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At the beginning of the nineteenth century, London’s Albermarle Street saw a crush of carriages leading to the new Royal Institution. So, at least, the story goes about the effect of the handsome Humphry Davy drawing such a crowd to his dramatic lectures that, if Albermarle was not the first one-way street in London, it soon became the most famous. Without doubt Davy was a remarkable showman as well as a brilliant chemical and electrical experimenter. He was, amidst the rage for science, electrical to the ladies at least. But there were many less flattering views, revealed in detail in Jan Golinski’s *Experimental Self*, which is not so much a biography as a study of in unrelenting narcissism. The more Davy attracted attention the more it magnified his “genius.” But Golinski’s deep appreciation of the complexity of Davy’s character does not allow reduction to caricature even if, in early days at the Royal Institution, he was satirized as one of the “Pneumaticks” by the likes of the witty James Gillray.

Davy was nothing if not a fashionable philosopher. His career seemed an exercise in manufacturing selfhood—as respectable philosopher rising by effort and skill from modest origins in remote Cornwall to the pinnacle of London’s scientific establishment. Davy proved adept at exploiting opportunities emerging from his gifts at experiment. Thus, under the early influence of the radical Thomas Beddoes, he was drawn to the wild excesses of nitrous oxide affirmed in his willingness to use himself as subject. The self as subject was Davy’s realm even when results demonstrated the risk to humans, of much unpleasantness or of “loss of control over the body that implied a loss of sovereignty of the individual mind” (p. 33). Davy was far from the only one to experience such sensations, as he had with Lovell Edgeworth or perhaps with Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Beddoes’s allies James Watt, Josiah Wedgwood, James Keir, and their families were long among the many pneumatic adventurers. Davy, however, publicly addressed the “sublime” effects which transfixed late Georgian England. It is significant, in a period when the British establishment feared they might lose social control, that unruly effects on character and behavior could be fashioned in the pneumatist’s laboratory.

Golinski makes an important point about how Davy’s personal agenda played on the growing demand for scientific theater. He was, perhaps, the most able showman of the age. Tom Paine, however, sniffed that such “a sort of foppery in the human character … degrades it” (p. 83). Davy had put his performance at the service of his social climbing to the extent that even the scientific aristocracy
with whom he mixed sneered at him as “dirty finger gent-try” (p. 83). His objective, of course, not only served to distance him from his early associations with the radical Beddoes. He hoped to avoid the Tory abuse heaped upon reforming “pneumatics” like Erasmus Darwin or William Godwin. Democratic enthusiasms, whether induced by airs or by ideas, could readily have undermined Davy’s self promotion.

To be branded “enthusiast” in the eighteenth century, even more so in the midst of revolutionary sentiments, was to court disaster. Beddoes’s chemical patronage needed to be quarantined lest it reek of republics. It is thus interesting that Davy attracted great crowds to the Royal Institution, even to hundreds of auditors including, controversially, women although all were distinctly at least of an elite and middling sort. The Royal Institution did not stoop to those artisans they eliminated from access who otherwise might have been drawn by a democratic distribution of knowledge. Workers would find their interests best encouraged in small local societies and, ultimately, in mechanics’ institutes. In this regard, despite his modest origins Davy seems a special case, advancement apparently founded on talent and display, rather then upon ideology and designs for social benefit. As Golinski reveals of this so-called philosophic genius, “the allurements of fame and fashion” trumped all else (p. 16). But what does the explanation of genius do but simply disguise deeper reasons? Among his many intersections, some are revealing. Thus Coleridge warned of the serpents of ambition and vanity which stalked him. There are even deeper currents in what Henry Brougham described as the “frothy, feeble current” of fame (p. 64), some of them judged variously as “foppery” or “manly” depending on the moral or political messages of fashion.

As Golinski puts it, Davy’s display of genius was often deemed short of the ideal, the consequence of a charisma that ultimately “threatened him with moral harm” (p. 65). To be both respectable and a performer was a divide difficult to traverse in an age when there were many lesser lecturers, some of them even witnessing his dramatic voltaic pile which gave him authority they did not have while his occasional mishap set the press in agitation. Even here the pile was claimed to reveal fundamental organic laws, while he soon boasted to Coleridge that his pursuit of galvanism might “lead to the door of the temple of the mysterious god of Life” (p. 103).

At his lectures Davy appeared to play to the ladies while the men, it was suggested, “were mostly asleep or taking snuff” (p. 75). Even in the early nineteenth century, after decades when the presence of women at a philosophic lecture was really no novelty, there were those who intended a firm defence of serious science rather than, as William Buckland famously remarked in 1832, the shame of “a sort of Albermarle dilettanti meeting” (p. 75). There were many critics provoked by the popularity of science, such as Thomas Carlyle, who was not seduced by “whole batteries of retorts, digesters, and galvanic piles” (p. 99). But these reflected his very appeal with those elaborate instruments out of which Davy manufactured a reputation, and induced as well a certain amount of hostility—especially when he was compared to Newton. The difficulty here is that there was also another reputation that reached beyond Albermarle’s theater—of a particularly adept experimentalist who could reasonably claim discoveries of new metals like barium or strontium, of chlorine as element rather than oxide which, in turn, led to criticism of Lavoisier’s (and French) chemical nomenclature. Davy used the Royal Institution laboratory and select witnesses to affirm his apparent challenge to the French proposition of oxygen in all acids. So, Davy exploited his opportunities not simply to create amusement, but also to lay a firm foundation for his scientific status. That may well have been enough for resentment to grow especially when, as the itinerant lecturer James Dinwiddie had witnessed, Davy laid claim to philosophic as much as experimental reputation. If Davy relied on his instruments, he also depended on carefully separating his private reflections on the privileged from his public assertion of the benefits to workers that the rich might usefully encourage from promoting experimental philosophy. Out of his own self interest, he did not dare challenge the “refinement” of Count Rumford in the Royal Institution or the power of Joseph Banks at the Royal Society as “bulwarks of the aristocratic hegemony against subversion” (p. 131). Davy lamented the well-known trope of “dissipation” by which the wealthy were often seduced, which had also been of alarm to industrialists like James Watt and Matthew Boulton. But this complaint could just as readily be leveled at Davy as a philosophic dandy.

As Golinski reveals, Davy had to navigate between the pull of his ambition and avoiding the social radicalism assumed by many natural philosophers. Conflicting social and political currents affected the image of scientific promotion. And he knew from the consequences to Beddoes where political views might otherwise lead, notably in the hostility Banks had directed at Beddoes’s pneumatic schemes. It is striking that by 1821, Davy had cause to reflect upon those who carefully managed these associations, such as with the inventive
James Watt, whom Davy described as a "truly illustrious philosopher" (p. 128). Industrialists too had ambitions. Decades earlier, the chemical manufacturer James Keir in 1792 had already described the Wedgwoods as "Philosophers by Fire." Such was a common claim of those asserting respectability from talent and experimental trial. His own critics, Davy asserted, were repeating the slander of those who had sought to damage Galileo. Reputation was all, and he did not mind wrapping himself in the mantle of victim when he was abused for his public pretensions. This indeed was his vulnerability, especially when, for example, some assumed his chemistry of gunpowder might lead to an unseemly commercial interest. This criticism, of course, he might happily avoid by his marriage to the wealthy Scottish widow Jane Apreece. While married wealth could avoid commerce, it did not help convince anyone of their personal affection. The uniting of the 35-year-old Davy with Widow Apreece was, by all accounts, an alchemical mismatch, a continuing battle that caused much gossip and musing about his dandyism and his surliness in her presence. The best of their relationship was seemingly by correspondence from the Continent, while miles apart, and not from the financial independence she provided. He could then, however, ignore the worst of his critics in the Royal Society who resented his rise under Banks and ultimately from Oxbridge dons, like Charles Babbage, in the British Association for the Advancement of Science. He had come a long way from the patronage of Thomas Beddoes to relying on the elites of the Whig aristocracy. When he died in 1829 in Geneva, on a tour with his box of portable instruments, he had become the victim of Regency and late-Georgian snobbery reflected in the resentment that soon gave rise to new scientific societies. "Genius" provided more resentment than relief.

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