

The Psychology of Darkness as Expressed in the Paintings of Caravaggio

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Introduction

Since the beginning of life on earth, darkness has fascinated and terrified us. There is no escaping it. Darkness' counterpart, light, is inextricably tied to it. There is no light without darkness. All light, all color, comes from the void. Out of the darkness, comes the light. Light and dark create very visceral reactions in people. Light is seen as pure, good, full, even holy. Darkness obscures, is negative, empty, threatening, even evil. But lack of light creates light adjacent to it. One cannot experience one without the other. "As the darkness bore down, the wind came. The people on the hill shivered, their

lawn chairs suddenly felt flimsy. They huddled in their little groups, laughing nervously as the world shifted, darkness brought with it a primal fear. Glasses fell to the ground as the people, drawn upward into the sun's swirled vanishing, felt their disbelief: would it come back?

Discussion

Memories flooded them as the air grew colder, darkness crouched on the western horizon, streetlights flickered." ("Eclipse," Trafton, April 8, 2024)
There is the age-old, at times terrifying phenomenon of the end of a day. The coming of darkness is accompanied by the

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breathless fear that the sun might not return. “Night. To Renaissance humanists Night and Day were destructive powers since they ceaselessly marked the passage of time that led inexorably to decay and death. Hence, they were sometimes represented as a pair of rodents, generally rats, one black and one white. The figure of Night personified floats in the sky, sometimes under a blue canopy studded with stars. She may hold a child in each arm, a white one who is Sleep, a black one, Death. Her usual attributes are an owl, masks (which may be worn by putti) and poppies, sometimes worn as a crown. She may be accompanied by the sleeping Morpheus, the god of dreams, who may likewise be crowned with poppies (Giordano, Palazzo Riccardi, Florence). Or she sits in the lamplight with folded wings, her head in her hands, the two children asleep nearby.” (Hall, Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art, pg. 224)

“There are many forms of darkness. There is darkness when we close our eyes, darkness that climbs up our back, darkness that grabs, that we fear when our eyes are closed in the shower. The darkness of the mind. There is the darkness of primordial fear, deeply rooted in the human psyche. The fears of death, isolation, and darkness.” (“The Darkness of the Mind,” Trafton, 2023)

The thick gloom of Stygian night: “of or relating to the river Styx. The literal sense began to be used in the early 16th century, and by the beginning of the 17th had taken on its figurative sense.” (“Stygian,’ ‘Umbra,’ and Other Words for Darkness: Words borne from the dying of the light,” merriam-webster.com) There is the mythology of darkness as it relates to the Underworld, to Hades. Darkness that holds a mystery and strikes to the core.

And there is the darkness laid down, in careful emotional brushwork. Light is pulled out of this darkness, tenebrous darkness, the darkness used by Caravaggio in the late 1500s and early 1600s. Caravaggio separates light from darkness. He sets up a kind of spotlight. He almost leaves no room for a shadow. He has one loud, spotlit

message. He uses extreme light, which makes for extreme darkness. “He liked to push figures up against the picture plane and used light to create drama with a technique called tenebrism, a heightened form of chiaroscuro, in which figures are brightly illuminated against intense darkness. Caravaggio’s light, accompanied by exact, dynamic drawing gives his art a physical presence that can startle with its realism.” (MacDonald, “Caravaggio: Death of the Virgin – 1605”) One of the characteristics of Caravaggio’s paintings is that the light comes from an upper corner of the composition, casting a staring, stark light on the scene. The feeling is “visceral, you feel exposed, vulnerable, involved.” (Puschak, Nerdwriter videos, “Caravaggio: Master of Light”) “Caravaggio was an expert at using black. Unlike every painter before him, black became perhaps his most dominant color, covering large parts of nearly every canvas he painted. He was fascinated with contrast and discovered that black could be a powerful tool. Dubbed Tenebrism, his method not only highlights his bright and vibrant colors, putting them strikingly in front of the viewer, but also removes parts of the painting that would normally be seen. It shrouds many of his paintings in mystery, forcing the viewer to look intently into the darkness and discern what is hidden there. It begs speculation; it begs wonder. It forces us to look at the dark.” (Klingsmith, “Caravaggio’s Black Paint”) In The Calling of Saint Matthew, the intense light of the arrival of Christ comes from the right-hand side of the scene. The figure of Christ is shrouded in darkness, except for his barely suggested halo and pointed finger. The mystery is complete. Saint Matthew’s face and hand are fully illuminated; his startled expression is picked out in the strength of the light cast by Christ’s presence. The darkness behind him, made claustrophobic by the presence of a dimly lit window, situated unnaturally high on the wall, presses down upon the scene. The dim light of day cannot compete with the light of Christ. Caravaggio’s pointed

use of the power of darkness makes the scene seem breathless.

"Light is therefore revealed little by little; it is not crystal clear like Buonarroti, but emanates from the shadows, often bisecting the canvas and emphasizing the truthfulness of the experience. The 'Caravaggesque light' thus has a tangible as well as moral significance: it is God's mercy, which — like a wedge — finds its way to Matthew's calling; it is the familiarity and warmth of Christ's birth; it is the painful strength in the body of the flagellated Christ. And it comes — as typical with the Lombard painters — out of darkness. The shadow is therefore not a simple physical darkness, but an equally spiritual night, a spiritual drama, as in the last version of David and Goliath, in which the giant emerges from the dark background into the light. With Caravaggio, shadow always creates life." (Dal Bello, *The Bible of Caravaggio: Images from the Old and New Testament*, pg. 19, ¶ 3)

This kind of intense light is familiar to us, we have witnessed it before, in the golden, horizontal afternoon light before shadows reach out and darkness settles in. We can almost hear the crickets chirping on a warm late summer afternoon. This familiarity brings us closer to the painting's subject. The people in Caravaggio's paintings are not idealized, they are regular people, familiar faces. The settings in his paintings are not idealized, they are common spaces with which all viewers could identify. During the Counter Reformation, the Catholic church wanted this kind of homely art. One of the Council of Trent's decrees was that: "Through images the faithful would be confirmed and instructed in the articles of faith. Through images of the saints, the people could see the miracles of God and salutary examples of the faithful. Additional requirements for this imagery were clarity, realistic interpretation, and an emotional stimulus to piety. Artists in Catholic countries were affected by this advice, often creating paintings and sculpture to further Catholic orthodoxy. Many works of art in this period emphasize the power of

intercessions by the Virgin and the saints, as well as the orthodoxy of miracles and other mysteries of the faith. Another important strategy of the Counter-Reformation was to revive the reputation of long-neglected saints or near-forgotten miracles." (Sullivan, "More Counter-Reformation Art") Caravaggio's work fit this need perfectly. People found humanity in his figures, and through that familiarity were able to feel the passion of his Biblical scenes. Caravaggio's paintings are "always 'speaking' — thus the 'painted Word,' and Christ truly becomes the God 'who has become man.' He is a man like us and is therefore often seized with deeply human feelings such as pain, surprise, defeat, or confidence." (Dal Bello, *The Bible of Caravaggio: Images from the Old and New Testament*, pg. 17, ¶ 5)

Darkness was Caravaggio's secret weapon. Tenebrism, which he introduced to the Baroque period, is characterized by "an extreme or violent contrast between light and dark, and where darkness becomes a dominating feature of the image. Tenebrism comes from the Italian word *tenebroso*, which means gloomy." (Amuze Art Lectures, "Tenebrism Explained: and how it differs from *chiaroscuro*") Caravaggio's use of extreme light removed the need for a background. He placed the scene against a flat black wall or space dominated by darkness. He then pulls his figures from the darkness, lifting flesh and folds of drapery from a velvety black background. The background almost succeeds in dominating the painting, were it not for the familiarity of the subject matter. In *John the Baptist (John in the Wilderness)*, the darkness of the dominant field is particularly dense. The Baptist is depicted as a young man, whose white shoulders and ruddy, hardened hands are pulled uncomfortably from the blackness of the canvas. A particular detail, the vibrant red cloak that is wrapped loosely around him, creates a secondary light source. "He also developed a highly original form of *chiaroscuro*, using extreme contrasts of light and dark to emphasize details of gesture or facial expression: an outflung arm, a look of

despair or longing.” (Graham-Dixon, “Caravaggio: Biography, Paintings, Style, and Facts”)

Caravaggio further wields the power of darkness in the way that he crowds the figures of some of his paintings, particularly in the Taking of Christ. He lays out the drama at close range — we see the hardened soldiers, Judas clutching Christ’s shoulder, and the screaming, fleeing St. John. Caravaggio pares down the number of figures, and yet gives us the sense of a crowd, in the way in which the figures are entangled. The struggle is fierce. They are at close range and are pulled from the darkness with a breathless power. All of Caravaggio’s Biblical narratives have this singular power. They stir deep emotions. The viewer is crowded by the figures, it’s as though you can feel the heat of the soldiers’ armor, smell the Evangelist’s fear, and hear Judas’s kiss as he betrays his friend. “He also pushed figures up against the picture plane and used light to enhance their dramatic impact, creating a sense of immediacy that had not been seen before.” (Down, “Discovering Caravaggio: The Master’s Life, Art, and Legacy”)

In the Conversion on the Way to Damascus, one of Caravaggio’s most dramatic examples of tenebrism, the “background is dark and only illuminated by a few moonbeams from the upper right; they break through the darkness, descend upon the back of the imposing horse to reach Paul, who has tumbled to the ground. Stillness and loneliness prevail, further accentuated by the painter via his subtle psychological insight into the image, in recounting what occurs within the spirit of the ‘converted.’ ...Christ cannot be seen, yet the light becomes his word and image.” (Dal Bello, *The Bible of Caravaggio: Images from the Old and New Testament*, pg. 79, ¶ 3-4) Paul lies stunned, not from the fall from the horse, but by the intensity of God’s light and his conversion to Christianity in the velvety darkness of night. Caravaggio’s use of tenebrism and dramatic foreshortening remove the air from the scene, enabling the

viewer to experience the overwhelming magnitude of the conversion as well. Much has been said about Caravaggio’s mental state, and his sexuality. He was passionate to the point of self-destruction. “Early biographers of Caravaggio cite those who knew him personally as calling him ‘turbulent and quarrelsome,’ a ‘madman,’ and ‘dragged down by his own temperament.’ While his volcanic rages and violent behavior are consistent with a severe personality disorder, his self-portrayal as the severed head of Goliath suggests that Caravaggio possessed some degree of insight into a central element of his psychopathology — pitilessly self-destructive and ultimately fatal masochism.” (Buckley, “Images in Neuroscience: Caravaggio (1571-1610)”) Mario Dal Bello, in his book *The Bible of Caravaggio: Images from the Old and New Testament*, presents a different side to Caravaggio: “...for Caravaggio, life is always worth living. It is no coincidence that in one of his last paintings, he presents himself twice: once in the youthful, pale, perfect oval face of David and then in the stony countenance of Goliath, a manifestation of his own fear of death. These forms of beauty are not opposing; they are complementary, for the painter speaks of two diverging excerpts from the same life.” And “It appears at times as if the artist wanted to take a personal, spiritually-motivated journey in order to eventually reach an ‘illuminated path...’” (Dal Bello, *The Bible of Caravaggio: Images from the Old and New Testament*, pg. 19-20, ¶ 4-7). I have to admit that I would rather not dwell on Caravaggio’s mental health, or — no matter how fascinating — his sexuality. I am most taken by Dal Bello’s descriptions of the sublime qualities of Caravaggio’s paintings, and from my own experiences. I have had the great good fortune to see *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, the head of Medusa and others in the Uffizi in Florence, his works in the Galleria Doria Pamphilj in Rome, *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, *Inspiration of Saint Matthew*, and *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* in San Luigi de’ Francesi; *The Deposition of Christ*

in the Vatican Museums, and the Conversion On the Way to Damascus in Santa Maria del Popolo, also in Rome. I first traveled to Rome with my family in 1983, and the most recent time in 2018 with my partner's family. I remember going past armed guards and a metal detector outside San Luigi de' Francesi and entering the cool quiet of the church. Caravaggio's works are impressive in books like Mario Dal Bello's or lit from behind on a computer screen, but nothing compares to seeing one in person! I remember my partner saying in a hushed and almost reverent tone, "there are Caravaggios here!" And yes indeed, there were. We stood and looked at The Calling of Saint Matthew. "The light is no longer scattered, but focused, providing the painting with an emotional quality and endowing particular significance to every detail: from the table with coins to the items of clothing, to the psychological and dynamic contrasts that are charged with strong moral tension." (Dal Bello, *The Bible of Caravaggio: Images from the Old and New Testament*, pg. 54, ¶ 1) I wondered whether my agnostic partner was reconsidering, because he was so moved by the paintings. We bought Dal Bello's book and a handful of postcards and burst out of the church which was growing crowded. The midday light of Rome, with its strong shadows from the sycamores, was Caravaggio's.

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