


**Érudit**

 ▶ INDEX DES REVUES  
 ▶ RECHERCHE DANS LA COLLECTION ÉRUDIT



## Romanticism on the Net

**Transatlantic Romanticism: A Special Issue of Romanticism on the Net**

Issues 38-39, May-August 2005

Issues guest-edited by: Joel Pace, Lance Newman and Chris Koenig-Woodyard

Editor: Michael Eberle-Sinatra

Publisher: Université de Montréal

ISSN : 1467-1255 (electronic version)

↓
**ARTICLE**

## Textual Surveillance, Social Codes, and Sublime Voices: The Tyranny of Narrative in *Caleb Williams* and *Weiland*

### Author

**David S. Hogsette**  
New York Institute of Technology

### Abstract

William Godwin and Charles Brockden Brown present narrative and textuality as Gothic mechanisms of psychological terror and political oppression. Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794) directly addresses the issues of social injustice and the abuses of political power that he examines in *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), and these two works had an immense ideological and artistic influence on Brown's American Gothic tale *Weiland* (1798). Though both authors were in some ways anti-Gothic, they indeed chose this popular genre in order to reach, as Godwin notes in his preface, "persons whom books of philosophy and science are never likely to reach." As the genre dictates, these novels do provide some of the classic Gothic mechanisms such as ruinous dungeons, creepy castles and mansions, and mysterious, dark figures. However, the main source of Gothic terror in these novels is the oppressive misuse of language. Located within the anxiety and uneasiness evoked by these abuses of language and textual entrapments are Godwin's and Brown's political comments concerning the power relationships between governments and individuals.

### I. Introduction: Transatlantic Gothic Intersections

When comparing William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794) and Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798), many scholars establish Godwin as the literary and conventional center around which Brown's novel operates. For example, Pamela Clemit argues that Brown transforms the social idealism of Godwin's *Political Justice* (1793) and *Caleb Williams* into a Federalist skepticism that emerged from the ambiguous political climate of a post-revolutionary American republic divided over the violent turn of the French Revolution (107-121). *Caleb Williams* undoubtedly influenced Brown's aesthetic and thematic construction of *Wieland*, but we should be careful not to diminish or obscure Brown's work by presenting him as a derivative writer subsumed by Godwin's literary example. What if we examined these novels within the aesthetic context that joins them in a discursive, transatlantic relationship? What insights could we glean if we considered the Gothic tendencies shared by these narratives? Robert Miles defines Gothic literature as a series of culturally and historically synchronous forms that "are not simply recycled, as if in the service of a neurotic, dimly understood drive; rather, Gothic texts 'revise' one another, here opening up 'ideologically' charged issues, there enforcing a closure" (3). It is from the perspective of the Gothic as a reflexive and (re)visionary literary form that we see the dynamic transatlantic intersection between these two significant writers, who spoke powerfully to their contemporary audiences (on both sides of the Atlantic), and who continue to reach audiences around the globe today. Although Brown's *Wieland* was indeed deeply influenced by Godwin's philosophical, political, and literary work, [1] he did not simply write a Godwinian novel of the American republic. Rather, in these novels we see both authors develop, revise, transform, and enhance the Gothic by exploring the terrors of linguistic power and textual imprisonment, thus emphatically infusing popular Gothicism with explicit moral and political significance.

## II. *Caleb Williams* and the Tyranny of Aristocratic Codes

- 2 At its heart *Caleb Williams* is a political novel concerned with the various abusive forms of power. As many commentators have noted, *Caleb Williams* is partly a fictional expression of Godwin's social and political views outlined in *Political Justice*. [2] By casting his political idealism in Gothic melodrama, Godwin hoped to reach those readers who would not necessarily read or be exposed to his longer political treatise. In the preface to the novel he writes, "It is now known to philosophers, that the spirit and character of the government intrudes itself into every rank of society. But this is a truth highly worthy to be communicated to persons whom books of philosophy and science are never likely to reach" (3). Many suggest that the novel contradicts its preface and that Godwin does not achieve his stated purpose. [3] Moreover, the Gothic emotional excesses and melodrama of the novel seem to contradict Godwin's emphasis in *Political Justice* that the human faculty of Reason is the key for bringing about political change and social justice. From these perspectives it is understandable that many conclude *Caleb Williams* is a failed political novel. [4] However, what if we consider this apparent narrative failure as a rhetorical feature of the novel? That is, these logical contradictions ultimately underscore a specific political intent, foregrounded by Gothic aesthetic excess. Caleb's failure to vindicate himself, his failure to escape the confines of aristocratic decorum, and his failure to change "things as they are" all mark Godwin's chilling commentary on the culturally erosive and self-destructive powers of aristocratic hegemony. Not only is Caleb incarcerated by a political system and its tangible dungeon, but he is also rhetorically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually entrapped by a powerfully restrictive social narrative.
- 3 The politically charged purpose of his novel, particularly in the context of the English debates over

the French Revolution, was not lost on its early readers. In 1794 a reviewer for the *British Critic*, which was then supportive of the Pitt government, condemned the novel as a political allegory that inaccurately and dangerously protested the governmental oppression of eighteenth-century reformers (70-71). Godwin wrote a reply in July 1795 to the *British Critic*, emphasizing that the purpose of the novel had been “to expose the evils which arise out of the present system of civilized society; and having exposed them to lead the enquiring reader to examine whether they are, or are not, as has commonly been supposed, irremediable; in a word, to disengage the minds of men from presupposition, and launch them upon the sea of moral and political enquiry” (qtd. in Dumas 583). Godwin identified himself as a political radical and positioned his novel as a fiery political tract engineered to move readers toward radicalism and social critique. By writing what Tilottama Rajan calls a “political metafiction” (239)—a text that draws specific attention to the political relationship between writer, text, and reader—Godwin successfully communicates his critique of social institutions.

- 4 Godwin claimed that institutional government intrudes upon the private lives of its citizens (especially political radicals), erasing true freedom through invasive surveillance. This concern over governmental espionage, as Maurice Hindle rightly notes (xx-xxiv), becomes one of the novel’s central political themes. James Thompson discusses surveillance in *Caleb Williams* in terms of Michel Foucault’s analysis of the Benthamite Panopticon in which the authoritative gaze isolates and alienates its subject, inducing feelings of terror and paranoia (181-83). Much of the terror in *Caleb Williams* indeed stems from a realization that Falkland’s authoritative gaze ultimately isolates Caleb from all human community and leads him to despise himself, resulting in self-alienation. Ultimately, though, the true terror in this Gothic novel is self-imposed surveillance and linguistic imprisonment. Godwin reveals that an individual can victimize himself by trying so hard to uphold external social codes that he allows himself to be completely defined by these codes and social narratives. As Jerrold Hogle observes, Caleb creates a personal identity “wrapped up in textual chains that are different from him and different from their own referents” (262), thus becoming a performative prisoner of the text he writes. Moreover, Caleb’s narrative re-inscribes him within the very social codes he tries to expose and escape. Godwin thus examines how an individual can be psychologically entombed and physically decayed by stubbornly upholding and being confined by external social narratives.
- 5 In Godwin’s Gothic drama, true freedom is found within the mind and through an individual’s control over his or her own will. Terror results when the individual loses cognitive sovereignty. This principle is first introduced in the narrative depicting Tyrell’s patriarchal tyranny over his cousin Emily. When Tyrell threatens to lock Emily up in her room if she does not marry Grimes, she rebelliously charges, “You may imprison my body, but you cannot conquer my mind” (60). Physical confinement is a typical Gothic threat throughout this novel, but the greater fear is the loss of control over one’s mind. We see this same principle in the Gothic horror of Brown’s *Wieland*, where real terror is located in the tragic loss of rational thought and the subjugation of one’s will to the power of an external voice and social code. This level of freedom, idealized in *Caleb Williams* by the characters of Emily, Hawkins, and Mr. Raymond, eludes Falkland and Caleb, for their *minds* are ultimately imprisoned by the imaginary, by narrative codes of honor and chivalry. Falkland assembles these behavioral codes from an imagination fueled by a fancy for antiquarian literature and culture:

Among the favourite authors of his early years were the heroic poets of Italy. From them he imbibed the love of chivalry and romance. He had too much good sense to regret the time of Charlemagne and Arthur. But, while his imagination was purged by a certain infusion of philosophy, he conceived that there was in the manners depicted by these celebrated poets something to imitate, as well as something to avoid. He believed that nothing was so well calculated to make men delicate, gallant, and humane, as a temper perpetually alive to the sentiments of birth and honour. The opinions he

Falkland is not a Godwinian free thinker. Although Godwin encouraged active reading as a way to shape the rational mind, to encourage moral development, and to engage political enquiry, the dangers of reading are the loss of the reader's individualism to that of the author. [5] Falkland's fancy impresses upon his mind the fictitious codes of chivalry and honor, thus overshadowing the purging power of philosophy while determining his identity and his actions in society.

- 6 Caleb is equally possessed by the imaginary, particularly the narrative dictates of romance. In his boyhood, Caleb's curiosity and lust for knowledge implanted in him "an invincible attachment to books of narrative and romance. I panted for the unravelling of an adventure with an anxiety, perhaps almost equal to that of the man whose future happiness or misery depended on its issue. I read, I devoured compositions of this sort. They took possession of my soul; and the effects they produced were frequently discernible in my external appearance and my health" (6). Rajan notes that Godwin's hermeneutic theory assumed a "prophetic reader" who could divine the original tendency of a text and thus create the proper meaning and significance of a narrative (224). In this novel, Falkland and Caleb are examples of failed prophetic readers who fall victim to the text instead of divining the truth within it. For these two characters, reading excites their imaginations and enslaves them to ancient aristocratic codes. Instead of developing a rational individuality based upon an elevated Reason, Caleb and Falkland construct fictitious identities based upon romance quests and tales of chivalry. Their independent wills become dominated by imaginary dictates of an internalized ancient literature.
- 7 Godwin's exploration of Gothic imprisonment and tyranny is so disturbing precisely because it uses the imagination and manipulates literary conventions to reveal the hegemonic dangers of the imaginary. Although abuse of institutional power and juridical authority is a major subject of this novel, Falkland and, later, Caleb are not subject to the state; rather, they are victims of a self-imposed imaginary tyranny. Ironically and significantly, the poet Mr. Clare recognizes this character flaw in Falkland: "You have an impetuosity and an impatience of *imagined* dishonour, that, if once set wrong, may make you as eminently mischievous as you will otherwise be useful" (37; italics added). As a poet and practitioner of the imaginary, Mr. Clare knew just how unstable these structures could be and that just as Falkland's sense of self was based on the imaginary, an imagined offense could tear down this narrative identity. The imaginary is a realm of pretense and falsity, rarely rational and stable. Like destroys like—the imagined can destroy the imaginary. Falkland's public humiliation (being physically abused by Tyrell in front of the town council) is expanded in his own mind, imagined to be a far greater dishonor than it really was, and the irrational response to this dishonor initiates an internal conflict that the aristocratic codes could not resolve, even in the literature: the barbarous desire for revenge versus the honor code of civility. In a fit of rage that shatters his civilized façade, Falkland murders Tyrell in cold blood, and he further betrays the aristocratic codes by covering up his deed and framing the Hawkins family. He had to create a new fiction to hide the truth and to maintain his honorable image in the eyes and minds of the community. He walls himself up behind a series of fictions and becomes a prisoner of and slave to his imaginary identity.
- 8 Even though his identity is an imaginary construct, his isolation is tangibly real, and he feels the pangs of anguish associated with his subjugation to a hegemony he now desires to eradicate. In one of many manipulative conversations orchestrated by Caleb to uncover the truth concerning Falkland's actions, Caleb mentions an historic case in the court of Queen Elizabeth in which a man

was unjustly accused of a crime but was saved when the real murderer, who was serving on the jury, confessed. This story enraged Falkland who suddenly “drew back with trepidation, and exclaimed, ‘Detested be the universe, and the laws that govern it! Honour, justice, virtue are all the juggle of knaves! If it were in my power I would instantly crush the whole system into nothing!’” (122). This once aristocratic ideologue now views himself a miserable victim of culture and a dupe of social codes. He has become a lonely, isolated prisoner to a hegemonic value-system that he once fully supported and perpetuated but now wishes could be obliterated. Because of his crime that violated the chivalry codes and his desire to maintain the fiction of his original honorable identity, Falkland is hopelessly trapped. He has three options. He can confess his crimes and suffer the legal and social consequences as supported by the hegemonic codes; but his selfish pride, bolstered by these codes, is too great to allow such a confession and social disgrace. Or, he can become a radical and destroy the system that imprisons him; but this system is too powerful for one man to annihilate, and this reality fills his heart with rage and poisons his mind with madness. Last, he can maintain the fiction, uphold the codes of the hegemony, and suffer through personal guilt, emotional isolation, and physical decay. Falkland chooses the latter and becomes the poster-child for tortured Gothic villains that would populate hundreds of later Gothic tales and novels in England and America.

- 9 Falkland’s slavish devotion to his public image and the antiquarian codes of honor alienates him from others and transforms him into an incarnate Gothic ruin. Here, the self serves as a prison, and the body becomes the site of ruinous decay.<sup>[6]</sup> This imprisoning subjectivity contrasts the experience of Emily and that of Caleb when he is first imprisoned. For them the mind is a vehicle for true freedom, allowing them to exercise a transcendent liberty of thought. Although Tyrell controls Emily’s social and economic position and manipulates her destiny, she triumphantly declares, “You may imprison my body, but you cannot conquer my mind” (60). She experiences a freedom of spirit and thought by making her own life choices and refusing to succumb to the oppressive will of Tyrell. When Caleb is first imprisoned, he falls into himself and exercises his mind, exploring the far reaches of his reason and imagination. His physical isolation gives way to an internal transcendence, and he achieves freedom of mind and thought (192-94). Yet for Falkland, and indeed Caleb by the end of his narrative, the mind is already entrapped by a fanciful devotion to codes of honor, allowing for no kind of cognitive freedom or mental transcendence of physical bondage. Because his mind is imprisoned by his slavish devotion to honor, he internalizes the guilt of his crimes, translating it into an emotional disease that fragments his mind and cripples his body. When he confesses his crime to Caleb he says that ever since the day of the murder, “I have not had an hour’s peace; I became changed from the happiest to the most miserable thing that lives; sleep has fled from my eyes; joy has been a stranger to my thoughts; and annihilation I should prefer a thousand times to the being that I am” (125). Internalizing his guilt and struggling to maintain the façade of his former honorable identity destroy his soul and transform his body into a ruinous shell of his former self. The full extent of his transformation into an incarnate Gothic ruin is revealed after Caleb is freed from all the false charges and brought before Falkland, who confesses that he had been watching, hounding, and perversely protecting Caleb all along:

But now he [Falkland] appeared like nothing that had ever been visible in human shape. His visage was haggard, emaciated, and fleshless. His complexion was a dun and tarnished red, the colour uniform through every region of the face, and suggested the idea of its being burnt and parched by eternal fire that burned within him. His eyes were red, quick, wandering, full of suspicion and rage. His hair was neglected, ragged, and floating. His whole figure was thin, to a degree that suggested the idea rather of a skeleton than a person actually alive. Life seemed hardly to be the capable inhabitant of so woe-begone and ghost-like a figure. The taper of wholesome life was expired; but passion and fierceness and frenzy were able for the present to supply its place.

Although never physically imprisoned himself, Falkland has taken on the ghastly shape of a tormented Bastille prisoner. Falkland's self-imposed mental and emotional incarceration has transformed him into a demonic figure whose body is decayed and his soul filled with a hellish rage. The transformation of Falkland's decaying body into a ruinous Gothic architecture underscores the dehumanizing ramifications of social hegemonies. By manipulating such Gothic conventions as imprisonment, tyranny, ruins, psychological torment, and physical decay, Godwin expresses his own political concerns over the horrors of overt political oppression and the spiritual and psychological terrors of a slavish devotion to social prescriptions of personal identity.

- 10 The main purpose of Caleb's own narrative confessional—the novel he narrates—is to escape the prison of Falkland's narrative legacy and to redeem himself in the eyes of the public. He also writes this confessional tale to regain narrative control over his life, to achieve freedom by clearing his name, and to expose Falkland as the “true” criminal. Maggie Kilgour claims that Caleb is successful in achieving his narrative goals: “The creation of *Caleb Williams* becomes itself a model for an ideal literary society in which the free individual is able to encounter the ideas of others without losing his individuality: seeing how others think helps rather than impedes thinking for oneself. Literary relations produce not the conformity of sterile copying, but the individuality of new and original creations” (56). Kilgour here describes the Godwinian ideal for literary production; however, Caleb's narrative does not achieve this ideal. Caleb starts off with the radical spirit of intellectual and political individualism, but by the end of the confession he succumbs to the very same social codes that originally imprisoned Falkland. Godwin expresses his literary ideals and political views on the tyrannical power of narrative by representing bitter ironic failure.
- 11 Some readers argue that the narrative is not a failure. For example, Hindle suggests that unlike other eighteenth-century first-person narrators, “Godwin's first-person narrator spends time ruminating upon his experiences, analyzing his thoughts and motives, and *learning* from them” (xviii; Hindle's italics). However, Caleb only learns self-loathing. He is similar to Coleridge's Mariner who entraps listeners in his Gothically seductive tale, draining them of Reason and joy, leaving them “sadder and wiser,” and further alienating himself from human community. Caleb likewise fails to learn the truth of his tale—the imprisoning power of social codes—and tragically enslaves himself to the very same chivalric and aristocratic codes that entombed and destroyed Falkland. Kilgour also makes this implicit connection between Caleb and the Mariner, yet she reads the Mariner and Caleb as narrators in control of their tale (70-74). She suggests that Caleb is not a failed revolutionary figure who has merely switched places with his oppressor, the victim becoming the victimizer. Rather, she locates his final accomplishment and eventual freedom in the guilt and compassion he feels for the destroyed Falkland: “As a result, in the final moments of the confrontation the system of domination and vicious circle of victimisation appear not futilely inverted but totally transcended through the power of sympathy and the emergence of mutual love” (71). This mutual love, according to Kilgour, allows them to “exert their powers as free agents to move beyond their determined positions” (70). Moreover, Rajan argues that the revised ending not only offers the possibility of reconciliation but also transforms Caleb into a reader of Falkland's body and character, a reader who models reconciliatory reading that we can continue outside and beyond the text (242). But these interpretations assume there is a constructive reconciliation. The cycle of oppression and revenge may be averted here, but the processes of victimization are not transcended. These characters indeed come to love each other for who they are, but the process of Falkland's transformation into an incarnate Gothic ruin is complete and is in no way reversed through this mutual love. Caleb simply embraces the aristocratic honor codes that oppressed Falkland from the

beginning, thus learning nothing from his experiences nor from his own confessional tale. There is no true conversion of character here.

12 Godwin gives us a self-reflective narrative in which narrative itself is the Gothic prison. Far from freeing himself from social scrutiny or emotional bondage, Caleb simply reinscribes his body and mind within the very same social codes he is writing and fighting against. Near the end of his tale, Caleb proclaims the non-violent revolutionary power of his tale: “No, I will use no daggers! I will unfold a tale!—I will show thee to the world for what thou art; and all the men that live shall confess my truth!” (324-25). Here, Caleb is a puffed up radical charged with indignation and idealism. He is carried away by his own zeal, blind to the fact that his narrative and his efforts at confessional redemption were doomed from the start. Caleb tells this tale *in retrospect*, after he had destroyed Falkland and after his sympathies doomed him to a prison house of guilt. Caleb tellingly begins his (re)narration of Falkland’s life, as told to him from Mr. Collins’s perspective, with an admission and foreshadowing of his own guilty conscience: “My heart bleeds at the recollection of his [Falkland’s] misfortunes, as if they were my own. How can it fail to do so? To his story the whole fortune of my life was linked; because he was miserable, my happiness, my name, and my existence have been irretrievably blasted” (12). Far from blaming Falkland or locating his own failings within those of Falkland, Caleb extends Godwinian sympathy toward his oppressor. Yet this sympathy does not link Caleb to Falkland as an individual human being, thus freeing him from the dictates of the social. Rather, this sympathy stems from the realization that he has violated the social and thus condemned and destroyed this man before the world that once revered him.

13 As he continues to write the confessional narrative, Caleb realizes that his confessional act does not free him of guilt; it merely reveals the truth of his social reinscription, a truth that becomes a heavy load indeed: “But these motives [that the truth concerning political abuse be exposed and justice ultimately be served through the telling of this tale] have diminished in their influence. I have contracted a disgust for life and all its appendages. Writing, which was at first a pleasure, is changed into a burthen” (314). The burden that oppresses him is his continued public humiliation of Falkland whom he has deified now in his mind. When he saw the wasted and skeletal remains of a once great aristocrat, Caleb shuddered at the realization that he was responsible for Falkland’s public destruction by breaking the chivalric code of allegiance and the honor of one’s word: he revealed Falkland as Tyrell’s murderer after promising to Falkland that he would never tell (330). Caleb berates himself for succumbing to selfish indignation and breaking his promise. He abandons his radical quest for truth and justice and adopts the social concerns of the establishment. In his mind, Falkland is no longer a tyrant but a god: “A nobler spirit lived not among the sons of men. Thy intellectual powers were truly sublime, and thy bosom burned with a godlike ambition” (336). Caleb comes to revere Falkland as an aristocratic gentleman of the highest sort, a nobleman whom he betrayed. Caleb leaves himself victim to his own guilt:

It would have been merciful in comparison if I had planted a dagger in his heart. He would have thanked me for my kindness. But, atrocious, execrable wretch that I have been! I wantonly inflicted on him an anguish a thousand times worse than death. Meanwhile I endure the penalty of my crime. His figure is ever in imagination before me. Waking or sleeping, I still behold him.

336

His guilt grows not out of a humanistic sympathy but is rooted in the precepts of the very aristocratic social codes he attempted to expose from the very beginning of his tale. Sympathy here offers no social or political transcendence. No alternative hegemony is offered, and Caleb victimizes himself under the authority of aristocratic social expectation just as cruelly as Falkland imprisoned himself.

14 Aristocratic codes and identity narratives serve in this novel as Gothic modes of imprisonment,

terror, and tyranny. According to Jan B. Gordon, true Gothic horror resides not in representations of social transgression and monstrous excess but, instead, in continually decentered and deconstructed narrative: "While attempting to set up a world of texts within texts which establish some order in a succession of literary priority and hence authority, what the Gothic mode actually achieves is a constant questioning of the respective legitimacies and status of competing texts by narrowing the difference between them" (211). The repetition of texts enclosed within texts and narratives enfolding other narratives ultimately proliferates narrative presence and thus challenges the central authority of any single text and undermining the authority of narrative itself. In *Caleb Williams* the proliferation of competing narratives is horrifying not only because the authority of narrative is problematized, but also because the individual as a social and political agent is entrapped within the labyrinth of proliferating narratives, losing his subjectivity to that of predetermined social texts and losing control over his own narrative life.

### III. Oppressive Gothic Ventriloquism in *Wieland*

- 15 For all of the apparent inconsistencies between Godwin's rationalist political theory and his imaginative reworking of his political views in *Caleb Williams*, his use of Gothic conventions and the horrifying proliferation of entangling narratives of subjectivity underscore his concerns over social hegemony. Charles Brockden Brown similarly manipulated Gothic machinations in *Wieland* to articulate a political message for the rather young American republic. However, this Gothic novel met with mixed responses. For example, early nineteenth-century English reviews leveled savage criticism against Brown's use of spontaneous combustion and ventriloquism. These readers felt that locating a solution to the mystery with such a simplistic idea as a parlor trick gone wrong is largely disappointing and insulting. [7] Indeed, if we view the ventriloquism only as a way of providing a rational explanation of the mystery as in a Radcliffe novel, then *Wieland* surely disappoints. However, as Bernard Rosenthal notes, Brown's use of sublime voices "had purposes having little to do with the solving of mysteries. Brown had a polemic message, the dangers of morality based on revealed religion" (104). Some early critics who supported the novel took a similar view, arguing that the voices spoke of the dangers of being misled by superstitious belief in supernatural agencies. [8] Some readers, like Edwin Sill Fussell, encourage us to shift our focus away from the Gothic totally, claiming that genre considerations ultimately reduce the work to a catalog of infantile tropes. Fussell suggests we read the novel as an important historical document that represents writers and their function in revolution and social disruption (185). By locating this novel within the Gothic genre, I do not wish to remove the novel from history; rather, I wish to examine how Brown draws from Gothic conventions to achieve his literary goal in history and thus better understand how Gothic literature functioned historically and culturally.
- 16 As a writer and political thinker, Brown was aware of Godwin's political views, social ideals, and Gothic appropriations, and he was well versed in the sensational fiction and Gothic novels that were popular in his day. [9] Yet he also understood the absurdity of transplanting continental Gothic machinery onto a new landscape that lacked the medieval history to support it, and in the preface to his *Edgar Huntly* (1799) he called for an Americanization of the European Gothic literary tradition. True terror, he explained in the Advertisement to *Sky Walk* (1798), could be found in his readers' contemporary American life, and thus grounded his Gothic tale and literary craft in the realities of eighteenth-century American life (Sheldon 17-18). Just as Godwin's representation of social narratives as Gothic prisons underscored his political concerns over political justice, social reform,

- and oppressive reactions against revolutionary ideology, Brown's American Gothicism in *Wieland* similarly reveals language and narrative to be imprisoning devices that can entrap the will, control the body, and eventually disease the soul. [10] This form of Gothic terror is especially frightening due to its political ramifications for a young American republic whose democratic system is grounded in a belief in the authority, purity, and efficacy of the people's will and voice.
- 17 Rhetoric and voice in *Wieland* are acknowledged for their persuasive powers, and as such they become mechanisms of oppression and Gothic tyranny. Jay Fliegelman notes that in the second half of the eighteenth century rhetoric in American academies of learning and in politics developed into a purified Ciceronian notion of persuasion, an active art of moving or influencing individuals to action (xxviii). Brown realized that power and authority in the young American republic hinged upon the ability to excite the mind, animate the soul, and control the will. He transformed the traditional European Gothic—characterized by dark dungeons, labyrinthine abbeys and cathedrals, foreboding castles, decaying ruins, and tyrannical aristocracies—by representing voice and narrative as rhetorical prisons that entrap the will and tyrannize the individual. In an aesthetic and thematic move similar to that of Godwin's Gothicism in *Caleb Williams*, Brown examines the Gothic tyranny of discourse. For example, early in *Wieland*, Clara identifies the will as the primary tool of understanding and notes its dependence upon the senses: "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" (39). Tyranny is achieved by controlling the will, and in Brown's transformed Gothicism, the will is dominated not only through physical imprisonment but also through narrative manipulation. The voice becomes a rhetorical machination through which the senses are deceived and the will is controlled. As we saw in *Caleb Williams*, the mind is capable of freeing the individual from physical imprisonment; however, in *Wieland* the mind is also the weak link in the chain of independence and self-determination: "So flexible, and yet so stubborn is the human mind. So obedient to impulses the most transient and brief, and yet so unalterably observant of the direction which is given to it!" (61).
- 18 Brown recognized storytelling or the author's rhetorical use of voice as a Gothic mechanism for influencing the human mind and thus controlling the will of his readers. The Advertisement to *Wieland* is clearly an attempt to enlist the favor of his audience and to justify his use of the Gothic and the marvelous. However, the Advertisement also introduces the theme of narrative influence and textual enticement at the heart of Brown's Gothicism. His purpose for writing this novel is to instruct the moral constitution of man (as was Godwin's purpose for writing *Caleb Williams*, for he also considered the issue of political justice as fundamentally moral), and he attempts this goal by ventriloquizing his message and text through the epistolary voice of Clara. He creates a series of textual chambers and deliberately masquerades as a woman, revealing his authorship as a form of ventriloquy. Moreover, he manipulates fictitious voices to create "memorable forms" (4) or impressions on the mind and soul. Fliegelman notes that "[i]n his first published work, the magazine essay series *The Rhapsodist*, Brown suggests that the role of the writer is 'to enchain the attention and ravish the souls of those who study and reflect'" (xxi). Note the Gothic terminology here and how Brown characterizes the author as a disembodied voice that imprisons the reader's mind and ravishes the soul. Through his narrator Clara, Brown repeats this notion of textual enticement and submission to excited emotions: "How will your wonder, and that of your companions, be excited [sic] by my story! Every sentiment will yield to your amazement" (6). Brown presents himself as a rhetorical storyteller who manipulates voices in order to influence the will of his audience, foreshadowing Carwin's tyrannical abuse of narrative and characterizing rhetoric and narrative as Gothic forms of imprisonment.

- 19 The novel begins with a genealogy detailing the Wieland family's association with affective language and literature that ultimately leads to textual indoctrination and imprisonment. Clara's grandfather devoted his short life to literature, music, and drama and was supposedly the founder of German Theater. Furthermore the "modern poet of the same name is sprung from the same family" (7). These ancestors were crafters of affective art intended to entertain through impressing upon the minds and souls the images and creative visions of their creators. Clara's devoutly religious father, ironically, "entertained no relish for books, and was wholly unconscious of any power they possessed to delight or instruct" (8). Clara's father is unaware of the manipulative power of literature and books, and he becomes an intellectual and spiritual prisoner of a book written by a French Protestant (8-10). This book was so powerfully seductive that it completely engaged his soul and entrapped his mind. It details the doctrine of the Camissards, a Protestant sect, and it eventually frames his will and structures his study of the Bible. Instead of freely and reflectively studying the Bible in open prayer with God, he becomes indoctrinated by the sect's discourse, and his thinking, feelings, and meditations are fashioned and determined by this single text. The result of this narrow textual indoctrination is tragic and horrific. The Wieland family has an interesting and tragic historical connection to affective narrative and textual imprisonment, yet the knowledge of this history and genealogy—a narrative in its own right—does not free Clara and her brother from their own tragic encounters with manipulative rhetoric.
- 20 Clara and her brother seem predetermined to fall victim to the tyranny of Gothically affected narrative. Clara is most influenced by Carwin's emotional melodrama. For example, when he masquerades as the peasant stranger and visits the house, Clara remarks, "The voice was not only mellifluous and clear, but the emphasis was so just, and the modulation so impassioned, that it seemed as if an 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" (59). Carwin is a master of the Gothic voice who can manipulate the will of an individual by affecting emotionalism and influencing the listener's senses. His "magical and thrilling power" (79) also enslaves the empirical intelligence of Wieland and Henry. The earliest and clearest example is when Carwin mimics Catherine's voice and provides false information concerning the death of Theresa (50-51). This shadowy voice raises questions of identity and authenticity of voice, but it also reveals the power of voice to affect the soul and influence the will of the listener. By deceiving the senses, Carwin can manipulate their rational minds that are so dependent upon empirical principles, thus directly controlling their wills. Carwin's sublime voice becomes a Gothic machination of emotional tyranny and intellectual imprisonment.
- 21 Though Carwin's sublime voice is the most obvious form of Gothic narrative tyranny, it really could not succeed without the dominance of empiricism in this Age of Enlightenment. As Carwin suggests during his confession, he is not solely responsible for Henry's and Wieland's transformations and tragic actions. Arguably, his narrative trappings only work because his victims are already imprisoned by empiricism, a scientific grand narrative. They trust their senses too much as a positive source of empirical data, and because they value this data as rationally sound, they are ultimately and ironically deceived into false conclusions that lead to irrational behavior. A key problem with empirical reasoning is that it cannot account for convincingly forged or mimicked sensory input. Carwin's ventriloquy demonstrates the limits of empirical thought and reveals how individuals can become prisoners to logic. Conclusions based on forged empirical data are logically sound, but they can be, as in Wieland's and Henry's case, tragically flawed.
- 22 Because the seemingly disembodied voice of Catherine is so convincing and the information it communicated is so extraordinary, the group concludes that this empirical evidence proves the

existence of a supernatural force or presence (51-52). Yet shortly after Carwin enters this social circle, he provides them a rational explanation for all the supernatural elements and voices they've experienced: mimicry and ventriloquy (86-87). Carwin actually gives himself away, but they fail to realize the truth. They are so taken by empiricism that they cannot think beyond it. Ironically, rational thought has been manipulated to convince them of the irrational. Carwin's ventriloquy is merely the precipitating factor revealing the extent to which they have already imprisoned themselves to an over-reliance on empirical evidence and rational thought. They follow the dictates of empiricism to the point of absurdity, and their Reason drives them toward the irrational. This is illustrated again in the later descriptions of Wieland's excessive religious enthusiasm (188-90). His spiritual knowledge and faith are not truly spiritual so much as they are empirical. He submits to what he thinks is God's will, not out of true faith (a belief in that which cannot be substantiated) but out of an earthly knowledge and human understanding rooted in empirical, verifiable evidence—Carwin's voice and parlor tricks. The source of authority and meaning is dislocated from the divine absolute and placed back onto the receiver of language. The final irony is that as in Caleb's and Falkland's case, Wieland and Henry imprison themselves by limiting their perspectives to the precepts of empiricism, allowing their wills to be contained by the precepts of a scientific grand narrative.

#### IV. Melodramatic Tragedy and Gothic Political Tracts: A Working Conclusion

- 23 Godwin and Brown appropriated key Gothic mechanisms to motivate the plots of their novels and to express their political commentary. Indeed, the specifics of their political content slightly differ. Godwin responds to the Pitt government's oppressive reaction against the French Revolution and thus writes a fictional representation, expansion, and application of the social idealism expressed in *Political Justice*.<sup>[11]</sup> Brown reacts directly against the excessive zeal and horrors of the French revolution and pleads, as Jane Tompkins observes, “for the restoration of civic authority in a post-Revolutionary age” (61). Godwin works toward an idealized progressive liberalization in which ultimate authority is located within the rational and sympathetic individual. Brown, rooted in a uniquely American experience, expresses a Federalist skepticism toward egalitarian liberalism and speculates on the chaotic horror resulting from the disillusion of centralized power and authority. As Lisa Steinman has observed,

Godwin had suggested that cultural narratives manipulated by traditional institutions of privilege necessarily infect how any individual can conceive of him or her self and his or her social and political position; Brown (given *his* cultural narratives) presents a different but equally dark imagination of what could happen in a society he envisions as having no secured narratives, no institutions, no paternal authority, no higher court of appeal to adjudicate cultural authority.

Steinman's italics

128

- 24 Both writers base the efficacy of their Gothic political tracts in melodramatic tragedy, as did the major progenitor of this Gothic tradition, Horace Walpole. In *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) Walpole offers what appears to be a comic resolution: the ancient prophecy is fulfilled, providence wins, nobility by birth is upheld and maintained, and the divine right of kings and primogeniture is validated. However, the remaining characters are not joyous. Walpole infuses the comic resolution with melodramatic pain and emotional suffering, thus leveling social criticism against the aristocratic

ideals that are narratively sustained. Similarly, tragedy underscores the political messages in *Caleb Williams* and *Wieland*. Caleb ends his confessional tale a sadder and wiser man, suffering the melancholy of his guilt and reinscribing his identity within aristocratic social codes. Clara, who is physically palsied and emotionally shaken by her own retelling of the tale, ends her narrative with what ultimately becomes a tragic epilogue. The ending is written three years after the main plot of the story, and it provides a brief narrative resolution to the previous tragedy. However, the brief hint of hopefulness is derailed by the Maxwell story, which simply replicates the tragic outcomes and themes of the Carwin tale, thus reasserting the theme of chaos and destruction resulting from rational manipulation, logical deceit, and emotional zeal. Through tragedy, excessive melodrama, and negative example, Godwin and Brown appropriate and adapt major Gothic machinations to express their respective political commentaries.

## Works Cited

- Brown, Charles Brockden. *Wieland and Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist*. Ed. Jay Fliegelman. New York: Penguin, 1991.
- Butler, Marilyn. "Godwin, Burke, and *Caleb Williams*." *Essays in Criticism* 32.3 (1982): 237-57.
- Clemit, Pamela. *The Godwinian Novel: The Rational Fictions of Godwin, Brockden Brown, Mary Shelley*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1993.
- Dill, Elizabeth. "The Republican Stepmother: Revolution and Sensibility in Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*." *The Eighteenth-Century Novel* 2 (2002): 273-303.
- Dumas, Gilbert. "Things as They Were: The Original Ending of *Caleb Williams*." *Studies in English Literature* 6 (1966): 575-97.
- Fliegelman, Jay. "Introduction", In Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland and Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist*. Ed. Jay Fliegelman. New York: Penguin, 1991.vii-xlii.
- Fussell, Edwin Sill. "*Wieland*: A Literary and Historical Reading." *Early American Literature* 18.1 (1983): 171-86.
- Godwin, William. *Things as They Are; or, the Adventures of Caleb Williams*. Ed. Maurice Hindle. New York: Penguin, 1988.
- Gordon, Jan B. "Narrative Enclosure as Textual Ruin: An Archaeology of Gothic Consciousness." *Dickens Studies Annual* 11 (1983): 209-38.
- Handwerk, Gary. "Of Caleb's Guilt and Godwin's Truth: Ideology and Ethics in *Caleb Williams*." *ELH* 60.4 (1993): 939-60.
- Hindle, Maurice. "Introduction," In William Godwin, *Things as They Are; or, the Adventures of Caleb Williams*. Ed. Maurice Hindle. New York: Penguin, 1988. ix-xxxix.
- Hogle, Jerrold E. "The Texture of the Self in Godwin's *Things as They Are*." *Boundary* 27.2 (1979): 261-81.
- Kilgour, Maggie. *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Leaver, Kristen. "Pursuing Conversions: *Caleb Williams* and the Romantic Construction of the

Reader." *Studies in Romanticism* 33.4 (1994): 589-610.

Litton, Alfred, G. "The Failure of Rhetoric in Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*." *Lamar Journal of the Humanities* 40.1 (1989): 23-40.

McCracken, David. "Godwin's Literary Theory: The Alliance Between Fiction and Political Theory." *Philological Quarterly* 49.1 (1970): 113-33.

Miles, Robert. *Gothic Writing, 1750-1820: A Genealogy*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

O'Shaughnessy, Toni. "'An Imperfect Tale': Interpretive Accountability in *Wieland*." *Studies in American Fiction* 18.1 (1990): 41-54.

Rajan, Tilottama. "Wollstonecraft and Godwin: Reading the Secrets of the Political Novel." *Studies in Romanticism* 27.2 (1988): 221-51.

Rosenthal, Bernard. "The Voices of *Wieland*." *Critical Essays on Charles Brockden Brown*. Ed. Bernard Rosenthal. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1981. 104-125.

Sheldon, Pamela J. "The Shock of Ambiguity: Brockden Brown's *Wieland* and the Gothic Tradition." *The DeKalb Literary Arts Journal* 10.4 (1977): 17-26.

Steinman, Lisa M. "Transatlantic Cultures: Godwin, Brown, and Mary Shelley." *The Wordsworth Circle* 32.3 (2001): 126-30.

Sullivan, Garrett A. "'A Story To Be Hastily Gobbled Up': *Caleb Williams* and Print Culture." *Studies in Romanticism* 32.3 (1993): 323-37.

Rev. of *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams*, by William Godwin. *The British Critic* July 1794: 70-71.

Thompson, James. "Surveillance in William Godwin's *Caleb Williams*." *Gothic Fictions: Prohibition/Transgression*. Ed. Kenneth W. Graham. New York: AMS P, 1989.

Tompkins, Jane. *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*. New York: Oxford UP, 1985.

## Notes

- [1] Brown was first acquainted with Godwin's work when selected chapters of *Political Justice* were published in the *New-York Magazine* in July 1793. Furthermore, *Caleb Williams* was reprinted in Philadelphia in 1795, and Brown's own *Monthly Magazine* published reviews of Godwin's *The Enquirer* (1797) and *St. Leon* (1799).
- [2] For example, see Marilyn Butler, Gilbert Dumas, Gary Handwerk, Kristen Leaver, David McCracken, and Garrett A. Sullivan.
- [3] For an excellent discussion of various critics who view *Caleb Williams* as a contradiction of its Preface, see Jerrold Hogle 261-62.
- [4] Some critics have attempted to resolve these narrative contradictions and ideological tensions. For example, Leaver argues that the novel actually establishes a private conversation between reader and novel that serves as a model for working through and overcoming social problems. Handwerk argues that the apparent contradictions actually complement Godwin's overarching political project, thus complicating his rationalist political system and extending its efficacy by exploring emotional and psychological dimensions of the human experience as it relates to political injustice.

- [5] For a full discussion of Godwin's views on reading, see Maggie Kilgour 53-55.
- [6] Godwin does satisfy the more traditional Gothic demand for actual prisons and dungeons with the scenes of Caleb's incarceration. More than just providing Gothic atmosphere, Godwin uses these scenes to comment on the condition of prisons and the cruelty of the justice system during his day. For example, when Caleb is first placed in jail, Godwin jarringly intrudes upon Caleb's narrative, exclaiming, "visit the scenes of our prisons! Witness their unwholesomeness, their filth, the tyranny of their governors, the misery of their inmates! After that, show me the man shameless enough to triumph, and say, England has no Bastille!" (188). And later when Caleb is visited by Thomas, Godwin speaks through the later who says, "Lord, what fools we be! Things are done under our very noses, and we know nothing of the matter; and a parcel of fellows with grave faces swear to us that such things never happen but in France, and other countries the like of that" (210). The ideological intent of these scenes is clear, and Godwin uses Gothic aesthetic excess and melodrama to magnify his political criticism.
- [7] See the reviews of *Wieland* published in *The Ladies' Monthly Museum* 9 (December 1810): 338-339 and *Gentleman's Magazine* 81 (April 1811): 364.
- [8] See the review of *Wieland* published in *Critical Review* s. 3, 22 (February 1811) 144-63.
- [9] Elizabeth Dill argues that Brown's use of domestic fiction and Gothic melodrama complicates the role of the sensible woman figure and questions the function of the domestic within shifting American ideologies of revolution and republicanism.
- [10] See Toni O'Shaughnessy for a discussion of how authors or users of language in *Wieland* abuse rhetoric and language for the purposes of manipulation and power by breaking down the relationship between authors and readers and disrupting the connection between language and meaning. See also Alfred G. Litton who reveals the ways in which rhetoric in *Wieland* fails as a constructive tool for Enlightenment ideals of knowing truth and understanding reality.
- [11] For detailed discussions of the complementary thematic and ideological relationship between *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams*, see Handwerk and Leaver.

Author: David S. Hogsette

Title: Textual Surveillance, Social Codes, and Sublime Voices: The Tyranny of Narrative in *Caleb Williams* and *Wieland*

Journal: Romanticism on the Net

Issues: 38-39, May-August 2005. « Transatlantic Romanticism: A Special Issue of Romanticism on the Net »

URI : <http://www.erudit.org/revue/ron/2005/v/n38-39/011667ar.html>

Copyright © Michael Eberle-Sinatra 1996-2005 — All rights reserved