

My Journey Through the Angels of Rome

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On my first day of exploration in Rome, I walked through the Roman Forum. It was early, maybe 10:30 or 11 a.m., and it felt even earlier because of the jetlag. It was a Tuesday, and the sky was blue and sunny from the top of Palatine Hill where I stood for a while, looking down on the ruins of empire thousands of years old. Hundreds of tourists milled about me, some of whom directed their attention in the same direction. But others, so many others, had their eyes trained on the sky, on the seagulls swirling through the crisp January breeze. Cell phone cameras redirected their lenses to the birds resting for a moment on the ancient rock at the heart of the city. I was curious about this and what it might say about our culture, but the thought quickly slipped from my mind as my eyes hungrily sought out the next ancient wonder. I was looking for angels inscribed on the marble and travertine, and a strange obsession with the seagulls did not merit too much space in my research. I wanted to know how our society interacted with and experienced the angels of Rome. And only in retrospect, once I'd let the scope of my research grow wings and lead me in new directions, did this image return to me. Only at the end of my trip, as I sat on a bench in the Forum of Julius Caesar with the birdsong fighting for its place amid the electric violin street music, did I feel the full presence of Rome's modern angels.

The seagulls at the Forum were not native to Rome. An article from BBC News lists the 1980s as the time of their arrival. I find myself fascinated by this idea that even the birds migrated there, like tourists of a sort. According to the article, the seagulls moved inland, attracted to the garbage thrown away by residents and tourists. Garbage. A different sort of remains. The remains of a day, the evidence of a city grown to bursting with people and life. It

seems crass in relation to the remains of civilizations past. But in as much as a crumb constitutes a ruin of lunch, it could be said that we travelers find ourselves attracted to the same parts of Rome as the gulls. We feast on the crumbs of the past, marveling at the treasures we find that might have once been pieces of everyday life. And maybe they still are to the people who call Rome home. Perhaps the arches and temples would feel commonplace to someone who passes them by once, twice, three times a day. But to the traveler, or at least this traveler, the presence of the past remains a novelty that the mind struggles to wrap its head around each time it passes into sight.

Rome today is full of travelers. Like the seagulls. Perhaps we recognize ourselves in them. Perhaps that is why they draw the tourist's attraction. Or maybe it's the height—the longing, the envy for flight. Even as the seven hills and the skyline reach for the sun, the birds have them beat. And this I know to be a constant of Rome's visual landscape. As early as birds existed, they take their place at the top of the world so that we humans must look up and dream of what it would be like to reach such heights. It's a longing repeated in art and literature from Ovid to Italo Calvino, from 8 CE to 1965. Neither author stood out as particularly pertinent to my interest in the angels of Rome until their works caught my eye in a small independent bookstore, tucked into an alley I happened to stroll through on my last night in the city. It felt like fate in the moment I picked up *The Complete Cosmicomics*, as if some might say, I'd been guided by an angel. Or an interest in the birds and their beginnings. Reading through "The Origin of the Birds," it was the longing that birds inspired that caught my attention. As the narrator describes, "we were looking at the bird full of amazement—festive amazement, with desire on our part also to sing, to imitate that first warbling, and to jump, to see the bird rise in flight" (Calvino 168). In this story, Calvino projects our modern fascination with birds onto an ageless

narrator who describes the beginnings of the universe. And while it cannot testify to the thoughts of our ancestors, it does capture a truth of our current existence. There is a part of us that wants to be like the birds.

Whether we be waking or sleeping, we dream of sailing through the clouds, and it does not feel strange. It feels familiar, like remembering something we may have once been able to do. And while our predecessors might not have had wings, it would see as though they share our same dream for them. I see this in the story of Nisus' daughter, Scylla, as she wishes to "take wing" and fly across the battlefield to the



Kelly's first day at the Roman Forum. The seagulls can be spotted soaring above the city, as can the statues of Victoria atop the Altare della Patria in the distance.

opposing side and the king she has fallen in love with from afar (Ovid 3). There is something of this dream in Daedalus as he fashions wings for him and his son to soar back to their homeland (Ovid 11-12). I even, and most especially, see this dream in the unnamed character of Icarus's story, who is described in the passage: "Some fisher, perhaps, playing his quivering rod, some shepherd leaning on his staff, or a peasant bent over his plough handle caught sight of them as they flew past and stood stock still in astonishment, believing that these creatures who could fly through the air must be gods" (Ovid 13).

These are the regular people, the humans confined to the ground who look up at the sky and see a piece of themselves reflected there. In this story, the beings in the sky do have both

human bodies and wings. But I wonder what inspired this story. Were there people who looked into the sky and let their desire construct visions of human-looking creatures with wings? It does not seem like such a stretch to theorize that the beings we call angels today were born from this dream of humans in the sky. And since growing wings and taking flight is a dream that cannot be realized in reality, it seems as though the attributing of godhood, holiness, or some other supernatural quality to “angels” was a natural step in their creation.

I put the word angels in quotations—at least, in this instance, before I’ve explained my process of redefinition—because while it is the most sufficient way to characterize all the different beings with wings, it is a name applied by Christianity that dominates public consciousness. Before I began the research process, this was the only way that I knew to conceive of the winged beings of Rome. I knew, as Dante describes in Canto XXIX of *Paradiso*, that “The angelic nature goes so far beyond the scale of mortal numbers that there is no word or concept that can reach that far” (29.130-132). I had looked through the Christian hierarchy of angels and familiarized myself with the different kinds of angels I might encounter in Rome. I also knew that due to the strong presence of the Church that I would see angels all over the city, far more than I could ever count, in secular buildings as in religious ones. But even as my preliminary research led me to scholars who theorized that the Christian image of the angel evolved from earlier mythology, I placed far too much weight on the impact of Christianity on the widespread appearance of the winged creature in Roman art and architecture. Most frequently, the winged creatures I saw around the city were not Christian angels at all, but their predecessors. These include winged genies, erotes, and victories.

Since the creatures around Rome were not the angels I expected, I struggled to find a term that might encompass the entire evolution of the contemporary angel without neglecting

their full, rich past. I started by calling them “winged creatures” as a means of universalizing. But something about this felt wrong. I have recognized in contemporary media, such as the film *Wings of Desire*, as well as in images like *The Angel of Grief at the Non-Catholic Cemetery*, a growing trend that reclaims the angel from Christianity. This contemporary angel is not limited to the realm of religion and religious interpretation as a signifier. It is an image of humanity, for humanity. By this reasoning, I decided to repurpose the name “angel” instead of throwing it out. Part of this processes of reclamation requires constructing a new definition for the angel, one that spans every stage of their evolution. Under this new definition I am proposing, angel becomes a category through which I can speak about all beings which have aspects of a human appearance in addition to wings. To look at my definition scientifically, this Order of angels is made up of different Families, Genuses, and Species of angels. In this Order, there exist certain Families of angels that are Christian in nature and others that are not. Instead of projecting the image of the Christian angel onto all angels, this system allows me to isolate the former as one part of a much larger cultural history.

With the terms of my narrative thus established, I want to spend some time analyzing and dissecting the different kinds of angels I encountered on my journey through Rome. My first encounter occurred at the Arch of Constantine where I incorrectly assumed that the angels at the bottom of the arch were placed there because Constantine is sometimes thought of as the first Christian emperor. No, these particular angels were actually winged victories, servants of the Roman god Victoria. There are many things that I love about them. For one, they are all women, and this feels particularly powerful to me because they look like warriors. Many of the victories I came across are depicted framing a painting or structure, like frozen sentinels guarding their masterpieces. Sometimes they carry shields, like two of the ones featured in the middle legs of

the Arch of Constantine. Other times, their arms are outstretched and bearing a fiery torch or a spear. Most frequently, they are holding a laurel out with one hand, and the implication is that, with it, they are bestowing victory. Interestingly, we almost never see a particular person to whom the victories present their laurels. A lot of them reach forward, toward the viewer, and I wonder if this puts us in the place of the commissioner. Does this put us in the seat of victory, trying to imagine what it might have been like to stand as an individual and look upon a monument to your military might? Would this have been the intent? Or does the empty space upon which the victories reach for have more to say about their power as a signifier? Are they reaching out to all of us, to the land and empire, to grant us victory? Does it still feel victorious?

I cannot say that I feel victorious. For some reason, they evoke an immense sadness in me. Perhaps it is because I know at what cost to humanity they offer victory to the few. I know that their spears dripped with blood and their torches kissed the grass before they could bind their leaves in a crown. There is also a sadness in how closely they remind me of soldiers. The ones who are not remembered. The bestowers of glory and memory, but never the receivers. The victories are just victories, nameless women who are not remembered as individuals even in story or mythology. They are servants to Victoria, and even she is a servant to Jupiter and the higher gods. It is



A victory at the base of one of the Arch of Constantine's columns.

like the statue of An Athlete that we saw in the Gallery of Statues at the Vatican Museums. In one hand, he holds a tiny victory, wings outspread but not in flight, laurel tucked into her side. She belongs to him, it would seem, from the way he looks in the opposite direction, sure that she will not slip away while his head is turned. My research revealed just how common this pose is, with victory in the hand of some god or mortal.

At the Arch of Constantine, the victories are faceless, though they did not used to be. Time has chipped off their features until what remains is a smooth and concave, blank stone, the only part of them that is completely indecipherable. But even without this visual tribute to their



The Altare della Patria at sunset. At the top right and left corners, one sees the statues of Victoria.

namelessness, the sentiment lives in the hard chiseled features of the twin statues of Victoria and her flock of victories at the Altare della Patria. Flanking both sides of the building, two renderings of winged Victoria in a chariot pulled by horses stand at the highest point of Capitoline Hill, as close to the birds as anything in the

city center comes. One holds a spear and laurel, the other a shield as she gestures with her other hand, palm facing out in a sign of peace or cessation of violence. Below these two large bronze pieces, a row of winging victories is stationed on pillars across a lower level of “The Wedding Cake,” as many Italians mockingly refer to the monument. Each has one foot on the stone and the other raised behind them as if they are halfway between walking and flying, halfway between humans and the divine. My favorite of these four victories holds a snake above her head. Maybe

the idea is that she is crushing it as we watch. Maybe it is already dead, and she is showing it off to us. Or maybe it is alive and well. Maybe it is part of the new narrative of the age that the snake should be lifted up from where it has been trod on by centuries of popes and their reign of Rome.

I have a lot of favorite places that I visited while in Rome, but the Altare della Patria is one that I kept coming back to. Perhaps I can blame the H bus for this. It is the stop I got off at on many mornings of early exploration. But I had to stop and look up at it every time I passed. I stood there, trying to memorize all the victories, all the soldiers, all the faces and details, knowing it would be impossible. They were far too numerous. It is a fitting representation of my reaction to Rome as a whole, trying to memorize and remember, not only because I wanted to, but because that is what the sights seemed to demand of me. I am interested in analyzing my attraction to this the Altare della Patria in particular because it brings up the complications of memory: who is asking us to remember and what? What are they letting us forget?

Completed in 1911, the Altare della Patria's victories are much younger than the ones I witnessed on the Arch of Constantine, but it seems they were created for a similar political purpose. Built in an attempt to create a visual symbol of empire that would commemorate the unification of Rome, that Altare utilizes victories in its design to connect to Classical mythology and iconography, thus linking Rome's earlier empires with modern imperial endeavors. Almost in opposition to the victories, the building is known today by many names. The Victor Emmanuel II Monument. The Altare della Patria. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The many names and attributions feel like an attempt to create a catchall of nostalgia and sentiment. And perhaps it is because I am not from Italy and have never experienced the oppression of the regime to whom the monument became such a cornerstone, it does move me even as I know it is a tick. It is the soldiers, I think. The nameless statues of fallen bodies, draped and piled over each other,

remembered for the fact that they will never be remembered. Like the victories. The two become so intertwined in my mind that it is hard to separate the sentiments that each invoke in me. It likely comes, in part, from my fascination with the intersection of my studies of war with my study of angels and the recognition that they both come from the same place. I am interested in soldiers for largely the same reasons I am interested in angels. They are the nameless ones, used as pawns in games of empire and politics. There is a sense of loss that comes from being without a name, from being a number in the masses that history will not remember. From being so low in the unnatural hierarchy of things that a fellow man can tell you to go and fight and die and you do. But on this point, I will digress forever and ever. So I will return to the topic at hand: the angel as a political signifier.

I began my exploration of the different types of angels throughout Rome with the victories because, by looking at their transformations, it would appear that even as angels evolve, something of them stays the same. It is no secret amongst scholars that victories, erotes, and other winged creatures inspired the visual appearances, at a minimum, of the Christian angels (Giorgi 280). I see this evolution most clearly in the Castel Sant'Angelo. I was very surprised by this site, though I suppose I should not have been. It was one of the places I researched prior to my trip because of its obvious associations with angels. In fact, it is one of the only places that comes up in an internet search when you type in angels in Rome. Its association with Michael and the Bridge of Angels allows it to come as close to the very typical idea of angels that most people have, a very Christian idea of angels. I was surprised by what cannot be seen by merely looking at the building. I was surprised by what I found in its many layers of history.

If there is one site that I found to be most metaphoric of Rome's layers of history and repurposing of structures, it is the Castel Sant'Angelo. Wandering through the museum they have

made of it today, one starts at the very bottom in its earliest layer: The Tomb of Hadrian. Spiraling up to the next level, I came to a series of the papal apartments that no longer held any furniture or relics. They had been stripped bare by their time as a military barracks, and their nakedness must have functioned well for the museum because now they showcase blueprints and models. In a chain of rooms, each one has a different model of what the *Castello* would have looked like in each stage of its history. Fortress. Prison. Castle. Tomb. The farther back the models aim to go in history, the more theoretical they get, but not outrageously so. The hypothetical model of the Hadrian's Tomb caught my eye because it looked just like the building we can stand before today. Only, the statues on the bridge were victories. Victories with their laurels, reaching to the sky. And as soon as I realized this, something clicked into place. I could really feel, for the first time, just how direct the connection between the victories and the Christian angels truly was.

I have spent a lot of time thinking about it afterwards. At first, I was preoccupied with the similarities. Prepared to launch into a section on how the angels on the bridge hold the objects of the passion instead of their laurels, repurposing the narrative of victory for a different religion, I almost missed a detail which evaded me until this reflection, when I wrote the line about the victories reaching for the sky. Because it is true. The victories stand tall with their hands and faces lifted to the sky. But the angels that stand in their place today look down. They watch each person who passes below with a sadness evocative of their human conception. It feels like they are sad for us because we cannot fly. They testify to our miserable condition, perhaps even try to convince us that our limitations are grounds for misery. They do not feel victorious. They mourn us and what we cannot have. And though Bernini's angels are not fallen, this emotion I feel from

them is similar to what I get from the angels of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. So close to the ground, they feel as though they endure our suffering with us. They feel very human.

The large statue of Michael at the very top of the Castel Sant'Angelo has this humanity as well, though in a different way. He is named, like Victoria, and given a place above the other angels, just as kings, emperors, and popes take a place above the rest of humanity. We are given in literature and religion to believe that this hierarchy of power is natural, ordained by God or the universe. The natural order of things. But it seems a very human impulse to construct our ideas of religion and power upon height. It is something we desire, as we desire to be birds, that we can strive towards, stepping on the shoulders of others, pushing and shoving until someone is on the top. And they get to be the one whose name is remembered. I have come to believe that the desire for height and flight comes from the same place that this desire to be remembered comes from. For me, I see the Archangel Michael as human because he was created to represent the power and triumph of the papal kingdom, of man over men. I do not feel the sympathy for him that I do for the nameless angels and victories, but this parallels my compassion for the unremembered of humanity.



The large statue of the Archangel Michael from atop the Castel Sant'Angelo.

Returning to the replacement of the victories with the angels that stand today, Michael looks just as victorious as his predecessors. But by sheathing his sword instead of offering a laurel to another, he claims the victory for himself, and his God by extension. In this way, Michael is a servant to god, not to humans as the victory in the

palm of the athlete's hand remains. This does not always feel like the case with the Christian angels though. In the portraits of Jesus and Mary and the many saints housed around Rome's museums, the angels kneel and bow to the figure of a human. Just as the nameless fisher or shepherd who spotted Icarus in the sky thought he must have been a god, the image of an angel, with so much more capability of flight and transcendence, bowing to a man conveys upon a holiness that his fellows surely must lack. While some bow, other angels of this kind are shown swooping down to place a laurel on the head of human. This image, nearly identical to and easily confused with that of the victory, shifts the meaning of the laurel. It tailors it to a Christian sense of victory, that of obtaining a designation of holiness. Even without the presence of the angel in a portrait, the auras surrounding the heads of saints and biblical figures remain a lasting tie that connects the mythology and Catholicism. And this is far from the only connection.

I made this connection between the laurels and auras while walking through the Gallerie Nazionali di Arte Antica, and as my head spun in all directions to take in both the paintings hanging on the walls and the art on the ceiling, it all started to blur together. In one room of the mansion turned museum, there are paintings of Christ and the crucifixion, while the frescos on the ceiling depict a scene from mythology, and each were created in the same time period as the other. The rooms even take their names from the Roman gods depicted in them, a detail I saw replicated in the interior of the Castel Sant'Angelo, the Galleria Borghese, and the Musei Capitolini. In one room of the paintings exhibit inside the Musei Capitolini there are a handful of paintings by Guido Reni. There's one of Mary Magdalene beside one called Young Woman with a Crown. Though they say they are of different women, the two look identical in coloring and emotion. Further down the wall, there is painting of Mary Magdalene, and the same features are also reproduced in a portrait of Cleopatra with the snake at her breast. Though what should have



On this wall in the Gallerie Nazionali di Arte Antica, one can see the painting of the Archangel Michael in the center. On the far left side is Young Woman with a Crown. Directly to the right of this is Magdalene with the Jar of Ointment. The painting directly to the right of Michael is Cleopatra.

drawn my eye was the large portrait of Michael that this woman, in all her paintings and under all her names, framed, I could not help but fixate on the idea that the same face could stand in so many stories. The same woman, likely a human subject, who is just as unnamed today as two of the paintings'

subjects, is given to us as a no one and a royal and a saint and an Egyptian queen.

The cross contamination of images can also be seen in paintings of Mary with baby Christ, which look remarkably similar to that of Venus and the cupids. Like the victories, the cupids or erotes offer another view of the repurposing of winged beings from mythology to those of Christianity. This became most clear while I was in the Galleria Borghese looking at two paintings by Scarsellino that hang on the same wall with one above the other. The top is Venus bathing and the bottom is Holy Family with the Infant Saint John. Both use the same style and dark blue composition. The woman representing Mary looks identical to Venus, only the former is clothed while the latter covers her nakedness with an arm. Both are surrounded by children or, at least, figures who look like children. Here, Christ and Saint John look like the erotes that surround Venus. When looking at paintings of Mary and the Christ where cherubs are depicted around them, the similarity between this image and those with Venus becomes even more compounded. Christian cherubs look entirely identical to erotes. They are depicted as naked male

children with wings, and sometimes they can even be seen indulging in the activities of children, such as napping.

I am fascinated by how blurred the lines between stories get in these paintings. There is a similar transgression of the boundaries of story when it comes to literature. In texts like *The Divine Comedy*, characters from history, contemporary life, and the bible all coexist in the same space and plot. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton casually weaves references to Rome and Orion with those of Edom and Satan. As he describes the army of fallen angels, he includes among them the Roman gods and heroes, with the implication that they too rebelled from some higher God. It is clear that Milton also recognized similarities within the plot of the stories themselves. In the very beginning of Book 1 as Satan awakens in chains, I could not help but think of the story of Prometheus bound. The very idea that Satan fell from heaven reads in parallel to stories where Jupiter hurled down his sons from Olympus. The renaming of gods from the Greek pantheon to that of the Roman makes no secret of this tendency to rename the characters in the stories. But Milton's text hints that a renaming and repurposing may occurred between Roman lore and the figures from the Bible. As evidence to this theory, I take lines 356-365 from Book 1:

Forthwith from every squadron and each band
 The heads and leaders thither haste where stood
 Their great commander: godlike shapes and forms
 Excelling human, princely dignities,
 And power that erst in Heaven sat on thrones,
 Though of their names in heavenly records now
 By their rebellion form the books of life.
 Nor had they yet among the sons of Eve
 Got them new names . . .

In this section, gods of old come at Satan's call and merge their stories with his. The narrator also tells us that in the time after the creation of humans, they will be renamed. Time is also of interest in my analysis of this text since at once, it implies the existence of the Roman

gods and even invokes them by name, but also situates itself in a time before humans existed. To me, this does not read as a contradiction, but rather as evidence to the ways in which there are no walls that separate where one story ends and another begins. Each writer builds upon what has come before in a snowball of characters and plot that can never be untangled. There is something very special about this, something that speaks to the way we as humans are connected to one another. In the story of the world, we may even be read as the same characters, the same masses, in each period. We, the nameless and faceless, and our rulers who mimic those before them.

Looking back more directly to the similarities between erotes and cherubs, one must also discuss the object both so frequently possess: an arrow. While erotes pull back their bowstrings to launch an arrow of romantic desire into their target, the Christian angels launch a religious ecstasy. The lines that separate the two kinds of love are very hard to find and distinguish. Many people look at The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa and see a figure overtaken by sexual pleasure all the same



An erote, virtually identical to the cherubs we see in Christian art today, stares up at a statue of Venus just outside the Galleria Borghese.

as heavenly fire. But regardless of just how similar the beholder finds the sentiment, the object of the angel remains.

While in Rome, I had the opportunity to attend services at the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria. I arrived early because I wanted to stand at the front and look at The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa awhile as a tourist before making my way to the pews. The statue is situated deep

enough into an alcove to the left of the altar that unless one is sitting in the first or second pews, it cannot be seen. During open hours, there is a light that shines down on the statue, illuminating the arrow and the place on Theresa's chest where it will penetrate as if God himself is shining down on the scene. But during the service, the nuns who live at the church turn the light off. I found this to be both very natural and very odd at the same time. Natural because, by turning the light off, it drew attention away from what might have been considered an idol. Unnatural because before this moment, I had never thought to consider angels as idols before. But I could see it. Here, at this very small church, with only a handful of people sitting in the pews, the vast majority of visitors came not to experience a religious phenomenon but to gaze upon the marble masterpiece.

That is what I have learned from observing the angels of Rome. The angels belong to the people. More than they belong to story or religion. They belong to humanity. To the nameless and faceless who look upon them and see themselves reflected there. This is what I experienced through looking at the statues of angels throughout Rome. I looked and felt as though my humanity was reflected there. In so much more than a religious sense. What I felt was the realization of a shared humanity. It was the need that we feel to gaze upon something so much like ourselves and know that no matter what, even if our names wash away like tears on the water, the things that we have felt are immortalized. We remember each other, if not in name, then in joy and sorrow and experience. There is something in us that wants to transcend our earthly bounds. And through recognizing ourselves in the angels, even on a subconscious level, we see our own desire mirrored back to us across the centuries. This is the ultimate experience of Rome and of angels in Rome. That through gazing upon them and their transformations we can see the ways in which we have changed but also the ways in which we have stayed the same.

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