

Constructing Conspiracy:
Epistemology and Secret Publics in Eighteenth-Century Countersubversive Discourse

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This paper engages in a literary study of late eighteenth-century conspiracism. In the wake of the French Revolution, the conservative reaction to Jacobinism often took the form of conspiracy theories. The now-familiar secret society conspiracy narratives—like those involving the Freemasons and the Bavarian Illuminati—developed during this period. Focusing on the Anglo-American context, the paper surveys a wide variety of texts and examines how different genres engaged with countersubversive discourse. These texts range from conspiracist manifestos like John Robison’s *Proofs of a Conspiracy*, to canonical political treatises like Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, and literary fiction like Charles Brockden Brown’s *Ormond; or, The Secret Witness* and *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist*. While not all of these texts are explicitly conspiracist, each deals with themes of secrecy, suspicion, and concealment. These recurring themes and motifs reveal patterns of thought, argument, and rhetoric that align the texts with conspiracism. The paper argues that these disparate texts—whether fiction or nonfiction, revolutionary or counterrevolutionary—are united by a fundamental sense of epistemological unease. Relying on conspiracist tropes, these texts express an ambivalence with Enlightenment forms of knowing and emphasize the limitations of human understanding. The paper first discusses Robison’s *Proofs*, examining the text’s treatment of secret micro-publics. The paper then turns to the Burke–Wollstonecraft debate and analyze their use of the conspiracist unmasking trope. Finally, the paper addresses Brown’s *Ormond* and *Memoirs of Carwin*, discussing how these works map the nexus between knowledge and power. Each of these texts reveal that questions of knowledge and questions of power are inextricably intertwined, as complex power relations undergird the quest for Enlightenment.

Feeling paranoid? Good: illumination is on the other side of absolute terror. And the only terror that is truly absolute is the horror of realizing that you can't believe anything you've ever been told. You have to realize that you *are* "a stranger and afraid in a world you never made," like Houseman says.

—Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson,
The Eye in the Pyramid (1975)

Introduction

In 1797, John Robison made a startling pronouncement. The Scottish physicist and mathematician claimed to have uncovered evidence of a world-devouring plot that threatened the governments and churches of Europe. He published his findings in *Proofs of a Conspiracy*, a tract that accused German philosopher Adam Weishaupt of having "long been scheming the establishment of an Association or Order, which, in time, should govern the world" (Robison 103). In leveling such accusations against Weishaupt's "Association," the Order of the Illuminati, Robison made a lasting contribution to the conspiracy narratives that continue to find purchase in the present day. As preposterous as Robison's declarations may seem, however, they were made in the context of a broader countersubversive discourse that grew out of the conservative reaction to the French Revolution. Scholars on both the left and right generally agree that the French Revolution acted as a watershed moment in the development of modern rightist political thought. Conservative political philosopher Russell Kirk characterizes conservatism as a "system of ideas" that "has sustained men . . . in their resistance against radical theories and social transformation ever since the beginning of the French Revolution" (107). Meanwhile, leftist political theorist Corey Robin notes that it "is hardly provocative to say that conservatism arose in reaction to the French Revolution. Most historically minded conservatives would agree" (43). In their response to Jacobinism, figures like Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre came to be regarded as the godfathers of modern right-wing politics in the West. Pitted against what they considered to be the forces of insurrectionary chaos, these right-wing thinkers

mounted a robust intellectual defense of order and hierarchy. As *Proofs* would suggest, these straightforward ideological critiques of Jacobinism operated alongside more conspiratorial interpretations.

In the Anglo-American context, conspiracy theories were not a fringe phenomenon.¹ Conspiracism operated as a part of the mainstream political landscape. Robison alleged that the French Revolution itself had been a conspiracy, masterminded and orchestrated by the Bavarian Illuminati. Beyond the French Revolution, Robison claimed that the Illuminati had international ambitions and were working to foment revolution across the globe. Reactionary ideologues saw the Order's sinister influence in a range of "subversive" groups, with American and British rightists casting Jeffersonian Republicans and the United Irishmen as Illuminist proxies. This discourse was a major force in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century political life. Historian John R. Howe, Jr. describes the American political landscape during this period as "gross and distorted, characterized by heated exaggeration and haunted by conspiratorial fantasy. Events were viewed in apocalyptic terms with the very survival of the republican liberty riding in the balance" (qtd. in Levine 17). The ascendancy of countersubversive discourse reached its peak with the 1798 Alien and Sedition Acts, a draconian series of bills that restricted immigration, allowed for the deportation of "dangerous" non-citizens, and criminalized criticism of the federal government. In arguing for the passage of the acts, Federalist Representative Robert Goodloe Harper declared that the laws would help to fend off "a domestic—what . . . shall I call it—a

¹ For the purposes of this paper, I will use political scientist Michael Barkun's definition of "conspiracy theory." Barkun defines a conspiracy theory as "the belief that an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end" (3). A related term that I will use is "conspiracism." Researchers of political extremism Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons use the term conspiracism to denote an ideological worldview that "assigns tiny cabals of evildoers a superhuman power to control events; it regards such plots as the major motor of history" (10).

conspiracy, a faction leagued with a foreign power to effect a revolution or a subjugation of this country” (qtd. in Levine 17). When President John Adams signed the bills into law in 1798, countersubversive discourse was consecrated as federal legislation.

Conspiracist discourse also wormed its way into print and literary culture. Throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a great deal of ink was spilt defending and refuting conspiracy theories. Historian Rachel Hope Cleves notes that “French Revolutionary discourse pervaded American newspapers, religious literature, political orations, broadsides, private letters, fiction, poetry, pedagogy, drama, and periodicals” (2). In this paper, I will examine some of these kinds of documents in order to answer the following research questions: What role did conspiracy theories play in the reactionary backlash to the French Revolution in the English-speaking world? What were the recurring motifs and preoccupations of these counter-conspiracy discourses? How did contemporaneous literary works articulate these concerns? And how do these theories resonate in our current moment of conspiracism? In investigating these questions, I surveyed texts from a number of different genres. These works ranged from conspiracist manifestos like the aforementioned *Proofs*, to literary fiction like Charles Brockden Brown’s *Ormond* and *Memoirs of Carwin*, and canonical works like Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. While *Proofs* is the only overtly conspiracist screed in my bibliography, all of the texts that I analyze deal with themes of secrecy, suspicion, and concealment. Even the texts that are not explicitly conspiracist reveal patterns of thought, argument, and rhetoric that align with them conspiracism. I argue that what unites these disparate works—whether fiction or nonfiction, revolutionary or counterrevolutionary—is a fundamental sense of epistemological unease. Relying on conspiracist tropes and motifs, these texts express an ambivalence with

Enlightenment forms of knowing and emphasize the limitations of human understanding. In what follows, I first discuss Robison's *Proofs*, examining the text's treatment of secret micro-publics. I then turn to the Burke–Wollstonecraft debate and analyze their use of the conspiracist unmasking trope. Finally, I address Brown's *Ormond* and *Memoirs of Carwin*, discussing how these works map the nexus between knowledge and power. Each of these texts reveal that questions of knowledge and questions of power are inextricably intertwined, as complex power relations undergird the quest for enlightenment.

I. Secret Publics

As mentioned above, John Robison's *Proofs of a Conspiracy* is widely heralded as one of the most influential conspiracist texts ever produced. Political scientist Michael Barkun, an expert in modern conspiracy subcultures, credits *Proofs*—along with *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* by the reactionary Jesuit priest Abbé Augustin Barruel—with first developing the Illuminati conspiracy narrative that continues to thrive on the political fringe (46). On the surface, this legacy would mark *Proofs* as an example of what historian Richard Hofstadter dubbed the “paranoid style” in politics. Reducing Robison's narrative to mere psychosis or pathology, however, misses the vital insights that the text provides. *Proofs* is worth examining more closely because it articulates a curiously sophisticated understanding of the relationship between power and knowledge, secrecy and openness, and the private and public spheres. In many ways, Robison's anti-Illuminati diatribe anticipates the theory of the public sphere that sociologist Jürgen Habermas developed in the twentieth century. Reading *Proofs* alongside Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* reveals that both Robison and Habermas view the establishment of secret micro-publics as integral to the

development of radical politics.² Even though Robison and Habermas both take secret micro-publics as their subjects, however, the two interpret them in radically different ways. While Habermas views hidden publics as laboratories for the evolution of a rational, liberal politics, Robison instead sees a cancerous growth on the body politic that has been allowed to fester in secret.

Robison's critique of the Illuminati is based on the organization's structure. Specifically, that the Illuminati's operations are concealed within the Masonic lodge system disturbs Robison. He declares that the "Order of the ILLUMINATI appears as an accessory to Free Masonry" (110), with Illuminist agents infiltrating Masonic lodges and perverting them from within. According to Robison, the Illuminati targeted the Masons because they knew that they could exploit the structural secrecy built into the Masonic organization. In particular, Robison focuses his attention on the Theodore Lodge, which counted Weishaupt himself as a member. Robison describes the lodge as "nursery or preparatory school for another Order of Masons, who called themselves the ILLUMINATED" (105). He explains how "innovators in religion and politics, and other disturbers of the public peace" use Masonic lodges "for venting and propagating sentiments in religion and politics, that could not have circulated in public without exposing the author to great danger" (Robison 14). With the inherent secrecy of the Masons concealing them, "this impunity had gradually encouraged men of licentious principles to become more bold, and to teach doctrines subversive of all our notions of morality . . ." (Robison 14). Acting as a secret public within a secret public, the "secret [Illuminati] assemblies" within the Masonic lodges were

² Robison's preoccupation with secret micro-publics is evident in the full title of his manuscript: *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free-Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies, Etc., Collected from Good Authorities.*

shielded from the prying eyes of the state. Robison believes that, in the absence of such protections, the Illuminists—with their anti-church and anti-state rhetoric—would not have survived out in the open.

Robison's analysis of Masonic structures prefigures Habermas's history of the development of the public sphere. The two give essentially the same account of this history, just with different conclusions. Habermas views the bourgeois intelligentsia as pioneering figures who helped found liberal democracy, while Robison views them as dastardly subversives who undermine state and ecclesiastical authority. For Habermas, the seemingly contradictory formulation of a private public sphere played an integral role in late eighteenth-century political culture, as it opened up spaces—both physical and cultural—for revolutionary organizing and counterrevolutionary theorizing. He characterizes the “bourgeois public sphere” as “the sphere of private people come together as a public . . .” (27). Habermas goes on to isolate the salon as an important site for this complex interplay between publicity and privacy. Salons were one of the most important institutions in the bourgeois cultural archipelago, providing a clear example of the dialectical relationship between openness and secrecy. Salons and reading groups provided physical and ideological spaces for radicals and revolutionaries to gather discuss ideas. Habermas explains that, since these organizations sprang up in repressive, autocratic societies, “social equality was possible at first only as an equality outside the state” (35). Thus, the “coming together of private people into a public was therefore anticipated in secret as a public sphere still existing largely behind closed doors” (Habermas 35). Developed in private settings, these intellectual circles served as miniature encapsulations of the bourgeois public sphere that would later develop. Habermas argues that “Reason . . . itself needed to be protected from becoming public because it was a threat to any and all relations of domination. As long as

publicity had its seat in the secret chanceries of the prince, reason could not reveal itself directly. Its sphere of publicity had still to rely on secrecy; its public, even as a public, remained internal” (35). For the bourgeois public sphere to truly come into its own, the absolutism of church and monarchy would have to be broken down. This, in turn, helped to foster the anxieties of reactionaries like Robison regarding the possibility of publics existing outside of the domain of the state.

Robison further grounds his critique of secret micro-publics through an investigation into Illuminati publications, depicting the Illuminati as a miniature (secret) print public. Reflecting the secret publicity of their own organization, members of the Illuminati produced tracts and pamphlets that were circulated between members of the order. Robison describes how, within these Illuminated assemblies, “[m]any bitter pasquinades, satires, and other offensive pamphlets were in secret circulation, and even larger works of very dangerous tendency . . .” (104). While he decries the secretive nature of this circulation, Robison only describes the actual texts being circulated in vague terms. The actual content of these “pasquinades,” “satires,” “offensive pamphlets,” and “larger works” is never revealed. This clandestine circulation became a public one, however, when the Bavarian Court of Inquiry summoned and questioned four Illuminist professors from the Mariünen Academy. The four professors confessed their allegiance to the Illuminati and transcriptions of their confessions were published: “They acknowledged that they belonged to [the Order of the Illuminati], and when more closely examined, they related several circumstances of its constitution and principles. Their declarations were immediately published, and they were very unfavourable” (106). Through an official judicial procedure, the private knowledge of the Illuminists becomes a part of the public record. Their confessions revealed the Illuminati’s atheism, blasphemous endorsement of suicide along “Stoical principles,”

internationalist ambitions, and raising “[s]ensual pleasures . . . to the rank they held in the Epicurean philosophy” (106–107). What had once been secret knowledge meant for only a privileged few was now brought to light, increasing the publicity of this once secret public. This shift from secrecy to publicity meant that judicial order was brought to the Illuminati’s unregulated production of knowledge. While Robison does of course object to Illuminated thought, however, his references to the nature of Illuminati philosophy are brief and in passing. Robison is more concerned with the way in which certain structural formations allow for conspiracy and subversion.

In his denunciation of the Illuminati, Robison does not wholly reject the Enlightenment. Instead, he attempts to distinguish a moderate Anglo-Protestant Enlightenment from a radical deistic Illumination. This project involves drawing connections between the Illuminati and Catholic organizations like the Society of Jesus. The connections that Robison draws are both structural and ideological. On the structural side, Robison points out that Weishaupt himself “had been educated among the Jesuits; but the abolition of their order made him change his views, and from being their pupil, he became their most bitter enemy” (101–102). With his Jesuit background, Weishaupt was then able to form an organization that structurally mirrored that of the Jesuits, even as it pursued an opposing mission. According to Robison, Weishaupt then found a willing audience amongst Bavarian university students:

The engaging pictures of the possible felicity of a society where every office is held by a man of talent and virtue, and where every talent is set in a place fitted for its exertion, forcibly catches the generous and unsuspecting minds of youth, and in a Roman Catholic state, far advanced in the habits of gross superstition . . . and abounding in monks and idle dignitaries, the opportunities must be frequent for observing the inconsiderate

dominion of the clergy, and the abject and indolent submission of the laity. Accordingly Professor Weishaupt says, in his *Apology for Illuminatism*, that Deism, Infidelity, and Atheism are more prevalent than in any country he was acquainted with. Discourses, therefore, in which the absurdity and horrors of superstition and spiritual tyranny were strongly painted, could not fail of making a deep impression. (102)

This passage illustrates what Robison believes is the causal relationship between reactionary Catholicism and revolutionary Illuminism. For Robison, they simply function as two sides of the same dogmatic coin. The students that Robison describe swing from one extreme to another, adopting radical atheism out of a sense of disgust with papist superstition. According to historian Mark Taylor, this attempt to distinguish “good” Anglo-Protestant Enlightenment from “bad” continental Illumination was a common rhetorical move among the British right-wing intelligentsia: “In order to distance British philosophic traditions from what they perceived as pan-European radicalism, conservative intellectuals . . . presented [Britain] as an oasis of intellectual propriety, distinct from a continent overrun by impiety and sedition” (Taylor 302). This stands in stark contrast with the rhetoric of Catholic conservatives, who rejected the Enlightenment wholesale—whether in its moderate or radical forms. French Catholic reactionaries like Barruel saw no difference between the two, with historian Geoffrey Cubitt describing how tracing the Enlightenment’s “roots led back to Protestantism and perhaps earlier heresies . . . was a commonplace of nineteenth-century Catholic and conservative thought” (25). Unlike Barruel, Robison did not promote a Counter-Enlightenment or a return to pre-Enlightenment values. Instead, he sought to situate himself between the extremes of both Catholic reaction and atheistic radicalism. Just as Edmund Burke distinguishes between “rational liberty” (4) of the Glorious Revolution and the “spurious principles” (15) of the French

Revolution, Robison seeks to extricate the legacy of the Enlightenment from the clutches of wild-eyed continental Illuminists. This project then also allows him to distinguish his critique of Jacobinism from the retrograde superstition of the papists.

Like Habermas, Robison understands that spaces of secret publicity were required for the development of revolutionary politics. Unlike Habermas, Robison regards these spaces as sites of subversion and sinister organizing. For Robison, the concealed nature of these spaces is what made them so dangerous.

II. Suspicious Readers

The debate between Edmund Burke and Mary Wollstonecraft over the French Revolution seems worlds apart from Robison's vision of dastardly cabals and international intrigue. While Robison is today viewed as a historical curiosity whose work inspires the fever dreams of paranoiacs, Burke and Wollstonecraft are canonical authors regarded as the forerunners of modern conservatism and feminism. Their arguments appear to take place on a more straightforward political plane than Robison's, with no references to secret plots or sinister machinations.³ While neither Burke nor Wollstonecraft are conspiracy theorists in the conventional sense, both exhibit a conspiracist impulse in their polemical exchange over the French Revolution. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, Burke and Wollstonecraft are suspicious readers. By decoding their opponents' language, the two claim to unmask the ulterior motivations which animate their enemies' arguments. They accuse their rivals of corrupting public discourse through concealment and corruption. Like

³ Interestingly, Burke does cite two German conspiracist texts in a footnote in *Reflections: Einige Originalschriften des Illuminatenordens* and *System und Folgen des Illuminatenordens* (137).

Robison, both Burke and Wollstonecraft privilege the structures by which knowledge is communicated rather than the knowledge itself.

Burke claims that the British supporters of the French Revolution use rhetoric to create epistemological obscurity. Responding to the radical preacher Richard Price and the pro-Jacobin London Revolution Society, Burke argues that the Anglo-Jacobins try to entangle their critics in “the mazes of metaphysic sophistry” (19). This casuistry allows them to cover up the factual and intellectual shortcomings of their “delusive, gipsy predictions” (Burke 15). While the silver-tongued sermonizing of someone like Price is usually enough to fool and distract people, “when they come to be examined upon the plain meaning of their words and the direct tendency of their doctrines, then equivocations come into play” (Burke 13). Burke accuses the radicals of engaging in “miserable subterfuge” (13), like employing logical fallacies to shore up their “paltry artifices” (23). One example he gives is of a straw man argument: “These sophisters substitute a fictitious cause and feigned personages, in whose favor they suppose you engaged whenever you defend the inheritable nature of the crown. It is common with them to dispute as if they were in conflict with some of those exploded fanatics of slavery . . .” (Burke 23). Just as they must resort to ill-informed emotional appeals to garner support, so too must the radicals employ sleazy rhetorical tricks when debating their opponents. Recalling Robison, Burke’s prioritizes knowledge organization over ideological content. The radicals’ “miserable subterfuge” seems to disturb Burke more than their “delusive, gipsy predictions,” as Burke spends more energy castigating their obscurantist evasions than addressing their actual political beliefs.

In her polemical rejoinder to *Reflections*, Wollstonecraft couches her accusations of concealing knowledge in terms of power relations. Wollstonecraft critiques Burke for the hidden motives that she suspects lie in the subtext of *Reflections*. Throughout *Vindications*,

Wollstonecraft uses the language of the veneer or façade to describe the relationship between Burke's stated intentions and hidden motives: "employed to varnish" (6), "behind the curtain" (16), "gorgeous drapery," and "the specious mask of refined manners" (28). Burke's passionate intensity and literary flourishes are therefore meant to obfuscate his true intentions, which Wollstonecraft isolates in his "servile reverence for antiquity" (12). This in turn is animated by his "prudent attention to self-interest" (12). Therefore, Burke's reactionary defense of status and property is simply a mechanism by which he can gain further wealth and power. For Wollstonecraft, even Burke's sycophantic apologia for hierarchy is insincere. She explains that Burke has staked out a counterrevolutionary position as a sort of publicity stunt: "[S]ince you could not be one of the grand movers, the next best thing that dazzled your imagination was to conspicuously oppose. Full of yourself, you make as much noise to convince the world that you despise the revolution" (Wollstonecraft 33). She goes on to claim that Burke's vituperative attacks on Price were motivated not by genuine ideological disagreement, but by professional envy, as Burke did "not lik[e] to see so many brothers near the throne of fame" (Wollstonecraft 33). Wollstonecraft even goes as far as to speculate that if Burke had "been a Frenchman, [he] would probably have been . . . a violent revolutionist . . ." (33). This turns the tables on Burke's assertion that the Jacobins—though they profess lofty ideals—are actually venal, power-hungry blackguards.

While not conspiracists themselves, both Burke and Wollstonecraft use conspiracist tropes when critiquing their political foes. In launching their broadsides against revolution and reaction, Burke and Wollstonecraft address the same epistemological questions as Robison. The presumed concealed intentions of their enemies disgust Burke and Wollstonecraft as much as the secret assemblies of the Illuminati horrify Robison. In both cases, the privacy or publicity of

knowledge—and the attendant power relations wrapped up in this openness or secrecy—is regarded as more significant than the knowledge itself.

III. The Dark Side of Enlightenment

In the early American republic, Robison's theories echoed throughout mainstream politics and culture—particularly contemporaneous literary works. While it had its most obvious effects on the political realm, counter-conspiracy discourse was also refracted through the lens of literary works. V. M. Verhoeven and Marcus Grenby contend that the anti-Jacobin novel made “a historically significant contribution to the emergence of the ideological discourse of popular conservatism in the 1790s” (qtd. in Taylor 298). Surveying the right-leaning novels of the period, literary scholar Nichola Watson notes that many of these works used conspiracist plot elements, “from Irish rebellion to Illuminati meetings, from Methodism to methodical spying-for-the-French, from reading German literature to overthrowing Christianity” (qtd. in Taylor 298). Along with such right-wing literary agitprop, conspiracy narratives could also be found in less ideologically-coherent works. For this sort of engagement with conspiracist themes, the novels and stories of Charles Brockden Brown provide useful case studies. Brown's work is not simply reducible to mere propagandizing, as it engages in a meta-commentary on the social and epistemological questions that conspiracist discourse raises.

Writing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Brown uses the period's anti-alien and anti-radical political climate as a backdrop to the main action of his stories. Brown, however, never lapses into preaching or propagandizing, playing with the discourse without actually endorsing its content. Responding “to influential [scholarly] attempts to align Brown with the countersubversives,” Bryan Waterman asserts that a “closer examination of Brown's . . . engagement with the Illuminati scare reveals [his] deeply entrenched skepticism

toward the conspiracy theories” (13). Instead of subscribing to such theories, Brown utilizes conspiracist frameworks to explore epistemological issues. A lingering uncertainty haunts Brown’s work, as his novels and stories question whether there is such a thing as an uncompromised epistemological vantage point. His novel *Ormond; or, The Secret Witness* (1799) and his fragmentary story *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist* (1803–1805) provide fertile ground for understanding these issues. These works embrace epistemological uncertainty and reflect—but do not resolve—the anxiety and ambiguity of Brown’s epoch. Drawing on themes and motifs from counter-conspiracy discourse, Brown blurs lines and turns his fictional worlds into incomprehensible moral and narrative landscapes. In *Ormond*, Brown uses the recurring motifs of “concealment,” “illumination,” and “secret witnessing” to create instability on the moral, political, and narrative level. Meanwhile, in *Memoirs of Carwin*, Brown uses the genre of the bildungsroman to illustrate how enlightenment can serve as a screen for sinister power relations.

Ormond follows Constantia, a young woman struggling to survive in post-revolutionary Philadelphia after a con artist bankrupts her father. As a yellow fever epidemic besieges the city, Constantia runs afoul of the titular Ormond, a mysterious Illuminist agent. In the novel, spying destabilizes conventional ethical distinctions and situates much of the action in a moral gray area. Appearing throughout *Ormond*, the motifs of concealment and illumination collapse the boundary separating microcosmic (interpersonal) and macrocosmic (international) conspiracies. These motifs manifest themselves most prominently through the act that informs the novel’s subtitle: “secret witnessing.” Bill Christophersen observes that secret witnessing is present in both the book’s more mundane examples of eavesdropping and in the cloak-and-dagger practices “of Illuminism, the purportedly international cabal whose members elevated spying to the status

of philosophical rubric and *modus operandi*" (37). Brown presents the practice of secret witnessing as a neutral tactic utilized by both good and evil characters. For example, early on in the novel, Stephen Dudley spies on his apprentice Thomas Craig. Brown writes, "There was no other person in the room when Craig entered it. He did not perceive Mr. Dudley, who was screened from observation, by his silence and by an open door. As soon as he entered, Mr. Dudley looked at him, and made no haste to speak" (*Ormond* 11). Of particular significance in this passage is the fact that Dudley "made no haste to speak." Instead of calling out to Craig to alert him to his presence, Dudley chooses to lurk silently behind the door. Along with his body, Dudley also conceals information from Craig. Wishing to bring Craig's (fictitious) brother to Philadelphia to work as an apprentice, Dudley "concealed this intention from his partner, and entrusted his letter to a friend who was just embarking for Europe" (Brown, *Ormond* 11). Later, of course, Craig is revealed to be an impostor, forging an identity and backstory in order to dupe Dudley (Brown, *Ormond* 13). Christophersen contends that these acts of secret witnessing are an "epiphany of evil they record: an epiphany that, while primarily a shock of recognition, is also, perhaps, a shock of self-recognition—since a 'secret' witness is both one who becomes privy to hidden truth *and one who himself has something to hide*" (37). Ironically, Dudley's act of secret witnessing—while it does impugn his morals—does not illuminate the truth of Craig's duplicitous nature. This showcases the limits of knowledge provided by even furtive means of intelligence-gathering. Even though Dudley's subterfuge pales in comparison to Craig's deceptions—and is at times done for innocuous, even benign, reasons—the fact that both engage in concealment is significant. The fact that both engage in the act throws the entire moral equation into question, as it prevents the reader from conflating openness with moral goodness and concealment with moral corruption.

The question of secret witnessing even extends to the reader's relationship with the text. As with the characters of *Ormond*, this secret witnessing shows how moral and epistemological questions are inextricably intertwined. The novel's narrative frame is a letter sent from Sophia Courtland to the unseen I. E. Rosenberg (Brown, *Ormond* 3–4). Thus, the reader is secretly perusing private correspondence intended for another's eyes. Meditating on this narrative voyeurism, Christophersen rhetorically asks, "Does a similar moral taint accrue to us as a result of our viewing familiarly the skeletons in another's closet? Don't we as readers witness the uncovering of truths that implicate us?" (40). The reader also engages in meta-secret-witnessing, covertly watching characters who are covertly watching other characters. Christophersen contends, "The final irony of Brown's witness motif is that it incriminates the reader for eavesdropping on dark scenes and dusky revelations. The act of reading, like the act of writing, imbibes an aura of guilt; becomes a shared, conspiratorial venture" (40). Like the characters featured in the story, the reader becomes incriminated in the book's intrigues. With the reader also implicated, the story's entire moral calculus is once again thrown in disarray. Similarly, secret witnessing also raises the issue of narrative uncertainty. Due to the novel's epistolary form, the reader is often left with less information than the characters. In the "To I. E. Rosenberg" preface, Sophia writes, "I am well acquainted with your motives, and allow that they justify your curiosity" (Brown, *Ormond* 3). The nature of Rosenberg's motives—or even of Rosenberg himself—is never revealed to the reader. Informational blind spots like this whet the reader's appetite for answers without ever actually providing them. Left in the dark, the reader is forced to navigate an epistemological landscape shrouded in secrecy and mystery.

Along with moral and narrative ambiguity, the politics of *Ormond* remain uncertain. Robert S. Levine believes that this political ambiguity is intentional, arguing that Brown's "texts

reflect less a political line than a sensibility—inquiring, capacious, and anxious” (25). This nonpartisan “sensibility” contributes to the novel’s decentered narrative. Levine—citing Mikhail Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination*—describes this decentered narrative as a “dialogical” one. He characterizes “Brown’s literary career writ large [as] a dialogue without an authoritative center in which various positions at different times move into prominence” (Levine 26). The “decentering” of Brown’s “narrative authority” means “that we are never quite sure of his ‘own theories’ . . .” (Levine 26). Brown ventriloquizes different ideological discourses in order to create a dialogue that mimics the main discursive modes of his political context. Levine describes the Federalist–Republican debates as an exchange of unfounded conspiratorial accusations and counteraccusations: “Federalists . . . insisted that . . . the increasingly virulent opposition of the Jeffersonian Republicans were all secretly kindled by Jacobin subversives. In contrast, Jeffersonian Republicans proclaimed that Federalist policies of economic centralization reflected the corruption of an oligarchical ministry deviously plotting to subvert the freedoms achieved by the American Revolution” (17). Not taking either side of the debate, Brown uses the absence of a reliable narrative center to recreate the doubt and anxiety of his epoch. Just as the citizens of the early American republic were unsure of whom to trust, so too are the characters and reader of *Ormond*.

The novel’s lack of a definitive political persuasion highlights the characters’ own ideological prejudices. This is especially true in the case of the book’s narrator, Sophia. Throughout *Ormond*, Sophia’s asides and digressions reveal her reactionary political leanings. At one point, Sophia connects her fear of the mysterious Ormond with her hatred of Enlightenment radicalism:

I had seen too much of innovation and imposture, in France and Italy, not to regard a man like this, with aversion and fear. The mind of my friend was wavering and unsuspecting. She had lived at a distance from scenes, where principles are hourly put to the test of experiment; where all extremes of fortitude and pusillanimity are accustomed to meet; where recluse virtue and speculative heroism give place as if by magic, to the last excesses of debauchery and wickedness; where pillage and murder are engrafted, on systems of all-embracing and self-oblivious benevolence; and the good of mankind is professed to be pursued, with bonds of association and covenants of secrecy. (Brown, *Ormond* 194)

This passage raises serious questions regarding Sophia's depiction of Ormond over the course of the novel, as her right-wing biases reveal themselves when she conflates Ormond's politics with the apocalyptic destruction of Robespierre's Reign of Terror. Beyond her depiction of Ormond, however, the stridency of Sophia's countersubversive rhetoric also raises doubts regarding the validity of the rest of the text. This helps to make *Ormond* a metanarrative, in which "the novel becomes a narrative about the discourse of conspiracy . . ." (Levine 39). With the reliability of even the work's principal narrator thrown into doubt, the reader becomes as paranoid as the conspiracy theorists that Brown ventriloquizes.

Brown uses epistemological uncertainty in *Ormond* to illustrate the limits of available knowledge and the lack of authoritative perspectives. Brown presents these shortcomings as potentially dangerous. Surveying the breadth of Brown's *oeuvre*, Levine suggests that "the question, central to all of Brown's fiction, [is] of how to establish the authority of information and construe the shape of the plot" (27). An attendant question that Brown raises regards the repercussions for not establishing an authoritative source of information and being unable to

construe the shape of the plot. One epistemological limit that Brown draws in *Ormond* is the ability to determine someone's moral character. For instance, the investigative tools available to the characters are adequate enough to expose the duplicity of someone like the hapless Martynne. Upon first meeting Martynne, Sophia describes him as "a youth, whose appearance did not greatly prepossess me in favor of his judgment" (Brown 185). When confronting him, Sophia also notes that he is visibly shaken: "He approached me with an air, supercilious and ceremonious, but the moment he caught a glance at my face, he shrunk back, visibly confounded and embarrassed. A pause ensued, in which Miss Ridgeley had opportunity to detect the error into which she had been led, by the vanity of this young man" (Brown, *Ormond* 185). Through the use of physiognomic observation and the reading of simple body language, Martynne's ruse is detected. This method of analysis, however, is not applicable to everyone. One character who is immune to these tactics is the book's eponymous villain, Ormond. A master of disguise, Ormond is able to perform immersive transformations. Sophia relates, "The disguise, also, was of the most impenetrable kind. He had served a sort of occasional apprenticeship to the art, and executed its functions with perfect case. It was the most entire and grotesque metamorphosis imaginable. It was stepping from the highest to the lowest rank in society, and shifting himself into a form, as remote from his own, as those recorded by Ovid" (Brown, *Ormond* 100). Sophia goes on to describe Ormond's primary alter ego—a black chimney sweep. Donning race and class drag with chameleon-like flare, Ormond is rendered unrecognizable. With talents such as these, Constantia and the reader are hard-pressed to accurately decipher Ormond's character. Cases of epistemological limitations like this one showcase the fundamental illegibility of *Ormond's* fictional world.

Brown also uses epistemological limitations to illustrate the menace of countersubversive overreaction. With the 1793 Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic taking place in the background, the dangers of paranoia come to the fore. Levine observes, “Embedded in Sophia’s alarmist presentation of the havoc wrought by invisible germs, however, is an account of one Baxter that portrays infiltration fears as a form of local hysteria” (35). This “local hysteria” manifests itself through Baxter’s fixation on Monrose. Sophia writes, “Baxter had a notion that Frenchmen were exempt from this disease. He was, besides, deeply and rancorously prejudiced against that nation” (Brown 50). The Francophobia and chauvinistic nationalism of Baxter, an English veteran of the Seven Years’ War, leads him to accept bizarre, fanciful conspiracy theories regarding hereditary French immunity. Emphasizing the phantasmagoric nature of Baxter’s suspicions, Michael J. Drexler and Ed White describe this episode as “a dream . . . a compressed narrative of fantasy” (335). This vignette showcases the societal fracturing that occurs during times of crisis, as fissures erupt along points of tension—already existing prejudices, resentments, and bigotries—exacerbating the problem and driving wedges between the citizens of the republic. Instead of working together to preserve the republican collective, these citizens turn on one another, “with no cares but those which related to their own safety” (Brown, *Ormond* 42). Thus, Brown depicts paranoiac countersubversion as an atomizing force that leads to the breakdown of republican community.

Brown continues to explore these epistemological issues in the unfinished *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist*. As with *Ormond*, *Memoirs of Carwin* draws from counter-conspiracy discourse to express an ambivalence about the epistemology of the Enlightenment. Brown tells the curious tale of the titular Carwin, a precocious farm boy from the Pennsylvania countryside who discovers that he possesses the power of ventriloquism. After leaving for Philadelphia,

Carwin meets a mysterious benefactor and falls in with an Illuminati-like order. Brown uses anti-Illuminati conspiracism to explore the dangers of enlightenment and limitations of human understanding. As with *Ormond*, the motif of secret witnessing is once again portrayed as an apparatus of domination. While it does not promote a return to pre-Enlightenment forms of knowing, *Memoirs of Carwin* does problematize the notion that the act of uncovering the truth is an inherently emancipatory one. Told as a mini-bildungsroman, the story documents the dark side of Carwin's journey toward enlightenment. This journey involves an escape from one patriarchal figure—Carwin's rustic, superstitious father—and the adoption of another—the educated, cosmopolitan Ludloe. In Carwin's quasi-Oedipal struggle with both men, Brown reveals the messy power relations that undergird the search for knowledge.

Carwin's conflict with his father is cast in epistemological terms. When the story begins, Carwin's intellectual horizons are limited. As an autodidact who devours whatever books he can get his hands on, Carwin chafes against his father's provincialism and anti-intellectualism. The father, who "conceived that all [knowledge] beyond the mere capacity to read and write was pernicious," imposes educational restrictions on Carwin in order to check his "unconquerable . . . curiosity" and "thirst for knowledge" (Brown, *Memoirs of Carwin* 183). These attempts to exert control over Carwin involve surveillance and investigation, with the father secretly watching Carwin and searching his bedroom for books. This puts the father in a paradoxical position, decrying knowledge in theory while seeking it out in practice. In the end, however, "[t]he most vigilant and jealous scrutiny was exerted in vain," as Carwin "was incessantly employed in the invention of stratagems and the execution of expedients" (Brown, *Memoirs of Carwin* 183). Carwin achieves an epistemological victory over his father, marking the beginning what Immanuel Kant calls "*Enlightenment*" or the "*exit from [one's] self-imposed immaturity*" (58).

Kant defines “immaturity” as “the inability to make use of one’s own understanding without the guidance of another” (58). Thus, in outmaneuvering his boorish father, it would appear that Carwin has made his first step toward achieving enlightenment.

Carwin’s success, however, is limited. Using moments of epistemological crisis and uncertainty, Brown undercuts what would otherwise be read as a triumphalist parable of Enlightenment reason’s victory over premodern tyranny and irrationalism. Brown links the father’s contempt for learning with a tendency toward supernaturalism, as Carwin recounts how “[a] thousand superstitious tales were current in the family. Apparitions had been seen, and voices had been heard, on a multitude of occasions. My father was a confident believer in supernatural tokens” (*Memoirs of Carwin* 189). Despite being a deist who despises organized religion, Carwin himself also lapses into supernaturalism. While taking a shortcut through eerie glen at twilight, Carwin grows fearful: “I was accustomed to despise danger when it presented itself in a sensible form, but, by a defect common in everyone’s education, goblins and spectres were the objects of the most violent apprehensions. These were unavoidably connected with solitude and darkness, and were present to my fears when I entered this gloomy hollow” (Brown, *Memoirs of Carwin* 185). This scene showcases the limitations of Carwin’s enlightened intellect, as the right conditions—say, a vale drenched in the spectral shadows of twilight—can make even the most hardened secularist believe in ghosts.

After leaving home to live with an aunt in Philadelphia, Carwin becomes a protégé to the story’s second paternal authority figure: Ludloe. An Irishman “of some rank and apparently rich” (Brown 195), the worldly Ludloe initially appears to be the opposite of Carwin’s father. While the father had destroyed Carwin’s books, Ludloe offers financial support for Carwin’s intellectual pursuits. He seems like an ideal mentor for Carwin, encouraging him to seek

knowledge and become enlightened. The same power relations once again emerged, however, when Ludloe reveals that he is a representative of an unnamed revolutionary sect. Offering to induct Carwin into the order, Ludloe explains that “[a]mong the conditions of their alliance are mutual fidelity and secrecy” (Brown, *Memoirs of Carwin* 210). Ludloe forces Carwin to swear an oath of secrecy, commanding him to “[b]e well aware of your condition. What I now, or may hereafter mention, mention not again. Admit not even a doubt as to the propriety of hiding it from the world” (Brown, *Memoirs of Carwin* 211). Reminiscent of Carwin’s father, Ludloe uses surveillance—or at least the threat of surveillance—to control Carwin’s behavior. He warns Carwin that “[t]here are eyes who [will] discern this doubt amidst the closest folds of your heart, and your life will instantly be sacrificed” (Brown 211).⁴ Along with spying and assassination threats, Ludloe also refuses to disclose information regarding the order. Carwin at one point complains, “As yet I had no glimpse of the nature of this fraternity” (Brown, *Memoirs of Carwin* 212). Ludloe sets Carwin’s epistemological parameters and decides what he can and cannot know, which once again evokes Carwin’s treatment at the hands of his father. Brown, in equating Carwin’s father and Ludloe, seems to be responding to philosopher Immanuel Kant’s theory of Enlightenment. In the essay “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” (1784), Kant argues that a political revolution can only be truly emancipatory if it involves a revolution in consciousness: “A revolution may perhaps bring about the fall of an autocratic despotism and of an avaricious or overbearing oppression, but it can never bring about the true reform of a way of thinking. Rather, new prejudices will serve, like the old, as the leading strings . . .” (59). With Carwin having escaped the despotism of an unenlightened patriarch only to become ensnared in

⁴ Brown appears to have been familiar with *Proofs*, as this exchange recalls Robison’s claim that the Illuminati “method of education made them all spies on each other and on all around them” (107).

the epistemological prison of an enlightened one, Brown illustrates how Kant's version of Enlightenment does not in itself guarantee liberation.

Along with evoking the father's authority, Carwin's time with Ludloe also recalls the issue of supernaturalism. Brown imbues both Carwin's ventriloquism and Ludloe's secret society with theological qualities. As a "biloquist," Carwin can conjure unseen voices, an ability which he uses to impersonate the dead (Brown 189) and even God Himself (Brown 204). Ludloe makes the connection between Carwin's ability and the divine explicit when he says,

Men . . . believed in the existence and energy of invisible powers, and in the duty of discovering and conforming to their will. This will was supposed to be sometimes made known to them through the medium of their senses. A voice coming from a quarter where no attendant form could be seen would, in most cases, be ascribed to supernatural agency, and a command imposed on them, in this manner, would be obeyed with religious scrupulousness. Thus men might be imperiously directed in the disposal of their industry, their property, and even of their lives. Men, actuated by a mistaken sense of duty, might, under this influence, be led to the commission of the most flagitious, as well as the most heroic acts: If it were his desire to accumulate wealth, or institute a new sect, he should need no other instrument. (Brown, *Memoirs of Carwin* 196)

This statement echoes the plot of one of Brown's earlier novels, *Wieland; or, The Transformation* (1799), in which Carwin uses his ventriloquism to impersonate the voice of God and sets events in motion that end with a man murdering his entire family. Like Carwin, Ludloe also casts his fraternity in theological terms, claiming that group possesses the power of omniscience. While lecturing him on the potential dangers of speaking aloud about the group, Ludloe warns Carwin not to "console himself with the belief that his trespass will be unknown.

The knowledge cannot, by human means, be withheld from the fraternity” (Brown, *Memoirs of Carwin* 211). Here Ludloe implies that his order is omniscient, possessing an epistemological vantage point beyond that of normal human faculties. Thus, for both Carwin and Ludloe, abilities with natural explanations—ventriloquism and surveillance—take on a supernatural aura. In these instances, Brown shows how certain enlightened activities can lead individuals or collectives to possess powers once considered godlike or divine. For Brown, even the most enlightened of epistemologies can lapse into superstition—at least of a secular variety.

In both *Ormond* and *Memoirs of Carwin*, Brown shows that epistemology is intimately tied up in questions of power. The recurring motif of secret witnessing serves as a potent manifestation of this dynamic. Brown also illustrates the inherent limitations of human knowledge gathering, demonstrating how even seemingly enlightened epistemologies can be compromised.

Conclusion

In “What Is Enlightenment?,” Kant declares that a man “who [is] himself enlightened, does not himself fear shadows . . .” (63). Eighteenth-century countersubversive discourse rejects this assertion. For this period’s conspiracy theorists, the flickering light of enlightenment simply drenched the world in darker shadows. This image encapsulates the essence of conspiracism—the feelings of disorientation and dislocation wrought by viewing the world through a paranoid prism. The enlightenment offered by this prism is limited: more questions are raised than answered; more culprits stay masked than unmasked; and more mysteries remain unsolved than solved. Wandering through this frightening landscape, the paranoid suspects all but can prove none. The conspiracist discourse that arose in reaction to the French Revolution problematizes the Enlightenment narrative of humanity progressively evolving into more rational beings. The

texts that I examined—*Proofs of a Conspiracy* by John Robison, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* by Edmund Burke, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* by Mary Wollstonecraft, and *Ormond* and *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist* by Charles Brockden Brown—all undermine such a narrative. An epistemological uneasiness plagues these works, uniting what would otherwise be a seemingly random collection of disparate texts. These works destabilize Enlightenment forms of knowledge and question whether true understanding is actually possible. In lieu of triumphalist narratives of reason and progress, the texts depict seemingly rational epistemologies as secularized superstitions. We all have the potential to lapse into conspiracism—and not just the John Robisons of the world.

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