

INTRODUCTION

Now the nights of one period are not
the nights of another.

Neither are the nights of one city the
nights of another.

—DJUNA BARNES,
*Nightwood*¹

The Dream Site

IN THE early 1850s, Henry David Thoreau took a series of long nocturnal strolls in the countryside near Walden, mapping out lectures on night and moonlight.² Thoreau had his eyes on the shadowy forest, yet his eagerness to subdue the kingdom of night for poetical purposes echoes the exploitative fervor with which urbanites were beginning to explore the city after dark. “I shall be a benefactor,” wrote Thoreau,

if I conquer some realms from the night, if I report to the gazettes anything transpiring about us at that season worthy of their attention,—if I can show men that there is some beauty awake while they are asleep,—if I add to the domains of poetry.³

Writing of natural processes that had changed little in thousands of years, Thoreau seems unaware of how desperately outmoded his projected conquest is. He gives no hint that artificial lighting and feverish nighttime activity had already rendered his slumbering landscape an object of nostalgic curiosity for city dwellers. By the mid-nineteenth century, the silvery dreamland that Thoreau wandered while his neighbors slept would have seemed to many New Yorkers as remote as the African interior. And yet, although he was seeking something primeval, Thoreau’s desire to “add to the domains of poetry” by aesthetically annexing the land of the night put him in the mainstream of modernity. Like many other writers and artists, capitalists and pioneers, he was participating in one of the epoch’s great adventures: the colonizing of the night.

While his timing was perfect, Thoreau was simply in the wrong place. The action was elsewhere, in the great cities. It had been only a few decades since urban life in Europe and the United States had begun to feel the radical alteration caused by the advance of light into hitherto dark hours. But now



FIGURE I.1. Andreas Feininger (1906–1999), *Brooklyn Bridge at Night*, 1948. Gelatin silver print, 16 × 20 in. (40.6 × 50.8 cm). Getty Images/Time & Life Pictures

the race was on to capture broad swaths of nocturnal territory for profit and pleasure. The installation of gaslight in London's West End in 1807 ignited a series of innovations that permanently rearranged the rhythms of everyday life, transforming traditional patterns of industry, commerce, leisure, and consumption. The concept of “nightlife” was born, along with the twenty-four-hour workday. With reliable lighting came safer streets, late shopping, and vastly expanded entertainments. The illumination of the city changed the very way people thought about—and thus lived in—the night. Darkness, so long a barrier to human activity, quickly became a stimulant.

The ability of the city to transcend the rhythms of nature, to banish night so that its own artifice could reign supreme, came to symbolize the essence of progress, the culmination of technical prowess and cultural sophistication. Drawing human moths to its flame, the decked-out city of night ostentatiously burned its candle at both ends. By the twentieth century, a shimmering skyline and a blaze of electricity signified human life at its richest, most promising, and most seductive: “bright lights, big city.” The physical paraphernalia of light, from the lamppost to the gasworks or the power plant, became permanent daytime reminders that a visual newfound land was being charted every evening.

Artistic renderings played a vital role in this revolution, not merely recording the novel sights of the city after dark, but also educating their audiences

in the modes of perception through which this “darkness visible” might be experienced. In ways we are only beginning to appreciate, the impact of gas and electricity reshaped the arts and the psyche, not to mention the experience of urban life.⁴ City dwellers realized that a new arena of human interaction had opened up. Its joys and perils needed to be interpreted—morally, aesthetically, and socially. How did the city look to those who ventured forth, the *flâneurs* prowling the streets in search of inspiration? How were their responses communicated through poems and novels, guidebooks, paintings, prints, and photographs? How did nocturnal imagery evolve as people made efforts to comprehend first the gaslit and then the electric city? And how was the cityscape framed and transfigured, so that it came to seem like a stage set, a fantasyland, or an intimate interior? *New York Nocturne* explores how writers, painters, and photographers helped turn the unscouted terrain of the urban night into a legible part of contemporary life.

As we read the map of nocturnal modernity made by such figures as Walt Whitman and Ralph Ellison, Georgia O’Keeffe and Edward Hopper, Alfred Stieglitz and “Weegee,” I want to stress that my emphasis is not so much on social or technological transformation as on how that transformation was registered in literature and the visual arts. The works of innovative image-makers, rather than the experiences of ordinary people, are the focus here. But along the way, I refer to the still-unfolding histories of illumination and nightlife as a means of establishing concretely how technological change altered urban experience, something implicit in my interpretation of art and literature. Thus, *New York Nocturne* concentrates not on nocturnal urban “reality” as lived by various socioeconomic groups but on how creative individuals have in memorable ways depicted and reinterpreted that ever-evolving reality for themselves and their audiences.

Looking at the visual and verbal ideas that engaged the makers of night imagery, we will often arrive at fresh readings of familiar works, now that they are seen in the context of the nocturnal genre. Some of the images and texts presented here are classics, chosen because they have had a lot of cultural visibility and impact—those by Edgar Allan Poe and Emma Lazarus, Edward Steichen and Berenice Abbott, James McNeill Whistler and Joseph Stella, for instance. But I also use many lesser-known works to gauge the depth of an idea or image, and see if something unexpected will turn up to compel attention. Since showing what’s special about nocturnal imagery is at the heart of my endeavor, I try to identify just what working with the night contributed to the art of each figure I analyze—and what each figure contributed to the growing body of nocturnal expression. We will see, to take just a few examples, how representing nocturnal subjects and atmosphere helped Whistler achieve a desired notoriety, lent Steichen an “artistic” aura, enabled Frederic Remington to be recognized as a painter rather than mere illustrator, helped Stella fuse a Futurist style with American

themes, burned Weegee's flash photos into public consciousness, and gave poets William Carlos Williams and Elizabeth Bishop a human moth-to-electric-flame image of the writer's tormented act of creation.

Since 1812, when the composer John Field first gave the title "nocturne" to a series of quietly expressive piano pieces, the term has been applied to a wide range of imaginative works that, according to their creators, evoke nighttime thoughts and sensations. Because the history of the nocturne zig-zags between music, the visual arts, and literature, study of the subject demands an interdisciplinary, multimedia approach. I will admit right here that regrettably, this book does not address the nocturne in either music or film—still unexplored topics that are well worth investigating.⁵ And long as it is, this book itself has had to be selective. For reasons of space and personal inclination, I have focused on what might be called "descriptive" nocturnes: works of writers, painters, and photographers that may well have musical or cinematic counterparts, but that give special privilege, verbally and visually, to the look of the city after dark. Although I will be comparing how the city is represented in various texts and images, trying to show what each has contributed to our composite picture of New York, the aim is not to compare the media themselves, or offer theories about their similarities and differences, advantages and constraints. Rather, I will try to show how ideas and approaches may be borrowed, emulated, subverted, or rejected, often quite loosely and by analogy, among people trying to represent in their own way, in their own medium, a shared topic: the city at night.⁶

Tracing the imagery through which ideas about the nocturnal scene entered cultural consciousness, this book concentrates mostly on exterior, outdoor views of the city. For centuries people have sought security at night behind their shutters and doors. Their relation to interior space remained largely stable even as improved forms of lighting and heating made indoor life more comfortable. But gaslight's sudden arrival tempted them out of their homes with the promise of wondrous sights. For Americans and Europeans both, emboldened initially by gaslight and then by a succession of new techniques of looking and lighting, the night became an arena for action. Artificial lighting had opened up a new epoch in human endeavor. Scrutiny of the night seemed almost an obligation; like Charles Dickens's vampiric lawyer Mr. Vholes, darkness courted inquiry. Freightened with associations but at first little frequented by the "respectable" classes, tractable in theory but challenging in practice, night assumed the allure and menace of an uncharted continent. It beckoned.

As artistic perception of night and light evolved, nocturnes became an influential force in the development of modern art and literature. Discovering the city, and particularly New York, through the lens of nocturnal experience, image makers found exceptional artistic possibilities that shattered traditional forms and encouraged greater freedom of expression. As they

worked, they created a new New York—a vibrant composite image that has developed as the actual city has, an image that to this moment influences how we respond to the physical city before us. Through study of that nocturnal image, we can learn a great deal about how it felt to live in the city in times past, and how the resonances of the words “New York” have multiplied over time.

Why New York? Nowhere else did nocturnal exploration take a more exciting form. Even before the advent of electricity, New Yorkers were announcing that their gaslit whirl rivaled that of London and Paris, as illustrators and journalists, writers and artists cataloged the city’s infamies and chronicled its secrets. For New York’s self-proclaimed arrival on the world stage around 1850 coincided with the dawning recognition that night was a kind of global stage in itself. Inextricably bound up in the rhetoric of exploration, colonization, and discovery, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century encounters with the night were suffused with a sense of adventure. “Daytime” activities—the constant construction and demolition; the influx of immigrants, industries, and capital; the ever-rising skyline—lent New York a protean form that rapidly achieved legendary status. But complementing the transformation of the built environment was another, equally mythic metamorphosis—one that took place nightly as darkness fell, and the workaday world seemed to don garments of fire and diamonds.

Growing furiously, the city emerged from the gaslit era on nearly equal terms with London in size and Paris in ostentation. Then, in the 1880s and 1890s, New York aggressively assumed a more pronounced “electric” personality, assembling a nocturnal semiotic arsenal that no other city could match. Sustained by the legends that art and commerce were building, the allure of New York as the preeminent city of the night stemmed from a simple fact: no city anywhere had ever been so radiantly and thoroughly lit. Opening its first central power plant in 1882, just three years after Thomas Edison successfully demonstrated the incandescent lightbulb, New York electrified more rapidly and completely than any European capital.⁷ Streetlights sparkled in processions along the avenues, while brightly lit interiors of apartments and offices became visible to people passing in the streets or on elevated trains. Meanwhile, the proliferation of skyscrapers began to change the topography of the city itself, as their lights broke the ceiling of darkness that in cities had hovered at the five-story level since the Middle Ages. From the 1890s onward, seeing New York created a lust for light that no place else could satisfy. Returning to Ireland in 1964, Brendan Behan wrote:

When I arrived home from Broadway, where my play *The Hostage* was running, my wife said to me, “Oh isn’t it great to be back. How do you feel coming home?”

“Listen Beatrice,” I said, “It’s very dark!”

And I think anybody returning home after going to New York will find their native spot pretty dark too.⁸

New York stood out especially in its contrast with the countryside. The illumination of cities outpaced that of less populated areas even more dramatically in the United States than elsewhere, due to the private ownership of lighting companies. Whereas Europeans regarded lighting as a public service to be administered nationally, Americans treated it as a commercial commodity produced by and for the benefit of private enterprise, and lit each locality in direct proportion to the profits it could generate. Poorer and rural areas found themselves simply left in the dark. As the center of American commerce, the most highly visible and valuable piece of real estate in the nation, downtown Manhattan was quickly illuminated to the hilt. Citizens were calling Broadway the “Great White Way” even in the 1890s, and it was the intensity of light from advertising that created this impression. The spectacle shone all the more powerfully because it burst out at a time when not even 5 percent of American homes had electricity.⁹ It all amounted to a gigantic self-promotion, an urban publicity campaign that rapidly mythologized New York as *the* modern city, the ultimate city of light.¹⁰

By 1900, three of the most salient features of New York’s modernity—its skyscrapers, its brash, self-confident love of newness, and its dollar-driven, accelerated pace of life—coalesced and found their most spectacular form after dark. The boldness of the city’s lines, its soaring heights and uninhibited theatricality, marked it as a place apart, operating on a scale that eclipsed its European predecessors. A first step in changing perceptions of the night city came from those who championed the simple romance of elevated trains and watering holes. Realist novelist William Dean Howells and the painters of the Ash Can School tamed the threatening features of nightlife for middle-class audiences, as did O. Henry, whose stories of “Baghdad on the Subway” showed that urban chaos could be repackaged in ingeniously knotted four-page bundles. Between 1900 and 1915, with the spread of lavishly decorated lobster palaces, movie houses, and cabarets, going out at night gradually became the order of the day. By the 1920s New York had a mayor, socialite Jimmy Walker, who claimed it was a sin to go to bed on the same day you got up. The city lights produced a breathtaking skyline that outsparkled the rest of the world with its ambition, promise, and inhuman beauty. Visiting the city in the 1930s, the Swiss architect Le Corbusier remarked that New York at night is “a Milky Way come down to earth.”¹¹

For over a century now, the sheer spectacle of New York at night has proved irresistible. Painters’ images of the city at night have become modernist icons in themselves: the soaring gothic arches of Stella’s *Brooklyn Bridge* (1922) open onto a promised land of light and height; O’Keeffe’s

Radiator Building, Night, New York (1927) discharges urban energy from its floodlit, flowering top; Charles Demuth's *I Saw the Figure Five in Gold* (1928) projects an apocalyptic vision of a fire truck hurtling through the night (color plate 1); and Hopper's *Nighthawks* (1942) presents a human diorama in a diner, its specimens drenched in the light of loneliness. The astonishing beauty of skyscrapers seen from a distance appears to engage in a nightly duel with the abrasive passion of city streets confronted close-up.

Stella summed up New York's nocturnal plenitude as a "battle of lights." Artists, writers, and photographers have responded to this tension by portraying New York nights as an unpredictable compound of stunning extremes: they can be explosive or tranquil, brutal or romantic; they can deal in archetypes or absurdities. The coming of night may silence the city or make it more vibrant than ever, offering blinding visions of a radiant future or shadowy glimpses of the vanished past. For many, New York at night becomes quite simply the embodiment of dreams, whether fantasy or nightmare. "New York, the dream site," the poet Adrienne Rich has called it.¹²

It's important to recognize, however, that New York was not alone in creating a culture of the gaslit or electrified night. Around 1850, artists and writers throughout Europe and North America began realizing that the night offered them unexpectedly rich opportunities for exploring the clash between a disorienting urban world and the dislocated individual psyche. What Charles Baudelaire wrote of Paris was true of London and even truer of New York, but it applied to modern life, wherever it was experienced: cities change, Baudelaire said, "faster, alas, than the heart of mortal man." People struggled to catch up, to understand or even conceptually mold that transformation. "As Baudelaire was very quick to see," the critic David Harvey points out, "if flux and change, ephemerality and fragmentation, formed the material basis of modern life," the artist had no choice but to respond to these developments: "The individual artist could contest them, embrace them, try to dominate them, or simply swim within them, but the artist could never ignore them."¹³ Just as much as railways and crowds, machine-filled factories and mass culture, the urban night compelled attention. A volatile combination of ancient association and up-to-the-minute illumination, the artificially lit cityscape provided both a refuge from change and a testing ground for ways of confronting modernity in its most glaring manifestations.

The technical challenges, the dramatic lighting, and the turbulent or mysterious content of night scenes called for new strategies of representation. Encouraging greater subjectivity and assailing the boundaries of realist art, nocturnes would play an important role in the movements toward symbolism and abstraction, imagism and pictorialism. Describing nighttime experience also required greater frankness about poverty and sexuality, greater openness on moral and formal levels regarding what could not be fully seen or known owing to extremes of darkness and light. It also spurred new

techniques of image-making. The development of flash photography as an art, for example, sprang first from Jacob Riis's struggle to capture the slum life of the city at night. Ephemeral yet persistent, the blinking lightscapes of electric and neon signs added another dimension to painting, photography, and literature from the early 1900s onward.

For nighttime urban experience was more than a defining feature of modernity; its representation helped to create many of the artistic strategies and ideas we have come to call "modernist" or "modernism." My underlying argument is that artistic grappling with the artificially lit city, of which New York is the outstanding example, should be recognized as an integral part of the processes that propelled European and American culture in bold new directions. By modernity, I mean not only rapid transformations of technology and socioeconomic structures but also Euro-American culture's sense of itself as living in a world of accelerated innovation, where constant changes in the environment reach, in large ways and small, into every aspect of how life is lived and art is made. As Harvey notes, from the 1840s on, few could doubt that modernism, the artistic response to modernity, "was very much an urban phenomenon, that it existed in a restless but intricate relationship with the experience of explosive urban growth . . . strong rural-to-urban migration, industrialization, mechanization, massive reorderings of built environments, and politically based urban movements. . . . Modernism was 'an art of cities.'"¹⁴

While the study of modernism can lead in many directions, I am drawn to the technologically inflected way the issues have been framed by Andreas Huyssen. Noting the close but often adversarial relation between modernism and the avant-garde, on the one hand, and social and industrial modernization, on the other, Huyssen writes tellingly that artists "drew their energies, not unlike Poe's *Man of the Crowd*, from their proximity to the crises brought about by modernization and progress. Modernization—such was the widely held belief, even when the word was not around—had to be traversed."¹⁵ As one of the most salient manifestations of modernization, the night city in particular had to be traversed. Gaslit or electrified, it would be crossed and confronted, literally, metaphorically, ceaselessly—just as in Poe's story, which I discuss at length in chapter 1. The experience was transformative, not only for individuals, but for the arts and society at large.

In speaking of the nocturne's contribution to modernism, I want to emphasize the variety and complexity of that response. Though he allies modernism and the avant-garde as radical cultural responses to modernity, Huyssen distinguishes between what he sees as modernism's political quietism and the avant-garde's social engagement: "contrary to the avantgarde's intention to merge art and life, modernism always remained bound up with the more traditional notion of the autonomous art work."¹⁶ While these categories have had a useful history in helping us to define the art of the past century, the nocturne does not fall simply into one camp or another. Images

of the artificially lit urban night inevitably represent a space of intersection between art and nature, technology and society. Whether viewed as autonomous, escapist, or activist, they engage in an effort that simultaneously accommodates and critiques the new night world.

Nor do they present any clear consensus on the value of artificial as opposed to natural light. The painters Whistler and Stella were both interested in artifice and abstraction, and they shared the stereotypical modernist's aversion to mass culture. But Whistler, like most of the New York painters, writers, and photographers who followed his example, gravitated toward dark, quiet, meditative scenes of fog and mist to express his carefully structured vision of the urban landscape, while Stella, although influenced by Whistler, found *his* abstract forms and critique of commercial culture in the pulsating electric signs of Coney Island and Broadway. One could argue that at first, modernists preferred natural darkness to manufactured light, until about 1910, when they had to accept the larger cultural changeover to bright nights. "Let the reign of holy Electric Light finally come," declared the Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in that year.¹⁷ But that scenario would miss the fascination with artificial light found earlier in Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Degas, Theodore Dreiser, Riis, Alvin Langdon Coburn, and Childe Hassam, and the deep ambivalence felt later by O'Keeffe, Hopper, Williams, Bishop, and Ellison. What makes the art of the night significant in the history of modernity and modernist expression is not any one political program, or any particular stance toward streetlights, but rather a sustained attention to the problem of how to represent an unprecedented reality and the complex of ideas, issues, forces, and sensations that came along with it.

In a now-classic study of modernity, Marshall Berman took his cue from Karl Marx's analysis that capitalism's "constant revolutionizing" of social, economic, and physical life brings about a perpetually unsettled and agitated condition in which "all that is solid melts into air." Examining the cultural impact of this dynamic, turbulent, urbanized landscape, Berman found that "the great modernists . . . attack this environment passionately, and strive to tear it down or explode it from within; yet all find themselves remarkably at home in it, alive to its possibilities, affirmative even in their radical negotiations, playful and ironic even in their moments of gravest seriousness and depth."¹⁸ This seems especially true of how they treated the artificially lit night; it is a fertile, frightening, and exciting milieu in which they thrive. Moreover, if at first the art that modernists produced offered a series of defensive responses to modern life, soon it took a more active role. It became enmeshed in the production and consumption of that life, showing people how to live with, critique, and even alter their ever-altering reality. Since the mid-nineteenth century, nocturnal art has been teaching people how to inhabit the new night world, even as it asks them to reconsider the relation between the human, the urban, and the dark.

To anchor what might seem sweeping generalizations, I have chosen to concentrate on how the image of the nighttime city has evolved around five recurrent themes.¹⁹ Each theme comes to the fore in a particular period: the city seen as a morally perilous gaslit Babylon, circa 1840–1870; the power of nightfall to transform daytime ugliness into magical beauty, circa 1870–1910, during the heyday of the nocturne; the notion of the night as a colonizable territory and later an empire of light, from about 1890 to 1920; the vision of the skyscraper city as a fantasyland of desire, from 1910 to 1940; and the lit-up streets and interiors of the city viewed as a stage of desire and self-definition, voyeurism and violence, in the 1940s and 1950s. My epilogue suggests how these themes have continued to shape much of what we see and read about nighttime New York since 1960, even as undreamt of intensities of lighting have pushed urban imagery into uncharted territory. *New York Nocturne* thus offers a cluster of interrelated arguments about how gas and electric light changed the nocturnal city, and how the artistic imagination responded by wrapping the night in simple but flexible metaphors through which the new reality could be apprehended.

SEEING IN A NEW LIGHT

As a result of the invention of gas lighting our life has gained in speed, as it did with the discovery of steam. Since the invention of gas light our evening life has experienced an indescribable intensification, our pulse has accelerated, nervous excitement has been heightened; we have had to change our appearance, our behaviour and our customs, because they had to be accommodated to a different light.

—ROBERT SPRINGER, *Berlin Becomes a Metropolis*²⁰

Like a city, night has a history. The two come together explosively with the spread of artificial light.²¹ At night, lights attract, reassure, sustain. The intensity of our response to *city* lights in particular may be due to the way in which humanity's collective action against the night has been able to lift spirits and make things happen. For since ancient times, night has been the most persistent obstacle facing people who wished to extend dominion over their surroundings. Until the nineteenth century, outdoor labor ceased at sundown and travel became hazardous; even indoor occupations were hampered by the erratic flame of candles and fires. Manufacturing processes central to the development of an industrialized society, such as smelting and casting, could not run efficiently because of the time it took for furnaces to be refired each morning. A familiar biblical adage summed up the prevailing condition: "The night cometh, when no man can work" (John 9:4).

Or play. Hence the demand for artificial, practical forms of outdoor lighting was largely the product of urban societies. Torch-bearing slaves lit

the way for prosperous Athenians and Romans returning home from banquets. The modern notion of public street lighting as providing fixed and reliable illumination for all passersby dates back to the late Middle Ages, when Paris and London required citizens to hang oil lamps in front of their houses. By that time the growth of capitalism, trade, and towns had led to the first twenty-four-hour clocks and generated the need for a form of lighting more powerful than candles—one that could expand production hours for larger markets and facilitate travel among them. The demand grew in courts and towns until it matured in the eighteenth century. Interestingly, it was not a concern for trade or safety that first opened the way for sustained nocturnal activity, though these factors soon came to the fore. Rather, the lust for light was driven by the self-conscious urbanity of the Baroque and Georgian social elites, who used the night as an exclusive space where the privileged could amuse themselves with conspicuously expensive displays of refined artifice. The high cost of candles alone meant that only the rich could afford to illumine, never mind provide, the musical evenings, soirées, and balls that marked the social season.

The commercial culture of night took shape for the first time on a large scale in London in the 1730s and 1740s, with regular public entertainments at the pleasure grounds of Vauxhall Gardens and Ranelagh. From its origins, commercial nightlife not only functioned as a class marker, separating those who could afford to spend at night and sleep during the day from those who had to work; it also proclaimed a difference between province and metropolis, between those who followed agricultural rhythms of life and those who could ignore them.²² Decked out with thousands of lamps, first oil and later gas, made beautiful and exhilarating by the flicker of candles and the bursts of fireworks, Vauxhall and Ranelagh were ancestors of the modern amusement park. They worked profitable wonders with what in the daytime were flimsy wooden structures and a few acres of ordinary hedges and trees. Contemporary prints present Vauxhall as a fashionable wonderland.

Soon the working classes too found reason to be abroad at night. Cheap entertainment increased; expanded working hours led to more nighttime jobs. The profitability of new industrial processes, particularly at foundries and forges, was becoming ever-more dependent on shift work and round-the-clock operation. By the end of the eighteenth century there was a great demand for efficient urban and indoor illumination, although in practical terms little had changed from the earliest oil lamps.²³ No Columbus arrived to open the nocturnal New World until the industrial engineer William Murdoch discovered in 1792 how to light his home and workshop by means of igniting the gas given off by burning coal. The first gas lighting was introduced in English factories around 1802, and on January 28, 1807, the first centralized urban gas street-lighting system cast its glow over Pall Mall in London's West End. The technology spread so rapidly that by 1813, many

streets of England's larger towns were gaslit, and by the 1820s gas lighting had become a standard feature of cities throughout England and the United States. In 1823, London boasted forty thousand public gaslights along 215 miles of streets. By 1842, the late hours of commerce had spawned an Early Closing Movement that while acknowledging the picturesqueness of gaslights, futilely argued that the "health [of shoppers and workers] is more important than chiaroscuro."²⁴ In factories, hospitals, railway stations, markets, printing houses, and telegraph offices, and in the web of hostelrys and services spun around them, the twenty-four-hour work-and-play day was being born. In New York, "Newspaper Row" opposite City Hall occupied the center of the city's night work by 1850. In 1853, the *Sun* self-promotingly lit its building to shine like its namesake, but in fact the aim of putting out early morning papers meant that the entire journalistic industry helped lead the way in illuminating the U.S. workplace.

With the arrival of continuous nocturnal activity and the gradual acceptance of the premise that "a great city never sleeps" (as the French poet Gérard de Nerval pointed out in 1852), came the need to learn how to live in the night in a new way.²⁵ As Robert Springer remarked, "We have had to change our appearance, our behaviour and our customs." The transition took some getting used to. For instance, in 1826, Richard Dighton's pair of comic etchings portrayed the oil-to-gas changeover as a shift in how the public suffered: *One of the Advantages of Oil over Gas* depicts a negligent lamp-filler spilling oil all over a passing dandy, while *One of the Advantages of Gas over Oil* shows a woman and child knocked flat in the street when a faulty gaslight causes the shop front of druggist "I. Killen" to explode.²⁶

But once these sometimes-deadly inconveniences had been accepted, the development of ever-larger areas for nighttime use—particularly for manufacture, shopping, and recreation—rapidly followed. Fatalities from gas—due to asphyxiation, explosions, heat exhaustion, and overexposure to fumes—became, like automobile deaths nowadays, regarded as deplorable but unavoidable, a necessary sacrifice.²⁷ While still a zone of relaxation, romance, or risk, night now extended its associations in the direction of the mundane. Activities and sensations that once had been chiefly or even strictly tied to the daylight hours gained a nocturnal tinge: buying, selling, manufacturing, transporting, entertaining and being entertained. As the urbanization of Europe and North America progressed, intensive, extensive nighttime activity became the hallmark of big cities—their splashiest trait.

The public justification of gas lighting initially centered around its ability to protect travelers and prevent crimes against property. Because a dark street signified moral turpitude as well as physical danger, law enforcers, businesses, and respectable citizens urged that streetlamps be used to vanquish harlots and criminals who, theoretically, shunned the light.²⁸ "A light is as good as a policeman," went the popular refrain.²⁹ Similarly, the popular



FIGURE I.2. Unknown artist, *A Saturday Night Scene in the Bowery, New York*. In *Harper's Weekly*, May 20, 1871. Museum of the City of New York Print Archive

dictum that “trade follows light,” originally had less to do with advertising than the need to reassure wealthy patrons of their safety.³⁰ But as the different social classes learned to live in the urban night together, the accelerating commodification of nocturnal leisure rapidly ensured that a wide public could indulge in a variety of activities, from shopping and the theater to dining and dancing. And if gaslight meant safety for the upper and middle classes, then its reassuring glow could be exploited commercially at all levels of society. An engraving titled *A Saturday Night Scene in the Bowery*, from *Harper's Weekly* in 1871, depicts crowds surging around market stalls and pushcarts under the city's gaslights, supplemented by the smokier oil lamps of individual vendors.

One key to the urban night's appeal was artificial light's apparent ability to transform whatever it touched. In *Sketches by Boz* (1836), Dickens gave an account of his daytime visit to Vauxhall:

We paid our shilling at the gate, and then we saw for the first time, that the entrance, if there had been any magic about it at all, was now decidedly disenchanted, being, in fact, nothing more nor less than a combination of very roughly-painted boards and sawdust. . . . We bent our steps to the firework-ground; there, at least, we should not be disappointed. We reached it, and stood rooted to the spot with mortification and

astonishment. THAT the Moorish tower—that wooden shed with a door in the centre, and daubs of crimson and yellow all round, like a gigantic watch-case! THAT the place where night after night we had beheld the undaunted Mr. Blackmore make his terrific ascent, surrounded by flames of fire. . . .³¹

As Dickens found, if the night enchanted, the day disillusioned.

But every evening, for those who had time and money to spare, the lights cast their spell, turning the workaday city of dirt and disorder into a wonderland fraught with promise and mystery. “When the evening mist clothes the river-side with poetry,” as Whistler put it, “the poor buildings lose themselves in the dim sky . . . the warehouses are palaces in the night, and the whole city hangs in the heavens, and fairy-land is before us. . . .”³² Those who could and those who dared set off to explore what amounted to a second city—with its own geography and its own set of citizens—that lay concealed behind the familiar daytime one. Urban adventurers and armchair explorers were helped in their journeys by the writers and artists who scouted the terrain and brought back images of what might be found there. Yet those who grappled with the problem of representing this alien landscape had to discover new artistic means to convey it. Artificial light was altering perception of the night city at the very moment that it brought it into view.

DARK ARTS AND THE URBAN SUBLIME

Because what went on in nocturnal New York was in some ways an echo or amplification of developments in London and Paris, New York’s unique drive toward nighttime supremacy needs to be set in the context of its European cousins. In the process of adapting to the gaslit world, artists and writers such as Joseph Mallord William Turner and Degas, Dickens and Baudelaire, transformed earlier conventions, even as they shaped new categories and habits of seeing. In a movement that transcended genres, the fascination with the gaslit city permeated not only journalism and ephemeral forms of notation—the engraving, the sketch, the vignette—but also more respected arts—lyric poetry, the novel, the urban landscape painting. Americans applied and altered European models, discovering in their own country subject matter that would help build the mythology of nocturnal New York. A brief look at the history of nocturnal art gives insight into some of the sources of their vision.

Before gas lighting, little could be seen in the night without the help of the fickle moon. Artificial means—torches, fires, candles, and oil lamps—were inefficient and expensive. The nature of the problem facing artists who wanted to record nocturnal subjects was caught in 1771 by a comic engraving. In *A Connoisseur Admiring a Dark Night Piece*, a frowning gentleman

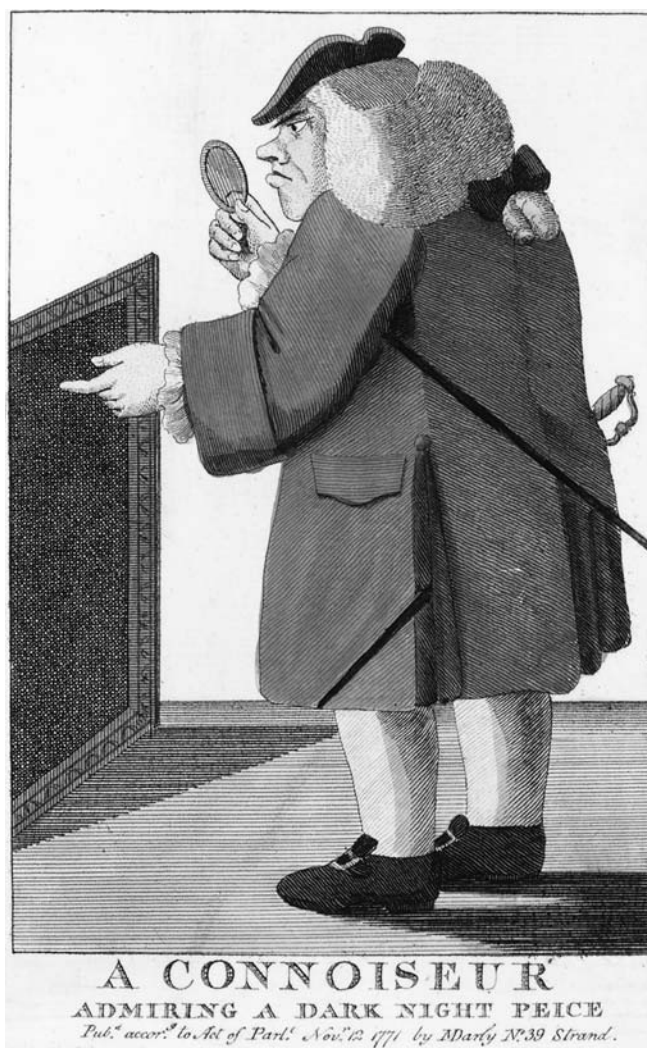


FIGURE I.3.
 Henry Bunbury, *A Connoisseur Admiring a Dark Night Piece*, 1771. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Virginia

uses a lens to peer at a pitch-black canvas. In Western painting, the earliest night scenes depended on divine illumination: the star that guided the Magi, the angels appearing to shepherds, the radiance of the Christ child at the nativity. Whether the artist was Giotto or Monaco, Altdorfer or Tintoretto, supernatural light prevailed. The shift toward less miraculous forms of lighting was signaled by Caravaggio's dramatic *The Taking of Christ* (1602), where a lantern held by a figure resembling the painter himself illumines the face of Jesus. Of all pre-nineteenth-century artists, probably only Rembrandt, in an etching such as *Flight into Egypt* (c. 1634), gave any idea of how feeble actual lantern light was—thanks as much to the black inks of the etching process as to Rembrandt's love of chiaroscuro.³³

As secular subjects gained in importance and the concept of landscape in its own right began to develop, artists placed greater emphasis on natural



FIGURE I.4. Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), *Landscape by Moonlight*, c. 1637–1640. Schelte Adams Bolswert (1581–1659), printmaker. Engraving, $12\frac{1}{2} \times 17\frac{1}{2}$ in. (32×44.5 cm) (plate mark). The Samuel Courtauld Trust, Courtauld Institute of Art, London

sources of lighting and the integration of human figures into the landscape. Like the travelers, fishers, or hunters they depicted, Peter Paul Rubens, Claude-Joseph Vernet, Joseph Wright of Derby, and Turner needed bright moonlight to show the way. The main lines of the secular approach to night scenes emerge in Rubens's painting *Landscape by Moonlight* (c. 1637–1640), and are clearer still in the etched version. Rubens lit the scene with moonlight, starlight, and what was to become the almost inevitable complement to the full moon: a body of reflective water in the foreground.³⁴ The near universality of the moonlight-on-the-water motif can be explained in practical terms: one can barely see colors or detail in even the brightest moonlight, but a full, reflected moon provides the utmost in illumination and verisimilitude. The double light source (often augmented by a third: a fire on shore) also increases the visual interest of the picture.³⁵

Writers, meanwhile, readily found urban material, but they were apt to stress the consequences of the inability to see: Jonathan Swift and Samuel Johnson, like the Roman poet Juvenal before them, blamed the night for street crime; in William Shakespeare, Miguel de Cervantes, and Henry Fielding darkness leads to cases of mistaken identity; and night owls comically lose their way in works by John Gay and Oliver Goldsmith, as in their Latin predecessors. Gay devoted an entire section of his *Trivia; or, The Art of Walking the Streets of London* (1716) to "Walking the Streets by Night." He



FIGURE I.5.
Joseph Wright
(1734–1797), *An Iron
Forge Viewed from
Without*, 1773. Oil
on canvas, 41 × 55 in.
(105 × 140 cm).
The State Hermitage
Museum, Saint
Petersburg

advises against employing the torchbearers or “linkmen” that hung around taverns and theaters, waiting for hire:

Though thou art tempted by the Linkman’s call
Yet trust him not along the lonely wall,
In midway he’ll quench the flaming brand,
And share the booty with the pilf’ring band.
(III, lines 139–42)

In “London” (1738), Johnson was even more explicit in his warning: “Prepare for Death, if here at Night you roam, / And sign your Will before you sup from Home.”

Since night in rural areas remained untouched by gaslight and electricity, little changed in its visual aspect until well into the twentieth century. Thus artistic representations of moonlit ponds and haystacks, rivers, fields, and villages, served as a nostalgia-laden constant against which to measure the drastic alteration of urban nightlife. But even in the country, and especially in the English Midlands, the Industrial Revolution made itself felt. Wright’s *An Iron Forge Viewed from Without* (1773) contrasts the forge’s ruddy glow—which dominates the painting and pierces the holes in its decaying farm shed—with the faint silvery light of the moon reflected on the clouds outside. Not only does the painting comment on the shifting relation between natural and human lighting, it also enshrines the industrial process in the rustic place of the nativity, a dilapidated stable.

As blazing industry and flaring artificial light changed the face of the night, hellish fire became a frequent, rather than exceptional feature of nocturnal

art. In factory towns and thriving cities, artists embraced the opportunity to record an unsleeping world made bright with foundry fire or Babylonian festivity. P. J. de Loutherberg's *Coalbrookdale by Night* (1801) depicts factory blast furnaces flaring in a devastated landscape, the natural illumination of moonlight and stars marginalized by manufactured hellfire. Of course, celebrations with bonfires and fireworks had been recorded from the Renaissance on, as were great conflagrations. Pierre Antoine DeMachy, a leading figure in French urban night painting, recorded both fireworks and fires in his *The Foire St. Germain on Fire* (1763) and *Fireworks on the Place Louis XV* (1782). In London, even before the commercial pleasure gardens were opened, crowds delighted to see displays of fireworks on the Thames and at Whitehall, such as those for which George Frideric Handel composed the famous "Music for the Royal Fireworks" in 1749.

With the advent of gaslight, the flaming pandemonium of earlier eras was translated into a set of new conventions fraught with moral overtones. Painters and poets now used nocturnal settings to portray the industrial city as an inferno, an apocalyptic site of sin, judgment, and retribution. Edmund Burke had anticipated this development in his *Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) when he observed that "night [is] more sublime and solemn than day."³⁶ Burke defined the sublime as "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger," and he regarded awe-inspiring sights, such as violent thunderstorms or dizzying abysses, as "productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling."³⁷ For Burke, the size and might of natural forces accentuated the feebleness of human endeavor. One might therefore think that the sublime was about nature, God, and light, not darkness and the Devil in cities.

But interest in the sublime, perhaps the furthest-reaching aesthetic concept of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, arose just as technology, industry, and urban growth threatened to rival the Almighty sources of sublime power. One could say of Burke what William Blake said of John Milton: that he was "of the Devils party without knowing it."³⁸ For in fact, Burke's own ideas were heavily influenced by hellish scenes in *Paradise Lost*, particularly the passages in which Milton described Satan's headquarters, the infernal city of Pandemonium:

A Dungeon horrible, on all sides round
As one great Furnace flam'd, yet from those flames
No light, but rather darkness visible
Serv'd only to discover sights of woe . . .
(I:59–62)

The "darkness visible" of the fallen, fiery city, echoing the biblical fall of Babylon, is the prototype for the "infernal sublime" of the industrial

era. In linking the sublime to the nocturnal landscape, and then connecting the fearful darkness to Milton's urbanized hell, Burke formulated a durable moral and aesthetic strategy for dealing with the city after dark. Whether drawing or being drawn into the inferno, the artist and writer could adopt a divine standpoint that implied the righteousness of the fiery spectacle that so fascinated them. Turner capped the whole genre with his incendiary, apocalyptic scene, *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons, October 16, 1834* (1834–1835) (color plate 2). The Parliament buildings burn so fiercely in the night that it is as if the very fabric of the British government has caught fire. The watching crowds appear to flow over Westminster Bridge to be pitched into the inferno. Even the reflecting water of the Thames seems to take flame, outshining a solitary gas lamp in the foreground.

One hundred and fifty years later, Richard Haas's *Burning Pier, World Trade Center* (1985) adapted Turner's painting and the city fire tradition to the vertical geography of Lower Manhattan. Positioned on an overgrown Jersey Shore, the viewer faces a blazing pier that cuts across the lower half of the picture, while in the background the twin towers of the World Trade Center preside impassively over the scene. The natural world verges on reclaiming the urban one; ominously, the modern towers of Babel and Babylon are just touched by flame (color plate 3).

Burke anticipated two further twists on the sublime that later loomed large in images of New York at night. First came the "mathematical" urban sublime of nineteenth-century artists and writers who stressed the endlessly repeated and standardized features of warehouses and avenues, built-up vistas leading forever toward a perspectival vanishing point. Given a new vertical dimension by skyscrapers, this approach seemed custom-made for New York's apparently limitless expanse of sparkling lights. From here it was a short step to the twentieth century's "technological" sublime (dating, in New York, to the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883), wherein awe at the mightiness of human construction replaces religious wonder at the divinely driven power of the natural world.³⁹ Here, too, nocturnal New York proved both inspiration and example, projecting an all-encompassing script of light that stunned observers with its unnatural brilliance and cryptic, seemingly cosmic significance. Yet as the mesmerizing urban light storms painted by Stella, Mark Tobey, and others show, the Burkean sublime and its descendants not only profited from the moral confusion sown by artificial light, they promoted it. The sheer visual attractiveness of the urban sublime eventually overcame its spiritual horror.

With the gas lighting of London, urban reality caught up with imagined sublimity. Artists and citizens confronted an artificially illuminated city for the first time in history. With its unbroken chains of lights and seeming infinity of murky byways, London offered the eye what Burke called



FIGURE I.6. John Martin (1789–1854), *Pandemonium* (from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*), 1841. Oil on canvas, 48½ × 74 in. (123 × 184 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photographer: Gérard Blot. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux /Art Resource, New York

a “managed darkness” of Miltonic effects.⁴⁰ The night view of London was sublime as Milton’s hell was sublime: unimaginably vast and luridly, frighteningly attractive, a battleground for the cosmic struggle of good and evil. Indeed, given that Milton’s Satan and his fallen angels dwell amid “a fiery Deluge, fed / With ever-burning Sulphur unconsum’d” (*Paradise Lost*, I:68–69), hellfire and gaslight appeared roughly equivalent, since the “candlewick” in gas lamps at first amazed people because it burned all night without being consumed. The painter of cataclysmic canvases John Martin conflated these two sources of “darkness visible” in his giant depiction of Satan’s capital, *Pandemonium* (1841). The apparently endless terrace that runs the width of the picture in front of Satan’s palace is lit by a row of lamps that unmistakably resemble the London gas lamps that burned on dissolute Pall Mall, near the notorious “hells” or gambling dens of the West End. Martin represented Milton’s infernal city to Burkean measure, with buildings of vast proportions dwarfing the poor devils writhing below. Anticipating the dazzling, Dantesque blaze of Stella’s *Battle of Lights at Coney Island* and *New York Interpreted*, the infernal urban sublime produced a universe in which hell comes to look a lot like London—and London a lot like hell.

What New Yorkers learned from London reinforced the Protestant, Anglocentric American sense that gas lighting magnified dark deeds and sexual

misconduct. Gaslight was at once an id and a superego, luring people into the very sins that it exposed. In night's pleasure garden, paradise was repeatedly promised and lost. In London, the powers of darkness seemed almost to increase in proportion to the spread of gas lighting. Stormy nights, sputtering lamps, deep shadows, dense fog that the streetlights render even more opaque—these are the recurrent images of the Imperial City. From the harlot-ridden “midnight streets” of Blake’s “London” to James Thomson’s *The City of Dreadful Night* and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, nighttime in London signifies temptation, transgression, and sin. Occasionally, as in the murders committed by Jack the Ripper in 1888, it even seemed to some as if divine retribution had fittingly taken the form of nocturnal sexual violence. In this regard, London gave warning that earlier, biblically inflected perils of the night would not readily yield to the new technologies; the Devil seemed to dance in gaslight.

London’s otherworldly drama was complemented in Paris by a more secular effort to capture the novel look of streets and people bathed in artificial light. The natural order, it seemed, had been overthrown and the rhythm of nature now mattered less than the dictates of human will. “Gaslight has replaced the sun!” the Parisian journalist Jules Janin wrote in 1839.⁴¹ If light had once represented the monarchy—to the point where supporters of the Old Regime were hung from lampposts during the French Revolution—by the mid-nineteenth century the populace frolicked in a brightness that had unofficially become part of the Rights of Man. The Place de la Concorde was lit by one of the first electric arc lights in 1844. By the 1870s and 1880s, when powerful electric arc lights were introduced in central areas, Parisians not only felt themselves drenched with light, they were eager to have more. In Vincent van Gogh’s *The Outskirts of Paris* (1886), a solitary gas lamp shoots up amid muddy open fields north of the city, an incongruous outpost of the approaching nightlife that its presence implies.

The disparate social, political, and commercial uses of gas lighting fell into place in the 1860s with the rebuilding of Paris under Napoleon III and Baron Haussmann. Haussmann’s plan destroyed many of the darkest, oldest quarters of the city and their narrow twisting streets, and replaced them with wide, brightly lit boulevards lined with glittering shops and cafés. Visitors coming to the city for the Exhibitions of 1867 and 1878 found Paris joyfully dazzling at night. “There certainly is no other . . . European city,” wrote Italian traveler Edmondo de Amicis in 1878, “where beauty, light, art, and nature aid each other so marvelously by forming a spectacle which entrances the imagination.”⁴² The electric lightbulb made its European debut in 1881 in Paris at a fair devoted entirely to electricity.⁴³ In 1885, a plan to create a “Sun Tower” that would arc light all of Paris from a single source became a serious rival to the Eiffel Tower as the centerpiece of the 1889 Exposition.⁴⁴ By the time of the Universal Exposition of 1900, the illumination

was spectacular enough to encourage night photographs, some taken by the novelist Émile Zola. Ingenious lithographers stuck bits of mica and tinfoil to their images of the Expo, in an attempt to imitate its unprecedented glitter.⁴⁵ Whereas earlier depictions of towns and cities had offered moonlit reveries of silent streets, portraits of the artificially lit city now shone with the glare of shops, signs, cafés, and boulevards, treating all the hubbub as a “natural” feature of the sublunar landscape.

While the Parisian regard for sheer splendor paralleled the New Yorkers’ pride in their own city’s size and showiness, it was the rapid pace of change that formed a deeper link. Both cities reveled in the disorienting spectacle of their own modernity. In Paris, the shock of enormous physical alterations in the landscape made the accompanying psychological convulsion of gaslight so much more apparent. It was soon evident that nights in the old city had provided privacy, mystery, and solace. In his prose poem “Le Crépuscule du soir” (1864), Baudelaire speaks of “refreshing darkness” carrying a reprieve from death for those caught “in the stony labyrinths of a capital.”⁴⁶ But the brilliantly lit boulevards and arcades had metamorphosed the city into one gigantic entertainment. Wearied by the long perspectives of shop windows and mirrored cafés seemingly engaged in mutual self-reflection, the brothers Edmond de and Jules de Goncourt complained that the new boulevards had replaced the world of Balzac with “quelque Babylone américaine de l’avenir”—with “a futuristic American Babylon.”⁴⁷ As Paris became the brightest star of the gaslit era, Baudelaire, Nerval, Guy de Maupassant, Georges Seurat, and many others felt that their city was being transformed into a spiritually vapid, relentlessly social space, dedicated to display and amusement, that threatened both privacy and imaginative autonomy.⁴⁸ The artists Édouard Manet, Auguste Renoir, Gustav Caillebotte, Berthe Morisot, and Mary Cassatt kept their distance from the urban landscape after dark. Claude Monet, who never painted a nocturnal Paris scene, wrote from the country, “How can one live in Paris? It’s a hell. I prefer my flowers and this hill encircled by the Seine to all your noise and all your nocturnal lights.” It was as if, a tourist wrote, “the great city had banished sleep for ever, and were condemned by God to the torture of an everlasting festival.”⁴⁹

An upstart aesthetics that found beauty in the gaslit Champs-Élysées also questioned conventional norms of behavior by scrutinizing prostitution and café life, and casting a seductive glow around dance halls and amusement parks. In *Café Concert aux Ambassadeurs* (1877), for instance, Degas managed to capture the sensory intensity of a Parisian night in the heat of the summer. He crams four female performers onto a slice of outdoor, gaslit stage, in addition to placing the heads of an audience in the foreground, and moonlight and fireworks in the background. The whole effect is augmented and fractured by the large mirrors behind the lead singer, the famous Émélie Bécot.



FIGURE I.7.
Edgar Degas
(1834–1917),
*Café Concert aux
Ambassadeurs*, 1877.
Pastel on monotype on
paper, $14\frac{1}{2} \times 10$ in.
(37×26 cm). Musée
des Beaux-Arts de
Lyon. Photo: Erich
Lessing/Art Resource,
New York

With its garish gaslit colors and disorienting structure, the painting creates an alluringly dynamic, somewhat vertiginous effect. Camille Pissarro's painting *Paris, the Boulevard Montmartre at Night* (c. 1897) conveys the city's compulsive gaiety, the wide-open eye of the streetlight in the foreground standing guard over the insomnia of the city (color plate 4). With puritan underpinnings, this sleepless bacchanal was where New York was heading as the electric age dawned. What New York would eventually be to electricity, Paris was to gaslight: its kingdom and playground.⁵⁰

A new art of night and the city emerged. Throughout the nineteenth century, urbanites everywhere were gradually forced to rethink the age-old perception of night: what had been once a time of indoor relaxation now became an outdoor space for social display and visual spectacle that seemed

to demand everyone's participation. The arrival of artificial light had, almost paradoxically, "invented" natural light, for no such conceptual category existed before the new technologies posed alternative forms of illumination.⁵¹ In New York, as in London and Paris, the scale and power of the transformation demanded immediate attention, as people alternately embraced and abhorred its effects. Soon the contrast between gas jets and the moon and stars became standard visual symbols of an ongoing struggle cast in moral terms, God and nature allied against humanity and artifice. But the choice was not necessarily clear: the churchgoing middle class might support the spread of gaslight for economic reasons, while freethinking artists might well value darkness for aesthetic purposes.

With evidence of night's vulnerability flickering before them, many nineteenth-century artists and writers felt compelled to dispute the light-loving absolutism of the preceding era. The simple difficulty of seeing in the dark provided an opportunity for recorders of the night world to blur or obscure the boundaries between objects, classes, and socially acceptable styles of representation or behavior. Night scenes ask us to reconsider noonday certainties from the murkier ground of midnight, to entertain the sense of psychological liberation that comes from probing conventions outside their familiar context. American nocturnal connoisseurs such as Poe, Whitman, Whistler, and Stieglitz challenged ingrained symbolic values by suggesting that one might discover more evil, ignorance, alienation, and ugliness in the light of day than in the subtle, poetic darkness that followed. Stressing the limitations of the quotidian, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Dreams acquaint us with what the day omits."⁵²

Their nocturnes not only portrayed original material but also suggested new ways of artistically responding to it. The process of perceptual education they undertook was inseparable from social acculturation, as their strategies of representation encouraged freer responses to simply being abroad at night. To take just one example: in London and Paris, gas lamps were linked with prostitution; in Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen's 1894 lithograph, *A Prostitute's Prayer*, a young woman kneels in front of streetlights rather than altar candles. But Americans, like the Futurists, put technology itself, the new religion, in the foreground. In New York in the same year, the impressionist painter Hassam used the light-reflecting qualities of swirling snow to paint halos around a row of gaslights as they trail off into the distance in *Winter Midnight* (1894) (color plate 5). By the 1900s, it would become commonplace to observe that the moon and stars had been eclipsed by streetlights, and a Futurist artist like Giacomo Balla could explore this idea literally. In *Street Light* (1909), Balla carries Hassam's scene to its extreme: he devotes his entire canvas to one sizzling electric globe. In the upper corner he buries the now-secondary, feeble moon beneath a shower of jittering electric rays. A sublime new divinity had arrived.

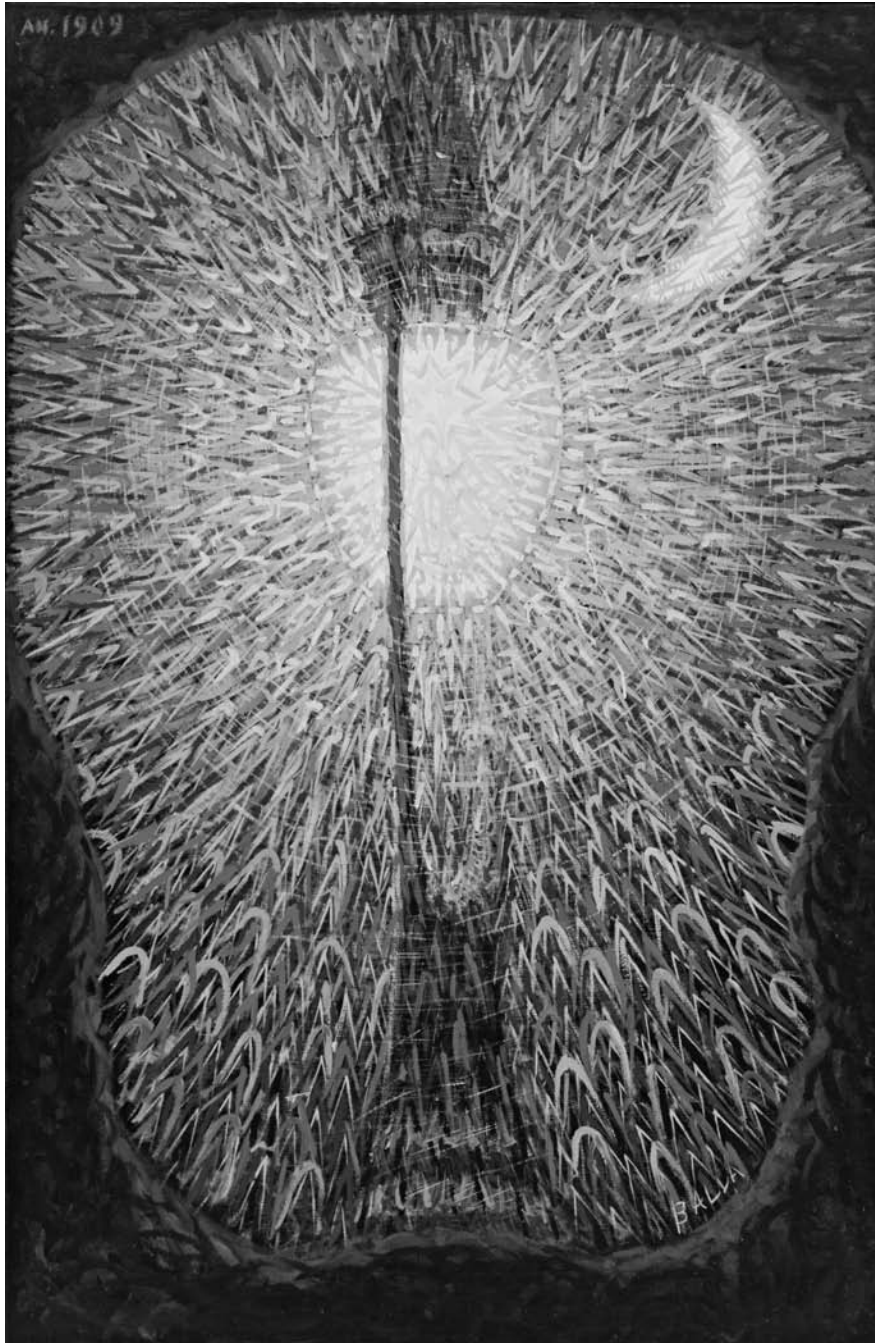


FIGURE I.8. Giacomo Balla (1871–1958), *Street Light (Lampada-Studio di luce)*, dated by the artist 1909. Oil on canvas, 68 $\frac{3}{4}$ \times 45 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (174.6 \times 115 cm). Hilman Periodicals Fund [7.1954]. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome

GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH THE NIGHT

Someone frames upon the keys
That exquisite nocturne, with which we explain
The night and moonshine.

—T. S. ELIOT, *Conversation Galante*

What is a nocturne? In the wake of Field, Frédéric Chopin, and Whistler, the word has most often been used by musicians, writers, and visual artists to designate what dictionaries call “a dreamy pensive composition.”⁵³ In its stricter sense it refers to the expression of romantic and lyric emotions evoked by nighttime, in contrast to the boisterous strife of the daytime. Its mood is more intimate and personal, more reflective than that of an ordinary scene. The urban nocturne, with its meditative quality, is almost a contradiction in terms. Its very repose implies the uproar and excitement of city nightlife lurking just around the corner. The nocturne invokes daytime hubbub and nighttime clamor in order to repress it.

For example, what makes the title of Alice Neel’s painting *Harlem Nocturne* (1952) so appropriate is the mood that she establishes with the mysterious aura of light cast over her scene. While the title itself may be borrowed from Earle Hagen’s sultry rhythm-and-blues standard of the 1940s (“a nocturne for the blues played on a broken heartstring,” according to the lyrics by Dick Rogers), Neel gives her attention to a silent landscape, not pained people. Is it moonlight or city lights downtown that hovers over her stark winter tree and blunt yet inviting tenements, where every window is lit? In keeping with the nocturne genre, Neel plays on the tension between the still winter street and the implied offstage commotion signaled by the warm apartment lights. The bare tree separated by a chain-link fence from the crude geometry of minimalist housing has since become a clichéd image of poverty; it summarizes the urban brutalization of natural and human worlds. But Neel, who lived in Spanish Harlem during the 1950s, uses the crescent moon and the compelling glow in the sky—Is it shaped like a body? Is it the white world trying to engulf the homey tenement?—to draw her viewer into a silent reverie. Tenement, tree, and light all seem to take on lives of their own, luminous, substantial, humbly eloquent.

And it is this potent interplay of shadows and light that the more general meaning of the word carries: a nocturne can also be any representation of “what is proper to the night, what takes place in the night.” As a particular kind of nocturne—the urban landscape lit by artificial light—the quiet contemplative city scenes of the modern era represent a historically unprecedented type of art that faces special formal challenges, as moonlight and darkness confront the glare of gas and electricity. For depictions of more public events, the venerable term “night-piece,” dating to the time of

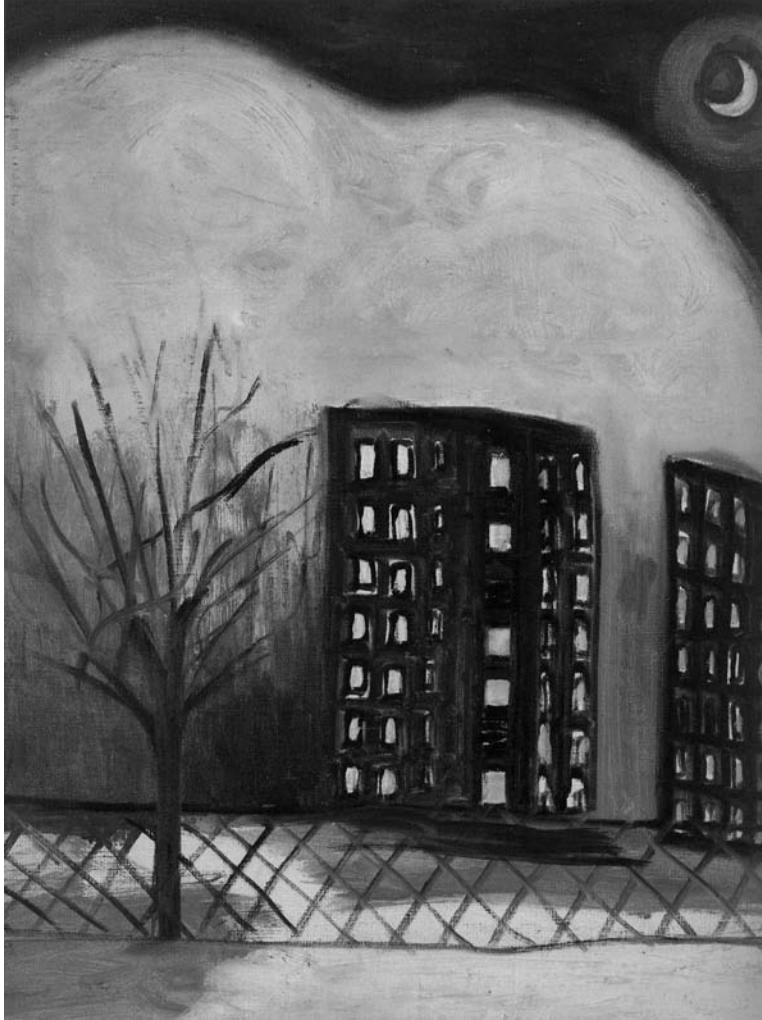


FIGURE I.9.
Alice Neel
(1900–1984), *Harlem
Nocturne*, 1952. Oil
on canvas, 24 × 21 in.
(61 × 53.3 cm). Private
collection. © Estate of
Alice Neel

Shakespeare, can still be used.⁵⁴ It includes animated images of fires, celebrations, riots, nights on the town, and the social interaction between lights, people, buildings, and streets.

Thus all nocturnes are night pieces, although not all night pieces are nocturnes. Inevitably, public and private experiences of the night shade into each other; even the most dreamy nocturne hints at the brassy world it renounces, while even the brightest lights may become mirrors to the secret desires of anonymous crowds or hidden observers. The name “nocturne” covers a spectrum of responses to night, registering the dynamic relation between light and darkness, action and reflection.

We can better understand the issues involved in the nocturnal discovery of self and city by taking a look at Robert Frost’s poem “Acquainted with the Night” (1926) in company with Coburn’s striking photograph, *The Coal*



Cart (1911). Like many of Frost's poems, "Acquainted with the Night" skirts the topic that it promises to scrutinize. Description is minimal; rhapsodies or laments about lights and loneliness are absent. But what Frost does capture is the modern necessity of encountering the urban night, pursuing truths about the human condition in an altered world. The poem is a perfect nocturne in the sense that it delivers an emotion "proper to the night"—not by revealing its source, but by using the imagery of rainy, deserted streets to project the reader into the same profound meditation as the poet:

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-by;
And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.⁵⁵

By the time we are done reading, we know *how* the speaker has become acquainted with the night—through his nocturnal walking, listening, and looking—but little about *what* he has learned from this acquaintance. The phrase "unwilling to explain" characterizes the poem's method.

But there are clues. The poem is written in *terza rima*, the rhyme scheme that Dante used in *The Divine Comedy*. Although references to the city as an inferno abound in literature, here Frost is more concerned with the totality of Dante's structure: the speaker looks down "the saddest city lane" (*Inferno*), he looks up to an "unearthly height" (*Paradiso*), and he walks out past "the furthest city light" (Dante situates the starlit *Purgatorio* at the dark far ends of the earth, the antipodes of Jerusalem). Modern urban geography parallels the spiritual schema: there's life at street level as well as a subterranean

Facing page FIGURE I.10. Alvin Langdon Coburn (1882–1966), *The Coal Cart*, New York, 1911. Gelatin silver print, 8 × 6 in. (20.9 × 15.7 cm). George Eastman House, Rochester, New York. Gift of Alvin Langdon Coburn

region (subways, dives, and basements) and an aerial realm of skyscrapers. Yet the poet provides no Virgil to guide his Dante, and by averting his eyes the speaker refuses to make even a mute confession to a modern stand-in for divine surveillance: the watchman.

Frost provides all these parallels in order to discount them. What we learn about the urban night is that it is as reticent as the poet; there is no moral structure of meaning to its shape, no concern on its part either to claim the poet (“call me back”) or reject him (“say good-by”). There is nothing guiding the poet’s aimless walk, and the moment for decisive action, or even the value of the action, is equally unclear: “neither wrong nor right.” The poem recognizes a fundamental yet unstatable need to be acquainted with the night, even as it also recognizes the night’s indifference. It will never be, in Paul Simon’s words, “darkness my old friend.”

Part of the poem’s power comes from ambiguity about the nature of the unhelpful “luminary clock”—is it a mechanism on a tower, or is it the moon, with its implicitly supernatural creator, that proclaims time without judging it? Frost’s rainy night would likely have obscured the moon, but Coburn’s *The Coal Cart* suggests a fuller, New York–inflected answer. Frost’s night city is delocalized, while Coburn’s is site specific. Taken in Madison Square, the photograph beautifully captures the tripartite vertical structure of the city: the dark cart dumps its infernal fuel down a sidewalk chute into a basement where it will stoke the fires of Mammon, while the aptly named Metropolitan Life Tower (the world’s tallest building when it was erected in 1909) looms symbolically above, its clock face and upper lights fulfilling the celestial role of Dante’s stars. “Metropolitan life,” the photo implies, really is a spiritual drama on a cosmic stage—it transposes the nocturnal drama of the city into a medieval allegory of and for Everyman. Even if money is the new religion, and life insurance buildings overtop church spires, time moves us inexorably into the next world.

Is this the “luminary clock” at an unearthly height? Amy Lowell wrote about the Metropolitan Life tower and clock in “New York at Night” (1912), a poem that Frost would have known:

. . . and luminous
Above, one tower tops the rest
And holds aloft man’s constant quest:
Time! Joyless emblem of the greed
Of millions, robber of the best
Which earth can give, the vulgar creed
Has seared upon the night its flaming ruthless screed.⁵⁶

Republished in the first-ever urban poetry anthology, *The Soul of the City* (1923), just a few years before Frost’s poem appeared, Lowell’s “New York

at Night” assails the “luminous” tower and its self-interested glorification of “Time!” But working against the moral framework of so much urban imagery, Frost transmutes Lowell’s “joyless emblem” and Coburn’s radiant one into an existential mocker of meaning. Time becomes timeless. Like the clock, his poem is circular and repetitive; content, structure, and sound return on themselves; there is no escaping—or deepening—acquaintance with the night.

Yet these are, so to speak, black, white, and gray visions of a city whose vibrant color clamors for recognition. A contemporary work, Charles Demuth’s *I Saw the Figure Five in Gold*, shows us how Burke’s infernal urban sublime had by the 1920s shed its inhibitions to revel in the blazing ambiguity of a city careening between heaven and hell. Emphatically not a nocturne, the canvas nonetheless opposes immediate urban uproar to more distant and peaceful darkness. Three glowing “5s” seem both to rush toward and recede from the viewer, increasing or decreasing in size depending on our focus (color plate 1). In this “get ’em coming and going” scenario, Demuth emulates his source, a short poem called “The Great Figure” (1921) by his friend William Carlos Williams:

Among the rain
and lights
I saw the figure 5
in gold
on a red
firetruck
moving
tense
unheeded
to gong clangs
siren howls
and wheels rumbling
through the dark city.⁵⁷

Williams was originally inspired by the sight of a fire engine moving across his field of vision, down Ninth Avenue at the end of Fifteenth Street. But his poem, with the words “red / firetruck / moving” at the center, seems to bear down directly on the visionary poet, whose words “I saw” echo the opening of Saint John’s vision in the book of Revelation. “Unheeded,” the golden Figure Five becomes a Manhattanized version of Saint John’s apocalyptic warning, both a harbinger of the fire that can destroy earthly Babylon and a forerunner of the golden city of New Jerusalem that could replace it. And as a lethal piece of speeding machinery, it can, “unheeded,” send the viewer straight to heaven or hell. The poem gains in force because Williams

sets his modernist machine revelation against a background of classic nocturnal elements: the rain and darkness from which the clanging, howling vision surges, only to be swallowed up at the end of the poem.

Demuth constructed his painting to be a poster-portrait of Williams and the city, a double homage. Emphasizing the vertical structure of poem and city, he put the poet's name up in lights, turning "Bill," who was becoming a "great figure" in poetry, into a billboard, and he celebrated the city's nocturnal dazzle with the dynamically slanting ray lines of light and dark that rake the scene.⁵⁸ Above all, he used the red and gold fire engine to convey the surging energy roaring through the tantalizing canyons of the night. The interplay of near and far, Babylon and promised land, is encapsulated in the letters on the right-hand side: what from a distance reads "ART Co.," an inside joke between poet and painter about their life's mission, becomes "TART Co." on closer inspection. To succeed, artists and writers must sell themselves. Art and sex, painting, poetry, and prostitution, brazenly advertise their great figures in the night city.

Works like these help us to discover how modern art has been recasting its relation to the night over the past two hundred years. And given the immense part played in Western culture by ideas about darkness, they also help to reveal something less apparent: how the urban night has come to mirror the electrified darkness within. The psyche is a city; as Bishop remarks of New York, if we want to know ourselves, we have to learn how to read "the neon shapes / that float and swell and glare // down the gray avenue between the eyes."⁵⁹

ONE STORY OF THE NIGHT

The inexhaustible variety of New York mocks the very idea of "comprehensive coverage." Hence, this book offers not so much a sweeping history as a multipart story about one century's portrayal of Manhattan nights.⁶⁰ In brief outline, the story goes like this:

Night is a window that opens into the self and on to the world. Dimly or dazzlingly, nocturnal art reveals persistent ideas about the night that, however much they lurked in the background in earlier centuries, came boldly forward in the gas and electric eras. So strongly have these ideas shone that it is now impossible to look through night's window without seeing them in front of us: the city after dark is a snare, a canvas, a foreign land, a fantasy, a stage. As an ensemble these ideas, which shape both artistic content and form, tell us a great deal about the experience of modernity. And although they are intertwined, we can still fruitfully examine them one by one.

Nocturnal New York was at first viewed as a beckoning Babylon, not the promised land, its nightlife considered less glamorous than notorious. Chapter 1, "Gaslit Babylon," tours the temptation-ridden city of New York's

early gaslight period. In the 1840s and 1850s, fascination with the lamp-lit world was tempered by the perceived need to judge it morally. A tension arose between the quest to throw light into every shadowy corner and the desire to celebrate the mysteries of the night. The strolling spectator, the *flâneur*, is the central figure in this early period of nocturnal exploration. Here my emphasis is largely literary; I discuss writers such as George Foster, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, and the visiting Charles Dickens, setting them in the context of the city's emerging visual identity in the popular press. Remarkably little "fine art" dealt with the gaslit streets in this era, and thus it was left mostly to journalists and illustrators to guide their audiences through the city's gloom and glare. As with the Ash Can artists and the photographer Jacob Riis a generation or two later, the gritty, uncouth aspect of nocturnal material played a role in reshaping notions of just what form the art of the modern city might take.

Impossible to ignore, the relentless march toward light did not thrill everyone. Using darkness as a cloak to ward off moral evaluations of their deliberately indistinct subject matter, early modernist poets, painters, and photographers battled those who demanded ever-more light and clarity on the streets, the canvas, and the image. Partly out of fascination, partly in reaction to the Babylonian displays and excesses of the night city, they began to develop a synesthetic art for art's sake that discovered beauty in the seductively dim fringes of the gaslit metropolis. Chapter 2, "The Nocturne," traces the evolution of nocturnal urban aesthetics from the 1870s to the early 1900s. James McNeill Whistler is the central figure here, flanked by a history of night painting before him and a history of poetic and artistic nocturnes after him. Whistler's impact on aestheticism, symbolism, and imagism spilled so forcefully over into the photographic and artistic treatment of New York that nocturnal art and modern art were for a while practically synonymous. In Manhattan, the arrival of Whistler's flat, Japanese-inspired aesthetic coincided with the birth of the city's vertically structured geometry to produce an effect that was unmistakably American and distinctively "New York." Figures caught up in Whistler's fascination with the night include Oscar Wilde, Vincent van Gogh, Edward Steichen, A. L. Coburn, and Childe Hassam.

As the lights grew brighter, the ever-whiter nights of New York revealed a dark side. For the lighting of the city not only provided new images of aesthetic beauty and economic prosperity; it was also deeply linked to a discourse of imperialism and power: the power of Anglo-Saxon light over ethnically inflected darkness, of modernity over the past, of rich over poor, and of "native" Americans over newcomers.⁶¹ The effort to represent night's subtle rewards coexisted uneasily with the struggle to control the night and its inhabitants on moral, political, and economic fronts. Chapter 3, "Colonizing the Night," grapples with the notion of conquering and exploiting the

night, circa 1890 to 1920. From the Statue of Liberty's electric torch to Fred-eric Remington's paintings of nocturnal confrontations between soldiers and Apaches in the Wild West, the frontier of the night was assaulted by explorers, settlers, and self-proclaimed benefactors eager to extend the discipline of light. Thoreau's desire to "conquer some realms from the night" sets the tone for this chapter, which also examines how the flash photography of Jacob Riis and the undercover journalism of Stephen Crane thrust the light of the press into the darkest slums of New York. One of the most intriguing aspects of nocturnal New York's history is that "the blank spaces" on the map, as Joseph Conrad designated the terra incognita of Africa in *Heart of Darkness*, were explored and exploited almost as vigorously in nighttime Manhattan.

In the electric era, the ancient contest between light and dark was recast into an all-encompassing spectacle, a billboard-studded dreamscape where art and life, power, technology, and commerce, blended into a profit-oriented performance. Chapter 4, "The Empire of Light," shows how, in the 1910s and 1920s, the quest to dominate the night produced an empire of signs electrically selling every commodity, including illumination itself. In Harlem and on Broadway, or out at Coney Island, agents of the light tried to promote "primitive" revelry with civilization's most sophisticated scintillations. Among those who pondered the power of electricity were O. Henry, Claude McKay, and Don Marquis's free-verse-writing cockroach, Archy. As we see in Willa Cather's "Behind the Singer Tower" and Joseph Stella's *New York Interpreted*, the evolution of nighttime imagery turned into a battle to liberate or command the subversive attractiveness of darkness and its un-governed emotions. While light sought to control the body of the impoverished Other, the wayward Woman, the untrained Consumer, some still hoped that an art of darkness might be emancipating in more than aesthetic terms. Might people not, through the agency of the nocturnal image, come to know the darkness on less hostile terms?

With the soul-stirring confluence of light and height, skyscrapers and floodlighting, the glittering city became a topography of desire, in which the buildings themselves seemed to take on sexual attributes, acting out a scenario of private yearning in public places. Chapter 5, "Skyscraper Fantasy," treats the sexualizing of nocturnal sights from the 1920s to the 1940s. Here I discuss sexually coded images and texts by Le Corbusier, John Sloan, Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Cadmus, and Elizabeth Bishop, among others. Flirtatiously, the erotically charged siren call of towers and canyons sent many a mixed message; its tantalizing ambiguity tempted and tortured. A teasing, evocative painting such as Georgia O'Keeffe's *Radiator Building at Night* (1927) subverted the cliché of the "phallic" skyscraper by crowning one with flowery blossoms of steam and light, while the heroine of Janet Flanner's *The Cubical City* (1926) boldly engendered Fifth Avenue as "the flaming provoking face" of a licentious young man.



FIGURE I.11.
David Lebe (b. 1948),
*Apartment View, New
York City*, 1981.
Silver print, 16 × 20
in. (40.6 × 50.8 cm).
Reproduction courtesy
of the photographer

Pervasive and persuasive, the nightly fantasy was nonetheless threatened by the viewer's sense that no show and no observer, however discrete, went unseen by someone else. Chapter 6, "Staging the Night," considers the city night as a theatrical experience, an artistically exploitable arena of voyeurism and violence. A perennial feature of the urban night—the "stage set" quality of lit-up streets and squares, uncurtained bedrooms and spotlit public spaces—drew concentrated attention in the 1940s and 1950s. Building on earlier instances of "electric voyeurism" by William Dean Howells, Henry James, and John Sloan, works by Edward Hopper, Weegee, Ralph Ellison, and William Carlos Williams catch onlookers in the act, establishing a strange complicity between the artist, the viewer, and the usually sexual object of their gaze. Light can be a liability; visibility and vulnerability coincide. The dynamics of seeing and being seen, often in erotic contexts, raise

a tangle of aesthetic and ethical issues, as do the activities of slumming, spying, gawking, gazing, art making, and “just plain looking.” In New York, someone is always watching.

My epilogue, “Night Now,” reflects on some of the shapes, new and recurrent, that the night image has assumed since the 1960s. I consider works by E. B. White, Jane Dickson, Adrienne Rich, George Segal, Yvonne Jacquette, and others, and conclude with meditations by Thoreau and W. H. Auden on the deep human need to experience what only the night can give. In a mediatized new millennium, the “old” urban night of risky frolic in the light-checked darkness seems to have become an endangered species, a vanishing terrain ripe for preservation drives and theme-park treatment—as the “new” Disneyfied Times Square, with its legislated light displays, so stridently shows. Yet the motifs of earlier eras survive and even thrive. Romantic celebrations of yesteryear—glittering skylines and rainy, reflective streets—do a brisk business as homages to “the city that never sleeps.” Meanwhile, against the ever-mounting pressure of indiscriminate illumination, many artists as well as activists have decided to “Take Back the Night”—to combat sexual violence, to recapture nocturnal beauty, to resist glitzy commodification or the raunchily “real” by searching past the clichés of Tinsel Town and Sin City. They often seek a deliberately mundane ground on which the sharp edge of mortal concerns will not be blunted by the immensity of Edison’s triumph. Struggling for perspective, others have pondered with skeptical awe the distant aerial view, each pinprick of light circled by its own halo of darkness. As light pollution covers the night sky, we find our stars by looking below us from the window of the plane, as we sink, to paraphrase Wallace Stevens’s words, “downward to brightness, on extended wings.”

Having absorbed for over a century the energy of the light-soaked night, we find ourselves transformed by it, into it. As the work of contemporary photographer David LaBeaume reveals, we humans now radiate our own lines of light for others to wonder at. The purpose of *New York Nocturne* is to show how this unfolding story of the night has compelled us to deal with an experience that is close to the essence of our modernity, an experience that also engages some of our most primordial instincts: urban life after dark.