

Darkness as a metaphor in the historiography of the Enlightenment

This paper concentrates on darkness as a metaphor in eighteenth century historical writing. In contrast to the celebration of light as a symbol of knowledge and progress, the interpretations of the meaning of darkness varied. For many historians, it symbolised backwardness, or decline, which culminated in medieval society. Yet, the relationship between eighteenth century historiography and the Middle Ages was not as explicit as the usual suspects such as Voltaire and Edward Gibbon suggest. First of all, the understanding of the culture or texts of the Dark Ages signalled the skilfulness of the interpreter. Secondly, some supposed features of the medieval culture, such the free use of the imagination, gradually became more appreciated.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT IN THE EIGHTEENTH century was a movement which renewed the world by adapting the rhetoric of Christianity and giving it a new meaning. From this viewpoint, the secularisation process can be seen to have reached its culmination in a reinterpretation of the Biblical dualism of light and darkness. In Christianity, the idea of truth is reflected the eternal light God has given humankind. This metaphor was gradually replaced by the idea of scientific truth, which illuminated the dark areas of human knowledge. (Roger 1968.) The Enlightenment writers considered light as a symbol of progress, reason and tolerance. Their relationship with darkness became more complicated as they began to consider what it actually meant. This essay attempts to describe the various meanings of darkness in Enlightenment historiography.

My examples come from historical writing, which was a dominant genre in the literature of the eighteenth century. Almost everyone from David Hume to marquis de Condorcet aimed to write an inter-

pretation of the origins and development of the Age of Light. The concept of 'history' was radicalised by defining it as a description of the processes leading to the modern use of reason. Clairvoyance or visual acuity was conceived of as the essential characteristic of the scientific spirit. Light symbolised the natural sciences, as well as the use of reason untrammelled by superstition and religion. (Schneiders 1990: 83–93.)

Darkness and the Dark Ages in the Age of Light

The dichotomy between light and darkness had become quite complicated in the eighteenth century. Implicitly, darkness symbolised the deprivation of natural light. Even in the *Encyclopédie* (1751–72) Louis de Jaucourt claimed that *ténèbres* signified the lack of light (*privation de clarté*). It was the opposite term of natural light. Yet, de Jaucourt did not celebrate the coming of the light as did most of the thinkers of the period. Curiously, he foresaw the return of darkness after the prevalence of this light: 'La nuit est la cessation du jour, c'est-à-dire le temps où le soleil n'éclaire plus' (de Jaucourt 1765).

De Jaucourt regards the night as coming after the day, when the sun does not shine anymore. Even in the context of the Biblical thinking, where the light of God had first appeared in the darkness, de Jaucourt's description of darkness as something which came *after* light was controversial. In terms of history, de Jaucourt seems to have denied or questioned the notion of progress.

De Jaucourt's emphasis on darkness reflects the concerns of eighteenth century historical writing quite straightforwardly. Ernst Breisach regards the dissent from progress as one of its main themes. It echoes Rousseau's dissatisfaction with modern society, which was characterised by a decrease in happi-

ness. (Breisach 1983: 209–10.) By contrast, most historians wanted to chart the progress of the sciences, art and manners in relation to the contemporary high point.

Despite the emphasis on progress, the metaphors of darkness and light were not as separate in the eighteenth century histories as one might expect. Historical writing of the Enlightenment surprisingly often shows sympathy for the dark periods of human history, or for those cultures which were generally considered to be lacking enlightenment. For instance, the commonly held view of the Enlightenment writers as being uncompromisingly hostile towards the Middle Ages should be reconsidered. Many historians wrote about the Middle Ages as a period of superstition in strong contrast with current science and freedom of thought, but for every harsh critique one can find more neutral attitudes.

In fact, the period we know as the Middle Ages is above all a creation of the eighteenth century writers, whose ideas were developed in the century following. The periodic term, *medium aevum*, the Middle Ages,

had been in use from the second half of the seventeenth century, but it was the historians of the Age of Enlightenment who defined what kind of period the Middle Ages was.

Associating darkness with difficulty and decline

The dualism between light and darkness had been essential in the formation of modern secular historical thought in two ways. Firstly, for historians, the term darkness referred to a certain ambiguity, unclarity or obscurity of the period due to a lack of reliable information. Light, in contrast, symbolised the capacity to understand clearly what had really taken place in the past, in a similar way as the natural sciences allowed for an empirical investigation of the world.

There were many debates about the nature of truth in eighteenth century historical writings. The manner of stressing original sources had developed in antiquarian studies, where the presentation of material had the monopoly over narrative presentation. The



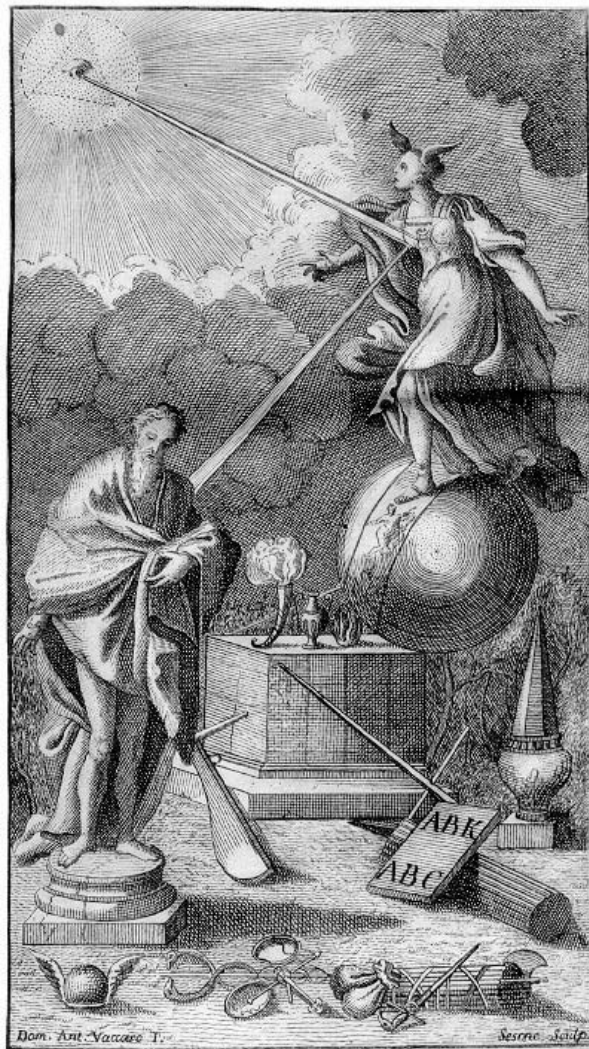
Natural sciences and especially Isaac Newton's discoveries were presented in public lectures. Here the lecturer shows the centrality of the sun and its light in the universe. Joseph Wright of Derby: *A Philosopher Giving that Lecture on the Orrery in which a Lamp is put in the Place of the Sun.*

historians' task was to see clearly, to see objectively. In short, he or she had to look at the past in such a way that nothing obstructed his view. But the idea of the purity of sources never dominated historical writing; the broad scale of historical research prevented any concentration on a single source as most historians endeavoured to formulate what kinds of forces had created the modern world.

Many eighteenth century historians deplored the use of medieval sources. Aside from the official documents, which were considered to be trustworthy, they encountered such forms of literature as seemed to be incomprehensible, as well as unreliable. They did not realise that the terms of medieval literature necessitated an exceptional knowledge of literary genres, tropes, figures and contexts, as well as language. Most historians did not consider it necessary to acquire enough adequate information to analyse 500-year-old texts convincingly. Robert Henry deplored medieval sources as 'unpolished and oral' and 'without regard to selection or arrangement' (Henry 1771-93, VI: 360). Indeed, Henry's six volume *The History of Great Britain* utilised mostly those sources which he considered to be truthful. Henry's history was based on official records as well as on previous studies. The medieval chronicles, for instance, were analysed as a separate entity in a chapter in which Henry presented the medieval literature. No wonder that he considered the medieval period as 'the dark ages, from which the most upright and intelligent writers could not emancipate themselves' (Henry 1771-93, I: 155).

In Henry's analysis, the darkness of the Middle Ages embodied primarily its writers' incapacity to write intelligibly. Orality was at the centre of misunderstandings, even for another Scottish scholar and defender of James Macpherson's Ossian, Hugh Blair, who described the beginning of the organised human life as dark from a contemporary viewpoint: 'History, when it treats remote and dark ages, is seldom very instructive. The beginnings of society, in every country, are involved in fabulous confusion.' (Blair 1763: 1.) Blair thus sees the Dark Ages not as something that had followed from an Age of Light. Instead, in this excerpt the term 'Dark Ages' symbolises the state of society in its original confusion, which was not understandable to eighteenth century scholars.

Secondly, darkness served as a counterpoint to progress. Historians struggled to explain when the Age of Light had started. In Enlightenment historiography, progress began in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For instance, William Robertson argued that printing and other 'obvious causes' had



The ray of light symbolises the inspiration Homer receives from the divine eye. Light does not refer to knowledge or freedom, but to wisdom. Frontpiece of Giambattista Vico's *Scienza Nuova*, 1730 edition.

been the source of the modernisation of European society. For Robertson, the Age of Light was a result of technological innovations, which had led to European expansion.

Not all historians emphasised technological advantages as being at the core of the modernisation project. David Hume found its roots in the late Middle Ages, when the courts had introduced a sphere for polite discussion and social life which included the presence of both men and women. The courtier had thus to find such a way to speak and behave which was not excessively intrusive and which made sure his own intentions were fully expressed. Hume believed the practice of constraint in manners decreased social differences.

In fact, the concept of 'the Dark Ages' was popularised in the fourteenth century, when Francesco Petrarch divided world history into three periods: a dark period had emerged after the classical Golden Age of Greece and Rome. Petrarch believed he had witnessed the last phases of the second period after which a new Golden Age, due to the rebirth of the classical literature, would begin. The return of light to human society had been expected to take place in the future, but the eighteenth century writers believed they had witnessed this period themselves. After the time of darkness, all was light.

After Petrarch's definition the Middle Ages was gradually considered to be a period of historical decline. This interpretation was based on the demand for imitating classical culture, the influence of which had declined simultaneously with the waning of the Roman Empire. Edward Gibbon's classic *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–89) analysed the process from the rise of Christian culture in the West and continued with a strange mixture of classical values and those of the Greek Catholic Church in the East. For Gibbon, the narrative was really about the emergence of the forces of darkness. The ruins of Rome reminded him of the greatness of an ancient civilisation, whose achievements had been lost forever. The Middle Ages was a period which witnessed the continuous decline of not one, but two empires, as philologist James Harris defined it:

THE INTERVAL BETWEEN THE FALL OF THESE TWO EMPIRES (the Western or *Latin* in the *fifth* Century, the Eastern or *Grecian* in the *fifteenth*) making a space of near thousand years, constitutes what we call THE MIDDLE AGE (Harris 1781: 240).

The claims for the darkness could be based on the demise of the ancient cultures. Gibbon's sarcastic comments about the Catholic Church and medieval religiosity have come to symbolise the Enlightenment attitude towards the medieval period. In some eighteenth century texts, the medieval darkness was seen as similar to the lack of progress in the Orient. De Condorcet's *Esquisse* (finished in 1794) claimed that the medieval darkness had now left Europe, but that it would not leave the Orient. (Tunturi 2002.) The similarity between the Middle Ages and the Orient is obvious because both had denied the possibility of progress.

Darkness as cultural capital

As is exemplified in the ruins depicted in Gothic prose, the appreciation of decay became popular in the eighteenth century. It signalled a change in historical thought: the emergence of an admiration for the peculiarity and cultural diversity of the Middle Ages, which was in contrast with the uniform present. According to Jonathan B. Kramnick, the expansion of literacy and the increase in the production of books made reading a popular pastime, whereas its stature as cultural capital had diminished. In this situation, Kramnick argues, the idea of superior reading skills emerged. Above all, a good reader needed time and education to improve his (and very rarely her) skill to the extent that he could understand a text which remained inaccessible to the majority. (Kramnick 1999: 28–43.)

For sure, medieval literature had not been studied properly. The Dark Ages had produced texts that were mostly fictitious to modern eyes and thus of no interest to historians such as Hume (Bryden 2005: 17). Yet, behind the contempt of the philosopher-historians, there emerged new awareness with respect to vernacular literature, especially of epic poetry such as the cycle of Arthurian tales. For the eighteenth century elite, these texts were adequate, as they required better education than contemporary novels and plays. Yet, the task of interpretation was not as challenging as in the case of Greek or Hebraic texts, for medieval vernacular languages were still comprehensible to educated readers. The readers had to contextualise texts to present themselves as the real authorities on the distant period.

As Kramnick suggests, the first modern histories of literature in the eighteenth century were not written according to academic standards. Studies such as Thomas Warton's *The History of English Poetry* (1774–81) and Gian Maria Crescimbeni's *Storia della volgar poesia* (1714) were written for contemporary, educated readers and not for scholars. The difference from the learned *historia literaria* was notable as the new literary histories aimed to present and contextualise the central oeuvres of national literary history instead of analysing the intertexts too scrupulously. Despite the refined style, they celebrated the difficulties of the reader.

Eighteenth century literary histories are full of astonishment about the difficulty of medieval texts. Thomas Warton wrote extensively about the interpretation of medieval poetry. Warton wondered especially how to read the allegories, which were so

different from modern literature. He realised that the difference between medieval and modern poetry did not only concern their value or goodness. Warton commented on Alexander Pope's neoclassical imitation of Geoffrey Chaucer's House of Fame: 'When I read Pope's elegant imitation of this piece, I think I am walking among modern monuments unsuitably placed in Westminster Abbey' (Warton 1774: 96).

Warton did not condemn medieval poetry, even if he could not completely understand it. His response is twofold, for *The History of English Poetry* participated in the Enlightenment project by celebrating the rise of literacy, the general standards of literature and intellectual networks. Warton rejoiced in the decrease of superstition. Yet, at the same time he was not sure if poetry had improved in the Age of Light. Warton wrote how the imagination had deteriorated simultaneously with the progress of human reason. For Warton, the use of allegories reflected the importance of the imagination in medieval thought:

'As knowledge and learning increase, poetry begins to deal less in imagination: and these fantastic beings give way to real manners and living characters' (Warton 1774: 68).

What humanity had won in 'reality', it had lost in imagination. Warton's *The History of English Poetry* thus continued the dualism of light and darkness, but in a more nuanced manner. He found reasons to appreciate medieval obscurities as things lost forever. Warton may have even thought that contemporary writers could learn about the use of the imagination from the medieval era. Warton's appreciation of the imagination reflected the new indebtedness to the periods, which were not progressive by contemporary standards, or which did not seem to communicate with precise utterances. Warton's analysis of medieval literature thus turns over two explanations of darkness: the obscurity of the medieval texts could even signal advancement compared with the ancient literature.



Light as a symbol of truth and hope survived the French Revolution. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789) is celebrated by the etching showing the transition from an age of darkness (and thunder) to a period of light. *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen, décrétés par l'Assemblée Nationale dans les séances des 20, 21, 23, 24 et 26 août 1789, acceptée par le Roi.*

Warton hesitated to state whether or not literature had really progressed along with the rest of society. The poetry in the title of his study suggests why he did so. In the aesthetics of the eighteenth century the term poetry referred to a certain genre of literature, but also to obscure, dark, and complicated ideas (Ikonen 2010: 248–9). The concept of poetry did not accord with light in the common eighteenth century meaning. The contrast between unveiled poetry and the metaphors of light was sharp in eighteenth century vocabulary, but literary historians became aware that light was, in the end, quite a complicated concept. Richard Hurd analysed the cultural differences:

Nothing in human nature, my dear friend, is without reasons. The modes and fashions may appear at first sight fantastic and unaccountable. But they, who look nearly into them, discover some latent cause of their production. (Hurd 1762: 1–2.)

Hurd's reference to sight echoes many references to light in the eighteenth century texts. 'Darkness' did not only denote the interpretative difficulties of medieval texts, or refer to the general strangeness of the period. The adjective was applied to the period when either historical progress, or the knowledge of classical texts had disappeared. The views of Gibbon and de Condorcet thus did not prevail completely in the historical writing of the Enlightenment. Some scholars defended the medieval darkness, which obscured more than the historians of progress had noticed. ■

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