

## From Darkness: A Brief History of Contrasting Ideas

### Part I: The Worshipful Light of Reason

Plato and Saint Paul – figures who have dominated Western thought for the past two millennia – were agreed that light is to be associated with what is Good, Beautiful, True, Highest, Eternal and most Proper. Paul was already aware of the divine, world-making “let there be light” of the Book of Genesis – not to mention the angelic glow of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary – before his own experience of a blinding light on the road to Damascus filled his heart and focussed his purpose.<sup>i</sup>

For Plato, ideas themselves belong to an eternal realm of light. This material world we live in is made up merely of shadows cast by the ideal forms; the passing of time and all our mere stuff is only the play of shades, which our minds must venture beyond. For Plato as for Paul, we live in darkness and must strive for the light – whether that be with our hearts or our minds.

In their own writings and in the libraries overseen by the students and interpreters of these men, theology and philosophy inevitably encountered the question of art. For Plato, art is only the shadow of those shadows which constitute the world – poetry, sculpture and painting alike are to be despised for seducing us further away from the light; to thrill to the arts is to take a step in the wrong direction, into the doubled shadows cast by the objects and emotions of the material world. Even Plato’s idea of beauty disregards the arts, looking instead to a more geometric, idealised and disembodied notion of harmony. Indeed, in his ideal world, his *Republic* of philosopher-kings, Plato would offer no home to artists.<sup>ii</sup> His pupil Aristotle was a little less absolute, recognising the potential art offered for catharsis – which is to say that the shadows-of-shadows (and especially the theatre) offer us a sandbox in which to work through and dissipate intense feelings. But for Aristotle, as for his teacher, Plato, whether we linger briefly with them or abreact them absolutely, shadows must be had done with in pursuit of the light; art and emotions alike must neutralise themselves, spend themselves in catharsis so that the real business of pure and abstract thought can be gotten on with.

This question of whether art might play any role in raising thoughts and hearts toward the Highest would cause considerable consternation as Christianity began its attempts to coalesce into a centralised administrative entity. At the Second Council of Nicaea of 787AD, the question of icons was hotly debated. Is the veneration of an image necessarily a blasphemous act of idolatry, the question went, reefing us in this fallen, worldly world? Or might the image lead us toward the light that casts the shadow? Catholic and Orthodox Christianities took opposing views on the matter; yet still the same basic argument is in place as in Aristotle’s revisions of Platonism: whether or not art is completely debased, it has no intrinsic worth. Art is, at best, a means to an end; the launchpad that is destroyed in the takeoff.

These two threads of light – the philosophical and the theological – were braided together throughout the Middle Ages by the Scholastics, who coaxed the centre of cultural influence away from the Mediterranean to also include England, the Netherlands and France. It was in Paris – later to be dubbed ‘the City of Light’ for its central role in the Enlightenment – that Thomas Aquinas wrote his *Summa Theologica*. Widely regarded as the pinnacle of Scholastic thought, the treatise harmonised Aristotelian logic with Catholic doctrine. Crucial to the book is Aquinas’ notion of “ontoluminescence”, whereby he conceives of a kind of light-beyond-light, the Light of Being as such. The notion is built on the quintessentially Scholastic ambiguity of the word “*claritas*”, the Latin word from which we get our own “clarity”. It is perhaps better translated, in Aquinas’ sense, as “radiance”. Or, better yet, it is both of these: it is the moment when a mental clarity learned from the philosophers grants access to the divine light known by the Saints and theologians – the Light of Being or “ontoluminescence”. It is, for Aquinas, a resolutely aesthetic category, but one in which any aesthetic object *per se* soon lies in ruins and the mind alone contacts the one True, Good,

Beautiful Light. Once again, art – and the body which would enjoy it – are denigrated, and in its place is raised this strange hybrid, half Saintly vision of radiance and half reason’s crystalline clarity. Importantly, this insistence on rationality was effectively used to bar women – the so-called irrational sex – from both philosophy and the priesthood.

## Part II: Taking Long Baths in the Shadows<sup>iii</sup>

There are those who love not only the light. If the dark, the shadows, are what fall outside of the light – the most high and praiseworthy – they constitute all that must pass in order for the eternal to reign; all of the fleeting moments of this life that stand between us and eternity. But, as the poet Charles Baudelaire insisted: we have no right to hate the present.

Indeed, Baudelaire’s insistence on the importance and fundamental dignity of our lived present – in all its limping, soiled and sore palpability – turned on its head what was thought of as *real*. In this burgeoning modernity, the real was no longer the Good and Eternal realm of God and Ideas, but was rather the nitty-gritty of the everyday, all the more real for its fleetingness. In this Modern overturning of Platonism, the idea was now contrasted with the real rather than identical to it; as today the realist contrasts himself with the idealist.

There is a sense in which Baudelaire is exemplary of his age. The poet turned 18 years old in the year that Louis Daguerre’s invention of photographic plates became commercially available, and he died a few years before the first Impressionist paintings appeared in the Paris Salon, influenced by the contemporary scenes and fast brushwork of Baudelaire’s friends and neighbours, like Édouard Manet and Eugène Delacroix. With Impressionism and photography, capturing light was no longer the pursuit of the Eternal, the Good and the True; on the contrary, truth and beauty were to be found in what was most fleeting, the half-seen.

In turn, the moral overtones of light became rather more muddy around and after Baudelaire. For the poet, to concentrate on what is most earthly, most here-and-now – that is, to prefer the quick shadows of art and everyday life to the light of Heaven and Eternity – also meant to love the dark corners, the fallen, the sick, the bottom of the bottle or the bowl of the pipe. He translated the gothic tales and poems of Edgar Allan Poe into French – with their black cats, consumptive beauties and bodies bricked up behind walls or sealed into sherry casks, never again to see the light of day. The dark – both literal and figurative – takes on a perverse, provocative deliciousness for Baudelaire, whilst also being a joyful insistence on the present over deferred promises of Eternity.

Perhaps paradoxically, this joyful shadowiness is best associated with the reinvention of light in Modernity. Light becomes a quotidian phenomenon, both natural and artificial, pastoral and commercial: it is the present illuminated and captured in the camera’s flashbulb; the bright, broad, bawdy spaces of Manet’s *Folies-Bergère* music hall and his paintings of cheeky sailors and likely lasses at the sparkling harbour of *Argenteuil*; it is the global rewiring promised at the First International Exposition of Electricity, held in Paris in 1881.<sup>iv</sup> It is with Baudelaire and his generation that the City of Lights reinvents itself under the same name: no longer the capital of Enlightenment thought, where the brightest offspring of Aquinas’ marriage of reason and the divine made their homes; now, Paris is the gaudily lit, bright-all-night reincarnation of luminescence as debauchery, pallor, joy and hell-for-leather good times – all caught in quick dabs of paint and on photosensitive silver. Paris in the nineteenth century takes on the full shine and exhaustion of the present, the lived paradox that is modernity – capital of fashion, home of the fallen; everything that a few decades later would give rise to the divine, spot-lit gravel of Edith Piaf’s torch songs.

## Part III: All That Glitters

Today, darkness can be hard to find. The dominant luminescence is no longer the Light of the Divine nor the electric lighting of those nineteenth-century people-watching public spaces. Light follows us around, in our office cubicles, private spaces, from inside our kitchen appliances and, most of all, in the palm of our hands. The back-lit glow of smartphone screens is the new public space, where so much of our social interaction happens. It is not *in* the light but *as* light that sociality and “friendship” have been re-cast as administrative duties rather than a social behaviour; as individualised games of chasing dopamine rewards rather than forms of solidarity, mutual obligation and love.

A phone might dip its blue tones of an evening to reduce the strain on our eyes and manipulate our brain-stem associations with the blue skies of daytime; but, as Jonathan Crary discusses in his book *24/7* we – like the lights – are always switched on.<sup>v</sup> Albeit in a rather different way to Plato and Saint Paul, neo-liberal capitalism abhors the darkness: for the globalised financial markets, sleep is a human inefficiency inconveniently tied to time zones. But the antipathy to sleep goes deeper than this. As Crary argues, sleep is a time of withdrawal and consolidation; a daily micro-strike which fosters processes of care and repair. Sleep is not merely an inconvenience for globalised financial capitalism, it is, in a sense, antithetical to it; it represents a structural opposition between the always-on economy and the dark, where the latter, by providing a space for our cyclical animal metabolisms to acknowledge and tend to our frailties, shows us that part of ourselves which does not serve unrestricted growth.

A 2014 article in the ornithological journal *The Condor* offers a sobering – it would not be an exaggeration to say devastating – indictment of the effects of our 24/7 lit-up lives on other creatures of the natural world. The collected data reveals that as many as one billion migrating birds in North America alone die every year because of light pollution. The reasons are two-fold: artificial lights obscure the stars by which these migrant birds navigate, and some lights can appear to the birds as stars themselves, turning city skylines into false maps.<sup>vi</sup> If we have followed Baudelaire’s dictum not to disdain the here and now – to keep at it all night and bathe in the shadows cast by streetlights – perhaps we have followed it too far, obscuring the heavens from view and navigating by paper moons.

Baudelaire’s logic of the lowest and most earthly as, in fact, the most praiseworthy, was embraced by another Parisian intellectual in the first half of the twentieth century who, whilst no less decadently perverse than Baudelaire, might offer a way through this apparent impasse between, on the one hand, servitude to Ideals and fear of eternal damnation and, on the other hand, the sleepless, sunless, darkless and world-wrecking non-stop growth of bright-light, fibre-optic capital. From early in his writing career, Georges Bataille argued for the importance of the “Big Toe”, the part of the human body closest to the mud and the dark.<sup>vii</sup> It is here, he argued, that philosophy should direct itself, and not toward the head, that part of the upright, de-animalised human which aspires to the Heavens, to the Light of Reason and Goodness. Indeed, Bataille would make his rejection of Aquinas’ saintly logic of ontoluminescence all the more clear several decades later with his final writing project, which he called *La Somme Atheologique*, The Height of Godlessness.

Throughout his intellectual life, Bataille steadfastly maintained his interest in figures like the Big Toe, the decapitated man (or Acephale) and the importance of the ground and the body, what he called base materialism (which he opposed to the dialectical or historical materialism of the Marxists, itself an economy of growth and progress). Between the early, surrealist work on the Big Toe and his last godless works, Bataille developed a keen interest in prehistoric art. He was particularly galvanised in this by the rediscovery, in 1940, of the Lascaux caves in the Dordogne, a complex of shafts and chambers covered with over six hundred wall paintings dating back 19,000 years.<sup>viii</sup>

#### Part IV: From Darkness

Considering prehistoric painting and sculpture can have a vertiginal, telescoping effect on our timelines of art. Suddenly, the five centuries separating Plato and Saint Paul, or between Aquinas and Baudelaire seem very little. We are not counting in lifetimes, now, but in time periods which cross geologic epochs – back through the series of the Holocene into the Upper Pleistocene. We find here, I would suggest, in the near-dark of the caves, something more profound than the Eternity of Plato’s Ideas and Paul’s Heaven: we find something which dwarfs the human but which still includes it, which forces us to think much bigger than ourselves yet still to include ourselves in that thinking – from our noblest intentions to our fugliest big toes, from our most mundane actions to the most global of consequences.

At Lascaux, art binds us again to the human species and to the Planet itself. Rock cradles us and provides the substrate – and often the pigment – for this art work. Here, “from darkness” takes on a new meaning – or, rather, causes an anamnesis, an un-forgetting, of a very old meaning. Here, art does not raise us above the darkness into the light; art is not called upon to follow the vector of ontoluminescence, to ride the lines of light that lead from the pure heart and mind back to the One True Glorious Source which sits elsewhere, abstracted and transcendent above this big-toe world. Here, we are reminded that art calls to us from the darkness, from the depth of the cave – something perhaps intuited, but certainly despised, by Plato. This darkness is not our personal failings or suffering – our avarice or sadness or spite – though it does also include these things. Darkness is simply what is here, all of it – the sparkling worlds of photography and lightly grasped Impressions of lillies and snowfall; it is winks from sailors and bored barmaids and staring into glasses of absinthe at three in the morning; it is tucking socks into boots and feeling the stream around our ankles and the mud between our toes; it is the bird that passes so quickly we cannot name it and the heat that stays in the rock into the night. It is all of life, as the poet D H Lawrence recognised in myriad ways throughout his writing: from our lives vibrating with “kissing and horrid strife” to the humility and dread of an encounter with a snake, which drinks from the water-trough before us, reminding us of our place in the world, before passing home through “the dark door of the secret earth.”<sup>ix</sup>

And once we agree that we have no right to hate the present, this enormous present, we might find that we are newly able to attend to it more widely, more deeply, to re-find in this material world all of history and everything that is possible: the memories of the species, the depths of the Earth, the Planet in all its strange, wondrous and violent becomings.

Art does not lead us out from darkness, it is not a bringer of light. Art is a reminder, a call to take off our shoes, to get those big toes into the mud and our smudging thumbs into the graphite; to bring our minds back into our bodies and our bodies into the times and places that surround and constitute us; to let our minds and our bodies – the light and the darkness – be un-split in each gesture and mark we make.

Art calls to us from darkness, calls us to return, in a sense, to the Planet: to a love of matter that is not materialistic; to a love of images and their efficacy which is not idolatry; to a love of thought and abstraction that is more, not less, when it occurs in and with our bodies.

We are from darkness. Art did not raise us from it toward the highest light – that was the demand of the Saints and the Logicians, and from the first they were rightly suspicious of the artists. From deep underground, art whispers across millennia, making again the last promise to our species that we might return to unity with ourselves, and with the Planet.

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i The relevant verses are Acts IX, 3–17. It is interesting to compare these verses to the account in Acts XXII, 6–11 wherein Paul’s fellow travellers on the road to Damascus also see a light but hear no voice (in Acts IX, 3 they neither see nor hear anything divine).

ii Iris Murdoch, the novelist and Oxford don, gave an excellent series of nuanced and accessible lectures on the subject in 1976, later collected as *The Fire and the Sun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

iii This is a reference to an image which appears more than once in Charles Baudelaire *Paris Spleen* trans. Louise Varèse (New York: New Directions, 1947), p.15, p.100.

iv Oddly enough, whilst Avenue de l’Opéra was electrically lit early in 1878, Paris was rather behind many cities in adopting electric lighting, preferring gas across much of the city until as late as 1888, when a devastating fire at the Opera Comique swayed public opinion and council purses toward the benefits of electricity. See the enlightening

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- short paper, A. N. Holcombe “The Electric Lighting System of Paris”, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (March 1911), pp. 122–132.
- v Jonathan Crary *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2014)
- vi Scott R. Loss, Tom Will, Sara S. Loss and Peter P. Marra, “Bird–building collisions in the United States: Estimates of annual mortality and species vulnerability”, *The Condor*, Vol. 116, Issue 1 (Feb 2014): 8–23.
- vii Georges Bataille “The Big Toe” [1929] in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939* trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1985), 20–23.
- viii Opinion varies widely on the age of the paintings. This figure is taken from the Lascaux website, operated by the French Ministry of Culture. See <http://archeologie.culture.fr/lascaux/> The website also includes a virtual tour of the caves and high resolution images of the paintings. See also Georges Bataille *Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture* trans. Michelle and Stuart Kendall (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2005)
- ix D H Lawrence “Kissing and Horrid Strife” [1932] and “The Serpent” [1923] in *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1972), pp. 246–7 and 134–7.