

The Angel and the Machine

by Thomas Merton

Editor's Note: Thomas Merton had been a friend of William Everson, a.k.a. Brother Antoninus, the Dominican poet who was also involved in fine printing at the Dominican House of Studies in Berkeley. Brother Antoninus visited Gethsemani and gave a poetry reading here as well as in Louisville in the mid-sixties. Through this friendship, Merton was asked to write an article for *Season*, a short-lived quarterly on Human Problems at the Dominican House of Studies at Berkeley. The issue in which this article appeared was volume 5, summer of 1967, and with it the small magazine ceased publication. William Shannon had first discovered a copy of it, and sent it to *The Merton Seasonal* in the hope that it could appear in these pages along with a commentary of his own on the contemplative life and technological society. The message is as poignant today as when it was first written.

The angels are our brothers and fellow servants in a world of freedom and of grace. Like us, they are saved by Christ the Lord and King of Angels. With Christ their King and sent by his command, they come to us as invisible messengers of his divine will, as mysterious protectors and friends in the spiritual order. Their presence around us, unimaginable, tender, solicitous and mighty, terrible as it is gentle, is more and more forgotten while the personal horizon of our spiritual vision shrinks and closes in upon ourselves.

The much advertised “death of God” — that “absence” which is one of the most significant features of our modern world — is no doubt due in large part to our incapacity to hear the voices of heavenly messengers. We have forgotten how to trust these strangers, and because of our suspicion we have denied them. Mistrust of the Lord begins therefore with mistrust of his messengers. And how easy it is to mistrust those invisible ones who speak more by sudden and significant silences than by clear and probative statements.

For the angels “prove” nothing, not even themselves. They efface themselves entirely in their messages. Yet it is by the silent power, the all-embracing clarity of their messages that we know them. God speaks to us in and through them, and in so doing he also speaks to us their identity, revealing in them strange and sacred personalities which bear witness to him in his utter hiddenness.

The angel is an exclamation point emphasizing a divine word, and it is by the exclamation that we grasp the word. But men began by taking away the exclamation point — too dramatic and too mythical — and when the angelic and personal tone was robbed out of the word, the word itself lost its full character as revelation, and ceased to be personally convincing. Then man found it necessary to prove that the word was truly from God, and human reasoning tried to take the place of the tone and timbre of the personal voice that once spoke with angelic conviction.

After all, do not the angels come to us from afar, from “out there” in order to underline the inexplicable fact that he who sent them from afar is already present within us? Do not their exclamation points simply make us aware that what God tells us of his will is simply his own seeing and his own loving at work within us? In the last analysis the angels are saying, by their personal and sudden presence, that a greater than they is here,

and they are sent to inform us that we are rooted in the very Light by whom they were sent! Yet if they were not sent our eyes would never open, our hearts would never leap out of their own little constraint into the large freedom of a perfect and total response. But if we are the “only persons” in the created world, then immediately the world of personality, of freedom, of grace, of joy becomes cramped, its lights are extinguished and its shutters are closed. In the words of Wordsworth, “shades of the prison house” close in upon us. The “visibility” of the spiritual world becomes opaque and our own inmost heart freezes and closes to us. God remains only as an almighty and infinitely distant abstraction when the angels no longer speak to us of him. And when he becomes abstract, he “dies.” But his “death,” unfortunately, takes place in ourselves. We no longer know ourselves, having lost him.

We meet the angels, the messengers of divine help, on the frontiers of our own freedom and our own capacity. They touch us when we reach our natural limits. This is why they are to us “terrible” (*Jeder Engel ist schrecklich*, said Rilke) not only because they are greater than we, not only because they belong to the sacred world of the “totally Other,” but because we do not usually meet them except when we ourselves are at the end of our strength, or of our endurance, or of our understanding, or of our capacity to hope and to believe. The angel appears when we ourselves are reduced to the center of our deepest need. If the angel comes as the comforter who says, “fear not” (Luke 1:13) and “Thy prayer is heard” (Luke, id. cf., Daniel 7:23), that is precisely why man prefers more and more not to be reduced to the extremity where he needs the angelic answer. Rather than fearing and then being told to fear no more, he would prefer to avoid fear. Our weak faith would rather get along without such powerful help, coming as it does from the invisible world that is entirely beyond observation and control: in other words, we would prefer to get along with fewer demands upon our faith. We would prefer not to be reminded of our poverty. And besides, angels seem to complicate things, in the modern world of space flights. Apparently the angels are no longer governing the planetary system, so perhaps, we think, they have nothing to do with us either. We have taken over their planets. We are richer than they!

Technological civilization is, as we have it now, a civilization without angels. It is a civilization in which we have chosen the machine instead of the angel: that is to say that we have placed the machine where the angel used to be: at the limit of our own strength, at the frontier of our natural capacity. But now we can view our limits without fear and without the need of invisible helpers. The machine is fully visible. And though the world of the machines is in itself something of a *mysterium tremendum* (it becomes so more and more with computers performing in an instant mental operations that man could never hope to perform in years), yet the machines are “our” angels. We made them, not they themselves. They are, we think, entirely in our own power. They become, then, extensions of our own intelligence, our own strength. We do not have to walk to the edge of an infinite void in order to feel the brush of their unpredictable wings upon us in the starlight. They form part of our own enclosed and comfortable world, they stand between us and nature. They form a kind of “room” in which we are isolated from the rest of material creation, and therefore all the more from spiritual beings. They create our weather for us. They even abolish day and night. They make the heavens unnecessary. They make for us a new “time” and new “space.” They have in fact built for us a complete new mental world. They too have a kind of life of their own — they live by spirits of men who have relinquished more and more to the machine, have surrendered to it more and more that is human and natural. So man dwells surrounded by angels of chromium and steel. Safe in the world of technique that surrounds him, man recreates himself according to his own pleasure: or so he believes and hopes. Here the invisible angels cannot reach him. Or can they? Are there perhaps other angelic intelligences secretly building the brilliant and prestigious realm of mechanical power all around man, and silently taking it out of his hands while he thinks himself to be the master of it? Who can say? We do not stop to wonder about it, for we do not have time.

The “time” created for us by the machines that “save time” for us, is a time of new dimensions, a new spiritual measurement in which, curiously, all is breathless and thought is strangely distracted and confused.

(Notice that when one lives in solitude dedicated to God, there is a complete change in the time dimension of one’s life. First of all, the solitary living in the woods is delivered from “machine time” and restored to natural time. Dawn, noon and sunset regulate his work and his day, and winter means longer hours of darkness, meditation, silence. With the coming of winter his mind itself takes on a new quietness, an advent expectancy of wonderful deep tone, undisturbed by too much active thought. Then comes a still further time dimension — that of angelic time, measured not by expectation of the rising sun, not by the planning of practical work, but by a sense of fallowness, of waking dormancy, the lostness and disorientation of one whose hands and heart are empty, waiting only for what can never conceivably be planned. In machine time, everything is planned, determined, every instant has its own demands. In natural time there is the slow harmonious succession of cosmic and terrestrial events, to which man’s own nature has its ancient replies. In angelic time there are no plans, for plans are impossible.

It is the time in which man is totally free, therefore empty, therefore nothing, therefore happy! There one is *at* the same time “useless,” “feriated” or in a state of incomprehensible holiday, and “ready” for the approach of any “word” that may come. At such times there is no difference between hours and minutes, or minutes and hours.)

In extending the horizons of man’s physical power, the machine has completely closed the horizon of planlessness and “feriation” — and yet it leaves man full of bustle and action in the presence of a moral void. He can no longer comprehend himself or face the supernatural which is beyond conceiving. In promising him unlimited power, the machines have allowed man to surrender so much to them that when he is suddenly without their support, then he is much more helpless, much more limited than he ever was before.

You may build a building without windows, air-condition it and light it artificially: but when the electric power fails, then you no longer have even daylight filtered through the city fog or the ordinary air of the street. You are imprisoned in the stifling dark. Such was the angelic “sign” that struck the Eastern United States in the fall of 1965 when not only a section of a city, not only one city, but fifty big cities and hundreds of towns were suddenly deprived of electric power. Express elevators in eighty-storey buildings stopped, totally blacked out in shafts where there was no opening for hundreds of feet. The imprisoned passengers had to be rescued through holes made in the shafts by pneumatic drills. Delicate heart operations in darkened hospitals (some of which strangely had no auxiliary power) had to be completed by the light of flashlights and with all kinds of expedients to replace electric power. Then indeed the angels suddenly had very much to do once again! Was this perhaps an angelic and merciful warning to the powerful society that has decided to live entirely without angelic help, since it has forgotten the angels anyway?

Are we to expect even greater and more frightening disasters in these next years? And if disasters come, will we be able to interpret them? Certainly, there were hundreds in the New York blackout who felt that it was a “sign,” a reminder of something worse that might soon happen. Many responded with great charity, patience and helpfulness. Their realization that this was something mysterious and extraordinary brought out the deep goodness in them. But together with this vague awareness came a profound sense of helplessness, of disorientation in a society that had become radically absurd. (. . . A high official in the power company, when asked to explain the blackout, delivered himself of an utterance that was completely unintelligible — and suddenly everyone realized that behind the apparent “order” and harmony of the technological world was a vast thoughtlessness, outside of certain restricted limits accessible to the managerial mind.)

Surely the angels do not envy us our machines, nor are they excluded altogether from a world in which machines supplement our physical and mental powers. If the technological world is in fact without angels, it is because of our own choice, not because of the very nature of technology itself. After all, there was primitive machinery used in the building of cathedrals which, by their extraordinary sculpture and architecture presented to us a visible and symbolic cosmology replete with angels! Could the angels not be as much a part of our modern world of machines? Obviously we would have to see the angels differently. We would seek a new understanding of them. We would interpret their action in our lives perhaps along lines suggested by the archetypes of Jungian depth psychology. The angels are above all persons, but their personality must not be conceived in terms of individuated matter. Still less are we required to look upon them as super-physical forces bursting into the world of terrestrial physics like asteroids from outer space. If we now have space ships, then perhaps angels need no longer be imagined as elder brothers of the stars. Yet they are no less real today and no less personal, no less concerned with us, and we need them no less. After all, it was not simply as doctors and engineers that we wanted angels in the Middle Ages. There still remain limits where we face the void from which no mechanical rescue is imaginable. And these frontiers will never be abolished.

At these frontiers, as always, the angels await us. If technological society may seem to exclude the angels, it is because it seeks to make us forget these other frontiers (especially death!): and this again is no fault of the innocent machine. It is our own choice. In our folly we have tried to convince ourselves that our machinery is sufficient for all our needs and that there is nothing that science cannot do for us. Here is our tragic error. It is our anxiety to make our machine world completely self-sufficient and autonomous that we render it spiritually unlivable for ourselves. More than ever we need the angels, not to replace our machines but to teach us to live with them. For the angels come to us to teach us how to rest, to forget useless care, to relax, in silence, to “let go,” to abandon ourselves not in self-conscious fun but in self-forgetful faith. We need the angels to remind us that we can get along without so many superfluous goods and satisfactions which instead of lightening our existence, weigh it down. May they come back into our world and deliver it from its massive boredom, its metaphysical fatigue! The Russian theologian, P. Evdokimov, says with remarkable insight that the devil acts on man as “a will which is alien to him, *which draws him out of himself without providing for him any encounter.*” Surely this describes the actual situation of technological man.

No matter how we may imagine the spiritual world in which we live — even should we imagine that it has ceased to exist altogether — it nevertheless remains. The frontiers of our being remain, death remains, the void remains. And when we are at the edge of it, we are bound to meet angels: if not good ones (in a genuine encounter), then bad ones (the masks of Nothingness). That is the trouble. And that shows us the need we have to rethink our whole position before our time runs out.

One more remark: There are many moderns who are prepared to accept a world of “inwardness” and immanent spirituality, but not a world of religion marked by faith and dependence on a transcendent and personal God. In the world of mere inwardness, the thought of the angel can become an illusion and an enticement. The angels themselves warn us against complacency in our spiritual relationships with them (Apocalypse 19:10). They remind us always that it is God we must adore and serve. They teach us how to serve him. They seek to draw us into their liturgy, and to make our whole world, machines and all, part of their great community of praise.

Surely, if we are to rebuild the temporal order by the dedication of our own freedom and our science to truth and to love, we need our good angels to help us and to guide us. Who knows? Maybe our technology itself calls for angelic guardians who are ready to come if we let them. We need not fear that they will revive obsessions that died with the Middle Ages. It is not for us to imagine them, to explain them, to write them bodily into the details of our blueprints. It is for us to trust them, knowing that more than ever they are invisible to us, unknown to us, yet very powerful, very propitious and always near.