

Mohr, Hans-Ulrich

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In:

Susan Brähler; Kerstin-Anja Münderlein (Hrsg.), "When men are unprepared and look not for it": in Memoriam Christoph Houswitschka, Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, S. 325-336. DOI: 10.20378/irb-96531

Beitrag im Sammelwerk - Verlagsversion

DOI des Beitrags: 10.20378/irb-105210

Datum der Veröffentlichung: 04.12.2024

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Coming to Terms with the Enlightenment, Two Revolutions, and a Gothic Aftermath: Charles Brockden Brown's Novel *Ormond* (1799)

Hans-Ulrich Mohr, Dresden University of Technology

No doubt, the focus of Christoph Houswitschka's research interest lay in the Age of Romanticism, that epoch around 1800 when significant convictions of the previous century underwent a profound crisis but also when important new directions towards a modern, industrial world were developed. An author of that period who analysed the conditions of the 1790s and came to a differentiated understanding of the situation is the American Charles Brockden Brown, due to his expertise in European literature. Especially his profound knowledge of the works of England's eminent thinker William Godwin proved to be fertile. Moreover, he was clearly aware of the special situation of the US as the first democratic nation newly founded on the principles of the late Enlightenment and its stance against the corrupt aristocratic societies of Europe (Goetzmann 3-8). Following the course taken by the US as a nation with a written constitution (allegedly) based on a 'natural' authenticity, he felt himself under a special obligation to assess the human condition. With his circle, *The Friendly Club of New York City*, he was ardently interested in establishing a sphere of cultural activities and philosophical reflection.

Of course, Christoph Houswitschka's domain was British literature. But if you look at Brown (1771-1810) as a case of William Godwin's philosophical and literary influence, dealing with him would appear as a good supplement to Christoph's activities. Interestingly, the first German translation of Brown's *Ormond* (published in Leipzig, 1802) was entitled *Ormond, oder der geheime Zeuge. Aus dem Englischen des Godwin* [sic]. This attribution to the famous English writer and thinker Godwin, obviously made in tacit recognition of the merits of this novel but also to boost sales, gives evidence that Brown was considered a substantial contributor to the trans-Atlantic socio-political discourse of the late eighteenth century. C.B. Brown wrote this novel in December 1798 and had it published by the end of January 1799 (Waterman 108). The American scholar Bryan Waterman characterises it as follows: "*Ormond* emerged directly from a nexus of *Friendly Club* discussions of education, gender, religion, and politeness. It tests – and ultimately vindicates – many of the club's fundamental tenets, in particular its members' confidence in the efficacy of women's education and improvement" (118). In doing this, the novel deals, directly as well as by implication, with relevant elements of contemporary thought and its reaction to political developments at home and abroad.

Let us, in extension of Christoph's research, take a look at *Ormond*.

1. A Long Letter Thematising Intellectual Traditions via Interacting Characters

The action of *Ormond* is narrated mainly via a long 'letter' written by Sophia Courtland (née Westwyn) to a female German friend (I.E. Rosenberg). This letter is, above all, populated by a group of female characters representing different attitudes based on variant combinations of individual education and experience. Sophia narrates her knowledge as a secret witness (as the subtitle says) to the life of Constantia Dudley between the (marriageable) age of sixteen to roughly eighteen. In Chapter VI of this novel/long letter, the situation of the Dudleys is as follows: Mr Dudley, a widowed, well-to-do merchant, and his daughter Constantia are ruined by the trickery of an employee. Mr Dudley, who now makes a scanty living as a scrivener, grows irritable, takes to drinking and loses his eyesight. Constantia – a telling name – however, leads the household with a firm hand and never falters or even complains. She keeps the family going by setting up as a sempstress. But then the yellow fever plague comes to Philadelphia, where the Dudleys live. It depopulates their surroundings, eradicates their friends, neighbours and customers. Constantia, the smart and highly rational being she is, discovers the possibility of eking out their livings for at least a few months by living on corn meal mush (*Ormond* 46).¹ And thus, the Dudleys survive this dreadful plague and their financial crisis. Another word for that food is *hasty pudding*. Even today, this term reminds some people of a frugal but delicious dish in a genuine American tradition. For Brown this had a very immediate meaning and even more implications. Joel Barlow, a former member of the *Friendly Club* (seventeen years older than Brown), had composed a 'mock heroic epic poem' under the title *The Hasty Pudding*. Barlow, who had been an active patriot of the American Revolution, was also actively participating in the events and discussions around the French Revolution. Brown became a French citizen in 1792, stood for election in the French National Assembly and accepted French citizenship. He contributed to the text of the French Constitution. He also spent several years in London, being a member of the *London Society for Constitutional Information*, a progressive democratic circle around such eminent philosophical and political thinkers like William Godwin and Thomas Paine.

In 1793 in revolutionary France, radical groups prevailed who were determined to liquidate everyone and everything that stood in the way of the abstract ideas of objective reason and individual freedom. At that point, Barlow, staying in Savoy and being offered a dish of *Polante* (Barlow, Canto I, l. 86), was suddenly overcome by an epiphany of the authentic American spirit which resulted in his famous *The Hasty-Pudding: A Poem in Three Cantos*, published in New York in 1795.

¹ My quotations from *Ormond* refer to the edition by Ernest Marchand (Hafner Library of Classics).

Barlow surmises that Nature in the shape of a dark-skinned Indigenous goddess of agricultural fertility, comparable to the Greek Ceres (I, 37), must have given the maize plant to the early Americans. Denying that it is only food for pigs (I, 111-19), he refutes the slander of the middle and lower classes as “swinish multitude“ made by the English author and MP Edmund Burke in his *Reflections Upon the Revolution in France* (1790)². For Barlow, corn stems look like time-honoured Corinthian columns (II, 61) and the fields where they grow offer sublime views of undulating verdant hillsides, i.e. authenticity confirmed by the aesthetic of the Sublime and Picturesque. This aesthetic, founded on the empirical and psychological experience of the workings of Nature, was developed in the course of the eighteenth century and would eventually prevail and carry the idea of an *organic historical process* far into the nineteenth century in movements such as Romanticism and Historicism (see Mohr “Picturesque” and “Picturesque and Sublime”).

Outstanding is the corn harvest: for Barlow, it is a series of events combining work, culture and the celebration of life by collective, very democratic rituals. Constitutive of all this is nature as it is found in America as well as the traditions of dealing with it handed down by the ancestors: “So taught our sires and what they taught is true” (III, 78). Barlow now appears to remind the French and his fellow citizens in the US of a society where the notions of human rights and freedom have already come true. In America, these rights have been established and they grow naturally and organically.

Now back to Constantia Dudley. She, who is almost an embodiment of perfect rationality, is not ideologically enthusiastic about the hasty pudding. For her, it is not even an emotionalised soul food. She adopts it by necessity, in a very sober and pragmatic way, as a ‘natural’ antidote to the epidemic and it saves her and her father. Obviously, American nature and the people living there are not special. America’s soil may provide rich harvests, but there is also the devastating epidemic. Constantia has been educated to become “eloquent and wise” (*Ormond* 23). Instead of the usual female education in music and drawing, her father had taught her Latin, philosophy and physical science, which according to Sophia, the narrator, made her superior to the rest of women whose education tends to make them “alluring and voluptuous” (23). Her father had also instructed her about the moral course of mankind, particularly exemplified by the experience of Italian landscapes and history (23). Constantia’s reason tells her not to get married before the age of twenty-three, even against her father’s advice and will. Her two caveats against marriage are (a) the inequality of partners in terms of mind, intellect and taste and (b) the fact that wives become the legal property of their husbands. She

² For this term and the discussion around it see Conor Cruise O’Brien’s “Introduction” to Burke’s *Reflections*.

also finds it unacceptable to waste her time with a man she is not morally and intellectually convinced of.

Quite the opposite of Constantia is Helena Cleves. She has been educated to excite emotions more voluptuous than dignified. She falls prey to Ormond, the eponymous hero, Constantia's male opponent. Ormond sets Helena up as his mistress. When Constantia tries to help Helena to correct her mistaken education and her decision, Ormond becomes attracted to Constantia and discards Helena. Helena thereupon commits suicide, although Ormond has financially provided for her. Like Constantia's name, Helena Cleves's name is telling: she is a beautiful woman who 'cleaves' to her lover, lacking rational distance and self-control. Ormond's relationship with her is based on sensual attraction but not on intellectual compatibility. This is actually the reason why he has declined to marry her.

The narrator (letter writer), Sophia Courtland, appears also as a novel character representing another variant of female attitudes. When Sophia's criminal and drinking mother deserted her, the Dudleys took her into their family and thus exposed her to the impact of what was then called 'domestic affections' (185-91). After the age of seven, then, she had been educated by Methodists and adopted a devout and sentimental belief in the workings of God. This attitude colours her letter-writing/narrative and occasionally makes her sententious. In this way she is an unreliable witness. But as her name Sophia suggests, she is, on the whole, understanding and wise.

For Constantia, on the contrary, religion is only a vague option because her father had withheld it from her. He did not want to influence her with religion until she had reached a mature knowledge of life.

Ormond's life is orientated at the pursuit of happiness, or rather: pleasure. He considers "Nature [as] a theater of suffering. What corner is unvisited by calamity and pain?" (141) and strives to distil as much satisfaction as possible from her. In this he is a late descendant of the libertine hero in the tradition of the Restoration Comedy and the ideas of Hobbes (see Underwood 12-46). In Brown's age the 'pursuit of happiness' reminds, of course, primarily of what the new American Constitution promises to ensure. But one should be aware that this is a phrase from the libertine tradition that found its way into Enlightenment thinking.

Ormond's French-sounding name is a combination of *or*, i.e. gold, and *monde*, i.e. world. Such a name seems well-suited to characterise a person who represents an elegant, refined person with an intensive, if not cynical awareness of the world as it is, and who strives to get the best out of it. Such a character has forerunners in, for example, Dorimant in Etherege's *The Man of Mode* (1676) or Mirabell and Millamant in Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700). Nevertheless, Ormond does

not take to outright hedonism. He is too enlightened not to rise beyond the libertine tradition and its cynicism. Sophia judges, “No one could entertain loftier conceptions of human capacity. . . . But he carefully distinguished between men in the abstract, and men as they are” (92). For him “virtue and duty were [not] terms without a meaning, but they require us to promote our own happiness and not the happiness of others. Not because the former end is intrinsically preferable, not because the happiness of others is unworthy of primary consideration, but because it is not to be attained” (93). He believes (according to Sophia), “The principles of the social machine must be rectified, before men can be beneficially active. Our motives may be neutral or beneficent, but our actions tend merely to the production of evil” (93).

In the late 1780s, the Restoration libertine had reemerged in novels addressing the new middle-class mass-reading public as the ‘Gothic villain’ (Mohr, “Beginnings” 26). In 1794, William Godwin, author of the long and profound philosophical treatise *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), had the idea to spread his convictions in a more efficient way (Marshall 115-20). He found the then popular Gothic novel suited for his purpose and decided to write a novel using its narrative mould (see McCracken, “Introduction” x-xii). It usually dealt with an eighteenth-century heroine in her late teens and with an educational background of upper middle-class sense and sensibility who was (sexually) pursued by a libertine aristocrat. This was enacted in a late medieval scenario.

Godwin now adjusted this model to express the *contemporary* political confrontation between the aristocracy and the middle classes, which is the (implied) centre of his *Enquiry*. The full title of his novel is therefore *Things As They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams*. Godwin believed in the omnipotence of reason and truth. Human vices are not invincible and Man is perfectible. Waterman sums up: “Godwin’s program was . . . the architecture for a progressive and optimistic intellectual republic whose citizens were men and women of benevolence, a republic that depended on free inquiry and free expression, and on the ability to shape public opinion” (100). Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* deals with the social clinch between the aristocrat Falkland, who has committed a murder, and his inquisitive middle-class secretary Caleb Williams, who comes to know about the murder. The novel ends with Falkland’s downfall; his pretensions to an elevated social rank justified by his moral superiority implode.

In *Ormond*, a similar confrontation seems to be represented by the interaction between Ormond and Constantia. In fact, Ormond employs a lot of Godwinian argumentation to persuade Constantia before she sees no way out but stabbing him. Of course, this scene echoes the pursuit of the virtuous orphan girl by the aristocratic seducer in the Gothic novel. But Constantia’s killing of Ormond in an act of ‘instinctive’ self-defence, according to Sophia: “by a momentary frenzy”

(240), represents a new twist in (poetic) justice. Hitherto, punishment for the Gothic villain had come through self-destruction by his excesses or through providential intervention. But, as we have seen above, Ormond is a more complicated case. He argues with references to objectified reason and strives for "superiority to what he accounted vulgar prejudice, [and] . . . to emotion . . . vague and sensual" (97). He has killed the murderer of Constantia's father, believes that he has removed an obstacle to her felicity (232), and has – moreover – produced public, universal good. Now he expects Constantia – according to Sophia: in "a fatal perverseness of reasoning" (234) – to show her gratitude, exert "solace" and "beneficence" (235) by granting him sexual reward. Constantia, however, is resolved to die uninjured, if necessary by suicide. Not so much to preserve her virtue, but to preserve her personal honour: "To save a greater good by the sacrifice of life" (234). There we have a woman rescuing herself from being raped, or rather 'dishonoured', by killing the aggressor – a situation more concretely Gothic than the novels in the female (Radcliffean) school usually suggested.

Nevertheless, this was not far-fetched in an age where women armed with pitchforks and scythes had forced the French king to move from the detachment of Versailles to Paris, the centre of events (Thamer 39). It is also not unusual after Charlotte Corday's murder of Marat, after Olympe de Gouge's publication of her *Déclarations des droits de la Femme et de la Citoyenne* (1791)³ and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published one year later. This text by Godwin's partner and later wife (1797) was a critique of the traditional marriage and of female education. It stood in the centre of the discussions at the *Friendly Club* (Waterman 108-11).

Constantia's act is like an initiation from her abstract concepts into life, especially in the light of the fate of Martinette de Beauvais, who represents another important point of view in the spectrum of female characters that surround Ormond. She combines intellectuality, independence, and a mastery of existence gained from world-wide travel and experience at several hotspots of human history such as various wars in America, in Eurasia, and during the French Revolution, where she had even been involved in the killing of political and military opponents. Like a martin she has flown between the continents and she sees herself as a pioneer of liberation like *Martin* Luther. Martinette has met leading philosophers of the Enlightenment (157-76), especially Volney, the author of *Les Ruines*, the then highly admired book on the history of the rise and fall of empires (158). As it turns out, Martinette is Ormond's lost sister. Set against her, it becomes clear that Constantia's attitude is reasonable only to a degree. It is also rigidity derived from

³ On these women see *Ormond*, ed. Barnard and Shapiro, 359-64. On de Gouge see Blanc. In rejection of her feminist and anti-slavery arguments, de Gouge was accused as a Royalist under the regime of Robespierre and guillotined on 3 November 1793.

inexperience. In the light of this, Ormond's death is as much *her* fault as it is *his*. Underneath Ormond's reasoning lurks an irascible temper, but Constantia is also unable to respond adequately.

2. Assessing Brown's Position

I hope I have shown that Brown's choice of characters represents the configuration of intellectual positions prevalent in the Western hemisphere in the Age of the French Revolution, thematising the arguments discussed in the *Friendly Club*. Ormond's, Martinette's and Constantia's attitudes converge in the conviction of the Enlightenment that man/woman partakes in the objective reasonability of Nature. Certainly, this is combined with individual traits. But, in a more generalised way this had become the orientating horizon for (collective) political action. Especially under Robespierre such reasoning was used to justify a regime of virtuous terror against alleged enemies of the Revolution (1793-94). On 8 June 1794, a famous *Fête de l'être supreme* (festival of the supreme being) was celebrated with a large crowd, first in the *Tuilleries* (Engl. Tuileries) and then on the *Champ de Mars*.

It was planned and carefully orchestrated by Robespierre and the painter Jacques-Louis David. It culminated in an oath spoken by the people up to a female allegorical statue of objectified reason, standing on top of a high column next to a 'mountain of liberty' (Thamer 85; Schulin 223-24). The painter Pierre-Antoine Demachy was engaged to visualise this (allegedly) sublime event for posterity in a famous painting.

However, there was a context, bloodier than a Gothic novel writer could think of at the time. Between 10 March 1793, the establishment of the revolutionary tribunal, and 27 July 1794, the overthrow of Robespierre, almost 3,000 people were



Fig. 1: "Fête de l'Être suprême au Champ de Mars, 8 juin 1794" by Pierre-Antoine Demachy, 1794. Musée Carnavalet, Paris. This painting is in the public domain.

executed (mostly guillotined). And there was a Gothic aftermath to the festival. Two days after the festival, the *Décret de Prairial* was issued, speeding up political trials by prohibiting defence, with the effect that within 49 days 16,594 persons were sentenced to death and killed nationwide. The actual count is very likely much higher. This legalised terror came to a stop only when on 28 July 1794 Robespierre and 105 of his followers were also beheaded (Thamer 88; Schulin 224-25).

Back to C.B. Brown's novel. Sophia and the other characters are appalled not only at the bloody course of history, especially the French Revolution,⁴ but also at the cruel and painful workings of nature, such as the epidemic. Thus, Brown rejects the late Enlightenment notion of the progress of reason or of man being able to shape history in a perfectionistic way. If there is anything like an objective reason working in Nature and history, man has certainly no privileged access to it. As to the people of America: they are just as ambivalent, of limited knowledge and morally unstable as other people. Mr Dudley's intellect did not prevent him from being cheated out of his fortune and from becoming a drunkard. As Brown shows in his characters, the use of reason is mostly instrumental and selfish. The strongest example is Ormond's attempted rape of Constantia using Godwin's highly rational arguments against marriage in view of the inequality between men and women. But Brown is not outrightly pessimistic. The following statement by Sophia seems to outline the human possibilities that remain: "Our power in the present state of things is subjected to certain limits. . . . A wise man will relinquish the pursuit of general benefit, but not the *desire* of that benefit, or the perception of that in which this benefit consists, because these are among the ingredients of virtue and the sources of happiness" (93, my italics). This is authenticated at least by Sophia's well-considered education and her expertise relating to the arts and history (see footnotes 5, 6, and 7) as well as her role in the novel and her standing among the other characters.

With the selection and the combination of his characters and their fates, Brown's novel diagnoses the virtual collapse of the driving force of Enlightenment optimism: its belief in the moral sovereignty of the collective individual of the middle classes. Historian Hans-Ulrich Thamer writes that the Enlightenment was the catalyst and the symptom of a surging crisis of authority. It established, extended and legitimised a new political discourse. Through its forms of organisation and communication it created a public sphere of critical debate with a tendency towards unlimited dynamics and radicalisation (Thamer 19). Objectified reason became the (allegedly) legitimate point of reference for the middle classes in their struggle against a corrupt aristocracy and clergy and for political representation.

⁴ Sophia writes of "the great theatre of Europe" (155) and of "the sanguinary tyranny of Robespierre . . . and . . . [t]he blood which it occasioned to flow . . ." (170).

But Brown demonstrates that such reference is beyond the reach of man. It is this new, negative awareness that lies behind the despair of High Romanticism (1795-1815). In an article in Marie Mulvey-Roberts' *Handbook of the Gothic*, Christoph Houswitschka has shown that Hegel has articulated this state of mind in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) with the term 'Zerrissenheit', describing "a feeling of self-estrangement between the 'rent/lacerated consciousness' . . . caused by the tensions between the individual's desires and the limitations of experience, the fragmentation of man's perception in the empirical sciences and the disintegration of his social substance" (Houswitschka 263).

This existential despair was, of course, more present in a Europe devastated by social upheavals and successive wars than in America. The US were less aware of all this because of their open economic possibilities, their non-aristocratic, less hierarchical structures, their religious sense of mission (despite their areligious constitution), and their cultural lag (Goetzmann 53-70). Brown, however, distances himself from those normative convictions of America and the self-deceptions of revolutionary Europe. He acknowledges the failure of the Enlightenment notion to understand and to direct Nature. He can only accept it as a very desirable ideal.

What was to replace the failed notion of objective reason as an authentic orientation? As we have already indicated in the discussion of Barlow's *Hasty Pudding*, aesthetic experience became the new prime source of knowledge because the organism and history of Nature proved to be larger than what man would be able to comprehend by rational means. The favourite objects of such aesthetic experience are landscapes and the history enacted in them, but also music as the highest medium of sensation.⁵ In the presentations of female lifelines in *Ormond*, there are, now and then, brief references to the categories of the Picturesque and the Sublime (*Ormond* 23,⁶ 52, 175, 176, 221, 222) which are, in fact, aesthetic categories connected with organic (irrational) natural history. Both concepts conjoined would soon come to dominate the nineteenth century as the prevalent model of reality, especially when after the Napoleonic Era the novels of Sir Walter Scott had found a convenient and widely acceptable formula to express it, setting out in 1814 with his novel *Waverley* (Kroeber 168-92; Pittock 1-10, 293-312).

⁵ Thus Sophia practices music and takes a strong interest in painting (e.g. Tititiano and Caracchi), e.g. *Ormond* 152-54.

⁶ Sophia writes: "The most precious materials of the moral history of mankind are derived from the revolutions of Italy. Italian features and landscape constitute the chosen field of the artist" (*Ormond* 23).

This model of reality and natural history found its most striking visualisation in Thomas Cole's cycle of five paintings entitled *The Course of History* (1836, reproduced in Novak 11-13).⁷

Hand in hand with this goes a new emphasis on domestic affections. Until 1795, William Godwin, like the French Enlightenment, had insisted that domestic affections were limited, too specific and irrelevant in promoting the general well-being. In his later novels *St. Leon* (1799) and *Fleetwood* (1805), however, he conceded that domestic affections were the most important source for shaping a moral character and the basis for an authentic society. This is a position we have also found in *Ormond*, especially with Sophia and Constantia. Nevertheless, we should not forget that this novel is, above all, a study of the variance of human behaviour derived from perception, education, intellect, judgement, and 'instinct'. It shows men attempting to cope with a nature that evades/transcends the categories of human reason, but is, on the whole, as her aesthetic experience and her unfolding *qua* history show, benevolent to man. She is however – even at her most intense – ultimately inscrutable. Brown's novel, published in early 1799, offers an astounding depth of insight despite being still surrounded by the aftermath of the French Revolution and the turbulences of High Romanticism.

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⁷ In his cycle Cole exemplifies the workings of natural history through the landscape between Palermo and Erice (Sicily) around the distinctive Monte Bonifatu (as I have experienced personally).

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