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978-1-107-02910-1 - Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences: Knowledge and Cultural Institutions in the Romantic Age

Jon Klancher

Excerpt

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Introduction

This book investigates an enabling framework of modern literary and cultural studies, the “Arts and Sciences,” by returning to a little-understood sphere of British Romantic culture – the emergence of new arts-and-sciences institutions in London that would generate both excitement and controversy in the metropolis, spread far and wide to the provinces, then migrate to the American lyceums and lecturing platforms of the nineteenth century. They would even have an impact, more indirectly, on the history of university disciplines or knowledge fields, some of them (like book history) still being constructed today. To grasp this Romantic turn in the history of the modern category “arts and sciences,” I shall try to overcome the disciplinary divide between various kinds of knowledge-history (those of the sciences, visual arts, print, and the literary) to see how this matrix of arts-and-sciences institutions formed a response to the crisis, as well as a remediation, of the early modern Republic of Letters. One result was to help produce much of the literary writing we now call Romantic criticism. A related aim of this book is to grasp the discourse about institutions as a cornerstone discourse of modernity largely invented by the Enlightenment, but given perhaps its richest and most contradictory articulations in the Romantic age. This book does not try to resolve the status of “literature” at the end of the Romantic age, but it will offer reasons to believe that literature could only become a specialized world in its own right, from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, by simultaneously resisting and incorporating the increasingly disciplined domain called the “arts and sciences.”

I shall first be concerned, in Part I of this book, with a historic invention at the turn of the nineteenth century, what contemporaries called, with a capital *I*, “Institutions” of the sciences, the arts, and many knowledges or practices in between: the Royal Institution (opened in 1800), the British Institution (1805), the London Institution (1806), as well as the Surrey (1808), Russell (1808), and Metropolitan (1823) Institutions among others.¹

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Founded in the midst of political struggle and commercial competition, they often began as risky, speculative projects – in the sense Defoe or Swift might have recognized in the early modern “age of projects” – yet they worked to turn these projects into powerful, often durable patterns of knowledge production, circulation, and cultural organizing that we would more customarily associate with “institutions” *sui generis*. These Institutions invented new methods of cultural transmission and defined new roles for the “artist,” the “scientist,” the “literary” writer and, not least, the “director,” or what we would now call the “administrator.” When we enter the world of these Institutions, we also find the more familiar kinds of cultural producer – poets, critics, novelists, editors, playwrights, natural philosophers, painters, architects, and lecturers – working hand-in-hand with those rather different kinds of knowledge producer I shall be emphasizing in this book: projectors, collectors, directors, and institutors.

Despite the relatively short lifespan these Institutions enjoyed in Britain (most were gone by 1900), their wider impact was arguably immense, both for the future of the “arts and sciences” as a modern category and for the way they helped to reconfigure the cultural past. Much of our own reflection on modernity’s changing conditions for knowledge production and transmission has focused on the institution of the University, its current transformations and its longer historical role. Yet beyond a university genealogy, where the new learning Institutions of the early nineteenth century will require us to go, we find an altered scenario to think about. Unlike the German university’s provenance for this spacious framework called Arts and Sciences, which moved into American university structures as the name of an emerging disciplinary research system in the later nineteenth century, the British discourse and practices of the arts and sciences around 1800 were notably more chaotic. These new Institutions of arts and sciences did not reach out from a secure institutional framework toward a public sphere, nor did they find pathways for scholars and students to become, through a strenuous outreach, “public intellectuals.” Instead, such Institutions *began* there, in the realm of public controversy in the metropolis, diverse markets, political debate, and colonial rule. They made their impact on public knowledge and on forms of communication in ways that would, in the long term, have a striking if sometimes an oblique effect upon university knowledges and institutional continuity. These Institutions were subject to the powers of commercial society and particular markets of cultural production, and in a period of hotly contested political reaction, the writers, lecturers, and administrators who will appear in this book – among them, Samuel Coleridge, William Hazlitt,

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Humphry Davy, Leigh Hunt, Jeremy Bentham, Charles Lyell, Percy Shelley, Thomas Bernard, Count Benjamin Rumford, Mary Robinson, Thomas Dibdin, Richard Carlile, and others – could very well grasp the feel and the moment-to-moment volatility of what a “conservative revolution” means and how it acts.²

These arts-and-sciences Institutions had a complex and lasting effect upon discipline formation, British print media, and what we may call learning-publics, the English audiences variously fascinated, taught, or repelled by the lectures and exhibitions coming their way. “The arts and sciences are now taught in lectures to fashionable audiences of both sexes,” reported Robert Southey with some surprise and skepticism in 1807.³ Women and Dissenters in particular could find what they would never be admitted to Oxford or Cambridge University to learn. Constructing a cross-class and mixed-gender constituency in London and then the provinces, the Institutions became distinctive for the social makeup of their spectators – the Royal claimed its “fashionables,” the Surrey and London had their Dissenters of all kinds, the Russell drew in its more professional audience. No less visible were the intellectuals: Byron, Godwin, Lamb, Coleridge, Keats, Hazlitt, Crabb Robinson, Thomas Talfourd, Samuel Rogers, Thomas Campbell, Joseph Banks, or Jeremy Bentham, to name only a dozen among many.

While the Royal Institution and others became famous for scientific lectures and sometimes spectacularly staged experiments, they simultaneously pursued a more ambitious (to use our word) multidisciplinary agenda: instruction on moral philosophy, literary and book history, poetry and drama, the histories of commerce and technologies, the arts of printing and engraving, as well as the “fine arts” of poetry, music, painting, architecture, and aesthetics. Our knowledge of this lecturing, research, and publishing world has thus far been fragmentary, in part because of the highly unreliable paper trail scholars have had to follow (only the Royal Institution has left a substantial archive of its productivity), but also because of the very separation of disciplinary perspectives which those institutions ultimately, though not always intentionally, helped produce. Some of these Institutions began to be studied as “scientific lecturing institutions” by social historians of science in the 1970s, an early case study in what would become the wider cultural studies and history of the sciences. Others have been studied as “art institutions” by art historians since the 1980s and 1990s, while literary historians know them mainly for their sponsorship of literary lecturing by Coleridge or Hazlitt. These separate disciplinary histories of “art,” “science,” and “literature” respectively have

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tended to obscure the most novel innovation of early nineteenth-century cultural organizing in Britain – the emergence of a new complex of arts *and* sciences institutions going by the name of *Institutions* rather than the earlier nomenclature of learned “societies” or “academies.” Societies and academies had played a fundamental part in building European knowledge since the mid seventeenth century across the Continent and in Britain. The new arts-and-sciences Institutions did not replace them – many new scientific societies appeared in Britain after 1800, in fact – but they created a very different kind of knowledge production and circulation with a far greater public impact than the earlier organizational forms had ever attempted or achieved.

These ventures in public scholarship afforded their audiences a combination of both disciplinary and, perhaps more revealingly, extra- and pre-disciplinary kinds of knowledge. Emerging work on the history of modern disciplines has increasingly opened the way to think more skeptically about assuming their long-term stability in light of what Luisa Calé and Adriana Craciun have suggestively called, with an ironic nod to Foucault, “the disorder of things.”⁴ At issue are not only formal disciplines but also “indisciplines” and “predisciplinary” knowledge formations that were often resistant to becoming incorporated into the later system of disciplined university subjects. Some became formal, important disciplines of modern knowledge (chemistry and geology, for example); others began to build “fields of study,” such as historical bibliography or the history of books, only to be undone by contradictory forces at work in the very realm that was helping create them. Still others, like natural history, would prove so diverse and complex they would resist the disciplining of their knowledge entirely.⁵ In what follows I shall treat these domains as “knowledge fields,” a term I adapt freehandedly from the sociology of culture’s theory of modern “fields of cultural production.”⁶ By using this expression I shall not mean that all fields can count what they produce as “knowledge” in the same way. If anything it is the opposite: fields like the literary, the artistic, the scientific, or the economic emerged from the early nineteenth century with dramatically uneven criteria of what counts as “knowledge” and which of these fields could most strongly lay claim to it. Questions of “arts” and “practices” complicated this matter of assessing knowledge enough that it will be useful to look into both the more highly organized fields of knowledge production and those more disorderly fields of inquiry that never became formal disciplines.

Such fields will also pertain to what many now call the “second scientific revolution” of the Romantic age, a recent periodizing of modern knowledge

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that has driven a good deal of innovative work since the 1990s, in Romantic studies as elsewhere, while it poses new problems and possibilities for grasping the interplay of humanities and scientific researches. The concept of a second scientific revolution in the Romantic age, for instance, has encouraged the assumption that “the order of disciplines,” as Simon Schaffer puts it, amounts in historical perspective to “a utilitarian division of intellectual labour set up in the early nineteenth century.”⁷ In the following chapters I hope to complicate that picture by addressing problems of inter-, pre-, and in-disciplinarity in terms, not only of the new cultural Institutions of early nineteenth-century Britain, but also of the ongoing problem of the differentiation of cultural fields and disciplinary domains that still seems to me a key question and challenge to be met by any historical sociology of the literary or the cultural. For these reasons, I want to grasp the expression “arts and sciences” both in light of the dialectic it encompasses and to locate the historically shifting meanings of the “*and*” that both conjoins and separates its key terms.

Since the Royal, Surrey, and other Institutions would become most famous for their public lecturers, I should explain why this is not mainly a book about Romantic-period lecturing. Lecturing was a long-honored European practice both in and sometimes outside schools, universities, or academies; in late eighteenth-century Germany, Romantic lecturing became a remarkably prominent and complex medium of communicating knowledge in its own right, as Sean Franzel reveals in an incisive new study of its media, methods, and pedagogy.⁸ But Germany’s state-supported universities fostered lectures as a regular and largely academic form of inquiry and public scholarship that could have no counterpart in commercial London, where the state consistently refused to be patron to either arts or sciences. Instead, celebrity, charismatic authority, and sheer performative energy made Romantic lecturing a hot-ticket phenomenon in London from 1800, when the Royal opened what some called its “noon-day opera house,” to 1823, when the Surrey Institution suffered financial collapse and when the vibrant arts-and-sciences Institution world, though still widely celebrated, also began to appear increasingly unequal to the knowledge-proliferation it had done so much to stimulate.

Along with lecturing, these arts-and-sciences Institutions put an equal and a surprisingly public emphasis on their forms of *administration*: how they were governed and financed, as well as how individual managers or directors hailed from particular professional or social origins and were perceived to have certain designs or commitments regarding how the new Institutions were to function. There was a wide public preoccupation

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with what kinds of authority were at work in administering these Institutions' arts-and-sciences agendas, and many observers who learned about their construction and aims also knew whether those agents were improving aristocratic landholders, bankers and investors, wealthy merchants, legal and medical professionals, MPs, Whigs and Tories, leading-periodical founders, or members of specialist scientific societies as well as art collectors and connoisseurs.⁹

Along with lecturing and administrating, this book will investigate the print media that engaged with these arts-and-sciences Institutions and with their least-known objective today, the building of ambitious print libraries, reading rooms, and bibliographical researches. Libraries, archives, and the belated English pursuit of bibliography and early modern book history became a key part of the Institutions' public mission. Meanwhile, print media, from quarterly reviews to monthly magazines to newspapers, became frequently and sometimes polemically entwined with the arts-and-sciences Institutions. It's important to see that print media have been mainly understood, since the rise of print and reading history, as produced in the markets of civil society, while "institutions" have been grasped as a separate realm, largely distinct from civil society (the state or the established church). But the early nineteenth-century British arts-and-sciences Institutions became adept at cross-hatching the mediatic with the institutional, and they did so in ways keenly responsive to the political, economic, and cultural pressures of the times. They used print media variously and opportunely – sometimes generating weekly or quarterly journals about the "arts and sciences" of a distinctively new type – while the British periodicals, no longer merely speculating *about* the possible relationships of "arts and sciences," would now become more actively engaged in organizing, criticizing, or advocating these new English institutions of knowledge production.

This was not yet an age of specialist scientific journals, but rather of publications like Thomas Bernard's the *Director* (1807), a weekly journal that set out to "promote, improve, and refine, the arts and sciences in the British empire" by networking in a single publication England's newest Institutions of knowledge with the older societies and academies (the Royal Society, Royal Academy, the Society of Antiquaries).¹⁰ The *Director* sounded a theme of the moment – "In this country, nothing of a public nature can be effected but by clubs, societies, or institutions" – but the *Director* itself would become a case of print culture playing a critical part in mediating this institutional domain.¹¹ The same period saw a remarkable rise of the art-critical press, from the *Artist* (1807) and *Examiner* (1808) to

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Annals of the Fine Arts (1816), and there was likewise a palpable turn in scientific writing, from those still using an older vocabulary for the sciences, such as the *Philosophical Magazine* (1798), to those articulating the new knowledges and idioms as signaled in titles like the *Quarterly Journal of Science and the Arts* (1816). The most powerful and distinguished print media in Britain sooner or later became imbricated in the emerging arts-and-sciences world. The *Edinburgh Review* entered complicated relations with the London phenomenon, from hostile reviewing to collaborative building; the *Quarterly Review*, not especially known for its secularizing interests since its founding in 1809, would take a notable scientific turn in the mid 1820s by depicting an institutional revolution occurring in the British sciences since the end of the eighteenth century. The *Anti-Jacobin Review* (1798), *British Critic* (1793), Leigh Hunt's *Examiner* (1808), and other politically focused journals took variously critical stances toward the lecturers, programs, or Institutions themselves. As Chapters 6 and 7 will explore, the more philosophical and political Romantic-age writers registered their impact in books ranging from *Biographia Literaria*, *Theory of Life*, and *The Friend to Chrestomathia*, *The Plain Speaker*, and *The Spirit of the Age*.

In Part II of this book I turn to Romantic literary writing and cultural criticism that grappled with the altered shape of the “arts and sciences” these Institutions were helping to produce. Their new kinds of cultural invention arose in part from the instability of what early moderns had long called the Republic of Letters. According to recent historical scholarship, this early modern framework of a “commonwealth of learning,” which sustained the communicating and making of knowledges for two centuries, was by the end of the eighteenth century entering a state of crisis that would diminish its power as a normative world of knowledge production and scholarly/commercial exchange. The new arts-and-sciences Institutions of the early nineteenth century will show every sign of departing from that existing framework of educated knowledges. Still, if there was a crisis and collapse of the Republic's conceptual unity by the 1790s, as Ian Duncan, Paul Keen, and others have compellingly shown, this notional collapse was by no means the terminus of the intellectual field the literary republic had helped structure for nearly two centuries.¹² Instead, a mutation of that wider field was underway – both a differentiation of its knowledge genres in some ways, and a convergence of such knowledges in others.

Was this still Enlightenment? In their ordering and disordering of knowledges, the Institution world and its many participants could adapt

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the Enlightenment legacy only by transforming its matrix of disciplines, media, and modes of public outreach into a wholly renegotiated landscape of Romantic-age practices and spaces. To define such spaces, I shall attend throughout the book to key controversies that crystallized in or through the new learning organizations and their public impact. Institutions often arise out of controversy – indeed the history of religious and political struggle suggests they nearly always have done so – even as they generate new controversies to come. This is why institutions can appear as both stable and unstable, long lasting in one sense, yet remarkably volatile, contingently grounded, and prone to sudden change in another. Within a good many interlocking controversies at issue in the pages that follow, I focus mainly on those that concern questions of arts, sciences, belief systems, material interests, and philosophical dispute. Painters and architects stimulated controversy over the state of the British art field, through the Institutions and their print media, well before these struggles crystallized in the great Elgin Marbles debate. Critics of the Institutions’ scientific powers opened territories of political dispute by challenging the scientific discipline-formation under way on various political, economic, and philosophical fronts. As the only major European capital without a university, London became a city especially open both to political struggles over who should have access to what kinds of knowledge, and to the commercial context that put into question whether this or that discourse could count as knowledge at all. Religious controversy also, to a perhaps surprising degree, entered the presumptively secular realm of producing “arts and sciences”: Anglicans, evangelicals, rational Dissenters, Deists, Methodists, and atheists can all be found working to configure the early nineteenth-century public learning spaces, while High-Church Anglicans and anti-Jacobin writers often took every chance to oppose them. The secularity of the “arts and sciences” we now tend to take for granted was by no means the assumption guiding writers and organizers in the Romantic age.

If the formation called “arts and sciences” has been somehow less visible to us in the Romantic period than in the encyclopedic eighteenth century, it is in part because Romantic writers themselves often took a skeptical stance toward this rapidly proliferating discourse. Byron’s “Parenthetical Address” (1812) mocked a version of its language by having his fictive “Dr. Plagiarist” mindlessly rehearse what had become a national trope: “‘In arts and sciences our isle hath shone’ (This deep discovery is mine alone).”¹³ In a time of cross-European war, the “arts and sciences” were becoming a key stake in the competition between French, German, British, and other national cultures or political visions which deployed

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them as arms in an international struggle. At the same time, Romantic writers could react to the discourse as if it were an obstacle rather than a stimulus to thinking or doing anything new. “We are so far advanced in the Arts and Sciences,” Hazlitt demurred in *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), “that we live in retrospect, and doat on past achievements.”¹⁴ Leigh Hunt’s *Reflector* (1810–11) warned English reformers that “the arts and sciences, which should have been primary planets and fixed stars in the parliamentary system,” have instead become “the vortices in which we are whirling to destruction.”¹⁵ Nor have readers of Coleridge been quite sure of what he meant in his last published work by referring ambiguously to “the so called liberal arts and sciences” in a text on Church and State where the stakes of his meaning were surely very high.¹⁶ These and other cases suggest that the intellectuals we have regarded as major Romantic writers took a questioning distance from the wider discourse on “arts and sciences,” yet made a most active and complex engagement in what it does or should mean. They pushed and pulled, contested and absorbed, struggled with and sometimes capitalized upon the discourse of “arts and sciences” in ways not foreseeable from its early modern usage.

Romanticism and the contingency of institutions

Romanticism has become culturally famous for generating powerful anti-institutional postures, or for vigorously pro-institutional defenses. Among the most important of these we would have to include Godwin’s philosophical indictments of the “positive institutions” called government, Shelley’s critique of religious and political institutions in his poetry and prose, Hazlitt’s stinging assessment of “corporate bodies,” Blake’s exposing of those exploitive cathedrals in “Holy Thursday” or his fictional creation of that most anthropomorphic figure of institutions, the god Urizen. Edmund Burke furnished counterrevolutionary writers an idiom in which to defend Britain’s great “immemorial” institutions that were now at risk in the wake of the French Revolution, and in a paradigmatic case, former radical critics of British institutional powers would convert, with Coleridge, Southey, and Wordsworth, to their most literary and polemical apologists.¹⁷

But while such critical or defensive postures have been important to grasping the Romantic period’s most profound disagreements, they have tended also to obscure the extent to which the Romantic age was an extraordinarily active age of *instituting* in its own right. On the one hand, many could imagine or experiment with radically different kinds of instituting than had happened in the past. On the other, they could take old

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power structures and rethink them in a very modern way under the rubric “institutions” itself, as fascinated with what they could *do* as well as with how they worked and who was building them. “Institutions can new model our nature,” enthused Robert Southey after reading a book of Quaker history in 1806, and many of his contemporaries, whether radical, Whig, or Tory, were working by that intuition as well.¹⁸ The myriad forms such instituting could take are impressive when seen as a whole – scientific, artistic, welfare-shaping, punitive, rights-protective, print-cultural, culture-collecting, managerial or administrative, and so forth. In the following chapters I shall try to show what made this instituting process, and the language in which it was undertaken, *modern* as opposed to customary or even “early modern.”¹⁹ Thus I shall accentuate the recentness, the worked-up and modernizing character of this discourse of “institution,” which, though it has tended to rear-project a social history measured in millennia, is itself no more than 300 years old. For late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writers, the discourse on modern institutions was still a *new* language even though it was drawing upon its early modern roots in the various verbs and participles *to institute* and acts of *institution* such as founding, educating, transmitting an inheritance, law-making, or declaring authority.²⁰ And whether we credit the emerging conceptuality of institutions to the Scottish, French, English, German, or Italian enlightenments, the modern discourse on institution was to be an invention of both magnificent intellectual skill and sometimes treacherous rhetorical powers.

Forged as a generalized noun gradually through the eighteenth century, *institutions* became a word uniquely capable of lengthening into a vast historical process, engaging its users in a fundamental anachronism whereby the distant past came suddenly closer and remarkably more familiar since it too, like we moderns, knew its own “institutions” of kingship or kinship, marriage or slavery, church or state. Human institutions have led a life of 20,000 years, sociologists tell us today, without blinking at the conceptual device devised by the eighteenth century that put modern social-scientific instruments to so sweeping a use for grasping all sociocultural pasts.²¹ Such anachronism has thus tended to obscure the discourse on institutions’ more effective Enlightenment invention as a cornerstone – or what Peter de Bolla would call a “load-bearing concept” – for thinking and writing about modernity itself.²² In this light we can recall that the first consistently analytical deployment of the British discourse on institutions occurred in the Scottish Enlightenment, especially in the work of John Millar, Adam Ferguson, and Adam Smith. But the broader rhetoric of *institution* perhaps nowhere so tellingly assumed a modern