





Karl Ove Knausgaard

# A Time for Everything

Translated from the Norwegian by James Anderson

*a r c h i p e l a g o   b o o k s*

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N O R L A

# A Time for Everything



ANTINOUS had been born in 1551 at Ardo, a small mountain town in the far north of Italy, where in all likelihood he remained until he began to study in 1565. Apart from one particular event, to which he was to return time after time for the rest of his life, little is known about his early years. The names of his parents and native town do not figure anywhere in Antinous's writings, and, as they are otherwise characterized by a large amount of biographical detail, this early obscurity has aroused the curiosity of many readers. But if one is to attempt to understand Antinous, it isn't to the inner man one must turn. For even if one succeeded in charting his inner landscape as it actually *was*, right down to the smallest fissure and groove in the massif of his character, imperceptibly shaped by the slow erosion of events, and traced the course of the flood of feelings back to their source, one would end up no wiser and the meaning of what was being charted would remain obscure. Even if the events and relationships of his life were to correspond exactly with a life in our own time, one that we could understand and recognize, we would still come no closer to him. Antinous was, first and foremost, of his time, and to understand who he was, *that* is what must be mapped. The minimal emphasis we place on this difference is due perhaps in particular to the lasting influence of Freud, that speculative genius of the twentieth century, whose fatal confusing of culture with nature, combined with his equally fatal insistence on the external event's inner consequences, has influenced our self-understanding more than anything else, and lured us so far away from our ancestors that we believe they were like us. But our world is only one of many possible worlds, something of which the writings of Antinous and his contemporaries serve to remind us in no small measure.

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The decisive event in Antinous's life occurred when he was eleven years old. Where he'd come from, we're not told, nor where he went afterward, and the fact that the incident is surrounded by obscurity makes each detail in his narrative stand out with unprecedented clarity. The red tinge of the earth he walks on, the green leaves of the riverside trees he's approaching, the yellow sun, the blue sky, the shimmering dragonfly that hovers for an instant in the air in front of him, before it breaks free and next moment is flying away to the trees. The fishing rod he's carrying over his shoulder, his dusty feet, his brow glistening with sweat. The way the shadows from the trees are splintered by sunbeams into small, quivering lattices of light as the wind takes hold of the boughs and gently rocks them up and down. The moss on the stones by the river's edge, the distortions of the current on the black surface, trouser legs that darken with water when he steps into the water, eyes that close in rapture.

All that long Sunday he's been looking forward to this. Coming here, to this shady pool in the river, his regular spot, to fish.

After a while he gets up, pulls out a worm he's been carrying in his pocket, and threads it on the hook. Even with half its body impaled, it tries to wriggle free. Its pale pink color and the small grooves on its skin make it look a bit like a finger, he thinks, as he studies it for a moment before clasping the writhing end and impaling that on the hook as well. Then he casts it out onto the water.

When, half an hour later, he hasn't had a single bite, he walks a few hundred yards upriver to the next fishing place. But there are no bites here, either. Feeling restless, he decides to hide his rod and go exploring up the valley instead. He stands a while above the rapids and stares down into the sparkling water, fascinated by how all its various movements always occur in one place, from the swelling current at the top, where the water looks as if it's flowing inside a membrane, to the roaring fall below the ledges, which almost seems to be *plowed* into the waiting mass of water below, there to create innumerable small eddies on the surface.

The eddies are made up of water, he thinks. So why don't they flow away when the water flows away?

He chucks a stick into the river above the rapids and follows it, running down faster and faster, until it goes over the edge and disappears into the foam. When,

a little while later, it comes gliding into the backwater, he's there ready to pick it up. He repeats this game a couple of times before he tires of it and continues his journey. He follows a path up the rough mountainside and halts, damp with sweat, at the summit to look out across the plain. The town he comes from, lying in shadow under the mountains on the other side, is hard to see with the bright light in his eyes. The thought that a stranger probably wouldn't have spotted it fills him with pride, for *he* knows, *he* sees. For a while he amuses himself pointing out various houses and places to the stranger, who's just as amazed each time. Is that a *house*, you say? Who would have thought it? It looks just like part of the mountain! Then he turns and gazes down at the forest in the valley on the other side. Dark green and dense it lies, ringed by mountains, as if in a crater. There are tales told about this forest, but now, highlighted here and there by clearings, meadows, and small, glittering lakes, it doesn't seem the least threatening, and without giving it a second thought he carries on down the path.

When he gets into the valley, he's struck by how silent it is. The air is quite stagnant between the trees, as if exhausted by the heat. The shade beneath the treetops is scaled by shafts of light, filled in places by small pockets of swarming insects. There is the scent of resin, dry pine needles, warm earth. The water in the stream he's following is greenish black in the gloom beneath the great conifers, blue and sparkling where the sky opens up above it, shiny white and frothing in the terrace-like falls leading to the little lake in the middle of the valley. Full of adventure, he runs this way and that and, completely impervious to the approach of evening, moves ever deeper into the valley. He sees a wasps' nest under a branch, he sees a meadow filled with butterflies, he sees a dead cow in a ditch, and the disgusting stink that emerges when he finally manages to push a stick into its rotting belly almost makes him sick. He sees a dried snakeskin in some scree, he sees a cherry tree in full bloom, he sees a hare bound past him in the grass only a few yards away, and as the sun goes down, he's lying on his stomach in front of a huge anthill studying the strange life going on there. He doesn't notice that the sun's rays are moving higher and higher up the mountainsides and that the valley around him is gradually filling with darkness. Nor does he register that the birds have stopped singing, or that the constant hum of insects gradually decreases. He is watching the workers marching in long lines with their small loads of organic material on

their backs, pine needles, pieces of leaf, blades of grass, or bits of dead insect they have come across on their journey, and the posted sentries that constantly go up to the lines of ants and sniff them, like dogs, and occasionally raise themselves up and gesticulate with their forelegs, at which the alien ant, having perhaps believed that its identity was a well-kept secret in the throng, rushes off and disappears into the undergrowth.

After a while he takes a twig and pokes it gingerly into the anthill, curious to see the chaos this causes, the furious concentration of thin legs and chubby bodies as the ants come streaming up from all directions. At the same time he finds it repulsive, he doesn't really want to destroy their work, but there is something almost magical about being able to influence a chain of events in this way, and he's not really *ruining* their anthill, is he? They're so hardworking, they'll soon have it mended again.

He pokes the stick into the other side of the anthill, keen to see how they will rise to the challenge. A new wave of ants pours out, while the first ones, certain that the danger is now past, have already set about repairing the damage he's just caused. For a time he switches between them, enjoying seeing how quickly they switch from attack to defense, until without giving it a thought he thrusts the stick into the anthill as hard as he can and starts wiggling it around. The way the porous mixture of earth, pine needles, and twigs yields to his movements gives him a strangely satisfying feeling. And as parts of the anthill have already fallen in, he may as well continue, he thinks. At the same time he begins to despise what he's doing. But in a strange way, it's precisely this disgust that causes him to carry on. He knows just how strong his remorse will be when it's over, and he wants to put that moment off for as long as possible, while his despair at what he's doing creates a kind of fury within him. He begins to kick at the anthill, more and more wildly, not stopping until it has collapsed completely and the ground around him is dark with crawling ants. Then he throws down his stick and hurries away.

Even though dusk is dimming everything he sees, and great sails of darkness have lapped up some places entirely, he still doesn't think about how late it is. He only wants to put as many yards and as much time between him and his crime as possible. *What have I done*, he thinks, *what have I done, what have I done?*

Only when the path he is following enters a meadow he can't remember seeing

before does the seriousness of the situation dawn on him. Soon it will be completely dark. And not only is he several miles from home, he is also well off the track that leads there.

For a long time he stands motionless on the forest brow looking across the meadow. The summit of the dark mountain behind it shows clearly against the inky blue sky, where the moon, which all day long has floated pale and ghostly above the horizon, has now appeared. He can see the shadows thrown on the mountains, the luminous plateaus.

It's as if it's moving toward him, he thinks. As if it's gliding in from space like a ship from the sea.

Suddenly he shivers: there's a rustling noise in the undergrowth nearby. The sound moves quickly away over the forest floor, but when it stops it isn't replaced by silence, as he's unconsciously been anticipating; quite the contrary, it opens the way to a host of other small sounds. A twig cracks here, a bush rustles there, somewhere in the distance an owl hoots. Then, with a sigh, the wind rises in the valley and the branches of the trees behind him begin to sway. He thinks that they're like blind people grasping at something. Or the dead waking. He imagines how their shadows float unseen through the darkness about him. But if he stays still, he thinks, perhaps nothing will notice he's there. No wild beasts, no evil spirits, no dead souls . . . At the same time he's itching to get away from the place. It won't be long before the darkness is total, and if he's not out of the forest by then, he'll never find the way home.

He steels himself several times, thinking, *Now I'll run*, but each time fear prevents him from putting the thought into action. Only when the owl hoots again and he hears that it has come closer are his thoughts matched by movement. He begins to run, and he runs as fast as he can, because owls are creatures of the devil, they have human eyes and birds' bodies, and hearing one so soon after what he's done must be an omen. Perhaps more than an omen, too. Perhaps they're flying through the black treetops at this very moment searching for him. Perhaps they've just caught sight of him. Perhaps they're stooping through the darkness above him right now . . .

At that moment he realizes that he's approaching the scene of his crime. He never wants to set eyes on that ruined anthill again, the mere thought of it fills

him with desperation, and, as he doesn't dare stop either, he runs into the forest in what he thinks is a gently curving detour that will bring him back onto the path again after a few hundred yards.

Like a frightened animal he crashes through the thick undergrowth. He aims for a tree about fifty yards in front of him; when he gets to it, he turns to the left and goes on another fifty yards before he begins to look out for the path. It should be about there, he thinks. Behind the tree trunk *there*. When he gets to it, he realizes that it's behind the other tree trunk there. Provided he hasn't crossed it without noticing?

No, not a chance!

But when it's not there either, a little shadow of doubt enters his mind. He halts and leans against a tree to catch his breath while he stares into the darkness in front of him. Could he have run too far? Could it be in the forest higher up?

Then he understands. Of course, the path has turned! That's why he hasn't found it yet. It's just a matter of keeping on, he thinks, glancing up for a moment at the sky, where darkness is just about to extinguish the last remnants of blue. Then he starts running again. This time he runs several hundred yards before doubt again gets the upper hand. There is no path here. He must have run the wrong way. The path is in the other direction, he thinks, and begins to run back in the direction he's come from. Now he can barely see his hand in front of his face. He stumbles, gets to his feet, stumbles again. The thought that he's got himself lost is so awful that he pushes it away by giving himself small encouragements each time it surfaces. He thinks constantly that he can recognize formations in the landscape about him. That toppled tree, this moss-grown rock face, that bit of bog. Even when these signs turn out not to fit, he refuses to make any concession to doubt, provided he keeps straight on, he thinks, he must eventually come to the path or the mountainside. He strays into a thicket of thorns, one cheek and the backs of both hands get scratched, but he doesn't notice, he's going to find the path, it's somewhere close by, he knows it is. Behind that rise there, perhaps, he thinks, but it isn't there, nor behind the next rise either . . .

Finally he can't run any farther, and the fear, which during the past half hour has drifted about within him on its own, shut in behind the hammering heart and furious panting, can once again connect with its source. Even the smallest sound

strikes him like a stone and spreads its unchecked ripples of anxiety when it touches bottom. *If only I hadn't destroyed that anthill*, he thinks.

In the pale moonlight the shadows around him have formed themselves into figures. He can see them clearly, they stand in huddles under the trees and watch him, and when they whisper to each other, it's his name they're whispering. *Antinous*, they whisper. *Antinous*.

Without taking his eyes off them he stops, clasps his hands, and begins to pray. *Our Father, who art in heaven.*

A sigh passes through the figures in the forest around him.

*This evening I destroyed an anthill. But I didn't mean to. I don't know why I did it. It was a sin and I repent. Please forgive me.*

Are they retreating?

*Help me get out of here. Please, help me get out of here.*

Yes, they are moving away. At first he hardly dares believe it, and peers suspiciously into the gloom. But when they remain motionless, even when he takes a few steps into them, he realizes they've gone.

It's just a matter of finding the path, he thinks. He can't remember which way he came from anymore, and he starts walking in the direction where the trees seem to be least thick. He imagines God is directing his footsteps. Around him the forest becomes sparser and sparser until, after a few hundred yards, it opens into a clearing. And there is the ridge.

There is the ridge!

The fact that he can't see the path he descended earlier in the day doesn't concern him in the least, because the ridge's side isn't steep and is easy to force, even in the dark. And on the other side will be the plain. Once he gets there, he'll be able to find his way to town as easily as anything.

But when, a quarter of an hour later, he halts at the summit, it's only to discover that instead of sloping down into the plain as he'd imagined, it plunges straight into a ravine, from which another mountainside rises.

This can only mean that he's on the *other* side of the valley. That the entire forest is between him and the plain.

This time he can't hold back the tears. A sob racks him, and the stream of feelings that follow no longer meets any resistance but wells up unchecked inside

him, until it fills him entirely and he throws himself weeping to the ground. His thoughts, too, dissolve and merge into the spasms. He lies there without noticing anything apart from his own despair, locked within his own darkness, and where no time exists, for when his tears subside and his breathing at last returns to its normal rhythm, he has no idea how long he's been gone.

It's as if he's slept, he thinks, and then woken up in a different place.

Totally relaxed in body, he sits up and dries his eyes on his sleeve. At least he's gotten out of the forest! The treeless darkness up here seems purer somehow, he thinks, and decides to endure whatever lies in store for him.

The first thing he must do is find a safe place to sleep.

He gets to his feet and begins to walk along the ridge while inspecting the terrain in front of him. After a few minutes he catches sight of a ledge protruding a little way down the mountainside. When he clammers down to it, he finds to his joy that it forms the roof of a deep, narrow cave, which actually widens out at the back, where it almost becomes like a small room. Here he can sleep securely. But not comfortably: the ground is hard and uneven, and after trying various positions, he crawls out again to collect some conifer branches from the trees he saw growing on the mountainside below the mouth of the cave.

It is then he makes the discovery. Some five hundred yards farther down, at the end of the ravine, a small prickle of light floats in the darkness. His first impulse is to hurry toward it, and he actually begins to clamber downward, but stops after only a few yards, for who could be out at this time of night? It might be shepherds, but it could also be bandits . . .

Or perhaps it's people from the town searching for him?

There is only one thing children find harder to hold back than tears, and that is joy. Antinous is no exception. The odds against anyone searching for him just *here* isn't something that crosses his mind. Nor yet the unreasonableness of doing so in such utter darkness as this. One does not argue with joy, one surrenders to it, and after his first instant of doubt, he begins the steep descent into the ravine. If he were certain they were well-disposed, he might have called down to them, but this he doesn't do; on the contrary, he's careful to make as little noise as possible. Whenever he dislodges a stone and it begins to roll down, he stays still for a while before continuing.

The upper reaches of the slope are steep, in several places he has to search for hand- or footholds on the mountain, but on the last bit the gradient relents, and soon he's standing down by the riverbank, surrounded by the noise of the waterfall, whose white curtains he can just glimpse in the darkness to his right. To the left the river cuts in behind a shoulder of rock. It is perhaps fifty feet high and hides the light completely. As he doesn't know what awaits him there, he decides to go up the slope a bit again, so as to close in on them as unnoticed as possible, whoever they are.

Although the light is hidden behind the projection, the darkness up toward the top of it is less intense, like the sky the moment before the sun peeps over the horizon, and he can see the outline of each tree in the stunted forest around him. He thinks that perhaps his father is sitting on the far side along with other men from the town. A pulse of joy courses through him as he imagines how happy they will be when he walks down to them from out of nowhere. But if it is them, he thinks, he ought to hear them soon. They've no reason to be quiet. Or could they have lain down to sleep?

He stops and listens. But the only thing he hears is his own heart. Worried by the silence, he places each foot carefully before transferring his weight over to it as he moves on, and when he comes to the highest point of the shoulder, which is bare, he gets down on his stomach and wriggles forward. Just before he reaches the lip, he stops and listens.

Nothing.

Cautiously he raises his head and looks over the edge. The sight that meets his eyes petrifies him. Two cloaked men are standing motionless on the riverbank staring up at him. Quick as lightning he ducks and presses his face to the ground. Did they see him? Or was it just a noise that made them look up? He shuts his eyes and tries to make out if they're on their way up toward him. If he hears so much as a twig snap, he'll take to his heels and run away from them as fast as he can. But the silence is unbroken, and a few seconds later, when he's convinced himself that they couldn't have seen anything, blinded by their own light as they must have been, he again lifts his head above the lip.

The two figures stand as immobile as before. But now they're looking at the water in front of them. One holds a torch in his hand, the other a spear. Both wear chain

mail under their cloaks and each has a sword hanging at his side. The glare from the torch encircles them and makes it look as if they're standing in a cave of light.

Slowly they begin to wade out into the river. They stop roughly in the middle, and one lowers his torch toward the water's surface as the other raises his spear to throw. The quivering light of the flame leaves their faces and the uppermost parts of their bodies in shadow. Even so, it's impossible to take one's eyes off them. In some strange way, Antinous's gaze seems to meet no resistance, it's as if it vanishes into them. He looks at the deep red color of their cloaks, enhanced by the light from the torch, he looks at the black metal of the mail and the shining silver scabbards, he looks at the lowered arm and the reflection of the fire in the water. He looks at their mysterious faces, half hidden by the dark, he looks at the small eddies round their boots, the long, narrow fingers curled around the spear, the turned wrist, and all he wants is to be in their presence. Without giving a thought to what he's doing, he gets up and begins to walk slowly down, all the time concealed by the trees and with his eyes fixed on the two figures, who display no sign of having heard him, but stand there still as ever. Halfway down he notices their wings and thinks what has until then been just a vague inkling: there are two angels standing in the river. The rush of fear and happiness that this sends coursing through him is almost unendurable. Despite it, he ventures right down to a small hummock on the mountain only ten yards away from them, behind which he can hide. But he isn't able to look at them, even though he wants to, his closeness to them overwhelms him, and for a long time he lies quite still with his eyes closed and his face pressed to the ground.

When the residual image of the angels has cleared from his retina, the blackness in his head is filled with the rush of the waterfall, the almost imperceptible ripple of water along the bank, his own thudding pulse. But although he tries as hard as he can, he hears not a sound from them, and little by little the desire to see them overcomes his fear.

He opens his eyes and is just about to lift his head when there is a kind of hissing from their direction. Appalled, he lies still.

Have they noticed him?

One of them takes a few steps through the water, he hears how it splashes against the angel's feet, but then it goes quiet again, and slowly he raises his head

above his cover. This time it is only with the greatest caution that he allows his gaze to close in on them. Slowly he lets it sweep across the water's black surface, into the glare of the torch, at first visible only as a glossier texture of blackness, then lighter and lighter, until it reaches the very reflection where the water flames up yellow and orange.

Then he sits up and takes in everything in one single glance.

Their faces are white and skull-like, their eye sockets deep, cheekbones high, lips bloodless. They have long, fair hair, thin necks, slender wrists, clawlike fingers. And they're shaking. One of them has hands that shake.

Just then the other one tilts its head back, opens its mouth, and lets out a scream. Wild and lamenting it reverberates up the walls of the ravine. No human being is meant to hear that cry. An angel's despair is unbearable, and almost crushed by terror and compassion, Antinous presses his face into the earth once more. He wants to help them, but he can't, he wants to be something to them, but he can't be, he wants to run away from that place, but he can't run.

Again he hears the hissing. This time it's followed by a splash, and when he looks in their direction again, one of them is just lifting the spear from the water. The fish it has impaled thrashes its tail a few times, twinkling in the light from the torch, before the angel pulls it off the point and breaks its neck.

The other one comes a few steps closer. Antinous now sees that its jaw, too, is shaking. But its expression is firm, its eyes cold and clear. The first one bites into the fish and pulls off a piece with a jerk. Then it takes the torch for the other, which grips the fish in both hands and bends its head slowly forward. It is as if the effort increases the shaking, and the first one places a supporting hand on its arm. And so, standing close together, the light flickering across their faces and the bottom of their cloaks trailing in the water, they stand eating the fish. Antinous stares at them, spellbound. The teeth that sink into the fish's flesh, the scales that cling to their chins, the eyeballs that now and then turn up and make them look white and blind. Then they look like statues standing there, for without the life of the eyes, the deadness of their faces is emphasized. Each time he sees it, Antinous recoils in fear. *They're dead*, he thinks. *They're dead*. But then the eyeballs correct themselves, the faces again fill with life, and what a moment before was loathsome in them is now beautiful again.

The angel with the shaking hands stretches his head forward once more. Its wings, the upper part of which Antinous can just make out over its shoulders, glimmer green and black. Its neck is long and slender, its skin white as snow, and its eyes so blue that they almost seem artificial, as if made from glass or porcelain. Or perhaps it's their stillness that creates that impression. They look ahead the whole time, seemingly independent of the body's movements as it slowly and laboriously lowers its head to the trembling hands. But then, just as the mouth opens and the teeth are bared, just as it's about to bite into the soft fish, the eyes swivel to the side.

*They've seen him.*

As if dazzled by a sudden light, Antinous shuts his eyes. At the same moment there's a leap in his breast. It feels as if a cord is being tightened around his heart. He tries to fill his lungs with air, but it's impossible, his heart feels even more constricted. Unable to move, he lies and breathes in small, short spasms as the angels begin to move toward him. He can't see them as the light continues to burn on his retina, but he can hear them, the water splashing over their feet with every step they take, the almost imperceptible swish of their clothes, the chinking of the rings of chain mail. And he can sense them: the coldness in the air increases as they approach.

When they stop before him, he's lying with his face to the ground. He hears their breathing, and feels the darkness that emanates from them, the icy coldness. He's never been so frightened in his life. Even so, he wants them to stay, it is as if something inside him discerns the vacuum their absence will leave, that he will long to return here, to this moment. Perhaps that's why he stretches out his hand and reaches out for them.



FOR SOME reason the cherubim, those chubby, rosy-cheeked little boys that throng the paintings of the late Renaissance and Baroque period, have stuck in our consciousness as the true image of angels. And it may not be a complete misconception, for in many ways it was during this period that the angels enjoyed their heyday. At the same time it represents a turning point in their history. Few knew it then, but their demise had already begun, and for those of us who can look at paintings of

them with the benefit of hindsight, the signs are clear: there is something greedy and cosseted about them, which not even the most ingratiating pose can conceal, and here, perhaps, the hardest thing to understand is how innocence and purity, attributes they always steadfastly displayed, could so easily be turned into their diametric opposites. But that was precisely what happened. Many will say that the angels got what they deserved, because they didn't have the sense to stop, but allowed themselves to be tempted further and further into that world they had been sent to serve, until finally they got caught up in it. It strikes me that the terrible fate they suffered isn't wholly commensurate with their sins. But that's my own view. As for the angels, it doesn't concern them now anyway. They no longer remember where they came from or who they were, concepts like dignity and solemnity have no meaning for them, all they think about is eating and reproducing.

The origin of angels is uncertain. Around BC 400 Jerome claimed that angels were around long before the world was created, and based this assertion on their notable absence from the story of the creation, in which angels are not mentioned at all, whereas the opposite view was taken by Saint Augustine, who for his part argued that the angels *were* mentioned in the creation story, albeit indirectly, by being included in God's first command, *Let there be light!* and so were created on the first day. This argument, expanded and refined by Saint Thomas Aquinas, presupposes that the relationship between angels and light isn't merely metaphorical, as we normally assume, but a complex one that sees them as approaching the identical. Light is not angels, but angels are light. Beautiful though this thought is, and much as it tells us about the angelic condition, unfortunately it doesn't hold water. Light is only one of the angels' many manifestations according to the Bible, and why should *that* be the one used to indicate when these perfect, God-favored creatures came into existence? Are they, in their otherworldliness, impossible to describe or comprehend? If so, it seems very strange that immediately after this, in the Garden of Eden story, their name is spoken without the least reticence and that there, on the *first* occasion angels are directly alluded to in the scriptures, their existence is so tangible and solid that they even appear equipped with swords.

So I think Jerome was right in his deduction: angels aren't mentioned in the creation story because they had long since existed by then. Whether they have

*always* existed, as claimed by Antinous Bellori and others, it is clearly impossible to say. Everything about the angels is shrouded in a mist of obscurity: we don't know when they were created, we don't know where they came from, we don't know what characteristics they have, how they think, or what they see when they look at us. But at the same time, all through the Bible they are endowed with a kind of familiarity, as if their existence is so ineluctable that it permits no explanation. Such ambivalence is natural, because angels' most important characteristic is that they really belong to two worlds, and always carry the one into the other. Nowhere is this clearer than in the story about the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah. There is something alien about them – as soon as Lot catches sight of them outside the city gate at dusk, he runs to meet them and bows down in the dust at their feet – but also something familial, because immediately afterward he invites them into his house, bakes bread, and prepares a feast, which they eat. Presumably it is this familiarity that makes the author feel it's not worth the trouble to describe the situation in more detail. Here are two angels eating at a kitchen table in Sodom, having been sent by God to decide the city's fate, perhaps to annihilate it, and we are told *nothing* about the atmosphere, what they look like, what they say to each other. Only the laconic statement, . . . *and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate.* That's all. But the angels must have been sitting there a good while, at least as long as it takes to bake bread, and their presence must have made Lot nervous, as he was the only person who knew their mission. I picture him standing there in front of his oven, darting frequent glances at the two angels seated silently at his table, his desperation growing with each new noise outside in the street, for he knows what they are capable of, these citizens who have learned of the presence of strangers and who have now begun to gather in the darkness outside. The angels display a certain reluctance – at first they turn down his invitation, as they had planned to spend the night in the streets, but Lot is so insistent that they finally give in – while Lot for his part seems overeager and chatty, his concern being to prevent them from realizing what is happening outside.

At last the bread is ready. He takes the loaves out of the oven and leaves them to cool, places food and drink on the table, notes how their physical presence makes his heart pound in his breast, senses the coolness about them, but fights down these feelings, rubs his hands, and exclaims merrily:

“There's nothing like a good meal!”

There is no reply. Although the biblical text simply states that they eat, I'm pretty sure they must have been very hungry and dispatched the food without any attempt to hide their greed. The precise words are, . . . *and they ate*. The unexpected period brings the sentence up short. But the language is merely a vehicle, and the meaning of the language is thrown further by the momentum of its accumulated speed, across the period, out of the sentence, and down through the lines, where, of course, it can no longer be read, only conjectured.

They eat. While one hand grasps the joint of meat their teeth are busy stripping, the other feels blindly across the table for a piece of bread or cheese, to be ready the instant the mouthful is swallowed, if it isn't already cupping the beaker of wine that Lot is careful to replenish, apparently unnoticed by them, occupied as they are in stuffing themselves with what is before them. They slurp and smack their lips, their jaws shine with fat, now and again their eyeballs roll upward, making their eyes seem white and empty. Even though the sight fills Lot with fear, he wants the meal to last, because while they are eating they don't notice their surroundings, and in the street outside people have begun to shout his name. And so he rises unobtrusively as soon as anything on the table runs short, slips into his larder and fetches more food, which he places before them as discreetly as possible, trying not to draw attention to himself and shatter their trancelike state.

Perhaps things will be all right after all, he thinks. After a meal like this they'll certainly feel sleepy, and if he announces that he is going to retire for the night, they may very well be tempted to follow his example. The evening is well advanced, he realizes. And he has already made up a bed for them.

These thoughts lift Lot's spirits. Then he becomes aware that the two angels are looking at him. Red with embarrassment, he asks them if they've had enough to eat. They nod and thank him for the meal. It's quiet outside. Once he's cleared the table, he stretches his arms above his head and yawns.

"It's late," he says. "Maybe it's time to think about turning in?"

The angels push back their chairs and rise. The fervor of their eating has vanished without trace and the Lord's two servants once again exude dignity and calm, and for an instant Lot imagines he's dreamed the whole thing.

"I've put you in here," he says, pointing to the room next door. "If you'd care to follow me . . ."

*It's going to be all right!* he thinks. *It's going to be all right!*

Just then someone knocks loudly at the front door. Lot feigns unconcern, and continues across the room, but behind him the angels have stopped.

“What was that?” one of them asks.

“Oh, probably just a few kids,” says Lot. “Nothing to worry about.”

Then a shout from the street penetrates the room.

“*Lot!*” goes the cry. “*Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them.*”

There’s no avoiding it. Candle in hand, he walks past the two angels and opens the door to the multitude that has gathered outside. But still he hasn’t lost hope. For as it says in the Bible: *Lot went out to the men, shut the door after him, and said, “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly.”*

The key thing here is not the appeal he makes to his fellow citizens, but the information that he first ensures the door is closed behind him. So Lot is still trying to prevent the angels from finding out what is going on. There is something touching about this, I feel; what a desperation he must have felt to try to keep angels in ignorance with the aid of a closed door.

“Look, I’ve got two daughters, neither of whom have lain with a man,” he says. “Let me bring them out to you, and you can do with them as you think fit! Just leave these men alone, as they have sought shelter under the shadow of my roof!”

But they won’t listen to him.

“Get out of the way!” they shout. “Here is this man living among us as a stranger, and he always wants to set himself up as a judge! Things will go worse with you than with them!”

Furiously they press in upon him and rush forward to break down the door.

Just then the angels step in. They grab Lot, haul him into the house, and shut the door behind them, while at the same time striking the crowd blind so that it can’t pursue them any further. It almost looks as if they’re filled with wrath on Lot’s behalf. Presumably their sympathy for him must have grown during the course of the evening, they must have sat there smiling to themselves at his futile attempts to conceal his motives from them.

“If you have anyone here, either sons-in-law or sons or daughters or any others who are connected with you in the city, you must get them away from this place!” they tell him. “For now we shall destroy this place, because a great outcry about them has reached the Lord, and the Lord has sent us to destroy it.”

Lot does what he's told, he goes out and speaks to his sons-in-law, but he lacks credibility, they think he's joking. Then, of all things, he goes to bed, for the next thing that is written is: *When morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, "Arise, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you be consumed in the punishment of the city."*

When Lot hesitates, the angels take all four by the hand and lead them out of the city. Later that day the city is razed to the ground, and every living thing exterminated. The next morning, we are told, smoke is rising from the ground like the smoke from a furnace.

This is an extraordinary tale, and the angels' role in it is not easy to grasp. Traditionally angels are the link between the divine and the human, at once messengers and the message itself. The message carried by the angel that appeared to Mary about her being with child is also the thing that makes her conceive. The angels are action and meaning in one. Everything they do has to be interpreted. That is why their actions are normally so large and obvious, like the gestures of actors on a stage, which again are made with the distance of the audience in mind, and for this reason the angels' behavior toward Lot seems so strange. Isn't he too small for them? Aren't they too close to him? Yes, one might say, but couldn't that be the whole point? That, in doing it, they want to elevate this small, upright, and considerate man, as well as justify the terrible things that follow: the only pure person is spared, everyone else is impure and deserves to be punished. And that's certainly true, seen from our perspective. But it must seem different to the angels. What we may think of them means nothing. They don't belong here, just as they don't belong in heaven; transition between the two is their element. Compassion is alien to them, they are indifferent to us and all our affairs, thus the semblance of cruelty that angels often exude.

But they showed consideration and feeling as far as Lot was concerned.

What could have been its cause?

I believe the explanation is simple. Angels can, as is well-known, assume any shape. But what is less well-known is that the shape they assume contains an element of danger for them, as well. If they inhabit it for too long, it will begin to affect them, and finally, if they haven't heeded the warning signs, it will take them over entirely. In Sodom they appeared as human beings. Clearly the idea was to

go through the city, separate sinners from nonsinners, and then raze it. But Lot's intervention disturbed this chain of events. Initially they said no to his invitation, but then they must have thought: *Why not? A morsel to eat and a short rest can't do any harm.* Once they'd entered his house, they had to sit there and wait for the bread to bake, angelic still in their silence, dignity, and coolness, but slowly taking stock of their surroundings and noting everything that never usually impinges on an angel's consciousness, so that, by the time the meal was over, they had been fatally caught up in Lot's trivial existence. This frail man suddenly meant something to them, and the impulses that governed their actions became more attuned to him than to the task they had been sent to accomplish. This may explain the fury with which Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. As soon as Lot was out of sight, they came to themselves again, understood how weak they'd been, and took it out on the two cities. For they didn't just destroy all the houses and inhabitants, but also the entire plain and everything that grew in the fields; and they turned Lot's wife, who was unable to relinquish the past, not even the evil parts of it, into a pillar of salt.

A modern reader of the Bible is struck by how strong the connection between this world and the next once was. It can almost seem as if God was genuinely concerned about mankind. It took very little to get him to show himself and talk to men, or send one of his angels down to Earth to do his bidding. But these constant interventions never led to any permanent improvement. On the contrary, everything always reverted to its old ways. It seems as if all goodness and justness is the result of gargantuan efforts, which must constantly be repeated, in a continual maintenance that no human being is strong enough to manage. Even Lot, the angels' unlikely favorite, succumbed in the end. After fleeing from Sodom, he settled in the mountains above Zoar with his two daughters. Still too fearful to chance living in the city, they dwelled in a cave, and there he got both of them pregnant. True, they were living alone in the mountains after an apocalyptic event, and may have been bewildered enough to believe that they were the last people on earth, and certainly the insemination took place at the instigation of the daughters, who plied him with wine before going to bed with him, but Lot must still have been well aware of the mark he was overstepping. He wanted his daughters, and he had them. For lustful thoughts may form such a tangled web above the sky of consciousness

that not a single ray of light can penetrate to the soul, whose damp and dingy seat excludes all life-forms except the very lowest; moss and fungus, beetles and maggots, and a slimy snail or two blindly creeping about the mire. And who can be expected to do right under such conditions? For a time, perhaps, you'll manage to keep it open a chink; righteous and enlightened as you still are, but sooner or later you'll sleep, and when you awaken, you'll be surrounded by darkness once again. If you have the strength, you'll fight on, if you haven't, you'll give up. The human soul is a clearing in a forest, and for the divinely pure and untarnished it must be impossible to understand why it's forever getting choked with growth. This is the struggle the Bible speaks of; the darkness that descends again and again on person after person, generation after generation, century after century, until the despair is unendurable, and the story ends in the description of the insane, apocalyptic fury that was revealed to John on Patmos: *So the four angels were released, who had been held ready for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, to kill a third of mankind.* They decapitate, burn, become a living torture, and from the bottomless pit they release swarms of poisonous locust-scorpions, which harm no grass or bush or tree, but only the people who haven't the seal of God on their foreheads. Stars fall down to earth, the sun is darkened, forests burn in great firestorms, the seas turn to blood. A huge army is sent out numbering twice ten thousand times ten thousand, and they must have been an impressive sight for John, riding on horses with lions' heads and clad in breastplates the color of fire and sapphire and sulfur. His descriptions are so detailed that there is no reason to doubt that he has seen what he's describing, and yet there is something that grates, because since his vision in that cave on Patmos, things have happened to make the scenario he described impossible. The world will be destroyed, but not in that way. The angels have lost all the power they once had, and if they went to war with us now, we wouldn't find it hard to crush them. At that time they probably did have plans to destroy everything, and it might have happened, too, if something hadn't gone terribly wrong for them, so there is no need to lambaste John; he acted in good faith, and the fury he witnessed was at least authentic.

What the angels didn't foresee was what a success Christianity would turn out to be. At the time they revealed the apocalypse to John, Christianity was still just a

small, insignificant minority religion, something like our UFO sects, and as Christians were greeted with universal suspicion, and then persecuted, tortured, and killed, no one expected them to survive. When Christianity suddenly began to spread across the world in the first centuries after the death of Christ, the angels were completely unprepared. Soul after soul in country after country was saved. And all of them extolled the angels. Poetry was written about them, pictures were painted, theses written, stories told. By the time we get to the Middle Ages, angels were part of the common consciousness. They caused conditions resembling hysteria when they revealed themselves, because their proximity proclaimed those who'd been selected to carry out God's will, perhaps to give away their wealth and dedicate their lives to the poor, as in the case of Francis of Assisi, or lead the French army into battle against the English like Joan of Arc, or just flog themselves until the blood ran as the many flagellants did. Bodies were racked with convulsions, fell into deep trances, spoke in strange tongues, exhibited sudden wounds. The angels themselves stood aloof from this monstrous physicalization of God's word, but must have been fascinated by the way their mere presence could induce a phenomenon that was so utterly foreign to them. Fair, beautiful, and pure as they were, they must have felt a growing intoxication about the adoration they received. In any case they appeared more and more often, and gradually became the objects of another, and no less intense, kind of worship, in the welter of learned tracts and theses about angels that were written in the medieval period, tabulating, systematizing, and classifying all their various manifest forms in a kind of angelic taxonomy, complete with kinships, species, and subspecies. The Swedish theologian Lönnroth from Uppsala distinguished, for example, between material and immaterial, visible and invisible, immutable and mutable, with and without free will; in his *On the Heavenly and Ecclesiastical Hierarchies*, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite argued that there were nine classes of angel, while Gregorius Tholosanus believed that the number was seven, in keeping with the seven planets, and that the virtuous could be found above the moon and the evil beneath it. Johannes Durandus discussed whether angels had memory, or if their consciousness occupied an eternal present. Were they pure form (*creatura rationalis et spiritualis*)? Or were they, like human beings, both form and substance (*creatura corporalis et rationalis*)? Bodine and David Crusius maintained in *Theatrum naturae* and *Hermetica philosophia*, respectively, that

they were fully and entirely corporeal. Bodine put forward the odd notion that they must be as round as balls, because this is the most perfect of all shapes, while Bochard went as far as to claim that they were actually mortal, took sustenance, and had bowel movements.

In truth, the Middle Ages were the time of the angels. Can we blame them for allowing themselves to be flattered by this concerted attention? For being more and more often in the proximity of human beings, even when they had no specific business to perform there? They still radiated dignity with their stern looks, simple robes, and angular movements; their beauty still had something hard and cruel about it, not of savagery, but the opposite, of an inhuman restraint, which, however, deserted them when they sang – the song of angels, oh, how lovely it was! – then their features would soften, their cheeks flush, their eyes fill with tears. But it couldn't last. Throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries their sojourns with mankind got ever longer and more frequent, and at the beginning of the fifteenth century the first changes in the angels' physiognomy occurred. A painting by Francesco Botticini of that period clearly shows what has happened. Michael, Raphael, and Gabriel, three of the archangels, are walking in a landscape, presumably Italian, in the company of a young boy. True to tradition, Michael is clad in armor, in his hand he holds a raised sword, and yet there is nothing mighty or awesome about him, rather the contrary: his face is soft and boyish, his cheeks a trifle fat, his hair long and well-groomed, and he has chosen red shoes to go with his black armor, a matching gold-embroidered red cape and a red scabbard with a gilded point, giving the impression of a vain young nobleman rather than a victorious warrior with all the angels of heaven under his command. Certainly his gaze has retained something of its former ruthlessness, but with the rest of the figure appearing so mannered and self-obsessed, he has more of the arrogant aspect of the spoiled youth about him. Raphael's costume is violet, across his shoulders he has a gold-embroidered cape of red, fastened at his throat with a simple pearl, draped in such a way as to show the subdued green of the lining visible over his arms. Around his waist he has tied a red and black kerchief, also embroidered in gold, while his wings are decorated with green and black circles, not unlike the pattern of a peacock feather. His hips are broad, his posture feminine, his hair long and golden, his face beautiful as a lovely woman's. His small mouth is pursed, the

expression filling his half-closed eyes is one of boredom and distaste. Gabriel's figure is also dressed in a dark green silk cloak, with a black, gold-embroidered collar, his wings are red in color, and his face is turned to the viewer in an attitude that might have been challenging, had it not been for the almost demonstrative lack of interest in its expression. He knows he is being observed, he knows that he looks good, but is indifferent to it all. At the same time there is also sorrow in his eyes. It makes his expression enigmatic. Why is he looking at us like that? He must want something of us.

But what?

In the early Renaissance, angels began to be portrayed with expressions similar to this, all expressing compassion for man, as if they were only then close enough to comprehend what they saw. But Gabriel's expression is different, it's introverted: it isn't us he's suffering with, but the angels. He alone has a notion where the path they're following will lead. *The angels are to be pitied*, he seems to be saying as they pass us. But the clearest sign that something is wrong can be seen in their halos. Whereas in Cimabue and Giotto's time they shone so brightly that now and then they seemed like discs of gold, here they are so pale that they can be glimpsed only against a dark background, like Gabriel's red wings. Against the sky they are transparent. These angels are fallen, but they fall so slowly that they notice nothing themselves.

The fact that it would be another hundred years before these changes began to affect the angels' lives, bearing, and behavior must mean either that they remained blind in relation to their fate, something that's hardly plausible considering the length of time involved, or that they simply hadn't faced up to the consequences of it before, but lived in the hope that this new condition would pass, rather like the way some people shut their eyes to the most serious symptoms imaginable and don't visit the doctor until the disease has got such a grip that it's no longer possible to keep the truth hidden, not even from themselves. After becoming an ever-more-common sight in the purlieu of certain Italian city-states during the fifteenth century, the angels slowly began to draw back during the first half of the sixteenth century, presumably in an attempt to resurrect the old order in which an angel's appearance was as unique and rare an event as it was awe-inspiring and

important, but this was unsuccessful, as man's intimacy with them had become too great. Whether through arrogance or simply a lack of vigilance, they had gone too far. In certain places angels had become such a common sight that even the aura of revelation, the icy fear and ecstatic joy the sight of them had always generated, was gradually diminished. Fathers pointed them out to their children, farmers took them for good auguries, country priests were flattered when they manifested themselves in their churches. It was as if they'd always been there. Even the glow of their fires on the mountainsides outside the towns at night, which at first had caused people such disquiet, particularly as they'd been told that large flocks of angels sat on the ground all night long completely immobile, just staring into the flames, as if they were hypnotized or the living dead, had gradually come to mean the opposite; over the generations a belief had grown up that the angels were just watching over their town. The fact that this intimacy is reflected in only a few sources isn't at all strange, because human nature takes note of the unusual rather than the commonplace, the exception rather than the rule. They had as little cause to remark on the angels' roamings across the countryside when they wrote to each other as they had to mention the flight of the birds across the sky. Apart from art, of course, where angels continued to be painted and feted. But even here their supernatural aura waned; they began, more and more, to be seen as beautiful in themselves, in just the same way as an animal or a flower or a landscape is beautiful.

When they did begin to retire, it occurred over several generations so that people didn't find the change remarkable. For the collective memory only slowly relinquishes its notions, and there the sight of angels would long remain a common phenomenon.



IN 1584 a work called *On the Nature of Angels* was printed in Venice. The author was anonymous, but there is no longer any doubt that it was Antinous Bellori, who some twenty-two years previously had had that hilltop encounter with two angels. We know that from 1565 to 1572 he did his basic studies at the university in Naples and that subsequently he began medical studies, which were to take him to Montpellier, where he studied anatomy, Padua, where he studied surgery, and