

***Wieland*: A Turn-of-the-Century American Allegory**

Lu Jin

School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai University, Shanghai, China

lujin8833@sina.com

Keywords: *Wieland*, Political Allegory, Partisan Conflict, Federalist Criticism, Seditious Rhetoricians

Abstract: Based on James Yates Murders in 1781, Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1789) is an epistolary gothic novel concerning the mysterious tragedy of the Wieland family. As a self-conscious intellectual who was deeply concerned about the political design and practice of the new American Republic, Brown weaved his profound thoughts on partisan conflict, democratic despotism, and seditious rhetoricians into *Wieland*'s gothic plot. *Wieland* is not simply the first gothic novel in American literature, but a true political allegory reflecting post-revolutionary America's contradiction and anxiety during the period of social transformation.

1. Introduction

Published in 1798, *Wieland; or, The Transformation: An American Tale* is Charles Brockden Brown's first major novel. Based on James Yates Murders in 1781, this epistolary gothic novel tells the mysterious tragedy of the two generations of the Wieland family. Previous domestic research on *Wieland* mainly focuses on Puritan fanaticism, ontological uncertainty, and Brown's inheritance of European gothic tradition. Nevertheless, given Brown's Quaker family background and his passion for national politics, the complicated political landscape in post-revolutionary America exerted an important influence on his literary creation. Underneath the gothic themes of fratricide, insanity, and ventriloquism in *Wieland*, careful readers could discern the author's profound thoughts on contemporaneous issues like domestic partisan conflicts, democratic despotism, and the revolutionists' manipulation of words. Just as the novel's subtitle indicates, *Wieland* is not only the tragedy of a single American family but also a true American tale reflecting the nation's contradiction and anxiety during the period of social transformation.

2. Fratricide as the Shadow of Partisan Conflict

Although Brown mainly describes the tension and conflict among the family's second generation, Clara's remembrance of her family background plays a key role in understanding *Wieland* as a whole. With the mysterious tragedy of Wieland's father in the first two chapters, Brown successfully introduces his readers to a grand American allegory. When Wieland's father was young, he happened to read a book about the doctrine of the Camissards. Stimulated by religious enthusiasm, he embarked for Philadelphia with the purpose of "disseminating the truths of the gospel among the unbelieving nations" ^[1]. Due to the cheapness of land, the service of African slaves, as well as his hard work, Wieland's father accumulated a large fortune. Despite his quiet and affluent life in the New World, the unfulfilled religious obligations began to haunt him in his later years. He built up a massive temple on the hill and prayed twice a day for God's forgiveness. But eventually, he went mad and died of spontaneous combustion in his temple.

As Christophersen Bill points out, "the beginning of the novel is almost an allegory of American colonial history. It includes religious fervor which is related to disrupting economic changes in Europe, frequent references to predestination and to stern self-analysis, the vision and failure of spreading truth among the savages, unexpected economic success, and even the well-known figure of a temple on the hill. The parallel continues with the disorganization and self-consumption of the original religious fanaticism and with the appropriation of the temple by rationalistic descendants"

[2]. From this perspective, Wieland's fratricide and Clara's self-defense in the latter part of the novel can be regarded as a continuation of the allegory reflecting social and political chaos in post-revolutionary America.

It is widely acknowledged that the victory of the War of Independence marked the beginning of the new nation's political experiments. Heated debates and sharp conflicts among different interest groups drove the new republic into political upheaval. In the 1790s, irreconcilable differences within Washington's Cabinet caused "the greatest political evil in the Constitution" [3], namely the formation of political parties. Led by Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, the Federalists differed from Jeffersonian Republicans in almost every aspect of their political design. Domestically, the Federalists distrusted popular democracy, especially the power of the majority. By setting up a strong central government, chartering national banks, restoring public credit, and levying high protective tariffs, they were determined to establish a highly industrialized nation. On the contrary, the Republicans had great faith in the common people. They criticized elite democracy as well as the Federalists' expansion and abuse of governmental power. Instead of promoting commercial and industrial development, they preferred to build up an agrarian republic on the virtue of the majority. Along with their power struggle, the Republicans and the Federalists also formed their political organs. Editors from the *National Gazette* and *Gazette of the United States* opened a new front for political battles. With the participation of the press, partisan conflicts drew more public attention.

Although many readers may find the fratricide between Wieland and Clara incredible and ridiculous, Brown's rewriting of the original James Yates Murders in *Wieland* implies his purpose. By adding the fratricide theme and describing the life-and-death struggle between brothers and sisters in graphic detail, Brown tries to express his concern about domestic political conflicts through his characters. That is why Clara always considers her beloved brother Wieland as her archenemy and the one who is determined to take her life, despite her strong fear and hatred for Carwin the stranger. Several weeks after Clara first hears the strange voices in the closet, she falls asleep on a bench in her summer retreat. As she describes her ambiguous nightmare, "I at length imagined myself walking, in the evening twilight, to my brother's habitation. A pit, methought, and been dug in the path I had taken, of which I was not aware. As I carelessly pursued my walk, I thought I saw my brother, standing at some distance before me, beckoning and calling me to make haste. He stood on the opposite edge of the gulph. I mended my pace, and one step more would have plunged me into this abyss, had not someone from behind caught suddenly my arm, and exclaimed, in a voice of eagerness and terror, 'hold, hold'." [1]

Clearly enough, deep in her heart, Clara holds a bitter grudge against her brother. She has not only foreseen the upcoming fratricide but also regards herself as the victim.

Also, when Clara finds someone hidden in her closet but refusing to show up, the suspect that first comes into her mind is still Wieland, rather than Carwin or other possible villains. When it comes to the final confrontation between Wieland and Clara in chapter 25, Brown expresses his idea clearly through Clara's narration that "all that I have said is preparatory to this scene" [1] and emphasizes the importance of this fratricide episode. At the pivotal moment of the fratricide, Clara grasps the knife with force and fights bravely against Wieland to the last. Though she drops the knife out of fear and Wieland picks it up committing suicide, Clara is aware of her intention to kill her brother. As she says in remorse, "he was stretched at my feet and my hands were sprinkled with his blood as he fell" [1]. In the early republic, American women were usually seen as the nation's moral guardians. There was also a social consensus that the improvement of men's virtue and morality lay in the education of American women. However, at the end of *Wieland*, the once-virtuous Clara inevitably falls into the abyss of evil and violence. From Clara's deterioration from Henry and Carwin's perfect moral woman into an attempted fratricide, readers realize Brown's painful disillusion with the republican ideal.

3. *Wieland* as Political Criticism of the Federalists

Special attention should also be paid to the fact that Brown sent a copy of *Wieland* to Thomas

Jefferson, the then-vice president of the United States, when he finished the novel in 1798. Though this seemingly weird action may puzzle ordinary readers, Sacvan Bercovitch's commentaries shed some light on Brown's intention. In *The American Jeremiad* (1978), he argues, "the overthrow of imperial power set loose a libertarian spirit that terrified moderate and propertied democrats. Their terror is evident everywhere in the literature: in Gothic novels and tales of violated taboos like parricide, incest, and idolatry; and in the Federalist jeremiads, warning against unbridled ambition and denouncing a long series of local insurrections" [4].

Brown is not a Federalist, nor does he participate in partisan struggles. But considering his childhood under the shadow of mass radicalism during the Revolutionary War and his fear of the Reign of Terror in the French Revolution, *Wieland* is to some extent Brown's strong political criticism against the Republicans from the perspective of the Federalists.

Brown was born in Philadelphia in 1771. His parents were members of the Society of Friends who embraced the principles of non-violence and pacifism. When the War of Independence broke out in 1776, Philadelphia was one of the major states that witnessed battles and skirmishes between the British army and radical revolutionaries. When Philadelphia revolutionaries seized power, they required loyalty oaths from the citizens. Brown's father was charged with "possessing a disposition highly inimical to the cause of America" and exiled to Virginia for his refusal to "affirm allegiance to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as a free and independent state" [5]. Apart from the persecution of the Quakers, the so-called revolutionary patriots committed terrible atrocities. When General Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown, the revolutionary government urged every citizen to light up candles for a general illumination commemorating the victory. As Kafer describes, "As masses of celebrating revolutionaries roamed the streets, not to light a candle on this special night was to risk losing one's house to a mob's pickaxes and iron bars. Indeed, some unilluminated houses were destroyed by overzealous patriots" [5].

Philadelphia revolutionaries' tyranny of the majority cast a long shadow on young Brown. Out of fear of democratic despotism, Brown joined the conservative Friendly Club in New York. He formed a deep friendship with the Federalists like James Kent and gradually developed a political view opposite to that of the Republicans. In the 1790s, what concerned Brown most was the overwhelming French Revolution and the consequent revolutionary radicalism spreading into the US. Though the Federalists strongly condemned the French democratic despotism, the Republicans seemed to hold a rather opposite attitude. Jefferson even invited the ambassador Edmond Genêt to visit the US in 1793 on behalf of the French Republic. This event aroused tremendous enthusiasm among the American people and successfully promoted American support for the revolutionary cause. Jefferson himself also had "great faith in common people and their ability to rule the nation", and even expressed openly his preference for "frequent and small-scale domestic rebellions" [6]. Given the impact of Shays' Rebellion and the Whiskey Rebellion as well as Jefferson's increasing political influence, Brown was deeply concerned about the future of his new republic. Through his political allegory *Wieland*, Brown tried to warn the Republicans about the danger of radicalism and democratic despotism.

It is widely known that Jean Jacques Rousseau was the spiritual father of the French Revolution. Rousseau inherits the idea of salvation from medieval theodicy and changes it into his political philosophy. By sweeping away all historical experiences, he tries to build up a secular republic of virtue instead of the kingdom of Heaven. In this republic of virtue, the general will have the supreme authority. As he argues in *The Social Contract*, whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body. When it comes to Robespierre's political practices, Rousseau's abstract concepts of "general will" and "the compulsion to obey the general will" [7] gradually become the tyranny of the majority and the purge of political opponents. When the Jacobins link God, virtue, general will, common people, and the leader of the people into an unbroken chain, they turn themselves into the embodiment of God and the speaker of the general will. Consequently, all the atrocities and bloodshed become necessary for justice.

In Brown's novel, *Wieland*'s transformation from a caring gentleman into an insane and violent homicide coincides with this distorted logic. When *Wieland* is called on for his defense at the court,

he remains calm and steady without any remorse. He emphasizes again and again that “God is the object of his supreme passion” and “his purpose has been pure” ^[1]. For the sake of “attesting his virtue”, the blood of Catharine is “to be shed by his hand” ^[1]. If Catharine and Clara dare to refuse God’s will, the only way is violent subjugation. Wieland also tells readers that “his thoughts are thrown anew into darkness and anarchy” ^[1] when he murders his wife; and Clara says to herself “I have no time to reflect in what way her safety will be affected by this revolution” ^[1] after Catharine’s death. Deliberately choosing political words like “revolution” and “anarchy”, Brown seems to imply the relationship between Wieland’s murder and the chaotic French Revolution. Discerning readers may also find Brown’s description of Wieland’s darling writer Cicero and his discussion with Henry on Cicero’s works at the beginning of the novel. These seemingly trivial details are not irrelevant. As Brown mentions in his short novel *Death of Cicero: A Fragment* (1799), Cicero was accused of being “an enemy of the state” by the Senate and died in the power struggle among the Second Triumvirate. Thousands of years later, his destiny was echoed by those who were guillotined by the Jacobins as “the enemies of the Republic”.

4. Radical Revolutionary Leaders as Seditious Biloquists

In the editor’s introduction to *Wieland*, Jay Fliegelman points out that “the centrality of the power of the human voice to Wieland cannot be understood without reference to a key event in English and American literary history” ^[1]. In the 1790s, since “the authority became redefined in the new republic”, the narrow concept of rhetoric as “ornaments in the service of proving or disproving a point against opposition” was gradually replaced by “a Ciceronian rhetoric of persuasion broadly understood as the active art of moving and influencing to action” ^[1]. In other words, American rhetoricians paid more attention to expressing their feelings and achieving their purposes rather than to prove their arguments. The second half of the 18th century was an age of passion and enthusiasm. Since the age required eloquent rhetoricians who had the power to “trigger the audience’s involuntary desire by psychological stimulation or contagion of feelings operating through language” ^[1], speakers attached great importance to facial expressions, gestures, body language, and voice tone which had been the minor elements in classical rhetoric. Nevertheless, Brown has no feelings for those passionate and seditious rhetoricians. The distrust of the general will and the leader of the people makes him acutely aware of the potential destructive power of voice and words. In *Wieland*, Carwin the biloquist is a typical example of those who abuse this power.

For Brown, the enchanting power of voice and words can be seen from two aspects. First, voice and words confuse the rational mind. Clara still remembers her first encounter with Carwin when he passes her door and asks for water. Despite his “rustic and awkward gait, ungainly and disproportioned form, sunken breast and drooping head” ^[1], Clara’s rational world collapses when she hears his voice. She describes the moment when she surrenders to Carwin’s enchantment, “I cannot pretend to communicate the impression that was made upon me by these accents, or to depict the degree in which force and sweetness were blended in them. The voice was not only mellifluous and clear, but the emphasis was so just, and the modulation so impassioned, that it seemed as if a heart of stone could not fail of being moved by it. When he uttered the words ‘for charity’s sweet sake’, I dropped the cloth that I held in my hand, my heart overflowed with sympathy, and my eyes with unbidden tears” ^[1].

That is the overwhelming power of voice and words. Under Carwin’s ventriloquy spell, Clara not only ignores his ugly face and ambiguous background but also develops a romantic feeling for him.

Second, voice and words are manipulated by revolutionary leaders to instigate public sentiment. Although Carwin’s early life remains a mystery in *Wieland*, Brown describes Carwin’s service to the Illuminati under the guidance of his master Ludloe in its sequel *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist* (1805). As an experienced revolutionary schemer, Ludloe knows exactly how to maneuver the power of voice and words. When he encourages Carwin to join the Brotherhood, he admits that “no more powerful engine than ventriloquism could be conceived, by which the ignorant and

credulous might be molded to our purposes”^[1]. Since “a voice coming from a quarter where no attendant form could be seen would be ascribed to a supernal agency, and a command imposed on them, in this manner, would be obeyed with religious scrupulousness”, the men “might be imperiously directed in the disposal of their industry, their property, and even of their lives”^[1]. In *Wieland*, Carwin the biloquist first horrifies Wieland by faking Catharine’s voice and then creates shadows and firelights to prove the supernaturality of his voice. When Wieland loses his rational mind and falls into insanity, he regards everything Carwin says as God’s will and sacrifices his whole family without hesitation. Considering the similarity between Carwin’s voice enchantment and the Brotherhood’s manipulation of its disciples, Brown’s intention to criticize radical revolutionary leaders is obvious.

Although there were neither monarchies nor subversive brotherhoods in America, the Republicans’ potential ally—the French Republic—tells a different story. During the French Revolution, seditious partisan leaders took turns ruling the country, large-scale mass movements rose and fell, and all culminated in the Reign of Terror. The Jacobin leaders were all masters of words who could easily arouse public sentiment with their provocative speeches.

For instance, the trial and execution of Louis XVI in 1792 was a triumph of words over rationality. Even though the Constitution of 1791 protected the monarch from any penalty worse than dethronement and no court in the land had legitimate jurisdiction over the king, Saint Just cried out that “humanity in the 18th century is less noble than that of the Caesar Era. Back then, the dictator was assassinated in the Senate. Though there was no ritual, thirty daggers were waiting for him; though there was no legislation, there was the freedom of Rome. Now, there is no citizen who does not have the right that Brutus had over Caesar.”^[3]

Robespierre also delivered a speech at the National Convention, arguing that “the trial of the people is different from the trial of the court; the people do not judge, but strike like thunder; Louis must die, because France needs to live”^[7]. According to historical records, the speech was extremely successful. The audience in the hall was so silent that as if they were enchanted by magic. When Robespierre finished his speech, both supporters and opponents burst into thunderous applause^[7]. The enchanting power of voice and words not only destroys political institutions and judicial procedure but also blurs the boundary between virtue and terror. Robespierre himself declares that “terror is nothing other than prompt, severe, inflexible justice; hence terror is an emanation of virtue”^[3]. In the Jacobins’ illogical wordplay, virtue and terror depend on each other. Under the spell of seditious speeches, atrocities like the great purge and massacres become flawless virtue. No wonder in Brown’s *Wieland*, the murderer who falls prey to Carwin the biloquist always insists that his brutal homicide is virtuous. Even the seditious master Robespierre marvels at the power of words, as he said two years before the Reign of Terror that “it was possible for some men to govern others with nothing but words”^[3].

5. Conclusion

Through his ingenious handling of gothic themes of fratricide, insanity, and ventriloquism in *Wieland*, Brown touched upon critical social and political issues in post-revolutionary America, such as domestic partisan conflict, democratic despotism, and revolutionists’ manipulation of words, and laid bare American nation’s contradiction and anxiety during the period of social transformation. Just as historian Cynthia Kierner comments, “Brown’s 1798 gothic novel *Wieland* is a cautionary tale about the need for constraints on individual freedom. Set in the seemingly idyllic Pennsylvania countryside, Brown’s novel is a Federalist meditation on the political and civil unrest of the 1790s”^[8].

References

[1] Brown, C. B. (1991), *Wieland and Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist*, Penguin Books, pp. 10, 71-72, 252, 264, 189, 190, 195, 175, 32, 28, 29, 57, 59, 300, 301.

- [2] Bill, C. (1986), "Picking up the Knife: A Psycho-Historical Reading of *Wieland*", *American Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1986, 117.
- [3] Dunn, S. (2003), *Sister Revolutions: French Lightning, American Light*. Translated by Xiaogang Yang, Shanghai Literature & Art Publishing House, pp. 87, 133, 135-137, 13.
- [4] Bercovitch, S. (1978), *The American Jeremiad*, University of Wisconsin Press, 134.
- [5] Kafer, P. (1992), "Charles Brockden Brown and Revolutionary Philadelphia: An Imagination in Context", *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 116, no. 4, 1992, pp. 468, 472.
- [6] Liu, Zuochang (2008). *American History*, Tianjin Ancient Books Publishing House, pp. 223-224.
- [7] Zhu, Xueqin (2003). *The Collapse of Moral Utopia: from Rousseau to Robespierre*, Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore Co., Ltd., pp. 87, 239, 253.
- [8] Kierner, C. (2003), *Revolutionary America, 1750-1815: Sources and Interpretation*, Pearson Education, Inc, 315.