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THE "EXPLAINED SUPERNATURAL" IN CHARLES BROCKDEN BROWN'S WIELAND

by

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"Pudd’nhead Wilson should be recognized as a classic of the use of popular modes -- of the sensational and the melodramatic -- for the purposes of significant art".¹ F. R. Leavis’ comment on Mark Twain’s classic could just as accurately be applied to Charles Brockden Brown’s first major work, Wieland. Brown used both the sensational and the melodramatic forms to produce one of the first novels in America and the first gothic romance of American authorship.

Jane Lundblad defines the gothic novel as containing some or all of the following characteristics: a manuscript, either translated from the original or reported by a character who gives an account of his experiences; a castle; a mysterious crime; religion; Italians (or Spaniards); a deformity in a character; ghosts, either supernatural or "false phenomena that seem supernatural to the beholder but are ... rationally explained;" magic; nature; blood; works of art; and armored knights.²

Brown incorporates ten of these qualities in Wieland in various deviations from the strict definition. Clara writes a manuscript relating her activities, as did her father; a crime is committed with mysterious motivations; the Wielands observe private religious practices; instead of an Italian, a "transformed Spaniard" is the villain; Carwin’s peculiar appearance is the closest example of a deformity; supernatural forms appear to Wieland; Carwin uses ventriloquism as his "magic;" pastoral nature is combined with the terrors of night (the deaths of the elder Wieland, Catherine and the children occur at night); the murders are bloody; and Clara draws a sketch of Carwin that engrosses her imagination. No armored knights or
castles appear in *Wieland*.

The gothic novel is based upon the feeling of mystery and upon the contrived horrors which the author invents. This type of fiction began in England with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. In defining this work, Walpole, in a letter to Joseph Wharton, March 17, 1765, states:

"[It is] partially an imitation of ancient romances; being rather intended for an attempt to blend the marvellous of old story with the natural of modern novels."

Montague Summers indicates that the key to the gothic is the feeling of romance which he defines: Romanticism is literary mysticism." His point is that while some literature mirrors daily life to the readers, romantic "literature may lead a man away from life" to a faraway subjective world. The term "gothic" referred to anything typical of the medieval period. Eventually, the term was applied to works that did not have a true medieval setting or atmosphere but which did try to create an atmosphere of mystery and terror. One approach to the gothic romance which influenced Brown, Mrs. Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian*, emphasized natural explanations for seemingly supernatural events -- the "explained supernatural." These natural explanations are not necessary ingredients for the gothic novel, but Brown used them where he could.

Another major influence upon Charles Brockden Brown was Godwin's *Caleb Williams*. Brown was apparently fascinated by the combination of the ethical and intellectual in Godwin's novel. Godwin's theses are two: that character is shaped by environment and, therefore, evil can be traced to ignorance and outmoded institutions; and that reason should be the sole governor of man, therefore implying that man can be improved without limit.
In *Caleb Williams*, Godwin combined suspense and terror with psychological analysis and an indictment of the rich for their treatment of the poor in society. Godwin's basic ideas appealed to Brown, especially when expounded in the suspenseful novel form of *Caleb Williams*. Brown believed that the value of such novels lay in their moral teaching, which would gain the attention of readers wishing enlightenment. Therefore, in *Wieland*, Brown wished to illustrate the moral constitution of man and his susceptibility to misinterpretation of sensory data -- an adaptation of Godwin's two basic principles. David Clark sees *Wieland* as "a sermon against credulity and religious fanaticism," but this thesis does not allow for consideration of other aspects of Brown's novel.

Leslie Fiedler cites three images which "possess our fiction" -- "images of alienation, flight, and abysmal fear." These are the basic elements of the gothic novel, and are found in

... Charles Brockden Brown, [who] single-handed and almost unsustained, solved the key problems of adaptation, and though by no means a popular success, determined, through his influence on Poe and Hawthorne, the future of the gothic novel in America.8

The problem Fiedler refers to is one of adapting the gothic novel to the American scene, of combining a gothic atmosphere with a social and ethical message and a native setting. Brown's solution was to use a native setting he knew, on the banks of the Schuylkill River in Pennsylvania. He combined this setting with his knowledge of an actual tragedy in 1781, and then incorporated seemingly supernatural events with a natural explanation. This difficult combination of elements he determined to communicate through the epistolary form established by Richardson.

Brown also had major interests in natural phenomena and human
psychology that he included in Wieland. Besides the use of ventriloquism and Brown's conjectures as to its development in an individual, he reveals an interest, here undeveloped, in dreams, the psychology of guilt, and insanity. He cites his reference material in notes to the text of the novel. In the late eighteenth century, these ideas were in embryonic form and mostly unexplained; but he still was fascinated with their literary possibilities.

The five major characters of Wieland are Theodore Wieland, his wife Catherine Pleyel Wieland, his sister Clara Wieland, Henry Pleyel, and Carwin. The first four prefer a secluded family life on the Schuylkill River, near Philadelphia. They gather for learned, intellectual discussions upon interesting topics, even though Clara maintains her own household nearby at Mettingen.

Wieland chooses agriculture as his profession and raises a devoted family. However, his inherited tendency toward insanity is foreshadowed from the first by the recitation of his father's death. Catherine is not a fully developed character, shown only as a loving, concerned wife and mother, fairly well-educated but not taking a major part in the family discussions. Her brother, Pleyel, is designed as a Godwinian type by Brown. He first reacts to mysterious voices as deceptions, but his belief in the news he heard proves only his credulity, not his rational disbelief. He is obviously intended to be Clara's husband. Clara Wieland, Theodore's sister, is the writer of these letters to friends. She is seen by both Pleyel and Carwin as the perfect woman -- ordered, brave, and sensible. But her consternation at the voices belies her presentation as a rational being of Godwin's mold. She is the pursued heroine of the sentimental
novel. Carwin, a wanderer who comes into the novel only by chance, is also
typical of the sentimental novel as the villain-pursuer of Clara. He is
the catalyst for many episodes in Wieland, but in the end, lacks full
motivation.

The tone of mystery, suspense, and terror is effectively set by events
in the first letter-chapters. The elder Wieland feels a premonition of his
death. He dies mysteriously through spontaneous combustion\(^\text{14}\) but not be-
fore his mental weakness is pinpointed as a legacy which will haunt his
children.

From these past events and ones to be later revealed, Clara proposes
a Godwinian theme: "It [the tale] will exemplify the force of early im-
pressions, and show the immeasurable evils that flow from an erroneous or
imperfect discipline."\(^\text{15}\) Later, as the family discusses the first myste-
rious voice, she continues the rationalistic theme of Godwin:

The will is the tool of the understanding, which must
fashion its conclusions on the notices of sense. If
the senses be depraved, it is impossible to calculate
the evils that may flow from the consequent deductions
of the understanding.\(^\text{16}\)

She and Pleyel thus agree on the theory, but their behavior challenges the
totality of their conviction.

After the introductions of characters, setting, theme, and tone,
Brown begins his plot in earnest. The family exists peacefully and intel-
lectually in a pastoral setting. Their peace is disturbed by a mysterious
voice which, in turn, warns them, gives them advice, and threatens them,
thoroughly upsetting their serene routine. This voice is heard seven
times, and in the first two cases, it seems to belong to Catherine, but
she has not left the company of Clara.
Carwin comes to Clara's and impresses her imagination tremendously, so much that she draws a sketch of him. She is the next to hear unfamiliar voices. Pleyel tells the Wielands that he met Carwin in Spain, where Carwin had assumed the garb and the ways of the country. When Carwin visits the Wielands, he listens to their comments on the voices and gives an explanation involving mimicry, which, although rejected, is nonetheless true. As Clara thinks of her relationship with Pleyel that night, she reveals her hereditary fear of water (not developed) and her fears that she might be possessed like her father. (So far, there has been no hint of the younger Wieland's weakness.) She again hears the voice, but further investigation reveals Carwin. Pleyel finds them together and believes this midnight meeting to have been an arranged assignation. Later he tells Clara that Carwin is wanted as a murderer and a thief.

The next day Clara returns home late to find a light in her room. A voice orders her not to go upstairs, but she does, finding Carwin's note and Catherine's body. Her brother, Wieland, enters and, obviously demented, talks of killing Clara -- the first indication of the previously fore-shadowed insanity. Others arrive with the news of the murders of the children.

Clara is taken away during her ensuing illness and, upon her recovery, reads the trial testimony of Wieland. His motivation is revealed as supernatural voices ordering the deaths of his loved ones. Clara again fears for her own sanity and returns to her home to retrieve the manuscript of her father before she goes to Europe.

In her rooms, Clara contemplates suicide but is interrupted by Carwin who has returned to confess. He reveals his talent for ventriloquism.
and his source of knowledge about Clara as Judith, her maid. His position is one of catalyst in a cauldron of evil. Again the theme of the evils or credulity and imposture are emphasized. Wieland returns; Carwin leaves; and Wieland again wishes to kill Clara. A voice stops him, and he commits suicide in sorrow at his recognition of his deeds. A subplot concerning some acquaintances, the Conways, is concluded in the last chapter, where Clara is now married to Pleyel.

Thus Brown has here combined an American setting, the gothic atmosphere of terror, and a novel of enlightenment. The terror in Wieland is derived from two sources -- one unexplained, the other explained. One unexplainable event was the use of Clara's dream as a premonition of the dangers awaiting her from her brother. This premonition is not here fully developed, but it and the also undeveloped detail of her fear of water demonstrate Brown's interest in such phenomena in an age which did not have enough scientific and psychological knowledge to try to explain such events. The guilt of Carwin is also undeveloped, and his involvement in the plot is very awkwardly motivated. The use of ventriloquism is explained fairly fully by Carwin early in the novel. It could have been developed as one of the first literary uses of the guilt complex. These two themes play larger roles in Brown's later work, but are examples in Wieland of his interest in things unexplainable to his era.

The elder Wieland died by spontaneous combustion. The mood of fear derived from this event is accentuated by chronicling a premonition of Wieland of his coming fate and by the use of the presence of illumination at both the father's death and at the coming of the voices to Wieland. The other unexplained event of terror, and truly the core of the novel, is
the murder by Wieland of his family. This can only be explained by Brown as "mania mutabilis." An illuminated vision emanating from a spirit called upon him to murder his wife. Later, this same voice asked him to kill his children.

The knowledge of psychology in Brown's age did not require this to be explained, nor could it be. He refers to a source for this act in his "Advertisement:"

If history furnishes the parallel fact, it is a sufficient vindication of the writer; but most readers will probably recollect an authentic case remarkably similar to that of Wieland.

This event to which Brown refers is recorded in the November 12, 1914, edition of The Nation. Carl Van Doren cites an article which appeared in the New York Weekly Magazine in 1796, entitled "An Account of a Murder Committed by Mr. J_____ Y_____ upon His Family, in December, A. D. 1781."

Wieland's fate parallels that of the hapless farmer in so many respects that it is obvious that he used this news item as a source: both maintained a wife and children in comfortable circumstances; both held private religious services; both were devoted to their families; both were approached by illuminations which ordered them to destroy their loved ones to demonstrate their loyalty to these spirits; both had sisters who were likewise endangered and who escaped; both seemed cognizant of their deeds but were adamant in their belief in obedience and duty; both were imprisoned as lunatics; both escaped twice and were recaptured.

A newspaper article on the murders probably gave Brown the basis with which to begin his novel. The supernatural voices that the farmer heard:
Instantly a new light shone into the room, and looking up I beheld two Spirits ... he at my left bade me destroy all my idols, and begin by casting the Bible into the fire.

But the good angel whom I had obeyed stood by me and bade me go on, 'You have more idols (said he) look at your wife and children,'

were used in a similar manner in Wieland's vision:

I opened my eyes and found all about me luminous and glowing. It was the element of heaven that flowed around. Nothing but a fiery stream was at first visible; but, anon, a shrill voice from behind called upon me to attend,

and

[It said] in proof of thy faith, render me thy wife. 23

Brown's uses of these unexplained events are interrelated; an explanation for Wieland's horrible crimes would be that his mental susceptibility was inherited from his father. If this is assumed, then the inclusion of the elder Wieland's death in the first chapters can be seen as explanatory as well as for purposes of mood and tone. His reaction to Carwin's ventriloquists' voices indicates that they may have set off his already susceptible mind.

Equally important in Wieland is Brown's use of the "explained supernatural". By using this technique of explaining away supernatural happenings, especially in the life of Clara, Brown succeeds in producing frightening events and then in solving the mysteries.

His main focus for the "explained supernatural" is the use of ventriloquism by Carwin, the villain who pursues Clara. In five instances Carwin uses his talent to gain his own ends, regardless of their
consequences to the lives of others; in two instances, he works for Clara's safety.

The first instance occurs early in Wieland, when Wieland returns to the summerhouse-temple for a forgotten letter. He hears his wife's voice warning him away and is quite upset when he finds she had not left the room. The second use of the voice occurs when Pleyel and Wieland hear a voice informing them of the death of the Baroness de Stolberg, Pleyel's fiancée. Catherine's voice is also heard to say she would not approve of Wieland's plans to go to Europe. Wieland is not aware that Catherine knew of his plans and of his indecision about the trip.

Clara hears the mysterious voice next, when in her chambers late at night. There are two unfamiliar voices conversing in her locked study about what she misunderstands to be her murder. A corollary use of the voice occurs when Clara rushes in fright from her home to Wieland's. The household is awakened by a voice warning them of her situation.

The fourth instance occurs on the riverbank where Clara has gone to relax from the terrors of the previous night. She sleeps and is awakened by the voice of one of the "murderers" who repents of his part in the scheme and warns her away from the summerhouse, cautioning her not to divulge the warning or its source -- and to remember her father.

The fifth instance of the voice occurs when Clara hears a cry warning her not to enter her study, from which she had planned to obtain her father's manuscript. These five uses of the mysterious voices are utilized to build suspense and are later revealed as done for Carwin's own ends.

The last two uses of the voices are warnings and are not for selfish
ends. Clara is cautioned not to proceed upstairs when she returns home to find Catherine's body. The seventh example occurs when Wieland acts to kill Clara and is halted by a voice.

Brown introduces in Carwin a character who is neither a family friend, like Pleyel, nor of the Wieland family itself. Carwin is a character who takes the role of the villain in opposition to Clara's role of heroine. Without his machinations Wieland's latent insanity might not have been provoked, and Clara's life might have continued in its pastoral, sentimental fashion. Carwin's first appearance at Mettingen is to ask for a drink. He is at first included in the learned discussions of the Wielands and later is dropped through their slight knowledge of his suspicious past.

He is present when the group attempts to determine the source of the voices. They cannot perceive the source -- the rational data received by their senses do not fit their knowledge of life. They feel the need to explain this in a logical manner, especially in light of their father's death, and they cannot do so.

Carwin makes an attempt to explain the voices through a narrative device. He states it to be possible for a familiar voice to be mimicked, by one at a distance safe from detection, and "reflected into a focus, or communicated through a tube." However, in his tales, there were none that had instances similar to those befalling the Wielands; therefore this solution to the mystery of the voices was discarded.

Only after Wieland's crimes and imprisonment and Clara's illness are the readers (and characters) apprized of the source of the catastrophe. Carwin had disappeared at the time of the murders, to be blamed as having been involved in them. He returns to Mettingen to discover Clara. He
reveals his part as the voices, disclosing the fact that he is a ventriloquist.

In the first instance of the voice, he had entered the temple and read the letter. He had previously heard Catherine's voice and imitated it to prevent his discovery. He had not thought this use of his art would be detrimental to those concerned, but in fact it started the chain of events which helped to unbalance Wieland.

When Pleyel heard the voice telling him of the Baroness' death, Carwin was conjecturing as to the veracity of the news, thinking it probable after hearing their conversation. Carwin said he thought that his advice would be beneficial to Wieland in helping him to decide about the trip.

He tells Clara that his source of information about her habits was her maid, Judith, whom he had convinced of his love and with whom he had an affair. Judith was a key in the "murderer's" conversation for she had told him of the unusual sensibility of Clara. He determined to test Clara's courage, more for mischief than for any other reason. He counterfeited the dialogue imitating two voices, intending that one other than Clara would be the object of the murder of which the voices talked. He climbed a ladder near the window of the study to make the voices seem to come from within. His plan utterly misfired when Clara thought herself the one to be murdered and fled to Wieland's. Finding the door to Wieland's closed, he called through the keyhole to alert them.

As Clara slept unnoticed by the riverbank, Judith and Carwin ensconced themselves in the shrubbery and were interrupted by her awakening. To keep this haven to themselves, he warned Clara away and used the "murderer's" voice to try to clarify the events of the previous night.
Finally Carwin had gained access to Clara's study through Judith and was surprised there by Clara, who had retired and then arisen to peruse the manuscript. Carwin held the door against her efforts and made a cry. He pretended to be a murderer and a seducer at his discovery, based on Clara's erroneous judgment of the previous night. Here he was using his talent to purposely frighten and amaze Clara.

In the sixth instance, he had intended to leave Clara an explanation, but when he saw Catherine's body, he left a shorter note. As he left, he saw Clara approaching and used his art once more to warn her away. Later Carwin uses his voice again to confound Wieland and save Clara's life.

After the recital of his errors and his desire to be forgiven, the suspense of the plot relaxes. The voices have been explained as not originating from the supernatural.

Brown termed ventriloquism "biloquism:"

The art of the ventriloquist consists in modifying his voice according to all these variations [of direction and distance], without changing his place .... This power is ... given by nature, but is doubtless improvable, if not acquirable, by art.\textsuperscript{33}

He cites the Abbe de la Chapelle as a further source, but Pattee has noted that his contemporary source on ventriloquism was the \textit{Encyclopaedia: or a Dictionary of the Arts and Sciences}, published in eighteen volumes in Philadelphia in 1798.\textsuperscript{34} This was reviewed by Brown in his \textit{Monthly Magazine}; therefore it is obvious, Pattee states, that Brown never read de la Chapelle in the original, that "all he knew about it he had gathered from the \textit{Encyclopaedia}."\textsuperscript{35} The same definition of ventriloquism is used and many of the examples of ventriloquism in the \textit{Encyclopaedia} might have suggested details to Brown for \textit{Wieland}. 
Carwin exemplifies one defect of Brown, that of lack of motivation. Carwin is not sufficiently developed as a character to present his reasons for his actions. The reader does not learn how he learned the art of ventriloquism or in what ways Carwin has previously used this talent. Brown evidently realized this, for he added the Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist to Wieland. Here the reader finds that Carwin learned his talent through an echo, and practiced by imitating it. His efforts in simulating the echo's sound are a fortunate conjecture by Brown, probably garnered from his reading in the Encyclopaedia of the probable means of the development of the talent in an individual. Carwin combined his skill at imitation with ventriloquism to complete his new knowledge. However, his use of ventriloquism was often questionable:

'I delighted not in evil; I was incapable of knowingly contributing to another's misery, but the sole or principal [sic] end of my endeavors was not the happiness of others. I was actuated by ambition. I was delighted to possess superior power.'36

Ludloe, a rich Irishman, introduced new ideas to Carwin about using ventriloquism for influencing people to do as he wished.37 If this knowledge about Carwin had been incorporated into the main narrative of Wieland, then the character of Carwin would have been more fully and more satisfactorily developed.

The device of ventriloquism was a unifying factor to Brown, especially as it was tied to the unexplained supernatural and the possible effect it had upon Wieland's inherited insanity. Thus, the "explained supernatural" served to set off a narrative copy of an actual murder and an unexplained supernatural force. The explained terrors are the key device in Wieland, however, and were used by later writers who knew of Brown's
As a plot device, the use of ventriloquism as an example of the "explained supernatural" is quite convenient. It provides the main technique for the solution and explanation of crimes. It succeeds in building suspense and serves as a climax when revealed to readers and characters in the tale. In *Wieland* it is the main device for movement and serves as a contrast to the unexplained supernatural and the factual basis of the multiple murders. Thus we see that the plot structure of *Wieland* derives from factual murders, an explaining away of seemingly supernatural events, and the problems of social and individual responsibility.

Brown's habit of rapid composition led to many plot and character imperfections. One of these is the lack of motivation of Carwin; another is the lack of development of Clara's dream and her hereditary fear of water. This mode of composition also led to an unequal emphasis in plot material, such as the "lost" and suddenly remembered Conway subplot and the undue stress placed on the subject of Pleyel's fiancée.

Another of Brown's problems was the choice of the epistolary form of Richardson. Although the first person point of view is effective, it cannot maintain Clara's position as authoress in explaining past events. For a more effective novel, the first person past, Clara living the experiences, would have been more realistic. Brown carefully does not reveal Carwin's part until the end of the novel, but it does not come across as very logical for Clara to write in this manner. Therefore, the reader often finds Clara speaking as if the events were occurring at the time of the composition. In trying to bridge Richardson's form with Radcliffe's gothic terror, Brown produced an awkward novel which still influenced his American successors.
FOOTNOTES


4. Ibid., p. 18.

5. Ibid., p. 17.


8. Ibid., p. 129.

9. The theme of dreams is further discussed in Edgar Huntly and Arthur Mervyn.

10. The psychology of guilt is developed in Edgar Huntly.

11. Edgar Huntly also deals with the problem of insanity.


13. So Brown tells us, but in Wieland, as in so many novels by Henry James, nobody ever seems to have to work.


15. Ibid., p. 5.

16. Ibid., p. 33.

17. Brown's use of ventriloquism in Wieland is believed to be the first in fiction.

18. It is perhaps significant that among the religious influences upon the elder Wieland were, according to Brown, the doctrines of the Illuminati.

20Ibid., p. iii.


22Ibid., p. 577.

23Brown, op. cit., p. 155.

24Ibid., p. 30.

25Ibid., p. 40.

26Ibid., p. 54.

27Ibid., p. 59.

28Ibid., p. 79.

29Ibid., p. 137.

30Ibid., p. 213.

31Ibid., p. 69.

32How Carwin and Judith have conducted their affair without being discovered in this sparsely populated neighborhood, Brown does not explain.

33Brown, op. cit., p. 184, n.


35Ibid., p. xxxi. This is conjecture. De la Chapelle's book might have been available to Brown, and Brown's substitution of biloquism for ventriloquism may be the result of de la Chapelle's emphasis on the fact that the belly is not the source of the ventriloquist's voice (de la Chapelle, passim).

36Brown (1926), op. cit., p. 289.

37The Encyclopaedia article, quoting de la Chapelle, gave a number of instances of ventriloquists using their gift for advantage.

38Brown's influence can be seen in Edgar Allan Poe's "Thou Art the Man." Poe here solves a murder by the use of ventriloquism. Charley Goodfellow, the deceased's crony, plants clues to charge the nephew with the crime. At an evening gathering, the narrator has a box, supposedly
containing wine, delivered to Goodfellow. The corpse of Shuttleworthy is fortified with whalebone so that it would sit up when the box was opened. The narrator, having discovered Goodfellow's guilt, utters the words "Thou art the man," forcing a confession from Goodfellow. These words appear to issue from the corpse.

At this time, ventriloquism was still uncommon, and its use in fiction is quite effective. Since Poe is credited with developing the techniques of the detective story through several of his short stories, ("Thou Art the Man" among them) Brown can be seen as a precursor in one of the techniques that Poe incorporates.
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