

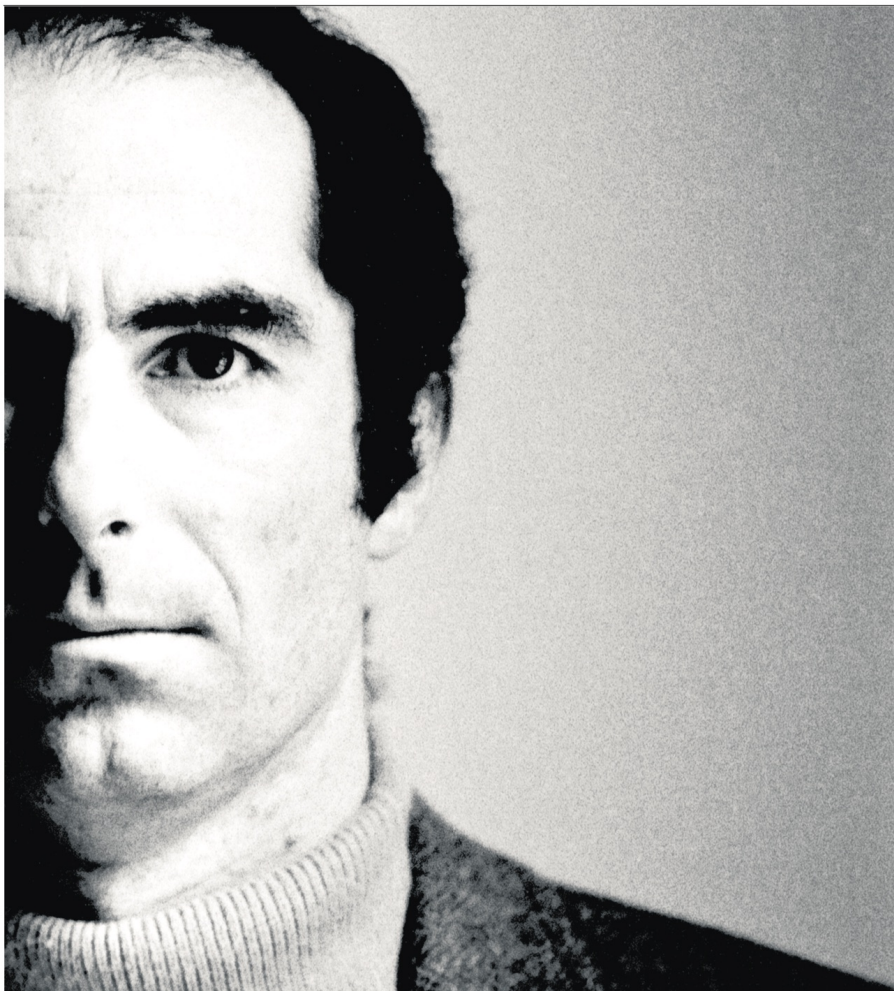
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THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

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Artist of sorrows and solitudes

An optimistic enlightenment wasn't Joseph Wright's subject matter

ALEXANDRA HARRIS

JOSEPH WRIGHT OF DERBY

Painter of darkness

MATTHEW CRASKE

368pp. Yale University Press. £45 (US \$60).

IN THE EARLY 1770s, Joseph Wright of Derby painted a series of views of forges. Large, grandly composed, and dramatic, all five are night scenes, the forge-fires alive among shadows, the mobile bodies of muscular blacksmiths silhouetted against blazing white ingots of molten iron; onlookers shield their eyes. We might admire the incongruous ecclesiastical arches that reach up into moonlit skies, seeming to confer a mysterious sanctity on the figures and flames beneath, but commentary on these pictures has tended to set their depiction of labour in the context of the Industrial Revolution. They have often been associated with the Midlands, production and commerce, the transformation of materials, the valorization of work.

Matthew Craske, in this major new book, thinks that a shift of emphasis is needed. If Wright had wanted to paint modern industry, he points out, he could have gone regularly to the large-scale iron-works at Coalbrookdale. He adds that the mechanized tilt-hammer in "The Iron Forge Viewed from Within" (1772) is a piece of technology in use since at least the twelfth century, hardly an icon of scientific progress. His subtitle responds directly to Benedict Nicolson's 1968 study of Wright as "Painter of Light" and sums up his thesis: Craske identifies his subject as a "Painter of Darkness".

As a child Wright paid rapt attention to the peep box shows brought to Derby by the travelling raree man; later he would enchant children with his own dark boxes and magic lanterns. There were many kinds of popular night painting around that could produce a pleasant thrill with their alluring treatment of light flickering across faces and fabrics. Craske cites, for instance, the work of Godfried Schalcken, the Dutch painter noted for his use of candlelight, who gave an illicit frisson to glowing figures in darkened private rooms. Night painting could court intimacy or impressive theatricality.

But Wright aspired to a kind of nocturne that was not, or certainly not only, a momentary spectacle delighting viewers with virtuosic painterly effects; his paintings are meditations, gradually unfolding their meanings. He brought to the hours of darkness, Craske argues, all his "restless creative intelligence". Here is Wright the philosopher of melancholy, an artist of sorrows and solitudes. Here is an early Romantic closely engaged with cultures of sensibility, and particularly with poetry.

The word "melancholy" in the later eighteenth century encompassed a range of habits and feelings from pensiveness to fashionably cultivated gloom, from general introspection to profound grief, and it also described loosely grouped varieties of mental illness. Wright suffered from depression (probably Seasonal Affective Disorder with summer lows, as the doctor Barry Hovibrand recently suggested in "Joseph Wright of Derby and Dr Erasmus Darwin, the artist and his physician"), and he was deeply interested, as Craske shows, in other forms of emotional "darkness". "I have laboured under an annual malady", the artist wrote to his friend and advisor William Hayley in 1783, "some years, four or five months at a time." It had been going on for sixteen years, "the core" of his life, he wrote, describing with vivid simplicity how he "dragged" his way through these months without any wish to take up his pencil.



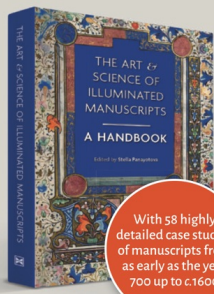
"The Dead Soldier", 1789

Craske looks carefully at the way Wright's friends, patrons and public described him - the man and his pictures - and notes the frequent emphasis on sensitivity. In his "memoir" of Wright (published in the *Monthly Magazine* after the artist's death in 1797), John Philips, a Manchester manufacturer who knew Wright well, stressed his "delicate mind" and interest in the feelings of others. Hannah Wright's 1850 memoir and biography of her uncle dwelt more on habits

of reclusiveness than on brisk engagements with commerce. Hayley linked his friend's "malady" with the strong emotions that went into his pictures, and which his works could awaken in those who grasped their power. He turned Wright's illness into a poetic brand, publicizing him as an artist of sensibility.

But for a long time, Wright was chiefly a portraitist. He left his native Derbyshire in his teens to study in London under the portrait painter Thomas Hud-

“His paintings are meditations, gradually unfolding their meanings



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son. He worked successfully in Liverpool, where he was in demand among the merchant families. Making a mid-life change, he married and moved to Italy with his pregnant wife, undertaking a belated Grand Tour that lasted through 1773-5. On his return, he set up a portrait studio in fashionable Bath. Season celebrities, however, did not come rushing for his attention, and in between commissions he worked on dazzlingly ambitious canvases based on his Italian experiences.

It was these that people started to talk about: "Vesuvius in Eruption", for example, daringly paired with the man-made blaze of fireworks above Castel Sant'Angelo. In Italy he had worked frantically. George Romney (who was painting in Rome at the same time and became a friend) thought his "excessive application" there worsened his "nervous sufferings", but it also changed his art, and the two things are perhaps inextricable. The *campagna* inspired him in ways that pushed him towards literary subjects and that also deepened his feeling, always strong, for the landscapes of home. After Bath, he returned to the places that mattered to him: Matlock Tor, the River Derwent. It was always Derbyshire that called him back.

Craske is interested in Wright's difference from the technologically orientated and politically progressive circles with which he is often aligned; he is tired of candles being made to symbolize sociable enlightenment in recent readings of "An Experiment on the Bird in an Air Pump" (1768) or "A Philosopher Giving that Lecture on the Orrery in which a lamp is put in the place of the Sun" (1766). But where does that leave these astonishing works which first made Wright famous in the 1760s and which are more celebrated today than anything else of his?

The first owner of the orrery painting was the prominent Freemason and Derby aristocrat Washington Shirley, fifth Earl Ferrers. Reading the picture as one made specifically for Ferrers, perhaps at his suggestion, Craske thinks that he may have had "a great part in the design". He connects the picture here with the expensive renovation of Ferrers's houses, his collection of mathematical and astronomical instruments, and his energetic work at the forefront of navigational techniques and naval boat design. Like a detective appraising the murder weapon, Craske knows where on Fleet Street to buy this particular model of orrery; he has the instruction manual in his hand.

The point is that if the "Lecture on the Orrery" was a private commission for a private house, reflecting a patron's interests, it doesn't stand as proof of Wright's own commitment to enlightenment forms of scientific education, or any kind of

science at all. This is both revealing and not altogether surprising. There at the centre of these facts, with contexts and patrons orbiting like planets, the painting glimmers with all its magic and mystery, its regions of deep shadow, a visual language that seems to speak less of rational explanation than of enchantment and vision.

The next generation of Romantic thinkers would not want to separate these things out, and nor, one suspects, did Wright. Craske is rightly impatient with loose associations, however, and hunts out evidence. He finds no proof of any active involvement with the Lunar Society, the group of forward-thinking friends including Matthew Boulton, Josiah Wedgwood and John Whitehurst who met to discuss their ideas each month and walked home by the light of the moon. Although Wright knew its members well, painted their portraits, made art for their houses and wanted to know all that Whitehurst could tell him about volcanoes, Craske sets him apart. For one thing, he was "not a clubbable man". For another, he "lacked the inherent optimism necessary to an exponent of any brand of 'enlightenment' that was fixed on the notion of human progress".

There is some strain in this effort to disentangle Wright from the society of people whose friendship and knowledge he clearly valued. But Craske convincingly offers a different canon of Wright pictures: "The Hermit" (1769), "Miravan Breaking Open the Tomb of His Ancestors" (1772), "The Dead Soldier" (1789), "The Death of Juliet" (1790). These are explicitly emotional images, too mannered, histrionic, ghoulish or metaphysically strange to sit easily with current tastes, but which Craske sees as sophisticated and many-layered, telling us as much about Wright's vision as the "Lecture on the Orrery".

Take, for example, "The Earthstopper on the Banks of the River Derwent". A ragged workman is out alone by moonlight, stopping up foxholes ahead of the morning's hunt. The subject was suggested by reading a draft of "Needwood Forest", Francis Mundy's long poem in celebration and defence of the ancient Staffordshire woodland. The solitary figure who appears in the long night-walk section must have caught Wright's imagination:

His lantern gleaming down the glade,
One, like a sexton with his spade,
Comes from their caverns to exclude
The mid-night prowlers of the wood.
Through fields of air while pausing slow,
Yon death-bell tells the village woe!

Returning to the picture with this in mind, it becomes a kind of graveyard painting, less like a moonlit genre scene of rural work and more

“A man who painted more cave-dwelling hermits than family science classes, more auguries of death than lamps of progress

expressly meditative, closer to the philosophical mood of Thomas Gray's "Elegy".

A subject to which Wright returned again and again was that of melancholy or troubled old men, a "grand theme" in his art. He wasn't doing it to please the market: his old men rarely sold. But on he went with them: hermits contemplating "the wreck of material ambitions", or the elderly aching labourer in "The Old Man and Death" who drops his firewood in fright as a skeleton appears before him. These pictures are rather strenuously made to fit Craske's reading of Wright's anti-materialism and social conservatism. For Craske, the terror-struck wood-gatherer teaches a bracing moral lesson: that the peasant "ought not to get above his base expectations of toil".

More immediately revealing, one of a series of striking references to contemporary funerary sculpture, is the visual comparison with Louis-François Roubiliac's monument to Lady Nightingale in Westminster Abbey. Here a desperate husband raises his hand to push back the figure of Death. Craske (who has written on William Hogarth and on monumental sculpture) shows how Wright was continually drawing together sources like this - borrowing expressive poses from sculpture, or strongly characterized faces from old genre prints, or dramatic juxtapositions from the Drury Lane stage, and putting them to his own extraordinary uses.

The old men stayed unsold in the studio, but Wright knew how to attract and move an audience. Grieving women were always a success. "The Dead Soldier", one of his most publicly admired pictures, shows a grief-stricken woman (bare-breasted, of course) holding both her baby and the discoloured corpse of her husband, a foot-soldier fallen in battle. Its colours are "the colours of sympathy", enthused reviewers with tears in their eyes. Craske wants us to see how the pietà worked morally, politically, affectively, for viewers who took sentimentality to be a strength.

Josiah Wedgwood, at home at Etruria Hall, surrounded himself on all sides with Wright's afflicted women. He hung a whole series of them together: "The Corinthian Maid", "Penelope Unravelling Her Web by Lamplight", "The Lady in Milton's Comus" (the lady "frozen by a pulse of restrained terror"), the "Indian Widow" sitting firm in an attitude of quiet endurance. It is no surprise that Hayley, shrewdly diagnosed by Craske as having a "personal preoccupation with the sacrifices of widows", had much to do with these pictures: it was he who suggested that Wright paint the steadfast vigil of a Native American woman at the grave of her lost husband. Wright imagined her in a mountainous region with the sky a tumult of thunderstorm and, most alarmingly, a volcano in mid-eruption, its fire and clouds of ash rapidly encroaching on the static mourner. Viewers were asked to weigh the extreme danger, feel with her, and learn her strength.

The prominent business people and gentry of the Midlands and the North did not ask for industrial scenes but for what Wright willingly offered: noble figures in extremis and landscapes of ancient decay or sublimity. The Wakefield manufacturer John Milnes built a whole new gallery to accommodate the pictures he was commissioning and buying from Wright year after year, pictures of Mount Vesuvius, Miravan opening the tomb, the elderly prisoner from Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, the young flautist from James Beattie's poem "The Minstrel" sitting beside his own future grave.

Wright's identification with the Midlands and the North is consistently important in this account, and has more to do with rivers and rockforms than with industry or urban development. Wright added "of Derby" to his name as early as 1767 and kept it, even when resident elsewhere. He was taking a risk, and making a statement - about his origins, his allegiances, his values. Though the words "of Derby" might conjure ideas of cultural life in a growing Georgian town, assembly rooms, friends' houses, subscriptions and ventures, Craske demonstrates that what he really minded about was the "wild and gloomy" scenery of his rural "homeland".

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As an artist drawn to the area's rugged beauty, Wright had a significant predecessor. He would certainly have known the work of Thomas Smith of Derby (always "of Derby") who was publishing spectacular views of local scenery when Wright was a boy. In 1743 you could buy Smith's portfolio *Eight of the Most Extraordinary Prospects in the Mountainous Parts of Derbyshire and Staffordshire*, and extraordinary they certainly appeared: precipitous cliffs rising vertically over the River Dove, cascades plunging into Matlock Bath. A picturesque tour in Derbyshire looks set to rival a journey through the Alps. Inheriting this appreciation for rural drama, Wright brought to the "northern grotesque" his experience in Italy, his ambition and his melancholy.

Craske's Wright wants to be alone in his chosen places. He liked to walk in the ruins of nearby Darley Abbey and play his cherished German flute among the broken stones. We could shift the emphasis a little and conjure different ideas of him, remembering that he had a friend who lived next to the ruins, and that "contemplative isolation" was probably not the dominant mood at home when a large family was busy growing up there. But Craske shows us how much he wanted to make space for roaming thought and to be immersed in his environment. He wanted this for the family too: keenly following Rousseau, he hoped to raise "children of nature". Craske's very fine chapter on "The Minstrel" shows how the boy who sits gracefully with his flute in his lap and his chin in his hand is a representative of rural seclusion, harmony with nature, and the lost innocence of Britain itself.

Rural retirement, away from London coffeehouses, studios and exhibition crowds, was a purposeful declaration of the kind of artist he was. Hayley, who styled himself "the Hermit of Earham", encouraged this making of a private world; and he encouraged, too, Wright's bold separation of himself from the Royal Academy. Subsumed into Hayley's "private cult of feeling", says Craske, "Wright was bound to put up a hostile front to the wider world". These different kinds of alone-ness - the voluntary hermit, the exile from London, the rebel from the establishment, the haunter of the night, the man struggling with his "annual malady" - are all facets of the "painter of darkness".

With his emphasis on particular groups of works, Craske is not trying to give a balanced summing-up. The result can feel partial and disorientating. What are we to make of the late paintings of Arkwright's cotton mills? What about the hundreds of portraits - self-conscious Thomas Borrow, stoutly velveted William Brooke, flushed and thoughtful Catherine Swindell - beautiful portraits that seem so daylight, sane and steady? And has the situation in Wright scholarship been so dire as Craske suggests? Perceptive commentators have taken Wright seriously and have not ignored the darker emotions. There have been insightful readings of his turn to poetic subjects, for instance Amina Wright's account in *Joseph Wright of Derby: Bath and beyond* (2014); in her powerful essay on the "Virgil's Tomb" paintings, Jenny Uglow allows Wright's interest in geology, especially volcanoes and caves, to complement his preoccupation with the "deep, underground powers of the poetic imagination"; Elizabeth Barker's edition of *Documents Relating to Joseph Wright of Derby* (2009), bringing together letters, account books, client lists, is a feat of editorial judgement.

We'll go on needing a range of Wrights, but Craske makes a distinctive contribution to the study of him. It is good to read a book so intent on its argument about a British painter, so sure that there is much at stake, so determined to break free of both neutral surveys and theoretical schemes. Thanks to the abundant images and superb production values, we can look and look again at the pictures as the text subtly colours what we see. Disagreements may surface along the way, but this intricate study leaves little doubt that Wright is not an intriguing minor artist with an attractive line in candlelit drama but among the great European painters of the eighteenth century. ■

Alexandra Harris is a Professorial Fellow in English at the University of Birmingham. She is currently writing about landscape, locality and the arts

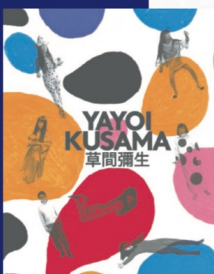
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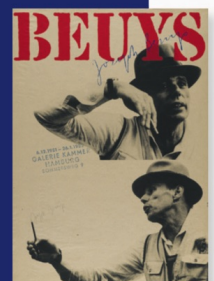
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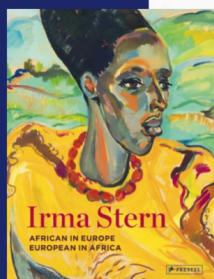
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