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Announcings

Babette Babich

Fordham, babich@fordham.edu

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Announcings

To speak about the doctrine of the immaculate conception is also to evoke the beauty of the sheer idea of the immaculate conception. And following Stendahl's conviction that «*La beauté n'est que la promesse du Bonheur*» as this also has found its expression in Alexander Nehamas where he writes in his book *Only a Promise of Happiness*, on "the place of beauty in a world of Art", this same ideal of the unsullied, of the immaculate, is also a perspective expressing and expressed from a male perspective ideal, if it captivates women's fantasies no less. By contrast with this conception of the immaculate, there is no



William Adolphe Bouguereau,
Baigneuse accroupie

shortage of paintings that offer more, as Nehamas suggests referring to the (not particularly sacred) example of William Adolphe Bouguereau's *Seated Bather* (1884), conventionally sensual ideations of the female object, likewise from the male perspective. Thus Nehamas clarifies Bouguereau's painting, with a kind of gentle apology, as «primarily a painting *for men*»¹, explaining that the

«open picture plane and spatial recession of Bouguereau's picture issue an invitation to the viewer and encourage him [...] to enjoy the radiant sensuality of the young woman's flesh, soft and bright against the dark and craggy background»².

¹ A. Nehamas, *Only the Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*, University of Princeton Press, Princeton 2007, p. 25. My emphasis here.

² *Ibidem*.

Elsewhere I emphasize the regrettable lack of paintings that might be described similarly, that is: as “primarily” paintings for women – just because there are effectively none of these. What sensual depictions of men may be found in art are likewise “primarily” paintings “for men”³. Women rarely take the role of the objective/subjective observer of the male, no matter whether immaculate or otherwise. And yet the idea of an unmediated apprehension, as Nietzsche mockingly spoke of “immaculate perception” (Za II, *Von der unbefleckten Erkenntnis*), dominates all of our philosophy: all our politics and all our ethics, our epistemologies (analytic and continental), our aesthetic theologies, and so on and so on.

By contrast, however, paintings of the annunciation allow us to view a very different kind of feminine object. Note that I am not here about to undertake to read this in terms of feminist critique (this has been done)⁴. For this particular object *qua* subject of representation is the means for nothing less than the salvation of the world: Mary is herself the highest human being; above Joseph, above all of Jesus’ later disciples. And all of this happens by way of, by means of, a word only.



Beato Angelico, *Annunciazione*

³ This is the theme of the first section of B. Babich, *The Hallelujah Effect*, Ashgate, Surrey 2013, especially in sections contrasting male desire and female desire but I also reprise the theme (again with reference to Nehamas’s Bougeureau) in B. Babich, *The Aesthetics of the Between: On Beauty and Artbooks – Museums and Artists*, in «Culture, Theory, Critique» 1 (2014), pp. 1-28.

⁴ Elizabeth Losh looks at the iconography of paintings of the annunciations: see E. Losh, *Between the Angel and the Book: The Female Reading Subject of Early Modern Flemish Annunciation Painting*, <https://eee.uci.edu/faculty/losh/pubs/Angel.htm>. See also Carolina Núñez Puente’s chapter *The Dialogical Feminine: The Chronotype of Pregnancy in “Annunciation”*, in Ead., *Feminism and Dialogics: Charlotte Perking Meridel Le Sueur, Mikhail M. Bakhtin*, puv, Universitat de València 2006, pp. 41-72.

The story is more complicated than we think – just as we might expect from a New Testament account. There are variations, some including non-standard gospels, and to a certain extent the Annunciation as such is also the breaking point between Catholicism and Protestantism. Not all Protestants, but many, exclude the virgin birth and if and when they do, they exclude the Annunciation⁵. Here I am going to talk about some images just to the extent that when it comes to the Annunciation there are rather more of these than one can think – it is a common artistic motif and is often written about, so much so that one can hardly review the literature and I will not try. And just to this same extent everyone is familiar with the Annunciation, even those of us who are not believers or who do not have, as Julia Kristeva says that she has, “her” own Annunciation. And if this in turn is part of a certain esoteric cult of Mary, another part of this is bigger than what can be regarded as a classical focus on the eternal womanly alone.

The Annunciation bespeaks a numinous and real encounter: the Annunciation is how the word becomes flesh and dwells on earth among the rest of us. The Annunciation is ours, Mary is ours. Kristeva’s identification of this as a “prior to the beginning”, or “before-the- word”, as Gary Waller cites Kristeva’s claim to “her” Mary and her saints, is part of this. It is the reason it cannot be gotten around but more than this it is the very idea of the word incarnate, made incarnate, by sheer announcement. An angel, Gabriel, comes on behalf of the Lord, to greet, to detail what is announced and to specify what it will mean, and to accept assent.

It is an RSVP.

If we read the gospel as Luke tells this, we learn that “in the sixth month” – and already our minds are calculating, that would be June, from thence to December is only another six months: this cannot be right; no, this must be Elizabeth. But just how long is this told before Mary’s marriage, she is only just betrothed? – and I cite the popular and current Catholic version for precision:

«the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. And the an-

⁵ G. Waller, *A Cultural Study of Mary and the Annunciation: From Luke to the Enlightenment*, Pickering and Chatto, London 2015, p. 11 ff. Waller points to the complexity of the account as well as to the sheer difficulty of giving an overview (what perspective shall one take? Is this a matter of scholarship, is it a matter of belief?) also gives a brief overview of feminist and religious critique.

gel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end". And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible". And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word". And the angel departed from her» (*Luke 1,26-38*).

We have to do with a miracle, a miraculous appearance. For Gabriel is a messenger of God and what he comes to tell the virgin is that she has pleased the Lord. Having thus «found favor with God», Mary is told «And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus». The virgin is perturbed by the language used. She is struck or surprised to be hailed by an angel, "troubled" by the meaning of the words themselves, of what it is to think what it might be, what it might mean to "please" the Lord, and to be "full of grace".

And we note that like Zeus, God himself finds that virgins attract him – he favors her – and on God's own behalf, the angel promises Mary wonderful things not to be sure for herself but, speaking as vaguely as all divine communications tend to be vague, rather that her son will be "great", promising that he «will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end».

This is familiar: when one thinks of a child one plans not only on a baby but on all the great things that child might live to do. So Mary is promised a child with every glory that might be heaped on an unborn head. And to set her confusion at ease (she has no husband), the angel answers her: «The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God». This sentence might still be unclear, so the angel speaks parabolically so that she might understand, thereby also giving the faithful to think that where one miracle is at hand, any number of others might also perhaps be had: «And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible».

This is the kind of fulfillment prayer ordinary people will understand: a barren woman has already conceived, too old to bear a child, and she, this relative of Mary's, and hence someone she knows, Elizabeth, is sixth months pregnant. The Old Testament is here reprised, a child can be born to those in old age, as a sign of divine favor, the impossible can come to pass. But what is that but a regular conception, just one with an elderly father? A conception in a man's old age, though difficult, is not unknown, but with an old woman, there one has the sense that this is a miracle and further still, even apart from age, with a woman not otherwise known to be fertile, that is: proven infertile, hence the language of "barrenness", the fruitfulness that comes to pass is a sign of grace.

We receive all things from God.

The difference here is the absolute absence of the male. Mary, without a husband, yet with the favor of the Lord, is promised that «The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you». As a result, i.e., «therefore», she is told, «the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God».

This is extraordinary favoring, this is the union of the divine with the mortal and this congress occurs without bodily contact. This is the first line of Hölderlin's *Patmos*: «*Nah ist/Und schwer zu fassen der Gott*»⁶.

It is by and through «The Holy Spirit» that «the power of the Most High will overshadow you». And this is rare as Hölderlin writes in *Bread and Wine*: «For not always a frail, a delicate vessel can hold them./Only at times can our kind bear the full impact of gods»⁷.

This deity is then really new. This is not the same as the Zeus we know from his mythic exploits, not even the same as the Adonai of the Old Testament visiting and drinking tea with Abraham in his tents. But generation between divinity and mortal is also and at the same time well attested and this generation takes place in just this way, that is to say, begotten not made, begotten on women, as the Greek gods had always done, thus Dionysus, thus Herakles, as Hölderlin famously connects the Syrian, this is Christ, or as he reflects «*Oder er kam auch selbst und nahm des Menschen Gestalt an*», in his *Brot und Wein*⁸, all demigods, all begotten on mortal women. This God does not take the form of a Swan, or a Bull, nor indeed as a shower of gold, hence the association with shining beauty (rendering the temptation for Psyche to catch a glimpse

⁶ Near and/Hard to grasp is the God.

⁷ «Denn nicht immer vermag ein schwaches Gefäß sie zu fassen,/Nur zu Zeiten erträgt göttliche Fülle der Mensch» (F. Hölderlin, *Brot und Wein*).

⁸ Else he would come himself, assuming a shape that was human.

of her Eros irresistible), much less a thunderbolt that blasts the mortal form, permitting the deity in the case of Zeus to take over both pregnancy *and* birth, of himself, Dionysos, the twice born.

So we might say we “love” the story. The Annunciation tells us of the highest of all human beings, conceived without sin herself, so that she herself could be this vessel, so that she might find favor with the Lord, so that she might conceive without sin, blameless, the Most High, “the son of God”. And her reply: «Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word».

The word from her mouth to God’s ear, and what transpires is the miracle of salvation, namely the incarnation: it is the divine taking of full human form through the assent of this «handmaid of the Lord», who says – and this saying is essential, for with this the angel departs – «let it be to me according to your word».

Full competence, «with God nothing will be impossible», is now combined with consummate incompetence, with vulnerability unto death, which is the meaning of mortality, the meaning of being human. How shall we understand this? It turns out that just this story breaks Christianity itself in two: not everyone can accept this literality: if the shadow of the Lord is sufficient then the shadow of the Lord is compatible, co-possible, with Joseph too as the human or mortal father of Jesus. As already noted, virgin births – that is to say, accounts that tell of babies born to women who have no husbands – could be said to happen every day.

We are familiar with paintings of the Annunciation, some of these feature no more than an encounter between angel and virgin as in Fra Angelico’s frescoes. In many of these paintings, and the Fra Angelico below is here exemplary, there is a veritably Augustinian mirroring of both piety and purity between these two figures, one a messenger from heaven, the other the handmaiden of the Lord. There is the word itself, illuminated: gold.

The book on Mary’s lap matters because it shows that Mary is no idler but not less because the word made flesh is akin to the revealed word. It is not merely that, as Erwin Panofsky says, one of the iconic attributes of Mary is the book as such⁹. Rather this is also important because, as we know from the tradition of the text, as Augustine himself tells us, but as Ivan Illich takes care to remind us in his book about books, *In The Vineyard of the Text*¹⁰, to read is always also to

⁹ Erwin Panofsky writes: «[T]he main attribute of the Annunciate is a prayer book» (E. Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1958, p. 131).

¹⁰ I. Illich, *In The Vineyard of the Text*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1993.

hear because, by reading, breath gives voice to the word, it enfleshes, embodies, articulates the word.



Beato Angelico, *Annunciazione di Cortona*

We see more than Mary's piety, we see that she is not otherwise comporting herself, rather as some other virgins might be said to do (in their spare time). Her modesty extends to her spare time, that she has no husband means, as this will also be an issue for Joseph, that she has not known a man. The greatness of this child is that he, son of Man as he is also called in Mary's name, and not in the name of Joseph, is the Son of God alone. And the son of Mary.

And yet.

Joseph is the father of Mary's son in the full, legal and proper sense. In accord with canon and Roman law, to this day still binding in some communities, all that is needed for paternity, the sole thing required for a father to acknowledge paternity, is the father's recognition. That Joseph does not put Mary away when she is with child is all that is needed for the son of that union to be his own son. Fatherhood in the sense of having engendered the child takes second place to the importance of recognizing the child as of his line. Thus they need to go up to Bethlehem to register for a certain census, and Jesus is, as Joseph is, of the house of David.

«*Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich*»: «*But she was greatly troubled at the saying*»

In another essay on the destruction of the power of suns, that is on the atomic devastation wreaked against two Japanese cities, I quoted, as many people quote, Walter Benjamin who, for his own tragically ontic reasons, could not have known anything of these bombings, but wrote of the angel of history, blown backward by the recording force of his witness¹¹. There I quoted too, as I quote here, from Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, «*Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich*».

Aren't they all? I wondered?



Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*

Where are you when you see angels?

Well: the answer in the case of the virgin is a bit different from the angel inspired by the oddly staring Klee painting of an Angel, fronting the wreckage of the past, facing the viewer, who is thus inscribed not into the future, into living life, but and just that same history. For Mary is named, greeted, visited by the angel, Gabriel who comes to her in the town where she lives, with a message from God.

¹¹ B. Babich, *Angels, the Space of Time, and Apocalyptic Blindness: On Günther Anders' Endzeit – Endtime*, in «*Etica & Politica/ Ethics & Politics*» 1(2013), pp. 144-174.

Now, and to be sure, the angel should disturb us: Mary's fright is more than justified. And maybe the angel himself is to be blamed? There is a reason we are warned not to kill the messenger. For, how do we, placed where we are, knowing we can know (and cannot know) of the divine, of holy things, of good and of evil, how can we know, how can Mary know, that he comes from the Lord? How do we know who sent him? And what is the spirit he brings along with him? What spirit comes upon the virgin?

And, possibly to abate the brunt of this and related suspicions, the Bruges painter, Gerard David, offers us dual panels: *Archangel Gabriel* and *The Virgin Annunciate*, thus separating the angel from the virgin by a physical frame, two paintings, like a bundling board, eliminating the (possible) suspicion of angelic congress.



Gerard David, *Archangel Gabriel
and The Virgin Annunciate*



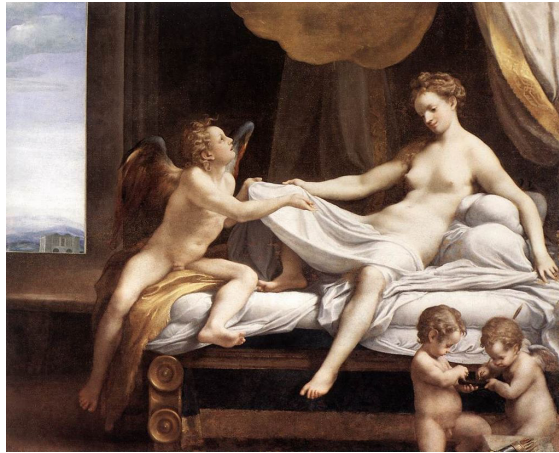
Jean Hey, Le Maître de Moulins,
L'Annonciation

In other paintings, such as that by the Master of Moulins, Jean Hay, *Annunciation*, the angel arrives like a visitor at the door, just as Luke's gospel tells us. Perhaps the angel is more than the occasion of an announcement. Thus in Hay's painting, as in many others, like Fra Angelico above and many, many more, indeed: in most paintings, the angel comes equipped with a paraclete. Of

the trinity of father, son (in this case: son-to-be), and holy spirit, all the members of which trinity are announced by the angel, it is the last, the holy spirit, who serves as instrument, organon, of the miracle of the immaculate conception that is to transpire: this is the overshadowing “announced” by Gabriel. And the painter places the spirit just above Mary’s head.

Still we may ask: whose Annunciation is it?

For this is not, contrary to the title of many paintings, the annunciation of Mary, she is conceived herself without sin, she is already announced, already called by name in the world. The annunciation of Mary is the announcement of the coming of the Lord, the birth of the savior. And this too is plain: say the word, only, so ventures the centurion, speaking to the Christ in his own bid for the salvation of his own son. And the Annunciation promises a gift from heaven, like the shower of gold that impregnates the sealed and secured Danaë.



Correggio (Antonio Allegri), *Danaë*

The gift is a child, unsullied by contact with a human father, begotten, not made. But it is hard to believe that a God who can do so much with a word only, in the beginning, made flesh, can only save the world he himself has made in this most circuitous and cumbersome of ways. Ah but to say that proves it. You have to have faith.

And my favorite, not just because of the proximity of the Roger Campin Triptych in my lifeworld (the painting can be seen in the Cloisters above

Washington Heights in the northernmost part of Manhattan), is the wonderful homunculus that represents the Holy Spirit, no paraclete in this case but a little, white, veritable Holy Ghost: a tiny soul, bearing its fated cross along with it: flying in, riding the characteristic shower of gold with force enough to blow out the burning candle.



Robert Campin, *The Merode Altarpiece*, Detail.

In this sense, the theophanic revelation that is so significant is the moment of encounter: this is the fulfillment of the promise of salvation, this is the moment of fulfillment, even if it points to the crucifixion as the little white ghost of a soul already bears his destiny with him, as every child already bears his own future promise from the moment of conception.

But this child will be the saviour, the son of God. God become man, begotten, born of Mary, born of the Father. If we are all creatures of God, we can answer Blake's question, to us, as to his "little lamb, who made you?" We are made, by the demiurge or by God himself, we are made, we do not cause ourselves. But in the begetting that is here attested the difference is a different origin.

This is the wedding, not unlike Hölderlin's *Brautzeit*, between the human and the divine, the idea itself corresponds to the mystery of what it means for the human being to be said to be *imago dei*. We are capable of taking divine form: divine form can be imprinted on human matter. The promise of the annunciation is, just as Jean-Paul Sartre once mused although he was not talking of the annunciation, nothing other than our human, all-too-human longing to "be god"¹².

¹² I discuss Sartre's point, along with a more complicated constellation, in B. Babich, *Sakrale*

But that is also to say that, «as Jesus said to his Jews», and that is the point of the annunciation, as Nietzsche wrote of this in his *Beyond Good and Evil*, «The law was made for servants; – love God as I love him, as his Son!»¹³.



Mosaic of the Annunciation, in Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome.

ABSTRACT

The Annunciation is often thematized in the critical literature and foremost among these thematizations, recently to be sure, are feminist readings, which matter for this essay although this essay can only refer to these in passing. The focal concern is personal intrigue. This essay thus offers a hermeneutic readings less of the presumptive purity of our perception of this painting, as indeed of its reception, involving a distinction to be noted between male and female subjects than it reviews a recollection of the divine inclination to beauty in both pagan, Greek, and Judaeo-Christian traditions. Adverting thus to the parabolic as to the salvific, and to the question of Redemption by means of faith (the word only), the essay concludes by noting the terror of angels and being, in the image of, like unto, God.

Huren und das Fetisch-Fragment. Batailles Kriegstagebücher Sur Nietzsche, in A.R. Boelderl (ed.), *Bataille*, Turia-Kant, Vienna 2015, pp. 275-298.

¹³ F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, transl. W. Kaufmann, Random House, New York 1966, §164.