Darkness and Paradox as the Beginning and End of Understanding

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Metaphors of light and darkness permeate most, if not all, aspects of our lives. However, their usage stands out in two particular areas, knowledge and morality, and in the overlap between them. Knowledge, and the ability to apply it, makes an individual bright, while ignorance and stupidity leaves them dim; learning and technical ingenuity set an En*light*enment apart from a Dark Age. In the moral sphere, honesty is transparent and a conscience is clear, while to do evil is to commit dark deeds, to be devious is to be shady. Falling from one extreme of the moral spectrum to the other, Lucifer, originally the 'light-bearer', becomes Satan, the 'Prince of Darkness'. In these sorts of dichotomies, darkness is considered the absence and negation of light; darkness is 'non-existence' to light's 'existence'.

At the same time though, darkness is also conceived of as representing a knowledge, a morality beyond the light, an obscure order that transcends it. Darkness as that which conceals is associated with esoteric or occult wisdom; that which transcends conventional dichotomies of 'good and evil', 'right and wrong', even 'light and darkness' itself, yet at the same time underpins them. The *Dao de jing*, for example, speaks of the *Dao* as the 'dimly visible' 'Mysterious Feminine' who precedes the categories of Heaven and Earth, unity and plurality. In the Hindu tradition too, the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* speaks of the dark and unmanifest self-existent Lord as the source of the manifest.

So, the light does not simply exist where the darkness is not; rather, it exists between two darknesses: the darkness of negation and the darkness of transcendence. Or perhaps it is not a matter of two darknesses, but simply one darkness divided by light. Often, the line between the two darknesses is blurred, and sometimes it seems as though the light is simply a device intended to keep them apart. Certainly, the darkness remains at its most disturbing, confronting and challenging when the boundary between these two darknesses seems to become indistinct and uncertain, when these two darknesses seem to merge – is this merging ultimately what the darkness conceals? In one way or another, this paradigm – but perhaps more interestingly the paradoxes that surround it – has always proven not just challenging, or even enticing, but downright

irresistible for so many mystics, religious thinkers, artists and writers.

The papers presented in this volume follow their lead. Those of us represented here have found these issues equally irresistible in incredibly diverse and complex ways, yet we have all succumbed nevertheless. Our discussions here are the culmination, or at least ongoing development, of ideas presented at the seventh conference of the Religion, Literature and the Arts Society held at Sancta Sophia College, the University of Sydney, from the 5th to the 7th of October, 2002.

All of the papers presented here critically assess and challenge the assumptions behind the light and darkness model, both on the ethical and the epistemological front. All of them use this as a starting point to then offer a critique of the process of categorization in general, as typified by the straightforward light and darkness dichotomy. Yet, paradoxically, it is precisely the notion of the darkness itself which provides a vehicle for this sort of wider critique; once again, the overlap between darkness as negation and darkness as transcendence becomes apparent. In short, darkness becomes a metaphor for where the metaphors break down, where they come to an end in either terror or awe, often both. It represents a distant edge, or boundary.

However, this is just as true for our inner subjective 'boundaries' and extremes too. The darkness represents that knowledge which, rather than being beyond our understanding (such as the esoteric or the occult), lies *before* our understanding; it indicates the assumptions we take for granted, our givens. The darkness conceals not just because it is too far in the distance, but because it is too close. Methodologically speaking, exposing these particular dark corners is especially important given the interdisciplinary focus of the Society for the Study of Religion, Literature and the Arts, and this focus is reflected in the plurality of approaches represented in this volume.

Gabrielle Carey, for example, uses literature, and fiction especially, to allow a glimpse into issues that have remained blindspots for traditional religious thought. She questions the typically rigid distinction between literature and religious experience, suggesting instead that creativity is just as much the wellspring of both, and that it precedes the categories of 'religious' and 'literary'. This is implied also by James Tulip in his analysis of the creative darkness of Les Murray's 'Black Dog'. Conversely, religious imagery and metaphor shed light upon the literary, and, more specifically, the poetic realm in Barry Spurr's study of the *via*

negativa in the work of T.S. Eliot. Similarly, Joan Kirkby and Jane Williams Hogan explore the influence of religious assumptions on the work of Emily Dickinson and Edgar Allan Poe respectively.

Cultural blindspots are also exposed. John Moses explores Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reflections on the dark assumptions entrenched in the cultural background of Protestant Germany in the lead up to Nazism. Michael Godfrey reminds us that social and economic forces are all too often obscured in the light of our own academic concerns and preoccupations, as shown in his analysis of modern and postmodern readings of Daniel Defoe, which he then uses as an entry point to discussing Defoe on his own terms. Roland Clark, John Wu and Ray Kerkhove assess hidden cultural assumptions as evidenced in the vagaries and shortcomings of cross-cultural comparison. They centre their discussions on the issue of certain taboos and how different cultures have approached them. Roland Clark discusses Eastern and Western European explanations for the origin of evil and the darkness which shrouds them, mainly because such explanations run the ever-present risk of appearing to justify evil by attempting to explain it. He focuses particularly upon contrasting cultural approaches to avoiding, or at least concealing, this risk. John Wu explores the universal taboo of death, and how its very universality provides a touchstone for comparisons between Western and Tibetan Buddhist world-views. From this, he then shows the way this particular taboo intersects with other taboo topics such as traditional Western and Tibetan misogyny; indeed, his emphasis is really upon how one surface taboo is often used to hide a far deeper one, how one darkness is used to hide another. In a similar vein, Ray Kerkhove shows how Western attitudes and abhorrence toward Aztec human sacrifice have masked deeper cultural prejudices and presuppositions.

Ray Kerkhove also addresses the issue of how Aztecs themselves viewed human sacrifice; namely, as a way of validating and maintaining a particular cosmic order, which is also how Daniel Bray approaches sacrifice in Norse religion. Violent deeds, which usually lie outside of conventional morality, are undertaken in order to preserve it; morality is transcended so that it can be restored. What at first glance appears as a negation again gives way to transcendence, and finally to restoration. The darkness conceals, yet at the same time preserves, an ethical structure that underpins conventional ethical certainty. The darkness is dangerous, yet necessary; it is built into the ontological structure of the universe. To participate in the workings of the universe, in the workings of the natural world, is to participate in the darkness.

Marius Paul O'Shea takes this one step further by arguing that Western technological progress – the outworking of the En*light*enment project – has alienated us from participation in this hidden natural order. In attempting to cut ourselves off from the darkness, to 'sanitize' it out of existence, we have distanced ourselves from the natural as well – a tendency Sarah Penicka also notes in her paper regarding modern neo-Pagan attitudes to traditional flying ointments. Contemporary witches, she observes, have been keen to downplay the role of natural hallucinogens so as to gain further credibility in wider society. Both note that the natural has maintained its association with the darkness of negation and dichotomy, but without the darkness of the transcendent. Or, if this transcendent aspect is preserved in a modern Western setting, it is reduced to a superficial nostalgia and romanticizing for an imagined idea of the 'natural' or of 'witchcraft' which is symptomatic of, rather than a remedy for, this alienation. Our conception of the relation between the human and natural worlds is thrown out of balance; the darkness again obscures the blurring of traditional boundaries.

Carole Cusack approaches this from the perspective of the opposite cultural and philosophical response to this crisis of the natural; rather than alienation, she concentrates on hybridisation, as shown in the figure of the cyborg. The darkness is a category used to obscure the fluid, and often tenuous, boundary between categories, here between the human and the technological; the cyborg is an embodiment (a personification?) of this fluidity.

The darkness is what conceals, indeed it is this very act of concealing. Yet, at the same time, labelling this concealing as 'the darkness' almost seems to have the opposite effect, since it actually *reveals* this concealing. It may conceal the blurring of categories, but it reveals a separate category for itself by doing so. Tony Bond, in his exploration of nineteenth and twentieth century art, suggests that this interplay of revealing and concealing captures the very essence of the notion of transcendence: by revealing something hidden, only to the extent of showing us that it is hidden, the darkness hints at something beyond, without spelling it out, thus ensuring that it remains 'beyond'. Again, in blurring the boundaries between disciplines, art is used to address philosophical and religious issues.

This volume is the result of just this sort of inter-disciplinary blurring. And Chris Hartney and I warmly thank all the conference participants, volume contributors, the Society for the Study of

Religion, Literature and the Arts Executive, and the President, Dr Carole Cusack in particular, for allowing all this blurring to take place, and, what's more, for allowing us to have something to do with it, no matter what sort of hybrid, or category-defying might result from the process. This volume attempts to shed light on the darkness, it attempts to reveal the process of concealing, and so, needless to say, it leaves it itself open to the charge that the whole undertaking is a contradiction in terms. And indeed it is: the intention of this volume is to preserve the darkness by destroying it.