



Tenebrism in Baroque Painting and Its Ideological Background

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Tenebrism in Baroque Painting and Its Ideological Background

The subject of the present study occurred to me as a result of observations in museums and at numerous exhibitions of 17th century painting.¹ The art historians who analyse this painting usually employ stylistic categories such as Mannerism, anti-Mannerism, Classicism, anti-Classicism, dynamic Baroque, or Naturalism. These categories, frequently disputable, have been omitted in this study with the exception of the term "Baroque", which is conventionally accepted for the 17th century in the division into periods. In the painting of that time the relation of light and shade is the main problem of the visual structure and the most characteristic means of expression. I noticed that the way in which light appeared in 17th century paintings was conditioned by the intensity and extent of their dark parts. From about 1600 onwards darkness took up "statistically" more and more space, and in numerous Italian and Spanish pictures it predominated over light, frequently spreading over two-thirds or more of the area of the canvas.

It should be pointed out at once that today a large number

of Baroque paintings (as well as of those from later periods) have an overall dark tone owing to chemical changes in the paint itself. This was already noted by earlier historiographers, who drew a distinction between purely external, physical causes (the kind of paint vehicles) and a change in taste which took place in a certain historical period.² The strong contrasts of light and shade and the large areas of darkness in the pictures of the extremely numerous group of 17th century artists were the expression of a definite stylistic trend called "pittura tenebrosa". The trend, if noticed at all, was by no means praised by earlier critics.³ This referred above all to the art of Caravaggio, whose formulation of the new artistic idiom was the most radical [Fig. 1]. The critical texts on this subject written at the time are widely known. In particular they condemn violent contrasts between light and shade, the "soverchia oscurità", the plunging of some parts into obscurity, this being regarded as ruinous to the drawing. It is striking how the criticism and theory of the 17th century diverged from living art. The categories of estimation did not go beyond

¹ Here is a list of the major exhibitions of painting of the period under discussion: *Mostra del Caravaggio e dei Caravaggeschi*, Milano 1951; *Mostra del manierismo piemontese e lombardo del 600*, Torino 1955; *Maestri della pittura del Seicento emiliano*, Bologna 1959; *Caravaggio e Caravaggeschi*, Napoli 1963; *Tanzio da Varallo*, Torino 1960; *Mostra del Cerano* Novara 1967; *Lichteffekte in der Malerei*, Wien 1971; *Il Seicento lombardo*, Milano 1973; *I Caravaggeschi francesi*, Roma 1975; *Caravaggio y el naturalismo español*, Madrid 1973; *Cinquanta anni di pittura veronese 1580-1630*, Verona 1974; *L'immagine di San Francesco nella Controriforma*, Roma 1982.

² Giulio Cesare Malvasia, *Felsina pittrice*, Bologna 1678 (two vol.), Vol. II, p. 58; Luigi Lanzi, *Storia pittorica d'Italia* (Three vol.), Bassano

1795-1796, Voll. II, pp. 159-160.

³ Cf. Francesco Scanelli, *Microcosmo della pittura*, Cesena 1657, p. 115: "...Il medesimo pittore da Canto (...) aveva sentito più volte dolersi coloro, che possiedono i dipinti della propria sua prima maniera, per nascondere gli occhi, bocca e altre membra nella soverchia oscurità, e per ciò non havere stimato compite alcune parti, coll'asserire ben spesso non conoscere le faccie e talvolta anco le azioni particolari delle figure". Passages from the source texts criticizing Caravaggio were collected by B. Joffroy, *Le dossier de Caravage*, Paris 1959; Cf. also: R. Longhi, "Alcuni pezzi rari nell'antologia della critica caravaggesca", *Paragone* 1951, nr. 15, marzo, pp. 41-62.



1) Caravaggio, «Vocation of Saint Mathew», Roma, San Luigi dei Francesi.

the stereotypes of traditional classical aesthetics which had taken shape in the Renaissance.⁴ Like Caravaggio, Rembrandt too was accused of hiding in shadow his defects in drawing.

In view of the present sensitivity to the formal, expressive, and psychological values of art, it can be stated that we realize better than the earlier theorists the changes that occurred in the pictorial language about 1600. The most essential

innovation in it can be defined as the "discovery of darkness", or the "discovery of night". This is naturally connected with the way of using light. In the very few works dealing with light in the history of art it has been observed that light plays a particularly important role in Baroque painting, some authors emphasizing its realistic and "temporal" function of posing the presented scene at a specified time (night, day, dawn, dusk),⁵ whereas others brought out the religious interpretation of light.⁶ However, no one has taken up the problem of darkness, so characteristic of the visual structure and the kind of expression in the vast majority of 17th century paintings.

The painters of the Baroque have given us beautiful pictures of a "real" night, moonlit landscapes (Elsheimer, Rubens). Yet it is not these pictures that are typical of the "Maniera tenebrosa". The most characteristic feature of the latter is the use of condensed light, giving the impression of being artificial (late Tintoretto, Caravaggio, Ribera, Honthorst, and Georges de la Tour). It is possible to obtain such an effect of light only by employing active darkness. Such darkness is a value active both artistically and psychologically and is indispensable for displaying various possibilities of light and for introducing an element of mystery, ambiguity, and understatement. The contrast with darkness lends to the light a dynamic quality and brings in the element of drama and pathos [Fig. 2]. Thanks to this contrast the traditional biblical subjects acquire an exalted mood and new meanings. The darkness of paintings, deepening from the late 16th century onwards, does not concern solely the scenes called "notti", in which the action takes place at night and is illuminated with a "real" source of light, a torch or an oil lamp. In the vast majority of religious pictures the place and time of the scene are undecipherable. We are not sure whether it is day or night, whether the scene is laid indoors or outdoors. The source of light is very frequently invisible, remaining outside the picture, so that only a shaft of brightness can be seen; and when it does appear within

⁴ W. Tatarkiewicz, *Estetyka nowozytna*, Wroclaw 1967, p. 374, p. 458.

⁵ W. Meserer, "Die Zeit bei Caravaggio", *Hefte des Kunsthistorischen Seminars der Universität München*, 1959, Heft 9/10, pp. 55-71; K. H. Spinner, "Helldunkel und Zeitlichkeit, Caravaggio, Ribera, Zurbaran, Georges de la Tour, Rembrandt", *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 1971, vol. 34, Heft 3, pp. 169-183; J. R. Martin, *Baroque*, London 1977, Chapter: "Light".

⁶ M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, "Le Opere della misericordia, contributo alla poetica del Caravaggio", *L'Arte*, 1968, nr. 1, pp. 54 ff.; M. Calvesi, "Caravaggio o la ricerca della salvezza", *Storia dell'Arte*, 1971, pp. 95-141; Idem: "Lecture iconologiche del Caravaggio" (in) *Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi caravaggeschi di Bergamo*, Bergamo 1975, pp. 75 ff.; C. del Bravo, "Sul significato della luce nel Caravaggio e in Gian Lorenzo Bernini", *Artibus et Historiae*, 1983, Nr. 7, pp. 69-77.

Till now the most comprehensive study of the problem of light in painting has been presented by W. Schöne, *Über das Licht in der Malerei*, Berlin 1954 (includes bibliography). Among later publications are: "Über Farbe, Licht und Dunkel", München 1959, *Hefte des Kunsthistorischen Seminars der Universität München*, Nr. 5, hrsg. H. Sedlmayr, (coll. work); M. Barasch, "Licht und Farbe in der Cinquecento", *Rinascimento*, 1960, Vol. XI, Nr. 2, pp. 207-300; Idem: *Light and Color in the Italian Renaissance Theory of Art*, New York 1979 (bibliography); E. von Zawadzki, *Helldunkel und Farbe bei Rubens*, München 1965 (inaugural Dissert.); "Light - from Aten to Laser", *Art News Annual*, XXXV, 1966 (coll. work); E. Strauss, "Zu den Anfängen des Helldunkels", (in) *Koloritgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur Malerei seit Giotto*, München 1972; V. Nieto Alcaide, *La luz. Símbolo y sistema visual*, Madrid 1978.

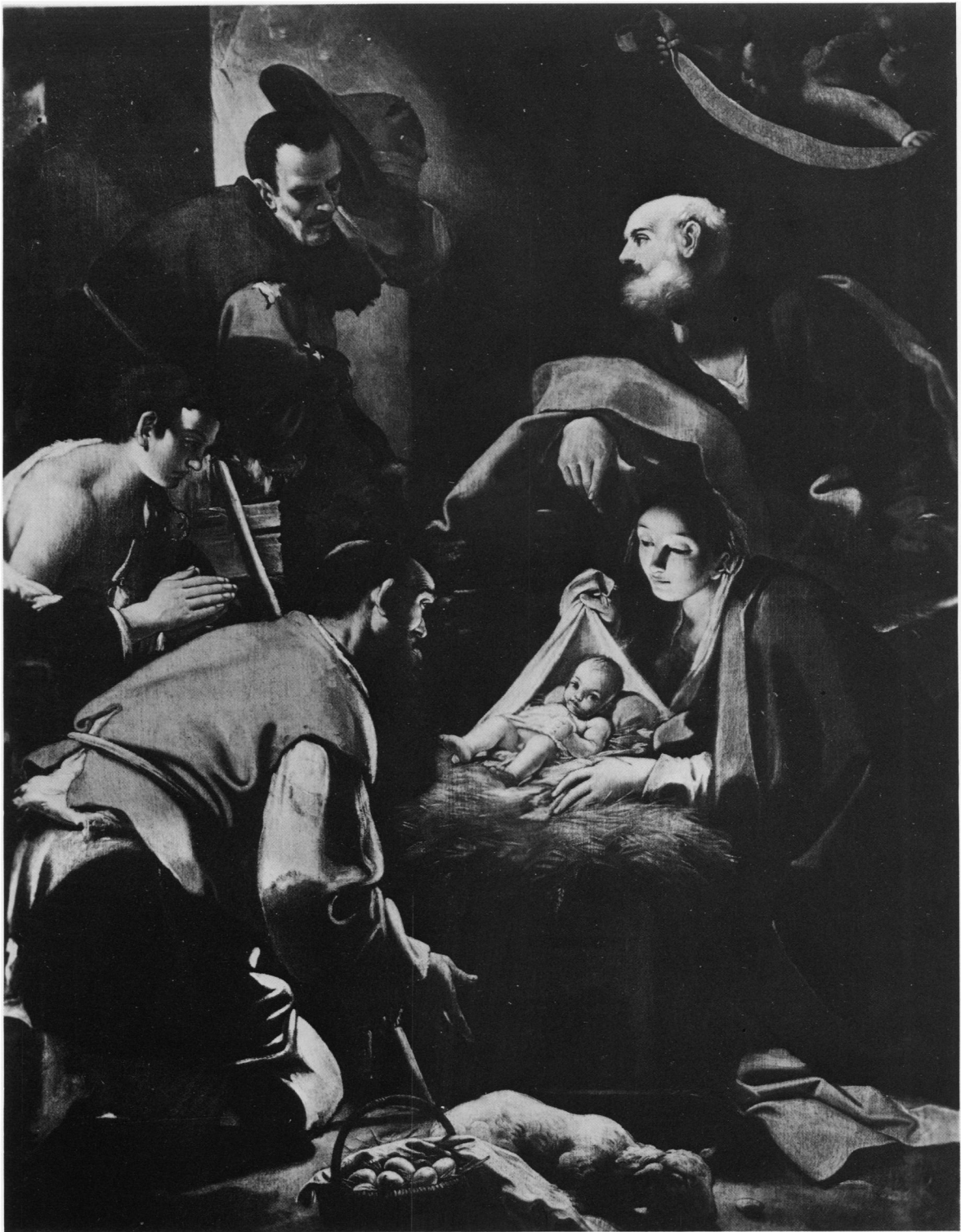


2) Tintoretto, «The Last Supper», Venezia, San Giorgio Maggiore, 1594.

the picture, the light emanates from the Child, the Holy Spirit, or the angels, thus being clearly of a metaphysical nature though the model of representing it follows real optical effects [Fig. 3, 4]. Nonetheless, even when the light shines forth from a real source, a candle or an oil lamp, it can carry some symbolic meanings. A burning candle can denote the light dissipating ignorance [Fig. 5], but it can also stand for the inner, spiritual illumination, "a candle in a dark place", mentioned in one of the Epistles of St. Peter [Fig. 6]. However, these symbolic meanings of light are perceived only because it appears in extreme darkness, the intensity of which also accounts for the degree of intensity of the light and for the diversity of its variants. In some parts of the paintings darkness attains the depth of impenetrable black, but it is apprehended as an artistically positive value and not as a means of "covering

up the errors of drawing", as was naively believed by some earlier critics.

Such a treatment of darkness in painting cannot be explained solely by the "influence of Caravaggio", as is usually done. Caravaggio gave particularly forcible expression to a certain tendency which grew out of the general spiritual undercurrent of the epoch. This was a powerful European trend which introduced darkness, inseparable from light, as an iconic and psychological factor of essential significance. Let us then try to answer the question how this artistic idiom can be linked with other branches of the culture of the time, with the attitude of mind, the stance on transcendence, and with the knowledge of nature and man, what ideas and facts combine to form the origin of the phenomenon of tenebrism and at the same time are a comment on it. No answer to this



3) Giacomo Cavedone, «Adoration of the Shepherds», Bologna, San Paolo Maggiore.



4) Tintoretto, «The Martyrdom of St. Catherine», (c. 1590) Venice, Accademia di Belle Arti.

question will be found in the 17th century historiography and theory of art, as they barely touch on the problem of light and shadow. One must therefore look for source material of another kind. First of all, however, it is necessary to go to as

far back as the mediaeval metaphysics of light, which numerous modern researchers associate with mediaeval art and the "aesthetics of light".⁷

In the Christian world of the 12th, 13th, and 14th century

⁷ E. de Bruynes, *Etudes sur l'esthétique médiévale*, Brugge 1946 (three vol.) T. III, Livre IV, Chap. 1, "L'esthétique de la lumière"; J. Koch, "Über die Lichtsymbolik im Bereich der Philosophie und der Mystik des Mittelalters", (in): *Studium Generale*, 1960, Jhrg. 13, pp. 653-670; Ibidem: H. Sedlmayr, "Das Licht in seinem Künstlerischen Manifestation", pp. 313-323. The major works dealing with the "philosophy of light" are cited by: W. Schöne, *op. cit.* pp. 51-68; W.

Tatarkiewicz, *Estetyka średniowieczna*, Warszawa-Kraków 1960, pp. 258-260; J. Gage, "Gothic Glass. Two aspects of a Dionysian Aesthetic", *Art History*, Nr. 1, March 1982, pp. 36-58. See also: W. Stróżewski, "Claritas". Uwarunkowanie historyczne i treść pojęcia, (in): *Estetyka*, 1961, An. II, pp. 125-144; M. Rzepińska, *Historia koloru w malarstwie europejskim*, Kraków 1970, Chap. II, part. 1, Part 2, pp. 101-115.



5) Gerard Dou, «The Evening School», Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

the symbolic meaning of light pervaded the whole of theology, cosmology, and philosophy. Light was considered the first principle of being, prevailing in the entire world. "Omnia esse unum ab unius lucis perfectione", says Robert Grosseteste. The earth is located in the centre of the concentric spheres of light, of increasing brightness, which form the cosmic heaven. This heaven is the image of the spiritual heaven, the latter being nothing but light emanating from God. In this luminous cosmos there was no room for darkness. Darkness and shadow, if accepted at all, always carried a negative meaning. Darkness was associated with evil, negation, non-being, and sin (Eckhart, Hildegard of Bingen), and was thus evaluated as negative. This view was shared by scholastics as well as as mystics. St. Thomas Aquinas was called the "doctor of light".

This stereotype changed very slowly and gradually in the Renaissance. The Neo-Platonists of the Quattrocento were still the continuators of the mediaeval metaphysical aesthetics of light. The *Liber de lumine* by Marsilio Ficino begins with the words: "Odi maxime omnium tenebris (...) amo ante omnia lumen".⁸ The whole of Ficino's cosmography hinges upon Divine Light. Light is the highest value, while darkness is "a heavy inert matter". Beauty lies in the brightness and grace of a form and not in obscure inert matter. Leone B. Alberti, a humanist and theorist of art, asserts that "by nature we like bright things" and gives the advice to "avoid black and terrible works".⁹ However, side by side with the spiritualism and the purely speculative system of Ficino and his circle, there developed the direct observation of the world around. It could not possibly be ignored that every solid body produces and accepts a shadow. This fact began to interest both scientists and artists. Leonardo da Vinci was both the one and the other and it was he who developed the science of light and shade on an unprecedented scale.¹⁰ Likewise Leonardo's role in the structural transformations of painting is of immense importance. The aesthetics propagated by him and manifested in his paintings differs from that introduced nearly a hundred years later by Caravaggio and by many of his contemporaries; nonetheless it can be regarded as the first stage between the mediaeval "aesthetics of light" and the Baroque "aesthetics of light and darkness". In his notes Leonardo studied the effects of condensed light (*lume particolare*), but he did not apply it to his paintings and even warned against using such



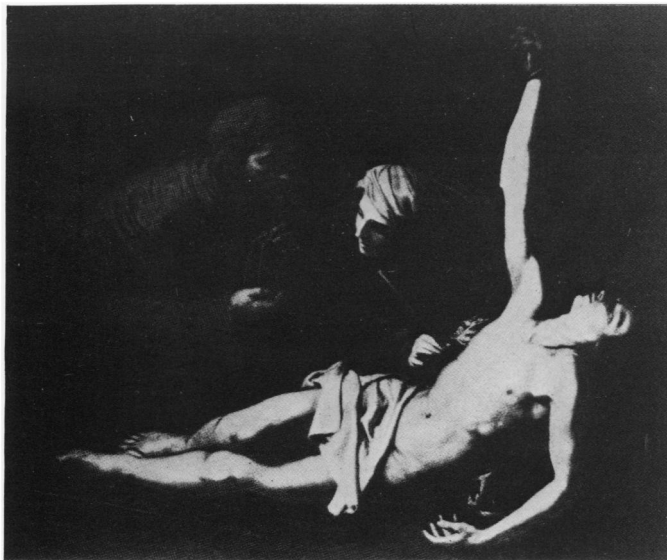
6) Georges de la Tour, «Job and His Wife», Epinal, Musée des Vosges.

an illumination as giving too strong a contrast and being of "little use to a painter". The development of the range of chiaroscuro introduced by Leonardo was continued by his successors primarily as a means of enhancing the plasticity of figures and objects. At least this was so in the Florentine-

⁸ I quote from K. Goldammer, "Lichtsymbolik in philosophischer Weltanschauung, Mystik und Theosophie vom 15. bis 17. Jhrdt.", (in): *Studium Generale*, 1960, Heft 11, pp. 670-682.

⁹ Leone Battista Alberti, *Della pittura*, ed. L. Mallé, Firenze 1950, p. 47.

¹⁰ Leonardo's notes on light and shade are scattered in various codices (mainly in Ms. C and Ms. E) and have been compiled by Francesco Melzi in the *Trattato della pittura*. The writings of Leonardo have been printed several times in various languages since the 17th century.



7) Jose de Ribera, «S. Sebastian and St. Irene», Leningrad, Ermitage.



8) G. B. Caracciolo (Il Battistello), «The Baptism of Christ».

Roman School, whereas the northern schools followed somewhat different paths, using light and shade to enrich the fabric of colour and value.

Leonardo derived his theory of chiaroscuro from his observations of nature and from the rules of geometry. The next phase in this evolution is marked by the treatise of Lomazzo (Milan, 1584).¹¹, who again regards light as a metaphysical element, though without abandoning realism. In the historiography and criticism of the 16th century the problems of light and shade occurred rarely and incidentally, though in practice painters developed and enriched it in various ways (Correggio, Luca Cambiaso, Titian, Tintoretto). Thus Lomazzo's work is invaluable as it deals with light in an exceptionally comprehensive way and presents its typology. The latter is intricate and chaotic, but after careful consideration it is presented as follows. Lomazzo introduces two divisions. One of them concerns primary and secondary lights (*lumi primari e lumi secondari*). *Lume primario* denotes a source of light and can occur in three forms: a) as natural light, of the sky or the sun, b) as *lume divino*, metaphysical light, emanating from divine persons and angels, and c) as artificial light, kindled by man, coming from a fire, a torch, or a candle. Lomazzo

points out that the *lume divino* is shown independently of whether the picture represents a diurnal or nocturnal scene. However, it follows from his further considerations that the "lume primario divino" should be subject to the laws of real light, with all the optical consequences. And here appears the other typological division into *lume diretto*, *riflesso*, and *rifratto*. The *lume diretto*, falling directly on an object, is identified by Lomazzo with the *lume primario*, and thus with the source of light. It can be metaphysical or natural, but this does not change the fact that its brightness is set off because the objects intercept and produce shadows, partial shadows, and reflections. Lomazzo presents numerous examples of pictures familiar to him in which the divine light has been applied, his descriptions indicating that the *lume divino* appears invariably as a condensed light surrounded by darkness. This concept of Lomazzo's is of essential significance and befits excellently the formal structure of religious paintings, which took shape towards the end of the 16th century. Painters continued and developed this concept by deepening contrasts and intensifying darkness; these tendencies, however, met with objections from critics. The latter seem to have been ignorant of the important innovation ushered in by Lomazzo, who distinguished the

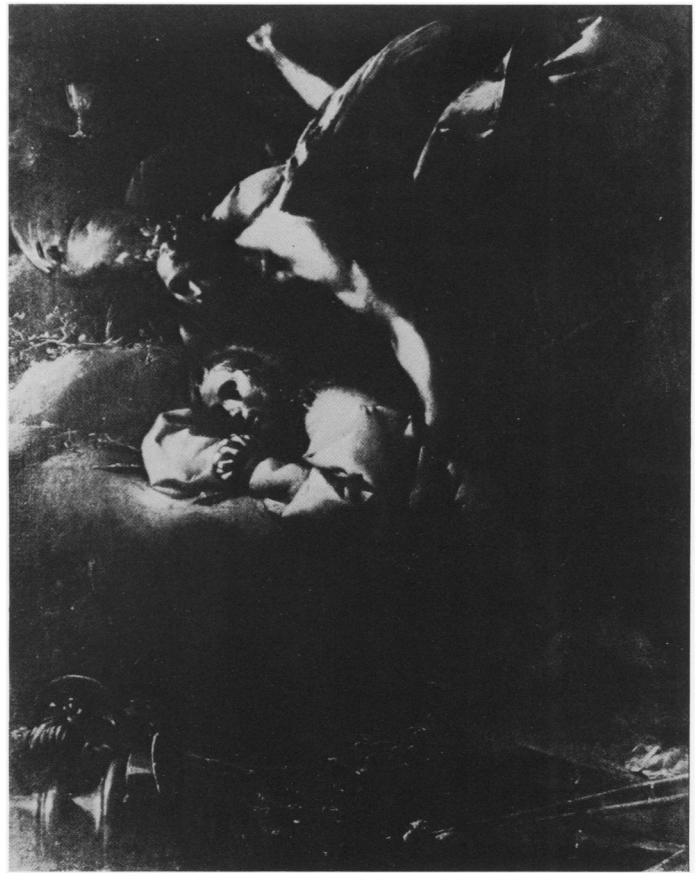
¹¹ I referred to the edition: Gian Paolo Lomazzo, *Scritti sulle arti*, a cura di R.P. Ciardi, Firenze 1973 (two vol.). Vol. II contains the text

of the Trattato. Cf. Libro IV, "Dei lumi", pp. 186-214. See also: M. Barasch, *Light and Color...*, New York 1979.



9) Valentin de Boulogne, «The Sacrifice of Isaac», The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

“divine light”, and it is just this kind of light that predominates in the religious paintings of the 17th century. This light, even if it shines from above, is never the sunlight of sky and day. The “metaphysical” effect is always achieved by means of condensed light, that is to say, the light which passes through a small aperture into a dark interior, through a slit in dense clouds, or from every bright lantern. It is impossible to achieve the effects of illumination of this kind without the introduction of shadows and of activating gloom. In 17th century painting this gloom becomes increasingly dense and in the background sometimes deepens to utter, impenetrable blackness. In the vast majority of Italian, Spanish, Flemish, and French religious paintings, scenes from the Bible and mythology are laid, as it were, in the middle of the night. In some cases this has its justification in “reality”, as e.g. in the scenes of the healing of St. Sebastian by St. Irene, which, according to the *Martyrologium Romanum*, took place at night [Fig. 7]. However, darkness is usually an autonomous factor. The painter introduces it disregarding the circumstances handed down by tradition. The shadow of night reigns in paintings showing the *Baptism of Christ* [Fig. 8], or the *Sacrifice of Isaac* [Fig. 9],



10) Francesco Del Cairo, «Agony in the Garden», Brera, Milan.

though the setting of these scenes at night is clearly inconsistent with the Scriptures.¹² The favourite subject of the painting of that time, i.e. the ecstasy of the saints, is nearly always a nocturne, the divine light falling in a beam of brightness from an invisible source. In numerous pictures the dense, impenetrable gloom takes up three-fourths of the canvas, whereas light brings out small, as if casual, fragments of a torso, hand, leg, or drapery [Figs. 10, 11]. The shadows bound to the objects are so deep that they submerge these objects in the dark background, completely swallowing up their

¹² Reproductions of the paintings of: Battistello *Christ and Simon of Cyrene*, G.M. Crespi *Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene* and V. de Boulogne *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (all of them being nightscenes) are

to be found in the catalogue of the exhibition: *Caravaggio e la sua cerchia a Milano*, Milano 1951.

outlines and blurring their spatiality.¹³ The setting of these scenes is frequently nondescript; it is only known that they are laid in a "dark place".

This specific structuring of the paintings in which shadow and darkness are as important as light, and at times predominate over it, implies a new aesthetics. It was never formulated by the theorists of the time, and in vain would one seek it in their works, as it was incompatible with the prevailing official classical aesthetics. Therefore, let us try to search for it in other statements, in the texts apparently remote from matters of painting but contributing to the climate in which it was created and in which it existed. Should not the extremely wide spread of tenebrism in painting be explained by its being the artistic expression of some trend in world outlook, which was not institutional or official but was particularly significant and distinctive for the epoch? This intellectual trend, treating darkness as a value, as the negation but at the same time and indispensable complement of light, can be detected in some fields of spiritual and intellectual life, i.e. in 1) a change in the type of religiousness and the wave of new mysticism, 2) astronomy and the science of the projection of shadows, and 3) hermetic doctrines, above all, alchemy.

Let us discuss the first of these elements. Historians have devoted much space to the relationship between religiousness and art in the post-Tridentine period. However, so far no one has taken into account a matter of real consequence: the introduction of the theology of darkness by St. John of the Cross in the late 16th century. In his doctrine darkness and night are treated as something positive. The soul's night is not the night of sin, it is not something negative; on the contrary, it is indispensable for the attainment of spiritual perfection and on the way leading to God. In his treatises *Noche oscura* and *Subida del Monte Carmelo* the great Spanish mystic distinguishes the following stages of the soul's progress: the active night of the sense, the active night of the spirit, and passive night.¹⁴ In his "Way to Mount Carmel" St. John of the Cross says: "It is for three reasons that the progress

of the soul towards its union with God is called Night. First, because of the position from which the soul departs, as it must mortify all the lusts regarding the things it has in the world and abandon them. Such an abandonment and the lack of these things are a night for the human sense. Secondly, it is called Night because of the way or the means which the soul must use in order to achieve the union. That means is faith, which is such a darkness for the mind as the shadows of night. Thirdly, it is called Night owing to the end, this end being God. In life on earth He is also a dark night for the soul". Having discussed the active night of the senses, St. John passes on to the active night of the spirit, saying: "Deeper is the obscurity in the spiritual part, similarly as pitch darkness is deeper than the shadows of night. Even in the depth of night it is still possible to see something, whereas in total darkness one cannot see anything. Also in the night of the senses some light still remains; there remain the mind and reason, as they are not dimmed then. However, the spiritual night, i.e. faith, is deprived of any light from either the reason or the senses". And next: "According to theologians, faith is the soul's faculty, sure and dark. It is a dark faculty because it makes one believe in the truths revealed by God Himself, which are above all natural lights (...) This mighty light flowing from faith is deep obscurity for the soul, as it deprives the reason of light just as sunlight eclipses all other lights" (...) Faith is a night for the soul but it also gives it light. And the more it obscures it the more light of itself it imparts to it. An image of this night was the cloud which separated the Israelites from the Egyptians as they went into the Red Sea, to which the Holy Writ refers in the following words: "Erat nubes tenebrosa et illuminans noctem (...). From what we have said it can be concluded that faith as a dark night lends some light to the soul plunged in darkness. And it proves true what David says to that effect: Et nox illuminatio mea in deliciis meis".

St. John of the Cross repeatedly emphasizes that faith requires that one should close one's eyes to everything that pertains to the senses and particular cognition. He quotes the

¹³ Paintings of this kind were executed by so many 17th century artists of various schools and nationalities that it is impossible to list all of their authors. The following names are only examples: G.B. Crespi (Il Cerano), Caravaggio, Mastelletta, L. Caracci, Passignano, A. Tiarini, L. Cantarini, J. Ribera, F. and J. Ribalta, J. Sanchez Cotan, V. de Boullogne, C. Vignon, T. Bigot, H. Terbrugghen, D. van Baburen, A. Blomaert, L. Finsonius, M. Stomer, O. Gentileschi, A. Gentileschi, C. Saraceni, G. Serodine, J. Leclerc. Reproductions of the paintings of these artists can be found in the catalogues of the exhibitions mentioned in Note 1. Cf. also the illustrations in the book by A. von Schneider, *Caravaggio and die Niederländen*, Amsterdam 1967. However, also numerous paintings of George de la Tour, Simone Vouet,

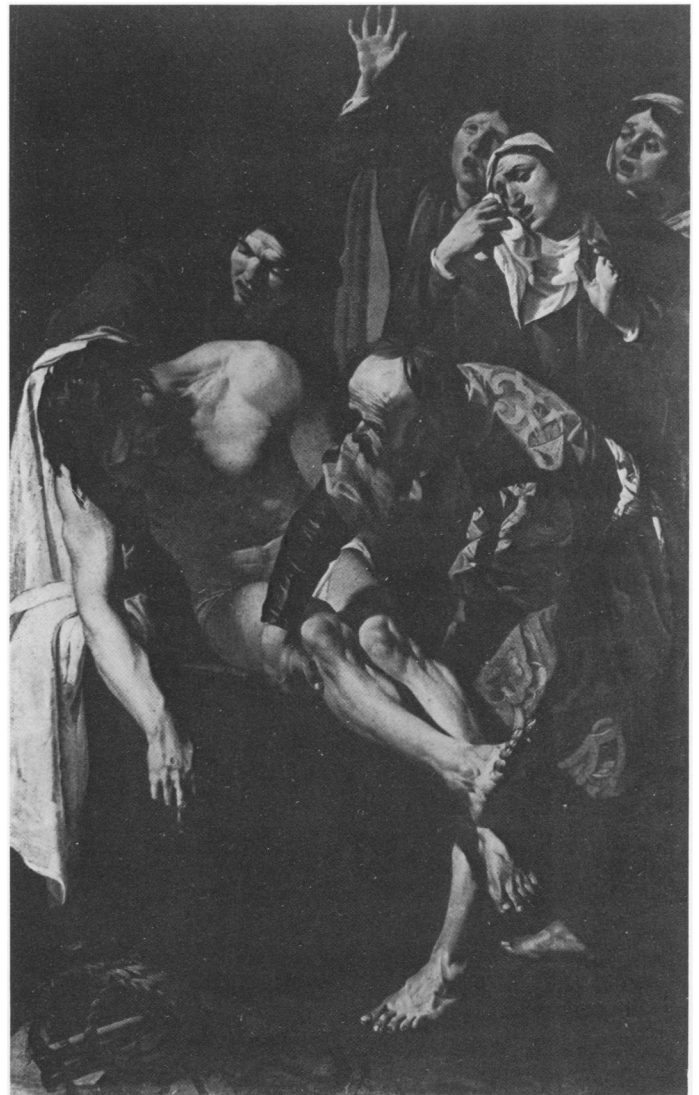
Rembrandt and many others are examples of tenebrism in the larger sense.

¹⁴ A distinction should be made between the poem "Dark Night" written in prison in Toledo in 1578, and the prose treatise bearing the same title, written in Granada in the years 1582-85, simultaneously with the "Way to Mount Carmel", which also discusses the doctrine of dark night. The quotations in the present study come from the Polish edition: Św. Jan od Krzyża, *Dzieła* (two vol.), (translated from Spanish by Father Bernard, a Carmelite). Cf. Vol. I, Book I, Chap. 2, p. 46; Book II, Chap. 1, p. 101, Chap. 2, p. 105, Chap. 4, p. 107, Chap. 16, pp. 178-179.

words from the Second Epistle of St. Peter: "We have more sure evidence than the vision on Mount Tabor, and these are the discourses and words of the prophets, which bear evidence of Christ. Whereunto you do well that you take heed, as unto a candle that shines in a dark place". And here is St. John's comment on these words: "The statement that we should regard the faith preached by the prophets as a candle in a dark place indicates that we should remain in darkness, shutting our eyes to all other lights (...) Reliance on other lights, on clear comprehension, leads us to abandon that dark light of faith, shining for us, according to St. Peter, in a dark place".

The paradoxical idea of "dark light" had its precedent in the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite, which, though never officially recognized by the Church and of disputable origin, nevertheless exerted a significant influence on the concepts of both Neo-Platonism and the Christian theology of the Middle Ages. However, from Dionysius's words only those passages were taken which referred to the "theology of light", sun, fire, and brilliance. They are all the sign of "lux perpetua", the pre-eminent light of God. Being is light and darkness is Non-being – such could be the most general expression of the attitude of Christian Philosophy, departures from this attitude occurring very rarely.¹⁵ The writings of St. John of the Cross contain the doctrine of the theology of darkness, for the first time developed in such a comprehensive and fascinating way. He knew the works of Dionysius the Areopagite but also those of St. Ignatius Loyola. And it is in St. Ignatius's "Exercicios" that we shall find an intimation that staying in darkness is particularly conducive to contemplation: "To deprive myself of the brightness of daylight (...) by shutting the windows and doors for the time of my stay in the room. Exception is made for the time of saying office, reading, and taking meals".¹⁶

The "Exercicios espirituales" were officially recognized and recommended by the Church in 1548 and were published in the same year. They came to be widely read by religious, and not only Jesuits; among the ideas contained therein the eulogy of darkness had a significant impact. The Reformed Carmelites (whose order was founded by St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross), in their missionary activity in the south of Italy, frequently pointed to the night as a time suitable for pious concentration: "giovano non poco al compungimento dei cuori



11) Dirck van Baburen, «Deposition», San Pietro in Montorio, Rome.

le tenebre della notte, che coll'horrore notio intimorendo gli animi, gli dispongono più attamente ai colpi del divino timore".¹⁷ The "Exercicios" were also read by artists, as is known with

¹⁵ J. Gage, "Gothic Glass, Two aspects of Dionysian Aesthetic", *Art History*, 1982, vol. 5, Nr. 1, pp. 36-58. T. Merton in his work: *The Ascent to Truth* (Polish version, Kraków 1983, p. 52) points to the precedent of the "theology of darkness" in the teachings of St. Gregory of Nyssa (4th century A.D.).

¹⁶ Św. Ignacy Loyola, *Pisma wybrane*, Kraków 1968 (two vol.),

T. II, p. 119, Ignatius Loyola was beatified in 1609 and canonized in 1622.

¹⁷ Cfr. C. Ginzburg, "Folklore, magia, religione", (in): *Storia d'Italia*, Torino 1972/76, vol. I, pp. 603-670. The first monastery of the Discalced (Reformed) Carmelites in Italy was established in Rome in 1597.

regard to El Greco and Rubens.¹⁸ The writings of St. John of the Cross were first published at Alcala de Henares in 1618, but their manuscripts had circulated earlier among monasteries and congregations. In the Italian version they came out in Rome in 1627. Nothing is known of their reception at that time, as until recently the official history of the Church rather ignored their author.¹⁹ No historian has taken up the question of the significance of the "theology of darkness" for Baroque art. I can only draw attention to this subject, which still remains to be elaborated. The analogy between the enormous number of paintings plunged in the mysterious gloom of "spiritual night" and passages from St. John's writings suggests itself irresistibly. As yet too little is known of the complex religious and cultural background of the period around 1600, however, one cannot possibly overlook in it the high praise of night and darkness given by St. John of the Cross with great suggestiveness and at the same time with the logic of argument.

The mystical doctrine of dark night was written in Granada in the years 1582-85. It is noteworthy that the positive estimation of darkness in the transcendental, spiritual order coincides in time with the positive role assigned to darkness by the great physicist and astronomer Johannes Kepler. In his work, *Ad Vitellonem Paralipomena. Astronomia Pars Optica*, published in 1604 but, of course, written earlier, he praises darkness, shadow, and eclipses as the factors which gave rise to astronomy. In the introduction to this book he wrote: "Porro quantum Defectibus Luminum adiuventur homines in Astronomia tota, docent omnes Astronomorum libri. Nam quod motus Solis et Lunas attinent, annorumque et mensium spacia, tota haec doctrina es sola Eclipsium observatione primum est orta, nec aliter constitui potuit; ac ne limari quidem et expoliri amplius potest, nisi Defectibus Luminum accuratius et limatius consideratis, qui huius libri scopus est. Iam qui perpenderit, quam arcte tota reliqua Astronomia cum Solis motu copuletur, quantumque nobis Luna, diei noctisque particeps, opituletur, quando nos omnia alia media deficiunt: iure credet, universam Astronomiam his luminum obscuracionibus inniti, adeo ut hae tenebrae sint Astronomorum oculi, hi defectus doctrinae sit abundantia, hi naevi mentes mortalium preciosissimis picturis illustrent. O eximium et omnibus gentibus commen-

dabile argumentum de Umbrae laudibus. Quantitas itaque speciei quam Luna Solve seu integer seu deficiens nobis ostendit, umbraeque, quam Tellus et Lunam extendit, Astronomo diligenter est investiganda". (How far the eclipses of the celestial bodies are helpful to men in the whole of astronomy can be learned from all astronomical writings. For, as regards the movements of the sun and the moon, the length of years and months, the science arose solely from the observation of the eclipses. And it could not originate otherwise; nor can it be polished or improved any further save through a more detailed and more precise analysis of the eclipses of the celestial bodies. This exactly is the aim of the present work. Now, if one considers how closely the rest of astronomy is connected with the motion of the sun and how many benefits are received from the Moon, partaking in day and night, when all other means fail us, he may well come to the conviction that it is on these eclipses of the heavenly bodies that the whole of astronomy is based, so much so that this very darkness is the eyes of astronomers, these flaws illuminate human minds with the most precious images. How magnificent and recommendable to all nations are the considerations of the eulogy of a shadow! Therefore, the astronomer must observe very carefully the size of the picture shown by the Moon or the Sun, whether with or without eclipse, and the size of the shadow cast by the Earth on the Moon).²⁰ Furthermore, in the index of subjects listed by Kepler for the above book, he notes: "Tenebrae sunt activa qualitas".

The observation of the shadow cast by the sun in different seasons of the year and the observation of the eclipses caused by the shadow of the earth or the moon when one of them falls in line between the sun and the other planet gave rise to Greek astronomy and suggested to some philosophers the idea of the spherical form of the earth.²¹ This idea, however, appeared only occasionally and was later forgotten for many centuries. In the Middle Ages the conceptions of the cosmos, stars, and planets came within the theological system subject to the metaphysics of light. Only Vitello in his "Perspective" mentions the shadow of celestial bodies. That the earth is a sphere was not at all obvious - not only to mediaeval theologians but also to natural historians of the Renaissance.

¹⁸ E. Waterhouse, *Roman Baroque Painting*, Oxford 1976, p. 17.

¹⁹ Until recently the name of St. John of the Cross was rather ignored in the official history of the Church. The *Storia della Chiesa*, a cura di L. Cristiani, consisting of 22 volumes, contains only a short note on him in vol. XVII, Torino 1977, none of his writings being mentioned at all. John of the Cross was beatified in 1675 and canonized only in 1726. Time and again the Holy Office debated whether or not his doctrine had anything in common with the quietists or the so-called "alumbrados", not recognized by the Church. Cf.

Bibliotheca Sanctorum, Vol. VI, entry: "Giovanni della Croce", pp. 702-732. In recent years there has been a great revival of studies devoted to St. John of the Cross and his writings, however, in no connection with art. Cf. I. C. Nieto, *Mystic, Rebel, Saint. A Study of St. John of the Cross*, Genève 1979.

²⁰ Joanne Keplero, *Ad Vitellonem Paralipomena. Astronomia Pars Optica*, Francofurti MDCIV. I used the edition: *Gesammelte Werke J. Kepler*, München 1939. The passage quoted from page 16.

²¹ D. R. Dicks, *Early Greek Astronomy to Aristotle*, Ithaca 1970.

In the “*De Revolutionibus*” (1548) Copernicus had to persuade his readers emphatically: “*Talem quippe figuram habere terram cum circumfluentibus aquis necesse est, qualem umbra ipsius ostendit; absoluti enim circuli amfractibus Lunam deficientem efficit. Non igitur plana est terra ut Empedokles et Anaximenes opinati sunt, neque tympanoides ut Leucippos neque sca-phoides ut Heraclitus, nec alio modo cava ut Democritus (...) neque ex inferna parte infinite radicitus crassitudine submissa ut Xenophanes, sed rotunditate absoluta, ut philosophi sentiunt*” (Liber I, Cap. V, p. 10).²²

The Copernican system, so revolutionary from the modern point of view, was by no means regarded as such by his contemporaries. A large number of astronomers still accepted the Ptolemaic system, violently attacking the work of Copernicus, and not only in its theological aspect.²³ More than fifty years after the great astronomer’s death, his theses still had to be defended by Giordano Bruno, one of his most ardent followers. Vindicating the thesis that “the sun is not only huge but that it is larger than the earth”, Bruno used as a basis the geometry of the cones of shadow cast by the planets on their dark side.²⁴ I am not dealing here with Bruno’s diagrams or with the question whether his reasoning was precise. I wish to state a certain symptom, namely, that the opinions of the three scientists mentioned above rank shadow and darkness remarkably high, being connected with the development of the new astronomy.

Likewise symptomatic is the intensity of studies on the projection of shadows, which continued throughout the 17th century. The Early-Renaissance treatises concered with optics and linear perspective hardly touched upon the problem of shadow (except Leonardo) or took it up only casually. However, about 1600 the situation changed markedly. There appeared great numbers of works discussing the projection of shadows for various types of light, both natural and artificial. They were written by natural historians and mathematicians who, nevertheless, also dealt with artistic problems; they were concerned with the correct rendering of the distribution of light and shade in a painting, this matter being discussed extensively. These discussions and the reasons why the

question of the projection of a shadow in sunlight was resolved only by Desargues in the second half of the 17th century are presented in the article by Da Costa Kaufman, therefore I shall not dwell on them here.²⁵ What is important is the sheer presence of the problem, the frequency of its occurrence, and its parallelism with the period of painting in which the struggle of light, shadow, and gloom attained its highest expression.

Let us now pass on to the last field, of immense importance for the “re-evaluation of darkness”, that is to say, to magic and alchemy. The significance of esoteric sciences in the culture of the Renaissance and Baroque, earlier passed over in silence by the humanities, has for some time been a subject of particular interest.²⁶ Contrary to the notions prevailing until recently, alchemy and all the sciences coming within the term of occult or hermetic flourished on the largest scale not in the Middle Ages but in the Late Renaissance and in the Baroque, parallelly with the development of natural science. From the mid-16th century onwards the doctrines of alchemists gained an increasingly wide range thanks to numerous publications of printed works. From about 1600 the number of these writings rose rapidly, testifying how deeply thinking in terms of magic pervaded the intellectual and spritual culture of that time. The attitude of the Church towards these sciences was equivocal and changeable. “Wizard” practices were condemned, and yet alchemy was a subject of interest for numerous high church dignitaries. The contact of painters with alchemy and pharmacy had always been lively on account of the procedure of making paints. It is also almost certain that the symbolism of colours, related with the planets, temperaments, mythological figures, and individual phases of alchemic process, was known to artists. Art historians have interpreted the iconography of a number of Renaissance works of art by means of alchemic symbols (e.g. the magic square appearing in Dürer’s engravings or some motifs in Parmigianino).²⁷ However, they have overlooked a coincidence between the formal means of expression in painting and the religious and cosmological symbolism of light and darkness, the latter being one of the basic threads of hermetic-alchemic treatises. On comparison of the dates of these treatises one must find

²² *Nicolai Copernici De Revolutionibus libri sex*, Warszawa-Kraków 1985. Ed. Polska Akademia Nauk.

²³ G. Sarton, *A History of Science* (two vol.), Harvard 1959, Vol. II, p. 181; E. Rybka, *Cztery wieki rozwoju myśli kopernikańskiej*, Warszawa 1972, p. 327.

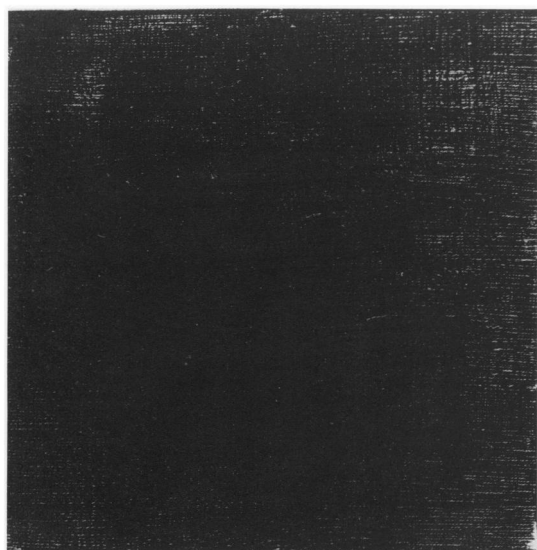
²⁴ Giordano Bruno, *Le opere italiane*, a cura di P. Lagarde, Göttingen 1888, Vol. II, “La cena dei cenieri”. Dialogo terzo, p. 159, p. 179.

²⁵ Th. da Costa Kaufmann, “The Perspective of Shadows. The History of the Theory of Shadow Projection”, *Journal of the Warburg*

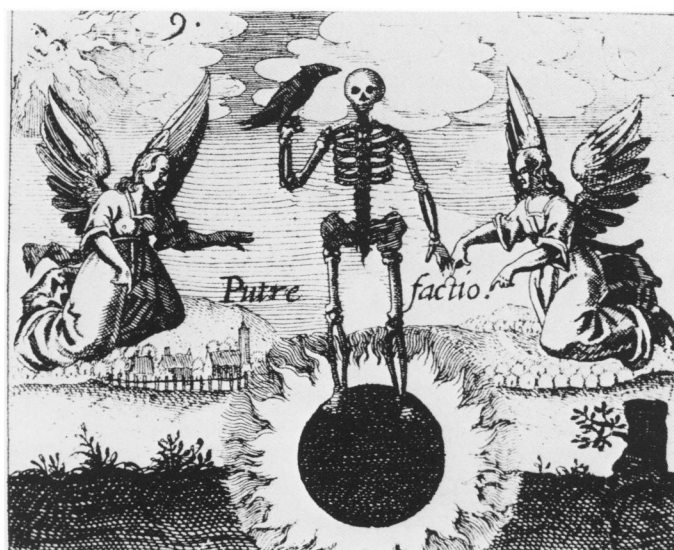
and Courtauld Inst., 1975, Vol. 38, pp. 258-287.

²⁶ F.A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, Chicago 1964; Id. “The Hermetic Tradition in the Renaissance”, (in): *Art, Science and History in the Renaissance*, Baltimore 1968 (coll. work); *The Late Italian Renaissance 1525-1630* (coll. work) Glasgow 1970; M. Calvesi, “A noir (Melencolia I)”, *Storia dell’Arte*, 1969, nr. 1/2, pp. 37-97; W. Schumaker, *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance*, Berkeley 1972.

²⁷ R. Klibansky, E. Panofsky, F. Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, London 1964; M. Faggiolo dell’Arco, “Il Parmigianino, un saggio sull’ermetismo nel Cinquecento”, *L’arte*, 7-8, 1969.



12) «Et sic in infinitum». *Nigredo* (Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi*, Oppenheim 1617, Vol. I, p. 26).



13) «Putrefaction». Black Sun of Death. (Johann D. Mylius, *Philosophia reformata*, Frankfurt 1622, p. 117).

it striking that this symbolism undergoes evolution. The significance of the element of darkness as something important and positive grows, the role of the shadow attaining its apogee about 1600 and continuing until approximately the middle of the century. Cornelius Agrippa (d. 1535) in the *De occulta philosophia* still continues the metaphysics of light originating from Neo-Platonism and Christianity, thereby considering darkness as an element exclusively negative. God is the pre-eminent light, but also temporal knowledge is associated by Agrippa with brightness and ignorance with darkness. A similar standpoint is assumed by other authors of the Renaissance, no matter whether it is scholasticism, mysticism, or "magia naturalis" that predominates in their writings.²⁸

A change in this attitude came about towards the end of the 16th century. The increasing number of printed alchemic treatises contained more and more frequently the motifs "umbra" and "nigredo" as an indispensable part of the whole initiation, of the whole of the cosmic-psychic system. Some of these treatises have attracted the attention of present-day researchers, the most complete material having been gathered

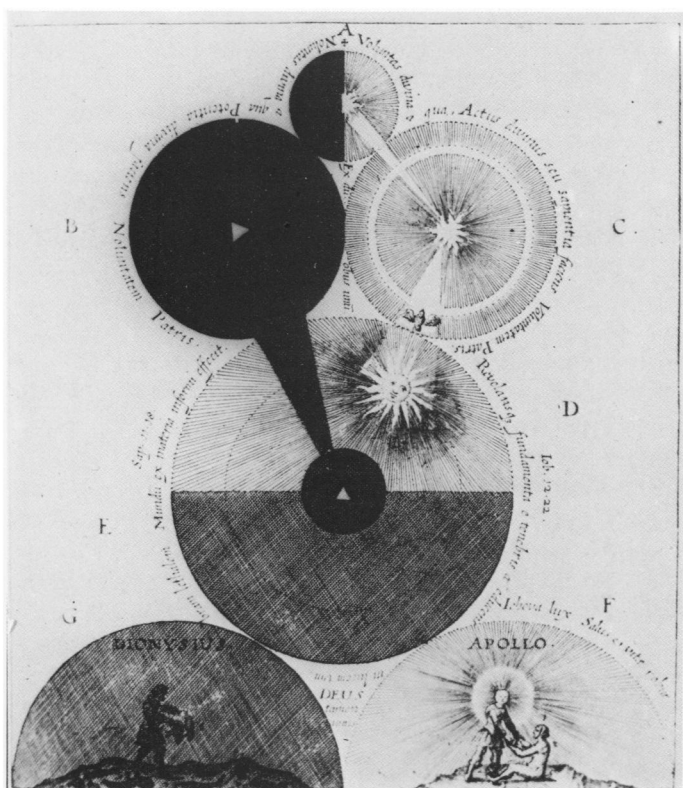
by Johannes Fabricius, who used it as a basis for a reconstruction, as lucid as possible, of alchemists' doctrines in his book published in 1976.²⁹ This book was of great value to me as an aid in my attempts at reaching the ideological origins of the phenomenon called *pittura tenebrosa* and at setting it in its historical cultural context.

The basis of the alchemists' doctrine is the conviction (derived from Aristotle) that out of the chaos of *materia prima* emerged "forma" as four elements: earth, air, water, and fire. Each element has a pair of "qualities" out of the total number of four: cold, moist, dry, and warm. Their various combinations have given rise to the theory of the "transmutation of the elements". Each metal has something of the qualities of the four elements, therefore metals also undergo transmutation in the alchemist's crucible. Besides its practical side (transmutation of metals, quest for gold), alchemy has its philosophical and mystical aspect. It lays stress on meditation and imagination and, in addition, presents something like cosmology and existential symbolism. The four stages of the *opus alchymicum* are *nigredo*, *albedo*, *citrinnitas*, and *rubedo* (black, white, yellow,

²⁸ K. Goldammer, *op.cit.* (Cf. Note 8); A. Koyré, *Mystiques, spirituels, alchimistes du XVI siècle allemand*, Paris 1971.

²⁹ J. Fabricius, *Alchemy*, Copenhagen 1976. I also used the book: E. Canselier, *L'Alchimie appliquée sur ses textes classiques*, Paris 1972,

and Calvesi's study, "A noir ..." (Cf. Note 26). These authors have assembled in their works several scores of the titles of hermetic writings, frequently anonymous, which were published from 1572 to about 1660.



14) «Umbra solis» (Robert Fludd, *Medicina catholica*, Frankfurt 1629).

and red). However, the number of these stages is not always equal and in numerous treatises *citrinnitas* does not occur at all, though the traditional number of the elements is unchanged. (It is worth noting that, according to the sources from the epoch of Titian, that artist used only those four colours in his late works). *Nigredo* denotes primary chaos, *massa confusa*, *materia prima*, out of which the four elements emerged, but as the "second darkness" it denotes one of the phases of the alchemic process, designated as *tenebrositas*, *mortificatio*, *putrefactio*, or *melanosis*, and, typically of the doctrine, each "physical" term has its "psychical" equivalent. Alchemists describe nigredo as *nigrum*, *nigrius nigro* and, in order to give some idea of it, compare it with a raven's head, coal, lead, tar, or burnt bone.³⁰ [Fig. 12, 13]. Alchemic treatises devote

much space to the question of colours. Following Aristotle, it was believed that all colours originate from the combination, in different proportions, of black and white (darkness and light). In the alchemists' interpretation the combination of the sublimated opposites: fire/water and light / darkness results in the appearance of the *cauda pavonis*, sometimes identified with the rainbow. Nevertheless, there also occurs a peculiar and rather isolated view that all colours derive from black. An anonymous manuscript from the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris states that "Only black is a real colour, because all others derive from it, as is pointed out by sages telling of the hundred black eyes of Argus; but when after Argus' death Juno placed his eyes on the tail of her peacock, all began to shine with different colours, and this was to demonstrate that all colours derive from black".³¹

The practical side of alchemy was distinguished from its philosophical one. The basic point of the latter was that in order for a new life to arise every organism must first die and decay. The word *nigredo* can refer to death, putrefaction, solar eclipse, or the darkness of the womb, thus being related both with the symbols of death and of revival, with the embryo of birth. The next stages of the *opus alchymicum* are those of purification, followed by the last one of *unificatio*, *coniunctio oppositorum*, the mystic marriage of the sun with his lunar bride. The paradoxical expression *umbra solis* denotes the highest degree of initiation, the conjunction of the opposites: birth and death, light and darkness, and Being and Non-being. The work by Robert Fludd, *Medicina Catholica* (1629), contains an engraving which shows an intricate schematica diagram of the interpenetrating circles of brightness and darkness.³² It illustrates the doctrine which can be defined as the "ontology of light and darkness". The doctrine has a tiered, hierarchical structure: at the bottom on the left is Dionysus, the god of darkness, and on the right Apollo, the god of light. At the top of this construction can be seen a circle half light and half dark, with the encircling inscription, "Voluntas divina – Noluntas divina. Es duobus unu" [Fig. 14]. Both darkness and light originate from God and are his attributes. God is All, light as well as darkness. Thus darkness is equated with light, being its antithesis but also its necessary complement.

The scheme presented in Robert Fludd's treatise is, for all its complexity, exceptionally clear. The same idea is expressed with different variants and illustrated in a far more complicated way in other 17th century treatises. In the *Alchymia recognita* by Libavius (Frankfurt, 1606) the phases of transmutation are

³⁰ J. Fabricius, *op.cit.*, p. 98.

³¹ M. Calvesi, "A noir..." (Cf. Note 26).

³² Robert Fludd, *Medicina Catholica* 1 (without pagination), Frankfurt 1629. The engraving has been reproduced in J. Fabricius, *op.cit.*, p. 195, ill. 377.

discussed at large, special emphasis being laid on *nigredo* as the point of departure and basis.³³ The work of Libavius is mentioned here on account of actual historical and personal connections. The writings of this alchemist were studied by Cardinal Francesco del Monte, who was the patron, of Caravaggio and in whose residence the artist lived and worked for some time.³⁴ The cardinal's brother Guidobaldo del Monte, in turn, wrote the "*Perspectivae libri sex*", Pesaro 1600 (dedicated to his brother), in which he devoted one large chapter to the projection of shadows. It should also be recalled that Galileo, maintaining friendly relations with Francesco del Monte, in his statements on art considered the distribution of lights and shades as an element of the greatest importance.³⁵

It was amidst these facts that Caravaggio's painting took shape. The drama of light and shade, the total dense gloom in his pictures was a particularly emphatic expression of the new axiology which treated shadow and darkness as a value. All the same, "Caravaggism" alone cannot account for the fact that the *pittura tenebrosa* found so many magnificent creative continuators, also outside Italy. This trend in painting originates from the new spiritual stereotype which was forming slowly but which attained its climax and finest artistic expression in the Baroque. An increase in Catholic mysticism with its "night of dark faith" of St. John of the Cross and with the "dark ecstasy" of St. Teresa, the Protestant mysticism clearly overlaid with alchemic concepts (Jacob Boehme), Kepler's words about darkness as "*astronomorum oculi*", and the alchemists' *nigredo* as the cosmic earliest beginnings and, at the same time, the necessary phase of death and putrefaction in order that life and light might arise – all these symptoms somehow meet, forming an important trend at the time of the Baroque. The universality of this trend is striking. It ignores a religious division into Catholicism and Protestantism. The

mystic current, new natural science, and thinking in terms of "magic" encompassed European countries independently of religions, just as astronomy progressed independently of them, discovering the immensity of the world and the darkness of space. The hermetic treatises were printed in Italy, Germany, Spain, Holland, France, and England, and all of them contain speculations that are similar in very general outlines. What is most interesting to us in these doctrines – the motif of the symbolism of light and darkness – recurs in them with great regularity, though this regularity is very hard to extract from the verbose, intentionally confused works, written in truly "hermetic language".

No doubt the alchemic-cosmological doctrines remain in large measure under the influence of the Cabbala, the mystic Jewish philosophy which also aroused the interest of some dignitaries and reformers of the Catholic Church.³⁶ The authors of 17th century treatises refer to the *Corpus Hermeticum* but just as frequently to the collection of cabbalistic writings known as Zohar (Brightness), which came out in Spain in the 13th century and was printed for the first time in Mantua in 1588.³⁷ It contains an immensely expanded, esoteric commentary on the Books of Moses and the Psalms. It aims to interpret the deeper, hidden sense of the Bible, to a great extent on the basis of linguistic speculation, on the symbolic meaning of Hebrew words and letters which also have numerical values. Among several threads of the cabbalistic idea the one of interest here is the motif of light, winding about it incessantly and in various forms. Light is the Divine substance and, in fact, potential matter creating the hierarchy of beings. The farther their brightness departs from its source, God, the weaker and dimmer it becomes to be eventually transformed into "dark light" (or shakhor), this being a lower hypostasis of being. Thus light is not opposed to darkness in the sense

³³ This work is discussed and cited by M. Calvesi, "A noir... (Cf. Note 26). It was published in two versions. One of them is to be found in the Jagiellonian Library but Calvesi used the other one.

³⁴ L. Spezzaferro, "La cultura del Cardinal del Monte e il primo tempo del Caravaggio", *Storia dell'Arte*, 1971, Vol. 9/10, pp. 87-98.

³⁵ Galileo's words from his letter to Lodovico Cigoli (1612): "Non ha la statua il rilievo per essere larga, lunga e profonda, ma per essere dove chiara e dove scura (...) Conosciamo dunque la profondità, non come oggetto della vista per se e assolutamente, ma per accidente e rispetto al chiaro e allo scuro. E tutto questo è nella pittura non meno che nella scultura, dico il chiaro, lo scuro, la lunghezza e la larghezza; ma alla scultura il chiaro e lo scuro lo da per se la natura, ed alla pittura lo da l'arte". Quoted from E. Panofsky, *Galileo as a Critic of the Arts*, The Hague 1954, p. 24.

³⁶ The Ambrosiana Library, founded by Cardinal Federigo Borromeo, contained, among other works, some Hebrew codices, among them being the best known compilation, "The Zohar". The Cardinal

himself wrote the "*De cabbalisticis inventis libri due*", Milano 1627. Cf. F. Secret, "Les cabbalistes chrétiens de la Renaissance" (in): *Annuaire de l'Ecole Pratique de Hautes Etudes*, Vol. 73, 1965/66; *Idem*: "Notes sur quelques alchimistes italiens de la Renaissance", *Rinascimento*, 1973, Vol. 13, pp. 197-217.

³⁷ The Zohar (Brightness), the basic work of Jewish cabbalism, is a compilation of texts from various periods, written by various authors. It was made up in Spain, most probably in the 13th century. The first printed editions came out in Mantua in 1588 and in Cremona in 1590. I used the text: *The Zohar*, translated by M. Simon, H. Sperling, P. Leverto, Intr. by J. Abelson, London 1949 (five vol.) Cf. especially Vol. I, p. 51, p. 117. The *Corpus hermeticum* discusses the symbolism of light which is the synonym of God and of the highest good. Darkness is mentioned only in connection with the primordial Chaos. Cf. *Corpus Hermeticum*, traduit par A. J. Festugière, Paris 1945 (two vols.), Vol. I, p. 44, p. 74.

of plus - minus, in the sense of incompatible opposites. Researchers of Hebrew culture point out that in its domain darkness is not always treated as something negative, as evil and nothingness. There occur here two forms, as it were, two versions of darkness. The "lower darkness" reigns in Gehenna and then it is conceived as the absence of light. But it also occurs as the "upper darkness", as God's attribute.³⁸ In the Zohar we can find an extensive commentary on the quotation from Psalm 138: "... but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee" and on the passage from Exodus, which refers to God as appearing as "pillar of fire" and at the same time as "a dark cloud".³⁹ This very passage was developed on a large scale by the Christian mystics and occultists of the turn of the 16th century. The study of their writings leads us inevitably to the conclusion that in the outlook of that time there appeared a tendency to equate darkness with light in terms of religion, cosmology, and existence.

When presenting the significance of the motifs of *nigredo* and *umbra solis* in the alchemist doctrine, I referred mainly to the works of Fabricius, Calvesi, and Canseliet. Now I will discuss three source texts, studied in the original, which clearly show the role of light and darkness in the intellectual speculations of the period. The first of them is the small "Traité de feu et de sel", Paris 1618, once immensely popular, judging from the number of editions in various languages.⁴⁰ Its author, Blaise Vigenère, much like other occultists, refers to the authority of Hermes and the Cabbala, but also to that of the Bible. At first he speaks about God as the pre-eminent light, the life source, quoting the same passages from the New Testament that were used by mediaeval theologians to create the "metaphysics of light". But soon after that Vigenère quotes from Exodus, where God is said to "dwell in darkness". He also refers to the passage from Psalm 138: "Sicut tenebrae eius sicut est lumen eius", commenting on it extensively, and his reasoning can be recapitulated as follows: God dwells in the light to which no one has access. This light is at the same time darkness to us, just as sunlight is darkness to owls, bats, and other nocturnal creatures. Darkness appertains to the Divine nature in the same way as light does and is even identified with the latter. For God is All, embraces all, and is

the giver of all, and therefore also of darkness. He separated light and darkness from Chaos and called them day and night. He brought the four main elements out of the primordial Chaos. Vigenère lauds light, the life source, extols the *ignis divinus*, the purifying fire, whose derivative is the alchemist's fire in which the elements undergo transmutation. But he also praises darkness because it is necessary in the same way as death, decay is in order that a new life might arise. He distinguishes between the "primeval darkness", the darkness of Chaos, and the "second darkness", the one which God called night, having divided light from darkness, both of which belong to the natural order created by God.

The second hermetic text that I should like to dwell upon was written by Robert Fludd, a physician, the author of the *Medicina Catholica* – from this book comes the already mentioned diagram of the *umbra solis*. The original of this work was not available to me; instead I studied another of Fludd's writings, *Utriusque cosmi metaphysica, physica, atque technica Historia*, Oppenheim 1617. The subject of interest here is dealt with in Volume I, which discusses cosmogony and the structure of the world. A great role is played in them by the cabbalistic symbolism of letters, but light and darkness form the pivot of Fludd's speculations. The considerations of their nature and hierarchy (*substantio aut accidens*) take up over 60 pages; however, one should not expect here logic in its usual modern sense. This is the world of mystic language, the world of myth and its notional apparatus. The authorities referred to by Fludd are of various provenance; they are Hermes, Jamblichus, Ficino, but predominantly the Old Testament. Fludd cites the words of Moses when, vindicating the Divine substance of light, at the same time he assigns darkness a place in cosmogony. He ventures to defy one of the greatest Christian philosophers when he states: "Augustinus 'Contro Manicheos' asserit, privationem nihil aliud esse, quam tenebras, quae definiuntur lucis absentia. Sed so recte consideretur tenebrarum significatio, illam latius quam privationis vocabulum se extendere percipimus. Nam teste Moyse: Tenebrae super faciem abyssi fuerunt, priusquam lux seu forma crearetur; privatio vero nominari non potest".

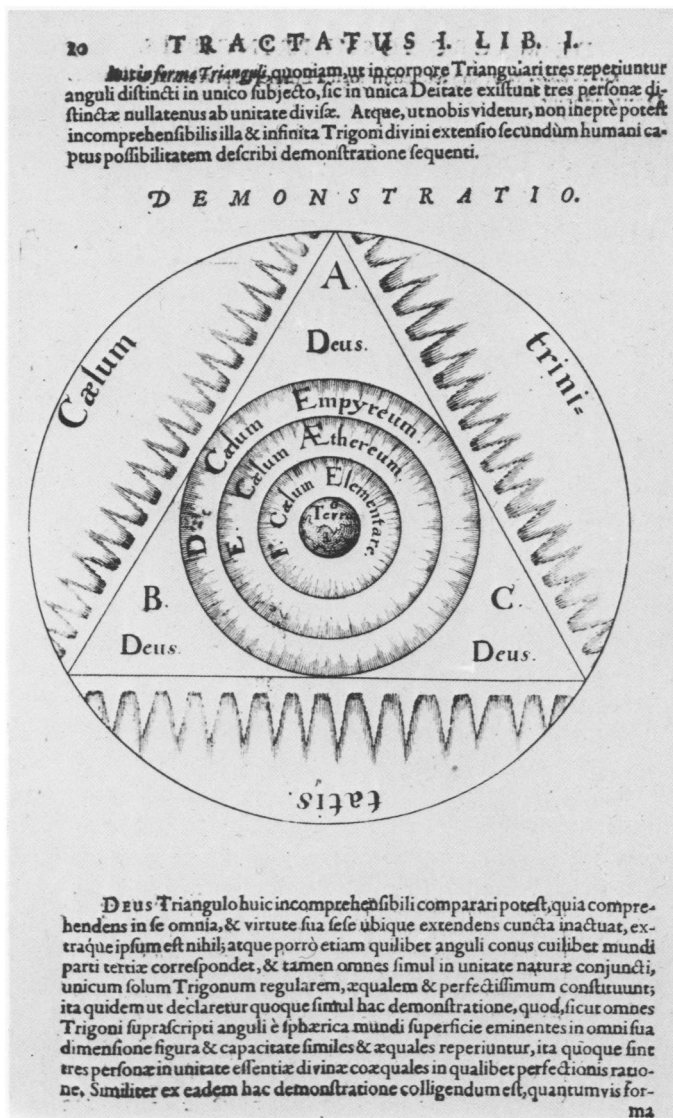
Right at the beginning of his work Fludd emphasized that the darkness is the earliest beginning of all things: *Mundi*

³⁸ S. Aalen, *Die Begriffe "Licht" und "Finsternis" im Alten Testament, im Spätjudentum und im Rabbinismus*, Oslo 1951 (especially pp. 9-16, pp. 63-73, pp. 318-319); J. Hempel, "Die Lichtsymbolik im Alten Testament", *Studium Generale* 1960, Heft 6, pp. 352-368; J. Kania, "Opowieści z żydowskiej «Księgi Świątłości»", *Znak*, nr. 356, VII, 1984, pp. 865-874.

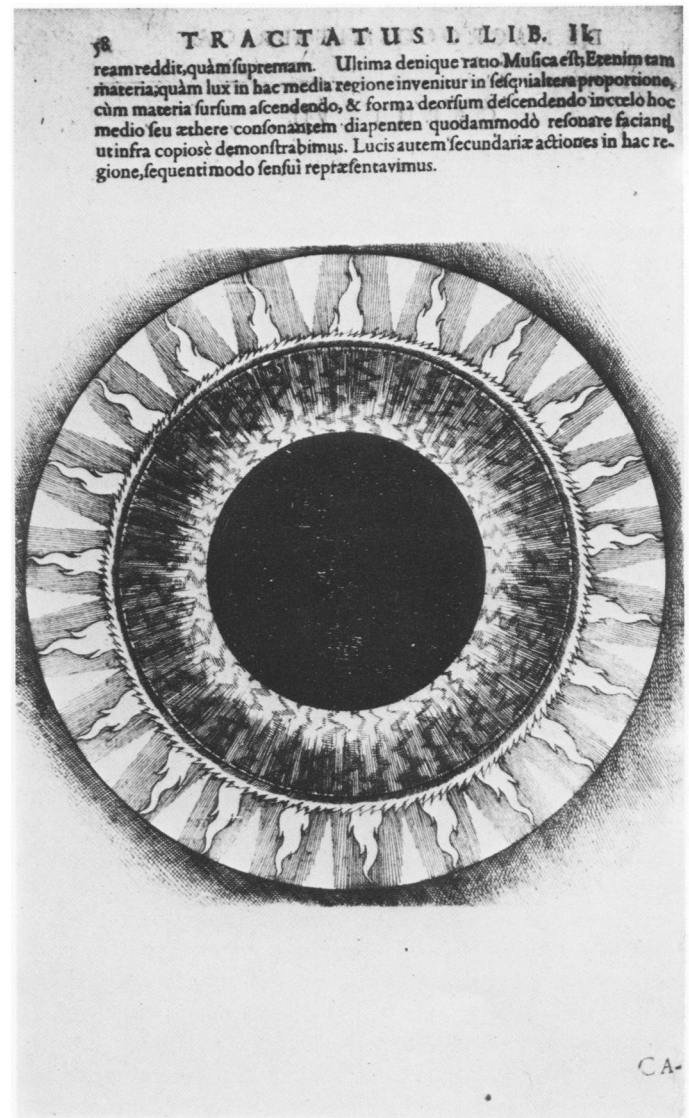
³⁹ The numeration of the psalms slightly varies, depending on

the edition. The psalm denoted in the 17th century as No. 138, in the present-day editions of the Holy Scripture appears as No. 139. Cf. the edition of the British and Foreign Biblical Society (Polish version) Warszawa 1983, p. 694.

⁴⁰ I used the German translation: Blaise Vigenère, *Abhandlung von Feuer und Salz* (trans. D.A.P.) Breslau 1782. Cf. Especially pp. 5, 28, 48, 107, 211, 215, 227-232.



15) «Terra opaca» (Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi*, Oppenheim 1617, Vol. I, p. 29).



16) «Terra opaca» (Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi*, Oppenheim 1617, Vol. I, p. 66).

mater, Ens primordialis. This primordial darkness (associated with expression such as *fumi nigerrimi*, *tenebrositas*, *abyssum*), penetrated by light, became the mother of the four elements. The scheme of their order is shown in a number of engravings (pp. 9, 29, 37, 63, 66, 75, 131, 136, 138, 141, *Utriusque cosmi*) as a system of concentric circles. In the centre is the globe, the second, outer circle is water, the third air, the fourth the “natural heaven” with the planets and the sphere of the

fixed stars, and the fifth one the “metaphysical heaven”, or the empireum, which is the closest to the brightness of God. The earth, occupying the centre of the system, is plunged in darkness, is an obscure place, very remote from the Divine light. Here is Fludd’s comment on one of these engravings: “Manifestum igitur est, omnem tenebrarum substantiam, cuius praesentia totius mundi materia spiritualis occultata erat et informis, jam tandem virtute lucis in molem densam et opacam

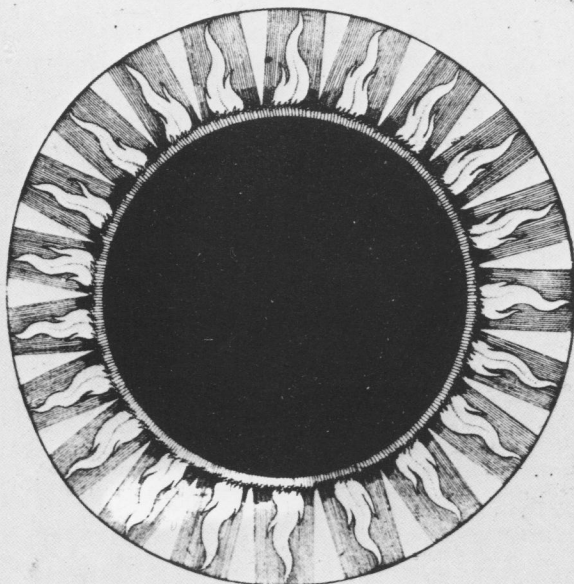
DE MACROCOSMI FABRICA.

autem modo cum ipsis radiis increatis eadem; Et ut speculum absentia objecti suas perdit impressiones; sicut etiam absentia horum lucis increatae radiorum & vel in momento aut nutu oculi perdet suam formam ac pulchritudinem. prioremque tenebrarum deformitatem rursus induet spiritus iste supercelestis. Luce igitur gratia divina vivit mundus mundique creatura; illa vero in semet ipsam tantum reflexa, & aquis nigerrimis ac nubibus densis obvelante creatore tabernaculum & sedem suam, delubro mundum ac creaturas ejus perire necesse esset: *Benedictus itaque sis super omnia DEUS, qui & spiritualiter & corporaliter nos illuminas, nec avertas a creaturis tuis splendorem faciei tue ob merita unigeniti filii tui Amen.*

Regio autem hac jam impleta est luce creata, ac tenebras substantiam ejus tenuem occupantes virtute sua lucida deorsum detrusit, & lucis increatae radios deorsum a loco spiritus increati in hanc regionem creatam descendentes imitando, suae quoque lucis creatae radios basin regionis suae penetrat, deorsum tenebras persequens, ut infra declarabitur.

Fiat lux, & factum est calum spirituale. Basil. lib. 1. Hexameron. & Beda.

LUCIS CREATAE PRIMARIAE APPARITIO.



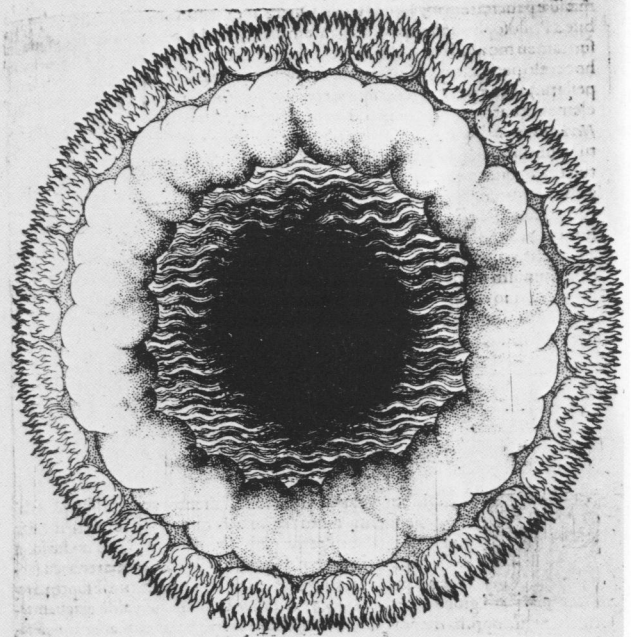
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17) «Terra opaca» (Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi*, Oppenheim 1617, Vol. I, p. 75).

circa mundi centrum collectam redigi et conglobari, quae quidam elementum terrae appellatur. (...) In principio creavit Deus coelum et terram, hoc est lucem a tenebris separavit; coelum enim perspicuum lucidumque fecit; terram vero opacam, hoc est mundi centrum tenebris immergebat”.⁴¹ [Fig. 15, 16, 17, 18].

The earth is therefore a dark place, a *locum tenebrosum*. The physical meaning is combined in this doctrine with the

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CAPUT. XIV.

De elementorum forma.

FORMA hujus caeli debiliore est, quam illa superiorum, propter longinquitatem a sua origine; Hoc autem facillime ab effectu ejus probatur. Etenim ignis noster terrestris vim suam calefaciendi a luminis actione accipiens, quanto longius a passivo suo distat, tanto debilius calefacere solet; & per consequens certum est, hujus caeli materiam, quod magis centro appropinquat, eo grossiorem, impuriorem, & indigniorem esse; secundum illud *Aristotelis* in metaphisicis, ubi plus est materia, ibi minus est forma, & è converso. Unde liquido constat, hujus caeli materiam, propter formae suae remissionem praedominari, & per consequens novam subinde formam quotidie appetere, neque enim suppetit hanc regionem satis formae, ut materiae ejus appetitus inde possit expleri & satiationi. Hinc igitur assidue in ea rerum mutationes oriuntur, hinc corruptiones quae

libet

18) «Terra opaca» (Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi*, Oppenheim 1617, Vol. I, p. 138).

symbolism of the human condition. Fludd quotes Job's words about the fate of man on the earth: "Et terra tenebrosa cooperitur cum obscuritate Mortis; et alibi: terram de miseria et obscuritate esse dicitur". It is impossible to ignore this

⁴¹ Robert Fludd, *Utriusque Cosmi maioris silicet minoris metaphysica, physica atque technica historia*, Oppenheim 1617. The passages quoted: p. 9, p. 27, p. 74, p. 65.

motif, which keeps recurring in hermetic writings and which must have been widespread in the intellectual stereotypes of the time.

The third text to be dealt with here is the *Ars magna lucis et umbrae* by Athanasius Kircher, published in 1646.⁴² Historians have recently been intimating that the occult doctrines were adopted not only by vast numbers of unorthodox Christians; they also penetrated into the institution of the Catholic Church, especially into the Jesuit circle.⁴³ I think Carl G. Jung was the first to observe the similarity of the role of meditation and imagination, very important in the philosophy of alchemy, to that assigned to them by St. Ignatius Loyola in his "Exercicios spirituales". Francis Yates points out how numerous and how little investigated are the Jesuit writings on the borderline between mysticism and exact and hermetic sciences.⁴⁴ Athanasius Kircher was a Jesuit and he published his work of nearly a thousand pages in Rome. It is of special significance for the problem discussed in the present study.

The title page bears the motto: "Sicut tenebrae eius sicut est lumen eius" in Greek, Hebrews, and Latin (the same line is quoted by Vigenère and by other hermetic authors). The contents of Kircher's huge opus are a peculiar mixture. It comprises astronomy, gnomonics, optics and the projection of shadows, as well as cosmology and the "magic arts". Here, for example, are the titles of some books and chapters: *Cosmometria gnomonica*, *Sciagraphia sive de Umbra Lucis sobole*, *Physiologia lucis et umbrae*, *Magia lucis et umbrae*. At the beginning of the last-mentioned book the author declares that it is not concerned with the "false, superstitious, dishonest or devilish" magic but with the "natural magic", that is to say, the knowledge of the laws of nature. He discusses sundials (*magia horographica*), and also writes about the magic lantern and the possibility of throwing images on a screen in a dark room (*magia parastatica*). This is a veritable compendium of the knowledge of light and shadow as it appeared in its various aspects in the first half of the 17th century. What was of particular interest to me in Kircher's work was the apology of a shadow and darkness, the equation of darkness with light as two forms of being. Kircher quotes the statements of Aristotle and Vitello regarding light and vision (they were the identified with each other) and also the definition of darkness as the absence of light (*absentia luminis*), thus a definition by negation. Likewise a shadow was conceived as "privation" (*privatio*) or diminution (*diminutio lucis*). Kircher objects to

such an attitude. We see light but we also see a shadow, so it is a being: "Umbra non est ens pure privativum". Let Kircher speak for himself in an extensive passage from Book II, Part 2, entitled Sciasophia, or the knowledge of the shadow, a descendant and an inseparable companion of light: "Hoc admirabile lucis opus explicandum aggredimur, umbram inquam, cuius antiquitatem si spectes, nobilissima est; si ingenium acutissima; si virtutem, fortissima; si gloriam, honoratissima. Antiquitate tanta pollet, ut uni Creatori posterior esse videatur; ante prima enim omnium rerum existentiam in nihilo illo praelusit; deinde in Chao illo, et mundani corporis, Tohu et Bohu, quaedam veluti essentiae suae rudimenta iecit; ac denique in ipso parturientis naturae sinu edita, non per quosdam infantiae et pueritiae gradus ad maturitatem pervenit, sed statim totum hoc Universum complex ferrugineo suo pallio operuit (...) Quid proprie umbra sit. Umbra non est ens pure privativum (...) Vitellio in 3 et 4 Postulato in absentia luminis umbram fieri postulat; Et contra in allatione luminis umbram deficere. Et alibi, umbram esse privationem cuiusdam lucis existente in actu praesentia lucis alterius in loco tenebroso. Alii dicunt esse privationem lucis primariae (...) Quidquid sit, lumini contrarias esse tenebras, oppositamque proprie dici obscuritatem, et Aristoteles testatur omnibusque est evidentissimum. At quoniam huiusmodi sit oppositio inter lumen et tenebras, purene privativa, an quovis pacto positiva repugnancia, et utrum lumini praeter tenebras aliquid aliud opponatur discutiendum est. Lumen tenebris opponi, ut habitui propriam privationem, ex Aristoteles constat. Etsi vero in tenebrarum entitate maximam luminis privationem reperias, ut tamen obscuritatem, tenebrasque puram putamque luminis ab omni positiva entitate segregatam privationem credam induci non possum. Primo enim tenebrae ita visum congregant, ut praeter dolorem quem oculis etiam subinde nimis diuturnae caecitatem adferant; at congregatio et excaecatio reales et positivae operationes, a nuda, et mera privatione veluti causa efficiente – provenire nequeunt. Iterum contraria, quae sese mutuo refrigunt retundendo hebetandoque, naturam habent utcumque positivam: tale est lumen et tenebrae. Sicut igitur flamma non est ignis sed corpus mistum cum multo praedominio ignis; ita tenebrae quoque non sunt pura privatio, sed naturam habent visibilem ex privativa et entitate positiva coniunctam; si igitur tenebrae et obscuritas non est pura privatio, certe minime umbra erit; quamvis etiam aliquo modo lumini opponi dici possit. Potest itaque duplex hoc loco obscuritas considerari:

⁴² Athanasius Kircher, *Ars magna lucis et umbrae in decem libris digesta*, Roma 1646.

⁴³ R. Taylor, "Hermetism and Mystical Architecture in the Society of Jesus", in: R. Wittkower and B. Jaffé, *Baroque Art. The Jesuit*

Contribution, New York 1972.

⁴⁴ F. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, London 1964, pp. 401-429.

prior natura constans privativa, lumini opponitur, ut habitus; et nomine tenebrarum appellatur: altera positivam magis essentiam obtinens, lumini ut qualitati contrariae repugnat; et haec vocatur umbra, quae est entitas maxime positiva eò quòd maximè visum movent. (...) His itaque positis dicimus corpora lucida corporibus opacis contraria quidem, at non omnino privativa sed positiva; illa enim lumen emittunt, haec tenebras. A lumine et tenebris, proles quaedam nascuntur, quae uti et matres earum in medio diaphano diffunduntur (...) Actio enim et passio à viribus agendi et patiendi provenit: vires autem omnes an essentia sibi propria procreantur, et in essentia sunt, in ea fundantur ex eaque funduntur. Non sunt ergo obscuritas, umbra, umbratioque simplices lucis et luminis privationes, sed vera sunt entia, qualia dicuntur positiva”.

(Now we proceed to the explanation of this admirable work of light, that is to say, a shadow. If its antiquity is considered, it is most noble, if its inherent ability, it is very acute, if its power, it is very strong, if its glory, it is worthy of every honour. It is characterized by such a great antiquity that it is naturally posterior only to the Creator; because already prior to the existence of all things it played a role in that nothingness, and next in that Chaos and in that Tohu Bohu of the body of the universe it established the rudiments of its quasi existence; and, finally, begotten in the very womb of mother nature, it came to maturity not through some stages of infancy and childhood but it immediately embraced the whole Universe and wrapped it in its dark mantel. (...) What exactly is a shadow? A shadow is not a purely privative being (...) Vitello in his 3rd and 4th postulates assumes the indispensability of the occurrence of shadow in the absence of light, and, vice versa, the vanishing, of shadow at the appearance of light. And, in another place: that a shadow is the privation of some light in the actual presence of some other light in a dark place. Others say that it is the privation of the primary light (...) Whatever it may be the fact remains that darkness is contrary to light and as its opposite it is rightly called obscurity, as is testified by Aristotle and is obvious to every one. It should, however, be considered what kind of opposition exists between light and darkness, whether it is purely privative or in some way positive, and whether anything else besides darkness can be contrasted with light. On the basis of what Aristotle says it is known that light opposes darkness just as the deprivation of property opposes possession. On the other hand, though you would find in the entity of darkness the maximum deprivation of light, I am not willing to believe that obscurity and blackness are nothing but a pure deprivation of light, free

from any positive entity. In the first place, darkness makes sight concentrate to such a degree that besides pain it sometimes brings blindness to the eyes if it lasts too long; and the concentration and blindness, being real and positive operations, cannot originate from nothing but a mere privation as the effective cause (...) Darkness is not the pure state of privation but is of visible nature deriving from the conjunction of the privative and positive entities; therefore, if darkness and obscurity are not a purely privative state, then undoubtedly the shadow will not be such a state either; though it could also be said that the latter in some way opposes light (...) despite the fact that bright bodies stand in opposition to dark ones, the dark ones are not completely privative but positive; the former giving forth light and the latter darkness. Both light and darkness give birth to some kind of progeny which, similarly as their parents, diffuse in a diaphanous medium (...) For activity and passivity derive from the capacity to act and to perceive, and all these capacities derive from their specific nature and in this nature they exist, they rely on it, and spring from it. Thus darkness, shadow, and obscurity are not ordinary states of privation of luminosity and light but are real entities which are called positive).⁴⁵

This rather lengthy quotation was necessary to bring out the idea of the “axiology of darkness”. This idea was included in the metaphysical system, recapitulated by Kircher in the last part entitled “Epilogus sive metaphysica lucis et umbrae”, and at its briefest running as follows: A man is too weak to withstand the power of the Divine light (*lux*). Therefore God created light, as it were, of the second degree (*lumen*), and between this and a man He put yet another, third degree: a shadow; darkness forms the lowest degree. Thereby the following hierarchy has been established: *Lux, Lumen, Umbrare*, and *Tenebrae*, corresponding respectively to God, the Angels, Man, and Animals, and to the four elements: *ignis, aer, aqua, terra*. Let us again quote Kircher’s words: “Est enim Angelicum intermedium veluti umbra quaedam, qua inter Deum et hominem frangitur divinae Lucis irradiatio, quave divini Solis ardores humanae fragilitati intolerabiles divinae Lucis radii quodam modo coarctantur, et consequenter inter nubem et Solem divinae claritatis umbra causatur, quam umbratilis et imperfecta nostra cognitio sequitur”.⁴⁶

The influence of alchemy and the Cabbala on Kircher’s system is quite clear, but the stress laid on the apology of a shadow is a significant and original trait of Baroque culture. Whoever wishes to become acquainted with this culture in its: “deep layer” should study the “Ars magna lucis et umbrae”.

⁴⁵ Athanasius Kircher, *Ars magna, op. cit.*, pp. 53-54.

⁴⁶ Athanasius Kircher, *Ars magna, op. cit.*, p. 923.

It is not easy to wade through this book but it is worthwhile, as it introduces us into that peculiar conglomeration of religious, scientific (Kircher knows and approves of Copernicus' discovery), and magic thinking which was a general stereotype of the first half of the 17th century. In addition, Kircher's book marks out most emphatically the end of the monistic mediaeval metaphysics of light and its replacement with the metaphysics of light and darkness as two forms of being.

* * *

The problem of light and darkness in Baroque painting was not purely artistic in character. It penetrated into the entire intellectual life of the time, into religion, philosophy, and natural science. This also seems to have been the only period in the history of European culture in which the phenomenon of shadow and darkness has aroused so much speculation and gained such an important position unknown of before or later.⁴⁷ The end of the 16th century saw the formulation of the theology of darkness in its perfect and unsurpassed form – in the writings of St. John of the Cross. The Jesuit and Carmelite Orders recommended darkness as conducive to contemplation, thus a positive value in spiritual life. Owing to the great revival of Biblical studies in Hebrew the representatives of the Church and Orders were able to become acquainted with Judaic mysticism, where God “dwelled in darkness” and where darkness was His attribute just as light was. The new

astronomy stressed the phenomena of solar eclipse and of the phases of the moon as the point of departure for the geocentric system. All these “signs of the times”, though scattered and apparently independent of one another, show a concurrence which cannot be accidental; they are various facets of a significant cultural topos. One of these facets is the painting of the Tenebristi. Their darkness is a symbolic darkness. Just as the gold background in the Middle Ages was the metaphor of the Divine Light – *Lux perpetua* – so the murky background of Baroque paintings is a metaphor which, depending on the context, can be understood as a “mystic night” or as “a dark place”, the latter being the earth. The gloom of the Tenebristi can be interpreted as the sign of “dark faith” in its theological bearing, but it can also denote the alchemists' *nigredo* which is likewise a positive value, as it gives rise to a new life. Since all symbols are equivocal, it is not always possible to read the artist's intentions (frequently subconscious anyway). Many of them surely associated darkness with negation. However, in the pictures of the Tenebristi darkness appeared as a positive value, active both iconically and symbolically, thereby creating a new aesthetics. Darkness was equated with light, as it conditioned the brilliance and magnificence of the latter. The religious, cosmic, alchemic, and existential symbolism of light and darkness was expressed not through the iconographic subjects but in the whole visual structure of the works by Tintoretto, Caravaggio, Georges de La Tour, Rembrandt, and Spanish artists, going beyond the borders of countries, schools, and patronages.

Translated from the Polish by Krystyna Malcharek

⁴⁷ The modern encyclopedias always contain the entry “light” but lack the entry “darkness”. Text books of physics and optics concerned with light never deal with the problem of darkness. Immense scientific literature gives an answer to the question “What is light?”, whereas the question “What is darkness?” is never asked. Humanists and philosophers tend to treat darkness as non-entity. Cf. e.g.: E. Heimen-dahl, *Licht und Farbe*, Berlin 1961, p. 108: “Bei dieser Beschreibung der phänomenalen Beziehung zwischen Licht und Dunkelheit wird offenbar, dass die Dunkelheit wohl Gegensatz und Gegenstand des

Lichtes aber kein zweites Element ist. Dunkelheit bedeutet schlechthin Abwesenheit des Lichtes, welches allein die agierende, optische Macht ist. Der Akzent liegt auf dem agieren, d.h. die Dunkelheit kann von sich aus nicht handlungsfähig sein, ist passiven Dunkelgrund. Die eigene Macht des Dunkels – radikal ausgesprochen in der Finsternis als totalem Nichts – ist damit nicht getroffen. Das ist eine existentielle Lebensfrage”. Cf. also: *Enciclopedia delle religioni*, ed. Vallecchi, Firenze, 1971, Vol. III, col. 1708, entry: “Luce et tenebrae. Due fenomeni fondamentali della natura”.