

In Manhattan, the beauty of the night sky is only a faded metaphor, the shopworn verse of an outdated love song. The stars shine no brighter at midnight in midtown than the ones depicted on the time-dimmed ceiling of the waiting room at Grand Central Terminal. The eternal orange glow of the city lights leaves only the faintest hints of the blackness beyond. And when the sky is truly clear and the clouds do not reflect this amber aura, the brightness of the city environs constrict the pupils so much that only the moon can be seen on most evenings. But over the last few weeks it has been possible, even in Manhattan, to watch the evening star—Venus—descending in the west, presenting her orbit, edgewise, to viewers on Earth.

Venus is the luminous body hanging over New Jersey to the west in the early evening. In spite of the fact that it emanates no light of its own—only reflecting light from its neighbour and provider, the sun—it is brighter than any heavenly object visible from Earth except the sun and the moon. For the moment, Venus becomes apparent at twilight, about a third of the way up the western sky, and it sets around 11. Every night people go to bed wondering what strangely bright star that is. To those who live in New York City, it may be the only star they see when trapped on this tiny little island. Whatever the case, in the morning no one remembers that luminous body any longer.

To say, as one must, that Venus is not a star but a planet seems ungrateful, almost pedantic. Astronomers might have us know that this distinction is not a mere splitting of hairs, but the most basic of divisions, not unlike that of plants and animals. Be that as it may, it is the kind of technicality the English essayist Charles Lamb had in mind when defending the generosity of his personal ignorance almost 200 years ago. —I guess at Venus,|| he wrote, —only by her brightness.|| Lamb was no Copernican, and neither are most of us. We are little Ptolemies every one. The sun rises and sets upon us. When one lies upon a meadow late at night, etherized by the fullness of the sky, it is all one can do to imagine the simplest of celestial motions—the pivoting of constellations around the North Star. To impart to each point of light the motions that are proper to it—to do the unimaginable calculus of all those interfering rotations, those intersecting gravities —is simply impossible. It is easier to imagine that one is staring at the ceiling of a celestial waiting room, forever spinning around and around above our heads.

But at the moment, one can almost picture the motion of Venus in its orbit, as if one were looking at a diagram of the solar system. Imagine a line between the sun, at sunset, and Venus, glittering high above the horizon. That, roughly speaking, is the path of the Venusian orbit. When Venus moves toward Earth, as it is doing now, it is the evening star, and when it moves away from Earth, it is the morning star. Even this, to some, might seem like a stretch of the abilities of conceptualization, but it is worth the challenge. For if one can muddle through this mental errand for a moment, it will become clear that a change is about to take place. The moment of transition will occur on June 10, when Venus passes between the sun and Earth. As May wears on, Venus will appear nearer and nearer the sun, until the planet is engulfed by twilight. Venus will come back into view, at dawn, sometime in late July.

For now, the evening star—Hesperus, as it was anciently known—is a steadily waning crescent, no matter how star-like or globular its light appears. It will not return to its present position until

sometime in December 1997. And who knows
where we will be by then? Surely someone, but not me, not one of the little
Ptolemies, that stares up into the night sky
and sees a most beautiful display, arranged every night for his personal
enjoyment.