

The Economist

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The threat to trade
 Alan Greenspan on the crisis
 The meaning of Madoff
 Pakistan's militants
 Sex and scent

Why we love music

Angels ♪ Darwinian society ♪ William Tyndale, hero of the information age ♪ Oysters
 Building the Fastnet lighthouse ♪ Bubbles ♪ Ecstasy ♪ Sufis ♪ Chinese birdwatchers
 The meaning of cookbooks ♪ The battle of Smoot-Hawley ♪ Chilies
 Tintin ♪ Manipulative shops ♪ Victor Bout, lord of war
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Angels

Angels haven't gone away. If anything, the virtual world has given them a new lease of life

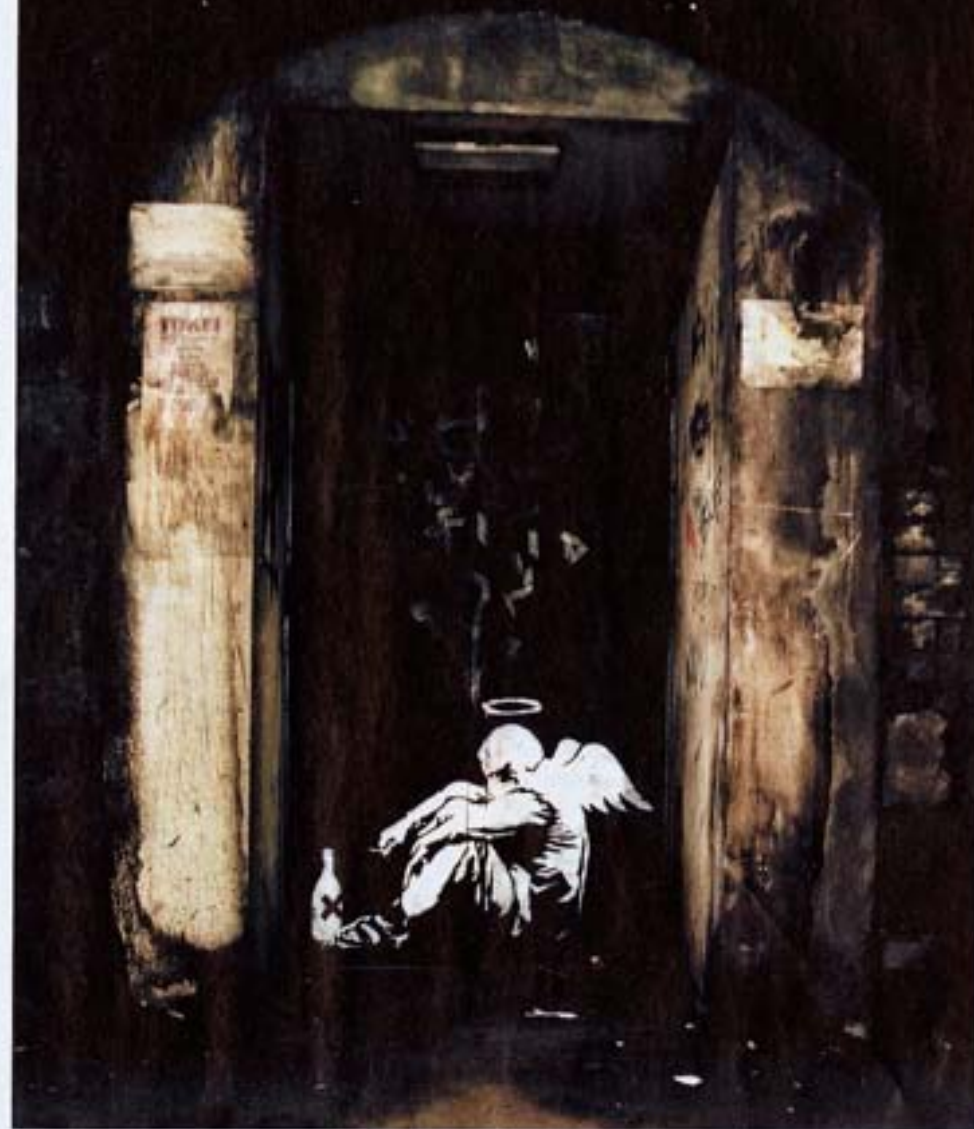
WHEN he was eight years old, William Blake saw a flock of angels in a tree. Their bright wings "bespangled every bough like stars". He also watched them in a field on the outskirts of London, threading through the oblivious haymakers. Cecil Collins, an English artist working in the second half of the 20th century, painted angels as he saw them: inhabiting trees, blessing rivers, walking by the sea. In 1949 Jacques Prévert, a French surrealist poet, imagined a boxing match with an angel under magnesium lights. He ended up winded and defeated, blinded with feathers. Pia Northrup, a Danish poet, spots angels in her modern Danish kitchen ("An angel came in; we fled from him/as though we had got too near the fire").

Poets and artists see strange things. But angels are notable for their trespassing into the modern world. Blake was not in some rural idyll; he was on Peckham Rye, within a mile or so of his dark Satanic mills, and down the road from the workhouse. Angels were no more expected or regarded in his day than in ours. He was lucky, in fact, to escape a whipping from his father for telling a lie. Collins worked in the midst of Thatcherite Britain, serene in his conviction that angels were "part of the transforming process of the universe". The mysterious artist Banksy, whose work is pictured here, portrays angels in flak-jackets and gives policemen wings. This particular angel rests, smokes and shines in a doorway in rundown Bermondsey, in south-east London.

A modern Irish writer, Lorna Byrne, is convinced that she sees angels; so convinced, that her memoir, "Angels in My Hair", has been bought for six figures by the American publishers of "The Da Vinci Code". She sees them as spirals of light behind people; their human form, she says, is just a disguise to make them less frightening. Their wings are not always obvious, but, as she told the incredulous man from the *Daily Telegraph*, angels sometimes show off their golden feathers to her. They were in the room during the interview; her eyes were on them, not on him.

The inexorable progress of the Enlightenment, though it has sent devils packing

Angels are notable for their trespassing into the modern world



and committed nymphs and sprites to the realms of silliness, has never managed to stamp out angels. They survive, and are taken seriously. Indeed, when John Cornwell, a Catholic writer, wanted to pen a counter-tract in 2008 to Richard Dawkins's atheistic book, "The God Delusion", he boldly put it in the mouth of Charles Darwin's guardian angel, as if there was no problem there. The book ended, cheekily: "With affection, from Darwin's Angel, and Yours."

Angels fascinate, as Christmas-card-makers rediscover every year. Agnostic buyers snap them up for their golden robes, their peacock wings, their haloes raying glittery light, their instruments that

hum with the music of the spheres. Angels appear on earrings, thimbles and dinner plates, as flying pins and cherubs curled up asleep. Western commercial angels are soothing creatures: in a world of stress their wings are as soft as fresh towels or bubble bath, their expressions gentle, their activity nothing more strenuous than praying, singing, or lightly dancing. Every "Little Book of Calm" includes them, along with kittens and flowers.

The modern world's obsessions, or hang-ups, do not touch the angelic sphere. Most angels are safely sexless: though they are beautiful, they are beyond desire, and their lovely faces and androgynous bodies have no improper suggestions to make. Though they are uniformly young, white and Aryan, somehow they flit past the keepers of political correctness. And though they are still somewhat religious, ▶▶

they are not embarrassingly so. Where a Nativity won't do, and a robin on a pudding would be crass, angels fill the yawning space with beauty and taste.

Even as images on cards, or as ornaments hanging in a window, angels perform their age-old function as messengers and mediators between the seen and unseen, or material and spiritual, worlds. Many people still want go-betweens of this sort. Polls show that three-quarters of Americans believe in angels (more Republicans than Democrats, more southerners than north-easterners, but still an impressive showing). In Israel, 45% of people believe in them. In Britain, Canada and Australia the figures are in the 30s, still far healthier than churchgoing.

To some extent, a sort of folk belief sustains them. Those who die young in Britain—teenage victims of knife crime, child victims of road accidents—are immediately dubbed “angels”, and are understood to have entered the ranks of the innocent and the immortal. Survivors of near-death experiences typically mention shining figures who, at the end of tunnels, greet and help them. Even when people do not much believe in the hereafter, they easily invoke or envisage heavenly beings to ease death and make some sense of life.

It may not be surprising, then, that the world's largest angel sculpture is only a decade old and stands, not in some cathedral, but at the head of the Team valley overlooking Gateshead, in the postindustrial north of England. The “Angel of the North” is built of 200 tonnes of steel, with rigid and rather rusty outstretched wings. For a while it was dressed in a Newcastle United shirt with “Shearer 11” on the back. But the shirt made the point. This is a local, protecting angel, whose function is to link the mining past with the future and to focus the hopes and fears of a region struggling out of decline.

For its tenth anniversary, Gateshead folk were asked who their own particular angel was. Besides the many who said “My Mam”, there were more unexpected answers. A teenage boy volunteered “My guitar, because it's fun to play.” And one man said, “The good in people, that's always there, in some little way.” The angel realm is subtle and complex, and almost everyone still knows it.

Praisers and poster-boys

All the world's major religions have had vital dealings with angels, the relaters of divine words to them in their beginnings. It is centuries since the Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary at Nazareth or to Muhammad at Mecca, since an angel intervened to stop Abraham sacrificing Isaac, or since angels announced the rising of Christ from the dead. It is even some decades since the Angel Moroni, in dazzling white, helped Joseph Smith to unearth the golden tablets of

the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints from a hillside in Manchester, New York. But as religion has re-emerged, especially in more fundamental forms, angels have re-emerged also. And they demand attention. They are too bound in with the fundamental incidents and mythologies to be moved aside as fanciful. It all stands or falls with them.

The modern Catholic Catechism teaches that angels are a “truth of faith”, meaning roughly that if you believe in them they are true, and they are true because you believe. There's no rational riposte to that. Maimonides, a Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages, proposed a more functional view of angels as metaphors for the laws of nature: the burning of fire, the flowing of water, and so forth. But they have never managed to cling to these scientific credentials, or to tone down the religious ones. Each Catholic mass is still an act of praise in which worshippers explicitly join their

devil; Gabriel, the annunciator, droops beautifully with his spray of lilies; Raphael, the guardian, takes his small charge by the hand; and Uriel simply glows. For better particulars, it is hard to beat John Milton's description of the “affable” Raphael, off to check on Eden in “Paradise Lost”:

At once on th' eastern cliff of Paradise
He lights, and to his proper shape returns
A Seraph wing'd; six wings
he wore, to shade
His lineaments divine; the pair that clad
Each shoulder broad, came mantling
o'er his breast
With regal ornament; the middle pair
Gird like a starry zone his waist, and round
Skirted his loins and thighs with downy gold
And colours dipped in Heav'n;
the third his feet
Shadowed from either heel
with feathered mail
Sky-tinctured grain. Like Maia's
son he stood,
And shook his plumes, that Heav'nly
fragrance filled
The circuit wide.

Helpers in Tennessee

Only Adam and Eve deserved a Raphael. Ever since that unhappy operation, the job of protecting human souls has been assigned to junior angels. St Jerome was the first to assert the presence of guardian angels protecting every soul—the sort angel-spotters most often see. But in the modern world, apart from that great outlier, Lucifer (the champion of liberty, expelled from the Organisation, with a bunch of other rebels, for pride and disobedience), most angels are presumed to have a guarding and messaging role. Their multiple jobs have been merged into general communications. In the Greek Orthodox church all angels wear ribbons in their hair, the better to hear God's word and human cries, and act on them.

And they are good at it. The internet is crowded with testimonies of their efficacy and helpful intervention. Most, however—as Ms Byrne attests—seem to adopt human disguise when they appear on earth. When Josh's van broke down in Tennessee, he was helped by a man and a woman dressed in white who were playing pinball in a diner. They said they installed aluminium sidings, and bought a bus ticket for him; but when he turned round to say goodbye, they had gone. Paul, a no-nonsense army officer, was saved from a gang of thugs in a parking lot by a man in jeans and a red shirt, who quietly walked him away while the thugs froze, and then faded into an alleyway.

Such encounters are not enough for some people. There are still anecdotes like Amy's, who felt she was kissed by the archangel Michael while his white wings enfolded her bedroom and his “spectacular” blue eyes gazed into hers. But most active modern angels look like ordinary men and



Angelic string theory

voices with the angelic choirs. And the Second Coming, which every American evangelical anticipates, will feature angels in their millions, choreographed as planned from the beginning of the world.

The importance of angels to the Divine Enterprise makes them naturally hierarchical. At the top of the nine medieval orders, still invoked today, are those who stand closest to the throne of God: Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones. Then come the outer ranks: Dominations, Virtues and Powers. The last three orders alone have regular dealings with mortals: Principalities, Archangels, Angels.

Among these are the only angels who are given names, the archangels Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Uriel (though Uriel's name is doubtful). These are the poster-boys of the angel world, blond, muscled and shining. Michael, the fighter, slays the

women: the man sitting in the café, the woman crossing the street, the teenager next in line at the bus stop. They are not in the least otherworldly: they do jobs, and carry enough money to help a stranger out of trouble. Then they vanish.

Or they can be a simple voice in the head, like the one Tammy heard as she was driving along one night in thick fog. She thought it was safer to stay with the slow traffic; but then she heard a voice ("not out loud, but in my mind") telling her to get in the fast lane. She obeyed it, and narrowly avoided crashing into a stalled car in the lane she had left. According to a recent article by Jonah Lehrer in the *New Yorker*, scientists who have investigated insights like this have found bursts of electrical frequency in the brain, a sudden spike of gamma rhythm caused by the binding of neurones in the cortex. That sounds like a plausible explanation; but to Tammy and others like her, it might equally be an angel passing.

Instant messaging

Oddly enough, modern science—so antithetical to angels—has made the world a more receptive place for them. In the age of the internet, scientific and technical language evokes angels all the time. Invisible networks and the world wide web are their natural and eternal business; from Ancient Greece onwards they have had instant access, global reach and universal applications. (Their very name, from the Hebrew, means "one going", continuous action.) As Aquinas put it in his "Summa Theologia", "The angel is now here, now there, with no time-interval between...angels exist anywhere their powers are applied." Indeed, as fast as bytes flash, angels always go faster. It is sheer speed that makes them invisible.

Angels also "know all the time", as Aquinas puts it. No need for tortuous reasoning or extrapolation; they are "perfect instances of intelligence", divine intelligence unconfined and unmediated by bodies, ever active and actualised, with the whole moving globe apparent to their gaze. And as soon as they wish to make their thoughts known, those thoughts are known. No barriers of any sort impede the message in, or the message out.

The knowledge universe is therefore the ideal home of angels, and their natural place. Anyone who supposes that the potential of the human mind is scarcely yet tapped or appreciated, and that its operations may extend to levels far subtler and higher than the senses can grasp, is leaving space for an angelic realm. And where there are still gaps in the grand unified the-

ory of the universe that scientists dream of, angels fill them, agents of motion and illumination otherwise unexplained.

No doubt, in the future, these agents will acquire some sub-sub atomic label; just as, presumably, whole classes of angels have been replaced by photons and quarks. In some mystical quarters, the vibrating strings that are now posited to make up the created universe are happily compared to angels' harps or the motion of their wings.

And the web of unseen, unknown material that scientists call dark matter, holding everything together, might as well have been spun by the angels until the Large Hadron Collider proves otherwise.

But it is in the realm of consciousness, especial-

ly artistic feeling and expression, that angels still hold out most boldly against science. They travel, like consciousness, outside space and time; the laws of the physical universe put no limits on them. Their ceaseless web of connections includes insight, inspiration, persuasion, adoration, and the synthesising and creative power of the imagination: human capabilities that many poets see as divine, even if scientists don't. Wherever there is no explanation for genius, or perceived beauty, or sudden comfort, or for the way a line or phrase ignites the heart, angels provide one.

Wrestling and resisting

They are also held accountable for less comfortable feelings: inferiority, shame, terror, impossibility of achievement. There is nothing subtle about such angels; they are as strong as demons and, in their purity, more implacable and challenging. In the Old Testament, Jacob wrestled until dawn with an angel (in fact, described only as "a man", like those angels in the Tennessee diner) who represented his own sins to him. The angel refused either to listen to him or to accept his repentance; on the other hand, he did not simply break away. He let Jacob test himself all night against him, and in the end blessed him. In the same way Rainer Maria Rilke, the greatest German poet of the 20th century, was tormented by angels all through his "Duino Elegies":

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among
the angels'
hierarchies? And even if one of them
suddenly
pressed me against his heart, I would perish
in the embrace of his stronger existence.
For beauty is nothing but the beginning of
terror
which we are barely able to endure and are
awed
because it serenely disdains to annihilate us.
Each single angel is terrifying.

Rilke saw his particular angel as strong, still, radiant, a pure divider "between the Here and There". But his angel also meant that "There" could be "Here", within Rilke. This was the being he had to wrestle with in order to write poems. The angel not only brought inspiration to him, but also challenged him constantly to be better than he was. And it carried his own significance into the universe. "Shine, oh keep on shining!" he cried in "To the Angel" in 1913. "Make me known to the distant stars..."

This sense of vital two-way communication, still not wholly explained by the synapses of the brain, is the chief reason that angels keep intruding into the 21st century. Their very persistence is a sign of the potential, and the defiance, of human imagination. When Antony Gormley, the sculptor of the "Angel of the North", was asked "Why an angel?" he replied: "Because no one has ever seen one, and we need to keep imagining them." The first part may not be true; but the second is.

Among the imaginings is that ultimate and common dream, that humans may become angels themselves. Christian and Muslim mystics both believe it, as the natural progression of the spirit to a purer and higher state. But ordinary, not very religious people find themselves hoping for it too. Humans in angel guise, with haloes askew and briefcases still tightly clutched among the clouds, remain a favourite of cartoonists. Typically, the new arrivals are surprised and disconcerted by their heavenly state. But most surprising of all, to any experienced passing angel, would be the implication that from now on they will have nothing much to do. ■



Watching over Gateshead