

ENGLISH EXTENSION II

So Bright It Could Only Be the Light of Revelation



The Daily Courant

Wednesday March 3rd, 1786

Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor,

Joseph Wright's painting, Experiment on a Bird in an Air Pump, is a blasphemous and blatantly offensive example of man's growing self importance. The enshrinement of the inhumane experiment is an abomination to humanity and the moral dignity of our society.

For those who have not yet been unfortunate enough to cross the halls of the Derby Museum and Art Gallery, allow me to explain to you the painting in question. In a dimly lit room a natural philosopher¹ is drawing the last breaths out of the lungs of a bird; the breaths that the Lord put there, as a series of prospective beneficers regard this scene with ethical disregard and ignorance. This example of the destructive nature of natural philosophy is horribly ensconced in a light which, up until now, was rightfully reserved for paintings of the utmost religious significance.

What is happening to our society? I attend the Church of England in Derby's East End every day, generally for the matinee, and I have noticed that the previously large Congregation has begun to dwindle. People on the street are discussing natural philosophy and physics and debating the temperament of the natural world. If these people seek clarification about the natural world please allow me to inform them where they need go; Genesis, chapter one, line one:

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth..."

If these natural philosophers believe that there may be room for their irreverent and absurd notion that they play a part in the creation process then may they be doomed to an eternity of repentance for their sins. Natural philosophy is a destructive force that undermines the religious significance of our culture. I do not want to raise my children in a society that values the men in the laboratories who are interfering with nature and disregard the men in the churches who preach the Word of God. That is not the world I grew up in. Society is on the edge of destruction and it is men like Joseph Wright who beautify this notion of the "divine" power of man and who will lead to our downfall. Nature is not a force to be reckoned with nor is the Lord, and the meddling of these natural philosophers, trying to dabble in the divine sphere, will only lead to downfall.

Had I written this letter ten years ago I would have suggested that the art gallery's curator take down this painting of the modern day Sodom, but much has changed in the past ten years. Men are now examining the heavens with instruments made from common materials; they are engaging the mundane and human to observe the divine and celestial. Where is England going as a nation? I certainly hope not to the exhibition in Derby.

Yours Sincerely,
Cecil Vincent

¹Science was known by the term "natural philosophy" in the Eighteenth Century

The Daily Courant

Thursday, March 4th, 1786

Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor,

As a friend of Joseph Wright, arguably one of the greatest artists of our time, it is more than disconcerting that the meaning of his magnificent piece of work has been lost on the chap who wrote to the editor yesterday. For all of its “enshrinement” of rationality and logic it seems to me that the painting is not trying to steer society away from God but rather to reflect on and question how far we may be willing to either let natural philosophy or religion impose upon our lives, which is where I become very worried about its grave misinterpretation.

We are standing upon the brink of what may be one of the greatest social changes in history; that is one of the greatest social changes caused by man in history. Never has society held so much power in its hands. Never have we had the inventive ability and technology that we possess now. We are at the beginning of one of the greatest intellectual revolutions and it is entirely due to natural philosophy.

In Wright’s painting the role of natural philosophy in society is being explored from not just a religious perspective but also from a philanthropist’s perspective. Our Christianity aside, how far are we, as human beings, going to allow natural philosophy to come into our lives? To affect our decisions? And most importantly how much are we willing to forego to see natural philosophy advance our society into the nineteenth century? That, my friend, is the question that young Joseph’s painting is asking.

As a reflection of society, Joseph’s painting is highly accurate; the worried faces of the women, the unaffected men and the enlightened and questioning face of the natural philosopher. This is not a blasphemous work of heresy but a mirror image of the state of society at present. Accept it or not; it is reality.

We may accept this truth or live in a land of idealism and backward thinking. Joseph Wright is a visionary thinker not because he can see what the future should be but because he can see it now!

I admire the strength of the bridge he has built between natural philosophy and art, for why should practicality and artistry never meet? By doing so he has not only inspired me, Erasmus Darwin, to endeavour a similar feat in poetry but has drawn countless artists and natural philosophers alike to think in fields tangential to their own, just as Joseph has.

As a natural philosopher I am honoured to see the reflection of the divinity of the art of natural philosophy and, as a human being, I am humbled to be able to recognise the social significance of this noble piece of art. Although blind faith in religion may be undermined by the search for evidence and proof in natural philosophy, I know that natural philosophy further draws attention to the Lord’s divine power, not destroys it. Not only did he create man but he also created a creature that in turn can create within his world. In my opinion Experiment on a Bird in an Air Pump is something that is to be more highly revelled in than prosecuted.

Yours in sincerity of faith,
Erasmus Darwin



Joseph Wright approaches his art as a natural philosopher would approach an investigation into the properties of light. First he mastered the subjects of his painting and their components such as anatomy, optics and chemistry before venturing into the depths of imagination and expression. Upon viewing this painting, notice the way the light can throw shadows, enhance facial expression and bring the true light of our Age into the consciousness; natural philosophy. Wright, who normally specialises in portraiture where he is paid for his painterly skills, not his social comments, has branched out from his normally politically neutral art front by

painting An Experiment on a Bird in an Air Pump. What distinguishes Wright from his contemporaries is his challenge to the path that intellectual thinking is taking; opposed to conformity and obedience. We must be continually challenged, reminded and cautioned and this masterpiece does just that. This painting reminds us of the peril and destruction that can be brought about with the advancement of natural philosophy and the power of man. Another peril to be cautioned of that you might not have thought of during this cold season is gout. Be prepared and buy Berrow's gout powder for just 10p or Berrow's dropsy elixir for 12p.

Berrow's Worcester Journal, 1786

The waning moon shone over England, flooding its newly constructed, prized buildings in silver light. The tips of the roofs stood tall like peacocks brandishing their colourful tails for all to see. The night was still; however, there was a silent hum that overtook the sound of the crickets; a hum of life and gentle movement. It was the earlier hours of the evening yet the city was alive; breathing under the weight of expectation and growth. This was a new Britain.

The bird writhing within the air pump is a fascinating example of how far we have come as men. As the air is extracted I can visibly see the bird's struggle to hold onto consciousness; grasping every breath it may to preserve itself. It does seem like natural philosophy really is the new way into the future, whether we like it or not.

I imagine that at the moment we stand on a precipice similar to that of the discovery of fire. Once man had fire everything was different and everything had changed permanently. Natural philosophy is our fire now and I am sure that I shall be doing everything in my power to control this fire and burn the right barrels: business, enterprise and expansion.

This display tonight has reassured me that beyond all reasonable doubt I should invest in natural philosophy and reap the benefits in the form of splendid sums of money. For we all know that it is neither the poet who benefits from his poetry nor the artist who benefits from his painting, nor the natural philosopher who benefits from his discoveries. It is when men of business, such as me, invest then come and scoop up our findings into our top hats and use them to make large sums of money. It is that beautiful, we have an endless supply of labour because, by Plutus, where there lay people hungry, there lay people willing to work under whatever conditions they are offered! There lies the true beauty of natural philosophy: under the pay cheque.

Upon the consideration of what area of natural philosophy I should be looking into I do not believe it matters; for what year the pound may have been printed does not change its value. Dabbling in alchemy is the venture of Platonists so perhaps I should be harnessing the powers of engines and machinery? Engines are the way of the future after all; where we once used our hands for days we may be able to turn a handle *et viola*; the work is being done.

I do find natural philosophy an odd thing. Those involved are as dedicated as any others but they seem not to yield benefits that other disciplines reward for such standards of dedication. I do not understand the real motivation behind the occupation. If natural philosophers were to take their research and inventions into business they would be several times wealthier thus have several times more freedom and be several times more comfortable. It does not make sense to me as to why they would choose not to do this as they are all intelligent enough and they have gone to the right universities and have met the right people.

However, I do find it absolutely necessary to teach not only my nephews and nieces about the art of making money but to value natural philosophy. I know that they may not be inclined towards natural philosophy, however, I believe that exposing them to scenes like the experiment they witnessed tonight is a crucial part of invoking a passion for learning within them. Whether they can access the means to fulfil this is not my duty to them but I would assist where possible of course. From a young age I believe one begins to form one's passions, interests; however one's desires must change over time. Only a fool would not change his mind when circumstances change and I have seen my desires vary wildly as my circumstances did. When I was a young boy I wanted to sell my father's business when it came to me and sail boats around the world. Of course when my sister died giving birth to Lucy, my priorities changed once more as I realised that I needed to earn a sufficient income to support not only myself but also Lucy and Catherine, which was when I went into the steelworks business. I did not know what I wanted to do in business but all I knew was that, by Plutus, I am good at it! It is a life that is worth living now, a life worth living.

The young woman stood at the head of my desk, nervously fingering her threadbare cardigan. She was a slight woman who could have used some more nourishment to bring her roses to bloom but she was attractive nonetheless. She would probably have nowhere to sleep within a week but there was nothing I could do. The accountant to my company, Miller's Steelworks and Machinery, strongly advised that I needed to let go of some staff to avoid losses as soon as I could and this woman had some of the lowest output per unit figures out of all of the other workers. She looked again at the desk as I asked her to sit down. She shuffled into the chair and continued to look down.

I couldn't do it. I let her leave and just asked her to raise her output levels once more. She assured me smilingly that she would and nearly floated out of the room.

It wasn't that the profession had changed, it was me. Six months ago my brother, Benjamin, got severely burnt when a pipe from the smelting furnace burst. After several weeks his wounds were not healed but infected and he died later of gangrene. This was the case not only for Benjamin but for fifty of my other workers who either died instantly or later from infected wounds. After the accident nothing remained the same and I became useless in the business world. I could no longer fire people, cut their wages or treat them as I used to. Now the company is in trouble, especially since William Pitt brought in the new tax last year to pay for weapons to fight Napoleon². Why should I continue like this? Even the natural philosophy of it doesn't excite me anymore because it reminds me of what we are using to destroy the lives of our workers and our world. I never held any real regard for the natural world before now but the more I seem to drift away from the business the more I seem to be drawn into the sublime simplicity of nature. Yesterday I stopped outside the church that I used to visit everyday ten years ago. I didn't go in; I just listened; remembering the hymns and the prayers. I had not thought about God in years either but everything seems to be coming back to the fore: everything we suppressed for the past few years seemed to be suddenly rearing its unwelcome face again. It was inevitable and there is nothing to be done about it. What are you supposed to do when everything you have worked for over the past ten years begins to dissipate into the air of uncertainty?

Natural philosophy should never have approached the brothel of capitalism.

² William Pitt the Younger introduced income tax, which included business receipts, in 1789 to raise funds for weaponry and equipment for fighting the Napoleonic wars.

The finest brushstrokes that Derby has seen in many years now beautify the halls of the Derby Museum and Art Gallery. The masterful artist behind this painting is none other than Joseph Wright of Derby who was born and bred amongst us all. The painting depicts a frightful image of the potential cruelty of natural philosophy to small animals; however, the actual painting has been undertaken so brilliantly that this seems

masked by both the beautiful lighting effects from the centre and the young ladies who are gathered around the experiment, adorned in some of the finest quality silks and jewels. It is a true beauty to behold and a masterful creation to be adored. This is a fine example of the delicate nature of art and a scathing interpretation of the nature of natural philosophy.

The Derby Mercury, 1786

The bird was running out of breath, nay; it was running out of air. The bright light from the candles illuminated the distressed cockatoo as it began to slowly fade into a land somewhere between the living and the dead. The light from the flickering candles in the centre flickered across the glass as they were disturbed by a momentary breeze outside. The young girl shrieked once more and buried her head into her father's waistcoat and he tried to soothe her, imploring that the bird had to suffer momentarily for them to learn more about air and breathing. Her sister bravely tried looking in the direction of the bird, instead letting her eyes wander to the cabinet nearby which was full of dainty trinkets and vases. The bird's white feathers were motionless as it ceased to breathe. He was acting as God yet he had none of the knowledge and all the power. The lined face challenged the others in the room for opinion and direction as to his next move in his game of life and death.

When I first heard about it I thought that it was a lovely idea for Uncle Jeremy to invite us to watch his experiment with the bird. Apparently the natural philosopher has travelled all the way from Glasgow to London just to do this experiment for people. That is an awfully long way to travel just to do an experiment but apparently he is one of the best natural philosophers for the job.

As I waited for Lucy to get ready I began thinking about all of the aspects of natural philosophy that I knew about and concluded that there weren't very many. I wish there were perhaps more though because I did have to wait an extremely long time for Lucy as she could not decide what to wear and, I admit, I had the same conundrum. Mother taught me how to dress for balls, garden parties and horseback riding but she had never advised on what one should wear to view a natural philosophy experiment. I suppose natural philosophy experiments were not grand social events in her day as they are becoming in ours.

In the carriage on the way to Uncle Jeremy's, Lucy questioned me about the experiment and who would be there. I did not know the answers to many of her questions but I noticed that she seemed rather excited, which surprised me as it is not common for a girl, particularly of her age, to take an interest in such a fruitless pursuit considering our more limited options for the future.

Gathered around the table in Uncle Jeremy's study were several familiar faces and many that I had not seen before. Henry and Jane were there as was Uncle Jeremy with some of his fellow men of business. As we greeted each other we were rudely interrupted by the entrance of a very strange looking man.

He looked at odds with the polished furnishings of the house, his white hair unkempt and his carbon eyes reflecting the licking flames of the fire. The unusual man moved with a surprising elegance across the room towards Uncle Jeremy who introduced the man to us.

The man was not a derelict from the street as I had suspected but rather the man who we had all come to watch! He was the natural philosopher who had travelled from Glasgow. The Natural philosopher was the first I had ever met and I could see why; although he might be intelligent he was downright unpresentable in society.

When the experiment was about to begin the Natural philosopher made us turn out every light except for the lamp upon the table where the experiment was being held. Uncle Jeremy's young assistant, Bernard, drew the curtains and we gathered around the table. What happened next shocked me; the Natural philosopher called for Uncle Jeremy to go and get him a bird but, not just any bird, he called for him to fetch the finest bird he owned! Dutifully, in blind faith, Uncle Jeremy fetched his brand new white cockatoo from the aviary. Uncle bought this cockatoo a mere month ago when they brought them back from *terra australis incognita*. The rough hands of the Natural philosopher took the delicate, rare bird and pushed it into a large glass dome shaped instrument.

I entered the drawing room once more holding Lucy's hand, guiding her silently back to the table around which the experiment was still taking place. She had been overcome by emotion for the bird and had fainted. The bird had been deprived of air for several minutes now, as had Lucy, and the natural philosopher was now gradually bringing the bird out of limbo. I did not want Lucy to miss any of this so I made sure she stood where she could clearly see the bird awake.

That night when we were in the carriage on the way home Lucy startled me from my thoughts as I looked out the window

“Do you think we could get some of the books that Uncle Jeremy reads? Those ones from Cambridge and Oxford.”

Lucy was referring to the periodicals that Uncle Jeremy received from Oxford and Cambridge every month or so. They were filled with current and revolutionary thought and discussed areas such as philosophy and natural philosophy. I smiled for a while at the thought of Lucy, the same Lucy who faints at the thought of small white birds experiencing pain, reading the Oxford periodical. Lucy's interest; however, could only be expected after the confronting experience that we just had. I too felt like I had been invigorated with this overwhelming sense of urgency to find out more about what I had seen and had changed my previous opinion on the wild haired natural philosopher.

Shutting one eye to gain a closer look the young woman drew the crucible closer to her chest. The bubbling liquid that it contained became subdued as expected and she placed it down to take some notes of the reaction. Catherine was proud of what she had achieved and knew that a lot of her achievement and drive was owed to her uncle and his interest in natural philosophy. The first experiment she ever saw, the experiment on the bird in the air pump, was one of the most influential moments of her life, even though at the time she did not realise it. Picking up the crucible once more she swirled it counter clockwise twice, clockwise three times and sat it down again. She looked like a gypsy reading tea leaves but she knew that the conclusions she could draw from this crucible were more concrete than anything coming out of a teapot.

Catherine was still quietly criticised by her friends for her love of natural philosophy which, in turn, was seen as a lack of dedication to her two sons, William and Jonathon. This; however, failed to deter her as she could not help but thrust her dedication to natural philosophy upon her sons, who became equally enthused, which resulted in William and Jonathon spending nearly as much time in the laboratory as their mother did.



he destructive and overpowering characteristic of natural philosophy makes it hard for the natural world to compete. This is expertly demonstrated in Joseph Wright's painting *An Experiment on a Bird in an Air Pump*. The idea of natural philosophy and the natural world living harmoniously in the same sphere, with each thriving and evolving, is preposterous and downright ignorant. If natural philosophy is about mirroring the natural world why must we mirror what we already have? Wright's painting explores the exploitative nature of natural philosophy in the natural world as we see

a bird clearly suffering as a group of onlookers watch. Society today is full of onlookers who are standing by as we see natural philosophy take over and intervene in the natural world, destroying the order and cycles of nature. I have never seen London hazier, Manchester becoming larger and the British more ill. If you are in the area of Derby I urge you to go and see this painting, if you are unable to do this; look outside your window.

The Hull Packet, 1786

It seems that everyone's eyes are on the glass air pump and its contents. Almost everyone's. A young man seems preoccupied with the deeper shades of green in the eyes of his lover, as is she with his. The natural philosopher beckons for reactions however shall not be receiving any from the two young people on the fringe of the group for they have been transported far away from the room that contained them to a place that had no concern for natural philosophy whatsoever. Outside on the street you could hear the gas lamps being lit, adding some artificial light to the already indiscriminately bright light of the full moon.

When I walked down the street after escorting Rose to her home I stopped to sit in one of the parks that lay on the path back to my father's house. These parks, which used to be bountiful not so many years ago, have become scarce and novel so when I see one in London I still take care to sit for a moment. The beauty of the natural world shall always far outweigh the beauty of natural philosophy as far as I should see, however, there is an alarming emergence of disregard for the natural world.

God is mirrored in all things that he has created; he lives in the face of the sparrows, the eye of the storm and the mouth of the river. If we are to destroy all of these things to make way for the factories that serve to benefit only some people where should we find the Lord? For placing trees in cages denies the condition under which they exist: naturally. Sometimes I feel like walking up to people in the street and dragging them out of their coffee shops to pronounce wisdom unto their humbled ears

“Come forth into the light of things, let nature be your teacher”³

What should my children have to look forward to? Tonight I saw one of the most inhumane acts ever committed and it was committed to a bird, in a room full of people by a natural philosopher. The natural philosopher deprived the bird of air and then, with the great gusto which I am sure that the Lord enjoyed too, released a pump to choose to bring him back from limbo. He held the power to bring the bird back from the dead and he swung that authority over the heads of his audience as we waited in suspense to learn the fate of the bird. He used the power that God instilled within him to push the boundaries of his mortal omnipotence, choosing whether the bird should live, die or wait a while longer. Since when has this sort of experiment become acceptable, let alone a point for public viewing and entertainment. The young girls in the room began to weep for the rare bird and the men in the room watched on, as if they were at a theatre. This should not be entertainment. It is provocative, yes, but entertainment should not be at the expense of another being.

Man is intrinsically linked to the natural world, as natural philosophy ironically would prove; however, the natural world is not at all dependent on the society which we have ground into it. The relationship between the natural world and man is not one of equality, if anything it is one of selfishness and, now, destruction. If in the future we find ourselves in a world emptied of nature then we shall find ourselves in a society absent of guidance. Natural philosophy raises questions of existence whereas the natural world answers these questions. Without the natural world the answers to these questions may become void.

When I have a chance to sit and reflect I can sometimes allow myself to drift off into the most wondrous day dreams to places where time and space are not important.

I am taking off my shoes and I am connecting as I press my toes in the earth. I am closing my eyes but I know that the moon still shines onto my face. I am feeling the sensation of the pressure of the earth pushing against the weight of my feet. I am being lifted off slowly as I continue to lose myself.

I am transcending the confines of the city and moving up and beyond this world at this moment and its horrific disregard for all things true and pure. I am feeling it now.

³ Lines 15-16, *The Tables Turned*, Wordsworth, W.

There are many younger people like myself who are equally horrified at the direction that society's values are taking. It is only so long before values like mine become more abundant and society remembers what it must really value. That will be a time of true beauty. I can see it now; people moving out of the cities and into the country. I know that there shall be a time where I am not alone.

In this time I shall walk along the streets and see people acting upon impulse and raw emotion. Their feelings are not measured and counted but are genuinely evoked. I would climb up the mountains, through the fog and the mist to emerge atop a rocky mountain and I shall be able to look down and see no people, just the sublime natural world and its all of its components fashioned by the hand of God, which is the way that they would have remained. Everyone would have a genuine love and appreciation for the natural world and for its inhabitants and people would be treated as they should for it would be recognised that they were made in the image of God himself. I hope this time is coming because I know this is the world that I belong in.

Transportation through creation and imagination was first explored with me by the most memorable man I have ever met. I met him in 1780, a few days after the Gordon Riots. I was visiting the Royal Academy of Arts in the Strand as it was where I aspired to study once I had satisfactorily completed my "real education". There was a young man sitting in the foyer with his sketchbook in hands, being held by paint flecked fingernails and as I approached I could smell his own strong personal scent of turpentine and paint. I felt drawn to speak to this man for some peculiar reason so I feigned sudden interest in where the engraving workshop may be located so as to have an excuse to ask him and begin a conversation. The young man, when asked as to the whereabouts of the engraving workshop airily told me that it was down the hallway to the left of the Somerset viewing gallery but before the Eleventh Darkroom. To my delight this led into a lengthy conversation about my ambitions as a poet and an artist to which the young man, William, gave me some advice. He told me not to dream of artistic perfection but self perfection and the dignity of the body and soul. He then spoke about the power of imagination to expand the present life and reach into other equally vital dimensions. I walked away stunned from the very one sided conversation; me speechless for once and Mr Blake talking in such a way that I got the sense that it wasn't just to me. It was a moment that I shall forget nor shall its impact cease for some time. Now, six years later, when I wish to revisit the memory and the wisdom of William Blake I can go to my study and take down his collected works of poetry.

This man reflects on what the world is losing. This simplicity of mind and state and innocence is going to be lost in the future under the crushing palm of natural philosophy and its demand for proof, evidence and its apparent objectivity. Being objective is not something that should be praised as it encourages reliance on others; where should the spontaneity go when the world demands logic? Where will the all the imagination and faith go when society requires proof? Projections of life in the future will be as mechanic as the machines we are creating; nothing will be left to chance.

I decided I needed to get out; to go somewhere and do something to stop myself from thinking so negatively about everything. I felt entrapped by the smog and being surrounded by unsightly buildings was definitely not an inspiring climate to work in. I need to be reminded that in some places people can be simple minded with pure morals that have not been contaminated with the capitalist greed that dominates London. I do not want to leave Rose because it would be hard for her but I know that I should not ever live up to her expectations for the future; large house in London, her staying at home entertaining guests, me going to work in an office in the city centre every day. Nothing could be more excruciatingly mundane. As London becomes more like the place I fear than where I live I find myself fearing for the future of the ones that I love here. I know that I should never stay but my cousins Catherine and Lucy will be raised in a society that values money and forgets morals; that claims scientific truth reigns over natural beauty. Where should they find their spiritual guidance as it may be certain that The Lord would shall live in the concrete or the banknotes?

As I sit here I can hear the serene sounds of the owls hooting and wonder how long it may be before nature surrenders, how much of this building over nature may it put up with? It has to buckle under the pressure at some stage, whether it is now or in a hundred years. It is impossible to determine what it will take to make the factories stop and the greed cease. It could be the natural world shutting them out but with this much momentum they are in a state of inertial drive that shall not stop merely at the hands of plants and animal life. Work used to cease when the sun went down but now stronger gas lamps lighting up the machinery allow for extra working time while the very same gas lamps allow for the wealthy and privileged to safely enjoy the entertainment of the night which could be certain to not involve any late night prayer services or anything else possible enriching.

Dear Editor and Readers,

My painting was not meant to anger nor was it meant to incite divisions between the Church and our brothers in natural philosophy, however, I understand that once the canvas has left my easel the interpretation of the painting is no longer under my control, if it ever was.

Ask yourselves why you reacted the way that you did? I believe I received these reactions because we are turning into the entity we are challenging; we are standing on the precipice of the dawning of discovery of the workings of our world and we are not stopping to question the fundamental driving forces behind this search for Truth of existence. We have developed and progressed so far from our ancestors as to be questioning the very meaning of our existence yet society still fears progress. We are afraid of the very light of our society.

Nothing to harm anyone has ever been forced upon society from a laboratory; instead it has been subjugated and twisted at the hands of humanity. Do not question the dignified nature of the exploration of the natural world but instead question the society that takes the pure intentions of natural philosophy and uses them to deprave, oppress and elevate different groups in society. There is a potentially destructive force that works itself through scientific discovery at the hands of the proud and arrogant men who believe in and channel their omnipotence. We seem to forget about this destructive force and must be constantly reminded at every opportunity which is what I served to do with my painting.

To the natural philosophers: how much are we willing to sacrifice the individual for the grandeur of the natural philosophy? Look at the poor houses in the darkest streets of London. Look at the people working with steam engines, created at the hands of Watt⁴- a mere omnipotent mortal. These people are not the success story of the divine body that is natural philosophy but they are the slaves of the exploitation of technological discovery.

To the religions: why are you so opposed to something that might redefine what you believe in? Is religion not also about the search for truth? It scares us to think that we might be something smaller on this earth, something less significant but we believe in a greater being, a control. We could be that greater being, we could be that control but if we continue to oppose our progress we might never find out.

As for the light; it is a light, so bright, that it must be the light of revelation.⁵

⁴ James Watt invented and had implemented the first steam engines in 1776

⁵ Comment from Kimmelman, 1990.



So Bright It Could Only Be the Light of Revelation

Reflection Statement

During my preliminary studies of the Extension I English course I was exposed to the Enlightenment period and found Joseph Wright's painting, *An Experiment on a Bird in an Air Pump*, (1768). I was captivated by the image which revealed parallels between the Enlightenment and contemporary society. The painting makes a statement about the impact of science and technology on the social, economic, philosophical and religious paradigms of the period that marks the transition from the Enlightenment to Romanticism. Our contemporary society is a product of scientific and technological innovation and continues to be shaped by the possibilities that science promises. Poised on the eve of significant change we are forced to confront and debate profound ethical questions. My Major Work identifies the multiple responses to change stimulated by science, ranging from fear to optimism about the future. While the context of my short story is the Enlightenment, the questions and dilemmas raised by science are not dissimilar to the responses to change that we face today.

I have used Joseph Wright's painting in my story as a central image. It represents the interplay between science and religion as the focus for a debate about the ability of science to redefine the fabric of society and to challenge religion and God's place in society.

In Wright's painting, I identified four archetypes of the period: the capitalist, the scientist, the young females of the next generation and the romanticist of the next generation and I created a character and a story for each archetype. The capitalist's story is set in the Enlightenment as he represents the values of science and logic. The stories of the young girl and the romanticist, while being set in the Enlightenment, have projected images into the future Romantic period in order to explore the long term effects of the effects of radical scientific changes. In shaping the character of the romanticist I was heavily influenced by the works of Romantic poets Coleridge, Wordsworth and Blake, particularly Coleridge's *The Tables Turned* from which I directly quoted lines 15-16:

“Come forth into the light of things, let nature be your teacher.”

This intertextual reference reflects both the romantic values of the young man and positions the audience to recognise the young man's links with the future reactionary movement. Coleridge's poem *The Lime Tree Bower* inspired the stylistic choice to suspend reality and allow the romanticist to transcend time and project himself into the future Romantic period in the same sense that John Fowles' Sarah Woodruff, in the novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, occupies the nineteenth century but has the sensibilities of a twentieth century woman. Furthermore, in the same vein, all three poets purposely post-date the context of my major work which adds another element of transcendence to the romanticist's section. The young girl's story explores the impact that progress in science and technology had on redefining the possibilities for women as science gained greater respect in the wider community. This is seen through the changes that the young girl undertakes throughout the piece, such as changing her mind about the nature of science, and the contrast between her as a young girl and a woman. The description of her in the future reflects the continuation of the questioning of women's roles in society made possible by advances in science and technology.

Mary Shelley's Gothic novel, *Frankenstein*, inspired the epistolary structure of my story which consists of three framing devices, the first being the painting itself which features at the beginning and the end of the piece. The second is letters to the editor, which brings to the fore the ideological debate between science and religion. The two perspectives are identified by an outraged letter from a fictional member of the congregation, Cecil Vincent, representing religion, and a reply from Erasmus Darwin, representing science. These two letters are balanced by a response from Joseph Wright at the end of the story encouraging society to re-examine itself in the light of scientific possibilities. Within these frames are three stories each being positioned by a newspaper review to identify various public reactions to the painting and a third person account of each character's reaction to the science experiment.

Each archetype represented in the painting has been animated in my short story to articulate a different response to the experiment. *Hiroshima* (1946) by John Hersey, studied in the Extension I English Elective *After the Bomb*, effectively contrasts the various responses to the atomic bomb which inspired my choice of multiple perspectives. In the Advanced English module *Conflicting Perspectives* my attention was drawn to how texts can position the reader to align their perspectives with that of the author. Being conscious of the need for objectivity I tried not to privilege one perspective to accurately represent the debate between science and religion. In the light of contemporary debate that has risen from recent scientific progress I hope that my audience will be encouraged to keep an open mind as they draw parallels between the Enlightenment and our own time.

Through historical research I was able to construct authentic voices. *The Enlightenment; Studies in European History* by Roy Porter gave me insight into the values and attitudes of everyday society as well as the technology of machines that drove the Industrial Revolution such as the Spinning Jenny and Watt's Steam Engine. The format of the newspaper extracts, including the insertion of Berrow's advertisement for gout powder, has been replicated along with the language in use in 1768. This required significant use of the etymology dictionary. Further research into the science of the aether theory and air pump technology revealed the power of the painting as a metaphor for the transformative potential of scientific progress.

My intended audience is educated and interested in the crossroads of science and religion, however, the use of a range of archetypes serves to broaden the appeal of my major work to a larger audience. The historical context of the late Eighteenth century further broadens the audience. It is intended that my audience is able to see parallels between the late Eighteenth century and the Twenty First century.

Through my major work I have realised the universal nature of Wright's painting and its relevance to contemporary audiences. Wright's painting poses big questions and highlights ethical dilemmas around science and its ability to reshape society. Wright reminds us to always question the roles of both science and religion as we navigate a pathway into the future. Having been inspired by a painting I discovered in Extension I English course and further influenced by my own reading and research, my major work is my exploration of the role of science and technology and the influence it has on faith and religion from an Eighteenth century inspired worldview. This universal message of challenging the technological progress of society is more relevant today than perhaps at any other time due to the great ethical dilemmas that we face. The light in the painting was further illuminated by the comment from Kimmelman in 1990, who stated that the light portrayed was "so brilliant it could only be the light of revelation".