

**picking up the knife**

**a psycho-  
historical reading  
of *wieland***

bill christophersen

Literature . . . has a relationship to social and intellectual history, not as documentation, but as symbolic illumination.<sup>1</sup>

Edwin S. Fussell, in his essay “*Wieland: A Literary and Historical Reading*,” goes far toward establishing a political/historical context for Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland, or The Transformation* (1798). He identifies the transformation of *patria* that Brown and his generation had experienced as the real antecedent of the subtitle. Suggesting that, figuratively speaking, the newly nationalized writer of Brown’s era was, like Carwin, a biloquist—a British “speaker” become American—and stressing the almost causal role writing had played in the American Revolution, Fussell sees this novel that pivots on biloquial voices and the writing act as embodying a revolutionary/postrevolutionary tension. With Clara Wieland as a “daughter of the American Revolution” in conflict with Carwin, an “American revolutionary and postrevolutionary writer,” Carwin’s destruction of the Wieland family becomes an image of America’s revolutionary devastation—even as Brown’s “horror and contempt” for the author’s powers becomes a “product of postrevolutionary backlash.” Fussell concludes by noting a paradox: “Writing is both the cause and the effect of action: . . . the American Revolution . . . , at least partly caused by writers, . . . necessitates an American literature to justify it and to ensure its fruits to posterity.”<sup>2</sup>

Fussell, in highlighting a historical context for Brown's melodramatic plot, gives new resonance to Carwin and to several of the book's motifs. His fertile reading, however, skirts the central drama—Clara's transformation and confrontation with her deranged brother Theodore. Fussell concentrates to good effect on Carwin, but Carwin is, at last, more red herring than protagonist. If *Wieland* is the American tale Fussell says it is, the transformation Clara undergoes even more than Carwin's biloquist transformations ought to reflect the nation's revolutionary/postrevolutionary tensions. This essay suggests that such is the case. It further suggests that *Wieland* himself reflects both Clara's and the young republic's dangerous potentialities writ large—hence the nationalism of Brown's "American Tale."

i

From the start Brown's favorite writers were epic poets. "National songs," Brown wrote in a letter to William Dunlap (November 28, 1794), "strains which have a particular relation to the political or religious transactions of the poet's country, seem to be the most precious morcels [sic]. . . ." <sup>3</sup> Brown set out, indeed, to write an American epic in 1794 (he had planned several). I believe this epic ambition that Brown failed to realize in verse informs his fiction—especially *Wieland*—revealing itself in story lines with national as well as dramatic and psychological dimensions: story lines that generally feature a society under siege by an ineluctable evil. <sup>4</sup>

Brown's background adds credence to a nationalistic reading of his works. Fussell rightly notes that Brown, a young, liberally educated Philadelphian during the formative years of the new republic, had firsthand exposure to the political and philosophical tradewinds of the time. Brown avidly read the French Encyclopedists and the English "novelists of purpose," especially Godwin and Wollstonecraft. On the other hand, Brown's association, during the 1790s, with various New York conservatives in the Friendly Club no doubt counterweighted an ideological dialogue that, as Alan Axelrod has suggested, may have begun years earlier when Brown was tutored by Tory Quaker Robert Proud. <sup>5</sup> Proud's explicit denunciations of revolution, augmented by the Quaker's moral opposition to violence, may well have heightened Brown's sensitivity to the violent potential of individuals and nations, and (as Fussell suggests) to the paradox of a purportedly God-fearing republic conceived in blood and insurrection. <sup>6</sup>

*Wieland*, not surprisingly, bears early indications of historical intent on Brown's part. Not only is the tale set on the eve of the American Revolution (as Fussell notes): its protagonist is also equipped with a family history that reads like America's. Brown sets the stage for his drama by detailing the elder Wieland's history and death and introducing the family circle that has succeeded him at Mettingen. As David Bryon Davis points out,

The story thus far is almost an allegory of American colonial history. It includes disrupting economic changes in Europe, religious fervor which was not unrelated to these changes, 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 (or city) 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. Finally, the continental Enlightenment appeared [*sic*] in the character of Henry Pleyel, 'the champion of intellectual liberty . . . who rejected all guidance but that of his reason.'<sup>7</sup>

Such suggestions of historical allegory may seem far-fetched or gratuitous. Yet Brown, judging by his prefaces, his fictions "Thessalonica" and "The Death of Cicero," his historical sketches and his "political" pamphlets (as much literary as political artifacts), was intrigued by a literature in which history and fiction intersect. Indeed, his narrator in "Walstein's School of History" finds "the narration of public events, with a certain license of invention, the most efficacious of moral instruments."<sup>8</sup> Nor was the strategy of allegorizing contemporary history, of making "the picture of a single family a model from which to sketch the condition of a nation," absurd to Brown—however so it may have seemed to Pleyel.<sup>9</sup> Jeremy Belknap, in *The Foresters* (1796), a book subtitled, like *Wieland*, "An American Tale," and reviewed by Brown in his *Monthly Magazine and American Review* (April 1799), had allegorized the colonization, rebellion and confederation of America. Brown, in praising Belknap, alludes to the "pleasing and popular form" of allegory.<sup>10</sup> Davis' suggestion of an allegorical level to *Wieland*, then, is perhaps less far-fetched than it might seem. Like Fussell's reading, however, it skirts the main drama. To that drama we must, by degrees, turn.

In all Brown's major romances, naive young protagonists undergo transformations in which a dark side of their personalities comes to the fore and they become capable of horrendous acts. These characters, however, are unaware of their evil propensities: fundamentally, they do not know themselves. Brown's early novel *Skywalk* (a lost precursor to *Edgar Huntly*) was, in fact, subtitled *The Man Unknown to Himself: An American Tale*. In *Arthur Mervyn* and *Edgar Huntly*—especially the latter, a tale in which the "concerns of this country" find expression in a sleepwalker-protagonist—this ignorance of self assumes startling proportions.

For Brown such lack of self-awareness apparently characterized America. In *An Address to the Government* . . . Brown, in the elaborate guise of a French Counsellor of State urging France to deploy troops in Louisiana, seeks, through reverse psychology, to goad America into seizing the territory herself. America, claims the French Counsellor, has too many political and social problems to permit her to act effectively in her own interest. The problems the French Counsellor lists—the presence of suppressed populations (blacks and Indians), capitalist greed, a political

system prone toward faction—are so ironic in an “enlightened” republic that they suggest a nation unknown to itself. Reiterating the image he had used in *Edgar Huntly*, Brown has his French Counsellor lecture Napoleon as follows: “It is time to awaken. Should this fatal sleep continue . . . fortune will have smiled in vain. . . .”<sup>11</sup> But the letter, of course, is a device; there is no French Counsellor. Brown is writing to America. And his words, I propose, may be taken as the theme, not only of his pamphlet, but of his fiction in general.

With Brown’s apparent doubts about America’s self-awareness in mind, consider *Wieland*, Brown’s first romance of troubled sleep and traumatic awakening. Clara Wieland in a horrible flash discovers her brother’s homicidal mania. Only by degrees, however, does she discover her own propensity for comparable violence. This transformation, which critics have explored but never fully clarified,<sup>12</sup> is central to our understanding of *Wieland*.

Clara, prior to her tragedy, is both sane and sensible. This, indeed, is what makes her transformation matter. In contrast to her brother, whose brooding, obsessed mien suggests the potential psychotic, Clara is not easily swayed by superstition, nor is she given to solitary pursuits. Rather, she is strong-minded: fearing an intruder in her closet, she tries the door. Nevertheless, she soon finds herself plagued, then driven, by irrational forces she cannot control. Critics have noted the sexual alliances she unconsciously contemplates. Ambivalent about all three men in her life, she sleepwalks and dreams that her brother beckons to her from across a gulf, but awakens instead to the voice of Carwin—who no sooner disappears than Pleyel appears, calling to her “from the edge of a precipice” (*Wieland*, 64). Less apparent, though, are the aggressive impulses Clara betrays.

Clara’s fears and fantasies are perhaps more violent than sexual. Deciding to grant Carwin a midnight interview, she resolves to arm herself, then reflects on the moral as well as physical danger she is courting: “Whoever has pointed steel is not without arms; yet what must have been the state of my mind when I could meditate, without shuddering, on the use of a murderous weapon, and believe myself secure merely because I was capable of being made so by the death of another!” (*Wieland*, 144). Given Clara’s evolution, Pleyel’s wrongheaded tirade depicting her as “the colleague of a murderer” (*Wieland*, 113)—a murderer once removed—assumes ironic significance. Clara herself muses aloud: “Yesterday and today I am the same. . . . yet in the apprehension of another I had ceased to be the same. . . . What was it that swayed me? . . . What purpose did I meditate?” (*Wieland*, 113, 140, 146). The point is that she is not the same; she meditates all kinds of things. Metaphorically she not only pursues her own brother, but discovers murderers in her own closet.

Clara’s psychodrama is temporarily interrupted by the slaughter that devastates her brother’s family. Clara bears up as well as can be expected following the murders, but her discovery of her brother’s agency leads to “a new dread . . . more insupportable than the anguish . . . lately

endured.” Revolving her brother’s transformation, Clara writes: “Had I not equal reason to tremble? What was my security against influences equally irresistible? . . . Was I not transported to the brink of the same abyss? Ere a new day should come, my hands might be embrued in blood . . .” (*Wieland*, 179-180). In fact, as her subsequent acts show, a frightening propensity for violence *has* dawned on Clara. Its first fruits include a flirtation with suicide: “Death is a cure which nature or ourselves must administer. To this cure I now looked forward with gloomy satisfaction” (*Wieland*, 180).

Clara recovers under her uncle’s care. She cannot, however, dispel the suspicion that Carwin has prompted her brother’s conduct, and, with uncharacteristic vehemence, remarks, “I thirsted for knowledge and for vengeance” (*Wieland*, 190). Twice more Clara reiterates the sentiment: “The milkiness of my nature was curdled into hatred and rancour”; “my soul was bursting with detestation and revenge” (*Wieland*, 216, 217). Her craving for vengeance soon leads to blasphemy: “I invoked all-seeing heaven to drag to light and punish this betrayer, and accused its providence for having thus long delayed the retribution that was due to so enormous a guilt” (*Wieland*, 193). During the final visit to her old house despair overtakes her, and she again premeditates, then resolves upon suicide. She is preparing to execute her design, in fact, when Carwin appears. These mortal sins, however, are only preliminaries.

The final episode finds Clara confronted by her deranged brother come to kill her. “All that I have said [thus far] is preparatory to this scene,” Clara specifies, italicizing the significance of what is to follow (*Wieland*, 221). That final scene is crucial not merely because *Wieland*’s fanatical passion is brought to a climax, but because here Clara finds herself ready to commit the mythic equivalent of *Wieland*’s crime:

Yes, I acknowledge that my guilt surpasses that of mankind. . . .  
What shall I say? I was menaced, as I thought, with death, and, to elude this evil, my hand was ready to inflict death upon the menacer. . . . O insupportable remembrance! hide thee from my view for a time; hide it from me that my heart was black enough to meditate the stabbing of a brother! (*Wieland*, 223)

Circumstantial justification notwithstanding, Clara’s readiness to commit fratricide, the crime in which “every form of guilt is comprehended” (according to Cicero’s *Pro Cluentio*, a text *Wieland* refers to earlier in the tale), suggests the enormity of her transformation. Brown spares Clara (and us) this final horror, arranging, as one critic has noted, for Clara to drop the knife and for *Wieland* to pick it up and kill himself.<sup>13</sup> But Clara, acutely aware of her own implication in this tragedy, underlines its wider significance: “. . . my hands were sprinkled with his blood as he fell” (*Wieland*, 232). Nor does Brown leave matters here.

## ii

The Maxwell-Stuart-Conway subplot, in which Brown describes Max-

well's semi-successful seduction of Mrs. Stuart and enunciates what Clara's tale has dramatized—that “no human virtue is secure from degeneracy” (*Wieland*, 241)—provides a bridge, however unlikely, to the historicity of *Wieland*. Regarding Mrs. Stuart's transferral of affection, though not of favors, Brown writes: “This revolution in her sentiments was productive only of despair. Her rectitude of principle preserved her from actual guilt, but could not restore to her her ancient affection, or save her from being the prey of remorseful and impracticable wishes” (*Wieland*, 241). Mrs. Stuart “falls,” in other words, even though she stops short of committing the deeds she thinks about. The same kind of guilt tarnishes Clara: though she does not actually wield the knife against her brother, the realization that she has verged on doing so traumatizes her and constitutes a virtual “fall.” The point of the digression, however—that a “revolution in . . . sentiments,” even if not taken to the limit, carries irrevocable consequences—bears not only on Clara, but also on postrevolutionary America. Brown's use of the term “revolution” evokes, however fleetingly, the consequences of political “revolutions.” In conjuring this dimension, it invites us to examine the drama of family confrontation we have just witnessed in a broader light.

Colonial America, like Clara, had, in maturing, undergone a change; had found her new self alienated from and threatened by her former self; had picked up the knife, as it were, however reluctantly and justifiably, and squared off against her former self—that elder-kinsman-turned-antagonist, Great Britain. Fortunately, while our revolution triumphed (thanks to France), our republicanism (unlike France's) remained within bounds. But, Brown seems to warn his readers, even if we hadn't, like our ideological brother France, become a fanatical butcher (and this, I submit, is the second historical antecedent of *Wieland*'s mania), we ought not be blind to the residual possibility, or to the violent transformation we *had* undergone. For as Mrs. Stuart (who also stopped short of infamy) discovers, a “revolution in . . . sentiments” *anticipates* the worst.

The violent transformation dramatized in Brown's climax, I am suggesting, echoes a complex national transformation (though, let me stress, I am speaking of echoes, not equivalences). *Wieland*'s threatening posture conjures two contrasting historical moments: first, the revolutionary era, during which America, like Clara, was obliged to take up arms against her former protector and kinsman; and second, America's postrevolutionary era, whose haunting spectre was that of our zealot-‘brother’-turned-indiscriminate-murderer, revolutionary France. Brown, I am suggesting, does indeed make “the picture of a single family a model from which to sketch the condition of a nation”—a literary strategy that he explicitly discusses earlier in the novel (*Wieland*, 30).

At the risk of redundancy, let me put the matter another way. Behind the book's final brother-sister confrontation, two opposite sides of the American psyche resonate: our volatile, revolutionary self, ready to resist an elder kinsman and former protector, if need be, to survive; and our postrevolutionary self, afraid of being “transported to the brink of the

same abyss” as our crazed political brother, France—perhaps even needing, paradoxically, to “kill” that lunatic, revolutionary self. (Brown, indeed, characterizes Wieland’s lunacy with the politically-loaded words “overthrow” and “anarchy” as well as “revolution” [*Wieland*, 162, 171, 154].)

But which self deserved to be heeded? Brown confounds the two: Clara’s knife-wielding posture suggests both revolution *and* reaction; Wieland’s menacing attitude recalls both Britain’s mid-century arrogance *and* France’s late-century fanaticism. Brown thus not only evokes a turn-of-the-century American dilemma, he also implies that each self poses a comparable danger.

“Murderers lurked in my closet,” says Clara, midway through the tale. “One resolved to shoot, and the other menaced suffocation” (*Wieland*, 58). This icon of two-fold danger such as Clara will face during the climax (and once after that—see p. 13) also reflects the nation’s political juncture in the years prior to Brown’s writing of *Wieland*. America in the mid-1790s was factionalized, torn almost to the point of civil war between an explosive republicanism and a Federalist reaction. This factional strife, kindled by the French Revolution, among other things, and fanned by international crosswinds (Britain’s war with France exacerbated as well as mirrored America’s domestic split), threatened, during the years 1794-1797, to become a conflagration. During the summer of 1798, a Federalist administration, reacting to a new wave of republican discontent, passed the Alien and Sedition Acts, decrees that sought to stifle anti-Federalist criticism and the growth of republicanism. Republicans, in turn, drafted the defiant Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions—accompanied, apparently, in Virginia’s case, by arms appropriations to resist federal troops bent on enforcing the Acts.<sup>14</sup> America was, in brief, a family at odds with itself, not only in the years prior to, but even during the months when Brown was completing *Wieland*.

Nor were America’s problems merely internal. France, a dangerous other as well as a projected self, menaced war. This real, external threat lends further resonance to Brown’s confrontation scene. America’s outrage over the XYZ Affair—a French diplomatic insult—peaked in June, 1798. By July, France’s declaration of war on the United States was considered imminent. Because America owed France her very existence (and perhaps assistance under the Treaty of Paris, though we had denied this on legalistic grounds), this bitter pass must have been regretted with a mixture of guilt, fear and mortification not unlike that by which Clara, confronting her formerly solicitous brother, is paralyzed.

Essentially, though, these political crises—France’s hostility, faction at home—reflected a more profound identity crisis: America’s need to come to terms with her revolutionary heritage. The French Revolution had mirrored our republican sentiments, then made us rue the likeness. The 1790s saw George Washington denounce committee-of-correspondence-type Democratic Clubs as diabolical; saw John Adams sponsor laws that threatened the first amendment; saw Patrick Henry come out of retirement

to back the Federalists in their most illiberal hour. This suggests the scope of the transformation America in 1798 was experiencing: our elder self, our long-revered revolutionary self, had suddenly begun to look like a crazy relative. Or perhaps our accusatory postrevolutionary self was the crazy relative. Who could be sure? In either case, that lunatic was us; to dispatch him, moreover, was, in a sense, to become him.

Brown's America was—to borrow a motif from *Wieland*—a temple on a cliff. Her primary challenge was to retain her balance, to avoid being toppled by European wars or domestic crises. Hence George Washington's admonition to shun faction at home and “entangling alliances” abroad. But as crises erupted and faction increased, a studied balancing act must have seemed more and more difficult, even futile. “My mind seemed to be split into separate parts,” says Clara, “and these parts to have entered into furious and implacable contention” (*Wieland*, 140). Perhaps decisive action—even a figurative fratricide—was necessary.

Brown does not answer this dilemma in *Wieland* (though he does in *Ormond*); he merely dramatizes it. *Wieland*, Brown's Scylla and Charybdis myth for the young republic, is primarily a plea that she wake up to the danger on either hand. The conclusion repeats this motif: Clara, literally asleep in her bed, barely escapes when her house catches fire. Simultaneously menaced by flames and by suffocating smoke, she is unable to break the “spell” that stupefies her (*Wieland*, 236). And though Brown contrives a *deus ex machina* to save her, her house burns to the ground.

This apocalypse and Clara's consequent expatriation suggests grave doubts on Brown's part toward America's prospects. Even Clara's fairytale preservation (carried through the flames to safety in the arms of a dark stranger, she is soon reunited, then eventually united with Pleyel) is rendered ironic by the change she undergoes. Once in Europe Clara adopts a moralistic, phony-sounding—one is tempted to say a “thrown”—voice, and, with it, a habit of rationalizing—indeed, of transforming—troublesome truths. Regarding the feelings she harbors for Pleyel even after he has married another, she says: “I continued to love him, but my passion was disguised to myself; I considered it merely as a more tender species of friendship, and cherished it without compunction” (*Wieland*, 238). Such explicit rationalizing forms an ironic coda to a tale that has hinged on the importance of discerning the truth behind appearances, of knowing oneself.

Clara's “biloquism” (so Carl Nelson, at least, has called it<sup>15</sup>) recalls a tack taken earlier by her uncle: that self-deception, ironically, may be necessary for survival. It proves so, at least, for *Wieland*, whose delusion sustains him even as it subverts his mind. And for America? Was America up to the task of self-confrontation? Considered in this context, Fussell's paradox takes on an almost tragic necessity, the revolution/writing act necessitating, as it were, a postrevolutionary rewriting act, a biloquial transformation of past deeds into palatable “history,” of present lunacy into functional “sanity.”

Vying with this disheartening possibility, however, is a still grimmer

one: that the American experiment—the New, Improved Jerusalem, the Enlightened Republic on a Hill—may simply be doomed beyond recall. Allusions to the crumbled glories of Rome, for instance—and particularly to Wieland’s revered Cicero, whose death in an insurrection signified the triumph of anarchy and darkness—bode ill for the Wielands’ neoclassical polity. Brown’s occasional allusions to *Macbeth*, moreover,<sup>16</sup> melodramatic though they seem, remind the American reader that for centuries striking at a king meant nothing less than upending nature, and that hands thus bloodied defied cleansing. In addition, Brown’s intimations elsewhere in the book that fire signifies divine displeasure (consider the elder Wieland’s death) makes the burning down of Clara’s house smack of divine mandate rather than mishap.

In short, Brown, in his “American Tale,” has traced depravity not merely to an Old World villain (Carwin) or to an overwrought zealot (Theodore Wieland), but to his normative, rational, eminently American protagonist, Clara Wieland; has recorded her progress toward infamy culminating in an ironic confrontation with her brother/self that carries overtones of America’s own ironic confrontation with her revolutionary self; has suggested that even a limited “revolution” contains the seeds of future blight; and has hinted that America, the figurative protagonist as well as the setting of *Wieland*, may be doomed, even as Clara is doomed, twice-over: first, by a fatal ignorance of self, and second—ironically—by self-knowledge, once it has been afforded. By sending his surviving characters back to Europe, Brown as good as denies the possibility of rectifying the New World’s “fall,” of returning a still-adolescent America to a state of bliss. Even any *apparent* resumption of sanity, of balance, Brown seems to say, will come about through Old World artifice (New World art?), not genuine convalescence. Ironically, the most genuine hope *Wieland* extends is that Clara and America may, in time, learn, as Carwin perhaps learns by the tale’s end, to use a revolutionary, transforming power with discretion.

### iii

*Wieland* criticism during the past generation has generally taken a psychological or philosophical tack—either bringing Freudian insights to bear on the characters’ behavior (particularly Clara’s) or examining the ways in which the novel questions Enlightenment assumptions it was formerly thought to dramatize. Studies along these lines by Larzer Ziff, Donald Ringe, Arthur Kimball, Alexander Cowie and others have become basic to our understanding of *Wieland*.<sup>17</sup> Several recent critics, however, have remarked increasingly on the novel’s Americanness. Roberta F. Weldon, for instance, in an article characterizing the Wieland family as a microcosm of American individuality and insularity, proposes that “in the failure of this family it is possible to see a failure of the national experiment.”<sup>18</sup> Cynthia S. Jordan, stressing the extent to which *Wieland* renders all narrative endings—especially happy ones—suspect, concludes:

“Brown’s message to a young nation, nurtured from its infancy on stories promising its own happy ending . . . has only too recently begun to be heard.”<sup>19</sup> Alan Axelrod’s *Charles Brockden Brown: An American Tale* proposes that all of Brown’s fictions “attempt to establish an American identity,”<sup>20</sup> which Axelrod associates with a frontier mind-set. And Edwin Fussell, his preoccupation with Carwin notwithstanding, wonders, at one point, “whether or not Clara is in some of her permutations the young nation herself.”<sup>21</sup> These readings offer at least perceptive alternatives to the one developed above, if not collateral credibility for its nationalistic tack. Axelrod’s thesis in particular—that the complex tension of opposites they generate (reflect?) makes Brown’s novels “American tales”—reifies, I think, the revolutionary/post-revolutionary hypothesis that Fussell and I propose.

So, too, do other of Brown’s writings. *An Address to the Government* . . . , besides suggesting a nation wrapped in “fatal sleep,” also corroborates the concern with a politically polarized America inferred from *Wieland*. In this pamphlet Brown refers to the “great weakness of these States”—that “Their form of government and the state of the country is a hot-bed for faction and sedition.”<sup>22</sup> Brown’s short fictions “Thessalonica” and “The Death of Cicero,” furthermore, investigate the social psychology of anarchy and political upheavals in an earlier republic.

Brown, moreover, in an otherwise forgettable work entitled *The Man At Home*, hints at political/historical concerns like those inferred from *Wieland*. *The Man At Home* was published in installments in the *Weekly Magazine* during February and March of 1798 (when Brown was beginning *Wieland*). A tale rhetorically obsessed with “revolution,” it features a box with a false bottom concealing a manuscript that “unfolds the causes and exhibits the agents in a transaction of high importance in the American Revolution.” Characterizing this manuscript, Brown’s narrator Bedloe says, in words that could almost apply to the confrontation scene in *Wieland*, “It is a sort of picture of the age at that period, and displays remarkable features in the condition of France, England and America.”<sup>23</sup> (*The Man At Home* also draws an indirect parallel between the plague of 1793 in Philadelphia and the political plague of “faction in an ancient republic”—a conceit that both reiterates Brown’s concern with the dangers posed by political strife and adumbrates a symbolic motif Brown uses in *Ormond*.)

These external referents lend incidental support to the reading of *Wieland* proposed above. The most compelling indirect argument, though, for reading *Wieland* as a fable about America’s revolutionary/postrevolutionary tensions comes in *Ormond*, the novel that followed *Wieland* by a scant four months. In *Ormond* Brown reenacts the *Wieland* fable, but heightens and simplifies its political overtones. Again the protagonist, threatened by a murderous aggressor who is both an other and a self (“Is there no part of me in which you discover your own likeness?” Ormond at one point asks Constantia<sup>24</sup>), takes up the knife. Here, however, the resonating ambivalence of the *Wieland* climax, with its simultaneous echoes of two different moments and mindsets, becomes something close to

straightforward historical allegory. Ormond, a Frenchman and revolutionary<sup>25</sup> with whom the young, enlightened American adolescent, Constantia Dudley, has been infatuated, who has killed her father—purportedly on her behalf—and who, after courting her affections, has returned, transformed and violent, to extort unwarranted “dues,” clearly personifies France. (The book’s first half, in which a yellow fever plague sweeps Philadelphia, almost carrying off the heroine, adumbrates this crisis—“plague” being a metaphor for revolution both in the rhetoric of the time and elsewhere in Brown’s work.) The climax, in which Constantia stabs Ormond, postfigures America’s spurning of France and, ultimately, of her radical, “French” self.<sup>26</sup>

#### iv

Before all else, Brown’s fictions are dramas of the human heart: dramas of traumatic self-discovery and compulsive self-denial, of young men and women who don’t know the evils they are capable of and don’t understand the true nature of the deeds they commit. Yet because the young republic was going through similar crises of identity, survival, self-assertion and self-understanding at the time Brown was writing, Brown’s gothic fictions remain essentially “American Tale[s]” that portray the country itself, not just a few of its inhabitants. This is especially true of *Wieland*, the work that most thoroughly dramatizes the dark underside of Enlightenment optimism and the schizophrenia of Federalist America.

New York City

#### notes

1. Robert E. Spiller, *The Cycle of American Literature* (New York, 1955, rpt. 1957), ix.
2. Edwin S. Fussell, “*Wieland*: A Literary and Historical Reading,” *Early American Literature*, 18 (Fall, 1983), 171-186, especially 184.
3. William Dunlap, *The Life of Charles Brockden Brown: Together With Selections From The Rarest of His Printed Works, From His Original Letters, And From His Manuscripts Before Unpublished*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1815), 2:92.
4. I am in some ways more comfortable terming *Wieland* a modern prose epic than an historical allegory because “epic,” while denoting a literature rooted in national/social history, nevertheless suggests multiplicity of meaning rather than simple equivalence; myth rather than metaphor. But the generic term hasn’t been invented that fully characterizes the hybrid *Wieland*.
5. *Charles Brockden Brown: An American Tale* (Austin, Texas, 1983), 73.
6. Fussell, 172.
7. *Homicide in American Fiction, 1798-1860* (Ithaca, New York, 1957), 89.
8. Charles Brockden Brown, “Walstein’s School of History,” *Monthly Magazine and American Review*, (April, 1799), 407.
9. Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland and Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist*, Eds. S. W. Reid, Sydney J. Krause, and Alexander Cowie. Bicentennial Edition (Kent, Ohio, 1977), 30. Future references will be included parenthetically in the text.
10. Charles Brockden Brown, Review of *The Foresters*, *Monthly Magazine and American Review* (April, 1799), 432.
11. Charles Brockden Brown, *An Address to the Government of the United States on the Cession of Louisiana to the French; and on the Late Breach of Treaty by the Spaniards, including the Translation of a Memorial, on the War of St. Domingo, and the Cession of Mississippi to France, drawn up by a Counsellor of State* (Philadelphia, 1803), 18.
12. Cynthia S. Jordan presents the most detailed reading of Clara’s dark side. She sees no transformation, only chronic untrustworthiness in Clara’s behavior. Nonetheless, she notes the evidence and argues, indeed, that Clara may actually have killed her brother and fabricated his suicide, so suspect is her narrative (“On Rereading *Wieland*: ‘The Folly of Precipitate Conclusions,’” *Early American Literature*, 16 [1981], 154-174). Other critics who have beaten the

same bushes are Scott Garrow and John Cleman. Both highlight Clara's stated fear that she too might become prey to the forces that have transformed her brother. Garrow fails, however, to adequately trace such a transformation, and identifies it, somewhat disappointingly, as merely a "lapse into senseless depression and irrational action motivated by fear," while Cleman too timidly concludes that "the question of Clara's innocence is not clear-cut." ("Character Transformation in *Wieland*," *Southern Quarterly*, 4 [1966], 316; "Ambiguous Evil: A Study of Villains and Heroes in Charles Brockden Brown's Major Novels," *Early American Literature*, 10 [1975], 207.)

13. Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (London, 1960), 142.

14. John C. Miller, *The Federalist Era* (New York, 1960), 164, 241. As Miller notes, "Most Virginians denied these measures were directed against the Federal government: the enemy, they declared, were the French and Indians. But William Branch Giles and John Randolph later asserted that the purpose of Virginia's warlike preparations was to resist Federal Troops."

15. Carl Nelson, "The Novels of Charles Brockden Brown: Irony and Illusion," Diss., State University of New York at Binghamton, 1970, 75.

16. Carwin's most frequently thrown command, "Hold, Hold!" is only the most obvious echo of *Macbeth* in *Wieland*. Consider also the bloodied hands motif, the supernatural overtones of the first dramatic scene and the witchcraft motif traced by Carl Nelson ("Irony and Illusion," 48-58). And the sleepwalking Clara? Does Brown mean to make her an ironic counterpart to Lady Macbeth?

17. See Ziff, "A Reading of *Wieland*," PMLA 77 (1962), 51-7; Ringe, *Charles Brockden Brown* (New York, 1966); Kimball, *Rational Fictions: A Study of Charles Brockden Brown* (McMinnville, Oregon, 1968); and Cowie, Introduction to the Bicentennial *Wieland* (See Note 9 above).

18. "Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*: A Family Tragedy," *Studies in American Fiction*, 12 (Spring, 1984), 8.

19. Jordan, 171.

20. Axelrod, xix.

21. Fussell, 183.

22. *An Address*, 45.

23. Charles Brockden Brown, *The Rhapsodist and Other Uncollected Writings*, Harry R. Warfel, ed. (New York, 1943), 69.

24. Charles Brockden Brown, *Ormond, or The Secret Witness*, Eds. S. W. Reid, Krause and Cowie. Bicentennial Edition (Kent, Ohio, 1982), 167.

25. Ormond is linked to a society patterned on the Illuminati, an eighteenth century cabal credited, in the popular mythology, with fomenting the French Revolution. See John Robison, *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies* (New York, 1798), 9-10.

26. Constantia's deed, though boldly performed, is not without its own ambivalence. Instead of liberating her, it seems to confine and isolate her irrevocably. Our final image of Constantia is Sophia's keyhole portrait of her, "trapped" alone in her old house, distraught with horror and what looks like guilt. Constantia/America, in killing her French self, has, in a sense, amputated the ideological possibilities that had brightened her "coming out." By contrast, the old house in which she has taken refuge has become a prison.