

Light

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Simple, supremely commonplace. Ever present, this light that is nowhere else and everywhere else. Life-giving, living. It is the aura of each winding day and also a dimension of, a key to our place in nature. No accident that a yearned-for revelation/state/ destination seems always depicted with dramatic light.

Present at the origin of life and omnipresent within it. In the 9th century Duns Scotus Erigena declared, "All that is, is light."¹ Co-extensive with the air we breathe, and yet nothing in our experience is less banal or neutral. We are in it, and it evades our attempts to grasp it. Light is mad. It gathers and scatters and arrives in all guises, according to time, place, and countless other conditions.

Light pervades our senses and meanings to an unparalleled degree. We want to be seen in a good light, "I have seen the light," enlightened rather than benighted. Like the ripening dawn, "it has dawned on me." Matthew Arnold coined the phrase "sweetness and light" for the goal of our striving. Luxurious comes from lux, Latin for light; lucid, similarly. We know what is meant even if all of us, all of life, see and feel light differently.

Many kinds of light, to be sure, yet John Keats asked, "For what has made the sage or poet write/But the fair paradise of Nature's light?"² A plant in a cellar will grow toward the light. "That Light, whose smile kindles the Universe," wrote Percy Bysshe Shelley.³ That light of which "Amina sings; copious as stars and glad as morning light," recounted Walt Whitman.⁴ Goethe's last words were "More light, more light!"⁵

Our planet's fundamental rhythm is the alternation of light and dark, day and night. Sunlight is basic to all life on Earth. Less obvious is the fact that we once responded with delight and wonder to the radiance of the sun, moon, and stars in an intimacy with such celestial bodies. How this has changed. As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, "The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child."⁶ Domesticated, we have been turned

¹Quoted in Stan Brakhage and Forrest Williams, "On Filming Light," *The Structurist* 13/14 (1973-74), p. 94.

²John Keats, *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, ed. H.W. Garrod (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), "I Stood Tip-toe..." p. 6.

³Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Poems* (PoemHunter.com 2004), "Adonis," p. 16.

⁴Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1930), p. 445.

⁵Quoted in Frederic J. Perry, *The Village, and Other Poems* (London: Simpkin, 1853), p. 89.

⁶Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Portable Emerson*, ed. Carl Bode (New York, Penguin Books, 1981), "Nature," p. 10.

away from this communion; but in a sense, we still worship the sun. “Thou Sun, of this great World both eye and soul,” in John Milton’s words.⁷ The sun is a bright, galvanizing point, and for some a center of incomparable value. From the warmed primordial ocean we are the sun’s children. We are made out of sunlight, even if we take its unbounded gifts for granted.

Luminous, numinous, we are sunbitten in its downpouring. Ojibwe writer Theresa Smith describes being on a rock as the sun broke upon her: “I felt I was going to be able to live a new life from that moment. I was going to be able to move into a new light.”⁸ The unmediated sun can cleanse and heal. Our own solar power and Vitamin D; Seasonal Affective Disorder is of course lack of sun. Lawrence Durrell summed it up: “pure/ Affirming sun.”⁹ “Again the sun!/anew each day’ and new and new,/that comes into and steadies my soul,” proclaimed Marianne Moore.¹⁰

Walt Whitman observed that it “bursts through in unlooked-for directions.”¹¹ “Busy old foole, unruly Sunne,” according to “The Sun Rising” by John Donne.¹² The sun knows secrets, goes on past the ends of thought. The shadows, its creations, hide nothing. Mark Van Doren noted that “This amber sunstream, with an hour to live,/ Flows carelessly, and does not save itself.”¹³

Rulers, at least from the pharaohs of Egypt down to France’s “Sun King” Louis XIV, have identified themselves with the sun. There are also countless associations between sun and agriculture/ domestication, including many Sun Dances. A Seneca story, “Three Brothers Who Followed the Sun,” has it that “the sun loves war,” in the context of growing tobacco and corn.¹⁴

Coextensive with the air we breathe, light is also commonly linked to spirit in many traditions and religions.¹⁵ In the 14th century BC Akh-en-Aton offered a famous hymn to the sun god, at the dawn of monotheism. A theme in Chinese religion is “the idea of objects, places, or mythical beings of perpetual light.”¹⁶ “The light in me recognizes and honors the same light that is within you” is a standard greeting for yoga practice. The first book of the Hebrew Bible (8th century BC) includes the famous “And God said ‘Let there be light’: And there was light.” (Genesis 1:3) According to the Gospel of John, Jesus claimed to be “the light of the world.” (John 9:5) The reverse aspect is darkness: in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, for example, Satan reigns in Hell, “seat of desolation, void of light.”¹⁷

In a more philosophical vein, it is clear that in that discipline, too, light has been a powerful metaphor and more. The sublime, for instance, became a key philosophical and aesthetic focus in the 18th century; it was a commonplace that light was the essence of the sublime. Much later, Georges Bataille resented the Platonic sun of cool reason and celebrated instead the burning sun,

⁷John Milton, *The Poetical Works of John Milton* (London: Baynes and Son, 1825), “*Paradise Lost*,” Book 5, p. 101.

⁸Theresa S. Smith, *The Island of the Anishnaabeg* (Moscow, ID: University of Idaho Press, 1995), p. 32.

⁹Lawrence Durrell, *The Poetry of Lawrence Durrell* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1960), “*Cities, Plains and People*,” p. 148.

¹⁰Marianne Moore, *A Marianne Moore Reader* (New York: The Viking Press, 1961), “*The Pangolin*,” p. 39.

¹¹Walt Whitman, *op.cit.*, p. 325.

¹²John Donne, “*The Sun Rising*,” in *The Athenaeum*, London, Sept. 2, 1871, p. 306.

¹³Mark Van Doren, “*This Amber Sunstream*,” in *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, Vol. 2 (New York: Library of America, 2000), p. 75.

¹⁴Margot Edmonds and Ella E. Clark, eds., *Voices of the Winds: Native American Legends* (New York: Facts on File, 1989), p. 338.

¹⁵See, for example, G.R. Evans, *First Light: A History of Creation Myths from Gilgamesh to the God Particle* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

¹⁶Fabrizio Pregadio, *Great Clarity: Daoism and Alchemy in Early Medieval China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 72.

¹⁷Milton, *op.cit.*, Book 1, p. 154.

which to him stood for the thwarting of Icarus' yearning for transcendence. Heidegger's *lumen naturale* is an intuitive faculty of meaning within us, while darkness appears in Sartre's writings as nausea, annihilation, that which is closed off. Maurice Merleau-Ponty sought a primordial ontology of vision prior to the split between subject and object. Lived perception was the key to his phenomenological research, and light was never far from this active perceiving in the world. For feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, Merleau-Ponty's stress on the tangible wasn't tangible or intimate enough. "I see only through the touching of the light," she declared.¹⁸

In his *Vision of Nature*, Michael Tobias observes that despite the hundreds of Western art history books with "light" in their titles, they are "surprisingly silent on the topic of light."¹⁹ Paul Hills is nonetheless correct in noting "the preoccupation with representing light that is a characteristic of the Western tradition from the Renaissance to the Impressionists."²⁰ In the early 15th century the Van Eyck brothers brought an extraordinary clarity of light to their paintings. In the following century, toward the end of the Renaissance, Masaccio's light was a pre-eminent feature of his work. Representational purpose becomes somehow lost when light becomes a prime subject, in a satisfying move away from what representation is always trying to achieve.

Centuries later in the 1870s, Renoir and Manet triggered an entire movement. As Robert Delaunay summed up, with some exaggeration: "Impressionism; it is the birth of Light in painting."²¹ From the sun-drenched pre-Impressionist canvases of J.M.W. Turner to the even more focused intent of Manet: "Light is the principal person in the picture."²² In America the Hudson River School had a closely related emphasis slightly earlier, albeit in a quite different style. As in France, artists were drawn to the light as industrialization threatened it decisively.

Pierre Bonnard captured the radiant light, sunlight streaming through a window as a secular grace, in the early 20th century. Later in the same century, Mark Rothko brings us back to the sublime, the depth of his rectangular forms pulsing with light. Light is a presence that evades representation, it knows so many tricks by which it prevails. The image, by contrast, is but the "ashes" of what was active, as noted by Man Ray in his 1934 essay, "The Age of Light."²³

"Light is light, and dark is dark; and if, as at twilight, they appear to blend...they do so without either of them relinquishing anything of itself to the other," according to philosopher John Sallis.²⁴ In a June 13, 1851 journal entry, Thoreau taps a similar vein: "Then is night, when the daylight yields to the nightlight...an interval, a distance not recognized in history."²⁵ There is so much to think about and discover in these silent, all-encompassing realms. "Luminous night, touched with a quickening whose denseness never appears in the light," is a meditative insight from Irigaray.²⁶ The intangible radiance of deep space in a night sky is inescapable to anyone who is somehow able to avoid the always-spreading light pollution.

¹⁸Quoted in Dorothea Olkowski and James Morley, eds., *Merleau-Ponty, Interiority and Exteriority, Psychic Life and the World* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), Elizabeth Grosz, "Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray in the Flesh," p. 158.

¹⁹Michael Tobias, *A Vision of Nature* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1995), p. 15.

²⁰Paul Hills, *The Light of Early Italian Painting* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 1.

²¹The Structuralist, op.cit., Robert Delaunay, "Light (1912)," p. 43.

²²Quoted in *The Academy*, Vol. LXIX (July-December 1905), anon., "Fine Art: from Turner to Corot," p. 907.

²³Man Ray, *Man Ray: Photographs 1920-1934* (New York: East River Press, 1975), "The Age of Light," unpaginated.

²⁴John Sallis, *Light Traces* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), p. 95.

²⁵Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal 1837-1861*, ed. Damion Searls (New York: New York Review Books, 2009), June 13, 1851, p. 54.

²⁶Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, trans. Joanne Collie and Judith Still (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 13.

Our moon, blind queen, bright ghost of the sun, holds us in its steady light, which seems hollow and yet not hollow. Moon that makes the seas tilt, pulls the seas after it. We are moon-blanced by its silver beams, made restless when it is full. “The moon hangs like a hook,” Lee Hou-Chu wrote,²⁷ and the sun puts daybreak moon away. “A dawn moon, hard to hold its light,” in Meng Chiao’s words from the 8th century.²⁸

In the silky sea of night there is a surf of stars. Civilization has steadily obscured them, but the luxury of fire-spilling stars remains, its fantastic sifting. Seamus Heaney’s “Oysters” gives us some sensuous lines: “My tongue was a filling estuary,/My palate hung with starlight:/ As I tasted the salty Pleiades/ Orion dipped his foot into the water.”²⁹ Mary Oliver, more simply: “I look up/ into the faces of the stars,/ into their deep silence.”³⁰

As Milton wrote, it is “the morning star that guides/ The starry flock”³¹ and announces the impending dawn. Black Elk, referring to a crucial turning point in his maturity, recalled: “From that time on, I always got up very early to see the rising of the daybreak star.”³² For many, this has been a time of deep significance. Native author Paula Gunn Allen, referring to important awareness and memory, found that “You can hold it, if you hold it lightly. Like sunrise.”³³ “I have watched the morning break in many quarters of the world; it has been certainly one of the chief joys of my existence,” mused Robert Louis Stevenson.³⁴ Dawn is a private showing, and it is also what lasts--the meaning of N. Scott Momaday’s title for his novel, *House Made of Dawn*.³⁵ A new day dawning is another sense of the word, one that we may yet experience provided the number of cynics and nihilists doesn’t grow too great.

Nature gives a whole array of different kinds of light. Here in the Pacific Northwest there is generally a liquid light, a soft marine light. Sometimes noticeable in European art is the difference between the wetter north, with a slight shimmer or sheen in the air, and the drier, dustier south--a difference of the light. And what of the variations of shooting stars, aurora borealis, rainbows, and other such spectacular lights!

Artificial light seems best suited for conveying the alienation that it embodies. One thinks, for instance, of Edward Hopper’s “Nighthawks,” his 1942 depiction of lonely figures in a late-night diner, illuminated by harsh lighting. A more abstract starkness is brought out by Richard Ross’ 1998 photograph, “Restrooms Shoreline Park, Santa Barbara, California.”³⁶ As the sun sets over the Pacific, artificial light floods out of the foregrounded public restrooms, in a striking contrast, as if the forms of light are pitted against each other.

Like technology, light is not neutral. Its modern history, the acceleration of non-natural lighting sources, can be a reminder of lost meanings and values. The emergence of gas-lighting circa 1800, and electric lighting several decades later, paralleled the development of the rest of the

²⁷Lee Hou-Chu, *Poems of Lee Hou-Chu*, trans Lin Yih-Ling and Shahid Suhrawardy (Bombay: Orient Longmans Ltd., 1948), “Wu Ye Ti,” p. 59.

²⁸Stephen Owen, *The Poetry of Meng Chiao and Han Yu* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 61.

²⁹Keith Tuma, ed., *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), Seamus Heaney, “Oysters,” p. 666.

³⁰Mary Oliver, *The Leaf and the Cloud* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2000), “Gravel,” p. 44.

³¹Milton, *op.cit.*, p. 268

³²Black Elk, as told to John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1932), p. 180.

³³Paula Gunn Allen, *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* (San Francisco: Spinsters, Ink, 1983), p. 4.

³⁴Robert Louis Stevenson, *Dreams of Elsewhere* (Glasgow: In Pinn, 2002), p. 290.

³⁵N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

³⁶Richard Ross, *Gathering Light* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), unpaginated.

technological juggernaut. At base the advance of artificial light was called forth by the factory system and the Industrial Revolution.³⁷ Bluhm and Lippincott noted, “In the second half of the nineteenth century, light seemed to be everywhere and in immeasurable quantities,”³⁸ just as industrialism was everywhere. It was precisely this onslaught that the Impressionist painters reacted against.

For the factory owners and all their ideological defenders, on the Left as well as the Right, it hasn’t been acceptable for more than two centuries to awaken with the sun and sleep when it has set. Now we are ever more sleepless in the 24-hour working day in which artificial light overrides the sun, on the global treadmill. Melatonin is suppressed by electric light, and Wilhelm Reich’s “dead light” of fluorescence reigns in office buildings. Women living near bright streetlights are far more likely to develop breast cancer than those lit by the moon and stars.³⁹ Computer screens, e-books, and the like are just the latest rest-robbing sources of light. Coelux of Italy has developed a “new form of artificial light [that] is able to dupe humans, cameras and computers alike, using a thin coating of nanoparticles.”⁴⁰ This supposedly replicates sunlight itself. Who needs the natural world at all?

In “Bring on the Dark,” Clark Strand regrets that night, which once held back unrelenting and exhausting enterprise, has been made to submit. “The lights are always on.”⁴¹

Light is a form of electromagnetic energy; it is both particle and wave; it makes photosynthesis happen, among other well-known features. Recent science has shown that the speed of light can be exceeded, and researchers have managed to slow down the speed of light.⁴²

Wordsworth wrote of Sirius and the seven stars of “Orion with his belt, and those first Seven,/ Acquaintances of every little child.”⁴³ How many children now have that connection? “All things that love the sun are out of doors” was another, more enduring statement of his.⁴⁴ “To live in the Old Way is to live with the sky,” as Elizabeth Marshall Thomas beautifully described traditional Ju/wasi hunter-gatherer wisdom.⁴⁵

We are always drawn to the light, sometimes rapturously. Painter George Inness collapsed and died after raising his hands to a sunset and declaring, “My God, oh, how beautiful.”⁴⁶ Turner’s last words were, “The sun is god.”⁴⁷ Meng Chiao wrote in a similar, if less dramatic vein: “Looking up, I am moved by the light of newly cleared skies,/ That shines down on me making me doubt my sorrows.”⁴⁸

³⁷Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: the Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1988), e.g. pp. 8-9.

³⁸Andreas Blühm and Louise Lippincott, *Light! The Industrial Age 1750-1900* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), p. 30.

³⁹Diane Ackerman, *Dawn Light* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), p. 31.

⁴⁰Alecopec88, “New Artificial Lighting Simulates Sunlight” (wearechange.org, February 18, 2015).

⁴¹Clark Strand, “Bring on the Dark,” *New York Times*, December 20, 2014, p.A4.

⁴²D. Giovanni et al., “Spatially Structured Photons that Travel in Free Space Slower than the Speed of Light,” *Science*, 20 February 2015, pp. 857-860.

⁴³William Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), “The Prelude,” p. 518.

⁴⁴“Resolution and Independence” in Geoffrey Durant, *William Wordsworth* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 90.

⁴⁵Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, *The Old Way: A Story of the First People* (New York: Picador, 2006), p. 255.

⁴⁶Tobias, *op.cit.*, p. 235.

⁴⁷Blühm and Lippincott, *op.cit.*, p. 120.

⁴⁸Owen, *op.cit.*, “Cold Creek,” p. 150.

Thoreau put this in sharper focus: “Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn.”⁴⁹ In this sense, the light depends on us. Or as Lawrence Durrell urged, “Ride out at midnight,/ You will meet your sun.”⁵⁰

So. How to proceed? With great passion...but lightly.

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⁴⁹Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings* (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), p. 297.

⁵⁰Durrell, *op.cit.*, “Lines to Music,” p. 8.

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