

JOURNAL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY HISTORY OF IDEAS



2015

Volume 4 Issue 7
Item 6

– Section 4: Reviews –

Book Reviews

S. Mammola, E. Pasini



JIHI 2015

Volume 4 Issue 7

Section 1: Editorials

1. *Gastronomy and Revolution* (M. Albertone – E. Pasini)

Section 2: Articles. Special Issue: Erasmian Science

2. *Lorsque le luxe bégaye: enquête sur les relations entre État et 'choses banales'. France, XVIII^e-XIX^e siècles* (A. Millet)
3. *Writing for Women at the Beginning of the Seventeenth Century: Hugh Platt's Delights for Ladies* (D.-C. Rusu)
4. *Algérie, terre promise. Plaidoyer pour une Algérie française dans la pensée de Buchez et ses disciples. (1830-1848)* (M. Lauricella)

Section 3: Notes

8. *Review-Interview with Roger Cooter. The Critical Intellectual in the Age of Neoliberal Hegemony* (P.D. Omodeo)

Section 4: Reviews

6. *Book Reviews* (S. Mammola, E. Pasini)

Section 5: News & Notices

7. *Activities of the GISI | Les activités du GISI (2015)*
-

Book Reviews

S. Mammola, E. Pasini

Reviews of Valery Rees, From Gabriel to Lucifer: A Cultural History of Angels, London-New York 2012; G. R. Evans, First Light. A History of Creation Myths from Gilgamesh to the God Particle, London-New York 2014.



1 VALERY REES, *From Gabriel to Lucifer: A Cultural History of Angels*, London-New York: I. B. Tauris, 2012, p. 272. ISBN 978-1-84885-372-0, £20.00 - \$29.00.

The enthusiastic blurbs on the back cover notwithstanding, this is a work of scholarship. The Author is a well-known Renaissance scholar with a focus on Marsilio Ficino, and the book is rich in learned enquiries and scientific sources. To “get a sense of how our ideas of angels have been formed” (3), Biblical texts and their later commentators, as well as Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman sources, and Neoplatonists ancient and early modern, and innumerable such-like, are invoked; even “entirely fictional” accounts, when they “have helped to shape our perceptions of the angelic world” (151, referring to Milton). And “there is still room for discovery” (115).

The book parades an engaging theme indeed—we inherit the interest in angels from a shadowy side of the Western 20th century, with its long-lasting nostalgia and desire for angelic beings, from Rilke to Wenders, from Klee to Kushner. Angels present the combined appeal of the religious and, at least now, of the unfamiliar. Unfailing messengers, indefatigable guardians, angels are true

cultural “archetypes” (18); representations of angels have to do with ‘higher powers’ drawn to us (34-35). But they, or our ideas of them, have a backstory of deep transformation. Angels have strange and disparate origins: seraphs were dragons (120) and cherubs were chariots (107-108), and their imagined aspect was often complex and terrible, before the iconographic uniformation of mature Christianity and the assimilation of angels to certain classical images of winged human creatures.

A crucial chapter concerns the midway position of angels between heaven and earth that modernity will consign to humans. It is one of the best parts of the book, with the exception of two discomfiting pages devoted to a very short history of astronomy (36-37, with a clumsy note on Ptolemy at p. 227; it makes one wonder who is the ‘target’, the *lecteur virtuel* that the writer has in mind). The coalescence of Christian and classical sources in Ficino’s 15th-century angelology, so on the verge of modernity (45-48), is the high point both in the historical development of those ideas of ours, and in the chapter. In fact, after Ficino, the chapter (and the history) goes somewhat kaput, because angels do not seem to keep pace with the times—although later in the book the reader will enjoy again John Dee’s late-16th-century conversations with angels and the ensuing ludicrous adventures (173-74).



“After Descartes”, the Author concedes, “angels had no place in a mechanistic universe” (55); they would remain only in imaginative thinking and arts, and in “popular affection” (the Author does not even suggest popular devotion, and this is a bit of a surprise). Angelology becomes the exertion of bizarre spirits, be they professional theologians or not. One might observe that, for Descartes himself, differently from our souls, angels, although unextended, can exercise their power on the parts of the extended substance (Letter to Henry More, apr. 15 1649; AT V, 342); and that, before and after Descartes, it is not easy to take philosophers at face value. In a stimulating article of the ’80s, Macdonald Ross

had already been able to show how difficult a theme is “the extent to which philosophers and others must be taken literally when they have written about angels” and other supernaturalities¹.

The matter is overall very complex and the book is sometimes a history, sometimes a catalog of stratified ideas on angels, ordered by kinds, or by names. Sometimes it is like ‘anything angels’ (at p. 211 we even meet the Auschwitz physician Mengele, an infamous ‘angel’ indeed). At p. 1 the Author hints to a very broad perspective on winged creatures in innumerable cultures, but then focuses on the three religions of the book and on ‘us’. Concerning the first-person plural pronoun, by the way, it must be noted that its use to appeal to a common feeling, or even experience, of angelic presences, sometimes surfaces. But it is kept within prudent bounds.

The wider perspective, anyway, returns only occasionally and with some slips like: “the dakinis of Tibetan Buddhism seem to bear a particularly close relation to the daemons of Iamblichus and Proclus” (36); be it true or false that they seem to do so, *was sollen wir damit anfangen?* At time, when the perspective really broadens, it seems that ‘our ideas’ on angels are simply open to the projection of any problem, any (other) idea, of any need for an image in metaphysical thinking—see pp. 115-16, and at pp. 116-17 the author makes it clear to the reader that with the idea of angels any confusion becomes possible and even sought for. In the end, thus, the book is not exactly a contribution to knowledge as every genuine work of scholarship intends to be. It is rather a quintessential exemplar of history of ideas in its commercial stage of development. Such a stage, in our society, is common fate of many revolutionary things.

Enrico Pasini



¹ George Macdonald Ross, “Angels”, *Philosophy* 60 (1985): 495-511.

2 G. R. EVANS, *First Light. A History of Creation Myths from Gilgamesh to the God Particle*, London-New York: I. B. Tauris, 2014, p. 306. ISBN 978-1-78076-155-8, £22,50 - \$35,00.

We received this book called *First Light*. Perhaps it would be better to call it “*Too Much Light*”: too much to the point of confusing the view, rather than facilitate it. This feeling arises immediately browsing the challenging subtitle, according to which this book should contain “a History of Creation Myths from Gilgamesh to the God Particle”. All too easy to remind us of Gramsci’s *Brevi cenni sull’universo*¹. We admit that it may be only a transient prejudice, inspired by the vaguely New Age cover on which the undulating profile of Ayers Rock stands under a very clear sky. The reading, however, does not help to reverse this prejudice, but rather confirms it. First of all, this book speaks truly of many, too many things, belonging moreover to that kind of topic typical of certain television shows in which everything is brought together, from Egyptian myths to Vedic doctrines through Greek cosmology, hermetic tradition, biblical exegesis, African or Scandinavian beliefs, in an inevitably doxographical mixture that simply evokes questions rather than discussing them critically. On the other hand, such an alleged encyclopedical approach is then betrayed by the peculiar point of view of the author, who is still a professor emeritus of Medieval Philosophy and dedicates therefore more space to cosmological theories of Church’s Fathers than to the founding myths of the Polynesian or pre-Columbian cultures, which - logically - should be fully examined by a “History of Creation Myths”. After all, the chapter in which references to legends of the non-European people find some space reveals even from its title (“Going to See”, p. 127-182) a eurocentric perspective: it is resolved substantially in a brief description of the misunderstanding, more or less ideologically oriented, that has marked the look of Europeans on the civilizations that they have gradually encountered in their expansion process, taking reports of explorers and missionaries of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century as almost exclusive sources. Nothing to do, however, with Giuliano Gliozzi’s research about the European debate on the origins of ‘indios’ in *Adam et le Nouveau Monde*. Cap-

¹ Quaderno 8/XXVIII, § 143; “A caricature of a pedantic and pretentious headline: ‘News Briefs on the Universe’” (Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, ed. by Joseph A. Buttigieg, New York: Columbia U.P., 2007, p. 318).

tains and religious people are introduced just to conclude that “attitudes which recognised the full humanity of all human beings and the equal claims of their accounts of creation were slow to emerge” (p. 182).



Here and there, sketches of possible interdisciplinary investigations emerge, condensed for example in the sections dedicated to the intersection between “travel, science fiction and theological speculation” in the works of Daniel Defoe (p. 169-171), or to exotic paintings of Thomas Daniell (p. 176-177). But it is a matter of simple hints piled up without effective coordination between them. The same can be said about the “cosmographic” chapter of the work (“What is the layout of the cosmos?”, p. 36-49), which refers to a series of problems familiar to anyone who has dealt with issues related to the production of “images of the world”, such as the demonstration of the sphericity of the Earth, its division into climatic zones or the discussion about the existence of the antipodes. Also in this case, topics are only juxtaposed without having completed the excavation work necessary to unearth the connections, perhaps underground, which link authors, disciplines, logic and systems of representation different from each other—that is what constitutes the true meaning of a real interdisciplinary study (which can be exemplified, to remain within the subject, by the beautiful *History of the World in Twelve Maps* written by Jerry Brotton).

It is rather clear that this is not what interests the author. Her effort to single out various ways of understanding the concept of Creation—as an event complete in itself or as a dynamic system that contains within itself the laws of its own development or even as an event destined to repeat itself cyclically—is aimed instead, as she puts it, to “the search for a key” (title of chapter eight), meaning a possible underlying theme that unifies all the stories that humanity has been able to produce on the origin of the world. Truly speaking, since the very first line Evans makes clear that a definitive answer akin to the one developed by the supercomputer in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* does

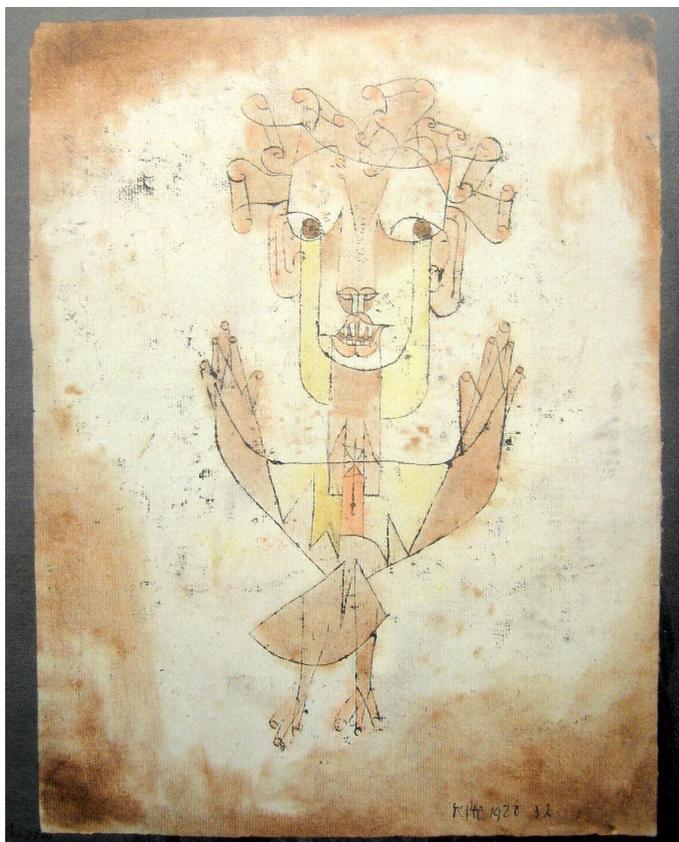
not exist. This view is echoed in the conclusion: “creation stories are kaleidoscopic. A shake, and the colourful scraps settle into another pattern. It is hard to fix principles on which to consider one of these ephemeral pictures more ‘true’, ‘beautiful’ or ‘meaningful’” (p. 255). It follows that attempts to access the archetypes of a collective unconscious or to rebuild comparatively the rules of a unified mythology of mankind are therefore doomed to fail: “there is no single unifying version of the end any more than there is of the beginning” (p. 256). This is probably not the most exciting conclusion that can be given by a book of more than two hundred pages. However, it is precisely this question—namely, if you can give a definitive “story” about the origin of all things—the stimulus that somehow sustains the whole research, and it is inevitable that, put in these terms, it can only result in an esoteric account *à la* René Guénon or in skeptical considerations of minimum common sense.

In all this, what of the “God particle” recalled on the cover? The two photos of LHC in CERN that open and close the gallery available along with the book allude to it implicitly, but it is mentioned only for few lines at the end of a paragraph dedicated to Democritus’ atomism, simply as latest discovery in the research of the infinitely small. Is this simply the last of the “creation myths” elaborated by humanity – and in this sense, science is only one of many possible “stories” with which men try to explain the meaning of the world—or is the scientific approach, reasoning about the “principle” but not necessarily about the “creation”, escaping by its very nature such a discussion? It is an aporia that is not openly resolved. At the end of a chapter entitled “What is the evidence?”, Evans writes that “within the parameters of the grand options identified down the centuries, whether to believe the text of a sacred book, think the matter through by pure reasoning or make inferences from observation of the universe, there has proved, then, to be a good deal of room for manoeuvre and changes of fashion”. Then, she asks, “has there been progress?”—and she does not provide an answer (p. 71).

On balance, the feeling is that the author has ordered the copious personal readings accumulated over a lifetime, directing them towards a wisdom reflection rather than to an interdisciplinary research, of which this book is, so to speak, just a simulation. The basic idea is that the question of the origins is a question that has always accompanied mankind and continues to remain open, even today, even if sometimes reformulated in scientific language. At this point,

however, it is best to leave this task to those who can perform it much better and give ourselves the pleasure of reading a book such as Gore Vidal's *Creation*, of which Evans quotes some passage. Even for a scholar, great literature is more useful than a banal academic monograph.

Simone Mammola



Paul Klee, Angelus novus, 1920 (Rees, From Gabriel to Lucifer, fig. 7).