

# TRANS- HUMANITIES

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Republic**

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Source : *Trans-Humanities*, Vol. 9 No. 1 (2016), pp. 85–103.

Published by : Ewha Womans University Press

URL : <http://eiheng.ewha.ac.kr/page.asp?pageid=book10&pagenum=060600>

Online ISSN : 2383-9899

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# Enlightening the Blind: *Ormond; or, The Secret Witness* and the Representation of Cataract Surgery in the Early Republic<sup>1</sup>

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Kenichi SATO (Tokyo University of Science)

## I. Introduction

In the dawn of the Early Republic, literature as a genre had not yet been established. It was in such circumstances that Charles Brockden Brown (1771–1810), the first professional writer in the US, happened to establish the interface between both the literary and fictional and the scientific and factual in a fictional discourse. Focusing on Stephen Dudley, a character that appears in *Ormond; or, The Secret Witness*<sup>2</sup> (1799), which is Brown's second novel, this paper attempts to examine the nature of this interface.

In the beginning of chapter II of *Ormond*, Stephen Dudley, the father of Constantia, who is the heroine of the novel, loses his sight entirely. This happens soon after Dudley finds himself cheated by Craig, the imposter, and bereft of his wife: “[h]e was imperfectly recovered from the shock occasioned by the death of his wife, when his sight was invaded by a cataract. Its progress was rapid, and terminated in total blindness” (51).

In fact, the so-called “opening event” of the novel depicts Dudley's various losses and dispossessions. First, in the very beginning of the narrative, we are told that the death of Dudley's mother “had rendered his society still more necessary to old gentleman” (40), which is soon followed again by the death of this “old gentleman,” that is, his father. Of course this series of events “introduced an important change in his situation,” a change which compels

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1. This paper is a largely revised and enlarged version of the paper appeared in Japanese in *Studies in English Literature* (regional branches combined issue) in 2010. My deepest appreciation goes to Professor Stephen Jennings, my colleague at Tokyo University of Science, who gives insightful comments and suggestions.

2. Hereafter, *Ormond*.

Dudley to abandon “an attachment to the pencil” (39) and he is obliged to engage in his father’s former business as a stationer. This “new path” (40), however, is “too incongenial to his disposition” (40) and almost drives him into depression, when a young boy called Craig arrives at his shop as an apprentice. After five years of service, the boy brings “the total ruin” of Dudley’s fortune by embezzling almost all the Dudleys’ savings (50). The list of privations is finally completed by the sudden death of his wife, followed by the loss of sight.

Stephen Dudley, thus, seems to enter into the novel only to lose. Certainly, the fact that he is finally killed by the command of Ormond might emphasize the nature of Stephen Dudley as being the sole loser in the novel. And perhaps owing to this seeming weakness, Stephen Dudley has been unnoticed by critics for a long time. There has been almost no attempt at a critical analysis of this character. In fact, more than nine articles on *Ormond* have been published after 2000, but none centers on Stephen Dudley. Even Sydney Krause in the “Historical Essay” of the bi-centennial edition of *Ormond*, which usefully summarizes the critical trend of the novel, pays little attention to Stephen Dudley while he gives substantial explanations on such characters in the novel as Ormond, Constantia, Sophia, and Helena. In this essay, however, I will argue that Stephen Dudley deserves more careful scrutiny.

Stephen Dudley certainly appears weak, or even insignificant in the novel, but this is just a matter of appearance. The first thing to take note of here is that in *Ormond* there is a subplot of vengeance in which Stephen Dudley, otherwise the man of loss, plays a central role and achieves a hidden triumph. We have to remember the fact that even after he is murdered, Dudley is still alive as a sort of spirit in Constantia. After “[t]he first transports of grief [of his father’s death] having subsided,” Constantia is convinced that “her father had only changed one form of being for another; that he still lived to be the guardian of her peace and honour, to enter the recesses of her thought, to forewarn her of evil and invite her to good” (213). Seen in this light, Dudley is revenged on the commander of his death at the climax of the novel when Constantia happens to stab Ormond to death. Constantia’s accidental murder of Ormond, therefore, can be read as the unexpected achievement of Dudley’s vengeance. It is unexpected because Constantia denies her intention of vengeance right after the murder of her father. Speculating on “[w]ho could be the performer of so black a deed,” the narrator of the novel explains that her speculation derives “not from the thirst of vengeance, but from a mournful curiosity” (214). A penknife, with which Constantia happened to stab Ormond, is telling in this

context because it definitely reminds the reader of Dudley's reluctant "service as a writer in a public office" right after his financial ruin brought about by Craig in the opening of the novel (50); at that time, there was no choice left for him but to rely on the "facilities and elegancies of his penmanship" (50). Hence, a reader especially keen on the destiny of Stephen Dudley will find that the climax of the novel speaks more eloquently of him than of anyone else.

Thus, even a brief observation on Stephen Dudley teaches us his importance in the story. What follows is a reading of *Ormond* different from what has been attempted by any former critic and the revelation of a mode of representation that is peculiar to *Ormond*, which is, in my understanding, a curious amalgam of the fictional and the scientific.

## II. The Recovery from Blindness

Stephen Dudley, as we have seen above, is not just a loser in *Ormond*. This can also be proved by the most curious event in the novel: his recovery from blindness. Before he is killed by Ormond, he regains his sight. This completely subverts his role as a man of loss. In the end of chapter XVII, Stephen Dudley has his sight restored by "[a] surgeon of uncommon skill" brought by Ormond. As is often the case with Brown's novel, we are unexpectedly told that the case of Dudley "was by no means remediless" (179) and that he was treated by "the necessary operation" to restore "the enjoyment of light" (179).

So far critics of *Ormond* have rarely, if ever, mentioned his recovery from blindness. They often comment exclusively on the blindness of Stephen Dudley, but their attention has only been centered on its figurative effect. "Dudley's wife dies," Robert S. Levine explains, "and the grief-stricken Dudley goes blind," adding that "[i]n a world of hypocrites the trusting individual suffers from a kind of blindness" (32). Michael T. Gilmore observes that "[t]he characters in *Ormond* are impoverished by unpredictable occurrences beyond their control—in Mr. Dudley's case, in being embezzled and going blind—and they are enriched by similarly accidental events" (651). After his blindness, argues Norman S. Grabo, "[a]ll Dudley can do is talk about what he sees in his mind" (38). Probably these critics have the traditional image of the blind in their mind. "The blind person," points out Mosche Barasch, "is understood primarily as unfortunate, disabled, a human being deprived of what has always been considered the most precious gift man has received" (147). Backed by this

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kind of assumption, former critics just vary in metaphoric interpretations of the seemingly singular event in Dudley's life.

However, the peculiarity of the case of Stephen Dudley should not be ignored. Of course, the mere fact of Dudley's blindness will give *Ormond* a place in the tradition of literary works featuring the blind. But if so, its place will not be in the mainstream. Traditionally, as Jacob Twersky points out, the blind as a literary motif are never cured except in the case of a miracle (7). And this means that the cause of blindness cannot be specified (Lawenfeld 28). To this the case of Stephen Dudley is the perfect opposite. His blindness is doubly idiosyncratic: he gets blind with a specific cause and is later cured.

As Donald A. Ringe rightly suggests, in *Ormond* the reader can see "the use Brown makes of realistic detail to establish the social environment in which his characters move" (46). For instance, the narrator tells us quite specifically that Constantia, in out of sheer poverty, relied on "Indian meal" that "was procurable at ninety cents per bushel" (81). In fact, this information has a direct source in Court Rumford's publication that Brown reviewed in the magazine he edited, *The American Review*. Moreover, it is a well-known fact that in depicting plague-stricken Philadelphia, Brown relies on many contemporary factual sources and witnesses (Krause 360–68). Concerning this point, Bryan Waterman argues along with Gilmore and Michael Warner that the "factuality" of Brown's novel can be read as his "sincere attempt to disseminate medical and moral facts" in the Early Republic's circulation of knowledge (218). Basically agreeing with their arguments, hereafter I would also suggest that the case of Dudley can be another good example of "factuality" in *Ormond*, which has definite effects on the progress of the narrative and the politics of the Early Republic.

### III. The Narrative and the Pathology

The fact that the narrative sequence of the opening events keeps pace with the invasion of a cataract into his eyes has long been unnoticed. The image of the *cataract* definitely underlies the opening narrative.

Here, it is useful for us to review the pathological history of a cataract as an eye disease. A cataract, which is one of the world's leading causes of blindness even today, can be simply defined as "a loss of transparency, or clouding, of the normally clear lens of the eye" (Shulman 1). The word itself is derived from

Greek, which stands for “down-rushing, a down rushing bird, a portcullis, waterfall” (“Cataract”). As this etymology suggests, from antiquity onward it was widely believed that cataracts were formed by “evil liquids” or “humor” flowing into the eye (Shulman 2). The notion of the opacity of the lens, on which current pathology is chiefly based, was not confirmed until the mid-seventeenth century when a German doctor, Warner Rolpink, published his theory (2).

Among the various forms of cataracts, the most common kind is that which develops with aging. Indeed, “[i]n its early stages a cataract is not a disease at all, but a normal part of aging” (Shulman 1). Other than this, there are congenital cataracts and cataracts brought about by an accident such as a severe eye injury.

Except in the case of accidents, a cataract hardly inflicts any pain on the eyes. The US in the late eighteenth century was probably familiar with this. According to an article titled “Of the Cataract,” one of the earliest reference sources on this side of the Atlantic, which appeared in *Encyclopaedia; or a Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Miscellaneous Literature*, a year before the publication of *Ormond* (1799), a cataract can be distinguished from other eye diseases that have “the evident marks which these affection produces, as well as by the pain attending their beginning” (136). “It commonly begins,” *Encyclopaedia* continues, “with a dimness of sight; and this generally continues a considerable time before any opacity can be observed in the lens” (136). Yet, once it starts to progress, it will possibly bring serious damages to the eyes. “As the disease advances the opacity becomes sensible,” and it “gradually increases till the person either becomes entirely blind, or can merely distinguish light from darkness” (136). This diagnosis is definitely true in Dudley’s case.

In fact, Brown’s wording shows us the possibility that he is more or less versed in the era’s basic pathology of a cataract as described in *Encyclopaedia*. The narrator of *Ormond* tells us that Stephen Dudley’s “sight was invaded by a cataract” and “[i]ts progress was rapid” (51). Here, adopting the words “invaded” and “rapid” instead of “surprising” and “sudden,” the narrative seems to stay true to the encyclopedic description of the pathology of a cataract. What the narrator depicts here is that, though Dudley goes blind quite abruptly, this is only a matter of appearance. The description tells us nothing about how *suddenly* the disease comes from the outside into Dudley’s body; but it does tell us about how *rapidly* it damages his eyes from the inside.

Once the account of the contemporary encyclopedic discourse on the

pathology of a cataract is taken into account, then, the two catastrophic losses of Dudley in the opening events overlap. It can safely be said, based on the pathology, that the the cataract in Dudley's eyes was already silently, but steadily, progressing while Craig was penetrating into the family business of the Dudleys. And the nature of both are quite similar in two ways. First, they both seep into innermost places (Dudley's eye and the Dudleys' family business) unnoticed and make catastrophes (total blindness and bankruptcy). Second, their progress is so silent and lasting that when they cause catastrophes it seems as if they come on all of a sudden. The narrator tells us that Dudley's "misfortune had not been foreseen" (49) even though he is "prone to suspect" Craig at the last stage of the infiltration (48). Ironically enough, while the totally unforeseeable plot is unraveling, Dudley is losing his physical capacity to see.

#### IV. Enlightening the Blind

After Dudley was deprived of "the light of heaven" (51), none could really predict he would recover his sight. "Condemned to *eternal* dark[ness]" (51, emphasis added), he is characterized to be the one who is not willing to depend upon support from others. "To live upon the charity," the narrative goes, "or to take advantage of the compassion of his friends, was a destiny far worse than any other" (50) for Dudley, and his attitude does not change even after the financial ruin. Constantia, therefore, is obliged to devote herself "to rescu[ing] him, by the labour of her hands, from dependence on public charity" (58).

Strangely enough, however, Dudley suddenly accepts the offer from Ormond to cure his blindness through surgical operation. Without any reasonable explanation Dudley decides to "live upon a charity." Though it accompanies "considerable *difficulty*," he is finally "prevailed upon to undergo the necessary operation" to cure his blindness (179, emphasis added). This is, for sure, quite puzzling in terms of the consistency of the characterization of Stephen Dudley. Even if the "*difficulty*" referred to above in persuading him could be a trace of the consistent characterization of Dudley, the consistency is completely destroyed when he unpredictably accepts the offer of the eye operation.

However, in view of the medical practice for treating a cataract, the cause of Dudley's blindness, a cure can be predictable even from the outset. We have

to notice that by the late eighteenth century, blindness caused by a cataract had already come to be radically cured. This was owing to a newly invented method of removing cataracts, which was called “extraction.” The sole method of cataract surgery until then had been only what was known as “depression” (or, sometimes, “couching”). While surgeons just “push the cataract down out of the line of sight” (Shulman 76) in the method of depression, in the method of extraction they literally extract the clouded lens itself. This prevents the return of cataracts, the notorious side effect common to the method of depression. Because it can bring about a radical cure for blindness caused by a cataract, the new extraction method was enthusiastically welcomed.

The method of extraction was first adopted by a French doctor called “Petit” in 1708. However, when English surgeon William Cheselden removed cataracts for the first time from a blind person since birth in 1728, his choice was depression, not extraction (Degenaar 59). The method of extraction had not become widespread due to its difficulty and the lack of proper tools until Doctor Jacques Daviel at French court improved the method and the tools in the mid-eighteenth century. According to Shulman, Daviel first performed the operation of extraction in 1745. In one operation he failed to do the ordinary procedure of depression and was forced to remove both lenses from his patient’s eyes. Unexpectedly, the removal had a positive effect on the patient’s sight. The record has it that in the following eleven years he succeeded in 384 operations (out of 434 cases) with the method of extraction, which he exclusively adopted after 1750 (75–76). The development culminated four years after Daviel’s first attempt, when another French scientist René Antoine Ferchault de Réaumur extracted cataracts from the eyes of a person who had been blind since birth for the first time in the history of medicine (Barasch 150).

The case of Réaumur provoked the intense curiosity of Denis Diderot, one of the leading philosophers of the Enlightenment.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the early eighteenth century devotion to the treatment of the blind caused by cataracts was driven not merely by practical and medical interests; it was also motivated by more speculative excitements among philosophers of the age. There was a well-known epistemological enigma known as Molyneux’s problem, which attracted the attention of many intellectuals in the period of Enlightenment.

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3. See especially pages 52–53 in the following source: Riskin, Jessica. *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sensational Empiricists of the French Enlightenment*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002.



The problem can be epitomized as this: if a person born blind gains his sight by successful surgery, does this person recognize a cube and a sphere only by his sight? As Barasch suggests, the matter was highly hypothetical before the curability of the blind since birth was confirmed; but especially after Daviel and Réaumur, the question became experimental (150).

Of course it is not the task of this paper to follow the long debate on Molyneux's problem, but here I would like to emphasize that it was the mid-eighteenth century that first saw the radical curability of blindness caused by cataracts. It was a period of transition in which the blind turned out to be the object of experimentation. Blindness was no more the object of speculation accompanying various mystifications or superstitions.

At this point we should remember that Harry Levin once asserted that Brown "was completely committed to the postulates of the Enlightenment" (21). And Brown's delight "in rationalistic explanations of apparently supernatural phenomena" (Levin 21) shows the possibility that Brown himself got involved in the Enlightenment project of demystification of the world and I argue this is proven by the description of the cataract surgery in *Ormond*. And in this sense, the perfect recovery of Dudley in *Ormond* is not only informed by, but also informs, Brown's commitment to the Enlightenment philosophy.

Brown could read French and was familiar with French *philosophes* who advocated the assumption of the intellectual radicalism of the Enlightenment (Krause 318). As Wilhelmus Maria Verhoeven reveals, Hocquot Caritat, the New York publisher of *Wieland* and *Ormond*, was "a major source for the ideas of the *philosophes* for Brown," and, as Brown himself admitted, he could understand French so that he "traversed [...] some thousands of pages of the immense compilations of Diderot and D'Alembert" (Clark 69).

Now, if what Brown wanted to present to us by describing the total blindness and the radical cure of Stephen Dudley is a fine example of demystification brought by the Enlightenment, it is reasonable to infer that Stephen Dudley is cured by the method of extraction, the advanced medical skill bred during the Enlightenment period. This assumption, as you can imagine, is supported by the contemporary medical sources.

There were at least two texts contemporary with *Ormond* specifically referring to the cataract operation — one is medical, and the other is encyclopedic. They can be strong support to infer the operation method for Stephen Dudley's case. Viewing chronologically, the first is an entry in *Encyclopaedia; or a Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Miscellaneous Literature* (1798), and the second is

the inaugural dissertation by a doctor called Frederic Seip, which was submitted to the medical faculty of the University of Pennsylvania (1800).

Both of them were published in Philadelphia but they were not original accounts in the sense that they recorded all kinds of findings and inventions in the United States. They are accumulations of the knowledge then available concerning the new type of cataract operation. And this helps us understand the depth and width of the framework within which the contemporary understandings of the pathology of cataracts are articulated. It is this framework of knowledge that was shared by an encyclopedic description, a medical dissertation, and a piece of fictional discourse.

Based on both sources, we can easily realize that the method adopted for Stephen Dudley's operation was extraction. First, *Encyclopaedia* is thus making clear when the method of extraction should be adopted:

The proper time for the operation [of extraction] is when the opacity of the lens is so considerable as to prevent from his ordinary occupation. When this is not the case, or the patient has the use of one eye, it ought not to be performed, as it is always attended with some degree of danger. ("Of the Cataract" 136)

As we already confirmed above, the blindness of Dudley is "total" (51) and it "prevent[s] him from his ordinary occupation." "He was," the narrator tells us right after Dudley became blind, "now disabled from pursuing his usual occupation" (51). This means his could be a case for extraction here. And the dissertation by Seip, who was seemingly a strong advocate of the method of extraction, adds another piece of proof. He criticizes those who adhere to depression: "It is certainly no uncommon thing to find surgeons still persisting in the method they have first adopted, urging it as a reason, that they can perform it in such a manner" (Seip 15).

If the operation of Dudley was done by the method of depression, which was "no uncommon thing" and with which many surgeons of the time were "still persisting," then, there was no need for Ormond to take the trouble to call in a surgeon. Conversely, it is natural to think that Ormond contacted the "surgeon of uncommon skill" who "had lately arrived from Europe" (179) for the operation of Dudley because the difficulty of extraction, which was, as *Encyclopaedia* puts it, "attended with some degree of danger" ("Of the Cataract" 136).

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Indeed, various contemporary sources also show the fact that, due to its difficulty, extraction was usually performed even in the late eighteenth century Europe by itinerants. A treatise published in 1791 in London admits that extraction “has in England, as in Germany, been chiefly confined to the hands of Itinerants,” who “certainly acquire a dexterity which is but seldom to be met with among regular-bred surgeons” (Richter 5). Another short paper with the purpose of explaining “to the young surgeon the Extract of the Cataract,” which was published in 1793 also in London, acknowledges that “[p]rofessional men [...] have sometime shrunk from this operation on account of the peculiar difficulties with which it is attended” (Bischoff vi). As a result, “the person afflicted by this disease, has been compelled to apply either to some traveling Oculist, who is seldom much interested in the welfare of his patient” (Bischoff vi). I suggest that the fact that “[a] surgeon of uncommon skill” who was “lately arrived from Europe” (Brown, *Ormond* 179) radically cured Dudley’s cataract clearly points to itinerants or traveling oculists who once really existed, on whom people in the eighteenth century relied when they were obliged to remove cataracts.

Lastly, it can also be pointed out that the timing of Dudley’s surgery does make perfect sense in the contemporary guideline of the operation. *A Treatise on the Disease of the Eye*, the first textbook of ophthalmology written in the US, which was published in 1823, warns doctors that “[t]he operation should never be undertaken during the prevalence of any epidemic” (Frick 180). This endorses the narrative progress from the Stephen Dudley’s to the cataract surgery before the outbreak of the Plague in Philadelphia. The period of operation is arranged so that Dudley can get through the pestilence without danger of complications from yellow fever.

In *Ormond*, thus, the traveling oculist appears to merge the two frameworks of reference: the literary and fictional and the scientific and factual. There we can see how different discourses rooted in different fields converge, and it is these competing voices, negotiating with each other that form a discourse of fiction in the Early Republic.

## V. The Representation of Cataract Surgery in the Early Republic

The operation on Stephen Dudley is described thus perfectly within the contemporary framework of knowledge about cataract surgery. In other words,

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the novel's description of the surgery has a firm foothold in contemporary factual knowledge. But the anecdote has further political resonance, when we view it from the political perspective of Ormond, who apparently is affiliated with a secret society. Ormond's "political projects," the narrative explains, "are likely to possess an extensive influence on the future condition of the Western World" (126). According to Mary Chapman, this suggests his affiliation with the Bavarian Illuminati, an organization similar to freemasonry that is supported by radical intellectuals all over Europe and is supposed to be the hidden cause of the French Revolution (126–27).

And if Ormond is a member of the Illuminati, the doctor who removes Stephen Dudley's cataract is also one of the members. In fact, he is introduced in the novel as "one of the numerous agents and dependants of Ormond" (179). Taking this context into account, the Illuminati doctor bears symbolic meaning. Taking advantage of the advanced medical technology bred in the Enlightenment period, he brings "the light of heaven" (51) back to Stephen Dudley. In short, Dudley's recovery is brought by the combination of lights—the Illuminati and the Enlightenment.

But if we were to have a closer look at the political situation in the US around the time of the publication of *Ormond*, we would need a more careful scrutiny. What we need to observe hereafter is not simply that a member of the Illuminati helps *cure* the blindness; but that the Illuminati doctor helps *extract* the cause of the disease. Viewed in this perspective, the treatment of Stephen Dudley by the supposed member of the secret society takes on ironical meaning. In fact, the significance of his recovery, the most curious event about Stephen Dudley, will never wholly be understood without considering Brownian irony that is working throughout the anecdote.

As we have confirmed above, the doctor cures Stephen Dudley probably by extracting the "evil" (179), that is, the cataract. But the problem here is that the doctor is a member of the Illuminati, which was considered to be a social "evil" in the US at the time of *Ormond's* publication when the Federalist government was in operation. People of the Federalist persuasion at that time generally believed that the Illuminati should be removed—"extracted"—from the United States.

According to Vernon Stauffer, in 1798, a year before *Ormond's* publication, a Federalist minister Jedidiah Morse, in his sermon on 9 May for the first time, referred to the possibility that members of the Illuminati are already in the United States (10–11). The Illuminati peril in the Early Republic is inaugurated

and the situation soon becomes hysteric (103). On 29 November in the same year and 25 April in the following, Morse repeatedly warned that the members of the Illuminati threatened the social order of the United States (“A Sermon Preached” 22; “A Sermon Exhibiting” 17). Timothy Dwight, a well-known theologian and the president of Yale College, also argues in his Independence Day sermon of 1798, “The Duty of Americans at the Present Crisis,” that the purpose of the Illuminati is “the overthrow of religion, government, and human society civil and domestic” (13). They, he insists, “insinuated themselves into every place of power and trust” (13).

It is in such a situation that Brown, who was well acquainted with both of those Federalist ministers (Krause 435), published *Ormond*. In fact, as Marshall Smelser points out, the years 1798 and 1799 were the age of crisis, fear, and hate, in which the ruling Federalists and opposing Republicans competed each other (412). And the conflict culminated in the enforcement of a series of the Alien and Sedition Acts in June–July 1798, which aimed to check “internal invasion” (qtd. in Hamilton 18) of foreign powers. For example, the first article of the Alien Friends Act (An Act Concerning Aliens) declares thus: “any treasonable or secret machinations against the government thereof, to depart out of the territory of the United States” (58). Here, “any treasonable or secret machinations against the government” clearly involves the Illuminati, who, Federalists as the ministers seen above did believe, threatened the order of the government and attempted to subvert the polity by supporting the Republicans, or more specifically, Thomas Jefferson.

It is not the aim of this paper to follow the details of this heated debate.<sup>4</sup> Rather, here, I would like to emphasize the analogy of two logics: the logic of Federalist foreign policy and that of cataract surgery. They seem to share the same logic: both of them try to “remove” or “extract” the internal “evil.” “[I]t shall be lawful for the President of the United States,” the Act clarifies, “whenever he may deem it necessary for the public safety, to order to be removed out of the territory thereof” (58). The intention of the Federalist government to extract the evil out of the body politic perfectly overlaps the performance of the doctor who extracts a cataract, or the evil, from the body of

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4. For a detailed account of the controversy over the Acts, refer to the following sources: Smith, James Morton. *Freedom's Fetters: The Alien and Sedition Laws and American Civil Liberties*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1966; Miller, John C. *Crisis in Freedom: The Alien and Sedition Acts*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1951.

Stephen Dudley. In *Ormond*, therefore, the method of the cataract operation might represent the Federalist policy concerning “aliens.” And the point is that the doctor who extracts a cataract can himself be the “evil”—a member of the Illuminati—that should be extracted from the body politic of the United States according to Federalist policy.

Here lies, I argue, the most effective (but hitherto totally ignored) irony in *Ormond*. The subject of surgical extraction in the novel is at once also the object of removal in the view of contemporary politics. The subject and the object are merged into each other so that the action of the doctor in the novel satirizes, criticizes, or even nullifies, the value of the xenophobic policy of the Federalist government. The mere fact that the Illuminati doctor is already within the United States is detestable for Federalists, but it is even more so when that doctor “with uncommon skill” perfectly cures the blindness by extracting the evil, through the very action strongly encouraged by Federalists. The doctor in *Ormond* is thus defying the Federalist government by showing that the evil—that is, he—is already in the United States and he himself can remove the cataract—another evil—easily. Performing what the current government fails to do, he betrays the fatal defect of the Federalist government and tries to show them how to deal with or get rid of the evil which is already hidden in Dudley’s body or the body politic of the US.

## VI. Conclusion

Cataract surgery was done without anesthesia at the time of *Ormond*’s publication.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, the surgery itself can primarily be defined as a scene highly charged with Gothicism. Based on this forgotten fact, the present paper first demonstrated that the novel’s description of the surgery was completely within the contemporary medical frame of reference. This led us to the hitherto unnoticed fact that the infiltration of Craig into the Dudley family overlapped the invasion of a cataract into Dudley’s eye. Second and most important, this paper pointed out that the description of the surgery could possibly have had political resonance in the Early Republic right before 1800, when the heated competition between Federalists and Republicans was at its climax. The fact that Stephen Dudley’s cataract is extracted by the foreign doctors who can

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5. See Figure 1 below.

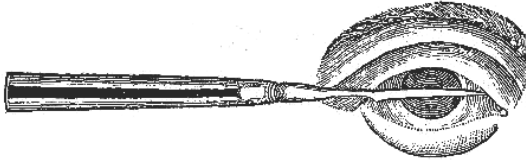


Fig. 1

also be the object of removal in the contemporary policy of the Federalist government caricatures, almost laughingly, the government's policy itself. The performance of the Illuminati doctor implies the deficiency of the Federalist government.

Brown declared in "To the Public" of *Edgar Huntley*, which was also published in 1799, that while other American authors write about "[p]uerile superstition and exploded manners; Gothic castles and chimeras," he himself describes "[t]he incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of western wilderness" (3) so as to provoke the sympathy of American readers. This statement, as has been often pointed out, can be regarded as the declaration of independence of the American novel. However, while it signifies, for sure, the American novel's proclamation of independence, it also confirms the dependence of the American novel on the Gothic tradition of Europe, because here, the things American—"Indian hostility" or "the perils of Western wilderness"—are nothing more than the counterparts of Gothic tradition on the other side of the Atlantic. The statement, therefore, did not simply celebrate the brand-new creation of the American tradition. Rather, it happened to admit the reception and adaptation of the European tradition. After all, the independence prepared by Brown is inevitably ambivalent. It is characterized by the separation from Europe, but the separation itself is dependent on the consistency with Europe. Brown's ambivalence thus involves the disconnection from Europe based on the connection to Europe and vice versa.

Stephen Dudley's cataract surgery embodies this Brownian ambivalence of the Americanness in the Early Republic. The surgery is a trace that connects the novel, which is considered to be the least Gothic among Brown's, to Gothic tradition of Europe; it can also find its place in the project of the Enlightenment of demystifying the blind; furthermore, it represents ironically the xenophobic policy of the Federalist government. The description of the surgery is thus at once European and American. It is at once Gothic, Enlightening, and anti-

Federalist.

Providing *Ormond* with literary, cultural, and even political significance, the performance of the Illuminati doctor, who comes from Europe to the United States in the Early Republic Period and into the text of *Ormond*, dis/connects the newly born nation to the other side of the Atlantic. It is in this unremitting performance of dis/connection that one can find the unique achievement of Brown as the first American professional author.



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## Abstract

This essay is an attempt to uncover the nature of the interface between the literary and the scientific in a fictional discourse. In so doing, it focuses on an anecdote in Charles Brockden Brown's second novel *Ormond; or, The Secret Witness* (1799), in which the father of the novel's heroine Constantia, Stephen Dudley, loses his sight but recovers it soon. The paper points out that this most curious, though unexplored, event is interlinked with various discourses that were bred in the Enlightenment period. Almost all of the critics have long ignored the fact that Dudley's blindness has a distinct cause: a cataract. First, the paper tries to show, based on pathology, that the opening events in the novel and the progress of a cataract in Dudley's eyes are paralleled. Second, it discusses the peculiar feature of the anecdote: the operation on the cataract. According to contemporary sources, there were two methods of cataract operation—depression and extraction—available in the Early Republic. Examination of these sources and Brown's description proves that the method described in the novel is extraction, the advanced medical technology of the age, which can radically cure the blindness caused by cataracts. This is notable because Ormond, who helps remove Dudley's cataract by calling a doctor, could be the object of removal in view of the US political situation. Ormond, who is a member of Illuminati, a secret society bred in the Enlightenment, has enough reason to be the "evil" that should be expelled immediately from the United States due to the enforcement of Alien Laws in 1799. Therefore, the fact that the person who should be removed helps remove a cataract critiques the Federalist policy. Thus, the two frameworks of reference—medical treatment and political thought—encounter at an anecdote in *Ormond*, which successfully contrives the interface between the literary and the scientific with a political resonance.

**Keywords:** Charles Brockden Brown, *Ormond; or, The Secret Witness*, cataract operation, Alien Acts, Enlightenment, Early American Literature

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Received: 15 December 2015 Reviewed: 25 January 2016 Accepted: 10 February 2016
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