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The Black Dew
Dirk Lauwaert

An oeuvre about black: long, extended gradations of twilight, in which a complete climate installs itself. With this black, Dirk Braeckman assumes his unique voice, with its own specific "grain du noir" (in the way that Roland Barthes referred to "le grain de la voix"). As the lithographer works on stone or the maker of etchings on zinc plate, Dirk Braeckman works on a surface (glass or a derivative thereof). The artist of the camera is like a fresco painter who paints on wet plaster, or the watercolourist, painting on absorbent paper. His technique (the water replaced by light) allows no corrections. Photographer, fresco painter, watercolourist: all three work with and against time. The drying—of the layer of plaster, the watercolour paper, the photographic paper—is crucial to all three. The rapid touch, the brief opening, and in contrast there is the slow exposure, the slow fixing, the slowness with which it floats into view. (The Polaroid is the extreme example of this, the digital machine its extreme denial.)

The paper. It is known that William Turner was perpetually searching for new papers, from different—native and foreign—manufacturers. In the same way that wine is bound to a region (to earth), so too are papers and textiles bound to water. Their capacity to absorb is crucial. Everyone who tried watercolours as a child remembers how the paper took in the water and how different kinds of paper did that so differently. There is a slow paper, which seems to repel the coloured water, or one that very rapidly drinks the tinted water amongst its fibres, as if it were grains of sand in a sandbox. The slower the paper, the more vain and cool the image (grains of silver, grains of sand and fibres on one side; mercury, quicksilver and mirror reflection on the other).

Papers with open pores pull the tinted water into themselves (if we had a "sound micro-cope", we could hear the slurping and the sighing). Then the paper stops, to take a breath. This is how Dirk Braeckman's paper brings light into itself, holds it fast. The (accursed) glossy paper of photography books reflects the light, smacks it back: cold and vain. "Real" paper does not bounce light back, but absorbs it, sucks it in (with the dedication of a Georges de La Tour) and gives it back to us as a glow: warm, soft, caressing and whispering.

The black in the hands of Dirk Braeckman is not that of Brassai, Eugene Smith, or Robert Frank, nor even that of Bill Brandt. Their black can tolerate glossy paper. Because, however dark it may be, black there is no more than a sign of darkness. It refers to a dark space, but is itself not black. It has neither the intensity nor the materiality of black. Braeckman's black lies deep in the paper. It does not signify black: it is black. Black matter. Here, black is not a word, but substance, unformed, unstructured, escaping language, escaping meaning. This is no significant, figurative black (indicating that "it is dark there"), but a black that, in contrast, exists beyond every form (like coal dust, it lies black in the lungs, on the cheeks, in the sweat of the hands). Black as part of the material world, not of its language: it is not an image of black, but the smell of a coal cellar. This black is that of a charcoal drawing by Georges Seurat, the black of Max Beckmann, of Odilon Redon, of Victor Hugo. This black is heavy. This black is lead, with the promise of poison. It is impenetrable, massive. It cuts the eye off at the pass: "To here, and no further". The black square with the white border (Kazimir Malevich); a wall in a dead-end street that you smack into. The fatal black of Sin City (Frank Miller). Dirk Braeckman's black is as intense as the black of a negative on a glass plate, where the silver has been scorched by light. It is deep black (one never says "deep white"). His black is falling downwards, without echo, "a voice in the void".

But there is more. Dirk Braeckman's black moves. It creeps cumbrous and sighing like a cripple, towards something from which the black has been removed, not panting towards that lighter place, but shuffling. This "un-blackening": it digs a way for itself towards grey (oh so slowly, and in each successive proof, it must be even slower). There is nonetheless no liberating light in the distance. There is no promise at the end, no hope whatsoever for the eye, no gaiety for the gaze. The black becoming grey is

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not feeding the hungry eye (Walker Evans). On the contrary, it is ash in the throat. Thirst and hunger, starvation, a need for light, light-starved: it is only a brightening illusion.

Braeckman's black is never sterile. His black is not the skeleton of black, no wisened caricature of black. This is no tombstone. There is motion in it. It is slow, admittedly, like a telluric movement of hundreds of thousands of years, but there is movement. The ending of the grey and the flood of the black take a long time: yes, a very long time. Through that slow and trembling, dragging yet also stubborn transition, full of pushing and pulling, like arm wrestling, nothing is ever being postulated. There is nothing affirmative or coercing in the images of Dirk Braeckman. There is, therefore, not a radical contrast (no boxing), as there is between the whites and the blacks of the Nabis (Félix Vallotton, Pierre Bonnard), or of Frans Masereel. There, even after years, the aggression still hangs in the image. There is no hesitation or nuance whatsoever, but caricature. Coercingly clear and efficient.

Braeckman is not the artist of the obvious contrasts, nor the artist of the nuance. He is the artist of ambiguity. The driving transition of grey to black, or vice versa, of black to grey, is the ultimate cornerstone of his visual language (if I may use the worn-out term). This slow looking forward, this slow shifting across the surface—this is his. It belongs to him, his work, his creation: the quiet, yet compelling tide on the broad, black beach. Holding back, breaking, from *lento* to *lentissimo*, from walking to shuffling: this is the figure of the cautious avoidance, the rejection of every dictate. There is no polarity, no discussion. There is no war, as there is in a woodcut, but the gradual rising up from the black, in a slow motion, not of an amorous, but of an aggressive nature. "Moving out of the dead" (rather than rising from): this must take place in a slow movement. *Nosferatu* is that slowness, unformed, without movement (because it is so slow).

That we get to see something is not unimportant—on the contrary. Dirk Braeckman is not an abstract formalist, nor is he obsessed by technique. His images are not nihilistic. There is still paper that can be blackened. There are still figures that he must show in order to direct his blacks, thanks to which he can allow his black to shimmer. His blacks lie in the paper, but also on the shoulders of his figures (objects and backs), heavy as lead. These figures are certainly no alibi. They are not indiscriminately used. What you see stored away in the black (as if in a burka) has been determined with voyeuristic tension and super-cooled excitement. An opened door, a pleated curtain, a tiled wall: everything in an intensity that you can only read as sexual, a sexual intoxication. Not a passion for the world, but a deep sigh to the stupefying absence thereof.

The spaces, objects and details are not "chosen". That is too active. Braeckman lets it happen. He allows the fishing line that he has thrown into the world to simply walk on. The line walks with a continuous swish along the mill. The fisherman stands still on the bank. The fish flashes away. The line follows. Braeckman's black is always an "allowing", a letting go, stumbling and falling, the way one must let death go, quietly let it do its work. This allowing is not an acceptance (too active), but an observing. It is without pity, but also without hardness, in the same way that one takes the light of spring, the rustle of the night, a tedious rain: as they come. It is not only because it cannot be otherwise, but because it is for this very reason an inescapable gift (in French: *le donné*).

The figures depicted are those of *l'homme de la nuit*. The night-time eye brings its own subjects—limited in number. Following the sombre debut of sex after the cassock, the artist shifts to the gaze of the night itself (the night watcher). What reveals itself in the hollow reverberation of the black? Grey, or better yet: greying subjects. They are not old, but dis-cou-ragingly familiar (a swinging door, a shower stall, a painting on a wall). They are empty, immaterial, indiscriminate. They are just there, in that softly breathing black, like an ailing hound that no longer lifts its head, with a tail that does not wag. All the arguing is over, the bracing against a bed from early sex, leaving only that solitude that walks around, feeling its way in the familiar bedroom, in the toilet in a café. Or the tossing and turning alongside the opposite sex in bed: a black that opens its eyes after a long illness and closes them again, that wins back its breath, lets it go again and sinks away, then again undulates in waves, in a glorious off and on,

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up and down, floating towards the depths and rearing to the surface, the alternating succession of splendid breathing out and majestic breathing in, allowing the filling up with black salt (those magical, microscopic little grains of silver).

This black is not sombre, negative or provocative. On the contrary, everything is rich in glow, in ardour. These blackened figures are so intensely present. If I inquire of an image of Dirk Braeckman's if there is something there, then something replies to me, "Present"! It may be a back, shoulders, tiles on the shower wall—"Present"! It is a relief, this black that assails the eye and body (here, the eye is body). It proves indeed to carry something, able to carry something, able to bear. It is not a ghost-body, but it bears, with determination, sometimes as a thing enveloped in skin, sometimes a thing with a surface. Am I making a leap here? Braeckman creates a black with many, many skins (so many layers!).

The skin of the paper is as dry as the surface of a stick of charcoal. So too is the body, the body of the things and figures. They should be polished, rubbed with oil. That beautiful skin yearns more for the rub than the cuddle. If the things (figures and objects) were turned towards us, we would see the moisture of the eyes, reflecting, carriers of facial expression. But that face is not there, because in this work, we see everything (people and things) from the back (a tergo). What should I be able to perceive in that verso world? I fear a crushed mask, the mocking of the longing of the viewer (Hieronymus Bosch's mocking of Christ).

In a comparison with Craigie Horsfield, there are beautiful blacks there, too. But with his blacks, Horsfield brings no uncertainty into the picture, no risk for the viewer, no threaten-ing restlessness. There, it is a black that comforts. The face in his case is a "you" that calls on your capacities, that brings responsibility into the world, and also into the body, now as the junction for that responsibility. The face of Dirk Braeckman is ambiguity, absent yet fully present. It is in the negative, like a mould. A black mould, automobile tyre black, it is a black that gets under my feet, makes the earth shake, cuts off my breath. There are more metaphors: jerking on the gallows, choking in passion.

What is the black of the black? What is the black as substantive and the black as adjective? What is the essence of black and what is black as a relative phenomenon? You see the essential black in the light outside the cave—it is revelation. The relative black, in contrast, darkens. Dirk Braeckman lays the essential black onto my worktable, a black that shows the world. It is a black epiphany.

Every revelation calls for parables, just as every deity unavoidably sets metamorphoses in motion. Black is the mantle of a king, en route.

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