19 Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century

Judith Thompson, 'Operations and cooperations': John Thelwall, George Birkbeck, and the Movement for Public Education in Britain. *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 36 (2024) <https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.10608>

Open Library of Humanities

'Operations and cooperations': John Thelwall, George Birkbeck, and the Movement for Public Education in Britain

Judith Thompson

Drawn from new research towards the first full biography of the radical Romantic polymath John Thelwall, this article explores his 'operations and cooperations' with his friend George Birkbeck, leading up to the founding of the London Mechanics' Institution, Birkbeck College, and the University of London. Manifesting his lifelong preoccupation with democratic education, Thelwall's heretofore unknown contribution is rooted in the extensive, transnational lectures and educational institutions, both political and elocutionary, that he delivered and operated for mechanics (defined in relation to social class, science, language, and the body politic). They in turn were founded in eighteenth-century debating societies, and the long-neglected 'universal academy' of 'Orator Henley'. The article concludes that Thelwall too, so far ahead of his time and so long forgotten, still has much to teach us.

The role of George Birkbeck in the development of public education in Britain is well known. The London Mechanics' Institution (LMI) that he helped establish in 1823, which became the college given his name, grew out of the mechanics classes that Birkbeck offered at Anderson's Institution in Glasgow between 1800 and 1804 (*Fig. 1*). Both dates and sites are useful benchmarks in the movement for inclusive workers' and adult education, although alternative starting points have been suggested, including classes run by mechanics themselves after Birkbeck's departure from Glasgow, and John Anderson's own classes at Glasgow University well before Birkbeck's arrival there.[1] Another significant, but heretofore unrecognized, figure in this still-emerging history is Birkbeck's friend John Thelwall, the radical Romantic orator, polymath poet, and maker of the English working class. Major gaps in the biographies of both men, but especially Thelwall, have obscured their friendship and Thelwall's contribution. But new research for the first full biography, *Citizen Thelwall: A Voice for the Voiceless*, reveals the nature and significance of their 'operations and cooperations' leading up to the foundation of the LMI. Thelwall operated two institutions in London that were important precursors and influences for the LMI, starting thirty years before its opening, one political (the Beaufort Buildings) and one elocutionary (Mr Thelwall's Institution). Thelwall was a 'significant link-figure' not only between political reformers and intellectuals in London and the provinces, but also between mechanics (broadly defined), literature, oracy, and *logopaedia* (i.e. the advanced study, teaching, and therapy of speech).[2] In his hands, or more accurately, mouth, elocution was not just a polite art but a political act and a medical science of language, essential to the health, education, and operation of any democratic nation.

Before ranging back and forwards in time and space, let me begin in 1804, with my title quotation. It comes from a letter of February that year written by Thelwall, then lecturing in Glasgow, to inform a friend in Edinburgh of his future plans: 'Dr. Birkbeck + myself have determined to return to England together. Our respective operations + cooperations for spring and summer are projected — & the ensuing winter will witness, I hope, the establishment of <u>both</u> in London.'[3] His prediction was off by only a year: in March 1806 Thelwall opened his multipurpose 'Institution for the Cure of Impediments, Instruction of Foreigners, Improvement of Oratory and Preparation of Youth for the Higher Departments of Active Life', which would run for fifteen years (1806–20) in

[1] John Gardner, 'A Disruptive and Dangerous Education and the Wealth of the Nation: The Early Mechanics' Institutes', in *Institutions of Literature 1700–1900: The Development of Literary Culture and Production*, ed. by Jon Mee and Matthew Sangster (Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 196–214.

[2] E. P. Thompson, *The Romantics: England in a Revolutionary Age* (New Press, 1997), p. 176.

[3] John Thelwall to Dr Anderson, 9 February 1804, Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Adv.MSS.22.4.14 (p. 51).

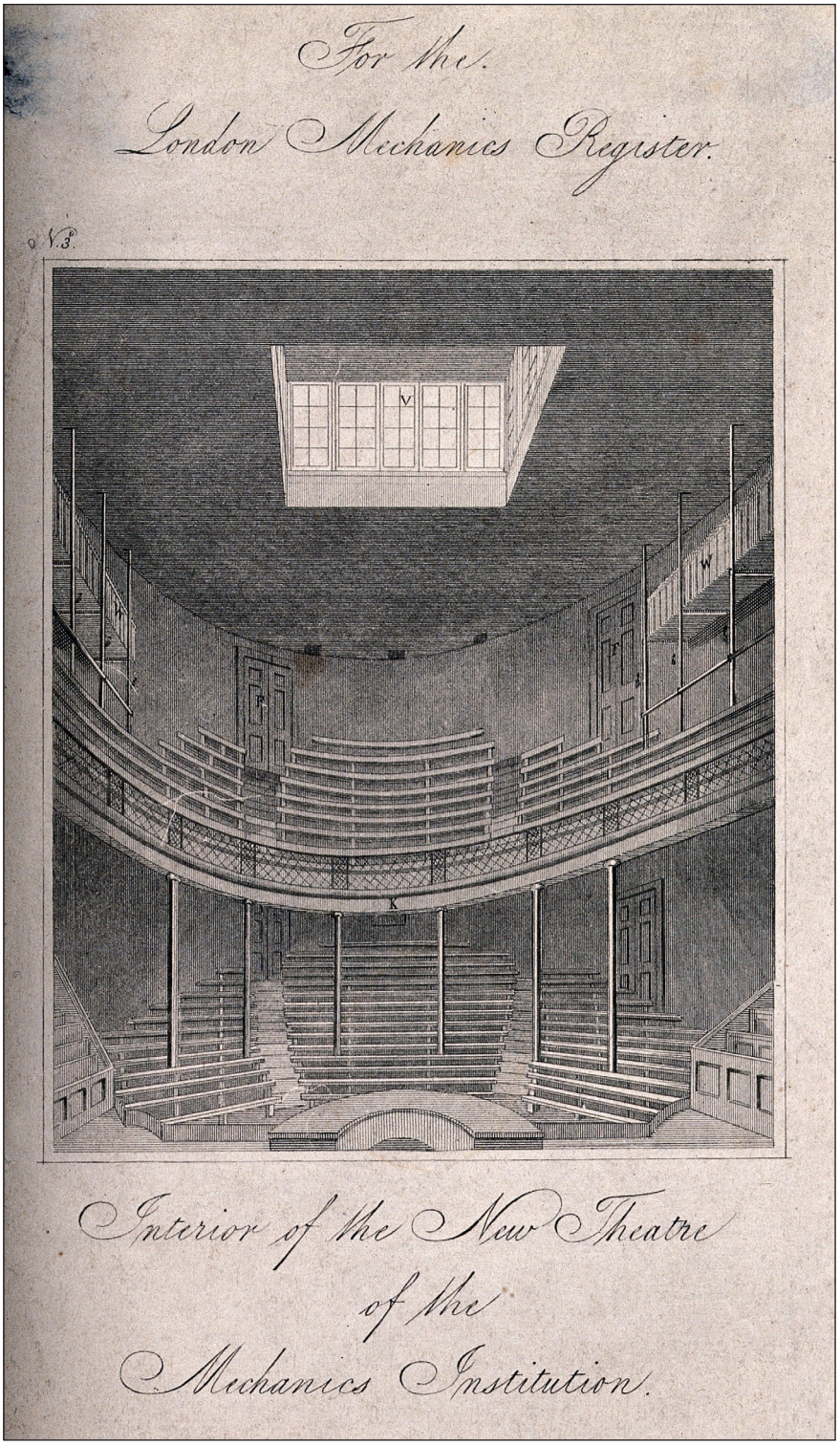

Fig. 1: Robert McWilliam, *London Mechanics' Institute, Southampton Buildings, Holborn: The Interior of the Lecture Theatre* (1825). Courtesy of the Wellcome Collection.

Bloomsbury and Lincoln's Inn Fields, while a newly married Birkbeck launched his medical practice, operating in fashionable Finsbury Square as well as the slums of Aldersgate and St Giles.[4] While not explicitly collaborative, their operations were complementary and remained so (Thelwall would name the child of his old age after Birkbeck). Both men combined lucrative enterprise and humanitarian values in theory and therapy, intellectual sociability, and leadership, pursuing similar ends through parallel activities in intersecting circles. Birkbeck was not notoriously radical, but shared Thelwall's egalitarian principles and friends among radical doctors like Astley Cooper; Thelwall was not a doctor, but had studied medicine, and his elocutionary practice was rooted in those studies and networks (his chief elocutionary treatise 'A Letter to Henry Cline' was addressed to his and Cooper's common mentor). Though elocution is not now recognized as a legitimate pedagogical or medical profession (in fact its history has been little studied), Thelwall practised and promoted it as such, uniquely defining it as simultaneously the art, the act, and the science of speaking, the 'whole theory and practice of the exterior demonstration of the inward workings of the mind'.[5] Adopting oral methods used by dissenting educators to foster moral agency, self-determination, and civic awareness, and drawing on his training in anatomy, materialism, and scientific laws of 'progressive motion, organic and mechanical', Thelwall worked to overcome all manner of impediments to speech in a manner consistent with his now better known political ideals.[6]

Thelwall and Birkbeck were acquainted before 1804, but when they met in Glasgow in January of that year, both were at a crossroads. After almost four years at Anderson's Institution (he was hired in late 1799), Birkbeck was only a few months away from resigning, due to a conflict with the managers who had failed to pay his salary, and who began charging a fee for the popular mechanics classes that he had been offering gratis.[7] Over the same period, Thelwall had prospered by giving public lectures and private lessons on elocution throughout the Midlands and North, profiting from his reputation as the most powerful popular orator in the country. But he was also attacked for the radical democratic beliefs he still held, despite moderating his

[4] Thomas Kelly, *George Birkbeck: Pioneer of Adult Education* (Liverpool University Press, 1957), pp. 41–42.

[5] 'Introductory Discourse on the Nature and Objects of Elocutionary Science', in *Selected Political Writings of John Thelwall*, ed. by Robert Lamb and Corinna Wagner, 4 vols (Pickering & Chatto, 2008), IV: *Late Journalism and Writing on Elocution and Oratory, 1810–1832*, pp. 119–28 (p. 120).

[6] 'A Letter to Henry Cline', in *Selected Political Writings*, ed. by Lamb and Wagner, IV, pp. 3–111 (p. 15). On the role of dissenting educators in the history of elocution, see Judith Thompson, 'Elocutionary Rhetoric: Educating the Vox Populi; or, Delivery as Deliverance', in *The Cambridge History of Rhetoric* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), IV: *The Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Adam Potkay and Dietmar Till.

[7] Gardner, p. 200; Kelly, pp. 35–37. Though Birkbeck announced his resignation in August 1803, there was a period of negotiation and uncertainty, which coincided with his discussions with Thelwall.

public pronouncements in accordance with the reactionary repression of the era.[8] His discussions with Birkbeck reanimated plans he had hatched with his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge five years before, to set up a school that might both allay persecution and reduce the breakneck intensity of the itinerant profession that separated him from his growing family. During the year that followed their departure from Scotland, he and Birkbeck took parallel paths, intersecting again in Kendal (where Birkbeck had family and the Thelwalls were based) and lecturing in many of the same places (like Hull and Birmingham, where Birkbeck courted his wife).[9] Thelwall taught elocution at several schools (in Rotherham and Doncaster, for example) before settling with his family in Liverpool (where Birkbeck was also lecturing) in summer 1805. There he opened his first elocutionary institution in his home, moving it to London the following spring.

For Thelwall this was a time of both transition and continuity. His five-month Scottish tour has traditionally been seen as the end of his political life, after he had embroiled himself in a pamphlet war with Francis Jeffrey and the *Edinburgh Review*, which had trashed his poems, mocked his elocutionary science, and disrupted his Edinburgh lectures. According to E. P. Thompson, 'the political fox was now dead', and Glasgow was a retreat into vain delusion (p. 190). Insufficient understanding both of elocution in general, and of Thelwall's later career, has obscured the fact that his new elocutionary endeavour was a strategic redirection, not an abandonment, of his political principles and efforts. A closer look at his lectures and pamphlets reveals how firmly he maintained the commitment to democratic rights, and especially to working-class education, that he had championed in his chief political treatise, *The Rights of Nature*, eight years before: elocution was simply another way to teach 'practical fluency' to that 'great body of virtue, intelligence and well-grounded principle among what may be called the *Sansculotterie*'.[10] Members of that body — mechanics and millowners alike, as well as printers, booksellers, dissenters, journalists, intellectuals, trades- and craftsmen and women, aspiring artists, poets, and performers — flocked to his elocutionary lectures of 1801–05, as they had to his political and classical history lectures of 1794–97. In Edinburgh he militantly defended not only his own

[8] Thelwall was one of a 'lost generation' devastated by this 'Reign of Alarm', as detailed by Kenneth R. Johnston, *Unusual Suspects: Pitt's Reign of Alarm and the Lost Generation of the 1790s* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

[9] While living in Kendal, Thelwall had an impact on another of the small, local institutions that heralded the mechanics' institutes: its Society for Promoting Useful Knowledge, more independent and less paternalistic than the similarly named Societies for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge promoted twenty years later by Henry Brougham, one of the founders of the LMI. See Judith Thompson, 'A Shadow in Profile: John Thelwall in the Lake District', in *Grasmere 2008: Selected Papers from the Wordsworth Summer Conference*, compiled by Richard Gravil (Humanities EBooks, 2009), pp. 175–203.

[10] 'The Rights of Nature', in *The Politics of English Jacobinism: Writings of John Thelwall*, ed. by Gregory Claeys (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp. 389–500 (pp. 399–400).

elocutionary science, but his fellow Lake Poets' egalitarian experiments in extending poetry to 'common' subjects in the 'real language of men', which had been attacked along with his own 'vulgar' intellectual pretensions in the *Edinburgh Review*'s anti-Jacobin culture war.[11] In his pamphlet counter-attack Thelwall proudly allied himself with a pantheon of working-class intellects: the poets John Gay ('a Silk-mercer'), Matthew Prior (a 'Coffeehouse waiter'), and Robbie Burns ('an Ayreshire ploughman') as well as 'the Statesman, the philanthropist and the Philosopher' Benjamin Franklin ('a *printer's devil*'). Asserting that 'the excellence that these had a right to *attain*, I had a right to *attempt*', he stood proudly with the 'profane and unhallowed vulgar', and on their behalf took on the 'fiery dragons of Criticism' who guarded 'the Hesperian fruit of genius and intellect'.[12] His elocutionary science also took democratic poetics a step further by actually putting the words of great poets into the mouths of the people. Even as the lowly but polymath ploughman voiced a 'Chevalier's Lament' with the natural nobility of a 'man for a' that' beyond hierarchies of class, so Thelwall, in reciting that and many other poems, took high and low into his own mouth, to repeat and amplify Burns's radical message of equality through elocution.

In his ongoing battle with dragon 'wits and literati', Thelwall found allies in Glasgow, a city typical of many provincial centres of industry, invention, and improvement that had supported him, as they had the democratic cause in the 1790s, and would do so again, from Peterloo and the Radical War of 1820 to the Reform Bill agitation and Chartism in the 1830s and 1840s. In Glasgow Thelwall was inspired not just by Birkbeck but by the ideals upon which his workplace was founded. John Anderson, an idiosyncratic professor of natural philosophy and oriental languages at Glasgow University, arguably began the mechanics' movement in the 1760s, with 'anti-toga' classes, which he invited labouring men and women to attend in their work clothes, without charge.[13] He continued that effort after his death in 1796 by leaving all his money to found an alternative university whose mandate was to

> diffuse that useful branch of knowledge [natural and experimental philosophy] more generally among Artists and Manufacturers connected with the trade and prosperity

---

[11] Despite its general Whig sympathies, the *Edinburgh Review* shared the anti-Jacobinism that was widespread in Scotland, especially Edinburgh. Its attacks on Thelwall and the Lake Poets (not yet labelled as such) were part of a broader campaign against 'levelling' in poetry.

[12] 'A Letter to Francis Jeffray', in *Selected Political Writings*, ed. by Lamb and Wagner, III: *Journalism and Selected Writings on Elocution and Oratory, 1797–1809*, pp. 109–55 (pp. 129–31), emphases in original.

[13] Jon Klancher, 'Lecturing Networks and Cultural Institutions 1740–1830', in *Institutions of Literature 1700–1900*, ed. by Mee and Sangster, pp. 135–56.

> of this city [...] as well as to afford a rational and agreeable amusement to the Ladies, who, by the Professor's Will, are admitted to the benefit of these Lectures.[14]

Those artists, manufacturers, and ladies also supplied Thelwall's audiences and the friends with whom he socialized in Glasgow. One of them was Mary Bannatyne, who had won first prize in her botany class at Anderson's Institution, and to whom Thelwall addressed an ode celebrating their 'interchange of soul' as 'intellectual beings [...] improving and improv'd', while also honouring 'our common friend' and 'guide | Thro the bright maze of science', unnamed but almost certainly Birkbeck. Thelwall met Bannatyne among the 'kindred minds' and 'kind circle' of the Grahame family, which included Robert, a sympathetic lawyer who had defended the radical 'Scottish Martyrs' in 1793, and his brother James, a poet attacked in 1804 by the *Edinburgh Review* after defending the rights of the poor in his popular poem 'The Sabbath', forcing him to remove its very militant preface from subsequent editions.[15]

Mary's father Dugald Bannatyne connected these Glasgow radicals to wider intellectual networks through his friendship with members of the Roscoe circle, a similarly supportive, socially progressive, polymathic group of 'Liverpool Jacobins' and passionate abolitionists that included Edward Rushton, an outspoken radical bookseller, poet, and founder of the landmark Liverpool School for the Blind in 1791.[16] This too provided an important influence on Thelwall's institution. During and after his five-month residence in Liverpool in 1805, Thelwall and Rushton exchanged poems, letters, and conversation on matters political, philosophical, and pedagogical, and Thelwall addressed an ode to Rushton on the restoration of his sight in 1807.[17] Born poor and sent to sea as a boy, Rushton had gone blind at the age of 17 while trying to

---

[14] Arianne Chernock, *Men and the Making of Modern British Feminism* (Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 49–50, 172. Chernock quotes a statement of the goals of the institution upon its foundation from the John Anderson Papers, Glasgow, University of Strathclyde Archives, OB/5/1/2/1.

[15] For information on the Bannatynes and Grahames, I am indebted to research done by Mark Diachyshyn in '"Their Voice is Music to my Ear": The Role of Women in the Work of John Thelwall' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Dalhousie University, 2019). Quotations are from 'To Miss Bannatine', in *John Thelwall: Selected Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Judith Thompson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 197–98.

[16] William Roscoe, historian, attorney, banker, and patron of the arts, was the centre of a distinguished and prosperous circle of middle-class dissenters and activists, which dominated the cultural and commercial life of the city, but was at odds with its powerful slave-trading bloc. It included Bannatyne's friend Dr James Currie, the biographer of Burns, and Dr Peter Crompton, a lifelong friend of Thelwall's who was connected to equally influential circles of dissent, reform, and science in Derby and Birmingham. See Ian Sellers, 'William Roscoe, The Roscoe Circle and Radical Politics in Liverpool, 1789–1807', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 120 (1968), pp. 45–62 <https://www.hslc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/120-5-Sellers.pdf> [accessed 14 November 2023].

[17] John Thelwall, 'Ode III. To Edward Rushton, of Liverpool', in Thelwall, *The Vestibule of Eloquence* (the author, 1810), pp. 81–84.

help slaves suffering from an outbreak of eye disease on a slave ship, an experience that gave him a profound insight into the rights and wrongs of those marginalized by class, race, and disability. Having overcome economic, social, and physiological impediments through his own prodigious self-education (memorizing books that he hired a boy to read aloud to him), he recognized the intellectual potential of the 'indigent blind' and resolved to encourage it. The institution that he helped establish anticipated the mechanics' institutes not least in the disputes among its strong-minded founders, between those like Rushton who envisioned something cooperative and autonomous, operated for and by the blind themselves, and those who wanted it to be a charitable 'school of industry' controlled by well-off patrons and the Church (which it ended up becoming).[18] Thelwall's interest in disabled education at this time was also fostered by his friendship with John Gough, the famed 'blind philosopher' of Kendal. Gough's example, and theories, of sensory compensation and the sonorous body had a significant impact on Thelwall's elocutionary theory and practice; in their lively conversations and correspondence (much of it published in the *Monthly Magazine* and 'A Letter to Henry Cline') they exchanged case studies, each seeking advice and contributing his own ideas and experience regarding the treatment of physiological, psychological, cognitive, and behavioural impediments.[19]

These inspiring interchanges and influences built on deeper foundations, however, laid a full century before the LMI by John 'Orator' Henley, an eloquent dissenting minister whom Thelwall celebrated, vindicated, and with whom he identified himself, in an 1826 essay on the anniversary of the opening of Henley's Oratory in London in 1726.[20] This eccentric but highly successful 'Universal Academy' of 'ye Sciences, School Learning and ye Classicks' was established above a meat market in Soho and ran for thirty years, till Henley's death in 1756 (eight years before Thelwall was born). Part church, part school, part theatre, it resembled a one-man university in its scope, with Henley offering 'academical lectures' on a wide range of subjects (including mathematics, the new sciences, rhetoric, and belles-lettres), organizing 'conferences' and 'disputations', and publishing these 'oratorical transactions' along with a weekly newspaper, the *Hyp Doctor*.[21] The aim of his institution was 'to search the truth [...] by a mutual free communication' for the 'equal benefit of persons of all ranks, professions,

[18] Franca Dellarosa, *Talking Revolution: Edward Rushton's Rebellious Poetics 1782–1814* (Liverpool University Press, 2014), pp. 5–14; Michael W. Royden, *Pioneers and Perseverance: A History of the Royal School for the Blind, Liverpool 1791–1991* (Countyvise, in conjunction with the Royal School for the Blind, 1991), pp. 25–39.

[19] Judith Thompson, *John Thelwall in the Wordsworth Circle: The Silenced Partner* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 93.

[20] [John Thelwall], 'Orator Henley', *Retrospective Review*, 14 (1826), pp. 206–25 (pp. 207–16).

[21] Henley's title shows that he saw himself as a healer treating maladies of the body politic, 'hyp' being a common abbreviation for hypochondria or melancholy at the time (*OED*).

circumstances and capacities', from labouring butchers to a visiting Voltaire. Henley also welcomed women as patrons, students, participants, and political allies. With subscriptions starting at sixpence, the Oratory was widely accessible and wildly popular; audiences were drawn by Henley's charismatic theatricality but also by their own hunger for knowledge. Over the years Henley became increasingly radical theologically and politically, and was imprisoned for sedition, 'connected with the idea of mere ignorance, charlatanism and impudence',[22] treated with mocking condescension by established literati like Alexander Pope, and satirically caricatured (note the cloven hoof under Henley's robe, and his animal companion (*Fig.* 2)). As a result, upon his death, his memory, work, and even his grave were virtually erased from history. First rescued from oblivion fifty years ago, Henley has more recently been reclaimed

Fig. 2: George Bickham the Younger, *The Oratory* (1731). The Trustees of the British Museum. CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

[22] Thelwall, 'Orator Henley', p. 207.

by Paula McDowell as a key figure in *The Invention of the Oral*, a groundbreaking reconceptualization of orality as oracy, the dynamic and sophisticated cooperation of 'print and oral discourse' characteristic of working-class and 'urban venues'.[23]

In the last thirty-five years, Henley's most important cultural legacy — the debating society — has been rescued from a similar fate.[24] Scholars agree that these associations and their variants (spouting and mooting clubs) were 'epidemical' in the late eighteenth century; but their very popularity has been an impediment to their consideration as legitimate institutions of education. Serving the same class, gender, and racially mixed constituency as Henley's Oratory — tradesmen, apprentices, tailors, clerks, cockneys, law students, aspiring actors, men, and women — they ranged in size from small, informal, or exclusive discussion groups in coffee houses and pubs to inclusive, formal debates attracting audiences of up to 1200 in large assembly rooms with a moderator, several speakers, and a vote reported in the press, like a counter-parliament for those denied a voice in government and education. Topics were often but not primarily political, and as wide-ranging as the audience: women's issues (from sports to suffrage) were very popular in the female-led Belle Assemblée, but also in the larger mixed societies, and in one year alone (1787–88) there were more than twenty-one debates on the subject of slavery and abolition, including one memorable evening that featured both an ex-slave (probably Olaudah Equiano in advance of his *Interesting Narrative*) and 'a LADY' known for 'intellectual accomplishments, and wonderful powers of eloquence'.[25] The movement peaked in 1780, when there were more than thirty such societies in London alone, staging almost three hundred debates a year, and still more in rapidly growing provincial centres, even in smaller towns like Paisley, whose Encyclopedia Club, founded in 1770, was still going strong a century later.[26] However, due to government hysteria over the perceived danger of common people finding their voices at the time of the French Revolution, debating societies were viciously

[23] Paula McDowell, *The Invention of the Oral: Print Commerce and Fugitive Voices in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), pp. 6, 115–61. Aside from the quotation from Thelwall noted previously, the quotations in this paragraph are from Henley's 'Academical Lectures' and 'Oratorical Transactions', as quoted by McDowell, pp. 115–38.

[24] Mary Thale, 'London Debating Societies in the 1790s', *Historical Journal*, 32.1 (1989), pp. 57–86, doi:10.1017/S0018246X00015302; and *London Debating Societies 1776–1799*, ed. by Donna T. Andrew (London Record Society, 1994). McDowell connects Henley to the rise of debating societies (p. 160).

[25] *London Debating Societies*, ed. by Andrew, pp. 216–46, esp. item 1318 (25 February 1788, Westminster Forum) <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/london-record-soc/vol30/pp216-246> [accessed 18 January 2024]. Adam Potkay compares Equiano to Demosthenes in 'History, Oratory, and God in Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 34.4 (2001), pp. 601–14, doi:10.1353/ecs.2001.0046. Given the date and location of the debate (Westminster Forum), it is quite possible that this is the lady to whom Thelwall paid tribute in his 'Speech in Rhyme'.

[26] *London Debating Societies*, ed. by Andrew, pp. vii–xiii; and John Crawford, 'The Community Library in Scottish History', *IFLA Journal*, 28.5–6 (2002), pp. 245–55, doi:10.1177/034003520202800. The Encyclopedia Club appears in *Watson's Directory for Paisley* (Watson, 1871), p. 251.

suppressed and most of them disappeared after the Gagging Acts of 1795. This seed of democratic education was thus buried almost as deeply as the oratorical tree it fell from, with historians tending to accept satirical stereotypes of their predominantly lower-class participants as vulgar, mindless buffoons, and pretentious, pushy blowhards, as reflected in the satirical prints reproduced here (*Figs* 2 and 3).

The life of Thelwall provides strong evidence to the contrary, though he too faced the same satirical attacks. From his late teens, he was a 'conductor and constant speaker at some of the public debating societies' in London, including the two largest, Westminster Forum and Coachmaker's Hall, which he regarded as 'seminar[ies]' offering 'oratorical degrees'. They formed his character, aroused his democratic activism, and compensated for the classical education he was denied by social class and economic circumstance.[27] In fact intellectual curiosity and ambition, more than politics, was the keystone of Thelwall's polymath identity. This can be seen in his very first autobiography, published at the tender age of 23 in his *Poems on Various Subjects* (1787): a remarkable sequence of twelve elegies, in which he mourns himself in the persona of Thomas Gray's 'mute inglorious Milton', fired by the 'Love of Science', but cursed as a 'youth of humble birth' to whom 'the deathless classics [were] never taught [...] | To me no aid laborious science brought [...] | Thro academic groves I never rov'd'. The 'cold Misfortune [that] chill'd [his] progress long' and 'suppress' his 'aspiring flame' is a persistent theme in all his autobiographies, including *The Peripatetic* of 1793, in which he celebrates the Socratic tutor, 'a young man of spirits, as well as ingenuity', who 'wak'd the first spark' just before he was withdrawn from school at the age of 13, encouraging voracious and indiscriminate reading, and eccentric conversations with and in nature and society.[28] These led him to the debating societies that continued his self-education, including the one in which he is now best known, the radical London Corresponding Society (1792–99). In fact, in many ways the Beaufort Buildings, headquarters of the LCS where he gave lectures, held meetings, and made his home for three years (1793–96), was Thelwall's first educational institution. It has an equal claim to be considered the first mechanics' institution, if one takes the word *mechanic* in its 'senses relating to [...] manual workers [...] artisans, tradesmen' rather than 'senses relating to mechanics as a science'.[29] Indeed, though he focused on political

[27] Mrs H. C. Thelwall, *The Life of John Thelwall* (Macrone, 1837), pp. 34, 40. As this biography makes clear, these societies first awakened his social conscience, and their suppression by the Two Bills of 1792 first sparked his political activism.

[28] Thelwall follows the versification of Gray's 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard' in his elegies, from which I quote here: Elegy VII, 'The Consolation', in *Poems on Various Subjects*, 2 vols (the author, 1787), II, p. 105. Other quotations are from *The Peripatetic*, ed. by Judith Thompson (Wayne State University Press, 2001), p. 300; and 'Harvey. An Apostrophe', in *Thelwall: Selected Poetry*, ed. by Thompson, p. 143.

[29] Headings from *OED* I. 1–2 and II. 4. Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* makes the same class distinction in the noun: a 'low workman' vs 'a mathematical science'.

rather than scientific education, Thelwall's lectures made reference to science, along with literature, history, economics, moral philosophy, and many other subjects, in their analysis and application of fundamental democratic principles.

Like Henley's Oratory, the Beaufort Buildings was a multipurpose, egalitarian institution, devoted to 'mutual free communication' in speech and print. Like Henley, Thelwall charged sixpence, attracting the widest possible audience, male and female, from illiterate labourers seeking political education to curious aristocrats looking for entertainment. The space, too, was similar, with a street-level 'market' of ideas for the 'swinish multitude',[30] where in 1795 his weekly newspaper *The Tribune* was produced and sold; while upstairs, in an assembly room decorated with busts and prints of republican orator-heroes, Thelwall lectured two to three times a week, to audiences of up to seven hundred.[31] For him as for Henley, free speech and a free press went hand in hand; oracy and literacy cooperated as fundamental counterparts in a representative public sphere. Thelwall's profound egalitarianism was reflected in the one-level layout of this room, which had neither the high pulpit and gallery of Henley's Oratory, nor the steeply stratified seating that distinguished more exclusive lecturing institutions like the Royal or Surrey, which reacted against Thelwall's. Their intellectual elitism was signalled by the separation not only of speaker from audience but of different social classes from one another, a hierarchical structure of knowledge and education that would prevail well into the nineteenth century (and arguably still continues in the status-oriented universities of the present day).[32] By contrast, Thelwall, influenced by the debating societies, deliberately aimed at 'promiscuous' public intermixture and interaction (a cornerstone of his political programme), as seen in the only image of the Beaufort Buildings' interior during his tenure, a caricature labelled *Debating Society*, published in May 1795 (*Fig. 3*).[33] It shows Thelwall, at the centre of a crowd on the floor,

[30] Radicals appropriated and wittily played upon this term of abuse that had originated in Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), in which he lamented the destruction of 'natural' hierarchies of learning which 'will be cast into the mire and trodden down under the hoofs of a swinish multitude'. See *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy*, ed. by Marilyn Butler (Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 33–49 (p. 46).

[31] On the Beaufort Buildings layout and operation, see Judith Thompson, 'From Forum to Repository: A Case Study in Romantic Cultural Geography', *European Romantic Review*, 15.2 (2004), pp. 177–91, doi:10.1080/10509580420001680615.

[32] The class apartheid was epitomized in the removal in 1799 of a back staircase intended for working-class audiences at the Royal Institution, which was seen as having 'a dangerous political tendency', as Sarah Zimmerman points out in *The Romantic Literary Lecture in Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 6. Gillian Russell deals comparatively with lecture spaces, including the Beaufort Buildings, in relation to gender more than class in 'Spouters or Washerwomen: The Sociability of Romantic Lecturing', in *Romantic Sociability: Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain 1770–1840*, ed. by Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 123–44.

[33] 'To mix with all ranks of men is the duty of every individual […]. It is the *promiscuousness* of society, and not the multitude, that enables us to form in any degree a just idea of the state of popular sentiments' ('Consequences of Depriving

Fig. 3: Isaac Cruikshank, *Debating Society. (Substitute for Hair Powder)* (1795). Courtesy of Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

orating and gesticulating; a moderator trying vainly to keep order from the slightly raised tribune to the side; and everyone talking at once. Thelwall is juxtaposed with the head of an ass at a window in the background, and the caption indicates the speakers are 'braying'.[34] Like the caricatures of Henley, this satirizes the very idea of popular oratory and egalitarian education (though Thelwall was not demonized as thoroughly as Henley). Thelwall was actually renowned for keeping order in the Beaufort Buildings; his lecture on the hair tax, being satirized here, was quite sensibly criticizing the folly of fashion (using flour to dress wigs at a time of war and famine).

---

the Mass of the People of their Share in the Representation' [from *Tribune*, vol. 2], in *The Politics of English Jacobinism*, ed. by Claeys, pp. 181–209 (pp. 187–89), emphasis in original).

[34] Quoted in Russell, p. 130. On the depiction of Thelwall's institutions in satiric caricature, see Steve Poole, 'Gillray, Cruikshank & Thelwall: Visual Satire, Physiognomy and the Jacobin Body', in *John Thelwall: Critical Assessments*, ed. by Yasmin Solomonescu, in *Romantic Circles* (2011) <https://romantic-circles.org/praxis/thelwall/praxis.2011.thelwall.poole> [accessed 18 January 2024].

What allies Thelwall with Henley, Anderson, and Rushton, and differentiates him from most other pedagogical precursors and contemporaries, was his profound faith in the 'animating intelligence' and rational capacity of every human being, no matter how 'despised' or disabled by 'name [...] colour [...] country', poverty, class, or gender.[35] While even political anarchists like Thelwall's friend William Godwin were terrified by mass audiences and popular oratory, which they associated with mob violence and demagoguery, Thelwall saw them as essential to the political process. He recognized the danger of a mob, and worked constantly (and very successfully) to defuse violence, but even after he became its victim he argued that it was fostered by the calculated ignorance of tyrannical elites who preferred to keep the populace in blind ignorance, as silent, fearful slaves, dupes and tools, rather than treating them as autonomous agents and equals able to think for themselves. In all his lectures he maintained that inclusive, truly public education was the only way to allay fear, avoid riot, fix convictions, shake prejudices, interest imaginations, resolve arguments, and give the vox populi the 'practical fluency' required of every citizen in an enlightened nation. Despite his conspicuous and much-maligned theatrical ego, his principles and practice were profoundly democratic, as he consistently decentred his own intellectual authority in favour of 'associated intellect':

> All instruction, all reading, all eloquence are no further useful than as they cultivate the seeds of enquiry in the minds of those who listen or peruse; and as they furnish them with materials wherewith to work for themselves in those grand enquiries in which it is the happiness and interest of man to be engaged [...]. I do not deliver opinions from this place, for you to adopt them without examination [...] be as averse to a Pope in Beaufort Buildings as to a Pope at Rome.[36]

The 'associated intellect' of Thelwall's 'great body' is in some ways similar to what contemporary psychologists call the 'social brain' or 'distributed mind', which is as good a definition of an institution as any.[37]

---

[35] 'The Second Lecture on the Moral and Political Influences of the Prospective Principle of Virtue' [from *Tribune*, vol. 1], in *The Politics of English Jacobinism*, ed. by Claeys, pp. 102–16 (p. 111); and 'Report on the State of Popular Opinion, and the Causes of the Rapid Diffusion of Democratic Principles', in *Tribune*, II (1796), pp. 185–200 (p. 186). Available at *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*.

[36] 'The Duty and Interest of the People to Enquire into the Causes and Conduct of Wars' [from *Tribune*, vol. 1], in *The Politics of English Jacobinism*, ed. by Claeys, pp. 80–87 (pp. 80–81); 'Lecture on the Moral and Political Influences of the Prospective Principle of Virtue', pp. 88–102 (p. 89); and 'The Rights of Nature', p. 400.

[37] *Social Brain, Distributed Mind*, ed. by Robin Dunbar, Clive Gamble, and John Gowlett (British Academy, 2010). This concept was raised in discussion at one of the colloquia that fed into Mee and Sangster's *Institutions of Literature*, whose editors, drawing on Raymond Williams's *Keywords*, also note a shift in definition of *Institution* at the end of the eighteenth century, from a set of performative acts and practices to an established system of authority (pp. 7–8).

As much as his Beaufort institution focused on socio-economic enquiry, it might be argued that its primary purpose was to offer a much-needed education in the politics of language, for Thelwall recognized, as Henley did eighty years before, and Orwell would 150 years later, that language is an essential tool of the people, who must therefore be educated against its abuse. Well before he defined elocution as the art, science, and act of speaking, Thelwall was teaching it both in the substance of his lectures (like his well-known 'Spies and Informers', which constitutes a 'politically informed ars rhetorica'),[38] and in his broadly, brilliantly instrumental oratory, whose rapid, multiple modulations of sound, syntax, metaphor, allegory, irony, wordplay, and gesture literally embody the 'universal principle of action and reaction' and 'law of progressive motion' at the heart of his elocutionary theory and practice. Indeed, the *Prospectus of a Course of Lectures* he produced 'in strict conformity with the restrictions' of the Gagging Acts at the end of 1795 begins with a defence and analysis of oral delivery, in terms similar to those he used in later essays.

Thelwall spent a year following that prospectus lecturing on classical history in London and the Midlands, but facing increasing persecution, which culminated in his eviction from the Beaufort Buildings at the end of 1796. Thus began his ten-year hiatus from a bricks-and-mortar institution, starting with a return to his first love, poetry, when he followed the invitation of Coleridge and became a self-proclaimed 'Recluse', farming with his family in the romantic Wye Valley of Wales. Though this was a significant turning point in his life, he did not abandon his principles: not only did he spend considerable time and energy conversing with radical ironworkers in Merthyr Tydfil and a 'Society of Jacobins' in Hereford, but he took his first pupils and patients in Wales and conceived his elocutionary system in a romantic epiphany while 'resounding' the prosody of Milton and Dryden beside his rural hearth. This retreat exemplified the therapeutic rhythm of action and reaction that he formulated out of that epiphany and recounted in his 'Letter to Henry Cline'. It also complemented the rhythm of restoration he had outlined in a political lecture of 1795, where he defended the necessity of regular, temporary 'retirement from the path of public duty [...] to fit me for the pursuit of that duty with more vigor and more effect' upon his return.[39]

---

[38] Judith Thompson, 'Re-sounding Romanticism: John Thelwall and the Science and Practice of Elocution', in *Spheres of Action: Speech and Performance in Romantic Culture*, ed. by Alexander Dick and Angela Esterhammer (University of Toronto Press, 2009), pp. 21–45.

[39] 'The Address of J. Thelwall to the Audience at Closing his Lectures for the Season', in *Tribune*, I (1795), pp. 329–37 (p. 330); and 'A Letter to Henry Cline', pp. 8–9. The only pupil we know he had in Wales was James Belcher Jr, son of a radical printer and bookseller in Birmingham. See 'Letter from John Thelwall to Thomas Clark', prod. by Nicholas Benbow (2018), in *John Thelwall: Words and Work* <https://wordsandwork.johnthelwall.org/archive/beaufort/correspondence/> [accessed 10 November 2023]. His first patients were the sons of a hatter in Brecon, whom he taught with a mix of

That renewed vigour went into effect when he began his elocutionary practice in 1801, taking advantage of what was by then a well-established provincial lecture circuit, serving an ever growing market for intellectual entertainment among an 'alert, inquiring and [...] thinking people', outside the universities and larger metropolitan centres.[40] Itinerant lecturers, some distinguished, most now forgotten, spoke not only on science but on many different subjects, including elocution, at dissenting academies, 'lit-and-phil' societies, civic clubs, local assembly rooms, and theatres around the country; indeed, sometimes their routes followed those of provincial theatre companies.[41] This was the case with Thelwall, whose 'love of Science' and 'rage for theatricals' had overlapped since early youth, and whose circuit also intersected with radical networks in which he was already well known.[42] For five years he repeatedly circulated through the Midlands and North, teaching elocution as a subject that incorporated science, literature, history, and drama. Visiting almost every market and manufacturing town, every hub in the networks of intellect and innovation that transformed Britain at the turn of the nineteenth century,[43] he succeeded so well financially that by 1806 he was able to return to London and acquire premises that reflected his new identity as a prosperous professional, rather than a harried radical: first in the new middle-class residential area of Bedford Place (1806–12) and then at an even more prestigious address in Lincoln's Inn Fields (1813–20), near the Inns of Court (which offered a steady supply of law students requiring speech education), in a spacious townhouse recently renovated by Sir John Soane, next door to the residence that Prime Minister Spencer Perceval had occupied before his assassination the year before.[44] Thelwall had arrived, and then some.

---

medical diagnosis and playful 'buffoonery' that offers useful insight into his practice, countering impressions of his ego and pomposity ('A Letter to Henry Cline', pp. 10–11). On Hereford, see Penelope Corfield, 'Rhetoric, Radical Politics and Rainfall: John Thelwall in Breconshire, 1797–1800', *Brycheiniog*, 40 (2008), pp. 17–36 (pp. 22–25), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/649d4579168838251e67aa8c/t/64e4837327239904d9d1a169/1692697482646/Brycheiniog_2009.pdf> [accessed 9 August 2024].

[40] Alan Osler, *The Rise of Public Lecturing in England* (Trafford, 2007), p. 10. See also Klancher, who diagrams the complex networks of itinerant science lecturers (pp. 137–44); Thelwall adds many more layers to those maps.

[41] Thelwall began by following the route of Tate Wilkinson, the 'monarch' impresario of provincial theatre, even as he also advertised elocution as a science and went head-to-head with an astronomy lecturer named Samuel Lloyd in 1802.

[42] Mrs H. C. Thelwall, p. 13.

[43] Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention and Community 1762 to 1830* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

[44] Since 2005 the premises of Thelwall and Perceval (57–60 Lincoln's Inn Fields) have been home to the chambers of England's leading group of human rights barristers, from whose pamphlet, prepared for tours during the annual Open House London event, these details come (thanks to David Watkinson). Since Thelwall's 39–40 Bedford Place address, site of a heritage blue plaque since 2018, is occupied at the time of writing by an upscale hotel, the symbolic doubleness of Thelwall's institutional space survives.

Upon beginning his elocutionary profession, Thelwall told his friends that he aimed to assimilate himself 'in dress, in manners &c. to the fashion of the times' and 'the reputation of every aristocratical accomplishment', but assured them that the 'plain out-of-fashioned singularity of the old republican' remained 'in my heart', to be indulged with a 'chosen few'.[45] This explains the strategic doubleness of his new institution. At first glance, Thelwall's elocutionary venture seems diametrically opposed to his political one, aimed at enabling the middle class to gain entry to genteel, upper-class society, rather than encouraging the working class to critique or subvert that society. This aspirational mission is symbolized even in the entrances to the buildings. The title of one of the flurry of books published from and for Bedford Place in 1810, a volume of original poetry used in recitation, was *The Vestibule of Eloquence*, a word he also used in its preface to describe the institution as a place of 'probation' between the 'studious refinement' of an 'Academy or College' and the 'decisive intercourse' of 'Public Life'. The entrance to 57 Lincoln's Inn Fields was an Athenian portico, a feature used in many scientific and literary institutions to signal intellectual respectability and classical cachet.[46] Both vestibule and portico reflected the values of intellectual sociability and the Socratic 'Academus' that Thelwall had promoted from his earliest lectures.[47] Upon entering his new institution, however, one found not a bustling, indiscriminate marketplace of ideas but a 'rendezvous of some of the first persons of fashion, who mingled with a crowd of scientific and literary characters', according to a puff in the *Morning Post* after his opening lecture in March 1806. 'Mr. THELWALL has thrown together two large rooms and fitted them up in a very elegant style [...] at a very considerable expence', including busts of famous orators, ancient and modern, regularly rearranged to suit the lecture subject.[48] Instead of a 'promiscuous' crowd of seven hundred, it accommodated approximately fifty in 'comfort and convenience', with the tribune now turned into a stage for orations and recitations by himself and his students (*Fig. 4*): 'In the recess of the platform are figures of the Muses, surrounded with festoons and classical devices; and in the front are two Egyptian tripods, surmounted with groups of graces supporting branches of lights.'[49] At 57 Lincoln's Inn Fields the

[45] Thelwall to Josiah Strutt, 20 December 1801, quoted in Damian Walford Davies, *Presences that Disturb: Models of Romantic Identity in the Literature and Culture of the 1790s* (University of Wales Press, 2002), pp. 311–13.

[46] Zimmerman, pp. 85–86. Her book offers the most complete account of the operation of Thelwall's elocutionary institution in comparison with other lecturing institutions in London at the time.

[47] The venue in which he gave his lectures in Leeds in January 1802 was Tom Paine's Hall on Albion Street; 'The Hope of Albion' was the title of the epic whose composition coincided with his lecture route, and an apt metaphor for his project as a whole.

[48] *Morning Post*, 28 March 1806, p. 3.

[49] 'Thelwall's Lectures', *Port Folio*, April 1810, pp. 282–87 (p. 283).

premises were even grander: up Soane's elegant elliptical staircase, the assembly room boasted a grand piano for concerts, and there was a 6000-volume library with an excellent collection of classical and modern literature, natural history, and science, in several European languages.[50]

Thelwall's fashionable new face also showed in the wording of his expansive advertisements. Where five years before he cultivated seeds of enquiry, he now cultivates grace and accomplishment; where once he encouraged audiences to take on 'the whole college of aristocratical declaimers' with the 'weapons of plain solid Socratic argument', he now teaches them to converse with harmony and propriety. Above all, the difference between old and new institution was displayed in the prices: while he charged only sixpence for entry to the Beaufort Buildings, at Lincoln's Inn Fields a single elocutionary lecture started at four shillings, four guineas and upwards for a course of six, one guinea for a private lesson or consultation, and 150–300 guineas a year for room, board, individualized treatment of impediments, and a complete classical education, including Greek and Latin prosody, 'pronunciation and critical composition of the living languages', mathematics, astronomy, music, dancing,

Fig. 4: Samuel De Wilde, *School of Eloquence and Grace*, *Satirist*, 1 March 1808. The Trustees of the British Museum. CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

[50] Watkinson. Details on the contents of the institution, including every volume in the library, and elegant furnishings and fittings, are contained in the sixty-page auction catalogue, *A Catalogue of the Library of Valuable Books* (by Mr Anderson, 8 May 1820). I am grateful to Patty O'Boyle for access to this document.

drawing, and sculpture taught by himself and a variety of tutors, some quite notable.[51] Such an education was obviously well beyond the means of the working classes.

It would be easy to see Thelwall's turn to elocution as a mere capitulation to fashion or an outright betrayal of his earlier principles. In truth, however, Thelwall remained an egalitarian republican at heart, and his practice was in many ways as actively humanitarian as Birkbeck's work in the slums, but attending now to physiological rather than economic and class impediments. He was no longer overtly radical, but he still taught 'practical fluency' and sought to 'enfranchise the tongue' and 'vindicate the right of diffusing those principles, that were to give to the Mute, and to the convulsive Stammerer, the free exercise and enjoyment of a faculty, which constitutes the essential attribute of our species' for 'even from among the pupils of this description, might start forth some new Demosthenes, to enlighten and to energize the rising generation'.[52] The aim of instruction was still agency, not mere display, polish, or social climbing; his advertisements and outlines consistently emphasize words of action: 'excite', 'convey', 'impress', 'influence', 'impel'. Action was also reflected in his architecture: he had a covered gymnasium built in the back garden of 57 Lincoln's Inn Fields for the 'exercise, health and recreation' of his pupils. Seating in his assembly room was still all on one level, reminding us, as Ian Newman does elsewhere in this issue of *19*, of the 'fluidity between cultural identities' and class categories that characterized mechanics' institutions.[53]

Thelwall's egalitarian principles also show in his provision of almost the same education and therapy to women as men, which may even have included physical exercise (after all, this is the man who took a Wollstonecraftian delight in watching his daughter romp and run in her trousers when they lived in Wales).[54] Of course his advertisements pay careful attention to decorum, as he assures parents that their daughters will have a 'distinct suit[e] of apartments' under the 'maternal care' and 'immediate superintendence of Mrs. Thelwall' and in company with his own daughters, with joint instruction in 'every attainment and accomplishment adapted to their sex

---

[51] One of his 'Plans and Objects' mentions that the sculpture master was Sebastian Gahagan, an assistant to Joseph Nollekens and a considerable sculptor in his own right, exhibiting regularly at the Royal Academy.

[52] 'A Letter to Henry Cline', pp. 12–13.

[53] Ian Newman, 'From Magazine to Meeting: Francis Place, the Crown and Anchor Tavern, and the Founding of the London Mechanics' Institution', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 36 (2024), doi:10.16995/ntn.10579.

[54] '[S]he bounds along in her trowsers in all the romping vivacity of independence, runs up the mount, clambers among the rocks & […] takes health by storm' (Thelwall to Dr Crompton, in Walford Davies, p. 302). On Thelwall's feminism, see Diachyshyn, who counters earlier views (which were based on very limited evidence) that he was hostile to women in public life.

and circumstances'.[55] But the insistence on 'domestication' for all pupils, who ate with and were treated as family, was consistent with the fraternal atmosphere of the Beaufort Buildings, as well as with the values championed in his feminist, abolitionist, anti-imperialist novel *The Daughter of Adoption* (1801), whose entire plot is oriented towards 'build[ing] a family [...] in social equality and reciprocal love'.[56] There is some evidence that women participated in the public-facing elements of his curriculum, which included both a debating society in which students (with a few outside members, 'by application') gathered to discuss and orate on 'Historical, Literary and Scientific' topics, with Thelwall in the chair, and in courses of public lectures which students regularly attended, and in which they sometimes performed, solo or in collaboration.[57] Given that one of Thelwall's youthful triumphs at Westminster Forum had been a dazzling metanarrative, 'Speech in Rhyme', in which he cross-voiced a woman who outperformed four male rivals to win the debate, that he regularly lectured on the 'superiority of female elocution', and that he included passages by female authors and in women's voices in his elocutionary *Selections* anthologies, it is likely that female students took an active role in debates and performances. The one female pupil whose name we know, the ingénue actress Henrietta Cecil Boyle, was often featured in these public lectures, and garnered acclaim for a powerful public address in defence of Queen Caroline in 1820.[58]

In its commitment to active learning, in which literacy and oracy went hand in hand, and lectures alternated with recitations and exercises, Thelwall's curriculum resembles the mix of theory and hands-on practice that he witnessed and discussed at the mechanics classes in Glasgow and would admire and participate in at the LMI. Indeed, if we return to the *OED* headings for the word *mechanic* and shift back from the 'senses [...] of workers' to the 'senses [...] of science', it is clear that Thelwall's was an institution for the mechanics of body and language. His elocutionary system was profoundly influenced by his three years studying at the prestigious Guy's Hospital (1791–93), where he attended lectures and demonstrations on the subjects

---

[55] *Vestibule of Eloquence*, pp. 14, 6, 7.

[56] John Thelwall, *The Daughter of Adoption: A Tale of Modern Times*, ed. by Michael Scrivener, Yasmin Solomonescu, and Judith Thompson (Broadview, 2014), p. 474.

[57] Thelwall's commitment to collaboration grew out of his theatre experience and was reflected in his extensive theatre criticism, particularly his comments on Edmund Kean. See Judith Thompson, 'Origins, Contexts, Transformations: Reviving *The Fairy of the Lake*', in *John Thelwall in Performance: The Fairy of the Lake*, ed. by Judith Thompson (2011), in *Romantic Circles* <https://webarchive.loc.gov/all/20190310045511/https://romantic-circles.org/reference/thelwall_fairy/HTML/Origins.html> [accessed 12 November 2023].

[58] Boyle married Thelwall after his first wife's death in 1816 and published his first (incomplete) biography in 1837. There is substantial manuscript evidence of their collaborations, literary and elocutionary, some of them fascinatingly gender-fluid, as discussed by Diachyshyn, pp. 163–83.

— anatomy, chemistry, and physiology — that were at the centre of the materialist turn in medicine and brain science.[59] There he was also exposed to the lively intellectual exchange between French and English materialist thought that manifested itself in his provocative medical and political lectures of 1793: the first on animal vitality, the second on the material mind; and, in between them, his famous Chaunticlere allegory, which alludes to the notorious French mechanist physician and philosopher Julien Offray de la Mettrie.[60] By 1807, at least, Thelwall was also aware of renowned French institutions for disabled education, including the École des sourds-muets in Paris, founded by the Abbé de l'Epée in 1760. In 1814 he visited this institution and initiated an exchange with its headmaster, the Abbé Sicard, who attended a famous choral recitation of Milton's *Comus* by Thelwall's pupils at Lincoln's Inn Fields in 1815, and Thelwall sent Sicard information about 'the Scientific part of my system' before lecturing in Paris in 1818.[61] Thelwall was also familiar with the mechanics' institutes set up throughout France by the Baron Dupin from 1808 onwards, to which he devoted an 1826 article.[62]

The pragmatic and therapeutic mechanics of language shared by Thelwall and Sicard owe less to the so-called 'mechanical' school of elocution than to the tradition of philosophical materialism from the English empiricist John Locke to French *philosophes* like Étienne Condillac, who theorized a 'natural language' of action, common between animals and humans, which evolved into spoken and finally written language, and was fundamental to all thought and all art.[63] The tradition of *logopaedia* (or *orthophonie*) offers new perspectives on Romantic-era language theory, long dominated by Coleridge and German idealism, with scant attention to the contribution of, or Coleridge's rivalry with, Thelwall's French materialism. As Yasmin Solomonescu points out, Thelwall's system rested on an analogy between the way the vital principle operates in the body and the way language operates in the body politic.[64] Language is produced by a sympathetic cooperation or correspondence of bodily organs, each of which is responsible for

[59] Yasmin Solomonescu, *John Thelwall and the Materialist Imagination* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Alan Richardson, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism, 47 (Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Alan Richardson, *The Neural Sublime: Cognitive Theories and Romantic Texts* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

[60] In his chief publication, *L'Homme machine* (1747), de la Mettrie uses the example of a headless rooster that runs after it has been decapitated, which is the central motif of Thelwall's Chaunticlere allegory.

[61] Thelwall to Amaury Duval, London, Wellcome Collection, MS.7734/5–6. The description of the choral recitation is from *Diary, Reminiscences and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson*, ed. by Thomas Sadler, 3 vols (Macmillan, 1869), I, pp. 507–08.

[62] Thermes [Thelwall], 'Mechanics Institutes of France, &c.', *Panoramic Miscellany*, March 1826, pp. 323–26.

[63] Lorne Falkenstein and Giovanni Grandi, 'Étienne Bonnot de Condillac', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2017 Edition) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/condillac/> [accessed 10 November 2023]; and John W. Yolton, *Locke and French Materialism* (Oxford University Press, 1991). On the name 'mechanical school', see Judith Thompson, 'Elocutionary Rhetoric'.

[64] *John Thelwall and the Materialist Imagination*, pp. 31–32, 95–119.

different phonological elements (e.g. tone, articulation, modulations of sound, etc.), and which Thelwall classified as primary or executive (e.g. the larynx), secondary or perceptive (e.g. the diaphragm), and enunciative or recipient (e.g. the tongue and ear). Therefore, language is literally organic, but also mechanical, operating by the same 'universal principle of action and reaction' that governs all progressive motion. It is less a machine, however, than a musical instrument, or an ensemble, and the speaker, like an orchestral conductor or piano tuner, must be trained to bring the organs into harmony and 'command the correspondent tones'. The musical analogy extends to the prosodic notation, adapted from Joshua Steele, that Thelwall taught, and that survives in copies of his *Selections* that emigrated around the world with his pupils.[65] Thelwall's prosody or rhythmus (the action and reaction of heavy and light syllables, or thesis and arsis) is at once the key to effective speech, the remedy for speech impediments, and the heart of lyrical experiments whose radical versification goes well beyond those of his fellow Lake Poets, anticipating the sprung rhythm of Gerard Manley Hopkins.[66] This conjunction is perhaps best captured by Julia Carlson's term *therapoetics.*[67]

The final clue to understanding Thelwall's materialist science and therapoetic institution is to recognize that for him, as Solomonescu has shown, the body is always also the body politic.[68] Thus public organs such as the press, the university, and Parliament operate on the same laws of reciprocal 'progressive motion' and must be brought into equitable harmony. Though Thelwall never made this explicit, and his institution was never political in the partisan sense, instead going out of its way to 'accommodate' the 'respective views and principles' of students who included Members of Parliament, he continued as always to encourage political enquiry. The topics and questions of both his debating society and his public lectures were usually historical, but he applied them to current events just as he had in his classical history lectures of 1796. Indeed, it was 'The Trident of Albion', his patriotic ode and elocutionary 'effusion' on the death of Admiral Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar, delivered to rapturous acclaim in Liverpool in autumn 1805, that gave the final impetus for his return to London. There he repeated the coup and, not long after, delivered his equally celebrated 'Monody' on the death of the great Whig orator Charles James Fox. In 1807 his lectures on 'The Abolition of the Slave Trade'

[65] For example, a copy marked up by one of Thelwall's students exists in a public library in Melbourne, Australia. It would be worthwhile to explore parallels between Thelwall's musical speech theory and new theories on neurology and music.

[66] Jerome McGann, 'Romantic Subjects and Iambic Laws: Episodes in the Early History of Contract Negotiations', *New Literary History*, 49.4 (2018), pp. 597–615, doi:10.1353/nlh.2018.0037.

[67] Julia S. Carlson, *Romantic Marks and Measures: Wordsworth's Poetry in Fields of Print* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), pp. 260–304.

[68] *Materialist Imagination*, pp. 1–33.

responded to specific points and speakers in parliamentary debate upon that bill and were delivered in conjunction with his poem 'The Negro's Lament' (published with his ode to Rushton in *The Vestibule of Eloquence*). By 1808 he was touring with his philippic on Napoleon and ode 'Addressed to the Energies of Britain', the first of three Spanish odes applauding republican bravery, resistance to imperialism, and democratic self-determination in Spain. These efforts show the therapoetic power and flexibility of not only his voice but his institution, at once socially conscious and independent, able to respond immediately, with 'progressive motion', to public issues, like a newspaper. It is no surprise that, at the peak of his success, Thelwall launched and produced another weekly paper, *The Champion* (1819–20).

As already noted, however, Thelwall's elocution was already political, not in its subject but as the act of bringing dead writers to life in the voice of the body politic. Just as Blake's Milton enters the living poet's nerves and feet to 'walk forward' and redeem Albion, so Thelwall's students, in taking Milton into their mouths, reanimated both him and themselves. They legitimized and enfranchised themselves, as Thelwall had in his own imprisonment, resounding the Lady in Milton's *Comus*: 'Thou can'st not touch the freedom of my mind | — altho' this corporal rind | Thou hast immanacled.'[69] He did the same with his own epic 'The Hope of Albion', reprinting passages from it in *The Vestibule of Eloquence* to 'incorporate some of them with the science, which it is my profession to teach' and transfer them 'from the silence' of print to 'voices [which] hereafter, may give them an expression, not less effective, from their having been used as instruments for the improvement of the melodies of elocution, and the energies of oratorical delivery'.[70]

Ironically, however, Thelwall's very success led to the downfall of his institution and explains why he was not directly involved in the LMI project. The launch of *The Champion* coincided with a renewal of political involvement and he had less and less time to devote to teaching and therapy. He became increasingly active in Westminster elections and more outspoken in his journalism, especially on Peterloo, the Queen Caroline controversy, and finally the Cato Street Conspiracy. Although he did not support the rebels, his *Champion* attacked the government's use of spies and agents provocateurs in terms that recalled *The Tribune*; he even strategically republished selections from his *Poems Written in Close Confinement* (1795).[71] Unsurprisingly, history

[69] John Thelwall, *Poems Written in Close Confinement* (the author, 1795), title page.

[70] 'The Hope of Albion', in *Thelwall: Selected Poetry*, ed. by Thompson, pp. 211–47 (p. 213).

[71] Michael Scrivener, *Seditious Allegories: John Thelwall and Jacobin Writing* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), p. 199.

repeated itself in response. Having gone beyond the caution he had maintained for twenty years, in 1820 he was once again targeted with threats of prosecution, arrested, and imprisoned. Only for one night, but that was enough: he was almost 60 and unable to summon the uncompromising resistance and resilience with which he had endured the noxious, lifelong trauma of imprisonment when he was 30. Intimidated and disheartened, he retreated, abandoning the newspaper, auctioning off the institution, with all its fashionable fittings and extensive library, and retiring to a cottage in semi-rural Brixton, in a repeat of his three-year retirement twenty-five years earlier. By 1823, when his old friends Birkbeck and Francis Place (but also an old enemy from Edinburgh 1804, Henry Brougham) were planning the LMI, he was living in straitened circumstances and devoting himself to poetry.

He remained in touch with Birkbeck, however, and was supportive of the LMI in principle and eventually action. In 1824 he returned to London, teaching on a small scale at a modest address in Regent's Park, and pursuing independent projects both periodical and performative, but also embroiled in new scandals and financial embarrassments. Soon after, he began the final peripatetic phase of his life, returning to the towns and expansive networks he had cultivated in his long career, once again lecturing in numerous schools, theatres, and societies throughout the nation. He met with considerable acclaim, widely recognized as the foremost English elocutionist, and still a powerfully entertaining and instructive orator. His lectures received extensive newspaper reviews, which give a clearer picture of both his stature and their content (the latter particularly helpful to scholars because, unlike his political ones, his elocutionary lectures were never published). He was honoured as a veteran and a celebrity, but as the years went on, was increasingly seen as yesterday's man, and still occasionally the object of Tory satire. Though he lectured at mechanics' institutions in Bristol and Manchester in the late 1820s, he did not appear at the London one until the summer of 1831 when he gave 'lectures, elocutionary and critical on the Genius and Poetry of Milton' in comparison with 'Shakespear and other distinguished Poets', as well as series on domestic education, and an introduction to the Principles of Universal Prosody. In the middle of those LMI lectures, on 4 August, when he had just turned 67, the last of his eight children (six surviving) was born, whom he named Weymouth Birkbeck in honour of his old friend (his older children had been given the names of revolutionary heroes). Birkbeck appeared on the platform with Thelwall at least once, and their cooperative operations came full circle when Thelwall offered to take a class of pupils for free 'on condition that they should, in return, give instruction to a class of fellow members'. This was a great success and at the end of the year he was elected

an honorary member. After touring in 1832, he returned to the LMI between September and October 1833, when he gave a popular series on the Oratory of the Bar and Senatorial and Popular Eloquence.[72]

Though records of Thelwall's LMI lectures are scant, newspaper reviews are more informative, though not as extensive and in depth as in some of the provincial papers. They praise his range and success at integrating 'scientific induction and critical remarks'. As always, his lectures were illustrated by recitations from and critical observations upon a wide range of authors and genres, but Milton remained the epitome and exemplar, embodying and uniting literature, orature, and politics, showing the instrumental nature of elocution and its value 'from a national point of view'.[73] Whatever the subject, his lectures showed critical insight, wit, nuance, originality, and sharp commentary drawn from a lifetime's experience and observation of self and society, with 'all the life and elasticity of youth', even in old age.

Some reviews noted his crowd-pleasing showmanship, like speaking through a cloth to show by its lack of movement that oratorical power comes not from expenditure of breath but control of the organs.[74] Others at greater length praised his ability to hold the 'deep interest and breathless attention' of a 'very crowded audience' of both sexes and 'all classes', by explaining 'his difficult and complicated subject' with ease and clarity.[75] Only one review was ever so slightly negative, complimenting him as a 'venerable orator' in a way that underlined his age and perhaps implied his irrelevance.[76] Of all the notices, the most illuminating highlights another aspect of his cooperative operations at the 'MECHANICS INSTITUTE' when it notes that, in addition to 'oral experiments', his lecture used 'diagrams made by the ingenious draughtsman of the Institution' to compare classical, musical, and mathematical notation and the 'anatomical structure of organs of all vocalized beings', in a manner that applied equally to the philosophy of language, science, classical prosody, and the theory and practice of music.[77] The review of his last LMI lecture series, in October 1833 (just four months before his death), testifies to the survival of the radical democrat in the elocutionary professor:

---

[72] London Mechanics' Institute, Minutes of Quarterly General Meetings, 4 vols (1824–58), II (1831–40), University of London, Birkbeck Library Archives and Special Collections, BBK 1/2/2, pp. 8–9, 19, 29–30, 33, 55, 161. I am grateful to Luisa Calè and Nera Hart for sharing transcriptions and research into the history and archives of the LMI.

[73] *Morning Advertiser*, 3 October 1833, p. 3.

[74] *Globe*, 4 June 1831, pp. 2–3.

[75] *London Courier and Evening Gazette*, 23 June 1831, p. 2.

[76] *Morning Post*, 24 June 1831, p. 3.

[77] *London Courier and Evening Gazette*, 18 July 1831, p. 2.

> He remarked, that [...] the requisites of oratory were not confined to any particular rank. He said, the best speech that had been made at Exeter Hall, at a meeting about the Poles, had been delivered by a labouring mechanic; and he cited another instance of extraordinary oratorical powers having been exhibited by a weaver at a meeting at Bolton: a man, destitute of ambition, apparently unconscious of his powers — an excellent workman, and proverbial for his industry — but who lived in rags and poverty.

He had lost none of his subversive wit, or the 'humorous vein' that made his 'imitations' so 'irresistibly droll', the review going on to note that his old ideological nemesis Edmund Burke, so valued by his contemporaries for his oratorical style, was an orator only in writing, for in performance 'he rolled about like a porpoise in a storm, and his voice was so disagreeable that not only would a person be inclined to shut his eyes, but [...] to shut his ears when Burke was speaking'.[78]

Quite aside from his lectures at the LMI, however, Thelwall had already delivered his most important statements on the enduring principles that lay behind it, and his lifelong work, in 1826. This coincided with the launch of the London University, an institution distinct from the LMI, but set up by one of its founders, Henry Brougham, as well as Thelwall's friends Thomas Campbell (a fellow poet and literary lecturer, who conceived the idea) and the memoirist Henry Crabb Robinson. In his essay on 'Orator Henley' in the *Retrospective Review*, he explicitly compared the new university to Henley's Oratory: 'Let not Mr. Brougham and Sir James Mackintosh be startled, when we apprise them, that Orator Henley, in the year 1726, projected a LONDON UNIVERSITY' (p. 217). But his commitment to fully accessible education is addressed most strongly in his own, and final, publication, the monthly *Panoramic Miscellany*, which returned to the polymathic format of his very first periodical, the *Biographical and Imperial Magazine* (1789–91), while manifesting 'the continuity of his commitments to political causes, public education, elocutionary training and literary criticism' adapted to the 'new media context of the 1820s'.[79] Its opening editorial 'On the Connexion of Periodical Literature with the Moral and Intellectual Progress of Society' is a militant manifesto and a memorable prophecy of democratic education from below:

> Wisdom is *ascending*! — It comes *from* those *to* whom it was so long forbidden to descend! — The cry of the people for means of extended information is its warning

[78] *Morning Advertiser*, 3 October 1833, p. 3.

[79] Angela Esterhammer, 'John Thelwall's *Panoramic Miscellany*: The Lecturer as Journalist', *Romantic Circles* (2011) <https://romantic-circles.org/index.php/praxis/thelwall/praxis.2011.thelwall.esterhammer> [accessed 10 November 2023].

> voice; and happy shall it be for the exalted great, and for the nation, if they disdain not to obey the call.[80]

This is followed by two regular features that focus on institutional outlets for these wise and warning voices: a monthly report on the 'Progress of Popular Societies' which he calls 'powerful engines for the improvement of the social and moral condition of man', and a five-month series of essays on 'The London University' under the rather transparent pseudonym CIVIS ('Citizen').[81] It compares the new institution to the LMI (and its predecessor in Glasgow) as part of a historical survey of education in Britain that echoes and sums up points made in all his lectures — political, classical and elocutionary — since 1793. It welcomes London University as a place of social levelling, where 'a great number may receive the same advantages as a few', and praises the LMI, where students 'by co-operation [...] obtain easy access' to 'great and important truths' (turning the tables on established authority by cheekily noting that at one mechanical lecture he attended, the 800-strong audience was more familiar with the 'terms of art' being discussed than the academics were). It emphasizes the superiority of oral lectures by alluding to an eloquent French orator and recommends the spacious lecture theatre of the LMI as an example to London University. It ends with Thelwall's last word on his lifelong preoccupation with democratic education, in a prescient vision of a diverse, cooperative, tolerant, accessible, global university:

> A University ought to be open to all the world. The highest honor, and this was the honor of Athens, is, that all nations flock to it, thence to derive instruction [...]. How much better would it be, to leave the road to study open to all — to see Americans, Greeks, Russians, Arabians, in our halls. The mixture would be a benefit to all [...]. [A] Sectarian University is a thing not to be tolerated in an enlightened age.[82]

Thelwall still shines as a beacon for institutions of today. Sadly, however, his light, like Henley's, was occluded for many years. This began not long after his death in February 1834, and ironically, it came at the hands of his own eldest son. Algernon Sydney Thelwall became the first lecturer in public reading at King's College London, the institution founded in the backlash to the LMI and that 'godless Institution in Gower

---

[80] John Thelwall, 'On the Connexion of Periodical Literature with the Moral and Intellectual Progress of Society', *Panoramic Miscellany*, 31 January 1826, p. 3, emphasis in original.

[81] There is considerable internal evidence for Thelwall's authorship, including, as Esterhammer notes, the thesis–arsis structure of this and most of the pseudonyms used elsewhere in the *Panoramic Miscellany*.

[82] Thelwall, 'The London University', *Panoramic Miscellany*, 31 January 1826, p. 34; 30 April 1826, pp. 504–05; 31 May 1826, p. 657. See also, 'The London University', in *John Thelwall: Words and Work Archive*, produced by Julia Schabas <https://wordsandwork.johnthelwall.org/archive/institute/journalism/> [accessed 10 November 2023].

Street'. Like his siblings (several of whom went into education),[83] Sydney had grown up helping out at his father's institution, but at the age of 18 he rejected plans that he enter law and, estranged from both his atheist father and his young Irish-Catholic stepmother, he took orders and became an evangelical (and rabidly anti-Catholic) missionary, caught up in the fractious sectarian politics of the Church of England. He seldom mentioned his father, despite living off his legacy. So, John Thelwall's vision of democratic, collaborative, secular, progressive education was appropriated and folded into a hierarchical, controversial, sectarian, patriarchal system, even as his liberationist, empowering voice of oracy was hidden behind a restrictive Victorian idea of elocution as propriety and politeness.

And yet Thelwall, like Henley — both so far ahead of their time, both so long forgotten — has been rescued and still has much to teach. He reminds us that we need and must defend humanity and humanities, and continue to use the active arts of both literature and orature to reanimate the great minds and words of a dead past in the mouths of the living. Only then can we preserve democracy and cooperate to stem the rising tides of reactionary repression that always return, whether they take the form of Gagging Acts or austerity politics.

[83] In 1827 the second son, John Hampden was appointed headmaster of a new school in Exeter that shared the aims of the London University, but after it generated religious controversy he withdrew to take up a quiet life as a village rector known not for militant oratory but for practical social conscience. The youngest daughter Sara Maria became a governess and published a *Syllabic Primer and Reading Book* that applied her father's elocutionary system to the teaching of children, adopting his tone of militant defensiveness in her preface.