it finally emerges: a dialogue, the form given to the majority of Cusa's works. It supposes the irreducibility of each speaker with respect to another: for want of a common vision, the one has to believe the other. The protocol of a verbal agreement between them is made up of successive acts (but opposing and reciprocal ones), ordered in the production of a common sentence. The text sums them up in a "canonical" conversation, a temporal series, as if it were presenting a juridical formalization of conversational procedures: the inter rogatio, the revelatio (the deposition and revelation made by the witness interlocutor), the auditio (a hearing as much as an audition), and the assent (credere) which makes it possible to "grasp" (capere) what one cannot see. At the end, the experience of the gaze consists in believing without seeing, thus in living in society, in "understanding each other." (de Certeau, 1987: 19).

As we can notice from the above quotation, as well as from the Cusan text itself, the verbs signifying the process of perception have also changed: “revelatio” now substitutes “intueri” – the icon has transcended the sphere of empirically observable objects, it has been re-veiled, that is, its hidden (and true) meaning has emerged. But
this was possible only by accepting the co-presence of simultaneous experiences of the
gaze from all the participants in the hermeneutical exercise. This was possible also
because the mode of perception of the beholder has changed from “inspicere” and
“respicere” to “attendere”. “Attendere” has a double function: on the one hand, as
cognate with attention, it signifies that patience, that prosochē that Cacciari was
defining as the characteristic of angelic exegesis. On the other hand, it points to the
social dimension of the hermeneutical exercise, suggesting that this particular mode of
perception was possible only by submitting oneself to the rigors of a practice carried
out within a community (to attend to). The face re-veils itself only liturgically.
Moreover, while seeing was passive in the first phase (“videbitur”), it has now become
active (“videre”). The fundamental principle that organizes this mode of perception is
the coincidence of contraries: the gaze re-unites the general and the particular, it can be
present in all places and in every place at the same time and it beholds both the
individual and the multiple. The acceptance of this reconciliation of contraries is the
mode of perception that Cusa seeks to induce in his readers, his “brothers”.

Going back on our steps, what was it that made possible this final change in
perception? It was movement that enacted the first response to the fixity of the gaze.
Movement translates as the presence of desire: desire to know, to experience, to enter
dialogue with the other. By the same token, desire will only be appeased by doing, by a
specific practice that will enact the possibility of meaning, conjoining “the desire to
know with the courage to do” […]. “It is no longer stupefaction which responds to the
gaze, but desire” (de Certeau, 1987: 20). Desire is not only the trigger for the beginning
of discourse, but also a profoundly ethical hermeneutic stance: “desire is the respect
and knowledge of the other as other, the ethico-metaphysical moment whose transgression consciousness must forbid itself” (Derrida, 2005: 102). With the evacuation of consciousness from the field of desire, we get a further intimation into what Cacciari was meaning to say about the non-intentional character of the apperception of the hidden meaning of the word (that belonged to the “angelic” type of representation). This was in no case a plea for hermeneutical irrationality: as Marion was noting, the “royal path of revelation” properly belongs to prophets and mystics and not to philosophy. It is, rather, a profoundly ethical question which underscores any and all the engagements with the text as the face of the other:

This is why we should define the face not only as the other of ethics (Lévinas) but, more radically, as the icon that imposes its call. The icon makes itself visible by making me hear its call. Only in this way can we understand that the face envisages me: its phenomenality never consists in becoming seen as a visible among other visibles – in this sense, there is nothing to see in the face and it stays perfectly invisible. But it phenomenalises itself when it makes itself heard, when I can feel the weight of its glory, when it inspires respect. Respect – attracting the gaze and the attention (-spectare), of course – but because I feel called and kept at a distance by the weight of an invisible gaze, by its silent call. Respect is thus the counter-concept of regard (Marion, 2001: 143).

This quotation can be read as a summary to the phenomenology outlined in Cusa’s “Preface”. By drawing an analogy between the face and the icon, Cusa was able, in a first moment, to point to the excess of visibility which surrounds the icon/the face of God. Secondly, by engaging the actors and the readers in the exercise of reading the icon, he emphasized the discursive nature of iconographic representation: he thus defined a parler which played itself outside the empirical world of regardable objects. One of the fundamental aspects of this exercise is the dialogical character of the contemplation of this excess of visibility: the face/the icon are phenomenalised only
once the beholder has perceived himself as beheld by them. It is a concomitant and reciprocal act of realization, of that *mise en image* which I was referring to earlier. The keener the perception becomes, the larger the horizon of inclusion (both the details and the generals, both the particular and the abstract). This is the *coincidentia oppositorum* of perception, a mode which no longer chooses between absence and presence but, patiently, lingers in the space that opens up between them (while resisting the excess of each). Lastly, the communal experience of the “all-seeing icon” translates an interpretive attitude under the mode of desire, away from the finitude of representation, beyond *in-tueri*. Marion’s “respect” is this desire. Both respect and desire are revealed at the margins of visibility. Cusa started this exercise under the mode of *regarding* (*intueri*, *inspicere*, etc.) and finished it under the aegis patience, respect (*attendere*).

Desire, respect, attention or *admiratio*, as counter-concepts of observation, looking into, or examination, cannot function in the realm of analytical reason. Still, they are just as valid and they represent, moreover, better ethical choices. As a hermeneutical attitude, *admiratio* comprises an awareness of the process of perception accompanying the encounter between the beholder and the aesthetic object. The prefix “ad-”, unlike the abolishing proximity of “in-” (from *intueri* and *inspicere*) and the distancing fracture of “re-”, reconciles distance with proximity: it conserves the *noli me tangere* of the all-seeing icon – its intangibility – but also affirms a communal discourse in which the seer and the seen constantly signify and re-signify one another. They are both *attending at* this liturgy of revelation. The attribute of patience, one that accompanies angelic exegeses was also noted by Cacciari: “the Angel’s wings are the wings of this patience, of this *prosochê* or attention which does not pertain absolutely to a separated-
transcendent dimension” (Cacciari, 1992: 85). Therefore, despite the theme of revelation, we are in no case in the sphere of what Derrida called “a metaphysics of radical separation and exteriority”. What the Cusan admiratio offers is the opening up of the folds or veils composing the space between the one who contemplates and the object of this contemplation (and the reversibility of their roles). It is the necessary preliminary stage into the praxis of reading as well as its equally important ethical pact. This is, very concretely, the first step into the world of “poetic logic” which Paul Colilli defined as follows:

The poetic logic I have in mind is the middle term of human signifying practices and it is characterized by two important features: (1) the overcoming of any dualistic relationship between subject and object – a form of thought, in other words, that moves directly from ordinary experience, from the concrete human situation; and (2) the fact that it sets the basis for an interpretive approach that includes both what is readily present before our senses and that which lacks a material form or which is hidden from our eyes” (Colilli, 1997: VIII-IX).

This is precisely the kind of practice Cusa’s text proposes to his readers. My analysis of the “Preface” has highlighted the figures and stages in which such an operation can be carried out. It has also pointed to the spaces where such an act of re-signification can become possible: in this case, it was at the confines of representation, in the space of excessive presence. The following text that I examine will deploy the particularities of a realm of vision situated at the other end off the spectrum: excessive invisibility.

**The Empty Tomb**

The infinitely other is the invisible (Jacques Derrida

19)
In the previous section, we have seen that the excess of visibility gave rise to the emergence of discourse. Would it be possible to think that the other of visibility given in excess – the invisible or the absence of the visible – can somehow engender the same process of discursivity? Is it also given in the space-between of representation, in that point where figure (or non-figure) and discourse become co-substantial? I will address these questions in light of Louis Marin’s reading of the narrative of the Resurrection. Marin’s reading is called “Propositions métaphysiques sur l’origine du récit” and is part of his book, *De la représentation*. The title of this section already indicates a correspondence with Nicholas of Cusa’s “Preface”: the moment investigated is the one which precedes and triggers the beginning of discourse. The novelty with Marin’s title consists in the explicit reference to the word “origin”: the spatial, vertical axis is doubled by a horizontal, temporal one. Thus, we are invited to a return of sorts, one that opens up the hermetic space of the tomb and finds, amidst its first layers, the grains for the conception of discourse. As Paul Colilli showed in his book, *The Idea of a Living Spirit*, tombs are privileged spaces of return:

A catacombal signifying practice defined by the properties of the *mundus imaginalis* encourages us to place a series of topological signs side by side. The aim is not to show reality in its most essential feature of fragmentation. Rather, the intent is to illustrate how these seemingly disparate topological domains have an important characteristic in common: they open themselves to the dissolution of the boundary that separates the real from the unreal, the transient from the eternal, the concealed from the unconcealed. In many ways, we are encouraged to bring things back to their catacombal origin. *The return*, to paraphrase Rella, does not bring us backwards to a univocal meaning which rests below the pluralities of meaning, but instead to a superimposition of parallel spaces and worlds, which is the correlative foundation of the plurality of meaning” (Colilli, 1997: 22-23).
Marin’s methodology is very similar to this multi-layered catacomb archeology: at the beginning of the section, he announces his intention of formulating a number of “metaphysical propositions”, starting from the procedures of structural analysis. Taking as his model a Biblical narrative, Marin notes the contributions of Propp and Lévi-Strauss in the field but wonders what the results of the respective analyses would have been if other spaces had been explored:

But by building, in a rigorous fashion, the text in its content as a system of bifurcating and interlacing forms, wasn’t it [i.e. structural analysis] fulfilling the task of a stylistics of the Biblical text, incurring the only reproach of stopping too soon, making halt at the notion of genre? […] In other terms, was it possible to consider the Biblical narratives in general and the Evangelical texts in particular as messages of multiple codes, of different levels of amplitude, each displaying its own, partially independent grammar and vocabulary and whose rules of combination and articulation would constitute a ‘general grammar’ […] of the narrative in general?” (Marin 124-125).

Marin’s reading will therefore be a grammar of these multiple layers of significance seen within the purview and scope of “metaphysical propositions”. This is an important and decisive step, one which reconciles the structure of the text with its metaphysical status. The fundamental point here is that the author seems to take as a given the fact that the narrative comprises, in its layers of meaning, messages that can be interpreted as “metaphysical propositions”. For the purposes of this demonstration, Marin chooses – not at all coincidentally, if we think of the relation between tombs and passages – the New Testament episode of the Resurrection, more precisely, the coming of the women to the empty tomb of Jesus.

The author starts his exposition by reflecting on the referential domain which this episode opens up. The episode is illustrative of the referential modus operandi of language in general since it reiterates the two essential procedures which accompany the
transformation of reality into discourse: 1. The initial conversion of a present situation into words and 2. The transmission of the result of this operation to someone else who deciphers or interprets the words “by producing a discourse which maintains and displaces at the same time the speech addressed to him” (Marin 125). In the first case, we are dealing with the passage from perception to language, a stage which shows, on the one hand, that perception is organized as a language and, on the other hand, that the mode of sensitive experience is already a signifying one. In the second instance, we are witnessing the deployment of the dialogical structure of language since it “covers, dialectically and phenomenologically, the structural opposition of langue and parole, of code and messages, the relation of signification and the relation of interpretation…” (Marin 125). Whereas in Cusa’s “Preface” the emphasis was on the transformation of the image into language, in the case of the narrative of the empty tomb of Jesus we move further in the domain of discourse, in the mechanisms of production and transmission of the parole. The case is particular because, on the one hand, we are again at the limits of representation – the missing presence translates as an invisible in excess – and, on the other hand, this surplus of absence is doubled by excessive presence: the angel’s tremendous presence by the tomb, metonymically signifying the presence of the absent body of Christ. Another advantage that a narrative such as the episode of the Resurrection presents is that this text is at the same time a discourse and a metadiscourse: In it and through it is achieved, through the continuous recitation-interpretation, the effective realization of the possible of its sense, through its double discursive and metadiscursive characteristic, through the essential inclusion of the metadiscourse in the narrative discourse as the “history” itself that this discourse retells. The fundaments of every possible discourse are thus not posed speculatively like in Greek philosophy (Heraclitus, Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle) and they are therefore not susceptible to the philosophical or scientific interrogation.
according to the principles of true and false. [...] The narratives of the Resurrection truly retell how the experiential event becomes language and discourse and how this event constitutes communication, because this very discourse is a narrative and the possible of its sense is indefinitely explored in its communication. Because of this, it is history, a discourse wherein the possible of sense incessantly manifests itself as real (Marin 126-127).

Through this double quality of the narratives of Resurrection, the exegete can see them both as one of the possible interpretations of history and as the matrix upon which modes of thinking have been molded. In this last sense, they serve as archetypes for the ways in which representation takes place, the ways in which individual and particular experiences are converted into language, becoming, in their historical transmission, universal messages. In this case, the true-false valuation system is redundant not because we are in the domain of non-intentional desire, but because we are entering the realm of history, dialogue and communication: in this context, the sense is infinitely and indeterminately a possibility continuously changed and adapted to other paroles. Moreover, we should push Marin’s statement even further and say that the narrative(s) of Resurrection not only do not fall under the incidence of speculative philosophy or valuation, but they simply belong to the pure domain of being: their most striking particularity (both historically and phenomenologically) is that they are. This mode of being is constituted by their evenimental nature, in that they structure themselves, at the same time, as a narrative-event, and a narrative-discourse. This is certainly the case of the episode of the women’s coming to the tomb of Christ in which this double function of the narrative is highlighted: we are assisting, at the same time, at the narrative about the women coming to the tomb and at another event which transfigures this coming into something else, into the event of the Resurrection:
In the end of the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulcher.

And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it.

His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow: And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men.

And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified.

He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.

And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I have told you.

And they departed quickly from the sepulcher with fear and great joy; and did run to bring his disciples word (King James’ Bible, Mathew 28:1-28:8).

The peculiarity of this narrative resides in the fact that, in this case, the sense is already given: the Resurrection of Christ. It will be this sense and no other that will have to emerge in all subsequent readings and interpretations of the text. The angel assimilates this function of the narrative – he becomes one with the message and thus, with the sense. The angel attests to this lack of presence, destabilizes the discourse and institutes as real the “unlikely possibility” of the living spirit in place of the missing body. The angel’s message transfigures the historical event into an epiphanic one: “The fact of the missing presence is told, in and through the message, as sense; or, moreover, the missing absence of the fact is substituted by the enunciation of a message, by its sense. The sense, it's the present fact as absence: this is the fundamental speech act happening in the ‘hole’ of the narrative tissue, as the central element – the ‘focal point’ – of this surprising narrative”
(Marin 130). As we have already seen in the writings of angelological poeticians and philosophers, the angel’s “transversal poetics” consists precisely in creating this fracture in narratives pertaining to a historical mode: now, his words, while filling in the void of representation, are also transforming the fact of the astonishing absence of the body into an infinite historical presence. The angel appears at the crossroads between the two axes of the narrative. On the one hand, there is a temporal, horizontal vector which recounts the succession of events in their chronological occurrence: Christ was crucified, his dead body was entombed, the women are going to anoint his body, etc. On the other hand, the angel’s apparition introduces a vertical direction to the narrative, coordinated along the lines of “the encounter, the apparition, the irruption and the instantaneous manifestation” (Marin 135). With the angel’s presence, we are assisting at a quite spectacular exchange of statuses: the absent body becomes, in the message, the living spirit and the angel’s presence becomes, again, in the message, the empty tomb. The angel’s manifestation, in the space-between these two axes “protects the empty place, the neutralized space which is the possibility of sense, the possibility of interpretation, the reversal of the statement that the statement cannot formulate and that only the narration can outline in the narrative through the two opposing axes from which discourse is generated” (Marin 135). In and of itself, either of the two axes would not be able to release the full potential of significations that the event is meant to engender. We should also note that the angel occupies that “empty place”, space of neutrality, very much in the sense of Michel Serres’ definition of angels as prepositions. As in the case of Cusa’s text, it is again a question of movement and vectors but now the trigger is more explicitly named: it is the angel who makes possible the process of signification by uniting the two axes together.
Even if they are outlined in non-congruous fashion, these two main axes organizing the narrative make way for a potentiality of signification which, from the very beginning, subsumes and re-signifies historical development to a transcendent event, *which has already occurred*. The importance of the absence indicated, and then represented by the angel, is great: as in the case of Cusa’s “Preface”, it is the fundamental condition for the beginning of discourse. The difference, this time, is that instead of translating the image into discourse, we are assisting at the recreation of the living body from the discourse of the absence of the dead body: “This *parole* is the other of being, the *other-body* substituting the dead body; it is not ‘here and now’ in the empty place. It is the other-body of the exchanged *parole*, the historical universal” (Marin 136). The invisibility of the “other” is explained as its phenomenal mode of continuous becoming in all subsequent speech acts which keep the traces of this lack of presence. This signifies, as Louis Marin astutely points out, that the text, taken in the totality of its communicative and signifying schemes and networks, shelters, in a way, the space of interpretation(s). The place of the empty tomb is what makes possible the relation between the text and the interpretive discourses: “This relation of communication is possible only starting from this absence, the absence of the empty tomb. This is where are created the message of the message, the discourse of reality, as well as the reality of discourse: common *parole*, historically living because overly plural, because its sense is the very possibility of sense” (Marin 136). Of course, this sense is not entirely indefinite and indeterminate – as Marion cheekily says, there is a reason why they had wine and not beer at the Last Supper.

Although Marin’s analysis has more general implications for the generation of discourse and the nature of communication and interpretation, I will insist, for the
concluding part of this section, on the place attributed to the angel in this spatial and
temporal inscription of such a fundamental or archetypal narrative. I have already noted
that the angel appears at the middle point between the two narrative axes which, joined
together, form a cross. He does not properly belong to either of these axes or, if he does
“belong”, he will appear in both. But his proper place is at the juncture between them, he
is the one who reverses and undermines the enunciated discourse and reinstates the
enunciation, the kerigmatic Words of God. We can call this place that he occupies
“empty” as Cacciari does or “transference”, in the terminology of Michel de Certeau. But
we could add to this definition the paradoxical specificity of Louis Marin’s “neuter”:

It is in this point that all the motifs and mobiles of the reading-
interpretation are undone and unraveled: representation and fiction, fiction
and reality, power of truth and truthfulness of power, neuter and play, historical time and permanent instant. Everything connects and unravels
with the emergence of this Someone between discourse and silence on the
threshold of the interrupted text, where the interruption points to an
outside the text, the real, but also a play of words, of phrases where the
text has its strongest effects, place of limits and borders, place of
contradiction: the neuter. […]
The negation linked to the space that the name designates opens up the
field […] to possibles which are not the possibles of truth” […] “the
neuter is not…this distance of representation where the beautiful forms
can deploy themselves and where the desire to trespass the determining
limitations of reality is accomplished. The neuter is the name give to the
signal of an exit and an entrance, on the threshold of separation between
the interior and the exterior […] name given to all the limits by the
thought of the limit: contradiction itself (Marin 152-153).

Understanding the angel as the place of the neuter in the domain of
communicative signification has several implications. First of all, in the narratives which
explicitly make reference, in one way or another, to the figure of the angel, the neuter
offers a localizable place and narrative function of transformation and connection
between spatial and temporal axes. It is “localizable” because the place of the neuter is
always that point in the narrative which arrests or interrupts one of the narrative schemes, introducing, at the same time, another scheme which re-signifies the first. The angel is thus that necessary included middle which makes possible the dialogue between the two main axes of the narrative. Without this dialogue, sense-making would be impossible. Secondly, the idea of neuter plays itself outside the fields of valuation – it no longer needs labels such as ‘fiction’, ‘truth’, ‘representation’, ‘reality’: temporally, it precedes and predetermines such categorizations. Lastly, as Marin also notes, the neuter is the threshold itself, the very limit between the interior and the exterior, the visible and the invisible. More precisely, the angel, as place of the neuter, is that moment which precedes choice: his mode is of the type “both…and…” or “neither…nor…”. Both modes are evocative of an excess: in the first case, it is an over-abundance of presence which appears in the angel’s domain of signification. This domain of complete inclusivity is his privilege and vocation. In the second case, it is the infinite vacuity behind the sign: the apophatic night which hides the face of God. But both spaces are inclusive of their counterparts: the all-seeing icon reveals the invisibility of the face of God and the empty tomb attests to the presence of the resurrected body of Christ. Thus, to resume the words of Derrida which I quoted as a motto for this chapter, “the infinitely other [of representation] is the invisible”, because the invisible is the sense of all the spaces of enunciation and the sense, in its completeness, can only be realized as a process, going on ad infinitum, until the living body re-emerges in place of the dead body. The two instantiations (presence and absence) appear separately in the two texts discussed so far. In the following part of this chapter, I will discuss a figure in which the visible and the
invisible are co-present: this is the archangel Gabriel, the “Crimson Angel”, the archetypal figure of the in-betweenness of knowledge and revelation.

The Crimson Angel.

*Everything is but revelation; there can only be re-velation* (Henry Corbin

A bit earlier in my discussion, I stated that the “royal path of revelation” is not accessible to philosophical discourse; the same, undoubtedly, applies to my own study. However, in order to understand the deep and long-running affinities between the figure of the angel and the process of interpretation, I propose the reading of excerpts from a text by Sohravardi: “The Recital of the Crimson Angel” as annotated and interpreted by Henry Corbin. Henry Corbin’s interpretation will serve more as an orientation in the particularities of the esoteric discourse of the Iranian mystic philosopher. However, given his focus on the mystical and religious content of these writings, I will formulate my own reading of this text in light of its relation with the problems of revelation and interpretation.

The enigmatic words that open Henry Corbin’s essay, “Theology by the Lakeside” and which he wrote when he was only 29, summarize the philosopher’s major contribution in the field of religious studies and philosophy. It would not be too far-fetched to group those works that he dedicated to the translation and interpretation of such mystics and philosophers as Sohravardi, Ibn Arabi or Avicenna under the heading of the “hermeneutics of revelation”, a spiritual hermeneutics whose scope and greatness go far beyond the purview of the present study. It is important to state, however, that the angelology that Henry Corbin extracted from Iranian mystic philosophy is one of the
most detailed and rich expressions of in-betweenness and will represent one of the
fundamental backgrounds upon which I will develop the concepts and readings presented
in this thesis. Such concepts as the “imaginal world”, “creative imagination”, “celestial
Earth”, “tawîl”\textsuperscript{22}, etc. are all extremely detailed explanations of a cognitive and spatial
realm which, while co-existing with the empirical realm, is given to us only by
revelation, in image: hence its in-between status – both material and immaterial, both
spirit and body, both visible and invisible. The most consummate expression of this realm
appears in the figure of the Archangel Gabriel, the guide of prophets and philosophers
such as Muhammad, Avicenna and Sohravardî.

Shihâboddîn Yahyâ Sohravardî, also known as \textit{Shaykh al-Ishrâq}, the “philosopher
of lights”, one of the most important Iranian mystic philosophers, lived in the twelfth
century and left behind him an impressive body of work. Although his life was abruptly
interrupted\textsuperscript{23} at only the age of 36, Sohravardî was able to leave us an immense legacy: a
“doctrine of lights”, which he resurrected from his spiritual masters, the mystics of
ancient Persia. This is how Corbin defined this doctrine:

We briefly designate this doctrine with the simple term of Ishrâq. The
term properly designates the rising star, \textit{aurora consurgens}. It is the
\textit{Ori}ent as birth and origin of light (\textit{Oriens-origo}). […] “Oriental
knowledge” is characterized as knowledge which is presence and co-
presence […] as opposed to a knowledge which is simply representation
of things through the intermediary of a form or \textit{species}. […] It is this
“oriental knowledge” which appears in the Latin texts, hermetic or other,
as \textit{cognitio matutina}\textsuperscript{24}. The Shaykh al-Ishrâq is \textit{Doctor cognitionis
matutinae}\textsuperscript{25}(Corbin, 1976: XIV-XV).

In this passage, we have the re-emergence of the discourse on origins which was also part
and parcel of Louis Marin’s reading of the narrative of the Resurrection. Without
insisting too much on the prevalent mystical significances of this text, we should also
note the distinction made between two types of representation: *formal* representation of things and this “oriental knowledge” which re-turns reality to its original space of enunciation. This was the idea that I presented in the introductory part of this chapter via Massimo Cacciari’s discussion of the “problem of representation”. Therefore, with the Crimson Angel, we are also returning to the initial problem put forward in this chapter and attempting to elucidate the ways in which this return can take place. As with the Cusan text, we also get the intimation of a hermeneutical process which is profoundly dialogic and has, as *sine qua non* condition, the reader’s orientation, a movement of sorts, towards the object of his contemplation.

In Iranian and, most notably, in Sufi mysticism, the Archangel Gabriel is a fundamental figure, the mediating Intelligence between God and humanity, the angel of prophets and philosophers, of knowledge and revelation: “He is the tenth of the hierarchical Intelligences of the pleroma, the one whom the philosophers call “The active Intelligence”. He is the Angel of the human race”. […] “He is the Angel that the Quran designates as Gabriel, the Holy Ghost. […] Sohravardî also calls him “eternal Wisdom”. […] “This Angel-Holy-Ghost is at the same time the angel of knowledge and revelation” (Corbin, 1976: XVIII). This definition was necessary in order to understand the full great significance of the Archangel Gabriel for Islamic thought. As compared to the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Islamic Gabriel accomplishes a far larger spectrum of functions than the ones of, for instance, *annunciation* or message-bearing. Interesting as it might be to go deeper into the meaning of the identification of the Archangel Gabriel with the Holy Ghost, I will, for now, simply signal it and emphasize, instead, this function of revelation and knowledge. I have already noted that the archangel Gabriel appears, in
Islamic prophetology, as a guide to the main prophets and philosophers. This recurrent presence signifies, according to Henry Corbin, “the necessary mediating function of the Angel in the Ishráqí spirituality: theophanic function, initiating function, saving function.

Sohravardí believed that he had conceived and written his great Book of Oriental Theosophy under the direct inspiration of this Angel-Holy-Ghost” (Corbin, 1976: XVII).

So the Archangel Gabriel appears as the mediating intelligence between the prophet/philosopher and all the hidden/esoteric things. He therefore inhabits and solicits a particular faculty of human cognition, which Corbin called “creative imagination”:

We should note in particular the mentioning of Ná-kojá-ābâd, the “realm of no-where”, Persian term felicitously created by Sohravardi. […] We should remember here the Sohravardian doctrine of active Imagination, situated in an “in-between” of intellection and perception. Whether it is in the service of the first or of the second, it is either Imaginatio vera, active (or intellec tive) Imagination, organ of visionary perception, or, on the contrary, phantasiesis, degenerating in absurdities and monstrosities. In the first case it is, like here, the faculty for entering the imaginal world; it perceives things “at the confluence of the two seas”, as Ibn Arabî phrased it (Corbin, 1976: 243).

This represents one of the many definitions of “creative imagination” which Henry Corbin gave in most of his writings. One of the ideas that he stressed repeatedly was this distinction between imaginatio vera and phantasis. Corbin, aware of the historical contamination between these two types of imagination, realized the necessity of emphasizing this distinction and of defining and re-instating “true imagination” in its rights. This distinction is a fundamental one for the present study too as it introduces another element between or, rather, outside the categories of truth and falsity upon which the traditional theory of representation rests. However, these last two categories are just as legitimate and their descendence goes as far back (at least) as creative imagination.

“The Recital of the Crimson Angel” is very revealing in this respect.
“The Recital of the Crimson Angel” is a typical narrative of the (prophet’s) encounter with the angel, outlining the angelic functions of revelation enumerated by Corbin. It has the following succession of events: 1. the exit from the “visible” world and the entrance in the “invisible” world; 2. the encounter with the angel; 3. correspondence between physical and meta-physical realities; 4. initiation to several esoteric truths; 5. revelation of the significance of the wings of the angel; 6. sublimation, or, the transfigured return to the empirical world. I will briefly comment on all of these six stages, except for the third and fourth ones, which contain strictly mystical ideas that do not make the object of my analysis.

“The Recital of the Crimson Angel” begins under the pretext of a question that one of the philosopher’s closest friends asks him: “Do birds understand the language of one another?” (Sohravardî 201). The narrator responds affirmatively, stating that he knows the answer because, at the beginnings of time, he and all the other beings had been created as “falcons” who understood each other perfectly in that country they were coming from. Corbin explains this passage by reference to the symbolism of the bird, as it appears in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, that is, as a symbol of the soul: “In short, to understand the ‘language of the birds’ is to understand the secret language that each being speaks in and of itself. It signifies possessing the key to the symbols and this privilege is here in reference to the state of the soul before its fall in this world” (Corbin, 1976: 214). We are, therefore, in that archetypal narrative of paradisiacal universal language, in the moment preceding the fall. This is how Sohravardî narrates the moment of the fall:

One day, the hunters Decree and Destiny put the trap of Predestination; in it, they introduced the grain of attraction and through this means they succeeded in making me their prisoner. From this country that had been my nest, they took me away to a far-out region. My eye lashes were
sown; something like four chains were fastened around me; finally, ten guardians were assigned for my keeping: five of them with their faces towards me and the back outside, and five others with their back towards me and the face towards the exterior. The five who had their face turned towards me […] kept me so tightly in the world of beatitude that my own nest, the far-off country and everything I had known there, all of that, I forgot. I was imagining that I had always been what I had become (Sohravardî 201-202).

The symbols in this passage are quite straightforward: the four chains signify the four elements of the empirical world and the ten guardians represent the five internal senses and their corresponding five external senses26 (Corbin, 1976: 215). What is important to note here is that the fall of the soul from Paradise, which coincides with the beginning of historical time is also the beginning of the world as representation. The insight of the Iranian philosopher is great: he places – like all modern or postmodern phenomenologists – “the problem of representation” in the realm of subjective perception: it is because the soul has been confined to a too narrow field of perception that it can no longer grasp reality to the full, nor can it remember an *illo tempore* of perfect perception. I would also like to note that this state of blindness and amnesia is compared to a state of drunkenness: the particular choice of the word “beatitude” is extremely important; by rendering the idea of ‘bliss’ conterminous with ‘drunkenness’, the author shows the illusory nature of earthly happiness. After the first moment of confinement, the narrator retells the revival of his senses:

After a certain period of time passed, my eyes opened a bit and I started seeing as much as my eyes were permitting me to see. Again I started to see the things I had not seen and I was in admiration. […] Finally, my eyes opened completely; the world showed itself to me as it was. I was seeing myself in the chains that had been tightened around me; I was seeing myself as a prisoner of the guards… (Sohravardî 202).
This moment of self-awareness is immediately followed by *admiratio*: in this case too, the perception of the invisible things goes hand in hand with this active mode of engaged perception which awakens man from his preceding stupor. As in Cusa’s “Preface”, this awakening to the invisible realm was possible because of the *mise-en-scène* of movement, a practice of doing and knowing which follows the first, imperceptible movement of desire. In Corbinian terminology, it is the movement of the heliotrope, that orientation of the heart to the auroral light of *cognitio matutina*. It is in this moment that the one who contemplates (because this is what this exercise is about) is ready for the encounter with the angel. After another period of time, the narrator perceives that his guards are not present and takes the opportunity to “escape” them: “I ended up on my way to the desert. And there, in the desert, I perceived a person who was coming in my direction. I went to meet him and greeted him. With perfect grace and delicacy, he returned my greetings. Noticing the red color whose sparkle made his face and hair look crimson, I thought I was in the presence of a youth” (Sohravardi 202). The first thing to remark is the motif of the desert which, as Corbin says, typifies the place where, at all times, the evasion from the external senses occurs (Corbin, 1976: 215). This is the episode of the encounter with the angel and this encounter can become manifested, as in the monks’ exercise in front of the icon, by a first movement of *adherence* from the part of the beholder. It is only after this movement that the actual meeting takes place. Not yet recognition, however. The narrator, who is taking his first incursion in the imaginal world, allegorizes the features of the character he meets: he interprets the significance of the crimson hue as the “person’s” youthfulness. However the “person” – this *neuter* of the narrative – is quick to correct him:
Oh young man, I tell him, where are you coming from?
- Child! Was I answered; you are mistaken in calling me like this. I am the eldest of the children of the Creator and you are calling me ‘young man’?
- But if that is the case, how is it that your hair hasn’t gone white like it happens to old people?
- The Wise Man: White, I am truthfully; I am an ancient one, a Wise Man whose essence is light. But the very person who made you a prisoner […] threw me away, a long time ago, in this dark pit. And this is the reason for this crimson color in which you perceive me. Otherwise, I am all white and luminous. When anything white, whose whiteness is the same as light, is mixed with darkness, it appears then, indeed, reddish. Notice the dusk and the dawn, both white, since they are in connection with the light of the sun. Nonetheless, the dusk and the dawn are a moment in-between: one side towards the day which is white, one side towards the night which is black, they give the crimson color of the morning dawn and of the evening dusk (Sohrvardî 202-203).

As the dialogue between the narrator and the Wise Man begins, the former is still looking at what he sees through a metaphorical lens: he equates the color red with youthfulness and the color white with old age. What follows is an initiation in the science of photisms, an explanation of the real symbolism behind the appearances of things. In order to make the narrator understand his status and the reason for the particularity of the manifestation, the Wise Man gives the example of dusk and dawn which are, in their turn, crimson in appearance because of their status between night and day. The method of revelation is again that of analogy and correspondence, starting from the earthly, empirical things and ending with the celestial. The reference to the dusk and the dawn is not coincidental because there is a temporal dimension which is added to the angel’s characterization: he is the hermeneut both of cognitio matutina and of cognitio vespertina, he is holder of that knowledge from the beginnings and ends of time. What we are not given in this narrative is the explanation for the Wise Man’s in-between status. This explanation is, however, present in another one of Sohravardi’s recitals – “The Rustling of the Wings of Gabriel”: 
Know that Gabriel has two wings. One of them, the right one, is pure light. This wing is, in its totality, the pure and unique relation of the being of Gabriel with God. And there is the left wing. On this wing, there is a certain tenebrous imprint which is similar to the reddish color of the Moon […]. This tenebrous imprint is his potential-being […] which has a side turned towards non-being (Sohravardi 236).

As father of the humanity, the archangel Gabriel typifies the interplay of light and darkness in which the whole domain of human knowledge is played out. The status of the object of revelation can therefore be only an in-between manifestation or image, given at the confluence between the light of the celestial realm and the shadows of earthly existence. After this initial identification of the angel and of his attributes, the actual recital of initiation into the hidden truths begins – the presentation of the seven mysteries of the world. At the end of this voyage, the narrator is warned that he will have to go through the apophatic night before reaching the final state of salvation:

The seeker of the Source of Life in the darkness will go through all sorts of stupors and distresses. But if he deserves to find this source, finally, after the darkness, he will contemplate the Light. […] as he re-emerges out of the Source, he has attained the Aptitude which renders him similar to the balm of which you distill a drop on the inside of your hand keeping it towards the sun and which then goes through to the other side of your hand (Sohravardi 212).

The final stage of the initiation is this process of sublimation which is explained in correspondence with the drop of balm traversing from one side to the other of the hand. This analogy is a very important one and it refers to the reversal of statuses between interiority and exteriority. The understanding that the initiate is brought to and the reality that he is invited to contemplate is that of “enveloping interiority” (Pleșu’s terminology): a hidden meaning which is exterior, outside, in the open, yet inaccessible.
“The Recital of the Crimson Angel” is a typical narrative of initiation whose most important significance undoubtedly resides in the reader’s assimilation of the teachings as if he were the one who was initiated. This aspect, however, even if essential for Corbin, pertains to mystical discourse and cannot enter the sphere of interest of the present study. Nevertheless, Corbin’s insight for the ways in which this recital should be read is a very good model for the type of exegesis the angel is proposing in order to re-turn things to that initial “problem of representation” that Cacciari was referring to in his book: “In order to respond to the intention of this recital which is, at the same time, a visionary and an initiatic recital, we must not simply transpose but simultaneously see the vision on the level of the Imaginal world. […] Otherwise, the visionary recital is degraded into a superfluous allegory; the event disappears” (Corbin, 1976: 241). This insistence on vision, as well as on the evenimental character of the recital invites the reader towards a type of hermeneutics which is able to conserve the images and figures that he encounters in the text in their imaginality, without seeking to allegorize. It is an invitation to a voyage somewhere outside a certain blindness to the imaginal richness that this text has to offer. Only by conjoining all the levels of reading – both literal and symbolic – will the reader be able to apprehend the sense of the recital. By mere allegorical reading, the text offers itself as representation of philosophical concepts and cannot, as such, escape the roundabout trajectory of self-referential representation. The literal reading is equally insufficient: it provides mere orientation in the formal aspects of the narrative (succession of events, characters, plot, etc.). In a first moment, Corbin proposes that only by combining these two levels (and all available others) can we reach a satisfactory interpretation of the text. However, as opposed to Marin, for instance, Corbin does not
point to the vertical axis opened up by the angel’s presence in the recital. Without positing this dimension, it is hard to understand the narrative as an “event” and comprehend its mode of being, so to speak. However, Corbin does have the intuition of this level of signification in the narrative because, while referring to the Quran, he resumes the trajectories of the hermeneutics of revelation: “To the descent (tanzîl) of the revelation corresponds the elevation, the re-turn of the letter to its archetypal state, the ta’wil as hermeneutics of the symbols” (Corbin, 1976: 250). While in the Resurrection narrative the angel’s presence by the tomb was introducing the locus of the neuter which, in its turn, was opening up the possibility of sense, in the “Recital of the Crimson Angel” Gabriel typifies, both through his appearance and through the mode of revelation that he induces in his disciple, a way of interpreting which is very akin with sublimation (the final analogy with the drop of balm). As such, the reading is supposed to directly affect the reader, to alter his or her very substance. However, this manner of understanding the ta’wil properly belongs to mystical exegesis and only archetypally to artistic representation. Nonetheless, there have been efforts to elucidate this deeply mystagogic meaning of the hermeneutics of revelation in terms of artistic representation:

In this separation, there are two moments that yield, in the artwork, two types of imagery: the moment of ascent into the heavenly realm, and the moment of descent into the earthly world. At the crossing of the boundary into the upper world, the soul sheds, like outworn clothes, the images of our everyday emptiness, the psychic effluvia that cannot find a place above, those elements of our being that are not spiritually grounded. At the point of descent and re-entry, on the other hand, the images are experiences of mystical life crystallized out on the boundary of two worlds. […] Once we understand this difference, we can easily distinguish the ‘moment’ of an artistic image: the descending image, even if incoherently motivated in the work, is abundantly teleological; hence, it is a crystal of time in an imaginal space. The image of ascent, on the other hand, even if bursting with artistic coherence, is merely a mechanism constructed in accordance with the moment of its psychic
genesis. When we pass from ordinary reality into the imaginal space, naturalism generates imaginary portrayals whose similarity to everyday life creates an empty image of the real. The opposite art – symbolism – born of descent, incarnates in real images the experience of the highest realm; hence, this imagery – which is symbolic imagery – attains a super-reality (Florensky 44-45).

Pavel Florensky’s book on iconography is an extremely rich reservoir for exploring the dialogue between the artistic and the mystic realms. There will be ample occasions to return to his ideas throughout this thesis. For now, I will highlight the recurrence of the motifs of ascent and descent which accompany, this time, the creation of art. What the author calls symbolism here is very similar to the Islamic ta’wil, the re-turn of the image to its archetypal, imaginal state, its *trans-figuration*. It is not mere metaphorical substitution because, as I have stated earlier, the image is transposed in its “imaginality”, that is, the work preserves that bound character to a form or Idea. This type of transfiguration cannot be metaphorical or fictitious because there is no substitution, the image and the idea both *adhere*\(^\text{28}\) to one another, and therefore they are both preserved in their integrity. What makes possible this type of relation – both identity and difference – is that space-between which Florensky also references (“the point of descent or re-entry”), and which is typified by the Crimson Angel. After the necessary initial movements of *desire* and *admiration*, the angel meets his disciple in this neuter field of the narrative – the desert – which opens up the possibility of sense; after this first encounter, the dialogue takes place in the crimson, in-between space of revelation, the imaginal world whose images become, as Florensky phrased it, crystals of time. Paul Ricoeur also noted this crystallized character of symbolic images:

> But within the sacred universe, symbolism is a *bound* symbolism or, to speak like Kant when he speaks of independent beauty and adherent
beauty, it is an adherent symbolism. Here, in my opinion, is the essential fact for the dialectic of manifestation and proclamation. Symbols come to language only to the extent that the elements of the world themselves become transparent, that is, when they allow the transcendent to appear through them. This ‘bound’ character of symbolism – its adherence – makes all the difference between a metaphor and a symbol. A metaphor is a free invention of discourse, whereas a symbol is bound to the configuration of the cosmos. […] This adherence is not such that it does not call for a labor of speech or interpretation, as though it were a mute spectacle. However, this labor of speech and interpretation is not ‘free’ but rather ‘bound’ by the appearance of the elements and by the appearance of the sacred in and through these elements” (Ricoeur, 1995: 53).

The notion of appearance is another witness yet to the substitution of the initial “problem of representation” - what Benjamin was defining as representation of Ideas – by the “problem of representation” of historical time, the one which cannot avoid the self-referential circularities of a language that seems to have lost its adherence to things and Ideas: the institution of the reign of illusion in the space once inhabited by the imaginal. But, as Marin was pointing out, the symbolic is not illusory – “il fait signe” – and, as such, it is the site of passage of all disjunctions and conjunctions of visibility and invisibility, absence and presence, interiority and exteriority. In his own reprise of the Islamic ta’wil, Cacciari showed the problematic nature of transferring this interpretation outside the field of religious exegesis: “the Angel is intermediary between the purely aesthetic dimension of the *phantasia* and the invisible, supra-imaginative vision: he ‘saves’ the former in the latter but, for a while, he *re-veils* the latter in the former” (Cacciari, 1992: 149). This quotation condenses the dynamics of passage from one type of representation to another (and of which the angel is the intercessor). Cacciari shows that the “problem of representation” resides in the ways in which “phantasia” veils and renders unavailable the “supra-imaginative vision”. We have seen that this process of
veiling and re-veiling was a fundamental *topos* in the structure of “The Recital of the Crimson Angel”. However, if this idea can hold true for a narrative/recital of initiation, how are we to interpret the *symbolic which signifies within the metaphorical*? This is the crux of the problem of representation such as it is presented to us from the sphere of artistic expression. So far, Massimo Cacciari, in his reading of Walter Benjamin, seems to have found the most complete answer:

A *new* time is that time for which the Angel incessantly searches the *right* representation: present-instant, interruption, stopping of the continuum, *Jetzt-Zeit*. *Any Jetzt* can represent it. […] However, the Jetzt-zeit does not sign the simple ‘fall’ in the allegorical, but it is, within the allegorical, memory of the symbol. It is through this memory that the infinite variations of the Spiel turn into a Trauespiel […]. Such a force represents itself precisely in the ‘saving’ of the Jetzt-zeit from its immediate profane signified, *illuminating it*, without transcending or sublimating it: profane illumination (Cacciari, 1992: 87).

Cacciari’s explanation is too well formulated for me to paraphrase it here without running the risk of altering its significance. I will simply say that “profane illumination” is the name that we can give to the imaginative space opened up by the works of literature in their encounter with the angel that I will discuss in this thesis. “Profane illumination” is the *coincidentia oppositorum* of the symbolic and the metaphoric whose tension is enacted in the artistic transfiguration of the ideas of which the angel is the sign.

**Conclusion**

The three texts that I have discussed so far crystallize the main theoretical axes of my thesis as well as represent a preview to the lines of inquiry along which I will develop my research. In presenting them, I have intended to make several points. First of all, these texts can be read as alternative modes of responding to the criticism of the “problem of representation” that I outlined in the first part of this chapter. This contemporary
approach to “the problem of representation” which, for the purposes of the present paper, I have labeled as “the metadiscourse of excess”, is concerned, in the main, with breaking away from the traditional, Aristotelian definition of representation and opening up a theoretical space beyond dichotomous thinking. Given this double bind, the means of exceeding what is resented as a boundary, as a limitation, will also be a discourse on this very limit and on the ways in which its space can become significant (once again).

The three texts that I have analyzed represent different ways in which this theoretical discourse on exceeding the limits of representation can become concretized in specific forms and approaches to the problem of representation. These three texts are an opening of this space of the limit and a delineation of its topography in more particular and specific modes of expression. In so doing, I am also aware of Louis Marin’s reservation towards any such attempt – he believes that the indeterminate nature of this space-between has to be preserved, that any approach that would try to define and specify it is also destined to annul it. Bearing this legitimate consideration in mind, I also believe that this space-between of representation is not resistant to definition and knowing by its nature. In this respect, I am more in agreement with the contemporary approaches to angelologic poetics, with the insights of Colilli, Pleșu, Virilio, Serres, etc. who agree on the fact that the intermediary domain of “angelological semiosis” has become unavailable to us because of our analytical bias, because we have forgotten to cultivate the cognitive faculty which directly responds to the space-between. If anything, the three texts presented in this chapter are a testament to attempts, both from the Judeo-Christian, and the Islamic traditions, to restore the connection between this type of knowing and the specific space of the limit.
The “Preface” of Nicholas of Cusa’s *The Vision of God* is one instantiation of a discourse taken to the limits of representation: excess of visibility, ultra-presence, the all-seeing icon. What the Cusan exercise has shown is that the space of excess can become accessible according only to a certain ethics of doing and a specific interpretive attitude: *admiratio*, desire, respect. With the “all-seeing icon” we have the specification of an over-determining space of enunciation which, even if invisible with the tools of empirical perception, becomes comprehended in its *all-presentness* only within a community, in a profoundly dialogical attitude which draws the lines of development of this liturgy of revelation. Louis Marin’s reading of the narrative of Resurrection discloses the infinite space of the invisible other, excessive absence. But, just as much as the ubiquitous presence of the icon was wedded with invisibility, the signifying absence of the dead body of Christ can only be understood in conjunction with all the spaces of enunciation of the message of the living spirit (their excessive presence). The angel appears here as the warrant of this co-substantiation of presence and absence, the place of the neuter, opening up, precisely because of his neutrality, the possibility of sense. With “The Recital of the Crimson Angel” the question of the “limits of representation” becomes, more properly, that of “the limits of interpretation”. The “Crimson Angel”, the archangel Gabriel, is an exemplary figure of a hermeneutics of revelation, a guide towards the hidden meaning of symbols. In light of the exegesis and in-between knowledge proposed by him, we can better understand the notion that the object of a theory of representation should be representation of ideas (and not things). With the Crimson Angel, the space of revelation/interpretation becomes an intermediate realm between perception and
intellection: creative imagination and the imaginal world. The access to this realm is also possible only by exceeding a previous, analytical mode of perception.

Each episode enacts a different stage in the process of interpretation. The focus of the Cusan text is on the passage from one type of perception to another, from *intueri* to *videre*, that is, from an analytically biased way of seeing to an imaginative and dialogical way of seeing. This is the stage which educates the contemplative function and orients towards a particular mode of assimilating the objects of perception. In the Resurrection narrative the focus shifts on the process of transmission of the message, on the essentially historical and communitarian dimension: the *parole* now substitutes the image (the empty tomb). Finally, Sohravardi’s text, although it contains the previous two stages, emphasizes the process of interpretation as typified by the figure of the archangel Gabriel. Thus, with these three texts, we have a detailed description of the three fundamental stages in the process of artistic representation.

Another important element that these texts are bringing to this study is the presence of a number of concepts which lend themselves very well to the study of angelic in-betweenness: *admiratio*, the neuter, appearance, the imaginal and symbolic interpretation. Without going in too much detail about these notions which I have already explained, I would like to note that they will constitute very significant theoretical tools around which I will build my analyses in the following chapters. Another aspect that I would also like to mention is the recurrence of the preposition “*ad*” in three different instances in my discussion so far: Cacciari’s definition of the angel’s as *ad-Verbum*, the Cusan *admiratio* and Ricoeur’s definition of adherence. In the first case, we are dealing with the theophanic function of angels, that of un-veiling and re-veiling the face of God.
With *admiratio*, we are given a glimpse into the exegetical attitude proposed by the angel, one which both preserves the *miraculum tremendum* of the revelation of the Face and its intangibility. Finally, *adherence* evokes the bound character of symbols and ideas, the trace of their connection, even within the allegorical. In all these instances, the angel is the figure who makes possible this revelation, this return to “the representation of Ideas”.

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**Chapter 2.**

*Exceeding Presence. Angels and the Poetics of Appearing and Revelation.*

*It is God’s presence among men which is beautiful, this is what ravishes and transports the soul* (Evdokimov, *L’art de l’icône* 17).


**Introduction.**

The previous chapter has brought to light three different hypostases of a discourse attempting to exceed the limits of representation: the ubiquitous gaze of the all-seeing icon (of God), the representative void of the missing body (of Christ), and an instance of a hermeneutics of revelation (of the Archangel Gabriel). All these three texts are under the sign of religious discourse and will therefore serve only as archetypes in my interpretation of literary texts. The present chapter and the following one will more directly address the issue of the possibilities of exceeding the limits of representation in artistic discourse. Although each chapter will resume, in the main, the fundamental theme from the previously discussed episodes – excessive presence, excessive absence and the space-between of interpretation – all of these themes overlap, so to speak, both synchronically and diachronically: on the one hand, as Jean-Luc Marion was stating, absence and presence are conterminous and they accompany each other in their phenomenality; on the other hand, as we will see in this chapter, a metaphysics of (excessive) light is inextricably connected with the hermeneutics of revelation.

These three main themes are grouped around the revelatory function of angelophanies, both in their dogmatic signification and in the ways this *topos* has informed twentieth-century philosophical and artistic discourse. The first two (presence and absence) coincide with the kataphatic, manifested version of creation, and with the apophatic, the non-manifested, hidden aspect of God, respectively. In both cases, as we
could see in the Cusan text as well as in the episode of the Resurrection, angels have this fundamental function of mediating between the visible and the invisible, both revealing aspects and names of God and, at the same time, veiling His Face, thus safeguarding the transcendence of the transcendent One. It is this tension of the co-substantiality and co-presence of visibility and invisibility, light and darkness that will define, in philosophical and artistic discourse, the inadequacy between traditional modes of representation and a non-exclusivist, non-analytical type of comprehension. This inadequacy, or non-congruity as Marin defined it, is the locus for the opening up of a signifying domain which exceeds the modes of traditional representation.

As we could see in Nicholas of Cusa’s “Preface” to The Vision of God, excessive presence, as typified by the “all-seeing icon” is one of the possible modes under which the revealed reality of God gives itself. The act of seeing thus becomes transfigured, it is no longer mere non-engaged perception or (worse) allegorical transposition, it is a beholding, an admiratio which turns a previously invisible face into discourse. Under these auspices, “excessive presence” appears as the condition and trigger for the inception of discourse. The phenomenology of the face, iconographic transposition and this particular metaphysics of presence are all channels leading together to the reconfiguration of this world of representation, given at the margins of visibility, where non-visibility becomes, first, excessive visibility (the “admiratio” comes first) and then co-presence and co-visibility. In attempting to unravel and explore even further these “fragile” concepts, I will devote this chapter to the discussion of authors who have found different modes of expressing the realm of the signification given in the domain of excessive presence: Walter Benjamin’s “Agesilaus Santander”, Paul Valéry’s Eupalinos,
ou, l'Architecte, Bernard Malamud’s “Angel Levine” and Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Angel of the Odd”. Before proceeding to the commentary of these texts, I will offer a theoretical introduction to the main lines of inquiry concerning angels and the metaphysics of presence.

**Angels and the Metaphysics of Presence.**

In considering the aspect of “excessive presence” in relation to angelophanies, we direct our attention to one of the three fundamental theological modes of addressing the problematics of theophany: the kataphatic way (which is the case of the present chapter), the apophatic way (which will make the object of study of the third chapter) and the perspective of the *coincidentia oppositorum* (both presence and absence) such as we find it in the works of Sohravardî, Ibn Arabî, Nicholas of Cusa and Sergei Bulgakov, to give just a few examples. Although this last approach is what comes closest to my own understanding of divine theophany, I have decided to treat the issues of presence and absence in two separate chapters (and yet, in the same thesis) so that we can fully grasp the specificity of each. Therefore, in this chapter, my focus will be on the manifested, revealed aspect of God such as can be inferred from angelic presence.

When attempting to draw a clear parallel between angels and the theme of revelation, even if the connection seems obvious, I have found that the actual dogmatic accounts and interpretations are much less obvious in stating this connection. This is mainly because this primordial theophanic function of angels, such as it is implied in the Old Testament, was assimilated and enhanced by the figure of Christ. Moreover, shortly after the establishment of Christianity as the main European religion, the angels became
“suspect” because of their historical connection with an older, polytheistic order of things. However, contemporary Christian theologians (especially from the ranks of the Catholic faith) agree on the importance of angels in the revelation of God. Again, this should have nothing surprising about it, especially if we think of the abundance of episodes in the Bible, wherein the manifested form of God took the shape of an entity of light and fire (elements with which, as we will see, angelic substance is identified): the episode of the burning bush, the blinding Taboric light which overwhelms Moses, the terrible splendor and light in the vision of Joseph, the beauty and magnificence of the Annunciation archangel and the majesty of the angel announcing the Resurrection of Christ. It is no wonder that the angels’ presence is almost always accompanied by the dictum: “don’t be afraid!””. In his readings of Sohrawadi and Ibn Arabi’s theosophies, Henry Corbin has also highlighted this primordial theophanic function of angels. In these accounts, the cosmogonic scenario is, (much like Plotinian cosmology), viewed as an incessant emanation of light and/as names from the Godhead. In the following, I will detail these notions, hoping to show that there is plenty of ground to start from the premise of the angels’ fundamental function of revelation. Related to this idea is the definition of angels as light, a special sort of light, celestial, “uncreated” light, or that light that is never extinguished as Sergei Bulgakov defined it. The over-abundance of brightness accompanying angelophanies brings into question the issue of the connection between presence and light, which has been much problematized in post-structuralist philosophy. Finally, my theoretical preamble for this chapter will address the question of a hermeneutics of revelation, attempting to find its specifics and givens through the insights of Paul Ricoeur and Jean-Luc Marion on this matter. The themes of light,
presence and revelation bring the angel in close relation to icons (which are themselves modes of manifestation of God and which, for the same reason, shared the same “suspect” fate as angels for a while). Therefore, the ways in which scholars of iconography have understood the mechanisms of revelation involved in iconic transposition will further explicate the ways in which the manifestation of presence can take place.

**Angels and the Revelation of God.**

In his book on iconography, Sergei Bulgakov stated that when talking about icons we should start from the *sophianic* premise of the manifestation of God: “we should not start from the *apopahtic* thesis of the invisibility of non-representability of God, but from the *sophiologic* one, according to which God is representable and the world is configured in His image. God has traced His Image in the created world and it is therefore possible to represent Him (Bulgakov, 1996: 54). Since the revealing function of icons is very much akin to the ways in which angels manifest God’s presence, I will also begin this part of the thesis from the premise of the representability of God in the world. Perhaps one of the best definitions of the theophanic function of angels comes from Dionysius the Areopagite, according to whom the angel is “image of God, manifestation of the hidden God, pure mirror, most limpid and immaculate, uncorrupted, ready to receive all the beauty of the divine form, bearing the imprint of goodness” (The Areopagite, in Cresti 147). This passage brings together a number of fundamental notions on angels as the revelation of God: the analogy with the mirror, which is a recurrent *topos* in all the Abrahamic religions and which captures the reflexivity of the angelic *kenosis*: the angel
is that which empties itself in order to receive the light of God and render it manifest. Through the angels, the “hidden God” becomes present. Furthermore, it is through this act of reflexive kenosis that beauty and goodness are brought together.

This view is also shared by Jean Daniélou who, on the occasion of a colloquium on the subject of angels in Paris in 1969, stated the following: “the angels appear as a certain irradiation of the glory, as pertaining to a certain epiphany of the transcendent God. They correspond in this sense to a sort of world of manifestation of God on the created level” (Daniélou 44). The words that Father Jean Daniélou has employed here reference a very specific tradition: for instance, the notion of the “irradiation of the glory” is not without echo to the Plotinian emanationist cosmology. This perspective is based, in the Christian tradition, on the notion that the light created in the first day directly corresponds to the creation of angels. Since Plotinus and other subsequent neo-Platonic theosophists believed that this light of the first day was also the first emanation of the Godhead, and therefore His first manifested form or “name”31, it is not then too far-fetched to consider that, for this specific neo-Platonic tradition which inspired to a large extent the Patristic literature, angels were the first manifested form of God in the beginnings of Creation. Another notion for which the French theologian chose his words with care was this idea of “a sort of world of manifestation of God on the created level”: this signifies that, even if the angels are creaturely beings, their world is different from ours; it is “a sort of world”.

According to Protestant theology however – such as in the writings of Karl Barth, but also in the fundamental works of Calvin and Luther – the angel’s role in the creation is not very central; in the words of Father J. Bosc, the angels “do not have this primordial
role, they are not on the level of what constitutes the central axis of the Revelation. And we should consequently always consider them secondary or auxiliary figures (Bosc 196). This opinion illustrates very well the point I was making earlier about the ways in which the revealing function of angels was rendered obsolete by the presence of the resurrected Christ. However, even if their role is not fundamental, Father Bosc states later that their presence, even if discreet, in inextricably linked with revelation:

We could say indeed that the presence of angels intervenes in the most neuralgic moments of the impact of the presence of God in the world: we should think here of two absolutely fundamental moments in the evangelic perspective. The first one is that of the Incarnation, the mystery of Christmas, where angels appear indeed. The second one is this particularly extraordinary moment which is the Resurrection (Bosc 197).

Even with this concession, through these two examples, Father Bosc’s formulation on the revelatory function of angels remains tributary to Christology, to the ways in which they partake in the Supreme Revelation of God by Christ. According to Daniélou, this ambiguity of the status of angels in relation to God is due to their representation, especially in the Old Testament, as “men” or “the men of God”:

In the oldest books of the Old Testament, there is often reference to the angel of Yahve, the *malak-Yahve*. Thus, in a well-known episode, the one who appears to Abraham by the oak trees of Mambre is the manifested God and Abraham recognizes Him as such. It is true that at this point it is very difficult to tell whether the expression designates God in His manifested form or an individual persona distinct from God. And it is evident that we can find this ambiguity in the New Testament too. For instance, in the Scripture of Luke it is said that the angel Gabriel appears to Mary. […] However, the syntagm angel of God is just as ambiguous as *malak-Yahve* and it is so true that certain Judeo-Christians think for instance that what we call the angel Gabriel it is the Verb itself, which takes the shape of an angel to visit Mary and which subsequently becomes enfleshed in her. It is very peculiar that in the Judeo-Christian religion […] the vocabulary of angelology serves very often to designate either The Holy Ghost or the Verb. The Verb is very often called glorious angel. […] Let us not forget that in the Byzantine iconography, the three persons of the Trinity are still represented as three angels, all three of them have
wings; and angel in this sense is therefore an expression of Yahve as manifestation (Daniélou 40).

I have quoted this longer paragraph for several reasons. First of all, Daniélou implicitly points to the fact that the closer the angels come to the image of God, the more unlikely they become as images of Him – when they are identified with Him, they can also become mere autonomous persons. There seems to be a need for the predication of a type of relation that assimilates both the identity and the difference of angels from God which the Scriptures do not explicitly formulate. Secondly, this passage provides us with two very enlightening examples concerning the revealing function of angels which are both telling us that the angels manifest the presence of God in crucial moments and in an extra-ordinary way, in an overwhelming and out-of-proportions mode of appearing. Finally, we can identify, among the last sentences, the implication that the archangel Gabriel can be identified, to a certain extent, with the Word and with the Holy Ghost, an idea we have already seen was part and parcel of Sohravardi’s theosophy of lights.

This notion of angels as the Verb is a recurrent theme in theological writings: Philo of Alexandria, for instance, was defining angels as “logoï”. A very interesting reprise on this topic comes from Islamic theology in which etymologically the verb/logos and the word for angels “malak” are practically the same: “The word kalima (Parole) comes from the tri-lettered root KLM and the word for the angel (Malak), from the root MLK. The one is the anagram of the other. The Words of God (Kalimat Allâh) are the Angels of God (Malâikat Allâh) in the other world” (Mokri 78).

There are thus several levels of interchangeability between God, His Verb and the angels, whose complexity far exceeds the limits of my theological knowledge. It is
important to signal this aspect, however, especially in the context of the figure of the Archangel Gabriel who is paradigmatic in several of the texts that I will discuss. Since he is also the angel of revelation *par excellence*, it is through his epiphanic modes that we can understand the ways in which God is revealed via the figure of the angel. In this respect, we can find a very plastic description in Henry Corbin’s *Paradoxe du monothéisme* “In the centre there is God. The multiple flames in the multiple mirrors around are as many theophanies of God: One is Himself, multiple in His theophanies; […] All around there are multiple mirrors so that a candle appears in each mirror in the position of this mirror” (Corbin, 1981: 35-36). The motif of the mirror appears again, this time pointing to the concomitance of the indivisibility of God and the multitude of His manifestations. In this way, too, the idea of an “absolute God” becomes more nuanced because, as Corbin outlines, “The Angel is the *Absconditum* absolving Himself of his abscondity”; herein plays the syntactic configuration of the French word for “absolute” – “absolu” – a passive past participle of the verb “to absolve” (“absoudre”), but also an adjective meaning ‘absolute’ (Corbin, 1981:84). Corbin ends his book paraphrasing the words of Rainer Maria Rilke, on the ultimate necessity of angelology, in its mystagogic function to humanity: “Our task in the world is to accomplish an intimate and durable transfiguration of the visible in the invisible, in a reality that no longer needs to be visible and tangible. […] The Angel is the creature in which this transformation has already been accomplished” (Corbin, 1981:188-189). Thus, to conclude, the doctrine of angels as revelation of the hidden face of God is a fundamental one because “it is related to the doctrine of God itself in the sense that it always opposes an abstract notion of God.
The Lord is the living God, the God of the world created in its totality, the Skies and the Earth” (Bosc 201).

**Angels and/as Light**

Directly related to the doctrine of angelophanies, there is the motif of angels as light: if angels are the first act of existentiation and this act is represented as light bringing forth light, then angels are these first, victorious lights by which God “absolved Himself of His abscondity”; “The angels represent one sphere of creation. […] That is, we oppose the world of angels as a world illuminated by divine light and bathing in this light, to the underworld of this universe which is, on the contrary, immersed in darkness” (Daniélou 42). These notions of mirrors and lights related to the creative aspect of angels appear in a great number of theological and angelological texts. To give just a few examples, Sergei Bulgakov considers that “The Angels are the secondary lights, mirrors of the uncreated Light, where there is no shadow and which transcends any possible form. Nonetheless, as creatures called forth from nothingness into beingness, they contain the possibility of a chiaroscuro and, by necessity, they have a limit, hence a form” (Bulgakov, in Cresti 154). It is on this background that Alida Cresti explains the color white used in the representation of angels in her book, *Mitografie di luce. Il colore degli angeli*:

[The angel] lives in ‘pure light’ and he is himself light of triumphant dawn. As mirror, potentiality of reflected light, ‘secondary light’, […] he fills himself with divine light. […] Clad in white, splendor of light, he appears in the New Testament (*Mark*, XXIV, 5-7: *a young man clad in white*; *Luke* XXIV, 4: *two men appeared there in shining clothes*, etc.) […] In the *Slavic Enoch* (I, 4-5) the visionary sees two gigantic men appear with faces shining like the sun and the eyes burning like the stars,
spitting fire from their mouth and with arms like golden wings (Cresti 133-134).

As Cresti amply shows in her book, this revealing function of angels is related to a whole symbolism of light and color: the color white refers to the purity of the light created in the first day; the first created angels, the arch-angels, the ones surrounding the Throne of God, the “angels of the Face” are each attributed one of the colors of the rainbow; or, according to the Hebraic tradition, they are the four archangels Michael, Seraphiel, Azrael and Gabriel.

As we can see from these examples, the very nature and substance of angels are defined as light. Marco Bussagli, in his angelologic archeology – *Storia degli angeli* – also identified angels with light, according to a very specific theological repertoire:

> A body similar to a brilliant light, as Origene says.

On the other hand, for san Basilio, as well as for the Damascene, the body of the angels is so subtle that they speak of ‘fire’ (*pyr aulon*). Also for the already quoted Gregory of Nazianz the nature of the Angels is ‘immaterial and incandescent’ (*pyr aulon kai asomaton*), while for the pseudo-Clement of Alexandria, it is “intellectual fire” (*noeron pyr*). Saint Augustine, comparing the angelic body with the Resurrection body, describes the *angelica corpora* as substance *lucidissima atque etherea* [...](Bussagli 237).

While for the Christian religion the angels’ substance is characterized either as light or as fire, for the Islamic tradition, the angels are all born out of this primordial celestial light and it is only the inferior spirits such as the *djins* who were made out of fire (cf. Mokri 69). These are just a few examples of the relation between angels and light, having the role to give a bit of background on the theme of excessive presence. Some of the examples quoted so far have also highlighted this attribute of angelic presence as excessive appearing. It is a mode of revelation that makes God manifest in His glory, one
that exceeds earthly modes of perception. Possibly, it is this characteristic of
angelophanies that Thomas Aquinas had in mind when he stated that: “God is not known
on account of obscurity but on account of abundance of brightness” (quoted in Colilli,
1999: 26). It is this excess, this overflow of light that signals the presence of God in our
world. However, as pure, unadulterated light from the beginnings of time, this light of
God can appear in this world only in a much lesser degree of brilliance, ‘filtered’, as it
were, through the veils of darkness surrounding our world: “truth is veiled by seventy
thousand veils of light and darkness. If it were to appear unveiled all of a sudden (and
thus no longer solely in the form of re-velation), we would die from it” (Cacciari, 1992:
18). The motif of the veil is not only related to the idea of theophany but also to that of
the angelic hierarchies which, according to their rank and time in the creation, reflect
different degrees of luminosity.

All of these instances attest to the angel’s primordial role in the revelation of God
and to a mode of knowledge which does not eliminate the possibility of access to God.
These forms of manifestation are excessive, on the one hand, because they come from
outside this world and its intelligence, on the other, because the sacred is always
experienced as tremendous and overwhelming. This terror that Rilke saw as tantamount
to the presence of angels and which is also implied in the injunction “have no fear” is, as
Jean-Luc Marion explains, the only way in which we can experience this over-abundance
of brightness: “The access to the divine phenomenality is not forbidden to man; on the
contrary, it is only when it becomes wide open, that man […] forbids himself to advance
and even stay. Terror attests, in the mode of the forbidden, to the persistent and
unbearable surplus of the intuition of God” (Marion, 2001: 194).
The Metaphysics of Presence

Before going further in the discussion of the revealing function of angels, I will make a short detour in order to address the aporias of the metaphysics of presence, such as they were conceptualized by twentieth-century philosophers, most notably, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. So far, we have seen that theological discourse abounds in metaphors of light and brilliance and has its foundations on the law of an all-encompassing presence of God. The present topic, namely the revelation of God by the angels, is, by its nature, particularly sensitive to these descriptions. The revelation narratives retell, without exception, the advent of an out worldly and overwhelming act of existentiation defined as the presence of a light which is blinding and impossible to behold. It would be useful to recall here the fracturing nature of these events, their “transversal poetics”, as Michel de Certeau called it. Another element that should be retained is also their evenimential character; their occurrence coincides with their imprint in history – they create, mark and alter this history. But, when we are talking about these events, aren’t we running the risk of imposing the limits of our representation on the reality of the particular event? This, in any case, is the opinion of Emmanuel Lévinas:

But is not to glimpse into a time whose moments do not refer to the present to connect everything together again in the present of that glimpse? Already correlation or structure returns: transcendence is synchronized with speech and reenters the indestructible order of being in its undephasable simultaneity that is, into a totality which gives it meaning (Lévinas 1987: 63).

To phrase it even more clearly, what is at stake here is the unsurpassable barrier between the “present” of speech and the particular “present” of that manifestation. What is interesting here, even to a greater extent than the necessary distancing from a logocentric
discourse, is the implication of two different temporalities: those “moments” do not refer only to the present of my speech or of my “glimpse” – they also belong to the one who had the first-hand glimpse into the event and who enunciated the first speech act about the manifestation. In this case, that “other present” can refer only to a different temporality (from the historical one). But is it really what Lévinas has in mind? Let us study a longer excerpt in which he refers directly to an episode of revelation:

For there to be the possibility of disturbance, a fissile present is required, ‘destructuring’ itself in its very punctuality. The alterity that disturbs order cannot be reduced to the difference visible of the gaze that compares and therefore synchronizes the same and the other. *Alterity occurs as a divergency and a past* which no memory could resurrect as a present. And yet disturbance is possible only through an intervention. A stranger is then needed, one who has come, to be sure, but left before having come, absolute in his manifestation. “At the same time” would not be enough for the breakup of order. In order that the tearing up from order not be ipso facto participation in order, this tearing up, this abstraction must, by a supreme anachronism, precede its entry into order; the past of the other must never have been present. This anachronism is less paradoxical than it seems. The temporal continuity of consciousness is overwhelmed whenever it is a consciousness of the other and ‘against all expectation’, counter to all attention and anticipation, the sensational *turns back* the sensation that brings it. The voluptuous – *acumen* – while still rising, has already fallen. Self-consciousness is kept breathless with tension or relaxation, in the before or after. In the *meanwhile* the event expected turns into the past without being lived though, without being equaled in any present. Something takes place between the dusk in which the most ecstatic intentionality which, however, never aims far enough, is lost (or is recollected) and the dawn in which consciousness returns to itself, but already too late for the event which is moving away. […] To the voice that calls from the burning bush, Moses answers, ‘Here I am’ but does not dare to lift up his eyes. The glorious theophany which makes so much humility possible will be missed because of the very humility which lowers the eyes (Lévinas, 1987: 68-69).

This excerpt summarizes and adds further insight into some of the characteristics of angelic presence that I have discussed so far. It needed to be quoted in its entirety in order
to render explicit all the steps that Lévinas took in making his point. First of all, what Michel de Certeau had called the “transgression by short-circuit” is, for Lévinas, that “fissile present”; what we are gaining with this insight, is the specification of a *temporal* non-congruity or inadequacy. According to Lévinas’ phenomenology of appearing, angelophanies have this profoundly disturbing and tremendous character because they phenomenalize themselves as a present that has never been present. But of whose present (or past, for that matter) is Lévinas talking here? What is really meant in the appealing, yet intriguing idea of a stranger who “has left before he has come”? The answer is possibly found in Lévinas’ own words, in the way in which he interprets the episode of the burning bush. In light of Lévinas’ reading of the episode, we would have to understand this ‘pastness of the presentness’ of the manifestation as the necessary corollary of the excess of light – Moses lowers his eyes and thus misses the actual phenomenalization of the burning bush. But is this act of averting the eye enough to render the presence of the event as past? After all, Moses does participate in the event: he answers God. Even more importantly, however, what does the turning away of external vision mean? Let us remember that, in the all-seeing icon episode, the actants needed to effect a change in perception, to transform external perception into *ad-miratio*. This is precisely what Moses does too: he obstructs external perception in order to see the image of God *even better*. But in so doing, indeed, Moses has entered, epiphanic or liturgical time. Thinking like Corbin when he states that liturgical space is space become time (and vice versa), we can also say that the distantiation completed by the “blinded” eye created the possibility of theophanic, liturgical time in which Moses could be so co-present with God: “here I am!”. Lévinas seems to have caught an intimation of this
moment of temporal transference from profane to sacred time, from intellection to the
imaginal – “something takes place between the dusk … and the dawn” – but he errs in
subordinating everything to the sphere of consciousness. In so doing, however, he
successfully traces down the perplexities of intellective cognition in the face of the sacral.
But something has happened, indeed, and it was the revelation of God to which the
metaphors of the dusk and dawn inadvertently point. This act of revelation is
consummated, as I have shown in the discussion of Cusa’s “Preface” and via Corbin’s
readings of Sufi theosophy, only through a co-present moment of dialogicity. Therefore,
the moment of incongruence does not refer to the actual encounter and participation of
Moses in the revelation of God; “divergence” occurs only between the space-between of
revelation and the “overwhelmed consciousness”39. Therefore, in dealing with
angelophanies, we need to posit another time (liturgical, epiphanic, etc.) – as Cacciari
said, “a new time is needed”, the Jetzt-zeit. This is also the view of Colilli:

The icon opens the door, like the Angel, to a theophany; the idea of ‘art’
and ‘artist’ dissolves in the presence of a tradition that speaks. There is no
place for aesthetic spectacle but in its place an experience that obliterates
the experience of space and time of human history. To be sure, the
theophanic event that the icon provokes does away with history, leaving
only enough to recognize the face of the saint, or the event from sacred
history (Colilli, 1999: 232)

However, Derrida shows that the discourse on presence and light is ideologically
and historically “guilty”. To him, the metaphysics of presence cannot avoid “the ancient
clandestine friendship between light and power, the ancient complicity between
theoretical objectivity and technico-political possession” (Derrida, 2005: 101). It is true,
if we think about it, light, in its epiphanic function, has become compromised historically
by its direct association either with autocratic and totalitarian regimes (from
Tutankhamon’s ‘heliopolis’ to Louis XIV’s absolutist monarchy, for instance), or with analytical, objectivist knowledge (i.e. “The Enlightenment”). Moreover, angels have always entertained an ambivalent relation with power and politics. In the previous chapter, I was alluding to the uncanny affinities between Dionysius the Areopagite’s hierarchy of angels and the ecclesiastic hierarchy. In his Il regno e la gloria, Agamben dedicated a full-fledged study to this matter:

Once the centrality of the notion of hierarchy has been established, angels and bureaucrats, just like in Kafka’s universe, tend to become indistinguishable from one another: not only are the celestial messengers ordered according to offices and ministries, but also the earthly clerks acquire, in their turn, angelic features and, just like the angels, they become capable of purifying, illuminating, perfecting (Agamben, 2007: 175).

However, these historical facts simply show the undermining of the sacred by the profane, some of the grave mistakes that were made in human history. And to all this, undoubtedly, we should be wary. For Lévinas and Derrida too, light has become heavy; it will subsequently carry within the stigma of the suppression of the other:

to see and to know, to have and to will, unfold only within the oppressive and luminous identity of the same; and they remain, for Levinas, fundamental categories of phenomenology and ontology. Everything given to me within light appears as given to myself by myself. Henceforth, the heliological metaphor turns away our glance, providing an alibi for the historical violence of light: a displacement of technico-political oppression in the direction of philosophical discourse (Derrida, 2005: 101).

This erasure of the other was not the case in the Cusan episode; on the contrary, the others “appeared”, they became visible only within this ever-present and all-encompassing gaze. In a televised interview, Elie Wiesel said that the great difference between our century and the ancient Platonic time is that in the case of the first, the guiding principle will have been ‘know thy neighbour!’, whereas the Platonists and Neo-
Platonists followed the inscription of the oracle of Delphi: ‘know thyself!’ However, what the narratives of Revelation seem to show – and this becomes quite explicit in the preface to The Vision of God – is that a conjunction of the two is needed in order to make the other appear. This is what Paul Ricoeur phrased as *soi-même comme un autre* – ‘oneself as another’. Nevertheless, Derrida’s insight is very helpful in avoiding the trappings of a discourse that, taking as its alibi the purity of light, attempts to totalize the multitude of experience under a unifying claim. However, in this respect, Colilli’s understanding is more profound: he relates the theophanic experience of presence to *entirety* and not totality (2005). “Entirety” refers more to the idea that the experience of revelation has to be received with all your soul, both with consciousness and *imaginatio vera*. This idea was expressed also by Paul Evdokimov:

> The beauty of God, just like His light, is neither material, nor sensorial, nor intellectual, but it gives itself through the forms of this world and allows itself to be contemplated by the eyes of the transfigured body. [...] It is neither the ‘sensible’ mysticism of the Messalinians, nor the reduction to the intelligible one, nor a gross materialization of the spiritual, but the very concrete communion of the created nature of the entire man with the uncreated (nature) of divine energies (Evdokimov 32-22).

It is precisely this concreteness of experience that the narratives of excessive presence bring to the fore. Relinquishing this aspect completely would mean to collapse their domain either to realm the ethereal, of the evanescent, or to historical relativism. Without any doubt, one has the liberty to do so but he will do that at the price of neglecting or obliterating the proposed mode of manifestation of these events. To preserve the iconographic analogy, I will let the words of Pavel Florensky express the particularities of this “concreteness”:

> Both metaphysics and iconpainting are grounded on the same rational fact (or factual rationality) concerning a spiritual appearance: which is that, in
anything seriously *given*, the senses wholly penetrate it in such a way that the thing has nothing abstract in it but entirely incarnated sense and comprehended visuality. A Christian metaphysician will therefore never lose concreteness and so, for him, an icon is always sensuously *given* (Florensky 152).

Even for Lévinas, everything seems to be played out in the excessive time-space opened up by the image of the Face of God:

Immediacy is the collapse of the representation into a face, into a “concrete abstraction” torn up from the world, from horizons and conditions […] Is it the trace of an excess, the excessive, of what could not be contained, of the non-content, disproportionate to all measure and all capacity, the trace of the infinite signifying diachronically exactly through these ambiguities […] But the surplus over pure nothingness, an infinitesimal difference, is in my non-indifference to my neighbor, where I am obedient as though to an order addressed to me. Such an order throws a “seed of folly” in the universality of the ego. It is given to me who answers before the one for whom I am responsible. (Lévinas, 1991: 91)

This excess (of the limits of representation) is therefore the fundamental condition for the preservation of the integrity of the other, “my neighbor”. As I have already showed, angels are, like icons, manifestations of the face of God, of his presence in the world. This “immediacy” of the manifestation as well as of its subsequent ritualization through my attention to the other is the space-between where, as Evdokimov was saying, the uncreated and the created meet. In this sense, Lévinas’ metaphysics of presence is a “return to things themselves, where we find the common root of humanism and theology: the resemblance between man and God, man’s visage and the Face of God” (Derrida, 2005: 117). From the angelic perspective, the beautiful becomes fused with the good and the metaphysics of presence is analogous with the ethical movement of respect and admiration of the other as reflection of this beauty of the face of God.

**The Poetics of Appearing and Revelation. Preliminary Considerations.**
Bearing Derrida and Lévinas’ cautionary statements in mind, I would like to propose, nevertheless, the idea that the manifestations of the sacred, and, more specifically, angelophanies, are highly particular modes of phenomenalization and they belong to realms that exceed the sphere of consciousness and chronological historicity, bearing, at the same time, an indelible imprint on them. This idea has remarkable consequences for artistic/literary aesthetics, which has only marginally and in a non-exhaustive manner approached the phenomena of appearing and revelation in relation to art. As we have seen, positing a specific mode of manifestation for these events implies, among other things, accepting the notion of another type of spatiality, temporality and intellection in which angelophanies are given. No matter how far removed they are from an objectivist and objectifying epistemology, all these ideas impose themselves to us when considering artistic representation from the perspective of its mode of appearing and revelation. In the following, I will present the definitions of three theorists who have also, in one way or another, attempted to define the characteristics of appearing and revelation: Jean-Luc Marion’s definition of saturated phenomena, Theodor W. Adorno’s considerations on aesthetic appearing/appearance and Paul Ricoeur’s propositions for the possibility of a hermeneutics of revelation in connection with the “poetic function” of language. Through these definitions, I am seeking to show, firstly, that the phenomenology and aesthetics of revelation are inherent to the poetic function of language and, secondly, the fundamental phenomenological and hermeneutic mechanisms and features by which these phenomena are deployed. These constitute preliminary essential considerations, starting points and assumptions upon which I will develop my interpretation of the aesthetics of excessive presence in this chapter. All these
instances relate directly to the specificities of angelophanies in their conjunction of surplus of presence, over-abundance of light, and revelation.

Through the examples considered so far, we can already get an intimation of the fundamentally excessive mode of manifestation of divine presence through the figure of the angel. Angelophanies are, therefore, what Jean-Luc Marion called “saturated phenomena”, which he defined as follows:

Let us restate that, by revelation, we understand here a strictly phenomenological concept, an apparition purely in and of itself, which does not subject its possibility to any preliminary determination. Such revealed phenomena emerge, mainly, in three domains. Firstly, the painting as spectacle that cannot be constituted by excess of intuition but is still regardable (the idol). Secondly, a certain face that I love which has become invisible not only because it bewilders me, but especially because I do not, nor can I any longer see there anything but its invisible gaze weighing on mine (the icon). Finally, the theophany, where the excess of intuition ends up with the paradox that an invisible gaze visibly envisages and loves me (Marion, 2005: 74).

According to Marion, revealed phenomena, together with “pure historical events” constitute the two main categories of the larger concept of “saturated phenomena”. Of the three instances that he defines in the above excerpt, the last two – the icon and theophany – are fully applicable to the example of the all-seeing icon in the Cusan exercise. From this instance, we get another significance of the correspondence between angels and icons: as saturated phenomena, they both escape the “possibility of any preliminary determination”. What does this mean? This can only be understood in light of Marion’s attentive definition of these phenomena: “The saturated phenomenon exceeds, in effect, the categories and principles of understanding – it will therefore be invisible in terms of quantity, unbearable in terms of quality, absolute in terms of relation and impossible to regard in terms of modality” (Marion, 2005: 57). The saturated phenomena are invisible
in terms of quantity because they can only be apprehended by what Marion calls
*instantaneous synthesis* and not by successive synthesis like all the other phenomena; in
terms of quality, they are unbearable because the limitlessness and non-negative nature of
the given manifestation does not allow perception to anticipate the data of the given or
withstand the degrees of this phenomenon; according to the principle of relation, they are
absolute because they give themselves in and of themselves; finally, they are
“irregardable” in terms of modality because perception cannot catch a hold of them nor
can it objectify them in any way. In the discussion of the all-seeing icon passage, I was
quoting Marion’s take on the problem of regardability which he understood as *intueri*, as
the “killing” of the vision by keeping and taking hold of it in the sphere of consciousness.
Therefore, it is important to signal the use of this particular term here, especially in the
context in which Marion considers that “bewilderment characterizes what regarding
cannot bear. Impossible to bear is not the same as not seeing as one must at first perceive
or, rather, see in order to have the experience of not being able to bear. In fact, this is a
visible that our perception cannot sustain” (Marion, 2005: 59). This quotation can
alternatively be read as a direct response to Levinas’ reading of the episode of the
burning bush. With Marion’s perspective, we have a clearer explanation of this
theophanic event: this surplus of visibility and presence *does not immediately fall into
invisibility and absence* – it first goes through an intermediary stage in which perception
perceives, so to speak, its incapacity to perceive. It thus becomes incongruous with the
apparition and is then superseded by another sense, the one that is able to operate with
“instantaneous synthesis”. What is important to note here is also the fact that
angelophanies, as saturated phenomena, do not belong to the domain of invisibility or
impossibility: they are “visibles” that exceed the boundaries of perception of regarding. Therefore, with Marion’s definition of theophanies as “saturated phenomena”, we have the phenomenological grounds for positing the fracture in the texture of representation that angelophanies enact, as well as for considering them in a domain outside the field of analytical perception (since they do not conform to it nor can be apprehended by it).

The question is now how do we define that which angelophanies represent or, rather, transfigure in art? A first answer on this matter can be given in analogy with iconography. Towards the end of the first chapter, I was quoting an excerpt from Pavel Florensky’s *Iconostasis*, which captured the movement between the image and its prototype, as well as the necessity that the image should transfigure this celestial prototype, contain its trace. This idea is based on this fundamental theological tenet:

This is how we should understand one statement which is frequent in the writings of the Fathers: that all the prototypes have their image; or an even more profound expression in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite: ‘The visible icons are truly the visible of the invisible’. The sacred symbols are ‘a production and representation of divine traits, the visible images of unspeakable and elevated contemplations. According to a definition by Saint John the Damanscene, every image is a revelation and witness to what is hidden (Bulgakov, 1996: 46).

We can recognize here the Platonic background of the world of ideas or prototypes of which earthly images are the representation. As concerns the art of the icon, Florensky was describing the movement between images and their prototypes as, first, an ascesis of the artist’s contemplative mind in the world of ideas/prototypes accompanied afterwards by a movement of kenosis by which these ideas become transfigured in the iconographic image. This means, if we are looking at this notion in tandem with the Islamic tawil, that the direction of the *return* is always from ideas to images, and not the other way around.
The attempt to transpose these images back into ideas does not belong then to the sphere of iconographic representation (or angelic appearing). Moreover, Theodor W. Adorno shows the shortcomings of such an attempt in approaching art: “Artworks are no more translatable into concepts than they are ‘real’ […] Artistic concretion is, however, neither pure existence, conceptless individualization, nor the form of mediation by the universal known as a type” (Adorno 95). As such, ideas are not to be confused with concepts or typologies: since they exceed the domain of human comprehension, they cannot be created by it.

Adorno’s formulations on the aesthetics of appearance show the author’s attempt to highlight the particularity of artworks only in relation to all those domains whose traces they contain. But in so doing, Adorno is also attempting to find a space between the too particular and the too general of artistic representation. Interestingly enough, Adorno found this space in the apparitional character of artistic representation and in analogy with divine theophany:

The artwork as appearance is most closely resembled by the appariation, the heavenly vision. Artworks stand tacitly in accord with it as it rises above human beings and is carried beyond their intentions and the world of things. Artworks from which the appariation has been driven out without a trace are nothing more than husks, worse than what merely exists, because they are not even useful (Adorno 80).

To Adorno, “apparition” is fundamental for understanding the particular nature of artistic phenomena, it is their very essence and that which vitalizes and gives sense to the artistic works. The analogy with the heavenly vision shows the complementarity between the epiphanic moment of angelophanies and art: the image that appears is the image of a heavenly prototype which is given (“beyond their intentions”). This image is contained in
the artwork as a trace and the only indication to its epiphenomenal nature is this “apparitional character”. However, for Adorno too, the prototype of artistic images is not to be conceptualized in any way; the direction of the movement of revelation is, in Adorno’s opinion too, from upwards to downwards (and not the other way around). The result of this movement of revelation is what appears in the work of art, its very “spirit”:

That through which artworks, by becoming appearance, are more than they are: this is their spirit. The determination of artworks by spirit is akin to their determination as phenomenon, as something that appears, and not as blind appearance. What appears in artworks is neither to be separated by their appearance nor to be held simply identical with it – the nonfactual in their facticity – is their spirit (Adorno 86).

Adorno makes a clear distinction between the two types of appearance to which I was alluding in the first chapter: there is, therefore, on the one hand, earthly appearance, the one that is synonymous with illusion; on the other hand, referring to the appearance of artworks evokes their apparitional moment, their very spirit. Moreover, Adorno seems to define artistic appearance as an intermediary between the ‘flesh’ and the ‘spirit’: it is at once contained (as a trace) in the field of figuration of the artwork and, at the same time, it is something else than the mere figure or image. For Adorno, artistic appearance is what connects spirit with mere image or appearance and makes possible artistic creation: “Spirit forms appearance just as appearance forms spirit; it is the luminous source through which the phenomenon radiates and becomes a phenomenon in the most pregnant sense of the word” (Adorno 87). Artistic appearing or apparition is the trace of the connection between “spirit” and “appearance”, “prototype” and “image”. It is important to note that the apparitional nature of artworks is deeply related with what Paul
Ricoeur was calling the *adherence* between images and ideas; it is defined as the phenomenalized link between the two.

As we can see, for Adorno, the domain to which artistic apparition belongs is neither solely the ‘real’ nor uniquely the ‘ideal’. Would there then be a more specific way to define the revealing function of art? This is the question proposed by Paul Ricouer in his article “Herméneutique de l’idée de Révélation” (“The Hermeneutics of the Idea of Revelation”). Like Adorno, Ricoeur considers that sacred and artistic texts have in common what he calls “the poetic function of language”, which can be best grasped through the hermeneutics of revelation, namely, by investigating the “revelatory function” of poetic discourse. He begins by reconsidering the referentiality of poetic discourse:

Poetry supposes the suspension of the *descriptive* function. It does not enhance the knowledge of objects. From this to saying that with poetry, language refers to itself in order to celebrate itself, there is one step. But, by saying that, we would be giving in to the positivist preconception according to which only empirical knowledge is objective because it is verifiable. In so doing, one does not notice that one is non-critically ratifying a concept of truth defined by the *adequacy* to objective reality and submitted to the criterion of empirical verification [...] The question is to know if this suspension, this abolition of a first degree referential function, would not be the condition, all negative, for releasing a more primitive referential function, more originary, which can be defined as second degree only because *descriptive* discourse has usurped it and assumed the first rank in daily life [...]. My most profound belief is that it is only poetic language that can give us back a *belonging* to an order of things which preceded our capacity to oppose these things as objects facing a subject (Ricoeur, 1977: 39).

Ricoeur’s observations in this paragraph are quite remarkable: in a first moment, he disqualifies the truth/falsity criterion for defining the referential world of poetic language, on grounds of its conforming to empirical verification and objective perception which are both superseded by the revealing function of poetic language. With this assumption, the
definition of the self-referentiality of poetic language is also proved insufficient and limiting in addressing the problematics of the world actualized by a poetic text. By shifting away the focus from the self-referential nature of poetic language, Ricoeur manages to bring to light a completely different dimension of this issue. Thus, poetic language, by annulling the descriptive function, makes way to a world which precedes analytical thought and the split between the subject and the object. Since Ricoeur is talking about the revealing function, the actualization of this originary moment is very much akin to that moment of appearing which artworks enact. But what makes possible the collapse of the boundary between the subject and object? The answer to this question becomes apparent by looking at artworks as saturated phenomena:

Far from being able to constitute this phenomenon, the I experiences itself as constituted by it. Constituted and no longer constituting, because it no longer disposes of any viewpoint that would dominate the intuition that submerges it. [...] Thus, the phenomenon is no longer reduced to the I that would be regarding it. Irregardable, it proves itself irreducible. [...] The pure event that occurs does not allow itself to be constituted in an object and leaves the lasting trace of its birth only in the I/me which finds itself, almost against itself, constituted by what it receives. The constituted witness follows the constituting subject. Constituted witness, the subject remains the worker of truth, but no longer its producer (Marion, 2005: 69-70).

Therefore, what the postulate of an exceeding, over-determining presence presupposes is, firstly, the obsolescence of analytical perception and of the truth/false criterion of verifiability; secondly, it makes possible the remembering of a belonging, an adherence between the subject and the world; and, thirdly, it will lead to a complete redefinition of the subject which will be no longer “a subject opposing objects”, but a subject among other subjects, all working together in a world supra-determined by an order of truth that can only give itself in excess, as a fleeting apparition and trace in the
poetic sign. These are the phenomena that occur both in the episode of the burning bush and in the all-seeing icon exercise. Consequently, all these phenomena are also part and parcel of angelophanies and they explain in greater detail what I was defining, in the first part of my study, as the transgressive nature of angelic apparition. With Ricoeur’s insight, we can more clearly see the affinities between angelophanies and the revealing function of poetic language. This is also the primordial reason for the strong connection between the actualization of angelic figures in literary texts and the redefinition of artistic representation.

Ricoeur’s definition of another order of referentiality allows us to establish the “problem of representation” and the exceeding of its limits on different grounds, away from the constricting adequacy to a truth/falsity criterion. It is a question, as Marion stated in *De surcroît*, of positing a third way of artistic/literary representation, one that considers the very particularity of the world opened up by the angel’s exceeding presence in the text:

…through all the traits it resumes and through those it properly brings out, the poetic function incarnates a concept of truth that supersedes the definition by adequacy […]. Here, truth means no longer verification, but manifestation, that is, letting be that which shows itself. What shows itself is every time a proposition of the world, of a world such as I could inhabit it in order to project on it some of my most intimate possibles. It is in this sense of manifestation that language, in its poetic function, is the site of a revelation (Ricoeur, 1977: 41).

**Angelic Appearing and Revelation in Literature.**
Looking at an artistic text as manifestation, as “the site of a revelation”, means, first and foremost, taking it at face value: here, in the sense that Marion was giving to the phenomenology of the face – that invisible of excessive visibility that phenomenalises itself through my attention and admiration for it, after my decision of not killing it (through adequacy to my regarding, for instance). In considering artistic texts from the vantage point of their apparitional character, the only possible approach to take is that of careful attention to their proposed mode of manifestation. As we will see, the embedding of the angelic figure in these texts is almost a mise-en-abyme of this process: let us remember that, for Cacciari, the angel is the teacher and exegete of this patience and attention to the text as the other. From this perspective, angelophanies, as actualized in literary texts, enact the manifested presence of the revealing function of poetic language. This implies the invitation to contemplate this pre-conceptual referential world in the entire richness of its repertoire without attempting to equal it with reality or fiction. Through my reading of the texts in this chapter, I will attempt to take this approach as well as to outline the main points of inquiry of a hermeneutics of appearing and revelation in relation to the angelophanies enacted in literary texts.

The Iconostasis of “Agesilaus Santander”

In his book on iconography, Pavel Florensky defined iconostasis as “The wall that separates two worlds. […] Iconostasis is vision. Iconostasis is a manifestation of saints and angels – angelophania”(62). Thus, the notion of iconostasis reunites several of the concepts that I have discussed in the first part of this chapter: the link between iconography and
angelophany, the metaphysics of presence as manifestation, and vision as the dialectical opposite of regarding. From the perspective of iconostasis, all these ideas appear as experiences of the threshold ("the wall that separates two worlds"), they are all given in an in-between space-time between two worlds. In proposing a reading of Benjamin’s "Agesilaus Santander" in the key of iconostasis, I am seeking to add further insight to the author’s ‘autobiographical’ statement through the theoretical framework that these fundamental notions offer. My assumption is that “Agesilaus Santander” is the representation of an apotheotic moment of the transfiguration of the self akin with the mystical experiences of Neo-Platonic prophets and philosophers. This line of interpretation is made possible by several textual and intertextual factors: the implied topos of initiation, the connection between name, angel and icon and the Neoplatonic background upon which Benjamin grounds the figure of the angel in this text. Starting from these essential preliminary points – that I will develop and explain in greater detail in the first part of my reading – my focus will be on the particularity of the space-between that the angel’s iconostasis opens in this text.

The figure of the angel, in its somewhat hermetic transposition in Benjamin’s text, integrates the domain of iconostasis through its double instantiation as “name” and “icon”. All these three elements – angel, name and icon – have deep and long-running connections which lead to the transfigurative dimension of iconostasis (or angelophany). My analysis will therefore center on these two main lines of inquiry that the double instantiation of the figure of the angel brings to light. Because the text is so dense, it has been customary to treat the angel and the motifs in “Agesilaus Santander” on the same hierarchical level and somewhat indiscriminately. Thus, little has been noted so far about the double
configuration of the angel: on the one hand, there is the name “Agesilaus Santander” and, on the other, “Angelus Novus” which also appears doubly represented – both as Klee’s painting on the wall and as “the immense number of new angels that God creates every instant” (Benjamin, 2003: 714). Of course, all these three images are related, both as integrated in the same text and through Benjamin’s explicit link between “Agesilaus Santander” and “Angelus Novus”: “before springing from my name into broad daylight, accoutered from head to toe, he had posed his image on the wall: Angelus Novus” (Benjamin, 2003: 714). But this connection, which is taken for granted, becomes much more interesting if we posit the preliminary fundamental difference between Agesilaus Santander and the (investment of) name, on the one hand, and Klee’s painting and the new angels of the Kabala, on the other hand: these two configurations each lead to different angelological traditions which, brought together under the generic figure of the angel, can give us further insight into Benjamin’s text. The first of these two configurations is rooted in the Platonic and Neo-Platonic figures of the daimonion and tutelary spirit. The second one opens the space of the iconographic and of excessive presence given in the caducity of the instant. The connection between the two in the context of an autobiographical text brings to light the forgotten relations between icons and names and inscribes the text in the distinctive line of spiritual autobiographies: it is really a text about conversion and return to one’s true self through the co-presence and transference between language and image, name and icon, as mediated by the figure of the angel. This connection is under the sign of the “new”: to the new angel corresponds the new name. In this process, to paraphrase a Cacciarian adage, “the problem of representation explodes”, we are assisting at the return to the origin40 of words and to the emergence of linguistic images of in-betweenness:
maturity (which is a threshold too), the androgyn (the reference to the woman⁴¹), patience and attention (which were also informing the space-between of revelation in the Cusan “Preface”), transparency, the jetzt-zeit of revelation and the return (as tawîl).

Most of the theorists who have approached Benjamin’s text agree on the fact that “Agesilaus Santander” is fundamental for understanding the author’s take on language and representation as well as his own autobiographical relation to them:

the core of Benjamin’s hermetic mind-set is to be found in what Gershom Scholem calls “Walter Benjamin’s Ange”. This angel is at once Paul Klee’s Angelus Novus, the description of Klee’s angel in “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, but also the figure Benjamin talks about in Agesilaus Santander. Scholem states that Benjamin’s genius is ‘concentrated in this angel’; the Angel is for Benjamin ‘the occult reality of his self (Colilli, 1999: 521).

There are, indeed, many elements which appear in “Agesilaus Santander” that relate to Benjamin’s larger body of work: the magical or originary force of language, the theme of alterity - “Benjamin’s texts reveal a self that can come into its own only in, and as, another, an alterity. For him, it is writing – the act, the object and the concept – that names this alterity” (Richter 221) - “the problem of representation” which, as Cacciari was showing, consists in the identification between character and demon. In her article, titled “Language and Mimesis in Benjamin’s Work”, Beatrice Hanssen was noting that one of Benjamin’s main purposes in his theory of language was the re-discovery of “the ability to recognize the flash of lightning, the magic of similarities and correspondences in poetic, historical, and secular no less than in sacred texts” (Hanssen, 2004: 70). This notion of the impregnation of the secular by the sacred is what lies at the core of “Agesilaus Santander”, that “profane illumination” which is one of the most appropriate ways to describe the fundamental motivation of Benjamin’s work.
In terms of alterity, Benjamin’s draws on a very particular tradition because, as Agamben points out, “according to a doctrine that can be found both in Cabalistic texts and in hermetic writings, the vision of one’s own angel coincides with prophetic ecstasy and supreme knowledge. In a Cabalistic anthology that dates from the beginning of the thirteenth century (*Shushan Sodoth*), prophecy appears as the sudden vision of one’s own double” (Agamben, 1999: 146). These prophetic traditions, together with the figure of the angel, invite a reading of “Agesilaus Santander” as a “visionary recital”, much like the one we have seen in Sohravardi’s “The Crimson Angel”. Before proceeding to the explanation of the morphology of the angel’s name in Benjamin’s text, I will consider its archaeology in terms of the relations it entertains with the prophetic tradition and with Plotinus’ definition of “the tutelary spirit”.

Plotinus’ “Tutelary Spirit”, a text that appears in *The Enneads*, is concerned with two main distinctions: firstly, the definition of the tutelary spirit as both bound and un-bound to its human counterpart; secondly, the distinction between the tutelary spirits of the common mortals and the presiding spirits of the Sages:

The *Timaeus* indicates the relation of this guiding spirit to ourselves: it is not entirely outside of ourselves; is not bound up with our nature; is not the agent of our action; it belongs to us as belonging to our Soul, but not in so far we are particular human beings living a life to which it is superior; take this passage in this sense and it is consistent; understand the Spirit otherwise and it is contradiction (Plotinus 168)

These guiding spirits are, at the same time, the background, the “spiritual inheritance” or “imprint” of man as well as his ultimate goal; we should note the dialectic of the tutelary spirit’s configuration both as man’s double and “different”, in other words the interplay of “sameness” and “difference” present in Plato’s *Timaeus*. However, the determining factors that decide man’s re-orientation towards this “perfect nature” or, on the contrary,
downwards, to an inferior level of being or rather becoming, lie within man’s own actions: “for while its presidency saves us from falling much deeper into evil, the only direct agent within us is some thing neither above it nor equal to it but under it: Man cannot cease to be characteristically Man” (Plotinus 172). What is at stake here is rescuing the tutelary spirit from its degradation into demonology and magic. Plotinus’ solution is the introduction of another category – the “Intellective Principle” which is reserved for the Sages: “What, then, is the achieved Sage? One whose act is determined by the higher phase of the Soul. […] the active force in the Sage is the Intellective Principle (the diviner phase of the human Soul) which therefore is itself his presiding spirit or is guided by a presiding spirit of its own, no other than the very Divinity” (Plotinus 170-171). This particular presiding spirit can, unlike the other tutelary spirits, interfere, act somehow on the prophetic capacities of the Sages they over-determine (as is the case of Socrates’ daimonion):

Of the higher Souls, some live in the world of sense, and some above it: and those in the world of sense inhabit the Sun or another of the planetary bodies; the others occupy the fixed sphere (above the planetary) holding the place they have merited through having lived here the superior life of reason […] so with our souls; they must have their provinces according to their different powers, parallel to those of the World Soul: each must give out its special act; released, each will inhabit there a star consonant with the temperament and faculty in act within and constituting the principle of life; and this star or the next highest power will stand to them as God or more exactly as tutelary spirit (Plotinus 171-172).

Thus, these higher guiding spirits or Gods are assigned to planets and celestial bodies, they represent their “souls”. From Plotinus’ passage, we can see that these planetary spirits are the ones that over-determine the Sages, the philosophers, and endow them with prophetic vision. To sum up, the tutelary spirits of the Sages are higher or the highest in the hierarchy of presiding spirits and they are specifically associated with astral bodies.
Now, turning to Benjamin’s “Agesilaus Santander”, I would like to suggest that what appeared in the Plotinian text as the “tutelary spirit of the Sages” (which references the Socratic daimonion) is one of the archetypes upon which Benjamin molds the dialogue between himself, as a writer-philosopher and his Agesilaus Santander. I am in agreement with Giorgio Agamben in recognizing these traditions as playing a crucial part in Benjamin’s text. According to Agamben, “Here we find ourselves before an extremely rich and yet a coherent tradition which is present not only in Judaism but also in Neoplatonic mysticism, late-ancient hermeticism, Gnosticism, and early Christianity, and which also has precise counterparts in Iranian and Muslim angelology” (Agamben, 1999: 145). This tradition of a tutelary spirit connected with an astronomical sign was also noted by Henry Corbin in his discussion of the “perfect nature” such as it was defined by Hermes:

Wise Socrates declared that Perfect Nature is called the sun of the philosopher, the original root of his being and at the same time the branch springing from him. Hermes was asked: “How does one achieve knowledge of wisdom? How can one bring it down to this world below?” “Through Perfect Nature”, he answered. “What is the root of wisdom?” “Perfect Nature.” “What is the key to wisdom?” “Perfect Nature.” “What then is Perfect Nature?” he was asked. “It is the heavenly entity, the philosopher’s Angel, conjoined with his star, which rules him and opens the doors of wisdom for him, teaches him what is difficult, reveals to him what is right, in sleeping as in waking (Corbin, 1978: 17).

There are certainly connections between Platonic philosophy, Neoplatonism, Sufi mysticism and, as Agamben says, the Jewish Kabbalah. Benjamin must have been aware of this tradition of the “tutelary spirit” because the particular configuration of the angel in his essay is in agreement with most of these traditions. However, these associations do not come easily to mind: according to Gershom Scholem, Agesialaus Santander is a satanic angel par excellence, it is, no more no less than the anagram of ‘der Angelus
Satanas’. One of the arguments Scholem gives in order to support his interpretation is the reference Benjamin provides in the beginning of his essay to his Saturnine, melancholy inclinations: “I came into the world under the sign of Saturn – the star of the slowest revolution, the planet of detours and delays” (Benjamin, 2003: 714). Of course, the reference to Saturn can also be read as Scholem does, as the reference to a particular state of the temperament, to the black bile which can be connected to the realm of the demonic. However, we can interpret it in another way too. According to Agamben, the figure of Agesilaus Santander is a mix of the Neoplatonic daimon and the Jewish zelem:

In the first place we find a fusion of the ancient pagan and Neoplatonic motif of the *idios daimon* of every man with the Jewish motif of the celestial image, *demuth* or *zelem*, in whose image each man is created. The Cabalists interpret the passage of *Genesis* 1:27 according to which “God created man in his own *zelem*, in the *zelem* of God created he him”, […] in the sense that the second *zelem* designates the originary angelic form (and later, astral body), in the image of which each man is created” (Agamben, 1999: 145-146).

It is not a coincidence that the reference to Saturn appears in an essay whose other central themes are the investment of name and the encounter with the philosopher’s angelic counterpart. It is clearly a narrative that groups together three disparate moments in time: a pre-biographical moment which coincides with the reference to Saturn (thus an over-determining moment before birth); an initiatic biographical moment which coincides with the investment of name and lastly, a moment in which the biographical investment of name finds its pre-biographic vocation and achievement through the encounter with the perfect nature (and thus the motif of the return at the end). This is indicative, in my view, of the fact that the tutelary spirit evoked by Benjamin is equal with what Plotinus’ referred to as the tutelary spirit of the Sages in his attempt to extricate the Platonic *daimonion* from the
demonological interpretation of the Platonists. This particular philosophical lineage of the
counter with the tutelary spirit is a prophetic one par excellence: Socrates’ *daimonion*
gives the philosopher insight into the future, as Rist explains; Plotinus’ God is invoked in a
temple and Avicenna’s “visionary recital” is guided by his “perfect nature”. However,
herein lies the danger of the demonization of this spirit too. In his reading of “Agesilaus
Santander”, we could say that Gershom Scholem interprets Benjamin’s angel much like
what Rist says the Platonists interpreted Plato’s *daimonion*, that is, through degradation to
the sphere of the demonic. Another one of Scholem’s arguments in the identification of
Agesilaus Santander with the demonic is the depiction of the angel as a figure with claws
and fangs – “with claws and wings as sharp as knives” (Benjamin, 2003: 714). Agamben
was able to deconstruct this interpretation showing that this description pertains to another
reference, namely the Neoplatonic figuration of *eros*:

In the European iconographic tradition, there is only one figure that brings
together purely angelic characteristics and the demonic trait of claws. This
figure, however, is not Satan, but Eros, Love. According to a descriptive
model that we find for the first time in Plutarch (who attributed ‘fangs and
claws’ to Eros), [...] Love is represented as a winged (and often feminine)
angelic figure with claws (Agamben, 1999: 141).

The notion of *eros*, coupled with the idea of the tutelary spirit as angelic counterpart leads
to an interpretation which is almost diametrically opposed to what Scholem was
suggesting. With Scholem’s example we have a very clear instantiation of the collapse of
the boundary between the character and the demonic, the latter usurping the first. In
Benjamin’s text, however, this confusion is resolved in the creation of an *erotic* relation
between character and the *daimonion*: the harmonious union between the same and the
different via the figure of the angel. As we have seen, Plotinus rescues this interpretation by
advancing the notion of the tutelary spirit of the sages which is not merely an angel or daimon but a God.

This distinction becomes crucial in terms of Benjamin’s vocational statement in this essay. According to Max Pensky, one of the fundamental features of Benjamin’s writing consists in his “juxtapositions which could explore the real with a messianic interest, without betraying its commitment to the things themselves and produce images whose transcendent force could be contained within their absolute historical concreteness and graphicness”. The notion of the messianic is central to Benjamin’s writings of history. But why Saturn⁴², of all tutelary planet-spirits? Pensky might have found the explanation, one which sees melancholy in its “happy”, germinative accomplishment: “Melancholy occupies the space that separates Benjamin’s ‘messianic’ and ‘materialistic’ gaze – it is a space that is carved between the subject and the object by a question concerning the possibility of meaning” (Pensky 16). Melancholy, then, is the pre-condition for not falling into a blind, demonic philosophical prophetology: melancholy is that which keeps the “messianic” and the “materialistic” apart. Moreover, Dufour El-Maleh, while pointing to Saturn’s dialectical representation, shows the connection between the two aspects of melancholy and the Platonic eros:

We have already had to recognize that the patience […] and the slowness of his movement have, as dialectical opposite, the majesty and grace with which he perceives in the most distant objects the greatest proximity. The most ancient theories of Melancholy had noticed this dialectical character, as they had noticed the dialectical character of the representation of Saturn: it is not only a question of opposing the negative meaning of the far-off position of Saturn from the earth to a beneficent sense, since it is also the initiator of all ‘profound contemplation, turning the soul from the exterior to the interior of things, elevating it higher and higher and finally granting it supreme knowledge and the gift of prophecy’. No, we would have to see there one aspect literally returning into the other, being the same while at the same time being two, evoking thus the dialectical
concept of the Platonic Eros, *daimon*, like this one (Dufour El-Maleh 273-274).

This theme of the *coincidentia oppositorum* which appears in Benjaminian philosophy as the dialectical image is crucial for understanding the relation between character and *daimon* in “Agesilaus Santander”. All these Platonic and Neoplatonic elements – the *daimonion*, tutelary spirit, *eros* and the planetary overdetermination of the soul – concur to make possible a reading of Benjamin’s text in light of Platonic ideas. However, as I was saying earlier, not all the themes appearing in this short text are given on the same hierarchical scale. The fundamental “moment” of the text is the moment of angelophany, of the *return* and encounter with the self – this is the actual “present” moment of the enunciation which gives meaning and fulfillment to the other two – the pre-biographic Saturnian determination and the “baptism” of the hidden name. Therefore, since the moment of the encounter, of the angelophany of the self is the climax and accomplishment of this text – “as soon as I saw you, I traveled with you backwards to where I was coming from” (Benjamin, 2003: 715) – the other two moments, even if determining, are superseded; in this context, the Saturnine, melancholy reference, which has been the source of many interpretations of “Agesilaus Santander”, refers to an inclination from the past which becomes sublimated in the moment of the encounter with the “new angel”. As I will show towards the final part of my discussion, *acedia* is transfigured here in *patience* and *attention*.

The angel first appears in the text as *name*: Agesilaus Santander. The importance of the name is also reinforced by the large portion of text that Benjamin devotes to talking about the hidden name granted to him at birth at the beginning of the essay:
When I was born, my parents thought I would be a writer. And that it would be a good idea if my being Jewish had not been immediately evident to everyone: this is why they added to the name they gave me two other names, very uncommon ones, which one could not tell whether they were the names of a Jew, or that they were only his forenames. Forty years after that, it meant showing proof of extraordinary clairvoyance. What appeared then as unlikely possibility has now become true (Benjamin, 2003: 714).

The beginning of “Agesilaus Santander” already situates us in the atmosphere of “unlikely” events: a highly uncommon “hidden” name, “clairvoyance” and the intrusion of the improbable in the sphere of the real. All these elements bring the text in close proximity with the numerous recitals of “elect baptism” which abound in the Old Testament and in which the parents are “induced” either by an angel or by God to give a particular name to the child about to be born. The nominal dimension of the angelic presence establishes the link, from the start, between character and destiny and draws attention to the great importance of the investment with a name: “Naming is a generative act. More exactly, it is the moment of birth, of the union, methexis, between the name-idea and matter, the moment of the name’s entrance into matter its sealing by matter” (Bulgakov, 1999: 162). The name is therefore the only memory and proof of the idea becoming flesh; the name is the representation of the idea and warrants the communication between matter and spirit. In this light, the name becomes as a vessel, an interconnecting principle – methexis – between character and destiny. The ‘elect name’ is almost a promise of the re-encounter between man and his daimon:

A name lives in history, just like any other word. However, its destiny is incomparable with the destiny of the latter: it becomes the symbol of a vital essence, having a particular quality, seed or germ, in a very weighing sense. A name is a force, the root of an individual being whose bearer is the ground of. Receiving a name thus has a determining and fatal character. [...] The name of a person is his idea, in the Platonic sense (Bulgakov, 1999:152-153).
It is very significant, therefore, that the narrator reports his distancing from this hidden name in his early life:

However, the precautions with which my parents were attempting to counter the destiny were destroyed by the one concerned first. That is, instead of rendering them public through his writings, he behaved in respect to them as Jews have the habit of doing with the second name that they give to their children and which stays secret. In fact, this name is revealed to them only when they reach maturity. However, as this maturity may occur several times in life and since the secret name stays the same and not transfigured only for the right one, its change can reveal itself all of a sudden a new maturity. This is what happened in my case (Benjamin, 2003: 253).

In this passage, Benjamin explains the absence of the hidden name as the gap between character and destiny/daimon: it is as if the self needed to grow, to reach “maturity” before the adequacy between his character and the destiny embedded in his name could become real. We should also note the use of the deictic “I”: in the space of the same paragraph, it appears both as “he” and “I”. This distinction indicates the radical separation to which I was referring earlier, between two fundamentally diverse moments: the moment before the coincidence with the name, which corresponds to the use of the third person singular, and the moment after the encounter with the angel, which is experienced as “I”. The fact that the narrator thus more clearly identifies with the latter version of the self suggests the idea that the referential “moment” of the narration is the moment of the encounter with the “tutelary spirit” embodied in the name (which coagulates and transfigures the previous moment). In this passage there is also an anticipation of the *Angelus Novus* through the use of the epithet “new maturity” – thus, this moment is a threshold, as well as a birth: the coming of age with his own, hidden name is under the sign of the “new”. Nonetheless, Benjamin gives to understand that this
“coming of age” was not without complications because of the duality of the destiny that a name brings into possibility: “However, in no way is this name an enrichment for the one that has it. On the contrary, a fair amount of its image collapses when the name becomes audible” (Benjamin, 2003: 715). We can understand this statement from a Platonic perspective, as the name that carries within it the *chora*, which Sergei Bulgakov explains as follows: “the Platonic matter, meonic space, plastic element, which both collaborates and opposes itself, which aspires to a plenitude of being and which darkens at the same time (Bulgakov, 1991: 161-162). The name thus shelters this double possibility of destiny, either of accomplishment of the idea of the name or of failure of correspondence to it. What makes possible the accomplishment of the idea of the name is its revelation in an image which renders it transparent again:

The name loses mostly its gift of appearing anthropomorphic. In the room I was occupying in Berlin, he, before springing forth from my name in the broad daylight, accoutered from head to toe, had posed his image on the wall: *Angelus Novus*. The Kabbala tells that in every instant of time God creates an immense number of new angels whose only reason of being is to sing for a moment the Glory of God before his Throne and to vanish afterwards. The new angel appears as one of them before being ready to be named (Benjamin, 2003: 714-715).

This passage represents the moment of connection between name, icon and angel. It is therefore essential for understanding the nature of the angelophany that Benjamin describes in this text. First of all, we should note the intrinsic relation between the name and the image of *Angelus Novus*. This co-substantiation between image and name is nowhere more emphasized than in iconography: in order for the icon to be able to conform to its celestial, ideatic prototype, is *must* have a name. Sergei Bulgakov also noted this inextricability between name and icon: “The iconic nature is granted by the name which is inscribed on the icon, as center of incarnation of the Verb, of its
revelation. [...] In the icon, the representation is a hieroglyph of the name” (Bulgakov, 1991: 174). Thus the icon co-participates, like the name, in the revelation of the idea of the self; it renders the invisible manifest. In this sense, both name and icon are sites of revelation; their union is what renders their revelatory capacities manifest. Klee’s painting of *Angelus Novus* is, of course, not an icon *per se*. It becomes one, however, in this text, especially if we think about the fundamental definition of icons as windows towards the transcendent: by explicitly relating the painting with the infinity of angels as well as with the esoteric name, Benjamin clearly points to the transfigurative dimension of this image. It is also an icon if we think about Marion’s definition of saturated phenomena and of Nicholas Cusa’s all-seeing icon: the fixed gaze of Benjamin’s angel elicits the same organization of space as in the case of Cusa’s “Preface”. Moreover, its equivalence with the plethora of caduceus angels suggests the reference to presence given in excess which, as we have seen, informs both the space of iconography and that of angelophany.

This theme of excess is actually pervasive throughout the essay: “extraordinary clairvoyance”, “spring forth in broad daylight”, “in every instant of time God creates an immense number of new angels”, “the longest road, the most fatal detour”, “ecstasy” and “beatitude”, to give just a few examples. The name is that which condenses this extraordinary essence of man; as Benjamin says, “In the name the spiritual essence of man is communicated to God. [...] The name is that through which nothing more is communicated, that in which language communicates itself absolutely (Benjamin, “Mythe et violence”, in Dufour El-Maleh 270-271). The moment of the biographic recognition of the identity between angel and name, their re-encounter, can therefore be
nothing less than an apotheosis of the self, a moment of spiritual maturing in the line of prophetic philosophy.

Having re-established the common ground between the name, the angel and the icon, Benjamin has also set the scene of this autobiographic statement in an epiphanic time-space in which we are assisting at the transfiguration of the self. Henceforth, the figures emerging in the space of angelophany will be figures of in-betweenness:

…taking advantage of the fact that I was born under the sign of Saturn – star of the slowest revolution, the planet of detours and hesitations – he sends the feminine form after the masculine one reproduced in the painting through the longest road, the most fatal detour, even if they are both so intimately close to each other without, however, knowing each other. Maybe he does not know that the force of the one he wants to attack will manifest itself best in this way: that is by attending. When a man meets by chance a woman who captivates him, he is at once determined to lie down on the path of his life and to wait (attendre) until the moment when, sick, old and in rags, she would fall in his arms. In short, nothing can discourage the patience of that man. And his wings are similar to the wings of the angel in that very few movements are necessary to stand for a long time without moving in front of (en face de) what he is determined never to let go of (Benjamin, 2003: 714).

Without going into too much detail about the reference to Saturn which I have already discussed, I would like to note the parallel transformation of register: from slowness and hesitation to patience and attending. Under the gaze of the angel, the author is transfiguring here, much like in the way Dufour El-Maleh was explaining it, Melancholy’s acedia in the almost saintly connotation of patience. As cognate with attending, the Benjaminian patience is bringing us in close proximity with the Cusan admiratio: this unflinching determination of gazing at the invisible face of the beloved is evocative of the liturgical dimension of the participation in the exercise of the all-seeing icon. What is quite extraordinary - and it approaches Benjamin’s text even more to the
Cusan “Preface” - is that the narrator’s fixed gaze is “answered” a few lines later, by the equally unmoving gaze of the angel: “He fixes his gaze for a long moment, then proceeds by movements and advances and he does that incessantly. Why? With the intention of taking him on this path towards the future where he comes from. He knows this path so well that he travels it without turning around or turning his eye away from the one he has elected” (Benjamin, 2003: 714). The motif of the reciprocal contemplative gaze is also present in the narratives of the encounter with the perfect nature: “the Contemplator becomes the Contemplated and vice versa, a mystical situation expressed by the wonderful Eckhartian formula: ‘The seeing through which I know him is the same seeing through which he knows me” (Corbin, 1978: 19). This reciprocal act of seeing entails, as Jean-Luc Nancy shows, the obviation of representation; it opens up a space which is outside the limits of representation:

Between the image and sight, then, there is not imitation but participation and penetration. The participation of sight in the visible and, in turn, the participation of the visible in the invisible is nothing other than seeing itself. The *methexis* in *mimesis* is doubtless one of the terms of the Greco-Judaic chiasmus in which the Christian invention takes place (Nancy, 2008: 7).

The space of the Platonic *methexis*, which is the realm of ideas and image-archetypes, is also the place of genesis of the angelic counterpart as the ideal image of the self, the *methorios* towards which man aspires. The moment of the re-encounter with this idea is mediated, in Benjamin’s text, through the re-connection between name and icon, as well as through the identification between the self and the ultimate other: Agesilaus Santander. This re-encounter, since it is configured as a reciprocal act of contemplation, abolishes the idea of representation. Since the figure mediating this encounter is the painting/icon
of *Angelus Novus*, we could say that what Benjamin implies here is the *transfiguration of representation*, the re-discovery of the first order of representation within the very confines of the world of representation. In this light, the image-objects of this world appear as hermetic symbols that one has to unravel in order to return to their real significances.

The fixity of the reciprocal gaze is the same as absolute, unimpeded presence and, as Simone Weil says, “Attention in the absolute, with no intrusion, is prayer” (Weil 135). Patience, as co-participation of absolute presence, as *ad-miratio*, reminds us of the *miracle* of writing and of the *ponderación misteriosa* in the space of revelation. This patient co-presence and co-participation under the gaze of the angel/icon are the miracle: “‘Miraculous’ means, literally, ‘full of presence’” (Evdokimov 154). It is through this patience and attention that the ultimate transfiguration of the *I* is effected: “It is only the attention, this attention so full that the ‘I’ disappears, that is required of me” (Weil 137).

The new self emerging in the space of angelophany can only appear at the costly price of the disappearance of the previous subject: “the constituted witness” takes the place of “the constituting subject”, to use Marion’s terminology in terms of the metamorphosis of the self in the experience of saturated phenomena. “The constituted witness” is, in Benjamin’s text, the self who has submitted himself to the dialogical practice of patience and attending. In “Agesilaus Santander” *admiratio is the coincidentia oppositorum of eros and patience*. This exercise is a taxing one, requiring a tremendous effort on the part of the one whom “the angel has elected”. This difficulty – *penia*, as Cacciari called it – is what is expressed through the sharp claws and nails of the angel.

In the so-called ‘esoteric’ fragment written in Ibiza […] the angel’s chant […] represents by *dividing*. His exegesis initiates by putting to the test,
accusing, giving the experience of misery, penia for the distance of the beloved. But it is as if this principle of separation projected itself on the background of that chant and rendered mature, then, from its own interiority, an inercible force of patience, an invincible patience. Accusing and separating, he educates to the attendance and patience through the name (Cacciari, 1992: 85).

The re-encounter with the angel comes with the price of separation from the world of contingency: “However, the angel is similar to everything I had to separate myself from: people and especially objects. He has his home in the objects I no longer have. He renders them transparent and, behind each one of them, the one to whom they are destined appears to me” (Benjamin, 2003: 715). The abnegation of the contingent self is expressed as the loss of all bonds with creaturely life – people and objects.

“Transparency” is another one of the figures of sublimation that iconostasis puts into place; it is related to the transfigurative and transcendental dimension of icons: “It is through this liturgical function that the icon shatters the aesthetic triangle and its immanentism; it incites not the emotion, but the mystical sense, the mysterium tremendum, in front of the occurrence of a fourth principle in relation to the triangle: the parousia of the Transcendent One whose presence is attested by the icon” (Evdokimov 155).

The motif of transparency as the mode of possibility of parousia - which appears in Rilke’s Duino Elegies as the final question: “Earth, is this your will/to become invisible?” – is also the mode of manifestation of angels as “most limpid mirrors” of God. There is another, subtler connection between angels as mirrors and patience (and thus between patience and transparency). In The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism, Henry Corbin reminds us that in the early Middle Ages mirrors were made of metal and they
achieved their reflexive properties through assiduous polishing; the metaphor of the mirror was therefore used by theosophists to point to the perfecting of the soul, to the carving out of the material in excess until the “heart” achieved the property of reflecting the beauty of God – a sort of imitatio angelica (104). The fact that both the motifs of “transparency” and of “patience” appear so closely knit in this short essay shows that the Benjaminsian acedia can be understood in terms of this patient and attentive carving out of the material in excess: “people and objects”, but especially the previous self, the “he” from the first part of the text. Under the gaze of the angel-icon, the self becomes fragile, it can be easily broken, like a mirror: “The icon represents the fragility of human nature as it prepares itself for transfiguration” (Colilli, 1999: 362). However, the achievement of iconostasis coupled with the angelophany of the self attempts to rescue the self from its contingency. The key resides in the co-participation, in the inexhaustible reciprocal gaze between the angel and the narrator: “We are dealing here with the answer (Entsprechung) thanks to which what manifests itself – the form or beauty – will not remain in the order of appearance, will no longer be vulnerable. The solution for the phenomenal to be saved – thus, to no longer be considered ‘mere semblance’ – consists in its participation, the fact of taking part in the order of ideas” (Cozea 67). Thus, the angel manifests in this text “the real appearances of things”, he is the intercessor of the transformation of the visible in the invisible. The transformation of semblance into real appearance can take place only in the contemplative and dialogic mode of admiratio. In this way, the self is returned to its archetypal, ideatic matrix and representation becomes, as Benjamin was saying, “representation of ideas”. The idea is “saved” in this incessant polishing of the outstanding material until the angel, as “the beloved other” becomes visible again;
henceforth, this fragile image will be safeguarded only by the uninterrupted contemplation of the other as oneself and vice versa. Patience and attention are what grants this coming into visibility of the angelic counterpart. Eros is what holds the fragile, evanescent image together. Both of them coalesce in the *admiratio*, in which the beauty of the real appearance of things and the distance from the beloved are brought together.

The gradual accumulation of novelty – “new maturity”, *Angelus Novus*, “new angels” – together with the themes of angelophanic experience find their climactic achievement at the end of the essay:

He wants happiness: happiness resides in the conflict between the ecstasy of the unique, of the new (the “only once”) as not yet lived, and the beatitude of possessing again (*à nouveau*) what one has experienced. This is why, for the new, there is no hope except on the path of return home, when he takes with him a new human being. Just like me, as soon as I saw you, I travelled with you backwards to where I was coming from (Benjamin, 2003: 715).

The transformation is now explicit: what the “new angel” has brought about is, together with a “new time”, “a new human being”. In this passage, the time-space of revelation is defined as outside the “limits of representation” because, as Cacciari explains,

Already the great Scholastic thought (Hebrew, Arabic and Christian) does not content itself to opposes the *Nunc stans* of divinity to the *nunc fluens* of the creature, but adds a third one: the tertium datur is the *Nunc instantis*, the dimension of the *improviso frattanto*⁴⁴, so sudden, and still so *actual* to the point of almost not being a moment of time. A dimension of *perfect* caducity: the most sudden moment (caduceus like Angelus Novus) has as its name the instant that arrests and breaks the continuum.[…] The ‘small door’ of which Benjamin speaks is the image of this name. Like any door, this one has two sides which both unite and separate the Hodie with the *nunc fluens*, unbreakable polarity, inseparable difference (Cacciari, 1992: 88-89).

The “small door” is very similar to what I was defining in the beginning of my commentary on Benjamin as *iconostasis*: the intermediary space-time of revelation which
I have elaborated on throughout my discussion. One important question remains nonetheless: how “caduceus” or fleeting can we consider this moment in light of the whole discourse of transfiguration which forms the entire texture of this essay?

Travelling back home with the angel implies the ultimate act of transfiguration, it presupposes that all the efforts and stages reviewed have been accomplished and that this instantaneous moment of revelation has become nunc stans, it has become eternity. As Colilli says: “but the element that the Angel seeks most is happiness that is figured in the unrepeatable instant of meaning and of being, which shatters the repetitive logic of history” (Colilli, 1999: 529). The shattering of “the repetitive logic of history” can be realized only if the “jetzt-zeit” has endured this flow, only if it has been crystallized in the imaginal world. Pavel Florensky was defining the moment of iconographic revelation as “a crystal of time”, precisely, a moment which coagulates the fleeting vision of the idea into the durable, real appearance of names and things. This is the only way in which this moment of revelation can become “happy”: otherwise, it disappears in the undifferentiated flow of the nunc fluens. This is what the true birth – or, really, if we think about the fundamental connection with the name, it is more the true baptism of the angelic self - is supposed to accomplish:

In the icon the ‘second birth’ manifests itself, it is the image that we had lost. In the gold of the icon the figure emerges (baptisma) and receives the seal of the lost form. It receives it here, on earth; here on earth, the figure becomes celestial too: ‘he who loves God lives an angelic life on earth’ repeats the Cabasilas of Maximus the Confessor (Cacciari, 1985: 182).

The Space-Between of Appearing: Paul Valéry’s *Eupalinos, ou, l’Architecte.*

*But of beauty, I repeat again that we saw her there shining*
In company with the celestial forms; and coming to earth we find her here too, shining in clearness through the clearest aperture of sense (Plato, Phaedrus).

In the above-quoted passage from Plato’s *Phaedrus* we can find one of the many expressions of the Platonic notion of the correspondence between terrestrial and celestial beauty (the former being a shadow, an imitation of the latter). This concept is also the cornerstone of the Benjaminian take on *mimesis* as “imitation of ideas, not of things”. In Paul Valéry’s *Eupalinos, ou l’Architecte*, “the representation of ideas” is seriously challenged and eventually discarded in favor of a more logos-oriented poetics, one which shifts the focus from *contemplation* to *practice*. In my reading of Valéry’s dialogue, I will attempt to demonstrate that the author creates here an aesthetic of “real appearance” as an intermediary form of expression between disembodied knowledge (which coincides with the realm of Ideas) and material reality. In his poetics, this intermediary realm has its epistemological ground in the shift from “connaître” (to know) and “construire” (to construct). This intermediary poetics of “real appearances” is situated by the author in anantagonism with the Platonic/Socratic realm of ideas and, in more general terms, with what Valéry assumes to be the utterly disembodied Platonic philosophy. Since the text was conceived and presented in the form of a philosophical dialogue, the essential ideas exposed here by Valéry are quite straightforward and their “unraveling” will not constitute the purpose of my study. My focus will be on the ways in which this dialogue, in its articulation of an in-between poetics of appearance, echoes similar motifs and themes from the imaginal world of angelic poetics. More specifically, I will compare *Eupalinos* to Ibn Arabi’s *The Ship of Stone* in the attempt to show how the Valéryan
poetics of in-betweenness reflects, if not necessarily an explicit or assumed awareness of
the affinities between poetic language and “angelological semiosis”, at least a similar
concern for an intermediary realm where transience and permanence meet.

Published in 1921, *Eupalinos, ou, l’Architecte* was the first of a series of
philosophical dialogues – the most notable of which is *L’âme et la danse* – that Valéry
wrote in the model of Platonic dialogues. *Eupalinos* represents the exposition of a poetics
of “construire”, one which, in the author’s opinion, found its most accomplished mode of
expression in architecture and music (and to a lesser degree in the other arts). This poetics
is set in opposition to the mode of “connaître”, which pertains to the philosophical mode
of understanding reality. For Valéry, “connaître” is an epistemological form which is
deeply related with the angelic. In “L’ange”, Valéry reinforced the thematic pertaining to
the critique of disembodied knowledge which appears in *Eupalinos*. In the 1945 text, the
angel is a being who “knows and does not understand”. Quite significantly, in this text,
Valéry relates the angelic knowing with a specific type of representation: the angel
appearing in this text contemplates himself and is saddened by the great distance between
the knowledge he has of himself and the reflection of his face on the surface of the water.
The angel’s all-encompassing knowledge does not, however, coincide with recognition.
This type of self-reflexive representation that the angel undergoes is the mode of
representation of “knowing” but the antipode of “comprehension”. While the former is
unilateral, re-turning an unrecognized image of the self, the latter is profoundly dialogical
(the prefix “com”). Therefore, we could say that for Valéry the angel is at the crossroads
between two diverse modes of knowing which are accompanied by two opposing types of
representation. For the author, the angel is the figure who can obviate this intersection in
the most patent manner because, as Cacciari was showing in his book, the angels, in their conjunction of the visible and the invisible, have a double possibility of destiny: a dialogical union with the “all-seeing icon” of God (“comprehension”) or a self-reflexive fall in the world of representation.

This polarity is clearly inscribed in *Eupalinos*: “a mode of thinking that would divide itself between constructing and knowing”, says Socrates in his reminiscences of the times when he was a youth. In a way, we could say that the whole dialogue represents the attempt to define and circumscribe that space “between seeing and knowing”, to which alludes Eupalinos: “everything that the philosophers are dealing with takes place between the perception of the object and the knowledge that results from it…only to end prematurely” (Valéry, 1957: 25). For the philosopher, the interval between perception and knowledge passes almost unnoticed; for the artist, however, this interval plays a major part.

The dialogue begins with the re-encounter between Socrates and Phaedrus in the realm of the shadows, to which they have both been relegated after their death. This particular setting offers the author a number of vantage points. First of all, it gives the possibility of reinterpretation at the end of a major cycle; as Robillard points out: “birth, death and re-birth: this cycle is at the heart of the Valéryan experience” (Robillard 164). Secondly, the whole dialogue could thus be read as Valéry’s turning over the tables on the Socratic banishment of the Poets from the city: by placing Socrates himself “dans les parages de ce monde” (Valéry, 1957: 13), “sur les frontières de cet empire transparent” (Valéry, 1957: 1), Valéry outcasts Socrates and his philosophical lineage from the very *Empyreum*, and reinstates poetry and the arts in their rights. Lastly,
bearing in mind that one of the main themes of Platonic philosophy was man’s *anamnesis* of the realm of ideas, we could say that here, with the insertion of Phaedrus as partner of the dialogue, Valéry is reversing this perspective: the main subject matter of the dialogue will be the remembering and longing for the terrestrial, embodied reality:

PHAEDRUS
What are you doing there, Socrates? I have been looking for you for a long time. I have traversed our pale sojourn, and I asked of your whereabouts everywhere. Everybody here knows you, but nobody has seen you. Why have you gone far from the other shadows and what thought enjoined your soul far from ours, on the borders of this transparent empire?

SOCRATES
Wait. I cannot answer. You know very well that thinking is indivisible for the dead. We are too simplified now not to undergo to the very end the movement of some idea. The living have a body that allows them to enter and re-enter knowledge. They are made of a house and a bee\(^{48}\) (Valéry, *Eupalinos* 1).

[…]

SOCRATES
…but, in these Elysean fields, even if I still doubt whether I struck a good deal or not, I can still imagine that there is something left for me to know. I am looking for, amidst the shadows, the shadow of some truth. […] The bodies are memories, the figures are of smoke; this light so equal at all points; so weak and nauseating of pallor; this general indifference that it renders visible or, rather, that is impregnates, without figuring anything exactly; these groups half-transparent that we form of our ghosts (Valéry, *Eupalinos* 12)\(^{49}\).

The transparency of the nether realm is figured here as oppressive; the “angelic” transparency of being is described in very similar terms with what Derrida was calling “the oppressive and luminous identity of the same” (op. cit.), as an undifferentiating, erasing effect of an all-encompassing “presence”. It is as if, left to itself, excessive presence could only know this excess, could only know *itself* as this excess, whose mode of being is characterized by the evacuation of all the “visibles” from its range of perception. Quite suggestively, at the beginning of the dialogue, Phaedrus avows his
incapacity of seeing and hearing – “I can’t hear anything. I can’t see much” (Valéry, *Eupalinos*). This impossibility of seeing in the very midst of complete transparency is evocative of what Marion was writing about the concomitance of visibility and invisibility, of the absence accompanying the revelation of complete presence at all times. Valéry creates a strong tension between seeing and knowing. This seems to be the state in which the two characters of *Eupalinos* find themselves: even if surrounded by transparency and all-encompassing visibility, they can no longer “see”. By relegating Socrates at the very limit of “this transparent empire”, Valéry is identifying the philosopher with the utmost margin of disembodiment and immateriality: it is only here, in this space, that the soul is eternally condemned at this paradoxical status of unappeased desire of knowledge within perfect visibility. However, this setting has a redemptive function too: it is only *from* here, only after they have reached the heart of excessive presence, that Socrates and Phaedrus can come to understand and transfigure reality (even if this understanding comes too late for their own redemption) \(^50\). In this sense, excessive presence has the function to re-inform and redefine reality. The ensuing poetics will therefore be at the middle point between disembodiment and embodiment, presence and absence.

After their first re-encounter, Socrates and Eupalinos start talking about their past lives. The dialogue thus comprises three embedded narratives which, as Alexandre Lazarides says, “bring life to this dialogue of the dead. Quite literally: the three episodes will be dedicated to recounting the memories of the terrestrial beyond, from the times when Socrates and Phaedrus were still alive” (Lazarides 172). In the first of these interpolated narratives, Phaedrus brings the figure of Eupalinos \(^51\) into discussion, as one
of his past life’s acquaintances. The transition from the theme of disembodiment to architecture is created by the characters’ almost elegiac recollection of the stones, marbles and temples that had sheltered many of their discussions in the past:

PHAEDRUS
Does it remind you of the constructions we saw being built in the Piraeus?
SOCRATES
Yes.
PHAEDRUS
Of these tools, of these efforts, of these flutes that were tempering them with their music; of these operations so precise, of these progresses so mysterious and so clear at the same time? What confusion, in the beginning which turned into order then! What solidity, what rigor […]

SOCRATES
I still hold this beautiful memory. Oh materials! Beautiful stones!...Oh too light that we have become!
PHAEDRUS
And of that temple outside the walls, next to the statue of Boreas, does it remind you?
SOCRATES
The one of Artemis, the Huntress?
PHAEDRUS
That very one. One day, we went there. We talked about Beauty...
SOCRATES
Alas!
PHAEDRUS
I was friends with the one who built this temple. He was from Megara and his name was Eupalinos. He was telling me readily about his art, of all the cares and all the knowledge that it requires; he would make me understand everything I was seeing with him on the construction site. What I could see mostly was his astounding spirit. I found he had the force of Orpheus52 (Valéry, Eupalinos 5-6).

From the beginning, Eupalinos’ teachings are set in juxtaposition with Socrates’ thought.

In talking about Eupalinos, Phaedrus intends to present to Socrates an alternative mode of envisaging beauty, one that embraces both the form and the idea, but which has the (terrestrial) form as its pivotal point of reference. This valorization of earthly forms is quite straightforward, especially since Valéry puts into play here such a strong antinomy
between the immateriality of disembodied spirits and the materiality of architecture’s stones. Through the reference to Orpheus, the author is also drawing an equally clear parallel between architecture and poetry, giving us to understand that the teachings of Eupalinos on architecture are equally valid for poetry.

As I have already noted, Eupalinos does not seem to appear anywhere in the realm where the shadows of Phaedrus and Socrates meet; in fact, Socrates remarks: “I do not know what he could construct here. Here the projects themselves are memories.” (Valéry, Eupalinos 7). This impossibility of projecting, of a differentiation between the past and the present is the characteristic of the nunc stans, which is the temporal framework of the “transparent empire”. Valéry seems to be hinting already to a major distinction between Eupalinos and Socrates: while the latter pertains to the space of undifferentiation, of the vanishing instance, the former, while not here, is identified to a temporality between the present and the future, a projecting instant, an act that becomes solid and eternal. One of the fundamental artistic aims of Eupalinos, as related by Phaedrus, is indeed associated with movement: “My temple, said this man from Megara, must move men like the object of their love moves them” (Valéry, Eupalinos 11). This association between movement and love in the contemplation of artistic beauty has many affinities with the second stage in the Cusan admiratio; here, the insistence on movement highlights the fundamental role of the practical part of the exercise, that movement which is equivalent with the de-centering of the self in the encounter with the other (and towards the other). It is around Eupalinos’ teachings that Valéry will expose his poetics of “construire” as “se construire”: “By constructing, he told me smiling, I truly believe
that I have constructed myself” (Valéry, *Eupalinos* 18). This act of construction as self-construction is not so much the opposite of the idea but rather its *sine qua non* corollary:

Phaedrus:
….and he added: I have sought the just in the thoughts; so that, clearly engendered by the consideration of things, they change, as if of themselves, in the acts of my own art. I have distributed by attentions; I have resumed the order of the problems; I begin from where I once finished, only to go a bit farther…I am avid of reverie, I conceive as though I executed. No longer in the amorphous space of my soul do I contemplate those imaginary edifices, which are to real edifices what the chimeras and the gorgons are to real animals. But what I conceive of is feasible; and what I do is related to the intelligible (Valéry, *Eupalinos* 18-19).

What Eupalinos is enunciating here is a reworking of the philosophical notion of beauty as *eidos*: in the architect’s perspective, the idea is wedded with the act of doing to such a point that they become almost indistinguishable. The trajectory of this mimetic understanding of practice is the following: the thoughts, after being justly or adequately inspired by the perception of the intelligible objects, will have to instill a sort of metamorphosis by which the mere thought or idea can become an *act*. For Eupalinos, the mere reflection of heavenly beauty in the realm of human ideas is only a stage in the process of creation. That which represents the real accomplishment and permanentization of the Idea is the practice of doing, because only by creating is man able to reflect God’s primordial act. It is through this perception of the object – which is a more elaborated version of that fundamental interval between seeing and understanding – that the relation between art and the phantasmagoric is broken: the creation of art has more to do, for Eupalinos, with reality and the “just” perception of the object than with the supernatural. This notion is in stark opposition with Plato’s take on the arts: for him, the arts were “sinful” precisely because of their cavalier distancing from reality.
Inspired by Eupalinos’ exposés on architecture, Socrates is gradually drawn to similar musings and begins to relinquish his adamant skepticism to a more vacillating position until he is brought back, anamnetically, to an essential moment in his adolescence, in a time which immediately preceded his becoming a philosopher. The episode that he recounts about his own encounter with the object represents the climax around which Valéry constructs his poetics of appearance in this dialogue. Quite significantly, this narrative is situated in the text between the other two embedded narratives: Eupalinos’ and Tridon’s. I will return to this episode when I begin the discussion on the in-between facets of real appearances in this text.

The narrative of Tridon the Sidonian, which is also reproduced in the text by Phaedrus, has a couple of essential functions in Eupalinos. First of all, it offers a parallel, from a non-artistic perspective, to Eupalinos’ narrative; the common denominator between these two narratives is, among other things, the presence of the motif of sea constructions. Secondly, since Tridon is a merchant of the sea, a fellow who has more sins than one, and since it is implied that even his work, since it involved construction, was a better employment of one’s life that Socrates’, the narrative serves to accentuate the condemnation of Socrates. Tridon’s narrative contains long, descriptive passages on the construction of ships:

**PHAEDRUS**

He believed that a vessel must be, in a way, created by the knowledge of the sea and almost moulded by the very wave!... But this knowledge actually consists in replacing the sea, in our judgment, by the actions that it exerts on a body – to the point that it would be a question for us to find the other actions that oppose to this one and that we wouldn’t be needing any longer anything except for a balance of forces, all of them borrowed from nature [...]. However, the restless sea is not appeased by this balance. Everything is complicated by the movement...56 (Valéry, Eupalinos 78).
In similar manner, the architectural creations of Eupalinos that are evoked in the text are not so much temples, statues, etc., but naval constructions on the border of the sea:

Eupalinos depicted for me another magnificent picture of these gigantic constructions that can be admired in the harbors. They are advancing in the sea. Their arms, of an absolute and tough whiteness, circumscribe slumbering ponds whose tranquility they defend.

[…]
Everything conspires to the effect that these noble, half-natural buildings produce on the soul: the presence of the pure horizon, the birth and the vanishing of a veil, the emotion of the separation from the earth, the beginning of perils, the glittering threshold towards unknown territories; and men's avidity itself, ready to change into a superstitious fear, hardly do they give in to it, than they embark on the ship…They are truly admirable theatres (Valéry, *Eupalinos* 22-23).  

While it might be easier to understand why Valéry resorted to the example of architecture in order to counterbalance Socrates’ disembodied philosophy, it is not quite as transparent why the actual examples he gives are all related to the sea. This recurrence of the co-presence of water and stone in both embedded narratives brings a certain peculiarity and subtlety in the otherwise too pellucid and uncompromising antithesis between air and stone. Looking closer at the excerpts quoted above, we can notice the presence of a few elements that might help formulate an answer to this question. First of all, we should notice the presence of vocabulary borrowed from the other arts: these constructions are, in turn, “dancing flames” or “admirable theatres”; actually, the theme of artistic synergy is present throughout the dialogue: Eupalinos’s constructions “sing” and “dance”, the architect’s work is similar to Orpheus’, etc. Moreover, the anthropomorphic description of Tridon’s constructions gives the spark of *energeia* to these constructions, restoring for them that essential practical and progressive dimension.
in the sense Aristotle gave to the term. Lastly, these architectonic monuments, which are
described in such high, Apollonian terms – “absolute, tough whiteness” – “move” and
“dance” with almost Dionysian madness. Perhaps involuntarily, Valéry comes here very
close to the Platonic notion of *methexis*, as the intermediary realm between disembodied
and embodied reality:

Between beauty and ugliness, between knowledge and ignorance, between
matter and form, between the mortals and the immortals, there are all sorts
of ‘intermediaries’. There are myriads of them. The soul and love, the
demons and the demiurges, mathematics and the philosophers are part of
them. The world is created by their mediations and their transformations;
it becomes animated by their movements and metamorphoses (Quéau 9).

Therefore, with the two embedded narratives of Eupalinos of Megara and Tridon the
Sidonian, Valéry is setting the benchmark upon which he will bring to light his specific
poetics in response to the Platonic one. The sea as a metaphor of intermediality and
interconnectedness is what gives purpose and movement to the “gigantic constructions”.
This bringing together of all the arts under the umbrella of a space which connects stone
and water suggests the author’s attempt at defining a truly intermediary poetics, in which
the act of doing becomes co-substantial with the idea. Before proceeding to the
deployment of the specific features of this poetics in the last part of my analysis, I will
make a short parenthesis in order to draw a parallel between Valéry’s poetics “between
the river and the stone” and Ibn Arabî’s description of the imaginal world of poetry.

In an article on the mystic philosophy of Ibn Arabî, the French Islamic Studies
scholar, Claude Addas, added further insight into Arabî’s philosophy by proposing a new
interpretation of “The Ship of Stone”. In the view of Addas, this text condenses the
fundamental idea that poetry is a most accomplished vessel for reaching the “imaginal
world”. Let us look at an excerpt from Ibn Arabî’s text itself:
In that world I saw a sea of sand as fluid as water; I saw stones, both large and small, that attracted one another like iron and a magnet. When they came together, they could not come apart without someone intervening, just as when one takes the iron away from the magnet without the magnet being able to hold on. But if one fails to separate them, these stones continue to stick to one another at a set distance; when they are all joined, they have the form of a ship. I myself saw a small vessel with two hulls. When a boat is thus constructed, its passengers jump into the sea, and then they embark for wherever they wish. The deck of the vessel is made of grains of sand or of dust, soldered together in a special way. I have never seen anything so marvelous as these stone vessels floating on an ocean of sand! All the boats have the same shape; the vessel has two sides, behind which are raised two enormous columns higher than a man's head. The rear of the ship is at the same level as the sea, and is open to the sea without a single grain of sand coming inside (Ibn Arabî, quoted in Addas 7).

In this exquisite allegorical transposition of Ibn Arabî’s vision of the imaginal world, we are witnessing the very substance and texture of the realm of creative imagination: all the elements adhere here, they are full-fledged symbols. Like all visionary recitals of Sufi mysticism, this particular one is also carried out under the influence of the angel, who always guides and accompanies the revelation. To call the image of a ship of stone paradoxical would be too little to say. This is because the images offered here have little, or nothing to do with the ‘doxa’ and they are not ‘subordinated’ to it. They pertain more to an intermediary realm where image is closely connected with imagination. It is interesting to note the topos of construction, which is also part and parcel of Valéry’s poetics. As in Eupalinos, the construction of the ship of stone brings together permanence and fluidity. Addas’ interpretation of this text reveals the fact that “the ship of stone” is an elaborate representation of poetic language:

It is also true that to structure the story he deliberately borrowed key terms from a specific lexicon in Arabic linguistics: bahr is the word commonly used for the ocean. But it is also the word that, in the language of Arabic poetry, denotes the meter of a poem; likewise, ramal, which ordinarily
refers to sand, is the name for one of the sixteen meters in classical Arabic prosody. The use of vocabulary borrowed from the language of Arabic poetry is obviously not coincidental in the least. From this point of view, the story of the stone vessels sailing over a sea of sand has nothing to do with the dream state of a delirious mind. The vessel (safīna) represents the qasīda, the classical Arabic poem; the inseparable stones are kalîmât, the words that, when joined together, form the verses which, when arranged together make up the poem; the two sides of the boat are the hemistiches of each line of verse, and the two columns refer to the two 'pillars', watid, of Arabic meter. Thus, with slightly encrypted language, Ibn 'Arabi points out to us that poetry is the privileged way to 'travel' in the 'âlam al-khayâl, whose haqâ'iq (spiritual realities) it carries, although spiritual realities, by their very nature, are supraformal (Addas 9).

Of course, the equation between the language of poetry and the imaginal world is not as straightforward and intentional in Valéry’s text as it is in Ibn Arabi’s recital of initiation. However, there are enough elements in Eupalinos that point to the idea that, in his own construction of a poetics of appearance, Valéry had at least the intuition of a realm of intermediary realities. For instance, in the last passage quoted from Eupalinos, the one describing Eupalinos’ naval buildings on the seashore, we can notice almost the exclusive use of figures of the intermediary: “half-natural buildings”, “the birth and the vanishing of a veil”, the border of the sea itself which separates water from earth, thresholds, etc. The coincidence of the ‘ship of stone” motif in this text and in Ibn Arabi’s, suggests a similar mode of perceiving and understanding the originating realm of the language of poetry, one of creative imagination: wherein one projectively constructs a durable edifice that will be able to “float” on the matricial waters of artistic imagination.

This poetics of the in-betweenness of artistic creation becomes evident in one of Eupalinos’ expositions on the fundamentals of architecture:

— Oh, poor soul, I told him, what do you hope to do in the space of a flash?
— To be free. There are a lot of things, he resumed, there is... everything in that instant; and everything that the philosophers deal with takes place between the perception of the object and the knowledge which results from this perception... to end only too prematurely.

— I do not understand you. You are attempting to retard these Ideas?

— One has to. I prevent them from satisfying me, I always defer pure happiness.

— Why? Where are you drawing this cruel force from?

— This is what is important to me more than anything else: to obtain from what will be that it satisfies, with all the vigor of its novelty, the reasonable exigencies of what was. How not to be obscure? Listen: I saw, one day, a certain bush of roses and I made a wax model after it. Once I finished my wax model, I placed it on the sand. The hurried Time reduces the roses to nothingness; and fire promptly returns the wax to its amorphous nature. But the wax, having come out of its matrix fomented and lost, the dazzling liquid of the bronze becomes wedded, in the hardened sand, with the shallow self of the tiniest petal... (Valéry, Eupalinos 25-26).  

The theme of the jetzt-zeit, coupled with the idea of happiness, brings the first part of this text in proximity with Benjamin’s Agesilaus Santander, where we have seen that happiness depended on the transformation of the caduceus instant into a crystal of permanence, an imaginal space-time of the revelation of the self. However, whereas in Benjamin’s essay the focus was on the return to the Idea, here this return is indefinitely deferred: Eupalinos prefers to linger, as long as possible, in this space-between of the instant, the space of potentiality and meaning, between the beholder and the perceived object, a moment prior to the moment of sense-making. Although the word ‘attention’ does not explicitly appear in the text, we can infer that such a practice necessarily requires an attentive and patient eye. Such a practice, moreover, is a figurative, or, rather, imaginal experience: the figures of wax, sand, mold and flower have the same imaginative connotations and strength as the ship, the stones and the sea in Ibn Arabî’s recital. The final image of the imprint of the flower in the sand creates a beautiful metaphor which reminds us of the apparitional character of artworks that Adorno was
talking about. The future, the what will be of the artwork is deeply embedded in the trace that contains the sublimated moment of appearing. This is, very precisely, the moment when appearing and appearance become wedded, without however turning into illusion or mere semblance. For Valéry, durability is not sought in the Idea, but in the trace left by the artistic act of “construire”.

For H.R. Jauss, Valéry’s poetics of “construire” in Eupalinos is meant to do away with the Platonic idea of the beautiful; thus, art “frees itself of the eternal substantiality of the beautiful by ‘making the indefinable the essential characteristic of the beautiful’. And it frees itself of the model of the theoretical cognition of the true, the connaître of the philosophers, by disputing the precedence of meaning over form in the process of aesthetic production” (Jauss 602). Meaning, thus, no longer depends on the adequacy to a truth-falsity criterion in order to make it relevant for the process of art making and interpretation. The locus of the artistic work is in the manifold of meanings granted in the appearing of the object which contains the traces of a myriad of processes and images. The beautiful is the possibility of contemplating this bringing together itself. It is really, in the end, a matter of no longer having to choose the “right” representation but rather of being able to comprehend the entirety of the experience that a “mere object” has to offer. This is the lesson that, through Eupalinos’ and Tridon’s examples, Socrates’ is “brought back” to:

Right there. I found one of these objects that the sea rejects; a white thing, of the most pure whiteness; polished and tough and mellow and light. It was shining in the sunlight, on the wet sand, which is dark and has tiny sparks scattered all over. I took it in my hand; I blew away its dust; I rubbed it on my coat and its singular shape interrupted all my other thoughts. Who made you? I thought. You do not look like anything and still, you are not shapeless. Are you the play of nature, oh, nameless one,
Socrates’ encounter with the strange object includes all the stages of the process of revelation: the perplexity due to the impossibility to map the object on any recognizable cognitive scheme, the attempt to “literalize” it, to “translate” it into something familiar, the interruption and evacuation of the doxologic ordinary and, finally, the dialogue, the attention to the object as both utterly different (“you”) and somehow related to the self (“you have reached me, sent by the gods”). However, Socrates, after pondering awhile on the origin of this object – was it a thing made by nature, or by the hand of man? – decides to throw the stone back to the sea; nonetheless, the thought still continues to trouble him and the question of its origin remains a puzzle. His realization now, as he remembers this episode in his angelic state, at the margin of the “transparent empire”, is that, finally, choosing one answer simply did not apply in this situation and the only way to have gone about it would have been to accept and include the presence of both possibilities. He thus also realizes that this represents the major flaw of his entire philosophical system too.

In the opinion of Jauss, this decision is what defines the ancient chiasmus between nature and art and the object that Socrates finds is the paradigm for the modernist aesthetics of the “objet trouvé” which blurs the lines between the two once again (Jauss 603-604). Jauss believes that Valéry’s poetics of the “objet trouvé” has primarily a historical function, in outlining the direction of modernist aesthetics. However, I believe that, read in the context of the deconstruction of the Platonic idea of beauty as well as of proposing a poetics of “real appearances”, Valéry’s text helps in specifying even further the nature of the new directions in twentieth-century poetics. The object that Socrates
finds is – what else could it have been? – a stone; but it’s not just any stone. In fact, the narrator insists on the particularity of the object: it is white and polished and tough and mellow, etc., therefore the very locus of *coincidentia oppositorum*. This object has, therefore, more the attributes of what Michel Serres called “the incandescent” (*l’incandescent*) which he defined in relation with the color white:

I simply thought of the metaphor of the white color which appears not to be a color at a certain moment but which, when this white color passes through a prism, it bursts out in the spectrum of all perceivable colors, of all visible colors. No color, all colors, 0 color, a great quantity of colors. It so happens that in Latin the word for white is *candidus* and so ‘incandescent’ actually means this white color (Serres, 2003: 33).

The incandescence of the revealed, manifested object specifies the polysemic and undecidable nature of the poetics that Valéry is exposing in *Eupalinos*. By drawing attention to the space between the perception of this object and its final sublimation or subordination to an idea, Valéry opens up the space of meaningful incandescence and luminosity. In *Metaxu*, Philippe Quéau noted that the vocabulary of Greek philosophy is bathed in light, that light is the primordial metaphor for dealing with the realm of intermediary reality. However, for Valéry, the light of the Socratic universe of disembodied knowledge is excessive and oppressive: it erases the space of differences and overwhelms the realm of being. The white stone that Socrates finds on the sea shore is then Valéry’s manner of transfiguring the colorless whiteness of disembodiment into that whiteness full of potentiality and meaning. In a way, for Valéry, as for Benjamin, the angelic state of being has to be reached here, on earth; if not, it remains a “pale shadow” “at the confines of the transparent empire”. This is achieved by coming to “see” the incandescence of the object in the space between its appearing and its disappearing: real appearance.
The Fall in the Allegorical. Angels and Defamiliarization in Poe’s “Angel of the Odd” and Malamud’s “Angel Levine”.

With Valéry’s poetics of real appearance, we find ourselves on the threshold that marked the passage from contemplative beauty to the aesthetics of what Valéry himself called “raw excitement”: “Beauty is a sort of corpse. It has been supplanted by novelty, in-tensity, strangeness, all the shock values. Raw excitement is the sovereign mistress of recent minds, and works of art are at present designed to tear us away from the contemplative state, the motionless delight, an image of which was at one time intimately connected with the general notion of the Beautiful” (Valéry, 1957: 118-119). This aesthetics is what lies at the basis of the take on the angels in the two texts that I am about to discuss. Both in “The Angel of the Odd” and in “Angel Levine”, the angel is, at the same time, a strange figure and a figure of the strange, that is, to paraphrase Marin’s interpretation of the narrative of the Resurrection, both the discourse and the metadiscourse, both the question and the solution to the problem. I have already pointed out that angelophanies always have a troubling, profoundly disturbing character. However, in traditional angelological accounts, this is because of their out-worldly appearance and high degree of luminosity and incandescence, as well as because they represent a tremendous trespassing of the boundaries of the phenomenal. In Poe and Malamud’s short stories, the angels are strange and their phenomenalization is overwhelming because, on the one hand, their manifestations come in gross opposition to their traditional representation and, on the other hand, they still preserve all the other angelic attributes of revelation and annunciation.
In his book, *The Angel and the Machine*, Michael E. Jones showed that the age of mechanization and industrialization gradually led to a complete desacralization of angels both in philosophy and in the arts. Quite paradoxically, even if the angels are divested of their sacral attributes and splendor, their actualization preserves all the other elements characterizing angelophanies as saturated phenomena. It would seem that the angels’ para-doXical vocation – which is the grounds of their mode of being as excess – can find the ‘strength’ to signal (i.e. Marin’s *faire signe*) from the very heart of the allegorical. However, this ‘fall in the allegorical’ translates the chiasmus created between understanding and creative imagination and the collapse of the latter to the domain of the fantastic (a danger that Corbin, as a man of his time, always warned about). But even with this evacuation of the imaginal, the angels come to manifest the profound affinities between their realm and that of human *poiesis*. In both texts, the angels are thus associated (and even) identified with all the mechanisms of defamiliarization. In this sense, they become here, the very archetypes and symbols of “the resurrection of the word” that poetic language, in its most accomplished form, is supposed to achieve.

This aspect of the resurrection of the dead metaphors was also noted by Colilli: the angels’ “corpse is a signpost […] that shocks us into reawakening” (Colilli, 1999: 26-27). The idea of reawakening is evocative of Viktor Shklovsky’s definition of defamiliarization as the device of poetic language *par excellence*:

> If we should wish to make a definition of ‘poetic’ and ‘artistic’ perception in general, then doubtless we would hit upon the definition: ‘artistic’ perception is perception in which form is sensed (…); And he goes on, stating that “this loss of the form of the word represents a great easement for the thought-processes and may be a necessary condition for the existence of science, but art could never be satisfied with this eroded word (Shklovsky 42).
The topos of finitude appears in both quotations in opposition to the “poetic” and the “artistic”. What Colilli calls “the cadaverization of thoughts and processes” appears, in Shklovsky’s poetics, under the name of automatization, a thought-process which transforms the poetic into the prosaic and which is responsible the words’ fall into invisibility: “Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war” (Shklovsky 5). Therefore, automatization is the way of being of prosaicized, every-day life. What belongs to poetic language, that which is able to “resurrect” the word is what Shklovsky called defamiliarization: “And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By ‘estranging’ objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and laborious” (Shklovsky 6).

Although Shklovsky never uses the idea of transcendence, the very oppositions that he posits between poetic and prosaic language, defamiliarization and automatization, as well as the metaphors he employs to highlight these binaries – “resurrection” versus “fossilization” or “eroded word”, everyday language is like a “graveyard” whereas poetic language resembles more “an image once alive in the newly-born word” – all hint to the capacity of poetic language to transcend the automatized cyclicity of the everyday.

Before proceeding to the analysis of the angel as a figure of defamiliarization, I will review some notions which are the common denominator between defamiliarization and what could be called the angelic function in poetic language. Firstly, we should note the importance of epistemology in Shklovsky’s writings: one of the main differences between defamiliarization and automatization consists in the thought-processes through
which they get imprinted on our perception: defamiliarization becomes effective when we are able to feel the “palpableness” of form anew, when the form of the word itself is sensed. Related to this idea, there is, implied in Shklovsky’s formulations, the notion of the transformation of the “invisible” into “visible”– “that is, because of this device, the object is brought into view” (Shklovsky 12). This is a highly significant feature of defamiliarization because it allows us to sense the complexity of the visibility-invisibility relationship. The paradox of making visible that which is already manifest but invisible to us because of our automatized perception creates a dilemma in what concerns the way in which cognition determines perception itself. Defamiliarization, then, foregrounds this dilemma and offers a field of vision that goes beyond the meaningless routine of the every-day. The angel has many affinities with this move from invisibility to visibility. His appearance marks this very transformation. The angel proceeds, like defamiliarization, through an imprint on human perception because of his complete strangeness, because he cannot be “mapped” on any realm of actuality that cognition over-determines; the aesthetic effectiveness of defamiliarization resides, precisely, in its contradiction to any of the domains of the automatized “known”. Another, more subtle epistemological feature that the figure of the angel and defamiliarization share is what Paul Colilli formulated in the following way: “knowing the angel is closely linked to an unknowing; cognition exists alongside its opposite of cognitive impossibility (the brilliance that kills). The closest we can come, then, to knowledge of the angel is in its imprinting itself in human thought. That is, an idea of the Angel, has a corresponding ‘realness’ for which we are cognitively empty. […] It is a realm of void that is housed in the poetic sign (Colilli, 1999: 37). We are able to perceive the form because of this
contradiction, as Colilli points out: “the word draws its fullness from its very vacuity” (Colilli, 1999: 45). In both cases, we are faced with the realness of an intensified “palpableness” of form which is juxtaposed to a referential void.

Another idea involved in Shklovsky’s definition of defamiliarization is that this device brings about a sort of cognition by which we see objects anew, as if we saw them for the first time. This is the Sohravardian cognitio matutina – morning knowledge – and it is associated with the metaphor of the dawn to signify precisely this “newness” of objects seen as if for the first time. “Re-awakening” implies the same move as the “resurrection of the word” and the displacement from every routine translates the same operation as defamiliarization effects in its destabilization of automatized thinking.

The fourth concept related to the notion of defamiliarization is that of difficulty: “By ‘estranging’ objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception ‘long’ and ‘laborious’” (Shklovsky, 1999: 6). The defamiliarized object achieves its aesthetic effectiveness through the length of the perceptual process and by delaying recognition. The appearance of the angel in the “everyday” is marked by the same difficulty of comprehension and it coincides with a first stage of non-recognition. Like the poetic sign, the angel operates the contamination of the real with the supra-real.

In Bernard Malamud’s “Angel Levine”, the apparition of the angel comes to disrupt the ordinariness – we could say automatization – of life. The moment immediately preceding the angelic estrangement is marked as automatized:

He was not truly reading, because his thoughts were everywhere; however the print offered a convenient resting place for his eyes; and a word or two, when he permitted himself to comprehend them, had the momentary effect of helping him forget his troubles. After a short while he discovered, to his surprise, that he was actively scanning the news, searching for an item of great interest to him. Exactly what he thought he
would read he couldn’t say—until he realized with some astonishment that he was expecting to discover something about himself (Malamud 45).

The act of automatized reading intensifies the sense of ordinary drudgery and is presented exactly as a lack of perception of the form. Manischewitz, the hero of the story, is a former tailor, who has recently been hit by all sorts of adversities – he has lost his shop to fire, his wife has become very sick and he is plagued with atrocious back pains, which prevent him from working more than two hours a day. A man of faith, he is somewhat resigned to the destiny God has reserved for him. The moment he is scanning the newspaper marks the climax of his resignation. “Reading without seeing” is the image that Malamud uses in order to foreground the automatization of the real. This paragraph is immediately followed by the estranged apparition of Angel Levine:

Manischewitz put his paper down and looked up with the distinct impression that someone had entered the apartment, though he could not remember having heard the sound of the door opening. He looked around: the room very was still, Fanny sleeping, for once, quietly. Half-frightened, he watched her until he was satisfied she wasn’t dead; then, still disturbed by the thought of an unannounced visitor, he stumbled into the living room, and there had the shock of his life, for at the table sat a Negro reading a newspaper he had folded up to fit into one hand (Malamud 45).

The encounter with the angel literally enacts the contamination of the real with the unreal and, in this particular case, it identifies the “real” with automatization and the “unreal” with ostranenie (“he had the shock of his life”). Defamiliarization is the more effective given that the image of the angel is defamiliarized too; as if it were not strange enough for an angel to emerge in the familiar space of Manischewitz’s home, the Angel Levine has nothing of the attributes of the “traditional” angel:

He was a large man, bonily built, with a heavy head covered by a hard derby, which he made no attempt to remove. His eyes seemed sad, but his
lips, above which he wore a slight moustache, sought to smile; he was not otherwise prepossessing. The cuffs of his sleeves, Manischewitz noted, were frayed to the lining and the dark suit was badly fitted. He had very large feet (Malamud 45.).

The topos of non-recognition is easily graspable in Malamud’s story as the necessary accompaniment of defamiliarization. The figuration of the angel Levine accomplishes a double estrangement, on the one hand, as the irruption of the supernatural into the natural and, on the other hand, through the unorthodox depiction of the angel’s appearance. Therefore, the re-cognition of the angel is impeded and delayed in the story. In the following passage, we can observe the deployment of the devices of non-recognition in Manischewitz’s encounter with the angel:

Levine, at this point removed his hat, revealing a very white part in his black hair, but quickly replaced it. He replied, "I have recently been disincarnated into an angel. As such I offer you my humble assistance, if to offer is within my province and ability—in the best sense." He lowered his eyes in apology. "Which calls for added explanation: I am what I am granted to be, and at present the completion is in the future."

"What kind of angel is this?" Manischewitz gravely asked.

"A bona fide angel of God, within prescribed limitations," answered Levine, "not to be confused with the members of any sect, order, or organization here on earth operating under a similar name."

Manischewitz was thoroughly disturbed. He had been expecting something but not this. What sort of mockery was it—provided Levine was an angel—of a faithful servant who had from childhood lived in the synagogues, always concerned with the word of God?

To test Levine he asked, "Then where are your wings?"

The Negro blushed as well as he was able. Manischewitz understood this from his changed expression. "Under certain circumstances we lose privileges and prerogatives upon returning to earth, no matter for what purpose, or endeavoring to assist whosoever."

"So tell me," Manischewitz said triumphantly, "how did you get here?"
"I was transmitted."

Still troubled, the tailor said, "If you are a Jew, say the blessing for bread."

Levine recited it in sonorous Hebrew.

Although moved by the familiar words, Manischewitz still felt doubt he was dealing with an angel.

"If you are an angel," he demanded somewhat angrily, “give me proof."

Levine wet his lips. "Frankly, I cannot perform either miracles or near miracles, due to the fact that I am in a condition of probation. How long that will persist or even consist, I admit, depends on the outcome." (Malamud 46-47).

In the passage quoted above, we can follow the mechanisms of defamiliarization and see how this device works on our perception. Because of the strong impression of the double estrangement, Manischewitz cannot recognize the angel as such: he does not fall under any of the categories that come under the incidence of his cognitive map; this is why Manischewitz cannot recognize him even after he is able to recite the “blessing for the bread”.

In Malamud’s story, as well as in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Angel of the Odd”, non-recognition is necessary in order to perceive the angel; this is why both authors estrange the angel twice. Recognizing the angel, on the other hand, becomes, in Malamud’s story after the first moment of contact, a matter of life and death (and not a matter of automatization as in Shklovsky’s scenario): Manischewitz’s disbelief in the angel makes it impossible for the angel to save him from his troubles; only when his wife, Fanny, is about to expire, is Manischewitz able to profess his belief in the angel; the miracle is performed, then, only as if through the subordination of cognition to perception. However, this last aspect, although present both in Poe and Malamud’s
stories, is more specific for the encounter with the “angelological” than the “poetological”. There is, nevertheless, one notion associated with Shklovsky’s description of automatization, which is implied through the juxtaposition with defamiliarization. This is the idea that defamiliarization enacts a disruption in the automatized cyclicity of the everyday; it is then a property of poetic language which has the capacity to arrest and question the notion of the eternal return of the same; even if, on their way from poetry to prose, words undergo the transformation from strange and new to familiar and dead, this hints more to the capacity of poetic language to “resurrect” and innovate the word-image; hence, it is not the return of “the same” but rather the constant re-shaping and re-discovery of new figures of artistic imagination.

This break in the cyclicity of the everyday is present is Malamud’s story. We have already seen how the Angel Levine, through his intrusion in Manischewitz’s life, was already able to arrest the previous automatized time. However, after this first moment, because of Manischewitz’s non-recognition, “life” goes back to its normal course:

The next day Manischewitz felt some relief from his backache and was able to work four hours at pressing. The day after, he put in six hours; and the third day four again. Fanny sat up a little and asked for some halvah to suck. But on the fourth day the stabbing, breaking ache afflicted his back, and Fanny again lay supine, breathing with blue-lipped difficulty (Malamud 48).

It is only after Manischewitz decides to look for Levine and only after he affirms his belief in him, that the angel can perform his miraculous mission. After two failed attempts at entrusting himself in the angel’s hands, followed by “a return of the same”, Manischewitz can finally conquer his disbelief and subordinate his reason to his perception. In Malamud’s story, as well as in Poe’s “The Angel of the Odd”, the angel is
presented as capable to arrest the inexorable flow of time and also in radical opposition to automatized thinking and its meaninglessness. Like the poetic sign, the angel, in its visible stance, illuminates, even if for a moment, ways of seeing and understanding that we, “in our blindness”, as Manischewitz once says, are unable to grasp.

In his relationship to man, the angel has to be a figure of defamiliarization in order to be perceived. It is important to note, at this point, that the angel cannot be completely identified with defamiliarization: laying bare the device of defamiliarization is not central in Malamud’s story. It is in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Angel of the Odd” that we can trace the close intersections between the epistemological implications of defamiliarization and the figure of the angel.

“The Angel of the Odd” can be considered a full-fledged study on defamiliarization through the figure of the angel. In Poe’s short story, we can identify all the elements discussed so far in relation to the epistemological implications of defamiliarization. The identification between the two – defamiliarization and the Angel of Odd – already comes to mind when looking at the name of Poe’s angel: he is the “angel of odd”, of everything that is strange, of the accidental and of the “improbable possibility”.

The first notion which is foregrounded is, as in Malamud’s story, the stark opposition between the automatization of the real and the estranging effects of the fantastic. Interestingly enough, Poe uses the same motif of “reading without understanding” to depict the moment of automatization, immediately preceding the angel’s apparition:
In the morning I had been reading Glover's "Leonidas," Wilkie's "Epigoniad," Lamartine's "Pilgrimage," Barlow's "Columbiad," Tuckermann's "Sicily," and Griswold's "Curiosities"; I am willing to confess, therefore, that I now felt a little stupid. I made effort to arouse myself by aid of frequent Lafitte, and, all failing, I betook myself to a stray newspaper in despair. Having carefully perused the column of "houses to let," and the column of "dogs lost," and then the two columns of "wives and apprentices runaway," I attacked with great resolution the editorial matter, and, reading it from beginning to end without understanding a syllable, conceived the possibility of its being Chinese, and so re-read it from the end to the beginning, but with no more satisfactory result (Poe 366).

This passage foregrounds the notion of automatization and, implicitly, the gap between perception and understanding; it antinomically prepares the grounds for the emergence of the Angel of the Odd. As in Malamud’s story, the effectiveness of defamiliarization resides also in its opposition to automatization. In this case too, what is automatized is everyday life and it is the supernatural that brings about estrangement. In Poe’s story we get a new dimension of this process because the author is carefully noting the transformation from invisibility to visibility. In a first moment, the narrator’s idle reading is stopped by an embedded narrative from the journals he was scanning; that which estranges the narrator is an “odd event”, an “improbable possibility”, which contradicts the “reflecting intellect” and “contemplative understanding” (Poe 367) of the narrator:

The avenues to death are numerous and strange. A London paper mentions the decease of a person from a singular cause. He was playing at 'puff the dart,' which is played with a long needle inserted in some worsted, and blown at a target through a tin tube. He placed the needle at the wrong end of the tube, and drawing his breath strongly to puff the dart forward with force, drew the needle into his throat. It entered the lungs, and in a few days killed him (Poe 366).
Both in “Angel Levine” and in “The Angel of the Odd”, the defamiliarizing angel posits a radical contradiction to “common sense”, which is associated with blindness. Becoming estranged entails, in both cases, being confronted with an intense palpability of form which has no reference in the realm of phenomenal perception and intellection. The effect is the “laying bare” of the limits of common sense itself. One can argue that, because of the fictional convention, it is quite possible to produce “signifying movements” that have no counterpart in the “real world”. However, one fact remains: we cannot ignore the overwhelming presence of these facts in language nor can we remain blind to that which their artistic employment is directed against. In defense of the “improbable possibilities”, Poe actualizes the Angel of the Odd to question the limits of cognition. The angel’s turn from invisibility to visibility is carefully marked by the author from the perspective of the narrator:

Mein Gott, den, vat a vool you bees fo r dat! replied one of the most remarkable voices I ever heard. At first I took it for a rumbling in my ears - such as a man sometimes experiences when getting very drunk - but, upon second thought, I considered the sound as more nearly resembling that which proceeds from an empty barrel beaten with a big stick; and, in fact, this I should have concluded it to be, but for the articulation of the syllables and words. I am by no means naturally nervous, and the very few glasses of Lafitte which I had sipped served to embolden me no little, so that I felt nothing of trepidation, but merely uplifted my eyes with a leisurely movement, and looked carefully around the room for the intruder. I could not, however, perceive any one at all (Poe 367).

This passage carefully notes the angel’s subtle passage into visibility. First of all, we should note the estranging effects of the voice which, marked by the German accent, singles out the occurrence. The author signals the fact that the angel’s lack of visibility is due to the limits of the narrator’s perception; the deployment of the cognitive mechanisms by which the narrator is attempting to “prosaicize” the odd occurrence, to
turn it into something mundane prevents the angel’s emergence: “I could not, however, perceive any one at all”. As in the case of Malamud’s story, the angel has to be doubly estranged in order to be perceived. The Angel of the Odd is therefore described in opposite terms from the traditional representation of angels:

"Humph!" resumed the voice, as I continued my survey, "you mus pe so dronk as de pig, den, for not zee me as I zit here at your zide."

Hereupon I bethought me of looking immediately before my nose, and there, sure enough, confronting me at the table sat a personage nondescript, although not altogether indescribable. His body was a wine-pipe, or a rum-puncheon, or something of that character, and had a truly Falstaffian air. In its nether extremity were inserted two kegs, which seemed to answer all the purposes of legs. For arms there dangled from the upper portion of the carcass two tolerably long bottles, with the necks outward for hands. All the head that I saw the monster possessed of was one of those Hessian canteens which resemble a large snuff-box with a hole in the middle of the lid. This canteen (with a funnel on its top, like a cavalier cap slouched over the eyes) was set on edge upon the puncheon, with the hole toward myself; and through this hole, which seemed puckered up like the mouth of a very precise old maid, the creature was emitting certain rumbling and grumbling noises which he evidently intended for intelligible talk.

"I zay," said he, "you mos pe dronk as de pig, vor zit dare and not zee me zit ere; and I zay, doo, you mos pe pigger vool as de goose, vor to dispelief vat iz print in de print. 'Tiz de troof - dat it iz - eberry vord ob it" (Poe 367).

The repetition of the angel’s utterance with the same strange, German accent and the accumulation of extraordinary elements in the angel’s description make it impossible for the narrator to ignore the character any longer. The great number of details attests to the importance of the “palpableness of form” in the production of estrangement. However, recognition does not occur; the angel is taken for an intruder, for a vagabond, and is treated as such. Non-recognition has the function, as in “Angel Levine”, to retard the dénouement and to preserve the singular character of the event, as well as to
contaminate the real with the “unreal” as the story will now unfold under the sign of the supernatural. As in Malamud’s story, the two characters go through the whole ritual of identification/non-identification, this time, mainly due to the angel’s strange accent, with a comic effect:

"You zee," said he, "it iz te bess vor zit still; and now you shall know who I pe. Look at me! zee! I am te Angel ov te Odd."

"And odd enough, too," I ventured to reply; "but I was always under the impression that an angel had wings."

"Te wing!" he cried, highly incensed, "vat I pe d o mit te wing? Mein Gott! do you take me vor a shicken?"

"No - oh no!" I replied, much alarmed, "you are no chicken - certainly not."

"Well, den, zit still and pehabe yourself, or I'll rap you again mid me vist. It iz te shicken ab te wing, und te owl ab te wing, und te imp ab te wing, und te head-teuffel ab te wing. Te angel ab not te wing, and I am te Angel ov te Odd (Poe 368).

Despite the angel’s assurances, the narrator still does not believe him and fails to recognize him as such; because of this, the Angel of the Odd teaches him a lesson: from then on, the character will undergo a series of improbable, odd events – his house takes fire, he fails to get married, because the wig he was wearing to cover the boldness of his head caused in the fire “accidentally” falls right in front of his wife-to-be – all of which culminate in his decision to put an end to his life. He fails at this attempt too because, as he is trying to drown himself, a “crow from nowhere” comes and takes his clothes and, while following the crow, he will meet again the Angel of the Odd: “Looking up, I perceived the Angel of the Odd. He was leaning with his arms folded, over the rim of the car; and with a pipe in his mouth, at which he puffed leisurely, seemed to be upon
excellent terms with himself and the universe. I was too much exhausted to speak, so I merely regarded him with an imploring air” (Poe 371).

The final, semi-recognition of the angel puts an end to the unfortunate events in the narrator’s life and takes him to the moment immediately following the angel’s first visit. In Poe’s story, like in Malamud’s “Angel Levine”, the presence of the angel is marked, in temporal terms, by arresting chronological time. In “The Angel of the Odd” we find almost an allegorization of defamiliarization through the figure of the angel. As we have seen, all the elements that play a part in the process of estrangement – automatization versus defamiliarization, recognition versus non-recognition, the transformation of the invisible into visible - are present and foregrounded in Poe’s story. The juxtaposition of the world of the natural with the world of the supernatural is translated in the contradiction between the logic, the reasonable and the accidental, the contingent. In epistemological terms, this signifies that the Angel of the Odd, stands for a cognitive realm that we are able to perceive only through an excess of form.

Starting from the notions advanced by Viktor Shklovsky, we could say that the figure of the angel represents a radical case of defamiliarization, which makes it highly effective in highlighting and laying bare the perceptual/cognitive processes associated with this device. Moreover, the presence of such an accurate and detailed mise-en-scène of estrangement in both texts – the marked opposition between automatization and de-automatization, between perception and re-cognition, the paradox of the excess of form coupled with referential non-existence, the transformation of the invisible into visible, as well as the device’s capacity to arrest time and present the form anew – show the many
affinities between the angel and what Ricoeur was calling the revealing function of poetic language.

The figure of the angel in both stories represents a combination of all of these elements as we could see in the analysis. The defamiliarized figure of the angel, in its “visible” manifestation to man, seems to always evoke a referential and cognitive gap, which becomes paradoxical in its close connection to the excess of form in which it is presented. This effect is the more disturbing as we are dealing with the visual, which, ever since the advent of writing, was equated with understanding. Therefore, the actualization of the angel always foregrounds the limitations of human cognition and the reign of cognition over perception. The explicit problematization of this phenomenon in both stories discussed is not only a case in point for the self-referentiality of poetic language, but also a proof of the affinities among poetic function, the angel and perception and understanding. Of course, no definite answers are given, nor are they sought for. The simple fact that there is reason to question all these matters attests to the inexhaustible mystery of the poetic sign.

Conclusion.

In this chapter, my primary intention was to open up and explore the possibility of a poetics of in-betweenness related to the manifested aspect of angels in their function of revelation. Starting from the kataphatic premise of the angels’ revelation of the face of God, I have sought to question and demonstrate the affinities between the poetic function of language (in the Ricoeurian sense) and angelophanies. The four texts I have analyzed concretize different aspects concerning this problem; still, they all address, explicitly or
implicitly, in their engagement with the figure of the angel, a similar concern for exceeding the limits of representation. This desire for the limit-less is translated in the attempt to make way for an aesthetic space that lies beyond the traditional dichotomies of body and spirit, reality and fiction, mimesis and poiesis.

Thus, in “Agesilaus Santander”, Benjamin condensed, with great art, a mode of “representation” which, by restoring the connections between the self, on the one hand, and angel, name and icon, on the other hand, superseded the very notion of representation. The redefinition of the self under the aegis of this tripartite determination opens up the space “between image and sight” (Nancy, op. cit.) which, as we have already seen in the Cusan Preface, is the locus of revelation. The revealing function of language is located, for Benjamin, in the superimposition of the I/eye, in their co-participation. Under the unflinching gaze of his angel, Benjamin could arrest time and concentrate it into an intermediary “crystal”, a threshold between the sensible and the supra-sensible: this is the iconostasis of the self, the transfiguration of the autobiographic into an imaginal state of being, in which man reaches his angelic horizon, the return of the image/idea that has at once engendered him and is yet to be reached; this is why the “new angel” can only be reached “on the way of return”.

Valéry’s Eupalinos, ou l’Architecte engages the space-between of revelation and appearance in more direct reference to its poietic/aesthetic function. Valéry’s poetics of “real appearance” represents an alternative to the philosophic disembodied knowledge which is condemned as partial and incapable of transfiguring and arresting the image. Thus, we can witness, in Valéry’s text, two types of angelic configuration: on the one hand, the one associated with excessive light, with the philosopher’s discarnate
knowledge, is relegated to the realm of shadows: excessive visibility becomes excessive invisibility; the one related to the “real appearances of objects” is neither pure immateriality nor pure materiality: it is the infinite space of the interval between our perception and the world around us. In this sense, Valéry’s poetics is very similar with Merleau-Ponty’s dialogic *phenomenology of perception* and with Patočka’s definition of the *incarnate being*. The interval that defines the real dialogue between perceiver and the aesthetic object is the capacity to behold the *incandescence* of the world of plurisemical meaning. This particular perception depends on the beholder’s infinite attention and patience towards the world as a sign that has a deep bearing on his very nature and destiny. Both for Benjamin and Valéry the space-between of appearing and revelation is profoundly related to the idea of transcendence. The great difference is that while for the former this takes the aspect of a return to an ideatic origin of the self, for the latter, the permanent, transcendental self is already embedded in reality, in the act of constructing and shaping the self *through* this reality.

With Poe and Malamud’s “strange angels”, we are returned to the second problem of representation, the one that inevitably brings language back to itself. However, in spite of this collapse to the domain of the allegorical, the problematization of the relationship between angels and poetic language is the most patent in these two texts. Through the reading of the defamiliarizing processes enacted by the angels in the two short stories, I was able to recapitulate, almost to the letter, the characteristics of angelophanies outlined in the first part of the chapter. This signifies that, on the one hand, the poetic function of language has conserved, even if in a deformed way, the creationist and imaginal capacities of angels as primordial matrices of language, of the revelation of God as *logos*. 
On the other hand, we could hypothesize that this reunion, which is manifested even in the most skeptic contexts, is the real destiny of poetic language, be it allegorical or not. It is a reminder of Ricoeur’s understanding that the destiny of poetic language is to restore for us that unjustly called “second degree of representation” which will reshape the dialogue between the perceiver and the transfigured object.

In terms of excessive presence, of the possibilities of poetic language to enact presence as revelation of an exceeding domain (that is, both one that is analytically unavailable and one that gives itself outside the categories of truth and falsity, fiction and reality), all these instances bespeak the artistic vocation of expressing, even if cursorily and nostaligically, the illumination of a “no man’s land” which is at once their matrix and reason of being. Of all the texts that I have analyzed, the one that formulates this problematics in the most unambiguous way is Valéry’s *Eupalinos*, with the architect’s insight on the great difference between philosophical and artistic perception: for the artist, the world of signification is born and becomes crystallized in the interval between the perceiver and the object perceived, whereas for the philosopher this domain is quickly collapsed to one analytically viable solution (most of the times to the detriment of others). Freed from analytical prerequisites, the artist can fully embrace the entirety and complexity of significations: he does not have to choose. This is one of the reasons why artistic language and the angel are so akin: the angel is the very epitome of the illumination of the hidden sense of the world, a revelation given in the interval between night and day, a mere fragmentary intimation of a unitary reality. The coming about of this revelation is, however, incandescent, an overwhelming act of excessive presence that
temporarily annuls chronological time (which was the case in all the four texts) and in
general, all the elements pertaining to the instituted *order of things*.

Chapter III. Exceeding Absence. Angels and The Space-Between of Negativity

*Become as a child,*  
*become deaf, become blind!*  
*Your very something*  
*Must become nothing,*  
*Drive all something, all nothing away!*  
*Leave place, leave time,*  
*And images as well!*  
*Go without way*  
*On the narrow path*  
*Thus you will come to the desert trace.*  
*(Meister Eckhart)*

Introduction
As we move to the other end of the spectrum of an *a priori* of representation, we can, by now, understand that this space is infinitesimal (yet infinitely rich); it is a discreet line or limit separating the transformation of the visible into the invisible and vice versa. In the previous chapter, there have already been ample occasions for at least touching on the theme of absence, in its inextricability from excessive presence. The *topoi* of absence, negativity, loss, etc., inform the intellectual and artistic substance of twentieth-century thought to a far greater extent than those of presence, revelation or appearing. In this respect, my discussion of the “angelophanic” function of poetic language can be considered an attempt to further open the space of excessive presence if only because, as we have seen, the one does not really exist without the other, nor can presence be sublimated into absence without reducing or completely altering the significance of this complex experience. As for the affinities between poetic language and absence, they have permeated, in one way or another, the artistic and philosophical discussions of language throughout the twentieth-century. Franco Rella has shown that this discourse of absence was often accompanied by the expression of a liminal aesthetic:

The discovery of this great culture of the end is translated [...] in the ‘axiomatic pride of the dusk’, as Cioran phrases it, which, on the one hand, is stated as the very figure of the law and on the other, with that pathos which the same Cioran defined as ‘the melancholy of the end of the world’. It is therefore love for the fall, for the slippage, with the illusion of reaching the limits of darkness and night (Rella, 1987: 120).

This definition of the artistic attempt to explore and exceed the limits of darkness and negativity is somewhat similar to the Luciferic/Promethean impulse of transgression. My reading of excessive absence and negativity will almost entirely neglect this dimension and instead propose several other significances related to these pervasive themes. In this chapter, I will confine the analysis of the relations between excessive
absence and the limits of representation to the ways in which angels partake in this via negativa, in the revelation of the infinite void opening up behind the poetic sign. The preliminary assumption that the negative way can be translated in a phenomenology of excessive absence can be found in one of the “Ur-texts” of twentieth-century reconsiderations of apophasis, namely, Derrida’s Sauf le nom: “That is one of the essential traits of negative theology: passing to the limit, then crossing a frontier…” (Derrida, 2005: 36). As we could see in Marin’s discussion of the neuter, the approach of the space of negativity signifies attending to, and lingering in those textual junctures and points of suspension in which language continually undoes itself in order to generate other possible discourses. This is also the fundamental enterprise of negative theology. William Franke’s introduction to the recently published anthology of apophatic thought is very close to Marin’s definition:

This entails attending especially to the ruptures and interruptions, to the silences and ellipses that displace discourse and break the circuits of sense. These gaps open discourse to the non-sense or to the surplus of sense that it embodies and bears witness to, even without being able to say it. The motivations of discourse lie to a great extent in what cannot be said, and to read for this unsayable that is betrayed especially by impasses to saying is to recognize the moment of apophasis, of silence and unsaying, as constitutive of saying and its meanings (Franke 1).

Working again with the joined perspectives from theology, philosophy and poetics, I am seeking to further clarify more the relations between angels, apophatic discourse and the referentiality of poetic language within the limits of their twentieth-century configurations. In a similar way to my approach in the previous chapter, my scope will be to unravel the motifs and themes of a poetics of in-betweenness in relation to the angels’ apophatic functions. My approach to the theoretical background will
change here, however, due to the extreme diversity of significances of apophasis itself, on
the one hand, and of the angels’ apophatic functions, on the other hand. Therefore,
instead of looking at the theological, philosophical, etc., perspectives on this matter
separately, I will focus on the different significances of absence and apophasis such as
they were conceptualized in theology, philosophy and poetics. This different structure of
the argument was dictated mainly by some inconsistencies that I found in various
formulations on the topics of presence and absence themselves and which therefore
needed thorough clarification before any serious re-conceptualization could be possible.
With this multi-layered and plurisemic perspective on the notions of absence and
apophasis, I seek to re-discuss the so-called polarity between presence and absence as
well as to counter some of the criticisms brought to the negative way as a positive way in
disguise. The main point will be to see the ways in which the aesthetic space of excessive
absence can become meaningful and significant in itself, without turning into presence.

My theoretical preamble in this chapter will consist of three main parts: a very
brief summary of the various significances of apophasis, the definitions of the angels’
apophatic functions and their relations with the reinterpretation of representation and
sense, and finally a discussion on how the angel, as a figure of excessive absence, can
open up the possibilities of a third way of representation. From these preliminary
theoretical considerations, I will proceed to the analysis of literary texts, following the
apophatic itinerary in Elie Wiesel’s Les portes de la forêt and discussing the language of
ascesis in Rafael Alberti’s Sobre los ángeles.

The Meanings of Apophasis and Absence.
In terms of excessive absence, the problem of representation becomes, in twentieth-century philosophy and poetics, the attempt to extricate the negative way as a mode of discourse from the phenomenology of presence, as well as to understand the ways in which this space/discourse can become significant in its own terms. In the first case, I am referring specifically to Derrida’s deconstruction of apophatic discourse and to his subsequent poetics of deferral of meaning as a manner to counter the shortcomings of the negative way, such as it was elaborated by Dionysius the Areopagite. In the second case, I am referring both, in more general terms, to the crisis of sense underscoring the whole of twentieth-century philosophy and poetics and, more specifically, to the recent developments of a poetics of absence such as we can find in the works of Giorgio Agamben, Franco Rella or Jean-Luc Nancy. As I was showing in the first chapter, the phenomenology of excess is for Derrida and the whole post-structuralist thought, “a metaphysics of radical separation and exteriority” which will have to be played out in a language that can gesture towards this exteriority only by continually undoing itself. This poetics of denial, of the impossibility of attaining sense has recognizable (and avowed) roots in apophatic thought. In the following, I will attempt to summarize the main definitions of apophasis coming from theological discourse in parallel with the reformulations of Derrida, Nancy and Marion, in order to actualize all the main significances of the concept of apophasis and see the ways in which they can refine and expand our understanding of the referential vacuity of poetic language. It will be of course impossible to account for the great richness of apophatic thinking from its origins to the present day in the limits of this thesis. What I will offer in this section is a summary of the main meanings of apophasis that I synthesized from my own readings of
apophatic thinkers: 1) The inadequacy between language and God (God exceeds language and is therefore inexpressible); 2) According to the essence of God: God is infinite and unknowable (this one is akin to the first one but it more clearly makes incognoscibility the attribute of God and not a lack of our capacity of transcendence); 3) As a taboo of revelation: it is not allowed or possible to put into words the experience of revelation; 4) As an emptying of presence or kenosis; 5) As the experience of the “desert”, or night as a necessary stage on the mystical itinerary. Since either one, or the other of these definitions will inform the poetics excessive absence in the texts that I will analyze, I believe it is best to see their similarities and differences because not all the meanings of apophasis are played out on the premise of the impossibility to know God and of his radical exteriority (which is the fundamental assumption in Derrida and Nancy).

The main significance of apophasis is the one that refers to the inexpressibility of God in language: “the superessential Illimitability is placed above things essential, and the Unity above mind above the Minds; and the One above conception is inconceivable to all conceptions; and the Good above word is unutterable by word…” (The Areopagite 2). This idea has guided and informed all the subsequent formulations on the matter by mystical theologians. This is also the significance that has influenced to the largest extent deconstructive poetics. The main assumption that lies at the core of Derrida’s negative poetics is the following: “It is only in God that speech, as presence, as the origin and horizon of writing is realized without defect” (Derrida, Levinas 112). By stating that, Derrida clearly points to the impossibility of achieving presence/immediacy while in language because language is infinitely removed from God: “the dissymmetry that exists
between the divine regard that sees me, and myself, who doesn’t see what is looking at me” (Derrida, 2005: 55-56). In Derrida’s reinterpretation, however, apophatic discourse is trapped in an indissoluble paradox by which, plainly stating, it affirms its incapacity of referring to its point of reference (God) while, at the same time, not doing anything else but referring to it; for this reason, unless it defers indeterminately its arrival at, and exceeding of the limit, it will be nothing else but a kataphasis in disguise:

In principle, the apophatic movement of discourse would have to retraverse all the stages of symbolic theology and positive predication. It would thus be coextensive with it, confined to the same quantity of discourse. In itself interminable, the apophatic movement cannot contain within itself the principle of its interruption. It can only indefinitely defer the encounter with its own limit” (Derrida, 1992: 81).

In Marion’s opinion, however, Derrida’s criticism is misguided because:

Non only […] does Dionysius not isolate a ‘negative theology’ as such, but he is employing apophasis only by including it in a system comprising not two, but three [my italics] moments: […] “because the perfect and unified Requisite of all things is above all thesis […] as well as above all negation, […] it is that which surpasses the total suppression of all things and that which exists beyond their totality”. […] The game is not played then between two terms, but among three, different and irreducible to one another (Marion, 2001: 163).

There appears to be a gap, a surplus of meaning between what these two authors are affirming; this ‘non-congruence’ is what informs, I believe, the concomitance of sameness and difference between two diverse ways of understanding apophasis. This problem will be better understood if we think of apophasis in relation to the idea of excess. In this light, it becomes evident that, on the one hand, apophasis can be defined as a mode of speaking about that which absolutely exceeds this speech while, at the same time, indicating this différence (which radically distinguishes it from kataphatic discourse
and the ‘metaphysics of presence’). On the other hand, however, apophasis is already a mode given in excess of something else (of the affirmative way, for instance), it is already beyond or outside a certain (another) limit. Therefore, in terms of excess, we will have to reckon that apophasis can be identified with (at least) two completely diverse movements: 1) the avowal of the exceeding absence of God; 2) a discursive mode which best defines itself as an excess of the limits of representation - “It says something of the end of discourse itself and is an address to the friend, the extremity of the envoi, the hail, the farewell” (Derrida, 2005: 41). Thus, while apophasis is about the exceeding absence of God, its discursive mode, its how, is the testing of the limits of discourse. In this light, my question is, when Derrida states that apophatic discourse is defined as “passing to the limit, then crossing a frontier”, to which of these two different limits is he referring? To the passing of the limit to God (à Dieu), or to the exceeding of the limits of representation? It would be useful to remember here Sohravardi’s recital of “The Crimson Angel”. If we were to analyze that text from the perspective of excessive absence, we would find (again) two completely different ways of defining absence: first of all, there was this blindness to the imaginal which, once removed, was becoming the awareness of the world as representation, or mere shadow; secondly, towards the end of the recital, the angel mentions a stage in the mystical itinerary which is the experience of complete absence of light, of utter darkness and which immediately precedes, not the revelation of the face of God, but the coming to life of an angelic state of being. The first stage corresponds to the derivative and imitational nature of earthly reality. The second one corresponds to the rarefied realm of God, to the mystical experience of Him as absence. Therefore, what I would like to suggest is that, by incorporating two different
movements of exceeding absence, apophasis does not really contradict itself: its “passing of the limit” only refers to its involvement with the limits of language and of representation and not to its entrance in the sphere of God. As such, apophasis cannot be an affirmative way in disguise. Other meanings and interpretations of the referential domain of apophasis as well as of its discursive mode of being will further elucidate this matter.

Apophatic thought has many other definitions of absence besides the impossibility to express God or His names in language. The whole apophatic enterprise resides on the premise of God’s exceeding absence, not only in relation to the world as representation but also in relation to His own substance. This is how the theme of excessive absence appears in Clement of Alexandria:

Hence some have called it the Depth, as containing and embosoming all things, inaccessible and boundless.

[…]

For the one is indivisible; wherefore also it is infinite, not considered with reference to inscrutability, but with reference to its being without dimensions, and not having a limit. And therefore it is without form and name (Clement of Alexandria 138-139).

This aspect of the illimitability of God (of this excessive presence which, because it exceeds representation, is unrepresentable and invisible) becomes apparent, in Gregory of Nyssa’s thought, on the mystic’s itinerary outside the world of the senses, much like in the Sohravardian recital: “Scripture teaches by this that religious knowledge comes at first to those who received it as light. […] But as the mind progresses and, through an ever greater and more perfect diligence, comes to apprehend reality, as it approaches more nearly to contemplation, it sees more clearly what of the divine nature is uncontemplated” (Gregory of Nyssa 142). This interplay of light and darkness, visibility
and invisibility is a recurrent motif in the writings of apophatic mystics. This shows that presence and absence, although very different in terms of the attempts to speak or not speak about God, are both equally important in delineating the limits of the discourse about God. The one who expressed this idea best is Henry Corbin, in his reprise of Iranian mysticism:

Majesty (i.e. rigor, inaccessible sublimity) and Beauty (fascination, attraction, graciousness): these are the two great categories of attributes which refer respectively to the divine Being as Deus absconditus and as Deus revelatus, Beauty being the supreme theophany, divine self-revelation. In fact they are inseparable and there is a constant interplay between the inaccessible Majesty of Beauty and the fascinating Beauty of inaccessible Majesty (Corbin, 1978: 103).

Therefore, when starting from the premise of these two attributes of God, one already affirms the incapacity to ever reach this excess and cannot affirm anything but this impossibility; moreover, as we can see from the above-quoted paragraph, absence, the majestic attribute of God, cannot be collapsed into presence because this absence can never come into presence, it is absence pure and simple. Dionysius the Areopagite made this distinction even more clearly: God is revealed through His works in the world, yet He remains inaccessible and unattainable in terms of His essence (the “hidden treasure”). It is this inaccessibility of the essence of God that is the ultimate referent of apophatic theology. Therefore, apophatic theology is always a double negation and a double excess: it is the discursive negation of the possibility to access God, as well as the reference to the exceeding absence of God, without ever denying the possibility and legitimacy of kataphasis, however. The union between the two types of negation can become effective only when discourse itself has become this absence, for instance in the injunction “noli
me tangere” which accompanies the revelation of Jesus’ angelic body to Mary Magdalene:

if Jesus says that he is going ‘toward the Father,’ this means that he is leaving, absolutely: the ‘father’ […] is none other than the absent and the removed, precisely the opposite of ‘my brethren’, those present, those whom the woman can and must go find. He is departing for the absent, for the distant: he is going absent [il s’absente]; he is withdrawing into this dimension from which alone comes glory; that is, the brilliance of more than presence, the radiance of what is in excess of the given, the available, the disposed” (Nancy, 2008: 17).

Thus, apophatic discourse can reach beyond the limit à Dieu only when it has acquired intangibility, that is, outside life. The only way in which apophatic discourse could become a metaphysics of presence would be if it usurped and mimicked this intangibility, in the sense of its incommunicability to the others, ‘the brethren’. In fact, as Derrida beautifully explains, the whole paradox of the referentiality of apophatic discourse is resolved in the idea that the actual speech act is a con-fession, a sharing of a secret:

To what mode does this discourse belong, then, both that of Dionysius and that which I hold about him? Must it not necessarily keep to the place, which cannot be an indivisible point, where the two modes cross – such that, properly speaking, the crossing itself, or the symploke, belongs to neither of the two modes and doubtless precedes their distribution? At the intersection of the secret and of the non-secret, what is the secret? At the crossing point of these two languages, each of which bears the silence of the other, a secret must and must not allow itself to be divulged. It can and it cannot do this. One must not divulge, but it is necessary to make known or rather allow to be known this ‘it is necessary’, ‘one must not’ or ‘it is necessary not to’ (Derrida, 1992: 94).

This concomitance of affirming the secret and, at the same time, undoing, denying this affirmation – with the possibility that there is always a surplus, something that exceeds both the saying and the unsaying - is the proper space-between of apophasis. This place is
very similar to Marin’s neuter which I was further explaining as pre-determining both the affirmative and the negative axes of discourse since ‘it precedes their distribution’ as Derrida puts it. With this understanding, we are reaching another significance of apophasis, namely its sense of a taboo of revelation, a secret that must be kept at all costs. This idea also appears in Dionysius the Areopagite’s Divine Names as well as repeatedly at the end of all of Sohravardi’s recitals. For the apophatic mystics, the experience of revelation remains a secret also because of the non-congruity between language and the imaginal world of revelation: “Once a man has purified his heart, so that he may perchance see the Lord’s beatitude fulfilled, he will then despise all human utterance as absolutely incapable of expressing what he has experienced” (Gregory of Nyssa 145).

This brings us to another one of the significances of apophasis: kenosis, the emptying or silencing of the self, the attempt to experience this void of representation of the hidden God:

You should love God unspiritually, that is, your soul should be unspiritual and stripped of all spirituality, for so long as your soul has a spirit’s form, it has images, and so long as it has images, it has a medium, and so long as it has a medium, it has not unity or simplicity (Meister Eckhart 296).

For union with God, the soul has to be stripped of all representations. Images and intelligible concepts alike must be surrendered. [...] It is necessary for the soul to abide in utter darkness and emptiness of everything, without sight or feeling. This state of union is defined by Juan⁶⁶ as a night of faith in which the soul empties itself completely in order to unite with God (Franke 365).

This discourse is clearly very different from the iconographic presupposition of the revelation of the face of God. It indicates its move in an a-priori of representation, in a domain preceding images and representation. It is the mystics’ via negativa, the “dark
night of the soul” which has to be experienced in order to attain the proper capacity for the “union with God”. As can be noticed, this understanding of apophasis does not so much negate the possibility of access to God but rather, while starting from the premise of His exceeding absence and hiddenness, as well as from the idea that language, images, etc., obstruct our access to Him (hence the double negation and excess), attempts to silence itself, to empty itself of the over-fullness of representation in order to be able to witness the unrepresentable: “It is in the emptiness or in the emptying out of presence that the light shines” (Nancy, 2008: 26). This sentence does not have any sense if we do not take into account this double aspect of negativity and positivity that I was defining earlier: the light could never ‘shine’ if the emptying out of presence had been the same as this light; here, Nancy employs ‘presence’ in order to refer to earthly life, to the world of the flesh – the world of representation: the light that shines after exceeding the limits of this world of presence is the light of the exceeding God. With this example from Nancy, it is easy to see how the criticism of the ‘metaphysics of presence’ is problematic because of the collapse of the boundaries between the two orders of representation that Cacciari was talking about: here, presence is employed to refer to what theologians consider that world of shadows and absence whereas full, unimpeded presence solely belongs to the realm of God. It is clear now that any discussion about presence or absence and their relation to representation would have to start from this preliminary distinction; otherwise, we risk perpetuating the same kind of confusion and, for instance, assign to the metaphysics of presence which is strictly related to the presence of God (in the world) the negative attributes of the (equally) all-encompassing presence of the world of representation.
Seen from the perspective of apophatic mysticism, the negative way is also an intermediary stage on the itinerary from the world of sensible to supra-sensible phenomena: between the moment of exit from the world of representation and the perception of the intangibility of God, of “the black light of Deus absconditus” (Corbin, 1978: 100). It is the aspect of revelation as infinite re-veiling of that secret, that ineluctable and irreducible surplus of meaning that remains, as Dionysius and Marion say, beyond presence and absence. In Sohravardi’s recital, this “dark night of the soul” represented the final and most daunting stage in the itinerary of revelation which, having undergone the experience of presence, of the beauty of the Face of God (as Gregory of Nyssa says, “religious knowledge comes first to those who received it as light”) is called to witness His majestic hypostasis. The angels intervene in crucial moments of this voyage and they are associated with several of the connotations of apophasis that I have discussed so far. As we can already infer from Rella’s definition, the intermediary space of apophasis has the same vocation with the intermediary world of the angels:

The voyage that takes us back to the ‘everywhere’ of the path that is allotted to man is a dangerous voyage, it is the crossing of a desert, of a sea full of monsters. But it is only in this voyage that we can reach that intermediary space, in which the ideas and images converge with the world of sensible phenomena and in which, as Corbin says, ‘everything that appears inanimate in our world comes to life’ (Rella, 1987: 120).

Angels and Excessive Absence.

From this perspective of the double significance of the via negativa, we can identify several main functions of angels: 1) Sharing, to a certain extent, our destiny of witnessing the incommensurability of God; 2) As the most accomplished models of apophasis as kenosis; 3) As guides of the mystics through the apophatic night; 4) As
veiling the Face of God, thus safeguarding His transcendence; 5) As (neutral) messengers of the inexpressibility of God. Dionysius the Areopagite says that the full revelation of God is inaccessible even to the angels, who, even if they may attain a higher degree of ‘union’ than man, are still removed from God and His essence:

…it is not possible either to express or to conceive what the One, the Unknown, the Super-Essential self-existing Good is, - I mean the threefold Unity, the alike God, and the alike Good. But even the unions, such as befit angels, of the holy Powers, whether we must call them efforts after, or receptions from, the super-Unknown and surpassing Goodness, are both unutterable and unknown and exist only in those angels who, above angelic knowledge, are deemed worthy of them. The godlike minds (men) made one by these unions, through imitation of angels as far as attainable (since it is during cessation of every mental energy that such an union as this of the deified minds towards the super-divine light takes place)… (Dionysius The Areopagite 8).

In this passage, there is the recognition of a certain affinity between angels and men, as they are both creatures of the interval, both of them “on their way to God” but still infinitely removed from Him: “All creatures would like to echo God in their works, but there is little indeed they can manifest. Even the highest angels, as they mount toward and touch God, are as unlike that which is in God as white is unlike black” (Meister Eckhart 292). However, Dionysius does not exclude the possibility of revelation through the ‘negative’ practice of “cessation of every mental energy”. In this respect, the angels achieve an essential role in acting as models, as horizons to be attained by the mystic on his way to God: “The human mind also, and not only the angelic, transcends itself, and by victory over the passions acquires an angelic form. It too will attain to that light and will become worthy of a supernatural vision of God, not seeing the divine essence, but seeing God by a revelation appropriate and analogous to Him” (Gregory Palamas 322). This light that appears at the end of the crossing of the desert is that black, majestic light
associated with the hidden face of God. The angel’s role in this stage is both as a model for the emptying of the self which makes possible the revelation of the absent aspect of God, and as a guide, the Iranian *dhikr*: “the capacity to perceive suprasensory lights is proportionate to the degree of polishing, chiefly the work of the *dhikr*, which brings the heart to the state of perfect mirror” (Corbin, 1978: 104). However, this is also the stage where the angels become ‘redundant’, their role as intercessors between men and God becomes obsolete because, as Leon Askenazi explains,

As we advance in our own ascension,\(^6\) this angel disappears. It is not him that God wanted to create, but me. Between the Creator and me, there is the project of the Creator for me. And, in order that I learn the will of God for me, I have to know my angel. And, once again, it is not a question of adoring this angel. This would signify adoring myself in the perfect hypostasis (Askenazi 215).

This passage summarizes very well this essential ambivalent function of the angels in terms of revelation - both revealing and veiling the Face of God. On the one hand, the angel appears as the horizon, the perfected image of man after the work of overcasting the material in excess has been accomplished; it is under this aspect that the angel reveals God. On the other hand, as the apophatic mystics were saying, after the reception of this first divine theophany of light, all images and representations must be removed: and this is where angels disappear too. It is because of this double aspect in the economy of revelation that the angels’ essential function is, as Corbin was explaining in *Le paradoxe du monothéisme*, that of safeguarding the transcendence of the transcendent One. The angels are thus those who draw our attention to this signifying absence of God:

God sees me, he looks into me in secret, but I don’t see him, I don’t see him looking at me, even though he looks at me while facing me and not, like an analyst, behind my back. Since I don’t see him looking at me, I can, and must, only hear him. But most often I have to be led to hear or believe him [on doit me le donner à entendre], I hear tell what he says, through the voice of another, another other, a messenger, an angel, a
prophet, a messiah or postman [facteur], a bearer of tidings, an evangelist, an intermediary who speaks between God and myself. God looks at me and I don’t see him and it is on the basis of this gaze that singles me out [ce regard qui me regarde] that my responsibility comes into being” (Derrida, 2008: 91).

The angel is thus that “another other” par excellence, his discursive status is always deictic, pointing to the absence that envelops and beholds the self. The similarity between the images that Derrida uses here in order to convey the absence of God and Cusa’s description of the all-seeing icon is striking and it incontrovertibly points to that non-visibility of excessive presence as well as to the fact that encompassing presence can only reveal itself as excessive absence. In this regard too, the angel’s domain is pre-representational, it is the locus of presentation, of epiphany: but even this epiphany is never the revelation of the hidden face of God. Therefore, we could say that angelophany is the very condition of veiling. As we can see from the writings of the apophatic thinkers on the majestic aspect of God, the angel does not point to a lack of presence but rather he is signaling absence as such, the absence and void that are at the heart of the substance of God:

The multiplicity of the ‘Pantheon’ renders God absent, and art appears where God is absent […] The sense that can expose itself only as fragment is not an absent sense comparable to the absence full of sense of God who does not cease, insofar as he is God, to be absent: it is the sense whose absence does not make sense, that is, it does not become absented presence but which consists entirely, so to speak, in the absence as presentation or in the fragmentation of presence (Nancy, 1993: 200-201).

These notions of “the absence as presentation” or of “the fragmentation of presence” are fundamental for understanding the movements of twentieth-century aesthetics of finitude and excessive absence. In this context, the angel’s enduring
presence is not necessarily a paradox but the normal corollary of this constant effort of apophasis that informs so many of twentieth-century artistic works. In those works in which the angel is invoked in tandem with the theme of excessive absence, he comes to transfigure the effort of language of undoing itself, as if in an attempt to achieve that transparency which is the accomplishment of kenosis as the elimination of the material in excess.

The Negative Way as a Third Way of Representation.

From these theological and philosophical takes on the functions of angels in relation to apophasis and to the revelation of the excessive absence of God, we can already infer that, in this case too, the place of the angels is an intermediary one, either because it is located at the point of juncture of two “excesses” (beyond the limits of representation and before the veiled face of God), or because it lies “at the intersection of the secret and not-secret”, always sheltering the possibility of a reminder. The angels, thus, exceed representation in (at least) three ways: 1) as place of the neuter, they are at once the trigger for the inception of discourse as well as the trace of an ineluctable reminder; 2) as indicators of absence as such, they invite to the contemplation of a space where images and representations (including themselves) are no longer necessary or possible; 3) as (necessary) partakers of the kenotic purging of discourse, they reveal that “another other” beyond all dichotomous thought: “Does not the invisibility of God belong to another play, to an approach that does not polarize into a subject-object correlation but is deployed as a drama with several personages?” (Lévinas, 1987: 62).
In the episode of the Resurrection, the angel had the primordial function of undoing the “statement” of the excessively absent tomb image not necessarily by a negation, but by a mutation in the sphere of the narrative: as Marin was saying, henceforth, the only way of unraveling the affirmation or presentation of absence is through the transference into the domain of the narrative. The angel is the one who makes possible this transfer, through his conjunction of epiphanic and historical axes. The angel’s statement is more of a promise, the pointing to that space of the reminder wherein another encounter takes place: the negativity of discourse and the negativity of presence (Jesus is gone to the Father):

neither regeneration, reanimation, palingenesis, rebirth, revivification, nor reincarnation: but the uprising, the raising or the lifting as a verticality perpendicular to the horizontality of the tomb – not leaving it, not reducing it to nothingness but affirming in it the stance (thus also the reserve, restraint) of an untouchable, an inaccessible” (Nancy, 2008: 18). In this perfect example of dénégation, Nancy deliberately rejected all the verbs bearing the prefix “re-” in order to point to the fact that this episode is, on the one hand, completely outside the limits of representation, but also to show that the angel’s affirmation should not be confused with a reversal of death into rebirth: what is affirmed, what remains is this very absence and intangibility. Since the angel is the one who transmits the affirmation of this reminder of exceeding absence, he also acts as a neutral stance that promises re-union only by passing through the empty tomb. His place is neutral precisely because he bespeaks the possibility of re-union only through this kenotic emptying of the self, through the aphaeresis of all images and representations. To Franco Rella, neutrality signifies “that which is neither I nor you, neither the one, nor the other, but that supersedes both, thus cancelling all value” (Rella, 1987: 117).
By positing this ineluctable *reminder*, governed by the relation of the type “neither, nor”, contemporary phenomenology re-emphasizes the poetics of the void which is at the heart of apophatic discourse and opens up the space of excessive absence as an *a-representational* mode. As Marion clearly explains, the negative way is neither the affirmation nor the negation of the affirmation, but something that exceeds both, a “third way”, such as the *docta ignorantia* of Nicholas of Cusa:

“And there is nothing to be found in pursuing negative theology [secundum theologiam negationis] but infinity”; this infinity itself does not revert into affirmation by means of negation, but it extracts and perceives the divine truth as the experience of incomprehensibility – […] . There is no longer the case, here, of a hypostasized apophasis, but of a third position, the only one considered from the beginning. “And such is the *docta ignorantia* that we are seeking” (Marion, 2001: 164).

It is this unlearning, this emptying of all images and representations that the angel’s *poiesis* reveals. For Marion, this process takes the shape of subverting the nominative function of language by means of *dénomination*; once again, the stakes of the undoing of language are placed in the name:

It is no longer a question of naming Him, neither of not naming Him, but of *de-naming* Him. In the double meaning that the term could have: naming (naming for the purpose of..., ‘nominating’) [...] and also disentangling Him of all nomination [...]. The de-nomination carries, in its ambiguity, the double function of saying (affirming negatively) and of undoing this saying of the name. It is a *parole* that no longer says something about something (neither a name of someone), but that denies all pertinence to predication, it denies the nominative function of names and suspends the empire of the two values of truth. Dionysius indicates this new pragmatic function of language, which refers to the one who surpasses all nomination, by assigning it the title of *aitia*[^68] [...] The *aitia* does not name God, it de-names him by separating itself from the predicative function of language, in order to move to its strictly pragmatic function – referring the names and their speakers to the unattainable addressee, beyond all name and all denegation of the name (Marion, 2001: 167-168).
This passage implies the idea that I was talking about earlier, on the double movement of excess that apophatic discourse enacts: on the one hand, it is a question of surpassing all nomination and of cancelling the two values of truth, and on the other of referring all discourse to the exceeding God. What is interesting is that it would seem that by the very capacity of discourse of turning in on itself, of undoing all nomination, the reference to a radical exteriority is already given.

Poetic language is what comes closest to this radical act of transference and emptying which, according to Simone Weil, is the only one capable of bringing us, through imitatio angelica, in the proximity of the incommensurability and infinity of God: “The extinction of desire (Buddhism) – or detachment – or the amor fati – or the desire of absolute good, are always the same thing: emptying desire, the finality of all content, to desire nothing, to desire without wish (Weil 15). This notion that the emptying of intentionality is very much akin to “the finality of all content” is an idea I have already discussed in relation to the writings of Derrida and Levinas. One of the pragmatic ways in which poetic language best expresses this relation is through its conspicuous non-intentionality. This is the punctum caecum of poetic language and it has been understood and interpreted in various different ways, either as absolute aestheticism, or as lack of referentiality, zero degree of writing, etc. The fact remains that it is very difficult to label this phenomenon since this is the movement that most closely resembles that reminder or surplus, at the crossing between “phenomenon” and “enigma”. Through its non-intentionality, poetic language achieves a sort of lightness (one comparable to the state of a sculpture after all the material in excess has been removed), which most closely resembles the angelic state of being:
But although humans have no wings, as Claudel writes in *Positions et propositions*, there is enough strength to fall. That is, they have the weight (PENSUM) of thinking (PENSARE). Instead, the Angel possesses only the lightness of unrepeatable and unthought knowledge. The closest that humans come to such a state of being is through the unbearable empty truth of the poetic sign (Colilli, 1999: 531-532).

This truth of the emptiness of the poetic sign is no longer understood, in terms of apophatic thinking (both old and new), as a lack of something, a lack of referentiality which then collapses in the idea of the self-referentiality of poetic language. The void that the poetic sign opens should be seen as the (implicit) reference to that excessive absence of God which is translated (at best) through the capacity of language to undo itself, to relinquish all nomination and predication. It is in this opening up of the infinite space of excessive absence which the angel both guides and points to, that Jean-Luc Nancy finds the potentiality of attaining a new sense:

The very growing of the desert could unveil an unknown space, an unknown aridity, excessive, of the sources of sense. End of sources, beginning of the dry excess of sense. Maybe nothing will grow other than this aridity, and this is what will carry us. […] No more *parousia*, in short, no more present sense, attested (*if there ever was one*), but a wholly different eschatology, another extremity, another excess of sense (Nancy, 1993: 44).

It is this “another excess of sense” which signifies, ultimately, the extinguishing of all desire of sense and the infinite fracturing and distancing of *parousia*, which is the fundamental orientation of the two texts I am about to discuss. On this apophatic background, both texts will offer different perspectives by which artistic discourse can becomes “productive” in the absence of sense. Once again, this supra-saturation of sense should not be seen as referring to the limits of signification of poetic language, but rather as its capacity of referring to *sense as absence* (i.e. the majestic aspect of God), as
something that absolutely exceeds each utterance. In Wiesel’s novel, the angel is the one who makes possible the narrativization/historicizing of this giving of sense as absence. In Alberti’s Sobre los ángeles, the angels enable the crossing of a space of poetic genesis which takes place on an apophatic itinerary of kenosis and remembering. In the first case, the apophatic mode is that of “sharing of a secret” which I have discussed in relation to Derrida’s writings as well as Marin’s “neuter” and “non-congruity”. In the second text, the dominant apophatic significance is that of kenosis. These texts are therefore quite revealing in terms of the ways in which artistic discourse can address the question of an (exceeding) sense as absence as well as re-discover its own limits and “beyonds” in the process. As each text expands the space-between of apophasis in an ample space of artistic signification, my analysis will attempt to address the relation between angels, artistic sense as exceeding absence and the space-between as exhaustively as possible.

There are, of course, many other possibilities of investigation and analysis in the field but, for the present study, my discussion of Wiesel and Alberti’s engagement with apophatic discourse will provide sufficient examples of the ways in which the questions of angelophany and absence can become relevant for the study of artistic discourse.

**Angels and Excessive Absence in Literature.**

**The Dark Wing of Gavriel. Apophasis and Alterity in Wiesel’s Les portes de la forêt.**

In one of his lectures on the status and role of the post-Holocaust writer, Elie Wiesel affirmed that: “Now he has to remember the past, knowing all the while that what he has to say will never be told. What he hopes to transmit can never be transmitted. All he can possibly hope to achieve is to communicate the impossibility of communication”
(Wiesel 1990: 8). These words mirror, almost to the letter, the fundamental assumption underlying contemporary apophatic phenomenology, such as we have seen it in the writings of Derrida, Nancy or Marion. They also inscribe the author in the pervasive post-World War II Weltanschauung of trauma and impossibility. They are the words of one who, having undergone the experience of the exceeding absence of God from the world, has identified himself with, and put his writing in the service of the phenomenology of constituted witnesses. What differentiates Wiesel from the majority of twentieth-century writers whose works are permeated by the themes of nothingness, death, finitude, etc., is the conscientious engagement with the Jewish (and not only) mystical traditions on the absence of God, as well as his attempt to translate this experience not only into a discourse about absence but into a discourse that incarnates this excessive absence:

To the careful reader, Wiesel struggles in all of his work to convey to his audience that the radical negativity of the Shoah irreparably ruptures language, rendering discursive thought woefully inexpedient. To convey a very real sense of this crisis of representation and interpretation, Wiesel in his essays often uses the direct means of stating in no uncertain terms that words fail in post-Holocaust discourse (Bussie 131).

Much as his artistic effort is in response to the tragedy, colossal absurdity and absolute evil of the Holocaust, Wiesel’s concern is fundamentally a theological one, at all times directed at deploying the several folds of the absence of God in and through language. For Wiesel, the experience of a world seemingly forgotten and abandoned by God does not necessarily condemn humanity, but rather opens the self to the experience of the other (very much in the way Marion, Ricoeur or Levinas were envisaging the problem of alterity). This radically new experience of the other, of living as another is
one of the key-motifs lying at the core of Wiesel’s re-conceptualization of artistic discourse.

Published in 1964, Wiesel’s *Les portes de la forêt* is one of the author’s most elaborate attempts at incorporating the experience of abandonment in discourse. Not coincidentally, the whole work of the undoing of discourse towards and into its radical exteriority gravitates around an angelic figure, Gavriel, who is both the bearer of the message of the absence of God from the world, as well as the model and example to follow in this disenchantment of the world of representation. Beyond silence, maniacal laughter, lying and story-telling, there is always the mystery of the experience of oneself as another, the most consummate experience of excess:

Just like the spatial form of a human being’s outward existence, the aesthetically valid *temporal* form of his inner life develops from the *excess* inherent in my temporal seeing of another soul – from an excess which contains in itself all the moments that enter into the transgressed consummation of the whole of another’s inner life. What constitutes these transgressed moments, i.e., moments that exceed self-consciousness and consummate it, are the outer *boundaries* of inner life – the point where inner life is turned *outward* and ceases to be active out of itself (Bakhtin, 1990:103).

Precisely such an overwhelming of the boundaries of self-interiority into the interiority of the other is enacted through the angel’s presence in Wiesel’s novel. As we have already seen in the previous two chapters, one of the angels’ essential functions is that of acting as guides and doubles orienting man toward this utter exteriority, outside the limits of the senses as well as of “the boundaries of inner life”. I was already referring, earlier, to Pleșu plastic description of angels as a sort of “enveloping interiority” (in *On Angels*); in the same context, Pleșu was also using the analogy of the *mandorla* in order to express this idea even more precisely: for him, the *mandorla* literally represents the notion that
man’s interiority (soul, angel, etc.) is not located anywhere inside the body, but it
envelops him like a superior self, like a methorios that has yet to be reached. The novel
idea that Bakhtin’s insight is bringing to the discussion is that the dialogue with the
exterior other radically transforms the movements of interior life: once the dialogue has
commenced, the self will abandon the Narcissistic or Luciféric contemplation of itself
and will live only through this acquiescence and recognition of the other.

Wiesel is thoroughly submitting the main character of Les portes de la forêt to all
the stages involved in the metamorphosis of the self through the lived experience of the
other. The “other” is the angel, that most radical stranger whom Michel de Certeau was
defining as the “shadow which comes from afar, the advent of an unnamable origin in a
fleeting sign” (de Certeau, 1984: 117). The angel’s advent in language, within the limits
of representation, is the indication of that absolute mystery and secrecy lying beyond all
discourses, be they affirmative or negative (or both). Through this double instantiation of
otherness (the other of the self and the other of everything that has a name), the figure of
Gavriel enacts in Wiesel’s novel that connection between language and destiny that we
have already seen in Benjamin’s “Agesilaus Santander”. The great difference is that this
reunion is first given as a fracture and it is reinstated in the end only to find another
sense, a sense akin to the liturgy of attending at the celebration of the invisible God that
envisages me only within a community, which we have seen as the last stage of Cusa’s
Preface. It is also the sense of having to live without a sense, that excessive aridity that
Nancy was defining as “the sense of the world”. In the following pages, I will look at this
double particularity of the presence of the angelic figure in Wiesel’s novel in order define
the traits of the via negativa such as it is incorporated in a discourse which always points
its move to the peripheral regions of language. My reading will highlight the four main strategies of exceeding the limits of representation deployed in the novel – *de-naming*, alterity, secrecy and joy – in parallel with the angelic semiosis in order to define Wiesel’s highly particular and semantically rich reinterpretation of the absence of God from language and from the world. My intention is to highlight the trajectories towards the *tertium datur* of representation that are shaped in the aftermath of the angel’s disruption and disenchantment of the world of representation.

The novel is structured in four main parts according to the seasons of the year: the first three parts – spring, summer, autumn – are the chronological development of the dramatic events in the hero’s life after his whole family had been deported. The last section – winter – represents a moment in the distant future, in an indefinite time after the war. At the time when the narration begins, the main character, Gregor/Gavriel, 17 years of age, has been separated from his whole family and forced to hide in a cave in the mountains, due to the deportation of the Jews from Eastern Europe. He comes from a village in Hungary, very close to the border with Romania. When the novel starts, we find Gregor waiting for his father in a cave, deep in the forest, having lost count of days and hours. It is in the moment when he almost goes mad with fear and loneliness that a man, a Jew like himself, makes his presence felt nearby his hiding place. This man, nameless and laughing maniacally, shocks and bewilders Gregor at first. Gradually, Gregor becomes enticed by the man’s sad accounts of the massacre of men and children, hopeless prophets and lost Messiahs and of the ineluctable guilt of a God who seems to have abandoned His people. When the two meet, Gregor admits that he is not using his true, Jewish name so that he won’t be recognized. Learning that the man does not have a
name or rather, that he had lost it, Gregor decides to offer him his actual Jewish name, Gavriel. After a while, as their food resources draw to an end, the man decides to go to the nearby village and ask the people for food. Although this gesture keeps them from starvation for a little longer, the villagers denounce the presence of an intruder to the local authorities. Consequently, the Hungarian police are quick to begin searching the mountain for the hiding Jew. As the police draw closer, Gregor entreats Gavriel to leave the cave with him and run away under the cover of the night. However, Gavriel has another plan. Just when the police are about to find the entrance to the cave, Gavriel walks out in the open and surrenders himself, thus saving Gregor’s life (since the police were looking for just one Jew). Left with this unexpected and larger than life gift, Gregor eventually decides to run away and cross the border to Romania, where his family’s former servant, Maria, had her house. What follows is a whole itinerary of exceeding absence during which Gregor will experience suffering in the form of silence in the village of Maria, the loss of his best friend, the re-encounter and remembering and the final letting go of the self in the joyful dancing of the hassidim.

In the last part of the novel, we find Gregor at a Jewish celebration taking place in New York, after the end of the war. We learn that in the meantime he had married Clara but the ghost of Lieb had never quite left them. Most disconsolate and embittered, Gregor comes to this meeting of the hassidim to find the answer to his unanswered questions, in a last attempt to repair the damage that had been done to his life. In a dialogue with the Rabbi, he openly accuses God for his absence as well as for having allowed the atrocities of the Holocaust to take place. As he is about to completely relinquish all hope for sense, he suddenly perceives a man in the crowd whose
appearance reminds him of Gavriel, the man who had sacrificed his life for him and whom he had been searching for ever since. Distant and retained, the man does not confirm his expectations, nor does he deny them. Instead, he accepts to listen for a long time to Gregor’s life narrative which culminates in the avowal of the loss of his true name – Gavriel. It is then that the stranger asks Gregor whether he is ready to have his true, Jewish name back. After this, Gregor falls asleep and, when he wakes up, he cannot find the stranger anywhere. However, reconciled with his name and with himself, he is now ready to participate in the prayers and joyful dancing of the hassidim and decides to return to his wife.

As we can already notice from the summary of the plot, the whole narrative gravitates around Gavriel, whose presence both triggers the beginning of Gregor’s story as well as makes possible its ending. For a writer so conscientiously engaged with mystical matters as Wiesel, the name of Gavriel is surely not coincidental and it already suggests an angelic reference. It is also worthwhile noting that in most of Wiesel’s novels there is almost always such an angelic figure who acts as a guide, alter-ego etc. to the main character. Although he constantly intersperses allusions to the angelic nature of his character, Wiesel prefers to retain the ambivalence of his status, to blur the line between the human and the angelic (this deliberate confusion is also in line with the Old Testament accounts of angels where, as Daniélou explains, angels were called ‘men’ and sometimes even God was called an angel or a man):

- It is the name of an angel, said Gregor whispering. He is called Gavriel. The stranger gave a little sad laugh:
- Do you know what it signifies? The man of God. Funny name, don’t you find? Thus we learn that those whom we call angels are nothing else but men.\textsuperscript{70} (Wiesel, 1964: 20).

In Wiesel’s text, the configuration of the angel is in clear relation with these particular Old Testament description of angels as men; the subtext of this description is the revealing function of angels that I was referring to in the previous chapter, as a hypostasis of the Face of God. Here it will be the revelation of the majestic aspect of God, of God’s absence as His substance. At the moment of his encounter with Gregor, Gavriel is just as disconsolate and dejected as his companion; his bitterness and lack of confidence in humanity and in God are expressed in a maniacal laughter that horrifies Gregor:

- We should not forget laughter either. Do you know what laughter is? I will tell you. It is the error of God. By creating man in order to submit him to his purposes, God gave him by mistake the faculty of laughter. He didn’t know that later this earth worm would use it as a means of revenge. When he realized it, it was too late, there was nothing to be done. Too late to take this power away from man. But he tried to, nevertheless. He chased him out of paradise, invented for him an infinite variety of sins and punishments, gave him the conscience of his own nothingness and all that in order to prevent him from laughing. Too late, I’m telling you. The mistake of God preceded that of man: what they have in common is that they are both irreparable
And as if in illustration of his words, he laughed with such a passion, that Gregor had to cover his ears so that he wouldn’t start yelling.\textsuperscript{71} (Wiesel, 1964: 29).

This blasphemous, despising angel does not so much accuse God for his absence from the world, but is there in order to point to an original sin that had produced an \textit{irreparable} fracture between man and God. For the character in Wiesel’s novel, laughter is that surplus left by mistake in the scheme of representation, the one attribute that man has in order to escape the intricate web in which human destiny and the demonic have become imbricated. In this respect, Gavriel has many affinities with Sohravardi’s \textit{Crimson Angel}
(the Islamic Gibreel) who was also beginning his recital by pointing to the shadowy nature of earthly appearance. Like the Crismon Angel, Gavriel is also coming from “the land of nowhere”: “Where are you coming from? asked Gregor. From over there. Where exactly is this ‘over there’? There, I’m telling you. Everywhere. On the other side” (Wiesel, 1964: 16). Like Gibreel, he is also a creature made of lights and shadows appearing both, as we have already seen, in an all too human instantiation, and bearing the attributes of the angelic realm: “his voice with an unreal accent came from another world” (Wiesel, 1964: 18); “death has no power over me” (Wiesel, 1964: 44), he declares to Gregor shortly before surrendering himself to the hands of the Hungarian police. The first time Gregor becomes aware of his presence, he does so through hearing, not sight:

The steps were approaching. The rustling became clearer (Wiesel, 1964: 12). […] Then, for the first time, he heard the laughter. A shudder went all over him. He felt the earth slipping under his feet. Behind every tree and every strip of clouds there was somebody who was laughing. It wasn’t the laughter of a single man, but of a hundred, of seven times seven hundred (Wiesel, 1964: 14).75

This association between laughter and excessive absence propagating itself ad infinitum, in tricking replicas which do not allow for the recognition of an origin (the loss of the symbolic relation between words and ideas) is also the mark of the beginnings of the “dark night of the soul”:

The theme of the voice is connected to that of the night. […] The secrets Gavriel possesses are disclosed only in the dark, which stimulates him and which he peoples with images and memories. […] Listening in amazement to the poisoned words of the messenger, Gregor is unable to grasp their significance. All he knows is that a cruel and foreign universe exists outside of the cave “in which things and events must have a secret meaning, a secret bond, impossible to understand, a warped meaning, a warped bond” (Fine 86-87).
With Gavriel’s laughter, we are already in the sphere of the inexpressible and the irrepresentable. Whenever Gavriel laughs – at the tragedy of the Holocaust, at the loss of the promised Messiah, in the faces of the Hungarian guards – it is as if to superimpose on all these chronological events, a supra-determining order that can only be expressed through laughter in this world. Laughter is the echo and response to that secret of secrets wherein lies hidden the undoing of all names and non-names. Submitted to the experience of the sole unnamable trace of the tremendous mystery, Gregor cannot do anything else but tremble. It is this trembling that translates the confrontation with excessive absence, with the revelation of the world as excessive absence. In *The Gift of Death*, elaborating on Kierkegaard’s analyses in *Fear and Trembling*, Derrida envisaged the act of trembling precisely as the experience of this secret: “A secret always makes you tremble. Not simply quiver or shiver, which also happens sometimes, but tremble” (Derrida, 2008: 53). The emphasis on the verbal character of this act – *makes* – suggests the deployment of the specific phenomenology of saturated phenomena in which the subject drastically alters his subjectivity, transforming himself, from an independent, unbound agency into a *subjectified* entity, a “constituted witness”, to use Marion’s terminology. In Wiesel’s universe, the idea of witnessing is a fundamental one; for him, it is an actual genre, with its own specific traits which modify the whole deployment of perspective in the novel as well as the polarity between fiction and truth (as in the case of saturated phenomena, the condition of witnessing precedes any capacity of valuation, it resembles more that “instantaneous synthesis” that Marion was defining as the actual perceptual process taking place in the sphere of revelation). Trembling, as we have seen in the various
accounts on apophasis as the kenotic unveiling of the world of representation, is also the sign of the revelation of the absence inherent in what had previously been perceived as the exceeding presence of the world. In Wiesel’s novel, this parallel between the revelation of the excessive absence lying at the heart of “presence”\textsuperscript{77} and the encounter with the angel is made evident through the metaphor of the forest which has all the phantasmagorical attributes of earthly life:

As a child, he was afraid of the forest, even in broad daylight. He had been told that it sheltered wild wolves that will take your life, sanguinary beings which will steal your pride and evil creatures sent on earth in order to deter man from his route: they enslave your regard and dampen your enthusiasm. […] There’s no point trying to escape from this forest, it is everywhere; it is what separates man from the image that he creates of his destiny, of the death of this destiny. Who was it that opened your eyes, Gregor? He. Did it hurt? Yes and no\textsuperscript{78} (Wiesel, 1964: 12).

We are prisoners of this forest which, like a living being, holds its breath and, curious, advances and reclines listening carefully so as not to lose the slightest rustle, the slightest whisper: nothing must escape it, nothing can take place outside its embrace. We are prisoners of this madness\textsuperscript{79} (Wiesel, 1964: 129).

The forest contains the first dimension of apophasis enacted in Wiesel’s novel. It is, as the above quotations unambiguously suggest, the realization of the representational character of reality, as well as of the demonic significance of this mise en représentation. At the moment of the encounter with Gavriel, Gregor is temporarily located in an in-between place, in that cave which is almost a breech in the thick texture of the demoniac forest. Caves are also traditional places of recollection and ascesis for monks. It is their configuration, their concavity that turns upside down the process of perception and makes possible the return and awakening of the interior self. It is in this privileged place of
return, deserted and unencumbered by almost any sign of life, that the encounter with the angel as the radical other of the self can take place:

- That’s nothing, said Gavriel. Have no fear.
- Fear?
- In my hometown, they said that when your shadow leaves you, you will die in the following thirty days. It is coward, the shadow, it refuses to follow the body in the abyss. This explains why, in our world, there are more shadows than living beings.
- So, I will die in the next thirty days?
- I did not say that. I said: have no fear.
Gavriel leaned slightly towards his companion and added:
- I will be your shadow, I will protect you (Wiesel, 1964: 33).

With yet another allusion to Gavriel’s angelic nature – the injunction ‘have no fear’ – Wiesel is here preparing the grounds for the dénouement of Gregor and Gavriel’s encounter, as well as articulating the perimeters of the bond between the two characters: the whole scene is played out on the metaphor of the shadow, with all the implications of excessive visibility and invisibility it carries within. As long as Gavriel is present, Gregor’s shadow becomes invisible. By sacrificing his life in order to save Gregor, Gavriel restores him his imperiled shadow/soul. From this perspective, Wiesel constructs a highly complex angelic figure, inextricably linked to the human destiny and at the same time seemingly obeying another spatial and temporal law, irreducible to this very destiny for which it is made to fall. Even if there are constant hints to this saintly, divine dimension of Gavriel throughout the novel, Wiesel prefers to infinitely veil this aspect, highlighting only the somber, human aspect of this being. The “light wing” of Gavriel will become visible only gradually, incarnated in Gregor’s slow and painful kenosis. As in the case of Benjamin’s “Agesilaus Santander” this transfiguration of the self is possible not only through the bond of destiny (i.e. giving one’s life for another) but also
through a connection in the nominal dimension of being. As in Benjamin’s text, the angel is at the middle point of this reunion between name and destiny. While in this case too the name will have to be guarded, kept secret, hidden by the angel at first, the emphasis is laid on the loss of this relation:

- What is your name?
- I don’t have one.

Gregor could not hide his astonishment:
- Everybody has one, he said.
- Perhaps. But I have lost mine.

[...]
- Listen, I have an idea. I have no use for my name anymore. I am offering it to you, it is yours. Take it, Gavriel. [...]
- You like to give, don’t you?
- Yes, admitted Gregor. It’s easier.
- Not at all. Nothing is more difficult.

He added, as though for himself:
- For the Orientals, giving is a privilege that one has to deserve83 (Wiesel, 1964: 17-23).

This double gift of name and destiny opens the narrative in the excessive chiasmus that the gift of infinite love determines. The one receiving such an incommensurable gift, Gregor, attempts to palliate its effects by forebodingly giving his name in return for his life. But even this giving of the name could never measure itself to the gift of infinite goodness whose only mold is the exceeding void opened by death. It is from this surplus of gift that the inevitable economy of guilt arises, which is inherent even in the most responsible of characters:

Only infinite love can renounce itself and, in order to become finite, become incarnated in order to love the other, to love the other as a finite other. This gift of infinite love comes from someone and is addressed to someone; responsibility demands irreplaceable singularity. Yet only death or rather the apprehension of death can give this irreplaceability, and it is only on the basis of it that one can speak of a responsible subject, of the soul as conscience of the self, of myself, etc [...]. But the mortal thus deduced is someone whose very responsibility requires that he concern
himself not only with an objective God but with a gift of infinite love, a
goodness that is forgetful of itself. There is thus a structural disproportion
and dissymmetry between the finite and responsible mortal on the one
hand and the goodness of the infinite gift on the other hand. One can
conceive of this disproportion without assigning to it a revealed cause or
without tracing it back to the event of original sin, but it inevitably
transforms the experience of responsibility into one of guilt: I have never
been and will never be up to the level of this infinite goodness nor up to
the immensity of the gift, the frameless that must in general define (in-
define) a gift as such. This guilt is original, like original sin. Before any
fault is determined, I am guilty inasmuch as I am responsible (Derrida,
2008: 51).

Although the experience of the infinite gift of death is entirely necessary, it
remains bound up in this contamination of responsibility and guilt. By founding his
whole narrative on the premise of the angel’s gift of death, Wiesel sets his discourse in
the mode of denial (in the sense of dénégation): on the one hand, he is constructing a
responsible character, a “subjectified” subject, a constituted witness who can become so
only through the experience of the absolute absence of God; on the other hand, he
implicitly denies any possibility of achieving such a redemption due to the reminder of
guilt whose Gavriel self-abnegation necessarily bestows upon Gregor’s destiny. Indeed,
this guilt will never leave the character and the novel’s resolution is not a suspension of
guilt or a coming to terms with God’s absence but a way to make do with both of them.
Through his self-sacrifice, Gavriel is also presenting Gregor with the most consummate
example of kenosis, the completely selfless gift that can never be repaid. Although the
gift cannot be returned or repaid, it comes with an obligation of honor for Gregor to
follow the trajectories of this silencing of the self: “‘He emptied himself of his divinity’.
To empty oneself of the world. To refigure the nature of a slave. To reduce oneself to the
point that one occupies in space and time. To nothing. To undress oneself of the
imaginary kingdom of the world. Absolute solitude. It is then that one has the truth of the
world” (Weil 14).

The fact that this particular configuration of the via negativa goes hand in hand
with, this time, the divesting of name is indicative of Wiesel’s attempt at hinting at that
third way of the apophatic path that Marion defined based on his reading of Dionysius the
Areopagite:

De-naming does not become a ‘metaphysics of presence’ which would not
avow its name, but a theological pragmatics of absence – where the name
gives itself as without name, as not giving the essence and having, precisely,
nothing but this absence to make manifest, where listening is accomplished,
as Paul notices, “not only in my presence, but much more so in my absence”
(Philippians, 2, 12). […] Through a ‘theological pragmatics of absence’ we
will understand from now on not the non-presence of God, but the fact that
the name gives itself God, which gives God, which gives itself as God (all
of them going together, without confusing one with the other) has the
function to protect him – because weakness designates God at least as well
as power – from the presence and to give him just like in the way it excepts
him [from giving] (Marion, 2001: 187-188).

In Ibn Arabi’s cosmogony, angels are also called names (of God). Through Marion’s
explanation, we can intuit more clearly the relation between the necessity of angels as
hypostasized names of God and the preservation of His hidden, unrevealable aspect. This
is the background on which Wiesel’s Gavriel is created. In the economy of apophasis, the
divesting of the name has the function of a dénomination: it does not, apostatically, deny
the existence of God but protects His coming into presence. Through this connection
between the giving of name and destiny, Wiesel seems to be suggesting that the only way
to respond to this de-naming of God is through a parallel emptying of one’s destiny and
name. But this act is possible only through the presence of the other as oneself, through
“his absence, even more than through his presence”.

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The angel as the *absented* other guides the character towards self-knowledge even to a larger extent than he does through his presence (which is too overwhelming for Gregor, he cannot comprehend Gavriel: in the moment of their encounter, he takes him for a madman). As the narrative unfolds, Gregor will begin to identify himself more and more with Gavriel: he will become silent like his companion; in the moment of the partisans’ interrogatory, he will understand and assimilate Gavriel’s mad laughter, all of these in parallel with the obsession of finding him again. This identification is also hinted at from the very beginning: “He became sad. He thought: one day I will be like him, I will be surrounded by sadness, one day I will be another” (Wiesel, 1964: 18). By the time he reaches the Romanian village, Gregor’s assimilation of Gavriel is almost complete: “You see, Maria, it is not I who knocked at your door. It is he, the stranger who inhabits me, he is the one who knocked on your door, he is the one who made you come down from your bed. He is powerful, you recognize him, don’t you?”84 (Wiesel, 1964: 68).

This instantiation of the angel as the other of the self was also present in Benjamin’s “Agesilaus Santander”. Agamben’s insights have shown the Talmudic and Kabalistic influences on the configuration of Benjamin’s angel. In Wiesel’s text, these traditions are made explicit and they offer the *sense* of the absence and hidenness of the angel as the other of the self. It is in the third season of his apophatic itinerary that Gavriel will learn this sense through Yehuda’s teachings:

> It is inhuman to wish to shut yourself up in pain, in the memory, as in a gateless prison, without air. Suffering should open us to the other and not turn him into a stranger. The Talmud says that God is suffering with man. Why? In order to reinforce the connections between creature and creator; it is in order to better understand man and to make himself better understood by man that God chooses suffering. But you, you are trying to suffer all alone. This suffering limits and demeans you, it is close to cruelty85 (Wiesel, 1964: 190).
It would seem that the sense of suffering (from God’ excessive absence from the world, from the loss of the sense bestowed by the connection between destiny and name, etc.) is this ascetic and ascending movement towards the other through which the character more closely approaches God. As compared to the angels’ manifesting the presence of God in the world, which was defined by a movement of descent from the divine to material reality, the way of apophasis, the emptying of the world of representation are characterized by a movement of ascent from creature to Creator. This emptying of the world of representation is an *imitatio angelica*, that evacuation of all images and representations in order to reach the limit separating the visible from the invisible. This is a space where excessive presence and absence meet. Envisaging the angel Gavriel as Gregor’s alter-ego means going very deep in the realm of the imaginal, where the images have a face but no flesh, where *parousia* can come about only once one has learnt to perceive the other’s interior meaning through the displacement of the confines of the self in the direction of the other:

Lived experiences, when experienced outside myself in the other, possesses an inner exterior, an inner countenance adverted toward me, and this inner exterior or countenance can be and should be lovingly contemplated, it can be and should be remembered the way we remember a person’s face (and not the way we remember some past experiences of our own) […]. It is this exterior of another’s soul (an inner flesh of the subtlest kind, as it were) that constitutes an intuitively palpable artistic individuality […], that is, a particular realization of meaning in being, an *individual* realization and embodiment of meaning, a clothing of meaning with inner flesh … (Bakhtin, 1990: 102).

The similarity between Bakhtin’s description of envisaging the palpable interiority of the other and the definitions of angels’ bodies as “spiritual flesh”, etc., is striking. There is a deep affinity between the apophatic way as the emptying of the self in the other, a
particular way of perceiving reality, and the ascending movement of the soul towards God. All these acts are concentrated in the kernel of the metamorphosis of meaning which is made possible by envisaging the *countenance* of the other. Bakhtin’s use of this word here is probably not accidental; in *Iconostasis*, Pavel Florensky elaborated on the notion of countenance (*lik*) as opposed to the ideas of mask and face (*lichina* and *litzo*) in order to refine the distinctions between them (in spite of their similar linguistic root) as well as to define this “face of the interior self” that Bakhtin was referring to:

we are beholding a countenance, then, whenever we have before us a face that has fully realized within itself its likeness to God: and we then rightly say, Here is the image of God, meaning: Here is depicted the prototype of Him. […] In Greek, we remember, *countenance* is called *εἰδ*ος or *ιδέα* (i.e., idea), for *ιδέα* is precisely the meaning of countenance: the idea of revealed spiritual being, eternal meaning contemplatively apprehended, the supreme heavenly beauty of a precise reality, the highest prototype, the ray from the source of all images: such are the meanings of idea in Plato (Florensky 52).

In Wiesel’s novel, alterity has the role to accomplish this transfiguration of the inner self into a countenance, a meaningful interiority which is accompanied by a movement of return to the idea (as we remember from Benjamin’s text, idea, in its turn, is deeply related to name and destiny). The emergence of the countenance is conditioned, in *Les portes de la forêt*, by the disappearance of the name and “shadow”. It is through this paradoxical abnegation of the tokens of the self that the new subject can emerge. Moreover, Gregor will be able to regain his true name *only* in the radical loss of the self, in his abandonment of all questions and rationalistic guises. The significant absence of Gavriel will open, little by little, the dimension of what Bakhtin called “sympathetic understanding”:
This self-activity of mine in relation to another’s inner world (from outside this world) is usually called ‘sympathetic understanding’. What should be emphasized is the absolutely incremental, excessive, productive, and enriching character of sympathetic understanding. […] The other’s co-experienced suffering is a completely new ontic formation that I alone actualize inwardly from my unique place outside the other. Sympathetic understanding is not a mirroring, but a fundamentally and essentially new valuation, a utilization of my own architectonic position in being outside another’s inner life. Sympathetic understanding recreates the whole inner person in aesthetically loving categories for a new existence in a new dimension of the world” (Bakhtin, 1990:103).

First of all, we should note the excessive nature of this way of envisioning alterity: undoubtedly, it signifies that “growing of the desert” which is the sense of the communitarian dimension of bereavement and suffering. The other oscillates between the invisibility of the face (in Bakhtinian terms) and the visibility of the countenance. For Gregor, the disappearance of the embodied Gavriel will lead to the gradual growth of his countenance, both as Gavriel and himself. The access to this moment of transfer and transfiguration is possible only through the via-dolorosa of suffering together: with the people of the Romanian village for their muted secrets, with the partisans for their massacred people, with Clara for the loss of the man they both admire the most.

However, in all of these instances, Gregor is never really co-participating in the suffering of the others: he is only playing a part when he becomes the confessor of the Romanian villagers, his being accused of treason takes away from him the possibility of sharing with the partisans the same moment of mourning for the loss of Lieb, and Clara’s holding on to the image of her first lover oppresses and accuses him. Until the very end of the novel, Gregor is not quite ready for that “new valuation” that sympathetic understanding affords. Eager to relinquish his name, he is not nearly as ready to strip himself of his divinity, of himself as Gavriel: “If I stay alive, he thought, I will devote my life to
clarifying this question. This will be the purpose of my existence. I will become him in order to grasp him better, maybe understand and love him; love him without understanding him” (Wiesel, 1964: 49). But in the space of excessive absence opened up by the gift of death, there is no longer room for angels: any such identification is an apostasy, an attempt to dress nothingness with images. The surplus of secrecy enacted by Gavriel’s self-sacrifice and reinforced by his persistent absence is what turns the whole experience into a secret, exceeding language and even the possibility of witnessing:

The ideas of secrecy and exclusivity [non-partage] are essential here, as is Abraham’s silence. He doesn’t speak, he doesn’t tell his secret to his loved ones. He is, like the knight of faith, a witness and not a teacher […] and it is true that this witness enters into an absolute relation with the absolute, but he doesn’t witness to it in the sense that to witness means to show, teach, illustrate, manifest to others the truth that one can precisely attest to. Abraham is a witness of the absolute faith that cannot and must not witness before men. He must keep his secret. But his silence is not just any silence. Can one witness in silence? By silence? (Derrida, 1964: 73).

Indeed, Gregor’s witnessing is fraught with guilt and it always leads to the propagation and intensification of the lie: it is because he decides to share with Leib the story of Gavriel that the partisans’ leader eventually loses his life; even at the end, when he meets the character he takes for Gavriel and retells him the whole narrative of his history of loss, his words seem to pass through his audience, they seem to serve the sole purpose of helping the narrator empty himself of inescapable images. His story, having started under the sign of the gift of death, is utterly incomprehensible and impossible to express in language. In Gregor’s subsequent narratives on Gavriel, he will, most of the times, only very vaguely hint to his supra-natural dimension. Gavriel will remain, until the very end, the impenetrable gate-keeper of a world of secrecy: “Gregor did not dare interrogate him, he did not dare introduce himself in this closed world in which things
and events must have had a secret meaning, a secret connection, exceeding understanding, a sick sense, a sick bond\textsuperscript{87} (Wiesel, \textit{Les portes de la forêt} 26). The inexpressible referent of apophatic discourse is, for Derrida, that which lies at the intersection of “a secret and non-secret”. In Wiesel’s novel, it takes the shape of that double movement of excess that characterizes the majority of apophaticism: on the one hand, it is the secret of the world of representation and on the other hand, it is the secret of revelation, the taboo and impossibility of expressing and sharing the mystery of the encounter with the angel. In the novel, the forest encapsulates both:

The miracle of the forest: nothing of what is said there is lost. The saint and the solitary – maybe they are one and the same – go there not only to purify their body and passion, especially their passion, but mostly in order to listen and tremble, to tremble while listening to this roaring voice which, before the primordial creation, before the liberation of the verb, already contained form and matter – joy and its defeat – and what separates and reconciles them – from which the universe, time and their secret life were petrified\textsuperscript{88} (Wiesel, 1964: 129).

The secret is experienced as a sickness, as this trembling which is the sign of the exposure to the exceeding absence. The forest integrates a double movement of excess because, on the one hand, it is a metaphor of the world of representation – the demoniac stratum of representation – which becomes shattered after the encounter with the angel and the experience of the gift of death. But even beyond this purging of false images and representations there still lies hidden the absolute secret of the coming into being of creation. Gregor’s apophatic itinerary will be successful therefore only in the re-encounter of these \textit{traces}. The key-word here is \textit{joy} and Wiesel embeds it at the beginning of the novel as a subtle foretelling of the final stage of Gregor’s apophatic itinerary. After the failure of words and acts, of witnessing even, there is but one domain that the experience of apophasis as alterity can find its most accomplished expression:
What is possible, of course, is that I come to partake passively in the justified givenness of being, in the joyful givenness of being. Joy knows no active relationship to being; I must become naïve in order to rejoice. From within myself, in my own self-activity, I cannot become naïve and, hence, I cannot rejoice. Only being, and not my self-activity, can be joyful; my self-activity is inescapably and irresolvably serious. Joy is the most passive, the most defenselessly pitiful condition of being. Joy is possible for me only in God or in the world, that is, where I partake in being in a justified manner through the other and for the other, where I am passive and receive a bestowed gift. It is my otherness that rejoices in me, not I for myself” (Bakhtin, 1990: 136).

This is the lesson that Gregor will learn at the Jewish celebration of the hasidim. The climax of that moment is not, as has been suggested, Gregor’s so-called re-encounter with Gavriel, but his final self-abandonment after this encounter, when he joins the joyous dancing of his people. It is only after the undoing of the sense he had given to the story of Gavriel’s absence, after this denegation, that he reaches that emptiness and selflessness in which he can experience the “joyful givenness of being”:

The hasidim are dancing in place, vertically, imposing their rhythm to the ground. Too bad if the walls should fall, that will prove that no room is large enough to contain their fervor. They are singing and it is their song that makes them live, that fills them with energy and unites them […], yes, there was a time when God and man were one, then they grew apart and ever since they have been looking for each other, they are following each other, proclaim themselves invincible and, as long as the celebration lasts, they will be so (Wiesel, 1964: 201).

This joy which is experienced in dancing is, for Bakhtin, the most consummate manner of “losing oneself in another”: “In dancing, everything inward in me strives to come to the outside, strives to coincide with my exterior” (Bakhtin, 1990: 137). This final image in which the hero is restored his name at the same time as experiencing the joyous dimension of being through co-extensive participation with the other is what defines the
final stage of the kenosis begun with the encounter between Gregor and Gavriel (or their split).

In this highly particular deployment of apophatic itinerary, which involves the fundamental stages of de-naming, alterity, secrecy, and joy, Wiesel has opened up a space which does not attempt to fill in the void left by the fully experienced absence of God from the world. Rather, with the emphasis on these aspects of the apophatic experience, he has highlighted the traces by which language (only) dialogically becomes the site of a marked and excessive absence of sense. In this context, the angel’s presence/absence educates to the unlearning of images of the self in the experience of the other. The angel Gavriel narratavizes this revelation of the hidden aspect of God as well as continuously veils it through the repeated movements of de-naming or un-naming which are enacted in his presence at all times. The pathos of this peripatetic wandering outside the limits of the self towards the re-discovery of traces of an absolutely exceeding sense is the mode of being of the coming to life of history, from the punctum caecum of the encounter with the angel. Gavriel’s narrative function in Wiesel’s novel is very similar to that of the angel announcing the Resurrection of Christ. The narrative, as well as the trans-figuration, began with his announcement of exceeding absence. The sense of the narrative, as Marin and Nancy seem to imply, will always be the presence of the empty tomb, or rather all the narratives and histories will henceforth have to pass through this experience of excessive emptiness. However, the space between the announcing of excessive absence and the final accomplishment of kenosis is a vast one and its figures and traces constantly relate the two moments of death. Seamlessly, the angel weaves the two axes together.
“A Ladder without Heaven”. The Language of Ascesis in Alberti’s *Sobre los ángeles*.

*Look. A boy, a solitary boy who passed for a nocturnal stone,*  
*For an indifferent angel of a ladder without heaven...*  

(Alberti, “Death and Judgment”, *C.A.*)

Rafael Alberti’s *Sobre los ángeles*, published in 1929, has received considerable critical reception and is generally regarded as a radical experiment in the limits of poetic language. For instance, Anthony L. Geist notes the generative force underlying the pervasive absence and silence characterizing Alberti’s poems: “*Sobre los ángeles* is a poetry full of silences, gaps, and absences. More than simple dissatisfaction, these voids and hollows indicate a failure of poetic language. And this failure, paradoxically, generates the powerful poetry of *Sobre los ángeles* (Geist 165). Some critics regard this experience of referential vacuity as the expression of a personal crisis that the poet underwent as he was writing these poems:

The loss of youthful faith and innocence frequently has been perceived as the catalyst that provoked Alberti’s spiritual crisis, evident in the general sense of *desengaño* that pervades the text. In each instance, the interpretation varied according to the emphasis given a particular theme, but the idea that the poet, or the poet’s state of mind, was the principal subject of his writing, has served as a foundation and common ground from which the critics have studied the poems individually and collectively (Rugg 259).

In the discussion of the particularities of the language in Alberti’s *Sobre los ángeles*, the other major focus of the criticism has been on the relation the poetry entertains with Spanish Surrealism (Havard 2001), either attempting to see the ways in which the language coincided with major Expressionist themes and motifs, or inscribing Alberti in the general poetic art of the “Generation of 1927” which included Federico
Garcia Lorca, Salvador Dali, etc. Such approaches have highlighted, for instance, the radical transformation in the Albertian style with the publication of this volume:

Astonished by the radical departure from the themes, tone and metric structure associated with *Marinero en tierra* and *La amante*, critics found the contrast between *Sobre los ángeles* and Alberti’s previous work to be of major importance. The graceful, carefree beauty, combined with attention to popular tradition which characterized Alberti’s first three works, and the stylized intricacy of *Cal y canto*, were supplanted in *Sobre los ángeles* by violent, disturbing images of destruction and disillusion rendered in irregular meter and free verse. Attempts to explain this sudden transformation in Alberti’s work have relied heavily on the fact that Alberti was undergoing a severe personal crisis at the time he was writing *Sobre los ángeles* (Rugg 259).

Although all of these interpretations have offered valuable insight on Alberti’s poetic art in *Sobre los ángeles*, very few critics (if any) have seriously discussed the relation between this poetics of absence and the overwhelming presence of angels in these poems. In some cases, the angels were considered a sign of the afore-mentioned “personal crisis”. In other cases, this relation was seen as an image of the poet’s loss of faith. Either way, for most critics the figure of the angel was altogether an irrelevant topic as concerns the engagement with the transformation of the poetic language in this work:

In a general way, the meaning of Alberti’s *Sobre los ángeles* is reasonably clear. Once a believer, now the poet can no longer hold that Christianity will redeem him and give him immortality. Thus paradise is lost and he wanders disconsolate. The poems portray Alberti in a spiritual wasteland resulting from the loss of faith. Indeed, Alberti calls the first poem in his book “Paraiso perdido” and he further underlines its obvious function by calling it “Entrada”. This is, then, the portal to the poet’s hopeless loss (Horst 174).

Such vocabulary, verging on the brink of the elegiac, abounds in the general reception of Alberti’s poetry and, while it is true that these poems were written also in response to a previous emotional crisis which Alberti himself avowed to in the preface to this
volume⁹⁰, these considerations leave the whole question of the relation between the figure of the angels and the transformation of poetic language virtually unanswered. This marked disinterest for the pervasive angelic thematic in Sobre los ángeles has even led to flagrant confusions such as the equation between the loss of faith and the motif of the paradise lost, as we can notice from Horst’s considerations.

Although it is quite clear that Alberti did not necessarily have a specific angelological or religious project in mind, I believe that the co-presence of angels and the metamorphosis of Alberti’s poetic language are not coincidental. In my reading of Sobre los ángeles, I will show that the structure and style of this poetry run in parallel with an apophatic transfiguration of language which is profoundly connected with the overwhelming presence of angels to which the whole book is dedicated. In my view, this volume represents both Alberti’s difficult climbing up a fractured Jacob’s ladder and a double apophatic movement of linguistic ascesis and remembering/anamnesis. As we will see, this double movement of ascesis and fragmentary recollection coincides with the deployment of a particular Jacob’s ladder which is inscribed both structurally and stylistically in the text. As is suggested by Alberti’s own statement in the preface of this volume, the poetic imagery and language coming to life in Sobre los ángeles do not lend themselves to generalizations or vague definitions: “But what I wrote was not all that obscure, and the most confused and nebulous thoughts assumed the form and reptilian movement of a snake in flames” (Alberti XII). This sentence hints to a careful configuration of structure and style which, despite their non-conformity to a specific literary canon, are nevertheless meaningful in their own terms.
Sobre los ángeles is structured in three different cycles of poems, each bearing the title of “Guest of the Mists” (“Huespéd de las nieblas”): the first part contains sixteen poems, the second part nineteen, and the last part eighteen poems. This series is preceded by a sort of prologue (“Entrada”) titled “Paradise Lost”. In its turn, this prologue is entirely composed of tercets. In many respects, “Paradise Lost” can be considered the volume’s point of departure and return, its summary and foreboding finale. Many of the recurrent motifs and themes of Sobre los ángeles already appear in this poem: the dead or lost guardian angel (“behind me, imperceptible/ hovering just above my shoulders,/ my dead angel watches”\textsuperscript{91}), questions addressed to a forever silent “you” (“Where is paradise,/ my shadow, you that were there?/ A silent question.”\textsuperscript{92}), the slumber and incommunicability of reality (Cities without answers/ rivers without speech, peaks/ without echoes, mute seas.”\textsuperscript{93}), repeated negations (“No one knows. Men standing/ fixed on the stopped edge/ of the burial grounds/ do not know me. Sad birds/ petrified songs,/ blind in the ecstasy/ of flight. They know nothing”\textsuperscript{94}), the unattainable heavens (“The formless heavens,/ diluted, the truth hidden/ within them, flee me.”\textsuperscript{95}), invocations and imprecations (“Shadow void!/ Bubbling world froth!/ What confusion of centuries! /Get back! Back! How frightful/ the voiceless dark./ How lost, my soul.”\textsuperscript{96}) those desperate and inconsolable cries toward a celestial truth which are evocative of the beginning of Rilke’s Duino Elegies (“Dead angel, awaken. Where are you? Illuminate/ with your way the return.”\textsuperscript{97}), the motifs of return and re-awakening, and the coalescence of all of them in the excessive absence of the double negation (“Silence. More silence./ The unbeating pulses/ of the unending night./ Paradise lost!/ Lost in the search for you./ I, without light, forever”\textsuperscript{98}) (Alberti 5-7). In terms of content and imagery, this first poem can also be
viewed as composed of three diverse parts: the first eight stanzas refer to the poet’s engagement with reality and the silence and negativity underlying the whole sphere of the visible; from the ninth stanza on, the focus moves to the “diluted heavens” and imaginal figures begin to emerge instead of the images of the mundane (“green gate”, “the black chasm”); finally, the last three stanzas, concentrated around the notions of return and re-awakening, affirm a double movement of recollection which is then overwhelmed by increasing absence (“silence. More silence”). This tertiary stratification of imagery is not coincidental and each cycle corresponds, to a certain extent, to these main themes. Although many motifs, themes and even titles of poems are common to all of the three parts, the focus given to a particular imagery in each of them suggests a subtle difference of space; we are seamlessly moving to different spheres of perception. Moreover, this recurrence of the figure three, which is consistently deployed throughout the volume – many poems are mostly organized in tercets – hints to a three-stage itinerary which has many affinities with a climbing up a re-configured Jacob’s ladder which covers the space between the exit from the world of representation, the arrival at the impenetrable celestial gates, and fragmentary recollection. Quite interestingly, this space appears as an adaptation and re-interpretation of Dionysius the Areopagite’s ‘celestial hierarchies’ (which might be an elaboration on Rilke’s ‘who, if I cried out loud/ would hear me from the angelic hierarchies’). This interpretation is supported by the textual inscription of particular numeric scales in the text. Thus, the first part, which, from a thematic point of view, can be considered the first stage of the apophatic emptying of the world of representation, encapsulates this movement in the following formula: “And the angel of numbers,/ pensive, flying/ from 1 to 2, from/ 2 to 3, from 3 to 4”99 (Alberti, “The Angel
of Numbers”, C.A. 35). This first inscription of the numerological in the text would have little or no significance if, in the second cycle of poems, the other numbers appearing were not 5, 6 and 4:

Five ashen hands/ burning the fog, opening/ five paths/ for the turbulent water,/ for the turbulent wind¹⁰⁰ (Alberti, “5”, C.A. 57).

Spirits with six wings,/ six straw spirits,/ pushed me./ Six red-hot coals. 
[…]
Six red-hot coals,/ obscure the name and the faces,/ pushing me hastily./ Stop me!/ Nothing./ Stop me still, for a moment./ Nothing./ They did not want/ me to stop in nothingness¹⁰¹ (Alberti, “The Hasty Angels”, C.A. 61).

Four echoes, above, fleeing./ To the light/ to the heavens,/ to the winds¹⁰² (Alberti, “Ascension”, C. A. 85).

The first number to appear, five, embedded in the beginning of the second series of “Guest of the Mists” suggests, I believe, the fact that this cycle is under the sign of duality and intermediality. “The Hasty Angels”, which contains several repetitions of “six”, immediately follows this poem and it evokes the beginnings of an ascent in the troubling atmosphere of the space preceding the perception of heaven. This idea of ascension is reinforced toward the end of the cycle when, after traversing this space (and possibly following the “invitation to the air” from the first cycle of poems), the number “four” appears in a poem suggestively titled “Ascension”. However, this also represents a first moment of rupture in this Jacob’s ladder because number four reverses the ascent, from this point on, the difficult climb is interrupted and reversed, the poet stops short in front of the impenetrable gates of the heavens: “There is no entrance for anyone in heaven” (Alberti, “The Soul in Pain”, C.A. 89). It is not surprising then, that the first poem of the third cycle titled, “Three Remembrances of Heaven” is a return to number three as well as a re-figuration of the whole volume: it has a “Prologue” and three
separate poems, each titled “First Remembrance”, “Second Remembrance” and “Third Remembrance”. It thus re-condenses the whole structure around the tertiary motif. If we regard the first two parts as the difficult ascending from the world of representation and the disturbing and fragmentary perception of the angelic realm of apophasis, this return to number three, coupled with the notion of “remembrance of heaven” which, moreover, occurs after the poet’s stopping in front of the closed gates of heaven, has the function to translate this itinerary into one of anamnesis in which, through the gradual purging of images and representation, the final stage would be the refinement and transfiguration of the previous two stages and not the impossible superseding of both in the unattainable realm of God. In the following part of my discussion, I will resume this itinerary, focusing on the relationship between the images of apophasis appearing in all the poems and the gradual transformation of language. The transformation of the style and versification in Sobre los ángeles closely follows this interrupted Jacob’s ladder, in which the kenotic emptying of poetic language is translated through this movement of ascent or artistic ascesis.

The characteristic which most poignantly distinguishes the first cycle from the following two is the pervasive presence of urban and terrestrial imagery:

Nostalgia of archangels! / I was…/ Look at me./ […] On the streets, who remembers? Shoes are my sandals./ My tunic, trousers/ and sports coat./ Tell me who I am./ And once, nonetheless, I was…/ Look at me… (Alberti, “The Unknown Angel”103, C.A. 13).

Encircled cities/ beneath the parading armies./ Cities of the south wind/ that saw me./ […] Crowds of sea and land,/ names, questions, memories,/ face to face./ Heaps of cold hatred,/ body to body104 (Alberti, “The Bellicose Angels”, C. A. 33).
And the walls fall/ the cities’ fortifications/ that watched over me./ And the towers tumble/ the stately/ sentinels of my dream./ And the wind,/ the earth,/ the night\(^{105}\) (Alberti “The Uninhabited Body”, C. A. 19).

There is a gradual accumulation of objects, nature, landscape, the four elements, etc., which are brought to light only to be dismantled and emptied of signification. The whole of reality is configured either in terms an “excessive visibility” which prevents the possibility of recollection, of remembering who the poet once “was”, or as an antagonistic deployment of forces (“heaps of cold hatred/body to body”). The final objective of this \textit{mise-en-scène} of the real seems to be casting away all the images and representations. This theme was also present at the beginnings of Sohravardi’s \textit{Recital of the Crimson Angel}, in which external reality was viewed as a prison from which the “prisoner” had to escape. The only direction which is traced explicitly at this stage is “to the air”:

I invite you, shadow, to the air.

Shadow of twenty centuries,

to the truth of the air,

of the air, the air, the air.

[...]

Shadow without light,
mining the depths
of twenty tombs, twenty
hollow centuries without air,
without the air, the air, the air.

Shadow, to the peaks, shadow
of the truth of the air,
of the air, the air, the air!\(^{106}\) (Alberti, “Invitation to the Air”, C.A. 43).
Alberti constantly juxtaposes these essentialized images of reality with the themes of invisibility and deception: “He doesn’t know the cities./ he doesn’t remember them./ Dead, he goes,/ dead, walking along the streets./ Don’t question him. Grab him!/ No. let him go./ Without eyes, voices, shadows./ Now without shadows./ Invisible to the world,/ to anyone” (Alberti, “The Uninhabited Body”, C.A. 21); “And I was routed/ I, without violence,/ with honey and words” (Alberti, “The Lying Angel”, C.A. 41). Moreover, in this part, the angels appear more as absence, as the silent addressees to the poet’s questions and invocations. In one of the few direct descriptions of the type of angelic struggle he is engaging in, Alberti gives a particular definition of the angelic influence at this stage:

Gates of blood, these,/ millenia of hate,/ rancorous rains, seas./ What did I do to you, tell me,/ that makes you leap from them?/ Why, with your bitter breath/ did you ignite all my angels?/ Axes and lightning bolts/ do me little good./ Nor armed nights, nor loyal/ winds./ You break and assault me./ You take me captive/ to your light, that is not mine,/ to set me spinning./ To your bitter light, so bitter,/ that no one bites” (Alberti, “The Enraged Angel”, C.A. 49).

This reference to a “bitter light” in relation with the one who has “ignited all my angels” is not without affinities with that black light which is defining for the majestic aspect of God. There is thus a constant mingling of the deconstruction of the world of representation and a quite particular repertoire of angelic presence. At this stage, however, the angelic visions are all fragmentary, they are fleetingly captured from within the world of representation: reality is slowly eroded by this external intervention of the angels:

Burning up the chill/ your voice caught fire in me:/ Come to my country./ Cities await you/ with no living nor dead/ to crown you./ ‘I’m sleeping./ No one awaits me”\(^{111}\) (Alberti, “The Undeceived Angel”, C. A. 39).

It is important to note the direction in which the angelophany is given in these instances. In the first example, the vision is fragmentary and the angel appears as if to conjure the poet towards an image that extends beyond the “mountains and seas”, “sunsets and dawns”; in “The Undeceived Angel” this direction is even more clearly drawn – the poet answers a call to the angel’s “country”. On the background of the urban/worldly imagery so thoroughly deployed in this first part, these instances suggest that we are for now following a trajectory starting in this world and already projecting itself in fragmentary glimpses outside of it. However, this movement is not straightforward: as we follow the poems, there are detours and returns, poems which project us in a moment either following or preceding this flight out of the world. One such example is with the poem “The Musty Angels”, one of the most stylistically accomplished poems in *Sobre los ángeles*: “Once there was light that/ had for bone a bitter almond./ Voice that for sound,/ had the fringe of the rain/ chopped with a hatchet./ Soul that for body,/ had the air sheath/ of a double-edged sword./ Veins that for blood,/ had the bile of myrrh and broomweed./ Body that for the soul/ had the void, nothing”\(^{112}\) (Alberti, “The Musty Angels”, C.A. 45). This “once”, as well as the symbolism of the images in this poem prefigure the moment of the recollection which will occur only in the third part of the volume. Another interesting foreshadowing of the final stage of the ascent on the broken angelic ladder is the recurrence of the color green. Alberti was also a painter and the pictorial always had a great importance in his writing. However, in *Sobre los ángeles*, given the minimalist use of language and imagery, the repeated use of
the color green might signify a reference (even if non-intentional) to the realm of the imaginial. As Corbin showed, the color green corresponds to the *visio smaragdina* which is contiguous with the perception of the black light that accompanies apophatic revelation (Corbin, 1978: 64; 100). In Alberti’s poetry, the color green appears three times in the first cycle and re-emerges in “Three Remembrances from Heaven”, the tripartite poem opening the third cycle:

hope dead in me/ I look for the green gate/ in the black chasm (Alberti, “Paradise Lost”, C.A. 7).


Neither sun, moon, nor stars./ neither the unexpected green/ of lightning or thunder/ nor the breeze. Only mists (Alberti, “The Angel of Numbers”, C.A. 35).

It was before the harp, before rain and words./ She didn’t know./ White schoolgirl of the air./ she trembled with the stars, with the flower and the trees./ Her stem, her green shape (Alberti, “First Remembrance of Heaven”, C.A. 103).

This recurrence will become clearer when I discuss the language and imagery of the last part of the volume. For now, I would like to simply highlight this aspect, particularly in the context of the apophatic themes which are developed throughout the first “Guest of the Mists”. This apophatic imagery – the exfoliation of the images of the world, invisibility and absence, as well as the majestic and difficult encounter with the absent “you” to which some of the poems are addressed, the color green, etc. – go hand in hand with a language which is equally stripped of all unnecessary adornments, a style displaying a blatant minimalism.
This aspect of the poetic language can be easily noticed by studying the prevalent stylistic devices in this first cycle. The general atmosphere of negativity and impossibility is transmitted through the repeated use of negations and double negations:

Dawn./ The light, dead on the corners,/ and in the houses./ Neither men nor women/ were there anymore\textsuperscript{117} (Alberti, “The Uninhabited Body”, C.A. 15).

neither sun, moon, nor stars,/ neither the unexpected green/ of lightning or thunder/ nor the breeze. Only mists\textsuperscript{118} (Alberti, “The Angel of Numbers”, C.A. 35).

The other stylistic devices dominating the text are fragments - “Dampness. Chains. Cries/Wind gusts” (Alberti, “Eviction”, C.A. 11) and ellipses: “And on the dead slates,/ the angel of the numbers,/ lifeless, death shrouded/ on the 1 and the 2,/ on the 3, on the 4…”\textsuperscript{119}(Alberti, “The Angel of Numbers”, C.A. 35). There is also a minimal use of metaphor and epithets. This rarefied configuration of language is in line with the critics’ observation on the change in the poetic style of Alberti. What has not been noted, however, is that this apohaeretic representation of language runs in parallel with an apophatic itinerary which, intentionally or not, is clearly present in the imagery and themes of the poems.

Another reference to the idea of a gradual traversing of qualitatively different spaces is the fact that the cycle ends with an image of redemption and hope (as if to suggest a new development): “Uninhabited cities/ are quickly populated. Derailed/ trains are set right/ and run./ Old shipwrecks float./ Light wets its foot in the water./ […] Bells! An angel brought down a letter from heaven”\textsuperscript{120} (Alberti, “The Good Angel”, C.A. 51). It is significant that the first cycle ends with this image of connection between heaven and earth, especially in the context in which the second cycle begins with a prayer, an
invocation to the poet’s guardian angel: “Oh come blazing angel of light/ And with your sword/ set fire to the chasms where lies/my subterranean angel of the mists./ […] Burn him, angel of light, my guardian/ you who walked weeping across the clouds/ you, without me, you, for me,/ cold angel of dust, now without glory/ turned out into utter darkness! Burn him, angel of light,/ burn me and flee”121 (Alberti, “The Two Angels”, C.A. 55). Set in the middle of the volume, this cycle which, as we have seen, evolves along the lines of “5”, “6” and “4”, begins under the sign of duality and struggle. It would be difficult and undesirable even to morph Alberti’s angels on any specific paradigm; in the critical reception of Alberti’s work, the angels are perceived either as evil or dark angels or as images of paradise lost. There is very little indication however in the actual text on the exact nature of these angels and this is because Alberti did not necessarily embark on an angelological project in this volume, nor did he intend to conform to any religious canons here. On the contrary, we could say that, to a certain extent, what he had in mind was more the subversion of a literalist reading of the angels related to the institutionalized religious practices of Christianity: I was quoting, earlier, a few lines which were making reference to the “twenty centuries” of lies and deceit which, coupled with the image of “twenty tombs”, makes a quite transparent reference to the existence of Christianity; a similar allusion appears in “Death and Judgment” in which Alberti embeds Jacob’s ladder only to demystify it: “You believed neither in Venus, born in the open compass of your arms,/ nor in the feathered ladder that extends Jacob’s Ladder into Jules Verne’s”122 (Alberti, “Death and Judgment”, C.A. 121). But this de-mythization of the religious canon is only a very small part of Alberti’s linguistic and thematic experiment in Sobre los ángeles. The angels appearing in these poems are not all related to finitude,
deception or impossibility. At times, the angels are a “he”/“you” who died and which could possibly reference the poet’s friend who had committed suicide, or the absent God, or the (lost) guardian angel, or the poet himself. This referential indeterminacy is constantly enhanced through the contradictory and fundamentally diverse contexts in which Alberti depicts the angels throughout the volume. Perhaps the only safe statement that could be made about the angels in Sobre los ángeles is that they appear as the necessary corollary in the apophatic experience the poet is describing in this text. In the introduction to this chapter, there were already many references to the “perilous” aspect of the apophatic journey, to the contiguity angelic/demoniac which seems to characterize it at all times. This is the fundamental tension in Alberti’s figuration of angels and the second cycle is the one that enacts this struggling duality in the most dramatic way:

And you didn’t see.
It was his light that fell first.
Look at it, dry, on the ground.

And you didn’t smell.
His essence is what cleaved the silence.
Smell it cold, in the wind.
And you didn’t taste.
His name is what rolled, destroyed.
Taste it in your tongue, dead.

And you didn’t touch it.
The vanished was his body.
Touch it now in the void, ice (Alberti, “The Two Angels”, C.A. 57-59).

Ugly one, sooty and muddy.
I don’t want to see you!

Before, you were snowy, gilded,
in a sled across my soul.
Ornamented pines. Slopes.

And now through the carriage houses,
of charcoal, filthy.

That soul in pain, alone,
That soul in pain always pursued
By a dead brilliance.
By a dead man.
[…] 
Celestial catastrophes rain rubble on the world,
broken wings, lutes, harpstrings,
remains of angels.

There is no entrance for anyone in heaven.

In pain, always in pain,
pursued soul.
Always at counterlight,
ever overtaken, alone,

That which unites this over-saturation of angelic signifieds is the image of the
“soul in pain”: at all times, these angelic images are organized in terms of their relation to
this soul which is now traversing their space. In spite of the plethora of angelic visitations
and visions, the soul remains “alone”, gradually overcastting these disturbing images. We
can already notice that in this cycle, the imagery is changing significantly: there are
virtually no more references to an urban or terrestrial landscape; we are traversing a zone
which has more the attributes of the imaginary/imaginal:

That a riderless horse goes stamping/ on his old amazon by the walls./ That on the battlements, cries, dead, someone/ whom I touched, sleeping, in a mirror (Alberti, “The Angel of Mystery”, C.A. 83).

Subterranean tremors shake his brow./ Slides of loose earth,/delirious echoes,/confused sounds of picks and shovels,/his ears./ His eyes,/ acetylene torches,/ dank, golden corridors./ His heart,/ explosions of rocks, bursts of joy and dynamite./ He dreams of mines” (Alberti, “The Greedy Angel, C.A. 95).

These Surrealist, oneiric images take center stage in this part of the volume together with
the figures of conflict and struggle. Although the stylistic devices are largely the same
ones as in the first cycle, here their use is incremental; the fragmentary images multiply and become more precisely shaped. This effect is achieved mainly through the combined use of repetitions and enumerations:

Behind you, bodiless,/ soulless./ Smoky voice of dream./ cut./ Smoky voice./ Cut\textsuperscript{128} (Alberti, “Deception”, C.A. 67).


South./Metallic field, parched./ Plain, soulless, my body\textsuperscript{130} (Alberti, “The Hound of Flames”, C.A. 77).

Bolts, keys, doors/ leap inconveniently,/ and frozen curtains in the night lengthen,/ stretch out, / set themselves ablaze, / grow longer. / I know you, / I remember you, / inert candle, livid halo, dead nimbus\textsuperscript{131} […] (Alberti, “The Soul in Pain”, C.A. 89).

This \textit{pêle-mêle} of angelic, demonic, oneiric, subconscious, invades the text in this second cycle. The great number of repetitions and enumerations creates a film-like vision on “fast forward” – the poet is moving fast and obsessively through this space, accelerating the pace; the juxtaposed images are superseded by others immediately after they are invoked.

While in the first cycle of poems the angels appeared as brief, fragmentary visions irrupting in the poet’s worldly space, in this part the relation is reversed: it is the poet now who seems to be visiting the angelic realm: “Who are you? Tell us since we don’t remember you/ from either earth or heaven./ From what space, tell us, is your shadow?/ Speak. What light sent it/ to our realm?/ Tell us, where do you come from./ wordless shadow,/ since we don’t remember you?”\textsuperscript{132} (Alberti, “The Vengeful Angels”, C.A. 75).

With this reversal of direction, we get a clearer explanation of the recurring title of each cycle – “Guest of the Mists” – the whole volume represents an incursion in this realm of
the “mists” and the angels appear as the necessary companions in the poet’s ‘dark night of the soul’.

This intermediary imagery is molded, as in the first cycle of poems, on an apophatic texture:

You know now that my mouth is a well of names,/ of dead numbers and letters./ That without my words the echoes loathe themselves/ and what I never said scorns and hates the wind./ You have nothing left to hear./ Let me be!"¹³³ (Alberti, “The Somnambulant Angels”, C.A. 97).

The silence mutely moved/ and said something./ Said nothing"¹³⁴ (Alberti, “The Enraged Angel”, C.A. 71).

Besides the theme of the inexpressibility of the absent God, there appear, in this cycle, some of the other predilect motifs of apophatic discourse. This second part of the volume, having started under the aegis of prayer and invocation of the “good angel”, is also a thematic development of “desire”:

He came, the one I wanted, the one I summoned. 
[…]
Not the one who tied death to his hair.

The one I desired.

Without scratching the winds, Without wounding leaves nor rattling windows.

That one who tied silence to his hair.

To carve out, without hurting me, a shore of sweet light in my breast and make my soul navigable¹³⁵ (Alberti, “The Good Angel”, C.A. 93).

In spite of the overwhelming themes of death, impossibility, finitude, etc., this poem brings a quasi-redemptive value to the whole endeavor and the angel here is one
“who tied silence/ to his hair”. I elaborated more on the theme of desire in the first chapter through my readings of Nicholas of Cusa, Derrida and Marion. I was noting there that desire represents a fundamentally ethical attitude which can be translated, in terms of apophatic discourse, as the only possibility of envisaging/loving the absent God. The fact that the angel/God (the ambiguity is patent here and throughout the volume)\textsuperscript{136} “came” to the poet does not necessarily contradict the significance of “desire” because the purpose of this “coming” is not the “giving of” the angel/God but it is “to carve out, without hurting me/ a shore of sweet light in my breast/ and make my soul navigable”. The motif of carving out has many affinities with what Marion was defining as the visible given in excess, as well as with the apophatic notion of kenosis. This emergence of “a shore of sweet light” in the place of the “soul in pain” represents, I believe, the highest point of the ascent up Jacob’s ladder. This poem which is inscribed, significantly, shortly before the end of the second cycle, appears as a threshold, a moment of accomplishment in apophatic terms of the whole excursion (from the world of representation and into the “mists” of the angelic realm)\textsuperscript{137}; from this point on, the movement will be of return, but a return more in the sense of Corbin’s \textit{tawîl}. The last poem of the second cycle, titled “The Somnambulant Angels” is precisely such an invitation to return/remembering, thus prefiguring the last cycle/stage of this itinerary: “Think about that hour:/ when the invisible eyes of the bedrooms/ rebelled against a king in the shadows”\textsuperscript{138} (Alberti, “The Somnambulant Angels”, \textit{C.A.} 97).

The third part begins with the poem “Three Remembrances of Heaven” which resumes \textit{en abîme} the whole structure of the volume. It is a return to the tertiary motif. But this return is at the same time a re-signification of the previous two stages (the
and, more importantly, an *anamnesis* of the soul’s life before the fall from Paradise:

Neither the rose nor the archangel had lived a year. It was all before the bleating and the tears. When the light did not yet know Whether the sea would be born a boy or a girl […] It was all before the body, the name and time. Then, I remember that once, in heaven…*139* (Alberti, “Prologue” to “Three Remembrances of Heaven”, *C.A.* 103).

It was before the harp, before rain and words. She didn’t know. White schoolgirl of the air, she trembled with the stars, with the flower and the trees. Her stem, her green shape*140* (Alberti, “First Remembrance”, *C.A.* 103).

Also before, before burnt feathers could fall to earth and a bird could be felled by a lily/Before, before you could ask me/the number and location of my body./Long, long before the body./In the era of the soul./When you opened in the uncrowned head of heaven/the first dream dynasty./When you, seeing me in the void./invented the first word./Then*141*, our meeting*142* (Alberti, “Second Remembrance”, *C.A.* 105).

Most critics have noted the transformation of style in the second half of the volume: “*Sobre los ángeles* moves from an initial verbal restraint to a kind of linguistic exuberance in the second half. A passage from order to disorder accompanies this progression from silence to noise. The conventions of meter, rhythm, and rhyme that traditionally constrain poetic language gradually recede, giving way before a tumult of words, an over-flowing of language” (Geist 171). However, while some critics interpret this change only in terms of its formal, stylistic values and others see in it an expression of defeat “as if the battle were over and all had been lost” (Rugg 264), I believe that the artistic process taking place here is deeply related to the apophatic itinerary structure which I have discussed in relation to the previous two parts. As with the first two parts, the language and style of the third “Guest of the Mists” is intricately connected with the
particular stage of the journey. After the ascending rarefied topography of the first two parts, the return to number three suggests a reversal of the ascent on Jacob’s ladder as well as the accomplishment of the poetic vision into an imaginal one (the visio smaragdina), even if still fragmentary and distanced.

The above excerpts from “Three Remembrances of Heaven” are all instances of such transfiguration. After the imagistic paucity of the first two parts, these poems are an explosion of imaginal visions as they display a great abundance of symbols. They are hermetic and obscure rather than “disorderly” and “unruly”. The significantly longer verses render the images more consistent and discursive, marking the shift from the photographic-like snapshots of the first two parts to a filmic texture in this last part. This filmic quality of the imagery is the prefect mold for the topos of remembering – as we know from Bergson and Deleuze, matter and memory are the flesh and bones of the film image. Through these film-like flashbacks of heaven, Alberti is signifying several things. First of all, he is directing the trajectory of apophasis away from an ineffable “beyond” and back to the deeper recesses of the “I” who shelters these images first in the expression of a feeling of loss (the first cycle), secondly as fragmentary glimpses into the obscured regions of the self (the second cycle) and lastly as a more consistent anamnesis of another history and temporality of the soul, preceding the moment of the fall (the last part). In “Three Remembrances of Heaven”, the poet keeps with the referential indeterminacy of the “she”/ “you”, deliberately overlapping the autobiographic with the heavenly vision: the “she” in “First Remembrance” could refer both the poet’s lost beloved (he points to this loss in the preface of the volume) but also to the “soul”, the image which is focalized in the most constant manner throughout Sobre los ángeles. As
we progress through the “remembrances”, the images become clearer: the “Prologue” and the “First Remembrance” end with ellipses – “Then, I remember, that once, in heaven…” (103); “And, I remember…/Nothing more: dead girl, keep your distance” (105), while the last two remembrances articulate an image which overlaps the autobiographic and the paradisiacal: “When you, seeing me in the void,/ invented the first word./Then, our meeting” (105); “Then, behind your fan, our first moon” (107). However, given the theme of remembering and the correlative distance embedded in all these instances, the discourse remains one of loss and fracture. Nevertheless, this conjunction of the imaginal with the number three is very evocative of the ways in which Walter Benjamin defined the realm of imagination:

However, the purity of this appearance in its dissolution is matched by the purity of its birth. Thus, there is a pure appearance, a burgeoning one, at the dawn of the world. This is the radiance that surrounds the objects in Paradise. Last, there is a third, pure appearance: the reduced, extinguished or muted one. […] These are the three worlds of pure appearance that belong to the imagination.” (Benjamin, 1996: 281).

However, Alberti does not stop here. The fragmentary visions of paradisiacal bliss are quickly overtaken by the memory of the loss of this state: “When for me the wheatfields were habitations of stars and gods/ and frost the frozen tears of a gazelle,/ someone cast in plaster my breast and shadow,/ betraying me” (Alberti, “The Evil Minute”, C.A. 113). This image of betrayal and imprisonment also appeared in Sohravardi’s “Recital of the Crimson Angel” in the same context of the fall from Paradise. As we advance in the reading of the volume, the images become grandiose and majestic, we are seamlessly moving to a different temporality: present/apocalyptic future (“The Angel of the Ruins”). With the last poems of the volume, we are taken back to the
atmosphere and tone of “Paradise Lost”: “There are nights when the hours turn to stone in space/ when veins do not move/ and silences erect centuries and future gods./ A thunderbolt shuffles tongues and jumbles words”¹⁴⁴ (Alberti, “Punishments”, C.A. 135). However, this realization has come after a long journey and the point of return is not quite the same as that of departure. Without attempting to reject and deny the general reception of the critics concerning Alberti’s somber tone in Sobre los ángeles, I would say that the language and imagery of the poems, when read in their apophatic articulation, are not necessarily given in a positive or negative connotation. After all, with the constant focus on the soul’s ‘dark night’ and ascent, something has been achieved: “Look at this too, before we entomb the journey:/ when a shadow catches its fingernails in the door hinges/ or an angel’s frozen foot suffers the still insomnia of a stone,/ my soul, unknowingly, achieves perfection”¹⁴⁵ (Alberti, “The Ugly Angels”, C.A. 149). These crystallized fragments of remembrance are the ascesis of the soul, the moment when it “achieves perfection”.

The angelic and paradisiacal geography of Sobre los ángeles is deeply related to the transformation of poetic language, to its initial emptying of the images of the world and its subsequent remembering of an Edenic, unified state. As I have constantly shown throughout my thesis, the language of poetry and the angelic meet in the mundus imaginalis. The fact that this moment of re-encounter appears so patently in Alberti’s ascetic treatment of language highlights this deep connection, as well as sheds more light on the process of artistic genesis and re-invention.

Conclusion.
In this chapter, my intention was to discuss the absence inherent in literary discourse in terms of its affinities with apophasis. I have focused on the mode of apophasis (rather than on other significances of absence in twentieth-century thought) because of the belatedness between apophasis and discourse and also because this is the fundamental notion against which contemporary phenomenology and poetics have articulated their reinterpretations of absence in artistic discourse. My study of the figure of the angel in this context was conditioned by the assumption that poetic language, in invoking an angelic repertoire, taps on its apophatic dimension and brings it to “light”. Both in Wiesel and Alberti’s texts, there is a deep connection between angels and poetic language/discourse. In their cases, this coincidence is made in the context of an apophatic way of understanding the “zero degree” of both language and narrative. In many respects, their engagement with the dark spots of artistic discourse can be considered an attempt, not necessarily of exceeding the limits of representation, but of displacing the focus from the “present” part of “representation” into its absent dimension. Their treatment of absence can be considered an incursion towards the peripheral zones of representation for several reasons: 1. through the relation with an apophatic manner of envisaging absence, both Wiesel and Alberti have referred their texts back to the moment of intersection between the two types of representation that Cacciari has identified in his “Problem of Representation”; 2. In this process, they have both rendered transparent the moment of artistic genesis, the transformation of the visible in the invisible. As Marion was showing in *De surcroît*, this moment of transference is what constitutes a “third way” of representation; 3. Thirdly, as can be inferred from Derrida’s considerations on apophasis, any discourse that incorporates this form and movement says something about the
(unattainable) and forever deferred arrival at the limits of discourse. In all of these cases, this exploration of the limits of language under the patient angelic exegesis offers glimpses into a “space” which belongs neither to representation as “re-presence”, nor to the inaccessible domain it points to. In my readings, I have sought to illuminate this intermediary space as well as show, in line with Franke’s take on the matter, that the moment of apophasis is “constitutive of saying and its meanings”.

Conclusion

Having started from the premise that the literary actualization of angels is aimed at an artistic re-configuration of the limits of representation, this thesis has sought, on the one hand, to substantiate this claim, and, on the other hand, to discover the particularities of the space brought to life in this process. In addressing these issues, this dissertation has led to the re-consideration of four main aspects: 1. the “problem of representation”; 2. the space-between of literary representation; 3. the “revealing function” of poetic language; 4. the role and function of angels in their literary transfiguration. All of these aspects are
rediscussed from the perspective of angelological poetics, which offers a very specific focus on these matters. The intention was therefore not to treat these issues in an exhaustive manner, but rather reveal the insights that angelophany brings to this discussion.

The chapter “The Problem of Representation” started under the aegis of Nancy’s idea that “the irrepresentable, pure presence or pure absence, is also an effect of representation”: the inescapable limit of my own approach was thus signified, along with the idea that all the attempts at exceeding the limits of representation are, implicitly, discourses or metadiscourses of failure (in the sense that transcendence, proper, is impossible within the limits of the world of representation, the space that all these discourses of excess reference is “intangible”). However, in my readings of texts which have incorporated this discourse of excess of the limits of representation in relation to an angelic repertoire, I have found that this signifying movement towards the limit is quite explicitly the mapping of a space which can no longer be subsumed to the traditional categories of ‘fiction’/ ‘reality’, ‘truth’/ ‘falsity’, etc. Seen from Nancy’s perspective, for instance, the ‘problem of representation’ is this uneasy relation with its zones of irrepresentability, the most consummate expressions of which are, as Nancy phrases it, ‘pure presence’ and ‘pure absence’. In turn, these excessive manners of phenomenalizing presence and absence are the mode of being par excellence of angelophanies. Therefore, by including this motif in their texts, all the authors discussed in this thesis have at least attempted to accede to that “surplus” of representation which, in the case of excessive presence, is unavailable because ubiquitous and, in the case of excessive absence, is the very end of discourse, a seamless movement of self-dissolution that poetic language
integrates in gesturing towards its (final) undoing. In light of these radical instances of irrepresentability, we could say that ‘the problem of representation’ is this permanent oscillation between ‘blindness’ and ‘insight’, ‘birth’ and ‘death’. However, as we could see in the case of most of the texts discussed here, an uncanny “third” intersperses itself between these sublimating poles: between the blindness accompanying by necessity the over-flow of light of angelophanies and the insight/ “inspicere” that turns the all-seeing icon into non-existence, there is the whole space of revelation; between the genesis of the aesthetic object and its collapse into the world of representation, there emerges the figure of the return as a transfigured synthesis of both.

Besides the problem of ‘irrepresentability’, the angels are related to the ‘problem of representation’ in their definition as first acts of existentiation of the invisible God. In this respect, as Cacciari has shown in *L’angelo necessario*, the angels *pose* the problem of representation as a *necessity* of distantiantion between character and *daimon*. Without this distinction – which, from a contemplative perspective, appears as the Cusan *ad-miratio* – the world of representation is the *mirroring* of an angel who has lost his reflexive properties, who no longer transmits this world of reflection back to its original space of enunciation but, narcissistically, ‘loses’ himself in this representation. Representation is, in this case, nothing but self-reflexivity (and a roundabout replica of this original act). What the angel offers instead is the neutrality of the “most limpid mirror” which empties itself in order to enable the return. The angel thus poses the problem of representation by constantly short-circuiting and defamiliarizing the very question of representation and representability. In mystical accounts of such an event – as we could see in examples from the Scriptures, Sufi mysticism or apophatic thought – this
problem is raised, first, by the phenomenalization of the invisible which is linked to the
angelophanic modes of appearing, second, by the revelation of the finitude and
invisibility at the heart of the “visibility” and “presence” of the world of representation
and third, by a transfigured return to the space of representation. We could see this
process, in its multiple forms of manifestation, in “The Recital of the Crimson Angel”, in
Poe and Malamud’s short stories, and in Wiesel and Alberti’s texts. Consequently, this
“posing” of the problem of representation is a constant given in both the “present” and
the “absent” aspects of the phenomenology of excess.

But what does this mean in terms of literary representation? Artistic
representation certainly does not entertain the same transparency of relation with its
referentiality or genesis as mystical/religious discourses do. In a way, we could say that
the angel renders transparent this opacity of poetic language, he engages it in a process of
remembering and, we could say, self-awareness (which does not amount to self-
reflexivity, it is more like the Platonic *ousia*), in which it concomitantly displays its
“revealing function” and the finitude characterizing the created world.

To behold the world of artistic creation as a site of revelation in line with the ideas
associated with the giving of angelophanies, signifies to accept the idea that, despite the
infinite absence and distance of language from the original problem of representation, or,
to be more exact, from the departed God, poetic/artistic language, in the very
manifestation of its revealing function, preserves the possibility/channel of expressing
this “ineffability”. This idea is crucial especially in the context of contemporary
apophatic phenomenology: this means that artistic language is quite capable of “profane
illuminations” which are, nonetheless, mysteriously *given*, in spite of the apparent non-
availability of the giver\textsuperscript{146}. Moreover, what all these instances show is that, before collapsing the whole domain of signification that angelic encounters afford, to the concepts of absence, impossibility, ambiguity, undecidability, fantastic, etc., there is a whole, full-fledged interval of semiosis which enacts the very presence of the transcendent, His excessive presence or absence in language. This space-between of revelation, although it has “a far too immediate obsolescence for our analytical consciousness, for our scrutinizing minds” (Virilio, \textit{Negative Horizon} 30) is something we cannot evacuate simply under the pretext of impossibility and limitedness. This seems to be the insistent reprise of artistic consciousness in its enactment of angelic figures of revelation. The fundamental realization of my study of the revealing function of angels in literature is very close to what Franco Rella formulated in the following way: “beyond the experience of the ‘impossible’ we can glimpse in fact an \textit{experience of the possible} which appears, in a first moment, much more terrible than the ‘impossible’ itself” (Rella, 1984: 103).

This “experience of the possible” appears, in all the texts that I have discussed, as a struggle both against and towards excessive presence and absence. I have treated the subjects of excessive presence and absence in two different chapters because I intended to capture the specific traits of each moment. However, a close examination of the trajectories I have taken in my discussion shows that all the texts I have analyzed actually enact one and the same hermeneutic process of revelation: both presence and absence are part of their referential world; the only difference is that for some of them the accent falls on one, and for the others on the other of these limits. Thus, Benjamin’s \textit{iconostasis} comes after the experience of separation which he references in the text, Valéry
conceives his aesthetic of real appearance in reaction to the ineffability of the “transparent empire” of signs and Poe and Malamud’s characters are re-awakened from automatized perception. Conversely, the apophatic itinerary in Wiesel’s novel would be inconceivable without the preliminary angelic presence and, in many respects, Alberti’s apophatic re-configuration of poetic language is the effect of that resistance to the excess of visibility that Marion was talking about. Moreover, I have also shown through my readings that in the case of the texts which evidentiate the present aspect of revelation, the particular movement accompanying discourse is one of descent – the projection of an image from the idea/angel to the world of representation, which destabilizes and fractures its boundaries; on the other hand, those discourses which touch on the apophatic dimension of representation are characterized by a movement of ascent – but this ascent is one of return for Gregor in *The Gates of the Forest* and of remembering in Alberti’s poetry. Therefore, this thesis has followed the trajectories of a hermeneutic arc which is very similar to the dynamism *tanzîl/tawîl*. At the end of this itinerary, there emerges the red line uniting all these texts, drawing the connections between the beginnings and ends of discourse in the space-between of representation as revelation.

One of the constant reprises in angelological discourse is the fact that the angel appears at the crossing of the boundaries between the visible and the invisible. As can be noticed from the words of two artists who have evoked the figure of the angel in their works, this process is two-sided: for Klee, the purpose of art is to render the invisible visible, but for Rilke the angel accomplishes the transformation of the visible in the invisible. In a way, the space-between I have unfolded in my study is an attempt to understand the phenomena of transformation from visibility into
invisibility and vice versa. From this perspective, I would conclude that the space-
between of representation which appears in light of angelological exegesis is the
adventure of language from the moment preceding and triggering the beginning of
discourse until the moment in which, through an act of self-emptying, language
remembers this coming into presence and becomes aware of the distance from
presence. More specifically, however, the space-between of literary representation as
revelation is to be found in the attentive reading of individual authors, who have each
found highly particular manners of approaching this space.

From the point of view of what might be called the poetics of angelic
revelation, there are a number of common themes and figures that can be identified.
The mystical encounter with the angel corresponds, on the poetological plane, to the
emergence of genetic motifs. Just as much as the revealing function of angels is
deeply related with the creation of the world, with divine theophany, so is the literary
representation of angelophanies profoundly connected with the genesis of the self or
of the artistic work. These genetic motifs appear, in Benjamin and Wiesel’s texts, as
the new, transfigured self, the “new angel”; in Valéry’s dialogue as the revelation of
the incandescence of the world; in Poe and Malamud’s short stories as resurrection or
reawakening; and in Alberti’s poems as the remembering of the texture of
imagination. This return to the moment of birth of the literary/artistic work or of
poetic language in general through the angelic filter of excessive presence is fully
explainable through the affinities between the angelological and the poetological that
Paul Colilli elaborated in his book, The Angel’s Corpse. Moreover, by situating the
moment of angelic appearing in this germinal and generative context, the authors are
rendering the lines between the imaginal and the poetological fluid and are thus returning the problem of representation to its initial matrix. The dialectic between the visible and the invisible, the repetitive and the instantaneous is resolved, in all these cases, in the evocation of a pre-determining moment in which the angels’ excessive presence shocks or peremptorily induces into reawakening. Just like in Cusa’s “Preface”, this is the sine qua non ground on which poetic discourse can begin: this coming into excessive visibility of that which was previously invisible.

Another theme that was common to all the texts that I analyzed in the second chapter was that of appearing, which entailed the restitution of “realistic” values to the notion of “mere semblance”. The key issue here was to “save” the (aesthetic) object by retrieving its “archetypal epura”147, as the meeting point between figure and ground, that is, the revelation of the real significances of its figuration. For this process too, the angels are the exemplary figures because their very substance and nature can be defined as apparitional, as conjugating the visible with the invisible, the flesh with the spirit, etc. Thus Henry More defined their substance as caro spiritualis or spissitudo spiritualis and Swedenborg was calling them apparentiae reales. This unadulterated mix of flesh and spirit, idea and matter is what lies at the core of the redefinition of the appearance of the aesthetic object in the texts I have discussed. In “Agesilaus Santander” this process takes the shape of the conjunction of the sacred with the profane, of the transfiguration of Klee’s Angelus Novus into a “window towards the invisible” which will, in turn, re-inform and re-signify the autobiographical. In Eupalinos, Valéry is deploying a full-fledged aesthetics of “real appearance” starting from the redefinition of the dialogue between the perceiver and
the object perceived and what we might call their co-extensive relation: the real significances of this encounter appear only in the infinitesimal yet infinitely rich interval in which the beholder and the world beheld have a secret and unexpected bearing on one another. With the equation between angelic and poetic appearing in Poe’s short story, we are reminded that the actual referential world of poetic language is not so much ‘reality’ but rather the invisible. In Sobre los ángeles, the last stage of the apophatic itinerary resides in the re-discovery of that “real appearance” from the beginnings of time and of the soul. It is a resolution similar to the kenotic emptying of the world of representation concentrated in the Eckhardtian formula: “become as a child/ become deaf, become blind”. Understanding the world of poetic language in the sense that Ricoeur was giving it, as “a proposition of the world, of a world such as I could inhabit it in order to project on it some of my most intimate possibles” (Ricoeur, op.cit.), means accepting the idea that the revealing function of poetic language entails the illumination of the “dark spots” of this same, excessively present or absent world. These dark spots are not figures of the imaginary or of the fantastic; but nor are they part of the realm of ordinary visibility: much like angels, they are figures which do not necessarily belong to materiality. Acknowledging their presence in the domain of poetological referentiality implies extending our very understanding of the real and of the worlds actualized in poetic language.

Another particularity of the figures of in-betweenness appearing in these texts is the configuration of a special sort of temporality, one that conjugates the nunc instantis with the nunc stans. This special configuration of time adds a further explication to the ways in which angelophanic temporality has been envisaged so far:
that effulgent instantaneity of the encounter cannot be relegated to the evanescent in these cases. In “Agesilaus Santander”, the sudden glimpse into the invisible was congealed, _sub speciae aeternitatis_, in the admirative reciprocity of the gaze; Valéry’s poetics of “construire”, with all the implications of its affinities with Arabî’s _ship of stone_, also suggests a conjunction of the ephemeral with the eternal. The hero of “The Angel of the Odd” is ‘saved’ at the end, but he is saved in a ‘world’ that has abolished the boundaries between sacred and profane time. All these examples attest to the deep, perhaps all too esoteric connections between our temporality and the temporality of revelation. But, in a way, the very possibility of revelation already implies this connection: if anything, we could paraphrase Lévinas’ take on the phenomenology of revelation and say that the “present” of the angelophany is not so much “past” but, rather, always “future”, that is, much like Benjamin phrased it, a walking back towards its _apokatastatic_ destiny. Directly related to this idea of the conjunction of sacred with profane time, there is the recurrent motif of _crystallization_: the _iconostasis_ of “Agesilaus Santander”, the imprint of the flower in the sand in _Eupalinos_ and the actual ‘saving’ of the heroes’ lives through the angelic intervention in the two short stories.

All these motifs and themes create a not at all negligible texture of an intermediary world which exceeds, or is attempting to reach beyond the premises of representation: the poetics of genesis and “real appearance” situates its referential domain _before_ representation, in the domain of participation, which precedes (and also alters significantly) the moment of language. The crystallization of the angelophanic moment takes the referential domain beyond the instantaneity of presence in a temporality
exclusively created in the act of admirative gazing of the invisible. Does this mean that the revealing function of poetic language exceeds the polarity between truth and falsity as Marion was suggesting with reference to theological/mystical discourse? A first answer would be an obvious ‘no’ since all these experiences are given in language, within representation. However, what all these instances suggest is that, outside the fiction/reality dichotomy on which the traditional understanding of representation rests, there is a completely different referential world which resists such categorizations (either because it brings them together or because it precedes or follows the coming into representation). More importantly, however, this shows the extreme richness of the repertoire offered in this complexio of participation, which precedes the fall in the allegorical or in the finitude of a circuitous system of signs.

This liminal poetics of revelation invites a specific configuration of its reception, with its own figures and particularities. The filling with presence of the angelic revelation coincides with a movement of descent from the transcendent to the immanent: from the icon to the name, in Benjamin’s case, from disembodied perception to real appearance in the case of Eupalinos and from sacred to profane in Poe and Malamud’s short stories. This movement of descent corresponds to the tanzil of revelation, to the first part of Corbin’s hermeneutics of revelation that I presented in the first chapter. This particular direction of the movement of revelation is also in agreement with Adorno’s description of artistic appearing, as a movement from idea to image and not vice versa. This means, in line with Lévinas and Derrida’s takes on the notion of revelation, that angelophanies, as acts of excessive presence, are always given, that one cannot intentionally provoke or
create them. Their phenomenological reason of being is that of re-telling and redefining
the real, the profane, the mundane, etc.: “and through this grace the mind comes to enjoy
the divine effulgence, and acquires an angelic and godlike form” (Palamas 329). On the
other side of the coin, the poetics of excessive absence is characterized, both in Wiesel
and Alberti’s texts (and in most apophatic writings), by a movement of ascent from the
world of representation and towards the absolute absence of God. From this perspective,
the apophatic itinerary is the traversing of an intermediary space. Altough neither Wiesel
nor Alberti end their itinerary with the motif of reunion which appears in most mystical
writings, their incursion in the “dark night of the soul” is at least a retrieval of
imagination vera and an exposure of the limits of representation.

All the main characters in the four texts are “constituted readers”, they are, first
and foremost, interpreters or partakers in the process of angelic revelation: the character
of “Agesilaus Santander” abandons himself to the angel’s “claws” and travels back with
him “home”, Socrates’ destiny is decided in his felicitous (or not) reading of the
significance of the incandescent object, Manischewitz has to submit himself to the angel
in order to be saved, the life of the hero of “The Angel of the Odd” is turned upside down
by the angel’s intrusion, and Gregor is redefined as a responsible character in the
experience of the angel’s gift of death. The attempts to literalize the experience, to turn it
into a recognizable pattern, are futile. Therefore, the characters have to adapt, so to speak,
to the new order of things dictated and imposed by the coming into being of
angelophanies. This configuration of the process of interpretation induced by the angels’
excessive presence is in sharp contrast with the totalitarian gaze that deconstruction
associated with the metaphysics of presence. Quite on the contrary, it is precisely this
irruption of the presence (of another, of the utterly other) that educates and submerges the self.

The transformation of the constituting subject into *constituted witness* goes hand in hand with the collapse of the boundaries between subject and object: the co-substantiation of name and icon in “Agesilaus Santander”, the co-extensive relation between man and the world in the act of “construire”, etc. Therefore, we can say that the transfiguration brought about by the angels’ descent in the world of phenomena has very much to do with the restoration of the *adherence* between subject and object, highlighting their secret affinities and relations. This new understanding of the relations between the subject and object is possible, on the part of the submerged witness of the angelophany, only because he has learnt (or will learn) to cultivate a certain *visio*, through the *attention* that saturated phenomena elicit by necessity. We have already seen, in Cusa’s “Preface”, that *attention*, as a hermeneutical attitude, covered a series of key-notions: the bringing together of distance and proximity, the ethical counter-concept to “regarding” or “intueri”, and the first movement of adherence on the part of the beholder, the very possibility for the invisible to become visible. The recurrence of the idea of *attention* in so many different texts, from such different authors is interesting and would perhaps require a separate study. However, one important remark should be made here: the connection between attention and the transformation of invisibility into visibility points to the domain of the excessively present and therefore invisible: this means that not all the “invisibles” are ineffable or inexpressible. This notion of attention has already appeared in the field of literary studies via M. Bakhtin’s profound understanding of the encounter between readers and text:
The valued manifoldness of Being as human (as correlated with the human being) can present itself only to loving contemplation...Lovelessness, indifference, will never be able to generate sufficient attention to slow down and linger intently over an object, to hold and sculpt every detail and particular in it, however minute [...] An indifferent or hostile reaction...always...impoverishes and decomposes its object (Bakhtin, 1993: 62).

The dialectic between the revealing function of poetic language and the fall into the allegorical and the self-referential could be translated, through the lens of attention, as the opposition between the re-composition and the de-composition of the text in the reader’s engagement with it. An act of reading as re-composition (rather than decomposition) entails not necessarily a holistic approach or the absurd desire to account for the entirety of significances that a text can offer but rather not applying an analytical, de-composing grid on it. The best representation of this act of reading is in the encounter with the incandescent object in Valéry’s *Eupalinos*, in the possibility of exploring all those vistas given in the interval between image and perception. Far from totalitarian, the angels’ exegesis gives itself as the warrant for the presence of the invisible other by educating (shocking, if necessary) the subject to attend and actively participate in the revelation of radical alterity. Attention, admiratio, respect, are the only ways to ‘hold tight’ in that “surplus of the intuition of God” (Marion) that the encounter with the angel always manifests.

In proposing a number of figures of in-betweenness, I have not sought to define a specific poetics and hermeneutics of the interval but merely to show that, upon close inspection, the space-between of representation which is opened in relation to angelophany is semantically and interpretively rich, providing us with alternative vistas of discussion, outside the problematics of whether these texts are under the sign of
‘fiction’ or ‘truth’, “good” or “bad”, ‘intrinsic’ or ‘extrinsic’, etc. The great variety and novelty of the motifs and models of interpretation that I was able to identify in these texts speaks for the semantic and hermeneutical richness of an approach of representation from the perspective of its limits.

Another way this dissertation has contributed to the field is in the bringing together of a consistent theoretical repertoire for the discussion of the concept of in-betweenness in relation to the problem of representation. In so doing, I have also shown the inextricability between theology, philosophy and poetics. Although the examples from all these disciplines were numerous, there have been very few studies which have shown the relations among all these authors in terms of a phenomenology, aesthetics and even ethics of the interval. The field is by no means exhausted: with my discussion, I have shown just that there is sufficient ground for the possibility of developing a more concerted and applied discussion of the space-between.

The angel has been the guide of this hermeneutics of revelation from the first moments of envisaging the idea of an intermediary poetics. The angel in this dissertation has been, more than anything else, a herald of re-awakening and return to what Colilli has called “poetological thought”. He brings with him a very fertile space of semiosis, of which this dissertation has caught but a few glimpses. It is through the angel’s gaze that Rainer Maria Rilke had set to find “our own fruitful soil/ between the river and the stone”. My purpose was to illuminate further this space-between the contingent and the transcendent: in Benjamin’s iconostasis, which unites the autobiographic with the celestial destiny, in Valéry’s incandescent stone, polished and nurtured by the sea, in the
journey of the self towards the other in Wiesel’s *Les portes de la forêt*, and in the conjunction of ineluctable distance and remembering in Alberti’s *Sobre los ángeles*.

Notes:

1 I am referring to the (at least) last two centuries of Western culture here. In popular culture, angels are easily assimilated to ghosts, gremlins, goblins, thus under the category of the “fantastic”. To give an example, angels appear in Borges’ *El libro de los seres imaginarios* (1967).


3 Terror of the void.

4 Andrei Pleșu is a Romanian contemporary philosopher, former disciple of such philosophers Emil Cioran and Constantin Noica; his book, *On Angels*, represents a series of lectures he gave at the University of Bucharest on the theme of angels in philosophy.
and the history of religion; his main concern is the retrieval of an “ethics of an interval”, one that would supplant the logic of dichotomies.

5 From Saint Augustin and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite to Massilio Ficino’s philosophy in the Renaissance, Leibnizian monadology, Swedenborgian theosophy, Romantism as epitomized by the Cambridge group of Platonists such as Coleridge, etc.

6 Swedenborg had an immense influence first, on Romantism, and second, on modernist poets such as W. B. Yeats, Paul Valéry, Charles Baudelaire, etc.

8 Oetinger’s ‘spiritual flesh’; at the Council of Nicea in 787, it was also agreed on the “representability” of angels on account of the fact that they were not completely incorporeal beings (cf. Pleșu 48).

9 It is interesting how the third space and the included middle become the same in the French/English translation.

10 In fact, the very integrity of “sameness” and “difference” is safeguarded by the presence of the instructed middle.

11 Barthelme’s sentence could be reversed and we could say, on the contrary, that the death of angels left God in a strange position as Henry Corbin would brilliantly argue in his book, Le paradoxe du monothéïsme. The death of God (both for religion and for the other humanistic disciplines) could be attributed mainly to a lack of understanding of the crucial function of angels of mediating between an invisible, transcendent God and the multitude of His manifestations in the world. Traditionally, this role is attributed to the Archangel Gabriel, “the angel of the Face” who both reveals and hides the face of God. Without the awareness of this essential angelic hermeneutic act, monotheism, as Corbin puts it, “perishes in its moment of glory”, or, in other words, God – intangible and estranged from the world - can be altogether declared dead. In this sense, the loss of this dimension of the angelic office has been pivotal to the understanding of transcendence in the 20th century.

12 The existentialist themes grounded on Nietzschean or Sartrean philosophy left little room for angelic presences: man, now, alone, in charge of his own destiny, takes center stage (Sartre, Camus, Dostoievski, Malraux, etc.).

14 He even confessed to having realized that he was a Platonist very early in his life.

15 This is also the faculty that ‘awakens’ while we sleep: the grammar of dreams is the closest thing the profane world has to the imaginal world.

16 But neither will a falsely ethical discourse of failure do: as Marion showed in his book, skepticism is the critical attitude to adopt only once all the other available vistas have proven wrong or futile (Marion, 2001).
Admiratio is the principle/beginning of philosophy, in *Summa Theologiae*.

I am using here this term in direct reference to Jean-Luc Marion’s definition of “envisager” that I will come back to at the end of my analysis.

“Metaphysics and Violence”, *Emmanuel Levinas* 102.

This quotation represents the beginning of an essay, “Theology by the Lakeside”, which Corbin wrote when he was 29 years old.


“Tawîl”, strictly speaking, signifies “hidden, esoteric meaning”. But it also appears in the writings of the French philosopher to designate the whole process of interpretation of spiritual hermeneutics (it is also the last stage of this process).

He is also known as “the martyr shaykh”.

Auroral knowledge.

Corbin plays here, probably, on the nickname of another theologian – Thomas Aquinas, also known as *Doctor Angelicus*: thus, a first connection between angels and a particular type of knowledge is made.

These definitions of the symbols that I am giving here are simply clarifications: in no way do they represent the actual interpretation of the text.

Which pertains to the mysteries, initiatic.


I am employing the term here in the sense Paul Colilli gave it in his book, *The Angel’s Corpse*: “love is a fragile sign that is the category of a destiny hidden on some horizon” (314).

In many patristic writings, the light of the first day of Creation is equated with angels; it is “uncreated light”, the light that makes the substance of heaven.

In Ibn Arabî’s cosmogony, these first, victorial lights were also called “names of God” (conf. Corbin, 1969).

In order to understand this act of “creative theophany”, it will be useful to consider this passage in the *Paradoxe du monothéisme* too: “The notions of mirror, epiphanic form (*mazhar*) and epiphanic function (*mazharîa*) are fundamental here. Just as, through one of his acts of contemplation, the angelic Intelligence is the mirror of the Intelligence.
preceding it and who originated it through an act of contemplation too, the world, which proceeds from the Angel’s act of contemplation is the mirror, his apparitional form. [...] He is the Holy Spirit, called, by the philosophers, the active Intelligence, Holy Spirit, this Angel of Humanity is thus identified with theology’s Archangel Gabriel. He is at the same time the Angel of knowledge and the Angel of revelation” (64).

33 In the Quran hell is defined as the absence of light.

34 This aspect, of the duality of light and darkness, body and spirit is another fundamental aspect and will be further developed in my last chapter.

35 The angelic bodies.

36 Most brilliant and aethereal.

37 Lévinas’ notion of the temporal incongruity between manifestation and reception does have an equivalent in the stories of angelophanies but it does not fall under the purview of ‘excessive presence’. Rather, it is more appropriate for those episodes in which the angels were taken for “men” such as the Raphael and Tobias episode, when the manifestation is realized only after it has already happened.

38 The distinction between chronological time and the “time of the being”/ “interior time” has already been made in Bergson’s Matter and Memory.

39 In “The Rustling of the Wings of Gabriel”, the narrator/Suhrawardi also invokes the motif of the closing of the external senses of the world and the opening of the interior “eye”.

40 Here, “origin” in the sense Cozea uses it, as “birth” rather than beginnings of time.

41 Thus, we could say that there are more than two configurations of the angel in this text – the reference to the female is identified by Agamben with the Shechinah of the Zohar, the female counterpart of man to whom the soul must return at the end (Agamben, 1999: 143).

42 This reference is, indeed, very intriguing: it might be just a trifle detail, but, after all, Benjamin was not born under the sign of Saturn: he was born on July 15, which is the sign of Cancer to which corresponds the tutelage of the Moon (and not Saturn).

43 “A particular illumination of grace is needed in order to name well, that is, in order to establish the greatest possible correspondence between a name and his bearer [...] It is therefore not fortuitous that, in exceptional cases, a name be conferred after a direct injunction from God, before birth or even conception” (Bulgakov, 1991: 155). Bulgakov then gives the example of the birth of John the Baptist and of Christ who were both named before their conception: “an angel of God told Zaccharia: ‘Your wife Elisabeth will give birth to a son and you will call him John…’.”
Quite significantly, Eupalinos, who is clearly the one who has Valéry’s adherence and epitomizes the poetics of the latter is nowhere to be found “dans ces parages”.

PHÈDRE
“Que fais-tu là, Socrate ? Voici longtemps que je te cherche. J’ai parcouru notre pâle séjour, je t’ai demandé de toutes parts. Tout le monde ici te connaît, et personne ne t’avait vu. Pourquoi t’es-tu éloigné des autres ombres, et quelle pensée a réuni ton âme, à l’écart des nôtres, sur les frontières de cet empire transparent ?

SOCRATE
Attends. Je ne puis pas répondre. Tu sais bien que la réflexion chez les morts est indivisible. Nous sommes trop simplifiés maintenant pour ne pas subir jusqu’au bout le mouvement de quelque idée. Les vivants ont un corps qui leur permet de sortir dela connaissance et d’y rentrer. Ils sont faits d’une maison et d’une abeille” (Valéry, Eupalinos 1).

“or, dans ces prés élyséens, quoique je doute encore si je n’ai pas fait un assez mauvais marché, je puis imaginer toujours qu’il me reste quelque chose à connaître. Je cherche volontiers, parmi les ombres, l’ombre de quelque vérité. Mais toi, de qui la Beauté toute seule a formé les désirs et gouverné les actes, te voici entièrement démuni. Les corps sont souvenirs, les figures sont de fumée ; cette lumière si égale en tous les points ; si faible et si écoeurante de pâleur ; cette indifférence générale qu’elle éclaire, ou plutôt qu’elle imprègne, sans rien dessiner exactement ; ces groupes à demi transparents que nous formons de nos fantômes” (Valéry, Eupalinos 12).

Indeed, even if Socrates realizes his error at the end of the dialogue, this understanding does not necessarily save him; rather, we could say that Valéry “gives” him this enlightenment only to make his suffering even more unbearable.

Eupalinos was a real life architect of ancient Greece; however, the character in Valéry’s dialogue is only loosely based on him.

PHÈDRE
Te souvient-il de ces constructions que nous vîmes faire au Pirée ?

SOCRATE
Oui.

PHÈDRE
De ces engins, de ces efforts, de ces flûtes qui les tempéraient de leur musique ; de ces opérations si exactes, de ces progrès à la fois si mystérieux et si clairs ? Quelle confusion, tout d’abord, qui sembla se fondre dans l’ordre ! Quelle solidité, quelle rigueur naquirent
entre ces fils qui donnaient les aplombs, et le long de ces frêles cordeaux tendus pour être
affleurés par la croissance des lits de briques !

SOCRATE
Je garde ce beau souvenir. O matériaux ! Belles pierres !... O trop légers que nous
sommes devenus !

PHÈDRE
Et de ce temple hors les murs, auprès de l’autel de Borée, te souvient-il ?

SOCRATE
Celui d’Artémis la Chasseresse ?

PHÈDRE
Celui-là même. Un jour, nous avons été par là. Nous avons discours de la Beauté...

SOCRATE
Hélas !

PHÈDRE
J’étais lié d’amitié avec celui qui a construit ce temple. Il était de Mégare et s’appelait
Eupalinos. Il me parlait volontiers de son art, de tous les soins et de toutes les
connaissances qu’il demande ; il me faisait comprendre tout ce que je voyais avec lui sur
le chantier. Je voyais surtout son étonnant esprit. Je lui trouvais la puissance d’Orphée.

53 “Je ne sais pas ce qu’il pourrait y construire. Ici, les projets eux-mêmes sont
souvenirs”.

54 “... et il ajouta : J’ai cherché la justesse dans les pensées ; afin que, clairement
engendrées par la considération des choses, elles se changent, comme d’elles-mêmes,
dans les actes de mon art. J’ai distribué mes attentions ; j’ai refait l’ordre des problèmes ;
je commence par où je finissais jadis, pour aller un peu plus loin... Je suis avare de
rêveries, je conçois comme si j’exécutais. Jamais plus dans l’espace informe de mon âme,
je ne contemple de ces édifices imaginaires, qui sont aux édifices réels ce que les
chimères et les gorgones sont aux véritables animaux. Mais ce que je pense est faisable ;
et ce que je fais se rapporte à l’intelligible...”.

55 “Just” or adequate should not be read as conforming mimetically to reality or as the
attempt of perfect reproduction; “just” should be read more in light of its ethical valences,
as the concomitance of attention and distance and the balance between the two in the
artist’s perception of the object.

56 PHÈDRE
Il croyait qu’un navire doit être, en quelque sorte, créé par la connaissance de la mer, et
presque façonné par l’onde même !... Mais cette connaissance consiste, à la vérité, à
remplacer la mer, dans nos raisonnements, par les actions qu’elle exerce sur un corps,—
tellement qu’il s’agisse pour nous de trouver les autres actions qui s’opposent à celles-ci,
et que nous n’ayons plus affaire qu’à un équilibre de pouvoirs, les uns et les autres
empruntés à la
nature […] Mais encore, la mer agitée ne se contente pas de cet équilibre. Tout se
complice avec le mouvement.
57 Eupalinos me fit encore un magnifique tableau de ces constructions gigantesques que l’on admire dans les ports. Elles s’avancent dans la mer. Leurs bras, d’une blancheur absolue et dure, circonscrivent des bassins assoupi dont ils défendent le calme. Ils les gardent en sûreté, paisiblement gorgés de galères, à l’abri des enrochements hérissés et des jetées retentissantes. De hautes tours, où veille quelqu’un, où la flamme des pommes de pin, pendant les nuits impénétrables, danse et fait rage, commandent le large, à l’extrémité écumante des môle... Oser detels travaux, c’est braver Neptune lui-même. [...] 

Tout conspire à l’effet que produisent sur les âmes, ces nobles établissements à demi naturels : la présence de l’horizon pur, la naissance et l’effacement d’une voile, l’émotion du détachement de la terre, le commencement des périls, le seuil étincelant des contrées inconnues ; et l’avidité même des hommes, toute prête à se changer dans une crainte superstitieuse, à peine lui cédent-ils et mettent-ils le pied sur le navire... Ce sont en vérité d’admirables theaters (Valéry, Eupalinos 22-23).

58 — O malheureux, lui dis-je, que veux-tu faire pendant un éclair ? — Être libre. Il y a bien des choses, reprit-il, il y a... toutes choses dans cet instant ; et tout ce dont s’occupent les philosophes se passe entre le regard qui tombe sur un objet, et la connaissance qui en résulte... pour en finir toujours prématurément
— Je ne te comprends pas. Tu t’efforces donc de retarder ces Idées ?
— Il le faut. Je les empêche de me satisfaire, je diffère le pur bonheur.
— Pourquoi ? D’où tires-tu cette force cruelle ?
— C’est qu’il m’importe sur toute chose, d’obtenir de ce qui va être, qu’il satisffasse, avec toute la vigueur de sa nouveauté, aux exigences raisonnables de ce qui a été. Comment ne pas être obscur ?... Écoute : j’ai vu, un jour, telle touffe de roses, et j’en ai fait une cire. Cette cire achevée, je l’ai mise dans le sable. Le Temps rapide réduit les roses à rien ; et le feu rend promptement la cire à sa nature informe. Mais la cire, ayant fui de son moule fomenté et perdue, la liqueur éblouissante du bronze vient épouser dans le sable durci, la creuse identité du moindre pétale...

59 Là même. J’ai trouvé une de ces choses rejetées par la mer ; une chose blanche, et de la plus pure blancheur ; polie, et dure, et douce, et légère. Elle brillait au soleil, sur le sable léché, qui est sombre, et semé d’étincelles. Je la pris ; je soufflai sur elle ; je la frottai sur mon manteau, et sa forme singulière arrêta toutes mes autres pensées. Qui t’a faite ? pensai-je. Tu ne ressembles à rien, et pourtant tu n’es pas informe. Es-tu le jeu de la nature, ô privée de nom, et arrivée à moi, de par les dieux, au milieu des immondices que la mer a répudiées cette nuit ?

60 Which could be a parodic allusion to Doktor Faustus.
I will return in the next chapter to this extremely delicate question of the transformation of the visible in the invisible and of presence into absence; I should note for now that, just as much as presence can be both positively and negatively connoted, so can absence. These distinctions are crucial because, as we have seen in Eupalinos, depending on the positive or negative significations of presence, we are actually dealing with two different definitions of presence.

See the very end of the theoretical introduction to chapter 1 (pp. 18-19).

An extremely useful anthology on this matter is William Franke’s *On What Cannot Be Said* (vols. 1 and 2) which starts with Parmenides and ends with Jean-Luc Marion.

All of these significances can, of course, overlap, they are more orientative, suggesting the emphasis on these issues by the apophatic thinkers, rather than narrowly delimited or opposing concepts.

He is referring to Saint John of the Cross.

I would like to stress the recurrence of the idea of ‘ascension’ in relation to the mode of apophasis; I will return to this idea at the end of the chapter

Signifying “cause”.

Which could be easily identified as Sziget, Wiesel’s own birth-place.

- C’est le nom d’un ange, dit Gregor en murmurant. Il s’appelle Gavriel. L’inconnu émit un petit rire triste:
- Sais-tu ce qu’il signifie? L’homme de Dieu. Drôle de nom, tu ne trouves pas? Ainsi nous apprenons que ce que nous appelons des anges ne sont que des hommes” (Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt* 20).

“Il ne faut pas oublier le rire non plus. Sais-tu ce qu’est le rire? Je vais te le dire. C’est l’erreur de Dieu. En créant l’homme afin de le soumettre à ses desseins, il lui octroya par mégarde la faculté de rire. Il ignorait que plus tard, ce ver de terre s’en servirait comme moyen de vengeance. Lorsqu’il s’en rendit compte, il était déjà trop tard, Dieu n’y pouvait rien. Trop tard pour ôter à l’homme ce pouvoir. Pourtant, il s’y est appliqué. Il le chassa du paradis, inventa à son intention une variété infinie de péchés et de châtiments, lui donna conscience de son propre néant et cela uniquement dans le but de l’empêcher de rire. Trop tard te dis-je. L’erreur de Dieu précéda celle de l’homme: elles ont ceci en commun qu’elles sont irréparables”.

Et comme pour illustrer ses paroles, il rit avec une telle passion que Gregor, pour ne pas se mettre à hurler, dut se boucher les oreilles (Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt* 29).

D’où viens-tu? demanda Gregor.

De là-bas.

Ou exactement se situe ‘là-bas’?


“Sa voix a l’accent irréal provient d’un autre monde” (Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt* 18).
“La mort n’a pas de prise sur moi” (Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt* 44).


I would like to note the drastic shift of the subject-object polarity. Here, it is not a question of “being objectified” (like in postmodernist, post-Marxist discourse) but rather of being subjectified, that is, becoming even more truly and authentically a subject through the experience of excessive absence.

Here, I am using presence like Nancy does, in order to refer to the “real world”.

“Enfant, il avait peur de la forêt, même en plein jour. On lui avait dit qu’elle abritait des loups sauvages qui vous prennent la vie, des êtres sanguinaires qui vous dérobent la fierté et de créatures maléfiques envoyées sur terre afin de détourner l’homme de sa voie: elles emprisonnent votre regard, plient votre élan. […] Rien ne sert de fuir cette forêt, elle est partout; elle est ce qui sépare l’homme de l’image qu’il se forge de son destin, de la mort de ce destin. Qui donc t’a ouvert les yeux, Gregor? Lui. Cela faisait mal? Oui et non (Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt* 12).

Nous sommes prisonniers de cette forêt qui, tel un être vivant, retient son souffle et, courieuse, avance et s’incline en tendant l’oreille pour ne pas perdre le moindre froissement, le moindre chuchotement: rien ne doit lui échapper, rien ne peut se produire en dehors son étreinte. Nous sommes prisonniers de cette folie” (Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt* 129).

Symbolically, the cave in the novel corresponds to the moment of the desert in Sohravardi’s recital.

“– Cela ne fait rien, dit Gavriel. N’aie pas peur.
- Peur?
- Chez nous on disait que lorsque l’ombre vous quitte, vous mourrez dans les trente jours. Elle est lâche, l’ombre, elle se refuse à suivre le corps dans le néant. Ceci t’explique pour quoi, dans notre monde, il y a plus d’ombres que d’êtres vivants.
- Donc, je mourrai dans les trente jours qui viennent?
- Je n’ai pas dit cela, j’ai dit: n’aie pas peur.
Gavriel se pencha légèrement vers son compagnon et ajouta:
- Je serai ton ombre, je te protégerai” (Wiesel, *Les portes de la forêt* 33).

We are reminded here of Gregory of Nyssa’s comment on the apophatic way as necessarily following the revelation of presence and light. In similar manner, after this first, incontrovertible encounter with Gavriel, Gregor will only experience him as absence and loss.
“- Quel est ton nom?
- Je n’en ai point.
Gregor ne dissimula guère son étonnement:
- Tout le monde en a un, dit-il.
- Soit. Mais moi, je l’ai perdu” (17).
“- Ecoute, j’ai une idée. Mon nom, je ne m’en sens plus. Je te l’offre, il est tien. Prends-le, Gavriel. […]
- Tu aimes donner, pas vrai?
- Oui, admit Gregor. C’est plus facile.
- Pas du tout. Rien n’est plus difficile.
Il ajouta comme à lui-même:
- Pour les Orientaux, donner est un privilège qu’il faut mériter” (Wiesel, Les portes de la forêt 17-23).

“Tu vois, Maria, ce n’est pas moi qui ai frappé à ta porte. C’est lui, l’étranger qui m’habite, c’est lui qui a frappé, c’est lui qui t’a fait descendre du lit. Il est puissant, tu dois le reconnaitre, non?” (Wiesel, Les portes de la forêt 68)

“C’est inhumain de vouloir s’enfermer dans la douleur, dans le souvenir, comme dans une prison sans porte, sans air. La souffrance doit nous ouvrir à autrui et non faire de lui un étranger. Le Talmud dit que Dieu souffre avec l’homme: pour quoi? Pour renforcer les liens entre la création et le créateur; c’est pour mieux comprendre l’homme et se faire mieux comprendre de lui que Dieu choisit la souffrance. Or toi, tu cherches à souffrir seul. Cette souffrance te retrécit, te diminue, elle est proche de la cruauté” (Wiesel, Les portes de la forêt 190).

“Si je reste en vie, pensa-t-il, je consacrerais mes années à éclaircir cette question. Ce sera le but de mon existence. Je deviendrai lui pour mieux le saisir, peut-être le comprendre et l’aimer; l’aimer sans le comprendre” (Wiesel, Les portes de la forêt 49).

“Gregor n’osait l’interroger, n’osait s’introduire dans ce monde clos ou choses et evenements devaient avoir un sens secret, un lien secret, echappant a l’entendement, un sens malade, un lien malade” (Wiesel, Les portes de la forêt 26).

Le miracle de la forêt: rien de ce qui s’y dit ne se perd. Le saint et le solitaire – peut-être c’est le même – y viennent non seulement pour se purifier le corps et la passion, surtout la passion, mais surtout pour écouter en tremblant, pour trembler en écoutant cette voix mugissante qui, avant la création première, avant la libération du verbe, contenait déjà la forme et la matière, contenait déjà la forme et la matière – la joie e sa défaite – et ce qui les separe et ce qui les concilie – a partir desquels furent petris l’univers, le temps et leur vie secrete” (Wiesel, Les portes de la forêt 129).

“Les hassidim dansent sur place, verticalement, imposant leur rythme à la terre. Que les murs s’écroulent, tant pis, cela prouvera qu’aucune enceinte n’est assez large pour contenir leur ferveur. Ils chantent et c’est le chant qui les fait vivre, qui les emplit de sève, qui les unit; […] oui, il fut un temps où Dieu et l’homme ne faisaient qu’un, puis
ils se seprèrent et depuis ils se cherchent, se poursuivent, se proclament invincibles, et tant que durera la fête, ils seront” (Wiesel, Les portes de la forêt 201).

90 “I had lost a paradise, the years of my clear and primal youth, happy and without problems. Suddenly I found myself cut off from my past without the consolation of those soothing shades of blue [he is referring to the sea]. My health had again deteriorated, and I felt a deep sense of emptiness. I began little by little to withdraw from my friends, the café chit-chit, the Residencia, and even from the city itself. A creature of darkness, I began to write blindly at any hour of the night in my room and with a kind of unbidden automatism, spurred on by a trembling, feverish spontaneity […]. My language became harsh, dangerous, as sharp as a sword point. The rhythms crumbled into pieces. Each angel first appeared as a spark and then ascended in columns of smoke, into funnels of ashes and clouds of dust. But what I wrote was not all that obscure, and the most confused and nebulous thoughts assumed the form and reptilian movement of a snake in flames” (Alberti, “Preface” to Concerning the Angels XII).

91 “Tras de mí, imperceptible,/ sin rozarme los hombros/ mi ángel muerto, vigía” (Alberti 4).

92 “Adónde el Paraíso,/ sombra, tú que has estado?/ Pregunta con silencio” (Alberti 4).

93 “Ciudades sin respuesta,/ ríos sin habla, cumbers/ sin ecos, mares mudos” (Alberti 4).

94 “Nadie lo sabe. Hombres/ fíjos, de pie, a la orilla/ parade de las tumbas,/ me ignoran” (Alberti 4).

95 “Diluidos, sin forma/ la verdad que en sí ocultan,/ huyen de mí los cielos” (Alberti 6).

96 “Oh boquete de sombras!/ Hervidero del mundo!/ Que confusión de siglos!/ Atrás, atrás! Qué espanto/ de tinieblas sin voces! Qué confusión de siglos!” (Alberti 6).

97 “- Angel muerto, despierta./ Dónde estás? Ilumina/ con tu rayo el retorno” (Alberti 6).

98 “Silencio. Más silencio. Immóviles los pulsos/ del sinfín de la noche./ Paraíso perdido!/ Perdido por buscarte,/ yo, sin luz para siempre” (Alberti 6).


100 “Cinco manos de ceniza,/ quemando la brumo, abriendo/ cinco vías/ para el agua turbia, para el turbio viento” (Alberti 56).

101 “Espíritus de seis alas/ seis espíritus pajizos,/ me empujaban./ Seis ascuas/ […] Seis ascuas,/ oculto el nombre y las caras,/ empujándome de prisa./ Paradme! Nada/ Parame todo, un momento!/ Nada./ No querían/ que yo me parara en nada” (Alberti 60).

102 “cuatro ecos, arriba, escapándose./ A la luz,/ a los cielos,/ a los aires” (Alberti 84).
“Nostalgia de los arcángeles!/ Yo era…/ Miradme./ […] Por los calles, quién se acuerda?/ Zapatos son mis sandalias./ Mi tunica, pantalones/ y chaqueta inglesa. Dime quién soy./ Y, sin embargo, yo era…/ Miradme” (Alberti 12).

“Remolinos de ciudades/ bajan los desfiladeros./ Ciudades des viento sur,/ que me vieron./ […] Gentío de mar y tierra,/ nombres, preguntas, recuerdos,/ frente a frente./ Balumbas de frío encono,/ cuerpo a cuerpo” (Alberti 32).

“Y se derrumban murallas,/ los fuertes de las ciudades/ que me velaban/. Y se derrumban los torres,/ las empinadas/ centinelas de mi sueño./ Y el viento,/ la tierra,/ la noche” (Alberti 18).

“Te invito, sombra, al aire./ Sombra de veinte siglos,/ a la verdad del aire,/ del aire, aire, aire./ […] Sombra sin luz, minera/ por las profundidades/ de veinte tumbas, veinte/ siglos huecos sin aire,/ sin aire, aire, aire./ Sombra, a los picos, sombra,/ de la verdad del aire,/ del aire, aire, aire!” (Alberti 42).

“No conoce las ciudades./ No las recuerda./ Va muerto./ Muerto, de pie, por las calles./ No le preguntéis. Prendedle!/ No, dejadle./ Sin ojoz, sin voz, sin sombra./ Ya, sin sombra./ Invisibile para el mundo,/ para nadie” (Alberti 20).

“Y fui derrotada/ yo, sin violencia,/ con miel y palabras” (Alberti 42).

“Son puertas de sangre,/ milenios de odios,/ lluvias de rencores, mares./ Qué te hice, dime/ para que los saltes?/ Para que con tu agrio aliento/ me incendies todos mis ángeles?/ Hachas y relámpagos/ de poco me valen./ Noches armadas, ni vientos/ leales./ Rompes y me asaltas./ Cautivo me traes/ a tu luz, que non es la mía,/ para tornearme./ A tu luz agria, tan agria,/ que no muerde nadie” (Alberti 48).

“- Levántate! Y mis ojos/ vieron plumas y espadas./ Atrás, montes y mares,/ nubes, picos y alas,/ los ocasos, las albas” (Alberti 26).

“Quemando los fríos,/ tu voz prendió en mí:/ ven e mi país./ Te esperan ciudades,/ sin vivos ni muertos,/ para coronarte./ - Me duermo./ No me espera nadie” (Alberti 38).

“Hulo luz que trajo/ por hueso una almendra amarga./ Voz que por sonido,/ el fleco de la lluvia,/ cortado por un hacha./ Alma que por cuerpo,/ la funda del aire,/ de una doble espada./ Venas que por sangre,/ yel de mirra y de retama./ Cuerpo que por alma,/ el vacío, nada” (Alberti 44).

“muerta en mí la esperanza/ ese portico verde/ busco en las negras simas” (Alberti 6).

“Tú. Yo. (Luna.) Al estanque./ Brazos verdes y sombras/ te apretaban el talle” (Alberti 18).
“Ni sol, luna, ni estrellas,/ ni el repentino verde/ del rayo el relámpago/, ni el aire. Sólo nieblas” (Alberti 34).

“Era anterior al arpa, a la lluvia y a las palabras./ No sabía./ Blanca alumna del aire,/ temblaba con las estrellas, con la flor y los árboles./ Su tallo, su verde talle” (Alberti 102).

“Madrugada./ La luz, muerta en las esquinas/ y en las casas./ Los hombres y las mujeres/ ya no estaban” (Alberti 14).


“Y en las muertas pizarras,/ el angel de los números,/ sin vida, amortajado/ sobre el 1 y el 2,/ sobre el 3, sobre el 4” (Alberti 34).

“Ciudades deshabitados/ se pueblan, de pronto. Trenes/ descarrilados, unidos/ marchan./ Naufragios antiguos flotan./ La luz moja el pie en el agua./ […] Campanas!/ Una carta del cielo bajó un angel” (Alberti 50).

“Angel de luz, ardiendo,/ oh, ven!, y con tu espada/ incendia los abismos donde yace/ mi subterráneo angel de las nieblas./ […] Quémalo, ángel de luz, custodio mío,/ tú que andabas llorando por las nubes,/ tú, sin mí, tú, por mí./ ángel frío de polvo, ya sin gloria,/ volcado en las tinieblas! Quémalo, ángel de luz,/ quémame y huye!” (Alberti 54).

“no creíste ni en Venus que nacía en el compass abierto de tus brazos/ ni en las escalas de plumas que tiende el sueño de Jacob al de Julio Verne” (Alberti 120).

“Y no viste./ Era su luz la que cayó primero./ Mírala, seca, en el suelo./ Y no oliste./ Era su esencia la que hendió el silencio./ Huélela fría, en el viento./ Y no gustaste./ Era su nombre el que rodó deshecho./ Gústalo, en tu lengua, muerto./ Y no tocaste./ El desaparecido era su cuerpo./ Tócalo en la nada, yelo” (Alberti 56-58).

“Feo, de hollin y fango./ No verte! Antes, de nieve, âureo,/ en trineo por mi alma./ Cuajados pinos. Pendientes./ Y ahora por las cocheras,/ de carbon, sucio./ Te lleven!” (Alberti 68).

“Esa alma en pena, sola,/ esa alma en pena siempre perseguida/ por un resplandor muerto./ Por un muerto./ […] Catástrofes celestes tiran al mundo escombros,/ alas rotas, laúdes, cuerdas de arpas,/ restos de ángeles./ No hay entrada en el cielo para nadie./ En pena, siempre en pena,/ alma perseguida./ A contraluz siempre,/ nunca alcanzada, sola,/ alma sola” (Alberti 88).

“Que un cabalo sin nadie va estampando/ a su amazona antigua por los murros./ Que en las almenas grita, muerto, alguien/ que yo toque, dormido, en un espejo,/ que yo, mudo, le dije../No sé./ Explicádmelo” (Alberti 82).
“Temblores subterráneos le sacuden la frente./ Tumbos de tierra desprendida,/ ecos
dessvariados,/ sones confuses de piquetas y azadas,/ los oídos./ Los ojos,/ luces de
acetileno,/ húmedos, áureas galerías./ El corazón,/ explosiones de piedras, júbilos,
dinamita./ Sueña con las minas” (Alberti 94).

“Detrás de ti, sin cuerpo,/ sin alma./ Ahumada voz de sueño/ cortado./ Ahumada voz/
cortada” (Alberti 66).

“Amor, pulpo de sombra,/ malo” (Alberti 68).

“Sur./ Campo metálico, seco./ Plano, sin alma, mi cuerpo” (Alberti 76).

“Cerrojos, llaves, puertas/ saltan a deshora/ y cortinas heladas en la noche se alargan,/ se
estiran/ se inciandan,/ se prolongan./ Te conozco,/ Te recuerdo,/ bujía inerte, lúcido
halo, nimbo difunto” (Alberti 88).

“Quién eres tú, dínos, que no te recordamos/ ni de la tierra ni del cielo?/ Tu sombra,
dinos, de qué espacio?/ Qué luz la prolongó, habla, hasta nuestro reinado?/ De dónde
vienes, dínos/ que no te recordamos?” (Alberti 74).

“Ya sabéis que mi boca es un pozo de nombres,/ de numeros y letras difuntos./ Que
los ecos se hastían sin mis palabras./ y lo que jamás dije despacija y odia al viento./ Nada
tenéis que oír./ Dejadme!” (Alberti 96).

“Se movió mudo el silencio/ y dijo algo./ No dijo nada” (Alberti 70).

“Vino el que yo quería/ el que yo llamaba./[…]/ No aquel que a sus cabellos/ ató la
muerte./ El que you quería./ Sin arañar los aires,/ sin herir hojas ni mover cristales./
Aquel que a sus cabellos/ ató el silencio./ Para, sin lastimarme,/ cavar una ribeera de luz
dulce en mi pecho/ y hacerme el alma navegable” (Alberti 92).

The reference to the absent God is clear in this instance: “Think about that hour:/ when the invisible eyes of the bedrooms/ rebelled against a king in the shadows” (Alberti 97).

In terms of Corbin’s hermeneutics of revelation, we could say that this is the apogee of the “tanzil” – the external significance of revelation which is accompanied by a
movement of ascent; in this hermeneutics, we will remember, tawil represents the hidden,
esoteric significance of the angelophany and it signifies precisely, the return, the
movement of descent.

“Pensad en aquella hora:/ cunado se rebelaron contra un rey en tinieblas/ los ojos
invisibles de los alcobas” (Alberti 96).

“No habían cumplido años ni la rosa ni el arcángel./ Todo, anterior al balido y al
llanto./ Cuando la luz ignoraba todavía/ si el mar nacería niño o niña./ […] Todo, anterior
al cuerpo, al nombre y al tiempo./ Entonces, yo recuerdo que, una vez, en el cielo…” (Alberti 102).

140 Era anterior al arpa, a la lluvia y a las palabras./ No sabía./ Blanca alumna del aire,/ temblaba con las estrellas, con la flor y los árboles./ Su tallo, su verde talle” (Alberti 102).

141 In the Spanish version, “then” appears as “entonces” which signifies rather “therefore”.

142 “También antes,/ mucho antes de la rebelión de las sombras,/ de que al mundo cayeran plumas incendiadas/ y un pájaro pudiera ser muerto por un lirio./ Antes, antes que tu me preguntaras/ el número y el sitio de mi cuerpo./ Muchos antes del cuerpo./ En la época del alma./ Cuando tú abriste en la frente sin corona, del cielo,/ la primera dinastía del sueño./ Cuando tú, al mirarme en la nada,/ inventaste la primera palabra./ Entonces, nuestro encuentro” (Alberti 104).

143 “Cuando para mí eran los trigos viviendas de astros y dioses/ y la escarcha de los llores helados de una gacela,/ alguien me enyesó el pecho y la sombra,/ traicionándome.” (Alberti 112).

144 “Hay noches en que las horas se hacen de piedra en los espacios,/ en que las venas no andan/ y los silencios y erguen siglos y dioses futuros./ Un relámpago baraja las lenguas y trastorna los palabras” (Alberti 134).

145 “Mirad esto también, antes que demos sepulture al viaje:/ cunado una sombra se entrecoge las uñas en las bisagras de las puertas/ o el pie helado de un angel sufre el insomnio fijo de una piedra,/ mi alma sin saberlo se perfecciona” (Alberti 148).

146 It would be a bit counterintuitive to say that all this is possible because we are in the domain of language and therefore fiction and unreality. This is the danger against which Ricoeur has warned us and which he has deconstructed in his own take on revelation which I have commented on in the first part of this chapter. I would like to add to this the following: we can always wonder what there is to be gained by labeling everything (all this complexity) as fiction or as a lie; but even more importantly, we can wonder what is lost with this label. In many respects, this thesis is an attempt to answer this last question.
Glossary

Amor fati (Lat.) – ‘love of (one’s) fate’; appears in Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* and in Weil’s *La pesanteur et la grâce*.

Apotheosis (Gk.) – deification.

Acedia (Gk.) – melancholy, listlessness, torpor.

Angelophany – the manifestation/revelation of angels.

*Aphaeresis* (Gk.) – “to take away”.

Apophasis – from Greek *apophanai*, ‘to say no’, ‘to deny’. It refers to a mode of discourse which says without naming, refers without referring.

*Aurora consurgens* (Lat.) – the rising star. Also appearing as the title of a 15th century illuminated manuscript about alchemy.

*Cognitio matutina* (Lat.) – auroral knowledge.

*Cognitio vespertina* (Lat.) – knowledge of the dusk.

*Daimon* (Gk.) – In Plato’s Symposium, they are supernatural beings between mortals and Gods.

*Daimonion* (Gk.) – Socrates’ tutelary spirit; a higher daimon.

*Deus absconditus* – the hidden God.

*Deus revelatus* – the revealed God.

*Docta ignorantia* (Lat.) – “learned ignorance”; Nicholas of Cusa’s terminology.

Epiphany – from Gk. *Epiphaneia*, meaning “manifestation, striking appearance”; related to the revelation of the supernatural.

*Hassid* (pl. Hassidim) Lat. – “sect of Orthodox Jews that arose out of a pietistic movement originating in eastern Europe in the second half of the 18th century; a sect that follows the Mosaic law strictly” ([http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Hassid](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Hassid)).

*Horror vacui* (Lat.) – an Aristotelian term, used to designate nature’s rejection of empty space and its attempt to always fill in the blind spots.
Heterotopia – literally: “different spaces”; Foucault uses this term to designate those marginal, liminal spaces which have the capacity of both revealing the illusory nature of reality as well as instituting a new, different perspective of reality.

*Iconostasis* (Gk.) – ‘icon stand’, the wall separating the nave from the sanctuary.

*Imitatio angelica* (Lat.) – imitation of angels; refers to the angels’ roles as guides, horizons to be attained.

*Inspicere* (also respicere) Lat. – to observe, to analyze.

*Ishrâq* (Ar.) – meaning ‘light’. Here, it refers to Sohravardi’s ‘doctrine of lights’.

Jetzt-zeit (Ger.) – ‘now-moment’.

*Kenosis* (Gk.) – emptying (of the self); one of the modes of *apophasis*.

*Malak-Yahve* (Heb.) – “the angel of God”.

*Methorios* (Gk.) – horizon.

*Mundus imaginalis* (Lat.) – also called Alam al-Mithal, mundus archetypus, is a realm of intermediary reality, where spirits are embodied and bodies are spiritualized. It coincides with imaginatio vera (true imagination), which appears, in Corbin’s writings as “creative imagination”.

Mystagogic – which pertains to the mysteries, initiatic.

*Nâ-kojâ-âbâd* (Ar.) – “the realm of nowhere”, a term invented by Sohravardi.

*Noli me tangere* (Lat.) – the words addressed by Christ to Mary Magdalene after His Resurrection, signifying “do not touch me”.

*Nunc fluens* – fleeting, passing instant.

*Nunc stans* – eternal instant.

*(the) One* – the designation of God in Plotinian cosmology.

*Parergon* (Lat.) – literally: *para  ergon*, meaning ‘around the work’; in Derrida’s text from *The Truth In Painting* referring to the space of the frame as a space of connection of the exterior with the interior.

*Parousia* (Gk.) – presence arrival, derived from 'para-': beside, beyond, and 'ousia': substance; designating the second coming of Christ.
Penia (Gk.) – the name of the goddess of poverty in Plato’s *Symposium*; another mode of *apophasis*.

Phantasis (Lat.) – the fantastic; here, the opposite of creative imagination.

Pleroma (Gk.) – the entire world of the divine – a world of ‘fullness’.

Prosotchē – also as “proseuche” or “prosuke”: "A place in the open air where the Jews were wont to pray, outside of those cities where they had no synagogue," *Lexicon of the New Testament*.

Punctum caecum (Lat.) – the eye’s blind spot.

Shoah (Heb.) – ‘calamity’; refers to the Holocaust.

Simploke (Gk.) – complexity; a rhetorical figure which combines anaphora with epiphora.

Shushan Sodoth (Heb.)- the ‘Rose of Mysteries’; related to the Kabbala.

Sophianic/Sophiologic – related to Sophia, the female divinity of Gnosticism. In Bulgakov’s writings, it refers to the creationist, positive aspect of the world and is epitomized by the Virgin Mary.

Sub limen (Lat.) – “underneath the limit”; it is the etymological root of ‘sublime’.

Tanzîl (Ar.) – descent.
- the exoteric sense.

Ta’wil (Ar.) – interpretation, explanation.
- the hidden, esoteric sense of the Qu’ran
- in Corbin: the final stage of the hermeneutics of revelation.

Theophany – revelation of God.

Vanitas vanitatum (Lat.) – first part of “vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas”, meaning “vanity of vanities and all is vanity”, in the *Ecclesiasts*.

Via negativa (Lat.) – the negative way; related to apophasis.

Zelem (Heb.) – or ‘demuth’; man’s celestial image, the originary angelic form.
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