

On Constricted and Dimly Lit Spaces

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In a museum, you often see a person standing in front of a painting, completely still for minutes that seem like hours, trapped within the experience as though he or she is unable to crawl over and out of the experiential frame. Or it is as if a singularity has been created, a point in time and space that admits life's many trajectories so that they coalesce to erase boundaries such as outside and inside, past and present.

In his fifth postulate, Euclid says that if there is a line A and an independent point B, there will exist a line going through point B that will never cross line A. These two lines will be parallel. Also, if line A and line C are both parallel to line D, then line A and C will be parallel to each other. If we are blessed with more dedicated teachers, we may hear a thing or two about Lobachevski and his work on parallel lines in the field of hyperbolic geometry. There, in the world of convex and concave planes and more reflective of our own world than the planar world of Euclid, any two parallel lines can intersect at some single point before continuing on their journey into infinity. Two corollaries of Lobachevski's work are: if a space is curved enough, any seemingly unrelated set of three or more points can appear on the same line, and at each point in space, an endless number of different seemingly parallel trajectories intersect. It seems to me that it is just a matter of time until we find a point where everything—the lives of our friends, the lives of all people who lived before us and who will live after us—will come together as these hyperbolic parallel lines come together. On a smaller scale, such a realization of the convergence of many past moments, moments one person has lived through as well as those he knows others have experienced, is what happens to anyone trapped in front of a painting.

Connections with past experiences will differentiate the way one person sees a painting from the way another person sees it. One Thursday, I visited the Frick Collection and felt the need to stop in front of George de la Tour's *The Education of the Virgin*. Other more elaborate and colorful paintings out-

shone it; in fact, the *Virgin* had been slightly damaged in a restoration attempt. The painting shows a space very dark and closed yet partially illuminated. The main source of light comes not from the candle in the young girl's hand, but from the pages of a book that her disinterested teacher is holding. Light and knowledge radiate straight into the girl's intelligent and absorbing face, relegating her teacher and the rest of her surroundings to the realm of irrelevance and darkness. Interestingly enough, the girl's face is in the damaged portion of the painting: it was whitened too much during the restoration, only adding to the light's glowing effect. It might seem to a third party that I was attracted to this painting simply because, as someone of college age, I would enjoy the idea of being bathed in the scholarly light emitted by my textbooks. But this notion was only partially the case. After all, it is almost impossible not to see the association between the girl's calm smile and the comfort that such knowledge—one accumulated by, and passed down from past generations—brings. Yet, I felt moved by something deeper than the straightforward connection with education. After all, the education that the subject of de la Tour's painting is receiving is most likely a religious one, so, this would be an education perhaps not always well suited for the challenges I would face in the real world. It was something else in the painting that caught my attention and drew me in.

When I walked into the next room, I understood that this magnetic something was the way light interacted with the subjects of the painting. There hung Jan Vermeer's *Officer and Laughing Girl*, which depicts the next stage of a girl's education, beyond the ideal love that Christ has for humanity radiating from de la Tour's book. A man and a woman are sitting across from each other. They are in a room with a map on the wall, a table, and two chairs. The girl, wearing a black and gold dress that matches the upholstery of the chair and a white scarf enhanced by the light coming in through the window, is holding a glass and smiling nervously. The officer's face is not visible. His back is to the viewer and even the girl within the frame cannot see him well because he is in shadow. All light herein enters through the window, from the outside, from the real world. It casts brightness on the face of the woman, separating her from the man in shadow, implying a depth that transcends such simple concepts as foreground and background.

The room the officer and girl are seated in is small; they are brought together into a closed space with two possible exits. The first is the window, leading to a more open space, lit with the full magnitude of the sun, unlike the room into which only a few sunrays can enter. The other exit is the map hanging behind the girl, showing all of Holland with its seemingly endless

combinations of places. But the map is closed off by a frame, a memento of a boxed-off finiteness that we are all trapped in.

You also feel that you know all you need to know about the young woman at that particular instant. She is politely, perhaps excitedly, enjoying the moment, the attention, the nice words, and if there were to be in their conversation a conflict, you would side with her because she seems so sweet. But there is no sign of a conflict, just a shadow. The brim of the officer's hat creates, in contrast with the woman's white, glowing scarf, a dark halo around him, making him seem both suspicious and mysterious. Who is he? What are his intentions? The young woman is being entertained by him. She laughs, she is happy; but one cannot tell how all this will end. Light, though, is usually a source of comforting reassurance. Whether it is the light of God's book educating the girl in de la Tour's painting or the light of exposure to the outer world, we associate it with "shedding light," overcoming the unknown. We are drawn to it because of these revealing powers. If the officer were to turn around, he would be caught in the light and would no longer remain a mystery. But, of course, he will not turn around, so this particular light is limited to a brief moment and cannot reveal the future. The viewer is left wondering whether this encounter will end well or whether the officer, to paraphrase Emily Dickinson's famous words, will "kindly stop for her."

People say that during near death experiences (or at the moment of death), a person's life reappears as a sort of instantaneous movie, a single scene with all other scenes within it and no logical boundaries of time, the sort of worldview Saint Augustine's three-and-four dimensional God would have. A walk in the Frick Collection is far from traumatic. Yet moving between *The Education of the Virgin* and *Officer and Laughing Girl* and seeing similarities in composition and meaning caused this very movement of moments for me, seemingly parallel lines from my past intersecting with that immediate moment. It reminded me of a third picture, albeit one not created by an artist's moment of inspiration and framed by mortals, but by natural forces instead.

My grandparents' village is a tiny point on the east Adriatic coast where everybody knows everybody else. The only stranger is a Russian tycoon who bought a summer house there a few years ago. He, his wife forty years his junior, and his bodyguard soon became accustomed to the rhythms and rituals of life in the Balkans. Every summer they would arrive followed by a truck full of furniture to replace everything that was stolen during the off-season when the house was empty. The village had given up whatever opportunities

it may have had to develop as the center of the universe, to preserve its ancient, natural beauty. Unlike the more famous Duino Castle on the same sea, the village is tucked deep in a bay, and so the angry voice of the sea cannot be a source of inspiration. Instead, the water slowly overwhelms the shore that crawls upwards to become the surrounding frame of mountains that seem to touch the sky all around. In reality these walls are not that tall; they only appear so because the village and everyone in it are so small. Around noon, when the sun falls perpendicular to the sunbathers, leaving no dark place to hide, and when the heat becomes unbearable, I want to melt into the environment, relieved of any direct connection to the sun. Through this transformation of light and humidity, I become less aware of the enclosing magnitude of my surroundings.

On a summer day, with my mother and my aunt, I walk across the road around noon to get from our house to the other side of town where the graveyard is. A car approaches, and so accustomed are we to angry driving in the region, we hasten to get out of the way. Surprisingly, though, the young man stops and lets us pass while smiling, and I let his gaze follow me. My aunt teases me about it while I pretend not to care, putting on my somber face. We are going to put flowers on my great-grandmother's grave, and it is not the time to "stir dull roots with spring rain."

We arrive at the graveyard soon after. It is more of a cute little garden behind a church than the densely populated rows of single-filed headstones I had pictured. We reach the headstone engraved in Cyrillic with my great-grandmother's name. We set the flowers down. My mom asks me if I remember her at all. No, I say, but I do remember the photograph in which she is holding me as a baby. My mother then mentions that her uncle is planning to be buried in this plot, to which my aunt adds, "Mihajlo is too fat, he'd need to be cut up into three pieces in order to fit. Even then, it would be uncomfortably snug."

"I think that even if we cremated him, his ashes wouldn't fit properly," my mom continues. We stifle our laughter, as though the tombstones can hear—my great-grandmother's hand might rise out of the dirt and slap us on the wrist for making such cruel jokes! It is the type of gallows humor that can only exist at noon, when there are no shadows, when we are certain that the spirits of the dead are asleep, when we seem to be free from strange conjunctions.

It is the type of humor that keeps me up that night, when the postcard landscape gives way to never-ending black and navy. When the stars are visible, you can see the jagged outline where the mountains stop and the sky

starts, and you are humbled by the greater force that surrounds you. When there are no stars, there is so much darkness around that you are blindfolded. There is no beginning, and there is no end, and you are trapped in a single dark spot. This is when you are alone with yourself and the tide brings the smell of rotting mussels and, with it, *thoughts* of rotting muscles. Jokes about the impossibility of properly burying a fat man turn into meditations on sickness, on aging, decaying, and dying, on cartilage, tendons, and flesh. During the day, cutting someone up into three pieces is a Tom and Jerry cartoon, but at night it becomes someone attacking with a meat cleaver. I try to think of the home where I spend the other ten months of the year, my quiet suburb in New Jersey that is in a time zone six hours behind that of this mountainous frame, where it is evening and there is still some light. I try to think of nice things, not of the mysterious splashing in the water or the graveyard down the road, which is no longer a garden resting place but a series of pits where we dump our dead.

A few months earlier, a young woman in my town in New Jersey had been killed by her jealous ex-boyfriend. She had been out for a jog, and as she crossed the street, he ran her over repeatedly with his car. Another man who was present rushed over and banged on the car window in a futile attempt to stop the crazed driver. I hadn't thought about the incident since it happened, but at that moment, looking at an infinite sky, I conjured up memories I had never had. I heard the crunching of bones and the screeching of tires, sounds that I'd never heard in real life. I smelled something awful and indescribable, and I saw the dark stains on the concrete. I thought of the gaze of the smiling boy who stopped for me and let me cross the street earlier that day and whether or not he had the capacity to do the same thing to me. I suppressed a scream and fell into a fitful sleep that later disappeared with the delayed arrival of sunlight, delayed because the sun's rays had to push themselves through the mountainous frame.

I do not know whether Vermeer intended for viewers to look at his painting and connect his ideas and use of shadows and highlights to the chiaroscuro of their own daily lives, or whether any artist plans to create an effect like this. But, in one way or other, perhaps each and every moment of a life can be painted in chiaroscuro. Every moment is a point and we, in a very closed and framed space, see only that particular moment as illuminated, like the light shining only on Vermeer's girl or sunlight peeking over dark mountains. While some trajectories from the immediate past are like beams of

light, most lead to a moment that is obscure to us and out of our control. The future remains dark, no matter how we might pretend otherwise.

Combinations of darkness and light, the closed spaces with hints of ways out into openness, burrow themselves deep within us and affect our subconscious. Rather than individual moments not connected to one another—the skeletal combination of lines and points in a sketch—our most moving thoughts are those that result from combinations of meaningful memories triggered by the way our surroundings are molded, impressions of color made clearer by the filling in of depth and shadow. All of our memories—those that have actually happened, those that we have imagined happening, and those that we are still waiting for—attach themselves to the light and the dark, the open and the constricted. This is why I am uncomfortable when I am in a small room, or when I look at a painting of two people in a small room. I am taken back to that sleepless night framed by mountains where, in turn, I was taken back to a different moment in New Jersey, at the intersection of sidewalk and street, of running sneakers and rubber tires. *This* is why different people are moved by different paintings. In each mind, memories are evoked by different associations, and the parallel lines drawn from a moment in the past to the present intersect. They converge upon and diverge from me as they cannot for others. The associations I make come from the arrangement of light and spatial orientation. Someone else may react to a specific cascade of notes. Another may find that a certain smell causes a rush of moments. The associations we make with our surroundings, whether they are about constricted and dimly lit spaces or not, begin to form patterns in our lives, patterns that eventually settle down and become a part of the consciousness we don't normally access. When I turn the lights off to go to sleep, I don't usually panic and think of death and the unknown, and I can safely assume that most other people are not paralyzed on a daily basis by the sudden onslaught of thoughts when a small association is made. It is only when the right combination of lines, of moments, unites perfectly at a specific point in space and time that we are overwhelmed with memory and freeze into statues before a work of art in a museum, realizing how intertwined our lives really are.

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